Camillo Sitte and Otto Wagner: Contrasting Theoretical Positions towards Modern Cities

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Abstract

This paper aims to investigate contrasting theoretical positions of the late nineteenth century between Camillo Sitte and Otto Wagner. While the face of Europe was being transformed in terms of its planning, there were theorists who sought to make sense of the changing social and cultural landscape and attempted to find some way to reconcile the past with the new conditions of living. Among such theorists were Camillo Sitte and Otto Wagner. Although differ, their views played a radical role and helped shape the beginning of modern city planning. This paper will investigate the differences in their views that in many ways have been translated into diverse urban planning ideologies relating to the question of public space and the fabric of the city.

Keywords: Camillo Sitte | Otto Wagner | Modern Cities | City Fabric

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1. Background

Before the grand restructuring of major cities in Europe in the late nineteenth century, city planning had not yet been established as a field of study. Activities concerning the planning of the city were entrusted to architects, engineers as well as municipal officers involved in each schemes. Some were knowledgeable about this specific endeavor, some were not. But after many European restructure schemes were accomplished, new awareness has been raised, and concerns have been expressed. Efforts to lay the ground rules or framework to city planning activities had been attempted, yielding various outcomes. Some have been systematically worked, being able to established city planning as a respectable professional field. (George Collins and Christian Collins, 1986: 26-31)

At any rate, city planning was established in Germany through the combined activity of many individuals working on particular problems in a variety of different but related fields. (George Collins and Christian Collins, 1986: 26-31) This German profession owe its early conceptions to the efforts of three men: Reinhard Baumeister, Joseph Stubben and Camillo Sitte. (George Collins and Christian Collins, 1986: 26-31) The efforts to establish an understanding of city planning as a discipline was culminated in an innovative work that would continue to be of influential relevance until today, Camillo Sitte's Der Städtebau nach seinen künstlerischen Grunsätzen. It provide a new ground for thinking and planning the city, which stirred both agreeable and opposed views. One of Sitte's opponents, Otto Wagner, laid a diametrically opposed ground for city planning, putting the two views on opposite end of the theoretical spectrum. These two views, however contrast, were to become influential and continue to generate two opposite methods concerning the planning of cities until today. Thus in many ways, the relationship between the two differing views can be seen as the framework for modern city planning.

Before examining the differing views of Camillo Sitte and Otto Wagner, it would be helpful to acknowledge the efforts of both Baumeister and Stübben. Reinhard Baumeister (1833-1917) was generally credited with having laid the basis of city planning as a scientific field (Wissenschaft.) (George Collins and Christian Collins, 1986: 26-31) He was responsible for the guidance of professional associations, municipalities, principalities as well as the German Empire itself through the formative years of the new discipline of city planning. In addition to lectures, Baumeister provided authoritative handbooks on technical and legal branches of city planning. Among the many accomplishments, he was the pioneer of the zoning idea and its legal framework. Yet, despite the scientific point of view, Baumeister criticized the universal use of rectangular systems and had instead suggested that one look back at he the character of ancient squares and the picturesque medieval streets, an idea that would resonated later in

Siite's work. Published widely, Baumeister 1914 summary of the accomplishments of German planning is exemplary and gives credits to both Joseph Stübben and Camillo Sitte. (George Collins and Christian Collins, 1986: 27)

Trained as an architect in Berlin, Joseph Stübben (1845-1936) was also a figure of great influence and productive activities. During his lifetime, the Germanic city planning movement became international in scope, rendering his contributions more influential. (George Collins and Christian Collins, 1986: 28) His publication, including the extensive Handbuch des Städtebau, was encyclopedic in scope. The first edition of 1890 incorporated everything he had published beforehand. Many of Stübben's ideas, especially those concerning the aesthetic theory of city planning shares similarities to Sitte's belief. But being informative, hardly anyone would read through the 6 parts, 30 chapters, 23 appendices, 900 illustrations and 690 marginal divisions of the Handbuch. Many of the ideas were to be known through the works of Camillo Sitte and Otto Wagner.

2. Contrasting Ideologies: Camillo Sitte and Otto Wager

While the face of Europe was being transformed in terms of its planning, there were theorists who sought to make sense of the changing social and cultural landscape and attempted to find some way to reconcile the past with the new conditions of living. Among such theorists were Camillo Sitte and Otto Wagner. Although differ, their views played a radical role and helped shape the beginning of modern city planning. The following section will investigate the differences in their views that in many ways have been translated into diverse urban planning ideologies relating to the question of public space and the fabric of the city. (George Collins and Christian Collins, 1986: 26-31)

It was against Hausmann Grand Boulevard and the Ringstrasse ideology that both Camillo Sitte and Otto Wagner unleashed their ideas of urban life and form.[1] Using the both urban developments as negative models, Sitte set forth a basic critique of the modern city from the point of view of the ancients, criticizing its inhumane configuration. Wagner launched his attack from the opposite direction, denouncing the masking of modernity and its functions behind the stylistic screens of history. (Otto Wagner, 1911: 85-500) Sitte and Wagner divided between them the unreconciled components of the Ringstrasse legacy. While one placed his hope in contained space, in the human and socializing confines of the square, the other subjected the city to the ordinance of time, and saw the street as the artery of men in motion. (Otto Wagner: 101-123., Carl Schorske, 1981: 24-80)

3. Biographies

Camillo Sitte was born on April 17, 1843, five years before the revolution that would change the face of Vienna. His father, Franz Sitte, was an artist and architect born in Northern Bohemia who came to Vienna in 1838 to study at the Academy of Fine Arts under the Swiss Classicist Peter von Nobile. (Collins, 5-15) Franz eventually rebelled against the repressive Academy and left for Munich before he returned to Vienna again in 1842, where he would spend a greater part of his career. Franz Sitte was part of the generation that would become much involved in the revolution and the transformation of Vienna afterwards. The Sitte family lived in the Landstrasse District of Vienna, beyond the fortification and glacis that separated the old city center from its surroundings. (Collins, 5-15)

At the wake of the Ringstrasse development, Camillo Sitte had entered the atelier of the architect Heinrich von Ferstel, in the Technische Hochschule. It was his critical view towards von Ferstel's practice that would later provide a platform for Sitte's theory. At the University, Sitte also pursued art-historical and archeological studies under Rudolf Eitelberger between 1863-1868. (Collins, 5-15) He undertook research on the physiology of vision and space perception of which would eventually lead to his studies of Piero della Francesca as well as his dissertation on perspective (Beobachtungen über bildende Kunst, besonders über Architectur, vom Standpuncte der Perspektive, 1868). Sitte's career as an independent architect began in 1873 when, a few years after finishing University, he took over the design of the Mechitarists Church in the Neubau district adjacent to the Ringstrasse, from his father. Having established himself as an architect, Sitte continued to travel extensively, including a one-year-long trip in 1882-1883 to Italy, where he was deeply impressed by many of its picturesque towns. Upon returning to Vienna in 1883, Sitte was called to organize the new State School of Applied Arts, whose new building was under way on the Schwarzenburg-gasse at the edge of the Ringstrasse. His first book, Der Städtebau nach seinen kunstlerischen Gründsatzen, 1889,[2] was formulated during his years at the School as a critique of the monotonous planning of the Ringstrasse and a call for attention to aesthetic treatment of space, street patterns and vistas. Despite his criticism for the Ringstrasse, Sitte did not believe in

[1] See Sitte's introductory chapter of Der Städtebau, and Otto Wagner, *"The Development of the Great City,"* in **Architectural Record**, 1911, pp. 485-500. See also Carl Schorske, Fin-de-Siecle Vienna Politics and Culture. (New York: Vintage Books, 1981),
pp. 24-115.

[2] Camillo Sitte, **Der St¨dtebau nach seined Kunstlerrischen Gr¨ndsatzen**, Wien, 1889. For various translations, see the bibliography.

the possibility of recovering or recreating the beauty and conviviality of preindustrial city's space, but rather had realistically assessed the scope of the spatial and social disruption wrought by the industrial revolution. The stage of the Ringstrasse program, from 1858-1890, became the subject of Sitte's first book that was later to be received with much enthusiasm from the public.[3]

[3] For the full biography of Camillo Sitte see Heinrich Sitte, *"Camillo Sitte,"* in **Neue ¨sterreichische Biographie, Part I, vol. VI**, 1929, pp. 132-149. A complete biography, by his son.

See also Ferdinand von Feldegg, *"Camillo Sitte: Gedenkrede zum 80"*. Geburtstage, in **Zeitschrift des ¨sterreichischen Ingenieur – und Architeckten Vereins**, LXXV, 1923, pp. 125-127. Feldegg was a close friend of Sitte, with whom Sitte discussed the future plan for his theoretical projects. Towards the later part of Sitte's life, he worked on a project of eight volumes intended for publication. In a letter of July 6, 1899, to Ferdinand von Feldegg, he described how he had reached a comprehensive understanding of the evolution of culture on the basis of his research on Darwin, art-history and cultural history. With the letter, Sitte attached a detailed description of this work. His eight volumes were to organized as the following:

Vol. 1. Über die Entstehung der Grundformen der altgriechischen Baukunst und Ornamentik (The development of the basic forms of ancient Greek architecture and ornament)

Vol. 2. Die Wurzeln der etruscisch-römischen Baukunst (The origins of Etruscan and Roman Archtiecture)

Vol. 3. Geschichte des perspectivischen Zeichnens (History of Perspective Drawing)

Vol. 4. Die Figurendarstellungen in der grossen Kunst (The representation of figures in the art)

Vol. 5. Beiträge zur Erkenntnis des Völkerwanderns und Völkerwerden

Vol. 6. Die Physiologischen und psychologischen Ursachen von Weltanschauungen (Physiological and psychological basis of the world view)

Vol. 7. Das deutsche Kunstwerk der Zukunft (The German work of art of the future)

Vol. 8. Gesamtelte Pädagogische Aufsätze (Collected pedagogical writings)

See also Camillo Sitte: Archive Catalogue, by Rudolf Wurzer, Technische Universität Wien. The majority of Sitte's biographical data from the Archive Catalogue is also collected in George Collins, pp. 5-55.

Sitte's senior by two years, Otto Wagner was born on July 13, 1841, in the Viennese suburb of Penzing, at the time still a country village.(Heinz Geretsegger and Max Peintner, Otto Wagner, 1979: 9-18) His father Rudolf Wagner was the son of a master smith and was himself a notary to the Royal Hungarian court. When Otto was five, Rudolf Wagner died, leaving his wife and sons three houses which were then modernized and converted into a single residence, a project planned by Theophil von Hansen. Wagner's boyhood friendship with the architect Hansen would later influence his decision to study architecture. After finishing the Akademisches Gymnasium in Vienna, Wagner studied at the Polytechnic Institute and proceeded to the Königliche Bauakademie in Berlin, a step advocated by Hansen. In 1861, Wagner returned to Vienna where he attended the Academy of Fine Arts under the guidance of August von Siccardsburg and Eduard van der Nüll. Wagner held a lifelong admiration for the *"utilitarian principle"* in Siccardsburg's *"artistic soul"* and for van der Nüll's abilities as an *"incomparable draughtsman,"* qualities which he later strove to emulate.

After working briefly in the studio of the Ringstrasse architect Ludwig von Föster, Wagner won the competition for the casino in the Wiener Stadtpark. This competition was the first of many that Wagner was to win during his lifetime, accelerating his career with subsequent commissions and helping to establish himself as the architect of Vienna. His artistic reputation culminated with an appointment to the chair of the Academy in 1894, after the death of Karl von Hasenauer. Wagner also inherited Hasenauer's assistant and his student, Joseph Olbrich and Josef Hoffmann. By that time, Wagner had established himself as one of the most influential architects in Austria.[4]

Having joined the foremost art school in the Empire, Wagner felt obliged to define, establish and defend the practice of his art as well as to further his task as a teacher. In 1895, he published his Moderne Architektur (Modern Architecture), which was reprinted in 1899, 1902 and 1914, the last reprint in his lifetime appearing under the title Baukunst unserer Zeit (Building-Art of Our Time). (Schorske, 24-115)

[4] For Wagner's biography see Otto Graf, Otto Wagner, Wien, 1985. See also Harry Mallgrave's introduction of Otto Wagner, **Modern Architecture**, translated by Harry Mallgrave, (CA: The Getty Center for the History of Art and the Humanities, 1994), pp. 61-73.

Wagner began his chairmanship at the Academy while the second phase of the Viennese planning was underway. In 1893, an international competition was held for various works. Wagner won the competition for the overall plan for Greater Vienna, and was subsequently given the responsibility of designing the entire metropolitan railway system. Its stations, tunnels and overpasses became the perfect illustration of his ideas, which were later summed up in a 1911 book on the metropolis, Die Großstadt. By the time Wagner's idea for the Viennese plan was clearly formulated, its deviance from Sitte's view became evident. (Schorske, 24-115)

4. Theoretical Propositions

Camillo Sitte first presented his ideas in May of 1889, in a small volume of essays entitled Der Städtebau nach seinen künstlerischen Grunsätzen appeared in Vienna. (Sitte, Der Städtebau) Sitte analyzed the civic and artistic character of old European towns that had survived in relatively unspoiled state from the preindustrial age. With the intent to discover the principles that might be learned from them, Sitte had turned to unplanned and incrementally developed towns ranging chronologically from Roman times to his own day. The continuity of space and time which caused a perpetual evolution of the urban fabric were for Sitte the fundamental aspects of older towns. Focusing on public spaces, plazas, streets and their choreographic sequence, he searched for an inner structure, a hidden pattern that allowed for unending change. (George Collins, 1986: 15) In contrast to the open expanse of the Ringstrasse, this sense of enclosed aggregation of form and space became the center of the Raumkunst (Space-art) concept, a notion later to be attributed to Sitte. Der Städtebau was followed with a large number of weekly writings in the Neuer Wiener Tagblatt, where Sitte tirelessly launched his program before public indifference could freeze the urban future of Vienna into seeming drabness and sprawl. Parts of Sitte's study focused on the spatial configuration of the incrementally developed towns that seemed to be the product of chance rather than the product of will. (Schorske, 24-115) Yet, this notion that the city grows organically is the problematic paradox of Sitte's ideas. On the one hand, Sitte adhered to the nature of the enclosed squares and their aggregated surroundings, which he believed were the natural product of incremental growth. On the other hand, he set ground rules that aimed at reconstructing the accidental assembly of the spatial and formal configuration of the city. Raumkunst was a way of composing the natural. The city was to be the product of will, modeled after the natural product of human instinct. (Schorske, 24-115)

Der Städtebau appeared at the time when the picture of the great city was radically different from Baudelaire's famous essay of 1863 The Painter of Modern Life. The physiognomy of the nineteenth century metropolis made great contribution to the vitality of its public life. With the labyrinth of its small streets and picturesque irregularities that had survived in a relatively unspoiled state from the pre-industrial ages, the streets of the inner city of Vienna offered an esthetic pleasure of mystery and surprise. Both the spatial planning and the treatment at the face of the building became important. Such quality is also essential to the survival of the street as a locus of personal exchange and communication. But with urban development plans such as those of Paris and Vienna, when streets become a means of traffic, the old qualities simply disappeared. Close to the new century, the familiar patterns of experience once offered by pleasurable streets and representational images were in decline.

However, even with the radical transformation of many cities underway, Camillo Sitte did not present an anti urban point of view, but rather accepted the city as a vital part of cultural development. Many of his unpublished manuscripts, now kept at the Technishe Universtät Wien, confirmed this belief. Nowhere in his writings do we find a rejection of urban development in favor of ancient towns. Rather, Sitte firmly believed that if properly guided the modern city was capable of fulfilling civic, cultural, and human needs. (Schorske,: 63) Looking for possibilities of such guidance, Sitte turned to towns of the past believing in the free form of ancient and medieval city space organization which arose not on the drawing board but *"in natura."* (Schorske,: 63) Analogous to working the members of living organism, a town also has a pattern of its working members inherent in nature and functions of daily life. Forms of towns continually changed or developed though time. Identifiable members of towns or descriptions such as rectilinear, radial, triangular or uniform grid alone do not suggest the towns function and relationship of each working member. Sitte did not reject the uniform grid on the basis of its being modern rather on the ground that any pattern originated on the drawing board may crudely disrupt the spatial-temporal continuum of an evolution of urban fabric.

Sitte's patterning principles show his idea on the relationship of nature, original models or types and man's creative work of art. Artistic principles are considered according to the universal principles closest to the intentions of nature or the original type which only the study of the creator can reveal. Using examples ranging

from Roman time to his own days, it represents an attempt to explain the plurality of origins and the diversity of forms. His principles did not aim toward an imitation of concrete material models, rather to universality and flexibility of elements and at the same time toward an opening to new possibilities.

Sitte made clear that the original forms of towns arose from human's need and human's response to nature. As time progress, everything including our environment changes but the fundamental principles of town and its operative system did not change. Sitte's notion of *"type"* or patterning principles certainly allows an opening to changes and transformations. The act of referring itself to the original type, function, or purpose of such pattern would make all changes rational, be it a change into uniform grid or other systems. At a time of great change, Sitte was in search for pattern in ancient towns, once and for all, not for a return to the pattern of the past but for a link between the city of the past and the city of the future. He found such link in the patterns of towns that can be used as a parameter to satisfy ever-present, universal needs of communal living - social and aesthetic as well as functional. (Schorske,: 63)

Sitte's diagrams of plazas and streets have to be considered within a context of place as well as in terms of their ability to endure within a process of urban change. His analysis of patterns of compositional elements analogous to those in tiles and textiles derives meaning from the relationship and contiguity of such elements. His work can be considered in terms of pattern and the semiotic analysis of ornament and of individual elements within the whole. His patterning principles is a way toward an evolving unity and universality in planning.(Collins,: 50-55) For Sitte, no pattern is an isolated entity. Each pattern can exist only to the extent that it is supported by other patterns that are the larger patterns in which it is embedded, the pattern of the same size around it, and the smaller patterns which are embedded in it. (Collins,: 50-55)

At any rate, Sitte's theory was critical to the pleasure that spectators find in the representational images and architectural expressions in the city. It can be seen as a guide in which such representational forms and architectural expressions of the city are structured and modified. It constituted the art of building the city. (Collins,: 50-55)

In 1893, four years after Der Städtebau was published, Wagner won a competition for a new development plan for Vienna and secured his place as the new guardian

of the city.[5] Wagner's ideas were based on a very different premise than Sitte's. His program was focused on the non-aesthetic factors of the city such as traffic, land-use differentiation and sanitary control.[6] In accordance with new concerns of the city council, Wagner submitted a design dominated by the idea of transportation. In addition to the Ringstrasse, he proposed a series of three other circumferential roads and rail belts, all of which would be intersected by radial arteries running toward the heart of the city. Wagner launched his project with the motto Artis sola domina necessitas. Necessity for Wagner meant the demands of efficiency, economy, and the facilitation of business, which were manifested in his design centered on transportation. It was a tool to unite a widespread Großstadt into a total unit, whatever its constituents might be. The city itself was to be subdivided into parts, which would be linked and united by the lines of traffic. Transportation belts and arteries were conceived as a grid at once dividing and uniting each area of the city. By the architect's hand, the city was to become the product of Gesamtkunstwerk, whose sense of totality was not to bear upon the old artistic means but was rather a new aesthetic, representing new economy, efficiency, utility and modern technology. (Malgrave, Otto Wagner: 1-20)

Necessity carried a different meaning for Sitte. For him, it was based on artistic principles, as he felt the city must not be *"a merely mechanical bureaucratic product but a significant spiritual work of art, a piece of great genius folk art, especially in our time, when a popular volkstümlich synthesis of all visual arts in the service of a national Gesamtkunstwerk is lacking."*[7] While an expansive circulation network was Wagner's tool for building the city, Sitte considered the enclosed city squares as representing the Gesamtkunstwerk that he felt his era lacked. This was perhaps the closest the architect could get to building the city. As the architect could neither

[5] See Harry Malgrave's introduction to Otto Wagner, **Reflections on the Raiment of Modernity** (CA: The Getty Center for the History of Art and the Humanities, 1994), pp. 1-20.

[6] The competition called for the designs for a general plan for regulating the whole municipal area of Vienna. See Die Wiener Ringstrasse, Bild Einer Epoch (Wien: H. Bohlaus Nachf., 1969-1981) See also Schorske, Fin-de-Siecle Vienna, p. 73.

[7] See Camillo Sitte, Grossstadt Grün, an appendix which was added to the third and all subsequent editions of Der Städtebau.

build nor control the whole city, the square would at least provide him a platform from which to work. The square was a place that allowed the architect to unify several arts into a visual totality, and a tool to break the linearity of the infinite spatial pattern of the modern city. Instead of being unified by linear circulation lines, the city would be assembled by a network of interlocking squares.

It is worth noting that Sitte never proposed a total scheme for the planning of Vienna, but instead, addressed each particular section of the city. His city seemed to be composed of fragmented units of spatial volume rather than by an extensive network, as Wagner's city was. The fact that Sitte was at times fixated on the lengthy discussions of the merits of crooked over straight streets can also mislead one to interpret his idea of street networks as a mere connections of lines, whose configuration could be drawn on a drawing board. Straight streets are not just lacking in picturesque quality, but imply a homogenous volume and a form of space lacking in hierarchy and order. (Schorske,: 24-115)

5. Conclusion

The difference between Wagner and Sitte's drawings is illuminating. Comparing Wagner's proposal for a general plan published in Die Großstadt in 1910 to Sitte's fragmented plans in Der Städtebau, the space of the city carries fundamentally different connotations. For Wagner, plan-making is a manifestation of proportionate and coherent unity. Space, in this sense, is measured as the regulated field that can be repeated or divided. For Sitte, on the other hand, plan-making is more of an assembly of both masses and spaces that is built up at the same time. The city is an assembly of rooms aggregated and unified by the relations between each particular setting. While Wagner's space is being expanded, Sitte's is being delimited. Despite their differences, both shared certain attitudes toward the city, believing it was to be the product of will rather than the product of chance. These two points of view, however contrast, continued to represent different ends of the spectrum in city planning. While it may be true that neither the first nor the second will suffice, they offer different methodologies that can be worked and reworked together to find an equilibrium that is capable to respond to different socio-cultural situations in different places.

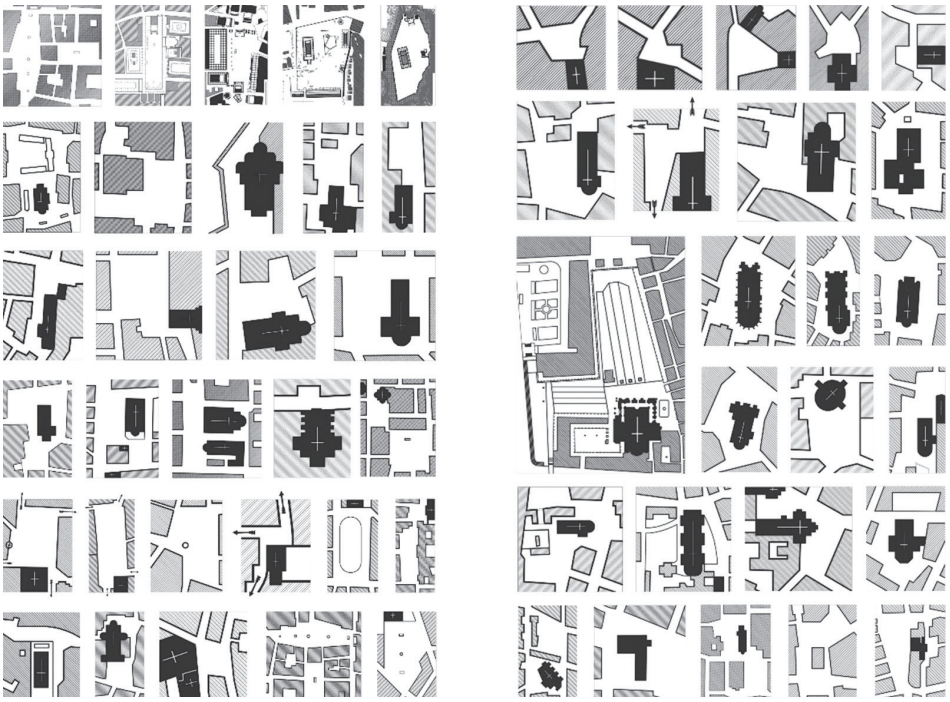


Fig 1–2: From Camillo Sitte, Der Städtebau

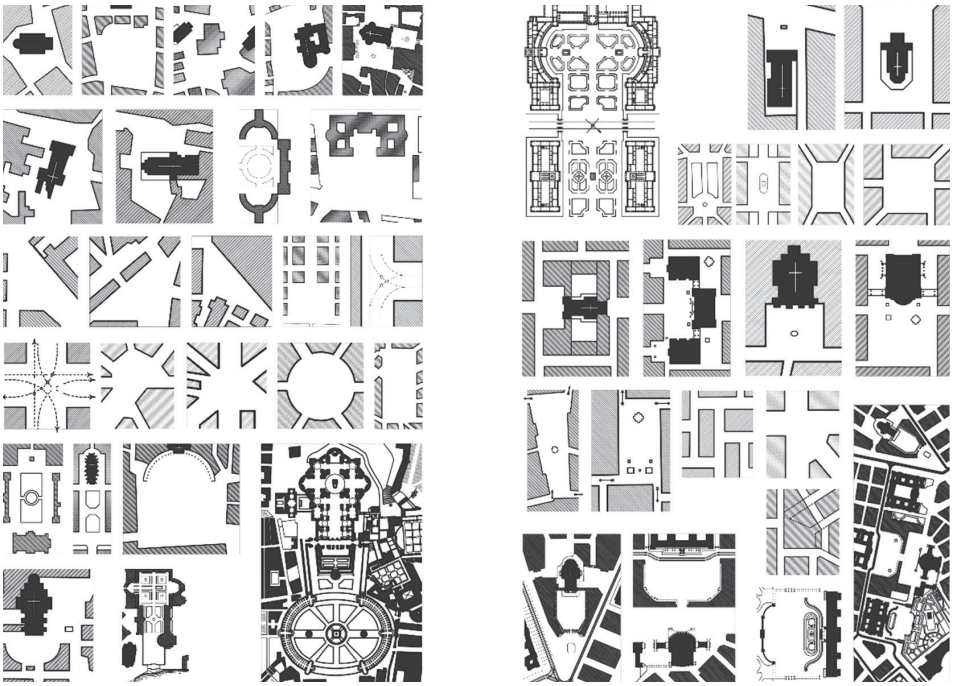


Fig 3–4: From Camillo Sitte, Der Städtebau

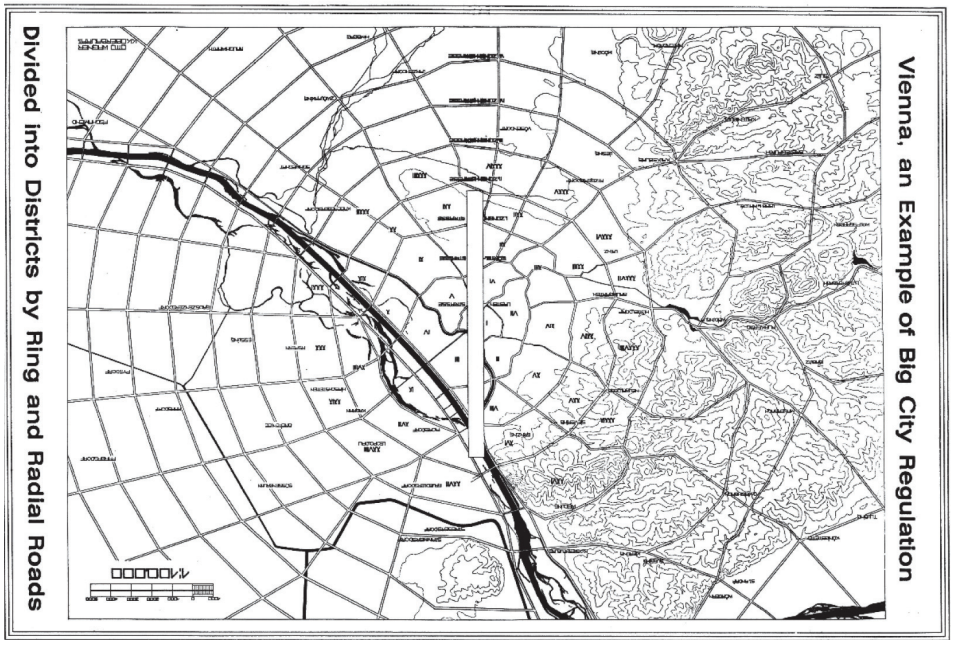


Fig 5: Vienna, expanding city from Otto Wagner, Die Grosstadt.

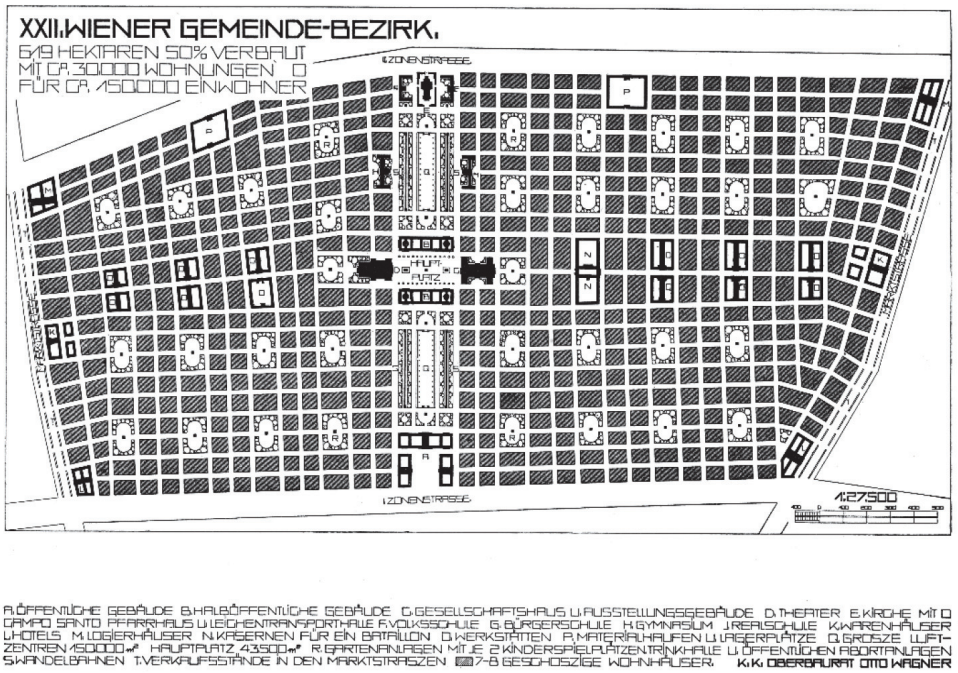


Fig 6: Viennese district XXII, Otto Wagner, Die Grosstadt.

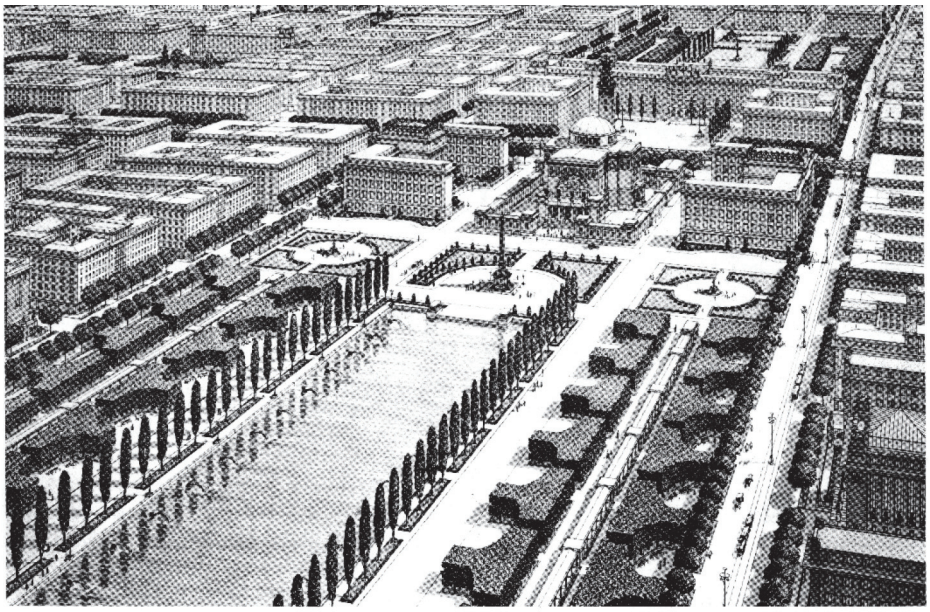


Fig 7: Viennese district XXII, Otto Wagner, Die Grosstadt.

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