

The Politics of Style: Vienna and the Ringstrasse

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Abstract

The subject of this paper is twofold – the 19th century notion of historical styles, and an architectural culture and its preoccupation. The architectural culture is that of Vienna during the last twenty-five years of the Austro-Hungarian Empire, exemplifies by the architecture of the Ringstrasse, which represents the paradoxical nature of architecture and cities in response to modern industrial society. The concept in question is, or appears at first sight to be, our own Twenty-First century concept in its infancy: the concept of styles, which was explicitly discussed as during the 19th Century.

The Ringstrasse represents the culmination of the late Nineteenth-century views around the formulation of artistic and architectural concepts of style. The conceiving of style became a tool for both rationality and expressiveness as a new foundation for architecture. Framed between the extremes of idealism (abstract symbolism and art) and realism (materials and construction), the dialogue on architectural style was sought as a consolidated position. It generally represents a proclivity to theoretical compromise and constitutes the complex mixture of aesthetic idealism and scientific empiricism that have become the modern theories of architecture.

Keyword: 19th Century Architecture | Ringstrasse | Architectural Style | Architectural Historicism

1. Vienna Ringstrasse

During the course of the Nineteenth century, three periods of revolution changed the face of Europe. Of these revolutions in 1830, 1848 and 1870, the ones that most affected the future development of the cities were the bourgeois and anti-aristocratic revolutions of 1848. The development of cities partly resulted from the concern to prevent any upset to the newly-dominant power of the bourgeoisie. In particular, the complex medieval structures which Baroque city planning had framed were perceived to provide a hiding place for the unruly oppositional forces of the working classes. If the bourgeoisie were to be able to exercise its forces of suppression, the old urban areas had to be regulated. The most famous city restructuring was that of Paris undertaken by the French emperor Louis Bonaparte, Napoleon III, and Baron Georges-Eugene Haussmann between 1850 and 1870. Another such restructuring, that of Vienna, was equally dramatic and influential. [1]

Old Vienna had not undergone any radical change in form from the Thirteenth century to the second half of the Nineteenth century when the ambitious project of the Ringstrasse was launched. From the time it had become a fortified capital of Babenbergs in 1135, and was under the first Habsburgs by the following century, the town had roughly the perimeter that it possessed mid Nineteenth century. The city survived in a curiously fossilized form until a late date while becoming one of the major European capitals and commercial centers late in the Eighteenth century. Its medieval towers and walls had been replaced by a modern earthwork bastion and glacis while the city's suburbs lay out past the fortifications. By 1850, there were thirty-four suburbs lying out beyond the glacis, which now constituted a far greater area than the inner city itself. (fig. 1-2)

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[1] For the details of the Ringstrasse development, see *Die Wiener Ringstrasse, Bild Einer Epoch: die Erweiterung der inneren Stadt Wien unter Kaiser Franz Joseph / in 14 Banden*, ed. Renate Wagner-Rieger, Vienna, 1969-1981.

For a critical discussion of the Ringstrasse development, see Carl Schorske, *Fin-de-Siecle Vienna, Politics and Culture*, New York, 1981, 24-115.

See also Iian Borden and David Dunster's discussion in Borden and Dunster, ed., *Architecture and the Sites of History*, Oxford, 1995, pp. 1-23.

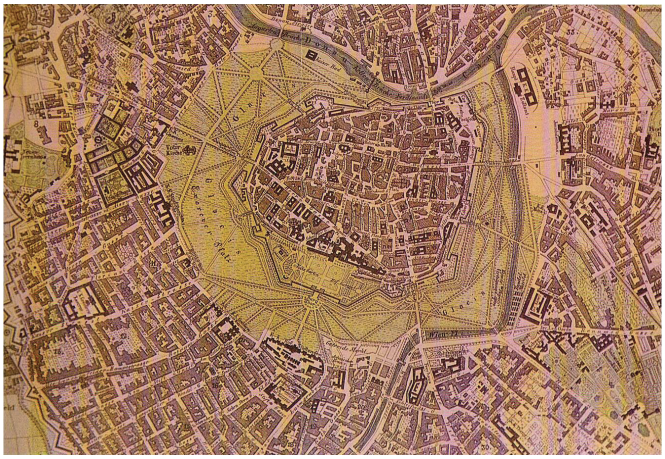


Figure 1: Vienna 1857

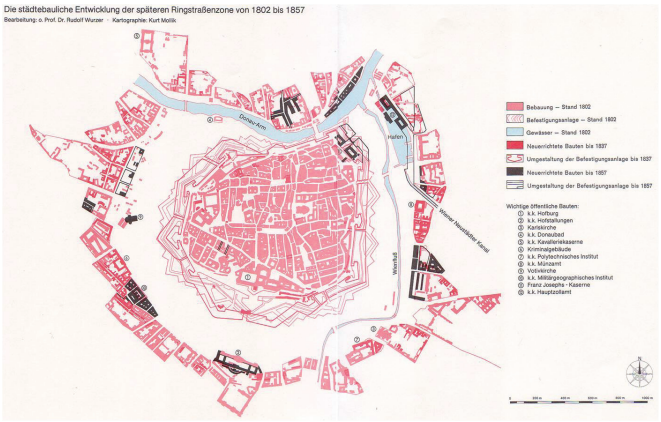


Figure 2: The inner city of Vienna, with the glacis, 1857.

After the revolution of 1848, the emerging commercial and mercantile classes sought control of the fortified area, which separated the medieval core of Vienna from the growing suburbs. The revolution of 1848 redefined politically the place of the glacis in the life of the city. After centuries of direct imperial rules, the liberal bourgeois could demand from the Emperor the right to municipal self-government. The new municipal Statue provided a political framework for advancing civilian claims to the glacis. Moreover, beyond the political pressure, this industrializing city's rapid economic growth of the 1850s increased its population, creating both a population influx and a severe housing shortage.[2] During the first half of the Nineteenth century, the overwhelming majority of Vienna's population was comprised of Germans. However,

[2] For complete account of political issues behind the development of the Ringstrasse see, Schorske, *Fin-de-Siecle Vienna, Politics and Culture*, pp. 24.

from the mid-Nineteenth century onward, the movement of minority groups into the city transformed its composition and its politics. Vienna had become a multi-cultural center with ungovernable nationalities. The rapid growth of its population aggravated a long-standing problem of housing.[3] The use of land along the glacis seemed ideal.[4]

As political and economic pressure proved strong, Emperor Franz Joseph finally proclaimed his intention to open the space for civilian use and established a City Expansion Commission to plan and execute its development.[5] On December 20, 1857, the Emperor issued his famous memorandum ordering the demolition of the fortifications enclosing the old city of Vienna and their replacement by an ambitious town-expansion plan. The glacis was to be replaced by the 60 foot wide, tree-lined boulevard,[6] the celebrated Ringstrasse, with its vast complex of public buildings that would occupy a broad belt of land along it. Land around each of these new building would be sold to pay for the construction, creating an area for the development of apartment buildings.[7]

A competition was planned for the Ringstrasse layout for which Ludwig von Förster won first prize with his motto, "Der gerade Weg ist der beste (The Straight line is the best)!" Other awards went to Friedrich Stache and the team of van der Nüll and Siccardsburg, while the actual plan employed was produced by the new building department of the Ministry of Interior and approved by the Emperor in 1859.[8] From a baroque town squeezed into the physical structure of a medieval town, Vienna was to transform itself into a metropolitan Großstadt. It was the beginning of the Ringstrasse era. (fig. 3-6)

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[3] Alan Janik and Stephen Toulmin, *Wittgenstein'S Vienna*, New York, 1979, p. 49.

[4] Schorske, Fin-de-Siecle Vienna, Politics and Culture, pp. 24-115.

[5] Ibid.

[6] The word boulevard is believed to derive from the word bulwark for a rampart or earthwork. See Borden and Dunster, ed., Architecture and the Sites of History, Oxford, 1995, pp. 291-304.

[7] For full accounts of the development of Ringstrasse apartment buildings see Die Wiener Ringstrasse, Bild einer Epoch: die Erweiterung der inneren Stadt Wien unter Kaiser Franz Joseph / in 14 Banden, Vienna, 1969-1981, vol.2.

[8] Stache's project was presented in the interesting booklet Denkschrift zu den Plänen für die Erweiterung und Verschonerung Wiens, Vienna, 1858.

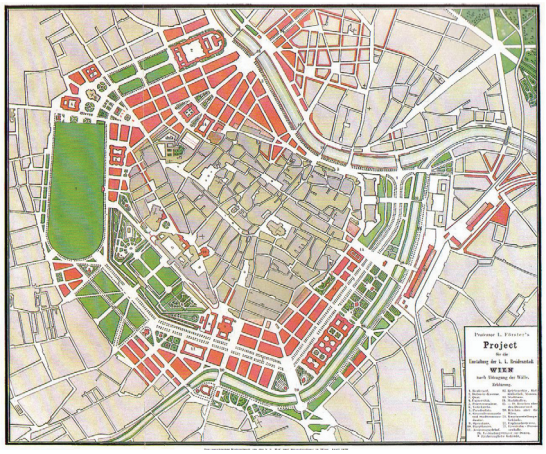


Figure 3: The Ringstrasse project, Ludwig von Förster, 1858.

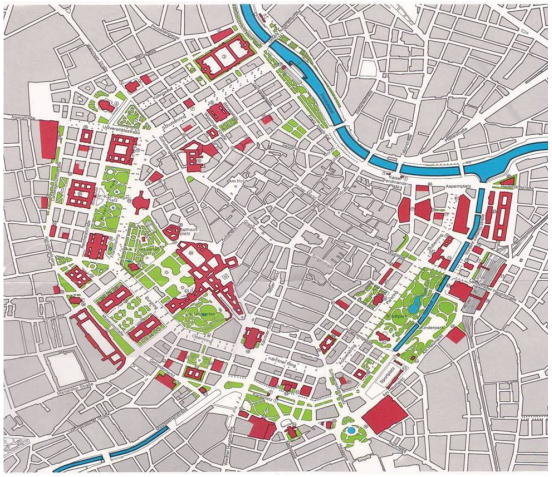


Figure 4: The Ringstrasse, 1910.



Figure 5: The Votive Church (Heinrich von Ferstel)



Figure 6: The Parliament (Theophil Hansen)

As Carl Schorske noted in his extensive study of the Ringstrasse, although its scale and grandeur suggest the persistent power of the Baroque, the spatial conception which inspired its design was rather new. For the Baroque planners, space was organized to carry the viewer to a central focus, thus serving as a magnifying setting to the principal buildings which encompassed or dominated it. The Ringstrasse, in contrast, used the buildings to magnify the horizontality of its space by organizing all the elements in relation to a central grand corso.[9] The Ringstrasse, polyhedral in shape, became an element in the vast complex with an independent life unsubordinated to any other spatial entity. It became a focus of design stressing the circular flow of traffic, thus cutting off the old center from the new suburbs. The streets, coming from either the inner city or the suburbs, were swallowed by the circular flow.[10] The military insulation belt of fortifications and glacis were now replaced by an isolation belt of traffic more difficult to cross.

Soon the Ringstrasse had become an expression of middle-class values. In the vast, continuous circular space of the Ringstrasse, public services like hospitals, parks and clean water were matched by overtly ideological public buildings that were installed as symbols of the new political power. Viennese masters were summoned to contribute to the Ringstrasse development. A series of public building along the Ringstrasse included the Votive Church (1856-1879) and the University (1873-84) by Heinrich von Ferstel, the Rathaus by Friedrich Schmidt (1872-83), the Opera House by Eduard van der Nüll and August von Siccardburg (1861-1869), the Parliament by Theophil Hansen (1874-83), the Hofburgtheater (1874-88) and the Art and Natural History Museums (1872-1881) by Gottfried Semper and Carl von Hasenauer. Each building's purpose – municipal autonomy, national government, higher learning, liberal culture and so on – contributed to a vision of a new democratic power. The creation of the Ringstrasse and the development of its neighboring residential areas helped give physical form and identity to the new city life.[11] (fig. 7-10)

Architectural styles also proved to be a problem in this transformation of the glacis into the Ringstrasse. It emphasized the question that had become a long-standing debate throughout the century. The styles of Ringstrasse architecture were considered to be both political and cultural matters. Yet it was not a question of which style was appropriate for the era, but rather of which style would be appropriate for each building. As the Nineteenth

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[9] Schorske, Fin-de-Siecle Vienna, pp. 24-115.

[10] Ibid.

[11] See the discussion of each building in Die Wiener Ringstrasse, Bild einer Epoch, vol.2-4.

century was perceived to have no style of its own, the architects of the Ringstrasse had many historical styles from which to choose. As a result, architectural styles were adopted to match the content of each building. The Reichsrat Parliament building was designed in the Greek style because of its associations with Athenian state democracy. The Rathaus City Hall architect employed Gothic because of its associations with medieval municipal autonomy and freedom from aristocratic power. Neoclassical was suitable for the University because of its associations with renaissance secular learning. Architectural styles were considered as something like a book of patterns, from which a selection could be made by educated reading.[12] Each example of style stood for larger cultural and historical ideas. This led to a debate that was, in many ways, a discursive arena on the plural nature of architecture in response to modern industrial society.[13]

In this sense, the Ringstrasse was seen as a victim of the vast proliferation of knowledge and the exhaustion of historical references. Yet considering such practices as mere artistic failings prevents one from acknowledging precisely how the theoretical and artistic dialogue of architecture had been fundamentally restructured through such a presumed failure.[14] In many ways, the eclecticism and historicism of the Ringstrasse ideology had dialectically re-composed the discussions on architecture and city planning.

During the course of the Nineteenth century, the association of architectural theories with industrial modernity had become crucial. The mass urban market-place and its corresponding cosmopolitan society made architecture a more demanding and a less harmonious profession. With rapid changes to the practice of building, the norms of the discipline were less agreed upon than ever before. The theoretical debates in the Nineteenth century German speaking countries were aspired to reconstruct a common set of values for an architectural culture in the midst of uncertainty. The Ringstrasse program appeared after the dramatic episodes of the Nineteenth-century debates on style.[15] In 1828, Heinrich Hübsch

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[12] David Dunster, "The Birth of a Modern City" in Architecture and the Sites of History, ed. Iain Borden and David Dunster, New York, 1995, pp. 291-303.

[13] See the discussion on style in Mitchell Schwarzer, "Style as a Cultural System," in German Architectural Theory and the Search for Modern Identity, Cambridge, MA., 1995, pp. 33-82.

[14] See Harry Mallgrave's introduction to Empathy, Form, and Space: Problems in German Aesthetics, 1873-1893, trans. Harry Mallgrave and Eleftherios Ikonomou, Santa Monica, CA, 1994, pp. 1-85.

[15] See In What Style Should We Build: The German Debate on Architectural Style, translated by Wolfgang Herrmann, Santa Monica, CA, 1992.

published an essay titled "In What Styles Should We Build?" (Im welchem Style sollen wir Bauen?) which would become a catalyst for a long-standing debate throughout the next few decades. Hübsch's question of style was first conceived as a practical matter concerning the styles that were appropriate for the building materials, methods and needs of his time. His discussion of style was grounded in the attainment of a new style representing the present, which signified more than the application of an ornamental mask atop modern phenomena.

In order to legitimize themselves, architects and theorists of the Nineteenth century sought a coincidence of architectural forms and ideas with the contours of historical ages. Within the history of architecture, this strategy was nothing new. Referencing remote histories has been a determinant feature of Western architecture since the Roman time. What marked the Nineteenth century as different was the new phenomenon of numerous competing historical styles. Previously, architects had generally affiliated themselves with a single stylistic source. Yet in the Nineteenth century, style had become associated with time, a multiplicity of historical references preoccupied architects and theorists.[16] They believed that the different styles which had been chosen and favored could be developed and would, in the course of time, lead to a new style appropriate for their era. At first, the debate on style focused on the conflict between the merits of Greek and Gothic revivals. Eventually, ruminations on the sources of design extended to historical values and forms from all periods. Hence, architectural theorists opened debates in the merits of diverse styles such as Greek Classicism, Italian Renaissance, the Romanesque-influenced Rundbogenstil and medieval Gothic building methods and forms.

Another important contributing factor to the debate on style was politics.[17]Throughout the Nineteenth century, in both the Austrian and German lands, there existed unresolved class antagonisms between the declining aristocracy and the rising middle classes.[18] Between 1800 and 1866, Germanic politics was characterized by competing principalities under the domination of the rivalry between Austria and Prussia. A crucial political question of the Nineteenth century revolved around the shape of German unification. Up until 1866, the

[16] Ibid., p. 33.

[17] For the discussion of Austrian and German politics, see Arthur May, The Habsburg Monarchy 1867-1918, New York, 1968. See also William Johnston, The Austrian Mind, An Intel lectual and Social History 1848-1938, Berkeley, CA, 1972.

[18] For extensive accounts on the class antagonisms in Vienna see Schorske, Fin-de-Siecle Vienna, pp. 23-26.

choice for unification was narrowed down to the solutions of the Grossdeutschland and Klein-deutschland. The first option would have included all of the German-speaking lands as well as the Austrian Empire. Thus, it would have included the numerous non-German-speaking countries subjected to Habsburg domination. The second option, instead, would have limited its boundaries to German-speaking Europe. This solution, therefore, implied the exclusion of Austria from German political unification (as it was unlikely that the Habsburgs would relinquish their control over much of Central Europe).[19]



Figure 7: Rathaus (Friedrich Schmidt)



Figure 8: The University (von Ferstel)



Figure 9: Art- and Natural History Museums (Gottfried Semper and Karl von Hasenauer)

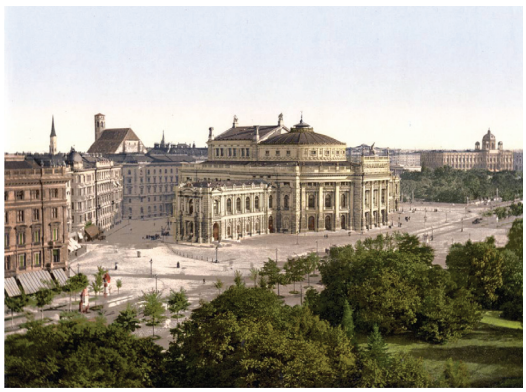


Figure 10: Burgtheater (Gottfried Semper and Karl von Hasenauer)

[19] See May, The Habsburg Monarchy, chapter 1-2. Johnston, The Austrian Mind, pp. 1-32.

In 1866, when Prussian forces under Bismarck routed the Austrian army at Sadowa in Bohemia, German unification under Prussia became imminent. Prussia then absorbed Hanover and excluded Austria from the affairs of the new North German Confederation. Five years later, in 1871, after defeating the French armies, Prussia completed the final German unification. Bavaria, like Saxony and the Rhineland, also became a dependency of a German state, ruled from Berlin. For perhaps the first time in its history, Austria was excluded from German political affairs. Such political separation emphasized cultural, economic and artistic differences between the Austrian and German states.[20]

In 1867, realizing the implications of this exclusion, Vienna agreed to a compromise with Hungary on sharing power over the other minorities of the empire. Austria, now the Austro-Hungarian Empire, was left with a cultural need to compete with the German States. Architectural style became a vehicle for the centering of identity around a political capital. The Vienna Ringstrasse and its historic styles became both the tools of the social class, the bourgeois liberals, and an expression of the power and the political, economic and cultural identities of the states. In many ways, the monuments of the Ringstrasse served as the symbols of cultural and political aspirations expressed with and intensity of historical eclecticism and convocation of architectural nobility.[21]

The Nineteenth century historical styles in general and on the Ringstrasse in particular, embodied in some ways more than an attentiveness to finished form. The historical styles of the architecture may be considered as links among different cultural relationships, representing powerful religious, nationalistic, and symbolic demands. Crucial to the choice of historical model was the belief that the particular era possessed an order and cultural unity transcending the fragmentation of the modern age. Each historical style was viewed as a mechanism to mediate modern uncertainty with ideas of social cohesion located alternatively in classical antiquity, feudal Christianity and mercantile humanism. Hence the styles were an expression of a desire to affiliate with the greater meaning and unity of a cultural order.[22]

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[20] Ibid.

[21] Schorske, Fin-de-Siecle Vienna, pp. 46-62.

[22] Schwarzer, German Architectural Theory, pp. 35-40.

In this way, the Ringstrasse embodied in stone and space a cluster of social values and so cannot be addressed purely architecturally. Its critics inevitably addressed themselves to more than architectural questions.[23] Critics of the Ringstrasse architecture raised questions based on the dissonance in the relationship between style and function. But with them, a wider question was raised, a question about the relationship between cultural aspiration and social content in a liberal bourgeois society. Disproportion between a society's social arrangements and its creative power led to an awareness of the gap between promise and performance, potential and realization. The Ringstrasse Vienna has become a concept, a way of summoning to mind the characteristics of an era. It was a visual expression of the values of a social class.[24]

In the late 1860s, another event in the Ringstrasse work took place, which was to have a decisive influence on Sitte. It was the calling of Gottfried Semper to Vienna to advise on the further development of the Hofburg area. As the Ringstrasse would bisect the new Hofburg plan, Semper planned to screen it with triumphal arches and to remove the old Burgtor at that point so that the enclosed court could become a contained spatial entity. It was a solution that would break the strong flow of the Ringstrasse, shifting focus from a broad artery of traffic to an area of spatial containment and human activities.

The second phase of the Ringstrasse program began in 1892 when an international competition was held for various works. Joseph Stübben and Otto Wagner were the winners of the overall plan for Greater Vienna while the brothers Mayreder won the design for the completion of the Ringstrasse's further development.[25] Karl Mayreder was put in charge of architectural aspects in the new city planning bureau established to combine the best elements of the various competition entries and to prepare definitive programs for all phases of the work.

The third phase of the Viennese planning took place after 1904 when municipal control extended across the Danube and a ring of woods and meadows was provided as a buffer outside the suburbs.[26] Sitte died in 1903 before this third

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[23] Schorske, Fin-de-Siecle Vienna, pp. 60-65.

[24] Ibid.

[25] See Die Wiener Ringstrasse , Bild einer Epoch, vol. 12.

[26] See Schorske's discussion of Camillo Sitte and Otto Wager, in Fin-de-Siecle Vienna, pp. 72-95

phase got underway, with bitter regrets that none of his persistent efforts and warnings were taken into account. By that time, Otto Wagner had assumed a prominent role in the city planning activities of Vienna. Although Wagner's planning principles were radically utilitarian in their basic premises, he based his effects on visual principles and stressed the architectonic character of the city plan.[27] Working from the idea that beauty arose out of complying with the purpose of a project, Wagner undertook the responsibility of designing the new metropolitan railway system, the station, tunnels and overpass-ways, of which perfectly demonstrated his ideas. His overall view of planning was later summed up in a 1911 pamphlet on the metropolis, Die Großstadt.

Toward the end of the Nineteenth century while the third phase of the Ringstrasse project was underway, the intellectuals of Austria began to develop doubts about the city's culture of liberalism and the values of its social class. The Ringstrasse inevitably became a symbolic focus of their critique. In the realm of architecture, the Ringstrasse ideology provoked inquiries into the pressing issues of the relationship of architecture to modern industrial culture. Attempts to tackle the current architectural problems ingrained in historicism and academicism resulted in various alternatives, from the organic aestheticism of the Viennese Secession and the functionalism of Otto Wagner, to Adolf Loos's seemingly anti-ornamentalist approach. Arguments and counter arguments were advanced when traditional values were upheld against radical proposals and the materialistic approach was opposed by an idealistic point of view. Architects began to question the dogmas of propriety in the same rational spirit that had animated other Austrian Intellectuals such as Karl Kraus and Arnold Schoenberg. As a reaction to the long-standing historicism, the discussion of styles and aesthetic matter would soon be joined by the matters of purpose and human activity. In the end, the Ringstrasse dialectically produced a discussion of space, both in relation to architecture and to the city as the embodiment of human activities inside a stylistic shell.

Acknowledgement:

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27 Ibid.