

The Ringstrasse, Its Critics, and the Birth of Urban Modernism

The Creation:

That Vienna had large open space in the center was a fortunate consequence of historical backwardness

While other cities had razed their fortifications the walls in Vienna were still in place for protection from the Turks just years before

Along with the walls was a large glacis (a slope extending down from the walls)

The city had long outgrown these limits with suburbs stretching for miles past them

In 1857, out of economic needs Emperor Francis Joseph announced his plans to open space for civilian use (figure 1), demolition of the wall and the making of the large avenue

The large avenue became the Ringstrasse:

They constructed the broadest possible street to maximize the mobility of troops- like Paris

First buildings still reflected the values of dynamic neo-absolutism:

1) Votivekirche (1856-79)- great church built to celebrate the Emperor's escape from a Hungarian assassin- functioned as a Westminster Abbey, used as the burial place for Austrians leaders

2) new arsenal complex and two barracks constructed by the new railway station- two tracts of land left open near the Hofburg as protection fields against fire in the suburbs

From Absolutism to Constitutionalism:

Within the decade Absolute regime turned into a Constitutional Monarchy

In 1860, the liberals of Austria took power of the western portion of the Hapsburg Empire, taking control of Vienna, and transforming the institutions of the state in accordance with the principles of constitutionalism and cultural values of the middle class

Ringstrasse became the visual expression of values of the rising middle class:

-radiating center of intellectual life

-center of urban reconstruction

-doubting, critical, aesthetically sensitive sons rejecting the Old World ways of their parents, new thoughts, new ideals

Camille Sitte and Otto Wagner- Urban Life architects, transformed the City with a sensitivity to psychic states

Practical objectives were subordinated to symbolic function of presentation-

The objective was not utility but cultural self projection

Beautification of the City's image

Ringstrasse transformed to meet the liberals needs
Erected a series of buildings expressing the values of pax liberalis

The liberals produced a leaflet in 1860 announcing the development of the Ringstrasse-
Depicting the ideals of the new city- women on sides representing “strong through law and peace” (instead of military force) and “Embellished through art” displaying the personification of art dressing her mistress, Vienna

Inner city dominated by Baroque Hofburg (residence of the emperor), elegant palais of the aristocracy, Gothic Cathedral of St. Stephens, and small churches and narrow streets
-The pillars of Absolutism
-Old city reduced to a museum like thing

Ringstrasse stressed constitutional (Recht) over imperial (Macht), secular culture over religious faith- no longer palaces and churches but constitutional government and higher culture

Organization and Style:

They organized all elements around central broad avenue

Avenue, is a polyhedron, and is the only thing that leads an independent life, unsubordinated to any other element
Stress of circular flow

Trees around the ring emphasize the isolation and importance of street from buildings- focus on the horizontal rather than vertical

Still Baroque architecture but spatial conception was original and new:
Baroque procedure was to bring the viewer's attention to central focus- space served to magnify the buildings
Ringstrasse architecture inverted this- used the buildings to magnify the horizontal space

Functions of buildings- political, cultural, educational
Representational buildings of bourgeoisie
Are expressed in spatial organization as equivalents

Buildings are related to each other only in their “lonely confrontation of the great circular artery, which carries the citizen from one building to another, as from one aspect of life to another...whose only stabilizing element is an artery of men in motion” p.36

Sense of isolation is heightened by variety in historical styles

Rathaus Quarter- visually depicts their value system

Four buildings form a quadrilateral of Recht (constitution) and Kultur (culture)

- 1) parliamentary government in Reichsrat building
- 2) municipal autonomy in the Rathaus
- 3) higher learning in the University
- 4) dramatic art in the Burg Theater

Each building in appropriate style to fit its function:

- 1) Parliament- classical Greek- each side flanked central hall- one for the house of Lords and one for the House of Representatives- integration of peers and people in the middle (fig 7)→Athena- chosen as the central symbol-protector of polis, Goddess of wisdom
- 2) Rathaus- Gothic- to express the origins of free medieval commune reborn after absolutism (fig 4)
- 3) University- Renaissance- to proclaim historical affiliation between modern, rational culture and revival of secular learning after long era of medieval superstition (fig 6)
- 4) Burg Theater- Baroque- to commemorate the era in which theater first joined the people together (fig 5)

Ringstrasse buildings expressed heightened values of liberal culture:

- political institutions of a constitutional state
- schools to educate a free people
- museums and theaters to bring culture to all

With the liberals in charge, aristocracy of culture was open for everyone, not just the genealogical aristocracy

Adolf Hitler was fascinated by the Ring when he was a young aspiring artist visiting Vienna- “From morning until late at night I ran from one object to another, but it was always the buildings that held my primary interest. For hours I could stand in front of the Opera, for hours I could gaze at the Parliament; the whole Ring Boulevard seemed like an enchantment of ‘The Thousand and One Nights.’”

Three decades later he would return to the Ring as the conqueror of all it stood for -p.46

Ring also had large apartment houses- private sector funded the public buildings, the proceeds from land sales went to City Expansion Fund

Housing chosen reflects values

Apartment house- four- six stories high, modeled after aristocratic palace of Baroque era but divided into apartments- called the Mietpalast (rent palace) or Wohnpalast (apartment palace)

19th century trend from combined residence and workplace to separation- Ringstrasse apartment houses displays transitional stage of development- commercial space on bottom but not the work places of the residences

Multi- family dwellings but aristocratic character carried out through façade

2nd floor most prestigious- noble etage

Vertical differentiation by height and windows, richness of ornamentation differentiated the floors and class- higher the floor more units and cheaper

First building period- 1861-65- overriding need for middle class homes- smaller uniform units Kartner Ring (fig 9)

Second Phase- 1868-73 façade and interior reflect higher aspirations of society (fig 10)

The Ring makes a full circle:

Stuben Quarter- designed by Otto Wagner in the 1890s

New War Ministry and the Imperial Postal Savings Bank

Marked return of the army and Catholicism to the Ring- in modern bureaucratic form

Bank- created by Georg Coch- martyr hero of the Christian anti-Semites

Bust placed on a pedestal in the square in front of building- first monument to an anti Semite hero

Flat façade with windows flushed with the walls, experimentation with new materials, simplification of designs

Votivekirche- symbol of traditional Catholicism at one end of the Ring

Postal Savings Bank marked the revival of the Church on the other end-symbolizing the end of the liberal era