

# RED VIENNA AND THE CONSTRUCTION OF DEMOCRATIC SPACE

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When the Social Democrats came to power in Vienna at the end of the First World War, they faced a devastated economy and a society in need of thorough reconstruction. They decided to devote a major portion of the city's energies and slender resources to redressing its acute, long-standing housing shortage. As a result, the 377 individual housing projects constructed between 1919 and 1934 constitute the architectural legacy of the period known as "Red Vienna."

Many studies of the housing of Red Vienna have treated it as exemplifying the socialist political project of that period. Those concerned with architectural issues, on the other hand, have tended to see it as outside of the modernist orbit, if not anti-modernist, and therefore of limited interest. I am interested in rethinking the relationship between the politics and architecture of Red Vienna, to look at whether there might be a stronger connection between the progressive socialist goals of the municipal government and the housing it built in the face of both political and economic constraints. This paper is part of that larger endeavor.

By considering the legacy of these housing projects, can we discern principles of architectural and urban design that embody democratic ideals? To address this question fully requires situating these housing initiatives within both the urban design and the political contexts of the late 19th and early 20th centuries. Clearly our time limitations do not allow us to range so widely. Instead, I will offer a few considerations that help to define the problem, and then turn to the built forms themselves.

The urban reconstruction that we most associate with Vienna is the creation of the Ringstrasse following the demolition of the encircling fortifications beginning in 1857. Carl Schorske's cogent analysis of this process, which reached into the early years of the 20th century, remains the best overview of this history and provides a model for studying how political relationships are articulated through the languages of urban space and architectural form. The range of institutions built along the Ring asserted the civic and cultural prominence of the liberal bourgeoisie. Distributed non-hierarchically along both sides of the broad avenue, with parks, gardens and new apartment blocks for the elite interspersed among them, they formed a secular rosary: opera house, art and

natural history museums, Parliament, theater, city hall, university.

Two observations must be made concerning Ringstrasse development: First of all, although the circuit of Ringstrasse space broke with the imperial Baroque tradition of radial forms, in other ways continuity between the new structures and both past and current imperial practices was maintained. Historicist architectural styles formed a common vocabulary; the Baroque affiliation of the "apartment palace" of the bourgeoisie is also evident. The challenge mounted by the rising new class, in other words, was not posed in terms that broke entirely with imperial models.

Secondly, the construction of the Ringstrasse, along with the design of new transportation and civic-engineering infrastructures at the turn of the century, provided several generations of Viennese architects with experience in reshaping urban space. These projects formed the basis for intellectual continuity, especially among the students of Otto Wagner, many of whom contributed to the design of municipal housing for Red Vienna.

With the fall of the Habsburgs in 1918, the need arose to redefine the places and spaces that had been stamped by imperial power. Within the context of the contemporary political situation and of Austro-marxism - the theory guiding the Social Democrats, who had won the postwar municipal elections - this took the form of establishing housing as a social good. In addition to undertaking the construction of needed new housing, rents in general were reduced from about 25 percent to less than 5 percent of income. As Peter Marcuse has argued, the value of this policy lay in its demonstration of fairness, of equity, and of democracy, and in what it "said to the people of Vienna about their own lives, their roles in society, the respect to which they were entitled, the importance of their welfare, and their ultimate control over the conditions of their lives." (215)

Were these principles embodied in the projects constructed under the Social Democrats that provided 64,000 new housing units? Two features suggest that they were. These are the visual diversity built into the projects, on the one hand, and the way the projects related to the urban totality, on the other. I cannot treat

either of them exhaustively here, but let me sketch some aspects of each.

Architects did not enjoy a free hand in building the Red Vienna projects. Economic constraints meant that designs had to be efficient and embellishments few; social policy shaped some planning decisions, such as the elimination of long corridors in favor of numerous staircases providing access to small groups of apartments. Nevertheless, roughly 200 architects were involved in the design of the municipal blocks, and although the use of some standardized elements, such as windows, also ensured commonalities, the variety of design solutions reflects this multiplicity of designers. The large "hoefe" or courtyard complexes are the most familiar exemplars of Red Vienna, but even these are diverse - in plan, in massing, in elevation, and in details.

Clearly, there is a balance between a shared architectural idiom and this diversity that has its roots in the Ringstrasse era and merits further examination. For now, however, we can only ask what the force is of this diversity. Perhaps it is a way of affirming, and possibly cultivating, an ongoing process of dialogue about shaping the material environment. Beyond providing at least some employment for a substantial number of architects, the involvement of so many designers underscores opposition to a single aesthetic, a single "party line." The multiplicity of design solutions enacts in built form the multi-vocality of democratic social intercourse and political debate.

The other feature we can consider is the way the housing projects relate to the urban totality. The municipal housing bureau integrated the housing it built within the preexisting fabric of the city. That is, it opted against creating satellite towns or suburban pockets of new communities. The arguments in favor of this and opposed to it, both at the time and in more recent assessments, are beyond our consideration here. Rather, we can consider the fact of this decision and its ramifications. Clearly, it affirmed the city itself as a habitat, and staked the claim of the working people - for whom the majority of Red Vienna's housing was built - to that city. Municipal projects were constructed throughout the city, in every district except the first, the Inner City. Many were what we would today call "infill" blocks, especially within the most densely built-up areas. The majority of new structures were erected on, near, or beyond the Guertel, the old beltway that had originally been the customs boundary between the city and its surroundings. Siting "people's palaces" along this outer ring of stores, working-class apartment blocks ("rent barracks"), rail stations, and some industrial shops physically preserved the historical layering of space while it renovated historical meanings. That is to say, Vienna's spatial history records its social history: The urban core was the domain of the court, the church, and the aristocracy, and as one moved away from the physical center one also moved down the social scale. This is a typical pattern in European cities.

The development of the Ringstrasse provided an opportunity to alter this pattern somewhat, but in the 1920s such an opportunity to build from scratch within the heart of the city did not present itself. Instead, the municipal housing blocks shifted attention to previously

neglected or peripheral zones, where they asserted that the quality of ordinary people's daily lives was now integral to Vienna's identity.

The most obvious device that spoke to this integration of the housing projects into the urban totality was signage. Each municipal block bore its name and the communal source of funds or the name of the communal agency that had underwritten its construction. This emphasized the collective nature of the reconstruction of daily life, and also decentralized that collectivity: the city is the sum of dispersed units such as these, whose development is possible only as a result of their inhabitants' collective actions.

Signage may also be seen as expressing a new view of international relationships. The city was no longer the center of the Empire; new ties had to be forged. These, too, could be decentralized, as in the "Zuerchnerhof," a project named in honor of the material aid extended by the city of Zurich to Viennese in distress following the First World War. This link of solidarity offered an alternative model for the new nation's external relations. The most famous project named in honor of a foreign land is the George Washington-Hof, indicating another way that housing nomenclature could affirm democratic ideals.

How did individual projects reflect a commitment to reweaving the urban fabric? Following the typology developed by Paolo Piva for the most systematic consideration of these projects, Manfredo Tafuri's Vienna Rossa, we find that each of the five types relates, in different ways, to its urban environment.

The largest group (161) consists of housing blocks that fill in where other structures had been razed. These are in many ways the least obtrusive structures; they have been successfully woven into the fabric of their surroundings, completing their streetscapes.

The 57 single- and 34 multiple-courtyard types create outdoor rooms within the city. Such projects vary in size and in the number of features of a typical commercial urban streetscape that they embrace, such as stores, clinics, libraries, etc. At the minimum, storage for bikes and baby carriages is located in the courtyard. Among the several variations, those with forecourts blur the boundaries between city street and residential precinct. There is a shared public space where the two commingle, signalling the shared public enterprise of the housing - and so reinforcing that aspect of the signage.

In a city under-supplied with green spaces within its built-up areas, the courtyards provide much-needed oases. Generally, Red Vienna's apartment blocks occupy 40-60 percent of the building lot, considerably less than the 85 percent permissible by code. Courtyards, together with areas of the city designated for small gardens or allotments, preserve or create open spaces, translating the private patch into a communal benefit.

Forty-two projects include one or more streets within their perimeters. Often building wings span city streets. These draw the lifeline of the city into the core of the residential complex, declaring forcefully the continuity between the public arena of the city street and the more intimate realm of the community of dwellings. They are emblematic of the social and physical integration of

housing within the urban totality that Red Vienna was striving for.

In view of the design constraints mentioned earlier, we can also note that there seems to have been an urbanistic rationale for the distribution of visual embellishments. Infill blocks — making up the largest group of housing projects — could be conceived as subordinate to their surrounding streetscapes and so received the least articulation. Freestanding blocks are generally characterized by visual details that lend a unifying identity to a complex that may extend over several city blocks. The greatest articulation — although this is still necessarily restrained — was reserved for the most public structures, such as public baths. This hierarchy of visual form requires that the individual housing block be seen in relation to its place within the larger, public, urban frame.

Vienna's municipal housing, then, displays a number of devices, including siting, open ground, signage, surface

articulation, and both commercial and collective facilities, that promote the perception of a dialogic relationship between individual project and the city of which it is a part. By placing housing in relation to the city as a whole, Red Vienna's architects began a process of transforming Vienna's identity from imperial headquarters to that of a self-determining polity represented as much by the quality of daily life as by formal institutions of power and culture.

## REFERENCES

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