



Vienna • Budapest Metropolis along the Danube

Urban spaces of the founding period

From 21 April until 5 June 2015

Scientific Development of the subject:

Máté Tamáska

Curator

Architektur im Ringturm: Adolph Stiller

Exhibition venue:

Exhibition Centre in the Ringturm
1010 Vienna, Schottenring 30

Opening hours:

Monday to Friday: 9 am to 6 pm, free admission
(closed on public holidays)

Press tour:

Monday, 20 April 2015, 11.00 am

Speakers:

Adolph Stiller, Máté Tamáska

Official Opening:

Monday, 20 April 2015, 6.30 pm (by invitation only)

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No two European cities are as similar in so many ways as Vienna and Budapest. During the founding period, these twin cities were both referred to as the “Queen of the Danube”. At first glance, their ring and radial roads look virtually identical. Their former imperial complexes with their neo-baroque additions evoke memories of the dual monarchy under Emperor Franz Joseph, while the opera houses symbolise the cities’ rivalry when it came to designing showpiece buildings. But there are also a number of obvious contrasts. The Austrian capital lies next to the Danube, while its Hungarian counterpart extends along the banks of the river. Vienna’s Ringstrasse boulevard is the legacy of the city’s bourgeoisie and the aristocracy, but Budapest’s Nagykörút inner ring road was mainly a symbol of the burgeoning middle classes. The Hungarians had great respect for their king, although Queen Elisabeth was much closer to the people. The latest exhibition in the Architektur im Ringturm series turns the spotlight on these subtle differences as well as the similarities between the two cities. Staged by Wiener Städtische Versicherungsverein, the main shareholder of Vienna Insurance Group, the exhibition takes visitors on a journey back to the days of the Austro-Hungarian monarchy with the help of classic examples of urban photography.

Throwbacks to the founding period

It is not their architecture as such, but the fortunes of the two cities which give the impression that Vienna and Budapest are memorials to urbanisation during the founding era. In the space of half a century, the imperial seat of Vienna grew to become one of the world’s major cities, with Budapest as the empire’s second capital. The size and splendour of the dual monarchy’s twin capitals reflect the scale of an empire with deep historical roots that was looking to consolidate its political future, especially in the Balkans. After 1918, both were again cast in the role of capital cities, this time of the nation states of Austria and Hungary. As a result, a strong sense of nostalgia for the dual monarchy developed over the years. The founding era architecture in both cities is now recognised around the world as a symbol of a prosperous time of peace, signifying the age of affluence and wealth in Europe around the dawn of the 20th century.

Tracing the development of modernism

The second half of the 19th century was the heyday of modern urbanisation in Europe. All of the aspects commonly attributed to cities – a high-tempo lifestyle, hustle and bustle, crowds of people, and factories – can be traced back to this epoch. But modernising urban centres had their own structural and historical backgrounds which they extended and which were closely connected with their identities. As the seat of the empire, Vienna was one of Europe’s most important cities, and the nobility as well as the royal court itself fuelled this development. Pest-Buda had been destroyed during the Ottoman wars and was re-established in the early 18th century. The city’s revival only really took off after 1800, thanks to the proactive urban management policies implemented by Habsburg Archduke Joseph of Austria, as well as the city’s favourable geographical location, which made it a magnet for traders.

The importance of inner ring roads

The ideal layout for a 19th century city resembled a spider’s web, with radial and ring roads unifying previously distinct districts. The routes of the inner ring roads were based on medieval city walls, and the customs boundaries introduced later. However, ring roads were more than just an urban planning element; they also facilitated troop movements, with a view to keeping working class districts under tighter control. In other words, they symbolised the authority and power of the ruling elite. Based on the Parisian model of broad, spacious main roads, boulevards originally featured the prestigious trappings of baroque avenues, with ornamental gardens, rows of trees and imposing buildings. Over time, though, traffic began to take up more and more space.

The growth of the railways

Railways were the making of the major urban centres of the 19th century, helping to consolidate resources and shorten travelling times. But far more important than the technical achievements was the fact that railways regimented every aspect of daily life. Work was organised along similar lines to the military, meaning that large numbers of people could be managed from a head office. The state quickly recognised the power of the railways and gradually assumed control of private rail companies. From the 1860s onwards, the monarchy's rail network had only one headquarters. The large cities in western Hungary were first connected to Vienna, and then to Budapest, which by 1910 had become Hungary's main railway hub. Three parallel lines linked the two capitals, with two lines running via Bratislava and one via Győr.

Farmhouses, tenements and stately homes – living in the imperial age

Residential construction was one of the most lucrative ways to invest money at that time. As landowners and homeowners, local residents had a decisive financial advantage over immigrants. The mansions of the early modern age were converted for residential use, and these were followed by apartment buildings and tenements of ever-decreasing quality. Meanwhile, over time the elite retreated to upscale residential districts. Apartment buildings became a metaphor for cities themselves: the inner courtyard represented the town square, and the hallways were the roads. In line with the social hierarchy, there were rooms for upper class and common citizens, and for the servants or the caretaker who carried out minor maintenance work, kept the house in good order and acted as the porter in the evenings. An apartment block was also a reserve, and the embodiment of a sense of community that until then had only been an aspect of rural life.

On the outskirts

As Vienna's city walls were demolished, it seemed as if the city began to rapidly reproduce itself, with new ring roads being constructed, radiating out from the centre. But these rings – which took up progressively larger areas – gradually broke apart. The upper classes sought out expansive plots of land on the outskirts to suit a new lifestyle, giving rise to the villa districts. To supply the raw materials required for this construction activity, space also had to be found for giant factories and public utilities. Meanwhile, the roads of existing agricultural settlements were enclosed within the new suburbs. Outlying districts gradually spread into a mosaic covering the surrounding landscape, eventually encompassing neighbouring towns which, in turn, owed their own ascendancy to their location on the edge of a global city.

Vienna and Budapest: pearls of the Danube

The River Danube doubled up as the inland sea of the Habsburg monarchy. Its waters linked together the Holy Roman Empire of German Nation, the Austrian hereditary lands, the Kingdom of Hungary, and the Ottoman Empire as well as the Balkan countries that emerged as a result of its decline. Vienna – the preeminent city on the Danube – was the uncontested ruler of this Central European region for centuries. But the rise of steamboat transportation around Pest and Buda and the resulting exponential development of Budapest shifted the balance of power. Moreover, due to its advantageous geographical position, the layout of Budapest – the “Queen of the Danube” – was also better aligned with the river.

The park: important green spaces for the city

The more the city grew, the more pressing the question of open, green spaces became – and the areas that were most prestigious became home to the most parks. Two models for city parks presented themselves: aristocratic baroque gardens, and the recreation spaces in the surrounding area. The former comprised notable sights, order and the traditional representation role, while the latter offered serenity and a feeling of freedom. There were numerous variations on the city park, which was the result of these two contrasting traditions. Some emphasised the effect of specific architectural approaches, others added value to apartment buildings, while yet others were places for enjoyment, physical exercise or a pleasant walk. Green spaces were one of the most appealing features of urban centres at the turn of the century. At this point cities were ahead of their time. But from the mid-20th century on, classic city parks in many areas were built on or fell into neglect.

Entertaining the masses

The concept of a world's fair is integral to the definition of a modern global city. World's fairs were a way to showcase technological development, and a laboratory for the industrialisation of entertainment. Specially planned miniature town squares, the dense arrangement of different elements, and the numerous tailored environments introduced a new form of experience. The first world's fair was the Great Exhibition held in London in 1851; world expositions in New York (1853) and Paris (1855) followed. Vienna was the only city in Central Europe that was able to take up this challenge, in 1873. However, the Vienna Stock Exchange crash cast a shadow over proceedings, coming soon after the exhibition opened in May. Budapest also suffered consequences from the crash and it would be a good 20 years before the Hungarian capital held its own small national exhibition in 1896.

Into the 20th century

The beginning of the 20th century was a turning point for architecture, as a new generation of artists established themselves – although still partly socialised under the tradition of eclecticism, they were also looking to break out in new directions. In France, the new stylistic movement was called Art Nouveau, while in Germany it was termed Jugendstil, and in Austria-Hungary the Secession opened a new chapter of art history. Other movements and styles proliferated, including early modernism, national style, and arts and crafts. But eclecticism did not disappear entirely, and enjoyed a second flowering. The decade or so leading up to the First World War represented one of the most varied and interesting periods in the history of art. It is worth noting that an era characterised by such diverse movements gave birth to the term “Zeitgeist” in the study of architecture, which refers to the defining taste of each of the major architectural epochs.

Catalogue

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