

Expert urban design assessment regarding the redesign project for the “InterContinental Hotel, Vienna Ice-Skating Club and Konzerthaus” area in Vienna

Surprisingly, the area between the Vienna Konzerthaus and the InterContinental Hotel is among the most neglected spots of this city. Not only that the rear of the beautiful Konzerthaus building faces an unlovely point in the urban tissue, that the spaces and area of the Vienna Ice-Skating Club (Eislaufverein) – an important institution of Vienna – urgently require repair, that the InterContinental Hotel shows its age and lacks an up-to-date convention and hotel structure: this block, which is of unusual dimensions for Vienna, is a largely isolated and impermeable element within the urban body, and Lothringerstrasse, which runs along it, is an excessively wide, awkwardly arranged and designed traffic artery. There is no question that the site requires urgent action.

In this sense, a project like Heumarkt Neu is welcome and overdue. The forms of use planned for the site are virtually ideal both for the place itself and for Vienna: The Konzerthaus will be preserved with all its current functions and freed from its tight corset; the Vienna Ice-Skating Club will likewise stay in its place and can actually prosper due to a new, year-round indoor rink. The convention hotel will be enlarged and complemented by a modern event and conference centre as well as serviced hotel apartments. The whole will be enriched by flats, a spa, cafés and restaurants. All this creates a coherent mix of elements that reinforce each other and enriches Vienna’s range of offerings.

The architectural design that translates this programme into a built complex is pleasantly discreet and of above-average quality. Isay Weinfeld is an architect of worldwide renown, who not only disposes of great experience, but also – and above all – of the skill to implement architectural concepts with high-quality materials and subtle detailing. His particular forte lies in interior spaces, which with respect to the convention centre and the hotel promise results of unusual elegance.

What is more problematic is the urbanistic attitude expressed by this project. With its large, seemingly floating base, the 13-storey slab placed atop it and the 17-storey tower, the Heumarkt complex comes across as a fragment of the classic modernist city to be implanted in 19th-century Vienna. Such implants exist in many other cities, and some of them may certainly be considered successful. Yet this project proves traumatic already because of its mere scale: The tower is over 40 metres higher than the surrounding historic building stock, from which it juts. Above all, however, the spot in which the Heumarkt Neu project aims to intervene is a very particular one, as it is an extension of the Ringstrasse boulevard inserted between Schwarzenbergplatz and Stadtpark.

The creation of Vienna's Ringstrasse with the edifices lining it is a singular event in the history of European cities. It is based on a unique test arrangement: an innovative urban expansion concept for the area occupied by the soon-to-be-demolished fortifications, a large-scale international competition that was meticulously prepared and resulted in a total of 85 competing entries, three winning projects – on whose basis the different architects developed a binding basic plan in very close co-operation with the city administration – as well as numerous competitions and direct commissions for individual boulevard sections and buildings. The outcome was a total work of art that involved the most important architects of the second half of the 19th century, from Gottfried Semper to Otto Wagner. This result was so convincing and successful that it was drawn upon as a model by innumerable other urban expansion projects, from Frankfurt am Main to Zurich – yet none of them attained the perfection of the example they strove to emulate. This perfection withstood the ravages of war and the assaults of speculators, as the new buildings substituting their historic predecessors respected the established volumes, thereby blending in with the overall ensemble. The Ringstrasse architecture is not a rigid monument of the past, but a very special piece of the city, able to live and to change with it.

However, this calls for care and respectful treatment of this part of Vienna. Even if its architecture changes over time (as long as this is done to a reasonable extent), its volumes and spaces must be preserved. They are the constituting factors of Vienna's unique urban expansion in the second half of the 19th century or, in other words, the score of the architectural concert. The latter may and can be performed in different ways, but only within the given framework. If this framework is broken up, the respective piece of the city loses its identity, precisely like a musical composition.

The Ringstrasse section between Schwarzenbergplatz and Stadtpark – i.e. Schubertring – embodies a particularly sensitive part of the ensemble. The buildings lining it must provide a clearcut frame for the streetscape, especially since this space widens towards Schwarzenbergplatz square to the west and segues into Parkring, which in its turn opens on one side towards the park designed by Rudolf Sieböck, to the east. This urbanistic frame involves not only the first and second rows of blocks south of the Ringstrasse boulevard, but also those across Lothringerstrasse. This includes the Heumarkt zone.

This aspect acquires even greater importance if one considers that the last row of buildings on Schubertring directly adjoining the Stadtpark fulfils another and equally significant function, i.e. delimiting the Stadtpark to the west. The delimitation should be as clearcut and homogeneous as possible in order to strengthen the character of the Stadtpark as an inner-city park and to create an additional accent for the point where Wien River emerges and becomes visible, which is also celebrated by Friedrich Ohmann's embankment design. In

other words, the scale of the two blocks north of Lothringerstrasse must be taken up to the south as well.

The old InterContinental Hotel overrode the urbanistic logic of the site, reflecting the arrogance of the 1960s, in order to loudly proclaim a new beginning precisely in a spot where such a new beginning was most out of place. Seen against the background of that era's fundamentally optimistic attitude (and urbanistic confusion), this old urban planning transgression is understandable and even forgivable. However, it would be incomprehensible and unpardonable to repeat or even potentiate this urban planning error, this time without even the concomitant socio-historical background of the past and its mitigating factors. Without any necessity, this would ignore and counteract all knowledge attained by urban planning culture in recent decades, above all with regard to this particular spot, one of the most delicate and vulnerable in the hub of art and architecture that is Vienna.

Against this background, I recommend to use the Glacis Master Plan, an outstanding urban planning tool, as a basis to conduct an in-depth urbanistic study of the area around the Heumarkt site. If this study should confirm what I am convinced of on the strength of my experience as an urban designer and planner, i.e. that it is necessary to preserve the historic eaves height of the Ringstrasse structures and their building volumes and types in order to continue the urbanistic spirit of the historic ensemble of the Ringstrasse and the adjoining buildings, then the Heumarkt Neu project should be fundamentally revised while maintaining its usage programme as far as this is possible and observing the same architectural standards.

The five questions are answered as follows:

1. The project for the InterContinental Hotel, Vienna Ice-Skating Club and Konzerthaus area in its current state would impact its urbanistic context so markedly and negatively that the conservation and value of the Viennese World Heritage property would be seriously threatened.
2. The Karlsplatz project would, with only slight adaptations, upgrade the urban design quality of the architectural and urbanistic stock of the area and hence would not threaten the World Heritage property.
3. The urban development of the Historic Centre of Vienna since its inscription on the World Heritage List has partly proceeded highly positively, but partly also quite problematically, e.g. in the case of the superstructure spanning the Wien-Mitte Underground and commuter train (Schnellbahn) hub. For the Heumarkt project, a very different, more city-compatible accent should indeed be embraced.

4. The Historic Centre of Vienna must be able to evolve as a living organism; in my opinion, planning instruments are therefore more important than protection instruments. The Glacis Master Plan is a very good approach which, however, should be further deepened, specified and concretised, also with the support of experts from various disciplines and planning studios with experience in the field of urban design.

5. The dialogue between politicians, investors, planning experts and citizens must be continuously maintained and conducted on an interdisciplinary and international basis.

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