

Saint Stephen's Square in Vienna: The Result of Unimaginative City Planning in the 1970's.

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A short history of St. Stephen's Cathedral and St. Stephen's Square.

The history of the cathedral and square began in 1137 when Leopold IV prince of this region made a contractual agreement with Reginmar, the Bishop of Passau. The choice for the site was to have considerable consequences for the development of the city later on, since the site lay at the crossroads of two heavily frequented traffic routes: one leading north/south and the other east/west. 1137–1170 saw the first construction of St. Stephen's which now lay within the newly erected city walls which continued to stand until 1857. In the 16th century the cathedral was the focal point of an organically developed, multi-functional inner city area comprising shops, trading centres and citizens homes, a connection between the workplace and home and the place where the dignified integration of the bishops' see and the home of Christendom manifested itself.

In 1732 the cemetery around the cathedral was abandoned for reasons of hygiene. The newly won space around the cathedral found an urban function; it became a town square. In 1781 the chapel of Mary Magdalena was destroyed by a fire and afterwards completely cleared away. In 1789 the cemetery stores which still stood there were removed and several rows of houses were demolished. Already the intention was to free the cathedral of surrounding clutter and housing in order to give it a respectful and worthy place. It would take more than a few decades to see this process through to the end.

In the middle of the 19th century certain criteria were applied in Vienna (as in many other European cities) which resulted in extensive planning regulations. Town squares were formed in exact angles and freed from any historical building remnants in order to convey their grandeur and splendour. They wanted to establish a *city*, an inner district to represent the heart of the city. The medieval town with its crooked narrow lanes was to give way to a spacious

modern city. This was urgently required since the amount of traffic in the city was continually rising. This was to be a pulsating city with the hustle and bustle of a world metropolis. With the steady rise in living standards for the citizens new representative buildings were raised. The purpose of a city came more to the forefront since – argued Viennese architect and builder Alfred Riehl – traffic means money, it feeds the people and goes straight into becoming money again for building. Tied into this was an improvement in living standards in the inner city. Vienna was to become a cosmopolitan city.

According to Camillo Sitte (1843-1903) architect, city planner, painter and theorist, a *square* was however a closed construction. Traffic should merge into or cross the square in a way that does not disturb this cohesion. Sitte vehemently resisted the grid system of the city planners of the 19th century. To him the city was a social organism to be shaped. He also objected to a radical exposure of architectural monuments at the mercy of a modern traffic plan. For the observer of a square the cohesion of that place should be conveyed through a backdrop and not through a further flight of streets. Because of an increase in traffic wide avenues had already been constructed in the 19th century, these often merged into narrow squares and in crossing these disturbed the impression of cohesion.

The editors of the conservative-catholic royalist daily paper *Das Vaterland* also vehemently resisted the so-called *Blick-Freilegung* (Clear Exposure) of St. Stephen's Cathedral. The main argument being that these great gothic cathedrals were not built in their positions in order for them to have a nice view before their eyes! Otto Wagner (1841-1918) demanded modern wide streets, a control of the existing old buildings in order to preserve that beauty which was already there and to conveniently utilise the cityscape.

Conclusion: The cathedral was scraped out of its objectionable surroundings, stripped of its symbolic power, and was reduced to a landmark of erstwhile city architecture. In this century there originated also the famous view of the St. Stephen's Cathedral characterized by the painter Rudolph von Alt, this being the view from the Graben to the south tower.

After the decline of the monarchy in 1918 there were no more moves to improve the surroundings of St. Stephen's, the cathedral and the square stayed untouched, the cathedral remaining as the emblem of Vienna which now became the capital city of the nine provinces which formed the new republic of Austria.

In 1945 the western side of St. Stephen's Square was bombed. The cathedral was badly damaged by a large fire caused by local plunderers. During the last months of the war Vienna was heavily bombarded, thus a window of opportunity for new approaches to design and construction was opened after the end of hostilities. For

the first time in nearly two hundred years the way was clear for city planners to introduce structural changes. There was a mind for a conscious revival, just as there had been at the end of the 18th century.

The cathedral was rebuilt, financed by donations from the people throughout Austria. The roof of the cathedral displayed the emblems of the city of Vienna, the imperial double eagle with the initials Franz Joseph I and the emblem of the Austrian Republic.

From 1948 onwards a start was made to repair those houses slightly damaged which surrounded the cathedral. There followed two competitions at the beginning of the 1950's with the aim of renovating the square in front of the cathedral. Everyone agreed to keep to a uniform line when rebuilding the square. The results were not very satisfactory and there arose bitter arguments amongst the architects. The people were asked to vote for certain projects. In the end, however, only a few small individual contracts were awarded.

In 1956 the city officials proposed a new competition for ideas to renovate the inner district. They pushed aside the utopian wish for a traffic free inner district. Traffic should circulate. This thought, raised in a number of post-war competitions, would be understood through the desire to rebuild after the destruction caused in the last weeks of the war, and through the forward looking and spaciouly laid out new constructions. Even the architect Roland Rainer demanded in 1961 a concept for dealing with traffic. However there were voices against this. Dagobert Frey (1883-1962) an Austrian art-historian, reminded people that it was the task of city regulators not only to encourage traffic, but also to stop it where necessary. Therefore there should be a stop put to the generous development of the city centre. The results of the competition were partly a reminder of the radical ideas of the 19th century. This project failed like the post-war projects, through lack of finance.

The Project Design of the Pedestrian Zone in St. Stephen's Square by the St. Margarethen Sculptors, 1973-1976.

In 1972 several western and eastern European sculptors met in Tirgu Jui, Rumania, around the so called *Table of Silence* by Brancusi. Maria Biljan-Bilger (1912-1995), an Austrian artist, had organised the meeting in the spring of 1972 and the result of the meeting was the idea that sculptors should in the future involve themselves in tasks and contracts which involved municipal planning. Thus they would gain a more public face and integrate themselves more with cities and communities. This meeting was documented on film by the now internationally recognised director, Robert Dornhelm.

After their return to Austria, Maria Biljan-Bilger and the sculptor Karl Prantl (1924-2010) began their first consultations regarding the plans for St. Stephen's Square. A short while later the first sculptors met in St. Margarethen in the quarry (Römersteinbruch) and began to work on this project without, however, any background to financial details.

How had it come to this? In the middle of the 1960's there was a shift in thinking regarding traffic concept and city planning. In 1965 Kurt Heller, city councillor for traffic regulation, presented a new comprehensive plan for the city of Vienna. It contained the proposal for the building of an underground rail network. The underground was seen as the integration and complementary network for individual movement. St. Stephen's Square should become a cross-junction for the planned underground lines. However there was loud criticism by the first presentation that some points (which had come to public attention) did not proceed conclusively and the conjecture was that marginal constraints had not been properly thought through.

In 1966 the Vienna City Council recommended a resolution for a *Basic Network* consisting of the underground line U1, U2, and U4. A year later discussions began on the design of the underground. They wanted to proceed with a *holistic* or integrative design in accordance with the approach from Otto Wagner (Foltin 2000:70) who, during the construction of the city railway between 1894-1901, said:

These modern times have brought forth such innovations which wait for artistic handling. The first thing that comes to mind is the railroads whose influence on the picture of the city can be the most fatal. Trains at street level almost always blight the picture. Underground lines can be built either high or low. The choice of one or other systems depends on local prerequisites and technical details. The underground lines have hardly any influence on the street picture, particularly if they are covered. The elevated railways can influence the street picture in a very sensitive way, although it does offer those travelling some pleasure with the variety of views.

In 1968 the Vienna City Council decided on its policy to begin with the construction of the underground, keeping to the plan for a narrow basic network comprising the U1, U2 and the U4. Building was planned to start in 1969 and was to be managed in several phases. Phase 1 was the new U1, conversion of the city railway Wiental-Donaukanal into the U4, and the USTRAB-line (tramlines which partly went underground) under the 2-line to the U4.

From 1969 the building of the new U1 began in various stages, whereby plenty of challenging building tasks presented themselves, one being the area around St. Stephen's Cathedral.

A competition for the contract to design the underground and the stations was won in 1972 by the *Architektengruppe U-Bahn (AGU)*. The group consisted of the architects Wilhelm Holzbauer, Heinz Marschalek, Georg Ladstätter and Bernd Gantar. They began to

work out a uniform concept which also embraced St. Stephen's Square.

Ernst Heiss (1929-1991) was professor for municipal building at the Academy for Arts in Vienna and since 1959 had been occupied with the task of city planning for the Vienna Council. In June 1968 he published his study - *Städtebauliche Struktur* - which was concerned with the concept and design of St. Stephen's Square and the Graben in relation to the building of the underground and the approaches to it. After a look at the history he described the present situation (Heiss 1968:1):

... today St. Stephen's Cathedral is surrounded by tall structures. It appears small, and stands somewhat lost in a shameful, bleak sea of asphalt. Certainly this is the view from the Graben. The situation of the cathedral from the choir side becomes more impressive and interesting, the narrow passage between the south tower and the house wall opposite..... the entrance to an underground garage ... at the back of the cathedral ...

He thought this entrance to the garage was completely unacceptable - it is still there today. He further said,

... the approaches and entrances to the underground have to be arranged so that they are harmoniously integrated. No compromises should be made. The underground and its resulting opportunities for the inner district must become a real impulse for the active urban development of this area.

There should be a generous cosmopolitan impression, weaknesses avoided, and a tangible feeling of space achieved that is not deflected by traffic. His most insistent demand was that the square be re-designed, this was an imperative, an absolute necessity. The square had to be brought to life and become a place people wanted to visit in order to, for example, sit in the sun and drink coffee. It should be built on different levels, and care and attention taken to detail just as one would design one's own household.

The new design and the renovations should result in a cohesive traffic free pedestrian zone for the Graben and St. Stephen's square. The *centre piece* should be the square. The appearance of a city is constantly changing. Not only visitors notice this, but also the citizens too. Changes are usually of a constructional nature and are the result of the economic and cultural demands of the respective social structure.

In 1971 the provisional pedestrian zone in the Kärntnerstraße was extended to the Graben and St. Stephen's square. The first experiences could be assessed.

The collaborative work on dealing with the accumulating problems of city renovations was taken up here in Vienna by the sculptors of the St. Margarethen Symposium.

St. Stephen's cathedral and its surrounding square is the focal point of the city of Vienna and moreover, the emblem of Austria; this was the motivation for the sculptors involved in the work of producing the appropriate plan for the design of the square around the cathedral. Also as citizens of Vienna the artists who lived there felt they had every right to be involved in the consultation and work of such an important event.

The years of trying out different stone materials, and the experience of living and working in larger communities and the forming of their sculptural works in their own space prompt the sculptors to take up this new task and, through a long and intense working process, find the right answer. As sculptor and chairwoman of the Sculptors Symposium I would like to point out all those involved in this difficult and responsible work laying ahead, and to appoint sculptors who, at the beginning of this work and later on, combine the qualities of both designer and craftsman. Vienna can be used an example to combat the trend of trivialising the idea of the "pedestrian zone" because of time pressure and the need to rapidly implement something. Vienna can set a worthy example to other cities, namely to think things over with the best knowledge and insight.

This was Maria Biljan-Bilgers summing up of the sculptors intentions (Arbeitsgruppe Stephansplatz 1975:1). 18 men and women from Austria, Germany, Japan and the former Yugoslavia came together: Maria Biljan-Bilger, Makoto Fujiwara, Fritz Hartlauer, Hannes Haslecker, Mathias Hietz, Akijama Hiromi, Stephan Kamenyeczky, Leo Kornbrust, Anna Kubach-Wilmsen, Wolfgang Kubach, Milena Lah, Janez Lenassi, Gero Müller-Goldegg, Osamu Nakishima, Franz Xaver Ölzant, Karl Prantl, Paul Schneider, and Ebina Shigeharu.

The artists were willing to work actively together and made use of every communication to achieve a wide reaching effect, and take an opportunity to learn what the needs of the citizens were. They began discussions on radio and television. The sculptor Franz Prantl came up with the idea of using existing stone materials from abandoned Viennese cemeteries in the construction of the paving. This stone lay in the storehouses of the Vienna cemeteries, most of it was granite which had been paid for by rich and by poor citizens decades before. It was ready to be used again at a variety of requests by the city council or private buyers such as sculptors and stonemason firms. This idea was a reminder of Otto Wagner (Foltin 2000:70), who said:

The quickest and most efficient way to achieve one's aim – a recipe. First: embarrassingly exact comprehension and complete discharge of the purpose up to the tiniest detail. Second: luck in the choice of construction materials (easily available, good to process, durable and economical). Third: Simple and economical construction. After consideration of these three main points the form emerges. Even the simplest form can, without any increase in cost, generate artistry. The architects design demands is the same with any building, it does not depend on type or size.

Karl Prantl's idea was forwarded to those departments responsible, the cultural offices of the city council (councillor, Ms. Sandner) and the department of planning (councillor, Mr. Hofmann). Both offices welcomed the proposal and the first gravestones were transported to St. Margarethen. This was an important step bringing the sculptors their desired material for further work on the paving design. However when news of this idea broke in the newspapers there was a public outcry. Heated discussions followed. Parts of the public were outraged and found

it ethically objectionable to be walking on former gravestones which were now to be used as paving.

In 1973 the sculptors received a grant of 50,000 Austrian shillings (ca. 3600 euro) from the Vienna city cultural department, from the provincial government of Burgenland they received 40,000 shillings (ca. 2900 euro), and from the Department of Education and Arts 20,000 shillings (ca. 1500 euro). With the help of these grants further sculptors could come to St. Margarethen to work on the project, *Design of the pedestrian zone in St. Stephen's square*. For those invited and those already working on the project the grants were necessary for them to survive in a time when they had no income and were working with no security.

They leased a field by the Sculptors House in St. Margarethen and worked on the remodelling of the gravestones. In the house they worked on sketches and plans for the floor design of the space around the cathedral. This work brought a further important step to the understanding of their idea.

In autumn 1973 there came the first *inspection* – in the truest sense of the word – in St. Margarethen. Representative for the city of Vienna, officers for the city council planning division and road building and management division together with the co-ordinating architects Wilhelm Holzbauer and Wolfgang Windbrechtlinger paid a visit. They tore apart the first tentative suggestions from the sculptors. This first meeting of parties ended after prolonged and deliberate discussions with a hesitant *yes* to the continuation of the work.

In the same year those sculptors who were present, Karl Prantl, Franz Ölzant, Matthias Hietz and Maria Biljan-Bilger agreed on the regulations for further working procedures. Long discussions and debates preceded this vote. Karl Prantl made clear what his further expectations were of the work process. He declined to make a contractual agreement with the Vienna city council: *'Sculptors should regain their social rank, one should give their trust to the sculptors without the need for a contract.'* (Arbeitsgruppe Stephansplatz 1975:21). Maria Biljan-Bilger, on the other hand, preferred a collaboration between all parties and the appointed architects and sculptors. A contract served as a mutual commitment and a mutual protection.

A year later, after a number of negotiations with Vienna city council and city department 19, the artists were awarded a research contract in the sum of 190,000 shillings (ca. 13,500 euros). Additional money came through the sale of sculpture works, around 120,000 shillings (ca. 8,500 euro). With great enthusiasm the artists proceeded with their detailed design suggestions.

They had intensive arguments about the design of the floor of the square. In late autumn 1974 the resulting suggestions were presented to council representatives and the architects Holzbauer

and Windbrechtlinger. The verdict was unanimous from all parties involved. The work of the sculptors was highly praised and permission to continue was granted. Four artists from St. Margarethen – Karl Prantl, Milena Lah, Paul Schneider and Maria Biljan-Bilger, presented a file with selected drafts to Dr. Rudolph Kirchschräger the president of the Austrian Republic at that time. The president was impressed with the work and affirmed his approval, promising to visit the quarry in St. Margarethen.

At the beginning of 1975, after several days of closed meetings the artists decided to pursue their work at the site of the cathedral itself. This had become necessary since a direct transmission of the simulated floor design from the field in St. Margarethen was not manageable. At this advanced stage it required a place at the actual site: a test area directly by the cathedral, 150 square metres at the south tower right of the entrance.

On 8th September 1975 the work at the test site began. The new observations were: the combination of old and new materials, the gullies and the 16 rays as the classifying principle.

In the meantime Karl Prantl was no longer involved in the project or on the board of directors. He did not agree with the use of old and new materials for the paving stones. A working group responsible for the documentation was formed. This included Maria Biljan-Bilger, Franz Ölzant, Leo Kornbrust, and Annemarie and Wolfgang Kubach. In 1975 forty five meetings took place in the Vienna Town Hall, in various council departments, with the architects and in St. Margarethen, all involving the plan to design St. Stephen's square.

It became clear that more space for the sculptors ideas was needed and that an integrated plan from all those sculptors working on the project must be developed.

Since the beginning of the project - *Design of the pedestrian zone at St. Stephen's Square* - six plans had been devised. They originated from the sculptors Gero Müller-Goldegg, Milena Lah, Paul Schneider, Janez Lenassi, Hannes Haslecker, and Franz Ölzant. The co-ordinating architects Holzbauer and Windbrechtlinger and those responsible in the city council department 19 approved two plans which should be pursued further, those of Haslecker and Ölzant. These plans were developed after the predetermined water bearing lines of the underground civil engineers.

February to March 1975 saw a new concept for the cathedral fringes and the radial principle from Bilger, Haslecker, Kornbrust, and Ölzant. There was now one cohesive concept on which to base the work. The artistic design around the cathedral was purposely held back. Also the sculptors design concepts in this area should not appear too strongly. Maria Biljan-Bilger planned a large fountain in the area behind the cathedral and occupied herself

extensively with the paving by the main entrance to the cathedral, the so called *Riesentor* (Giant Door) and the side entrance at the south tower. The cathedral took centre stage.

In April 1975 the first results were exhibited to the public in a gallery on the Graben. More and more people demanded a say in the design of the square. Negotiations become tough and troublesome and delivered no further concrete results.

Until the summer of 1976 Hannes Haslecker concentrated his attention on the underground chapel of Maria Magdalena which he wanted to raise up above ground to the square using a variety of stone materials. This was the only thing to be realised, although in a revised form, but was not supported by other members of the working group.

The last suggestion, not discussed, from the sculptors in 1976 resulted in the reduction to an 8-part-plan: the undisputed situation in the axes of coordinates (the west front with the giant door, north and south towers with side entrances and the chorister).

Transitional situations emerged for the four buffer zones through a 45 degree change in direction. The octagonal geometry that the cathedral presents (5/8 – closure, Heiden-tower, north and south tower) was determined.

In accordance with this geometry all connections to the cathedral could be solved. Through the main trend line of the stone layout the necessary guideline for the eye could be ensured, following a satisfactory segue from the merging of the Kärntnerstraße over Stock-im-Eisen-Platz and Graben to St. Stephen's cathedral. The entrances by the Cathedral Door, Giant Door, north and south towers

The Infamous End.

Then something happened which no one could have foreseen. On 1st August 1976 the Reichs-Bridge over the Danube collapsed. Councillor Hofmann, in charge of the in city department responsible for safety controls, resigned. The Mayor of Vienna Leopold Gratz appointed Rudolph Wurzer as his replacement. Wurzer took his own initiative and had no more need for any sculptors. Contact broke off between the new city councillor and the sculptor group. Scheduled meetings were called off and suddenly it was no longer possible to make an appointment for a meeting with the new councillor. His argument was that he was not informed about the work of the sculptors and did not have a clue about what they were doing!

Surprisingly enough in the 20th century Museum an information meeting was held regarding the design of St. Stephen's square. The sculptors were not invited to this. As Maria Biljan-Bilger became aware of the event in the last minute she tried to take part and was

told that she was not desired and was even led out of the room. The artist later recalled, '*I was so angry that I challenged Wurzer*' (Magazine 1979:33), a situation which was extremely embarrassing for the councillor and all those present.

In order to try not to let the differences between himself and the sculptors from St. Margarethen escalate, Wurzer came up with an idea. He invited five sculptors and architects to take part in a competition. However no design managed to convince him. This made it finally clear. The plan to re-construct St. Stephen's square had failed. Today the square is grey with no imagination or flair, and no real design.

However, the failure did have one positive aspect for the individual sculptors. The ideas and discoveries they made through their work of designing paving for historical places allowed them to market their ideas abroad and make a profit.

In 1985 St. Stephen's square saw its last alteration, the building of the *Haas House* by the architect Hans Hollein. The public presentation of this proposed building led to loud protests from various sections of the population who feared a restricted view of the south tower. Hollein then presented a second draft which more or less addressed these concerns: the building was erected.

Translation: Tracey Bernhard

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