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Visual Integrity of Famous Karlskirche in Vienna at Risk

The Karlskirche in Vienna is one of the most important baroque buildings in Europe and the major sacral building designed by architect Johann Bernhard Fischer von Erlach. In the plague year of 1713, Emperor Charles VI had pledged to Saint Charles Borromeo that he would erect a church. Work started as early as in 1714, and the church was consecrated in 1737 (after Fischer von Erlach's death in 1723 completed by his son Joseph Emanuel). Generally considered as a programmatic work of Habsburgian imperial style, the church dominates the southern side of the Karlsplatz, one of the major historic squares in the city, situated in the core zone of the UNESCO World Heritage site Historic Centre of Vienna. Between 1954 and 1958 a new building for the Wien Museum (founded in 1888 as the Historisches Museum) was erected on the



Aerial view of the Karlsplatz with simulation of the Wien Museum Neu (photo Architektur aktuell)



View of the Karlskirche with simulation of planned height of the Wien Museum Neu (photo Wikimedia)

east side of the Karlsplatz (architect Oswald Haerdtl). In the early 1970s, in the line of the museum's façade the Winterthur building of the Zurich Versicherung (architect Georg Lippert) was added. The latter building bends and comes as close as three metres to the east side of the Karlskirche (thus visually closing the square).

After a lengthy planning phase for the Wien Museum (today a listed building) the result of the architectural competition of 2015 for the "Wien Museum Neu" was a largely accepted conversion project, including an additional storey, however, with planned open passageway and demolition of the adjacent building section of the Wintherthur building. As compensation for this partial

demolition it was suggested to the Zurich Versicherung to build storeys on top of the remaining building. Plans intending to add two full storeys and thus a height of ten metres have caused quite a stir. The visual consequence of one of the submitted designs would be that the Karlskirche would look as if it received another side tower. Due to the present moderate height of the Winterthur building and the considerable distance between the church and the next building on the west side the church so far appears as if standing alone. If the extra storeys were built, the original appearance of this Viennese landmark would be lost and the ensemble of the Karlsplatz willfully destroyed.

Heritage Alert for the Otto-Wagner-Hospital in Vienna

The following letter was sent by the Secretary General of ICOMOS and the President of ICOMOS Austria to the Mayor of Vienna in December 2015 (with copies to Mag. Maria Vassilakou, Vice-Mayor of the City of Vienna; DI Dr. Bruno Maldoner, Federal Ministry of Arts and Culture, Constitution and Media; the Austrian Commission for UNESCO; and to Ing. Gerhard Hadinger, Initiative Steinhof) to express their concern about the present condition of the Otto-Wagner-Hospital, a major work by the famous architect Otto Wagner. The letter is part of the Heritage Alert strategy initiated by ICOMOS. The Heritage Alert process uses ICOMOS' professional and public networks to promote the conservation of cultural heritage and draw attention to the threats which it confronts and to promote good conservation solutions.

*Dr. Michael Häupl
Mayor of the City of Vienna
Town Hall Vienna
Lichtenfelsgasse 2, Stiege 5, 1. Stock
1010 Vienna
Austria*

Paris, 18 December 2015

*Subject: ICOMOS Heritage Alert for the Otto-Wagner-Hospital,
Steinhof, Vienna*

Dear Sir,

ICOMOS international and ICOMOS Austria wish to express their deep concern at the situation of the Otto-Wagner-Hospital, Steinhof, Baumgartner Höhe 1, 1140 Vienna, owned by the City of Vienna.

The significance of the site as an extensive ensemble, built from 1903–1907 by Otto Wagner with the participation of Heinrich Goldmund, among others, is beyond doubt and has been confirmed by several scientific studies (notably most recently by Jäger-Klein, Caroline & Plakom-Försthuber, Sabine (ed.). (2015). Die Stadt außerhalb: Zur Architektur der ehemaligen Niederösterreichischen Landes-, Heil- und Pflegeanstalt für Geistes- und Nervenkranken Am Steinhof in Wien, Birkhäuser-Verlag).

The importance refers to both the architectural characteristics and the spatial planning of the site, including the horticultural design of the gardens. In addition, its relevance to developments in medical and therapeutic history are eminent and therefore of major cultural value.

Whilst the core area (Kernbereich, pavilions and church) of the site benefits of Statutory Monument Protection, no protection is afforded to the so called economic area (Wirtschaftsbereich) in the eastern part and today the site is gravely endangered by:

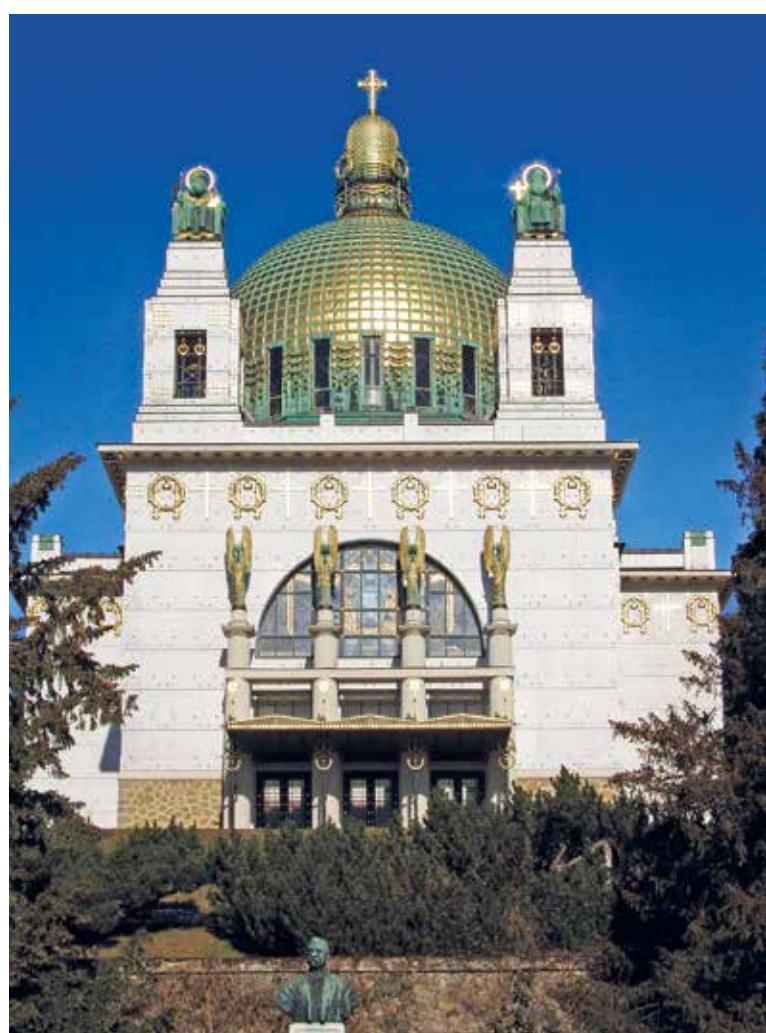
- Already newly erected constructions (VAMED) and buildings under construction;*
- Change in land use/dedication of the so called economic area (Wirtschaftsbereich) in the eastern part of the ensemble;*
- The planned closing of hospital services within the next decade.*

Due to the extraordinary characteristics of the site, in recent years numerous suggestions and appeals have been made from

various quarters to the authorities of Vienna and Austria to consider nominating the Otto-Wagner-Hospital for inclusion on the UNESCO World Heritage list. In this light, ICOMOS Austria asked internationally renowned expert Dr Leslie Topp (University of London) to make an assessment, on the basis of a com-



Aerial photo of the Otto-Wagner-Hospital, 1932
(photo Wikimedia Commons)



Steinhof Church by Otto Wagner (photo Haeferl, Wikimedia)

parative analysis, on whether the site may possess potential for the values which would argue in favour of such a nomination. Dr Topp's study came to a positive conclusion. In addition, a citizens' initiative (*Initiative Steinhof*) independently consulted Dipl.-Ing. Christian Schuhböck, Alliance of Nature, whose expertise came to the same conclusion.

Based on these findings, and considering the dangers the site is facing, ICOMOS Austria made several petitions to the authorities of the City of Vienna, also highlighting the values of the site. Due to increasing public attention, a mediation process among the various stakeholders was initiated by the City of Vienna. In addition, an Expert Committee was established to review the development potential of the area taking into account the preservation of the existing core site. The result was that it was suggested to reduce the originally planned 600 new building units in the eastern part of the area to 440 units. However, another 100 additional apartments are planned by conversion of usage of protected estate buildings.

Although the findings of the Expert Committee, established by the City of Vienna (in which ICOMOS did not participate), have led to significant changes in the foreseen usage of the area, the new planning basis still remains in contradiction with the multi-faceted significance of the site. Taking into account its values, it is beyond doubt that the site must be maintained intact in its entirety. The new structures that have regrettably already been built

serve as a reminder of a misguided concept and unsuccessful policy. Also a number of the historic structures are in an increasingly poor state of conservation, especially the building originally used for "Pathology" – associated with the terrible memories of Nazi crimes, and in need of urgent attention.

ICOMOS therefore again calls upon the authorities of Vienna and Austria not to allow economic aspects to override the cultural importance of the ensemble and to urgently:

- Extend the status of protection to also include the so called economic area (*Wirtschaftsbereich*) in the eastern part of the site;
- Reconsider the development and conservation concept for the entire area;
- Develop a usage programme for the future when the hospital services close, which takes into consideration the exceptional importance and history of the whole ensemble.

ICOMOS, through its Austrian National Committee, remains at the disposal of the City of Vienna and the Austrian governmental authorities, for all advice they may wish to undertake the above actions.

Yours sincerely

Kirst Kovanen
ICOMOS Secretary General

Wilfried Lipp
President of ICOMOS Austria