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Historic Centre of Vienna on UNESCO's List of World Heritage in Danger

In 2017, the Historic Centre of Vienna, inscribed as a UNESCO World Heritage Site in 2001 under criteria ii, iv and vi, was put on the List of World Heritage in Danger.

From the very beginning UNESCO and ICOMOS had warned the responsible city authorities to avoid high-rise building structures within and around the World Heritage site. In 2001 the evaluation by the advisory bodies promoted the nomination for having kept “all the attributes that sustain its Outstanding Universal Value, including its architectural and urban qualities and layout”, and added that “the Historic Centre of Vienna has also maintained its characteristic skyline” (ICOMOS 2001). Parallel to the preparation of the nomination file, the city authorities worked on a significant infrastructural development project. The first plans of the building complex, well known as “Wien Mitte” included six high-rise towers within the buffer zone of the proposed World Heritage site. Hence, the World Heritage Committee awarded the inscription “with the recommendation that the project be evaluated in terms of its compatibility with the visual integrity of the historic city”. It also “recommended that special attention be paid to the observation of all changes in the morphology of the existing historical buildings and emphatically recommended the reduction of all larger re-vitalization projects within the buffer zone in future.”

In spite of previous discussions and recommendations the project Hotel Intercontinental/Heumarkt was launched in 2012. This project is located within the core zone of the World Heritage site and near the famous “Ringstrasse”, which represents the “Gründerzeit” period, one of three key periods of European cultural and political development, and one of the key elements of the Outstanding Universal Value of the Historic Centre of Vienna. Not only the advisory bodies of UNESCO but additionally the Austrian Chamber of Architects already warned during the preparation of an international design competition that, if high-rise structures replaced the existing Hotel Intercontinental, the integrity and authenticity, as described in the nomination, would be severely threatened. These warnings were ignored and the competitors could choose between three scenarios, of which only two were compatible with the OUV of the World Heritage site as well as within the legal frame of the local planning regulations.

In scenario 1 the planners could choose to retrofit the existing Hotel Intercontinental. In 1963, the construction of this hotel complex had been influenced by contemporary US architecture. It has some significant qualities of international modernism, but it has not yet been placed on the national list of protected monuments.

In scenario 2 they could also hand in projects which assumed the hotel to be torn down and replaced by so-called Viennese duplex blocks; a building typology with strong reference to the morphology of the “Ringstrasse”. In that case the built structures would be situated at the edge of predefined new city-blocks, densely grouped around small courtyards and limited to the height of the other buildings within the zone of the “Ringstrasse”.

Scenario 3 allowed, even encouraged, to keep the Hotel Intercontinental but “reshape” and “optimise” its urban qualities through tearing down parts of it and replacing them with a high-rise of double the height of the existing structure.

The winning project by Isay Weinfeld from Brazil was designed on the basis of the third scenario. Again, ignoring the strong protests from all sides – NGOs, neighbours, architects, even politicians – in June 2017 the city council changed the spatial planning law to legalise the project. Even the city’s own planning principles, e.g. a high-rise exclusion-zone concept, were modified to make the project possible and a “Masterplan Glacis” tried to argue in favour of high-rise buildings within the area of the “Ringstrasse” (Figs. 1 and 2).

Systemic risk potential identified

In preparation for the UNESCO-ICOMOS Joint Advisory Mission and in cooperation with experts and concerned citizens ICOMOS Austria systematically analysed the wider context of the project and discovered several serious issues of mismanagement which had accumulated over the years. These allowed the situation to finally arrive at the current state.

First, the specially protected zones of Vienna (*Wiener Schutzzonen*) do not match with the buffer and core zones of the World Heritage site. The area of the Hotel Intercontinental/Heumarkt is not located within these specially protected zones of Vienna and is therefore not protected under Viennese law. Second, the existing object, the Hotel Intercontinental, is not a nationally listed monument, although it has monument qualities according to new findings. Third, the management plan to protect the World Heritage site Historic City Centre of Vienna was never ratified by the provincial authorities of Vienna (Wiener Gemeinderat).

In addition, another project on a far smaller dimension not comparable to the “Heumarkt Neu” project but within the same core zone has raised public awareness concerning the possible damage of the Outstanding Universal Value of the Historic Centre of Vienna: an open-air restaurant in the privately owned and managed gardens around Palais Schwarzenberg. This case was solved through an intensive dialogue between ICOMOS Austria, the owners of the gardens and the planners. The project was improved in a way that satisfied all stakeholders’ needs.



Figs. 1 and 2: The proposed project “Heumarkt Neu” within the core zone of the UNESCO World Heritage and its simulated impact on the site “Historic City Centre of Vienna” (Source: v-cube/Philipp Tebart/michael kloos planning and heritage consultancy)

Outstanding individualistic architecture and heritage

Another threat to the more than a hundred historic town centres of Austria in general is the still booming adaptive use of former empty roof spaces. Certainly, the additional use of roof space under the usually pitched or hipped roofs enables the retrofitting of

the historic building structure underneath, as the profits generated with these new apartments are much higher than with the other spaces (especially as rents for apartments in older buildings are strictly regulated). Hence, “ambitious” architecture of “outstanding individualism” (© Nicholas Clarke, ICOMOS South Africa) quite often destroys the characteristic silhouette of the roofscape.



Figs. 3 and 4: The eroding traditional roovescape as part of the UNESCO World Heritage site "Historic Centre of Vienna" (photos Jaeger-Klein 2018)

ICOMOS Austria started campaigning for better practice in 2018 by intensifying the dialogue at eye-level with the site managers about architectural qualities in general and the essential attributes of their site in particular.

ICOMOS Austria reorganised the monitoring of heritage sites from single-person observation to group-observation to accommodate for this shift. Emerging professionals are part of each monitoring group. It also implemented workshops for students to show them more modest and harmonious solutions for constructions within a historic context in general (Figs. 3 and 4).

Synopsis

Besides individual cases of inappropriate new building structures within cultural heritage landscapes, ensembles and sites, various systemic failures are currently threatening the cultural heritage of Austria:

- The Federal Monument Protection Act has not embedded the UNESCO World Heritage sites so far and is very weak in protecting historic gardens as well as cultural landscapes.
- The various building codes and spatial planning regulations in Austria refer, if at all, to World Cultural Heritage and only deal marginally with cultural landscapes. The natural sites and landscapes are much better protected through other legal frames.
- The Austrian monument protection authorities have not yet been efficient enough in listing all monuments of the modern movement to protect them from severe changes and/or destruction of industrial or technical heritage sites. It is obvious that the monument protection authorities urgently need more capacities to fulfil their mission.
- Austrian universities neither provide a specific higher education in monument protection nor do any educational institutions train cultural heritage experts and/or conservation architects specifically on a professional level.

References

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