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***the consciousness of place***  
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We know it from that Woody Allen film, where Woody and Diane Keaton stroll as lovers through misty rain, a panorama of Downtown Manhattan as the backdrop for their wit and charm. The place is the Brooklyn Promenade, a park-like walkway abutting Brooklyn Heights, from which views of New York Harbour, of Wall Street and of the Brooklyn Bridge are laid out like a string of postcard pearls. It's hard to imagine a more spectacular public space in the world, and this is why it has been used in so many films over the years. It's a million-dollar view.

But what's really interesting about the Promenade is the side facing away from the Manhattan view. It's the back side of a Row of 19<sup>th</sup> century Town Houses. Well-proportioned, well-to-do town houses – Brooklyn Heights has always been a home for the upper bourgeoisie – but the backside nonetheless. So, what's going on here? This is a window on a world-class spectacle, and last century's burgess handed it over to their chamber maids to use. Either they were crazy, or we're seeing something that they did not.

Certainly, the view has changed over the years, but it is hard to believe that it wasn't always a vast and spectacular panorama. The natural landscape is in itself a compelling sight for our eyes. But this is the point: it is compelling to *our* eyes. We see space through social and aesthetic expectations of the 21<sup>st</sup> century. What the 19<sup>th</sup> century saw, what *interested* them, was obviously something else. By orienting their architectural faces to the street, the Brooklynites of that time made their preference clear. The respectable rhythms of the social world were what drew them, not the sublime expanse of bay that lay beyond their backyard.

The Brooklynites were not a breed apart, alone in their rejection of spaces not tamed: a Boston trademark is the Charles River basin, yet here too the 19<sup>th</sup> century townhouses lining its south shore give their backside to this grand, metropolitan space. Amsterdam, presently filling its Harbour with modern housing, focused more in the past upon the introspective spaces of its canals than on the open views of Het IJ. For the urbanites of that time in general, these spaces were residues, the blank edge of the page of their daily life. It might be said that they tried not to see them, and that their cities turned their architectural faces the other way. It was only after modernism's revolution of taste that these spaces took on new meanings and became valued, even beloved, elements of the urban landscape.

During the 19<sup>th</sup> century, the Wienfluss in Vienna was one of these rejected spaces. In the years before Wagner's regulation of the stream bed, the valley was residue in the Koolhaasian sense, a leftover place-in-between: a site of river banks, light industry and somewhat disreputable theatres and freehouses. The development that accompanied the regulation foresaw a grand boulevard that connected the city to the Schönbrunn Palace. This vision was only partly realized. Across from the magnificent Majolika House, on the Rechte Wienzeile side of the river, one finds the incomplete fragments of this larger civic vision; strewn in-between are the flotsam and jetsam left over from an earlier urban sensibility: backyards, interrupted streets, subordinate facades. Wagner's early modern paradigm of a noble, public space is flecked with broken remainders of its rejected past.

It is into this urban residue that "walk me. Die Kunstzeile an der Wienzeile" seeks to insinuate itself. The project was conceived by Wolfgang Niederwieser, director of Margaretens *Bezirksbetreuung*, who saw this leftover space as a potential enhancement for the 5<sup>th</sup> district. Winding itself along the newly laid-out bicycle path between Pilgramgasse and Margaretengürtel, "walk me." proposes to be an open-air gallery for Public Art. The 9 pilot projects for the *Kunstzeile* – curated by Engelbert Köb and recently the subject of an exhibition in Vienna's Architecture Center as well as a lengthy article in *profil* magazine – stem from a formidable group of international artists as well as students under the tutelage of Erwin Wurm; they represent an admirable cross-section of contemporary strategies for art in the public space. Yet more compelling than any of the individual pieces is the urban idea for an open-air gallery. As I presently

understand the project, the works will be - at least in part - changing and temporary, so the concept promises to produce something more than a sculpture park. The space could actually become a forum for presenting new talent and ideas – and could thereby become much more interesting than any permanent installation.

But what really fascinates is the role that art would play in the valorization of place. The project involves a rapprochement with these residual spaces; it seeks to make them both accessible and desirable. In doing so, it raises questions about the role that public art can and should play in the renewal of the city. Art has long appeared in marginalized spaces. This has much to do with the marginalization of the artist in our society; artists often produce works in and for the spaces that they inhabit. But this is not a space inhabited or used by artists, nor is it a spontaneous expression of those artists exhibited. The project is supported by public funds and promoted by public institutions. There's nothing spontaneous involved here. This is a marginalized space, but the project is not an effort of marginalized persons. There is an evident attempt to intervene in the space in a way that transcends the artworks themselves.

In a very broad sense, the project seeks to finish the work that Wagner began. The “Kunstzeile an der Wienzeile” applies a very different strategy than that of Wagner, but the goal is in many ways the same: to make the 19<sup>th</sup> century residue into a valued public space. Whereas Wagner used maximal architecture to create a space that celebrated the alliance of haute bourgeoisie and monarchy, the *Kunstzeile* draws on minimal interventions in order to pursue a more democratic goal: without affecting drastic changes, it wants to make us see this space in a new light. The artworks will not valorize the space by improving it materially per se (although they may have a positive aesthetic effect); it will valorize the space by giving us a new consciousness of it.

This brings us back to the Brooklyn Promenade, for its valorization has worked much along the lines that the *Kunstzeile* proposes. Although the skyline of Manhattan has grown spectacularly since the town houses of Brooklyn were built, I would propose that this is not the reason that the value of this space has increased. It is not that the space has been materially transformed and improved; it is that we have learned to appreciate its qualities. And I think that this is what the *Kunstzeile* wants to do. It intends to use artwork to make us appreciate the space in a new and, hopefully more positive way. The strategy here, intentional or not, is to give the spaces a new reading for the public at large. As such, it is not the artwork that is interesting; it is the declaration that the space is a Public Gallery. This recoding of urban space gives it new meanings, and can lead to a new appreciation, a new acceptance, appropriation and use of the space by the public. Of course, such recodings are always fraught with danger; one does not always achieve the intended results. But while the strategy of recoding through public art is not entirely new, the chosen site is especially promising and the chance for transformation of its public perception is correspondingly real.

In the end, let us neither overstretch nor underestimate this comparison with the Brooklyn Promenade. The Wienzeile is a great urban space, but it will obviously never offer anything quite as grand as the Manhattan skyline. There are, of course, limits to metaphors. However, by activating these urban residuals through art, the project's initiators are stating that public institutions believe that these spaces are worthy of aesthetic intention, and therefore are worthy of reconsideration. Above and beyond any qualities of the individual artworks themselves, this is what projects like “walk me. Die Kunstzeile an der Wienzeile” can offer to the city.