

Roof Gardens and Urban Reserves

On the Roofs of Vienna

Essay, 2006

First published in *werk, bau, und wohnen*, Ausgabe April 2006

The landscape of urban rooftops has long been a realm that has fascinated and inspired European architects. For Corbusier it was his second point of a new architecture and the garden on top of the city. For Josef Frank it was his own apartment and the archetype of modern domestic space. And for contemporary Vienna it is the new urban frontier and a showcase for emerging architectural talent. Meter for meter, Vienna's rooftops represent the most expensive real estate in town, and, in the course of the last few years, developers and private clients have been increasingly bold in pursuing ambitious designs for this valuable property.

Whereas radical designs such as the coop *himmelb(l)au's Falkestrasse* rooftop from 1988 or delugan_meissl's *House Ray 1* of 2003 have become internationally acclaimed icons of this building form, these projects have not occurred within a creative vacuum. Within the last 10 years, the problem of rooftop additions has produced a large body of works and has spurred one of the liveliest debates on architecture and urbanism within Vienna. For this *metropolis emeritus*, the theme of the penthouse is a reflection of its particular urban development as well as the city's own, often highly ambiguous attitude towards modernism itself. As the city's historical relationship to its rooftops has singularly shaped its idiosyncratic discourse on this building type, it is useful to reflect upon the evolution of the rooftop.

Roof Tiles and Glass Pavilions

At the end of the 19th century, while Paris built its zinc-clad roofscape out of *chambres-de-bonnes* filled Mansards and New York began to reach for the sky, the attics of Vienna – then one of the world's most dynamic urban centers and its fifth largest city in 1910 – remained, by and large, laundry rooms. This had much to do with Viennese attitudes to living arrangements as well as the history of the city's building code. The many major conflagrations over the city's long history made fire prevention a priority, and historically the building codes prohibited use and inhabitation of the roof-top zone. Although, as in Paris, Berlin or Milan, the *Belle-Etage* was the most desirable location and the upper stories were reserved for the socially inferior, the most desperate classes of the city were banished to the *souterrain*. Thus, unlike in Paris or London, for example, there existed little or no tradition of substandard accommodations for the servant classes in the attics of Vienna's housing stock. The exploitation of this urban reserve was further hampered by local building practices. The standard Viennese apartment house clogged its attic with a longitudinal, chimney-filled and load-bearing wall (a situation that still haunts contemporary attempts to rationally build-out and utilize the city's huge reserve of roof-top space). As a result of these various factors, roofs in pre-modern Vienna were predominately low-pitched and clad with red-brick roof tiles.

The rare developments that occurred above the cornices of imperial Vienna were usually related to unusual and even exotic usages. During the late *Gründerzeit* and *Jugendstil* eras, some roofs were built-out into broadly glazed studios for the city's academic painters. Even more radical were the rooftop pavilions that sprouted after the emergence of commercial photography. Often fully glazed and using an exuberant formal language, these constructions were the avant-garde of their time. One of the best surviving examples of this type is Otto Wagner's Ankerhaus am Graben from 1884. But these projects were exceptions to the generally uninspired roofscape of Vienna, although they did lend an aura of bohemian extravagance to the idea of the penthouse itself.

Despite Joseph Frank's documented fondness for rooftop living, not much happened to Vienna's roofscape during most of the 20th century. The housing boom of Red Vienna concentrated upon reducing building density and creating accessible, green courtyards. For all its social radicalism, the architecture of Austro-Socialism was rather conservative in form and construction and continued the tradition of low pitched, red-tiled roofs. The urban development of the post war years concentrated upon the production of standardized housing and pursued the sort de-urbanization that was typical for that period throughout the western world. The nineties finally brought a new paradigm, however. Fed by reborn prosperity and the economic energy that arose from the fall of the iron curtain, a new desire for urbanity gripped the city. Restaurants and clubs sprung up in the districts, and the young and well-to-do began to move back into previously unfashionable *Gründerzeit* quarters. The rooftop apartment became a hot commodity. Not only did it expand the inner-city building stock, it presented a new urban life-style. One could enjoy the amenities of the city while living in an individually-crafted dwelling outfitted with a terrace and a view. Perched on top of the city in loft-like spaces, the young and successful began accustoming itself to the light, the air and the aura of modern extravagance that came with roof-top living.

Old Lines, Emerging Ideas

The turning point was the revision of the city building code of 1996. Whereas the previous building laws prohibited dwelling above the cornice line, the new regulation allowed the whole of the building envelope to be used (The expressive roof form of Coop-Himmel(l)au's *Falkensteinstraße* were only possible because its floor-level lies below the building's eaves). Formerly neglected and once hardly profitable, the 19th century housing blocks turned out to contain a spatial reserve that has transformed them into very attractive properties; Robert Kniefacz, director of the department of architectural assessment of the MA 19 in Vienna has termed this reserve as a potential building site of gargantuan proportions. He has also vocally supported the realization of progressive architectural solutions for this program. An important contribution, for the emergence of this new field of architectural opportunity coincided with the appearance of a new generation of young Viennese architects whose formal sensibilities stand in stark contrast to the historic fabric of the city. Conflicting visions of how the will to form should be applied to roof-top development has become a topic of long and often heated debate.

The discourse became, in many ways, a question of the image of the city. Many in the field of architecture, in the press and in the city administration maintain that the aesthetic integrity of the historic urban fabric required that the traditional forms of the Viennese roof be perpetuated; others believed that this new and singularly intensive urban expansion should be allowed to reflect the architectural standards of our time. The city building code is somewhat schizophrenic on this issue. While most paragraphs insist upon a traditional roof form with dormer windows over 1/3 of the length of the façade, there is a certain amount of freedom in interpreting what a dormer is (an bureaucratic flexibility that allowed the sculptural form of *ray-1* to wiggle its way through approvals) while the (in)famous §69 allows for "insignificant deviations" from the standard building code in certain circumstances. What insignificant means in this situation is often a matter of long discussion and negotiation. The ultimate result of this struggle between context and expressionism is a great deal of rather uninspired rooftop build-outs, a situation that is generally alleviated by a surprising number of original built statements that have succeeded in harvesting the architectural potential that both Corbusier and Frank had once foreseen.