The Ringstrasse
Urban form and social structure.

The development of the Viennese Ringstrasse began and ended with a revolution. In 1848, Europe was under the spell of a series of uprisings aiming for the replacement of centralised state power by more liberal and democratic forms of governance. It was this pursuit to which the Netherlands, for example, owes its constitution. In the Austro-Hungarian Empire the riots led to the fall of the government, the abdication of the emperor, a new constitution, the establishment of parliament and indirectly, but very closely related, the construction of the Ringstrasse.

Already in the thirties of the nineteenth century, central Vienna had to contend with a great lack of space. The historic inner city and the suburbs were separated by a wide zone containing the city walls that was a popular place for Sunday walks, but otherwise hindered traffic. It was an open secret that the walls should be torn down to relieve some of the spatial pressure. The events of 1848 initially reinforced the belief that for military reasons demolition was not a good idea.

At the same time, it sparked off a process that sealed the fate of the walls. A new state had to be built, with all the necessary institutions: the new emperor was honoured with a church, the army wanted new barracks and all Viennese wanted a new opera. It was unthinkable that buildings like these could still be accommodated in the inner city. Planning began, but without coherence, direction or consultation.

It took nine years before the Emperor put an end to the uncertainty. It is my wish, he said, that the extension of the Viennese city centre is embarked upon as soon as possible, taking into account that appropriate connections are made with the suburbs and with due concern for the layout and beautification of my residence and imperial capital. The emperor gave permission for the demolition of the ramparts and the development of what became known as the Ringstrasse area. The emperor’s phrasing has great political significance.

At a time when many tried to weaken monarchic power, the emperor boldly calls Vienna the capital of his empire. He takes the initiative in the tumult surrounding the fortifications, supplies everyone with sufficient space and thus secures his own position. His utterances are not met with great resistance. On the contrary: “Ganz Wien war dadurch in freudige Aufregung versetzt.” The Emperor divides and rules. This closely links the construction of the Ringstrasse to the development of the Austrian state.

The Ringstrasse became the arena where the major powers after the revolution reached a necessary social compromise. The Ringstrasse helped shape the bourgeois-monarchist society of which she herself became the centre. The town hall, the parliament, the palace, the stock market, the university, museums, theatres, the opera, the art academy, a public park, but also speculative housing, everything found a place along the ring. She is the nineteenth century in a nutshell.

If the Ringstrasse is the embodiment of a social compromise, should we then call her form a compromise too? The course of events following the dictates
of the emperor gives reason to fear the worst. First, a design competition was organised from which no clear winner sprang.

The jury then drew up a plan herself based on the three best entries. This plan was changed several times in the following decades. A site visit raises many questions too: is this a street at all, or is it a zone? Is it a barrier or a connection? Is it a series of spatial incidents along a road? It takes no great effort to identify weak spots. In oversimplified terms: the Votive Church is too far back, the Burgtheater too far forward, the square in front of the town hall is too big, the palace lacks a wing and all these institutions are so loosely connected that it is indeed hard to call much of the Ringstrasse a proper street (should anyone care). But these are all incidents.

Let us rather ask whether the main structure is clear. My experience is that with difficult questions like these, one can always fall back on Adolf Loos. And sure enough, also in this case the oracle of Vienna has some good suggestions. As late as 1912, his studio produced an alternative plan to the Ringstrasse, more than fifty years after issuance of the competition (figure 2).

Strikingly, with Loos, the ring road is projected much further outward than in the executed plan. This places all the representative buildings on the side where they belong, namely that of the inner city. In the case of the built Ringstrasse, these buildings are located on both sides, which results in much cross traffic and turns the street into a barrier. Many central institutions now face the old town, instead of being a part of it. In Loos’ plan a number of major streets are resolutely extended into the inner city, reducing even the significance of his ring road. The built plan lacks these cross connections. One of the reasons why the ring road area is such a prominent feature of Vienna – for better or worse – is because old and new are not so much connected, but permanently separated by this autonomous body.

I began this article by saying that the development of the Ringstrasse is framed by two revolutions. The Ringstrasse was the result of an emerging national consciousness. The same nationalism was the driving force behind the first World War. In June 1914, shortly after the last major buildings were finished along the Ringstrasse, the assassination of the Austro-Hungarian crown prince in Sarajevo plunged the world into a thirty year crisis that completely destroyed the society that created the Ringstrasse.

The social structure behind the Ringstrasse is gone forever, but the street itself still stands. A visitor of the Ring Road will see many beautiful things today, but what do they mean? What is really missing on the Ringstrasse is not some formal resolution. What is missing is something that makes the historic weight of these forms tangible.

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