

UNESCO/ICOMOS/ICCROM-Monitoring Mission „Historisches Zentrum von Wien“.
NGO-FORUM, RATHAUS, VIENNA
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Statement of the ÖGFA, the Austrian Society for Architecture

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Honorable guests, thank you for your interest and thank you for the opportunity to speak on this occasion today.

1 Introduction

1.1 The ÖGFA

The ÖGFA has its roots both in modern architecture and in a critique of modern architecture. The demolition of Otto Wagner's Stadtbahn stations in the 1960s was one major reasons for the founding of the ÖGFA in 1965.

We are not conservationists, and we have never demanded that the World Heritage should be, as it were, frozen in place, but we have always pointed out the immense value of Vienna's architectural heritage from all periods, and the danger posed to it by various external factors.

1.2 ÖGFA and the Heumarkt project

We have, for this and other reasons, been very critical of the Heumarkt project from the very start and of the way the planning process and the political actions in its implementation.

Just two examples:

In May 2013, the ÖGFA together with numerous architects and other NGOs signed a letter to then-vice mayor Maria Vassilakou, criticizing the competition process, pointing out that the city government has to safeguard public interest over private interest.

In August 2023, the ÖGFA was one of the NGOs that signed the open letter in advance of the 45th session of the World Heritage Committee in Riad, pointing out that the then-current version of the project still did not meet the requirements for the World Cultural Heritage Historic Center of Vienna set out by UNESCO ten years earlier.

In our view, the project continues to pose a massive threat to the integrity of the World Heritage property Historic Centre of Vienna.

2 Statement

Today, as many other speakers are pointing out similar concerns, I will highlight just one particular aspect which seems particularly problematic to us: The process of planning and decision making and the unacceptable mis-use of urban planning tools.

Two major examples, which have been commented on by ICOMOS in the past:

2.1 Vienna High-Rise concept of December 2014

This planning document replaced the previous high-rise concept from 2002 and says:

"Enriching the cityscape by accenting the height relief in spatially significant points – interfaces in the urban structure, city edges, activity poles, inner-city development areas, etc. – may be definitely desirable. (...) High-rises embodying appropriate dimensions in relation to the existing building stock may be acceptable if they are conducive to local enrichment of the urban fabric, to spatial and functional clarification, to a meaningful transformation of the respective situation in keeping with the requirements of urban typology and urban sociology, and if they help to compensate for structural deficits and support the public appropriation of urban space"

The criteria quoted here are extremely vague and completely open to interpretation. In contrast to the previous High-Rise Concept of 2002, this one no longer establishes exclusion zones for high rise buildings in the urban areas, and that includes the core and buffer zones of the UNESCO World Heritage properties.

To quote the ICOMOS Reactive Monitoring Mission to the World Heritage property of November 16-19, 2015:

"ICOMOS expresses its great concern as the newly adopted High-rise Concept 2014 abolishes exclusion zones for high-rises in the Vienna urban areas, without having applied proper instruments of control for height volume and urban density adequate for respecting the Outstanding Universal Value of the World Heritage properties."

2.3 Masterplan Glacis of 2014

The second planning tool is the Masterplan Glacis, also implemented in 2014. A masterplan for the Ringstrasse and the 19th century urban structure between the historical core and the outer boroughs.

The document considers that

"the area still contains isolated inner-city lots suitable for possible urban development"
and

“The changes wrought over the past decades and the project developments currently under discussion show that dynamic urban development also harbours major development potential for the historically evolved core of Vienna.”

So, by this daring logic, the discussion about a questionable project as such is already a justification for its implementation. The word “dynamic”, by the way, also featured very prominently in the contributions by the city officials in the hearing about the implemented management plan in May 2021.

To quote again the assessment of ICOMOS in its monitoring mission 2015:

“The High rise Building Concept and the 2014 Glacis Master Plan do not provide a sufficiently clear, measureable set of standards and guidelines, particularly in relation to the potential height of new developments”

The ÖGFA explicitly shares this concern.

The fact that, in May 2017, a few months after the zoning plan (Flächenwidmungsplan) was adapted to allow the Heumarkt project to be built, the Vienna city council decreed that high-rise-buildings in the historical core were not allowed “from that point in time onwards”, merely underlines the fact that the High-Rise concept and the Masterplan Glacis, although purportedly part of the long-term urban planning strategy set forth in the STEP 2025 (Stadtentwicklungsplan 2025), were basically tools set in place to facilitate the realization of the Heumarkt project. The fact that, since 2017, the Masterplan Glacis has barely been mentioned again by the city government and administration, further underlines this point. It had obviously served its one and only purpose.

2.4 Vagueness and the mindset of “Situationselastizität”

We have seen both in the Masterplan Glacis and the High-Rise Concept behind all the ornamental vocabulary, a vagueness both in words and graphics. They include basically anything and exclude almost nothing, and leave any decision to the future. It is, however, the nature of planning that it makes assumptions about the future and that it definitely includes this and excludes that. The cityscapes we treasure today, the medieval city, the 19th century city, the boulevards in Paris, and some modern developments owe much of their structural quality to the fact that someone in the past has decided what is NOT allowed.

By this definition, the Masterplan Glacis and the High-Rise Concept pretend to be tools of urban planning but they are not. Conversely, they constitute what we notoriously call in Austria “Situationselastizität”, which roughly translates as “situational elasticity”. It is a very Viennese mindset of being comfortable with vagueness, because vagueness leaves you room to manoeuvre in the future. In practice, it means: “anything is possible, let’s just start, and then we’ll see”. This does have some advantages, but it is a very dangerous precedent when it comes to planning decisions, especially in sensitive areas.

I should also point out that, although this vagueness is often used to make room for the demands of investors, it is not actually what investors want. Because they want certainty and clarity for their investments.

The Heumarkt project is a glaring example among many others of where this mindset can lead, and at great cost to the public purse at that. Moreover, as we have seen, it hijacks and degrades valuable planning instruments, which purportedly apply to the whole city (in the High-Rise concept) or to a specific area (as in the Masterplan Glacis) but in reality mainly serve to legitimize one particular project by embedding it in some sort of simulated objectivity.

2.5 “Situationselastizität” in practice

In the past years, we have seen the representatives of the city administration and government expecting UNESCO to share this mindset of *Situationselastizität*, and during these years of negotiations, of stops and starts and makeovers, they have time and again been surprised and upset that this was not the case: That sometimes facts are facts, that guidelines are guidelines, that maximum height means maximum height.

This collision of two mindsets has over the last years, caused an endless cycle of attempted compromise, a seemingly endless elasticity of building volumes. We have seen the project developers re-arranging building volumes in response to UNESCO’s demand. We can see that the vagueness has by now transformed into complete randomness. Lower, wider, longer, and – because why not – at one point with explosion of vegetation all over the window frames and rooflines, probably to make them more palatable. All this can be seen as an attempt at a ex-post-facto compromise for the initial mistake of ignoring the demands of UNESCO, while still retaining the profitable gross floor area. A task which is, quite obviously, impossible.

2.6. Loss of architectural quality

Meanwhile, Izay Weinfeld’s winning project of the architecture competition is completely unrecognizable. This competition, as ÖGFA and others have repeatedly made clear, has had numerous flaws, but a competition as such is a valuable and important and democratic planning instrument, which has in this case been hollowed out completely. In the course of this slicing, pushing and squeezing, the project has certainly not got any better in terms of architectural quality. Instead, what we have seen is haggling and bantering and political tactics which have by now completely lost any connection with any sensible criteria for urban planning and civic architecture.

Of course, compromise as such is a valuable asset of the democratic process. The problem arises, however, when compromise becomes both the only tool and the only objective, with everything else falling by the wayside. In the case of the Heumarkt project, this has resulted in a seemingly interminable re-shaping of the project in an attempt to approach the UNESCO guidelines, whereas both crucial rules of architectural quality such as proportion, materiality, adequacy, and the history of the project itself are being ignored. Maybe it is the intention of those responsible to just wear everyone down until they give in.

But it is fair to assume that whatever the outcome will be, it will not and cannot be well-proportioned, dignified and in accordance with its site and with the World Cultural Heritage Historical center of Vienna.

3 Conclusion

It is of course not our position to decide but merely to advise. But we have to make clear to ourselves, that whatever version of the Heumarkt Neu project presented today or in the future will be the final one, be it version 3b, version 4f, version 8d, or 2plus or any of the mitigation proposals contained therein, this result will define the urban space in central Vienna for decades, if not centuries to come.

It will be unavoidably, and massively, THERE.

None of this or future versions of the project in the current dynamics of compromising and bantering and negotiating will be satisfactory, will be a worthy addition to the cityscape. The project has been burdened from the start with a birth defect of ignoring vital criteria for building in this sensitive site.

We are thus of the conviction that the best, that the only useful solution is to go back to the beginning and start anew.

Thank you.