

Open letter to the Mayor of Vienna, Dr. Michael Ludwig, concerning the preservation of St. Michael's Square in Vienna

Dear Dr. Ludwig,

No one would dream of planting trees on the Piazza Navona in Rome, the Grand-Place in Brussels or the square in front of the Salzburg Cathedral. In Vienna, on the other hand, the city government has plans to plant vegetation on St. Michael's Square, one of the most important squares in Europe from an historical and architectural, as well as town-planning, standpoint.

St. Michael's Square not only exemplifies the most important periods of Vienna's history – from ancient Roman times through the Middle Ages and the Baroque to the modern period – but it is also the site of some of Vienna's most significant buildings. Among them are icons of world architectural history such as Joseph Emanuel Fischer von Erlach's *Michaelertrakt* (St. Michael's Wing) of the Hofburg and Adolf Loos's residential and commercial building for Goldman & Salatsch. Furthermore, the actual layout of the square was designed by Hans Hollein. As the emblematic entrance to the imperial Hofburg, the square holds not only historical but, moreover, symbolic significance far beyond the borders of Austria. As part of the UNESCO World Heritage, its integral preservation is in everyone's interest.

The present plan calls for making this iconic city space "climate friendly" with the planting of trees and the introduction of water features. Even considering the justification for these measures in view of the challenges of climate change, they would mean the destruction of the square. St. Michael's Square is an urban space and its impact depends essentially on the subtle interplay of the buildings surrounding it. If trees and water features are placed in front of and among them, their spatial interaction will necessarily suffer and lose coherence. Ultimately the square will forfeit its urban character as a generous empty space within the density of the urban fabric.

It is therefore impossible to reduce the urban significance of St. Michael's Square to a single sight axis from Kohlmarkt to the Hofburg's St. Michael's Gate, as official announcements of the city of Vienna—perhaps all too aware that planting trees at this location represents a serious intervention—would suggest. Depending on where one enters the square, either from Kohlmarkt, Herrengasse, Schauflegasse, or St. Michael's Gate, different perspectives of the urban space open up, triggering new visual sensations and rendering the urban space each time perceptible in a unique way. All these impressions would be dramatically impaired by the planned interventions.

The planned redevelopment of the square is a threat to the impact of its urban planning, and brings with it serious damage to this historical ensemble. The costs of these modifications would indeed be much better invested into a genuine improvement of the city's climate in other locations. For example, this might involve the unsealing of Heldenplatz, or the greening of other parts of the city which, at present, offer very little in the way of open space for their many residents.

The undersigned individuals, institutions and associations urgently ask you, as mayor of the City of Vienna, to work together with renowned experts on a complete solution over the course of the square's redevelopment. This would take into consideration its entire spatial unity, as well as the unrestricted visibility of certain facades, thereby doing justice to the significance of St. Michael's Square – especially in the context of its status as a World Heritage site.

We hereby request that the goal of a climate-friendly city be implemented with reference to the entire urban context. This means prioritizing a funded analysis of such redevelopments from an urban planning perspective that is not focused on sites with a strong public appeal, and which does not (only) respond to commercial interests.