Exhibitions

Vienna's Ringstrasse: The Making of a Grand Boulevard
Wien Museum, Vienna
11 June–4 October 2015

In 2015, Vienna celebrated the Ringstrasse, “Europe’s most beautiful street.” The date commemorated was 1 May 1865, when Emperor Franz Joseph I officially opened the first section of the Ringstrasse to the public. The year of the emperor’s death, 1916, marked the completion of the one of most extensive and most monumental urban expansion projects of the nineteenth century. Despite destruction during World War II and a small amount of demolition in the ensuing years, the Ringstrasse remains one of the most complete and impressive examples of European historicist architecture and urbanism.

Aside from the Thyssen research project led by Renate Wagner-Rieger, this chapter of Vienna’s architectural history has been relatively neglected over the past few decades.

The 150th birthday was seen as a chance to resuscitate its reputation, to raise the profile of Vienna and its Ringstrasse to the public. The year of the emperor's death, 1916, marked the completion of the one of most extensive and most monumental urban expansion projects of the nineteenth century. Despite destruction during World War II and a small amount of demolition in the ensuing years, the Ringstrasse remains one of the most complete and impressive examples of European historicist architecture and urbanism. The comparison between the two cities is made again and again—for centuries the imperial city of Vienna has seen itself as competing with the French capital. This competition came to a head in 1853, when Emperor Napoleon III had Paris transformed into “the capital of the nineteenth century.”

The fact that the Ringstrasse’s 150th anniversary was marked by six concurrent exhibitions in Vienna was no coincidence. Over the past several years, Vienna’s tourism promoters have pursued the method of marking important anniversaries by grouping exhibitions together. The anniversary of Gustav Klimt’s death in 2011 was marked by no fewer than eleven exhibitions in Vienna museums; in 2013 the birthday of the Ringstrasse architect Theophil Hansen was the occasion for eight exhibitions and book publications.

Of the most recent crop of Ringstrasse exhibitions, the one most worth seeing was Vienna’s Ringstrasse: The Making of a Grand Boulevard at the Wien Museum. Its success was due not only to the spectacular objects on display but also to the academically rigorous concept developed by Andreas Nierhaus, the Wien Museum’s curator of architecture. He maintained a focus throughout on the initial, pioneering stage of the Ringstrasse: the preparations for the competition for an urbanistic scheme to replace the fortifications, the projects submitted, and the beginnings of building activity from midcentury onward.

Nierhaus rightly emphasized the success of the decision to fund the enormous project—including the street itself and its monumental buildings—through the proceeds from the sale of building sites. He showed how the so-called City Extension Fund ended up in 1914 with a balance of 102 million gulden in expenses against 122 million gulden in income. He stressed as well the impressive continuity demonstrated by the Ringstrasse as an urban planning project: it was built over a period of sixty years, adhering throughout to the original scheme. Such consistency was extremely rare in a century of change that saw many new developments and discoveries.

The exhibition stood out for the number and quality of the objects displayed, which derived for the most part from the Wien Museum’s own collections; the opportunity to view these items was in itself worth the price of admission. The remarkable model of Vienna’s historic center made by Eduard Fischer in 1852–53, which has long marked the beginning of the museum’s permanent display devoted to the city’s history, here provided a striking opening for the exhibition. This was a clever move, and a technological enhancement made a strong impact: the footprints of the monumental Ringstrasse buildings were projected onto the model so that the later development was superimposed on the earlier city, giving the visitor a powerful experience of the massive extent of urban transformation. The installation demonstrated the pedagogical significance as well as the aesthetic importance of this meticulously detailed and accurate large-format model.

Alongside the colored maps, architectural plans, and city views, the contemporary photographs produced by the Imperial and Royal Court and State Printers under the leadership of Alois Auer were especially notable. These appeared at various points in the exhibition and demonstrated the immense care and attention given to the documentation of Vienna before, during, and after the demolition of the city walls. The astonishing scale of the glass plates, some as big as 40 by 50 centimeters, made possible a remarkable level of detail, offering scholars a surfeit of information about the “old Vienna,” then already in the process of disappearing.

The exhibition’s structure corresponded largely to the chapter divisions in the catalogue. In addition to the themes mentioned above, there were sections with titles such as “Maximum Density: Vienna before the Fall of the City Walls” and
“Demonstrative Waste: Palaces of Old and New Elites.” The exhibition introduced Ringstrasse protagonists like the architects Ludwig Förster, August Sicard von Sicardsburg, and Eduard van der Nüll alongside a few of the most significant buildings begun in the 1860s and corresponding to various typologies and functions, including the Opera, the Palais Todesco, the Heinrichshof (a huge residential and commercial building), and the Parliament Building.

The last section focused on the Ring’s reception, thus reaching into the present and touching on contemporary city planning and historic preservation. It included contemporary critiques as well as “corrections and revisions” such as Adolf Loos’s utopian replanning proposal of 1912–13. The exhibition ended with a celebration of the groundbreaking academic studies of the “pioneers of Ringstrasse research,” such as Renate Wagner-Rieger’s multivolume study (with its documentation of the Ringstrasse in thousands of photographs by Johanna Fiegl, which entered the Wien Museum’s collection in 2014) and the analysis of the Ringstrasse in Carl Schorske’s *Fin-de-Siècle Vienna* of 1980, which continues to inspire researchers internationally.3

In its design of the exhibition, MVD Austria sought to achieve a “light” and “transparent” installation by suspending picture frames from the ceiling and displaying objects on glass-topped tables supported by thin legs (Figure 1). The overall impression of fragility was unsettling. Many of the objects exhibited on tables would have been better displayed on the walls. The staggered hanging of maps and architectural plans of varying sizes in the middle of the space led to confusion and an irritating overlap among the different formats. The backs of framed documents presented unattractive views, and visitors had difficulty orienting themselves in the space, as they needed to look past the suspended objects to see into the next thematic section. The shortcomings of the exhibition design were painfully visible throughout, and a feeling for the appropriate handling of valuable objects was missing. Reproductions, text panels, and originals were often treated identically. An oil painting, such as the portrait of the young emperor, or a colored presentation drawing is, after all, not only a historical object but also an artwork; as such, it calls for treatment as an artwork—that is, ideally, hung on a wall of an appropriate texture and color. Lending to the general overcrowding of the exhibition’s displays were the inadequate gallery spaces in the Wien Museum’s premises on the Karlsplatz. One can only hope that work on the institution’s much-needed extension will soon be under way.

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**Figure 1** Installation view of Vienna’s Ringstrasse: The Making of a Grand Boulevard, Wien Museum, Vienna, 2015 (photo by Christian Panzer; © Wien Museum).

**Related Publication**

Andreas Nierhaus, ed., *Der Ring: Pionierjahre einer Prachtstraße* (Vienna: Residenz Verlag, 2015), 288 pp., color and b/w illus. €29, ISBN 9783701733675

**Notes**


On the many technical innovations and achievements connected with the Ringstrasse, arguably the city’s most important anniversary of the opening of the Ringstrasse, there was erected in this final phase. Interest in the presentation of the Ringstrasse in different media (arguing that selective visual images of the Ringstrasse have strongly influenced its subsequent interpretation); the Ringstrasse as an economic resource, including its role in stimulating tourism (presenting, for example, a diachronic selection of guide books); and finally the process of rebuilding after the damage experienced during World War II. The exhibition was a fine memorial to the art historian Renate Wagner-Rieger, who was the first to show scientific interest in Vienna’s nineteenth-century art and who launched a remarkable research project.