Wien wird Weltstadt: Die Ringstraße und ihre Zeit
Austrian National Library, Vienna
21 May–1 November 2015
Vom Werden der Wiener Ringstraße
Vienna City Library, Vienna
30 April–13 November 2015
Ringstraße: Ein jüdischer Boulevard
Jewish Museum, Vienna
25 March–4 October 2015

In 2015, Vienna celebrated the 150th anniversary of the opening of the Ringstrasse, arguably the city’s most important contribution to nineteenth-century art and architecture. In addition to a large exhibition at the Wien Museum (reviewed separately in this issue by Christoph Hölz), three exhibitions explored the theme in contrasting ways. All of them faced the challenge of interpreting and presenting the mammoth undertaking represented by the Ringstrasse; all sought to give a comprehensive overview and, at the same time, to present new information at a level of detail that would add to our general knowledge of the era. Unfortunately, the exhibition makers relied for the most part on materials stored in their own collections, without making much use of objects kept by others. It was obviously not their aim to organize one comprehensive large-scale exhibition on the Ringstrasse era comparable to such groundbreaking exhibitions as Traum und Wirklichkeit: Wien 1870–1930 (Künstlerhaus Vienna, 1985) or Bürgerinn und Aufgebegeben: Biedermeier und Vormärz in Wien 1815–1848 (Künstlerhaus Vienna, 1988). The exhibitions of 2015 appeared instead like separate contributions to a transdisciplinary conference highlighting different aspects of a common theme.

The Ringstrasse, the symbol of Vienna’s transformation into a modern metropolis, was opened on 1 May 1865. In 1857, Emperor Franz Joseph I had commissioned the demolition of the former fortifications and the building of a completely new city quarter on the site. In contrast to Haussmann’s procedure in Paris, in Vienna the income from the sale of building lots to individuals went to the design committee, and the process of its realization. It continued with themes like 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 scandal surrounding the Opera building—in which one of its architects committed suicide—was presented in sensationalized terms, without reference to the deplorable involvement of the press in this matter. However, the National Library did display one extremely interesting and previously unknown object: a manuscript written by the civil servant Friedrich Schindler in 1866. As an eyewitness, he gave a detailed description of the Ringstrasse area under construction, with all its exciting innovations and inconveniences. It is of great benefit that the whole of Schindler’s text has been reproduced in the catalogue.

The exhibition at the Vienna City Library, by contrast, was based on a much more coherent concept, again starting with preexisting urban conditions, the competition for the scheme, and the process of its realization. It continued with themes like 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
that resulted in a multivolume work published from 1969 to 1981 (on display in the exhibition) that is still the main point of reference for any study of the Ringstrasse.²

The focus of the Jewish Museum’s exhibition was on the architectural and artistic, economic, social, scholarly, and cultural contributions to the Ringstrasse made by members of the Jewish community. The opening section of this exhibition was both provocative and illuminating: the Catholic Votivkirche, offered by the Habsburg archduke Maximilian to commemorate the attempted assassination of his brother Franz Joseph in 1853, was confronted with the main synagogue in Vienna’s traditionally Jewish Leopoldstadt district. Both buildings’ cornerstones were quarried in Jerusalem and brought to Vienna by the same person, the Jewish writer Ludwig August Frankl. Again, however, visitors who wanted to learn more on the background and significance of this fact had to refer to the catalogue. The broad thematic range of this exhibition gave a good overview of topics related to nineteenth-century Vienna, but what was missing was a sense of how the contributions of the Jewish community, undoubtedly very important, related to the contributions of the several other groups involved in the formation of the Ringstrasse. The exhibition documented anti-Semitism through anti-Semitic caricature, but those who uttered these verdicts could themselves have been portrayed. This would have achieved two aims: presenting the sociopolitical conflicts that characterized Vienna in this period and communicating the competitive situation and the contributions of diverse groups.

Even if all three exhibitions had shortcomings, the catalogues and other books published to accompany them add new, if not groundbreaking, insights, furthering our understanding and interpretation of Vienna’s most important urban project.

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Related Publications
Harald R. Stühlinger, ed., Um Werden der Wiener Ringstrasse (Vienna: Metroverlag, 2015), 396 pp., color illus. €29.90, ISBN 9783993002183

Notes
1. See “Masterplan Glacis,” Vienna City Administration, http://www.wien.gv.at/stadtentwicklung/projekte/glacis (accessed 12 Oct. 2015). Interestingly, in these recent discussions the area is often called Glacis, referring back to the open space in front of the city walls that predated the Ringstrasse. The discussions thus invoke a historical term for a thing that no longer exists and pretend that there is still undeveloped space on which to build.

The New Brutalist Image 1949–55
Tate Britain, London
24 November 2014–4 October 2015

The Brutalist Playground
Royal Institute of British Architects, London
10 June–16 August 2015

Brutalism has never entirely been out of fashion since Reyner Banham published The New Brutalism in 1966, but the term has become trendy again in the past five years as most of the movement’s iconic buildings in Britain have been swept away.¹ When eighteen years ago I began work on my own book Space, Hope and Brutalism (published in September 2015), I did not expect to catch the crest of a wave.²

Yet what does Brutalism actually mean? Banham’s book coincided with the generation of great concrete housing blocks and shopping centers, to which the label stuck. But the initial New Brutalism (the adjective is important) was a more discrete movement of architects and artists who looked at the sources of art in nature, at basic geometries, and believed in expressing building materials and structure as naturally as possible, whether in timber, brick, steel, or concrete. One can see parallels in the work of Aldo van Eyck, himself inspired by artists, and even Louis Kahn, but the term New Brutalism is wholly British—although the movement’s revival has been led largely by historians from abroad. The Tate exhibition focused on collaborations among sculptor Eduardo Paolozzi, photographer Nigel Henderson, engineer Ronald Jenkins, and architects Alison and Peter Smithson. While much of its content had been picked over since the major exhibition on the Independent Group at the Institute of Contemporary Arts in 1991, including a small retrospective on the exhibition Parallel of Life and Art at the ICA on its sixtieth anniversary in 2013, the importance to the movement of the collaboration between artists and architects remains inadequately recognized. So too is the collaboration of both parties with the engineer Ronald Jenkins of Ove Arup and Partners, who contributed to Parallel of Life and Art and who commissioned its begetters to remodel his office in Fitzroy Street.

The Tate’s exhibition was curated by Victoria Walsh of the Royal College of Art with Claire Zimmerman of the University of Michigan, assisted by Helen Little and Elena Crippa of the Tate (Figure 1). The exhibition raised the question of whether the New Brutalism would be familiar to the average Tate visitor, and what its appeal might be for someone without a general grounding in architecture. Was this mixed exhibition a way of making architecture approachable, or (as I suspect) was further explanation needed to bring the New Brutalism to life? The exhibition was based on the Tate’s holdings of Henderson’s work, but it also included, laid out in cases resembling giant drawing boards, student drawings by the Smithsons, placed next to the photographs of found objects and the catalogue for Parallel. Also represented were early collaborations between Paolozzi and Henderson, including the latter’s cast stones for a later collaboration with the Smithsons in the exhibition This Is Tomorrow, held at the Whitechapel Gallery in 1956.

Henderson had met Paolozzi at the Slade School of Fine Art and was living in Bethnal Green during the period when Paolozzi and Peter Smithson taught together at London’s Central School of Arts and Crafts in 1950–55. At that time Alison and Peter Smithson were building Hunstanton Secondary School with Ronald Jenkins, and Henderson photographed the project as it neared completion;