

## **Expert urban design assessment regarding the UNESCO World Heritage property “Historic Centre of Vienna”**

*Developed on 13 April 2018 by:*

*Univ.-Prof. Dipl.-Ing. Christa Reicher,  
Department of Urban Design and Land Use Planning,  
founder and director of the Expert Group for Urban Heritage Conservation  
(Fachgruppe Städtebauliche Denkmalpflege), Technical University of Dortmund*

*On the basis of*

- *the expert workshop conducted on 14/15 March 2018 at the Federal Chancellery in Vienna*
- *the documents and planning studies submitted*

### **Preliminary remark**

Cities as well as historic city centres are exposed to a permanent process of change resulting from new utilisation demands, demographic and social change as well as architectural requirements. In phases of growth and densification, historic structures come under increasing pressure. In order to safeguard the identity of a place, its readability and specific characteristics, it is becoming more and more important to distinguish between identity-creating **constants** that must be preserved under all circumstances and possible **variables** of lesser architectural-cultural value.

Interventions into the urban structure within the framework of necessary renewal or appropriate densification must be evaluated according to the **readability and clarity of the spatial rhythms** of a city as well as in conjunction with the **added value for society**. A World Heritage property like the “Historic Centre of Vienna” demands special mindfulness in dealing with its multiple “layered histories” as well as its historical characteristics and rhythms.

The present urban design assessment builds on this concept of how to continue constructing while preserving historic cities; the five questions asked will thus be answered as follows:

### **1. Will the Vienna Ice-Skating Club – InterContinental Hotel – Konzerthaus project negatively impact the attributes underlying the OUV of the World Heritage property to an extent that would seriously threaten the conservation and value of the World Heritage property?**

When the Historic Centre of Vienna was nominated as a World Heritage property by the World Heritage Committee in December 2001, the following criteria, which are listed in abbreviated form below, were decisive and complied with by the situation as it applied at the time:

- The urban and architectural qualities of the Historic Centre of Vienna bear outstanding witness to a continuing interchange of values throughout the second millennium (ii).
- Three key periods of European cultural and political development – the Middle Ages, the Baroque period, and the Gründerzeit – are exceptionally well illustrated by the urban and architectural heritage of the Historic Centre of Vienna (iv).
- Since the 16<sup>th</sup> century Vienna, has been universally acknowledged to be the musical capital of Europe (vi).

What is emphasised is the outstanding character of the Historic Centre of Vienna, which is seen to reside in the integrity and authenticity of its architectural heritage as well as in its manifold cultural facets, thus making up the Outstanding Universal Value (OUV) as defined by UNESCO. By determining a UNESCO core zone and a buffer zone, the World Heritage property is spatially differentiated; while this definition is not fully comprehensible and transparent in all its details, it does provide an important frame of reference for the intensity of interventions into the historically evolved situation.

A look back into history shows that Vienna's old city centre has undergone significant changes throughout the different phases of urban development. For example, the enormous development pressure during the Gründerzeit period led to the slighting of the fortifications including the old city walls, thus creating space for the construction of the Ringstrasse with its impressive representative buildings. The construction of the Ringstrasse and the demolition of part of the medieval building stock caused seminal changes to the urban structure. These measures also created space for new, important buildings. The damage wrought by the Second World War likewise led to a need for architectural interventions and new buildings, which today form a more or less integral part of Vienna's historic cityscape.

The InterContinental Hotel built in the Heumarkt zone in the 1960s is an example of this permanent process of transformation and at the moment of nomination for inscription on the UNESCO World Heritage List was considered a functionally important built structure and architectural legacy of a specific architectural period. Despite some vehement discussions regarding the InterContinental Hotel edifice, it was accepted as a witness to its period of construction; hence, at the moment of nomination for inscription on the World Heritage List, it was considered an integral element of the Historic Centre of Vienna and not regarded as a true impairment of the World Heritage property. As an important event location and invigorating structure serving various purposes, the current InterContinental Hotel building did not negatively affect visual integrity to a significant degree. The Heumarkt area with its different forms of use in public space and in the adjoining structures was intact.

Given these background facts, any assessment of potential negative effects cannot solely consider building heights in this spot, but must take account of the complexity of the overall situation and the genesis of the site. The current Vienna Ice-Skating Club – InterContinental Hotel – Konzerthaus project, which is the outcome of a competition process and in due course was modified and revised, aims to replace the InterContinental Hotel with an architectural complex composed of a slab-type building, a high-rise and a base structure. The planned height of the complex will exceed that of the extant hotel building and will present a much more massive volume than that of the current urbanistic ensemble.

Today the urbanistic situation around the Konzerthaus, the skating rink and the InterContinental Hotel is rather unattractive. Both the area of the ice rink itself and the adjoining buildings are in need of rehabilitation and require renewal both from the viewpoint of urban design and from the architectural angle. The frame conditions for the Heumarkt competition took principally account of this need for holistic redevelopment.

The winning competition entry meets these requirements in part: Public space as a central place of encounter for different social groups – in this case also viewed as a

place of sports activities by providing a wintertime skating rink as well as a free-for-all public space – is appropriately upgraded in connection with the framework created by the new structures and the renewal of the extant building stock. The project organises the different forms of use in the Heumarkt area (residential units, event and convention centre, hotel, restaurants, cafés, the Konzerthaus, ...) in a way that ensures their interaction with public space while at the same time providing a multifaceted and invigorating mixed-use ensemble. With a view to these two central aspects – i.e. public space and a constellation of different forms of use –, the planned project harbours great potential for the immediate environs of the Heumarkt site.

The changes introduced to modify the original design submitted for the competition – in particular for the buildings that are to replace the current 1960s hotel – have principally raised new questions regarding the height and volume of the future structures, which I evaluate as follows:

I consider the preservation and rehabilitation of witnesses to a specific period, such as the InterContinental Hotel, to be of extreme importance for the readability of a city. The competition result for the Heumarkt area linked to the proposal to preserve and rehabilitate the 1960s edifice and to merely add to and consolidate the architectural ensemble as such was thus entirely comprehensible. While the current status quo of the project – modified as compared to the competition – with two higher buildings (one slab-type structure, one high-rise) is economically understandable due to the desire to make the best possible use of the available space and the welcome investment in public space and social infrastructure, a new high-rise would cause an impairment of sightlines affecting the UNESCO World Heritage property that in its turn is not understandable in view of the given situation. If a structural addition of this size is truly necessary, I would propose to reduce the height of the high-rise while adding an appropriate number of storeys to the residential building along Am Heumarkt; however, it would seem impossible to fully compensate for the loss of usable floorspace even if this solution were adopted.

My assessment is motivated less by the argument to preserve the so-called “Canaletto view”, i.e. the perspective of Vienna’s old city centre as seen from Upper Belvedere Palace (painted in the mid-18<sup>th</sup> century), but rather by my advocacy of an appropriate preservation of sightlines, of a clearcut and visually evident hierarchy of the third dimension of the historic cityscape, and of the readability of urban layers accreted over time.

In balancing these different arguments and criteria, I do not consider the World Heritage property in its entirety as being threatened, especially since the Heumarkt area is situated at the interface between core zone and buffer zone, and because it is absolutely necessary to eliminate the current urbanistic deficiencies. The criteria ii and vi (see Question No. 1) are impaired only to a limited degree; criterion iv is not done justice by the current plans, since the attempt to continue building on important key eras as aimed for by this object cannot be classified as a convincing urbanistic layer of the 21<sup>st</sup> century.

In my opinion, an **adaptation of the planned building heights as well as of the scale of the project** – in particular of the ensemble composed of slab and tower – is called for. For this purpose, **urbanistic options** should be developed that would then need to be evaluated on the basis of the abovementioned complex criteria. The objective must lie in finding a truly convincing solution for this important spot of the old city centre of Vienna; this solution should contribute to giving expression to

the 21<sup>st</sup>-century urbanistic and architectural attitude **of appropriateness and respectful integration into the historic building stock.**

**2. Will the Karlsplatz project negatively impact the attributes underlying the OUV of the World Heritage property to an extent that would seriously threaten the conservation and value of the World Heritage property?**

The Karlsplatz project with the two planned buildings for Wien Museum and Zurich Insurance, both of which result from an architectural competition, does not impair the World Heritage property, but on the contrary provides a general **improvement of the overall situation.**

The Wien Museum redesign with the addition of storeys would prove a functional and architectural boon for this institution. The elimination of the intermediate bridge structure between museum and adjoining office building will prove of benefit for the visual independence of the structures. At the same time, the Zurich Insurance office building, which is to be enhanced by two more storeys, will adapt to the height of the museum edifice. The vicinity of the office building to the Church of St. Charles Borromeo (Karlskirche) does not pose any problems, since the church will remain the dominant building in this site.

The interaction of Wien Museum and Winterthur Building with the church creates a **spatially coherent ensemble.** The architectural measures would thus – in combination with the public space of Karlsplatz – appropriately consolidate this area.

**3. Has a serious and alarming extent of urban development occurred since inscription and have its cumulative (negative) effects on the attributes underlying the Outstanding Universal Value (OUV) of the World Heritage property attained an extent that would seriously threaten the conservation and value of the World Heritage property, and if so, how does this threat manifest itself?**

Since the nomination of the “Historic Centre of Vienna” for inscription on the World Heritage List in 2001, architectural changes have taken place to meet the demands of social and demographic flux as well as of changing economic requirements. The changes that have thus occurred have not attained a degree that truly threatens the value of the World Heritage property.

Many new construction projects and conversions or modifications of recent years (e.g. MuseumsQuartier, P&C Weltstadthaus, OPEC Headquarters, ...) show that the standards set for continued building activities inside the historic part of the city are high, and that contemporary architecture need not be in contradiction to the historic World Heritage property, but on the contrary can revive and render it more attractive through new forms of use in combination with an appropriately proportionate scale. Most projects show visible respect of the historic built stock.

Evident transformations have mainly involved the **roofscape** and **advertising installations**, in particular with regard to the illumination of buildings and structural building elements. In the future, attention must increasingly be paid to rooftop conversions or additions and hence to the 5<sup>th</sup> façade of the Historic Centre of Vienna, as massive interventions involving conversions and storey additions have taken place in this field. Moreover, the sometimes too generous use of advertising facilities and luminous displays must be subjected to stricter control.

The Heumarkt area indicates clearly that negative developments can indeed arise in public space if this space is given insufficient attention and is not architecturally evolved according to requirements. The current urbanistic situation in the Heumarkt area is very unsatisfactory: The public spaces are urgent need of renewal, the traditional use of the Vienna Ice-Skating Club is jeopardised, and both Konzerthaus and hotel building are in need of rehabilitation; this is compounded by rundown public spaces, in particular along the street Am Heumarkt. The interaction of these urban design deficiencies impacts the Outstanding Universal Value (OUV) of the World Heritage property negatively. Hence the site is in absolute need of appropriate urbanistic upgrading and architectural renewal (see Question No. 1).

#### **4. Are the protection and planning instruments of the City of Vienna and of the Republic of Austria sufficient to adequately protect and sustainably develop the World Heritage property?**

The legal protection instruments for Vienna's old city (protection zones as part of the Building Code for Vienna and monument protection applying to important buildings as a federal competency) and the possibilities inherent in them appear sufficient to protect the World Heritage property. Specifically, about 50% of the building stock in the core zone is under monument protection; thus this legal instrument can be comprehensively applied. The extension of monument protection to parks and gardens, introduced in 2000 with the amendment to the Austrian Preservation of Monuments Act, was another highly welcome step.

With regard to advertising and illumination (see Question No. 3), the question arises whether it might not be advisable to intervene more restrictively by applying design stipulations or to employ these to control the visual impact more effectively.

In my opinion, linking the existing legal instruments to the extensive range of informal instruments is more important than broadening and tightening the former:

The **Vienna Memorandum** "World Heritage and Contemporary Architecture – Managing the Historic Urban Landscape" of 2005 contains very astute, still valid statements that should be taken intensified account of in the discussion and decision-making process concerning the further development of Vienna's World Heritage. These guidelines should not fall into oblivion but rather be increasingly incorporated into the current discussion, especially in view of the topicality of the questions involved.

The current version of the **Vienna High-rise Concept** (Thematic Concept HIGH-RISE BUILDINGS. Strategies for the Planning and Evaluation of High-rise Projects), which has been in force since mid-2014, offers plausible approaches regarding exclusion zones and potential high-rise locations.

The **Glacis Master Plan** of October 2014 for the periphery of the World Heritage property contains important strategic statements concerning urbanistic potentials and restrictions. With its morphological analysis of spatial and architectural structures, the constants supported by this basis and the scenarios highlighted in it, this document offers a valid foundation for the further development of the 1<sup>st</sup> municipal district Innere Stadt.

Overall, these informal instruments as well as the awareness of the important role of lines and angles of sight as well as of visual axes for the perception of the cityscape provide a good basis, whose operationalisation and implementation, however, need to be rendered more concrete.

Alongside planning requirements, guidelines and scenarios (as potential test concepts), an accompanying management process to address important decisions impacting the future is essential, as is evidenced by the Heumarkt project. Such a management process must go beyond the management plan formally demanded by UNESCO and contains stronger participatory elements. For cities (and above all historic cities) are a negotiation process and, ultimately, a compromise between divergent interests. This agreed compromise can only be attained if there is openness towards different – societal, social, economic and aesthetic – concerns, and if a management structure to ensure the attainment of quality is in place or created.

The identity of the Historic Centre of Vienna can only be successfully preserved if cityscape preservation is given equal importance as long-term safeguarding of the quality of life. Contrasting and exciting, yet appropriate integration into the context must serve as the guiding principle for the further evolution of the historic character of the city. Hard (legally binding/formal) instruments should serve to define “constants”, while soft (informal) instruments and procedures should be employed to arrive at a **consensus-oriented process** regarding proportionality, qualities of public space and the interaction between existing built stock and new architecture.

##### ***5. How can dialogue be improved and communication optimised in order to resolve conflicts and prevent them in the future?***

Conflicts can only be avoided if **dialogue** is improved **at three levels**:

###### **- Dialogue between different disciplines**

The disciplines of **monument protection and urban development**, both of which pursue their own thematic focuses, must be more strongly interlinked. A **wider understanding of the cultural heritage concept**, which apart from the built environment takes greater interest in human beings and society, is not yet sufficiently part of recommendations regarding the management of the World Heritage property. More than in the past, the aim of protecting and preserving the Historic Centre of Vienna must place a much stronger focus (going beyond the preservation of individual monuments) on interactions at a greater scale, on connecting visual axes and lines of sight, on the functional interplay and importance of public spaces.

An intensive **dialogue between the different disciplines** and actors involved is not only desirable, but actually indispensable if viewed against the backdrop of the

inevitable processes of change regarding use, social structure, architectural structures and cityscape. Contemporary architecture is able to further develop the Historic Centre of Vienna while ensuring high building quality if the “historic constants” are respected. World Heritage sites are not museums, but rather must walk a tightrope between the preservation of the historic building stock and its embedment in a vital urban organism. The very reasons – mentioned above – which entailed the inscription of the Historic Centre of Vienna on the World Heritage List specifically and expressly refer to manifold cultural institutions and activities that are in permanent evolution – in particular in a growing city – and create new demands, which must in their turn be met by built structures and open spaces. Cities have always been, and will always be, living organisms; World Heritage properties, too, must correspond to this reality; they cannot be regarded as static urban bodies existing in an isolated vacuum.

An **integrated and holistic view** is necessary and can only be implemented if decision-making processes such as those concerning World Heritage properties involve experts from different disciplines (urban planning, urban design, cultural studies, landscape design, etc.) more strongly than so far.

#### **- Dialogue between politicians, experts and citizens**

Urban development is complex but often becomes visible to the “world outside” only in highly reduced fashion on the basis of individual projects, individual concerns and partisanship relating to specific, single projects. This is highlighted with particular clarity by the Heumarkt project.

The complexity of urban contexts and above all the potential options for the future must be communicated by means of easily understandable methods. **Realistic visualisations** of the future status to be expected are absolutely necessary as solid decision-making aids. Experience has shown that (deliberately) exaggerated visualisations stir up emotions and conjure up images that later on are difficult to break down to a more objective level.

The history of the city and its individual layers must remain readable and understandable for people; otherwise, there is the risk of igniting overblown emotionalised discussions that take on a life of their own in public perception and no longer can be addressed with the desirable degree of objectivity while drawing on the requisite expertise of specialists.

#### **- Dialogue with UNESCO**

It should be possible to exchange arguments and viewpoints as part of a discourse and not on the basis of (partly obsolete or no longer current) planning materials and documents. To the extent to which the vitality of a World Heritage property is desired by UNESCO, it must also be possible for the actors involved (i.e. above all the representatives of the City of Vienna and UNESCO) to engage in lively and direct dialogue.

In the same way as UNESCO cites the three epochs of the past – i.e. Middle Ages, Baroque and Gründerzeit – as key for its inscription of the Historic Centre of Vienna on the World Heritage List, the 21<sup>st</sup> century could retrospectively also prove an era able to take its place among them as an important phase of urban development with high standards of architecture and urban design.