

A NEED FOR CHANGE. VIENNA, A PERFORMATIVE BEAUTY

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241

A NEED FOR CHANGE

Cities' actual and future livability – including healthiness and life quality – depends on their preparedness to tackle climate change and biodiversity loss, crucial issues of the Anthropocene. Contemporary open spaces need design actions for new aesthetics capable of conveying values through architecture by combining spatial quality, environmental performance, and sociality. Each new project must aim to take part in a broader transformation, taking into account, and tackling, the urgent challenges of a precise historical moment due to the *urban or higher-order paradigm* (Cozza 2017, p. 73).

The city of Vienna is one of the European best practices with a long pioneering tradition in promoting holistic planning and project design actions capable of guiding design choices with a multidisciplinary approach. The city is no longer the compact urban structure of the Nineteenth century only; to improve its spatial quality and livability, it has built the Danube Island, ambitious social housing projects with superb green and open spaces, and springwater mains for water supply, it has expanded the district heating network, preserved its green belt with specific legislation and made huge investments in public transport.

In 2022 the municipality presented the Vienna Climate Guide (Municipal Department 20 2022), a roadmap that has set out the path to achieving climate neutrality by 2040 by promoting climate protection and climate adaptation actions at different levels, including “Buildings”, “Ecosystems, natural and recreational areas”, and “Public space and buildings” (*ibid.*). The declared goal is “that Vienna will still be the most livable city worldwide in 20 years from now” (*ibid.* p. 4).

The *Climate Protection Programmes* begun in late 1999 – *KLiP 1* (1999-2009) and *KLiP II* (2010-2020) – and the *Urban Heat Island Strategy* (Municipal Department 22 2015) was launched in 2015 enacting changes to mitigate the effects of heat waves, which are also connected to a higher mortality ratio (Kaltsatou, Kenny 2018, p. 053). This choice was moved by the awareness of the effect of the climate crisis on the city which, according to scientific studies, was following a dangerous trend:

Vienna will be among the European cities most affected by the climate crisis [3]. Since the 1970s the annual mean temperature has increased [...] by even three degrees in Vienna [4]. [...] Scientists expect that Vienna will further warm by up to four degrees Celsius by the end of the century. Heat spells that only lasted for an average of five days in the past 30 years may extend for up to 28 days towards the end of the 21st century [3; 8]. (

Municipal Department 20 2022, pp. 15-16).

Esterházy-Park. The plan of the eastern part, redesigned by the team of Carla Lo, Landschaftsarchitektur (on behalf of MA42 Stadtgärtner), Breathe Earth Collective and Green4Cities GmbH in 2019-2022, Vienna. Courtesy of Carla Lo, Landschaftsarchitektur.



Moreover, recent landscape architecture and open space design dialogue fruitfully with the local contexts, enhancing their spatial quality, environmental performance for people, animals and plants, and promoting sociality through complex inclusive programmes of various uses.

In February 2022 the Vienna City Council adopted *The Vienna Smart City Strategy* (City of Vienna 2022) aimed at Vienna becoming “a model climate city” with the mission to achieve a “high quality of life for everyone in Vienna; through social and technical innovation in all areas; while maximising conservation of resources” (*ibid.*, p. 23). Important targets of this strategy, such as adaptation strategies to climate change are setting quantitative and qualitative goals (*ibid.*, p. 43)† related to landscape architecture and open and green spaces.

Esterházy-Park is representative of this city’s capability; it is a public park with a long history and a complex inclusive programme of uses, located in Mariahilf –in the sixth district. The plot is on an embankment surrounded by slopes, has a triangular shape and is wider than 10.500 square meters. It actually hosts various outdoor leisure amenities in the western area for hosting different category of users, animals and plants – a big playground with various games, sandpits and water for little children, another one for a different group age, a training park, a dog park, a garden, ping-pong tables, sports courts, etc. –, different typologies of seats are located in all the areas, and an innovative experimental *Cooling Park* is located on the eastern side ∩. Other functions are hosted in the former World War II air-raid defence tower *Flakturm* which has been enlarged and re-designed several times – the aquarium-terrarium *Haus des Meeres* in the main renewed building since 1956, the climbing gym on the southern façade, and the torture museum *Foltermuseum* in the underground air-raid shelter –; moreover, there are a school complex and a huge green wall on the northern façade. In Vienna there are 6 “flak” towers, part of the totalitarian power apparatus of the Nazi regime; five of them are listed monuments and are largely preserved in their 1945 condition with the only exception of this one which has seen numerous proposals for conversion or expansion: from the shell of flats of the Fifties to Hans Hollein’s sculptural superstructures of the Sixties and Christo’s proposal for a temporary cover in the Seventies and the conceptual installation of Lawrence Weiner of the Nineties (Kühn 2018). Originally *Esterházy-Park* was a suburban noble palace garden constructed around the year 1695, even though today “not much has been left from the original park compositions (Baroque and later landscape ones)” (Staniewska 2016, p. 16) ∟.

Indeed, the garden was subjected to many transformations during the last 250 years due to property changes, the Mariahilfer district context's development and the effect of decay, buildings demolitions (the palace in the Seventies) and constructions (the tower in 1942-43 and the school in the Seventies).

As mentioned, this garden went through a stratified modification across the centuries, which transformed its design from the garden palace of the Albrechtsburg family into a landscape park till the moment of its opening as the first public park of the city in 1868 ^Λ.

The layout of the historical landscape composition has been definitely damaged by the construction of the *Flakturm* in 1943-44; its shape, dimension and position in the centre of the plot have disrupted the fluidity of the original triangular shape cutting the remaining open spaces into two main portions. Indeed, the actual composition is irregular and heterogeneous; there is a perimeter path next to Gumpendorfer Strasse – higher than the road level – which starts with a ramp and ends in a staircase, and there is also a perpendicular one connecting the end of this path to Schadekgasse at a point coplanar with the road at the end of the slope. The park is organized into two main parts: the square with the *Cooling Park* in front of the *Haus dees Meeres* with the monumental staircase and the big ramp, and the area with the leisure amenities at the back, facing the fences of the school complex and connected with the irregular fabrics of the context by smaller ramps, stairs, and paths. The programme of this area is extremely rich, and intended to be accessible, inclusive, and livable to people of all ages; it is equipped with many high-quality furniture of different types and greenery: traditional and experimental seats of various shapes (that characterize all the areas), games, sports equipment, etc.

The whole park (10.600 square meters) has been retrofitted according to the project by Dimitris Manikas and Auböck and Kárász in 1997- 2002 which improved both the accessibility (a monumental staircase, a big ramp with a fountain and antique sculptures plus many other devices to solve the gap between the embankment and the various heights of the surroundings) and the design of the amenities; the eastern plaza and the borders were more regular, playing with lines following the geometry of the plot generating modular squares and rectangles, while the other parts were plenty of curves and diagonal lines to provide good accessibility and identify the different functional areas. In 2019-2022 the eastern area (2.400 square meters) was redesigned by the design team of Carla Lo (on behalf of MA42 Stadtgärtner), Breathe Earth Collective and Green4Cities GmbH, taking part in the research

Esterházy-Park. An innovative experimental Cooling Park in Mariahilf. The cool spot capable of refreshing the summer temperature of 6 degrees Celsius, Vienna. Photo by the Johannes Hloch. Courtesy of Carla Lo, Landschaftsarchitektur.



Esterházy-Park.

Various seats along the perimeter of the embankment facing the city, located at a lower level, Vienna. Photo by the author, 2023.



project *Tröppferlbad 2.0* aimed at the evaluation and adaptation of the technical measures and the transfer of knowledge between research and practical implementation ^L. This area of the park is a pilot project that does not renounce beauty and is based on microclimatic simulations with a *cool spot* of about 30 square meters, capable of cooling down the surroundings by up to 6 degrees Celsius on hot days. Aesthetics, technical, ecological and social aspects were addressed in the design and construction of the *cool spot*, including participation design measures tested and developed for different target groups of users and residents, with vulnerable groups among others. Several serpentine benches that can accommodate an entire school class and over 30 new benches and chairs create additional seating for visitors. Findings about microclimate, materials, and energy as well as data on usage behaviour were collected and summarized in a planning guide ^E. Concrete and asphalt surfaces have been unsealed, allowing the addition of new grass, perennial beds, and trees to the existing plants. The water technology has different features, such as mist showers, a drinking fountain, an irrigation system and a circular *cool spot* with misting nozzles. There are climate trees, planted and shaded places to stay consisting of three rings with almost 3-metre-high mist showers of up to 2.20 meters in diameter that cool the surroundings with a fine spray. Low-tech measures are also important: a special assortment of trees, a new approach to pavements and green joints to keep low the degree of sealing and increase water permeability ^{*}. The project combines vegetative and hydrological elements of cooling, thus providing shade through a mix of artificial shading and vegetation, and cooling by spraying water. ^{||}

Esterházy-Park is representative of Vienna's attention and capability of promoting changes in a precise chosen direction through a multidisciplinary design approach that combines architecture, landscape and open space design, planning and participation but this is not the only example. Many new developments and districts are experimenting with this approach, from *Biotope City Wienerberg* to *Seestadt*, as testified by the IBA Vienna 2022 *New Social Housing* ^A with the slogan *How will we live tomorrow?*, thus demonstrating the emergence of a new *performative beauty* for contemporary open spaces, capable of conveying values through architecture by combining spatial quality, environmental performance, and sociality.

✱ “Adapting to climate change: • To mitigate and protect against summer overheating, new green and open spaces are created and existing ones expanded and structurally upgraded to improve the urban microclimate. • All citizens of Vienna have access to high-quality green space within a radius of 250 metres. [...] • Greening measures, shading features and other installations in the public space substantially reduce the (perceived) ambient temperature in summer and provide the backdrop for vibrant, climate-proof neighbourhoods. • In Vienna, as much rainwater as possible is fed back into the local natural or near-natural water cycle. [...] Urban ecology, environment & water: • The share of green space in Vienna is safeguarded on long term at over 50%. • Vienna creates additional new woodlands and green spaces as recreation areas for its growing population and to improve the urban microclimate. • The natural functions of the soil are maintained through preservation of existing unsealed surfaces and creation of new ones. • Vienna promotes biodiversity. [...]” (City of Vienna 2022, p. 43).

✂ See also: <https://www.wien.gv.at/umwelt/parks/anlagen/esterhazy.html> [accessed 22 December 2023].

|| The article provides an interesting description, supported by historical data and maps, of the garden's transformations from its construction to 2016, and states that currently, Esterházy Park “resembles more a city square than a reconstructed historic garden” (p. 28). According to the author, this is justified by the “significant lack of preserved substance” that did not allow “to undertake admissible reconstruction of the garden” (p. 26).

^ The garden palace was owned by the Albrechtsburg family, who had a summer residence and park built here in 1695-1698; from 1754 to 1794, the park was owned by state chancellor Wenceslas Anton Prince Kaunitz, who had it redesigned several times (a view of the garden from the palace is represented in the painting of Bernardo Bellotto (Canaletto) *Vienna, Panorama from Palais Kaunitz*, (1759- 1760), oil on canvas, Museum of Fine Arts, Budapest), while under Nicholas II, Prince Esterházy (1814-1833), the garden was partially transformed into a landscape park (Blaschek 1926, p. 136; Faber 1989, p. 24). After having being purchased by the state in 1868, the palace was turned into a gymnasium (Staniewska 2016, p. 21 and 23) while the park was opened to the public on 11 May 1868, thus becoming one of the first public parks of the city.

L See also: <https://presse.wien.gv.at/2020/04/26/esterhazypark-bauarbeiten-in-wiens-erstem-cooling-park-schreiten-zueig-voran> [accessed 22 December 2023].

E See also: <https://urbaninnovation.at/en/projekte/troepferlbad-2-0/> [accessed 22 December 2023].

* See also: <https://www.nextroom.at/beilage.php?inc=beitrag&cid=548> [accessed 22 December 2023].

|| See also: <https://www.green4cities.com/en/troepferlbad-2-0-2/> [accessed December 22, 2023].

^ See also: <https://www.iba-wien.at/en/> [accessed December 22, 2023].