

Vienna's Otto Wagner Hospital Am Steinhof – A Potential World Heritage Site in Danger

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Fig. 1: The Otto-Wagner-Hospital Am Steinhof in a painting of Erwin Pendl, 1907.

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The architectural ensemble of the Otto Wagner Hospital in Vienna's 14th district is a cultural heritage of exceptional universal value, rarely to be found anywhere in the world. In particular the institution's church "St. Leopold", named after the patron saint of Lower Austria, is a masterpiece of human creativity. The sacral building in Art Nouveau style, specially designed to meet the needs of the sick and frail, represents a highlight of Belle Epoque architecture. Accordingly, efforts have been made for years, to nominate the Otto Wagner Hospital for the World Heritage List and hereby place it under the protection of the international community. In contrast to the Austrian Federal Government, however, the Vienna city government, made up of Social Democrats and Greens, refuses to nominate this formerly most modern and worldwide exemplary hospital complex. Instead, the hospital operation will be dismantled and the 970,000 m² large area is successively obstructed, as a result of which its authenticity and integrity are increasingly lost.

The sanatorium and nursing home "Am Steinhof" – a "city within the city"

The Kaiser-Franz-Joseph-Landes-Heil- und Pflegeanstalt ("Emperor Franz Josef Regional Healing and Care Institution") in Mauer-Öhling (Lower Austria) for a thousand men-

tally ill people was built as an Art Nouveau pavilion facility under the lead of Carlo von Boog at the end of the 19th century, and was inaugurated in 1902 by the emperor himself. The open construction approach of the institution with 19 pavilions and a chapel, which was at the same time a "society house", in the middle of a huge park, represented an enormous progress in the care for mentally ill people. For the first time, new and more humane ideas were implemented in the healing and care of the mentally ill.

Although at the previous turn of the century society accepted that mentally abnormal persons were now to be regarded and treated as mentally ill instead of crazy, healing and care should take place as far outside the city as possible and not in the center of the city as before. Accordingly, the sanatorium and nursing home was built on the Gallitzinberg in the west of Vienna and thus on the outskirts of the city – easily accessible by public transport, but far enough to keep the distance between the sick and healthy.

It was also essential that the "Am Steinhof" sanatorium and nursing home should be the smallest possible burden to the general public, preferably as self-sufficient, autonomous and independent as possible, and that it should be able to sustain and manage itself. Supply of fresh air from the nearby Wienerwald and the connection to water supply

through the first Viennese high-quality water source pipeline were aimed to ensure that the institution could also to a certain extent provide itself with food. Agricultural areas and farms were established in which both employees, workers and patients carried out their work. Employment in agriculture and the different enterprises of the institution was an important part of the therapy and the recovery process. The fact of creating and doing something together distracted many patients at least to some extent from the disease, sometimes filled them with satisfaction and pride, but in any case reduced the feeling of being completely inactive and useless, of simply having to kill time.

The quiet and the less sick thus had a regular everyday life, were able to be trained in certain activities and even specialize in their field – similar to a profession in “normal civilization”. For this purpose, however, it was necessary that everything essential for life was in situ – and this requirement was met through “Am Steinhof”. From stables and garden houses to laundries and boiler houses to the administration building and its own church – everything was there. A “city within the city” – even with its own “society house”, in which the sick and the healthy performed, danced and acted.

“The City in the City” included on its opening on October 8, 1907, a sanatorium with 13 pavilions (870 beds), a nursing home with 11 pavilions (888 beds), a mental health home with 10 pavilions (356 beds), a spa hotel, two community centres and its own kitchen building, four buildings at the main entrance, the administration building along the main axis, and the community centre (today: Belle Epoque Theatre). In the farmyard there is a workshop building, a residential building, a building with horsehair combing and disinfection facilities, a laundry building, a boiler house, glass houses, a gardener’s house, horse and pig stables, an object for sausage production and fat melting, a gatehouse and a carriage house at the entrance to the farm, the mortuary with chapel of consecration and rest as well as a shed – a total of 60 individual objects (53.909 m²; 737.186 m³) with 518 sickrooms.



Fig. 2: Detail of a pavilion building.

Photo: Christian Schuböck

Carlo von Boog and Otto Wagner

The “Niederösterreichische Landes-Heil- und Pflegeanstalt ‘Am Steinhof’”, the present Otto-Wagner-Hospital (OWS), was conceived and planned by Carlo von Boog (1854-1905), who developed a “civil servant’s draft” for it. Since only limited funds were available, the Milan native adapted “the city in the city” to the terrain of the Gallitzinberg, whereby his wealth of experience from previous work in Mauer-Öhling met his needs.

At the same time, Otto Wagner (1841-1918), one of the most important architects of the Austro-Hungarian monarchy during the Belle Epoque, was busy with numerous buildings and infrastructure facilities. Among his most important works are the Vienna Stadtbahn (metropolitan railway), the Nussdorfer Wehr (Nussdorf weir system) and the quay on the Vienna Danube Canal as well as numerous commercial and residential buildings (Austrian Postal Savings Bank building, house of the insurance company “Der Anker”, Secessionist residential buildings on the “Linke Wienzeile” and many more).

As Vienna’s city planner, in addition to his numerous secular buildings Wagner wanted to realize a sacral building. The planning of “Am Steinhof” sanatorium and nursing home came just in time, and he submitted his “artist’s design” to the parliament of Lower Austria. He adopted Boog’s “civil servant’s draft” almost completely, but arranged the individual buildings in a symmetrical way. He gave his special attention, however, to the “St. Leopold” institution church, which he realized in Art Nouveau style with the participation of numerous outstanding artists and members of the Vienna Secession (including Koloman Moser and Othmar Schimkowitz). Today it is regarded as one of the most important sacral Art Nouveau buildings in the world.



Fig. 3: The theatre and memorial for the children abused for medical experiments.

Photo: Christian Schuböck



Fig. 4: The institution church “St. Leopold” with the figures of St. Leopold and St. Severin in the front of the cupola, created by Richard Luksch. Photo: Christian Schuhböck

Worthy of World Heritage status

Although almost all of the Otto Wagner Spital (OWS) is listed as a protected monument, the farm yard in the eastern part of the institution has been successively spoilt for years. In July 2012, “Alliance For Nature” therefore carried out a comparative and feasibility study on behalf of the citizens’ initiative “Steinhof erhalten” (“Safeguard Steinhof”) – with the result that the Otto Wagner Hospital with its St. Leopold institutional church even meets four of UNESCO’s World Heritage criteria, (i) (ii) (iv) and (vi). In comparison with the other hospital complexes on the World Heritage List – “Hospital de la Santa Creu i Sant Pau” of Barcelona in Spain (criteria (i) (ii) and (iv)) and the Cabañas Hospice of Guadalajara in Mexico (criteria (i), (ii), (iii) and (iv)), the OWS also fulfils criterion (vi) – being a memorial of human atrocities due to mistreatment of children for “medical experimental purposes”.

In September 2012, the study was officially handed over to Maria Vassilakou, Deputy Mayor of the City of Vienna, and published as a book the following year. In this book, alternative options for a possible nomination for the UNESCO World Heritage List were also pointed out – namely as an independent World Heritage Site

or as an addition to the existing World Heritage Site “Historical Centre of Vienna”.

ICOMOS Heritage Alert

Since the Vienna City Government did not propose the OWS for Austria’s Tentative List and instead tolerated further demolition and construction on the OWS site, “Alliance For Nature” prepared a documentation to trigger the “ICOMOS Heritage Alert”. Based on the documentation, ICOMOS International then triggered the International Heritage Alert at the end of 2015 and sent a letter to the Mayor of Vienna, Michael Häupl, informing him that the OWS fulfils all the values that justify a nomination of the hospital complex as a World Heritage Site.

Nevertheless, in the Otto Wagner Memorial Year 2018, which was celebrated with exhibitions on the occasion of the 100th anniversary of the death of this extraordinary architect, no activities were undertaken with regard to the nomination of the OWS as a World Heritage Site. Even the numerous applications and petitions that have been made at state and federal level in recent years have so far had no effect. Instead, construction activities on the eastern part of the OWS is progressing undiminished, whereby the authenticity and integrity of this Art Nouveau ensemble is increasingly being lost.

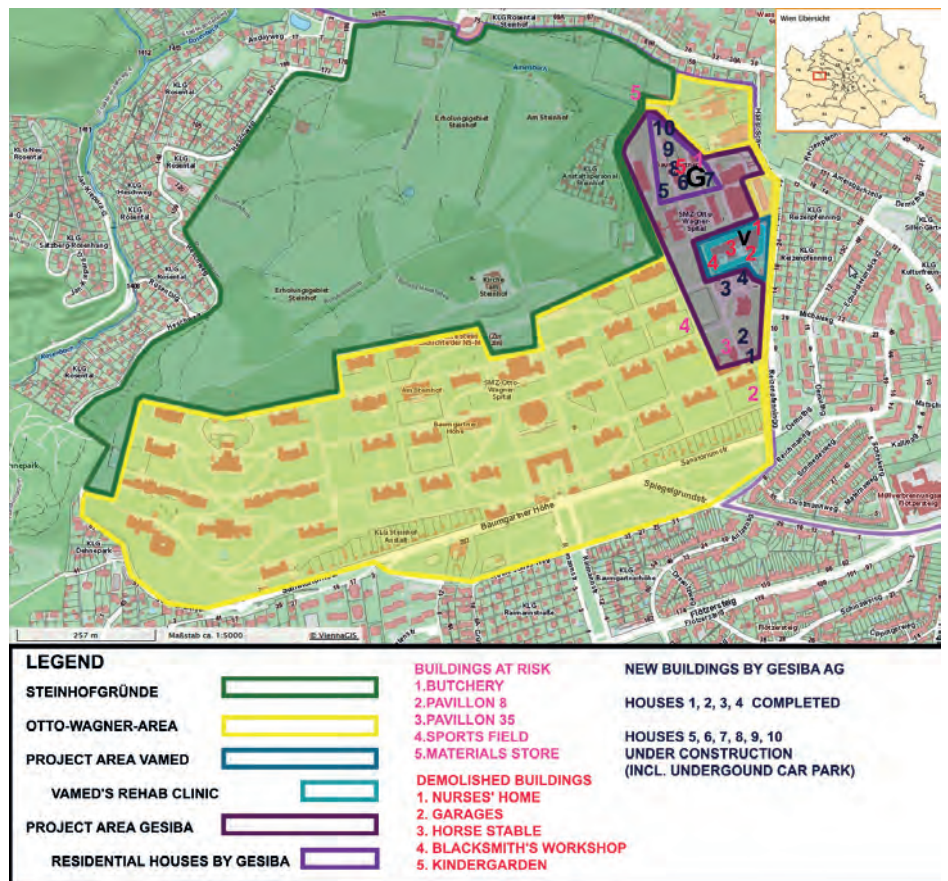


Fig. 5: Plan of the Otto-Wagner Hospital with the two project areas of Gesiba and Vamed in the eastern part of the OWS grounds. Map: Stadt Wien, ViennaGIS, MA22 / Andrea Martinez



Fig. 6: The decommissioned pathology building and a new GESIBA residential building (4).
Photo: Christian Schubböck



Fig. 7: GESIBA residential building (1).
Photo: Christian Schubböck



Fig. 8: GESIBA residential building (3) and decommissioned pathology building.
Photo: Christian Schubböck

The nursing home, a garage building, the horse stable, the smithy and the kindergarden have already been demolished and replaced by a rehabilitation center of the VAMED Corporation (an international corporation for planning, building and operating health projects). Furthermore, the city's own GESIBA settlement and construction company builds trivial residential blocks which don't match the Art Nouveau ensemble.

The extinction of the imperial heritage

Especially in times of the COVID-19 pandemic, the OWS, due to its pavilion system, would be ideally suited to keep patients apart. Instead, the hospitals built in the times of the Habsburg Danube Monarchy are closed and their departments relocated to newly constructed, giant block buildings such as the North Hospital in Vienna-Floridsdorf.

For decades we have observed that the capital city of Vienna, governed by social democrats, has gradually demolished buildings of the former imperial capital and residence city of the Austro-Hungarian Danube monarchy, and replaced them by commonplace buildings, which means that the imperial cultural heritage of one of Europe's most important metropolises is gradually being lost.



Fig. 9: GESIBA residential buildings (6) and (8) under construction; the construction pit for residential building (7) in the foreground.
Photo: Christian Schubböck



Fig. 10: VAMED building.
Photo: Christian Schubböck

References

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