

REVIEW ARTICLE

The Urban Struggle for Free Spaces

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'Occupied' – The Struggle for Free Spaces since the 1970s. Exhibition held at Wien Museum Karlsplatz, Vienna, Austria – 12 April - 12 August 2012.

Anthropologists have investigated varied forms of urban resistance, protest and riots. Social and political shortcomings of the historical and present-day world often come to a head in cities. Global processes of insecurity and precariousness, the problems connected to land-grabbing, climactic disasters and war, force people to give up subsistence forms of agriculture-based life and lead to increased urbanisation. Today, more than half of the planet's humanity lives in cities and in various kinds of amorphous urban agglomerates.

As urban anthropologists encounter phenomena of civic activism, they must cast these events into a global perspective. They must notify, compare, analyse and acknowledge them as relevant, for they are expressions of poverty, of lack of access to an increasingly capitalized housing market and of an urban misery which so often meets our eye.¹

Occupied! The fight for free spaces since the 70s is one of several current exhibitions at Wien Museum, Vienna. Wien Museum, housed in a lofty 1950s building on Vienna's near-centre Karlsplatz, is dedicated to collecting, analyzing, and making accessible the city's long history in all its facets. Wolfgang Kos, the museum's director, writes in the Foreword of the catalogue: 'Today, in order for the institution of the museum to make sense, the alertness must be directed towards all social actors, interests, life situations, and objects. Counterpositions are equal factors of urban history' (*Heute muss, damit die Institution Museum Sinn macht, die Aufmerksamkeit allen gesellschaftlichen AkteurInnen, Interessen, Lebenslagen und Objektzeugnissen gelten. Gegenpositionen sind gleichberechtigte Faktoren der Stadtgeschichte*, Nußbaumer and Schwarz 2012:13). Citing from the museum's strategy paper, Kos remarks that 'social plurality and diversity' should be documented, and therefore it is 'increasingly relevant to try to acquire objects that tell about resistance and counter-trends'

¹ Increasingly more so, I would add, as urban-based academics face long-time precariousness through diminishing funds, privatization of universities and a demanding and competitive grant and project market.

(*sich verstärkt auch um Objekte zu bemühen, die von Widerstand und Gegentrends erzählen*, Nußbaumer and Schwarz 2012:13).

The excellent catalogue of the exhibition includes contributions by squatters, artists, social workers, politicians and many other ‘insiders’, thus offering a well-informed picture. Walking to the exhibition rooms on the first floor, the museum’s architecture (1950s post-war elegance on its way to the economically saturated 1960s) and the Viennese every-day items which are on display on the way to the *Besetzt!* show rooms inadvertently highlight relevant backgrounds of the occupation movements. Together with the museum’s large block-buster show on Gustav Klimt, these exhibits bring out Austria’s history: from the Danube Monarchy and its crucial role in the starting and waging of World War I, and the following new Republic’s catastrophic and traumatic participation in the Second World-War, on to Austria’s troubled and repressive post-war decades.

These historical conditions provided the backdrop of the first occupation movements in the 1970s: people protesting against the drab, boring, grey, authoritarian and repressive structures of Vienna, then still the dead-end street of the industrialised West and close to the Iron Curtain. Strictly party-bound politics and the suppressed contexts of the Nazi disaster, together with the fear of Communism, framed an atmosphere of paranoia and oblivion of the past. Another background was formed by Vienna’s restructuring tendencies encapsulated by urban planners who aimed at fostering fluidity of (individualized) traffic and at easing the transport of goods. Living, working, leisure, education were to be spatially divided in order to forge a Fordist city, modelled on a functionality which was also demanded of the human being.

The corresponding tearing-down of old Grätzl (housing units incorporating small passages, hidden gardens, courtyards and the corresponding closely-knit economic structures, including small enterprises, groceries and workshops) aimed at modernizing the inner city districts infuriated and depressed the urban dwellers. Occupation movements, such as that around the still-alive Amerlinghaus in the Stiftgasse, followed; and processes of gentrification began. Artists and people from what later would be called creative industries moved into empty spaces of former production companies and industries, enjoying the low rents, and built up their businesses. Students sharing large run-down apartments in these old and cheap romantic districts were also common. Their networks of communal living were, at the same time, part of gentrification processes and of occupation movements.

The occupation of the export slaughterhouses (‘Auslandsschlachthof’), which were re-named ‘Arena’ in the hot summer of 1976, followed the intermittent use by the *Wiener*

Festwochen, a cultural festival dedicated to bringing alternative forms of music, theatre and film to the forefront as a counter-position to the heavily state-supported high-brow institutions *Staatsoper* (National Opera) and *Burgtheater* (National Theater). Although it was agreed with the city administration (ruled by the Socialist party with a comfortable majority since 1945) that the red-brick buildings would be torn down after the events, the producers of the festival decided to occupy the buildings after the last official event. They were supported by large numbers of people, who had enjoyed the shows and were eager to experience new, freer ways of life together. The occupation included daily communal meetings and concerts (also by Leonard Cohen who, after his show at the mainstreamed *Wiener Stadthalle*, performed for the occupants and reportedly said that the Arena was ‘the Happiest Place on Earth’). Socio-cultural initiatives soon were established: a children’s house, a women’s house, counselling stands, a motorcycle club, cooking, cleaning and public relation groups, and more.

Interactions with politicians and the city administration started immediately. Heated discussions, which were reported on TV and documented by various occupiers, brought out the urban population’s critique and their problems. Large demonstrations took place through the inner city to the *Rathaus* (the stately, castle-like building of the city administration), and the occupiers — their numbers swelling, also with young people from Austria’s rural realms who were attracted by the Arena — dominated the discussions with their arguments and demands for new, free spaces where living and working, and family and friends, were not segregated. However, after the Summer (‘the 100 days’), many younger people left the grounds and the buildings were used by more demanding groups who engaged in more, heated discussions and clashes with politicians and the city administration, leading to their eviction and to the sale of the buildings.

Following this initial ignition, smaller groups took over the *Inlandsschlachthof* (a close-by, smaller area offered by the city authorities and still in use today). Others refused to compromise, left the occupation movement and moved on in their (often artistic) careers.² Various old buildings owned by the city (and, therefore, basically tax payers’ property) were occupied by squatters, who were later evicted. Other buildings were offered by the politicians, in a strange *ritornello* of giving-over a house to a group, tearing down another, dividing groups and people and so on. Precarious contracts were issued, secret treaties arranged and

² The huge protest movement against the newly-built atomic reactor in Zwentendorf included many of the former Arena activists. In 1978, the protesters were finally victorious, as the public vote that they had demanded turned down the use of atomic energy.

social work's and civil society's (and often occupants' middle-class parents') demands for constructive, non-violent developments uttered.

Numerous documents are displayed in the *Occupied* exhibition. Posters, photographs, flyers from demonstrations, occupations, announcements of concerts and meetings, demands, and films, most of which were produced by ORF, the monopoly-holding Austrian Broadcast Company. Important archives have recently been donated to the Wien Museum and have been included in the exhibition. The exhibition also addresses recent occupations (autumn 2011) and the changes from the socialist-dominated Vienna government, through processes of neoliberalism, to the present-day situation, where more and more buildings (increasingly whole blocks) are bought and refurbished by private owner-groups and converted into either new temples of event- and gastro-culture or office buildings (often hosting the headquarters of international and global insurance companies). The situation has, therefore, dramatically changed for people who try to establish housing free from the harsh conditions of the free market.

However, this exhibition not only brings to mind how staging a show in a museum always produces exclusions but also exposes the tensions between representation, documentation, history and the present time. Who are the people who provide their archives; who, for that matter, kept archives at all? Who was able, back then, to take pictures, to document ongoing scenes; and which excerpts are selected as exhibits?

The exhibition does not address the changes brought about by the occupation and squatting movements: newly-formed groups furthering alternative building (inter-generational housing, open space housing, building cooperatives and so on). These movements are engaged in collecting and analysing people's views on how they want to live, in lobbying in society to implement and financially support building projects and in information campaigns for the urban population. Although Zurich, Berlin and Christiania in Denmark are briefly mentioned, international squatting movements are left out of the exhibition, which is understandable for the focus must be on Vienna given the museum's tasks and its donations and archives. Still, it is important to keep in mind movements such as those, for example, New York ('no housing, no peace'), the Amsterdam's Kraaker and similar processes in London, Paris, and Bologna, to name but a few.

Another context that comes to mind includes larger protest movements in London (where, in 1976, the Punk movement started in earnest and where, with the concerts under the headings of Rock Against Racism, National Front aggression was firmly rejected by Punks and reggae musicians) and in Turkey: there, 1976 saw democratization movements, the

foundation of unions (workers, students, pupils, nurses), strong protests against traditional and patriarchal structures and the formation of new, hopeful outlooks.

For urban anthropologists, the exhibition opens up ways of thinking about slums and ‘zoning’; about urbanisation processes which frequently include crowded flats as new migrants move in with their relatives; about Kolkata’s illegally erected dwellings and Istanbul’s and other Turkish cities’ *gecekondus* (literally, dwellings ‘built over night’); about neoliberal transformations in post-socialist cities, such as Tirana, and about urban planning processes more generally.³

New processes of gentrification also need attention. An example from Vienna is the current restructuring of the *Etablissement Gschwandner* in the 17th district: this defunct former variety and dance hall — which was lively and active in the first half of the 20th century — in an old working-class area was recently bought by a group of investors. It is presently used, intermittently, by the large low-budget art festival SOHO in Ottakring which focuses on critical, political, interventionist art. The formerly elegant art déco hall of the Gschwandner, the *Visionenhotel* (hotel of visions) assembles new alternative communal and private building projects. *Visionenhotel* strives to bring together people who work for a new, economically and ecologically fair urban development, and sees the earlier occupation movements in Vienna as one of its forerunners. However, the new establishment was rebuilt as an event and gastro temple aimed at a wealthier clientele with a consumer-dominated life style and opened to the ‘public’ in 2013.

References cited

Nußbaumer, Martina and Schwarz, Werner Michael (eds.) (2012). *Besetzt! Der Kampf um Freiräume seit den 1970ern*. Wien: Czernin Verlag and Wien Museum.

³ From a visual anthropological perspective, I found that a combination of artistic and scientific approaches offers new insights in understanding these contemporary urban phenomena (see, for example, Mayer’s *Menschen in Städten* [2007-2011], available at: www.okto.tv/mist; and the 2012 exhibition, *Etablissement Gschwandner*, which is part of the biennial art festival, SOHO in Ottakring, available at: www.sohoinottakring).