

GREENING VIENNESE URBAN FABRIC: URBAN RENEWAL AND STREET IMPROVEMENT

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ABSTRACT

How can the Viennese Urban Renewal Model develop the ground floor zone of historical urban fabric? How can a comprehensive planning approach restructure and reuse the building blocks at ground level, including courtyards and street spaces?

Sustainable urban development requires more open and green areas, sufficient local supply, social infrastructure and convenient traffic solutions. All these characteristics interact with the ground floor zone, street spaces and common areas within the urban fabric of the city. The ground floor zone and surrounding open spaces establish the quality of life and are key to the image of the cities.

The city of Vienna, like a number of other cities, has a growing problem with vacant ground floors and deactivated desolate street (common) spaces. The negative influence of private traffic, and the disappearance of retail outlets are the main reasons for the current situation. The symbiotic relationship between the many user groups, local residents, small retail outlets and small-scale local economy are obvious. This coherence impacts on the quality of life in the neighbourhood. How and if is the historical urban fabric transformable and transferable?

The results of the investigations on Viennese urban renewal program in a 'block redevelopment' area are not only implementable on the existing urban fabric, but also on the new development areas in between. The findings are addressed not only to the urban renewal department and planners, but to all relevant City departments (urban planning, housing subsidy, traffic planning, environmental protection, architectural and urban design, green planning and business development), delivering transferable and typological planning procedures and methods.

INTRODUCTION

The city of Vienna, like a number of other cities, has a growing problem with vacant ground floors and deactivated desolate street (common) spaces. The vacancy in Vienna becomes noticeable and widespread only at the level of ground floor zone in the historical core areas of the urban fabric. This development does not proceed as dramatic as those completely empty buildings and blocks in some other post-industrial or post-socialist European cities. However the increasing rate of vacant ground floor areas at the street level shows that this development is not as harmless as it seems to be.

The quality and usability of ground floor zone and the public spaces in-between impacts the quality of life and image value of an urban area. The ground floor areas and their spatial structures amongst adjacent spaces such as courtyards, streets, squares and green spaces give the character of the urban quarters. Their neglect causes undoubtedly a depreciation of the environment and the surrounding neighborhood.

The local supply enterprises like groceries, small shops, workshops and small apartments have been the traditional uses of the ground floor zones in Vienna. In

many areas of the city today, the ground floors are increasingly losing users and usability. The city of Vienna, like a number of other cities, has a growing problem with vacant ground floors and deactivated desolate street/common spaces. The negative influence of individual motorized traffic, and the disappearance of retail outlets are the main reasons for the current situation. The different user groups of ground floors such as inhabitants, retailers and small-scale local economy exist in a symbiotic relationship.

CURRENT SITUATION OF GROUND FLOORS IN VIENNA

The vacancy of existing ground floors means unused building resources. In addition, the vacancy of ground floors weakens the identification of the inhabitants with their neighborhood. This phenomenon can be observed in many cities. Their ground floor zones show, in spite of all the similarities of their urban structures, significant differences related to the nature of street spaces: such as height, width and design of the spaces between the building blocks, the intensity of the street parking and traffic, the legal regulations of rents and property matters.

The rising vacancy rate in ground floors due to the replacement and closure of small(est) enterprises creates not only in the so called 'problem zones' of the cities a downward spiral.

As already mentioned, the city of Vienna, like a number of other cities, has a growing problem with vacant ground floors and deactivated desolate street/common spaces. In recent years, series of cultural and economical programs has been initiated to upgrade and revitalize the neglected ground floor facilities due to the long term vacancy.

On one hand the negative influence of the motorized street traffic and on the other hand the increasingly closures and displacements of enterprises in ground floors are the main reasons for the current problems.

MIGRATION OF CITIZENS

The scarcity of available public or green areas causes an exodus from the core cities to the suburbs; Particularly the families with children. More land consumption, more infrastructure, new social institutions such as schools, kindergartens, public transport and more traffic are the common results. Moreover Vienna's population has traditionally weekend homes in the countryside. The young singles, elderly people and migrant households prefer to live in the core city areas. (Wiener Einkaufsstraßen Management 2007)

The exodus to the suburbs and the growing urban sprawl burden ultimately the city governments due to the rising infrastructure costs. The growing private traffic between the central areas of the city and residential areas around the city causes more motor traffic emissions; this development set further migration in motion: Circulus Vitiosus.

STIGMATIZED BY TRAFFIC EMISSIONS

More than half of the population in Vienna claims to suffer from constant noise. Dust is further a serious problem. The longer distances between work, housing and traditional weekend houses cause more and more traffic. This means not only increasing greenhouse emissions, but also a negative development of the street spaces in the urban areas. The controversial role of traffic planning and the conflicting objectives and trends of economic and environmental policy support the negative development. The small scaled urban traffic planning requires immediately new ways and innovative solutions, which are carried out by decentralized local politics.

SMALL(EST) ENTERPRISES AND STORE CLOSURES

The retail spaces in the ground floor zones, which are not located in the main shopping streets, around the market places, in the pedestrian zones and on the traffic-calmed places, are no longer in demand and they become unused, stigmatized spaces.

The lack of retailers in short distances causes more car traffic and insufficient local supply. The typical uses of the ground floors like retailers, cafés and restaurants or

small offices has the character of semi-public places. More vacancies in the ground floor zone cause less interaction between closed and open spaces, public and private spaces at the street level.

The small-scaled structures of existing local supply are increasingly weakening. More and more retails and other enterprises established in ground floors are closing. The local supply enterprises (like small business, retail and offices) are dependent on the current customers coming from their district.

The presence of the pedestrians on the streets vitalizes the street life, reduces motorized traffic and supports the local economy. The rate of small(est) enterprises is over 90 % in Europe: Vienna and other Austrian cities are in this case no exception. (KMU Forschung Austria)

MINI-GARAGES VERSUS RETAILS

In the last years, the restructuring and re-use of the ground floors as small (mini-)garages for the new residential units, that have been built on the roofs historical buildings, changed the character of the street spaces and the ground floor zones .

The existing ground floor spaces are allowed to be converted into the closed small garages in last decade. The parking garages (mostly with 2 car parking places) in the ground floors, which often belong to the new users of the new penthouse apartments on top of the historical blocks.

These mini garages built in the former spaces of local supply and retails transformed in recent years the street facades of the street level into the death zones. The dark holes of garage entrances and exits has been turned to usual elements of ground floors not only of the new buildings but also at the historical façades of the building blocks.

The obligatory new car parking places for each new housing unit or new office areas play an important role in this development. The local politicians see the creating new parking space as the key to political success. Reducing the parking lots in the streets to create green/common places causes protest actions of the inhabitants.

To date the house owners and housing managements do not consider today the ground floors as profitable enough areas for retails and small enterprises are profitable enough and do not rent out to retails and small enterprises. The ground floors of the new housing blocks are usually planed and used as service spaces like car parking areas and garbage rooms with introverted façades.

Higher rental income, higher yields, better marketing opportunities and available public construction subsidies (hearing wohnfonds_wien 2006) are the basic motivations of property owners to convert the former shops and flats into the mini-garages.

Although the urban renewal and the urban planning authorities are obviously against this development, the relevant legal instruments are not existing to stop this process. The decision-making authority and responsibility lies in the hands of the local governments.



Figure 1 The new mini-garages and blind windows on the street level in Vienna

VIENNESE URBAN RENEWAL FABRIC

Central city areas of Vienna is dominated by late 19th century block raster system (perimeter block development)

Vienna has a prevailing historical housing stock: over one-third of the dwelling stock and one-fifth of the building stock in Vienna built before World War I, between 1870 and 1910). 32.000 of 150.000 Viennese buildings belong the historical urban fabric. (Potyka 2006)

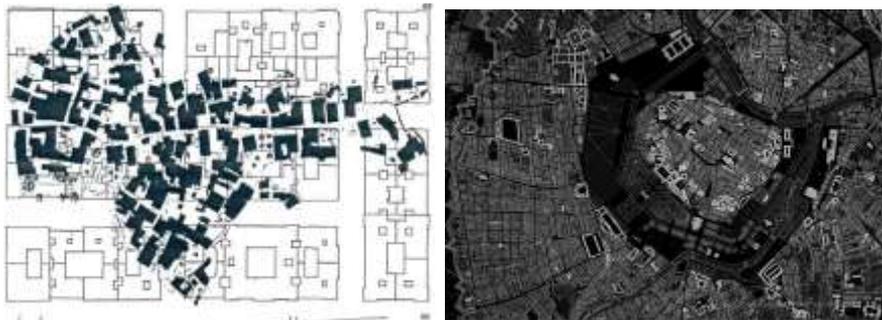


Figure 2 Transformation of urban structures in Vienna at the end of 19th century, R.Rainer

At the end of the 19th century, the industrialisation, mass migration and construction of mass housing for new comers caused a extremely rapid change of the urban structures of the city. The small scale building structures has been transformed into the perimeter block development.

These new structures of homogeneous block raster system of 19th century dominate the urban character of the city today. After the urgent reparation of the damaged buildings after the world war II and the construction of social housing projects of the periphery in the 60's, an intensive building regeneration program has been initiated by the urban renewal department of the city government. In the middle of 1970s, 300.00 housing units - about 30 % of the housing stock - had substandard quality. In 2002, after the modernization activities the rate of the substandard housing units without has been only about 10% (Statistik Austria).

In our time, the core city areas of high density historical urban fabric provide several functional qualities such as spatial flexibility for different users, for new functions, new lifestyles. The traditional (still) existing mixed uses in small scale, availability of local supply and public transport in walking distance provided by central location in the city are the further significant qualities of the historical urban fabric. The dynamic of social and ethnic diversity as well as the intensive cultural and social infrastructures makes these areas of the city more attractive especially for young singles, elderly people and migrant families.

The high demand for them in housing market and increasing market prices demonstrate this current tendency. A gentrification process starts after a block development program despite the rental regulations to keep the rental prices constant and to prevent the replacement of low-income inhabitants.



Figure 3 'Gründerzeit' Workers Housing (Bobek, Lichtenberger: *Hoftypologie*, 1978)

URBAN RENEWAL PROGRAM FOR STREET-LEVEL IMPROVEMENT?

The block redevelopment program (so called Blocksanierung) of City of Vienna has been developed and implemented since the mid-1980s. The program targets a comprehensive improvement of entire blocks - of different private owners by combining housing redevelopment with other measures to improve living conditions in an selected neighbourhood. (wohnfonds_wien 2010)

The block redevelopment program, which financed by housing act has two main aims (WWFSG 1989): The main intention of the program is the modernisation and regeneration of historical housing buildings. The further targets are the comprehensive improvement of restructuring of whole districts, which are seen as problem zones due to the low housing and buildings standards and concentration of low-income-groups and migrants as well as improvement of the open spaces and street spaces. (Bretschneider 2008, Reichl, R. 2000)

The block renewal program instigated by the housing renewal authorities in Vienna is an regeneration model which also targets the improvement of ground floor zone related components like green areas, courtyards of the blocks, public spaces, streets and local supply. The following objectives such as:

- Opening the block courtyards of historical urban fabric to create accessible green spaces
- Creating common spaces between the building blocks, green parks and street spaces for different social groups of a urban renewal area
- Implementation of a block renewal management, coordinating stake holders, tenants, retail outlets and service facilities
- Redefinition of the density of urban fabric on the basis of the new master plans for the urban renewal area

are given as key assignments of a block renewal project by the urban renewal department of Vienna.

Although the urban renewal program is geared towards a comprehensive urban revitalization of the whole neighbourhood, its implementation has fallen short of target particularly with regard to ground floor zones and open spaces.

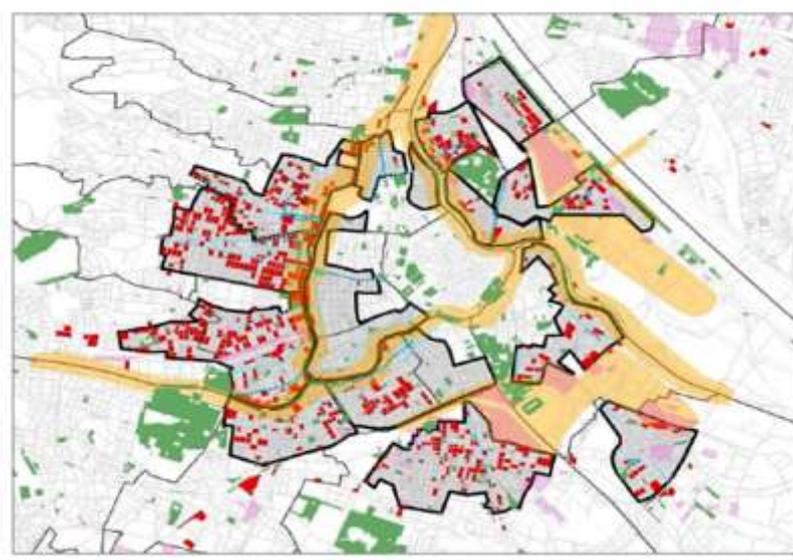


Figure 4 Target areas of urban renewal in Vienna; 2005, G. Berger, City of Vienna

The urban renewal targets remains rarely achievable because of contradictory interests of property owners, local politics and public planning authorities. Without a coherent modernization of the whole block area with open spaces and ground floor facilities, there is not enough sustainable success.

STUWERVIERTEL AS BLOCK REDEVELOPMENT TARGET AREA

The case study on block redevelopment program delivers a series of strategies for the improvement and recycling of ground floor zones in the urban fabric of Vienna with all regulative, legislative and financial components in cooperation with the planning authorities operating in different fields of urban planning. The main target of the project is a sustainable restructuring and reusing program of existing blocks at ground level, including courtyards and street spaces- as a comprehensive planning approach.

In the context of the research project on Viennese block redevelopment program of urban renewal department of the City, the barriers and obstacles in planning processes has been analyzed to develop new methods and strategies and to help the program achieve its aims. The case studies in of European practice of urban renewal programs (Berlin, Leipzig and Basel) and the analysing of recent cultural initiatives has been some of the methods to define the way forward in planning.

A recent block renewal target area - Stuwerviertel in Vienna - has been analysed in a simulation and implementation model to test the feasibility of the planning solutions and methods of the case project, as well as to confirm the transferability of these, on the basis of Interviews with the planning, building and controlling authorities for urban renewal, urban development, building legislation, urban traffic and local organizations, residents, tenants, investors and stake-holders as well as field studies.



Figure 5 Block renewal area 'Stuwerviertel' in Vienna

The block renewal area is located between new urban development areas, surrounded by the water front development area (of the River Danube) the green recreation area Prater and a new housing area on the brown file of the railway company.

One of the most important objective of the block redevelopment projects to reduce the partly extremely high density of the urban fabric by partial demolition of the backyard blocks.

The findings of the case study are addressed not only to the urban renewal department, but to all relevant city departments (urban planning, housing subsidy, traffic planning, environmental protection, architectural/urban design, green planning and business development), delivering transferable and typological planning procedures and methods.

ACTION PLAN FOR A COMPREHENSIVE BLOCK REDEVELOPMENT

Over the last few decades, the urban renewal program 'the block renewal' in Vienna had the physical building regeneration as prime objective. An extension of the current urban renewal practice is absolutely necessary to keep the mixes use urban fabric and to improve the quality of life in Vienna's high density urban areas in order to keep the households in the central areas of the city.

Greening and re-functioning of open spaces, reduction of individual traffic and new planning of street spaces should gain more importance in the target program of the block redevelopment program of the city government. Improvement of the public and semi-public spaces at the beginning of the urban renewal process enhance the acceptance of property owners to invest for their properties, because of better marketing potential.

Furthermore, a cooperative action plan which is carried out by all involved administrative departments of the city governments, specially by the decentralized local (district) governments, who are acting as both decision maker and investor for the public spaces and street spaces. The departments of funding for housing and for local micro-economy should really work together.

In this context, the following measures are addressed to the public hand and urban renewal authorities for reusing to revitalize the ground floor zone:

- cooperation by parties affected, involvement of local of authorities, local politics, local community based organizations to reach the targets of the block redevelopment projects
- a better knowledge transfer, communication and cooperation of all departments of urban planning and urban politic
- further development of urban renewal methods to regenerate the neighbourhood as a whole
- special and effective subsidies and customized information services for the entrepreneurs to start and to develop small business
- more support and information for the greening measures in the courtyards and street spaces, specially for the active gardening of the inhabitants

- innovative measures for the reduction of car traffic and traffic calming methods
- extension of housing subsidies to support the non-residential uses in the ground floor zones
- abolition of the regulation of the obligatory car parking lots units within the building block, for the new built 'penthouses' on top of them
- Elimination of contrary strategies and practice of planning and legislative authorities
- new legal tools to provide the guaranteed implementation of measures (like common spaces for children and tenants in the ground floors, bicycle parking spaces and greening).

The following measures support retail and small(est) enterprises for reusing and transformation of ground-floor-zone:

- effective financial support for start-ups (in the ground floor-zone),
- active information and know how transfer (specially for migrant enterprises of ground floor-zone) but also for landlords and tenants
- less restriction of use for the ground floor zone (specially for smallest enterprises)
- no functional zoning for ground floors (open and flexible usability)
- sufficient financial support (subsidies) for the renovation of the non-residential-spaces of ground floors
- exemption from various fees, charges and rates specially for new comers (retail, small entrepreneurs) of ground floor zones
- controlling of rental price level not only for housing but also for commercial uses

Furthermore the following measures are addressed to public hand and public authorities for an efficient (re)use of ground floor-zone:

- cooperation of all players and stake holder; inhabitants, tenants, neighbourhood organizations, local authorities, local politics, local community-based organizations, house owners and NGO's
- unconventional architectural planning solutions
- elimination of contrary strategies and practice of planning and legislative authorities
- new legal tools to provide the implementation of measures (like common spaces for children and tenants in the ground floors, bicycle parking spaces, greening etc.)
- coordination and merging of different financial supports for housing, greening and business development.

The results of the case study are implementable measures for an enduring and sustainable restructuring of the ground level zone with new strategies for organization, regulation, planning guidelines and planning.

The block redevelopment area Stuwerviertel is still in a improvement and transformation process. The new subway station, the planned university campus in the adjacent green area Prater and new built housing facilities attract the quarter for the investors. Recently new users have established their offices in the ground floors of the historical blocks. The green park Max-Winter-Place in the middle of the quarter has been revitalized after a participation process. The property owner modernize the flats in the houses, mostly without having public subsidies. The urban change around the quarter transform the area very quickly. The future investigations will be focused on the speed of gentrification process and the level

of income of the inhabitants. The main question will remain to answer, if the higher income groups as new-comers of the pilot area Stuwerviertel will change the rate of vacancy in the ground floors of and the quality of the street level in the next years.

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