

# The Austro-Hungarian Ring Boulevards as the Space for Representation of Identities

## Abstract

The public space of the city was always the most important place for representation of social, national, religious and other kinds of identities. Today's multitude of identities and the speed of their change require new models of their coexistence within central public space of the city. Austro-Hungarian architects have already been confronted with similar issues in the second half of the 19<sup>th</sup> and at the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> centuries. They used the space of the former defensive city walls or other vacant spaces for creating the loop with public buildings, places, streets, parks and monuments that represented cultural and social richness of Austro-Hungarian population and complex structure of authority. Their methods and strategies can be used in today's practice of city planning.

**Keywords:** public space, architecture of Austria-Hungary, representation of identity, ring boulevards

## The concept of identity and its spatial representation

In psychology and sociology, identity is a person's conception and expression of their own (self-identity) and others' individuality or group affiliations (such as national identity and cultural identity). But what role is architecture playing in the process of identification? How can the person for instance identify oneself with the larger group of people through architecture? For this to happen, the group of people should be somehow represented with architectural means. Representation is not only the political term and can also be found in architecture. Different important public messages can be represented by means of architecture and urban planning. This raises the question of representation in architectural environment.

The importance of representation in architecture is confirmed by many sociologists, who affirm, that person is constantly associating oneself with, so called, "imaginary communities". This person knows about the existence of such communities only because they represent themselves in this or other way.

Artistic and conceptual facilities of architecture allow the architectural object to represent some social, political, economical etc. phenomena. As far as every object exists in specific spatial and temporal dimensions and every social community, political system or cultural movement is in the end only the part of the whole spatiotemporal context, architecture is able to represent some contextual phenomena or point to them. In other words, through the language of architecture we can understand some information about spatial or temporal context, in which the building was built or existed since then.

One of the most important spaces of public representation is the open public space of the city as the space that can be freely entered and used by the citizens and guests of the city. Those are streets, places, squares, parks and other available sites. In addition to provide the literal communication between people

and fulfill certain functional programs, open public space always needs also to be the place of public representation. Historically precisely the architecture of the most important public spaces of the city represented the world view of people, political structure of society and other social and cultural phenomena. Single buildings around the open public space generated ensembles, capable to translate the complex public messages.

## Treatment of city's public space and its representational functions in Austria-Hungary

Great amount of uniqueness considering the representation of identities present the cities of former Austro-Hungarian Empire. Because of their extraordinary mixture of different cultures, those cities generated the specific attitude towards the representative qualities of architecture and city planning. Public space of Austro-Hungarian cities played especially important role in representation of different identities (national, religious, political etc.). In each of the major cities of Austro-Hungarian Empire lived several different national communities at once. In many cases none of them was dominating over the others. One of the most effective ways to declare the importance of specific community was for their members to architecturally represent their identity inside the most important public space of the city.

The topic of open public spaces and their representative functions was studied by many

\* Bohdan Cherkas Prof. Dr.Sc. Ing.-Arch., Director of the Institute of Architecture, Lviv Polytechnic National University

\*\* Anton Kolomyeytsev Ph.D., Univ.Ass. at department of «Architectural Design», Institute of Architecture, Lviv Polytechnic National University, e-mail: antonkolo@gmail.com

European theorists, such as: R. Banik-Schweitzer, E. Blau, R. Wurzer, B. Dmytrasz, S. Knezewicz, K. Mollik, A. Moravanszky, G. Reining, M. Csaky, J. Purchla, F. Achleitner.

The 19<sup>th</sup> century was the epoch of modernization of the city's infrastructure all over the world. Open spaces of the city were more and more regarded as the place for transport corridors and transport nodes.

### **The representative and esthetic functions of city's open spaces have fall into decay**

In this context it is interesting to determine what was so special in approach of Austro-Hungarian theorists to city's open public space. While at the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century all the major cities of the continent were encompassed by the process of uncontrolled urbanization and the open public space was constantly shrinking, theoretical interest to this topic in Central Europe only increased.

One of the most significant theoretical figures was Camillo Sitte, who studied the central places of medieval European cities and then popularized the idea of building the modern urban ensembles with the same spatial qualities. Sitte received a lot of attention in 1889 with the publication of his book "Der Städtebau nach seinen künstlerischen Grundsätzen" (English title: "City Planning According to Artistic Principles"). The richly illustrated book pointed out that the urban room around the experiencing man should be the leading motif of urban planning, thus turning away from the pragmatic, hygienic planning procedures of the time. Sitte emphasized the creation of an irregular urban structure, spacious plazas, enhanced by monuments and other aesthetic elements. While the historical places were the closed spaces, which followed the rules of integral ensembles, the modern spaces of the city have lost this "part to whole" relationship. As the realist thinker, Sitte searched for solution of dilemma that consisted in coexistence of the qualitative public spaces with the spaces, dedicated to modern, dynamic and pragmatic needs of the city. He agreed, that the major part of city's environment could be designed in accordance with pragmatic needs and only the smaller part can be the true representative space.<sup>1</sup>

The work of Sitte is not exactly a criticism of architectural form, it is more precisely an aesthetic criticism of the nineteenth century's end urbanism.

### **Austro-Hungarian ring boulevards**

Not only specific theoretical treatment of city's public space distinguished Austro-Hungarian architects from other European colleagues, but also their practical activity.

The ring boulevard around the historical city center is frequently called the Austro-Hungarian phenomenon, although the territories of former city walls were actively developed all over the Europe. Even before the competition for the plans of Viennese Ringstraße in 1858, many of the European cities have already developed their vacant fortification spaces. City walls of Bremen were for instance destroyed as far back as in the year 1666. In 1809 city council took the decision to transform the space around the inner city into the parks with pedestrian paths.<sup>2</sup>

What has significantly differentiated the Viennese boulevard from other European ring boulevards was the huge attention of

the architects and competition committee to the forming of large-scale open public spaces. The special emphasis was given to the new Imperial Forum, that was planned as the two symmetrical buildings of Imperial palace with the spacious plaza in between. There was also the series of smaller and larger places planned along the entire boulevard.<sup>3</sup>

As the most important city of Austria-Hungary in political, economical and cultural sense, Vienna was the model for other large cities of the region. The capital had the influence not only on development of the former defense territories around the old city centers (Salzburg, Brno, Olomouc), but also significantly influenced transformation of already existed ring boulevards (Lviv, Graz, Krakow). This tendency manifested even on the sites, that didn't have defense facilities in the past. This was the case of such cities as Budapest and Zagreb.

For instance in Lviv the members of the Lviv Polytechnic Society, particularly Julian Zachariewicz, created the concept of the new spacious Carl Ludwig Street on the place of former defense bulwarks.

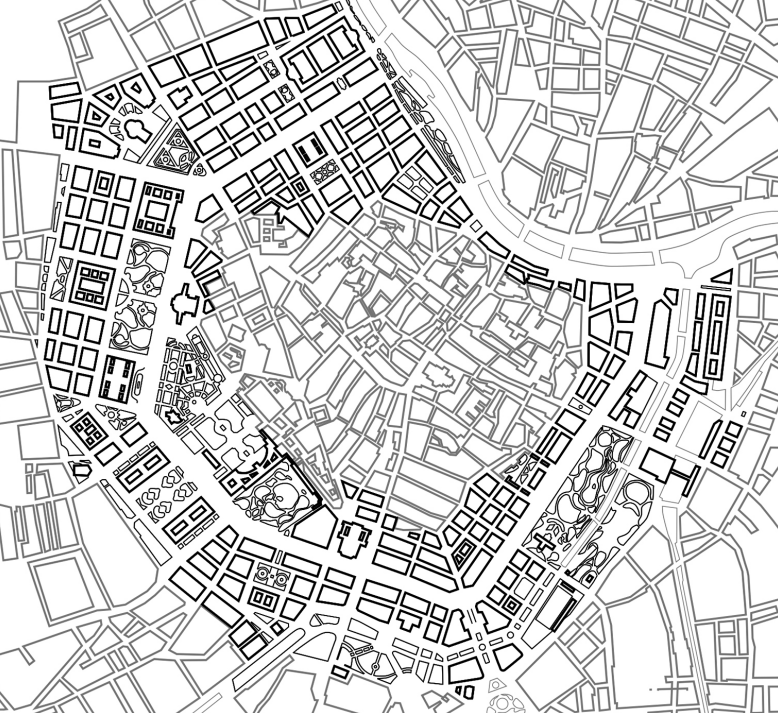
In general the mission of the new spaces of the ring boulevards was:

1. To eliminate the problems of transport pressure on the medieval inner city;
2. To provide the incorporation of the suburbs into the territory of the city;
3. The construction of new housing;
4. Provision of the military control over the city;
5. The introduction to the space of the city of the new green areas for recreation.

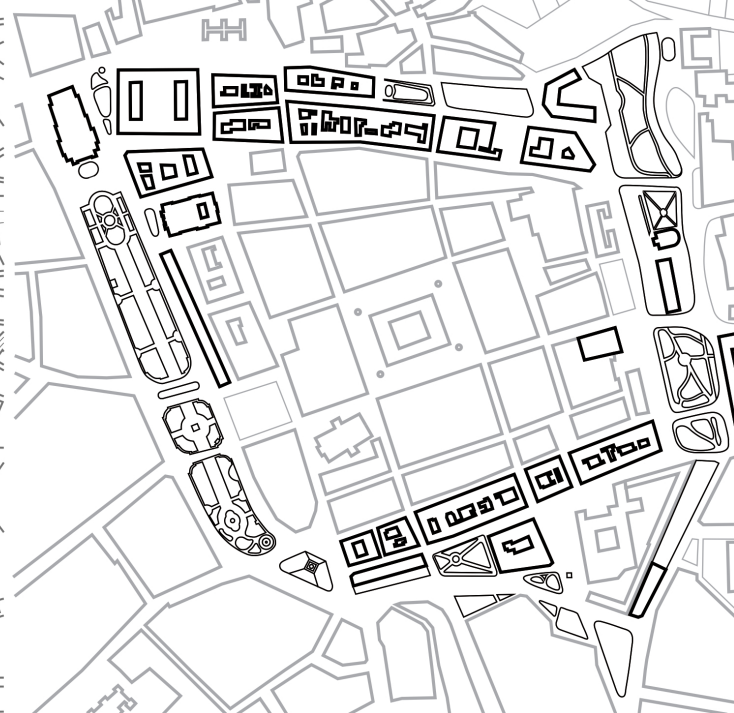
Its important that the ring boulevards besides of that were also conceived as the space with representative functions, provided by the wide range of significant public buildings and whole series of carefully placed monuments. Sometimes the ring boulevards in some Austro-Hungarian cities were much more artistically representative than functionally pragmatic.

For instance the, so called, Green Horseshoe in Zagreb, unlike the Ringstraße in Vienna and other cities, has no major boulevard running along its spine. Green Horseshoe was planned by architect and land surveyor Milan Lenuci. Lenuci engineered a succession of strategic moves to realize his "plan" which did not actually exist on paper until after the Green Horseshoe had already been realized on the ground.<sup>4</sup> That is, the space of the ring boulevards in the cities of Austria-Hungary was sometimes staged only because of its representative qualities.

In general ring boulevards had a tremendous impact on the planning structure of the cities.



il. 1. Plan of the ring boulevard in Vienna, developed after the competition, organized in 1859 (Drawing by Anton Kolomyeytsev)



il. 2. Plan of the ring boulevard in Lviv that consists of two main avenues intensively developed at the end of the XIX<sup>th</sup> century (Drawing by Anton Kolomyeytsev)

Although the radial-concentric structure of Central European cities was preserved, the functional and communicational relevance of historical inner city was seriously reduced. That is, the modified structure of the city advantageously combined the positive aspects of concentric and gridded city models.

As the territory of the cities expanded, the boulevards have become the shortest possible way to go from one part of the city to another. This generated previously unseen concentration of urban activities. For the local citizens boulevards have become the showcase of modern metropolis. In contrast to the medieval place, that could be understood by the citizens from the first sight, ring boulevard was constantly fluctuating space, that could never be perceived and understood in all its totality.

These huge urban metamorphoses directly influenced the daily life of the citizens. Generated by the calm capitalist rules, the dense urban environment of the of the 19<sup>th</sup> century`s cities was almost completely deprived of the open public spaces and urban greenery. The new ring boulevards were perceived by the local citizens as the natural oases, and have quickly revived the idea of urban recreation. Besides their public functions, these spaces also created the qualitative housing environment and have become the ideal models for combining the public and the private. It's worth at least to name the quiet public gardens, which divided the living spaces from the noisy life of the street.

### **Representation of identities on the Austro-Hungarian ring boulevards**

As already said, the population of the former Austro-Hungarian Monarchy was very heterogeneous. It was divided not only vertically (the classical strata), but also horizontally. As the result, there were a lot of religious, national and other minorities. Each citizen belonged to few of them at once.

The ring boulevards have become the most important instrument to represent the multiple identities. Before regarding more in detail the buildings, that embodied them, we could first of all

structure the references to these identities in accordance with some hierarchy. The best is to take some spatial measure. It could be for example the Austro-Hungarian state itself. In this case we can determine the supranational, nationwide and intranational references.

The supranational architectural references referred to, so called, spirit of time. It was not only the Austro-Hungarian phenomenon. Every architectural style in this or other way historically represented current worldview and believes of the citizens of different cities around the globe. Of course the Austro-Hungarians have also identified themselves with different all-European or better to say Western cultural phenomena.

Almost every building on Austro-Hungarian ring boulevards was planned in style of either historicism or Central European secession. Thereby the architectural language of this buildings referred either to the cultures of the past or to some natural objects and mythological characters. By doing so it suggested the secondary associations with cultural phenomena, specific for the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> – beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> centuries. The language of historicism for instance referred to all-European culture of late romanticism, that by-turn was the reaction to Enlightenment, as well as to scientific and technical progress. In that sense historicism represented the most common cultural identity of Austro-Hungarian citizens at the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century.

In contrast to this supranational identity, the nationwide one was represented only by sporadic complexes, buildings and monuments.





il. 3. Plan of the ring boulevard in Graz, that in the end of the XIX<sup>th</sup> century was meant to be the second beautiful ring boulevard in Austro-Hungarian Empire, but wasn't realized according to initial intentions (Drawing by Anton Kolomyeytsev)



il. 4. Ring boulevard in Zagreb, developed without the initial plans by the local architect and land surveyor Milan Lenuci (Drawing by Anton Kolomyeytsev)

The most important supranational identity in Austria-Hungary was provided by the figure of Austrian Emperor and Hungarian Apostolic King Franz Joseph I. The New Emperors Castle that today faces the Heldenplatz, was initially conceived by the architects of Viennese Ring Boulevard as part of the complex which was to become an Imperial Forum (Kaiserforum) that was never completed. This forum with symmetrical buildings of New Emperors Castle and twin museums on the other side of Ringstraße had to represent the power of Franz Joseph and political identity of the whole nation. The project of New Castle was led by Gottfried Semper and later by Karl Freiherr von Hasenauer. The main façade of the building was topped by the double-headed eagle with Emperors crown – symbol that attached highly ideological meaning to whole Emperors Forum.

City hall building on the same Viennese ring boulevard represented absolutely another political identity. This identity was rather intranational. Finished in the year 1883, this building, designed by Friedrich von Schmidt, was inspired by medieval gothic city halls.

The similarity of this building to those, that emerged in autonomous and self-governed European cities during the Middle Ages was the instrument of representing political identity of Vienna citizens. The city hall actually presented the life of the city that was in fact lost long time ago. This explains why the architect has called his project “Saxa loquuntur”, or “the stones are speaking”. That is, the use of specific style in combination with typography in this case ensured translation of socially and politically important meanings.

While the city hall represented the intranational identity, this identity was shared by all communities of the city. This was not the case with some other important buildings of the ring boulevards. Sometimes there were even the conflicts considering the style of expected building. Even when one of the city's ethnic communities has the evident dominance over the others, city council sometimes rejected the nation-indicating designs.

This happened for instance in Graz, where the famous Austrian architects Fellner and Helmer designed the building of new Graz Opera in “neo-baroque style as the true Austrian style”, as recommended by the City Council and versus the will of German majority, that wanted it to be built in the style of German Renaissance. Plans for new theatre suitable to the growing size and importance of the city and intended to be a “new home for German art” were first proposed already in 1887.<sup>5</sup> But official authorities were beware of separatist dispositions of the local population. In general Fellner and Helmer built 30 theaters all over the Austro-Hungarian Empire, choosing the stylistic solution by themselves and only in Graz city council insisted on the pure baroque stylistic approach. Eventually it's not that the neo-baroque architecture expressed some Austro-Hungarian identity, but it certainly prohibited the expression of undesirable German identity.

For local community to represent its intranational identity was possible only in the building built on community costs.

This kind of identity on the ring boulevards of Austro-Hungarian cities was represented either by the accent on one of the neo styles or by the use of, so called, National Secession. Emerged on the wave of late historicism and early art nouveau, Czech cubism, Hungarian architecture of Odon Lechner, as also the Ukrainian, Polish and Slovakian versions of Secession were called to represent the local national identities. All this styles were widely present on the ring boulevards of Austro-Hungarian Empire.



il. 5. Ring boulevard in Salzburg with the length of 700 meters. Development from the end of the XIX<sup>th</sup> century was spatially connected to historical complex of Mirabell Palace (Drawing by Anton Kolomyeytsev)

One of the most famous public buildings, pointing to the presence of national identity was the Museum of Applied Arts in Budapest, designed by Odon Lechner. This museum was placed not far from the new Grand Boulevard that forms a semicircle connecting two bridges of the Danube and is one of the most important parts of the city. Museum opened its doors in 1896. Lechner aimed to create the national style that included the motifs from Hungarian folk art and the elements of Indian and Persian architecture. By referring to this cultures architect wanted to remind the eastern origin of Hungarians.

Sometimes there were the collisions concerning the representation of different national identities of the city.

The Jewish communities used the Moorish style in many architectural objects, built on community costs. This style represented Jewish communities by pointing to their Semitic origin. In most of the cities of Austria-Hungary this logics functioned very well. But that was problematic in Sarajevo, where two Semitic communities lived together (Jewish and Islamic). Similar stylistic collisions emerged before the World War I in many cities of empire. Only the architects of young independent states after the WWI have found the recipes how to overcome these archi-

tectural inconsistencies. This gave birth to the unique phenomenon of Central European modernism.

The initial social and cultural context of ring boulevards has seriously changed and today's citizens have lost their ability to perceive the original messages of architectural styles from the end of the XIX<sup>th</sup> century. But these spaces have received the special touristic attractiveness. Because of the pluralism of their architectural styles they represent the richness of local history.

Unfortunately today architecture and urban planning are rarely seen as the instruments for representation of identities. Only modern art brings these identities to the public spaces of the city.

It's not only about the need to create the new urban ensembles. Historical ring boulevards have become such important components of the cities that it's hard for them to move forward without renewing functional and representational properties of ring boulevards. One of the most successful introductions of the new identities to old boulevard was the creation of Museums Quartier in Vienna. The complex of former imperial stables was transformed into the vivid public space with the blocks of museums for modern art. In contrast to other buildings of ring boulevard, these two new buildings were deprived of any decorative elements and required absolutely new approach to reading of them. But nevertheless they have also become the part of the single ensemble.

## Conclusion

In contrast to the region and time described above, the process of modernization inside the space of the city during the 20<sup>th</sup> century globally destroyed the representational functions of urban environment. Pragmatic functioning of the city suppressed its semantic dimension. The quantity of representative public spaces was constantly shrinking. Even though such spaces were sometimes pompously built, they never were really public in their appearance, because they didn't express all the plurality of existent identities.

Culturally the cities of today are more similar to the cities of former Austro-Hungarian Empire. The amount of different identities is increasing with every year. The environment of the city can again be reflection of societal aspirations and believes.

The recipes for inclusive approach towards the social and cultural identities of the city could be found on the Austro-Hungarian ring boulevard-

ds. Well thought-out hierarchy of objects, representing different identities, their regular placement along the axis of the boulevard and their interrelationship with different components of qualitative open public space can only be some of them. It's important to think about the public space of the city not only in the terms of its functional suitability for the needs of everyone, but also in terms of its powerful symbolical potentials. As the matter of fact each Austro-Hungarian ring boulevard was nothing but architecturally formulated system of checks and balances, which made possible the coexistence of sometimes even incompatible identities.

In contrast to previous totalitarian practices of the XX century, modern democratic ensembles instead of singularity and dominance have to demonstrate the overall multiplicity and diversity.

#### ENDNOTES:

<sup>1</sup> C. Sitte, *Der Städtebau nach seinen künstlerischen Grundsätzen*, Verlag von Carl Graeser & Co., Wien, 1901, S. 102.

<sup>2</sup> R. Stein, *Das vergangene Bremen*, Verlag H.M. Hauschild, Bremen, 1961, S. 64.

<sup>3</sup> B. Dmytrasz, *Die Wiener Ringstrasse*, Amalthea Signum Verlag, Wien, 2008, S.12.

<sup>4</sup> E. Blau, I. Rupnik, *Project Zagreb*, Actar, Barcelona, 2007, p. 66.

<sup>5</sup> B. Stráth, N. Witoszek, *The Postmodern Challenge*, Rodopi, Amsterdam/Atlanta, 1999, P. 236–240.

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