

CHANGING THE SETTING CAN MEAN CHANGING THE IMPACT THE CASE OF VIENNA

Everybody understands the meaning of setting in the world of the theatre. It implies providing the right background for the play, musical or opera. The problems involved in creating the appropriate atmosphere, lighting and furniture are well-known and familiar and can make or break the staging. In modern stage directing the question of finding the suitable setting, which can deliver the desired impact, is a delicate matter. With its minimalist set design and alienated costumes the modern stage creates distancing effects and estrangement.

But changing the setting of a city is not comparable to shifting the setting of a stage. Stages can be easily varied, that is their advantage. They are mobile and need not provide historic and traditional identity. However, in the context of the city, new constructions and alterations cannot simply be carried away as can be the set on a stage, when no longer in demand.

Let us leave the stage and theatre and transfer these ideas to cityscapes, townscapes and landscapes which have developed over hundreds of years. Here too it is impossible to modify the setting without changing the impact. The setting is subjected to alterations and adaptations that reduce the historic impact.

Roof space and high rise buildings are examples of this process, which in particular has begun to transform the face of Vienna. Economic pressure, urban development and change of use have led to a dwindling significance and decrease in the value of architectural heritage and to the dominance of modernity and modern lifestyle as factors of social prestige. The seduction exerted by technology, materials and design is obvious.

Right up to the beginning of World War II Vienna was expanding width-wise. Apart from the damage caused by the war, much of the roofscape remained intact. However, the last few decades have witnessed the development of this area, with dramatic consequences especially during recent years. New types of construction have appeared on the rooftops of Vienna. The “city above the city” reflects how this newly discovered building zone is dominated by affluent society and its representatives and in this sense is an expression of social and economic power. This means that socially and economically privileged groups shape the city. The “city above the city” is a kind of “gated community” which is placed “above” the socially and economically lower classes in more than just a metaphorical sense. “Draufsetzen” (to set on top of), the title of an exhibition held during 2004 in Vienna, almost postulated this new building activity in a positive and encouraging manner.

The buildings most affected by these aggressive additions are those built during the second half of the 19th century. Although usually not subject to preservation laws, these historic buildings have without doubt fulfilled an important role in the city. Through these roof additions the general appearance of Vienna – the continuity created by the original façades of these structures – is being lost. A mixture of architecture will profoundly disturb the ensemble these buildings constitute and ruin the general historic authenticity the city conveys.

Another issue with regards to the compatibility of the setting is the question of high rise buildings and skyscrapers. It is not a matter of whether they should or should not be built, but rather where they should be placed in the setting of the cityscape. The lack of adequate planning, which could be implemented to achieve effective compatibility between the historic setting and the new stage, has taken its toll on the historic town centres. The influence of money and economic pressure has resulted in disarrangement and a jumble of juxtaposed structures where the harmonious effect and the overall coherence is being sacrificed. The challenge is therefore to provide adequate space and an appropriate location for modern constructions giving them the setting they need which allows them to expand without causing conflict and so creates compatible arrangements of buildings. This would be a welcome turn in the developments that can be seen today. Continuing to simply fill the spaces without consideration of the whole is poor policy.

The slow eradication of the old, thus gradually creating a new setting, may abruptly end in the search for the former setting which can no longer be reproduced at the snap of a finger as is possible on stage. The most urgent task today is therefore to find a way to correct this development and safeguard the historic sites and the identity they provide.

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