

by Duncan J. D. Smith

On 9 April 1938, Adolf Hitler stood before an audience of 5,000 in the vast hall of the Nordwestbahn train station. He spoke of their city, just absorbed into the Third Reich, as a pearl in need of a worthy setting. Few could have known that setting would be a noose of concrete anti-aircraft towers (*Flaktürme*), built during a war that would leave Vienna in ruins.

Immutable reminder

There is little getting away from Vienna's *Flaktürme*. Two of them dominate the Augarten, looming up at the intersection of tree-lined promenades where the Viennese have taken their leisure since the palace grounds were opened to the public in 1775. Looking up at them, the contrast is stark, the reminder immutable.

Sealed since the war, it takes a while to circumnavigate the base of the huge towers – but it's grimly fascinating. How were these huge concrete structures built, and in such a short time? After all, they are 50 metres high, with walls almost four metres thick. The answer, of course, is simple: thousands of forced labourers using know-how derived from the Nazis' construction of Germany's *Autobahn*.

Cold shadow

There is currently no on-site visitor information about the Augarten towers – but the basic facts are well known. From 1942 onwards, when the tide of war turned against Germany, civil engineer Friedrich Tamms was commissioned to design a series of *Flaktürme* to protect Berlin, Hamburg and Vienna. Three pairs of towers

STONES OF VIENNA

Three sets of concrete anti-aircraft towers stand as reminder of the National Socialist presence in Vienna during the war

Monstrous Monuments: Vienna's Giant *Flaktürme*

forming a defensive triangle were erected around each city, each pair comprising a heavily-armed attack tower supported by a smaller communications centre.

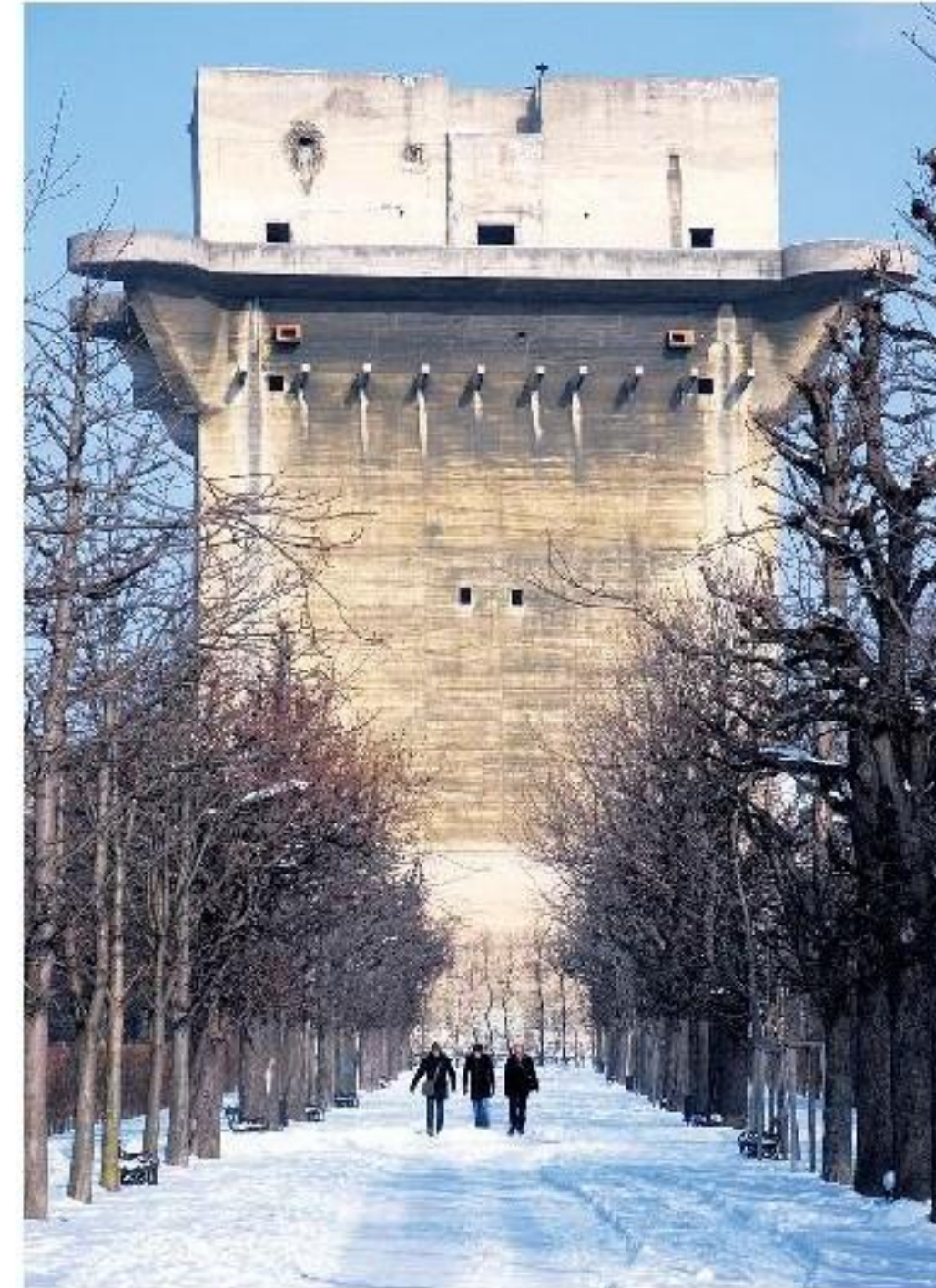
It's winter now, but even in summer the cylindrical Augarten attack tower throws a cold shadow avoided by visitors to the park. Some evenings it provides a bizarre backdrop for outdoor cinema, the entranced audience

blissfully unaware that a successful war included plans to clad the tower in black marble, with the names of the Reich's fallen inscribed in gold.

Understandable amnesia

Elsewhere, historical details are also sparse. The *Riesenrad*, for example, the Prater's iconic Ferris wheel, provides a superb overview of the Augarten, but the aerial photos in each gondola ignore the *Flaktürme*. Like the post-war postcards of Vienna, in which the towers were paint-

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The brutish tower stands amid the Augarten's manicured walkways Photo: Duncan J.D. Smith

ed out, it is an exercise in wilful amnesia in a city that has long struggled with its wartime image.

Looking back up at the Augarten tower a great crack is visible down one side. A man walking his dog claims it was from a failed attempt by the liberating Red Army to destroy the tower, as they had partly toppled one in Berlin. But ask around in surrounding Leopoldstadt and the story takes on a home-grown slant: Darling local schoolchildren, they say, broke into the abandoned tower and set off a weapons dump.

Adaptive reuse

It's a stiff walk of almost 3.5 km to Arenbergpark on Landstrasse, where the next pair of *Flaktürme* stand. No mysteries here and neither tower appears damaged. This, and the fact that the formidably thick walls guarantee a stable temperature, explains why one of them has been used since 1995 as an art depot by the city's Museum of Applied Arts (MAK).

By design, it's the same distance again to the final pair of towers, where a surprise awaits. Through an ingenious programme of adaptive reuse, the former communications tower in Esterházy park has been transformed into the *Haus des Meeres*, a hugely popular aquarium containing sharks and giant turtles. There's even an exhibition on the tower's wartime role. A trail of children enters the tower in high spirits. The weather may be as inclement as in the Augarten, but here somehow, the shadow no longer feels so cold.

[See also, "Gumpendorf – Papa Haydn's Grätzl", *TVR*, Feb. 2012; and "Towers of Burden", *TVR*, Oct. 2009] ♦

The Haus des Meeres is open daily 9:00-18:00 (21:00 on Thursday)

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