

STONES OF VIENNA

Vienna's former gas holders were adapted into affordable housing with infrastructure to promote social interaction

Good Living in Gasometer

by Duncan J. D. Smith

In 1962, in the district of Hietzing, Vienna's last gas street lamp was extinguished. It's still there today outside the local museum, a small testimony to the great network of gas pipes laid across the city in the late 19th century. The gas that lit it came from the Simmering Gas Works, which in 2001 were transformed into the Gasometer, an extraordinary example of industrial adaptive reuse.

Telescopic tanks

It couldn't be easier to reach the Gasometer: there's a station of the same name on the U3. At the top of the escalator the massive former gas holders fill the skyline, appearing much as they did originally. But don't be fooled. What actually remains are only the decorative brick shells; the great telescopic tanks inside, which once rose and fell as gas was added or removed, have been dismantled.

Each of the four gas holders is 65 metres wide, so it would take some time to circumnavigate them all. Since they're identical, the first one – Gasometer A – will suffice. On one side of it there remains a giant pointer that once indicated the amount of gas inside. Not surprisingly a Habsburg double-eagle is emblazoned on it, a

reminder that the Austrian emperor, despite his distrust of technological innovation, needed to be associated with Vienna's rapid industrialisation.

Living Daylights

Today, like every day, several thousand people trail in and out of the entrance to Gasometer A. Few of them, however, seem interested in the oversized gas valve displayed on the forecourt. It's a reminder of the technological expertise required to provide a safe and reliable source of gas to Vienna's 100,000 end-users a century ago.

Despite suffering damage during the Second World War, the Simmering Gas Works continued in business until 1978, when Vienna switched from coke to natural gas. Of no further use, for the next two decades the empty gasholders were used for all-night raves and as an unusual backdrop for film crews. Austro-pop singer Falco made a music video here, and in 1987 the abandoned site featured in the James Bond film *The Living Daylights*.

High calibre architects

Enough of examining the exterior, it's time to enter Gasometer A, and the transformation is astonishing. The great cylindrical space is no longer recognisable for what it once was. Instead



Each Gasometer building is 65 metres wide with individual interior designs Photo: Duncan Smith

there is a bustling circular courtyard, its perimeter lined with shops and fast-food restaurants, and in the centre, a café. The whole is illuminated by a glass roof affording peace to those occupying the sleek apartments above, which cling to the inside of the brick shell.

Gasometer A was designed by Jean Nouvel, one of four high-calibre architects responsible for the conversion. The work of the other three can be seen easily by following the mall, which forms an axis through the entire complex. Glancing upwards reveals how each architect has chosen to grapple with the problem of creating homes within a curving space.

Red Vienna

Returning to the U3 one might conclude that the Gasometer is just a novel commercial

endeavour – but that would be to miss its real purpose. The brief to all four architects, as well as to the non-profit housing associations involved, was that the housing element should remain as affordable as possible, whilst also providing the 1,500 inhabitants with an infrastructure to maximise social interaction. In this way the project was brought firmly under Vienna's historic umbrella of "social housing", inaugurated in the 1920s as part of the city's Socialist experiment known as Red Vienna. Some of the Gasometer's retail ventures have since died, which means that its greatest contribution is the unique housing it provides for the living. ♦

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