

VIENNA'S FLAK TOWERS: HISTORICAL MEMORY AND ADAPTIVE REUSE

By Duncan J. D. Smith

On March 15th 1938, 200,000 people gathered in Vienna's Heroes' Square (*Heldenplatz*) to celebrate the amalgamation (*Anschluss*) of Austria with the so-called "Fatherland" of Germany, something many Viennese had wanted since the end of the First World War. Adolf Hitler himself appeared on the balcony of the Neue Burg, part of the Habsburgs' old city palace, from where he proclaimed: "As Führer and Chancellor of the German nation and the German Reich I hereby announce to German history that my homeland has entered the German Reich." Shortly afterwards the Austrian-born dictator took an aeroplane back to Germany – and the rest is history.



Within a few years, as war swept Europe, the grand Heldenplatz itself would be ploughed up to grow vegetables for the city's bewildered population already suffering under Hitler's faltering "thousand year Reich." Hitler famously described Vienna as a pearl for which he would provide a suitable setting. But by April 1945 the burned-out remains of the once-glorious Habsburg capital would be wrested bloodily from German forces by the liberating Red Army.

There are few visible remains of the Second World War in Vienna today (note 1). With generous funding from the Marshall Plan, the badly damaged city was quickly re-built, virtually brick-by-brick. In many cases, the city's wrecked theatres, churches and grand palaces were so well restored that not even close scrutiny by today's

visitor can distinguish between what is original and what has been recreated. Also, there are few official war memorials. Indeed, only within the last twenty years have monuments been commissioned in the city to remind people directly of the terrible cost of Vienna's wilful and inexorable slide into Fascism sixty years ago; these include the "Holocaust Memorial" (*Holocaust Mahnmal*) by British artist Rachel Whiteread, in Judenplatz; and the "Monument against War and Fascism" (*Mahnmal gegen Krieg und Faschismus*) by Austrian sculptor Alfred Hrdlicka, in Albertinaplatz.

Yet there stands in Vienna a stark, immutable reminder of the years of the Third Reich: six huge reinforced-concrete anti-aircraft towers whose blank facades and imposing mass contrast sharply with the city's finely-restored historical architecture. In 1942 Hitler had decreed that Vienna, like the capital Berlin and the busy port of Hamburg, should be protected by a series of anti-aircraft towers known as *Flaktürme*. (The word *Flak* is an acronym for *Fliegerabwehrkanone*, meaning anti-aircraft gun.) In Vienna three pairs of towers were constructed by German troops during 1943 and

1944 forming a defensive triangle centred on the city's great cathedral, the Stephansdom (note 2). Each pair consisted of a large, heavily gunned attack tower (*Gefechtsturm*) and a smaller communications tower (*Leitturm*).

Towers were built in the spacious Augarten in the 2nd district of Leopoldstadt (defacing in the process Austria's oldest surviving Baroque garden dating to 1712). Another pair were squeezed into Arenbergpark in the predominantly residential 3rd district of Landstrasse. The third pair, straddling the busy thoroughfare of Mariahilferstrasse, were laid out in the 6th district of Mariahilf; one of these was built in the Esterházy park whilst the second was punched into the courtyard of the Stiftskaserne barracks.

The towers were designed by motorway architect and city planner Professor Friedrich Tamms, already famous at the time for his contribution to Germany's concrete *Autobahnen* system. Built of almost indestructible steel-reinforced concrete eight to twelve feet thick, it is said construction of the towers used enough material to build an apartment for every citizen of Vienna! The attack towers were built either as a square-planned fortress tower 137 feet high and 187 feet square with corner turrets, as in Arenbergpark; or as a circular tower (actually a 16-sided structure) 166 feet high and 141 feet in diameter as at the Augarten and Stiftskaserne sites. The heaviest artillery was placed on the roof, with lighter armaments installed on projecting balconies below.

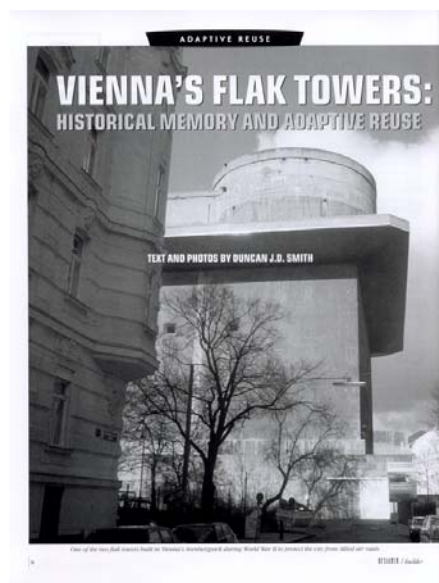
The communication towers, from where anti-aircraft operations were to be directed, were all rectangular in shape, between 128-169 feet high, and 79 by 128 feet in plan. More lightly armed, these structures had communication facilities and searchlights on the roof. All the towers, both for attack and communication, were self-contained with their own water and power supplies, military hospitals, and filtered air systems in case of gas attack. However, the towers only became operational towards the end of the war by which time they were already serving as air raid shelters for the local populace.

After the war, the towers were quickly stripped of their guns and other valuable materials. While some *Flak* towers in Germany were successfully demolished, those in Vienna resisted destruction. Soviet sappers attempted to blow up the attack tower in the Augarten but managed only to produce a crack around the top and to dislodge part of the balcony (note 3). The other towers were deemed too close to surrounding buildings to allow demolition with explosives. So Vienna was simply rebuilt around the towers, which have now for more than sixty years born silent witness to their creator's madness. They stand as particularly powerful reminders of the darkest chapter in Vienna's history.

Despite their longevity, surprisingly little has been done to either adapt Vienna's huge *Flak* towers to new uses or to acknowledge their status as memorials of war. Since 1945 the Austrian government has considered more than a dozen plans for comprehensive re-use of the towers but none has ever got beyond the drawing board. These have included proposals to wrap apartments around the outside of the towers, and to use the gloomy interiors as multi-storey parking lots, cinemas, and leisure centres.

Only recently have things begun to change. Because their thick walls keep interior temperatures constant and the reinforced floors are able to support great loads, the towers make the ideal superstructures for zoological collections such as aquaria and vivaria: collections, that is, which require environmental controls and huge water tanks. With this in mind, the communication tower in Esterházy park has been successfully converted into the fascinating House of the Sea (*Haus des Meeres*) and

now houses many species including snakes, piranhas and crocodiles as well as sharks and giant turtles. A door cut with much effort through the eight-foot thick reinforced concrete wall gives access to a conservatory (or biotope) known as the *Tropenhaus*, which is bolted on to one side of the tower; this addition contains a miniature rain forest complete with its own waterfall and fully grown trees. A visitor to the House of the Sea is thus afforded the unlikely experience of crossing a rope bridge accompanied by swinging monkeys and swooping tropical birds – all inside a Second World War anti-aircraft tower. In addition, an elaborate climbing-wall (*Kletterwand am Flakturm*) has been installed on one of the exterior walls of the Esterházy park tower; publicity material boasts no less than twenty-five different routes up this highly unusual urban reproduction of an alpine rock face.



However, there is little on site to inform visitors about the history of the distinctive structure they now enjoy. Only a modest sign indicates who constructed the tower and for what purpose. Also unexplained is the graffiti artwork “Smashed into pieces (in the middle of the night),” which is daubed in large letters around the top of the tower. Attributed to American artist Lawrence Weiner, it is an apparent reference to the Night of Broken Glass (*Reichskristallnacht*) in November 1938 when Vienna’s Jewish synagogues were systematically and deliberately destroyed. At the base of the tower is a former air-raid shelter that now contains the Museum of Medieval Legal History and the History of Torture (*Museum für Mittelalterliche Rechtsgeschichte: Die Geschichte der Folter*). It is strange, however, that given the

close proximity of the *Flak* tower the Nazis are given little more than cursory mention in the collection.

Another tower undergoing adaptive reuse is the fortress-shaped attack tower in Arenbergpark. As with the House of the Sea, stable internal temperatures have facilitated reuse of part of the tower, since 1995, as the MAK Depot of Contemporary Art, an archival depository of the Austrian Museum of Applied Arts. MAK director Peter Noever, with architects Sepp Müller and Michael Embacher, is actively developing an ambitious plan to reuse all 42,300 interior square feet of what Noever calls this “windowless monolithic building.” Under the working banner of Contemporary Art Tower (CAT), Noever hopes to “use modern designs and equipment to turn this building into an Art Tower to host a constant and live dialogue between artists and the audience.” He envisages the lower three storeys housing commercial exhibition space, as well as concert and club venues, while the next five storeys above would be devoted to live-work spaces for artists.

Restaurants and a bar are planned for the top level, revenues from which it is hoped will offset some of the estimated twenty three million dollars price tag for the conversion. The biggest talking point is the so-called Skyspace Bar, to a design by American artist James Turrell, offering customers an unobstructed view of the sky through a thirteen-foot diameter hole in the roof through which anti-aircraft guns once poked. Turrell, a self-styled light and space artist famous for his ongoing conversion of an extinct volcano, Roden Crater, near the Grand Canyon into a large-scale artwork

and celestial observatory, anticipates this feature will allow bar patrons “to perceive the space between heaven and earth as a materialised field of colour and experience.” Also planned, for the south side of the MAK tower, is a so-called “media mast” by Ohio-born artist Jenny Holzer. Designed to project art, information, and news by laser technology onto the walls of the *Flak* tower itself, the mast continues Holzer’s involvement with provocative street posters and LED (Light Emitting Diode) signs which she has exhibited at the Pompidou Centre in Paris, the Guggenheim Museum in New York, and on the famous Times Square “Spectacolor Board.” It remains to be seen whether Noever’s bold plan to convert such a cavernous space can be implemented, and if sufficient visitors can be attracted to what is a relatively off-the-beaten-track location in Vienna. If successful, it is possible this project might inspire partial or complete re-use of the other towers as cultural and entertainment centers.

At present, however, the other towers remain little used. The attack tower in the Stiftskaserne courtyard now bristles with myriad telecommunication aerials (tall buildings that can be defaced in this way are at a premium in today’s urban environments). In the Augarten, the attack tower forms an uneasy backdrop to the outdoor cinema festival (*Kino unter den Sternen*) organized each summer by the Austrian Film Archive (their headquarters are nearby), looming up into the darkness and entirely dwarfing the screen. Few filmgoers seem to be bothered by the contradiction between the flickering ephemera on the screen and the grim solidity of the nearby *Flak* tower. Similarly, the clusters of Turkish women from the tenements of nearby Leopoldstadt who picnic in the park on summer days do so seemingly oblivious to the towers’ brooding presence. Indeed, carefree youngsters play games in the sun while their parents sunbathe, both parties taking care to avoid the cold and heavy shadows cast by the menacing fortresses behind them, forming an incidental but powerful image of historical amnesia at work in Vienna today.

It is perhaps not surprising that Vienna still has an ill-defined and uneasy relationship with these tangible reminders of the city’s all too recent dark past. Even though Hitler’s *Flak* towers dominate significant parts of the urban landscape, they scarcely get a mention in the city’s official tourist literature. Take, for example, Vienna’s famous Ferris wheel (*Riesenrad*) in the Volksprater, used to such memorable effect in Carol Reed’s 1949 film, “The Third Man.” On the gondola walls are panoramic photographs depicting the salient points of the city, which can be seen as the wheel slowly rotates. The *Flak* towers are clearly visible from the gondolas and, indeed, are shown in the photographs - but they are not identified or named the same way other prominent landmarks are.

Likewise, the backdrop to the classic tourist view from the Habsburg’s city palace, across the Ringstrasse towards the statue of Empress Maria Theresa, is a *Flak* tower - yet this structure is neither mentioned nor identified in any guidebook. It is even said that in the immediate post-war period postcards of the city had the towers touched out entirely. Such omissions have much to say about the way the city has and continues to interpret its past. But the *Flak* towers have a great deal to tell about the socio-political history of the city, indeed at least as much as the more celebrated socialist apartment blocks, old imperial barracks and remains of Jewish synagogues which make up tourist Vienna.

Elderly Viennese will no doubt remember the towers being built; and some of them may have sheltered inside as bombs fell on the city. Who can perhaps blame this older generation for ignoring the *Flak* towers, wishing them pulled down, or else wanting them left as unloved and stark reminders of a war that cost millions of lives? By contrast, younger Viennese have assimilated the towers’ existence into their everyday

lives as just another part of the familiar urban landscape: they are novel and unusual structures they can climb up, spray paint on, watch films below, enjoy art in, or otherwise treat as a modern leisure facility. (School students visit the former concentration camp of Mauthausen in Upper Austria as a matter of course; such a dreadful place is likely to have more of an impact on developing moral conscience than visual sight of the empty and anonymous concrete towers in Vienna.) And finally there is the visitor to Vienna, wanting to know what these huge concrete colossi that punctuate the skyline are all about. For those who come from countries that were never actually invaded during the Second World War, there is perhaps a certain fascination in such structures. For those visitors whose homelands suffered directly at the hands of the Third Reich, they may better appreciate and understand the continuing Viennese tendency “to avoid the *Flak*.”



Anticipating victory, Hitler's architects had plans to clad the *Flak* towers with slabs of black marble on which the names of dead German soldiers would be chiselled in gold leaf. The towers would thus become both monuments to German triumph as well as memorials to those who died achieving it, similar to such antiquities as Ravenna's Roman Mausoleum of Theoderich and the Castel del Monte in Apulia. Indeed, Hitler's own architect Albert Speer would no doubt have approved of such plans. After all, it was he who urged use of the finest materials for Nazi monuments so they might age gracefully like the ruins of ancient Greece and Rome. We can be thankful that this particular future for the *Flak* towers of Vienna never materialized.

Notes: (1) Vienna's battle-scarred masonry has all but vanished. However, just behind Empress Maria Theresa's Gloriette, a triumphal arch high on a hill overlooking Schloss Schönbrunn's in the 13th district of Hietzing, is a pile of broken sculptures. These stones have been left as testament to the skill of the masons responsible for the superb restoration of this war-damaged monument. Less well preserved, inside the first gate of the Central Cemetery (Zentralfriedhof) in the 11th District of Simmering, are piles of scarred Jewish headstones which were either deliberately bullet-strafed by German troops or else victim of wayward allied bombings. Also telling, in Léhargasse in the 6th district of Mariahilf, is an ordinary wall peppered with gunfire, site perhaps of an unrecorded wartime execution; a nearby plaque reads simply “Wunden der Erinnerung” (Wounds of Memory). For a photographic survey of the destruction wrought on the architectural fabric of Vienna during the last years of the Second World War, see Hans Riemer *This Pearl Vienna: A Book of Pictures Taken From Vienna's Most Dreadful Time* (Jugend und Volk G.M.B.H.: Wien, 1946).

(2) For an excellent photographic survey of the *Flak* towers in Vienna, Hamburg and Berlin, both extant and demolished, see Hans Sakker's *Flaktürme: Berlin, Hamburg, Wien* (Fortress Books: Zuiderdiep, The Netherlands, 1998).

(3) A longstanding urban myth that has shown itself to be true is that the demolition attempt was in part the result of a group of daring Viennese schoolchildren breaking into the tower and igniting an abandoned German weapons dump. Fearing Russian reprisals the children were hidden by their parents until the incident had blown over.

Useful websites on the re-use of Vienna's *Flak* towers include www.mak.at and www.haus-des-meeres. For historical background, archive photographs, and original technical specifications of the towers, visit www.thirdreichruins.com and <http://www.turbo.at/geheimprojekte/flaktuerme.htm>