

The *Stelle* in the Unbounded Metropolis

Otto Wagner's 1911 plan for a future metropolis has become an icon of abstraction in urban planning (fig. 1). The network showing the city's future districts subordinates everything to its rational design. That a real city lies under it seems almost incidental. "Let us not place any particular value on the city's name," wrote Robert Musil at the opening of his epic portrait of Imperial Vienna in its final days.¹ Yet anyone who knows that city on the Danube will recognize it under Wagner's grid, with its river flowing towards the east, the hills of the Wienerwald at its west, and its old center still controlling the middle. "The spread of a metropolis must be, according to our contemporary sensibility, an unbounded one," announced Wagner, conceding, however, that every city has its "skeleton" consisting of the natural terrain and a human sediment, especially the roads that brought people to the spot.²

No one understood the cunning of these arteries better than Wagner. He launched his career designing buildings around the most famous of these: laid out on the foundations of the medieval fortifications that, until 1857, encircled the city, the Ringstrasse became Vienna's defining feature, Europe's last fortress town turned half-reluctantly into a modern magnet city. In his winning entry to the competition for the "general regulation" of Vienna (1892), Wagner made mobility the fundamental matrix of urban design. Taking his cue from the Ringstrasse, he

¹ Robert Musil, *The Man Without Qualities*, trans. Sophie Wilkins (New York, 1996), 1: 4.

² Otto Wagner, *Die Großstadt* (Vienna, 1911), reprinted Otto Antonia Graf, *Otto Wagner*, 2: 644, 642.

understood the old city walls quasi as growth rings of the metropolis. Turned into concentric ring roads, which could be repeated artificially at periodic intervals as the city expands, those former boundaries, now conduits of movement, connect to traffic routes radiating out from the center. Also part of Vienna's skeleton, these were the ancient trade routes that, passing east and along the Danube and north and south the edge of the Wienerwald, established at their crossing ancient Vindabona, and later connected the city to other centers, Prague, Bryn, as street names like Prager Strasse, Linzer Strasse, and Triester Strasse attest.

Building his Stadtbahn into these concentric and radiating arteries, Wagner tied modern Vienna to its historical and natural foundations. Since the old trade routes followed the waterways, the Stadtbahn system's radials also run parallel beside these, affirming the ancient bond between rivers and the movements of peoples: "Hier aber wollen wir bauen. Den Ströme machen urbar / Das Land," wrote Hölderlin of the Danube, or "Ister," as his poem calls it. This also made economic and technical sense, because the regulation of the waterways and the laying of the tracks could be accomplished in the same building campaign. But Wagner grasped an aesthetic component in the pairing, since by setting the train lines underground together with the channeled rivers afforded passengers a pleasant, rapidly flowing view. Through this architect's cunning, modern Vienna remains uniquely in touch with its primordial terrain.

Of course, Wagner did not built the Stadtbahn into the river as, for example, the old Elisabethbrücke was built into the Wienfluß, joining bank to bank for centuries. Instead he built the rivers into the Stadtbahn. Just upstream from start of

the Danube Canal Line, as the Danube's festive entrance to the city, he controlled with a gigantic dam of his design the waters that threatened the city with floods. It was here that technology itself began to show itself off. According to Wagner, all architectural forms derive from construction, therefore new construction methods must create modern forms. The dam at Nußdorf reveals the capabilities of iron in display of its functional elements and in ornaments that express the challenge technology overcame. Scrollwork on the abutment and spiraling handrail endings express how the dam channels and transports the river's force, turning it into a sight for humans whom the Stadtbahn channels and transports.

Wagner's plan for turning district boundaries into transport arteries resembles the map of a railway system. Trains connected the far-flung cities of Austro-Hungary to their capital in Vienna. Their gleaming rails led uninterrupted to the very doorstep of the emperor, and their stately stations spoke the same Imperial architectural language as did the capital, and they displayed in their waiting room, invariable, a portrait of the good old Kaiser, so that whether before boarding a train in Innsbruck, in Czernowitz, or in Temeswar one was already in Vienna. Wagner's plan for a capital city doubling in size every few decades assumed a flood of immigrants. He wanted his future Vienna to be beautiful to these arrivals and to advertise its livability. The Stadtbahn addressed the subjectivity of people on the move. The distinctive railing designs he created for the different Stadtbahn lines, along with a system of legible markers of place and measures of time, enabled travelers to find themselves while in transit. In the Imperial Pavilion at Hietzing, he included in the waiting room a painted map of Vienna in the form of Carl Moll's

aerial view so that, in the implausible event that he commuted by train, the emperor could trace his route to work.

In Wagner's view, the modern city-dweller prefers to "disappear as a number into the crowd," and yet, in its expansion, the metropolis should, where possible, take its shape from prior, individualized localities.³ Wagner therefore advised city planners to organize expansion zones around the slightest trace of human activity: old property boundaries, an overgrown cart road, "even a mound of dung."⁴ It was in order to generate a sense of place within increasingly abstract urban systems that Wagner introduced his concept of the *stelle* into city design.⁵ In his regulation plan for Vienna, he observed that the points of intersection between ring roads and radiating arteries formed natural nodes of human and infrastructural density,. This density would only increase once the *Stadtbahn* ran through the system. In a map accompanying his proposals, he termed these nodes *stellen* and superimposed them as numbered circles over a map of his future Vienna (fig. 2). Each *stelle* was to contain, at its concentration point, a municipal railway station, a cluster of trolley stops, a materials depot, a staging space for street cleaning and snow removal, the efficient management of utilities, such as water, sewage, gas, and electricity, and a mortuary surrounded by a garden—Wagner assumed his *Stadtbahn* would transport Vienna's dead from the districts to the Zentralfriedhof. Most importantly,

³ Wagner, *ibid*, 2: 246.

⁴ Wagner, *ibid*, 242.

⁵ Eve Blau, "Supranational Principle as Urban Model: Otto Wagner's *Grossstadt* and City Making in Central Europe," *Histoire de l'art du XIXe siècle (1848-1914)* (Paris, 2011); Christina Crawford, "The Operativity of Overlap: Urban infrastructure, artistry and theatricality in the *stellen* of Otto Wagner," unpublished essay, 2012.

the *Stellen* would be designed aesthetically as spaces of habitation—paradoxically mobile and transient—between home and the workplace.

On his map of these, Wagner put the term *stellen* in quotation marks, to flag this novel designation. In contrast to the words *ort* or *platz*, which conjure fixed and concrete localities, *stellen*—derived from the verb *stellen* (to set in place)—suggests action and agency. *Stelle* also relates to a family of words connoting human activity of a technical kind, such as *darstellen* (to present or exhibit), *herstellen* (to produce), *vorstellen* (to imagine), *sicher stellen* (to secure), and *zustellen* (to supply).⁶ A great problem solver, Wagner understood Vienna as a challenge *gestellt* (posed) to him, and he hoped his proposals for the city's *Stellen* would be *bestellt* (ordered) from him by the municipality.

Wagner never got to build any of the *Stellen* he envisioned for the city, but his thirty-six Stadtbahn *Haltestellen* put the principle to work. Each manages multiple paths of motion on a varying terrain. At Längenfeldgasse, where the elevated Gürtel line passes over the Wienfluß to connect to the underground Hütteldorf – Karlsplatz line, Wagner created a spectacle of motion, with pylons resembling triumphant arches, so that, even as one rushes past, one feels oneself festively and victoriously arriving (fig. 3). Wagner understood that, for the modern city-dweller, time is money, and that the quickest path is a straight line. Yet he also recognized, and critics of the metropolis publically lamented, that such efficiency could be hard on the soul. Writing in 1889, Camillo Sitte analyzed Vienna from within, from the point of view of a human inhabitant experiencing the city on foot. From this pedestrian

⁶ See Martin Heidegger, *Die Technik und die Kehre* (Stuttgart, 1962), 15-17, 3-39.

standpoint, Vienna was becoming unlivable, with new long straight streets with all frontage flush with the pavement's edge. This arrangement, Sitte noted, had given rise to a new malady: *Platzscheu*, literally, a fear of place.⁷ Championing an artistic rather than technical approach to urban planning, he advocated streets that bend, thereby showing something, anything, to the eye, hopefully a well-designed façade or pleasing monument. Wagner abhorred such painterly curves—he called them *Schmutzwinkeln*—but he understood that modern life consisted of more than movement and that somewhere people needed to feel at home.

Sigmund Freud wrote that, thanks to psychoanalysis, the 'I' was not "master in its own house."⁸ By this he meant that, through the discovery of unconscious drives forming and still partly controlling the conscious self, individuals could no longer feel at home even within themselves. Applying this Viennese model of the psyche as home to the built architecture of Vienna itself, one could say that in that city in Freud and Otto Wagner's day, people no longer felt themselves to be masters in their own home. This was partly because most Viennese lived in leased flats within apartment houses, limiting homemaking to interior design; partly it because, for new or recent arrivals, and especially for Jews like Freud, the city itself could be strange and inhospitable. *Platzscheu* was thus the quintessential urban disease, an anxiety arising from the experience of the metropolis. Some embraced this new condition. Writing in 1891, the critic Hermann Bahr envisioned nervousness as a new basis for art: "There will again be a Romanticism," he prophesied, "but it will be

⁷ Camillo Sitte, *The Birth of Modern City Planning*, ed. George R. Collins and Christiane Crasemann Collins (Mineola, 1986), p. 245.

⁸ Sigmund Freud, "Eine Schwierigkeit der Psychoanalyse," *Image* (1917): 7.

a nerve-Romanticism.”⁹ The original Romantic movement had been concerned with the mysteries of the inner self. A century later a new *Nervenromantik* returned to the self but found it exteriorized as a neural system. The young Freud, before he became a clinical neurologist, was among the first to isolate to isolate neurons in the laboratory, and in his mature work he pictured the mind as an electrical circuit, with blockages (repression) and detours (sublimation) that give rise to the self. In the realm of art, *Jugendstil* fulfilled Bahr’s prophecy, its whip-like lines, repetitive rhythms, and treatment of surface as a kind of sentient skin suggesting the energy flow in nerves (fig. 4).

Such a system has nodes—or synapses—where memories are stored and released, but it possesses no single place or rest or arrival. In the psyche as in the city, the *stelle* has replaced the *ort*. Wagner was perhaps the first architect to conceive and design the city itself as a system. On this model, there are longer any fixed places, private or public, but only sites of transit. The novels of Joseph Roth movingly capture how, the Hofburg at the core of old Vienna functioned a kind of home or *Heimat* for the denizens of the sprawling Austro-Hungarian Empire. And Viennese apartment buildings, although broken up into rental units, were modeled on the courtyard structure of aristocratic residences, where the princely homeowner truly was master of his domain. But for most Viennese, with the exception perhaps of the emperor (though even he felt more at home in the countryside), Vienna was *unheimlich*.

What would an actually *stelle* designed by Wagner have looked like? His

⁹ Hermann Bahr, *Die Überwindung des Naturalismus* (Dresden, 1891), p. 194.

project drawing for the Ferdinandsbrücke, made in 1905, gives an indication (fig. 5). Proposed for a key nodal point in Vienna, where traffic from the Ringstrasse passes over the Danube Canal into Leopoldstadt, the bridge incorporates the upper and lower embankments of both sides of the river, while also joining two trolley lines to the Stadtbahn station on the quay. Wagner concatenates these vectors into an alluring bit of space. The drawing imagines and presents the *stelle* in order for Wagner to supply it. Made to win over a jury, it draws viewers in through the depicted pedestrians who measure its heights, admire the abutments, and try out its the stairs. Like Sitte, Wagner gives these flâneurs something to see: not a façade or monument but the unbound metropolis itself condensed in the *stelle*. The city becomes a theater of space, with an audience that, also watching each other, forms part of the play. Wagner shows this corner of the city as if it were an interior open at the sides. The bridge becomes a shelter and hearth. Sitte mourned the loss of urban spaces that feel like interiors, noting that indoor elements—such as stairs—used outdoors gave charm to medieval towns (one thinks latterly of the Strudelhofstiege.¹⁰ Wagner's drawing fosters this sense of interiority through its sectional view. Thrusting us into the third dimension, it represents architecture not as wall and footprint but as creator of space.

The space of this *Stelle* has no walls, but then, neither will the ideal modern interior. Building in iron makes walls structurally superfluous, as Wagner explained. Adolf Loos developed this principle in his interior designs. What his students called the *Raumplan* emphasizes free movement even in the private space of home.

¹⁰ Sitte, *op. cit.*, p. 246.

Traditionally, buildings celebrated arrival to them. In the *stèle*, architecture becomes the diagram of movement beyond. The *Stelle* ties movement in a knot, but its drama derives from the nervous extensions of its elements—gleaming rails to faraway villages beneath an unknown sun.

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