

Comprehensive Urban Renewal: More than Building Regeneration: a Case Study in Vienna

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1 ABSTRACT

How can the Viennese Urban Renewal Model develop the ground floor zone of historical urban fabric? How can a comprehensive planning approach restructure and reuse the building blocks at ground level, including courtyards and street spaces? Sustainable urban development requires more open and green areas, sufficient local supply, social infrastructure and convenient traffic solutions. All these characteristics interact with the ground floor zone, street spaces and common areas within the urban fabric of the city. The ground floor zone and surrounding open spaces establish the quality of life and are key to the image of the cities. The city of Vienna, like a number of other cities, has a growing problem with vacant ground floors and deactivated desolate street (common) spaces. The negative influence of private traffic, and the disappearance of retail outlets are the main reasons for the current situation. The symbiotic relationship between the many user groups, local residents, small retail outlets and small-scale local economy are obvious. This coherence impacts on the quality of life in the neighborhood. How and if is the historical urban fabric transformable and transferable? The results of the research project are not only implementable on the existing urban fabric, but also on the new development areas in between. The studies and findings are addressed not only to the urban renewal department, but to all relevant City departments (urban planning, housing subsidy, traffic planning, environmental protection, architectural/urban design, green planning and business development), delivering transferable and typological planning procedures and methods.

2 INTRODUCTION

The city of Vienna, like a number of other cities, has a growing difficulty with vacant ground floors and deactivated desolate street (common) spaces. The vacancy in Vienna becomes noticeable and widespread only at the level of ground floor zones. This development does not seem as dramatic as those completely empty buildings and blocks in some other post-industrial or post-socialist European cities. Furthermore increasing rates of vacant ground floor areas at street level show that this development is not as harmless as it appears.

The value and usability of both the ground floor zones and the public spaces reflect upon the quality of life and image value of an urban area.

The ground floor areas and their spatial structures with adjacent spaces such as courtyards, streets, squares and green spaces create the character of the urban quarters. Their neglect causes an undoubtedly depreciation of the environment and the surrounding neighbourhood.

In the development of the urban structure in Vienna, the local supply enterprises like groceries, small shops and small apartments have been the traditional users of the ground floor area on the street and in small flats.

In many areas of the city today, the ground floors are increasingly losing users and usability. The city of Vienna, like a number of other cities, has a growing problem with vacant ground floors and deactivated desolate street/common spaces. The negative influence of private traffic, and the disappearance of retail outlets are the main reasons for the current situation. The symbiotic relationship between numerous user groups, local residents, small retail outlets and small-scale local economy are obvious. This coherence impacts on the quality of life in the neighbourhood. The symbiotic relationship between the ground floor uses, the street, the local supply and the inhabitants of structures is linked very closely.

3 CURRENT SITUATION OF GROUND FLOORS IN VIENNA

The unused existing ground floor spaces result in lost built stocks. In addition, the vacancy of ground floors weakens the identification of the inhabitants with their neighborhood.

This phenomenon can be observed in many cities. Their ground floor zones show in spite of all the similarities of their urban structures also significant differences related to the nature of street spaces - such as height, width and design of the spaces between the building blocks, the intensity of the (stationary) traffic, the legal regulations of rents and property matters.

The rising vacancy rate in the ground floor, because of the replacement and closure of the small(est) enterprises creates a downward spiral not only in the problem zones of the cities. The restructuring and re-use of the ground floors as small(mini) garages for the new residential units, which have been recently built on top of historic buildings, changes the character of a street spaces in the ground floor zones.

3.1 Migration of citizens

The scarcity of available public spaces and green spaces causes an exodus from the cities to the suburbs as the urban households prefer more open-green spaces and low emission environments. More land consumption, more infrastructures, new social institutions such as schools, kindergartens, public transport and more traffic are the common results. The migration to the suburbs and the growing urban sprawl ‘Zwischenstadt’ burden ultimately the city governments due to the rising infrastructure costs. The growing private traffic between the central areas of the city and residential areas around the city causes more motor traffic emissions; this development set further migration in motion: Circulus Vitiosus.

3.2 Small(est) enterprises and store closures

The local supply enterprises (like small business, retail and offices) are dependent on the current customers coming from their district.

The presence of the pedestrians on the streets vitalizes the street life, reduces motorized traffic and supports the local economy. The number of small(est) enterprises is over 90 % in Europe: Vienna and other Austrian cities are making no exception.

The small-scaled structures of existing local supply are increasingly weakened. More and more retails and other enterprises established in ground floors are closing.

3.3 Stigmatized by traffic emissions

More than half of the population in Vienna claims to suffer from constant noise. Dust is further a serious problem. Longer distances between work, housing and traditional weekend houses cause more and more traffic. This means not only increasing greenhouse emissions, but also a negative development of street spaces in urban areas. The controversial role of traffic planning and the conflicting objectives and trends of economic and environmental policy support the negative development. The small scaled urban traffic planning requires immediately new ways and innovative solutions, which are carried out by decentralized local politics.

3.4 Mini-garages versus retails

The retail spaces in the ground floor zones, which are outside the main shopping streets or market places, off the pedestrian zones and traffic-calmed places are no longer in demand. They increasingly turn to be idle spaces.

The lack of retails in short distance causes more car traffic and insufficient local supply. The typical uses of the ground floors like retails, cafes and restaurants or small offices has the character of semi-public places. More vacancies in the ground floor zones causes less interaction between closed and open spaces, public and private spaces at the street level.

The existing ground floor spaces are permitted to be converted into the closed small garages in last decade. The garages (mainly for 2 cars) often belong to the owners of the new penthouse apartments on top of the historic blocks. These mini garages built in the former spaces of local supply and retails transformed in recent years the street facades of the street level into the death zones. The ‘dark caves’ of garage entrances and exits has been turned to usual elements of ground floors not only of the new buildings but also at the historical facades of the building blocks.

The required car parking places for each new housing unit or new office areas play an important role in this development. The local government believes that the creation of new parking lots as the key to their political success. Reducing the parking lots in the streets to create green/common places causes protest actions of the people living in and around these streets.

To date, the house owners and housing management companies do not consider that the ground floors as rentable areas for retails and small enterprises are profitable enough if rented out. The ground floors of the

new housing buildings of the block structures are usually service spaces like car parking areas and garbage space showing introverted facades.

Better rental income, better marketing opportunities and subsidies are the basic motivations of property owners' decisions for mini garages.

Although the urban renewal and urban planning authorities are obviously positioned against this development, the relevant legal instruments are not in place to stop this process. In this case the decision-making authority and responsibility lies also within the local politics.

3.5 Viennese block redevelopment program

Vienna has a historical housing stock with around 30 % of all apartments built before World War I. The importance of these inner city districts lies in their urban variety, their (still) existing mixture of functions, and their flexibility, as well as their capacity to absorb new functions, new lifestyles and immigrants. (Potyka 2006)

The block redevelopment as an urban renewal program of City of Vienna seeks a comprehensive improvement of entire blocks with different owners by combining housing redevelopment with other measures to improve living conditions more generally. (wohnfonds_wien 2010)

Today, there is a growing necessity for comprehensive and interdisciplinary planning methods in participative and cooperative process with the co-operation of stake-holders, urban renewal authorities, investors and tenants.

The research project 'win wi(e)n' develops strategies for the improvement and recycling of ground floor zones in the urban fabric of Vienna with all regulative, legislative and financial components in cooperation with the planning authorities operating in different fields of urban planning. The main target of the project is a sustainable restructuring and reusing of the blocks at ground level, including courtyards and street spaces-as a comprehensive planning approach.

Interviews, hearings and case studies in other cities (Berlin, Leipzig and Basel) as well as the analyzing of recent cultural initiatives are some of the methods defining the way forward in planning.

The block renewal program is a convenient method instigated by the housing renewal authorities in Vienna as it also targets the improvement of the ground floor zone and open spaces of block structures including the following aims:

- Opening the block courtyards of historical urban fabric to create accessible green spaces
- Creating common spaces between the building blocks, green parks and street spaces for different social groups of a urban renewal area
- Implementation of a block renewal management, coordinating stake holders, tenants, retail outlets and service facilities
- Redefinition of the density of urban fabric on the basis of the new master plans for the urban renewal area.

Although the urban renewal program is geared towards a comprehensive urban revitalization of the whole neighborhood, its implementation has fallen short of target particularly with regard to ground floor zones and open spaces. Without a coherent modernization of the whole block area with open spaces and ground floor facilities, there is no real sustainable success.

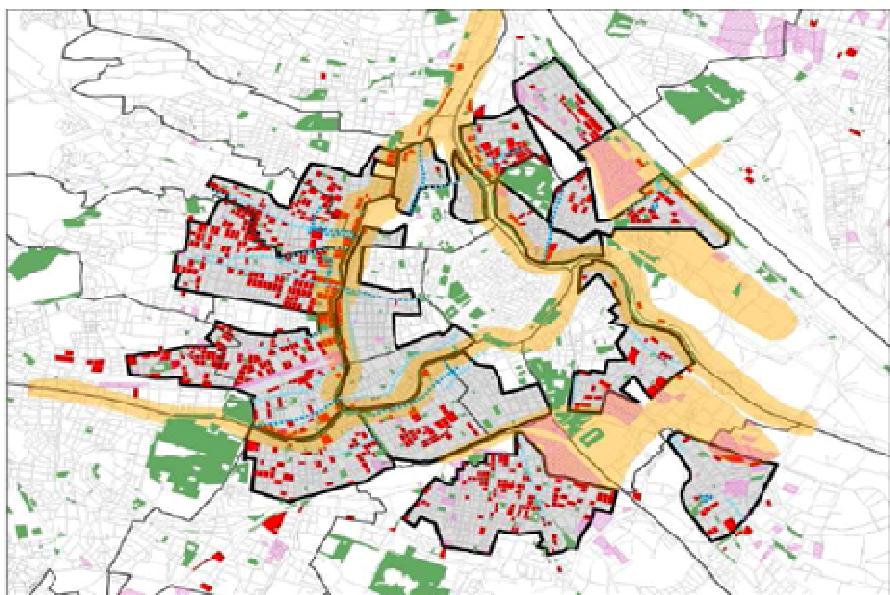


Figure 1. Target areas of urban renewal in Vienna; 2005, Gerhard Berger, City of Vienna

The targets of urban renewal remain rarely achievable because of the contradictory interests of property owners, local policy and public planning authorities.

4 THE RESEARCH PROJECT WIN WI(E)N

In the context of this research project, the urban block renewal program was analyzed as well as the barriers and obstacles within planning processes to develop new methods and strategies, to assist the program achieve its aims.

A recent block renewal area - Stuwerviertel in Vienna - of the urban renewal authority in Vienna has been analyzed in a simulation and implementation model to test the feasibility of the planning solutions and methods of the research project, as well as to confirm the transferability of these, on the basis of:

- Interviews with the planning, building and controlling authorities for urban renewal, urban development, building legislation, urban traffic and local organizations, residents, tenants, investors and stake-holders
- Case studies of European practice in urban renewal programs
- Evaluation the urban block renewal program in Vienna and the building legislation, planning policy and local financial support programs
- Thematically related studies and events on block renewal programs, renovation, participation, local district management
- The participatory project for Max-Winter-Place in the pilot area Stuwerviertel.

5 CONCLUSION

The findings of the research project 'win wi(e)n' are addressed not only to the urban renewal department, but to all relevant City departments (urban planning, housing subsidy, traffic planning, environmental protection, architectural/urban design, green planning and business development), delivering transferable and typological planning procedures and methods.

The results of the project are implementable measures for an enduring and sustainable restructuring of the ground level zone with new strategies for organization, regulation, planning guidelines and planning. In addition, a number of sustainable proposals for redesign and planting of the ground floor zones and open spaces require more detailed analysis.

Over the last few decades the urban renewal program 'the block renewal' in Vienna had the physical building regeneration as prime objective. An extension of the current urban renewal practice is absolutely necessary

to keep the versatile use of the urban fabric and to improve the quality of life in Vienna's high density urban areas to keep the households in the central areas of the city. The following measures are recommended:

- Knowledge transfer, communication and cooperation of all departments of urban planning and urban politic
- special support and subsidies for small(est) enterprises of ground floor zone
- special and effective subsidies and customized information services for the entrepreneurs to start and to develop small business
- more subsidies and information for the greening measures in the courtyards and street spaces
- innovative measures for the reduction of car traffic and traffic calming methods
- extension of housing subsidies to support the non-residential uses in the ground floor zones
- abolition of the regulation of the obligatory car parking lots units within the building block, for the new built 'penthouses' on top of them
- further development of urban renewal methods to regenerate the neighborhood as a whole

The following measures support retail and small(est) enterprises for a reusing and transformation of ground-floor-zone:

- effective financial support for startups (in the ground floor-zone),
- active information and know how transfer (specially for migrant enterprises of ground floor-zone) but also for landlords and tenants,
- no restriction of use in the ground floor zone (specially for smallest enterprises)
- no functional zoning for ground floors (open and flexible usability)
- sufficient financial support (subsidies) also for the renovation of the non-residential-spaces of ground floors
- exemption from various fees, charges and rates specially for new comers (retail, small entrepreneurs) of ground floor zones
- controlling of rental price level not only for housing but also for commercial uses
- The following measures are addressed to public hand and public authorities for an efficient (re)use of ground floor-zone:
- cooperation of all players and stake holder; inhabitants, tenants, neighborhood organizations, local authorities, local governments, local community-based organizations, house owners and NGO's
- unconventional architectural planning solutions
- elimination of contrary strategies and practice of planning and legislative authorities
- novel legal tools to provide the implementation of measures (like common spaces for children and tenants in the ground floors, bicycle parking spaces, greening etc.)
- coordination and merging of different financial supports for housing, greening and business development.

Monitoring the gentrification and the risk of displacement of the existing inhabitants during the urban regeneration process has been an additional target of the field studies in the pilot area. Over the last centuries this area has been the location of the new comer migrant families mainly from Eastern Europe. There is to further to state that the period of the field studies has been extensive enough to survey the consequences of urban renewal activities in the pilot area. Since there is no urgent pressure from the property market or severe difficulties through mass immigration, a gentrification process takes over ten years in Vienna. Finally, as with every city development scheme, legislative regulations of the local government play a major role in accomplishing sustainable and eminent results for urban space areas. In this very case the appropriate use of vacant ground floors and deactivated desolate street (common) spaces.

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