

# ARCHITECTURE AND REPRESENTATION IN EAST AND WEST

## BUILDINGS AS ACTORS AND COMMUNICATORS

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Architecture creates and shapes our everyday life. Buildings establish our environment and structure the space, in which we live and act. They are never „neutral“, but embody aesthetic concepts, cultural meanings, political visions, and economic conditions. In demonstrative or subtle ways buildings communicate with us as inhabitants, users, and by-passers: location, architectural form, style, iconography, and material etc. often express historical narratives, concepts of (national) identity, and assumptions of power. How do buildings communicate?

In an ERASMUS+ cooperation students from Georgia, Montenegro, Austria, and the US analyzed individual buildings in reference to the following topics:

### BUILDING TYPOLOGY, FORM, AND STYLE



In reconstructing Vienna after 1945 new actors participated in the competition for architectural presence in the Ringstraßen-area. Where previously political institutions like Town Hall and Parliament had competed with monumental buildings in varying historicist styles, profiteers of prospering capitalism now strived for architectural manifestations following modern, rationalist architectural aesthetics. Vienna Insurance Group commissioned architect Erich Boltenstern to build the new headquarter as a high-rise. Erected 1953-55 the huge office block integrates a tall, slender tower. With its 73 m plus 20 m antenna this solitary building dominated the city center with its low skyline in postwar Vienna.

By form and style, the functionalist reinforced concrete skeleton and glass construction distinguishes itself clearly from the historicist representation modes of the historical Ringstraße. Furthermore, by adopting these concepts of Western Modernism in the time of the Cold War, the high-rise also aims at a political statement, claiming supremacy of Western Modernity, Liberalism, and Capitalism.

Vienna Insurance Group Headquarter, called "Ringstrassenturm"; E. Boltenstern, 1953-55, was in its time one of the tallest buildings in Europe. ©Wikimedia, gugerell, 2014.



Plan of the city expansion on a New Year's lottery card, 1860, framed between the allegories of Justitia and Pax on the right and the allegories of the city of Vienna and the art decorating it on the left. © Wien Museum.

### LOCATION

Whole areas or city quarters can communicate political and societal visions. Vienna demolished its ancient city fortifications later than other major European cities. On the several hundred meter wide open space around the city center, the glacis, a modern image of the capital was to be created by order of Emperor Franz Joseph. This new area was meant to reflect both, tradition and modernity of the Habsburg Empire. In addition to buildings for the imperial family (including the court library and court theater) and the city and state

(city hall and parliament), the new cityscape also included public buildings such as museums and the university as well as residential buildings for the upper middle classes. The new Ringstraße was intended to give the city a monumental, grand character. The architectural means to achieve this were competing accentuated facades and distinctive roofscapes, as well as some accents in other historicizing styles such as Neo-Gothic and Neo-Baroque, in addition to the Neo-Renaissance, which were considered monumental.



In the context of the busy Karlsplatz, characterized by the baroque Karlskirche and numerous 19th-century buildings, the postmodern facade of the library stands out in particular. © Wikimedia, Peter Haas, 2012.

### ICONOGRAPHY

Iconographic programs on facades and interiors serve as direct communication with spectators. One example is the 18-meter-high figure of an abstracted owl on the postmodern library building of the Technical University Vienna (1978-87). Its architects Justus Dahinden, Reinhard Gieselmann, Alexander Marchart, and Roland Moebius planned a compact, natural stone-clad facade with large windows that offer a view of the reading rooms even from the outside, thus illustrating the active nature of this place. Referring back to ancient mythology, the owl and other small owls in the Attica zone refer to the goddess of wisdom,

Athena/Minerva, and thus mark this place as one of science and wisdom. With this reference to science and research the building manifests the institutions claim to be seen as high level research institution. The comparison with another building of the Technical University in the background shows that the means of representation are changing constantly: Only a few years earlier two of the same architects, Alexander Marchart and Roland Moebius, planned this modern building (ca. 1975-81) as (small) megastructure with unadorned facades.