Wien Museum Karlsplatz, Karlsplatz, 1040 Wien

VIENNA WERKBUNDSIEDLUNG 1932
A MODEL FOR NEW LIVING

Press talk: Wednesday, 5 September 2012, 10am
Opening: Wednesday, 5 September 2012, 7pm
Exhibition location: Wien Museum Karlsplatz, 1040 Vienna
Duration of exhibition: 6 September 2012 until 13 January 2013
Opening times: Tuesday through Sunday/Holidays, 10am until 6pm
Press photographs: www.wienmuseum.at/de/presse

“Europe’s Most Important Architectural Exhibition”

The Wien Museum presents the first exhibition on the Vienna Werkbundsiedlung, which opened in Lainz during the summer of 1932 – exactly 80 years ago – and could be viewed over a period of eight weeks. More than 100,000 visitors came to see “Europe’s greatest architectural exhibition” (according to one contemporary commentary), which was thought of as a manifesto of New Living; the exhibition was intended to visualise a better life out of the spirit of modernism. The exhibition not only showcased creative and aesthetic innovations, but it also addressed the notion of a happy life in a terrace or one-family home, complete with small garden, in a settlement association. The Werkbundsiedlung was thus a statement against the housing programme of “Red Vienna” with its “superblocks” such as the Karl Marx Hof.

Modern Living from a Viennese Perspective

The initiator and eponym of the Werkbundsiedlung was the Austrian Werkbund, established in 1912 along the lines of the German example. Its goal was to follow through with timely design in the production of commodities meant to achieve an interplay of architecture, arts and crafts, and industry. Josef Frank, a leading representative of Viennese architecture during the interwar period, undertook the project direction. Like the groundbreaking Stuttgart Weißenhofsiedlung of 1927, the Vienna Werkbundsiedlung was an international exhibition in which architects from France (André Lurçat), Germany (Hugo Häring), the Netherlands (Gerrit Rietvield), and the United States (Richard Neutra) participated. The overwhelming majority of architects, however, were from Austria, and so the Werkbundsiedlung presented modern living from a Viennese perspective. It is particularly striking that three generations of local architects were invited to collaborate. Alongside “old masters” such as Adolf

Vienna, August 2012
Loos and Josef Hoffmann, Josef Frank, Oskar Wlach, Ernst Lichtblau and Oskar Strnad were able to present, as well as younger architects, amongst them Anton Brenner, Ernst Plischke, Oswald Haerdtl, and Walter Loos. Only one woman was represented: Margarete Schütte-Lihotzky. The entire direction was in the hands of Josef Frank, a pronounced proponent of the measured modernism that rejected the pure functionalism and machine aesthetics that had been espoused for the most part by the international avant-garde.

The show presented 70 fully furnished houses, and each had a garden measuring around 200 m². 30 different types of settlement houses offered maximum living comfort with small floor space, and the living area ranged from 57 to 126 m². All houses were painted colourfully, boasted flat roofs and terraces, and some came with balconies. The living rooms were oriented towards the garden, and occasionally there were rooms for service staff. There had never before been an exhibition that had displayed so many furnished model houses. The Werkbundsiedlung offered a stage not only to the architects, but to the Austrian interior design companies as well. For the duration of the exhibition, sample ensembles that united local traditions of craftsmanship with modern needs were composed, and met with great public interest. Approximately 50 designers created versatile suggestions of how to furnish small spaces rationally and according to different tastes. They selected pieces from sample catalogues by cabinetmaker’s shops, lamp manufacturers and textile makers, or had their own designs executed.

Paradigmatic for the connection between tradition and modernism was the contribution of the globally active furniture manufacturer Thonet-Mundus. Modern, colourfully painted bentwood pieces were utilised as was the new tubular steel furniture. The “lightness” of this furniture corresponded to the demand to retain the greatest possible flexibility in the living area – this was an ideal that had also been prescribed by Josef Frank and Oskar Wlach in establishing their interior design shop “Haus & Garten” in 1925, located in the Bösendorferstraße (and which outfitted three houses in the Werkbundsiedlung). The public reaction to the Werkbundsiedlung was divided. While it was mostly well received internationally, the local papers scoffed at the “model colony of munchkin houses” as well as the “dice settlement.”

**Aspiration and Reality**

The apartment question was not only of an aesthetic nature, but it was also highly political. Otto Neurath, a leading popular educator of social democracy, thus promised a living with a “happiness maximum”. The houses in the Werkbundsiedlung were designed for the middle class, but in the future they were also meant to be accessible to the working class. However, the economic and political crisis was already escalating, and due to the high prices only 14 of the residential units had been sold after the closing of the exhibition in August of 1932. The rest were let by the urban organisation GESIBA, and were inhabited mostly by civil servants, engineers, artists, and writers. Following the “annexation” (*Anschluss*) of Austria in 1938, Jewish residents, as well as several of the planners from 1932, became victims of persecution by the National Socialists. In 1938 the unsold houses were transferred into the possession of the municipality of Vienna.
Where the Werkbundsiedlung Was Not Built

The planning of the Werkbundsiedlung had already begun in 1929, albeit for a site on the southern slope of the Wienerberg. It was here that Josef Frank planned to have apartment complexes facing the Triester Straße, with terrace houses to the east. The funding, however, then switched from the municipal housing programme to homebuilding aid, which only supported owner-occupied houses. At the same time the municipality planned to erect large apartment buildings on the nearby Wienerberg, which would have compromised the appeal of the settlement houses. For this reason the decision was finally made on Lainz, where construction work began in the fall of 1930.

The Werkbundsiedlung in the Wien Museum

The exhibition in the Wien Museum concentrates not only on architecture historical aspects, but it also connects architecture with interior design in its presentation. One main attraction is the complete model of the settlement, which has been custom-made for the exhibition, and another highlight is the reconstruction of a room in the Werkbundsiedlung. Furthermore, many unknown drawings, photographs and plans are on display. Subjects include the first residents and the problems of conservation – right up to the current renovations being carried out by the City of Vienna.
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Admission: Adults: 8 €. Concessions 6 € (Seniors, Wien-Karte, Ö1-Club, disabled persons, students up to 27 years of age, trainees, recruits and those conducting community service, groups of 10 or more)
Children and youth under 19 years of age – free admission!
Every first Sunday of the month - free admission!

Visitor information: Tel (+43 1) 505 87 47-85173, www.wienmuseum.at; e-mail: service@wienmuseum.at
Tours: Sundays and holidays, 3pm
Group registration: Tel.: (+43 1) 505 87 47-85180; e-mail: service@wienmuseum.at
Curators: Andreas Nierhaus, Eva-Maria Orosz
Exhibition architecture: polar
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Press:
Peter Stuiber, Wien Museum
Tel (+43 1) 505 87 47 - 84019, Fax (+43 1) 505 87 47 - 7201
e-mail: peter.stuiber@wienmuseum.at

Barbara Wieser, Wien Museum
Tel (+43 1) 505 87 47 - 84068, Fax (+43 1) 505 87 47 - 7201
e-mail: barbara.wieser@wienmuseum.at

www.wienmuseum.at