

Hans Hollein 1985 Laureate Essay

Notes on Vienna
By Brendan Gill

Vienna, native city of Hans Hollein, is the sum of a series of errors that have caused it to become the best-designed city on earth, as well as one of the pleasantest to live in and visit.

Paradoxes irritate you—far better to give an example or two of the city’s errors? Very well, then: having foolishly preserved its ancient fortified walls until well past the middle of the nineteenth century, Vienna at last tore them down, providing space for an elegant “ring” of grand public buildings, park, and promenades. Thus, a blunder became an act of wise city planning. But just a moment, the newly laid out nineteenth-century city, suitable for the capital of a vast empire, discovered after the Second World War that it was the capital of a tiny country. Thus, an act of wise city planning became a blunder.

Many such misfortunes have befallen Vienna over the centuries and from each of them it has rebounded with an invincible exuberance. It is this exuberance that has caused so many jokes to be told about the city, not least by the Viennese themselves. One thinks of that perennially repeated epigram to the effect that the condition of Vienna is hopeless but not serious, and one thinks, too, of how the Congress of Vienna, meeting to stitch Europe together after the downfall of Napoleon, was rebuked, in a French pun, for dancing rather than getting on with its appointed labors. Dance it did, to the scandal of onlookers, but we have no way of knowing whether, if the Congress had danced less, more good would have flowed out of its earnestness.

To be earnest is to be tiresome, and there is nothing in Vienna’s long history to indicate that it has ever felt any greater desire to be earnest than a beautiful woman feels to be plain.

Not without some reason, therefore, Vienna has come to seem in the world’s eyes a synonym for waltzing, for wine, women, and song—indeed, for all the flirtatious merriment that the music of Johann Strauss serves to evoke in us. It is as if an entire city were capable of being summed up in terms of a single preference, whether for dance, or, still more unlikely, for whipped cream: pastry *mit schlag* and perhaps also art and architecture *mit schlag*. Plainly, the threat is not substantial. At the risk of sounding earnest, one may as well affirm that there is more to real life, even in Vienna, than whipped cream.

The fact is, of course, that there are many Viennas, as there are many Londons and New Yorks. The greater the city, the more we must be on our guard against reducing it, for our convenience, to an instantly identifiable stereotype. There is a dark Vienna as well as a dancing one, a Vienna of ordinary, every-day misery as well as of joy, a Vienna (little as we may like to admit it) of stolid, hard-working citizens, whose wit finds its source not in the salon but in the barnyard. We do well to remember that the Vienna which most of us elect to make our favorite is only that—our favorite, and not necessarily that of its inhabitants.

Nevertheless, one suspects that there is something intrinsically beguiling about the very site of Vienna, for it is one of the oldest continuously occupied localities in the world. Eight or ten thousand years ago, our Neolithic ancestors had already settled on one or another of the natural terraces that descend from the foothills of the Alps to the immense fertile basin of Eastern Europe. Through the basin flows the broad (and perhaps once upon a time the authentically blue) Danube, and near its banks the first stumbling attempts at agriculture were carried out; stones were polished to serve as tools and weapons, and clay pots were fashioned for holding seeds and water.

Thanks to the indirect shorthand of history furnished by such artifacts, we detect the presence of generations of Romans in that place, of their reluctant retreat before the oncoming hordes of barbarians, and of the fierce Turks, who in what amounts almost to our day—the seventeenth century—lay siege to Vienna, were turned back from its gates in the nick of time, and left behind

Notes on Vienna (continued)

them, like so many accidental prizes of war, thousands of bags of coffee beans, then and there kindling in the hearts of the Viennese a passion for coffee that has never waned.

There are architects and city-planners to say nothing of priests and professors, who in their idealism would like to assume that a city may achieve greatness out of goodness, but alas! The evidence of history is forcibly against them. Indeed, it is almost always the case that cities are great in proportion to the amount of corruption they are able to sustain without flinching. Though our Savonarolas would have it be otherwise, Rome, Paris, and Vienna have counted for far more in the world when they have been widely perceived to be sinks of iniquity than when periods of comparative virtue have momentarily overtaken them; out of the compost heaps of decadence leap up incandescent *fleurs du mal*. We forget at our peril that the word "culture" is of the earth earthy and implies the need for a continuous animal and vegetable enrichment. Yeats says of love that it pitches its tent in the place of excrement; for better or worse, so does art.

Vienna at the turn of the century was notorious both for its corruption and for the energy that this corruption provided its artists, authors, and composers. Vienna was then the capital of an enormous empire, but the intellectual ferment present in its coffee houses stood in vivid contrast to a moribund court, upon whose throne sat a no less moribund emperor. The battlements that defended his mind against change had outlasted the ancient city walls he had ordered thrown down in youth.

In any great city, there will be distinguished individuals who seem fated to meet and never do so. In that feverish Vienna of the turn of the century, most of the figures who have since entered history—Klimt, Schiele, Kokoshka, Wittgenstein, Kraus, Mahler, and the like—were well acquainted with one another, but two of the most prominent among them, Freud and Schnitzler, had almost everything in common except friendship. Surely they must often have passed each other in the street; perhaps their eyes met, perhaps they lifted their hats to one another in the civil homage of not quite strangers. Despite their mutual esteem, some instinct (of self-preservation ... of unexpressed envy?) must have served to keep them apart. And this was just as well, for Freud was a difficult man to sustain an unbroken relationship with; one was safer in possession of his admiration than of his friendship.

After the First World War, two gifted Viennese architects, Rudolph Schindler and Richard Neutra, set out, a year or so apart, for the New World. Both stopped off in Chicago, both worked for Frank Lloyd Wright, and both settled in Southern California, gaining fame if not fortune there. It was in part because of Schindler and Neutra that, in the late 1950s still another gifted Viennese architect, Hans Hollein, followed in their footsteps—Chicago, Frank Lloyd Wright, California. This evening we raise our glasses in salute to him and his native city. May they flourish together, each like a brightly colored feather in the other's cap! Over the years, many tales have come to us out of the Vienna woods, but surely none of them will ever make us happier than this one.

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