utopia and the project for the city and territory

Luca Velo, Michela Pace eds.

"Quella che non è una utopia è una dimensione.<br>

"Per una città come Firenze un’integrazione tra interno e esterno. "

"L’utopia come cliché: "

"Le città sono..."
The Viennese Terrassenhaus: An Example of a Utopian Reality?

Lorenzo De Chiffre

Recently, a small selected group of internationally renowned architects was invited by the city-owned development agency of Vienna to design a multi-functional building on a prominent site in the Seestadt Aspern district of Vienna. Surprisingly, several of the selected architects proposed using a version of the Terrassenhaus. Particularly the Dutch firm Atelier Kempe Thill and the French architects Lacaton & Vassal developed buildings that are strongly reminiscent of the pyramidal designs by Henri Sauvage and Adolf Loos of the 1920s. On one hand, the choice of this stepped building form can be explained in terms of the current zeitgeist. But on the other hand, it also has links to a local discourse that can be traced back to the Red Vienna co-operative housing tradition.

With the aim of better understanding the possibilities, as well as the difficulties, inherent in the original Terrassenhaus concept, the following discussion of the type will focus on its development in the urban housing discourse of Vienna, where it has enjoyed a special prominence and has manifested itself in several distinct incarnations over the course of the twentieth century (Blau 2015). Despite its apparent architectural shortcomings, it also offers a fusion of nature and urban housing, provides a strong private sphere within a collective structure and allows for the de-densification of the urban tissue without eroding its underlying pattern. This quality is what led to the notion that the Terrassenhaus could be considered a built utopia.

To better understand this perspective, three concepts concerning utopia developed in a recent book on the topic by the philosopher Agnes Heller prove useful. First, Heller asserts that the general notion of a ‘utopian construct’ is an idea based on segregation and isolation that is best exemplified by the island metaphor often adopted as the locus of historical utopias. She also suggests, however, that a ‘utopian reality’ is a place somehow related to architecture where people can form a community without giving up their personal freedoms and where moments of happiness can still be enjoyed (Heller 2016, 95). Lastly, the philosopher states that human history can largely be defined by its ‘utopian moments’. In the discussion that follows, these ideas are used to interpret the past phases of the Viennese Terrassenhaus:development.

ADOLF LOOS AND THE 'TERRASSENHAUS' AS A 'THEATRE FOR COMMUNAL ACTION'

Unlike Henri Sauvage, who, together with his business partner Charles Sanzin, succeeded in building two famous immobiliés à gradins in Paris, a building type he is generally credited with having invented, Adolf Loos, who in fact had concurrently developed an equivalent principle, never managed to realise his idea in built form. The only Terrassenhaus realised by Loos is Scheu House, built in 1912-13. After World War I, the project’s client, lawyer Gustav Scheu, became a member of the social democrat city government and, impressed by Loos’ interpretation of Anglo-Saxon domestic culture and garden-city ideals, decided to employ him as Vienna’s housing development architect. The early years of the Red Vienna period could be described as a ‘utopian moment’ in Heller’s sense of the term, for self-organised settlements actively supported by the city administration and assisted by the leading architects and sociologists of the time became the basis for a strong co-operative movement.

In opposition to the superblock, a group of architects with Loos among its protagonists formulated an alternative mass-housing model based on the concept of the Terrassenhaus. This can be seen as an attempt to embody the
initial concept of the settlers' movement in an intra-urban form. The design by Loos was a transformation of his row-house concept into a stepped multi-storey structure similar to Scheu House with a so-called Höchstraße (street in the sky) as its central element. The project's cascading terraces, described by Manfredo Tafuri as "a theatre of collective action, [and as] a scene for the representation of living" (Tafuri 1995, 76), connected the dwellings and the urban fabric in a completely different way than the courtyards of the superblock housing type. Unlike the semi-public landscaped courtyards of the housing blocks, criticised by the historian Eve Blau for confusing "insiders with outsiders" (Blau 1999, 173), Loos' concept envisaged a clearly defined spatial domain wedged in between the public and private realms that could provide a stage for the performance of communal life.

**URBANISING POST-WAR VIENNA WITH 'HOUSING MOUNTAINS' AND 'GREEN VALLEYS'**

One of the main protagonists of the generation of Austrian architects educated after the World War II was Arbeitsgruppe 4'. In its exhibition project Wien der Zukunft of 1964, its architects formulated an urban concept based on a reinterpretation of Otto Wagner's radial city (Wagner 1912). But unlike the urban block interspersed with public squares and civic buildings that Wagner proposed, Arbeitsgruppe 4 modelled its concept, which it called Wohnberge (housing mountains), of a large self-contained courtyard structure with communal facilities in its centre, on a combination of the Karl-Marx-Hof by Karl Ehn and the stepped section of the Loosian Terrassenhaus. The Wohnberge idea represents one of a pair of principles that has dominated the Viennese discourse on urban development in the post-war era: Städterweiterung (urban extension) and Städterneuerung (urban renewal).

The principle of urban extension, which until the early 1970s was, generally speaking, the preferred option, was also the focus of the seminal exhibition Neue städtische Wohnformen (New forms of Urban Housing) mounted by the ÖGFA (Austrian Society for Architecture) in 1966–67 (Hufnagl, Czech 1967). Among all the projects for the urban periphery that it showcased, a relatively unknown one by Hermann Czech in particular chose the existing city as its field of intervention. Czech had developed his project in direct response to the Wohnberg idea of Arbeitsgruppe 4, applying its principles to urban renewal. He polemically argued that it was feasible to try to "fabricate" a new form of urbanity on the city periphery when the traditional city's pre-existing fabric was equally in need of attention. Czech designed a detailed reconfiguration of the city that retained the basic block structure. The results could be described as a grüner Tal (green valley), demonstrating that the traditional notion of the street could be preserved while introducing a different, landscape-like condition into each urban block in a manner similar to Tafuri's idea of the theatre. In the context of the present discussion, this shift from the Gießform enclave on the urban periphery to its application within the existing city can be considered a second example of the Terrassenhaus as a utopian reality.

**THE VOLUNTARY PRISONERS OF THE 'TERRASSENHAUS'**

Of the Terrassenhaus projects realised in the 1970s, two of them – both related to the concept of the Wohnberge – stood out. One is the Am Schöpfwerk project, which was the direct outcome of the aforementioned Neue städtische Wohnformen exhibition. If the Am Schöpfwerk project was favoured by the architecture critics but disliked by its inhabitants, the opposite can be said of the other large housing development, the Wohnpark Alt-Erlaa. While architects and critics derided it, the project has emphatically proven itself to be the peoples’ choice. The Wohnpark Alt-Erlaa was developed by the city-owned housing agency Gesiba and was designed by a group of 'commercial' architectural firms with Harry Glück as the lead designer. Appropriating the main insights of the discourse on urban housing from the 1960s, the project consists of three housing slabs in which the lower thirteen stories have a stepped section forming the base for between nine and thirteen stories of regular flats on top. The approximately 3,200 dwellings are supported by a large range of social infrastructure. One of the project's most striking features, besides the lush greenery of its park-like landscaping and private terraces, is the provision of swimming pools on
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In response to pressure from the client to aim for a high density of inhabitants, Glück and his team collaborated with sociologists and ethnologists (behavioural studies specialists) to create a socially balanced environment. This was not unusual at the time, and the main sociologist consulted, Kurt Freireiter, had already been part of an experimental Terrassenhaus project that had involved the participation of its future inhabitants in Graz. But it could be argued that in the Wohnpark Alt-Erlaa project the function of interdisciplinary teamwork was utilised to provide an unusually stringent anthropological basis for mass housing. This was made economically viable thanks to a very efficient shear-wall construction employing a standardised bay width designed to accommodate the underground car park and to a highly optimised internal-corridor access typology. In summary, the project created a sophisticated 'biotope' for human living that has always enjoyed exceptionally high approval among its residents.

Yet this radical interpretation of what mass housing and urban life should provide also has a cynical side that is clearly recognisable in the ethological rhetoric cited in support of the concept. Here the biological premise of pre-historic man – a creature conditioned by millennia of life on the savannah and possessing an ingrown desire to live in and according to the social practices of small, herd-like groups, to enjoy distant views and to be close to fresh water and plants – was reinterpreted in a synthetic and mechanistic way. Seen from this perspective, Glück's Terrassenhaus concept acquires an anti-urban dystopic quality, for in it seemingly imposed sense of happiness due to communal living becomes evident, something far removed from the general ideal of free civic life.

In this context, a comparison with the early seminal project Exodus, or the Voluntary Prisoners of Architecture by Rem Koolhaas in collaboration with Elia Zenghelis from 1971–72 seems justifiable. The speculative project by Koolhaas
and Zenghelis, which was inspired by the Berlin Wall interpreted as absolute architecture, comprises a walled "strip" of nine large programmatic fields cutting through central London and containing "intense metropolitan desirability" in a condensed form as an alternative to the "old city". Elements such as "the baths," for "testing and possible introduction of new forms of behaviour", and "the allotments," for "recover[ing] in privacy from the demands of intense collectivism and communal way of life make on them" (Sigler 1995, 2-21), as well as other recreational facilities provide a synthetic and highly choreographed environment whose aim is to manipulate the subconscious of its "voluntary prisoners". In the project, the remaining city, which progressively turns into a ghost town as the walled 'strip' slices through the urban territory, becomes a picturesque ruin (Koolhaas, Zenghelis et al. 1972).

All of these features of the project are conspicuously similar to the built reality of the Wohnpark Alt-Erlaa, which also functions as a self-contained, potentially extendable enclave in which the inhabitants are said to be so pleased with their lives that for long periods of time they don't even leave the complex (Seib 2014). Seen from this perspective, it could be argued that the utopian element is inherent in the Terrassenhaus concept, for which it provides the basis for proposing a segregated enclave that is dangerously similar to the description of Koolhaas' dystopia.

The intention of this discussion is not to belittle the success of the Wohnpark Alt-Erlaa. To sustain such a high level of outspoken support over the entire course of its forty-year existence is an indisputable achievement.

But in spite of this project's singular success, can such an anti-urban concept be justified as a model for the future development of cities more generally? The question is, in fact, currently being debated by the top levels of Vienna's city administration. As seen in the examples by Adolf Loos and Hermann Czech, the Terrassenhaus building type can be used in a way that allows it to embed itself in the existing urban fabric, working with rather than against what is there already, whilst simultaneously providing a range of different spatial solutions and thereby expanding...
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the morphological repertoire of urban housing. Through this approach, the sociological aspect of the Terrassenhaus remains an integral part of the overall concept, but it no longer inhibits the building type's other, subtler features from unfolding.

As mentioned at the beginning of this article, Ágnes Heller ends her recent essay Von der Utopie zur Dystopie with the surprising suggestion that contemporary architecture is where 'utopian reality' can be found today. This brief discussion of the Terrassenhaus has shown that there is a crucial difference between what Heller calls a philosophically constructed utopia, with its inherent totalitarian connotations (i.e., the projects by Arbeitsgruppe 4 and Harry Glück), and the spatial notion of a 'utopian reality' as a stage for communal living (i.e., the projects by Adolf Loos and Hermann Czech) that can be encouraged by the architectural development of the Terrassenhaus concept. The derivation of both of these fundamentally opposed results from the application of the Terrassenhaus type warns us to be cautious and alert when confronted with the concept's employment as a wholesale solution for urban housing today.

Notes:
1. The architects’ projects were exhibited in a show entitled aspen INTERNATIONAL at the Architekturzentrum Wien from 12 June to 24 August 2015.
2. The projects are located in rue Vavin (1912–13) and rue des Amiraux (1913–30).
3. Two different designs by Adolf Loos as well as a large building complex by Oskar Strnad, none of which were realised, are the only known examples.
4. Its members included Wilhelm Holzbauer, Friedrich Kurrent and Johannes Paulet.
5. This concept had been studied in principle in an earlier project called Valley City by Hans Hollein for Manhattan in 1960/64.
6. Two examples are the architect Roland Reiner and the architecture critic Friedrich Achleitner.
7. The project has scored the highest levels for user satisfaction in several sociological studies over the years, including independent studies from 1978, 1983 and 2004.
8. The project was designed by Werggruppe Graz in 1967/1972.
9. The project was originally designed in the autumn of 1971 for a competition entitled La città come ambiente significante held by Casabella (Gargani 2008, 6–7).

REFERENCES
Q1 Scenari, a cura di Maria Chiara Tosi
Q2 New Territories, a cura di Paola Viganò
Q3 Comment vivre ensemble, a cura di Paola Pellegrini e Paola Viganò
Q4 Storie del futuro, di Paolo Bozutto, Andrea Costa, Lorenzo Fabian, Paola Pellegrini
Q5 Landscapes of urbanism, a cura di Viviana Ferrario, Angelo Sampieri, Paola Viganò
Q6 The Next Urban Question, a cura di Valentina Bandieramonte, Chiara Cavalieri, Irene Guida, Kaveh Rashidzadeh
Q7 Suolo, a cura di Monica Blanchettin Del Grano
Q8 Bernardo Secchi, Libri e piani, a cura di Cristina Renzoni e Maria Chiara Tosi
Q9 Utopia and the Project for the City and Territory, a cura di Luca Velo e Michela Pace