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THE *GRÜNDERZEIT* IN PRAGUE USING THE EXAMPLE OF THE QUARTER ŽIŽKOV

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Abstract

Being a part of the Austrian monarchy in times of the global wave of industrialization and urbanization of the 19th century, Prague has an abundance of quarters with great similarities to Vienna's Gründerzeit-*style. However, the history of how these quarters emerged and developed differs greatly. One of Prague's* Gründerzeit *districts is Žižkov, today a central part of the city, which emerged and existed for many years as an independent town outside Prague's borders.*

Introduction

The city of Prague was a part of the Habsburg monarchy since the 16th century. Thus, in the time of industrialization and urbanization, the *Gründerzeit*-era would hit the city as much as the rest of the monarchy, seeing Vienna as a role model in architectural and urban questions.

Most of these quarters, however, that arose during this time around Prague, did not grow as a part of the city of Prague but were separate cities until the early 1920s. Even though they emerged due to the immense growth of the urban population in Prague, the saw and developed themselves as independent cities. Over the years there were efforts to join them to be within the borders of Prague, but there was only a little willingness on their part to do so.

One of these cities, that was integrated into the capital of Prague in 1922, was Žižkov. Built in a very hilly area, this city was rather a developer's project, seeing the potential to build a large number of houses for the working class on cheap ground. It was planned in the 1860s on the grounds of fields and vineyards. In the following years, the city began to grow at a spanking pace and was often criticized for its steep and narrow streets. Instead of the typical urban grid following a square geometry, the streets of Žižkov were placed in a rather irregular geometry to fit onto the steep topography. It is, however, these aspects, that are characteristic of this quarter and that many people appreciate nowadays.

Urban beginnings of the city of Prague

The area of today's Czech capital has been inhabited since the early Middle Ages. Until the 18th century, four independent royal towns shared this location, grouped around the Vltava-river: the Old Town (Staré město), the Lesser Town (Malá Strana), the Castle District (Hradčany) and the New Town (Nové Město). In the course of the reforms of Emperor Joseph II in 1784, it was decided to merge these four municipalities into one fortified city – the imperial and royal capital Prague. The previously separate cities thus became one administrative entity with four districts.

Another important part of the reform that had a significant influence on the development of the city was the introduction of the first building code for the Kingdom of Bohemia. Compared to previous regulations, the requirements for new buildings have now become much stricter. The Municipality reserved the right to approve all new buildings and conversions to ensure the strength and regularity of the road while keeping it straight. These were already the first hints for the later redevelopment interventions into the medieval city structure, among other things by defining new street lines, which in the coming decades resulted in many monumental objects falling victim to. The historical and medieval townscape was slowly replaced by that of an industrial revolution city. Vienna and its architecture had a trendsetting impact on this transformation [Hrůza 2003, 71-73].

In the shadow of Vienna

As the capital of the Habsburg Empire, Vienna was the centre of power and culture and gradually advanced to become the "eastern lighthouse" of the civilized world. In contrast to Vienna or even Budapest, where urban development plans and major infrastructural projects were subordinated to the interests of state power and representation, Prague – as a less important city of the monarchy – had the disadvantage of not being the focus of state development strategies. Prague's implemented projects and plans were therefore mostly the result of initiatives by individual associations or chambers [Melinz 1996, 7]. This is the reason why the development in Vienna, being in the focus of attention, progressed at a much faster pace. People looked up to Vienna in political, cultural, scientific and architectural matters. Besides, Vienna, as a royal seat, had decision-making power over the whole empire and thus for Prague. Therefore, many things had to be approved and clarified by the emperor before they could be implemented. At the beginning of the 19th century, when capitalism and entrepreneurship experienced an enormous upswing which we know today as the *Gründerzeit*, Prague also made efforts to catch up in matters of modern urbanization. In many respects, it referred to Vienna as a role model. In Prague, for example, a counterpart to the Vienna Ring Road was aspired to but never achieved. By that time, Prague was administratively seen still very small which is why it was hardly possible to accomplish a concerted urban development [Brůhová 2017]. Whereas Vienna widened its area already in the mid-nineteenth century and was able to plan a rather coherent and extensive area of new urban quarters, Prague remained an
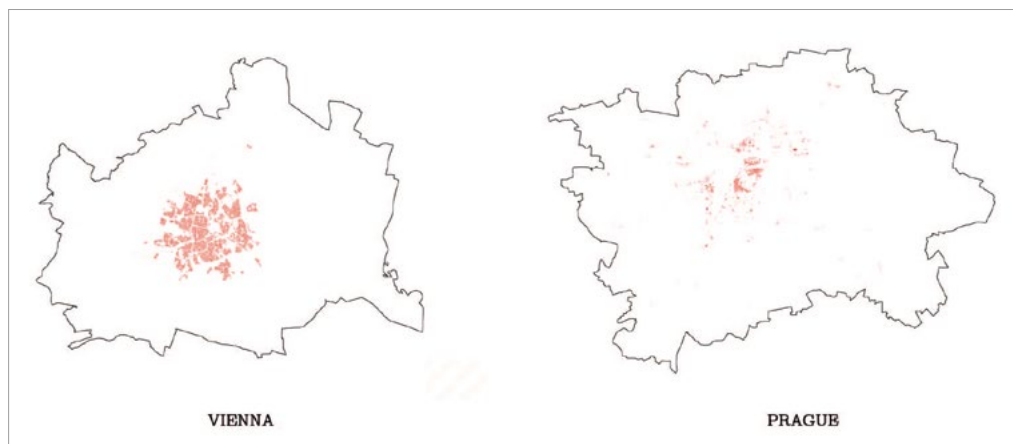
1: Comparison of the area of the *Gründerzeit*-development in Vienna and Prague [Elaboration of Kamila Drsata].

agglomeration of several municipalities until the early 20th century. The number and area of *Gründerzeit*-quarters were thus much smaller and more scattered (Fig. 1).

Industrialization and Urbanization of Prague

Shortly after 1800, the first factories were built outside Prague's city walls, marking the beginning of Prague's industrial era and laying the foundation for the development of the suburbs. Within the densely built-up, medieval structured city, there was no space for industrial development. The first factory was established in the southwest-located Smíchov. Further industrial plants followed in Karlín and Libeň, located northeast of Prague. All three of these suburbs were situated by the Vltava river. Other areas around the fortification wall had less suitable conditions for industrial development. The area southeast of the town, for example, was characterized by very hilly terrain and didn't have any connection to the river, which is why it was basically not built on until the second half of the 19th century. Entrepreneurs were more interested in regions that were located directly on the Vltava. Even though these regions were all very close to each other, their growth and development were very individual. The city of Karlín was designed as a planned town with a strict chessboard layout. In 1816, a generous, classicist plan was drawn up for this area, prescribing a street width of 22.75 m (12 fathoms). In Smíchov the planning conditions were much looser, which was perhaps also the reason why this suburb, which urban development was not regulated at first, grew way faster than Karlín [Hrůza 2003, 83f].

A key moment in Prague's development was the fall of the absolutist government of Alexander von Bach in 1859 when after a long period of Vienna's superiority, a period of loosening up began for the Kingdom of the Czech Republic. When – moreover – in 1861 the Czech National Party won the most votes in the municipal elections in Prague, the Czech population was finally given more space for its emancipatory ambitions.

Apart from a revival of Czech culture in the form of political and social representation, a major focus was given on changing Prague's appearance to develop the city into a European metropolis. At that time, Prague was still surrounded by the baroque fortification wall. Within the wall, there was only little room for urban development towards a metropolis. With the end of the Prussian-Austrian war in 1866, Prague lost its status as a fortified city. As a result, the city wall no longer had any military significance and in October that year, Franz Joseph I. agreed to the demolition of the fortification walls. In 1874, the demolition of the walls was finally begun, giving the city a large development area. Even though the emperor promised to donate the parts of the fortification belt to the Municipality of Prague as compensation for the damage caused during the war, the city had to buy them off in the end. The (unexpectedly) high financial requirements were later reflected in the rather limited generosity of an urban planning concept for the areas acquired [Brůhová 2017, 17].

In Vienna, the fortification walls were starting to be removed already in 1858. Vienna received the areas of the former city walls as an imperial gift, enabling a greater urban development due to larger financial resources.

Even though there were efforts to transform this area for the benefit of the common good and to draw up a wholesome urban concept, similar to Vienna's Ringstraße, the economic situation in Prague caused that no such solution was implemented. Instead, there was a rather scattered and incoherent development and placing of different quarters and buildings without being coordinated.

Prague and its suburbs

The effort to integrate the suburbs to enable a metropolitan development of Prague was a long-lasting process continuing for several decades. Eventually, the integration would succeed in 1920 with the establishment of "Greater Prague".

Especially towards the middle of the 19th century – with the emergence of the industrial age and the resulting increase in demand for space for industry, housing, and transport – a merger with the suburbs would have been beneficial for still rather small and dense city of Prague. Within the ramparts, there was hardly any room for structural development. After the city wall was dismantled, attempts were made to move the borders of Prague to the urban hinterland. However, before the turn of the century, precisely in 1884, solely one suburb (Holešovice - Bubny), situated in the Vltava River loop, was connected. Only 17 years later, in 1901, Prague was extended by another suburb, namely Libeň. Despite repeated attempts to merge with other suburbs, including Smíchov, Karlín, Vinohrady and Žižkov, theses municipalities themselves refused to do so. Even though there was an economic connection – since parts of the Prague population worked in Smíchov or Karlín and vice versa – and the economic boom of the municipalities was largely due to their proximity to Prague, local patriotism was extraordinarily strong in the different cities. Also, there were differences in interest and consumption taxes, which did not exactly favor the willingness to cooperate.
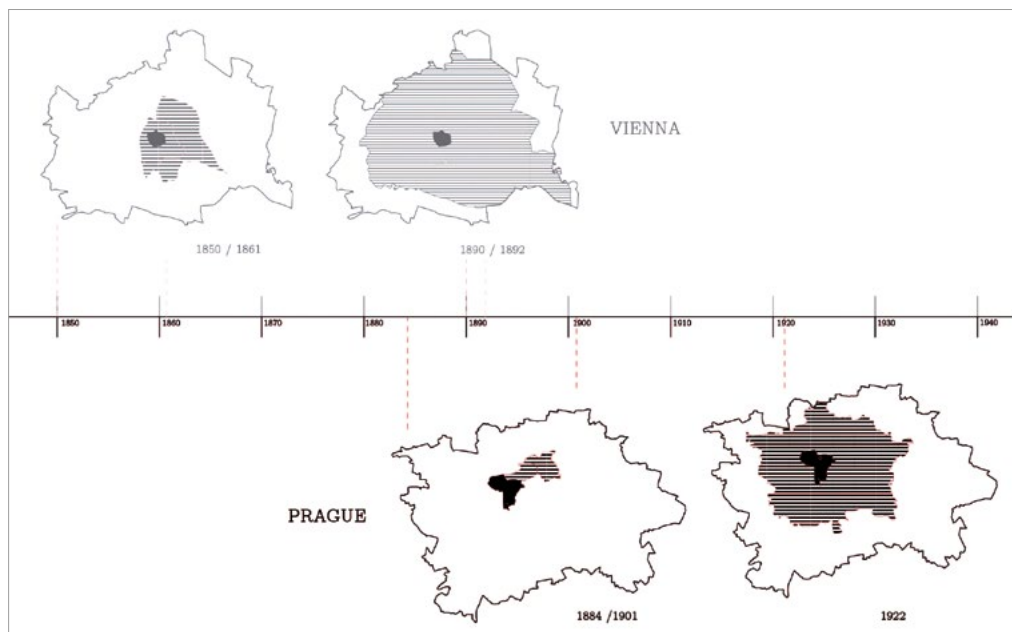
2: Territorial growth of Prague in comparison to Vienna [Elaboration of Kamila Drsata].

It was not until 1918, when the Czechoslovak Republic was founded, that a new era began – not only in social and economic terms but also in terms of urban development. The merger of Prague with its suburbs became then one of the basic objectives for the urban development of the capital. It was recognized – and now also enforced – that the city needed clear ideas in terms of construction and planning to support its regulated urban growth (Fig. 2).

In February 1920, the law on the merger of Prague with the neighbouring municipalities finally brought about unification. Under the name of the capital city of Prague, known as Greater Prague, an administrative unit of the Prague agglomeration was created. In 1922 then, Prague was enlarged by 37 municipalities and towns which in many cases had grown into large cities with tens of thousands of inhabitants in the meantime [Hrůza 2003, 81-91].

Žižkov

One of these municipalities that were founded during the *Gründerzeit* is Žižkov – today a district of Prague known for its very individual character. Located on a rather steep northern slope, the street blocks are irregularly arranged, which is since it was built on the ground plan of original country roads and estates. From the very beginning, it was built as a workers' residential town, which was intended to provide housing for people who found work in the nearby towns of Karlín or Libeň, which had an abundance of industrial plants.

Over the years, a very specific, often seen as rebellious culture developed here, which is still inferior to the neighbourhood today. Located east of the historical centre of Prague, adjacent to the fortification wall, until the middle of the 19th century this area was used as a wine-growing region with a few scattered properties. It was King Charles IV who decided in 1358 to use the surroundings of Prague for growing vines [Url 01]. For five centuries then this area was used for the cultivation of wine and became a popular excursion destination for city dwellers. In 1849, as a result of a gubernatorial decree, the whole area with its estates was united in the new municipality called *Vinohrady* (Vineyards), later it was separated to two different parts, one naming itself Žižkov [Srb Houba 1910, 72ff]. In contrast to other municipalities around the fortification wall, the geographical conditions for the development of (industrial) suburban development were less favourable here. It was not until the second half of the 19th century, when the number of people living in Prague increased rapidly – as more and more people came to the city to find work – and Smíchov and Karlín were no longer able to meet the demand for housing, that the construction boom started also in this area.

It was, therefore, the simple principle of the increasing demand for cheap housing, which at that time favored the emergence of Žižkov. Due to the hilly terrain, which was unfavorable for construction, and the location on the northern slope, the land prices never reached those of the neighboring municipalities, which is why the area attracted many entrepreneurs to build cheap, small apartments here [Horský 2009]. Most of these developers didn't have any experience in the construction industry, but they recognized the economic potential of the situation.

The most important entrepreneur who very much influenced the essence of Žižkov was Karel Hartig, a bricklayer and master builder and later mayor of Žižkov. In 1865, he worked out the first development plan for a 7.5-hectare site and thus gave the first impulse for a regulated development.

He drew up a settlement plan that divided the site into eight small blocks, with one block in the middle remaining empty as the central square. The houses, arranged in a chessboard pattern, were very densely organized, which already met with criticism at the time. However, it must be remembered that Hartig reacted to the given conditions here and wanted to create as much living space as possible by creating a high building density.

With the completion of Hartig's plan, an intensive phase of buying up of the properties by speculators began together with a wild construction phase. The construction of the buildings did not follow any concerted scheme, which would regulate a gradual growth starting from the city center. The timing of the construction on each plot was more or less decided by the property owner. For this reason, some of the sold plots remained empty until the 20th century. Most of them, however, were developed as soon and quickly as possible. Neither in Prague nor other parts of the Czech Republic has a city ever been built as fast as Žižkov.

In the years 1866-1868, the initial phase of Žižkov's urban development, an average of ten new buildings were erected each year. In 1870, there were on average 24 new buildings per year, from 1871 to 1874 even 44. As a result of the crash of the Vienna Stock Exchange and the economic crisis of the late 1970s, construction activity declined for

several years but increased again from 1880 [Bečková et al. 2015]. Unfortunately, the original regulatory plan prepared by Karel Hartig was not retained [Mikota 1995, 9]. The urban structure of Žižkov which he designed is still largely visible today.

The particular arrangement and shape of the blocks and the unusually steep roads is the result of an attempt to force the strict urban block grid typical for that time onto a very hilly terrain. The basic structure of the road network is based on the site boundaries of the former vineyards, fields, and estates as well as the paths that ran between them. Despite the apparent arbitrariness, however, the composition of the roads also possesses a deliberate order and hierarchy. Hartig paid attention to both an equitable distribution of squares and public spaces and to provide an adequate supply of social infrastructure [Havlová Lukeš Svoboda 1997, 132].

The visual relationships also played an important role in the construction of roads. Often views to small squares or important buildings like schools and churches are offered.

Typical for Žižkov are the many small public squares distributed within the city structure. In the sense of the urban composition of a residential quarter of that time, the squares are designed without great representative ambitions. They should serve much more as a recreational space for inhabitants of that densely built-up city. Their small size makes them appear rather modest and intimate. They are located in such a way that they are easily accessible from everywhere and only a short walking distance away from each other [Sedlák Lukeš Cudlín Havlová 2008, 26-38] (Fig. 3).

An interesting feature of Žižkov is the colorful façade views, most of which have been maintained to this day. At that time, it was ordered that two adjacent parcels could neither be joined nor built on by the same builder. The intention was to avoid a schematic
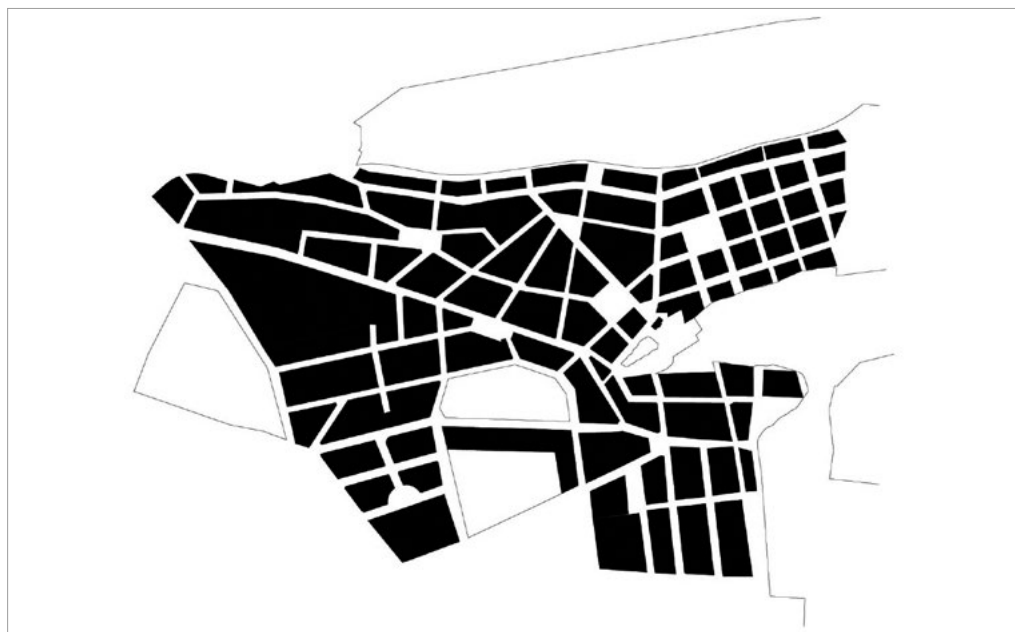
3: Urban structure of Žižkov [Elaboration of Kamila Drsata].

construction in order not to hem the streets with long, monotonous facades. The hilly terrain often causes cascading facades and a rugged roof landscape. [Bečková *et al.* 2015, 18f]
At the turn of the century, Žižkov was one of the most populous cities in the Czech Republic after Prague. Built to create living space for those who came to Prague to find work in one of the numerous industrial plants, the population consisted mainly of workers and small traders. Wealthy people hardly moved to Žižkov. With the enormous population growth, also numerous small trade businesses developed, mainly in connection with subjects of the daily need.
In the 1970s, this original part of Žižkov became the core of an urban redevelopment project and fell victim to new development. However, the characteristically hilly part of that quarter was preserved and is now in the urban protection zone. This applies also to other of Prague's *Gründerzeit*-quarters, that had a very different history of their formation and development, but still, show a very similar typology of architecture.

Conclusions

The fact that for a long-time Prague was rather an agglomeration consisting of several independent towns and villages adjacent to each other – some of which have developed a strong local patriotism – can still be felt today. The various quarters, which were once independent municipalities, are not only spatially separated from each other, given by the very hilly topography of Prague, but also often function to a certain extent independently of the rest of the city. In comparison to Vienna for example, the polycentric character is thus much stronger. The *Gründerzeit* architecture in Prague is limited to separate parts of the city and is thus much more connected with these various former suburbs of the city rather than with Prague as a whole.

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