From Cultural Regeneration to Discursive Governance: Constructing the Flagship of the ‘Museumsquartier Vienna’ as a Plural Symbol of Change

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Introduction

The urban globalization debate is now turning to the question of what to build and how — at the local level. Under the pressures of increased economic competitiveness, political decision-makers are looking to cultural flagship architecture to combine competing images of economic regeneration and socio-cultural cohesion within a shared urban symbol of civic pride. But the plural nature of culture not only promotes collective mobilization to overcome political-economic interest conflicts; its deep symbolic identifications can also enhance contestation and conflict. The political decision-making surrounding the Museumsquartier Wien (Vienna museums quarter), a museum flagship project in the historic centre of the European capital city Vienna, shows how symbolic conflicts over urban culture can turn urban regeneration into a dynamic and open-ended process of discursive self-transformation.

The recent importance of city marketing and symbolic regeneration strategies provides analytical insights into the cultural dynamics of urban politics beyond the analysis of political economic interests and structural functions (Le Galès, 1999). In many European cities cultural policies are guided by competing policy objectives, including older local and national traditions as well as the recent global marketing trend, into contextually different policy outcomes (Bianchini, 1993; Bloomfield, 1993; Gonzalez, 1993). Yet most studies of cultural regeneration analyse city marketing as a conscious and deliberate manipulation of culture, which — as Philo and Kearns (1993) put it — serves the legitimation of a political economic elite, excluding the ‘others’ from its ‘architecture of power’. Analysing the social effects of cultural policies in terms of winners and losers of local economic development is a valid and necessary research perspective (Keating, 1988; Whit and Lammers, 1991; Crilley, 1993; Zukin, 1995; Hubbard, 1996; Molotch, 1996; Miles, 1998; Newman and Smith, 2000; Aalst and Boogaarts, 2002). But the implicit antagonism of global versus local or growth versus anti-growth interests tends to overemphasize the external orientation towards growth competition at the input side of cultural policy decisions. Instead of a shared governing consensus, cultural policy-making
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draws on a specifically local heritage that is open to multiple and contextually contingent interpretations, referring to diverse meanings, identities, tastes, values, collective memories (Tunbridge and Ashworth, 1996; Graham, 2002; Keating and de Frantz, 2004).

In this plural urban context, one way to achieve collective political action and urban cohesion might be a more participative and procedural model of governance based on the discursive deliberation of social and cultural conflicts (Beauregard and Bounds, 2000; Brodie, 2000; Healey, 2002). However, some issues of urban politics — such as architecture — provoke controversy far beyond the local realm of the city, thus linking these localities to larger discourses on European identity and globalization (Delanty, 2000; Paasi, 2001; Delanty and Jones, 2002). This symbolic aspect of cultural flagship projects presents a particular challenge, as participation processes are as yet mostly limited to neighbourhood politics. However, the initiation of a self-reflective discourse on the transformation of urban culture in the context of European integration might offer an opportunity for the political integration of plural societies. Cultural flagships as the places of discursive struggles over the meanings of Europeanization or even globalization might contribute to strengthening the role of urban politics in these multi-level processes.

This article researches the construction of cultural flagship architecture as a symbolic initiation of political self-reflection that gives rise to discursive participation in urban governance (de Frantz, 2004a; 2004b). Looking at the input side of cultural policy decisions discloses the plural and dynamic character of the political struggles for establishing a shared vision among the many contested meanings of urban culture. Allowing for a dynamic, plural and open-ended conceptualization of governance, cultural regeneration is defined as a political process in which normative, aesthetic and emotional motivations are as important as rational interest politics (Goodwin and Painter, 1997). Collective political action can emerge from a complex process combining collective identities based on shared cultural values, tastes and emotions, as well as collective goods based on the rational negotiation of mutual interest. Public space represents a political realm where different identities meet and confront each other in symbolic contestation, thus creating an opportunity for the discursive negotiation of collective action (Eder, 2003). Contrary to the manipulation of culture by a dominant political economic power, the discursive governance of contemporary plural urban societies is an open-ended process shifting between conflict and compromise. One possible long-term result and politically desirable outcome of this process might be the emergence of an urban consensus as a basis for collective political action.

Vienna, due to its symbolic and political status as a capital city with an important cultural heritage (Dijkink, 2000; Van der Wusten, 2000; Wagenaar, 2000; Therborn, 2002), offers a catalyst environment to illustrate the political opportunities and difficulties inherent in cultural regeneration strategies. The political controversy surrounding the ‘Museumsquartier’ illustrates how the leaders of an old European capital city struggle to retain their long-established institutional consensus, while at the same time redefining their collective future vision in response to recent restructuring challenges in the Central Eastern European region. Following a short introduction to the cultural political context of Vienna and an overview of the political emergence of the cultural flagship ‘Museumsquartier’, the three main sections of this article will be dedicated to some of the most contested issues in the political debate about its architecture. First, the discussion about architectural construction as a symbol of change; second, the historic heritage symbolizing diverse collective memories; and third, the spatial framing, referring to complex intertwined multi-level processes, illustrating some of the multiple and changing urban meanings relevant to cultural regeneration. The cultural flagship ‘Museumsquartier’ is the constructed result of collective action emerging from a conflictive political process and negotiating these multiple meanings in the search for a shared political basis.
The context Vienna: cultural politics in an old European capital city striving for change

At first sight, Vienna seems to bear little testimony to those major cultural, economic and institutional shifts proposed by the urban globalization literature. As a regional economic centre and political capital, Vienna is much larger than the average European city and yet too small to qualify as a global city. With around 1.8 million inhabitants it is the oversized capital city of a small state, the Federal Republic of Austria, in which it has the status of an administrative region and an autonomous municipality. Vienna is governed by the Social Democratic party, highly institutionalized since the 1920s era of 'Red Vienna' and — with the sole interruption of the National Socialist regime — in power until present. With political competence for cultural policy divided among federal state and urban authorities, most big cultural institutions in the capital city are administered by the central state, leaving a broad variety of more innovative initiatives to the municipality. As typical of the Austrian consociational democracy, cultural policy is traditionally a matter of intergovernmental cooperation and agreement among party elites. A turn in federal politics from consociationalism to aggressive party competition, beginning with the rise of new parties in the early 1980s and in 2000 culminating in the replacement of the long-standing grand coalition by a right-wing government, affected the municipality with considerable delays. While the ensuing federal expenditure cuts for capital city culture did not affect the present case study, the power struggles beginning in the early 1990s illustrate a capital city culture loaded with deep social and political symbolism in a context striving for political and economic change.

Cultural policy becomes a highly contested issue, as social integration and political representation functions get increasingly entangled with economic development strategies. The city’s inhabitants and opinion leaders identify themselves strongly with their cultural heritage, including the highly conflictive social and political traditions of: Habsburg imperialism carried by aristocratic elitism and a neo-absolutist bureaucracy; a bourgeois retreat from political emancipation into nineteenth-century Biedermeier culture, culminating in Vienna’s turn-of-the-century excellence in arts and sciences; and a strong working-class tradition institutionalized throughout decades of Social Democratic cultural education policy. Today, with tourism constituting a major source of income, Vienna’s world-wide reputation is dominated by its Habsburg heritage, its image as a city of music and a place combining historic urbanity with quality of life. Although most inhabitants and opinion-makers take pride in this rather exclusive high-culture profile, it is at the same time challenged by those identifying with alternative cultural visions. Particularly in the context of a debate about Austria’s historic responsibility for National Socialist crimes, shaking the country’s post-war consensus since the late 1980s, the function of cultural policy for a positive national myth around simplified images of the Habsburgs, music, mountains and sports became contested. When Vienna’s historic city centre was acknowledged as a UNESCO world heritage site in 2003, this was accompanied by intense political controversy over whether the international image effects would actually offset the inherent political obligations. Historic conservation concerns have often inhibited innovative development, particularly where they combine with overly bureaucratic political institutions based on a class-conscious society with a strong belief in state authority dominating over commercial or civic traditions of individual entrepreneurship. This has become apparent in the field of architecture, where many of Vienna’s internationally reputed architects — from the Baroque masters Johann Lukas von Hildebrandt and Jakob Prandtauer, to the Secessionists Otto Wagner, Joseph Olbrich and Josef Hoffman, and the pioneer of functionalist architecture Adolf Loos, up to contemporary star architects such as Coop Himmelb(l)au and Ortner and Ortner — have received only reluctant acceptance by the rather conservative taste of their compatriots. The resulting ‘slow pace’ constitutes one of Vienna’s characteristic life qualities as well as posing problems for economic development, so that international trends have reached Vienna with considerable delay and moderation.
Nevertheless, Vienna’s cultural heritage as well as its geographic position in Central Europe ensures the city a specific role within the international urban hierarchy. Due to the historically close relationship with the former Habsburg provinces, later Communist states and now recent or would-be EU members, the city represents a regional centre far beyond the territorial borders of the Austrian state. Against the background of its otherwise problematic national history, Vienna’s Habsburg heritage has contributed a symbol of national pride in the construction of Austrian post-war identity. While cold-war diplomacy profited from Vienna’s geographic position as a political centre of intermediation between East and West, the city remained situated at the economic and geographic margins of the Western hemisphere. Only since the beginning of the 1990s have the political transformations in Central Eastern Europe brought Vienna back into the centre of the region — and with it Prague, Budapest, Bratislava, and other neighbouring towns as potential partners and competitors. Since Austria’s EU accession in 1995 and the preparations for EU enlargement in 2004, the city’s long-established and highly institutionalized Social Democratic government faces an increasingly competitive market environment. Confronted with larger European and global transformations, Vienna’s political leaders feel the need to redefine their city’s profile in order to contribute as a central player to these spatial restructuring processes. Since the early 1990s, growing debates on the city’s strategic visions and future objectives in the region have created an atmosphere of change. Yet political-economic transformations to the long-established Social Democratic regime are difficult to identify as a consequence of this more competitive environment (Novy et al., 2001). But an active political marketing strategy, which associates urban life quality and social cohesion with new images of private enterprise and innovation, has opened up Vienna’s institutional consensus to discursive challenges, reflecting an increasingly plural urban society.

The ‘Museumsquartier Wien’: political emergence of a cultural flagship project

The ‘Museumsquartier Wien’ represents Vienna’s most ambitious cultural flagship project realized in the last few decades. At the same time it has turned into the one cultural issue that has attracted most political contention within urban politics. Its inauguration in June 2001 was accompanied by a professional image campaign, embracing the internet, print media, urban events and political speeches. The following extract from the official webpage best represents the large variety of different symbolic ambitions attached to the project:

The Museumsquartier Wien is one of the ten largest cultural complexes in the world. But above all, it is a forward-looking, inner-city cultural district that will have an enormous impact on future trends. The Museumsquartier unites baroque buildings, new architecture, cultural institutions of all sizes, various disciplines of art, and recreational facilities in a single spectacular location (www.mqw.at, Jan 2002).

This ‘grandiloquent’ language gives an example of the marketing effort that accompanied the construction and inauguration of the ‘Museumsquartier’. The complex combines a broad variety of cultural offerings, including a museum for Austrian contemporary arts, a collection of Austrian modernism, an exhibition hall, a contemporary dance centre, an experimental space for children, two event halls, a theatre museum, several offices and workspaces for international artists and local initiatives, as well as cafes, restaurants and shops. Within Vienna’s larger tourism marketing strategy the aim was to attract new, younger, more diverse audiences to the location otherwise known internationally as the city of Habsburg and music. It aimed at establishing a cultural flagship such as defined by Frey (2000) as characterized by great prominence among tourists and world fame among the general population; a large number of visitors;
a collection of generally known painters and individual paintings; an exceptional architecture; and a large role for commercialization, including a substantial impact on the local economy. The marketing campaign had the side effect of distracting public attention from the overly long and difficult political emergence of the project affected by conflicts over the actual meanings of realizing such a global cultural symbol in the specific local context of Vienna.

The ‘Museumsquartier’ goes back to an initiative by the Austrian federal government for the cultural regeneration of a prominent location in the centre of the national capital. The idea of turning the run-down former imperial baroque stables, which had been used since the 1920s as a fairground, into a museum complex stems from a national parliamentary debate in 1977. In 1980, the project development agency (Messepalast Verwertungsgesellschaft; from 1990 Messepalast Errichtungsgesellschaft) was established as a purely public partnership of the federal state (75%) and the city of Vienna (25%). The following years marked a discussion on different use possibilities — from shopping mall, to hotel, and back to varying museum conceptions. In 1986, when the project was verging on obliteration in political competence struggles, the responsible federal minister initiated an architectural competition. The political discussion could thus be redirected from the conflictive use problem towards the apparently neutral issue of urban design. This implied that initial substantive decisions on the cultural concept could be transferred from the political realm to the expertise of architects. In 1989, the federal minister of science and education, Erhard Busek (conservative Austrian Peoples Party, ÖVP) took up the plans of his Social Democratic (SPÖ) predecessors, and initiated a second competitive round. The award went to the young Austrian architects Ortner and Ortner, and in 1990 the federal parliament approved the project called ‘Museumsquartier’. Pending the municipal decision on the zoning legislation and the construction permit everything was then prepared for the construction to be realized.

But what would normally have been a routine procedure was met by a wave of protests led by several prominent arts historians and ecologist experts who formed a citizen initiative defending the historic city centre against the construction of new architecture. Supported by international representatives from UNESCO, the local right-wing opposition party (Freedom Party, FP) and, between 1992 and 1994, an aggressive media campaign carried by the Kronenzeitung, a tabloid newspaper with about 43% national coverage, the protesters achieved major political leverage. Defied by similarly emotionalized defenders of the project from among parts of the local Greens and the Social Democrats, artists, architects and liberal media such as the newspaper Der Standard, the evolving 7-year-long political controversy about architectural design inhibited the pending decisions on urban zoning and historic heritage protection. Changing political issues and cultural cleavages politicized the urban elites, cut across the traditional political camps of left and right, and left divides within the party leadership of the governing Vienna Social Democrats, the Austrian People’s Party, as well as the Viennese Greens. Confronted with an increasingly unstable spectrum of varying coalitions among experts, politicians and potential private contractors, Vienna’s long-standing Social Democratic leaders reacted indecisively to the diverse political pressures. The political turn towards a moderation of the ambitious cultural undertaking was facilitated ultimately by a personnel change in the respective federal ministry, enabling the governmental patrons to jointly mandate a series of modifications and architectural reductions to the initial model. In 1996, the urban parliament found a way to transfer its political responsibility back to the federal bureaucracy, who chose an expert commission to take the final decision outside the politically emotionalized public realm. While the political debate had failed to deliver a generally accepted basis for collective cultural consensus, what was finally constructed reflected a political compromise that attempted to symbolically combine the several competing urban conceptions. When the new cultural district was inaugurated in June 2001, the
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spectacular staging of the event hardly managed to cover the critical comments from all sides.

The preparation phase of more than 25 years, from the end of the 1970s until 2001, had been extremely long even for — by international comparison rather slow — Austrian standards. From the almost endless variety of topics discussed in the course of these political negotiations, the following account focuses on the most conflictive public controversy regarding the architecture model. In the phase between 1990 and 1996 some of the most controversial issues related to political redefinition through architectural intervention, the contemporary and historic symbolisms associated with collective memories, and the diverse spatial transformations affecting the national capital city. In combination these issues clearly illustrate some of the cultural motivations often underestimated in urban political economy research. The following account redraws the process of political decision-making with reference to the most commonly employed arguments for and against the construction of the flagship project. Within the limited space of this article, no conclusions about the respective political interest groups and their underlying power constellations can be drawn. Diverse statements expressed repeatedly by different participants in the debate serve merely as evidence of some of the normative issues at stake in the process of cultural regeneration (see Appendix for a list of the case study resources used in this article).

Contested intervention: redefining the city through flagship architecture

‘Europe’s largest cultural construction zone’, ‘one of the ten biggest cultural complexes in the world’ having ‘an enormous impact on future trends’ with its ‘large art museums’, and ‘the giant interior courtyard’ becoming ‘the city’s largest open-air “festival hall” ’ (www.mqw.at, January 2002) — were the kind of descriptions employed by the project management. The size of the construction project served as an indicator of the ambition to position the cultural flagship, and thus the city, within the global urban network. In the ensuing political debate, references to big or small, high or low architecture were employed to express competing ambitions to either change or conserve the urban status quo. The main issue of contention was whether Vienna’s international image should be recreated to pursue active growth strategies or whether the quality of life associated with a more low-key profile should be maintained.

In the early 1990s, soon after top officials from the urban and central state government had jointly presented the project ‘Museumsquartier’¹, it was mainly the size of the project that provoked protests among the political opposition and civil society. The comments in the newspaper Kronenzeitung were full of metaphors associating the architecture with a ‘gigantomaniac monster’, a ‘tumor’, a ‘cancerous implant’, or a ‘huge energy draining machine’.² Such negative images presented the planned museum quarter as a disproportionate piece of architecture that would destroy the surrounding urban landscape with its large and potentially growing size. Particularly threatening

aesthetic forms were embodied in images of the ‘skyscraper’ and the ‘concrete block’, referring to the height and the massive bulk of the planned constructions.

 Locating such buildings in the city centre was attacked as a destruction of the ‘historically grown ensemble’, for the construction of a ‘tower twice as high as the urban cathedral’ would mean that the ‘fight for Vienna was lost’. This threatening scenario contrasted with the idealized status quo of a ‘picture of the beautiful city’ that conveys an impression of ‘moderate harmony’ and ‘humaneness’. To avoid threats to the feelings of human belonging identified with the city centre, big architecture should be banished to the urban periphery where it would merely ‘add’ to the existing ‘architectural and social heap of rubble’. Some critics also saw the conditions for cultural creativity threatened by a political ‘prestige’ project, initiated by destructive top-down forces aiming at ‘political centralization’ and ‘cultural homogenization’. Against these oppressive associations with massive construction complexes, ‘modern architecture with a human face’ was envisaged as ‘measurable’ and ‘slim’. Thus, the city centre represented a strategic place of ‘cultural struggle’ over the power to define the dominant cultural vision of Vienna. The struggles over size, as represented either by the church or by a new architectural flagship, stood for the conflict between civil society’s cultural self-recreation opposed to the potential power abuse represented by politicians’ top-down intervention. So the mayor agreed with the protesters campaign in the Kronenzeitung that the church tower should unite both height and centrality in one place and not be overshadowed by any ‘megalomaniac skyscraper’.

 In principle, many defenders of the architecture model concurred with the view that the urban surroundings should be taken account of in the new architecture design. ‘We do not build a skyscraper, the tower is the identity’, were the project management’s attempts to downplay the architectural interventions. In response to the expressed identification desires the planned skyscraper was called a ‘tower’ and thus turned into an urban symbol giving ‘signal effects’ that would combine ‘all the varied cultural contents of the whole cultural complex in concentrated form’. Yet, for the sake of the larger project realization, the ‘tower’ had to be ‘sacrificed’, in what was interpreted as a lack of political leadership and courage to initiate necessary social and cultural change. Size thus functioned as a symbol to increase the economic attractiveness of Vienna’s metropolitan image.

 Under the pressure of almost daily news headlines, the responsible politicians started to discuss alternative, smaller solutions. After several redrafts the final layout in 1996 excluded the ‘tower’ and reduced the heights of the ‘concrete blocks’ so that they fitted
with the historic cityscape. In the place provided for the tower two laser rays were installed, shining high up into the Viennese sky. Until they were removed rather hurriedly, these virtual light towers remained the only externally visible remnants of the extensive interventions intended originally by the spatial dimensions of the architectural model. Reduced to transparent and easily removable signals they were sent from a huge new architectural complex hidden behind the long horizontal façade of a baroque building. The conflict over architectural size reflecting different expectations about the city’s future ambitions was decided in favour of a horizontal cityscape as defining the quality of a European city. The question of whether the centrality of the church tower should be complemented by other sizable landmarks resulted in the exclusion of skyscrapers and big contemporary architecture from the city centre. Yet, size — particularly height — remained the dividing issue, meaning on one side the destruction of diversity by the centralizing state and the homogenizing forces of capitalism. On the other side, skyscrapers stood for the political courage and economic ambition to self-determinately recreate the city as a self-confident European player.

Contested heritage: constructing the future around the memories of the past

Like many European cities, Vienna’s urban centre is loaded with protected historic monuments, leaving little space for contemporary construction. The problem becomes particularly urgent as few of the old buildings offer suitable standards for international real estate investment. Confronted with the complex problem of heritage protection, urban developers face sparse choices: conservation as a museum, with the likelihood of losing the contemporary economic and social functionality of a place; revitalization and soft adaptation for contemporary purposes, an often expensive and minimally functional compromise; or the construction of new buildings in place of the old ones, an aesthetically problematic solution. In addition to technical, economic and aesthetic considerations, heritage protection becomes particularly problematic due to the complex political symbolism and collective memories associated with different monuments and styles.

In the case of the ‘Museumsquartier’, the citizen initiative and its political speakers prioritized the protection of the ‘baroque treasures’ against new architecture. Some extreme voices even argued for an authentic reconstruction of the original baroque plans that had never actually been realized. Yet the general demands for historic protection predominantly concerned preservation, including moderate reconstructions of the existing historic parts. In response, the historic protection zone was stretched out beyond the baroque buildings to include also the late nineteenth-century parts of the complex as a consistent ‘historically grown ensemble’. As the concept of cultural heritage protection thus changed from a historic to an aesthetic base, contemporary adaptations were accepted only where there was no threat to the ‘historical picture of the city’.

The repeated use of words such as ‘respect’, ‘responsibility’ and ‘duty of the citizen’ in this context seemed to imply a moral obligation identifying ‘responsibility for the historic cityscape’ with politically paradigmatic values such as ‘ecology’ and ‘democracy’. Demands for a ‘future-oriented city design’ with ‘flexible, changeable materials’ merged references to historic heritage protection with themes familiar to the

urban sustainability discourse. Protesting against the ‘aggression’, ‘provocation’ and ‘threat’ of ‘ostentatious new architecture’ was designated ‘the task of every educated citizen’. While accepting the freedom of artistic expression in principle, the only alternative was to build ‘a resolutely modern “Museumsquartier” without historic corsets’. But the assertion that ‘old and new would declassify each other’ intended to banish contemporary artistic expressions to the urban outskirts and thus to exclude them from more prominent representations challenging the aesthetics of the city centre.

‘Rediscovering the unique beauty of historicism for Vienna’s urban history’ addressed a highly symbolic dimension of collective memory. Celebrating the insight into the destructive brutality of modernity as progressive, the ‘beauty of the cityscape’ should be protected regardless of the differing historic periods and styles. Comparisons of the planned modern architecture with a nearby bunker tower left over from the National Socialist regime introduced a historic dimension of high political sensitivity. A range of references to totalitarian architecture underlined the aesthetic atrocity of the envisaged model in opposition to the beauty of the valuable historic buildings threatened by it. Argumentation lines proposing a sceptical attitude towards modernity appeared also in its characterization as ‘pseudo-modernism’ and an ‘overreaction to the post-war situation characterized by a hostile attitude towards modern architecture’. Although the contribution of modern design was apparently valued in principle, its specific application in the context of Austrian post-war society was rejected as exaggerated modernity. Against the backdrop of post-fascist history, modern architecture — meaning all contemporary styles with no differentiation of postmodern design — was thought to lack ‘normality’. Therefore the model presented by the architects as contemporary and innovative was criticized for its disregard of the latest international trends toward ‘soft adaptations of historic buildings’. The argument was thus inverted; conservation of historical identity turned into a critique of progressive modernity. The negative historic allusions made it possible to overcome the specific memories associated with the Viennese relics of fascist modernism through the appreciation of a historic period preceding modernity, which was thus devalued.

In accordance with the general consensus, the references to National Socialism were always used as negative contrasts; yet the mere use of such historic references was provocation enough to polarize political emotions. In response, the defenders of more liberal historic protection rules suspected the re-emergence of the ‘eternal old guard’,
characterized as ‘backward’, ‘mentally inert’, ‘quarrelling’, ‘snobbish’ and ‘suburban’.24
By ‘playing off tradition against modernity’, urban identity was seen as loaded with a political ideology that ‘protected’ certain anachronistic values ‘like a home’.25 The post-war reconstruction of the Austrian nation, rooted in the Habsburg heritage as ‘nostalgia for a glorious past’, served to deflect public attention from the issue of responsibility for war and Nazi crimes. The Austrian ‘modernization trauma of the 1950s and 1960s’ had resulted in a ‘refusal to consciously experience the crises of the present time’. This ‘fear of unpopular modernism’ needed to be counteracted by constructing the new museum architecture as a ‘self-representation of the republic’ and ‘built symbol of democracy’.26

Putting the whole inner city under a ‘protection screen’ would inhibit creativity and ‘suppress any originality’ in the typical ‘mediocrity’ of Austria’s contemporary culture buildings.27 Creative innovation could come about only where new ideas were allocated central places in urban design: the highly praised beauty of Vienna’s historic centre, for example, had evolved through past cycles of innovation and destruction. Compared to this creative continuity of the past, heritage protection represented a very recent value of the present epoch and was therefore subordinated to the ‘right of our generation to express our time’. The architectural model had been chosen in particular because of its ‘equal’ mix of old and new, creating a confrontation of styles and consequently a vivid, symbiotic tension, a ‘visualization of the city’s history and its urban development’.28

In sum, the need to adapt a run-down complex with partly historically protected buildings for contemporary use culminated in a political controversy over the collective memories associated with cultural heritage. Historic protection was associated on one side with a new trend towards sustainable ‘human’ development, on the other side it was interpreted as a sentimental longing for the illusion of a harmonious past. Ultimately, the legal obligation for historic protection was defined in an extensive way, covering not only a few separate Baroque monuments, but also the general ‘beauty’ of the mostly nineteenth-century cityscape and permitting only ‘soft adaptations’ of its built substance.29 The new contemporary architecture was redesigned so that it virtually filled the space left by the old one. Only marginally touching the preserved monuments, new buildings now standing next to older ones, the realm transformed innovatively without affecting the visual effects of Vienna’s historic cityscape, which thus qualified as UNESCO world heritage.

27 ‘Ich hielte es für falsch, über die ganze Innenstadt eine Käseglocke zu stülpen’, Christoph Chorherr, Green party leader (Die Presse, 8 September 1992); ‘Österreich wird beherrscht vom Immunsystem der Mittelmäßigkeit, das jede Eigenwilligkeit erstickt’, Wolf Prix, architect ‘Coop Himmelblau’ (Der Standard, 31 October 1997).
29 ‘Sanfte Zubauten’, Helmut Zilk (Kronenzeitung, 12 October 1994).
Contested multi-level space: capital city culture in an emerging local-global cleavage

Going back to an initiative by the federal government, the project development of the ‘Museumsquartier’ was based financially on a central-local state partnership and legally on a division among urban zoning and national heritage competences. Located in the centre of a national capital with aspirations for a larger Central European role, the cultural flagship was associated with a much broader spectrum of spatial frames. These sometimes contradictory symbolic meanings were part of a political controversy that was fought out primarily within a local arena.

‘Europe’s biggest cultural construction zone’, ‘one of the world’s biggest cultural complexes’, ‘a world museum of the twenty-first century’ were marketing labels reaching far beyond what was initially presented as the ‘cultural manifestation of the second republic’. In order to represent Austria’s self-confident attitude as a modern republican state in the middle of a newly emerging Central European region, the focus was on Austrian contemporary arts with an international orientation. Under pressure from increased competition with neighbouring cities such as Prague and Budapest, the need for ‘self-representation’ as a ‘European metropolis’ turned cultural investment into an ‘interest of the republic’. To make ‘Austria aware’ that losing the competition for investments meant losing innovation and falling into ‘anti-progressive passivity’, the flagship project would add the touch of a ‘contemporary metropolis’ to Vienna’s image of a ‘capital city and imperial residence of the past’.

More or less adequate comparisons with recent global media events such as the Potzdamerplatz in Berlin or the Guggenheim museum in Bilbao illustrated the growing importance attributed internationally to cultural city marketing despite the differences between these locations. In contrast to the second-tier city Bilbao and the new capital Berlin, which both used culture for regenerating their otherwise negative images of either deindustrialization or former partition, Vienna could rely on a well-established worldwide reputation as an old European capital full of valuable historic heritage and high culture. Yet the media spectacles initiated recently in those cities were interpreted in Vienna as pressures to join the competitive ‘search for an urgently needed new identity at the dawn of the new millennium’. In these times of globalization, spectacular flagship architecture stood for a ‘new vision of development’, positioning the city ‘at the node of international brain and transport flows instead of at the margins’ just as the ‘crown’ had represented the medieval symbol of urban autonomy. Within Vienna’s city marketing the ‘Museumsquartier’ was envisaged as a necessary...


32 Andreas Lehne, arts historian (Der Standard, 26 March 1994).

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complement to ‘imperial Vienna’ that would diversify its tourist attractiveness also to younger market segments. While the internationally predominant reputation of the ‘city of music’ did not appear prominently in the debate, the flagship was associated rather with transformative ambitions that aimed to mobilize a climate of creative innovation internally and diversify its tourism attractiveness externally. The uniqueness of the Viennese location was seen precisely in the contrast between the new architecture representing a ‘modern city’ and the established ‘good image as a beautiful old city’. Although by itself comparable to any other flagship museum, the apparently ‘global’ character of the architecture drew attention to its specific local context, the challenges and opportunities of globalization for an old European capital city full of cultural heritage with deep symbolism. Thus, it was less the project itself, but rather its creative setting within the urban context that provoked political reflection about the spatial framing and thus added another element of local cultural specificity.

Global-scale arguments also served the opponents, who, rather ambiguously, found support from international experts and UNESCO lobbyists, while at the same time criticizing the global orientation of the project. Global competitiveness was reinterpreted with reference to Vienna’s unique local heritage, which would be destroyed by the homogenizing plans of global investors and architects. Local interests in the social provision of urban housing were turned against the central state’s use of public budgets for an apparently ‘aesthetically destructive’ project. The project was rejected as ‘non-Austrian’, ‘sulky’ and ‘stubborn’ in its destructive persistence in pseudo-modernism. Against these ‘foreign elements’, the ‘protest of the Viennese population’ was stylized as a ‘courageous battle’ fought ‘for all of Austria’ in defence of a ‘love for the horizontal and simple’ symbolized by the ‘comfortable coffeehouse’.

In addition to the different local and national identifications with the capital city, a new local-global cleavage emerged around the national heritage of the capital city. The ‘Museumsquartier’ debate was described as a ‘turning-point’ in Austria’s political culture where the old ideological struggle ‘between left and right’ was replaced by a new opposition ‘between small and large’ associated with the question of whether ‘globalization and capitalism bring homogeneity, uniformity and alienation’. In the context of the transformations in the larger Central European region, Vienna’s Habsburg heritage combined national symbolisms of the capital city and emerging local European ambitions within a complex spectrum of spatial and political frames. While city marketing strategies capitalized on this cultural reputation as a beautiful old city, this initiated a controversy about the meanings of globalization for local identity, which came to address a deeper conflict over the nation’s heritage. On one side, the more liberal-oriented supporters of an open discussion about history and national identity welcomed external influences such as globalization and European integration as new challenges to the local and national status quo. On the other side, a right-conservative, anti-liberal, and also social-sustainability-oriented local protectionism searched for international coalitions against what was perceived as the homogenizing impact of globalization. Cutting across the conventional political party spectrum, this ‘national culture battle’

34 ‘Wir haben ein gutes Image als schöne alte Stadt . . . aber wir müssen verstärkt auf Junge zugehen’, Karl Seitlinger, Director Vienna Tourism Association (Der Standard, 19 July 1997).
35 Peter Pilz, politician Green Party (Der Standard, 8 September 1992).
between challengers and preservers of the national post-war consensus polarized the urban political arena of the capital city according to a new global-local cleavage.

Due to the complex spatial symbolisms of capital city culture, Vienna’s entrepreneurial ambitions as a local centre in Central Europe initiated a public discussion about different future perspectives for the city that fuelled a controversy about national identity. The dominant impression was that globalization was a force outside local political control, but opinions differed about its impacts on local society and appropriate political responses. The new global-local cleavage varied among differing definitions of the capital city, implying both local and national meanings, challenged by global transformations in Europe, the Central European region, and the world. While local issues associated with traditional urban planning measures could be solved more easily, the remaining conflicts concerned mostly national identity transferred to and renegotiated around capital city culture. As the national post-war consensus was generally negatively perceived, the urban ambitions for a more independent status of the city shifted to a conflict over different national interpretations of the globalization challenge.

Conclusion: cultural flagship as political stimulus for self-reflective urban regeneration

At first sight, the ‘Museumsquartier Wien’ represents just another case of a cultural flagship project built to promote urban regeneration in a run-down area close to the city centre. The various new cultural attractions offer an additional input to Vienna’s tourism marketing and thus help to enhance the competitiveness of one of the city’s major economic sectors. Yet this selective account of some of the normative arguments influencing the political decision process has shown that there are more contextually specific aspects to this publicly induced flagship project than just opposing political economic interests in cultural regeneration. Thus, Frey’s (2000) cultural flagship concept takes on very diverse meanings when transferred from the general perspective of the global political economy to the specific perspective of local cultural politics. The broad spectrum of values, attitudes and tastes associated with the capital city Vienna goes far beyond the static antagonism between entrepreneurial and anti-growth objectives or global and local positions on cultural regeneration. In order to show how the cultural legitimacy base transformed dynamically in the course of a complex political discussion process, this article has mentioned only a few of the many contested issues in the construction of Vienna’s new museums’ district.

Initiated by the need to renovate some run-down historic buildings, the ‘Museumsquartier’ started as an urban regeneration project concerning merely the respective monumental protection zone. But under the perception of increased competitive challenges from European integration and globalization, the decision-makers turned to a more ambitious cultural flagship strategy and thus to the question of how to integrate the project into a more comprehensive urban development vision. The planned entrepreneurial repositioning of the capital city was facilitated by a public finance plan and a long institutionalized central-local government cooperation concerning capital city culture. But starting with a political campaign for historic preservation led by some prominent experts, the cultural flagship strategy soon resulted in a political struggle that broke the institutional consensus. In the evolving political debates so far, mere technocratic planning issues became highly politicized, as the flagship project was discussed with regard to its diverse symbolic meanings in the context of Viennese cultural politics. Differing interpretations of Europeanization and

globalization gave rise to new cleavages of local versus global orientations and heritage protection versus radical innovation that got entangled with conflicts over national identities and collective memories symbolized by the capital city. As a result of the emerging plural pressures, political decisions were postponed until the architectural model was redrafted in a way that attempted a compromise among the diverse cultural concerns.

This case study supported the claim that cultural heritage is a plural and contested field of political struggles (Tunbridge and Ashworth, 1996; Graham, 2002; Keating and de Frantz, 2004). Despite — or rather due to — the importance of culture for urban regeneration processes, economic competition posed complex challenges to a city as rich in historic heritage as Vienna. Although the cultural heritage of this old European capital city represented a major issue of civic pride and global reputation, it was particularly this symbolic character that caused political contestation in times of transition. Vienna’s political leaders wanted to make use of urban culture as a location advantage in the competitive race for tourism and investments. But the contradictory character of culture confronted decision-makers with a strategic dilemma, which could not be reduced to a mere question of public choice. On one side, historic heritage presented a cultural and aesthetic value to be protected as a soft economic factor important for the life quality of Vienna’s location. On the other side, the spectacular ambitions of ‘cultural newcomers’ such as Bilbao and Berlin made tourism managers feel that the mere existence of historic monuments was not enough to keep up with global competition. Instead, it was the entrepreneurial profile of culture, its symbolic associations with innovation and creativity that were considered decisive for the image of urban competitiveness. Compared to the media events around such new cultural locations that could be created often independently of their urban contexts, Vienna’s politicians considered historic heritage almost as a political burden for the mobilization of a consistent entrepreneurial vision. In the case of Vienna, political conflicts stemmed not only from local cultural resistance against capitalist globalization, but contextually different interpretations of the economic growth objective led to competing cultural policy objectives (Bianchini, 1993). Even a clearly defined economic development consensus, when transferred to the specific local context, turned ambiguous, thus confronting the political decision-makers with conflicts over different growth paths.

The economic growth consensus itself was challenged also by a variety of intertwined cultural and political motivations. The original plans for the ‘Museumsquartier’ combined external economic objectives with internal mobilization of collective feelings in view of a more entrepreneurial as well as cohesive future vision of the capital city. These internal mobilization plans followed an ambiguous strategy by mobilizing sentimental longings for a glorious and harmonious past represented by the Habsburg heritage and its associated Middle European frames, as well as transforming inherent anti-innovative tendencies into more entrepreneurial and future-oriented sentiments. In the context of Austria’s political culture, where the historic responsibility for National Socialism has been a very recent issue of public debate, this mobilization of collective memories touched upon a highly emotionalized complex of modernization fears and national pride that combined in an uneasy alliance with anti-globalization and sustainability themes. For the media, the references to the National Socialist heritage fulfilled the economic function of keeping the newspaper copies selling by polarizing the debate. For the different experts and opinion representatives, this polarization served to sharpen their public profile and thus increase their political and professional influence. However, the fact that the urban flagship became part of a more general political controversy about Austria’s national identity meant for the political initiators that their initial intentions of a controlled urban regeneration strategy had slid out of their hands. In the capital city Vienna the symbolically loaded, multiple and contested nature of urban culture rendered its manipulation (Philo and Kearns, 1993) a difficult strategy.
The final construction of the ‘Museumsquartier’ thus represented the result not of a planned political strategy reflecting a dominant governing consensus or even a collective urban vision, but rather the product of a plural, conflictive process of political self-reflection, as conceptualized basically by Goodwin and Painter (1997). The flagship project’s combined old and new architecture now symbolizes not, as Philo and Kearns (1993) propose, one consistent urban vision but it incorporates a broad diversity of urban perspectives in a way that seems to lean towards Healey’s (2002) model of discursive deliberation. In the context of beginning transformations of Austria’s consociational institutions, governmental power was challenged by the politicization of social, cultural and economic elites. The discursive pressures reflected a transition tendency from government to governance in the sense of increased informal political participation claims of diverse private interests with plural political affiliations. However, the spatial scope and symbolic nature of capital city culture rendered a governance approach based on equal participation in political discourse difficult. Ultimately, the flagship was realized in the old Austrian consociational way by a powerful institutional intervention of pragmatic political interests that ended the process of discursive deliberation. But the imposition of this barely transparent compromise failed to provide a generally accepted solution so that the cultural conflict remained a challenge toward institutional transition — as Eder (2003) proposed — with an open-ended outcome.39

Among the many tastes and attitudes characterizing the urban realm, the choice of one aesthetic style that would adequately represent the pluralist vision associated with a ‘democratic manifestation of the republic’ has proved impossible. The mere attempt to cast one fixed urban representation permanently in stone contradicts the diversity of reflectively changing expectations necessitating a flexible response to globalization. However, the ‘Museumsquartier’ has shown that the process of discourse initiated by a symbolic flagship project might be as politically relevant as the actual outcome of the museum architecture. Not only has the course of the debate transformed decisive aspects of the project realization. By opening urban design decisions to political controversy, capital city culture became a primary political concern inviting discussion about the role of the city, its history and spatial context. While this might be due to the specific political and symbolic situation of the capital city Vienna, it supports the hypothesis about urban public space, particularly architectural flagships as symbolic sites reflecting plural and multi-level identities (Delanty, 2000; Paasi, 2001; Delanty and Jones, 2002). Instead of regarding political conflicts as unwanted and accidental by-products of cultural regeneration policies, the contested nature of flagship projects could be used as a purposeful political strategy to initiate discursive governance processes. In the case of the ‘Museumsquartier Wien’, the political leaders misused the collective potential inherent in symbolic contestation and instead enhanced the identity conflicts by imposing their government strategies against the emerging political expressions of a plural urban culture. Alternatively, a more partnership-oriented understanding of political leadership might have engaged in active discursive mediation to coordinate rational and identificational moments (Eder, 2003) in ‘creating the city as a collective resource’ (Healey, 2002).

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39 In 2003, the skyscraper project in Landstraßle, neighbouring the historic centre, though initiated by the urban government, had to be halted and redrafted in response to similar cultural political constellations as described here with regard to the ‘Museumsquartier’.
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References


governance. European Urban and Regional Studies 8.2, 131–44.


Appendix — Case study resources
   Der Standard, daily newspaper, Austrian coverage, liberal-educated urban audience
   Die Presse, daily newspaper, Austrian coverage, Christian-conservative elite audience
   Kronenzeitung, daily tabloid, almost monopolistic Austrian coverage, right-populist tendencies
   Kurier, daily newspaper, Austrian coverage, centre-conservative middle-class audience
Museumsquartier Wien. Architektur Aktuell, June 2001
Webpage of Architekturzentrum Wien (cultural institution established in ‘Museumsquartier’ and dedicated to contemporary Austrian architecture): www.azw.at
Webpage of Museumsquartier Wien: www.mqw.at