

The fifteen years of Red Vienna, by Eve Brau

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In 1932, twelve years after the beginning of the public housing projects, known as Red Vienna, an architecture exhibition marks the end of an era. Commissioned by architect Josef Frank (1885-1967) the exhibition “Werkbund Siedlung” showed domestic architecture by architects who were ideologically committed to the housing issue in post-industrial cities in Austria. But what had marked Red Vienna, in what concerns building a city, now gave way to an exhibition about the architecture of buildings. Red Vienna did not consist of a unit but as a whole. The book by Eve Blau “The Architecture of Red Vienna 1919-1934”, published by MIT in 1999, describes the detailed analysis of this unique moment of union between politics and architecture.

In 1919, one year after the end of World War I, Austria was going through a turbulent moment in defining itself as a country - a country that was going through a rapid transition from a rural culture, marked by regional divisions to one marked by urban proletariat concentrated in Vienna. With the rise of the Social Democrats into local power in Vienna, and in conflict with a more conservative central power, it was possible to use the capital to put into practice the urban policies required to establish this new proletariat. It is the social movement that the author, Eve Blau, calls the transition of the *Volkskultur* to *Arbeiterkultur*, which means, the transition of a traditional culture based on a rural past to an urban one, emblematic of the twentieth century - the worker.

To understand the impact of this policy which involved architecture we have to resort to numbers. Red Vienna relocated one tenth of its city population. Four hundred public housings were built which partially held kindergartens, libraries, clinics, laundries, theatres, stores, sports facilities and public gardens. What was asked to the architects was to build a proletarian urban society able to see its own culture through architecture. The architects' work- about two hundred of them were invited to be involved in the project- generally consisted in medium-sized housing blocks, incorporated into blocks

in the city or areas in expansion, but without any disruption to the environment or pre-existing urban morphology. The urban revolution of Red Vienna was a peaceful one. Austro-Marxists called it the “Revolution of Renovation”.

Some of the architects involved in the program belonged to the so-called avant-garde radicals, and even though they were critical to the type of architecture of Red Vienna, they eventually participated. The architects of avant-garde criticized, according to Eve Blau, mainly the origin of the adopted architecture. That is, they defended a more experimental urban approach and a possible breach with the historical city.

The German avant-garde, that exerted extreme influence over Central Europe, had developed a concept of worker’s housing, called *siedlung*, a successor of the English green-courts at the end of the eighteen hundreds, which joined the prefabrication and artistic expression of flat roof structures and clean lines. The *siedlungen* had also another ambition which was the social and morphological autonomy from the metropolis, i.e., a possible connection to an industrial or rural system. That was exactly what the architect Walter Gropius (1883-1969) tried to put in place near Bauhaus de Dessau, the school in which he was the first director. It was a housing project called Törten, for farmers where the only buildings were the cooperative and the civic centre.

But Red Vienna did not match with this pure model of avant-garde; it was a series of hybrid situations. And here lays its specificity regarding the Modern Movement architecture. The tenement blocks were the model widely used in favour of peripheral suburbs based on modern *siedlungen*. And the refusal of prefabrication was an attempt to reduce levels of unemployment. With the use of traditional building techniques and only standardized doors, windows and a few finishing was it possible to generate employment in building and also tenants who were able to pay rent. Thus, Red Vienna did not produce two buildings alike.

The most emblematic housing project of Red Vienna is Karl Marx Hof, also called Karl Marx Court. Designed by the architect Karl Ehn (1886-1959), a pupil of Otto Wagner (1841-1918), a renowned Viennese architect and city planner, the project was built between 1926 and 1933 and it stands out as a statement of the proletarian culture with over one kilometre long. The entrances, which invite the city to follow, resemble large-span arches that show a wide-open courtyard. Inside are the pavilions to storage the equipment. At the top are defensive towers that give a symbolic meaning to the structure. From its urban ambitions, with one thousand and three hundred apartments with minimum housing units (with areas of forty square meters, on average), emphasizes the public area with big gardens, and supported by a library, theatre, kindergartens and laundries. It was not a coincidence that its inhabitants were the pro-Nazi symbol for the ideological turning point in Vienna. In 1934, Red Vienna barricaded in the building for fifteen days, while the firing of cannons tried to overthrow the collectivist spirit of Karl Marx Hof.