

The Aspern Waltz

A Bigger Ballroom

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Place ballet

Jane Jacobs identified the “...movement and change...it is life” of the sidewalk as an “intricate ballet”.¹ She was referring to various groups of people competing, cooperating and creating life in the most abundant of public spaces in the cityscape. Our own investigation of Vienna developed our awareness of the diversity of public spaces available to the local population. From these observations of urban life we have developed ‘the Aspern Waltz: a Bigger Ballroom’.

Freedom from types

If an urban development is intended to be inclusive of different types of people then it is reasonable to suggest different types of spaces will also be necessary to achieve the desired inclusivity. Defining the “types” is not so difficult when discussing the constructed and enclosed spaces that exist within buildings. A student attends a school, a consumer visits a shop and a city clerk works at city hall. But who are we when we inhabit public space, the space between buildings, a plaza or a park? Beyond the adjectives of stationary, pedestrian, cyclist or motorist it is often difficult to assign a societal function to the everyday people we observe in public space. Here, it seems we have found a space for freedom from our normative roles in society. However, public space is not without some restriction. Other than physical controls “...an individual’s behavior is also constrained by what they think is appropriate, admissible or possible.”²

Encounter (& Solitude)

Other than transit, public space is also utilized for encounter and solitude providing therapeutic effect for the individual and establishing a foothold for community cohesion. Often the users of public space will later describe the space in terms of their interaction or non-interaction with other people rather than simply describing the space. However, encounter in public space does not always equate to positive and meaningful contact. Sometimes, space is contested among social groups differing in social status, ethnicity, age, gender, etc. At other times, differing groups maintain parallel lives in close proximity and even observing the other but without more than incidental contact.³ In any case, encounter can “never take place in a space free from history, material conditions, and power.”⁴ Where one group may feel at ease, another group may feel anxiety about what is ‘appropriate, admissible or possible’ and intentionally avoid the space.

1. Jacobs, J., *The death and Life of Great American Cities*, New York 2011., p. 65

2. Franck, K. A/ Stevens, Q., “Tying Down Loose Space”, in: Franck, K. A/ Stevens, Q. (ed.), *Loose space: Possibility and Diversity in Urban Life*, London u.a. 2007, p. 11.

3. Dines, N./ Cattell, V., *Public spaces, Social Relations and Well-being in East London*, Bristol 2006.

4. Valentine, G., “Living with Difference: Reflections on Geographies of Encounter”, in *Progress in Human Geography*, (32/3) 2008, p. 333, available at <http://phg.sagepub.com/cgi/>

Fig. 1
Social infrastructure distribution in the study area

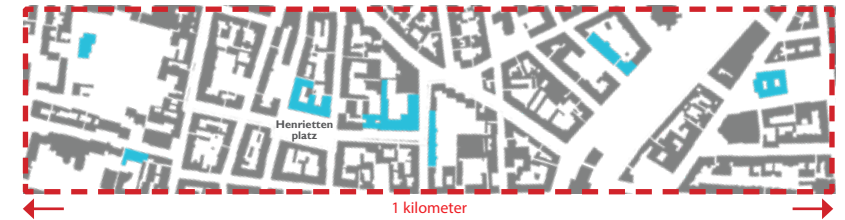


Fig. 2
Social infrastructure distribution in the Seestadt Aspern master plan

■ Social infrastructure



Diversity of public spaces

How then to promote the freedom that public spaces offer while mitigating the ‘history, material conditions and power’ relations in a way that allows meaningful contact among community members? Franck and Stevens suggest, “The easy availability of different kinds of places and people, doing what they choose, gives people the chance to enact particular individual and collective identities, to learn and to find others like themselves.”⁵ In Newham, East London the lobby of a primary school was the site of first encounter for some parents who had unknowingly been living on the same street elsewhere in town and further interaction was carried into the neighborhood park next to the school.⁶ Our investigation of Vienna led to Henriettenplatz adjacent a high school, where we found in the same space and time young children, students, young adults, mothers and fathers, Austrian and immigrant, in close quarters in a space both functional and beautiful. With these examples of public space tied to buildings of a public purpose we see an opportunity for Aspern to strengthen the diversity of its public spaces. It is not that we wish to emphasize a particular combination of space types. Conversely, our hypothesis is that a multiplicity of public space types attached to a variety of functions has the potential to give diverse groups the needed places to encounter, interact and enjoy.

5. Franck, K. A/ Stevens, Q., “Tying Down Loose Space”, in: Franck, K. A/ Stevens, Q. (ed.), *Loose space: Possibility and Diversity in Urban Life*, London u.a. 2007, p. 20.

6. Dines, N./ Cattell, V., *Public spaces, Social Relations and Well-being in East London*, Bristol 2006.



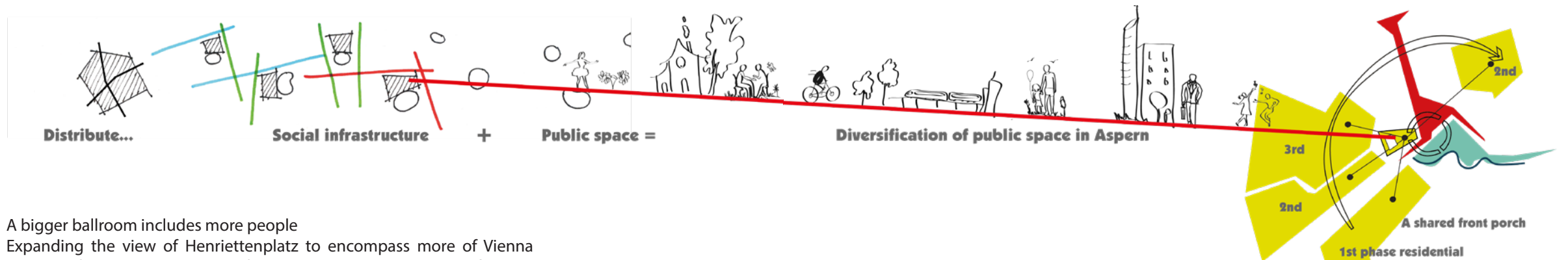
Fig. 3
Existing land use plan
(adapted from Wien 3420
Aspern Development AG)

- Residential
- Residential with flexible ground floor use
- Mostly residential
- Social infrastructure
- All except production
- All except production & residential

Fig. 4
Proposed land use plan



- Residential
- Residential with flexible ground floor use
- Mostly residential
- Social infrastructure
- All except production
- All except production & residential



A bigger ballroom includes more people
Expanding the view of Henriettenplatz to encompass more of Vienna reveals a frequent distribution of public buildings. Fig. 1 identifies kindergartens and schools along a one kilometer axis within a residential field. Though not all these buildings can claim adjacent public space the frequent distribution of social functions provides a framework. Our proposal re-deploys this framework in Aspern together with public space in order to introduce new and different types of public space to Aspern's master plan (fig. 2). Thusly, variation in the character of pub-

lic space is not dependent only on differences in scale, enclosure, light and shadow, materiality. Adding opportunities for social functions to attach themselves to public space adds to the diversity of public space in Aspern by inviting a wider range of users to share those spaces. Also of great importance to our proposal is the use of syntactic analysis (depthmapX v0.28) in order position these new public spaces.



Fig. 5
Space Syntax analysis
choice R1600
proposed situation

Frequency
high
low

At the heart of Aspern

The current masterplan of Aspern exhibits a two-chambered heart (fig. 3). The north chamber is a retail plaza and the south chamber, a lakeside park. Our proposal adds a third chamber, a town square, towards the west, in close proximity and of a varied character from the others (fig. 4). Where the retail plaza provides an extroverted site of display and commerce, our proposed third chamber provides a more introverted place of mediation and meditation. Where the lakeside park provides a natural setting for recreation our proposal adds an urban context for community action. In this third chamber will stand a piece of the planned social infrastructure, a use type relocated from outside the ring road. It will be an integral part of the new square, not to be separated by a road, forming both one side of the square and a focal point. Supporting retail functions at the ground floor of multi-unit residential structures will form the enclosing edges.

Beyond symbolism, a common front porch

In order to make this new town square more than a symbolic gesture towards inclusivity it occupies a prominent position in the spatial network of pedestrian activity. Syntactic analysis predicts high frequency pedestrian routes converging at the site both from the east, the direction of the retail plaza, and from the south (fig. 5). In addition, building parcels along the southern edge of the square have been adjusted where necessary to achieve view corridors to the retail plaza and to the lakeside park. These strong visual and syntactic links establish the new town square as integral to the heart of Aspern. Such a central position is especially relevant to Aspern where the Ringstrasse organizes spaces to continually reflect the existence of a center. The high level of accessibility to the center from all residential districts allows this new town square and its attached social function to be understood as a communal 'front porch' (fig. 6). If made a part of the second phase

Fig. 6
Town square

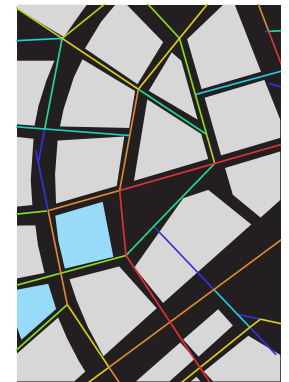


Fig. 7
Neighbourhood park

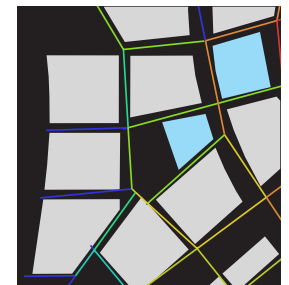
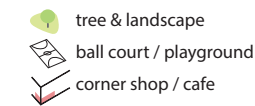
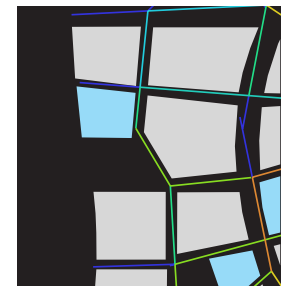
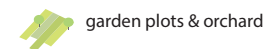


Fig. 8
Community garden



of the development schedule this town square can begin to exercise its role as front porch early. It can be a place where Aspern's pioneers meet the incoming generations of Aspernese.

A residential district

Within the residential field to the west of Aspern's centre, the pairing of social functions and public space can be reformulated in terms of scale, materiality, and accessibility in the spatial network in order to further amplify the diversity of Aspern's public space. Our proposal creates new neighborhood parks and a community garden each paired with a component of social infrastructure. The multiplication of such spaces will introduce small permutations in the character of the spaces. Hard surfaces become soft and green, wooden benches

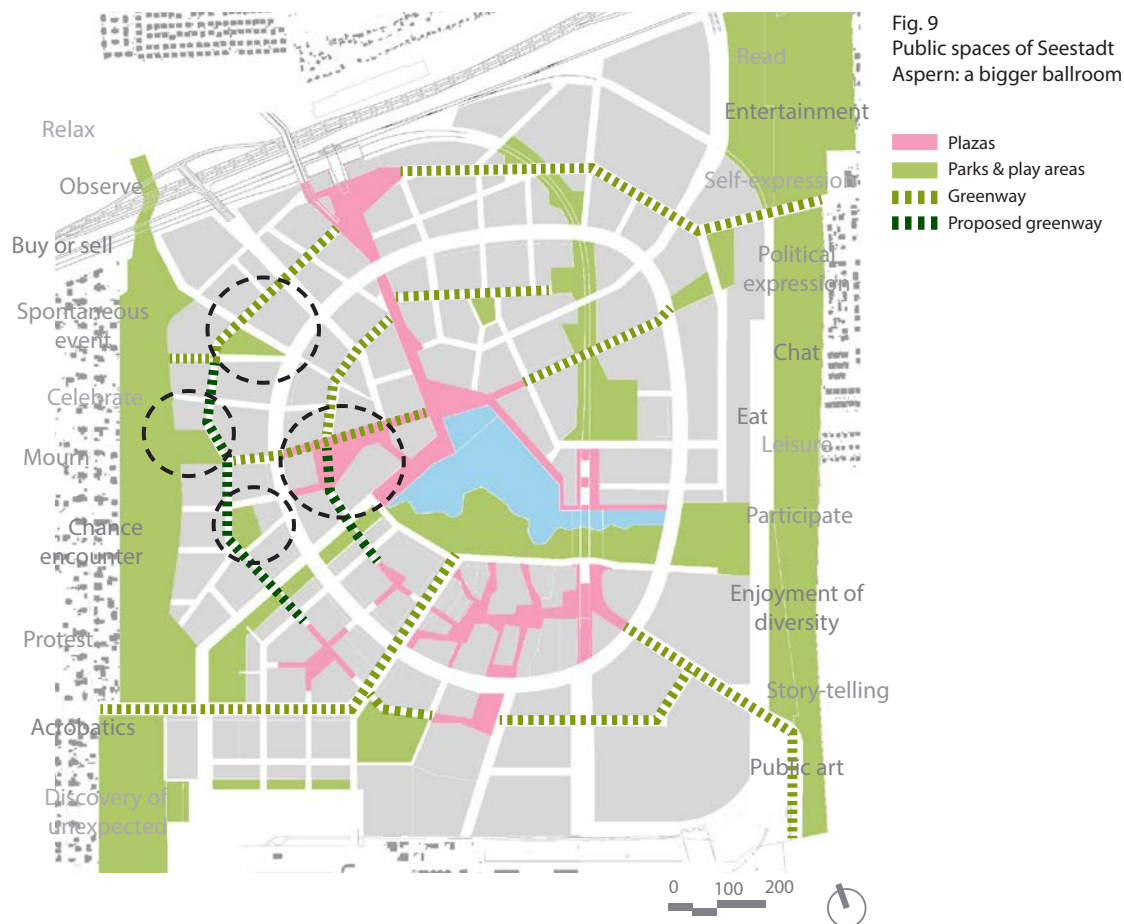


Fig. 9
Public spaces of Seestadt
Aspern: a bigger ballroom

Conclusion

In Aspern we have found the opportunity to embed a multiplicity of public spaces in order to mitigate the “history, material conditions and power” relations that sometimes inhibit the use of space. Research in the city of Vienna revealed a distribution of social infrastructure from which a multi-layered strategy developed. Our approach to public space in Aspern began with a recognition that an inclusive community is built on the many different patterns of urban life. It is our objective that these patterns be allowed to diverge and converge in spaces and at times chosen by people rather than urban designers. These patterns may be visualized as a dance, however it should not be a formal affair replicating only traditions of former centuries. Aspern can provide the space for an evolution of the dance, it only requires a bigger ballroom.

become sculptural concrete seating, public art becomes a sandbox, or the nearby cafe becomes a kebab shop. These spaces are intentionally positioned at locations predicted by syntactic analysis to be frequented by a relatively high number of pedestrians (fig. 7 and 8).

Ballroom and network

We have imagined Aspern’s public spaces to be a ballroom and have proposed a larger, more inclusive ballroom. There remains the question of how the citizens of Aspern will move within the ballroom, from space to space. Syntactic analysis has revealed the likely steps but if the ballroom is to be truly inclusive then how should we make room for alternate tempos? The current masterplan indicates a selected network of streets designated as “green corridors”. These corridors will achieve a particular identity through landscape and provide shaded paths and areas of seating. Our proposal extends this network in order to link each site of intervention and to public space elsewhere in Aspern (fig. 9).



Result:
An urban quarter providing a diversity of function and public space serving a diverse population.

Decoding Urban Space in Wien: from Wien to Aspern

-5 days and 4 study sites in Vienna,

-Observe, Map, Analyze, Document the city,

-Discover Aspern, a new settlement for 20,000 people in the suburbs of Vienna,

-Inspired by the city, propose an intervention.