

"The Augarten Project"

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Summary

A group of citizens living near the Augarten baroque gardens in Vienna have been working for almost three years on a project aiming for a revival of this almost forgotten park. First, its entrance gate was renovated and new playing facilities for children were developed. A good climate of cooperation with the public authorities has been established and an official plan concerning its design and use is being elaborated. But the park has also gone through a cultural revival. "Historical promenades", concerts, conferences, theatre, festivals and musical performances with audiences of up to 5000 have reminded Vienna's population that the Augarten was *the* cultural centre during the reign of Emperor Joseph II, whose favourite garden it was.

Résumé

Un groupe de Viennois vivant près de l'Augarten, le plus ancien jardin baroque de la ville, travaille depuis bientôt trois ans pour réaménager ce parc presque oublié. D'abord, son portail d'entrée fut rénové et l'on installa de nouvelles places de jeu pour les enfants. La coopération avec les autorités municipales a été très positive et, actuellement, un plan d'aménagement est en préparation. Le parc a également vécu une renaissance sur le plan culturel. Des "promenades historiques", des concerts, des conférences, des représentations théâtrales, des fêtes et des manifestations musicales suivies parfois par un public de près de 5000 personnes ont fait du parc une attraction et ont rappelé à la population de la ville qu'Augarten était un haut-lieu culturel sous le règne de l'Empereur Joseph II, dont c'était le jardin préféré.

1. Introduction

Many people see the city of Vienna as the metropolis that has succeeded in saving the values of centuries past into our modern time. Vienna seems to be a town where leisure and sociability still play an important role, where Mozart, Strauss and Schubert are still alive, where carriages and traditional coffee-houses still remind of past centuries, and where music and culture still matter in everyday life.

This image is not absolutely wrong, but it applies only to the historical heart of Vienna, i.e. to its first municipal district, the quarter that was once surrounded by the old city wall. The area created by the ensuing expansion of the town, a ring around the centre that was built during the so-called "Gründerzeit", already manifests all the characteristic features that Vienna has in common with every other comparable European town: high population density, not enough green open spaces, bad substance, etc. The following "ring of growth" does not differ at all from that found in other large towns;

these are the modern zones of town development that have all the typical features of mass construction of apartment houses and industrial enterprises.

The inhabitants of the modern city show an increasing lack of orientation, which makes the creation of means allowing the development of one's personality and one's self-confidence necessary. The dark aspects of human life – isolation, anonymity, aggressiveness, criminality, monotony, lack of individuality of the local environment – call for re-organization. The task of a forward-directed town planning must thus be to turn the anonymous (urban) living space into a place of social contact, a place in which the interaction between man and his environment is ensured.

Therefore, the future of our towns is tied up to their inhabitants' willingness to take part in social life, with all their creativity and imagination. A stronger feeling of neighbourhood, more solidarity and more communication must be restored to our towns. People wish more and more often to find "life-connections"; they want to collaborate and to have a voice in all matters.

It is in the field of culture that the individual could learn to work in and upon society. Cultural events or festivals provide a good start for inhabitants to cooperate. These give the population a chance to get in contact with one another, to talk and to celebrate, to meet neighbours, to discover shared hobbies and to organize activities. This makes it possible to stimulate the people's identification and preoccupation with their residential environment; the orientation of the entire living space can then be transformed.

"Cultural neighbourhood work" may help people discover their right to a culture of their own. "Neighbourhood work" implies a knowledge of the meaning of culture that excludes any type of rejection or non-acceptance by the "bourgeois civilization" and its abstract demands on education. This kind of culture is not fixed on aesthetic products but is concretely related to working for a better life. "Neighbourhood work" encourages people to further their own culture and to realize their personal ideas.

For three years the "Augarten project" has been trying to develop the "neighbourhood culture" mentioned above. The group was founded in order to offer interested people practical possibilities for participating in its work. It should also provide a frame for social life, for the development of neighbourhood solidarity, for communicative and cultural exchange; it aims at being a centre for people to develop and implement their ideas. It has been our aim to encourage the residents who were interested in organizing their own leisure activities. In an epoch defined by consumption and the mass media, many people no longer know how to develop ideas of their own; the group provides to them the means and support they need to train and develop this ability again.

2. The Augarten

The Augarten, Vienna's oldest Baroque garden, is located near the town centre, amongst a group of buildings dating from the *Gründerzeit*. In the course of its 350 years, the park has had several functions. Originally, the area of today's Augarten was part of the forests along the Danube, a hunting ground. Up to the 15th century, the Augarten was probably not inhabited; it gained in importance later on, due to the traffic crossing the bridges over the Danube. An imperial hunting point was built in the Augarten during the 17th century, and just before the second Turkish seat in 1683, the Emperor Leopold I ordered the setting up of a vast, orderly, walled pleasure-garden with

tree-lined allées in the French style. During the reign of the Emperor Joseph II (i.e. during the second half of the 18th century), the Augarten had its heydays: it became the cultural and social meeting place of Vienna. The Emperor Joseph II chose the Augarten as his personal residency; he had a small dwelling built, contributing to upgrading the park. Up to Joseph's reign, only the imperial family and the aristocracy had access to the Augarten. However, in 1775, the popular emperor opened the park to the public. During this period, many important cultural events took place in Augarten, such as concerts given by Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart, Ludwig van Beethoven, Franz Schubert and Johann Strauss (the father). Opera performances, public festivals, exhibitions and fireworks were the highlights of the times. After the Congress of Vienna, in 1814, Augarten lost its importance and gradually fell into oblivion. During the following decades, a number of great events were still being staged in the Augarten; but by the turn of the century the park no longer played a role as Vienna's centre of events.

Now, the once so glorious and bustling Augarten has become an insignificant park that many Viennese people do not even know. Only a few of them realize that the park is home to such great institutions as Vienna's china manufacture and the famous Viennese boys' choir. Gardeners lovingly cultivate the park but it nevertheless looks partly deserted and neglected.

However, the park's green spaces provide neighbouring residents with a precious recreation area. They are of special importance to the foreign residents since it allows them to escape from their much too small and very badly equipped quarters. Elder people also benefit and, together with the foreigners, they form the most important group of users. Young Austrian families, who are normally better off socially, do not favour the Augarten because it lacks in attractive playgrounds. They put up with longer distances and visit Vienna's largest and most attractive municipal park, the *Prater*.

3. The early history of the "Augarten project"

In 1988, the so-called "Augarten neighbourhood" was appointed an area of urban renewal. This neighbourhood borders on the Augarten. It is a residential neighbourhood built during the *Gründerzeit* and it has numerous structural problems. The area is located in the 20th municipal district – near to the centre but separated from the heart of town by the "Danube channel". A local welfare centre – the *Gebietsbetreuung* – was established for the residents. At the moment, 12 local welfare centres exist in the densely built-up areas of Vienna. The first one was founded in 1974, when the municipality was confronted with the important task of improving dwellings and their surroundings, and decided to adopt a "gentle" course of urban renewal. The areas chosen for urban renewal were given this kind of service. The *Gebietsbetreuung's* task is to respond to the population's interest and requirements with regard to a gentle restoration of the buildings. Further, they should try to improve public social life. This new kind of town development is to be carried out as "cooperation with the inhabitants".

When, in 1988, we started to set up a *Gebietsbetreuung* in the Augarten neighbourhood, the district administration asked us to work out a plan on how to improve the public space. During a public meeting, 16 concrete suggestions were presented to the residents. A first contact with the population of the area was made. We organized

discussions with various administrative authorities, first of all with the head of the district, in order to find out which of our suggestions would be most promising and most easily realized. This was of great importance then because we did not want the residents who were cooperating actively to end up feeling frustrated. Our first suggestion was to remodel the entrance to the Augarten. There was only a provisional entrance, a relic of World War II, that did no longer meet the needs of the users. Moreover, it was ugly. We found out later on that the same applied to the whole park. Many people were interested in the remodeling of the entrance but the project became difficult to realize because of rivalries between two administrative bodies (state and town). Difficult bureaucratic hurdles had to be taken. We then decided to cooperate as much as possible with the population and to bring our project before the public, in order to put pressure on the authorities. A second meeting was organized, in which the emphasis was put on the presentation of the project "entrance Augarten". Thanks to the fact that we could show them a good architectural model, the inhabitants – laymen – had no trouble understanding our suggestions. More people than expected attended the meeting. Surprisingly enough, as we soon noticed when talking with interested residents, they were as dissatisfied with the entire park as they were with the entrance. The discussion about the remodeling of the entrance triggered off an emotional outburst. People used the opportunity to articulate their concern about the present state of the park in general. Then the idea of giving "Augarten neighbours" an opportunity of expressing their anger and their displeasure and of collecting ideas for an improvement of the park arose. Thus, in the summer of 1989, we founded the "Augarten project".

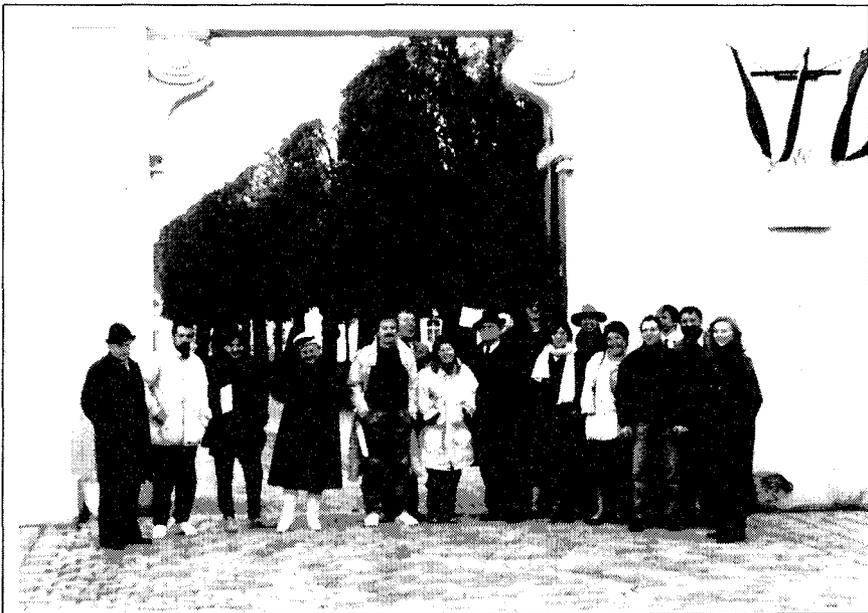


Fig. 1 The Augarten group arose spontaneously around the revitalization of this park in Vienna. The first step was the remodeling of the entrance to the park.

Le groupe Augarten s'est formé spontanément pour la revitalisation de ce jardin public à Vienne. Le premier pas fut le remodelage de l'entrée du jardin.

4. The Augarten project

In effect, the "Augarten project" was originally not an initiative "from below"; it was not called into being by dissatisfied inhabitants but we, the *Gebietsbetreuung*, took the initiative.

The first meeting was attended by four people only. After the promising reactions we had received from the people during the preparatory phase, this was rather disappointing. However, this meeting allowed us to prepare the first activity. We arranged a first "historical promenade" through the Augarten. Mrs Silbert, an elderly resident had a lot to say about the Augarten and its history and she spontaneously volunteered to transmit her knowledge to interested people. This promenade was a great success; about 80 residents walked through the park and eagerly listened to Mrs Silbert's account. Her "stories" gave many of the participants a completely new view of the Augarten. The Press published a detailed account of this first event and thereafter every activity made the group more popular.

The first "historical promenade" through the park was thus a successful start. Many participants, but also other people who had heard of our activities through the press or from other accounts took an interest in the group; they were ready to cooperate with us and to attend the regular meetings. The beauty of it was that people of every age group, and belonging to various occupational groups and different social classes joined the group. The membership (residents of the Augarten neighbourhood) quickly increased to 40-50; the regular meetings were attended by 15-20 people.

Our aim was to beautify the park, to make it more useful for the population and to restore it to its former role as an important cultural centre of Vienna. We wanted the cultural tradition and the history of the Augarten to be revived; a centre for the arts and for culture, for experimentation and for innovation should come into being.

At the beginning, the members of the group focussed on the history of the park; there were lots of talks and discussions, and soon the wish to collect an extensive "Augarten chronicle" arose. We, the initiators, originally did not know much about the Augarten; but we soon learned a lot about the park, its peculiarities, its history and its present deplorable state. During the phase of methodical work on Augarten's history, we came to know that in former times great festivals had been staged in the park. We were impressed and started thinking of organizing a big cultural event in Augarten. This seemed a fascinating task and it could also serve as a spectacular prelude to our work. The idea of a "Cultural Week in Augarten" was born.

In May and June 1990, a very extensive cultural programme (lasting five days) was offered. We wanted a tradition to be revived, but we also hoped to encourage local groups and the neighbourhood's inhabitants to collaborate. The whole programme was set up within a few months. On the first evening, emphasis was put on the park's tradition. Hans Peter Nowak, a member of the group and a resident, played the "Kreutzer-sonate" by Ludwig van Beethoven – it had been first performed in the Augarten in 1782, with the composer himself conducting the orchestra. Then, the "Augarten Suite", composed by Hans Peter Nowak on the occasion of the cultural week was presented. A performance by the famous Vienna's boys' choir was the highlight of the evening. On the second evening, a Hungarian and a local choir took the floor. This evening was followed by a rock concert, a folklore-evening and, finally, a day dedicated to children. As many groups, clubs and schools from the neighbourhood



Fig. 2-3 The "historical promenades" soon became a success, with larger audiences and increased participation in the Augarten group. A whole spectrum of activities, ranging from concerts to buffets has developed over the last years.

Les "promenades historiques" devinrent un succès qui élargit l'écoute du groupe Augarten et la participation à celui-ci. Un éventail d'activités fut développé ces dernières années, allant de l'organisation de concerts à celle de buffets.

as possible were asked to collaborate. During the preparatory phase of the festival, the *Augartenfestschrift* – a brochure of 80 pages, presenting informations about Augarten's early and more recent history – was published, and sold in order to partly finance the project.

Finding money to finance the programme turned out to be very difficult and time-consuming. Members of the group went from one firm to another, offering to put advertisements in the *Augartenfestschrift*; firms and private people were asked to contribute; public institutions were asked for contributions; artists and other performers were invited to help by accepting smaller salaries. A buffet was organized and became an important source of income: many people offered free help and the proceeds were highly satisfactory. For formal reasons, the *Gebietsbetreuung* could not give the necessary guaranties or take up insurance. The organizers thus had to be made personally liable. For the same reasons, the *Gebietsbetreuung* could not become the official organizer of the week. Two people – the initiators – had to take personal responsibility for the posters and the brochures. But the "cultural week" was a great success. There were about 3000 visitors, and many contacts were made with the population of the area.

The official functions of a *Gebietsbetreuung* does not include all the complex elements that would be implied in our conception of "neighbourhood work": renewal of town, improvement of living space, cultural and social life and the establishment of bridges between them. When, in 1990, the *Gebietsbetreuung* was no longer allowed to take official responsibility for the "Augarten project", we decided to carry on with the work in our spare time. This turned out to be a good idea, since the work became less bureaucratic and highly productive.

A whole spectrum of activities took place during the last three years, reaching from the cultivation of traditions to unusual and innovative projects. A number of festivals provided highlights and served to train the members' ability in organizing and planning. Programmes were discussed; activities in which one would like to participate were analyzed; ways of contributing were suggested; possible personal participation were discussed. Both tasks and responsibility were shared. We put a priority on supporting "everyday culture". Within this frame, people are offered the possibility of developing their ideas. The group functions as a "stage" on which anybody who is interested and who has ideas can act. This may have one inconvenient – there is no programmatic orientation as such; but we wanted, first of all, to create structures which everybody would be able to use. The group's regular meeting and its activities provided opportunities to meet new people, to develop contacts and ideas.

The group gradually became a place where communication is possible, where people are offered an opportunity to talk with one another, where they can organize and share activities and where they can develop their interest in the culture of their neighbourhood.

5. Events and activities

Although the "cultural week" brought a lot of work and was rather strenuous for all the participants, the members of the project remained motivated and thirsty for action. They had grown closer to each other and become an established "citizens' committee". Other projects were prepared: the remodeling of several entrances to the park, the design of plans for the improvement of the playgrounds, further "historical prome-

nades", a Mozart concert, an Easter celebration, readings, theatre performances, and activities for children. The highlight was the multi-cultural "Festival of Nations", prepared by the members of the project – an important step towards a revival of the arts in the Augarten.

Here is a list of activities carried out to date:

- Foundation of the project group:
13/07/1989; 4 participants and 2 initiators
- First "historical promenade" through the Augarten:
22/09/1989; about 80 participants
- Poster-activity / "Cultural week":
11-12/05/1990; about 10 participants
- "Cultural week" in the Augarten:
29/05 - 02/06/1990; about 3000 visitors
- Private festival of the project group:
23/06/1990; about 30 participants
- Second "historical promenade" / guided tour through the Gustinus-Ambrosi Museum:
18/97/1990; about 150 participants
- Concert by Vienna's boys' choir:
22/09/1990; about 300 visitors
- Photo-exhibition ("Cultural week") in banks and schools:
24/09 - 31/10/1990
- Chestnut-handicraft festival:
09/10/1990; about 25 participants
- Mozart concert:
05/12/1990; about 100 visitors
- Project group's Christmas:
20/12/1990; about 30 participants
- Reading of Grillparzer with music:
14/03/1991; about 100 visitors
- Cultural festival within the International Unesco Symposium:
21/03/1991; about 100 guests
- "Easter egg-hunt" and play-activities:
01/04/1991; about 400 children
- Summer theatre: "The Taming of the Shrew":
07/07/01991; about 60 visitors
- "Festival of Nations" in the Augarten:
06-07-08/09/1991; about 5000 visitors
- "Song Festival":
14/09/1991; about 350 visitors
- Project group's Christmas:
18/12/1991; about 40 participants

6. Prospects

In the course of the last years, we have made a lot of valuable experiences and have established important social contacts with the population, but also with cultural institutions. In no time at all we have managed becoming highly efficient in public life. The "Augarten project" group has become a port of call, a centre of information for the inhabitants of the neighbourhood, for politicians and for administrative departments. It has thus become an important coordinator and go-between.

Experts and organizations in Austria and abroad have shown interest and some appreciation for our project. Here are a few examples:

- In March 1991, we were invited by UNESCO (on the occasion of the International Symposium on "Culture in the Outskirts") to report on our project and to organize a "cultural festival";
- We were given the BMUK award for the "Festival of Nations" in September 1991, this having been seen as an example of innovative "neighbourhood culture promotion";
- The BMUK suggested to the Council of Europe that our project should receive an award for daring, imaginative, innovative and forward-looking cultural work overstepping national borders;

The way our work has been received has encouraged us to proceed and to intensify our efforts. However, we think that it will be necessary to set up an administrative body if we want to develop our activities in the field of contemporary arts and social culture. We would like this body to have a social component, allowing the population to cooperate; but it should also make it possible for difficult projects in the park to receive help from professionals.

Many possibilities for developing and expanding our work are open. We need a local meeting-place, open twelve months a year, if we want to preserve the quality and the continuity of our work. Up to now, we have been dependant on the weather or on the institutions that allowed us to use their rooms for our activities. In the long run, the project group may be in danger of dissolution if we have to keep meeting in local restaurants instead of using our own premises.

If one can relate to a cultural identity oriented towards locality, one may develop a sense of solidarity, of neighbourhood, of home; one receives support and orientation and the bond to one's own world is strengthened. In this sense, home is not a patriotic concept; it stands for the living space that relates to personal history, to important personal experiences to which one is emotionally linked. It has to do with an environment in which one feels at home.

A living culture and a net of social contacts may come into being, developing from local centres. The individual may then gain a new self-consciousness and a new feeling of identity with regard to his personal world. A neighbourhood project offers people an opportunity to become creative, to collect new experiences with regard to personal and shared responsibility, to a social conscience and to solidarity. It allows its participants to directly see the effects of their personal activities.

Therefore – and this applies particularly to a town like Vienna, where "very advanced civilization" has a tradition and is ranked very high – we think it very important to promote "neighbourhood culture" in such a way that large groups of people may take part in this endeavour.