

by Duncan J. D. Smith

In 2001, UNESCO decreed that the Stephansdom was to remain the tallest structure in Vienna's First District. But that's not to say the newly-declared World Heritage Site hadn't already brushed with skyscraper technology. Two fine 20th century *Wolkenkratzer* rise above the city's ancient rooftops.

Urban ziggurat

At Herrengasse 6-8, it's easy to miss a wall plaque recording a long-lost concert hall where Franz Liszt once performed. It closed in 1913, so the valuable land could be better exploited – but not until 1932 was the new building revealed: The 16-storey, 50-metre high *Hochhaus* designed by Siegfried Theiss and Hans Jaksch was Vienna's first skyscraper.

The best view of the *Hochhaus* is from Michaelerplatz, from where the controversy surrounding its construction becomes easy to understand. Detractors feared a colossus out of all proportion with the surroundings. But the architects avoided this by stepping the four uppermost storeys backwards, thereby making the building appear lower than it actually is. Once completed, this urban ziggurat was quickly accepted, bringing kudos to the Christian Social Party that promoted its construction.

Glitzy residents

With its American flair and state of the art infrastructure – central heating, electric ovens and prototype tumble dryers – the *Hochhaus* soon became an address of choice, especially for the actors of the nearby Burgtheater. Glitzy

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STONES OF VIENNA

While modest by today's standards, Vienna's Hochhaus and Ringturm remain monuments to early technologies of height

Skyscrapers in the Altstadt

residents in the 224 apartments included Curd Jürgens, Paula Wessely and Gusti Wolf.

Today it's not possible to ascend to the top of the *Hochhaus* to view the former rooftop restaurant, its sliding windows once opening out onto an *al fresco* dancing area.

A hint of glamour remains, however, at Unger und Klein, a tiny street-level café that served originally as a milk bar. Trumping the Kleines Café as Vienna's smallest coffeehouse, this seductive venue is a jewel of curved glass and polished chrome.

This is Austria

In 1955, the *Hochhaus* relinquished its crown to the Ringturm at the northern end of the Ringstraße. Occupying the site of a building destroyed in World War II, this skyscraper makes no effort to disguise itself. Still the tallest secular building in the 1st District, it was designed by Erich Boltenstern, with 20 storeys rising to a height of 70 metres. Novel for the time, the tower's grand opening prompted a contem-



The stepped roof of the Hochhaus is to mask the building's height Photo: Duncan J.D. Smith

porary newsreel to boast, "This is not America, this is Austria."

The man behind the building was Norbert Liebermann, who is general manager of the insurance giant *Wiener Städtische*, which still occupies the building.

Having spent his war years in America, Liebermann appreciated the benefits of modern office space and was undeterred when offered the cramped Ringstraße plot for his company's new headquarters. "We are going to build a high rise," he boasted, creating a symbol of Austria's economic rebirth in the process. This time it was the Social Democrats who took credit for the building of a skyscraper.

A hundred coloured lights

A visit to the Ringturm today reveals more than just a landmark workplace. Since 1998, the building's foyer has been home to the acclaimed *Architektur im Ringturm* exhibition series, showcasing architecture past and present from across Central and Eastern Europe. Free entry means a visit is always well worth the journey.

Only at nighttime does the Ringturm reveal its most unique feature: a 20-metre high weather mast adorned with more than a hundred coloured lights.

Linked to the computer system of the Central Institute of Meteorology and Geodynamics on the Hohe Warte, the blinking bulbs give the forecast for the following day: red for temperature, green for general conditions and white for snow and ice. How useful it would have been to the rooftop dancers on the *Hochhaus*! ◇

Unger und Klein im Hochhaus (Ringturm)
Mon.-Fri. 8:00 – 22:00, Sat. 10:00 – 22:00
www.vig.com/en/press/architektur-im-ringturm
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