

By Duncan J. D. Smith

Vienna is a sacred city and rightly proud of its churches. From soaring Gothic to gilded Baroque, the place boasts myriad well-documented masterpieces. Concealed in its suburbs, however, lurk other gems that reach to the heavens in spires of concrete.

A first in concrete

Austria's first concrete church was unveiled in 1913 in Ottakring. The Heilig-Geist-Kirche on Herbststrasse is the work of Slovenian architect Jože Plečnik, a student of renowned town planner Otto Wagner. But whereas Wagner favoured clearly-defined *Jugendstil*, Plečnik pioneered an altogether more eclectic idiom.

The heavy classical frontage is deceptive, giving onto an open space more in the tradition of early Christian basilicas. Unfettered by columns, it is lit by a stained glass clerestory, which also illuminates an altar adorned with an aluminium dove and golden sunburst. A mosaic on the back wall illustrates the seven attributes of the Holy Ghost. The eclecticism continues in the crypt, where Klimt-like murals stand guard over a trio of grottoes. It was not popular in the Hofburg, and was decried by the Habsburgs as "a temple to Venus, a Russian bath and a stable"!

Praise and politics

By the 1930s politics had got in the way of praise. The Christkönigskirche on Vogelweidplatz in Rudolfsheim-Fünfhaus is a case in point. The unfussy concrete structure was consecrated in 1934 as a memorial to recently-deceased priest and politician Ignaz Seipel. A member of Karl Lueger's Christian Social Party

STONES OF VIENNA

As a city well known for its gothic and baroque churches, Vienna also has houses of worship cast in concrete and steel

In Praise of Concrete

and twice Federal Chancellor, Seipel courted wealthy industrialists and paramilitary units in his quest to restore the Austrian economy. His policies resulted in the July Revolt of 1927, whereafter the Social Democrats dubbed him the "Bloody Prelate".

Back in neighbouring Ottakring, the Pfarrkirche Sandleiten on Sandleitengasse appeared around the same time. Part of a church building programme initiated by the Austrofascist regime of Engelbert Dollfuss, it was a riposte to the anti-clerical policies of the Social Democrats a decade earlier.

Harmony from chaos

A further pair of concrete churches date from the 1970s. The Kirche Maria Namen on Hasnerstrasse was consecrated in 1974 but it was much longer in the making. The first place of worship on the site was no more than a timber store pressed into service as a chapel in 1930.



The Wotruba church in the 23rd District casts graphic shadows Photo: Duncan J.D. Smith

Only after the Second World War were plans drawn up for the austere building seen today.

The Kirche zur Heiligsten Dreifaltigkeit on the St. Georgenberg in Liesing also has a secret past in that it occupies the former site of a *Wehrmacht* barracks building. Unveiled in 1976 to a design by sculptor Fritz Wotruba, it is made up of 152 concrete blocks stacked seemingly haphazardly. Viewed a different way, however, the startling structure illustrates the atheist Wotruba's belief that out of apparent chaos comes harmony.

Styrian steel

Vienna's penchant for ecclesiastical concrete comes full circle with the Donaucity-Kirche in Donaustadt. Consecrated in 2000, it takes the form of a cross-shaped box made from Styrian steel, the result of a competition to design a church that could hold its own amongst the surrounding high rises. By day, a series of port-holes illuminate the interior, which then shine like a ship at night. The simple decor is clad with birch and features a curving skylight representing Christ's wound on the Cross.

To the rear of the church, a staircase leads down to a series of community rooms whose stark concrete walls are enlivened by children's paintings. Parish meetings, coffee mornings, theatrical presentations and exhibitions are staged here, all without disturbing the sanctity of the church above. Cold concrete is transfigured by the warmth of human togetherness. ◇

Duncan J. D. Smith is the author of Only in Vienna (Christian Brandstätter Verlag) www.duncanjdsmith.com