

### ***Self-Contained Nonsense***

*Peter Noever, 66, director of the MAK, about the Viennese penchant for mediocrity and the fear of opening Vienna's Ringstrasse Boulevard to modern contemporary architecture.*

*By Doris Lippitsch*

DER STANDARD: *By installing Ross Lovegrove's Solar Tree, you set a clear signal for contemporary urban lighting.*

PETER NOEVER: The Solar Tree is a prototype that uses a new technology which is completely independent of the city's electricity network. I know the city, and I know the atmosphere here. All things that are fundamentally new are at first repudiated here. Everything is pigeonholed. But not everything is red wine that gets better with time.

*Isn't this changing with the young generation?*

NOEVER: No, not at all. Mediocrity is violently overbearing here. There is nothing going on in culture. There is no balance.

*Is this a question of mentality?*

NOEVER: Yes, it is unbelievable. Everything is dealt with in an unambiguous democratic fashion of taste. This is repeated until everything starts going downhill. The souls is going downhill, the spirit is going downhill. And of course the sight of the Viennese will be going downhill, unless they dare to do things that are unpopular. This is what art is all about. Building the Ringstrasse Boulevard was a most unpopular measure, the most radical innovation. This is not to say that the radical incision made with the Ringstrasse was an intelligent solution. Quite on the contrary. If there is anything that the Ringstrasse has it is a point in history with a number of different styles.

*Historicism.*

NOEVER: Yes, this building [the MAK] follows a model from the Florentine Renaissance, the House of Parliament follows an ancient Greek one etc. All styles are represented. The idea of a splendid boulevard was linked with the Ringstrasse cafés, but these were replaced by cars and car dealerships. The Ringstrasse has degenerated into a motorway. The 'Danube Platform', for example, is just a playground for architects to run riot and do all sorts of things that have nothing to do with architecture and urban design. You can only go from the inside out, and not the opposite way.

*Do you want to get contemporary art on the platform?*

NOEVER: That would be marginalization. Art is not worth much in Vienna anyway. This means, it is not allowed into the city center. It is moved to the platform. This is a disposal of contemporary art. And all this has consequences that you have to bear in mind.

*You have taken a strong stance for contemporary art for many years now.*

NOEVER: Vienna is centralist and dirigist. This is a place of ordained tastes. Antitheses are not admissible here. New York is already going the same way as Vienna and Salzburg where anything that stands out is leveled off. Everything has to be pleasant and chic. This cannot be really elegant and never will be. It can't because of the predominant mediocrity. A city, however, lives on contrasts. The stronger the contrasts, the more urbane it will be – and the more democratic in the sense that we all don't want to be all the same. What you see here in Vienna is dull and monochrome. This whole discussion about streetlamps in fact has less to do with lighting than with the predominant spirit.

*Historical candelabra versus the Solar Tree?*

NOEVER: Yes, what would be wrong with that? If the University of Applied Arts, which educates artists and architects, and the MAK decide to have a different type of street lighting in front of their buildings, this is a question of culture. After all, we have Zaha Hadid, Greg Lynn and Wolf D. Prix teaching at the university. And at the MAK we recently had Frank Gehry, Ross Lovegrove, or Rem Koolhaas a. o. giving lectures. It cannot be that this is simply ignored or that people think that everything just has to be uniform. It is a fact that the people who make those decisions neither have the necessary knowledge, nor the sensibility. It is a scandal! A scandal that is not new; it has always existed and it will also prevail in the future. And it is of course cynical to have expensive – cast iron – replicas made of a model that was once designed as a gaslight. The fluorescent tubes from the 1950s were removed – taken down from the sky – only to be replaced one-hundred-year old historical candelabra. This is an act of design impotency that has nothing to do with lighting! The citizens of this city are particular cowards. Nobody ever attacks the authorities. Everybody rather goes to the café or pub, all they do is talking or chit-chatting. But that's not a potential for change.

*In 1848, there was a revolution, even here in Vienna ...*

NOEVER: Which did not have any consequences. This is about a certain amount of intelligence and decency. Nobody would think of taking the question of lighting to the street, apart from the fact that this would be pretty dangerous because the Ringstrasse is a motorway nowadays. Things have not changed since the times of Karl Kraus and Thomas Bernhard. The question is what the distance is between Vienna and the present age? This distance is not decreasing, abut increasing. Even if everything looks modern – it is all chichi; Vienna has a special penchant for this – the same type of boutiques can be found in Bucharest. This is another step toward provincialization, but not development of urban identity. Almost all cities look the same today. And it all began with the regulations for sausage stands and facade designs.

*Sausage stands are slowly dying out.*

NOEVER: The must not be freely designed which entails a loss of design intelligence. Everything has to look the same. Facades are polished, painted, and gilded like in a beauty parlor. The inside is turned out. Everything has to be pompous. Each and every silly little building is stylized into a palace. These are things that are indecent and artless. Barbarism has triumphed. The Ringstrasse is an outrage of bad taste! All those shoe boxes and hotels that are being put up there. Like this gingerbread palace diagonally across the street from here. It is inconceivable that there are no contemporary projects along the Ringstrasse.

*Modern buildings along the Ringstrasse are rare: the Ringturm Tower and the Opernringhof which is now about to undergo reconstruction to facilitate access to Karlsplatz*

NOEVER: Digging up old plans does not make sense. The Ringturm Tower is one of the most elegant pieces of architecture, given the era it was built in and that money was short. Why don't we build an opera house for the 22nd century with a 20th-century program? The Opernringhof is a piece of history as well. Decent, without ornamentation, not trying to compete with the opera house. Those were interesting architects who did those buildings. With the Ringstrasse, you have to differentiate. If this were really understood, they would invite leading-edge architects and not renovate the House of Parliament but think of building something new. What is being placed in the foreground is what can be celebrated. But not admitting anything new is suffocating. Everybody has arranged with this state of affairs. That's why Vienna is so popular with tourists. The federal president and the chancellor still have their offices in establishments from the time of the monarchy. A 21st-century architect could be entrusted with reconfiguring the Federal Chancellery so as to define the Republic in a contemporary style. But here the fear of admitting differences prevails, although this would be what makes the city exciting. There is a potential of pioneering thought in Vienna, but nothing is done; instead, there is endless discussion. The Centre Pompidou in Paris, for example, was built 20 years ago.

*And fiercely rejected at first.*

NOEVER: Yes, it was a painful operation. The belly of the city was sacrificed for the benefit of contemporary art, it was like sacrificing Hofburg Palace. There were always moments of radicalism that occurred in French history. Here, everything is purling along indifferently. The Ringstrasse Boulevard is the only street where people say: This or that does not fit! But who would dare to say that the House of Parliament, the City Hall, or the Burgtheater don't fit? This is self-contained nonsense.

*The Solar Tree was realized within a few months.*

NOEVER: Yes, everybody had a strong interest in the project: Gismondi, Artemide, Lovegrove and Sharp, the manufacturer who developed the new technology. It was unique! The Solar

Tree is dedicated to Vienna. At the moment, it is on a presentation tour in Milan. Vilnius, the 2009 cultural capital, is interested in the new technology, too, as are Paris or Shanghai.

*Do you have to keep leaving Vienna to preserve your energy?*

Noever: This city is unbearable. The word 'creativity' alone is terrible. Or 'innovation'! Everybody is talking about it all the time, because they have a bad conscience. Every human is creative!