Jäger-Klein, Caroline; Plakolm-Forsthuber, Sabine (Hrsg.): *Die Stadt außerhalb. Zur Architektur der ehemaligen Niederösterreichischen Landes-Heil- und Pflegeanstalten für Geistes- und Nervenkranke Am Steinhof in Wien*, Basel: Birkhäuser - De Gruyter 2015

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This volume is the first book-length account of the architecture and landscape of one of the most extensive and innovative complexes of buildings and gardens to be built worldwide in the first decade of the twentieth century: the Lower Austrian state psychiatric hospital 'Am Steinhof' in Vienna, designed by a team including most prominently Otto Wagner and built between 1903 and 1907. That it has taken so long for such a study to be produced is testament to the complexity of the institution's design and construction process and the number of players and the range of disciplines involved (from architecture to politics to psychiatry). The problematic history of the institution has been another brake on scholarship – as an insane asylum it has been viewed with suspicion, and the stigma attached to it was immeasurably deepened by the crimes that took place there during the Nazi period, many of which only came to light much later. Finally, Otto Wagner's St Leopold's church, the only one of the sixty buildings comprising the complex which was designed by Wagner, is widely recognised as a major early modernist monument; while attracting attention to Steinhof, the church's prominence has also tended to overshadow the rest of the complex. With increasing attention now being paid to architecture's wider social and political context, and to the lives of buildings as they develop after the moment of their design and inauguration, scholars have begun to get to grips with the institution as a whole.[1]

This volume, edited by the Vienna-based architectural historians Sabine Plakolm-Forsthuber and Caroline Jäger-Klein, gives us an authoritative and detailed account of the complex as a whole as well as of its individual components, while also pointing towards its wider psychiatric, institutional and political contexts. The impetus for this project was two-fold. First was the access given to the editors and their students at the TU Wien to an extensive and previously unexamined collection of plans and drawings of the individual buildings of which the Steinhof complex is comprised. This collection was assembled by the Otto-Wagner-Spital from the store rooms of the individual pavilions themselves and recently deposited with the Wiener Stadt- und Landesarchiv. Second was the need for a detailed architectural historical record of the complex at a time when its grounds and buildings (which are still in large part used for medical and indeed psychiatric purposes) are coming under sustained pressure from developers and inspiring community-based preservation movements.

The core of the book, then, is the catalogue section, whose main author is Sabine Plakolm-Forsthuber. Here, a useful overview of each of the constituent zones of the institution (the main hospital for patients who are wards of the state; the so-called 'sanatorium' for patients who could afford to pay for their care; and the zone of service buildings, including laundry, agricultural buildings, heat-

ing plant, etc., which all contributed to the self-sufficiency of the institution as a whole) is followed by entries on individual buildings or building types (e.g. in the case of the patient pavilions, seven repeated types are identified). To read through this section gives the reader a powerful impression of the ambition and meticulousness with which the Lower Austrian government officials and the architects they employed confronted the challenge of building what was then the largest such institution in all of Europe, as well as – in technical and infrastructural, if not in medical, terms – the most innovative. There is a freshness and curiosity about the writing too, stemming from the fact that the great majority of these buildings are being properly looked at and closely analysed for the first time, with recourse to original plans and drawings, with which this section is richly illustrated. The social building (Gesellschaftshaus), with its 1200-seat theatre, and the enormous common laundry building, for instance, while being relatively unexceptional in terms of surface aesthetic handling, are convincingly shown to offer previously untried spatial and technological solutions to problems of circulation and lighting. As the authors point out, the particular nature of the commission and its status as a world unto itself allowed designers to experiment with new configurations.

The catalogue is supplemented by fifteen concise essays by a range of contributors, including the editors, covering topics from the pre-history of psychiatric institutions in Vienna, the wider Central European context for psychiatric provision, the specifics of the administrative, political, technical and architectural inception of Steinhof as well as the design and construction process, and the changes the institution and its buildings have undergone up to the present day. The essays are notable for their engagement with primary sources, authoritative reach, and avoidance of the reliance on anecdotes that can characterise studies of psychiatric architecture. The catalogue and essays together contribute several new findings. The identity of the various figures in the design team is pinned down and their respective roles convincingly argued for – a difficult undertaking in view of the anonymity assumed by participation in government projects at this time, and of the historiographical dominance of the figure of Wagner (the hospital itself has been renamed 'Otto-Wagner-Spital'). The book thus offers a useful case study of collaborative government projects in this period, and in addition gives fascinating insights into the ways such projects were organized and administered from the initial acquisition of the site from multiple private owners, to the assembly of a construction work force and the work day and night to complete the project within the promised time frame. Glimpses of the difficulties and conflicts of the process are also given, including poor working conditions, strikes, and radical revisions to the design.

Unfortunately, the book does not succeed in shedding further light on the obscure process by which Wagner came to design not only the church but also the site plan for the institution as a whole, supplanting an existing design by Carlo von Boog, the director of the Lower Austrian office of public works, and giving the institution its characteristic grid plan. A detailed inventory and illustration of the various stages of the site plan (including an identification of which versions are missing from the sources) would have enriched the book considerably. This absence is related to a shortcoming of the catalogue section of the book as a resource for future scholars. The entries, while authoritative, and clearly based on a thorough examination of the sources, do not consistently cite the particular archival and primary material on which they are based, so that future investigators will need to reconstruct this process themselves. The original illustrations (plans, presentation drawings, photographs), most of which have not been published previously, are also not given identifying information beyond a general reference at the back to the collection they stem from,

and can thus not be easily sought out again by scholars wanting to pursue particular lines of enquiry. Part of the issue is presumably that the main archive – the collection of plans referred to above, now in the Wiener Stadt- und Landesarchiv – is not yet securely catalogued.

That said, this is a rich and fascinating book containing insights and evidence (especially visual evidence) that are bound to spur future research. In addition to the contributions mentioned above, there is new research and analysis by Richard Kurdiovsky of Wagner's famous church building, convincingly demonstrating the ways in which Wagner exploited the opportunity to build the ideal modern church he had envisioned already in the mid-1890s and above all how he choreographed the public presentation of his design. The role of the institution during the Nazi period is also sensitively handled, with catalogue entries and an essay by Herwig Czech tying the crimes committed there and their memorialisation to particular buildings and later interventions.

Note:

[1] The author of the review has published on Steinhof: Leslie Topp, "Otto Wagner and the Steinhof Psychiatric Hospital: Architecture as Misunderstanding," Art Bulletin, 87, no. 1 (2005): 130-156; Madness and Modernity: Mental Illness and the Visual Arts in Vienna 1900, edited by Gemma Blackshaw and Leslie Topp, London: 2009 (Published in German as Madness and Modernity: Kunst und Wahn in Wien um 1900, Vienna, 2010). A scholarly history of Steinhof was published on its 100th anniversary: Eberhard Gabriel, with Sophie Ledebur, 100 Jahre Gesundheitsstandort Baumgartner Höhe Vienna, 2007. For a recent medical historical account, see Sophie Ledebur, Das Wissen der Anstaltspsychiatrie in der Moderne: Zur Geschichte der Heil- und Pflegeanstalten Am Steinhof in Wien, Vienna, 2015.

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