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A HEALING LANDSCAPE – THE STEINHOF GARDENS

LECZNICZY KRAJOBRAZ – OGRODY STEINHOF

ABSTRACT

This paper presents the Steinhof Gardens and delves into their planning history. In accordance with an urban design concept by Otto Wagner (1841–1918), the construction phase was planned and carried out by Franz Berger (1853–1938) and his team, and in 1907 the facility was opened. The garden architect Ferdinand Müller (1858–1942) played a role in the implementation of the sanatorium's gardens. Several alterations have been made since its acquisition by the City of Vienna; a care manual is still lacking.

Keywords: healing gardens, architectural spirituality, sensible psychotherapy, landscape architecture of 1900, landscape architecture of art nouveau

STRESZCZENIE

W artykule zaprezentowano ogrody Steinhof oraz zagłębiono się w historię ich planowania. Zgodnie z koncepcją urbanistyczną autorstwa Otto Wagnera (1841-1918) faza budowy została zaplanowana i przeprowadzona przez Franza Bergera (1853-1938) i jego zespół, a w 1907 roku obiekt został otwarty. Projektant ogrodu, Ferdinand Müller (1858-1942), odegrał rolę w realizacji ogrodów sanatorium. Od czasu przejęcia przez miasto Wiedeń dokonano kilku zmian; nadal brakuje jednak wytycznych dotyczących pielęgnacji.

Słowa kluczowe: ogrody lecznicze, duchowość architektoniczna, psychoterapia sensoryczna, architektura krajobrazu roku 1900, architektura krajobrazu w nurcie *art nouveau*

The pavilion gardens on Baumgartner Höhe (today: Otto Wagner Hospital) were designed and developed as a “healing landscape.” According to Dr. Mara Reissberger it is “a unique ensemble, (...) because underlying it is a comprehensive urbanistic concept”¹. My essay explores Otto Wagner’s

approach to this concept and to urban space with the aid of the entire stock of known plan documents and his texts. In recent years, Dr. Sabine Plakolm, professor of architectural history at the TU Wien (Vienna University of Technology), examined this stock of plan documents and catalogued them. What follows are thoughts that arose related to this “healing landscape for spirit and soul.”

The Steinhof Gardens testify to the achievements of Vienna’s Medical School: they were developed – as green spaces for therapeutic use – congruently to the pavilion system. On October 6, 1907, the “Neue Freie Presse” wrote: “*The rising terrain of the gardens allows the patients to enjoy the glorious panoramic view beyond the enclosure, while they themselves remain invisible to curious onlookers (...)*”

¹ Maria Auböck and Mara Reissberger, “Die Gärten des Otto Wagner-Spitals in Wien, Ein Bericht zur Untersuchung der Gartengeschichte,” in: *Die Gartenkunst*, no. 1 (2002), 91. Since 2000 – when, commissioned by the Federal Monuments Authority Austria, we began the study of the vegetation stock and the history of the hospitals built environment with Dr. Mara Reissberger and DI Annalisa Mauri – our atelier (a+k landscape architects) has been involved in several projects on the grounds of the Otto Wagner Hospital (footpaths, garbage management concept, apartment complex in the northeast).

the grounds are characterized by Viennese charm, the pleasure of light colors and the avoidance of conspicuous measures that would give patients the feeling of being confined, (...) Each building is surrounded by gardens that extend all the way to the Vienna Woods and the projected green belt... ”

1. AN IMPORTANT LANDMARK IN GARDEN DESIGN

The gardens Am Steinhof are, stylistically speaking, of interest with regard to garden design around 1900: while the sanatorium could still be understood as an English Park, the pavilions' formal gardens were laid out in a thoroughly modern fashion and, in combination with the building ensemble, generated an “interior” aesthetic. In the Vienna of that day, the strong forms of Art Nouveau were prevalent in genres ranging from painting, sculpture, and architecture to literature and the applied arts.

In 1912, Marie Luise Gothein wrote: *“A fresh victory was gained by the architectural garden, but it did not spring from the public park (...) It was a movement from the outside, like the old invasion of the landscape-garden style which came from the artists, but this time it was the architects who took action. Long in the background, they now became conscious of their rights ...”*

The oeuvre of Otto Wagner (1841–1918) exemplifies this notion – during the transition from the *Gründerzeit* era to modernism – because in his projects, landscape architecture is always an integral component of the design. Wagner's concepts often demonstrate astonishing qualities with respect to urban space. Examples include the “Air center for the 22nd district,” the project for Emperor Francis Joseph's “Stadtmuseum” (City Museum, 1910) and the “Palmschos project” for Bressanone (1914). (ills. 1, 2) In his theoretical texts, Wagner explains his view of urban design in relation to observations on human vision: *“One of the attributes peculiar to human perception is that in examining any work of art, the eye seeks a point of rest or concentration; otherwise a painful uncertainty or aesthetic uneasiness occurs. This will always prompt the architect to design a focal point where the rays of attention combine or organize themselves.”* He continues: *“The sensuous apprehension of the impression made by a great monumental design, for example, can perhaps be explained in the following way. First the general image is indistinctly grasped, and only some moments later the eye and impression slowly concentrate on a point, during which time the silhouette,*

distribution of color patches, border, and total arrangement continue to have an effect.

The resting of the eyes has occurred.”

Otto Wagner put this observation to use to realize – by means of accentuated garden design – projects for the metropolis Vienna. He also applied his thoughts on a “compositional axiality” to the *Baulinienplan 1904* (zoning plan), a surprising discovery made by Sabine Plakolm, which serves to confirm his theories: by means of a main axis that, instead of directing attention outward, is oriented inward, different wing zones were developed on the west and the east flanks (ill. 3). Wagner employed this gesture to organize the different functions on the site – in terms of function his design closely resembles Carlo von Boog's preliminary project, but stylistically it is a new design! In the area in front of the hospital (“the approach”) an existing cemetery was turned into a large park and in reference to the church on the crest of the hill a far-reaching visual axis terminating in a park across from the main entrance. Broad roadside plantings, as part of the new streets, supplement the parcelling in the southeast in front of the hospital grounds. In his publications – to, among other things, underscore what was special about the grounds of the Am Steinhof church – Wagner compared it with other religious structures, such as St. Peter's in Rome and the Dome of the Rock in Jerusalem. As Peter Haiko, Harald Leupold-Löwenthal, and Mara Reissberger put it in their study (1981): *“He turns a romantic English park landscape into a baroquifying ‘modern’ architectural landscape (...). A layout that had been ‘coincidentally’ embedded in nature becomes a strictly composed hospital (...). something that had seemingly grown over time becomes something planned of volition.”* (7) On account of revisions made by to Wagner's concept for the design of the outdoor spaces, the latter was only partially implemented. The symbolic axial references the panorama of the city and of the church via the pathology department to the *Hofburg* (as the seat of the Sovereign) were, however retained and to this day link this “outlying city” to Vienna's center. The site's imposing terracing makes possible a subtle staggering of the buildings in the new topography. The curved streets on both sides of the main axis bring to mind the ornamentation of Art Nouveau. Several contemporaries – for example, the art critic Hevesi – paid tribute to this “healing landscape” which, at the time of its construction, was the world's largest psychiatric hospital.

Beginning in 1905, the design of the outdoor space of the entire site was implemented by Franz

Berger and his team. The outdoor spaces foreseen for it consisted of:

- Design of outdoor spaces and the pavilion gardens of the “Heil- und Pflgeanstalt”
- The sanatorium’s green spaces, with ice-skating rink and tennis courts
- Street construction with lighting and internal railway, networks of paths, berms
- Eastern and western green strips
- Officials’ gardens along the southern edge of the site and northeast of the church
- Vegetation and glasshouses of the nursery, along the workshops and stables in the northeast, and the farming and orchards north of the pavilions

The landscape and architectural design of the entire grounds of the former *Niederösterreichischen Landes-, Heil- und Pflgeanstalt Am Steinhof* (Lower Austrian Provincial Hospital “Am Steinhof”) as pavilion concept required elaborate adaptation of the terrain. The extensive collection of plan documents precisely and effectively illustrates how the planning team headed by Franz Berger developed and implemented the project (ills. 5, 6). This same team was also responsible for the hospital’s outdoor spaces, including the streets and paths; Rupert Bittermann, Anton Liepolt, and Adolf Prosch served as project managers. For the sanatorium, the garden architect Ferdinand Müller, of Kaiserebersdorf, was called in to participate in the realization of the gardens². Unfortunately, at present we do not have a comprehensive planting plan at our disposal, though there are several original sketches of portions of the gardens. The explanation might have to do with the hurried implementation on site. Despite the fact that the final report was published in 1909, it took until early 1914 to complete the gardens.

The plants were supplied by the Oroszvárér Nursery, by estate management firms in Neuwaldegg, Frauenburg, Schönborn-Bruchheim, Purkersdorf and Hirschstetten, as well as by 15 additional suppliers, including Franz Praskac, a highly reputed nursery still in operation in Tulln.

The annual report of the *Niederösterreichische Landes-Irrenanstalten* (Lower Austrian Provincial Mental Institutions) for the period from July 1, 1907 to June 30, 1908 (Vienna 1909) states: “*The hospital’s parks, made up of departmental gardens and public ‘parterres,’ have (including the footprints of*

the buildings) a surface area of 560,000 square meters, of which at present 380,000 square meters are planted, including lawns (...) The hospital’s gardens are vast; the initial plantings in these gardens comprised: 12,000 trees of all sorts, 32,000 bushes, 2,800 conifers and 85,000 one- to three-year-old spruce trees. Some 150,000 perennials, bushes, ground cover and diverse other flowering plants were used to create the flower gardens and ornamental gardens; 3500 kilograms of grass seed to seminate the lawns. In the northwest, there is an existing stock 600 fruit trees (cherry, plum, apricot and peach) in parts of the park protected by the hospital wall.”

The clearly defined predominant trees (*Leitgehölz*) on the streets and paths running north-south make the design of the gardens Am Steinhof easily surveyable and visitors can orient themselves well. The carefully grouped rarities in the pavilion gardens and in front of the administration building and in the sanatorium’s park-like areas provide color accents with summer flowers and shrubs. Some such details are discernible in the fire-department plan (ill.7).

The annual reports meticulously record the plant species and the materials that were used. In addition to the sober quantity surveys, these reports document the problems at the construction site, for example, the cost explosion on account of the elaborate earthworks and erosion caused by precipitation – the site presented a challenge to the gardeners and plant suppliers, because the ground was difficult to cultivate. Integrated in the extensive terracing (the accompanying calculations and sections through the site are signed by Anton Liepolt) are the streets, the berms and the pathways. There were no sidewalks, but carefully laid out gravel gutters drain the streets and paths. To ensure that passers-by do not disturb the patients, enclosures were installed and in the pavilion gardens for calm patients wire netting and partially even with hedges were employed as fences. These drawings are signed by Rupert Bittermann, who was a member of Berger’s team. The plantings differ in the gardens for calm and agitated: the gardens for calm patients were fenced in with privet hedges (*Ligustrum vulgare*). The garden architect Johann (Ferdinand) Müller equipped the area surrounding the boarding school with tennis court(s), ice-skating rink and fountains as park-like *Gründerzeit* landscape, partially even as “rock garden” with stone arrangements. The enthusiasm for the large variety of plants is evident in the annual reports:

(...) In these gardens most of the streets, alley and transverse paths are lined by mountain ash, chestnut, acacia and linden trees, which will in a few

² Dr. Eva Berger’s research pays tribute to Ferdinand Müller, garden architect and nursery owner, for his involvement in the creation of the Steinhof Gardens, in: *Gartenzeitung der Österreichischen Gartenbau-Gesellschaft*, 1958, no. 2, 11, see Berger Eva, *Historische Gärten Österreichs*, vol. 3, Vienna 2004, 333.

years provide sufficient shade. All the narrow berms lining the fronts and long sides of the departmental gardens were planted with fronts of the *prunus* genus (flowering plum, almond, apricot, and tart-cherry trees), perennial shrubs, conifers and birches. The large berms in contrast, whose bare slopes are not able to sustain grass (...), are covered – park-like – with ten- to twelve-year-old black pines, and distributed among them are white-barked birches, dark-red hazelnut bushes, yellow and red willow shrubs and flowering wildwood flowers. (...) The gardens for officials lie between Street Nr. 1 and the southern wall of the hospital grounds – that is, on a long strip of land that would hardly have come into consideration for buildings or other uses, and contains initially about 150 young fruit trees, a variety of deciduous trees, coniferous trees, flowering and ornamental shrubs; these are screened from the street by a privet hedge and supplement the overall grounds in a decorative fashion (...) “A nursery with greenhouses was set up in the northeast for the maintenance of the garden. Soon, control of the patients became a consuming issue, and in the subsequent decade, the gardens were radically simplified. By 1912, this topic was already evident in the annual reports of the *Niederösterreichische Landes-Irrenanstalten* (Lower Austrian Provincial Mental Institutions): “(...) And therefore, due to supervision requirements, it became necessary to remove all shrubbery and conifers from all patients’ gardens and instead to supplement the very sparse stock of trees in these gardens (...)”

2. THE CONTINUED DEVELOPMENT

After the City of Vienna acquired the facility, comprehensive changes were made to the pavilions and the gardens – for example, to provide the open-air wings necessary for therapy. The patients who were physically capable were expected to work in the fields, the workshops, or taking care of the gardens. Beginning in 1941, Johann Gross, who was a pupil at the school for children with behavior problems, described the grounds: “... From ‘Steinhof’ we could often see the patients, who had to work under the supervision of the medical staff. It was usually garden work.” During the reign of the Third Reich, more than 5,000 persons died as a result of therapeutic experiments, for lack of treatment, and of illness. For this reason a memorial was erected south of the *Gesellschaftshaus* (Theater). In 1948, a *Festschrift* notes: “Much of the upkeep was not carried out during the war; ... employees were reassigned to other jobs and the work they had done, such as the care of forest and gardens, was simply discontinued or

severely cut back.” The aerial photos taken from 1925 to 1959 show, in comparison, an increasingly dense wood and the simplification and overgrowth of the green spaces (ills. 8, 9). In maps of Vienna dating to the years 1968 to 1985, paths are still discernible that are, in part, today no longer in existence. Since 1926 – like at every other contemporary hospital – the structures have been subjected to continual renewal and change. Multiple renovations, additions, and new buildings (as, for example, orthopedics) have reshaped the grounds, and particularly in the southwest and northeast, the general layout is considerably altered. As the practice of medicine evolved, on account of contemporary standards, the *Gesellschaftshaus* (the theater) and the butcher shop, among other structures, became vacant. It was necessary to renovate the pavilions in support of the new types of therapy. In the summer of the year 2000, a research group consisting of Prof. DI Maria Auböck, Mag. János Kárász, Dr. Mara Reissberger, and DI Annalisa Maura (Austrian Federal Monuments Office) was commissioned to study the history of the gardens of the “Otto Wagner Hospital.” Compiling the historically verifiable records of vegetation stock (ills. 10, 11, 12) proved to be a challenging venture. The allées are clearly discernible, as are the designs of the pavilion gardens. Unsystematic decisions – often based merely on personal preference – regarding subsequent plantings and faulty care, etc., have unfortunately led to major changes in the configurations of the trees and consequently of the spaces themselves (above all, in the pavilion gardens).

That is why a perspective is necessary that details how for the gardens and outdoor spaces “Am Steinhof” are to be restored. And regarding the coming rezoning, this will also have an influence on the outdoor spaces of the Otto Wagner Hospital. We are hopeful that a manual for the care of the park will be at hand to provide support for the painstakingly prepared implementation.

Several citizens’ action initiatives have warned of impending re-development of the grounds.

In the fall of 2014, a commission of experts specified a 10-point program to specify how the site be developed.

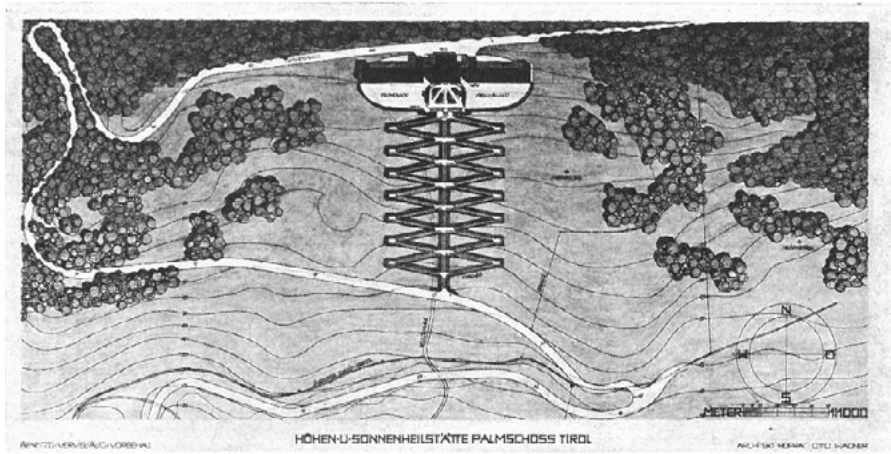
For those who would like to delve deeper into the history of this exceptional ensemble and landmark, I recommend Professor Sabine Plakolm’s book, *Die Stadt ausserhalb* (Vienna 2015)³.

³ This text is an abridged version of a lecture held in Cracow on October 20, 2017: “A healing landscape for the spirit.” It includes material from the publication by Sabine Plakolm (ed.) *Die Stadt ausserhalb*, Vienna 2016.



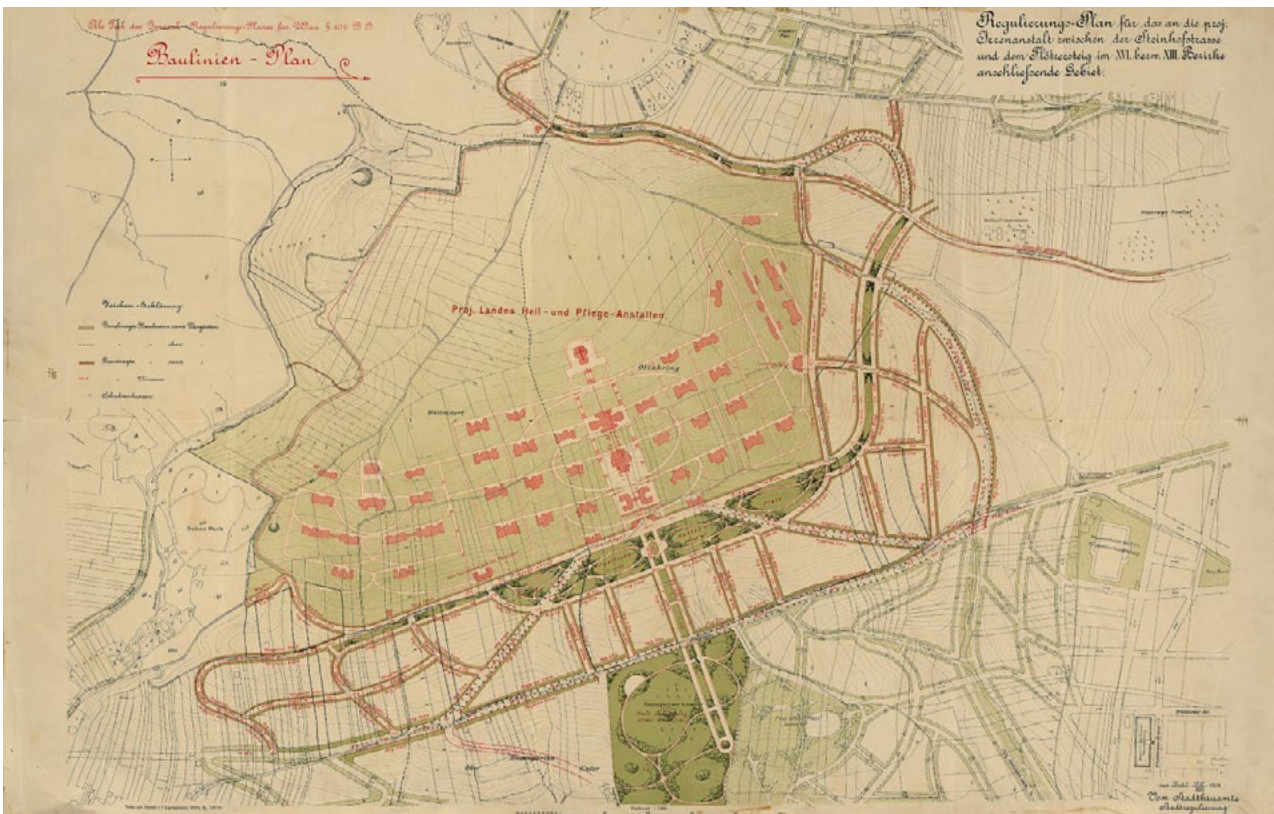
II. 1. Otto Wagner, (source: Austrian National Library)

III. 1. Otto Wagner, (źródło: Austrian National Library)



II. 2. The air center in the 22nd district (source: Otto Antonia Graf, *Wagner, Das Werk des Architekten 1860–1902*, Vienna/Cologne/Graz 1985, vol. 2, 630, 741)

III. 2. Centrum lotnicze w 22 dzielnicy (źródło: Otto Antonia Graf, *Wagner, Das Werk des Architekten 1860–1902*, Vienna/Cologne/Graz 1985, vol. 2, 630, 741)



II. 3. *Baulinienplan* 1904 (master plan, source: Stadt- und Landesarchiv Wien)

III. 3. *Baulinienplan* 1904 (master plan, źródło: Stadt- und Landesarchiv Wien)



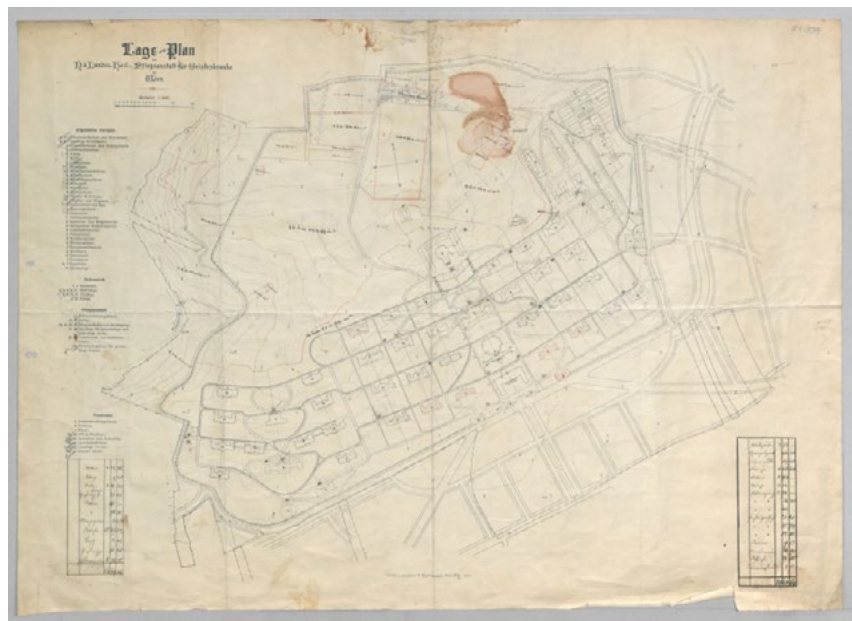
Il. 4. Referential axes of the grounds of the Otto Wagner Hospital (source: Google Earth, edited by Auböck + Kárász Landscape Architects)

Ill. 4. Osie referencyjne na terenie szpitala Otto Wagnera, (źródło: Google Earth, opracowanie: Auböck + Kárász Landscape Architects)



Il. 5. Portrait of Franz Berger (source: Austrian National Library)

Ill. 5. Portret Franza Bergera (źródło: Austrian National Library)



Il. 6. Site plan with path structure, blueprint, anonymous, undated (source: TU Archive and OWS)

Ill. 6. Plan sytuacyjny ze strukturą ścieżek, anonimowy, niedatowany (źródło: TU Archive i OWS)



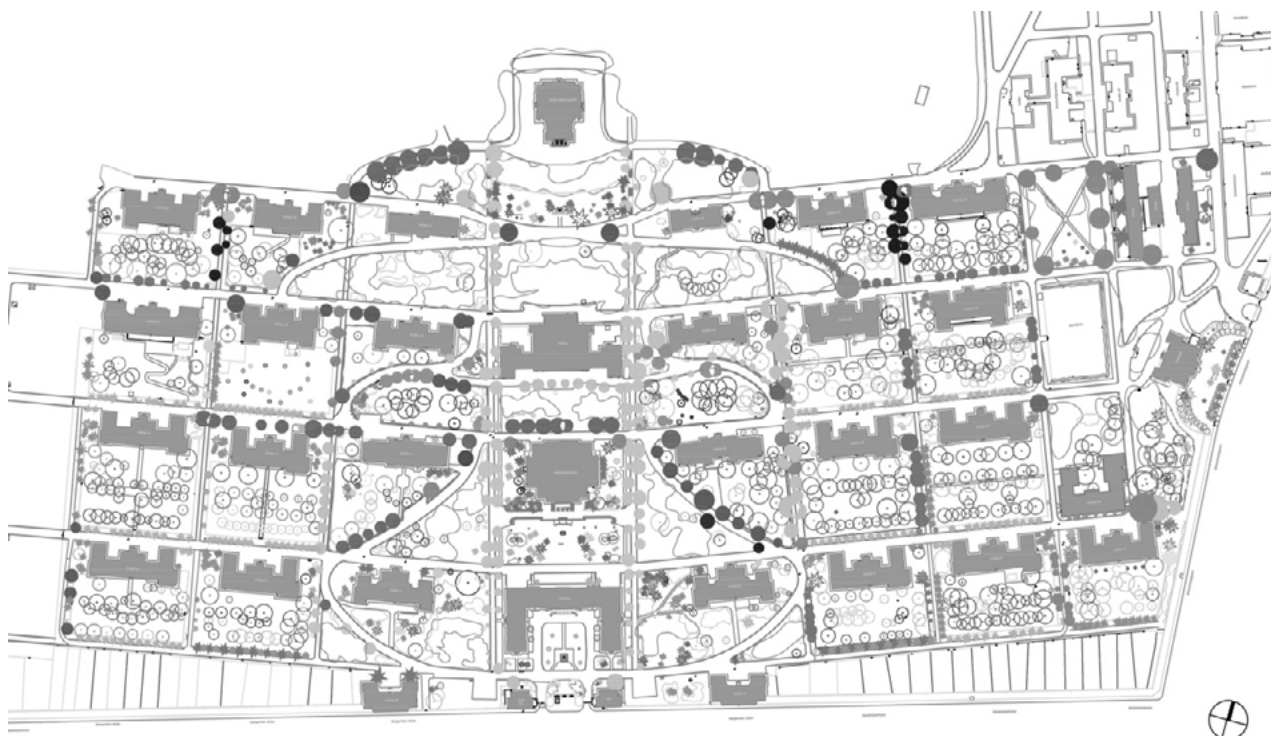
Il. 7. Aerial photo of pavilion gardens, ca. 1925 (source: Archive Otto Wagner Spital)

III. 7. Zdjęcie lotnicze ogrodów pawilonowych, ok. 1925 r. (źródło: Archive Otto Wagner Spital)



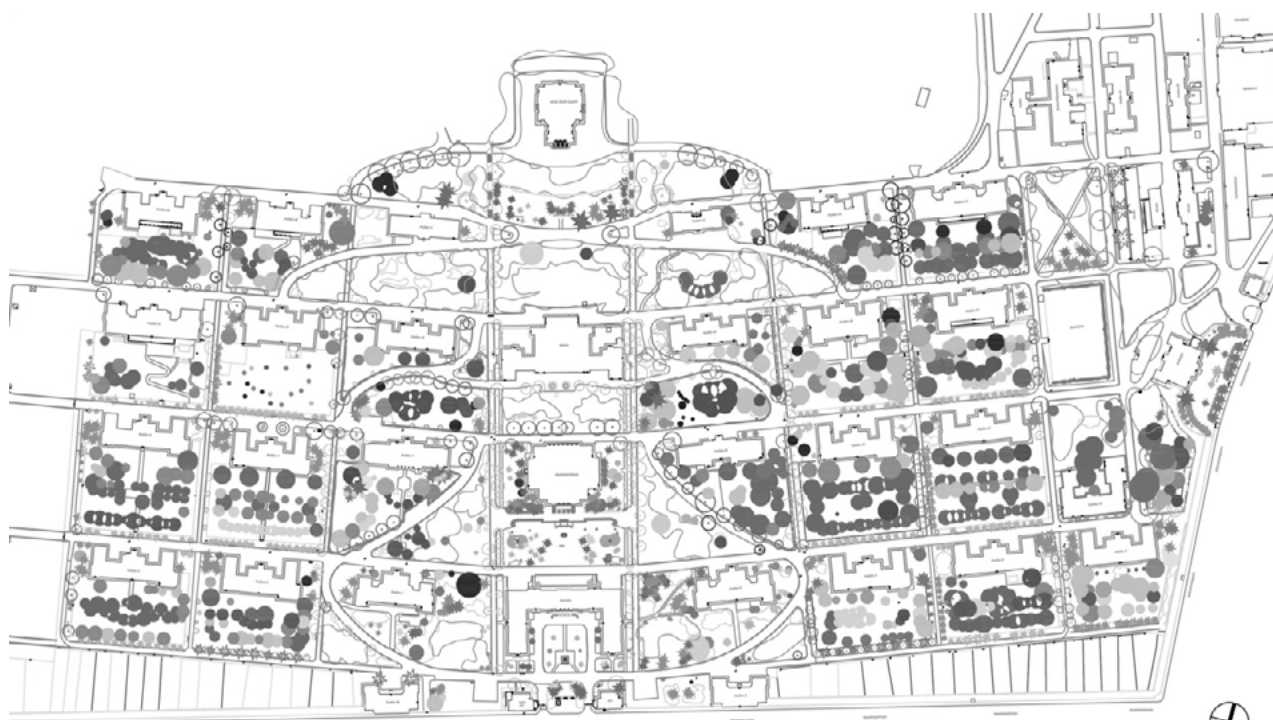
Il. 8. Aerial photo 1959 (source: Landeslichtbildstelle Wien)

III. 8. Zdjęcie lotnicze 1959 r. (źródło: Landeslichtbildstelle Wien)



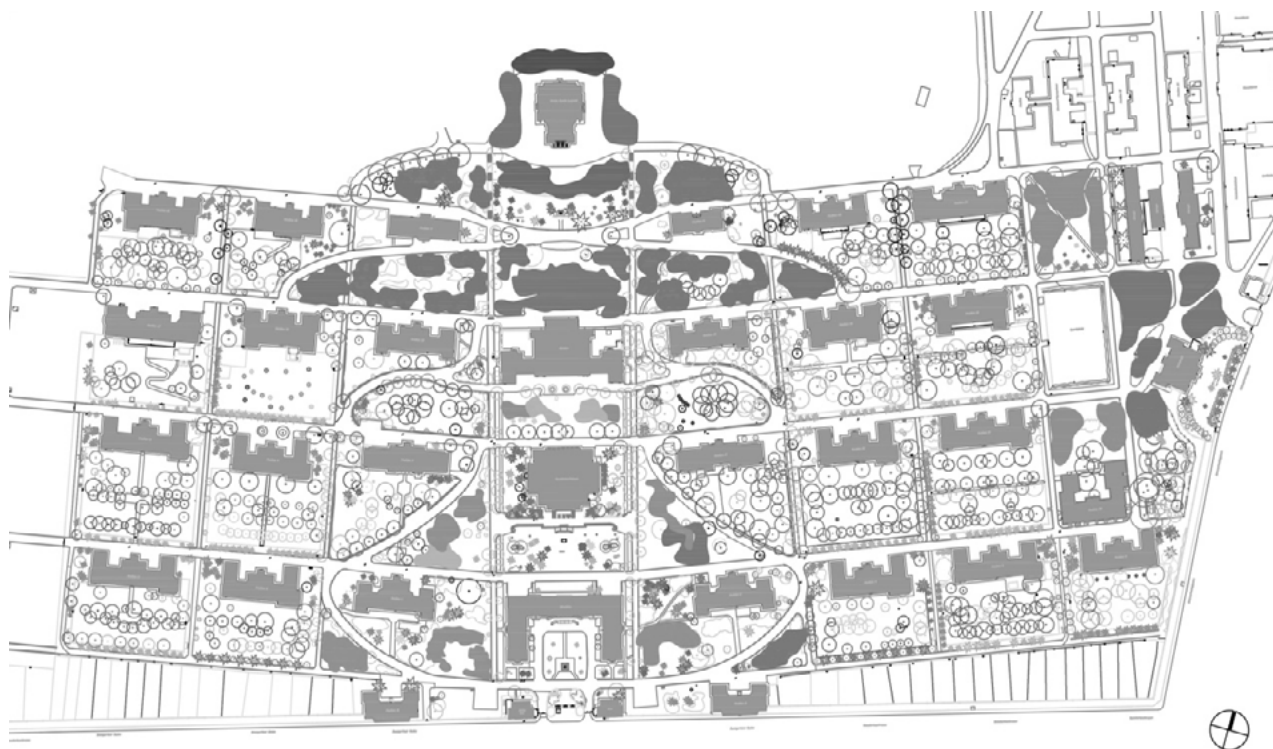
Il. 9. Vegetation mapping 2000: allées (source: Mehrzweckkarte Wien and Auböck + Kárász Landscape Architects)

III. 9. Mapa roślinności 2000: aleje (źródło: Mehrzweckkarte Wien and Auböck + Kárász Landscape Architects)



II. 10. Vegetation mapping 2000: pavilion gardens (source: Mehrzweckkarte Wien and Auböck + Kárász Landscape Architects)

III. 10. Mapa roślinności 2000: ogrody pawilonowe (źródło: Mehrzweckkarte Wien and Auböck + Kárász Landscape Architects)



II. 11. Vegetation mapping 2000: individual woody plants (source: Mehrzweckkarte Wien and Auböck + Kárász Landscape Architects)

III. 11. Mapa roślinności 2000: rośliny drzewiaste (źródło: Mehrzweckkarte Wien and Auböck + Kárász Landscape Architects)

NOTES

1. For further design-analytical approaches see: Peter Haiko/Harald Leupold-Löwenthal/Mara Reissberger: „Die weiße Stadt.’ Der ‘Steinhof’ in Wien. Architektur als Reflex der Einstellung zur Geisteskrankheit,” in *kritische berichte*, 9 (1981), no. 6, 3–37.
2. J Mara Reissberger, in: Maria Auböck and Mara Reissberger, „Die Gärten des Otto Wagner–Spitals in Wien, Ein Bericht zur Untersuchung der Gartengeschichte,” *Die Gartenkunst*, no. 1 (2002), 105. The 1914 annual report describes the reuse of plant material as allée plantings on the hospital grounds, additional plantings of pines and firs, and the creation of a hill for surveying the area.

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