

Experiencing Medieval Vienna: New Approaches towards the Presentation and Interpretation of Invisible Cultural Heritage

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Abstract: The Viennese inner city was inscribed in 2001 in the UNESCO World Heritage List, one of the arguments being its outstanding medieval heritage. Although scattered across the historical core, the medieval heritage of Vienna as a whole is hardly a strong touristic attraction. On the one hand this is due to the difference of visual impact between St. Steven's Cathedral - Vienna's Gothic Landmark - and other incomparably less impressive medieval monuments. On the other hand the spatial structure, the touristic infrastructure - combining shopping, gastronomy and accommodation - and above all the built assets of the imperial heritage lead to a touristic trail through the inner city which neglects several medieval jewels - such as the churches of the Minorites or Maria am Gestade.

The paper at hand presents a concept for the interpretation of medieval Vienna which integrates all built cultural heritage assets of the period. As a preamble it discusses the meaning of presentation and interpretation of cultural heritage within contemporary society and individual identity, stressing out the importance of compensating invisible and incomprehensible aspects of cultural heritage through effective storytelling.

The result is an interpretive master plan which confronts the visitor not only with singular preserved architectural objects, but with the complex spatial and functional structure of the medieval city. Being the holistic cultural heritage of medieval Vienna, the preserved street pattern is used as a grid to develop themes and routs which enable the exploration of different aspects of urban history. As a consequence of the spatially inclusive approach the master plan addresses a main challenge in touristic enhancement: the connection of different sites and areas of the historical city through storytelling aims at activating a niche attraction to sustain local economy, avoid crowding and increase revisiting value.

Keywords: Medieval Vienna, Interpretation, Thematic Routes

Introduction

The medieval heritage of Vienna plays generally a secondary role in the cultural tourism image of the city and is currently being treated by the competent organizations as a stepchild among its attractions. At the same time, the high and especially the late Middle Ages are the eras that have set the foundation for the political and urban development of Vienna to a metropolis, capital, education and trade center and thus determine the current image of the city. This historical importance justifies the role of the medieval element within the UNESCO world heritage site as well as the need for interpretation.

The individual sites - mostly religious buildings - have their own interpretation media that present their historical significance. The interpretive offer varies greatly from place to place. However, a medium which considers the historic city as a whole and these assets presented as items of a no longer existing image is neither available inside the medieval sites, nor in the public places in between. Furthermore the visitors aren't provided with an explanation of the medieval origins of the street pattern and its relationship to the medieval sites or to the current distribution of functions in the historical city.

The paper at hand presents an interpretive master plan which addresses this deficits. Its basic idea focuses on the presentation of the overall image of the medieval Vienna by highlighting the relationships between the individual sites.

Society - Heritage - Interpretation

In the dynamics of the performance society experiences are means to perceive the moment consciously - the experience becomes a need, it becomes "a necessary detour, which intensifies our journey through life and recharges the batteries of our human vehicle" (SHUSTERMAN 2001: 143). The entertainment value of a product is crucial to its marketing. To the individual the story, the narrative becomes increasingly important - the individual is no longer focused on the need of something, but on the experience it could provide.

For the reflection on cultural heritage, the narrative - i.e. the interpretation and presentation - is just as important as preservation. This foremost because interpretation reaches out beyond the simple communication of facts and seeks to raise awareness of and engagement with these facts (cf. CARTER 1997: 5). Regardless whether it concerns simple flyers, illustrated panels or complex digital media, interpretation shows not only what something is but what this something means (cf. Lancaster County Planning Commission in 2007: 3).

The interpretation plan is part of the presentation and communication concept for a site. It structures and organizes individual aspects and ensures that individual interpretations are embedded in a broader context, attract attention, create a connection between cultural heritage and the existing experience of visitors, address different audiences and communicate a clear theme and a clear idea while being at the same time interesting, useful, pleasant, organized and easy to understand (cf. HLF 2013: 3). In the case of large zones - such as historical urban areas - the interpretation plan becomes a master plan, which allows the joint presentation and explanation of all related sites. Furthermore it establishes a basis for cooperation between the organizations which manage those sites.

Vienna - the UNESCO World Heritage Site and the Medieval Heritage

On December 2001 the Historic Center of Vienna is inscribed in the World Heritage List. One of the three criteria arguing its outstanding universal value points out the Middle Ages as a main period of European history, of which the historical center of Vienna bears testimony:

„Three key periods of European cultural and political development - the Middle Ages, the Baroque period, and the Gründerzeit - are exceptionally well illustrated by the urban and architectural heritage of the Historic Center of Vienna.“ (UNESCO 2001: 41)

The nomination documents from June 2000 (Vienna 2000: 6) and the report of ICOMOS (International Council on Monuments and Sites) from September 2001 (ICOMOS 2001: 1) underline repeatedly the importance of the medieval development of Vienna as part of European history. e.g.:

„Within the property and its buffer zone we find a coherent historical building state which reflects the succession of major developmental stages from the Middle Ages to Baroque and Gründerzeit periods.”

(Vienna 2000: 6)

or

“The property nominated to the World Heritage List consists of the medieval core (based on the Roman settlement), the principal Baroque ensembles with their axes, and the Gründerzeit constructions from the beginning of the modern period.”

(ICOMOS 2001: 2)

While identifying concrete architectural examples, it appears that the medieval structure of Vienna is represented mainly by a few religious buildings. As monuments with medieval fabric the documents point out the Scots Monastery, the Church of St. Mary on the Strand (Maria am Gestade), St. Michael's Church, the Minorites Church, St. Stephen's Cathedral and the Hofburg (cf. ICOMOS 2001: 2).

The importance of Vienna's inner city as a World Heritage Site lies within the historical role played by the Danube metropolis as the political, cultural and spiritual center of Central and Southeastern Europe (cf. Vienna 2000: 6). In this context, the Middle Ages are one of the most important stages of development of the city and the over regional political configuration alike: In this era the tracks were laid for the entire modern development of the South Eastern European region: the ducal residence was moved to Vienna and the Duchy of Austria went to the Habsburgs.

As a result of the discrepancy between the historical significance and the thin inventory, a question arises: How present is the medieval element in Vienna's historical core? In contrast to Baroque and Gründerzeit Architecture, which characterize coherent urban spaces, medieval buildings - such as St. Stephen's Cathedral - appear as stylistic stand-alone in the urban landscape. Furthermore, most medieval buildings have received new Baroque or Classicist facades to integrate them in the cityscape of the time.

The medieval essence of the city of Vienna is therefore not to be found in the third dimension. However the street layout of the historical core and the alternation of linear and concave spaces have hardly changed in their essential features since the urban expansion of the 13th century and give the city a medieval skeleton.

Viennese Cultural Tourism and Main Tourist Routes

The Viennese inner city cultural experience is determined by the historical buildings of the first district and the Ringstraße boulevard as well as by an extensive museum mile (cf. MUSNER 2009: 239). The core theme is the branded "Imperial Heritage", which is responsible also for the high visitor numbers (cf. Vienna Tourist Board 2009: 12,18).

A main competitive advantage of Vienna on the cultural tourism market is the compact historical area which enables seeing a large number of significant sights in a short time. The distribution of the attractions through the inner city leads to a tourist "beaten path", especially attractive to first-timers. The area is highly used since those make up almost half of the visitors (40% acc. Vienna Tourist Board 2009: 5).

The "beaten path" stretches from Hofburg Palace on the Ringstraße via Michaelerplatz, Kohlmarkt and Graben to St. Stephen's Cathedral and further along Kärntnerstraße back to the Ringstraße (Fig. 1). In addition to the Hofburg - the inner city landmark of the imperial heritage and St. Stephen's Cathedral - the Gothic showpiece of Vienna – the "beaten path" leads visitors also by the Gründerzeit buildings of the Ringstrasse, incl. State Opera House and the museums around the Maria Theresa Square, the Gothic St. Michael's Church, the Baroque St. Peter's Church, the Haas House, the Gothic Maltese Church and, via a short detour, by the Capuchin Monastery at Neuer Markt and the Albertina. This results in a route, which provides an intensive experience and an overview of the essence of the Viennese cultural heritage, combining museums, old town flair, meaningful historic architecture, exquisite retail and gastronomy.

Aside this route the Viennese inner city has several "special interest" attractions that invite to an extended visit. The Ankeruhr - a musical clock at Hoher Markt -, St. Ruprecht's Church and the supply of gastronomy and retail lure visitors to the north of the area. The Judenplatz with its tragic history, the Old Town Hall with the District Museum as well as the Scottish Monastery and the Kunstforum on the Freyung guide the visitors from the "beaten path" to the representative buildings of the western section of the Ringstraße: the Votive Church, the University, the Burgtheater, the City Hall and the Parliament. These and other attractions create a labyrinthine pattern, expanding the "beaten path" by offers of individualized experiences.



Fig. 1 – Main touristic routes and the sites with connection to the medieval development of Vienna (Copyright: Claudiu Silvestru)

Within this mixture niche attractions - such as the Viennese Middle Ages – provide a necessary addition to the main offer, ensuring the competitiveness of the destination and increasing the re-visit value. In particular, for

individual tourists - which constitute more than two thirds of the Vienna's visitors (68% acc. Vienna Tourist Board 2009: 5). - niche attractions could provide added value in terms of uniquely customized exploring experiences.

"The medieval Vienna is a forgotten city"

(POHANKA 1987: 210),

whose acquaintance implies a

willingness to leave the "beaten path" and to engage this fragmentary preserved cultural heritage in order to put together the puzzle-like image.

The Importance of the Medieval within the Viennese Touristic Offer

Research (cf. SILVESTRU 2014) shows that the medieval built heritage has no potential as a main attraction of the destination Vienna. As a niche attraction on the other hand it has a particular character defined by the tension between the alien and no longer existing resp. the familiar and present. The comparison between then and now - both in terms of everyday culture as well as cityscape - is highly attractive. Accordingly, visitors are willing to explore rather dynamic contexts, changes and processes than individual buildings and art objects. A presentation of this contexts is only possible through the cooperation of organizations dealing with the different aspects of cultural tourism and medieval Vienna. Networking and cooperation between those actors is currently rather weak. The state of the art lacks platforms which sustain faster communication of new research results, a centralization of presentation and interpretation offers of different institutions as well as the use of digital media for presentation. Nevertheless the Vienna City Museum - ultimately the most important point of contact with regard to the dissemination of local history - regards the above mentioned as short-term actions to be taken (cf. SILVESTRU 2014).

The Current State of Viennese Medieval Heritage

The road layout is probably the most prominent medieval asset of the Viennese inner city. The overlay of the current buildings and the reconstructed late medieval street pattern highlights the continuity of the structure of public space since the urban expansion in the 13th century (Fig. 2). Most deviations of street profiles are emerging in the areas which had to be rebuilt in the second half of the 20th century. This concerns in particular the northern and central part of the city which were destroyed as a result of the bombing on March 12, 1945 (cf. Vienna Cultural Property 1946). In addition only punctual interventions and minor deviations can be detected, which are due to further developments of the modern age. For example the medieval Swiss Wing of the Hofburg was gradually expanded up to the early 20th century.

The medieval assets of the Viennese inner city are scattered over the entire late medieval urban area without defining a coherent medieval-looking setting. This assets can be divided into three categories according to their visual character within the urban landscape:

1. Sites with an original medieval character.

This buildings give an authentic picture of the medieval public space, despite several interventions, including reconstruction. Due to the dynamic history of Vienna this category includes only a few objects, all being sacral

buildings. Nevertheless these structures are the most important element to link both visually and in terms of content the niche attraction "Medieval Vienna" to the general perception of space and cityscape. (Fig. 1)



Fig. 2 – Overlay of the medieval (yellow) and the current street pattern (Copyright: Claudiu Silvestru)

2. Sites with major medieval elements, but characterized by a baroque facade.

This category includes in particular religious buildings whose main facades have been rebuilt in the Baroque. Although both interiors as well as geometry testify of the medieval origin, this is not visible at first glance and needs further exploration. Due to this bivalency these buildings can be used as an effective link between major attractions and the niche attraction "medieval Vienna". (Fig. 1)

3. Sites connected to the medieval development only in terms of content.

This category includes buildings whose predecessors have played a major role in the urban structure and functioning in the Middle Ages, yet are related to this original cityscape (almost) exclusively through the continuity of use. Although these objects can't be perceived as medieval monuments, they are - like the structure of the public space - part of the medieval heritage of Vienna and provide an essential complement and support to its wider interpretation. (Fig. 1)

	Public space				Interior			Interactive / Dynamic				Digital		Publications		
	Projections and Illumination	Installations	Panels	Labeling and Signage	Panels	Immobile audiovisual media	Labeling and Signage	QR-Codes	Multimedia touchscreens	Audioguides	Guided tours	Handouts for the visit	Apps	Websites	Brochures	Flyers
Hofburg - Schweizert.	■		■	■		■								■	■	
Michaelerkirche	■			■	■			■			■			■	■	
Augustinerkirche	■			■	■	■								■	■	
Stephansdom	■	■	■	■		■				■	■			■	■	
Virgilkapelle	■		■	■							■			■	■	■
Deutschordenskirche			■	■							■			■	■	
Malteserkirche		■		■	■		■	■						■	■	
Minoritenkirche	■	■		■		■		■						■	■	
Schottenkirche	■			■							■	■		■	■	
Kirche Am Hof				■												
Synagoge / Judenpl.	■		■	■	■	■					■			■	■	■
Salvatorkirche			■	■							■			■	■	
Maria am Gestade	■			■	■	■								■	■	
Neidhart Fresken				■							■			■	■	
Ruprechtskirche	■	■		■	■									■	■	

Fig. 3 – Employed interpretive media in the sites with medieval fabric of the Viennese inner city (Copyright: Claudiu Silvestru)

The comparison of available interpretive media shows a very different offer depending on size, location and reputation of the sites (Fig. 3, further described in SILVESTRU 2014). The focus is mainly on classic, informative media that allows only restricted interactivity. The amount is limited in order to reduce museification. The sites are marked within the public space via standardized signs displaying relevant dates and the use (Fig. 4). The most common fixed media inside the buildings are explanatory panels and technically obsolete phonomats. Surprisingly only few sites provide free flyers, none of which points to sites with similar assets. This passes on an appealing information medium and limits the wide publicity of the site. The rare use of QR codes shows that new media is rather irrelevant within the interpretation offer. Almost all sites have a website, but the consistency of the content regarding the explanation of the buildings and their history as well as their presentation are very different, ranging from interactive user interfaces to simple texts. As in the case of the flyers hardly a website provides links to sites with related features. Considering the general interpretation offer a revision concerning individual use and flexibility appears necessary. In particular, deficits have to be eliminated in the area of networking among sites and correlated communication strategies.

The Goals of the Interpretive Master Plan

1. Interpretation of individual parts, completion of the fragments.

The target of interpretive interventions is to convey the history of the place through sensitive design of physical and digital elements and to increase the comprehension of its nature and development. Going beyond the interpretation of individual sites, the holistic interpretation plan has the goal of emphasizing them and consciously employing them for completing the imaginary medieval cityscape and its development process. To this end the continuity of the street pattern since the 13th century provides an ideal framework to make the outlines of the historical space perceivable for today's visitors.



Fig. 4 – Standardized signs of Viennese Cultural Heritage (Copyright: Claudiu Silvestru)

2. Activation of niche offers and increasing of the re-visit value resp. length of stay.

The medieval Vienna is directly related to the general range of history interpretation and is linked through numerous sites to the tourist "beaten path". Thus, it provides an additional enhancement layer to the main attraction - the imperial heritage. This Layer extends over the entire cityscape of the first district covering also areas with low tourist importance. In this regard the activation of the niche attraction will lead to a better distribution of the offer. Steering small groups of visitors beyond high profile zones will enable a "slow" perception of cultural heritage and thus a deeper engagement without the disruptive visitor density.

3. Promoting interest and guaranteeing the highest possible access to a wide audience.

An entertaining, attractive and accessible interpretation encourages to focus on a specific theme. In order to function, and to attract a critical mass, a niche attraction within the extensive Viennese cultural tourism offer must increasingly rely on the entertainment of the visitors. It is important to consider that for almost half the guests (45%) the history of the city and even for two-thirds the guests (66%) fun and pleasure motivate their visit to Vienna (Vienna Tourist Board 2009: 11). Especially in the case of niche attractions aspects such as everyday culture and past and present cityscape play a vital role in order to keep the interest of visitors upright.

The Thematic Framework

The overlay of findings of urban history research (cf. SILVESTRU 2014) with the distribution of sites with medieval buildings and current urban areas with high medieval significance results in a net-like image of relationships (Fig. 6). Taking into account the interest of the visitors in processes and developments, two main themes with several sub-themes (see further below) derive from this correlations:

- The becoming of Vienna is accompanied along the Middle Ages by an increasingly complex interplay of ecclesiastical facilities, whose constructions – churches, convents and chapels – represent urban constants that shape both the modern era and the contemporary cityscape.
- The medieval history of Vienna is marked by the tensioned relationship between Austrian dukes and citizens, the resulting building measures influencing the urban landscape until today and reminding of the early supra-regional significance of the city.

This thematic framework represents the filter to structure and organize the whole interpretation. The main themes for the interpretation of the medieval heritage of Vienna link the three main factors of medieval life – the religious, the civic and the nobility – to the historic urban development and the present cityscape. While going beyond dry factual descriptions and presentations of urban space, the proposed narrative framework provokes engagement and encourages visitors to develop own attitudes towards the presented content. The sub-themes (see below - R1, R2, R3 resp. R4, R5 and R6) deal with aspects of general interest that can be clearly linked to architectural objects and/or parts of the current public space. Based on these physical elements, several routes have been designed to include the contents of the interpretative sub-themes in a dynamic experience of the historical urban area.

The Thematic Routes

The thematic exploration is based on routes that are associated with a specific theme. In this context, the medieval buildings become the main physical component of a visit experience based on interpretation. In contrast to spatially-linear display the routes don't place quantity and quality of historic buildings in the foreground, but the importance of historical events and contexts. The routes connecting the assets target at relating visitors to certain themes and provoke them to engage with their contents:

R1. The Oldest Church (walking distance ca. 20 min. / 1,5 km):

The label as the oldest church of Vienna is claimed by the small St. Ruprecht's church within the early medieval core as well as by St. Stephan's, the later bishops residence and present day landmark of the city. (Fig. 6)

R2. Behind Baroque Facades (walking distance ca. 40 min. / 3 km):

Behind the Baroque facades of religious buildings of the first district hide medieval monuments with distinctive Gothic interiors, which reflect the patchwork nature of a city with medieval core and modern presence. (Fig. 7)



Fig. 5 – Relationships between sites with medieval relevance (Copyright: Claudiu Silvestru)

R3. Monastic Vienna (walking distance ca. 45 min. / 3,5 km):

The ducal residency as well as the influx of mendicant orders within the late medieval city walls lead to the consolidation of the monastic presence in Vienna and mark the medieval origins of the Viennese monastic culture, still visible within the present cityscape. (Fig. 8)

R4. Ducal Residence (walking distance ca. 30 min. / 2,5 km):

The relocation of the ducal residence directly next to the city wall in the late Middle Ages shows until today the initially distant relationship between citizens and residing dukes and facilitates at the same time the construction of an imperial forum in the 19th cent., to connect the historic city with the Ringstraße and the outer districts. (Fig. 9)

R5. The Jewish Quarter (walking distance ca. 20 min. / 1,5 km):

The Jewish Square reminds of the medieval persecution of Jews, being a relic of the termination of the ghetto in the 15th cent., one of the darkest incidents of the medieval history of Vienna, from which both city administration and residing dukes have profited. (Fig. 10)

R6. Medieval Metropolis (walking distance ca. 50 min. / 4 km):

In the context of supra-regional commerce, crusades and a general mobility in the late Middle Ages, the favorable position of Vienna at the crossroads of historical connections has led to spatial and functional developments within the city, commercial streets and market places being still visible consequences on the urban landscape. (Fig. 11)

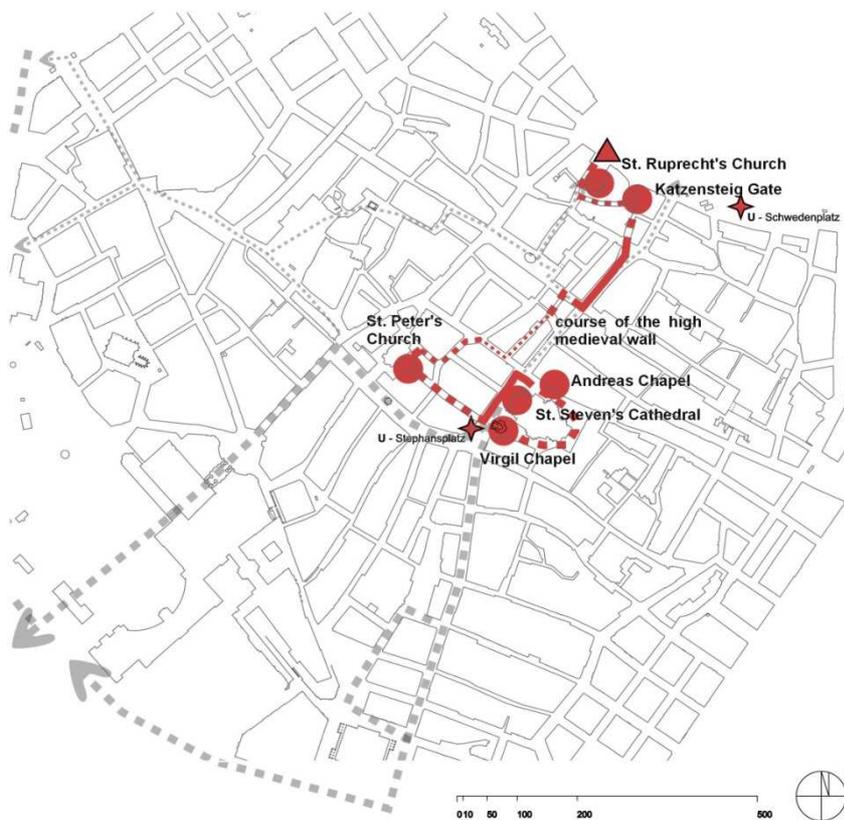


Fig. 6 – Route R1: The Oldest Church (Copyright: Claudiu Silvestru)

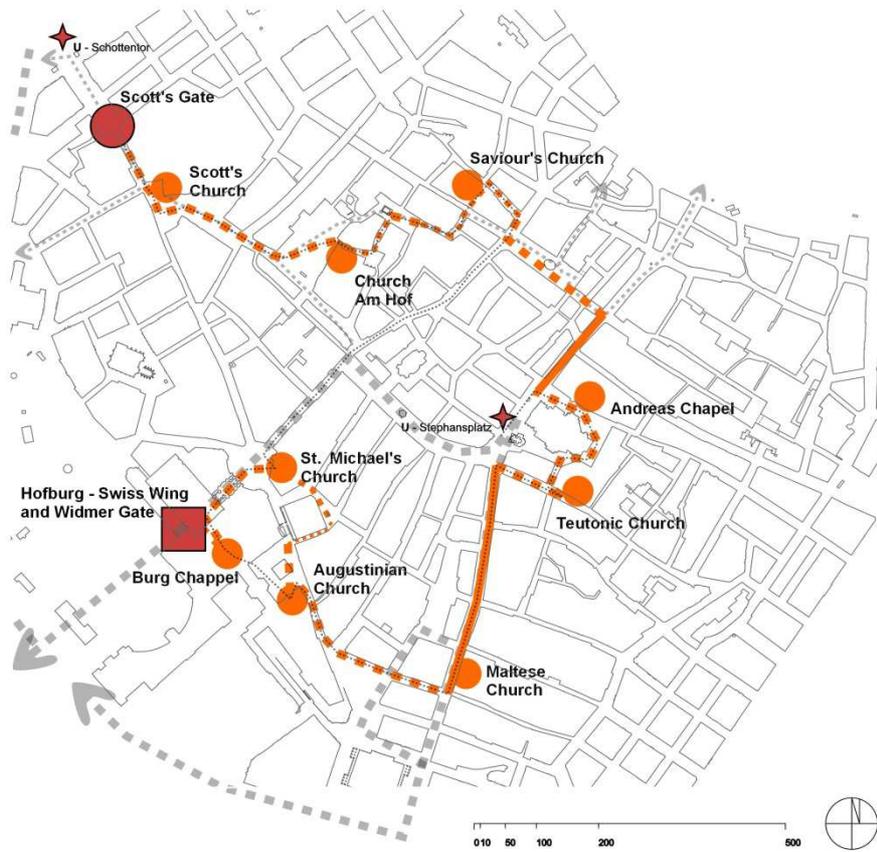


Fig. 7 – Route R2: Behind Baroque Facades (Copyright: Claudiu Silvestru)

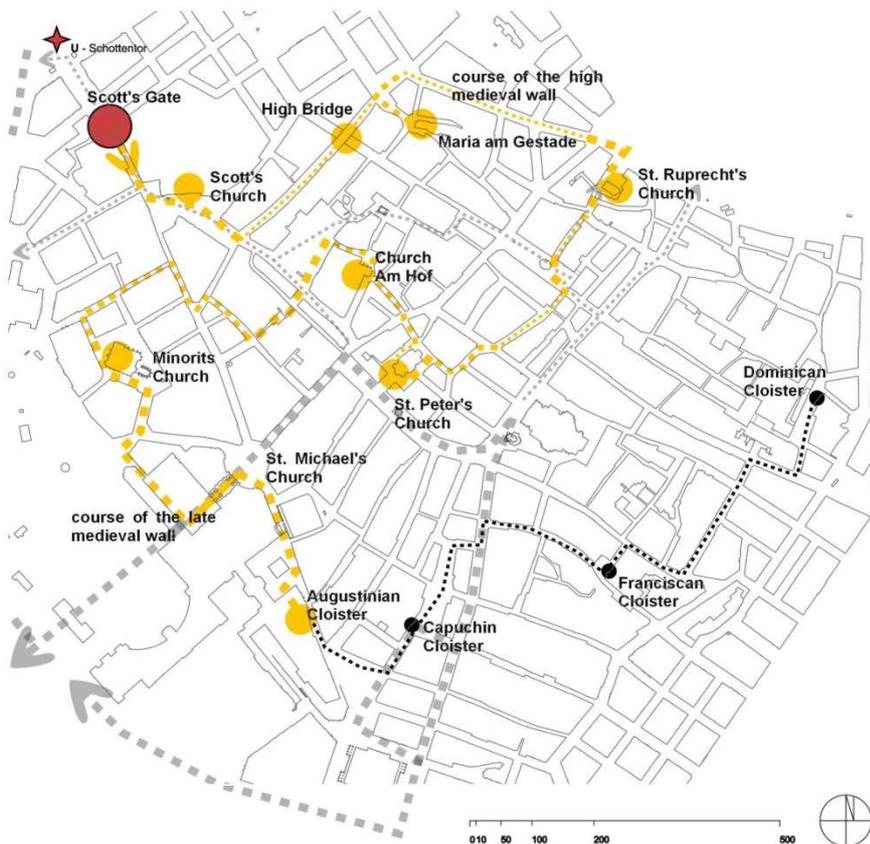


Fig. 8 – Route R3: Monastic Vienna (Copyright: Claudiu Silvestru)

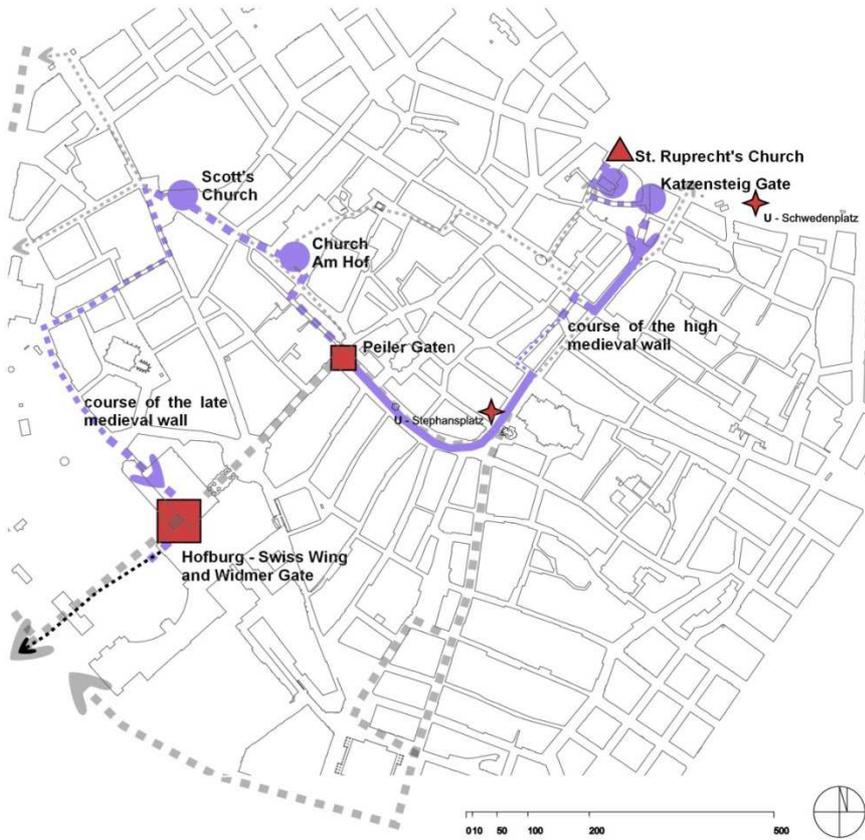


Fig. 9 – Route R4: Ducal Residence (Copyright: Claudiu Silvestru)

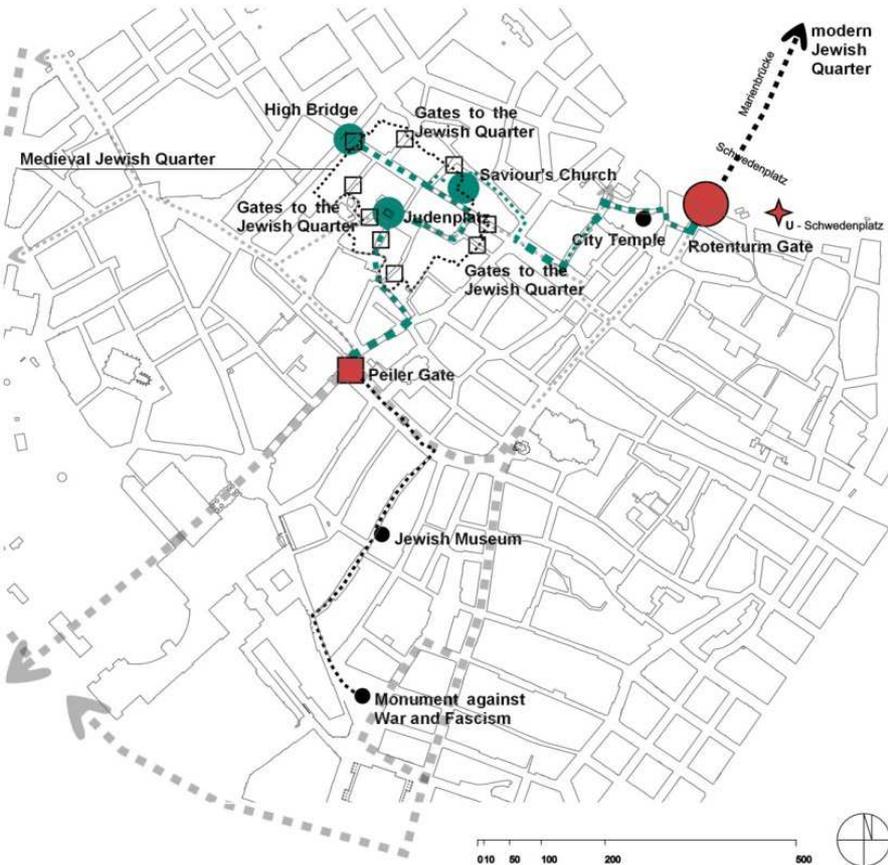


Fig. 10 – Route R5: The Jewish Quarter (Copyright: Claudiu Silvestru)

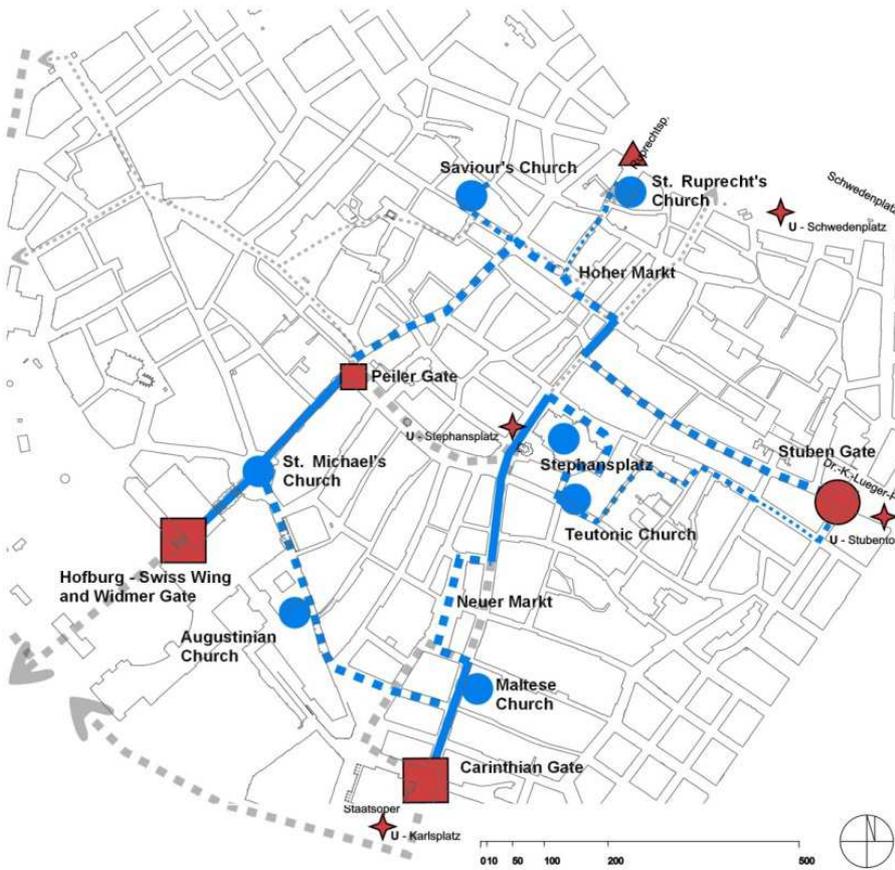


Fig. 11 – Route R6: Medieval Metropolis (Copyright: Claudiu Silvestru)

In the case of an interpretive route starting points, ending points and intermediate points as well as connecting elements should be related to the theme which it addresses. As far as possible only parts of the public space of medieval origins have been used for the routes. This automatically leads to neglecting the principle of the shortest path between two points and to an alternation of main and secondary spaces of the urban structure adapted to the theme. The heterogeneity of the experience space induces the illusion of independent exploration. Especially within the interpretation of the Viennese medieval heritage - which includes the street pattern - the visitor should experience public space and engage with its development. The sequence of spaces which is part of the thematic routes is used accordingly both in support of the interpretation as well as for producing an attractive, entertaining and diverse visit experience.

The freedom of exploration resp. the diversity of the visit experience arise from the contact points between the sub-themes: i.e the different main themes as well as buildings and urban spaces addressing multiple sub-themes (Fig.13). The intersections of the routes offer visitors the chance to link the narrative they experience to a different theme and switch to the corresponding route. This results in a non-linear sightseeing: a network of interpretations which deals with different meanings of assets, reflecting the complex development of Vienna in the Middle Ages and assuring the freedom of exploration of the visitor.

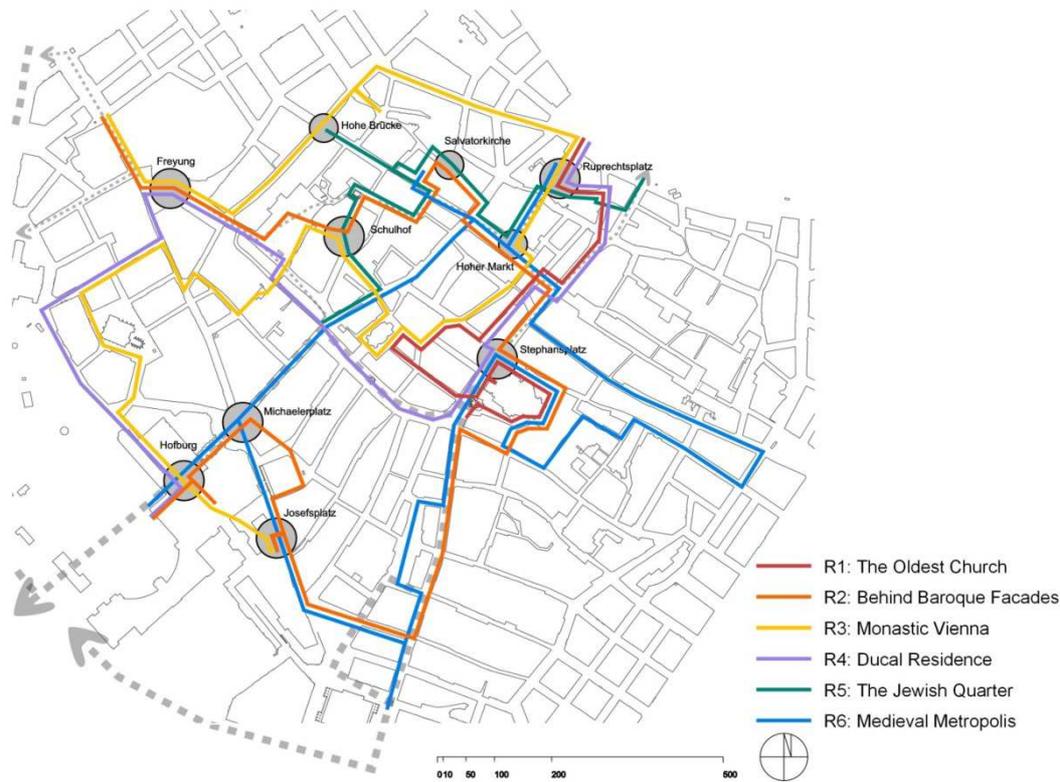


Fig. 12 – Network of Routes (Copyright: Claudiu Silvestru)

Conclusions

Due to the distribution of the buildings with medieval fabric, the route network connects the areas with a high density of tourist activity with areas that are less important for the image of the destination Vienna. Visitors are led in this way in "quieter" zones that invite lingering already through their nature - slower public life, intimate scale, appealing uses etc. By combining the staging of medieval heritage with a slow-down experience of the Viennese inner city, the existing offer will be extended by a niche attraction that differs in content from the cultural tourism image of imperial heritage. From the point of view of the experience the niche attraction relates to another specific of the destination: the bon-vivant and comfy image of Vienna.

The interpretive master plan described above combines the medieval heritage of Vienna with the staged experience of the historical urban area. In addition to the presentation of medieval buildings the chosen approach prioritized the interpretation of urban development as well as the possibility of in-depth engagement with the structure of public space. Therefore the medieval structure becomes readable and recognizable in its historical context. This intellectual accessibility defines it as a cultural heritage site the visitor - i.e. the heir - can relate to. The thematic routes and the included assets connect exterior and interior spaces turning the current public space into an element for staging its historical predecessor. This approach reduces the discrepancy between the relatively small number of buildings with medieval presence and the importance of the late medieval period in the development of Vienna and offers the visitor a coherent experience, in which the individual sites function as a link between the historical and the present cityscape.

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