



**Robert Rotenberg.** *Landscape and Power in Vienna.* Baltimore, Md.: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1995. xviii + 385 pp. \$39.95 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-8018-4961-9.

**Reviewed by** Barry Seldes (Rider University)  
**Published on** HABSBURG (December, 1995)

## Landscape and Power in Vienna

Rotenberg, an anthropologist, argues that landscapers from the baroque era to the present have designed Vienna's parks and gardens to represent particular world views and to legitimate or criticize given power relations. Students of town planning, including those who have read Carl Schorske's work on the Ringstrasse (1) already understand how city layout and built structures represent the dreams, fantasies and political outlooks of designers and those who commissioned them. Rotenberg extends this argument to include landscape design as a system of meanings. By skillful use of horticultural, layout and design manuals, interpretive texts, maps and legal codes, as well as insights gleaned from a panel of contemporary gardeners whom he interviewed over a number of years, Rotenberg builds his discussion of the profound interrelations between Vienna's politics and green culture as these developed over the last three centuries.

Rotenberg begins by spelling out methodological considerations and offering an historical overview of Vienna's formation, development and expansion. He then elaborates the cultural-political history of Vienna's green spaces in a series of chapters, each centered around what he finds the major period's exemplary garden type, with discussion divided into four sections – the first expository, the second, an elaboration or discourse on the particular garden type, the third, an analysis of social class motivation for producing that garden type, and the fourth, a description of the social order or what Foucault called the "heterotopia" represented by the garden.

The "garden of order" which dominated the period of seventeenth to mid-eighteenth century absolutism, and

exemplified by the gardens of the Belvedere and Schoenbrunn, was designed to legitimate Habsburg control over the natural and social environment. Landscapers borrowed French garden layout ideas, e.g. unswerving commitment to rectilinear and orthogonal layout, and the shaping of plantings into non-natural patterns, to produce sublime vistas and to indicate mastery over nature, respectively, and thus to instill in the stroller/viewer the awesomeness of Habsburg power.

Opposed to the baroque garden of order was the Enlightenment's "garden of liberty." If nature tamed was at the ideological center of earlier eighteenth century epistemology, nature as source of power and law had begun to emerge under Maria Theresa's reign in mid-century, and reached full bloom under that of Joseph II after 1780. The French garden of order was replaced by the freer-styled English garden design imported for the new garden of liberty realized for Enlightenment intellectuals and members of the rising middle-class. Landscape designers of this type of garden – its heyday was from late in the 18th century to 1820 – sought to liberate nature from its French confines and present it as subject to a will of its own. To English garden designers, nature, and by extension human nature, was playful and carefree; the garden's free forms would offer the promenader metaphoric representations of bourgeois ideals of civic and economic freedom.

The onset of the police state under Franz I and Metternich after the Napoleonic Wars drove the middle class from public life into the home and enclosed back yard. Fenced in and now safe from the agents of repression, the

Biedermeier family could build a “garden of domesticity” within which a rococo placement of icons, statuary and plantings from a variety of styles represented both affluence and a new sensuousness. According to Rotenberg, the placement of this mix of objects was in fact a political act. He had earlier noted (p. 57) that rococo design had been introduced into the Schoenbrunn garden during the later Enlightenment for entertainment’s sake – a clear break with the strict classical garden idea. Later, as the aristocracy began to employ neo-classical forms, the Biedermeier liberals turned to the rococo to symbolize their anti-aristocratic republicanism. (p. 108)

In the wake of the revolution of March, 1848, liberals recovered their place in the public sphere, and now sought expression for their new freedoms in a style which Rotenberg calls the “gardens of pleasure.” Down came the walls which had enclosed the gardens of domesticity, and in came a new design, akin to English garden design, marked by graceful curvilinear walks which took one around the house, now pushed into the middle of the garden. But the new political-economic order also brought the house and garden into the capitalist ethos – most manifest with the construction of the Ringstrasse and the rise of Ringstrasse culture. The values of house and garden were now regulated by “Hausdenken” –market ideology which reduced all objects to long-term investments, and thus to standardization.

Meanwhile, the presence of burgeoning lower middle class and working class populations within the industrializing city raised the question within liberal circles about how to represent bourgeois legitimacy and authority within mass-public recreation spaces. A new design regime was developed in 1861 for the Stadtpark, calling for English horticultural design which bespoke freedom in areas where the new mass clientele was encouraged to sit on the grass and otherwise enjoy the park’s amenities, but a French order where enforcement of decorum was called for. The English garden design was used for the Rathauspark (thereby reinforcing the neo-Gothic Rathaus structure’s attempt to recall civic republican virtues), with one major exception. As Rotenberg notes (p. 139), the area between the Fine Arts and Natural History museums, articulating with the Emperor’s palace, called for French design, not only for the sake of architectural unity, but to spare the Emperor the embarrassment of having a republican symbol stare him in the face.

By the last decade of the century, the ascension of the engineer’s ideology, functionalism, had found its

way into greenspace planning, leading to what Rotenberg calls the “garden of reform.” Greenspaces would be planned to rid the air of the soot which was apparently bringing tuberculosis to the city’s population. Engineers stressing use over ornament, greenspace urbanists such as Camille Sitte who fought to maintain curved streets fit for civic use rather than grid street patterns set up for high traffic volumes, and populist politicians such as the new Christian Social mayor, Karl Lueger, found themselves in a new confluence of interest. This coalition successfully promoted a new garden design which deemphasized horticultural considerations and emphasized popular usage with ease of movement, playgrounds and other amenities. The garden city idea and the Jugendstil notion of the city as a total work of art both found expression with the introduction of green spaces, including shrubs and trees planted within the city street network. These spaces, so-called *Schmuckplaetze* were designed, not as their name might imply, for ornamentation, but for functional purposes. These included not only hygiene but political legitimation, e.g. in the Ringstrasse, where, Rotenberg notes, the numbers of trees and their relative height served to point out the relative importance and status of institutional and governmental buildings. (pp. 180-81)

And yet, the very triumph of functionalism would call forth an opposition which would challenge the very basis of metropolitan machine-age civilization. That opposition would come to include, of course, fascism. Fascist ideology, already present before the formation of Lueger’s Christian Socials, and finally succeeding in the 1930’s, found material form in what Rotenberg calls the “garden of reaction,” less a garden as such, more the idea of *Bodenstaendigkeit* – a parcel of soil valued as the homeland of a tribal or racial community. Fascists would hold that the forces of modernity and urbanization had uprooted many from the traditional soil, while Jews and other outsiders had corrupted that soil. It followed that the organic group must return to the soil and eject the outsiders.

Rotenberg indicates that the fascists had predecessors in the garden movement. The turn-of-the-century *Wandervogel*, or the “wandering birds,” took long walks in the hills and dales of the mystical countryside, hoping to find their tribal or racial *Heimat* or “homeland,” and to regain their health lost in the city. Other groups were anti-modernist but not racist. They held to an organic view of nature which included soil and humans (*Biologismus*), held to an ecological view of *Bodenstaendigkeit*, understood nature as the site where modern corruptions must be contested by the ethically enlightened, and expected

people to return to the countryside to live in small communities. (p. 194) Many of these anti-modernist movements, such as nudists, had both right and left or progressive wings. The right-wing nudists deplored the unhealthy effects of city and factory, and discarded their cloths to celebrate the body made healthy by sun and good living; left-wing nudists discarded their cloths to reject bourgeois culture and symbolize revolutionary “daring.” (p. 195) Perhaps the most important non-racist “reactionary” movement had been founded by German “back to nature” *cum* homeopathy pedagogue Daniel Gottlieb Moritz Schreber (incidentally, the father of the schizophrenic Daniel Paul Schreber whose memoirs provided Freud with the material for his famed canonical case study). The “Schrebergaerten” movement had arrived in Austria by 1903, (p. 212) but essentially as a weekend activity for its Viennese members. The idea of permanently settling in the garden soon caught on with many, to become the critically important *Siedler* or settler movement. Nor was the *Siedler* movement necessarily right wing. Left wing *Siedler*, the Pioneers, had first appeared in Vienna when, in 1911, hungry working class families formed a cooperative, squatted on land, and built permanent houses and cooperative gardens. For the Left, the communal garden movement would produce in its members a sense of solidarity lost due to the alienating effects of industrial capitalism. By contrast, the right wing consisted of those who wanted to own their own houses and gardens.

By the end of the First World War three important gardener communities had emerged: the Schrebergaertner who lived apart from their gardens, and two full-time gardener tendencies, the progressive and right-wing *Siedler*, who took up residence on their greenspace. Where both *Siedler* movements were driven to the garden by the need to grow their own food – Rotenberg thus dubs their gardens “gardens of refuge” – the Pioneers emphasized community, while the right-wing tendency, which, following Rotenberg I will call “*Siedler*” proper, held to the old Hausdenken idea of home as investment, and otherwise emphasized house and garden as personal or family property. Inasmuch as it was property ownership as such which defined the right-wing *Siedler*, and not necessarily racial homogeneity and Bodenstaendigkeit, the lower middle class or *Kleinbuenger* mentality of the *Siedler* of the 1920’s was not necessarily fascist. Nevertheless, many *Siedler* would soon find their ideological home within Nazism as the politics of housing and gardens heated up during the 1920s and 1930s, and would adopt as a cardinal assumption the belief that the

racial *Volk* would regain moral and ethical health with a move to the soil.

Polarization developed over housing policy. Social-Democrats had tended to emphasize “Superbaublock” and other large-scale apartment house building, not *Siedler* communities, as the most efficient way to alleviate the housing crisis. They also assumed that the layout of the public housing complexes such as the Karl Marx-Hof, with its interior parks and educational, medical and shopping facilities, would bring a sense of social and political solidarity to its embattled working-class denizens (although the tiny apartments, barrack-like washing amenities and long lines at the shops [pp. 245 and 364 n.29] must have caused a lot of grumbling). In any event, the Viennese Social Democrats were unable to maintain electoral majorities. At best rather reluctant sponsors of single-home garden complexes, they offered the property-conscious *Siedler* little reason to vote socialist. Not only the *Siedler* adherents found the politics of the Right attractive. So too did private real estate investors who found the values of their rental apartment properties sinking each time a municipally-sponsored public apartment building opened its doors. The Right proved victorious: by the late 1930s, *Siedler* outlook had come to hegemony within Vienna municipal politics.

In the immediate aftermath of the Second World War, hungry Viennese reconstructed their food-growing gardens of refuge, but with recovery gardeners stopped growing foodstuffs and turned their gardens into what Rotenberg calls “gardens of renewal.” The great impetus to renewal arose with the city’s economic and social recovery. Vienna was to be filled with greenspaces and gardens. Wedges, lines and other parcels of green would extend from the outer areas of Vienna, the Wald and Wiesenguertel, which included the Wienerwald, into the city core. Home owners were encouraged to create gardens which would emphasize beauty and health, the latter the result expected from the hard labor required to maintain the lawns, bushes and flower beds which surrounded the house front and back. Rotenberg very skillfully spells out how the ideology of the garden of renewal combined elements of Biedermeier and reaction, but with a strong individualist-bourgeois rather than organic-fascist outlook – a kind of sanitized romanticism in which one cultivated one’s garden with native plants and thereby created a family Heimat. The garden might be open, with lawn joining neighbors, or closed. That the latter case predominated seems to have been the result of a widely-held popular desire for shelter and isolation. Rotenberg argues that such a Biedermeier-like

sensibility arose in the minds of many who needed to overcome what he calls the “humiliation” suffered by being on the losing end of the war, the “illusion of ‘victimization’ at the hands of the Germans,” and the fear of the Cold War turning hot. (p. 287) To these must be added the psychological and ideological effects of upward mobility into the middle class, and the apparent pervasion and permeation of managerialism and systems theory into middle-classes across the advanced industrial world through the 1950s and early 1960s. In this outlook, the individual aspires to own a house and garden. The garden is then managed as a small business – after all, it is an investment – and the successful garden is thus a sign of higher value and moral and social stability. The rise of the idea of everyone a bourgeois was manifest in the steadily growing strength of the Siedler movement. Rotenberg takes his reader through some legislative history to point out how the Siedler movement has been able to obtain municipal legislation which expands personal rights, not only to build houses on garden land, but to use them throughout the year, the latter forbidden by earlier legal codes. The movement has fought to privatize garden colonies and thereby make parcels available for the housing and real estate markets. In fact, the coalition of Siedler and real estate interests is today contending with the coalition of ecology/green interests and departments of municipal government intent upon preserving, if not expanding, Vienna’s green spaces and public recreational and sports facilities. So profound is this division, writes Rotenberg, that “the city is faced with a cultural crisis.” (p. 288)

Even as this crisis seems to dominate Vienna’s green politics, an alternative garden outlook has emerged. This is the “garden of discovery” set up by ecologists who would form wild gardens or otherwise let seeds mature in order to discover the rhythms and patterns of nature itself. Gardens of discovery grow in backyards, on apartment house roofs, and other available spaces. The gardener is more an observer than a tenderer or manager, for nothing is designed or planted, mowed, shaped or shorn. Rotenberg is clearly a partisan of these ecologists who are members of the Green Party and the coalition of socialists and others who support the further development of Vienna’s public greenspaces.

Rotenberg has written an important study. He wants his readers to understand that political views shaped the gardens and parks in each great period in Viennese life – baroque, Enlightenment, Biedermeier, liberal/Ringstrasse, reactionary, socialist, fascist, post-war, and present. His reader has learned that the groups and classes which aspire to positions of political power must monopolize or at least take a major share in the formation of cultural meanings manifest in landscape design. The reader is certainly helped by Rotenberg’s organization of material and clarity of writing – the work is meant for the general reader. The author has supplied copious notes, many of which are short essays in their own right, bibliography, maps and other illustrations to support his work and the reader’s efforts. The reader who likes to comment directly in the text will enjoy the generous page margins provided by the book designer.

How well the author has succeeded in fulfilling the ethnographic component of his design – to obtain from his panel of some twenty interviewees a sense of cultural continuity and self-consciousness – I must ultimately leave to anthropologists. Rotenberg claims that his thinking was formed with the insights he obtained from the panel, but I must add that he has not organized these sometimes-quoted materials of subjective, first-hand experience and reflection systematically. Generalizations regarding the deeper strains of Viennese culture and garden-cultural life would prove very interesting. I would also have enjoyed reading accounts of civic life in the heady first moments (1927-) of the Karl Marx-Hof. But it may be unfair to fault Rotenberg on this matter. Anyone who could have helped him to reconstruct such life would have to have been at least in his or her 70’s in the years 1986-91, when Rotenberg conducted his interviews. Are there no extant memoirs? But I must end on a positive note. There is much to be learned from this work. Indeed, urbanists, Habsburg architectural and cultural historians, and visitors to Vienna, will enjoy Rotenberg’s study of the city’s green spaces.

#### Note

[1]. “The Ringstrasse, Its Critics, and the Birth of Urban Modernism,” in *Fin-de-Siecle Vienna: Politics and Culture*. (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1981), 24-115.

If there is additional discussion of this review, you may access it through the network, at:

<https://networks.h-net.org/habsburg>

**Citation:** Barry Seldes. Review of Rotenberg, Robert, *Landscape and Power in Vienna*. HABSBURG, H-Net Reviews. December, 1995.

**URL:** <http://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php?id=235>

Copyright © 1995 by H-Net, all rights reserved. H-Net permits the redistribution and reprinting of this work for nonprofit, educational purposes, with full and accurate attribution to the author, web location, date of publication, originating list, and H-Net: Humanities & Social Sciences Online. For any other proposed use, contact the Reviews editorial staff at [hbooks@mail.h-net.msu.edu](mailto:hbooks@mail.h-net.msu.edu).