

Law in the Landscape: How fire, and the threat of it, has left a mark on Vienna's urban fabric

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A. Introduction

Since arriving in Vienna in 2003 it has been my pleasure to explore the historic streets of this fascinating city, in my profession both as a historian and as a travel writer¹. Much like an archaeologist I have peeled away the layers of modern society in a quest for Vienna's past. Fascinating as they are, however, the old stones I've unearthed provide only half a story, and a sometimes lifeless one at that. The rest must be fleshed out with the living. In this respect I am especially grateful to University-Professor Dr. Wolfgang Zankl, a Viennese and proud of it, who has not only expressed his approval of my research but also added considerably to my knowledge.

Dr. Zankl – to whom this short article is humbly dedicated – once commented that a city can not really call itself a 'city' if it never had a city wall. With these words in mind I have often walked along Vienna's Ringstrasse, the imposing 19th century boulevard built on ground once occupied by the city's massive Renaissance walls. From Max Fabiani's Urania in the south to Erich Boltenstern's Ringturm in the north the 'Ring' is today adorned with some of the city's most iconic structures. All have been documented admirably in myriad books, with one exception: the Ringtheater on Schottenring. The destruction of this building by fire in December 1881 not only altered forever the appearance of this part of the Ring, but also highlighted a desperate need for the stringent application of new laws relating to fire prevention. My retelling of the Ringtheater story also provides a perfect opportunity to reflect on the long history of fighting and preventing fires in Europe, and how such activities have impacted on the present-day urban fabric of Vienna.

During many enlightening encounters with Dr. Zankl I have detected abiding passions for Vienna (his city) and for the law (his profession). It is my hope that the following article, which includes some elements of both, will prove of interest to him.

¹ Duncan J. D. Smith, *Only in Vienna* (Christian Brandstätter Verlag, 2005).

B. Babylon Burning – More than 3,000 years of fire legislation

The earliest known law relating to fire is recorded in the Code of Hammurabi (*Codex Hammurabi*) dating back to c. 1760 BC². The Babylonian king and law-giver legislated that “If fire break out in a house, and some one who comes to put it out cast his eye upon the property of the owner of the house...he shall be thrown into that self-same fire”. Whilst perhaps reducing theft in ancient Babylon it is doubtful that such a law did much to actually prevent fires. For this we must turn to ancient Rome.

Following a serious conflagration in Rome in 6 BC the Emperor Augustus replaced the city's existing fire brigade, which was made up of slaves, with a corps of so-called *vigiles* (firefighters and watchmen), consisting of seven cohorts, each of a thousand freedmen. Each cohort was responsible for fire and, especially at night, police protection in two of the city's fourteen *regiones*. Equipped with buckets, water syphons, axes, and dousing blankets it was the dawn of the fire service as we know it. This wouldn't be enough to stop the burning of Rome in 64 AD, however, after which new building regulations stipulated the need for broad access roads, standardised house façades, restricted use of timber, and subsidies to ensure that the construction of private dwellings also adhered to the law.

Meanwhile, far from Rome, on the eastern border of the empire, a fire brigade comprising military veterans was formed in 150 AD in Carnuntum, the capital of the Roman province of Pannonia. A similar force was deployed in the nearby legionary fortress of Vindobona (modern Vienna) in 220 AD. And it was just three decades after this that St. Florian, the patron saint of firefighters, was born in Aelium Cetium (modern St. Pölten), in the region that would later be known as Lower Austria.

A high-ranking officer in the Roman army, Florian is remembered for refusing an order to



put Christian properties to the torch, declaring instead his own strong Christian beliefs. When Florian subsequently failed to make the required sacrifices to the pagan gods of ancient Rome he was sentenced to death by burning. After taunting his executioners with boasts of how he would climb to heaven on the flames Florian was drowned instead in the River Enns. Several statues of St. Florian can be seen in Vienna today, usually in the act of extinguishing a burning house with a pail of water (e.g. on a building in Sobieskiplatz in the 9th District of Alsergrund).

² L. W. King (trans.), *The Code of Hammurabi* (Yale University, 2005).

With the fall of the Roman Empire the art of fire prevention was lost in Central Europe until 1221, when the Babenberg Duke of Austria, Leopold VI, passed a law whereby those whose houses caught fire, threatening others in the vicinity, were liable to a large fine.



With such a threat hanging over them, and the knowledge that a soot-filled chimney was usually the cause, it is little wonder that the Viennese began viewing the humble chimney sweep as a harbinger of good luck. This is still felt strongly in the city today. The huge figure of a chimney sweep, for example, hangs outside the lotto office on Wipplingerstrasse, where it acts as a symbol of good fortune. Similarly, tiny

effigies of chimney sweeps are amongst the most popular lucky charms exchanged in Vienna at New Year.

With the accession of the Habsburgs to the Austrian throne further fire legislation followed. Emperor Ferdinand I, for instance, issued specific instructions in 1534 as to how fires should be handled in the capital. Certain trades, such as blacksmiths and carpenters, were to play key roles in firefighting, and the city treasurer was to finance these activities. In 1686, two years after the Great Fire of London, Vienna's first fire brigade was founded, with four firefighters (Fueurknechte) storing their equipment in the Civic Armoury (Bürgerliches Zeughaus) on Am Hof. Further legislation followed during the 18th century, by which the army was to be brought in if several fires started simultaneously.

The 19th century saw great leaps forward in the provision of firefighting equipment, the first respirator arriving in Vienna in 1812, after two chimney sweeps suffocated in a smoke-filled cellar. Another important development came in 1838, when a watchmaker from Klagenfurt signed up for duty as Austria's first voluntary fireman. A decade later the newfound confidence that spread amongst the citizens of Vienna in the wake of the French Revolution of 1848 was reflected in the formation of further volunteer fire brigades, including the first in Krems, Lower Austria, in 1861.

Still the threat of fire remained high, due mainly to the preponderance of buildings with thatched and timber-shingled roofs, as well as the use of candles and oil lamps. What Vienna needed was a city centre fire station. During the early 18th century Austria's most influential Baroque architect, Johann Bernhard Fischer von Erlach, had voiced the need for this, if only as a means of protecting his own work, which included the magnificent Hofburg library, the *Prunksaal*. However, it was not until 1848, when Viennese citizens stormed the Civic Armoury on Am Hof, looking for weapons with which to arm

themselves, that a fire station was opened here (the Armoury was re-located to a purpose-built Arsenal in Landstrasse). Incidentally, adjacent to the former Armoury, behind the palatial façade at Am Hof 7-9, is today's Central Fire Station (Feuerwehr Zentrale), installed here in 1935. Vienna's Fire Service Museum (Feuerwehrmuseum) can be found on the first floor of the building and contains a reconstruction of a look-out post (*Alte Türmestube*), which was once installed in the spire of the Stephansdom³. The post was used for fire watching between 1534 and 1956.

C. The Ringtheater Ignites – A disaster waiting to happen

In June 1870 the Austrian Parliament decreed that the responsibility for firefighting be transferred to the regional municipalities, each with its own police force and fire chief. The Lower Austrian fire brigade federation was founded a year later, and in 1873



Vienna's first steam-powered fire engine (*Dampf-Spritzenwagen*) was demonstrated at the World Exhibition in the Prater. Despite such readiness, however, some of Vienna's buildings remained perilously unprepared for a fire. The Ringtheater at Schottenring 7, on the northern stretch of the Ringstrasse, would become the most infamous of these.

The Ringtheater was unveiled on January 17th 1874 as the Wiener Theater, an *Opéra Comique*, providing a counterpoint to the seriousness of the K. K. Hofopertheater (later the Wiener Staatsoper). In September 1878, however, the artistic focus of the Wiener Theater shifted to spoken plays, German and Italian opera, and variety, and it was renamed the Ringtheater.



Given that the footprint of the Ringtheater was small – and that the building was intended to hold an audience of 1700 – the architect Emil von Förster (1838-1909) was forced to build high and narrow, but with disastrous consequences. On December 8th 1881 a fire broke out shortly before a performance of *Les Contes d'Hoffmann*. Known thereafter as the *Ringtheaterbrand* it gutted the

building within a few hours killing at least 384 people in the process⁴.

³ The Vienna Fire Service Museum at Am Hof 7 is open on Sundays and Public Holidays from 9am-Noon, and Monday-Friday by prior arrangement, Tel. 0043-1-531 99.

⁴ *Zeitzeichen* on Westdeutscher Rundfunk 5 (8th December 2006).

The cause of the fire remains a mystery, although it is known that the stage lamps were lit at 6.45pm, while the curtain was still down, in readiness for the performance to begin. Perhaps one of these lamps, which could raise the temperature of wooden stage scenery to 70° centigrade, was to blame? For reasons unknown the safety curtain was not lowered and the flames burst quickly out into the front seats. In the ensuing panic the theatre's telegraph system was not used to summon the fire brigade, nor were the water taps on the stage activated.



At this point, what began as a manageable accident turned quickly into a human catastrophe. So as not to quicken the spread of the fire the management switched off the flickering gas jets, which were used for illumination in theatres at the time. The emergency oil lighting in the narrow and windowless hallways, which led to the theatre's four galleries, had been left inoperable after recent repair work. Those trying to escape the flames were consequently plunged into darkness.

Whilst most of the performers were able to make their escape through the back of the building, the terrified theatregoers stumbled *en masse* towards the exit on Schottenring. Here they became trapped, since the main doors only opened inwards. The scene was horrific, as recorded later in gruesome detail by the world's press. With the doors firmly closed and the fire raging behind them those that didn't succumb to the flames were soon asphyxiated.



Within an hour the building was like a furnace, fuelled by the lavish internal decorations that were made of highly combustible light wood and *papier maché*. The uppermost gallery, containing the cheapest seats, had no windows opening directly outside, so rescue by ladder was impossible. By contrast, some fifty people from the more exclusive first floor gallery were saved by their jumping from the windows onto sheets held out by the fire brigade on the pavement below. Here a surreal scene was unfolding as bodies slowly piled up and it began to snow.

By 11.30pm only the outside walls of the theatre remained standing. By this time those still unaccounted for had undoubtedly been reduced to cinders. Bizarrely, the ornate façade of the theatre, with its confident statues of theatrical muses, was still intact. It is a little-known fact that these Classical-style statues were later taken down and used to adorn the Pötzleinsdorfer Schlosspark, where they can still be found today.

D. Phoenix from the Ashes – Old Europe gets new fire laws



As the Ringtheater burned, Emperor Franz-Josef I (1830-1916) was at his Hungarian summer residence in Gödöllő. Upon hearing the shocking news he rushed back to Vienna and the city went into a period of deep mourning. In the immediate aftermath of the fire the pioneer of modern forensic pathology, Eduard von Hofmann (1837-1897), a professor at the University of Vienna, was brought in to examine the bodies. His autopsies deemed carbon monoxide poisoning to be the primary cause of many of the deaths.

Those who had lost family members were offered financial assistance, and a considerable amount of money was raised at the city's stock exchange (*Börse*), which stood almost



directly opposite the burned out ruins. The imperial family also contributed and in time a so-called *Sühnhaus* (house of atonement) was built on the former theatre site at the emperor's expense. Used for charitable purposes it was demolished in 1951, after being damaged during the Second World War, and was replaced by Vienna's federal police headquarters (a plaque commemorating the Ringtheater fire can be seen on the building today).

Blame for the failure to halt the Ringtheater fire and for not saving more lives was laid at the feet of two men. One of them, the Ringtheater's newly-ennobled director Franz Jauner, was held responsible for the lack of emergency oil lighting and for failing to keep the theatre's fire buckets filled. The emperor stripped him of his title (awarded for directing the K. K. Hofoperntheater between 1875 and 1880) and had him thrown into prison for three months. Returning to the theatre in later life Jauner eventually shot himself after falling victim to financial mismanagement.

The second potentially guilty party was the Austrian Prime Minister and chief of secret police Count Eduard von Taaffe. Ironically, he had ordered an investigation into the safety of all Vienna's theatrical venues following the burning of the Théâtre Royale in Nice in March 1881. That particular fire, which had been caused by a faulty gas main, had claimed the lives of ninety-two people. Von Taaffe's report concluded that existing building and fire regulations in Vienna were woefully inadequate. Numerous urgent improvements were deemed necessary: emergency exits should be clearly marked and

fitted with emergency oil lighting in the event of the gas supply being switched off; the wire-mesh safety curtain (made today of iron) separating the stage from the auditorium should be lowered at all times, except during rehearsals and performance; separate gas mains should be used for the stage and for the auditorium; and all doors serving as exits for the audience should open outwards. By the time of the Ringtheater fire it was clear that not all of these improvements had been instigated.

Von Taaffe's recommendations finally became law in 1882 and were emulated in theatres around the globe. At the same time Vienna's network of fire alarms and water hydrants was improved, and outward-opening doors became commonplace in all buildings accessible to the public, from the grandest of theatres to the most modest of corner shops. To some of today's visitors from *outside* continental Europe, this author included, outward-swinging doors are still quite a novelty to behold.

The effect of these new regulations was felt quickly. On 16th May 1884, for example, the Wiener Stadttheater set alight and its interior was gutted. A proposal to rebuild a theatre on the same site was refused by the Lower Austrian authorities on the basis of the new fire regulations: in this case the access to the site was not deemed good enough. Consequently, in March 1887 the ruin was sold to Anton Ronacher, who built an eponymously-named concert hall and ballroom on the site, with tables where the theatre stalls had once been. Similarly, when Vienna's Volkstheater was unveiled in 1889, the new regulations were clearly reflected in the architecture of the building, which was given an isolated site and exhibited a clear structural separation between auditorium and stage, which were given separate roofs. The Volkstheater also featured a fireproofed iron stage and electric lighting.

By 1908 the improved situation in Europe even warranted an article in the *New York Times*⁵, bemoaning the fact that the cities of the New World were suffering more fires each month than those of London, Paris, Berlin and Vienna were in six months. Regarding Vienna it stated the following: "There is no case known in this city where a conflagration has extended beyond the building in which it originated, and even hardly any cases are known where a fire extended beyond the floor on which it originated. This is prevented by the solidity of the buildings, by strict fire regulations, and by a pretty well-trained Fire Department".

It would be another three decades, and the appearance of Allied bombers in the skies over the city, before well-built Vienna and its well-trained firemen would again face the threat of destruction by fire.

⁵ "Why Should America Have So Many More Disastrous Fires Than Europe?" *New York Times*, 1908