

The Otto Wagner Hospital – a potential World Heritage Site

“The Otto Wagner hospital together with the Art Nouveau church St. Leopold is a unique cultural property of outstanding universal value” – a formulation used in the UNESCO guidelines for characterizing World Heritage Sites according to the Convention concerning the Protection of the World Cultural and Natural Heritage.

The ‘Niederösterreichische Landes- Heil- und Pflegeanstalt ‘Am Steinhof’ (the original title of the hospital) was drafted by Carlo von Boog, symmetrically oriented by Otto Wagner and politically facilitated by Leopold Steiner, corresponds, together with the hospital church planned by Otto Wagner, to the criteria (i), (ii), (iv) and (vi) of the Convention.

The church St. Leopold in itself corresponds to criteria (i), (ii) and (iv). A unique Art Nouveau sacral building, the church is a master piece of human creativity in the Belle Epoque; it is an outstanding example of a sacral building of Art Nouveau directed particularly to the needs of sick and invalid persons. Additionally, the entire hospital site as an architectural ensemble underlines the assessment according to the said criteria.

The Otto Wagner hospital is comparable to the two already existing World Heritage hospital sites, the Hospital de la Santa Creu i Sant Pau in Spain and the Cabañas-Hospice of Guadalajara in Mexico. Because of the unique significance the church St. Leopold even surpasses the importance of the existing World Heritage hospitals, last not least because these two existing World Heritage sites no longer have active hospital and nursing functions.

The Otto Wagner hospital has one additional characteristic that does not apply to the two existing World Heritage hospitals, that is, however, an important criterion for UNESCO, i.e. that of a memorial. The ‘dark history’ of the Otto Wagner hospital during the National Socialist era, with medical experiments on innocent children and the inhuman treatment of so-called antisocial elements, corresponds to criterion (vi).

On the international level the declaration of the Otto Wagner hospital ‘Am Steinhof’ (with its Art Nouveau church St. Leopold) would with great probability be declared a ‘World Heritage of Mankind’ by ICOMOS and UNESCO provided that a very detailed documentation following the UNESCO guidelines can be presented. Before that, the Otto Wagner hospital complex would have had to be included in the national ‘tentative list’.”

A comparative feasibility study compiled by DI Christian Schuhböck (sworn-in certified expert specialized on World Heritage and National Parks) comes to the above conclusion.

Accordingly, several members of Parliament have already filed a petition demanding that the Otto Wagner hospital “Am Steinhof” and the Art Nouveau style church should be put on the tentative list in order to indicate to UNESCO that the nomination of this universally important hospital complex and its Art Nouveau church will be presented by the Republic of Austria.