



In Vienna, 'Matrix' Meets 'Sound Of Music'

A modern look arrives
in the suburbs, with
elbows that aren't too
sharp.



Photographs by Herta and Paul Amirian

NEWCOMERS Jürgen Bauer and Beatrix Roidinger, with their son Camillo, above right, represent Vienna's new suburbanites. Their low-slung house, left, has dormers coated with polyurethane, top, and a second-floor work area, inset top, known as "the cockpit."

By ALASTAIR GORDON

SHORTLY after Jürgen Bauer and Beatrix Roidinger moved into their house, two police officers on their midnight rounds walked onto the property, mistaking it for a construction site. They walked all the way into the master bedroom before realizing their error. "Who are you?" one of them asked the startled residents. "We live here," Mr. Bauer replied from beneath the bedcovers.

Two years later, it is still a house that seems to demand closer inspection. With its sci-fi dormers and long, low profile inspired by ship construction and 60's movies, it has also been mistaken for a cafe, a housing project or a weather station.

Perched on a hillside in the northwest part

of Vienna, it conspicuously breaks with convention while still managing to fit within the picturesque neighborhood of steeply pitched roofs and pocket-size gardens.

Ms. Roidinger, 38, and Mr. Bauer, 46, began producing techno rock in 1993, and they started their own recording company five years later. Now fugitives from the club scene, they have made a new life for themselves and their two children in this outer district near the Vienna Woods.

"We wanted a house that would give us the freedom to stay close to our children but also go on with our careers and continue being creative," Ms. Roidinger said, pointing out the spire of the 700-year-old Cathedral of St. Stephan while her 2-year-old son Camillo parolled the front yard and his 5-year-old brother, Lino, played quietly in his bedroom.

"My horror vision was to end up settling in

a little house and die," she said. "People have children and feel like they have to act like their parents or grandparents, but I don't feel at all like that. I feel like I am 25 and will always remain that age."

The hills around Vienna are alive with the sound of concrete mixers as a wave of Viennese like Mr. Bauer and Ms. Roidinger migrate from the city center to start families and escape apartment life. As a result, the outlying districts have become testing grounds for inventive new architecture.

"The image of architects is that they are very expensive and very arty, but that isn't always true," said Volker Dienst, a curator and architecture writer. "In Vienna we have a high density of young architects who would rather make buildings than make theory. They

Continued on Page 9

are willing to take on smaller residential projects, often for friends, without earning much money."

Most of the new houses are built on modest-size lots in the districts that lie outside the Gürtel, the road that encircles Vienna's nine central districts. Within a few miles of Mr. Bauer's and Ms. Roidinger's house is a steel pavilion with interchangeable panels of glass and plywood known as the Teahouse. Built in 2000 at a cost of about \$139,000 on a steep site overlooking a vineyard, it was designed by Georg Marterer and Thomas Moosmann for a professional tea taster.

"We wanted to create a sense of the patient sensibility of the professional tea taster," Mr. Marterer said. "It was a difficult site, so we made a house that one or two men could put together by hand."

In the town of Mödling, just south of Vienna, a couple in their mid-30's hired a firm called the Unit to design a minimal white cube with a reddish-orange curtain that billows across the garden facade like a giant matador's cape. "They studied books on architecture and told us that they wanted something wide and pure and clean," said Peter Reindl, a partner in the Unit. The curtain was used to bring in color and to soften the stark white geometries of the house, which cost about \$435,000 at its completion late last year. "It creates a wonderful warm light," Mr. Reindl said.

What these projects have in common is a sense of experimental design for real life. "Young Viennese couples are well educated and have modern tastes in fashion and architecture," Mr. Reindl said. "They don't want to live in an average house. They want something special and timeless."

Not surprisingly, some new residences have been greeted with resistance. Some neighbors tried to stop the Teahouse from being built, according to Mr. Marterer, by complaining to their local council that it was too modern. And when a futuristic glass tube designed by Georg Driendl was built in a nearby part of town, one longtime resident declared that the area had gone "kaput." But most neighbors have been surprisingly tolerant of the newcomers.

Some of these outlying neighborhoods were filled with small summer homes built after World War II for low-income workers. In the past few years, zoning restrictions have been eased, allowing some innovation and gentrification.

After holding an informal competition through three firms, Ms. Roidinger and Mr. Bauer chose a firm called Querkraft, whose four principals look and act like members of a brainy rock band.

"We liked their work, but we also liked their energy," Ms. Roidinger said. "We didn't want architects who would be annoyed by our own creativity."

The firm's name can be translated



Photographs by Hertha Burkau, bottom right, Nikolaus Koreb, bottom left, Mariet Moosmann Arch



SCI-FI LIFE Jürgen Bauer and Beatrix Roidinger asked the members of the design firm Querkraft, left, to create an experiment in family living, below left. Above, their son Lino on the roof deck. Below right, conspicuously public bathroom looks out on a covered terrace.



as "the art of lateral thinking." As Peter Sapp, one of the four principals, explained, "If some problem comes along, we try to think about it in a different way — laterally. We look behind the questions."

The house, the second one by Querkraft, is definitely different. Part cave, part spaceship, it has open interiors with floor-to-ceiling windows overlooking the Vienna skyline to the south.

The construction, which cost about \$315,000 at the time, was basic: a rectilinear shell of cast concrete burrows into the hillside like a bunker. The back of the shell acts as a retaining wall, while steel columns support the front. A floating concrete staircase ascends to a small work area, known as "the cockpit," flanked by two boxy dormers, or "pods," coated with polyurethane. "They are like two TV sets looking down on Vienna," said Michael Zimmer, one of the other architects.

The house was set back on the 1,345-square-meter plot (about a third of an acre) to leave as much

Echoes of the Enterprise in houses that go where none have gone before.



NEIGHBORS The glass Teahouse by Georg Marterer and Thomas Moosmann, left. Above, a cube with a facade curtain by the Unit.

garden area in the front as possible for the children to play in. A ground-level terrace stretches the length of the house and is sheltered by clear plastic roofing supported by steel outriggers. A clump of unruly bamboo pushes against the underside of the canopy. "I think we must cut a hole to let it grow," Ms. Roidinger said.

At first impression, the house appears raw and unresolved, but the design is disarmingly direct. "We are interested in building atmospheres for living, not architectural monuments," Mr. Sapp said. While the house grows out of 20th-century modernism, it makes no heroic gestures. The exposed structure, the open deck and the bulging dormers make it feel like a piece of clothing turned inside out to reveal rough seams and stitching.

Cutting-edge modern elements have been softened and childproofed with padding and rounded edges. Carpeting covers every surface in the dormer. Nylon netting, the kind used for hockey goals, is stretched on

either side of the open staircase and around the perimeter of the roof deck as a safety measure for the children.

From the outset, the couple and their architects agreed on a 1960's action aesthetic inspired by James Bond movies and John Lautner's houses. "I told the architects that it must look like Kubrick or 'Barbarella,'" Ms. Roidinger said. "It must look like Starship Enterprise."

The retro styling was combined with eco-conscious materials like steinwolte, an insulation that is used as an alternative to fiberglass. The back wall of the living area has been sprayed with an ochre-colored coating made from clay and sand that enhances the cave-like atmosphere while helping to absorb excess humidity. And the carpeting in the upstairs rooms is made from sheep's wool affixed to the floor and walls with a natural rubber from South America.

This area is designated as a special "kleingarten," or "little garden," zone where houses are restricted to 50 square meters (about 540 square feet) of floor space or less. But by building part of the underground, the architects and owners managed to build 250 square meters, or about 2,700 square feet.

Under the law, they could have added two more floors, but they chose to lower the profile of the house as much as possible, to preserve their neighbors' views.

Unlike its more traditional neighbors, the house has no clear point of entry or logical succession of rooms.

"We have a flexible concept of space," Ms. Roidinger said. Since she and her family moved in two years ago, they continue to modify and experiment. "We change rooms whenever we feel like it." A downstairs bathroom, for example, has a prime position looking out on the panoramic views.

Shortly after the family moved in, four curious passers-by walked into the property and peered into the bathroom. "They just stood there staring," Ms. Roidinger said.

The garden is still being landscaped, and a pool is partly built. The family will soon change the wood on the terrace to match the interior floors, blurring the line between inside and out. "We are learning how to live half inside, half outside, and learning how to integrate our life with the garden," Ms. Roidinger said.

There is hardly any distinction between private and family spaces, and boundaries between work and living areas are not always clear. A narrow breezeway separates the family quarters from an office wing, allowing an easy flow between the two.

In the Vienna suburbs, inventive architecture is more than an idea to be admired in books. It is increasingly a way of life — not always perfect, but charged with a sense of adventure.

"Living here is a process of discovery after years of living in the city," Ms. Roidinger said. "When I am wired from work and can't sleep, I visualize entering the house and garden. It makes me calm, and I am able to fall asleep."