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Talking the talk about walking Jane's Walk

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Jane's Walk is a transcontinental network that encourages community-building by having regular people join for free walking tours where they discuss their impressions and tell each other about their neighborhoods. It's based on the ideas of urbanist Jane Jacobs, who advocated the active participation of communities in the building of their city. Last weekend, from May 1st – May 3rd, Vienna was part of its walking tour festival for the second time. We met up with Andreas Lindinger, a business consultant and environmental expert, but also the Jane's Walk's City Organizer for Vienna. Of course, we also took part in a Jane's Walk: the '(Con)Temporary Vienna' tour.

Our meeting point is at Mobiles Stadtlabor in front of the Technical University in the Resselpark (<http://www.openhouse-wien.at/mobiles-stadtlabor-der-tu-wien.html>). It's an interesting project and a nice starting point because it combines the appropriation of a (very) public space by a group of students with the concept of a co-working facility. It is there that our two guides, Anna-Maria from Archiloop (<http://archiloop.blogspot.co.at>) and Thomas from urbanize (<http://urbanize.com>), welcome us and encourage us to observe and comment on our surroundings during the walk and to pick up and carry along interesting stuff if the chance presents itself.

According to Andreas Lindinger, that is precisely the point of Jane's Walk. "When I moved to Vancouver for a year in 2012, I stumbled across that year's Jane's Walk weekend and decided to participate in a walk in order to get to know the city better," Andreas tells us. "The whole concept of neighbors showing their area to you was very impressive and discussing the place where they live, worked out really well. So I decided to try to bring it to Vienna after coming back here. Everything went very fast after that – I came back to Vienna in 2013, and in 2014 we had our first Jane's Walk weekend here with four walks on offer. This year there are already twice as many!"



(http://www.viennashares.org/wp-content/uploads/2015/05/IMG_8832.jpg)

Andreas Lindinger, founder of Jane's Walk Vienna

Although the weather looks a bit concerning initially, with dark clouds looming overhead, it will luckily stay dry for the next two hours. So our merry little group goes on its way, except that it's not little at all. 60-70 people, ranging in age from small kids to some elderly citizens, decided to join for the day. "Although there's generally no limit to how many people can join. It's usually within a range of 15 to 50 people," Andreas tells us. "Though this year we suddenly had around 250 people subscribing to one of our walks! That's not really feasible for a walking tour though, so we had to cut it down a bit." We also notice that during our tour. Maneuvering around the city with 70 people is quite a task! (Especially with the ridiculously short phases of green light at some traffic crossings.)

Our walking tour leads us along the Naschmarkt, Gumpendorferstrasse and the Schadekgasse. Both areas are mostly empty on a Sunday, but filled with graffiti and street art. The most notorious one is of course the 'Puber' tag, but there are also plenty of larger scale graffiti art pieces – some artists are commissioned by stall-owners in order to raise prestige and attract customers, others are trying to do the opposite by making a statement against consumption. We also learn about less famous and obvious graffiti signs, such as the kiwi-bird in underpants(?!), which lurks around on a surprising amount of walls.

After that, the Sunday emptiness then makes the Mariahilferstraße – Vienna's busiest shopping street – a good place for another round of discussion. Its recent transformation into a ‚Begegnungszone‘, that is, a traffic-calmed area where pedestrians have precedence, and all the conflicts that came with it, are not new in urban planning. Our guide describes how they overlap with principles and questions that Jane Jacobs had already written about in the 1960ies: Is effective city-planning always connected with giving priority to car-traffic? Does it make sense to only involve academically-educated urban planners in this process, disregarding the local population? Also, should specific areas in a city always perform one pre-assigned function, such as traffic-facilitation, concentration of residences, consumption or industry? Or, should these areas not also, as public spaces, offer the possibility for passers-through and locals to use public space without having to spend money?

Andreas explains that this is exactly why Jane's Walk started. Jane Jacobs was a urban thinker, without having the academic background for it. She wanted to involve the inhabitants of the city and give them a hand in the planning of that city. After she died, her friends started the walking tours in her honor. It was a tool for people to get together and get to know and discuss their living space. "That's why it's so great that many different age groups take part. When you walk through, say, the Brunnenmarkt-area, it gets really interesting, because the old inhabitants, who have been living in the areas we're walking through for a long time, can offer some fascinating stories about how the neighborhoods have changed over the years." Andreas values the young participants just as much though. "In some Jane's Walks around the world, the tours are guided by 8-year-olds who show their favourite places. Which paints a completely different picture! I'd love it if we would also reach other groups of people to show their version of the city, so that your own perspective of it is questioned somewhat. In a completely different way, a tour guided by homeless people might do that, for example."

Our tour continues through the 7th district, where to our surprise we also make a stop at our friends', the Salat Piraten (<http://www.salatpiraten.org>) in the Kirchengasse. As an example of urban gardening, it serves as nice example for yet another way of using areas of the city; as does the nearby Sankt-Ulrichs-Platz, where you can sleigh down the short slope during winter. We then turn Gürtel-wards, stopping by at the Brotautomat (<http://www.meinbezirk.at/wien-07-neubau/wirtschaft/wiens-erster-brotautomat-d1144150.html>) which provides people with bread after hours for about half a year now. Due to time constraints, the Vienna Shares participants sadly have to break off our tour here.

But that's in a way also a nice thing about it. "I also really like the laid-back atmosphere of Jane's Walk," says Andreas. We're not offering standard touristic guided tours, but the focus is on people having conversations as they walk." And even though Vienna Shares misses the last 15 minutes of the tour, we certainly had a lot to talk about as we walked, and a lot to think about as we write. All in all, we'd love to take another tour. And if it's up to Andreas, we certainly will. "I would really like for this idea of communal walks to spread. Especially those where different groups come together to show each other their own use of space," Andreas says. "The organizational part is really easy. I manage to do it by myself right now, although I could use some help" he laughs. There is one difficulty though here in Vienna. "Very often people here feel that they don't have anything important to say about their neighbourhoods – which is not true. But I'm optimistic that that will change in the near future!"

To find out more about Jane's Walk and Jane Jacobs herself, visit their homepage (<http://www.janeswalk.org>). Also, be sure to pay a visit to Andreas' website (<http://www.andreaslindinger.at>).

By: Jakob Jorda

 (<http://www.janeswalk.org/austria/vienna/>)

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