

Practice

OWP/P's Foreign Exchange



by Tracy F. Ostroff

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Last year, several designers from OWP/P in Chicago traveled to Vienna to learn more about the European country's exemplary school building program. The result: affirmation of the firm's current philosophy and practices and a desire to incorporate more sustainable design elements into their work.

The OWP/P architects were particularly interested in visiting Vienna because of School Building Project 2000, the city's ambitious school construction project. The program sought to design and build nearly 60 new schoolhouses during a six-year period. Acclaimed Austrian architects took part in the projects, and chronicled and documented their experiences. Reading this diary got OWP/P excited about making the trip and seeing the buildings for themselves, said Trung Le, a principal and design representative in the educational design practice.

Le said he and his colleagues contacted the chief of the school building program, and several emails later had set up a weeklong trip featuring meetings with program officials as well as school tours with the architects who had designed the educational facilities. The OWP/P touring team included seven members of the educational core group and one mechanical engineer, who accompanied the group with an eye toward learning more about how the city managed mechanical engineering and ecological issues.



Sharing their experience

After the trip, the architects made a presentation to their entire firm to share what they had learned during their travels. They described what they considered the three overarching themes of Viennese school design: community, energy consciousness, and standard size.

One of the primary distinctions of school design is the way

Light infuses the entry at Northside College Preparatory High School, Chicago. Credit: Jon Miller, Hedrich Blessing.

in which the two countries approach construction. The architects for the Austrian schools program were selected through a design competition, Le said, which he said eliminates the need to enlighten clients who cling to old ways of approaching school architecture. His perception is that this method avoids struggles among the stakeholders who want to influence the design, and that the best idea that comes forward wins the job. Le noted that design competitions seem to produce a more "forward-looking," modern product.

As a result, the architects of the Austrian schools put a premium on new ideas, such as innovative use of materials and energy conservation. These methods help achieve another goal, too: reducing energy costs, which are higher in the European Union than in the U.S. For example, schools are cooled by natural ventilation, and window treatments use exterior sun shading to reduce heat gain.



In Vienna, schools are limited to 500 students, and they are constructed with a wing corridor system to allow light into the building to create a feel of a "main street," the OWP/P architects report. They also note that "schools are designed with a connection to the outdoors through creative use of materials," and that the needs of innovative architecture often spur industry to create better products.

Common areas

OWP/P points out that unlike Vienna, a single district "where the link between philosophy and architecture is direct and universal, in the U.S. the link between educational vision and the physical school varies from district to district and is sometimes more indirect."

"Therefore, it becomes the architect's responsibility to create the link between the program and the building . . . It is our responsibility to transcend bricks and mortar to design a school that maximizes the district's ability to execute its educational philosophy," Le said.

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The commons at A.E. Stevenson High School, Lincolnshire, Ill., is an informal area for students to eat, study, and interact. The space also is used for school clubs and activities, and can serve as a new entry to the school's new performing arts area. Credit: Christopher Barrett, Hedrich Blessing.

Le said he found that officials across the pond deal with many of the same concerns as their U.S. counterparts, such as creating schools that provide after-hours programming and community services. Le said one of the interesting facets of Austrian schools is their role in socializing children as citizens and productive members of society. This goal results in large break-out rooms, commons, and garden spaces to encourage spontaneous interaction and to ensure that learning is promoted in all areas. He noted that because the schools are treated as home-like environments, students and teachers often remove their shoes and wear slippers, instead.

Le also pointed out comparisons between OWP/P's projects and the inventive work being done in Austria. For example, the firm encourages its clients to consider good environmental design, such as is being accomplished in Europe to reduce energy costs. OWP/P's University High School, Carmel, Ind., employs a design that maximizes daylight and use of recycled and recyclable materials.

Like their Austrian counterparts, OWP/P and others employ the "wing system" to introduce organizational flexibility, which allows for growth and the promotion of "schools within schools." For example, its Carbondale Community High School divides its academic departments into small individual blocks, providing flexibility to accommodate either departmentalized or interdisciplinary educational programs.

OWP/P sponsored the trip to immerse themselves in superior architectural environments and to "challenge their own thinking" about standards of excellence. Despite differences in culture and organizational structure, many of the same design principles transcend cultural boundaries. OWP/P architects stay in touch with the Austrian program officials and designers, hoping to continue a dialogue that brings the "world to the students and the students to the world."



Schools designed during Vienna's School Building Program 2000 demonstrate the use of community space and natural light. Hybrid ventilation systems are supported by operable windows. Credit: Photos courtesy of OWP/P.



A modern-looking glass wall for the resource center at A.E. Stevenson High School, Lincolnshire, Ill., is reminiscent of the architecture the designers witnessed in Vienna. Credit: Christopher Barrett, Hedrich Blessing.