

## **Haptic and Olfactory Design Quality of Viennese Coffeehouses**

**by Dr. Ruth Mateus-Berr**

### **Abstract:**

Although it is a myth that the first coffeehouse opened in Vienna, tourists still consider it a typical Viennese institution. Research conducted on the distinctive haptic and olfactory qualities of seven Viennese cafés could not agree on a single prototype. Nevertheless, the research did determine specific aspects of Viennese coffeehouses: all had a tarnished look, time crept in slow motion (a “sleepy” atmosphere), they were full of similar sounds (the murmur of people, reading, playing cards, talking). A typical Viennese café is a mellow, flawed place, where time stands still. Waiters slowly shuffle to get orders, and then disappear. It is a place full of the rustling of newspapers, the clattering of plates and bowls from the kitchen, the purr of the coffee machine. Occasionally you hear billiard balls or piano music in the background, drowned out by the noise of intense conversation and patrons shouting for the waiter. The materials are authentic, if somewhat run-down, and contrast sharply (cold marble and warm plush velvet), providing a pleasant and cozy atmosphere enhanced by dim lighting.

### **Introduction**

The goal of the research, conducted by Vienna’s University of Applied Arts, was to study and determine the haptic and olfactory qualities that make up a “typical” Viennese café. The entire research team participated in selecting which coffeehouses were to be examined. Seven cafés were picked. Results therefore were based on a sample derived from a few examples depicting the core characteristics of Vienna coffeehouses. There were six project phases. The following were involved in the research process:

*Students:* Marie Theres Wakonig, Manuel Wandl, Georg Feierfeil, Judith Grünauer, Edyta Las, Katharina Weissteiner. These are all students of Art and Design Education at Vienna’s University of Applied Arts. They are in different stages of their studies and all have different levels of experience in Design Research.

*Experts:* Architects and designers: James Skone, Christian Harant, Alexander Korab, Andrea Pedit-Bódvay, Cornelia Pöter, Kai Stania. Ruth Mateus-Berr/Design Research. The experts were selected by Prof. James Skone; he chose young up-and-coming as well as established architects and designers in Vienna.

Concerning the design we wanted to know: how did the materials in Vienna cafés feel to the touch? How did the choice of material affect the atmosphere? What are the typical characteristics of a Viennese coffeehouse? What is the olfactory impression of a Viennese café? How would one brand a Viennese coffeehouse?

### **Locations and Space**

Each member of the research team investigated the seven Viennese cafés, which were determined previously in a WWTF (Vienna Science and Technology Fund) meeting. Cafés were selected on the basis of one criterion: a typical Viennese coffeehouse.

Café Prückl: a café with a 1950s style decor, located along the Ring surrounding the inner city (1<sup>st</sup> district, corner of Stubenring/Dr. Karl Luegerplatz. <http://www.prueckel.at>)

Kleines Café: unique coffeehouse with a floor made out of real tomb slabs (1010 Vienna, Franziskanerplatz 3)

AIDA: a Viennese coffee shop chain (1<sup>st</sup> district, Wollzeile 28)

Café Sperl: café for writers and poets (6<sup>th</sup> district, Gumpendorferstraße 11)

Café Ritter: a café outside the city center in a blue collar neighborhood (16<sup>th</sup> district, Ottakringerstraße 117)

Café Hawelka: legendary café, famous in Austria through the song “Was macht ein nackerte in Hawelka” (What’s that naked guy doing in Hawelka), (1<sup>st</sup> district, Dorotheergasse 6)

Café Diglas: the perfectly arranged café (1<sup>st</sup> district, Wollzeile 10)

We visited 4 of the 36 cafés recommended by Martin Weiss in his card game *Wiener Kaffeehäuser* (2005). Each card depicts a café and lists its attributes. He has broken it down into different criteria: a CULT (Hawelka), a CLASSIC (Sperl), an INSTITUTION (Prückl), a CHAIN (AIDA). The other selected coffeehouses were not in his deck of cards (see WEISS 2005).

## **SPERL**

**ATMOSPHERE:** The entrance is dramatically set up. We enter from a portal onto the “stage of the Café Sperl.” Across from the entrance – functioning in that capacity for centuries – is the command center, the café counter, which is run by the owner of the café. The café is set up according to a “typical blueprint of an orthogonal coffeehouse” (with corner-adjacent walls meeting at the entrance at a right angle). Upon entering, visitors to Café Sperl will find themselves transported to a 19<sup>th</sup> century world of tradition. It has the attributes of a typical Viennese café; a dignified pleasant atmosphere, established character and charm. Intellectuals come here to read the free newspapers, study or relax after an evening at the theater. The **OLFACTORY** impression is of less cigarette smoke than in the other cafés and good ventilation. The **AROMA** of a sweetened salad dressing of oil and vinegar tantalizes the sense of smell.

The **MAIN VISUAL** component of Café Sperl is the soft plush velvet seats and benches, as well as original Thonet bentwood chairs. Silver trays holding hot coffee meet cold marble with round edges. The walls are high, with wooden paneling and plastering (stucco work). The serving staff is made up mostly of women; the waitresses here celebrate Vienna coffeehouse culture together with their clientele. Sometimes, the staged appearance does not seem authentic. Recently, the brand “Café Sperl” has been showcased, complete with a fan shop.

The **ACOUSTIC** impression is one of rattling dishes and silverware.

**SUGGESTIONS:** The entrance could be even grander, more dramatically set up.

## **PRÜCKL**

**ATMOSPHERE:** Patrons enter Café Prückl through a corner portal and discover the aging flair of the 1950s. The audience, although diverse, is very intellectual and original. As to the decor, you could very well be sitting in a post-Stalin VIP lounge at the airport in Bratislava. There is no room for “Gemütlichkeit” (coziness), and intimate discussion may be a problem since there are no alcoves or niches. The front room is designated for smokers, and has a much more interesting set-up than the back room for non-smokers, which appears sterile due to its ghastly lurid atmosphere. Here the recognition factor of a typical Viennese café is missing. Vienna Coffeehouse goes 50s.

The OLFACTORY impressions range from smoky to nicely ventilated, but the smoking section has also been compared to a steamy nicotine-saturated cell. The patrons find themselves in a haze of warm air, smoke and smells coming from the kitchen.

The AROMA of food is in the air.

The HAPTIC/VISUAL main element is the iconic velvet-upholstered furniture in the smoker's room. The smoke-free zone, however, is sterile, hard and smooth. There are no decorations here that can serve as a reference point. The seats in the smoking section are low, the lighting somewhat unusual. Light wood is used and the potted plants add a bit of greenery. There are high rooms, without wooden paneling, and the ceilings have stucco trimmed with gold.

ACOUSTICS: are not mentioned here.

SUGGESTIONS: Both rooms could be integrated by a consistent and uniform design.

## **RITTER**

ATMOSPHERE: Café Ritter is a café outside the center of town, formerly an upper middle class café, where you can sink into the nostalgia of Historism and rest on the shores of an unadorned island of calm. It is a casual café, reminiscent of a grotto one can retreat to. Time stands still for contemplation and observation. Here one finds peace and is left in peace. It is a café for everyone, a playground for pensioners, a place one likes to come back to. Patrons of different age groups make use of the room in their own individual way. This is a clear indication that people feel comfortable here. To quote the city magazine *Falter* (Best of Vienna 2/2005/52): "This place is almost like a village square in the south; even the young people's faces there take on the features of old age as soon as they break out a deck of cards." The lighting is warm and soft, the waiters shuffle their feet in slow motion. Typical Viennese "Gemütlichkeit" (coziness).

The first OLFACTORY impression is the strong smell of cigarettes. Here the whiff of the cheap brand *Austria 3* can be felt to the third degree. You enter a haze of smoke sprinkled with flavors of food and packed in warm stale air.

The AROMA of food is in the air.

The HAPTIC/VISUAL characteristics are surprising. The place is full of real materials like wood, leather, stones and Thonet furniture. High stucco ceilings. Everything has a bit of a run down feel to it; it's worn out, gritty, spirited and comfortable. The tables are cold to the touch. It is a model of a democratic set-up; the clientele ranges from blue collar workers to architects.

**SUGGESTION:** It would be very difficult to copy. If at all possible, it would be much more pleasant if the noise level were reduced. Perhaps, better lighting for reading in the back corners of the room.

## **AIDA**

**ATMOSPHERE:** AIDA is the Viennese interpretation of an Italian espresso bar. Patrons are greeted with an Italian quick-espresso feeling of the 50s and 60s. Actually this is not a café, but a typical chain. AIDA should be listed as a historic monument. It's a treat for young and old from all walks of life and social circumstances. The regulars are usually old men who like to stand at the counter and drink coffee (maybe the pretty waitresses have something to do with this). People don't linger at this popular chain. It's a "grandma-coffee" place.

The waitresses wear pink traditional dirndl outfits. A mirror tries to expand the space, to provide a balance between the tiny tables and narrow room. It is an espresso bar with lots of side shows in progress, where people come and go quickly.

The **OLFACTORY** impressions of AIDA are a mixture of cigarette smoke and cheese cake (Topfengolatschen = a kind of curd cheese pastry), a sweet dessert – **AROMA**, rum punch donuts (Punschkräpfen), coffee and vanilla flavoring.

The **HAPTIC/VISUAL** can best be described as full of wooden paneling, a random mixture of plastic or wooden chairs, mirrors, lights, plastic, leather, mirrors. Words like small, narrow, cramped and smooth come to mind.

The chairs, though comfortable, do not fit in with the decor.

**ACOUSTIC:** The sound of coffee being ground.

**SUGGESTIONS:** The hybrid form seems to work: Viennese café meets Italian espresso. You could leave it exactly as it is, replicate it 1:1 and it would still be successful in China. In Austria, however, it needs to lose its "grandma" character, if it is to be successful with a younger crowd.

## **KLEINES CAFÉ**

**ATMOSPHERE:** The Kleines Café is less a café and more a bar, a kind of seedy English pub, catering to pop culture of the 70s and for many people the starting point of an all-night pub crawl. It is casual and has a grunge look to it. The waiters don't wear uniforms. It's a smoke-filled café atmosphere. You can't hear yourself think – it's too loud for that. And no one comes here alone. You come in for a bit, look around, and out you go. There are no typical

café-goers here; it's a mixture of suits and punks. Everyone is in a party mood. The broken or missing lighting fixtures don't seem to bother anybody.

The OLFACTORY impression is of medium levels of smoke. It smells more of beer and alcohol than of smoke, the air is stale and stuffy. When you enter the room you are struck by a heavy scent of coffee which is quickly absorbed into the air, leaving only thin whiffs of coffee fragrance. .

AROMA of smoke and horseradish.

HAPTIC/VISUAL main features are a fabrication of art from the 70s, made out of cold varnish, smooth surfaces, vibrant colors, worn out fake leather, and undecorated round globe-lamps.

ACOUSTICS: music, high noise density.

SUGGESTIONS: –

## **DIGLAS**

ATMOSPHERE: Diglas is a perfectly set up and decorated Viennese coffeehouse, magnificent in its pure clichés. It's like being in the dining room of the Titanic. It has been checked out too often; it's too smooth, a fine and posh tourist café. Every city has one. We are talking about a neatly cultivated smoky-café atmosphere. The cakes are displayed as a centerpiece to impart a classy up-market refined ambience. Actually, the atmosphere is somewhat awkward. You don't feel at home here, you don't feel like you belong, and have to ward off looks from the multicultural waiters. Decor: the chandelier has silverware hanging from it, an unfortunate attempt at "Kunst im Kaffee" (Art in Cafés). It is much too lustrous and bright and beams too many tones of light – it is much too gorgeous to be in a Viennese café. Here the staging of a Vienna coffeehouse is much too perfect.

OLFACTORY impressions consist of medium levels of smoke, desserts – AROMA: fresh air.

HAPTIC/VISUAL features are plush surroundings, marble tables, velvet, cold, smooth. It is soft and sterile. Many objects are made of glass and give off a cold effect. The walls are white, there is no stucco.

ACOUSTICS: –

SUGGESTIONS: Style & Order: this could be a perfect Viennese Café construction kit. However, it does not play on the clichés well enough. The concept could be implemented in other countries; already the waiters are not Viennese even though they dress like Viennese waiters. If this café were in a foreign city, someone from Vienna might visit it and feel at home, glad to have found an oasis of nostalgia. In Vienna, though, it is something foreign.

## **Conclusion:**

### **Patina, Time, Sound, Interaction of Material, “Gemütlichkeit” (Coziness)**

It's a myth that the first coffeehouse ever opened was in Vienna. But it *is* true that there is something archetypal, desirable about it which attracts tourists who visit the Austrian capital. In our search for *the typical Viennese coffeehouse*, according to specific haptic and olfactory criteria (using all our senses), we narrowed it down to seven choices. But even after studying these seven closely, we still could not find one that would perfectly fit this description. All seven cafés we examined have something typical, yet each one is different. Maybe Café Diglas comes closest to unifying all the criteria, and could be “exported” as a “typical” Viennese café, but then again, it is too much of a cliché, too sterile and empty of life: the patina is missing. AIDA would also go over well abroad, it is an interesting chain, a mixture of a Vienna coffeehouse and an Italian espresso bar, a hybrid form. A Viennese café is a staged room, which actually radiates coziness and comfort (*Gemütlichkeit*) not because it is perfect, but precisely because it is flawed. This is a place where Vienna can afford to be half-asleep, that is, if it doesn't address a young clientele. Kinesthetic perception takes note of slow movements; here time has stood still, or lingers in *slow motion*. The point here is not quick turnovers, rapidly changing patrons, or increased consumption. The typical Viennese waiter is cranky and grouchy and he serves his customers as if he had all the time in the world, in his own slow shuffle. This flawed but very human attribute is also reflected in the patina of the objects. It is a quiet patina, a visually and haptically perceivable level of information. The well worn objects tell a story of experiences, things that have collected in them in their interaction with humans. Authentic materials are used for the Cafés Sperl, Ritter, Hawelka and Diglas: real wood, leather, marble, stucco, real Thonet chairs, velvet, and plush. In AIDA we find the artificial materials of the 50s: plastic and melamine. The Kleines Café has made an artificial product that resembles art in the 70s, outfitted with cold smooth surfaces. It is used more as a pub. Plunging into an unknown past suggests nostalgic feeling that one can retreat to, a place to withdraw and rest. Here opposite materials attract and clash, mixing with people of all social levels. The smells fluctuate between cigarette smoke and food, a wide palette of desserts and the scent of coffee, alcohol, horseradish and sweetened oil and vinegar salad dressing. Only in Sperl and Diglas can you breathe some fresh air, now and then. On this matter the sensibilities of the experts also vary, depending on their habits and lifestyle (smokers/nonsmokers). Now that a new, stricter, nicotine law has come into effect, as

of January 1, 2008, a typical element (?) of Viennese cafés has gone up in thin smoke, so to speak. As of December 2008, in Austria, all cafés and restaurants over 80 m<sup>2</sup> are required to provide a smoking area. Diners and pubs under 50 m<sup>2</sup> must decide for themselves if they want to prohibit smoking. In January 2009, cafés and restaurants between 50 - 80 m<sup>2</sup> were required to partition the space between smokers and non-smokers. In a few years, smoking will be completely phased out and banned in accordance with uniform EU tobacco regulations. No one will be permitted to smoke in any place where food or alcohol is served. A familiar smell, as well as a yellowing patina will disappear forever from the Vienna café scene, along with some café-goers, who sought the refuge of these coffeehouses to escape “reality” and smoke to their heart’s content.

The body, surface, as well as the thresholds and passages (Zumthor 2006, 21-22) of Viennese cafés are reached through an entrance area, the vestibule of the stage, which one finds in many cafés, for example a curtain keeping the cold air out at the Café Prückl, or a passage with two doors (Cafés Sperl, Prückl, Ritter, Hawelka). In the future, the barriers between smokers and non-smokers will become more significant. The interaction of the material (Zumthor 2006, 23-29) in Vienna’s coffeehouses is especially determined by a confrontation of opposites: cold – warm. Cafégoers’ warm hands touch the cold marble surface of the table where the silver platter with the glass of water has been set down with a clink. The cold body of the person sitting there soaks up the warmth of plush velvet and in turn also gives off warmth, which the furniture soaks up like sunshine, to give off as heat again when the next person sits down.

The texture of the materials, whose patina has left traces, has a morbid feel to it, even if you are not drinking coffee *in the worst dump* (Teuschl 1994, 125). The sound of the room (Zumthor 2006, 29-33) is comprised of the murmur of guests calling for the waiter/waitress to order or pay, newspapers crackling, the rattling of plates and coffee cups from the kitchen, and the hissing noise of the coffee machine. In some cafés you can still hear the click of a billiard ball it hits the tip of a pool stick, and then rumbles over the felt table, or be treated to hours of live background music coming from a piano. The room temperature (Zumthor 2006, 33-34) is usually too warm, and this is intensified by the haze of cigarette smoke. The casualness and seductiveness of a Viennese café (Zumthor 2006, 41-45) lies in the peace that is found there, the *slow motion*. We are tempted to relax, to forget about time, to write, play, to stay there. The degrees of intimacy (Zumthor 2006, 49-57) in Viennese coffeehouses can be measured in the small alcoves, where people can retreat, shut off like in a train



compartment, and gossip – discuss rumors which are *not everyone's cup of tea* (Teuschl 1994, 125). The “Gemütlichkeit” (coziness) is intensified through soft lighting (Zumthor 2006, 57-63).

Attempts to copy Viennese cafés were made by, among others, chains like Starbucks. The staged patina and plush at a haptic level lost sight of the authenticity of the objects in use (paper cups with lids sealed off the aroma of coffee). And as opposed to Viennese coffeehouses, here you get your own coffee at the counter. The coffee is not freshly blended, but soluble and sold in different flavors. The coffee shops are artificially scented (Mauthner-Weber 2009, 14). Instead of the soothing murmur or background piano music, Starbucks forcefully emits “world music to chill to.” The narrowness of a Viennese café is also missing here, along with the clattering and colliding of different materials. This pseudo-patina is easy to see through.

What do these results mean for Vienna's creative industry?

All design objects are the result of decisions made by the designer, and which s/he has to justify before the others. Theories are nothing more than a system of justifications, which help in the decision-making process (Zemke 2005).

The theory of a “typical Viennese coffee” house is also a myth. One would have to synthesize the total haptic qualities and atmosphere of Vienna cafés and come up with a new USP (unique selling proposition) for the city of Vienna and gear it towards a younger audience.

### **Integration in an art space installation in the framework of the exhibition ESSENCE 2008, Museum for Applied Arts (MAK) (June 27 – July 13, 2008)**

The assigned task was to visualize the scientific research results in an exhibition. The group of students focused on the following aspects: patina, time, sounds, mixing of materials, smell, and “Gemütlichkeit” (coziness). These considerations resulted in a space installation, corresponding roughly to the Zen garden (Ryoan-ji) in Kyoto in M 1:15. The work *Island* presented elements of Viennese coffeehouse tradition, from Biedermeier to the current time. The artwork *Moos* corresponded to the patina of the objects and the symbolism of the *dry water of Zen* was turned into ground coffee, literally ground and on the ground.

### **TITLE: Zen or the Art of Drinking Coffee in Vienna**

An Island in the Flow of the Day (Schwaner 2008)

Essence 2008 merges design and science in one space installation. The basis of research becomes a space installation; core elements of the café are transferred and transformed.

The essence of Viennese cafés lies, among other things, in its deceleration; the patina retained in the objects a melange of odors. You can spend a whole day in a Viennese café...just as the classical Zen garden is a place of contemplation, this quality, too, can be attributed to coffeehouses in Vienna....You can write, read, chat, negotiate, play games chess or cards and just “let the day pass by” (Schwaner 2008).

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**CAFÉS:** AIDA, Café Diglas, Kleines Café, Café Hawelka, Café Ritter, Café Sperl

**SPONSOR:** EDUSCHO

**Photo credits:** Margarete Neundlinger

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#### **Media/Internet:**

- AIDA: <http://www.aida.at>  
DIGLAS: <http://www.diglas.at>  
HAWELKA: <http://www.hawelka.at>  
PRÜCKL: <http://www.prueckel.at>  
RITTER: <http://www.cafe-ritter.at>  
SPERL: <http://www.cafesperl.at>

#### **Terminology:**

- USP: Unique Selling Proposition/Product