

## Das "Eiserne Haus" - The "Iron House"

The Murvorstadt, as the old town on the right bank of the river Mur is called, is one of the oldest suburbs of the city of Graz. Though it has undergone substantial alterations, the square formerly called the Murplatz (though previously known as the Murvorstadtplatz and lately re-named Südtirolerplatz) remains the true gateway to this part of the city. Situated just beyond the western end of the Hauptbrücke; it lies on the way to Annenstrasse, to the railway station and to Eggenberg. The history of the square is closely linked with that of the bridge over the Mur, for centuries the only one within the city limits and of importance since the earliest days of Graz. In June 1827 the river flooded, and the old wooden bridge, which had been roofed over and was lined on both sides with market stalls, was swept away. The temporary bridge that was immediately erected was not replaced until 1845, when a suspension bridge was constructed. This work could not commence before protracted negotiations were completed for the acquisition and demolition of a number of buildings, some to make room at either end of the bridge for the piers in which the suspension chains were to be anchored, some to allow the construction of a proposed new road along the quay to take place concurrently with that of the bridge. Similar considerations applied to the demolition of part of J. Purgleitner's tannery, which had been severely damaged in the flooding of 1827, and of the adjacent building in the Brückenzeile, the narrow street connecting the Murplatz to the bridge. As these demolitions would open the square towards the river, provision was made for it to be restored to its original closed state once the bridge was built by erecting new buildings on the north side of the former Brückenzeile in a position that would take into account the new line relating to control the river.

At that time as it happens there was a young architect and manufacturer living in Graz: a man called Johann Benedikt Withalm, who had not only got himself talked about on account of his involvement in technical innovations - the use of iron as a building material and the employment of novel techniques of construction he had learnt about on study visits to Italy and Germany - but who had also made his mark on the Graz social scene with a highly individual building known as "Withalm's Coliseum". The conferences and dances which the inventive architect organized in his Coliseum created a considerable stir, not only in Graz but also in the world beyond. It was the same enterprising businessman and architect, Johann Withalm, who was quick to see the pivotal importance of the building site on the Murplatz.



Situated as it was at the intersection between the main river crossing and the new road along the quay, it was strategically placed to benefit from the urban development of Graz. It was here that Withalm planned to erect a luxurious café. Embodying an engineering process then being developed the project was to take the form of a two-storey building with a cast-iron skeleton. The completed structure, soon known as "the Iron House", appears to have created no less a sensation in what was then still a late Biedermeier city, than the Coliseum had done. [...] In his series of 43 views of Graz the topographical painter Johann Vincenz Reim included a painting of the "Iron House" in Graz as it was originally designed, i.e. as a two-storey building with an iron skeleton. (fig.)

However, it was Withalm himself, no doubt for reasons of safety, who undertook a modification of the original plan by having the ground floor and the mezzanine above it built in brick, and leaving only the storey above, which housed the actual café, to be constructed on a cast-iron skeleton. This is proved unambiguously by the surviving building documents and working drawings. A plan signed by Withalm and described as relating to the "new building project for building no. 499 in Murvorstadt" clearly shows the masonry at ground floor level and the iron skeleton in the upper storey. The date-stamp on the plan shows reads- 14. February 1846. [...] So what was the appearance of the completed Iron House? The body of the building was very narrow, abutted on a space which had formerly been an alley at the back of the now demolished buildings of the Brückenzeile, and which was now assigned to the new building for use as a yard. A balcony running around the facade accentuated the junction between the brickwork of the lower floors and the delicate, pavilion-like cast-iron superstructure of the upper floor, which was topped by a flat roof terrace. Access was by way of winding stairs, centrally situated at the rear of the building and extending from the basement to the attic floor. Above the exit to the roof terrace and one storey higher there was a further, smaller, roof terrace. A restaurant/pub, with its own access from the quay, occupied the south-eastern part of the basement, while brick walls divided the ground floor into a number of separate retail units. The whole of the upper floor, situated above a low mezzanine, was occupied by the café, divided by thin wall-panels into rooms of different sizes. The cast-iron and glass structure, which in this area was transparent, offered an unhindered view of the Murvorstadtplatz, the city centre and the Schlossberg. In good weather the clientele were able to sit out and be served on the terrace. The Café Meran, as it was called, was one of the most popular cafés in Graz.

Yet a mere three years after the completion of "the Iron House of Herr Johann Benedikt Withalm" the roof terrace had to give way to a conventional truss roof. Dangerous cracks had appeared in the structure.[...] Clearly dismayed by the loss of the terrace Withalm sold the whole building in 1852. [...] The records show the owner of the Eisernes Haus in the years 1870 - 1900 as J. Hüttenbrenner. No structural alterations worth mentioning appear to have taken place during this period, apart from the removal of some of the dividing walls on the ground floor in order to enlarge the retail premises concerned. The application to carry out one of these operations originated with Franz Lechner, who with the agreement of the owner, Andreas Ritter von Hüttenbrenner, sought permission to extend his business premises on the western side of the building. The city council granted permission in a decision notice dated 8 August 1900. There is also a plan of the "Johann Blahowsky's First Graz Steam Joinery" which shows the elaborate shop doorway fashioned in wood. The council minutes for 17 April 1906 provide information about a major remodelling of the building in that year: "The building known as the 'Iron House' at no. 2 Murplatz has been leased by the firm 'Lechner Brothers' from its owners, the heirs of Hüttenbrenner, for a period of 20 years. Lechner Bros. propose to refurbish the entire building, with the exception of a few ground floor locations, so as to adapt it to their own business.

With the agreement of the owner the following adaptations are proposed: "The main staircase, which is accessible from the Lendkai at the rear of the building, is to be replaced by straight flights of stone stairs, which will go on to the first floor. The existing winding stairs in timber, which will thus become redundant, will be dismantled [...]The restaurant "Zum Kärntner Keller", located in the basement, will remain unchanged." Thus the closure of the café was decided. The whole proposal for the remodelling of the building was passed on 16 May 1906 and carried out to the plans of Joseph F Flohr, master builder and master carpenter. The documents include the authorization, dated 26 July, of an application by the brothers Lechner to replace the four shop doorways to the east of the centrally situated main entrance, by a single entrance, to be manufactured by the Johann Blahovsky steam joinery. In the same year the firm of Lechner Bros. planned to acquire no. 3 Lendkai (the neighbouring building to the north) and bring its appearance in line with that of the Iron House by means of an appropriate remodelling of its existing facade. According to a document used in the negotiations and dated 5 August 1910 this harmonisation was to be achieved by aligning the

eaves at no. 3 Lendkai with those of the Iron House and by using similar cast-iron mouldings to restyle the ledges. The window apertures of the second upper storey were to be enlarged to match those in the Iron House, but it was provided that instead of a cast-iron structure there should be pillars of clinker brick to bear the weight. Only the main entrance, the demolition of which had already been planned, was to be incorporated in the new facade. The remodelling of the facade was not however executed in accordance with the plan drawn up by the master builder, Joseph Flohr, on the basis of the document of 5 August 1910, but was restricted to the raising and realignment of the eaves fascia. For the rest, the facade was given a somewhat palatial appearance, particularly by the addition of a balcony over the entrance. On 14 September 1910 the Lechner brothers notified the city council that they had purchased the building at no. 2 Mariahilferstrasse, the Palais Thinnfeld. At the same time permission was sought to connect the business premises in the Iron House with those in the Palais Thinnfeld. [...] The council gave its consent. With the buildings on either side of the Iron House (no. 3 Lendkai and no. 2 Mariahilferstrasse) in their possession before the end of 1910, the steadily expanding firm of Lechner Bros. finally acquired the Iron House itself in 1914. This was not merely an opportunity to start planning a major reconstruction of the Iron House; it also produced new and ever more ambitious proposals for its enlargement. These envisaged the disappearance of the buildings at nos. 2 and 3 Lendkai and their replacement by a complex of department stores. The city architect Johann Baltl was in overall charge of the planning as well as the reconstruction. [...] When a final inspection by the authorities on 18 January 1916 marked the official conclusion of these rebuilding works the firm of Lechner Bros. had available for unrestricted commercial use not only the whole of the Iron House but also parts of the adjacent properties. For the firm, however, this represented no more than the foundation stone of a programme of rebuilding and development on a larger scale. The proposals for a complex of department stores which the architect Johann Baltl now drew up envisaged the demolition of the Palais Thinnfeld as a first step, together with that of the adjoining building at Mariahilferstrasse no. 4, and the total remodelling of Lendkai no. 3 and no. 5. The pretext for the proposed demolition was the need to conform to a new control line in the Mariahilferstrasse which the council had laid down. On the area thus liberated, together with that of the neighbouring properties already mentioned, it was planned to erect a three-storey department store, at the centre of which there was to be a glass-roofed hall extending to the full height of the building. The hall was probably modelled on that of Kastner and Öhler's department store, erected in 1912 on the basis of plans by the Vienna architects Fellner and Helmer, and its proposed location was the existing yard between the Iron House and the building at no. 5 Lendkai. [...] The surviving plans constituted the basis for a committee discussion that took place on 3 November 1916, and were presented to the art advisory board of the provincial capital on 1 December.

It is uncertain whether the demise of the project was brought about by the art advisory board, which rejected it because it required the demolition of Palais Thinnfeld, or by the First World War: the surviving documents are silent on this point. In the following years little was heard of the Iron House. The sole structural alteration was the installation of a passenger lift. In 1931 Messrs Kastner and Öhler took over the department store, though they continued to run it under the old name of Lechner Bros. The new management ordered a number of structural alterations corresponding to the current state of technology. Thus the weight-bearing internal walls were removed on every floor and replaced by reinforced concrete supports. [...] The two existing flights of stairs which gave access to the store from the east and west were replaced by a space-saving central stairway in three flights. In the course of the alterations other parts of the properties at no. 3 and no. 5 Lendkai were to be included in the department store complex. Thus in the course of a little less than a century Withalm's café and a smaller shop dealing in ladies' fashions evolved into a department store, whose constant expansion necessitated continual rebuilding and extension, until at last there was nothing left of the original fabric except the outer shell, the facade. And in the summer of 1931 this too began to be threatened. In accordance with plans by the architect Bruno Fielder the western facade of the Iron House was so thoroughly transformed that in this area nothing remained of the cast iron architecture (final viewing 16.03.1932). As

a letter dated 27 October 1931 from the Office for the Preservation of Ancient Monuments makes clear, "though the present state of the alterations precludes fundamental changes, the city council would wish to make it a condition that in creating the frontage facing the Mariahilferstrasse all possible consideration be given to the total form and the positioning of the roof...every effort should also be made to obtain good photographs of the Iron House proper." Happily more than a photograph has survived of the original facade of the Iron House, even though a mere six months later there was a meeting to negotiate about a further remodelling of the Mariahilferstrasse frontage on the model of the west facade. Although it was possible to avert the worst dangers, the frontage has been much degraded by minor "modernisations" in recent years. In 1936 the wooden frames of the shop-windows were replaced by metal ones. In 1950 the wooden boarding on the underside of the balconies was removed and replaced by rendering.

Conceived as a delicate and transparent structure of glass and iron, the Iron House was transformed by an endless succession of architectural modifications into an opaque and unwelcoming pile. The reconstruction of the destroyed fabric should not be restricted to the area of the facades, but should also take into account the original transparency of the upper floor which the initial choice of materials aimed at. The establishment of a café with a view, or the transfer to another floor of the restaurant in the basement, would accord well with the function for which this building was initially intended. Only a profound restoration would restore this building to its status as a cultural monument of the city of Graz, and do so in a two-fold sense: as an architectural monument linking Graz with the early days of the age of the engineers, which was just then breaking in on the world, and as a memorial to the unjustly forgotten architect of this new spirit, Johann Benedikt Withalm.

Friedrich Bouvier, Das "Eiserne Haus". In: Historisches Jahrbuch der Stadt Graz, Vol. 10, Graz 1978