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Steinhof, Another Potemkin City?

Steinhof, which will be the focus of this workshop talk, has at its heart a theater. This theater is key to my reading of the complex. It was actually not much used, but its existence points to an interest in the psychiatric patient as a spectator. The new therapy of “distraction” was often referred to in its publicity. Steinhof was also contrasted with the Narrenturm, the panopticon-like tower that is traditionally associated with a surveillance machine. Steinhof turns the Narrenturm inside out: it is an architecture of exteriority, with an emphasis on what the patients were seeing, not only in the pavilion plan and its emphasis on exteriority (villas with verandas), but also in the decorative finishes of the theater and the church. The elevated view was represented in the decorative finishes, but was a *representation*, rather than an actual view outward for patients. The theater was also highly symbolic in its form and function, simply because it wasn’t used; most doctors agreed that theater could harm patients. But what architectural historians are finding as “mismatches” between architecture and science in asylum building was nothing of the sort at Steinhof. Its pavilion plan fulfilled the actual function of housing problematic patients (out of sight in the pavilions), while giving visitors the illusion of having seen the complex by walking its grounds, seeing the theater, church and *exteriors* of the pavilions. Rather than an architecture of misunderstanding, Steinhof was exactly what the doctors needed: it was a Potemkin village that gave the illusion of new, more pleasant and humane cures through distraction and patient freedom. The reality was that there was no agreed upon cause or cure for insanity or nervous disorders. Doctors spent so much time planning asylums and writing about the therapeutic benefits of the architecture because in the nineteenth century, the architecture was necessary for the profession to exist. It became a mediator between public (families, loved ones) and the profession of psychiatry, which had a touchy reputation. This is part of my IFK project, a book-length study on the bird’s-eye view that incorporates the visual cultures of modernity and the traditions of the Imperial Baroque, both of which figure in my reading of Steinhof and its cultures of looking.