Traditional house with thatched roof and timber slat walls with whitewashed earthen rendering in Moschendorf. (Photo: Fernando Vegas / Germany, Mexico)
Earthen architecture in Austria

Traditional earthen architecture in Austria may be found above all in the eastern area of the country, not so mountainous but hilly, namely in the regions of Lower Austria, Vienna, southeast of Styria, and, in particular, in Burgenland. Indeed, the existence of traditional earth architecture in this country should not be considered as an isolated phenomenon, but rather linked to other examples of vernacular architecture close to the Danube basin and Pannonian Plain regions. This resemblance may be discovered in rural buildings of the adjacent region of Moravia (Czech Republic), southern Slovakia, Hungary and northeastern Slovenia.

In these areas, historic earthen architecture coexists with log houses, otherwise common and prevailing throughout the country. In fact, the preponderance of log buildings across the country, added to the increased difficulty of moving and rebuilding traditional earth houses, practically cancels the existence of houses built with earth in open air museums. Even in very complete collections of Austrian vernacular architecture of museums like the Freilichtmuseum Österreichischs Stübbings in the region of Styria (which is just located in the geographical border between areas of log architecture and earthen architecture), hardly reflects any existence of earthen constructions.

This is also visible in the open air museums such as Gerersdorf or Bad Tatzmannsdorf in Burgenland, a region known for having a higher concentration of earthen architecture examples. In spite of this, the museums do not show the true proportion of earthen constructions compared to log buildings present in this area.

Earth was used traditionally as an auxiliary building material even in these log houses, for making bread ovens, mortar joints between logs, renderings, as pavement for the ground floor, for filling between floor joists, thermal insulation in the roof, etc.

Earth used in walls as a structural construction material throughout the
Austrian Danube Basin takes form in the same building techniques and examples as in the rest of the Pannonian plain. Nevertheless, the frequent use of rammed earth walls, locally known as Stampflehmbau should be noted in particular.

In Austria, the location of earthen architecture frequently coincides with the presence of vineyards, where it is common to find this type of building not only in private houses but also as stores and cellars, probably due to the insulating property of earth, a material that provides constant temperatures to interior space.

In any case, today, Austrian earthen traditional architecture remains largely unknown: with thatched or tiled roof, under whitewashed earthen renderings and perfectly maintained coatings that conceal its materials, confused with rendered log houses, ignored by the open air museums,..., this traditional architecture is urgently requiring care and protection of local, regional and national authorities.

On the other hand, there is in Austria an extraordinary attention and sensibility from building regulations and even from contemporary architectural trends towards earth as a new old building material, being expressive, functional, ecological and sustainable for the future. Probably in no other European Country is there a such marked divorce between local traditional architecture and contemporary architecture built with the same material.

In fact, rammed earth in Austria has been transformed from an ancient technology to an interesting and innovative raw material that is increasingly attracting attention. Today, clay has become an important material not only for an elite of alternative and ecological applications, but also for established
architects that use this versatile material and its advantageous properties (for heating and cooling, new designs, and functional potentials, etc.). The region of Tirol, divided between Austria and Italy, has shown during recent years strong policies of this type of sustainable architecture, with important public investments in the field of this architecture (i.e. Casa Clima Project). In Austria the pioneer of low-tech architecture applied to a high-tech approach is Martin Rauch, from Vorarlberg, with the team of “Lehm Ton Erde”. He studied as a ceramist during the ’70s and step by step has developed a brilliant earth constructive approach and career. In the last 10 years his research into new earth architecture techniques has spread to different experiences in Austria and generally through other countries, such as Switzerland and Germany. From public spaces (i.e. cemetery, chapel, congress hall…) to private houses, earth is always used as a lyrical and sustainable raw material. Study, design, experiments (i.e. prefabricated earthen furnace) and research are bonded, obtaining projects with high quality and durability.

Though Martin Rauch refers to the existence of some examples of rammed earth historical architecture in the region of Vorarlberg, apparently, there does not seem to be any explicit link or reference between these traditional houses and the contemporaneous architecture. Through these projects earth is used as structural material, filling, coating, finishing solution…with plasticity and always with new declinations, according to projects’ function. Is it possible to use the same raw material and process, for a Kindergarten or for a bus-stop station? The answer could be affirmative and positive, analyzing “Lehm Ton Erde” concepts and works. Austria has shown a pioneer interest in social and sustainable architecture/ research, and also in speaking about education and training. In this framework Architecture Faculties have developed research programs, and among these is notable the effort of the University of Linz (Kunstuniversität Linz). “Base-habitat”, set up in this University since 2005, which has a real “manifesto” of challenges and a great structure of programs-trainings, about experimental materials, climate control and sustainability in architecture. Speaking about earth architecture is important to underline “the earth work summer school”, organized by this platform. This is an experience that tries to give an application-orientated knowledge in building with earth, with a series of hands-on activities.

We can affirm that Austria, like other Germanic countries, shows a deep interest in sustainable development and “green” policies. For this reason, in