ARCHITECTURE AND TRUTH IN FIN-DE-SIÈCLE VIENNA

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INTRODUCTION

One day some conscientious art scholar will take it upon himself to write the history of the Modern in Vienna. He will have his work cut out for him, for the documents which our time has left for him, both written and executed, are full of contradictions. (Alfred Roller, preface to *Aus der Wagner Schule* [Vienna: 1900], 5.)[1]

If historians agree on anything about Vienna at the turn of the last century, it is that the city was a tangle of contradictions. Contemporaries such as the Secessionist and set designer Roller saw "great whirlpools of current and counter-current – and undercurrent".[2] In almost every area of intellectual activity, battles were fought between opposing theories, practices, ideologies and assumptions, and observers were hard-pressed, as they still are, to decide which side was winning. It was a modern metropolis, a boom town with an expanding population, growing industry, energetic building speculation and an enthusiasm for the future accompanied by a deep and sometimes bitter nostalgia for "good old Vienna". It was the seat of an ancient empire and the home of an emperor who held on to power by maintaining a precarious balance among the claims of multiple nationalities and forces of various political stripes. It was populated by a wide mix of ethnicities and religions, was seen by some as magnificently cosmopolitan, by others as culturally fragmented and soulless, and by others still as a hotbed of ethnic hatred. Fin-de-siècle Vienna is renowned for having fostered radical modernist innovations in literature, philosophy, theory of language, art, psychiatry, music, and political theory as well as in architecture. But the "modernists" in these fields were hardly united in harmony around the coffeehouse table. Neo-Romantics embraced art as redemption and were confronted by materialist skeptics who in turn were spurned by those with a commitment to Enlightenment ideals.

Progressive architecture in Vienna from about 1894 to 1912 was in itself markedly heterogeneous (quite apart from the fact that it shared the urban stage

with various traditional approaches from neo-Baroque to Heimatstil). Otto Wagner and his followers were the dominant force in the modern architectural movement, but they were anything but consistent in their approach. Moreover, Wagner School positions were constantly being challenged by critics such as Adolf Loos, who also saw himself as representing modern architecture in Vienna. Within the general category of innovative architecture in turn-of-the-century Vienna, we find sober realism and symbolist fantasies, the stripping away of ornament and energetic decoration, the desire to embrace the most technologically-advanced aspects of modern life and a religious devotion to the primitive roots of culture itself. Utopian visions, delight in the status quo and nostalgia for the Vienna of the early nineteenth century were all important impulses for modern architecture in Vienna. The visual unity of the *Gesamtkunstwerk* was opposed by the deliberate creation of sharp contrasts. Neither surface nor space dominated.

Did these various impulses have anything in common, apart from being part of the avant garde in architecture at a certain time and in a certain place? Curiously, paradoxically, one thing they had in common was a devotion to "truth", and it is this curious paradox that is the starting point for my investigations. Architects, theorists and critics wrote a great deal about the new architecture in Vienna, and the terms "truth", "honesty", "objectivity" and "realism" are used again and again. Many rejected excessive ornament, embraced and expressed new building technologies and emphasized purpose, as we might expect, in the name of "truth". But many (and sometimes the same people) also claimed that the desire for truth was the impetus behind elaborate symbolic ensembles, the invocation of Greek temples, and the call for architects to create from the depths of their Romantic souls. The flat white walls and hygienic interiors of a sanatorium were described as "true" but so was a building crowned by a dome so functionless that the rain passed right through it, and another whose materials and structure were carefully concealed behind slabs of expensive marble and Doric columns.

One purpose of this book is to trace the fluidity of the notion of architectural truth in Vienna by looking in detail at four major monuments built between 1898 and 1912. The four monuments were designed by four different architects, for four distinct purposes; each was imbedded in a different culture; and each possesses a rich textual context, both in the form of documents relating to its use, planning, and presentation to the public and in the form of its reception by the press. "Truth" is present throughout in expected and unexpected places and plays expected and unexpected roles.

Hermann Bahr, literary critic and supporter of the Vienna Secession, wrote about the Secession building, designed by Joseph Maria Olbrich and built in

1898: "to know the true and to have created its expression, the only irreplaceable expression it can have, that is the accomplishment of our young architect".[3] This was a building on a Greek Cross plan, its corners decorated with trees of life and its entrance crowned with an open-work dome of gilded bronze laurel-leaves resting on pylons that vaguely evoked the East (Figure 1). But its interior was also mostly devoted to an exhibition space of the most advanced design, with moveable partition walls and skylights exposed on the exterior. For Olbrich and the Secessionists it was "true" *both* in a Romantic sense, as the utterly original and heart-felt invention of its architect, *and* in a realist sense, as an efficient container for art, designed with the honesty of an engineer.

Bahr's colleague Ludwig Hevesi described the Purkersdorf Sanatorium, built by Josef Hoffmann in 1904–05, as a "logical organism", unencumbered by "false ornament" and completely suited to its scientific purpose (Figure 2).[4] This makes more sense to us perhaps, because the building is utterly simple, devoid of historical "style", and its reinforced concrete ceiling beams are left exposed. But it is also strictly symmetrical in plan and elevation and is subject to an ornamental program throughout. Similarly, Otto Wagner described his design for the Postal Savings Bank of 1904–06 as "flowing naturally out of the nature and the purpose of the building"; "nowhere", he claimed, "is even the smallest sacrifice made to any sort of traditional form" (Figure 3).[5] The critic Berta Zuckerkandl proclaimed that Wagner had, "with the most unabashed honesty", designed a building which embodied the principle that "style is never anything but the truth of an age".[6] The design did take into account the operations of the Postal Savings Bank to an impressive degree. Meanwhile, as many art historians have pointed out, the building's main facade seems full of ornamental refinements, visual games and surface deceptions.

My last example, the Michaelerplatz building by Adolf Loos of 1909–12, was a beacon of truth, according to its admirers, exposing the falseness of the rest of contemporary architecture (Figure 4). For Richard Schaukal in 1910, it was simple: "Loos wants truth".[7] Loos's main inspirations were not engineering or modern life, however, but men's tailoring and the Viennese apartment houses of the early nineteenth century. While the upper stories were shocking at the time for their utter simplicity and absence of traditional window moldings, the lower stories, in deliberate contrast, were clad in green and white veined marble and, decorated with Doric columns. The advanced technology of the building's construction was completely concealed on the exterior.

Definitions of architectural truth in Vienna were thus various and fluid. Moreover, they emerged from and were shaped by a wide range of forces, both within and outside of the sphere of architecture. The influences of English Arts and Crafts reformers, German-language debates about the relationship between

1. Joseph Maria Olbrich, Secession Building, Vienna, 1898 (photo taken 1898) Bildarchiv d. ÖNB, Wien.

2. Josef Hoffmann, Purkersdorf Sanatorium, Purkersdorf, Austria (formerly Vienna), 1904–05, Niederösterreichische Landesbibliothek.

3. Otto Wagner, Postal Savings Bank, Vienna, 1904–06, PSK, Wien.

construction and art, and what was termed "French realism" were all important. Also influential were Max Nordau's analysis of nineteenth-century civilization as characterized by deceit, Hermann Bahr's rejection of realism in literature in favor of subjectivism and symbolism, and ideas about the relationship between the artist, the craftsman and the machine in the design of furniture. The architects of the four buildings I discuss worked with clients who themselves brought forces to bear on the "truthfulness" of the buildings. Olbrich was designing for a group that was steeped in neo-Romanticism and for whom artistic freedom was of paramount importance. The psychiatric theories, which I argue had a significant impact on Hoffmann's design for a sanatorium for nervous ailments, combined empirical science and anti-urban utopianism. The self-conscious frugality and efficiency of the Postal Savings Bank, a new state institution handling unprecedented amounts of information, both influenced and stunted Wagner's design for its headquarters, as did a political concern for healthy working conditions. Loos's Michaelerplatz building created an image of neutral Englishness and tailored elegance for its client, a tailoring firm specializing in the English style that had both commercial and political reasons for distinguishing itself from the kitsch modernity of the ready-made clothing retailer.

Before proceeding further, I should emphasize the historical nature of this study; my method is that of the cultural historian rather than that of the theorist. Despite the appearance of "truth" in the title, I am not presuming to contribute to the long philosophical tradition of deliberation about the meaning of that word. I am not seeking to define what architectural truth is and is not, but instead to examine what it meant to architects, critics, clients and others involved in the world of architecture in Vienna at the turn of the last century.

VERSIONS OF ARCHITECTURAL TRUTH

"Architectural truth" is used here as an umbrella term for a variety of ways of talking about the principles of architectural design, about priorities in the design process, and about the impulses behind the creation of a building. I will be referring to the use of terms such as honesty, authenticity, sincerity, realism and primacy of purpose (*Zweck*), in addition to "truth" itself. The category is admittedly a wide and potentially unmanageable one, but these various terms do have a common denominator: an ideal of the building developing in a direct fashion from a sound basis, and doing so demonstrably. This ideal is perhaps easier to visualize in terms of what it rejects. Supporters of progressive architecture saw the architecture of the immediate past (as well as much contemporary architecture) as being based on the shifting sands of convention, academic formulae,

4. Adolf Loos, Michaelerplatz Building, Vienna, 1909–12 (*Der Bautechniker*, 18 August 1911, 31, no. 33, Plate 33) Bildarchiv d. ÖNB, Wien.

surface aesthetic considerations, or the desire to impress or shock. In contrast, the new architecture, its advocates claimed, would be based on firmer foundations, whether they be the new problems of modern life, deep poetic feeling, scientific objectivity, personal integrity or vernacular tradition.

Primacy of Purpose

One aspect of the truthful approach to architecture was an insistence on the primacy of *Zweck*, a word which is repeatedly used in German-language architectural theory and criticism at this time. The *Zweck* of a building was the sum of its uses and is sometimes translated as "purpose", sometimes as "function". The uses, purpose or function signified by *Zweck* are more likely in turn-of-the-century theory to be connected to the needs and activities of the inhabitants of a building than to its structural articulation. That is, it is more common to read about the commercial *Zweck* of a central banking hall, for example, than about the load-bearing *Zweck* of a reinforced concrete floor.

It is tempting to use the term "function" as a translation of *Zweck*, because it is a term we tend to associate with buildings and because it has convenient nominal and adjectival forms that would seem to correspond well with the frequent variations on *Zweck* (so that *zweckmässig* becomes "functional", *Zweckmässigkeit*

becomes "functionality", and so on). "Purposive", and "oriention towards purpose" are less elegant. But from a twenty-first-century perspective, attention to "function" in architecture conjures up a more exclusively technical and structurally-oriented approach (the "function" of "Functionalism") than was meant by attention to *Zweck* a hundred years ago.[8] Early twentieth-century English translations or paraphrases of Viennese texts, moreover, translated *Zweck* as "purpose".[9]

The idea that architects, when they design buildings, should see the fulfillment of purpose as their primary goal was not new. It had existed as a serious, if not dominant position in German-language architectural debates since the early nineteenth century.[10] Both Karl Friedrich Schinkel and Heinrich Hübsch, in the course of their deliberations on an appropriate style for the nineteenth century, identified fulfillment of purpose as "the fundamental principle of all building".[11] Schinkel sought, with his very wide definition of *Zweck* – which included "historical, artistic and poetic purposes" in addition to the more immediate, particular purposes of specific buildings – to develop a clear, well-founded process of building that would include art and imagination as integral factors.[12] Hübsch in his famous 1828 essay "In What Style Should We Build?" was more radical, stating that *Zweckmässigkeit* (which he defined as the combination of fitness for use and solidity) determined "the size and basic form of the essential parts of every building", and that aesthetic decisions were secondary.[13] Hübsch's essay inspired a debate in which his position was widely rejected by those who saw his approach as based too much on material considerations.[14] By the 1840s, a wide spectrum of positions included one which held that *Zweckmässigkeit* and *Nützlichkeit* should form the basis of a new architecture.[15] Gottfried Semper, in the prologue to his *Style* of 1860, objected to those architects who sought to reproduce historical models exactly,

> and imitate them with the greatest possible critical and stylistic accuracy. They seek to make the demands of the present fit this mold, instead of, as would seem more natural, letting the solution to the task evolve freely from the premises that the present offers, taking into consideration those traditional forms that have developed over the course of millennia and stood the test of time as irrefutably true expressions and types of certain spatial and structural formal concepts.[16]

Through the 1870s and 80s, under the influence of Semper, various arguments were put forward supporting an architecture that corresponded to purpose while stopping short of severing ties with historical styles.[17]

Advocates of a modern architecture in Vienna around 1900 insisted with renewed radicalism that the most honest and therefore best approach was to consider purpose first, purpose being the needs (albeit widely defined) of the

users. Olbrich wrote about the Secession building in 1899: "What was decisive for the planning of this building was its purpose, exclusively: to deliver with the simplest means an efficient container for the activities of a modern artists' association".[18] This is Hermann Bahr in 1898 analyzing the exhibition spaces in the Secession building:

> Here everything is dominated by purpose alone. There is no desire here to please in a frivolous manner, to show off or to dazzle. It is not supposed to be a temple or a palace, but a space that should be capable of showing works of art to their best effect. The artist did not ask himself: how can this be done so that it looks best; rather: how can this be done, so that it best serves its purpose, the requirements of new tasks, our needs? The situation alone determined everything. . . . It was made, like a good wheel is made, with the same precision, which thinks only of purpose. . . .[19]

And Otto Wagner, in his 1903 description of design for the Postal Savings Bank: "the office spaces must fulfill their purpose in the first instance and aesthetic requirements only in the second instance".[20] In 1906, a critic summed up what he or she saw as "the highest principle of Wagner's architecture": "that the purpose of each work must first be considered and that material and appearance will follow of themselves".[21]

Even if Bahr pushes the functional point with his comparison of the Secession building to a wheel, it would be a mistake to assume that the primacy of purpose meant the exclusion of aesthetic, historical, monumental or symbolic considerations. It was much more a matter of a shift of priorities, a re-ordering of the steps in the design process. With rhetorical over-simplification, the modernists argued that their predecessors had designed buildings giving priority to a set of rules or intentions which existed in a separate realm from considerations of what the building would actually be used for. The old Ringstrasse architect (or the new neo-Baroque one), according to the modernists, saw the program of a parliament building or a bank, the actual needs of the client, as a list of labels to be given to rooms in a container already formed according to an academically-approved, historically-derived formula. Modern life and longings, activities and ideas were suppressed and stunted by such ill-fitting costumes; to release modernity from this bondage, the architect would draw on the inspirational potential of the task at hand, would be true to purpose pragmatically and poetically, and take into account not just technical details but the range of social and even spiritual needs embodied in the program.

When Louis Sullivan wrote that "that FORM EVER FOLLOWS FUNCTION, that this is the law – a universal truth",[22] he seemed to reduce architecture to a simple, if not simplistic equation. But the remainder of the passage sums up the idea, also

present in Vienna, that buildings' purposes (or "functions", in Sullivan's terminology) and clients' needs could be rich sources of multi-layered modernity. Sullivan wanted the young architect to remember

> that the main function, so far as you will be concerned, will focus on the specific needs of those who wish to build, and that such needs are quite apt to be emotional as well as what is so generally called practical. That your share will be to investigate and assimilate these needs with the utmost care, to find in the problem, which in the aggregate they form, a true solution, and then express in truthful terms, in satisfying beautiful forms a creative impulse which shall conserve and not suppress.[23]

The primacy of purpose in architecture was seen as part of an open, or honest, attitude to modern life, one which approached modern needs head-on and was indeed inspired by them.

Realism

The German architecture critic Karl Scheffler, writing in1911, described the primacy of purpose (*Zweckmässigkeit*) in modern architecture as the desire "to satisfy a need directly and clearly". *Naturalismus in der Baukunst ist die Zweckmässigkeit*, he wrote: "naturalism" – which in modern literature and painting meant a focus on the truth to nature and modern life – was equivalent in architecture to *Zweckmässigkeit*, the primacy of purpose.[24] Already in the 1880s Otto Wagner was making the connection between the need for a *zweckmässig* architecture and wider, truth-oriented artistic movements. In the introduction to his volume *Some Drawings, Projects and Executed Buildings* of 1889, Wagner allied himself directly with what he identified as the French trend of "Realism".[25] He defined as part of French Realism the emphasis on the technical over the artistic aspects of architecture, and in this he may have been referring to the rationalist theories of Eugène Emmanuel Viollet-le-Duc.[26] But he then proceeded to turn to painting, in which "this Realism has already achieved a breakthrough".[27] Specifically, it was "pictures in the modern '*plein-air*' genre" that demonstrated an alternative to "all the historical paintings with their monstrous formats and their archaeological stunts" and represented the ideal that "works of art should always be the reflection of their time".[28] He then turned back to architecture and admitted that Realism has already produced some "strange fruit", such as the Eiffel Tower, but that while such a structure might suffer from too much Realism, most contemporary buildings in fact suffer from too little.[29]

As J. Duncan Berry writes, "there simply was no uniform, monolithic school or even notion of architectural realism".[30] Certainly there was, as Berry and Harry Francis Mallgrave have argued, a pre-existing sense of architectural

realism within German architectural theory, represented by aspects of Gottfried Semper's theory and by interpretations of Semper's ideas in the 1880s and 1890s.[31] Semper had used the terms "*Realistik*" and "*realistisch*" in *Style* to refer to the raw, material origins of building which should be both preserved and overcome in the narrative, developmental architecture he advocated.[32] The Dresden architect Constantin Lipsius widened this fairly specific notion of the realistic into what he saw as a more general "realistic sense" in Semper's architecture, mitigating Semper's fundamental emphasis on the symbolic.[33] And K. E. O. Fritsch, editor of the *Deutsche Bauzeitung*, would write in 1890 that Semper, in exploiting the ability of the Renaissance style to adapt to the multiple needs of modern life, had been the leader of a "healthy, pure realistic movement" in architecture.[34]

The focus on Semper's legacy and the exploration of the long forgotten German architectural discourse of the late nineteenth century is invaluable, especially for the way in which it allows us to see that the appeal for a new, realist architecture and the continuing use of traditional forms in, for example, Wagner's built work, do not necessarily contradict each other. What has not been fully explored is the precise way in which architects responded to realism as a wider artistic and philosophical movement. Wagner identified painting – "pictures in the modern '*plein-air*' genre" – as the area in which realism had already achieved a breakthrough. According to the first, 1896, statement of the group of young architects around Wagner, the *Wagner Schule*,

> Realism, truth, was the battle-cry; sharper observation of nature, deeper knowledge of her laws, formed the basis – of a completely new art awakening today. Poets and sculptors, painters and musicians recognized these ideals long ago. . . .[35]

But architecture, "the art . . . which reaches most deeply into the real requirements of life," still lagged behind, caught up in the imitation of past styles and lacking "truth in form, and Realism in the expression of materials and construction".[36]

Wagner and his disciples were not the only ones to embrace the rejuvenating influence of non-architectural realism, or to insist that architecture needed finally to open itself up to a realist impulse that was seen as dominant in modern life and thought. In 1889, the same year in which Wagner first called for a realist architecture, Albert Hofmann, the co-editor of the *Deutsche Bauzeitung*, visited the World Exhibition in Paris. He wrote an article on the exhibition buildings, including the Halle des Machines, in which he enthusiastically promoted a modern realist architecture inspired by France, and went to more explicit lengths than Wagner to identify the philosophical sources of this idea.[37] The exhibition

buildings in Paris, wrote Hofmann, exemplified France's devotion to the "scientific method" in art, otherwise known as "Realism".[38] With "Realism", Hofmann had a specific philosophical and artistic movement in mind, and he turned to the Hart brothers (Heinrich and Julius), the main German representatives of literary Realism, for a definition. In the first issue of the Harts' *Kritisches Jahrbuch*, wrote Hofmann,

> they explain that Realism is thoroughly "modern", and indeed modern "[in its character] as *objective* Realism, as an aesthetic principle, which has grown out of the inner spirit of our century. This spirit is none other than that of *unprejudiced research*, of research which is not led astray by any of one's own wishes or tendencies, by any of the outside world's rules, by any belief or hope, which sees before it only one goal, to acknowledge the truth". Realism is the opposite of "formal art, of academicism, of rhetorical phrases and rational sobriety", for "inner content means more for it than outer form".[39]

Richard Streiter, in his 1898 essay "*Architektonische Zeitfragen*", written in response to Wagner's 1896 edition of his treatise *Modern Architecture*, identified a social and artistic phenomenon, sometimes called realism, sometimes naturalism, that had forced architects to reconsider their attachment to the past:

> The call for "pure nature", for "truth", could be heard everywhere, including in the field of art. . . . For a while, when costume-painting and costume-poetry was dominant, the present was denigrated as "unpoetic" – now it has been conquered anew as the most enticing realm for artistic discoveries. The goal of the "Moderns" became to capture the artistic elements within modern life itself and to represent them with new, refined means utterly suitable to the material represented. With this tendency, the realist and naturalist movement reached into the areas of decorative art, of craft, and lastly into architecture as well.[40]

Wagner was determined to justify his new approach in terms of the ongoing debate within architectural circles, but also in terms of the wider concerns of society and "our time". Realism indicated an approach to art generally that looked not inwards or backwards but out to the "real" conditions of life, to the dominant tendencies of the age. And the realist approach applied to architecture on a number of levels. It loosened architecture's focus on its own past. It demanded that architecture (particularly because it was, in Fabiani's words, "the art . . . that reaches most deeply into the real requirements of life") respond directly to the needs of modern humanity, pragmatically and poetically, on the levels of planning and of representation. If, as Streiter wrote, realism in art and literature meant the representation of modern life "with new, refined means, utterly approriate to the content", this would mean, in architecture, the embracing of new materials and new technology. And the use of those new materials