

# THE IRRITATION OF ARCHITECTURE

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## ABSTRACT

*As a part of the second-year undergraduate architectural theory course I teach, one among the series of questions I pose to students regards the status of architecture as an art.*

*To examine this issue with students, they read two articles: Adolf Loos's "Architecture" and Theodor Adorno's "Functionalism Today". In "Architecture", Loos appears to make an unequivocal argument that architecture under virtually every circumstance cannot and should not be considered an art. To understand his argument one needs to understand the context of architectural practice in the German-speaking world and especially Loos's Vienna at the turn of the last century. His advocacy of a functional and rational approach to architecture could be and in retrospect has been variously misinterpreted often in somewhat positivistic terms.*

*Whereas Loos's writing is confident and assertive, Adorno's writing can seem quite elliptical. Despite this, "Functionalism Today" is penetrable. Although he acknowledged the sophistication of Loos's various polemics on architecture and culture in general, Adorno seemed to refute Loos's functionalism as well as Loos's apparent absolute distinction between art and architecture. Hence, one might presume these two authors to stand on opposite sides of the fence regarding the question of architecture's legitimacy as an art; it is a much more complex and engaging debate than such first impressions allow.*

*An interesting perspective on the nature of this debate can be seen in the work and ideas of the contemporary Austrian architectural firm Riegler-Riewe. They found their work on the principle of the "poetics of use". Through this, they endeavor to give architecture a sense of normalcy without reduction to banality or alternatively a hyperbolic exaltation of everyday life. By advocating the necessity of an "irritation factor", the tenor of their work appears in many ways to be an affirmation of the ideals evoked by Loos while simultaneously offering a "nonidentical" aesthetic critique often associated with Adorno's thought.*

## INTRODUCTION

As a part of the second-year undergraduate architectural theory course I teach, one among the series of questions I pose to students regards the status of architecture as an art. To many people, questioning if architecture is an art may seem preposterous and most undergraduate architecture students hold this opinion. However, any issue that appears to have an inescapable conclusion deserves a healthy degree of skepticism. As with my students, in this brief essay I do not intend to resolve the central question it poses, i.e., "Is architecture an art?" More interesting and certainly more relevant than a definitive answer is the examination of the various arguments that surround this question. Although not quite so pregnant as this one, such questions emerge frequently throughout the architectural design process. For the thoughtful architect, they provide the conceptual traction one needs to be creative. To pursue this question, students read two essays. One is "Architecture" written in 1910 by the controversial *fin de siècle* Vienna architect and acerbic cultural critic Adolf Loos. The other, "Functionalism Today" by Theodor Adorno, the eminent social theorist and critical philosopher of the Frankfurt School, is the text of a lecture he gave to a group of German architects in 1965.

## LOOS

As a cultural critic, we mostly remember Loos for his scathing critique of ornament in the 1908 essay "Ornament and Crime". Loos believed that ornament fundamentally masks the authenticity and integrity of materials. According to him, in the modern world the naked beauty of materials should suffice. He continued his critique of the ornamental impulse more expansively in "Architecture" in which he assessed the architectural values held by many of the leading architects of Vienna and throughout continental Europe. These practitioners were influential contributors to several contemporary movements in the arts: the Vienna Secession, its outgrowth the *Wiener Werkstätte*, and the *Deutsche Werkbund*. Loos was sympathetic to their intent to make an architecture sensitive to the psychological state of the modern urban dweller. However, he considered their application of a universal artistic standard to architecture misguided and inappropriate. For him, their philosophy of using architecture to induce a state of comprehensive equilibrium to palliate the anxieties of modern urban life was quite static. He vehemently contended that this approach sacrificed both the functional and experiential concerns of a building's inhabitants in favor of an effete and condescending formalism. Thus, he surmised that "Only a very small part of architecture belongs to art: the tomb and the monument. Everything else that fulfills a function is to be excluded from the domain of art."<sup>1</sup>

Loos regarded art as a private matter for the artist with no responsibility to anything or anyone other than to aggravate quotidian composure. Like the face of Medusa, it must confront society with a frightening and paralyzing truth. Alternatively, he believed architecture must provide comfort, reassure its inhabitants, and satisfy their vision of the world or at least that part of the world they call home or residence. From this, he drew the radical conclusion that art exists outside of culture whereas architecture is embedded in culture. When art attaches to architecture in the way that Loos understood the applied arts of his time, he believed it demeaned both art and architecture and was especially deleterious to the psychological condition of the modern urban dweller.

## ADORNO

Ironically, Adorno gave his lecture to the intellectual heirs of the same *Deutsche Werkbund* that was the object of Loos's scorn more than half century earlier. His address to this group was fundamentally a lamentation on the generally impoverished quality of German building, particularly housing, in the postwar period. His concern was that it dispensed with aesthetic qualities in order to serve an expedient functionalist agenda. In deploring this situation, he examined the foundations of the functionalist argument in modernist architecture. His argument in large part transpired from Loos's advocacy of function's primacy among architectural concerns. However, Adorno's principal critique of Loos proceeds as a dialectical analysis both of how Loos constructed his position and its effect, which Loos predicated on

the radical distinction between purposeful and purpose-free art. Adorno perceived Loos's rejection of ornament as actually its sublimation within the quality of materials themselves. With this in mind, he determined that Loos's advocacy for the separation of art from architecture was suspect because it was inherently non-dialectical. Also, in spite of Loos's reproof of bourgeois cultural diffidence, Adorno found Loos's prescriptive and Archimedean position regarding these matters as exemplary of bourgeois criticism. Adorno did not necessarily disagree with Loos regarding the obsolescence and irrelevance of ornament to the architecture of modernity but he did disagree with him regarding the disambiguation of purposefulness and purposelessness or rather the autonomy of art with respect to its functional value and the estrangement of architecture from its artistic consequences.

*The purpose-free (zweckfrei) and the purposeful (zweckgebunden) arts do not form the radical opposition which he [Loos] imputed. The difference between the necessary and the superfluous is inherent in a work, and is not defined by the work's relationship – or lack of it – to something outside itself.<sup>2</sup>*

For Adorno the two notions, purpose-free and purposeful, are inherently and historically inseparable and thus the surgical distinction that Loos made is illusory. All aesthetic objects exist within a field of various kinds of tensions and Loos's rejection of the role of art in architecture, like his view on ornament, can only be its sublimation and not its elimination.

## AESTHETICS

If he does not outright admit, Adorno nevertheless implies throughout "Functionalism Today" a rather high regard for Loos's polemical capabilities, theoretical sophistication, and cultural perspicacity in the wake of the vector of modernity. Moreover, Adorno avers that Loos likely would not have dismissed what Adorno calls his "correction" to Loos's basic argument because "the question of functionalism does not coincide with the question of practical function".<sup>3</sup> Adorno does not elaborate precisely on this differentiation. However, I take his statement to mean that function in Loos's sense was not congruent with the limited idea of function that characterized the pedestrian nature of German post-war housing contemporary with Adorno's lecture. This limited notion is rigidly instrumental and responds perfunctorily to the obligatory dictates of building and its inhabitation. It does not encompass the broader conceptual territory Loos embraced in his considering the less explicit and experiential forms of living.

I turn now to this more expansive condition of function in Loos's work. Given the force of Adorno's critique of Loos's position on the relation of art and architecture, one might interpret it as a suggestion that Loos was antipathetic to aesthetic concerns in architecture. Students often draw this conclusion because they mistakenly both equate art with aesthetics and presume that aesthetics deals primarily with formal and compositional issues. The aphasic quality of the exteriors of many of the buildings Loos designed, especially the residences, can easily confirm this impression of his work. (**Figure 1**) However, Loos was far too astute to presume that architecture has no aesthetic dimension and Adorno never actually accused him of this. Hence, Loos's renunciation of art as central to architecture was not a simultaneous rejection of architecture's aesthetic possibilities.

Bohuslav Markalous, a contemporary of Loos and editor of "*Wohnungskultur*" compiled various conversations he had with Loos and published them as "Regarding Economy". In one of these conversations, Loos discussed his distaste for assessing architectural quality from the two-dimensional format of photographs.

*...what I want in my rooms is for people to feel substance all around them, for them to know the enclosed space, to feel the fabric, the wood, above all to perceive it sensually, with sight and touch, for them to dare to sit comfortably and feel the chair over a large area of their external bodily senses, and to say: this is what I call sitting!<sup>4</sup>*



Figure 1: Adolf Loos, Haus Rufert

In a similar vein, in “Architecture” Loos decried the concentration of architectural effect in the equally two-dimensional format of fastidiously drawn plans. “The sign of a truly felt architectural work is that in plan it lacks effect.”<sup>5</sup>

In “The Principle of Cladding”, he was emphatic that among other things architecture has psychological consequences.

*...the artist, the architect, first senses the effect that he intends to realize and sees the rooms he wants to create in his mind's eye. He senses the effect that he wishes to exert upon the spectator: fear and horror if it is a dungeon, reverence for a church, respect for the power of the state if a government palace, piety if a tomb, homyness if a residence, gaiety if a tavern. These effects are produced both by the material and the form of the space.*<sup>6</sup>

Implicit to these observations is Loos's recognition of the experiential and temporal circumstances of architecture that elude the seductions of the photograph and the drawing. In these observations as well, Loos evidenced a much broader sense of architecture than the primarily visual preoccupations of his peers like Josef Hoffman and Josef Maria Olbrich. Simultaneously, these statements indicate his expanded idea of function as far more than the immediate satisfaction of programmatic requirements and technological propriety. In fact, the position he espoused, especially in the first citation from “Regarding Economy”, is reminiscent of an intriguing definition of architecture that Walter Benjamin employed analogically in his argument to ascribe aesthetic legitimacy to film. Benjamin founded his argument for film's legitimacy on what he understood as a crucial similarity regarding the way both are received. In Section XV of “The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction” written in the 1930s, Benjamin, who was an associate of Adorno at Frankfurt's Institute for Social Research, portrayed architecture as a phenomenon “appropriated in a two-fold manner: by use and by perception – or rather by touch and sight.”<sup>7</sup> Thus, he regarded architecture as an art form that its inhabitant encounters in a state of distraction because the nature of tactile appropriation does not admit contemplation as does optical appropriation. Benjamin declared further that even optical appropriation “occurs much less through rapt attention than by noticing the object in incidental fashion”. Given these conditions, Benjamin concluded that in architecture both visibility and tactility are necessarily entangled. From several of the above citations, it is obvious Loos understood the medium for this entanglement as space.

What Loos ultimately meant by function in architectural design or for that matter the design of any artifact is the importance of recognizing the different ways people choose to live their lives. These differences are not only the differences inherent to any particular group that shares similar values but also and particularly the differences that characterize any individual life. Again, implying the necessity of experience and temporality, Loos insisted that forms of living are what determine the design of any artifact and that any change in the design of an artifact must be driven by a change in the ways of living associated with that artifact. In “Cultural Degeneration”, a critique of the *Deutsche Werkbund's* cultural aspirations, he equated these forms of living to culture: “[w]e have our culture, our forms according to the way we live, and the objects of daily use which make our lives possible”.<sup>8</sup> The expression “forms of living” in German is *Lebensformen* and in *Wittgenstein's Vienna*, Allan Janik and Stephen Toulmin noted that this word and its associated concept became a virtual commonplace in Vienna of the 1920s well after Loos's articulation of the notion. They further noted that *Lebensformen* served as an important point of departure for Wittgenstein in the development of ideas he ultimately elaborated in his *Philosophical Investigations*.<sup>9</sup> Moreover, John Hyman in *Wittgenstein, Theory, and the Arts*, remarked that Wittgenstein himself acknowledged a considerable intellectual debt to Loos.<sup>10</sup> In fact, Wittgenstein spent several years in the mid 1920s designing and supervising construction of a house for his sister at Kundmannngasse 19.

## CULTURE

On the matter of culture or forms of living, Loos in “Architecture” makes the provocative observation that the architect in modern urban civilization has no culture. Considerable irony inhabits this thought because what he means is that the architect who submits every artifact of living to the decorative arts in reality subverts culture. In Loos’s mind, such cultural subversion is the exclusive domain of the artist who works outside of culture unconcerned with its pragmatics. Although Loos does not specifically reference Nietzsche in this respect, the nuance behind his observation is that those architects who arrogate for themselves the role of apostle of culture are very much like what Nietzsche portrayed in *Untimely Meditations* as the *Bildungsphilister*, the cultural philistine.

However, in “Architecture”, Loos makes another explicit and succinct definition of culture as “that balance of man’s inner and outer being which alone guarantees rational thought and action.”<sup>11</sup> This was how he saw Anglo-Saxon culture, which for him correctly defined western culture in the modern world. He was anxious to bring this culture to Austria. Comparison of Loos’s definition of culture in “Architecture” with his definition of culture as forms of living in “Cultural Degeneration” reveals a potential contradiction. On one hand, he necessarily advocated a new kind of homogeneity for culture that balanced “man’s inner and outer being”. On the other hand, his sense of the way life takes form in the modern world presumed culture to be heterogeneous. For example, with respect to this latter definition, in “Ornament and Crime” he notes that the individuality and psyche of the modern person is so strong, so refined, and subtle that no single expression can suffice to represent the diversity of that experience to the outside world. Hence, inherent to Loos’s thinking about the house is the idea that in modernity there can be no such thing as an integrated identity, no actual balance of inner and outer being. Nevertheless, Loos sought to address in his architecture this perceived loss of balance but neither to restore nor redeem it. He saw such redemptive intentions among his peers as futile and accepted this fracture as a condition of his work by trying to exploit its conflicts, contradictions, incongruities, tensions, and foibles. This became his way of resisting the entire spectrum of cultural falsifications he saw in Austrian life.

An important foundation for the successful practice of architecture is the negotiation of problematic constraints. This is precisely what Loos does in formulating his architectural response to the paradoxes of *fin-de-siècle* Austrian civilization. In doing so, he is at once conservative and radical. The anxiety of this position is evident in his Haus in the Michaelerplatz and Haus Straßer (Figures 2 & 3). In both is the uneasy juxtaposition between what Loos believed are the enduring forms of the past like the plastic materiality of the Doric column and the prismatic and crystalline austerity of the architectural expression surrounding the column.

The long tradition of western architecture since Roman antiquity defines the exterior expression of a building as determined by at least two communicative conditions. First, it should be a compositionally rigorous and balanced expression of the internal order of the building. Second, it should appropriately represent the purpose of the building and status of its occupants. When we look at Loos’s exteriors, especially his residences, with respect to these established precepts their aggressive neutrality seems perplexing. (Figures 4 & 5) However, recall that Loos defined the modern urbanite’s individuality as too strong and diverse for any single expression to represent it. In Loos’s Vienna, it had become *de rigueur* in the design of new apartment blocks to express the exteriors as aristocratic palaces and thus unseemly elevate the status of the building’s bourgeois occupants. Loos inveighed against such ornamental pretensions in “The Potemkin City” as a false style and a failure of nerve to define an architectural expression consistent with the bourgeois ethos. His answer was that definitive expression, i.e., an identifiable style, was no longer possible given the complexity of the modern urban dweller’s forms of living. Hence, there must be an unbreachable gap between exterior architectural expression and interior spatial quality, which was the refuge for the individual psyche. The interior is the place of culture and must have a dynamic empathetic relationship to those who inhabit it. It



Figure 2: Adolf Loos, Haus in Michaelerplatz



Figure 3: Adolf Loos, Haus Straßer



Figure 4: Adolf Loos, Haus Müller



Figure 5: Adolf Loos, Haus Moller

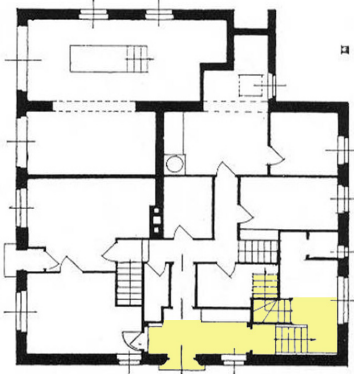


Figure 6: Adolf Loos, Haus Moller



Figure 7: Josef Hoffmann, Palais Stoclet

should support the pleasure of domestic life. Space is lived experience and coincident with *Lebensformen*. On the other hand, the exterior can only be silent; modern civilization has obviated its need for definitive representation. Beyond the obvious differences in expression between exterior and interior – the exterior being neutral and abstract and the interior being redolent with intimacy and materiality – they also differ in how they are experienced and interpreted. For example, if the public face is symmetrical with the entry on the axis of organization as is the case with the Haus Moller, the interior space evolves in a contradictory way. (Figures 5 & 6) At Haus Moller, immediately after the entry, the primary circulation system diverts immediately to the right away from the symmetry implied by the façade and threads back and forth up a staircase along the periphery to arrive at the main living floor. Loos's belief in the impossibility of style and his attempt to express his exteriors as inconspicuous or free of style provoked Adorno to observe correctly, "the absolute rejection of style becomes style."<sup>12</sup>

### ETHICS

With regard to the highly controversial issue of culture in Loos's Vienna, his close friend and intellectual ally Karl Kraus, the noted Viennese satirist and essayist, wrote:

*Adolf Loos and I – he literally and I grammatically – have done nothing more than show that there is a difference between an urn and a chamber pot and that it is this distinction above all that provides culture with elbow room.*<sup>13</sup>

Kraus was both caustic and literal in his juxtaposition of urn and chamber pot. Like Loos, he deprecated the fact that the two should be identified with one another with no sense of irony. As hyperbolic as Kraus's remark seems, it is rather close to defining the objective associated with the intent of *Wiener Werkstätte* architects like Josef Hoffmann to redeem culture from the insipidness they, like Loos, saw in most mass produced items of everyday use. Their design program submitted every object of use, no matter how mundane and practical, to a pervasive aesthetic regime. Each thing must connect with an overall aesthetic identity in order to provide a harmonious living environment. The consequence of such a coordinated design elaboration was the presumptuous elevation to high art of objects that in Loos's mind should maintain their individual everyday integrity in fulfilling a specific need. Hoffmann's Palais Stoclet perhaps most clearly exemplifies this ideal where even the most incidental item of the toilet is subordinate to a grand formal narrative and becomes more an object of artistic contemplation than an artifact of use. (Figure 7)

As we have seen, Loos was quite assiduous in maintaining a difference between art and architecture as well as carefully calibrating the relationship between art and aesthetics. These were his ways of making more precise the ways of living, which have a specific psychological dimension. If any conflation of categories exists in Loos's work, it concerns ethics and aesthetics because Loos grounds his rejection of art's role in architecture in an ethical position. In this respect, much of his critique and ultimately his own architectural work were denunciations of the prevailing architectural theory and praxis embodied in both the *Deutsche Werkbund* and the *Wiener Werkstätte*. As can be surmised from the illustration of Hoffmann's work above, the stated goal of both was to express all material aspects of human life as a single unified work of art and in the process build a foundation for a cohesive culture (*gemeinsame Kultur*). Loos saw this ideal of *gemeinsame Kultur* as fundamentally ignorant of historical processes. In "Cultural Degeneration", he argues not only that culture is perpetually subject to change but also that every artifact of use evolves at a different speed and rhythm from every other artifact. In fact, culture and its artifacts are subject to differential development that no one person or privileged group can control. "No one", Loos wrote, "has tried to put his podgy hand into the spokes of the turning wheel of time without having that hand shorn off."<sup>14</sup> In Robert Musil's portrait of Austrian society prior to World War I *The Man Without Qualities*, the protagonist Ulrich ruminates on what kind of house he should live in and recalls the statement he had read in various art journals: "Tell me what your

house is like and I'll tell you who you are."<sup>15</sup> This sums up rather well Hoffmann's position that architecture should harmonize with its inhabitants. Loos found appalling the aesthetic and psychological determinism implicit in such a stagnant identification between house and inhabitant. He vilified this position in his sardonic parable "The Poor Little Rich Man" and concluded that ultimately the inhabitant, whose ways of living change over time, would be forced to harmonize with the house rather than vice versa. Loos opposed the redemptive polemics of these positions with the idea that culture is essential to *renewal* in civilization. Modernity is not about achieving a cohesive culture throughout civilization but a recognition that just the inverse is at hand, i.e., culture is multi-form and tends toward diversification. Therefore, the *Deutsche Werkbund* and *Wiener Werkstätte's* proposals to create a cohesive culture (*gemeinsame Kultur*) put the inhabitant at the service of an aesthetic ideal and are ethically unacceptable responses to modernity. Consequently, there can be no necessary identification of one physical artifact with another purely through formal means. In other words, they denied the difference between "chamber pot and urn." In seeking to reconcile modern humanity to the differential nature of culture, Loos's thought clearly aligns with Adorno's repeated insistence that any cultural production must be understood in the context of complex historical forces.

### LOOS'S DIALECTICS

Adorno's notion of how these historical forces operate was dialectical. However, his dialectic is negative; it is neither synthetic nor positive in the sense that it does not presume reason and reality will ultimately converge. His process of thought requires one to think against thought, i.e., to think in contradictions and resist the construction of relations of identity, which he argues is what thought itself tends to do. Such thought must be reflectively critical, always examine its own premises, and set them against one another. Loos's writings express provocative ambivalences and contradictions in his thought but these alone do not progressively interlace to contest one another dialectically because many of his conclusions prescribe specific outcomes for architectural development. In spite of this, I will take the risk of contending that Loos's thought is in fact dialectical and specifically in the negative sense that defines Adorno's position. It requires, however, that we look beyond the largely prescriptive nature of Loos's polemical writing to include his architectural work as integral to his intellectual posture. Together they form what Edward Said calls an intransitive kind of thought that does not presume to prescribe the end in its beginning.<sup>16</sup>

Architecture requires a great deal of thought in both conception and development. However, this thought cannot be purely discursive in the sense that such thought proceeds coherently and linearly from one point to the next. In fact, it has many aspects that make it discursive in the alternative, virtually contradictory, meaning of this word as a desultory movement between ideas without a preconceived plan. This is thought in action; it is practice. Thus, a completed and inhabited work of architecture represents the architect's thought in various ways, but it is not necessarily prescriptive thought even if the architect advocates or intends certain specific outcomes. Karl Kraus summed this up concisely with his observation about Loos's Haus in the Michaelerplatz: "There he has built you a thought."<sup>17</sup>

In the latter years of first decade of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, Loos designed a building, which is now known as the Looshaus, for the menswear firm of Goldman and Salatsch in Vienna's Michaelerplatz. **(Figure 2)** In addition to a haberdashery and tailoring operation, the program for this building also included approximately 60 apartments in the four stories above the store. Sited opposite the Imperial Palace and adjacent the Michaelerkirche, a Romanesque church given a neo-classical façade in the late 18<sup>th</sup> century, the rather innocuous appearance of the Looshaus belies the extremely heated controversy it provoked. **(Figures 8 & 9)** The press responded with opprobrium and ridicule and the Emperor considered it such an affront that he boarded up the windows of that part of the palace overlooking the Michaelerplatz so he would not have to look at it. **(Figure 10)** A group of architects even sponsored a competition to design a façade they considered more appropriate to its sensitive context. **(Figure 11)** Given the furor it caused, the Looshaus evidences an interesting contra-



Figure 8: Johann Bernhard Fischer von Erlach, Imperial Palace



Figure 9: Michaelerkirche

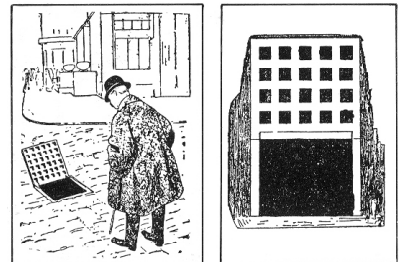


Figure 10: Newspaper cartoon satirizing Loos's design process

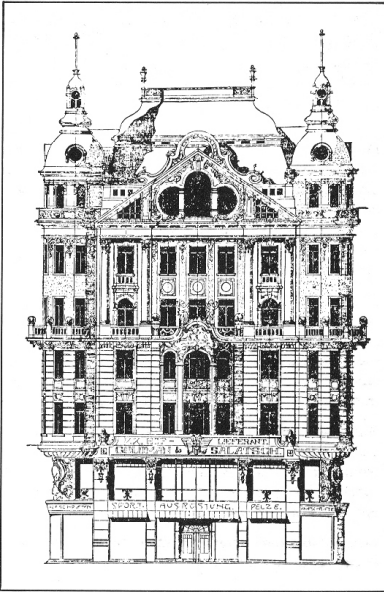


Figure 11: Competition entry for Looshaus facade

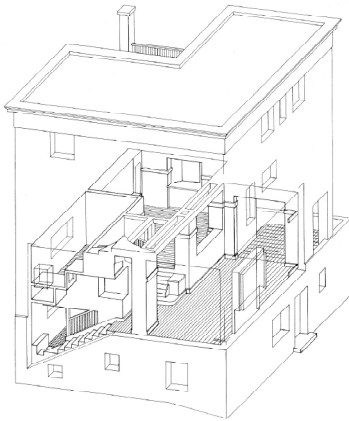


Figure 12: Adolf Loos, Haus Rufert, axonometric



Figure 13: Adolf Loos, Haus Rufert



Figure 14: Riegler-Riewe: Computer Science & Electronics Institutes TUG

diction within Loos's thought. In fact, one would have to ask if its presence did not deliberately exemplify what Loos himself stated was the mission of art. "The work of art wants to draw people out of their state of comfort . . . [it] is revolutionary."<sup>18</sup> Is this radical juxtaposition between intention and outcome dialectically legitimate in Adorno's terms?

Unlike his contemporaries who generally conceived their architectural designs two-dimensionally in plan, section, and elevation, Loos conceived his architecture as a differentiated continuum of contiguous spaces with varying heights and levels within the same floor. Loos did not have a specific name for this innovation but eventually his unprecedented approach to design by planning in volumes became known as *Raumplan*. *Raumplan*'s complex configuration of interior space stands in sharp and unexpected contrast to the regularity of the cubic volume that usually encompasses it. (Figures 12 & 13) Beyond this disconnection between exterior and interior order, the idea also has another embedded contradiction. On one hand, the location of activities on differing levels within the same volume gives clear delineation to their specificity. On the other hand, the openness of these spaces to one another from the standpoint of both visual and physical access manifests an ambiguity regarding the boundaries between them. In a curious and not altogether unrelated way, this reflects Loos's conflation of ethics and aesthetics. However, this entanglement also creates a subtle interruption in the conventional identification between space as seen and space as experienced. In other words, there are moments when the one-to-one correspondence between the line of vision and the line of movement through the same space diverges. Space, expressed as *Raumplan*, is the medium that entangles sight and touch the two senses Benjamin identified as fundamental to architecture. However, in *Raumplan*, space is also the medium that disintegrates the identity of vision and experience.

#### IRRITATION

In many ways, Loos's approach to architecture seems to bypass architectural modernism and is prescient of the postmodern world. Although it differs significantly with Loos on the view of materiality, the contemporary Austrian architectural firm Riegler-Riewe, like Loos, attempts to question the status of architecture in a world where image and reality incessantly infect one another. In doing so, the firm's principals express many ideas reminiscent of Loos. Their approach considers architecture as a background, a framework for "the complex flow of use."<sup>19</sup> It is not prescriptive, utopian, nor affirmative. Nevertheless, they intend the liminality of their architecture as critical and subversive. Thus, they believe that every work of architecture must have some factor of irritation, "a means to heighten the perception . . . to understand space in a different way, at the same time to discard the images" with which its inhabitants have become familiar.<sup>20</sup> (Figure 14) They consider this a necessary challenge to our tendency to identify ourselves uncritically with our physical surroundings.

Aside from the innovation of the *Raumplan*, Loos's interiors generally seem quite conventional. In part, this was due to his disregard for how his clients furnished their houses. After all, it was his core belief that the inhabitants of his houses should feel comfortable, reassured, and at home in their surroundings. His only stipulation with regard to the furnishing of the interior was that the architect owns the walls, which Loos used to build in furniture. Despite Loos's espousal of intimate tranquility in his residential architecture, a closer inspection of many of these interiors reveals moments of what Kenneth Frampton calls a "sense of quiet unease."<sup>21</sup> These irritating moments seem quite calculated and assert themselves modestly in one of his earliest houses, the Steiner house. There is no consequential development of *Raumplan* in this house but if we consider the beams in the ceiling, we see two qualities that the shrewd observer might find disturbing. (Figure 15) First, is their very wide spacing and shallow depth, which give the impression that they may not be able to support the load of the above floor. These beams also do not seem to have any noticeable support where they join the wall and this entire structural ensemble appears to hover like the sword of Damocles over the space. A subtler deviation from

the norm occurs in the wainscot of the Steiner interior, which ends much higher on the wall than is typical. A more startling example of this unease or irritation occurs at his Straßer House. **(Figure 16)** One of the earliest examples of *Raumplan*, this commission involved a substantial remodeling of an existing house. The presence of the fireplace in its main living area seems perfectly normal. However, a second look proves more disconcerting. A staircase climbing from the main living area to the floor above occupies the space immediately behind the fireplace. This provokes several perplexing questions: “Where is the flue? How does this fireplace function?” Loos fractured the traditional identity of the fireplace as firebox and flue joined seamlessly to one another by hiding the flue in the unremarkable paneled pier to the right. Another example occurs through his use of mirrors to suggest a virtual condition. In the interior of The American Bar, mirrors surround the space above eye level, which is crucial to the effect of the inhabitant being only marginally conscious of an indeterminately extensive virtual space. **(Figure 17)** The reflections of the ceiling coffers against one another in opposing mirrors multiply and create a virtually immense space that both contrasts with and reinforces the intimacy of the seating area. In the dining area of the Haus Moller, Loos applied mirrors with a rippled finish to the inside face of a wall that separates interior from exterior. **(Figure 18)** This finish blurs and distorts reflected images. He surrounded these mirrors on either side of the mantle with framing that appears to be doors to the exterior. Together they give the impression of access to the side yard where no access exists. All of these slight disruptions to the overall logic of their interiors, these irritations, are a subtle invitation to thought. They gently incite the inhabitants to extend their imaginations beyond the immediate comforts of their dwelling and suggest the distractive quality that Benjamin found inherent to architecture, the sense that there is always something just at the threshold of awareness but is slightly out of reach.

Loos was unquestionably adamant in claiming that the beauty of an artifact must be grounded in how well it responds to the ways of life it accommodates and cannot be considered in purely formal terms. By comparison, Adorno is much less prescriptive in his conception of what constitutes beauty. Nevertheless, in defining what beauty is in the modern world, he corroborated Loos’s belief that beauty considered in purely formal terms is meaningless and passive.

*Beauty . . . can have no other measure except the depth to which a work resolves contradictions. . . [ cuts ] through the contradictions and overcome[s] them, not by covering them up, but by pursuing them . . . Aesthetic thought today must surpass art by thinking art.*<sup>22</sup>

Despite the absolutist declarations of Loos’s written polemics on this question, his architecture testifies to a more intangible and dialectical conception of function. Function, of course, for Loos meant the satisfaction of immediate need but that satisfaction must necessarily involve an elevation of one’s experience of inhabitation through the irritations, interruptions, contradictions, and discontinuities within the spatial matrix of *Raumplan*. Loos’s work was a persistent interrogation of the prevailing conception of architecture in his own present in order to surpass that conception and open a door onto another universe of questions that remains relevant in our own present.

## NOTES

1. Adolf Loos, “Architecture”, in *The Architecture of Adolf Loos*, Wilfried Wang and Yehuda Safran, eds., London County Arts Council, 1985, p. 108
2. Theodor Adorno, “Functionalism Today” in *Oppositions*, no. 17, Jane O. Newman and John H. Smith, trans. and Anthony Vidler, ed., Summer 1979, p. 32
3. *Ibid.*, p. 32
4. Adolf Loos, “Regarding Economy” in *Raumplan Versus Plan Libre*, Francis R. Jones, trans., Max Risselada, ed., Rizzoli, New York, 1988, p. 139
5. Adolf Loos, “Architecture”, *Op. Cit.*, p. 106
6. Adolf Loos, “The Principle of Cladding”, in *Spoken Into the Void*, Jane O. Newman and John H. Smith, trans., MIT Press, Cambridge, MA, 1982, p. 66
7. Walter Benjamin, “The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction” in *Video Culture: A Critical Investigation*, Harry Zohn, trans., John G. Hanhardt, ed., Visual Studies Workshop Press, Rochester, NY, 1986, p. 45



Figure 15: Adolf Loos, Haus Steiner



Figure 16: Adolf Loos, Haus Straßer



Figure 17: Adolf Loos, American Bar



Figure 18: Adolf Loos, Haus Moller



8. Allan Janik and Stephen Toulmin, *Wittgenstein's Vienna*, Simon and Shuster, New York, 1973, p. 230
9. *Ibid.*, p. 231
10. John Hyman, "The Urn and the Chamber Pot" in *Wittgenstein, Theory, and the Arts*, Richard Allen and Malcolm Turvey, eds. Routledge, London, 2001, p. 137
11. Adolf Loos, "Architecture", *Op. Cit.* p. 104
12. Theodor Adorno, *Op. Cit.*, p. 34
13. Karl Kraus, *Die Fackel*, no. 389 - 390, December 1913, p. 37
14. Adolf Loos, "Cultural Degeneration", in *The Architecture of Adolf Loos*, Wilfried Wang and Yehuda Safran, eds., London County Arts Council, 1985, p. 98
15. Robert Musil, *The Man Without Qualities*, Eithne Wilkins and Ernst Kaiser, trans., Perigee Books, New York, 1953, p. 16
16. Edward Said, *Beginnings: Intention and Method*, Basic Books, New York, 1975, p. 72
17. Karl Kraus, *Die Fackel*, no. 313 - 314, October 1910, p. 4
18. Adolf Loos, "Architecture", *Op. Cit.* p. 108
19. Roger Riewe, "Tetra Pak, or an Architecture of Background", in *2G Riegler- Riewe*, no. 31, 2002, p. 131
20. quotation from Riegler-Riewe noted by Peter Allison, "Education and Culture", in *2G Riegler- Riewe*, no. 31, 2002, p. 6
21. Kenneth Frampton, "Introduction: Adolf Loos and the Crisis of Culture" in *The Architecture of Adolf Loos*, Wilfried Wang and Yehuda Safran, eds., London County Arts Council, 1985, p. 10
22. Adorno, *Op. Cit.*, p. 41