Leslie Topp

Architecture and Truth in Fin-de-Siècle Vienna


Fin-de-siècle Vienna set the pattern for architectural creativity amid ideological turbulence in the modern era. All through the nineteenth century, architects had provisioned buildings with weighty ornamental languages. Walking the city's great new boulevard, the Ringstrasse, one moved through a dizzying terrain of styles—Classical to Gothic to Renaissance/Baroque and even Moorish. That terrain was so vast and irregular that architects eventually began to worry that the discipline was no longer making headway. Either the historical styles had to be jettisoned or the present would sink. Beginning in the 1890s, Viennese architects chose the former course of action, and embarked on a quest for a contemporary style outside of historical convention.

Vienna's role in this quest becomes clearer if we consider the city's place within industrializing Europe. Alone of the great states, the Austrian monarchy possessed no dominant ethnicity. Although German was the language of court and bureaucracy, Croatian, Czech, Hungarian, Polish, and other minorities constituted the bulk of population. While predominantly Catholic, the empire had a particularly large Jewish population as well as lands containing Muslims, Orthodox Christians, and Protestants. With each passing decade, as it grew from a Germanic court city to a cosmopolitan metropolis, Vienna increasingly reflected the empire's diversity and political strife. In 1850, the capital's population was 446,000; by 1910, a mere sixty years later, it had risen to 2,080,000. Most new Viennese came from far-flung cities and villages. Adjusting to the capital, they had to relinquish their customs, languages, and identities. Migration brought repression. But it also unleashed a particularly creative form of sublimation, where drives and desires that no longer had an acceptable outlet in the capital were channeled toward other purposes. In this important sense, the architectural creativity and turbulence of fin-de-siècle Vienna can be cast in the terms of Sigmund Freud's theory of sublimation. Freud describes sublimation as the process by which the sexual aims of the libido are turned into cultural aims by the intercession of a conscious ego under pressure to be accepted socially. Analogously, the gap between the demands of highly civilized Vienna and the provincial origins of much of its population meant that a process of sublimation was at work in all aspects of the political, cultural, and artistic spheres. Conscious mores, too, were diverted from their rural, ethnic, and religious origins into a new and unstable cosmopolitan polity. The exceptional contributions of the Viennese avant-garde result from this contradictory pressure: first, the need for a diverse citizenry to adjust to modern, urban Vienna; and second, the lack of clarity as to what the capital's new historical rationality would constitute.

Leslie Topp's *Architecture and Truth in Fin-de-Siècle Vienna* examines the urgent and extreme nature of architectural attempts to come up with a timely approach to design. Looking beyond the differences among important Viennese architects, Topp locates one great commonality—a devotion to truth. Describing the avant-garde turn, she writes: "Supporters of progressive architecture saw the architecture of the immediate past as being based on the shifting sands of convention, academic formulae, 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" (6–7). Undoubtedly, the two sides of this transition sound equally freighted with incompatible concepts; in the end, what differentiated the avant-garde was its uncompromising demand for change and its passionate articulation of the truthfulness of that change.

Topp argues persuasively that the great architecture of the period resulted from attempts to realize the vision of modern institutions. Consequently, she spends almost no time chronicling architectural movements, like the Austrian *die Moderne*. Nor does she place architects within the contexts of their own careers. Instead, four case studies, supported by contemporaneous press accounts, explore the varieties of architectural truth that emerge from institutional encounters: Josef Olbrich's Secession Building, Josef Hoffmann's Purkersdorfs Sanatorium, Otto Wagner's Postal Savings Bank, and the Goldman & Salatsch Building on the Michaelerplatz by Adolf Loos.

The Secession Building of 1897 is the most wide-ranging of the architectural projects covered in the book. Olbrich's building by the Karlplatz refers to the distant past and the contemporary, to vernacular traditions and aesthetic subjectivity. How else can one explain the "ancient" pylons supporting a purposeless laurel-leaf dome, or the barren white walls invaded by blooming ornament? The fact that the Secession Building housed an art institution that had broken away from the conservative Academy of Fine Arts explains its fever pitch of exploration and contradiction. The building embodies the pluralism then emerging within modern art, driven by individual imagination, attention to natural observation, a fascination with the archaic and primitive, and the notion that art was becoming a secular religion.

The Purkersdorf Sanatorium in the Vienna Woods, completed in 1906, pre-
sents a very different challenge. How can architecture align itself with the then-current medical belief that nervous disorders are best treated through a regimen of sensory relaxation—even deprivation? Might Hoffmann’s avoidance of agitated line and ornament counter the nerve-threatening effects of life in the great city? Accordingly, the building’s relentless straight lines and rectangular shapes and volumes were intended to complement the physician’s goal of providing patients with a simple and restful place of recuperation. How interesting that the origins of sterile (or utilitarian) design were intended for psychic well-being.

The institutional needs of the Postal Savings Bank, erected in 1907, downplay aesthetics in favor of material preoccupations; Wagner was chosen for his skill in spatial planning. Most of the decisions he made in working with the bank’s board of directors were directed toward providing commodious and efficient workplaces, public facilities, and means of circulation. Surely the magisterial glass roof and phallic vents in the banking hall raise pragmatic needs for light and heating to an artistic level. Even the exterior façade, whose granite and marble panels are affixed by the bolts intended to hold them in place while the lime mortar dried, exhibits Wagner’s goal of an architecture harmoniously tied to the building’s purpose and nature.

Adolf Loos’s building on the Michaelerplatz (1910) was hugely controversial. Critics objected that the absence of ornament on the upper stories was inappropriate for its location across from the palace. Years later, the colonnaded building was castigated for not being modern enough. Loos, ever the iconoclast, charted a course between tradition and modernity, a course where evolution and not revolution determined architectural appropriation. The correlation to the men’s clothier, Golman & Salatsch, that occupied the building’s lower floors, couldn’t be tighter. Loos himself described English clothing—as well as the unsullied crafts—as the epitome of correct modernity: a design movement gradually working toward a tradition of austerity and uniformity. Ironically, as Topp points out, Loos’s anglophilia worked here to lend a Viennese character (and mask) to the building, diffusing racist worries among the Viennese that retail establishments were starting to appear too foreign and too Jewish.

Architecture and Truth in Fin-de-Siècle Vienna provides a welcome reading of how architects innovated in concert with institutions. It offers many insights. By tightly posing four important Viennese buildings against their functions Topp shows how their artistic heights embody the so-called truths of modernizing society, which, alas, include far-fetched science and hatred of cosmopolitan difference. This is a moment in the history of modernism when the question of representation is at the forefront. Plan and elevation loosen but do not break open. The ornamental treatment of the façade becomes the preoccupation, only now it is ornament’s end. Beginning with Olbrich’s oneiric dance with historical forms, we end in Loos’s starched propriety. The modern city and its institutions demand a devoted architecture, pragmatic and focused on the contemporary moment.

It might have been fruitful to explore in greater depth the “truthfulness” of architecture to institution. In each case study, Topp finds that architects successfully resolve institutional demands within built forms. But, as her studies also show, these demands are neither predictable nor lasting. Institutions, like buildings, have profound internal inconsistencies and choices. Their functions are by no means a rational outgrowth of their missions, but a far more complex interaction with unpredictable social forces. Architectural responses therefore cannot be judged as solutions, but rather must be regarded as engagements with a fluid problem that achieves fixed form and only momentary truth. Although Topp’s rigorously internal history has nothing to say on the matter, modern architecture would have had a very different history had her idea of “truth-to-institution” been carried forth consistently after 1914. The great architectural flights of the twentieth century, more often than not, resulted from struggle with rather than subservience to an institutional mandate. They were, moreover, inspired by a wealth of other factors—new technologies, materials, and social circumstances as well as a fruitful, if frictional, dialogue with architecture’s past. Architecture cannot be reduced to function, institution, or any single variable. Indeed, in a demographically evolving and socially unstable metropolis like Vienna, an institution’s mission and functions exemplify a sublime of unacceptable desires. The fields of psychology, banking, and retailing, despite their efforts at solidarity, always melt into air.

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Builders and Building Codes

Brian Hanson
Architects and the ‘Building World’ from Chambers to Ruskin: Constructing Authority

Rebecca Daniels and Geoff Brandwood, editors
Ruskin and Architecture

A single word—professionalization—can reasonably encapsulate the history of the architect over the past 250 years. For the builder, no such radical summary is possible. During that same span, immense and complex changes affected how buildings came to be. One was the great rise in available capital, and of institutions capable of lending it. Well into the nineteenth century, speculative builders were cash poor, and financed their projects by offering artisans shares in the completed project in exchange for their services. Donna Rilling’s enthralling Making Houses, Crafting Capitalism (Philadelphia, 2001) depicts how this