One of the central questions in the history of Viennese modernism in the years between the two world wars is why so few of the city’s architects embraced the International Style. The question is even more arresting if one recalls the prominent role that the Viennese assumed in the architectural reform movement in the early years of the century. Why, given the large number of important modernist architects that Austria produced, did so few join the architectural vanguard of the interwar period?

Part of the answer no doubt lies with the influence of Otto Wagner. Despite his prescient designs in the decade before 1914, Wagner never abandoned his allegiance to classical principles—or his conviction that the architecture of the past could still serve as a model for the present. The same was true of most of his students and followers, from Josef Hoffmann and Joseph Maria Olbrich to Jože Plečnik and Leopold Bauer, who continued to believe that history had a place in the making of a new aesthetic. The adherents of the Wagnerschule, with few exceptions, would pursue a course in the 1920s markedly at odds with most of the European avant-garde.

But many Viennese who were neither students nor followers of Wagner continued to subscribe after World War I to a sort of modernized historicism. Although Adolf Loos, for example, advocated a formal language of simplicity and restraint, he too drew on historical ideas—especially Greco-Roman classicism—for his designs. (Among Loos’s prized possessions was a seventeenth-century Italian translation of Vitruvius.) The same was true of Josef Frank, who, after Loos, the most visible Viennese architect on the international scene in the interwar years. At the time, Frank was considered the most “modern” of the younger Viennese architects. He was the only Austrian invited to build at the Weissenhofsiedlung in Stuttgart, and he was the sole Austrian representative at the founding of the CIAM in 1928. But by the end of the 1920s, Frank emerged as an outspoken critic of Walter Gropius, Hans Schmidt, J. J. P. Oud, and the other German and Dutch functionalists, arguing that they disregarded the complex nature of modern society. The exteriors of Frank’s buildings may have borne a superficial resemblance to the International Style, but their massing and arrangement was more composite (a consequence of Frank’s belief in reproducing the complexities and contradictions of the past), and their interiors, which displayed Frank’s penchant for discordant patterning and his belief in physical comfort, were strikingly at odds with the purified look developed by Le Corbusier and Ludwig Mies van der Rohe.

Only a handful of Austrians produced work that repeated outlines of the International Style. The most important, of course, were Richard Neutra and Rudolph M. Schindler, who spent most of their careers abroad, in California. Of the younger Austrian modernists who remained, few were able to generate a large body of work due to the impact of the war and the dissolution of the Habsburg Empire. Among the best were Lois Welzenbacher, who built a series of elegant hotels, resorts, and houses in the Tyrol and southern Germany, and Walter Loos (no relation to Adolf Loos), who designed several striking villas in and around Vienna before immigrating to Buenos Aires. But undoubtedly the most noteworthy of the younger Austrians in the interwar years was Ernst A. Plischke (1903–1992), who is now regarded as the preeminent architect of the post-World War I generation.

Plischke has been the subject of several previous studies, but until now, there has not been a comprehensive examination of his life and work. Ernst Plischke: Modern Architecture for The New World is a collaborative effort of two well-known and respected authorities on Austrian architecture and design, August Sarnitz, a professor of architecture at the Akademie der bildenden Künste in Vienna, and Eva B. Ottlinger, who teaches in the art history department at the University of Vienna and is the curator of the Hofmobiliendepot (Imperial Furniture Collection). The book, originally published in German in 2003, was reissued in English the following year to accompany an exhibition of Plischke’s work at the Wellington City Museum. It offers a wealth of new material, especially on Plischke’s interwar designs in Vienna, and will become an essential resource for anyone interested in the period, but the book leaves some unanswered questions about his work and its meanings.

Plischke was born in 1903 in Klosterneuburg, a small town on the outskirts of Vienna. His father was an architect in the employ of the Ministry of Public Buildings who also operated a small private construction firm in his hometown. Hoping to follow in his father’s footsteps, Plischke decided to study architecture. Just after the war, he entered the Vienna Kunstgewerbeschule, where he came under the influence of the visionary educators Franz Cízek and Oskar Štrnad, who before the war had been Frank’s partner. In 1923, Plischke was accepted into Peter Behrens’s master class at the Akademie der bildenden Künste, and over the next few years he developed a personal style that borrowed from Behrens’s tectonic rationalism and German expressionism.

In 1927, Plischke began tutoring a young American architect, William Muschenheim. The two men developed a close friendship, and after a brief stint working for Frank, Plischke moved with Muschenheim to New York to establish a practice there. The onset of the Great Depression dashed the effort, and in late 1929, Plischke returned to Austria. He

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August Sarnitz and Eva B. Ottlinger
Ernst Plischke: Modern Architecture for the New World—The Complete Works
designed a pair of row houses for the 1932 Vienna Werkbundsiedlung, but his real breakthrough had come the previous year with the completion of his first independently realized project, the Arbeitssamt (employment office) in the Vienna suburb of Liesing.

With its taut plaster skin, flush ribbon windows, and dramatic projecting staircase, the Arbeitssamt is often described as the best International Style building in Austria. The design almost certainly drew from Gropius’s 1914 Werkbund exhibition building in Cologne and his Bauhaus complex in Dessau, as well as Erich Mendelsohn’s Schocken Department Store in Stuttgart (1926–28), but it has an elemental simplicity and clear rhythmic ordering scheme that anticipated the glass box architecture of 1950s. Indeed, Plischke’s work of the early 1930s developed a marked sense of lightness, rational precision, and lucidity that was perhaps closest in spirit to the designs of Mies van der Rohe.

The comparison is even more apt if one considers Plischke’s Gamerith House, on Lake Attersee in Salzburg province (1933–34), an elegant, U-shaped pavilion on thin pilotis, which shares a certain formal kinship with Mies’s Tugendhat House. Yet there are also telling differences that go to the core of Plischke’s own personal brand of modernism. Unlike Mies, Plischke never employed completely free and open planning; the rooms in his houses and other buildings maintain their discrete identities. Even when he developed a feeling of spatial flow, the individual areas remained clearly defined. Plischke may have mimicked Mies’s floating masses and sliding planes, but his idea of living was bound by more conventional ideas of planning.

Plischke also came to borrow elements of Loos’s Raumplan and Frank’s notion of the “house as path and place.” The movement sequences in his houses, though, are more relaxed, less dependent on formal systems and more in accord with the normal patterns of living. This loosening of the stiff conventions of traditional Central European domestic design was one of the principal features of the so-called Wiener Wohnkultur (Viennese dwelling culture), the dominant design direction in Vienna between the wars, and it became a guiding axiom of Plischke’s designs. From the mid-1920s on, he fashioned furniture and interiors that were characterized by both notable simplicity and close attention to issues of comfort. His softened, mitigated modernism became an alternative way of liberating architecture: rather than exploding the walls, as Mies did (while maintaining a strong formalism with his furnishings), Plischke sought to engender a feeling of ease by positioning his wood and upholstered pieces freely about the rooms in informal groupings. The same evident move away from regularity is apparent in the planning of his houses. The result is a consistent ensemble, an unaffected and unforced modernism that corresponded in a direct way to the new modes of living.

Plischke took these stylistic precepts with him to New Zealand, where he fled after the annexation of Austria by Nazi Germany. Plischke himself was not in danger—he was a Catholic and not politically active. But his wife Anna Lang and his two stepsons were Jewish, and Plischke chose to go with them into exile.

When I interviewed him in the 1980s, Plischke was still bitter about his initial reception in New Zealand, where he encountered both xenophobia and a marked hostility toward European high modernism. Eventually, he was able to establish himself, and over the next two decades he completed an array of refined and inventive houses and public buildings that display the best features of post-World War II architecture and decisively influenced the country’s architectural scene.
In 1963, Plischke accepted a call to return to Vienna and succeed Clemens Holzmeister at the Akademie der bildenden Künste. He taught there until the early 1970s, leaving his mark on a generation of younger Austrians, among them Luigi Blau, Hermann Czech, and Dietmar Steiner. He continued to design and build, and one of his last projects, the Frey House in Graz (1970–73), certainly ranks with the best Austrian works of that period.

Ottillinger and Sarnitz do a splendid job of summarizing the events of Plischke's life and discussing his major works, but there are a few problems. They apparently chose to produce the chapters independently: Ottillinger wrote the first, third, and last chapters covering Plischke's early life, his education, his furniture and interior designs, and his collaboration with his wife Anna, who worked as a garden designer; Sarnitz contributed the second, fourth, and fifth chapters, which document Plischke's time in New York, his architecture in New Zealand, and his work in Austria after 1963. The result is both a certain amount of repetition and some notable gaps. The best features of the text are Ottillinger's discussion of Behrens's impact on Plischke and examination of Plischke's interiors for the apartment of Lucie Rie (1928), and Sarnitz's look at Plischke's relationship with Frank and analysis of the Liesing Arbeitsamt. What is ultimately missing, however, is a full accounting of Plischke's distinctive contribution.

Two basic questions need to be answered. The first revolves around Plischke's position in the history of Austrian modernism; the second has to do with his place within the larger modern movement. The issue of Plischke's role in Austria may be the easier of the two to resolve. In the section on the Frey House, Sarnitz quotes the historian Friedrich Achleitner: “[The Frey House] brings the building tradition of Adolf Loos or Josef Frank to its high point and conclusion. Plischke . . . was the only one in Vienna to represent successfully an optimistic radical ‘International Style’ against resignation and skepticism of the older generation” (212). Sarnitz argues this involved the addition of a “spatial quality” and “a refined domestic culture” that transcended “pure functionalism” by combining elements of open planning with an understanding of how people actually inhabit spaces. He draws a comparison with Gerrit Rietveld's notion of “active living”—that one must constantly experience one's surrounding spaces—which guided Rietveld's design of the Schröder House (1924). But Plischke, Sarnitz contends, went a step further than Rietveld because “he differentiates the heights of the flexible spaces” (212, 222). In other words, Plischke's achievement was to merge successfully the idea of a Raumplan à la Loos with the concepts of spatial engagement and flexibility.

Sarnitz is undoubtedly correct, but Plischke may have contributed something more to the tradition of Viennese design—a new way not only of making spaces but also cladding their surfaces and furnishing them. Ottillinger notes that Plischke adopted Loos's “cladding principle” (Bekleidungsprinzip), using color, material, surface, and texture to create warm, comfortable rooms. At the same time, she argues that he relied on Le Corbusier's ideas of view corridors through the house and, ultimately, to the outside. In this way, he was able to devise humane and pleasant spaces that overcame the rigid and closed feeling of Loos's domestic designs. Plischke's simple wood and upholstered furniture complemented this approach by fostering a sense of genuine ease without compromising its modernist identity. Thus, he continued Frank's belief in preserving the ideal of premodern coziness without succumbing, as Frank had, to older ideas of form. Plischke made the Wiener Wohnkultur truly modern.

Plischke's place in the wider modern movement is more difficult to sum up. He was not an important theoretician. During his time in New Zealand, he wrote a short book, Design and Living (Wellington, 1947), and later, after his return to Austria, he published a text, Vom menschlichen im neuen Bauen (Vienna and Munich, 1969), outlining his ideas. But neither contains much that is original. Indeed, he pointedly rejected the “over-intellectualizing” of architects like Frank and Le Corbusier, preferring those who were “builders.” As a builder, Plischke was responsible for two exceptionally accomplished and beautiful works, the Liesing Arbeitsamt and the Gamerith House, which belong with the very best of the modernist canon. But in the end, he was less a formative designer than a gifted synthesizer. He was able to bring together a broad assortment of influences to forge a compelling and attractive design style. Plischke did not invent a new modernism, but he did help to humanize it, and in that sense his work forms an important chapter in the history of the new architecture. Ottillinger and Sarnitz's book demonstrates this very well, and it deserves to be widely read and discussed.

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Notes
1. Previous studies on Plischke include Gustav Peichel, Ernst Anton Plischke, exhibition catalog (Vienna, 1983); and Friedrich Kurrent and Walter Stelzhammer, eds., Ernst Anton Plischke: Architekt und Lehrer (Salzburg, 2003). Plischke also published an autobiography shortly before his death; see Ernst A. Plischke, Ein Leben mit Architektur (Vienna, 1989).
2. Ernst A. Plischke, interview by Christopher Long, Vienna, 28 Nov. 1986. Plischke remarked that "Frank was an intellectual who built ideas”—an approach that he thought was at odds with genuine architecture.