On the sloping edges of the Villa Borghese in Rome, the white Beaux-Arts edifice of the National Gallery of Modern Art marks the watershed between the città storica and the affluent residential district of Parioli. Romans love to stroll along the winding tree-lined lanes of the villa before being welcomed inside the geometrically ordered rooms of the gallery. The museum hosts important collections of nineteenth- and twentieth-century art, mostly Italian, with some spectacular rooms dedicated to avant-garde artists and to the so-called arte concreta of the two decades after World War II, exhibiting painters such as Alberto Burri, Giuseppe Capogrossi, and Lucio Fontana, among others.

Understanding the gallery is relevant to the appreciation of the spatial and thematic environment that framed the exhibition on the architectonic oeuvre and design of Adolf Loos. Exhibitions dedicated to architecture, specifically modern, are rare in these spaces, and their presence surprises visitors. For this review, I made several visits to the Loos retrospective and interviewed people who could not recall seeing an architecture exhibition in the gallery for over a decade. This omission is more shocking in light of the gallery’s close proximity to the School of Architecture “Valle Giulia,” University of Rome La Sapienza, and the potentialities of exchange between the two institutions as users and producers of cultural material. Thus, the opening in December 2006 of two exhibitions dedicated to individual architects, Enrico Del Debbio and Adolf Loos, demands sincere praise for the new directorship of the museum.

Del Debbio (1891–1973), the lesser known of the two, was the designer of the nearby School of Architecture (1925–32) and one of the most prominent architects of Mussolini’s regime. His works have had a strong impact on the growth of modern Rome and helped shape the image of the Fascist capital. Between 1927 and 1933, Del Debbio was in charge of planning for the Foro Mussolini (renamed Foro Italico in 1943), the sport facilities area on the right bank of the Tiber near the Roman Milvius Bridge. The città dello sport was planned as one of the three poles of Mussolini’s Third Rome, together with the città universitaria (the university campus to the east) and the città della civiltà italiana (the southern district where the E.42 Universal Exhibition would be located).

The Del Debbio exhibition occupied the columned entrance lobby and the central salon of the gallery with a highly scenographic presentation, focusing on the major buildings the architect realized at the Foro Mussolini. The display centered on a large model, scale one to five hundred, newly made for this exhibition, which showed the athletic facilities at the beginning of the 1960s (when Rome hosted the seventeenth Olympic Games) integrated with the impressive landscape between Monte Mario and the river.¹

To reach the Loos exhibition visitors had to cross the Del Debbio installation and the museum section where post–World War II artists are exhibited. This path of travel had significant results, unwittingly or not: it spatially emphasized the wordless void between Loos and Del Debbio while allowing visitors to get acquainted with the clear, high, and generously sky-lit rooms of the gallery. Suddenly, the scene changed as visitors entered a dark room, enclosed by black painted walls, conceived to capture the feeling of crossing the threshold of a Schatzkammer. The epiphany of Loos’s world had its beginnings in this trajectory.

The Loos exhibition consisted of seven sections organized thematically, with emphasis on the design of his celebrated villas in Vienna and abroad and the invention of a new domestic landscape. The curators, Richard Bösel (director of Istituto Storico Austriaco a Roma and former curator of the graphic collection at the Albertina Sammlung) and Vitale Zanchettin (assistant professor at Istituto Universitario di Architettura di Venezia and currently residing in Rome with a grant at the Hertziana) guided the exhibition designers to an inspired reinterpretation of the architect’s Raumplan, Loos’s concept of integrating split-level space. The three entry galleries, located on the same level, favored large-scale projects and urban schemes, stressing Loos’s interest in the public sphere and metropolitan life; no reference at all was made to his residential projects or to his concerns for social housing reform. This later investigation seemed to belong to another universe, which in the exhibition was spatially dislocated on two upper levels that were not in a sequence but were connected through a corridor and flights of stairs. Therefore, the overall effect was convoluted, implying a search for Loos that required close attention and some skill for the public to integrate disparate forms of architectural documentation.

The first gallery in the Loos exhibition, “Icons of the Twentieth Century,” had an explosive effect with three projects that remain examples of Loos’s provocative creativity. The model of the skyscraper in the shape of a monumental Doric column for the Chicago Tribune Tower (1922) occupied the center of the room. On one side of it was the stepped volume of a project for the municipal building in Mexico City, and on the other side was the project for the Grand Hotel Babylon in Nice that evoked Loos’s awareness of another antiquity. The adjacent room placed Loos’s design within the theatrical ambience of fin-de-siècle Vienna. The focus was on institutional buildings and multifunctional edifices, all designed before 1918. A detail of a map of central Vienna, glued to the floor, was animated by models on their respective locations. The Goldman and Salatsch Store was meticulously documented by two models at a scale of one to fifty and an extraordinary series of period pictures showing the elegant interiors of the tailor shop. One model, made of transparent material, showed a section

¹ For the purposes of this article, the space between Monte Mario and the Tiber has been called the città dello sport. This term should not be confused with the cità dello sport, the name Mussolini gave to the huge district near the Roman Milvius Bridge for the Olympic Games (when Rome hosted the seventeenth Olympic Games) integrated with the impressive landscape between Monte Mario and the river.
including the ground floor and the mezzanine so that exhibition visitors could penetrate the complexity of the spatial connection between the two levels and their mediation through the articulated urban space of the adjacent Michaelerplatz.

Some curatorial decisions, however, made the exhibition more of a machine for studying than a vehicle for showing and visiting. This approach was most visible in the rooms with Loos’s residential projects. If the curators’ intention was to recreate the atmosphere of a studiolo or a cabinet of curiosities, then the result was fully accomplished. The low intensity of artificial light and the reproduction of Kurt Gerlach’s black-and-white photographs in small format with few variations of size had predictable results. In addition, if Loos used irony as a weapon to castigate his contemporaries, the exhibition made no attempt to show that irony. Instead, Loos appeared sedate and even understated while a general tone of melancholy (another key word in Loos’s thinking) pervaded the exhibition rooms. Drawings, sketches, and photos all received the same attention; they were part of a scientific investigation with no indulgence of their aesthetic significance. This can be interpreted as a “radical” decision of the curators in tune with Loos’s own preference for no excess, but in a few instances, this anti-aestheticism was a punishment for visitors.

A room showing projects for working-class housing preceded the sequence of sections dedicated to Loos’s design for his wealthy clientele. Loos’s position as head of the municipal office for public housing in Vienna is little known, in part because it lasted only three years, from May 1921 to June 1924. Nevertheless, his housing projects offered a clue to the importance of the two schemes of urban developments built in this period: Siedlungen, complexes on the outskirts of the city, and Höfe, courtyard schemes in the proximity of the city center. Seven housing projects were displayed, including three large-scale interventions by Loos, but the existing documentation of this work is so fragmentary that it has been difficult to understand the impact of his contribution. Loos was not a skilled draughtsman; his drawings were technical, and many were not kept when he died. While some projects can be read with limited drawings, the curators here used plans that did not convey the scale or location of the projects. Of the other designs, Loos’s row housing at the Werkbund Siedlung in Vienna provided a critical response to the Weißenhof in Stuttgart and received much media attention, but only two models and an absence of plans made it difficult to understand. Furthermore, the extraordinary design, never built, of a house made of one wall was difficult even for an expert to comprehend. Another section was dedicated exclusively to the Villa Moller, built in Vienna in 1927, as the epitome of the Raumplan, while the final two sections displayed apartment designs (including Loos’s own apartment showing his search for a certain coziness), objects and furniture, and several villas.

The significance of this major Loos retrospective was double-sided. On one hand, it was the first exhibition documenting Loos’s complete oeuvre in any Italian museum, following the earliest and superb Viennese retrospective of 1989.2 On the other hand, Loos’s undisputed and long-standing reputation as thinker, before that of architect, among Italian designers obviously played a role in the decision to present his projects and buildings to a large public. As a critic and theorist, Loos’s writings made an impact on Italian architectural culture for several decades after World War II; his notoriously condemnatory essays, published in the anthology titled Parole nel vuoto (1972, with subsequent reprints), has always been a bestseller among students. The origin of such success is undoubtedly rooted in Aldo Rossi’s admiration of Loos’s radical modernism, dating from the mid-1950s when the still-young contributor to Casabella continuà published his acute analysis of Loos’s urban monuments, an examination later echoed in his L’architettura della città (1966). Rossi’s interest in Loos’s critique of a futile functionalism in favor of architecture as art and spirit gained recognition through the film Ornamento e Delitto (Ornament and Crime) that Rossi produced for the Milan Triennale of
1976. The title remains a true manifesto of Rossi’s worship of Loos. Considering that the Roman exhibition was mainly directed to an Italian public, it would have been appropriate to point to Rossi’s appreciation of Loos and the cultural debt to the Viennese master from the Italian side of the Alps.

The large-scale, well-detailed, and elegant models of Loos’s built and unbuilt projects captured the attention of visitors and contributed to the great success of the exhibition. These models were made on two occasions—the mid-1990s and early 2000—by students of the Technische Universität in Vienna under the supervision of excellent scholars such as Hans Puchhammer and Anton Schweighofer who have contributed through various essays to establish Loos’s celebrity in Austria and abroad. The models, together with the original drawings and the period pictures taken by Gerlach at the end of the 1930s, form the corpus of the Loos archive at the Albertina Sammlung in Vienna.

A well-documented, superbly printed catalog accompanied the exhibition and included a series of essays on Loos’s world and his cosmopolitan culture. The curators contributed two articles: Zanchettin wrote on Loos’s Baukultur and his juvenilia, and Bösel explored the consequences of the Raumplan on the morphology of Loos’s façades. Fulvio Lenzo wrote on Das Prinzip der Bekleidung not as theory but from the point of view of Loos’s selection of marbles, therefore offering a new reading on the materiality of his architecture. The catalog also provided excellent analysis of each project presented in the exhibition.

The second half of the publication followed the layout of the show with its seven sections, including reproductions of the majority of the documentation displayed in vitrines and on the walls. Both the catalog and the exhibition mirrored Loos’s ordered thinking in its consistency and uniformity.

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Notes
1. The exhibition Enrico Del Debbio architetto. La misura della modernità resulted from a research project supervised by Maria Luisa Neri and Gigliola Del Debbio, with the collaboration of the Centro Archivi MAXXI architettura, Rome.

Publications related to the exhibition:
Maria Luisa Neri and Gigliola Del Debbio, eds.,