Exhibitions

Josef Hoffmann: Interiors, 1902–1913
Neue Galerie, New York
2 November 2006–26 February 2007

Although Josef Hoffmann is well known for his influence and achievements in designing interiors, as ensembles those interiors are not well known. The extensive destruction of World War II reduced their number, and surviving interiors were often victims of time and taste. Many were broken up and their coordinated elements, fundamental to the idea of the Gesamtkunstwerk, were separated for their individual visual and monetary value. The Neue Galerie’s show, Josef Hoffmann: Interiors, 1902–1913, was thus a welcome and novel addition to recent exhibitions devoted to Viennese turn-of-the-century art and design.

The show consisted of two major elements: recreations of four Hoffmann-designed rooms and a series of smaller displays illustrating aspects of Hoffmann’s and the Wiener Werkstätte’s production from the period. The four rooms—a girl’s bedroom from the Max Biach residence (Vienna, 1902), a bedroom from the Dr. Johannes Salzer residence (Vienna, 1902), a dining room from the Stonborough/Stonborough-Wittgenstein residence (Berlin, 1905), and a dining room from the Ferdinand Hodler residence (Geneva, 1913)—were full-scale verisimilar recreations, erected within the spaces of the museum and populated with the original furniture. Where necessary, modern copies of hardware, fittings, and textiles were commissioned. Supplementing the four display rooms were wall-mounted period photographs, reproduced from original design journals, that illustrated the rooms and apartments in their original states.

The other display spaces were roughly thematic. On the second floor, silver and metal objects from the Wiener Werkstätte were presented in two freestanding cases, while the walls held photographs of Wiener Werkstätte projects, notably the Palais Stoclet and the Café Fledermäus. Original textile designs in Hoffmann’s own hand, drawn from the archives of Backhausen and Soehne (the original manufacturer), added brilliant dashes of color. On the third floor were displays of furniture, glass, book bindings, leather- and metalwork.

The unheralded gem of the exhibition was a small array of photographs documenting Hoffmann’s own private Vienna residences and his summer house. That easily oppressive idea of the Gesamtkunstwerk seems to have gained no foothold in Hoffmann’s own apartment. “Live as I design, not as I live” seems to have been his motto. Views of his summer house (his birth house in Moravia) and of his various apartments in Vienna, some of which have never been shown before, contained an eclectic range of objects from a span of periods, all arranged in creative but gemütlich ways. The overall artistic uniformity of the rooms in the exhibit and his interior works as a whole were not visible. Biedermeier and Secession, antique and modern design existed side by side. The absolute order of the designer’s vision, which animated the Wiener Werkstätte and its products, was forsworn by the master for himself.

The reunification of the Hoffmann objects within the recreation of their original surroundings was an admirable and impressive undertaking. Attractive and interesting individually, the objects were at their best when seen as an ensemble in the spaces for which they were originally designed and the Neue Galerie painstakingly and intelligently reproduced. Great effort was taken to ensure success, including commissioning hand-loom weavers to make the bedspreads. The deliberate and thoughtful placement of the rooms, oriented so that windows coincided roughly with those of the museum, reinforced the impression of viewing the original rooms.

The installation was well considered and well executed, befitting a show devoted to a master of design. Numerous subtle details tied the presentation together. The larger spaces containing the Biach and Salzer bedrooms were both finished with Hoffmann-like details—stencils of small squares or thin black moldings that outline the space and reduce the walls from tectonic expressions to decorative presences. In the third room, the walls were covered with a stencil pattern copied from Hoffmann’s Hugo Marx breakfast room, and the display vitrines were based on those of the Austrian Pavilion at the Paris Exposition des Arts Décoratifs of 1925. Even the hallways were treated decoratively. Visitors to the third floor were greeted with a portrait of Hoffmann on a wall finished with a Biedermeier polka-dot pattern, while the long connecting hall was painted after Hoffmann’s designs for the Kaasgraben colonie. The exhibit itself, especially the third floor, was a Gesamtkunstwerk.

The exhibit was limited by a strict curatorial standard: only those rooms...
with surviving furniture and known layouts were eligible for inclusion, thus excluding other significant but incomplete works. Additionally, the current owners of the furniture had to consent to loaning the furnishings. (The Salzer bedroom is still used by descendants of the original patrons who, for the duration of the show, slept on cots while their bedroom was on display.) The selected period, 1902 to 1913, seems in some ways arbitrary, though the period defines a moment that the curator, Christian Witt-Dörring, saw as bridging premodern and prepostmodern.

A second limitation of the exhibition, the extensive use of black-and-white photographs, was the product of scholarly and legal necessities. Employing black-and-white period illustrations of rooms that no longer exist makes sense, as color renderings are unavailable. In the case of the still-extant Palais Stoclet, black-and-white photographs fail to capture its brilliantly integrative color schemes; yet the owners of the house do not permit reproduction of color images of the interiors.

Though beautifully produced and hung, the exhibition was also troubling because recreations were presented as if they were originals. The use of period rooms is a well-accepted museological technique; sometimes a room is recreated from fragments, sometimes the space as a whole is removed from a locale, but they are clearly marked as one or the other. At the Neue Galerie, dispersed objects were reassembled in a simulacrum of their original locale, but these reproductions were incomplete. In the Stonborough/Stonborough-Wittgenstein room, for instance, the area and shape of the floor were accurately reproduced (including a cut-off corner) and an artificially low ceiling was installed; however, a wall was removed to afford a view of the dining room in a way Hoffmann never intended. In the Biach bedroom, the design problem for Hoffmann was the narrowness of the bedroom. Yet, the room as presented, with wall removed, eliminated the very narrowness to which the design reacted. Thus, the viewing conditions in the gallery made it difficult to grasp Hoffmann’s design challenges. While there are limitations as to how rooms can be presented, there are also creative solutions. We could look through windows or doorways or even enter the space guided by ropes and stanchions, but the design of the exhibit simultaneously wanted to present the rooms as reality and as museum artifacts. We were supposed to believe that we were looking at the actual rooms, yet we saw simulacra.

The scarcity of wall text reinforced this confusion. The curator said he wished to avoid the kind of didactic show so common in America; his aim was to induce visitors to experience the art
rather than read long labels. But texts were needed to differentiate original Hoffmann-designed objects from reproductions. Limiting wall text certainly has merit, yet this approach presumes knowledge and visual skills viewers may lack.

A handsome book, not precisely a catalog, accompanied the show. Five essays by American and Austrian scholars focus on general aspects of turn-of-the-century Austria and Austrian design but not necessarily Hoffmann’s work. Some of the topics, such as the mental interior of Viennese space, woman and reform clothing, and nationalism and design are indeed interesting, but their relationship to the exhibition at hand seems elusive except in the broadest of terms. Two essays, however, focus on the design and decor of Hoffmann’s various residences: one by curator/editor Witt-Döring on the Hoffman interiors and the other by Michael Huey on Hoffmann’s personal spaces. A more thorough treatment of the reconstructed rooms is forthcoming.

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Publication related to the exhibition:

Muséo de Historia de la Ciudad de Barcelona
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“In architecture in Spain does not exist; there are no architects, only pastry-makers. What for? So that foreigners can laugh at us.”1 The exhibition G.A.T.C.P.A.C. 1923–1939: A New Architecture for a New City, organized by the Museo de Historia de la Ciudad de Barcelona and Colegio de Arquitectos de Cataluña, provided a context for these words written in 1930 by the young Basque architect José Manuel Aizpurúa. In 1929 in attempting to answer the question, “when will there be architecture in Spain?” Aizpurúa, along with Joaquín Labayen, designed and built the Club Náutico of San Sebastián, a small emblematic building along the beautiful seashore of the city. Both architects belonged to G.A.T.E.P.A.C.—Grupo de Arquitectos y Técnicos Españoles para el Progreso de la Arquitectura Contemporánea (literally, Group of Spanish Architects and Technicians for the Development of Contemporary Architecture). The group was established in Zaragoza in 1930 by several young, forward-looking Spanish architects following the success of two exhibitions held during that year in San Sebastián and the year before in the Dalmau galleries of Barcelona. During their first meeting on 26 October, they drafted a charter and decided to publish a journal, AC-Documentos de Actividad Contemporánea. G.A.T.E.P.A.C. was organized into three groups: the Northern Group, almost exclusively represented by the Basque architects Aizpurúa, Labayen, and Vallejo; the Central Group, with headquarters in Madrid, represented by Fernando García Mercadal and his followers; and the Eastern Group, centered in Barcelona and structured around its two most distinguished representatives, José Luis Sert and José Torres Clavé.

Mercadal and his friend Juan de Zavala were the only two Spanish architects invited by Helène de Mandrot to her castle at La Sarraz where the Congrès Internationaux d’Architecture Moderne (CIAM) was conceived, and consequently they were able to participate in the foundation of the Comité International pour la Réalisation des Problèmes de la Architecture Contemporaine (CIRPAC, an executive branch of CIAM), as well as in the first CIAM. Mercadal also participated as the Spanish delegate in the CIAM of 1929 in Frankfurt, and he was joined by Sert for the 1930 CIAM in Brussels. In 1932, CIRPAC met in Barcelona with the Spanish architects of G.A.T.E.P.A.C. By 1933, the Northern and Central groups of G.A.T.E.P.A.C. had ceased to function, and thereafter the Catalan group grew in size and became more active. Chartered in October 1930 as G.A.T.C.P.A.C. (Grupo de Arquitectos y Técnicos Catalanes por el Progreso de la Arquitectura Contemporánea), it aggressively championed the cause of contemporary architecture. Torres Clavé, a key figure in the group, directed the publication in Barcelona of its critical, theoretical, and propagandistic journal AC-Documentos de Actividad Contemporánea.2 Torres Clavé and his partner Sert, serving as the driving force behind G.A.T.C.P.A.C. and its pledge to modernize architecture, represented the best rationalist architecture of those years. Generally, rationalist architecture arrived in Spain rather late and with a formalist, uncompromising orientation. However, younger architects like Luis Lacasa, who were committed to a social function of architecture, showed that Madrid provided a fertile rationalism, as seen in several realized projects that developed independently from the avant-garde postulates defended by G.A.T.C.P.A.C.3

The exhibition, curated by Antonio Pizza and Josep M. Rovira to mark the seventy-fifth anniversary of both G.A.T.E.P.A.C. and of the proclamation of the Second Spanish Republic, was organized around four clearly differentiated periods: the first period, 1925 through 1930, presented the architects as restless students and the academic training of the young architects that formed G.A.T.E.P.A.C.; the second period, 1931 to 1936, devoted to architects of the republic, documented the consolidation and realization of the new ideology in projects for a new city, a productive phase that benefited from the publication of the journal AC; the third period, 1936 through 1939, showed the change of direction of the avant-garde group affected by the Civil War and revolution at this time in Barcelona; the fourth period, 1939 and shortly thereafter, examined the demise of the group in the midst of criticism, silence, and exile.

Beyond contextualizing the work of G.A.T.C.P.A.C. and documenting their urban projects, the great attraction of the exhibit was the coherent presentation of