Anthony Alofsin

*When Buildings Speak: Architecture as Language in the Habsburg Empire and Its Aftermath, 1867–1933*


Using language as an interpretive framework, Anthony Alofsin examines the complex architectural history of the former Austro-Hungarian Empire and its successor nation-states, a region usually little known to the Western reader. This book concretizes the extensive scholarly work brought together in Alofsin’s ambitious collaborative research project, “A Tense Alliance: Architecture in the Habsburg Lands 1893–1928,” which he conceived and organized. During long years of research, Alofsin benefited from the work of numerous eminent scholars in the region, which is reflected in his rich bibliography.

Considering the architecture of the former Austro-Hungarian Empire in terms of language is not a new approach—Ákos Morávanszky and Friedrich Achleitner used it as well—but Alofsin has transformed the idea into a key to understanding modern architecture in this complex region. As he explains in the preface, his use of the concept was not motivated by fashion; rather he has drawn on late nineteenth-century debates about architectural history to suggest a way to include buildings usually left outside the canons of modernism (ix). This idea of architecture as a language also allows Alofsin to construct a unified vision for reading the intricate range of expressions of modern architecture employed in the Habsburg Empire as well as to put forward a significant interpretation of it. His approach metaphorically parallels the multitude of languages spoken inside the Austrian-Hungarian Empire, a cultural characteristic that had significant consequences, especially on a political level.

Alofsin’s introduction frames the complex historical and cultural background of the empire, and emphasizes the role of language in it as a tool in the process of national identity formation. As the use of dominant languages “became a powerful weapon and a necessity in political control,” cultural production (including architecture) took an active part in this process (8). By making buildings speak, Alofsin helps them deliver their message in this intricate context of history and culture. He proposes a method of “contextual formalism,” which seeks to “join divergent paths by assuming that social and political forces of architecture are transmitted through its physical form and that the two inseparably create a dialectic realism” (11). This contextual formalism also determined the choice of illustrations; because of their “narrative” capacities, Alofsin favors exterior and interior views and decorative details rather than more “technical” floor plans or sections.

Alofsin discerns five types of architectural languages in his analysis of modern architecture in Central Europe. Each chapter of the book is dedicated to one language, analyzes several examples judged to be exemplary, and discusses the reception of buildings at the time of completion. The first to be considered, the “language of history” serves to express both authority and identity, either imperial or, in this case, its opposite—national identity. Not only did history provide the most coherent and dense narrative framework, but its discourse was also of paramount importance in shaping the political and cultural strategies inside the empire. Alofsin examines the force of this language through three significant examples: the Vienna Rathaus (Friedrich von Schmidt, 1869–83), the Czech National Theater (Josef Zítek, 1868–83), and the Rumbach Street Synagogue in Budapest (Otto Wagner, 1868–72). Built immediately after the 1867 Compromise that shifted the empire into an Austro-Hungarian dual monarchy, these three edifices embody different discourses on identity and power by using different stylistic vocabularies. The neo-Gothic of the Vienna City Hall, the highly allegorical neo-Renaissance of the Czech National Theater, and the use of Moor-

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ish architecture in the Budapest synagogue all speak about cultural and political representations, multiple or hybrid identities, and the way that certain aesthetic doctrines came to acquire symbolic significance at this time.

Both pressured and stimulated by industrialization and technological innovation, architecture at the end of the nineteenth century began to explore “organicism,” a language that soon became international. In the second chapter, Alofsin distinguishes between two types of organicism—biomorphic and structural—and examines four significant buildings of Viennese modern architecture: Josef Olbrich’s Secession Building, the building manifesto of the movement (1898); and three works by Otto Wagner—the Imperial Court Pavilion at Hietzing Station (1894–98), the apartment buildings on Linke Wienzeile (1898–99), and St. Leopold’s Church at Steinhof (1905–7). Other works, by Hungarian and Czech architects, are discussed in parallel with these major Secessionist examples.

Industrialization and technology, based on the vertiginous evolution of scientific knowledge, also nourished the language of rationalism. As Alofsin remarks, the specificity of this architectural expression in the Austro-Hungarian Empire was that its multiplicity of meanings could exist simultaneously. This varied production is examined in the third chapter, which gathers works by Max Fabiani (Portoi & Fix Store and Apartments, Vienna, 1898), Olbrich (Palais Stoclet, Brussels, 1905–11; the Purkersdorf Sanatorium, Vienna, 1904; and his interior design production), Jan Kotěra (City Museum, Hradečk Kralové, 1906–12), and Otto Wagner (Postal Savings Bank, Vienna, 1904–6) and the work of his students. Alofsin also explores here numerous Czech examples, including the idiosyncratic Czech cubism.

Noting that “the idea of architecture as a language that represents the identity of a people was a widely shared assumption at the turn of the twentieth century,” Alofsin considers that this aspiration was expressed by the “language of myth” (127). Instead of the usual examples, the fourth chapter traces the development of “national” schools: Hungarian (centered around Ödön Lechner and his followers, Marcel Komor and Desző Jakab, although largely omitting Károly Kós, who is only briefly mentioned), Polish (“the Zakopane style”), Slovakian (Dušan Jurkovič and his military cemeteries), and Slovenian (Jože Plečnik and Ivan Vurnik). Curiously, when examining this latter school, Alofsin does not discuss Plečnik’s well-known and extensively studied work in Ljubljana and instead focuses mainly on his Hradčany Castle in Prague.

The fifth chapter argues that the coexistence of this multitude of languages can be understood as a complex expression, “a language of hybridity,” resulting in the polyglot architecture that mirrored the multilingual character of the Austro-Hungarian Empire. In order to illustrate this productive eclecticism, Alofsin examines a rich array of examples among which the most striking are a set of buildings in Budapest—the Academy of Music (Flóris Korb and Kálmán Giergl, 1902–7), the Institute for the Blind (Béla Lajta, 1905–8), the Alléé Reformed Church (Aladár Árkay, 1911–13), but also the Chamber of Commerce in Cracow (Franciszek Mączyński and Tadeusz Stryjeński, 1904–6), as well as the technically innovative Roman Catholic church in Mul’a (István Medgyaszay, 1908–10). The final chapter of the book presents a brief synthesis of the material discussed and describes the aftermath of the Austro-Hungarian Empire. More than a simply a conclusion, this chapter looks at the architecture as the consequence of the plurality of languages and idioms employed there.

When Buildings Speak represents a seductive but occasionally difficult effort, due to the inherent ambiguity of the concept of language. Aspiring to a unifying vision, Alofsin uses both the narrative and the gestalt meanings of the term, and this double usage sometimes causes a certain confusion, in spite of the masterly intellectual connections that link one chapter to another. This is reflected at points in the choice of the examples, which often seem to argue for the interchangeability of the different languages. One can also question the use of “myth” as a category due to its broad operational coverage here, where it is applied to different national circumstances but not to the “language of history,” which also presupposes a mythical dimension. One wonders why Alofsin did not use the category of “ethnicity,” a concept that nourished these national identities. Nonetheless, this book marks an undisputable contribution not only to the knowledge of the Central European architecture, but also to the ongoing re-mapping of modern architecture. Alofsin introduces a new reading of the architecture of the region and supports it with an extremely rich use of illustrations, including many large color photographs of breathtaking quality. Special mention should also be made for the good sets of maps that accompany the introductory chapter. Alofsin demonstrates here that modern architecture implies several and different means of expression, all of which are equally worth investigating. While certainly contributing to the continuing shifts in the historiography of modern architecture, this book will also open pathways to the study of even more “adventurous” territories that have yet to be considered by mainstream architectural history.

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1. Another outcome of this program was the exhibition and book by Eve Blau and Monika Platzer, eds., Shaping the Great City: Modern Architecture in Central Europe (Munich, 1999).