courses of brick were slightly projected from the face of the wall and gravely called a cornice; . . . facias, or projections extending across the façade to indicate the several stories were considered so outré that people had them cut out of the fronts even of old houses; and the everlasting round headed doors, were universally adopted, at the expense of the most obvious principles of good taste; thus presenting a façade without the slightest projection except what was made in some instances by thin window sills, and the tasteless apology for a cornice at the top (190).

In almost every respect, this volume is scrupulously and intelligently edited, with a thoughtful introduction and useful marginal notes. I could find only one error of fact: the Unitarian Church in the Greek Doric mode, where Rev. William Henry Furness preached, was designed not by Walter but Strickland (89). But there is one most unfortunate omission: Amundsen does not cite Jeffrey A. Cohen’s “Building a Discipline: Early Institutional Settings for Architectural Education in Philadelphia, 1804–1890,” which has much to say about the role of the Franklin Institute in architectural education.1 Cohen points out that Walter taught at “that Institution for two successive seasons” (154), the first of which began in late 1840, preceding by a full year his course on architectural history. In that first season he spoke not as a historian but as a practicing architect, covering such issues of contemporary concern as “On Glass as Applied to Architecture.” By slighting this first course of lectures, Amundsen does not quite give us what her title promises. Walter’s lectures on architecture, but rather his lectures on the history of architecture (in either event, the starting date ought to be 1840).

Other than Walter’s lecture on glass, which was excerpted in the Journal of the Franklin Institute, no comprehensive record survives of this first course of lectures. His lecture of 7 January 1841, provocatively entitled “The Philosophy of Architecture,” remains unlocated.

One way of compensating for this would have been to reprint here all seven of Walter’s 1841 articles for the journal. Not only are they the practical counterpart to the historical lectures that follow, but they reveal a far less pedantic Walter. If his historical lectures referred to the Corinthian order as “the highest triumph of art in architecture” (93), his published essays demanded no slavish copying. Even the impeccable Greeks never repeated themselves in their buildings: “a portico may therefore be designed in Greek taste without being exactly like anything that ever existed in Greece; it may possess the spirit and beauty of Grecian compositions and yet be different in its disposition, as well as in its details.” If this book had included these essays, which surely reflect the sentiment (if not the actual) words of his first bout of lectures, then Walter would have seemed much less the conventional arbiter of rules that inadvertently emerges here.

Walter’s lectures may well have been, as Amundson claims, “the first formal architectural theory written by an American” (26), but one would like to know more about their effect on the profession, if any. How many of Walter’s listeners, for example, were aspiring designers, as Walter himself had been, or merely intelligent laymen seeking entertainment with some intellectual substance? The architects of antebellum Philadelphia consisted almost exclusively of carpenter-builders who after an improvised program of guided reading and drawing instruction declared themselves to be architects. Some of them, such as John Notman and Samuel Sloan, achieved national prominence; one wonders if they were among Walter’s audience.

How important were Walter’s lectures? They seem to have produced at least one architect of note: John McArthur Jr. A classical revivalist of genuine conviction, McArthur was the designer of Philadelphia’s City Hall, a building that owed much to the counsel of Walter, who served from 1874 to 1887 as McArthur’s chief assistant. That these two men could work together so long and so harmoniously, and in a hierarchy that inverted their original relationship, could scarcely have been possible had they not shared a similar conception of architecture, both formal and philosophical.

In the end, Walter’s model of architectural history was politely conventional, assuming implicitly that Athenian classicism was “the full perfection of art” (73). It posed no challenge to the existing order, as did the theory of contemporaries such as Heinrich Hübsch or A. W. N. Pugin. Perhaps this accounts for the relative neglect of Walter in American architectural history, which has always been more curious about rule breakers than rule givers.

MICHAEL J. LEWIS
Williams College

Notes


Iris Meder and Evi Fuks, editors

Oskar Strnad 1897–1935

Salzburg and Munich: Verlag Pustet, 2007, 168 pp., 79 color and 147 b/w illus. €32, ISBN 3702505539

Judith Eiblmayr and Iris Meder, editors

Moderat Modern. Erich Boltenstern und die Baukultur nach 1945

Salzburg and Munich: Verlag Pustet, 2005, 247 pp., 82 color and 296 b/w illus. €45, ISBN 3702505121

Vienna was among the few cities on the eve of World War I that could boast of having three full generations of modern architects. The first generation had a sole representative—Otto Wagner, born in 1841, who had almost single-handedly crafted the basis for the new aesthetic in the early 1890s. The second generation, more numerous, was comprised of those who had been born three decades later, in the years around 1870. Its leaders—Leopold Bauer, Josef Hoffmann, Adolf Loos, and Joseph Maria Olbrich—had all been reared elsewhere, in the provinces

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of Moravia and Silesia, but by 1914 each had assumed a central place in the precipitous rise of the Wiener Moderne. The third generation was made up of young architects born in the 1880s and early 1890s. Most had begun their studies after the turn of the century when the modern movement in Vienna was already flourishing. Those who left Austria, such as Rudolf M. Schindler and Richard Neutra, would emerge in the postwar era as leaders of the new movement. But for the young architects of this third generation who remained, a different and less happy fate awaited. As the brilliant prospects of the prewar world faded, they were forced to confront decades of political turmoil and economic ruin. Only a few—Josef Frank, Clemens Holzmeister, and Ernst Pischke—would find international fame, and their success, like that of Schindler and Neutra, came mostly with their departure from Vienna. The remaining architects of the third generation became symbols, in the wider sense, of Austria’s tragic collapse.

The saddest tale might be that of Oskar Strnad. In the period just before the assassination of Archduke Franz Ferdinand, no young architect in Vienna was more esteemed or showed greater promise. The seeds for Strnad’s downfall and slide into posthumous obscurity were sown in part by his inability to adapt to the new postwar culture, but his demise serves also as a poignant illustration of the disaster that befell almost all of the later modernists in Vienna.

Strnad was born in Vienna in 1879, the son of a Jewish estate manager. He studied architecture at the Vienna Technische Hochschule with Carl König, Karl Mayreder, and Max von Ferstel, and after completing his regular coursework, he stayed on to earn his doctorate with a dissertation on the principles of decoration in early Christian building. Supremely skilled with both pencil and brush, he supported himself at first by doing oil portraits and graphic design à la Gustav Klimt. After working briefly for Friedrich Ohmann and theater specialists Ferdinand Fellner and Hermann Helmer, he and Oskar Wlach, another recent graduate of the Technische Hochschule, opened their own office. In 1909, on Hoffmann’s recommendation, Strnad was appointed as an Assistent at the Vienna Kunstgewerbeschule; three years later, at the age of thirty-three, he was promoted to full professor.

Strnad and the other young architects trained in the first years of the new century entered the scene just as the Jugendstil was expiring. Most of his contemporaries adopted the neo-Biedermeier (which had been popularized by Hoffmann and his followers after 1905), Otto Wagner’s modernized classicism, or Loos’s proto-functionalism. Strnad, however, charted his own separate course. Working closely with Wlach, and, after 1910, also Frank, who joined the group practice upon completing his studies, Strnad began to forge a radical eclecticism, one that borrowed freely from historical styles of different eras while mixing in assorted elements of a modernist vocabulary.

Among Strnad’s remarkable early works was a villa in the eighteenth district for the writer Jakob Wassermann. The L-shaped house was based on cubic masses, not unlike Loos’s prewar houses, although his application of neoclassical detailing is more reminiscent of Le Corbusier’s Villa Schwob. What makes the house a singular work is not its elemental simplicity, but Strnad’s novel idea of arranging it along an architectural promenade, designed to heighten and expand the sensory experiences of occupants and visitors. From the street, he laid out a pathway extending into and through the interior; along the way, Strnad employed various materials and textures, visual shifts, and small flights of stairs to foster various bodily and perceptive experiences. He explained his intentions in a 1913 lecture, “Gedanken beim Entwurf eines Grundrisses” (Thoughts on the design of a ground plan):

Architecture is by no means a purely visual medium, but is made up of an endless number of imponderables. An architectural conception arises from the combined impact of our impression [of a space] and the possibilities for movement (providing a complete feeling of space) as well as the effect of light (the color of the material), of smell, of sound, and of touch (of the material world). . . . The treatment of surfaces must not only proceed from aesthetic considerations, but also from a much deeper, inexplicable spirit.¹

Strnad’s notion of the experience of kinetic space drew from the new concepts of psychological and physiological perception first developed in the writings of German theorists Conrad Fiedler, Adolf Hildebrand, Theodor Lipps, August Schmarsow, Robert Vischer, and others in the later nineteenth century.² But he was less concerned about how we perceive space than how it affects us psychologically. In a second 1913 lecture, “Einiges Theoretische zur Raumgestaltung” (Some theoretical observations on designing spaces), he argued that opportunities for movement constituted one of the “essential” ingredients of “comfortable living spaces.” Such “shifting movement,” he believed, would result in a more profound awareness of space and intensify the observer’s architectural experience. “The more possibilities for movement a plan offered,” he insisted, “the more profound awareness of space (providing a complete feeling of space) as well as the effect of light (the color of the material), of smell, of sound, and of touch (of the material world) . . . . The treatment of surfaces must not only proceed from aesthetic considerations, but also from a much deeper, inexplicable spirit.”³

Strnad was also experimenting at the time with a new rationalist vocabulary based on the use of the concrete frame and planar facades with uniform fenestration. In 1912–13, with Wlach and Frank, he produced a striking project for an office building near the church of Maria am Gestade in Vienna’s inner city that anticipated the functionalist idiom of the 1920s and 1930s. With the outbreak of the war, however, Strnad’s career began to falter. He continued to teach during the war years, but he found few opportunities to build. In the postwar era, the situation only worsened. Hyperinflation and the shrinking of the Austrian economy stifled the private building
economy. Most of Vienna’s modernists found work designing housing blocks for the Socialist city authorities, but Strnad decided to focus instead on theater design. Beginning in 1919, he produced a series of stage sets for the Volkstheater; by the late 1920s, he was also designing productions for the Burghtheater, the Staatsoper, and the Theater in der Josefstadt, as well as for companies in Berlin, Paris, and Hamburg. For many years, Strnad also created sets for the Salzburg Festspiele, then under the direction of the legendary Max Reinhardt.

Strnad’s innovative designs earned him notoriety and income, but his architectural practice virtually dried up. From 1925 until his death in 1935, he was able to realize fewer than a dozen commissions, most for interiors. One of his few larger works, a double house for the 1932 Werkbund exhibition in the Viennese suburb of Lainz, exhibited a sleek and assured version of the new functionalist aesthetic, but it advanced nothing in the way of new spatial or constructional ideas. Strnad’s great promise at the turn of the century remained unfulfilled.

Oskar Strnad 1879–1935, edited by Iris Meder and Evi Fuchs, serves as the catalog for an exhibition held at the Jüdisches Museum der Stadt Wien in the spring and early summer of 2007. Little has been written about Strnad since the 1930s. After his death, most of his papers were lost or destroyed, and the surviving drawings and other materials, distributed among various archives and private collections in Vienna, offered only a scatter-shot glimpse of his life and work. This catalog, which contains a dozen essays by well-known Austrian scholars, including Friedrich Kurrent and Martin Wagner, presents the fullest view of Strnad to date. The book also brings together a number of Strnad’s theoretical writings and offers a catalogue raisonné of his architectonic works, as well as complete lists of his theater designs and writings. Several of the essays add much to what we previously knew about Strnad. Meder’s overview of Strnad’s life and career, Markus Kristan’s essay on Strnad’s studies with König, Fuch’s article on his designs for funerary monuments, and Vana Griesenegger-Georgila’s piece on his set designs contribute a great deal of new material and help place his work and ideas in context.

What is missing from this book is a larger statement about Strnad’s import. Was he merely a tragic exemplar of the downfall of Austrian architecture in the interwar years? Did he make some larger contribution to the history of modernism? The answer doubtless rests with two facets of his work. In developing an architectural framework based on the notion of “affective space” already before World War I, Strnad undoubtedly played a role in the formation of later ideas about architectural experience. This aspect of his designs in particular demands further study. But just as important, perhaps, is Strnad’s part in formulating the notion of a modern eclecticism. Strnad’s belief that the modern age did not require a single, unified style, but that architects and designers should express the complexity and diversity of our times posed a powerful counterpoint to the mainstream of the modern movement. This idea has its anchorage in Loos’s arguments about the evolutionary and variegated nature of cultural development. Strnad, however, was able to articulate fully the principles of a new eclecticism in his work, drawing from a vast array of past and contemporary influences. The result—what would in the interwar years become widely known as the Wiener Wohnkultur—was a forceful statement about the nature of modern life and the impossibility of capturing it with a single gesture or concept, a position that has taken on ever more currency in recent years.

Strnad also had an important role as an educator in Vienna. Over the more than two decades he taught at the Kunstgewerbeschule, he influenced many of the architects and designers of Austria’s next generation. Among his protégés was the young Erich Boltenstern, who emerged after World War II as one of the country’s foremost practitioners and teachers.

Boltenstern was born in Vienna in 1896 and studied at the Technische Hochschule from 1918 to 1922. Between 1928 and 1934, he served as Strnad’s assistant and subsequently replaced Peter Behrens in one of the two architecture chairs at the Vienna Academy of Fine Arts. He was suspended from his post after the Nazi takeover in 1938, but managed to eke out a living as a freelance architect during the war years. Afterward, he resumed his post at the academy and later taught at the Technische Hochschule until his retirement in the later 1960s. As one of the few prominent Austrian architects who had remained in the country and was untainted by Nazi associations, he assumed a prominent position in rebuilding the city. Among his most important postwar commissions was the reconstruction of the Staatsoper (1948–55), which had been badly damaged by bombing. Boltenstern also designed one of the city’s only skyscrapers, the Ringturm (1952–55), the so-called Osttorgebäude of the Austrian National Bank (1950–56), and numerous interiors for the Wiener Verein, Zentralsparkasse, and other banks and insurance companies.

Most of these works were competent but unspectacular renditions of the modernist language of the postwar era. Even Boltenstern’s two best designs, the prewar Kahlenberg Restaurant (1933–36) and his addition to the Wiener Verein building in the third district (1962), only summarized the standard modernist aesthetic of those years, incorporating little that was new or challenging. Reading through Moderat Modern, Erich Boltenstern und die Baukultur nach 1945, which serves as the exhibition catalog for a show that was held at the Wien Museum in the fall and winter of 2005–6, one can only be impressed by the evident care with which the book’s editors, Judith Eiblmayr and Iris Meder, assembled the work. It includes essays from a wide array of scholars, among them Barbara Feller (on the rebuilding of the Ringstrasse), Wolfgang Kos (on the journal Der Bau in the mid-1950s), Elke Krasny (on Boltenstern’s designs for the Wiener Verein), Kristan (on the exhibition pavilions at the Wiener Messe), Herbert...
Lachmayer (on Austria’s cultural and political position in the 1950s), Maja Lorbek (on the Austrian branch of the CIAM), Meder (on Boltenstern’s designs for the Kahlenberg), Véronika Pfolz (on two of Boltenstern’s contributors), Georg Rigele (on the politics of the post-war rebuilding campaign), and Adolph Stiller (on Boltenstern’s work for the Wiener Städtische Versicherung), as well as a fine catalogue raisonné. There is also an excellent overview of Boltenstern’s life and work by Eiblmayr. Yet the product, in the end, is disappointing, a fact that has less to do with quality of the scholarship than with uninspiring impact of Boltenstern’s work.

Perhaps the best and most engaging chapter in the book is Kos’s interview with the historian Friedrich Achleitner about the “evaluation of postwar modernism” in the city. Achleitner, who has long been one of the most perceptive observers of the Viennese architectural scene, was a student at the Vienna Academy of Fine Arts in the years after the war and watched keenly as Boltenstern and others remade the city. He was then, and remains now, troubled by the architecture of the time, charging that Boltenstern “risked little [either architecturally, or] politically,” and that he was responsible in part for Austria’s rapid decline into “intellectual provincialism.” Yet he also points out, with great care, their failure was their own.

Notes

1. Oskar Strnad, “Gedanken beim Entwurf eines Grundrisses,” rpt. in Max Eisler, Oskar Strnad (Vienna, 1936), 56–57. The original manuscript of the lecture is preserved at the Sammlung, Universität für angewandte Kunst, Manuskript 4648/Q/3.

Jayne Merkel

Eero Saarinen


Jayne Merkel was for many years the much-admired editor of the important architectural magazine Oculus, and she brings that experience to bear in her monograph on Eero Saarinen (1910–61). He emerges in its opening pages as an architect of great talent and historical significance with an unequalled capacity for creating works with popular appeal. He achieved a fame greater than most of his contemporaries in the eleven-year span of his career working independently of his father, Eliel Saarinen. As innovative as he was prolific, Saarinen and his talented collaborators introduced several new building materials and perfected the emerging building program of the corporate office park. Yet his name was close to forgotten in critical circles within a decade of his death at the age of fifty-one and would only reappear three decades later, in the 1990s, when mid-century modernism’s return to fashion brought along an appreciation for innovative forms and technologies, which were his signature achievements. Accordingly, Merkel’s subject is Saarinen’s production and reception in his time, and to a lesser extent, ours. She sets out to join the critic’s objective of “set[ting] the record straight” with the historian’s ambition of filling the lacunae in the historiographical record of a career and oeuvre (6–7).

Merkel’s narrative of Saarinen’s emancipation from his father’s influence and his traditionalist approach, his matriculation as a modernist, and the almost unimpeded realization of the promise of Saarinen’s talent and genius unifies the book’s fourteen chapters. Three chapters on Saarinen’s early life, his precocious works for his father and their joint endeavors (along with Robert Swanson) as the firm Saarinen, Swanson and Saarinen, and one chapter on his first independent projects and designs for furniture precede eleven chapters on his projects. They are grouped by program—corporate office parks; college campuses and individual buildings for universities; embassies; airports; and memorials—or by place, with one chapter devoted to his four works in Columbus, Indiana, and one to his two buildings in Manhattan.

Approximately sixty works are discussed in what might be called a series of mini-monographs. Merkel takes the majority of them from commission through completion, paying special attention to issues of structure, materials, and engineering as well as to contemporary critical reception. Excellent formal descriptions and explanations of these technical matters are supplemented and enriched by many eyewitness reports from Saarinen’s clients and collaborators, taken from Merkel’s extensive interviews. Each project history is generously illustrated. Merkel’s accounts of Saarinen’s work are instructive, lively, evocative, and generally accurate. With certain reservations, they can be usefully read by scholars as well as by the broad audience for which they are primarily intended.

Phaidon’s monographs on architects are conceived in keeping with the press’s