Akan rereads Taut’s work and traces its intellectual origins to Immanuel Kant’s cosmopolitan ethics.

Neither Germany nor Turkey was a good place for cosmopolitanism in the 1930s. But Taut’s embrace of “non-Eurocentric cosmopolitan architecture” (278)—as Akan calls it—serves as an antidote both to the top-down translations of modernism and to the nationalist rejection of all translations. Akan has written a surprisingly dialectical book: the antinomies of translatability/untranslatability are resolved only through the telos of a cosmopolitan architecture.

While Akan’s theory of architecture in translation refers to a broader flow of ideas in one or multiple directions—a common experience—the cases she examines underscore translation as effectuated by the agency of the architect. It is precisely against this emphasis on the role of the architect as the author/translator that one needs to weigh the methodological innovation of Akan’s project. What are the benefits of privileging translation as the organizing metaphor of a history of modernism?

Akan’s method departs in equal measure from an art historical biography, and from a critique of ideology, as exemplified in Sibel Bozdoğan’s seminal book Modernism and Nation Building. It is the historical unevenness of translation between a German-speaking modernism and Turkey that is central to Akan’s book (17). Inspired by the work of Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, and the recent attention to translation in cultural studies, she is at her critical best when reading specific buildings, projects, and spaces, against the grain, and as a text.

Akan’s analysis of a house designed by Seyfi Arkan for Mustafa Kemal Atatürk’s sister—the Atadan House—is a case in point. Whereas Kemalism has presented the liberation and suffrage of Turkish women as one of its chief achievements, and the modern houses designed for the republican elite were meant to serve as models of a new domestic life, Akan finds evidence of a deep-seated patriarchy in the Atadan House. As in Beatriz Colomina’s reading of “domestic voyeurism” in the houses of Adolf Loos and Le Corbusier, Akan’s reading deconstructs Arkan, a Turkish modernist architect.

Akan’s book thus offers an opportunity to reflect on the translations of poststructuralist literary theory into architectural history. For all the talk since the 1980s about the “death of the author,” the history and theory of architecture have been unwilling to give up the figure of the architect as a potent, form-giving subject. Quite on the contrary, the various applications of deconstruction and postcolonial critique have made architectural history more—not less—dependent on the advent of the subject.

To her credit, Akan provides a superbly researched and nuanced account. She does not suggest that “Turkish modernism was only a translation of a modernism conceived elsewhere. Yet by describing Turkish modern architecture as an “architecture in translation,” and by showing how it changed in translation, she, too, privileges the view of modernism as the production of a select few.

Turkish modernism took place at a time marked by the shifting allegiance from an empire to a republic, the radical rejection of the Ottoman multietnic society, and a relentless repression of ethnic difference. Translation alone does not explain why some architectural models were embraced and others rejected by different segments of Turkish society. The problem of hegemony in the classical Gramscian sense presents itself in the evidence that Akan provides us: Why did Eldem, the German-educated heir of an illustrious Istanbul family, end up creating the ultimate ideological-aesthetic construct of the 1940s: the Turkish house? Why did Arkan’s experiments with Weimar-style social housing in the 1930s remain an exception, rather than the rule? Why did the patrons of a Turkish housing cooperative in Ankara demand a garden city and not a Siedlung? Turkish modernism seems to call for more, not less, critique of ideology.

Spivak once wrote, “Translation remains dependent upon the language skill of the majority.” Herein lies the sea change of the past two decades in the history and theory of architecture: as Weimar modernism has lost its paradigmatic value for the students of architecture, some of its major historical figures have attracted new attention precisely because of their years of “exile” in Turkey. Emerging audiences have reshaped the ways in which histories of modernism are written. Akan’s book is a significant contribution to the historiography of modern architecture by transcending “East-West” polarization. This is a monumental undertaking and an excellent introduction to the brave new world of multipolar histories where the old fictions of a center and a periphery no longer apply.

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Lada Hubatová-Vacková
Silent Revolutions in Ornament: Studies in Applied Arts and Crafts from 1880–1930
Prague: Academy of Arts, Architecture and Design, 2011, 288 pp., 256 color and 112 b/w illus. $38.00 (cloth), ISBN 9788086863184

Joseph Masheck
Adolf Loos: The Art of Architecture
London and New York: 1. B. Tauris, 2013, 290 pp., 52 b/w illus. $29.00 (paper), ISBN 9781780764238

In a short autobiography from 1915, Adolf Loos (writing in the third person)
described his great struggle against ornament: “Adolf Loos is the philosopher of the architects of our time, and through his declaration of a vendetta against the proliferation of ornament has assumed a special place among [all] artists. … Already seventeen years ago, [he] preached in favor of simplicity, truth to materials, and quality work, and today he can savor the triumph that his opponents have largely accepted his demands.”11

Here, as elsewhere in his writings, Loos depicted himself as a solitary crusader against the evils of ornament, a lone knight errant bent on its eradication. But Loos was only one of a number of figures at the time pondering the problem of ornament, questioning whether it still had meaning, purpose, and validity. In the period just before Loos wrote his famed assault “Ornament and Crime,” in late 1909 or early 1910, the German-language design press was filled with pieces decrying or defending ornament. Loos, far from being a single voice, in fact, had a great deal of company.2

The issue of ornament and its relation to modern architecture and design, though, had a much longer history, extending back some three decades. It is a story that until now has been strangely neglected or passed over in silence. Recently, a young architectural historian in Prague, Lada Hubatová-Vacková, who teaches modern art and architectural history at the Academy of Arts, Architecture, and Design, cast a scholarly eye on the history of ornamental theory and practices during the early years of modernism. Her excellent and thoroughgoing book in Czech, Tiché revoluce vnitrího ornamentu: Studie z dějin uměleckého průmyslu a dekorativního umění v letech 1880–1930, has now been translated into English as Silent Revolutions in Ornament: Studies in Applied Arts and Crafts from 1880–1930. It offers a remarkable and important insight into the ornament question in Central Europe.

Hubatová-Vacková argues that later historians erred in shunting the ornament issue aside. “It is a field,” in her words, “that has been artificially pushed to the periphery of our interest, a broad area that has not been adequately dealt with. … Ornamental theory and decorative practices belong among the important chapters of art history and are wholly essential for understanding the revolutionary changes that the avant-garde and Modernism established in the early 20th century, despite ostentatiously rejecting the legacy of ornamentalism” (10). She is also quick to point out the strange paradox of the period’s engagement with ornament—that a “modern society (one which we would consider rational and pragmatic) devoted a surprising amount of attention to ornament and decoration” (10). One of the results of this new rationalism, Hubatová-Vacková contends, was a developing “scientism” of ornament, an obsession with the “ur-form” of artistic creation, and the penchant for attempting to make new ornament on a “scientific and theoretical basis” (11). Much of her book concerns the ways in which teachers, artists, and scientists sought to discern the “hidden” basis of ornamental form, and how it might be described, taught, and applied. The work is a tour de force of research, reexamining both the obvious, the writings of well-known figures like Christopher Dresser and Owen Jones in Britain and Eugène Grasset and Maurice Pillard-Verneuil in France, and the truly obscure, the many now forgotten Czech and German-speaking theorists (such as Alois Studnička, Karel Vrba, and Thomas Weigner—hardly household names today) who championed various ornamental systems. Much of what she found is new—at least in annals of present-day scholarship—and enlightening.

Hubatová-Vacková’s book consists of four sections, “Rhythmic Forces of Life,” “Ornamental Instruction and Experiments with Vision,” “Spirit and Matter,” and “Anti-Ornament,” which roughly parallel the chronological evolution of the ornament idea at the end of the nineteenth and beginning of the early twentieth century. The four sections are in turn divided into chapters, fourteen in all. One of the more interesting chapters deals with Loos’s own early training in the principles of ornament. As a sixteen-year-old at the Staatsgewerbelschule in Reichenberg (Liberec, Czech Republic), Loos produced a drawing of a stylized lily (now preserved in the Albertina in Vienna), a precisely made copy of a standard teaching pattern from a large folio by Josef Ritter von Storck. In the caption, Loos noted that he had spent “36 hours on a wash drawing of historical ornament.” Such renderings were hardly unusual at the time: the idea that ornament was integral to architectural design was then in its ascendancy. Most of those who have written about Loos have been content to dismiss his early training or to see it as a spur to his later rejection of ornament. Hubatová-Vacková, however, goes on to argue (correctly in my view) that Loos was “something other than the radical opponent of ornament that he had declared himself to be in his famous essay ‘Ornament and Crime,’” and that, indeed, his notion of the Raumplan “actually develops the Art Nouveau idea of ornament he so vociferously opposed.” She contends that Loos saw in ornament “an articulation of space” and that his own attempts at complex spatial manipulation were derived from earlier notions about the unfolding and articulation of ornamental form (218). Although this idea does not fully account for Loos’s spatial strategies, she is onto something here. It is a smart and powerful argument, one very much grounded in a sensitive understanding of fin de siècle ideas about form and spatial expression.

Loos’s rejection of most ornament (for he never fully repudiated all ornament) and his tendency toward the use of blank and “ordinary” architectural expression (at least on his buildings’ exteriors) raise another vexing problem: In what sense does his work constitute art? Does he truly deny the notion of architecture as art? Adolf Loos: The Art of Architecture, written by critic and art historian Joseph Masheck, is an effort to answer this question. Masheck claims that his book is an attempt at revision. It is, he tells us, an assault on “easy” interpretations of Loos as a mere “ironist,” “iconoclast,” or “only as a critical curmudgeon clearing the way to modernism rather than … building and advancing it.” He insists instead that one must see Loos as a practitioner, one who “belongs as much to the history of art as any other great artist” (xv). He writes: “While Loos might be both an artist and an anti-artist (or architect and anti-architect), any possibility that he might be exclusively an anti-artist is undermined by certain evident similarities of formal
thinking with characteristically modernist works of art” (xiv).

Masheck’s book is a series of nine loosely connected essays, each bearing on the issue of Loos’s artistic intentions and achievements. The chapter titles give something of their flavor: “Loos and Fine Art,” “Loosian Vernacular,” “Architecture and Ornament in Fact,” “Loos and Minimalism” — to cite only some examples. Though they deal with different buildings and projects or different moments in Loos’s career, all are clustered around the issue of Loos’s objectives and what his works “say” in aesthetic terms. Masheck’s own description of one of the chapters from the preface offers a good sense of his aims and methods:

The possibility of a willful “architecturelessness” is raised in chapter 7 as a way of coming to terms with Loos’s problematic theoretical denial that houses, at least, are or should be works of art, and that most buildings designed by people identified as architects (at least in his historical moment) amount to architecture at all. If in 1910 Picasso had written that because most paintings are not works of art and hence he was not going to consider himself a painter, would that have been taken at face value for the next fifty years as an effective denial that his work could be, or was ever really meant to be, art? Regrettably, this is just how the writings and buildings of Loos are still, a hundred years later, widely presented. (xxv; emphasis in the original)

Masheck’s corrective, his doggedness in emphasizing Loos’s striving to make architecture that was indeed architecture, is an important and necessary effort. Too long have scholars and critics viewed Loos through a simple and reductive lens. But Masheck’s path to this larger truth is not always convincing. He ranges widely, drawing on an extraordinary (and occasionally baffling) array of sources and voices, from Giorgio Vasari to Robert Venturi. Writing about the possible influence of the obelisk in Charlestown, Massachusetts, commemorating the Battle of Bunker Hill (Loos had in his possession a postcard of the monument), on Loos’s Doric tower for the Chicago Tribune competition, he writes:

Commonly overlooked, however, is the Bunker Hill monument’s instigator, Horatio Greenough’s, own homegrown American anti-ornamental theorizing in any possible relation to the sophisticated anti-ornamentalism of Loos, with Louis Henry Sullivan maybe somewhere in between. It is not farfetched to think of Loos as having been influenced by the architectural texts of Greenough, whose own tracts against architectural ornament were to be rediscovered in the heyday of postwar “functionalism” in American architecture and design. (151–52)

While it is possible that Loos drew on the Bunker Hill monument for creative stimulus (Eduard Sekler and Ludwig Münz, two very astute observers of Loos, both suggested as much), the connection to Greenough is quite speculative. Later, Masheck writes of Ralph Waldo Emerson’s ideas of the column and “modernist aesthetic autonomy,” not quite drawing any specific linkage (160). But there is not a shred of evidence that Loos was even aware of Greenough or Emerson, much less that he had read their works. Loos was not a particularly diligent intellectual, and he was not notably widely read. He could be remarkably clever at times, drawing subtle and powerful inferences and conclusions, but his knowledge of letters and history was, to be sure, spotty.

A few pages later, Masheck again engages in similar speculation: noting that Loos’s design for the Tribune competition was “historically embedded,” he writes, “Loos might have appealed, for his inhabited column idea, to Racine Demonville’s country house built for himself in the shape of a giant fluted—though protoromantically broken—column in the garden called Le Désert, near Marly, in 1771, of which engravings had been published (in Johann Karl Krafft’s Recueil d’architecture civile, 1812)” (154). Perhaps. Perhaps not. Very likely not. Masheck is undoubtedly right to want to read Loos as an architect of the wider modern movement and to stress the “artistic” qualities of his buildings. In that, his book succeeds well. But there is too much free speculation in this work.

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Notes

Sandra Parvu
Journal de bord de quatre chantiers: Grands ensembles en situation
Geneva: MètisPresses, 2011, 201 pp., 95 b/w illus. €27; ISBN 9782940406647

The large modernist housing project has been, since Jane Jacobs’s writings on the city, one of the most maligned architectural legacies of the twentieth century. In her new book, however, Sandra Parvu shows that at least in France, the grand ensemble was neither uniform nor schematically independent of local culture, and its planning did not amount to a blindly