

OTTO WAGNER & THE FACE OF MODERN ARCHITECTURE

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INTRODUCTION

The conventional idea of modernism in architecture is generally viewed as having its origins in the British Arts and Crafts movement in the mid-nineteenth century, but is more closely associated with building practices that negated historical styles for simple geometric forms and undecorated surfaces. Prominent examples of what is commonly associated with such an idea are the works of De Stijl, Bauhaus and Deutscher Werkbund in the early 20th century¹ and the work of Le Corbusier that seemed to have 'caught-up' with related movements in art as propagated by Sigfried Giedion². In these narratives of modernism, there is a marked negation of historical and representational values and a visible thrust placed on subjective, symbolic and 'honest' form of expression. The historians seem to have

"...identified connecting formal and conceptual traits among works produced by a broad range of artistic personalities, enabling them to arrange large bodies of art and architecture into concise and manageable trends"³

This negation of the polyvalent condition of modern architecture ultimately manifested

¹ See Nikolaus Pevsner's "Pioneers of modern design, from William Morris to Walter Gropius" Reprinted with revisions Harmondsworth, Middlesex: Penguin Books, c1975, 1981 printing.

² See Sigfried Giedion's "Space, time, and architecture; the growth of a new tradition" 3d ed., (enl. Cambridge, Harvard University Press, 1954)

³ Schaffer, Debra, 1955- The order of ornament, the structure of style : theoretical foundations of modern art and architecture /Cambridge ;New York : Cambridge University Press, 2003, Pg 1

in the emergence of postmodern architecture in the 1980's that offered a critique which was based on a narrow reading of modernist ideology⁴.

In this paper, I will emphasize the heterogeneity of modern architecture by a synoptic reading of Otto Wagner's uniquely situated architectural discourse along with a case study of one of his most significant buildings. His strategic presence in the early 20th century in Vienna and a seemingly paradoxical body of work make him the most relevant source for informing contemporary architectural practices. In the following sections, I shall extrapolate on Wagner's position in a historical context, his ideologies that formed the underpinnings of modern architecture, his position as an artist arbitrator and speculate his legacy's potential in contemporary architectural practice.

WAGNER'S VIENNA

In the 1860's, Vienna went through a major urban redevelopment of the city's urban core by constructing an array of public and private buildings along a newly created grand boulevard in a mix of historicist styles (See Fig.1). This investment in the city brought forth a snapshot of Vienna's bourgeoisie's outlook towards architecture. As architects tried to grapple with the tradition of the Beaux-Art school and the implications of a growing industrialized society, the decisive eclecticism of the Ringstrasse may be attributed to the socio-political environment in the mid nineteenth century in Vienna. As Debra Schafter notes,

"Though recently scholars have identified proto-modernist ideas at work beneath the stylistic facades of many of these monuments, the Ringstrasse's opulent and eclectic display of historical styles also

⁴ Oechslin, Werner- Otto Wagner, Adolf Loos, and the road to modern architecture / 1st English ed. Cambridge, U.K. ;New York : Cambridge University Press, 2002, Pg 8

*furnished important symbols of aristocratic values that linked the liberal bourgeoisie to the ruling class of the Habsburg Dynasty, the history of which in Austria extended back to the thirteenth century."*⁵



Fig.1: Vienna – Ringstrasse Map

Otto Wagner, who was schooled in the French Beaux-Arts model of architectural discourse, seemed to have imbibed the stylistic leanings of the Ringstrasse years as several of his bank and residential projects of the 1880's express. Harry Francis Mallgrave in his introduction to Modern Architecture notes

*"...it is not surprising that Wagner should assert with considerable intrepidity that 'a certain free renaissance'- that is, free and inventive use of Renaissance forms and motifs - 'that has assimilated our genius loci and taken the greatest possible account of all our circumstances and accomplishments in the use of materials and construction is the only correct course for present and future architecture.'"*⁶

⁵ Schafter, Debra, 1955- The order of ornament, the structure of style : theoretical foundations of modern art and architecture /Cambridge :New York : Cambridge University Press, 2003, Pg 8

⁶ Wagner, Otto,1841-1918. Modern architecture : a guidebook for his students to this field of art /Santa Monica, Calif. : Getty Center for the History of Art and the Humanities, 1988, Pg 8

Otto Wagner in his famous inaugural address to the Academy of fine arts in 1894 had started to already move away from his historicist leanings when he said

"The starting point of every artistic creation must be the need, ability, means and achievements of our time." He goes even further in the preface of first edition of Modern Architecture in 1895 " One idea inspires this book, namely THAT THE BASIS OF TODAY'S PREDOMINANT VIEWS ON ARCHITECTURE MUST BE SHIFTED, AND WE MUST FULLY BECOME AWARE THAT THE SOLE DEPARTURE POINT FOR OUR ARTISTIC WORK CAN ONLY BE MODERN LIFE."⁷ (His capitals) Also in the same book he asserts "...if one surveys what has been accomplished up till now, then one must be convinced THAT TODAY THE CLEFT BETWEEN THE MODERN MOVEMENT AND THE RENAISSANCE IS ALREADY LARGER THAN BETWEEN THE RENAISSANCE AND ANTIQUITY."⁸

The above might be read as a precursor to the oft-repeated comment about the modern movement negating historical and representational value. Although, in context of Wagner, who was himself up till the late nineteenth century in favor of 'a certain free renaissance', historical values are even more closely read and critiqued than a mere negation. After Recognizing the loss of architecture's loss of function as a monument or a symbolic form, construction and technology were read as the means to project architecture's continuity with its past by Wagner.

He was certainly not alone in taking this radical direction. A major change that was a major influence in Viennese art and architectural environment was the formation of the Union of Austrian Fine artists commonly referred to as the Secession. The organization was established as a result of the increasingly conservative and isolationist stance of the Association of Austrian artists. Although he was not one of the founding

members, Wagner is widely recognized as a significant member of the movement along with Gustav Klimt, Joseph Maria Olbrich and Josef Hoffmann. The Majolica house (See Fig.2) is a significant in this period with its flowery motifs and decorative use of iron. The composition seems to emphasize on the structural arrangement behind the façade. This convergence of novel material application and new stylistic motifs expressed by the secessionists implied a deeper ideological context that was built up over time and negates the conventional 'break with history' explanation for the rise of modern architecture.



Fig.2: Majolica House, Otto Wagner

IDEOLOGICAL CONTEXT

As noted earlier, Wagner's appointment to the Academy of fine arts in Vienna caused a stir when he publicly and vehemently proclaimed the shift from a historicist attitude to a 'realist' one. The term realism became one of the most important parts of his radical agenda. He noted in the inaugural address:

⁷ Ibid, Pg 9

⁸ Ibid Pg 80

"Our living conditions and methods of construction must be fully and completely expressed if architecture is not to be reduced as caricature. The realism of our time must pervade the developing work of art. It will not harm it, nor will any decline of art ensue as a consequence of it; rather it will breathe a new and pulsating life into forms, and in time conquer new fields that today are still devoid of art- for example that of engineering."



Fig.3: Funeral at Ornans, Gustave Courbet

As J. Duncan Barry notes in his essay "From historicism to realism"⁹, this realist attitude can be traced back to the radical stylistic rupture in French academic painting beginning with Gustave Courbet (See Fig.3) and the literary socialist realism of Emile Zola. Also, its usage in the German architecture parlance was common place in the 1890's, although with an ambiguous set of meanings attached to it. According to Mallgrave,

"(Realism in German architecture varied) its meaning from an anti academic and anti romantic return to the demands of modern life, to a verism or ideal striving for truth in art, or to a functionalist acknowledgement of needs and technical demands, dispensing thereby with such formal elements such as gables, towers, mansards, oriels, and an abundance of plastic decoration."¹⁰

⁹ J. Duncan Barry "From historicism to realism," *Otto Wagner: Reflections on the Raiment of Modernity*, pg 246

¹⁰ Harry Francis Mallgrave, Preface to Otto Wagner's *Modern architecture* : a guidebook for his students to this field of art /Santa Monica, Calif. : Getty Center for the History of Art and the Humanities, 1988, Pg 3

Coming back to Wagner's understanding of the realist agenda, it seemed problematic for him to reconcile the 'realist' agenda with his largely historicist and symbolic practice. In his book, *Modern Architecture*, he later favored the term building -art (Baukunst) to architecture. This term already reflects the convergence of artistic idealism and the realist tendencies initiated by Wagner in his work. His Secessionist leanings with symbolic motifs should not be treated as aberrations in his line of thinking but rather as Wagner's coming to terms with the idea of Art Nouveau tendencies as a catalyst to bring forth the 'inner form' of the building by emphasizing its construction principles through ornamental treatment.

Wagner's dual emphasis on construction and art in building can be understood as a consequence of his understanding of Gottfried Semper's theory of *Bekleidung* which accepted a building's forces necessary and subordinated the structure to them. Akos Moravanszky notes:

"According to Semper, the origin of a work of art is influenced by such factors as materials and modes of construction, local and ethnological influences, climate, religious and political institutions, and the personal influences of the patron, artist, and the producer of work. But Semper also maintained that the human culture had always been enchanted by the veil or mask...the mask was the constant element, the symbol representing themes that cannot be expressed by the inner structure."¹¹

However, Wagner seems to have taken the idea of new architectural forms arising out of new means of construction and purpose a little too far than what even Semper would have agreed with. In a curious criticism of Semper, Wagner suggested that he lacked the courage to complete his theory in a consistent manner and

¹¹ . Akos Moravanszky "the Aesthetics of the Mask," *Otto Wagner: Reflections on the Raiment of Modernity*, pg 203

compromised himself "with a symbolism of construction, instead of naming construction itself as the primitive cell of architecture."¹²

In his essay "From Realism to Sachlichkeit", Mallgrave discusses this criticism of Wagner through the writings of Wagner's contemporary architectural critic, Richard Streiter. He acknowledges Streiter as the first person to introduce the word Sachlichkeit in architectural parlance. The term Sachlichkeit as a simple or straightforward way of solving a problem implied a greater meaning than being just functional. It put the realist agenda of Wagner in focus by criticizing it for going too far as to make a virtue out of a necessity. Streiter went further and speculated that Wagner's insistence on a "straightforward Sachlichkeit" resulted from a misreading of Semper's arguments. Indeed, Semper himself had anticipated such readings of his writings and termed these people "materialists," who have "fettered the idea too much to the material...believing that the store of architectural forms is determined solely by the structural and material conditions." Streiter aptly termed this tendency as 'tectonic realism.'¹³

However, Wagner seems to confound this critique through his apparent disjunction with his tectonic realism in theory and his secessionist designs that have pure historicist and ornamental basis. This uneasy coexistence of Wagner's aspirations and his designs seem to reflect the complexity and vigor of the artistic context in his times. We shall now look at some of the peculiar tectonic strategies he used in one of his seminal works that established Wagner's artistic outlook as the final arbiter of his own realist polemic and his symbolist practice

THE POSTAL OFFICE SAVINGS BANK BUILDING:

Wagner entered into a competition in 1903 and was selected among 37 participants to design the new building for K.K. Postsparkassenamt (also known as Postal Savings Bank) in the significant Ringstrasse area of Vienna. The building is a reinforced concrete structure faced outside with marble and granite slabs, fastened with aluminum capped iron bolts. Entrance canopy, balconies and roof and cornices are also made of aluminum. The interior facades are covered with tiles and the main court is roofed over with a steel and glass structure creating the central hall (See Fig.4).



Fig.4: Post Office Savings Bank- interior, main hall

In addition to this, the building has a number of interesting details that seem to aestheticize the presence of new material and technology and not hiding them behind a historicist mask. Wagner's realist tendencies can be seen through his open display of the Steel and glass structure in the main hall. Even the ventilator columns and the light fittings present themselves as a matter of fact and not hidden in any way (See Fig.5). Here, it is important to note the aesthetic qualities of these details. There is a certain stylistic grammar that is employed in the construction of these elements that seem to be in harmony with the overall structure. The new material vocabulary

¹² Harry Francis Mallgrave "From realism to Sachlichkeit," *Otto Wagner: Reflections on the Raiment of Modernity*, pg 287

¹³ Ibid

seems to emanate from Wagner's station building projects as Fritz Neumeyer has suggested in his essay (See Fig.6):

"The famous banking hall of the Postsparkasse has altogether 'interiorized' the station building and its large glass-covered space with a type of construction that seems to be inspired by the suspension bridge. The section cut through the main hall, with the ocular positioning of the circular lamps, even suggests the illusion of a locomotive on rails. The station building and the bridge, both prominent issues in Wagner's urban architecture, reoccur, but this time they are hidden behind walls."¹⁴



Fig.5: Post Office Savings Bank- interior view

This last comment on hiding the iron supports behind walls is one of the most significant evidence to show Wagner's inconsistency with the 'Tectonic realism' that Streiter had charged Wagner with. The walls in his case become the intermediate surfaces for the expression of iron to soften from structural supports and transcend into the Aluminum capped iron bolts that allow for a softened transition to the exterior. It should be noted that the bolts did not seem necessary for plain construction purposes as the mortar was strong enough to make the stone slabs stay in place. Wagner seems to have been tackling a problem that was more than just

¹⁴ Fritz Neumeyer "Iron and Stone," *Otto Wagner: Reflections on the Raiment of Modernity*, pg 134

a construction detail. The problem here seemed to be aestheticizing the iron construction in the context of his artistic background (See Fig.7).

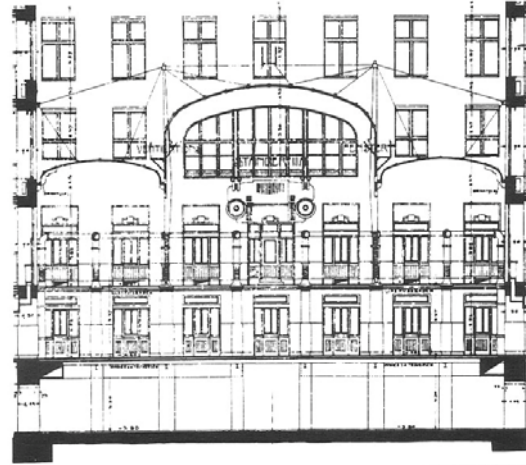


Fig.6: Post Office Savings Bank- Section through Hall

This reduction of a monumental structure to a more minimalist one accounts for a particularly unique architectural expression that seems to take Wagner back to his symbolist roots. It is interesting to note that Neumeyer finds a contemporary counterpart in the work of Tadao Ando where the holes left by concrete formwork allow for "...light itself to become a substitute for the revealing veil of a material layer."¹⁵



Fig.7: Post Office Savings Bank- Corner Detail

WAGNER'S LEGACY AS AN ARBITER:

¹⁵ Ibid, Pg 135

So we must ask ourselves, why and how is Wagner's legacy relevant to the issues of contemporary architecture? Firstly, as mentioned at the beginning, the diverse pursuits of Wagner make it difficult for conventional historic accounts to bracket him in a singular reading of him that connects together a linear narrative in time. Therefore, Wagner provides an understanding of modern architectural principles that is more mutable and establishes an alternative narrative of the impact of technology in the late 19th and early 20th century architecture.

Another important aspect of Wagner's seemingly inconsistent architectural principles is the understanding of this very inconsistency as a virtue and not a vice. It does not seem possible that Wagner could have made before-mentioned innovative tectonic strategies had he not been critically engaging with the idea of bringing the discipline of art and building together. Even today, art and building disciplines seem to exist separated from each other. For Wagner, this was not so. So then, we may conjecture that the inconsistencies are

only present in the historian's eye and not the practitioner's.

Wagner's role can then be seen as an arbitrator of sorts who seems to have given precedence to his artistic ideals than his realist polemic, though never abandoning it completely. This implies a certain sense of continuity with the past and also provides for in Wagner's case, ornament as a representation of cultural values. This reiterates the obsolescence of the idea of a 'radical break with history' of modern architecture. The face of modern architecture acquires a lot more depth and expression through the work of Otto Wagner.

Contemporary architectural discipline gets informed by new technological feats on a regular basis leaving the profession of architecture in anxiety over their implications and its relation to past cultural values. A re-evaluation of modern architectural principles might be able to provide clues for ascertaining architectural strategies. Otto Wagner's discourse in this regard may prove itself to be most rewarding.

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2. Majolica House, Photographer: Bouchard, Karen, Brown University
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4. Post Office Savings Bank- interior, main hall, Image and catalog data provided by Allan T. Kohl, Minneapolis College of Art and Design
5. Post Office Savings Bank- interior view, Image and catalog data provided by Allan T. Kohl, Minneapolis College of Art and Design
6. Post Office Savings Bank- Section through Hall, Scanned Image from Harry Francis Mallgrave, Ed., Otto Wagner: reflections on the raiment of modernity /Santa Monica, CA: Getty Center for the History of Art and the Humanities, 1993, Pg 138
7. Post Office Savings Bank- Corner Detail, Image and original data provided by the School of Architecture Visual Resources Collection, The University of Texas at Austin