

Adolf Loos and the Aphoristic Style: Rhetorical Practice in Early Twentieth-Century Design Criticism

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Adolf Loos has been described in the annals of architectural and design history as the individual most responsible for introducing the principles of abstract, austere, orthogonal design into numerous pre-World War I Viennese buildings.¹ His early commissions—the Steiner House of 1908, the Scheu House of 1910, and others—are generally interpreted as embodiments of the maxims contained in his most famous 1908 essay, “Ornament and Crime.” As one of the most radical polemics of design criticism of the twentieth century, this essay gained Loos considerable notoriety in the way in which it violently denounced, and then claimed to close the door forever on, an “arbitrary” use of ornaments that had predominated in Viennese architecture and applied arts for decades. Employing a series of grand rhetorical gestures to denounce nineteenth-century historicism as well as newer styles being explored by the Austrian Secession, the Deutscher Werkbund, and the Wiener Werkstätte, Loos’s written and built works generally are credited with inventing the forms that inspired countless modernist architects to embrace abstraction and the International Style of the 1920s.²

Succeeding generations of scholars and architects have treated Loos with varying degrees of sophistication, analyzing his buildings as expressions of his cultural polemics, connecting him loosely with other Viennese cultural innovators, or mining his writings for justifications of new directions in late-twentieth-century architecture. Among the most illuminating analyses of Loos’s complex, anti-systematic philosophy are those of architectural historian Stanford Anderson. Anderson has argued that Loos’s critical breakthrough consisted of developing an awareness of how competing conventions and practices—drawing, photography, master craftsmanship and building, and the production of art—could constructively criticize one another from within respective, sovereign domains of praxis.³ Instructive for understanding Loos’s approach to the process of building and making, Anderson’s work nevertheless leaves open the question of how Loos used language in particular ways to advance his ground-breaking design philosophy.

This article contrasts Loos’s celebrated early design criticism with certain rhetorical practices in his writings, insofar as the field of rhetoric traditionally has concerned itself with “the way discourses are constructed in order to achieve certain effects.” This

- 1 This line of interpretation was inaugurated by Nicholas Pevsner in *Pioneers of the Modern Movement From William Morris to Walter Gropius* (London: Faber & Faber, 1936), 188–92.
- 2 For example, Loos is said to prefigure the International Style by at least eight years in Kenneth Frampton, *Modern Architecture: A Critical History* (New York: Thames and Hudson, 1980), 90–95.
- 3 Stanford Anderson, “Critical Conventionalism: Architecture,” *Assemblage 1* (1986): 6–23, quoted in Stanford Anderson, “Critical Conventionalism: The History of Architecture,” *Midgard: Journal of Architectural Theory and Criticism*, 1: 1 (1990): 47. The architectural theorist Massimo Cacciari characterizes Loos’s philosophy as “negative thought” that seeks to “give an order to the absence of synthesis.” See Massimo Cacciari, *Architecture and Nihilism: On the Philosophy of Modern Architecture*, trans. by Steven Sartarelli (New Haven: Yale, 1993), 37.

definition of rhetoric, borrowed from Terry Eagleton, emphasizes rhetoric's long-standing interest in writing as a form of power-laden performance.⁴ Arguing for a cultural and geographical specificity that has been omitted in many studies of the International Style, this article begins by examining the dependence of Loos's thought on his Viennese context. It then investigates the extent to which Loos's writings and his agenda for design and architecture followed radically different sets of rules. Not only did these rules conform to different conceptions of modern public and private domains, as Michael Hays and Beatriz Colomina have argued, but Loos's writings embraced a colorful, even ornamental style that assisted him in the construction of his celebrated theory of modern culture and identity.⁵

Theatricality and Authenticity in *Fin-de-Siècle* Viennese Culture

Loos's early and formative writings give him a significant relationship to other major late-nineteenth-century rhetorical masters who, together, make up a group known as the Viennese "language circle" because of their commitment to language as a tool of cultural reform. Intellectual historian William Johnston, author of *The Austrian Mind*, refers to Loos's associates such as the writer Karl Kraus as one of Vienna's "therapeutic nihilists," to the poet Peter Altenberg as an "expert at dissimulation," and to the philosopher of language Ludwig Wittgenstein, who designed his own house inspired by Loos's ideas, as "a Utopian and therapeutic nihilist at once."⁶

These figures shared a cultural and social matrix that has been characterized by an array of historians in Vienna as being highly "theatrical," and though the term is significant, it also is used very differently by different scholars. In works by Carl Schorske, Donald Olsen, and Allan Janik and Stephen Toulmin, for example, Viennese tendencies toward performance and theatricality could be seen spilling over into the journalism, café culture, and street life of the city.⁷ Other historians, such as Michael Steinberg and Edward Timms, have interpreted tendencies toward Viennese theatricality much more darkly. To Michael Steinberg, theatricality denotes the settings and rituals of a centuries-old ideological technique with roots in Catholic baroque culture.⁸ In Edward Timms's more nuanced view, theatricality permeated the structure of Viennese social, cultural, and political life as a form of performance and dissembling throughout the waning years of the Habsburg Empire. In a multinational entity struggling to preserve its dynastic structure through the early decades of the twentieth century, Timms argues, Austrian leaders and much of the rest of Viennese society exhibited an increasing tendency to embrace theatricality in cultural forms, as well as in behavior. As a form of dissembling, theatricality could be detected in society through the blurring of the lines between actors and the behavior of avid Viennese theatergoers, in the layers of

4 Terry Eagleton, *Literary Theory: An Introduction* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1983), 205.

5 K. Michael Hays, *Modernism and the Posthumanist Subject: The Architecture of Hannes Meyer and Ludwig Hilbersheimer* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1992); Beatriz Colomina, *Privacy and Publicity: Modern Architecture as Mass Media* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1994). Both authors make this point but, as with many other examinations of Loos, these works do relatively little to examine the architect's theories in their specific relation—and in their debts—to Loos's Viennese cultural context.

6 William Johnston, *The Austrian Mind: An Intellectual and Social History 1848–1938* (Berkeley: UC Press, 1972), 207, 223, and 397. Paul Engelmann, a Loos disciple, forms a crucial link between Loos, Kraus, and Wittgenstein. As one-time personal secretary to Kraus, Engelmann also was assistant architect of record for Wittgenstein's own house in Vienna's Kundmannngasse, built between 1926 and 1928. See Paul Engelmann, *Letters from Ludwig Wittgenstein: With A Memoir* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1976). For another account, see Dagmar Barnouw, "Loos, Kraus, Wittgenstein, and the Problem of Authenticity" in Gerald Chapple and Hans H. Schulte, eds., *The Turn of the Century: German Literature and Art, 1890–1915*, The McMaster Colloquium on German Studies II (Bonn: Bouvier Verlag, 1981), 249–273.

7 Allan Janik and Stephen Toulmin, *Wittgenstein's Vienna* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1973); Carl E. Schorske, *Fin-de-Siècle Vienna: Politics and Culture* (New York: Vintage, 1981); and Donald J. Olsen, *The City as a Work of Art: London, Paris, Vienna* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1986), especially the chapter, "Vienna: Display and Self-Representation," 235–50. Also excellent on this period, though less specifically focused on theatricality, are Jacques Le Rider, *Modernity and Crises of Identity:*

pomp and historicist ornament self-consciously intermingled with products of modern manufacturing, and in laws, customs, and cultural practices that fundamentally conflicted but persisted side by side. These trends compensated for tensions building up within the Austrian Empire's increasingly anachronistic system. At the same time, they betrayed a hypocrisy that Timms locates at different levels of the Imperial government, the military, and the social hierarchy.⁹ It is not surprising, therefore, that theatrical performance and social dissembling figured as central themes in works of contemporary literature by such *fin-de-siècle* literary figures as Arthur Schnitzler and Robert Musil.¹⁰

It was precisely such hypocrisies and seemingly decadent frills that gave rise to radical cultural critics like Adolf Loos. The architect's writings and buildings suggest that he knew his targets well. Largely an autodidact, he appeared poised from early in his career to articulate a vision for architectural and cultural change—his total of two semesters at Dresden Technical University notwithstanding.¹¹ Loos's work, however, cannot easily be separated from the very Viennese dissembling against which the architect claimed so forcefully to rebel. Exhibiting, in fact, a kind of anti-theatrical prejudice, Loos's crusade for an authenticity befitting the modern age led him to enact his own versions of Viennese theatricality. As Jonas Barish has shown, upsurges of theatricality in Western cultures historically have been opposed by a "rage for authenticity" which, for many reformers, represents the reassertion of a reality seen as distorted or suppressed.¹² Loos's contributions to the nascent modern movement in architecture and design must thus be understood as the product of theatrical and anti-theatrical forces balanced in palpable tension. To the extent that his writings and architecture charted new cultural territory, on the one hand, they were not-so-subtly undermined by dissembling, performative, and highly theatrical conventions that the architect absorbed from his cultural context on the other. More than the achievement of an eccentric architect forming a new style before his time, Loos's work is particularly useful for understanding many features of modernism's own ambivalence.

In view of the numerous historical accounts of *fin-de-siècle* Viennese theatricality, it is easier to understand Adolf Loos's contemporary criticism of a culture that embraced so much historicist ornament in its architecture and design of everyday objects that it undermined the very idea of a modern culture. His designs for buildings, furniture, and everyday objects were, in part, a critique of an urbanity Loos regarded as intrusive and grossly out of step with the times. As other scholars have pointed out, Loos, Wittgenstein, and Karl Kraus thematized "the limits of language" by constructing an ethical critique of Viennese social practices.¹³ Loos's relatively blank exteriors in architecture, the "silences" of Wittgenstein's language philosophy, and Kraus's denunciations of print media

Footnote 7 continued

- Culture and Society in Fin-de-Siècle Vienna*, trans. by Rosemary Morris (New York: Continuum, 1993), and Hermann Broch, *Hugo von Hofmannsthal and His Time: The European Imagination, 1860–1920*, trans. by Michael P. Steinberg (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1984).
- 8 Michael P. Steinberg, *The Meaning of the Salzburg Festival: Austria as Theater and Ideology, 1890–1938* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1990).
- 9 Edward Timms, *Karl Kraus, Apocalyptic Satirist: Culture and Catastrophe in Habsburg Vienna* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1986), 3–30. See also Kari Grimstad, *Masks of the Prophet: The Theatrical World of Karl Kraus* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1982).
- 10 Typical treatments of these themes are Robert Musil, *Der Mann ohne Eigenschaften* [*The Man Without Qualities*] (Reinbeck bei Hamburg: Rohwolt, 1978); and Arthur Schnitzler, *Der Weg ins Freie* [*The Road Into the Open*] (Wien: Residenz Verlag, 1980).
- 11 See the discussion of Loos's education in Burkhardt Rukschcio's and Roland Schachel's unsurpassed, 700-page critical biography and catalog, *Adolf Loos: Leben und Werk* (Salzburg: Residenz Verlag, 1982), 14–21.
- 12 Jonas Barish, *The Anti-theatrical Prejudice* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1981). See especially 451–69. This study explores the numerous complexities faced historically by Western playwrights, artists, writers, and philosophers who have grappled with the antagonism between theatricality and cultural authenticity.
- 13 Johnston, *The Austrian Mind*, 203–207.

conventionalism in his one-man journal, *Die Fackel* (*The Torch*), sought collectively to purge superfluous elements from a culture seen as carnivalesque and debased.¹⁴

To Adolf Loos the writer, however, Viennese theatrical traditions left an indelible imprint on his ironic, aphoristic, and, at times, incendiary prose style. As the architectural historian Reyner Banham put it, Loos's writing typically consisted of "not a reasoned argument but a succession of fast-spieling double-takes and non-sequiturs holding together a precarious rally of clouds of witness—café Freudianism, café-anthropology, (and) café criminology."¹⁵ To what can we attribute the difference between Loos's austere, even "silent" buildings, and the highly "ornamented" and theatrical quality of his writings? If there is a connection between aphorism and ornament, how should we understand the seeming contradiction between the writing style featured in Loos's design criticism and the outward sobriety of his architecture and furniture?

One can begin by pointing to Loos's fundamental distinction between the qualities of private and public life, an attitude usefully explored by Beatriz Colomina in her 1994 book, *Privacy and Publicity: Modern Architecture as Mass Media*. She recounts how Adolf Loos and Josef Hoffman, his Viennese counterpart and rival, developed radically different approaches to urban residential design. Hoffman understood the house as a social artifact: the architect's task was to design an elegant residence that reflected the owner's station to an outside world which, beholding a monument to taste, would elevate the house to the status of an artwork. This point is illustrated in one of his best known works, the Palais Stoclet in Brussels, whose interior mural paintings were carried out by Gustav Klimt.¹⁶

Loos, on the other hand, renounced that aestheticization of building which confused utilitarian objects with art. He insisted on the use of architectural drawing not for the production of images, but as a tool for communicating constructional and technical ideas to the builder. Since humanity had evolved past the need for superfluous historicist ornaments, Loos reasoned, modern creativity lay in the development of a method of designing houses three dimensionally, in section rather than in plan, and from the inside out. Presenting "masked" exteriors to the outside world, these houses were designed with an emphasis on spatial fluidity and adaptability, shielding the owner from the fast-paced modern metropolis. The most inventive spatial features of Loos's architecture did not translate in the new technology of photography which, like drawing, was regarded by Loos as an "irreducible system" for the communication of form.¹⁷

Cultural Reform as Design Reform: Loos's Rhetorical Devices

A different set of rules applied to the public realm, however. Loos's public persona was that of an outspoken cultural critic and mesmer-

14 Barnouw, "Loos, Kraus, Wittgenstein," 251–60; Schorske, *Fin-de-Siècle Vienna*, 339–40; Johnston, *The Austrian Mind*, 212–13.

15 Reyner Banham, "Ornament and Crime: The Decisive Contribution of Adolf Loos," *Architectural Review* (February 1957): 86.

16 Colomina, *Privacy and Publicity*, 38–43.

17 *Ibid.*, 65.

izing lecturer who delighted as well as educated audiences through his performances.¹⁸ Regarding the private and public realms of the modern city as radically discontinuous, Loos adopted such additional performative elements of Viennese theatrical culture as the *feuilleton* and an aphoristic writing style as his chosen means of public self-expression.

As a lecturer and through his tenure writing *feuilletons* for Vienna's best known liberal newspaper, *Die Neue Freie Presse* (*The New Free Press*) Loos revealed himself to be a masterful writer and incisive cultural observer. The *feuilleton* consisted of an impressionistically written article, one that seized upon seemingly minor elements of behavior or material culture, and examined them with merciless wit. Introduced first in Paris around 1800 before making its way to Vienna in the decades that followed, the *feuilleton*, as the historian William Johnston has noted, was the literary correlate to the intellectual camaraderie of the coffee house. Carl Schorske has further demonstrated that the *feuilleton* was symptomatic of an expanding aesthetic strain running through late-nineteenth-century Viennese culture, one which provided a competitive, educated bourgeoisie, or *Bildungsbürgertum*, access to aristocratic privilege via recognition in the arts and literature.¹⁹ At their best, *feuilletons* cleverly expanded on small details of cultural life until they became, in the hands of skilled authors, virtual embodiments of the hypocrisies and afflictions of the culture at large. In *Wittgenstein's Vienna*, historians Allan Janik and Stephen Toulmin attest to Loos's talents through their observation that "to have an essay accepted by Theodor Herzl, the *feuilleton* editor of the *Neue Freie Presse*, was to have 'arrived' on the Austrian literary scene."²⁰

In fact, Loos had "arrived" on this literary scene in 1897, after returning from three years in the United States.²¹ Loos supported himself for several years in Vienna by publishing design criticism in various Viennese newspapers and journals. Many of Loos's early essays between 1897 and 1900 adhere to the style of the Viennese *feuilleton*, commonly appearing as a lead front-page piece of cultural commentary in Viennese dailies. Loos, however, went far beyond the limits of a mere disgruntled arbiter from the fashion pages. Instead, he published scathing, satirical reviews of Viennese society and cultural groups, diagnosing hypocrisy and cultural anachronism everywhere. A well-known early essay, for example, attacked the falseness of the facades of the famous Ringstrasse, the pride of late-nineteenth-century bourgeois liberal Vienna. Calling the buildings part of a "Potemkin City," Loos likened the monumental Ringstrasse facades to the false building fronts erected in the Potemkin village of the Crimean peninsula by a conquering Russian military commander. The commander had hoped to impress the Russian ruler, Catherine II, by fabricating the appearance of a territory already developed when she passed through on inspection. But if a false stage had been put up in the rural Crimea, such pretense

18 See the reviews and description of Loos's "free, sparkling speeches" in "Vorträge: Karl Kraus und Adolf Loos," *Prager Tageblatt* Nr. 63 (March 5, 1913): 4; and "Ein reichbegabtes Brünner Kind," *Tagesbote aus Mähren und Schlesien: Feuilleton-Beilage* Nr. 7 (January 4, 1908): 1.

19 Johnston, *The Austrian Mind*, 115-27; and Schorske, *Fin-de-Siècle Vienna*, 7-21.

20 Janik and Toulmin, *Wittgenstein's Vienna*, 46.

21 On the journey to the U.S., see Rukschcio and Schachel, *Adolf Loos: Leben und Werk*, 21-32.

amounted, in Loos's estimation, to blasphemy in Central Europe's purported cultural capital.²²

Loos's other feuilletons cleverly exploited seemingly minor details found in Viennese clothing, crafts, and other items of material culture. Through comparisons to these objects' counterparts in England and America, Loos inflated his interpretation of Viennese consumer products until they became a virtual index of Viennese backwardness and hopelessness—exhibits of a willful Viennese blindness to the challenge of living in the present. Loos interpreted the gaudy frills of outmoded Viennese clothing (compared to the smart, practical English suit), wallets and leather goods covered with Rococo ornamentation, and "tin bathtubs that aim to look as if they are marble" as part of a Viennese culture steeped in imitation. He identified quality in those objects that had escaped the ornamental applications of art and remained in the control of craftsmen, engineers, and trades workers (such as plumbers), the focus of whose attention had been on practicality and use.²³

Loos did not shy away from finding direct institutional and personal targets for his attacks. His essay, "Poor Little Rich Man," lambasted the Secession movement's approach to design. Like his other feuilletons, "Poor Little Rich Man" performed the work of the knowing satirist: it took everyday life as the setting in which to tell the woeful tale of a successful man who was virtually strangled in the "total-work-of-art" [*Gesamtkunstwerk*] atmosphere of his house. Secession architects had designed furniture, wall coverings, and even clothing for the client in such excruciating detail that the simple act of living put the dweller in danger—either of injuring himself or of transgressing some ostensibly "artistic" principle governing the design of the house.²⁴ Loos penned equally aggressive essays with such titles as "The Superfluous Ones" and "Degenerate Art" to attack Hermann Muthesius, the whole Werkbund association, and the Wiener Werkstätte arts and crafts branch, led by Anton von Scala, for foolishly seeking to invent new styles truly "of their time."²⁵ Loos argued that such a search was pointless: abandoning artistic pretension, the English and the Americans already were introducing the world to a style for the times by using efficient production methods and by respecting older, evolved forms that did not have to be decorated or improved. The one contemporary Austrian for whom Loos reserved praise was Otto Wagner, the architect who had glorified practicality and efficiency as the principles of modern life in his expansion plan for Vienna of 1893, and who had published his ideas in an 1895 textbook for his students at the Vienna Academy of Fine Arts.²⁶

Yet, if Loos's early essays contained exaggerated complaints about Viennese imitation in material objects, the essence of the architect's objections became clear in *Das Andere: Ein Blatt zur Einführung Abenländischer Kultur in Österreich* (*The Other: A Newspaper for the Introduction of Western Culture into Austria*), which Loos

22 Loos, "Die potemkische stadt" (Juli 1898), *Sämtliche Schriften* (Wien: Verlag Herold, 1962), 153–56. All citations are from the German text, but Loos's early essays between 1897 and 1900 have been reprinted in an English translation in Adolf Loos, *Spoken Into The Void*, trans. by Jane O. Newman and John H. Smith (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1982).

23 Loos, "Lederwaren und Gold- und Silberschmiedekunst," "Herrenmode," and "Die Plumber" (originally in *Die Neue Freie Presse*, May 15, May 22, and July 17, 1898 respectively) in *Sämtliche Schriften*: 15–25; and 70–7.

24 Loos, "Von einem armen reichen manne" (April 26, 1900), *Sämtliche Schriften*: 201–7.

25 Loos, "Die Überflüssigen" and "Entartete Kunst" (1908) in *Sämtliche Schriften*: 267–75.

26 Loos, "Die Interieurs in der Rotunde," *Neue Freie Presse* (June 12, 1898); and "Das Sitzmöbel," *Neue Freie Presse* (June 19, 1898) in *Sämtliche Schriften*: 40–54. Also see the discussion of Loos and Wagner in Rukschcio and Schachel, *Adolf Loos: Leben und Werk*, 48–9.

founded in part through the inspiration of Karl Kraus's radical journal of cultural criticism, *Die Fackel* Loos's short-lived publication, with a run of two issues in 1903, furthered his polemic with such impressionistic articles as "Clothing," "The Home," "What We Read," "What We Print," and "How We Live."²⁷ In these pieces, Loos drew the crucial distinction between the culture of the Austrian countryside and the culture of the Austrian city—or, more accurately, the absence of authentic culture in the modern city. To Loos, the cultural authenticity of a people depended on cultural practices and production methods derived from their local context; thus geography as well as temporality figured into his notion of authentic culture. Since most city dwellers were immigrants from the countryside, it was much more difficult for urban centers to realize a culture that was truly their own. This, then, was the challenge of the city: to recognize that modern production methods represented an authentic cultural practice, just as traditional crafts generated the authentic products of rural culture. In a later essay Loos discussed authentic culture as "that balance of man's inner and outer being which alone guarantees rational thought and action." If the urban dweller could only unify his "inner being" with the outer practices being engendered in the modern city—something the Viennese had abjectly failed to do, in Loos's view—then there would exist an authentic urban culture as well.²⁸

It was from this perspective that Loos glorified manufactured goods that had not received the beautifying attention of applied arts decorators. Loos rejected as inherently false any urban product that bore applied ornamentation. As long as the typical Viennese city dweller continued to accept outmoded Gothic script in the city's newspapers, along with masses of gaudy decorations from random historical periods on everyday consumer products, Loos argued, he or she was doomed to remain completely out of step with cultural progress.²⁹ Because Loos defined "progress" in terms of forward-looking Anglo-American accomplishments, Austria stood in need of Western culture's "introduction," as his journal title made plain. Until this happened, Loos's "blind burgher" would continue to buy inferior applied arts goods and "shake his head" at the English assertion that quality products were worth paying for; he also would continue to denigrate farmers and peasants—eighty percent of his country's population, as Loos pointed out—as second-class Austrians.³⁰

This cleft between city and country especially bothered Loos. In all of their blindness, the Viennese failed to recognize the responsibility of their city to disseminate culture and civilization throughout the countryside in a process of cultural development. Idealizing the New World as a land unfettered by aristocratic traditions, the Austrian architect claimed to see fewer discrepancies between the American city and countryside. Instead, he perceived America as a place where modernization was dissolving unhealthy divisions

27 Loos, *Das Andere: Ein Blatt zur Einführung Abendländischer Kultur in Österreich* 1: 2 (1903), reproduced in facsimile by Carlo Pirovano, ed. (Milan: Gruppo Editoriale Electa, 1982). Mark Wigley examines the relationships between clothing, dress, and the development of modern architecture in *White Walls, Designer Dresses: The Fashioning of Modern Architecture* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1995).

28 Loos, "Architektur" (1910) in *Sämtliche Schriften*, 303.

29 In a 1921 foreword to his first book of essays written between 1897 and 1900, Loos enlisted the authority of the philologist-folklorist Jakob Grimm in order to criticize the Gothic "Fraktur" script, and to explain why he had not capitalized any of the common nouns in his early essays. Loos regarded this German convention as a degenerate, "distorted fashion" of writing that produced a "purposeless proliferation of capital letters." See "Vorwort," *Sämtliche Schriften*, 10.

30 Loos, "Abendländische Kultur," "Was man Verkauft," *Das Andere*, n.1 (1903), pp. 1–3.

between country and city in a process that was equal parts political, economic, and cultural. In short, Loos embraced a view, according to the historian Benedetto Gravagnuolo, that included “a necessary presupposition for a gradual breaking down of the historical discrepancy between town and country,” a trajectory of history that Loos felt was being followed in the New World. As something of a wide-eyed traveler from the Old World, Loos idolized the efficiency and practicality of American culture, claiming to sense something Hellenic in its spirit. While leading American architects and engineers in Chicago tackled the new problems of the age—the design of new machine tools, tall buildings, electrical wiring and lighting, and fireproofing—they were availing themselves of the same spirit that enabled classical architects to meet and surpass the technical challenges of their own time.³¹ But back in the Old World, Loos wrote in *Das Anderer*,

When you travel for an hour on the railway and then go on foot for another hour and enter a peasant’s house, you meet people who are stranger than those who live a thousand miles away across the sea. We have nothing in common with them... they dress differently, their clothes strike us in the same way as those in the Chinese restaurant of an international exhibition, and their celebration of festivities arouses the same curiosity in us as if we were watching a procession in Ceylon. This is a shameful situation. There are millions of people in Austria who are excluded from the benefits of civilization.³²

In essence, the model for restoring authenticity was to be found in old Europe’s “other,” in the New World and its pragmatism. Through the idolization of selected features of American culture—filtered through his stance toward the Old World—Loos constructed a foil for the ornamented, theatrical culture of *fin-de-siècle* Vienna. Using the theatrical feuilleton and the articles in his own journal, he exhorted the Viennese to embrace the present, and to rejuvenate an authentic Austrian character embalmed in ornamental frills.

Yet Loos’s conflicting attitudes toward rural culture reveal an ambivalence toward traditional and modern peoples characteristic of many features of early twentieth-century modernism. In some articles, Loos treated the farmer, rural builder, and craftsman as the untainted preserver of an unspoiled crafts tradition—the embodiment of Rousseau’s primitive ideal.³³ In other essays, however (and most notably in “Ornament and Crime”), he denigrated peasants as primitive and backward, equating them with tribal peoples whom most Western contemporaries regarded as inferior. If Papuans were “savages” in essays such as “Ornament and Crime,” in “Architecture,” written two years later in 1910, Loos announced: “I am preparing a new lecture: ‘Why the Papuans Have a Culture While the Germans Do Not.’”³⁴ This sliding scale of cultural relativity

31 Loos, “Wiener Architekturfragen” (*Reichspost Morgenblatt*, October 1, 1910), *Sämtliche Schriften*: 299–300.

32 Loos, *Das Andere*. The translated quote is from Benedetto Gravagnuolo, *Adolf Loos: Theory and Works* (New York: Rizzoli, 1982), 44.

33 Adolf Loos, “Architektur” (1910), *Sämtliche Schriften*: 302–18.

34 *Ibid.*, 303.

depended on Loos's consideration of different criteria of social development and economic activity, making different cultures seem alternately more primitive or more advanced. Recent scholarship by Mitchell Schwarzer and Patricia Morton has traced connections between Loos's thought and the currents of the social Darwinism of Herbert Spencer, the criminology of Cesare Lombroso, and the teleological anthropology of John Lubbock and the philosopher Condorcet before him. These thinkers, including Loos or his Viennese contemporary, Sigmund Freud, contributed to models of individual and societal development that progressed linearly from primitive savagery to modern civilization. This view was linked to a deep-rooted tradition of modern social scientific thinking that rested upon problematic assumptions of Western superiority.³⁵

Ornament, Aphorism, and Crime

Loos carried many of the assumptions of modern social science into his design criticism. At the same time, he embellished these through the use of rhetorical techniques common among Viennese literary figures. Loos's criticism most frequently relied on the aphorism, a literary device closely allied with theatricality. As with the feuilleton and with the contours of Loos's thinking in general, the architect's aphoristic mode specifically locates him within a *fin-de-siècle* Viennese intellectual and cultural milieu. Once again the research of William Johnston on "The Vienna School of Aphorists" sheds light on the utility of a writing style known for removing the reader from his or her usual context—a precursor to the reconfiguring of the reader's reality through the arguments of the text.³⁶ Drawing on the biting wit of such contemporary Viennese authors as Arthur Schnitzler, Hugo von Hofmannsthal, and Karl Kraus, Loos exploited aphorisms as an ideal medium for radically dissembling, questioning, and reordering experience. They provide, moreover, a direct way of understanding his theory and criticism of culture.

A successful aphorism, in the view of students of this genre including William Johnston and J.A. Cuddon, expresses a kernel of wisdom in unconventional terms, addressing readers outside of their specific identities in the world. Aphorisms, in other words, reconfigure a reader's relationship to the commonplace or familiar. Aphorisms also tend to focus on moral rather than aesthetic considerations, furnishing the perfect technique for a writer intent on cultural reform. In commemorating Adolf Loos's death in 1933, architecture journals such as *Architectural Review* chose to publish a list of Loos's aphorisms as a provocative and entertaining "anthology" of the architect's outlook.³⁷ However, while Loos had observed many of the "chattier" conventions of judging taste in early feuilletons, he pushed the radical, perspective-altering potential of aphorisms to the limit in such essays as "Ornament and Crime" (1908) and "My School of Architecture" (1913).

35 Mitchell Schwarzer, "Ethnologies of the Primitive in Adolf Loos's Writings on Ornament," *Nineteenth-Century Contexts* 18 (1994): 225–47. For a useful discussion of Loos in the broader context of nineteenth-century German architectural theory, see Mitchell Schwarzer, *German Architectural Theory and the Search for Modern Identity* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1995), especially 238–60; Patricia Morton, "Modern Architecture and Its Discontents: Loos and Le Corbusier on Ornament," (paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the College Art Association, Toronto, February 1998).

36 William Johnston, "The Vienna School of Aphorists, 1880–1930: Reflections on a Neglected Genre" in Chapple and Schulte, eds. (see note 6), 275–90.

37 "Adolf Loos Anthology: Basic Principles," *Architectural Review* 76 (October 1934): 151. J.A. Cuddon discusses the aphorism in *A Dictionary of Literary Terms* (Garden City, NJ: Doubleday, 1977), 376–7.

Architectural theorist Beatriz Colomina has argued that Loos's writings participate in a storytelling tradition that, "like those of (Walter) Benjamin... have an almost biblical structure." Colomina further asserts that Loos's approach engages in a Benjaminian resistance to that "replacement of [an] earlier storytelling tradition by information, of information by sensation, (which) reflects the increasing atrophy of experience."³⁸ In my view, however, Loos's rhetoric goes far beyond that of resistance, placing him squarely within a *fin-de-siècle* Viennese cultural milieu. Loos's aphoristic mode bears relatively little relation to the tradition of Benjaminian Marxism. It exhibits, in fact, a constitutive dimension whose building blocks are contained within the aphoristic style. With theatrical gestures and aphoristic flourishes, such Loos essays as "Ornament and Crime" ridicule and dismantle the usual structure of sense by which the reader might reasonably expect to relate to the world.³⁹

To illustrate briefly, Loos begins the following way:

The human embryo in the womb passes through all the evolutionary stages of the animal kingdom. When man is born, his sensory impressions are like those of a newborn puppy. His childhood takes him through all the metamorphoses of human history. At two, he sees with the eyes of a Papuan, at four, with those of an ancient Teuton, at six, with those of Socrates, at eight, with those of Voltaire.

After offering similar comments on color theory, tattoos, and the erotic nature of art, Loos makes his point:

I have made the following discovery and I pass it on to the world: *The evolution of culture is synonymous with the removal of ornament from utilitarian objects* (emphasis original).⁴⁰

The rest of Loos's essay issues similar decrees even as it overreaches. But into the rhetorical space opened up by this performative style, Loos advances a fairly sophisticated theory of culture—though one admittedly riddled with the cultural biases identified by Schwarzer and Morton. With respect to the crafts, trades, and building, Loos's writing advocates a combination of a selective historical consciousness with a sensitivity to present circumstances, which, together, form the cornerstone of his program for Viennese cultural modernization. Influenced by Nietzsche, this program called, on the one hand, for the retention of the best that the ancients had achieved in their time; on the other hand, it called for the use of "new" practices made available by contemporary technological innovations. Truly modern practices, in Loos's view, were continuous with the "spirit" of the modern practices of past eras which had understood themselves as modern.⁴¹

As observed at the beginning of this article, Stanford Anderson has argued that Loos's achievement consisted of developing a critical awareness of how competing conventions and prac-

38 Colomina, "On Adolf Loos and Josef Hoffman: Architecture in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction" in Max Risselada, ed., *Raumplan Versus Plan Libre* (New York: Rizzoli, 1988), 74.

39 Loos's "Ornament and Crime," in which his earlier arguments reach a kind of rhetorical crescendo, is the best example of this practice. Quoted in Ulrich Conrads, *Programs and Manifestoes on 20th-Century Architecture* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1970), 19–20.

40 Loos in Conrads, 19–20.

41 Loos's debts and similarities to Nietzschean "historical perspectivism" are developed in Taisto H. Makela, "Modernity and the Historical Perspectivism of Nietzsche and Loos," *Journal of Architectural Education* 44: 3 (May 1991): 138–43. For a brief discussion of other German-speaking architects' reception of Nietzsche, see Steven E. Aschheim, *The Nietzsche Legacy in Germany, 1890–1990* (Berkeley: UC Press, 1992), 33–4, 48; and also Fritz Neumeyer, *The Artless Word: Mies van der Rohe on the Building Art*, trans. by Mark Jarzombek (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1992), 53–61, 87–93.

tice could constructively criticize one another.⁴² Loos's writings, I would add, dismantle and reconstitute the reader's understanding within a dense narrative of aphorisms, hyperbole, and theatrical gestures. This writing style represents a radical abandonment of usual notions of narrative time. In so doing, this narrative structure bears some resemblance to Loos's program for simultaneous awareness of past and present in actual social practice. These rhetorical effects also could be said to embody elements of the same "highly differentiated subjectivity" which theorist K. Michael Hays points out has material analogues for Loos in the "insuperable partitions between languages of form." How this subjectivity translates into the everyday lives and practices of architects, designers, or users of buildings, however, is an issue that theorists including Hays still have to explain.⁴³

The success of Loos's autonomous narrative logic, which I am suggesting embodied his theory of culture in form and content, derives in large part from the architect's participation in the Viennese milieu of theatricality. The leaders in this milieu formed a constellation of actors who assumed self-conscious roles for the express reason, it was felt, that dramatic personae could mount more effective attacks on Viennese culture. Thus, the wandering aphorist-poet and feuilletonist Peter Altenberg, one of Loos's closest friends, followed the motto "To live artistically," adapted from Nietzsche's *The Gay Science*. Altenberg's reputation and work has led the historian William Johnston to characterize the poet's café behavior, and live and written performances, as a "walking kaleidoscope of worldviews."⁴⁴ Karl Kraus, a complex figure who actually denigrated the feuilleton for its violation of his language-based ethics,⁴⁵ nevertheless admitted to writing his aphoristic journal, *Die Fackel*, "as an actor" whose utter conviction in the act of performing was meant to convert his masked persona into a "real identity."⁴⁶

Adolf Loos clearly was part of this theatrical yet peculiarly sensitive Viennese culture. This was a culture in which, as William Johnston writes, "Experts at dissimulation, such as (Hermann) Bahr and (Peter) Altenberg, professed to find no fixity beneath a flux of sensations, while positivists, like (Sigmund) Freud and (Ernst) Mach, ferreted out natural laws behind a welter of detail."⁴⁷ Into this matrix can be added the perspectivism of Adolf Loos, whose views were meant to "inoculate" his students of architecture against the mindless copying of classicism. Thus, to Loos, "The present constructs itself on the past just as the past constructed itself on the preceding past. It has never been another way—nor will it ever be any other way."⁴⁸

To conclude, Carl Schorske's classic work on *fin-de-siècle* Vienna characterizes this city as an "infinite whirl of innovation" in which modern ideas appeared against the background of a fading Habsburg Empire.⁴⁹ Yet many Viennese innovations contained significant continuities with the past, for example, in the debt that

42 Anderson, "Critical Conventionalism: The History of Architecture," *Midgard: Journal of Architectural Theory and Criticism* 1:1 (1990): 47.

43 K. Michael Hays, *Modernism and the Posthumanist Subject*, 62.

44 Edward Timms, *Karl Kraus: Apocalyptic Satirist*, 194. Johnston, *The Austrian Mind*, 123. For an in-depth documentary study of Altenberg, see Andrew Barker and Leo Lensing, *Peter Altenberg: Rezept die Welt zu Sehen* (Wien: Braumüller, 1995).

45 Johnston, *The Austrian Mind*, 122.

46 Edward Timms notes how much the aestheticized, conscious self-fashioning of Altenberg, Kraus, and (through Kraus) Loos owed to Oscar Wilde and Friedrich Nietzsche. Significantly for Loos's own crusade at the time, Kraus reprinted such Nietzschean aphorisms in a 1908 issue of *Die Fackel* in the definition of the artist as "a person for whom form is coextensive with content." This discussion of theatricality has benefited greatly from the analysis of Timms, 188–195.

47 Johnston, *The Austrian Mind*, 397.

48 Adolf Loos, "Meine Bauschule" (1913), in *Sämtliche Schriften*: 323.

49 Schorske, *Fin-de-Siècle Vienna*, xix.

aphorisms owe to the romantic tradition of what is known as the literary "fragment." One prominent theory of late eighteenth-century German romanticism goes so far as to maintain that:

The motif of the unification of the Ancient and Modern, as it appears so often in the fragments, always refers to the necessity of bringing about a rebirth of ancient naïveté according to modern poetry.⁵⁰

A critical modern awareness is evident here in these eighteenth-century roots of the German-speaking world's aphoristic style, containing a conception of historical simultaneity and perspective that resurfaces through figures such as Nietzsche to influence the literature of Kraus and the writings, and even the book titles, of Adolf Loos. Following a century of modernization and fragmentation in the Habsburg Empire of the nineteenth century, Adolf Loos re-tapped these romantic roots at the opening of the twentieth century. His theory of modern culture, in fact, is nicely encapsulated by historian Jonathan Crary's characterization of the nineteenth century as a whole. He writes: "The destructive dynamism of modernization [in the nineteenth century] was also a condition for a vision that would resist its effects, a revivifying perception of the present caught up in its own historical afterimages."⁵¹ Bounded as he was by his particular historical and cultural context, the figure of Adolf Loos reminds us that, in our own era, among the most arresting visions of modernity are those that transfigure the fragmentation of the present into an intelligible pattern, a pattern somehow continuous with a meaningful past.

50 Philippe Lacoue-Labarthe and Jean-Luc Nancy, *The Literary Absolute: The Theory of Literature in German Romanticism*, trans. by Philip Barnard and Cheryl Lester (Albany: SUNY Press, 1988), 49.

51 Jonathan Crary, *Techniques of the Observer: On Vision and Modernity in the Nineteenth Century* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1990), 21.