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Hélène Furján

^a Department of Architecture and Urban Design, UCLA, Los Angeles, California, USA

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Dressing down: Adolf Loos and the politics of ornament

Hélène Furján

*Department of Architecture and Urban Design,
UCLA, Los Angeles, California, USA*

This paper begins to suggest what might happen to ornament under the Modernist reign of abstraction and rationality. Rather than accepting the usual understanding of ornament as a category outside of modernist aesthetics, rejected by its criticism, it suggests that within the development of Modernism (and a 'pre-Modernist' position to which Loos would belong), ornament was a much more complicated and knotty question. The ideological motivations for a reform of the role of ornament, played out by Loos through clothing and objects of everyday use as well as architecture, and appropriated by Le Corbusier, had a significant effect on the history of architecture.

Introduction

The work of Adolf Loos, particularly his writings, has received considerable attention in recent years. Much of this scholarship has focused on the relations of fashion, dress, sexuality and gender to architecture in Loos' work.¹ In some readings, which take heed of his close relationship with Karl Kraus, Loos has become the prophet of silence, performing a poetic purging of historicist nostalgia and decorative excess that heralds a modernism stripped of ornamental figure and abstracted to a rational purity. Others have attempted to expose the repression of ornament, decoration and fashion within Modernist discourse (and the 'returns' of such repressions), placing Loos within that history.² But Loos' position on the question of ornament remains more complicated than the usual interpretations of Loos' well-known essay 'Ornament and Crime' would have us believe: an argument connecting excessive ornament to the degeneracy of criminal or primitive body decoration, suggesting the advancement of civilisation is equivalent to the increasing reduction of ornament. It is to Le

Corbusier and his French colleagues that this (mis)reading of Loos' writing on ornament as a call for its eradication can be traced.

If Loos demanded a suppression of fashion, both sartorially and architecturally, it was not in relation to fashion in general so much as a very particular notion of fashion. Loos' writings, then, must be considered in relation to their wider culture and their ideological imperatives. My project here is to extend the debate on Loos and ornament in a particular direction, focusing on Loos' entanglements with the Wiener Secession and Werkstätte to hypothesise that Loos' position may have been motivated not only towards mounting an opposition to competitors within the discipline, but to advance a socio-political ideal.

Dress and dressing

Loos' writings on ornament focused around a critique of contemporary Viennese architects and artists who had, like him, begun a process of abstracting and re-figuring the classical language they had received. This critique targeted the

members of the Wiener Secession, Otto Wagner, Josef Olbrich and Josef Hoffmann especially, who at the beginning of the twentieth century borrowed from Jugendstil to create an anti-classical, and therefore anti-historical, ornamental language.³ Loos was briefly linked with the Secession, sharing its rejection of appropriations of historical ornament, but he quickly moved against its members' art nouveau tastes and dependence on style. Despite their formal and technical innovations, which Loos recognised, he remained resolutely opposed to their extension of style to every aspect of modern life. They had not in the end been able to criticise style itself, as he demanded, but had simply abandoned one style (historicist and classical) for another ('modern' and organic). Their buildings were thus for him over-embellished, the gilt, silvering, patinas, geometric patterns and vegetal growths problematic.

Accusing them of an aesthetics of excess, Loos called instead for an architecture of restraint. Loos' Café Museum designed in 1899, which he referred to as the Café Nihilismus, demonstrated his point. Located close by the Secession building, it has been described as a lesson in the 'renunciation of ornament'.⁴ The whitewashed façade was decorated solely with the lettering of the café's name, while the interior was similarly restrained, with low timber panelling and Thonet furniture.⁵ Loos' project for the Michaelerplatz, the 'Looshaus' of 1909–11, was a similar effort in understatement. But the reduced façade remained incomprehensible to the public, receiving much condemnation. To them, it no longer presented a public face, its formal simplicity compared in a popular cartoon to a drain cover.

Divested of its necessary ornamental embellishments, it appeared undressed – it was as if it had gone out into the streets in its underwear, gown, jewelry, gloves, feathers, makeup left behind. The furor that such an impropriety caused was only ameliorated by Loos' addition of bronze window boxes containing flowers to some of the windows.

Plain though it was, the façade was not without decoration: the base of the building containing a department store was clad in marble, and the columns which defined the main entrance were purely ornamental, with no load-bearing capacity. The interiors were even richer, employing mirrors, expensive marble and wood veneers. Loos' urban houses were to follow a similar model: white-washed mute volumes on the exterior, their interiors were embellished with veneered and reflective surfaces. Like the marble on the façade of the Looshaus, the interior decorativeness that avoided friezes, cornices, or mouldings, was restricted instead to materiality. In fact, Loos had not really done away with ornament, it had simply re-figured itself otherwise. The question here was thus not one of decorativeness, but of ornament and its role in the elaboration of 'style'. Loosian ornament was no longer the attached supplement of classical ornament, or the figural additions of the Secessionists, an ornament applied to the surfaces of a building. It was instead an ornament that could no longer be detached from the surface it was to adorn: it had *become* the surface.

For Loos, the question of the surface was a principle of *dressing*. The double meaning is significant: the German term *Bekleidung* that Loos took from Gottfried Semper constructed a relationship

between clothing and architecture (dress and dressing), and in Loos' writings the critiques of ornament and fashion were linked. Both over-ornamented buildings and the ostentatious fashions of Viennese society came under fire. This conceptual relationship was mobilised by Loos to construct what was essentially an ideological argument about fashion, gender, economics, ornament, culture, nationhood and taste. This involved a critique of style – the classical language inherited from the nineteenth century and the *Jugendstil* creations of the twentieth. It offered a comment on luxury and a claim for a class distinction (one clearly articulated in Georg Simmel's sociological analysis of fashion⁶) by opposing the conspicuous display of wealth of the *nouveau-riche* bourgeoisie with an architecture and dress borrowed from the understated, elegant simplicity of the English gentleman. It presented an economic argument that claimed that the worker, whether shoe maker or cabinet maker, would earn more if paid the same amount for work that left off ornament as that which retained it due to the reduced labour required. For Loos, the Secession's utilisation of *Jugendstil* motifs placed them on the wrong side every time.⁷

The tyranny of style

Walter Benjamin, in his analysis of the bourgeois interior, also criticised *Jugendstil* for its attempt to dissolve all the elements of architecture – functional, cultural and so on – into pure style.⁸ Henri van de Velde was particularly criticised for using style in domestic architecture to translate personality into design: 'With van de Velde, the house becomes the plastic expression of personality.

Ornament is to this house what the signature is to painting'.⁹ Benjamin cites van de Velde himself as evidence: 'The art of the future will be more personal than what has come before. At no other time has man's passion for self-knowledge been so strong as it is today, and the place where he can best fulfil and transform his individuality is the house.'¹⁰

For Benjamin, this house was no longer a home but a fictional space for the elaboration and display of the 'self': 'The fictional framework for the individual's life is constituted in the private home. It is thus that the *Master Builder* takes the measure of *Jugendstil*'. The submission to fashion rather than historical or cultural specificity ensured that this display took the form of 'style', the institutionalising of a kind of advertising for identity, status, and class that utilised changing trends to protect its constituency. Architecture was thus utilised to construct representations – Benjamin's 'fantasy landscapes' – couched in a language of luxury that magnified and reassured identity. With *Jugendstil*, it was no longer necessary to appropriate historical images of luxury and opulence. An entirely *contemporary* style had been developed which fulfilled the same representational function, and the same need for an idealised world.¹¹

The Austrian liberal-intellectual upper-middle class found itself in a difficult position by the end of the nineteenth century, one that differed from those of England or other European nations, its success the result of the debilitating foreign defeats of the aristocratic order, with whom they continued to have to share power. Its political power never strong, its socio-cultural power remained equally

weak, preventing it from asserting itself as a definitive social group and leaving its identity that of an outsider. Having failed fully to divest the aristocracy of power, or to achieve a monopoly themselves, the bourgeoisie continued to attempt to assimilate with it. But courtly culture remained far removed from the rational, legalistic and commercial cultural base of the bourgeoisie, and rarely admitted outsiders. If it could not enter the aristocracy the bourgeoisie could emulate it, on aesthetic and cultural grounds. The process was thus not an assimilation into the aristocracy as such, but into aristocratic *culture*.¹²

For Benjamin, the vegetal nature of Jugendstil ornamental motifs signalled a sublimation of the question of social dominance into a dominance over nature, an easier victory and one, it could be surmised, that would encounter less hostility.¹³ It was thus through the use of ornament, here operating allegorically, that the movement hoped a representation of economic and social power could be realised, and it is in these terms that Benjamin connects Loos to Jugendstil, as its critic. Jugendstil's response to new processes of technological reproduction, for Benjamin, was repression: 'And so the confrontation with technology that lies hidden within it was all the more aggressive. Its recourse to technological motifs arises from the effort to sterilise them ornamentally. (It was this . . . that gave Adolf Loos's struggle against ornament its salient political significance.)'¹⁴

Jugendstil, for Benjamin, had lost the potential for art as a conduit for political expression, reducing culture to a neutral naturalised aesthetics. Its attempt to displace an awareness of its socio-political status onto a relation to nature was an

escapism similar to that embraced by the Viennese bourgeoisie: 'By the end of the century, the function of art for Viennese middle-class society had altered, and in this change politics played a crucial part. If the Viennese burghers had begun by supporting the temple of art as a surrogate form of assimilation into the aristocracy, they ended by finding in it an escape, a refuge from the unpleasant world of increasingly threatening political reality.'¹⁵

Benjamin's critique shares much in common with Loos' writings.¹⁶ Loos' critique of the Secession revolved around a concern that art was being 'applied' to things outside of its sphere – particularly to buildings and to objects of everyday use. His argument called for a distinction between art and the design of functional or practical things that, for him, had different requirements and spheres of activity, and as such could not, or should not, be confused. In his 1908 essay, 'Cultural Degeneration', he wrote 'the modern individual considers mixing art with objects of everyday use as the greatest humiliation possible.'¹⁷ In 1910, in the essay 'Architecture,' the house became his example of an object outside the realm of art:

A house should appeal to everybody, as distinct from works of art which do not have to appeal to anyone . . . Does the house therefore have nothing to do with art, and should architecture not be classified under the arts? This is so. Only a very small part of architecture belongs to art: the tomb and the monument. Everything else, everything which serves a purpose should be excluded from the realms of art . . . Only when the deceptive slogan 'applied art' has disappeared from popular

parlance, only then will we have the architecture of our times.¹⁸

In his earlier essay, 'The Poor Little Rich Man', originally published in 1900 and a thinly disguised critique of the Secession (Hoffmann in particular), Loos attacked the architect-as-artist, who designed not just a house for his client but every aspect of his life there, including his clothes, a triumph of stylisation matching that seen by Benjamin in Jugendstil more generally.¹⁹ This house was a 'psychological' work, a representation of the client's individuality and a mark of their distinction: 'the individuality of the owner was expressed in every ornament, every form, every nail.' But it was *not* an expression of the client's identity, and the architect, who prevented the inhabitants from expressing that individuality themselves, had created an impossible stylistic *regime*: nothing could be added to the house, changed, or worn within it, without conforming to the architect's original scheme.²⁰

In 1898, in 'Interiors in the Rotunda', Loos had put forward the same argument in clearer terms. He criticised 'the emptiness, the puffed-up posturing, the strangeness and disharmony of our stylish homes,' stating that they 'tyrannised [their] poor inhabitants':

People are not comfortable in these rooms, and the rooms are not suitable for people. And how could they be . . . And even if the occupant of these rooms has paid for them a hundred times over, they are still not his rooms. They remain forever the spiritual possession of the person who has conceived them.

In attempting to bring art into the sphere of interior design, the architect had transformed the house

into a museum; it was no longer a space that could be *lived* in as such: 'They lacked any relation to the person who occupied them; . . . they lacked intimacy'.²¹ As Loos wrote in 'Regarding Economy,' these interiors were designed 'not so that people can live in them well, but so that they look good.'²²

In introducing a subjective aspect to design (Loos' 'psychological work'), these architects had not only imposed on the inhabitants a representation of identity that left no place for the inhabitants themselves, but had imposed a cult of personality in which the marks of their own hand, the traces and authorisations of their own personalities, dominated. For Loos, movable furniture, wallpaper, pictures, and other objects that made up the decoration of the interior should be the preserve of the inhabitant: the inhabitant had to create a personalised space, a *home* for themselves. The house should be comfortable and secure; it must 'pulse' with the 'magic of the individual and the personal'. This was a *living* notion of identity, one different from the *representation* of identity, the 'image' of it created through the 'styling' of the interior by the architect: 'The answer is very simple: everyone should be his own decorator'. In these terms, the architect can only provide a casing in which the inhabitant can create their own dwelling place.²³

Dressing against style

Loos extended his criticism of 'applied art' to the Werkbund, accusing them in 'Cultural Degeneration' in 1908 (the only essay to mention Hoffmann by name) of operating as artists rather than craftsmen, thereby interfering in a design process that industry was itself capable of undertaking.²⁴

Loos attacked the Werkbund, both in Vienna (the *Weiner Werkstätte*) and in Germany, perhaps more energetically than the Secession, his critique revolving around the notion of 'applied art.' Loos's critique was aimed at Hoffmann as the Viennese representative of the Werkbund, and Hermann Muthesius, who had laid out the aims of the Werkbund.

Acknowledging that Hoffmann had given up much of the florid art nouveau tendencies of his earlier work, Loos rejected his continued recourse to ornament.²⁵ His opposition also lay with the interference of the artist in the process of the design of everyday things (furniture, clothes, cigarette cases), with the presumption that the artist rather than the craftsman could produce the 'style of the times' the Werkbund had nonetheless largely achieved. Industrialised methods had begun to erode the status of the craftsman as early as the eighteenth century. In England, for example, Wedgwood already employed designers in the production of tableware. Production was a highly atomised process: each step was undertaken by different workers; responsibility for design thus already removed from the 'craftsman' who threw or decorated the wares. Realising this, Loos aimed to return to industrial production something of the artisanal quality that had been lost.

But Loos' critique was in the end equally personal. He disliked the objects designed by Hoffmann for the *Werkstätte*, and implied in general that they would not be able to design simple, practical things because of their 'foppishness', evident in their bad and over-decorated suits that Loos himself (he claimed) had to correct by directing

them to a good tailor. This 'foppishness' was for him an indicator of their indebtedness to the notion of 'Style', the tyranny of fashion or arbitrary aesthetic rules over Loos' 'style of the times'. 'Ornament and Crime,' first given as a lecture in 1910, continued to criticise these promoters of the 'applied arts' for producing not plain, modern objects but 'tortured, laboriously extracted and pathological' modern ornament.²⁶

But the Werkbund (which in its Viennese form was begun by members of the Secession) had by this time rejected the excessive ornamentation of *Jugendstil* in the same terms, attacking van de Velde in particular for promoting a notion of the designer as individualised artist, and for producing elite, luxury items for a wealthy market. This rejection, as Mark Jarzombek has pointed out, was explicitly made in class terms in Germany at least – an upper-middle-class ideological project of economic and aesthetic control. The design of everyday things was thus a means of securing 'a coherent visual identity' in response to notions of German identity developed through other discourses (antiquarian, socialist or aristocratic).²⁷

Van de Velde's was an aristocratic rather than bourgeois allegiance, an elevation of the artist rather than a collaboration within a 'tradition' of industrial design, the production of expensive and ornamental objects rather than simple but carefully designed utilitarian products. This was not in itself a rejection of a tradition of bourgeois attempts to legitimate and express their wealth and social status through display. But it was a rejection of the imitation of aristocratic modes of display (luxury and opulence). For the writers associated with the

Werkbund, the haute bourgeoisie had to 'distinguish' themselves from the aristocracy, and to do so they required an aesthetics that spoke that distinction.

It is in these terms that their use of England as a model may make sense (a reference Loos also makes repeated use of). It was there that the upper middle classes had separated themselves from the aristocracy in representational terms, a distinction most successfully exhibited not in architecture but in dress. The dark, plain suit was established in nineteenth-century England as a mark of the gentleman who was not aristocratic: the professional and businessman of the upper middle classes. Initiated by the 'dandy' Beau Brummel at the beginning of the nineteenth century, this simplified attire was a precise contrast to the aristocracy. It was elegant in contrast to opulent, based on notions of cut and quality of cloth rather than on ornament and luxurious fabrics, with sober colours opposed to bright and ostentatious ones. Brummel was a gentleman who moved in courtly circles but he was *not* aristocratic (his father was a civil servant, his grandfather had been in trade). The image he presented, therefore, 'had to transcend aristocratic taste, and thereby class distinction.'²⁸ Through his dress, he made clear his stake on gentlemanly culture, expressing a right to be considered civilised and a right to a taste that could represent wealth and status, while also expressing his distance precisely from the aristocracy.²⁹

Almost a century later, Loos seemed to be making the same kind of assertion: he was no aristocrat either (his father was a Moravian stone-cutter and sculptor), yet he called for gentlemanly attitudes

and dress – particularly to the understated suit. For Loos, as he writes in 'Men's Fashion,' to be well dressed is 'a question of being dressed in such a way that one stands out the least . . . In good society, to be conspicuous is bad manners.'³⁰ He would have approved of the connotations that this suit evoked for the English middle-class: it spoke not only of gentlemanly character (implying cultivation, civilised behaviour and honourable conduct), but also of characteristics important to successful, trustworthy professionals or businessmen – soberness, morality, rationality, and so on.³¹ That such men were gentlemen suggests that the reader Loos preaches to in 'Ornament and Crime' is less likely to have been a member of the Viennese aristocracy than a cultivated, intellectual gentleman like himself: that is, upper middle class.

If the dandy's clothes of the early nineteenth century remained a form of display without their 'plumage',³² Loos' call for the modern man to dress so that he draws 'least attention' to himself and to 'use his clothes like a mask' aligns itself with the ways in which the plain suit operated as a very particular form of distinction.³³ Distinction thus still existed but it was a distinction that had been internalised, speaking only to those *within* the class of gentleman. The late nineteenth-century detective, who himself wore a dark suit, specialised in reading those traces. Arthur Conan Doyle's Sherlock Holmes, for instance, was able to read the traces of the upper middle classes through a complex knowledge of apparently useless information (train timetables, and so on) and could deduce the tailor of a suit merely from the cut, thereby tracing the identity of its wearer. For Holmes, the suit in these terms was

not undifferentiated, and therefore did not guarantee anonymity in the crowd.

Loos' interest in the question of differentiation was derived from Gottfried Semper's 'law of dressing' in which the dressing is not only differentiated from what it conceals, but ensures the secrecy of what this difference is. The suit as a masking for the body is a protective casing that allows the individual to cover up the actual marks of difference under the *sign* of differentiation. In these terms, Loos' project remains more closely tied to the Werkbund than he would have admitted. The members of the Secession already wore the suit he advocated: in a photograph of the members of the Secession taken in 1902, they are almost uniformly dressed in black suits, white shirts and black neckties, not the Scottish plaid or false ties Loos accuses them of wearing in 'Cultural Degeneracy'. Loos, in comparison to their modern black attire, must have seemed 'foppish' in the striped trousers and top hat he described himself wearing a year later in 'How Should One Dress?'.³⁴ Despite seeing himself in that text as an authority on modern dress, next to the Secessionists, he would have seemed conspicuously old-fashioned.

Nevertheless, Loos' criticism of ornament was a question of taste that was neither neutral nor merely a question of aesthetics.³⁵ It was ideologically mobilised, both an opposition to the competition in the design world that the Secession and later Werkstätte would have constituted for him and, more particularly, a class-specific critique that focused on a representational use of luxury, ostentatious finery, and historicist ornament. Rejecting bourgeois culture's imitation of aristocratic and

courtly aesthetics as a representational system within which to display class identity, Loos attempted to re-direct that culture towards a more useful form of self-representation.³⁶

But if the Secession also rejected the representational ornaments that the upper middle classes had buried themselves in, it remained bound to ornament (despite its own unornamented modern clothing), as representation, in its design work. Stripping off the historicist screen, they had merely turned to a vernal ornamental language that symbolised rebellion through an image of re-birth and regeneration. They also continued to rely on luxury as a marker of class distinction. Despite involvement in dress reform, van de Velde and Hoffmann, for instance, produced dresses as one-off commissions that, although 'freer', were made of luxurious fabric, often lavishly embroidered, and often designed to match the interior décor of the clients, much as Loos had claimed in 'The Poor Little Rich Man'.³⁷

Ornament as ideology

Loos' critique of ornament and applied art was given a nationalist twist in 'Ornament and Crime'. This took into account the importance of Vienna, as the political, economic, social and cultural centre of the upper middle class, as a locus for its self-imaging activities, a 'visual expression for the values' of that class.³⁸ As Schorske notes:

The first phase of the assimilation to aristocratic culture was purely external, almost mimetic. The new Vienna built by the ascendant bourgeoisie of the [1860s] illustrates it in stone. The liberal rulers, in an urban reconstruction which dwarfed that of

Napoleon III's Paris, tried to design their way into a history, a pedigree, with grandiose buildings inspired by a Gothic, Renaissance, or Baroque past that was not their own.

This building activity centred on the Ringstrasse, a public, commercial and residential development that included all the significant public institutions of the new regime. It was in these terms that the Ringstrasse was constructed; and it was in similar terms that it was to be criticised, not least by Loos.³⁹

Continuity with Austrian architectural tradition was to be provided for Loos by rejecting certain examples, particularly ones embedded in international styles of empire or aristocratic might. Greek, Roman and Renaissance architecture, as they were appropriated in the buildings of the Ringstrasse, were rejected in favour of a modest burgher style historically associated with the middle classes. As David Leatherbarrow points out, Loos' defence of his controversial building for the Michaelerplatz made reference to this building type as its source, arguing that it was truer to Austrian architectural tradition than the classical buildings it was being asked to fit in with.⁴⁰ The point, as with the understated suit, was thus again to create an aesthetic arena in which the upper middle class could indicate its own cultivation without recourse to imitation, a cultivation that was 'gentrified' but *not* aristocratic.⁴¹ At stake for Loos was a kind of repetition that was not mimetic, a repetition of a tradition that introduced a certain difference (differentiation, perhaps) that could allow architecture to remain relevant to its cultural context.

In 'Ornament and Crime' ornament was not just a cultural but also an economic problem, 'a crime

against the national economy.' It is in these terms that his claims for criminality and degeneracy are made, a call to reform of production to make it more efficient and therefore profitable, for the worker, the producer and the consumer: 'In a highly productive nation ornament is no longer a natural product, and therefore represents backwardness and even a degenerative tendency.'⁴² For Loos, ornament wasted material, money and labour, and thus contributed to Austria's economic impoverishment, ensuring production could not become internationally competitive: 'Woe betide the nation that remains behind in its cultural development. The English become richer and we become poorer.'⁴³ By remaining tied to historical ornament, Austria inhabited its own 'rate of cultural development,' the impact on the economy matched by an impact on culture Loos deemed 'criminal'.⁴⁴ For Loos, this was a national responsibility: 'The state, whose duty it is to impede people in their cultural development, took over the question of development and re-adoption of ornament and made it its own . . . The epidemic of ornament is recognised by the state and subsidised by government money.'⁴⁵

But it remained the repression of cultural specificity practised by architects associated with the Secession that received the most negative appraisal. Both van de Velde and Olbrich stood accused of producing an ornament that was no longer an expression of Austrian culture:

As ornament is no longer organically related to our culture, it is also no longer the expression of our culture. The ornament that is produced today bears no relation to us, or to any other human or

the world at large. What happened to Otto Eckmann's ornaments, and those of van de Velde? . . . The modern producer of ornament is . . . left behind or a pathological phenomenon. He disowns his own products after only three years.⁴⁶ Loos' antagonism to the Secessionists was such that even a revision of their position away from art nouveau ornamentality could be turned against them, here a sign of their fickle fashionability.

The history of ornament, for Loos a slow development firmly imbedded in culture, collapses in the face of such forced attempts to recreate its languages. Alongside the historicist ornament of the Ringstrasse, van de Velde or Olbrich's ornamental style had no cultural specificity, and it is through this recognition that Loos, marshalling his critique of 'applied art,' was able to claim that ornament, now the province of industrial production rather than cultural production, had been compromised. In summary, Loos writes: 'Ornament can no longer be borne by someone who exists at our level of culture . . . The lack of ornament is a sign of *intellectual* power.' The ornamental language they invented was not only rendered out of date by their work, the concept of ornament itself was.

For Loos, the Secession had made the wrong move (the shift of members to the tenets of the Werkbund not for Loos an amelioration): the answer to the problem of architecture or design overloaded with historical references was not simply to replace that ornament with a new, 'modern' vocabulary.⁴⁷ Nor was it a rejection of design history as such. It was instead a demand that both architecture and design be understood in

terms of an aesthetic tradition that could speak the history of the nation, represented through middle-class culture. The task was thus to maintain that sense of nation, but to clarify it, stripping away any excess that departed from this aim.⁴⁸ It was through this 'intellectual power' that Loos makes a direct appeal to the haute bourgeoisie, an appeal that finds its parallel in the call for the understated, plain suit.

Legacies

Loos was not alone in his pursuit of an architecture able to represent a national identity based on the abstraction of historical forms, as we have seen. In the early twentieth century, architects in France, Germany, and Italy were all attempting to satisfy the two goals of a modern architecture and a national identity, and all attempted to achieve this through abstraction.⁴⁹ In Le Corbusier's earlier work and writings, for example, as in that of the early Werkbund and other European nations simultaneously, a nationalistic role for design is discernible. These debates all seem to call for an upper-middle-class notion of style, one stripped of its historicist and aristocratic excess (ornament) and thus abstracted, but one still retaining an allegiance to 'tradition' (understood as an allegiance to nation).

In France, however, the publication of Loos' 'Ornament and Crime' in 1912 and 1913 was to be used to influence a drive towards an elimination of ornament more extreme than he had himself been advocating, the essay utilised as a manifesto for the 'total suppression of ornament'.⁵⁰ Le Corbusier, whose 'L'Architecture et le style moderne' appeared

alongside Loos' essay in *Les Cahiers d'aujourd'hui*, said of the latter essay: 'Loos crystallised, in solid form, vague impressions, feelings that are nascent or already well developed but which are hardly ever acknowledged at this time when the fury of "decorative art," the folly of the *Beautiful*, overwhelms and stupefies the simple, instinctive, necessary, and only true sentiment of the *Good*.'⁵¹ Le Corbusier had been involved in a French attempt to develop a national style through abstracted historical form, largely in opposition to German competition in the realm of the decorative arts. But after reading Loos' essay, he was able, as Nancy Troy points out, to recuperate 'the classical tradition without recourse to specific forms of the past' through an abstraction that removed ornament and therefore nationalist (that is, historical) specificity. Le Corbusier's reading thus took him away from an abstracted architecture that remained rooted in a cultural tradition, and towards 'an international, or non-national, style.'⁵²

Corbusier's was a misreading of Loos' work. As Loos himself pointed out in 'Ornament and Education' in 1924 (a direct response to the use of his essay in France), the elimination of ornament must occur through 'the passage of time' (it is through this 'historical' elimination that it can be re-born). Its active suppression was therefore as problematic for him as the Secessionists' active maintenance of ornament. While Loos might admit abstraction, it remained tied to a notion of cultural tradition, to a local politics that did not reject ornament so much as its submission to 'style' – precisely the kind of uprooted style that Corbusier was to champion.

Nevertheless, Loos' battles remained with the manifestation of the notion of a 'modern' style in the

development of ornamental motifs. In his own work, ornament had not been suppressed, but it had been sublimated, abstracted into the 'quality' linked to the gentlemanly suit. It seems probable that Le Corbusier took from Loos the interest in the surface that shifted the question from ornament as application to an ornamental understanding of the surface itself (the supplement integral to the structuring of that surface). Picking up on the emphasis on quality over luxury that found its expression in the fine grain of material and the precision of workmanship, ornament and material were understood *together*.

In Loos, this took the form of a decorativeness inherent in the materials used as cladding, principally the grains of marble or timber veneers. Luxury – the application of gilt, appliqué or filigree (Loos' 'gold buttons') – as an ornamental language tied to the aristocracy, and hence rejected by Loos as ostentation, was replaced by the quality of detailing and material in the same terms as the understated suit of the English bourgeoisie.⁵³ In Corbusier, ornament, material and even structure were brought together in the ornamental use of formwork, for instance, in which the *process* of generating structure and material was not only legible in itself, but written as ornamental, as the functioning of the surface. In giving up a nationalist discourse and turning to an International Modernism, Le Corbusier allowed ornament to return – as colour and texture. If the decorativeness of the surface was taken back to an *applied* effect, ornamental detail was not applied onto the surface but *into* it: ornament as inscription.⁵⁴

For Semper, through his theory of *Bekleidung* or dressing, the surface was always representational.

In Loos, particularly through the legacy of the French readings of 'Ornament and Crime', that surface seems to have been stripped of the elements that would operate as explicit signifiers, reduced to what Massimo Cacciari would call a mute surface.⁵⁵ However, this masks the ways in which that reduced surface was mobilised within the ideological, and even political, debates within which Loos situated himself. For Loos, such a mute surface was still able to operate in cultural terms. But a new ornament that spoke of modern culture could not be *designed*, by artists or architects; it could only *emerge*, over the course of history. If, in the meantime, a plain mode of dressing was required, that dressing nonetheless bore the marks of differentiation. The removal of ornament appeared to legitimate an 'understated' position that it in reality belied.

Notes and references

1. Jules Lubbock, Anthony Vidler, Massimo Cacciari, Beatriz Colomina, Mary McLeod, Mark Wigley and Andrew Benjamin have all considered fashion and clothing in an attempt to explain both Loos' architecture and his writings. Much of the work on ornament and fashion in Loos has been framed either around theories of the modern city, referring to the writings of Baudelaire, Simmel, Kracauer and Benjamin; or around Semper and Riegl, following Loos' references to Semper's theory of cladding as clothing. My contribution here must acknowledge a debt to Colomina, whose work ignited my interest in the subject many years ago.
2. Writing at a moment when architecture has held a fascination with fashion, Mark Wigley has demonstrated Loos' involvement in the suppression of a connection between fashion and architecture that was to haunt Modernism. See Mark Wigley, *White Walls, Designer Dresses: The Fashioning of Modern Architecture* (Cambridge, Mass., MIT Press, 1995).
3. His relationship to Hoffmann in particular, who was also a member of the German Werkbund and founder of the related Weiner Werkstätte, remained complex – they moved in and out of accord, and his criticisms of Hoffmann's work were not always justified. See Eduard Sekler, *Josef Hoffmann: The Architectural Work* (Princeton, Princeton University Press, 1985). Hoffmann wrote, in a letter dated March 1933: 'Adolf Loos, who must be considered the model for some methods of today's actions, did not choose to understand the essence of our intention. Yet he was in some respects a fellow traveller in a different form. He was at least original in his method, although he did not shrink from imputing what was untrue and false to others, and to exploit it for his perhaps pathological ambition' (Sekler, *Josef Hoffmann*, p. 498). Otto Wagner was later to develop a stylised or 'modern' form of classicism that simplified classical ornament into more purely geometrical forms and brought him closer to Loos' position.
4. See Benedetto Gravagnuolo, *Adolf Loos, Theory and Works*, trans. C.H. Evans (New York, Rizzoli, 1982).
5. In 'Cultural Degeneration' he specifically contrasted this project with Hoffmann's contemporaneous retail interior for the Apollo Candle Factory. See Adolf Loos, 'Cultural Degeneration', published in *The Architecture of Adolf Loos*, ed. Yehuda Safran and Wilfred Wang (Exhibition Catalogue, Arts Council of Great Britain, 1985), p. 99.
6. See Georg Simmel, 'Fashion,' in *On Individuality and Social Forms* (Chicago, University of Chicago Press, 1971), pp. 294–323.
7. Victor Horta's Art Nouveau had paved the way for Jugendstil in Germany, brought there by the Belgian émigré Henry van de Velde, who also influenced the

- aesthetic direction of the early Wiener Secession. See Mark Wigley, *White Walls, Designer Dresses*, *op. cit.*, p. 68. Henry-Russell Hitchcock claims Art Nouveau in architecture began with Victor Horta's work, principally taken up in France (where it was ironically referred to by the English name, 'Modern Style'). See Hitchcock, *Architecture Nineteenth and Twentieth Centuries* (Harmondsworth, Penguin Books, 1968), p. 291.
8. Benjamin's critique of Jugendstil focused on Henry van de Velde, while Loos' critique included attacks on van de Velde and Josef Hoffmann, who was also a member of the German Werkbund and founder of the related Wiener Werkstätte.
 9. The quote continues: 'It exults in speaking a linear, mediumistic language in which the flower, symbol of vegetal life, insinuates itself into the very lines of construction.' Walter Benjamin, 'Paris, Capital of the Nineteenth Century' (1939 exposé), in *The Arcades Project*, trans. Howard Eiland and Kevin McLaughlin (Cambridge, Mass./London, Belknap Press, 1999), p. 20.
 10. Henry van de Velde, *Renaissance in modernen Kunstgewerbe* [Renaissance in the Modern Decorative Arts], cited in Benjamin, Konvolut S, *The Arcades Project*, *op. cit.*, p. 551.
 11. Benjamin quotes Salvador Dalí ('L'Âne pourri', *Le Surréalisme au service de la révolution*, 1, no. 1, p. 12): 'Perhaps no simulacrum has provided us with an ensemble of objects more precisely attuned to the concept of "ideal" than the great simulacrum which constitutes the revolutionary ornamental architecture of Jugendstil . . . [It] painfully betrays the sort of hatred for reality and need for refuge in an ideal world that we find in childhood neurosis.' Benjamin, Konvolut S., *The Arcades Project*, *op. cit.*, p. 547.
 12. See Carl E. Schorske, *Fin-de-Siècle Vienna: Politics and Culture* (Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1981), pp. 5–8.
 13. See Benjamin, Konvolut S., *The Arcades Project*, *op. cit.*, p. 559.
 14. Benjamin, Konvolut S., *The Arcades Project*, *op. cit.*, p. 557.
 15. See Schorske, *Fin-de-Siècle Vienna*, *op. cit.*, p. 8.
 16. Despite the fact that Loos is mentioned 'in passing', we may wonder if he was more influential on Benjamin's reading of Jugendstil.
 17. Loos, 'Cultural Degeneration', *op. cit.*, p. 99.
 18. Adolf Loos, 'Architecture,' published in *Form and Function: A Source Book for the History of Architecture and Design*, 1890–1939, ed. Tim and Charlotte Benton with Dennis Sharp (London, Granada, 1975), p. 45.
 19. See Adolf Loos, 'The Poor Little Rich Man,' in *Spoken into the Void: Collected Essays 1898–1900*, trans. Jane O. Newman and John H. Smith (Opposition Books, Cambridge, Mass./ London, MIT Press, 1982), pp. 125–127.
 20. This raises the interesting question of how much freedom Loos' own clients had in the choice of their interiors.
 21. Adolf Loos, 'Interiors in the Rotunda,' first published in the *Neue Freie Presse* in 1898, and re-published in English in *Spoken into the Void*, *op. cit.*, p. 23.
 22. Adolf Loos, 'Regarding Economy' (c1924?), published in *Raumplan versus Plan Libre*, ed. Max Risselada (New York, Rizzoli, 1991), p. 139. He is speaking here of the photographing of interiors, but, within the framework of the previous essay, this statement can be extended to include the idea that the interior looks good as an artistic composition in general, whether photographed or not (see Loos, 'Architecture', *op. cit.*, p. 43). It is the presentation of an *image*, one furthermore that is *designed*, rather than a space of inhabitation. Beatriz Colomina speculates that Loos' description could well apply to Hoffmann's architecture. Citing Sigfried Giedion's description of

- Hoffmann's façades as 'framed pictures,' she explains that his architecture is 'conceived to be experienced in primarily visual terms,' suited to the visual apparatus of the camera lens. See Beatriz Colomina, *Privacy and Publicity: Modern Architecture as Mass Media* (Cambridge, Mass./London, MIT Press, 1994), pp. 51–64. She is quoting Sigfried Giedion from *Space, Time and Architecture* (Cambridge, Harvard University Press, 1941), p. 321.
23. Loos, 'Architecture,' *op. cit.*, p. 43.
 24. See Adrian Forty, *Objects of Desire: Design and Society since 1750* (London, Thames and Hudson, 1995), pp. 29–41.
 25. 'Certainly Hoffmann has given up fretsaw work since the Café Museum, and has, as far as construction techniques are concerned, come closer to my method. However, he believes, to this day, that his furniture can be made more beautiful by superimposed and inlaid ornaments.' Adolf Loos, 'Cultural Degeneration,' *op. cit.*, p. 99.
 26. Adolf Loos, 'Ornament and Crime,' delivered as a lecture on January 21, 1910 in Vienna, and again in 1913 (also in Copenhagen). Not published in German until 1929 in the *Frankfurter Zeitung* (October 24). Re-published in English in *The Architecture of Adolf Loos*, *op. cit.*, p. 102. Regarding the history of this essay, see Panayotis Tournikiotis, *Adolf Loos* (New York, Princeton Architectural Press, 1991). Tournikiotis points out that the date of 1908 usually given to this essay is false, and that it must be understood as a critique of the art and architecture of the Secession (p. 23).
 27. See Mark Jarzombek, 'The Discourses of a Bourgeois Utopia, 1904–1908, and the Founding of the Werkbund,' in *Imagining Modern German Culture: 1889–1910*, ed. Francoise Forster-Hahn (Studies in the History of Art, CASVA: Washington, National Gallery of Art, 1996), pp. 128–129.
 28. It was thus a style 'not tied to rank.' John Harvey, *Men in Black* (London, Reaktion, 1995), p. 29.
 29. As a result of such moves, the 'gentleman' was to be associated less and less with 'ties of money and blood,' and 'increasingly to become the image of the scrupulous character.' Harvey, *Men in Black*, *op. cit.*, p. 31.
 30. Adolf Loos, 'Men's Fashion,' published in *Spoken into the Void*, *op. cit.*, p. 11.
 31. Baudelaire, Balzac and Dickens (who all hated this suit's dominance and the funereal pall it established over the social world) understood the suit as a levelling device, able to obscure class and income differences and institute a kind of democratisation within the public sphere. See Harvey, *Men in Black*, *op. cit.*, pp. 23–27.
 32. 'The display of wealth is still present, subtilised into such evidence as the quality of the material on close inspection, and the meticulousness of the cut.' Harvey, *Men in Black*, *op. cit.*, p. 31.
 33. Adolf Loos, 'How Should One Dress?' first published in *Das Andere*, No. 1 (1903). Re-published in *Taste: An Exhibition about Values in Design*, ed. S. Bayley (Exhibition Catalogue; London, Boilerhouse Project, Victoria and Albert Museum, 1983), trans. V.C. Kaden, p. 55.
 34. Loos, 'How Should One Dress?' *ibid.*, p. 55.
 35. In 'Ornament and Crime', Loos specifically refers to the question of taste in his rejection of ornament: for him, simplicity is a matter of taste. He in fact states 'to me, it tastes better this way,' and in so doing explicitly links taste to consumption, in this case of food: 'The dishes of the past centuries which used decoration to make peacocks, pheasants and lobsters appear even more appetising produce the opposite effect in me. I look on such culinary display with horror when I think of having to eat these stuffed animal corpses. I eat roast beef' (Loos, 'Ornament and Crime,' *op. cit.*, p. 101). This is again an appeal to the English taste, but it can also be

read as a veiled rejection of courtly culture, where such elaborate food would have originated.

36. Loos' reading of women's clothes would operate in these terms, as well as a question of erotic commerce.
37. See Mark Wigley, *White Walls, Designer Dresses*, *op. cit.*
38. See Schorske, *Fin-de-Siècle Vienna*, *op. cit.*, p. 25. Vienna became for the upper middle class a 'political bastion, their economic capital, and the radiating centre of their intellectual life. From the moment of their accession to power, the liberals began to reshape the city in their own image.' (p. 24).
39. See Schorske, *Fin-de-Siècle Vienna*, *op. cit.*, pp. 7–8. Schorske points out that criticisms of the Ringstrasse went beyond aesthetics: it was 'a question of the relationship between cultural aspiration and social content in a liberal bourgeois society', p. 62.
40. See David Leatherbarrow, 'Interpretation and Abstraction in the Architecture of Adolf Loos,' *JAE*, Vol. 40 (Summer 1987), pp. 2–9.
41. The expensive apartment blocks of the Ringstrasse were owned and occupied by both aristocracy and upper middle class, and were without markers that distinguished these two social groups (see Schorske, *Fin-de-Siècle Vienna*, *op. cit.*, p. 60). Nevertheless, these apartments were modelled on the aristocratic palace, making them for the bourgeoisie an imitation of aristocratic culture.
42. Loos, 'Ornament and Crime', *op. cit.*, p. 101.
43. This is not an accurate understanding of the British relation to (or, rather, consumption of) ornament: the industrialisation of production in Britain in the late eighteenth and nineteenth centuries enabled ornament to be mass-produced so inexpensively that all goods could be decorative; plain, well-crafted goods were more expensive. But it does accord with a Taylorist reading of ornament within industrial modes of production – white china and white walls are the

signs of an Americanised progress, replacing the expensive, decorated products of the nineteenth century.

44. Loos, 'Ornament and Crime,' *op. cit.*, p. 101. 'The rate of cultural development is held back by those that cannot cope with the present . . . It is a misfortune for any government, if the culture of its people is dominated by the past.' Loos' rejection of a bankrupt or 'degenerate' upper middle class culture, and his promotion of the craftsman appears to have similarities with that of the Social Democrats. The question bears investigation, although I have not found evidence of a connection.
45. Loos, 'Ornament and Crime,' *op. cit.*, pp. 100–101.
46. Loos, 'Ornament and Crime', *op. cit.*, pp. 102–103, emphasis added. Intellectualism (here being claimed as a kind of 'rationalism' in relation to the irrationality of frivolous ornament) was marked out, alongside artistic creativity, as the territory of the upper middle classes in Vienna during the period (see Schorske, *Fin-de-Siècle Vienna*, *op. cit.*,).
47. Loos wrote that the Secessionist ornament (which he called 'modern ornament') 'has no parent and no offspring, it has no past and no future' (Loos, 'Ornament and Crime', *op. cit.*, p. 102).
48. Otto Wagner, who was also concerned with the cultural representation of the bourgeoisie and with a housing for it that accommodated the demands and realities of modernity, produced an apartment building at Neustiftgasse 40 in 1910 that closely met Loos' requirements. It used an abstracted classicism devoid of ornament, apart from modest banding on the lower main façade; gone was any reference to Jugendstil.
49. See *Nationalism in the Visual Arts*, ed. Richard A. Etlin (studies in the History of Art, CASVA; Washington, National Gallery of Art, 1991).
50. See Panayotis Tournikiotis, *Adolf Loos*, *op. cit.*, pp. 23–4.

51. Letter to Francis Jourdain, December 1913, quoted in Nancy Troy, 'Le Corbusier, Nationalism, and the Decorative Arts in France, 1900–1918,' in *Nationalism in the Visual Arts*, *op. cit.*, p. 80.
52. See Nancy Troy, 'Le Corbusier, Nationalism, and the Decorative Arts in France,' *ibid.*, p. 81. Troy notes that Loos' influence was played down post-1914, due to the political contingencies of the war in France, in favour of providing a French lineage to abstraction in opposition to German abstraction. Like others, Corbusier felt compelled to utilise nationalist rhetoric in order to 'claim an allegiance to a tradition' conceived in nationalist terms. The international, non-national, notion of architecture only emerged again after the war, in the 1920s (pp. 83–84).
53. The influence of this conception of 'ornament' (the term may perhaps require revision) on Modernism and beyond is visible in, for instance, Mies van der Rohe's use of richly grained marble veneers, or in the imprinting of the surface that can be seen in the more recent work of Herzog and de Meuron and others, in which the surface is etched by an ornament that is no longer applied but now inseparably part of the surface.
54. The legacy of this notion of a revision of ornament is perhaps most apparent in the recent work of Greg Lynn, in which the surface, as an ornamentally modulated topography, is literally formed out of the process of generation, and is both a trace (a moment of fixing) and an inscription of that process (a kind of diagram of it). Ornament and process are thus complicated by each other, and indeed inseparably linked.
55. See Massimo Cacciari, *Architecture and Nihilism: On the Philosophy of Modern Architecture*, trans. Stephen Sartorelli (New Haven/London, Yale University Press, 1993).