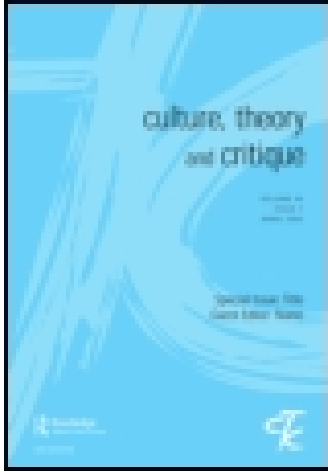


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### The metropolis as text: Otto Wagner and Vienna's 'second renaissance'

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# THE METROPOLIS AS TEXT: OTTO WAGNER AND VIENNA'S 'SECOND RENAISSANCE'

by  
David Frisby

## The Metropolis as Text

The notion of the city, its streets, its architecture, its populace as a text is to be found in various forms in the work of many writers since at least the nineteenth century.<sup>1</sup> In particular, the conception of the city as text rests upon a number of presuppositions. Amongst these is that the city possesses features of textuality – minimally a constellation of signs and symbols. In its most basic form, a language is presupposed, a system of hieroglyphics. The city as text presupposes a reader or readers. Although since Baudelaire the reader has often been identified with the figure of the *flâneur*<sup>2</sup> (and much more rarely the *flâneuse*), it should be recognized that readership is stratified, partly on the basis of access to the text (mediated by power relations in the city), but certainly according to gender, social class, ethnicity, generation, etc. In turn, the city as text presupposes legibility in principle. This may not necessarily be at the present time but in the future (Walter Benjamin speaks of ‘the coming to legibility’ of the nineteenth century in our own century, for example).<sup>3</sup> Again to follow Benjamin, legibility in principle does not exclude erroneous readings (where the object – in this case, the city as text – is ‘riddled with error’).<sup>4</sup>

In order to identify some of the problems and themes that emerge from the conception of the city as text, it may be fruitful to review a number of the ways in which the city as text has been discussed. The examples chosen are all associated with writers who are also concerned with the delineation of features of modernity. This is not a fortuitous connection. Rather, a case can be made for assuming that the activity of reading the city as text itself emerges out of a desire to know and to analyse that which is new in the modern metropolis. The metropolis since the mid nineteenth century at least has been one of the crucial sites of modernity – to be explored as a result of its quantitative and qualitative transformation. The interest

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1 See James Donald, ‘Metropolis: The City As Text’, in *Social and Cultural Forms of Modernity*, edited by Robert Bocock and Kenneth Thompson (Cambridge, 1992), pp.418-61.

2 See *The Flâneur*, edited by Keith Tester (London, 1994).

3 See Susan Buck-Morss, *The Dialectics of Seeing* (Cambridge, Mass., 1989).

4 See Walter Benjamin, *Charles Baudelaire: A Lyric Poet in the Era of High Capitalism* (London, 1973), p.103.

in reading the metropolis may be documentary, poetic, political, social, etc.

For Baudelaire, for example, the modern metropolis was the site of modernity, and associated with the transitory, fleeting and fortuitous elements of existence within it. The features of modernity within the modern metropolis require interpretation and representation – by ‘the painter of modern life’ – insofar as they are represented symbolically. When Baudelaire declares that ‘Man traverses a forest of symbols that look back at him with a familiar regard’, then this implies that although human beings have created this forest of symbols, they are not thereby necessarily immediately intelligible.<sup>5</sup> Indeed, Baudelaire’s conception of modernity as the transitory, the fleeting and the fortuitous also implies the discontinuous or disintegrating experience of time as transitory, space as fleeting and causality as replaced by the fortuitous and the arbitrary. It is the task of the painter of modern life to capture the fleeting beauty of these dimensions of metropolitan modernity that nonetheless contain elements of ‘the eternal and the immutable’.<sup>6</sup>

This transitory dimension of modern metropolitan experience is more broadly accentuated in Marx’s analysis of modernity, with its focus upon the revolutionary new destruction of the past, the ever new destruction of the present, and the ever same reproduction of the ‘socially necessary illusion’ of the commodity form as the barrier to a qualitatively new future.<sup>7</sup> Although Marx spends too little time analyzing the modern metropolis, the features of modernity that he outlines do nonetheless have relevance for reading the city as text. The destruction of the past in the metropolis is one of the central themes in the dispute surrounding the emergence of a new discipline of Städtebau in the late nineteenth century. In particular, the volumes by Camillo Sitte and Joseph Stübben published in 1889<sup>8</sup> and 1890<sup>9</sup> respectively are both responding – negatively in the case of Sitte – to Baron Haussmann’s earlier transformation of Paris and its ‘creative destruction’.<sup>10</sup> The destruction of the present takes the form of the accumulation of urban capital and the necessary increasing circulation of capital and commodities in the metropolis. The destruction and reconfiguration of the built environment that is implied in these processes has important implications for the constraints imposed upon metropolitan architecture, to maximize output of units and, where appropriate, to cheapen such

5 See Charles Baudelaire, *The Painter of Modern Life and Other Essays* (London, 1964).

6 For a brief discussion of this task in the context of exploring modernity see my *Fragments of Modernity* (London and Cambridge, Mass., 1985), chapter one.

7 Marx’s analysis of modernity is also examined in *Fragments of Modernity*, chapter one.

8 Camillo Sitte, *City Planning According to Artistic Principles*, translated by George and Christine Collins (New York, 1985).

9 Joseph Stübben, *Der Städtebau* (Braunschweig and Wiesbaden, 1990).

10 On Haussmann see most recently David P. Jordan, *Transforming Paris. The Life and Labors of Baron Haussmann* (New York, 1993).

units (as in the rental barracks [*Mietskaserne*]). In turn, the commodified (and the non-commodified) built forms are also given a representative, symbolic value in material and social hieroglyphics. As Marx remarks in the context of the commodity form – but also applicable to the non-commodified built form that owes its existence to the political production and reproduction of the built form – , ‘Value does not have its description branded on its forehead. Rather, it transforms every product of labour into a social hieroglyphic.’<sup>11</sup> In terms of the discussion here, the implication is that metropolitan architecture reveals constellations of hieroglyphics that require to be read.

If Marx did not spend sufficient time on the analysis of metropolitan modernity, the same cannot be said of the early Futurists, for whom the modern city was not merely the epitome of modernity but also one of the crucial showcases of modern technology. For Marinetti, the new configuration of everyday technologies both transforms the modes in which we experience the modern metropolis and creates new sets of entities in the urban landscape that require to be read. Writing in 1913, Marinetti notes that:

Whoever today makes use of the telegraph, the telephone, the gramophone, the train, the bicycle, the motorbike, the ocean liner, the airship, the aeroplane, the cinema, the major daily newspaper (synthesis of a day in the world) does not think of the fact that these diverse types of communication, transport and information exercise a decisive influence upon a person’s mind.<sup>12</sup>

What Marinetti does not mention here in this context is the dramatic increase in the street furniture and the plethora of things, signs and other entities that are produced for the modern metropolis and the increased circulation of its traffic and its individuals. One of the tasks of the new discipline of *Städtebau* was not merely to facilitate the creation of this new system of objects but also to read its significance. In a quite fundamental manner, the alignment of streets, the provisions for categories of traffic, the furniture of this street exterior all serve to condition not merely how we perceive the city and its streets but also our bodily movement and deportment within them.<sup>13</sup>

It remained for others to raise some of the issues involved in reading this increasingly complex text of the modern metropolis. In his volume *Spazieren in Berlin*,<sup>14</sup> Franz Hessel – with whom Benjamin had originally embarked upon writing

11 Cited in Frisby, *Fragments of Modernity*, p.21.

12 Cited in Manfred Smuda, ‘Die Wahrnehmung der Grossstadt als ästhetisches Problem des Erzählens’, in *Die Grossstadt als Text*, edited by Manfred Smuda (Munich, 1992), p.131.

13 As an instance of the significance of street furniture in the nineteenth century see Stübgen, *Der Städtebau*.

14 Now retitled and available as Franz Hessel, *Ein Flâneur in Berlin* (Berlin, 1984).

a couple of short articles on the Parisian arcades – quite explicitly operates with a notion of the city as text to be read by the *flâneur*. Hessel views the activity of the *flâneur* as follows:

*Flânerie* is a kind of reading of the street, in which human faces, shop windows, café terraces, street cars, automobiles and trees become a wealth of equally valid letters of the alphabet that together result in words, sentences and pages of an ever-new book.

Hessel, however, is less interested in the syntax and semantics of the city's signifiers than in the images themselves. Despite the dangers of *flânerie*, he assumes that the city as text can be read immediately by the *flâneur*.<sup>15</sup>

This assumption is not made by Hessel's contemporary, Siegfried Kracauer. Himself trained as an architect, Kracauer not merely relates to the city as text, as a labyrinth of often fragmentary signs, but also raises the problem of deciphering the metropolitan text as constellation of images. The city as text must be read in such a way as to uncover or reveal what is hidden. For Kracauer, 'spatial images are the dreams of society. Wherever the hieroglyphics of any spatial image are deciphered, there the basis of social reality presents itself.'<sup>16</sup> Elsewhere, Kracauer distinguishes two types of spatial images that are to be deciphered. The first is 'consciously formed' and to be found in plans and guidebooks. The second are 'fortuitous creations' – configurations of buildings, streets, and figures which the individual confronts.<sup>17</sup> Both contribute in different ways to our knowledge of the city, although it is the second type that is merely likely to reveal 'the basis of social reality'. This knowledge is not directly available but mediated through the images themselves: 'Knowledge of cities is bound up with the deciphering of their dream-like expressive images'.<sup>18</sup> In a more positivistic reading of the city, Wagner's critique of Historicist facades led him to denounce their 'dream' as 'a lie'.

The city as dream 'text' was already developed by Louis Aragon in his *Paris Peasant*, exploring the decaying world of the Parisian arcade in the 1920s.<sup>19</sup> There Aragon declares that 'our cities are peopled with unrecognized sphynxes'<sup>20</sup> whose significance remains to be read. Although drawing initially upon Aragon, it was in fact Walter Benjamin who most fully explored the possibility of reading the city as text, as well as drawing attention to intertextuality in this context. If the city is a text, then the reflexive possibility can be posited of the text possessing affinities with

15 Hessel, *Ein Flâneur in Berlin*, p.145.

16 Cited in my *Fragments of Modernity*, p.109.

17 See *Fragments of Modernity*, pp.135–36.

18 Cited in *Fragments of Modernity*, p.136.

19 Louis Aragon, *Paris Peasant* (London, 1980).

20 Aragon, *Paris Peasant*, pp.28–29.

the city: 'that which is written is like a city, to which the words are a thousand gateways'.<sup>21</sup> Although there are many instances of Benjamin reading the contemporary city in *One Way Street*,<sup>22</sup> *Moscow Diaries*<sup>23</sup> and elsewhere, it was his unorthodox historical projects reconstituting his childhood – in *Berlin Childhood Around 1900*<sup>24</sup> and *Berlin Chronicle*<sup>25</sup> and above all his textual reconstruction of 'Paris: Capital of the Nineteenth Century'<sup>26</sup> – that are testimony to his detailed analysis of the city, its architecture, streets, population, traffic, street furniture, interiors, etc. As Graeme Gilloch has demonstrated,<sup>27</sup> Benjamin's reading of the metropolis is a multifaceted one in which the city is explored as physiognomy ('a space to be read'), phenomenologically ('the city is a monad, a fragment within which the totality of modern life may be discerned'), as mythology, as history, as politics and as text. The city as text, as 'a linguistic cosmos' (Benjamin),<sup>28</sup> as 'a secret text to be read' (Gilloch) requires a special kind of reader of modern metropolitan life. Benjamin states his task as that of Hugo von Hofmannsthal: "Read what was never written". The reader called to mind here is the true historian.<sup>29</sup> For Benjamin's project to be successful, he would have to train *readers of his texts* to read the labyrinth of the phenomenal world of the metropolis.

This brief intimation of some of the issues – which could be extended – arising out of the concept of reading modern metropolitan existence is intended to indicate that 'reading' modern life cannot be viewed unproblematically. As Peter Fritzsche suggests in his reconstruction of a reading of Berlin around the turn of the century based upon newspaper texts, 'texts do not speak for themselves in one voice, and they are not understood in the same way by all readers'.<sup>30</sup>

In the present context, that draws in part on Otto Wagner's readings of modernity in Vienna in the late nineteenth century, it may be necessary to distinguish between the professional and the lay person's reading of modern life and the modern metropolis. Here we might draw upon a distinction which Michel de Certeau, in 'Walking the City',<sup>31</sup> made between reading the city as 'geometrical' or

21 Cited in Tester, *The Flâneur*, p.106.

22 Walter Benjamin, *One Way Street* (London, 1979).

23 Walter Benjamin, *Moscow Diaries* (Cambridge, Mass, 1983).

24 Walter Benjamin, *Berliner Kindheit um Beunzehnhundert* (Frankfurt, 1950).

25 In *One Way Street*, pp.293–346.

26 The incomplete project was assembled as Walter Benjamin, *Das Passagenwerk* (Frankfurt, 1982).

27 Graeme Gilloch, *Myth and Metropolis. Walter Benjamin and the City* (Oxford, 1996).

28 Cited in Gilloch, *Myth and Metropolis*, p.181.

29 Gilloch, p.181.

30 Peter Fritzsche, *Reading Berlin 1900* (Cambridge, Mass., 1996), p.47.

31 Michel de Certeau, *The Practice of Everyday Life* (Berkeley, 1984), pp.91–110.

'geographical' space of visual, panoptic or theoretical constructions – which might be associated with architects' or city planners' reading – and reading 'an opaque and blind mobility characteristic of the bustling city – in which a migrational or metaphorical city thus slips into the clear text of the planned and readable city' – which might be associated with a lay person's everyday reading.

However, there are two relevant problems with this distinction. The first, which draws upon phenomenological and ethnomethodological insights, is that the first reading rests ultimately upon the second, or at least that the grounds for privileging the first reading must be demonstrated and not taken for granted. The second problem arises from the notion of 'the clear text of the planned and readable city' which already concedes the 'clarity' of geometrical or geographical space. The first problem should lead us to inquire further into the location or siting of the professional's reading of the city or modern life (is it really a reading from above, for instance?). The second should lead us to question whether the building of cities [*Städtebau*] ever commenced from or created the clarity which de Certeau ascribes to it.

If de Certeau's distinction is transposed to the reading of 'modern life' then it has affinities not merely with a distinction between a conscious and a fortuitous reading (and therefore possessing similarity with Kracauer's distinction indicated above) but also with a distinction between two different readings of modernity. Modernity as a process of rationalization (and progressive abstraction) and modernity as disintegration of basic categories of time, space and causality and experience as 'transitory, fleeting and fortuitous' (Baudelaire) are ostensibly two distinct conceptions of modernity. But the first might well emanate from a desire to regulate the second, to control the implications of its dynamic and disintegrating movement. For the architect of modern life – and this is how Otto Wagner viewed the role of the modern architect, and was certainly his own aim – the task of giving expression to modern metropolitan life itself contained tensions that remained to be resolved. This task for the architect of modern life may well be construed as different from that of Baudelaire's 'painter of modern life'.

If the city is a text, then it should be read – amongst others – by those who seek to create, shape, and transform it. Their *reading* of the city crucially conditions their *writing* of the city as a text, its buildings, its streets, its street furniture, etc. Texts and cities can be read from a distance in which only their general contours are visible and which, therefore, might only appear abstract. They can also be read closely bringing out precise details. Both readings generate meaning out of a plethora of signifiers. As Franz L witsch argued for the Berlin street network in 1931, it is 'not a chaos of meaningless lines but rather a script that is to be deciphered'.<sup>32</sup>

32 Franz L witsch, 'Die Idee Berlin', *Wasmuth's Monatsheft* XV (1931), 424.

Readings of the city confront one another in space and time. There can be different temporal readings of the spatial configurations and physiognomy of the city as old (to be preserved) and as new or modern (involving the destruction of the old). The mode in which the juxtaposition and confrontation of old and new takes place conditions the manner in which modernity is expressed in the metropolis. This is significant for, amongst others, those who wish to create a modern architecture for the modern metropolis that is appropriate to, and even mirrors, modern life. A striking early exemplar is Otto Wagner in Vienna in the 1890's.

### Wagner and Vienna's 'Second Renaissance'

In the mid-1890's Wagner produced a critique of the Viennese architecture of recent decades in which he maintained that much recent and current architecture was responsible for the low esteem accorded to architects in Vienna. In particular, Wagner argued that

The main cause of the lack of full appreciation of the significance of the architect lies in the *world of forms* employed by him up to now, in his *language directed to the mass of the people* which in most instances *remains completely unintelligible* to them.<sup>33</sup>

There are a number of sources of this unintelligibility that render much of recent architecture unreadable, but Wagner is at pains to suggest that the indifference of the masses is not responsible for this state of affairs. Where construction has been increasingly given over to engineers rather than architects there has been a tendency to produce structures lacking in aesthetic form. However, the principal reason for unintelligibility lies in the absence of architectural forms that are appropriate to modern needs and representations of modern life.

Indeed, instead of an architecture appropriate to modern life, recent decades have witnessed a 'rush through all stylistic tendencies', 'a jumble of styles',<sup>34</sup> a morbid recall of past, dead styles, and an appropriation of specific Historicist styles for particular buildings (churches should be Gothic, for example). Historicist facades are often the expression of 'artistic lies', creating the impression in rented apartment blocks that everyone lives in a palace. The 'stuck on facade' of many a Historicist apartment block produces 'the swindle-like dimensions abounding in lies reminiscent of Potemkin villages'<sup>35</sup> – a reference taken up in 1898 by Adolf Loos in

33 Otto Wagner, *Modern Architecture*, translated by Harry Mallgrave (Santa Monica, 1985), p.65. Translated amended.

34 Otto Wagner, 'Moderne Architektur' in *Otto Wagner. Das Werk des Architekten* I, edited by Otto A. Graf (Vienna, 1985) pp.172 and 173.

35 Otto Wagner, 'Moderne Architektur', p.281.

his 'Potemkin City'<sup>36</sup>

Such a critique of Historicist architecture leads to the conclusion that recent architectural practice has created the basis for erroneous readings of the city, the construction of a 'false' text. Its Viennese context is summed up in Hermann Bahr's statement that 'Otto Wagner is the opposite of the Ringstrasse. There everything starts out from effect, in Wagner from expression. There arbitrariness, here necessity. There swindle, kitsch, theatre, here always merely what the object will be'.<sup>37</sup> The Historicist search for effect in earlier forms contrasts with Wagner's claim that new, practical and modern needs cannot be accommodated in old forms – the latter are no longer appropriate and new forms must be created. Such a view contrasts with the notion still to be found throughout the 1890s that it is possible, for instance, to have new buildings fulfilling new tasks but totally in Renaissance form.<sup>38</sup> For Wagner, the search for new forms must be undertaken on the premiss that 'the sole departure point for our artistic work can only be modern life'.<sup>39</sup> And what is true for individual structures must also be true for the metropolis as a whole since 'a great modern city cannot and should not have the appearance of Ancient Rome or of old Nuremberg'.<sup>40</sup> Indeed, for Wagner, the opposite premiss is his starting point: 'The most modern of that which is modern in architecture are indeed our present day metropolitan cities'.<sup>41</sup> Modernity in modern architecture means addressing modern needs, applying modern building materials, creating structures appropriate to modern life, with an accord between interior and exterior (and not the false motifs of apartment block 'palaces'), and interiors that are appropriate to modern human beings (and not Historicist, illusory backdrops to modern life).

At no point in his critique of Viennese architecture in recent decades does Wagner reveal his own earlier contribution to this architecture, its interiors or his collaboration with, for example, Hans Mackart.<sup>42</sup> Rather, Wagner appears to argue for a complete break with the past, including his own previous 'somewhat free Renaissance style'.<sup>43</sup> In keeping with this break with the past, Wagner sees the

36 Adolf Loos, 'Potemkin City', in *Spoken Into The Void* (Cambridge, Mass., 1982), pp.95–96.

37 Hermann Bahr, 'Otto Wagner', *Essays von Hermann Bahr*, edited by Heinz Kindermann (Vienna, 1960), pp.283–84.

38 See, for example, Fritz Schumacher, 'Die Sehnsucht nach dem "Nenen"', *Deutsche Bauzeitung*, 31 (1897), 629–32.

39 Otto Wagner, 'Moderne Architektur', p.263.

40 Otto Wagner, *Modern Architecture*, p.109.

41 *Modern Architecture*, p.103

42 See Otto A. Graf, *Der Baukunst der Eros* (Vienna, 1996) for details of Wagner's early work and the personal context.

43 Otto Wagner, *Einige Skizzen, Projekten und ausgeführte Bauwerke* (Tübingen, 1987), p.17.

present period of the mid 1890s not as a 'Renaissance of the Renaissance' but as a 'Naissance'.<sup>44</sup> However, contemporaries such as Feldegg, the founder and editor of the avant garde Viennese architecture journal *Der Architekt* since 1895 probably expressed contemporary views more accurately with his notion of 'Vienna's Second Renaissance'<sup>45</sup> in the 1890s. What was the significance of the contrast between the 'first' and 'second' Renaissance in Vienna? As Hermann Bahr's judgement on Wagner intimated, a distinction was being drawn between the first enlargement of the city of Vienna after 1857 and the construction of the Ringstrasse and the zone surrounding it and the second extension of the city in 1890 and the consequent expansion of building programmes in the ensuing decades. Feldegg drew a distinction between Vienna's first Renaissance associated with the building of the Ringstrasse as aristocratic in tone with individual monumental works as a primary feature, on the one hand, and, on the other, the second Renaissance in the 1890s as democratic in impulse with whole building complexes as monumental. The assemblage of public monuments often in open spaces on the Ringstrasse is contrasted with whole street perspectives of rented apartment blocks for example, as manifestation of a democratic impulse. What is noteworthy is that the Ringstrasse monuments – with the possible exception of the stock exchange – are all public and state dependent monuments.<sup>46</sup> In terms of building types, those which contemporaries viewed as manifestations of modernity, such as department stores and railway stations, are absent from the Ringstrasse. And whereas the Historicist variations in building styles along the Ringstrasse were not conducive to creating the effect, at least, of a *Gesamtkunstwerk*, one of the most prominent of the structures erected between 1894 and 1898 and designed by Wagner and his students – the *Stadtbahn*, the city railway – as a symbol of circulation in the modern metropolis (and for reasons of military security, the railway ran *around* the centre of the city) could lay claim to being a *Gesamtkunstwerk*, a total work of art on a monumental scale.<sup>47</sup>

The fact that the modern city railway runs around the old city centre has more than military significance. The second extension of the city boundaries after 1890 opened up renewed debate on the nature and boundaries of 'Old' and 'New' Vienna, on the challenge of modern architecture and the possibility of Vienna as a modern metropolis. This debate coincided with a related but ostensibly more theoretical confrontations on the nature and purposes of city planning, literally city

44 Wagner, *Modern Architecture*, p.79.

45 Freiherr von Feldegg, 'Wiens zweite Renaissance', *Der Architekt* I (1895), 1-2.

46 For a discussion of the symbolic significance of the Ringstrasse see Carl E. Schorske, *Fin-de-Siècle Vienna* (London, 1980).

47 On the city railway in detail see Günter Kolb, *Otto Wagner und die Wiener Stadtbahn* (Munich, 1989).

building (*Städtebau*), especially after publication of Camillo Sitte's volume on city planning in 1889. The preservation of the inner city's Renaissance and Baroque structures and the layout of its streets and squares was simultaneously a confrontation with the modern, taking on increasingly hostile tones after Wagner's students at the Academy of Fine Arts from 1894 onwards achieved some successes, and especially after the establishment of the Vienna Secession in 1897 and its heavily contested exhibition building designed and erected by Olbrich – a Wagner student – in 1898.<sup>48</sup> There were no major avenues constructed through the centre of the city (such as the projected Riehl avenue from the Stephansdom to the Prater), no underground railway (under discussion in the decade prior to the First World War) and not one of Wagner's projects completed (several Museum designs, hotel complex or department store) in the most disputed area around the Karlsplatz with the exception of his city rail station. The Ringstrasse, itself largely completed by 1890 with the exception of the Stuben area, remained the most monumental street complex and contained no 'modern' structures with the exception of Wagner's Post Office Savings Bank (which was itself set back from the main thoroughfare), yet which faced the Ministry of War designed by the conservative Ludwig Baumann (designs by Wagner, Adolf Loos and others were rejected).

Despite Wagner's search for support from the Christian Social Party Mayor, Karl Lueger (whose populist programme combined strong currents of anti-Semitic ideology with local public sector projects),<sup>49</sup> increasing opposition in Vienna resulted in none of his major public projects being realized (even the Kirche am Steinhof was approved by the Lower Austrian parliament and not the Viennese authorities).

Yet amongst his contemporaries, it was Wagner who published the first modernist manifesto on architecture (his *Modern Architecture* of 1896) and who, in effect, produced a reading of modern, metropolitan life that was to have been the foundation for a modern architecture responsive to modern needs. What were the salient features of Wagner's reading of modern life and how did he propose to render architecture intelligible?

### Transcending the 'unintelligible'?

In order for modern architecture to be intelligible once more it must be a reflection of its times. As Wagner declared in his 1894 Inaugural Lecture: 'the starting point of every artistic creation must be the need, ability, means and

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48 On the increasing opposition to Wagner see Peter Haiko, *Otto Wagner und das Kaiser Franz Josef-Stadtmuseum* (Vienna, 1988).

49 On Lueger's policy see John W. Boyer, *Culture and Political Crisis in Vienna* (Chicago, 1996).

achievements of our time'.<sup>50</sup> In a somewhat naive manner, Wagner assumes that the creation of a structural homology between modern life and modern architecture will render the latter intelligible. In turn, modern architecture's success in this respect depends upon an 'accurate' (and there are strong positivist strands in Wagner's reflections) reading of modern life. What were its features as recognized by Wagner?

Although there is no systematic and ordered presentation of the features of modern life in his writings, it is possible to draw them out from various sources. It will then be possible to enquire as to their common features and the problems which their realization in modern metropolitan architecture might raise. Wagner's reading of modern life is a general one, comprising the following features: an unbounded expansion of the metropolis, permanent progress, technological advance, democratization, levelling (of life styles, for example), purposive orientation to time and money, increasing mobility and movement in transport systems (and the transformation of time-space relations), monumentalism (including the street as monument), increasing significance of fashion and the domination of the rented apartment block (in its variants that include the dwelling and commercial block and its abstract form the 'conglomerate of cells'). Of perhaps greater interest are some of the implications contained within these somewhat abstract tendencies in modern life and their consequences for the transformation of modern experience.

Since his submission for the general plan of Vienna competition in 1894,<sup>51</sup> Wagner conceived of the modern metropolis as a constantly expanding network; a radial city with distribution centres (reminiscent of Gottfried Semper's *Stellen*) at appropriate points, expanding commensurate with population increases and accompanied by corresponding increases in troops stationed in the city (the military and modernity in this context appears contradictory until the fear of revolution and insurrection is taken into account). The modern metropolis of straight lined avenues and plain surfaces, the continuous rows of (economically viable) apartment blocks creates the modern street as itself monumental (and this aside from Wagner's permanent call for more public monuments, themselves contingent upon *political* support for their construction). Modern metropolitan constructions should avail themselves of new technological developments both in the use of new materials (steel, aluminium) and new modes of construction. In this context, Wagner calls for a greater co-operation between architect and engineer (as is apparent in his own contributions to the city railway and the Nussdorf sleuce on the Danube canal), thereby alleviating one of the grounds for the 'unintelligibility' of contemporary architecture (by giving engineering structures a modern architectural form).

50 Otto Wagner, 'Antritts rede Otto Wagners, 1894', in Marco Pozzetto, *Die Schule Otto Wagners. 1894-1912* (Vienna, 1980), pp.144-46.

51 See Graf, *Otto Wagner*, I, pp.88-122.

In terms of reading modern life, Wagner places emphasis upon its *tempo* and its distinctive *goal orientations*, epitomised in the slogan 'time is money'. The acceleration of interactions and transactions requires a new orientation to metropolitan life. First, architects themselves must concern themselves precisely with the economic needs of the building process (accurate and detailed costings), with the speed of construction and with the whole problematic of building investment (the rented apartment block's purpose, as Wagner recognizes, is to function as an interest bearing investment – not merely a rented block (*Miethaus*) but also an interest generating block (*Zinshaus*). Second, a general acceleration in economic and other transactions (*Verkehr*) is also implicit in this slogan, and above all in the sphere of circulation, exchange and consumption. The metropolis is not merely the site of accelerating circulation of commodities but also human beings (even Sitte saw the Ringstrasse as 'a traffic highway of human beings in motion'). Therefore, the infrastructure for safe, mass circulation in all its forms must be a priority. Third, our actions are conditioned by our orientation to ends in many spheres of life. What Max Weber later saw as purposive rational action requires, for Wagner, a new orientation in architecture: the development of a utility style (*Nutzstil*) and an art directed to needs and ends (*Zweckkunst*). Such orientations were vehemently contested by those who maintained that the artistic sphere should remain an autonomous sphere.

The identification of such general features of modern life with common orientations to action are associated, for Wagner, with a process of *levelling* in our conditions of life – a questionable general thesis in the context of an increasingly social class differentiated society. The assumption of the increasingly similar mode of living will lead to the increasing *uniformity* of the rented apartment block and the destruction of the external differentiation of the palace-like facades of the Historicist blocks (by size and degree of ornamentation). Similarly, the development of the electric lift leads to a potential equalization of floors in the rented apartment block. This is perhaps the context within which we may understand Wagner's assertion of the *democratization* (probably in a formal sense) of modern life. A mode of equalization at least is presupposed by the emergence of a mass private housing market – with the apartment block as a 'conglomerate of cells' – and the only differentiating feature of this and other building types (including the city railway) being a standard, uniform price to pay for entry.

In many respects most disturbing for his contemporaries is Wagner's positive association of modern architecture with *fashion*. Arguing against the disharmony between Historicist styles and modern life, Wagner asserts that this is manifested in a disharmony between fashion (which always responds to new tendencies) and style (which becomes rigidified and more difficult to influence). Modern human beings are extremely sensitive to fashion changes and the built environment should be

appropriate to this sensibility (rather than placing modern clothed individuals in imitation Louis XV or other settings). And although Wagner's examples of fashion are male, this argument is with reference to modern human beings in general. The archaeology of styles favoured by Historicism ensures that the language of art remains unintelligible. The clear implication of Wagner's argument is that modern architecture should heed *the language of fashion* if it wishes to create works for *our* times.

What are the implications of Wagner's unsystematic explorations of modern life for the transformation of modern experience? The levelling and democratization thesis implies the exchangeability and replicability of individuals and a tendency towards the creation of a mass society. At the same time, this replicability of individuals and life styles is accompanied by increasing *abstraction of signifiers* – a feature which is expressed architecturally in the predominance of the straight line and the simple surface or abstract ornamentation (whose monumental effect is produced by viewing the whole avenue of built structures). In this context, the modern metropolitan dweller in the apartment block is more prepared 'to disappear in the crowd as a "number"'<sup>52</sup> – as a means of securing individual freedom – than to long for the individual family house (and unwelcome contact with neighbours). Anonymity secures individual freedom.

This putative levelling and uniformity in lifestyle and, above all, in street profiles and major open squares could have other consequences, some of which are hardly addressed by Wagner. It is Sitte who sees a correlation between broad empty streets and huge open squares and agoraphobia, whereas the small, old enclosed squares create a feeling of cosiness<sup>53</sup> (which Wagner would view as claustrophobia). At all events, the pathologies of space (and Freud was shortly to investigate the uncanny<sup>54</sup>) as part of a wider pathology of modern life were entering contemporary discourse, to be joined by a pathology of loss in relation to the past (amnesia),<sup>55</sup> in relation to things (Simmel's association of hyperaesthesia with the money economy), and monomania in relation to the self (which Sitte ascribes to Wagner's obsession with straight streets).

All too briefly, Wagner touches upon the optical and perspectival transformation of our metropolitan experience arising, in part, from the fact that we are ourselves in motion in new ways. Beatriz Colomina has suggested that 'the mode

<sup>52</sup> Otto Wagner, *Die Grossstadt* (Vienna, 1911), p.21.

<sup>53</sup> See Sitte, *City Planning*.

<sup>54</sup> On Freud, see Anthony Vidler, *The Architectural Uncanny* (Cambridge, Mass., 1992).

<sup>55</sup> See Christine M. Boyer, *The City of Collective Memory* (Cambridge, Mass., 1996).

of perception is what becomes fleeting. Now the observer (the *flâneur*, the train traveller, the department store shopper) is what is transient. This transience, and the new space of the city in which it is experienced, cannot be separated from the new forms of representation'.<sup>56</sup> Wagner had already reflected upon the modern eye's loss of the small intimate scale, its becoming accustomed to changeable images, to longer straight lines, broader surfaces and larger volumes. Yet Wagner did not examine here these optical, perspectival and panoramic changes in relation to transport systems such as his own city railway, even though later in his essay on the metropolis he was to emphasize the fact that 'the "city's physiognomy" has the greatest influence upon the image of the city'.<sup>57</sup> There he is emphatic too that the city itself, and its streets should be works of art, and not be confined to the 'art storage spaces' of metropolitan museums.

### Contradictory Texts

If it is the case that Wagner's general delineation of metropolitan modernity, of modern life can be characterised as emphasizing abstraction, circulation and movement and monumentality – however contradictory these features might be when set alongside one another – then they do possess a further common feature insofar as none of them is specific to Vienna. The modern metropolis is cosmopolitan, not rooted inexorably in the past. Wagner's reading of modern life as a foundation for a modern architecture had to confront an alternative reading of Vienna's 'second Renaissance', sometimes based on a closed, anti-modern high culture, afraid of an unlimited metropolis (such as Berlin). The 'second' architectural renaissance heralded by Wagner, his students and others and epitomized by the Secession movement could be read by conservatives as 'arbitrariness', 'complete anarchy', the absence of 'a kind of logical grammar of forms', social levelling without 'reverence',<sup>58</sup> and so on. Others might reflect that the modern movement should confine its attention to building private villas in the suburbs since 'outside, one does not need to seek out its buildings'. In the heart of the city – and especially in the Karlsplatz area – this 'sudden, powerful tearing away from all tradition' must be resisted.<sup>59</sup> Yet others might lament Wagner's one-sided emphasis upon the *modern* that ignores the need for the development of a mature *national* art, a regard for national consciousness and, with the decline in the

56 Beatriz Colomina, *Privacy and Publicity* (Cambridge, Mass., 1994).

57 Otto Wagner, 'Die Grossstadt', in Otto Graf, Otto Wagner. *Das Werk II*, p.641.

58 See the articles on architecture in A.F. Seligman, *Kunst und Künstler von gestern und heute* (Vienna, 1910).

59 See Joseph Bayer, 'Die Moderne und die historische Baustyle', *Neue Freie Presse* 3, (April 1902).

influence of religion, the need for a new ideal – love of fatherland.<sup>60</sup> Such opposition to modernity reveals that the desire to create a ‘New Vienna’ confronted an ‘Old Vienna’, a confrontation heightened by tensions between capitalist and quasi-feudal social formations, vertical and horizontal stratification of social classes and ethnic groups and an emergent labour movement.

At the same time, Wagner’s own reading of metropolitan modernity contains contradictions and problems that he failed to address. The positivistic tendency to maintain that modern architecture should ‘mirror’ modern life entails that this mirror does indeed reflect everything in modern life including its contradictions. Contemporary life in Vienna in the 1890s contains both modernizing and anti-modern dimensions. In this sense, ‘modern’ life is not yet established in Vienna whilst, at the same time, a delineation of modern life that did address its historical specificity would have to confront deep contradictions in its social, economic, political and cultural configurations.

Wagner’s optimistic assumption that we are all ‘modern’ human beings is contradicted by his own assertions that large sections of the public – including much of the ‘educated’ public – are not yet capable of recognising architecture’s language of forms. His assumption is more seriously qualified by Adolf Loos’s reflections on the non-contemporaneity of the contemporaneous in Vienna. Loos maintained that,

The rate of cultural development is held back by those that cannot cope with the present. I live in the year 1908, but my neighbour lives approximately in the year 1900, and one over there lives in the year 1880.<sup>61</sup>

The temporal differentiation of readings of the contemporary metropolis must be taken into account. So too must the prior knowledge or ‘stock of knowledge at hand’ (Alfred Schutz) in recognizing a modern language of forms. Similarly, the loss or threatened loss of orientation by the destruction of the past requires new facilitators for the acquisition of a new language. Although writing in 1897 with a different aim, Karl Kraus comments that ‘Vienna is now being demolished into a metropolis. Together with the old houses the *last pillars of our memories* are falling, and soon an irreverent spade will have also leveled the venerable Cafe Griensteidl to the ground.’<sup>62</sup> The new Vienna emerging alongside old Vienna gave a stimulus to nostalgia. Not merely a ‘new’ Vienna in the process of being developed but also the ideology of ‘old Vienna’ was being renewed.

60 See Karl Henrici, ‘Moderne Architektur’, *Deutsche Bauzeitung* XXXI (1897), 14–20.

61 Adolf Loos, ‘Ornament and Crime’, in *The Architecture of Adolf Loos* (London, 1897), p.101.

62 Karl Kraus, ‘The demolished literature’, in *The Vienna Coffee House Wits 1890–1938*, edited by Harold B. Segel (West Lafayette, 1993), p.65.

Thus, beneath Wagner's confident and often very general reading of modern life as precondition for a modern metropolitan architecture that would be appropriate to it, the issues associated with rendering a reading possible and intelligible were clearly more complex than he appeared to indicate. However, without reducing the significance of his writings, it is Wagner's modern architecture itself which displays a very close reading of the immediate space within which it is located.

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