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Roger Paden [a]
[a] George Mason University
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Otto Wagner's modern architecture

ROGER PADEN
George Mason University

ABSTRACT *Wagner is thought to be one of the first Modern Architects, yet a number of writers have argued that his most famous Modern building, the "Postsparkasse," violates the most basic principles of Modern Architecture; principles that Wagner himself helped develop. This essay develops a new interpretation of this building by placing it in the context of fin de siècle Viennese culture. This interpretation shows that the "Postsparkasse" is a Modern building, but it also shows that the common understanding of "Modern Architecture" needs to be revised. It also suggests a new role for architecture in the contemporary world.*

According to what I will be calling, "the received view," the Viennese architect, Otto Wagner was one of the most important early members of the Modern Movement in architecture; a "pioneer of Modern design" (Pevsner); a "forerunner of Modern Architecture" (Sarnitz). His reputation rests on three pillars. First, in 1896, he wrote *Modern Architecture*, a very influential manifesto of early Modern Architecture. Second, between 1902 and 1918, he built a number of iconic early Modern buildings, perhaps the most important of which being the Imperial and Royal Austrian Postal Savings Bank, the "*Postsparkasse*" (1904–1906). Carl Schorske described this building, together with Wagner's *St. Leopold's Church at the Steinhof Hospital* (1902–1904), as "perhaps the most radically modern monumental buildings built by a European state since the erection of the Eiffel Tower" (p. 239). Third, he helped train a number of important Modern Architects, including Josef Hoffmann, Joseph Olbrich, and Richard Neutra. More recently, however, a controversy has arisen about whether or not the *Postsparkasse* is, in fact, a Modern building–and this controversy has raised questions as to whether or not Wagner is really a Modern Architect at all. Peter Haiko, for example, argues that Wagner's style is a kind of falsely Modern, "pseudo-functionalism" (Wagner, 1987, pp. 5–11). Along the same lines, Sanford Anderson uses the phrase "representational pseudo-*Sachlichkeit* [i.e., pseudo-practicality]" (p. 347) to describe Wagner's style, while Ákos Moravánszky's argues that Wagner's use of "masks" shows his Modernism to be false (1993). The question of Wagner's Modernism is worth pursuing, not only because its answer might help us understand both the building and the nature of Wagner's modernism, but also because it might help us understand

Correspondence Address: Roger Paden, George Mason University, 4400 University Drive, Fairfax, Virginia 22030. Email: rpaden@gmu.edu

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the nature of Modern Architecture more generally, as well as the role of architecture in modern society. Many writers have tried to address the question of Wagner's modernism by placing him within various European architectural traditions (Mallgrave, 1993). In this paper, I will take a different approach by locating him within the broader artistic and intellectual traditions of *fin de siècle* Vienna; in particular, by relating his work to that of the Viennese Secession. To do this, however, I must begin with a brief account of Austrian society.

Austria's Incomplete Modernization

Modernity came late–and then quickly–to Austria and, as a result, Austrian society suffered from a very uneven process of development (Vergo, pp. 9–17). In 1890, Vienna was still the capital of an Empire that traced its roots back many centuries. It had been ruled for many years by a conservative Emperor who resisted change of any sort, perhaps because the Empire had been in decline for many years and most recent changes had been for the worse. The Empire was breaking apart along ethnic lines; it had lost its leadership of the German-speaking world to Prussia; its economy was unable to keep up with the more dynamic economies of Western Europe; and its military was in decline. Finally, with the nobility still well-entrenched in government, with the virtual collapse of its liberal parties, and with the rise of a number of mass political movements, its political establishment was unable to respond to the challenges facing the society.

At the same time, Vienna was undergoing an intellectual, scientific, and artistic revolution and, during the *fin de siècle* period (1890–1910), it would become a world leader in physics, medicine, and philosophy, and, more important for this essay, in art and architecture. It was difficult to determine, however, in which direction Austria was headed. As a result, as the journalist and satirist, Karl Kraus, observed, Austria's half-steps toward modernism had created a "techno-romantic" civilization whose quickly developing technology had already outstripped its people's attitudes, understandings, and traditional–if somewhat Romantic–views of life.

The uneven nature of Austria's development was perhaps best illustrated by the *Ringstrasse*, the urban redevelopment project that created modern Vienna. Beginning in 1857, the defensive walls that surrounded the old city were destroyed and replaced by a series of wide streets. As part of this project, which was intended to unite the old city with its rapidly growing suburbs, to facilitate movement through the city, and, thus, to bring it into the modern age, a number of monumental public buildings were built along the *Ringstrasse*, including Vienna's new Opera House and Royal Theater, its History of Art and Natural History Museums, its City Hall, and Austria's Parliament Building. Each of these structures was designed in an historical style thought appropriate to its function: the *Rathaus* in a Gothic style to recall Vienna's early history as a free city; the *Burgtheater* in a Baroque style referencing the time when the theater united the society; the University in a Renaissance style indicating its connection to humanism and destruction of medieval superstition; and the Parliament in a classical style to connect it to the birthplace of democracy, Athens (Schorske, p. 37).

This copying of styles from diverse periods, known as "historical eclecticism," was widely popular with the citizens of Vienna. For the more progressive elements of

Austrian society, however, the failure to develop a new style for these buildings symbolized Austria's cultural backwardness; for them, the placing of buildings designed according to a variety of historical styles along streets which were supposed to help usher Austria into the modern age illustrated Austria's uneven and contradictory development. Their rejection of historical eclecticism reflected a more general critique of European culture. For example, in 1873, Friedrich Nietzsche published the first of his *Untimely Meditation* in which he criticized what he called the "historicism" of the German intelligentsia, who, celebrating the victory of Prussia over France and believing that whatever happened to be the case was good, had adopted a cultural complacency that Nietzsche though both naive and dangerous:

> Culture is. . .unity of artistic style in all expressions of the life of a people. Much knowledge and learning is neither an essential means to culture nor a sign of it, and if needs be [this learning] can get along very well with the opposite of culture, barbarism, which is lack of style or a chaotic jumble of all styles.
>
> It is in such a chaotic jumble of styles that the German of our day dwells: and one seriously wonders how, with all his erudition, he can possibly fail to notice it, but on the contrary, rejoices from the very heart at the "culture" he at present possesses. For everything ought to instruct him: [in] every glance he casts at his clothes, his room, his home, [in] every walk he takes through the streets of his town. . . , he ought to notice the grotesque juxtapositions and confusions of different styles. The German amasses around him the forms and colors, productions and curiosities of every age and every clime, and produces that. . .motley which his learned colleagues. . .classify as the "modern as such," while he himself remains seated calmly in the midst of the tumult. But. . .this kind of "culture". . .is in fact only a phlegmatic lack of all feeling for culture. . . . [It is the culture of] the cultivated philistine (1997a, pp. 5–7).

As Nietzsche argued in his second *Untimely Meditation*, the "monumental" and the "antiquarian" attitudes toward history that had produced this modern simulacrum of culture was the most debilitating force in European society (1997b), one which

> . . .enfeebled the individual's ability to act and reduced him to a restless, pathetic spectator unable to forget the past, banished to abstraction under the weight of erudition, and robbed of personality by the mask of culture (Mallgrave, 1988, p. 74).

If culture is to be renewed, Nietzsche argued, it would require the creation of a new, original, "grand style." Many members of the Viennese avant-garde agreed.

Wagner's Modern Theory: Modern Architecture

Wagner began his career as a *Ringstrasse* architect working in what he called "a certain free Renaissance" style. He was a conservative developer who built a number of

apartment houses, as well as a personal residence, the *Villa Wagner I*, in this style. During this "*Ringstrasse* Period" (1880–1896), he became one of Vienna's most well-established architects and urban planners. In 1894, he was appointed to a chair of architecture at the Vienna Academy of Fine Arts and in the same year was selected to be the architect for the city's new municipal rail system, the *Stadtbahn*, which was intended to further modernize Vienna's transportation infrastructure. At the end of this period, he came under the influence of Vienna's new Modern Art movement, the Secession, which led to a short, transitional "Art Nouveau phase" (1896–1901), during which he designed a number of buildings in the Art Nouveau style favored by the Secessionists. By 1902, however, Wagner had abandoned this style in favor of a more Modern, spare, and functionalist approach to architecture. During this final "Modern period," from 1902 to his death in 1918, he built a number of "Modern" buildings including the *Postsparkasse* (1903–1912), a second residence, the *Villa Wagner II* (1912), and the *St. Leopold Church*.

Wagner wrote his most famous book, *Modern Architecture*, in 1896, during his Art Nouveau period. In it, he developed a theory of the historical origins of architectural styles that he used to ground a critique of historical eclecticism that targeted the monumental buildings lining the *Ringstrasse*, and to motivate a theory of Modern Architecture. According to his critique, throughout its history, changes in architectural styles had been driven by technology as

> . . .[e]ach new style gradually emerged from the earlier one when new methods of construction, new materials, new human tasks and viewpoints demanded a change or reconstitution of existing forms. [Consequently,] art and artists have always represented their epoch (1988a, p. 74).

With the 19th Century and its rapid pace of technological development, however, this process came to an end as technological change

> . . .outpaced every development of art. What was therefore more natural than that "art," in the rush to make up for what it had missed, sought. . .salvation everywhere. . . . The past century's effort to race through every stylistic tendency was the result of this trend (1988a, p. 74).

The result was a "hodgepodge of styles, with everything copied. . ." (1988a, p. 76). Wagner believed that this was a mistake, arguing that

> . . .[a]rt and artists must represent their time. The salvation of the future cannot lie in racing through every stylistic trend, as has happened in the last decades. . . . [T]he starting point of every artistic creation must be the need, ability, means, and achievements of our time (1988b, p. 161).

Thus, there was a need to develop a new, "Modern," style, an "art for our time" (1988c, p. 143).

In many ways, this theory was similar to the critique of 19th Century art advanced by the Viennese Secessionists; a critique that led them to place the slogan "To every

age its art and to art its freedom'' on their new (1889) exhibition building (designed by Wagner's student, Joseph Olbrich, and financed by Wittgenstein's father). This view echoed Nietzsche, who claimed that

> [t]here were centuries during which the Greeks found themselves facing a danger similar to that which faces us: the danger of being overwhelmed by what was past and foreign, of perishing through ''history.'' They never lived in proud inviolability: their ''culture'' was, rather, for a long time a chaos of foreign...forms and ideas..., somewhat as ''German culture''...is now a struggling chaos...of all past ages. And yet..., [t]he Greeks gradually learned *to organize the chaos* by...thinking back to themselves, that is, to their real needs, and letting their pseudo-needs die out....
>
> This is a parable for...us: [we] must organize the chaos within [us] by thinking back to [our] real needs. [Our] honesty, the strength and truthfulness of [our] character, must...rebel against a state of things in which [we] only repeat what we have heard, learn what is already known, imitate what already exists; [we must] grasp that culture can be something other than a *decoration of life*..., more than dissimulation and disguise; for all adornment conceals that which is adorned.... [C]ulture [is] a new and improved [nature]..., without dissimulation and convention, culture [is] a unanimity of life, thought, appearance and will (1997b, pp. 122–123).

By a different route, Wagner reached many of Nietzsche's conclusions. Wagner's technological determinism led him to a theory of the 'real needs' of modern culture that seemed to predispose him to a more functionalist style. The architect, he wrote, ''always has to develop the art-form out of construction'' (1988a, p. 95). Specifically, the artist ''has not only to show the construction clearly in the created art-form, but to convince the viewer that the material used and the time of production are properly expressed in the work'' (1988a, p. 83). Therefore, the form of a building ''...must clearly reveal the material of construction and the technology used'' (1987, p. 18). Since, ''something impractical cannot be beautiful'' (1988a, p. 82), Wagner called for the development of a new Modern style to replace all earlier styles, a ''utility style'' (1987, p. 18), in which ''utility...prepares [the way] for art'' (1988a, p. 93). A real artist, he concluded, must remember that ''necessity is art's only mistress'' (1988a, p. 91). All this has a familiar ring today as it resonates with the popular slogan of Modern Architecture, ''form follows function.''

Importantly, however, this slogan's central term is ambiguous as there are at least two types of architectural functionalism (Topp, pp. 1–27). Call the first and most familiar type, ''structural-functionalism.'' According to this type of functionalism, the form of a building is supposed to ''express'' its underlying structure. Implicit in this view is a critique of architectural ''ornamentation,'' i.e., all ''arbitrary and structurally unnecessary decorations.'' In effect agreeing with Nietzsche, Modern Architects claimed that such decorations were ''masks'' that hid the underlying structure of the building; they criticized such decorations as ''false,'' while celebrating more Modern, functionalist buildings for their ''honesty'' (Brolin, pp. 1–27). In Vienna, this critique was most forcefully pressed by Adolph Loos, who famously identified ''ornament''

with "crime" (1995) and who, in an 1898 issue of the Secessionist journal, *Ver Sacrum*, condemned Vienna for being a "Potemkin City" (1995); that is, a city of facades, lacking substance. Given his demand that architects must clearly show the construction of their buildings and his claim that "the striving toward truth must be the guiding star of the architect" (1988a, p. 83), Wagner seemed to adopt this view: indeed, his abandonment of his middle period, Art Nouveau style might have been motivated by a desire to bring his practice more in line with his theory, for the Art Nouveau elements that he attached to his buildings during this period were just the kind of arbitrary decoration his theory condemned.

Call the second type of functionalism, "social-use functionalism" or simply "social-functionalism." This type of functionalism holds that the form of a building should reflect its social function or purpose; that is, that its form should express or facilitate the activities that are to occur within its walls. On this view, usefulness and economic efficiency are the ultimate standards by which we should design and judge architecture. A building, on this view, is constructed for some purpose and a good building should help achieve that purpose as fully and as cheaply as possible so that its occupants can efficiently satisfy their existing needs. This type of functionalism also entails a (less radical) critique of ornament: while useless and arbitrary decoration is to be avoided as it adds to the cost of construction, decorations that indicate or promote the activities for which the building was designed–say by helping orient people to its activities–are acceptable. Wagner, with his emphasis on practicality and usefulness, and with his calls for a new utility-style, seemed to adopt this form of functionalism, too.

Wagner's Modern Building: The Postsparkasse

Wagner's *Postsparkasse* was designed to house a relatively new type of institution for Austria. Founded in 1882 and based on existing institutions in Western Europe, the Austrian Postal Savings Bank accepted small deposits from poorer citizens at any post office in Austria. By paying a fixed three percent interest, the Bank hoped to attract the previously untapped capital of the poorer members of the population and make it available for government projects. In addition, however, "convinced that the...British materialist pragmatism of Adam Smith could [be made to] work in Austria," its creator and first director, Georg Coch, sought to "introduce rational, consistent practices into the way the mass of relatively poor people handled their money, encouraging them to restrain from all unnecessary expenses and replacing the habits of hiding money in socks or under mattresses" (Topp, pp. 100–101). Thus, its larger purpose was not just to mobilize capital to meet existing needs, but rather it was to help transform Austrian workers and peasants into more sophisticated and rational economic actors, who could participate more fully in the emerging capitalist economy; in short, its purpose was to better adapt the poorer members of Austria's population to the modern world.

The Bank had become very successful and had outgrown its relatively small original quarters, which were said to have become, cramped, inefficient, and 'unhygienic.' Breaking with its tradition, the Ministry of Commerce solicited proposals for a new building from private architects. Wagner won the competition

on the basis of what all thought was a design for a remarkably efficient building; indeed, when the building was finally occupied by the Bank, the *Neue Freie Presse* commented: "A very impressive machine has been put into motion" (Topp, p. 102). The completed building was set across a small plaza from the *Ringstrasse*. Its plan, with its placement of private offices and public halls, guaranteed a highly efficient operation. Moreover, it appeared to be a very Modern building. Its windows were unembellished by typical Viennese baroque ornamentation and its main doors were sheltered by a simple metal and glass awning. Finally, a glass and metal, gabled-roof, reminiscent of the London's 1851 Crystal Palace was to stand above the building's highest story and visibly mark from the outside the location of the building's central banking hall, where members of the public would do their business. Unfortunately, this visible roof was rejected late in the design process when a newly-appointed Director of the Bank required Wagner to lower the roof to just above the main hall's glass ceiling (which was supported from above by the roof in both designs) so as to allow the building's interior windows to open directly to the outside air. This change, done in the name of "hygienic air circulation," was both unnecessary and the cause of future maintenance problems. Moreover, as I will argue later, it undermined the artistic integrity of the building.

The building's external walls were clad with inexpensive stone panels attached to the underlying masonry structure with iron bolts covered with aluminum caps (Ford, p. 219–223) [Figure 1]. Outside the ground and first floors, these panels were

Figure 1 Otto Wagner, "Postsparkgasse," Front Elevation (Photograph by author).

Figure 2 Otto Wagner, "Postsparkgasse," Central Hall (Photograph by author).

made out of rough stone and were rusticated to give the impression of great mass and strength. Outside the upper stories, the panels were made of smooth marble and fitted more closely together to give the appearance of fine workmanship. The size and number of bolts attaching the panels to the building varied, as did the patterns they formed, with more and larger bolts on the panels nearer to the building's central vertical axis. Atop the building on either side of a pergola marking the spot where the glass roof was to have arisen, stood two acroteria, statues of the Greek Goddess Nike, each holding a laurel wreath in each of her outstretched arms. The interior was designed to be an efficient factory for the production of money. Its most striking element is its central public hall [Figure 2]. During the day, light floods into the hall through its ceiling which is made entirely of metal and frosted glass. The ceiling appears to be very light as it is supported from above by the metal and glass roof. Its floor is made of glass block so as to transmit light to the sorting rooms below. Most of the visible walls are made of highly polished metal, stone, or glass panels that could be easily cleaned so as to promote hygiene. These panels are attached to the walls with bolts that echoed those on the exterior walls. The freestanding heating vents, lights, and other decorations are made of burnished metal, giving the hall the appearance of being very modern and efficient.

The Dissenting View

In contrast with what I have been calling "the received view," "the dissenting view" holds that, despite his theoretical work, Wagner was not really a Modern Architect,

at least not in practice. Proponents of this second view base much of their case on the apparent contradictions between Wagner's admittedly Modern theory and the buildings he designed during his last "Modern" period, especially his *Postsparkasse*. Partisans on both sides of the debate do agree that some aspects of the *Postsparkasse* seem Modern. Remembering the ambiguity in Modern Architecture, the *Postsparkasse* could be said to be Modern in two senses. It is Modern in a structural-functionalist sense in that it makes extensive use of metal and glass; in that its exterior walls are clad with a thin non-load-bearing veneer; and in that these exterior walls are relatively free of unnecessary ornament. Consistent with the demands of social-functionalism, the building's plan seems to be Modern in that it is based on a single criterion, the efficient conduct of business.

However, Wagner made use of a number of design elements that did not seem to be consistent with Modern theory. Some of these elements look to the past. For example, the panels used on the exterior of the building reference decorations drawn from the history of architecture where marble was used to signal the importance of a building and rusticated stone was used to signal the ability of the lower stories to support the weight of the upper stories resting on them. Moreover, the statues of Nike seemed to refer to an ancient way of life. Finally, as Haiko has pointed out, the layout of the bank's main entrance and central hall resembles the layout of a church in the way that "the rooms leading to the main hall were staged: open-air stairway–portal–lobby–cross corridor–hall," while the main hall itself resembles a three-naved basilica with a high central nave and lower lateral chapels, where the real 'saving' would take place at the tellers' windows; "this arrangement," Haiko argued, "emphasized the sanctity of the main room, ennobling it" (p. 18). In addition, the proposed visible glass roof, that would call attention to this design feature from the outside, echoes the roof-line of a church. The building also seems to be covered with some more modern elements, especially the bolts on its external walls. As a number of writers have pointed out, however, these bolts, which appear to hold the stone panels to the underlying structure, do not actually serve this function: instead, the panels are adhesively attached to the structure. But, because the bolts are not currently serving a structural function, they must be understood as merely ornamental and, as such, a violation of Modernist principles. Thus, according to the dissenting view, the *Postsparkasse* is replete with forbidden architectural ornament, both old and new, and, as a result, it is not consistent with Wagner's own theory of Modern Architecture.

Although they are aware of all these problems, dissenters tend to base their critique of Wagner's building almost entirely on the problem of the exterior bolts. Their disapproval seems to be motivated, in part, by the fact that these bolts *seem* so Modern and functional: they don't just violate Modernist principles, they *betray* them. With this relatively narrow focus, most of these writers seem to base their criticisms on a structural-functionalist version of Modern Architecture. For example, Peter Haiko writes that, with his designs, Wagner did not

> . . .make transparent the real conditions of creation. . . . Thus, for Wagner, the simulation of an anchoring of the facade slabs was more important than their

> actual fastening. Perception took priority.... His functionalism was a metaphorical one (p. 15).

This last charge–that the use of the bolts was misleading–brings out the moralistic attitude that lies just beneath the surface of Modernist rhetoric. This attitude is clear in Moravánszky's charge that Wagner's use of these bolts makes the building's exterior into a "mask," i.e., a false, deceptive facade. From a more social-functionalist perspective, Anderson describes Wagner's style as "representational pseudo-practicality" (p. 347), implying that Wagner's 'utility-style' is neither practical nor functional; that it is a false Modernism. (Parenthetically, given the Postmodern criticism on Modernism–that all Modern architects, despite their distain for architectural ornament, actually made extensive use of a variety of different kinds of 'Modern' ornament (Venturi; Brolin)–, it may be that Wagner, with his simultaneous use and critique of ornament, truly was a "pioneer of Modern design"; a pioneer who first enacted the contradictions Postmodernist think are characteristic of Modern Architecture.)

Wagner, himself, tacitly acknowledging that there was a problem in his style, offered two explanations of a few of the problematic elements of the building. The "Explanation" that accompanied his original proposal appealed to ideas that reflected a social-functionalist approach. According to this explanation, the problematic design elements communicate messages to the public that will encourage them to use the Bank. Thus, the rusticated granite panels signal that this is both a government building and a bank, by indicating both solidity and soundness, while the smooth marble panels indicate great wealth. Moreover, the 'winged goddesses on the roof' symbolically stand for 'thriftiness,' 'customer service,' and 'the spirit of savings,' while the bolts represent 'a shower of gold.' Therefore, these symbols identify and facilitate the social function of the bank (1994, p. 41). This explanation, however, is fairly weak. First, Nike (to give the acroteria their proper name), has no connection to thriftiness, but is instead connected with the virtues leading to competitive success, especially military, athletic, or (in Austria) artistic. Statues of Nike, sometimes combined with Athena, often appeared in late Viennese art and architecture: Athena holding a small statue of Nike stands in front of the Parliament building (where she acts as a protector of the state) and on top of *Künsthistorisches* Museum (where she acts as a protector of the arts). Wagner, too, used both Nike and Athena on many of his other realized buildings and in drawings for unbuilt projects and on none of them can the statues be connected with 'thriftiness.' Second, the bolts on the *Postsparkasse* are aluminum, not gold; they look like bolts, not coins; and they seem to be arranged in a rigidly geometric way that does not connote a shower. Moreover, similar bolts appear on a number of Wagner's buildings and in no other case can they be connected to the idea of money.

When taking some journalists on a tour of the *Postsparkasse*, Wagner gave another, slightly more plausible, explanation of the bolts that connected them to the structure of the building. He argued that the bolts, while serving no current function, were originally necessary to secure the panels to the building while the adhesive that actually holds them to the building dried and that they now serve as a mark of this construction technique (Topp, p. 129). While more plausible than the first,

this explanation, too, suffers from a number of problems. First, a number of authors have expressed doubts that the bolts were actually needed for the structural reasons Wagner mentioned (Topp, p. 129; Ford). Second, bolts also appear inside the building, as well, where they are clearly decorative. Third, this explanation leaves the pattern of distribution of the bolts across the front of the building completely mysterious. Finally, it says nothing about the building's other problematic elements. Thus, the problems facing these interpretations of Wagner's building point to the need for an alternative explanation, one that would not only explain *all* the problematic features of the building, but, I think, one that would explain the building in terms of its broader cultural context and especially the work and worldview of the members of the Viennese Secession.

The Viennese Secession

Like its counterparts in Munich and Berlin, the Viennese Secession is usually understood to be a revolt by younger artists interested in exploring new, more modern styles against what the rebels viewed as the oppressive control of the arts by more conservative artists and their well-established societies; and, on one level, the "Viennese Secession" simply refers to the withdrawal of a group of younger artists headed by Gustav Klimt from the older society of artists that controlled the official exhibition hall, the *Künstlerhaus*. On this view, the Secessionists were taking this step simply to gain greater artistic freedom and economic viability which they achieved with the construction of the Secession Building. This account, however, is incomplete as it ignores the worldview of the Secession's more philosophically-sophisticated members, many of whom saw the Secession as reacting to the underdeveloped state of Austrian art and to the wider crisis of Austrian culture and as seeking to become the avant-garde of a wider cultural movement whose purpose was to transform the entire society. For example, according to Max Burckhard's essay on the first page of the first issue of *Ver Sacrum*, both the name of the group, the "Secession," and the journal's title refer to ancient revolutionary events, e.g., the term "secession" was taken from the Latin phrase "*secessio plebis*," which referred to an incident in which the Roman people withdrew from the city and threatened to found another Rome if their demands were not met (p. 916). These Secessionists clearly saw themselves as in revolt against the entire existing society: they were both aesthetic and social revolutionaries.

Klimt expressed similar ideas in a number of his paintings in which he, too, made use of classical references. For example, in a 1898 poster announcing the Secession's First Exhibition, he depicts Athena looking on as Theseus slays the Minotaur. These last two figures are generally thought to represent the Secession and the *Künstlerhaus*, respectively. With this act, however, Theseus was not simply winning a battle against a powerful established enemy, but he was setting into motion a series of events which would ultimately transform Athens. The presence of Athena in the poster initiates another theme. Athena, as I mentioned above, was a common figure in Imperial Vienna, widely understood to be the protectress of both art and the state, but in this poster Klimt uses her to symbolize the struggle between the arts and established institutions, and to signal the inevitable triumph of the arts and perhaps even the founding of a new social order.

Both Athena and Nike appear in a number of Klimt's works (e.g., the *Poster for the First Secession Exhibition* (1898), *Pallas Athena* (1898), the *Dedication Page* for the *Ver Sacrum* issue celebrating Rudolf Alt on his 88th birthday (1900) and the *Beethoven Frieze* (1902)), but their meaning changes as Klimt's artistic vision changes. During his early decorative period (1880–1897), Klimt used these Greek goddesses in the then standard way to celebrate Austrian culture and society, but during his Secessionist period (1897–1903), he gradually altered their significance; first, using them to predict and celebrate the success of the Secessionist's revolt, later, using them to explore the philosophical assumptions of the more radical members of the Secession. These projects had their philosophical roots in the ideas of Schopenhauer and Nietzsche, whose influence, either directly or indirectly, through the work of the composer, Richard Wagner, cannot be overemphasized (McGrath). In particular, the Secessionists accepted Nietzsche's critique of European society and, like him, they utterly rejected the views of the "cultivated philistine" who thought that the function of art was to produce pleasure, while the function of history was to provide 'edification,' along with a treasure trove of styles. Finally, like Nietzsche, these young Viennese artists believed that "art is the highest task and true metaphysical activity of this life" (1999, p. 14) and they granted art this high status because they thought that (as Nietzsche's analysis of Greek tragedy had seemingly demonstrated) it has the potential to affect some kind of psychological or spiritual transformation. On Nietzsche's view, this was possible because art can serve as a "transfigurative mirror" that can show us our current state and, thereby, lead us to change it (1999, p. 24). Klimt used this idea as the central metaphor in his painting, *Nuda Veritas*, in which a nude woman holds up a mirror to her audience in order to cause its members to reflect on their reactions to her nudity and perhaps change their traditional attitudes. In Klimt's *Pallas Athena*, Athena holds a stature of Nuda Veritas rather than Nike in her hand, thereby, connecting the Secession with this idea of the transformative power of art.

Many of the more radical Secessionists shared this quasi-religious, neo-Romantic view of art, according to which the purpose of art is to bring about some sort of profound, personal or "metaphysical" transformation in its audience (Whalen). This transformation, they hoped, might even trigger a larger social change that would solve the problems that were the result of Austria's incomplete modernization. As they argued in their manifestoes, to accomplish these ends, they had to develop new styles and new forms of art and challenge dated artistic hierarchies. Moreover, this view of art was the foundation of the Secessionists' self-image as an artistic and social avant-garde.

Otto Wagner and the Secessionists

Wagner, connected to the Secessionists through a number of threads, was strongly influenced by these neo-Romantic ideas. Several of Wagner's students, most importantly Hoffmann and Olbrich, were among the founding members and most active participants in the Secession. Wagner himself joined the Secession in 1899. Koloman Moser, another founding member of the Secession, provided the decorations for some of Wagner's buildings, in particular, a stained glass version of Klimt's *Pallas Athena* for the *Villa Wagner II*. Moreover, Wagner was a great admirer

of Klimt's work, believing Klimt to be "the greatest artist who ever walked the earth" (Schorske, p. 84). Finally, Wagner played a role in the scandal that brought Klimt's Secessionist period to an end. This scandal concerned three paintings that Klimt produced to decorate the main hall of the University's new *Ringstrasse* building. These paintings were supposed to celebrate the University Faculties' role in bring about the Enlightenment triumph of light over Medieval darkness, but, instead, Klimt produced three paintings that criticized these faculties (and the Enlightenment project, itself) from a Schopenhauerian perspective. The resulting controversy, which reached even into Parliament, brought Klimt great pain and professional harm, and Wagner, who was a member of an official commission charged with evaluating Klimt's works could not have failed to see that Viennese society was essentially conservative and that, in this situation, it is a mistake for artists to antagonize either the public or their clients with overly provocative creations.

Nevertheless, Wagner was strongly influenced by a number of Secessionist ideas and practices. Some early evidence of this influence can be found for this in Wagner's use of the Art Nouveau lines and themes popularized by the Secession in his Secessionist Period buildings; and in his continuing use of images of Athena/Nike which, throughout his later periods, connect his work to that of Klimt. More evidence of this influence can be found in *Modern Architecture*. This evidence, however, indicates that, while Wagner adopted some neo-Romantic ideas, he rejected others. While Schopenhauer, Nietzsche, Richard Wagner, and many of the more radical Secessionists differed as to the central problem facing modern society, they agreed that the social and cultural problems confronting modern individuals showed that the modern world was essentially flawed. Consequently, they sought an alternative to it. Others, however finding no essential flaw in modern life and thinking that Austria's problems lay in its incomplete transition to the modern world, sought only to complete that transition. For example, while accepting the radical Secessionists' ideas on the transformative power of art, Hermann Bahr thought that artists should use the power of art to help society complete this transition: their goal should be to help transform people into fully modern individuals. He wrote that for

> . . .us, the modern is something for which we can only wish, and yet it is out there everywhere, outside ourselves. It is not in our spirit. It is the torment and the sickness of our century, feverish and enraged, that. . .life has flown from it. Life has been transformed down to its very foundations, and every day it is continually changing into something new, restless and unsatisfied. But the spirit remains old and stiff and did not stir or raise itself; and now it suffers helplessly, for it is isolated and abandoned by life. . . .
>
> For hundreds of years the body had feuded with the spirit, the body of the new society. It created drives and desires, previously unknown and still not understood today, for the spirit remained narrow, hunched and deformed. It is not the new body which causes us pain, but the fact that we do not yet possess its spirit.
>
> We want to become true. . . . We want to become what the world around us has become. We want to shake off the decayed past, whose bloom has long

> since faded and which now suffocates our soul.... We want to be of the present....
>
> This will be the [task of the] new art... (p. 909).

A careful reading of *Modern Architecture* shows that Wagner shared these views. With, Bahr (and contrary to the views of the more radical Secessionists), Wagner believed that the real problem with modern life was that society had progressed too quickly and that contemporary individuals, caught in their slowly changing traditional understandings and attitudes, were not suited to the new social order: modern individuals had not yet adapted to the society they had created–and it was the task of art to help them do so. Thus, despite the often narrowly functionalist rhetoric of *Modern Architecture*, Wagner argued that architecture is also an art and that, therefore, architects must span the gap between the engineer and the artist (1988a, p. 94). Architects "with [their] happy combination of idealism [art] and realism [engineering]" had and should "combine the best elements of both" (1988a, p. 61). This emphasis on the artist side of architecture can be found even in the book's most functionalist passages:

> Need, purpose, construction, and *idealism* are therefore the primitive germs of artistic life. United in a single idea, they produce a kind of 'necessity' in the origin and existence of every work of art, and this is the meaning of the words... ['art has only one mistress, necessity'] (1988a, p. 91, emphasis added).

It is also clear, however, that Wagner's views on the task of art are more limited as compared to those of the more radical members of the Secession. At times, he simply suggests that "[t]he beautiful expression that art will give to the works of our time obviously has to harmonize with the views and appearance of modern man" (1988a, p. 124). But in other passages, he goes beyond this relatively passive, reflective, view and argues that art must be active and oriented to a new future. For example, he claims that although

> ...all modern creations must correspond to the new materials and demands of the present if they are to suit modern man, they must [also] illustrate our own better, democratic, self-confident, ideal nature and take into account man's colossal technical and scientific achievements.... (1988a, p. 78)

Wagner adopts an interesting turn of phrase when discussing this point. Schorske, in his analysis of Klimt's *Nuda Veritas*, quotes Wagner as saying that the aim of art is to "show modern man his true face" (p. 215), but what Wagner actually holds is that art must not show the face of modern man as he actually is, but rather it must show the face of modern man as he could be: "Art," Wagner writes, has "the power to show man his own *ideal* reflection" (1988a, p. 79, emphasis added). This phrase echoes Nietzsche's notion that art can be a "transformative mirror" and connects Wagner's work to Klimt's *Nuda Veritas*. Thus, despite Wagner's conservative predispositions, he clearly believed that art can be a very powerful tool for social change. He marveled at "the mysterious and overwhelming power that architectural

works have on man;'' he claimed that architecture is ''the most powerful expression of art'' (1988a, p. 62), and, argued that, if his students are diligent, they ''will become what architects of all epochs were–children of their time;'' and, as such, they would become ''truly creative...*educators*'' (1988a, p. 125, emphasis added). Additional evidence that Wagner accepted a neo-Romantic worldview can be found in his architecture and his urban planning projects.

Wagner, the Secession, and the Postsparkasse

How does the *Postsparkasse* implement Wagner's neo-Romantic program? How does it help to ease the transition to a fully modern life? A successful interpretation must begin with the fact that the acroteria are not ''wreath-bearing angels'' (Mallgrave, 1988, p. 39), nor ''iconographically unidentified female figures,'' nor ancient ''priestesses'' (Tabor, p. 41), but instead, they are statues of Nike. That they are depictions of Nike is implicit in Wagner's suggestion that they represent a particular virtue. Moreover, their remarkable similarity to the Nikes in Klimt's ''Dedication Drawing,'' *Beethoven Frieze*, and to the Nike held by the statue of Athena atop the *Künsthistorisches* Museum leave little doubt as to their real identity. Given this, together with Wagner's close association with Klimt and other Secessionists, who used Athena and Nike to represent their commitment to a neo-Romantic view of art, it is difficult to believe that his use of this symbol did not indicate a partial acceptance of that view. But, if so, how was this view incorporated into the design of this building? How should the building be read?

Imagine one of Wagner's contemporaries, perhaps a member of Vienna's avant-garde, approaching the building for the first time. For such a person, the acroteria will signal its connection to a neo-Romantic view art, thereby providing the key to the proper interpretation of the building. The Nikes would also draw the viewer's attention to the gabled roof between them. This (unfortunately unbuilt) very Modern roof would (as would soon become apparent) call attention to the central hall that lies directly beneath it, signaling its importance (along with the activities that would take place therein). Moreover, the shape of this roof would repeat the roof-lines of nearby churches, thus, hinting at a more spiritual program. As this person enters the building, this ecclesiastical premonition would be reinforced by the staging of the entrance hall and confirmed by the design of the central hall: the building has a quasi-religious, neo-Romantic, transformative purpose. Reflecting the purpose of the institution housed by the building, its plan and its decorations would point in the direction of the desired transformation: the building is designed to help those entering the bank to negotiate the move into the modern world. The building, just like the institution it houses, would seem to this visitor to be designed to help further the process of transforming its clients into modern individuals.

This interpretation can be extended to the panels and bolts on the facade of the building. At first, these panels might seem explicable on social-functionalist grounds. However, this traditional interpretation is undermined by the bolts on the facade. Most dissenters have noted how the bolts contradict a structural-functionalist reading of the building, but I would argue that, more important, they contradict a naive social-functionalist reading of the building, too. This occurs twice, once with

respect to the rusticated stone panels and once with respect to the marble panels. As Wagner noted, his contemporaries would expect that, since the lower walls of a building bear the great weight of the stories above, they should be made of large, heavy and strong, stone blocks. And indeed, the *Postsparkasse* has a rusticated base, thereby satisfying these traditional expectations. But the bolts in these blocks make it clear that they are actually thin panels that bear no weight; their rustication is a stylistic device. Thus, with this conjunction of ornaments Wagner raises expectations only to contradict them. The same process occurs with the panels on the upper stories. Traditionally, banks were constructed out of expensive monumental materials to signal the wealth associated with such an institutions. The panels on the upper stories of the *Postsparkasse* raise and apparently satisfy these expectations; but the bolts show them to be, in fact, only inexpensive panels. Again expectations are raised by the panels, only to be frustrated by the bolts. Thus, in each case, Wagner has intentionally created a contradiction; he has raised expectations only to immediately contradict them. He is doing this, I believe, to call attention to Austria's incomplete modernization and to indicate the role the audience plays in this process: technology has made our attitudes and self-understandings anachronistic and as they are the source of the problems of modern society, they must change. The facade of the building, that is to say, points to the contradiction between society and psyche noted by Bahr, between modern technology and society and traditional worldviews. The facade then sets up the experience of the interior, the central hall of which is designed to suggest the possibility of a solution, one already foreshadowed by the acroteria and the gabled roof; namely, the possibility of self-transformation. Finally, the interior, together with the glass and metal roof and the fact that the building houses an efficient modern bank, suggest the direction of the necessary transformation: the problems associated with Austria's incomplete modernization can be solved if its citizens become fully modern. Thus, with the building, Wagner raises the problem of modernity and suggests a possible solution-becoming fully modern.

Like the dissenting view, this interpretation is superior to the received view in that it acknowledges what the received view ignores, the appearance of the numerous contradictions between the building and Wagner's functionalist theoretical commitments. But it also has several advantages over the dissenting view. First, it suggests an explanation for the anomalous elements of the building; they are not inexplicable mistakes, random failures on Wagner's part, but essential aspects of his design. Second, it provides a unified and systematic explanation of all these elements; they are all part of a single larger program. Third, it provides an explanation that is consistent with Wagner's written works. Finally, it connects Wagner to the cultural crisis of his time and to the wider artistic culture of his day.

No interpretation is completely free of problems. The central disadvantage of mine is the fact that, if it is correct, Wagner was remarkably disingenuous in his explanation of his building: he even seems to have consciously misled the Viennese public and his employer. If my view is to seem plausible, I must explain these actions. One explanation seems plausible. More than other artists, architects are involved in public art; typically, their buildings are part of the public world; and often architects depend on public financing to realize their projects. Unfortunately, as Loos argued, art makes people "uncomfortable" (1995, p. 82). Wagner would have been painfully aware of this fact, given that a number of his proposals had already been rejected by

the authorities. Moreover, his experience of the scandal surrounding Klimt's "Faculty Paintings" would have reinforced this point. Knowing that the Viennese public has many very conservative members, Wagner would have realized the wisdom of maintaining a relatively conservative reputation. Therefore, it would have been wise for Wagner to adopt a policy of not being needlessly provocative. A forthright discussion of his style, a declaration of allegiance to neo-Romanticism, and an overly close association with the Secession would have been very dangerous for Wagner. Consequently, he followed his muse, but without drawing attention to the fact; he designed a neo-Romantic building, but made it seem as if its design was dictated by considerations of structure and efficiency alone; and he distanced himself from the Secession, while he produced some early examples of neo-Romantic Modern Architecture.

Modern Architecture is usually understood in terms of two types of functionalism, which I have labeled "structural" and "social." Wagner developed a third type of Modern Architecture, 'transformative-functionalism," which he based on the neo-Romantic view of art of the Viennese Secessionists. However, Wagner's works differed from those of most of his close contemporaries in that, in them, he sought to *solve* the problems of the modern world, not *transcend* them. His work demonstrates that it is a mistake to think of Modern Architecture solely in terms of structural- and social-functionalism. Following this lead, I would suggest that Modern Architecture should be understood as architecture that self-consciously confronts the problems produced by economic, social, and political modernization by using the tools that technological modernization has made available. This can be done by incorporating new design and construction elements made possible by modern science and technology; or by designing buildings in which the new social activities of modern life can be efficiently pursued; but it can also be done by designing buildings that seek to help solve the cultural problems of modernity. Thus, "Modernist Architecture" is any architecture that seeks to solve modern problems with modern means.

Wagner's modernism is particularly insightful as one of the problems that is often ignored by modernists is that the modern world needs modern inhabitants. Ever since the Enlightenment it has been assumed that reason is our essence and that we are naturally attuned to the rational structures made possible by the destruction of traditional life. On this view, if we strip away "superstition"–together with the institutions based thereon–we would find our natural place in the world, and "progress" would be guaranteed. Wagner realized that the problems of Austria's incomplete modernization demonstrated that this was not the case; "modern man," the natural inhabitant of modern society, is not a natural creature at all and therefore must be created. Borrowing from the neo-Romantic theory of art, Wagner developed an architecture that aimed at helping to produce individuals who were better suited to the new institutions that the modern world. If to be modern is to face the problems created by modern life, then Wagner was indeed a pioneer of Modern Architecture. Today technology and social change have led to new problems; they have created an environmental crisis, one rooted in our now anachronistic 'modern' attitudes. As Wagner might argue, it is the task of art and architecture to address our attitudes so as to bring about a transformation in us that will help us solve these new problems.

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