

The Deutscher Werkbund, Adolf Loos, and the Problems of Ornament and Style in the 20th Century

“Standardization” versus “Individuality” as a theme running through 20th-century architecture. Cost effectiveness and practical knowledge versus aesthetic exploration; architect as pragmatic problem-solver serving social needs versus architect as dreamer and pioneer of new ideas and aesthetic forms. For many art historians, the Bauhaus (1919-1933) in Germany epitomizes the modern search for a proper balance between individual artistic creativity and practical, socially conscious design.

Individual efforts in various German states are counterpoint to the centralization of arts and crafts reforms in Germany under Prussia, particularly under Minister Theodor von Möller in Prussia's Ministry of Commerce and Trade. Reform of its 40 applied arts schools by government appointee, the architect Hermann Muthesius, together with Peter Behrens as new head of Dusseldorf School of Arts and Crafts (from 1903-1907). Transfer and reworking of British ideas on German soil: Muthesius as government reporter in London, 1896-1903, and as author of *English Building Art of the Present* (1900), *Style-Architecture and Building-Art* (1902), and *The English House* (1904-05), and other articles and books while stationed abroad. Muthesius's return to Germany and his reform of Prussian Arts and Crafts education for service to a modern economy; Beginning in 1903, instills instructional workshops emphasis, with embrace of machine design, decorative arts, product design, united under architecture. Borrows Ruskin's philosophy of “Architecture as Mother of all the Arts.” German shift in arts and crafts education: away from ‘ornamental draftsman’ to ‘applied arts craftsman’ through use of instructional design workshops. Less ornamental emphasis, greater emphasis on practicality and use (“sachlichkeit”) as determinants of design, in place of “style” (especially unreflective historical styles). Inspiration of British Arts + Crafts movement and William Morris's goal of “re-designing the world,” but whereas British deemphasize the machine and industry, Germans emphasize it. Hermann Muthesius, **Neuhaus House**, 1906, Berlin, as compared to Hermann Grisebach, **House for Wilhelm von Bode**, 1885; Peter Behrens, Dusseldorf School of Arts and Crafts **student project for a living room** (1905) as compared to student projects for **stair hall** (1888). In an earlier lecture we saw Richard Riemerschmid's **Machined Furniture**, at Third German Applied Arts Exhibition, Dresden, 1906, an exemplar for artist-industry collaboration.

Controversial Muthesius speech in early 1907, “The Meaning of the Arts and Crafts,” condemns “traditional,” historicist crafts education and ornament-based building trades. Out of the controversy emerges a new organization, The **Deutscher Werkbund**, formed October 1907 as a union of architects, artists, craftsmen, and manufacturers dedicated to the improvement of German design and production quality through “artistic intervention.” Werkbund's fusion of arts and crafts principles with modern commercial practices and machine-oriented design. The Werkbund searches for a modern German style expressive of 20th-century values, technologies, and aesthetic developments. Main exponents: Hermann Muthesius (1861-1927), the Belgian Henry Van de Velde (1863-1957), the politician Friedrich Naumann (1860-1919), Peter Behrens (1868 – 1940).

Adolf Loos, an “immigrant” to Habsburg Vienna from Brno in Moravia (in today's Czech Republic) begins shifting architects's attention in the 20th century away from style and stylistic concerns, and more in the direction of method and approach to building. Loos harbors enormous respect for architectural tradition and for crafts tradition, and to him recognizing valid traditions and eliminating imitative, inappropriate traditions is the key to an authentic, modern approach to building, the applied arts, or, in fact, any activity that involves “making.”

Adolf Loos's philosophy of architecture has significant overlaps with the thinking of Hermann Muthesius (but is far from identical to it): Both share a great respect for English culture, esp. the Arts and Crafts, the modern Englishman's suit as metaphor for anonymous, respectable, understated sophistication (in place of, say, bombastic display or loud, colorful costumes of the Imperial army officer or court aristocracy); Both seek to establish a modern self-understanding for architecture and design; Both respect the machine and the modern ingenuity of engineers; Both develop an early skepticism toward the Art Nouveau, or Jugendstil, (which flowered, remember, roughly between 1895-1904), and see it primarily as a visually driven style bounded by the dictates of artistic originality and the fast-changing whims of fashion – the Jugendstil, that is, is too dependent on appearances, whereas Loos and Muthesius, by comparison, are in pursuit of essences for architecture. Where Muthesius journeys to England for 7 years, Loos travels to America (1893-1897) and admires the practical, non-aristocratic culture he encounters there. Muthesius “debates” van de Velde at the Werkbund Exhibition of 1914 (see reading in Conrads) on the issue of developing standard “types” (Muthesius) versus defending absolute artistic “individualism” and individual creativity as against any notion of standard types (van de Velde). Loos disrespects them both.

A key Loosian formulation: “The present constructs itself on the past just as the past constructed itself on the preceding past. It has never been another way – nor will it ever be any other way.” – Adolf Loos, “My School of Building” (1913), in *Collected Works*, p. 323. Where Loos parts ways with Muthesius is in his objection to the Werkbund and its search for a modern “style.” About the Werkbund Loos writes articles attacking the organization, with titles such as “The Superfluous Ones,” and “Degenerate Art.” You CANNOT invent a style for your time, Loos argues in the 1908 essay “Ornament and Crime,” any more than you can invent an ornament for your age. Rather, the successful, authentic architect of ANY time period combines contemporary techniques of making with time-honored, successful methods of building, and thereby achieves an expression of the age. Therefore, both Muthesius and van de Velde are misguided and wrong in their approach. From this point of view, Adolf Loos also harshly criticizes: Vienna Ringstrasse and all other forms of historicism, which to him represent false stage-set architecture, mere props for phony culture instead of buildings that are modern and of their time (again, the objection to style); he criticizes Secession idea of “Gesamtkunstwerk,” or total work of art; as well as of course the Werkbund, with its search for a holistic style through artistic intervention in product and building design. Remember that for Loos, ANY self-conscious pursuit of a modern “style” is fundamentally misguided – he understands art as separate from craft; building as separate from architecture; drawing as separate from photography or painting. **Thus, the Werkbund's search for improved design “through artistic intervention” is, to Loos, idiotic, for it confuses different realms or domains of MAKING, different languages of form, different concerns about representation versus actual methodologies of making or production.** He criticizes projects of his Viennese rivals Joseph M. Olbrich (1867-1908), **Secession Building**, Vienna, 1897, and the interiors of people like van de Velde. But Adolf Loos also admires things, things like: Otto Wagner's path-breaking combination of modern materials and engineering at the **Post Office Savings Bank**, Vienna, 1904; Loos admires the American ingenuity in building high rise buildings, such as those he visited in early 1890s in Chicago's downtown, which use the latest available innovations (fireproofing, elevators, steel frame construction) to explore new possibilities of building. Example: William Le Baron Jenney, **Fair Store**, Chicago, 1891. To Loos, the American high-rise builders are the “modern Greeks” of his day, for they use the techniques and capabilities of their time to advance building as the ancient Greeks did with the building techniques and materials of their time. And both of these (the Americans and the ancient Greeks) were modern in their day. Adolf Loos, Vienna buildings: **Rudolf Steiner House**, Vienna, 1910, radical separation of exterior and interior as expression of divisions of modern public/private city realms. Dwelling as a private matter, which gives rise to the anonymous exterior treatment. “The house is conservative, art is revolutionary.” **Michaeler House**, or “Looshouse,” Vienna, 1911. Public and private areas treated differently in this multi-functional building. Spatial planning enabled by steel structural skeleton and lack of load-bearing walls (recalls W. Jenney's work in Chicago). “Architecture is restricted to the tomb and the monument; everything else is building.”