

## BOOK REVIEW

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Inge Podbrecky and Rainald Franz, editors

### **Leben mit Loos**

(Schriften des Verbands österreichischer Kunsthistorikerinnen und Kunsthistoriker, vol. 3)

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More than 110 years have passed since Adolf Loos first emerged as a cultural figure in Europe in a series of astonishing articles in various Viennese newspapers. Since then, discussion of his ideas has never ceased. Loos continues to offer an exciting playground for analyses — some scholarly, some ill-informed, some substantial, others misusing him to gain attention or simply to make money. As a result, in addition to numerous monographs, a series of Loos symposia around the world have given birth to several publications. *Leben mit Loos* (*Living with Loos*) is the most recent of these, derived from a 2006 symposium held in the Goldman and Salatsch building in Vienna, designed by Loos in 1909. This is a most suitable location for a symposium on Loos, making it perplexing why this interesting information is so well hidden in the book itself.

A meeting of this sort always engenders a unique atmosphere, bringing together several (often controversial) intellects to focus on a single subject, and Loos's life is well-suited to such discussions. In their introduction, the editors aim high with their claim to a scientific, interdisciplinary method. Furthermore, the editors state that they have specifically chosen Loos's writings as their central topic and as the source for the research of the symposium. Since his published writings constitute only about half of what he actually wrote, this has previously been a proven method for trying to accuse him of contradictions between his written work and his built work. As a forceful personality and architectural exponent, Loos has always provoked people to look for his weak spots. Ludwig Hevesi, one of the sharpest critics of the time, finally had to admit that Adolf Loos was a man who always wanted to be right and who, in the end, *was* right.



\*Hermann Czech, Heinz Frank, Rainald Franz, Markus Kristan, Klaralinda Ma, Iris Meder, Anders V. Munch, Inge Podbrecky, Anne-Katrin Rossberg, Manfred Russo, Sigurd Paul Scheichl, Walter Schübler, Elena Shapira, Susana Zapke.

Fourteen authors, mostly of a younger generation, contributed to this collection of essays.\* Since they are all art historians, the interdisciplinary aim is fulfilled by concentrating on a variety of Loos's activities other than architecture or writing, his two main fields of production. But there is no shortage of these other activities since he immersed himself in every aspect of life. This review offers neither the place nor the space to take a close look at any single contribution of this interesting compilation of articles. Some contributions are reprinted from other publications, while others offer very personal philosophical perspectives that are sometimes hard to understand. Here I must confess my own personal perspective: that this latter type of essay goes against Loos's own method of writing straightforwardly and clearly in order to explain complex relations didactically, in the spirit of his design.

Other essays brilliantly point out some of Loos's deeper insights. One is by Elena Shapira, who has been researching the tailoring firm of Goldman and Salatsch for at least twenty years, studying it and its products from its origins in Austro-Hungarian Galicia (now Poland) to its transfer to Vienna along with its workshops. Shapira has all the necessary qualities for this undertaking, as an outsider coming from New York, as an insider living in Vienna, and as someone who has also extensively interviewed Kitty Goldman, the daughter of Leopold Goldman, the managerial partner of the gentlemen's outfitters. In her article, Shapira explores men's fashion of the era and relates it philosophically to modern culture. Not by chance was Leopold Goldman a member of philosophic and anthroposophic circles, thus ideally equipped as a patron-partner for an architect like Loos. Shapira's article is the only one in this book in English.

Inge Podbrecky, one of the two co-editors, focuses her essay on Loos's engagement in dealing with the overcrowded and starving capital after the collapse of the Austro-Hungarian Empire in 1919, shortly after the end of World War I. As chief architect of the newly created Wiener Siedlungsbauamt, Loos played an important role in the fight against misery. It was one of many occasions on which Loos could transfer English ideas to the continent. Political blindness finally led him to quit this important post, a task which only he could perform with the necessary energy and perfectionism, as was consequently demonstrated.

The second co-editor, Rainald Franz, sums up his thoughts concerning Loos's ideas about modern culture, which Franz infers from Loos's various activities. Siegurd Paul Scheichl, on the other hand, suggests selfish motivations behind Loos's writings; once more the self-assured attitude of Loos has provoked this typical interpretation. Another interesting yet little-mentioned aspect of Loos's life is covered by Anne-Katrin Rossberg in her article on Loos and his wives. This could actually be a book in itself: it would be quite tempting to get closer to his relationship with the designs he did for female clients, such as parts of the Villa Müller in Prague, which are indeed some of his best works. For scholars of Loos's personal letters, Susana Zapke publishes a series of Arnold Schoenberg's letters that he wrote on behalf of Loos, making her study more an article on the composer's life. But as the relation between Loos and Schoenberg was so close during these years, it would indeed be difficult to assign Zapke's observations to either Schoenberg or Loos exclusively. Iris Meder sums up what is commonly known about the small community of Loos's students, while Markus Kristan explores Loos's philosophy and habits of eating and drinking, comparing them to his architectural practice.

Regrettably, two of the true experts on the known writings by Loos, Susanne Eckel and Hildegund Amanshauser, are not included in this compilation of texts: both did doctorate theses on the architect's writings and would have neatly fulfilled and enriched the book's stated focus on Loos's writings.

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