



STADTBahn BRIDGE

...but it is this juxtaposition of contrasting symbols - the appliqué of one order of symbols on another - that constitutes for us the decorated shed.¹

Robert Venturi

Born of the Symbolist Movement, Modernism has nevertheless been hostile to the symbol as a means of visual communication. The rise of abstract art, in particular, has tended to focus our attention upon the work as a thing in itself, wholly identified with the art-process. Any art which can be described as symbolist must necessarily reject such an attitude.²

Edward Lucie-Smith

The skin 'hung' upon the structure of a building is a notion. Robert Venturi, in *Learning from Las Vegas*, pleads for the return of symbolism. Literal symbolism applied. What should symbolic appliqué mean and whom is it for?

Some of the purest expressions of the skin and applied symbolic ornament can be found in the Secessionist/Art Nouveau work of the great Viennese architect, Otto Wagner (1841-1918). He was an important figure as architecture evolved from eclecticism and revivalism into that which more truly embodied new materials, ideas and attitudes.

Born well-to-do, Otto Wagner was trained as an architect in Germany, under a former assistant of Karl Friedrich Schinkel, and subsequently in his native Vienna. During Vienna's glorious Ringstrasse era Wagner established a thriving practice. He became one of the leading architects in the Italianate classical style. "Utility behind a screen of historical style,"³ aptly describes his rationalist revivalist apartment houses and commercial buildings. These were very good, but tended to over-decoration.

Vienna, the grand stucco city. Wagner often used stucco in his early Italianate buildings. A continuous, non-structural, applied material. It is an ambiguous material capable of pretending heavy mass when in fact it is a thin applied

OTTO WAGNER APPLIED

by Graham D. Livesey



'MAJOLICA HOUSE'

layer. Stucco should not purport to be a classical load-bearing stone facade, as Wagner often caused it to appear. But stucco cannot indicate a light, thin skin either. Ornamental symbolism on stucco is either an uncertain continuation of the stucco or something quite separate.

Wagner was first appointed professor in architecture at the Academy of Fine Arts in 1894 and two years later he published, *Moderne Architektur*. The pragmatic nature of this, his first book of theory, is deceptive. It is a strident call for rational utility and the true expression of the modern age, a continuing theme in his polemics. He would, years later, when discussing city planning, reiterate that, "Art must give expression to the conditions of our own time. Art must therefore conform its city plan to the needs of the mankind of today."⁴ Seemingly a rationalist, a tremendous change occurred in Wagner's work during the 1890's which refutes this notion.

In his writings, Otto Wagner never admitted the deeply romantic side of his nature. This romanticism only became obvious in the ornament and skins of his buildings after the mid 1890's. So much so, that a statement such as the following seems absurd:

Quite as unjustifiable and as objectionable from an artistic viewpoint are intentional but unwarranted curves and irregularities in the lay-out of streets and squares, intended solely to produce artificially picturesque vistas.⁵

Although written much later, this passage adamantly denies the Art Nouveau character that his work took on. He never elaborated on the laws that governed his romantic tendencies, possibly to preserve an image in society or because of the inherent discrepancy between words and romantic thoughts.

The transformation began in the stations, bridges and cuttings Wagner built between 1894 and 1901 for the Vienna city railway system, the *Stadtbahn*. The white stucco stations had taken on a new voluptuousness and freedom of classical interpretation.



KARLSPLATZ STADTBahn STATION

Thus began his use of the unadulterated engineering aesthetic. Steel I-beams and rivets clashed with stucco and stone classicism unabashedly.

During the seven years of construction of the *Stadtbahn*, Wagner became more and more influenced by Art Nouveau aesthetics and symbolism. The middle aged master, open to new influences, produced organic and geometric ornament of great timeless beauty. This ornamental use of new materials stood beside the historical classicism of stucco and stone pilasters, cornices and rusticated bases and the use of engineering steel. Sinuous lines and plant images both led and delighted the commuter as he passed through the stations. John Ruskin, stated earlier his influential and immutable love for the organic; "...all perfectly beautiful forms must be composed of curves; since there is hardly any common natural form in which it is possible to discover a straight line."⁶ This leads to another Ruskinian ideal, a building with either a decorative skin or symbolic ornamental elements applied to it.

1897 sees the formation of the Vienna Secession under the leadership of the painter, Gustav Klimt. A group heavily influenced by the Glasgow school under Charles Rennie Mackintosh. The young radical Secessionists included the painter Koloman Moser and the architects Joseph Maria Olbrich and Josef Hoffman, both students of Otto Wagner. The principal aim of the group was, "to provide in art a surrogate religion offering a refuge from modern life."⁷ The Secessionists explored symbolically, the mystical and mythological and the sensuous, instinctual, erotic and ecstatic. This manifested itself in an art depicting plant images and elongated beautiful nymphs whose long flowing hair hopelessly entangles the male psyche. It was a symbolic psychological revolution in form.

The organic flowing lines and sensual women are visually engaging but the deeper meanings are obscure and elitist - a description of a snake-holding woman in the foreground of Gustav Klimt's painting *Medicine*: "Along with



KARLSPLATZ STATION - DETAIL

her brother Asclepius, Hygeia was born a snake out of the tellurian swamp, the land of death. The snake, amphibious creature, phallic symbol with bi-sexual associations, is the great dissolver of boundaries: between land and sea, man and woman, life and death."⁸ Visually relevant but symbolically irrelevant.

J.M. Olbrich's Secession building, the exhibition place for the movement, was constructed in 1897. Wagner's 'Majolica House', an ordinary Viennese apartment house gloriously clad in a skin of tiles colourfully depicting a majestic flowering rose plant, was built the same year; thin, applied decoration, symbolic of Wagner's respect for the young Secessionists.

The Majolica House is a 'decorated shed'. It is, floral-patterned, very much like Robert Venturi's 'Best' products showroom. For Wagner it is the first expression of the thin two-dimensional skin. However, like stucco, the thin tiles are applied ambiguously to a hidden surface. The curtain-wall, developed by the 'modernists', would ultimately express both its thinness and total separation from the structure.

In 1898 Wagner officially joined the Secession to the horror of Viennese society. The major figures were to remain with the movement until 1905 when most, including Wagner, left.

The romantic freedom and symbolism so masterfully delineated by Wagner on his skins and in his ornament failed, according to most historians, to influence the still very rational and traditional composition of plans, elevations and masses. This and the dull pragmatism of his writings suggests an intellect fighting its own artistic inclinations. Manfredo Tafuri contests, however, that the spiritual/romantic influence of the Secession also profoundly affected the design and nature of Wagner's seemingly rational buildings. Tafuri describes the unarticulated Otto Wagner; "To stop and listen to those mysterious echoes is possible only to one who understands the ritual of interpretation."⁹

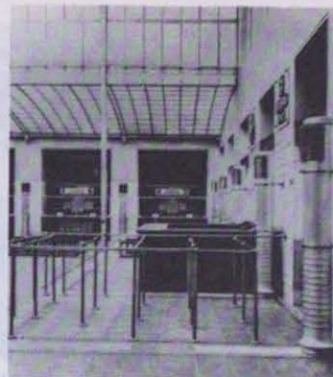
Wagner's ornament is visually and emo-



IMPERIAL POST OFFICE SAVINGS BANK

tionally engaging. The materials, the colour contrasts, the lines and the juxtaposition of detailed ornament with blank surface, play in masterful visual harmony. It ranges from the simple and poignant to the obtuse and esoteric. The meaning of the Secessionist ornament is irrelevant, it works only at the visual level. The mystical paintings of Klimt were not understood by the leading Viennese intellectuals of the day. The mythology, the sensuality, the abstract spiritual codes and ideas are obscure. Applied symbolism can represent many things: power, wealth, religion, philosophical ideas, a building type, structure. However, it must cater to the populace or not exist at all.

The most interesting Stadtbahn station is the Karlsplatz station of 1898-1899. Two classically planned pavilions across the street from one another, large semi-cylindrical canopies, forward set, dominate the simple masses beneath. Thin, white, pristine sheets of marble stand between slender steel support members. Floral and geometric patterns enhance, either carved into the marble panels or hung from the steelwork. Ornament contrasts with blank wall, green and gold contrasts with white, natural curve contrasts with straight line. The ornament seems removed and non-symbolic, merely flowers and leaves. The ornament is timeless and the material expression is lucid. "Wagner treated the walls in his modern manner as skins, suggesting volume rather than the mass beneath."¹⁰ The Karlsplatz station depicts for Wagner, motion versus stasis and romanticism versus rationalism. The buildings huddle,



SAVINGS BANK - INTERIOR

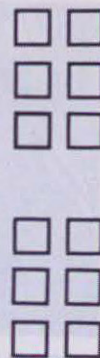
emanating a profound romantic non-intellectual spirit.

The Imperial Post Office Savings Bank from (1904-1906) is one of the most significant early modern buildings. Differing from his early decorated revivalism and his symbolic Secessionism, this is Wagner as the pragmatist. The use of materials is stunning, honest and revolutionary. Large aluminium bolts blatantly hold thin stone and marble sheets to the building. This would seem to be his ultimate and most explicit expression of the skin as an entity unto itself. It would never become the total separation of the skin from the structure.

The use of aluminium is unashamedly bold, particularly within the luminous glass-vaulted banking hall. Riveted supports penetrate the glass ceiling whilst aluminium robot-like ventilation diffusers stand on guard. Ornament enriches the entrance and encrusts the roof-line where two mystical damsels dwell, outstretched arms clutching wreaths to the city. A rationally functional building.

Otto Wagner's Kaiserbad Dam Administration building (1904-1908) is his most 'modern' building. Symmetrical, with a subdued cornice, the classicism has been restrained as the form follows the function. The building controlled one of the dams on the Danube canal. A ship bridge-like control bay lifts above the main mass destroying classical repose. Stairs that link the street level with the lower canal level are part of yet distinct from the building. Blue tile above bolted-on white marble sheets above a bolted-on stone base. Wavy white lines of tile upon the blue background symbolizes the waters. Electrifying blue and white, the building, a ship-like masterpiece, sits beside the canal. Symbolism is restrained. Wagner always designed according to principles most appropriate to the building in question.

Wagner's most Secessionist building is St. Leopold's Am Steinhof (1905-1907), a domed Greek-cross church. The marble sheets are bolted-on in such a way as to create conflicting rhythms of bolt-





KAISERBAD DAM - DETAIL



AM STEINHOF



MODERNE GALERIE

heads, joints and panels. Christian in its symbolism, the ornament has itself become separate from the structure and skin. Wagner incorporated stained glass, frescoes and statues of angels and saints by other Secessionist artists into the church.

The last built works, including the Neustiftgasse 40 apartment building (1909-1910) and the second Villa Wagner (1912-1913) show a return to stucco in a stripped-classical non-symbolic way. The buildings become simple masses adorned with tiles placed in the stucco to emphasize divisions and focal points.

Some of Wagner's most symbolic work remained unbuilt and only exists as drawings. Wagner's marvellous drawings, similar to those of Schinkel in delineation and the use of surreal foreground figures, somewhat paralleled his architecture becoming more and more Art Nouveau. The drawings show schemes for tremendous churches, museums and monuments. One of the most symbolically esoteric is a proposal for a Moderne Galerie of 1900. A long fresco on the facade shows the arts lifting the veil of ignorance from the people, whilst four be-throned women surround the entrance and floral ornament renders the surfaces fantastic.

As a respected transitional architect, teacher and polemicist Wagner's legacy to 'modernism' would be his distinct and honest use of materials. Although a functionalist, his methods would be rejected for new interpretations based upon the machine and industrialism, space, structure and socialism.

Adolf Loos, an admirer of Wagner, vigorously attacked the use of ornament in architecture. Inevitably architecture became the blank surfaces of the machine-age look. Although the ornament disappeared, symbolism remained. Venturi writes, "Ironically, the Modern architecture of today, while rejecting explicit symbolism and frivolous appliqué ornament has distorted the whole building into one big ornament."¹¹

The new abstract symbolism was industrial symbolism, the glorification of the machine and technology. The human intent shifted from bourgeois to socialist, but it failed. Unlike Wagner's work the symbolism was implied, not visual. The modern architecture was cold, oblivious, and inhuman and there was no recourse, just endless white blank stucco strips and endless steel-mullioned windows.

If one accepts ornament in architecture, it isn't a question of man or machine made. It is a question of enhancement, timeless beauty and if symbolic, understandable meaning... eradication of non-articulated surfaces in architecture.

Robert Venturi, the father of anti-modernism, argues for a return to literal symbolic appliqué in architecture in his book *Learning from Las Vegas*. He rejects abstract surfaces for applied Pop-art symbolism. His symbols are derived from pop American culture, the suburban home and the strip billboard. This understanding surfaces in his work like Andy Warhol Brillo boxes. From low art to high art and back again; a distortion. The references are not to be understood; but are instead esoteric tongue-in-cheek games played at the expense of good taste and architecture.

Venturi proposes the 'decorated shed' principle where pop symbolism is applied to an 'ordinary building', and opposes the 'duck' theory where the building itself is a literal symbol. Venturi is serious but are his ideas?

Venturi's symbolism is as elitist as that of the Secessionists. However, the old notion of small-scale, dense (and visually delightful) surface articulation still remains vague in contemporary architecture. Venturi's surfaces are geared towards a media-blitzed populace; "Articulated architecture today is like a minuet in a discotheque, because even off the highway our sensibilities remain attuned to its bold scale and detail."¹² Architecture representing flash and transience. The bold, flat, 'pop'-defined and pastel-coloured surfaces still lack the fine detail necessary for visual play.

Although very influential, Venturi's ideas have tended to spawn other things. The classicism of the suburban home has exploded into the classicism of Ledoux, Schinkel and Lutyens. The omnipresent classical cycle. It has become pseudo-revivalism and abstract expressionistic classicism and eclecticism; esoteric manipulation more removed from reality than ever before.

Symbolism tends to the esoteric and unrealistic; philosophical, industrial and 'pop' art.

Instead of a balanced critique of the modern tradition we are now being subjected to the indiscriminate reaction against the entire **evolution** of modernist culture.¹³

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Notes

1. Robert Venturi, *Learning from Las Vegas*, MIT Press, 1972, p.70.
2. Edward Lucie-Smith, *Symbolist Art*, London, 1972, p.7.
3. Carl E. Schorske, *Fin-de-Siecle Vienna*, 1961, p.75.
4. Otto Wagner, "The Development of the City", *Architectural Record*, May 1912, p.489.
5. Wagner, p.490.
6. John Ruskin, *The Seven Lamps of Architecture*, London, 1890, p.195.
7. Schorske, p.254.
8. Schorske, pp. 240-42.
9. Manfredo Tafuri, "Am Steinhof", *Lotus* 29, 1980, p.89.
10. Schorske, p.109.
11. Venturi, p.72.
12. Venturi, p.98.
13. Kenneth Frampton, *Modern Architecture - A Critical History*, London, 1980, p.288.

References

- H. Geretsegger and M. Peintner, *Otto Wagner 1841-1918*, 1964.
- Leonardo Benevolo, *History of Modern Architecture Vol. 1*, MIT Press, 1971.

Drawings and photographs from Otto Wagner, 1841-1918, by H. Geretsegger and M. Peintner.