Sammelrez: Adolf Loos


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In September 2015 Carl Schorske died at the age of 100; when he was born in New York in 1915, Emperor Franz Joseph still reigned in Vienna. For many of us in the Anglo-American world of Habsburg studies, Schorske provided our first thrilling glimpse of the cultural complications of fin-de-siècle Vienna, and his arguments and explications have inspired much of the work in this field over the course of the last fifty years. Reviewing new work about Adolf Loos, by architectural historian Christopher Long, one naturally turns to Schorske – only to discover that Loos receives no mention in the famous article on architectural reaction to Ringstrasse historicism, as Schorske focused on Camillo Sitte and, above all, Otto Wagner.

Loos does find a place, however, in Schorske’s fascinating article on „The Explosion in the Garden,” which addressed particularly Kokoschka and Schoenberg, but also noted the radically explosive criticism of Karl Kraus and Adolf Loos: „As Kraus sought to restore the purity of the linguistic environment of man by removing all aesthetic pretensions from expository prose, so Loos tried to purify the visual environment – city, housing, dress, furniture – by abolishing all embellishment.”¹ This purifying analogy between Kraus and Loos – which alluded to Loos’s provocative juxtaposition of „Ornament and Crime” („Ornament und Verbrechen”) – was also addressed by Allan Janik and Stephen Toulmin in „Wittgenstein’s Vienna”². Schorske himself returned to the subject of Loos in an essay on „Architecture as Culture Criticism” which first appeared under the title „Revolt in Vienna” in the New York Review of Books in 1986³, the year that fin-de-siècle Vienna became a public sensation in New York with the Museum of Modern Art’s exhibit „Vienna 1900: Art, Architecture, and Design” – itself, to a considerable extent, inspired by Schorske’s historical writings.

The denunciation of ornament as crime has been sufficient in itself to make Loos appear as a prophet and ideologist of architectural modernism. Yet, Long’s new book, „Der Fall Loos” (The Loos Case), published in 2015, concerns an entirely different kind of criminality, as it explores the not very well known episode of Loos facing criminal charges for the alleged sexual abuse of young girls in Vienna in 1928. There was a complaint that he was sketching young girls, with rumors that he wanted them to go to France with him, that he had touched them indecently, that he had posed them in immoral positions. It was further recounted that he made his sketches while wearing his pajamas – or even, according to one report published in the „Neue Freie Presse” – while completely naked. A medical examination established that the girls had not been sexually violated, but the police discovered in Loos’s apartment a cache of pornographic photos of young girls, and the famous architect was arrested.

In charges concerning three girls – ages eight, nine, and ten – Loos was acquitted of having „sexually abused [the girls] to satisfy his lusts” („zur Befriedigung seiner Lüste geschlechtlich missbrauchte”) but convicted of „seduction to indecency” („Verführung zur Unzucht”) for having posed the girls indecently in his sketches (Der Fall Loos, S. 123). The testimony of the girls was considered unreliable, though the courtroom was closed to the public, so their detailed narratives remain unknown. Loos received a suspended sentence, though Long feels that he paid a heavy price, emerging from the trial „visibly older and physically and spiritually broken” (Der Fall Loos, p. 149). Loos rushed into a disastrous new marriage (with a much younger

woman), followed by physical collapse and early death in 1933 at the age of 63.

Long’s ingenious Schorskean strategy is to show how the charges against Loos played out in the context of deeply rooted cultural connections and antagonisms dating all the way back to fin-de-siècle Vienna. Schorske famously made the „Gefühlskultur“ of artistic aestheticism into a principal interpretive key to intellectual life in Vienna, and in 1928 the „Neue Freie Presse“ – still the liberal „grande dame“ of the Viennese press, ever celebrated for its sensibility-infused feuilletons – summed up the arrest of Loos as „The Tragedy of an Aesthete.“ Indeed, Loos insisted that his sketching of the girls was an innocently aesthetic exercise, but more than half a century had passed since Charles Dodgson photographed little Alice Liddell at Oxford, and the 1920s was not a decade of innocence.

Long traces the Viennese artistic cult of young girls in the sketches of Klimt and Schiele (who spent time in prison in 1912); in the pornographic fiction of 1906 about a very young prostitute, “Josephine Mutzenbacher“ (probably authored by Felix Salten, also the creator of young Bambi); and in the exclamations of Loos’s friend, the writer Peter Altenberg, who declared: „A woman is always too old, never too young.“ Loos himself, in an essay from the 1890s on women’s fashion, was on record as an admirer of „das Weibkind“ („the woman child“), observing that „one thirsted for the unripe“ („nach Unreife“; Der Fall Loos, pp. 85–86). He was, of course, an apostle of artistic purity, but this was the sort of aestheticism of the 1890s that might have seemed more suspect after the criminal charges of the 1920s.

The legal and judicial personnel were all implicated in Viennese culture, with both of Loos’s attorneys (perhaps predictably) men who had commissioned modernist houses from Loos himself. The judge was the son of the sculptor who created the gilt commemorative statue of Johann Strauss in the Vienna Stadtspark. The communist journal „Die Rote Fahne“ claimed that Loos was only being prosecuted in 1928 because of his long-standing friendship with Karl Kraus, who had fiercely offended the director of police (and sometime chancellor of Austria) Johann Schober for firing on leftist protesters in 1927. Loos himself saw the case against him in 1928, not as a matter of pedophilia, or even police harassment, but rather – as he suggested in an interview with the press – a continuation of the attacks and controversies that had attended him ever since the construction of the house on the Michaelerplatz in 1910 and 1911 (Der Fall Loos, p. 48).

It is in this regard that Long’s new book on the criminal case of 1928 may be read with great interest alongside his 2011 (centennial) study of the Looshaus on the Michaelerplatz – though the former has been published only in German and the latter only in English. Both books, with their ostensibly very different subjects – a modernist building with an unornamented facade and a court case concerning sexual indecency with young girls – are, in fact, studies of Viennese public controversy which Long elucidates with great subtlety and a particular skill for observing the Schorskean network of connections between art and politics, culture and society.

Commissioned as the business establishment of a Viennese gentlemen’s tailoring company, Goldman & Salatsch, the Looshaus presented upper stories with a lime plaster façade of unadorned windows – which seemed particularly shocking on a square that included the neo-classical façade of the church of St. Michael from the 1790s and the Hofburg palace wing completed in the 1890s according to the much older baroque designs of Fischer von Erlach. Following controversy in the press and menacing interventions by the municipal authorities (who imposed a large deposit on the tailoring company, to be forfeited if the architectural outcome did not give satisfaction), Loos eventually won approval by adorning some of the bare windows with boxes of flowers. The controversy, however, was such that, according to Long, Loos ended up suffering from terrible stomach ulcers that destroyed his health – parallel to the aging and embittering effect of the criminal trial in 1928.

Karl Kraus believed that Loos had outraged the Viennese, because „he had built them an idea“ – the idea of a „tabula rasa,“ a building without ornament – and Long cites another

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Viennese architect who called the Looshaus a „built idea,” the pure expression of Loos’s „architectural principles” (The Looshaus, pp. 2, 115). Yet, Long’s research on the planning of the house suggests that the process was not particularly principled, as one early design showed some of the windows with ornamental pediments, and another showed the upper façade elaborated by horizontal bands. Even when the windows of the upper façade were presented bare and unornamented, the lower façade was always intended to make a lavish aesthetic impression with green Cipollino marble. (Loos toured the Mediterranean looking for marble, finding the particular style he wanted on the Greek island of Evia.) Not altogether unornamental, the building furthermore concealed its own concrete structure, violating a basic principle of modernism, while presenting a lower façade of marble „columns” that did not actually support anything. In fact, Long suggests that the most modern aspect of the Looshaus was not its famous façade, but its less well appreciated organization of interior space – the Raumplan – for the multiple aspects of the tailor-ing business. Though the Looshaus remains an essential sight on any architectural tour of Vienna, Long notes that it is curiously absent from most histories of architectural modernism, and even Schorske, in the essay on „architecture as cultural criticism,” pays tribute to Loos’s principles, but does not mention the Looshaus.

While Long suggests that the controversy surrounding the Looshaus destroyed the architect’s health (he had to carry a piece of ham in his pocket, to nibble cautiously, so as not to aggravate the stomach ulcers), there is also considerable reason to suppose that Loos purposefully stoked the controversy himself (The Looshaus, p. 146). The building of the Looshaus in 1910 and 1911 coincided with a series of public lectures in Berlin, Vienna, Munich, and Prague, introducing the provocative title „Ornament is Crime” in order to create controversy and attract a crowd. Loos needed the income from the lectures in order to pay the sanatorium costs (eventually at Davos) for his tubercular lover Bessie Bruce. Thus the cost of healthcare encouraged the radical lectures which partly reflected and partly conditioned his ideas about the house under construction.

Altenberg (who also harbored feelings for Bessie Bruce) claimed to find Loos’s self-advertisement in the period of controversy to be distastefully „Jewish” – though it was Altenberg who was Jewish, not Loos (The Looshaus, p. 172). In fact, Loos participated as godfather at the baptism of Karl Kraus when the latter converted to Catholicism in 1911 at the height of the architectural controversy. Though Loos was Catholic himself, his clients, the tailors Goldman & Salatsch, were Jewish, and recent architectural criticism has suggested that the modernism of the Looshaus might be understood as the tailored „suit” of assimilated Judaism expressed as architecture (The Looshaus, p. 190). One disturbing photograph shows the „Aryanized” Looshaus in the Nazi period, with the famous façade now „ornamented” with Nazi slogans and swastikas.

Long’s study is as much intellectual history as architectural history, for he traces the details of the controversy, illustrated with some of the extraordinary cartoons that appeared in the press. One, for instance, shows Fischer von Erlach in early 18th-century costume, looking anxiously at the modern façade of the Looshaus and wishing he had known about Loos’s style so as not to have ruined the Michaelerplatz with baroque ornamentation. Another cartoon, from the time of the sexual abuse scandal of 1928, reflected upon Loos’s publicized hostility to Viennese food: two Viennese gentlemen, considering the sexual allegations against Loos, remarked that his criticism of Viennese plum dumplings (Zwetschkenknödel) seemed comparatively less offensive (Der Fall Loos, p. 94). In both books Long offers a careful and detailed account of the cultural forces in play, surrounding the Looshaus and the Loos case respectively, but remains restrained in his theoretical and interpretive approaches. He writes in a clear and direct style (in English for the Looshaus and in Eva Martina Strobl’s fine German translation for the Loos case) – a style that, in the spirit of Loos, might be called „un-ornamented.”

The cultural complications of the Looshaus moment in 1910–1911 are charted with ref-
erence to several momentous events, full of Schorskean significance for intellectual history – as 1911 witnessed not only the conversion of Kraus (with Loos as godfather), but also the death of Mahler and his funeral in Grinzing (with Loos in attendance), and the seventieth birthday of Otto Wagner in 1911 (with Loos unable to resist making negative comments about Sezession aesthetics in his „tribute“ to Wagner; The Looshaus, p. 133). Politically, 1910 was the year of the death and massive public funeral procession of Karl Lueger, the hugely popular, viciously antisemitic, Christian Socialist mayor of Vienna, one of the protagonists of Schorske’s famous article on „Politics in a New Key.“ Long suggests that it was, in fact, the Christian Socialist transition in leadership, following Lueger’s long sway, which created some of the political obstacles to the Looshaus. The party sought new motivating issues and contemplated the demagogic possibilities of agitating against modernist architecture.

Both books emphasize Loos’s sense of himself as an outsider in Vienna, and the controversies over his house on the Michaelerplatz and his criminal charges only intensified his antagonism toward the Viennese. „Can you imagine […] a world without any Viennese?“ he wrote in 1911, from the Mediterranean, to Karl Kraus in Vienna. „No Viennese, no Viennese, absolutely no Viennese!“ (The Looshaus, p. 116) Loos, born in Brno, chose to become a citizen of Czechoslovakia, not Austria, after the war. Long suggests that the three years he spent in America as a young man were formative for his sense of a modern „West“ in contrast to the eastern Habsburg world. The controversies surrounding the Looshaus in 1910–1911 and the criminal case against Loos in 1928 were heightened by his own alienation from Vienna. Yet, as Long clearly demonstrates with the elegant methodology of Schorskean cultural history, those controversies can only be properly understood by exploring the intersecting intellectual strands of Viennese modernism.


