

📖 Topic Page: [Loos, Adolf \(1870 - 1933\)](#)

Definition: **Loos, Adolf** from *Philip's Encyclopedia*

Czech architect who pioneered modern building design. He hated art nouveau, the prevailing style of the time, publishing his views in *Ornament and crime* (1908). His most important projects were houses built between 1904 and 1910; Steiner House, Vienna (1910) was one of the first to use concrete. See *also* modernism

Summary Article: **Adolf Loos 1870-1933**

From *Encyclopedia of German Literature*

The architect, theorist, and writer Adolf Loos is considered a most important proponent for, and practitioner of, the modern style in architecture in Europe at the beginning of the 20th century. Walter Gropius, the founder of the Bauhaus, considered Loos one of the few architects who, in 1900, had already formulated the directives that later shaped the modern, functionalist building style. The financially hazardous visit to the United States that the 23-year-old student from Dresden Technical University embarked upon in 1893 has to be regarded as a catalytic event in this process. During his three-year stay, Loos familiarized himself with the architecture of the Chicago School, the high-rise projects of Louis Sullivan in Chicago and St. Louis, and the early New York skyscrapers. Sullivan's essay "Ornament in Architecture" (1892), which argued for a critical attitude toward ornament in the context of the emerging building style, is assumed to have influenced the young Austrian architect.

In 1896, Loos returned to Vienna, where the Secession movement was taking shape to become official in 1897. The U.S. experience had sensitized Loos in two directions simultaneously. He began critiquing the eclectic historicism of the Ringstraße architecture while at the same time ridiculing the innovative attempt of the Secessionists Joseph Maria Olbrich and Josef Hoffmann at a modern alternative to the historicist tradition by means of their art nouveau and proto-art deco styles. Loos began publishing his polemical statements against the decorative approach to design in *Die Zeit* and *Die Neue Freie Presse*, as well as in his own short-lived journal *Das Andere* (two issues in 1903). He also attacked the decorative movement at a different front, namely, in the interiors that he executed at the time. The Café Museum (1899, partly destroyed), which was located in the proximity of Olbrich's Secession building, was one such statement. Loos was in no way displeased that his design of radical simplicity, without ornaments and with (then) ordinary Thonet chairs, was nicknamed "Café Nihilismus." In 1898, the article "Die Potemkin'sche Stadt" (Potemkin—or Fake—City) appeared in the journal of the Secession, *Ver Sacrum*. In this article, Loos turned against the "hypocrisy" of the false Renaissance and neo-Baroque facades of the palatial Ringstraße buildings; they appeared to him, with their plaster of Paris imitations, as pompous simulacra of authentic Viennese Baroque ornamentation.

Loos's writing and designing activities after 1898 converged most intensively around 1910, when he gave a talk with the title "Ornament und Verbrechen" (Ornament and Crime) at the Akademischer Verband für Literatur und Musik in Vienna and completed the building for the clothier Goldman und Salatsch at the Michaelerplatz, now called the "Loos-Haus" (restored). The essay, which is frequently cited and alluded to in German-language cultural discourse, is usually dated in posthumous editions as having appeared in 1908. New research (Rukschio) claims that "Ornament und Verbrechen" was given in 1910, repeated in 1913 when it was first published in French, and eventually published in German on 24

October 1929, in *Frankfurter Zeitung*. The essay begins with an embrace of a primitivist aesthetic in the framework of an emphatic, untheorized anthropology of art: “The first ornament was the cross and was of erotic origin: a horizontal line—woman. A vertical line: man penetrating.” Throughout the text Expressionist fervor and deliberate crudeness create involuntary comic effects: “Modern man who tattoos himself is a criminal or a degenerate.” He also states: “He who goes to listen to the ninth symphony and then sits down to draw a wallpaper pattern, is either a crook or a degenerate.” Portraits of Adolf Loos in architectural histories generally omit a discussion of the essay. The piece does, however, contain the reflections—then unprecedented—that influenced architectural modernism and the 20th-century aesthetic sensibility in general: “Evolution of culture is identical to removing the ornament from the ordinary object of use.” Reading this statement today, we associate it with the evolution of the Bauhaus design aesthetic. Other important observations are: “Since the ornament is no longer organically linked with our culture, it is no longer an expression of our culture” and “Lack of ornament is a sign of spiritual power. Modern man uses the ornaments of earlier and foreign cultures at will. His own invention is focused on other things.”

For Loos, these “things” were first and foremost the attempt of the modern architect to use the very properties of a material as an expressive form. Loos demonstrated this most convincingly in the facade of the Loos-Haus (which also shows the architect's admiration for classicists such as Palladio and Schinkel). The green marble that is arranged in a functionalist manner is decorative only because of its nature as a richly textured, traditional stone; for Loos, this represents the true ornament of nature, because it is not made with human hands. Mies van der Rohe's Barcelona Pavilion of 1929 develops Loos's treatment of marble further; sharing Loos's condemnation of imitating one material with another, the Bauhaus also emancipated many ordinary building materials, even concrete, to an aesthetic status.

In 1910, Loos also completed Haus Steiner. The early historian of architectural modernism, Nikolaus Pevsner, said that any uninitiated observer would date this house in the years 1924 to 1930 or even later. The Steiner House is a key monument of the modern movement in architecture and anticipated the cubic forms of the International style; it was the first time concrete was used in the construction of a private house. The broad influence that Loos's Viennese houses and Haus Müller in Prague (1928-30) exerted on the development of modernist building styles can only be noted in passing. Loos's influence is also felt in the house that Ludwig Wittgenstein designed for his sister in Vienna, now an embassy.

Not enthusiastic about the reception of his work in Vienna, Loos left for Paris in 1922, where his collection of early essays had been well received (published in German as *Ins Leere gesprochen* in 1921 [*Spoken into the Void*]). Apart from numerous unexecuted designs during that time, his house for the Dadaist Tristan Tzara was completed. Among the planned work was the entry for the *Chicago Tribune* Tower competition (1922), which proposed a skyscraper with 22 floors in the shape of a Doric column. The “bewohnte Säule” (inhabited column), one of the most reproduced architectural designs, gained particular respect with postmodern architects in the 1980s. Robert Stern recreated a pastiche of Loos's design as a work of graphic art, and Ricarco Bofill built apartment houses in Paris using the inhabited column idea. Inspired by postmodernist quotation practices, the Belgian architect Bob van Reeth executed a flamboyant project first imagined by Loos: “Ein Haus für Josephine Baker.” What had to remain a design in 1920s Paris was built in 1985 in Antwerp, and it now tells a lively story of intertextuality in architecture.

The purist and iconoclast Adolf Loos remained controversial until his death in 1933. While his fame as architectural pioneer is secured, that of the writer Loos is considered modest. It should be

remembered that he came from an exclusively technical background and had little formal schooling in the humanities. It is therefore not surprising that his journalistic writings do not match the polished verbal wit of his ally Karl Kraus and others of the Viennese feuilleton; nor does his polemical playlet *Das Scala-Theater in Wien* (collected in *Spoken into the Void*) impress us today. He nevertheless had the respect of intellectuals such as Hermann Broch, who was clearly affected by Loos's decisive modernist stand. The Viennese novelist was one of the first to write on Loos, and in the 1920s he styled the interior of his Teesdorf home after Loos.

See also Karl Kraus

Biography

Born in Brno, Moravia, 10 December 1870. Trained as a bricklayer, 1887; studied building engineering at various trade schools and enrolled in the Technische Hochschule, Dresden, 1889; served in the army; applied to the Academy of Art, Vienna; completed his courses in Dresden, 1892-93; three-year visit to the United States, beginning 1893; worked as a journalist for the *Neue Freie Presse*, 1897-1900; private architectural practice, Vienna, 1897-1922; appointed chief architect, municipal housing department, Vienna, 1920; lived and worked in Paris, 1922-27; returned to Vienna to practice architecture, 1927-33; founder of the Free School of Architecture. Died in Kalksburg, Austria, 23 August 1933.

Selected Works

Writings

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- Loos, Adolf *Trotzdem, 1900-1930*, 1931.
- Loos, Adolf *Die Potemkin'sche Stadt: Verschollene Schriften, 1897-1933*, edited by Adolf Opel, 1983.

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