

AUSTRIAN DESIGN: TRADITION AND VISION

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What you are likely to know about Austria is definitely not its design. Probably you know the music of Mozart or Strauss, the performances of the white horses or movie star Arnold Schwarzenegger.

And if you are interested in architecture, you perhaps will know St. Stephen's cathedral, Vienna's Opera house and the Riesenrad.

And of course you all know one of the world's most tasteful products coming from Austria: the Mozartkugel and the Mozarttaler, which we want to offer here. We have an old saying: the proof of the pudding is in the eating. So, please, give it a try.

Ladies and Gentlemen!

When I came to Hongkong, I read in a Swiss newspaper that Hongkong can be described (quote) "as a region with a Chinese soul, a British heart and an international face".

Let me say that you can describe Austria also as a country of contradictions. Austria is a small country in the heart of Europe. Its population is just 7,5 million. This is half of the population of Greater London and hardly more than live in the Hongkong region.

But Austria also is a country with a complex political history and an immense cultural heritage which sometimes is too heavy for us today. You have to be aware of that fact as you listen to what I be telling you in the next 30 minutes. It will be a brief summary of the last hundred years of Austrian design history, showing some contexts and giving some perspectives.

Ladies and Gentlemen!

At the end of the 19th century in Europe industrial manufacture made cheap mass production possible. But in their design serial products still were based on traditional handicrafts. In Austria a real awareness of the new production methods started with the critical approach taken by various intellectual groups such as the Wiener Werkstätte and the German or Austrian Werkbund. In fact these groups were the birthplace of Design in Austria dealing with new materials and techniques. In the fine arts and in applied art the exponents of Jugendstil (art nouveau) were looking for new free forms signaling a new dawn.

From the very beginning Austria's design was confronted with the tasks of redesigning the living situation in the growing cities. At the turn of the century Vienna was facing these tasks of a big city in-the-making.

Town planner Otto Wagner was confronted with problems such as urban development, the incorporation of suburbs and the provision of communication systems. One of the most visible manifestations of his work is the old Stadtbahn, which was redesigned as a modern underground in recent years. Its station buildings and bridges are still in use.

And there was another reason for thinking about design in these years. Export figures of Austrian industry were decreasing at the beginning of the century. Therefore it was necessary to find new ways of promoting sales and improving quality. As in other countries too you could find two different approaches to tackling the problem:

One viewpoint was a nostalgic regard for craftsmanship. It was a romantic attempt to reunite design with the three-dimensional object. The aim was inner satisfaction for designer and manufacturer alike. The machine age meant that the maker could no longer identify with the entire object. He had thus become uprooted. Along with this philosophy the craftsman's satisfaction would be reflected in the quality of the product. This concept of the Wiener Werkstätte was similar to those of comparable groups in England. Refined and elegant as they were, the resulting products were only accepted, understood and could be afforded only by the upper classes.

The other viewpoint found its answer in dealing with the new techniques and technical opportunities. That meant adopting industrial methods and applying them to a new future-oriented design. This was the founding idea of the Deutscher Werkbund in 1907. This organisation soon integrated members of the Wiener Werkstätte, too. The Österreichischer Werkbund was founded in 1913. It was open to (quote)

"...all Austrian artists, industrial artists and craftsmen... whose designs met artistic criteria and whose techniques and use of materials were impeccable."

The Werkbund group used exhibitions on different subjects to communicate this idea.

They organized presentations of "Simple Housing Effects" (Der einfache Hausrat) or "Good and cheap Objects" (Der gute billige Gegenstand) or displayed the products of their members. So everybody involved in the Werkbund was able to show the quality of his work. Today this would correspond to receiving a design award.

The essential characteristic of the Austrian Werkbund was fruitful controversy. Ideologically Josef Hoffmann and Josef Frank were opponents, but they also had much in common. For instance their rejection of historicism and their search for a new vocabulary of form.

With hindsight view you can see that skepticism towards dogmatic attitudes always has been a characteristic of Austrian art history. The economical severity of German Modernism contrasted sharply with the elegant and sensuous quality of life in Vienna/Austria.

The aim might have been to educate manufacturer and customer alike, but it was free from any Bauhaus intransigence.

In all his rejection of ornament Adolf Loos never failed to appeal to the senses. He knew that culture and history exert more influence on our environment than designers do. In one of his programmatic statements Loos defined it (quote):

"The difference between me and the others (the representatives of the *Neue Sachlichkeit* in Germany) is as follows: in my way of thinking the form of an object evolves from its use. The others believe that a new form can influence the very form of civilized life".

It was in this phase that Adolf Loos developed his concept of designing houses and apartments. His houses did not develop from the outside to the inside. Not the entire form dictated the building, but the actual way of living within the building. This was a dynamic process of design, emanating from the inside. Rooms flowed into one another without any rigid symmetrical sequence or hierarchical articulation of levels.

After the First World War the reconstruction of Austria's - and above all of Vienna's - political system was on the agenda. The Austrian-Hungarian Monarchy was disintegrating. The small part of Austria that remained was now cut off from almost all its industry and from raw materials.

The City of Vienna under socialistic government developed dynamic concepts to deal with housing needs and unemployment. For a brief period these were successful. The "housing tax" made it possible to finance and build 65,000 flats in only one decade. Housing blocks of a palatial nature predominated. The architecture of "red Vienna" (as it was called) also embraced a vocabulary of great variety.

The realism of many a council building was accompanied by popular and expressive tendencies (Clemens Holzmeister, for example) or the critically intellectual dialogue with international modernism (Josef Frank, the "Werkbundsiedlung"). On the other hand there was a national romantic tradition, an architectural heritage that was later to find its identification in National Socialism. It was probably due to this very circumstance that Austrian socialists and the proletariat were better able to identify with these buildings than the German worker or civil servant could with the plain, flat architecture of the new Frankfurt. The idea of the block as a worker's palace also was a strong promotion concept making people proud to be a part of this political movement.

Social democratic projects in Vienna were holistic in a way that also addressed people's physical and mental health, their cultural and political education.

A still living representative of that design philosophy was Margarete Schütte-Lihotzky. She worked for the Viennese Estate development office and for other social projects in the city. And when she was employed in Frankfurt in later years she designed the famous Frankfurt kitchen, the world's first fitted kitchen.

Because of the political situation in Germany at the beginning of the 30's, Germany was looking for a mainly dedicated to support ideology and propaganda. At that time Josef Frank left Austria for Sweden; Josef Hoffmann and Clemens Holzmeister took over the Werkbund's management.

It is commonly thought that this break interrupted and destroyed Austrian and German Modernism. The expulsion and persecution of such major Austrian architects and designers as Friedrich Kiesler, Felix Augenfeld, Richard Neutra, Rudolf M. Schindler, Ernst A. Plischke and Josef Frank, had indeed left a gap in the world of architecture and design. It is however easy to overlook the fact that a stringent, self-confident Modernism had never existed in Vienna. There had for some time been intensive criticism and insecurity with regard to the *Neue Sachlichkeit's* dogmatic attitude.

The architect and critic Friedrich Achleitner stated in 1985, that (quote):

"There must have been a fateful alliance between the architectural doctrines of National Socialism and the first criticism of functionalism in the late Thirties. Later, in the Fifties, this proved to be a twofold impediment to the reception of the architecture of the Thirties."

The fact remains, however, that there had been a violent break in the tradition of aesthetic discussions. In the field of architecture the dialogue was not continued in an active form until the Sixties. Design visibly suffered from political and ideological conditions. Exhibitions with titles like "German Housing Effects" were typical in these years.

The only significant examples of industrial design were developed for the needs of a war society.

On the basis of a political reconstruction, economic recovery came very quickly. That means (and I am quoting Gabriele Koller):

"the failure to come to terms with Austrian history between 1938 and 1945 was tied to the building-up of a consumer goods industry. This functioned as a replacement for the identity that had been lost".

In Austria, especially in Vienna, the most pressing Post-War task was to deal with housing needs. Skepticism towards an over-intense political or ideological approach was coupled perhaps with a certain degree of exhaustion. Therefore in the first Post-War years there could be no new dawn for architecture and design.

Because of these political and social conditions provocative new approaches of product design could not be developed. In this way the average citizen was encouraged to create his own little private habitat. Therefore it is not surprising that architects and designers who had been forced to emigrate were not even invited to come back. When they did return, they were socially and professionally isolated, for example Plischke or Schütte-Lihotzky.

In the Sixties the term "Gute Form" was developed as an overall and abstract criterion of general and eternal validity. The term has its origin in the beginnings of Modernism. The problem was that the value systems of traditional bourgeois culture and also the recent design concepts of the Third Reich could not be accepted by the Post-War-generations. The best way of plastering over the crack in development seemed to be a link-up with the period between the Wars. Rapid technical and social developments and a gradual market saturation also forced rethinking and new points of reference. But as a matter of fact a criterion like "good form" was inadequate for an increasingly complex society and a correspondingly complex design process.

This period of the Sixties showed a cool but modern architecture committed to new methods of construction and represented by architects like Erich Boltenstern, Karl Schwanzer and Roland Rainer. Rainer was responsible for urban planning in Vienna from 1958 to 1961. Building projects no longer concentrated on housing alone. They also responded to the leisure time requirements of a big city (Stadthalle) and the needs for representation of the business world (Philips-Haus).

A young generation of architects tried to overcome this rigid concept defining technical progress as the only valid basis for design. Some of them attempted a reorientation and redefinition of Viennese modernism. The more radical among the younger ones refused to look back. They took up questions such as the consumer society, new mobility and social problems of big cities. They published progressive and provocative statements on issues, they attracted attention to themselves internationally by means of projects and publications. Some of these "radicals" you may know: Hans Hollein, Walter Pichler, the Hausrucker group or Coop Himmelblau.

Thanks to these activities, intellectual discourse again came to life for the first time since the period between the Wars. Unfortunately however it was restricted to Austrian architects and artists. It did not include the few product designers.

As an alternative the formation of an identity was replaced by productivity. This gap was filled by creative personalities. They managed to find their way in a new reality of rationalization and standardization. They were able to put the term "Industrial Design" into practice.

Essential aspects of design got lost in this climate. The cultural objective for example. That should be inherent in any product; it should be as important to the designer as the suitability of the material and as important to the manufacturer as marketability.

By the Eighties the intellectual gap had become visible. It is interesting to note that Austrian artists were the first to recognize this. Examples are Oswald Oberhuber, Franz West, or B.R.A.N.D.

In the Eighties Austria like other European countries was gripped by a sense of change and by design euphoria. Most companies relied on big names from abroad, in particular from Italy, a country that can boast decades of experience in dealing

with its aesthetic history. Throughout Europe the market was over-estimated. It promised a sheer endless need for objects as beautiful as they were useless.

An event as interesting as the "Design Forum" exhibition of 1980 was accorded international recognition. It still serves as an example for Austrian design in other European countries. But the new definition of design and the strategies were not comprehended by Austrian companies and designers. All this never became a part of company and design philosophy.

A hangover in the Nineties followed the design ecstasy of the Eighties. Only a few companies are trying to meet the challenges of design today. We are now in a "cooling down" period. Young designers seem to be very realistic about that. In an affluent society they have to work hard to establish and defend their right to work.

Ladies and Gentlemen!

Austria today is not a country of design. But we have a lot of very good designers. Slowly but surely some companies now are again creating successful communication and a basis of cooperation with these talented men and women. This cooperation is our chance because these examples can have an impact on industry as well as on society as a whole. This is a beginning.

Our membership and even chairmanship of the European union in 1998 also provoked a reawareness of the Austrian identity as well as a clearer ability for historical reflexion. It is important to realize that reflecting our cultural heritage can be of great importance for the future of design. The Austrian Design Institute emphasizes this aspect in its philosophy. For us design is not only a marketing factor, helping to sell products to the consumer. It is also an expression of our identity, telling the world who we are and what can be our position in the global society we are facing at the turn of the century and at the beginning of a new Millennium.

The Austrian Design Institute holds that (quote):

- **Design creates image**
- **image creates identity**
- **identity is key to success.**

This is the vision I wanted to communicate today.
Thank you for your attention!