

## DEBATE ON SECESSION AND HISTORICISM IN VIENNA. RELATION TO POZNAŃ

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### Abstract

The aim of the paper is to describe the discourse on architecture, which took place in Vienna at the turn of the 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> century. The participants were architects and Viennese university professors, known for their accomplishments in civil engineering as well as their teaching and research activities. This analysis is based on selected parts of the original publications which represent two opposing artistic attitudes. It has enabled the synthetic notion of trends. This paper marks the differences in opinions on the development and the future of architecture at the turn of the centuries. The presented situation is evident in the built architecture of the style of late historicism and secession in Vienna. In two generations of artists there were different styles of buildings and changes in style. The discussed examples are the buildings of *Carl König* and *Otto Wagner*. According to the architect *Alfred Grotte*, a student of Viennese masters, these influences have also affected building design in Poznan during the age of Secession.

### Streszczenie

Celem opracowania jest ukazanie rezultatów dyskursu o architekturze, który toczył się we Wiedniu na przełomie XIX i XX wieku. Uczestniczyli w nim architekci, profesorowie wiedeńskich uczelni, znani z realizacji i działalności dydaktyczno-naukowej. Analiza wybranych fragmentów ówczesnych oryginalnych publikacji reprezentatywnych dla dwóch przeciwstawnych artystycznych postaw umożliwiła syntetyczne ujęcie tendencji oraz odnotowanie różnic w poglądach na rozwój i przyszłość architektury przełomu wieków. Sytuacja ta widoczna jest w realizacjach późnego historyzmu i secesji wiedeńskiej, zróżnicowanej stylistyce budowli i wahaniach dwóch pokoleń twórców. Przykładem są realizacje *Carla Königa* i *Otto Wagnera*. Za sprawą wychowanka mistrzów wiedeńskich, architekta *Alfreda Grotte* wpływy te dotarły również na teren Poznania.

Keywords: Architecture; Vienna; Late historicism; Secession; Jugendstil; Poznan.

## 1. INTRODUCTION. ISSUES

“One would think that what we enjoyed 500 years ago, we cannot enjoy today. Certainly. A tragedy which would have moved us to tears back then will only be interesting today. (...) Therefore, architecture will always have to use the newer forms to remain impressive.” [1] In this sentence, announced by *Adolf Loos* in 1898 in the journal “Der Architekt”, the diagnosis of the architectural scene in Vienna of that time can be found. The splendid facades, of both public and residential buildings, can be compared to masks, with

repetitive decoration and expression. Fin de siècle in philosophy, literature and art was also reflected in architecture and art in Vienna in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century. The artistic involvement with nature has become an antidote and an escape from reality, in which man is part of an industrialized mass society.

Already in the mid-nineteenth century, through the theories of *Charles Darwin* (1809-1882) and the influence of the positivist philosophy of *Hippolyte Taine* (1828-1893) there was a return of the European art

scene in the direction of natural sciences, both at the intellectual and visual level. This resulted into the popularization of plant motifs, zoomorphic themes, soft, curved lines and free composition. A key source of aesthetic patterns was the stylistics of Rococo and Gothic style. Significant was also a fascination for Japanese art motifs. In Europe, when the new trends emerged, they were covering almost all domains of art and craft, proclaiming the need for renewal of forms ranging from architecture, through literature, painting, graphics, artwork, glassware, ceramics, textiles, jewellery and furniture. One of these movements, established by *William Morris* (1834-1896) in the era of progressive industrialization in the 1860s, was the British “Arts and Crafts”, which postulated a return to the crafts. Analogous assumptions were established by *Josef Hoffmann* (1870-1956) in Vienna in 1903, and *Koloman Moser* (1868-1918) as the guidelines for Vienna Workshops [2]. The aspiration of this movement was directed towards the integration of industrial production with craft manufacturing. The new influences could also be seen in painting. In Great Britain the Pre-Raphaelite Brotherhood of painters and poets was founded in the middle of the nineteenth century. Through the separation from the classical model of art, they showed influences of Gothic and early-Renaissance art and inspiration from nature. Viennese art also did not remain indifferent to these changes. Works of *Gustav Klimt* (1862-1918) bring to the artistic scene innovative as well as genius solutions. However, they differed from the current figurative and idealized academic style. In works such as “Adele Bloch-Bauer I” (Fig. 1) only the woman’s face was reflected in a naturalistic way, unlike the rest of her body and clothes. *Gustav Klimt* filled the soft planes with an organic ornament. Depictions, marked with erotic symbolism, were full of anxiety, which derived from the asymmetry of the composition. In the course of time, namely in 1897 *Klimt* officially formed the artistic group “Secession” [3] bringing together representatives of applied art. The movement was modelled on the Munich association “Secession”, which had already been active since 1892. One of the organs of the association was the periodical “Ver Sacrum” [4], which had been published in the years 1898-1903.

Creators of architecture, especially in the academic milieu had to rethink, what aesthetic forms of the buildings are suitable to absorb technological development as well as opportunities available due to engineering of the time. Two movements appeared in association with university circles. The practice of

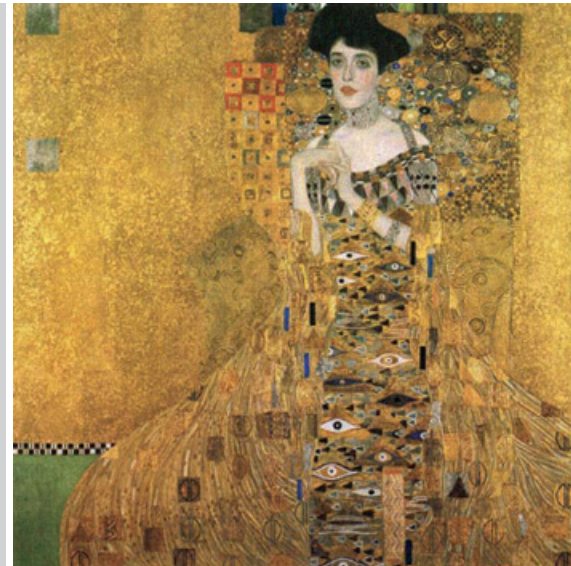


Figure 1.  
Gustav Klimt; „Adele Bloch-Bauer I”, 1907, online, 14 Jan. 2010, [http://de.wikipedia.org/wiki/Adele\\_Bloch-Bauer\\_I](http://de.wikipedia.org/wiki/Adele_Bloch-Bauer_I)

new formal solutions was preceded by discussions and polemics held by the architects which had been regularly published in architectural periodicals of those days.

## 2. VIENNESE HISTORICISM. “THE BARONS OF THE RINGSTRASSE”

The roots of the existing situation date back to the middle of the nineteenth century. The „age of iron and steam” resulted in the change of scale of cities and their shape. A series of urban projects was carried out. Those have permanently changed the face of major European cities on both large and small scale. Vienna has also undergone a gradual metamorphosis. Urban change, however, did not go parallel with refreshing the architectural appearance of the city. In accordance with the wish of *Emperor Franz Joseph*, the site of the former city walls of Vienna was redrawn as a representative avenue – the Ringstrasse. Since 1857 [5] a number of splendid public buildings such as the New Vienna Town Hall, Hofburg Imperial Palace, Vienna State Opera and the Burgtheater were gradually located there. The main initiative in their design was taken by architects later known as “The barons of the Ringstrasse” [6]: *Theophil von Hansen* (1813-1891), *Friedrich von Schmidt* (1825-1891), *Heinrich von Ferstel* (1828-1883) and *Carl von Hasenauer* (1833-1894). Their realizations were maintained in the convention of historicism. New buildings were described in the

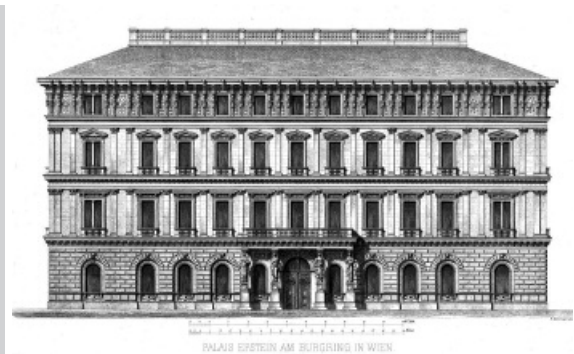
journal “Allgemeine Bauzeitung” which shaped the architectural outlook of that time, both in Austria and in other countries. These periodicals, aside from theoretical publications, document the practical achievements, namely completed buildings, as an effect of the evolution of the building movement. But above all the architects working in the academic field were the source of ideas and the scientific fundamentals for the city development. They educated the next generation of architects both in their own atelier and at the universities. Among them there were *Carl König* (1841-1915) and *Otto Wagner* (1841-1918).

### 3. ACADEMIC SITUATION IN VIENNA

In the nineteenth century, Vienna had two universities providing the opportunity to study architecture. One of them was the Viennese Polytechnic renamed in 1872 to k.k.Technische Hochschule [7] the other was the Academy of Fine Arts which got university status in the same year. Despite the equivalence of the two universities, there was a clear division among the priorities in teaching methods applied by them. Technische Hochschule in Vienna represented a fairly heterogeneous art of teaching [8]. Students were obliged to participate in a number of classes taught by different teachers. That allowed the students to become acquainted with various ideas and viewpoints presented by the teachers epitomizing the various options for ongoing discussion on the functional, structural and formal aspects of architecture. Every year about twenty graduates received a diploma in architecture from the Technical University [9].

On the other hand the Academy conducted a master training. Architects with outstanding authority and practice led the activities in small groups of students. This caused a threat for the diversity of views and guidelines for the students who followed only one direction represented by the master. The Academy put high demands on their students. It was even written in its regulations “(...) the provision that every teacher can refuse the admission of a student, if he does not show the skill that the teacher would be convinced that the candidate enters the artist's career with success” [10]. These are words of *Otto Wagner*, who emphasized later in 1895 in his book „Die Baukunst unserer Zeit” highly selective nature of the recruitment of the Academy. Annually an elite group of only four to eight students graduated from the Viennese Academy of Fine Arts. This is why peers *Carl König* and *Otto Wagner* began their career as students at the Viennese Polytechnic to continue later

their education at the Academy. *Carl König* came into the circle of influence and class of the above mentioned *Friedrich von Schmidt* [11]. *Otto Wagner* studied at the Viennese architects duo – *Eduard van der Nüll* and *August Siccard von Siccardsburg* who were the architects of such buildings as the *Vienna State Opera*. In addition, *Otto Wagner* began to work in the studio of *Theophil von Hansen*. That gave him an opportunity to actively participate, in the course of time in projects such as *Palais Epstein* (Fig. 2) maintained in the Neo-Renaissance style. [12] *Carl König* and *Otto Wagner* belonged to the generation that was born too late to leave a remarkable trace on the architecture of the representative *Ringstrasse*. It was already a built-up area. Unlike celebrities, they were also unable to independently participate in the real competition for monumental projects and become successful at the time. *Wagner* became an assistant at the Academy after 1894 and to some extent evolved to the successor of *Hansen's* style. *König* left the University to take up an assistantship at the *Technische Hochschule*. [13] His work was finally honoured with a position as professor in teaching of architectural form – propaedeutics of construction [14].



**Figure 2.**  
Theophil von Hansen; Neo-renaissance facade of Palais Epstein, Dr. Karl-Renner Ring 1-3, Vienna, 1868-1871. The project was created at the time, when young *Otto Wagner* worked in *Hansen's* office as a construction manager. *Allgemeine Bauzeitung*, Jahrgang 36, Verlag von R. v. Waldheim, Vienna, 1871, III. 73

*König* became the successor to *Heinrich von Ferstel*. At this point the paths of life and also the ideological priorities of these two architects had split up. This happened due to differences in the perception of social changes and the usage of technical progress, which they both experienced in the late 1890s of the nineteenth century.



#### 4. DISCUSSION ABOUT THE FORM

Soon Viennese downtown became saturated with the buildings providing representative facilities. In that case designing residential architecture in more or less splendid districts of Vienna provided an opportunity for architects to realize their design ideas. However, the crisis of form and style proved to be the main problem. This problem turns up on in the supplement to the magazine “Der Architekt” in 1895 where Max Fabiani writes: “Then at the beginning of our century, the tired forms of later Baroque and Empire period were no longer satisfying enough, so the tendency to rejuvenate the forms through studies of ancient, Renaissance, just past art periods spread everywhere rapidly. Half a century passed over it. (...) While these studies and stylistic experiments were executed the science and the skill of the engineer leaped with a giant step ahead.



Figure 3.  
Carl König; „Philipp-Hof”, Vienna, 1882-1884, (does not exist). Online, 12 Dec. 2009,  
<http://bibliothek.univie.ac.at/sammlungen/images/Philipp-HofWeb.jpg>

Where it was naturally to merge before, a distance developed, a gap barely possible to bridge in the time of a biased style” [15]. These universities, represented by *Carl König* and *Otto Wagner* were responsible for training new architects and Viennese fin de siècle architecture. Each of these institutions promoting new standards assumed diverse attitude towards the split that occurred between the sphere of aspirations of architects and clients and architectural media. *Carl König* presented priorities and aspirations of the Technische Hochschule and observations from his own teaching. In his initializing speech for his work as a rector of the Technische Hochschule on November 7, 1901 he said: “We are over this to accept any kind of works of the past as an infallible

model to believe and to imitate. We are mature for its critical review and comparison by which we recognize the constants and regularities in the infinite change of appearance” [16]. *König’s* expression can be read as the theory, that the history of architecture should help in finding invariant rules independent of passing periods. However, history cannot serve at the same time as a specific template and a source of uncritically taken solutions. *Carl König* was a supporter of minor changes in time, taking into account the historical achievements of the past. One can specify his views as “evolutionary”, referring to the historical conditions and an attribute of the conservative stance. This attitude towards design is reflected in his built architecture. Some of the sites like Viennese houses “Philipp-Hof” [17] (Fig. 3) on the corner of Augustinerstraße and Führichgasse 5 and “Rothenthurm-Hof” [18] (Fig. 4) on Franz-Josefs-Kai 21 and Rothenthurmstraße 26 unfortunately no longer exist.



Figure 4.  
Carl König; „Rothenthurm-Hof”, Vienna, 1890, (does not exist). Wiener Bauindustrie-Zeitung, Wiener Bauten-Album, Jahrgang 12, Vienna, 1895, III.77

A house on Mariahilfer Straße 117 [19] (Fig. 5), completed in 1886 is still present [20]. These buildings convey the form of distinct vertical divisions of the facade, carvings, overhangs, combined with the use of historical detail, such as window frames and cornices between the storeys.

In the views of *Otto Wagner* a rapid change and radical departure from tradition, represented by his master *Theophil von Hansen* took place.



Figure 5.  
Carl König; House, Mariahilfer-Straße 117, Vienna, 1886,  
(current view), Photo: M. Bączkowska, 2009

Starting from 1895, he published four editions of “Moderne Architektur” also known as “Die Baukunst unserer Zeit”, where he writes: “Every modern creation must use new materials and meet the requirements of today, if it is to adapt to modern society. It must illustrate our own better, more democratic, self-conscious, sharp thinking character as well as the enormous technical and scientific achievements and take the continuous practical result of the mankind into account – that’s obvious!” [21]. With these words, he criticized the design methods based on historical forms diverging from the possibilities of modern technology. Shortly before 1900 *Wagner* abandoned in his works complicated elevation structure for ornament, introducing colour on the flat surface of the facade, which became the beginning of “secession” period of his work and departure from the past. It is a peculiar signum temporis, when the tedious patterns have to give way to flat facade’s visual solutions. Such surfaces were easier to clean and maintain in accordance with his motto saying, that “Something impractical cannot be beautiful!” [22].

Houses on Linke Wienzeile 38-40 and Köstlergasse 2 [23] (Fig. 6, Fig. 7) may serve as an example and confirmation of this statement.

The formal differences between the two attitudes and



Figure 6.  
Otto Wagner; Majolikahaus, Linke Wienzeile 38, Vienna, 1900.  
Allgemeine Bauzeitung, Jahrgang 65, Verlag von R. v. Waldheim,  
Vienna, 1900, III.11



Figure 7.  
Otto Wagner; Houses, Linke Wienzeile 38-40 and  
Köstlergasse 2, Vienna, (current view).  
Photo: M. Bączkowska, 2009

styles are the best to be seen on the street frontage including the Majolikahaus combined with the facade of the neighbouring building. (Fig. 8) *Otto Wagner*’s building is a triumph of the utility over hypertrophic form.

## 5. ALFRED GROTE IN POZNAŃ

The students who had been educated by *Carl König* and *Otto Wagner* at the above mentioned universities in Vienna enriched not only the Viennese architecture scene. Training and experience which they





Figure 8.  
Otto Wagner; Detail, Majolikahaus, Linke Wienzeile 38,  
Vienna, (current view). Photo: M. Bączkowska, 2009



Figure 9.  
Alfred Grotte; Tenement house, Garbary 54 (former  
Gerberstraße 40), Poznań, 1911, (current view). Photo:  
M. Bączkowska, 2009

gained became later useful while opening their own ateliers abroad. One of them was *Alfred Grotte*, born in 1872 in Prague [24] who studied at the Technische Hochschule in Vienna in the years 1890-1896 [25]. Among the teachers with whom he had contact dur-

ing the studies, were, inter alia, *Karl Mayreder*, *Wenzel Ottokar Noltsch* but first and foremost *Carl König* [26]. In 1904 *Grotte* left Vienna and went to Poznań, a capital of the Great Poland region, which was at that time annexed by Prussia. He was appointed there as professor in the Municipal School of Civil Engineering [27]. *Grotte* has designed several buildings in Poznań, which include a house on the Garbary Street 54 (formerly *Gerberstraße* 40). The building, as he writes himself in the columns of the “*Ostdeutsche Bauzeitung*”, is maintained “in the style of contemporary Viennese art of building” [28]. Quoting *Jan Skuratowicz*: “In all realizations one can feel a trace of architect’s education in Vienna” [29]. It manifests itself in a special decoration of the building, which slightly differs from the other houses designed at that time in Poznań. However, that tenement house still bears the trail of both styles – secession and late historicism.

This is an example that shows a coexistence of these two trends. They prove to evolve and penetrate into one another. This phenomenon is undoubtedly the subject that requires further research.

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