

## Ornament and Materiality in the Work of Adolf Loos

BRIAN ANDREWS

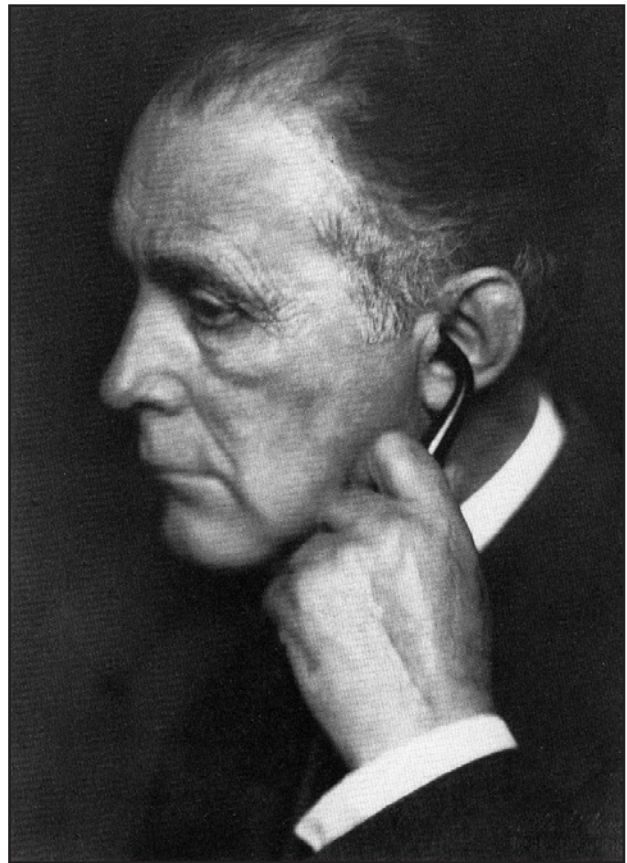
University of Nebraska-Lincoln

Photographs dematerialize reality, but precisely what I want is for people in my rooms to feel the material around them. I want it to have its effect on them. I want them to be aware of the enclosing room, to feel the material, the wood, to see it, touch it, to perceive it sensually, to sit comfortably and feel the contact between the chair and a large area of their peripheral sense of touch, and say: this is sitting as it should be. How can I demonstrate on a photograph how good my chairs are to sit on? How can I make a person who sees the photograph feel it, however well the chair is photographed? Adolf Loos, "On Thrift" (1924)

Ornament lends grace and beauty. Conversely, it has been defined as an embellishing note not belonging to the essential harmony or melody. Herein lies the dichotomy of ornament, comprehended as a positive principle in one mien, but seen as near superfluous in a divergent light.

Architecture has always revolved around the concept of ornament and architects have defined themselves by their relationship to ornament. Architects have often been judged either by their skill in employing ornament or in its denial. No discussion of Ornament is complete without the mention of Adolf Loos, the Viennese Modernist, whose 1910 seminal essay, "Ornament and Crime", was responsible for the abolition of much of what one might term traditional ornament in Modern Architecture. Ornament is no longer recognized as a fundamental element of architecture, the misreading of the Functionalist Doctrine has destroyed it.

Ornament still exists in modern architecture; it has been disguised under different principles. The Modern Architect, raped of figurative and



Adolf Loos

representational ornament, either by choice or necessity, began to exploit other means of ornament to separate themselves from the engineers. Materiality has perhaps been the most powerful of these principles. Adolf Loos, by his own hand

found himself denied the use of any ornament that was not culturally derived. How was he, as an architect, going to manage this loss of what some might term the very essence of architecture? Loos used many principles to offset this loss of traditional representational ornament. Materiality was however the strongest and most powerful. Loos utilized his skill and love of materials in a manner that transcended the mere act of application and instead wove together architecture and culture.

This paper will examine a number of rooms or works by Loos, thereby examining and explaining how Loos, through Materiality, was able to use ornament in a new and original way. Some of the works will include the Karntner Bar, his wife's bedroom, the bathroom of the Villa Karma, the elevation of the Looshaus, the music room of the Villa Moller and the boudoir of the Villa Muller. Within these, Loos, denied of traditional ornament, was able to use the cultural and physical properties of material as a way continuing the tradition or ornament in architecture.

For example, the elevation of the Karntner Bar in Vienna is comprised of three different elements; a sign that reads "American Bar", a glass prism that represents a stylized American Flag with the inscription "Karntner Bar" and finally four pilasters of reddish Skyros marble. The marble of these pilasters is colored in such a way that they seem to naturally have a gray base and a red shaft – enabling a subtle reference to the traditional architectural orders. The veins in the marble are intricate and seem to float within the material itself, giving them a three dimensional quality.

The dichotomy of Adolf Loos can be detected fairly early in his life. Adolf Franz Karl Viktor Maria Loos was born on December 10, 1870 in Brunn. This city at the time was the industrial and commercial center of the Austro-Hungarian Empire.

His father, who was a sculptor and stonemason, is often credited with providing Adolf his love of beautiful materials and meticulous details. However, since his father died when he was only nine years old, we must assume that Loos's use of precious materials was perhaps more of a remembrance. Loos's early education was fraught with difficulties. It began in 1884 when he entered the *Obergym-*



The Karntner Bar

*nasium* of the Benedictines of Melk; he left after only one semester and then entered the National School of Arts and Crafts in Reichenburg, in the hopes of becoming a mechanic. Finally he found himself at the National School of Arts and Crafts in Brunn where he studied mechanical construction. In 1889 he turned to architecture and enrolled in the technical university in Dresden. During the next year Loos began a career in the military reserve. Within a year he had completed his training and was an Officer of the Reserve. Not long after this Loos had a uniform tailor made and had himself photographed while wearing it. In 1892 Loos returned to Dresden to finish his studies. During these years in Dresden, Loos joined not only a student fraternity, but also a dueling club. These actions speak of someone, who as a member of a bourgeoisie society, is searching for the recognition of his personal honor. (1) Through these endeavors, Loos was seemingly able to achieve a level of prestige and it helps to explain his life long fascination with manners, etiquette and uniforms.

I have discovered the following truth and present it to the world: cultural evolution is equivalent to the removal of ornament from articles in daily use.  
Adolf Loos

This desire to attain entrance into a noble society seems counter intuitive to Loos's later position as a leader of Europe's avant garde and modernist movements. Herein lies the duality of Loos as a man, a philosopher and an architect. On one level he is seen, where so many prefer to place him, as a modernist. On another level he is recognized as

a traditionalist that understood the value of history and the past. One question that has accompanied this realization deals with one of his favorite subjects, ornament. It is difficult to separate ornament from the architecture of the past, in particular classical architecture. Loos always professed on some levels to be a classicist. Yet Loos's seminal essay "Ornament and Crime" seems to condemn ornament as an architectural practice. Loos condemned not all ornament, only that which was not culturally derived. Undoubtedly, Loos felt that classical ornament, used properly, was allowable. This is evidenced by his numerous uses of classical architecture in projects such as the Looshaus and the Villa Karma. Loos faced a dilemma, how was he to articulate an argument against the new superfluous ornament of the Secession and Art Nouveau, while maintaining the grammar of the classical? The essay was published in Paris in 1913, and was received as a purist manifesto; it became Ornament is Crime. The misreading of this essay has caused irreparable damage to architecture. Loos in 1924, wrote in "Ornament and Education": "I affirmed twenty-six years ago that the evolution of humanity would cause ornament to disappear from functional objects, an evolution which would allow its ineluctable and logical path...But I never thought like the purists who pushed this reasoning to the absurd, that ornament should be systematically abolished. It is only where the passage of time makes it disappear that it cannot be reborn."(2)

This conflict in architecture, between ornament and modernism, paralleled Loos's personal struggle between a member of Europe's avant-garde and his desire to be accepted into noble society. Ultimately Loos was able to achieve an architecture that defied many of the consequences that other architects were unable to avoid. Loos was not dogmatic when it came to his designs. Like all good architects, he had principles, however these principles allowed him to maneuver through the field with a different mind-set than most modern architects. His principles did not produce a unified language per se, but instead prevented a formulaic approach. In short one might say that he invented a formula that did not allow a formula. This approach was very different from his contemporaries. Loos's theories dictated all manner of concerns in one's life, from manners, etiquette, dress, and art and of course architecture. Loos was opposed to "styles", or even the notion of style, this is easily

seen in his geometric and stripped down domestic exteriors. In Loos's domestic interiors, the expression was eclectic, reflecting a fundamental split in his work between a comfortable rusticity on the one hand and a severe monumentality on the other. (3) The interiors of Loos's architecture are remarkably different from the exterior on certain levels, most notably, the materials. The geometry of these interiors is often very simple, taking its cues from the more ascetic exterior. The interior's difference is illustrated in its celebrated and sensual use of materials. Loos was operating in turn of the century Vienna, a most vibrant place intellectually, socially and artistically. Loos used Freud's idea of *masking* in his domestic architecture. Freud spoke about how each person wears a mask, in other words, one cannot tell what another person is thinking by looking at their face. Loos manifested this idea in his houses. Loos's interiors were conceived as a place of retreat from the shocking alterations in the public realm. (4) The street or public elevations were often stripped of all ornament and were in effect dumb.

The work of art is brought into the world without there being a need for it. The house satisfies a requirement. The work of art is responsible to none; the house is responsible to everyone. The work of art wants to draw people out of their state of comfort.

Adolf Loos, *Architektur* (1910)

These sentiments directed Loos throughout his career. His facades were simple in that they needed to respond to everyone. They masked the interiors, which were where the true nature of the individual could emerge. There is a marked difference between Loos's interiors and his exteriors, however the theories that produced them is consistent and as valid today as in fin de siècle Vienna. These interiors emerge from two different sources, one is the idea of the *raumplan*, and the other is the concreteness of materials. In this paper I shall primarily discuss the materials and how they acted as a replacement for ornament. Using a palette of materials, I shall discuss a number of Loos's projects and attempt to explain how he was using these materials and how they satisfied his need for ornament.

One should remember that quality materials and good workmanship do not simply make up for a lack of ornamentation; they far surpass it in luxu-



riousness. More than that, they make ornamentation redundant. Nowadays, even the most vulgar person would hesitate to decorate a fine wood with inlay work, engrave over the natural patterns of a marble slab, or cut a magnificent silver fox into small squares to make a chessboard design with other furs...Fine material is God's own wonder.  
Adolf Loos, "Hands Off", 1917

## MARBLE

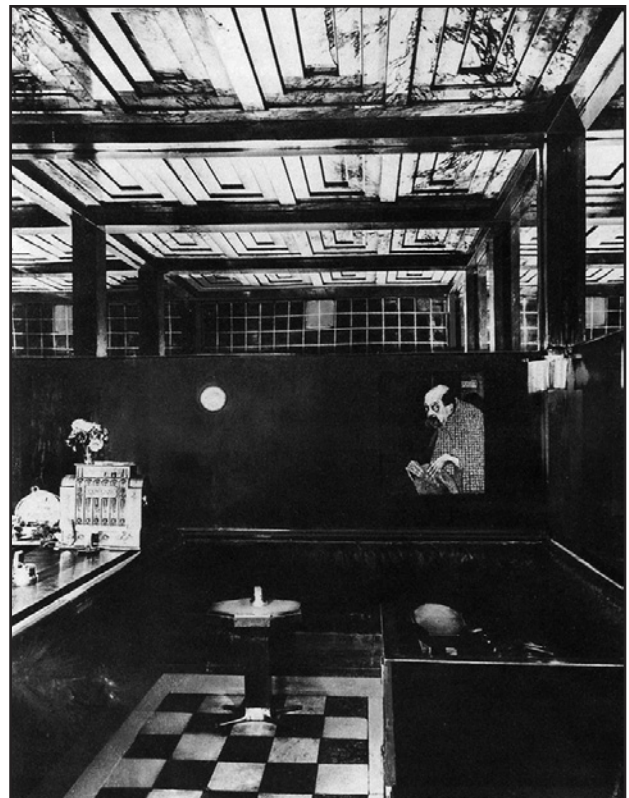
"It is to Loos's credit that he thinks of marble not merely in terms of its material reality but in what Demetri Porphyrios has called the "stylistic density" – that is "the coded meanings that classicism has already assigned to it". Loos seemed to understand that when he said, "not just the material, but the forms as well are bound up with place, with the nature of the earth and the air. (5)



Kärntner Bar

Of all the materials that Loos utilized in his projects, marble is perhaps the one that he is most closely associated with. This material found its way into many of Loos's projects and was continually handled with a skill unknown to his modern counterparts. In this paper I shall discuss only a few of these projects. The first project where the use of marble is most arresting is the Kärntner Bar. The exterior pillars of the Bar, which are in fact not structural, are clad in Skyros marble. This marble is colored in such a way that they naturally have a gray base and a red shaft, this acts as a subtle reference to the classical order of a column. In reality these pillars are very simple in form and have no

detail or ornamentation. Yet Loos had to essentially pick them from a quarry. This decision is of course tantamount to designing them. He did not choose a white Carrara marble that would have minimum veining, but instead chose the reddish gray Skyros. The veins and imperfections of the marble imply a type of authorless ornamentation. These veins are of course natural to the material, but they still operate on one's senses in the same way that an ornamented pillar might. In other words, the eye is drawn to their graphic quality, just as it might be to one of Wagner's invented forms. One almost expects to feel a texture when touching them. Inside the Bar Loos uses dark green marble (tinos green) pilasters and beams as a way to demarcate the space into three equal bays. The ceiling is coffered using a white marble that has darker veins (rosso antico). There are four coffers in each of the three bays resulting in a 3x4 composition that has seemingly no relationship to the plan of the furniture of the bar. It is as if this cave of marble somehow existed previously and Loos was merely furnishing it. This marble and its lack of relationship to the furniture serve as a way of identifying it as being



Interior of Kärntner Bar

from another time. The marble represents a noble culture, meanings that classicism had already imbibed it with. It should also be mentioned that the wall facing the street on the interior is constructed of onyx marble. As the light from the street filters through this material it is transformed into the color of whiskey, thereby referencing the very goods that are sold and consumed in the space.

The Looshaus on the Michaelerplatz was another project where Loos used marble in an ornamental fashion. He used Skyros marble in the interiors in the same way that he used it on the exterior pillars of the Karntner Bar; as a graphic device. On the base of the exterior façade, Loos employed Cipollino marble in a different manner and as a direct reference to Rome. The Romans had made extensive use of this marble and Loos attempted to draw a connection to the Romans by using this marble and also by using classical forms. Since Loos rejected the ornament of the 19<sup>th</sup> century that was so prevalent in Vienna, he was again facing a design dilemma; how was he going to dress the bottom of this building in a way that worked with its consumer function. Loos, having spent time in Chicago, was very aware of the ornamentation that Sullivan had used as an attention getting device in the Carson Piere Scott building. He realized that something



Looshaus on the Michaelplatz

similar would be required in the Looshaus. Loos chose a marble that on one hand was as graphic as Sullivan's ornament, and on another connected the building directly to Rome and Roman Culture. Essentially, by embracing historical forms and materials, Loos was able to leap over the problems of new invented ornament.

Other buildings where Loos employed marble as a type of ornamentation were the Villa Karma, the Duschnitz Villa, the Strasser Villa and the Villa Muller. It should also be noted that Loos typically used marble as a cladding and not as a structural material.



Library of Villa Moller

## WOOD

Loos's use of wood was truly ubiquitous in that it is difficult to name a project where it was not utilized. He used wood primarily as a cladding for the interior walls of his domestic interiors. This interior cladding and much of Loos's interior syntax was taken from Muthesius's three-volume study *Das Englische Haus* of 1904. (6) These woods usually took the form of a wainscot, but sometimes incorporated the entire wall, such as the music room in the Villa Moller. Almost without exception Loos used dark oak wood in the public interiors of his domestic projects. In the commercial projects he typically engaged a finer wood such as cherry or

mahogany. As with marble, Loos was using this material not only because he felt that it was perhaps beautiful, but also because it was imbued with meaning. As an Anglophile, Loos was fascinated with English culture and it is not surprising that his interiors borrow so much from the English Arts and Crafts tradition. Wood was also typically used in the beams of the public rooms, although, like the marble that he so often used, these beams were in fact rarely structural and were instead used in a symbolic way rather than a strictly functional way. Loos relied on wood to give his interiors a warm and welcoming feel, something that he felt very strongly about. This leads to the 'moods' which architecture, according to Loos, has to be capable of calling up in individuals as in the law courts which have to 'appear like a threatening gesture towards secret vice', the bank, which has to say to the individual that here 'your money is securely and kept by honest people'. It is crucial that under these circumstances Loos neither demanded nor offered inventions for the 'symbolization' of these functions, but called for the architect to establish relations with these buildings, which have hitherto produced this mood. (7) Loos accumulated a pool of materials, elements and surfaces that he was able to tap into repeatedly, and that could be arranged in order to match the desired character of his houses with the personalities of his clients and their families. (8)

In this consideration of wood as a material, one special moment in Loos's architecture worth consideration is the lady's room (Damenzimmer) at the Villa Muller. This room is special in that upon entering the Villa, one is naturally led through a series of episodes to this particular space. This entry sequence is essentially a spiral that leads to this small but rich room. Spatially the room is divided in a typical raumplan system, with a seating area above and a space for a daybed below. The seating area has a view down to the living room and out of the window beyond to the city of Prague, which confirms reciprocity between the city and the house. This room is faced in a light lemon wood that like many of the marbles chosen by Loos has a natural graphic quality that essentially makes the ornament. Loos often used lighter woods for the most private parts of a house and darker woods for the public or more masculine areas. The centrality and voyeuristic power of this room is perhaps explained by rumors of Loos's relationship with Mi-

lada Muller. It is telling that these most exquisite materials are used in the heart of the house, the private space for the woman. The spatial development of the boudoir is in many ways of the villa itself. Each volumetric unit within the room (like each room within the villa) is charged with a discernable interiority. The Villa Muller was the last of Loos's garden villas and this room, which is often described as a jewel box, perhaps more than any other, typifies his ideas of space and materiality.



Boudoir of Villa Muller

## TEXTILES

When considers textiles in Loos's work, then typically one thinks of either the fabric of his built in furniture or perhaps the numerous Persian carpets that are seen in the interior photos. Loos felt strongly that items such as carpets should chosen not by the architect, but by the clients. To Loos, the interior furnishings were of little concern to the architect. Clients had favorite chairs, carpets passed down from generations, all these must be accommodated in any house. The fabrics that Loos used in his built in furniture were often floral patterns typical of the English arts and crafts movement. In the Karntner Bar he imagined using green automobile leather for the seating. Loos also used curtains to divide rooms as in his own apartment and the main room of the Steiner House to name a few. The most singular use of textile in Loos's work came actually in one of his earliest works, the bedroom for his wife Lina. The parquet floor of



this room was covered with a pale blue wall-to-wall carpet, above which a large Angora rabbit fur rug lies. This rug occupied most of the floor and continued up over the bed. Loos saw fur as the original textile; it was the first fabric that man used. The walls were completely covered to the door height by white curtains in "Batist rayee". There were soft wood cabinets that were hidden behind these curtains. This bedroom, which Loos used until the end of his life, was the ultimate intimate space and was so direct and immediate in addressing an archaic drive and instinctive needs.



Lina Loos's Bedroom

That is the correct way; the logical way architects should go about their business. That was the order in which mankind learned to build. In the beginning we sought to clad ourselves, to protect ourselves from the elements, to keep ourselves safe and warm while sleeping. We sought to cover ourselves. Originally consisting of animal furs or textiles, this covering is the earliest architectural feature. Adolf Loos, "The Principle of Cladding", 1898

The materials of this room are archaic and their meanings supply the ornament. It is an intellectual/material ornament rather than a graphic/material ornament.

## MIRRORS

The last material that I shall discuss is really a type of anti-material or non-material. Loos was the first modern architect to use the mirror extensively. He was fascinated by its ability to extend and multiply space and was equally captivated by its voyeuristic

qualities. Loos first used mirrors in the Hirsch and Schwarzwald apartments where large plate-glass mirrors combined with freestanding pillars creates a perceptual oscillation between the virtual and real mirror image of the space. (9) Loos typically used the mirror as a method of extending space. This is most clearly seen in the Karntner Bar in Vienna, where the illusionistic clerestory helps to expand the upper volume of the space. When sitting in the Bar however, it is easy to image that there are other Bars next door and you wonder exactly what is happening in them. This explosion of space above eye level serves this small interior well.



Mirrors of the Karntner Bar

"With pleasure, the eye meets the soft mahogany shine of the panels, which extend beyond half of the room's height, sliding and sinking, surprised by newness at every turn, in the interweaving of reality and pure reflection of the solidly formed yet unladen marble coffers of the ceiling and of the wall made of translucent onyx slabs." (10)

Loos also used the mirror in the Looshaus on the Michaelerplatz, where two mirrors located opposite each other in the entry foyer, reflect the occupant into infinity. Loos used mirrors on the main landing of the stairway that was located in the Goldman and Salatsch shop. These mirrors, like those in the Karntner Bar explode the space above the mahogany panels and reflect the glass block ceiling.



Mirror on landing of the Knize Shop

Loos employed the mirror in the Knize shop in a different manner. This refined interior of cherry wood and brass details contains numerous mirrors that are often difficult to discern. Here the mirror acts not only in a reflective and spatial manner, but also as voyeuristic or security device. There is a mirror placed strategically on the landing of the customer's stair that allows the store manager to see who is entering the shop from his office on the second floor. Beyond the spatial and voyeuristic qualities of the mirrors, they worked well in this space in that they also allowed the customers to continually see themselves in their new finery.

## CONCLUSION

Loos used all these materials as a way of cladding. Loos would have encountered the teachings of Semper in Dresden and although Semper thought primarily of textiles in teachings on cladding, Loos incorporated all manner of materials into this practice. This undoubtedly came about due to the fact that Loos executed some 56 apartment interiors

during his lifetime. Having little or no control of structural or real spatial issues, Loos instead articulated these interiors with what he termed permanent wall paper. Each room is clad in the appropriate material; each creates a mood that comes not only from the material and its ornament, but also from its history. As people dress for certain occasions, so were Loos's rooms dressed in their clothing. Dining rooms and living rooms were either in dark oak or marble, bedrooms were typically light woods with fabric, shops were fitted with fine woods and brass metal work, commercial facades were clad in exquisite marble or granite and the exterior of houses were almost always left dumb. Loos understood and used ornament through his architecture, it was not however, the ornament of the Secessionists or the Art Nouveau, it was an ornament based in history and in the materials themselves.

The essential happens regardless.  
Friedrich Nietzsche

## ENDNOTES

1. Janet Stewart, "Fashioning Vienna, Adolf Loos's Cultural Criticism", p. 4
2. Adolf Loos, "Ornement e education" (1924) in *Malgre tout*, p. 289
3. Kenneth Frampton, "Introduction, Adolf Loos and the Crisis of Culture, 1896-1931", p. 11. In the book "The Architecture of Adolf Loos".
4. Gevork Hartoonian, "Ontology of Construction", Chap. 3, p. 44
5. Gevork Hartoonian, "Ontology of Construction", Chap. 3, p. 46
6. Kenneth Frampton, "Adolf Loos: The Architect as Master Builder", p.17. in the book by Roberto Schezen, "Adolf Loos, Architecture 1903-1932"
7. Dietmar Steiner, "The Strength of the Old Masters: Adolf Loos and Antiquity", p.23. In the book "The Architecture of Adolf Loos".
8. Ralf Bock, "Adolf Loos, Works and Projects", p.80
9. Kenneth Frampton, "Adolf Loos: The Architect as Master Builder", p.18. in the book by Roberto Schezen, "Adolf Loos, Architecture 1903-1932"
10. Munz, Kunstler, "Der Architekt Adolf Loos", p.40