

## Modernism and, or versus traditionalism: the work of the Wagnerschüler Leopold Bauer

Review of:

Jindřich Vybiral, *Leopold Bauer, Häretiker der modernen Architektur 1872-1938*, Basel: Birkhäuser, 2018, English Summary, 548 pp., 350 b/w illustrations, 120 colour illustrations, ISBN 978 3 0356 130 62

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Wagner – Mackintosh - Loos – Behrens – Gropius: no further information is needed to convey the essence of the history of architecture of the years 1896-1911, not only for Austro-German lands, but, in view of what it was thought to have led to, world architectural history as a whole. Only one stylistic term was needed, 'Modern'. It all gave these names an immensely high rank, alongside which almost all other figures, however much meritorious could be said about their work, seemed to pale into insignificance. One case in point was the career of Leopold Bauer. With a most thorough investigation of his work, Vybiral makes a major contribution to supplement the central Modernist narrative, even to partly push it aside, and thus opens one's eyes and understanding to a wider world of diverse 20<sup>th</sup> century architectural manifestations. Vybiral chooses the term 'heretic', thus suggesting that Bauer's departures from the Modernist line were fully intentional.

Vybiral's Introduction addresses in some detail two methodological conundrums which will be of good use for many readers of this journal. The subheadings are: 'The right Modernism and the other Modernism' and 'the biographical method and the "death of the author"', concluding with 'Leopold Bauer – creative subjectivity and sociology's dependant [soziologisches Subjekt]'.

Vybiral starts off with Bauer's marginalisation within the Wagner-Schule very early on, for his partial return to Classical forms. Such kinds of judgements would still be found in most later assessments by Austrian art historians. Vybiral counters it by throwing doubts on some basic tenets of Modernism itself; '... the thorough marketing-strategies of the avant-gardists the specialists [Fachleute] are not even agreed upon the essence of their movement' (11). What is most problematic is the relationship of 'Modernity' with its actual present, because of its constant utopian leanings(13). Vybiral then cites a number of other, more recent analysts, such as Colin St. John Wilson, who were searching for broader frameworks, comprising tradition, respect for natural conditions and the individual sites, as well as the individual requirements of the clients (12).

As regards the biographical method, Vybiral aims to forestall possible reservations. He rehearses in some detail the radical condemnations of auctorial intentionalism of Barthes and Foucault, as well as pointing to the ways in which Heinrich Wölfflin and Hans Tietze appealed for an 'art history without artists', without biographies, postulating that each practitioner simply adopts a particular way of seeing, a style prevalent at the time. Yet Tietze also stated that 'an act of

creation is always something individual' (17). The arguments go backwards and forwards. Arnold Hauser, avowedly a 'social historian of art', postulates a 'dialectical reciprocity ... the individual always finds himself in a historical-social situation and conducts himself, without knowing it or wanting it, according to its requirements'. Vybiral's own conclusion appears more balanced: '... a more active relationship between artist and style, whereby every artist has different *modi vivendi* at his disposition, so as to make his choice according to the shape of the task' (19), something that also conforms to Wilson's just mentioned broadened analysis of the Modernisms. One may at this point also add a less theoretical note: the abundant 'material', i.e. the remarkable state of preservation of Bauer's *Nachlass*, textual, pictorial, as well as the excellent state of preservation of most of his buildings. This can also be seen in the context of the way Bauer conducted himself, namely, so Vybiral, 'as a gifted director [*Regisseur*] of his own career' (20), all of which, one may claim, greatly justify a biographical approach. At the same time the social and political framework is effectively conveyed through ordering much of the material according to building types.

To begin with one needs to summarise the new Vienna scene from around 1895 to 1902. What art historians have so far not emphasised enough is the impact of the new style of drawing, and drawing for its own sake, emanating from designers in the circle of Paul Wallot in Berlin, notably Otto Rieth, with their phantasy sketches, creating impressiveness by looking upwards from a low position and at an angle. Wagner then geometrisises these structures, particularly by emphasising strong horizontals. In their designs for large monuments the Germans, especially Wilhelm Kreis, also increasingly went for sheer walls in cyclopic masonry, with decoration restricted to small zones. The surface without any *décor* began to fascinate the Viennese and by 1900 it was adopted in a radical geometrization in domestic interior decoration, resulting in a repetition of square outlines, large blank surfaces, contrasting with restricted zones of equally geometrising *décor* ('*Quadratstil*'). As in the case of the architectural monuments it was a style which also preferably manifested itself in a certain way of drawing, but this time it was in shadowless perspectives, with maximal contrast of whiteness and strongly coloured details. The two spheres of drawing and designing, the monumental and the intimate, merged in 1902 in Bauer's astonishing project '*einfache Pfarrkirche*', or 'simple Parish church', of 1902; horizontals, verticals, squares rectangles and triangles. A new catchword was "*einfach*", but Vybiral rightly warns that the adjective, especially as '*einfache Möbel*'; was not at all identical with '*schmucklos*' [unornamented] (119). It would be totally misleading to understand '*einfach*' here in terms of low-cost reductionism; to the contrary, Secession geometry must be categorised as bespoke throughout. In terms of the history of interior design, socio-historically speaking, these Secessionist designs helped to drive home Modernism's claims that it is the architect who is the sole guarantor of artistic worth of interiors and all their furnishings.

All this brings us already to the peak of the Wagnerschule and Vienna Secession movement. From here its members, Wagner himself, Hoffmann, Plečnik, Olbrich and others went their own and often quite different ways, not yet aware of, or worrying about the fact that the narrative of Modernist architecture was about to

move to Berlin. And at this point begins the discovery of Bauer's relatively independent career. The first field of an intense design activity is domestic work. In those years the well-appointed individual house was considered by many as the primary task for the architect, especially for the forward-looking designer. The Darmstadt competition Haus eines Kunstfreundes of 1900-1901 marked the high point of these efforts. Bauer's project was one of the three widely publicised entries. A year later he built his first major house, the Villa Reissig in Brünn / Brno. The principal idea is a multidirectional grouping around a central hall, held to be at the times an English custom, which also meant the abandonment of any idea of a principal façade. Secondly there are the completely plain external walls, apart from some gentle Secessionist ornamentation occurring at the top and the bottom, into which the windows are quasi punched into. But there is also one element that one might consider strongly traditional, reminiscent of old peasant houses, namely the hipped roof and the mansard roof.

Not championing the flat roof, as did Wagner and Adolf Loos, or as they were to do, must have been a momentous decision, and it was fuelling the growing negative evaluation of Bauer's work. The peak of this traditionalism came just before the First World War. In some of his projects for the Österreichisch-Ungarische Bank in Vienna he returned to an almost Semperian kind of Italian Renaissance / Baroque revival. In the built version there is, again, a mansard roof. And here comes the point at which Vybiral goes on the attack, stressing that the 'front lines between the propagators of progress and the reactionaries were at that time not as impermeable and as sharp [*eindeutig*] as the later Modernist historians tried to suggest in their trivial attacks'. Among others he cites Loos, who at one point accused Wagner of 'distancing himself from the formal language of Antiquity ...' (320).

The Post-WW I world, meaning, in retrospect, the Interwar world, was a different one in very many respects. In terms of architectural history, we lack a general overview of what happened in Austria, and, for that matter, in Prague or Brno, too; though, if anything, as regards advanced Modernism there was more of to report from Czecho-Slovakia than from Vienna. Vybiral's account of Bauer's work can be taken as going some way to fill these gaps. As with so many Viennese designers, Bauer had been an immigrant from lands well beyond old Austria; as it happens, a group photo from the Trade School of Brno, i.e. Brünn, in 1889, shows, apart from Bauer, two other Viennese protagonists, Josef Hoffmann and Adolf Loos. One may say that Bauer was now returning to his homeland, working until the late 1930s as a Sudetendeutscher in the new Czecho-Slovakian republic, obtaining most of his commissions in the region of his birth and in provincial Opava (Troppau) in particular, while holding on to a respected position in Austrian cities as well. The eclipse of the dominating wealthy Austro-Hungarian capital and the weakening of its intellectual circles from 1918 radically changed the pattern of architectural patronage. Now all kinds of tasks had to be taken on. This included factories, offices, stores, exhibition buildings, hospitals, municipal housing (for Vienna) and more, though there was still the occasional well-appointed villa and luxury interior. For Bauer, all buildings, including factories, required monumental treatment, that is, vigorous corner accents and strong cornices, with the occasional attic storey, as well

pitched, or hipped roofs. The verticals, whether or not they corresponded to the internal structural supports, still feel like pilasters.

A rather different and singular treatment is shown with his Breda & Weinstein Warenhaus Store in Troppau of 1926-28. Here the verticals are merely thin strips and the top can no longer be labelled a cornice, but an Art-Nouveau / (German) Expressionist kind of curved projection, while the roof now has completely disappeared from view – the whole curiously reminiscent of Sullivan's early skyscrapers. There is no monumental base, but the skeleton structure is exposed on the ground floor. A curious feature is the way a portion of the building on one side gently curves forward while its windows are smaller and more numerous: one can read a lower ceiling height inside and may guess that there are flats here, contrasting with the zones of larger windows indicating the commercial spaces. This Troppau store was duly chosen for the cover of the book. Its elevation was unique; at the same time one may take it to mark a transitional phase in Bauer's work. By 1930, in a design for a store in Novi Sad, Bauer adopted a very different formal language: horizontal window bands set into otherwise undisturbed surfaces and at the top there is no cornice, nothing whatsoever, the wall just ends. Inevitably one has to label this Modern, that is, belonging to the one, the international Modern, which Bauer has finally joined, and which effectively meant, so Vybiral, trying out the 'methods of his ideological adversaries' (448).

Like many architects of his generation, Bauer was fascinated with towers; it was a time when, notably in Germany, by the early 1930s a '*Hochhaus*' was *de rigueur* for every large city. For Bauer it principally meant the search for varied solutions for the top. For one of his 1913 projects for the Austro-Bank, the highest part is crowned a copy of the square Temple of Helicarnassos. The factory watertower at Maffersdorf of 1924, actually built, alternates polygonal and circular sections. Bauer, in a thoroughly utopianist mood, proposed a number of urban complexes with a special stress on placing living and working areas in close proximity. A huge complex was to be the '*Monumentale Arbeitsstätte* [place of work] *an der Donau*' of 1918 which shows a centrally placed triumphal arch, flanked by a high tower. 1922 saw Bauer's entry to the Chicago Tribune competition. Again, the top presents an opportunity for a multiplex combination of temples, becoming smaller as the building goes up. For him the design principle of the top of a tower was a gradual stepping back, in total contrast to the just mentioned Sullivanesque method of a flat, invisible roof of a rectangular block. What is most curious is how his Chicago tower was imagined to be surrounded gently by a leafy promenade and an 18<sup>th</sup> century palace; probably the assistant who helped with the drawing did not have the foggiest idea of an American city. By the early to mid-thirties Bauer's proposals for towers did give up the icings on the top, and are now terminating like other urban buildings with decisive horizontals. Finally, there was a complete oddity, manifesting itself only as a sketch, in 1929, namely the corner of the Gerngross Store in Vienna which was to be topped by an extension in the form of a sphere, a globe, containing five floors of commercial space.

Finally, there are two quasi natural towers, namely church towers. St. Nikolaus in Bieltiz (today Bielsko-Biała in Poland) of 1908-10 one may call, with its round-arches arcades, a Vienna Secession version of the Neo-Romanesque. One

of the architect's last works, certainly his last magnum opus, was St. Hedwig in Troppau of 1935-8. Compared with all the earlier solutions, its tower presents a sobered-up version of tower design, piling up a number of rectangular blocks of diminishing size, but increasing height. The round arch is now almost given up and there is a unified treatment with vertical flat bands framing white fields. One is tempted to use the dangerous epithet 'simple', but one hesitates to use a style-label. If one opts for Modern, then the question arises which version of Modern should one cite? If anything, the strong sense of rectangular geometry reminds one of rectangular frames and pure white surfaces in his Vienna-Secession - style interiors of 1900-1902. Even more reminiscent of delicate Secession ornament is the grille in the entrance, where, woven in with the ornament, one meets a most unusual feature, the letters 'Invenit Leop Bauer'.

'*Konservative Moderne*', '*Heimat und Modernität*', or '*das Dilemma des romantischen Pragmatikers*', such are Vybiral's formulations for his sections on Bauer's work of the Interwar period. They would apply to the work of numerous important figures of the period in Central and East Central Europe. What is most needed is investigations case by case, in the way Vybiral demonstrates it in his book on Bauer. The splendour of its production, hailing from Prague, almost identical with the first edition in Czech, brings out the most attractive qualities of Bauer's work. One thing is certain: the times of having to apologize for not being Modernist, or not Modernist enough, have definitively passed.

#### Note

The original Czech language version otherwise almost identical, appeared in 2015 *Leopold Bauer Heretik Moderní Architektury*, publ. Akademia Vysoká Škola uměleckoprůmyslová v Praze, 2015. See also: Jindřich Vybiral, *Reissigova vila v Brně a reforma rodinného domu po roce 1900* - Jindřich Vybiral, *The Reissig Villa in Brno and the Reform of the Family House after 1900*, Barrister & Principal: Prague 2011 (text in Czech and English), and Jindřich Vybiral, *Junge Meister Architekten aus der Schule Otto Wagners in Mähren und Schlesien*, Wien-Köln-Weimar: Böhlau 2007 (also in Czech).

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