



Hilde Heynen

Architecture and Modernity

A Critique

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Total
disillusionment
about the age
and nevertheless
an unreserved
profession of
loyalty to it . . .

Walter Benjamin, 1933

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Reflections in a Mirror

The Experience of Rupture

In 1890 Hermann Bahr published a short essay in which he formulated the younger generation's frustration with the culture that surrounded them. He expressed their sense of disorientation, their feeling of having no genuine ties with the world around them. The feeling that is dominant, he states, is one of agony and despair: "Fierce pain permeates our time, and the agony has become intolerable. There is general clamor for the Savior; everywhere we find the crucified. Has the plague descended on this earth?" In the face of this catastrophe, however, one should not give up. Out of the agony of those who seek the truth, a new age would be born, the age of the modern: "That redemption will come from grief, and mercy from despair, that day will break after this horrible night and art will dwell among people—this glorious and rapturous resurrection is the faith of modernity."¹

The modern was present already, he argued. It could be seen everywhere in the world outside. It was, however, not yet present in the spirit, nor did it yet fill people's hearts. The conditions of life had changed fundamentally and they would continue to change; people's minds, however, had not yet followed suit. This was why there was so much falsehood in cultural life, a falsehood that had to be done away with. The desire for truth would eventually bring people's outward circumstances and inner longings into harmony once more, creating a new identity between men and the environment they live in. The barriers between inside and outside had to be pulled down. Bahr called for a purge: everything that was old had to be got rid of, the dusty corners where the old spirit had made its home had to be swept clean. Emptiness was needed, an emptiness that would come from erasing all the teachings, all beliefs, and all knowledge of the past. All the falsehood of the spirit—everything that could not be brought into harmony with steam and electricity—had to be exorcised. Then and then only would the new art be born: "The entrance of outward life into the inner spirit: this is the new art. . . . We have no other law than the truth, as is experienced by everybody. . . . This will be the new art that we are creating, and it will be the new religion, for art, science and religion are one and the same."²

Bahr cherished the hope that the death throes of the old culture would herald in the birth pangs of a new culture, a culture that would erase the difference between outward appearance and inner spirit and thus would be based on truth, beauty, and harmony. This longing for a unified culture can also be recognized in Bahr's expectations regarding the house that he had Josef Hoffmann build for him. The architect, according to Bahr, should strive to express the personality of his client both in the house as a whole and in all its details. The ideal house should be a *Gesamtkunstwerk* that would reveal the inner truth of its inhabitant: "Above the door a line of a poem should be inscribed: the verse that expresses my whole being and what this verse expresses in words, should equally be said by all the colors and lines, and every chair, every wallpaper design and every lamp should repeat this same verse over again. In a house like this I would see my own soul everywhere as in a mirror."³ In many ways Bahr's rhetoric seems like a forerunner of the avant-garde's call for purity and authenticity. Out of a diagnosis of the rupture provoked by modernity, he advocates a new beginning, based upon the rejection of the old. What distinguishes him from the later avant-garde, however, is his definitely pastoral conception of a unity that is to be established between art, science, and religion.

In a famous essay of 1903, "The Metropolis and Mental Life," Georg Simmel adopts a more distant approach in discussing the same phenomenon of the discrepancy between the outward conditions of life and one's inner sensibility. In Simmel's view the metropolitan condition is characterized by a profusion of constantly changing stimuli with which every individual is bombarded. In order to protect his life against this deluge of stimuli, the individual responds in a rational manner. Human beings, after all, are more capable of adapting to change at a rational level than at the

level of feelings and emotional relations: "Thus the metropolitan type of man—which of course exists in a thousand individual variants—develops an organ protecting him against the threatening currents and discrepancies of his external environment which would uproot him. He reacts with his head instead of his heart."⁴

Simmel discerns a link between the dominance of rationality in the social sphere and the money economy;⁵ both systems rely upon purely functional relations among people and things. In the money economy, exchange value takes precedence over use value. This means that the particular character of separate objects is reduced to something that is purely quantitative: objects derive their value not from their inherent quality, but from their quantitative market value. For Simmel it is clear that an analogy can be drawn with the field of interpersonal relations: here too, he argues, emotional relationships used to depend on the individuality of the people concerned, while in the rational relations that are typical of the metropolis, people are treated like numbers. In relations of this sort, individuals are interchangeable entities:

Money is concerned only with what is common to all: it asks for the exchange value, it reduces all quality and individuality to the question: How much? All intimate emotional relations between persons are founded in their individuality, whereas in rational relations man is reckoned with like a number, like an element which is in itself indifferent.⁶

Simmel nevertheless maintains that the anonymity and indifference of the metropolis do not imply an impoverishment compared with the seclusion and security of the small town or village. For the reserve of city dwellers toward each other and toward their environment provides a context which allows for a much higher degree of personal freedom than is known elsewhere.

According to Simmel, there is yet another feature that is characteristic of life in the metropolis: the increasing fissure between "objective" and "subjective" spirit. Objective culture—the ensemble of achievements in the fields of science, technology, scholarship, and art—accumulates at such a speed that it is impossible for the individual, concerned with the development of his own subjective culture, to keep pace with it. The division of labor means that individuals develop in a way that is increasingly specialized and one-track. This discrepancy is particularly apparent in the metropolis, where objective culture is embodied in institutional buildings and educational organizations, in infrastructures and administrative bodies, and where it is clear that the personality of the individual is no match for this overwhelming presence.

Implicit in the picture that Simmel draws is a fundamental criticism of Hermann Bahr's expectations. Bahr assumed that art and culture would be joined in a new synthesis with science and technology. Simmel's analysis suggests that this hope of a new harmony has little basis. Bahr, one might argue, represents the programmatic and pastoral concept of modernity that was also at a premium in the modern movement. Simmel, on the other hand, demonstrates that social reality might

well form an obstacle in the way of achieving this synthetic ideal. The latter opinion is shared by the authors that are discussed in this chapter.

Adolf Loos: The Broken Continuation of Tradition

Adolf Loos (1870–1933) occupies a truly exceptional place in the history of architecture. The articles that he wrote for the Viennese press around the turn of the century won him fame as a critic of culture and essayist. In biting words he mocked everything he regarded as outdated and artificial. His main targets were the architects of the Sezession group, such as Hoffmann and Olbrich, and the practitioners of the applied arts.⁷ In language that was remarkable for its ferocity, he attacked the Werkbund, the union of German industrialists and artists that had been set up to improve the quality of industrial products.⁸ The backward habits and hypocrisy of the Viennese bourgeoisie were also a frequent target. He crusaded, for instance, for the universal use of bathrooms (“An increase in the use of water is one of our most critical tasks”)⁹ and argued for the adoption of Anglo-Saxon culture in Austria as an urgent priority.¹⁰

His architecture did not immediately win him the same recognition as his writings. This was largely because it was fundamentally at variance with the ideals of the modern movement and was therefore incompatible with the historiography of Giedion and Pevsner. The attitude adopted toward him was often ambivalent. He was respected and celebrated as a “pioneer of modern architecture”¹¹ with repeated reference to “Ornament und Verbrechen”—the only article he wrote that became really famous.¹² His other articles and the buildings that he actually built remained largely unnoticed and undiscussed for a long time. In particular, his invention of the *Raumplan*, the three-dimensional design, met with little response from his contemporaries.

Dwelling, Culture, and Modernity

Loos told a story about a poor rich man. The poor rich man had worked his way up from the lowest rung of the social ladder and now that he had finally become rich he was able to furnish his own house and to choose a famous designer to advise him. He was delighted with the result and moved into his new interior with a sense of perfect well-being. When the architect came to inspect his creation, however, he immediately spotted a number of eyesores and had them banished to the attic. No, those little cushions clashed horribly with the color of the sofa. And what on earth made him think that he could hang those hideous family portraits above the bookcase? Faced with such a torrent of criticism the poor rich man had to yield; every time the architect paid a call, more of his precious possessions disappeared. The man became increasingly wretched. True, his home was perfect now that there was no longer even a detail that needed changing or adding. The only problem was that he

could no longer live in it: "He thought, this is what it means to learn to go about life with one's own corpse. Yes indeed. He is finished. He is complete!"¹³

Loos told this story in order to expose the architects of the Sezession. Hermann Bahr's ideal home was a sarcophagus in his eyes, condemning its occupant to passivity and making it impossible for him to alter anything. He would end up like a living corpse, as he could no longer permit himself to have any desires or wishes of his own. Loos argued for a strict separation between architecture and dwelling: architecture was not meant to be a reflection of the personality of its occupant; on the contrary it should be kept separate from dwelling. Its task was to make dwelling possible, not to define it. Dwelling has to do with one's personal history, with memories, and with the proximity of loved ones. Furnishing a house is the expression of this and should also offer its occupants the possibility of putting their personal stamp on it, changing it whenever they choose.

Loos remembered with nostalgia the house that he lived in as a child—a house that had not suffered the encroachments of "stylish" interior furnishings:

I did not grow up, thank God, in a stylish home. At that time no one knew what it was yet. Now unfortunately, everything is different in my family too. But in those days! Here was the table, a totally crazy and intricate piece of furniture, an extension table with a shocking bit of work as a lock. But it was our table, ours! Can you understand what that means? Do you know what wonderful times we had there? . . . Every piece of furniture, every thing, every object had a story to tell, a family history. The house was never finished; it grew along with us and we grew within it.¹⁴

Living in a house is a personal matter and has to do with the development of individuals in the context of family life. It cannot be dictated by some interior designer.

To live properly in one's own home, however, one has to separate the interior from the world outside. The difference between public and private, between interior and exterior, must be given a distinct form. This is the work of the architect: "The house should be discreet on the outside; its entire richness should be disclosed on the inside."¹⁵ This duality of inside and outside is achieved by providing a good design for the boundary—that is, for the walls. It is here, according to Loos, in the distinction between inside and outside, that architecture comes into its own. Architects should not impose any uniform "style" on a house; they should not try to impose a single formal idiom on the volumes, facades, layout, and garden design, as, for instance, was done by Josef Hoffmann in the Palais Stoclet (figure 39), which owes its precious quality to its consistent unity of design and to the subtle harmony between the details and the whole. In Loos's view, the important thing was to draw clear distinctions between different areas in the house, and to set up definite boundaries between them. The architectural quality of a building lay in the way that this interplay

Josef Hoffmann, Palais Stoclet,
Brussels, 1905–1911.

(Photo from *Moderne
Bauformen* 13, 1914.)



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of demarcation and transitions was handled, in the structuring of the different areas, and in defining their relationship. The filling-in of the different areas was something to be decided by the occupants of the house and not by the architect.

Loos regarded cladding as the foundation of architecture. One's experience of a space is primarily determined by the way that ceiling, floor, and walls are clad—in other words, by the sensuous impact of the materials. An architect begins designing a space by visualizing it. Only in the second instance is any attention paid to the frame that will support the cladding. The architectural construction of the whole is therefore of secondary importance. For Loos the crucial requirement of authenticity had nothing to do with the structure being visible in the architectural design (as the dominant tendency in the modern movement would argue), but rather with the cladding being clearly visible as cladding. A material should not leave one in doubt as to its character or function—cladding cannot be substituted for the material that it clads; plastering should not be disguised as marble, nor should brickwork be treated with the pretensions of stone. "The law goes like this: we must work in such a way that a confusion of the material clad with its cladding is impossible."¹⁶ Seen in this light, authenticity does not mean a strict correspondence between inner and outer; on the contrary, it consists of the deliberate construction of a mask that is recognizable as a mask.

Loos went on to apply the principle of cladding at another level. He stated repeatedly that modern human beings need masks: their public images do not coincide

with their actual personalities.¹⁷ This idea was essential to his assessment of modernity. Modernity, in his view, was synonymous with the actuality of tradition. This actuality, however, is very specific, because one can no longer talk of an uninterrupted continuity in the tradition. Economic developments and progress have led to a rupture in the organic relationship that existed between individuals and their culture. The natural development of tradition can therefore no longer continue perfectly smoothly.

For Loos culture meant “that balance of man’s inner and outer being which alone guarantees rational thought and action.”¹⁸ Modern people, or rather, city dwellers, are rootless—they no longer have any culture. Tradition can no longer be taken for granted. The balance between inner experience and outward forms has been lost. This is why it makes no sense to attempt to create a contemporary “style” as the artists of the Sezession and the Werkbund did. A deliberate creation of this sort does not derive from any existing culture, and it is therefore doomed to remain superficial and artificial. If there is such a thing as a modern style at all, it will be one that is not deliberately created.¹⁹ The real style of the time, the style that is in harmony with the actual character of the culture of one’s own age, does exist, but not where one would expect to find it: “We have the style of our time. We have it in those fields in which the artist, as a member of that association [the Werkbund], has not yet poked his nose.”²⁰

The distinguishing feature of this style is its lack of ornament. There is a tendency inherent in the evolution of culture toward excluding ornament from everyday household objects. Loos argues that “the evolution of culture is synonymous with the removal of ornament from objects of daily use.”²¹ Quality and good taste in contemporary household objects by definition means absence of ornament. People who have genuinely assimilated contemporary culture will no longer regard any ornament as acceptable.²² The continuing production of decorative designs, as in the Sezession and the Werkbund, is a sign of degeneration and pretentiousness.

Since the organic unity that distinguished former cultures has been interrupted by modernity, the only way modern culture can advance, according to Loos, is by acknowledging this state of affairs and accepting that the relation between inner experience and outward forms cannot be perfect; there is a fissure between them. The most cultured person is the one who can adapt to every circumstance and who is capable of responding in an appropriate fashion on all occasions and in every sort of company.²³ This quality is achieved by imposing a deliberate partition or mask between inner and outer. The mask must be designed in such a way that the conventions are respected. Loos summed these requirements up with the word *Anstand* (propriety or decency): “I only require one thing of an architect: that he displays propriety in everything he builds.”²⁴

A house displays propriety if its appearance is unobtrusive.²⁵ Theoretically, this means that it must fit in with its surroundings and continue the traditions of the city

where it is built. Architects who take their profession seriously will be sensitive to the historical background provided by the old masters, while adapting their manner of building to contemporary requirements. There are enough grounds for change—old crafts have vanished, technological advances make their demands, and functional requirements evolve over time. Tradition is not a sacred cow but a vital principle of development that should be able to adapt naturally to the demands of the industrial epoch.

Tradition, argues Loos, is the essence of architecture, but it should not be confused with superficial aspects of form. Tradition does not mean clinging to the old just because it is old, any more than it means copying themes from folklore or applying a pastoral style in the city. Loos was uncompromising in his condemnation of the practitioners of *Heimatkunst*.²⁶ Tradition for him had to do with ensuring that culture advances on the road to an increasing distinction and perfection. This was the proper notion of tradition for an architect.

None of this, however, should be applied to the realm of art. Art belongs to another order of things. Art is superior to culture, or rather, artists are ahead of their time. Architecture, therefore, is not an art, for it is concerned above all with decorum, with homeliness and with dwelling:

The house has to please everyone, contrary to the work of art, which does not. The work of art is a private matter for the artist. The house is not. 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. The house has to serve comfort. The work of art is revolutionary, the house conservative. The work of art shows people directions and thinks of the future. The house thinks of the present. Man loves everything that satisfies his comfort. He hates everything that wants to draw him out of his acquired and secured position and that disturbs him. Thus he loves the house and hates art. *Does it follow that the house has nothing in common with art and is architecture not to be included among the arts? That is so.* Only a very small part of architecture belongs to art: the tomb and the monument. Everything else that fulfills a function is to be excluded from the domain of art.²⁷

Architecture belongs to the domain of culture; art transcends it. It is by this criterion that every form of “applied art” should be judged: applying art to the domain of practical everyday life means both prostituting art and failing to appreciate the practical. To give culture the space it requires, one must first be capable of distinguishing between an urn and a chamber pot, as Karl Kraus argued.²⁸

An Architecture of Differences

Adolf Loos's architectural work is further evidence of the need he felt to make distinctions.²⁹ Separating the different aspects of life, designing contrasts and boundaries—these are the aims of his architecture. It attempts to give a form to the transitions between public and private, between interior and exterior. It regulates the relations between men and women, between hosts and guests, between members of the family and domestic staff. It is an architecture that deploys a very wide range of expression: it is severely geometrical in its treatment of exteriors; sensuous in its use of materials (marble, wood, carpeting); theatrical in the layout of the rooms; classical in some of its detail and references. It is an architecture that cannot be summed up under a single heading, but which always draws on a number of themes simultaneously.

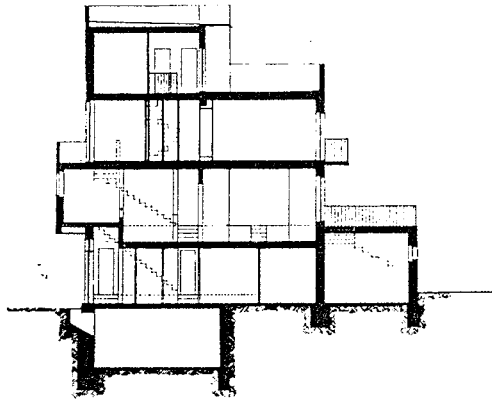
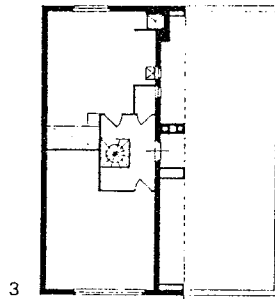
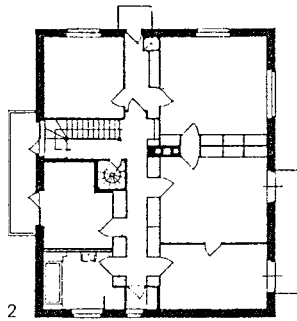
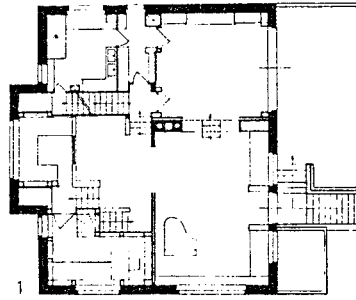
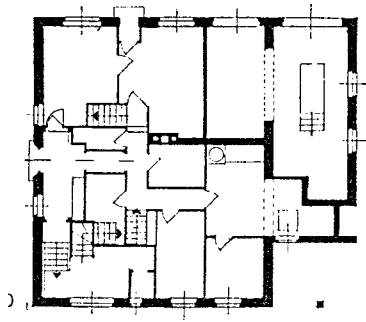
Dal Co states that the work of Loos "never attempts to mediate between the difference of separate parts and situations. It does not hide its multiplicity; at most it will undertake the task of revealing it completely: it traces partitions and boundaries because it sees them as synonymous with the principal characteristic of architectural practice."³⁰ This range of idioms is indeed a typical feature of Loos's architecture. No matter what the circumstances or the context, the function or the materials, he never hesitates to draw on another repertoire of forms, and to juxtapose different idioms in the same design. The precision with which he does this is something that strikes one in all his buildings. His houses get their very specific character due to the alternation of different atmospheres and to the contrast between light and dark, high and low, small and large, intimate and formal.

And yet this plurality of spatial experiences is unified in a certain sense, since the experiences are brought together by the *Raumplan*, a technique of designing in three dimensions that Loos regarded as his most important contribution to architecture.³¹ Designing for Loos involves a complex three-dimensional activity: it is like a jigsaw puzzle with spatial units of different heights that have to be defined first and fitted into a single volume afterward. The best description of it is given by Arnold Schoenberg:

Whenever I am faced with a building by Loos . . . I see . . . a concept that is immediately three-dimensional, something that maybe only someone else who had the same qualities could grasp. Everything here is worked out, imagined, ordered and designed in space . . . as though all the shapes were transparent; or as though one's mental eye were confronted both with the space in all its details and as a whole at the same time.³²

The *Raumplan* gives a form here to a theatricality that, as Beatriz Colomina argues, is typical of the architecture of Loos's dwellings: "The house is the stage for the theater of the family, a place where people are born and live and die."³³ This theatrical-

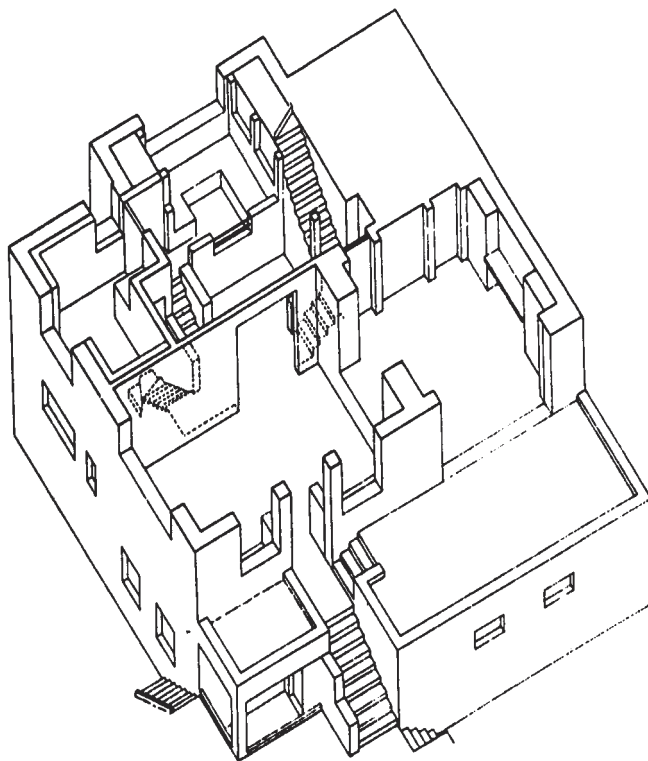




41

Adolf Loos, Moller House,
plans and section.

Adolf Loos, Moller House,
axonometry of the layout of
the interior.



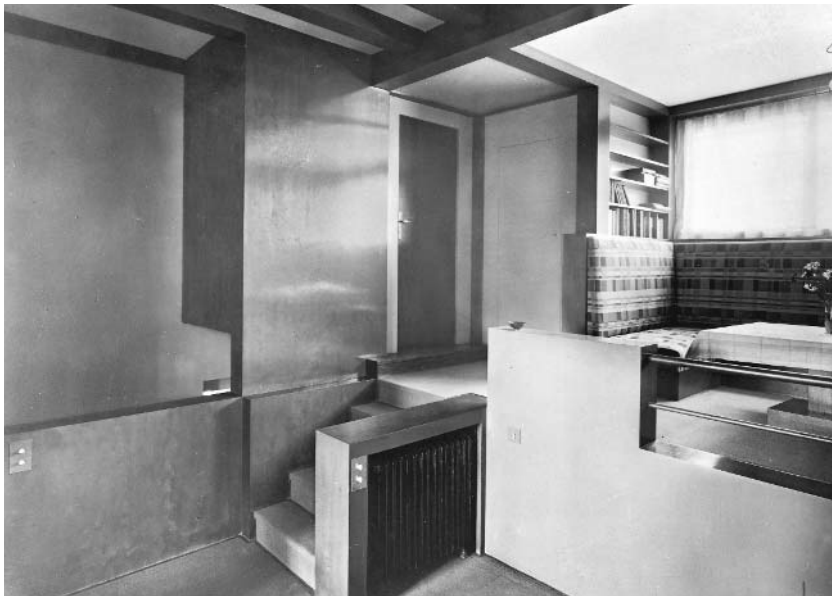
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ity can be seen in the way Loos creates a choreography of arrivals and departures: through the frequent shifts in direction that oblige one to pause for a moment, and through the transition between the dark entrance and the light living area, one gets a sense of deliberately entering a stage set—the stage of everyday life. In the Moller house (Vienna, 1928), for instance, the sequence of living areas is built around a central hall (figures 40 and 41). After going through the small entrance, the visitor has to turn left and mount a flight of six steps to the cloakroom. After the somewhat suffocating feeling of the entrance, this feels like a first breathing space. The route continues: once again one climbs a flight of stairs—this time with a bend in it; only then does one arrive in the huge hall that comprises the heart of the house. The rooms with a specific function are grouped around the periphery of this high-ceilinged salon: a “ladies’ lounge” (*Damenzimmer*) abutting on the front facade and built a few

steps higher than the level of the hall; the music room, which is at the same level as the hall and which abuts on the rear facade; immediately adjoining it, and four steps higher, the dining room, which also abuts on the rear facade (figure 42).

Each room is characterized by different materials and proportions. The ladies' lounge, which is situated in the bay window above the front door, has light wood paneling, and the fixed benches there are covered with a checked material (figure 43). It is like an alcove and has a wide opening onto the hall. In the music room darker colors prevail and the furnishings are largely peripheral: okumé paneling, a polished ebony floor, and blue material for the fixed benches just inside the garden facade (figure 44). Despite its visual relation with the dining room and the hall, and despite the fact that it can be entered from the garden, the dominant darker colors give this room an introspective character; this impression is reinforced by the slightly protruding ceiling surround that is also clad with okumé, and which contains the indirect lighting. The dining room is a light, open room that leads directly to the terrace (figure 45). The ceiling of this room is bounded by a plastered surround. It is supported by four projecting corner columns; these, like the skirting boards, are clad with travertine. The fitted cupboards and the rest of the walls also are clad with the same okumé plywood material as in the music room; above the sideboards there are mirrors. The din-

Adolf Loos, Moller House,
ladies' lounge.
(Photo: Albertina, ALA 2455.)



ing room is dominated by the dining table and the Thonet chairs in the middle. Both the dining room and the music room are linked to the garden. The only enclosed rooms on the main floor are the library (*Herrenzimmer*) and the kitchen. An open staircase leads from the hall to the bedroom level.

The spatial layout brings about a definitely theatrical effect. The route into the house consists of a sequence of spaces and directions that, as it were, physically prepare one for the arrival in the hall (figure 46). On two occasions visitors are exposed to the controlling view from the ladies' lounge: first as one approaches the front door; secondly as one climbs the steps. The ladies' lounge also overlooks the garden via the hall and the music room. All this gives it a privileged position—something that is reinforced by its wide horizontal window and the baylike projection in the front facade.

This street front has a severe symmetrical structure and its closed character gives the house the look of an isolated object (figure 40). The projection containing the lounge juts out at a low level above the front door giving the front facade a somewhat unbalanced, almost threatening appearance. The rear of the house, however, with its interplay of terraces and flights of steps, and larger windows, has a clear

Adolf Loos, Moller House,
music room seen from the
dining room.
(Photo: Albertina, ALA 2457.)



Adolf Loos, Moller House,
dining room seen from the music
room.

(Photo: Albertina, ALA 2454.)



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Adolf Loos, Moller House,
stairs from the cloakroom
to the central hall.

(Photo: Albertina, ALA 2456.)



Adolf Loos, Moller House,
garden facade.
(Photo: Albertina, ALA 2447.)



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relation with the garden. The dominant feeling here is of a welcoming openness (figure 47).

Beatriz Colomina observes that with Loos, windows are not normally designed to be looked out of.³⁴ They function in the first instance as a source of light; what is more, they are often opaque or are situated above eye level. Moreover, Loos likes placing benches or divans under the windows, something that makes for ideal nooks for sitting and reading in, but where one really has to turn one's head to take a look outside. All this means that the interior is experienced as a secluded and intimate area. Nowhere does the space outside penetrate the house. While partition walls are often absent in the interior, replaced by large openings between two spaces, every transition to the outside is very clearly defined as a door and not as an opening in the wall. The transition between inside and outside is often modified by a flight of steps, a terrace, or a verandah.

The contrasts that give this house its character are fundamental to one's spatial experience of it. In the interior there is the contrast between the small oppressive entrance and the high-ceilinged, airy hall from which one gets a view of the whole main floor. There is also a sharp contrast between the small, informal ladies' lounge from where one can look out over the whole house, the formal inward-looking music room, and the light, open dining room with its clear relation with the garden. The

exterior is distinguished by the explicit contrast between the front facade with its almost threatening character that seems to deny the visitor access, and the garden facade which is much more friendly, welcoming one in. The design serves to stress the split between the public realm of the world “outside” as represented by the street and the private “outdoor” domain of the garden.

The most striking thing in Loos’s houses is the unique way that the experience of domesticity and bourgeois comfort is combined with disruptive effects. The different rooms that contrast so sharply with each other are linked together and kept in balance by the sheer force of the *Raumplan*; one does, however, constantly encounter influences that make for disunity. For instance, Loos makes a good deal of use of mirrors, particularly because they give one a sense of increased space. Their reflections in unexpected places are unsettling and disorienting. Sometimes mirrors or reflecting surfaces are combined with windows, serving to undermine the role of the walls, because their unambiguous function as partitions between indoors and outdoors is threatened.³⁵ There is a distinct interplay between the openness of the *Raumplan* that coordinates all the rooms and the completely individual spatial definition that distinguishes each room separately, due to the materials used and details such as ceiling surrounds, floor patterns, and wall coverings.³⁶ This, too, makes for an ambiguous experience of space; on the one hand one feels these are well-defined spaces, with clear protective boundaries, but on the other hand one is aware it is quite possible that one is under the gaze of an unseen person elsewhere in the house. The sense of comfort is not unqualified, but is upset at regular intervals by disruptive effects.

It was the same sort of ambiguity, combining straightforward aspects with others that are dissonant, that was responsible for the controversy around the Loos house in the Michaelerplatz (Vienna, 1909–1911) (figure 48). The lower part of this building was reserved for a firm of tailors, Goldman & Salatsch, who commissioned the project. The complex spatial structure of this part contains rooms with varying ceiling heights that relate to each other in different ways (figure 49). The 4-meter-high main room was entered directly from the street. A staircase that split in two at the landing took one to the mezzanine that served as the accounts office. From there several steps down led to the storage room while a few steps up led to the reception rooms and the fitting rooms just inside the front facade behind the English-style bow windows. The height of the ceiling in this “mezzanine gallery” was 2.6 meters; there was also an ironing room (4.8 meters high) and the sewing room, where the height was only 2 meters because the dressmakers sat at their work.

The *Raumplan* comes into its own in the treatment of the lower part of the facades. The main facade that looks out on the Michaelerplatz contains four nonstructural Tuscan columns in front of the entrance porch. A metal profile that is much too small by classical standards is placed on these marble monolithic columns. These extend upward with rectangular marble blocks that in turn link up with a modestly molded cornice. While the spaces between the Tuscan columns are left empty, the



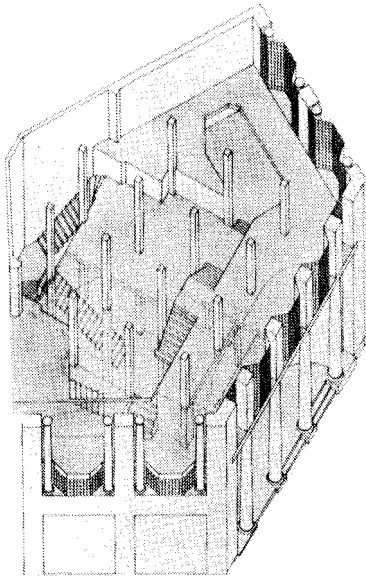
48

Adolf Loos, house on the
Michaelerplatz, Vienna,
1909–1911.

(Photo: Albertina, ALA 2408.)

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Adolf Loos, house on the Michaelerplatz, axonometric view of the *Raumpalan* interior of the tailor shop.

(From Hermann Czech and Wolfgang Mistelbauer, *Das Looshaus* [Vienna: Löcker & Wögenstein, 1976], p. 107.)

49

equivalent spaces between the rectangular column blocks are occupied by the bow windows of the mezzanine gallery. The relation between the length of the columns and the rectangular blocks is roughly 3 to 1. With the side facades, on the contrary, the lower part of the facades are split up in a 2:2 ratio. At the same height as the metal profile in the main facade, however, there is an equally wide horizontal strip, splitting the bow windows in two; this has the effect of ensuring a certain continuity between the different facades. The large columns of the main facade are repeated on a smaller scale on either side of the bow windows on the side facades.

Over this commercial part of the complex there are offices and living accommodations that are reached via an entrance in the left-hand side facade. The dwelling area does not require any elaborate display and is a model of discretion, with its unpretentious windows in a bare whitewashed wall—something that Loos's contemporaries regarded as “nihilistic.” The building’s commercial functions, on the contrary, are intended to attract plenty of attention, and here the whole gamut of means that Loos regarded as the authentic repertoire of the modern architect was deployed: lavish-looking materials, large glass window panes, classical quotations, and an emphatic rhythm punctuated by unexpected dissonances. The marble columns do not support anything, but they serve to give form to the porch that in turn links the building up with the square, enriching the public domain. The Tuscan column is the simplest order in the classical repertoire. Rather than inventing a new form, Loos therefore exploits an already existing element in a new way. At the height



Adolf Loos, house on the Michaelerplatz, view of the Loos house together with the neighboring Herberstein palace.

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Adolf Loos, house on the Michaelerplatz, view of a detail of the Loos house together with the Hofburg at the other side of the Michaelerplatz.

51



Adolf Loos, house on the Michaelerplatz, view of a detail of the Loos house together with the Michaelerkirche.

52

of the mezzanine the interior fills up the empty space above the porch: the top of the columns is indicated by a simple metal girder with the bow windows of the mezzanine above it between rectangular column blocks. In this way a transition is achieved from the columns with the spaces between them to the wall above that is completely filled in. The cornice marks the boundary between the lower and upper parts of the facade. The Tuscan columns are repeated on a smaller scale in the side facades, just as the iron girder is echoed in the wide horizontal strip in the bow windows on the side facades.

The rough ratios that determine the rhythm of the facade are partially dictated by the ratios of the other premises on the Michaelerplatz—the Herberstein palace, the Hofburg, and the Michaelerkirche (figures 50, 51, and 52). The contrast between the ratios of the lower part of the front facade (3:1) and that of the side facades (2:2) emphasizes their difference in importance. The use of materials in this commercial part is very rich: the columns are monoliths made of green veined Cipollino marble and the rest of the shop front is clad with the same material.

Loos's own comment on this design remains the best account of his intentions:

In order to separate the commercial and living sections of the house on the Michaelerplatz, the design of the facade was differentiated. I meant to make use of the two main pillars and the smaller supports to accentuate the rhythm, without which there can be no architecture. The fact that the axes are not congruent emphasizes this split. To avoid the building becoming exaggeratedly monumental and also to stress that the occupant is a tailor by profession, albeit a leading one, I designed the windows as "English" bow-windows. The division of the windows into small elements was intended to guarantee the intimacy of the interior.³⁷

What is emphasized is the way that architecture can design contrasts, the way that it distinguishes between different realms of life. Authenticity of expression has to do with the degree to which it succeeds in making these distinctions operative. This is accompanied by dissonances and nihilistic aspects, but it is precisely here that this architecture is true to life; rather than deceiving people with an illusory harmony, Loos chose a ruthless design that does not gloss over any discontinuities and moments of fissure but highlights them.

Discontinuous Continuity

The relationship with tradition is Loos's central theme, both in his writings and in his architectural work. He does not treat modernity as a new beginning, as a completely unique period that deliberately breaks with tradition. On the contrary, he sees moder-

nity as a very specific continuation of the tradition. His ideas are not avant-garde in character: one does not find any rejection of the existing order in his work, any call for a tabula rasa or repudiation of our cultural inheritance. His attitude is programmatic in that he claimed to be the advocate of a correct notion of modernity as against the majority of his contemporaries, whom he saw as hypocrites and builders of cloud castles.

The continuity that he defended, however, bears the traces of fissures and discontinuities that were evidence that a cultural evolution was taking place. Modern culture in his view should be based on the realization that it is no longer a priori possible to guarantee any harmony between inner and outer: there is no such thing as a seamless link, or any automatic relationship of unbroken harmony between different moments of life. The self-evidence with which farmers used to cultivate their land in the mountains is not available to the modern city dweller, who has become uprooted and thus can no longer lay claim to his own culture without question. This is why it becomes necessary to draw up a program that makes it possible to react in an adequate fashion to this loss of self-evidence. Loos's program is based on the need for a mask. Modern human beings function in a complex society with a variety of social settings and possibilities; they are therefore obliged to resort to a cover that permits them to separate their own personality from the outward forms that it adopts. Only in this way can one respond to all these disparate demands without continually being obliged to expose one's whole personality. This "cover" for the personality consists in the first instance of the clothes one wears and in the second place of the architecture of one's dwelling.

The home must be shielded from the outside world. The surroundings of the metropolis, with the demands it makes in terms of social status, speed, and efficiency, goes counter to an idea of dwelling that is based on familiarity, intimacy, and personal history. A distinction has to be made between the world outside—the public world of money, and of all that is equivalent—and the indoor world, which is the private world of everything that is inalienable and nonequivalent.³⁸ Dwelling can only happen if it is insulated from the metropolis, not in relation to it. Anonymity and concealment are essential conditions if dwelling is to survive within the modern world—this is the implication of an analysis of Loos's houses.

It is clear that Loos is aware of a certain incompatibility between modernity and dwelling. Modernity does not allow for a dwelling that coincides with the totality of life. Dwelling no longer pervades every moment of life. It is obliged to retreat into a realm of its own that gives it protection from the demands of the public domain and the destructive forces of rootlessness and artificiality. Dwelling has to be entrusted to the interior: only there do the conditions exist for an unquestioning garnering of memories; only there can one's personal history take on form. Only through this retreating movement can dwelling realize itself and achieve authenticity.

This strategy provides an effective counterweight to the pernicious results of the loss of self-evidence that can be observed, for instance, in the choice of stylish

interiors that are decorated by professionals. In such interiors dwelling is not experienced on the basis of personal memories and lived experiences; instead it freezes in an artificial outward show that has nothing to do with the individuality of the occupants. Loos uses the term “blasphemous” to denounce this stylish freeze. Imagine a domestic scene, he says, in which a young girl has just committed suicide and lies stretched out on the floor. If this floor is part of a van de Velde interior, then we are not dealing just with a tastefully furnished room, but with a “blasphemy of the dead.”³⁹ Blasphemy occurs when dwelling is overwhelmed by “style” and “art.” Style undermines dwelling, robbing it of its individuality. Art, moreover, has much too high a calling to become involved in the design of something that should be as self-evident as a house.

Loos’s call for a radical repudiation of ornament is the corollary of this criticism. The absence of ornaments—the rejection of the deliberate creation of a new “style”—was in his opinion a correct response to the diagnosis of life as being rootless and fragmented. Ornament is that which people use to attempt to relate different aspects of life and to join inner and outer worlds in a coherent whole. By getting rid of ornament the illusion is destroyed that a harmonious unity of this sort is still possible. One can only remain true to tradition if one acknowledges that its continuity is not an unbroken one. Dwelling can only be saved by separating it from other aspects of life.

Loos’s concept of modernity is therefore radically antipastoral. He does not conjure up any vision of a future in which all the different realms of life would merge in a harmonious unity. The belief in a single ideal uniting industrialists, artists, and craftsmen is completely foreign to him. In his view, the representatives of these different categories have different roles to fulfill on the stage of world history. He draws a clear dividing line between art and culture, between private and public, between dwelling and architecture. This division, he argues, is fundamental to the modern condition.

Walter Benjamin: The Dream of a Classless Society

In 1969, the year of his own death, Adorno wrote a final comment on the life and work of his friend Walter Benjamin.⁴⁰ The title of this text, “A l’écart de tous les courants,” puts a finger on a major aspect of Benjamin’s thought—the fact that it cannot be fitted into any specific philosophical or literary trend. Influenced by divergent currents of thought such as neo-Kantianism, the Jewish Kabbala, and dialectical materialism, Benjamin’s philosophy preserves a curious individuality, precisely because it is permeated by different modes of thought.

Born in Berlin in 1892, the son of a Jewish businessman, Walter Benjamin studied philosophy, psychology, and German literature at various universities. In 1925 his *Habilitationsschrift* was rejected by the university of Frankfurt⁴¹ and he resolved to earn his living as a freelance writer. After the Nazis came to power he went

into exile and from then on his situation was extremely precarious. A minimal grant from the Institut für Sozialforschung⁴² enabled him to live in Paris and work, until the war forced him to leave that city too. On the night of September 26, 1940, on his way to Spain—his plan was to go via Spain to New York and report to the Institute there—he committed suicide.

The work he left behind consisted of three books and a large quantity of essays, short and long. The *Passagenwerk* that would have been his masterpiece and on which he had worked during the last thirteen years of his life remained unfinished. Today Benjamin is acknowledged as one of the most important philosophers of modernity, even though recognition in his case came somewhat belatedly. The first edition of Benjamin's *Schriften*, edited by Theodor and Gretel Adorno, did not appear until 1955, and it was only in the sixties that his work finally became known in wider circles. Benjamin was a genuine cult figure for a while at the time of the student revolt of 1968. He was seen as a radical theoretician to whom one could refer in order to develop a materialistic theory about the relation between intellectual work and political engagement. The interpretation of his work that was fashionable at the time was based mainly on some of his most programmatic writings. These belong to a specific genre of Marxism; only occasionally do they give one an inkling of the theological-metaphysical mode of thought that was just as typical an aspect of Benjamin's philosophy.⁴³

Gradually, as more of his work was published—a process only completed in 1989—the reception of his work became less lopsided. Within the large body of secondary literature,⁴⁴ the ambivalence that would seem to be a hallmark of his work has become a recurring theme. His writings are said to attest on the one hand to an insuperable melancholy and grief about what has been lost, and, on the other, to a radical and utopian belief in the power of the avant-garde that has paved the way for the realization of a genuinely humane society. A number of recent commentaries, however, have attempted to identify a certain coherence behind the variety, internal contradictions, and fragmented character of Benjamin's oeuvre and to define his ambivalence in terms of an underlying consistency or even of a system.⁴⁵ This would have to do with a number of philosophical intuitions that permeate his work even though they are not systematically stated in any explicit fashion. At issue here are some very specific—not to mention uncommon—notions about language, world, and history that do not belong to the standard categories of Western philosophy. They depend on a curious mixture of Jewish and materialistic concepts, combined with a theory of experience and an openness to revolutionary impulses in mass culture. In combination, these contradictory principles lead to a unique and multifaceted oeuvre.

In architectural theory there has been a fairly intensive, if somewhat ponderous, assimilation of Benjamin's concepts.⁴⁶ Attention has been paid in particular to his interpretation of modern architecture. Benjamin was convinced that this architecture of steel and glass fulfills the promises that are inherent in modern civilization,

because it is an authentic expression of the “poverty” that is typical of this civilization, thus foreshadowing the realization of a transparent and classless society. It is in his vision of architecture that we find the quintessence of his ambivalent attitude toward modernity. For a proper understanding of his ideas on this subject it is first necessary, however, to look at his linguistic philosophy that underlies both his theory of experience and his views on the theory of history.

Mimesis and Experience

Benjamin’s notions about language differ fundamentally from the ideas that are generally current in semiotics.⁴⁷ In his opinion language is not based solely on the conventional relationship between signifier and signified. In addition to this communicative dimension of language, which he calls “semiotic,” he distinguishes a second, “mimetic” dimension that he sees as the origin of language. This mimetic level of language is less easy to locate than the semiotic one. The best way of describing it is as an extrapolation of the onomatopoeic character of language: just as words such as “cuckoo” and “tick-tock” resemble the thing that they denote, from a broader perspective language as a whole can be seen as a sort of imitation (*mimesis*) of the world.

Language as we know and use it, according to Benjamin, is a pale reflection of an original language that named things on the basis of similarities. The essence of this original language—and therefore of every language—is the name. This is the object of a *mimesis*, and is therefore linked by a relationship of similarity to the thing or person that bears this name. This mimetic structure, however, is no longer immediately recognizable and present in current language: it is no longer expressed in every individual word. Benjamin maintains nevertheless that, no matter how much it has been diluted and diminished, the mimetic structure continues to determine what language is. Not only can it be found between the spoken word and its meaning; it is also present between the written word and its meaning, and between the written word and the spoken. We become aware of this in the act of reading. Reading is more than just stringing together simple verbal meanings. In the act of reading a sort of abstract correspondence—Benjamin uses the term “*unsinnliche Ähnlichkeit*”⁴⁸—can be observed in the similarity between text and reality that is “illuminated” at the moment one understands it. This nonsensuous similarity is embodied in the constellations that words form in combination with each other: just as the constellations of stars in the cosmos are interpreted by astrologers who can use them to make predictions, so words with their mutual relations and interplay create a correspondence with reality. Or, as Cyrille Offermans puts it:

For Walter Benjamin, as for Adorno, a text is a sort of force-field: an exchange of semantic energy occurs in the words. A conscious use of language . . . amounts to creating such a force-field. . . . The more

consciously a text is constructed, and the more motivated the words, the less arbitrary the words become, and their abstract and haphazard relation to things declines. The experience of things becomes tangible as it were in the text, although no separate word can be held responsible by itself for this presence.⁴⁹

Human beings' faculty for mimesis, as Benjamin understands it, has two aspects: in its original sense it has to do with one's faculty for comparing or identifying oneself with something else, as a child at play will identify with a baker or a footballer, or with a train or a donkey; in a weaker derivative form it can be seen in our faculty for discovering correspondences and similarities between things that are apparently different. Genuine "experience," in the sense that Benjamin gives the term, should be seen as a mimetic gesture because "similarity is the organon of experience."⁵⁰

This concept is crucial to Benjamin's theory of experience, in which he distinguishes between the two German words for experience, *Erlebnis* and *Erfahrung*. *Erfahrung* means life experience; it refers to an integrated stock of experience wherein the individual assimilates sensations, information, and events. The ability to establish such a stock of experience owes much to the existence of a tradition. In that sense experience can be said to be collective and unconscious. *Erfahrung* has to do with the ability to perceive correspondences and similarities and to act them out. *Erlebnis*, on the other hand, refers to sensations that are reduced to a series of atomized, disconnected moments that are not related to each other in any way and that are not integrated in life experience.⁵¹

These ideas play a role throughout Benjamin's work, but it is in his study on Baudelaire, which was a byproduct of his labors on the *Passagenwerk*, that he explores them in detail. Benjamin begins his argument by stating that the "structure of experience" has undergone a change: in the "standardized, denatured life of the civilized masses" in "the inhospitable blinding age of big-scale industrialism," true experience has become a rarity. For experience (*Erfahrung*) is "a matter of tradition, in collective existence as well as private life. It is less the product of facts firmly anchored in memory than of a convergence in memory of accumulated and frequently unconscious data."⁵²

Whereas *Erfahrung* has to do with a gradual initiation into tradition, *Erlebnis* refers to superficial sensations. These are intercepted by an alert consciousness and responded to straightaway: there is an immediate response and the impression is more or less saved in conscious memory (*Erinnerung*); it leaves no trace, however, in the (unconscious) remembrance (*Gedächtnis*). Impressions that form part of remembrance, on the contrary, are the material from which *Erfahrung* is built. They are repetitive in character and often consist of impressions with a sensory content;⁵³ in the long run they have far more impact on the individual's experience than do the momentary and superficial impressions resulting from *Erlebnis*.

The hallmark of modernity is the decay of the subject's mimetic faculty and, with it, of the influence of tradition and of the significance of experience. The conditions of everyday life are increasingly unfavorable to the gaining of life experience. Newspapers, for example, present their information in such a way that their readers are obviously not intended to integrate it in their own experience. In fact, according to Benjamin, the opposite is the case: the whole aim of "news" is to keep current events from the realm where they might affect the experience of the reader. Processing information, therefore, is in a sense the opposite of acquiring experience; journalistic coverage has nothing to do with creating a tradition. City life with its rapid tempo and abundance of stimuli is the product of this development: the ephemeral, the sensational, everything that is continually changing is part of the order of *Erlebnis*; *Erfahrung*, on the other hand, is based on repetition and continuity.⁵⁴

In his famous work of art essay, Benjamin describes this process of the atrophy of experience in terms of the withering away of the "aura" of the work. The status of the work undergoes a fundamental change as a result of the technical possibilities of reproduction by means of new audio-visual technologies (photography, film, tape recorders). What gets lost in reproduction is the uniqueness and the authenticity of the work of art—its unique existence in the here and now, the material substratum in which its history was acted out. Benjamin sums up this uniqueness and authenticity in the term *aura*:

That which withers in the age of mechanical reproduction is the aura of the work of art. This is a symptomatic process whose significance points beyond the realm of art. One might generalize by saying: the technique of reproduction detaches the reproduced object from the domain of tradition. By making many copies it substitutes a plurality of copies for a unique existence.⁵⁵

This withering of the aura is, in Benjamin's view, a socially determined event. It relates to the need of the masses to "get closer to things." The aura, however, consists of the "unique phenomenon of a distance, however close it may be."⁵⁶ It is this distance that is destroyed by the techniques of reproduction.

The process described here—that of the (reproduced) work of art becoming a commodity—is analogous to what Benjamin elsewhere calls "the atrophy of experience." In this essay he adopts a fairly optimistic attitude toward this phenomenon. He argues that the new mode of perception that results from the universal availability of reproduction techniques has a considerable potential for emancipation, bringing about a change in the attitude of the masses toward art from one that is retrograde to a progressive one. The experiencing of a reproduced work of art, such as a film, is no longer characterized by concentration and isolation, but by collectivity and distraction. As a result, what is involved is no longer an individual becoming im-

mersed in a work of art as is the case, say, when one looks at a painting—it is rather the work of art itself that is immersed in the masses.

In Benjamin's view, then, modernity is characterized by a drastic change in the structure of experience. In some of his writings in which mourning and a deep sense of melancholy are the predominant feeling, he seems to regret this development.⁵⁷ In other writings, however, his tone is much less pessimistic. In these, the decay of experience is treated much more as a unique opportunity for humanity to begin all over again after the destruction of the false legacy of bourgeois culture. Benjamin's attitude seems to oscillate constantly between an approving tone and one that is mournful. His thesis about the decline of experience does not imply an exclusively negative diagnosis of modernity.

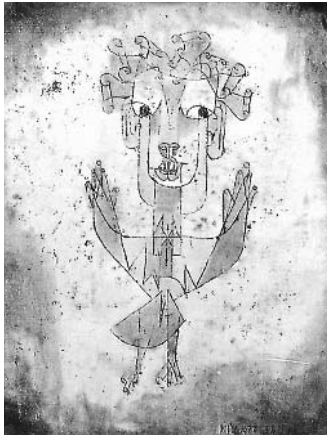
Particularly relevant in this connection is his essay "Erfahrung und Armut," written in 1933; this essay contains perhaps the most radical and intriguing formulation of Benjamin's liquidationist stance. In it he argues that the poverty of experience that he sees around him should be seized on as a new opportunity for humanity to make a completely fresh start. It brings a new barbarism into being, entailing a victory over a culture that can no longer be called human. That is what the most lucid avant-garde artists, such as Brecht, Loos, Klee, and Scheerbart understand. They wage a struggle against the traditional humanistic notion that prettifies humanity by dressing it up with elements of the past. Instead they turn toward their own naked contemporary, who is crying like an infant lying naked in the dirty diapers of the time. Their work is characterized by a "total disillusionment about the age and nevertheless an unreserved profession of loyalty to it."⁵⁸

To Brush History against the Grain

The last text that Benjamin completed before his suicide in 1940 is entitled "Über den Begriff der Geschichte" (On the Concept of History). In the form of eighteen theses, this text contains in condensed form Benjamin's unorthodox ideas about history. In this essay he rejects the notion that history should be interpreted as the narrative of the progress of humanity against the backdrop of an empty, homogeneous time. In a famous passage, he unmasks the notion of progress as an illusion:

A Klee painting named "Angelus Novus" [figure 53] shows an angel looking as though he is about to move away from something he is fixedly contemplating. His eyes are staring, his mouth is open, his wings are spread. This is how one pictures the angel of history. His face is turned toward the past. Where we perceive a chain of events, he sees one single catastrophe which keeps piling wreckage upon wreckage and hurls it in front of his feet. The angel would like to stay, awaken the dead and make whole what has been smashed. But a storm is blowing

Paul Klee, *Angelus Novus*, 1920.
(The Israel Museum, Jerusalem.)



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from Paradise; it has got caught in his wings with such violence that the angel can no longer close them. This storm irresistibly propels him into the future to which his back is turned, while the pile of debris before him grows skyward. This storm is what we call progress.⁵⁹

History is not the story of the advance of humanity but one of a heaping up of wreckage and debris. History consists of blood and suffering, and there is no such thing as a document of culture that is not at the same time a document of barbarism. Our cultural tradition is produced in a social setup that is rooted in exploitation and repression. One should never forget this when analyzing the past.

The task of the historical materialist, therefore, is not to write history from the point of view of the victors (which is what is usually done) but from that of the victims. It is his task “to brush history against the grain.”⁶⁰

The past and the suffering of the past call for redemption. The present has a duty toward the past. This is because the different epochs do not relate to each other in a purely chronological order. There are, as it were, underground links that relate certain ages to each other. The French Revolution, for instance, experienced itself as a reincarnation of ancient Rome. Between different historical moments there is a relationship of correspondences and responsibility; but this is in fact an understatement—according to Benjamin, each specific moment of history contains *everything*, both the entire past and the virtual realization of the utopian final goal of history. It is the task of the historical materialist to make that plain. It is his task to freeze time with a constructive gesture, illuminating the subject of his research as a monad in which the potential for “blowing up” the historical continuum is already contained:

Where thinking suddenly stops in a configuration pregnant with tensions, it gives that configuration a shock, by which it crystallizes into a monad. A historical materialist approaches a historical subject only where he encounters it as a monad. In this structure he recognizes the sign of a Messianic cessation of happening, or, put differently, a revolutionary chance in the fight for the oppressed past. He takes cognizance of it in order to blast a specific era out of the homogeneous course of history.⁶¹

In theory, then, the possibility of realizing the utopian final goal is implicit in every particular historical moment. Revolutionary classes are aware of this: it is their task to seize the opportunity of blowing up the historical continuum and making the leap forward into a new age. In this sense they are like the Jews for whom “every second of time was the strait gate through which the Messiah might enter.”⁶²

The theses on the theory of history constitute one of the few texts of Benjamin in which there is a deliberate interweaving of the theological-metaphysical mode of thought that formed such a powerful presence in his earlier work, with the explicit commitment as a historical materialist that colors much of his work during the thirties. This essay is clear proof that these two completely different approaches do not form successive phases in Benjamin’s work, but are strata that simultaneously overlap and influence each other. Benjamin never cared to submit to the contradictions that, according to orthodox thinking, exist between historical materialism and a theological-metaphysical concept of the world. According to him, historical materialism is obliged to exploit theological thought if it is to achieve a genuine understanding of the past and the future. It is not surprising that Benjamin’s version of historical materialism was as unorthodox for “real” Marxists as his messianism was for Jewish theologians.

And yet messianism remains a crucial element in the structure of his thought. Lieven de Caeter puts forward a convincing argument for the idea that Benjamin’s entire oeuvre can be seen as consistent and comprehensible once we appreciate the fact that the notion of a messianic order underlies everything he wrote.⁶³ Implicit in this idea is that history should not be seen as a chronology of successive periods existing in a time that is empty and homogeneous, but as a triadic process consisting of an original paradisiac state, a period of decline (the fall) as the prevailing condition, and a utopian goal (redemption) as the supreme climax. The essential thing is that these three moments are not so much stages in a development as layers of meaning to be exposed by the historical materialist who is inspired by theology. Every historical moment contains all three moments in essence: the origins, however faint they may have become, can still be seen through all the evidence of the fall, just as redemption is also virtually present as a sort of messianic splinter.

Once we realize that this triadic figure of paradise, fall, and redemption constitutes the underlying structure of Benjamin’s work, the ambivalence that characterizes his theory of experience and his diagnosis of modernity becomes more comprehensible. He describes what happens to experience as a process of decline: a falling off from a paradisiac state in which human language was synonymous with an Adamic naming of names and in which a mimetic attitude toward the world reigned unimpaired. In this process of decline, however, the germ of a possible reversal is contained. One can describe this fall from the point of view of mourning, of a melancholy for what has been lost and a concern to save as much as possible, even if only to preserve it through recollection. One can also—and this is the path he follows in his more radical texts—describe the fallen state in terms of its inherent po-

tential for reversal (*Umschlag*), as a state, in other words, whose revolutionary possibilities should be recognized and exploited.

Architecture or the Physiognomy of an Era

It is in its architecture that the true reality of an era achieves its clearest expression: according to the *Passagenwerk*, architecture is the most important testimony to the latent “mythology” of a society.⁶⁴ Benjamin’s aim is to read the character of the nineteenth century in the physiognomy of its architecture: by analyzing the “surface” of this culture—its fashions and its buildings—he hopes to identify its deeper, more fundamental characteristics.

This endeavor is crucial to his work. Benjamin sees the Parisian shopping arcades as the major architectural achievement of the nineteenth century. In these covered streets with their typical Parisian names—Passage du Pont-Neuf, Passage de l’Opéra, Passage Vivienne, Galerie Véro-Dodat (figures 54 and 55), Passage des Panoramas (figures 56 and 57), Passage Choiseul—an inexhaustible source of metaphors, analogies, and dream figures can be found that are at the same time grafted onto the tangible reality of an urban, metropolitan form. The *Passagenwerk* can be read, then, as an encyclopedic display of the historical potential that lies dormant in the word *Passage*, or arcade: Benjamin projects endless ramifications of meaning, associations, and connotations onto the object of his study.⁶⁵ He sees the arcade as a dialectical image—it is a momentary flash in which a number of fundamental aspects of history, of past, present and future, are synthesized in an extremely condensed form. Similar to a monad, it reflects the entire reality of the nineteenth century.

The arcades owed their existence to the rise of retail trade, particularly the trade in luxury articles, and also to new construction technologies: above all that of iron and glass architecture. This combination of developments gave rise to a new, typically nineteenth-century, urban form: the arcades form a transition zone between the “outdoor world” of the street and the interior space of the home. They really constitute an “inside” without an “outside”: their form is only revealed from the inside; they do not have any exterior, or at least none that we can easily visualize. In this sense, according to Benjamin, they resemble our dreams:⁶⁶ one can know an arcade from its inside, but its exterior shape is unknown and even irrelevant to those who are inside.

The transparency of glass roofs is what gives the arcades their particular quality. It is this that makes the *Durchdringung* of inside and outside possible, giving them their character of a transitional zone between street and home. The glass roofs made the arcades a superb space for the *flâneur*, the aimless city stroller: if the street constitutes a sort of “living space” for the masses and for the *flâneur* who dwells in the midst of the masses, this metaphoric projection is achieved spatially in the arcade:



Galerie Véro-Dodat, Paris,
1823–1826.

(Photo: Annemie Philippe.)

54



Galerie Véro-Dodat.

(Photo: Annemie Philippe.)

55



Passage des Panoramas,
Paris, 1800.
(Photo: Annemie Philippe.)

56



Passage des Panoramas.
(Photo: Annemie Philippe.)

57

Streets are houses of the collective. The collective is an ever-vigilant, mobile being, that experiences, learns, and creates as much between the rows of houses as individuals do within the shelter of their four walls. This collective prefers the glossy enameled company signs to the oil paintings that decorate the walls of the middle-class salons. Walls with “Défense d’afficher” are its sleeping accommodation and the café pavements the bow window from which it observes its household. Its hall is where the road workers hang their coats on the fence and the exit leading to the dark back gardens is the corridor, the entrance to the room of the city. And the salon of the city is . . . the arcade. More than in any other place the street reveals itself here as the furnished and run-down interior of the masses.⁶⁷

Even more suggestive than the arcades was the nineteenth-century iron and glass architecture of the huge halls where the great exhibitions were held. In both cases Benjamin sees a glorification of the phantasmagoria of the commodity: it is here that the urban masses revel in gazing at “nouveauautés,” it is here that the cult of commodities began. These huge exhibition palaces were “sites of pilgrimages to the commodity fetish”;⁶⁸ “there is a rampant growth of the dubious flora ‘commodity.’”⁶⁹ The commodity is enfolded in an almost fairyland aureole produced by the brilliant light during the day and by the flickering gaslight at night. They actually create an illusion, the “phantasmagoria of capitalist culture,” that “reaches its most brilliant display in the World Exhibition of 1867.”⁷⁰

But this is not all. Benjamin treats the iron and glass architecture as a dream image in which contradictory aspects often play a role. This dream image shows the triadic structure of a messianic figure. Inherent in it is a fraudulent aspect—the glorification of the commodity fetish; at the same time it has a utopian aspect in that it provides an image of the classless society: “In the dream in which, before the eyes of each epoch, that which is to follow appears in images, the latter appears wedded to elements of prehistory, that is, of a classless society.”⁷¹ In Benjamin’s view, the dreamlike character that is so typical of the architecture of the arcades and exhibition halls makes way in the twentieth century for a more sober reality.⁷² A new architecture flowers in the twentieth century; with its qualities of transparency and spatial interpenetration, it anticipates the new (classless) society, the features of which are a clarity and openness that is much more pervasive than that of the preceding age.

Rolf Tiedemann sees this movement of awakening as a crucial point in the original aim of the *Passagenwerk*: Benjamin’s aim was, by defining nineteenth-century cultural phenomena as “dream figures,” to effect the awakening from the collective “sleep” of capitalism.⁷³ In his view this process of awakening has already partially taken place in the architecture of his time: in the architecture of the New Building and that of Loos, Mendelsohn, and Le Corbusier, he discerns a new concept of space containing qualities that correspond to the transparency of a classless soci-

ety. This assessment of modern architecture is closely linked to his call for a new barbarism, for a new start for humanity that has suffered so severely from the storms of modernity.

In the work of art essay, Benjamin states that architecture can be seen as the prototype for the new mode of reception of the work. Buildings are the object of a collective and distracted attention: the perception of architecture is tactile (through the use of buildings) rather than optical. This mode of perception is in keeping with the new conditions of life imposed by industrial civilization. The individual learns to adapt to these through a sort of absent-minded attention rather than through contemplation and close study: "The automobile driver, who in his thoughts is somewhere else (for instance, with his car that has perhaps broken down), will adjust to the modern form of the garage much more quickly than the art historian, who takes a lot of trouble trying to analyze it stylistically."⁷⁴

Benjamin ascribes a "canonical value" to this mode of reception: "For the tasks which face the human apparatus of perception at the turning points of history cannot be solved by optical means, that is, by contemplation alone. They are mastered gradually by habit, under the guidance of tactile appropriation."⁷⁵ Architecture functioned for him as the prototype of tactile reception, because it has to do with dwelling and therefore also with habits and habituation.

Benjamin understands dwelling as an active form of dealing with the reality that surrounds us, in which the individual and his surroundings adjust to each other. He refers to the grammatical connection in German between *wohnen* (dwelling) and *gewohnt* (customary, habitual), a connection that is found in English between "habit" and "inhabit." This connection, he says, gives a clue to the understanding of dwelling as a sort of hurried contemporaneity that involves the constant shaping and reshaping of a casing. This passage must be stated in the original German: "Wohnen als Transitivity—im Begriff des 'gewohnten Lebens' z.B.—gibt eine Vorstellung von der hastigen Aktualität, die in diesem Verhalten verborgen ist. Es besteht darin, ein Gehäuse uns zu prägen."⁷⁶

It is because architecture responds to this "hurried contemporaneity" that it can serve as a model for what can be called a "politicizing of art," which, Benjamin argues in his work of art essay, is the only possible answer to the "aestheticizing of politics" as practiced by fascism.

Dwelling, Transparency, Exteriority

Benjamin's call in "Erfahrung und Armut" for a new barbarism should be seen in the light of his rejection of a superficial humanist approach—something against which he had been storing up ammunition for a long time. Opening moves for this intellectual strategy can already be seen in his *Ursprung des deutschen Trauerspiels*, the rejected *Habilitationsschrift* of 1925.⁷⁷ With this study of the German *Trauerspiel* of the seventeenth century, his aim was not simply to make a contribution to literary his-

tory. His underlying purpose was to explore the notion of allegory with a view to shedding light on the approaches and strategies of contemporary expressionism. Benjamin was convinced that allegory had unjustly been classified as an artistic device of secondary importance, and that a study of this particular means of expression was also relevant to modern aesthetic forms.⁷⁸

He deals with the difference between symbol and allegory via a critique of the attitude of romanticism. This attitude, based on idealist concepts, distinguishes between the two literary devices in terms of a hierarchical order in which symbols are qualitatively superior. The assumption is that a work of art that is conceived of as a symbol is founded on a unity, an inner correspondence between its outer form and its meaning. The beautiful merges, as it were, with the divine in an unbroken whole, so that it is possible to speak of an underlying unity of ethics and aesthetics. With the allegorical method, on the other hand, there is no intrinsic relation between signifier and signified: in allegory, divergent elements of different origin are related to each other and given a signifying relationship by the allegorist that remains extrinsic to its component parts. The symbol, which is ascribed a much higher position within the idealistic tradition of romanticism, is operative, for instance, in the ideal of *Bildung*. This ideal prescribes that individuals should be educated to be complete human beings in whom knowledge, aesthetic sensibility, and moral awareness merge to form the core of their personality.⁷⁹ The endeavor to achieve a symbolic totality is, in Benjamin's view, the fundamental characteristic of the humanism that derived from the romantic-idealistic tradition.⁸⁰

Benjamin, however, does not accept this hierarchy. For him it is allegory that constitutes an authentic way of dealing with the world, because it is not based on a premise of unity but accepts the world as fragmented, as failed. Allegory refers to that which has been blighted in the bud, to everything that is a source of pain and is ruinous; it refers to a fallen state, and it is for this very reason that it is important, forming as it does an adequate expression of an experience which has entirely ceased to be comprehensive or total. Allegory operates externally while symbols base their meaning on a premise of unity, a presumed harmony between inner and outer. The difference comes down to the fact that the symbol derives its significance from its inner being, while allegory resolutely limits itself to the external. Symbols permit one to get a glimpse of totality and unity, while allegory reveals the world as a desolate landscape with ruins scattered here and there as silent witnesses of disaster.⁸¹

If we are to believe Asja Lacis that Benjamin thought of his study of the *Trauerspiel* as shedding light on a contemporary aesthetic problem, then, like John McCole, we will conclude that Benjamin is implicitly raising the question of a modernist aesthetics here. One can indeed discern significant parallels between his reevaluation of allegory and his later attitude toward modernistic culture. This is also the view of Rainer Nägele, who sees a remarkable parallel between Benjamin's treatment of the

opposition between allegory and symbol on the one hand and that between bourgeois interiority and avant-garde destructiveness on the other:

What is at stake is not only the material substantiality of the world but the locality of the meaning-producing light: in the symbol it is “translucence,” light emanating from an interior; whereas in allegory the ray comes from the outside. This is the essential topology that structures the rhetoric of the symbol-allegory opposition as well as that of bourgeois subjectivity and its interiority. Against it, a pathos of exteriority or of the surface emerges in Modernism: it revalorizes allegory in all its theatricality.⁸²

Allegory—“the dissolution of the speculative synthesis of subject and object, visible in the dismembered body and in the ruin”⁸³—finds its counterpart in the preoccupation of the avant-garde with montage and construction. Instead of imitating an organic figure, the avant-garde opts for a mechanistic principle of design. This modernistic principle has in mind a world in which the false ideal of the cultivation of inwardness is liquidated in favor of a radical publicity. The goal of this publicity is transparency as an unconditional revolutionary duty: in a genuinely classless society in which collectivity reigns instead of individuality, privacy becomes an out-of-date virtue that in no way should survive revolution.

The fact that there is such a striking similarity in Benjamin’s work between his critique of the romantic-idealist concept of the relation between symbol and allegory and his interpretation of modernist aesthetics is not so strange after all. The rejection of nineteenth-century tradition is an equally crucial element in modernist culture. It should not surprise us, then, that Benjamin put special emphasis on this rejection. What appeals to him in certain elements of the avant-garde movement is their “destructive character.” He is convinced that these people in particular are the ones who give a face to the age and who are capable of paving the way to the future: “Some pass things down to posterity by making them untouchable and thus conserving them, others pass on situations, by making them practicable and thus liquidating them. The latter are called destructive.”⁸⁴ It is these destroyers who have the most to offer humanity. It is their work that is genuinely worthwhile. Benjamin quotes Adolf Loos: “If human work consists of destruction, it is truly human, natural, noble work.”⁸⁵

In Benjamin’s view, destructive work is essential for the process that humanity is obliged to go through in its historical confrontation with technology and with modern civilization. Only by way of a process of purification, with all the inevitable pain that that involves—implying as it does the destruction of the old—will it be possible to create the conditions for a new humanity, a humanity that will be intrinsically committed to the gesture of destruction:

The average European has not succeeded in uniting his life with technology, because he has clung to the fetish of creative existence. One must have followed Loos in his struggle with the dragon “ornament,” heard the stellar Esperanto of Scheerbart’s creations, or seen Klee’s New Angel, who preferred to free men by taking from them, rather than make them happy by giving to them, to understand a humanity that proves itself by destruction.⁸⁶

Destruction is crucial because purification is essential for every form of vitality. To make something, to create it, does not have so much to do with originality or inventiveness but with a process of purification. Creativity is a false ideal, an idol. The real aim of those who have the concern of “true humanity” at heart can be found in the act of destruction that exposes pretense and illusions. Benjamin refers to Karl Kraus, who used quotations in a destructive fashion and thus succeeded in salvaging certain vestiges from the ruins of history: “[Kraus] did discover in quotation the power not to preserve but to purify, to tear from context, to destroy; the only power in which hope still resides that something might survive this age—because it was wrenched from it.”⁸⁷ Benjamin recognizes the same will to destruction and negation in people such as Loos, Scheerbart, and Klee. In these men, in their destructive work, the hope for the survival of culture lay concealed. This is because they understood that the belief in the “fetish of creative existence” prevents people from adapting their lives to the demands of the industrial era.

For Benjamin it is clear that the ideology of a false humanism subscribed to by so many people offers no prospect whatsoever of any mode of life that is equal to the challenge of the new conditions of existence, let alone one that would take full advantage of the political vision of a classless society that he regarded as being inherent in technology. As John McCole puts it, Benjamin “remained adamant that the idealist tradition of humanism, and the classical ideal of humanity itself, were thoroughly compromised. Not the preservation of these traditions, but only a purifying liquidating could hope to save what had once animated them.”⁸⁸

For Benjamin the activity of destructive characters was essential if revolution was to succeed. The destructive character explodes one’s familiar environment and is averse to comfort, abandoning itself to the cold sobriety of glass and steel: “The destructive character is the enemy of the *etui-man*. The *etui-man* looks for comfort, and the case is its quintessence. The inside of the case is the velvet-lined track that he has imprinted on the world. The destructive character obliterates even the traces of destruction.”⁸⁹

Two different concepts of dwelling are contrasted here. In Benjamin’s view, dwelling should basically be understood as a distant memory of one’s mother’s womb. The feeling of being protected and of seeking a protective casing is fundamental to dwelling, but it was an idea that was pushed to an extreme in the nineteenth century:

The primal form of all dwelling is not a house but a case. This bears the imprint of its dweller. Taken to an extreme the dwelling becomes a case. More than any other age, the nineteenth century felt a longing for dwelling. It thought of dwelling as an etui and tucked the individual and all his belongings so far into it that it reminds one of the inside of a bow of compasses in which the instrument together with all its accessories is sheeted in deep, usually violet-colored velvet cavities.⁹⁰

The romantic-idealist concept of dwelling resulted in the nineteenth-century interior claiming to be “the etui of the private person.”⁹¹ These interiors are so personal, so focused on property and ownership, that their message for every visitor is unmistakable—there is nothing for you here; you are a stranger in this house. Art nouveau pushed this notion of dwelling to an extreme, almost identifying the house with its inhabitant (or rather the inhabitant with its house—as might become visible in the way Henry van de Velde designed everything for the houses he built, up to the ladies’ dresses that went along with it) (figures 58 and 59). In art nouveau, this conception of dwelling was culminating, and eventually brought to an end:

About the turn of the century, the interior is shaken by art nouveau. Admittedly the latter, through its ideology, seems to bring with it the consummation of the interior—the transfiguration of the solitary soul appears its goal. Individualism is its theory. In van de Velde the house appears as the expression of personality. Ornament is to his house what the signature is to painting [figure 60].⁹²

Art nouveau represents the last attempt of European culture to mobilize the inner world of the individual personality to avert the threat of technology. It is the culmination of tendencies that were already evident in the iron and glass architecture of the nineteenth century, in its arcades and its interiors. These architectonic figures are exponents of the dream that holds the collective in a trance: it is in the interior that the bourgeois registers his dreams and desires; in it he gives form to his fascination for the other—for the exotic and for the historical past. In the arcades, technology is applied not to confront the individual with the inevitability of his new condition but to display the material reality of capitalism, the reality of commerce, presenting it as a phantasmagoria. These tendencies are pushed through to their ultimate in art nouveau. In art nouveau the bourgeois dreams that he has woken up:⁹³ he has the illusion of having made a new beginning but in fact all that has occurred is a shift of imagery—from history to natural history.⁹⁴

The historicizing masquerades of nineteenth-century interiors—with dining rooms furnished like Cesare Borgia’s banquet chamber, boudoirs done up like Gothic chapels and “Persian”-style studies⁹⁵—are replaced by an imagery that refers to flowers and vegetation, to the soothing undulation of an underwater world.⁹⁶ Tech-



Henry van de Velde,
Bloemenwerf, Uccle,
1895–1896.

(From Henry van de Velde,
Geschichte meines Lebens
[Munich: Piper, 1962], fig. 33.)

58



A dress for the lady of the house,
designed by Henry van de Velde
around 1898.

(From Henry van de Velde,
Geschichte meines Lebens,
fig. 50.)

59

nology is applied here to further the ends of the dream: art nouveau explores the technical possibilities of concrete and wrought iron within a concept where “art” is primordial. This strategy is doomed to failure: “The attempt by the individual to do battle with technology on the basis of his inwardness leads to his downfall.”⁹⁷

The endeavor to give expression to the inner personality does not tally with the reality of an industrial civilization that is characterized by a poverty of genuine experience. This poverty of experience means that the individual is not capable of constructing a personality for himself.⁹⁸ For this reason, art nouveau’s bid to express this personality conflicts with the actual forces underlying the age. Only a new barbarism is in a position to give it form. Only a new barbarism is capable of saving what once

had animated genuine humanism. A new barbarism is therefore the only appropriate answer to the challenges of technology.

While the nineteenth-century figures of the arcade and of the interior constitute a form of dwelling that is in decay, the new barbarism represents a radical change, bringing with it another notion of dwelling—one that is no longer founded in security and seclusion, but in openness and transparency: “The twentieth century, with its porousness and transparency, its longing for light and air, put an end to dwelling in the old sense of the word . . . Art nouveau shook the etui existence to its foundations. By now it is deceased, and dwelling is reduced: for the living by hotel rooms, for the dead by crematoria.”⁹⁹ Dwelling as seclusion and security has had its day. Hotel rooms and crematories teach the individual to adapt to the new conditions of life that have more to do with transience and instability than with permanence and being rooted (figure 61). Things no longer allow themselves to be really appropriated; the notion of dwelling as leaving traces behind one withers away. Dwelling takes on

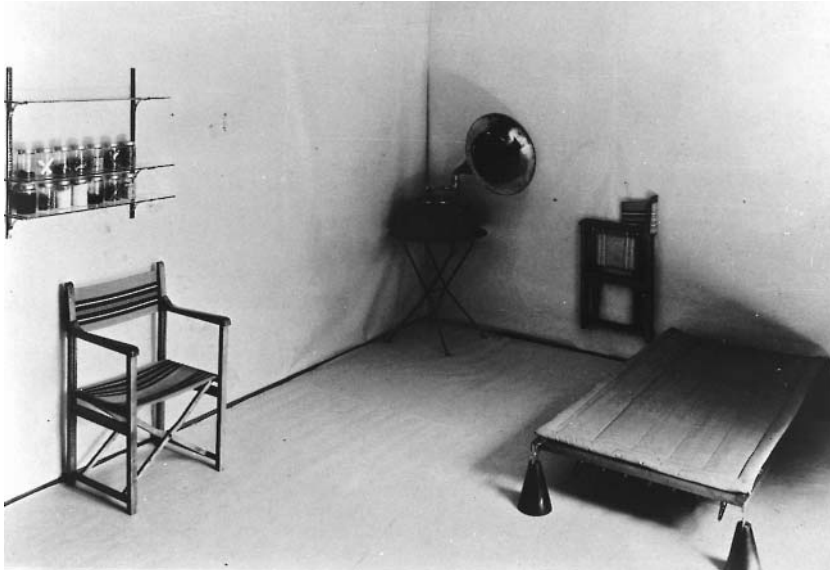
Henry van de Velde, interior
of a shop designed for the
Habana-Compagnie, Berlin, 1899.

“In van de Velde the house
appears as the expression
of personality. Ornament is
to his house what the signature
is to painting.”

(From Henry van de Velde,
Geschichte meines Lebens,
fig. 57.)



Hannes Meyer, Co-op Zimmer, 1926—a visualization of a new, nomadic way of living, based on transience and instability rather than permanence and rootedness.



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a “hurried contemporaneity” that is no longer recorded in ineradicable imprints but which expresses itself in changeable constructions and transitory interiors with hard and smooth surfaces (figure 62). This is not necessarily a negative development. On the contrary, Benjamin perceives it as the fulfilling of an important promise. He links the new coolness of dwelling with the openness and transparency that are characteristic of a new form of society (figure 63):

For it is the hallmark of this epoch that dwelling in the old sense of the word, where security had priority, has had its day. Giedion, Mendelsohn, Corbusier turned the abiding places of man into a transit area for every conceivable kind of energy and for waves of light and air. The time that is coming will be dominated by transparency. Not just the rooms, but even the weeks, if we are to believe the Russians, who want to abolish Sunday and to replace it with movable days of leisure.¹⁰⁰

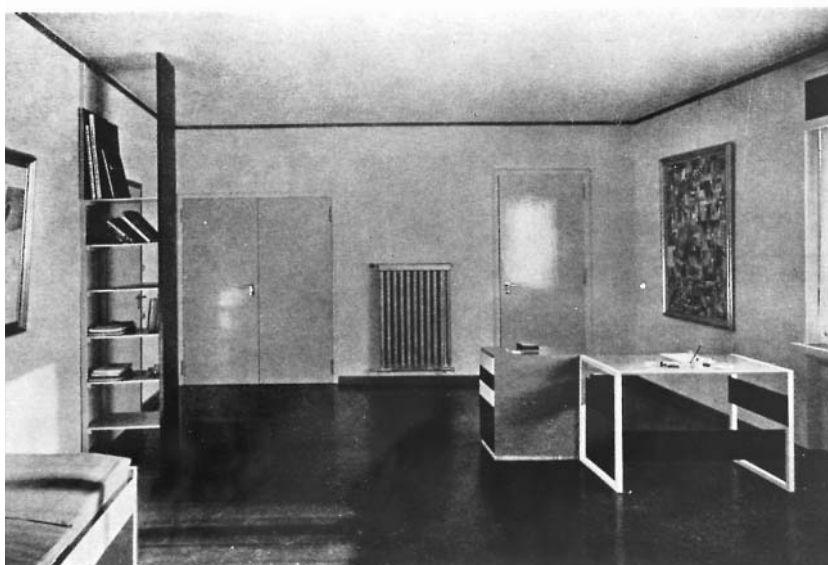
The motive of transparency has more than merely literal connotations for Benjamin. In this quotation he links spatial transparency in the sense that Giedion uses

the term with flexibility and adaptability in the individual who dwells in abiding places and transit areas, and with a flexibility in the structure of time as well. That time has become transparent amounts to a writing on the wall for Benjamin. It is a feature of revolutionary moments that the linear course of time is interrupted and that a new calendar is introduced or that the clocks are stopped. It is no coincidence, then, that he refers to Russia in this connection. Russia, which Benjamin had visited in the winter of 1926–1927, was, after all, the country where communism was gradually becoming a reality (this quotation dates from 1929) and which constituted the hope of many left-wing intellectuals, including Benjamin.

References to Russia appear elsewhere in his work. In his essay “Surrealism,” for instance, he recalls an experience he had in a Russian hotel, where he was astonished by the number of bedroom doors left open by the guests. It made him realize that “to live in a glass house is a revolutionary virtue par excellence. It is also an intoxication, a moral exhibition that we badly need. Discretion concerning one’s own existence, once an aristocratic virtue, has become more and more an affair of petit-bourgeois parvenus.”¹⁰¹

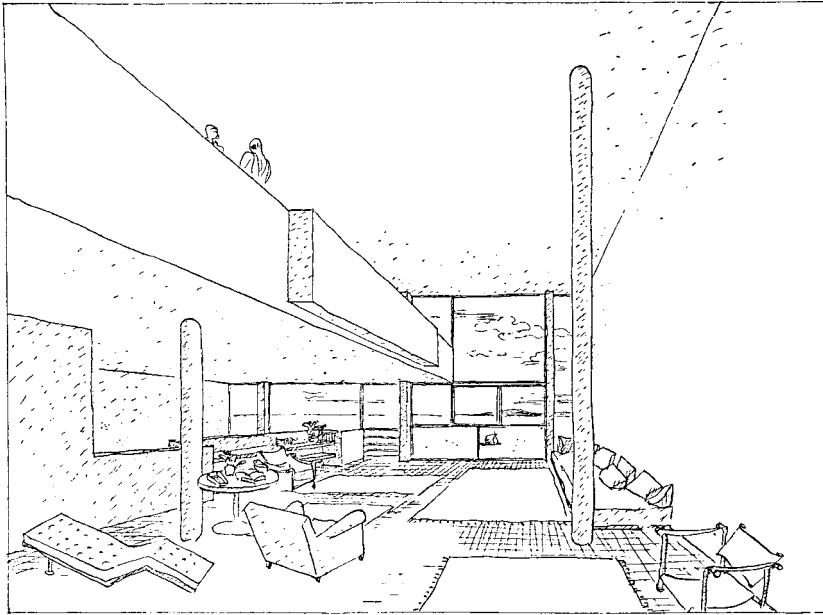
Interior of one of the houses for the Bauhaus professors, built by Walter Gropius in Dessau, 1926.

(From Walter Gropius, *Bauhausbauten Dessau*, 1930, fig. 132, photo by Consemüller.)



Le Corbusier, project for a villa in Carthage, 1928, drawing of the interior.

"Corbusier turned the abiding places of man into a transit area for every conceivable kind of energy and for waves of light and air."



63

Nor is this reference to a glass house an isolated one. The motif recurs in his essay on Karl Kraus, as it does in "Erfahrung und Armut." There he talks of the example of the "adjustable flexible glass houses that Loos and Le Corbusier have in the meantime realized. It is not a coincidence that glass is so hard and smooth a material to which nothing can be fastened. It is also cold and sober. Things that are made of glass have no 'aura.' Glass is the enemy par excellence of secrecy. It is also the enemy of property."¹⁰² Benjamin is implying here that, because it is inimical to secrecy and property, glass should be regarded as a material that literally expresses the transparency of the new society that would be founded on revolutionary lines. A society of this sort would have the political "radioscopy" of sexuality and the family, as well as of the economic and physical conditions of existence, as part of its program and therefore would be completely uninterested in protecting privacy in the home.¹⁰³

Architecture, Modernity, and Dwelling

Benjamin's high esteem for modern architecture has to do above all with the metaphorical qualities that he discerns in it. Giedion's *Bauen in Frankreich* made a deep impression on him.¹⁰⁴ Giedion's use of the terms *Durchdringung* and transparency to describe the architecture of the New Building appealed to him considerably, as did the idea that the structure played the part of the unconscious. In addition to this, as we learn from the footnotes in the *Passagenwerk*, he was familiar with Adolf Behne's *Neues Wohnen, Neues Bauen* and Le Corbusier's *Urbanisme*.¹⁰⁵ As mentioned above, he frequently referred to Adolf Loos. In view of all this, it is somewhat surprising that he did not discuss the important activities in the field of public-sector housing that took place in the second half of the 1920s in Germany. As far as I know, there is not a word in his work about *Das Neue Frankfurt* or the activities of Martin Wagner and Bruno Taut in Berlin. Nor does Benjamin discuss the work of Hannes Meyer, the architect who went furthest along the road that he pointed to in "Erfahrung und Armut."¹⁰⁶ His idea about the role of architecture as the prototype of a new sort of art reception was therefore not verified against the practice of his contemporaries.

What is more, the radical thesis that he argues for with reference to literature in "The Author as Producer" is not explored in terms of its relevance for architecture. This thesis states that the hallmark of a progressive author is not so much the subjects he deals with as the way that he operates in production relations: a progressive author is one who transforms the hierarchical relation between readers, publishers, and writers and who educates the public in adulthood, so that the roles of reader and writer eventually end up being interchangeable. With respect to architecture this theme would be taken up later by Manfredo Tafuri and his colleagues of the Venice School, but Benjamin himself did not back up this claim in any detail anywhere in his work.

Benjamin's attitude toward the new architecture can in the end most appropriately be qualified as ambivalent—here too his ambivalence is a product of the triadic structure of his thought. Some passages in his work lend themselves to interpretation as a straightforward plea for a cold and ascetic architecture, appropriate to the new barbarism and therefore representing an adequate response to the omnipresent poverty of experience. In other writings his tone is more one of mourning. When, in his essay "Paris, Capital of the Nineteenth Century," he comes to describe the bourgeois interior, with its excess of knickknacks and furnishings—the interior that was familiar to him from his childhood¹⁰⁷—he clearly betrays a nostalgia for this nineteenth-century form of dwelling, however much that manner of dwelling may be out-of-date and illusory. The prevailing tone here is one of the work of mourning (*Trauerarbeit*) that describes the withering of dwelling in order to rescue as much as possible of those elements that recall the original paradisiacal dwelling, the mother's womb. Elsewhere in his work another perspective prevails that focuses attention on the revolutionary potential concealed in the "decayed" form of dwelling.

It is unquestionably the case that Benjamin hoped for a revolutionary “reversal” (*Umschlag*) that would transform the life of the individual and of the collective by achieving a public openness, transparency, and permeability as conditions of everyday life. At the same time, however, as an individual subject he still clung to numerous memories of another sort of dwelling in another sort of time, the dwelling that made security and nurture possible in rooms that wrap round the individual like a shell.

The most striking feature in all this is Benjamin’s strategic attempt to understand modernity and dwelling as things that are not in opposition to each other. He developed a complex vision of modernity that cannot be seen as unambiguously programmatic or transitory, but which aims to ignite the programmatic possibilities inherent in the modern—the new barbarism—in its most transitory aspects—fashion, mass culture, modern architecture—because of their transparency and instability. A similar strategy can be seen with regard to the idea of dwelling. Benjamin refused to embed dwelling unequivocally in tradition. Although he acknowledges that dwelling means leaving traces behind, it is also his view that a degree of *Umfunktionierung* is possible in this area: dwelling, that is, can be understood as a transitive verb, as a question of “habituation.” This habituation, bound up as it is with a “hurried contemporaneity,” is much more forcefully related to the modern condition of changeability and transparency than the notion of dwelling as leaving traces behind one. “Living in a glass house,” therefore, is also a revolutionary duty par excellence. It can be seen as an instrument in the struggle for modernity, the struggle of those who want to exploit modernity for its revolutionary potential in order to fulfill the promises that had lain stacked up during thousands of years of suffering and oppression.

Building on Hollow Space: Ernst Bloch’s Criticism of Modern Architecture

The whole work of Ernst Bloch (1885–1977), from his first publication, *Geist der Utopie* (1918) to the work that he wrote at an advanced age, revolves round the theme of utopia and hope. He approaches this theme from every angle—above all that of philosophy. In doing so he covers so wide a field that one is impressed by his exceptional erudition. In a language that is rich in imagery, his work throws light on the recurring importance of the utopian moment that one finds in daydreams, fairy tales, fantasies, works of art, and philosophical theories. Bloch considers hope to be an essential force in everyone’s life, because being strives to fulfill itself by realizing that which is not-yet-being.

At quite an early stage in his life Bloch embraced the ideas of Marxism, and throughout his stormy career he never retracted. Fleeing from Nazi Germany, he arrived in America after years of peregrinations; not knowing the language, he was dependent on the earnings of his wife, Karola Piotrovskan, an architect. After the Second World War he returned to Germany. Rather than accept a professorship in Frankfurt, he took up a chair in philosophy in East Germany at the University of