

Confabulating with the Coffee Grounds of Reality:  
The Rhetoric of Adolf Loos



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## LAYER(S) OF MEANING

Aphorisms stick with us because they are short and easy to remember, but they remain embedded in history because they are usually just abstract enough to offer flexibility of interpretation. Adolf Loos was notorious for his stimulating, sometimes polemic writing style, and he provided his readers with pithy aphorisms by the dozens. One such quote by Loos, appearing again and again in monographs, biographies, architectural and cultural histories, seems reasonably straightforward: "The architect is a bricklayer who has learned Latin."<sup>1</sup> Janet Stewart's explanation of the quote determines that Loos is arguing for an active architecture that engages its occupants in a way "to awaken certain dispositions," but the architect can only achieve this by reexploring the way buildings of the past prompted similar reactions.<sup>2</sup> The practical, physically laboring mason, who understands the language of materials on an intimate level, must also understand the cultural value of the material and, perhaps even more so, the cultural value of the material's composition. And maybe Stewart is right: if the quote is allowed a little more context and is printed alongside other writings by Loos, it seems to deal with these other themes in his work, the relationship between the past and present, and architecture's ability to provoke response. But Stewart gets a little ahead of herself in the rushed attempt to connect this lone quote to the bigger picture of Loos's work. If we take Loos at his word, an analytical strategy his contemporary Karl Kraus was fond of, this little sentence alone does much more than Stewart gives it credit for. It offers a link between Loos's theoretical arguments about what architecture should be, should do, and what he is already doing successfully through his writing. Taking Loos at his word involves not underestimating the value of the words themselves. Perhaps, then, what Adolf Loos meant was not that an architect is literally a bricklayer who has studied the Latin language, or any language in particular, but one well versed in the ancient Greek art of rhetoric. Loos himself was a rhetorical master of both writing and architecture. For our understanding of Loos's work – text and building alike – this suggests that there are multiple layers of meaning waiting to be uncovered. As a specific

application of language with persuasive objectives towards a particular course of thought or action, rhetoric demands our attention to two levels of meaning: that conveyed through surface content of communication and that which emerges through the use of irregular expression.<sup>3</sup>

The "species" of rhetoric – categorized by audience involvement and chronological sequence of the argument in relation to its effects – all portray the primary intentions of the rhetorician as being persuasion, encouragement to set off a series of actions or, more abstractly, beliefs. A different analytical division of rhetoric, this time into "parts" – the active components that together form the basis for rhetorical speech – requires communicative logic, the acknowledgement that something can only be considered rhetoric if the writing or speech is effective, is understood, but at the same time realizing that this is not unilateral conveyance of a command; rather, rhetoric involves asking the audience to willingly suspend disbelief<sup>4</sup> through the veil of artistic, inventive, or stylistic flair in the use of language.

In the realm of architectural theory, types are often loosely linked to their most celebrated eras: The Renaissance treatise. The Enlightenment dictionary. The Modernist manifesto. Rhetoric is not inherently a formal strategy for organizing writing, but, in a way, rebels against all formal tendencies by compressing its organization – multiple readings are encouraged, because multiple meanings are already there. So does this approach speak to the time in which Loos's revival and reinterpretation of rhetoric emerges? Turn-of-the-century Vienna instills at once over-confidence and insecurity in the members of its cultural community, and it results in a confusing scene. With new technologies and new philosophies battering the individual with overwhelming stimulation and speculation, disagreement, discontinuity, and division are the most important words to stick by. Rhetoric, for Loos, is a way to invite dialogue, to spur others not only to agree, but to disagree, to question, and to think. Rhetoric becomes a way to engage the public somewhat informally, all the while maintaining an air of authority and knowledge.

And so we cannot, as John Maciuka has, fall into the trap of reading Loos too loosely. Maciuka asks, "To what can we attribute the difference between Loos's austere, even 'silent' buildings, and the highly 'ornamented' and theatrical quality of his writings?"<sup>5</sup> But he steers the investigation in the wrong direction. We should not be asking what is different in regards to Loos's almost mixed media approach to work, but instead, what is the same. As Aldo Rossi claims, Loos ultimately has "one sole idea of architecture," but that, "[n]either identifying style with ethics nor seeing technique as a restrictive condition, he is free to make use of all the variations that different situations permit."<sup>6</sup> Loos as writer and Loos as architect both function in a somewhat editorial role: working with an existing set of traditions, an existing set of modernities, he alters and critiques these conceptual artifacts as he simultaneously reasserts their presence. Loos uses rhetoric to access his audience, to persuade but also, primarily, to invite dialogue. He balances precariously between the abstract and the concrete, juggling words as he puts forth a determined response to the sirens of modernity.

#### RHETORIC AS SOCIAL PHENOMENON

The first measure in understanding the complexity of Loosian rhetoric is to grasp the constraints under which he is working. In addition to the argument he makes, Loos's audience and context remain relative constants in defining the fundamental conditions under which he works. Stewart's analysis, combining Loos's lectures and written texts, concludes that both are meant for public consumption.<sup>7</sup> They are tours, lessons, an instruction manual for modern life, but are also, as Stewart reminds us, dialogues. Massimo Cacciari also writes on the subject:

Loos teaches by 'strolling,' by indicating, by hinting. And his thought is most penetrating when it attains the simplicity and clarity of the brief aphorism, the illuminating anecdote. The commentary is very close to this mode of discourse, which takes upon itself the risks of equivocation and misunderstanding that are part of the dimension of the ephemeral into which it has now ventured. The more the commentary approaches the living word, the more it becomes true discourse, dialogue, forever balanced between understanding and equivocation.<sup>8</sup>

His words, written and spoken, have a certain informal character, a conversational way of speech that begs to be questioned and hopes to provoke a response. He doesn't give up the game all at once, but "hints," waiting for someone else to pick up his lead. Looking at both public (café) and private (apartment) spaces, Loos's audience, or occupant, is also primarily modern man<sup>9</sup> unsure of what he wants or needs. His occupant is the Metropolitan who lives fast and can't keep still – or quiet – and feels compelled to constantly exert himself as an individual, as Georg Simmel writes, "to preserve the autonomy and individuality of his existence in the face of overwhelming social forces, of cultural heritage, of external culture, and of the technique of life."<sup>10</sup> Loos's milieu also does not drastically shift even as he relocates himself from the role of critic to the role of architect. Vienna at the turn of the century is Vienna at the turn of the century, a menagerie of thinkers and doers. As described by Carl Schorske, "Vienna in the *fin de siècle*, with its acutely felt tremors of social and political disintegration, proved one of the most fertile breeding grounds of our century's a-historical culture."<sup>11</sup> But it is the convergence of the historical and the modern that generates tension between the intellectual ensembles bumping tables in the café.<sup>12</sup>

And it is in the coffeehouse that these ideas are allowed to fester and grow. As was the case for many of its European neighbors, Austria's coffeehouse culture was at the heart of intellectual and artistic development at this time. These places became spatial containers of knowledge; they became express libraries offering news and new ideas to anyone off the street. Stefan Zweig, an Austrian writer at the turn of the century, writes in his autobiography: "[We knew] everything that took place in the world first hand [...] Perhaps nothing has contributed to the intellectual mobility and the international orientation of the Austrian as much as that he could keep abreast of all world events in the coffeehouse, and at the same time discuss them in a circle of his friends."<sup>13</sup> But not just friends. More important were the intellectual adversaries, the bursts of argument that broke out across tables, across rooms. A brief essay on European

coffeehouses written in the seventeenth century deals directly with the importance of diversity and disagreement in contributing to the productive atmosphere of the café:

Such is the mixture of Persons here that me thinks I cannot better express it than by saying That at these Waters meet all sorts of Creatures. Hence follows the Production of diverse monstrous Opinions and Absurdities. [...] Infinite are the Contests, irreconcilable the Differences here. The Society hath been divided about the manner of the creeping of a Louse. Were there not here a constant contention amongst the Elements of this Body, it could not subsist. *For should all agree, and be of one Judgment, they would as it were become but one Person, the House would be Solitary, and at last one or two Persons would be the whole Company.*<sup>14</sup>

The coffeehouse is the ideal incubator for Simmel's individual as such, and not just to those who have already established their opinions and innovations elsewhere. Milan Dubrovic, an Austrian journalist of a slightly later generation, explains that coffeehouses were just as much for the public, who also wanted to be engaged in these flourishing discursive activities:

It has been too little pointed out that alongside the writers and artists who already had names, there was also a broad stratum of intellectuals who constituted the real public of the coffeehouse. They were people of all stages of life, belonging to different professional groups, who stood out from the norm of the average citizen by virtue of a considerably stronger interest in and passionate sympathy for the processes of and developments in literature, the arts, and learning, and had the need to express themselves on such matters, to debate them, and to collect the advice and opinion of clever people.<sup>15</sup>

The coffeehouse may have its regulars, and its favorites, but as a public forum it serves as a great equalizer,<sup>16</sup> an opportunity that reiterates the position of Loos's audience. Loos teaches through meandering commentary; he doesn't lecture or preach, but wants to engage the public in a dialogue. It is here, in the coffeehouse, where these intentions become most evident.

Aristotle may not have had coffeehouses in his day, but he certainly understood the importance of public discourse. Aristotle begins the introduction to his treatise, *On Rhetoric*, with something of a relative definition: "Rhetoric is an *antistrophos* [counterpart] to dialectic; for both are concerned with such things as are, to a certain extent, within the knowledge of all people and belong to no separately defined science."<sup>17</sup> In fact, rhetoric's ties to "all people" are even greater than its complementary craft. As translator to the

ancient text, George Kennedy gives a more detailed comparison of dialectic and rhetoric in his notes: "A dialectical argument does not contain the parts of a public address; there is [...] only proof. In dialectic only logical argument is acceptable, whereas in rhetoric, the impression of character conveyed by the speaker and the emotions awakened in the audience contribute to persuasion."<sup>18</sup> Rhetoric is then an even more public form of communication, with stronger ties to everyday conversation and recognition that not all human decisions are, or should be, based purely on the grounds of logical reasoning. Rhetoric is classified as "civic discourse," belonging as much to the public as to individual orator. Kennedy offers further explanation for the emergence of rhetoric as a solution to social needs:

Ultimately, what we call "rhetoric" can be traced back to the natural instinct to survive and to control our environment and influence the actions of others in what seems the best interest of ourselves, our families, our social and political groups, and our descendants. This can be done by direct action – force, threats, bribes, for example – or it can be done by the use of "signs," of which the most important are words in speech or writing.<sup>19</sup>

These indirect courses of action are what define a civilized society.<sup>20</sup> Rhetoric exists as a social phenomenon, explicitly addressing the relationships between members of a population, and a civic art, in which the "eloquent orator" transforms into "civic ideal," conveying specific solutions to contemporary issues.<sup>21</sup>

Stripping the word "civic" of its burdensome municipal meaning and returning it to its more humanistic, or heroic, etymological origins, we find that its earliest use comes from the name of the oak garland given in ancient Rome to a man who saved a fellow citizen's life in war.<sup>22</sup> Rhetoric reaches beyond governmental politics, but still carries with it the weight of obligatory duty to fellow members of a community. Rhetoric itself emerges in ancient Greece as a response to the development of a legal system and an increased production of drama and literature. It demands control of language and control of self in order to influence a greater audience, and the balance of "necessity and intensity."<sup>23</sup> What does this mean for Loos, then, as a writer, and as an architect?

As a "central figure moving in almost all social circles [...] at home both in Bohemian circles associated with the Viennese coffeehouses and in the more refined salons of the upper bourgeoisie," Loos gets around to experience a variety of social conditions.<sup>24</sup> This might suggest that the socially mobile Loos is exposed to modern problems arising in a variety of economic conditions. As an architect, and maybe also as a writer, Loos has a certain responsibility. He writes that "a building should please everyone [...] a building meets a need [...] a building [has a responsibility] to everyone."<sup>25</sup> Münz and Künstler even go so far as to summarize Loos's career into aspirations bordering a humanist legacy: "He wanted to build for human beings [...] Everything he stood for [...] signified to him only a means to give people time for the nobler pursuits of life."<sup>26</sup> Loos the rhetorician has the responsibility to propose a course of action but not to demand one. Although Loos was compelled to address the needs of modern man directly in his architecture and his writing, it is not usually in an attempt to solve specific social crises, but a sort of precursory step towards resolution without actually intending to get there.

#### WELL-DRESSED WORDS

Loos does not seem to face the same kind of internal battle that affected his contemporary Hugo von Hofmannsthal, "the struggle of those who considered words to be inadequate to express the modernity of 1900."<sup>27</sup> Hofmannsthal's inner conflict plays out in prose, as the impossibility of expression through language breaks down his fictional character, Chandos, in a story written in 1902. Hofmannsthal falls upon the realization that language is insufficient in conveying experience, that he can understand innately the meaning of things but at the same time all language falls short of ever being able to translate that experience of living into words, into legible meaning for someone else.

Everything that exists, everything I can remember, everything touched upon by my confused thoughts, has a meaning. Even my own heaviness, the general torpor of my brain, seems to acquire a meaning; I experience in and around me a blissful, never-ending interplay, and among the objects playing against one another there is not one into which I cannot flow. To me, then, it is as though my body consists of naught but ciphers which give me the key to everything; or as if we could enter

into a new and hopeful relationship with the whole of existence if only we begin to think with the heart. As soon, however, as this strange enchantment falls from me, I find myself confused; wherein this harmony transcending me and the entire world consisted, and how it made itself known to me, I could present in sensible words as little as I could say anything precise about the inner movements of my intestines or a congestion of my blood.<sup>28</sup>

It is an impossible task, not only to reimagine the experience in this representational format, but to affect his readers with his words, to inflict change in opinion or change in action. It is not so much the impossibility of language, but the impossibility of rhetoric. Loos, on the other hand, has a different infliction, one that keeps him constantly engaged in the finest details of the culture around him, and finds words a more than satisfactory way to reengage this milieu. In the year of 1898 alone, Loos writes at an average rate of an essay a week for seven months straight. Loos as cultural critic literally writes what he sees. To return to the notion of his "strolling" style, it is important to observe that he is in constant motion. Loos, too, has become captivated by the almost tidal nature of the Metropolis, the constant ebb and flow of waves of people and their machines, and their ideas. Simmel's individual who finds himself in this current contains uncannily Loos-like qualities:

On the one hand, life is made infinitely easy for the personality in that stimulations, interests, uses of time and consciousness are offered to it from all sides. They carry the person as if in a stream, and one needs hardly to swim for oneself. On the other hand, however, life is composed more and more of these impersonal contents and offerings which tend to displace the genuine personal colorations and incomparabilities. This results in the individual's summoning the utmost in uniqueness and particularization, in order to preserve his most personal core. He has to exaggerate this personal element in order to remain audible even to himself.<sup>29</sup>

Loos allows himself to be carried away, in part, but holds the oars in his lap, waiting for when the time is right. His writing, though it follows the quickened meandering pace of his feet, revels in its own wit. David Leatherbarrow draws from Loos's writings two definitions of ornament, or what Leatherbarrow calls "good and bad ornament, the first being indicative or capable of pointing away from itself towards something necessary but otherwise unrepresented, the second being ornament which distracts or fails to represent and is unnecessary."<sup>30</sup> The "good ornament" in Loos's own writing consists of the "theatrical gestures" Maciuika

accuses of Loos's writing style.<sup>31</sup> It is "good" because the meaning does not become lost by, or in, the text; rather, it is emphasized by it. It is ornament operating not outside of the law, but beyond it.

Some essays, such as "The Old and the New Style in Architecture," directly address the theme of writing as a way to convey information. The self-referential nature of the composition appears towards the end of the text, as a clarification of Loos's thesis and intentions. He writes: "In this essay I have concentrated on what can be achieved, given our present outlook [...] These ideas are meant for the present and the immediate future. [...] The world today is still ruled by capitalism and it is for that system alone that my remarks are intended."<sup>32</sup> His words are meant to directly address a contemporary audience under current conditions and constraints. As is the case with his architecture, his "task is to serve mankind and the present."<sup>33</sup> His writing, as his architecture,<sup>34</sup> intends to be followed in a logical – but never linear – fashion.<sup>35</sup> Though he makes his argument again and again, each iteration addresses his audience in a way that seems new; in a mad maze of aphorisms and speculative questions, of parables and metaphors, he creates obliviously close readers to his text. As Beatriz Colomina writes, "For Loos, the printed word could only communicate by recuperating 'common sense,' by deintellectualizing writing, by giving language back to culture."<sup>36</sup> Communication is a transaction only completed when understood, understood correctly, on the receiving end.

Architecture, too, must be "deintellectualized."<sup>37</sup> In coming to terms with the task of the architect, Loos defines a type of phenomenological persuasion:

What is it the architect actually does? He uses materials to arouse feelings in us which are not inherent in those materials themselves. [...] How do you do that? You see what buildings aroused those feelings in the past. That is where you must start out from because for their whole lives people have prayed in certain rooms, drunk in others. The feeling is acquired, not innate, and an architect, if he is at all serious about his art, must take these acquired feelings into account.<sup>38</sup>

Rhetoric emerges yet again as a defining factor in Loos's work. To write, and to create architecture, is to trigger a response through the overlapping of knowable regulations with unpredictable linguistic variables.

If we are allowed to return to Stewart's analysis of the bricklayer quote, we find that it is here that her analysis holds water. This notion of architecture's ability to activate certain feelings in people is reiterated towards the end of Loos's later essay, "Architecture." He writes, "Architecture arouses moods in people, so the task of the architect is to give these moods concrete expression."<sup>39</sup> By explicating Loos's writing and architecture, analyzing primary meaning – the most directly communicated, functional, useful meaning – and secondary meaning – the employment of irregular language, of art-like techniques – with anticipation that the later is a reiteration or reaffirmation of the former, we find that stronger connections between the written rhetoric and the built exist, and have critical implications for interpreting Loos's work.

#### LOOS AS CRITIC: "THE POTESKIN CITY"<sup>40</sup>

Loos begins his essay by presenting rhetorical questions posed to prompt the audience to self-evaluate, and to critique their own role or contribution to the built environment in which they live:

Who has not heard of the villages erected in the Ukraine by Potemkin, that crafty favorite of Catherine the Great? Villages of cardboard and canvas, the purpose of which was to transform a deserted wasteland into a blooming landscape for the eyes of Her Majesty. [...] It could only happen in Russia? The Potemkin City I am talking about here is our own dear Vienna. A serious accusation, I know, which I will find difficult to prove, since it demands listeners with a keen sense of justice such as are rare in our city.

The questions later become an organizational method, employing hypophora to introduce new elements of his argument: "But what of someone who tries to achieve the same effect [claiming to be more than he is] through the use of imitation stones and other sham materials? There are countries where he would suffer the same fate [and be despised by all regardless of if he is actually harming anyone]." By answering his own questions, Loos remains in control of his argument while still allowing his audience to contemplate where their own priorities lie.

And his audience is not entirely universal – he suggests he has shared interests with his Viennese listeners<sup>41</sup> while retaining an air of skepticism that his audience does in fact share his ethical values.<sup>42</sup> Loos

"strolls along the Ring" himself, and empathizes with his fellow citizens. He anticipates their objections before getting sucked into a cyclical bout of finger pointing, shifting the blame to the architects, but then back to the city, before ultimately settling on the guilty "supply and demand" system at work.<sup>43</sup> The syntax reflects the complexity of causation of this Potemkin phenomenon in Vienna, and every sentence acts as a new micro-argument.<sup>44</sup>

Loos finds a way to give unspecific examples that boost the validity of his argument without the rigor (or pretentious tone) associated with academic scholarship.<sup>45</sup> This results in a high number of generalities that sound a lot like absolutes.<sup>46</sup> Whether he is writing about a particular profession or a more abstract situation, Loos's questions in the beginning of this essay concretize into what Maciuka calls Loos's "aphoristic, and, at times, incendiary prose style."<sup>47</sup> If his writing is in fact intended to stir up conflict, insofar as he invites a dialogue with his audience, his writing style remains conversational, readable, yet forever bound to a strict understanding of logic.

The final paragraph of the essay leans on an anaphoric succession of statements to suggest a proscriptive logic in the proposed solution: to avoid a Potemkin-ized Vienna, there are certain things the Viennese must refrain from.<sup>48</sup> And it all boils down to shame. By embracing their social situation rather than covering it up with circumstantially irrelevant ornament, they will then "see how soon our modern age would have its very own architectural style." Style is the last dangling carrot, a result only possible to find together – it takes a collective agreement about existing conditions for a style to emerge, not the prompting of a single individual. Loos recognizes this and acknowledges it in his invitation to responsive discourse.

The primary motive of this essay is of course to introduce a negative comparison between Potemkin's cardboard city and Vienna. In some ways, it seems more appropriate than ironic that its original publication came about in the Secessionists' own magazine – it rejects the academy insofar as it abandons

traditional academic writing style for a much more casual tone, and it is very much advocating for an embracing of modern life. But the very basis of the essay is a historical precedent; the past is not forgotten here, but remembered in detail and used to construct an argument. Loos relies upon the past because it is something he knows his audience is familiar with. This use of history without dependence upon it becomes a lasting theme in his work, both written and constructed. The rhetorical devices Loos uses to construct his argument introduce a new type of relationship between speaker and audience, one that reflects the dialogue Loos engages in with history.

#### LOOS AS CURATOR: CAFÉ MUSEUM<sup>49</sup>

Fourteen years after his design for Café Museum was realized, Loos wondered aloud: "The usual Viennese café. How should it look outside? The thing by which the owner sets most store, the sign, is the least important of all. We people of the 19th and 20th century live in a quite different way from earlier times. We live on the horizontal, not upward."<sup>50</sup> Those who frequent the Café Museum, a single-storey, double-winged space that bleeds into the city on its southmost facade, must move horizontally, too, to interact. Organized by program in plan, with areas for reading, for playing billiards, for gambling loosely demarcated, it is the movement both within and through these zones that is encouraged and facilitated by the design of the café.<sup>51</sup>

Loos "had not created a cozy coffeehouse full of nooks and crannies, but rather an open plan space designed to facilitate intellectual communication."<sup>52</sup> Newspapers on metal hangers drape from the walls and litter tables. The Thonet chairs are light, easily moved and rearranged – the dining and billiard tables both outfitted with shoes that allow further reorganization for social assemblages in flux. Like the modern hotel lobby and railway station, the café existed as a fast-paced, interstitial space of the newly formed Metropolis.<sup>53</sup> "The coffee-house was instrumental in providing a location in which [...] discussion and

wider dissemination of information was facilitated."<sup>54</sup> It is a magnet attracting fragments of conversation to a single place. The architecture itself begins to curate these moments in time, to catalyze discussion, by opening itself to the street with its procession of windows and the inclusion of tables outside. The café moves outside and the street moves in.

The café is not a place for passive consumption, but for active generation of ideas. The café is never saying "nothing at all,"<sup>55</sup> but rather lots of things all the time, an amplifier of a cacophony of opposing echoes. It is worth dwelling on for a moment longer, then, what the café is not saying.<sup>56</sup> Gravagnuolo writes of the Café Museum: "This work is, in fact, a mature architectural expression of Loosian negation, of the theorized renunciation of style."<sup>57</sup> Loos's argument can be seen as a counterargument for other optional definitions of modern. Café Museum's popular name becomes Café Nihilism thanks to the words of journalist Ludwig Hevesi: "Adolf Loos shows himself to be a sincere 'non secessionist' with his Café Museum; not an enemy of the Viennese Secession but something different, because after all they are both modern. [...] It may be to some extent nihilistic, or even very nihilistic, but it is attractive, logical and practical."<sup>58</sup> The response of "nothingness" to the question of style offers a release from the messiness of groups like the Viennese Secession in the act of trying to define something; Loos instead begins by defining nothing. No tattooed ornament and no style, no individual indulgence and no anachronistic sentimentality. "Only on this negative can the Nihilismus of the Café Museum [...] be based: this Baukunst is built on detachment – on the renunciation of all style, of all synthetical utopianism."<sup>59</sup> The utopia is a non-place,<sup>60</sup> while Loos cannot escape the place he is in, cannot escape the community he simultaneously spurs with polemic words and architectural controversies, while feeding off of their day to day decisions, choices about what to wear and how to eat and where to drink their coffee prompting him to keep writing, keep working.

Both essay and building seek to establish a one-to-one relationship with the Viennese public. Loos's projects initiate a dialogue with a larger population, seeking response.

LOOS AS STORYTELLER: "THE STORY OF THE POOR LITTLE RICH MAN"<sup>61</sup>

Loos begins his short parable by initiating his role as narrator: Loos "wants to tell you a story," and you would be wise to listen. This is not yet much of departure from his cultural critiques, which also seem to arrive through a voice out of the sky, from the omniscient narrator, who foresees and hints at what is to come. But Loos is quick to establish conflict within his narrative.<sup>62</sup> Repetition emphasizes the rich man's obsession with Art with a capital A, and Loos's sarcastic praise of the architect further increases the drama foreshadowing the downfall of his character. The architect hired to shower the rich man in art takes on the role of an oppressive tyrant who refuses to compensate his composition with the imperfect additions the rich man tries to include in his life. Ultimately, the rich man's life becomes frozen, no longer a life, because it is "complete"; there can be no potential for lesser (or greater) things in life, because the architect has created a world for him that has everything. He has no reason to leave that room, or to bring things into it. "He was to shut out of all future life and longing, all striving and struggle."

The narrator, sympathizing with the rich man in the middle of the text, asks his readers a rhetorical question to engage their empathy: "One needs a rest from all that art now and then, doesn't one?" And where else does the rich man first try to escape from the overwhelming art surrounding him than the bubbling, babbling, unrestricted café.<sup>63</sup> Loos isn't exactly plugging for his Café Museum, completed just months prior to this article's publication, but he is making an argument against the isolated individual. Nothing becomes of ideas until they are shared and tested. There is a need for balance between public and private life, but the rich man has neither. Art has replaced life.

As the rich man struggles against his commissioned dystopia and the architect counts his profits, Loos offers a warning to his readers; this story hopes to turn the individual more self-reliant, more

independent, but less secluded. It celebrates life, in the present, in all of its imperfections, over Art, the glorified, untouchable glossiness that, frankly, isn't much fun.

#### LOOS AS CONSULTANT: FLAT FOR LEOPOLD LANGER<sup>64</sup>

In addition to cafes and shops, much of Loos's earlier architectural work is to be found in the small apartments of Vienna. Henry-Russel Hitchcock affirms, "It was Loos's tragedy that a very large part of his employment before the First World War was in remodeling and redecorating flats."<sup>65</sup> Tragedy it may be for today's students hoping to see Loos's work intact, but not for Loos himself. It is within the adapted premises that Loos first thrives under pragmatic constraints, and uses these restrictions to investigate spatial relationships between room types. Although, in the words of Oskar Kokoschka, "Loos never [was allowed to] build – the greatest architect! The others imitate him [...] but he never got an offer really to build something important," what offers he did receive, he never took for granted, and found in these smaller commissions the opportunity to explore very specific architectural solutions. What he did get to build, or redesign, were "little flats [that] he would find so exciting [he] usually left them without being paid."<sup>66</sup>

According to Münz, Loos's primary goals are a "peculiar effect of the interior, a blend of spaciousness and intimacy."<sup>67</sup> Even in one of his earliest works, a flat for Leopold Langer in Vienna, there is great control exerted over the three-dimensional qualities of the space. The height of the ceiling modulates to accommodate different experiences and to imply divisions between the large space, which is otherwise – in plan – read as one continuous room. Most important is the small alcove in the back of the space, set off-axis from the dining room, coming across as a pocket room within a room, with tight walls and a low ceiling, offering a quiet place to read by the fire. Its only furnishing, a sofa, sticks out into the larger space like a handshake, offering to smooth the transition from conversation to contemplation, from spaciousness to intimacy. Here, the individual can feel at home, can feel at one with the space in which he dwells.

These small fireplace recesses, which appear frequently in these apartments and reappear in his residential architecture later in his career, carve out the space for reflection and quiet development of ideas. Regardless of the overall dimensions Loos has to work with, this room in a room is a priority as a contained and sheltered nest for the intellectual with direct connection to the more public living and dining rooms. Like the space of the café, these rooms are protected incubators of ideas while remaining easily accessible for those who know where to find it. The Viennese should not "be ashamed to live in a rental apartment in a building with many others who are our social equals,"<sup>68</sup> but, at the same time, "the modern spirit demands individuality," so it is vital that "every [man] expresses his own characteristic qualities in the furnishing of his home."<sup>69</sup> Unlike the nightmare of an architect in "Poor Little Rich Man," Loos acts not as dictator, but consultant, using architecture to draw out the individual in his client.

These are stories about living dynamically in a modern age, about accommodating the spontaneity of life itself. Though also private quarters, Loos's apartments counter the themes of the home of the poor little rich man: Loos's architecture sets up opportunities for the individual to enliven the space himself, to inject his own possessions, his own history, into his home. The poor little rich man could have had all the money in the world, but there was no one to listen to him. No one was asking him what he thought, what he saw, what he felt, or what his needs or wants were.

#### AT THE INTERCHANGE

Timms sets up a dichotomy between Kraus and Loos, between words and architecture, beginning with

Kraus's aphorism:

All that Adolf Loos and I – he materially and I verbally – have done is nothing more than to show that there is a distinction between an urn and a chamber pot and that it is this distinction above all that provides culture with elbow room. The others, those who fail to make this distinction, are divided into those who use the urn as a chamber pot and those who use the chamber pot as an urn.<sup>70</sup>

With the tangibility of architecture's materials posed against writing's representations of the material world, "words do not really function in the same way as the facade of a building [...] the relationship between signifier and signified is more arbitrary."<sup>71</sup> Seemingly, architecture would win every time over these contested realities. Timms plays his own devil's advocate, though, and begins to argue "if we take away the pseudo-classical facade from the modern public building, what we are left with is still a building. [...] There is a certain gain in efficiency and in the open acknowledgement of social practice. But what has been achieved is a better building, not the revelation of some fundamentally different truth." Meanwhile, words don't have to be restricted by their materials: "Verbal facades are different. They are not really facades at all. They are a kind of veil through which our mental eye dimly apprehends the contours of the world around us."<sup>72</sup> Timms fails to recognize that the "open acknowledgement of social practice" is an extraordinary way to convey "some fundamentally different truth." Yes, verbal facades cannot be facades because all words are already limited to abstracted, secondary representations of what we perceive of as reality.

But I would argue, and Loos would argue, that buildings act upon this dual method of representation and reality. They rely upon the effects of remembered experience but have to re-represent aspects of those past episodes, translate the familiar through abstraction in order to incorporate conditions that have newly arisen from the modern Metropolis.<sup>73</sup> As David Leatherbarrow writes: "Abstraction in Loos's work is a result of the attempt to represent what is essential in architectural inheritance, to avoid idle talk; abstraction is a technique of interpretation."<sup>74</sup> Stewart also suggests that Loos follows a prefacing grammarology that came before, accepting and including his inheritance "in the construction of new cultural forms if they are to be relevant to collective understanding."<sup>75</sup> Again, we are left wondering how "collective" comprehension of Loos's architecture really is. But if intentions count for anything, at the very least we can see that Loos was trying. To restate Loos's own words: "I know I am a craftsman whose task it

is to serve mankind and the present."<sup>76</sup> And yet embedded within architecture remains a certain inevitable timelessness: "Architects do not create works for their times alone, later periods are entitled to find pleasure in them as well."<sup>77</sup> His audience is not universal, but he still must smooth the interruptions that become disruptions in the translation between old and new.

Architecture, like writing, is an act of recording. And through this concretization or crystallization of modern ideas melded together with the familiar, the traditional and the understood, the defiant modern is permitted to become a continuity – the new and seemingly irregular becomes part of the system of semantics before it has the chance to change again.

By utilizing rhetoric as a strategy of communication in both his writing and his architecture, Loos employs a synthesis of meanings to induce a response; although attempting to persuade his audience towards a particular course of thought or action, his rhetoric demands a dialogue. Loos is inducing them to speak. Maybe, as Peter Altenberg suggests, the impulse for conversation is a result of his milieu: "At home one is one's own man, but in society one immediately becomes a philosopher of life in general."<sup>78</sup> But Loos is never his "own man" – as critic, as storyteller, as curator or consultant, we only know him to be the public Loos, a modern man's man. Rhetoric is a way to resolve conflict, but only after multiple parties have engaged in the act of discourse.

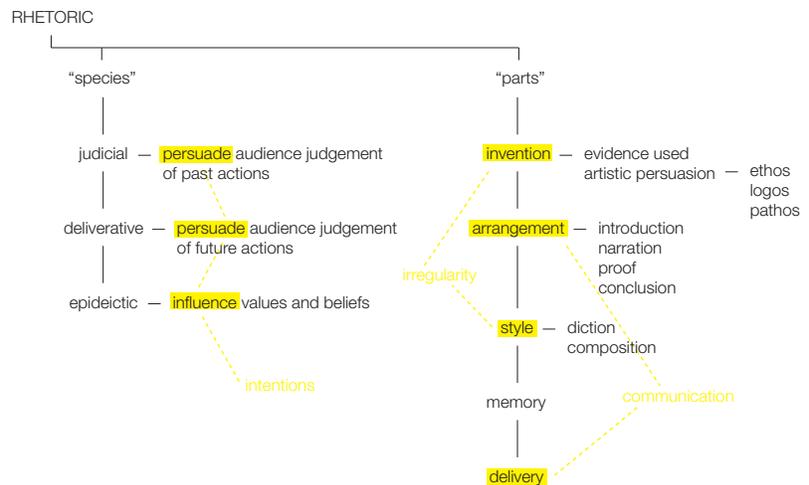
Adolf Loos's work enjoys a confusion of thought and experience (input), between thought and speech (output). Cacciari writes that "language *sees* the world," in a way that encompasses corporeal movement beyond mere optical vision, and that thought is a maximization of this sight.<sup>79</sup> The thinking maximizes the doing, but does not go beyond it. And the response to experience can only occur through equal consideration. Cacciari retains that "different ways of speaking are different forms of thinking."<sup>80</sup> It is in his specificity of speech, of architecture, of language, that underscores Loos's persuasive intentions. In his

eulogy to Loos, Kraus's final words to his friend reverberate infinitely in the deep echo chambers of history: "What you built was what you thought."<sup>81</sup> Cacciari continues his analysis: "To build a thought means: to define the specific form of thinking that is the game of architecture; to define it with maximum precision with respect to the other forms, and not to confuse it, blend it or attempt impossible, nostalgic harmonies."<sup>82</sup> Definition and precision are careful traits of the rhetorical master, but we should pay particular attention to the role division plays here. Well-acquainted with all three men, Paul Engelmann grants Loos, along with Kraus and Wittgenstein, the title of "creative separator."<sup>83</sup> Loos's rhetorical use of language, written and built, carves out his argument while asking his audience to reengage the same problems he is confronting, so that Loos is not the end. Loos seeks some level of continuity through this public participation in the rhetorical.

Rossi writes, "[T]here is a great difference between speaking about the Greeks and speaking as a Greek."<sup>84</sup> In his rhetoric, Loos speaks as a Roman – a Roman who "thought in a social manner" and utilized techniques already mastered by the Greeks, a Roman who didn't "waste [his] inventive powers on the orders" but applied himself spatially.<sup>85</sup> To provoke dialogue with the public is not only to continue this tradition, but to build upon it. Loos knows he is not speaking into the void; he waits not for an echo, but a response.

## ENDNOTES AND FIGURES

1. The oft-quoted – always with slight variation – maxim originates from Adolf Loos's essay "Ornament and Education" (1924), republished in *Ornament and Crime: Selected Essays*, trans. Michael Mitchell (Riverside, California: Ariadne Press, 1998), 187.
2. Janet Stewart, *Fashioning Vienna: Adolf Loos's Cultural Criticism* (New York: Routledge, 2000), p. 58-59.
3. Definitions are particularly useful, but also quite slippery, consisting of ideal clauses that may or may not relate to one another. The definition of rhetoric given here (extending into the following paragraph) is an interpretation of the classical categories and subheadings broken down by George A. Kennedy in *A New History of Classical Rhetoric* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1994). [Visual diagram of this definition's derivation; drawing author's own.]



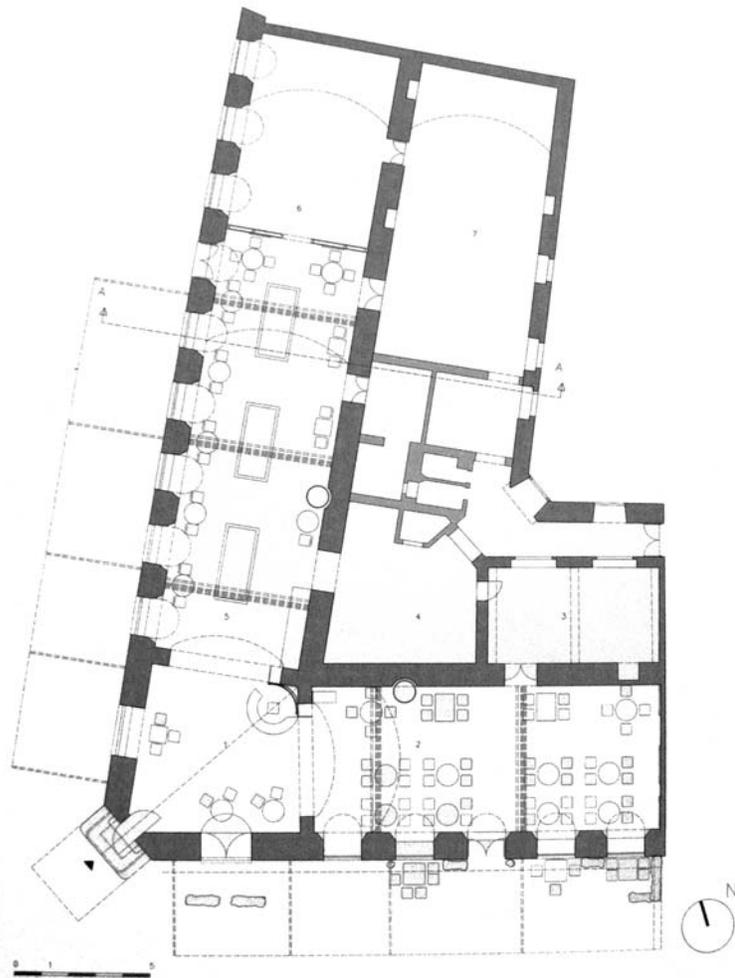
4. This legendary turn of phrase belongs to Samuel Taylor Coleridge, from his *Biographia Literaria* in 1817.
5. John V. Maciuika, "Adolf Loos and the Aphoristic Style: Rhetorical Practice in Early Twentieth-Century Design Criticism." *Design Issues* 15, no. 2 (Summer 2000): 78.
6. Aldo Rossi, introduction to *Adolf Loos: Theory and Works* by Benedetto Gravagnuolo (New York: Rizzoli, 1982), p. 15.
7. Stewart, p. 18.
8. Massimo Cacciari, *Architecture and Nihilism: On the Philosophy of Modern Architecture* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1993), p. 157.
9. Hilde Heynen outlines three perspectives for understanding the modern, as "the current, the new, and the transient." The notion of a fleeting modern, or one to which the individual has not yet adapted, suggests a certain level of chaos, an upheaval of social and cultural norms. Hilde Heynen, "Architecture facing Modernity," in *Architecture & Modernity: A Critique* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1999), p. 10.
10. On the effect of the economic, technological, societal conditions of the metropolis on the individual's psychological state, see Georg Simmel, "The Metropolis and Mental Life" (1902) in *Art and Theory 1900-1990*, eds. Harrison & Wood (Malden, MA: Wiley-Blackwell, 1992), pp. 130-135.



even something so 'down to earth' as the relative position of seas and continents? [...] And doubtless that's one reason why, though man is typically the symbol-using animal, he clings to a kind of naïve verbal realism that refuses to realize the full extent of the role played by symbolicity in his notions of reality." This dependence on a collective symbolic system suggests a social and cultural reliance; it necessitates discussion and exchange of information, of ideas. Kenneth Burke, "Definition of Man," in *Language as Symbolic Action* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1966), p. 5.

21. Kennedy, p. 29.
22. Definition from Oxford English Dictionary.
23. In an interview by Joan Allen Smith, Max Deutsch, French-Austrian conductor and pianist who studied music under Arnold Schoenberg in the early 1900s, is asked about an earlier comment that Loos, Kraus, Kokoschka, and Schoenberg are working in the same "style," to which he replies: "Ja, it is the sense of two things. First, in a general manner, necessity – what is necessary – and the second term is intensity – necessity and intensity. That is the criterion that you can find in the works of these four men. [...] Intensity can be *pianissimo*; it can be *fortissimo*. It is the inner way to bring out what you have to tell." Joan Allen Smith, *Schoenberg and His Circle: A Viennese Portrait* (New York: Schirmer Books, 1986), p. 58.
24. Stewart, p. 81.
25. Adolf Loos, "Architecture" (1910), in *On Architecture*, trans. Michael Mitchell (Riverside, California: Ariadne Press, 1996), p.82.
26. Ludwig Münz and Gustav Künstler, *Adolf Loos: Pioneer of modern architecture* (New York: Praeger, 1966), p. 31.
27. Patrizia Lombardo divides the Viennese intellectual "Rings" into two parties: "Hofmannsthal may be said to embody the intrinsic ambiguity of the Secession, which combined old and new, progressive taste, and which would ultimately fall apart [...] By contrast, then, with Oskar Kokoschka, Karl Kraus and Adolf Loos, the great negative spirits of the epoch, Hofmannsthal, together with [Gustav] Klimt, represented the backward-looking dream of the Secession, the lovely illusion that art would not only lose its aura of the idea but would further intensify it, covering it with a golden veneer of nostalgia." Despite this division, both groups seem to deal with varying degrees of nihilism and language in reaction to their collective milieu. Patrizia Lombardo, "Van Gogh and Hofmannsthal: Colours and Silence" in *Cities, Words and Images: From Poe to Scorsese* (New York, Palgrave Macmillan, 2003, pp. 48 and 51.
28. Hugo von Hofmannsthal, "The Letter of Lord Chandos" (1902), in *The Whole Difference*, ed. J.D. McClatchy (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2008), p. 77.
29. Simmel, pp. 134-135.
30. David Leatherbarrow, "Interpretation and Abstraction in the Architecture of Adolf Loos," *Journal of Architectural Education* 40, no. 4 (Summer 1987): 8.
31. Maciuika, p. 85.
32. Adolf Loos, "The Old and New Style in Architecture: A Parallel with Special Reference to the Artistic Situation in Vienna" (1898), in *On Architecture*, p. 35.
33. Adolf Loos, "Art and Architecture" (1920), in *On Architecture*, p. 141.
34. Both roles that Loos proposes to the architect, that of craftsman and of public servant, rely upon

- practicality and straightforwardness. It is an attitude imbued with this sensibility that produces a specific process or methodology by which the architect architects, "the correct way, the logical way architects should go about their business." Adolf Loos, "The Principle of Cladding" (1898), in *On Architecture*, p. 42.
35. The spiral-, web-, or game-like phenomena of Loos's writing is much noted by historians. See Beatriz Colomina, p. 46; Stewart, p. 20; and Rossi, p. 13.
  36. Beatriz Colomina, *Privacy and Publicity: Modern Architecture as Mass Media* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1994), p. 44.
  37. On Loos's criticism of the academy's overprotection of the title "architect" and of the inclusivity of the existing architectural profession, see the essay "To Our Young Architects" (1898), in *On Architecture*, pp. 29-30.
  38. Adolf Loos, "The Old and New Style in Architecture: A Parallel with Special Reference to the Artistic Situation in Vienna," p. 33.
  39. Adolf Loos, "Architecture," p. 84.
  40. Originally published "Die Potemkin'sche Stadt," *Ver Sacrum*, no. 7 (July 1898 – Vienna). All quotations taken from its translated, republished form, in *On Architecture*, pp. 26-28.
  41. I.e. looking out for "our own dear Vienna."
  42. "I will find [it] difficult to prove, since it demands listeners with a keen sense of justice such as are rare in our city."
  43. "People will object that I am attributing to the Viennese motives they do not possess."
  44. "The Viennese landlord is delighted to own such a property, and the tenant to live in one. [...] It is the architects who are to blame, the architects who should not have built in that manner. [...] Every city gets the architects it deserves. Building styles are regulated by supply and demand."
  45. Other "countries," that would "generally despise" a man "who claims to be more than he is" through architecture, remain undefined. Similarly, we never get more specific than "these Renaissance and Baroque palaces" for examples indulging in pinned-on facades.
  46. "The property speculator would far prefer to have the façade covered in smooth plaster from top to bottom." Or: "The artist's task should be to find a new language for the new material. Anything else is imitation." The language gets considerably stronger as the end of the essay approaches: "The parvenu always believes that." See also the line: "Poverty is no disgrace."
  47. Maciuka, p. 78.
  48. "We should stop feeling ashamed of living in the same building as many other people of the same social status. We should stop feeling ashamed of the fact that there are building materials we cannot afford. We should stop feeling ashamed that we are men of the nineteenth century and not one who live in a house whose style comes from an earlier age."
  49. Still in existence today, the Café Museum is located on the corner of Operngasse and Friedrichstraße, in Vienna. Original reconstruction of the ground floor and interior adaptations occurred in 1899. [Plan redrawn in Ralf Bock, *Adolf Loos: Works and Projects* (New York: Skira, 2007), p. 108; first photo of original interior, from Münz and Künstler, p. 54; second photo of original street view, from Colomina, p. 22.)]



50. "Architecture and the Café" was composed from the notes of a participant in a Loos seminar at the Schwarzwald School (1913/1914), republished in *On Architecture*, p. 130.
51. Reyner Banham comments on Loos's later text, "Ornament and Crime," offering a comparison between the structuring of his written argument and a "café" sensibility, suggesting a certain pace and atmosphere of collaborative chaos: "It is not a reasoned argument but a succession of fast-spieling

- double-takes and non-sequiturs holding together a precarious rally of clouds of witness – café-Freudianism, café-anthropology, café-criminology." Reyner Banham, "Ornament and Crime: the decisive contribution of Adolf Loos," *The Architectural Review* 121 (February 1957): 86.
52. Burkhardt Rukschio and Roland Schachel, *Adolf Loos: Leben und Werk*, quoted by Stewart, p. 33.
  53. "[The lobby of Hotel Friedrichstraße] is an extension of the street, things are not elegant there; you do not remove your hat on entry; people are running back and forth, suitcases are being piled up, people from the street are standing around." Loos (1913) in *Die Potemkin'sche Stadt*, ed. Adolf Opel (Vienna: Prachner, 1983), p. 128.
  54. Stewart, p. 33.
  55. A much more contemporary reference to Aleksandr Bierig's article on Office KGDVS, "Places of Exception," *Log* 19 (Summer 2010): 36-44. Bierig writes: "Particularly when they themselves seem so determined to emphasize architecture's persistent muteness – to say, in blank surfaces and abstract spaces, 'nothing at all.' These spaces assert an architecture for architecture's sake." Loos's café, instead, asserts an architecture for the sake of man.
  56. Burke reminds us that this is another defining attribute of man, as "there are no negatives in nature [...] this ingenious addition to the universe is solely a product of human symbol systems." The negative can only emerge through language, as a "function" of relationships that depends on abstract value systems. Burke, p.7.
  57. Gravagnuolo, p. 94.
  58. Originally published by Ludwig Hevesi, "Kunst auf der Strass," *Fremden-Blatt* (May 30, 1899 – Vienna). Translation from Gravagnuolo, p. 96.
  59. Cacciari, p. 115.
  60. Etymologically: from its Greek roots *ou-* ("not") and *topos* ("place").
  61. Originally published "Vom armen reichen Mann," *Neues Wiener Tagblatt* (April 26, 1900 – Vienna). All quotations taken from its translated, republished form, in *On Architecture*, pp. 48-52.
  62. Loos's protagonist is introduced as a wealthy man envied, and loved, by all. This is quickly qualified when Loos writes, "Today, however, things are quite, quite different."
  63. "Who would blame him for gathering new strength in a café, a restaurant, or among friends and acquaintances?"
  64. Viennese apartment, with structural and finishing adaptations by Loos for Leopold Langer in 1901.
  65. Henry-Russell Hitchcock, *Architecture: Nineteenth and Twentieth Centuries* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1987), p. 472.
  66. Smith, p. 33.
  67. Münz and Künstler, p. 59.
  68. Adolf Loos, "The Potemkin City," p. 28.
  69. Adolf Loos, "Printers" (1898), in *Spoken into the Void*, trans. J. Newman and J. Smith (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1987), p. 94.
  70. Karl Kraus in his own *Die Fackel* 389/390 (December 1913): 37. Translation from Yehuda Safran's exhibition review in *AA Files* 20 (1990): 90.
  71. Timms, p. 121.

72. *Ibid.*, p. 122.
73. Refer to footnote 38 in this text.
74. Leatherbarrow, p. 8.
75. Stewart, pp. 58-59.
76. "Art and Architecture," p. 141.
77. "The Old and New Style in Architecture," p. 34.
78. Peter Altenberg (contemporary of Loos, Viennese writer and a regular to the coffeehouse), "Conversation," in *Telegrams of the Soul*, trans. Peter Wortsman (Brooklyn, NY: Archipelago Books, 2005), p. 57. [Loos (left) with Altenberg, circa 1905, in Gravagnuolo, *Adolf Loos: Theory and Works*.



79. Cacciari, p. 157.
80. Cacciari, p. 163.
81. Karl Kraus, speech delivered August 25, 1933. Quoted in Cacciari, p. 163.
82. Cacciari, p. 163.
83. Paul Engelmann, "Kraus, Loos, and Wittgenstein," in *Letters from Ludwig Wittgenstein: With a Memoir* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1967), p. 131.
84. Aldo Rossi, introduction to *Spoken into the Void*, p. xiii.
85. Adolf Loos, quoted by Ludwig Münz and Gustav Künstler.

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