

CITIES AS MEDIATOR OF ARCHITECTURAL INTERIORITY: A THEORETICAL DISCOURSE

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INTRODUCTION

CITIES AND HUMAN INTERIORITY:

An understanding of social phenomena in cities is essential in gaining insights into how built forms and spatial conditions affect city dwellers. Apart from social activities and interactions, these phenomena also contain various expressions of human interiority, which are reflections of the city in which we live, work, and play. These reflections range “[b]etween submission to the intolerable and outraged revolt against it...” as the populace “...defined a human existence within the walls and along the passages of their streets.”¹ Based on our interiority, our responses toward cities differ among individuals. However, there have been many events throughout history that individuals reacted in unification—as a social entity—toward certain circumstances. These social phenomena are evidences that cities and their architecture have a vital role as mediators as:

*Buildings are the formative element of the city, and in their interior space the human dimension, physical and spiritual, is to be re-established; they are a kind of fortress of reality in an ever-changing environment of new needs and circumstances.*²

Within the “fortress” of reality, exists the interplay among exterior, interior, and interiority.³ This phenomenon was prevalent in fin-de-siècle Vienna when liberal elites took control of the city especially through the new development of the Ringstrasse. The unique character of the Ringstrasse somehow upset many Austrian intellectuals and the term “Ringstrassensti became quite a general term of opprobrium by which a generation of doubting, critical and aesthetically sensitive sons rejected their self confident, parvenu fathers.”⁴ The overall discontentment seemed to have stemmed from the way the city was designed and built as prominent nineteenth-century cities were transformed from the medieval “city of God” into the “city of man.” Georg Simmel provides an explanation that the psychological foundation of the nineteenth-century modern metropolis comprised of the preference for money economy and “blasé” intellectuals, caused “passionate hatred of personalities like Ruskin and Nietzsche for the metropolis.”⁵

Simmel further theorizes that metropolitan social ambience comprising of money economy and changes in social interactions, partially influenced by urban spatial condition, caused urbanites to develop urban disease known as agoraphobia—a psychological illness that stemmed from anxiety of city living in the nineteenth century.⁶ He further elaborates that agoraphobia-inducing urban spatial conditions are made up of vast open space such as public

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plazas and spatial exclusivity of architecture that can draw invisible territorial borders within the city. Therefore urbanites are left alienated with no sense of belonging in the space. Anthony Vidler, based on Georg Simmel's pathological diagnostic of nineteenth-century metropolis, asserts that this kind of psychopathology by sociologists reveals "a unique sensibilities of urban space", which are "reciprocally interdependent with society."⁷ Hence he further exemplifies Siegfried Kracauer's observation that the urban "spatial images are the dream of society" that can be deciphered to reveal social reality.⁸ Inferentially, the deciphering can be achieved through investigating prominent spatial images as well as expressions of interiority of those affected by the city.

For instance, within the unique ground of fin-de-siècle Vienna, expressions of human interiority namely art, music, and interior architecture shared a certain distinctive direction. In art, the society was stunned by Gustave Klimt's controversial paintings that abandoned the prevalent academy style.⁹ Klimt's artistic expression united an otherwise scattered debate of what was modern. In music, Schoenberg's atonal music was an expression of rebel against mainstream classical music axioms as much as a rebel against prevalent conservatism manifested in architecture and city form.¹⁰ As a close friend of Adolf Loos, Schoenberg admired Loos's interpretation of "modern" in his interior architectural design and believed it to be appropriate for modern man.¹¹ Similarly, for Wiener Werkstatte designers, their various secessions aimed to stir up alternative aesthetic in place of the engulfing classical aesthetic that they believed to be unfit for modern life.¹² Krafft-Ebing, a prominent psychologist also contributed to the discourse with his diagnostic of neurasthenia—a sickness of the nerve from overstimulation of urban life—, which further exaggerated the effect of the city.¹³ Working closely with Kraft-Ebing, Josef Hoffmann of the Wiener Werkstatte offered a cure through exposer to geometrical-based aesthetic and sunlight.¹⁴ Hence these phenomena warren for an argument that this unified expression of human interiority was in response to one significant factor—the city.

Out of the many expressions of human interiority, the focus of this paper is, however, on architectural interiority. This is within the theoretical framework of human and built environment that values the interplay between how one shapes the other and vice versa. Through hermeneutic investigation and interpretation of an agglomeration of various sources with the aim to reenact the distinctive city and spectator phenomenon at the turn of the 19th century, this paper strives to understand the relationship between urban form and theoretical development of architectural interiority during this crucial time in history.

NINETEENTH CENTURY CITIES AND ARCHITECTURAL INTERIORITY: THE RINGSTRASSE MODEL

Apart from necessities of commerce, cities crystallized through beliefs as well as superstitions. To conquer fear natural in all humans, leaders used cities as tools to proclaim normalcy in life as "[t] he city is a great place to release, a new world, and also a new oppression..." and "...an essential piece of equipment for psychological domination."¹⁵ Politically, those who govern do strive to minimize anxiety among their citizens therefore "sovereign power" of leaders and the "paranoid psychal structure was preserved and transmitted by the walled city."¹⁶ To sustain order in the society, cities resonated with beliefs

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of the population at large hence they were similar in forms comprising of axial arrangements, places of worship, and sacred monuments.¹⁷ As cities developed, they also carry the power to influence and control their population, which resulted in various social phenomena.

One such social phenomenon took place in the Ringstrasses in fin-de-siècle Vienna. Designed as the seat of power for liberal elites, the physical form of the city (comprised of a band of public buildings such as the city hall, theatres, and university) was intended to bounce power back to the elites it surrounded.¹⁸ Instead of the conventional Baroque planning that uses buildings to emphasize open space, architects of the Ringstrasse diverted the focus toward the buildings. The streets did not join to create a vista but blended into the flow of the ring resulting in an independent boulevard that led to nowhere in particular and expressing no subordination to any hierarchy.¹⁹ In architecture of the Ringstrasse, there was an extensive preservation of classical style in the facades of the buildings, which were criticized as pretentious as well as were considered the expression of oppression toward younger generation of Viennese.²⁰

In addition, in the 1900s, the innovation in printing and press led to more democratic use of the power of communication when newspaper and magazines were more readily available. Cities such as Vienna became a “city of newspaper and journals” where one can get “paper and periodicals for every section of the community.”²¹ Urbanites gathered in coffeehouses—mostly filled with newspaper and periodicals—on the Ringstrasses, and debated about unfolding political and economic situations as well as art and architecture.²² The overall social condition resonates with Georg Simmel’s observation of the “blasé” character of modern man that was influenced by rapid changes in the city. These changes stimulated individuals to develop an “...intellectualistic quality, which is thus recognized as a protection of the inner life against the domination of the metropolis...”²³

While intellectual arguments boiled in the coffeehouses on Ringstrasse, their interior décor reflected new idioms in interior architectural design. During this period, the design can be distinguished into two main types. The first type based on the Vienna Secession and blended existing conservative lifestyle with aesthetically focused design of Art Nouveau and the style of Wiener Werkstatte. The second type focused on philosophical value of interior space that can correctly reflect the modern life and rebelled against prevailing conservatives.²⁴ Further, as the city faced with intense political events of liberalism and anti-Semitism, the new middle class tried to establish their own identity and voice their opinions, which was reflected in the interior of public as well as private domains.²⁵ This was also viewed as a form of “refuge” or an “escape” from the confusion in the urban life, which was progressing at the speed that architectural style cannot keep up.²⁶ Hence the inevitable borrowing of old, traditional style.

Throughout history we see the use of cities as means of control but for the Ringstrasse the manifestation of this control was highly tangible. For instance, the powerful aristocrats who were slowly losing their grips on the economy expressed their intentions in keeping their power through investments on residential projects with pretentious facades.²⁷ The aim was to lure in the younger middle class people who were the true mechanism in the economic engine. This did not go unnoticed as architect and social critic Adolf Loos openly criticized this condition:

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*The Viennese landlords very much enjoyed owning such a palace; the tenant also enjoyed living in one. The simple man who had rented only one room and a w.c. on the uppermost floor, was overcome with a blissful feeling of feudal splendor and lordly grandeur whenever he looked at the building from outside.*²⁸

Loos also provides more extensive critique of the city of Vienna in terms of superfluous ornamentation in his famous writing “Ornament and Crime.” Further, in his design work like Muller House in Prague, Loos expressed the need to provide a refuge from this pretentious condition and designed interior space that emphasized private living by turning the occupants inward and covering windows with sheer or opaque curtains.²⁹ Loos also extended his theory into the design of public places like the revolutionary Café Museum, which bluntly took a stand in contrasting with the surrounding conservative style with light and airy space, red bentwood furniture, and plain façade.³⁰ This sort of rebel was fueled by the new generation of Viennese who seek refuge from desperation of city life. Many of Loos’s clients were well-to-do and influential people from various occupations and from several cities.³¹ These clients were very much aware of how this new approach to design was controversial but they were willing to support it nevertheless.

An important theory in architectural interiority that Loos proposed was to provide a refuge to the pretentious city life that urbanites were facing. This was well received by his clients who wholeheartedly allowed Loos to demonstrate his theories in their homes.³² In order to fulfill aesthetic sensibilities without the use of conventional ornaments, Loos introduced the spatial plan or the “Raum Plan” as a means to achieve visual satisfaction.³³ Steps and built-in furniture were used to define functions instead of walls and doors. The result was the impressive “acrobatic space” that also integrated activity and social interaction thus liberated architectural interiority from conventional theories of antiquity and classicism.

On another front, amidst the flamboyant backdrop of Art Nouveau and ostentatious Victorian style, Josef Hoffmann and Krafft-Ebing collaborated to create Perkersdorf Sanatorium as a place to cure neurasthenia that was plaguing urbanites. The important theory for architectural interiority proposed in this project was to employ simple geometric shapes particularly squares as basis for the design of floor, walls, ceilings, and furniture.³⁴ This was believed to calm the nerves through visual perception hence improving neurasthenia. This new idea was later adopted by designers and opened doors for nonrepresentational designs in architectural interiority.

CONCLUSIONS: THEORETICAL DISCOURSE

The form of the city of Vienna and the Ringstrasse at the turn of the century was unique in three aspects namely inverted Baroque layout, non-hierarchical design of the main boulevard, and the use of classical style on public and residential buildings. (Figure 1) These urban forms also resonate with Simmel’s characterization of agoraphobia-inducing spatial condition, which are the “vast open space” that has no visual frame of the wide boulevard and public plazas in front of buildings and “spatial exclusivity” caused by classically defined architecture of the Ringstrasse.

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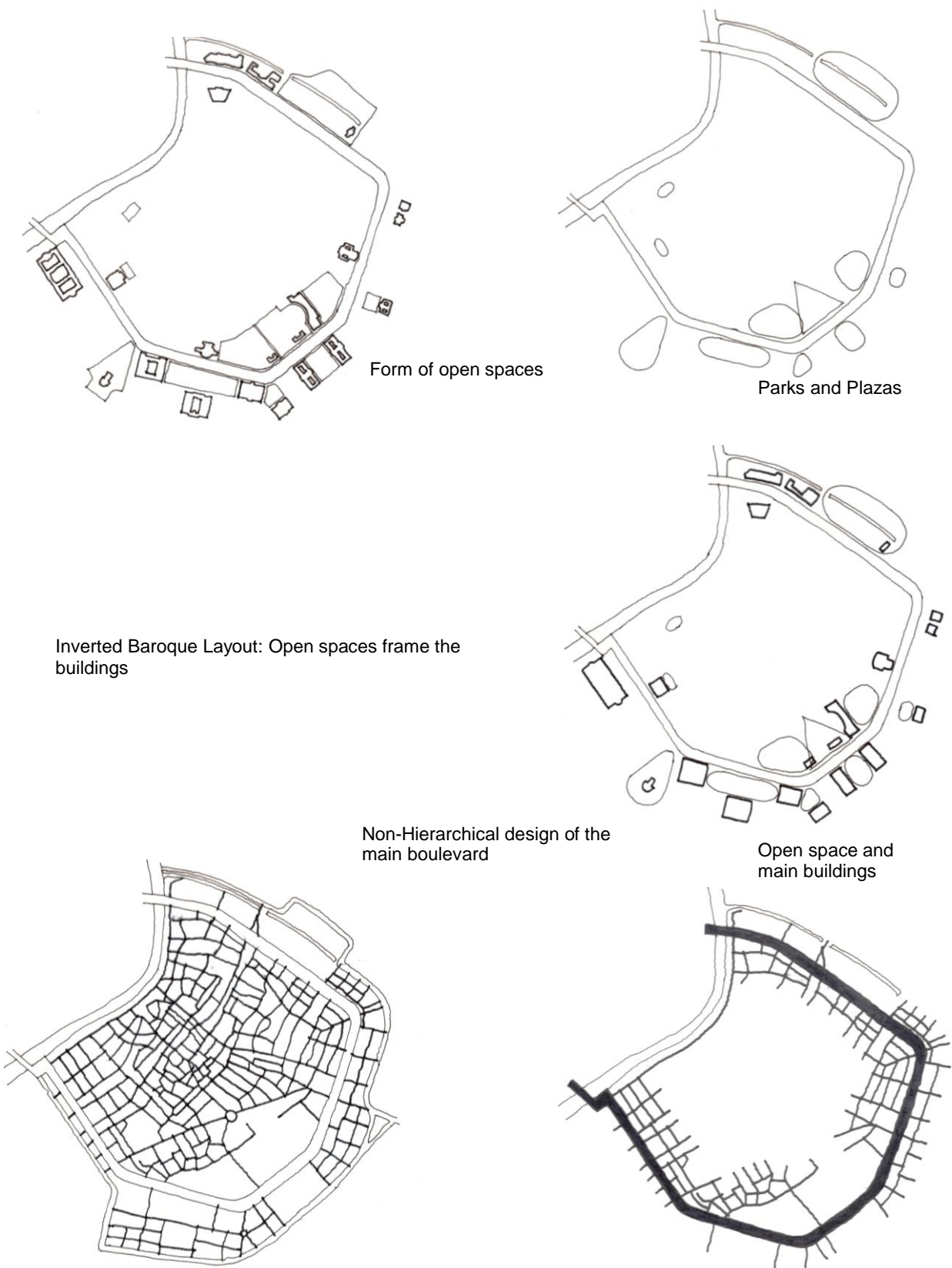


Figure 1. Analysis of city form: the city of Vienna in nineteenth century.

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Further, the review of historical records of the development of architectural interiority reveals that the responses to these urban forms and spatial conditions in the form of preference for interior architectural design appear to depend on the worldviews and social stratifications of the urbanites. This can be summarized as:

1. Conservative: Urbanites who were mostly aristocrats as well as those benefited from their philanthropic acts. They generally received the formulae of the Ringstrasse without resistance and perceived the city as progressive. The architectural interiority preference revolved around classicism and traditionalism. (Figure 2)
2. Liberal: Urbanites who were mostly middle class Viennese. They viewed the city as a place to work, live, and entertain and were content as long as their needs were provided. The architectural interiority was a combination of traditional and current trends such as those of Wiener Werkstatte. (Figure 3)
3. Revolutionary: Aesthetically sensitive elite urbanites, mostly artists, musicians, and architects, who felt compelled to express their interiority in tangible forms as the city form disturbed them. Architectural interiority preference included revolutionary unadorned style with deeper philosophical stances such as by Adolf Loos and Otto Wagner. (Figure 4)

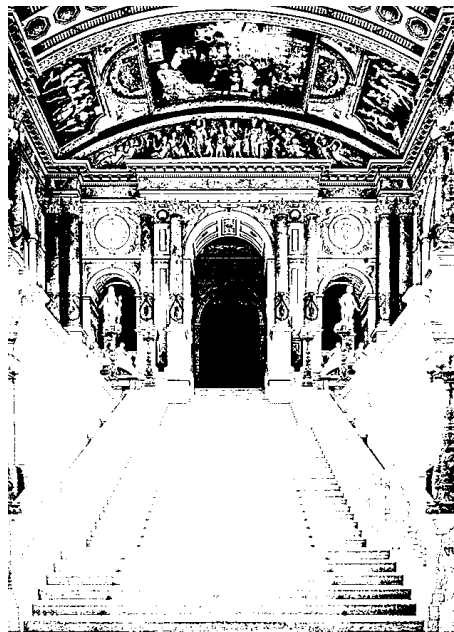


Figure 2. Vienna Opera House adapted from “The Opera House interior Vienna Austro-Hungary” by Snapshots of the Past, CC-BY-SA-2, Wikimedia Commons.

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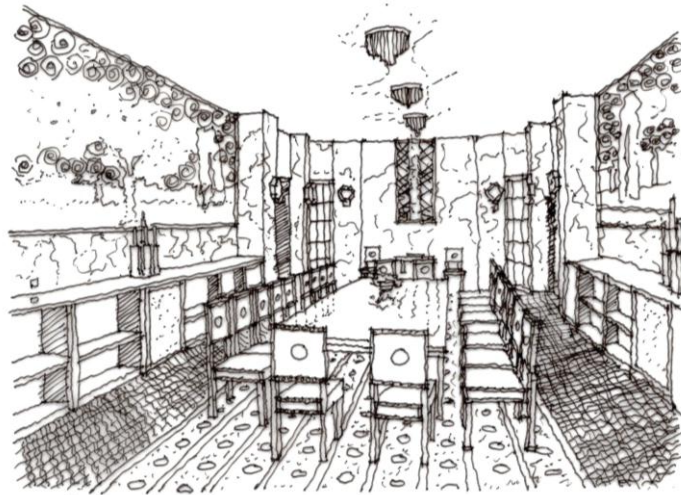


Figure 3. The dining room in Palais Stoclet, Brussels by Josef Hoffmann and the Wiener Werkstatte.

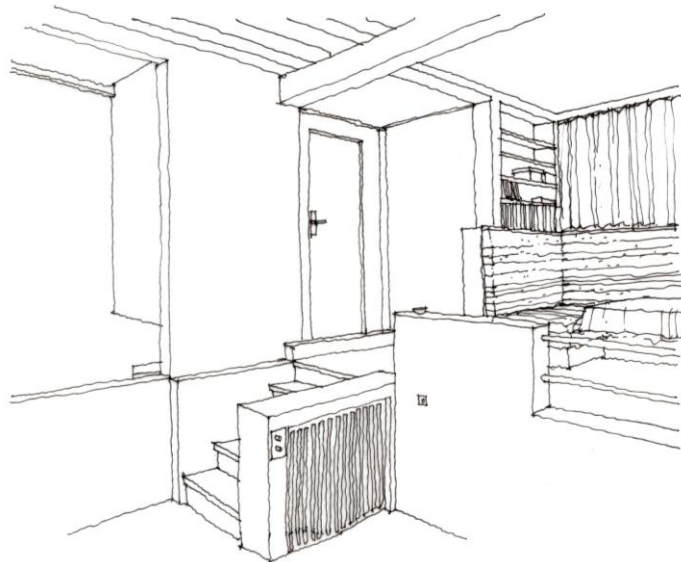


Figure 4. The hall of the Moller House, Starkfriedgasse 19 by Adolf Loos.

CONCLUSIONS

The Ringstrasse in fin-de-siècle Vienna stood as an evidence of how urban forms and spatial conditions can mediate social interactions and expressions of interiority. Particularly, the phenomenon was due to the interplay between extreme tangible manifestation of oppression through urban and architectural language and aesthetically sensitive individuals. These distinctive conditions have fueled intellectual activities that led to unprecedented advancement in architectural interiority theory.

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This also reflects the theory posed by George Simmel that nineteenth century cities tend to produce “intellectuals” due to their ability to stimulate rationality among urbanites through vast open space and metropolitan ambiance of money economy. Although it is still inconclusive whether this is a positive or negative outcome due to on going debates on effects of Modernism. The implication lies that the architectural interiority, as one form of spatial images, can be an important reflection of how urbanites feel toward the city. This opens up the possibility of further research on investigations of current architectural interiority in cities to reveal partial picture of how one may feel about the city.

ENDNOTES

- ¹ Anthony Vidler, “The Scenes of the Streets: Transformations in Ideal and Reality, 1750-1871”, in *Scenes of the Street and Other Essays* (New York: Monacelli Press), 17.
- ² Ronaldo Giurgola, “Reflections on Buildings and the City: The Realism of the Partial Vision”, *Perspecta* 9 (1965):111.
- ³ Inferring from Catherine Ingraham on interior as space for interiority, Petra Perolini asserts that there is a connection between the built environment and our inner being. Petra Perolini, “Bringing Interiority to interior design”, *Zootechnica*, 2 (June, 2012), access February 15, 2014, http://zootechnica.com/occ_web/issue_02/issue_02_essay.Interiority.html#pg_issue_02_essay.Interiority.html
- ⁴ Carl E. Schorske, *Fin-de-Siècle Vienna: Politics and Culture* (New York: Random House, 1981), 25.
- ⁵ Georg Simmel, “The Metropolis and Mental Life” in *The Blackwell City Reader*, ed. Gary Bridge and Sophie Watson (Oxford and Malden, MA: Wiley-Blackwell, 2002), 14.
- ⁶ Anthony Vidler, “Agoraphobia: Spatial Estrangement in Georg Simmel and Siegfried Kracauer”, *New German Critique* 54 (Autumn, 1991), 32.
- ⁷ Vidler, “Agoraphobia”, 32.
- ⁸ Vidler, “Agoraphobia”, 33.
- ⁹ Isabella Ackerl, *Vienna Modernism 1890-1910* (Vienna: The Federal Press Service, 1999), 24.
- ¹⁰ Holly Watkins, “Schoenberg’s Interior Design.” *Journal of the American Musicological Society* 61:1(Spring 2008): 127.
- ¹¹ Watkins, “Schoenberg’s Interior Design”, 127.
- ¹² Ackerl, *Vienna Modernism 1890-1910*, 15.
- ¹³ Leslie Topp, “An Architecture for Modern Nerves: Josef Hoffmann’s Perkersdorf Sanatorium,” *Journal of the Society of Architectural Historians* 56:4(1997): 433.
- ¹⁴ Anne Massey, *Interior Design of the 20th Century* (Singapore: Thames and Hudson, 2001), 62.
- ¹⁵ Kevin Lynch, *Good City Form* (Cambridge: The MIT Press, 1981), 9.
- ¹⁶ Lewis Mumford, *The City in History* (New York: MJF Books, 1989), 39.
- ¹⁷ Lynch, *Good City Form*, 79.
- ¹⁸ Ackerl, *Vienna Modernism 1890-1910*, P.9
- ¹⁹ Schorske, *Fin-de-Siècle Vienna*, 32.
- ²⁰ Ackerl, *Vienna Modernism 1890-1910*, 9-10.
- ²¹ Leon Botstein, “Gustav Mahler’s Vienna,” in *The Mahler Companion*, ed. Donald Mitchell and Andrew Nicholson. (Oxford University,1999), 26.
- ²² Ackerl, *Vienna Modernism 1890-1910*, 17.
- ²³ Simmel, *Metropolis and Mental Life*, 12.
- ²⁴ Tag Gronberg, “The Inner Man: Interiors and Masculinity in Early Twentieth Century Vienna,” *Oxford Art Journal* 24:1(2001): 74.
- ²⁵ Ackerl, *Vienna Modernism 1890-1910*, 9.
- ²⁶ Schorske, *Fin-de-Siècle Vienna*, 38-42.
- ²⁷ Schorske, *Fin-de-Siècle Vienna*, 54.
- ²⁸ Loos refer to Vienna as “Potemkin city” and that strolling along the Ring gave the feeling of being surrounded by aristocrats. Adolf Loos, “Spoken into the Void.” in *Collected Essays 1897-1900* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1982), 95.
- ²⁹ See discussion on Adolf Loos’s interior design works in: Beatriz Colomina, *Privacy and Publicity* (Cambridge, MA: the MIT Press, 1994).

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³⁰ The design was considered radical by Loos's contemporaries as they called it "Café Nihilism." August Sarnitz, *Loos* (Koln: Taschen, 2003), 23.

³¹ August Sarnitz, *Loos*, 7.

³² Loos was more than an architect to his clients as they continued good relations long after the projects were completed. August Sarnitz, *Loos*, 16.

³³ August Sarnitz, *Loos*, 12.

³⁴ Massey, *Interior Design of the 20th Century*, 62.

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