

RATIONALIST TENDENCIES: MINIMALIST ARCHITECTURE IN VIENNA

TENDENCJE RACJONALISTYCZNE: ARCHITEKTURA MINIMALISTYCZNA W WIEDNIU

Abstract

The mainstream architecture emerging currently in the capital of Austria, seems to question the primacy of rationalism. Former Vienna, as an important centre of European secession could turn into a contemporary place of confrontation between diverse and extremely expressive creative attitudes.

Especially from this point of view it is interesting to analyse the opposite tendency, i.e. architecture which does not expose the paradox but expresses the balance with itself. Nowadays, the image of Viennese rationalism is defined by the reducing form of minimalism, visible both in the output of Austrian designers such as Adolf Krischanitz and world ambassadors of this style, among which one can point David Chipperfield. In this aspect also appears the historical participation of Adolf Loos, who created the foundations of modernism, which is the starting point for both functionalist and minimalist attitudes.

Keywords: architecture, minimalism, rationalism, Vienna

Streszczenie

Architektura głównego nurtu, powstająca współcześnie w stolicy Austrii, zdaje się szczególnie kwestionować prymat racjonalizmu. Dawny Wiedeń jako istotny ośrodek europejskiej secesji mógł się przerodzić we współczesne miejsce konfrontacji zróżnicowanych i nadzwyczaj wyrazistych postaw twórczych.

Szpecially z tego punktu widzenia interesująca wydaje się analiza tendencji przeciwnej, a więc architektury, która nie eksponuje paradoksu, lecz wyraża równowagę samą sobą. Współcześnie wizerunek wiedeńskiego racjonalizmu określa bowiem redukujący formę minimalizm, widoczny zarówno w twórczości austriackich projektantów, takich jak Adolf Krischanitz, jak i światowych ambasadorów tego stylu, wśród których można wskazać Davida Chipperfielda. Nie bez znaczenia w tym aspekcie wydaje się także historyczny udział Adolfa Loosa, który szeregiem swoich wiedeńskich realizacji stworzył podwaliny modernizmu, będącego punktem wyjściowym zarówno dla postaw funkcjonalistycznych, jak i minimalistycznych.

Słowa kluczowe: architektura, minimalizm, racjonalizm, Wiedeń

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1. Introduction

The post-war development of Vienna, compared to other world metropolises, is characterized by an extremely large number of examples of architectural form with an intuitive and non-rational description. This may be evidenced by the statement of the *Coop Himmelb(l)au* group co-founder, who claims that the baroque traditions lead Austrian architects to celebrate space, while in Switzerland they rationalize it on the backdrop of Calvinism¹. The purpose of this article is therefore to analyse contemporary minimalist architecture; however, it does not have a dominant position in the context of its own place.

2. Minimalism contestation

The unique strong need to give the architectural identity of the capital of Austria meant that from the 1960s Vienna has become a particularly recognizable point on the cultural map of the world. Hans Hollein's anti-functional manifestos have launched an activity oriented against universalism both in the field of art and architecture. Also the activity of certain groups that worked on the borderline of these disciplines, such as *Haus-Rucker-Co* and *Coop Himmelb(l)au*, showed effectiveness in unleashing architecture from the modernist paradigm. As the result of these and other similar activities, Vienna has become a field for cultural experiment. The expressiveness of the forms or the conscious exposition of the construction paradox was a clear opposition to rationalism, whose previous medium was conservative functionalism.

However, it should be noted that also at the stage of the birth of modernism Vienna played a special role in the context of the global development of architectural thought. Adolf Loos became a special figure for this doctrine. His accomplishment was not only the obvious reduction of ornament, but the ability to create an opposition to the unreflective relativism whose risk brought with it a functionalism that was revealing. The architect left a mark in his projects of the classical paradigm, which was the last anchor point in a specific cultural area. Reductionist tendencies were not intended to enrich the building with new symbolic values in the meaning of Le Corbusier's concept. Loos did not undergo the modernist cult of the machine. Technology was just one of the tools available to help improving the architecture for him². He emphasized that our civilization managed to establish the division of mind and matter³. The crowning achievement of this activity was the local residential exhibition of *Werkbund*, the one where Loos designed terraced houses of demonstration together with Heinrich Kulka.

Undoubtedly, both the theoretical writings and the architectural practice of Loos influenced the minds of contemporary Viennese society. This way of perceiving form has a reflection in the whole artistic activity as widely understood. Acceptance of minimal art, which seeks to reduce the artistic means within a work, is the equivalent of the architecture that radically eliminates

¹ W. D. Prix, *Rapid eye movement Schindler*, 2001, [in:] M. Kandeler Fritsch, T. Kramer (ed.), *Get off of my cloud, Wolf D. Prix, Coop Himmelb(l)au: texts 1968–2005*, Hatje Cantz, Stuttgart 2005, p. 425.

² A. Serafin, *Wiedeńskie domy projektu Adolfa Loosa: racjonalizm przeciw symbolowi i ekspresji*, *Architecturae et Artibus*, 3, 2014, p. 68.

³ A. Loos, *Sztuka i architektura* (trans. B. Nowik), [in:] S. P. Kubiak (ed.), *Adolf Loos. Ornament i zbrodnia. Eseje wybrane*, Fundacja Centrum Architektury, Warszawa 2013, pp. 191–192.

the ornament. Although the Austrian neo-avant-garde of the 1960s managed to initiate counter-reaction, which meant bringing extremely different architecture into general use, the fact that minimalism is rooted in the Viennese building tradition remains unchanged.

3. Characteristics of the contemporary trend

The architecture that represents the complementary minimalist trend means the secondary power of contemporary Viennese building investments. The reduction of the means of expression is a phenomenon that is increasingly appearing in the entire world of architecture, but it is not a dominant tendency in the Viennese context. The analysis of representative, comprehensive minimalist solutions allows a more conscious reference to be obtained towards the continuity of the city's cultural heritage.

3.1. *Differentia specifica* of adolf krischanitz's projects

In the context of this issue a special role is occupied by the works of Adolf Krischanitz. It is justified by the homogeneous, minimalist character of the entire creative output of the Viennese architect. In the initial stage of the initiative, the designer was associated with the *Missing Link* group, which also included Angela Hareiter and Otto Kapfinger. The group constantly expanded the definition of basic discipline. The architects effectively directed the public's attention to the interdisciplinary dimension of architecture thanks to the activity in the field of graphics, but also experimental cinematography and performance. Multimedia technologies were also included in the field of interest. This experience meant that Krischanitz was also inclined towards such references in his later realizations.

Among the projects that express the primary interests of the *Missing Link* team is the *Kunsthalle Wien* pavilion (ill. 1), located at Karlsplatz, the communication hub of the city. The author claims that the implementation of pavilions with a cultural function is a kind of projection⁴. The display of technological solutions has become one of the assumptions in this case. The gallery is an urban institution, presenting national and international contemporary art. Its role is not only the promotion of an art, but it also states a negotiating space for the development of social solutions. Built in 2001, the pavilion replaced the makeshift container facility that had been existing since 1992.

The creative achievements of Krischanitz in the field of exhibition architecture also include the expansion of the *20er Haus* art gallery (ill. 2). The facility was built in 1958 according to the design by Karl Schwanzer. After the renovation in 2011, it was taken under the tutelage of the *Österreichische Galerie Belvedere* and gained the new name *21er Haus*, that underlines the timeliness of the exhibition in the context of contemporary art. The institution emphasizes the embedding of Austrian art in an international context, especially the works of Fritz Wotruba, which combines the issues of geometric sculptural composition and architecture. That seems to be important in the context of an integral relationship between the form of this building and its main function.

⁴ *Kunsthalle Wien, Project Space*, [in:] <https://krischanitz.at/index.php?inc=project&id=2682>.



In spite of adapting the building parameters to the current requirements, the project's aim was the orchestration of the courtyard below the ground level over which the footbridge leading to the main entrance was suspended. In addition, the gallery has its own cinema room, and the exhibition area exceeds 2,000m². An important element of the new assumption is a six-storey tower with an office function. Here the dogmatic character of Krischanitz's minimalism has been revealed. The basic act that gave a minimalist character to this building composition is the installation of windows in the outer surface of the wall. Overcoming the difficulties in ensuring the required thermal insulation of the building, meant achieving a homogeneous form, which was enhanced by the use of a black façade cladding and window stained in the same colour. This is an artistic procedure the architect previously used in 1994 at the *Neue Welt Schule*. Here, the same dark shape of the building with distinctive windows, forming one surface with the outside of the wall, and at the same time reaching the level of the floor, constitutes a background for the surrounding nature.

Another project that is particularly important in Krischanitz's output is the expansion of another Viennese educational institution, the *Lauder Chabad* school (ill. 3). The original facility has been extended with an elongated building wing, including functions such as halls and lecture rooms. Arranging diverse urbanism from the north-east, the new block spatially emphasizes the Rauscherstraße line, a nearby communication artery. Only from this side, large size glazing was used. All other façades feature deeply embedded two-part specific windows, which creates a readable and recognizable raster layout of façades.

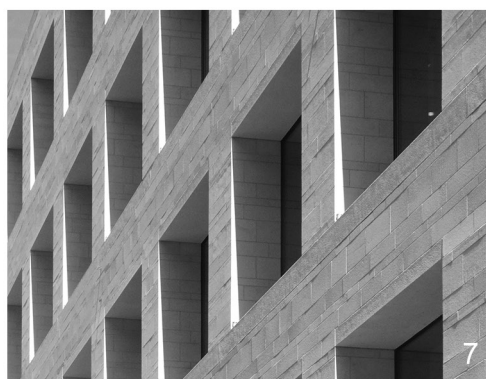
The urban situation also seems to be atypical. The facility is located on the edge of the city park Augarten. The composition of the building, limited in form, was thus confronted with the natural landscape. The aesthetic convention adopted is also not without significance in the context of the adjacent anti-aircraft tower (the so-called *Flakturm*), which is a distinct spatial dominant, as well as a certificate of history loaded with a strong emotional charge. The restrained arrangement that was adopted in this case seems to be a non-verbal statement formulated in the context of the place.

3.2. Minimalism as a result of fantastical style

It seems that the connections between the discussed trend and fantastic tendencies in architecture are distant. Among the Viennese activist groups whose achievements have a bearing on the situation of modern minimalism, one should indicate the *Haus-Rucker-Co* team. This association, like *Missing Link* based on Viennese Actionism, belonged to the leading architectural and artistic circles whose avant-garde activity became a catalyst for changes in the perception of architecture⁵. Works inspired by pneumatic technology were one of the

⁵ E. L. Pelkonen, *Achtung Architektur! Image and phantasm in contemporary Austrian architecture*, MIT Press, Cambridge-London 1996, p. 126.

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- Ill. 1. Adolf Krischanitz, art gallery *Kunsthalle Wien*, Vienna 2002. Photo by author
 - Ill. 2. Adolf Krischanitz, art. gallery *21er Haus* (renovation and extension), Vienna 2012, Photo by author
 - Ill. 3. Adolf Krischanitz, school *Lauder Chabad* (extension), Vienna 2007, Photo by author
 - Ill. 4. Laurids Ortner, Manfred Ortner, art gallery *Leopold Museum*, Vienna 2001, Photo by author



manifestations of creative activity of Laurids Ortner, Manfred Ortner, Günter Zamp Kelp and Klaus Pinter. A peculiarity of these interests was also the search for a new expression of architecture. Examples of this phenomenon can be seen in the contemporary realizations of the *Ortner & Ortner Baukunst* team that is the successor of the artistic group.

The Viennese museum zone – the *Museums Quartier* – was created as a result of the rebuilding of the baroque complex of the imperial stables. The authors designed there, among others, two characteristic art gallery buildings. These objects present two different faces of Viennese minimalism. Whereas the *Leopold Museum* (ill. 4) exhibits features of a radically geometric form, whose high visual standard defines restrained detail and high quality materials, the *Moderner Kunst Museum of Modern Art – mumok* (ill. 5) is a subtle reminiscence of pneumatic aesthetics. The applied curvatures in the attic level make the building's shape take on a swollen form, referring to Vienna's performative projects from the late 1960s, such as *Gelbes Herz* ("Yellow Heart") or *Ballon für Zwei* ("Balloon for Two"). The rectangular plan of the building, elimination of ornament, and selection of a homogeneous dark wall cladding makes the object a monolithic form that creates a minimalist convention.

An analysis of the remaining design achievements of Laurids and Manfred Ortner shows features of formal rawness. One of the many examples is the high-rise administrative and office building *Justizzentrum Wien-Mitte* (ill. 6). The object has been designed in such a way as to emphasize two directions in the plan. The first one is the building layout along Marxergasse, and the orthogonal north-south system has been applied to it. In addition, the solid of the first six floors above ground emphasises the regulation line of the Markthallebrücke, which coincides at an acute angle with the main street. As a result, the natural solution was to create triangular atriums illuminating interiors and improving the readability of the building's communication system.

An important decision of the *Ortner & Ortner Baukunst* was also the use of a stone cladding and, as in Krischanitz's designs, the fitting of windows in such a way that on the outside it forms one surface with an elevation wall. The façade is subject to an optical flattening effect, creating the most neutral background as possible for street activity. Also, the entrance portal has been limited to the form of arcades in the corner of the building. The accentuation of the entrance zone has been realized through a freely shaped colonnade, spatially captivating the outer entrance zone, which, however, almost completely encloses the cubature of the object. The entrance itself is preceded by a wide staircase which crosses the face of the façade only over a short distance. The entirety of the design activities demonstrated here results in the dissemination of the phenomenon of "democratization of architecture". This is because the form, on the one hand, avoids the legitimization of the hierarchical social structure through minimal and featureless sublimity, but on the other hand blurs the boundary between the public space of the street and the inner zone of the building.

It should be noted that minimalism is just one of the expressions of creativity by *Ortner & Ortner Baukunst*, although it is the most important element in the entire multi-faceted artistic

Ill. 5. Laurids Ortner, Manfred Ortner, art gallery *mumok*, Vienna 2001, Photo by author

Ill. 6. Laurids Ortner, Manfred Ortner, office and administration building, *Justizzentrum Wien-Mitte*, Vienna 2001, Photo by author

Ill. 7. David Chipperfield, store house *P&C*, Vienna 2011, Photo by author

Ill. 8. Rachel Whiteread, *Mahnmal für die Österreichischen Jüdischen Opfer der Schoah*, Vienna 2000, Photo by author

narrative of this design team. A slightly different face of architecture can therefore be indicated on the example of a housing development at Vorgartenstraße, which, although it is characterized by a significant restraint, has, however, been slightly enriched with ornamentation. In this way, the apartment complex was created with an expression similar to the latest forms of classicism, understood according to the interpretation of Hans Kollhoff. This and many other cases indicate that while for Krischanitz, minimalism is the only acceptable formal language, in the case of Laurids and Manfred Ortner, it results to a greater extent from practical premises.

3.3. International context

The reductionist nature of the phenomenon in question causes a dilemma as to the possibility of tying such architecture with the identity of the place. The universal nature of the trend means that it does not refer to any specific urban or historical situation. A building so conceived could be adapted as a “product” anywhere, without considering the cultural context. The reason for considering this may be the Viennese department store *P&C* (ill. 7), designed by David Chipperfield, who is now one of the creators of the strongest identified with modern European minimalism.

This building was constructed in the strict historical centre, which is a registered part of the world heritage. The author claims that the project refers to the typology of nineteenth-century department stores, but introduces contemporary architectural language into the historic urban tissue⁶. The building was filled with a plot that surrounded the tenement house located in the northern corner of the building quarter. The new and existing urban substance has been matched with the colour and scale so much that from the perspective of communication routes it became possible to pick them up as an integral complex. The designer proposed a compact body whose optical weight was emphasized by regularly spaced, large glazing, which at all levels above the ground floor were deeply embedded in the wall. This resulted in the impression of an unreasonably large thickness of external walls, and thus the massiveness, which translated into the refinement of this architecture. Krischanitz used the same procedure in the previously discussed *Lauder Chabad* school. In Chipperfield’s implementation, the windows were additionally devoid of divisions, and the façade was finished with a cladding made of locally mined stone. This increased the impression of reliability, and as a consequence, the composition introduced an ordering element against the background of the commercial street’s bustling character.

Also, the interior commercial spaces that occupy the basement ground floor and four overground storeys have been arranged with the minimization of the means of expression. Combining all the floors of the interior atrium, it assumed the role of a central structure organizing the functionality of the building, which supports natural lighting through the opening in the plane of the roof. A skylight with a span of more than 12 metres overlaps with the outline of the atrium, over the roof, forming a kind of “glass cage” crowning this space and at the same time creating a vertical partition for the terrace located on the top floor. In addition, the floors in the central space have been paved with stone slabs, identical with the façade

⁶ *Peek&Cloppenburg Flagship Store*, [in:] https://davidchipperfield.com/files/pdfs/1999/peekandcloppenburgflagshipstore_dca.pdf.

cladding. This underlines the sophistication of the whole assumption, also within the interior, but also leads to the conclusion that the architecture of the shopping centre at Kärntnerstraße is, after all, an attempt to establish a dialogue with the historical buildings of the centre.

3.4. The borderline of sculpture and architecture

A peculiar example of Viennese minimalism is *Mahnmal für die Österreichischen Jüdischen Opfer der Schoah* (Memorial dedicated to the Austrian victims of the Holocaust – ill. 8). The reinforced concrete structure does not exceed its height of 4 metres above the Judenplatz surface. The building is part of a larger museum assumption, which adjoins the square on the north side. Designed by Rachel Whiteread, the memorial in which the exposed remains of the mediaeval synagogue were exposed, was connected to the building via an underground corridor. The rectangular prism itself, occupying the central part of the square, is not directly accessible from the basement level. The symbolic sphere of the object announces the imitation of the door in the façade, which suggests its inaccessibility.

The uniqueness of the case in question consists mainly in locating it on the border of the building and sculptural art. However, while these two disciplines are returning to dialogue, Whiteread in all its creative output challenges the traditional meanings and architectural forms⁷. It should be noted that the goal of a commemorative character can not be the simple emanation of beauty. Therefore, this time, the reduction of means of expression has become an effective method of preserving the memory of the past.

In addition, the specificity of the object, as compared to other examples discussed, underlines the fact of the use of ornament. It creates a rustication, its appearance resembling innumerable identical books, arranged in horizontal rows. The whole made as a cast from high-quality concrete, however, is a form with an extremely homogeneous structure, and these values emphasize homogeneous colors. Therefore, specific stucco does not take on a beautifying role, but it is responsible for creating a specific façade texture. Such a structural façade drawing is also to a certain extent a reinterpretation of classical patterns, constituting a modern form of rustication. The restraint that characterizes this particular artistic solution has meant that the limit of the minimalist convention has not been exceeded.

3.5. Remaining work

Naturally, apart from these examples which should be considered as a specific figuration of Viennese minimalism, there are a number of other developments in the area of the city that can be qualified for this trend as well. However, there is no clear idea that would exclude these realizations from the format of reductionism elegance, thereby distinguishing these objects against a global trend.

The image of minimalism is therefore determined by numerous examples of housing development located outside the city centre. Among them, the *ARTEC* team (Bettina Götz

⁷ G. Świtek, *Gry sztuki z architekturą. Nowoczesne powinowactwa i współczesne integracje*, Wydawnictwo Naukowe Uniwersytetu Mikołaja Kopernika, Toruń 2013, p. 388.

and Richard Manahl) deserve special attention, as well as the more functionally differential *BEHF* projects (Armin Ebner, Stephan Ferenczy, Susi Hasenauer and Franz Gruber). However, it should be noted that the use of this formal language is incidental and concerns individual realizations against all of *BEHF*'s work. Taking into consideration the significant role of the consistently minimalist aesthetics promoted in Austria by Florian Riegler and Roger Riewe, it should be emphasized that its involvement in the Vienna investment market is relatively small.

4. Summary and conclusions

A review of the work of recognized contemporary architects who design in Vienna allows the role of the minimalist trend to be emphasized, even though it is not dominant in this area.

Minimalism is a global tendency, which is a social reaction to information over-stimulation and in this meaning it is a general cultural phenomenon rather than a domain of architecture. Its goal is therefore practical and thus it becomes an expression of rationalism. However, recognizing only such a universal point of view, it would be difficult to evaluate this architecture in the context of a specific place.

Minimalism is also treated dogmatically by some Austrian architects. The achievements of the early avant-garde are consciously continued by Krischanitz, the *ARTEC* group, or *Riegler Riewe*; however, each of them considers a different hierarchy of values⁸. It is also necessary to take into account the different levels of involvement of specific artists in the doctrine. While Krischanitz's activity has a cohesive and timeless character, in the case of *Ortner & Ortner Baukunst* minimalism presents one aspect of multi-perspective creativity.

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⁸ B. Stelmach, *Minimalizm a awangarda. Tendencje minimalistyczne we współczesnej architekturze w świetle koncepcji architektury "oryginalnego porządku" awangardy lat 30. XX wieku*, Teka Komisji Architektury, Urbanistyki i Studiów Krajobrazowych – O.L. PAN, 2009, p. 120.