

FROM THE VIENNA SECESSION TO THE CITY CROWN OF DARMSTADT A JOURNEY TO THE ORIGINS OF 20TH CENTURY ARCHITECTURE

Ten years, three studio locations: Vienna, Darmstadt, Düsseldorf. Projects throughout the whole of Europe and in the United States: from Paris to Turin, Milan, London, Berlin, Dresden and Moscow, right up to Belgrade, Strasburg, Karlsbad and St. Louis. A diverse range of architectural tasks, from international construction exhibitions to city villas, workers' housing projects, factories, garden city and water towers, train station and indoor swimming pool, right up to a spa hotel complex and a fountain colonnade. Complete interior designs for palaces, private homes, apartments, shops and even ships. Designed objects from reading stand to clothes hanger, magnifying glass, umbrella grip, thermometer, stand-up clocks, right up to cash register, gas hearth and automobile, to name just a few. This is the hardly imaginable balance of an all-too-short artist life around 1900 – the central creative years of the tireless architect and designer Joseph Maria Olbrich from 1898 to 1908.

Joseph Maria Olbrich, student of Otto Wagner, fellow student and office colleague of Josef Hoffmann, is today the “great unknown” among the Viennese Architects. Having been called away to work in neighbouring Germany, after 1900 Olbrich was gradually forgotten in Vienna, even though he had been a co-founder, along with Gustav Klimt, Josef Hoffmann and Koloman Moser, of the artists' association Vienna Secession and, at the same time, the

architect of the building of the same name: today one of the landmarks of the Danube capital. All the more reason that Olbrich deserves this overall exhibition of his oeuvre at the two main arenas of his artistic life – Darmstadt and Vienna. Also because the last retrospective, then only at Mathildenhöhe Darmstadt, took place 27 years ago.

So who is this Olbrich? What is it that distinguishes him, apart from his enormous productivity? When he died of leukaemia at the age of 40 just a few months after the opening of the Exhibition Building and the Wedding Tower in August 1908, it was even possible to buy postcards of his funeral. At the time he was at least as famous and popular as a present-day Frank O. Gehry, Daniel Libeskind or Rem Koolhaas.

In 1904 he was co-founder of the Bund Deutscher Architekten, in 1905 he was elected a corresponding member of the American Institute of Architects, in 1906 he became an honorary member of the Accademia di Belle Arti in Milan, in 1907 a founder member of the Deutscher Werkbund: at the time of his early death Joseph Maria Olbrich was a key figure in contemporary architecture and world design. In 1910 Frank Lloyd Wright was welcomed to Europe as an “American Olbrich”. And Erich Mendelsohn, the architect of the Potsdam Einstein Tower, wrote in 1919: “Incapable of creating anything new, after Olbrich's death the leaderless tribe again tries

to hide behind the tried and tested compliancy of past systems”.

This was the man who, after lighting the torch for the modernism of the Vienna Secession, left his own legacy to modernism in the form of the Exhibition Building and the Wedding Tower at the Mathildenhöhe Darmstadt which draws on the early history of architecture as much as it creates new shapes and symbol forms. Commenting on the opening of the Hessen Exhibition and the inauguration of the ensemble, on the 23rd of May 1908 the Darmstädter Zeitung wrote: “With the erection of this building dominating the city, the Mathildenhöhe, once a silent garden with mossy paths and forgotten little houses, [...] has become a focal point of the ideal interests of our nation.” Today the significance of the Exhibition Building and the Tower in and beyond architectural history goes far beyond Hessen: with the widely spread, geometrising hall and roof ensemble, the strikingly modulated use of bricks in the tower, its horizontal window bands over the corners, which invent a central topos of modern architecture, all capped by the impressive symbolic gesture of the hand raised as if taking an oath.

Curious irony of history: Built on a somewhat desolate traffic island between Ringstraße and Naschmarkt, the Vienna Secession was originally conceived as a provisional arrangement for a maximum of ten years. Originally, the wedding present for Grand Duke Ernst Ludwig was to be a wedding chest, until Olbrich persuaded the city authorities that a wedding tower would be much more appropriate to the solemn occasion.

Afterthought of history: Both buildings, which stand as milestones at the start and the end of Olbrich's oeuvre, are today incunabula of architecture, the first White Cube of modern exhibition architecture and the proto-expressionistic Wedding Tower. And on both occasions the architect built them for the

benefit of the community free of charge.

The promise and the legacy of modernism: For Theodor Heuss the 20th century began “as a promise and a task” in Darmstadt. The first president of the Federal Republic of Germany, a qualified art historian, was referring here to the genuine invention, the significance and the impact of the architectural exhibitions which took place on the Mathildenhöhe Darmstadt in 1901, 1904, 1908 and 1914. The first three presentations were intricately linked with the name Olbrich. It was he who gave the artists' colony in Darmstadt the unique face it retains up to the present day. While the buildings of historicism were determined by the building shell, Olbrich conceived houses primarily from the inside, in terms of their function. Even though he did not regard ornamentation as a crime, his buildings always display a clarity of form in the sense of early modernism while simultaneously bearing witness to his artistic creativity.

Thus it can be hoped that the exhibition at Mathildenhöhe Darmstadt and the basic publication accompanying it will make obvious what Josef Frank, the Austrian architect and co-designer of the legendary Stuttgart Weißenhofsiedlung, asserted in 1926 with firm conviction: “The architects Otto Wagner, Josef Olbrich [sic!], Josef Hoffmann, Adolf Loos and a number of others had a major influence on Europe's architecture long before the war. Works were created which lead in a straight line to our present-day architecture.”



Ralf Beil

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