Text by Univ. Ass. Frau Mag. Tulga Beyerle
Chair of the Theory and History of Design
University of Applied Art

The late 19th century was marked by the machine. Industrial manufacture made cheap mass production possible, although in appearance serial products still seemed rooted in traditional handicraft. A real awareness of the new methods of production only came about thanks to the critical approach taken by various intellectual groups such as the Wiener Werkstätte and the German or Austrian Werkbund. Design thus came fully to terms with materials and techniques.

At the turn of the century Vienna was facing the tasks of a big city in-the-making. Town planner Otto Wagner was confronted with problems such as the development of new housing estates, the incorporation of suburbs and the provision of communications. One of the most visible manifestations of his work is the old Stadtbahn; its stations and bridges still stand today.

In the fine arts and in applied art the exponents of art nouveau sought new, free forms signalizing a new dawn.

Export figures were falling at the beginning of the century. This meant it was necessary to find new ways of promoting sales and improving quality. The time was ripe to think about design.

One viewpoint upheld a nostalgic regard for craftsmanship. This was a romantic attempt to reunite design with the three-dimensional object. The aim was inner satisfaction for designer and manufacturer alike. The machine age meant that the maker could no longer identify with the entire object. He had thus become uprooted. The maker's satisfaction, so it was thought, would be reflected in the quality of the product.

The aims of the Wiener Werkstätte were similar to those of comparable groups in England. Refined and elegant as they were, the resulting products were only accepted, understood and afforded by the upper classes. They did not find favour generally.

The other viewpoint saw the answer in coming to terms with the technical means. That meant adopting industrial methods and applying them to a new, future-oriented design. This idea gave birth to the deutscher Werkbund in 1907. The organization soon integrated members of the Wiener WerkstÑtte, too. The îsterreichischer Werkbund was founded in 1913. It was open to "...all Austrian artists, industrial artists and craftsmen... whose designs met artistic criteria and whose techniques and use of materials were impeccable." (p. 39, Max Eisler, ôsterreichische Werkkultur, pub. by the ôsterreichischer Werkbund, Vienna 1916)

Members joined voluntarily and from conviction. Joint efforts were made to control and improve the quality of work.

Among the methods used for this purpose was a highly didactic one - the exhibition. Themes included "Simple Household Effects" and "The Good, Cheap Object" or were simple displays of members' work. All the companies involved were thus able to show the quality of their products. Today, this would correspond to awarding a seal of quality for design.

Fruitful controversy was an essential feature of the Austrian Werkbund. Ideologically, Hoffmann and Frank did not agree, yet they had much in common. Their rejection of historicism, for instance, and their search for a new form vocabulary. Scepticism towards dogmatic attitudes has always been a feature of Austrian art history. That is obvious in retrospect. The economical severity of German Modernism constrasted sharply with the elegant and sensuous quality of life in Vienna/Austria. The aim might have been to educate manufacturer and customer alike, but it was free from any Bauhaus intransigence.

In all his rejection of ornament Loos never failed to appeal to the senses. He knew that culture and history exert more influence on our environment than designers.

Here, a free rendering of a Loos pronouncement:

The difference between me and the others

(representatives of the Neue Sachlichkeit in

Germany) is as follows: in my way of thinking the

form of an object evolves from its use. The

others believe that a new form can influence the

very form of civilized life.

It was in this phase that Adolf Loos developed his way of articulating internal space. His houses did not develop from the outside to the inside. Not the outer form dictated the building, but the actual way of life within. This was a dynamic process of design, emanating from the inside. Rooms flowed into one another without any rigid symmetrical sequence or hierarchical articulation of levels.

Of paramount importance after the First World War was the reorientation of Austria's - and above all Vienna's - political landscape. The Dual Monarchy (Austria-Hungary) disintegrated. The small Austrian rump was now cut off from productive industry and, particularly, from raw materials.

"Red Vienna" evolved dynamic concepts to deal with housing needs and unemployment. For a brief period these were successful. The "housing tax" made it possible to finance and build 65,000 flats in only one decade. Housing blocks of a palatial nature predominated. The architecture of "Red Vienna" also embraced a vocabulary of great variety. The realism of many a council building was accompanied by popular, expressive tendencies (Clemens Holzmeister, for example) or the critically intellectual dialogue with International Modernism (Josef Frank, the "Werkbundsiedlung"). On the other hand there was a nationally romantic tradition, an architectural heritage that was later to find its identification in National Socialism.

(See p. 198, Friedrich Achleitner, in: Die Vertreibung des Geistigen

aus Österreich ((The Expulsion of Ideas from Austria)), University of

Applied Arts, Vienna 1985)

It was probably due to this very circumstance that Austrian socialists and the proletariat were better able to identify with these buildings than the German worker or civil servant could with the plain, flat architecture of the new Frankfurt. The idea of the block as a worker's palace was consciously propagated. It meant that everyone derived a sense of pride in belonging to this movement.

Margarete Schütte-Lihotzky was influenced by her work for the Viennese estate development office and by other social housing projects in the city. Later, she was employed in Frankfurt where she designed the famous Frankfurt kitchen, the world's first built-in kitchen.

Social democratic projects in "Red Vienna" were holistic in that they also addressed people's physical and mental health, their cultural and political education.

Nazi Germany sought a design path that upheld values such as home, heritage and handicraft. This resulted in a vocabulary that was dull and mediocre. In Austria this standardization of taste and aesthetic quality had already been prepared by Austrofascism. Based on a political Catholicism, the swing to the right became obvious in the controversy within the Austrian Werkbund. This led to its division and re-establishment. No Jews or Socialists were members now. (At that time Josef Frank left Austria for Sweden, Josef Hoffmann and Clemens Holzmeister took over the Werkbund's management).

It is commonly thought that this rift had interrupted and destroyed Austrian and German Modernism. The expulsion
and persecution of major Austrian architects - Friedrich Kiesler, Felix Augenfeld, Richard Neutra, Rudolf M. Schindler, Ernst A. Plischke and Josef Frank - had indeed left a gap in the world of architecture and design. It is, however, easy to overlook the fact that a stringent, self-confident Modernism had never existed in Vienna; there had for some time been intensive criticism and insecurity with regard to the Neue Sachlichkeit's dogmatic attitude.

"There must have been a fateful alliance between

the architectural doctrines of National Socialism

and the first criticism of functionalism in the

late Thirties. Later, in the Fifties, this proved

to be a twofold impediment to the reception of

Thirties architecture."

(See p. 198, Friedrich Achleitner, in: Die Vertreibung des Geistigen aus

Österreich ((The Expulsion of Ideas from Austria)), University of Applied Arts, Vienna 1985)

This insecurity probably explains why architects like Franz Schuster let themselves be taken over by the National Socialists. He heralded a sober, utilitarian architecture. After the War he continued in Tessenow's vein, but this was no new dawn in architecture.

The fact remains, however, that there had been a violent break in the tradition of aesthetic questions being approached intellectually. In the field of architecture the dialogue was not taken up again in this active form until the Sixties.

In the Anschluss years design visibly suffered from dictatorial ways. Exhibitions with titles like "German Household Effects" speak volumes. An innate sense of elegance and ease was, however, retained, as shown here by Haerdtl.

In Austria, and above all in Vienna, the most pressing post-War task was to deal with housing needs. Scepticism towards an over-intense political or ideological approach, coupled perhaps with a certain degree of exhaustion, meant that there could be no new dawn for architecture in the immediate post-War years. With very few exceptions the buildings were largely dull and still used the stylistic vocabulary of the National Socialists.

In a consensus-oriented country that saw itself in the role of victim no provocative new approach to product design was noticeable. Although it would have been an essentially necessary process, there was no real coming-to-terms with the past: instead, needs were deliberately awakened and requirements were met. In this way the average citizen was encouraged to create his own little private habitat. In this climate people were relieved not to rake up the past or questions of conscience. It is not, therefore, surprising that architects and designers who had been forced to emigrate were not even invited to come back. When they did return, they were socially and professionally isolated (Plischke, SchÅtte-Lihotzky).

In the Sixties the term "Gute Form" evolved. It was an overall and abstract criterion of general and, as it were, eternal validity. The term is without doubt rooted in the beginnings of Modernism. Bourgeois cultural history and the recent design history of the Third Reich featured inherent values. The subsequent generation could not and would not uphold these. The best way of plastering over the crack in development seemed to be a link-up with the period between the Wars. Rapid technical and social developments and a gradual market saturation also prompted a rethink and fresh points of reference. As a criterion, "good form" was inadequate for an increasingly complex society and a correspondingly complex design process.

This period witnessed a sober, but modern architecture committed to new methods of construction and represented by architects like Erich Boltenstern, Karl Schwanzer and Roland Rainer. The latter was responsible for urban planning in Vienna from 1958 to 1961. Building projects no longer concentrated on housing alone, but catered, too, for the leisure needs of a big city (Stadthalle) and the representational requirements of commerce (Philipshaus).

The young generation of architects had to overcome an inflexibility that saw technical progress as the only valid basis for design.

By rediscovering Viennese Modernism, some attempted a reorientation and redefinition.

The more radical among the younger set refused to look back. Progressive and provocative, they got themselves talked about internationally by means of projects and publications. These dealt with questions such as the consumer society, new mobility and big city problems.

Thanks to these activities, intellectual discourse again became a feature of Vienna for the first time since the period between the Wars. Unfortunately, however, it was restricted to Austrian architects and artists. It did not extend to the few product designers.

(Examples of the "radicals": Hollein, Pichler, Hausrucker, Coop Himmelblau)

Economic reconstruction succeeded thanks to a historical reconstruction that excluded any political responsibility and resumed where 1938 left off. In other words,

"the failure to come to terms with Austrian history

between 1938 and 1945 was tied to the building-up of

a consumer goods industry. This functioned as a

replacement for the identity that had been lost"

(Gabriele Koller, Design als umgekehrte Welt, in

Die Radikalisierung der Phantasie, p. 278)

In this connection it must be remembered that there had been an actively critical discourse on the central aesthetic questions of the time. The familiar historical facts prevented this from being translated into perceptible reality, however, and dialogue was stifled.

As we have seen, the constant search for consensus in a country that saw itself in the role of a victim of the Anschlu· meant that this discourse was not taken up again. Instead, the formation of an identity was simulated by productivity. Concealed by highly creative personalities and intensive activities in the Fifties and Sixties, this hollow structure proved to be very brittle in the Seventies. It was only upheld by a very few. They managed to find their way in a new reality of rationalization and standardization. They were able to put the term "Industrial Design" into practice.

Essential aspects were, however lost in this climate. The cultural objective, for example. That should be inherent in any product, as important to the designer as the suitability of the material, as important to the manufacturer as marketability.

By the Eighties this intellectual gap had become visible. It is interesting to note that Austrian artists were the first to recognize this. (Examples: Oswald Oberhuber, Franz West, Podgorschek)

Functioning communications with the few leading industries seemed to be permanently interrupted, however, and it proved difficult again to build up the trust that could perhaps be felt in the immediate post-War period.

In the Eighties most companies relied on big names from abroad, in particular from Italy. That country can boast decades of experience in dealing with its aesthetic history.

Like other European countries, Austria was gripped by a sense of change and by design euphoria. Throughout Europe the market, still very rich, was over-estimated. It promised a sheer endless need for objects as beautiful as they were useless. Critical observers recognized the sell-by date from afar.

An event as interesting as the "Design Forum" exhibition of 1980 was accorded international recognition. It still serves as an example in other European countries. The new definition of terms constituted the very synthesis of this display. With few exceptions, however, it was not comprehended by Austrian companies and designers. It never became a part of company and design philosophy. Mere product styling seemed to be the ultimate aim.

A Nineties hangover followed the design ecstasy of the Eighties. Few ventured to come to terms with the theme of design.

This is a "sobering-up" period. Young designers today are very realistic. In a world of surfeit they have to work hard to establish and defend their right to work. This further aggravates employment conditions in Austria, a country not at any rate over-endowed with design culture.

Things are stirring, however. There is a reawareness of the intrinsic Austrian identity with its ability for historical reflexion. Thanks to more modest production standards, this country should be able to comprehend the complexity of tasks facing the designer. This cannot just mean meeting all legal standards.

Slowly, but surely, some companies are again building up successful communications and a basis of trust with Austrian designers. This cooperation goes beyond mere styling. The means are as important as the ends. This work is paying dividends on an international level. By setting an example it will most certainly have an influence on the overall situation in Austria.