As I have observed in these pages once before, some things in art history seem to demand rediscovery every 20 years or so — my adduced examples being King Tut's tomb and Tiffany lamps. I hesitate to say that Adolf Loos (1870-1933) might be another. The early modern Austrian architect and designer has tended to be celebrated as an anti-architect who bravely faced the truth and blew the whistle on ornament as sub-civilized if not tantamount to 'crime'. He has been seriously appreciated over the past generation in the UK and US largely thanks to 'The Architecture of Adolf Loos: An Arts Council Exhibition', organised by Yehuda Safran and Wilfried Wang and mounted at London's Institute of Contemporary Arts in late 1985. Since then, what used to be a modernist critical problem of the 'merely' decorative — a larger but vague question than the Loosian denial of ornament as scandalous in architecture and design in 'Ornament and Crime', 1908 — has lost its pressure, especially now when even 'mere' transgressiveness has come to be seen as utterly stylish.

Now 'Adolf Loos in the Czech Lands' has been organised by Maria Szadkowska for the City of Prague Museum, which today administers Loos's great Villa Müller on the edge of town. The exhibition, which travelled to the Royal Institute of British Architects (RIBA) in February, gave me an opportunity to look specifically at his work in what is now the Czech Republic, much of which turned out to be elegantly remodelled flat or apartment interiors in pre-existing buildings. Given 'Ornament and Crime's' conspicuous contempt for decorative arts per se, how could Loos proceed to do so much interior decor — and identifiably and consistently Loosian in style at that? For one thing, he was more of a formalist than he sounds and, if it would have sounded too arty to say so, he could always fall back on his cheerful anglophilic notion of common-sense taste. But while decoration and ornament are not the same thing, they have enough in common for us to be curious about the great ornamental abolitionist of modern architecture's 'other' career as a designer of flat interiors in other people's buildings and, notwithstanding the glib summations of the survey books, his anything but 'functionalist' furniture too. Even as the new exhibition pursued its geographical theme it stimulated such thinking while, at the same time, offering a younger generation — for whom the name of Loos is legendary — a large spread of work by this founding modernist who nevertheless may well have had a sweet tooth for 'radical revision' — but who would have thought that that could apply to apartment renovation?

So this was a survey of sorts, though a selective one, extending from the nineties of the last century, when Bohemia and Loos's native Moravia were still imperial crown lands, to the time of the architect's death, five years before the Anschluss. The work in question did
not look more detectably Czech than Austrian, but then that is precisely why Loos is so identifiable with the cosmopolitan imperial capital. Nor was the apartment work, of which he did so much in Pilsen, news as such: it was a known category thanks to published photographs which he kept of his apartment remodellings. The preponderance of this material here corroborates my notion that, apart from economic necessity, Loos's apartment — and house — remodellings also belong to a 'green' aspect of his production. But whatever the pretext, it is always worthwhile to confront particular works of this figure who proves much more than an anti-architect in the event than we are often led to think.

At the RIBA the core of the presentation was an extensive display in the grand first-floor chamber of photographs and documents, drawings and models of many of Loos's works in Bohemia and Moravia, with satellite exhibits in the balcony-corridor outside this and the staircases, and in the library too. This included two special features, like side-shows: the scrupulous restoration of the Villa Müller, Prague, plus a display of reliquiae of what the Institute promoted as the 'unknown' Loosian legacy of its British Architectural Library — when, after the architect's death, the principal Loos archive, now in the Albertina in Vienna, was stored for safety at the RIBA in 1958. The Czechs are rightly proud of their fanatically fine 1999-2000 restoration of the wonderful Müller house, built in 1928-30 with the collaboration of the Prague engineer Karel Lhota, the crowning work of a homeboy. It is the only central European classic modern house besides Mies van der Rohe's Tugendhat, in Brno, to rival Corbusier's; and though the local neo-capitalists would not put it so, it survived the communist period, when Franz Müller shared it with editorial offices for a state publishing house, in better condition than the Villa Savoye survived war damage followed by municipal use in the 1950s.

One of the apartments within the main display is a major restoration accompanied by heavy-handed political promotion. A generation since the Fall of the Wall, with capitalism doing rather badly, we find a certain cast European obsequiousness towards capitalist power accompanying the slandering of socialism. The 'lost' 1927 Robert Hirsch apartment, moved to Prague and restored as The Adolf Loos Apartment and Gallery, was a case in point. It is disheartening to me to be told that the apartment 'suffered from the indignities and neglect of a communal ownership that eschewed private property' when it has only been saved by being moved to another city as a tourist attraction. 'By the 1970s it was largely destroyed and its furnishings were missing', we are told; but, beyond the irritating failure-of-socialism topos, what does it mean to say that a 'destroyed' work has been 'restored'? That a miracle is owed to some entrepreneur who did out of heroic self-interest what the communists so nastily failed to do ideologically for its own sake? In the catalogue, by the way, all the buildings have 'investors' instead of patrons — please.

It was in the core presentation that the whole question of the remodelled flat interiors — including furniture — arose. This also entails Loosian theory because, in denying that houses should belong to the art of architecture, he was specifically defending the domestic interior as a private space of unapologetic comfort. Talking that way was one thing. The surprise is that he meant it. Cosiness, Gemütlichkeit — in furniture if not in flooring, walls and ceilings — sometimes on the very verge of kitsch (though I have ways of excusing his can't-look-too-English false 'baronial' ceiling beams). This will presently concern pointedly informal salon furnishing, marked not only by the permissive embrace of an obviously favourite type of cheap-looking rattan armchair of circular form, but even by a favourite design of his own. For one whose voice was so important in the early modernist architectural campaign against eclecticism, he obviously does not mind producing internally eclectic rooms — even if he is on somewhat

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better behaviour in flats than in the houses he designed himself. This position was not as shaky as it might sound because Loos hated the turn-of-the-century ‘decorative art’ mania for entire gesamt-ensembles with matching accessories – a homely mess must be better than that.

But what about the relation of a Loosian flat to the given, non-Loosian block containing it? Manolo Guerri wondered whether one might not actually prefer to live in one of these – within an otherwise old-fashioned, late 19th-century ‘stylistic’ building – than in a from-ground-up Loos house. This interesting question suggests that there may be a polemical advantage for Loos when there was still something left for him stylistically to subtract, or maybe to subtract from. It cannot have escaped Loos that ‘square’ traditionalists often hold to defective poetics. Just cleaning up the mess of their decoration, at least within your own apartment, might make for a special aesthetic sense of relief.

Several of the photographs of Loos’s flats feature curiously delightful brick hearths, for which our architect – who rhetorically endowed that title in domestic circumstances – either took his own advice and deferred to local craftsmen without imposing artistic specifications, which is credible in view of the results, or else, just conceivably, did the pedestrian bricklaying himself. The finesse required, close in, of Loos’s craftsmen in other materials seems not to accord with the blunt brickwork of these hearths and surrounds (as Marjorie Welsh first noticed in front of the fireplace of Loos’s own 1903 Vienna apartment now housed in the Museum of Vienna). Several later examples in Pilsen looked similar, with the same simplistic ‘running’ or ‘stretching’ bond thickly plastered with grey mortar. Can this brickwork be US-style and, if so, is it the work of Loos himself, who was proud of having earned a bricklayer’s qualification in the US? That better fireplace brickwork was available in Pilsen could be seen in the later, more ‘Roman’ brick example of the flat of Hugo Semler, dating to 1921-22 and designed in collaboration with Adolf Hrusa, when Loos was physically on his last legs. By then incapable of bricklaying, he was however able to choose for Semler’s music salon a surreally intense, blue-veined ‘Fantaschi’ marble that had for me the visual bite – Loos would like the Englishness of putting it so – of Stilton cheese.

Several pieces of actual furniture were on view in the middle of the main space. Examples of both Loos’s subtle tweaking of established chair types and his very opposite extremism. Of the former there was a Loosified Chippendale side-chair, probably by Loos’s trusted chair-maker Josef Veitsch. Although I know next to nothing about furniture, I suspect its palmette back might look upside down to an 18th-century expert. If so, is it a modernist semantic reversal? But there was also Loos’s favourite little three-legged stool, which everybody says is owed to Liberty’s of London version of an ancient Egyptian type found in the Tut tomb. Maybe so, but that ignores a fact which would have interested Loos that – aside from Liberty’s – this is basically a verracular African village stool type which has never stopped being made.

The pièce de résistance of the furniture was something I admit to having often shunned, though now I think I am ready for it: that overly confident semi-reclining upholstered chaise longue called by Loos the Knieschaukamer (knee-floater), that seems to bellow: ‘Hi! It’s me!’ In photographs of his salons or living rooms, in flats or houses, it might seem something of a stand-in for Loos, one continuous suavely sweeping curve, tightly upholstered as a firmly fleshy place-marker for where he would like to park himself. Possibly derived from a frumpier normal type such as appears in the photograph of Loos’s 60th birthday party in the Villa...
Müller: in 1930, the design has a certain far-fetchedness akin to a 1950s TV spaceship captain’s take-off loungers, or today a classy dentist’s chair. The single large segmental curve is propped up on four angled wooden legs, with thin arms and duffel-like bolsters fixed to the upper and lower extremities. Anyone who thinks Loos is simply a prelude to Mies van der Rohe ought to consider how wildly different this gaga-cumbersome piece is from the contemporaneous but ever so different sweepingly curved Barcelona Chair.

That, however, would require engaging with style, and though the exhibition and its catalogue had evidently managed to co-ordinate a great deal of recent specialised research, style does not seem much to have entered into it. Among the Czech projects of Loos that were included, two – one pre-war and the other late – concerned me for what may have been lacking owing to that neglect. A particularly impressive model was that of the 1913-14 villa for the owner-director of a great sugar refinery – long attributed to Loos – at Hrušovany, known in German as Rohrbach, near Brno. The model revealed something which even period photography hadn’t seemed to do: how astutely placed drainpipes, nicely punctuating the corners, may come wittily close to being ornamental ‘piping’ (with parallel pun-potential in German, on the Rehr in Rohrbach), possibly showing up the almost painful art glamour of Josef Hoffmann’s then new 1910 Palais Stocklet in Brussels, with its preciously carved Chanel-box corner piping (in the ornamental sense). You understand a lot about Loos once you see what he hated in the upright-ornamentalist ‘applied crypto-classical stylistics here, that a well-cut, English navy blue suit is hardly styleless.

Some of us, after all, work from the opposite, more idealist end than either Stalinists or crazed capitalist-materialists. There is a need as I see it for some modicum of idealism, apparently as wanting now as ever before 1989 and the fall of the Berlin Wall, in what used to be called dialectical materialism, to undertake an operational sense of style as such. For all I know there is now, too, a parallel problem in the younger generation of the West, where we have had the luxury of taking excessive essentialism to task. But without some sense of essence no consistent thrust could be imputed to the formal tendencies of any style. Is this why, when ‘Loos of the Czech Lands’ came to London, we saw not even one of a large suite of 1932 designs (prints of a sort, like blueprint) from Loos’s office, made with the assistance of Krieger and Ulrich Straub, for a projected house for Hugo Semler’s brother Oskar in downtown Pilsen, even though these are owned by the RIBA itself? I myself have seen them and written about them. What’s the problem? Is something about them dubious? Or is it simply that no one is prepared to venture an official estimation of their loveliness possibly because, in the face of inadequate documentation, that cannot even be attempted without responsibly analysing their style as well as acknowledging some constants or essence or tincture of the master’s own? Don’t tell us, after all we saw in Portland Place, that Loos has all-too-conveniently been taken at his own shifty word as artless.

Adolf Loos was at the Royal Institute of British Architects (RIBA) from 24 February to 3 May.

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