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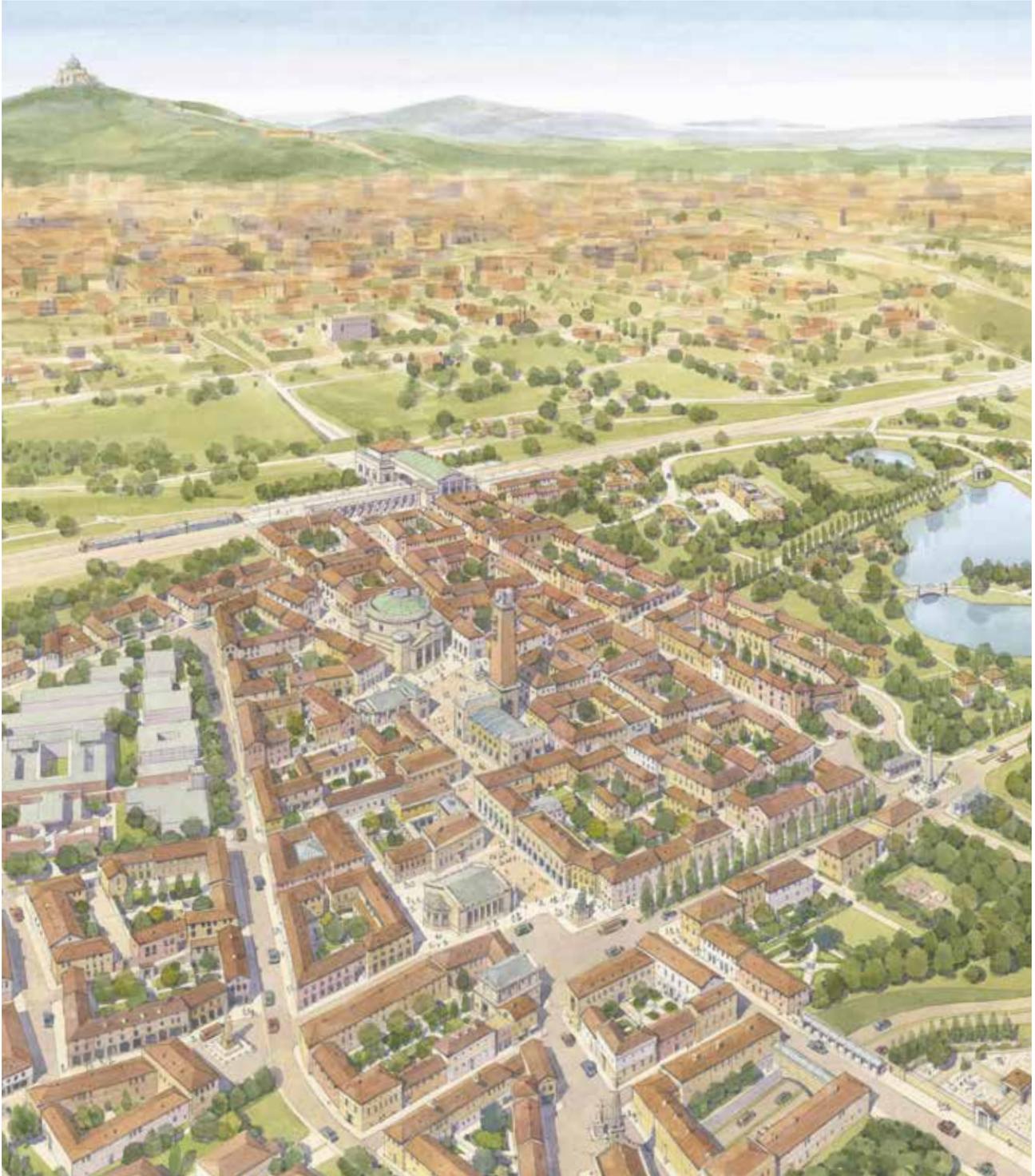
Archives of New Traditional Architecture

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Critique

John Dutton

Otto Wagner's Postsparkasse:
Architectural Tensions in the
Early Modern City



Otto Wagner's Postsparkasse: Architectural Tensions in the Early Modern City

JOHN DUTTON

The Viennese architect Otto Wagner's Postsparkasse (built 1904–1912) was not just a culmination of his own evolution as an urban architect, but a deft engagement of the acute cultural forces of a particular time and place. The building reflects the tensions felt at the turn of the twentieth century by architects with one foot in the

world of traditional architecture and another in the burgeoning world of new technologies, expanding cities, and all that implied for architectural discourse and production. In Wagner's work we can perceive the struggle and, ultimately, the balance between the gathering forces of modernity and the inherited norms of art and architecture. The Postsparkasse, in particular, exhibits a rethinking of the conceptual relationship of building and art, and the debate about the importance of rationality and honesty in building as a challenge to the accepted theories of Gottfried Semper's notion of "dressing." At a larger scale, the building ingeniously straddles the divide between monument and fabric, architecture and city, in a way that creates a model for how architects could build in the modern city: architects, by understanding their buildings as both figure and ground, can enable urbanity, can contribute piece by piece, block by block, to the considered construction of a city. (Vienna and other cities at the time seemed to be lost to shapeless expansion.) The Postsparkasse embodies numerous traditional values of architecture while attempting to intelligently address its contemporary realities.

The Postsparkasse, and indeed all of Wagner's work, must be understood as rooted in fin-de-siècle Vienna, a time of great artistic and intellectual flourishing. Otto Wagner came to

prominence during this era of cultural transformation, when battle lines and visions embodied not just in the stone and iron of its architecture, but the minds of transformational thinkers like Freud and Wittgenstein and writers such as Robert Musil. The Secessionist movement, led by the painter Gustav Klimt, was particularly influential on Wagner for its break from tradition and embrace of the modern, as well as its emphasis on two-dimensional and decorative art. (Wagner's facades were certainly flat compared to the deep sculptural facades of the historic buildings along the new Ringstrasse).

Urbanistically, the city of Vienna had just undergone an extreme transformation with the creation of the Ringstrasse. A defensive space encircling the medieval city for centuries, this perimeter zone had been developed into a wide boulevard with new buildings representative of the ascendant bourgeois: the opera house, university, museums, and government bureaucracies. Similar political and cultural transformations were happening throughout Europe, sparked by the anti-monarchist upheavals of 1848 and fueled by clear changes in urban and social structure brought on by the Industrial Revolution.

Plans to confront this rapid growth of the industrializing Western European city were developed by architects such as Henrik Berlage in the Netherlands, Raymond Unwin in England, Eliel Saarinen in Finland, or the civil

Opposite page, top: Front facade of the Postsparkasse. Photo: Mariano de Angelis. Below: Site Plan of the Postsparkasse (Danann de Alba, Dutton Architects).

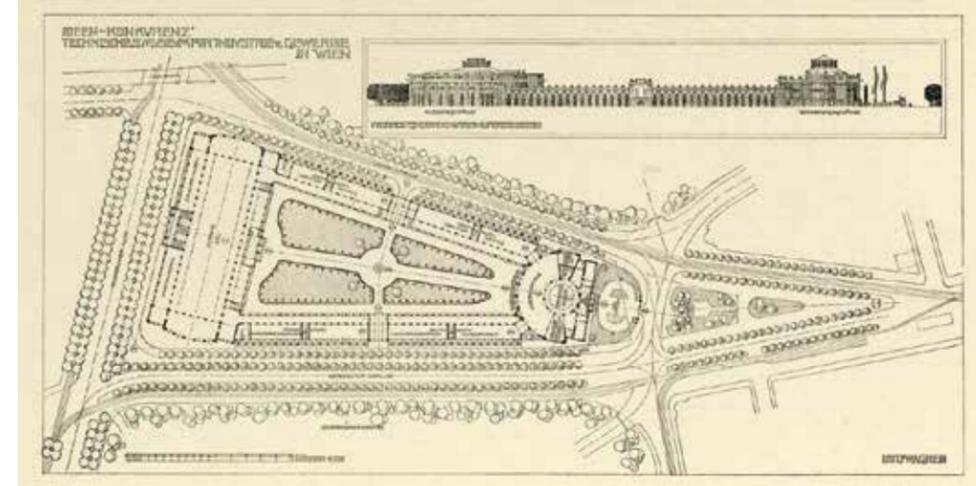


engineer Ildefons Cerda in Barcelona (who coined the term *urbanism*). Wagner, like these contemporaries, was trying to find an appropriate urban order and harness the power of the expanding metropolis for his visions. Broad boulevards, urban blocks, housing, and public plazas were being designed and built as part of a concerted attempt to design the future form of the city, in contrast to the inherited medieval organic city cores. It can be seen, in hindsight, as an optimistic vision of a benevolent future.

The Ringstrasse was a defining urban presence of this new epoch in Vienna, and part of the creation of a new Vienna that Wagner played a key role in developing. It was, perhaps paradoxically, not a form but a void. In this way the new Ringstrasse development did not connect the historic city center with its surrounding newer suburbs as much as separate them. Rather than a series of urban connections that spoked outward, the Ringstrasse was essentially

a vast linear space of movement that circumnavigated the historic city. The different reactions to this large-scale boulevard of two of the most famous Viennese architects, Camillo Sitte and Otto Wagner, epitomized the struggle to confront these modern urban forces.

Critical of the functionalism of the Ringstrasse and its associated architectural development was Camillo Sitte, the prominent urban planning theorist whose book *City Planning According to Artistic Principles* was published in 1889 and was exceedingly influential. His study of historic cities emphasized the importance of plazas and squares, composed and enclosed spaces that served as outdoor rooms. In particular, he criticized the nineteenth-century trend of floating massive civic and institutional buildings in the middle of vast plazas. To Sitte, plazas had to have an enclosed human scale, and the important monuments (traditionally churches) were not free-standing,



but emerged from the surrounding fabric. Sitte advocated for a picturesque composition, as well as an approach that was "artfully" choreographed. To him, the traditional medieval square and roads leading to it were the epitome of resistance to the vast scale of the new boulevards and plazas, and should be emulated. They were human-scaled spaces for social interaction.

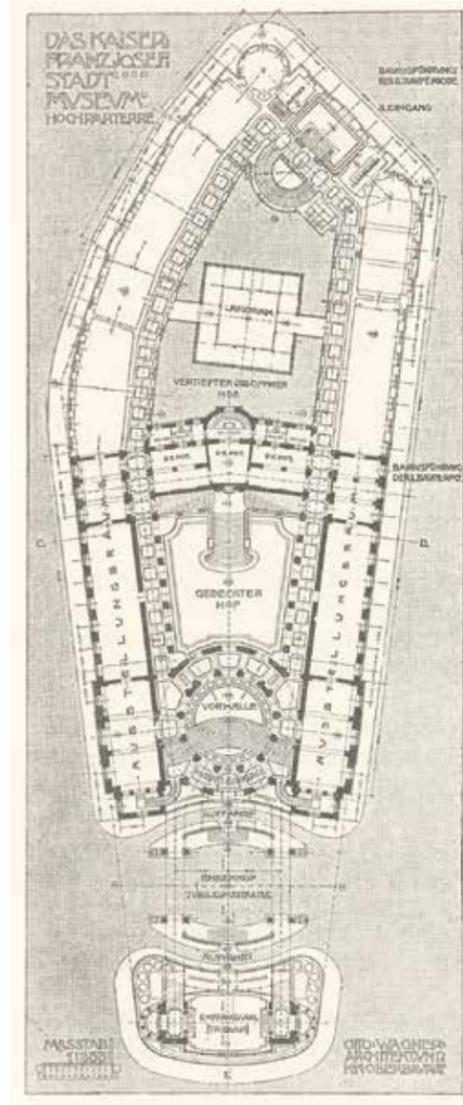
The younger Wagner, on the other hand, embraced the promise and excitement of the new modern city, and believed contemporary urban design should embody movement and efficiency. (In this and in other ways, he was largely influential on Sant'Elia and the Italian Futurists.) His buildings were in deference to the streets. They were not freestanding, or attached in picturesque ways as recommended by Sitte, but inserted into a more homogenous urban fabric, lining vast boulevards and squares. Wagner believed buildings should deflect and facilitate movement on the boulevards.

Wagner vested monumentality not in buildings, but the street itself. He envisioned a vast and rational network of boulevards cutting through the urban fabric, most famously in the urban vision displayed in his Groszstadt Plan of 1911. In this pedagogical treatise Wagner proposed a grid of wide avenues, lined by repetitive perimeter block buildings, interrupted by grand squares with freestanding monumental buildings. Unlike Sitte, for whom the square was an outdoor room approached organically, Wagner's squares were composed, geometric, and a part of a larger rational urban system that encouraged speed and directness. (Such an urban system promoted efficient transportation and the conduct of business, preoccupations which would govern the even more monumental modern fantasies of Le Corbusier a few decades later.)

While Wagner could certainly be accused of an overtly grand and optimistic interpretation of the impact of modern transportation on urban

Opposite page, top: Aerial view of Wagner's Groszstadt urban plan.

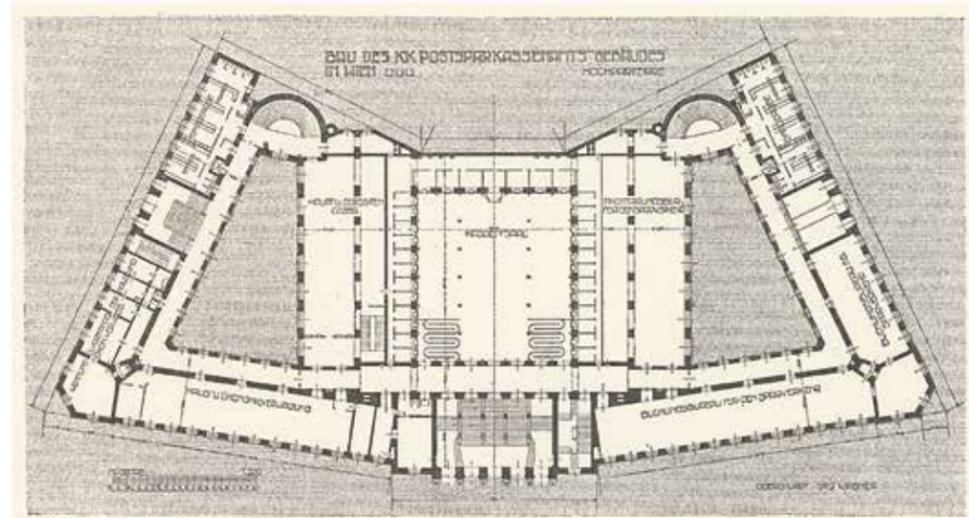
This page, top: Plan of Wagner's Technisches Museum. Below: View of Wagner's Stadtmuseum, adjacent to Vienna's Karlskirche.



form, his specific architectural projects were more contextual, subtle, and tactical. To begin with, like Sitte, Wagner accepted the essential relationship of buildings to urban form. But Wagner posited a particular importance to the middle scale of urban blocks. For Sitte, the deliberate pictorial design of urban spaces created and composed urbanity. For Wagner, the building and block structure enabled urbanity, allowing it to flourish. Urban blocks for Sitte were highly malleable with an almost whimsi-

cal character in the service of an organic choreography. The spaces created were meant to be experienced while moving in a way that elicited a sense of surprise and adventure for walking urban denizens. Building facades together created a collective picturesque enclosure and defined the public spaces. Wagner's urban building facades, on the other hand, were more abstract and homogenous. Continuous massing and the emphasis of horizontal coursing (through the rhythm and detailing of windows, cornices, ledges, rusticated pedestals, etc.) mediated between the urban and building scales. Buildings, especially housing blocks, were primarily meant to define the rational urbanism of the boulevards, and were relatively quiet compared to the more public buildings. Wagner's architecture beautifully balanced designed formal objects, appropriate for the site and program, and sensitive pieces of larger urban aggregations. They could be read as both object and context, figure and ground. These seemingly paradoxical qualities, perhaps even responsibilities, of buildings were increasingly difficult to find after the 1930s and advent of high-modernism.

If the block was the main unit in aggregate that created urbanism, it was also the platform for architecture. Before the design of the Postsparkasse, Wagner exhibited an astute ability to navigate between the space of the city and the form of the building. His architecture showed great respect for the scale, shape, and disposition of the block, which was for Wagner the connection between the scales of the building and the city. Such sensitivity provided an urban synthesis of design, a respect for context and traditional urbanism independent of style that could well be studied as a lesson for today's practicing architects. By default, Wagner's buildings, with the exception of free-standing monuments, almost always hew close to the shape of the block. In his unbuilt design for the Technical Museum in Vienna, the perimeters of the block and building are virtually aligned. The building in plan occupies the entire irregularly-shaped block. Its massing is less singular but rather an ensemble of tectonic forms that both emphasizes streets (by defining the block edge, for example) but whose



constituent parts suggest hierarchy, proportion, rhythm, and urban scale at the level of building tectonics. The Technical Museum design in this way was a sophisticated machine that resolved the complex geometries of the block and surrounding urban conditions through a collection of smaller and more intricate architectural design moves.

Similarly, Wagner's design for the Kaiser Joseph Stadtmuseum, situated on a prominent site adjacent to the revered Karlskirche by Fischer von Erlach, was not only itself a sophisticated urban proposition, but was also a key part of Wagner's larger urban masterplan for the area. Wagner's building helped define a new square in front of the church and adjacent civic buildings and create a coherent order of symmetries and urban axes. With its articulated massing and quiet elevation, the Stadtmuseum deferentially bracketed one side of the Karlskirche. Like the Technical Museum, the Stadtmuseum facade is continuous with the perimeter of the irregular block on which it is sited. The building is not an object with an autonomous and singular figure; rather, the building perimeter deflects to define the street edge, and the architectural design reflects this acceptance of its site. There are formal breaks along the building perimeter for both architectural and urban affect (entrances, monumental symmetry where appropriate, articulated

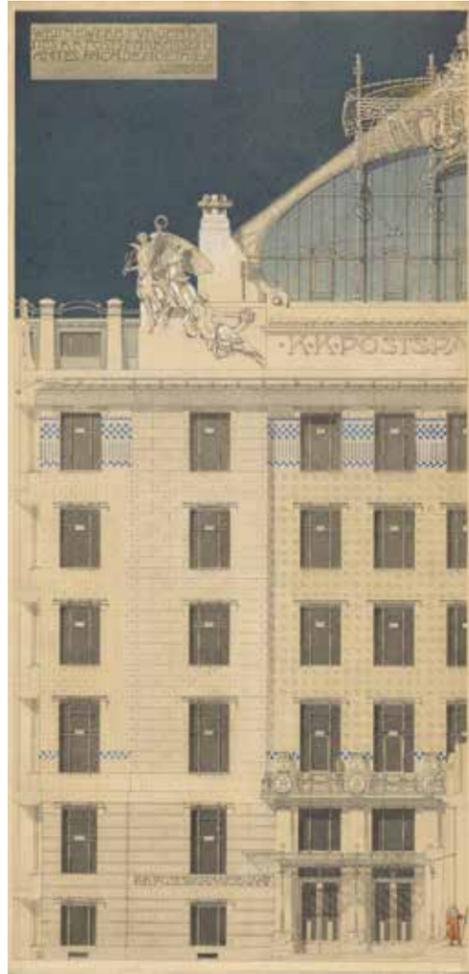
edges to public space). The entry, normally placed in classical tradition in the middle of a facade facing the main square, is instead moved to the narrow end so that the long facade facing the square is seen as more deferential, a flanking facade of the adjacent Karlskirche itself. The corners are articulated to emphasize the larger urban scale of the building and to create a kind of architectural hinge. Wagner's use of tectonic accents, the subtle manipulation of the space of the facade, intelligent plan, and contextual awareness reached a most sophisticated incarnation in the built Postsparkasse.

As we have seen with the Stadtmuseum, Wagner is a master at breaking down his building into constituent parts that conform to a given urban block situation. The trapezoidal Postsparkasse footprint mirrors precisely the geometry of the urban block. The long side of the trapezoid is slightly splayed, the symmetrical sides of this facade flank a central protruding entry massing, the only orthogonal part to the public square. None of these items are geometrically related to the Ringstrasse itself. It is as if from the grand boulevard one peeks into a short linear square that resets the local geometry of the surrounding architecture, with the Postsparkasse and its iconic facade as the focal terminus.

The building is a series of narrow bars of mostly offices that wrap around the block, respectfully defining the edge of the surrounding

Opposite page: Plan of Wagner's Stadtmuseum, Vienna.

This page: Plan of Phase 1 of the Postsparkasse.



streets. The building folds in on itself, creating a series of five courtyards, the most prominent of which is the iron- and glass-covered central banking hall (more on this later). From the outside this is a continuous perimeter block building, a faceted geometrical solid that sits precisely within the confines of the block. Yet within the building, one finds a complex series of solids and voids, a breakdown of the mass into a tightly conceived urban ensemble. The voids of the courtyards and a few efficient moments of *poché* deftly resolve the vicissitudes of the geometries. The corridor spaces are fluid, the office spaces continuously aggregated. This strategy of employing spatial and *poché* figures to resolve geometric irregularities is a traditional method of architectural design that lost some relevance with the advent of high modernism, but is a powerful tool for dealing with complex urban sites.

The perimeter of the building is rational and regular, with a classic tripartite division of base, middle, and top. The base is solid and articulated by carved horizontal stone panels, profiled with a slight S-curve that creates stacked shadow lines. The tall middle zone is rational and regular with its array of windows, almost proto-modern. The top contains the cornice and roof and is a place of symbolism and expression; the overhanging cornice creates a deeply shadowed stratum, with some articulation at the corners and other key places. The roof is the place of representation, a symbolic world that is expressed through sculpture and words applied at an urban scale.

The building in elevation is mostly repetitively continuous around the block, emphasized by the regular rhythm of simple windows cut into the facade with little adornment. There are, however, subtle exceptions for architectural effect. The rear private entry facade, for example, is indicated by a shallow canopy and change in the fenestration. The four main building corners are articulated with a gently protruding pilaster (similar to ones framing the main entry), a broken cornice, and a more dramatic sculptural figure at the roof. These corners, like in the Stadtmuseum's massing, balance the marking of an architectural "knuckle" around



which the perimeter pivots, with a sense of continuity of the perimeter-block wall.

The public entry, on the other hand, is conceived as a more prominent central volume that protrudes in the Semperian mode, and is the only portion of the building orthogonal to the urban ensemble forming the Georg Coch Platz. This is a classical composition of central entry volume, one that many architects at the time employed, and a key component of Semper's rules of massing. The central entry volume is itself subtly divided into three parts, with the outer walls designed as flanking pilasters hinting at a classical giant order. These bracketing pilasters are topped by a more ornate pediment crowned by large statues. There is a semblance of a *piano nobile*, a glass and iron entry canopy, and five large glass doors at the top of a few broad entry stairs. Inscribed at the top of the entry facade is the name of the building along with six classical wreaths. There is, within this first six feet of building, a world of architecture: a deep, articulated plane of both symbolic meaning and urban sensitivity. We can see in this facade the reflection of traditional architectural practice with Wagner's new urban vision.

Behind this continuous solid perimeter facade is a complex arrangement of courtyards and office spaces. The most significant of these is the large central covered courtyard that contains the main banking hall. Here Wagner designed a tall iron and glass roof structure that sits on rows of exposed iron columns, creating the sense of a large public hall or covered outdoor space. The minimal iron and glass structure is evocative of train stations and department stores, not only the great architectural and engineering feats of the late nineteenth century, but also symbols of travel and consumerism for the ascendant middle class. This luminous celebration of the utilitarian materials of iron and glass is realized following an entry sequence through a carved stone vestibule with more traditional architectural details, making it all the more surprising and effective.

Iron and stone represented two different approaches to architecture and symbolized the rift at the time between the competing ideals of "art" and "construction." Although the more modern architects like Wagner extolled the need for rational building and honest construction that served the purposefulness of a building, iron was commonly critiqued as utilitarian

Opposite page, top:
Original facade design of
the Postsparkasse. Below:
Corner of the Postsparkasse.
Photo: Wikimedia Commons.

This page: Main banking
hall of the Postsparkasse.
Photo: Mariano de Angelis.



and lacking the ability to express meaning and monumentality. The importance that Wagner attached to raising architecture to the level of art, to seeing buildings as a medium expressive of symbols and culture, largely depended on stone for its expressive capabilities. Stone could be stacked, scored, rusticated, or carved. It could be used to speak in both the self-referential language of architectural tectonics as well as the more literary ones of narrative decorative signification and sculpture. Iron never elevated the idea of building to the level of art. The Postsparkasse expressed this tension between stone and iron mostly between exterior facade and interior construction. There is almost a joyful schizophrenia between the massiveness of the exterior walls and the lightness of the banking hall.

Yet the massiveness of the stone facade is put into question by the way it is detailed. In fin-de-siècle society, at a time when the dichotomy of public mask and private interior was commonly accepted (as it would be in the city of Freud!), Wagner too employed stone for

the perimeter facade as an applied mask. He wanted to emphasize that the building was sheathed, that the facade consisted of a layer of panels affixed to the structure (that the stone itself was not structure) by exposing the heads of bolts ostensibly fastening the panels to the structure. Yet while the impetus for the exposed bolt-heads comes from the notion of honest construction, ultimately the stone panels were fastened without the aluminum bolts. The bolt heads are therefore applied and decorative, their pattern and density varied not for structural reasons, but for compositional effect (such as the band of bolting below the cornice). The bolts become a sign of technology, a decorative feature emphasizing the idea of a sheathed building.

Though some contemporary critics have derided the detail as false and inconsistent with Wagner's own philosophy of honest building, that is a viewpoint that wouldn't have rung true for Wagner and his contemporaries. Indeed, it was the very notion of skin to be the palimpsest for beauty, to carry the symbolic weight of art, while the skeleton carried the lit-



eral weight of the building, that was accepted at the time. Wagner was pushing this rich dichotomy to new depths, and working within the schism between facade and structure, art and building. These are early modern tensions that are still being explored today, that most architects still struggle with. The seeming inconsistencies of a building that embraces the promise of new technologies and carries representational significance, of a building that is both an objet d'art and an appropriate piece of a larger urban ensemble, is indeed part of the rich realm of complexity and ambiguity in which architects must still dwell today. Wagner's Postsparkasse represents the acceptance of complexity and ambiguity within a respectful engagement of traditional architecture and urbanism, with a nuanced result that is not easily reducible to any canon.

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Opposite page: Main banking hall of the Postsparkasse. Photo: Mariano de Angelis.

This page, top: Steel and glass construction of the central courtyard of the Postsparkasse. Photo: Wikimedia Commons. Below: Facade detail of the Postsparkasse. Photo: Stefanos Polyzoides.