



# The American Bar by Adolf Loos, Vienna, Austria 1907

## Fabrizio Gallanti

The American Bar by Adolf Loos, inaugurated in Vienna in 1908, is a small watering hole, for ages frequented by the cultural intelligentsia of the city. Although reduced in space, it contains numerous architectural features, later developed by Loos in his oeuvre, establishing many tropes of modern architecture: the careful control of affects, the use of raw materials, the incorporation of advanced technical features. The text analyzes the numerous analogies and references that can be identified in this project within the canons of western architecture.

### PALABRAS CLAVE

Viena, fenomenología, espejo, Adolf Loos, iluminación

### KEYWORDS

Vienna, phenomenology, mirror, Adolf Loos, lighting

Spending some hours, sipping cocktails at the American bar by Adolf Loos in Vienna (1907), one can notice a few occurrences that are not discernible through its photographs.

The first is that behind the signage of the bar, just above the entrance door, there is a surface, composed of a grid that holds onyx squares. The thin onyx marble sheets are translucent, so while they muffle the daylight filtering through them, pervading the space with an amber hue, they still allow to feel the passage of time. That screen is simultaneously an homage to the concept of the American bar, the drinking den completely separated from the hassle of the street outside and a negation of that same concept as it does not entirely disconnect the interiors with the exterior. The best moment when to be there is at dusk so that the night slowly creeps inside the tiny room.

The incorporation of onyx marble for the paneling over the entrance is inscribed within the tradition of Western architecture, since ancient Greece and Rome, where rare stones were particularly appreciated. One of the most notorious uses of that specific material in modern architecture can be identified in two crucial projects by Ludwig Mies van der Rohe and Lily Reich, the Barcelona Pavilion (1929) and the Villa Tugendhat in Brno (1930). In Barcelona, the golden-red onyx marble

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Fig. 01  
 American Bar, Adolf Loos.

was quarried from the Atlas Mountains in Algeria, and used to generate a “Rorschach” effect, by mirroring the sliced slabs of stone. In Brno, the onyx marble, also coming from the Atlas is creamy brown and used as a free-standing wall. Due to the thinness of the slabs, the wall is translucent and almost glow when hit by the sun.

Onyx marble and onyx are not the same material. According to the Encyclopedia Britannica “onyx is a striped, semiprecious variety of the silica mineral agate with white and black alternating bands”, while “the so-called onyx marbles consist of concentric zones of calcite or aragonite deposited from cold-water solutions in caves and crevices and around the exits of springs. They are, in the strict sense, neither marble nor onyx, for true onyx is a banded chalcedony composed largely of silicon dioxide”. So, onyx marble is in fact a deception. Although the ideology of honesty and truth in the use of materials, proper of the rhetorics of modern architecture, seems to have become dominant, imitation has been for centuries pursued by architects and continues to strive. Andrea Palladio invented building systems, for instance, using specially crafted triangular bricks with round edges (think of pizza slices) to obtain columns coated in plaster mixed with marble dust. Perhaps one of the more stunning tricks are the gigantic columns of the portico of the Chapel of Resurrection by Sigurd Lewerentz in the Skogskyrkogården cemetery of Stockholm (1925). These are monolithic chunks of grey granite, that look as if they were realized in poured concrete, according to local mythology a tongue in cheek joke, where a costly material is made to look like a cheaper one.

It is interesting to underline how the same Adolf Loos who was dispelling the idea of ornamentation, was deploying a masterful capacity in the usage of rare materials: brass and bronze, glass, mirrors, polished woods, and thin veneers of marbles and other stones. All these materials were to be exhibited in their raw state, though, with an almost obsessive quest for the ones displaying complex natural patterns. At walking distance from the American Bar, the commercial and residential building at Michaelerplatz 3, dubbed the “LoosHaus” (1912), displays an impressive two floors portico sheathed in green Cipollino marble, a stone featuring thick wavy green ribs interspersed with white streaks of mica, and already mentioned in writings by Pliny the Elder. Loos used the same stone for the paneling of the Villa Müller in Prague (1930), where his concept of the “raumplan” is enhanced by a glossy and almost sensual finish.

The second fact that is another proof of the absolute genius of Loos is that the walls of the bar are entirely covered with mahogany panels that are taller than one person. Over the wood panels, a mirror runs along the whole perimeter of the bar, therefore reflecting the dark green marble pillars placed at each corner and along the two longer walls perpendicular to the entrance as well as the coffered ceiling. Because of the reflections, the sensation of the size of the place is immediately augmented, creating the feeling to be in a space vaster than the 27 square meters of its actual surface. The images multiplied by the mirrors hint that there might be “more” behind the walls but because one does not see her or him reflected, due to the strategic interplay of the wood veneer and the mirrors, the trick is not revealed.

Adolf Loos has been christened as a sort of “founder” of modern architecture, because of his polemicist approach in his texts for

the two only issues of the journal “Das Andere” (1903), the journal entirely written and edited by him. Modernity meant radically rejecting the past. Nevertheless, his skilled management of effects, reflections and views in the American Bar corroborates the fact that he had a deep knowledge of historical architecture. Deception, mimesis, copy, the quest for surprise and wonder, were part of the arsenal of architects for centuries. The inversion of perspectival effects in the false apse of the Santa Maria presso San Satiro church in Milan by Donato Bramante (1482), where a *trompe-l’oeil* gives a sense of depth in just 90 cm, or the forced perspective of the gallery of Palazzo Spada in Rome by Francesco Borromini (1632) are perhaps among the better-known examples.

In the American Bar, Loos is extremely subtle, because it does not deceive the senses by showing something, but rather by hiding it, in that case the reflection of the persons. In another circumstance his usage of mirrors creates a rather different result. In the narrow corridor that connects a side access with the main stairs and lift of the LoosHaus, the two walls are clad in mirrors, which are not perfectly parallel, therefore creating an infinite multiplication of reflections, exactly as in a house of mirrors in an amusement park —one can wonder whether Loos saw one of such pavilions during his stay in the USA or at the Prater Park in Vienna and if that might be the origin of that choice. At the end of the corridor, one should push a second door to access the building. That pause is enough to see oneself reflected hundreds of times.

One can also speculate that using mirrors to multiply architectural elements while hiding them, because the patrons cannot see themselves reflected can respond to three reasons. The first is about preciousness: while mirrors, for centuries, were rare goods, that only the very rich could afford —La galerie des Glaces in Versailles by Jules Hardouin-Mansart (1684) is an example —after industrialization they became cheap to produce elements. Loos would have never been so crass to flaunt this material that had lost its aura. The second is that mirrors were used to multiply the light of candles: with electric lights, no need for that effect. And the third, perhaps was just to avoid the narcissistic glance of customers, when suddenly confronted with their own image. A craftsman working for a bespoke tailor in Jermyn Street in London, told me once that they removed mirrors from their fitting rooms,; otherwise their clients, men, would have indulged too long in watching themselves, not paying attention to the tailor. Loos wanted people to be engaged with “the other”, the barman or the acquaintances and friends sipping a cocktail, not with their own image.

In general, what Loos achieved in this place is an unique-feeling of intimacy and comfort. It seems as if the senses are trained to reduce the depth of attention within compressed cocoons, where there are two or three people, some drinks, and hopefully a pleasant conversation. Everything is resolved in a matter of centimeters. For a space so tiny, it is remarkable how it is composed of multiple and separate environments.

One can either seat on a stool at the bar, or, if lucky, on a leather banquette in one of the two booths. A portrait of the writer and poet Peter Altenberg by Gustav Jagerspacher was located over the place in the booth at the end of the bar where he used to sit (perhaps after some renovation, it is no longer there). The booths are organized around three tables —two for the booth at the end, one for the booth



closer to the entrance. The whole composition generates a strong sense of closeness.

In the essay by Italian philosopher Massimo Cacciari “Adolf Loos e il suo angelo” (1981), the cocooned interiors of the Knize menswear shop (1913) are described as a spatial device where calm, luxury, and muffled atmosphere were able to reduce the anxiety and stress of the metropolitan life, just outside the door. This juxtaposition between the interiors, whether domestic or commercial, as a restorative locus for the urban gentleman, against the bustling pressure of the city seems to be peculiarly Viennese. One can just mention the very long scenes in the novel “The Man Without Qualities” by Robert Musil (1934) or the house designed by philosopher Ludwig Wittgenstein with architect Paul Engelmann (1929), a former student and collaborator of Loos and also the secretary of Karl Kraus. But ultimately the quintessential protected interior of Vienna was the studio where Sigmund Freud received and treated his patients, at Berggasse 19.

Much of these places are also very close by: it takes only three minutes to walk from the Knize shop to the American Bar.

Loos was putting his attention to every single component of his designs. The tables of the American Bar are small wonders: they are composed of an octagonal surface in glass placed over a central stem, coated in mahogany, then attached to a base in bronze, with four legs. The white glass of the table is illuminated by a bulb, concealed in the stem, turning it into a lightbox. The result is mesmerizing: the light gives a special glow to all the liquids that are in the glasses over the table, with wondrous effects especially on liqueurs and spirits that are transparent. Whisky, cognac, or rum seem to echo the mellow glow of the onyx screen, while gin or vodka look as pure as alpine water.

In his “Remarks on colours” (1977), Ludwig Wittgenstein famously wrote “there is no transparent white”, an astonishingly simple truth, not detected before him. The milky glass over the tables of the American Bar allows the light to filter but remains opaque, generating the contrasts with the crystalware, holding the drinks, where instead the desired result is to be as colorless as possible. It might not be a coincidence that it was in Bohemia, then part of the Habsburg empire, that the technique to obtain completely transparent crystal was first developed in the XVI century, mixing potash with chalk. I think that this transparency is very Loosian, as the vessels show the colors of the drinks, without altering or falsifying them, while for centuries chalices or cups were either in tinted glass or in silver or gold, therefore opaque. In architectural theory there has been a dichotomy between “transparency”, as in the notorious essay “Transparency: Literal and Phenomenal” by Colin Rowe and Robert Slutzky (1963) and a certain blurred translucency, described by Anthony Vidler in “The Architectural Uncanny. Essays in the Modern Unhomely” (1992), as a much more contemporary feel, detected by him in projects by OMA or Toyo Ito. In the American Bar we can experience both on each table.

The attention of the patrons is subjugated by the small landscape created over each table, thus, almost forgetting the bar and the other customers around. This effect of almost religious concentration around each of the three tables, is enhanced by the carefully controlled sound quality of the place, where the leather of the banquettes and the paneling contribute to soften the noise, never too loud, but also never too

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quiet. There used to be, perhaps not anymore as apparently the place is falling victim of its reputation, the perfect buzz of civilized conversations. And to my memory, there was no music.

Rarely intoxicant substances can hide such a comforting menace. RA

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