



Alfred Preis, Lqu Residence, Honolulu, Hawaii, 1951. Dining room. © Photo: David Franzen, 2011.

Alfred Preis and Viennese Modernism in Hawai'i

BY LAURA MCGUIRE

Preis, who was a Viennese émigré and refugee architect with no early experience designing for tropical climates, went on to become one of the most prolific mid-century regionalist and modernist Hawai'i designers. Although he is best known for his award-winning design for the *USS Arizona* Memorial (1962) – one of the ships infamously sunk in the Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor, Preis's earlier institutional and residential commissions are arguably his most compelling.

His Viennese roots directly influenced Preis's approach to design in Hawai'i. By engaging numerous precedents from Vienna, he eventually forged a novel idiom for Hawai'i domestic design. This article will examine the interiors of two of Preis's more than 100 single-family houses – the Scudder Residence (now the Scudder-Gillmar Residence) (1939-1940) and the Dr. Edward and Elsie Lau Residence (1951) – in order to highlight some of the ways in which Preis transported Viennese modern design ideas of the first three decades of the 20th century some 7,616 miles from Austria into the middle of the Pacific Ocean. His interior designs for these houses evidence strong relationships with the ideas of earlier Viennese modernists about spatial planning, the aesthetic uses of materials, furnishings, and color. Perhaps more than any other influence, Preis's Vienna experience culminated in modern architecture that was as sensorially pleasurable as Hawai'i itself.

The Influence of Vienna Modern Design

Alfred Preis's (1911-1993) years as a young man in Vienna laid the groundwork for a rich career in Honolulu. The 1910s-1930s in Vienna were critical years for the development of a particularly Viennese Modernism, which balanced some of the more austere interior designs of German Modernism with traditional Viennese domestic comfort. Vienna developed its own, indigenous form of modern design that significantly differed from other idioms on the continent. The work of architects like Frank, Adolf Loos (1870-1933), and many others, forged a *Wiener Wohnkultur*. This was a mitigated modernism that generally rejected the more severe and functionalist form languages prevalent among the German avant-garde, and instead embraced a modernism of domestic comfort and livability.¹ Some key examples of *Wiener Wohnkultur* design – typified in expositions like the *Vienna Werkbund Housing Exhibition of 1932* – were the boldly colored and playful textile designs of Frank and others. Also significant to this idiom was Loos's earlier invention of the *Raumplan* – a spatially composed interior architecture of complex spaces with the use of rich materials, bold colors, changes in levels, and processional sequences that embraced spatial expansion and contraction along with a highly curated series of interior views.²

In his recent book, *The New Space: Movement and Experience in Viennese Modern Architecture* (2016), Christopher Long demonstrates this distinctly Viennese approach to modern design.³ He argues that 1910s-1930s Vienna modernists explored processional, tactile, and visual interactions with

architectural interiors specifically for their experiential effects. Viennese designers like Loos, Frank, Oskar Strnad (1879-1935), and Jacques Groag (1892-1962),⁴ for example, composed spaces that were not always strictly “functional.” Instead, they created innovative processional paths and interactive moments with features like built-in furnishings, staircases, bold colors, and materials. They achieved interior compositions that purposefully created spatial complexities, such as interior views from multiple levels, functionally ambiguous twists and turns, and moments of haptic compression and release. There was, indeed, a theatrical quality to Viennese Modernism of this period, in which



01 Alfred Preis, Scudder Residence, Honolulu, Hawai'i, c. 1940. Collection of Jack Gillmar.



02 Alfred Preis, Scudder house interior, 1939-1940. Now preserved in the Scudder-Gillmar Residence, Honolulu, Hawai'i. © Photo: David Franzen, 2017.



03 Alfred Preis, Lau Residence, Honolulu, Hawai'i, 1951. Exterior with formal entry sequence and living room window. © Photo: David Franzen, 2011.

interior space, geometry, and décor unfolded dramatically as one moved through a building.

Pries likely absorbed his design values from these practitioners, whose work was readily accessible in both public buildings and major exhibitions, in many publications, and during his training at the Vienna *Technische Hochschule* (TH). From 1932 to 1938, Preis studied architecture at the TH,⁵ a key training ground for some of Vienna's most influential pre-WWII modernists.⁶ Preis was also enamored of Vienna's theater and opera, which he regularly attended, and his passion for theater – its narratives and sensory envelopments – would later reappear in his residential designs.⁷ Prior to starting his architectural training, he had originally planned a career in scenic design.⁸

Escape from Vienna

When Adolf Hitler annexed Austria in 1938, Preis, who was ethnically Jewish, quickly recognized that any hoped-for livelihood as an architect was in peril. Through 1938, in his final year at the TH, he witnessed all of his Jewish classmates and professors expelled.⁹ Probably because he had converted to Catholicism in 1936 and had been removed from the Jewish registry, Preis was allowed to remain and obtain his degree. But because of the Nazis' increasingly brutal restrictions on Vienna's Jewish civilians – and following the horrific violence of *Kristallnacht* in October – he soon realized that his best chance for a normal life would be to flee his home.¹⁰

Preis wrote desperate letters to over one hundred US architectural firms in search of a job. He received only one response – from the small, Honolulu-based architecture firm of Dahl & Conrad.¹¹ With others' help, he and his wife were able to orchestrate an extremely difficult escape Vienna. They arrived in Honolulu during the spring of 1940. But most of his family – including his mother, father, uncle, aunt, and a cousin – would perish in Nazi concentration camps.

The Scudder Residence and Apartments

In his first year with Dahl & Conrad, Preis worked as their key designer. With his arrival, their work took an

increasingly European modernist cast. While many of their buildings embraced the contemporary American *streamline moderne*, Preis injected many Viennese modernist idioms, including boxy, white envelopes, planar surfaces, and glass block, with decorative effects achieved through the use of modern materials and lighting.

His own first residential design was the Scudder Apartments and Residence, commissioned in 1939 by a wealthy Honolulu woman. The eight-unit, two-story apartments mostly followed the earlier precedent set by other Dahl & Conrad apartment buildings. The rectilinear apartment building was constructed of reinforced concrete and hollow concrete tile and painted white, with a simplicity that gave the bright colors of the vegetation and landscape precedence. The custom furniture within highlighted Preis's impressive furniture design skills and his preference for horizontal lines and subtle details in contrasting colors of woods, derived from modern Viennese furniture design of the 1920s and 1930s.

The simple, white box of the Scudder house vividly echoed examples displayed at the 1932 Vienna Werkbund housing exhibition. Also in the spirit of such houses were Loos's earlier Villa Müller (1930) and Villa Möller (1927). Like these examples, Preis's varied fenestration patterns were asymmetrically composed and were oriented in order to light key areas of the interior spaces. A large, street-facing portal opened with sliding panels, which not only aided ventilation, but also an opportunity for indoor-outdoor tropical living. A more private entrance was located on the side, towards the rear of the building.

Preis's box-like exterior envelope for the Scudder residence shows that in these early years, he was still strongly wedded to his Vienna design experience and did not yet fully grasp the possibilities for seamless architectural transitions between indoor and outdoor spaces in Hawai'i's tropical climate. But Preis would eventually embrace a heavily indoor-outdoor mode of design after WWII.

Unfortunately, neither the apartments nor the original Scudder house have survived. But the home's interiors were saved and perfectly reconstructed in a new envelope on

a new site, now renamed the Scudder-Gillmar residence. With meticulous restoration work by architect Janet Gillmar and her husband, Jack, the interiors maintain close fidelity to Preis's original interior design, and using his original materials. However, due to reasons of site, among other concerns, the new envelope necessitated some alterations to Preis's original house. The sliding front door and upper window were reconstructed as a large window without mullions. However, the rest of the interior the original furnishings remain unaltered.

The reconstruction of the Scudder floor plan evidence Preis's effort to bring Viennese spatial planning ideas to Hawai'i. The two-story plan was a version of Loos's Raumplan idea. The Raumplan, along with its primary goal of spatial economy, often created a complex experience of interior architecture. With twists and turns and changes in levels, it directed interior lines of sight and bodily movement in novel ways.¹² The plan was loosely similar not only to Le Corbusier's *Maison Citrohan* (1920) but the overall interior treatments more strongly evoked Loos's duplex design for the 1932 Werkbund exhibition, which Preis undoubtedly visited as an aspiring architecture student. Heinrich Kulka's widely read *Adolf Loos* (1930) – with its many detailed photographs of Loos's residential interiors – likely served as an inspiration for Preis, not only as a student, but in his later Hawai'i career.¹³

Changes in ceiling levels, colors, and material details were key elements of the interior spatial experience at the Scudder house. The first-floor plan consisted of a rectangular space. The rear entry opened into a dining room, with a built-in cabinet and reflective mirror that made a rather tight space seem more open and expansive. The dining area was visually divided from the living room with a novel tubular steel screen, whose mechanical aesthetic contrasted sharply with other softer, natural materials. But the strong vertical lines of the screen were complemented by a nearby dining table on three legs, which perhaps owed its distinctive character to Wiener Werkstätte furniture design. A gray-blue painted ceiling over the dining room area created an intimate sense of rear enclosure, which was dramatically expanded into the brightly lit double-height space of the living room. The colored ceiling was one of the first of many such ceilings and fascias in Preis's later houses.

A hearth, executed in Diamond Head sandstone with built-in bookcases and a rear staircase, acted as the anchoring point of the open living room and a vertical axis for the house. The staircase and hearth combination were expressly Viennese in their details. The hearth's horizontal courses of stone were somewhat similar to Frank Lloyd Wright's designs – which were already well known across 1930s Europe – but the use of built-in cabinetry in two-toned wood was a common language in Viennese modernist domestic design. The subtly curving base of the staircase ascended behind the chimney to a bedroom loft. Preis's sumptuous attention to wood, using both angular and curving forms, included an exquisitely crafted handrail that directly reflected not only Loos's domestic designs, but

also evoked Loos's aesthetic preoccupation with the haptic qualities of vertical ascent.

In Raumplan fashion, the ascending hallway was extremely narrow in order to give more space to the living area below. But this also had a clear aesthetic intention; subtly lit by a porthole window, and following upwards through a tight ascent, inhabitants arrived onto a wide open and exceptionally well-illuminated second floor bedroom with a dramatic vista of the living room and large window openings. Here, Preis's affinity for theatrical design and narrative may have played a role in his concept for a spatially tight upward procession with a bold revelation of the light and open space in the loft. Turning to the right from the top of the stair, Preis also built out a small art gallery directly over the fireplace, which was unexpected in its slim proportions.

The built-in furniture incorporated imaginative door pulls and hidden compartments concealed by sliding doors, promoting a playful, visual, and tactile interaction with the units. The balcony railing, painted a gray-blue, was another ornamental touch that also echoed Loos's use of colored balcony railings in the *Khuner Villa* (1930), near Vienna. Preis's stark white and cubic exterior gave over to an interior of material richness with plays of procession, color, light, and volume that echoed the comfortable and livable modernism of the *Wiener Wohnkultur* – precisely in the fashion of the many examples at the 1932 Werkbund exhibition that Preis likely witnessed firsthand.

Toward Regionalism

After the Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor and the entry of the USA into WWII, building in Hawai'i ground to a halt. Because they were refugees from a Nazi-occupied country, Preis and his wife were arrested and interned for several months at the Sand Island detention camp. This was a traumatic experience for Preis and may have had some impact on his choice, after the war, to forge a tropical aesthetic that more closely connected him to the islands in an architectural way, despite his status as a recent immigrant.¹⁴ After the war's end, his designs became markedly "local." Through their material and aesthetic connections with the landscape and the climate, his buildings forged a regional idiom for modernism.

In his many public projects like the *Laupahoehoe School* (1947-1952), the *International Longshore and Warehouse Union (ILWU) building* (1951/1952), and the *First United Methodist Church* (1953) Preis embraced the ornamental qualities of locally available materials, such as lava rock, native ohia trees, brick, and locally fabricated concrete.¹⁵ It was often costly to import mainland building materials and while some architects might have seen this as a limitation, Preis used it as an opportunity to enrich his growing, regionalist stance.

Preis also became an architect for whom materials largely guided the aesthetic character of his building envelopes and surfaces. Like early Vienna modernists, such as Otto Wagner (1841-1918) at his *Postsparkasse* (1905) and the *Kirche am Steinhof* (1907), Preis relished articulating his

constructional systems as a form of ornamentation. He readily explored the decorative possibilities of construction, such as in his use of exposed volcanic aggregate at Laupahoehoe School and the First Methodist Church. His creative courses of brick at the ILWU building produced a textile-like quality to the exterior surfaces. None of these flourishes were “necessary” in a functionalist sense – strict International Style modernists would probably have regarded Preis’s strongly tactile and decorative use of materials as bordering on bourgeois indulgence.

Through the 1950s, Preis also began to better understand ways in which he could integrate the Hawaiian climate into his designs. By using wide overhanging eaves to protect from heavy rains and strong sunlight, clerestory ventilation, and walls which could be opened wide to outdoor spaces, Preis became an expert at designing buildings with little need for mechanical climate control.

Preis’s embrace of local materials, climate, and the landscape’s natural beauty, along with his implicit rejection of doctrinaire versions of functionalism and the International Style were especially evident in his residential designs and interiors of the 1950s. In these many houses, the influence of his Vienna sensibilities favoring spatial complexity, architecture’s processional qualities, and the aesthetic delights of color and materials – as both ornamentation and a way to create viscerally engaging experiences – also coalesced into veritable symphonies of delightful complexity.

The Lau Residence

By the early 1950s, Preis completely abandoned the European and modernist white boxes of his earlier residential designs, exemplified in the Scudder Residence. As he became more familiar with Hawai’i’s climate and topography, he understood that irregular plans spread out over a site would not only provide clients the best views of the striking landscapes, they would also foster better lighting, cooling, and privacy. The plan of the Dr. Edward and Elsie Lau residence is complex, angular, and cannot be discerned from the street. The street-facing, frontal volume is composed of an irregular, six-sided form of acute or obtuse angles. This volume, which encloses some of the main living areas, is sliced through with a longer, wedge-shaped rear volume that has a slightly higher roof. The intersection of the two creates a secluded, trapezoidal patio and garden in the rear. Together, these volumes create a house with a full *ten* exterior walls. Some of the walls have both straight and strikingly angled vertical projections in masonry. Projecting glass windows on the frontal volume, including on a north and street-facing kitchen and a northwest-facing living room, emerge from the wall at a dramatic cant. Details such as these optimized daytime lighting along with privacy and shading.

Decorative patterning in both color and material also played a crucial role in the exterior expression; white-painted masonry formed into sculptural courses gave texture and contrast to the vivid colors of black and Chinese Red under broad, overhanging eaves. Rectilinear patterns of fenestration were highlighted with black and

white surrounds. Indeed, each element of the exterior architecture was called out with its own special treatment.

Following Viennese precedents, Preis evoked the idea that movement through a house – much like the unfolding of a theatrical drama – should provoke moments of anticipation, surprise, discovery, and delight. A complex route of procession into the formal entry of the house was typical of many Preis’s residential designs. The house was entered via a sequence of turns, forcing the body to move in different directions. In this case, the visitor was directed up a set of stairs bounded with white brick walls with a narrow opening at the top to an open landing (*lanai*), finally revealing the door at one end. The ceiling of the *lanai* was painted in a rich red, with a red-tiled floor below; the white masonry *lanai* walls were also punctuated with vertical and horizontal lines of black trim.

The whole expression had an abstracted Asian sensibility, which not only spoke of the large Asian-American population of Hawai’i itself, but also of the Laus’ own ethnicity. Preis would repeatedly use Asian-styled motifs and colors in his residences, not only for his many Asian-American clients, but also as a way to make his modernism regionally relevant. His liberal use of these colors, especially reds, jades, and bluish-greens, also encapsulated the idea that a house should evoke visual pleasure.

Preis’s circuitous entry procession and bright colors continued throughout the home’s interior, with a clear, horizontal directionality. While earlier in Vienna, Loos had developed the Raumpfan with circuitous passages and bold spatial revelations primarily achieved with vertical procession, Preis’s houses kept with US residential trends that spread out one, primary living story over the site. While some of his houses have multiple living “stories,” he typically made transits between them with height changes of a half-story or less. At his Hudson House (1955), for example, a stunningly crafted wooden staircase acted as the central axis for the house and divided the second floor from the first. But it was short, and provided enticing – yet slightly obscured – views onto the second floor living area, encased in glass windows. His many residences have an overall sense of horizontality that is achieved with changes in *levels*, rather than in full stories.

Much of Preis’s one-living-floor strategy had to do with the topographies of the houses themselves – elevated single-floor, but variously leveled houses provided not only better views of the landscapes, but they also protected the foundations and the living areas from moisture and Hawai’i’s myriad insect pests. Preis thus continued to use Vienna-derived spatial complexity at the Lau house, but he developed it in a *horizontalizing* of Loos’s Raumpfan.

Like the street view, there is no moment at which the Lau’s plan is fully disclosed while standing in any position on the interior. Clear views between the rooms are suppressed with walls in various contrasting materials and at angles that provide a glimpse of what is beyond – without fully revealing what is there. From each vantage point, he revealed strategically framed vistas, punctuated with changes in materials and colors. Other Vienna



04 Alfred Preis, Lau Residence, Honolulu, Hawai'i, 1951. Living room.
© Photo: David Franzen, 2011.



05 Alfred Preis, Lau Residence, Honolulu, Hawai'i, 1951. View from dining room toward the living room. © Photo: David Franzen, 2011.



06 Alfred Preis, Lau Residence, Honolulu, Hawai'i, 1951. Stair to bedroom wing.
© Photo: David Franzen, 2011.

modernists used similar strategies in their buildings¹⁶ and Preis used those precedents to boldly explore the visual and haptic potentials of concealment and revelation. Using colors, materials, unusual turns, and areas of compression and release throughout the house, Preis created a dramatic interior procession of new discoveries. Views to the outside were similarly composed, such as through wide, glass doors that framed the compelling trapezoidal geometry of the home's rear patio (*lanai*) and exterior walls.

Around the rear *lanai*, the living room and dining room spaces were composed with a slightly angled L-shape. This organization resoundingly subverted the modernist open-plan by partially obscuring views between the rooms, but invited an exploration what the various spaces might reveal. Adding to the spatial complexity, devices like a tile floor from the rear *lanai*, which undulated organically under the glass doors disoriented the boundaries between indoor and outdoor worlds. These curving lines were also echoed by a black, amoeboid-shaped dining table.

Changes in ceiling heights were emphasized by changes in color – such as a deep red paired with dark, horizontal lines – and created a haptic sense of compression in passage between the rooms. The dining room ceiling (located in the rear volume of the house) was taller and covered with light, robin's egg blue acoustic tiles. But it was clearly separated from the lower, red ceiling by a dramatic band of clerestory windows. Moving from the lighter and higher ceilinged dining room space through a physically and chromatically “tighter” point of transition into the living room, the visitor was released into a space that revealed a dramatically canted picture window with views to the lush, outside vegetation. The window was framed with horizontal and vertical lines, modulating the exterior vistas, with clerestory openings for ventilation.

The material contrasts and geometries of the built-in living room furniture defied the elegant minimalism of mainland modernists like Pierre Koenig or Richard Neutra, for example. Instead, Preis created a sumptuous feast for the eyes, hands, and body. For example, the exterior walls of white brick projected into the living room, abruptly interrupting the smooth, dark built in window seat and cabinet. A light green band of color just under the deep red ceiling relieved its chromatic weight. Perpendicular lines set at irregular intervals in the two-toned, wood shelving broke up their horizontality.

Preis also used built-ins in contrasting colors and materials as opportunities to sculpturally interrupt flat walls. These were sometimes mirrored so that reflection would enrich visual experiences and make smaller spaces appear to have more volume. These pieces also functioned as moments for tactile contemplation through the opening or closing of their various compartments. In these ways, Preis's frequent use of built-in cabinetry was strongly reminiscent of Loos's earlier residential furnishings, as well as his use of mirrors to expand tight spaces, most notably applied at the American Bar (1908) in Vienna.

Preis's use of such complexities, including his angled walls, and obscured views continued into the entry sequence

to the bedroom wing and in the bedrooms themselves. These were located in the rear wedge-shaped volume of the house. A small flight of black-painted wooden steps (abutted by an angled wall with a hidden, timber paneled storage cabinet), ascended from the dining room with a leftward twist to a hall containing doors to the bedrooms. Even the masonry wall intersecting with the base of the stairs tilted at a slight angle. From the base of the stairs, the angle of the stair and the rightward swing of the upper hallway blocked a clear line of sight to this private wing. Some bedroom doors too, were set into angled walls, rather than as a series of doors along a straight wall.

The bedrooms and family common areas in this wing used rich in colors like green and turquoise, variations in material textures, alternating between colored acoustic ceiling tiles, various shades of timber paneling, some black painted floors, sliding shoji doors for closets and flexible spatial divisions, and ubiquitous built-in cabinetry stained in various shades. A guest bedroom was accessed through inset door in an angled wall, giving the room six walls, one of them mirrored. An undulating fascia in shocking lime green broke the levels of a dual-height, reddish-brown plywood ceiling.

Preis devoted attention to each space in the house, making each its own poignant work of architectural art. Yet he knitted them together by exploring the experiential possibilities of spatial, chromatic, material, and geometrical complexities. Moving through the house and experiencing its perfectly orchestrated views, its unexpected twists and turns, the playful beauty of its built-in furniture, bold colors, and materials evoked an ultimately joyful interaction with architecture.

As of 2011, when it was designated a state historic landmark, the Lau House fully retained its exterior and interior architectural integrity, apart from the addition of solar panels to the roof and some small interior alterations.¹⁷ Today, the exterior of the house remains intact. However, new owners have removed and paved over the front lawn and the side gardens along its rear wing for additional parking. The destruction of these landscape features has negatively impacted the exterior integrity of the house, as well as the interior views to the yards, to which Preis paid careful attention with the placements and dimensions of his windows. Whether its fine interiors have been preserved since the building's 2011 designation is currently unknown at may be at risk.

Conclusion

In Hawai'i, Preis embraced Vienna-inspired explorations of space and created compelling complexities through changes in levels, diameters, ceiling heights, and window articulation. Rather than eschewing ornamentation, Preis used materials, furnishings, and colors for unabashedly decorative effects. His residential buildings were not only sophisticated architectural compositions, they were also decidedly *fun* – and fitted deftly with popular ideas about Hawai'i's tropical leisure after WWII.

In contrast to the growing influence of the International Style in Hawai'i in the 1940s and 1950s (which was

historically derived from regions outside of Austria), Preis's residential designs owe a strong debt to Vienna's own indigenous forms of modernism before WWII. As described earlier, many Viennese architects' approaches to space, procession, and ornamentation were markedly different than what have generally been considered the "tenets" of Modernist design, such as spatial clarity, rationality, functionalism, and the rejection of ornament.

Although Preis ultimately developed a Hawai'i regionalism, his time in Vienna never left him. Indeed, he developed these sensibilities in novel directions compatible with his adopted tropical home. In both public and private buildings, he embraced the varied forms, materials, colors, and textures, and cultural traditions that characterized the breathtaking diversity of the Hawaiian landscape and its peoples. He distilled these into buildings that were lively, pleasurable, and suited to the tropical climate. Perhaps most importantly, as architecture and design historians re-evaluate the historical meanings and forms of "modernism," Preis's Hawai'i work aptly demonstrates the rich diversity of approaches to modern architecture at mid-century. His designs also highlight the fortuitous impact on Hawai'i architecture by a refugee who emigrated from Vienna only by force of tragic historical circumstance.

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Notes

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