



# Everyday Details: In Search for Semantic Clues

Assistance Professor Dr. Tonkao Panin Ph.D.  
The Faculty of Architecture, Silpakorn University

## Abstract

One grasps the immediacy of city life through its imagery. Sometimes thrilled by the imposed vision and power of the sovereign spectacle, one is as well mesmerized by the visuality of everyday sights. This paper will explore the role of everyday details, how they influence one's view, express or reveal one's perception and memory of the city. To acknowledge the meaning of surface details is not to abandon the idea of totality. Details can express the process of signification; that is, the attachment of meaning. It is a part of pleasure that spectators find in representational images and architectural expressions of the city. Focusing on representational details in the work of Peter Altenberg, Adolf Loos and Otto Wagner, details can be seen much more than subordinate elements for they are the minimal units of signification. Their works indicate the practice of ones who look into architectural forms, traditions and habits, wanders into space and meanings, and reads the difference existing between their present function and their previous signification. They considered their environment as a presence which communicates through the small details of everyday life. In the name of progress, while such "little things" were discarded, they tried to capture and celebrated things which their contemporaries had taken for granted.





### Reading the City

As spectator, one travels through the city observing its architecture and constructed space, transforming contemporary scenes into a personalized vision. To read across and through different layers and strata of the city requires that spectators established a constant play between surface and deep structural forms, between purely visible and intuitive or evocative allusions. Architecture in the city is not only a spectacle shaped by the representational order of planners and architects, it involves the public as well.<sup>1</sup> The spectator's amazement and memory are evoked by the figural images. The spectator's city experience is inseparable from the city imagery, for they either help or fail to produce a personal perception and view of the city. To explore representational images and architectural expressions of the city, this paper will discuss the aspect of visibility and meaning of everyday details; how they influence one's view, express or reveal one's perception and memory of the city. Focusing on the work of Peter Altenberg, Adolf Loos and Otto Wagner, the discussion in the role of details and their process of signification will be developed in two parts: first an analysis of details in literary texts of Altenberg and Loos, second in the architecture of Wagner.

The period after industrial revolution had been a time of disorienting upheaval. Industrialization, and with it the speed of machine production and circulation, once gave a promise of a new life in a new world also disrupted the patterns of human existence. Unlike London and Paris, Vienna reached its state of industrialization later in the nineteenth century. It was during the last third of the century when the outer suburbs of Vienna were being covered by various industries. The rise of industry forced new forms of life and understanding on the inhabitants of the rapidly expanding city. Within such change, the radical effects of the overturning, the clash between the emerging forces of production and the rising political aspirations of those who would share or were prevented from sharing, in its material benefits were displayed with particular intensity in the city streets.<sup>2</sup>

The streets comprised of the environments of the public realms within which the dramas of city and country life were to be acted out. The public realms of the street took on the functions of the theaters of everyday life, the city was a stage for the social action within its wall.<sup>3</sup> City dwellers and architects addressed the problems in ways according to the interests they served. While some saw a future of architecture in a new century to come and demanded a complete change, others saw change as disruptive, and recognizing a loss, called for a returned to the patterns of the past. As for the populace, they reacted as best they could, according to their needs, to the extent of their provocation, and to the immediate circumstances of everyday life.

The turn of the century in Vienna was also the time of remarkable ferment in the arts. Change was occurring at a rapid tempo, the natural result of the relentless progress of human knowledge. Yet the energies released in a period of rapid change



often stimulate extraordinary creativity. Progress was trumpeted everywhere, but the very technology which was the engine of progress seemed constantly to bring into question basic presuppositions and procedures within the arts. To many, the world no longer appeared as a unity which could be grasped and portrayed, instead it loomed as a series of images, sometimes fragmented and chaotic.<sup>4</sup> Thus Peter Altenberg's comparison of life in Vienna with an "ideal cinema" is a representative statement of a feeling for life in which the world around splits into a myriad of stimuli. There were also theorists who sought to make sense of the changing social and cultural landscape and attempted to find some way to reconcile the past with the new conditions of living. While the relentless technological and commercial advance resulted, in part, in a new image of the metropolis: faceless and dictatorial in character, architects such as Adolf Loos and Otto Wagner presented a concern for delivering a meaningful message from architecture to the city dwellers, allowing them to maintain a close relationship with their physical environment.

### Finding Clues in Everyday Details

Apart from the realm of architecture, there is another look, through a disciplined observing eye, that catalog the minutiae and facts of everyday life. The manifestation of urban life in the view of the city dweller also found its outlet in literary texts. It is the distinctive kind of texts that arose out of an observation of public life in the metropolis. With the effects of science and technology then making themselves felt as much in Vienna as anywhere, the world was changing at an astonishing rate. The city grew as industry spawned industry, and with the bustle of life in the city, life itself appeared speed up as impression heaped upon impression.<sup>5</sup> Yet the city was not without poetry. Modern poetry would be urban poetry. The observer of the public life of the city thus found fertile soil in the never-ending stimuli of the cities and tell the tales in their proses. Such observers and writers may be exemplified by Peter Altenberg, Karl Kraus, Alfred Polgar, Egon Friedell as well as Adolf Loos. Their observation was often transposed into various types of short prose that belong to the literary Kleinkunst.

By "small form" in literature it refers to various types of prose works of short length including short stories, sketches, anecdotes, reviews and aphorisms. They were often of an experimental nature and deserve to be regarded as another manifestation of the great transformation of artistic sensibility occurring at the turn of the century. Kleinkunst can be associated with a form of looking, observing of people and social types, social contexts, a form of reading the city and its population, its spatial images, its architecture, its human configurations, and a form of production of a distinctive kind of text.

The literary Kleinkunst and the architecture of Vienna found a common ground in the visuality of the surface details. Their methods were based upon the meaning of



visual phenomena. In other words, it is the superficial detail that gives clues to the essence of existence. The meaning and the inner truth is drawn from visual details and is discovered from clues often unnoticed by others.

This aspect of physical details can be found in a series of articles on Italian painting published between 1874 and 1878 in the German art history journal *Zeitschrift für bildende Kunst*. The author bore Russian name Ivan Lermolieff, who several years later revealed himself as Giovanni Morelli, an Italian. Morelli method was aimed to distinguish the copies from the originals paintings by concentrating on minor details such as earlobes, fingernails, shapes of fingers and toes.<sup>6</sup> Using this method, Morelli made dozens of new attributions in some of the principal galleries of Europe. But despite such achievement, Morelli method was much criticized for being mechanical, positivistic and fell into disfavor.<sup>7</sup>

Morelli's essays can be seen as a proposal of an interpretative method based on taking marginal and visual details as revealing clues. The details, generally considered trivial and unimportant or beneath notice, furnish the key to the whole.<sup>8</sup> Morelli wrote, "My adversaries are pleased to call me someone who has no understanding of the spiritual content of a work of art, and who therefore gives particular importance to external details such as the form of the hands, the ear, and even to such rude things as fingernails."<sup>9</sup>

In all Morelli's cases, tiny details provided the key to a deeper reality, inaccessible by other methods. Such details were external details visible to the spectator yet often gone unnoticed. Each and every external details constituted the whole physiognomy of the paintings. The importance of the characteristic features of Morelli method was that it permitted to leap from visual facts, which can be observed, to a complex reality.

Such small details led Morelli to the correct attributions in the work of art. In the case of Peter Altenberg, the use of small, often visual, details of everyday life helped him capture the meaning of events, the physiognomy of the city, the character of an epoch. Although Peter Altenberg emerged as a key figure in Viennese modernism, the visual orientation of his literary production deserves the critical attention as well. *Wie ich es sehe* is the title of Peter Altenberg's first collection of writings: "as I see it" - not as I think or judge it. It was the thought that grew within sight, within the language of sight. Language opens onto the world with the same richness as sight or as Massimo Cacciari notes - it is the language that sees the world.<sup>10</sup> What mattered most was the seeing. With the power of his observation which is the shaping agent of his many sketches, Altenberg's sketches were representations of urban life in Vienna. His way of life consisted in the main of spending much of the day on the street, in a coffee house where he became known for his stories, for befriending with "little people" of Vienna's inner city, and for viewing the life around him with an extraordinary power of observation. His attempt to capture the life of the city is



close to Baudelaire's *parfait flâneur*, to convey the overwhelming nature of urban experience when one is taking one's time. Egon Friedell, a close friend of Altenberg who himself was a *Kleinkunst* writer, was convinced of Altenberg's position as a radical literary impressionist, meaning by impression a heightened receptivity towards sensory stimuli, linked with the basic tendency to convey nothing other than those physiological impressions.

What Friedell did not mention is how Altenberg returned what he saw not in mirror-fashion, but with interpretation added. Towards the end of his life, Altenberg acknowledged the refracted nature of his observations, but believed that the interpretation and reproduction of what is perceived demands a certain courage (*ein gewisser Mut*).<sup>11</sup> Although it is a fabrication, Altenberg would not accept the charge of deception, drawing a line between the fabrication of the anecdote (*errichten*) or the masking of reality, and the accusation of simply making it up (*erfinden*). The reality of *Wie ich es sehe*, and the other early works, is to a considerable degree a poetic reality, in which the poet is ready to interpret seemingly simple events and give them a piquancy often hidden from other participants. The reader will frequently note the poet's tendency to read and decipher added significance into the materials of his narration. Altenberg's love of restaurants, café, shops and street life as settings for his work may well be related to their potential for visual stimuli.

Altenberg often insisted in the truthfulness of his interpretation. He never seeks beauty for its own sake but rather truth, being convinced that truth also always contains beauty. He believed that truthfulness (*Wahrhaftigkeit*) would always prevail over a sham existence (*Lebenslüge*).<sup>12</sup> Hermann Bahr, a leading figure of Viennese modernism, believed that truly "modern" art would ensue as a synthesis of Naturalism and Romanticism. Altenberg was often regarded as a writer who supremely combined these apparently antithetical approaches to literary production. He was obsessed with recording his observations and reproducing them in such a way to form a comment upon the age and place in which he lived.<sup>13</sup>

The fragmentary technique Altenberg used in his sketches to find the revealing clues found its echo in the pages of *Das Andere*, the review published only two issues in 1903 by Adolf Loos. While the model of *Das Andere* is clearly Karl Kraus's *Die Fackel*, the style of its writing is closer to Altenberg.<sup>14</sup> Its rhythm resembles more the rhythm of a stroll than insistent tempo of a critique. Moving about the various sites of Vienna, *Das Andere* trains the readers to see. Loos educates the readers while accompanying them on his stroll. His thought is most penetrating when it attains the simplicity and clarity of brief aphorism, the illuminating anecdote.<sup>15</sup> For both Altenberg and Loos, their subjects were often drawn from everyday life along the streets of Vienna. The stroll can be seen as metaphor for the commentary. It can indicate the practice of one who looks into architectural forms, traditions and habits, wanders into space and meanings, and reads the "difference existing between their present function and their



previous signification.”<sup>16</sup> The stroll also allows the opportunity of looking at the visible but with an eye to the invisible, with no expectation nor solutions. Such a stroll requires perceptive attitude to the imaginal dimension of the city. If the term impressionism is meant to indicate an immediacy of sight, then it cannot be applied to Altenberg, and even less to Loos. The “telegraphic” style of Altenberg, as described by Friedell cannot be understood as an elementary sharpness of vision, but a work of abbreviation, abstraction and purification. The description of everyday details in Altenberg and Loos is not characteristic of any primary, original sight but rather a representation of what was seen.

It takes a unique physical environment for such penetrating thought and language to grow from sight and observation. The streets of the Altstadt of Vienna provided the proper grazing ground. The subjects of the literary Kleinkunst were not academic ideals espousing deeds or events of the past, but contemporary themes drawn from the bustle of metropolitan life. One must engage in the public life of the city, be a part of the crowd. In Vienna, the role of an observer became a part of the production of literary texts, narrative reports as well as journalistic texts. The nineteenth century metropolis of Vienna possessed a quality unique to its own. While being the seat of the imperial and royal court, it became the center of rising industry. Vienna pressed great stress on public life. It was the necessity for *Selbstdarstellung*, the presentation of oneself, the acting of a role.<sup>17</sup> The streets of the city, narrow and confined as they were, provided stages for such presentation. The street of Vienna was an integral part of the pleasure of the inner city.<sup>18</sup> All classes of society were engaged in many different activities. Appearance on the street, see and be seen, acknowledge and be acknowledged was a vital part of Viennese life.

In case of Loos, the small details in *Das Andere* served as revealing clues to both Austrian and “Western” culture. Titles of short pieces in *Das Andere* such as What we see and hear, What we listen to, What we drink, What we buy, How we live indicated their sources the mundane everyday details. Western culture, whose introduction in Austria was sought by *Das Andere*, as Cacciari remarked, is in reality a culture of sight. Loos’s ideal is that this *Kultur* should become habit, behavior. He sought to train his readers in modes of behavior, habits and reactions. For Loos, external or superficial details were indicative, offering clues to the whole physiognomy of the culture.

But the structure of such physiognomy could not be easily described for it was made up of surface details, which together gave the outline of the whole. Loos’s critical view towards visuality and details became evident in his critique of ornament. His critique was not directed at a problem of ornament or not ornament, but at a problem of meaning. The designers of that time often regarded surface as a provocation for the ornamental inventor.<sup>19</sup> For Loos, ornament must be integrated with the way the building is built. As well as the way it is used which is opposite to



the decorated sheds his contemporaries purveyed.

Loos's writings were perhaps aimed at distinguishing different kinds of ornament, not different ornamental shapes, nor different ornamental styles but two kinds of ornament, the first being indicative or capable of pointing away from itself towards something necessary but otherwise unrepresented, and the second being ornament which distracts or fails to represent and is unnecessary.<sup>20</sup> Such unnecessary ornament is what is exemplified on the surface of the Ringstrasse buildings and was criticized by Loos. Visuality of details and ornament is not a matter of covering up but a matter of indicating, pointing or revealing in the similar way that the small details of everyday life reveal the physiognomy of the culture.

Loos's great hostility to the Viennese Secession turned to the point of how a building would be occupied and represented. Secessionist architects and designers thought that a new style could be created for their own time in terms of an ornamental vocabulary which would have no relation to historical ornament. For Otto Wagner, though initially affiliated with the Secession, the use of ornamental surface and details in his later works was radically different. His works stood in awe of the great technological achievements of the nineteenth century. Still, Wagner accepted limits to his realist programs. He sanctioned the role of speculative innovation from a functional base. In this sense, Wagner's architectural realism may be described through its constant symbolic exploitation of function.<sup>21</sup> His work came close to Semper's theory of *Bekleidung*, to demonstrate a precise relationship between an articulated skin and the development of a building in depth.<sup>22</sup>

From the theory of "dressing" or *Bekleidung* theory, Wagner assumed for its capacity to synthesize lightweight panel construction in both stone and metal. He seemed to embrace the metaphor of the mask of which Semper had remarked "Masking does not help, however, when behind the mask the thing is false." He did not intend falsehood by masking, but rather the creation of "tectonic veil" through which and by which it would be possible to perceive the spiritual significance of the pragmatic world of fact and symbolic world of value.<sup>23</sup>

In the church of Saint Leopold Am Steinhof and the Postsparkasse, brick structure were sheathed or dressed with thin sheets of marble, set in mortar bed, and seemingly anchored to the wall with metal bolts, themselves capped with aluminum heads. Yet, the anchor bolts had only a limited functional value. The enhanced and articulated bolts only held the panels in place during the first three weeks of construction while the binding mortar bed hardened. The bolts were decorative treated form-work. In such ornamental conception, the construction is not enriched with ornament expressive of its purpose, but rather the decoration (the bolt heads) is invented with a constructional meaning seemingly inspired by necessity. This visible, decorative artifice was a "symbolic functionalism," in that the surface details represent the technological, economic, and time saving attributes of this type of construction.<sup>24</sup>



Wagner's use of representational surface is also evident in his design for the Vienna Stadtbahn. Iron was used to represent functional form, and at the same time, iron supporting screen was used as a decorative motif. The transparent iron work of the girder provided a layer of decoration while allowed the eye to penetrate the surface and see what was behind. Wagner offered the possibilities for the modern artistic treatment of material in his subtle decoration of a structure. Hence it seems, Wagner's buildings are more representational than constructional in their conception.<sup>25</sup> It was the appearance, upon which Wagner's artistic conception was based.

Attention to the visual impression was typical of Wagner's compositions. The image to be perceived was the center of his architectural conception constant in his designs throughout his career.<sup>26</sup> Such compelling nature of his image raises the question of Wagner's relation to Gottfried Semper. Though accepting their basic differences on a theoretical level, Wagner's architectural conception, considering through many surface transformations of his buildings, remains close to Semper in its visual or dressing formulation. At first, Wagner's wall dressings are specifically textile-like such as with the majolica sheathing on the facade of Linke Wienzeile 40 (majolica house). After 1900, they began to adapt themselves to a new theme - that of symbolic functionalism. However, this new theme still maintained a close link to Bekleidung theory in the relationship of the symbolic surface and the constructional conception.

The uses of detail surface in Wagner's buildings, as well as in the writings of Loos and Altenberg's shared one common characteristic that lies in the interplay between perceptual and conceptual cognition. The center of their methodologies is the movement between essence and representation. The surface is representational of the content. Meaning can be drawn from physical form. Each superficial detail is a part of the physiognomic whole.

Part of the critique towards the theory of dressing was that it has led architecture down the false path of "externalization," the path of undue prominence given to the facade of a building.<sup>27</sup> In fact, Semper never pressed any stresses only to the facade or the externalization of building. In his opinion, the decorative parts of Greek architecture were closely connected with the construction and that their purpose was to express symbolically the mechanical functions of the structural parts. Both structural part and decorative symbol are closely related that one cannot be altered without affecting the other and that each must be a primary element born simultaneously with the whole. This will restrain any subjective and arbitrary desire to cover the structural form with symbols. The essence and the idea of a structural part prohibit arbitrary decoration as one pleases. The different symbols and decorative attributes of a structural part cannot be considered pure superficial ornament. Thus, it is important to realize what they really were: a covering suggestive of a function performed by the core to which it closely clings.<sup>28</sup> Using a recognizable decorative language, it





persuades architecture's intelligibility.

That the theory is called the “*art of dressing*” implies a superficial phenomena based upon visibility of the surface. For Wagner, following Semper, the surface detail possesses the representational language symbolically expressive of the mechanical functions of the whole building. In this sense, the “superficial” phenomena does not carry such negative connotation as found in many of its critiques. Such superficial traits do not arise solely out of subjective imagination of an architect. Rather, they are related to the mechanical functions of the structural parts and are indicative of the content. In other words, they are revealing clues to the essence.

Loos's view towards the “*art of dressing*” also came close to Semper. His ideal was against the superficial traits that are misleading. His critique of the deceptive detail surface of the Ringstrasse was based on this notion. The deciphering of clues to form the idea of totality is impossible when the clues are false. The use of everyday details in his writings was also intend to indicate, to give clues to the physiognomy of the culture. For both Altenberg and Loos, with the power of their observation, everyday details became revealing. The use of articulated skin in Wagner's buildings was also grounded on this notion. The superficial traits of persons, things, events in Loos's and Altenberg's writings are perhaps comparable to the tectonic veil of Wagner's building. The veil is comprised of surface details that are bounded together as if by the knots. In and of itself, each detail is also representational. But to acknowledge the meaning of superficial details is not to abandon the idea of totality. While Wagner aimed at architecture that could communicate through the surface, Altenberg and Loos followed the same idea in their writings using everyday details to indicate and communicate about the way of life. They observed with sharp and loving eyes the quality of sight, smell and touch, the habits, customs and colors, the passages of city. They did not consider their environments as a maze which traps a way of life, but a presence which communicates with its inhabitants. Such communication were carried out through the small details of everyday life. In the name of progress, while such “little things” were discarded, they tried to capture and celebrated things which their contemporaries had taken for granted.

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## Notes

- 1 M. Christine Boyer, **The City of Collective Memory: its historical images and architectural entertainment.** (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1996).
- 2 Anthony Vidler, "The Scenes of the Street." in Stanford Anderson (ed.) **On Street** (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1978), 29.
- 3 Ibid.
- 4 Andrew Barker, **Telegrams from the Soul: Peter Altenberg and the Culture of fin-de-siecle Vienna** (Columbia, SC: Camden House, 1996), 40.
- 5 Ibid., 41.
- 6 Carlo Ginzburg, "Morelli, Freud, and Sherlock Holmes: Clues and Scientific Method." in Umberto Eco (ed.) **The Sign of Three** (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1983), 82.
- 7 Ibid.
- 8 Ibid., 86.
- 9 Giovanni Morelli, *Della Pittura italiana* (Milan: Treves, 1897), 4. Quoted in Ginzburg, "Morelli", 87.
- 10 Massimo Cacciari, **Architecture and Nihilism: On the Philosophy of Modern Architecture** (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1993), 157.
- 11 Barker, **Telegram From the Soul**, 45.
- 12 Andrew Barker, "Peter Altenberg" in Donald Daviau (ed.) **Majors Figures of Turn-of-the-Century Literature** (Riverside: Ariadne Press, 1991), 19.
- 13 Ibid., 36.
- 14 Cacciari, **Architecture and Nihilism**, 156.
- 15 Ibid.
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- 22 Kenneth Frampton, **Studies in Tectonic Culture** (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1995), 89.
- 23 Ibid., 91.
- 24 Peter Haiko, "The Franz Josef-Stadtmuseum" in Harry Malgrave (ed.) **Otto Wagner: Reflections on the Raiment of Modernity** (Santa Monica, CA: The Getty Center for the History of Art and the Humanities, 1988), 53-84.
- 25 Harry Francis Malgrave, in the introduction of **Otto Wagner, Modern Architecture** (Santa Monica, CA: The Getty Center for the History of Art and the Humanities, 1988), 39.
- 26 Ibid., 40.
- 27 Ibid., 59.
- 28 Wolfgang Herrmann, Gottfried Semper: In Search of Architecture (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1984), 144.



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## บทคัดย่อ

บทความนี้มุ่งศึกษา การค้นหาความหมาย การอ่านความ  
สัมพันธ์ และการตีความส่วนประกอบย่อยในงานสถาปัตยกรรม  
ของ Adolf Loos และ Otto Wagner โดยโยงความสัมพันธ์  
กับการอ่านรายละเอียดในงานศิลปะและวรรณกรรมในช่วงปลาย  
ศตวรรษที่ 19 และต้นศตวรรษที่ 20 ส่วนประกอบย่อยที่เรียก  
ว่า Kleinkunst หรือศิลปะเล็กๆ นี้ นอกจากจะมีความสามารถ  
ในการสื่อสารความหมาย ตลอดจนการสร้างภาพความเป็นสถาน  
ที่ให้กับสถาปัตยกรรมและเมืองแล้ว ยังเป็นตัวแทนที่สามารถ  
สื่อสารถึงนัยยะทางสังคมวัฒนธรรม ตลอดจนเทคโนโลยี วิธี  
การก่อสร้าง และแนวความคิดทางสถาปัตยกรรมในยุคสมัยต่างๆ  
และเป็นเครื่องมือในการแสดงออกถึงเนื้อหาตลอดจนเอกลักษณ์  
ทางสถาปัตยกรรมในแต่ละยุคสมัยอีกด้วย



