ARRIS

JOURNAL OF THE SOUTHEAST CHAPTER OF
THE SOCIETY OF ARCHITECTURAL HISTORIANS

VOLUME TWENTY 2009

ARRIS

Anthony Alofsin. When Buildings Speak: Architecture as Language in the Habsburg Empire and its Aftermath, 1867-1933. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2006, 300 pp., 158 color plates, 52 halftones, cloth, $65.00, ISBN 978-0226015064, paper, $45, ISBN 978-0226015071.

Anthony Alofsin delivers a thoughtful, non-polemical study of architecture as language about a region and time period that is covered within the English-speaking press by only a few scholars. He commences with an introduction that serves the reader very well, identifying the major components of the Austro-Hungarian Empire in terms of geography, demography, and language. Alofsin then identifies five languages of architecture: history, organicism, rationalism, myth, and hybridity. Part of the honesty of Alofsin's approach is that he acknowledges not only the areas of overlap amongst these languages, but also the uneven treatment of buildings in his text due to the limited availability of historical materials in some instances. He also forthrightly states the reality that "some architectural explorations moved forward and then stopped; others moved forward and then regressed; still others moved forward and became transformed over time" (p. 12).

How refreshing it is to encounter an historian who has no theoretical axe to grind. One of Alofsin's wonderfully sly statements discretely flirts with understated commentary: " …my purpose here is to outline a method of historical and critical analysis that can proceed without the burden of satisfying a fashionable ideology" (p. 12). His contextual formalist approach is vindication for architectural historians who saw through the emperor's new clothes regarding the absurd attempt in recent decades to graft poststructural literary analysis onto our field. Alofsin delivers a terse assessment of those dark days: "This discourse on semiotics had become so overlaid with poststructural analyses that its basic concepts were barely decipherable… In the absence of polemics, a calm reassessment of the relationship of architecture language is now possible" (p. 10).

Yet the irony of writing a book about "the difficulty of applying the metaphor of language to architecture" does not escape him, and he begins his defense with a differentiation between an architectural style and an architectural language, terming the former "a shorthand, a marriage of convenience between writings and their objects, but a reducer of meaning" (p. 10). Alofsin broadly defines language as the ability to speak without mutual misunderstanding. He sometimes has trouble, however, reconciling this definition with the extraordinarily polyglot nature of the Habsburg Empire, wherein misunderstandings of how a building speaks would seem endemic. This tension comes to the fore in his chapter about the language of history with regard to the Weiner Rathaus. Alofsin positions the Rathaus as a counterbalance of "Catholic religiosity and opposition to neo-Renaissance and neobaroque styles that represented sanctioned tastes," yet since both imperial and bourgeois clients utilized such styles, to what portion of the population does he suggest the Rathaus spoke? He then delivers a final assessment, stating that the Viennese could read the building as a combinatory sign of new civic power, imperial fortitude, urban revitalization, and sacred grandiosity (p. 29). Yet the question remains: why initially identify the Rathaus as a figure of opposition if, in conclusion, one makes it the master of conciliatory architectural gestures?

Alofsin's lucidly written examination of the language of organicism is diminished by the fact that he only looks at buildings in Vienna, thus muting the polyglot quintessence of his book. Yet he deftly explains that since Hungarian organicism was combined thoroughly with a "quasi historicism," he addresses it in a different chapter about the language of myth. Alofsin's treatment Secession Building is surprising in its brevity, for he does not progress beyond a brief discussion of the front facade, totally ignoring the building's dissonance between its front and rear portions. Of all the buildings in this book, the Secession Building's schizophrenic nature offers perhaps the most intriguing analysis of how a building speaks, something that Leslie Topp addressed admirably in a recent study: "The Secession Building: Multiple Truths and Modern Art," *Architecture and Truth in Fin-de-Siècle* Vienna (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004). It remains a mystery why Alofsin did not offer the reader an in-depth examination of this seminal building.

Perhaps the best chapter in the book centers on the language of rationalism, and Alofsin's far-flung selection of buildings is illuminating and superb. He imbues his investigation with just enough elasticity regarding what constitutes "rationalism" to retain a measure of coherence. Yet once again, he seems to shy away from examining in

greater depth some of the buildings that he has selected, especially Ignjat Fischer's sanatorium in Zagreb. He offers a single photograph of the building's exterior, which shows two facades set as a puzzling oblique angle to one another, both cloaked in a historicist mode, while mentioning a rear facade that was rationalist by comparison. What Alofsin fails to explain is that the sanatorium was a trapezoidal shape composed of three historicist facades constituting the narrower portion of the trapezoid. The problem is a lack of floor plans, which would have clarified the reading of this building, as well as many others.

Alofsin explains that "floor plans have not been included because many people in the broad readership sought here do not read them—and more significantly, floor plans do not speak to our experience in the ways that seeing, feeling, and moving through buildings do" (p. ix). The omission of floor plans is a serious flaw, and the author's explanation does not ring true on three levels. First, while the book is intended for a relatively broad readership, it clearly is intended for a well-educated lay audience, as evidenced by his use of architectural terminology. Second, even if Alofsin's claim that many people do not read floor plans were true, it takes but a paragraph or two to explain how to read a plan. On the third level, the author explains that a well-educated lay reader probably does not experience a building in the manner that those of us within the architectural profession do. This claim may have some validity, but in this computer age, well-educated lay audiences are adept at making mental connections between two-dimensional representations of space and the vicarious, virtual experience of walking through a space.

In his chapter concerning the language of myth, Alofsin focuses primarily upon the creation of Hungarian national identity as witnessed largely in the buildings of Ödön Lechner. Although much of this material has been covered before by other scholars, the superb color photographs give the story an unexpected immediacy and freshness, conveying to a far better degree than any other scholarly work the lushness of Lechner's designs. In an effort to differentiate Slovakian identity from Bohemian identity, the latter well-represented by buildings in Prague, Alofsin examines three cemeteries in western Galicia by Dušan Jurkovi□. As occurs several times throughout the book, the inclusion of such a brief entry raises question as to whether it truly enhances the text.

The same might be said for the book's concluding chapter, which focuses upon crematoria of the 1920s and 1930s in Slovenia, Bohemia, Moravia, and Vienna. One understands the poetic nuance of closing a study of a vanished empire upon crematoria, and the magnificent color photographs of Clemens Holzmeister's crematorium in Vienna bring to life this startling building. Yet, as Alofsin himself notes, this concluding chapter is, for all intents and purposes, a continuation of the language of hybridity. After reviewing one final design, Alofsin abruptly ends his study with a single paragraph. One wishes that he had provided a lengthier and more introspective concluding section.

The chapter on the language of hybridity constitutes the most interesting and problematic one in the book. The nature of hybridity, which suggests an elevated level of complexity, calls for an examination of fewer buildings in greater depth. Here, the author's uneven treatment of the programmatic sequence of spaces within buildings throughout the book is most visible. Because he decided not to include floor plans, Alofsin's analysis often is reduced to disparate components of buildings, placing any semblance of an holistic experience by the reader out of reach. Perhaps the author's opening definition of a language of hybridity is what makes this reader uneasy; in differentiating it from mere eclecticism, Alofsin states that "the result was a hybridity whose purpose, like that in horticulture, was to graft differing elements to create a new, vigorous organism" (p. 177). One wishes that Alofsin had considered in a more critical manner whether a horticultural analogy is suitable as a lens through which to analyze buildings.

In the final analysis, *When Buildings Speak* is a valuable contribution to the study of architecture of the late Habsburg Empire. Anthony Alofsin has created an engaging and yet meticulously researched book, an admirable endeavor by all accounts. The quibbles that I have mentioned are frustrating precisely because the quality of Alofsin's writing is so high, and they arise from decisions that he made about the floor plans and about the scope and depth of his book, as opposed to those arising from flaws in his methodology. I understand his desire to avoid producing a 500-page tome, and in today's marketplace, that was a wise maneuver. Nevertheless, I am certain that there are many in academia who would welcome a more in-depth analysis of what he has commenced, and we eagerly await his next work on this topic.

DOUGLAS KLAHR
University of Texas at Arlington

ARRIS

JOURNAL OF THE SOUTHEAST CHAPTER OF
THE SOCIETY OF ARCHITECTURAL HISTORIANS