#### Fabian Tobias Reiner $\cdot$ Architectural Comfort



# BUCHER

## ARCHITECTURAL COMFORT

Fabian Tobias Reiner

DISCOVERING CONCEPTIONS
IN MODERN VIENNESE CONCRETISATIONS

This book is based on a dissertation submitted in partial fulfilment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Arts (History and Critical Thinking) in the Architectural Association School of Architecture, London (October 2020).

1st edition 2021
BUCHER Verlag
Hohenems—Vaduz—Munich—Zurich
www.bucherverlag.com

© 2021 Fabian Tobias Reiner All rights reserved

Cover: Josef Frank & Oskar Wlach (1929–31), Villa Beer, Hall Photograph: Julius Scherb © MAK - Museum of Applied Arts, Vienna.

Design: Gorana Guiboud-Ribaud Production: BUCHER Druck, Hohenems Binding: Haggenmiller, Lindenberg Printed in Austria

1 1111000 111 11000110

ISBN 978-3-99018-592-6

## Table of Contents

Preface	7
Bourgeois Indulgence: The Cotton Fabric	17
Elemental Needs and Wants: Easy Chairs	37
Civilised Comfort: The Door Hinge	57
Topos of Ailment: The Staircase	<b>7</b> 5
Morals of Modernity: Domestic Houses	95
Wider Landscapes	113
Conclusion	125
" <b>Beauty pulls stronger than oxen.</b> " An Afterword by Bettina Köhler	131
Comfort—A Matter for Architectural Theory?	
An Epilogue by Hermann Czech	135
Acknowledgements	137
Bibliography	141
Illustration Credits	155



### **Preface**

We all know comfort, yet we also do not know comfort. Arguably tied to physical well-being, a state of ease, and accessible for everyone individually, the conception of comfort was not always as such. Early origins beheld comfort as spiritual, mental consolation endowed by religion and acknowledged it as invigoration of the body's organs. It was a collective endeavour that progressively turned into a subjective matter. But how did today's self-conscious satisfaction of one's body concerning its immediate physical environment emerge?

The historian John E. Crowley remarked in *The Invention of Comfort*<sup>3</sup> that the infancy of today's material connotation recedes in the seventeenth-century French bourgeois and English proletariat. Indeed, "there was no systematic attempt to document inventions designed to make life easier" before, not alone is there any written evidence that the notion of com-

Köhler, 2003, p. 9.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>2</sup> Crowley, 2001, p. ix.

Crowley, 2001. The book constructs unequivocally an unfolding of the physically connoted comfort we live with today. But it also ties an early modern British and early American sensibility to various amenities, social realities, and architectural landscapes. One can sense the manifoldness of the conception as comfort reveals as: commodious, civil, colonial, decent, convenient, enlightened, picturesque, healthy, and gendered.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>4</sup> DeJean, 2009, p. 2.

fort played a major role in daily life. While the French cultivated an indulgent comfort only accessible for the few, eighteenth-century English emphasised elemental needs applicable to a broader audience. That a greater amount of people could progressively access comfort, blurred the lines of its conception as being either luxurious or necessary. This shift in realisation also seemed of significant importance for later stages in the conception's evolvement. Towards the end of the eighteenth and the beginning of the nineteenth century, the emerging relativity ransomed political commentators to propose a concept of comfort, which could form a civilised middle class—a social class thriving for the satisfaction of a maximum of needs by a minimum of moral judgement.<sup>5</sup>

As the social ladder in nineteenth-century Europe appeared to level, comfort emerged in relation to a materialistic revolution. It rendered tangible a *necessary luxury* for the people and elicited concurrently one of the greatest resonances of today's European society: a private life.<sup>6</sup> Bill Bryson in *At Home*<sup>7</sup> posits that "the history of private life is a history of getting comfortable slowly." <sup>8</sup>

<sup>5</sup> Crowley, 2001.

<sup>6</sup> DeJean, 2009, p. 16.

Bryson, 2010. The book is scrutinising with curiosity all conceivable spaces within the home. It discusses elements from fusebox to drawing room, study to garden, as well as dressing room to nursery, to arrive at a history of the vast domestic artefacts.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>8</sup> Ibid., p. 150. Another tribute can be found in Rice, 2007. Undoubtedly referring to the architectural inside as problematic, Rice manages to extend beyond the factual interior space by conceptually dividing an interiorisation from the spatial interior. Privatisation and its comfort happen not only materialistically but also psychologically. Although Rice is very aware that the historical construction of comfort is not as linear as commonly assumed.

Comfort is inherent in one's personally structured daily life, and the author Joan DeJean sharply analysed that it is presently cultivated as *a right*. Actions and behaviour are justified by the conception of private well-being. In *The Age of Comfort*, DeJean reminds us that "[o]ur comfort-driven life is a phenomenon with little precedent in Western history." Exploring the origins, DeJean locates as much as Crowley the beginning of *informal* life in seventeenth-century France. Fashion, furniture design, interior design, as well as architecture were among the first practices to demonstrate this change in values. 10

Authors and critics from history, sociology, philosophy, politics, as well as architecture render apparent that comfort is a product of its time "which varies from person to person, and from social group to social group; varies for the individual throughout his life and ... goes through very violent changes." The decisions we take upon our feeling of comfort are inflected by centuries of cultural as well as technological debate and innovation and prove immanently different in various contexts. Crowley ingeniously remarks that comfort is an invention, "one that [always] had to be taught and learned," and the design theorist Tomás Maldonado expresses that [c]omfort is a modern idea." Together, this suggests comfort's dependence on continually shifting dynamics.

<sup>9</sup> DeJean, 2009, p. 1.

<sup>10</sup> Ibid.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>11</sup> Rykwert, 1982, p. 23.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>12</sup> Maldonado, 1991, p. 35.

<sup>13</sup> Crowley, 2001, p. ix.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>14</sup> Maldonado, 1991, p. 35.

comfort (verb); 1. to strengthen (morally or spiritually); to encourage, hearten, inspirit, incite;

•••

3. to strengthen (physically), support; to make fast, secure;4. to minister delight or pleasure to; to gladden, cheer; please, entertain

comfort (noun); ... 6.a. A state of physical and material well-being, with freedom from pain and trouble, and satisfaction of bodily needs; the condition of being comfortable

In today's debate comfort proves challenging "due to its multidimensionality, the many meanings it can take on in different settings, but also because the concept of comfort serves as an arena for battling ideologies." <sup>15</sup> It is a sensitive topic as it can also flow into a negation of it. <sup>16</sup> One only has to investigate the perverse collateral effects that comfort has produced. <sup>17</sup> It is a concept that will prove crucial in negotiating future events that humanity will face—in the quest for equality, to efface racism, and to turn down climate change. It is humanity's responsibility to do so; and as the conception of progress will change, so will comfort. <sup>18</sup>

#### **Etymology**

Studying the *Oxford English Dictionary* one finds a layering of interpretations. <sup>19</sup> The term derives its meaning from the Latin *con*, which expresses an intensive force, and *fortis*, meaning strong.

As a verb, *to comfort* refers to a moral or spiritual strengthening, commits to physical support, and points towards an administering of delight or pleasure. It qualifies as an active agent and event that is executed

Birke, 2020, Introduction.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>16</sup> Maldonado, 1991, p. 36.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>17</sup> Ibid. The attainments of the automobile led to pollution and traffic congestions; the achievements of globalised access to the aeroplane fostered exuberant CO<sub>2</sub> emissions; the possibilities of plastic packaging fostered a culture of irreversible waste. This list may be extended endlessly.

Köhler, 2020. "Considering the present climatic issues, we might have to ask ourselves if our parameters of defining comfort are still accurate?"

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>19</sup> 2nd ed., 1989, Clarendon Press, Oxford.

to console, to fasten, or to delight physically and psychologically. It is evident that as a concept, it covers the entire range from misery to joy. Its contemporary terminology is a palimpsest of historically different conceptions.

As a noun, comfort points towards a state of physical and material well-being, with freedom from pain and trouble, a satisfaction of bodily needs, and the condition of being comfortable. It deviates from the verb as it behaves rather passively, observing one's immediate physical condition. Its evaluation happens along a man-object relationship that falls short of the social breadth inherent in the active verb.

Equipped with this understanding, it is apparent that the latter emphasises a personal *taking of comfort* while the former refers to an encompassing *production* of it. It is precisely the possible productive nature that will be embraced throughout this thesis. *Comfort* is not just a purpose but a means.

#### Architecture

Applying this definition onto an architectural discourse, the questions to pose are: How does architecture contain the evolvement of comfort? From the seventeenth-century French elite and the ascending middle class to the practices of modernity, to what degree is the conception's productive nature embraced formally and spatially?

Turning to the confines of architecture, it is surprising that the literature on comfort deals to a lion's share with well-being as a technical endeavour—ad-

dressing issues of material, construction, light, and heat. 20 Not belittling these scientific achievements, an *Architectural Comfort* shall help to critically reflect on architecture as a formal-spatial quality of cultural breadth. It evokes comfort as part of an architectural theory that liberates the contemporary practice from a merely functionalist idealisation. Of course, architecture relies on expediencies, but this thesis's argumentation shall prevent the building practice from ever *flatter* physical concretisations. It demonstrates architecture's potential to achieve comfort beyond the tangible, yet emphasises its quest for form.

It is here that the Viennese architecture from the turn of the twentieth century onwards seems exceptionally valid. It engages an architectural work that cherishes the ubiquity of daily life, incorporates the individual as much as the collective, and unfolds in a continuity only rarely found in Central Europe. <sup>21</sup>

To render a present conception of an *Architectural Comfort* rather productive and inclusive, this thesis embraces the work of modern Austrian architects, Adolf Loos (1870–1933) and Josef Frank (1885–1967). Their legacy is indisputable and their lineage consequently extended by another eminent, more timely, Austrian

To investigate comfort on these rather scientific terms but in close connection to architectural aspects, some of the more intriguing examples are Banham's *The Architecture of the Well-Tempered Environment* (1984), Reid's seminal works on natural ventilation, which were incorporated by Charles Barry while designing The Palace of Westminster from 1840 to 1876, Deplazes's *Constructing Architecture: Materials—Processes—Structures* (2008), as well as Chappells and Shove, 2004.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>21</sup> Ritter, 1996, p. 152.

architect, Hermann Czech (\*1936).<sup>22</sup> Together, they span an architectural history of extraordinary continuity that covers more than 100 years. Their body of work appears as an exciting testing ground, where conflicting ideas collate to produce an oeuvre that addresses a myriad of different well-beings—bodily, mental, cultural, social, and technical. Their work manages to negotiate the notion of comfort in an ambiguous multiplicity while not being dictated by shortsighted ideologies.<sup>23</sup> Loos, Frank, and Czech operate *modern* as they distil the viable elements of contemporary society and provide inclusivity by designing comfort in its multidimensionality.<sup>24</sup>

Loos was probably the most influential character in European modern architecture originating from Austria. Besides advocating his most well-known spatial conception of the Raumplan he stood in opposition to the advocation of the Vienna Secession, which was at that time at the height of their radiance. Frank took up Loos's tradition of the Raumplan but addressed, as he was rather socially attuned, the element of kitsch in his work. Besides being part of CIAM, he proposed his own approach towards architecture: Accidentism. It should not be misunderstood as generating a mere chance encounter, but a genuine incomprehensibility for the spontaneous spectator. Czech, a successor of Loos and Frank, was heavily influenced by both. He is based in Vienna and contributes ingeniously to the continuation of their legacy. By applying to his work the social-formal strategies of Mannerism and Participation, which in his cases are mutually dependent, Czech demands that "architecture is background."

The protagonists possess a tolerance of ambiguity. Tolerance of ambiguity is a concept that accounts for multiple stimuli simultaneously. In 1949 the psychoanalyst and psychologist Else Frenkel-Brunswik defined it as an ability of an individual to bear the coexistence of positive and negative characteristics in the same object or subject. In her studies, it renders measurable the emotional and cognitive orientation of an individual towards life. The tolerance of ambiguity is a hypothetical construct and apparent if a personality cultivates a balanced relationship between expectations and realisations, and is capable of tolerating any conflicts.

The term modern, how it is utilised throughout this thesis, shall validate Loos's, Frank's, and Czech's constant struggle for a viable present. It should not evaluate their architectural work as part of any modernity or any fashionable current.

What makes them additionally fruitful for a theoretical-discursive study is their engagement with the written word. Similar in style, the architects' writings are short, sharp-tongued, often polemic, and immanently paradox. In them, the three protagonists demonstrate a sensibility towards the political, social, and economic conditions alive, yet they do not try to resolve the ambivalences in place. <sup>25</sup>

Focusing throughout this thesis on written and built works as a lens for the study of a productive comfort, Loos's, Frank's, and Czech's various architectural elements are dissected individually. This enables to test a variety of thoughts on the different but distinct architectural gestures—the valid, analogue, and spatial components in use. The narrative from the "Cotton Fabric," "Easy Chairs," the "Door Hinge," and the "Staircase," to the "Domestic Houses" and the "Wider Landscapes" demonstrates a progressively more profound understanding of the historical condition of comfort and the Viennese diligence to produce an architecture of relevance.

Albeit setting focus on the architectural element specifically, this method allows in a Loosian fashion to indicate through the smallest *artefact* a wider totality that is otherwise approachable only with difficulty. <sup>26</sup> It also employs a Czechian attitude as it scrutinises the conventional spatial element to distil its inherent distinctness. <sup>27</sup> An *Architectural Comfort* challenges common prejudices.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>25</sup> Czech, 1996, p. 114.

Loos, 1919, p. 372: "If from an extinct people nothing else would be left but a button, I am able to extrapolate from the form of this button to the clothing and costumes of this people, to its customs and religion, its art and its spirituality."

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>27</sup> Ritter, 1996, p. 152.

## Bourgeois Indulgence: The Cotton Fabric

"Materials are almost mysterious substances. We must be deeply and reverently amazed that something similar was created at all."

-Adolf Loos, 1924

"[Eighteenth-century] French architecture had invented an art completely unknown to the ancients, the art of making homes comfortable."

—Joan DeJean, 2009

In 2014, news trumpeted: "A rediscovered treasure: Palais Schwarzenberg." Underneath, several images depicted two spaces, both strongly resonating a baroque palace. One of them, the *Restaurant*, captivated by its choice of encompassing materials. The walls and floor are covered in fabric. The former are executed in intense colours, the latter offers a rather unusual pattern. The application of the material engages a two-fold issue here. On the one hand it deals with the rather classical, technical problem of acoustics and on the other it enters into a direct dialogue with its clientèle's *habitus*. The fabric pairs a technical-functional necessity with psycho-physiological stimulations.

The fabric elevates the historical substance, yet avoids to invent history. It consciously integrates baroque clichés, yet keeps an ironic and critical distance. It excels by its accordance of mental reflection and bodily satisfaction, and employs a comfort

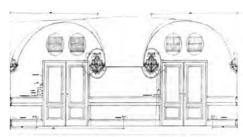


Fig. 1.1. Hermann Czech, Restaurant Schwarzenberg, Interior Elevation, 1984.

Feiersinger, 2014.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>2</sup> Kuß, 2018, p. 256.





that reaches back to seventeenth-century French bourgeois. The space in question was designed by Czech and furnished only thirty years ago.

In Czech's Restaurant Schwarzenberg, 1984, it is not merely about materialistic goods or a spatial atmosphere that evokes a condition of comfort, but the resonance of qualities that emerged during the rise of the French bourgeois. In that time, comfort progressed from the purely representative to the sensitively tangible. It received significance by the concurrent employment of emotional as well as tactile qualities. That the seventeenth-century ferment is as much historically conditioned as Czech's restaurant, must receive special attention. Because, de facto, both are its time's corollary and were carefully crafted.

In the mid-seventeenth century, those with wealth and influence thought only of magnificence. Life was lived indulgently and their behaviour was mainly a reaction towards broader societal issues. As the desire was to keep rank and wealth, comfort surfaced as a mix between beauty and convenience devoid of any reference to medieval material culture.<sup>3</sup> As the mannered and wealthy classes defined themselves principally through surface appearances, the garment of clothes and the covering of furnishings experienced a vital role in expressing grandeur and formality.<sup>4</sup> Interior spaces offered walls and furniture draped with expensive fabrics <sup>5</sup> that lent elegance and opulence by splendidly glowing and gleaming.<sup>6</sup>

<sup>3</sup> Crowley, 2001, p. 3.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>4</sup> DeJean, 2009, p. 186.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>5</sup> Crowley, 2001, p. 33.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>6</sup> DeJean, 2009, p. 18.

The architectural spaces and the prevalent furnishings did not convince through technical sophistication but the showcasing of the worthiest textiles and the most soothing patterns. As fabrics asserted status, displayed wealth, and only secondly protected from the naked elements, it comes without surprise that most of the spendings on domestic furniture went into the material. One only has to consider in the case of the bed it was "the bedding, not the bedstead,



**Fig. 1.3.** Michael Angelo Nicholson, *Gothic Bed*, 1826.

[that] gave the bed value and prestige." As the bed was a socially important place, the textile proved crucial in communicating this.  $^8$ 

Czech's *Palais* design refers directly to the historical value of representational magnificence and acknowledges the clientèle that still ties to palatial visits; or in the case of the *Palais*, a bourgeois hotel.<sup>9</sup> "[S]poiled guests will find everything they expect:" splashes of beauty as well as drops of convenience. However, it is not the sheer indulgence of material and visual exu-

Crowley, 2001, p. 7. For a list of bedsteads, cf. Kenny, Bretter, and Leben, 1998, pp. 198–201.

<sup>8</sup> Crowley, 2001, p. 6.

The Palais, transformed into a hotel in 1984, has been, besides occasional openings, closed to the public since 2008. Until 2014, the spaces were widely considered to be lost.

Achleitner, 1990, p. 141.



berance that excels. Czech's *Restaurant Schwarzenberg* contains equally strong references to the tactile and practical qualities that played a significant role even after the pinnacle of magnificence and etiquette.

Evidence illuminates that Versailles, albeit being the "ne plus ultra of grandeur and formality," was the place that initially incited a "desire that had never been a priority for the elite, the desire to relax and be casual." The new wants were an attempt to rework the customs of the reigning class. Revolts came from within, but also from without. The change of generation at Versailles, albeit being influence of the bourgeois, mutually stimulating, had as a consequence an emphasis on the immediate physical environment.

That the bourgeois had the chance to elevate themselves in times of an enhanced physical validity is closely bound to the evolvement of textiles. The material contributing to this shift the strongest was cotton. In the late seventeenth century, the realm of textiles experienced "one of the most significant transformations in its entire history. Heavy, stiff and formal fabrics went the way of magnificence and were replaced for many settings and occasions by breezily light ... cottons imported all the way from India." Swirling around the body, the fabric encouraged a more casual style of movement. Indeed, much was invested in obtaining the material worn with ease and cleaned with less effort.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>11</sup> DeJean, 2009, p. 4.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>12</sup> Ibid.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>13</sup> Ibid., p. 5. Retrospectively, the generation change at Versailles seems like the trigger for a quest of physical comfort. Louis XV sought an unofficial parallel life grasped in its direct distinction to the lifestyle of Louis XIV.

<sup>14</sup> Ibid., p. 13.

<sup>15</sup> Ibid.



Fig. 1.5. Calico Printing, ca. 1874.

It fulfilled the demand to be haptically pleasant and of a refined orderliness. Yet, it was not only the simpler workability and the material's lightness that triggered cotton's cultural ascent but the aptness with which the fabric could be imprinted.

Confronted with Czech's *flooral*<sup>16</sup> pattern, the aptness of print is more readily available in the work of Frank. Making use of the enhanced workability of cotton, Frank integrated various expressive textiles in his socially minded architecture. He sensed as much as the French bourgeois that the imprinting of the relatively inexpensive cotton enabled a larger proportion of the population to dress in clothes with bright colours and exotic ornamentation long associated with more prestigious textiles such as wool, silk, and linen. And he was aware that energy usually invested to afford expensive fabrics were now used for other pursuits.

Frank dealt casually and recognisably with the fabric as a visually expressive element, to embellish furniture, and to organise space. Albeit making use of the enhanced workability of cotton, its tactile and psychological qualities were equally important. Thus, it is without surprise that for a discussion on comfort that employs both haptic qualities and psychological momentum, Frank's textiles play an exceptionally valid role.

One note the readiness to combine floor and floral.

<sup>17</sup> Crowley, 2001, pp. 143-44.

Indeed, his prints stylise shapes, offer an increased colour intensity, and mingle nature with fantasy. They are characterised by bright and casual colour schemes, vivid tints, and dramatic juxtapositions. With its "vivacious colour, tropical foliage and fluttering insects," they are enthusiastically described as an "epitome of exoticism." 18 Their mostly white or at least mono-coloured background is a reference to the modern standards of hygiene and cleanliness.19

The prints solidify Frank's musing with different cultures and demonstrate a broad atti-



**Fig. 1.6.** Josef Frank and Oskar Wlach, *Villa Beer, Bedroom,* 1931.

tude towards life. They operate on the border of *kitsch* to be both pleasingly consumed and critically reflected on. As they act enchantingly to the eye and calming to the mind, they contribute to a sense of comfort. No plain surface would achieve the same moment of  $stasis^{20}$  in a world occupied by restlessness. Frank's cotton textiles produce a comfort that encourages and exacts; it draws attention and employs. It is not characterised by sobriety but enlivens.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>18</sup> Layton, 2019.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>19</sup> To explore the idea of cleanliness in relation to culture and aesthetics, cf. Hartmann, 2019.

The moment of stasis is of a double register here. It is the seduction to find halt in the depth of the pattern. Its richness invites to ponder.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>21</sup> Frank, 1927, p. 292.

## Elemental Needs and Wants: Easy Chairs



"At Trianon ... all the men now sit down in the presence of M. the Dauphin and Madame the Duchesse de Bourgogne; ... You can't imagine what it's like here because it no longer looks at all like a court."

—Princesse Palatine, ca. 1689

"Punch cures the gout, the colic, and the 'tisick. And is by all agreed the very best of physic."

—James Gillray, 1799

Considering today's bodily self-consciousness in relation to its immediate physical environment, the human desire for relaxation appears self-explanatory. The human requires rest, needs to sit down, and in the Western world, he does so, preferably, in a *comforting* chair. This is true for the present, as it was valid already 200 years ago.

From the turn to the twentieth century onwards, Loos designed a multitude of sitting furniture, yet the most suitable for a discussion on elemental comfort is the *Knieschwimmer*.<sup>2</sup> It is a piece of seating furniture spacious enough to move in around freely and fully upholstered to achieve a *looseness of fit*. A convenient dangling of the legs and a continuously flex-



**Fig. 2.1.** Adolf Loos, Knieschwimmer-Fauteuil, Apartment Friedmann, 1907.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>1</sup> Crowley, 2001, p. ix.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>2</sup> Loos's Knieschwimmer was available in various, according to the producer slightly differentiated, versions. Cf. Ottillinger, 1994, p. 56, and Voglhofer, 2011.





## Civilised Comfort: The Door Hinge

- $"Ordinary things contain the deepest \, mysteries."$
- —Robin Evans, 1978
- "We don't live in a space that's neutral and blank; we don't live, die, love in the rectangle of a sheet of paper."
- —Michel Foucault, 1966

The door is as much the element that evokes an abrupt break of continuity, as it is the element that attentively orchestrates the transition. For a spatial comfort to emerge, there are concise decisions to be made. And the door hinge, usually spurned, plays a crucial role.

Not that we want to investigate the technical specificity and production conditions of this modest element

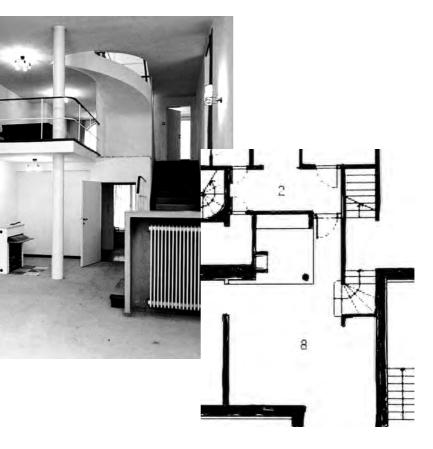


Fig. 3.1. Josef Frank and Oskar Wlach, Villa Beer, View towards Anteroom and Corresponding Plan, 1931.