

CHICAGO TRIBUNE

ADOLF LOOS

(1870-1933)



Proyecto / Project

Chicago, EE.UU., 1922

Keywords

Modern architecture

References

Tower

Doric

Column

If we understand the first period of modern architecture as one which, in order to follow the spirit of the time had to discard the use of references from the past, Adolf Loos' proposal for the Chicago Tribune competition is hard to decipher. But if we look at this project and its explicit use of past references from a different angle, we may begin to question those historiographical categories that have classified (and simplified) the complex ecosystem of ideas that shaped what is known today as modern architecture.

Despite being one of the most legendary architects of the modern period and also one of the most evoked by recent architecture, Adolf Loos is still hard to classify. Contemporary readings of his projects, such as those by Ines Weizman and Sam Jacob (presented on previous pages) are part of this current interest.

Before his renowned practice, Loos entered the scene as a cultural agitator and activist of modernity, through columns for newspapers and the magazine *Das Andere*. From that position, he managed to connect with the most important personalities of the European avant-gardes, securing his own place among them. Not by chance Loos had contact with the Dadaist movement, perhaps the most radical faction of the 1920s modern avant-gardes. Based on this background, historiography has presented Loos as a modern hero and one of its main defenders; however, his proposal for the Chicago Tribune competition in 1922 does not seem to fit this profile.

The competition received 263 proposals from 23 countries, and was won by the American architects Raymond Hood and John Mead Howells. Loos' submission (number 196) was sent from the city of Nice, shortly after the Viennese architect settled in France following his departure from the Austrian Government housing program. Without being awarded, Loos' proposal would still get attention for being both radical and seemingly inconsistent with his writings and

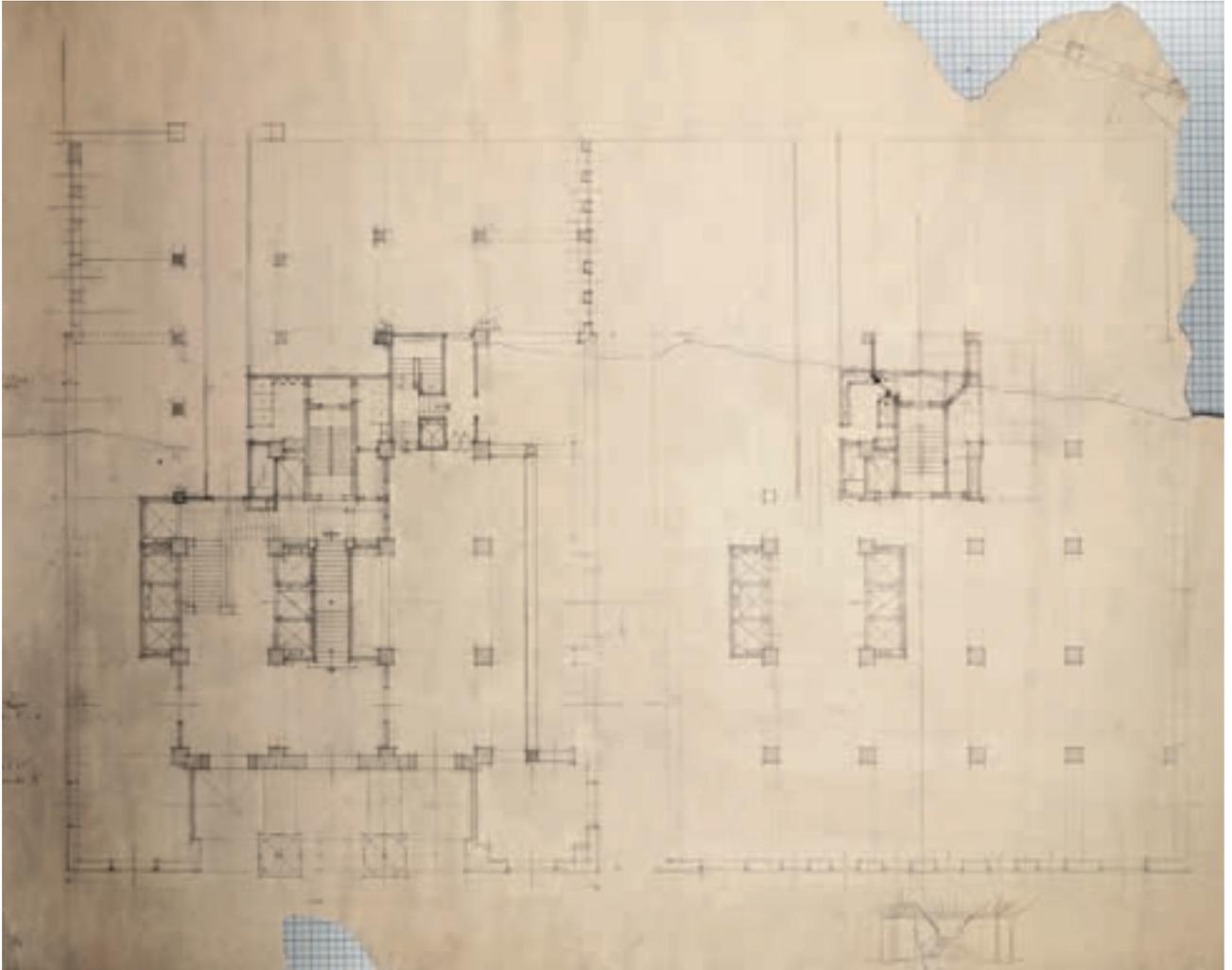


Adolf Loos.
The Chicago
Tribune Column.
Vista / View.
Chicago, 1922
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previous work, to the point that several architectural historians have left this project out of modern accounts. For example, Frampton (1981) does not mention the proposal, although he does refer to Gropius and Meyer's entry in two different occasions, also not awarded. More recently, Jean-Louis Cohen (2012) does not dedicate a single line to it, although he writes about the competition and publishes photographs of Hood and Meads building (the winning proposal, finally built), along with an image of Eliel Saarinen's project (Eero Saarinen father), who was granted the second place.

Here, we present three drawings prepared by Loos for that competition. The first, and also the best known, is a perspective of the proposal as if seen from a pedestrian viewpoint, showing a base – possibly citing the Austro-Czech art historian Max Dvořák's mausoleum, designed by Loos himself – on top of which a Doric column ending in a square abacus is placed; that is, an image combining two very clear references: the tomb and the column. Thus, it is not by chance that the legend does not read "The Chicago Tribune tower" but instead "The Chicago Tribune column." The second drawing, shows two of the building's floor plans: the access level and a typical plan, onto which a circular structure – ostensibly the column's shaft – is superimposed; on both drawings a regular 60 × 60 cm pillar structure can be noted, located right on the center (where the shank's weight would be), although the shank's structure or its interiors are hard to infer from these drawings. Finally, the third drawing – the most intriguing one – offers four handmade sketches: the drawing of a tower as an extruded square; the drawing of a tower made out of volumes and displaced planes (rather similar to the Gropius and Meyer's design for the competition); a tower with a square-shaped plan, standing on a podium analogous to his design for Max Dvořák's mausoleum and which was crowned by a square-shaped capital; and lastly, the drawing of a Doric column, from half its shank up to the top, ending in a circular Doric capital under a square-shaped abacus: Loos would finally submit to the competition the combination of these last two schemes.

This design – seemingly the first time a modern architect's use of a reportedly non-modern reference is self-evident – defuses most discourses on the epoch, even the one of its own author. It does not fit the schematic image that has been fabricated on Loos – as the main adversary of ornament – nor the following normative readings on modern architecture (which might explain why some historians have overlooked the project). Just as the Baker house analyzed in previous pages – with black and white stripes, that is to say, ornamented – Loos' project for the Chicago Tribune is an assemblage of a Doric column and a ziggurat, two references to Antiquity. Thus, the proposal questions not only the relationship between technology and architectural expression,



Adolf Loos.
The Chicago Tribune
Column. Plantas acceso y
nivel tipo / *Ground floor
plan & typical floor plan.*
Chicago, 1922
© Albertina, Viena.

but also technology itself as a formal reference for architecture. References to Antiquity are closer to the Dadaists irony than to the demureness of other vanguards of the time. However, the fact that Loos himself did not write about this project opens an arena of ambiguities well noted by Tafuri:

What joins together the entire Modern Movement is, however, the concept of architecture as ambiguous object. The Doric column planned by Loos for the Chicago Tribune competition, as a first and violent experiment in extracting a linguistic element from its context and transferring it to an abnormally sized second context, is the anticipation of a caustic and ambiguous Pop Architecture. It offers – apparently tied down to an established code, but in reality available to a maximum degree – an almost excessively open reading to the observer, or, rather, to the absent-minded user of the city (Tafuri, 1980:84).

This way of using a reference – removing an object from its context and placing it elsewhere, de-scaling it – is one of Loos' most interesting operations, and can still be productive at both theoretical and design level. As indicated by Massimo Cacciari (2002: 5), the Austrian architect “does not teach in vain ... he continuous to teach.” **ARQ**

Adolf Loos

Austrian architect born in 1870 in Brno (currently Czech Republic, back then part of the Austro-Hungarian Empire). After travelling to the u.s. he settled in Vienna in 1896 and started his architectural practice. He became known in the city's intellectual circuits from his debates with the Vienna Secession. His most famous writings are “Ornament and Crime” and “Architecture”, both from 1910. His most renowned projects are the store for Goldman & Salatsch (Vienna, 1910), the Tzara House (Paris, 1925), the Möller House (Vienna, 1926), and the Müller House (Prague, 1928). In 1922 he moved to France to only return to Austria in 1929, where he lived until his death in 1933.

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