

**RIBA Research Fund 2021**  
**Final Report: Nina Vollenbroker**

*Deafening Architecture – Re-centring the work of Adolf Loos*



Image 1: Adolf Loos cupping his left ear with his hand,  
Fotografie (Emil Theis, Dessau) 22,5 x 16,7cm um 1930  
Handschriftensammlung – WBR Sammlung Franz Glück / YHP1443  
Archivbox 6

This report is submitted at the conclusion of the project *Deafening Architecture – Re-centring the work of Adolf Loos*, supported by the RIBA Research Fund 2021. It was submitted in February 2024 and consists of three sections: The Proposal, The Research, The Dissemination.

I am sincerely grateful for the support of this important research – thank you.

### **The Proposal:**

*[D]isability is everywhere in history, once you begin looking for it.*<sup>1</sup>

Douglas C. Baynton

Adolf Loos might be seen as an architectural allrounder - one of those few practitioners whose acclaimed designs and built projects were matched by his output as a thinker, writer, and public speaker. During his tumultuous forty-year career, Loos lectured internationally and published dozens of essays, focusing mainly on the built environment, but also touching on other topics ranging from furniture, utilitarian objects, and clothes to food, music, and haircuts. The most significant of his writings is “Ornament and Crime,” a manifesto for modernism printed in the interdisciplinary journal *L’Esprit Nouveau* with a foreword by Le Corbusier, who unmistakably claimed his Austrian contemporary for modernism when he announced: “Loos is one of the predecessors of the new spirit.”<sup>2</sup> Loos was, as Le Corbusier affirms, one of the very first but also one of the most significant modernist architects.<sup>3</sup>

Loos quickly became known for his dissonant architectural stance: his polemical arguments were frequently met with outrage, his planning applications were repeatedly refused, and his building projects caused large-scale controversies. He also created numerous revolutionary interiors and buildings, amongst them social spaces like the Café Museum (1899) and the American Bar (1908), the highly contentious Haus am Michaelerplatz (1911) as well as many residential projects, most memorably the Haus Steiner (1910), which immediately became pilgrimage site for architects and was reproduced in virtually all literature of the modern movement, the Villa Moller (1928) in Vienna and the Villa Müller (1930) in Prague.<sup>4</sup> If the architect’s influence on his peers was immediate, it would also be enduring and profound. “Adolf Loos is the only architect of his generation whose thinking is still influential today,”<sup>5</sup> Beatrice Colomina writes, and most scholars agree. The abundance of academic literature on the Austrian architect continues to grow, but while Loos, his work, and his influence on the modernist movement have received plentiful and ongoing attention from both architectural practitioners and historians, one central aspect has been persistently disregarded: Adolf Loos was profoundly deaf by the time he produced his most influential works.

“[S]uccessful disabled people,” Lennard J. Davis points out, “... have their disability erased by their success.”<sup>6</sup> Many deaf people identify as a linguistic group and strongly reject the descriptor disabled, but this editing out of his differently-sensing body has certainly happened in the scholarship architecture has produced about Loos.<sup>7</sup> Given that he was so “successful” (to use Davis’ term), so crucial to modernism (to use Le Corbusier’s assessment), so influential to those around him and those who came after him (in Colomina’s view), it seems important to finally foreground his deafness and to ask new questions of this familiar architect:

How did his deafness shape Loos’s influential built and written work?

How does focusing on Loos’s deafness challenge narratives of anthropocentrism, bodily normalcy, and exchangeability which are understood to be at the centre of architectural modernism?

What can a consideration of Loos as a deaf architect reveal about larger intersections of architecture, disability, and ableism?



Images 2-4: Loos in conversation in Pilsen using gestures and written notes  
Photographs by Willy Kraus, 1930. Albertina, Vienna ALA 2106, 2107, 2093

The images show Loos communicating by gestures, facial expressions and glances, repositionings in space, and lip pattern reading.

### **The Research:**

*Deafening Architecture – Re-centring the work of Adolf Loos* tugs at records relating to Loos’s audiological condition amidst the rich, interconnected layers of two archives in Vienna, the Graphische Sammlung Albertina and the Wienbibliothek im Rathaus. During my visits, I was able to study diverse sources such as Loos’s architectural drawings, sketches, and photographs as well as under-considered items including handwritten manuscripts, notebooks used for communication in written rather than spoken language, business cards, travel journals, and letters. I was also able to interview the collections’ curators and visit a selection of Loos’s built projects. In addition to this work in Vienna, the research draws on the RIBA collections, on the work of architectural historians and Deaf studies scholars, as well as on critical

disability, cognitive science, linguistic and feminist perspectives. Based firmly on primary sources and rooted in an interdisciplinary context, my argument makes three distinct points:

1. Firstly, the research considers three of Loos's most acclaimed works through the lens of his deafness:

- “Ornament and Crime” (which architectural historian Christopher Long considers “defining essay of Loos’s ideology”);
- the Moller House in Vienna (which Panayotis Tournikiotis calls “the culmination of Loos’s long intellectual voyage”);
- and the Villa Müller in Prague (which Murray Fraser argues was “the richest [of his houses and best] expressed Loos’s most revolutionary concept, Raumplan”).<sup>8</sup>

I scrutinise each of these projects in detail, focusing on the architect’s consideration of materials, circulation routes, sightlines, and detailing. In parallel, I use archival material to trace the progression of Loos’s deafness over time and work with current medical scholarship on deafness, spatial cognition, and perception.<sup>9</sup> My argument draws out specific links between Loos’s differently sensing body and the kinds of spaces he proposed and built. Overall, I argue that key elements of Loos’s visionary architecture - from his desire for uncluttered space with interconnections and clear sightlines to his emphasis on haptics and materials – were rooted in his deaf sensory experiences and abilities and propose that Loos created what current research now calls “deaf space” almost a full century ago.<sup>10</sup>

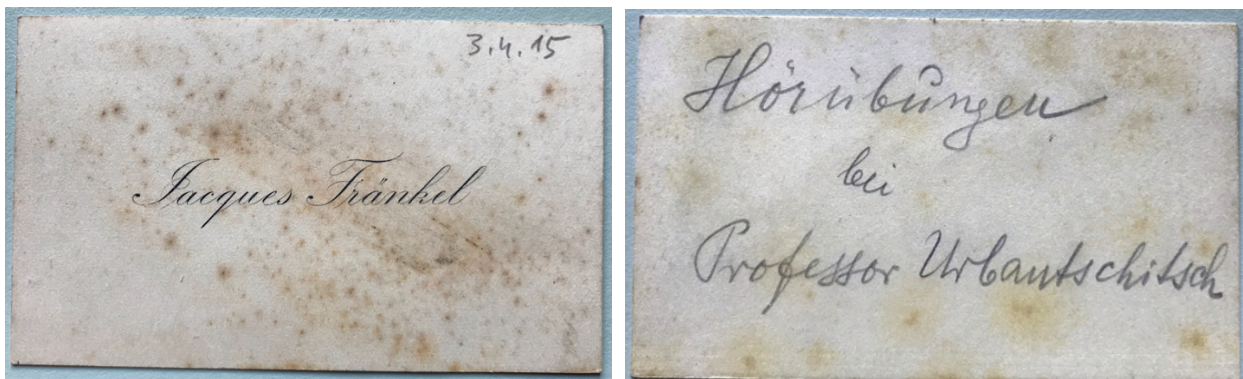
2. Secondly, the research branches out to address not only Loos and his work but also the creative context within which he operated. It considers modernist discourse and its anthropometric templates based on the normal body, its obsession with hygiene, fresh air, and self-optimization, and its rhetoric about standardisation, universality, and human interchangeability. Writing in *L’Esprit Nouveau*, Le Corbusier underlined that, as a modernist architect, he designed for a “typical, standardised, normal man: two legs, two arms, a head. A man who perceives red, or blue, or yellow, or green.”<sup>11</sup> A man who, no doubt, also perceives sound. A man who is not quite like Adolf Loos. I ask how, then, Loos fits into scholarly understandings of modernism, as whose distinct forerunner Le Corbusier hailed him and as whose “father figure” architectural histories have consistently cast him.<sup>12</sup> Or how does Loos *mis*-fit into these well-versed narratives and what this means for the modernist movement.

Here, I highlight Josef Veillich, the furnituremaker with whom Loos worked closely for decades, and Ottilie Berger, a weaver at the Bauhaus with whom Loos exchanged letters. Both, like Loos, were deaf. I argue that these (and other!) “flawed” bodies

were active determiners of modernist space and discourse: their distinct other ways of being, knowing, and making impacted and shaped the core of modernism. Their deafness further disrupts modernism's narratives of universality; their creative processes disturb the movement's overbearing message of bodily normativity.

3. Thirdly, the research proposes that architectural scholarship has, thus far, failed to consider its histories and practice through the lens of bodily diversity and to highlight deaf and disabled bodies' distinct influence on the discipline.

I propose that our discipline needs to critically consider larger entanglements of architectural discourse and practice with disability, ability, and – crucially - ableism. In the case of the early twentieth century, questions must be raised about the complex ways in which architectural modernism relied on highly reductive ways of thinking about bodily diversity to shape the core of its ideology. I argue that scholarship now must address the discipline's problematic connections to those narratives of human diversity which establish and support hierarchies of worth and authority by categorising bodies into binaries such as able / unable, normal / deviant, anthropometric / misshapen, hearing / deaf.



**Image 2:** "Hörübungen bei Professor Urbantschitsch"

Loos was given this business card by Jacques Fränkel, a childhood friend of the composer Arnold Schönberg. On its back, Fränkel's had written the words: "*Hearing exercises with Professor Urbantschitsch.*" Victor Urbantschitsch was an ENT doctor at a Viennese institution for the deaf and had supposedly developed a set of ortho-phonetic und ortho-acoustic exercises to improve residual hearing in deaf patients.  
WBR, HS, NL Adolf Loos, ZPH 1442,3.4.15

### **The Dissemination:**

In my application for the RIBA Research Award, I outlined three categories of output: publication, presentation, and diversification. I achieved the following in relation to these categories:

#### Publication

*Deafening Architecture* aims to articulate the value of deaf spatial contributions, to reverse the erasing of deaf voices and authorship from architectural history, and to

contribute to the discipline's movement towards inclusivity. To reach a large and diverse academic audience, I have laid the groundwork for three publications - two illustrated, refereed book chapter and one special issue of a specialist peer-reviewed journal.

- Nina Vollenbroker, "Deafening Architectural Modernism: Reconsidering the Archive of Adolf Loos" in Jenifer L. Barclay and Stefanie Hunt-Kennedy, eds, *Crippling the Archive: Disability, History, and Power*, Chicago, University of Illinois Press, 2024 (in print for autumn)
- Nina Vollenbroker, "Un/Common Precedents: Re-centring the work of Adolf Loos" in Federica Goffi, ed, *Un/Common Precedents*, London: Routledge, 2025 (under contract)
- *Architectural Research Quarterly* (Cambridge University Press), special journal issue "Architecture and Disability" edited by Nina Vollenbroker and Stelios Giamarelos, 2025 (under contract)
- (Furthermore, while this proposal was for a defined two-year project with distinct outputs, I have an ambitious larger plan and have started larger research into how deaf authorship has shaped our production and understanding of architecture, 1850 to 1950.)

#### Presentation

I have given invited academic presentations about this RIBA-funded research on Adolf Loos to audiences in the UK, Canada, and South Africa at three international symposia. I have begun firmly establishing myself as a scholar in the emerging field of architecture and disability. This spring, I am organising and chairing a panel at the prestigious Architectural Historians' Annual International Conference in New Mexico, USA, on the topic of architecture, disability, and deafness.

- "Modern Architecture in the Anthropocene" symposium. Three-day event hosted by The University of Cape Town, South Africa / The Bartlett School of Architecture (October 2022)
- "Inclusive Spaces" open lecture series. Co-organiser and speaker at an event exploring equity, diversity, and inclusion in the built environment hosted by The Bartlett School of Architecture (April 2023)
- "(Un)Common Precedents" symposium. Three-day event at the Azrieli School of Architecture, Carleton University, Canada (September 2023)
- The Society of Architectural Historians' Annual International Conference. Albuquerque, New Mexico, USA. Panel organiser and session chair: "Global Histories of Architecture, Disability, and Deafness" (April 2024)

## Diversification

*Deafening Architecture* ultimately navigates the problematics of diversity, privilege, and power within the built environment. Deaf spatial experience and production have been attributed very little influence on understandings of architecture and its history, leaving non-hearing people spatially marginalised and voiceless. I have been an educator and researcher at The Bartlett School of Architecture for over 15 years, and my new research is allowing me to underscore the multiplicity of architectural production and to further unravel those systems that translate human diversity into categories of differentiation, inequality and discrimination. I have addressed this in my regular teaching, in invited guest teaching, and in the proposal of a new short course.

- At The Bartlett, I have lectured on Adolf Loos as a deaf architect to students on the BSc Architecture programme and on the MSci Architecture programme. I have also spoken about the *Deafening Architecture* project to staff as part of our internal research presentations.
- London Metropolitan University has invited me to lecture to their students on my research.
- At present, I am liaising with The Bartlett about an entirely new short course focusing specifically on architecture and disability to cultivate a design community that maintains a shared interest in disability and working towards a more accessible world. This could be offered to postgraduate students from the coming academic year.

I will continue to argue that, as Douglas C. Baynton says, “[D]isability is everywhere in history, once you begin looking for it” and that, as architects, we need to commit to looking for diversity in the built environment,<sup>13</sup>



Image 3: Living room of the Villa Müller, with a view into the staircase and the raised dining area.

Photograph by Martin Gerlach jun. 1930. Albertina, Vienna, ALA932

Image 4: Moller Haus; view from the music room into the adjacent dining room.

Photograph by Martin Gerlach jun. 1927-1928. Albertina, Vienna, ALA2453.

Both buildings show the clear sightlines which are created by Loos's Raumplan and allow for embodied (in addition to spoken) communication

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<sup>1</sup> Douglas C. Baynton, "Disability and the Justification of Inequality in American History," in Paul K. Longmore and Lauri Umansky (eds), *The New Disability History: American Perspectives*, (New York: New York University Press, 2001), 51.

<sup>2</sup> Le Corbusier, "Foreword to Ornament et Crime," in Corbusier, *L'Esprit Nouveau* 2, November 1920, p.159.

<sup>3</sup> See: Murray Fraser, Alicja Gzowska and Nataša Koselj, "Eastern Europe, 1900–1970" in Fraser, ed., *Sir Banister Fletcher's Global History of Architecture*. Volume 2, p. 958.

<sup>4</sup> Panayotis Tournikiotis, *Adolf Loos*, New York, N.Y.: Princeton Architectural Press, 1994, pp.75-8

<sup>5</sup> Beatriz Colomina, "Sex, Lies and Decoration: Adolf Loos and Gustav Klimt," in *Potlatch*, Issue 3 (Adolf Loos: Our Contemporary Unser Zeitgenosse Nosso Contemporâneo), Fall 2012. P.1

<sup>6</sup> Lennard J. Davis, *Enforcing Normalcy: Disability, Deafness and the Body*, London: verso, 1995. P.9

<sup>7</sup> Davis writes: "The Deaf...feel that their culture, language and community constitute them as a totally adequate, self-enclosed and self-defining subnationality within the larger structure of the audist state. ... They see their state of being as defined not medically but rather socially and politically. Davis, *Enforcing Normalcy*. P. Xiv

<sup>8</sup> Christopher Long, The Origins and Context of Adolf Loos's "Ornament and Crime" in *Journal of the Society of Architectural Historians*, Vol. 68, No. 2 (June 2009), P. 201. Christopher Long, "Ornament is not Exactly a Crime: On the Long and Curious Afterlife of Adolf Loos's Famed Essay," in *Potlatch*, Issue 3 (Adolf Loos: Our Contemporary Unser Zeitgenosse Nosso Contemporâneo), Fall 2012. p.31. Tournikiotis, *Adolf Loos*, p. 87; Fraser, Gzowska and Koselj, "Eastern Europe, 1900–1970" P. 970.

<sup>9</sup> Daphne Bavelier, Matthew W.G. Dye and Peter C. Hauser, "Do deaf individuals see better?" in *TRENDS in Cognitive Sciences* Vol.10 No.11, pp.512-18. For investigations into how sensory modalities interact, see also Yuan, Lei, Tian (Linger) Xu, Chen Yu, and Linda B. Smith, "Seeing Is Not Enough for Sustained Visual Attention," In *CogSci*. 2017.

<sup>10</sup> H-Dirksen L. Bauman and Joseph J. Murray eds. *Deaf Gain. Raising the Stakes for Human Diversity*

<sup>11</sup> Quoted in Rob Imrie, "To Body, Disability and the Radiant Environment," in Jos Boys, *Disability, Space, Architecture; A Reader*. Florence: Routledge, 2017. p.27.

<sup>12</sup> Mark Wigley refers to Louis Sullivan and Adolf Loos as the "father figures of modern architecture." Mark Wigley, *White Walls, Designer Dresses: The Fashioning of Modern Architecture*. Cambridge: MIT Press, 2001. P.60

<sup>13</sup> Douglas C. Baynton, "Disability and the Justification of Inequality in American History," in Paul K. Longmore and Lauri Umansky (eds), *The New Disability History: American Perspectives*, (New York: New York University Press, 2001), 51.