

Adolf Loos: REGARDING ECONOMY

This article was compiled by Bohuslav Markalous in 1924 from conversations with Adolf Loos, and originally published in *Wohnungskultur*. Here, the text has been further refashioned.

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A top hat can take a variety of forms. Imagine a row of a hundred of them. I want to go to a funeral. I try various shapes and see that most of them are impossible, ridiculous, and that only one hat fits. The 1924 hat, let's say. This hat is the only possible one for me and the time in which I live.

People find only possible things modern. The 1924 top hat is definitely possible, and if I could have worn it twenty years ago and still wear it today, everything would be fine. And because I can actually wear it, this top hat is fully justified in production terms, or more generally speaking, in commercial terms.

But these are just fashions, which soon change. But if it so happens that a desk loses its aesthetic value for me after ten years, that I find it impossible, get rid of it and buy myself a new one, then that is a gigantic waste in commercial terms.

I reject any form of innovation-mania. Only a conservative person is economical, and every innovator is wasteful. On the other hand, someone who has a lot of clothes takes good care that they do not go out of fashion. Someone who only has one suit has no need to be cautious. On the contrary. Through constant use, he wears out his suit in a very short time, and in so doing forces the tailor to keep inventing new styles. The counter-argument, that these constant changes in fashion are a very useful thing in that they provide the producers with plenty of work, is actually back-to-front.

One needs to have a lot of clothes so that one can change them according to one's needs of the moment. When it is raining I wear a Mackintosh, in spring I wear an overcoat, in winter a worsted suit, and in this way I treat my wardrobe with respect. Fashion is something ephemeral only because we do not make things last. As soon as we have objects which last a long time and stay beautiful, fashion ceases. We should measure beauty in terms of time. I cannot judge rails by how many trains can pass along them, but only by how long they last. They will remain good as long as they do a good, reliable job.

Anyway, matter is alive. And it is essential for matter, substance, product, cloth to enjoy a certain period of molecular rest. This is why I sing the

praises of those great, four-square wardrobes: this is real progress, for besides anything else, such a wardrobe constantly assures me of my own autonomy.

Changing the form where no physical improvement is possible — this is the height of senselessness. I can devise something new when my task is a new one; in architecture: a turbine-house, an airship-hangar. But a chair, a table, a wardrobe? I refuse to acknowledge that a compulsive imaginativeness should lead us to alter tried and tested forms familiar for centuries.

A yawning gulf separates the 18th from the 19th century. In the former, 95 percent of the people worked so that five percent could wear wigs and expensive clothes and play the gentleman. This was utter social immorality. Today the factory-worker and the King of England wear what are basically, from a formal point of view, the same clothes. Our 20th-century presidents and monarchs have not the slightest need for masquerades with crowns and ermine cloaks.

This has a deeper meaning than meets the eye. The intelligent man of today has to wear a mask in front of his fellows. The mask is the form of his clothing, fixed and common to all men. Only half-wits wear individual clothes. They have a need to cry out to all the world who and what they really are.

It is the same with furniture. We make arbitrary changes to let people know immediately who is the article's lord and master, and that as a person he is quite different from everybody else.

It is right that there should be cheap and expensive clothes. This is determined by the quality of the cloth and the skill of the tailor. But even here there are limits. In sport we have a champion who can run 100 yards in the shortest time possible. There is someone who can jump higher than anyone else. Hence, somewhere, there is a master-tailor who knows how to make the most perfect of clothes from the very best material. He could be in New York, in London, in Paris — I do not know.

Luxury is a necessity. Top-quality work has to be paid for by someone.

And the manufacture of luxuries for the sake of the few involves what I was saying about the fastest sprinter and the best high-jumper: that at least a handful of the finest craftsmen manage to attain perfection in what they produce through skill and perseverance. This must stand as an example of the best that man is capable of. Otherwise everything, everywhere, goes downhill. Through the uplifting example of his perfect craftsmanship, the tailor of the King of England has an effect on the whole of the English clothing trade. Without such outstanding men we cannot rise above the mediocre.

Every effort to reduce the durability of an item is wrong. We must make all the articles we produce last longer. This is correct. I buy some poor-quality material and have a suit made from it: the suit lasts a third as long as a good-quality one. One to three! A good suit is economical, a bad one wasteful. This is a matter of great economic significance.

But when objects crafted from top-quality materials with consummate technical skill go out of fashion in a few years through wilfulness of form —this is waste. Laboring for months to produce lace only to have the lace torn in a single night is also a bad thing. Such lace can be produced effortlessly and at much less cost by machine.

Let us strive for refinement and economy. I do not know who is the more economical: the man who drinks good wine or the one who quaffs great quantities of bad.

But I would also like to say something about the psychology of economy. If I buy a cigarette-case, that does not mean I wish to be bludgeoned, to be deprived of the joy of material and workmanship and be given the dubious pleasure of ornamentation in its stead. I want the material itself, suitably finished. A ring is a hoop-shaped piece of good gold. A cigarette-case means two flat trays of good silver, perfectly smooth. The beautiful smoothness of polished silver, so fine to the touch, is the best ornamentation.

But people do not like this. They want something complex, painstaking. Our standards here are still medieval, it seems.

Painstakingness, complexity! How can I enjoy a meal that has been eight days of great effort and skill in the making? Such painstakingness, such complexity, so much trouble makes the banquet utterly tasteless, insipid. For the very reason that eight days' work went into it. Modern man has trouble accepting such excesses of effort.

What pleasure can I take in something which took five years to make? This is upper-class sadism. Nowadays we have simply outgrown such things. We want the opposite: to economize on labor, to spare our fellow men and, above all, to economize on materials. I must confess that I am almost pathologically thrifty and would willingly become leader of the savers.

If I see a lopped-off shelf, I feel sorry for the material, for I restore the missing piece through imagining it in the empty space. And I feel sorry for that piece. In Prague I have seen people ruthlessly cutting fine materials and making them into elaborate, intricately-assembled items. This is a sin.

Every age is economical in its own way. The 18th century spent a lot on food and made great savings in cleanliness. The century stinks. You can even smell it on the furniture.

Today we pay more attention to cleanliness. Even in the trenches the American soldiers built bathrooms. And what happened then? People said: "And you call them soldiers?" Why? Because, for us Europeans, the image of a good soldier is bound indissolubly with that of a dirty soldier. What is more, everyone saves differently on different things.

I am convinced that the proletarian is a much less economical person, that he spends money much more easily. The laborer does not ponder long over whether he should have a glass of beer, whereas the civil servant dillies and dallies—but the same civil servant thoughtlessly throws money away on a stupid ornamental cravat, the purchase of which would require at least half a day's deliberation from the laborer.

The old love of ornament must be replaced by pleasure in the material itself. Material is something completely unknown to us. At one time golden

ducats were thrown out of the window (an upper-class diversion), and pearls dissolved in vinegar and the solution drunk. Pearls were even cut. Nobody would do anything as sinful today.

And we have the least feeling for material, we show least respect for substance, in furniture-making. In architecture and joinery, the architects and designers of today have done away with this feeling for material.

A man was entrusted with the job of going into the forest and looking for a suitable tree. He looked for a long time, but in the end he found it and said: "If I had not found it, I would not have done my job."

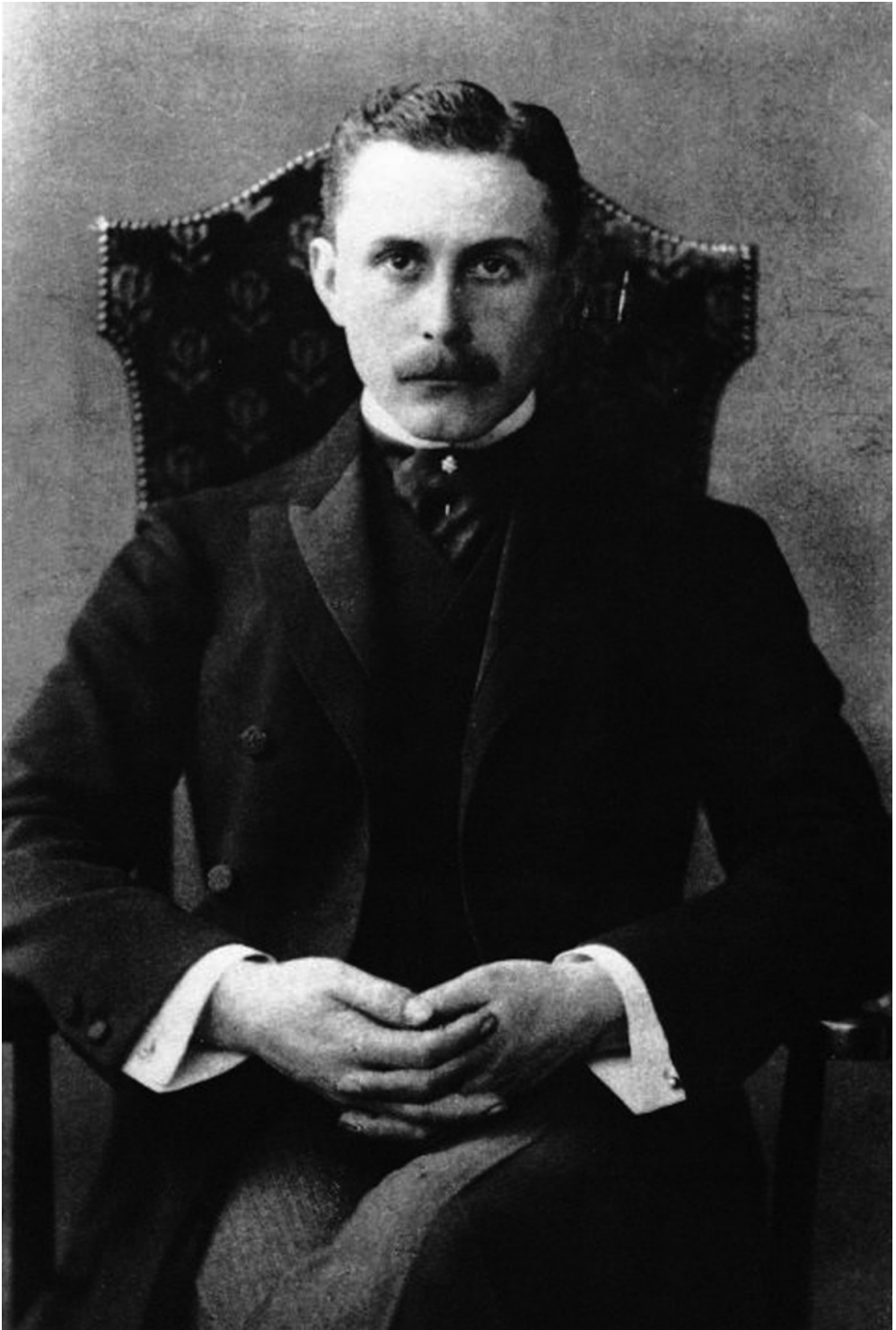
Now that is feeling for material!

Matter must become divine again. Materials are utterly mysterious substances. We must feel a deep, respectful wonder that such things were created at all. And as for decorating fine materials, perfect in themselves, with ornamentation? "Improving" fine mahogany with purple stain? These are crimes.

When someone tells me that it would be a cruel punishment to be sent to an ordinary prison, one which is pleasant in its plainness, in the language of whitewash and wooden bunks, I can just imagine how much more terrible the prison would be with a completely up-to-date decor created by a "modern designer," from carpets to curtains, from ashtray to clock-hand, from coal-scuttle to inkwell! Ten years imprisonment for such designers!

Our designers of furniture and interiors see their main task as that of outdoing. I repeat: outdoing. A shoemaker who makes good shoes can never outdo these good shoes of his. And if I manage to keep his products well, for I have many pairs of shoes, they will always stay up-to-date. Thank God that shoemakers are not yet trying to outdo one another. And God forbid that interior designers should ever design shoes. Then shoemakers would be burning with enthusiasm to outdo each other at least once every two years. I have had shoes for twenty years and they have not gone out of fashion.

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