

The Interior of the Glove: The Lining of Adolf Loos

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Adolf Loos's relationship to Gottfried Semper's theory of cladding is discussed, using the interior of the Villa Müller (Prague, 1930) as a case study. For both Loos and Semper, the effects of cladding transcends the material property of the lining of space to become what Semper referred to as the "double mask of material." This secondary mask resonates - in the best work - with an empathetic charge. For both architects, the "best work" is a product of evolutionary craftsmanship, a domain modified by only the most profound technological discoveries. The Villa Müller is presented here as if only the interior existed, referencing form and lining only. Like a glove turned inside out, the interior lining is exposed, the exterior disappears from view, yet the essential form is preserved.

(This paper is a modified chapter from our recently published book, The Villa Müller: A Work of Adolf Loos, Princeton Architectural Press.)

1. ON THE SURFACE

Loos moved without qualifiers between clothing and cladding. His writings targeted issues of dress, but his dictums rippled out to engulf architecture. Loos spent little effort in forging the theoretical link between these two domains. Only one essay is explicitly dedicated to the relationship between clothing and cladding, and it is a piece resplendent with ideas plagiarized from an architect a generation older, Gottfried Semper. The broad strokes of Semper's position were certainly known to Loos.¹ The necessity for housing the hearth paralleled the social and psychological need for distinguishing an inner world from the outer world. This desire for an interior motivated the construction of the first boundary; enclosure was the primary requirement. The pen and the fence were the first such enclosures invented by man. The first dense enveloping surface was fabric spun by the weaver. "The knitting and dying of colorful carpets were invented for wall dressings, floor coverings and canopies."² For Semper, the sheathing membrane was primary, and the structure required to accommodate gravity and resist loads was necessarily relegated to a subsidiary role. "The structure

that served to support, to secure, to carry this spatial enclosure was a requirement that had nothing directly to do with space and the division of space."³

No statement could more accurately describe the relative status of cladding and structure in Loos's work. Loos subscribed to Semper's conception of the primacy of enclosure, albeit with the substitution of the domestic unit for Semper's hearth (a more generalized social condenser.) Echoing Semper, Loos wrote: "In the beginning was cladding ... (Man) sought to cover himself ... (with) animal skins or textile products ... then the covering had to be put up somewhere if it was to afford enough shelter for a family. Thus the walls were added."⁴ For both Loos and Semper, enclosure was achieved with a thin membrane that wrapped the designated interior realm. Again, the image of the dinner jacket so favored by Loos is apt. Not only does the jacket define an inside via an act of wrapping, but it is essentially comprised of two one-sided surfaces; the inside is not merely the backside of the outside. The same is true for Loos's walls. One thinks immediately of the split between the white plaster exterior and the opulent interior, but the split wall is not limited to the enclosure that separates the inside from the outside. The schism quite logically runs through all the walls. Surfaces belong not to their particular wall section, but to the spaces they face. This contrast between the two faces of Loos's walls was preconditioned by the Semperian model.

The materialism evoked by Semper's evolutionary fiction disguises a more ephemeral Semper, the Semper of the double mask. In its architectural manifestation, cladding obscures the underlying structural substratum; the cladding is a mask. The wall is defined by its surface and the surface defines the interior of the room. But the interior actually stops a little short of its physical boundary. The material condition of the cladding is itself obscured by the shroud of a second mask. In the best work, the material of the enclosure is vaporized and physical substance is superseded by a vibrant aura. "(An) untainted feeling led primitive man to the denial of reality in all early artistic endeavors; the great, true masters....in times of high artistic development also masked the material of the mask..."⁵ Thus the material could be masked twice.

For Loos, every legitimate cladding material (a cladding material that cannot be confused with the material to be clad) aspired to this condition of material transcendence. Each material is infused with a particular charge, with atmospherics that envelope the mind's eye. This miasmatic condition is not merely the state of the architect imagining the quality of the final space, but it is a condition perpetuated by the built work. Well-employed materials elicit empathic responses. Occasionally, materials even summon more existential emotions. "May the secret of materials remain a mystery for us. Otherwise the ceramicists would not sit, in agonizing joy, before the kiln, hoping, dreaming of the new colors and tones that God, in his wisdom, neglected to create so that mankind could take part in the marvelous act of creation."⁶

Loos's ceramicists and Semper's builder of the double mask agree on the precondition for producing the haze of the mask. They share an attitude regarding fabrication and proclaim an essential connection to century-long traditions of established technique. Semper recognized that "masking does not help...when behind the mask the thing is false or no good. In order that the material, the indispensable (in the usual sense of the expression) be completely denied in the artistic creation, its complete mastery is the imperative precondition."⁷ Loos's potter also seeks transcendence from the base material quality of the clay, and his enterprise is predicated on a kind of cooperative contract between the craftsman and his material. "I know thousands of years of workshop traditions. I have applied them. But we are not at the end. The spirit of the material is not yet overcome...May that never happen."⁸ By linking material transcendence to technical mastery, architectural production is removed from the realm of original genius and from the stimulus of fabulous creative inspiration. Architectural form is tied to a slowly evolving plate, where shifts are infrequent, but when they occur, their effect is cataclysmic and irreversible.⁹ In contrast to this vision of epic evolution, the agitated generation of self-willed tremors emanates from a different realm: the field of "art." For Loos, the architect was not an artist. Technique appears paradoxically as both a lubricant and an abrasive; it enables authenticity and hinders willful invention.

2. THE LINING OF LOOS

In 1930, near the end of his life, in the outskirts of Prague, Loos completed his last urban villa. More than any other work, the Villa Müller was given over to the architect's obsession with the lining of the interior. There is value in scrutinizing the Villa Müller in literally the most superficial way, by tracking the thin and textured veneers that make up the interior. The cladding reveals the full scope of Loos's position. The textile origins of the enclosure, the two-faced nature of the wall, the empathic aura of the interior, the charge of the partially obscured, the authority of technique: these are all concretized, in subtle relief, on the surface of the wall. And since the cladding follows the same rules that govern the configuration of space, it is not surprising that,

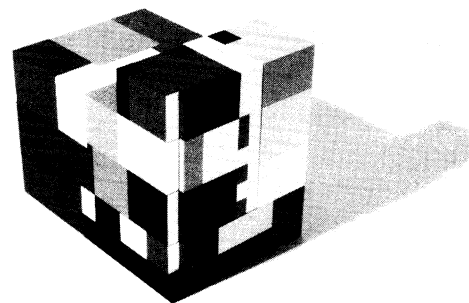


Fig. 1. Inside-out model of the Villa Müller, assembled.

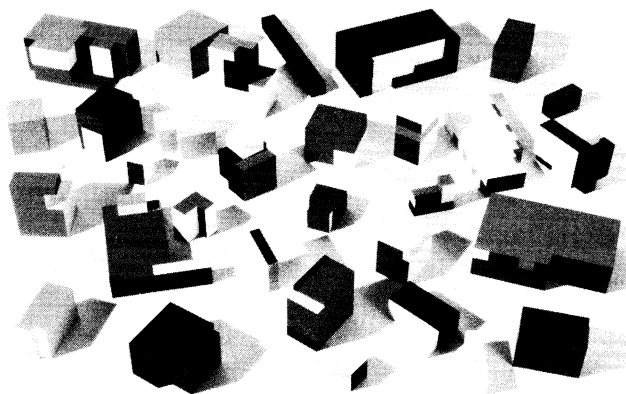


Fig. 2. Inside-out model, disassembled.

written onto the surfaces of the interior, is the story of the Raumplan.

Each room in the Villa Müller is not only distinctively formed, but also uniquely clad. Despite the density and opacity of the construction, one experiences the interior of the building as a sequence of linings. Like slipping in and out of fine dinner jackets, lining succeeds lining. The entry sequence, for example, is composed of four discrete spaces, and four discrete wrappers.¹⁰ The travertine dressing of the recessed porch opens into the emerald-green, glass tiled entry vestibule, which shimmers in the streaks of daylight from the south-facing door.¹¹ The opaque glass sheathing has the thinness and depth associated with still water, where all the virtual depth lies on the paper-thin layer of the undisturbed surface. The walls are bound at the top and bottom by a line of red ceramic tile. The ceiling is white plaster. Double doors fold back to reveal the next lining. The anteroom is wrapped with cream-colored wood cladding, with small square panels recessed from the gridded surface a slim 0.5cm. A molding strip of the lacquered wood frames the azure-colored ceiling. Opening into the anteroom is the small pocket of the cloakroom. Here the lining—raw burlap—is literally fabric.

A new material palette is introduced in the bookmatched,

marble-clad hall. Two massive blocks (400/66/60cm) of cipolin were cut into 47cm wide panels, a dimensional module that repeats throughout the hall on the finished structural columns, the pilasters, and the marble panels framing the fireplace.¹² The module appears in double and triple measure on either side of the windows, on the stepped wall to the dining room, and on the radiator housings flanking the couch. The use of the module, particularly the bookmatched double module, tames the frenetic pattern of the marble and regulates the interior. Great care was taken to assemble the cipolin plies in such a way as to deny a structural reading. None of the edges of the stone paneling are mitered, thereby preventing the illusion of solidity or mass. The horizontal surfaces never rest on the verticals. Instead, the side panels rise independently, and the horizontal sheets are laid between the vertical lips like precious gems in bezel settings. At each corner, both in elevation and in plan, the 1.75cm thin section of the material is exposed. The oak floor of the marble hall, laid in a conventional herringbone pattern, is outlined like a playing field by a band of mahogany and black oak. Originally, it was strewn with carpets. The similarity between the swirling-patterned textiles and the variegated stone emphasizes Loos's claim to the legacy of Semper's original weaver. Indeed, it has been written that the Loos's cladding "covers the occupant as clothes cover the body."¹³

The dining room, the library and the boudoir are also conceived of as distinctly-clad interiors. The dining room and the library are both lined with dark mahogany paneling and shelving. The woman's room is coated with a glossy veneer of lemonwood. In each of these interiors, the grain of the wood is obsessively composed, creating a graphic image with the thinness of a printed pattern. A substantial reflection glimmers on the surface, and from a depth that contradicts the shallowness of the veneer, a sensuous warmth is emitted.

The distinct cladding of distinct spaces is continued in the upper levels of the villa. The master bedroom appears in a romantic garb, wrapped in a wallpaper depicting (in patches



Fig. 3. Villa Müller, Marble Hall, photo 1992.

of finely cross-hatched images) sea-bound ships with billowing sails, floating islands dominated by outcroppings of decaying castle fragments, puffs of drifting clouds foregrounded by soaring swallows, canoes manned by dark-haired youths, and fishing vessels docked at the vegetated shores of a languid landscape.¹⁴ The bourgeois sentimentality that exudes from the walls of Mr. and Mrs. Müller's bedroom more than hints at Loos's untroubled relationship with the core of domestic bliss. But how quickly the fluff of this interior evaporates in the two flanking wardrobes, as if the act of dressing up applied equally to the occupant and to the space. Both wardrobes are respectably outfitted: Mr. Müller's with a rare and costly cut of oak, Mrs. Müller's with light maple. Behind the closet doors is an arsenal of devices developed by Loos for the many clothing stores he designed in Vienna, Paris and Prague.

Apart from the brightly-painted interiors (the lilac conversation room near the entry, the blue and yellow playroom, and the inversely-colored child's bedroom), there remains one room of notable cladding: the chamber on the terrace level. Its faceted plan is lined with frames of stretched plant-fiber sheets embossed with silver. The perimeter of each panel is clearly outlined with a broad band of emerald green and black trim, giving the panels the appearance of structural self-sufficiency. Like an unfolded screen, the frames are fit into the undulating recesses of the room. The panels stop short of the ceiling, rendering the cladding as a thin wrapper pressed into a mold of white plaster.

The distinct cladding of the individual rooms is the dress of the room. But the villa is not constructed of discrete, bounded rooms. For it is the nature of the Raumplan to dissolve an edge, to have spatial continuity across the carefully fabricated borders that define the spatial units of the villa. Two architectures inhabit the house simultaneously. The first is an architecture of rooms, the second is an architecture of transit, of flow between rooms. The cladding of the first is coordinated with the physiognomy of the room; the cladding of the second is coordinated with routes of passage, with the seams between rooms. It is disheveled, strewn with the traces of robing and disrobing. In Loos's conception, the zone of the seam is stretched. It not only occupies the unclaimed space between rooms, it contests the territories already claimed by the rooms. As the architecture of the joint becomes spatially complex, so too does its cladding. Consciously denied the condition of discrete interiority, and by extension discrete dress, the circulation system is lined with the intertwined fringes of adjacent fabrics. The cladding of the roving subject is formed by an act of weaving.

Material overlap is as much in evidence in the Villa Müller as the individually-clad interior. The ceramic tile floor in the entry vestibule sweeps beyond the swinging doors to claim the adjacent anteroom. The marble cladding of the main hall extends into the neighboring territory, sheathing the pedestal of the boudoir and stretching in opposite directions into the slotted recesses of the stairs. At one end, the marble stops at

the back door to the woman's room. At the other end, the marble terminates in a stepped pyramid, a form reminiscent of Loos's monumental works, particularly the mausoleum for the art historian Max Dvorak. (Appropriately, a bust of Frantisek Müller's deceased father was originally positioned on this ziggurat.) The marble of the main hall also claims both sides of the stepped wall, thereby contributing to a loss of material sovereignty in the dining room. Ultimately, the interior of this room is fragile; it is actually a veritable collage of adjacent materials. The west and south walls of the dining room (only partially clad in mahogany) are wrapped with materials from adjacent spaces, and the east edge of the space dissolves into a shimmer of glass, mirror and polished brass. The dining room's well-formed, well-clad interior is entirely the privilege of the group seated at the table under the mahogany canopy.

Nowhere is the ripple effect of the roving subject more poignantly expressed than in the low, narrow passage/niche that links the anteroom to the marble hall. Ironically, it is precisely this intriguing intersection that has slipped between previously published plans of the villa. The joint is hidden below the seating alcove of the boudoir in the original upper floor plan, and floats above the cut line of the lower floor plan. Loos's decision about how to section the building horizontally was driven by the need to sell the villa to city officials as a two-story construction. The architecturally logical choice to construct a plan of the entire entry sequence, from the front door to marble hall, was understandably sacrificed in the process of obtaining the building permit. The original plans have become the basis for almost all subsequent publications,

thereby perpetuating the confusion that Loos apparently wished to inflict upon the building officials.¹⁵

The impossibility of typologically categorizing this space makes it an exemplary specimen of the Loosian enclosure. It is not a synthesis of a passage and a niche, but rather it exists as both simultaneously. As a passage, it is an essential link in the transit system, a portion of the corridor/stairway feeder. From the anteroom, the passage promises nothing but steps and a circuitous ascent. As a niche, this zone appears as a place of stasis. The level portion at the top of the stairs measures 2.2m x 1.0m (h=2.1m) and is precisely located with respect to the larger room beyond. It is incorporated into an axial relationship with three openings framed respectively by the pilasters of the niche, the marble-clad columns, and the window with its view to the exterior.

What is of particular interest is the collision of such a space with a theory of cladding that thrives on definite enclosure. While few of the rooms are actually materially hermetic — their cladding wraps and folds onto adjacent walls and floors to weave the spatial chunks of the plan together — this zone is so small that it never appears to attain its own material identity. It is essentially dressed by the excess folds of the neighboring spaces. The wood paneling of the anteroom extends along the wall into the passage, covering most of the vertical surfaces. Wrapping around the corner from the other direction, two 23cm wide vertical strips of marble cladding flank the opening, marking the entry to the main hall like the folded flaps of a tent. While the wall treatment is dominated by the paneling of the anteroom, the flooring belongs entirely to the marble hall.

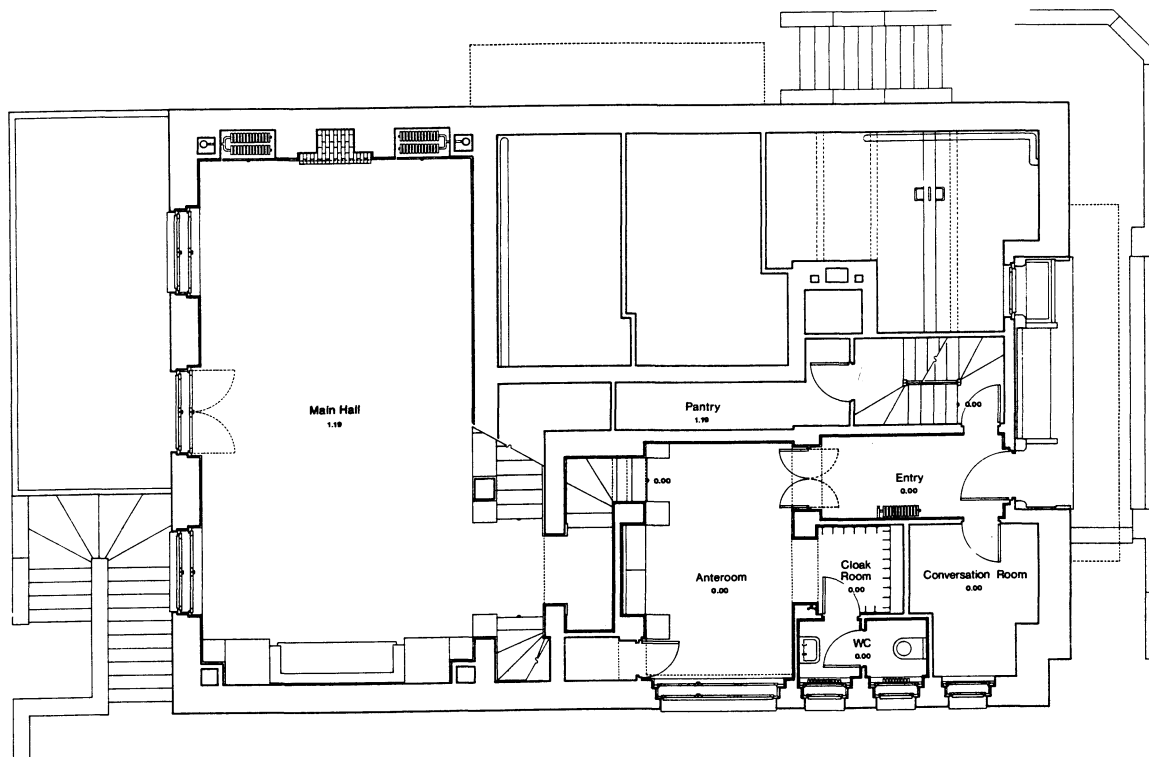


Fig. 4. Villa Müller, plan showing passage between anteroom and marble hall.



Fig. 5. Villa Müller, passage/niche, photo 1992.

The white plaster ceiling, however, belongs to neither. It belongs instead to the underside of the box of the boudoir above. The adjacent spaces seem to have conspired to leave a gap between themselves, and the narrow passage vibrates with the residue of their respective material attributes. It appears that the passage is permeated by a sense of transition, constructed entirely by sheathing spilling out from behind and ahead and above to form an enclosure by sheer overlap.

However, for the immobile eye, for the eye that momentarily warrants enclosure as the body rotates and pauses at the top of the stairs, for the eye that is transfixed by the symmetrically-framed spectacle that snaps into place like a carefully-laid trap, for the eye of the stationary subject, Loos has provided the subtle signs of a bounded interior. The floor of the niche is not a seamless extension of the floor of the marble hall. The oak strips of the niche were trimmed to form a distinct rectangular pad, and the direction of the herringbone pattern was rotated 90 degrees with respect to the room beyond. An inlaid bar of mahogany and black oak forms an unmistakable threshold, graphically marking the limit of the space. Roughly at eye-level, there is a band of cladding material that appears nowhere else in the villa: a strip of black

wallpaper speckled with blue and green flowers. The paper wraps all four sides of the niche, interrupted only by the opening to the marble hall. It is an announcement acknowledging the status of the niche as a room.

As in this diminutive space, the cladding throughout the interior is stretched and folded and wrapped in an effort to hold together an almost impossible set of relationships between the competing demands of two antithetical subjects. Arrangements are negotiated locally, and the cumulative effect is an interior of unfathomable density. The inside is not conceivable as a overall structure, but rather as a sequence of distinct episodes. Despite the thinness of the plies that define the spatial events, the "voids" between the wrappers are immeasurably thick. This opacity prevents any conceptual transparency. The building's geometric order lies somewhere within the thickness of the walls. It would require a substantial archeology effort to recover the underlying order on which these walls are erected.

Loos had no interest in assisting with an excavation of the line. In fact, he emphatically rejected the disembodied project of the draftsman/architect as marking the inevitable collapse of building under the weight of drawing. Perhaps it is surprising that there are many moments of measurable inexactitude in the Villa Müller: grids which are irregular, symmetries that are unequal, centers that are not centered. But these are Loos's rallying points of resistance against the seduction of graphic marks: "Drawing board and kiln! A world separates the two. Here the exactitude of the compass, there the indeterminacy of the incidental, the fire, the dreams of mankind, and the mystery of becoming."¹⁶

NOTES

- ¹ Loos spent a year at the Sächsischen Technischen Hochschule in Dresden where Semper's influence was still strong, and he greatly admired Semper's Viennese work. Loos echoed Semper's views quite directly in two early essays: "Glass and Clay" and "The Principle of Cladding." The first was dedicated to Semper's essentially materialistic reading of cultural artifacts; the second built on his theory of the textile origins of enclosing walls.
- ² Gottfried Semper, *The Four Elements of Architecture*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989), 254.
- ³ Semper, "Four Elements," 254.
- ⁴ Loos, "The Principle of Cladding" in *Spoken Into the Void* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1982), 66.
- ⁵ Semper, "Four Elements," 257.
- ⁶ Loos, "Keramika" in *Trotzdem*, 57.
- ⁷ Semper, "Four Elements," 258.
- ⁸ Loos, "Keramika" in *Trotzdem*, 57.
- ⁹ The flat roof and the electric light qualified as shifts of this magnitude. "One may only do something new if one can do it better. Only the new inventions (the electric light, the concrete roof and so on) rip holes in tradition..." Kulka, *Adolf Loos - Das Werk des Architekten* (Wien: Anton Scholl Verlag, 1931), 18.
- ¹⁰ The architectural "introduction" was to serve a therapeutic function for the "man with modern nerves" by inducing a mild form of amnesia: "thanks to the introduction, the person who enters the house with evil intentions must leave his animosity, together with his overcoat, in the anteroom." Kulka, *Adolf Loos*, 37.

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- ¹¹ The tiles, measuring 30cm x 71.5cm, are affixed with a mastic. Müller suggested a mechanical fastening, but Loos dismissed the notion of exposed screw heads, just as he generally eschewed any pseudo-mechanical gymnastics or pseudo-industrial fetishes (excluding his obsession with plumbing fixtures.) Müller to Kulka, 17 December 1929, Prague, Folio A14, Loos Archive, Graphische Sammlung Albertina, Vienna.
- ¹² Letter from Müller to Loos, June 22, 1929, Pilsen, Folio A14, Loos Archive, Graphische Sammlung Albertina, Vienna.
- ¹³ Beatrix Colomina, "Intimacy and Spectacle: the Interior of Adolf Loos" in *Strategies in Architectural Thinking*, John Whiteman, Jeffrey Kipnis, and Richard Burdett, ed. (Chicago: Chicago Institute for Architecture and Urbanism, 1992), 81.
- ¹⁴ Loos was able to bring himself to use a similar treatment (or was compelled to do so by the client) in the master (?) bedroom of the Villa Kapsa.
- ¹⁵ The plans have been redrawn for this publication to show the continuous route into the marble hall, including the complex knuckle beneath the boudoir.
- ¹⁶ Loos, *Keraminka, Trotzdem*, 57.