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The exhibition's textile display shows the range of Frank's zest for pattern
IMAGE Aslan Kudrnofsky

LESSON

Lesson: Josef Frank

Vienna
15 December 2015

Viennese architect and designer Josef Frank practised an inclusive form of architecture: architecture for the people and of the people. A new exhibition, *Josef Frank: Against Design* at the MAK in Vienna, commemorates Frank’s analytical and humanistic approach to design, a way of working that separated him from many of his modernist contemporaries in questioning the rigidity and moral purism of the International Style.

“One can use everything that can be used,” wrote Josef Frank in a 1927 essay. An architect and applied artist, Frank prioritised comfort and human interaction with a space over more formal design concerns; an attitude that placed him in contrast to the mechanistic and geometric preferences of architecture of the 1920s and 1930s. His socially democratic ideals, which valued the human and collective capacity of a space, remain relevant and continue to gain traction in the international design field.

“Frank made statements in the 1930s or 1940s which have come up only later in the architectural discussion,” says Viennese architect and designer Hermann Czech, one of the curators of the MAK exhibition. “He was sceptical. He was able to approach design questions from cultural and even political standpoints.”

Josef Frank: Against Design offers a comprehensive overview of Frank’s diverse, spontaneous and kitsch oeuvre. The exhibition features a selection of his furniture and textile designs, and places him in the context of 24 of his predecessors, contemporaries, and successors in the architecture world. Frank’s work is placed in dialogue with that of Leon Battista Alberti, Adolf Loos, Josef Hoffmann, Le Corbusier, Ernst A. Plischke, Alison and Peter Smithson, Robert Venturi, and Rem Koolhaas, among others.

Born into a Jewish family in Baden near Vienna in 1885, Frank studied architecture at the University of Technology in Vienna. He quickly began practicing, designing homes on Mies van der Rohe’s celebrated Weissenhof Estate in Stuttgart, as well as teaching at the Vienna School of Arts. In 1925 he founded Haus & Garten, a home furnishings company created in conjunction with fellow designer and architect Oskar Wlach, all the while remaining a central proponent of modernism in Vienna.

Yet growing anti-Semitism drove Frank to emigrate to Sweden in 1933, where he became a citizen in 1939. During his time in Sweden, Frank worked as the chief designer of the home furnishings company Svenskt Tenn. After a brief stint in New York, teaching at the New School of Social Research in New York, he returned to Stockholm in the 1940s where he remained until his death in 1967.

Throughout his career, Frank designed more than 1,000 pieces of furniture and approximately 200 fabric patterns, many of which remain in production. As an architect, his projects ranged from social housing to single-family homes and villas, yet he is particularly known for his intricate floral textiles and wallpapers for Svenkst Tenn, which were inspired by the vibrant patterns of 18th-century India. Yet Frank’s legacy endures not only through his eclectic body of work, but also through his nonconformist and pioneering theorisation.

Frank’s unconventional outlook prioritized interior space: he saw a building exterior as essentially reactionary, a backside influenced by inner liveability. His own home’s exterior was sleek and minimal – seemingly modern – but inside it was furnished with oriental rugs, cushions and colours suited to his taste. His architectural designs sought to empower, not by giving carte blanche to its inhabitants, but by providing a subtle structure through which they were encouraged to step in and tailor the home to their personal preferences.

He believed that comfort happened unintentionally and coined the term “accidentism” to suggest an environment that is designed as if it had been created by chance. This notion is in stark contrast to our increasingly mechanised and digitised world, in which little is left to chance. Frank’s approach was decidedly anti-dogma, although often contradictory: he dismissed rectangles as “totalitarian,” yet employed the shape in many of his designs.

“He would not adhere to a strict system,” says Czech. “In architecture, a theoretical system can be challenged by a concrete work. In each work there are always different conditions, so if you attempt to take a theory and make a system out of it, you will be met with contradictions.”

Frank regularly adjusted his theories to meet such tests. He preferred curved walls, but would employ straight angles if a space asked for it. Contrary to good-taste, he believed that designs could – and should – be the sum of an entire era, its tastelessness and all.

“The new architecture will be born of the whole bad taste of our period, of its intricacy, its motley-ness, and sentimentality, it will be a product of all that is alive and experienced first hand: at last, an art of the people instead of art for the people,” he wrote in his 1931 book *Architecture as Symbols*.

Frank advocated quality products and lasting consumer goods, a far cry from today’s lightning-speed product cycles, and saw no harm in altering buildings and designs to meet contemporary needs — a view that maintains its relevance in an age hard-pressed for resources and sustainable solutions. Perhaps even more striking is Frank’s conception of the collectivity of architecture, an observation that rings true nearly 85 years after he wrote it:

“The only visual art form which the masses have not been barred today is architecture, which makes it a remarkable part of contemporary life. Architecture can be enjoyed without any effort; it stands on the street, speaking to people as the philosophers once did, and is seen as essential even from a humble point of view. Everyone feels able to contribute to it because more than any other art, architecture emerges from a collective will and a collective action...”

WORDS Camilla Sterne, *Disegno’s editorial intern*

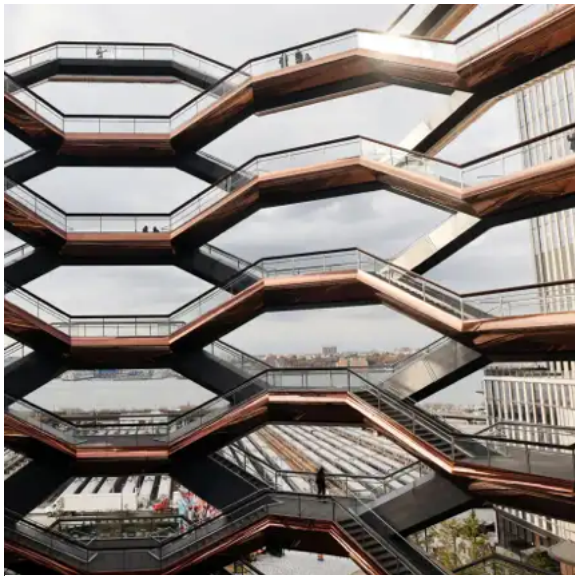
Josef Frank: *Against Design* is open at the MAK in Vienna from 16 December, 2015 to 3 April, 2016

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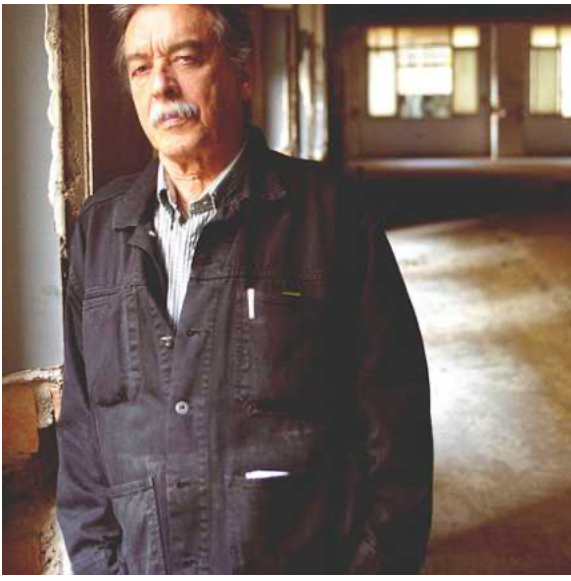


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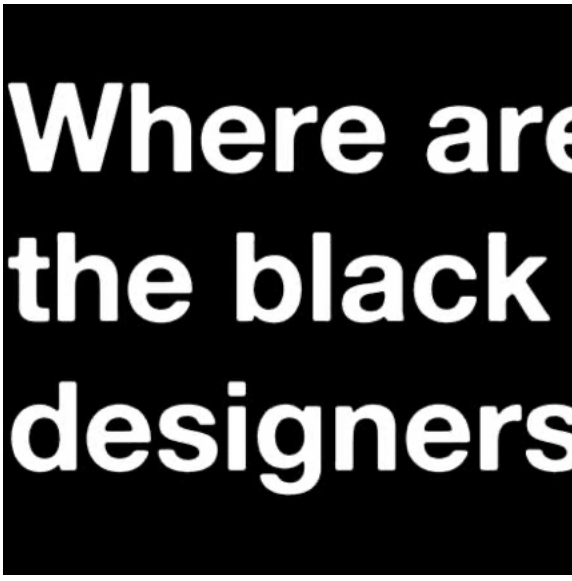
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