

Press Release

JOSEF FRANK: Against Design

Press Conference Tuesday, 15 December 2015, 10:30 a.m.
Opening Tuesday, 15 December 2015, 7 p.m.
Exhibition Venue MAK Exhibition Hall
MAK, Stubenring 5, 1010 Vienna
Exhibition Dates 16 December 2015 – 12 June 2016
Opening Hours Tue 10 a.m.–10 p.m., Wed–Sun 10 a.m.–6 p.m.
Free admission on Tuesdays from 6–10 p.m.

“One can use everything that can be used,” proclaimed Josef Frank, one of the most important Austrian architects and designers of modernity, who, with this undogmatic, anti-formalist design approach, was far ahead of his time. More and more, Frank’s architectural sensibility, which placed serviceability and comfort above form and rules of form, counts as trend-setting. The exhibition *JOSEF FRANK: Against Design* gives a comprehensive overview of the multi-layered oeuvre of this extraordinary architect and designer, while being much more than a survey of his work. This MAK solo exhibition delves into Frank’s complex intellectual and creative strategies, which today are once again highly topical.

The exhibition title *Against Design* encapsulates this undogmatic stance. Frank, who as an architect grappled with all of the themes having to do with architecture and living environments, was also highly productive as a “designer” and developed a plethora of furniture and textiles. Within the international avant-garde, however, he adopted a very critical position. He expressly declared himself opposed to the idea of the Gesamtkunstwerk, standardized furnishings, and innovative forms for their own sake. He could not really warm up to either the individual-artistic paradigms of the Wiener Werkstätte or to functional, mechanized production deriving from the Bauhaus. Frank strove for a socially and culture-critically motivated serviceability, for comfort, livability, and stylistic diversity.

Despite Josef Frank’s relevance as a leading figure of modernism, his work has been

little known up to now. Born into a Jewish family in the town of Baden bei Wien in 1885, Frank studied architecture at the University of Technology in Vienna. Growing anti-Semitism prompted him to emigrate to Sweden in 1933, where he became a citizen in 1939. During his sojourn in Sweden, Frank was closely affiliated with the home furnishings company Svenskt Tenn as their chief designer. From 1942 to 1946 Frank lived in the USA, where he taught at the renowned New School of Social Research in New York. His hopes of establishing himself as an architect and eventually to become involved in city planning were disappointed, however. Not least with his designs for Svenskt Tenn, many of which are still produced today, did Frank, who died in 1967 in Stockholm, leave his imprint on post-war Swedish design.

Curated by architect Hermann Czech and by Sebastian Hackenschmidt, curator of the MAK Furniture and Woodwork Collection, the exhibition *JOSEF FRANK: Against Design* traces an arc encompassing Frank's architectural work, his interior and furniture designs, and his theoretical positions.

The Architect Josef Frank

As an architect, Frank was involved from early on with social housing and the construction of worker settlements. He clearly preferred the settlement concept to multi-story housing blocks. Nonetheless, his buildings span the range from single-family houses with gardens to villas all the way to public housing projects. Built between 1929 and 1931, the Villa Beer counts as one of the most significant Viennese buildings—along with Adolf Loos's Moller House—in the realm of private housing construction during the 1920s. In 1932, Frank supervised construction of the famed Wiener Werkbundsiedlung, a built contribution to the debate about emancipated living in modernity. Frank invited architects Hugo Häring, Josef Hoffmann, Adolf Loos, Richard Neutra, Ernst Plischke, Gerrit Rietveld, Margarete Schütte-Lihotzky, and Oskar Strnad, among others, to participate. The settlement in Vienna's 13th district—occupied through today—arose from the premise of the highest economy of means, following the example of Stuttgart's 1927 Weißenhof settlement, but Frank's resolute choice solely of architects who had not been selected for the project in Stuttgart indicates his skepticism about doctrines and his belief in variety.

Frank's complex and critical stance as to the possibilities of architecture and building will be juxtaposed in this exhibition with comparable approaches of other architects, artists, and designers. This contextualization begins with Renaissance architect Leon Battista Alberti—the topic of Frank's dissertation—and continues with examples such as Adolf Loos, Josef Hoffmann, Hugh Baillie Scott, Mies van der Rohe, Hugo Häring, and Alison and Peter Smithson, Robert Venturi, Christopher Alexander, and Rem Koolhaas: thus, with what at first appear to be thoroughly contradictory positions.

These comparisons are presented not so much as evidence of mutual influence, but much more as a way of classifying the significance of Frank's oeuvre in an international comparison.

Residential living à la Josef Frank

About 70 of Josef Frank's interiors are known. As a designer of interior spaces, Frank represented a pragmatic design approach and advocated for normal—but by no means normative—architecture and design. He considered it self-evident that items already on hand be taken into account and intuitively developed for further use. He did not apprehend an apartment as an object of design, but as a living space that did not necessarily need to be representative or innovative. Especially nowadays, in light of the amplifying call for sustainability, do Josef Frank's uncontrived and unpretentious designs—aimed at an independent, liberated, emancipated social and middle-class lifestyle far removed from stylistic dogmas and modish conventions—appear to be more germane than ever.

On the occasion of this exhibition, the MAK has succeeded in acquiring nearly all of the inventory still remaining from Josef Frank's first interior, the Tedesko apartment finished in 1910 in Vienna. Compared with later works, this early project already demonstrates Frank's characteristic, undogmatic style, which exerted its influence on Viennese residential culture in the Interwar Period and also kept its relevance during Frank's time in Sweden.

Against Design

For Haus & Garten, the Vienna home furnishings enterprise he founded with Oskar Wlach in 1925, and later for Swedish home furnishings company Svenskt Tenn, Frank designed far more than 1,000 individual furniture pieces and about 200 fabric patterns, many of which have been in continuous production through today. Notwithstanding, what mattered to Frank was not merely launching new forms into the world, but the complex interplay of modern and historical approaches outside of the mainstream "design discourses," which tend to result in doctrines. As a theoretician, Frank demanded that kitsch, triviality, and everyday culture be permitted; this makes him a forerunner to architects like Robert Venturi or Rem Koolhaas, as well as a pragmatic antipode to the formalistic mindset of the International Style. In Frank's idea of a "comfort residence," vestiges of personal experience were essential, welcome components of the individual furnishing scheme.

As a designer and as an architect, Frank stood for culture-critically oriented, middle-class serviceability. In contrast to the dogmatic-educative tendencies of the Bauhaus and the German and Austrian Werkbund, Josef Frank did not intend to prime or herald

a future world. Frank coined the term “accidentism” and advocated for structuring living environments as though they arose by chance. As a pioneer of an enlightened postmodernism, he vehemently championed the normal and natural, the objective and spontaneous, as these represented an albeit unspectacular, yet thoroughly convincing design approach marked by the quality of chance.

Frank’s work groupings—furniture, drawings, plans, and textiles—will be shown in *Against Design* for the most part as originals and supplemented by contemporary photographs and architectural models. The comparisons to other architects will be visualized mainly through reproductions. With respect to Frank’s expansion on the Loosian Raumplan—*The House as Path and Place* is the title of one of Frank’s written works—a gallery will be installed in the MAK Exhibition Hall to allow the exhibition to be viewed from above and experienced three-dimensionally.

JOSEF FRANK: Against Design is the second major confrontation with Josef Frank’s critical work at the MAK, the first being the 1981 exhibition *Josef Frank. 1885–1967* curated by Johannes Spalt and Hermann Czech and organized by the erstwhile College of Applied Arts (today’s University of Applied Arts Vienna).

The exhibition will be accompanied by a comprehensive publication.

Images for the exhibition may be downloaded at MAK.at/press.

PREMIUM SPONSORS:



S V E N S K T T E N N

For their generous support we would like to thank
Richard Grubman and Caroline Mortimer
Ephraim F. Gildor Foundation
Kjell and Märta Beijer Foundation

We would like to thank Ingrid and Christian Reder along with their
RD Foundation Vienna for their generous support for research on Frank,
which benefitted the exhibition.

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Curators	Hermann Czech, Sebastian Hackenschmidt (curator, MAK Furniture and Woodwork Collection)
Publication	The exhibition is accompanied by the catalog <i>JOSEF FRANK: Against Design. The Architect's Anti-Formalist Oeuvre</i> , edited by Christoph Thun-Hohenstein, Hermann Czech, and Sebastian Hackenschmidt, German/English, 368 pages with numerous color illustrations, MAK Vienna/Birkhäuser Verlag, Basel 2016. Available at the MAK Design Shop and online at MAKdesignshop.at for € 49.95.
MAK Admission	€9.90 / Reduced €7.50 / Family Ticket €13 Free admission for children and teens up to 19
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Vienna, 15 December 2015