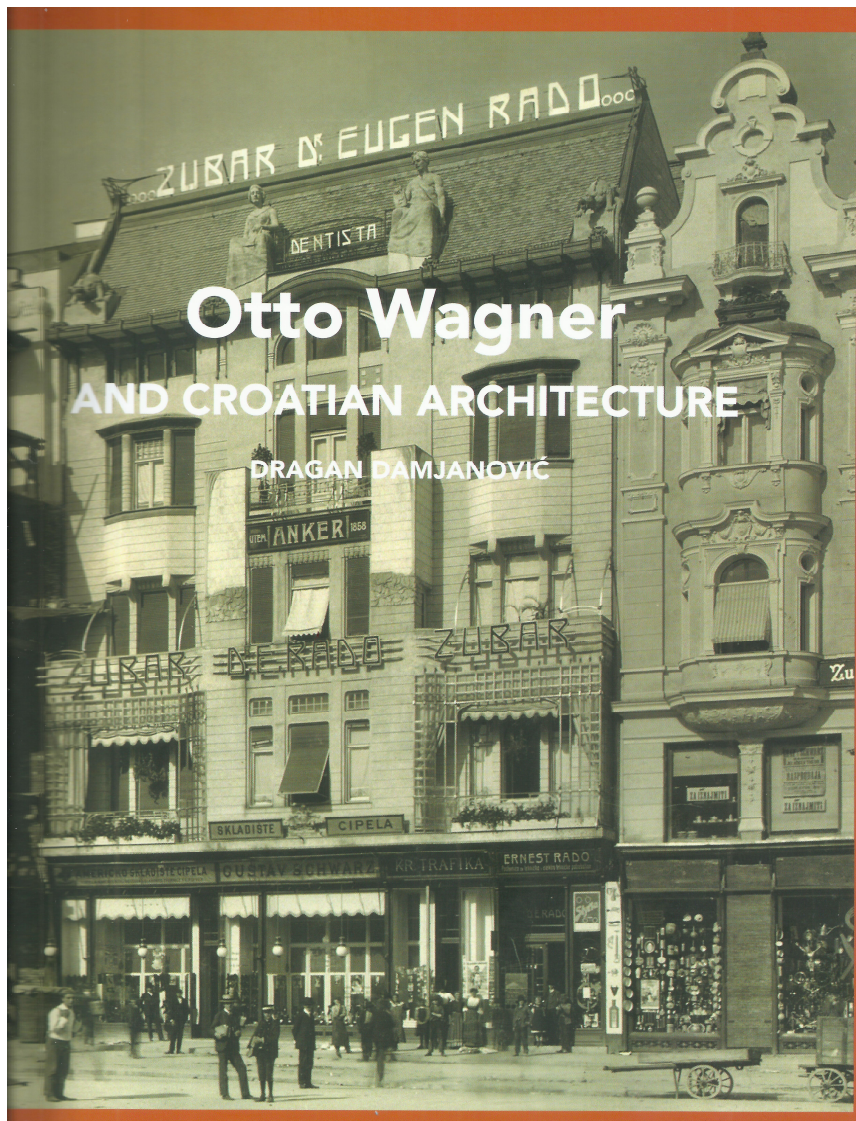


Dragan Damjanović, *Otto Wagner and Croatian architecture*

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Dragan Damjanović, *Otto Wagner and Croatian architecture*, University of Zagreb, Faculty of Humanities and Social Sciences, FF Press, 2024, ISBN: 9789533791579, 128 pages, colour.



Almost sixty years after Marco Pozzetto's pioneering monograph about Max Fabiani and forty-five years after his seminal book *La Scuola di Wagner 1894-1912*¹, the need to unveil the deep influence exerted by Otto Wagner on Central European architectural schools is still keenly felt by scholars. While Croatian historians like Željka Čorak and Tomislav Premerl² have already highlighted the key role of Wagner's architecture in shaping the originality of the Zagreb School, whose main forerunner was Viktor Kovačić (1874-1924), the overview on the complex scheme of the architects who had been schooled in Vienna and operated in Croatia has to be systematized. The worth of Dragan Damjanović's book, an English updated version of an exhibition catalogue in Croatian and German published in 2018³ is to investigate the ties between Croatia and Otto Wagner within a multi-faceted perspective. The exhibition had been organized jointly by Croat and Austrian authorities in October 2018 to celebrate the centenary of Otto Wagner's death and housed at the Croat Embassy in Vienna, in the famous Palais Wagner (Rennweg 3, Wien III). The multiple research objectives analyzed are: the projects and works where Wagner himself was involved; the vicissitudes of Croat students at Wagner's School of Architecture at the Academy of Fine Arts; the life and work of Vjekoslav Bastl (1872-1947) and Viktor Kovačić; the influence of the Wagner School in Rijeka through the works of Theodor Träxler; the Wagner School in Dalmatia and Istria, through the work of Juraj Zaninović (including his projects for Ljubljana and Trieste), Max Fabiani, Marcel Kammerer, Emil Hoppe, Eduard Kramer, Rudolf Melichar; the projects of Wagner's students on the island of Lokrum (Alfred Fenzl and Franz Kaym); to end with an epilogue about the works of Wagner's students in Croatia after 1910.

Damjanović, full Art History professor at the University of Zagreb, is already the author of several books on Croatian modernism before WWI: the strength of his method is to consider the works through an art historical lens, thus broadening the view to the very origins of Secessionist architecture from the Nineteenth century's debate about styles and including a discussion about decorations and artworks that enriched the buildings. With a research on periodical sources, he finds previously unknown information about the Neumann department store and highlights Wagner's connection with the furniture industry Bothe&Ehrmann from Zagreb as well as with other Croat companies. Moreover, with new studies on the archive of Viennese Academy of Fine Arts, he rectifies Pozzetto on the issue of the birth place of Wagner's students: while Pozzetto stated that two of Wagner's students were from Croatia and one from Dalmatia, Damjanović finds that only Josip Costaperaria (1876-1951) was born in Croatia. By a matter of fact, however, Costaperaria is nowadays much more known for his works in Ljubljana and in Slovenia, while Kovačić and Bastl, although born, respectively, in the present-day Slovenia, near Rogaška Slatina and in Příbram, Czech Republic, became not only the most significant exponents of the Wagnerian trend but the precursors of the later developments in Croat architecture. The peculiar, entangled biographies of these Croat architects, whose life was partly spent in Vienna or in different regions of the multi-

¹ Marco Pozzetto, *Max Fabiani architetto*, Gorizia: Comune, 1966; *La Scuola di Wagner 1894-1912: idee, premi, concorsi*, Trieste: Comune, 1979.

² Željka Čorak, *U funkciji znaka – Drago Ibler i hrvatska arhitektura između dva rata*, Zagreb: Centar za povijesne znanosti, Odjel za povijest umjetnosti, 1981; Tomislav Premerl, *Hrvatska moderna arhitektura između dva rata: nova tradicija*, Zagreb: Nakladni zavod Matice Hrvatske, 1990².

³ Dragan Damjanović, *Otto Wagner und die kroatische Architektur*, Zagreb: Moderna Galerija, 2018.

national Austro Hungarian Empire confirms the value of the research recently conducted by Catherine Horel in the social and urban historical field⁴.

Within the author's urban and art-historical perspective, one of the most interesting features of the book is the study on the social background in the turn-of-the-century Zagreb: between the paradigmatic examples, we could just here mention the parts devoted to the project and construction history of the Museum and Office Buildings of the Chamber of Commerce and Crafts (1902-1903), to the Elsa Fluid building (1905, both by Bastl) and to the St. Blaise church by Kovačić (1910-1914).

Each of these buildings reflects the animated political and cultural life of the small town of Agram-Zagreb at the beginnings of last century. The troubled history of the Chamber of Commerce and Crafts shows the fondness of the local bourgeoisie for the Secessionist decorative style (even if in a more moderate version than in the Viennese avant-garde buildings), seen as a way to reach a cosmopolitan image: this explains why the Hungarian governor only half-heartedly supported the initiative. The story of the Elsa Fluid building, together with the Kallina house (1903-1904) one of the most characteristic works of Secessionist architecture in Croatia, gives us a picture of the vivid polemics aroused by the spectacular advertising strategy displayed by the architect, with the giant bottle reproduced in the facade which was harshly criticized from the press. Finally, the church, together with the later building of the Stock Exchange (1922-1926), depicts the shift in taste as well as in the stylistic choices from the side of public customers: the author, in fact, recalls that the public tender won by Viktor Kovačić was inspired from the wish of the mayor of Zagreb to build a medieval style church.

Actually, Kovačić's proto-modernism displayed in his last works, as extensively argued by other Croat scholars, undoubtedly was the most important and future-oriented facet of the impact of the Wagner School in Croatia: in spite of the reduced number of realized works, Kovačić, both for his projects for the Kaptol area and for the two above mentioned masterpieces, as well as for his skills as a writer and teacher, was the most influential figure between the Croat students of Wagner. His figure stands in fact, besides that of Edo Šen (1877-1949) and Hugo Ehrlich (1879-1936), between the founding fathers of Zagreb Polytechnic, where he taught Architectural Composition from 1920 until his premature death in 1924⁵.

The primacy of Kovačić's architectural research, together with his role in the shift of paradigms in architecture after 1910, clearly emerges in the narrative of the book. The author even identifies the analogies between some interior design projects by Kovačić with the work of Adolf Loos, which later received great attention in Croatia, mainly through his collaborator from Zagreb, Zlatko Neumann. Perhaps, Kovačić's "Adriatic" protomodernism displayed in the St. Blaise church should have been put in relation both with the efforts of the architect Franz Kaym, whose projects for the isle of Lokrum are described in the book, as well as with the interest nurtured by the School of Wagner in the Mediterranean and Balkan vernacular tradition, for example with Ernst Lichtblau's sketches and photographic record of a travel through Bosnia and Dalmatia in 1907. Lichtblau published in *Der Architekt* not only his own architectural fantasies, but photographs taken in

⁴ Catherine Horel, *Multicultural cities of the Habsburg Empire, 1880-1914: imagined communities and conflictual encounters*, Budapest: Central European University Press, 2023.

⁵ Zvonimir Vrkljan, "Iz povijesti Zagrebačke Tehnike/From the history of the Zagreb Polytechnic", *Arhitektura* 200/203(1987), 2-11.

Sarajevo, Jajce, Banjaluka, Mostar, Dubrovnik, Split, Šibenik and Trogir⁶. Also, an important monumental work by Kovačić, whose style was extremely close to Adolf Loos, the mausoleum for the marquis De Piennes in Vrbovec (1910-1912) is missing from the book's coverage: in sum, some more hints to Croatian Modernism of the 1920s would have provided an even sounder basis to this excellent research. Also, a map would have been useful for foreign readers.

Finally, Damjanović's book is a remarkable contribution for its large geographical span and the large number of architects focused, thus including previously under-researched topic, like the tourism facilities in the isle of Brijuni designed by the architect Eduard Kramer(1874-1943), a Wagner student native from Galicia, as well as works which are more familiar to the Italian public, than to foreign readers and experts like the Valdoni house in Trieste (1907), by Juraj Zaninović (known in Italy as 'Zaninovich'). The work is also remarkable for its rich visual apparatus, including several photographs taken by the author, which provide a valid information on the current state of the extensive architectural heritage of the Wagner School in Croatia and in the neighbouring former Habsburg countries. As Damjanović states at the end of the volume, in fact «it is to be hoped that this edition will raise awareness of the importance of these achievements and contribute to their preservation, restoration and valorisation as part of the national heritage»⁷.

⁶ Ernst Lichtblau, "Studien und Skizzen aus Bosnien und Dalmatien", *Der Architekt*, 14(1908), 81-83, 86; Franco Borsi, Ezio Godoli, *Wiener Bauten der Jahrhundertwende*, Stuttgart: DVA, 1985, 183.

⁷ Damjanović, 119.