



Heinrich Kulka (1900-1971)
The Spatial Plan as a Design Method
8 July to 7 November 2025

Press tour: Monday 7 July, 10am

Speakers: Adolph Stiller, Jan Sapák, Stephan Templ

Press photos: Photos solely for use in reports on the exhibition and crediting the copyright holder are available for download free of charge at www.airt.at/en.

Curator: Adolph Stiller
Academic consultants: Jan Sapák (Brno) and Stephan Templ (Prague)

Venue: Ringturm Exhibition Centre
Schottenring 30, 1010 Vienna

Opening hours: Monday to Friday, 9am to 6pm, free admission
(closed on public holidays)

Official opening: Monday 7 July, 6.30pm
(invitation only)

Enquiries to: Romy Schrammel
T: +43 (0)50 350 21224
E-mail: presse@wst-versicherungsverein.at

Catalogue

Architektur im Ringturm LXVIII: *Heinrich Kulka. The Spatial Plan as a Design Method*. Adolf Stiller (ed.). German/English. Mury Salzmann Verlag. Approx. 202 pages
Price: EUR 38



Hidden in plain sight: Heinrich Kulka

"I always wanted to remain completely in the background" – so typical of Heinrich Kulka, these words reminded Friedrich Kurrent of the moment when he welcomed the architect back to Vienna in 1966, after 28 years in forced exile. Kulka was more than simply a pupil of Adolf Loos – within a short time, he had become Loos's partner and equal. When Kulka was forced to leave Vienna in 1938, Loos had already been dead for five years. Without Kulka, the semi-detached house in the Werkbundsiedlung development, the Kniže store in Paris, the Matzner stores, the Khuner House, the Müller House in Prague – and many more projects besides – would not even exist. Kulka was also the first chronicler of Loos's work. In his 1931 monograph, Kulka coined the now world-renowned Raumplan or "space design" concept, and, alongside Loos, he shaped its development. Up until his death in 1971, Kulka helped to spread Loos's ideas across the globe. Drawing on new material from international archives, the exhibition at the Ringturm and the accompanying catalogue also focus on less well-known projects such as the Kantor House in Jablonec (formerly Gablonz) and the Semler Residence in Plzeň – two outstanding examples of Kulka's independently designed Raumplan solutions, both built before he fled to New Zealand.

Loos's protégé and successor

Given that Adolf Loos always had highly talented employees working on his constructions, the question that has arisen concerns the work of Heinrich Kulka – often referred to by Loos as his "right-hand man", nowadays he is probably only known to a handful of experts as an independent architect. Born in the Moravian town of Litovel (in what is now the Czech Republic), Heinrich (Jindřich) Kulka began studying at the Technical University in Vienna, while at the same time attending Loos's privately run architecture school in order to gain the kind of expertise that the university could not offer. After winning two competitions that Loos organised for his students, Kulka became one of the favoured employees in Loos's architecture studio. From 1927/28 onwards, he served as a partner in nearly all of Loos's designs – thirty years his senior, Loos not only placed his trust in Kulka, but also gave him genuine creative freedom in aspects of design. In particular, Kulka was closely involved in developing a concept that was labelled Raumplan, which was first applied in the design for the Rufer House (1922). What's more, there was also a noticeable shift in Loos's style after Kulka joined the studio. A year earlier, Kulka had shown outstanding dedication in supervising the publication of a collection of essays entitled "Ins Leere gesprochen" (Spoken Into the Void) – Loos explicitly thanked him for his contribution in the afterword. Recent research has clearly shown that Kulka ought, in fact, to be seen as the co-designer of a series of projects, buildings and interior fit-outs, especially in light of Loos's steadily declining health and the months-long sanatorium stays that became necessary as a result.

Selected key designs

Kantor House, Jablonec



*Detached house for the Kantor family
1933-34
Jablonec nad Nisou
Palackého ul. 26
Heinrich Kulka
Photos: Adolph Stiller archive*

The Kantor House was built in the middle of an expansion zone that was created after the first world war along both sides of the main road leading to the nearest major town of Liberec. Featuring numerous villas built during the two interwar decades, the area still bears witness to the remarkable economic upturn based on the glass industry, which was comparable to the boom fuelled by the textile industry in the Moravian capital, Brno. A notable contrast with the architecture that emerged in Brno during the 1920s and 1930s can be seen in the styles of villas (as well as other structures, including residential buildings and the town hall) built in Jablonec for members of the upper classes, who took greater inspiration from Berlin than Paris. Most of the houses here featured either an eclectic design with echoes of a traditional regional vernacular, or a moderate, modern architectural language – intended to express the aspiring middle classes' pride in the possessions that they were plainly able to afford – that included a functional layout but sometimes also comes across as rather oppressive (the properties were designed by the architect for the town hall, Karl Winter, as well as Berlin-based competition entrants including architectural firm Lossow & Kühne). Only three of the private residences in Jablonec (two by architect Heinrich Lauterbach and the Kantor House profiled here) can be classed as examples of what is now referred to as functional modernism. Their clearly discernible cuboid forms and smooth, unornamented, plastered façades almost make the structures seem out of place against the backdrop of the predominantly conservative appearance of the other, modernist properties round about. The house features the rooms of a doctor's surgery that can be reached from the entrance area, an intriguingly designed connecting area that includes some surprising spaces from the entrance leading to the sequence of living rooms on the main floor, which takes its dynamism from two short flights of stairs that create three levels, including access to the bedrooms on the top floor. Elegant craftsmanship and refined materials (including cherrywood, breccia marble and parquet floors with pilaster strip edging) give the principal rooms their distinguished character, while the furnishings (which are largely built-in to create distinct spaces) form an integral part of the space concept. Openings (in the form of panoramic windows) that promote contact between the interior and exterior, as well as a terrace with steps that serve as an intermediate area, allow for smooth transitions in the use of the house and garden throughout the year. The reservoir by the Mšeno dam opposite the residence offers additional opportunities for outdoor activities and recreation.

Semler Residence, Plzeň, 1935



*Semler Residence
1933-35*

Plzeň

Klatovská třída 110

Heinrich Kulka

*Photos: Gallery of West Bohemia in Plzeň,
Semler Residence*

An imaginary visit – a journey back to the period when the property was built – represents an attempt to articulate the following impressions that the residence still evokes to this day. On entering through the heavy front door, protected by a porch – and, it should be noted, located at the rear of the block in a small extension – the occupants arrive in an entrance room reminiscent of a Roman atrium, where the impact of the space unfolds thanks to the aura created by its minimalism and the elegance of the materials. At the end of this elongated, low-ceilinged room, small travertine cubes at floor level subtly divert the route through the house. The striking monochrome design, intensified by incoming daylight filtered through frosted glass, generates an almost religious atmosphere, while the mirror on the rear wall alludes to the infinity of an “other world” (Jean Cocteau). Passing through this propylaeum (of travertine blocks), a small flight of steps leads up to a real world. At the top, beneath the gallery, is a low foyer with a seating area to the right, lit via an “onyx window”. A look to the left reveals the impressive dimensions of the hall. The large windows opposite are not only a source of light, but also serve as a small, trimmed garden enclosed by the glazing, with privacy provided by the frosted exterior glass. Although there is essentially no view of the outside, this – rather than detracting from the impression – heightens the sense of being fully enveloped by the room. Smooth and generously proportioned, the floor-to-ceiling polished poplar panelling creates the remarkable sensation of being in a walk-in piece of furniture surrounded by elegant fixtures and fittings: a fireplace on the front wall, with a large framed silk tapestry on the wall opposite; a city-style bar with a mirrored back has the effect of expanding the room; and a smooth white ceiling on accentuated, architrave-like beams soothingly spans the room. The openings to the gallery truly extend the space. A double-flight staircase with appreciably shallow steps leads to the more private gallery level. Here, a library and seating niche overlooking the expansive space provide a quiet retreat that also offers a view – at a remove – of the goings-on in the hall below. At the other end of the gallery is a sequence of three rooms: straight ahead a transverse veranda, the only significant element added to the original building; to the right, a symmetrical, octagonal dining room integrated into the existing alcove, and on the left a guest room. The doors from the passageway to all three rooms are ceiling-high, lending a

unifying sense of spaciousness, although a lower doorway to the en suite bathroom is concealed behind the door to the “Herrenzimmer” or smoking room.

Interior design

Featuring individual pieces of furniture, the entire interior design largely reflects Loos’s existing repertoire (chairs, tables, armchairs, wicker chairs, etc.) with only minor adaptations. To ensure the smooth running of the household, in particular when receiving visitors, the residence features a dumb waiter, as well as an iron staircase – cleverly integrated into the building fabric – for the staff.

Extending from the basement laundry, the staircase provides a discreet, vertical link running directly to the entrance hall, kitchen and dining room, gallery, and the bedroom level. The upper-floor bedrooms all have a private, intimate atmosphere. A door from the hallway leads to the main staircase, revealing a remarkable contrast between the residential structure – which is roughly ten years older – and the “apartment” intricately nested within. In structural terms, the entire property also embodies outstanding craftsmanship. Based in Plzeň, construction company Kapsa & Müller made this spatial composition possible through a series of unspectacular measures. The company had worked for Loos – with Kulka also involved – for many years, including on František Müller’s own house in Prague, a project that Kulka must have played a significant role in.

One of the most challenging aspects was the lowering of the ground-floor hall area by almost a metre to achieve the desired ceiling height and accommodate a gallery. Without inviting undue comparisons, this ensemble of spaces ranks alongside (for all the contrasts between them) the greatest examples of similarly sophisticated residential designs and homes from interwar Europe, including Le Corbusier’s Villa Savoye, Pierre Chareau’s Maison de Verre, Ludwig Mies van der Rohe’s Villa Tugendhat, Josef Frank’s Villa Beer, and one of the Vienna homes designed down to the last detail by Josef Hoffmann – all now regarded as iconic living spaces. The city of Plzeň has restored the property in exemplary fashion, and it is now run as an office of the city’s Gallery of West Bohemia.