

Leslie Topp

Tuesday 20th November 5:30-7:00pm Library (Department of Architecture)

Freedom and the Cage:

Modern Architecture and Psychiatry in Central Europe, 1890-1914

A strange sort of building boom occurred in the Habsburg Empire around 1900. In the Lower Austrian countryside, on the outskirts of towns in Moravia and Austrian Northern Italy, on the edges of three of the empire's major cities - Krakow, Prague, and Trieste - and overlooking the imperial capital, Vienna, settlements were constructed on what had been farmland or forest. These settlements, each containing from thirty to sixty separate buildings, and together housing about 16,000 people, were public institutions for the poor mentally ill. The Vienna asylum, 'Am Steinhof', with its church and site plan designed by Otto Wagner, is familiar. A prominent member of the Wagner school, Hubert Gessner, designed the site plan and all the buildings for the institution at Kroměříž, Moravia. The others were designed by a series of lesser-known architects using a range of progressive, nationalist and conservative approaches. This paper outlines a book project in preparation which interprets this group of projects in its medical, political, architectural and urbanistic contexts. It engages specifically with a notion that was central to these projects and that remained central to public built projects for the poor and working classes after 1918: the notion that freedom can be forced, that people can be coercively liberated from the chains of an unregulated and irrational existence.

Leslie Topp is Senior Lecturer in History of Architecture in the Department of History of Art and Screen Media at Birkbeck, University of London. She is author of *Architecture and Truth in Fin-de-Siècle Vienna* (Cambridge UP, 2004) and co-curator of the exhibition 'Madness and Modernity: Mental Illness and the Visual Arts in Vienna 1900' at the Wellcome Collection, London and Wien Museum, Vienna, in 2009 -10. She has published articles on aspects of Central European architecture in *JSAH*, *Art Bulletin* and elsewhere.



Otto Wagner, site plan for the Lower Austrian Institution for the Care and Cure of the Mentally Ill 'am Steinhof', Vienna, opened 1907