INTERWAR SHOPFRONTS AND SHOP INTERIORS BY THE JEWISH ARCHITECT ERNST WIESNER IN BRNO

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ABSTRACT: This paper presents the theme of interwar shopfronts in Brno in general, focusing on the shopfronts and shop interiors designed by the Jewish architect Ernst Wiesner in the 1920s and 1930s. The examples are described and compared to each other with regard to the target customer group. The Popper shoe shop and men’s fashion shops Weiss and Lassmann targeted a luxury clientele, whereas OPP confectionery targeted the middle class. The difference is visible in both the exterior and interior. The other method tracks the chronological development of Wiesner’s style and shopfront architecture. While the architect’s style was alike in the 1920s and 1930s, the shopfront architecture changed after 1934, when doors were recessed further into the shop, and the shop window area increased. In 1935, this new trend was applied at the Lassmann fashion shop. In contrast, all OPP shops kept the same simple style during the 1920s and 1930s because visual unity is important for the company brand.

KEY WORDS: Ernst Wiesner, shopfronts, shop interiors, interwar architecture, Jewish Brno

Introduction

The centre of Brno is interspersed with shopfronts, many of which were designed by Jewish architects in the interwar period. This paper focuses on this theme and its presentation in interwar journals, and on examples of shopfronts and interiors by the renowned Brno Jewish architect Ernst Wiesner (1890 – 1971), who is known particularly as the designer of
several lavish villas, the Morava Palace, and the crematorium. Since his shop projects are not well known, the aim is to introduce them and compare them with each other. Wiesner was a Jewish architect and worked primarily for Jewish clients, so almost all archive materials vanished during WWII, along with the Brno Building Archive, which burned down. The main source for the paper is thus articles in journals from the 1920s and 1930s.

![F. L. Popper shoe shop at night](image)

**Figure 1. F. L. Popper shoe shop at night (Source: WIESNER, Ernst. Ein modernes Verkaufslokal in Brünn, in: *Forum: časopis pre úmenie, stavbu a interieur*, 1931 (1), p. 41)**

### Modern shopfronts in interwar Brno

After 1918, society developed rapidly. Almost everything was being modernised, including shops. Interwar architectural trends are reflected in the design of modern shopfronts. In the case of an older building, wide glass panes set in metal frames replaced the original narrow windows with a portal made of carved wood. Original shop spaces were excavated and supported by steel beams. Opaxit (opacity glass) or Miropak stained glass cladding was often used because it is easy to clean and maintain. New technologies and materials were also being applied to heating and lighting. People’s pace of life and work changed because they had time to walk around the city, mostly in the evening. Lighting thus became an important element in advertising and promotion, shops marked by neon signs in the dark, and illuminated shop windows enabled customers to see the goods in peace (Sz. B., 1931). “The portal must have a day and night effect, the two must not interfere with each other, but rather be a unit, a parasol, and an umbrella in one piece…” (Scherer, 1927/28,
p. 204). The creation of new portals did not stop even during the financial crisis of the 1930s, merchants believed that modernising their shops would help them to make better sales (Sz. B., 1935). Great attention was also paid to shop window arrangement, which could be studied as a new specialisation at the Brno Arts and Crafts School. Period magazines covered new trends in shop display arrangement and developments in shopfront construction. From flat shopfronts, which were still typical in the 1920s, the “cubic” shopfront developed. Doors were recessed further into the store, and the shop window area increased (Mühlstein, 1934). The rounded corner shop windows had a psychological effect on customers, “inviting” them in.

The F. L. Popper shoe shop

In 1931, Wiesner designed a luxury shoe shop for Jewish entrepreneur F. L. Popper in the new building at the corner of Masarykova and Květinářská streets. Masarykova was already at that time the main shopping street in Brno city centre. Large glass flat shop windows are set in a bronze portal structure, the outer pillars are clad with black mirror glass and on the top, is the F. L. Popper sign, in chrome-plated plastic with blue neon letters (fig. 1). The space consisted of two storeys – a shop on the ground floor and a pedicure and warehouse in the basement. A freight elevator connected both storeys. Thanks to articles in magazines we know some sketches (fig. 2). The interior is dominated by pillars clad with red opacity glass and a horseshoe-shaped sales counter from black mirrored glass with chrome fittings (fig. 3). Steel racks with shoe boxes are placed along the walls between the front pillars. In front of them, there is a row of chrome chairs with sea blue paint for trying on shoes. The new idea of shop illumination is used here, the indirect lighting (Wiesner, 1931). Red glass pillars and blue chairs of metal and wood are complemented by a neutral grey rubber floor and curtains of grey silk plush, creating an
interplay of colours, shapes, and materials. F. L. Popper advertised his products in the magazine Měsíc regularly, with one special advertisement of this shop describing how wonderful the shopping experience there could be (Tilschová, 1932).

Figure 3. F. L. Popper shoe shop interior (Source: WIESNER, Ernst. Ein modernes Verkaufslokal in Brünn, in: Forum: časopis pre úmenie, stavbu a interieur, 1931 (1), p. 40)

Figure 4. Weiss and Lassmann fashion shops (Source: WIESNER, Ernst. Neugestaltung eines Modewarengeschäftes in Brünn, in: Forum: časopis pre úmenie, stavbu a interieur, 1936 (6), p. 102)
The men’s fashion shops Gustav Weiss and Lassmann

In 1935, Wiesner designed the adaptation of two luxury men’s fashion shops’ shopfront at Masarykova street 9 for Gustav Weiss and Arnold Lassmann (Wiesner, 1936). Originally, from around 1900, the house had wooden shopfronts and brick pillars holding a 5-metre high commercial ground floor. Riveted steel beams replaced the original pillars, and the high glass shopfront facade brings more daylight to the shop interiors (fig. 4). The original corridor between the two shops was kept, but the entrance of the fashion shop on the right (Lassmann) was replaced from the street line to the corridor, saving the shop window space on the main street. The area of the shop window on Masarykova street is thus larger than the neighbouring fashion shop, on the left (Gustav Weiss), where the street entrance was kept. The rounded corner shop windows are psychologically inviting customers to the corridor, transformed into a passage, ideal for window shopping in peace.

Regarding the materials, the iron parts are silver bronzed and the portal frame is accentuated by a border of black glass plates. The shop signs are in the same typography, made of blue neon glass letters on grey Eternit plates (fig. 5). Wiesner also designed the interior of the Lassmann fashion shop. Customised furniture was made of larch wood, metal, and glass. The heating was located in a souterrain, under a green-black polished terrazzo floor. A curtain separated the displayed goods and the shop itself, so a customer could focus on the display arrangement and illumination (fig. 6).

In 2009 the shopfront was reconstructed by Ludvík Grym and Jindřich Škrabal, who removed the entrance to the left shop and placed it in the corridor.

The OPP chocolate and confectionery factory – 25 shops around Czechoslovakia

Wiesner was commissioned to create shopfronts, adapt commercial spaces, and design interiors (not confirmed everywhere) for the OPP chocolate and confectionery factory. In the 1920s and 1930s, he designed 25 shops for the company – several in Brno but also in Prague, Olomouc, Moravian Ostrava, Opava, Břeclav, Znojmo, and Bratislava (Moravian Provincial Archive). Photographs can be found in magazines, but only with the caption Brno, without further specification. The common feature of all the shops is simple circle signage with the logo “OPP” (somewhere also as “A.S. OPP A.G.”). While in some cases the shop has no shopfront and is labelled only with this sign (fig. 7), elsewhere the entire shopfront is clad in travertine with lettering (fig. 8).
Shop interior photographs from 1927/1928 show what an OPP shop looked like (fig. 9). Custom-made furniture made of wood and glass runs along the walls all around the shop. The unusual curved counter displays bowls with chocolates.

Figure 5. Lassmann fashion shop at night (Source: WIESNER, Ernst. Neugestaltung eines Modewarengeschäftes in Brünn, in: Forum: časopis pre úmenie, stavbu a interieur, 1936 (6), p. 102)
Figure 6. Lassmann fashion shop interior (Source: Tchéco-Verre: odborný list pro výrobu a upotřebení skla a příbuzných materiálií, 1938 (5), p. 69)

Figure 7. OPP confectionery shop in Brno (Source: Die Bau- und Werkkunst, 1927/28 (4), p. 219)
Methods

1) Comparison of three examples of shopfronts and interiors regarding the target customer group.
2) Tracking the chronological development of Wiesner’s style of shopfront architecture.

Results and discussion

The shoe shop and men’s fashion shops targeted a luxury clientele, whereas OPP targeted the middle class. The difference is visible in both the exterior and interior of the luxury shops: expensive materials are used, the shops are elegant and know the customer’s needs. Attention was given to them in period magazines in the form of short texts, but regarding OPP, there are only photographs. Wiesner is well known for his work with daylight, enabling it by using high shop windows. In all examples, curtains are used in shop windows, with one curved furniture piece in the middle of the shop. His style was alike in the 1920s and 1930s, only following the trend in shopfront development – in fashion shops, the window area was enlarged with sophisticated usage of a corridor as a passage and entrance.

In contrast, OPP shops kept the same style during the whole time period (1920 – 1938). The simplicity of the portal as compared to the luxury ones can be due to multiple factors: there are more shops (in Brno and also throughout Czechoslovakia), it is a one-size-fits-all product i.e. it is not a luxury product only for a certain clientele. OPP shops were located in busy places and its simplicity invited all people. At the
same time, all branches are marked the same way, with the OPP logo on circle signage. Keeping this visual unity in wording, font colour and material for all shops is particularly important (Gerstl, 1936).

Figure 9. OPP confectionery shop in Brno, interior (Source: Die Bau- und Werkkunst, 1927/28 (4), p. 198)

Conclusion

As for the theme of the conference, it raises the question of whether or not, in this volatile world, interwar shopfronts should be protected. In the shown examples,
high-quality materials were used, and some original details have survived until now. In reconstructed form, the luxury shops have survived until the present, maybe also because of their timeless elegance. Unfortunately, other quality portals have not been so lucky, either being demolished or adapted insensitively. Hopefully, this paper can bring some awareness to remaining shopfronts.

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Literature and References


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