CCA

Centre Canadien d'Architecture
Canadian Centre for Architecture

1920, rue Baile
Montréal, Québec
Canada H3H 2S6
t 514 939 7000
f 514 939 7020
www.cca.qc.ca

communiqué /press release

For immediate release

CCA explores how architects of the modern city forged national and multinational identities in the heart of Europe, in the exhibition
Shaping the Great City: Modern Architecture in Central Europe,1890–1937

Montréal, 23 May 2000 – From 24 May to 15 October 2000, the Canadian Centre for Architecture will present ***Shaping the Great City: Modern Architecture in Central Europe,1890–1937***, an exhibition that expands architectural history by bringing to the fore a rich variety of modernisms. In the years surrounding World War I, these strains of modernism both reflected and shaped the many national and multinational identities of the Habsurg lands. The product of eight years of research, the exhibition is the first to explore the role of city-building throughout the Austro-Hungarian Empire, both before and after its dissolution.

Shaping the Great City is organized by the CCA, the Austrian State Ministry for Education and Cultural Affairs, Vienna, and the Getty Research Institute, Los Angeles. First shown to acclaim at The Municipal House, Prague (15 December 1999–1 March 2000) before its opening at the CCA, the exhibition will subsequently travel to the J. Paul Getty Museum, Los Angeles (20 February–13 May 2001) and the Kunstforum Wien, Vienna (6 June–28 August 2001). The exhibition is curated by Eve Blau for the CCA, Dieter Bogner for the Austrian State Ministry for Education and Cultural Affairs, and Monika Platzer for the Architekturzentrum, Vienna.

To evoke a sense of the cultural and political ferment of Central Europe in the years before and after the break-up of the Habsburg Empire, the exhibition takes visitors through galleries organized on the model of bustling streets and busy public places, in which projections of slides and early films mingle with architectural drawings and models, photographs, posters, and books. ***Shaping the Great City*** presents some 400 extraordinary objects, most of them never before seen outside of their home countries, in an installation designed by the firm Coop Himmelb(l)au.

"This exhibition is not a definitive statement but rather the opening of a discussion," notes curator Eve Blau. "It invites considerations of questions that are as crucial to our time and place as they were to Central Europe a century ago. How does architecture generate public meanings within a society of cultural differences and competing political agendas? How do cities, as arenas of public culture, shape the evolution of

architecture? These questions continue to resonate today, as the world's great cities develop in our age of globalization."

The city as form and idea

The first of the exhibition's two main sections, "The city as form and idea," documents the patterns of city-building in the Austro-Hungarian Empire at the turn of the 20th century, illustrating how the city became the stage on which the varied peoples of the Habsburg lands played out their identities.

At the beginning of the 20th century, the Habsburg empire was the second-largest land area in Europe and encompassed the third-largest population (after Russia and Germany). Among its inhabitants were 11 major nationalities as defined by language – German, Hungarian, Czech, Polish, Ukrainian, Serb, Croat, Romanian, Slovak, Slovene, Italian — and several times as many smaller linguistic groups. It was within the cities of Austria-Hungary, which burgeoned as the empire underwent rapid industrialization and modernization, that these various peoples developed a self-awareness and began to assert their separate identities.

How did architecture respond to this situation, in which cities were expanding quickly while various nationalisms grew within them, competing against the claims of a centralized, transnational, German-speaking administration? **Shaping the Great City** finds a key in architect Otto Wagner's prize-winning (and unexecuted) entry to the competition for a general regulatory plan for Vienna (1892–93). Departing from the two-dimensional planning models of engineers, who analyzed the growth of cities in terms of a grid of infrastructure, Wagner envisioned spatial relationships and building masses. His city was a complex, three-dimensional mechanism. Wagner developed these ideas in one of the most influential works of Central European architecture: *Die Groszstadt, eine Studie über diese* (*The Metropolis, a Study of the Same*), published in 1911.

After the dissolution of the empire in the wake of World War I, new political and economic realities rendered obsolete the traditional architectural conception of Wagner's *Groszstadt*. And yet his ideal of a densely urban, vertically stratified, multifunctional matrix remained vital, viewed by many as a model capable of development. Planning projects of this period, which also drew on Le Corbusier's Ville Contemporaine (1922) and Ludwig Hilberseimer's Hochhausstadt (1924–27), included Farkas Molnár's modular, anticapitalist KURI City (Constructive, Utilitarian, Rational, International) of 1925, Josef Gocár's regulatory plan for Hradec Králové (1925–28), and the undertaking of a Social Democratic government in 1923–34 to build a "Red Vienna" as a "*Groszsstadt* of the proletariat."

Modernity and place

The second part of the exhibition shifts the focus from common threads of development to singularities of place, examining episodes of modernism in ten different cities. They are Vienna (now Austria); Budapest (Hungary); Prague, Brno, and Zlin (Czech Republic);

Krakow (Poland); Zagreb (Croatia); L'viv (Ukraine); Ljubljana (Slovenia); and Timisoara (Romania).

The modern architectures that emerged in these cities in the early years of the 20th century were heterodox, politically charged, and characterized by a frequent melding of advanced building techniques and innovative spatial planning with local references and historical allusions.

In Budapest, for example, architects such as Ödön Lechner, Béla Latja, Marcell Komor, and István Medgyaszay rooted their work in Hungarian folk traditions (including their imagined antecedents in Moorish, Islamic, and Hindu forms), as they sought an expression of modernity that would be indigenous to Hungary. The Prague-based Czech cubists – Pavel Janák, Josef Chochol, and Vlastislav Hofman, among others – distanced themselves from Vienna and the Wagner school of "rationalist" modernism by drawing inspiration both from advanced aesthetic theories and from the traditions of Bohemia's late Baroque architecture. In Kraków, architects affiliated with the "Young Poland" movement, notably Stanislaw Wyspia│ski, cultivated a "Polish" Art Nouveau that incorporated folk-art forms as well as the influences of the Glasgow School of Charles Rennie Mackintosh and the brick modernism of Hendrik Petrus Berlage. According to curator Blau, this pluralism attests to "the all-important communicative function" of the work: "Modern architecture in this period of political and cultural dislocation generated a discursive space in the city that was public, palpable, and unavoidably present."

"Urgent problems of the metropolis have been vigorously addressed since the late 19th century, but none of them have been resolved," concludes Kurt W. Forster, Director of the CCA. **Shaping the Great City** illustrates groundbreaking accomplishments in Vienna, Budapest, Prague, and Lljubljana, where architects have created lasting urban sites."

Major publication accompanies the exhibition
In conjunction with the exhibition, Prestel Verlag (Munich, London, New York) has published a fully illustrated, 272-page catalogue, *Shaping the Great City: Modern Architecture in Central Europe, 1890–1937.*

Edited by Eve Blau and Monika Platzer, the catalogue contains essays by the editors and by Charles S. Maier, Moritz Csáky, Renate Banik-Schweitzer, Friedrich Achleitner, Petr Krajci, Rostislav Svácha, Iain Boyd Whyte, Aleksander Laslo, Ihor Zuk, Jacek Purchla, Ileana Pintilie, András Ferkai, Breda Mihelic, and Andrew Herscher. The foreword is by Phyllis Lambert and Kurt W. Forster of the Canadian Centre for Architecture, Deborah Marrow of the Getty Research Institute, Los Angeles, and Rudolf Wran of the Ministry for Education and Cultural Affairs, Vienna.

This copiously illustrated book is available in paperback for $49.95 CAN/$65 US

CCA

- 30 -

Information: www.cca.qc.ca/press