

IV enanparq

Encontro da Associação Nacional de Pesquisa e Pós-Graduação em Arquitetura e Urbanismo
Porto Alegre, 25 a 29 de Julho de 2016

DECODING THE “*MACHINE A EMOUVOIR*”: A PSYCHOANALYTIC READING OF LE CORBUSIER’S INTERIORS

SESSÃO TEMÁTICA: VIDA INTERIOR

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ABSTRACT

The reception of Le Corbusier's early buildings in Paris provoked an astonishing sensation of shock and estrangement in the public of the time. This troubling sensation of wonder is still alive today, after almost a century from their construction, and it is particularly vivid in some of the interiors, as we can notice from the photographic documentation of the time. Sigmund Freud, in his book “The interpretation of dreams”, underlined the direct relation existing between the interior of the human psyche and the interior of the house a subject lives in. He defined the interior of each man's home as a sort of “diagnostic box” of the human mind, able to disclose the psyche of the individual, expressing his dreams, desires and obsessions. In his purist houses, Le Corbusier seems to have imposed his overwhelming personality on the clients, somehow expressing his own idealistic dream of the city of the future and foreseeing the visionary scenarios of a modernist utopia. This paper's goal is to present a psychoanalytic reading of Le Corbusier's buildings of the time, analyzing a number of significant examples in order to identify their emotional effects, disclosing the hidden relations of architecture as a “machine à émouvoir”, and decoding the related composing technics used in the design process.

Keywords: Le Corbusier; Interiors; Architecture; Uncanny; Freud; Surrealism

1. INTRODUCTION

As is known, the reception of Le Corbusier's early buildings in Paris in the 1920s provoked an astonishing sensation of shock and estrangement in the public of the time.

This troubling sensation of wonder is still alive today, after almost a century from their construction, and it is particularly vivid in some of the interiors, as we can notice from the photographic documentation of that period, often carefully set up and selected by Le Corbusier himself.

Le Corbusier's Purist houses are pervaded by a slightly uncanny atmosphere where ambiguity of space reading, ghostly presences, unexpected occurrences, seem to lend to the space an "estranging" aura.

Regarding the interiors of the La Roche house, Tim Benton has spoken of "*Unheimlich*" («Uncanny» in English), claiming that the arcane sensation perceptible along its "architectural promenade" may be put in relation with the theories of K.A. Scherner and Sigmund Freud and explaining the psych-sensorial origin of these feelings with a comparison between oneiric sensations and the sensorial experience of the "promenade"¹.

According to Scherner, the oneiric fantasy had as a favorite symbolic representation the image of a house. Sigmund Freud, in his book "The interpretation of dreams", underlined the direct relation existing between the interior of the human psyche and the interior of the house that a person lives in. He defined the interior of each man's home as a sort of "diagnostic box" of the human mind, able to disclose the psyche of the individual, expressing his dreams, desires and obsessions².

The concept of *Unheimlich* was described by Freud in a famous essay³, The term *Unheimlich* is the contrary of *Heimlich*⁴, which means familiar, homely (the root *heim* means "home"). *Unheimlich* is therefore what, even if referring to a domestic environment, is not totally familiar to us, because we grasp something different and unusual that surprises and creates a sensation of "estrangement".

In other words, we feel the *Unheimlich* in architecture when we grasp something of anomalous, of unconventional, which more or less unconsciously strikes our feelings, in an interior

¹ Benton Tim, "Villa La Rocca, Die Planungs und Baugeschichte Der Villa La Roche", in *Ein Haus für den Kubismus, Die Sammlung Raoul La Roche*. Basel: Kunstmuseum, 1998, pp. 227-243.

² Freud Sigmund, *Die Traumdeutung*, 1899. Italian ed.: *L'interpretazione dei sogni*. Turin: Bollati Boringhieri, 1973

³ Freud Sigmund, *Das Unheimliche*, 1919. Italian ed.: "*Il perturbante*" in *Saggi sull'arte la letteratura e il linguaggio*. Turin: Bollati Boringhieri, 1969.

⁴ In German, a further meaning of the term *Heimlich* is also «secret, hidden», that could seem antithetical to the concept of «familiar» and «homely». *Heimlich* therefore presents a sort of ambiguity, in which the less used meaning (mysterious, hidden) is almost coincident with its opposite *Unheimlich*.

domestic space, which we should be accustomed to. It is the sudden revelation of these unexpected concealed elements, latent presences in our subconscious, which make us feel the vibrant *Unheimlich* sensation.

In architectural design, illusionistic expedients of any kind, decontextualizations, allusions, abrupt changes of architectural scale and dimensions, unexpected presences, mysterious solutions and surprise-effects, are all emotional devices able to immerse space users into an estranging and oneiric atmosphere.

Anthony Vidler, in his book *The Architectural Uncanny*⁵, has deeply investigated the concept of *Unheimlich* in architecture. Even if frequently associated with the frightening feelings of fear and mystery, according to Freud *Unheimlich* does not necessarily have a negative meaning. *Unheimlich* can be just something of new and unknown, and often what is new is scaring for most people. This may also partially explain the sense of shock (or even of refusal) often produced by Le Corbusier's early buildings in the Twenties.

In his purist houses, Le Corbusier imposed his overwhelming personality on the clients, somehow expressing his own ideal dream of the city of the future and foreseeing the visionary scenarios of a modernist utopia.

One can assume that the complex client-architect relation in many Le Corbusier's projects could be similar to a sort of psychoanalytic 'positive' *transfer*, in which the client unconsciously assign to the architect "passion" feelings in a way very similar to a process of "love" attraction. This is particularly relevant in residential projects, where the architect is appointed to design his client's "home" (so, according to Freud his "diagnostic box"). In these cases, the architect has to deep-dig into the clients' psyche, understanding and analyzing their conscious and subconscious needs and desires, elaborating and mediating them through the architect's leading personality.

For Le Corbusier, this can be certainly true in some cases, such as for the project of Raoul La Roche's house, where the client, a banker and art collector, was totally fascinated by his architect's aesthetic sense and personality. The client completely agreed on his ideas, giving him maximum freedom in his house's design. This relation of total reliance between client and architect is quite rare. La Roche was a bachelor who lived alone. His only passion was contemporary art, into which his great friend Le Corbusier had initiated him. The project of his house was intended to "frame" his collection of paintings, including those of Le Corbusier himself (significantly hanged in the more private space of the bedroom). Their friendship lasted a whole lifetime always with equal strength. According to Freud's theories, one may assume

⁵ Vidler Anthony, *The Architectural Uncanny: Essays in the Modern Unhomely*. Cambridge (Mass.) London: The MIT Press, 1992.

that La Roche lived towards Le Corbusier a kind of ‘positive’ transfer, similar to a proper “love” attraction.

On the contrary, this is certainly not the case of the project for the eccentric millionaire Charles De Beistegui, where the kind of relation with the architect was more similar to a brief “infatuation” (with subsequent quick separation and psychological removal). Here the project was the result of a “match” between two overwhelming personalities, both with strong (even if different) views and ideas, which outcome was an extraordinary crossing of unexpected reciprocal affinities.

Considering the psychoanalytic implications, Tim Benton attempted to uncover either the stimuli, or “elements” of Le Corbusier’s designs, and the process whereby the design components are transformed and distorted into a poetic architectural language⁶. A number of authors presented introspective analyses of some of Le Corbusier’s buildings, revealing the presence of significant stimulating aspects related to horror vacui, symbolism, mnestic associations, voyeurism, transparency and “surrealist” illusionism.

All these features are evident in a lot of significant buildings, from the pre-Parisian villa Turque to the subsequent La Roche house, villas Church, Stein and Savoye, up to Charles de Beistegui’s apartment.

In the present brief essay, I will attempt to present a psychoanalytic reading of some of Le Corbusier’s most relevant buildings of the time, analyzing a number of significant examples in order to identify their uncanny effects, disclosing the hidden relations between cause and effect, and decoding the related composing technics used in the interior design.

2. Horror Vacui, Sublime and oneiric sequences

Horror Vacui literally means from its Latin origins «fear of empty space». In architecture, we feel this disturbing sensation when entering into a very large and empty space, coming from a smaller sized room. This is a peculiar recurrent characteristic of the architectural “Uncanny”. Walter Benjamin⁷ observed that the Uncanny was generated by the appearance of modern large towns, with their huge empty spaces and the heterogeneous crowds flowing the Parisian *boulevards*. This originated the individual’s alienation as a modern collective pathology. The metropolitan Uncanny is often expressed by phobias associated to the space’s experience, such as agoraphobia, fear of large open spaces and of the void, which we find with different

⁶ Tim Benton mentions the drawings used by Le Corbusier to illustrate his lectures in Argentina, where these processes of transformation of physical stimuli are described in terms of “digestion”. Cf. Benton Tim, *Villa La Rocca*, op.cit.

⁷ Benjamin Walter, “Über einige Motive bei Baudelaire”, in *Gesammelte Schriften*, vol. I. Frankfurt am Main: 1974. Italian ed.: “Di alcuni motivi in Baudelaire”, in *Angelus novus. Saggi e Frammenti*, Einaudi. Turin: Einaudi, 1962, pp. 109-130.

scales and characteristics in many of Le Corbusier's interiors, where the sudden occurrence of wide empty spaces is a recurrent feature. Galleries, overhead walkways and balconies abruptly open to the void, generating a dizziness feeling that charges the environment with emotional tension.

In Le Corbusier's architecture, the *plan libre* allowed by reinforced concrete structure creates fluid inner space interpenetrations through mezzanines, internal courtyards and double high spaces in a continuous sequence. In *Notes à la suite*⁸ he defined these interpenetrations as the "*enjambements*" of modern architecture, particularly present in the hall of the La Roche house, where the promenade is a dream-like path full of emotional tensions, leading the visitor through a succession of spaces, ramps, stairs, bridges and mezzanines open over the void. Tim Benton also compared the feelings provoked by this dramatic path to a *Sublime* sensation evoking a Piranesian scenario, imagining La Roche walking alone at night to reach his bedroom⁹.

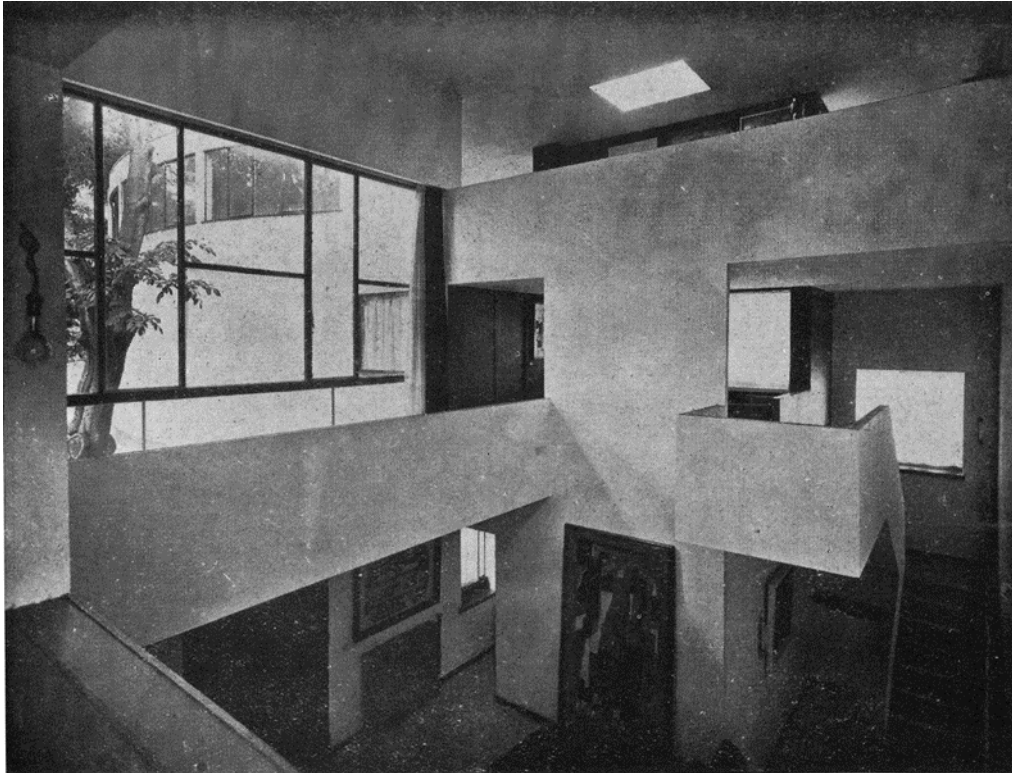
Since the entrance to the La Roche house, after an external approaching path, the visitor is obliged to pass through a narrow access door, a simple opening cut in a recessed wall located in the corner between two wings of the building. This entrance seems conceived as a "bottleneck" allowing the passage to the largest dimensions of the inner hall. Passing the threshold, the visitor is surprised by the ample dimensions of the hall, facing an impressive space developed in height on three floors. The light coming from the large glass span over the entrance floods the space fostering the sensation of vastness. The inner walls of this large empty space are totally in white, with a chromatic effect that amplifies its dimensions, and cut with openings and voids that further expand the space perception. After the "compression" experience of the entrance, the visitor is suddenly "decompressed" and plunged into a "*horror vacui*" feeling.

In the hall, the simultaneous presence of overlapped spaces and interpenetrations on the three floors, result of the previously mentioned architectural "*enjambements*", creates disorientation, lending *Unheimlich* qualities to this place. The visitor is overcome with astonishment, as the space is not immediately recognizable as a domestic space. It actually presents itself an enigma, which can be solved only climbing up through all its levels to reach the mezzanine of the library, lit by a skylight and visible as a target destination of the *promenade*.

The following emotional path is heralding of further surprises, climbing up the floors through stairs and ramps, in a mesmerizing dream-like sequence.

⁸ Le Corbusier, "Notes à la suite" in *Cahier d'Art*. March 1926, n.3. Paris: Editions A. Morancé, 1926

⁹ Cf. Benton Tim, "Villa La Rocca", op.cit., p.235.



1. La Roche house, hall, 1925 (photo Fred Boissonnas, FLC L2(12)74 ©FLC-ADAGP).

In the superior levels, the void sensation is particularly significant in the open spaces surrounding and overlooking the hall. The narrow corridor giving access to the bedroom at the third level is separated from the hall's void only by a very low balustrade of 30cm height, surmounted by a light and wide steel tube grid. Visitors walking in this tight space (especially those who are descending from the staircase) feel the frightening sensation of falling down in the empty space.

In his architectural promenades Le Corbusier often provides dynamic sequences alternating space "compression" and "decompression". Doors are treated as thresholds able to reveal the sudden show of the nature or unexpected changes of scale. In the La Roche house, the abstract inner environment generates contrasts with the external natural environment, which is suddenly discovered when opening some doors to disclose the presence of a tree or a garden, with a sort of *Sublime* surprise effect on the visitor.

In some cases, entryways lead to rooms with totally different space properties. For example, the La Roche's bedroom, accessible from the narrow corridor overlooking the frightening empty space of the hall, is a very small, essential and traditional simple room. Le Corbusier compared it to a monk's cell, and claimed that its small dimension and its cozy space proportions were properly fitting with this room's function, conceived just for sleeping.

Furthermore, in this very private room, where La Roche arrived after a long path to finally find his bodily and psychical relaxations, only Purist paintings were hanging, in order to assure his full sensorial satisfaction¹⁰.

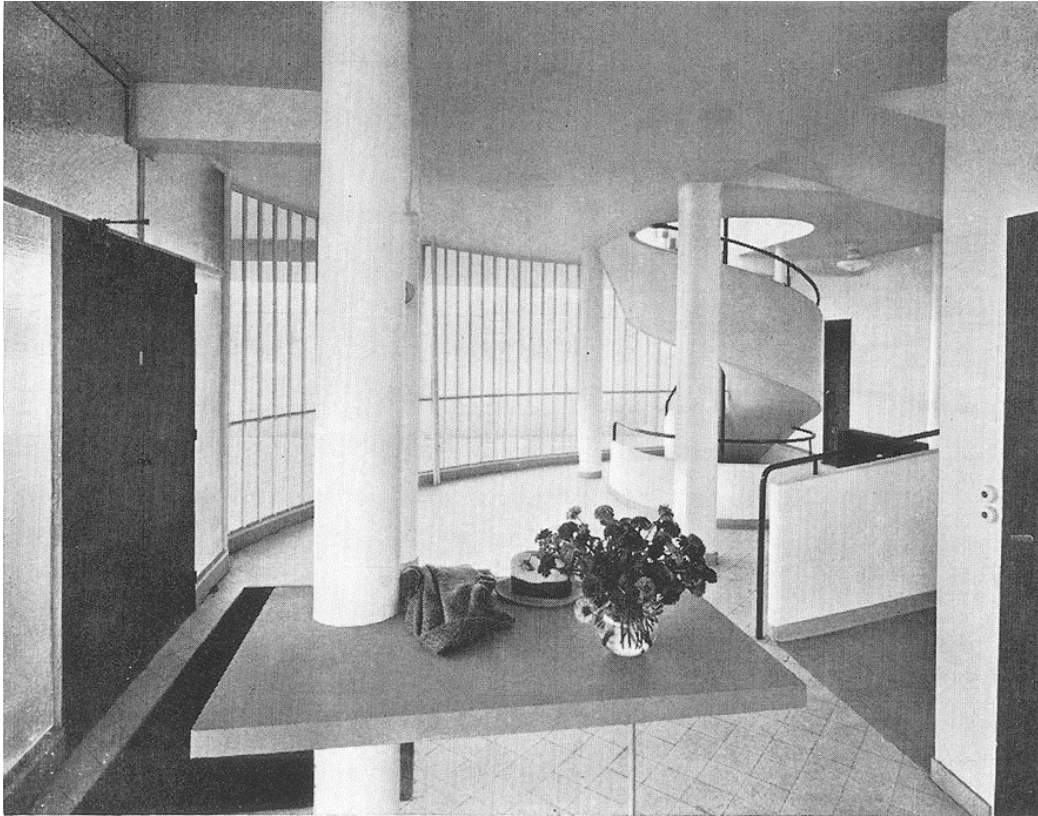
In the La Roche house, Le Corbusier treats domestic and public spaces in different ways. He features a more intimate and cozy atmosphere in the private spaces (e.g. bedroom and dining room), while giving a more representative and energizing character to public space like the entrance lobby. This hall performed the task of welcoming guests, with the cantilever balcony from which La Roche himself greeted visitors. According to Elisabeth Blum, this could wake mnemonic associations with the ceremonial of baroque receptions and in this house, one could find elements of baroque architecture mutated in new forms and functions, inspiring a sort of unconscious *déjà vu*. Although perhaps a more fitting reference was the balcony of Italian municipal palaces, from which the mayor gave his speeches to citizens.

3. Voyeurism

Another Le Corbusier's obsession, particularly recurring in his projects of the 1920's, is his compulsive interest for transparency, allowing a sort of architectural 'voyeurism'. Beatriz Colomina has underlined how Le Corbusier's buildings are crossed by continuous transparencies, where the look is directed both to the exterior (through framed views) and to interior spaces (terraces, roof garden). Along the promenade of villa Savoye, we have a sequence of views that pass through the interiors to the framed landscape, favoring a voyeuristic practice.

In the photographs of the interiors, we have the impression that somebody just left the room, leaving some traces of its presence as a coat or a hat left on the table.

¹⁰ We remember that La Roche reserved his bedroom to Purist painting also in his former Parisian apartment in rue Costantine. In a letter to Le Corbusier, La Roche writes "*J'ai accroché votre grand tableau en face de mon lit; il est vraiment admirable et me cause un grand joie. La peinture puriste se trouve concentrée dans la chambre à coucher et constitue un ensemble presque plus parfait encore que le tableaux cubistes du salon*". FLC E 2-7 (129), May 1923.



2. Villa Savoye, entrance (photo Marius Gravot, FLC L2(17)61 ©FLC-ADAGP).



3. Villa Savoye, kitchen (photo Marius Gravot, FLC L2(17)176 ©FLC-ADAGP).



4. Villa Savoye, (shot from *l'Architecture d'aujourd'hui*, Pierre Chenal, 1930 ©FLC-ADAGP).

This mysterious and *Unheimlich* presence is recurrent in many photos. The presence of objects in these images is functional to link the abstract modern architecture to the real world (represented by the presence of man) as its new aesthetic language is unfamiliar (thus uncanny) to the domestic imaginary of public. The human concealed presence, in this case, is a projection of Le Corbusier himself (*a doppelgänger?*)¹¹, which leaves objects belonging to him (glasses, hat, ecc.) as clues of his presence.

Some photographs of the kitchen in villa Savoye are particularly interesting. A picture depicts some bread and a jug on the table, while the door is left open, suggesting the idea that somebody (a mysterious “intruder”) just left the room. Colomina stated that the look in these pictures is a sort of “detective” look, a voyeuristic look where we are looking for somebody, a mysterious latent presence.

This is evident in many photographs but, as the perception occurs in motion, it is more tangible in the sequences of the short film *Architecture d'aujourd'hui*, directed by Le Corbusier and Pierre Chenal in 1930. Here, in a crossing view from interior to exterior, through the bars of a glazed surface, we can spy a woman walking up the external ramp towards the roof garden of villa Savoye, or watching a family chilling out on the roof terrace of villa Stein. According to

¹¹ CF. Rank Otto, “Der Doppelgänger”, in *Imago*, III. 1914, pp.97-164. Italian ed.: *Il doppio: uno studio psicoanalitico*. Milano: Se, 2001

Colomina, these fleeting apparitions are grasped furtively, there is not any *eye contact* between these people and the camera, and the point of view is the one of a voyeur spying their domestic life. In a reversal of roles, in this case we -the observer- are the “intruder”, the disturbing Unheimlich presence into a domestic private environment.

A further point is the recurrent “frightening” sensation to be observed, that one can grasp inside many Le Corbusier’s articulated interiors. The presence of enjambments and the space fluidity, increase this property that is present even in some of Le Corbusier’s early buildings like the already mentioned villa Turque. Here, at the upper floor, the presence of inner grating windows overlooking the hall remember the gratings from which enclosed monks see in monasteries. The same mnemonic association is present also in the La Roche house, misrepresented by means of hollow voids dug into the inner facades of the hall.

4. Polychromies: mnemonic associations and camouflage *architecturale*

Le Corbusier asserted to use in his interior polychromies, beyond the natural physical effects, also psychological effects connected to the emersion of subconscious memories. Regarding the emotional reactions generated by colors, in *La Peinture Moderne*, he states: «in addition to the immediate and purely physical reactions of the different colors, we associate also mental impressions: we associate to the blue color the specific sensations of aerial, liquid, remote, deep, memories of all that appears with that color in nature: water, sky, distant objects; brown is terrestrial, green suggests vegetation and so on»¹². Therefore, the colors’ physical and psychological effects will be used in architecture together with their perceptive effects. Scientific studies¹³ demonstrated that people form an emotional attachment to these places and they want them to be just as psychologically comfortable as they are physically comfortable. Therefore, we attempt to have our homes similar to other places that have been satisfying in our life, seeing the sort of colors we remember from these settings, and this makes our experience more pleasant through tiny sensory flashbacks.

¹² Ozenfant and Jeanneret, *La Peinture Moderne*. Paris: Ed. Grès, 1925. Italian ed.: *Sulla pittura moderna*. Milano: Christian Marinotti Edizioni, 2004, p. 226-228.

¹³ Augustin Sally, *Place advantage. Applied Psychology for interior architecture*. Hoboken (New Jersey): John Wiley and Sons, 2009, pp.169-170.

5. Surrealist influence and illusionism

Some scholars have noticed the presence of recurrent surrealist elements in the architecture of Le Corbusier, although he never acknowledged any relation with the surrealist movement¹⁴.

In *L'Art Décoratif D'Aujourd'hui*, he had harshly criticized Surrealists, arguing that their poetics was based on “real” objects, products of the machine age, instead of surreal “oneiric” objects issued from our deep remote unconscious¹⁵. Le Corbusier quoted De Chirico, that on the first issue of the magazine *Révolution Surréaliste* (December 1924) wrote: “they are like levers, irresistible as these powerful machines, these gigantic cranes lifting, on the tingling building sites, floating fortresses with heavy turrets, as breasts of antediluvian mammals”¹⁶. This stunning description of machines in motions on a modern building site, and the comparison to a prehistoric monstrous “antediluvian” creature depicts an uncanny scenario with elements belonging to the aesthetics of the machine age.

Nevertheless, even if Surrealists extol a “dramatic” romanticism, they used always real “functional” objects. These real objects are the “magnificent fruit of the machine age, to which we are so little accustomed that they intertwine them with their dreams’ muddle”¹⁷. Le Corbusier reaches the conclusion that “real” and “functional” objects, issued from the machine age, lead to a new concept of beauty, consequence of the *Esprit de l'époque*. According to Le Corbusier, Surrealists seem frightened by modernity, and refuse to abandon the certitudes of their aesthetic habits in their surrounding environment and in their homes’ architecture.

However, Le Corbusier had an intimate knowledge of the Surrealists’ work, writing also in Surrealist magazines¹⁸. Some views of his interiors, portrayed in photographs of the time, significantly look as proper surrealist stagings. As well as the Surrealists, Le Corbusier sought to jolt man’s perception of the architectural space through the deliberate reversal of the expected. He also shared with them the goal of transcending the real, attempting to disclose the concealed order of the universe.

Optical illusionism and surrealist effects are present, with different levels of ambiguity, both in Le Corbusier’s architecture and in the photographs of his works. A surrealist component is evident in many of the 1920s interiors photos, in which we often find unexpected presences. For instance, in a famous photo of the kitchen of villa Stein in Garches, there is a close up of a huge “uncanny” fish on the table, as a surrealist *objet-trouvé*. The oversized dimension of

¹⁴ Cf. Gorlin Alexander, “The ghost in the machine”, in Mical Thomas (ed.), *Surrealism and architecture*. New York – Abingdon (UK): Routledge, 2005, pp. 103-118.

¹⁵ Le Corbusier, *L'Art Décoratif D'Aujourd'hui*. Paris: Ed. Grès, 1925. Paris: Flammarion, 1996, pp 189-190.

¹⁶ Quoted by Le Corbusier in *L'Art Décoratif D'Aujourd'hui*, p.190 (translated by the author).

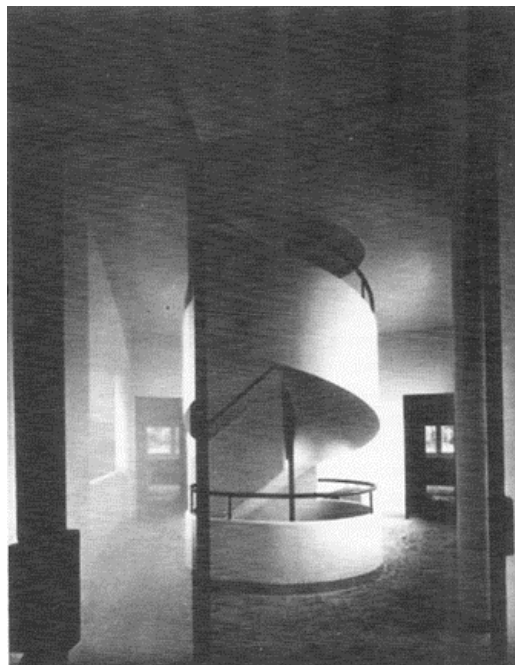
¹⁷ Le Corbusier, *Ibidem*, p. 190.

¹⁸ Le Corbusier reviewed a “madman’s” drawings in the Surrealist magazine *Minotaure*. Cf. Le Corbusier, “Louis Sutter, L'inconnu de la Soixantaines”, in *Minotaure* 9, 1936, pp. 62-65. Quoted by Gorlin Alexander, *op. cit.*

the fish is further underlined by its isolation in the modernist abstract surrounding environment that amplifies his estranging power. Another photograph of the interior of villa Savoye, presents an intriguing illusionistic set up. This picture portrays a glazed door open on the inner staircase on the right. The glazed door reflects the corridor in front of it, giving the illusion of a virtual deeper space and amplifying its perception¹⁹. Le Corbusier uses here photography as a tool to transcend (and distort) the space, producing a strong visual *Unheimlich* impact.



5. Villa Stein, kitchen (photo Georges Thiriet, FLC L1(10)53 ©FLC-ADAGP).



6. Villa Savoye, view on the staircase (photo Marius Gravot, FLC L2(17)139 ©FLC-ADAGP).

¹⁹ CF. Fanelli Giovanni, "Le Corbusier", in Fanelli Giovanni, *Storia della fotografia di architettura*. Bari: Laterza, 2009, p.428-437.

A particularly interesting case of “surrealist” illusionism is present in a photograph of the interiors of the pavilion of the 18th century in villa Church in Ville d’Avray, transformed by Le Corbusier between 1928 and 1929.

In this building, Le Corbusier used the whole range of window typologies of his architectural language, from “*pan de verre*” to the single conventional opening. Bruno Reichlin focused his attention on a window of the first floor, a modern version of the traditional window “*trou dans le mur*”²⁰.

Here Le Corbusier attempted to achieve not only the space qualities of the traditional window, limit between interior and exterior, but also its psychological effects and latent symbolic meanings. The goal of this interior setting seems to be the staging of these meanings and values.

This rectangular window is a recessed pivoting case surrounded by a white frame in concrete similar to a painting frame and has the traditional proportions of a painting. A mirror covers the wall surface around the frame. This generates an ambiguity of perception between real (the window view through the glass) and fiction (the reflection of the mirror). In the photo, a camera set on a tripod is visible reflected in the mirror. This unusual presence, together with two open books on the table reveals an “uncanny” presence in the room. It seems that somebody has been here and just left the room, and the observer feels a sensation of estrangement²¹. In another photo published on the *Oeuvre Complete*, the horizontal shelves of the wall library are reflected in the mirror, amplifying the room’s depth to infinity and widening the space.

Le Corbusier uses the mirror as an illusionist tool, to create a fictional staging in the interior design. As for his interior polychromies, the mirror becomes a powerful tool of *camouflage architecturale*, able to dissolve the wall. The windows lose its constructive significance: it is no longer a “hole” in the wall, as there is no longer wall, its perception is cancelled. This window was conceived as a proper painting. The solid frame detaches the opening from the mirror, characterizing it as a framed painting. The framed view of the landscape becomes a painting. The mirror dissolves the wall, leaving the window-painting on the threshold that divides the space in two parts: the real and the virtual one. This threshold becomes one of the centers of “gravity” and of “attraction” of the house, according to Le Corbusier’s vision of the role of painting in architecture expressed in *Notes à la Suite* ²². As well as in the La Roche house-

²⁰ CF. Reichlin Bruno, “Per un’iconografia della finestra nell’architettura di Le Corbusier”, in *PSICON* n° 2-3. Firenze: w/o.pub., 1975.

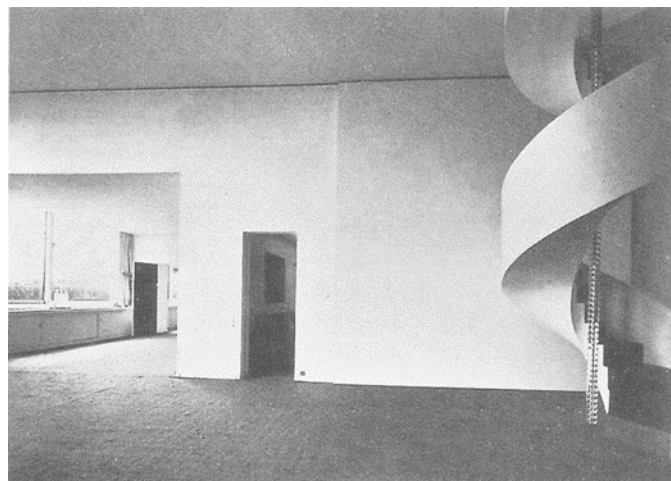
²¹ CF. Colomina Beatriz, *Privacy and Publicity: Modern Architecture as Mass Media*. Cambridge (Mass.) and London: The Mit Press, 1996. P. 327.

²² Le Corbusier, “Notes à la suite”, op.cit. (translated by the author).

gallery the painting acted as a proper “metaphysic catalyst” into the interior space²³, establishing a transcendent relation art-architecture, in the pavilion in Ville d’Avray the window-mirror holds a similar property. The ambiguity produced by the simultaneous perception of the two antithetic spaces extols the quality of the window view, which appears as detached from the surrounding environment and floating in the virtual space of the mirror, generating an “Uncanny” optical illusion.

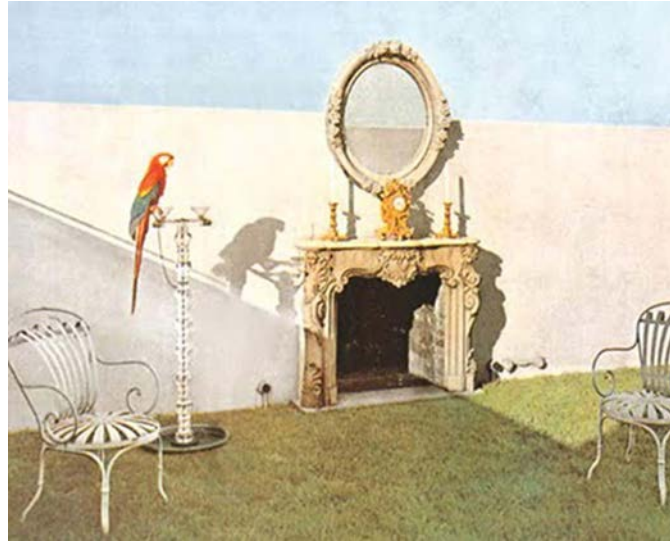


7. Villa Church in Ville d’Avray, living room
(photo Georges Thiriet, FLC L3(7)89 ©FLC-ADAGP).



8. Penthouse for Charles de Beistegui, interior view
(photo Marius Gravot, FLC L2(5)37 ©FLC-ADAGP).

²³ For further deepening on the relation art-architecture, CF. Aglieri Rinella Tiziano, *Dal cubismo al Purismo, arte e architettura nell’allestimento della collezione La Roche*. Roma: Kappa Edizioni, 2010. See also an English and Portuguese reduced text in: Aglieri Rinella Tiziano, “Do Cubismo ao Purismo: arte e moradia na casa galeria la roche”, (From Cubism to Purism-art and architecture in the La Roche house) in *ARQTEXTO*. October 2012, n.19. Porto Alegre: Departamento de Arquitetura e PROPARGS, 2012, pp.98-109.



9. Penthouse for Charles de Beistegui, chambre à ciel ouvert, setting by Salvador Dalí (from «Plaisir de France», mars 1936 ©FLC-ADAGP).

Le Corbusier will have a tangible opportunity to apply surrealistic devices to interior architecture with the project for the apartment of Charles de Beistegui, on the rooftop of a building on the Champs Elysées. Beistegui, a surrealist art collector, will have a fundamental role in the interior design and this decisive collaboration will produce the first proper surrealist work of architecture of the Modern Movement. Unlike the projects previously analyzed, in the design of which Le Corbusier had the only preponderant main role, in the Beistegui apartment the final result is the consequence of the overlapping wills of two exceptional overwhelming personalities: the client and his architect. Beistegui was an eccentric multi-millionaire who loved to organize memorable parties to which he invited many artists and celebrities of the time. The apartment was therefore not intended to be inhabited but to receive visitors and as a representative venue to host parties.

A first peculiarity was the absence of electric lighting in the apartment. The whole apartment was lit by candlelight. Electricity was used in the apartment, but only to move sliding walls and to open windows. Beistegui actually considered candlelight as the only “living” light. One could see in this choice a wish to create the characteristic cozy and spectacular flickering light of chandeliers in baroque banquets. Surrealists, and Beistegui, were obsessed by baroque theatricality and decorated furniture, and the overall atmosphere of the apartment during his parties had to be similar to the one pictured many years later by Stanley Kubrick in his famous movie *Barry Lindon* (1975, shot entirely by candlelight, without any additional artificial lighting). This reference to the baroque iconic imaginary is also evident in the surrealistic setting of the roof terrace, designed by Salvador Dalí upon request of Charles de Beistegui. Clearly, in the

Oeuvre Complete Le Corbusier portrayed the apartment without any furniture, which was chosen by Beistegui (who employed also Napoleon III chairs and Venetian chandeliers). Nevertheless, if the over-decorated styles were clearly in opposition to the abstract purist lecorbuserian architectural envelope, this estranging mixture produced an unusual environment, amplifying the objects' presence and underling the place's emotional tension.

The images of the *chambre à ciel ouvert* are particularly meaningful. Surrounded by white walls, the Parisian landscape disappears, except than for a few fragments of some "*lieux sacrés de Paris*" (the Arc de Triomphe, the Eiffel tower, the Sacré Cœur), which tops appear over the walls. The abstract decontextualized space is enclosed between the sky and the grass floor. The fireplace doesn't have a real function, but its goal is just to "give a direction" to the space, focusing the attention on its presence. In the setting created by Dalì, an oval mirror surmounts the fireplace, with an illusionistic effect similar to the one previously analysed in Le Corbusier's pavilion in Ville d'Avray: the mirror reflects the sky in his upper part (creating an ambiguity of perception between real sky and virtual reflection) and the top of the wall on his lower half (another ambiguity). Two traditional white chairs in wrought iron, a colorful parrot on a perch and some other objects complete the picture. We don't consider Le Corbusier's opinion on this setting, which is certainly very far from his customs, but one should notice that the iron chairs are similar to the ones present in many roof-gardens designed by Le Corbusier, such as the ones of his personal apartment in rue Nungesser et Coli and of the Jeanneret-Raaf house. Besides the settings personally arranged by Beisegui, the other photos of the terraces and of the (empty) interiors published by Le Corbusier in the *Oeuvre Complete* seem to express a latent metaphysic atmosphere, certainly accentuated by the absence of furniture. Particularly interesting is the use of electric technology to slide partition walls, open doors and activate cinematographic devices (a projection screens automatically unfolds as the chandeliers rise up on pulleys). It is interesting to imagine the oneiric ambiance of this interior space, lit simultaneously both by low "living" candlelight and flickering cinematographic light, and its mesmerizing effect on the visitors.

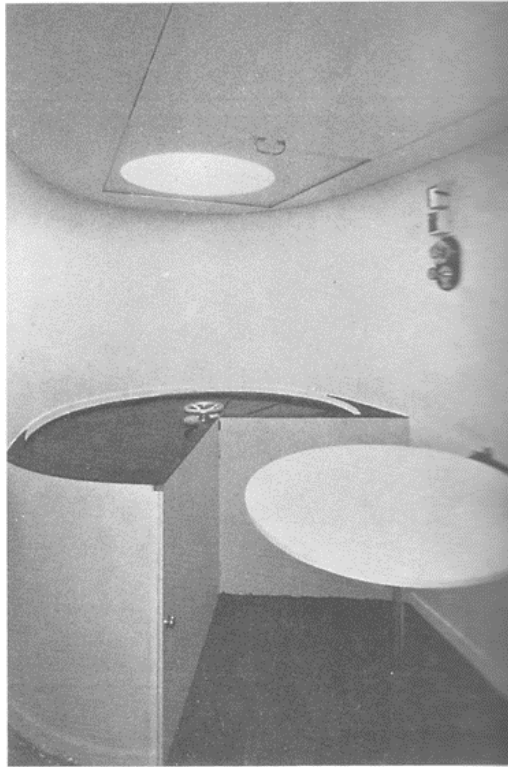
As Colomina observed²⁴, electricity was not used to illuminate, but as a technology of framing, to make visible or to hide landscape views. Le Corbusier's aim was to conceal the full panoramic view of Paris, offering instead framed views of its most representative elements. On one of the roof terraces, a hedge wall framed a view of Notre-Dame, isolated from its surrounding context. A button activated a sliding device to slip away the wall of greenery, revealing the hidden view of Paris. In the interior space, the living room had two windows "framing" the Eiffel Tower to the south and Notre-Dame to the east. These views were treated

²⁴ CF. Colomina Beatriz, op.cit., p. 301.

as “pictures”, in a way similar to the window-painting framing device used in the villa Church’s pavilion. Half of the south windows moved electrically, opening the view on the terrace where the *Arc de Triomphe* suddenly appeared. We can easily imagine the wonder of the visitors of the time, surprised by these unexpected discoveries and by the astonishing use of technology. The Apartment had multiple reframing devices, allowing visitors to experience amazing findings and revelations. This wish to surprise the visitor, to shock him with the unexpected, could be perhaps associated also to the eccentric personality of Beistegui. Le Corbusier however, had in this project the possibility to make use of the most advanced technologies of the time, for a very wealthy client. He applied these technologies to a space not intended to be a conventional “domestic” space, but rather a space for exclusive society events.



11. Penthouse for Charles de Beistegui, roof garden
(photo Marius Grivot, FLC L2(5)21 ©FLC-ADAGP).



12. Penthouse for Charles de Beistegui, the camera obscura
(photo Marius Gravot ©FLC-ADAGP).

Therefore, the whole project can be considered as a “frame” or a “stage” for the events organized by Beistegui. This explains the large use of theatrical (and even cinematographic) devices, which purpose was to surprise and excite guests. By using framed views, Le Corbusier totally decontextualized the Parisian monuments, presenting them completely isolated as *objets trouvés* into an artificial environment. Their sudden discovery, as well as the subsequent revelation of the surrounding landscape (after opening the frames), had a powerful surprising effect on the visitors. The place in which the decontextualization becomes absolute and the visitor plunged into an abstract immersive environment was the *camera obscura* with the periscope. Whereas the surrounding Parisian landscape was somehow denied on the roof terraces, hidden by high walls and greenery, here, in a closed darkened environment, the periscope projected the views of Paris on a glass table. As Tafuri asserted: *“the distance interposed between the penthouse and a technological device, the periscope, secures the Parisian panorama. An ‘innocent’ reunification between the fragment and the whole is no longer possible; the intervention of artifice is necessary”*²⁵. Thus, with the periscope, Le Corbusier realizes a complete and radical decontextualization of the apartment from its surrounding city, settling a void distance between them. The house is suspended into an

²⁵ Tafuri Manfredo, “Machine et mémoire: The City in the work of Le Corbusier”, in (Brooks Allen ed.) *Le Corbusier*. Princetown: Princetown University Press, 1987. Quoted by Colomina Beatriz, op.cit., p. 305-306.

abstract space. The modern man is totally “estranged” and dissociated from its urban space, to which he no longer belongs. Le Corbusier seems here to consider the “uncanny” feeling associated by Walter Benjamin to the appearance of large modern towns, enclosing the wideness of the Parisian landscape into a small projection room. As Anthony Vidler observed, ²⁶“here, the privileged point of view (the one of the [...] observer that maintains a cautious distance from the market, looking at it from the ‘cousin’s window’ with a telescope (...)) is an attempt to preserve a feeling of individual security (...) in the apparent chaos of modern urban life”²⁷.

6. Conclusions

The domestic projects of the Twenties are significantly a projection of Le Corbusier’s aspirations and dreams, in the heroic period of his ideological struggle for the modern architecture. Each house can be considered as a sort of “diagnostic box” of his psyche, able to reveal us his deep subconscious aesthetic dreams and obsessions.

Thus, the purist villas designed by Le Corbusier in this period are *Unheimlich* also because they show a vision of a possible future, as imagined by the mind of the most visionary architect of the XX century. Also, as Freud stated, often what is new is also worrying (thus «uncanny»). In the “*pittoresque*” articulation of volumes of the La Roche house and in the suspended pure volume of villa Savoye, there is perhaps an analogy with the imaginary future world envisaged by Fritz Lang in *Metropolis*, iconic science fiction film significantly issued in 1927, in the middle of Le Corbusier’s purist period²⁸. This comparison is particularly significant because both exemplify an ideal representation of a shared *Zeitgeist*, foreseeing new conceivable urban scenarios issued from the machine age.

I have tried to demonstrate, through a hermeneutic reading of some of Le Corbusier’s major purist works that, being aware or not, he instinctively applied psychological devices to his architecture. This feature is more evident in interior spaces, as these places were often qualified as “abstract” environments, with different levels of decontextualization from their surrounding venue. The minimalist setting of his interiors’ photographs often provoke a *horror vacui* sensation that, according to the applied psychology, emphasizes the architectural value of the portrayed spaces and objects.

²⁶ Anthony Vidler, op.cit., p. 4.

²⁷ Walter Benjamin, “Über einige Motive bei Baudelaire”, op. cit., pp.605-53.

²⁸ I’m certainly not claiming of any direct relation between Lang and Le Corbusier, but I’m just underlining a sort of affinity of views in accord with the “esprit de l’époque”.

I analyzed a number of significant examples, focusing on their «Uncanny» qualities and attempting to disclose the emotional expedients used in the interior design. Some of Le Corbusier's modernist interiors, from the La Roche house to villa Savoye, provoke to the visitors a strong sense of estrangement and disorientation, which Le Corbusier himself celebrated in the *Precisions*²⁹ and that has been investigated by many scholars³⁰. These houses are not immediately recognizable as domestic interiors as, entering into them, there is no trace of the conventional familiar functions of human habitations.

The disorientation feeling is further intensified by the space interpenetration of solids and voids and by the elision of forms and functions, generated by the “enjambments” of modern architecture (issued from the pictorial tool of the *mariage des contours*). Thus, this composition of forms originated in a rational reflection on the modern world and conceived as a “*spéculation plastique*”, is certainly the main feature that gives to these interiors astonishing visual power and disorienting “Uncanny” qualities.

Le Corbusier achieves in his interiors the abstraction of architecture, featuring a virtual place, a transcendental dimension suspended in time and space. On a more metaphysic level, in an endeavor to reveal a fragment of the concealed universal order of nature, he ‘opened’ a door towards the perception of the *Unheimlich*.

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²⁹ Le Corbusier, *Precisions sur un état présent de l'architecture et de l'urbanisme*. Paris: Ed. Grès, 1930. Paris: Altamira, 1994, p. 136.

³⁰ Beatriz Colomina has explored the sense of disorientation produced by Le Corbusier's modernist interiors. Cf. Colomina Beatriz, “Where are we?”, in *VV.AA., Architecture and Cubism*, Cambridge (Mass.)- London: The MIT Press, 1997, pp.141-166.

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