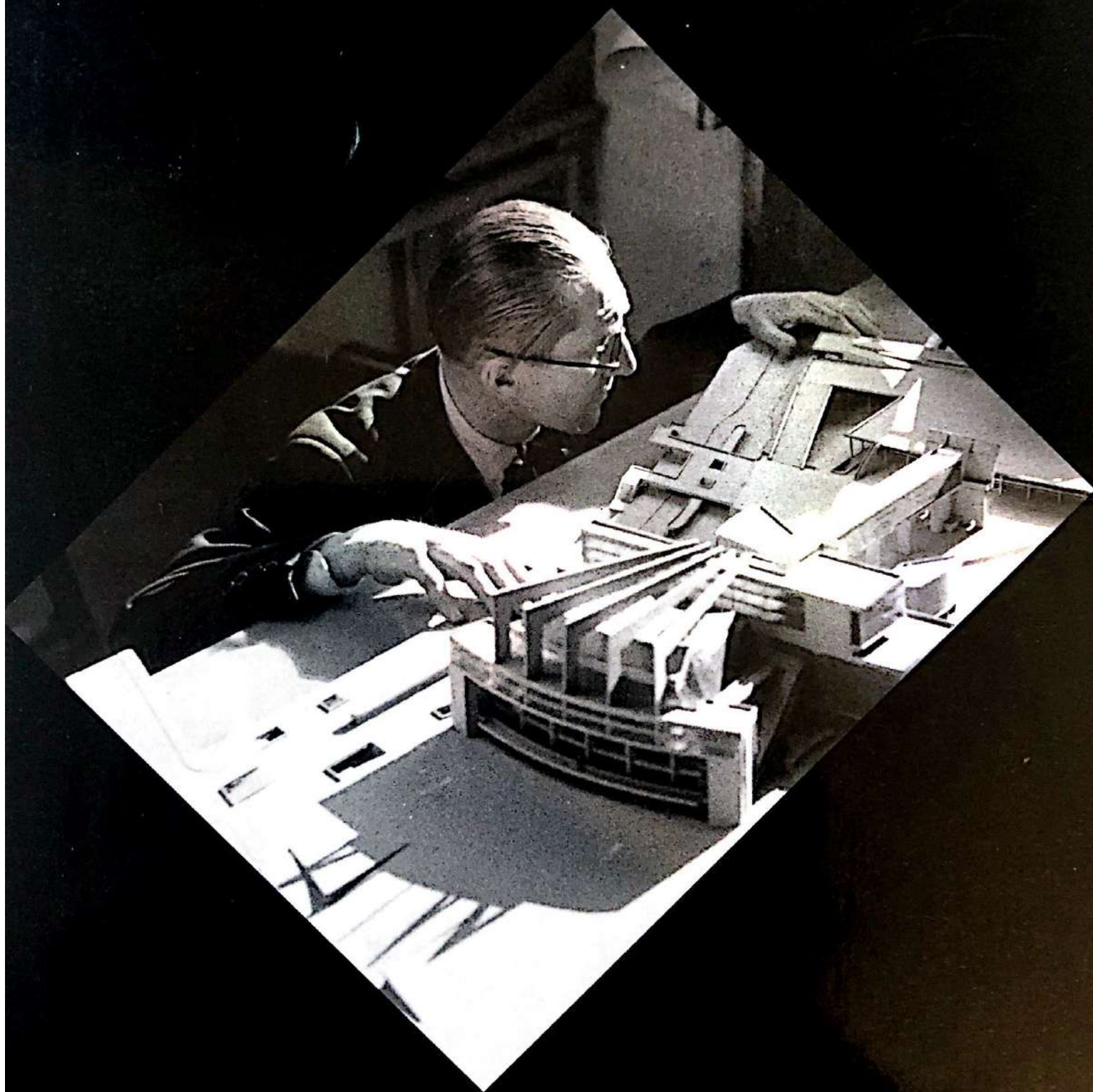


Kenneth Frampton

Le Corbusier



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Chapter 2 Towards a New Architecture' 1915–1927

As an autodidact who had an unfailing sense for what should be the next step in his career, Jeanneret moved in January 1917 to Paris. There he became a consultant architect to Max Du Bois's Société d'Application du Béton Armé (SABA), for which he designed and realized a number of reinforced concrete buildings, including a water tower at Podensac (Gironde), an arsenal at Toulouse and a hydro-electric plant at L'Isle Jourdain. In the same year he was also commissioned to design workers' housing at a power plant under construction in Saintes (Charente-Maritime). From the time of his arrival in Paris, Du Bois seems to have employed him in a double capacity: in the first instance as a consultant-architect, and in the second as a partner-manager of the Alfortville brickworks to the southeast of the city, which had been established in part as a means of recycling clinker from the coal-burning generators of a power plant that Du Bois owned.² This clinker when mixed with cement was cast into the form of insulating blocks that Du Bois marketed under the name 'Brique Aéroscorie'. At the same time, Du Bois encouraged Jeanneret to establish a *bureau d'études*, a technical office, the Société d'Entreprises Industrielles et d'Études, operating under the acronym SEIE.

Veering away from his aspirations to become a high bourgeois architect, Jeanneret concentrated, at this stage of his development, on the rationalization of building production, particularly as it might be applied to low-cost housing. He had first addressed the issue in his Dom-ino studies of 1915, when he realized that the period of reconstruction following the First World War would have to accord high priority to re-housing the population.³ It was this that prompted him to take out patents on various systems of prefabricated concrete construction that he developed, and the same impulse also lies behind the conceit of devising patent names for his inventions, such as 'Dom-ino', which seems to have been derived from contracting and combining the words *domicile* and *innovation* – although it is characteristic of his penchant for double metaphors that the abstract representation of a typical Dom-ino structure in plan should also resemble a domino and be hypothetically capable of being assembled much like dominoes are during a game.

16. Le Corbusier and Pierre Jeanneret: Cité-Jardin Frugès, Pessac, 1924-26: view of 'skyscraper' blocks.

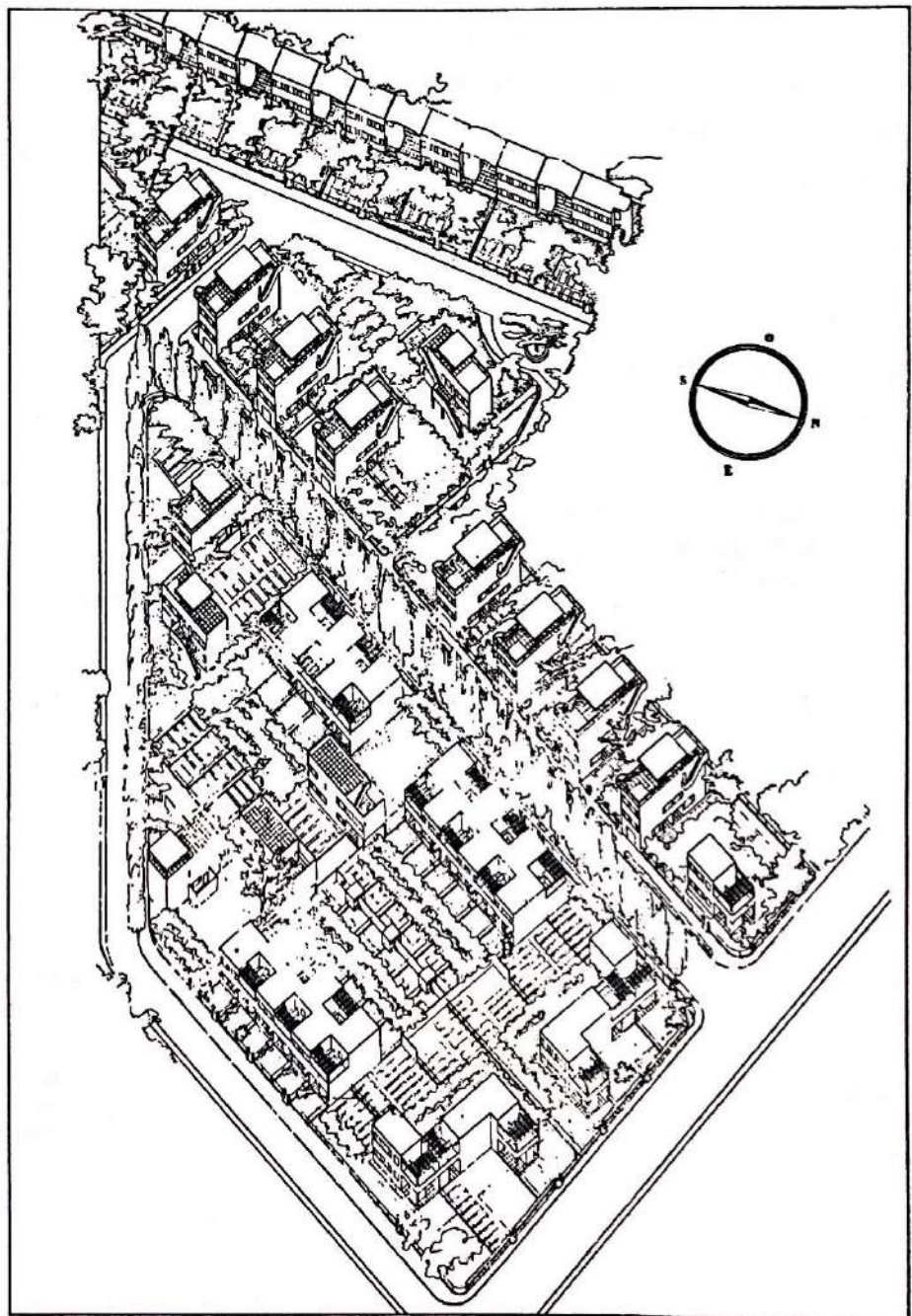


Given that the Dom-ino system already embodied the flat-slab, cantilevering principle of his famous *plan libre* or free plan of 1925-26, it is surprising to find that in its initial formation it was seen merely as a means to an end; that is to say, it appears to have been largely conceived as a flexible system of reinforced concrete framing that could be readily filled in with traditional masonry – as would indeed be the case in much of the housing that Le Corbusier/Jeanneret built in the early 1920s for the industrialist Henri Frugès. (By then, it should be noted, he had assumed the aristocratic-sounding sobriquet 'Le Corbusier' by which he would be known for the rest of his career: see p. 27.) Le Corbusier first tried out his Dom-ino system in the *Maison du Tonkin*, realized for Frugès in the centre of Bordeaux in 1924. This diminutive dwelling was accompanied by other works for Frugès at around the same time: two experimental houses built at Lège on the Atlantic coast plus a large garden estate at Pessac (1924-26). Pessac was the first version of what Le Corbusier termed a '*cité jardin horizontale*'. One should note here once again his polemical use of a 'patent' name for what was already by then a commonly received idea, namely the Anglo-Saxon garden suburb. At the same time, Pessac

was also the occasion for his initial foray in polychromy, conceived somewhat after the 'dazzle' camouflage ships of the First World War. Of it he wrote in 1929:

We established a standard value: white elevations.

Where the rows of houses tended to fuse into an opaque mass, we camouflaged each house: the street facades are thus alternately brown and white. Where a lateral facade is white, the next one is pale green. The return end facade, whether the lateral is pale green or white, is dark brown. This tends to suppress the sense of mass and amplify the apparent surface area. Such polychromatic treatment is absolutely new. It provides an elemental architectural symphony of exceptional physiological power. The co-ordinated physiological sensations in terms of volume, surface, contour and colour, afford an intense lyricism.⁴



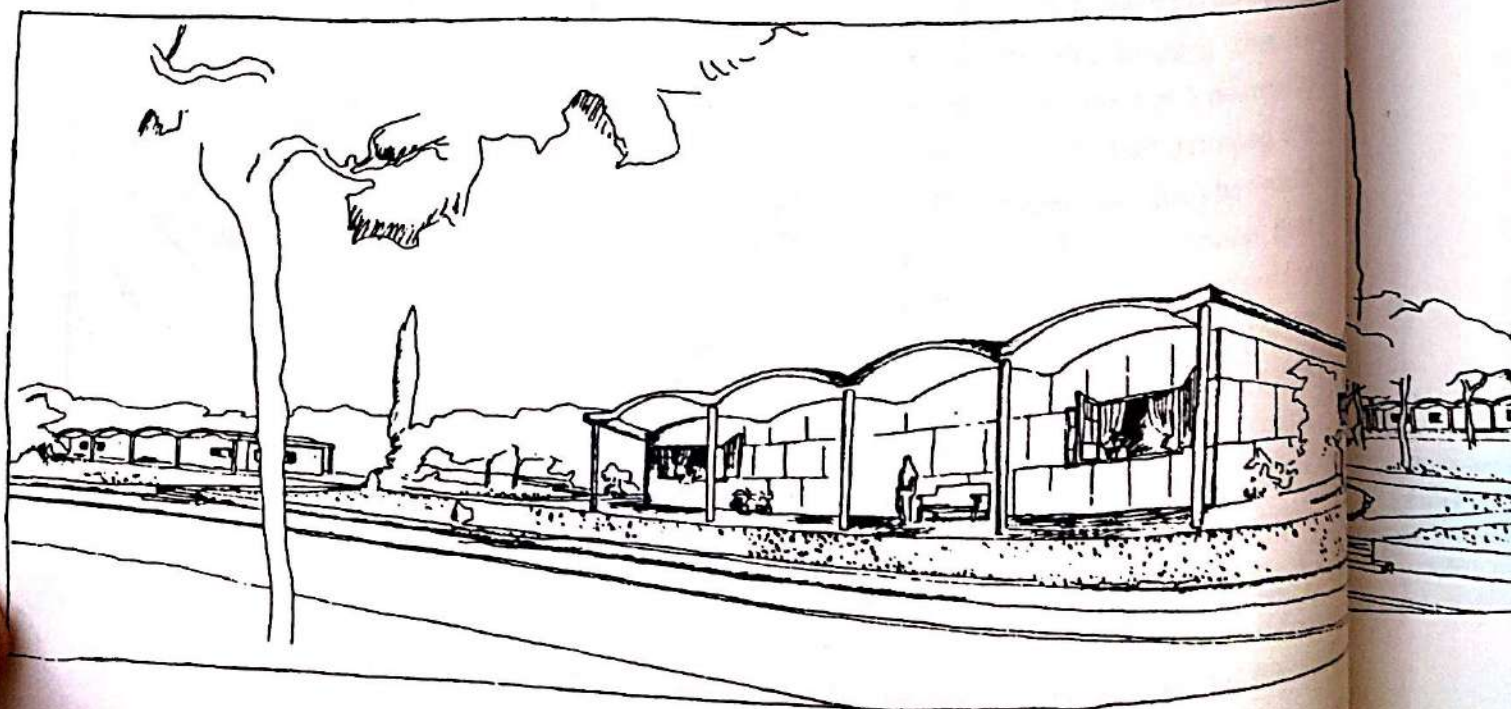
17. Le Corbusier and Pierre Jeanneret: Cité-Jardin Frugès, Pessac: axonometric.

A great deal of Le Corbusier/Jeanneret's energy over the years 1915–25 was spent in devising economical means of construction, and this led to a number of innovative structural systems, including a new way for constructing exterior walls out of hollow asbestos cement casings, the voids being filled with the rubble from war-damaged buildings. He first envisaged the system in his *Maison Monol* proposal of 1919. The patent name 'Monol', deriving from 'monolithic', was in fact misleading, since there would have been a decisive structural difference between the asbestos cement walls, filled with rubble, and the shell-vaults cast on top of corrugated asbestos, the curved form of the sheeting being used as permanent form-work. These vaults would have been supported by trimmer beams and free-standing cylindrical concrete columns.⁵ Despite the ingenuity of such inventions, Jeanneret slowly came to recognize that untried building materials and methods were not readily marketable. He recounted his misadventure in this regard to Jean Petit:

I was not able to sell my products because they were too well suited to current needs. Everyday habit stood in my way. I had to balance myself constantly between two different impulses.

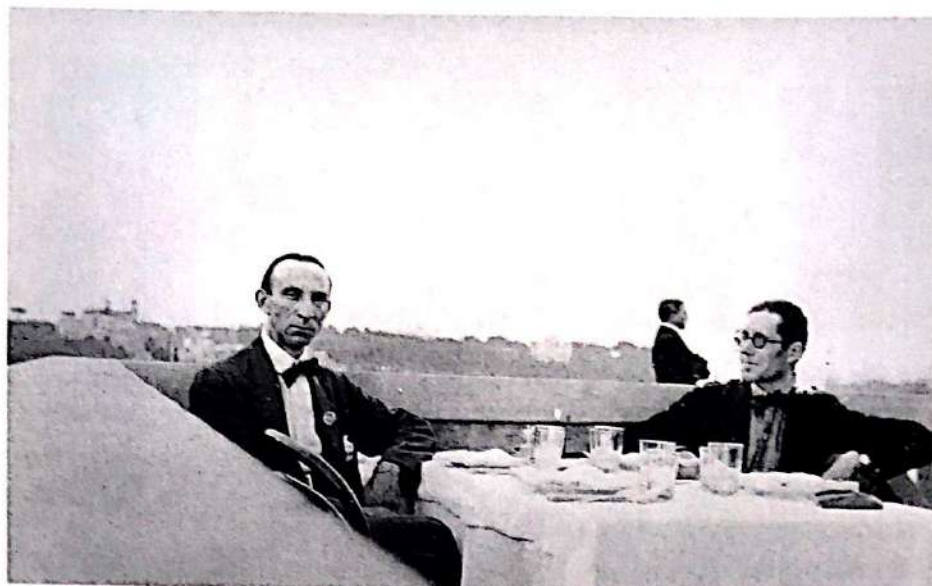
If I had been indifferent to the core within myself, I would have readily triumphed, but I sensed in my heart the way in which each one of us must live. Business is a cruel school. Ozenfant told me, Jeanneret, you must paint. I believed at one moment that I could do this in the afternoons, but my affairs caught up with me. I really had to get myself back into harness. One calls this the flux and re-flux of life and happily I soon began to find myself again.⁶

18. A sequence of single-storey *Maison Monol* units, 1919.



19. Le Corbusier
Amedée Ozenfant

19. Le Corbusier (right) and
Amedée Ozenfant in Rome, 1932.

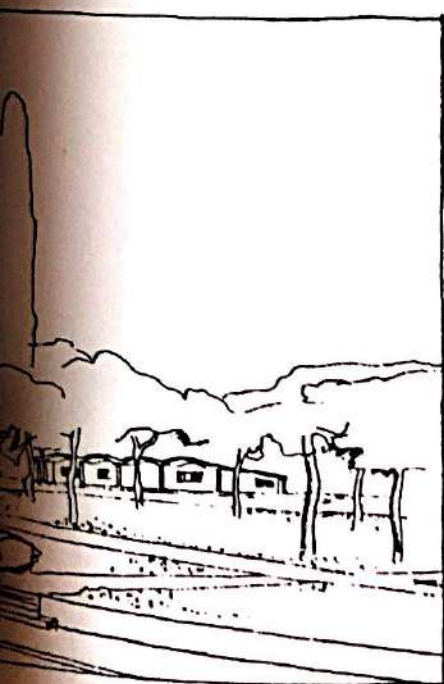


Le Corbusier is alluding here to the catalytic role played in his life by the painter Amédée Ozenfant, whom he met through Perret during the last weeks of 1917 at a lunch that they took together on the premises of the Association Art et Liberté. After meeting Ozenfant, Jeanneret took to the habit of painting and writing at night while continuing to work for SABA and the brickworks during the day. The relationship between the two men was extremely fertile, for while Jeanneret had much to gain from Ozenfant's cosmopolitan urbanity and artistic sophistication, Ozenfant, in turn, was able to take advantage of Jeanneret's architectonic outlook as a means of distancing himself from the received line of the Cubist avant-garde. After a joint vacation in Andernos, where Jeanneret learned the technique of oil painting from Ozenfant, the two exhibited at the Galerie Thomas and published their manifesto *Après le cubisme* on 15 October 1918. Two years later they founded the magazine *L'Esprit Nouveau*, subtitled 'Revue internationale d'esthétique', which they edited in collaboration with the Dadaist poet Paul Dermée, who remained an editor for the first six issues. With the first issue, of 15 October 1920, *L'Esprit Nouveau* declared its optimistic article of faith under the editorial premise, 'There is a new spirit, it is a spirit of construction and synthesis guided by a clear conception.'⁷ Ostensibly addressing themselves to painters, musicians, writers, industrialists and engineers, the editors underplayed architecture in the first issue, save for an article entitled 'Trois rappels à MM. les Architectes' (Three Reminders for Architects), written jointly by Jeanneret and Ozenfant under a pseudonym (see below). The same inaugural issue carried an article entitled 'Sur la Plastique', in which they attempted to deduce the syntax of Purism from first principles – a text signed on this occasion with their actual names.

19

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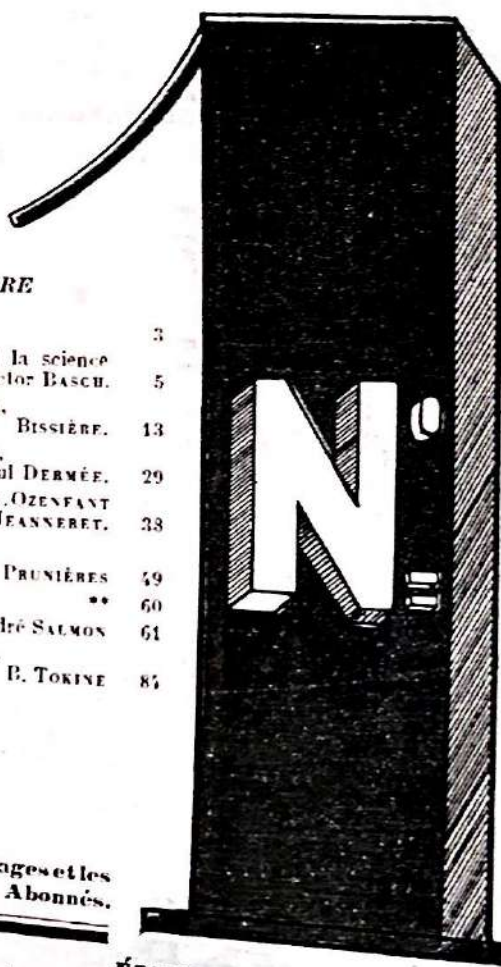
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In that joint pseudonym of autumn 1920, Charles Édouard Jeanneret first addressed the world as 'Le Corbusier'. The piece was signed 'Le Corbusier-Saunier', a fictive nom-de-plume derived from their family names. Where Ozenfant took his mother's maiden name, Jeanneret turned to that of his great-grandfather, a certain Monsieur Le Corbezier of Brussels, whose portrait had hung over the piano in Jeanneret's home during his youth.

With its arresting cover, designed by Le Corbusier's second cousin Pierre Jeanneret (pp. 42–43) – a design in which the bold number of the issue was given equal weight with the title – *L'Esprit Nouveau* established a new genre of cultural journalism in terms of both content and graphics. Indulging in a proto-Surrealist adaptation of 19th-century playbill typefaces, it was simultaneously radical and conservative. Influenced by Apollinaire's 'Calligrammes' (reviewed in the first issue) and by F. T. Marinetti's equally graphic 'Words at Liberty' (*parole en libertà*), Le Corbusier's habitual exhortatory style, with his own polemical graphics, first appeared in the layout and editing of *L'Esprit Nouveau*. The Purist Manifesto, *Après le cubisme*, reworked as *Le Purisme*, would be featured in the fourth issue of the magazine in 1920. Arguing that the techno-scientific industrial character of the age demanded not the mechanical dynamism of the Italian Futurists but a deeper cultural response grounded in the universality of mathematics, they went on to distinguish between *primary* and *secondary* sensations, the one being induced by universal, Platonic forms, the other attaining its aesthetic effect by virtue of its significance within a specific cultural context.

There are secondary sensations, varying with the individual because they depend upon his cultural or hereditary capital... Primary sensations constitute the bases of the plastic language; these are the fixed words of the plastic language; it is a fixed, formal, explicit, universal language determining subjective reactions of an individual order which permit the erection on these raw foundations of a sensitive work, rich in emotion... An art that would be based only upon primary sensations, using uniquely primary elements, would be only a primary art, rich, it is true, in geometric aspects, but denuded of all sufficient human resonance: it would be an ornamental art.

An art that would be based only upon the use of secondary sensations (an art of allusions) would be an art without a plastic base.⁸

This dialogical concept, combined with a belief in biological economy as the main principle behind natural selection, enabled them to transfer the concept of Darwinian evolution to the field of machine-made forms. At this juncture Purism went beyond being

20. Pierre Jeanneret: cover design for *L'Esprit Nouveau*, 1920. Note, at the top of the right column of contents, the first appearance of the name 'Le Corbusier'.

just a polemical aesthetic precept. In the very breadth of its discourse, it seems to have been posited as nothing less than a general theory of civilization. Thus iconographically and otherwise it was always more than just another avant-gardist line in the evolution of 20th-century art. A canonical canvas like Jeanneret's *Nature Morte à la Pile d'Assiettes* (Still-Life with a Stack of Plates) of 1920 was not only a demonstration of the interaction between primary and secondary forms: it was also intended to serve as an iconic evocation of a totally new way of life. Like the Cubist paintings from which it was derived, it represented a metropolitan civilization, in which the public realm of the café terrace was represented through a layering of architectonic planes and by overlapping plan and sectional representations of standard café tableware. In the centre of this canvas was the quasi-erotic symbol of two clay pipes interlocking about an empty glass. In imagistic terms, this was a characteristic Purist metaphor, part industrial, part folkloric. It was the focal point of an asymmetrical composition that was shifted off axis by a stack of plates and the pages of an open book. This last was a particularly ambiguous image in that it was left uncertain as to whether the ochre, shaded, curvaceous form occupying the centre of the picture was a book or a classical moulding.

The Purist *rappel à l'ordre*⁹ extended forward and backward in time; forward towards the imminent industrialized future and backward towards the Greek world. Ozenfant wrote: 'the newness of our time re-establishes the tie with the Greek epoch'.¹⁰ It also recalled Claude Perrault's 17th-century distinction between positive and arbitrary beauty. With typical Cartesian scepticism, Perrault had restricted the former to three attributes: symmetry, richness of materials, and precision of execution. The latter was dependent on local aesthetic convention, which for him included the five classical orders. In a parallel manner, Ozenfant and Le Corbusier wished to distinguish between the *primary* abstract character of architecture and the *secondary* attributes of ergonomic form, an interplay that both men saw as the inevitable dialectic of the machine age. The formal consequences of this interplay were made explicit by Le Corbusier in his book *Urbanisme* of 1925 when he wrote: 'We can say that the further human creations are removed from our immediate grasp, the more they tend to pure geometry; a violin or a chair, things which come into close contact with the body, are of a less pure geometry.'¹¹

Almost all of *Vers une architecture*, published in book form in 1923 under Le Corbusier's name alone, was initially issued under the joint pseudonym 'Le Corbusier-Saunier'. Only the last section,

entitled 'Architecture ou révolution' (a title which he had once envisaged for the book as a whole), was credited to Le Corbusier. Elsewhere, when exhibiting conjointly as Purist painters, or writing on aesthetics, Le Corbusier and Ozenfant would assume their real names, although they would also use other pseudonyms such as Vauvrecy, Fayet, Paul Boulard (Le Corbusier) and Julian Caron (Ozenfant). Despite this close, almost 'incestuous' collaboration, the nineteenth number of *L'Esprit Nouveau*, appearing at the end of 1923, anticipated the eventual dissolution of their partnership, for thereafter Le Corbusier signed the pieces on architecture alone. Despite their estrangement, in the same issue Ozenfant wrote a generous appraisal of *Vers une architecture*, conceding credit for the text to Le Corbusier.

While *Vers une architecture* fails to sustain a tight, consequential argument, its importance as an overall primer in Purist aesthetic theory resides in the fact that here for the first time the fundamental split between engineering and architecture is set forth in dialectical terms. As Le Corbusier put it in a passage that heads each of the three sections dealing with architecture in the latter part of the book,

You employ stone, wood and concrete, and with these materials you build houses and palaces. That is construction. Ingenuity is at work.

But suddenly you touch my heart, you do me good, I am happy and I say: 'This is beautiful.' That is Architecture. Art enters in.

My house is practical. I thank you, as I might thank Railway engineers, or the Telephone service. You have not touched my heart.

But suppose that walls rise towards heaven in such a way that I am moved. I perceive your intentions. Your mood has been gentle, brutal, charming or noble. The stones you have erected tell me so. You fix me to the place and my eyes regard it. They behold something which expresses a thought. A thought which reveals itself without word or sound, but solely by means of shapes which stand in a certain relationship to one another. These shapes are such that they are clearly revealed in light. The relationships between them have not necessarily any reference to what is practical or descriptive. They are a mathematical creation of your mind. They are the language of Architecture. By the use of raw materials and starting from conditions more or less utilitarian, you have established certain relationships which have aroused my emotions.

*This is Architecture.*¹²

This lyrical tone is left behind as soon as he begins to address the rationalization of building production in the penultimate section of the book, entitled 'Maisons en série' (mass-production houses). In the final chapter, 'Architecture ou révolution', he touches on the idea of revolution, both technical and political. By the former, he clearly meant the industrial revolution, already achieved through the mass production of automobiles; by the latter, he presumably intended revolutionary socialism fermenting beneath the surface of society and due primarily, in his view, to the fact that the working class was ill-housed (see also p.118):

The machinery of Society, profoundly out of gear, oscillates between an amelioration, of historical importance, and a catastrophe.

The primordial instinct of every human being is to assure himself of a shelter.

The various classes of workers in society to-day no longer have dwellings adapted to their needs; neither the artisan nor the intellectual.

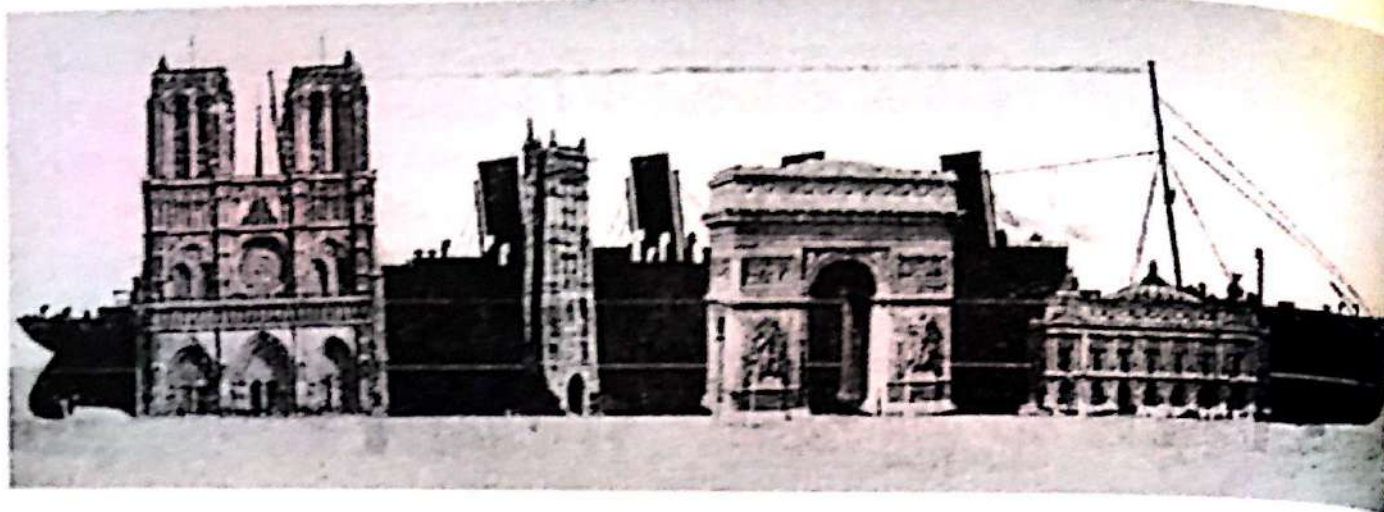
It is a question of building which is at the root of the social unrest of to-day; architecture or revolution.¹³

The significance of *Vers une architecture* resides in the fact that for the first time the two sides of Le Corbusier's Purist vision – the Academic and the Machinist – were integrated at a programmatic level, sustained by the conviction, inherited from Adolf Loos, that the style of the modern era already existed. For Le Corbusier this was as manifest in the instrumental character of metropolitan life as it was in the sublime character of large-scale engineering works. The latter exemplified the Engineer's Aesthetic as this was already evident in skyscrapers, grain silos, cranes and bridges of the modern world – engineering structures that, together with newly mechanized means of transport, had been recognized as the technological elements of the new industrial age in the Deutsche Werkbund yearbooks of 1913 and 1914.

21

In *Vers une architecture*, Le Corbusier fused together two distinctly different aspects of modern technology: on the one hand the German appraisal of the cultural significance of engineering form as this had been recognized by Walter Gropius and other Werkbund writers,¹⁴ and on the other his own naïve experience in the field of prefabricated housing. To these two classes of production he brought two parallel complementary aesthetic perceptions. In the first instance, there was the proto-Dadaistic aura that accrued to large civil engineering works when these were set against the grandeur of nature, as one might find this, say, in Gustave Eiffel's

21. *Vers une architecture*, 1923: title page for the first of the 'Three Reminders to Architects', featuring a north American grain elevator.



22. Illustration from *Vers une architecture*, 1923: the transatlantic liner *Aquitania* compared to four Parisian monuments – Notre Dame, the Tour St-Jacques, the Arc de Triomphe, and the Opéra.

railway viaducts in the Massif Central, such as his Garabit Viaduct of 1884 which served as the key illustration to the title page of the chapter entitled 'The Engineer's Aesthetic and Architecture'. An equally sublime juxtaposition appears in the first section of the chapter 'Eyes Which Do Not See', where in a culled magazine image the liner *Aquitania*, with its capacity of 3,600 passengers, is displayed against four Parisian monuments, the cathedral of Notre Dame, the Tour St-Jacques, the Arc de Triomphe and the Opéra. Beneath this, he writes:

*Architects live and move within the narrow limits of academic acquirements and in ignorance of new ways of building, and they are quite willing that their conceptions should remain as doves kissing one another. But our daring and masterly constructors of steamships produce palaces in comparison with which cathedrals are tiny things, and they throw them on the sea.*¹⁵

In the second instance, there was the ongoing proliferation of standard, mass-produced objects which were seen by Le Corbusier and Ozenfant as a concatenation of *objets trouvés*, ranging in affective tone from the coldly hygienic to the sensuously utilitarian. They had in mind the partly machine-made, partly crafted straw hats, spats, shoes, cigarette cases, luggage, clothing, bidets, filing cabinets, dynamos, fans and other mechanistic accoutrements that frequently appeared as advertisements or as illustrations in the pages of *L'Esprit Nouveau*. With the discontinuation of the journal in 1925, these 'readymades'¹⁶ were assembled as the anonymous lingua franca of the modern world in Le Corbusier's polemical *L'Art décoratif d'aujourd'hui* published in the same year.

Along with the Bauhausler László Moholy Nagy, Le Corbusier was one of the first propagandists of the modern movement to exploit the ceaseless proliferation of modern graphic and photographic images. He constantly mixed these images with his own

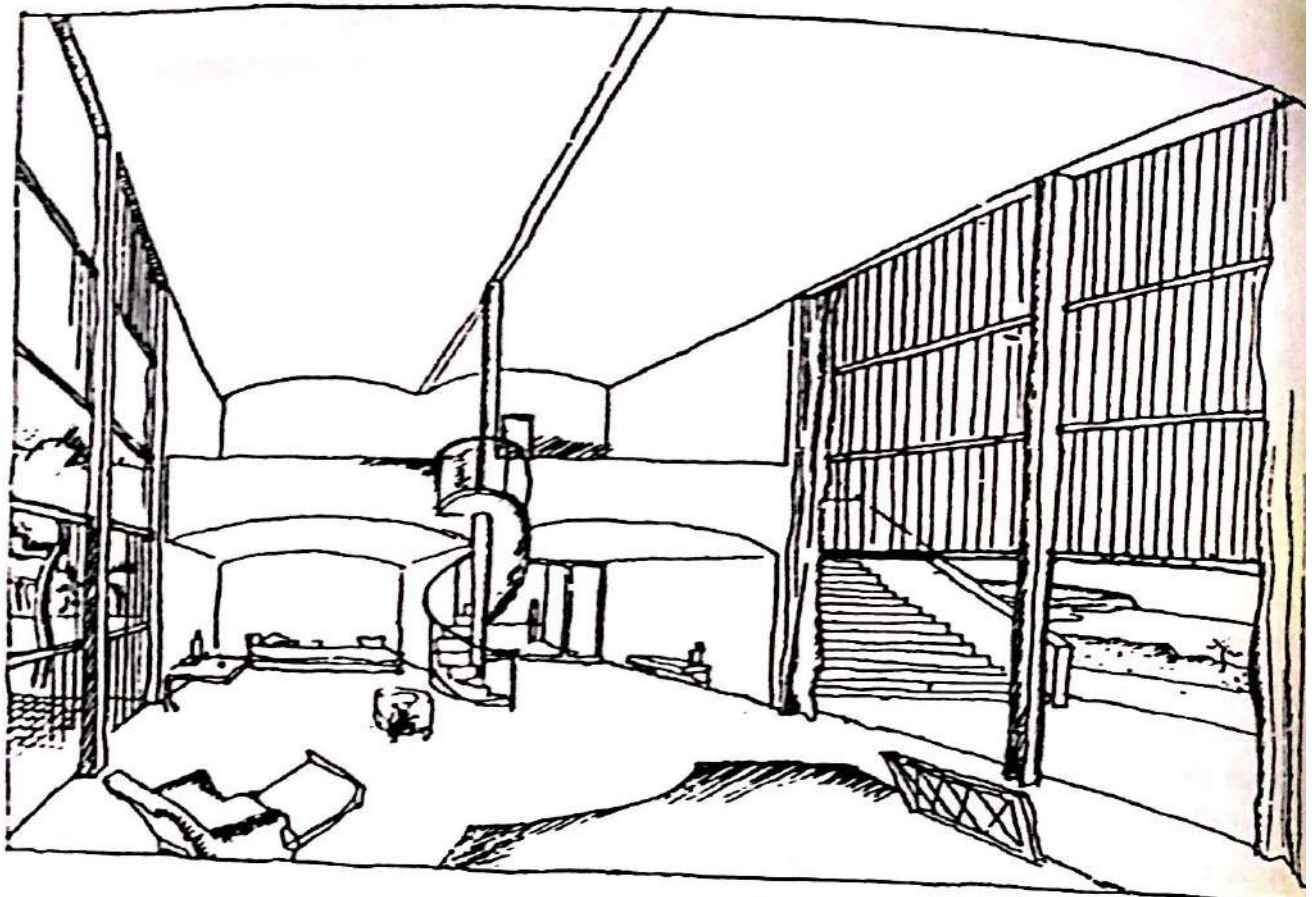
projected work, thereby fusing the real with the ideal and vice versa. He even employed the technique of photomontage to imply the realization of works that were still only hypothetical, or alternatively, on occasion, to depict the buildings of others as though they were his own. Le Corbusier's consummate skill in juxtaposing word and image enabled him to substantiate one rhetorical claim after another. Especially, it helped to give conviction to his critique of the École des Beaux Arts and the fashionable Art Deco movement, which by the mid-1920s was the most appealing neo-modern alternative to Purism.

Above all, Le Corbusier was one of the first architects of the 20th century to set such store by the precise photographic record of his finished work. His realized buildings were invariably published as Purist set-pieces, pristine, empty, luminous spaces, removed from the quotidian contaminations of domesticity and the inevitable depredations of time, depicted without the furnishings of the occupant and often enhanced by certain objects that implied the elective affinities of Purism—a trilby hat casually placed on a hall table, a lay figure posed on a window sill, an electric fan, a coffee pot, a jug and a fish, these last four being posed together like a still-life on the table in the otherwise deserted kitchen.

23

23. Le Corbusier and Pierre Jeanneret: Villa Stein de Monzie, Garches, 1927: kitchen.

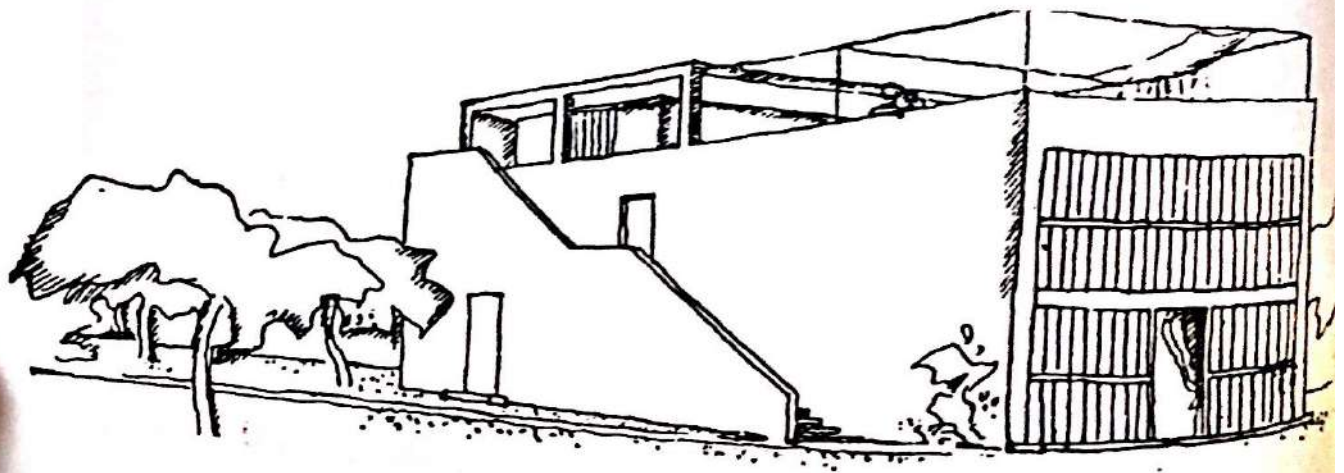




24. Le Corbusier and Pierre Jeanneret: 'Villa au bord de la mer', 1921.

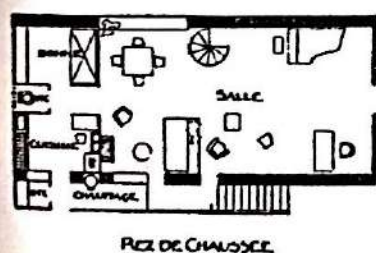
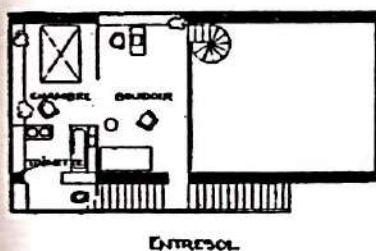
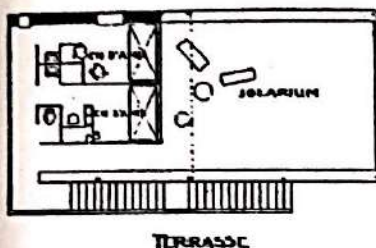
25. Le Corbusier and Pierre Jeanneret: first version of the Maison Citrohan, 1920: perspective.

26. Le Corbusier and Pierre Jeanneret: first version of the Maison Citrohan: plans of the ground floor, mezzanine, and roof terrace.



While the bulk of Le Corbusier's early project work as an independent architect in Paris consisted of prototypical low-cost workers' housing schemes of various kinds, the first *esquisse* for a bourgeois villa appeared in 1921 with his 'Villa au bord de la mer' (house by the sea) for the couturier Paul Poiret. Among his housing schemes, the most innovative, from a constructional standpoint, were the various applications of the Dom-ino type-form to the accommodation of mass housing, and the Maison Monol prototype, the one contingent on an orthogonal concrete frame, the other on a concrete vault. However, the spatial breakthrough from which much of his future work would evolve came with the Maison Citrohan (1920) – the name being chosen in order to evoke the mass-production norms of a Citroën car.¹⁷ This could hardly have been more misleading, however, since from a technical standpoint the house was somewhat retardataire. Its plan and sectional form were derived in part from the 19th-century artist's studio and in part from the megaron form of the Mediterranean vernacular. This last, typical of the islands of the Aegean and equally evident in North Africa, comprised two parallel load-bearing walls roofed by a primitive masonry vault and open at one end. It is the typical construction of the narrow-fronted, whitewashed peasant's house that one may still find in the Greek islands today. At the same time, the Maison Citrohan was also conceived as synthesizing other type-forms drawn from metropolitan culture: on the one hand, the typical small back-lot Parisian workshop, and on the other, the narrow-fronted café/restaurant. Le Corbusier's retrospective account of stumbling upon the latter as a kind of *objet trouvé* testifies to this:

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14, 15
18
25, 26



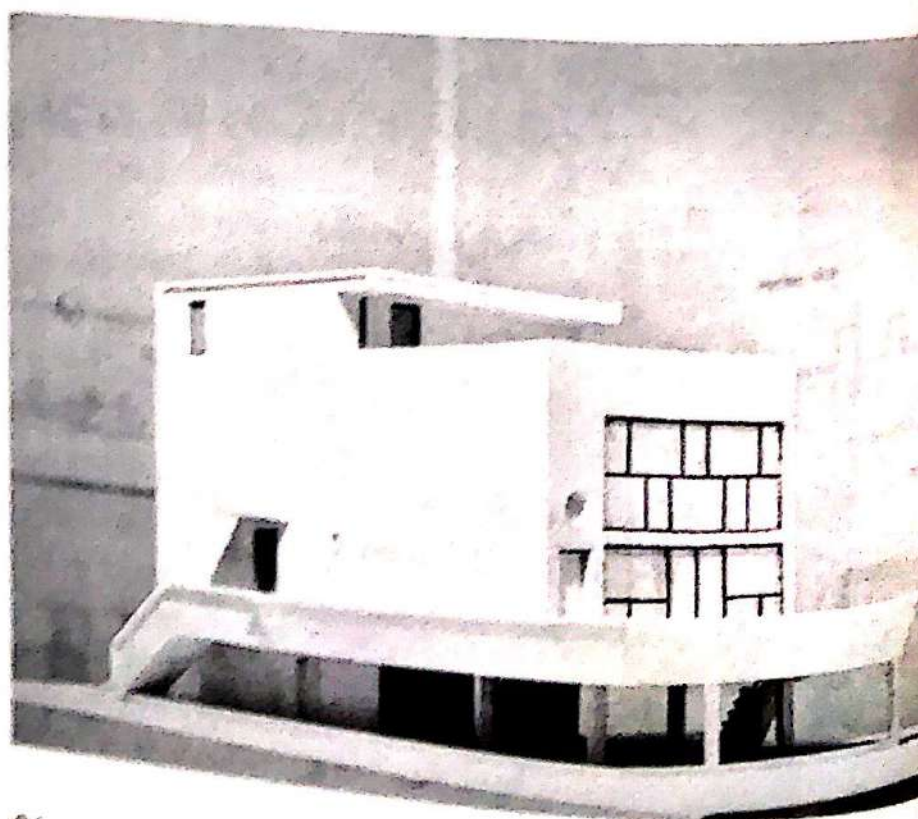
We were in the habit of eating in a little coachmen's restaurant in the centre of Paris; there was the bar (the zinc), and the kitchen at the rear; a mezzanine cutting the height of the place in two; the big window opening onto the street. One fine day, we discovered this and we saw that a certain paradigm was in evidence here, namely, an architectural arrangement that could be adapted to the organization of a house.¹⁸

With the first Maison Citrohan the essential domestic themes of his architectural career are already established: the augmentation of a restricted floor area by a double-height volume; the exploitation of the flat roof as an elevated terrace; the combination of metal-framed, industrial glazing with a reinforced concrete frame and concrete block infill; an anomalous insistence on retaining such bourgeois amenities as a boudoir and a maid's room; and finally, the implicit paradox of positing this reduced, abstract



architecture as a classless, quasi-vernacular norm. In all of this the Viennese cultural debate of the turn of the century was more influential on Le Corbusier's early work than is perhaps sufficiently acknowledged. By 1920 he was evidently under the spell of Adolf Loos's opposition to Josef Hoffmann's compulsion to render the bourgeois dwelling as a 'total work of art', designing everything from the cutlery on the table to the ornamental pinnacles on the roof (cf. Hoffmann's Palais Stoclet, Brussels, 1911). Thus the stripped-down geometrical severity of the Citrohan House seems to have been a direct response to Loos's critical precept that 'a house should be rich within and banal without'.

One needs to remark here on Le Corbusier's habitual typological approach, exemplified in this instance by the way in which the first Citrohan House of 1920 was followed by a second, improved version exhibited as a model at the Salon d'Automne in 1922. The initial three-storey prototype was now raised on reinforced concrete pillars with garaging and services beneath, while the roof-to-roof accommodation, that is to say the children's bedrooms (guest rooms in the first project) were now to be reached by an enclosed staircase extending from the raised living level to the roof. The standard Parisian workshop glazing was replaced by symmetrically composed large glass panes set in metal frames, while the overhanging roof slab and the balcony to the living room terrace were terminated with discreet cornices. One should hasten to add that the Citrohan House prototypes by no means exhausted the permutations that were to be derived from the original megaron form.



27. Le Corbusier and Pierre Jeanneret: second version of the Citrohan House, shown on plan, 1922: model.

28. Le Corbusier and Pierre Jeanneret: Maison La Roche, Paris, 1923: dining room. Note the Purist furnishings, the Thonet bentwood chairs, industrial light fitting, teapot, etc.; the 'tableau-type' is Le Corbusier's *Nature Morte à la Pile d'Assiettes* of 1920 (see p. 28).



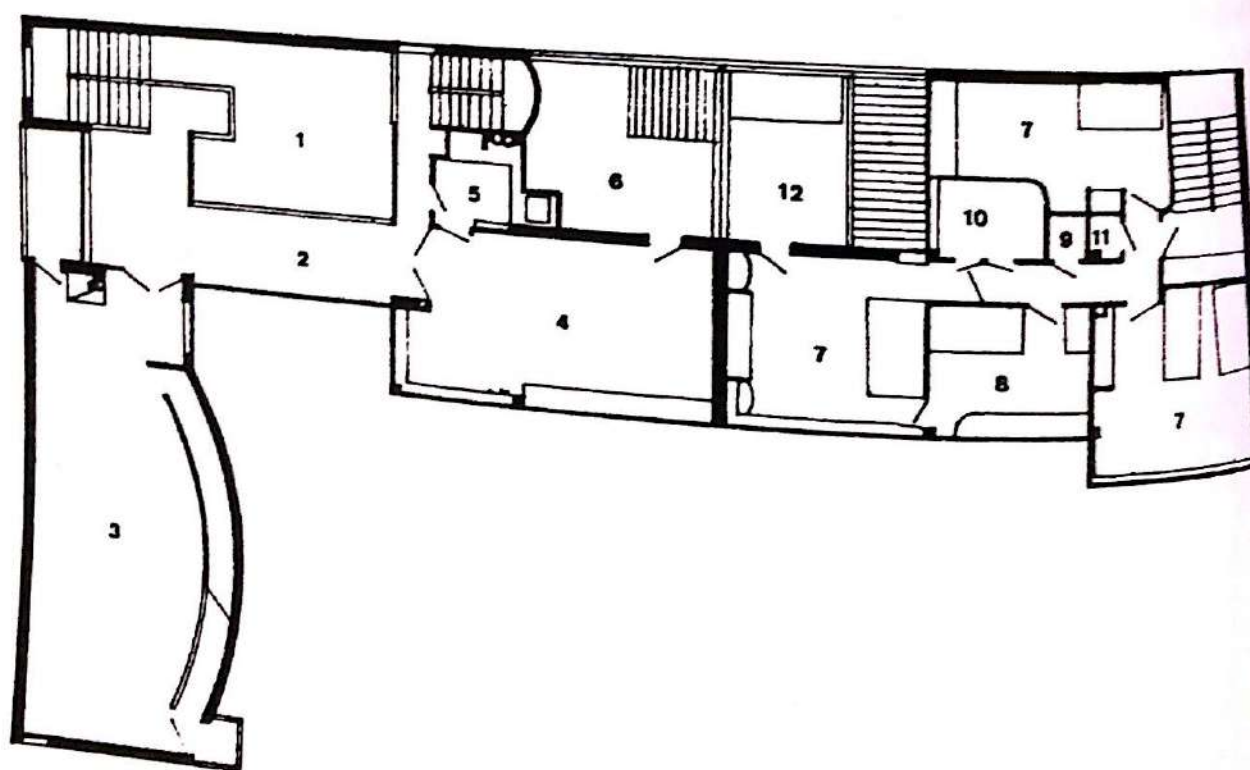
particularly as appears from the 'Maison d'artiste' of 1922 where an elevated single-storey living space is capped by a one-and-a-half-height monitor-lit studio, or the 'Maisons en série pour artisans' (mass-production craftsmen's houses) of 1924 where the initial primary volume is reduced to a half-cube. Above the square plan of this last, a ground-floor living level is ingeniously augmented by a triangular sleeping mezzanine with its balustrade and access stair aligning with the diagonal of the square. We should note in passing that Le Corbusier and Pierre Jeanneret would eventually realize a reduced version of their second Citrohan House at the Stuttgart Weissenhofsiedlung of 1927.

Along with its origin in European critical culture, the evolution of the Purist project depended upon a constant fertile interchange between architecture and painting, with Le Corbusier's architecture often being the three-dimensional equivalent of a Purist canvas and vice versa. This oscillation is particularly evident in two seminal pieces of the early 1920s: the Maison La Roche of 1923 and the Pavillon de l'Esprit Nouveau of 1925. The former originated with art in more than one sense, since Le Corbusier and Ozenfant had directly advised the young banker Raoul La Roche in his progressive acquisition of a series of Cubist and Purist pictures. As a consequence of this association Le Corbusier was commissioned to design a house to accommodate the collection, a project which was

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29. Le Corbusier and Pierre Jeanneret: Maison La Roche, Paris, 1923: general view, with the gallery wing on the left.

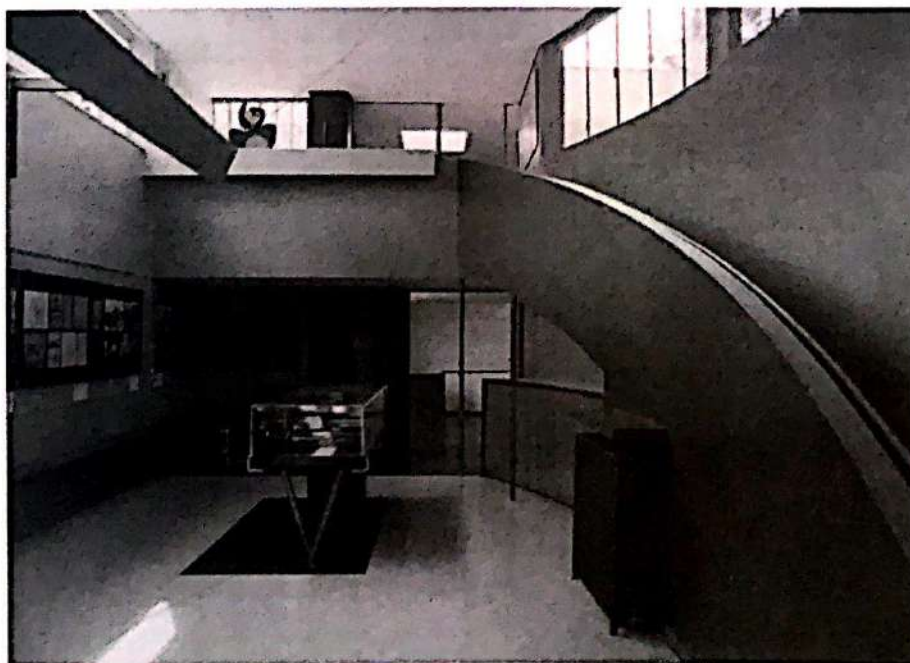
30. Le Corbusier and Pierre Jeanneret: first-floor plan of the Maison La Roche (left) and Maison Albert Jeanneret, Paris.

- 1 void to entrance hall
- 2 bridge
- 3 picture gallery
- 4 dining room
- 5 servery
- 6 yard
- 7 bedroom;
- 8 dressing room
- 9 w.c.
- 10 bathroom
- 11 sluice

duly put in hand as part of an earlier independent proposal by the architect to build a small residential cluster in the Square du Docteur Blanche in the Auteuil district of Paris. However, as a result of an unforeseen reduction in the width of the site, this cul-de-sac set-piece was reduced to two three-storey houses. The first of these, on entering the street, was occupied by Le Corbusier's brother Albert Jeanneret and the latter's Swedish wife, Lotti Raaf. (By this date, the musical Albert was teaching dance and eurhythmics according to the Jaques-Dalcroze method.¹⁹) The second house, belonging to La Roche, ended the street with an art gallery standing on cylindrical concrete columns – the first incarnation of Le Corbusier's characteristic *pilotis*. With its three-storey entrance hall, double-height gallery and mezzanine library (this last being accessed by a steep ramp from the raised gallery), this was the larger and the more spatially elaborate house. However it was also the occasion for an unexpected confrontation between art and architecture, for in a letter to Le Corbusier in 1926 La Roche wrote:

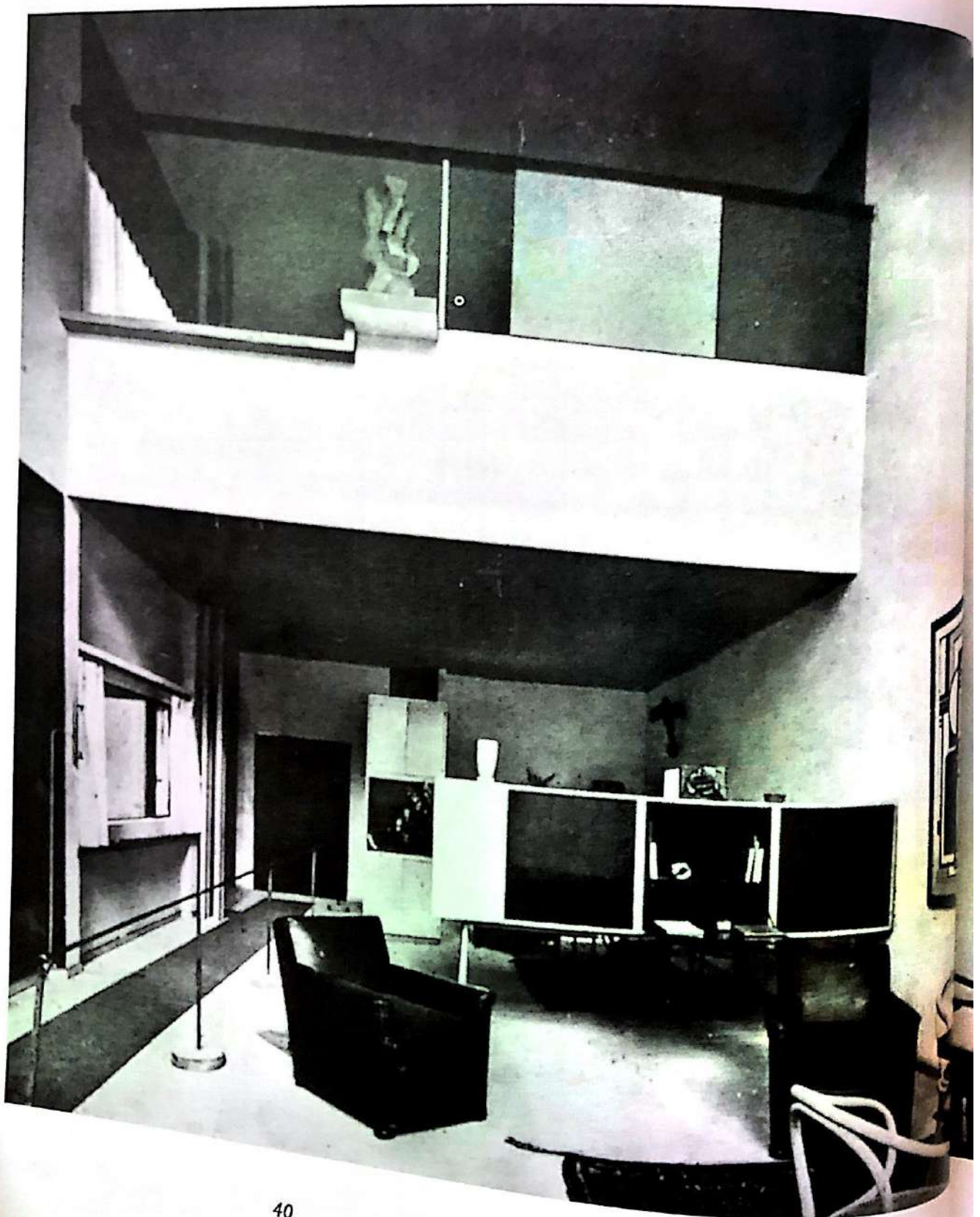
*Reading between the lines of your article in the Cahiers d'Art, No. 3, I was aware of some criticisms levelled at me. Indeed you loyally warned me in advance of them. What can I say? No doubt you have reason for complaint if the impact of your walls, of whom I have been one of the chief admirers, is ruined... The house, once built, was so beautiful that on seeing it I cried: 'It's almost a pity to put paintings in it!' Nevertheless, I did so. How could I have done otherwise? Do I not have certain obligations to my painters, of whom yourself are one? I commissioned from you 'a frame for my collection'. You provided me with 'a poem of walls'. Which of us two is most to blame?*²⁰

31. Le Corbusier and Pierre Jeanneret: Maison La Roche: picture gallery and mezzanine library.



32. Le Corbusier and Pierre
Jeanneret: Pavillon de l'Esprit
Nouveau, Paris, 1925: interior,
with Purist furnishings.

33. Le Corbusier and Pierre
Jeanneret. Pavillon de l'Esprit
Nouveau: exterior.



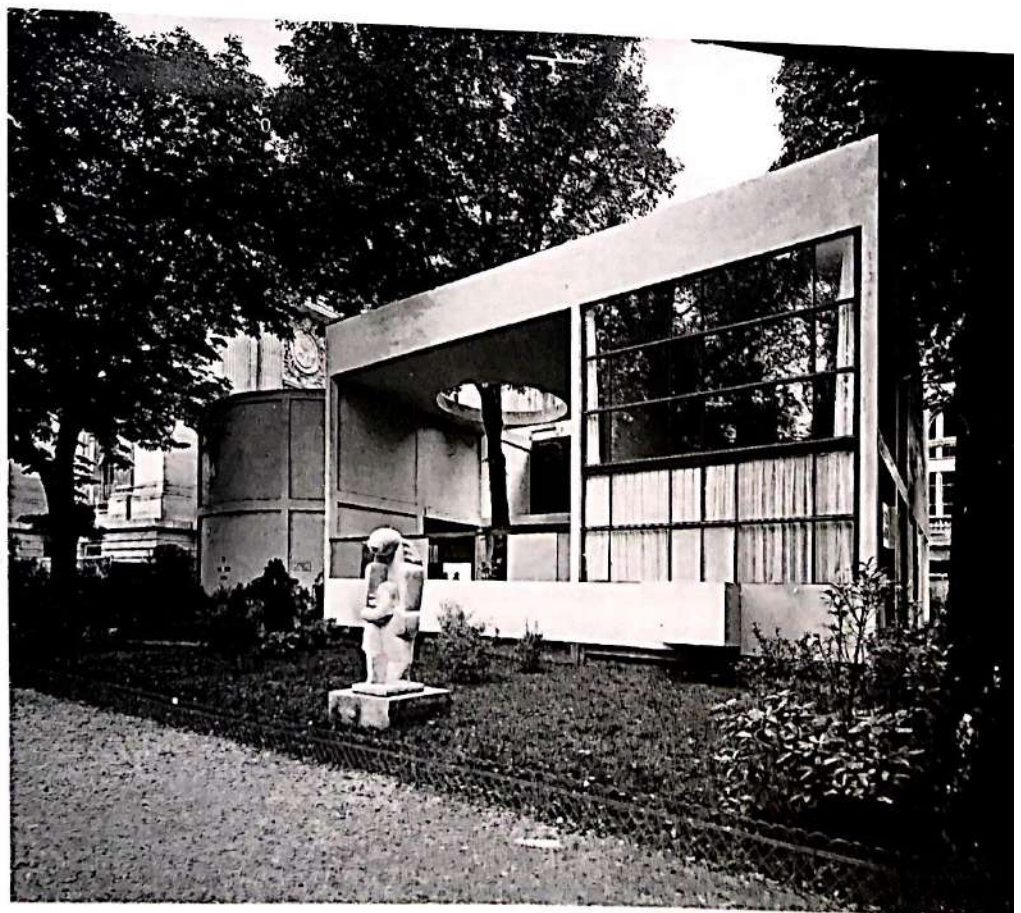
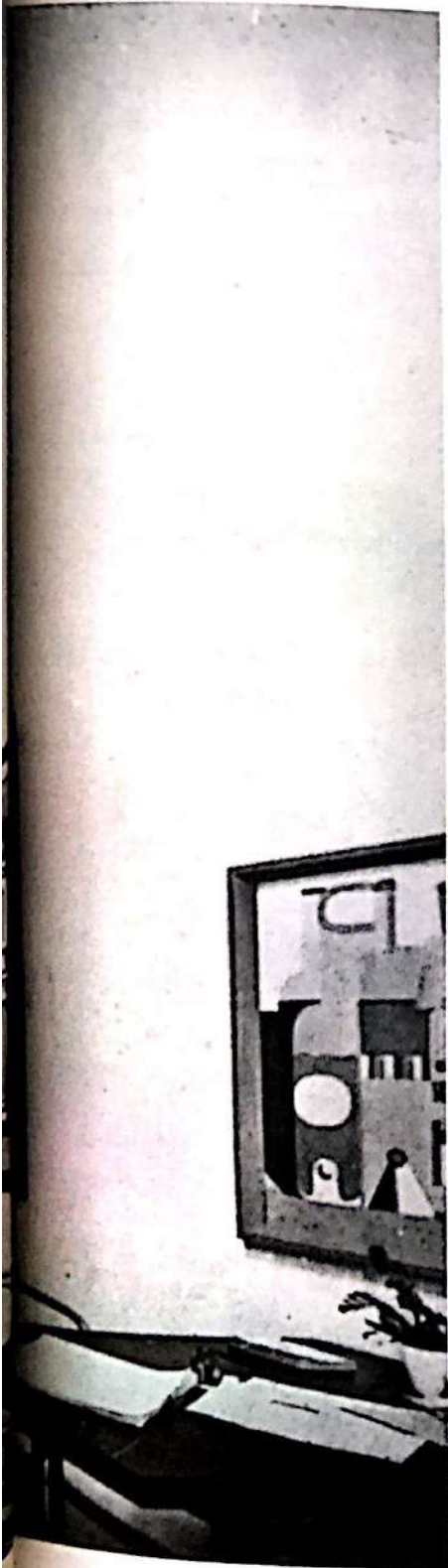
The need to avoid this conflict between the 'walls' and the 'works' had already been touched on in the 'Manual of the Dwelling' section in *Vers une architecture*, where the reader is advised to exhibit only a few paintings at any one time. This precept would be demonstrated in the Pavillon de l'Esprit Nouveau, with its two exemplary Purist canvases by Fernand Léger and Le Corbusier discretely suspended on a large blank wall.

The Pavillon de l'Esprit Nouveau, located behind the Grand Palais in Paris (as a barely acknowledged counter-thesis to the Exposition des Arts Décoratifs of 1925), was posited as a proto-typical two-storey high-rise dwelling unit, created by combining the megaron form of the Maison Citrohan with the characteristic two-storey L-shaped monk's cell and garden of the standard Carthusian monastery. Lit by a light-well to the rear of the court, the duplex was built around an inset 'hanging garden' rather than being equipped with a balcony in the conventional sense. It is this singular feature that has remained a challenge for all residential high-rise construction ever since, perennially unrealizable it seems due to its volumetric extravagance. This hanging-garden type had already appeared in Le Corbusier's double-sided residential block of 1922, his 'Immeubles-Villas', enclosing a tennis court.

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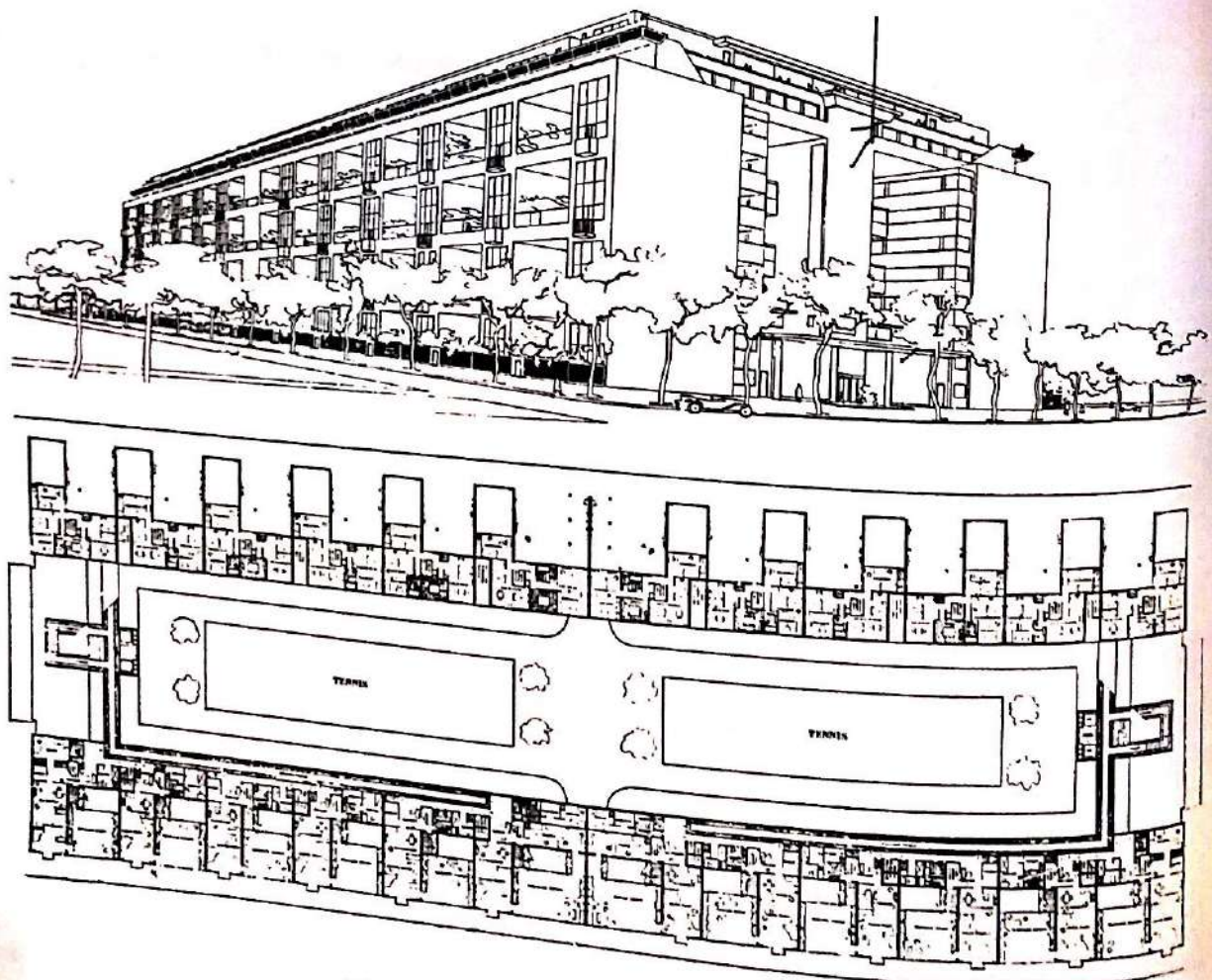
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Notwithstanding the cultural trap of the 'total work of art', against which Adolf Loos warned in his 1900 parable 'The Story of a Poor Rich Man', Le Corbusier came near to a similar aesthetic closure by positing an ideal world of Purist objects that were supposedly redeemed from effete aestheticism by being found in the surrounding society rather than *designed*. As with the furnishing of the Jeanneret and La Roche houses, this was the essential cultural polemic of the Pavillon de l'Esprit Nouveau, which was equipped with Thonet bentwood chairs from Vienna, Maples leather-upholstered club armchairs from London, Parisian iron park furniture, standard café tableware. However 'readymade' these may have been in the Duchampian sense, they were to be unified as an ensemble by a Purist colour scheme: 'Polychromy: ceiling blue, left hand wall white, right hand wall lower part ochre, upper part white, storage units, yellow ochre.'²¹

It is difficult to overestimate the seminal role played by Le Corbusier's second cousin Pierre Jeanneret (1896–1967) during the first sixteen years of their joint practice in Paris at 35 rue de Sèvres. Pierre Jeanneret had been trained in architecture, sculpture and painting at the École des Beaux Arts in Geneva from 1913 to 1915. Thereafter he served as an architectural apprentice in Geneva

34. Le Corbusier and Pierre Jeanneret: 'Immeubles-Villas', 1922: perspective and typical floor plan.

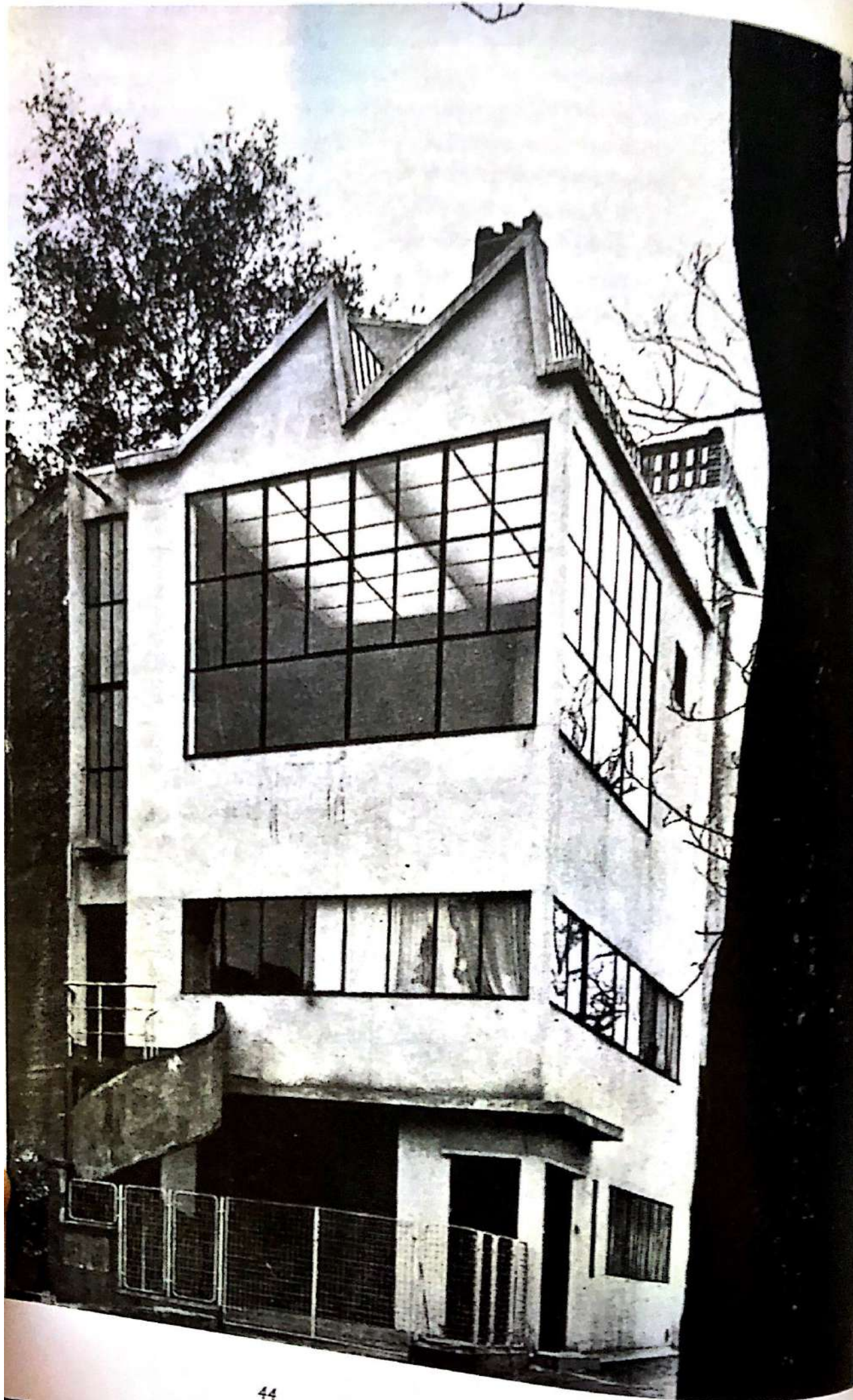


before working for Perret Frères in Paris in the early 1920s. The two cousins began their professional association at the end of 1923 with the inauguration of 'Atelier 35S' (named from the house number plus the 'S' of rue de Sèvres). Pierre Jeanneret was already assisting his cousin part-time during the years he was with Auguste Perret, when he acquired the technical expertise that would prove crucial to the subsequent realizations of the partnership. In this complementary, and at times difficult, association, it is clear that Pierre Jeanneret was the pivotal figure who was constantly present in the studio.²² He took full responsibility for the everyday production and supervision of the work, while his volatile cousin was always on the move, or even when not travelling was invariably engaged to some degree with his other intellectual activities. Nevertheless Le Corbusier remained responsible for the genesis of the basic concept in most instances, while Jeanneret was limited in large part to the task of evolving and perfecting the form, both spatially and technically. Of their relationship Le Corbusier wrote towards the end of his life (evoking perhaps, at the same time, the ambivalence that he had felt for his mountaineering father): 'I am the sea and he is the mountain and as everyone knows these two can never meet.'²³ There was nonetheless an indissoluble bond between them which, even after it had been forcibly disrupted by the Second World War, was restored in 1951 when Pierre Jeanneret became the site architect for the building of Chandigarh in India.

Le Corbusier and Pierre Jeanneret's Ozenfant atelier of 1926 transformed the second Citrohan House prototype into an irregularly configured cubic studio space under which the rest of the dwelling was rather incommodiously crammed. The main volume was a double-height painter's studio. It was lit by large glazed walls on two adjacent sides and by a saw-tooth factory rooflight above a flat studio lay-light in obscured glass. This privileged Purist space, flooded with light, could hardly have been more different from the cramped sleeping quarters of the single-storey space beneath. The idea of a *promenade architecturale* (p. 79) seems to have been tentatively broached in this work in a carefully contrived sequence of small-scale moves that were intended to accentuate the experience of the space, from the corkscrew compression of the spiral access stairs, both within and without, to the tubular steel companion ladders that afforded a more liberated, if precarious, means of access to the library and mezzanine at the narrow end of the studio.²⁴ This distorted megaron on an awkward urban site was patently designed to cater to the spiritual needs of the 'artist/monk', as the new ideal, metropolitan man.²⁵

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35. Le Corbusier and Pierre Jeanneret: Maison Ozenfant, Paris, 1926: exterior.

36. Le Corbusier and Pierre Jeanneret: Maison Ozenfant: studio.

Le Corbusier's work entered a period of unparalleled creativity in the first half of the 1920s that culminated in the realization of three diminutive canonical pieces: the Ozenfant studio, the Maison La Roche, and the Maison Cook. The latter (see pp.73–77), realized in 1926, combined in a compelling way both the classical and the vernacular strains of the European domestic tradition (cf. Adolf Loos) and at the same time inflected this synthesis with elements drawn from the new industrial world, with metal furnishings, radiators, fenestration and balustrading. Moreover, the use of flat-slab, concrete-framed, cantilevered construction enabled Le Corbusier to happen upon the free plan (*plan libre*) which hitherto had always remained latent in his work but was never actively expressed. Here it was employed not only to liberate the façade from any load-bearing function but also to reconcile in plan and section the interlocking proportions of the square and the Golden Section which modulate the volumetric and surface displacement throughout.

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