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LE CORBUSIER
HISTORY and **TRADITION**

Edited by

Armando Rabaça



1. Maison Cook, Paris, 1926.
Living room.

HADRIAN'S VILLA AND SPATIAL DIALOGUE
IN LE CORBUSIER'S HOUSES

INTRODUCTION

A good place to introduce the topic of this essay is the living-dining-library space in the Maison Cook, which Le Corbusier designed in 1926 (Fig. 1). The living room proper, an elongated rectangular space two floors high, takes the full depth of the house, from front to back. Along one of its long walls open the other two rooms—the dining room downstairs near the front of the house, the library upstairs near the back. And several other elements add further complexity (freestanding fireplace, staircase, curved projection). How should we look at this puzzling space? I propose that it was conceptualized by Le Corbusier as an ambiguous dialogue of three rooms, each with its own separate identity. The dialogue is ambiguous because, on the one hand, the living room dominates, providing a spatial and social centre; but on the other hand, there is a real negotiation and play between all three rooms, with a literal hierarchical reading undermined by the complexity of the composition and by the equalizing presence of a continuous ribbon window, linking the living and dining rooms along the façade. On the one hand *centrality*, on the other hand *play*.

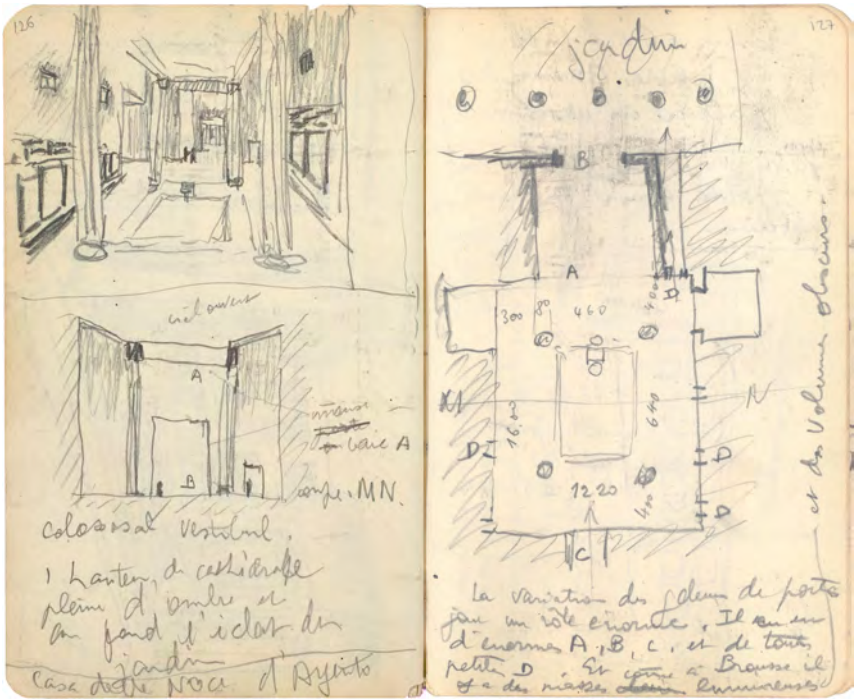
This description of interior space as a “dialogue of rooms” fits many of Le Corbusier’s houses, but would not come to mind at Mies van der Rohe’s Barcelona Pavilion, which can more readily be described as continuous space,

inside and outside, organized by floating planes.¹ And both Le Corbusier's and Mies's interiors differ from traditional interiors where several rooms are arranged *en enfilade*: there, the rooms are independent boxes, and the relationship between them is really the dialogue between aligned doors.

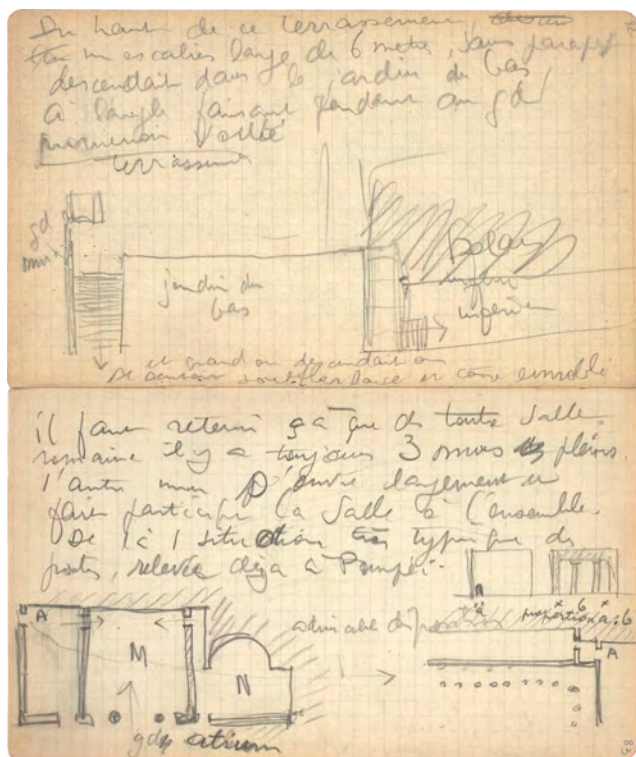
By the time he designed the Maison Cook in 1926, Le Corbusier had been evolving the concept of "dialogue of rooms" for fifteen years. The broad framework for his thinking about internal space had been a notion of space as "enclosure," acquired from reading Camillo Sitte and other authors in 1910-11, while preparing a manuscript about urban design that remained unpublished.² And an important early experience of sophisticated internal spaces had occurred during his Voyage d'Orient in 1911, when he had visited many great mosques in Turkey—in particular the Green Mosque in Bursa, where he had commented about the "admirable concordance between the volumes."³ But the specific moment when the concept of "dialogue of rooms" began to acquire specificity came at the end of his Voyage d'Orient, when he visited Pompeii and Hadrian's Villa. In this essay, I will speculate on that visit and its effect, with particular attention to two sketches from Hadrian's Villa (Figs. 2, 3, 4).

In Pompeii, Le Corbusier was exposed to the characteristic typology of ancient Roman houses, with rooms arranged around two large spaces open to the sky, the Atrium and the Peristyle. The drawings in his sketchbook show a keen appreciation of the spatial richness of Pompeian interiors, though his written comments do not explicitly address the spatial aspect, focusing more generically on contrasts of light and shade, volumes and surfaces, large and small. Typical are his comments at the House of the Silver Wedding (Fig. 2): "The range of door sizes plays a huge role. There are huge ones like ABC, and tiny ones like D. And, like in Bursa, there are bright masses and dark spaces" (he is referring to the Green Mosque in Bursa, Turkey).⁴

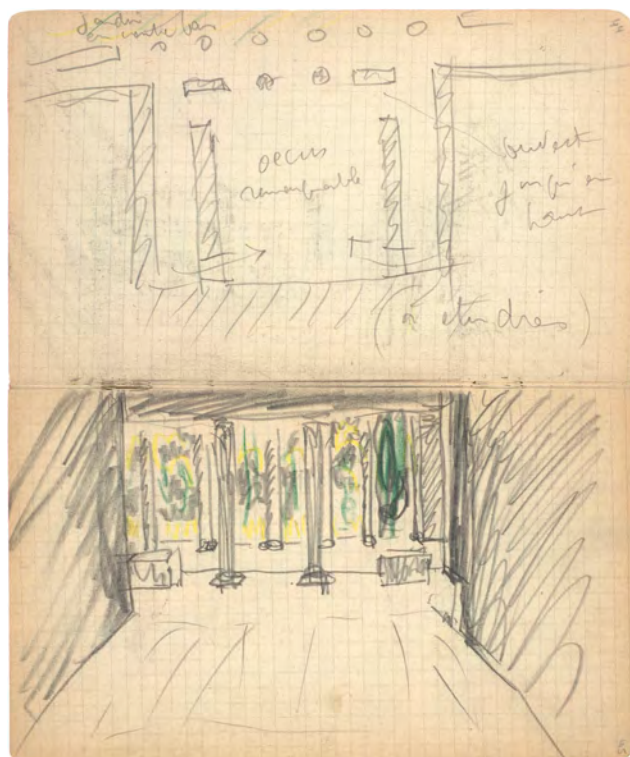
A couple of weeks later, while visiting Hadrian's villa near Rome, Le Corbusier suddenly understood the spatial quality of Pompeian houses in a more structural way. Next to a plan made at the Water Court adjoining the Piazza d'Oro he wrote: "Keep in mind that, in any Roman room, there



2. Le Corbusier.
 Sketches made at the House of the Silver Wedding
 in Pompeii, 1911.
Voyage d'Orient, Carnets, Carnet 4, 126-27.



3. Le Corbusier.
 Sketch made at the Water Court adjoining
 the Piazza d'Oro, Hadrian's Villa, 1911.
 See bottom half of the figure.
Voyage d'Orient, Carnets, Carnet 5, 82-83.



4. Le Corbusier.
Sketch made at the Library Court,
Hadrian's Villa, 1911.
Voyage d'Orient, Carnets, Carnet 5, 44-45.

are always three full walls. The other wall opens widely and lets the room participate in the ensemble. Hence a very typical context for the doors, already noted in Pompeii" (Fig. 3).⁵ In other words, Roman Rooms are U-shaped spaces, closed on three sides and open on the fourth one. The tone is as if Le Corbusier has just understood something important, as if he has just had a flash of intuition.

In a narrow sense, his new understanding of Roman Rooms solves the puzzle of those huge variations in door sizes: it does so by recasting categories. What he had called "enormous doors" in Pompeii are now the "fourth walls," the open ends of the *Alae* and *Tablinum* abutting the *Atrium*; and what he had called "very small doors" are now just functional passages, so small that they don't interrupt the "full walls." There are only walls, not doors.

But the implications of Le Corbusier's new understanding go well beyond door sizes. He has acquired a new framework to conceptualize synthetically the spatial qualities of Roman interiors: because of their fourth open wall, the peripheral rooms in the Pompeian house are like extensions (niches) of the *Atrium* or *Peristyle*, and thus help to shape the "ensemble." And beyond that, Le Corbusier has acquired a new framework to conceptualize interior spaces in his own architecture: it is this new framework that interests us here.

Le Corbusier's intuition will affect his architecture in two stages, one immediate, the other ten years later.

CENTRALITY

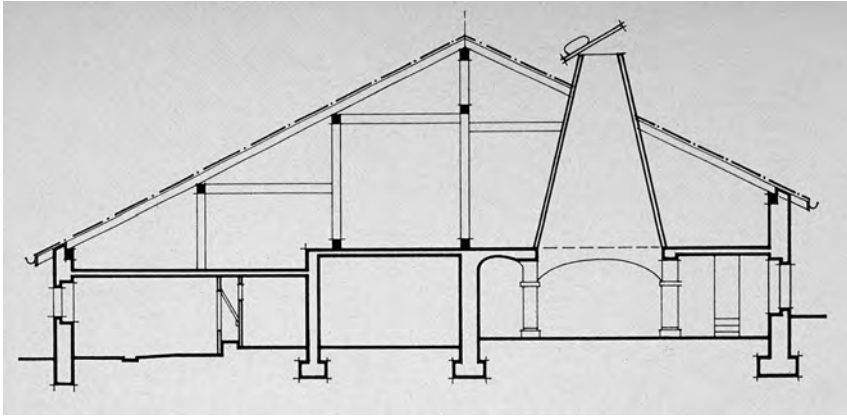
The first immediate effect was to qualify a preexisting interest in *centrality*—like in the earlier discussion of the *Maison Cook*, I use this term to indicate that the internal space has a centre or focus, it has physical and symbolic hierarchy.

Le Corbusier's interest for *centrality* predated his encounter with ancient Roman architecture. Le Corbusier's first important experience in this respect

had been that of the local farms in his native Jura region of Switzerland: he even lived in such farms on two occasions, in 1910 and in 1912 (Fig. 5).⁶ In these farms, some dating back to the 1500s, the living quarters are gathered around a tall central space serving as kitchen with an open fire and as the gathering place for the family. This space, which may be a room all by itself or form the central portion of a larger room, is two or three times taller than the surrounding spaces, because its ceiling—the chimney—is one giant pyramid rising through the spacious attic of the farm: like the attic, the chimney is built in wood, hence it must be kept away from the flames, and this is why it is so ample. These farms had had an enormous impact on Le Corbusier, so deep that forty years later he went back to them to conceptualize the Assembly Building at Chandigarh and the church at Firminy. There, he quite specifically used the sloped “chimney” form. But at a more general level, what matters is the notion of a central spatial focus, both physical and symbolic—the place that gives meaning to the rest, the place where the family gathers around the fire, where a country’s representatives gather to decide its collective course, where the faithful gather to pray. Indeed, throughout his career, from the Maison Citrohan, the Villa Cook, and the Villa Savoye in the 1920s, to the apartments of his Unité d’Habitation and to Chandigarh in the 1940s-1950s, Le Corbusier repeatedly structured his interior spaces around a powerful communal focus.

So, here we have a persistent interest of Le Corbusier for spatial hierarchy or *centrality*, an interest which predates his encounter with ancient Roman architecture and which will continue throughout his life. Together with other influences that I will not discuss here, Roman interiors gave Le Corbusier a way to articulate formally that kind of hierarchy, as a central spatial core surrounded by “Roman Rooms” that open onto it.⁷

The effect can already be seen in 1912, a few months after his return home, when Le Corbusier designed a house for his parents (Figs. 6, 7).⁸ Here, he is starting from current typologies that were routine in bourgeois houses: on the one hand, combining the main rooms through French doors; and on the other hand, connecting the whole plan through an axis, which here

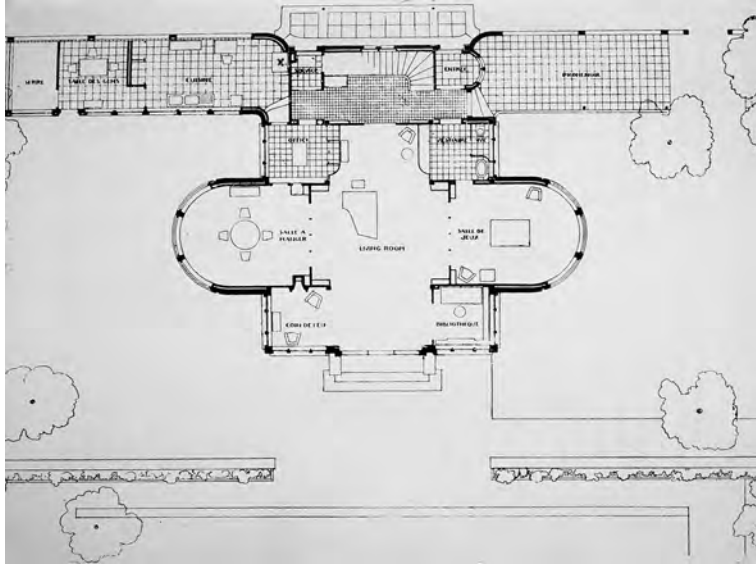


5. Farmhouse "Les Crosettes"
near La Chaux-de-Fonds, 1614.
Drawing by H. Mischler.
From Max Gschwend, "Bauernhäuser
im Hochjura," *Schweizer Baudokumentation*
(August 1968).
Courtesy Schweizerische
Bauernhausforschung, Archiv Zug.



House for Le Corbusier's parents,
La Chaux-de-Fonds, 1912.

6. Schematic plan of the main floor.
Drawn by author.
In order to highlight the main living spaces,
internal walls have been thickened and some
areas have been shaded.
7. Living room seen from the antechamber.
Dining-room in front with parlor to the left
separated by a curtain.



Villa Schwob, La Chaux-de-Fonds, 1916.

8. Plan of the ground floor.
From *L'Esprit Nouveau*, no. 6 (1921).
9. Façade towards the garden.
Photograph at the Bibliothèque de la Ville
in La Chaux-de-Fonds.

goes from the antechamber, through living and dining room, to the garden. But those current typologies are now overlaid with an ancient Roman interpretation, because the living room with its large window acts like an Atrium, a spatial centre onto which open three clearly subordinate spaces (antechamber, dining room, library): the hierarchical relationship is clearly visible in photographs of the room, and it is also implied in a contemporary remark by Le Corbusier's father, who likened the living room to the nave of a cathedral, with the antechamber and dining room acting as transept.⁹

The Pompeian influence continues in the Villa Schwob, designed four years later (Figs. 8, 9).¹⁰ This house combines two typologies, artist's studio and Pompeian house. Like in studios, the main space is an inward looking hub, with the big window, screened by curtains in its lower part, providing ample light. Like in Pompeii, the façade on the street is blind; and the main space, lit from the upper part of the big window, can be likened to an Atrium onto which open subordinate spaces, modulated from large to small.

And after Le Corbusier moved to Paris in 1917, echoes of the Villa Schwob interior will be felt in many of the interiors already mentioned, for example the Maison Cook.

PLAY

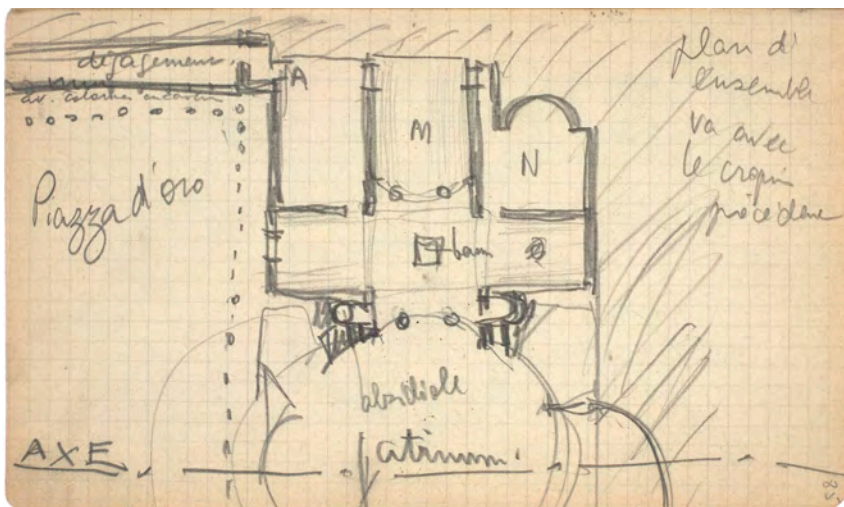
I will now turn to the second effect that Le Corbusier's intuition about Roman Rooms had upon his architecture—an effect that will only materialize ten years after the visit to Hadrian's Villa. This second effect has to do with what I called *play*: the dialogue or negotiation between the various parts that, together, compose the main internal space of Le Corbusier's houses.

Let's look again, more closely, at the sketch made at the Water Court (Fig. 3), with its insight that “in any Roman room there are always three full walls. The other wall opens widely and lets the room participate in the ensemble.” If we think of the typical Pompeian Atrium as the spatial hub of the house, and the Alae and Tablinum as the spokes, Le Corbusier's

insight does two things: it broadens the scope of the hub (from Atrium to “ensemble”), and it shifts the focus from the hub to the spokes. Le Corbusier is aware of the hub (the ensemble), but his focus is now on the spokes (the Roman Rooms that open onto the hub): his focus is on how each Roman Room participates in the ensemble, how the dialogue happens in formal terms (the fourth open wall allows one to see from one space into the other, hence to appreciate the hollow form of both the room and the ensemble).

Note also the relationship between the three rooms in that sketch: three parallel adjoining rooms of comparable size, sharing their front alignment. The sketch is notable for being decisive in tone and yet inaccurate or incomplete, in short for revealing much about Le Corbusier's first instinctive reaction. An archaeological plan that Le Corbusier copied on the following page of his sketchbook (Fig. 10), probably taking it from his Baedeker guidebook, shows that the three rooms were part of a larger complex arrangement (the Water Court); that they did not form an autonomous coherent sub-unit of that arrangement; and that only the central room was fully open in front, while the other two were closed boxes with doors—more closets than rooms. But the initial sketch, drawn before consulting the archaeological plan, reflects his first reaction and expectations: it treats the rooms as a suite of three giant niches, one of which is open while the other two have been walled-in, all facing in the same direction and sharing a common frontal alignment.¹¹

The lateral relationship between rooms is also evoked in a second sketch from Hadrian's Villa, which I have already mentioned but not discussed (Fig. 4). This sketch had been made on the previous day in the area known as the Library Court (Cortile della Biblioteca). It shows a typical Roman Room, closed on three sides and open on the fourth towards a lower garden, and flanked by two narrow rooms or passages. Two features struck Le Corbusier: a double row of columns in front of the opening between room and garden, and the fact that the two lateral walls of the room stop short of the front end, leaving two full-height passages to the flanking spaces. The dual layering thus generated in front of the room (by the columns and by the arrested



10. Le Corbusier.
Sketch reproducing an archaeological plan of
the Water Court adjoining the Piazza d'Oro,
Hadrian's Villa, 1911.
Voyage d'Orient, Carnets, Carnet 5, 85.

walls) suggests lateral movement to the right and left, while distancing the main reference from which the room draws its meaning, the garden.

We can summarize this discussion of the two sketches as follows. On the one hand, the written note on the Water Court sketch focuses on the openness and directionality of each Roman Room (three full walls, the fourth wall open to connect with the ensemble). On the other hand, the actual sketches, both of them, also explore the relationship between adjacent rooms, which can entail both their *lateral* physical connection and their *centripetal* common reference to a third party (the larger “ensemble”).

For the next ten years, as we have seen, the concept of “Roman Room” embedded in the two sketches will help Le Corbusier to articulate his pre-existing concept of *centrality*, of a hierarchical arrangement of spaces. But, soon after the end of the first World War, Le Corbusier discovered another larger potential in those two sketches—the potential for *play*. Le Corbusier had had his Roman insight during the Voyage d’Orient; but it took another epiphany, a trigger, a “booster” so to speak, to allow him to use it. That booster was his encounter with modern art—Cubist painting and Symbolist poetry.

At the end of WWI Le Corbusier became seriously involved with Cubism. Starting in 1918 he was associated with the painter Ozenfant in launching a post-cubist movement that they called Purism; and in 1921 the two acted as buyers of paintings by Picasso and Braque during the Kahnweiler auction, on behalf of the Swiss banker Raoul La Roche, for whom Le Corbusier would soon design a house.¹²

A central aspect of Cubism and its derivatives is the linguistic notion of the ambiguity of the sign: the meaning of a sign depends on its context. In Le Corbusier’s painting “Nature Morte à la Pile d’Assiettes,” for example, the circle can be interpreted as “hollow of the dishes” or “hole in the guitar,” depending on the context that we associate it with (Fig. 11).¹³

For Le Corbusier the architect, designing an interior space, a Roman Room now becomes a “room with one side wide open” that can operate in many different ways depending on the situation in which it is inserted.



11. Le Corbusier.
Nature morte à la pile d'assiettes, 1920.

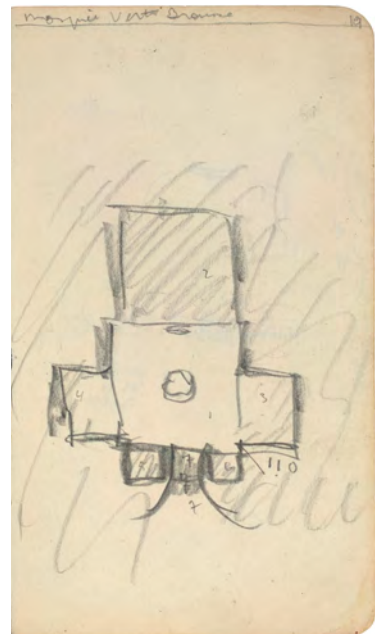
When Le Corbusier had designed the Villa Schwob, instead, a “room with one side open” had to open onto a larger and taller space, an Atrium: he could only think of a Roman room within a hierarchical diagram. I will come back to this in my discussion of the house La Roche-Jeanneret.

The other “booster,” besides Cubism, was Symbolist poetry, whose central concept had been given a classic formulation by the poet Stéphane Mallarmé in 1893 and then had been put in these terms by the poet Reverdy at the end of the first World War: the poetic image is born from the bringing together of two realities.¹⁴ Le Corbusier, who had read Mallarmé and knew Reverdy, soon echoed Reverdy in the caption to the photograph of an airplane cockpit that he published in 1921 (Fig. 12). What you see in the photograph is the padded edge of a powerful machine; the dials by which you know its performance; the stick by which you dominate it; the map on which you choose where you will go; the compass by which you know where you are going. In short, the poetic experience of flying an airplane. Below the picture, Le Corbusier's caption reads, in part: “Objects that mean something and that are arranged with tact and talent create a poetic fact.”¹⁵

Applied to architecture, for example to a complex interior space with different degrees of light and shadow, this means a focus on how its different parts interact with each other, because it is that interaction, rather than the parts taken individually, that creates something new, the poetic fact. Take the Green Mosque of Bursa, near Istanbul, which Le Corbusier had visited in 1911 before Pompeii (Fig. 13). Le Corbusier had been deeply affected by this visit, noting in his sketchbook that “it's night that comes down from the second dome, and that rises filling the whole with mystery” and “an admirable concordance between the volumes.”¹⁶ But in 1922, when he published his sketch of the plan, just a few months after publishing the cockpit photograph, his comment shows a new layer of understanding: “You are in a large space of marble white, flooded with light. Beyond, a second space opens, similar and of equal dimensions, full of shade and raised up by some steps (repetition in minor); on each side, two spaces in shade, still smaller; you turn around, two dark spaces, very small. From full light to dark,



12. Cockpit of a Caproni airplane,
from Le Corbusier-Saugnier,
“Des yeux qui ne voient pas... III: les autos,”
L'Esprit Nouveau, no. 10 (1921), detail.
Later included in *Vers une architecture*.
13. Le Corbusier.
Sketch of the plan of the Green Mosque in
Bursa, Turkey, 1911.
Voyage d'Orient, Carnets, Carnet 3, 19.



a rhythm. Minuscule doors and very large bays. You are taken, you have lost the sense of normal scale. You have been subjugated by a sensory rhythm (light and volume) and by clever dimensions, to a world in itself which tells you whatever it has chosen to tell you.”¹⁷ The one overriding issue is how the play between spaces and between light and shadow creates a new “world in itself,” a new poetic reality.

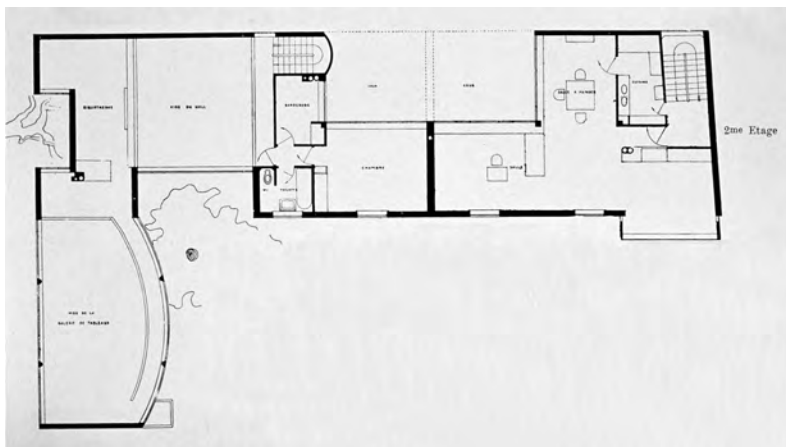
In different ways, then, both influences (Cubist painting and Symbolist poetry) liberated Le Corbusier from literalness, and opened the door to a notion of internal space as *play*. The effect was felt almost immediately in Le Corbusier's architecture. Here, we will discuss two designs, both from 1923-24: the house La Roche-Jeanneret in Paris, and the house for his parents in Vevey.

HOUSE LA ROCHE-JEANNERET

In 1923, soon after absorbing the lessons of Cubism and Symbolism and after writing the emotional lines about the Green Mosque, Le Corbusier designed his first important modernist house in Paris, the double house La Roche-Jeanneret, for the banker La Roche and for his own brother Albert Jeanneret and his wife Lotti Raaf (Fig. 14).

Here, we will focus on the Jeanneret living space, at the end of the long wing, on the top floor (Fig. 15). It comprises three parts: the living room proper, projecting forward from the façade with a big studio window; a dining corner in the middle towards the rear; and a study. In traditional bourgeois houses, these would have been three separate rooms. Here they have been merged together, but they still maintain separate identities. Note that the dining corner can be shielded from the rest by a curtain (visible in the photograph).

It is interesting to see how this solution emerged during the design process. In that process, I propose, we see Le Corbusier starting from a still hierarchical scheme (subsidiary spaces opening onto a larger central one)



House La Roche-Jeanneret, Paris, 1923.

14. Plan of the top floor.
The La Roche unit is on the left, the Jeanneret unit is on the right.
From *Œuvre Complète 1910-1929*.
15. Living space of the Jeanneret unit, looking diagonally from the dining room towards the living room. The study (not visible) would be on the right.

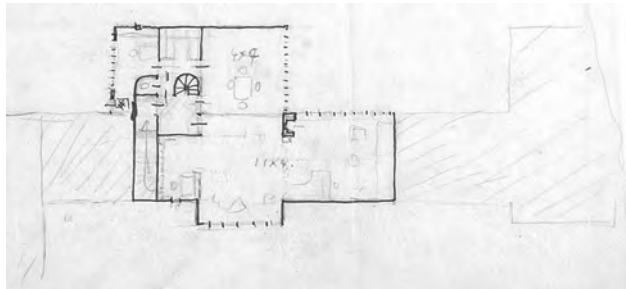
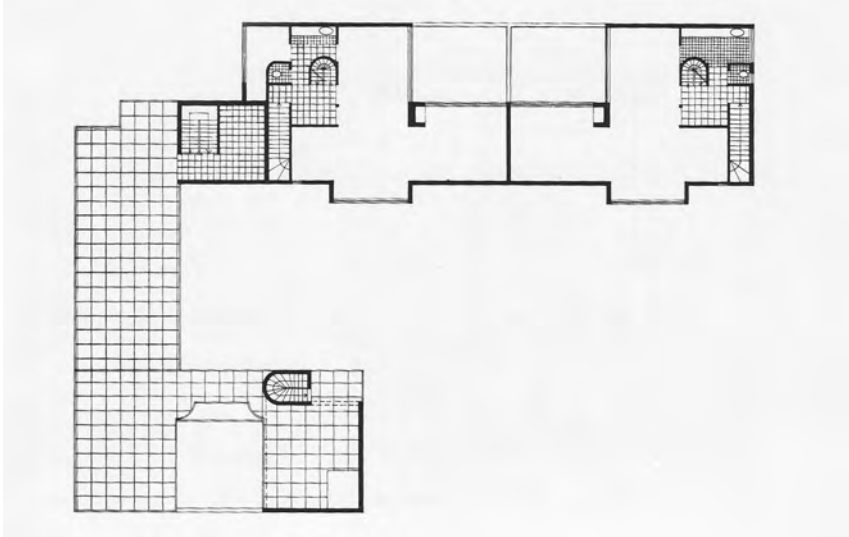
and then learning to let the “ensemble” arise from the mutual interaction of open rooms, without the presence of an a-priori hierarchy.

Early and final designs for the Jeanneret house were not very different.¹⁸ Once the location of the composite house, at the end of the short street, had been settled, its initial design was for three and then four units (Fig. 16); the final design was, of course, for two units (La Roche, Jeanneret). But several key features of the Jeanneret unit were already present at the beginning: the unit is located within the long wing, as one of two symmetrical units; the outline of the unit is a rectangle, expanded in front by a projecting bay and diminished to the rear by a small garden court; the living spaces are on the top floor; kitchen and circulation are in the far corner against the two blind party walls; the rest forms one undivided space with multiple wings and continuous ceiling, open to the street through an ample studio window in the projecting bay, and open to the rear through two narrow horizontal ribbon windows across both court walls; and the dining area, between court and kitchen, can be temporarily set off by a curtain or folding partition. We are interested in how that undivided space is conceptualized in the early and final design.

For the early four-unit design we have a telling plan of the living spaces on the top floor (Fig. 17). The plan is actually for the left one of the two symmetrical units, in the middle of the long wing, whereas it is its mirror image, at the end of the wing, that eventually became the Jeanneret house. So, in comparing the early plan with the final one (Fig. 18), we need to mentally flip the early plan in our mind.

In the early plan, within that undivided space with multiple wings, one can identify a long rectangular space taking the full depth of the house, from the projecting façade bay with studio window to the rear party wall. Because of its depth and its big window, this long rectangle seems to provide the principal reference for the plan, as if it were the nave of a church, from which emanate two “transepts” or “chapels” of different sizes.

Thus described, the early plan brings to mind the house for Le Corbusier's parents in La Chaux-de-Fonds, ten years earlier (Figs. 6, 7), that we already



House La Roche-Jeanneret, 1923.

16. Early scheme for four units, May 1923, top floor.
From Tim Benton, *The Villas of Le Corbusier, 1920-1930* (1987).
17. Early scheme for four units, May 1923, top floor.
Plan for one of the two symmetrical units in the long wing.
Detail.
18. Final plan of the Jeanneret unit, top floor.
Detail from Fig. 14 earlier in this essay.

discussed: indeed it is both likely and touching that Le Corbusier's early idea for his brother's house would be based on the one they had both called home as young men. And we saw that the house for the parents, in turn, was partly inspired by Pompeii. But in La Chaux-de-Fonds the central hall had clearly legible longitudinal walls and a clear rectangular ceiling, separate from that of the other rooms; and the other rooms abutted the central hall through subordinate openings. There was a clear hierarchy and narrative. In Paris, instead, the ceiling is continuous, with nothing to separate central rectangular space from side rooms.

Note also that, in the early plan for Paris (Fig. 17), the central "nave" can be read in two different ways, because the dining corner at its rear end can be set off by drawing a curtain, indicated in the plan: because of this potential separateness, the dining corner could be seen as a niche room by itself. Diminished of the dining corner at its far end, the central rectangular space would now be reduced to a square in front of the big studio window, flanked on three sides by three "Roman Rooms" for library, dining, and living.

In reinterpreting his parent's house in La Chaux-de-Fonds, then, Le Corbusier is, on the one hand, continuing his original reliance on the Pompeian hierarchical precedent. But on the other hand, Le Corbusier is undermining the primacy of its central space through continuous ceiling and comparable dimensions, thus generating a near-egalitarian assembly of "Roman Rooms": the only faint echo of the original hierarchical ordering principle is provided by the placement of the projecting bay with big studio window at the pivotal centre of the composition.

In the final design, even this echo is removed. The pivotal centre, with its projecting bay and big window, has been shifted to the corner, completely clear of the place where the other wings cross. There is no Atrium in the final scheme any more, only rooms with different characteristics communicating with each other through open walls.

If we now think again of the undivided quality of the living area in this house (Fig. 15), it becomes evident that its spatial continuity has a particular

character. This area is not conceptualized as “flowing space,” as a continuum that has been partitioned by floating vertical and horizontal planes, like Mies’s Barcelona Pavilion. Whereas Mies is thinking *Space*, Le Corbusier is thinking *Volumes* or *Rooms*—Roman rooms, open and directional.

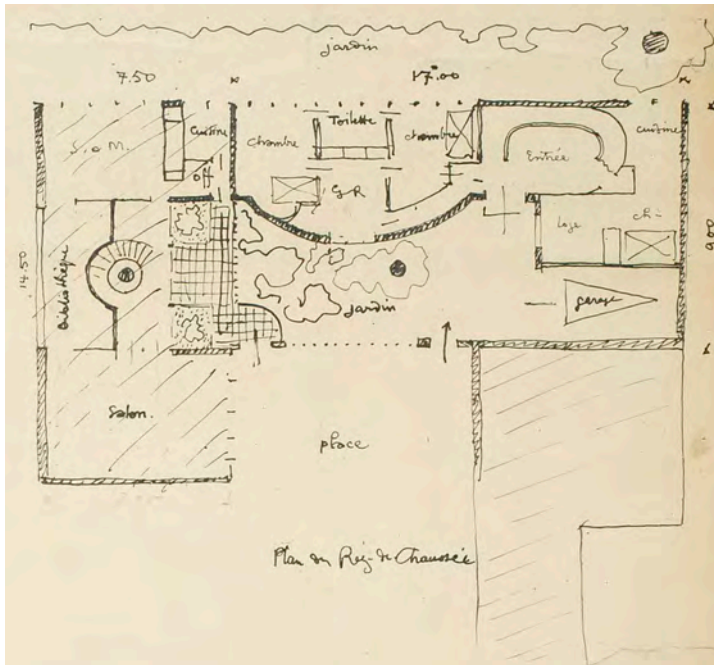
Of course, much of the architectural power of both Miesian and Corbusian space comes from the tension between continuity and discrete parts. But the direction of that tension is different. In Mies the tension goes from continuity to discrete parts, and in the Pavilion’s enclosed pool with statue we almost see “a room in the process of becoming” but not quite there yet. In Le Corbusier, the tension goes from discrete parts to continuity, and in the Jeanneret living room we see “several rooms in the process of becoming an ensemble.”

VEVEY

While designing the house La Roche-Jeanneret in Paris, in the winter of 1923-24, Le Corbusier also started work on a house for his parents near Vevey on the Lake of Geneva—the house that is also known as “Le Lac,” or “Petite Maison.”¹⁹ While very different in location and budget, the two designs are not unrelated, and our discussion of the house in Vevey will begin by analyzing a drawing for the house in Paris, specifically for the La Roche portion of the house.

This drawing (Fig. 19) is for an intermediate stage of the design, when the curved La Roche gallery at the end of the street was already in place, but when La Roche’s sleeping quarters were still on the ground floor *under* the curved gallery, instead of their final location upstairs in the long wing. The drawing is a plan of those sleeping quarters.

This plan, I propose, was inspired by those two sketches that Le Corbusier had made at Hadrian’s Villa. Two bedrooms and a bathroom between them face the garden along the rear wall—thus, three rooms in a row, much like in the sketch from the Water Court (Fig. 3). Each of the bedrooms is closed



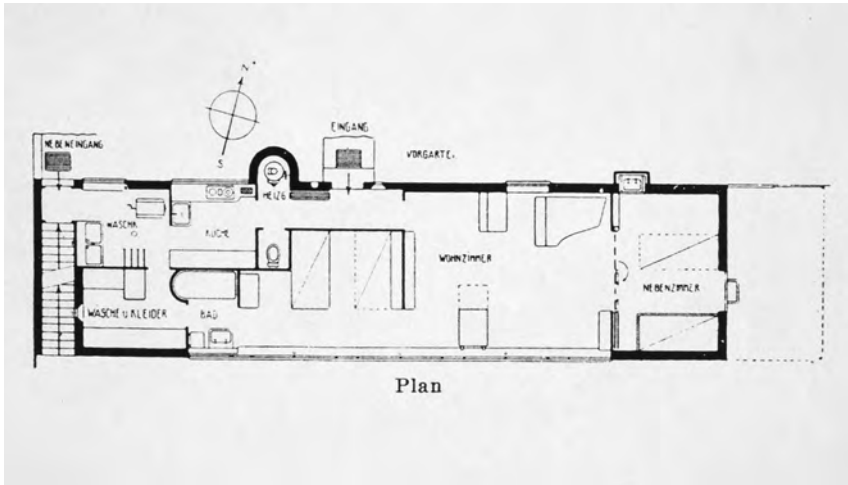
19. House La Roche-Jeanneret, Paris, 1923.
Intermediate plan, July-August 1923.
Detail.

In this scheme, the La Roche unit was at the end of the street (with a curved façade) and to the right, with bedrooms and services downstairs, living and dining upstairs. The unit to the left was intended for somebody else at this stage.

on three sides and ending with an apse of sorts, recalling the sketch. On the fourth side, the two bedrooms and the bathroom about a continuous window towards the garden, which gives these three very different spaces a common view and datum, like in both sketches from Hadrian's Villa, especially the one from the Library Court (Fig. 4), if we equate the regular mullions of the La Roche window with the regular columns at Hadrian's Villa. The doors connecting the shared bathroom to the two bedrooms come up against the continuous window and thus define a layer along the window, like the two openings at the ends of the lateral walls in the Library Court sketch.

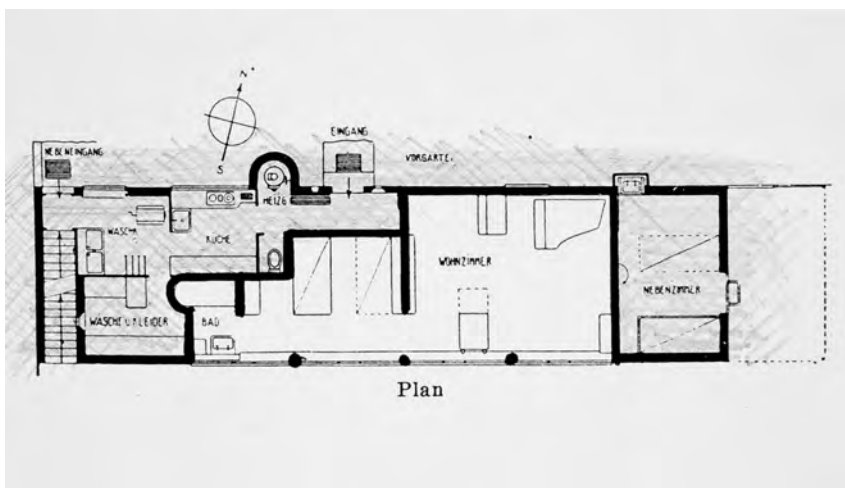
A couple of months later, I propose, the same concept governed the internal layout of a little house for his parents (Figs. 20, 21, 22). In contrast with the House La Roche-Jeanneret, of course, this house is extremely modest, a plain rectangular box set parallel to the shore: indeed, Le Corbusier's father referred to it as a "maison forme wagon," a train-car house—in modern American English one would say a "trailer."²⁰ The house has only a ground floor, with a single ribbon window taking up 2/3 of the long side towards the lake. The bulk of the interior consists of one large undivided space corresponding to the length of the ribbon window: going from right to left in the plan, it includes living, sleeping, and bath, with curtains for privacy. Kitchen, laundry, toilet, and closets are separate, tucked at the far end in the back.

In this discussion we are interested in the articulation of the main space (Figs. 22, 23). While open from end to end, this space is richly differentiated into parts by two wall panels perpendicular to the length of the house, by curtains that can extend those panels for privacy, and by the variable depth of the three parts (the depth from ribbon window to back wall of each section). As a result, the main space can be seen as a suite of three "Roman Rooms," much like the early La Roche bedroom scheme and like the sketches from Hadrian's Villa: three rooms of differing size and shape (living, sleeping, bath), set in front of the ribbon window and all directed towards the common domain of the lake. Like in the sketch from the Library Court at Hadrian's Villa (Fig. 4), the two wall panels stop short of the ribbon



House for Le Corbusier's parents near Vevey on the Lake of Geneva, 1923.

20. Plan.
From *Œuvre Complète 1910-1929*.
21. View from the lake (the house is on the left, the garden wall is on the right).



House for Le Corbusier's parents near Vevey on the Lake of Geneva, 1923.

- 22. Internal view.
Living-dining room
- 23. Plan (already seen in Fig. 20) with the main space along the big window highlighted.

window, thus leaving a floor-to-ceiling passage and defining a layer parallel to the window; and outside the window, the parapet of the sea-wall defines a second parallel layer (like the two layers of columns in the sketch).

Yes, this is a “maison forme wagon,” to use Le Corbusier’s father’s language: but it took Hadrian’s Villa to conceptualize it. Helped by his experience there, Le Corbusier could exploit the emotional potential of a play between two orthogonal directions—two directions that also have symbolic meaning: on the one hand the lateral direction from room to room suggested by the layer of space along the ribbon window, implying movement and the functional requirements of daily life; on the other hand the “centripetal” direction from each of the rooms to the lake, implying contemplative gaze and the light and view from which the rooms draw their shared meaning.

Notes

- 1 Alan Colquhoun hinted at similar points in his pioneering article “Displacement of Concepts in Le Corbusier” (1972), where he wrote that “However ‘free’ a plan of Le Corbusier’s may be, not only does it consist, in large part, of quite traditional ‘rooms,’ but a certain axial magnetism persists which has the effect of emphasizing the process of explosion and distortion to which the plan has been subjected. Such a spatial ‘discourse’ does not exist in De Stijl plans, where the blowing apart of the ‘box’ and the assertion of crystalline structure are never met with any resistance.” Reprinted in Alan Colquhoun, *Essays in Architectural Criticism. Modern Architecture and Historical Change* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1981), 62. On Miesian space see Barry Bergdoll, “The Nature of Mies’s Space,” in Terence Riley and Barry Bergdoll, eds., *Mies in Berlin* (New York: Museum of Modern Art and Abrams, 2001), 66-105.
- 2 Christoph Schnoor, “Le Corbusier’s early urban studies as source of experiential architectural knowledge,” Universitat Politècnica de Valencia, International Congress on *Le Corbusier, 50 years later* (DOI: <http://dx.doi.org/10.4995/LC2015.2015.1547>) which builds upon his earlier book *La Construction des villes, Le Corbusiers erstes städtebauliches Traktat von 1910/11* (Zurich: GTA Verlag,

- 2008). Schnoor's shows that Le Corbusier's interest for "space as enclosure," seen in the chapter "L'Illusion des plans" of his *Vers une architecture* and in interiors like the entry hall of the house La Roche in Paris, can be traced back more than ten years, to concepts that he had acquired while preparing his unpublished manuscript *La construction des villes* in 1910-11.
- 3 On Le Corbusier's reaction to mosque interiors in Turkey see Armando Rabaça, "Ordering code and Mediating Machine. Le Corbusier and the Roots of the Architectural Promenade" (Doctoral thesis, Coimbra University, 2013), 262-292.
 - 4 "La variation des gdeurs de porte joue un rôle énorme. Il en est d'énormes A,B,C, et de toutes petites D. Et comme à Brousse il y a des masses lumineuses et des volumes obscurs," Le Corbusier, *Voyage d'Orient, Carnets* (Paris: Fondation Le Corbusier, 1987), Carnet 4, 127.
 - 5 "il faut retenir ça que ds toute Salle romaine il y a toujours 3 murs pleins l'autre mur s'ouvre largement et fait participer la Salle à l'ensemble. De là 1 situation très typique des portes, relevée déjà à Pompei." *Voyage d'Orient, Carnets*, Carnet 5, 83.
 - 6 H. Allen Brooks, *Le Corbusier's Formative Years* (Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 1997), 185-191.
 - 7 For the sake of brevity I will omit discussion of two other precedents that helped Le Corbusier to articulate his interest in *centrality*. The first precedent is the Cabaret Fledermaus by Josef Hoffman in Vienna, completed in 1908 and visited by Corbusier in that year. It was a large and relatively low rectangular room converging towards the stage at one end; but in the area close to the stage it rose to double height, so that the proscenium could be tall; and the higher section of the room was surrounded by balconies. The second precedent is the Maison Bouteille, a concept-house designed by Le Corbusier in 1909, in dialogue with Auguste Perret, in whose office he was then working. Here, a double-height space with studio window expands on the sides into two low lateral rooms, but without a clear hierarchy between the parts. See Brooks, *Formative Years*, 148-149, 165-167.
 - 8 On the house for his parents, often referred to as "La maison blanche," see Brooks, *Formative Years*, 310-27; Leo Schubert, *La villa Jeanneret-Perret di Le Corbusier, 1912: la prima opera autonoma* (Venice: Marsilio, 2006).
 - 9 Letter by Le Corbusier to William Ritter, 10 February 1913. Bern, Schweizerische Landesbibliothek.
 - 10 On the Villa Schwob see Brooks, *Formative Years*, 424-463; Francesco Passanti, "Architecture: Proportion, Classicism and Other Issues," in Stanislaus von Moos and Arthur Rüegg, eds., *Le Corbusier before Le Corbusier* (New Haven and London, Yale Univ. Press, 2002), 69-97, esp. 90-95.

- 11 The proof that this is how Le Corbusier internalized those three Roman Rooms will come later in this essay, when I will discuss an intermediate project for the Villa La Roche-Jeanerret in 1923 (Fig. 19), twelve years after visiting Hadrian's Villa. In that intermediate project, Le Corbusier used the sketch from Hadrian's Villa as a point of departure for an arrangement of three side-by-side rooms all facing in the same direction.
- 12 Pierre Daix, "Die Sammlung Kahnweiler - als 'Feindesgut' versteigert (1921-1923)," in Katharina Schmidt and Hartwig Fischer, eds., *Ein Haus für den Kubismus. Die Sammlung Raoul La Roche* (catalog of an exhibition at the Kunstmuseum in Basel, 1998), 24-31.
- 13 The literature on this subject is too vast to be listed here. See in particular Yve-Alain Bois, "Kahnweiler's Lesson" (1987) in Bois, *Painting as Model* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1990), 65-97.
- 14 Mallarmé, "Divagation première, relativement au vers" in *Vers et prose, morceaux choisis* (Paris: Perrin, 1893), 172-194; Pierre Reverdy, "L'image," *Nord-Sud* 13 (March 1918), 73-75. The exact wording by Reverdy is this: "L'Image est une création pure de l'esprit. Elle ne peut naître d'une comparaison mais du rapprochement de deux réalités plus ou moins éloignées."
- 15 The full caption is this: "Caproni-Exploration. La poésie n'est pas que dans le verbe. Plus forte est la poésie des faits. Des objets qui signifient quelque chose et qui sont disposés avec tact et talent créent un fait poétique." Le Corbusier-Saugnier, "Des yeux qui ne voient pas... III: Les autos," *L'Esprit Nouveau* 10 (1921): 1139-1151. The photograph of the airplane cockpit is on page 1147. In 1923 the essay was used again as one of the chapters in *Vers une architecture*.
- 16 "C'est de la nuit qui tombe de la II coupole et qui y monte emplissant de mystère." *Voyage d'Orient, Carnets*, Carnet 3, 21.
- 17 "Vous êtes dans un grand espace blanc de marbre, inondé de lumière. Au delà se présente un second espace semblable et de mêmes dimensions, plein de pénombre et surélevé de quelques marches (répétition en mineur); de chaque côté, deux espaces de pénombre encore plus petits; vous vous retournez, deux espaces d'ombre tout petits. De la pleine lumière à l'ombre, un rythme. Des portes minuscules et des baies très vastes. Vous êtes pris, vous avez perdu le sens de l'échelle commune. Vous êtes assujéti par un rythme sensoriel (la lumière et le volume) et par des mesures habiles, à un monde en soi qui vous dit ce qu'il a tenu à vous dire." Le Corbusier-Saugnier, "Architecture...l'illusion des plans," *L'Esprit Nouveau* 15 (February 1922), 1769-70, later included in *Vers une architecture* (Paris: Crès, 1923), 146-147.
- 18 On the evolution of the design for this house, see Tim Benton, *The Villas of Le Corbusier, 1920-1930* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1987), 45-75. The story is extremely

complicated: the number of clients shifted between one and four; their identity changed several times; the location shifted from the left side, near the start of the short dead-end street, to the end and right side.

- 19 On the house in Vevey see especially Bruno Reichlin, “L’intérieur traditionnelle insidiato dalla finestra a nastro. La Petite Maison a Corseaux, 1923-1924,” in Reichlin, *Dalla “soluzione elegante” all’“edificio aperto.” Scritti attorno ad alcune opere di Le Corbusier*, ed. by Annalisa Viati Navone (Milan: Silvana Editoriale, 2013), 86-131; earlier versions of this essay, starting in 1975, are listed on page 417. As the title makes clear, the focus of this essay is on the ribbon window of this house.
- 20 “Ed a fait des plans très simples, d’une maison puriste, forme wagon.” Entry in father’s diary, on 27 December 1923. Cited in Reichlin, *ibid.*, 125, n16.