

Le Corbusier's Curutchet House: The Pleasures of Memory

JOSE BERNARDI

Louisiana Tech University

THE MAJESTIC LINE

Nothing exists in Buenos Aires, but what a strong and majestic line!

- Le Corbusier, *Precisions*

The late twenties were prolific for Le Corbusier who was fascinated with global issues and grand schemes. William Curtis described his thinking as "obsessive, forward-looking and utopian" — this idealism routinely preceded controversy and disappointment. In April of 1928 Le Corbusier and Pierre Jeanneret submitted their final proposal for the Society of Nations. It was summarily rejected in May of that year. In June, at a subsequent meeting of the CIAM in La Sarraz, Switzerland, his work was labeled as "aestheticist" by Mart Stam, Hans Schmidt and Hannes Meyer.² They confronted Le Corbusier's attitudes toward architectural form and technology. El Lissitzky, who had recently returned from Paris where he visited Le Corbusier's villas, referred to him as an isolated snob artist, someone who was preoccupied with originality, obsessed with the new, and unconcerned for the inhabitants of his Parisian villas.³ Ernst May also questioned the habitability of Le Corbusier's two houses at the Weissenhof Siedlungen in Stuttgart.⁴ Additionally, an invitation to present a project at the Siedlungen of Frankfurt was blocked by the radical branch of socialist architects. This attitude typified the intense debate which confronted the ideas and architectural language of Le Corbusier during the formative period of the CIAM.

Although the climate of the CIAM and the events of that year seemed to create a negative atmosphere in which to conduct his affairs, Le Corbusier was to receive a positive word and acceptance from South America. In August of that year he received a request from Victoria Ocampo, asking him to design her house in Buenos Aires. Suited to his aspirations of international stature, he also received an invitation from the "Friends of the Arts" to visit Argentina and give a series of lectures.⁵ The year of 1929 would become vital for Le Corbusier's career. His project for the Mundaneum, trips to the USSR in January and March, the contract for the construction of Centrosoyuz in May, and the lectures in

South America from September to December would dignify Le Corbusier with international recognition. The CIAM was deliberating the theme for its next meeting and considering Ernst May's proposal to address the problem of designing a dwelling for minimum existence. Adopting this theme, the conference markedly embraced the German ideology. Consequently, Le Corbusier was resolved to accept the invitation to visit Argentina and decided to postpone his participation in the CIAM. For him, the time to begin a Grand Travaux had arrived.

Through his relationship with the poet Blaise Cendrars, with whom he worked on L'Esprit Nouveau project, Le Corbusier created an idealistic image of South America. Cendrars, a Swiss-born native of La-Chaux-de-Fonds, visited South America in 1924 and returned in 1927. In Cendrars' poems, this continent appeared as a place of infinite possibilities, where nature and the physical dimensions of the landscape seemed overwhelming. Like Le Corbusier, Cendrars first visited South America to escape from what he saw as an increasingly negative tone in Europe. Was it discontent with the European intellectual atmosphere or the intriguing disorder, solitude, apparent lack of traditions, and sensuality of the continent which brought both Cendrars and Le Corbusier to South America? There: "*Nothing matters but that furious greed, that absolute confidence and optimism, that daring that work, that toil, that speculation which have ten houses built per hour in every style, ridiculous, grotesque, beautiful, big, small, northern, southern, Egyptian.*"⁶

That absolute confidence and optimism appealed to the furious greed of an architect and pamphleteer who was ready to be heard. He endeavored to implement his ideas and develop a following. Hoping this new continent would hear his message, he resolved himself "to conquer South America." Le Corbusier arrived in Buenos Aires in September of 1929. It was spring in Argentina. After fourteen days of solitude and silence at sea, he encountered the alluring coast line upon which the city lay. Two months later, on board the Lusitania, while writing his book *Precisions*, he would recall that moment:

"All of a sudden, beyond the first beacon lights, I saw Buenos Aires. The smooth sea, flat, unlimited to left or right; above, your Argentine sky so full of stars, and Buenos Aires, that phenomenal line of light beginning at the infinite right and escaping to the infinite left...The simple meeting of the pampa and the ocean, in one line...Mirage, miracle of the night: the simple, regular, and infinite punctuation of the city lights shows what Buenos Aires is to the eyes of the traveler who has been alone for fourteen days on the ocean"

For Le Corbusier, the moment was intoxicating. He concluded: *"This image has stayed with me, intense, masterly. I thought: there is nothing in Buenos Aires. But what a strong and majestic line."* This impressive landscape — dimensioned for the airplane — seemed empty and expanding...*"nothing, no hope, except in oneself alone."*⁹ His self-confident attitude was enhanced by the young educated elite who attended his lectures. From the time of his arrival, he seemed surprised by the Argentinean vitality and fascination with French culture. Le Corbusier felt that they had discovered the best Paris had to offer.¹⁰ Le Corbusier felt that Argentina would hear his voice and understand his message. An assured sense of avant-garde governed his strategy. While receiving a small number of small commissions, he set out to propagandize his ideas and develop grand plans for the country. A group of dedicated followers also lobbied the government to accept his design for the city of Buenos Aires. In later years, many of these devotees would come to powerful positions and collaborate with his office in rue de Sevre.

Le Corbusier's Argentina was a place where the urbanism of the future "would carry the sign of the creative spirit" yet reflect the character of the region. He studied the geographic characteristics of the continent: the magnificent mountains, the ocean, and particularly the grand gesture of the plains and horizon.¹¹

DO YOU OPEN YOUR EYES?

"I think that these ten lectures at Buenos Aires will be, for me, the last on the subject of an architectural revolution fomented by modern techniques"

- Le Corbusier, *Precisions*

Ten lectures were scheduled between October 3rd and October 19th. For Le Corbusier, it was an opportunity to express himself. In his words, these improvised lectures constituted moments in which he "experienced a sharp lucidity and crystallization of thought."¹² Sketching with colored chalk on large sheets of paper, he produced cogent drawings intended to confirm the integrity of his ideas. This visit, the lectures, and the resulting book preceded the beginning of his larger projects including proposals for nine cities. Moreover, it provided the opportunity to address his European critics and dismiss their derogations. Finally, he underscored the importance of a rational approach toward

technology and closed his reflections on an architectural revolution cultivated by modern technique. His lectures often affirmed the new events caused by mechanization: the destruction of regional cultures, communication, and mobilization.¹³ He proposed to resolve these problems through standardization, mass production and efficiency, while maintaining a sense of poetry and individual expression. He emphasized the necessity to break away from stagnant customs and academic thinking. Yet in his search for harmony, he continually identified that which has endured. "One thing remains constant, man...man and his dimensions, the concern for rhythms and the relationships of surface illuminated."¹⁴ He described architecture in "functional" and "rational" terms, like the human body, with a skeleton for carrying, a muscular filling for action, and organs for feeding and evacuation.¹⁵ While lecturing, he described the earth as an empty glass,¹⁶ a chaotic place awaiting the intervention of the architect. For Le Corbusier, "architecture is an act of conscious will power. To create architecture is to put in order...with reason and passion."¹⁷ Reason and passion seemed the most powerful attributes for the Le Corbusier who visited Argentina. He was eager to express both. His proposal for the city was carefully considered yet assertive. The plan maintained the fabric and posture of the city. However, a new city center, set on a reinforced concrete platform, was created by the edge of the sea. In the initial place he saw upon his arrival, was envisioned what Le Corbusier referred to as the new "city of affairs." the proposal consisted of five prodigious towers — "glass prisms, shining and geometrical under the stars."¹⁸ Le Corbusier, egotistically, described them as "cold reasoning and poetry,...a new state of consciousness." It was an encounter of earth and sky; a "pure human creation" conceived in modern materials. Le Corbusier boldly proclaimed this proposal as: "My Buenos Aires song."¹⁹ During the time of these lectures, Le Corbusier also met with potential clients. He received four commissions, including the one for the Errazuriz house in Chile.²⁰ To his disappointment, not one of these houses was built. It was however an event which was loosely entered in his book, and would prove to be decisive in his relationship with Argentina. With his friend Gonzalez Garreno, Le Corbusier visited the small city of La Plata, the capital of the Buenos Aires State.

THE PLEASURES OF MEMORY: THE CURUTCHET HOUSE

Until then, he had never dwelled on the pleasures of memory

- Jorge Luis Borges, "The Maker"

Visiting different cities and then returning to Buenos Aires reinforced Le Corbusier's convictions. He believed that the region was abundant with "disorder typical of America, a prodigious vitality, incoherence, and improvisation."²¹ The new continent acted as a powerful stimulus which served to formulate his intentions. The lectures in Buenos Aires and the resulting book *Precisions*, intended educate the public,

emphasized Le Corbusier's role as an architect with vision. In his book he stated, "I cannot exist in life without the condition of **seeing**."²² Le Corbusier contended that the capacity for seeing must reflect an understanding of universal building techniques, yet their application is contingent upon climate, topography, and cultural factors. According to Le Corbusier, technique and the machine precipitated man and nature into a conflict. The architect resolves this dilemma by adopting building technique to natural conditions. By emphasizing the strong light of the region, he underscored the need for contextual architecture to express the diaphragm window, the brise-soleil, and the pan the verre.²³

During his eighth lecture, on October 17th, Le Corbusier improvised several drawings and recalled a twilight walk in La Plata. In later years, these drawings and memories would mindfully guide the design of the Curutchet house.²⁴ In La Plata he saw common houses built by Italian contractors, and referred to the facades as "the beautiful horror, the Italian pastry" of the Vignola style. Accordingly, Le Corbusier stressed the importance of being well trained; of being able to see beyond fashion and styles; of developing an ability to see "architectural facts", to be able to see their archetypal significance. He dismissed the relevance of these decorative elements and intently stated: "This is not architecture, the styles, alive and magnificent originally, they are now dead **bodies**"²⁵ He patronized his audience by asking: "What do you look at when you walk in a town?" He rejected the generalization that the Argentinean town had nothing to offer and invited his audience to look at the existing houses. They consisted of pure forms which turned an unassuming wall toward the street and opened the interior to pleasant centralized gardens. By discarding the elaborate pilasters and balustrades and removing the "the beautiful horror of South American pastry," he presented these houses as models for techniques of mass production which employ standardized and combinable concrete elements. He stated his credo: architecture means creating order through simplicity, architecture as the purification of an object.

From these houses he distilled the following architectural elements: 1- The architectural fact of the little door set into the wall; 2- The door cutting the wall in two; 3- The big garage door; 4- The narrow passage between the two properties: on one hand, the property wall on the right, the mass of a building with a sloping roof against it; 5- A square loggia, and a roof terrace with a cylindrical water tank.²⁶

These everyday houses, built by Italian contractors, appeared to Le Corbusier as a logical expression of life in that city. They conveyed correct dimensions, harmonious forms, and a carefully articulated relationship to the **site**.²⁷ He encouraged the audience to see in those standardized plans and pure forms, the basic organization for a proper regional house. "You have",...Le Corbusier told the audience, "a beautiful play of forms under your Argentinean sky."

After his return to Europe in 1930, the democratic government of Yrigoyen was overthrown by the first of several coups in Argentina; this one led by Uriburu. Le Corbusier

unquestionably believed that this new government would be "more apt to understand urban **problems**."²⁸ In fact, the authoritarian state represented by Uriburu resembled the government which Le Corbusier described in June of 1928 when addressing his colleagues at La Sarraz.²⁹ He maintained that a strong state is a necessary instrument of good management. Politically opportunistic and naive, Le Corbusier was never to receive a commission from the Argentinean government. Almost twenty years after his lectures, he was actively lobbying to have his proposal for the city of Buenos Aires built, and the plan became an obsessive dream for him. In 1940, he appealed to the French national interest by writing to the French ambassador in Argentina and requested his intervention in the matter. In 1947, with General Peron in power, Le Corbusier's plan for the city was published. His utopian vision of environmental harmony, order and the elimination of class struggle was absorbed into the official discourse and rhetoric of the day. But his project of the city of Buenos Aires survived on paper only.

Perhaps it was an anxious concern for his proposal which compelled Le Corbusier to preserve his contact with Argentina. This may explain why, at a time when his office was engaged in a variety of important projects, he accepted a request to design a small house in La Plata. The offer came through a member of Dr. Curutchet's family who visited Paris. Commissioned by the surgeon Dr. Pedro Curutchet, it was to become the only domestic project Le Corbusier would ever build on the American continent. In September of 1948, Le Corbusier acknowledged the request and by April of the following year, his Paris office was ready to send the drawings to La Plata. In a letter to Dr. Curutchet, Le Corbusier stated his interest in creating a "work of simplicity, convenience, and **harmony**."³⁰ He was repeating the words used earlier when characterizing the houses of La Plata.

The city of La Plata, founded in 1882, was laid out in a Cartesian grid intersected by diagonals. The house is situated on a lot common to the city. Long and narrow, measuring approximately 23 by 9 metros, it was set within three preexisting walls. To the west was a traditional house with the facade following the diagonal line of the street. The volume of the house to the east, however, ignored the diagonal. Le Corbusier's solution resolves the program-site relationship by respecting the geometry of the surrounding context. It acknowledges the historic typology of houses in the city, and attempts to define volumes best suited to the intense light of the region. The young surgeon had several requirements. The principal rooms were to overlook the park and his office was to be clearly detached. He sent a sketch to Le Corbusier suggesting that the house include a basement in which the doctor's office was **located**.³¹ A special requirement was that the house have an abundance of natural light. Le Corbusier stated his conditions. He should be allowed to use the Modular and standardize everything possible. The client had no objection. Having received the plans for his future home, Dr. Curutchet wrote to the archi-

tect. "In every moment I discover a new interest, a new mirror of intellectual beauty."³² He anticipated occupying the house, an with time, assimilating the artistic essence of this "architectural jewel" into his new life.

In an attempt to free the house from the surrounding structures, Le Corbusier established a four by four meter grid of slender pilotis while still relating the facade to the diagonal of the street. Also, he set in motion a set of opposites by dividing the house into two basic volumes -a device previously used in the twenties when designing the Atelier Lipschitz. In both cases the frontal volumes absorb the diagonal imposed by the street. The difference in the Curutchet house is the manner in which the circulation ramp links the two opposing volumes. By adopting a simple scheme of rooms and courtyard, Le Corbusier refers to a predominate house type in the city, the "chorizo" or "sausage house". This type is particularly well adopted to the narrow elongated lots resulting from the urban growth of the late nineteenth century. Brought to Argentina by the Spanish, its precedent can be traced to the Roman peristyle house, and was modified by immigrants in the 1880's. It consists of successive patios which facilitate light and ventilation. As one penetrates the house, the intimacy of the patios is apparent. It allows for privacy, protection and a greater sense of autonomy for the inhabitants, yet large windows in the facade establish a visual link to the street. Le Corbusier intentionally referred to these characteristics.

The complexities imposed upon the program by a narrow lot and the need to maintain views of the park made the "sausage house" an efficient type for Le Corbusier's solution. A ground floor provides a common entrance for the office and family quarters, a garage, and a small service court. A mezzanine level contains the doctor's office and a staircase leading to the family areas. The next floor contains the living room, terrace, kitchen, and studio. The upper level contains bedrooms and bathrooms. A ramp, which links both volumes of the house, is located parallel to an existing perimeter wall, generating space for a shady courtyard. The Argentinean patio house and Le Corbusier's roof garden are combined to create a generous central court and expand the living room. Her Le Corbusier incorporates natural light and models the volumes of the house. Typical of the patio houses in the city, Le Corbusier's drawings propose a poplar tree for the courtyard.³³

Some of the most significant episodes of the house occur in section where a sequence of layers and the see-through thickness of the brise-soleil are visibly manipulated. This carefully articulated sequence allows brightness from the sky and foliage from the park to visually penetrate the house. In section, Le Corbusier combines elements of organic architecture with his earlier purist devices. A constricted site, a demanding program, and Le Corbusier's tendency towards "simplicity" coalesce to a result in a sophisticated architectural solution. In spite of the constraints imposed by a narrow lot, the use of the ramp combined with the overlapping floors generates a architecture which is livable in

"space, in depth, in height." In customary corbusian strategy, the house explores a dialogue of confrontation by accommodating opposites. the composition of the facade is the result of two opposing yet complementary forces, the brise-soleil in the front facade and the pan de verre or applique in the rear facade, a type of modulation he later employed in the design of the Millowners' Association Building.³⁴

The architect combines the order of his five points with organic shapes. this tension intensifies as one ascends through the upper levels. Walls begin to bend into organic shapes, connoting sculptural spaces. the platonic, pure shapes are dialectically opposed to the floating forms to distinguish specialized rooms. Bathrooms and corridors, expressed with convex forms, regain their significance. The opposition between the expanding ground floor and the compression and tension of the upper level is reconciled by directing views toward the park. the floating brise-soleil, which appears strikingly heavy yet non-material, is contrasted against the rigid, tall pilotis. The orthogonal order of slender columns interacts with the diagonal line of the exterior. This facade was defined as "not explicable in terms of Le Corbusier's purist architecture"³⁵ and also represents "his emerging sense of the wall as a sculptural device." It is, perhaps, in the front facade where Le Corbusier best interprets the memories of his earlier visit to Argentina. The impressions from the drawings which he produced while lecturing in Buenos Aires recur thematically in the facade of the Curutchet house. As in his earlier improvised sketches, a door bisects the front elevation. Le Corbusier's wall, however, is dematerialized and interpreted as a mesh screen. The narrow passage which exists between two properties is redefined to accommodate a ramp, and the loggia expands the upper level. The distinction between the wall mass and roof plane contrasts the thin tense layering of columns, brise-soleil, and screen against the dense, flat planes of the surrounding houses.

Le Corbusier designed the Curutchet house almost twenty years after his lectures in Buenos Aires. Although never to return to Argentina, the memories of his visit and regard for his city plan are presented in the house. Not only would Le Corbusier reinterpret images of the local context, but also, his five skyscrapers in the mist of the stars would now be abstracted into the design of the facade. The five shining volumes, transformed into slender, transparent screen, define the boundaries between the street, the house, and the sky.

THE PLEASURES OF MEMORY

The history of the people is never everything but...a description of oneself, a self definition. History doesn't exist, it is made up.

- Le Corbusier, *Precisions*

Under the supervision of local architect Amancio Willims and Simon Ungars, construction of the Curutchet house required nearly ten years. Pedro curutchet encountered numerous construction problems and was often outraged by

the changes proposed and sometimes actually built by Ungars. When the residence was finally occupied, his family was continually annoyed by curious onlookers and architectural enthusiasts. Although lack of privacy and constant leak of the roof terrace urgently concerned Dr. Curutchet, the foremost problem was excessive natural light. He felt it was never properly governed, but rather, it was governing. After few years the house was abandoned.³⁶ Curutchet was torn between respecting the architect's proposal and the inability of this "architectural jewel" to accommodate his family's necessities. Unable to reconcile this contradiction, eventually he would denounce "the tyranny of the architecture and the architect's ideas."³⁷ It is no small irony that, after so many years, a client repeated the same criticism made by the German architects, criticism which, in part, convinced Le Corbusier to journey to America.

The inability to implement his proposal for the city of Buenos Aires bitterly disappointed Le Corbusier. In 1949, he was compelled to write: "Argentine has done, in what concerns me, one of the most deceptive gestures I have ever been object in my professional career."³⁸ Despite this frustration, late in his life, Le Corbusier chose to remember only his idealism and the grandeur of Argentina. "All of my theory, my introspection and retrospection on the phenomenon of architecture and urbanism come from those improvised and illustrated conferences."³⁹

Perhaps the mature master chose a small house in La Plata as his final homage to that infinite shoreline which had overwhelmed him upon reaching the Argentinean coast. Many years later the "intoxicating dreams" he felt for that country would live, vicariously, in the Curutchet house as a reminder of those heroic times, gone for architecture, and also, in praise of memory.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

This paper is part of a project supported by a generous grant from the Graham Foundation for Advanced Studios in the Fine Arts. I would like to thank Robert Fakelmann for his extensive editing of the paper and his valuable criticism. Special thanks to Ana Rivas and Judith Rivas for their assistance on my research.

NOTES

¹ William Curtis, *Le Corbusier: Ideas and Forms*, (New York: Rizzoli, 1986), p. 225.

- ² Christian Borngraber, "Le Corbusier a Mosca" *Rassegna II*, 3 (July 1980), p.p. 79-88, see also Werner Oechslin, "Les Cinq Points d'une Architecture Nouvelle" , *Assamblage # 4*, The MIT Press, (October 1987), trans. by Wilfried Wang: pp 83-93.
- ³ Jean-Louis Cohen, *Le Corbusier and the Mystique of the U.R.S.S. Theories and Projects for Moscow 1929-1936*, (Princeton University Press, 1992), trans. by Kenneth Frampton, p. 108.
- ⁴ Giorgio Ciucci, "Il mito Movimento Moderno e la vicenda dei Ciam", *Casabella # 4631464* (November/December 1980): pp 28-34.
- ⁵ Le Corbusier recalls in his book *Precisions*: "It was at the home of the charming and so intelligent duchess of Dato, Paris, that I met Gonzales Garreno. He urged me to go to Buenos Aires, to express the realities and the approaching destiny of modern architecture." *Le Corbusier: Precisions on the Present State of Architecture and City Planning*, (The MIT Press, 1991), p.18, trans. by Edith Schreiber Aujame, the work originally appeared in French, published 1930.
- ⁶ Blaise Cendrars, *Complete Postcards from the Americas: Poems of Roads and Sea*, (University of California, 1976) p.195.
- ⁷ Le Corbusier, *Precisions*, p.18
- ⁸ *Ibid.*, p.201
- ⁹ *Ibid.*, p.3
- ¹⁰ *Ibid.*, p.15
- ¹¹ *Ibid.*, p.204
- ¹² *Ibid.*, p.20
- ¹³ *Ibid.*, p. 30
- ¹⁴ *Ibid.*, p.31
- ¹⁵ *Ibid.*, p.125, particularly sketches # 111 and # 114.
- ¹⁶ The earth as a container of harmonic relationships is present in the Le Corbusier of the 1960's: "A live organism (man) and nature (the environment), this immense vase containing the sun, the moon, the stars,"... Preface to the Second French Printing of *Precisions* (Editions Vincent Freal et Cie., Paris, 1960), p.VII. See also Francesco Tentori, *Vita e Opera di Le Corbusier*, (Biblioteca di cultura Laterza, 1967), p.6.
- ¹⁷ *Precisions*, p.68.
- ¹⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 208.
- ¹⁹ *Ibid.*, p.21
- ²⁰ Christiane Crasemann, "Le Corbusier's *Maison Errazuriz*, a conflict of two fictive cultures", *The Harvard Architectural Review VI*, (1987): pp. 38-53.
- ²¹ Le Corbusier, *Precisions*, p. 206.
- ²² Willy Boesiger, *Le Corbusier Last Works*, (Draeger Publisher, New York, Washington, 1970), p. 174.
- ²³ Le Corbusier, *Precisions*. p.132.
- ²⁴ *Ibid.* : pp 227-228.
- ²⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 68
- ²⁶ *Ibid.* See particularly sketches # 220, 221 and 222, p. 229.
- ²⁷ *Ibid.* p. 227
- ²⁸ Le Corbusier, *SPAZIO e SOCIETA*, vol. 2 3 8, (December 1978).