The cat and the ball of yarn.
Interweaving the threads of the history and restoration of the Villa Savoye (1970-1986)
Susanna Caccia Gherardini and Carlo Olmo
FIG. 1
Villa Savoye, 1984.
FLC – Fondation Le Corbusier, Paris

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Abstract: The essay, the first of two writings, reconstructs the events of the generation of historians who between the seventies and mid-eighties studied and interpreted the written and designed works by Le Corbusier. This picture is part of the reading of different phases of the restoration of villa Savoye conducted by architect en chef Ivan Gury after the first operation by Jean Dubuisson, leading to a season of infinite authorial restorations of the modern. The authors deal with the complex issue of the interpretation of Le Corbusier’s works during the formation phase of the history of contemporary architecture, when the sources are almost all accessible and the literature on the subject explodes. The text investigates unpublished materials and documents, offering a new interpretation both of the villa Savoye and of the texts on the French-Swiss master.

Keywords: Historiography, Le Corbusier, villa Savoye, restoration, micro-history.

Résumé: L’essai, le premier de deux écrits, reconstitue les événements de la génération d’historiens qui, entre les années 70 et le milieu des années 80, a étudié et interprété les œuvres de Le Corbusier, écrites et projetées. Cette image s’inscrit dans la lecture des différentes phases de restauration de la villa Savoye menée par l’architecte en chef Ivan Gury après un premier achèvement par Jean Dubuisson, ouvrant une saison de restaurations infinies du moderne d’auteur. Les auteurs abordent également la question complexe de l’interprétation des œuvres de Le Corbusier dans la phase de formation de l’histoire de l’architecture contemporaine, lorsque les sources sont presque toutes accessibles et que la littérature sur le sujet explode. Le texte explore des matériaux et des documents inédits, offrant une nouvelle interprétation à la fois de la villa Savoye et des textes sur le maître franco-suisse.


Resumen: El ensayo, el primero de dos escritos, reconstituye los acontecimientos de la generación de historiadores que, entre los años 70 y mediados de los 80, estudiaron e interpretaron las obras escritas y proyectadas por Le Corbusier. Esta imagen forma parte de la lectura de las diferentes fases de restauración de la Villa Savoye dirigidas por el arquitecto jefe Ivan Gury tras una primera realización de Jean Dubuisson, abriendo una época de interminables restauraciones de autor de lo moderno. Los autores también abordan la compleja cuestión de la interpretación de las obras de Le Corbusier en la fase de formación de la historia de la arquitectura contemporánea, cuando las fuentes están casi universalmente disponibles y la literatura sobre el tema se dispara. El texto explora materiales y documentos inéditos, ofreciendo una nueva interpretación tanto de la Villa Savoye como de los textos sobre el maestro franco-suizo.

Palabras clave: Historiografía, villa Savoye, restauración, micro-histoira.
FIG. 2
Villa Savoye, Scaffolding during restoration works, 1966
(picture by Félix Thyes).
FLC – Fondation
Le Corbusier, Paris.
Ouverture

In the sixteen years covered by this paper historians of architecture and conservation could experience the deformation and modifications generated by shifting from one text to another, and how, almost in a mockery of history, la longue durée (of the Savoye) was affirmed by the persistence of the first reception (which in our case arose from the complicity between critic and author) and the many metamorphoses of its mise en scène which, as Georges Duby taught us, would generate alongside the event what the French historian called une partie légendaire,1 up to the almost paradoxical situation of introducing the villa “à l’épreuve de sa restauration”2. A unique reversal of authenticity and evidence, but also one of the most complex expressions of a histoire du temps présent capable of mobilising the most diverse and varied fields of investigation and at the same time claiming its social role as guarantor of the mémoire played by conservation3.

This paper operates on three levels, attempting to investigate them and relate them to each other. The first concerns discovery, the set of rules and the first studies of Le Corbusier’s archive, the second focuses on the second restoration of the Villa Savoye, and the third on the construction of an architectural historiography which, starting with studies on the architect of La Chaux-de-Fond, would characterise an entire generation of studies on modern architecture. It does so by seeking to investigate a process that first assumes extensive use of the source (of everything that can be a source4), and then making the relationship with the source its own epistemic legitimacy. Up to the point of overturning the relationship between matter and narration at the very end of this period. But it also does so by re-establishing, with the second restoration, the consolidation of that retour à l’origine that would mark an entire season of restoration of the modern and more besides, and finally by shining a light on its debts with social historiography, ethnography and linguistics while still remaining suspended between the reworking of the reminiscence.

All three paths run through the biographies of very different actors, the establishment of a temporal scanning, the modern, which precisely in that period became a true form of identity and at the same time a mémoire obligée5, gradual awareness of the complex nature of documents and a set of sources that the Villa Savoye6 produced, generated and ordered in those sixteen years7. If each document is not only a past, present or the presence of an absence, the architecture of the villa and its restoration do not report a present as a horizon and emotion as a vehicle8, but also the existence of a source that is not “representation” but manipulated matter, sursignifiée, for a long time deprived of a function, almost a paradigm of architecture’s resistance to the linguistic storm that runs through contemporary studies. It is this twofold path, the history and restoration of this architecture sans public, that places the status of what a document is at the centre of a truly unique game of exchange.

FIG. 3
Des crayons aux mots

A catalogue on the organisation of Le Corbusier’s library prior to 1930, edited by Paul Venable Turner, was published in 19709. The very same Turner who, in a note to an article a year later, reported how Maurice Besset had completed his catalogue with Le Corbusier’s livres de chevet: the Bible, Cervantes and Rabelais10. Perhaps it is no coincidence that the paper years were consolidated through a text on the books in Le Corbusier’s possession, published by Fondation Le Corbusier, which in the same year published a short brochure on its legal and organisational status11. Writing was once again the focus of a second text published that same year, suspended between memories and anecdotes12. But by this time memory had started to give way to the written text.

The library marks the fragile start of a hegemony of papers on the work - transcribed in the literary genre of the still prevailing tyranny of artistic literature and in particular of one of its expressions - the monograph - which brought the historiography on Le Corbusier to the centre of contemporary debate on literary genres.

The biography, which moreover at that time represented the essentially Nietzschean narration of a heroic modernity that re-evaluated both author and critic, contrasted with a historiography that at the time was rediscovering avant-gardes, movements, journals and the collective dimension of artistic, and especially architectural, work. It would suffer the full criticism of Giovanni Levi years later.13.

In this sense, the historiography on Le Corbusier represents an exemplary case study that all researchers would like to investigate. Biographies - with the consequent glorification of individual action that the construction of the Le Corbusier character implies and facilitated by the accompanying rhetoric - are in fact intertwined with monographs that examine themes and individual projects. Two approaches that also come with different writings and narrative structures: high popularisation and investigation which starts to pose the problem of philology as the legitimisation of its argument. The difference can be seen, for example, in the nature and number of footnotes14, which were absent up until then even in texts by the most important art and architecture historians: a frontier that was also crossed in those years by historians of contemporary architecture. Besides others.

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After Besset’s text, which is more than a simple biography and Stanislaus von Moos’s Le Corbusier: Elemente einer Synthese, constructed without access to the Fondation’s archives, seven biographies on Le Corbusier by professional historians or critics were published between 1969 and 1975, not counting those by Hervé, Jean Petit and Yūkō Futagawa, and those by Franchetti Pardo, Carlo Cresti, Stanislaus von Moos, Robert Fourneaux Jordan, Charles Jencks, Stephen Gardiner, Peter Serenyi and Matin Pawley. The architectural works analysed in the monographs were La Tourette, Ronchamp, Pessac, and L’Unité in Marseilles, while the almost one hundred articles published in that same period covered the villas of the Twenties up to Firminy. It was the few thematic articles though that raised the problem of a text that seeks evidence (with all its rhetoric) in the archive and its narration through mise en intrigue, as Paul Ricoeur would write, which cannot disregard existing arguments. Texts by Turner, Corboz and Taylor raised the problem of documentary evidence, up to the first book that was not only entirely based on archival work but in which the text that included the archival materials on which it was based, at the foot of the text, was Le Corbusier e L’Esprit Nouveau. But what of the Villa Savoye?

The Villa Savoye followed the same course, but differentiated the media. Yūkō Futagawa’s popular and iconographic text, with an introduction by Richard Meier, was published in 1972. In 1975, William Curtis developed an Open University course on the Villa Savoye, evocatively titled Le Corbusier: The evolution of the architectural language and the crystallization in the Villa Savoye, while that same year Tim Benton launched a study of the preparatory drawings for the design of the villa, which would find its final outlet years later in the introductory essay to Garland’s volume on Le Corbusier and even more so in the first edition of Les villas de Le Corbusier et Pierre Jeanneret.

Historiographical revisionism, critical contextualism and a philological foundation began to intertwine, with texts by Benton, Curtis, Gabetti and Olmo anticipating the radical turning point of the next eight years. However, this opened up a contradiction. Namely, a historiography that replaces the lack of an examination of the work with archival investigation and increasingly uses philology as an almost exclusive way of pursuing loyalty to the memory, but ultimately this would start an interminable quarrel with the truth in history, which would find its topoi years later and in the bataille de Ronchamp.
What emerges is also a twofold interpretative path, which is also less and less convergent: between an architectural historiography that searches for its own paradigms and narrative structures in the papers - Tim Benton’s recent work on Le Corbusier’s agendas is exemplary in this sense⁴¹ - and a restoration capable of anticipating one of the most debated themes for decades, and not only by restorers: le retour à l’origine⁴². In the resolve (and illusions of the restorers), a modern view d’ailleurs, without ideological, avant-garde or aesthetic charges to defend⁴³. Ultimately it would be the word, not the material, that would test the interpretation, only to be overturned in the material called to confirm the word after 1986, the object of the remise en état. Restoring the status that every translation (historiographic or material) gives to the “name test”⁴⁴.

But how does historiography move forward? Above all, by replacing the examination of the artefact with the examination of its design, and surveys of the built architecture with sketches, drawings and notebooks that can assist with research into the genesis of the work by focusing on the author’s intentions and the historiographic issue of authorship. Work that would become systematic with the recent work by Danièle Pauly⁴⁵. What is increasingly interesting is the possible reconstruction of the design process and not the material configuration of the work, including the construction site. And this, as said, years after the essays by Roland Barthès on La mort de l’auteur⁴⁶ and Michel Foucault on Qu’est-ce qu’un auteur?⁴⁷. Thus, almost paradoxically, the foundation of a discursive tradition would mark the new season in the history of architecture.

But how does restoration move forward? Between the tyranny of image and syntagma (villa blanche) and historicism au second degré, given that the ruin is of a restoration, albeit almost dictated on 3 June 1965 by the author.

Contradictions that include what is still a no-man’s land between historiography and restoration: the oblivion into which the state of the villa entered, while it is l’image that prend position, that of villa blanche, that marked the true form of appropriation of the image d’une chose absente (that of the Villa Savoye as it was represented in Cahiers d’art 1930⁴⁸) and that appeared in all contemporary publications. An architecture that was not only independent from the state the villa was in, first restored and then returned to its state of ruin, paradoxically turned oblivion into an opportunity to radicalise beliefs and mythologies about its unity, coherence and above all uniqueness.

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It is in the travellers’ diaries, while the gradual reduction of the second restoration to a *sous entretien vigilant* brings into play an old metaphor of its designer: architecture as “une image de la technique” which Le Corbusier had wanted to create in 1963, when he himself promoted the Savoye as a prototype of a *blanche modernity*.\(^{50}\)

Papers in place of stones, images in place of ruins.

*The Loss of History and the Rediscovery of Origins* was the title Keuth Loftin gave to an article in 1980 on the restoration of the Villa Savoye, as well as a reading of the historiography that was accumulating, changing the historiographic paradigm.\(^{51}\) The process of transcribing the villa into a Weberian idealtype (as it was already in *Précisions*\(^{52}\)), demands that the object of study (and subsequently of restoration) was not history or reception, but the origin, recovering, and not always consciously, the splendid reading of this procedure first given by Pierre Hadot, attributing it to *metanoia*\(^{53}\), and then Focault, when authorship was made to depend on the response that can be given to the *origine*.

The same mythopoetic root of the *retour à l’origine* that organises practices and then clashes with the paradox that the *origine* itself not only cannot be practised (only Le Corbusier had achieved this by proposing an invented origin in drawings

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**Fig. 7-8**

he had chosen from the four designs for the villa), but it produces an authentic paradox: the freezing of the function that was the original substance of the design (living, producing, showing) and opening up to the infinite season of a potential architecture that exists as a “metamorphosis” without object that would accompany the entire complex season of restorations of the Villa Savoye up to 1998.

What actually emerges is a “twofold” realism – its existence as a work and its existence through the representation given to it by the papers, which makes the “Villa Savoye” document perhaps one of the most complex and ambiguous texts to investigate due to the succession of restoration campaigns and its emphasised exemplary nature as a fabrique of a modernity independent of contemporaneity. All of these games were played with the representations that historiography would make of the function-auteur, to return to Foucault and the difficulty of defining the nature of the document being worked on: architecture, drawing, representation, reception, as well as survey, construction site, mortar, and colours. There is certainly a risk that everything could become a document.

But the common thread of that retour à l’origine, to the arche, is the process of the symbolic re-appropriation of an asset that is now public, that has cultural value irrespective of the meanings that resulted in its construction (housing) and that has now entered into an almost indefinite polysemy, removed not only from the use for which it was built, but from the theory of values ordered by that use. At least Le Corbusier went further by replying to Madame Savoye and describing the villa as the Panthéon de la modernité!

This polysemy often undermines the invoked realism of the design by Le Corbusier (and Pierre Jeanneret, Albert Frey, Ernst Wiesmann), translated into matter by the Bertocchi company and the many artisans called to the construction table, creating the conditions for a hyperealism that characterises the events of the villa to this day. What started to be glimpsed between the late Sixties and early Seventies was the very use of the retour à l’origine to propose ever new theories on authorship, touching on Mircea Eliade’s “archetypes and repetitions”, as in the case of the abuse of metaphors. Then again, what does a recurring ruin, whose origin is investigated by historians and restorers in different ways, imply if not a dialectic between archetype and repetition?
La remise en état, the first definition to appear since 1961, is perhaps the closest syntagm to retour à l’origine, but not surprisingly it emphasises its contradictions: there would come a time when the work has outlived the author, and is no longer Madame Savoye’s residence: but merely a public and then meta-historical time. A timeless state that can therefore be placed at the basis of the antinomy between the villa, which presupposes housing, and the villa as a palimpsest (what Le Corbusier proposed after all in Buenos Aires) capable of hiding not only the absence of an intended use, but, at least up until 1998, also excluding the nature of a public asset which had prevented its sale and demolition and then allowed the inclusion of the villa among the monuments of the twentieth century to be preserved as early as 1964: thus creating an authentic hypostasis.

A hypostasis that exists irrespective of its material existence (continually manipulated by the restoration work carried out to this day), the child of two memories, one commandeé and the other manipulée by the villa, where historiography appears commandeée by the function-auteur and the restoration manipulée by the image, the Maison blanche. Hiding a precocious affirmation of a transcription-translation that is only more cultural, and not more interpretative of the work, in the very years when cultural studies were appearing on the scene61! But the Seventies also set forth another process: the attributions of meaning recognised to the work through studies on the genesis of its design were constructed while a rezeptiongeschichte prevailed, from the interpretative polysemies now set in motion by increasingly openly analogical literature62.

These two paths are somewhat separate but somewhat linked. The story of villa blanche conceals the confrontation between two words – testimony and reminiscence – whose history is the very essence of the historical and conservative knowledge with which the architecture is imbued. The villa blanche is called on – for example – to bear witness to a cultural and artistic season, that prefigured by Guillaume Apollinaire’s Meditations Esthétiques63, but it also incorporates all of the reminiscence, as defined by Ricoeur64, which first Hervé and then Giedion would guide and that Giedion would definitively introduce, first in Cahiers d’Art and finally in the first edition of Space Time and Architecture65.

Resorting to isolating a work and translating it into a “monograph”66, as we have just seen, appears to be an attempt to escape this dichotomy, attributing to a reduction in scale “confirmed and legitimised by images” the power of evidence of the document.
one is called to work on\(^6\). It is perhaps no coincidence that the prevailing source at that time in the already hypertrophic literature on Le Corbusier was photography. Photography as a testimony to Le Corbusier's ability to see and to Le Corbusier as a photographer\(^6\), but also as a representation that prevents us from crossing the Sargasso Sea being generated by “tout est source”\(^6\). The 61 images of the architectural promenade taken between 2002 (and the work of Barbara Mazza\(^7\)), 2012 (and the exhibition *Construire l'image: Le Corbusier et la Photographie*\(^8\)), and 2018 (and the work of Zaparain, Ramos Jular, Llamazares on *La promenade photographique de la Villa Savoye*\(^9\)) assumed the status of a source capable of existing autonomously also in the production of form.

The *Villa Blanche* is undoubtedly a rhetorical construction, and the power of images appears - and this is not an absurdity - all the stronger the more historiography moves towards a legitimisation through papers and ignores the constructed work\(^7\). But if the construction of the images of his works for Le Corbusier was part of a strategy, both professional and intellectual, for the construction of his biography after he was deprived of the possibility of redesigning the Savoye\(^8\), *la villa blanche* as a historiographical and conservative topos arises from the need for research that legitimises itself through the simulacrum of the built work: those photographs which, while Le Corbusier was alive, were the reading (almost always retouched\(^9\)) legitimised by the Swiss architect.

The period between 1979 and 1982 marked the greatest ambiguity as to what constitutes a document for research on architecture and the Savoye in particular. Papers, photographs, drawings, notebooks, *livres noirs* and agendas exchanged roles

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**FIG. 12**
Villa Savoye, details of decay, façade, end of Seventies. IFA - Centre d'Archives d'Architecture du XXème siècle, Paris - Fond Hourlier.

**FIG. 13**
Villa Savoye, details of decay, plaster, end of Seventies. IFA - Centre d'Archives d'Architecture du XXème siècle, Paris - Fond Hourlier.

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and legitimacy, along with the work itself, which moreover in those years was the subject, as mentioned, of the CEBTP’s first “scientific” investigation into the material with which the villa was made. But literature on the villa did not pursue this approach of calculations, correspondence, accounts, techniques and materials until very recently. A few years later, Lawrence W. Speck, in a lucid article, seized on another polysemy reflected in the magic mirror of villa blanche. The reference to mainstreaming, in this case of rationalist architecture, tends to exclude or ignore important elements of the building if they do not fully support a now consolidated “mainstream point of view.” The linguistic reduction of the built work necessarily leads to its trivialisation, and as Ellwood writes to a politics of myths.

The mechanism set in motion is the reduction of physical identities to cultural identities: villa blanche selects and reorganises functional elements for the new representation of rationalism, after rationalism – from Kaufman’s texts to Aldo Rossi’s introduction to Boullée’s Architecture – had become an almost genealogical writing. But can a collective memory really be deposited in a work of architecture, an archetype, that can be unveiled through almost any kind of investigation and point of view or various types of “coring”, an architecture whose status actually oscillates between representations, narratives, ruin and icon - and that thinks it can resolve the most disturbing steps of a continuous reconfiguration of the work, using images as a reference? Or do cognitive (and epistemological) procedures diverge because they are no longer...
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Sur :
la Villa SAVOYE construite en 1929 par LE CORBUSIER à Poissy (Yvelines)

Service : GROS OEUVRE ET CHANTIERS
Section : Contrôle chantiers
Nature des essais : Recherche des causes des désordres observés dans la construction

Echantillons reçus le :
Date des essais :
Observations :

Sous le n°

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capable of making sense of the investigations they conduct, fascinated by a paradoxically self-sufficient philology, or reassured by an origine that seems capable of excluding even the author, as is the case in many passages of religious literature that would be evoked and eventually simplified by the fortune of Mircea Eliade's text?

Acknowledgements of the intentionality of actions that have left traces, but also of voluntary or involuntary “oblivions”, and of the structural diachronic nature of the interventions to the villa that can be read, for example, in the comptes rendus of the construction sites of Dubuisson and Gury, propose a further, delicate passage. For historiography, the actions that have left traces are increasingly obsessively sought in the projects, drawings and texts that accompany them and which, all together, should be able to recount beliefs, attempts, renunciations, and paths taken and then abandoned, which in any case are found in otherwise inexplicable project waste.

For those involved in the subject of architecture, the actions that leave traces instead reveal how the configuration of the work does not represent the transfer of the design into architecture, but how additional relational and technical actors and cultures intervene: the result of a process that is both negotiated and authoritative78. The analogies that intervene not as a support, but as an alternative to these textual elements, represent primarily interpretative shortcuts.

Image historiographies, like purely cultural ones, can in fact “misrepresent” the intentions of the producer, artist or scholar, and even call into question the authorship of the work. The case of the Villa Savoye, and of the uncertainty even in naming the recovery actions, at the very time that this private house was transformed into a public asset and collective memory and removed from its author, Le Corbusier, is in this sense truly significant79.

Indeed, two processes collided. The Villa Savoye, conceived as an example of anti-historicist modernity, became the object of transcriptions into icons, even more so when what prevailed was a genealogy constructed of images, as a comparative reading of the illustrations in the well-documented monographs mentioned80. On the other hand, the Fondation’s archive was created as a workshop of values - like almost all paper archives81 - as an essential support for stories that look at the subjectivity of the work and its authorial genesis. Paradoxically, it was the intertextual reading anticipated by Qui était Le Corbusier82 that would lead historiography to address an even eighteenth-century discussion on the source and juridical model that inspired it.

The clash would no longer be between games of belonging, but over the source or the document and how the relationship with the evidence is constructed. The narration of the villa, almost ingenuous and naïve, even in the texts of the Sixties, would increasingly tend to affirm the primacy of the mise en intrigue83, or, to use another reference, of traces and plots84 that would increasingly constitute the palimpsest not only of historical investigation, but also, in a paradoxically opposite way, of the action of conservation. With a suggestion that cannot be ignored: what fostered the construction of the authorial myth (for example in this period the biography was not inclusive: even Pierre Jeanneret, and not just Frey85 and Weissman, are still to this day waiting for their complete collocation in the monograph on the Villa Savoye)86 was the aesthetics of reception or, indeed, a reception that became laden with aesthetic or aestheticizing values in ever increasing forms, which would make the Savoye imbroglio even more tangled and its writing increasingly relativistic. But we need to take a step back.

The loss of narrative words and the crisis of the object87.

The 1977 issue 3/4 of the Journal of Jewish Art published a text that marked a further step, and not only in the construction of the already vast imagery of the Villa Savoye88. The article presented a curious intertwaving of reception theory, art anthropology and a text that was losing its thread89. The essay brings together an appropriation – the Villa Savoye transformed into a National Rezeptionaesthetik, pedagogical sub species: the container that should educate those who use the shell of a public asset to beauty. That essay, which was almost overlooked, raised problems that would mark the literature on the villa: an acknowledgements of the intentionality of actions that have left traces, but also of voluntary or involuntary “oblivions”, and of the structural diachronic nature of the interventions to the villa that can be read, for example, in the comptes rendus of the construction sites of Dubuisson and Gury, propose a further, delicate passage. For historiography, the actions that have left traces are increasingly obsessively sought in the projects, drawings and texts that accompany them and which, all together, should be able to recount beliefs, attempts, renunciations, and paths taken and then abandoned, which in any case are found in otherwise inexplicable project waste.

The allegorical appropriation that Michael Levine takes to an extreme seems to give credence to an essential passage by Gombrich: the succession of styles masks the existence of just two interpretative categories: classical and non-classical92. Hence the almost unequivocal use of Renaissance metaphors (Albertian or Palladian) to describe the Savoye: metaphors fostered over the years by Colin Rowe up to James Ackerman of The Villa as Paradigm and in time Tim Benton up to the last91. Ackerman transforms the icon (the villa set in a Virgilian dream90) into a “milestone of modern architecture”90, decontextualising it but highlighting the root of that transmigration into allegory. With an observation that reinforces the reductionism that the villa was capable of making sense of the investigations they conduct, fascinated by a paradoxically self-sufficient philology, or reassured by an origine that seems capable of excluding even the author, as is the case in many passages of religious literature that would be evoked and eventually simplified by the fortune of Mircea Eliade’s text?

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undergoing, “The villa is less defined in form... because the requirement for pleasure demands less precision”96 Le Corbusier might not have agreed, but that sentence seems to have been written by Marshall McLuhan in Understanding Media.

Thinking about a paradigm, Ackerman actually grasps the core of an ambiguity that was at the root of the Savoye project and which the conjunction of the early Eighties exalted: “The mythical nature of the ideology of the villa frees the type from its concrete constraints of utility”97.

In that period, in addition to the already widespread forms of an aesthetic reception of the villa, an entire issue was dedicated to Le Corbusier in 1979 by perhaps the most ideological magazine of all artistic literature: Oppositions98. It was an essential issue, for its editorial staff and its university placement, precisely because it endorsed the existence of an invisible academy of modernity distinct from the events of contemporaneity, but even more so because it marked the passage of hermeneutic reflection from History to Theory that leads us to share what Camus wrote in 1938 “la théorie fait du mal à la vie”99.

The malaise of periodization100, which saw le temporalité the work had and that it was embodying slip away in favour of an all-too-anticipated presentism, seems to have found an prestigious incipit in this unknown essay. Moreover, in a cultural climate that marked another twofold process alongside the allegorical appropriation: the replacement of the investigation of the work with drawings and the almost definitive naturalisation of the sources.

The Fondation itself promoted the publication of Le Corbusier's papers. It did so directly between 1977 and 1982, promoting exhibitions – with Projets d'architecture de Le Corbusier101 – and endorsing the publication of unpublished drawings102 and documents103, until reaching the limits of the 1983 publication of the 32 volumes of the Le Corbusier Archive by Garland104. The investigation of the extremely rich material universe of Le Corbusier's works – which saw one of his most precious documents on the Villa Savoye published in 1979 – gave way to a search for the unpublished and a twofold process of enhancement.

Drawing is certainly not chosen out of laziness! Architectural drawing places the emphasis on authorship. Drawing emphasises authorship because it isolates graphic representation in architectural design and traces it back to a single author, who becomes its princeps and primary source of recognition. Drawing also generates a paradoxical contradiction: leading architecture back to art and reducing it to a substantially formal and genealogical interpretation: almost enclosing it in a frame, as might be the case for a drawing. But with a footnote.

Enhancement of the archive really sees that presumed individual memory take on the role of the sole workshop of values, further radicalising the sovereignty of the design called upon to represent the work. If, on the other hand, there are letters, correspondence, calculations, estimates and invoices, the archive almost constructs a hyper-reality parallel to the work. The history of architecture as the history of the construction would still have to wait years to find space and a dignified narrative correspondence, calculations, estimates and invoices, the archive almost constructs a hyper-reality parallel to the work. The history of architecture as the history of the construction would still have to wait years to find space and a dignified narrative.

Reflection on this possible role of the architectural archive once again started outside Europe: “The nature and value of architectural archives: a Parisian case study: Le Corbusier's archives“ was released in New Zealand105.

The document, unpublished or not, aesthetic or narrative, is not limited to soliciting a philological acrimony almost as if it were a glottologist: it isolates the document from the genesis of the text and, above all, does not investigate the source as social production, opening up a manière d'écrire opposed to the novelistic approach that prevailed until the Sixties, but also to the reflections that in 2013 would find their systematisation in François Hartog’s Croire en histoire106.

It is indeed essential to follow the writing of texts on Le Corbusier in those years in order to grasp the metamorphosis that writing underwent in the profession of the historian of modern architecture107. Alongside writing that is now in the genre of memoirs108 or comparative writings109 – the journal article, where the layout and image-text relationship almost always turn the writing into a commentary – what can now be defined as scientific writing took shape, of which “Corb as a structural rationalist: the formative influence of engineer Max Du Bois”110 and essays collected in The Open Hand: Essays on Le Corbusier111, Le Corbusier at Work by Sekler and Curtis112 constitute, with the English edition and partial revision of Von Moos’s Le Corbusier: Elemente eine synthese113, the most intriguing traces.

By now the drawing and the paper document constituted the bedrock of writing and the traces around which the narrative plot was constructed. How that document can assume different meanings depending on the form of the social production of the source and its role in defining the process that led to the work is of no interest115, the source that cannot be reduced to language is still the constructed work! The Fondation’s archive then really did emerge as the new Pandora’s box!
Do a change in the procedures for legitimising the profession of historian and a transfer of the object also result in a change to the interpretation of Le Corbusier’s work? One event summarised almost all the plots that were being woven together in the second half of the Seventies: the reconstruction in Bologna of the Pavillon de l’Esprit Nouveau in 1977. The operation launched by Giuliano and Glaucò Gresleri, beyond the also epistemological issue of copying and mimesis, interwove the archive as a workshop of values, drawings as a document, and history as utility, _avant à l’origine_ that was all too didactic, all in an ephemeral architecture that contained many of Le Corbusier’s projects and works created before 1925! The paradox of the work and its double to which the reconstruction refers was accentuated by the relationship between the container – staged – and the materials on display, between the investigation of the project and drawings that accompanied it. The interweaving represented by the pavilion, even in Paris and even more so in Bologna – between architecture as the mirror of a representation through original contents in the construction-reconstruction of the Pavilion – is a paradox very close to those on which Walter Benjamin constructed his _Doctrine of Similitude_ in 1933. A process that experienced a double mutation: the reconstruction of the pavilion in 1977 and the restoration of the reconstruction forty years later, thereby paradoxically mocking the restoration of the modern, as clearly illustrated on the cover of the collective work _Pavillon de l’Esprit Nouveau. A 21 Century Show Home_ which Giuliano Gresleri’s irony softly mitigates. The circle of Benjaminian similarity thus seemed to close. But what of the Villa Savoye?

The Villa Savoye floats between short, almost occasional articles and investigations into Le Corbusier’s improbable mastery art in the construction of the Savoye. These two genres that emerged from the writing - popular or scientific - marked a break in the narration of the villa.

The first is a 23-minute film, shot in colour, which Tim Benton produced for the Open University, the second is an ironic montage. The film is a document that combines footage, texts (taken from _Vers une architecture_) and photographs of the villa under construction and of Madame Savoye who lived there, and the interpretation anticipates the role of an almost sacred path, as von Messe had written, that the _promenade architecturale_ creates as a fundamental device for “knowing how to see” the Savoye. In the conclusions, the film revives and discusses the metaphor of the Palladian villa, of the house designed as a canon of modernity and not as a space to be inhabited, and Benton points out that the state of the villa in that period, devoid of furnishings, made that reading more credible and convincing.

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**FIG. 16-17**

I.Gury, Villa Savoye, Sketches, end of Seventies. IFA - Centre d’Archives d’Architecture du XXeme siècle, Paris - Fond Hourlier.
To some extent Benton’s film turns a critical and theoretical reading of the Savoye, which it had had since 1929, into a reading aimed at a much broader audience: it confirms the shift from a metaphorical hermeneutic – which originated with Le Corbusier, but that would be rewritten by Colin Rowe and James Ackerman up to Von Moos and Jean-Louis Cohen – that speaks to a professionel audience and conservation justified by the value that the villa assumes as testimony to a modernity that is by no coincidence recognised as a universal heritage, coincidentally speaking the language of popularisation.

In 1980, in the April issue of L’architettura, the Villa Savoye – together with the Einstein Tower, the Ronchamp Chapel, the Guggenheim and, less convincingly, the Greater London Council’s plan for the Thames – became the object of a unique exercise: a comparison of different semiological approaches to architecture. The uniqueness of the exercise lay in the choice of an almost comic-strip representation, with photos, visual diagrams and late-pop graphics that clearly denounced its Florentine origins. The villa appears in all three readings attempted – the empirical-historical one, the semantic-behavioural one, and the semantic-formalist one, independent from the historical events that accompanied it and from those of its “author”.

The readings attempt to break down and reassemble an architecture devoid of history, context and human events – the most evocative image is that of the Villa Savoye gently resting against a globe: an irony already present in Le Corbusier’s drawing in Précisions – in which the investigation aims to discover the compositional method, the rules that presided over the conception of an ideal type, in order to refute theory and give weight to the relationship between signs - signifiers. This approach radicalised the perception that there is a time of the work, a time of the author and a time of representation, but also of a critique that would be definitively legitimised when, through a reading of Genette, Bruno Reichlin proposed the Villa Savoye as a text, or rather a model of a possible intertextuality also in architecture.

As a cinematographic subject and the protagonist of late-pop imagery the Villa Savoye, with the change of medium, confirmed its fame and the fact that it now belongs to an almost commonplace utopia, which exercises in style can be built around. After all, the Savoye was intended to be both Palladian and anachronistic, classical and pop!
FIG. 19
IFA - Centre d'Archives d'Architecture du XXème siècle, Paris - Fond Hourlier.

FIG. 20
IFA - Centre d'Archives d'Architecture du XXème siècle, Paris - Fond Hourlier.
A la demande de Monsieur GURY, architecte, Monsieur PERRIN, Ingénieur du Service GROS OEUVRE ET CHANTIERS, division Matériaux Bitumineux "Étanchéité-Revêtements Routiers", a examiné l'ensemble des travaux en cours d'exécution, en parallèle à la visite effectuée ce jour, par Monsieur JOBÉR représentant de la S.M.A.C.

Les observations suivantes sont notées :

- Une tâche sombre est apparue au plafond sous la terrasse solarium à la verticale de l'accès des rampes intérieures (fuite possible qui demande un examen attentif).

- Les acrotères périphériques de l'immeuble et chêneau sur patio n'ont pas été remplacés et présentent toujours la fissuration généralisée (on entre le 18 Novembre 1979).

Terrasse Patio
- L'étanchéité des bordures de lanterneaux de la terrasse patio est recouverte par du mortier de ciment.

- Les jardinières sur la terrasse patio sont terminées mais on ne constate pas de joints aux jonctions avec les parois verticales.

- Le béton de la protection lourde est en cours de réalisation, mais l'ouvrage n'est pas terminé et nous constatons que les intermèdes ont arraché une partie du béton (porte d'accès et caniveau de protection du chêneau de la grande baie vitrée). Ce béton a été entraîné dans la pluviométrie et il y aura lieu de vérifier soigneusement les regards et canalisations car la prise est nettement avancée.

.../...
Remaniements et récits: la matière prend position

An archive discovered inside another archive is at least a unique premise. Even more unique is the fact that in an authentic game of Chinese boxes, within that archive there is a complex remaniement of the material structure of the villa, the social frameworks of memory and the historical narratives that have just been outlined. And even more so, that those boxes are an exemplary representation of two processes (the cumulative and stratigraphic nature of memory and the representation of the other) without which the restoration would lose its epistemic foundation.

This remaniement is very complex and has several sides. The first is the remaniement of the traditions that are being built, situated within the framework of a memory that would ideally be collective, but which sees progressive cracks emerging between the doctrinal traditions of restorers and the historical memory of the contemporaries. Ivan Gury’s archive covers around fifteen years in which the words that organise practices follow the doctrine and move away from the historical debate and memory that historians of Le Corbusier and Villa Savoye are canonising, marking a difference between collective memory and specialist memories that still needs to be reflected upon.

Work programmes that from the outset reiterate the need to “créer la documentation”, almost as if what was done and what was discussed in the Sixties never occurred. The legitimation of practices lies entirely within the relationship between documentation and action. Why? In 1971, the action of the architect en chef in charge of the restoration first became an “entretien” and then a

FIG. 22
“grosse réparation”[^38] becoming works d’équipment in 1972. Mots et choses started to find their own lexicon[^36]. While this is a “doctrine”, that of the restorers not yet dedicated to the modern, that instead runs through more technical documents such as the annual *Etat Sommaire*[^37]. But we need to take a step back, there are other mots et choses in the box.

In the Sixties the Villa Savoye was recognised first as a *batiment civil* and then as a *monument historique*[^38], and the first restoration project led by the architect Jean Dubuisson also inaugurated the eternal alternating of the cycle of restoration and renovation to which the building would be subjected. The period between 1970 and 1986 was time of an extraordinary maintenance work and inspections, proposals and the re-elaboration of images that remained, for the most part, on paper, but it also witnessed the start of a series of restoration works that would be repeated and consolidated over the following three decades[^39]. It was also witness to a second circularity between the work, drawings, projects and heritage.

The *remise en état* works directed by Dubuisson between 1966 and 1967[^40] did not address the issue of solving the problems that had plagued the villa since the Thirties, and once it had been abandoned by the caretaker it quickly fell into disrepair. After the villa was taken over by two ministries - *Bâtiments Civils and Culture*, another matter not investigated - in December 1967[^41], and the caretaker’s duties had ended in May 1968[^42], the façades and interiors once again fell into disrepair, while infiltration from the terrace risked making the villa uninhabitable once more. Then again it was not even supposed to be open to the public!

The idea of opening it to the public and turning it into a museum was abandoned a few weeks before construction was complete[^43]. But the controversy over its use predates this, as Le Corbusier himself had worked on its use as a museum mainly...
between 1960 and 1963. In this period, a reworking of the ground floor plan was produced, as well as a number of sketches for the layout of the lot and the external visitors’ route, which Jean Dubuisson had in some way referred to for the design solutions developed in 1965. According to these solutions, for example, the space on the ground floor of the villa occupied by the garage was to host temporary exhibitions. The 1966 project did not propose a real change of use, and although in the 1965 dossier and that of the following year the villa seemed destined for public use, it was rejected when the work was complete. In 1967 it was officially announced that “la villa Savoye et le pavillon du gardien ne seront pas classés comme établissement recevant du public”.

The works that Dubuisson had come to define, which would give the building – and this must be pointed out – those material “characteristics” against which any future architect en chef in charge of restoration would have to measure themselves, were mainly intended to resolve the problems that had arisen since the construction of the villa and were linked to this architecture (the undersized heating system, the infiltrations of the toit-terrasse), ransacking during the periods when it passed into oblivion, and the lack of use and maintenance (plasterwork, pictorial films, installed systems).

Interventions that would not however upset the material integrity of the villa. The interior plasterwork was not entirely stripped off and replaced, but where possible it was preserved and supplemented with mortars whose composition, discussed during the progress of the work, was compatible with the existing ones. In the end, the restoration gradually became ever more archaeological, with an uncommon attention to material authenticity compared to the traditional approach reserved for modern buildings.
Notes

3. Nothing will be more divisive than what we must or want to preserve of modern architecture. Because the choice is both ideological, chronological and economic. C. Olmo, “Mémoire et réminiscences dans la restauration de l’œuvre de Le Corbusier ou la nécessité d’un retour à l’antique discussion sur la modernisation de la modernité”, in Le Corbusier. L’œuvre à l’épreuve de sa restauration, La Villette, Paris 2017.
4. One reflection that must be made is what a body of knowledge, a discipline, considers as a source: from the written word up to archaeological finds, from a fork to a hoe, do all human products have the same status as a source?
15. S. von Moos, Le Corbusier Elemente einer synthese. 1968 was not only translated many times but it was also re-edited by von Moos himself for MIT Press in 2000, which made the updating of the text the trace of a history of the historiography on Le Corbusier in 2009. A history of the historiography, starting with each chapter of the text. After Besset, this was the second attempt to construct a narrative outside of the current historiographic rules.
16. J. Petit, Le Corbusier Lui-même, Genève 1970. Jean Petit was another of the authors-authors of Villa Savoye.
Qu’est-ce qu’un auteur?” in 3, 63 e année du R. Barthès, Brussels 2020.

D. Pauly, La villa Savoye trascrizione, la narrazione e Pollicino”, in cit, p.5.


38  T. Benton, “The Villa Savoye and the Architect’s Practice”, in Garland Le Corbusier, vol. VII.


47  M. Foucault, “Qu’est-ce qu’un auteur?”, in 3, 1939 annuel du Bulletin de la Société française de philosophie, referenced in M. Foucault (“Qu’est-ce qu’un auteur?”, 1969), in the anthology by A. Brunm (L’Auteur, GF-Corpus, 2001, texte VI, p. 76-82). This anthology brings together many of the most interesting theses on authorship.


49  The definition is by P. Saddy (Plan séquence sur la villa Savoye, 25/09 1984) and it is linked to the nature of the work, “Les épaissseurs et sections minimales voulu par le Corbusier comme l’image de la technique moderne exigent un entretien vigilant”, Cf. C. Olmo and S. Caccia, La villa Savoye, cit., p.170 ff.


70 B. Mazza, Le Corbusier e la fotografia. La verità blanche, Firenze 2002.

71 Exhibition curated by Tim Benton, Jean-Christophe Blaser, Véronique Boone, Arthur Rüegg, Catherine de Smet and Klaus Spechtenhauer.


74 Cf. “Dimenticare per ricordare” in Caccia Olmo, cit. p.25

75 Ibid.

76 Studies by Artur Graf, Bruno Reichlin, Carolina Mariaque, Susanna Caccia Gherardini and Roberta Grignolo have provided a new key to interpreting the relationship between matter and design.

77 L.W. Speck, “Mainstream is almost All Wrong”, in JAE, 1, 1980, p. 20.

78 This is explained better than any hermeneutics by Le Corbusier’s wish to see reality not as the work and its surveys, but as a selection of drawings from the four designs.

79 Carlo Olmo and Susanna Caccia Gherardini, Metamorfosi americane: Distruzione by Neglect. La Villa savoye tra mito e patrimonio, Quodlibet 2016.


81 It is not only the history of architecture that suffers from essentially being a “single archive” story. Cf. C. Ginzburg, Il filo e le tracce, Milano 2006, pp. 15-6.

82 On the intertextual reading that Bruno Reichlin would then bring, as a historian and architect, to its highest level, B. Reichlin, “Introduzione” to Dalla “soluzione elegante” all’“edificio aperto”. Scritti attorno ad alcune opere di Le Corbusier, Mendrisio 2013, pp. 23-25.

83 The reflection on the monograph of the work would be at risk of recreating an autonomous Crocian aesthetic of the work if it were not integrated with the assumption of the work as a canvas whose translation into actions, decisions and choices can be understood as an authentic mise en intrigue, cf. P.Ricoeur, L’histoire, la Mémoire et l’Oubli, cit., pp. 243 ff.

84 The other possible route is the one taken by many texts by Carlo Ginzburg, in prims Rapporti di potere, cit.


86 It was above all Mariastella Casciato who worked on Pierre Jeanneret, while there is still no systematic study of Weissman.


89 Up to arriving at the almost parody made of it by A. Vidler, “Diagrams of Diagrams: Architectural Abstractions and Modern Representation”, in Representations, 72, 2000, pp. 1-20.


91 Appropriation through discipleship is a tradition that is all too easily traced back to the Talmudic schools. Cf.: G. Benzimra, et al. “Ricordi di discepoli e di amici”, in Rassegna Mensile di Israel, 1973, 494-505.

92 E.H. Gombrich, Norms and Form. The Stylistic Categories of Art History and their Origins in the Renaissance Ideals, Phaidon 1971 (the essay was written in 1966), pp. 81-83.


94 J. Ackerman, cit., p. 14.

95 J. Ackerman, cit., p. 21.

96 J. Ackerman, cit., p. 26.


98 Issue 15/16 of Winter Spring 1979.

99 A. Camus, Alger Républicain, 20 October 1938.


104. Publication preceded by two texts essential for understanding what was happening in architectural journalism: M. Besset and A. Wogensky, *Le Corbusier-Carnets*, Milano 1981-2 (first notebook of a long series), and *Selected Drawings*, edited by Michel Graves, Rizzoli New York 1981, an almost paradigmatic approach of publishing unpublished drawings by architects whose professional career was about to take off.


125. S. Von Moos, cit.


127. The sources from Bruno Zevi, Robert Morris, G.K. Koenig are stated in the bibliography.


129. B. Reichlin, cit., p. 21.

130. Ivan Gury’s archive on the Villa Savoye is contained within the Houlier archive, his father-in-law’s agency.


133. The term is obviously taken from Maurice Halbwachs who spoke of the memory of musicians or surveyors, M. Halbwachs, *“Mémoire collective et mémoire historique”*, in *La Mémoire collective* (ed. cited 1997), p. 92 ff.


138. On 8 January 1965 the Commission supérieure des Monuments historiques endorsed the dossier, but only the *liret du charge de mission pour la creation artistique* dated 26 November 1965 led to the villa’s recognition and its classement with the *Arrêté du ministre d’état des Affaires Culturelle/Directio de L’architecture* on 16 December 1965. FLC, H1 (12) 453. On the broad debate in France in those years and the matters linked to the Commission established in 1963 to draw up the first list of modern “monuments” to be protected, see “Tra accademia invisibile e neo positivismo incipiente: la villa tra lista e inventari”, in S. Caccia Gherardini, C. Olmo, *Le Corbusier e l’Accademia invisibile della modernità. La Villa Savoye. Icona, rovina, restauro* (1948-1968), Roma 2016, pp. 204-208.

139. On the recurrences of the interventions, the items in the specifications, the estimates and the site reports preserved in the archives of the FLC and in the IFA Funds can be compared. In particular FLC U1 (15) 112, 113, 114, 115, 119, 120, as well
as the estimates U1(15) 132, 137, 158, 166, 182; IFA, Fondo J. Dubuisson; Fondo I. Gury; Fondo J.-L. Véret.


141 On 5 December 1967, a few weeks after closure of the construction site, “le ministère de la Culture devient propriétaire de la Villa Savoye. Il en confie la gestion à la Délégation aux arts plastiques qui l’ouvre au public”. An indication given by Pierre Saddy in that brief chronicle of the first restoration campaigns, preserved in the archives of the Parisian Foundation. A brief but nonetheless tendentious reconstruction of the facts. One of the few to tell the truth, according to which Saddy himself was among those in charge of the construction of the dossier for the restoration of the villa between 1963 and 1964, which would later be finalised with the Agence Dubuisson “sous le controle de Le Corbusier”, FLC, Pierre Saddy, Appunto manoscritto sui restauri della villa, 1966.

142 FLC, Dossier Confidentielle, 6 May 1968.

143 On the restoration directed by Dubuisson, see in particular “l’architetto che restauro è la prima ricezione della villa”, in S. Caccia Gherardini, C. Olmo, Le Corbusier e l’Accademia invisibile della modernità…, cit., pp. 129-208.


146 And it did. We need only recall the exhibition of 1987 curated by Jean Louis Véret on the occasion of the centenary year. On the exhibition events, cf. IFA, Fondo J.-L. Véret, Boîte «Villa Savoye».

147 The problem of the use of the villa would persist throughout Gury’s assignment, and he would always complain about the non “une utilisation des locaux” Gury a Véret’s letter dated 11 June 1986, Fonds Hourlier, Boîte 4227, IFA, Paris.


149 See in particular the reports of the meetings from as early as May 1966, IFA, Fondo J. Dubuisson, 224, boîte 245, Compte Rendu, 15 February 1967.

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