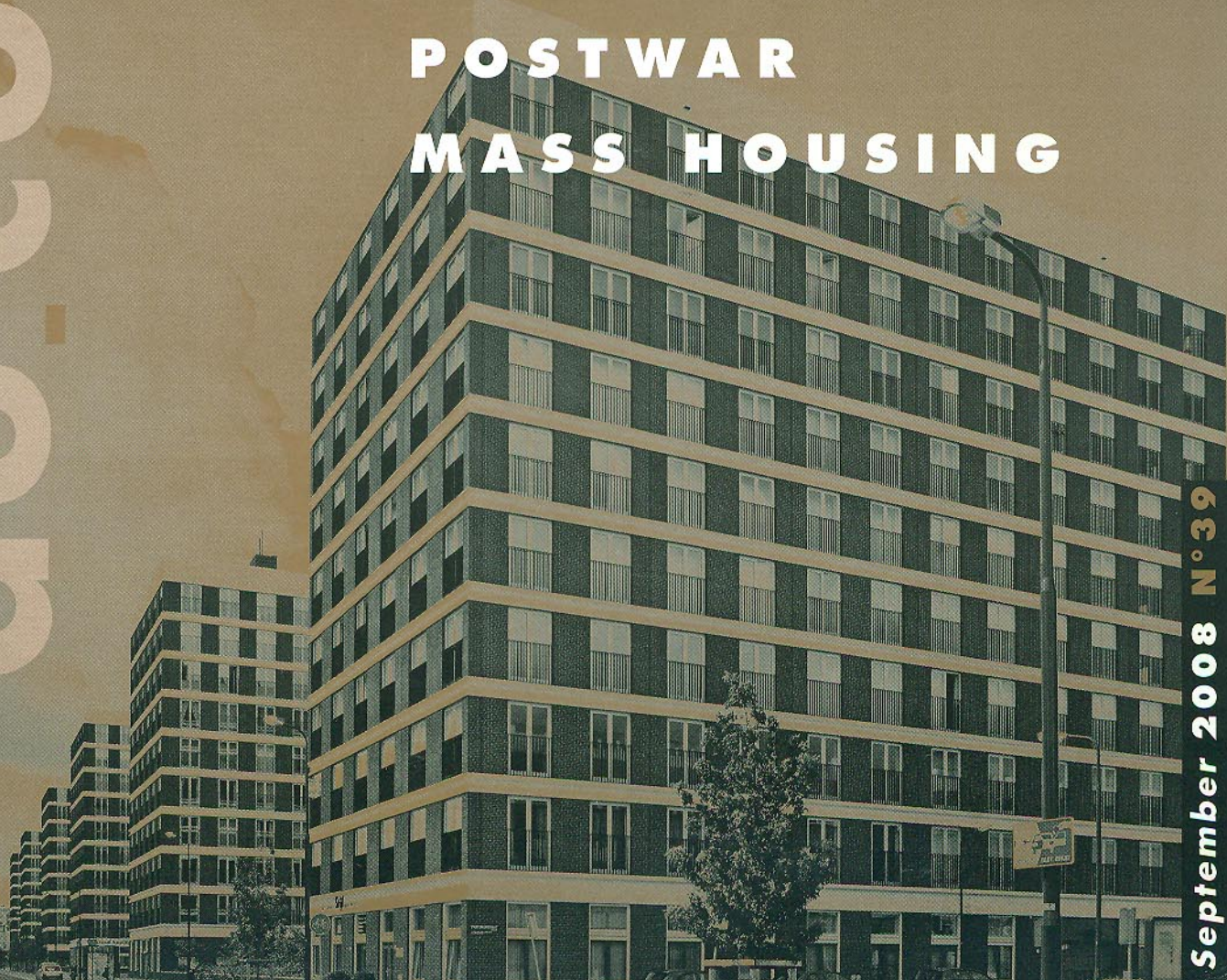


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**modern movement**

**Restoring Le Corbusier's La Roche-Jeanneret Houses**

**POSTWAR  
MASS HOUSING**



doc

September 2008 N° 39

## TABLE OF CONTENTS

- 4 Ennobling the Ordinary: Postwar Mass Housing and the Challenge of Change  
*by Miles Glendinning*

## DOCUMENTATION

### 1- International Survey

- 12 Les Courtillières: Ordinary Housing Project—Extraordinary History?  
*by the Research Group for History of Contemporary Housing*
- 18 Prefab Russia  
*by Florian Urban*
- 23 The Suburban Tower and Toronto's Modern Legacy  
*by Graeme Stewart*
- 30 Brasília's Superquadras  
*by Richard Williams*
- 35 Finding Housing: Singapore, International Exemplar of "Positive Public Housing"  
*by Belinda Yuen*

### 2- Inventorization and Recording

- 40 The Cumbernauld New Town Research and Inventory Project, 2006–9  
*by Diane M. Watters and Jessica Taylor*
- 44 Exploring the Soviet 'Golden Home' Project: The "Reworking Modern Architecture" Workshop in Pärnu  
*by Mart Kalm*
- 48 Doing Building Work: The Un-making of Red Road  
*by Jane M. Jacobs, Stephen Cairn & Ignaz Strebe*

## CONSERVATION

### 1- Preservation Strategy

- 54 The Van Eesteren Museum: A Protected Fragment of Amsterdam's Geuzenveld-Slotermeer Postwar District  
*by Vincent van Rossem*
- 59 Making Better Places Through Heritage Designation: The Byker Estate, Newcastle-upon-Tyne  
*by Rose Gilroy, John Pendlebury & Tim Townshend*

### 2- Intervention Strategy

- 64 Grass and Concrete: Regenerating Amsterdam's Westelijke Tuinsteden  
*by Wouter Veldhuis*
- 70 The Rhythm of Renewal  
*by Arjan Hebly*
- 74 Three Projects for the Renewal of the Modern City  
*by Endry van Velzen*

## TECHNICAL ISSUE

- 79 Le Corbusier's La Roche-Jeanneret Houses: Issues of Restoration  
*by Tiziano Aglieri Rinella*

## TRIBUTES

- 89 Guillermo Jullian de la Fuente  
Paul Overy

## 90 BOOK REVIEWS

## APPENDIX

- 96 Docomomo Addresses

# Le Corbusier's La Roche- Jeanneret Houses

## ISSUES OF RESTORATION

■ TIZIANO AGLIERI RINELLA

Recent studies, accomplished in 2005, resulted in the implementation of a "restoration dossier"<sup>1</sup> on Le Corbusier's La Roche-Jeanneret houses in Paris (1923-25). The dossier includes a detailed survey of the existing situation, the building's technical data and a documented chronology of all restoration, maintenance and transformation work carried out on it.

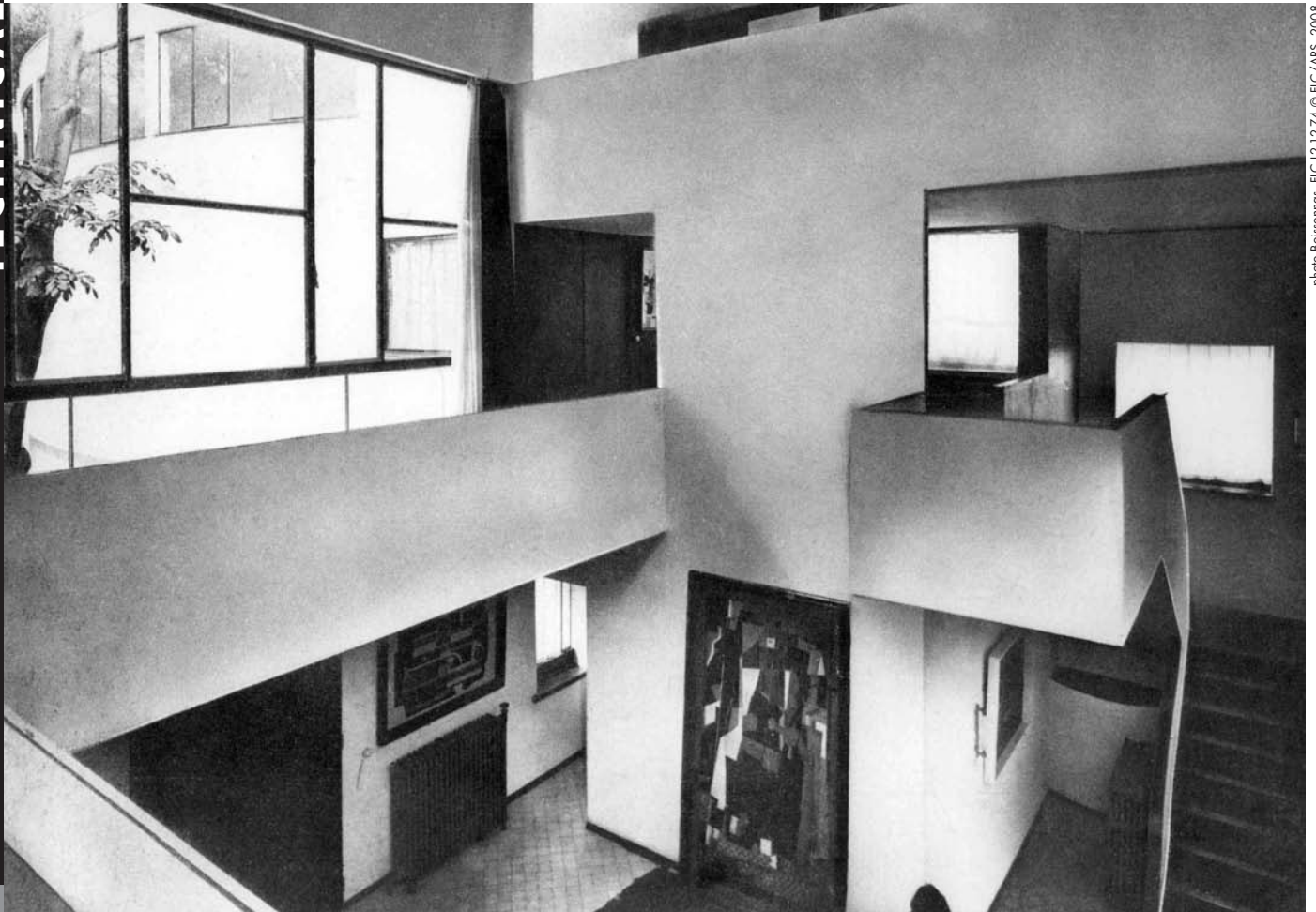


Fig. 1. **Le Corbusier**, *La Roche house*, the hall, 1926

The aim of that work, implemented upon request of the Le Corbusier Foundation and developed under the scientific direction of Bruno Reichlin, was to draw up a 'model' of dossier, to be repeated, with particular characteristics defined according to the case, for any existing building of Le Corbusier. It should be considered as a preliminary study, constantly updatable, to be used for any future project of restoration. Pierre-Antoine Gatier, architect and director of Historic Monuments, exploited these cognitive premises for a project of restoration of the La Roche house, currently in progress. Gatier completed the reference framework requesting to the Le Corbusier Foundation the execution of the required stratigraphic assays, that were impossible to carry out during the dossier's implementation time. His project, born from a simple request of updating the La Roche house's electric plant to current

standards, was afterwards extended to the whole architectural body of the house, taking into consideration various aspects of the building materiality and attempting to provide fair responses to the revealed contradictions.

#### SITUATION

The restoration dossier supplies an organic chart of the existing building's situation. To achieve this aim, every archive source of the Le Corbusier Foundation was used, including the recent 'current' archives.<sup>2</sup> These records gather all the documents related to any kind of work executed on the building, from when it was occupied by the Foundation (in 1970) to today. The available data was integrated and verified through interviews of witnesses and people in charge of the works. Besides the survey and the chronology of the restoration works, amongst the contents of the

"restoration dossier" there is a technical part on the 'matter' of the building and its constructive system, as well as a further part dedicated to the window frames.

#### RESTORATION WORKS AND MAIN MODIFICATIONS

The most relevant restoration work carried out on the La Roche-Jeanneret houses was directed by Christian Gimonet, first director of the Le Corbusier Foundation, in 1970. The goal was to restore<sup>3</sup> the La Roche house to open it to the public, and to refurbish the Jeanneret house, to host the offices and the archives of the Foundation. Many modifications done as part of this work are so well aged and camouflaged that they have caused misunderstandings, even for some experts. For example, a picture of the internal courtyard, published in some books, was sometimes indicated as an instance of the

influence of the *de stijl* movement on this building, because of its composition of orthogonal plans. In point of fact, this place was considerably modified by Gimonet in 1970, and that opened the passage between the courtyards of the two houses.<sup>4</sup> On that occasion he also added the canopy, that, indeed, is absent in the historical photos.<sup>5</sup>

A wide number of small modifications of differing importance were carried out at that time. Among them, one could remember the demolition of the toilets and some partition walls on the second floor of the Jeanneret house, in order to create the meeting room of the Foundation, enlarging one of Lotti Raaf's daughters' rooms.

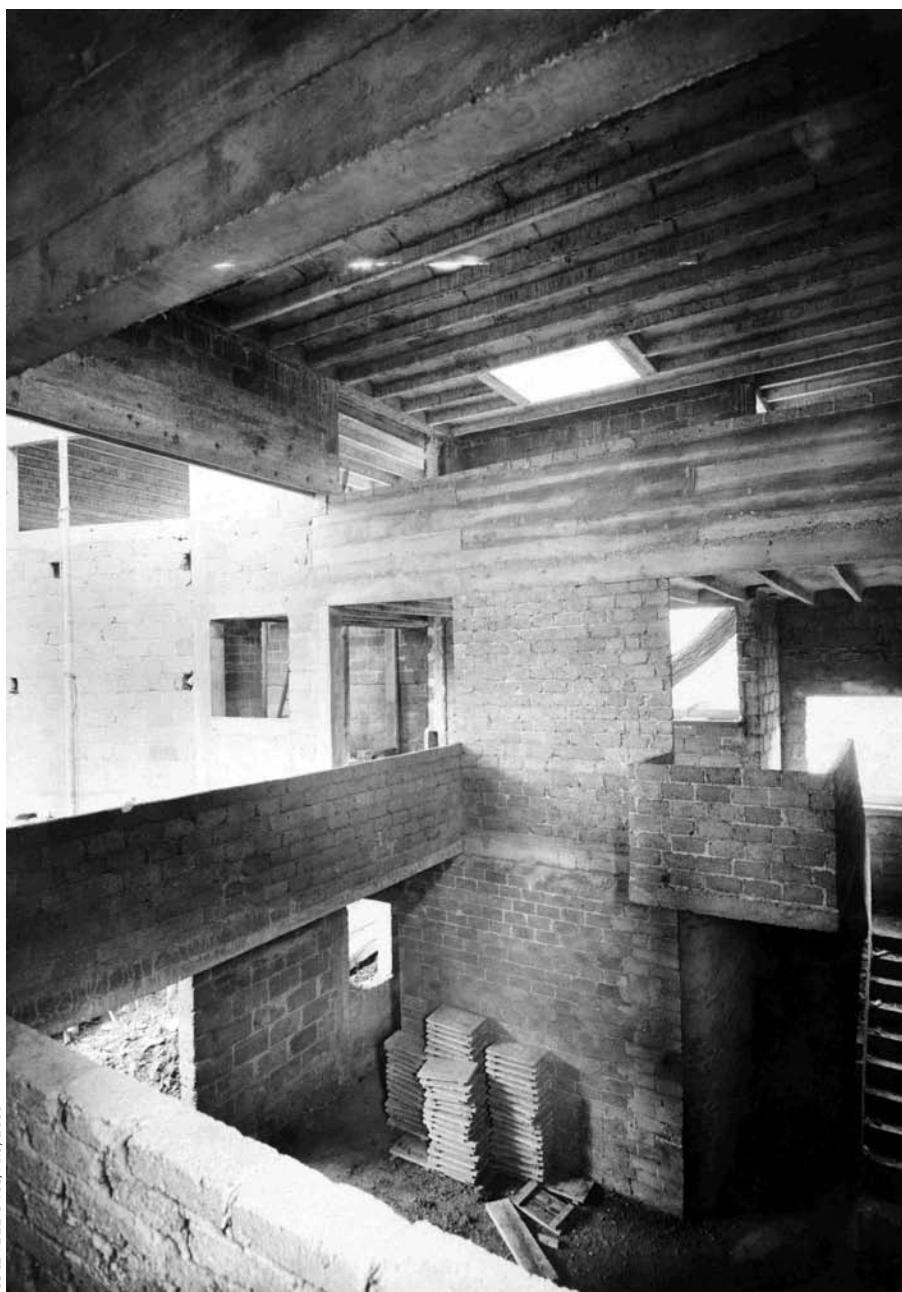
Further issues Gimonet had to confront in 1970 were the safety regulations. Indeed, according to the rules of the time, the height of the hall handrails was insufficient to open the La Roche house to the public. The matter was difficult, because any transformation could compromise the authenticity of Le Corbusier's architecture. Fortunately, on that occasion, the Foundation was able to obtain derogation from the relevant authority. This was not possible for the roof garden, because of the absence of handrails on a part of it. So, since that time, the roof is inaccessible to the public, and people who go up the staircase of the La Roche house to the last ramp are stopped behind a closed glazed door.

An important transformation took place in 1975, when the Foundation required some more space for the microfilm room. A door was opened in the partition wall between the Jeanneret living room (already used as library) and the La Roche bedroom, which was occupied by the Foundation.<sup>6</sup> This had a disrupting effect on the principle of the architectural promenade, applied by Le Corbusier in this project,<sup>7</sup> which was now broken in its continuity. Indeed, people who today follow

the 'promenade,' go along the narrow corridor at the third floor, forced between the wall and the very low balustrade, find a closed door, and are unable to enter. This minimalist space was important in the overall design concept because it represented the conclusion of the display path of the La Roche collection, completely dedicated only to the purist paintings of Le Corbusier and Ozenfant. Another problem related to the safety regulations occurred in 1984, when it was no longer possible to avoid the issues linked to the electric system. At that time, because of the tightening of safety

rules, it was necessary to completely remake the circuits. Therefore, it was decided to leave the original brass switches (considered as icons of a 'modern' aesthetics) in place, without electrical current, bypassing them with new wiring and switches. In 1986, it was necessary to replace the original linoleum flooring of the gallery.<sup>8</sup> Finding a material with the same characteristics was a very difficult task. After a long inquiry, a similar one was found, but with a slight difference in the color.<sup>9</sup> Unfortunately, the supplier was unable to produce a unique,

Fig. 2. **Le Corbusier**, the hall under construction, 1924, 1926



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monolithic, continuous surface like the original. Thus, the flooring was put in place in different pieces, attached with thin joints. A piece of the original flooring, conserved in the archives of the Foundation, is trustworthy evidence of the old color. Even the fitment under the ramp was restored in that period, under the supervision of its original designer Charlotte Perriand, who was, at that time, a member of the Le Corbusier Foundation. The evidence of the restoration work is on the fitment's top, covered with the same material used for the gallery floor.

Regarding the window frames, from the chronology of the works carried out in the "restoration dossier" we are able to discern which windows are still original and which ones were modified or replaced over time. An accurate survey of each type of window was accomplished, and the different kinds of restoration work carried out were identified.<sup>10</sup> One could assert that, for the La Roche-Jeanneret houses, there never was an overall restoration work on the totality of the frames, but just many single works for groups or types of windows. Generally, wooden parts were more frequently the object of restoration/replacement, because of their fragility. As an example, in the square windows on the second floor of the front façade, all the wooden parts were replaced by Jean-Louis Veret in 1981.<sup>11</sup> The steel parts of the frames were just restored, but not replaced. In that time, however, those soft steel frames, typical of the early modern architecture, were commonly in production in France. Consequently, if required, it was possible to replace some broken parts with new ones.<sup>12</sup> One of the original wooden parts of the frames was found in the cellar of the Foundation, conserved in the underground archives. The frame was too badly damaged to make a survey with common measurement instruments, therefore some clay moulds were used to obtain a profile that allowed redrawing it. The only completely original square window was found in a corner of



Fig. 3. **Le Corbusier**, *La Roche house*, the internal courtyard, 1926

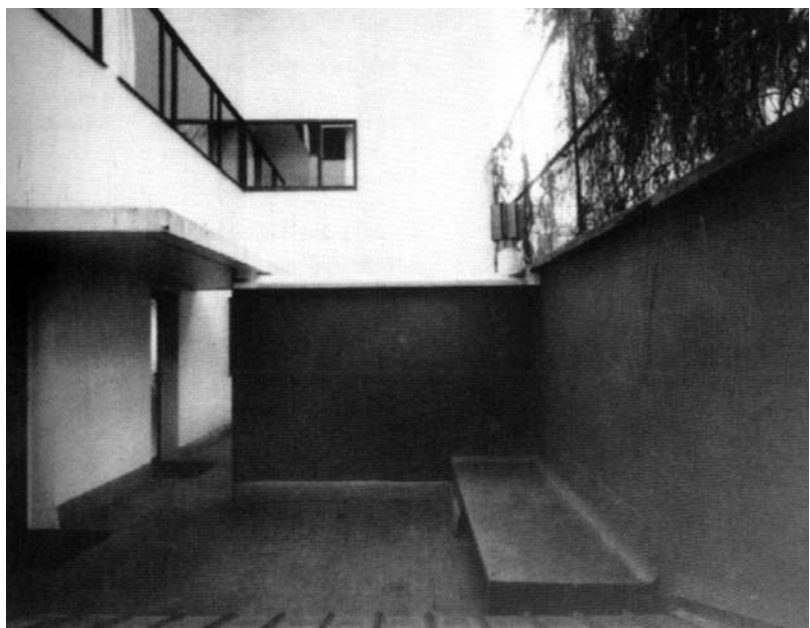


Fig. 4. **Le Corbusier**, the internal courtyard, current state

the building between the gallery wing and the entrance of La Roche house. Its position, protected from bad weather, helped to preserve it

and keep its originality. Among the restoration work carried out in the other types of windows, one can take as an example the ribbon

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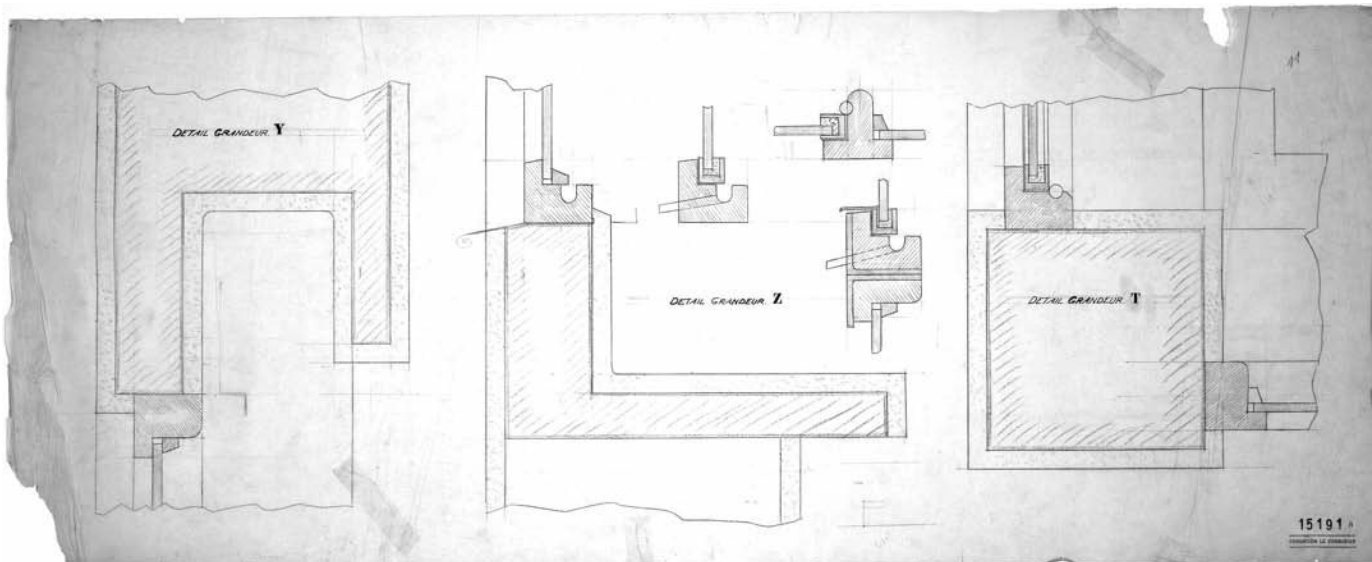


Fig. 5. **Le Corbusier**, details of window sills and frames

window of the La Roche dining room. In that frame, the wooden base was replaced, as well as the thin wooden frame used to block the glass to the main frame of the window. The other wooden and steel parts, according to the sources, should be original, except for the window locks that were replaced with replicas in 2000.<sup>13</sup>

**THE POLYCHROMIES**

Regarding the interior polychromy, very few works are actually documented. Even if many traces of repainting work were found in the archives, it is impossible to understand exactly on which surface the work have been done. In order to achieve more detailed information on the original state of the polychromy in 1925, taking into account even the first modifications carried out by Le Corbusier in the gallery in 1928 and 1936, it is necessary to examine the results of the stratigraphic assays. One should immediately specify, nevertheless, that these assays are currently in progress, and further investigations and laboratory verifications are necessary. The first series of assays, indeed, has given just a fragmentary and incomplete chart, therefore considered so far not fully reliable by the Le Corbusier Foundation. Before officially confirming the results, the Foundation is waiting for the

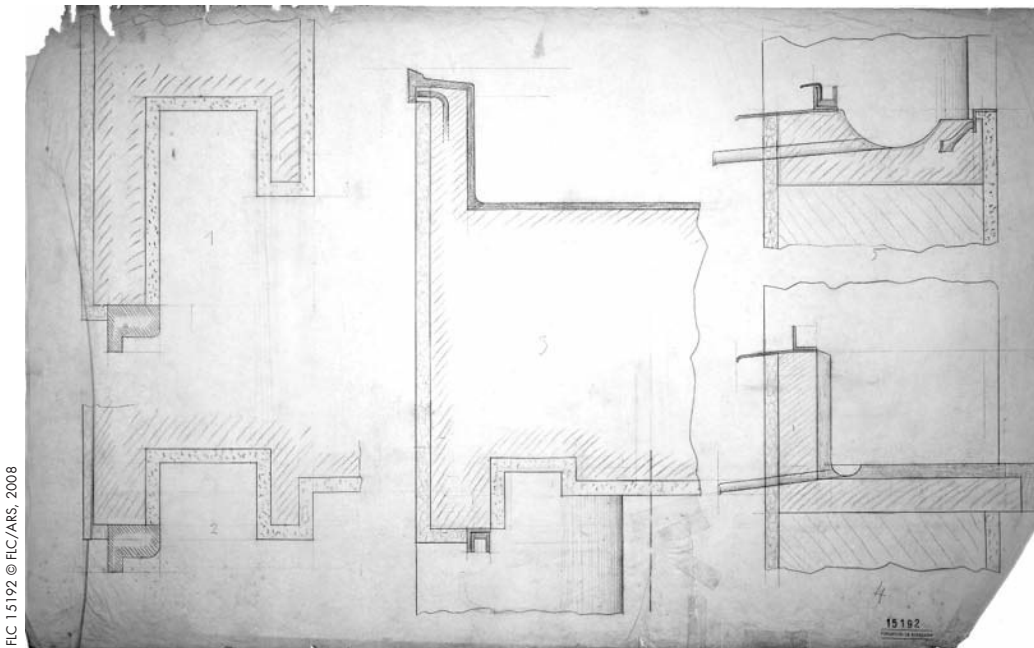
outcome of an additional series of assays to be implemented on the La Roche house.

**THE FAÇADES**

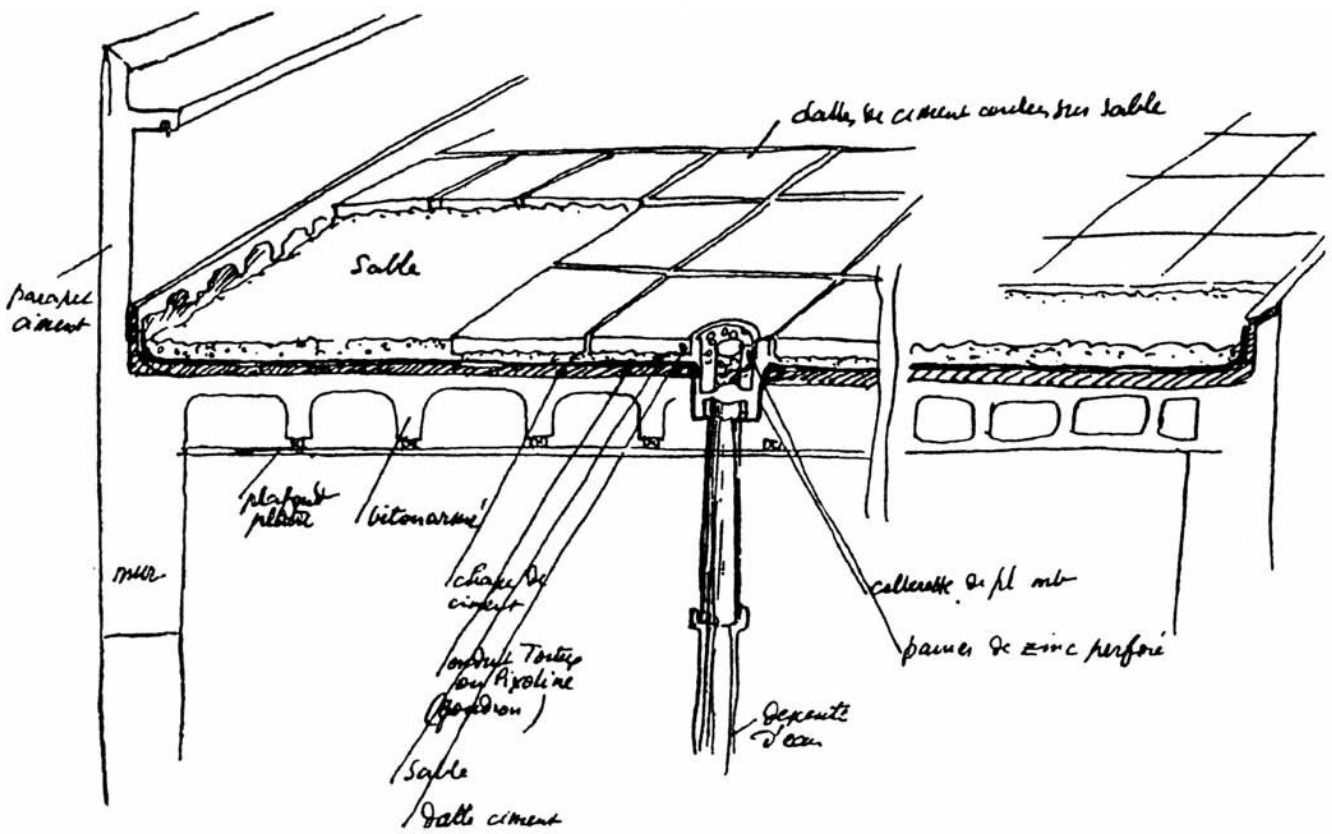
Regarding the façades, in 1970 Gimonet had to deal with the problem of choosing the right color tonality. In that time,<sup>14</sup> the façades were very dirty and ruined, so it was very difficult to understand which coat was the original color, as the exterior coat was not the original. The testimonies gave different versions. After a long inquiry, he decided to apply a coat of Polistrat, a synthetic paint made

like a thin film attached to the wall. The color of this coat was cold white, and its surface perfectly smooth, so, according to the common opinion, respectful of the aesthetics of purism. Unfortunately this Polistrat coat made the wall unable to transpire, and this caused serious and continuous damage to the interior polychromies, so that the Foundation was forced to repaint the interiors very often. This synthetic coat was completely removed only in 2001.<sup>15</sup> Lotti Raaf asserted, in a letter of 1970,<sup>16</sup> that the original mortar was mixed with stone powder, and

Fig. 6. **Le Corbusier**, *La Roche house*, details of window frames



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COUPE A TRAVERS UN TOIT-JARDIN EN BÉTON ARMÉ

Fig. 7. Alfred Roth, Weissenhoff houses, detail of the roof garden and balustrade, the same used for the La Roche-Jeanneret ones

from L'Architecture Vivante (Éditions Albert Morandé, Fall 1927) © FLC/ARS, 2008

it appeared as a raw coating, with a warm color, completely different from the cold and smooth white that exists today. This may be confirmed by the current stratigraphic assays,<sup>17</sup> that are attempting to discover, with many difficulties, some residual traces of the original mortar (removing the Polistrat layer had removed all the layers underneath).

**ISSUES OF RESTORATION**

A restoration project should confront several unsolved problems of the La Roche house's current state. First of all, it is indispensable to look at the principles that Le Corbusier put in his project. Today indeed, after many modifications have been carried out, some of these principles currently appear deprived of their original sense and forgotten. As Le Corbusier affirms in the *CŒuvre Complète*, the main principle applied in the design of the La Roche house was the architectural 'promenade,' mostly coincident with the display path of the art collection. The hanging of

art and the sculpture arrangement of 1926, indeed, were also prepared by Le Corbusier, following specific programmatic rules and taking care of a thoughtful balance between works of art and architectural spaces. Thus, a restoration project should take into consideration the reinstatement of the principle of the promenade, restoring its last episode, the La Roche's bedroom, in its original shape. An unsettled issue, unfortunately, will be the absence of the La Roche art collection (today owned by the Kunstsammlung of Basel), which significantly influenced the design of the architectural spaces. A further open problem is, in this context, the possible reinstatement of the original furniture. If some original pieces could be found in the antique trade market of the early twentieth century, a remake of some particular furniture custom-designed by Le Corbusier may be possible from the original detail drawings.

Another issue concerns the interior polychromies. For their restoration, one shouldn't simply restore just the oldest paint layer found in the assays, but also to implement a correct interpretation of the rules used by Le Corbusier in their

Fig. 8. Le Corbusier, La Roche house, brass switches



photo Jesus Villanueva © FLC/ARS, 2008



choice. Indeed, as Le Corbusier himself affirmed<sup>18</sup> regarding the La Roche house, at the beginning he often proceeded in many changes of the interior colors, testing empirically the color effect on the wall's surface. A further related problem to confront, today, is the choice of the right kind of paint. The original paint used in 1925 was a glue and oil paint that allowed a matte and warm color effect to be obtained, but was extremely fragile. Its use today is inappropriate; because of the intense flow of visitors of the La Roche house, it would lead to frequent repainting work. Therefore, it will be necessary to carefully define the choices, in a thorough decision-making process that will involve, besides the Le Corbusier Foundation, experts and officials of the French Ministry of Culture. A particularly difficult task is the negotiation with the relevant authorities that could allow, as in the past, the attainment of

a derogation from the regulation issues preventing the public to have access to the roof terrace. The balustrade height of the terrace, indeed, is not adequate according to the current French law. Moreover, a part of the terrace, over the hall and the gallery roof, is completely without handrails and definitely will never be open to the public. An appropriate solution should be agreed to by the architect, taking into consideration the different instances.

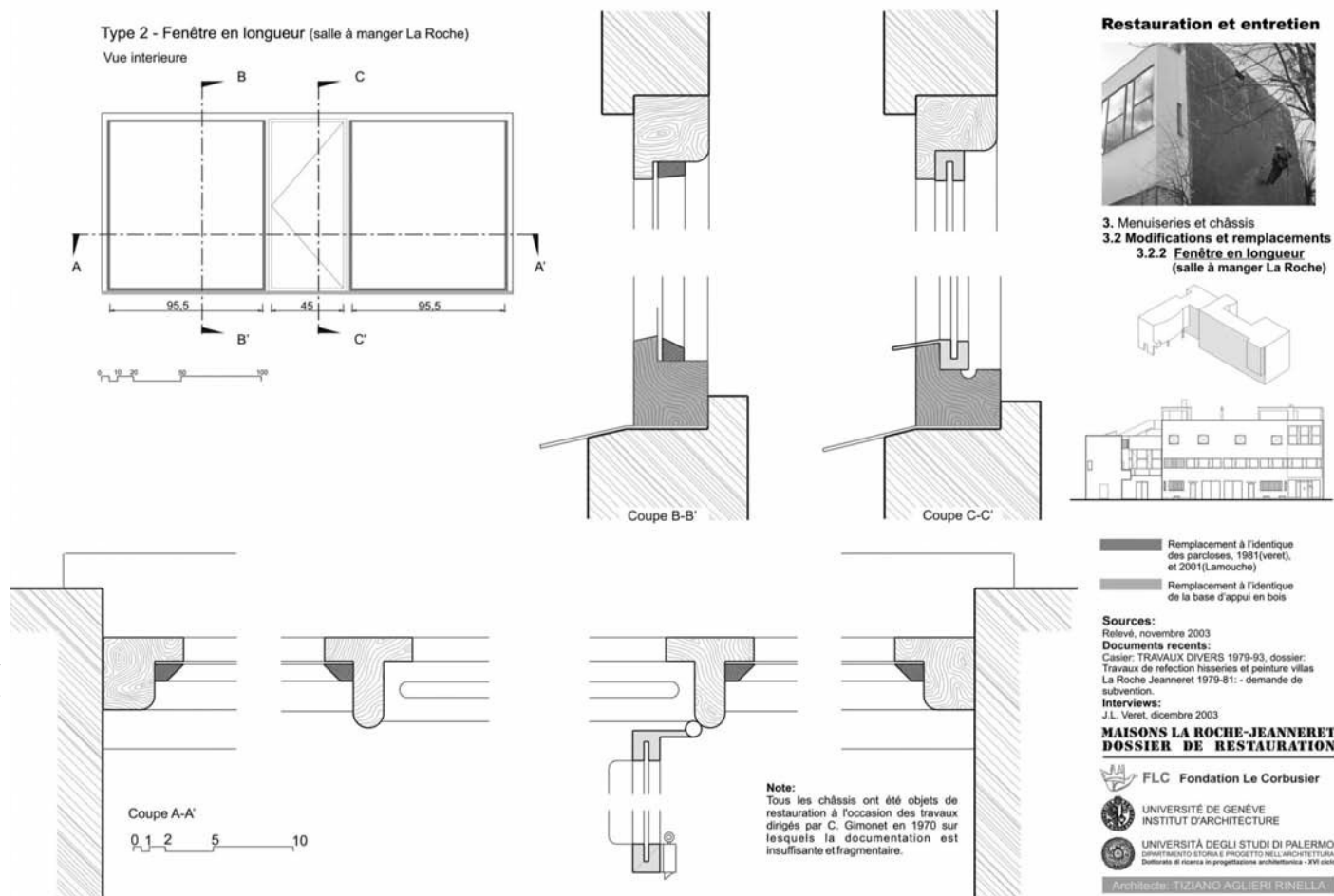
In conclusion, as seen, the range of matters to confront with the restoration project is quite wide. The status of institutional protection of the La Roche-Jeanneret house engages in its safeguard a large number of players that will control each stage of the restoration, sharing decisional responsibility. Thus, some good premises are arising to restore this early masterpiece of Le Corbusier to new life.

**TIZIANO AGLIERI RINELLA**, architect, has carried out a PhD thesis on "Restoration of Modern Architecture: La Roche-Jeanneret House, a Case Study of Le Corbusier." His work is currently under publication in Italy: *Le Case La Roche-Jeanneret di Le Corbusier – Riflessioni per un Progetto di Restauro* (Rome: Officina Edizioni, 2008). [tizianoar@alice.it](mailto:tizianoar@alice.it)

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Fig. 9. Tiziano Aglieri Rinella, window survey of the La Roche dining room



from the "Restoration Dossier" © FLC/ARS, 2008



from the "Restoration Dossier" © FLC/ANS, 2008

Fig. 10. **Le Corbusier**, *La Roche-Jeanneret houses*, front façade, Paris, built 1923–5

Mardaga, 1985.

RUEGG, ARTHUR. *Polychromie Architecturale*. Basel: Birkhäuser, 1998.

SBRIGLIO, JACQUES. *Le Corbusier. Les Villas La Roche-Jeanneret*. Basel, Boston, Berlin: FLC/Birkhäuser, 1997.

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#### NOTES

- 1** Annexes of Vincenzo Tiziano Aglieri Rinella, PhD thesis "Il Restauro del Moderno: la Villa La Roche-Jeanneret di Le Corbusier," tutors: Prof. Bruno Reichlin (IAUG, University of Geneva) and Prof. Pasquale Culotta; Dottorato in Progettazione Architettonica, Dipartimento di Storia e Progetto nell'Architettura dell'Università di Palermo, XVI ciclo, 2001–4.
- 2** The so-called "archives vivantes," of the FLC, not recorded yet. An index of these documents, implemented by the author, is included in the annexes his PhD tesi. Cf. Aglieri Rinella, *Il Restauro del Moderno*.
- 3** Christian Gimonet, "Restoration of Buildings of Le Corbusier," in *Docomomo Conference Proceedings* (1992): 276. See also FLC H 1-2-411.
- 4** FLC 15298; confirmed by the interview of Christian Gimonet, 22 May 2003.
- 5** Photo Boissonnas, 1926. Dossier La Roche, FLC.
- 6** In the Le Corbusier Foundation archives, no documents concerning this modification

have been found. By the interviews, one know that the wall had to be still intact on 1973 (interview of Christian Gimonet), and the door was probably open between 1975 and 1976, on the occasion of the inauguration of the microfilm room (interview of Evelyne Trehin, past director of the FLC).

**7** Le Corbusier, *Œuvre Complète 1910–29*, vol. 1 (Basel: Birkhäuser, 1929), 60.

**8** Cost estimate of SIS company, 5 December 1986, and related invoice of 30 March 1987, in current unrecorded archives of the FLC: file "Travaux Divers 1979–93," dossier: "Galerie La Roche: Revêtement du Sol 1986."

**9** Recently found by Gatier's staff.

**10** Aglieri Rinella, *Il Restauro del Moderno*, annexes.

**11** Current unrecorded archives of the FLC: file "Travaux Divers 1979–93," dossier "Travaux de Réfection Huisseries et Peinture Villas La Roche Jeanneret 1979–81:" cost estimate (approved by the FLC) of Guguin, Touzot & C, 8 December 1980, remplacement of frames "à l'identique des menuiseries existantes" (similar to the original ones); confirmed by the interview of Jean-Louis Veret (December 2003).

**12** Interview of Jean-Louis Veret (December 2003).

**13** In 2000 many of the window locks were broken, and it was impossible to find the same kind on the market, so an original

brass lock was taken to a workshop to make a mould so as to reproduce some new ones. Current unrecorded archives of the FLC: file "Ravalement Villas La Roche-Jeanneret," dossier "Entreprises 1999–2002," sub-dossier: "Serrurerie Ets Petit 2000."

**14** Gimonet, *Restoration of Buildings of Le Corbusier*.

**15** Current unrecorded archives of the FLC file "Ravalement Villas La Roche-Jeanneret."

**16** "Le Corbusier made a mortar of cement mixed with powder of stone, which made the surface slightly wrinkled and with a sand-yellowish color of a very beautiful effect, warmer than this cold and sterile white." Letter of Lotti Raaf to the Le Corbusier Foundation, 22 December 1970, FLC.

**17** Interview of Ariel Bertrand (July 2007).

**18** Arthur Ruegg, *Le Corbusier Polychromie Architecturale* (Basel: Birkhäuser, 1998).

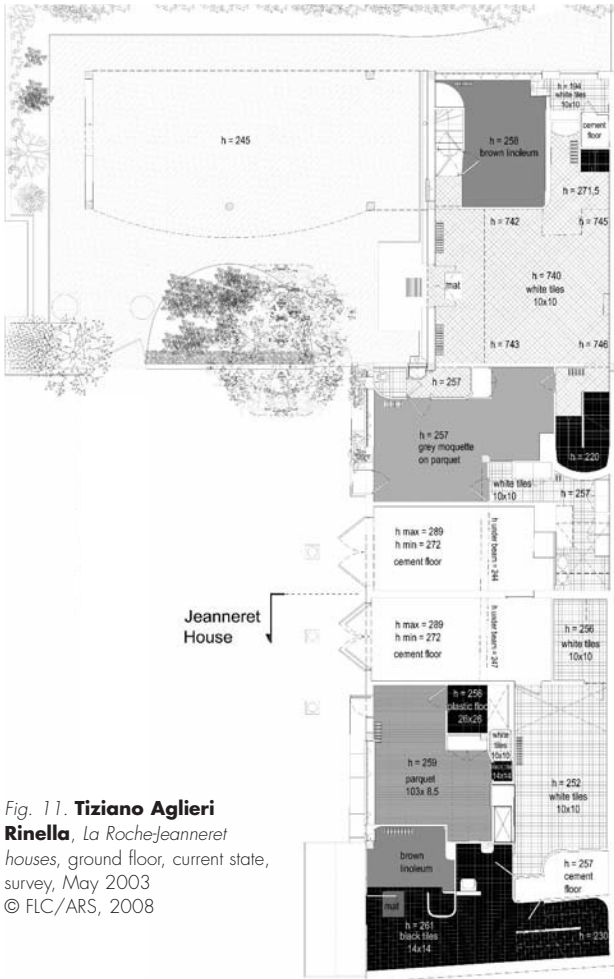


Fig. 11. Tiziano Aglieri  
Rinella, La Roche-Jeanneret  
houses, ground floor, current state,  
survey, May 2003  
© FLC/ARS, 2008



La Roche  
House

Fig. 12. Tiziano Aglieri  
Rinella, La Roche-Jeanneret  
houses, first floor, current state,  
survey, May 2003  
© FLC/ARS, 2008

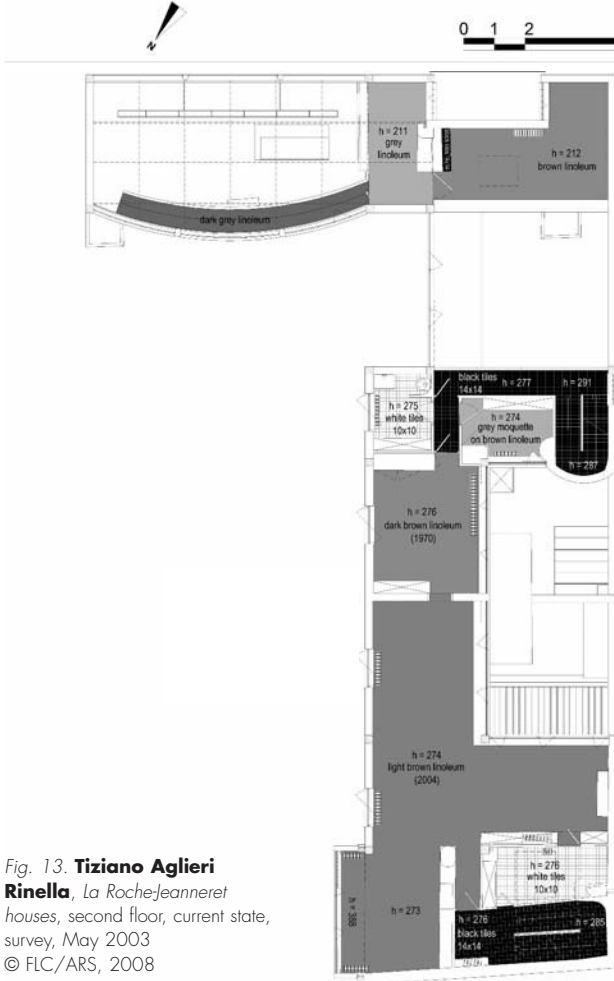


Fig. 13. Tiziano Aglieri  
Rinella, La Roche-Jeanneret  
houses, second floor, current state,  
survey, May 2003  
© FLC/ARS, 2008

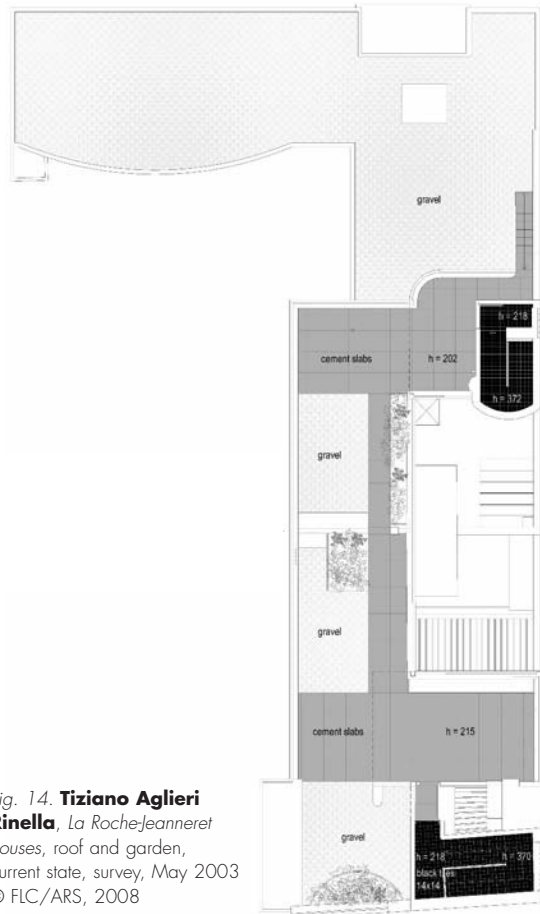


Fig. 14. Tiziano Aglieri  
Rinella, La Roche-Jeanneret  
houses, roof and garden,  
current state, survey, May 2003  
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at the end of each contribution.

Form:

- All texts must be in English; if translated, the text

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- Manuscripts should be written with double spacing

and liberal margins with all pages numbered in sequence.

- A short resume of the author(s), in connection to

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- Illustrations referred in the text should be mentioned

abbreviated as follows: (fig. 1).

- Articles must include a short bibliography of about

5 to 10 reference books or articles.

- Footnotes should be numbered and should follow the following style:

Books: Nikolaus Pevsner, *Pioneers of Modern Design:*

*From William Morris to Walter Gropius,*

Harmondsworth, Penguin, 1960.

Articles: Julius Posener, "Aspects of the Pre-History of

the Bauhaus", *From Schinkel to the Bauhaus*, London,

Architectural Association, 1972, 43-48.

3/ Illustrations

We accept 3 to 6 illustrations for short contributions (about

600 words) and up to 10 illustrations for full-length articles

(about 1500 words) It is essential that authors provide

good-quality black-and-white illustrations either printed on paper

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for a A5 format).

For figure captions, the order of information is: designer, name

of building or object, location, date, description, source.

If a building has been destroyed, include that information.

contribute to the next journal

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**Docomomo** International is a non-profit organization dedicated to the **documentation** and **conservation** of buildings, sites and neighborhoods of the **Modern Movement**.

It aims at:

- Bringing the significance of the architecture of the modern movement to the attention of the public, the public authorities, the professionals and the educational community.
- Identifying and promoting the surveying of the modern movement's works.
- Fostering and disseminating the development of appropriate techniques and methods of conservation.
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- Gathering funds for documentation and conservation.
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**Docomomo** International est une organisation non gouvernementale dont la mission est la **documentation** et la **conservation** de l'architecture, des sites et du patrimoine bâti du **Mouvement Moderne**.

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- Identifier et promouvoir l'ensemble des œuvres du mouvement moderne.
- Aider au développement et à la dissémination des techniques et des méthodes de conservation.
- S'opposer à la destruction et à la défiguration des œuvres architecturales importantes.
- Collecter des fonds pour la documentation et la conservation.
- Explorer et développer la connaissance du mouvement moderne.

*Docomomo International se propose également de développer ses activités vers de nouveaux territoires, d'établir de nouveaux partenariats avec des institutions, des organisations et des ONG actives dans le domaine de l'architecture moderne, de compléter et de publier l'inventaire international et d'élargir ses actions dans le cadre de la recherche, de la documentation et de l'éducation.*