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A HOUSE IN A CITY - PROPERTIES OF AN ARCHITECTURAL THING

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A HOUSE IN A CITY
PROPERTIES
OF AN ARCHITECTURAL THING
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Contents

Spis treści

TERESA BARDZINSKA-BONENBERG, AGATA BONENBERG <i>Eclecticism of 20th-Century Tenement House Façades as a Reiterating Occurrence</i> Eklektyzm fasad kamienic XX wieku jako powtarzające się zjawisko	7
CLAUDIA BATTAINO <i>The House as a Threshold. Lines, Borders and Boundaries</i> Dom jako próg. Linie, granice i krawędzie.....	19
ANDRZEJ BIALKIEWICZ <i>The Order's Houses – Functional Changes</i> Dom zakonny – zmiany funkcjonalne	27
WOJCIECH BONENBERG <i>Risk in Designing the Residential Environment</i> Ryzyko w projektowaniu środowiska mieszkaniowego	35
ARMANDO DAL FABBRO <i>The House Inside a Room</i> Dom wewnątrz pokoju	41
RAIMUND FEIN <i>A House Wants to Be a House</i> Dom chce być domem	47
BARBARA EWA GRONOSTAJSKA <i>Cohousing – Alternative Houses for Seniors</i> Cohousing – dom alternatywny dla seniorów.....	51
NINA JUZWA <i>“My” Houses in New York. Appearance, utility, originality</i> „Moje” domy w Nowym Jorku. Zewnętrzność, użyteczność, oryginalność	61
JUSTYNA KOBYLARCZYK <i>A House in the City</i> Dom w mieście	76
DARIUSZ KOZŁOWSKI <i>The House under the Stars in The Children's Village, or the Praise of Diversity</i> Dom Pod Gwiazdami w Wiosce Dziecięcej, albo pochwała różnorodności	83

ARMANDO DAL FABBRO*

THE HOUSE INSIDE A ROOM

DOM WEWNĄTRZ POKOJU

Abstract

I show only two relevant examples I hope will be meaningful, in which the theme of the residence was and is protagonist in the building of the twentieth century city. Le Corbusier's Petite Maison, the most modest of its houses, but I think the most loved and the most redesigned by the author, and Gardella's House in the Park, which has been and still for many of us is a valid reference in building urban architecture, are two examples I would say almost poor in their consistency, if compared to the plethora of aesthetic construction of these last few decades.

But it is the contemporary condition that should lead us to see, starting from works like these, the research opportunities for a different project and a different sensitivity approach, that can deal with the contemporary reality of the places.

Keywords: enclosure to border, live, the house inside the room, overview

Streszczenie

Wybrano dwa przykłady, które można uznać za znaczące, w których zagadnienie domu było i jest protagonistą w budowie XX-wiecznego miasta. Petite Maison Le Corbusiera, najskromniejszy z jego domów, lecz najbardziej podziwiany i najmocniej przez niego przeprojektowywany, oraz dom w parku Ignazio Gardelli, który był i nadal jest traktowany przez wielu twórców jako ważne odniesienie w kształtowaniu miejskiej architektury. Są to moim zdaniem przykłady ubogie w spójności, w porównaniu z mnogością estetyczną konstrukcji tych ostatnich kilku dekad.

Ale to właśnie współczesne warunki powinny nas doprowadzić do zobaczenia, począwszy od prac takich jak te, możliwości badawczych dla innego projektu i podejścia o innej wrażliwości, które mogą sprostać współczesnej rzeczywistości.

Słowa kluczowe: zamknięcie w granicach, dom wewnątrz pokoju

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The small house will be like an ancient temple
(Le Corbusier 1924)

No doubt about the value of the house, the man's house, the house for the man.

The house is the means for every human adventure, it is its reflection.

From the beginning the man has sought a shelter and a place to live and to progress socially, culturally and spiritually.

Having said this, it may seem trivial to continue to think of the house as a refuge, as an expression of identity that it is increasingly consolidated over time, and even today it is increasingly sought after.

The modern, modern culture in general, has certainly contributed to the construction of bourgeois thought of the house as a status symbol, as a condition of membership of a particular social or economic class. But the quest for modernity applied to the theme of the house, for some, has led, on the other hand, to a rethinking in terms of social role, civil expression and quality of space.

The masters of modern architecture have been attracted, seduced in some cases, by testing and experimenting with particular aspects of a different way of living and perceiving the domestic space of living.

But those who have reached, in my opinion, remarkable achievements have been especially those who have sought, through the cultured interpretation of the living functions, the minimum condition of the expression of living – with a minimum of gestures maximum results – and total rethinking of the architecture of the house in relation to the place in which it was to be built.

I do not have historical formation for pointing out particular developments of this way of thinking about the theme of the house. All I can do is re-propose, in brief, a few fragments of what was the reality of the modern tradition that has been able, with many examples, some of which are truly significant, to combine the reasons and ways of living.

As contrast, many, too many, are the discouraging results of the contemporary city that expresses and shows a lack of quality in housing's formal solutions and more often an ineptitude in the configuration of urban spaces that tend to be always the most messy and piled, the insignificant result of buildings without any urban value. The matter, in this case, is boundless.

I stick then, in order to better make some observations on this issue, to my specific and personal interests that have always accompanied me and that over time have become beliefs that today may have special meanings and positive applications in many contemporary realities.

1. AN ENCLOSURE TO BORDER, A LAWN ON THE ROOF, A ROOM TO LIVE IN

On the occasion of the International Seminar of Krakow architecture, I have already brought, in support of my reflections on the theme of elementary architecture, the example of Le Corbusier's *Petite Maison*: the small house built for his mother on Lake Léman in Geneva between 1923 and 1924.

On that occasion, I wrote: "Le Corbusier's *Petite Maison* is an architectonic axiom. The small house was built for the architect's mother on the edge of Lake Geneva between 1923 and 1924. It resumes in its simplicity the principles of Le Corbusier's poetics. It represents architecture's *raison d'être* through few, minimal signs. A primitive beauty that is created with architectonic archetypes: a wall-enclosure, a window that frames in the wall a view on the nature outdoors, a volume delicately based on the ground and crossed by a long horizontal cut, two thin steel pillars supporting a roof, a pervading landscape. Here is *un objet à réaction poétique*: a house, an architecture, a symphony of sounds, colours, forms, and space". (A. Dal Fabbro, 2004)

Le Corbusier speaks of this house as an ancient temple located on the water's edge, and just like an ancient temple it presents distinct elements that mark a multiscale process. The project has three intervention scales corresponding to as many architectural themes.

The scale of the landscape is a counterpoint to the external enclosure consisting of a wall at different heights; an open window in the enclosure's wall frames the lake and is the link between the inside and the outside of the garden landscape.

The enclosure, so configured, takes the shape of a large room in the open. To overcome the small size of the garden, which runs along the very narrow lot lying between the road and the lake, Le Corbusier proposes a lawn on the roof of the house, as a sort of addition to – and in continuity with – the garden on the ground. The roof garden is connected to the ground via a ladder placed outside the house.

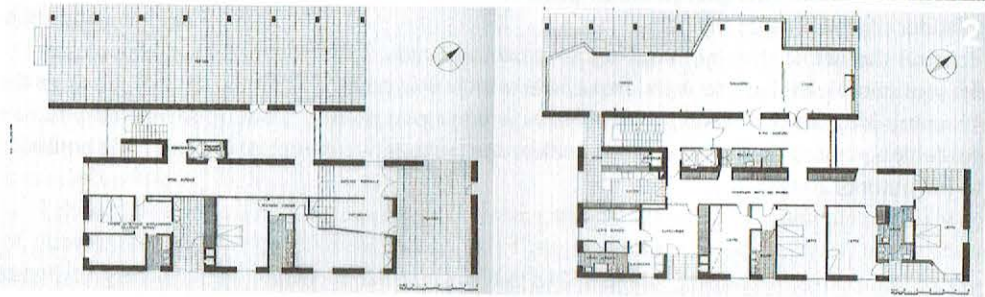
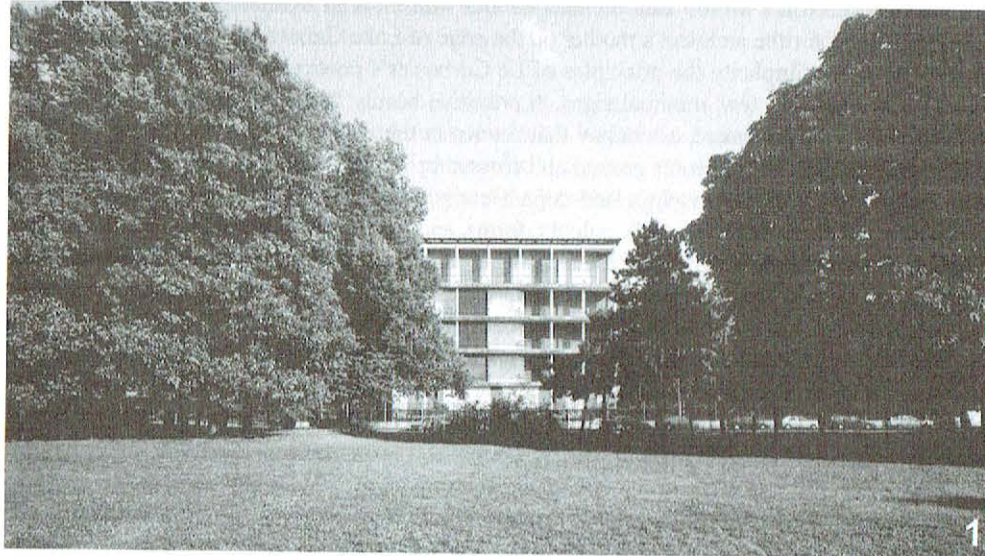
And the house, finally, is set up as a one and only large room. A tiny house actually, 56 sqm completely usable interior surface, which you can see from the outside through the 11-metre-long strip window, which offers a large perspective view. From inside you can perceive the more than 14-metre-long telescope perspective that crosses the whole house up to the outdoor loggia.

2. THE NEW HOUSE

In January 1946 at the end of Second World War E. N. Rogers on the pages of the born anew *Domus* hoped for a new idea of home. "I want a house that looks like me (but more beautiful)," wrote Rogers, "a house that resembles my humanity." With this opening article, he laid the foundations for a new era of post-war construction. (E. N. Rogers 1946).

In that year, Ignazio Gardella, the great Milanese architect, one of the most representative protagonists of Italian Rationalism, started designing Casa Tognella, more commonly known as the Park House (Casa al Parco). In the wake of the post-war reconstruction, the new climate, and the new social and political perception that was taking shape in those years, it was a profound reflection on the character of the bourgeois home.

Beyond the vicissitudes related to delays in construction of the building (the executive project began in 1947 and the building was completed in 1954) and the contrasting relationship with the client etc., what I am interested in is emphasizing the character of the house set on a strong figurative simplification both in plan and facade. From the interior distribution choices, to the relationship with the place, in this case with the Sempione Park, to the theme of the house view from inside, Gardella thinks back to the ancient nature of things and the modern taste for living in a new perspective of the urban landscape. (A. Monestiroli 2009)



- III. 1. Ignazio Gardella, The house in the park 1947–1954. View from Parco Sempione, Milano
- III. 2. Ignazio Gardella, The house in the park 1947–1954. Ground floor plan and Type floor plan
- III. 3. Le Corbusier, Petite Maison 1923, Lake Lemán (Ginevra)

This experience will gain the value of an *exemplum*, in relation to the role of residential architecture in the reconstruction of the city after the experiences of Milano Verde (Green Milan) and the A.R. Plan (S. Guidarini 2002).

In the ideal project solution, widespread and widely published in the 1950s, the plan of the building is tripartite in parallel bodies in the longitudinal direction according to a highly recognizable functional articulation: the living area; stairs, elevators and hallways; sleeping rooms.

The rich articulation of the sleeping area is a counterpoint to the big room of the living area designed as a single compartment that runs through the entire building, from side to side.

Again the theme addressed by Gardella – that he will resume with various formal solutions in the design of the house in Alexandria for Borsalino employees before and, later, in a more elegant way, in the house in Via Marchiondi in Milan – is the search for an undivided space which is completely free in its interior, articulated on the façade with simple glass bulges outwards.

As bow windows, encapsulated in the structural frame of the facade, these spacious, wraparound glass panels punctuate the space between the dining area, living room and study; only the latter, in the published version, is separated from the living area by a simple wall diaphragm.

In the methodological rigor of the plan's design – and in the framed façade's articulation – echo the rationalist themes of the frame's use denounced in the façade as a compositional style detail, but, more likely, even if indirectly, almost *ante litteram*, we can find the harbingers of an idea of inhabited broad and deep façade as unique architecture: the best example of all is the House Curutchet in La Plata in Argentina, designed and built in the same years by Le Corbusier. What unites and distinguishes the two is precisely the relationship that both will establish with the park. For Gardella the view on Sempione Park will impose the choice of the house's tripartition, while Le Corbusier's House Curutchet's urban stage mediates the relationship with the Rivadavia Park.

3. THE HOUSE IN THE FORM OF CITY

What emerges from these examples, these design choices, which will become harbinger of a way of thinking, full of formal solutions and valid theoretical research in the field of the residence, to which we must now return, is first of all the spatial value that is attributed to the house as a place.

A value, which expresses itself, as far as I can see, not only in the shaping of the façade, in the richness of the interiors layout or in the technological choices, but in the capability to interpret the sense of dwelling and living the quality of space, the space of the house, the space of the city.

In this regard, in Book I, Chapter IX of *De Re Aedificatoria*, Alberti addresses the issue of splitting the entire building into its components: “And if it is true the saying of the philosophers, that the city is like a big house, and the house itself is a small town, you will not be wrong saying that the parts of a house are themselves small houses”.

This philosophical Alberti's idea of the city in the form of the building leads us to understand, if still not clear, the role that architecture has in the construction of the city: the architecture builds the city in detail.

The forms and reasons of living can find their meaning in continuously performing that "Charon's movement" to come and go through the ancient and modern worlds and ways of living, investigating the constitutive principles which determined the architectural idea and the reasons needed for its definition, making also a critical reflection on the actual sense of building for living in the present tense.

And in the relationship between old and new we should approach the theme of the house. Its new foundation. Investigated, studied as home-place, real and ideal at the same time, it suggests a limit condition of architectural design in relation to the traditions and building customs (distributive and spatial) rooted to the places and to their urban and civil history.

"Preserving and building are moments of the same act of consciousness," writes E.N. Rogers in *Esperienza dell'architettura* in 1958, "because the one and the other are subjected to the same method: Preserving makes no sense if it is not understood in its meaning of discounting of the past, while building makes no sense if it is not intended as a continuation of the historical process: it is to clarify in ourselves the sense of history."

I wanted to quote, in terms even provocative, just two examples of a long lasting story, still progressing, in which the theme of the residence was and is protagonist in the building of the twentieth-century city.

Le Corbusier's *Petite Maison*, the most modest of his houses, but I think the most loved and the most redesigned by the author, and Gardella's *House in the Park*, which has been and still is for many of us a valid reference in building urban architecture, are two examples I would say almost poor in their consistency, if compared to the plethora of aesthetic construction of these last few decades.

But it is the contemporary condition that should lead us to see, starting from works like these, the research opportunities for a different project and a different sensitivity of approach that can deal with the contemporary reality of the places. Attributing value to the topic of residential architecture, the idea of home – the house man – means appreciating, in addition, its role in the construction and transformation of the contemporary city, a meaning that has cultural and civil claims.