Le Corbusier: From the primitive hut to the cabanon

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In the summer of 1912 he rented the upper floor of another farm house, known as La Cou- vent, just outside La Chaux-de-Fonds, which he shared with two of his friends Octave Mathey and Éric de Coulon, staying in the house through the winter, when his friends abandoned him, complaining of the cold. Here he worked intensely on the plans for his parents’ house and the design of a house for the industrialist Georges Favre-Jacot, as well as several articles and a book about German design. He had been used to working on texts and architectural plans in the lodging houses he had occupied during his travels in Germany and Austria, between 1908 and 1912, but this need for isolation, preferably surrounded by nature and in a vernacular setting, remained important to him all his life.

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The Toulous farms are composed of standard elements organised around local conditions. They are strictly functional. Everything is rigorous and pure. They are true. A prodigious architectural emergence from them (Le Corbusier, 1935: 322).

In the summer of 1926, at the height of the period of his París visits, Le Corbusier began what became a ritual of annual vacations with his partner Yvonne Gallis in the small fishing hamlet on the isthmus separating the Bassin d’Arcachon from the Atlantic (Benton and Hu- bert, 2013; Benton, 2013: 34-5). While Arcachon had become a favourite tourist site from the end of the nineteenth century, the Arcachon had become a favourite tourist site (Benton, 2015; Benton, 2013; Maak, 2011). While the Arcachon and Yvonne stayed in the simple wooden hou-
ses that offered demi pension facilities. They are in the typical condition of the villeda family who owned one of these establishments, and he and Yvonne sketched and worked on the daily routines of the group. Many of his paint-
ings reflect the courtyard of the Établissement Vidal, with its fig trees, its metal tables and open door. He spent his days sketching the fishermen and oyster women, the boats and coils of rope along the dunes were host to an itinerant group of loggers and carpenters and the lagoon was well known for its oysters and mussels. Le Corbusier and Yvonne stayed in the simple wooden hous-
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tended Vidal family who owned one of these establishments, and he and Yvonne sketched into the daily routine and group. Many of his paint-
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fant from 1918 to 1925, to a more richly co-
oured, sensual and expressive style of painting. Sketches he made at Le Piquey were worked up into paintings in Paris, in the winter months. By 1929, Le Corbusier’s love-affair with reinforced concrete had begun to wane, and he began to use natural materials expressively in his proj-
ections (Villa de Mandrot, 1929-31 and project for Villa Errazuriz, 1930) (Benton, 2011: 92-105). One of these paintings, La main et le silex, 1935 (Le Corbusier, 1935). The painting symbolises the workings of the imagination and creation. The flintstone has itself a biomorphic form. The insertion of the hand into a flintstone represents what Le Corbusier would later call the archetypal position of the house builder: they make a cottage, a shelter, nothing more, quite simply and honestly. They execute a pure programme unencum-
bered by pretensions to history, to cul-
ture to the fashions of the day […] Truly they are in the typical condition of the man of anywhere and anytime, thinking about what they have to do, carrying it out and reflecting on it (Le Corbusier, 1928: 48).

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Le Corbusier even published a sketch by Amédée Ozenfant of one of these shacks on the cover of the book, above his unsuccessful project for the League of Nations (1927). This long-pa-

It is important to reflect on the nature of Le Corbusier’s thinking and eventually led him to abandon the attempt to create high architecture in domestic form. For example, the twin houses he designed for his friend André Jaoul and his son Michel in 1951 explicitly adopted a ‘primitivist’ aspect, using rough brick and concrete textures (Maniaque, 1988 and 2005). It is important to reflect on the nature of Le Corbusier’s primitivism and its relation to his modernism. The task for the architect and urbanist, as he saw it, was to use modern means to resolve the crisis produced by modernity. There was no longer an attempt to create the ultimate temple, as Vitruvius had demonstrated in almost all his later lectures. For example, the twin houses he designed for his friend André Jaoul and his son Michel in 1951 explicitly adopted a ‘primitivist’ aspect, using rough brick and concrete textures (Maniaque, 1988 and 2005).


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It’s a wooden shack 2 metres by 6, raised on pilotis. You can spend the summer here. Modest and eloquent example of the minimum dwelling. [...] The lesson is the expression of the fundamental elements: sun, sky and greenery (Le Corbusier, 1936).

On 18 August 1927 Le Corbusier wrote to his mother inviting her to visit Le Piquey, with the words: “J’aurais voulu pouvoir acheter ici 3 pins et 4 m2 de sable et y planter une hutte et que tu puisses venir un jour. This dream of a little wooden hut was part of his rejection of what he considered a ruination of the surroundings. It’s the participation of the fundamental elements sun, sky and greenery that Badovici, Le Corbusier and even Eileen Gray referred to in this sophisticated work of modern architecture as a banque. The positive association of informal simplicity facing the sea clearly outweighed any possible criticism of the architecture.

In 1949 Le Corbusier borrowed the villa in order to spend ten working days with José Luis Sert and Paul Lester Wiener working on the pan for Bogota. It was on this occasion that Le Corbusier met Thomas Reutowski, who had just opened up a modest restaurant in the adjoining site. Le Corbusier stayed on for a few days after his friends had left and decided that this was to be his new place for vacations by the sea. He returned in 1950 and, supposedly on a café table, sketched out his plan for the Cabanon.
It was to be attached to the side of the Étale de mer restaurant; Le Corbusier cut a door from the interior into the bedroom of the Reboutaco family to allow him to pass through in inclement weather. The structure was prefabricated by Le Corbusier in his workshop in Corsica and the panels were fabricated steel parasol roof, also fits into Le Corbusier’s idea for a house-pavilion for his friend Heidi Weber in Zurich. The sketches were made in the summer of 1960 but the building was still in the design process in August 1965, when Le Corbusier suffered his heart attack while swimming at Roquebrune. It was Robert Rebutato, twelve years old when he first met Le Corbusier, who was Le Corbusier’s idea for a house-pavilion for his friend Heidi Weber in Zurich. The sketches were made in the summer of 1960 but the building was still in the design process in August 1965, when Le Corbusier suffered his heart attack while swimming at Roquebrune. It was Robert Rebutato, twelve years old when he first met Le Corbusier, who was Le Corbusier’s idea for a house-pavilion for his friend Heidi Weber in Zurich. The sketches were made in the summer of 1960 but the building was still in the design process in August 1965, when Le Corbusier suffered his heart attack while swimming at Roquebrune. It was Robert Rebutato, twelve years old when he first met Le Corbusier, who was Le Corbusier’s idea for a house-pavilion for his friend Heidi Weber in Zurich. The sketches were made in the summer of 1960 but the building was still in the design process in August 1965, when Le Corbusier suffered his heart attack while swimming at Roquebrune. It was Robert Rebutato, twelve years old when he first met Le Corbusier, who was Le Corbusier’s idea for a house-pavilion for his friend Heidi Weber in Zurich. The sketches were made in the summer of 1960 but the building was still in the design process in August 1965, when Le Corbusier suffered his heart attack while swimming at Roquebrune. It was Robert Rebutato, twelve years old when he first met Le Corbusier, who was Le Corbusier’s idea for a house-pavilion for his friend Heidi Weber in Zurich. The sketches were made in the summer of 1960 but the building was still in the design process in August 1965, when Le Corbusier suffered his heart attack while swimming at Roquebrune. It was Robert Rebutato, twelve years old when he first met Le Corbusier, who was...