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Le Corbusier: From the primitive hut to the cabanon

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English

Insufficient attention has been paid to Le Corbusier’s search for origins in the vernacular dwellings he observed, drew and inhabited. In parallel with his development of a machine-age architecture dominated by geometry and reason he explored the basis of contentment in the simple life of peasants and fishermen, and the rough shacks they built with their own hands. The ten years during which he spent his vacations in the little village of Le Petit Piquey on the Bassin d’Arcachon were fundamental for stimulating a revolution in his painting and, eventually, his architecture. This article explores the various ramifications of Le Corbusier’s search for a closer connection with nature and with a more primitive existence protected from ‘civilisation’. His book *La Ville Radieuse* is a witness to this patient research, as well as houses such as *Le Sextant* aux Mathes and the *petite maison de weekend*, La Celle Saint Cloud.

Key words: Le Corbusier, Adolf Loos, Bassin d’Arcachon, vernacular, nature

Español

La búsqueda que hace Le Corbusier de los orígenes en las viviendas vernáculas que observaba, bosquejaba y habitaba no ha recibido la debida atención. En forma paralela al desarrollo de la arquitectura de la era de la máquina, dominada por la geometría y la razón, exploró la satisfacción que sienten campesinos y pescadores en el marco de una vida simple desarrollada en viviendas rudimentarias construidas con sus propias manos. Los diez años durante los cuales pasó sus vacaciones en Le Petit Piquey -una pequeña población sobre la Bahía de Arcachon- fueron esenciales en la motivación de una revolución de su pintura, y finalmente, de su arquitectura. Este artículo analiza las diversas ramificaciones de la búsqueda, que hace Le Corbusier, en torno a un vínculo más estrecho con la naturaleza y con una existencia más primitiva que se protege de la *civilización*. Su libro *La Ville Radieuse* da testimonio no solamente de esta búsqueda paciente sino también de viviendas tales como *Le Sextant* en Mathes y *petite maison de weekend* en La Celle Saint Cloud.

Palabras clave: Le Corbusier, Adolf Loos, Bahía de Arcachon, vernáculo, naturaleza

Le Corbusier associated the simple hut with creativity and intimacy. Whenever possible he escaped from the city to an existence cut off from stress and turbulence, close to nature and ‘honest’ men and women. But he also looked to simple dwellings as a source of architectural inspiration and as a means to define architectural value.¹ In the grand tradition of the search for origins, Le Corbusier tried to find in vernacular structures the human values uncontaminated by industrialized society. As he said in *La Ville Radieuse*:

I look out the savages, in the Americas or in Europe, peasants or fishermen, not to discover their barbarity but to judge their wisdom. I understand: I go where men labour to feed themselves and invent in order to ease their sufferings. [...] I come to *man*, or rather *men*, in order to learn my trade. The city? But it's already

wasted. [...] What nuisance, what unhappyness, stupidities ; how many perverse, negative and destructive gestures, some of them even unintentional! (Le Corbusier, 1935: 6)

Brought up in a high valley of the Swiss Jura, Charles Édouard Jeanneret² associated creativity with leaving the city and taking long walks in the hills. In January 1910 he escaped from La Chaux-de-Fonds to spend three months snowed into a simple farmhouse on Mont Cornu, all alone with his thoughts. He spent long evenings in the windowless fireplace-room in the centre of the house, known as the *chambre du tué*³. In the summer of 1912 he rented the upper floor of another farmhouse, known as *Le Couvent*, just outside La Chaux-de-Fonds, which he shared with two of his friends Octave Mathey and Eric 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 with him all his life. Jeanneret was convinced that these large, low farmhouses derived from similar buildings in Languedoc, from whence he believed his ancestors had fled religious persecution. At some point in the 1920s, Le Corbusier or Pierre Jeanneret photographed one of these farmhouses. In *La Ville Radieuse*, Le Corbusier described these farmhouses in glowing terms:



Le Corbusier or Pierre Jeanneret, photograph of a farmhouse in Languedoc, France, 1920s (FLC L4-20-25-001) ©FLC/ADAGP, 2018.

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 architecture emerges from them (Le Corbusier, 1935: 322).

In the summer of 1926, at the height of the period of his *Purist villas*, 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 Hubert, 2015; Benton, 2013; Maak, 2011). While Arcachon had become a favourite tourist site from the end of the nineteenth century, the fishing villages on the North side of the Arcachon lagoon, over an hour away by car along

an unmade road, were relatively unspoiled. The pine forests that had been planted to stabilize 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 houses that offered demi pension facilities. He became particularly friendly with the extended Vidal family who owned one of these establishments, and he and Yvonne slotted into the daily routines of the group. Many of his paintings 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 as well as collecting flotsam and jetsam on the beach. This intense annual exposure to natural forms progressively changed his painting style from the highly ordered and geometric Purism

that he practiced alongside Amédée Ozenfant from 1918 to 1925, to a more richly coloured, 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 projects (Villa de Mandrot, 1929-31 and project for Villa Errazuriz, 1930) (Benton, 2011: 92-105). One of these paintings, *La main et le silex*, became the frontispiece to his book *La ville Radieuse*, 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 *contract with nature* (Le Corbusier, 1955). The flint metamorphoses into a kind of paper,

alongside which we find the pen of the author. At the base of the composition is the box of matches which, with the association of smoking, always symbolized the work of creation for Le Corbusier.

In this romantic search for origins, for the simplicity of working people not yet contaminated by urban civilisation and for the directness of expression of their buildings, Le Corbusier was struggling to find an antidote to the radical modernism of the architecture and urbanism with which he was making his reputation in Paris. On closer inspection. The vernacular was not at all a contradiction of machinist modernism. Rather, it was another way of searching for the same thing: a human measure uncontaminated by the teachings of the academy and the pernicious effects of industrialised capitalism.

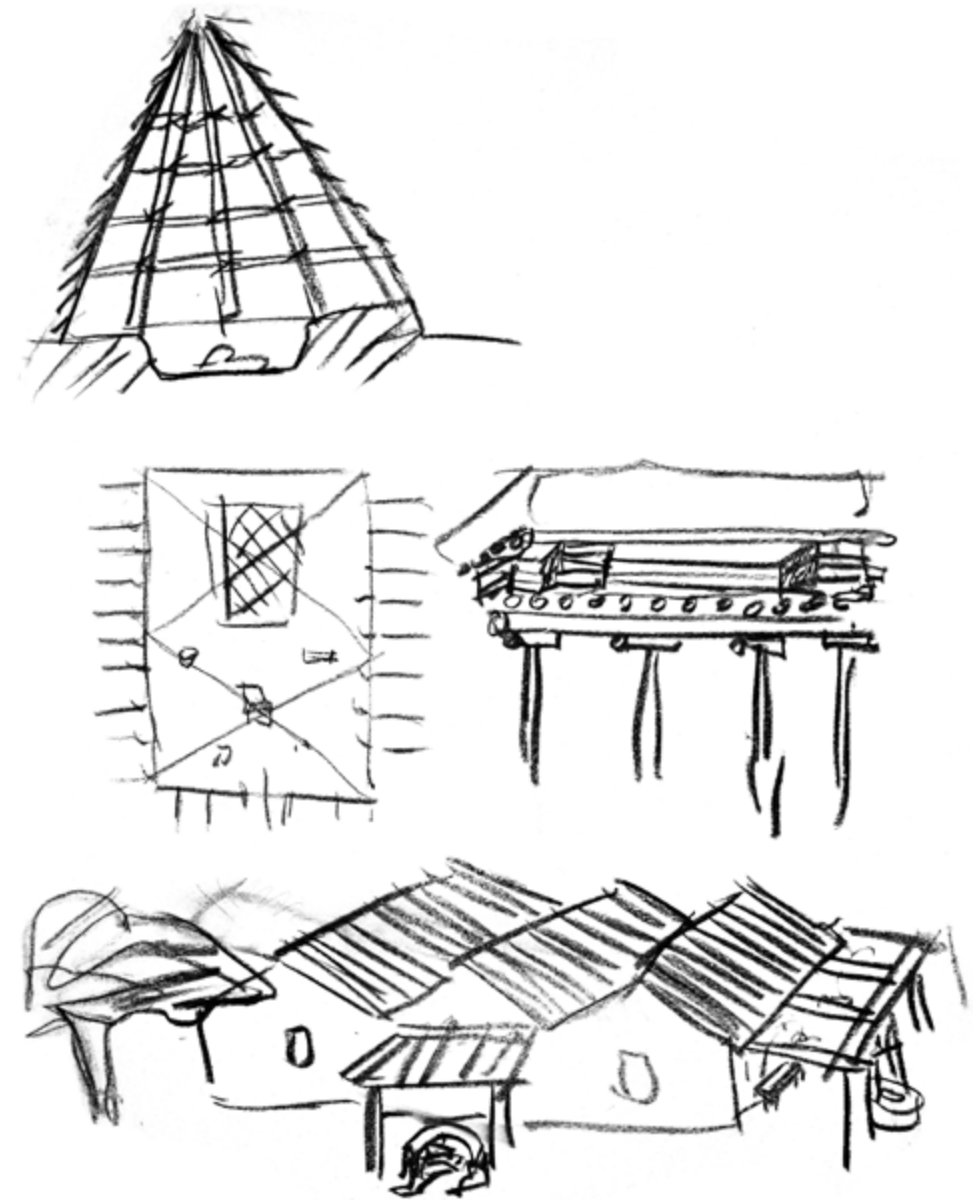
In 1928 Le Corbusier gave a lecture, later published as the first part of his book *Une maison un palais* in which he gave a long description of a fisherman's hut in the pineforests of the Bassin d'Arcachon. These shacks, made with the materials to hand, by seasonal fishermen who had no right to the land, were, he concluded *palaces*.

This precariousness places them in the archetypal position of the house builder: they make a cottage, a shelter, nothing more, quite simply and honestly. They execute a pure programme unencumbered by pretensions to history, to culture 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).

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 pas-



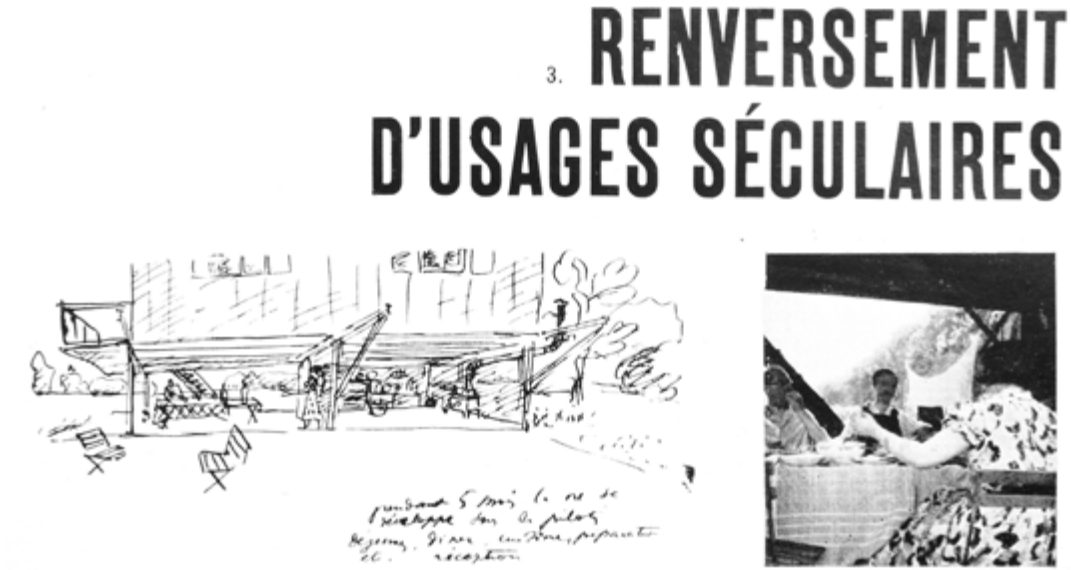
Le Corbusier (left) and Yvonne (right) at the first of the houses they stayed in at Le Piquey, 1926 or 1927 (FLC L4(16)21) ©FLC/ADAGP, 2018. | Le Corbusier, *La main et le silex*, 0000 (FLC 345) ©FLC/ADAGP, 2018.



Le Corbusier, drawing for his seventh lecture, Buenos Aires, 15 October 1929 *Une maison, un palais*, published in *Précisions* p. 160) (FLC 335254) ©FLC/ADAGP, 2018.

sage reflects the text by Adolf Loos, entitled ‘Architecture’, published in excerpt in *Der Sturm* in 1910 and in the first edition of Jean Badovici’s *Architecture Vivante* (autumn-winter 1923) (Loos, 1923: 26-34). For Loos, architects have no culture, that is to say, they are unable to design houses that meet human needs and sit easily in the countryside. Only peasants can do this, working with their own hands and with the help of a few friends. According to Loos, this had not always been the case, but the nineteenth century had destroyed the ability of architects to fit into their culture. The culprit was the separation of the architect from building practice; designing on sheets of paper with a pencil created artificial monsters. For Loos, only monuments and tombs could claim the status of art; the rest was building. For practicing domestic architects such as Loos or Le Corbusier, these arguments are clearly problematic and apparently contradictory, but they represent an important under-current in 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 ‘primitive’ 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 alternative but to use the new materials and methods to create grand schemes which would introduce order, open spaces and greenery into the tangle of the modern city. It was also part of what was in effect a military-style campaign to radically change the practice of architecture and urbanism and destroy the authority of ‘the styles’ and the academies which taught them. Only after the war was he able to partially bring together the contradictory love of the simple



Le Corbusier, *La Ville Radieuse*, 1935, p. 29 ©FLC/ADAGP, 2018. | Pierre Jeanneret (?), photo of Le Corbusier’s friends and Yvonne, on holiday on the Marne, 1934 ©FLC/ADAGP, 2018.

and natural with the grand scheme of urban renewal, with the design of the *Unités d’habitation*, however misunderstood these were. The description of the fishermen’s huts was also a kind of revision of Vitruvius’s famous account of the primitive hut in the forest. Unlike the article “*Architecture*”, where Loos insisted that houses were not part of architecture, both Vitruvius and Le Corbusier want to find the roots of high architecture in the simple dwelling. The hut made of tree branches becomes the temple, for Vitruvius, and the fishermen’s shack becomes a palace for Le Corbusier.

These houses, there are one to five hundred of them, are isolated in clearings in the pine forests or grouped in clusters on the beach. These houses all have a common scale - the human scale. Everything is in proportion: reflecting the footstep, the shoulder and head. Economy is at its highest.

3. RENVERSEMENT D’USAGES SÉCULAIRES

Intensity is at its highest. One fine day, I suddenly understood them and I cried out: “But these houses are palaces”. And I can define a palace quite simply: a palace is a house which strikes us by its dignity (Le Corbusier, 1928: 52-53).

Human scale, proportion and dignity could be the definition of a new architecture without styles and these were the elements that Le Corbusier increasingly sought in his own architectural projects, including a purification of the joys of living to those of sun, space, sky and greenery. *La cellule à l’échelle humaine* was to be his slogan (Le Corbusier, 1930: 91). He repeated the demonstration of the primitive temple, the fisherman’s shack and the peasant’s cottage in almost all his later lectures. For example, in Buenos Aires, in his seventh lecture on 15 October 1929, he illustrates the models). The first two sketches, of a primitive hut and the plan of a primitive votive temple, had been illus-

trated in *Une maison un palais* (1929: 38 and 41) and in *Almanach d’Architecture Moderne* (1925: 8-10). The third, derived from Choisy, shows the Doric order as a wooden system of construction and the fourth is the fisherman’s shack from the Bassin d’Arcachon. He explained:

It was these organisms, created with the same authenticity that nature lends its creations –its economy, purity and intensity– that became, one sunny and perceptive day, palaces (Le Corbusier, 1930: 157).

Le Corbusier liked to ask the fundamental question, “What is the purpose of living?” (Le Corbusier, 1930: 87). His answer would lie in a combination of intellectual and aesthetic exploration and the very simplest of pleasures. He illustrated this in his book *La Ville Radieuse* with some wooden and tar paper shacks that friends of his had rented by the river Marne in 1935. The accompanying text explains :



Pierre Jeanneret (?), Photograph of Jean Badovici's house, Vézelay, 1934 (p3192136) ©FLC/ADAGP, 2018.

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 extension of the interior to the exterior. It's the economy of the cell and the largesse of the surroundings. It's the participation of the fundamental elements: sun, sky and greenery (Le Corbusier, 1935: 29).

On 18 August 1927 Le Corbusier wrote to his mother inviting her to visit Le Piquey, with the words: "*Je voudrais pouvoir acheter ici 3 pins et 4 m2 de sable et y planter une hutte et que tu puisses y venir un jour.*"⁴ This dream of a little wooden hut by the sea would eventually be built in Roquebrune-Cap Martin, in 1951.

Le Corbusier's important text on the fisherman's hut was part of his rejection of what he

now openly called 'civilisation', the corruption of taste created by industrialisation with its shoddy mass-produced goods, over-crowding and tourism. He made the same observation touring Spain in 1928. When the road to Le Piquey was metalled in 1929, he saw the isthmus quickly overrun by holiday homes, and his primitive paradise was ruined. Already in 1935 he remarked:

The Bordeaux twentieth century civilisation (barber's son) invades, corrupts, corrodes, kills, destroys and dirties. Every day along the new road (road = the path of civilisation) we find subjects for observation and meditation (Le Corbusier, 1935).

On his last visit, in September 1936, he wrote in the visitor's book at the Hotel Chanteclerc:

I like houses made of planks (because they are honest, both in construction and in essence). Le Piquey today is spoiled. I knew it before the road and the builders. This lagoon, governed by the thirteen hour rhythm of the tides – a truly cosmic clock – created every kind of variety and infinite combinations. Now the houses are 'Basque' with their false beams of cement painted to imitate wood! On Sunday you will see a red sail on the lagoon and the whole harmony is destroyed. Soon some clown will haul up a yellow sail and another a white one. And so on, the massacre is complete. I had hoped that if the land itself had remained in the hands of the savages, the lagoon would have been saved. Where the hell can we still find something true...? I love Chanteclerc

because it is made of planks. I love Madame Dourthe (because she is honest) (Le Corbusier, 1936).

By 1936, Le Corbusier had discovered another place of seclusion surrounded by ancient natural stone houses⁵. His friend Jean Badovici had bought up a number of stone houses in the picturesque town of Vézelay, hoping to create a kind of artist's colony with his friends the painters Yves Renaudin and Olga Battanchon. Badovici showed great sensitivity in adapting these houses to a modern aesthetic. In his own house, he cut open the ceiling of the central space and created a circulation of sitting areas lit by a new steel window. Pierre Jeanneret took a number of photos of this house, which were published in *La Ville Radieuse* with an ecstatic set of captions by Le Corbusier. He wrote:

Why this astonishing largesse? [...] Why this breadth? [...] and this intimacy? [...] Because a proper human scale – that which is the product of our gestures – has determined everything. No more old or modern. There is only what is permanent: a just proportion (Le Corbusier, 1935: 53-33).

This emphasis on a human scale and correct measure became increasingly important for Le Corbusier and developed during the war into his research into the *Modulor*. So it is not surprising that when he finally created his own perfectly proportioned 'primitive hut', in Roquebrune-Cap Martin, it was based, notionally at least, on the *Modulor*. The story begins with Badovici's invitation to visit his villa E-1027, largely designed by Ei-



Le Corbusier, cabanon, Roquebrune-Cap-Martin, 1952 (TBT6938).

leen Gray between 1927 and 1929, in 1937 and again in 1938 and 1939⁶. It is interesting that Badovici, Le Corbusier and even Eileen Gray referred to this sophisticated work of modern architecture as a *baraque*. 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 Lluís Sert and Paul Lester Wiener working on the plan for Bogotá. It was on this occasion that Le Corbusier met Thomas Rebutato, who had just opened up a modest restaurant on 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.



Le Corbusier, Heidi Weber pavilion, Zurich, built after Le Corbusier's death in 1967 (Catherine Dumont d'Ayot, L1000337).

It was to be attached to the side of the *Étoile de mer* restaurant; Le Corbusier cut a door from the cabanon into the bedroom of the Rebutato family to allow him to pass through in inclement weather. The structure was prefabricated by Le Corbusier's favourite carpenter Charles Barberis, in his workshop in Corsica and the panels sent by train and off-loaded on the railway track just above the restaurant in 1952.

The design has been well analysed by Bruno Chiambretto (Chiambretto, 1987). Based on the *Modulor* dimensions of 3.66 m the plan has a pinwheel form that cleverly divides the space into sleeping, working and washing areas. The decision to add an external facing of split pine seems to have been improvised, but the imagery of the primitive hut was certainly not alien to Le Corbusier's idea. It was a space to sleep, but also to work, at night or in inclement weather, and the living space was projected out to the

exterior, with a table and chair overlooking the sea under the shade of a carob tree and, later, the addition of a simple workman's hut where Le Corbusier could work during the day and store his sketches and notes.

Le Corbusier claimed that the Cabanon had been designed for his wife Yvonne, who was suffering from mobility problems by the 1950s and appreciated being right next to the restaurant. Once again, here Le Corbusier had created the conditions for long weeks of separation from the city, creative work, swimming twice a day in the sea and good food and company. The *Étoile de mer* was a place of conviviality, with the young campers who occupied the *Unités de camping* that Le Corbusier designed to give Rebutato a small income. The young Robert Rebutato, twelve years old when he first met Le Corbusier, went on to become an architect and work in Le Corbusier's agency. It is characteristic of

the surprising juxtaposition of traditional, primitive context and highly sophisticated architectural designs that it was in his builder's hut next to the Cabanon that Le Corbusier sketched out his 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 and Alain Tavès who finished off the design and supervised construction. Completely different to the Cabanon aesthetically, the Zurich Pavilion shares underlying themes of prefabrication, *Modulor* dimensions and the continuing search for a type that could meet universal needs. The principle of the extension of the interior into the exterior, under the protection of the prefabricated steel parasol roof, also fits into Le Corbusier's long-running themes. The new and

the primitive were indissolubably linked in Le Corbusier's mind●

NOTES

1 - The pioneering essay on this theme is F. Passanti, "The Vernacular, Modernism and Le Corbusier," *JSAH* 56, 4 (1997): 438-51.2 -

2 - I will refer to Le Corbusier by his real name for references to his life before 1920.

3 - See Brooks (1997: 185-191 and 308-309)

4 - Le Corbusier to his mother 18 August 1927. He noted also that Jacques Lipchitz and his wife were staying in a fisherman's wooden hut on the shoreline. (FLC R1(06)170)

5 - Le Corbusier first visited Vezelay in 1934 or 1935 and Roquebrune in 1937. See Benton (2017).

6 - The relationship between Le Corbusier, Jean Badovici and Eileen Gray has caused much ink to flow. For a new perspective, see Benton (2017).

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Letter section

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LE CORBUSIER (July 14, 1935). [Letter to his mother], (R2 (1) 216), Fondation Le Corbusier, Paris.

Taste Art Deco in Paris 1910-1935 (Madrid, 2015). He has recently published *The Rhetoric of Modernism; Le Corbusier as lecturer*, (Basel, 2009); *Lc Foto: Le Corbusier: Secret Photographer* (Zürich, 2013); and a new edition of his book *The Villas of Le Corbusier and Pierre Jeanneret* (Basel, 2007). He has been working with the Association Cap Moderne on the restoration of the villa E-1027, Le Corbusier's cabanon and the *Étoile de mer* and unités de camping at Roquebrune-Cap-Martin, publishing a book *Le Corbusier peintre à Cap Martin* (Paris 2015) which was awarded the Prix du Livre de la Méditerranée.

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