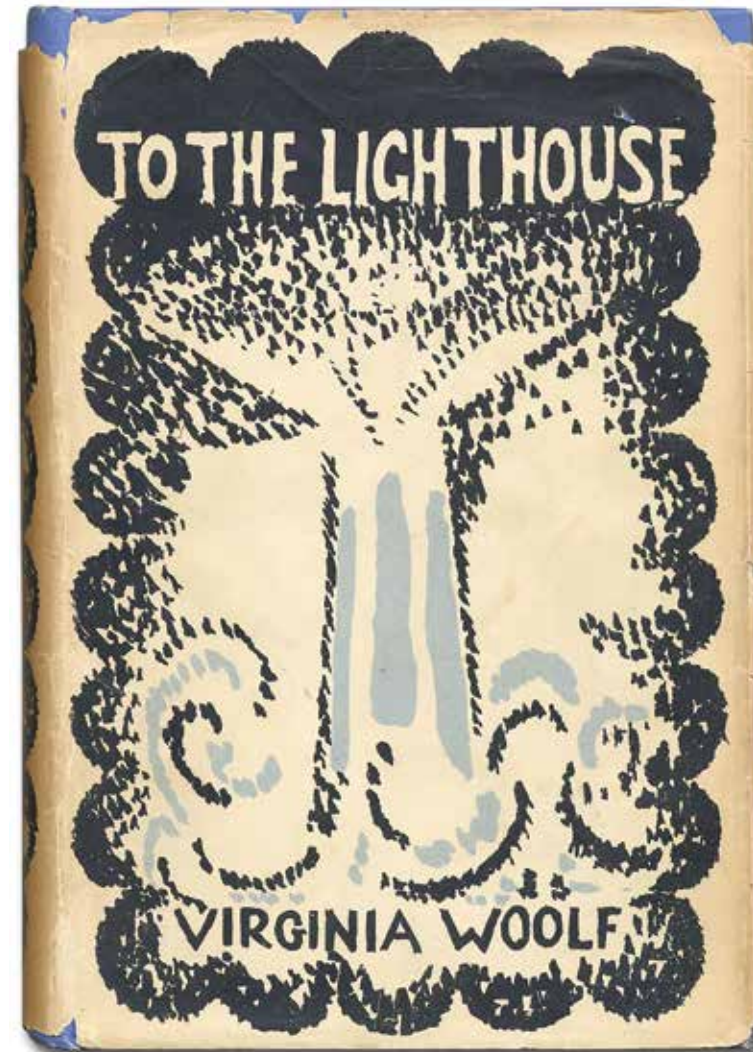


Modernism:

glass, steel, concrete ... and books

K. Pint



At first, modernist heritage seems an oxymoron, as modernism is usually associated with the fantasy of the *tabula rasa*, the most striking example of which was perhaps Le Corbusier's plan for the 'radiant city', which included the complete destruction of entire historical districts of Paris. An architect, according to Le Corbusier in his well-known work *Towards an architecture* (1923), should look at modern, functionalist engineering as a liberation 'from cursed enslavement to the past'.¹ The best way to honour a modernist building would thus be, quite simply, to destroy it and replace it with something more fitted to the present time.

Fortunately, the modernist relationship to past forms and traditions is far more complex than radical provocations such as Le Corbusier's would suggest, as becomes clear when we look at one of the most famous mottos summarising modernism's revolutionary project: 'to make it new'. This phrase actually referred to an ancient inscription on the bathtub of a Chinese emperor,² which was not about destruction, but rejuvenation: the old forms are not demolished, but revitalised. Le Corbusier himself was strongly influenced by previous architecture – the famous *Unité d'Habitation* in Marseille was inspired not only by the contemporary design of ocean liners, but also by the Greek monasteries on Mount Athos.³

This bold reinterpretation of the past, in order to envisage a new, different future for human dwelling, makes modernism an interesting frame of reference for the theory of adaptive reuse, not only because modernist buildings are now getting old, and increasingly need adapting to new demands, but also because the modernist cultural programme as a whole can be a source of inspiration. The seemingly paradoxical modernist attitude of using the past to make things 'new', can help adaptive reuse to go beyond the conservative demands of mere restoration. It combines a desire for radical rupture and liberation with a respect for the creative powers of past forms and of past ideas, to which we can now add modernism itself.

This study argues that, if designers, interior architects and architects seek inspiration in the modernist heritage, they should not only consider modernist architecture, but also modernist literature. Leafing through architectural handbooks and anthologies of modernist architecture, it is always striking to see how the canonical buildings of European modernism seem at odds with the books that form the canon of modernist European literature. How do we reconcile the pure, functionalist design philosophy of the architectural and design programme that Walter Gropius installed at the

Bauhaus in 1919, with the baroque chaos of modern experience presented by James Joyce in *Ulysses* in 1922? How do we understand that between the completion of Gerrit Rietveld's *Schröder House* (1923–24) and Adolf Loos' *Villa Müller* (1928–30), both radical, self-assured celebrations of the art of dwelling, Max Brod posthumously published Kafka's *The Trial* (1925) and *The Castle* (1926) – books that obviously offer a far more problematic and desperate account of what it means to dwell? How do we relate Thomas Mann's *The Magic Mountain* (1924), describing the doubts, desires, philosophies and experiences of eccentric characters in a sanatorium in Davos, to the Paimio Sanatorium designed by Alvar Aalto (1929–1933), with its focus on health and efficiency? And how do we link Le Corbusier's utopia of collective housing with the nihilistic despair and existential loneliness of Frits van Egters, the protagonist of Gerard Reve's *The Evenings* (1947), published in the same year as the construction of the Unité d'Habitation started? Modernist novels seem to be inhabited by a different breed of human beings than those who are supposed to inhabit modernist architecture.

This discrepancy may be caused by the fact that functionalist modernism was simply not very interested in the kind of complex domestic life into which modernist literature delved. Modernist architecture followed a rationalist design philosophy, and the home, in Le Corbusier's famous phrasing, is just 'a machine for living in'.⁴ It should provide shelter, with plenty of air and light, and be place to relax and work, but only as a temporary retreat from the outside world, where things actually have to get done. Modernist architecture has little time for unproductive neurotic ruminations. As Reed argues in his introduction to *Not at Home. The Suppression of Domesticity in Modern Art and Architecture* (1996), the modernist avant-garde 'imagined itself away from home'⁵ (Reed 1996:7), and saw 'domestic figures as the opposite of the heroic'.⁶ In her *Modernism and the Architecture of Private Life* (2005), however, Victoria Rosner argues that modernist literature made exactly the opposite move, such as in the work of Virginia Woolf: 'If modernism and the domestic have often seemed like antithetical categories, Woolf weaves them together as she locates modernism's origins squarely in the space of modern life'.⁷ For many modernist writers like Woolf, the human psyche was the most important source of an heroic exploration of the unknown (or unrevealed) territories of human experience. In *Modernism: The Lure of Heresy* (2007), Peter Gay looks for a common denominator for all forms of modernism, and finds it in the modernist belief that 'the untried is markedly superior to the familiar, the rare to the ordinary, the experimental to the routine'.⁸ Modernist literature wanted to demonstrate how the most familiar,

ordinary space of daily domestic life could be the source of the most experimental and rare explorations. It is this interior life that modernist writers wanted to explore in all its aspects, nuances, sensations, obsessions and perversities, creating an image of a human being that goes far beyond the limited, one-sided scope of the modernist ideal of the engineer-entrepreneur in Le Corbusier's *Vers une architecture*.

A key figure in this exploration of the unknown territory of the psyche was no doubt the founder of psychoanalysis, Sigmund Freud. Although himself deeply immersed in the aesthetics of the nineteenth century, his work would nonetheless have a major impact on modernist writers and artists. It is no coincidence that his work was translated into English by James and Alix Strachey, who were both associated with the Bloomsbury group, to which Virginia Woolf famously belonged.

Freud's famous dictum, in *A Difficulty in the Path of Psychoanalysis* (1917), that the ego is not master in its own house, was widely shared by writers and poets who presented their characters often in a stream of consciousness, in which strange associations, sensations, thoughts, banal and sublime experiences all intermingle, shattering any illusion of consistency and control., similar to the speaking cure of psychoanalysis, where the patient is asked to speak freely about whatever comes up in his or her mind. Writers including Virginia Woolf and Marcel Proust present their characters with a flux of impressions, mixing the interior with the exterior, the past with the present, and revealing how complex and paradoxical consciousness actually is. They wanted to find an expression for the kind of affective states that go beyond what was deemed to be 'normal', including the darker effects of alienation and abjection, as seen in the work of Kafka, but also effects of joy, desire and lust. These explorations often challenged a heteronormative framework, and the limited point of view of a masculine, heterosexual subject, as seen, for example, in D.H. Lawrence's *Lady Chatterley's Lover* (1928) or in Djuna Barnes' *Nightwood* (1936), or in Molly's famous monologue at the end of *Ulysses*, musing about her sexual desires and experiences.

Surrealism would take this experimental exploration of the mind a step further, in the celebration of irrationality as the primal source of inspiration. Or, as André Breton puts it in his Surrealist manifesto, 'Surrealism is based on the belief in the superior reality of certain forms of previously neglected associations, in the omnipotence of the dream, in the disinterested play of thought. It tends to ruin once and for all other psychic mechanisms and to

substitute itself for them in solving all the principal problems of life.'⁹ The unconsciousness was regarded as a creative force, not as the mere repression of unwanted ideas or effects: the irrationality of dreams and whims should be celebrated in its own right. Surrealism's resistance against functionalism and technocratic efficiency in modern urban life would inspire the Situationist movement after WWII, with its notion of psychogeography as an alternative, more playful, way to inhabit and to explore modern city life, and to avoid the pitfalls of capitalist consumerism.

Another, perhaps unexpected, territory of human experience explored by a number of modernist writers was that of spirituality. This may sound surprising, as modernity is associated with a radical atheistic worldview, summarised in the cry of the madman in Nietzsche's *The Gay Science* (1882), 'God is dead'. As Nietzsche predicted, however, the image of God would nonetheless linger on in the twentieth century, not only in the collective secular religions of totalitarian communism and fascism, but also in different forms of more individual spirituality. There was of course Nietzsche's own interest in Greek mythology, especially in Dionysus, the Greek god of ecstasy, but even older forms of religion gained a new appeal. *The Golden Bough* (1890), James G. Frazer's anthropological study of ancient, sacrificial fertility cults of dying, and rising gods and their afterlife, would greatly influence modern literature, as seen in one of the most famous modernist poems, T.S. Eliot's *The Waste Land* (1922). The many mythological references in this poem are juxtaposed with the experience of modern fragmented, meaningless existence and a sense of personal and collective collapse. The kind of magical associative thinking discussed by Frazer in *The Golden Bough* also had remarkable similarities with the poetics of surrealism. It is thus not surprising that occultism and esotericism played a great part in the work of André Breton.¹⁰

More established forms of religions were also explored in modernist literature: the Jewish mystical tradition is secularised, but at the same time survives, in the works of Franz Kafka and Walter Benjamin, just as Christian mysticism found a strange, erotic afterlife in the 'atheology' of Georges Bataille. T.S. Eliot converted to Anglicanism in 1927 and, in Graham Greene's *The Power and the Glory* (1940), the interior monologue of the flawed and pitiful 'whisky-priest' reveals how a tragic, modernist form of Catholicism could still exist in the twentieth century.

It would be interesting to attempt to bring together the architectural and the literary imagination of

¹ Le Corbusier, *Toward an Architecture* (Los Angeles: Getty Research Institute, 2007), 158.

² Sun, quoted in: Nadia Sels and Kris Pint, "Energies of History" in *Modernism: the case of Casa Malaparte*, *Interiors* 6, no. 2 (2015): 122–137.

³ Zacknik, quoted in: Kris Pint, 'If these walls could walk. Architecture as a performative scenography of the past,' In *Per-*

forming Memory in Art and Popular Culture, eds. Liedeke Plate and Anneke Smelik (Oxford/New York: Routledge, 2013), 123–134

⁴ Le Corbusier, *Toward an Architecture*, 158.
⁵ Christopher Reed, *Not at Home. The Suppression of Domesticity in Modern Art and Architecture* (London: Thames and Hudson, 1996), 7.

⁶ *Ibid.*, 15.

⁷ Victoria Rosner, *Modernism and the Architecture of Private Life* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2005), 4.

⁸ Peter Gay, *Modernism: The Lure of Heresy*. (New York/London: W. W. Norton & Company, 2008), 2.

⁹ André Breton, 'From the First Manifesto of Surrealism,' In *Art in theory, 1900-2000: an anthology of changing ideas*, eds. Charles Harrison and Paul Wood (Malden/Oxford/Carlton: Blackwell, 2003), 452.

¹⁰ See Tessel M. Bauduin, *Surrealism and the occult: occultism and Western esotericism in the work and movement of André Breton*. (Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 2014).

modernism. How would the characters of famous modernist novels, such as Kafka's Josef K. or Woolf's Mrs. Ramsay, interact with specific modernist buildings, and what would these virtual interactions reveal about the effects, sensations and thoughts this architecture either evokes or ignores? What would be the effect if T.S. Eliot's *Ash Wednesday* (1930) were to be read aloud in the setting of a modernist church by Rudolph Schwarz? What would it look like if the bedroom, in which Gregor Samsa wakes one day to find himself turned into a bug, in Kafka's *The Metamorphosis* (1915), were designed by Mies van der Rohe? In what kind of hallway designed by Loos could we imagine Sartre's voyeur in *Being and Nothingness* (1943), looking through a keyhole, totally forgetting about himself, until suddenly a noise startles him and he feels caught, ashamed, in an example of how the modern subject is always at the mercy of the gaze of the other? If we could look at the public offices and the shopping malls of modernism in the same way as Walter Benjamin experienced the outmoded Parisian Arcades of the nineteenth century, could their anachronistic typology generate the same messianic, erotic, revolutionary desire? Such virtual juxtapositions between architecture and literature could help us identify where our relationship with the built environment still causes friction, where human experience is neglected or taken for granted, or where there is room for experiment.

In *Encounters* (2005), Juhani Pallasmaa states that '[a]t the turn of the millennium, the great challenge for architects is the re-sensualization, re-mythologization, and re-poetization of the human domicile'.¹¹ One of these poetic, sensual myths is modernism itself. The modernist project is still helpful in the exploration of other ways of feeling, thinking, sensing, and eventually, dwelling. The combative boldness of modernism's *cri de cœur*, 'make it new', is refreshing in an era of ecological, political and psychological crisis, with its cheap cynicism and comfortable fatalism. It demands an engagement with reality that, even in Kafka's most grim evocations, still has much more vitality than scepticism or dreaming of a better past that never in fact existed. The modernist project offers a stubborn resistance to any form of reductive technocratic functionalism, showing that human experience is much more complex than we think. It demonstrates that, alongside the ecology of our planet, there also exists something akin to an ecology of the mind, which is an equally complex, yet at the same time fragile, beautiful and cruel system.

The modernist heritage, in glass, steel and concrete, but also in books, is a constant reminder that our exploration of the question of what human life actu-

ally is, is still far from over. It is an invitation to be guided by the same kind of 'principled self-scrutiny' that, according to Peter Gay, drove the modernist movement,¹² and where affectivity, irrationality, sexuality and spirituality all demand their rightful place in how we define ourselves and take care of ourselves, a definition which includes the way we build, or re-build, our environment.



¹¹ Juhani Pallasmaa, *Encounters. Architectural essays* (Helsinki: Rakennustieto Publishing, 2005), 70.

¹² Peter Gay, *Modernism: The Lure of Heresy*. (New York/London: W. W. Norton & Company, 2008), 4.

[Bibliography]

Bauduin, Tessel M.. *Surrealism and the occult: occultism and Western esotericism in the work and movement of André Breton*. Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 2014.

Breton, André. "From the First Manifesto of Surrealism." In *Art in theory, 1900-2000: an anthology of changing ideas*, edited by Charles Harrison and Paul Wood, 447-453. Malden/Oxford/Carlton: Blackwell, 2003.

Le Corbusier. *Toward an Architecture*. Los Angeles: Getty Research Institute, 2007.

Gay, Peter. *Modernism: The Lure of Heresy*. New York/London: W. W. Norton & Company, 2008.

Pallasmaa, Juhani. *Encounters. Architectural essays*. Helsinki: Rakennustieto Publishing, 2005.

Pint, Kris. "If these walls could walk. Architecture as a deformative scenography of the past." In *Performing Memory in Art and Popular Culture*, edited by Liedeke Plate and Anneke Smelik, 123-134. Oxon/New York: Routledge, 2013.

Reed, Christopher. *Not at Home. The Suppression of Domesticity in Modern Art and Architecture*. London: Thames and Hudson, 1996.

Rosner, Victoria. *Modernism and the Architecture of Private Life*. New York: Columbia University Press, 2005.

Sels, Nadia and Pint, Kris. "'Energies of History' in Modernism: the case of Casa Malaparte."

Interiors 6, no. 2 (2015): 122-137.

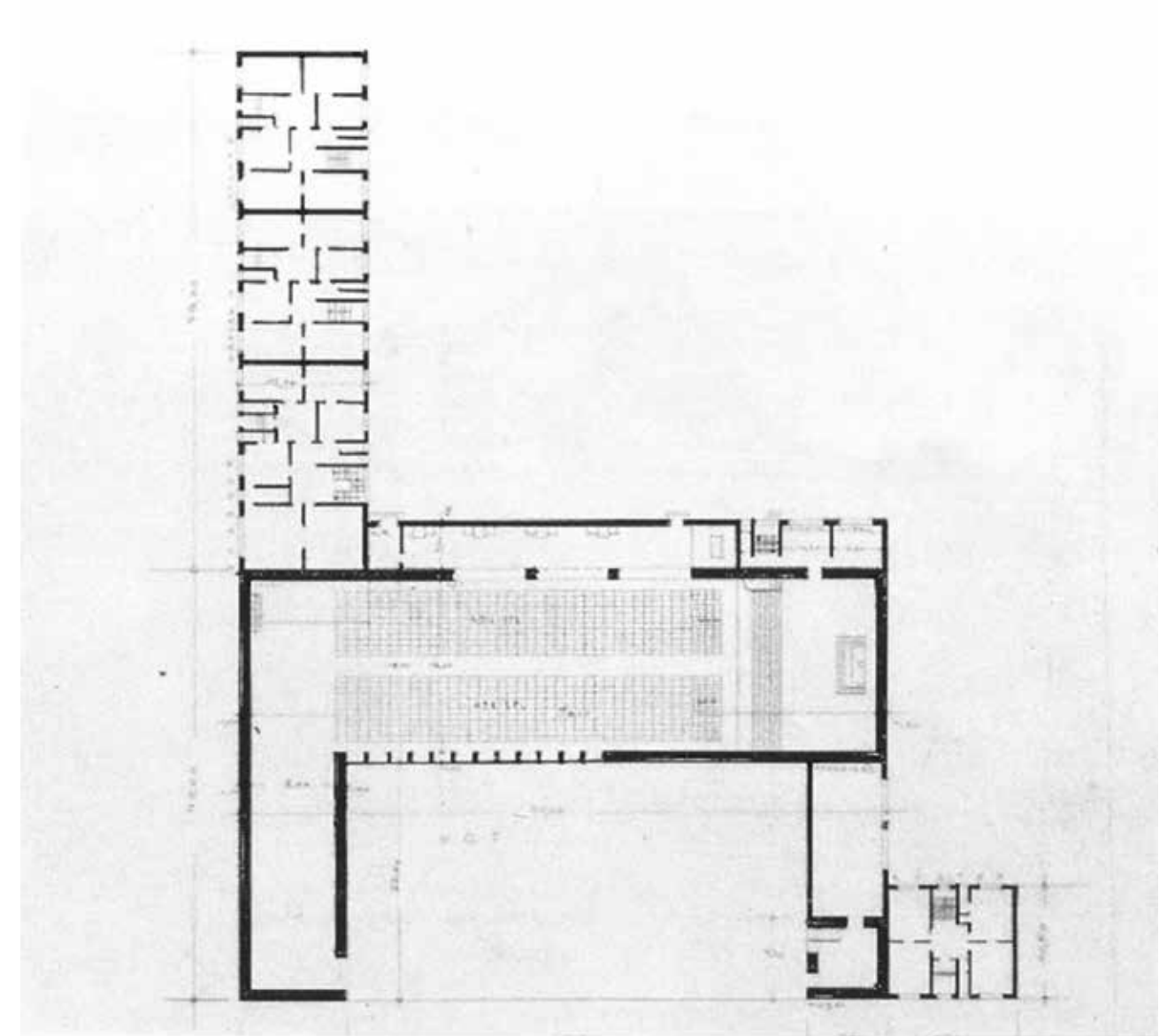
[List of figures]

- [1] Bell, Vanessa. "Dust jacket designed for the first edition of Virginia Woolf's *To the Lighthouse*, published by the Hogarth Press in 1927." In Encyclopaedia Britannica. Last modified November 13, 2019. <https://www.britannica.com/topic/Bloomsbury-group#/media/1/70024/95604>.
- [2] Starke, Ottomar. "Cover of the first edition of Kafka's *Verwandlung*, published by Kurt Wolff Verlag in 1916." Retrieved from Der Buchumschlag der Verwandlung: nur kein Käfer!. April 5, 2015. <https://nataschawetter.wordpress.com/2015/04/05/der-buchumschlag-der-verwandlung-nur-kein-kafer/>.

Beyond the modern

Some observations on the work of Rudolf Schwarz

C. Grafe



[1] Floor plan of St. Fronleichnamskirche (Aachen) by Rudolf Schwarz.