

Perret versus Le Corbusier

Building for Art in the 1920s

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Abstract

This article situates Parisian studio-houses in the context of the boom in contemporary art of the 1920s. It argues that in a highly competitive art market, architecture proved a useful means of individuating artists from one another. As boom turned to crash in the 1930s, the architecture of Perret served to shield his artist-clients from criticism and as an emblem of their integrity in an art market which stood accused of price-fixing.

Keywords

Studio-house
Auguste Perret
Le Corbusier
Montparnasse
Atelier

Looking back from 1932, Le Corbusier recalled his and Auguste Perret's struggle nine years earlier to 'find the expression of the modern dwelling' in a small street in southern Paris.¹ The two houses which resulted – Le Corbusier's celebrated studio-house for Ozenfant and Perret's house for the collector Pierre Gaut – reveal a polemical confrontation which destroyed the formerly close relationship between master and pupil.² The context is significant. This street – the Rue du Square Montsouris in Montparnasse – was not simply a stage for architectural rivalries. It was located in a neighbourhood remarkable for its quantity and variety of artists' houses. Underpinning both was the booming art world of the 1920s, in which artists jostled for attention, exhibition opportunities and sales.

With the improving economic situation in France in 1923, the market for contemporary art began to expand. New art dealers appeared, many of them employing a contract system in which all the work produced by an artist over a given period was exchanged for a regular stipend.³ The incentive which this gave dealers to promote their stable of artists fuelled the art boom of the 1920s. Montparnasse, which in the early twentieth century boasted the highest concentration of artists in Paris, saw a dramatic transformation.⁴ At its centre, the Carrefour Vavin boasted two enormous cafes, Le Dome and La Rotonde, and a range of smaller ones catering for artists of different nationalities. Jeanne Warnod observed that these functioned not simply as social spaces but 'places for bargaining and making deals.'⁵ This competitive environment proved a fertile terrain for experimental building and for inflated egos. 'Every so often I think that I hear a big, dull thud which silences the birds. It comes from Montparnasse: it is a poet, a painter or a musician too full of himself, exploding,' wrote Ozenfant.⁶

The area south of the Carrefour Vavin – partly urbanised in the 1870s – was developed in the early twentieth century with narrow streets and cul-de-



Ill. 1. Auguste Perret: Gaut house, 1923. Rue du Square Montsouris, Montparnasse. From *L'architecture vivante*, 1924.

sacs behind the major thoroughfares. The area around the Parc Montsouris was especially favoured by those who wished to escape the increasingly commercialised aspects of central Montparnasse. The businessman Pierre Gaut, attracted by illustrations of the *maisons en serie* in *L'Esprit Nouveau*, asked Le Corbusier to design him a house there based on the Citrohan type.⁷ Losing confidence in Corbusier, however, Gaut soon transferred the

commission to Perret, who designed an elegantly simple house on a corner site which provided ample interior spaces for the display of Gaut's art collection. Gaut, a keen sportsman, First World War aviator, and from 1934 the producer of Jean Renoir's films, is an intriguing figure.⁸ Gaut began to collect modern art at the sale of the Kahnweiler collection in 1922, and developed friendships with Picasso, Matisse, Braque and other artists,





Ill. 2. Auguste Perret: Interior of Gaut house. From *L'architecture vivante*, 1924.

whom he later supplied with paints manufactured by his firm, Linel.⁹ Unlike Corbusier's art-collector client Raoul La Roche, Gaut apparently occupied this house for only a few years.¹⁰ But this house is significant for demonstrating Perret's shift from a rigorously simple, almost purist approach to architecture and a more explicitly classical mode of design. The quarrel with Le Corbusier triggered by the Gaut commission encouraged both architects to develop new approaches to architecture. In their wake came a series of buildings which reveal diametrically different ideas about the sort of architecture which was best suited to modern art and the modern artist.

Although the recessed wall panels of the Gaut house gave the impression of a concrete frame, its structure was actually a hybrid, with brick cavity walls stiffened by steel cables and concrete floors, staircase and roof. The unwindowed, smoothly rendered mass of the upper walls reinforced the effect of classical stability and gravitas, an impression underlined by the inscription 'MCMXXIII EDIF' beneath an elegantly sculpted concrete cornice. Internally, the largest area of the house was a double-height hexagonal hall, surmounted by a circular gallery. This is where Gaut's cubist works were hung. As at La Roche's house, this void at the core of the house occupied the space conventionally allocated to reception

room; in both houses, this space was given interest and visual complexity by the shape of the staircase and upper landings, the art displayed on the walls, and the light from large windows which bathed the walls and accentuated the forms.

As the Gaut house neared completion in the autumn of 1923, Le Corbusier wrote to Perret to cast aspersions on his architectural abilities (*'vos dons de plasticien'*).¹¹ The studio-house for Ozenfant which Le Corbusier had just begun to build at the end of the same street demonstrated his own, very different, aesthetic. Ozenfant's house, like Gaut's, was brick-walled, but – unlike Gaut's – it had a concrete frame which created an effect of weightlessness. Thanks to its site, passers-by encountered a startlingly transparent corner, in contrast to the solid corner of Gaut's house. Ozenfant's house, where the living area was surmounted by a studio, was an extensively glazed, double-height cube whose smooth planar elevations were framed by a vertical joint between it and the adjoining house, and a vestigial concrete cornice.¹² The glazing and saw-tooth roof lights evoked the triple meaning of *atelier* in French: artist's studio, workshop and factory.¹³ This crisp, quasi-industrial idiom registered not simply the interests of Le Corbusier but those of its occupant, his former collaborator. Ozenfant used the studio as a place to paint, and also to use a camera obscura, to listen to his Super-Hetero-dyname radio, and claimed in 1923 that he also intended to 'do architectural work' there.¹⁴

Over the next few years, Le Corbusier was to formulate the principles of a new architecture in terms which explicitly challenged Perret's ideas, while Perret's own approach – based on the frank articulation of the concrete frame – was demonstrated in the five studio-houses which he designed for Parisian artists between 1926 and 1929. Fanelli and Gargiani have convincingly suggested that it was rivalry with Le Corbusier which encouraged Perret's bold expression of structure. But it was the competitive conditions of the art world of 1920s which gave their architectural disputes edge and urgency; and when the boom in contemporary art flagged during the following decade, these disputes assumed a different complexion.

Perret's first studio-house, for the sculptor Chana Orloff, completed in 1926, represented a new departure

for him. The dramatic effects and excessive glazing which Perret normally tried to avoid was modified in response to her need for well-lit workspace at ground level. Perret used the entire depth of a narrow plot in a newly created Montparnasse street, the villa Seurat, to accommodate two ground-floor studios with living accommodation above. The house, stiffened by party walls on either side, did not require a full frame. However, concrete columns, beams and floors were employed in order to maximise internal space. The Orloff house was ingeniously planned. The front studio functioned as an exhibition space, through which visitors were routed before accessing the working studio at the rear or going upstairs. This was crucial for an artist without a dealer and access to gallery space. A mezzanine allowed sculpture to be viewed from above. On the first floor was a dining-sitting room and two small bedrooms for Orloff and her young son. 'I don't like furniture; I prefer the walls to be furnished,' she told a journalist.¹⁵ Photographs show rooms stylishly but sparingly equipped with furniture designed by the artist's friends Pierre Chareau and Francis Jourdain, together with built-in cupboards, bed and mirrors. Textiles pinned to the walls complemented the textures of the plank-marked concrete studio ceilings.

The façade was classically organised: a studio occupied the bulk of the building, and above it was the domestic area, resembling an attic storey, and a broad concrete freize beneath the majestic cornice. Unlike the Gaut house, the façade frankly displayed the materials of which it was made: the beams and columns and window surrounds of un-rendered concrete contrasted with the timber sub-frames of the studio windows, the panel of decorative brickwork between the studio doors and the bricks set aslant on the upper elevation. This differentiation between frame and infill and the deep cornice appears a deliberate rebuttal of the ideas of Le Corbusier. The dialogue between Perret and Le Corbusier demonstrated in their buildings of the 1920s was echoed in their publications and those of their admirers. It began in 1923 with an exchange in *Paris-Journal*.¹⁶ Then, an article on the Gaut house in *L'architecture vivante* by Jean Badovici in spring 1924 was countered by a lecture delivered by Le Corbusier in June, repeated in November 1924.¹⁷ Among the principles of the new architecture specified in this lecture (which were to be codified in 1927 as the



Ill. 3. Le Corbusier: Ozenfant house, 1923. Ave Reille/rue du Square Montsouris, Montparnasse. Photo: G. Todaro.

five points of a new architecture) were the free plan, free facade, roof terrace, pilotis and horizontal window. To these Le Corbusier provocatively added a sixth point: the abolition of the cornice.¹⁸ Shortly afterwards, Marcel Mayer published an article contrasting the Orloff house with studio-houses by André Lurçat in the same street in which the use of structural concrete was disguised by render. The Orloff house, he wrote in 1928, 'teaches us a lesson, functions as a call to order, to good sense, to good taste...it is frank, likeable, robust, distinguished. Down-to-earth architecture, up-to-the-minute architecture, French architecture.'¹⁹ Marie Dormoy pushed the critique further in an article of 1929, '*Le faux béton*'. As examples of the 'false' use of concrete, she cited Lurçat, of 'true' concrete, she cited Perret.²⁰ Two years later, she was to characterise Le Corbusier's approach as wilfully formalist compared with the structural rationalism of Perret.²¹

In the aftermath of the 1927 Weissenhofsiedlung exhibition of modern housing, issues of national identity came increasingly to the fore, with modern architecture often criticised as something severed from place and from building tradition. In the light of this critique, Parisian studio architecture assumes a special importance, and the Montparnasse context provides the key. This area was by the late 1920s the most modern *arrondissement* of Paris, full of foreigners and giant American cafés which provided a *post-restante* service for footloose artists and travellers. It was an *arrondissement* which critics suggested had lost its distinctiveness and its character as an old artists' quarter.²² In this context, Perret's design for Orloff represented a reworking in modern materials of the traditional workshops of pre-war Montparnasse, the simple structures of wood and glass like Antoine Bourdelle's sculpture studios off the Avenue de Maine. Perret's work served as reminder of these older traditions, and Orloff was to be the fortunate beneficiary. Described by a critic as '*cette robuste ouvrière*', Orloff was represented as someone who had not lost touch with the artisanal nature of sculpture.²³ This image helped to differentiate her from both the cosmopolitan pre-war avant-garde and also from the commercialised new art world of the 1920s, dominated by flamboyant, publicity-hungry artists like Tamara de Lempicka or Foujita. Intriguingly, it emerges that Orloff had briefly considered employing Lurçat as her architect before asking Perret to build her a *travail-*



Ill. 4. Auguste Perret: House for Chana Orloff. Villa Seurat, Paris. The neighbouring houses were designed by André Lurçat. Photo: F.R. Yerbury, courtesy Architectural Association, London.

loir, a workshop.²⁴ Perret's architecture thus appeared to endow the house with gravitas and confer a French character on its occupant, who was born in the Ukraine but acquired French citizenship in 1925.²⁵ The Orloff house was hailed by critics as '*une date*' – a milestone in Perret's career in terms of his virtuoso use of materials.²⁶ It was certainly a turning-point in attitudes towards Perret, whose reputation as pioneer modernist had been boosted by his extraordinary concrete church at Le Raincy of 1923. Profoundly sceptical of the younger generation's use of concrete, Perret did not object to the way in which critics began to present him as upholder of French tradition of classical architecture. As we have seen, the differences between Perret and Le Corbusier were very real. But Le Corbusier's description of Perret as a continuator rather than innovator, and the gulf which it implies between



Ill. 5. Auguste Perret: Chana Orloff house. Interior of studio.
Photo: L. Campbell.

Perret and younger architects, seriously underplays the varied and experimental nature of his work in the 1920s.²⁷ Equally, Mayer and Dormoy's identification of Perret as classicist suggests an inflexibility which does not do justice to the way in which he responded to the needs and personality of his clients.

For Gaut, he designed a house which provided an unassertive frame for a collection which contained cubist collages, sculpture and at least one salon cubist painting.²⁸ The interior walls were painted pale rose, grey and light yellow. We do not know if the sorts of tensions between the architect's concept and the client's collection which beset the La Roche house project surfaced here, but Gaut was sufficiently content with the result to employ Perret to remodel his country house in 1928.²⁹

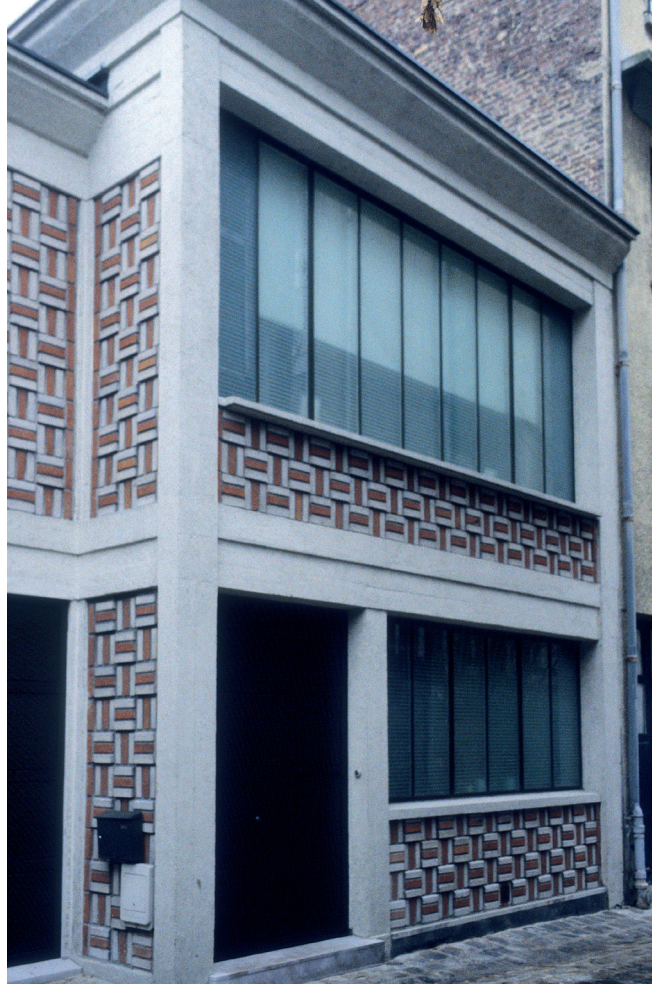
At Orloff's house, Perret gave an ostentatiously sculptural treatment to the façade, setting bricks at a jazzy angle between the windows of the first floor windows. The robust textures of this house contrasted with the de-materialisation of architecture evident in Corbusier's houses, with their smooth planes and thin partition walls. Perret's design for a studio house in Montparnasse for the painter Mela Muter the following year was also carefully individuated. The house was clad in red and cream bricks, laid in three alternately horizontally and vertically, separated by broad courses of mortar, forming a bold chequerboard pattern. Wall surfaces were lively and strongly textured, complementing the vigorous colour and handling of paint for which Muter was renowned. Like Orloff, Muter required exhibition space, a studio, and living quarters. Le Corbusier and Perret had earlier clashed over the relative merits of the horizontal and the vertical window, but Muter required wide windows for her exhibition room and studio.³⁰ Perret offset the squat proportions of her house, which might otherwise have resembled an industrial workshop, by means of a judicious glazing pattern, raising the main body of the house, and surmounting it with a cornice.

Much larger and more lavish was the studio-house for the sculptor Dora Gordine. This was not in Montparnasse but in western Paris near the double studio-house built by Le Corbusier for Miestchaninoff and Lipchitz, and the studio-house for Cook, to which it offered a pointed rejoinder. Gordine's house contained three studios, an exhibition space, living quarters and a garage. It is something of an architectural manifesto for Perret: the skeleton of the building is expressed on the exterior without disguise. But – similar although it might appear to his other studio-houses – it makes reference to the occupant's particular artistic identity and affiliation. Cream-coloured bricks give subtle texture, and the concrete keystone inscribed the sculptor as part of the classical tradition – the tradition of the sculptors Aristide Maillol and Joseph Bernard – rather than that of Orloff and her circle, like the cubist sculptors Zadkine and Lipchitz. Two doors away, in a house for Marguerite Huré, a stained glass artist who had worked with Maurice Denis on the windows of Notre Dame du Raincy, Perret produced an exceptionally free-flowing plan, with two interconnected studios over which

were suspended living quarters. The elevation design responded to Huré's need for maximum light, while its cascade of glass proclaimed that this was the house of a designer responsible for the window-wall at Le Raincy. Surviving preliminary designs for a zig-zag cornice and a concrete stair balustrade of geometric design allude to her designs at Le Raincy.³¹

Perret's last studio-house – for Georges Braque – had a very different character. Braque enjoyed a degree of financial security which made him unique among Perret's artist-clients. Thanks to his contract with the dealer Paul Rosenberg, Braque had no need to use his studio as a place to exhibit his work, and the studio was thus a place of private endeavour in the way it could not be for Orloff, Muter or Gordine. Perret told Dormoy that Braque involved himself a good deal with the house project, and that he himself anticipated difficulty reconciling the plan with the elevation.³² The bay window is one of the features which Braque himself specified. However, connections between the character of the artist's work and the elevation design which can be seen in the women's studio-houses are hard to find. Although Braque's house – a substantial two-storey house crowned by an enormous double studio – accommodates both domestic and artistic functions, it lacks the ingenious interweaving of living space and workspace with which Perret provided his female clients, who had more limited access to exhibition opportunities.

Contemporary critics' concern with the proper use of modern materials has been noted. Their discussion of honest versus dishonest treatment of concrete (Perret *versus* Lurçat) gained a new urgency after the Wall Street Crash. The impact on the French art world, as American collectors ceased to buy, although delayed, was serious. Suggestions that artists and dealers had inflated prices and manipulated the market in order to enrich themselves were rife.³³ Studios – which in the 1920s had transformed the character of Montparnasse with a spectacular range of modern buildings – now served to channel the indignation about fraudulent transactions from the economic sphere towards the world of art, focusing attention on artists as conspicuous consumers of cars and properties. Architecture, which formerly signalled the economic well-being of artists, became in the 1930s the subject of an increasingly politicised discourse, with the



Ill. 6. Aguste Perret: Mela Muter house, 1927–28. Allée Maintenon, rue de Vaugirard, Montparnasse. Photo: L. Campbell.

critic Camille Mauclair launching an attack on modernists.³⁴ The end of the 'age of gold' in the aftermath of the Crash meant that Perret received no commissions from artists after 1930. But a later episode reveals how changed conditions had affected one of his clients, and how – in an increasingly xenophobic climate – his new-found identity as the upholder of French architectural tradition was co-opted to protect her. The journal *L'Architecture d'Aujourd'hui* devoted an article to Mela Muter in 1933, describing her as an artist whose work had fallen out of fashion, but who stuck to her own style. It included a photograph of Perret, sitting for his portrait in the studio he designed for her, together with a photograph of Muter in her little patio garden. The description of Muter as 'an artist whose talent is unsullied by decep-

tion' is revealing. In the crisis, Dormoy's discussion of architectural morality helped to underline Perret's reputation as an exponent of structural honesty.³⁵ Perret's commitment to a particular approach to concrete was conflated with that of his former client. His stature as architect of major public buildings like the Ministère de la Marine was invoked in order to lend gravitas to Muter's work (someone occupied with honest endeavour during an era of bluff) in a gallant attempt to shore up her flagging fortunes.

It has been suggested that Perret's studio-houses provide a simple, functional container for artists and their work.³⁶ In fact, they do rather more than this, signalling

the sudden affluence which the 1920s brought to Parisian artists. In a comparable way to that in which Perret and Le Corbusier competed for attention and architectural commissions, their artist-clients vied for attention and advantage. In the short-lived era of prosperity which revitalised the artistic economy, studio-houses served to underline the artistic identity of their occupants and helped differentiate their work from that of their rivals. After the Crash, they were to perform a different function, providing a means of demonstrating modern artists' unflinching devotion to their vocation, and signalling their integrity and the enduring value of art in a society which had become profoundly suspicious of fraud and profiteering.



Ill. 7. Auguste Perret: Dora Gordine house, 1929. Rue du Belvédère, Boulogne-sur-Seine. Photo: L. Campbell.



Ill. 8. Marguerite Huré outside her house, designed by Auguste Perret, in rue du Belvédère, Boulogne-sur-Seine, c. 1930. Photo: Musée des Années Trente, Boulogne-sur-Seine.

Notes

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4. Bille Klüver and Julie Martin, 'Carrefour Vavin', in Kenneth E. Silver and Romy Golan, *The Circle of Montparnasse: Jewish Artists in Paris 1900-1945* (New York: Universe Books, 1985), 69.
5. Quoted in Silver and Golan, *Circle*, 45.
6. Amedée Ozenfant, *Memoires 1886-1968* (Paris: Seghers, 1968), 199.
7. Fanelli and Gargiani, *Confronti*, 138–145.
8. Antoinette Reze-Huré, 'Une lettre d'Henri Matisse à Pierre Gaut', *Cahiers du Musée Nationale d'Art Moderne* (1984): 26–29.
9. Pierre Gaut papers, Getty Research Institute Centre.
10. See David Thompson and Lorraine LoBianco, eds., *Jean Renoir Letters* (London: Faber, 1994).
11. Le Corbusier, *Lettres à Auguste Perret* (Paris: Eds. du Linteau, 2002), 214.
12. Fanelli and Gargiani, *Confronti*; Ngoo, 'La dialectique de l'enveloppe'.
13. Johann Gfeller, 'La casa-studio de Le Corbusier per Ozenfant a Paris', in *Case d'artista dal Rinascimento a oggi*, ed. E. Hüttinger (Torino: Bollati Boringhieri, 1992).
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17. Fanelli and Gargiani, *Confronti*, 167.
18. Fanelli and Gargiani, *Confronti*, 178–180.
19. Marcel Mayer, 'Une Oeuvre Classique', *L'Amour de L'art*, no. 7 (juillet 1928): 268.
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25. Ariane Tamir, Eric Justman and Paula Birnbaum, *A la rencontre de Chana Orloff* (Paris: À Vivre Éditions, 2012), 30.
26. Mayer, 'Une Oeuvre Classique', 269.
27. Le Corbusier, 'Perret'.
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31. Fonds Perret, IFA, 535 AP 35/1.
32. *Auguste Perret-Marie Dormoy Correspondance 1922-1953* (Paris: Eds du Linteau, 2009), 230.
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34. Camille Mauclair, *L'architecture va-t-elle mourir?* (Paris: Nouvelle Revue Critique, 1933).
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36. Britton, *Perret*, 112.