Le Corbusier

History and Tradition

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Living room.
Introduction

A good place to introduce the topic of this essay is the living-dining-library space in the Maison Cook, which Le Corbusier designed in 1926 (Fig. 1). The living room proper, an elongated rectangular space two floors high, takes the full depth of the house, from front to back. Along one of its long walls open the other two rooms—the dining room downstairs near the front of the house, the library upstairs near the back. And several other elements add further complexity (freestanding fireplace, staircase, curved projection). How should we look at this puzzling space? I propose that it was conceptualized by Le Corbusier as an ambiguous dialogue of three rooms, each with its own separate identity. The dialogue is ambiguous because, on the one hand, the living room dominates, providing a spatial and social centre; but on the other hand, there is a real negotiation and play between all three rooms, with a literal hierarchical reading undermined by the complexity of the composition and by the equalizing presence of a continuous ribbon window, linking the living and dining rooms along the façade. On the one hand centrality, on the other hand play.

This description of interior space as a “dialogue of rooms” fits many of Le Corbusier’s houses, but would not come to mind at Mies van der Rohe’s Barcelona Pavilion, which can more readily be described as continuous space,
inside and outside, organized by floating planes.¹ And both Le Corbusier’s and Mies’s interiors differ from traditional interiors where several rooms are arranged en enfilade: there, the rooms are independent boxes, and the relationship between them is really the dialogue between aligned doors.

By the time he designed the Maison Cook in 1926, Le Corbusier had been evolving the concept of “dialogue of rooms” for fifteen years. The broad framework for his thinking about internal space had been a notion of space as “enclosure,” acquired from reading Camillo Sitte and other authors in 1910-11, while preparing a manuscript about urban design that remained unpublished.² And an important early experience of sophisticated internal spaces had occurred during his Voyage d’Orient in 1911, when he had visited many great mosques in Turkey—in particular the Green Mosque in Bursa, where he had commented about the “admirable concordance between the volumes.”³ But the specific moment when the concept of “dialogue of rooms” began to acquire specificity came at the end of his Voyage d’Orient, when he visited Pompeii and Hadrian’s Villa. In this essay, I will speculate on that visit and its effect, with particular attention to two sketches from Hadrian’s Villa (Figs. 2, 3, 4).

In Pompeii, Le Corbusier was exposed to the characteristic typology of ancient Roman houses, with rooms arranged around two large spaces open to the sky, the Atrium and the Peristyle. The drawings in his sketchbook show a keen appreciation of the spatial richness of Pompeian interiors, though his written comments do not explicitly address the spatial aspect, focusing more generically on contrasts of light and shade, volumes and surfaces, large and small. Typical are his comments at the House of the Silver Wedding (Fig. 2): “The range of door sizes plays a huge role. There are huge ones like ABC, and tiny ones like D. And, like in Bursa, there are bright masses and dark spaces” (he is referring to the Green Mosque in Bursa, Turkey).⁴

A couple of weeks later, while visiting Hadrian’s villa near Rome, Le Corbusier suddenly understood the spatial quality of Pompeian houses in a more structural way. Next to a plan made at the Water Court adjoining the Piazza d’Oro he wrote: “Keep in mind that, in any Roman room, there