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BEATRIZ COLOMINA

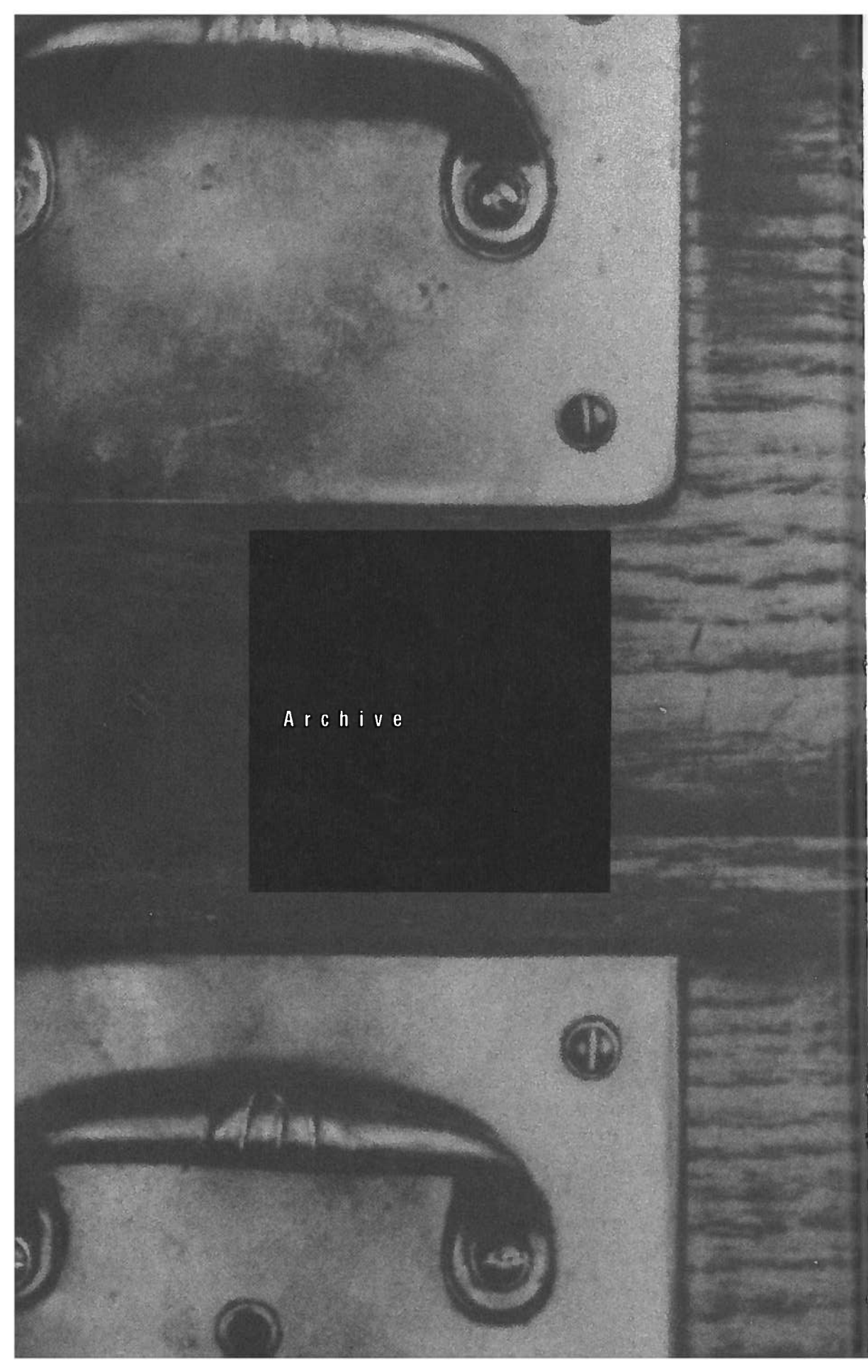


PRIVACY AND PUBLICITY

Modern Architecture as Mass Media

*The MIT Press
Cambridge, Massachusetts
London, England*

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Archive

25 Beatrixgasse, Vienna. Loos orders all the documents in his office to be destroyed as he leaves Vienna and settles in Paris in 1922. His collaborators Heinrich Kulka and Grethe Klimt-Hentschel gather the few fragments that remain and that will become the basis for the first book on Loos, *Adolf Loos: Das Werk des Architekten*, edited by Kulka and Franz Glück in 1931.¹ Over the years, more documents are found (but almost never complete). This collection of fragments will become the only evidence for generations of scholarship. As Burkhardt Rukschcio put it in 1980: "Today, on the 110th anniversary of Loos' birth, it can truly be said that we are unlikely ever to know more about his work. A sizeable part of his designs and projects has completely disappeared and we know of only some of the hundreds of interiors he did for homes."² All investigations of Loos have been marked by his removal of the traces. All of the writing is in, on, and around the gaps. It is even about those gaps, often being obsessed with them.

8–10 square du docteur Blanche, Paris. Le Corbusier decides very early on that every trace of his work, and of himself, should be kept. He saves everything: correspondence, telephone bills, electricity bills, laundry bills, bank statements, postcards, legal documents, court proceedings (he was often involved in lawsuits), family pictures, travel snapshots, suitcases, trunks, filing cabinets, pottery, rugs, shells, pipes, books, magazines, clippings from newspapers, mail order catalogues, samples, mechanical boards, every stage of every manuscript, drafts for lectures, doodles, scribbles, notebooks, sketchbooks, diaries . . . and, of course, his paintings, sculptures, drawings, and all the documentation of his projects. This collection, now housed in the La Roche-Jeanneret house as the Fondation Le Corbusier, has been the basis of a massive research into Le Corbusier culminating, perhaps, in the centennial celebrations of his birth in 1987. The immensity of the materials available has also generated a series of megapublications intended to make the contents of the archive public, including the *Le Corbusier Archive*, 32 volumes containing 32,000 drawings of architecture, urbanism, and furniture, which, as its editor, H. Allen Brooks, describes it, is “the largest architectural publication ever undertaken”; the four volumes of the *Le Corbusier Carnets*, which consist of the 73 notebooks filled with sketches realized between 1914 and 1964 and the transcription of the texts that accompany them; and *Le Corbusier, Viaggio in Oriente*, which chronicles the trip undertaken by Le Corbusier in 1910–1911 and which includes his report “Voyage d’Orient” and all the drawings, photographs, and correspondence of that period.³ Even the Centre Georges Pompidou’s choice of an encyclopedia as the form with which to commemorate the centennial of Le Corbusier’s birth is, in this regard, symptomatic.⁴ What other architect’s work (or artist’s) might have lent itself to such a treatment? This kind of exhaustive coverage was anticipated by Le Corbusier when, at the age of 42, he came out with the first volume of his *Oeuvre complète* (covering the years 1910–1929), to which seven further volumes were added over the years, with the last (1965–1969) covering the years after his death in 1965.⁵

Le Corbusier is probably the most written about architect of this century. The writing on Loos, on the other hand, began very slowly. While the first book on him was published in 1931, on the occasion of his sixtieth birthday,⁶ the second, *Der Architekt Adolf Loos* by Ludwig Münz and Gustav Künstler (which includes all the documents recovered since 1931 but is otherwise based on the earlier one), did not appear until 1964.⁷ Soon translated into English, it became the most influential source on Loos. In 1968, the Graphische Sammlung Albertina bought the documents from the estate of Münz and started the Adolf Loos Archive. And it was not until 1982 that Burkhardt Rukschcio and Roland Schachel came out with the monumental monograph *Adolf Loos, Leben und Werk*,⁸ which includes a complete catalogue of the work of Loos based on the Archive in the Albertina and on documents in three private collections. The authors of this book describe their enterprise as having been “truly the work of a detective”: the endless search for documents (which, they insist, is by no means finished, and how could it ever be?), a sweeping “raid” on the press of Loos’s time, conversations with Loos’s friends, clients, and colleagues. These last, they warn us, can not be trusted entirely: “Even in his closer collaborators and his most intimate friends, reality is often deformed by interpretations.” Consequently, these “subjective” and “anecdotal” contributions have been included only “after verification.”⁹ In a sense their book with all its gaps is the Adolf Loos archive (even in the police sense of “archive”).

If the research into Loos is organized by the gaps in the archive, the research into Le Corbusier is organized by archival excesses. Loos vacates a space and destroys all traces behind him. Le Corbusier fills a space ahead of him, but not just any space: a domestic space, literally a house. To think about Loos one has to occupy a public space, the space of publications, his own and others’, but also the space of word of mouth, hearsay, gossip, tips; the enigmatic space of circumstantial evidence. To think about Le Corbusier is necessarily to enter a private

space. But what does private mean here? What exactly is this space? And how does one enter it?

Square du docteur Blanche, a small cul-de-sac in Paris-Auteuil, an invaginated space, a street folded upon itself, a space halfway between a street and an interior, a private road. At the end of this dead-end street, number 8–10, Maison La Roche-Jeanneret, a double house, *deux maisons accouplées*, that Le Corbusier designed for Lotti Raaf and his brother Albert Jeanneret¹⁰ and for his patron the art collector Raoul La Roche in 1922, the same year that Loos arrived in Paris. Is 8–10 square du docteur Blanche private or public? A house or an exhibit, an archive or a library, an art gallery or a museum? The dilemma was already present in the original program, since La Roche had an art collection to display in the house; indeed the building was commissioned to “house” the paintings, and visitors used to sign in in a book by the door. Soon the issue of whether visitors were signing in for the paintings or for the house became blurred, at least for Le Corbusier, who would later recommend to Madame Savoye to leave a “golden book” by the entrance to her house too (even if she did not have an art collection displayed there): “You will see how many fine autographs you will collect. This is what La Roche does in Auteuil, and his Golden Book has become a veritable international directory.”¹¹

But where is this entrance?

No traditional entry presents itself. The house is L-shaped. The “pavillon La Roche,” behind a mesh security fence, closes the cul-de-sac, but since it is on pilotis the space of the street flows under the house. To the right, two small identical doors almost flush with the facade have a way of saying that we have nothing to look for in them. The protruding belly of La Roche’s gallery pushes the visitor away, back into the space of the street, while at the same time its curve points to the corner, to the hinge of the house where the fence has a small built-in door. Pass

through it. Now you see the driveway sweeping toward you. Perhaps the entrance was not clear because we were expected, as in the other houses of Le Corbusier, to arrive by car (in a way, leaving an “interior,” the car, for another, the modern house, in its turn inspired by the car). On the right the wall recedes, creating an entrance space. In the middle, hidden from the street view, you finally see the door.

In the *Oeuvre complète*, Le Corbusier goes out of his way to describe the entry into this house. It turns out to be all a matter of vision:

You enter: the architectural *spectacle* at once offers itself to the eye; you follow an itinerary and the views develop with great variety; you play with the flood of light illuminating the walls or creating half-lights. Large windows open up views on the exterior where you find again the architectural unity. In the interior the first attempts at polychromy . . . allow the “*camouflage architectural*,” that is, the affirmation of certain volumes or, the contrary, their effacement. Here, reborn for our modern eyes, are historic architectural events: pilotis, the horizontal window, the roof garden, the glass facade.¹²

To enter is to see. But not to see a static object, a building, a fixed place. Rather, architecture taking place in history, the events of architecture, architecture as an event. It is not so much that you enter architecture as that you see architecture’s entrance. The elements of modern architecture (pilotis, horizontal window, the roof garden, the glass facade) are seen being “born” in front of your eyes. And in so doing they make these eyes “modern.”

Modern eyes move. Vision in Le Corbusier’s architecture is always tied to movement: “You follow an itinerary,” a *promenade architecturale*. About this Le Corbusier will become more explicit in his Villa Savoye at Poissy (1929–1931):

Arab architecture gives us a precious lesson. It is appreciated by walking, on foot; it is by walking, by moving, that one sees the order of the architecture developing. It is a principle contrary to that of baroque architecture, which is conceived on paper, around a fixed theoretical point. I prefer the lesson of Arab architecture. In this house it's a question of a real architectural promenade, offering constantly changing views, unexpected, sometimes astonishing.¹³

The point of view of modern architecture is never fixed, as in baroque architecture,¹⁴ or as in the model of vision of the camera obscura, but always in motion, as in film or in the city. Crowds, shoppers in a department store, railroad travelers, and the inhabitants of Le Corbusier's houses have in common with movie viewers that they cannot fix (arrest) the image. Like the movie viewer that Benjamin describes ("no sooner has his eye grasped a scene than it is already changed"),¹⁵ they inhabit a space that is neither inside nor outside, public nor private (in the traditional understanding of these terms). It is a space that is not made of walls but of images. Images as walls. Or as Le Corbusier puts it, "walls of light."¹⁶ That is, the walls that define the space are no longer solid walls punctuated by small windows but have been dematerialized, thinned down with new building technologies and replaced by extended windows, lines of glass whose views now define the space.¹⁷ The walls that are not transparent now float in the space of the house rather than produce it. "Interrogated by Rasmussen about the entrance hall of the La Roche house, Le Corbusier answers that the most important element of the hall is the big window and that for that reason he had prolonged the upper edge of the window to match the parapet of the library."¹⁸ The window is no longer a hole in a wall, it has taken over the wall. And if, as Rasmussen points out, "the walls give the impression of being made out of paper," the big window is a paper wall with a picture on it, a picture wall, a (movie) screen.

Le Corbusier's basic definition of the primordial idea of the house—"The house is a shelter, an enclosed space, which affords protection against cold, heat and outside observation"—would have been commonplace if it had not included the question of the view. Seeing, for Le Corbusier, is the primordial activity in the house. The house is a device to see the world, a mechanism of viewing. Shelter, separation from the outside, is provided by the window's ability to turn the threatening world outside the house into a reassuring picture. The inhabitant is enveloped, wrapped, protected by the pictures. But how constrained these early windows were! laments Le Corbusier: the window is the "most restricted organ of the house." (Significantly, he says "organ" rather than element, because the window is thought of first and foremost as an eye.) Today the facade, no longer "constricted" by the old building technologies that made the wall responsible for bearing the load of the building,

fulfills its true destiny; it is the provider of light. . . . From this emerges the true definition of the house: stages of floors . . . all around them walls of light.

Walls of light! Henceforth the idea of the window will be modified. Till now the function of the window was to provide light and air and to be looked through. Of these classified functions I should retain one only, that of being looked through. . . . *To see out of doors, to lean out.*¹⁹

The modern transformation of the house produces a space defined by walls of (moving) images. This is the space of the media, of publicity. To be "inside" this space is only to see. To be "outside" is to be in the image, to be seen, whether in the press photograph, a magazine, a movie, on television, or at your window. It no longer has so much to do with a public space, in the traditional sense of a public forum, a square, or the crowd that gathers around a speaker in such a place, but with the audience that each medium of publication reaches, independent of

the place this audience might actually be occupying. But, of course, the fact that (for the most part) this audience is indeed at home is not without consequence. The private is, in this sense, now more public than the public.

Privacy is now what exceeds the eyes. That doesn't include what we used to think of as the private. As Roland Barthes put it: "The age of photography corresponds precisely to the irruption of the private into the public, or rather, to the creation of a new social value, which is the publicity of the private: the private is consumed as such, publicly (the incessant aggressions of the press against the privacy of stars and the growing difficulties of legislation to govern them testify to this movement)."²⁰ The private has become consumable merchandise. Maybe that explains why Baudelaire writes: "Your eyes lit up like shop windows." Even to look into the eyes, traditionally the only way to see into the private space of the mind, is now but to look at a public display. The eyes are no longer a "mirror of the soul" but its carefully constructed advertisement. As Nietzsche saw it: "No one dares to appear as he is, but masks himself as a cultivated man, as a scholar, as a poet, as a politician. . . . Individuality has withdrawn within: from without it has become invisible."²¹

If modern eyes are lit up like shop windows, so too are the windows of modern architecture. The picture window works two ways: it turns the outside world into an image to be consumed by those inside the house, but it also displays the image of the interior to that outside world. This shouldn't be confused with exposing one's privacy. On the contrary, we have all become "experts" on our own representation. In the same way that we meticulously construct our family history with snapshots, equally skillfully we represent our domesticity through the picture window.

The traditional sense of privacy is now not only scarce but endangered, under attack. It is better protected legally than with walls. This situation

may be traced back to the debates over the ownership of the image that developed with photography. The right to privacy has become the right to remain "out of the picture," which means not only out of the press photograph, of the gossip column, but also of the credit report and, most urgently, out of the disclosed medical record. That is, out of public view (or "access").²²

Modernity, then, coincides with the publicity of the private. But what kind of space results from this redrawing of boundaries? The space of the archive is very much affected by this transformation. In fact, this new reality is first and foremost a question of the archive. The archive has played an important role in the history of privacy, even in the history of history. The archive is private, history is public (the fact that today archives function mainly as clearinghouses for copyrights of the documents they hold only confirms this distinction). "Out" of the archive history is produced, but when writing history the utmost care is traditionally placed on producing a seamless account of the archive,²³ even though all archives are fractured and partial. The messy space of the archive is thus sealed off by a history. History then is a facade. Already in 1874, Nietzsche writes in "The Uses and Abuses of History":

The most characteristic quality of modern man [lies in] the remarkable antithesis between an interior which fails to correspond to any exterior and an exterior which fails to correspond to any interior—an antithesis unknown to the people of earlier times. . . .

We moderns [have become] walking encyclopedias. . . . With encyclopedias, however, all the value lies in what is contained within, in the content, not in what stands without, the binding and cover; so it is that the whole of modern culture is essentially interior; on the outside the bookbinder has printed some such thing as "Handbook of Interior Culture for Exterior Barbarians."²⁴

Significantly, the antithesis between interior and exterior is expressed by Nietzsche in terms of the home, what he calls “the disorderly, stormy and conflict-ridden *household*” that results from “memory” either trying to accommodate “these strange guests” which are our excessive historical knowledge, “a huge quantity of indigestible stones of knowledge,”²⁵ or alternatively memory “tidily storing away in its coffers” the “things worth knowing.” History is a public representation of this household.

“Forgetting is essential to action of any kind,” Nietzsche immediately goes on to argue. Loos seem to have understood as much when he destroyed all the documents in his studio. In a lecture given in 1926, he says:

Human works can be summed up in two actions: destruction and construction. And the bigger the destruction, the more human work is nothing other than destruction, the more it is truly human, natural, and noble. The concept of *gentleman* cannot be explained otherwise. The *gentleman* is a man who only carries out work with the help of destruction. The *gentleman* comes from the peasant class. The peasant only produces destructive work. . . . Who has never desired to destroy something?²⁶

Destruction is construction. Loos’s destruction of his traces has generated a massive work of reconstruction, an endless campaign for their recovery. A campaign into which, at first, only his closest friends and collaborators were drawn, but that would soon pass into the hands of another generation of compatriots equally devoted to the enterprise.²⁷ In this sense, Kulka’s book was the first stone in the building of Loos’s archive. If with Loos we go from the book into the archive, Le Corbusier follows the opposite strategy. He stores away everything. His obsession with filing cabinets is well known and well documented (in fact, even his filing cabinets have themselves been filed away in the Fondation Le Corbusier). But is not this filing away another way of “forgetting”?

What in the end makes Le Corbusier’s archive private is its capacity to hide things. Sometimes the best way to hide something is in full sight. Commenting on the choice of an encyclopedia as the form with which to celebrate Le Corbusier’s centennial, Jacques Lucan, the director of the work, writes:

The books, the articles, the studies devoted to Le Corbusier are almost innumerable. . . . This abundance finds a justification in the fact that perhaps no other artist has left to posterity, in a foundation created with that purpose, such an enormous number of documents concerning all his activity [public and private]. One would have thought that with the mass of documents available the task of historians and biographers would have been facilitated . . . that it would be possible to retrace his life . . . , the itineraries of his architectural and urban reflections. . . . Paradoxically, perhaps neither is possible.²⁸

The immensity of the traces makes the research a never-ending process, with new traces, or rather new ways of looking at these traces or even seeing them as traces for the first time, always producing new interpretations that displace the old. The encyclopedia, Lucan goes on to argue, does not enclose Le Corbusier precisely because each entry can send the reader through other entries “as in a chain without end,” in a way as if offering a “*promenade* through the articles.”²⁹

The space of Le Corbusier’s houses and the space of the histories of Le Corbusier would then have something in common. They are less about enclosure than about the entanglement of inside and outside, less about a traditional interior than about following an itinerary (no matter how many times redrawn, no matter how nonlinear), the enclosure resulting from the collage of fleeting images assembled as the reader moves through too much material, too many images, too many stimuli. And isn’t this precisely the experience of the modern city? The archive allows

the scholar to wander through the material as the flaneur wanders through the arcades of Paris, which are neither interior nor exterior.

Such a promenade necessarily involves a transformation of our sense of architecture. The way we think about architecture is organized by the way we think about the relationships between inside and outside, private and public. With modernity there is a shift in these relationships, a displacement of the traditional sense of an inside, an enclosed space, established in clear opposition to an outside. All boundaries are now shifting. This shifting becomes manifest everywhere: in the city, of course, but also in all the technologies that define the space of the city: the railroad, newspapers, photography, electricity, advertisements, reinforced concrete, glass, the telephone, film, radio, . . . war. Each can be understood as a mechanism that disrupts the older boundaries between inside and outside, public and private, night and day, depth and surface, here and there, street and interior, and so on.

What is "strange" about the "big city" to which, as Benjamin argues, people now have to "adapt" is the speed, the continuous movement, the sense that nothing ever stops, that there are no limits. Trains, traffic, films, and newspapers use the verb *run* to describe their very different activities. As in to "run" an ad in a newspaper. Even meeting somebody has become running into somebody. With this restless movement that effaces boundaries comes a new mode of perception that has become the trademark of modernity. Perception is now tied to transience.³⁰ If photography is the culmination of centuries of efforts to arrest the image, "to fix fleeting reflections," to use Benjamin's words, is it not somewhat paradoxical that once the fleeting image is fixed, the mode of perception is what becomes fleeting? Now the observer (the flaneur, the train traveler, the department store shopper) is what is transient. This transience, and the new space of the city in which it is experienced, cannot be separated from the new forms of representation.

For Benjamin, film is the form where these new conditions of perception, which "are experienced on an individual scale by the man in the street in big city traffic," find their "true form of exercise." The city will turn out to be a good stage for the movies. *The Man with the Movie Camera* by Dziga Vertov (1929), for example. This movie is often understood by film theorists to be about the way in which meaning is fabricated in film. In conventional film, the point of view is represented as "neutral," not visible, turning what you see into "reality." But with Vertov's movie there is seen to be a reversal of view and point of view. The subject's point of view comes after the view, making the viewer aware that what s/he sees is but a construction. But what all of this does not yet explain is why Vertov had to demonstrate this transformation with the city.

Realism in film is sometimes defined as a "window on the world." This is an architectural model, a traditional model of an interior with an unmediated view. But the space of the big city had already displaced the model of the room with a view, the model of the camera obscura. It is not by chance that Vertov will choose the city. His film makes clear that it is not just that the new space of the city is defined by the new technologies of representation; those technologies are also transformed by the city.

To think about modern architecture must be to pass back and forth between the question of space and the question of representation. Indeed, it will be necessary to think of architecture as a system of representation, or rather a series of overlapping systems of representation. This does not mean abandoning the traditional architectural object, the building. In the end, it means looking at it much more closely than before, but also in a different way. The building should be understood in the same terms as drawings, photographs, writing, films, and advertisements; not only because these are the media in which more often we encounter it, but because the building is a mechanism of representation

in its own right. The building is, after all, a "construction," in all senses of the word. And when we speak about representation we speak about a subject and an object. Traditionally, architecture is considered as an object, a bounded, unified entity established in opposition to a subject that is presumed to have an existence independent of it. Within modernity the object defines a multiplicity of boundaries between inside and outside. Inasmuch as these boundaries undermine each other, the object calls into question its own objecthood and therefore the unity of the classical subject presumed to be outside of it. It is in these terms that this book questions the ideological assumptions underlying our view of modern architecture.

The conventional view portrays modern architecture as a high artistic practice established in opposition to mass culture and to everyday life. It has focused on the internal life of the supposedly autonomous, self-referential object made available to a detached viewing subject, an art object. In so doing, it has neglected the overwhelming historical evidence of modern architecture's continuous involvement with mass culture. It is actually the emerging systems of communication that came to define twentieth-century culture—the mass media—that are the true site within which modern architecture is produced and with which it directly engages. In fact, one could argue (this is the main argument of this book) that modern architecture only becomes modern with its engagement with the media. Banham noted that the modern movement was the first movement in the history of art based exclusively on "photographic evidence" rather than on personal experience, drawings, or conventional books.³¹ While he was referring to the fact that the industrial buildings that became icons for the modern movement were not known to the architects from "direct" experience (only from photographs), the work of these architects themselves has become known almost always through photography and the printed media. This presupposes a transformation of the site of architectural production—no longer exclusively located on the construction site, but more and more displaced into the rather

immaterial sites of architectural publications, exhibitions, journals. Paradoxically, those are supposedly much more ephemeral media than the building and yet in many ways are much more permanent: they secure a place for an architecture in history, a historical space designed not just by the historians and critics but also by the architects themselves who deployed these media.

This book attempts to trace some of the strategic relationships between modern architecture and the media by looking at the work of the two canonic figures that articulate our view of the modern movement, one marking the threshold of this historical space but not crossing it, the other occupying and dominating the space. To rethink their work will necessarily be to rethink the architecture of that space. Perhaps no other modern architects have aroused so much speculation. If Loos destroys all traces and Le Corbusier accumulates too many, both hide. In so doing they have succeeded in generating an extraordinary amount of critical work. This book is not so much concerned with replacing the old space of modern architecture produced by this mountain of work. Rather it is a preliminary attempt to think about that old space and its limits, and to follow certain openings, tracing some leads but not to any single conclusion. Throughout its various trajectories, the book is not so much concerned with the relationship between architecture and the media as with the possibility of thinking of architecture as media.