

INTERNATIONAL STYLE DIASPORA: LE CORBUSIER'S *LE GROUPE TRANSVAAL*

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ABSTRACT

The philosophy and ideas of modern architecture, labeled the international style that originated in Europe were dispersed widely around the world. The theme in this paper is the transmission of the principles of modern architecture from Western Europe to one place, the tip of Africa. The new views were introduced into South Africa as early as 1925 and were continually applied until the early 1940s when local interpretation of these new views of architecture became apparent. Although Walter Gropius and Mies van de Rohe influenced the architects designing South African buildings during the 1930s and early 1940s, Le Corbusier held greater sway than these two internationally known architects. He named the close group of young architects who followed his way *le groupe Transvaal*. Their ideas were reinforced through visits to Paris, reading his books, and through publication of Le Corbusier's buildings in the local influential architectural journal.

THE INTERNATIONAL STYLE

After World War I there was a convergence of ideas about modern architecture in Germany, Holland, and France that eventually spread throughout the world. According to the account given by Hitchcock and Johnson (1966) the four great leaders of the new architecture were Walter Gropius, Mies van der Rohe, J.P.P. Oud, and Le Corbusier. Hitchcock and Johnson labeled this kind of architecture the *International Style* in a 1932 exhibition at the Museum of Modern Art in New York. The reference to *international* no doubt was influenced by the 1927 publications of Gropius' *Internationale Architektur* and Ludwig Hilberseimer's *Internationale Neue Baukunst*. At first the appellation "style" was disputed but later became a term commonly used (see, for example, Herbert, 1975).

In 1919 Walter Gropius took over as head of the Weimer School of Arts and Crafts from Henri van de Velde. Gropius renamed it the Bauhaus and in 1922 overhauled the curriculum to emphasize rational design. The change was influenced by two Constructivist oriented events, the international conference of avant-garde artists held in Dusseldorf and the Soviet design exhibition in Berlin. The meaning of modern architecture as understood then was explained clearly by Moisei Ginsburg, editor of the magazine *Contemporary Architecture* of the Association of New Architects founded in 1923. He stated that it was not an issue about style but the rational expression of structure in design, use of modern materials and construction methods, the standardization and prefabricating of building parts, and the industrialization of the building process. Functionalism, then, was to be the core of modern architecture. In 1924 conservative authorities forced the Bauhaus in Weimar to close. The following year Gropius relocated the school to Dessau where his design for the Bauhaus building became one of the landmark designs of the modern movement. Then in 1927 Mies van der Rohe organized the Werkbund exhibition in Stuttgart to present modern architecture to the public. In a small park he assembled an extraordinary collection of houses designed by various architects, including Mies himself, Gropius, Oud, and Le Corbusier. In the same year the first architectural course was added at the Bauhaus with Hannes Meyer as head.

In 1920 Charles-Edouard Jeanneret co-founded the journal *L'Esprit Nouveau* to publish articles on his and Amédée Ozenfant's philosophy of design. Their ideas included a post-cubist approach to purity of form with the rejection of past styles, enthusiasm for modern technology, and espousing theories of harmonious proportion. Jeanneret used the nom-de-plume Le Corbusier for his contributions to the journal. He published his articles in book form with the title *Vers Une Architecture* in 1923 (the English edition appeared with the title *Towards a New Architecture* in 1927). His early projects embraced two scales, the urban and the individual dwelling. In his designs for the Maison Citrohan (1922), Ozenfant's

Studio (1922), and the La Roche-Jeanneret house in Paris (1923), Le Corbusier displayed new ideas of domestic architecture. These included the dwelling as a simple cube with large areas of glazing, double-height living spaces, open plans, and concrete columns or *pilotis* that lifted the building off the ground. Reinforced concrete construction made all this possible. At the Exposition des Arts Décoratifs in Paris held in 1925, the exhibition that produced the name *Art Deco*, Le Corbusier's cubist Pavillon de l'Esprit Nouveau was the only one of two examples of Rationalist design. Among his building in the second half of the 1920s the Maison Stein at Garches (1927) and the Villa Savoye at Poissy (1929) in particular were among Le Corbusier's finest house designs in his so-called Purist manner. Le Corbusier's winning competition entry for the Centrosoyus (Co-Operative) Building in Moscow (1929-34) was among a number of fine rationalist design submissions. His designs for the Cité de Refuge (1929-33), a Salvation Army hostel, and the communal Pavillon Suisse (1930-32) for Swiss students at the Cité Universitaire in Paris were significant influences on the design of working-class housing. *Pilotis* and a glazed staircase tower were prominent features of the Pavillon building. As he described in his *Towards a New Architecture* the principles of architecture ("three reminders to architects") are mass, surface, and plan. "The plan is the generator" of both mass and surface, with order provided by "regulating lines of measurement" (Le Corbusier, 1965).

DIASPORA

At the beginning of the 1920s there were already signs that the ideas of modern architecture had spread beyond the Germany-Holland-France triangle. In the international competition for the Chicago Tribune Tower building (1922), for example, the modernist design of Gropius and Meyer stood apart from the winning gothic-style entry by Hood and Howell. Between 1926 and 1928 rationalist design was advanced by architects such as Johannes Duiker in Hilversum, Erich Mendelsohn in Stuttgart, and Ludvik Kysela in Prague. In Russia rationalism, associated with the Association of New Architects, began in 1923 but ended in 1930 with the last modernist design, Ilya Golossov's Pravda building (1930-34), and the imposition of traditionalism. Peter Behrens introduced the modern approach in Britain in 1926 with his simple cubist design for the New Ways house in Northampton. There were many other modern building designs built in England during the 1930s (Risebero, 1985). An exhibition held in Stockholm in 1930 introduced the new architecture to the Scandinavian countries. In America, where the Ecole des Beaux Arts approach prevailed, there were only a few architects in the country who had studied at the Bauhaus. An exhibition on modern architecture held in New York in 1932 attracted considerable attention even though only a few American architects were included. The title of the parallel book published by Henry Russell Hitchcock and Philip Johnson gave it a new name, *The International Style*. In Europe leading architects united to form the *Congrès Internationaux d'Architecture Moderne* (CIAM) to assert the internationalism of architecture. The first meeting was held in the old Chateau de la Sarraz, Switzerland, in 1928. Meetings were held in various places after that with the last one in being held in 1953.

Gropius, Oud, and to larger degree Le Corbusier, frequently published their projects and executed buildings that carried the principles of the new architecture abroad. Hitchcock and Johnson (1966) maintained that the influence of Le Corbusier was greater than the others. He achieved this mainly by what they call the "vehement propaganda" of his ideas. Through his many publications Le Corbusier's name became almost synonymous with the new architecture. The architectural historian Gideon was of the opinion that Le Corbusier's articles in *L'Esprit Nouveau* had "a formative influence upon the thought of the period" (1959, 522). Even Gropius remarked that Le Corbusier's "architectural and literary work [was] of an astonishingly wide scope which made a profound impression on the young generation in every country" (1962, 63). Le Corbusier's writings, as well as his buildings, influenced architects not only in Europe but in many countries abroad. While a whole following in Germany revolved around the Bauhaus and Gropius' cooperative approach to architecture in France, on the other hand, Le Corbusier's individualism dominated and no new school arose there. Students from all over the world came to

Europe to learn about the new architecture. They made the pilgrimage to the Bauhaus where they learned they needed "to start from zero." Some visited Le Corbusier in Paris at his Rue de Sèvres atelier.

LE GROUPE TRANSVAAL

Modernism can be said to have begun in the South African province of the Transvaal with the arrival from Britain of A. Stanley Furner in July 1925. He came from the Bartlett School of Architecture in London to take up a faculty position in the recently established (1921) School of Architecture at the University of the Witwatersrand in Johannesburg. A few months after his arrival he published a short paper on "The Modern Movement in Architecture" in the journal, *South African Architectural Record* (Furner, 1925). This was an extraordinary paper and an early inquiry into modern architecture in comparison to other countries in the diaspora, and even with those within Europe itself. The influence of Le Corbusier was evident in the paper in addition to the fact that Furner had brought a copy of the book *Vers Une Architecture* with him. In 1926 he was appointed editor of the *Record* and over the next three years of his editorship brought the attention of modernism to the country's architectural profession. He contributed much of the material himself that included book reviews and surveys of architectural magazines from abroad. Paradoxically while he introduced the radical ideas of modern architecture to practitioners through the journal and to the students that he taught, Furner's own designs for buildings were remarkably restrained (Herbert, 1967). In 1926 two of Furner's students, Gordon McIntosh and Rex Martienssen, visited England, France, Holland, and Belgium. They returned with enthusiasm for the new architecture and revelations of rational design (Martienssen, 1942). Martienssen began to read intensely on modern architecture. McIntosh graduated in 1927. When Furner left his position as full-time lecturer in the School of Architecture at the end of 1928 to enter private practice, Martienssen spent the fourth practical year of his studies in Furner's office. The practice was later named Kallenbach, Kennedy & Furner.

In early 1930 Martienssen set off again for Europe accompanied this time by Norman Hanson who had entered his architectural studies in 1926. Highlights of their trip were a visit to the Deutscher Werkbund Exhibition, seeing Le Corbusier's houses at the Weissenhof *Siedlung*, and the purchase of Le Corbusier's latest publication, *Gesamtes Werk von 1910-1929*. It appears that Martienssen was not inspired by the work of Mies van der Rohe. His reaction to the work of Gropius "was lukewarm" which would account for his not visiting Dessau (Herbert, 1975, 51) (Figures 1-4). Before Martienssen graduated in May 1930, the *South African Architectural Record* published a lecture he had given on "Architecture and Modern Life," a fully fledged statement on modernism (Martienssen, 1929). He began to teach at the School of Architecture in 1931 and became involved in editing the *South African Architectural Record*. In January 1932 the journal became a monthly issue with Martienssen in full control as virtual editor. In the promotion of modern architecture in South Africa this journal came to play the same role as the *L'Esprit Nouveau*, and the *Maanblad de Stijl*, had in Europe (Chipkin, 1993).

Thus the "seedbed of the new movement in South Africa was the School of Architecture at the University of the Witwatersrand; its principal forum was the *South African Architectural Record*" (Herbert, 1975, 1). As publicist and teacher Martienssen took the intellectual leadership in the promotion of the new architecture. In the December 1931 issue of the journal his path-breaking article "The International Tendency in Contemporary Architecture" appeared. Selected modernist designs of students from the annual prize day at the Witwatersrand School of Architecture also began to be published in the journal. The first local executed building in the international style to be published in the *Record* (June, 1932) was House Munro designed by Gordon McIntosh. When Hanson and his colleagues Tomkin and Finkelstein graduated in 1932 they immediately formed a partnership. Their first published work in the *Record* was the international style House Saffer (September, 1932) (Figure 6; Figure 7).

In January 1934 Martienssen was again in Europe and visiting Le Corbusier at his atelier in Paris for the first time. The normally brusque Le Corbusier was visibly impressed by the examples of South African modern architecture shown him by Martienssen in copies of the *South African Architectural*

Record and the one issue of the *Zerohour* publication he had brought with him. Le Corbusier gave Martienssen letters of introductions to visit his buildings and also diagrams of their location (Figure 5). After the visit Martienssen wrote the "genius of Le Corbusier is today the greatest single influence in contemporary architecture ... His superb projects ... inaugurate a truly international architecture" (Herbert, 1975, 101). He also wrote a polemic defending Le Corbusier's principles - for example, form as fundamental, functional spaces, freed plans and facades (Martienssen, 1934). The meeting of the two men was significant as it reinforced Martienssen's dedication to Le Corbusier and provided a link between a major source of modern architecture in Europe with a country in the diaspora. For years afterwards Martienssen sent a stream of young architects from South Africa to visit Le Corbusier's in his studio on Rue de Sèvres. Le Corbusier called these architects from Johannesburg and Pretoria *le groupe Transvaal* (Chipkin, 1993, 178). Rex Martienssen, Gordon McIntosh, and Norman Hanson constituted core members of the group. This trio formed the advanced guard of the modern movement. Other members of the group were John Fassler, Bernard Cooke, Monte Bryer, Duncan Howie, Colin Sinclair, Nora Coaton, and Alan Wilson. A student group comprised Kurt Jonas, Roy Kantorowich, and Heather Bush. Le Corbusier kept in touch with the Transvaal group as he did with others in Moscow, Rio de Janeiro, and Algiers.

After his return to Johannesburg from Europe in 1934, Martienssen established a partnership with his university colleague John Fassler and practitioner Bernard Cooke, both of whom had graduated from the University of the Witwatersrand in March, 1933. The partnership, which only lasted eighteen months, designed a few notable buildings in the international style (Figure 8) but their Corbusian House Stern (1934-35) (Figures 9 & 10) must be regarded as the pinnacle of their work. By remarkable coincidence two extremely fine examples of rationalist architecture were built adjacent to one another. These were Peterhouse (1934-35) by Martienssen, Fassler & Cooke and Hotpoint House (1934-35) by the Hanson, Tomkin & Finkelstein partnership (Figures 11 & 12). By the end of 1936 *le groupe Transvaal* had produced a considerable number of designs in the international style.

On the intellectual front Le Corbusier's influence was clearly evident. He acknowledged the role that the Transvaal group were playing in a letter published in the November 1936 issue of the *South African Architectural Record*. The bond between the master and the group was emphasized after Bryer attended the Fifth Congress of CIAM held in Paris in 1937. He wrote back that the Congress was "widely known as the Le Corbusier school" (Herbert, 1975, 186). A few months afterwards Martienssen received international recognition when he was elected a member of this association. He renewed personal contact with Le Corbusier in a highly stimulating meeting when he again visited Europe in February 1938. While the *groupe* remained the core of the modern movement in architecture they were slowly augmented by students graduating from the architecture programs in Johannesburg and Pretoria. Modern architecture also received wider public exposure through the publication of the modernist design submissions in the Ideal Homes exhibitions, held between 1934 and 1938, in the *Rand Daily Mail* and Johannesburg *Star* newspapers. Martienssen by this time had turned his attention away from practice and more towards scholarship. His publications included a major paper on "Constructivism and Architecture" (1941).

In city planning the group followed Le Corbusier's theories and urban plans. The problem of planning was seen as architecture writ large, as a question of "civic" or urban design. This was evident in the Town Planning Congress held at the University of the Witwatersrand in July 1938, directed by Kurt Jonas of the Architectural Society, and the two town planning projects on exhibition (Herbert, 1975, 232ff.). *Le groupe Transvaal* worked together on the one project, their first planning project, a new business center for Cape Town. The other project was a model township for the indigenous population designed by architecture students. Le Corbusier even provided an opening message for the Congress. Although Jonas (1938) was aware of the social and economic issues of planning, it was the non-architect members of the Congress who drew attention to these matters, and those of the problems of low cost housing.

CONCLUSION

During the 1930s, then, a small group of *avant garde* architects designed buildings in the new architecture of the international style. Although influenced by Walter Gropius and Mies van der Rohe they owed their allegiance to Le Corbusier. With the onset of World War II and the changes it wrought the group essentially disbanded. "The monolithic character of the [modern] movement gave way to diversification, the single style fragmented in a multiplicity" (Herbert, 1975, 231) (Figure 13). The international style designs of *le groupe Transvaal*, and others, now reached both a culmination and turning point (Chipkin, 1993, 169-177). Hanson's design for his own house (1939) marked the fulfillment of the rationalist style in its pure form (Figure 14). Hanson Tomkin and Finkelstein designs reached an apogee in Reading Court (1936), a building raised on *pilotis*, with long cantilevered balconies, curvilinear screen walls separating bedroom and living outdoor areas, and circular columns rising off ground and continuing vertically to the top of the building. In their design for Denstone Court (1937) the interplay of forms on roof was a dominant feature. Aiton Court (1937), by Stewart and Cooke, similarly was a building raised on *pilotis*, with projecting balconies and a roof solarium. Harold H. le Roith's design for Washington House (1938), a narrow office building, included a black painted cylindrical column on the facade rising from the ground floor right up to the roof canopy. His Dunkeld Mansions (1937-40) had large cylindrical *pilotis* supporting the main block above. Hanson's design with Cowin for the 20th Century Cinema (1939-40) (Figure 15) and Harold H. le Roith's Dunkeld Mansions, with its curved balcony parapet walls, displayed signs of a modified style that came to characterize late modern architecture in South Africa.

Martienssen's second version of his own House Greenside (1939-40) clearly showed a departure from the strict architectural principles of the international style (Figure 16). Although aspects of formalism and functionalism were evident he introduced emotional or aesthetic considerations. In a lengthy article he described architect's own houses, such as those by Walter Gropius, Marcel Breuer, of course Le Corbusier, and many other prominent architects, as a prelude to the depiction of his own house (Martienssen, 1942). His premature death at the young age of 37 in 1942 was an irreplaceable loss not only as the intellectual force of the *le groupe Transvaal* but to the modern architecture movement in South Africa as a whole. The October, 1944 issue of the London-based *Architectural Review* on South Africa signaled the end of *le groupe Transvaal* and the purity of the international style of architecture in South Africa.

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ILLUSTRATION DESCRIPTIONS

FIGURES 1 & 2

The designs of Walter Gropius, Mies van der Rohe, and early Le Corbusier work as they appeared in the *South African Architectural Record* (SAAR): Figure 1 in August, 1936; Figure 2 in January 1936; & Figure 3 in August, 1936.

FIGURES 3 & 4

The facade of the **House at Paris** depicts an early example of Le Corbusier's trademark features of *pilotis*, ribbon windows, and roof garden. The **Villa Stein** was noted for its asymmetrical composition, covered terraces, and simple rectilinear volume with projecting canopy over the entrance, cubic balconies, and ribbon windows.

[Other Le Corbusier buildings described in the *Record*, not shown here, included the **Villa Savoye** with its abstract form, severe symmetry, and all functions in one volume. Attention was also drawn to the **Pavillon Suisse's** curvilinear stair-tower, single-pane inset windows, and contrasting rubble wall. Martienssen observed that in the **Cite de Refuge** there was a clear articulation of primary forms, that the glass window wall was independent of its structure and that "Le Corbusier has freed the plan and freed the facade by keeping the functions of support and envelopment separate" (SAAR, July 1934, 173).]

FIGURE 5

In a handwritten note dated 4 January 1934, Le Corbusier provided Martienssen an introduction to the owner of House Stein along with directions to the dwelling.

FIGURE 6

House Saffer had clear separation of living, sleeping, and service functions joined together by a central means of circulation. Space flowed between the living room, breakfast room, and the dining area in the semicircular niche. The free planning continued in the bedroom wing.

FIGURE 7

In **House Harris** Le Corbusier's influence predominated and is almost a derivative of the Citrohan House. A sleeping porch of the main bedroom on the first floor was cut out of the cubist mass while a small cantilevered balcony opened out from the guest room. This design also reflected Le Corbusier's *Three Reminders for Architects - Mass, Surface, and Plan* (1965, 28).

FIGURE 8

House McLea displayed Corbusian *pilotis* supporting a bedroom wing above and clear separation of functions.

FIGURE 9 & 10

House Stern had a rounded stair-tower, a form borrowed from Le Corbusier, that became a hallmark in other international style houses in Johannesburg.(Chipkin, 1993, 166). Other prominent features seen here were the free floor plan, the paved roof terrace, the diagonal external staircase, and bedroom wing supported on *pilotis*. This house illustrated Le Corbusier's five principles (Gideon, 1957).

FIGURES 11 & 12

Both **Peterhouse** and **Hotpoint House** featured projecting balconies punctuating the planar geometry of the facade. The V-support followed the entrance link at the Salvation Army building and at the Villa La

Roche. Hotpoint House had a showroom on the first two floors with apartments above. These two buildings illustrated the “Three principles of the International Style” (Hitchcock & Johnson, 1966).

FIGURE 13

Radoma Court featured a gentle concave, freestanding stair-tower with a glass brick end wall, and a curved solarium wall on the roof. The glazed tile parapet walls of the balconies became a characteristic of apartment designs in Johannesburg.

FIGURE 14

House Hanson. Hanson payed tribute to Gropius, Mies van der Rohe, and even Richard Neutra, but major attribution was to Le Corbusier.(Chipkin, 1993, 166). As with House Stern there was a circular staircase and a bedroom cube raised on *pilotis*.

FIGURE 15

The **20th Century Cinema** was a multi-use corner building with a cinema on one side and a showroom with offices above on the other. The design was a reflection of the development of a local architecture. While the office block side was Corbusian with its egg-crate *brise-soleil* elevation the cinema side was dominated by a very large blank rectilinear form in brick with a superimposed fine-line neon logo (the number “20”) integrated into the facade design. The rectilinear form was supported by cylindrical columns that sit on an upper-level wall finished in glazed tiling.

FIGURE 16

The front facade of **House Martienssen** was described by the architect himself: “The frame provides essential protection from direct sunlight and weather, the balcony provides a psychological extension of the study - it suggests freedom to a front floor room; the jutting windows have deep shelves internally for flowers or pottery” (Martienssen, 1942, 40). Martienssen's adaptations to the international style were the white projecting rectilinear frame of the front facade, white projecting window frames, and the facebrick finish.

SOURCES OF ILLUSTRATIONS

South African Architectural Record, various dates: Figures 1,2,3,8,9,10,11,12,15.

Chipkin, 1993: Figures 4,5,13,14,16.

Herbert, 1975: Figures 6,7.

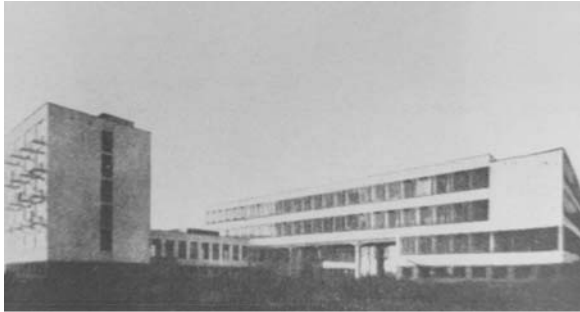


Figure 1

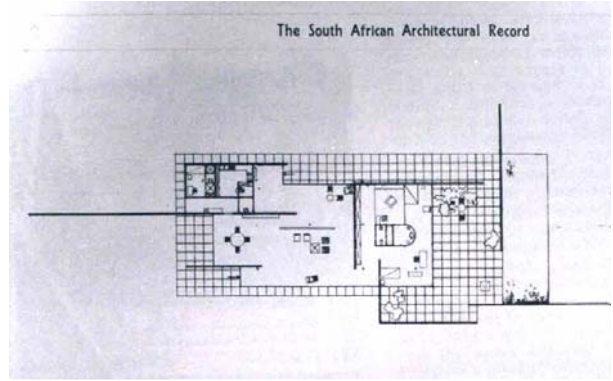


Figure 2



Figure 3



Figure 4

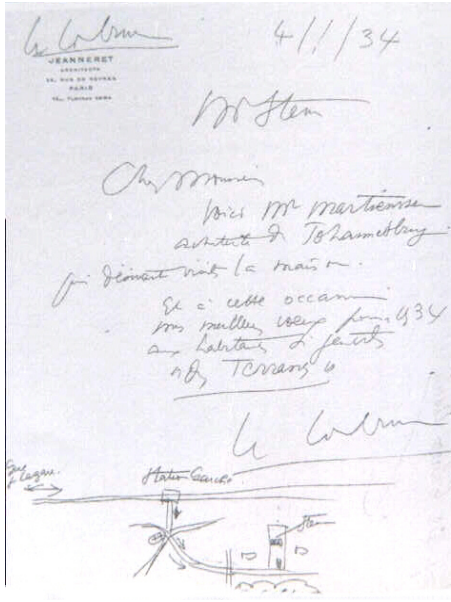


Figure 5

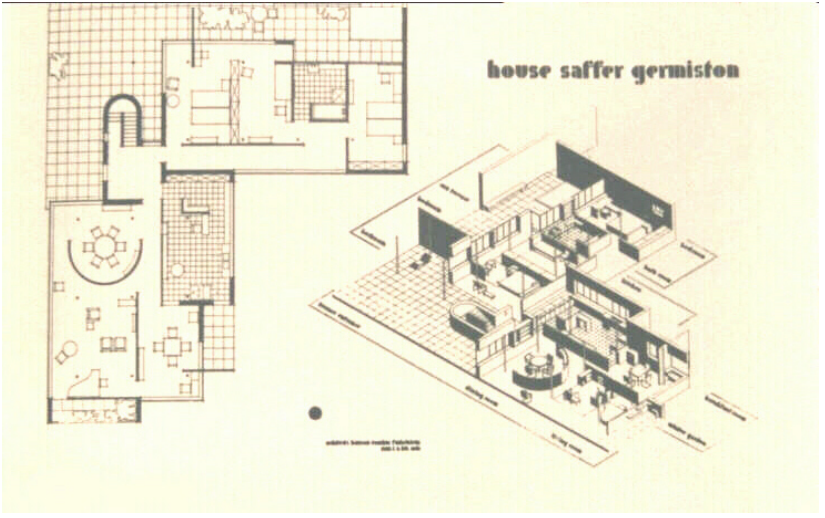


Figure 6

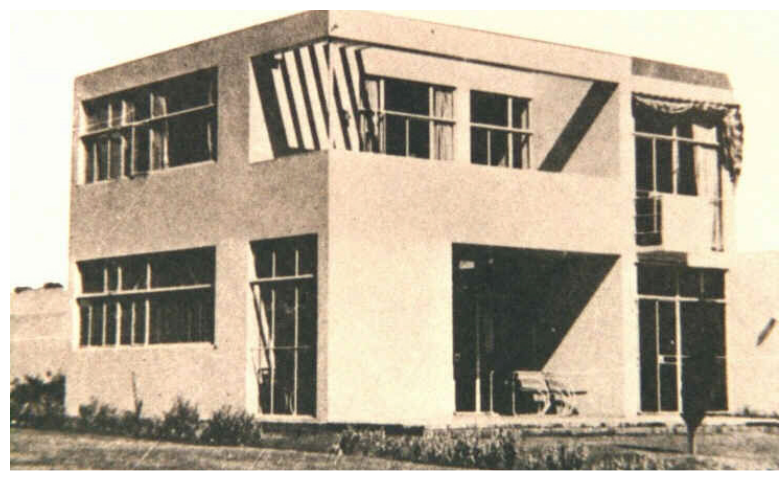


Figure 7

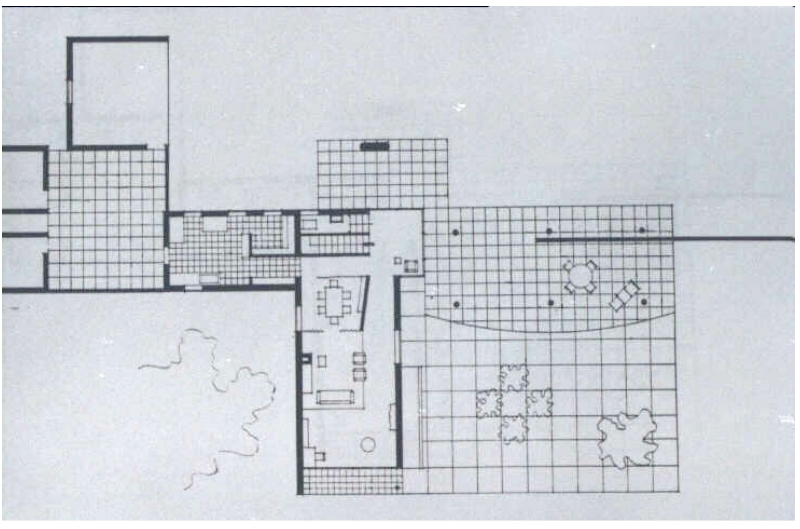


Figure 8

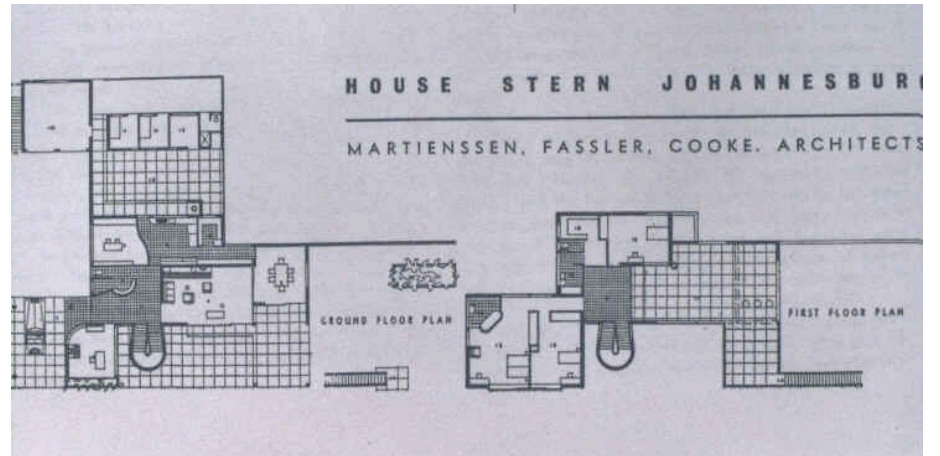


Figure 9



Figure 10

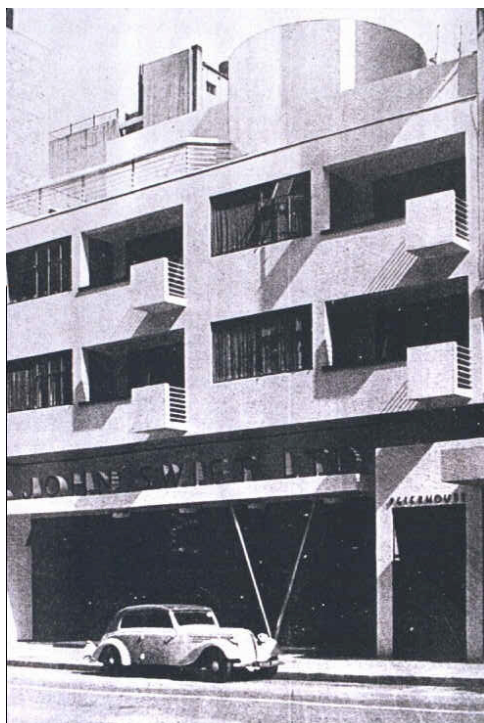


Figure 11

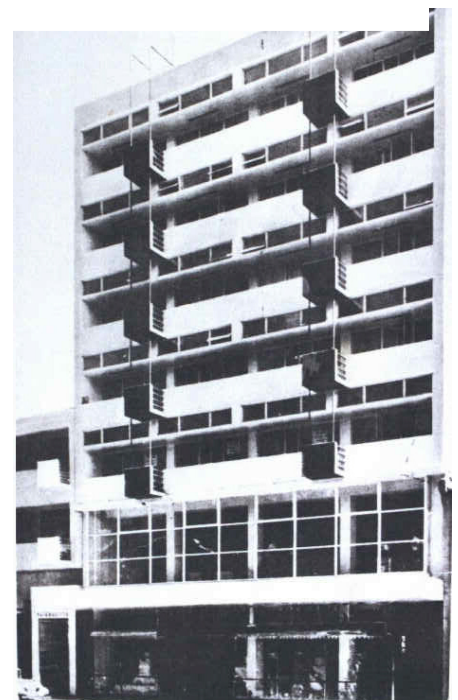


Figure 12

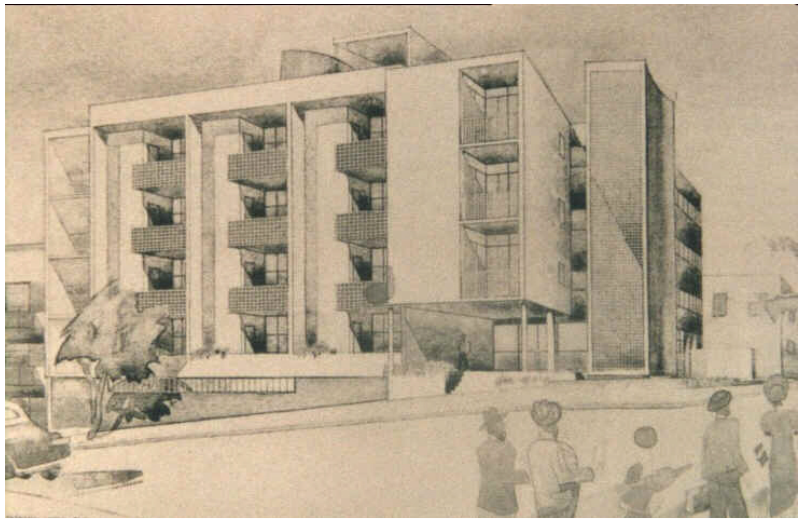


Figure 13

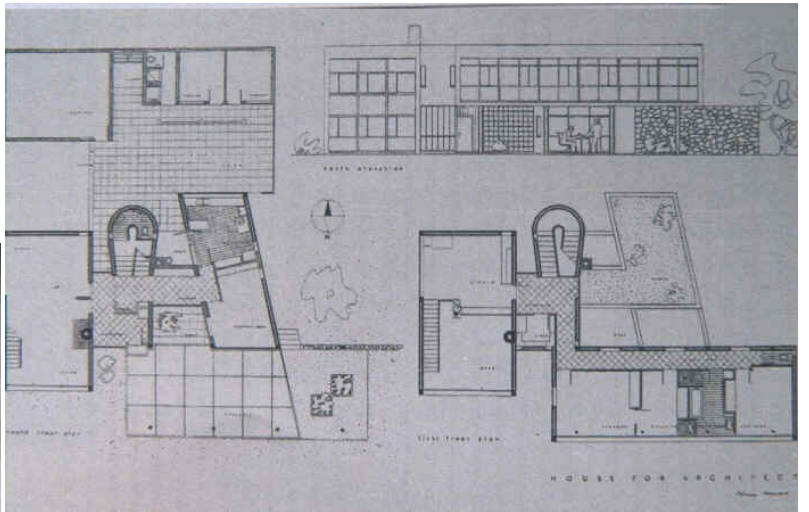


Figure 14



Figure 15



Figure 16