

# Modernism or Mannerism: Villa Stein-de Monzie and the Updating Knowledge of Modern Architecture

In Le Corbusier's didactic *Œuvre Complète 1910–1929*, Villa Stein-de Monzie at Garches, France (designed from 1926 to 1927, and built from 1927 to 1928), is an intriguing piece of work.

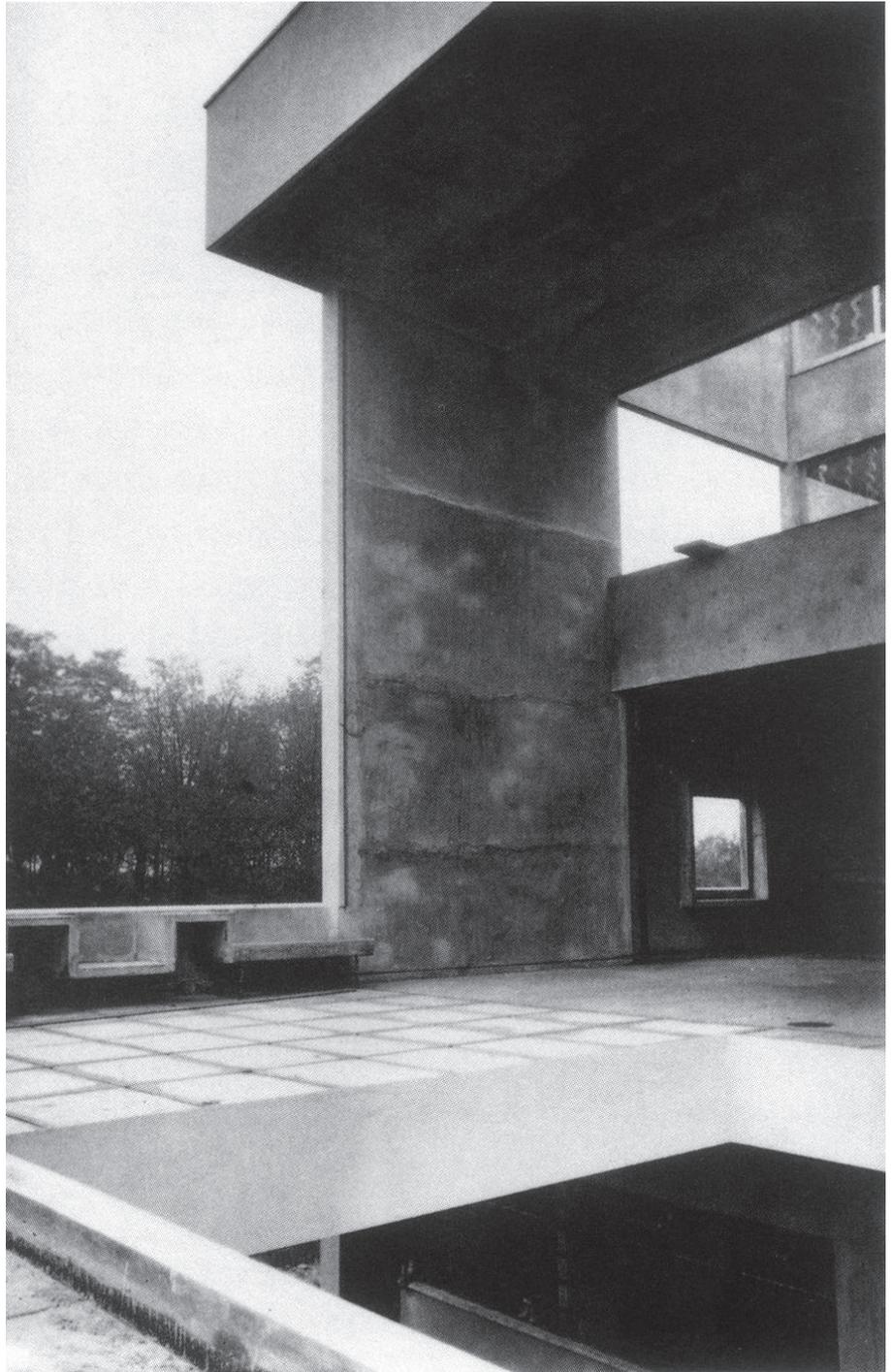
ZHENGYANG HUA  
Iowa State University

It, according to the mercurial architect himself, typified a very difficult composition.<sup>1</sup> Yet, without further explanation given for that, the emphasis was placed on the structural performance, functional arrangement, mathematical precision, and implementation of the celebrated five points.<sup>2</sup> These all contributed to a new architecture diametrically opposed to the academicism that he condemned for stylistic pastiche and negligence in realities.<sup>3</sup> A few progressive historians in the late 1920s such as Sigfried Giedion immediately noticed this house, accepting its formal manifestations as crystallization of Modern Architecture—reference to historical styles was eliminated and a new aesthetic was taking shape.<sup>4</sup> Nonetheless, in 1947, Colin Rowe, then a graduate student, not only revealed certain unexpected similarities between Villa Stein-de Monzie and Palladio's Villa Foscari, but also identified their crucial differences.<sup>5</sup> Those parallels suggested that instead of eclectic stylization there were other meaningful approaches to precedents. Those distinctions implied that modernist space still awaited extended interpretations. Moreover, the complexities of Villa Stein-de Monzie exposed in Rowe's analysis bear close resemblance to the mannerist expression that three years later he would investigate and astonishingly associate with Modern Architecture.<sup>6</sup> A textbook case of Modernism may uncannily turn out to be an inopportune variant of Mannerism.

Here some attempt will be made to conduct a brief but fundamental review of the respective comments on Villa Stein-de Monzie by Sigfried Giedion and Colin Rowe. From the former to the latter, besides deepened insights into the building itself, broadened is the understanding of Modern Architecture, particularly with respect to the idea of architectural space and the notion of architectural history.

## MODERNIST "SPACE-TIME": SIGFRIED GIEDION'S CONCEPTUALIZATION

Sigfried Giedion, the author of *Space, Time, and Architecture: The Growth of a New Tradition* and the first secretary-general of the Congrès International d'Architecture Moderne (CIAM), is commonly known as "the official historian of the Modern Movement".<sup>7</sup> He always wanted to convey a vision of a modern architecture that renounced the traditional values of the



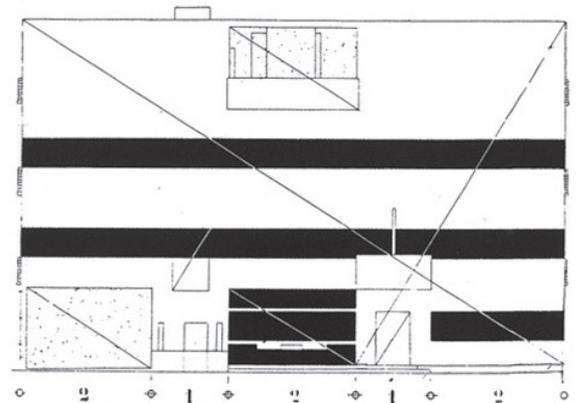
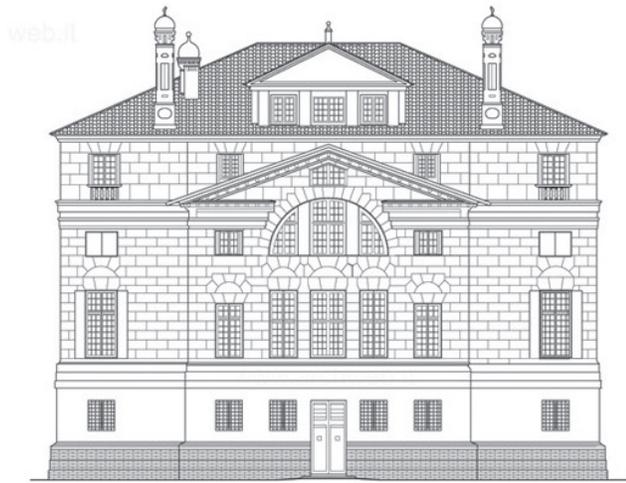
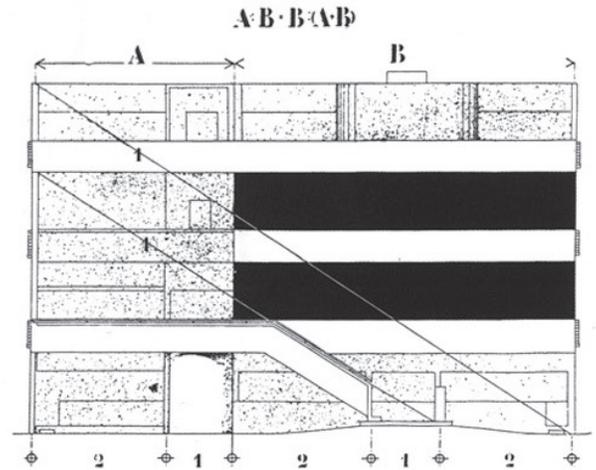
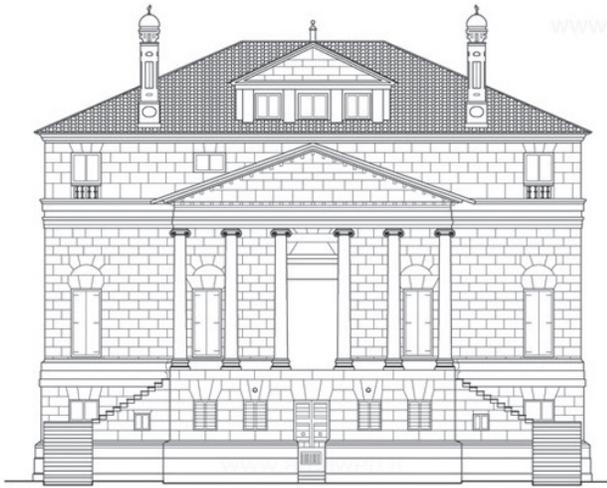
1

Figure 1: The Terrace of Villa Stein-de Monzie, showing air penetration that crushes the building volume, Photo from Sigfried Giedion, *Building in France, Building in Iron, Building in Ferroconcrete*, trans. J. Duncan Berry, (Santa Monica, Cal.: Getty Center for the History of Art and the Humanities, 1995), 182.

discipline and attained a genuine synthesis under contemporary conditions. Villa Stein-de Monzie is one example that he regarded as a notable contribution towards the emergence of a new architecture.

In the 1928 book *Bauen in Frankreich, Bauen in Eisen, Bauen in Eisenbeton*, Sigfried Giedion observed that Villa Stein-de Monzie far exceeded its “cubic dimensions”. It “attacked the facade of the building with enormous boldness”, and was “so penetrated with air that one can almost speak of a crushing of the actual house volume”. In those terraces and bridges, he found that there was “an almost balanced manipulation of spaces and particles of space that





3

Figure 3: The Comparison between Villa Foscari and Villa Stein-de Monzie, Drawings from Le Corbusier, *Œuvre Complète 1910–1929*, eds. Willy Boesiger, et al, (Basel: Birkhäuser, 1995), 144; [http://www.archweb.it/dwg/architettura\\_del\\_passato/Andrea\\_Palladio/Villa\\_Foscari\\_malcontenta.htm](http://www.archweb.it/dwg/architettura_del_passato/Andrea_Palladio/Villa_Foscari_malcontenta.htm).

at Dessau, Germany (1926), whose overlapping planes, transparency, interpenetration of interior and exterior were supposedly comparable to those in the cubist painting *L'Arlésienne* (1911–12). Hence he asserted that modern architects followed modern artists' steps, replacing the old with the new completely.

It is now evident that Sigfried Giedion regarded Villa Stein-de Monzie highly primarily because apart from eschewing stylistic elements the building embodied the interpenetration of inner and outer space, which is essential to "space-time", or the spirit of modern age.

Sigfried Giedion was criticized by later architectural historians and theorists for his historical determinism and "space-time".<sup>14</sup> Nonetheless, his ideas, more programmatic than historiographic, were typical of the protagonists of Modern Architecture. To them, an irrevocable break with tradition and a rise of new paradigm were emphatically assumed; a meaning of being modern was attached to a new set of forms.

### MANNERIST AMBIGUITY: COLIN ROWE'S ANALYSIS

When it became universally accepted after the Second World War, a few sharp minds sought to subject Modern Architecture to a rigorous examination, and Colin Rowe was among the pioneers. His comparison between Villa Stein-de Monzie by Le Corbusier and Villa Foscari by Palladio is provocative.

While it seems facetious to bring the two—one modern, the other classical—together, the similarities of the massing and the structural bay are not difficult to see. (Fig. 2) Both Villa Foscari and Villa Stein-de Monzie are single blocks with variations in roofs, each measuring 8 units in length, 5.5 units in width, and 5 units in height. Furthermore, their structural bays are rather comparable. Each building reveals as well as conceals an alternating rhythm of 2:1:2:1:2 on the front and back, and a tripartite distribution (5.5 units) with a projecting element (1.5 units) on the sides. In addition, each house puts the main floor on the second level.

Then the approximate configurations are transformed differently. At Villa Foscari, the main floor is symmetrically and hierarchically organized. In the center, there is a cruciform hall with an outward portico in the front, which constitutes the major axis; at each end, there is a suite of three rooms and one staircase. A cross minor axis is evident by means of the doors of the cruciform hall and the windows on the side walls. At Villa Stein-de Monzie, the situation is complex. The main floor is asymmetrically balanced. A central living room, which replaces the cruciform hall at Villa Foscari, is combined with a dining hall and a library to form a Z shape. A terrace in the left lower corner (3 units), which corresponds to the portico at Villa Foscari (5 units) but lacks perceptible relationship to the central living room, is an inward volume diagonally echoed by a kitchen in the right upper corner. One staircase occupies a position like its counterpart at Villa Foscari; the other is moved and turned 90 degrees. A cross movement is implied fragmentally by the windows on the side walls, but obstructed by other interior partitions. A re-reading of the structural bays on the sides also introduces difference. At Villa Foscari, the spatial interval proceeds in the ratio of 1.5:2:2:1.5, with an emphasis on the cruciform hall and the portico. At Villa Stein-de Monzie, it proceeds in the sequence of 1.5:0.5:1.5:1.5:1.5:0.5, equally without any prominence.

The elevations are quite dissimilar. At Villa Foscari, the front and back elevations fall into three divisions vertically and horizontally. Vertically, they are solid walls pierced by openings with outer subsidiary accents and a central highlight strengthened by the upper pediments. Horizontally, they are separated into the base, the main floor and the attic. A symmetrical and hierarchical organization is obvious. At Villa Stein-de Monzie, the situation is, again, complex. The garden and entrance elevations are a series of horizontal strips with equal interest in both center and end. On the garden elevation, the terrace and the roof pavilion, which correspond to the portico and the upper pediment at Villa Foscari, are displaced to suppress symmetry. On the entrance elevation, a central element on the fourth floor corresponds to the upper pediment at Villa Foscari, but the development within itself is not symmetrical. Though it echoes the central window on the first floor, the horizontal gashes of the windows at the bottom prohibit any linking of the two. No symmetry is promoted at all.

Furthermore, the roofs are different. The roof of Villa Foscari, a pyramidal solid, is additive. The roof of Villa Stein, a flat surface, is subtractive.

Colin Rowe then claimed, "Le Corbusier... would appear also, sometimes, to be tinged with a comparable historicism. For his plans he seems to find at least one source... in the ingenious planning of the Rococo hotel... one may often discover in a Beaux Arts utilization of an irregular site, elements which if they had not preceded Le Corbusier might seem to be curiously reminiscent of his own highly suave vestibules and boudoirs. Le Corbusier admires the Byzantine and the anonymous architecture of the Mediterranean world; and there is also present with him a purely French delight in the more overt aspects of mechanics."<sup>15</sup> He

## ENDNOTES

1. Le Corbusier, *Œuvre Complète 1910–1929*, eds. Willy Boesiger et al, (Basel: Birkhäuser, 1995), 189. The first edition was published in 1930. Le Corbusier briefly referred to four compositions in his housing designs at the time. The type that Villa Stein-de Monzie represented was simply called “très difficile (satisfaction de l’esprit)” (“very difficult (satisfaction of the spirit”).
2. *Ibid*, 140–149. See also, Le Corbusier, *Precisions on the Present State of Architecture and City Planning*, trans. Edith Aujame, (Cambridge, Mass.: The MIT Press, 1991), 72–73, 97, 134. The original French edition was published in 1930.
3. *Ibid*, 6, 11–13.
4. Sigfried Giedion, *Building in France, Building in Iron, Building in Ferroconcrete*, trans. J. Duncan Berry, (Santa Monica, CA: Getty Center for the History of Art and the Humanities, 1995), 180, 182–184. This book was originally published in German in 1928. See also, Henry-Russell Hitchcock, *Modern Architecture: Romanticism and Reintegration*, (New York: Payson & Clarke Ltd., 1929), 170.
5. Colin Rowe, “The Mathematics of the Ideal Villa: Palladio and Le Corbusier Compared,” *Architectural Review* 101 (March 1947): 101–104.
6. Colin Rowe, “Mannerism and Modern Architecture,” *Architectural Review* 107 (May 1950): 289–299.
7. Spiro Kostof, “Architecture, You and Him: The Mark of Sigfried Giedion,” *Daedalus* 105 (Winter, 1976): 189–204.
8. Sigfried Giedion, *Building in France, Building in Iron, Building in Ferroconcrete*, 180.
9. *Ibid*, 184.
10. For Sigfried Giedion, “volume” means the massing of a building and the exterior space.
11. Sigfried Giedion, *Space, Time, and Architecture: The Growth of a New Tradition*, 4th ed. (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1962), xlv–xlvi. See also, Sigfried Giedion, *Architecture and the Phenomenon of Transition: The Three Space Conceptions in Architecture*, (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1971).
12. Sigfried Giedion, *Space, Time, and Architecture: The Growth of a New Tradition*, 5th ed. (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1971), 434–436.
13. *Ibid*, 436–437.
14. For critique on *Zeitgeist*, see David Watkin, *Morality and Architecture*, (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1977). For critique on “space-time”, see Peter Collins, *Changing Ideals in Modern Architecture, 1750–1950*, 2nd ed. (Montreal: McGill-Queens University Press, 1998), 271–293.
15. Colin Rowe, *The Mathematics of the Ideal Villa and Other Essays*, (Cambridge, Mass.: The MIT Press, 1976), 14.
16. *Ibid*, 15.

further commented, “Le Corbusier is, in some ways, the most catholic and ingenious of eclectics... with Le Corbusier there is always an element of wit suggesting that the historical (or contemporary) reference has remained a quotation between inverted commas, possessing always the double value of the quotation, the associations of both old and new context.”<sup>16</sup>

Colin Rowe’s observations are quite contrary to Sigfried Giedion’s in several aspects. While Sigfried Giedion emphasized the break of the modern with the traditional, Colin Rowe stressed the link between the present and the past, whether unintentionally or intentionally. While Sigfried Giedion was worried about stylistic creation, Colin Rowe was concerned with typological transformation. While Sigfried Giedion approached a building mostly from the perspective of an architectural visitor, Colin Rowe dissected a house chiefly from the perspective of an architectural designer. In fact, it is Colin Rowe’s closing reading of the spatial organization that draws further attention.

As Colin Rowe’s analysis indicates, there is a permanent tension within the floor plan and the elevations of Villa Stein-de Monzie. There are the organized; there are the fortuitous. There are implications of a hierarchical order; there are counter implications of an egalitarian one. There are vestiges to provide central focus; there are fragments to introduce peripheral interests. There are tendencies to expand; there are boundaries to check. Conflicting strategies are simultaneously made use of. All is clear, and all is perplexing. Such a sort of ambiguity reminds one of the mannerist manifestations that Colin Rowe would delve into later in 1950. As a historiographical device, the conception of Mannerism is a product of modern thinking. Around 1920, art historians discovered in certain Cinquecento paintings something quite foreign to both High Renaissance and Baroque. Fascinated by those recognizable qualities, they coined the term “Mannerism” to designate a unique artistic style that predominated in Italy from the end of High Renaissance around 1520 to the emergence of Baroque around 1600. From the 1930s on, comparable phenomena were detected in the architecture during the Mannerism age owing to the efforts of a few scholars such as Rudolf Wittkower, Nikolaus Pevsner, and Anthony Blunt. Although there are different proposed causes for Mannerism, there seems a common denominator of its formal characteristics. Beneath the diverse mannerist appearances lies a governing principle: unstable movement generated by insoluble conflict. The presumption of a normal reading will soon be denied by the observation of abnormal facts that inescapably leads to a contrary reading. With no vital clue, the inherent tension is never resolved. At last, with every attempt failing to reconcile conflict, the eyes have to wander around incessantly. Therefore, Villa Stein-de Monzie must be a modern instance of Mannerism. It is probably the difficulty to design such mannerist ambiguity that led Le Corbusier to consider this building a difficult composition.

## DISCUSSION

Facing the two divergent interpretations on Villa Stein-de Monzie by Sigfried Giedion and Colin Rowe, what kind of conclusion can be drawn? If partiality could be consigned to oblivion, both opinions should have their own merits.

Concerning the view of architectural history, though his grand narrative of architectural development is too reductive to be consistent with historical reality, Sigfried Giedion was perceptive to point out the modern break with historical styles. Colin Rowe did not disagree with this undeniable fact, and he simply called attention to the potential link to the precedents, the *parti* of which can be reused creatively. Historical disruption in one way does not necessarily prevent historical continuity in another. Disruption and continuity are dialectical. As an early sponsor of Modern Architecture, it is understandable that Sigfried Giedion was interested in promoting something new. As a “graduate” of Modern Architecture, it is reasonable that Colin Rowe was interested in digging out something neglected by his predecessors.

Considering the view of architectural space, both Sigfried Giedion and Colin Rowe endeavored to identify modern spatial creations. Though he neglected that many buildings in history were well-known for their integration of interior and exterior space, Sigfried Giedion realized that new material such as transparent glass opened up exciting possibilities for new spatial experience. He was just not able to describe it precisely through the conception of "space-time". Colin Rowe, trained as an architect, was extremely capable of analyzing spatial composition, and was quite sensible to spot the inherent ambiguity in Le Corbusier's architecture. But he could not tell the difference between Le Corbusier and the Mannerists in the sixteenth century. While the Mannerists relied on conventional plastic elements and performed their formal operation mainly on two-dimensional facades, Le Corbusier came up with his inventions in three-dimensional space, and made historical reference by abstraction, conceptually transforming *parti*.

Taken together, Sigfried Giedion and Colin Rowe made their own efforts to improve the understanding of Modern Architecture. Although recent historiographies have more or less surpassed their achievements, it should be acknowledged that both of them shaped new knowledge for the discipline of architecture at their time. In the early twentieth century, while Henry-Russell was confined to the matter-of-fact "international style" and Nikolaus Pevsner was immersed in historical sources, it is Sigfried Giedion who provided a comprehensive and lucid interpretation to promote Modern Architecture. In the mid-twentieth century, while Reyner Banham was preoccupied with technology in a Futurist manner and Robert Venturi was proposing Post-modernism as well as Populism, it is Colin Rowe who calmly assessed Modern Architecture to imply the enigmatic interaction of the past, the present, and the future.

#### **ACKNOWLEDGEMENT**

I would like to thank Jelena Bogdanovic for her insightful comments on an early draft of this article, and for her patient encouragement along the way.