

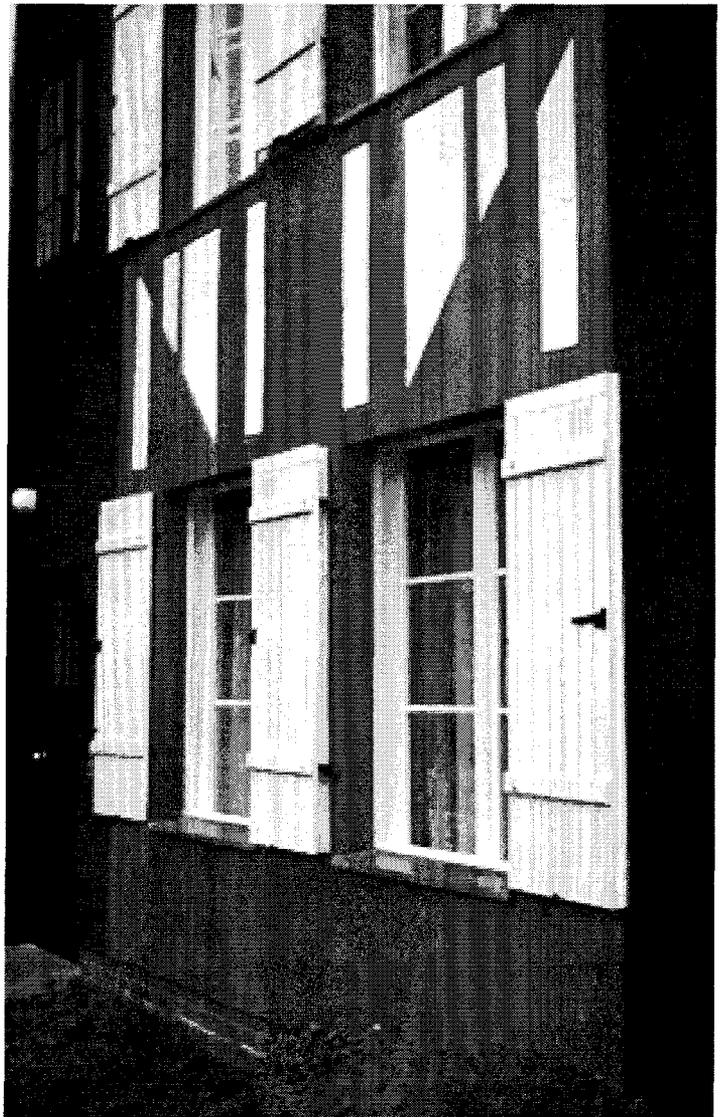
Creation of the Myth: “White” Modernism

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In his book *The International Style: Architecture since 1922*,¹ published in 1932, Henry Russell Hitchcock identified three phases in the use of color since the beginning of the new “Style”: “In the earliest days of the contemporary style white stucco was ubiquitous. ... Then followed a period when the use of color began to receive considerable attention. ... At present applied color is used less. The color of natural surfacing materials and the natural metal color of detail is definitely preferred.” Looking back however, we can recognize two parallel movements in the use of color. These were replaced at the beginning of the '30s by an acknowledgement of material values. In the beginning, however, white or off-white was the predominant color for one group, whereas the other group, mainly architects with a close relation to art, integrated color very early on in their architecture. During the gestation phase of the International Style, during which the emphasis was placed on dissociation from earlier architecture, the rejection of any decorative element became a central element in the development of the new style. “The absence of ornament” together with “fine proportions” was raised to a new aesthetic principle and replaced decoration. Most of the buildings from this phase have walls painted white or off-white, a feature that dematerializes the building even further. Parallel to this, several architects were active at the beginning of the 1920s who defined the use of color in architecture in a new and revolutionary way. Next to “white” modernism, which the majority of architects adopted, a “polychrome” modernism emerged, which integrated color as a means of artistic expression in an anti-decorative way.

The discussion about polychrome architecture was lead by architects who worked closely with contemporary artists and who moved “sometimes very different[ly] and in different groups, but all towards rationalization of cubism into architecture.”² In spite of the many differences among them, these architects can be divided into two major groups. Within the first group, architecture and painting were still viewed as two different disciplines, whereas the other group achieved a synthesis between the concepts of space and color. This latter

group integrated these two elements to such an extent that the spatial concept cannot be understood without the color scheme.



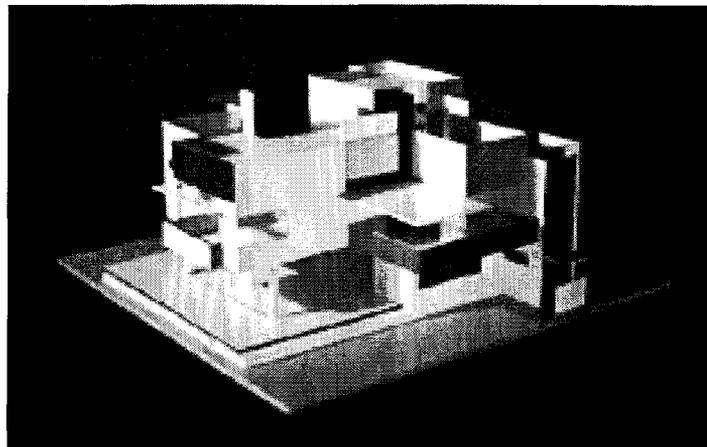
Siedlung Falkenberg, Berlin, Bruno Taut 1913-1919 Apartment House

The buildings and artwork from the early phase of the Bauhaus exemplify creations of the first group. Artists and architects worked in close cooperation with one another, and the structures they built reflected the idea of the “*Einheitskunstwerk—der Große Bau*, where borders between monumental and decorative art do not exist anymore.”²³ The buildings served as a background for independent artwork, such as Oskar Schlemmer’s famous mural for the staircase in the shop building of the Bauhaus (1923). Herbert Bayer’s design for the staircase in the main building (1923) and Farkas Molnar’s wall design for the passage into the court of the Bauhaus building (1923). Only when Gropius commissioned Alfred Arndt to create the color design for the Haus am Horn in 1924 and the wall painting of his own office, do we start to observe at the Bauhaus a movement away from applied mural painting towards an abstract, spatially integrated polychrome design of interior spaces. Later, after the Bauhaus had moved to Dessau, Hinnek Scheper took over the wall painting shop. In the colored organizational diagram of the Bauhaus building in Dessau, we can recognize color as an important factor emphasizing even more the functional and utilitarian aspects of the late Bauhaus style.

The second group was led by architects who rejected the notion that color was the “subversive element of art.” They tried to free color from its decorative connotation by making it a means of design equivalent to form. In Holland the de Stijl group, which included the architects Theo van Doesburg, Cornelius van Eesteren, Thomas Gerrit Rietveld and others, worked in conjunction with the painter Piet Mondrian to develop the ideas of Neoplasticism, which they soon transferred to architecture. In France, Le Corbusier developed a purist color theory for architecture, based on his experience and cooperation with the painter Amedée Ozenfant. Bruno Reichlin’s essay “Le Corbusier versus de Stijl”²⁴ proves brilliantly that there is a close relationship between the spatial and color ideas of van Doesburg and Le Corbusier. During the high point of polychrome architecture around 1924/1925, Le Corbusier launched a campaign in *L’Esprit Nouveau* and *L’Architecture Vivante*



Schröder House. Thomas Gerrit Rietveld. Utrecht 1924



Maison Particulière. Theo van Doesburg and Cornelius van Eesteren, 1923 (reconstruction as model 1997)

against the color and space concepts of Neoplasticism and proposed instead his own *polychromie réglée* as the universal and ultimate color theory. The final color scheme for the maison La Roche/Jeanneret was Le Corbusier’s first built manifestation of the *polychromie architecturale* based on the principles of purism. In their search for general validity in modern architecture, both architects transferred the color palettes from the abstract schools of painting into architecture, be it the primary colors in Holland derived from the theory of Neoplasticism or the purist color palette in France with its muted hues. In both cases color was used to dematerialize the architecture.

In the *maison particulière*, designed by van Doesburg and van Eesteren for the de Stijl exhibition at the Gallery of Leonce Rosenberg in Paris during the fall of 1923, color is seen first as an instrument for spatial dissolution. Van Doesburg transferred the principle of balance between lines and colored planes that was developed in painting by Mondrian into the three-dimensional space of architecture, and with this he dissolved the demarcation line between both disciplines.

Inspired by the exhibited works of the Neoplasticists, Le Corbusier started to investigate not only the spatial principles of the *espace continué* in the design of the maison La Roche/Jeanneret but also to discuss in publications the possibility of a transfer of the purist color palette to architecture. Earlier, Ozenfant and Jeanneret had already determined the relations between form and color in *Après Le Cubisme* (1918)²⁵ and their article “Le Purisme”²⁶ (1921). As a reaction to the exhibit, Le Corbusier published “Déductions consécutives troublantes,”²⁷ a fictive talk between Fernand Léger and Monsieur X (Le Corbusier) intended to differentiate Purism from Neoplasticism. In 1925 he wrote the *Loi du lait de chaux* (The Law of Ripolin), a pamphlet for the cleansing of architecture through whitewash. Several essays followed in quick succession. In all of them he legitimizes the use of color for architecture. “Entièrement blanche la maison serait un pot de crème”²⁸ (Completely white, the house would be a pot of cream) he stated in 1925, which

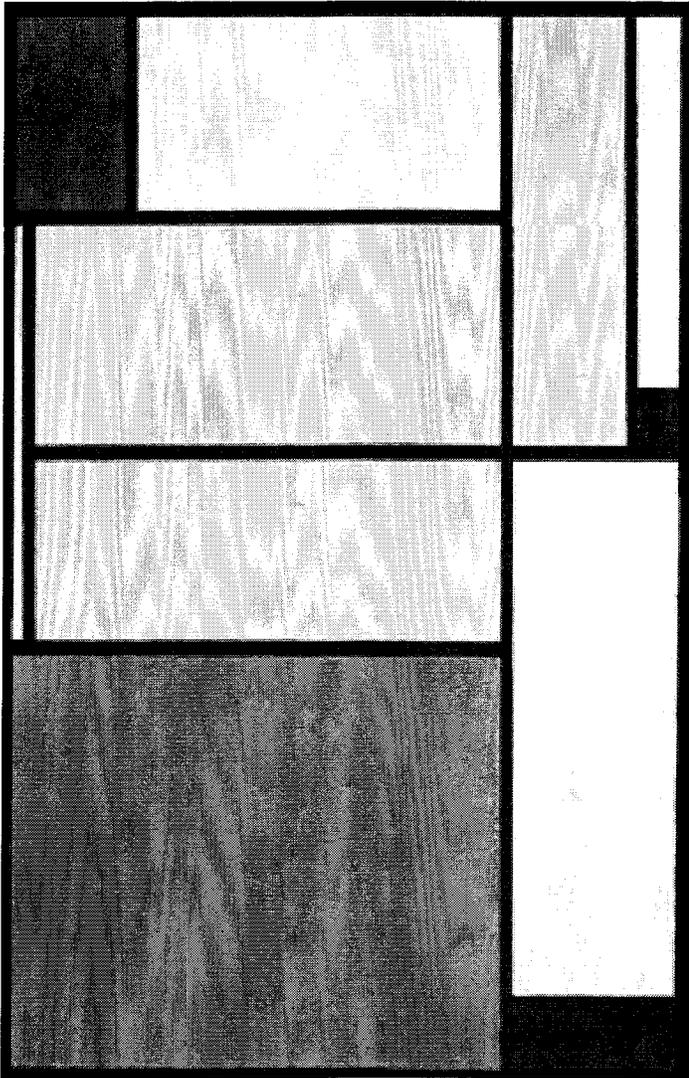
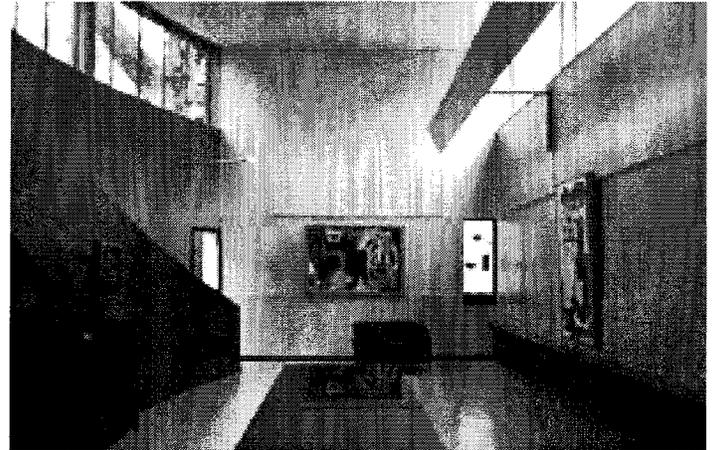


Tableau I. Piet Mondrian, 1921

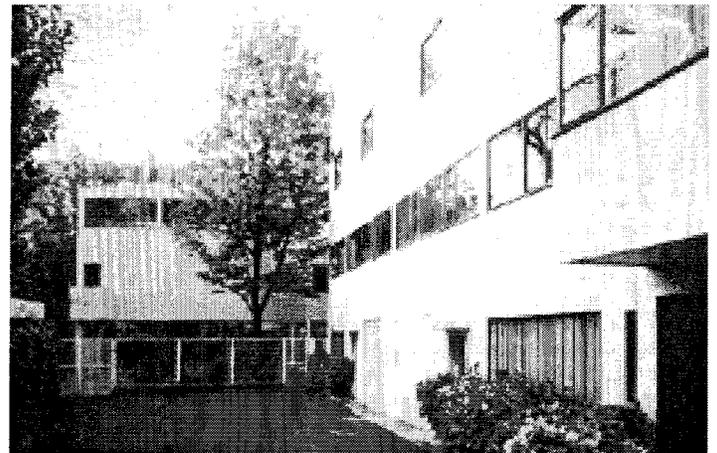
made clear his new attitude. Beginning with the construction of the maison La Roche/Jeanneret, a purist polychromy of the interior and exterior walls characterizes all his buildings. In contrast to the use of color in the buildings of van Doesburg, who attempted in his *counter constructions* to radically dissolve the space, Le Corbusier's buildings show color between the poles of spatial dissolution and spatial definition as the catalyst for the perception of space.

Common among all groups within the polychrome movement is a break with tradition in order to show color and form in a new light. Color became equivalent to form and thus an adequate means of space-design during early modernism.

The polychrome movement of the 1920s has been barely discussed in the reception of modernism, although leading architects of the International Style explored the new role of color as a non-decorative architectural element in their buildings and theories. Many reasons may have led to a single



Maison La Roche / Jeanneret, Le Corbusier, Paris 1924, Interior of the gallery



Maison La Roche / Jeanneret, Le Corbusier, Paris 1924

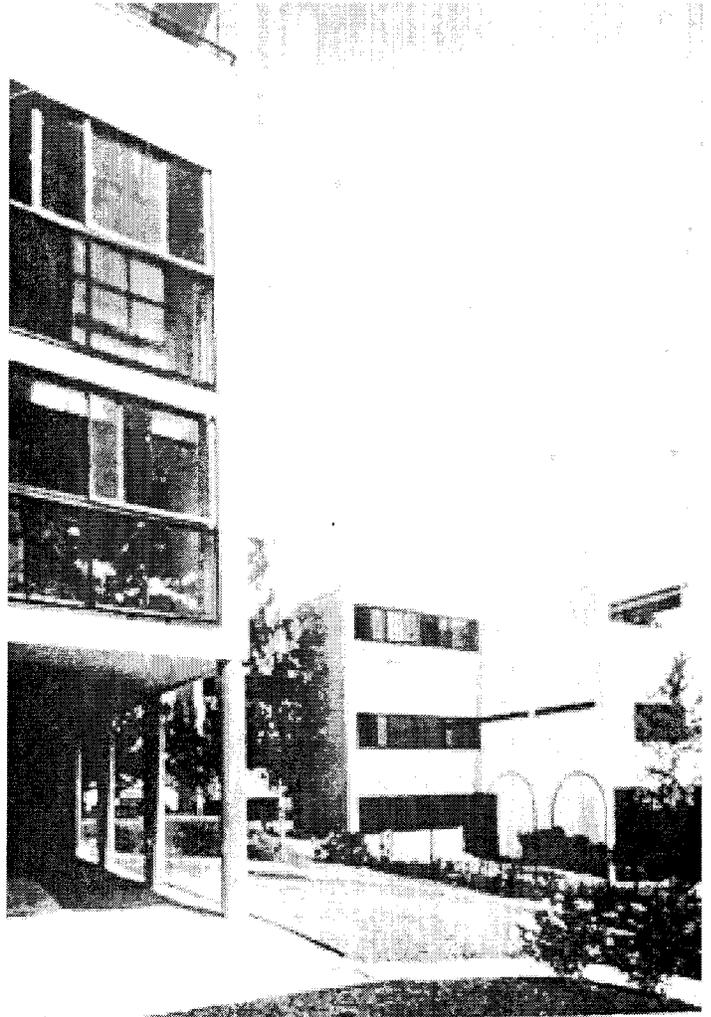
perception of white modernism: 1) the conscious creation of the myth of “white” modernism through publications; 2) the glorification of modernism by later generations; 3) the emancipation of architecture from abstract painting; 4) the absence of an aesthetic discussion during the CIAM congress of 1928.

The belief in a white monochromatic architecture concentrated on pure form repeats itself in the reception of the early modern movement and is similar to the polychromy discussion during the middle of the 19th century between Gottfried Semper and the opponents of his theory of a polychromatic Greek Antiquity. In accordance with the clichéd dictates of “white” modernism, formerly polychromatic buildings of the modern movement were painted white during the first restoration wave of the 1970s despite evident traces of color. Only the second restoration wave of the 1990s brought a surprising polychromy to the surface in Holland, Germany, and France that revised the image of a purely white modernism and opened up a discussion about the many aesthetic approaches of early modernism.

The publications of the early period that focus on the modern movement contain for the most part only black and white photographs. Examples are Walter Gropius' book *Internationale Architektur* of 1925, the four volumes of *Wasmuth's Lexikon der Baukunst*, which appeared between 1929 and 1932, *L'Architecture Vivante* (published in Paris, 1923-33) and Johnson and Hitchcock's *The International Style: Architecture since 1922* (1932), to name just a few of the major publications. These works documented an idealized image of the modern movement that began to become internationally known under the trademark color of white. Hitchcock realized this marketing effect in 1932 and wrote: "The earlier use of bright color had value in attracting attention to the new style."⁹ To separate themselves from the traditionalists, the architects viewed the white abstract surfaces of their buildings as a united and provocative answer and as a sign of the avoidance of applied decoration. In addition to attributes like cleanliness, hygiene, clarity, and honesty, white connoted newness and freshness. In his *Law of Ripolin*,¹⁰ Le Corbusier claimed: "The white of whitewash is absolute, everything stands out from it and is recorded absolutely, black on white; it is honest and dependable." The white volumes became the trademark of the new movement and the symbolic meaning of the color white their message.

During a time when black-and-white photography and film served to document the new era in architecture, the color of the buildings and its representation in both media had an important impact of how the building was perceived. Even though this argument is speculative, we can assume that some architects gained knowledge about the representation of color through the black-and-white medium used predominantly in the film production of the 1920s and 1930s.¹¹ Le Corbusier used a subtle polychromy consisting of neutral and muted colors that are perceived in the black-and white photographs as subtle changes in value. He placed colors of almost equivalent brightness next to one another to create the illusion of a consistent volume, knowing that in when photographed the difference would be perceived as a shaded white. We might assume that Le Corbusier reduced the representation of the polychromatic reality of the building to the mere perception of the stressed plasticity of an abstract, white volume.¹² His *polychromie architecturale*,¹³ developed in the 1920s, can only be partially perceived through the black-and-white photography. The photographs, together with his *Law of Whitewash*, created the perception of a white, abstract architecture, which was contradicted by the polychromatic reality of his buildings.

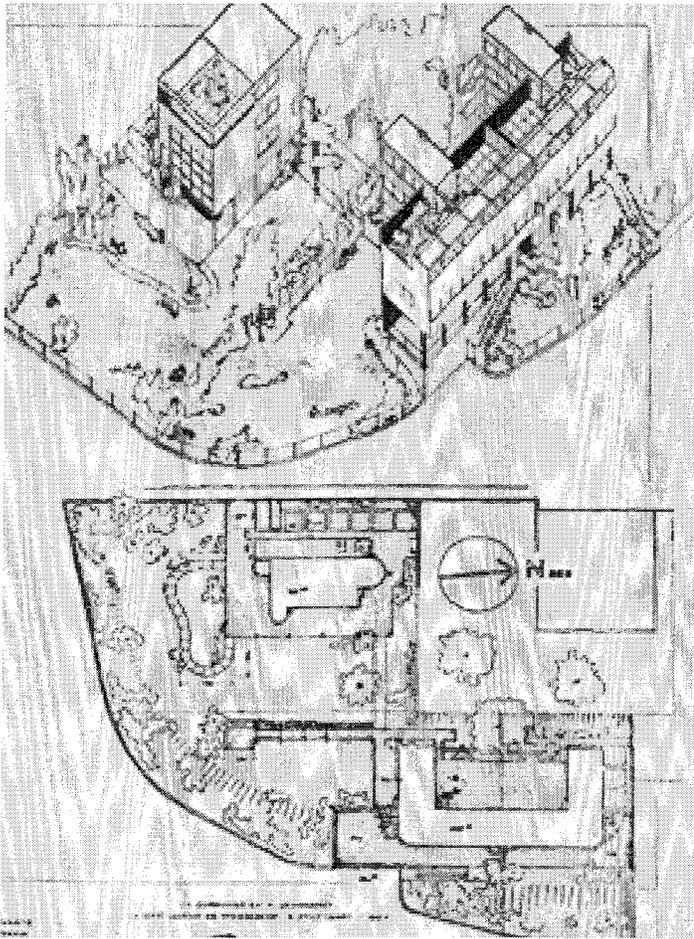
Contemporary documents of the modern movements contain relatively few hints about the use of color. In his book *Space, Time and Architecture*,¹⁴ Sigfried Giedion saw cubism as the origin of a new concept of space in the 20th century: "[Cubism's] symbols were not rational, were not to be utilized directly in architecture and the applied arts, but they give force and direction to artistic imagination in other fields." He considered Purism, Constructivism and Neoplasticism to be



Two houses in Stuttgart, Weissenhofsiedlung, Le Corbusier, 1927

attempts to rationalize cubism, leading from the two-dimensional spatial concept developed in art to architecture. Space and color concepts were transferred from painting and then developed into architecture by different groups, as discussed previously. Giedion described how color was applied to painting during Cubism: "Used in a spatial pattern, it was often divorced from any object, asserting a right to existence in itself."¹⁵ In emphasizing a discussion of space, Giedion did not mention the transfer of this important principle. He consciously avoided the importance of color for the modern space and its development in architecture as an independent element of design, and he created the notion that architecture had finally emancipated itself from painting. His lengthy description of the Villa Savoye does not contain a word about the color scheme employed there.

In his book¹⁶ that followed the famous exhibition at MOMA, "Modern Architecture – International Exhibition," Hitchcock dedicated a whole chapter to the "Avoidance of Applied Decoration" and included a short discussion about color as a substitute for material. With the exception of some captions



Two houses in Stuttgart, Weissenhofsiedlung, Le Corbusier, 1927, color scheme for the facades published in *L'Architecture* 1928

with descriptions of color, such as “the blue and rose windshelter above” in the case of the Villa Savoye’s color scheme, he does not reflect on the color concepts and theories. Even though Le Corbusier had already premiered his newly developed *polychromie réglée* at the maison La Roche/Jeanneret, Steen Eiler Rasmussen omits any mention of the color scheme in his article “Le Corbusier—Die kommende Baukunst?”.¹⁷ Thus the discussion about polychromatic architecture took place among the architects, but it was not picked up by the critics. The impermanence of color did not fit into their carefully created image of the modern movement as the new architectural style of the present and the future: “It (color) ceased to startle and began to bore: its mechanical sharpness and freshness became rapidly tawdry. If architecture is not to resemble billboards, color should be technically and psychologically permanent.”¹⁸

The congresses of the CIAM (Congrès Internationaux d’Architecture Moderne), which have taken place on a regular basis since 1928, have shaped the image and the myth of the modern movement more than anything else. The question of the aesthetic principles of modern architecture did not become

part of programmatic debates in the La Sarraz declaration, the founding manifesto of European modernism of 1928. Differences in the aesthetic positions developed by diverse and complex groupings within the European architecture scene were replaced by a discussion emphasizing standardization, general economies and city planning. “Socio-economic-planners” had shifted the debate about a new European architecture so that it favored their theories, and “conceptual aesthetes” such as Le Corbusier, wary of jeopardizing the consensus, carefully avoided a discussion about the content of a new aesthetic of modern architecture. This general failure to discuss aesthetic principles contributed to the creation of the architectural stereotype of modernism. In this regard Thilo Hilpert wrote: “Only when the architecture of the postwar decades ignored the historic preoccupation with those points of departure, could architecture claim as its architectural concept that which it had already formally adopted, an architectural cliché.”¹⁹

This emphasis on the essence of modern architecture finally led to a displaced perception of the aesthetic ideas that emerged in the 1920s. Taking up the cause of emancipation of architecture from art, and therefore from its roots, the discussion of 1928 avoided everything that could be related to any kind of artistic work. One year after the first meeting of CIAM, Le Corbusier described the position of the architects of *Neue Sachlichkeit* in one of the most important discussions about the *gestalt* concept in modern architecture: “In the groups of the avant-garde of a ‘*Neue Sachlichkeit*’ two words have been killed today: *Baukunst* (architecture) and *Kunst* (art). They have been replaced by *Bauen* (construction) and *Leben* (life).”

When the founding manifesto of CIAM in 1928 closed off access to a direction in architecture based on the common aesthetic principles of the “builder’s art” (*Baukunst*) and “art” (*Kunst*), the way was cleared for the myth of a “white” and retrospectively objective Modernism.

NOTES

- ¹ Henry-Russell Hitchcock and Philip Johnson, *The International Style: Architecture since 1922* (New York: Norton & Company, 1932).
- ² Sigfried Giedion, *Space, Time and Architecture*, 6th edition (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1946), 360.
- ³ Program of the Staatliche Bauhaus in Weimar of 1919, published in Magdalena Droste and Bauhaus Archiv Museum für Gestaltung, *bauhaus 1919-1933*. (Koeln: Taschen, 1998), 19.
- ⁴ Bruno Reichlin, “Le Corbusier versus de Stijl”, *De Stijl et l’architecture en France*, catalogue and exhibition under the direction of Bruno Reichlin and Yves-Alain Bois, Mardaga, Liège, Bruxelles 1985.
- ⁵ Carol S. Eliel ed., *L’Esprit nouveau : Purism in Paris, 1918-1925*; with essays by Françoise Ducros, Tag Gronberg ; with an English translation of After cubism (Après le cubisme) by Amédée Ozenfant and Charles-Edouard Jeanneret.
- ⁶ Amédée Ozenfant, und Charles-Edouard Jeanneret, “Le Purisme”, *L’Esprit Nouveau* 4 (1921), p. 369-386.

⁷ Le Corbusier. "Déductions consécutives troublantes". *L'Esprit Nouveau* 19 (1923).

⁸ Le Corbusier in *Almanach d'architecture moderne*, (Paris : G. Crès et Cie, 1925)

⁹ Henry-Russel Hitchcock and Philip Johnson, *The International Style: Architecture since 1922* (New York: Norton & Company, 1932), 76.

¹⁰ Carol S. Eliel ed., *L'Esprit nouveau : Purism in Paris, 1918-1925*; with essays by Françoise Ducros, Tag Gronberg ; with an English translation of The Law of Ripolin (La loi du lait de chaux) by Amédée Ozenfant and Charles-Edouard Jeanneret. First published in Le Corbusier, *L'Art décoratif aujourd'hui*. (Paris: Cres, 1925).

¹¹ See Sergei Eisenstein essay for practices used in the film production of the 1920's and 1930's: Sergei Eisenstein, "One Path to Color: An Autobiographical Fragment" Jay Leyda, trans., *The movies as Medium*, Lewis Jacobs, ed. (New York: Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 1970): 201-209

¹² A photograph of the buildings at the Weissenhofsiedlung in Stuttgart show the volumes of the double family house as one continuous volume, despite its color treatment. The dark red of the basement camouflages with the

surrounding in a similar way as the English Green of the rounded walls of the Villa Savoye. In both cases he emphasized the notion of a continuous white volume in the photography.

¹³ For more detail on Le Corbusier's polychromie architecturale see Arthur Rüegg, ed., *Le Corbusier – Polychromie architecturale: Le Corbusiers Farberläutungen von 1931 und 1959*, Basel: Boston: Berlin: Birkhäuser, 1997.

¹⁴ Sigfried Giedion, *Space, Time and Architecture*, 6th edition (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1946)

¹⁵ Giedion, *Space, Time and Architecture*, 360

¹⁶ Henry-Russel Hitchcock and Philip Johnson, *The International Style: Architecture since 1922*

¹⁷ Steen Eiler Rasmussen, "Le Corbusier. Die kommende Baukunst?", *Wasmuths Monatshefte für Baukunst* X/9 (1926).

¹⁸ Henry-Russel Hitchcock and Philip Johnson, *The International Style: Architecture since 1922* p. 76

¹⁹ Thilo Hilpert (Hrsg.): *Le Corbusier "Charta von Athen" Texte und Dokumente. kritische Neuauflage*, Bauwelt Fundamente Nr. 56