

Domestic transformations in time of the Modern Pioneers: Charlotte Perriand and political militancy.

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1937 was a year of political commitment for the Left-wing ideology in France. Especially in Paris, where anti-Republican crowds took the streets since 1934, warning about the power of an educated and well-organized Right-wing¹. The formation of the Popular Front in 1935 and its rise to power next year meant a parenthesis of *joie de vivre* (joy of life) among the economic crisis of 1929 and the declaration of war by Nazi Germany. For leftists, among whom there were many intellectuals and artists, this was a period characterized by powerful graphic expression, inherited from the Russian propaganda party that represented the ideals of the Revolution. It was also the year that Charlotte Perriand abandoned the *Atelier Rue de Sevres*, where she had spent the first 10 years of her career as a designer working with Le Corbusier, in the exceptional condition of "associated for the equipment of the house" since 1927².

The turbulent European political situation during the 30's decade and her leftist beliefs encouraged Perriand to commit politically, leading an active role in multiple social movements³. Between 1931 and 1937 Perriand had visited the USSR in two occasions, founded the *Union des Artistes Modernes* (Union of Modern Artists) and

joined the *Association des écrivains et artistes révolutionnaires* (Association of Revolutionary Artists and Writers), started studying dialectics in the *Université Ouvrière* (Workers' University), collaborated with the *Association des Peintres et Sculpteurs Modernes* (Modern Painters and Sculptors Association), founded with Jean Nicolas the young communist group *Jeunes 1937*, and also published articles related to the logical organization of the house in leftists magazines as *L'humanité* and *Vendredi*. For Le Corbusier it was quite the opposite: he rejected any political or partisan affiliation and, contrary to Perriand, he prioritized above all the harmony of the Atelier, where he was the brain and leading role and Pierre Jeanneret, his unconditional shadow⁴. But the arrival of young Perriand in 1927 had changed this delicate harmony and now, ten years later, Pierre Jeanneret was as much ideologically committed as Perriand was. The imbalance this race for ideological defense might bring, was something that Le Corbusier could not afford, therefore after the convulse events of 1937 Perriand had no other option than leaving the Atelier⁵.

When in 1931 Perriand had travel to the USSR, commissioned of the *Atelier* for the project of the Palace of Soviets, she had the idea that the modern world was being built by the Russian Revolution and sought to understand how those social beliefs

might become built forms to reflect Marxist ideals: the workforce, equality and justice above all. The result was a tremendous disappointment. Perriand soon realized that the solution was not to follow the Russian model, but to seek ways to translate these ideas into projects and real possibilities to change the way people live⁶.

Next year, 1932, the resolution of the Russian Government for the project of the Palace of Soviets marked another break point by expressing themselves about classical architecture as the style that would represent the revolution and the ideals of the left-wing. This resolution prompted some letters from the CIRPAC (the International Association of architects behind the International Congress of Modern Architecture) to Josef Stalin that leaves no doubt concerning their considerations about the relationship between political ideology and architectural representation. According to the CIRPAC, projects praised by the commission were: "A copy of Italian Renaissance architecture, this form of architecture imposes on the masses the power of the feudal princes [that can not] pretend to satisfy the modern needs and problems of which the solution is only possible through the application of modern technical achievements"⁷.

If the five-year plan was "Representative of the brightest manifestation of contemporary mind" [therefore, the] Palace of Soviets should speak the unmistakable language of architecture and express the revolution achieved by the new civilization of modern times."

The letter also accused the Russian commission of not taking responsibility to teach the world the benefits of modernity of the revolutionary project, by "Turning their back to the aspirations of modern society which found its first expression in Soviet Russia. This verdict confirms the architecture of pomp of ancient monarchies, consecrate the old regimes and, most of all, reveals Russian

governors' total contempt for the gigantic cultural effort of modern times. Dramatic treason!"⁸

This incident led to the cancellation of the fourth International Congress for Modern Architecture to be held in Moscow in 1933, which finally took place aboard the *Patris II*, covering the route Marseille-Athens.

The fourth congress established two lines of approach to the ideals of modern architecture. In the words of Perriand: on one side there was the group that defended the Marxist convention, criticizing the lack of attention to political and social issues; and on the other there was Le Corbusier who thought that: "The operation to add dimension to all things in the urban device can only be governed by the scale of man."⁹ In other words, there were those who understood urban planning as the result of social, political and economic tensions of its epoch, and on the other hand, the anthropocentric and isolated proposal of Le Corbusier.

One of the key objectives of the conference was to gather the results of discussions in a single manual that would allow general urban science, as a result of the progressive approach to the problem of the city that had begun in 1929 International Congress for Modern Architecture with the study of the minimum dwelling. It's only by this approach that we can understand the impossibility of this task: in seeking uniformity and standardization of the urban phenomenon, to make it applicable to every single city as their ideology would promote, the three publications that followed the Congress do not go beyond generalities. On one side is the compilation of Karl Moser and Rudolf Steiger published in *Annales Techniques de Grèce*¹⁰ in 1933. Then there was the Athens Charter, 1942, written by Le Corbusier based on notes taken during the conference. And finally there was the definitive adaptation of Josep Lluís Sert, once exiled in the United States, published the same year and

properly "Americanized"¹¹: "Can our cities survive?". In Charlotte Perriand Archives there's a copy of the first draft of this text dated 1933, written originally by Perriand and Sert that never saw the light¹². In written correspondence between Sert and Perriand during the years prior to the publishing of 1942 book, it can be understood how the "Americanization" Sert refers, obeyed to the excessive communist aspirations the book had, and that it would never be accepted by the American public, categorically anti-Communist.

To reinforce the ideological division inside the Atelier, Pierre Jeanneret was, as Perriand, an active member of the *Association des écrivains et artistes révolutionnaires* (Association of Revolutionary Artists and Writers). Founded by numerous artists and intellectuals, this association gathered all revolutionary writers defending the USSR and the struggle of colonized people, those who were against fascism and the 'social fascism'.

All types of artist were welcome, the aim was to give visibility to the ideas of the Revolution¹³, in part through photography, with exhibitions such as "*Documents de la vie sociale*" and "*La photographie qui accuse*" depicting workers in factories, buildings, laboratories or rural mines.

The emergence of photography as a tool to condemn social injustice, but also as a mean of expression in the domestic interior, is one of the legacies of this period to Perriand's further career. The first record of the use of photography in their works is precisely a house. *La Maison du Jeune Homme* (The House for a Young Man) was a collective stand for the Brussels Exhibition of 1935. It shows a photo-montage about the history of the invention of communications and its relation to the development of society. In

Perriand's words, the theoretical approach is to create "a **nest** for a young man, married to its time,"¹⁴ where the most important intend is to highlight the space devoted to recreation and physical culture, in harmony with the workforce. This definition of what should be a house breaks all traditional programmatic schemes. In fact, the program developed jointly by René Herbst, Louis Soignot, Fernand Lèger and the triad Corbusier-Jeanneret-Perriand is loaded with symbolism representing the ideological necessities of a modern man: a training room for sports¹⁵, resting areas¹⁶ (including toilet) and a study/working room that captures the spirit of the workforce as the engine of modern society. For the latter space, commissioned to Corbusier-Jeanneret-Perriand, she designed elements representing revolutionary ideals. The "Manifesto Unit", as she used to call it, formed by *Casiers standard* (a complete novelty in storing units) showed an engraving of the *Plan Voisin* for 1925 Paris, by Le Corbusier, as a reference to the dwelling as the basic cell of modern urbanism. In the right there was the photomontage on the suppression of the opposition between town and country, as only massive communications made it possible. In the back wall there were a selection of objects à *Réaction poétique*, a translation in terms of Perriand for the *Objet trouvé* by Le Corbusier. All of this, contained in a unique, transparent space without boundaries where independent spaces of diverse use melt within the big void, contrary to the established succession of enclosed spaces characteristic of the 19th century houses¹⁷. Finally, in one sidewall of blackboard she drew the floor plan of the pavilion with the corresponding authors of each space, and their affiliation with militant movements as International Congress for Modern Architecture, Union of Modern Artists or Association of Revolutionary Artists and Writers. The intention, according to Perriand, was to show their interdisciplinarity and the militancy of the participants in the various movements and

associations in order to promote social development, the art of building and, finally, create a new *art de vivre*¹⁸. This created an art of living influenced by modern times and technological developments; it re-thought a previously tighten space conditioned by the nineteenth-century social ceremonies and, in this case, becomes manifest on a work of powerful culture, sport and social forces rather than bourgeois representation.

Between 1936 and 1937 she created two photomontages that would define a huge break point in her career related to her political and ideological commitment. The first one was named *La grande Misère de Paris* (The great Paris misery) for the *Salon des Arts Ménagers* (Household Arts Fair) with photographs taken by herself and with a strong political content related to the unhealthy suburbs of the city. This photomontage shows Perriand's commitment in a particular way because the Household Arts Fair have been created for showing the housewives how to introduce the modern appareils into their homes, and in some way, to educate the feminine public to the freedom of the use of new tools and products. So Perriand's photomontage was more than out of place in the exhibition, and triggered a torrent of bad critics and the label of communist from the Fair's committee; nevertheless she counted on the Fair director André Breton, who was already a militant in the revolutionary groups as Perriand.

So next year, 1936, when Popular Front raised to power, Perriand was commissioned to design the pavilion for the Agriculture Ministry to be shown at the Exhibition of Arts and Techniques of Modern Life in 1937, her decision was to show through a large set of photomontages the relevance of the Agricultural program, which settled the basis for the Popular Front agricultural reforms introduced by the government. In a strict sense, the photomontages were conceived as party's propaganda and this was not an innocent action: the Agriculture

Pavilion was to be shown in the same premises as the Spanish Republican Pavilion where the Guernica was first shown surrounded by photomontages of Josep Renau denouncing the injustices of the Spanish Civil War. Perriand's Pavilion explained with the same technique the achievements of the Popular Front, opposed to those who were claiming for the agony of the Spanish people, who were suffering the slaughter of the Right-wing ideology.

Apart from the current political context and the many reactions in favor of militant groups in the ranks of the Communist Party, the creation of a language characteristic of the time and the patent of photomontage as party's propaganda, Perriand's political commitment never stopped in her career. Her intent to democratize design and take it to all spheres of society was a way to ensure equal rights to a dignified and quality living. Proof of this are multiple versions of furniture in different materials, always looking for material economy and structural efficiency. For example, the whole set of furniture designed in metal tube and leather for the Exhibition of Decorative Arts in 1929 was a pilot test of the deluxe version, which had a low-budget version in jute and canvas.

Thonet, the furniture fabricant did not agree to produce the low-cost version, due to the low earning margin it should suppose. This version remained in Perriand's book of sketches and it was not until 1948, after her stay in Japan, when the chaise-longue would know their version in bamboo, as a way of presenting a supposedly luxury furniture, in a multiple budget option that should be adaptable to every need. In the same way, the flat beds in wood and the tables designed in bicycle tube for the Swiss Pavilion of the Paris University Campus, or the beds for the Salvation Army in canvas with strings woven mattress are just a few designs by Perriand that keep the spirit of media

economy, beauty and efficiency.

In the same spirit as the articles published in the leftist journal *Vendredi* in 1934, these examples clearly demonstrate Perriand's exhaustive search to connect with the consumers and give them the necessary tools so, if what they needed was not in the market, they could have it done by a regular carpenter!¹⁹ Her idea was to bring the level of design closer to the consumer in a daring attempt to connect with the needs of ordinary people, very ahead of her time. On the way to understand the domestic space Perriand made no difference between container and contents. In her thoughts dwelling space is a system where both the furniture and space form creates a living atmosphere that determines the quality of life. This, related to the political issues we are concerned, should be democratically available to everyone. This is the revolution of dwelling that is performed by Perriand's hand all over her career, to produce useful objects, efficient and beautiful that construct the new "*art de vivre*" as everyone's right of having dignity in their living spaces at all scales.

¹ The rise to the power of the *Popular Front* (leftist parties coalition) between 1936-1937 represented the temporary triumph of leftist parties in France as opposed to the rising right-wing ideology growing in Germany, Spain or Italy at the same time.

² Le Corbusier, *Precisiones respecto a un estado actual de la arquitectura y el urbanismo*. Ed. Poseidón, Barcelona, 1979. p. 135

³ Among them, the AEAR (Society for Revolutionary Artists), the UAM (Union of Modern Artists) and also her tight bond with politically active projects related to the Communist Party as her studies of Dialectics at the Worker's University since 1932 or her ties with the young communist group known as the *Jeunes 1937*.

⁴ Udovicki-Selb, Danilo. "C'était Dans l'air du temps: Charlotte Perriand and the Popular Front". En McLeod, Mary (Ed.). Charlotte

Perriand, *An Art of Living*. Harry N. Abrahams, NY, 2003. p.74-75

⁵ Perriand, Charlotte. *A life of creation*. The Monacelli Press, 2003. p. 100-102

⁶ "communism in general can not be judged exclusively by soviet revolution" Perriand, Charlotte. *Op Cit*. p. 73

⁷ Steinmann, Martin. *CIAM Dokumente 1928-1939*. Birkhäuser, 1979. p. 124-125

⁸ Idem.

⁹ Le Corbusier, *La Charte d'Athènes*. Éditions de Minuit, Paris, 1957. p. 135, resolution 76

¹⁰ nov. 15, 1933

¹¹ Letter from Sert to Perriand, in Charlotte Perriand Archives

¹² See Barsac, Jacques. *Charlotte Perriand, a life of creation*. Paris, Norma, 2006

¹³ Jean Nicolas was a Communist Party member and close friend to Perriand, his main role in the AEAR was to establish relationships between artists and writers and the political compromised movements related to the communist party. He was also the instigator for the creation of the communist young group *Jeunes 1937*. See Perriand, Charlotte. *Op. Cit*. pp. 84, 91

¹⁴ Perriand, Charlotte. *Op. cit*. P. 70

¹⁵ *Modern man* has leisure time for cultivating body and mind as well.

¹⁶ *Modern man* can enjoy the benefits of the hygienic facilities inside its own house.

¹⁷ This idea of well communicated spaces is evident thanks to the net they include to separate the spot spaces of the working spaces, keeping the ball away but also the transparency and the space communication. This gesture can be understood as the seed of space communication in domestic spaces, with the posterior appearance of sliding panels that guarantee the same effect, keeping control between private/public spaces inside domestic spaces.

¹⁸ Perriand, Charlotte. *Op cit*. p. 69

¹⁹ Perriand, Charlotte. “La ménagère et son foyer” in *Vendredi*. May 1936, n° 26, 29.