ARCHITECTURE VIEW: A HOUSE IN THE SPIRIT OF ITS TIME

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A House in the Spirit of Its Time

A steady stream of architects under the age of 50 (and a good many over) going to Paris today manage to visit the Maison de Verre. And they all leave giddy with images and details that have a way of infiltrating their work, even to the point of profoundly affecting developing styles.

That would make the building important, even if it weren't interesting, which it is. The Maison de Verre, so-called for its prismatic glass brick walls, is a most remarkable house. Built from 1928 to 1932 by the French architect Pierre Chareau, in collaboration with Bernard Bijvoet, for Dr. and Madame Jean Dalsace, it is about as close to a totally original building as one can get — every detail literally invented and virtually consecrated to a brief period in modern history when technology was considered the key to health, happiness and beauty.

This is such a very special house, and it has come to mean so much to so many thoughtful architects, that a group has been formed, Les Amis de la Maison de Verre, to cherish and protect it. There has always been an architectural underground of such revered and influential buildings, structures that become icons and pilgrimage points and inspiration for the faithful. They usually change from generation to generation. Some, like Palladian villas, are enduring and familiar classics; more often, in the nature of a proper underground, they are buildings that the public knows little or nothing about. But they always have a special meaning for the fraternity that adopts them. Frequently, the features for which the building is admired tell us even more about the present than the past.

Although it is fashionable now to deny zeitgeist, or the spirit of the time, which informed so much of modernist theory, the Maison de Verre is a cultural, technological and esthetic artifact that derives much of its fascination from the fact that it is so completely in the spirit of its time. Another part of its appeal is the great creative ingenuity with which the architect has manipulated space, use, and a marvelously romantic and refined technological esthetic. And not the least is the incredible detail with which the "new" solutions for such basic things as doors, windows, stairs, storage and the processes of living are carried out. The building was so radical that it was actually unreproducible in spite of its assured, world-of-the-future industrial materials and imagery; and thus it remains a unique expression of a particular moment in art and life.

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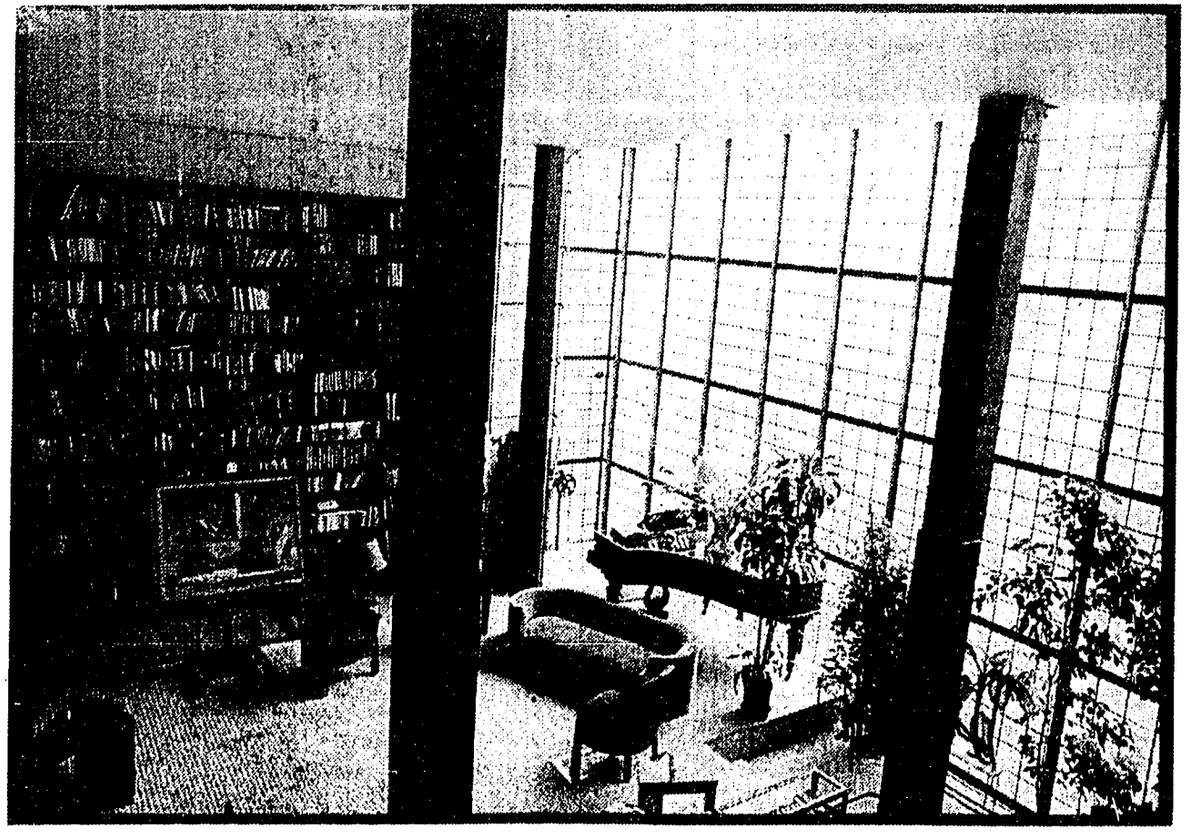
In recent years, there have been a number of extremely detailed presentations of the Maison de Verre in the architectural press. In 1965, Kenneth Frampton, Robert Vickery and Michael Carapetian measured and photographed the house exhaustively, and in 1969 Mr. Frampton analyzed the results at length in "Perspecta," the Yale architectural journal. Almost a decade later, in 1977, the Japanese periodical "Global Architecture" devoted most of one issue to an article on the Maison de Verre. A monograph on Pierre Chareau had already been published in Paris under the auspices of the Salon des Arts Menagers in 1954.

But the Maison de Verre had been noted and commented on internationally from the time it was constructed; it was an event in its own time. Professional publications of the 1930's all treated it as a trend-setting structure. It received this attention in spite of the fact that Chareau was better known for his furniture and interiors than for large-scale building. Although there are other commissions by his hand, he is virtually a one-building man.



An interior view of the Maison de Verre in Paris, designed by Pierre Chareau and Bernard Bijvoet—"as close to a totally original building as one can get"

The Maison de Verre ceased to play a pivotal role for the next generation of modernists, whose icons were the much purer abstractions of the Villa Savoie by Le Corbusier and the Tugendhat House by Mies van der Rohe, where a more restrained and absolutist modernist esthetic included all interior furnishings. At that point, and for that taste, the Maison de Verre contained too much "modernist" design of the sort that was popularized by the 1925 Paris International Exposition of Industrial and Decorative Arts.

Chareau's furniture style, a highly personal interpretation of essentially traditional pieces that stressed luxury of material and curiosities of form, offended the inheritors of the Bauhaus. The "radical" furnishings that used exotic woods covered with Lurçat tapestries are as unconcerned, ultimately, with machine art as the rest of the house is devoted to it, although they strain at modernity in every line. Chareau created the paradox of an almost cinematic world of the future in the service of a cultural bourgeoisie; this was a machine for living a fashionable intellectual and artistic life in the right social circles.

The two-story-high salon — a space indivisible from the rest of the house at the same time that a series of transparent, translucent, or opaque devices closed it off where necessary — is one of the great rooms of the 20th century. One wall is conventionally lined with books, while another is glass brick. The daylight coming through the glass wall, or the artificial light at night (Chareau's design provided spotlights from the outside), creates the atmosphere of a luminous private world. The combination of rich Deco design with riveted steel columns, swiveling aluminum cabinets, copper doors, mechanized windows, retractable stairs and rubber-tile floors (ancestor of all those fashionable Pirelli floors today) suggests some aerospace *éboniste*.

The house is not only a paradox, it is a structural tour de force. The intent was to replace an existing 18th-century building at 31 Rue St. Guillaume, but when an old lady on the top floor refused to move, Chareau supported the upper floor with steel scaffolding and inserted his new steel-framed, glass-walled structure beneath it (interestingly, early photographs show that top floor retouched out). This provided three new floors under the old one, to accommodate the office and home of Dr. and Madame Dalsace.

The view of the glass-brick facade as one enters the court can be seen abstracted in some of the work of the younger Japanese and European architects who are part of its admiring coterie. The inside of the house, a set of interlocking and overlapping planes and spaces contained by translucent or transparent panels and doors that pivot and slide — suggesting the imagery of Cubist sculpture or machine art — has proven very seductive for today's sophisticated practitioners.

Chareau meant the house to be the precursor of industrialized products and techniques. But like so many dreams of the future, this one was way off base. What the Maison de Verre turned out to be is a total and unique work of art of extraordinary spacial skills and great technological romanticism carried out with superb craftsmanship. Kenneth Frampton has pointed out that much of the mechanical detailing is as symbolic as it is functional, that it is actually a kind of "poetry of technique and *équipage*." How curious that the age of functionalism should have produced such a lyrical work, and that its poetry is the quality that brings architects flocking to it now. ■