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URBAN COUNTRY HOUSE

The net, the city and the nature

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In 1913, in an article published under the title "Philosophy of the Landscape"[\[1\]](#), Georg Simmel marks the difference between nature and the landscape; according to him what singles out the two notions is the concept of limit: nature appears as unlimited, the landscape manifests itself as confined into limits[\[2\]](#). The landscape thus is not nature, it cannot even be a part of nature, since a part of nature is already a contradiction to the definition of nature itself. The submission of nature into limits through the concept of landscape is marked, in Simmel's approach, from the art. The Simmel's landscape is mostly an artistic event. And it is this same artistic event, this landscape, that introduces us in the long history of the conflict between "nature" and "art". The nature already limited with art, that's what the landscape question is treating; a question that is leading to the impossible.

If we change our point of view, we could agree that nature could never be free from limits, as Simmel presents it. Nature would always be restricted to landscapes, since its notion would always need limits to be understood in this or another language scene. Nature would then need anyway a landscape scenography in order to be approached. Each conception of nature already forms limits for it. The word "nature" already forces the ideal of the unlimited that Simmel points out to accept limits. Nature looks already as an extracting and delimitating "technique".

We may remember Dürer's opinion about art and nature; "art" for him "lies hidden within nature; he who can wrest it from her, has it". And Heidegger commentating this remark, adds in his "Building Dwelling Thinking": "True, there lies hidden in nature a boundary and, tied to it, a capacity for bringing forth- that is art."[\[3\]](#)

These remarks would maybe look as a critique to Simmel's distinction between landscape and nature. However in the same essay Simmel describes the most fundamental tragedy of spirit like this: "the part of a whole becomes ... independent totality deliberated from the former [whole] and demands his rights in front of it"[\[4\]](#).

The change from the isolation of the part to its connection to the whole constitutes a tragedy for thinking, even if thinking is shaped by the gap of this change.

Why thus to open a paper on the country house with this discourse about the part and the whole, isolation and connection?

The country house was created as a negation to community and a surrender to "nature".

Mumford locates the beginning of the modern country house in the 15th century in England. It is then that the king, his archives and his court are moving to the National Capital. The rich lords leave their castles and go also to the Capital. Mumford connects this change to other specific cultural circumstances: the excavations of

Rome's antiquities and the research on manuscripts and books that were already circulating in the late Middle Ages. The confrontation with sophistication, luxury and sensuality of another civilization marked another possibility for humanity. Life in military camps and castles was formed as the exact opposite of such sophistication. For Mumford the reaction to the old way of life was expressed with the negation of castles (it is then that men stopped building them) and to monasteries (men stopped entering their closed communities). The spiritual and mundane life were transposed to a new statute, the country house. In the country house the freedom of the will is absolute for Mumford; it is a freedom enjoyed by anybody that lives in a country house till 1922, when he writes his text, because everybody follow there his free will and desire; they wake up whenever they feel like it, eat, drink and work whenever they want to. ([5])

It is interesting to think that the country house is born when castles and monasteries are dying. War enclosures and God enclosures are no longer attractive for men. In their place, if we follow Mumford's view, this new building type is created not as an enclosure planted in the landscape, but as an opening to the landscape. The country house marks a return of the city's man to the countryside, and as such it inaugurates another look to the landscape.

Mumford treats the country house as the sign of decline. The country house serves the greediness of the governors. Even more: Mumford distinguishes the country house from the roman villa defining it as a non authentic construction made for fun.

The modern architecture tradition has also created pieces of rhetoric against the country house. We remember a famous Loos text, written some years before the Mumford's one:

"May I lead you to the shores of a mountain lake? The sky is blue, the water green and everything is profoundly peaceful. Mountains and clouds are reflected in the lake, and so are houses, farmyards, courtyards and chapels. They do not seem man-made, but more like the product of God's workshop, like the mountains and trees, the clouds and the blue sky. And everything breathes beauty and tranquillity.

Ah, what is that? A false note in this harmony. Like an unwelcome stream. In the centre, beneath the peasants' homes which were created not by them, but by God, stands a villa. Is it the product of a good or a bad architect? I do not know. I only know that peace, tranquillity and beauty are no more ...

And I ask yet again: Why does the architect both good and bad violate the lake? Like almost every town dweller, the architect possesses no culture. He does not have the security of the peasant to whom this culture is innate. The town dweller is an upstart.

I call culture, that balance of inner and outer man, which alone can guarantee reasonable thought and action."[\[6\]](#)

Modern rhetoric usually insisted on the coherence of the building with the landscape. This seems to organize a common way of criticizing the country house. The country house cannot stand properly in the countryside. It belongs to a civilization that is strange to the landscape, it ignores the local particularities and it destroys the landscape.

Nevertheless modern architecture presented a serious quantity of country houses, built and photographed in "purely natural" landscapes. In the architectural literature, the negative aspects of the country house are sometimes forgotten; sometimes the phenomenon of the country house is observed from a radically different point of view than the Loos' one.

In 1954 we can read in a small book of Frank Lloyd Wright, treating the subject of the country house, as an alternative to the city one:

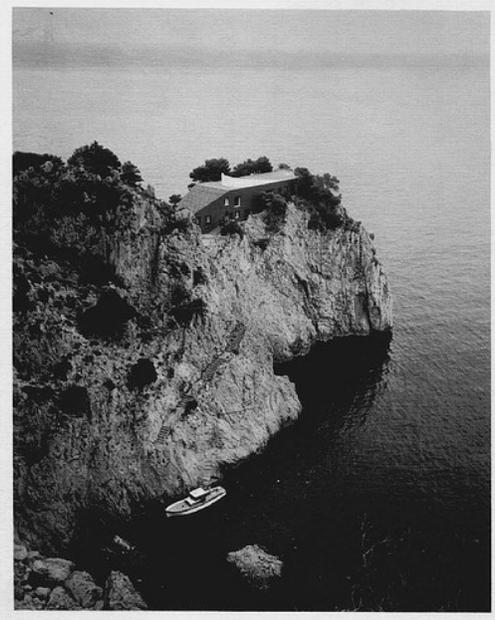
"When selecting a site for your house, there is always the question of how close to the city you should be, and that depends on what kind of slave you are. The best thing to do is go as far as you can get. Avoid the suburbs -dormitory towns- by all means. Go way out into the country- what you regard as "too far" -and when others follow, as they will (if procreation keeps up), move on. ...

Clients have asked me: "How far should we go out, Mr Wright?" I say: "Just ten times as far as you think you ought to go." So my suggestion would be to go just as far as you can go-and go soon and go fast."[\[7\]](#)

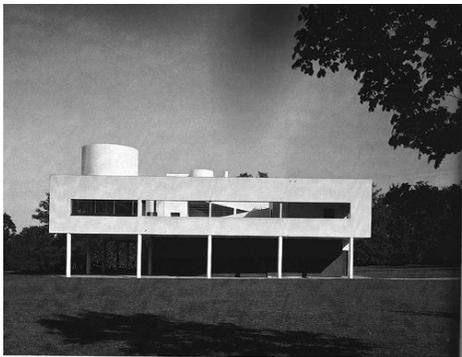
Write knows that when others follow we have to move on. The architecture is still aggressive to nature, we have to try to be alone in nature, even with an integral house as Write meant it. The perfect coherence of the construction with the landscape could not constitute a possible target. Even so, it is difficult for me to argue that the country house marks necessarily a profane act. On the contrary we could read the history of the country house as a path leading to the effacement of the building.

Such a effacement of the house could be explained by the new theoretic formation of the concept of nature, haunting the nowadays western imaginary. Nature seems to be an indisputable value, without being clearly defined. Nature seems to represent mostly a *view* and not any concept with internal logic. The meaning of the view is here referred to a clear optical exclusion of any human presence.

We can read thus the history of the country house as a theoretical path leading his own constructions to invisibility. From Libeira's Casa Malaparte



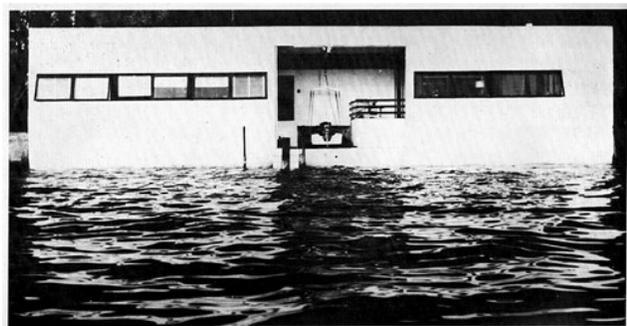
to Le Corbusier's Villa Savoye



from the Frank Lloyd Wright's Fallingwater



to the Grassi's Casa a Vello di Marone
Foreign Office's Moebius House



and to



we may observe an embedding of the building into the landscape.

This succession of houses illustrates more a history that I “create” than one that I “observe”. It gives us though a field for thinking on the country house. The country house itself programmatically leads us to a necessary distance from the “natural” buildings of a farmer, that Loos presented us. From the other side the country house is not mute about nature. The country house could present a change in the understanding of nature: earth is comprehended as landscape, framed by windows as Le Corbusier sketched it and Colomina mentioned it^[8]. Man could now be understood as a surveyor of earth, as the dominator who inspects his own field. The country house as a common vision which organizes our communities undertakes another role which deals with the comprehension of nature from modern man. Even more: the country house transforms nature.

The more the building spreads out (even while seeking an architectural way to disappear), the more nature is denaturalized.

A construction of a country house corresponds to the establishment of a big invisible eye that has to see no man’s construction, without taking in account that it represents itself such a construction. It is not nature that the country house glorifies, it is not the landscape; it is another construction even more mediated: “as if” there was such a landscape. Through this “as if” structure the country house is connected to nature.

This same country house that I observe and that installs a new nature, “as if” the landscape it creates was not constructed, has another part on which I have to pause also. The country house was enforced by a move of the man of the city back towards the country side. It marked a negation of the urbanity, of the common aspects of the

city. The country house would never be commonly accepted without this kind of isolation from the community it preserved. And in an analogue transposition we could project the change from a prevalence over nature in another move; from the negation of the community to the acceptance of a new one.

We locate in the country house of the pre-computerized era a simmered suspicion for the community. The country house is inaugurated as the alternative to the city life, guaranteeing a necessary distance from the city. Living in a country house marked a refusal of the community and a suspicion of the city life's "normality". Some years ago another possibility seemed to be raised for the country house. The capacity of preserving the normality of city life without needing the city itself, marks a new fact for life in a country house and for life in the city. Working and communicating through the internet forms a new frame for human community life. The private house itself, regardless if it is a city house or a country one, may become the center of another communal life: the digital one. We cannot see what perplexities this fact will provoke to humanity. But the return to the private house as a new virtual communal place, where one can meet other people and wander through different and random situations is giving a new potential to the isolated house. We may mention that a city house is not prohibiting this new communal house-sheltered, digital meeting system; but the country house seems now to preserve equally this new electronic community, as did the city one. The house thus that was inaugurated as a mark of a distance from the community, introduces necessarily new communal factors in its own body.

We could not easily accept that the digital community can replace the urban understanding of it. Even more: we cannot locate a clear opposition between these two formations of community: it is certain that sitting in front of this new electronic window deprive us of time for a "literal" wandering in the city. It deprive us some time of the urban way of living from which we are however still depending. But wandering through digital communities, finding one's "presence" in his internet life corresponds at a creation of another analogy for the community. Even if not opposed to the urban conception of wandering and meeting people, the digital wandering and meeting people can be read as a substitution of it. Substitution is marked by the sign of "as if". We could argue then that the installation of an on line computer in the center of a house could "run" the analogy of city life. The house becomes thus the

center of a communal structure, as if streets and piazzas were frequented in its same heart. The dweller can wander and meet people staying still. He can walk without moving, he can see who he meets, talk to who he meets without “properly” doing so. This communal life seems to be “determined” by the “as if” structure.

If we accept such a way of thinking we could also agree that the country house could emerge as the place of substitution *par excellence*. In the country house a clear cut can be manifested from what is commonly understood “literally” as nature and city to what is understood as substitutes of them. The country house would then be presented as a move towards a substituted human world. The country house could then represent the “center” that shelters and gathers substitutes of the nature and the city. We could argue that the modern country house always depended on the acceptance of the world as unhomely. It is not strange that the heart of “as if” is unhomely itself.

[1] “Philosophie der Landschaft”, *Das Individuum und die Freiheit*, republished in Berlin, 1984, pp. 130 - 139.

[2] I used here the French edition: Georg Simmel, *La tragédie de la culture*, Rivages, “Philosophie du paysage” , pp. 229 - 244, p. 232.

[3] “Der Ursprung des Kunstwerkes”, *Holzwege*, Frankfurt, 1950, p. 58. For the English translation see *Poetry Language Thought*, New York, 1975.

[4] *Op.cit.*, p.230.

[5] See the chapter on the subject in Mumford’s *History of Utopias*, 1922.

[6] *Architektur*, 1910, Cited by Frampton in the beginning of his 8th chapter of *Modern Architecture; a Critical History*, London, 1980, p. 90.

[7] *The Natural House*, New York, 1954, p. 134-135.

[8] Beatriz Colomina, “The split wall: Domestic Voyerism”, *Sexuality and Space*, Princeton Architectural Press, 1992, pp. 73-128.