

The House as Couch
(Or what is Mr Frampton doing under the staircase?)
2008

roger connah



Michael Carapetian ©

The interview that accompanies this small book of photographs on *Maison de Verre* was carried out in Venice, where the architect Michael Carapetian has been living for almost 20 years. It seemed appropriate to be doing this whilst also reading Régis Debray's small volume entitled *Contre Venice* (Against Venice)¹. But what struck me were not Debray's words, any amount of which we could shoplift to warn us all once more against the easy seduction of this infinite city, but the book itself. Ordered online as a second-hand copy, it came from the St Petersburg Public Library. This was announced in very small letters above the bar code which had been copied and moved onto the top left front cover of the book, perhaps thereby facilitating the lending librarian's scanning machine. The rest of the cover was a pixellated ambiguous shot of the lagoon and a gondola. Inside, on the first page, the phrase 'anti-voyages book' up right, the word DISCARD has been capitally stamped slightly off-centre and tilting down to the right. Bottom right, in the corner another stamp: Axalea Branch Public Library, St Petersburg, Fl. Had those in Florida, of course not much more than spitting distance of Cuba and Guantanamo Bay, not much use for a book warning them in a playful, hyperbolic tone of the theme-park that awaited them if they one day decided to visit Venice? But then why should they: if you live in a theme-park, you may not wish to travel to another one. Assuming the book was purchased by the library in 2000 or even the year of publication 1999; and discarded even this year 2008, the book's shelf-life had been 6, 7, 8 years.

Maison de Verre is a house with a much longer shelf-life, though you would never know it going by those who have never heard of it. This ignorance itself might be enough to consider the Discard stamp. However, with all the attraction to theme-park architecture today, to the machines that can tilt and morph just about anything *anywhichway*, we might just pause for a moment on the Discard warning. In fact we might be more generous to ourselves and our history, do ourselves a service, and those who might have never considered a truly modern house from as long ago as the late 1920s. For this purpose it helps us to look once more at this house through the eyes of a young photographer Michael Carapetian who along with his schoolfriend Kenneth Frampton visited *Maison de Verre* in Paris in 1968 with the aim of documenting it, measuring it and photographing it. ²

Maison de Verre (MdV), known also as The House of Glass, is one of those contemporary houses built between 1928 and 1932 that would probably make every anthology of modern houses if the 20th century. Often seen as remarkable, the house is both a gaming exercise for critics and a way to re-write critical history of modern architecture. MdV is a house usually attributed to Pierre Chareau but in fact the design was a collaboration between Chareau, a furniture and interior designer, and Bernard Bijvoet who was a Dutch architect working in Paris since 1927 and well-known for his work with Johannes Duiker). The third collaborator, important to the whole work-in-progress was Louis Dalbet, a craftsman, a metalworker, someone Carapetian will refer to, not inaccurately, as the blacksmith. Much of the intricate moving scenery of the house was designed on site as the project developed. In fact at the time, and during the construction of the house between 1928 and 1931, Chareau in partnership with these other two seemed to choreograph the construction into a form of moving scenery; a *mise en scene*.³

Dennis Sharp's paragraph available online, sums up the attributes attached to it: "The remarkable Maison de Verre was inserted into an existing building and is one of the unique buildings of the twentieth century... The dissolving of views through semi-transparent materials, the juxtaposing of metal and glass, 'free' space and solid add a dynamic dimension to this house which almost takes it into the realms of Surrealism." Cubist or Surrealist, 'modern asymmetrical aesthetic', le grand verre of Duchamp, with a sophisticated semi-transparency': all critical phrases notwithstanding, we can and should still use the word 'contemporary' to distinguish its psychology and theatre. It might not be so necessary to attempt to re-define its architectural lineage. The nostalgia that might suggest we can retrieve its serious critical history the photographer leaves to others.⁴

Chareau's *Maison de Verre* is a house of gaming. The photographer becomes both editor and cineaste tracing the architect's intentions and non-intentions. If film becomes part of the dissolved layers in this house making the house at all times accessible, mysterious yet legible, the photographer leaves the gaps between images for the rest of the movement to take place in the mind. Perhaps photography allows us to read the house to know where not to go. Film instead matches space and leaves us too exposed. The photographer can be more subtle, more elusive offering ways of reading the house like a narrative. If it is a game, and photography is connected to cinema it is only in a slight underhand way. With a house in movement, the photographer's stillness might be the best tool yet, to stay focused.

Transparency and translucency, the opaque and semi-transparent all interchange, slipping the photographer into vision and out of vision; the opaqueness strips back the transparency as if it could peel back or re-seal the see-through space. Interpenetration, internal spatial divisions, sliding, folding, reversing and rotating screens (in glass, sheet or perforated metal) all ideas and combinations recognisable to architects are obvious in the photograph but still need definition. The eye moving beyond the bounds of the visible space suggests of course a continuum, which helps Chareau and partners achieve subtle and relentless devices to dissolve the public and private functions of the house and surgery. Free space and semi-transparency all with variable circulation patterns can offer us a critical vision but this is not the only recognisable route into the house. Even the architectural concept of the promenade is inadequate when the actual spaces are in constant movement, opening and closing on themselves, and on the lives of those who live, work or visit the house.

Maison de Verre is itself en route. And whilst en route the visitor cannot fail to notice the machinery and the parts that make the house work and pull the visitor in more and more. An expressive mechanism or mechanical expressionism: the nautical traces of Bijvoet, the medical of Chareau, the tightening, the stretching of flat steel of Dalbet the 'blacksmith'. Who was it of the three knew about bounded and unbounded steel as the office set up on the site at 31 Rue St-Guillaume and worked as theatre designers altering the stage set for the lives of Monsieur Jean Dalsace and Madame Dalsace? ⁵

Machine a écrire = typewriter. Machine à construire = Maison de Verre. Everything reads, from the linguist to the plant pot, from Viktor Schlovksy to.homo faber, the man who builds is also the man who constructs the theatre. And the constructor in this case is the one who, with a fascination to control, controls the fetish. If you can control the fetish you control the mechanics and tame steel. The invention of the machine-house is balanced by the prominence of steel, the adept stretching of steel. If the primary materials used, steel & glass predominate it is the intimacy of industry that pulls more on the photographer as he begins to notice the rubber floor, the strapless steel beams and, the black perforated zinc sheeting and the light contraptions. The machine parts that are all around the house amount to the invention of another machine, the machine inside the house. All angles and turns, the photographer seems to suggest, need not the cinema to register all reverses. All openings imply also a closing; this reinforces the idea of movement. Promenade, cinema and game – Maison de Verre allows the photographer the license to move onto the psychology of space, ultimately the theatre of the life acted out within that space.

Medical aesthetics might have fascinated Chareau, they certainly were part of the clients' life; the house was the surgery and medical suite of Doctor Dalsace. Yet Chareau's fascination with the medical and the aesthetic of medical instrumentation might be the photographer's fiction, a kind of pull focus action which takes his eyes, draws him to the instruments that in the late 1920s were being considered inhuman.

Alvar Aalto for instance began at the same time to humanize the medical machinery in his Paimio Sanatorium whilst Chareau aestheticized the very 'inhumane' pipes and surfaces that Aalto may have felt needed humanizing. The photographer suggests Chareau was doing the opposite; instead of bringing the domestic into the hospital, he was bringing the hospital into the domestic. Whilst others at the time were turning chrome into chairs and curving pipe for streamlined forms of furniture, Chareau was all angle, the smooth agony of flat steel and perforated sheet metal. Looking at the lines of force, looking at the piping and circuitry of the house offers the photographer quite another narrative, quite another route through the house.

New details remain old details but are re-noticed and pull the photographer this way or that, like those electricians pulling out cables and trying to trace faults. The eye wanders along the pipes and surfaces, through the screens and layers.

It is true MdV has become a seminal house familiar to those who know its poetic constructors, its constructivist vision reverses life and architecture. Has it remained seminal? 40 years on from the house in 1968 we are now another 40 years on. Are we to understand our own fascination with the machine over the 20th century and map it back to this carefully machine-of-parts which make up this dissolving opening and closing house?

The house is compact and open, dense yet light; the Russian doll that can keep being opened or the medicine chest carefully opened to reveal boxes and layers, more and more medicine and characters. Does this remain a private reverie, the poetics of Chareau alone, seen through the young photographer? There is this continuum whatever route your take, the photographer suggests; there are no dead ends, and the spaces all interlink and lead to each other.

If we are not careful, we are entering the literary spatial world of Alain Robbe-Grillet where you reach the gallery but it's not the end because you come out and go on and go back to go on... the obsession of and within architecture and all in black and white. Not the bricoleur, or the attraction of the palimpsest so much as the ordered transformation of the ordering novelist; the mechanical expression pre-empting a white writing. Where *mise en écran* changes to *mise en scène*.

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I stop. I do not write so much not because I know this will not be read, but this too will face the rubber Discard stamp soon enough, perhaps sooner than we ever imagine. Maison Dalsace, to give it its other title, is the sort of house I suggest to the photographer - especially as we sit here in Venice - where we need a body in one of the photographs. Surely in all the black and white images we will find a corpse and not only the visiting critic. The photographer smiles: he knows more than we know, perhaps more than he is saying. We might then ask Brunetti, he says; or Colombo or even John Rebus to enter the scene of the crime and begin tracing these levels that led to the murder during one of Madame Dalsace's salons. Architecture is of course nothing if not mysterious. The detective would assess the importance of the client and the fetish of space and surface. Links would be made to the machine and the profession of the gynaecologist. From here not a giant leap to the arrangements of rooms, bedrooms and other rooms and their relationship to each other. The detective would pause though, at Chareau's deep involvement with the clients. This would all have to be taken into consideration.

And then there's the ordered and ordering separation between Madame and Monsieur's private rooms. Does this suggest the architect went much further in the relationship with the client, even to the extent of analysing their private life in order to satisfy their spatial needs? In this, the detective asks, was the architect not only influencing their private life in the way he dissolved space between their own two professional lives, but perhaps he began to inhabit their own social and private lives by choreographing space and all divisions.

Did Chareau know all along that the house would become the couch and Mr Freud the silent partner? Pierre Chareau, small, diminutive, looked every bit like a doctor and would have to be questioned. Come this way, Sir, I have a few questions for you. But it's too late thankfully to make another fiction from one of the greatest modern houses of the 20th century

Its 2008; the photographer comes over to me and whispers something. You know, it's quite possible that the architect went much further than we ever realized. He may have had the sort of relationship that went beyond the usual client-architect relationship. How so, I ask? Well, the arrangement of rooms, the cloak-and-dagger aspect of the bedroom and the joining bathroom, the curtain and sliding door theatre might have allowed quite another intimacy. You mean the architect may have exceeded his brief? An affair? Possibly, the photographer whispered. But Madame's room is so open and accessible, I answered. Madame? Who's talking about Madame? Now, there's the mystery of Maison de Verre, the photographer says, which allows us to stop and let the images tell their own story.



Michael Carapetian 1968 ©

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¹ *Regis Debray, Against Venice (Contre Venice)*, translated and with an afterword by Philip Wohlstetter, An anti-voyages book, North Atlantic Books, Berkeley, California, 1999.

² They were also accompanied on this week-long trip by Robert Vikery who did most of the measurements for the measured drawings that result.

³ ...The external form is defined by translucent glass block walls, with select areas of clear glazing for transparency. Internally, spatial division is variable with the use of sliding, folding or rotating screens in glass, sheet or perforated metal, or in combination. Other mechanical components included an overhead trolley from the kitchen to dining room, a retracting stair from the private sitting room to Mme Dalsace's bedroom and complex bathroom cupboards and fittings. (wikipedia.org)

⁴ For this lineage see the essay by Kenneth Frampton, *Maison de Verre*, *Perspecta*, The Yale Architectural Journal, no. 12, 1969, p77-126. 1969 accompanied by many of the images taken by Carapetian that are now reproduced in this small volume. See also: "The History of Interior Design", John Pile, *Architecture Week* No. 65, 2001.0905, pC1.1; & Dennis Sharp. *Twentieth Century Architecture: a Visual History*. New York: Facts on File, 1990.
http://www.greatbuildings.com/buildings/Maison_de_Verre.html

Also: Lang Ho, Cathy. *Maison de Verre's New Keeper*, The Architect's Newspaper, 2006-05-23. & Ouroussoff, Nicolai. *The Best House in Paris*, The New York Times, 2007-08-26.

⁵ Can we take the links and let others run with them re-check them, re-confirm them. The Photographer checks for the few references online and finds this on Wikipedia: Dr. Dalsace was a member of the French Communist Party who played a significant role in both anti-fascist and cultural affairs. In the mid-1930s, the Maison de Verre's double-height "salle de séjour" was transformed into a salon regularly frequented by Marxist intellectuals like Walter Benjamin as well as by Surrealist poets and artists such as Louis Aragon, Paul Éluard, Jean Cocteau, Yves Tanguy, Joan Miro and Max Jacob. According to the American art historian Maria Gough, the Maison de Verre had a powerful influence on Walter Benjamin, especially on his constructivist - rather than expressionist - reading of Paul Scheerbart's utopian project for a future "culture of glass", for a "new glass environment [which] will completely transform mankind," as the latter expressed it in his 1914 treatise *Glass Architecture*. See in particular Benjamin's 1933 essay *Erfahrung und Armut* ("Experience and Poverty").