

# Why Preserve Modern Now?<sup>1</sup>

By Bárbara Coutinho

Coming to design in a natural development from architectural practice, Le Corbusier considered design not as a sum or addition to architecture. Its existence decisively constructed and modulated interior space, as light and shadows, materials or planes. From that belief, he quests the perfect and ideal form that asserts itself as a model of universal validity, arriving at three different furniture types: type-needs, type-furniture and human-limb objects<sup>2</sup>. Consequently, together with Charlotte Perriand and Pierre Jeanneret, in 1928 he drew the prototype of the Grand Confort armchair, presented the following year at the *Salon d'Automne* in Paris. In the photomontage published in *L'Architecture Vivante* (Spring, 1930),<sup>3</sup> the armchair is in a foremost position, occupying the foreground, isolated in a no gravity and transparent space, where Charlotte Perriand reclines on the famous LC4 chaise longue [figure 4]. Grand Confort is the mirror of a decade that takes the chair as a space of experimentation and the tubular steel as the main material of research. Icon of the *Esprit Nouveau*, its also conveys a new conception of space, time and object, revealing the rationalist aesthetic that characterized the first decades of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Eighty years later, like many other examples of Modern design, its copies and reproductions get multiplied, although since 1964 Italian Cassina has the exclusive worldwide rights to manufacture it, being nowadays the only company authorized by Fondation Le Corbusier.

As from 1980, the heirs of the *Anti-Design* and *Radical Design* movements further questioned the Modern definition of design and its heritage, proclaiming the death of functionalism and debating the object itself, its utility, aestheticization, cultural heritage, image and value, relation with economy system and language. This criticism is evident, for instance, in Mies Lounge Chair of the

Archizoom Associati. With similar radicalism, almost ten years later, in 1978, Alessandro Mendini camouflaged Marcel Breuer's Wassily chair and introduced a religious touch to Gerrit Rietveld's Zig-zag chair, both symbols of Modern ideology that were reedited at the time. More recently, there are several interpretations of Modern chairs. Particularly from Le Corbusier's Grand Confort we can find three examples of three authors: "Grand Confort/Comfort Sans, the Corbu Dommage" (1980) by Stefan Zwicky; "Le Corbusier Chair" (1994) by Jorge Pardo; and "Naked Confort-Corrupted Classics Collection" (2003-2004) by John Angelo Benson [figures 1, 2, 3].

On the border between art and design, Benson upholds the tubular chrome steel structure and the original cubic shape, replacing leather components with an unusual material, straw. With humour, Benson seems to undermine the architectural thinking of Le Corbusier, but paradoxically when he undresses the chair he emphasizes its skeleton and structure in a de-construction process that leads us to the rethinking of the main Modern principles. Although it may be seen as an iconoclast gesture, Naked Confort highlights the value of the original piece by reinterpreting it. In his "Corrupted Classics Collection" Benson also works with the Red-Blue chair by Gerrit Rietveld and the Barcelona chair by Mies van der Rohe and Lilly Reich to create "Red and Blue, but clear" and "Mies Lobby Trap". The choice is categorically incisive because he picks from our collective memory three classics of Modern design which are universally recognized. Or we know the original works or we will not be able to interpret Benson's pieces. With that he makes us more aware of the timeliness of these icons, especially when our material culture has transformed them into appealing images widely reproduced and consumed, with a series of copies, reproductions and re-editions distancing themselves from the Modern original. Ultimately, the result is a reflection on our own memory of the Modern, its significance for society, heritage and cultural importance.

Moreover, we are going through a profound transformation in our global society, standing by a new economic paradigm, growing technological complexity and renewed social demands. Cities are changing, and so are we. The way we live, work and inhabit, but also learn, communicate, and move, shifted in the last years. The increasing use of new technologies or new materials have expanded the possibilities of production and conservation, while at the same time they have also provoked profound changes in design philosophy and methodology. In a wide range of disciplines, the research that has been carried out into the physical behaviour of materials has led to major reinventions in each field, allowing more complex, organic or aerodynamic solutions. When the

borders between design, art and crafts are broken down, younger generations seek for alternative manufacturing processes, return to traditional handcraft techniques and investigate on new forms of recycling. Countless projects show a more widely ethical consciousness and a social responsibility. The aim is to develop products, systems and services with a longer life cycle.

In this context, studying, understanding, preserving and reinterpreting Modern heritage gains a wider importance. To preserve Modern architecture, interior designs and furnishings means necessarily to rehabilitate or reuse, turning them effectively alive. But it also implies to raise public awareness of the cultural value of this heritage and to make a profound study of the ideology and context that gave rise to them. Therefore, we need to reflect on its contemporaneity and the way it can contribute to a

more sustainable and responsible development. To preserve Modern heritage is a highly relevant theme due to its significance in our times but also due to a number of conceptual and technical challenges. It's important to discuss the method and extension of each intervention, the material, formal or ideological authenticity regarding the original program, durability, and foresee future needs. But it is also important to value the level of interference, the basis from which it is made and the consequences of new performances or functions. Therefore, it demands a multi-faceted approach. As a result, the articles gathered in this Journal aim to address the multiple ways in which Modernism has been claimed and to present different and complementary perspectives of preservation, highlighting recent examples and successful case studies.

Emphasizing the holistic character of the Modern

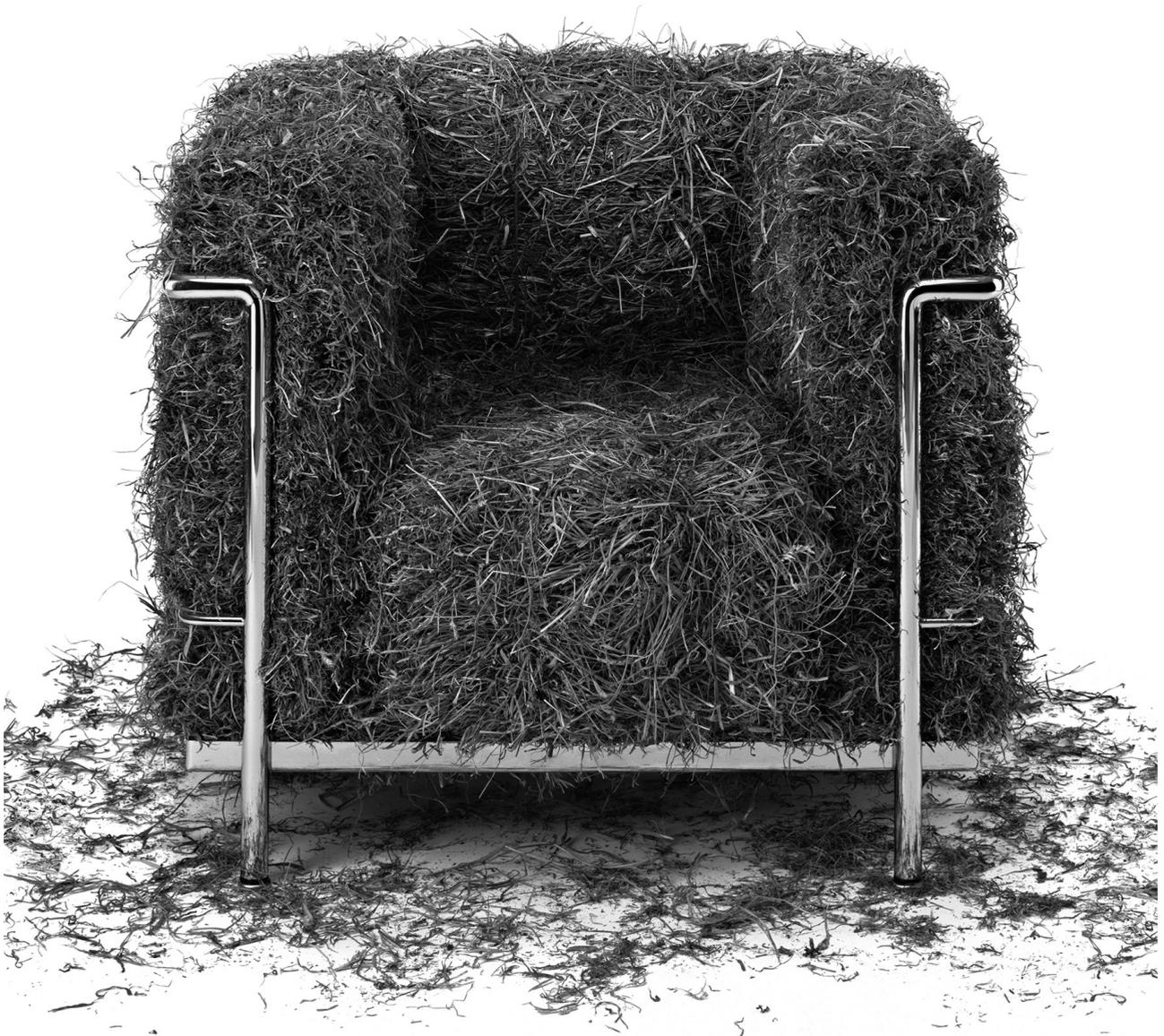


Figure 1. **John Angelo Benson**. Naked Confort (2003). Hay, Petit Confort (LC2) frame produced by Cassina. 67h x 76w x 70d cm

Movement and its goal to design Modern life in a *gesamkunstwerk* spirit with housing as the central theme of study and innovation, two essays explore the recently restored Tugendhat House by Mies van der Rohe and another article analyzes the coherence and unity of Charles and Ray Eames' work and thought. **Monika Wagner** shows how the Tugendhat House is a perfect metaphor of Mies' purist classicism, architectural space and living concept, explaining how materials, surfaces, furniture, light and nature decisively contribute in lightness, unity and tactility. **Miroslav Ambroz** emphasizes how Tugendhat is an expression of *gesamkunstwerk* with every detail (textiles, upholstery, covering material, colors) subordinated to the whole. Further on, he focuses on the reconstruction process to describe the importance of an initial research and documentation for the subsequent production of authentic replica furniture that respect the original pieces. Regarding Charles and Ray Eames, **Kyle Normadin** addresses the way they articulate the principles of Modernism with wartime technology to design a Modern living in a post-war era. The article also underlines the importance of Case Study House nº 8 as a mirror of a global living space and the house conservation project for a better understanding of their work and significance.

Looking at the legacy of ethics and Modern philosophy, **Klaus Klemp** concentrates on the "Ten design principles" of Dieter Rams and on his reflection about good design, specially his ideas of simplicity, innovation, technology, economy, intelligibility and utility. The result is the reinforcement of Dieter Rams' importance for the praxis and ethics of nowadays design.

Although the history of the Modern movement continues to stress it as a result of western culture, spread afterwards from Europe to the rest of the world, we talk more and more of peripheral Modernities.<sup>4</sup> **Louise Noelle** speaks about furniture and interior designer Clara Porset, putting in evidence the way she linked Modernity with local Mexican tradition and crafts in her interior designs. On the other hand, **Marc Dubois** focuses on Belgian architect Gaston Eysselinck, mainly in his masterpiece, the Post Office building in Ostend, stressing the reasons why this building continues to be incorrectly forgotten.

**Jurjen Creman** and **Otakar Mácêl** focus more directly on Modern furniture and its relation with Modern architecture. While Creman presents the restoration process of the Zig-zag chair by Gerrit Rietveld to explain how the new materials and new techniques used by Modern architects requires today new conservation solutions, Mácêl concentrates on the complementarity between design and architecture. He focuses on the steel tube furniture and the cantilever chairs and highlights their real contribution to the successful creation of Modern spatiali-

ty, specially its geometric, lightness and abstract character.

This Journal especially emphasizes the role of Finnish Modern design through the figure of Alvar Aalto and the way he represents a different path in the Modern movement, more organic, preferring to bend wood and seeking cosy and comfortable environments with as much natural light as possible. **Pekka Korvenmaa** writes an article about the architect's Modernity, thought and attitude, while **Mia Hipeli** focuses on the importance of Artek, created in 1935. The author bears witness of the importance of the company in the production, distribution and marketing of Aalto's pieces, and also of the worldwide promotion of Scandinavian design, spreading its simplicity, elegance, comfort, warmth and humanism. **Cristian Suau** puts the emphasis in the ephemeral architecture of exposition pavilions, discussing the significance of rebuilt this spaces and explaining in detail the philosophy and materiality of Aalto's *Metsapaviljonski*.

#### Notes

1. The title was inspired by *Why Design Now? - National Design Triennial of 2010 in Cooper-Hewitt, National Design Museum* where the main question was to know how design could help solving the problems of our society.
2. Le Corbusier, *L'Art décoratif d'aujourd'hui*, Collection de L'Esprit Nouveau, Paris, Les Éditions Arthaud, 1925.
3. Vegesack, Alexander von, ed, *Le Corbusier - The art of architecture*. Weil am Reim, Vitra Design Museum, 2007, 156.
4. Sarlo, Beatriz (1996), *Una Modernidad Periférica: Buenos Aires, 1920 y 1930*, Nueva Vision, 1996.

#### References

- AA.VV., *Design#Art*, London, New York, Merrell Publishers Limited/Cooper-Hewitt, National Design Museum, 2004.
- AA.VV., *Strangely Familiar: Design and Everyday Life*, Minnesota, Walker Art Center, 2003.
- AA.VV., *Modernism. Designing a new world. 1914-1939*, London, Victoria&Albert Publications, 2006.
- AA.VV., *Design contre design. Deux siècles de créations*, Paris, Reunion des musées nationaux, 2007.

#### Bárbara Coutinho

Born in Lisbon in 1971, she is the Director of MUDE - Design and Fashion Museum, Francisco Capelo's Collection since 2006. Member of Francisco Capelo's Collection Management Board. Invited Assistant Professor in *Instituto Superior Técnico* and collaborator in the Curatorial Studies Master in Lisbon University. Master in Contemporary Art History with the thesis *Carlos Ramos. Architecture, thinking and action: the search for bringing together Tradition and Modernity*. At present she is developing a PhD on the phenomenology of the contemporary exhibition space. Curator of MUDE Permanent Exhibition, "Seeds, Capital Value" (2010), "It's forbidden to forbid!" (2009) or "7 Environments/7 Designers" (2002). Author of "Sena da Silva, Designer" (2009) and "Unique and Multiple" (2011), signing essays and articles on contemporary creation, design, architecture and museology. Has also participated in conferences, juries and seminars. Between 1998 and 2006, was curator of the program of lectures about contemporary art/design/architecture and coordinator of the educational department of *Centro Cultural de Belém*.

Figure 2. Le Corbusier Chair, 1994,  
by Jorge Pardo

Figure 3. "Grand Confort/Comfort Sans,  
the Corbu Dommage", 1980, by Stefan Zwicky.

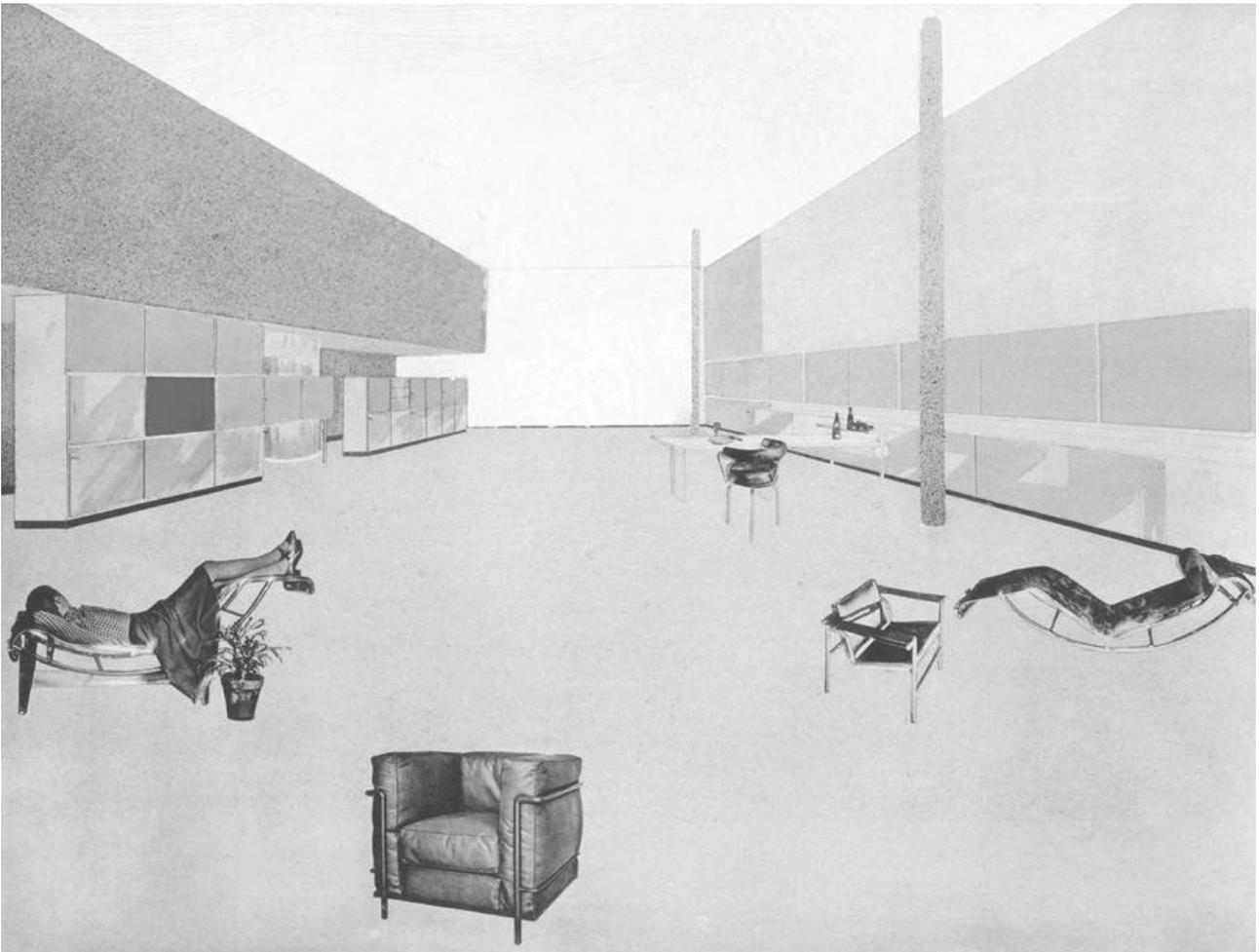
Figure 4. Photomontage of the prototype of  
the Grand Confort armchair, presented at the  
Salon d'Automne in Paris, published in  
*L'Architecture Vivante* (1930).  
© Fondation Le Corbusier.



2



3



9

4