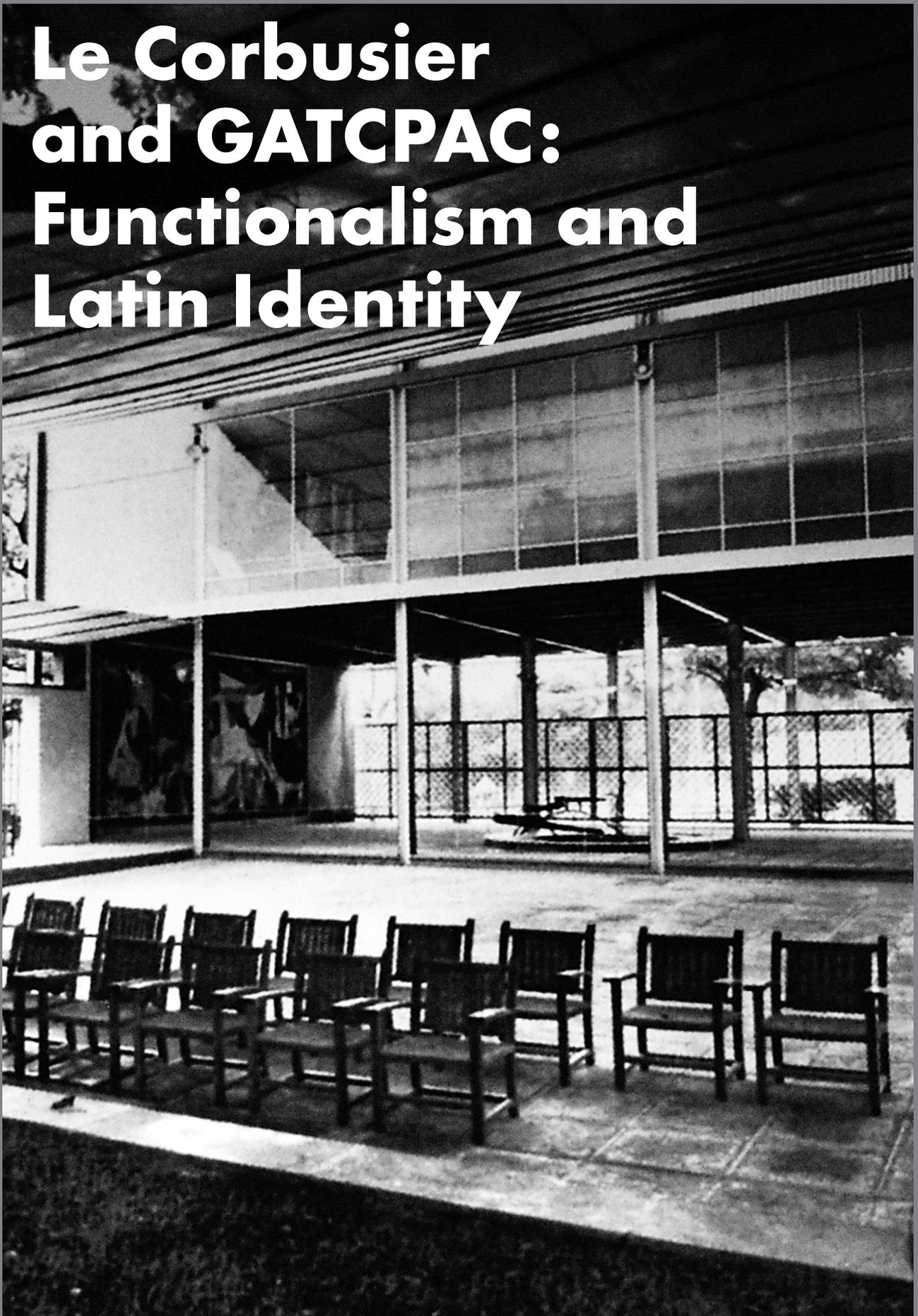


Le Corbusier and GATCPAC: Functionalism and Latin Identity

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This study presents a brief history of design in the context of historic avant-gardes. It shows that, in parallel to the more classical historiographical interpretation which followed Pevsner's ideas to "internationalize" the production of the 20s and 30s, other models with vernacular Latin roots were obviated.

By Mercè Vidal

Almost from the very beginning, in 1925, Gropius himself had brought the *Moderne Baukunst* of different countries together under the banner of "International Architecture". In 1932, the Museum of Modern Art held its first exhibition of European architecture under the significant title 'The International Style', and—as Jonathan M. Woodham has pointed out so well (2001)—hard on its heels and under the aegis of Gropius came Nikolaus Pevsner's reaffirmation of internationalism, *Pioneers*.¹ We cannot forget the original title of Pevsner's book, just as we cannot forget the few revisions he introduced in subsequent editions and the clarity of Pevsner's own ideological stance, reinforced this "internationalism" under the aegis of Gropius.

On the other hand, the work of a young group of Catalan architects known by the acronym GATCPAC (Group of Catalan architects and technicians in support of the progress of contemporary architecture) architects, who from 1931 to their dissolution in 1937 had disseminated furniture design along with new architectural proposals, was only initially prompted by a conception of interiors approximating the *Neue Sachlichkeit*; in time, that interest cooled, giving way to furniture and interior design that was rooted in "place" and adopted a more "humanistic" character, infused with identity through the Mediterranean vernacular. The A.C. *Documentos de Actividad Contemporánea* magazine was one of the means of dissemination of the new ideas in line with the new furniture designs.

Furnishing the Home, between Imported and National Designs

Soon after the group was formed in 1931, GATCPAC opened a centre that could double as a meeting place and shop. The sign outside the door simply said "*Construcció i amoblament de la casa contemporània*" (Construction and interior furnishing for the Modern house), and the example of the centre shows how the notion of standard was one of the group's earliest objectives. The shop [figure 1] was in the Passeig de Gràcia, a broad avenue in the heart of one of Barcelona's most affluent

neighbourhoods, just next to Gaudí's *La Pedrera*. Its clients included the parents of former mayor of Barcelona and President of Catalonia, Pasqual Maragall. The Maragalls came here to furnish their home as newlyweds, and when I once interviewed them about why they had chosen GATCPAC, their answer was short and to the point: "because it was Modern!" Such confidence reveals something about how the media worked in this period, and the public's response. Another factor that favoured this taste for Modernity was the declaration of the Second Republic.

The display of furnishing-through firms such as Thonet, Stylclair, Artek among others [figure 3] and the own production of GATCPAC in which the idea of *standard* was applied—considered all aspects of equipping the home and took every opportunity to highlight the Modernity of its designs. Alongside the presentation of architecture and town planning, its appearance in exhibitions, fairs or in even in the stage sets of theatre plays helped to disseminate many of the furniture designs on offer during this period as well as the materials necessary for construction. Paving the way for the founding of CIAM, in Moscow, CIRPAC's meeting in Barcelona in 1932 was GATCPAC's opportunity to exhibit much of its work.

MIDVA (*Mobilari i Decoració de la Vivenda Actual*)

Since 1931, when GATCPAC inaugurated its headquarters and shop in Passeig de Gràcia under the slogan "*Construcció i amoblament de la casa contemporània*", it had dedicated its efforts to lengthy debate about furnishing design and such issues as the import of certain models or the choice of industrial manufacturers. But in 1935, GATCPAC was replaced by MIDVA (*Mobilari i Decoració de la Vivenda Actual*) (Furnishings and decoration for today's living).

The inertia of some GATCPAC members and the working commitment of others lead to the creation, in GATCPAC's former headquarters, of the new society MIDVA. Formed by Josep Lluís Sert, Josep Torres Clavé, the young architecture student Antoni Bonet Castellana, German Rodríguez Arias, and a handful of industrialists, MIDVA played a decisive role in disseminating new models, although its activity was interrupted by the Spanish Civil War in 1936.

< GATCPAC's armchair at the Pavilion of the Republic of the International Exhibition of 1937, Paris. Josep Lluís Sert and Luis Lacasa.

MIDVA produced a series of designed objects, including a dining table, an auxiliary table, two easy chairs with sloping armrests, one of which was adjustable, and the GATCPAC's armchair [figure 2], the most widely seen of all when it was exhibited at the Pavilion of the Republic,

constructed by Sert and Luis Lacasa, during the International Exhibition of 1937, in Paris.

All the models were made of wood and, as reinterpretations of those anonymous pieces of Balearic furniture especially common in the style of Ibiza, they maintained a clear link with their Mediterranean vernacular roots.

MIDVA's initiative not only helped to create closer associations with foreign firms, such as Artek, but actually changed its headquarters name to MIDVA, as explained above, and then participated in the First Exhibition of Decorative Artists organized in May 1936 in Barcelona by FAD Foment de les Arts Decoratives (Organ for the promotion of decorative arts), which brought together a large number of artisans, ensemblers, technicians and designers. For Catalonia, this exhibition constituted a major step in the renovation and consolidation of the decorative arts and of design basing itself upon Modernity and national production. When within months the Spanish Civil War broke out, that advance was brought to a standstill.

The MIDVA Installation

But MIDVA was also a direct expression of the Mediterranean current and of the Latin element that had gradually been gaining ground in Modern architecture. I therefore believe that, however briefly, it is interesting to describe the organization's installation at the FAD exhibition: as I have argued above, the fundamental role that furniture and interior design played in accentuating, altering and prompting evolutionary processes was well understood by both architects and designers, and evident at the exhibition. The stand itself [figure 4] was situated on a terrace covered by a Catalan vault, recreating different themed areas, from dining and reading spaces to leisure areas for rest and sport.

The furniture and wall furnishings defined the different functions of these individual areas within a common space. The materials were particularly significant: wicker; plated string from Palma (originating in the traditional practice of crafted chairs 'de boga'—from bulrushes or reed mace); tile and vitreous pottery (present in peasant homes and in research in the period of Catalan Modernisme or Art Nouveau); Figueres stone (also traditionally used); Melis (a kind of resinous pine used in Catalonia for beams, doors and auxiliary furniture as early as the 14th century); and fiber cement. As we can see, together these materials constituted a material culture based on local tradition and they dressed the installation in a veritable symphony of Mediterranean color: limestone white, blue² and yellow. The stand was simply completed with a cut out painting by Joan Miró put on a cement support; an earthenware vase; pottery dishes painted white and a courgette, the outline of which was reminiscent of the

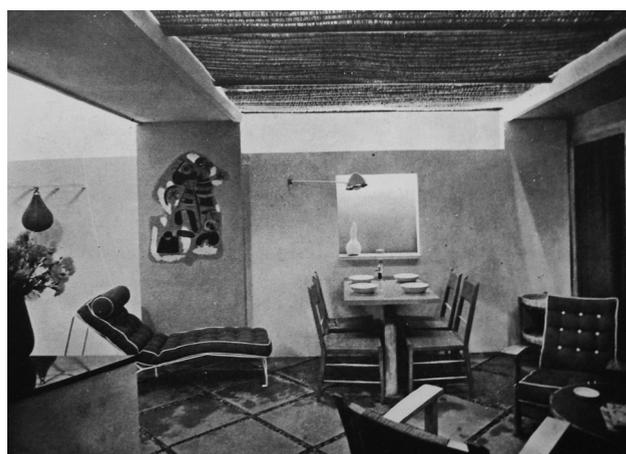
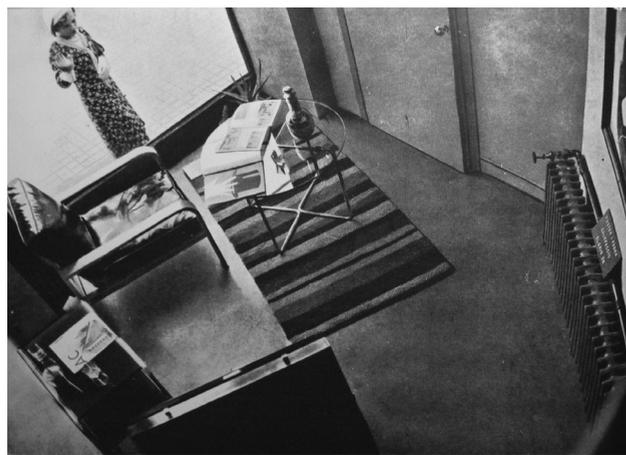


Figure 1. A.C. cover with the meeting place and shop GATCPAC's just next to Gaudí's "La Pedrera", in A.C. n° 2, 1931.

Figure 2. Armchair produced by MIDVA (1935), Museum of Decorative Arts Barcelona. Photo by Mercè Vidal.

Figure 3. Show-window of GATCPAC's shop with the new furniture design imported from European capitals (1931). Photo by Josep Sala.

Figure 4. MIDVA's stand with GATCPAC's models. A.C. n° 23-24, 1936.

more organically-shaped works of Jean Arp. The stand was made by three members of GATCPAC and MIDVA: Josep Lluís Sert, Josep Torres Clavé and Antoni Bonet Castellana.

3. Le Corbusier and GATCPAC, the “Latin Front”

In this last section I shall consider how the Mediterranean or Latin line in GATCPAC’s furnishing and interior design was in no way unconnected to other foreign trends which, in the current of functionalism and / or rationalism, reinforced what Le Corbusier described as the Latin Front. In the mid 30s, GATCPAC contributed to international debate at the same time that debate was being raised in other parts of the world. Its advance reaffirms that what began peripherally was brought together on common ground.

Especially through the influence of Sert, from 1928 onwards GATCPAC began to have direct contact with Le Corbusier, its initial admiration increasingly becoming an apprenticeship. During Le Corbusier’s first visit to Barcelona, in 1928, he had already observed that *“the architecture I propose is essentially Latin because it is mathematical and has clarity of vision. Do you understand why I should consider this architecture to suit your land, which has certain clear and well reasoned ideas for structural solutions?”*³

Studies have considered Le Corbusier’s interest in the Mediterranean⁴ but I believe they view this interest as simply one more of the architect’s many preoccupations. In Paul V. Turner’s examination of Charles-Édouard Jeanneret’s earlier apprenticeship—in the days of his youth before adopting the name Le Corbusier—we are given a valuable opportunity to see that interest from another angle. The influence on Jeanneret of Charles L’Eplattenier, his teacher at the *École d’Art at La Chaux-de-Fonds* in Switzerland, was decisive in the younger man’s reflective and thorough absorption of Henry Provensal’s theory in *L’Art de demain* (1904). In that book, Provensal had discussed the need to seek “integral harmony” and he referred to this as “the Absolute”, which existed in art in three divine and eternal laws: “Unity, Name and Harmony”. These three concepts went on to play a significant role in all Le Corbusier’s oeuvre. And no less important for him were Alexandre Cingria-Vaneyre’s thoughts in *Les Entretiens de la ville du Rouet*, which reflected upon the artistic identity of the Swiss romane, rejected the notion of German influence and upheld its Graeco-Latin foundation: “our classical soul [...] can evolve only by means of a Graeco-Latin formula”, Cingria-Vaneyre wrote; “Geneva must be Graeco-Latin”. Next to these lines in the margin of his copy of the book, Le Corbusier wrote the words “I fully agree”.⁵ And this, it would appear, partially explains why in 1911 Le Corbusier left Berlin and Behrens’ workshop

to undertake the long journey across the Mediterranean eventually described in his book *Le Voyage d’Orient*. There, he observed that *“this journey to the East leaves the lavish ornament of Northern architecture far behind. It answers the sun’s persistent cry, it reaches for the far-flung horizons of deep blue seas and the great white walls of temples: Constantinople, Asia Minor, Greece, Southern Italy—all these will serve as ideal vessels”*.⁶

The “idealism” in Le Corbusier’s work became a substratum from which his creation could be sustained, and this was already evident in the years of Purism. The material culture of the Mediterranean countries inspired his keenest interest and embraced the very greatest and the very finest details. The proof is the edition of Le Corbusier’s *Carnets*⁷ which contain the account of his journey to the East. It is just at this time, therefore, during the mid 30s, when designers in Catalonia, Italy or Greece expressed their conviction that new architecture, design and interior design had to maintain the spirit of research; that without this spirit there could be no invention and new design would be conventionally labeled as just another “style”—the very one, indeed, which we now call the “International style”. To avoid this, they believed it necessary to be anchored in “place”, to maintain and share “place” with one another, and extract from it a *latin identity*.

The Fourth CIAM Congress, held in the summer of 1933 on board the ship *Patris II* as it sailed for Athens, became a touchstone for many architects and designers. At that time, the A.C. journal described the event as follows:

The Latin contingent in this Congress is more strongly felt than it was in earlier editions. We form almost the majority and we are sailing across the Mediterranean. This will explain many of the differences between the Fourth Congress and previous meetings.

Modern architecture has found itself on the shores of this Sea, or more precisely, it is gathering back to its own shores the pure shapes of the Mediterranean. These shapes have influenced the constructions of Northern countries, which have allowed themselves a new building technique by using them.

*The coastline of Greece and the Greek Islands share an architectural style with the Balearic Island of Ibiza and Minorca: the walls of their villages whitewashed with lime, the flat or arched roofs of their houses. The spirit of this architecture is essentially Modern, the continuation of the same shapes that have repeated themselves over the centuries in so many corners of the Mediterranean.*⁸

The opportunity to contemplate the landscape of a Latin vernacular had a profound effect on all the participants in the Congress, and many years later this return to the Mediterranean brought back stirring memories for Italian architects like Gino Pollini: *“the feeling of ancient tradition was clearly present in every soul, even though*

it could not be expressed in the work of the Congress".⁹ Its effect was such that the Italian journal *Quadrante* dedicated an entire issue to Greece and the Fourth CIAM Congress (n° 5, September 1933), and n° 18 [figure 5], 19 and 21 of GATCPAC's A.C. ran features on popular architecture, the evolution of interior design in the home and the island of Ibiza respectively.

The force with which pictures in such journals could influence their readers has been discussed above, and this was particularly important with A.C.'s n° 19 (1935), which contained a variety of photographs related to interior design: the weekend houses [figure 6] designed by Sert and Torres Clavé between 1934 and 1935 for the coastal town of Garraf; the house designed by the architect German Rodríguez Arias in 1934 in Ibiza [figure 7]; Sert's own studio in Barcelona, as it appeared in 1931 [figure 9]; Rodríguez Arias's studio, also in Barcelona, in 1932; and the interior of the apartment and studio designed by Le Corbusier and Pierre Jeanneret in Paris in 1934. All these photographs were accompanied by brief captions, although here I have only considered the description of Le Corbusier's bedroom [figure 8]: "gentleman-academics of Modernity! See how perfectly Modern design can function without the usual hackneyed phrases or tubular chrome chairs, without excessively 'functional' furniture or severely 'rational' structures; look at its curving surfaces, which for some of you may be disconcerting..." (A.C. n° 19, 1935). The same photograph had been published one year earlier in *D'Ací i d'Allà* [figure 10], which ran a special Christmas issue on 20th century art written by Sert and Joan Prats. Le Corbusier's dining room and bedroom were featured opposite pictures of different interiors designed by Werner M. Moser, from Zurich, and accompanied by the following text: "[...] the interior of a Modern house can at the same time be friendly, intimate and entirely Latin in spirit. There is nothing cold or clinical about this room: there is no German severity. But the racial differences do become clearly evident when we compare these photographs with those on the other page".¹⁰

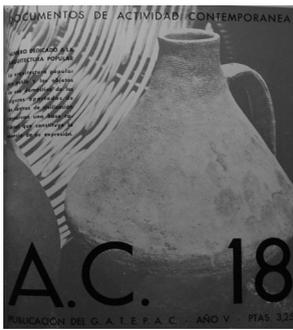
In August 1932, Le Corbusier made his feelings very clear in a letter he wrote to the architect Guido Fiorini: "your letters were waiting for me when I arrived in Spain [...] I delivered a paper in Barcelona [...] about the major projects of town planning. I have spoken at length to President Macià and met many people. I believe that the time has come for the Latin countries to act and that Latin inspiration will dominate the second era of the Machine Age".¹¹ In the period starting with the Fourth CIAM Conference and leading up to the end of the 30s, that movement rooted in the tradition of the Mediterranean vernacular gained ground, and then continued to exist beyond World War II, in the different regions of post-war Europe.

Notes

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- It is likely that this blue was what is called "*blauet*" the color which is used still today to paint the courtyards of many of the houses in the Catalan coast. We can find it in Ibiza and Sitges with that name.
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- D'Ací i d'Allà* "Werner N. Moser/ Le Corbusier i P. Jeanneret", Christmas special edition, 1934, n/p.
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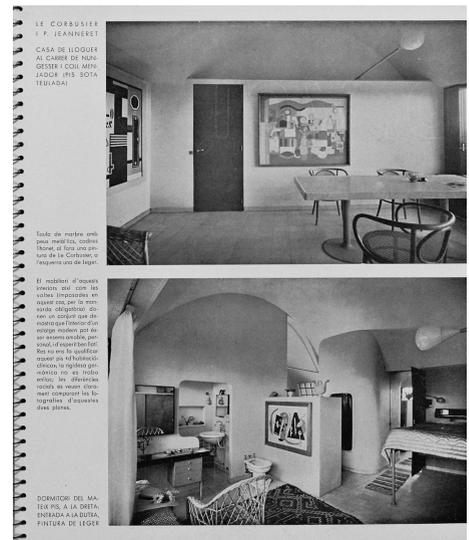
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Figure 5. A.C. nº 18 dedicated to popular architecture, 1935.

Figure 6. Weekend house designed by **Josep Lluís Sert** and **Josep Torres Clavé** (1934–1935) for the coastal town of Garraf. A.C. nº 19, 1935.

Figure 7. The interior equipping was remodelled with anonymous designs by **Germán Rodríguez Arias** in Sant Antoni (Ibiza). A.C. nº 19, 1935.

Figure 8. Apartment Block 24, *Nungesser et Coli* (Paris) and **Le Corbusier's** home (1931–1934). *D'Ací i D'Allà*, Winter 1934 and A.C. nº 19, 1935.

Figure 9. **Josep Lluís Sert's** studio in Barcelona (1931) with GATCPAC's armchair, objects from Ibiza, wicker carpet, anonymous chair and **Fernand Léger** painting. A.C. nº 19, 1935.

Figure 10. *D'Ací i D'Allà* journal cover illustrated by **Joan Miró**. *D'Ací i D'Allà*, Winter 1934.

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