



Le Corbusier, *Maison Curutchet*, La Plata, Argentina, 1949–1955. Living-dining room with double height. © Mario Refik, September 2014.

Maison Curutchet, La Plata, Argentina

BY JORGE NÉSTOR BOZZANO AND JULIO SANTANA

The *Maison Curutchet* is the only house by Le Corbusier in America. The project was developed between 1948 to 1949 and built between 1949 to 1955 as a single-family dwelling and as a professional medical office to the well-known Dr. Pedro Domingo Curutchet in La Plata, Buenos Aires.

In 2013–2014, *Colegio de Arquitectos de la Provincia de Buenos Aires* (CAPBA) which head office is settled there, decided to carry out a full maintenance, done with the strict criteria of minimizing the impact on the house and using as reference the original documentation.

The process was coordinated by CAPBA's Enhancement Research Institute, led by the architect Pablo Mastro-
pasqua, and directed by the architect Julio Santana.

Le Corbusier and Argentina

The relationship between Le Corbusier and Argentina began in 1928, when the writer Victoria Ocampo commissioned him to design a house and a small-scale building in Buenos Aires. For various reasons, they were never realized. With his journey to South America in 1929 and his presence in Argentina's capital — encouraged by *Amigos del Arte Association* — and his attendance at a series of conferences he cemented his contact with numerous people. As a result, he was asked to design the Martínez de Hoz House in Buenos Aires and the Errázuriz House in Chile, neither of which were built.

In 1937 two young Argentine architects, Juan Kurchan and Jorge Ferrari Hardoy, had the chance to collaborate at Le Corbusier's studio in Paris where they were entrusted with Buenos Aires' urban planning. In the end, the project was not realized.

One decade later, Pedro Domingo Curutchet — a well-known surgeon — contacted Le Corbusier through his sister, Leonor, to commission a combined single-family dwelling and professional medical office. The project was located in La Plata (the capital of the Buenos Aires province), seventy kilometers from the Argentine capital. The response arrived immediately: "Your program, a doctor's house, is extremely attractive from a social point of view. I am interested in the idea of making your house a domestic masterpiece with simplicity, functionality and harmony".

That was the beginning of an exchange of letters until 1949, when Le Corbusier and his team members — André Wogenscky, Roger Aujame and Bernard Horsli — resolved the design. The design drawings of the building were sent to La Plata suggesting several candidates for construction manager. Dr. Curutchet chose Amancio Williams, a young architect who, with unusual enthusiasm, undertook the realization of the construction plans, in constant consultation with Le Corbusier. The construction began one year later.

Materialization and Usage

The execution of the project was assigned to Amancio Williams, who realized Le Corbusier's design proposal as accurately as possible. He made many sketches and construction drawings in order to realize the preliminary design. Works were considerably delayed by this process and the owner decided to change his construction supervisor to the architect Simón Ungar with the engineer Alberto Valdes. Architect Nereida Bar was in charge of the garden design. Finally the house was completed and immediately occupied by the doctor's family, although for only a short time. Afterwards the house was occupied by a building manager for several years during which time it fell into disrepair.

A Little Big Masterpiece

The architectural program, which comprised a house for a couple with two daughters and a professional medical practice, is located on a narrow, sloping lot with a 9 metre frontage and a depth of 20 metres, facing a public square which opens onto the city park.

The living and working quarters had to function independently, for which reason Le Corbusier defined two volumes that were separate and yet connected at the same time. On the ground floor the garage is at the front and the service areas are at the back. The only pedestrian entrance, for both the house and the medical practice, is a ramp which acts as both a circulation system and a composition articulator of the ensemble.

The ramp climbs up from the street and at the first intermediate landing there is the generously glazed hall of the residence, which contains the stairs leading to the upper floors. Turning back towards the street, the ramp leads to the mezzanine which contains a waiting area and the medical consultation room. They occupy the entire width of the lot, and open to the park through a generous glass window. In front of it, there is a *brise-soleil* that consists of a rectangular



01 Le Corbusier, *Maison Curutchet*, La Plata, Argentina, 1949 - 1955. Access hall from the street. © Mario Retik, February 2014.



02 Le Corbusier, *Maison Curutchet*, La Plata, Argentina, 1949 - 1955. Access hall from the street. © Mario Retik, November 2014.

grid framework that continues up to the rooftop family garden terrace. The medical intern's accommodation on the mezzanine has independent access and views into the interior courtyard.

The stairs from the access hall to the residential area reach the first floor which contains the lounge and dining areas as well as the outdoor terrace. The stair hall gives separate access to the kitchen (for servants) and to the formal rooms (for family and guests). A double-height void above part of the lounge area allows a visual relationship with the upper floor where the bedrooms are located.

There are blade walls on the side boundaries, even though the structural system consists of reinforced concrete slabs and free-standing columns that are separate from both the boundary and internal walls and both the columns and the curved and straight internal walls between rooms are free to play with space.

Part of the furniture is built in under the windows or with the walls, integrating it thoroughly with the architecture.

The garden terrace is directly related to the living room, a part covered with a high concrete canopy that is in dialogue with both the *brise-soleil* and the higher house next door.

In the open central space that penetrates the building between both volumes, Curutchet planted a tree, following Le Corbusier's suggestion. It converses with the ramp, a real architectural promenade, with a play of views that open in multiple directions. A small sinuous path leads to the Ground Floor service areas and, along with the garage, there is a sculpture by Enio Iommi, that speaks of space, the movement of the plane, time, surface and light.

Seen from the park, *Maison Curutchet* stands out for the access door framed by a generous concrete splayed rectangular frame, contrasting with the rest of the framework that forms a subtle metal grid. The grid of the *brise-soleil* continues up to the rooftop garden terrace's concrete canopy which reaches the height of the Italianate style house next

door. On the opposite side, the boundary wall is hollowed out with an opening to the garden of the neighbor's house, designed by the Hungarian architect, Andres Kalnay, in a style between rationalist and art deco. This is how *Maison Curutchet* accomplishes a subtle dialog with the contiguous buildings and is an exemplary answer by modern architecture to the inherited surroundings. The use of the Modulor system for controlling measures, co-ordinating details, the well thought-out services installations, the maximum usage of views to the park, reaffirms the house's greatness.

In the house it is possible to clearly appreciate the re-formulation of the *Five Principles of Modern Architecture* that Le Corbusier announced two decades before designing it. Therefore, the open floor plan, the *pilotis*, the free facade, the strip window, and the roof terrace are all expressed in *Maison Curutchet* with the same strength that they are expressed in the emblematic *Ville Savoye* in Poissy.

Actions around the Building

In the 1980s negotiations began in order to recover the use of the house. Finally, in 1987, the house was declared a National Historical Landmark by resolution No. 2335, which was later ratified by decree N° 890/2006. In that context, Curutchet decided to rent the building to his friend Doctor Federico Christmann, a well-known surgeon in La Plata, with the aim of starting a Foundation. The first renovation project was under the charge of Luis and Julio Grossman, and for a short period of time, the Christmann foundation undertook a series of cultural activities.

In 1991 the house was rented by *Colegio de Arquitectos de la Provincia de Buenos Aires* (CAPBA), a body that represents fourteen thousand architects, and established there its first institutional and administrative head office. This institution has directed, executed and financed the maintenance and enhancement of the building ever since.

As CAPBA consolidated, the number of visitors to the house motivated the idea of moving the College's admin-



03 Le Corbusier, *Maison Curutchet*, La Plata, Argentina, 1949 - 1955. Doctor's office. © Mario Retik, February 2014.



04 Le Corbusier, *Maison Curutchet*, La Plata, Argentina, 1949 - 1955. Doctor's office. © Mario Retik, February 2014.

05 Le Corbusier, *Maison Curutchet*, La Plata, Argentina, 1949 - 1955. Railing ramp. © Mario Retik, February 2014.



06 Le Corbusier, *Maison Curutchet*, La Plata, Argentina, 1949 - 1955. Railing ramp. © Mario Retik, November 2014.



istration office, leaving the house for individual and group visits only. CAPBA bought two adjoining properties, where the new administrative office was relocated.

In 2009 the fiction film, *El Hombre de al Lado*, written and directed by Gastón and Andrés Duprat (the second of whom is an architect) and Mariano Kohan was filmed in the house. The movie was a big success and received several awards in International Festivals.

Growing appreciation towards cultural assets and the influence of the film increased the number of people visiting the house, going beyond academic and professional circles.

This motivated CAPBA to elaborate an enhancement plan to both answer and, at the same time, to question society's link with the *Maison Curutchet*.

This plan has three main working areas that gain focus at various times: added cultural value, added building value, added academic value.

Cultural Value Plan

Since 2011 it has been decided to assist artists from various disciplines who felt motivated by the house and by Le Corbusier's architecture.

From that idea of participation and openness, a call was made — started by architects but also including anyone who may be interested — to submit their proposals and initiatives, where the CAPBA had the roll of a curator.

The selection of proposals is based on three main criteria:

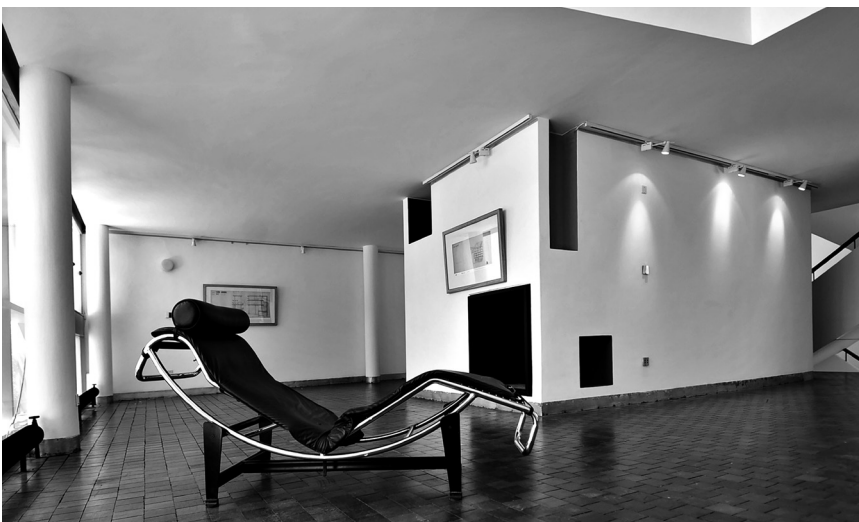
- Activities inspired by the *Maison Curutchet* and/or by Le Corbusier's work.
- Activities that articulate different disciplines.
- Collective activities over individual ones.

Among multiple activities already undertaken, it is worth highlighting the theatrical play, *El Espacio Indecible* which has had three successful seasons from 2013 until now. The play was created by the playwright Nelson Mallach and Roxana Aramburú to be exclusively played at the *Maison Curutchet*. It is about how Corbusian architecture increased after World War One, *IMBUIDO*/inspired by Balzac and Proust's spirit, about how ideas finally reached South America; about the master's relationship with Josephine Baker, his regular days in his Parisian studio and his time in the Cabanon at Cap Martin. Everything is modulated by French songs and by a theatrical tour to different areas of the house.

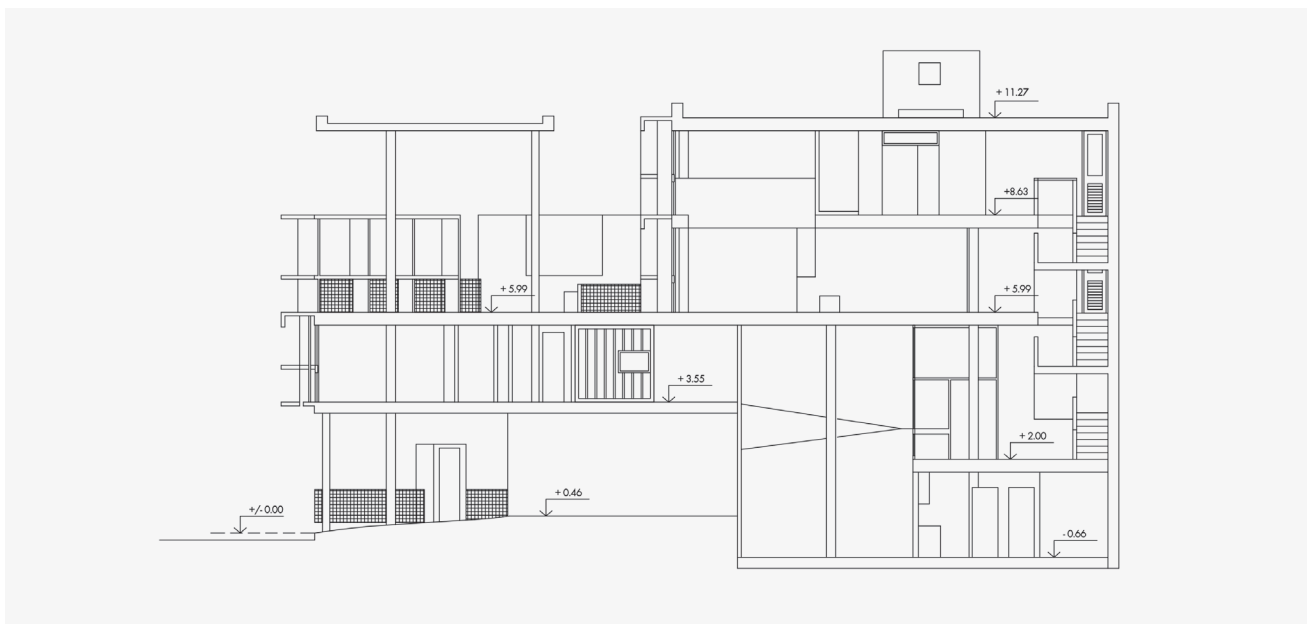


07 Le Corbusier, *Maison Curutchet*, La Plata, Argentina, 1949 - 1955. View to the park through the *brise-soleil* of the garden terrace. © Julio Santana, September 2014.

08 Le Corbusier, *Maison Curutchet*, La Plata, Argentina, 1949 - 1955. Living-dining room with double height.
© Mario Retik, September 2014.



09 Le Corbusier, *Maison Curutchet*, La Plata, Argentina, 1949 - 1955. *Brise-soleil*, canopy and tree, from the garden terrace. © Mario Retik, September 2014.



10 Le Corbusier, *Maison Curutchet*, La Plata, Argentina, 1949–1955. Section.

Several art exhibitions have taken place at the house. It is worth mentioning the one which brought together thirty well-known Argentinian architects who interpreted the *Maison Curutchet*, each one with a freedom of technique and materials. Some of the participants were Justo Solsona, Roberto Frangella, Isaac Rasdolsky, Sandro Borghini, and Miguel Jurado.

Dance was another discipline that has been inspired many times by the house, making the body move — from classical to contemporary dance or tango — playing with geometry, volumes and surfaces of the house. One of these performances — directed by the choreographer Florencia Olivieri — was supported by the National Endowment for the Arts.

Documentaries have their place too: in 2012 and 2013 *La Máquina de Habitar* by Bruno Garritano and *Amancio Williams* by Gerardo Panero were filmed there.

Additionally, conferences, talks and seminars have been given at the *Maison Curutchet* by prestigious Argentinian and foreign architects and town planners. Many of them have been broadcast through a modern teleconference system installed at the house.

The house also participates in *La Noche de los Museos*, an activity organized by the Cultural Institute of Buenos Aires in which, every year, the *Maison Curutchet* has an outstanding participation by hundreds of people inspecting the house in one night.

All this year and especially after July, numerous activities will take place in order to commemorate the fiftieth anniversary of the moment when Le Corbusier drowned off Cap-Martin.

For these activities different countries' embassies that normally organize activities at the house have been invited

— such as the Swiss and French embassies to Argentina; countries where the Master was born and lived.

The Building's Value Plan

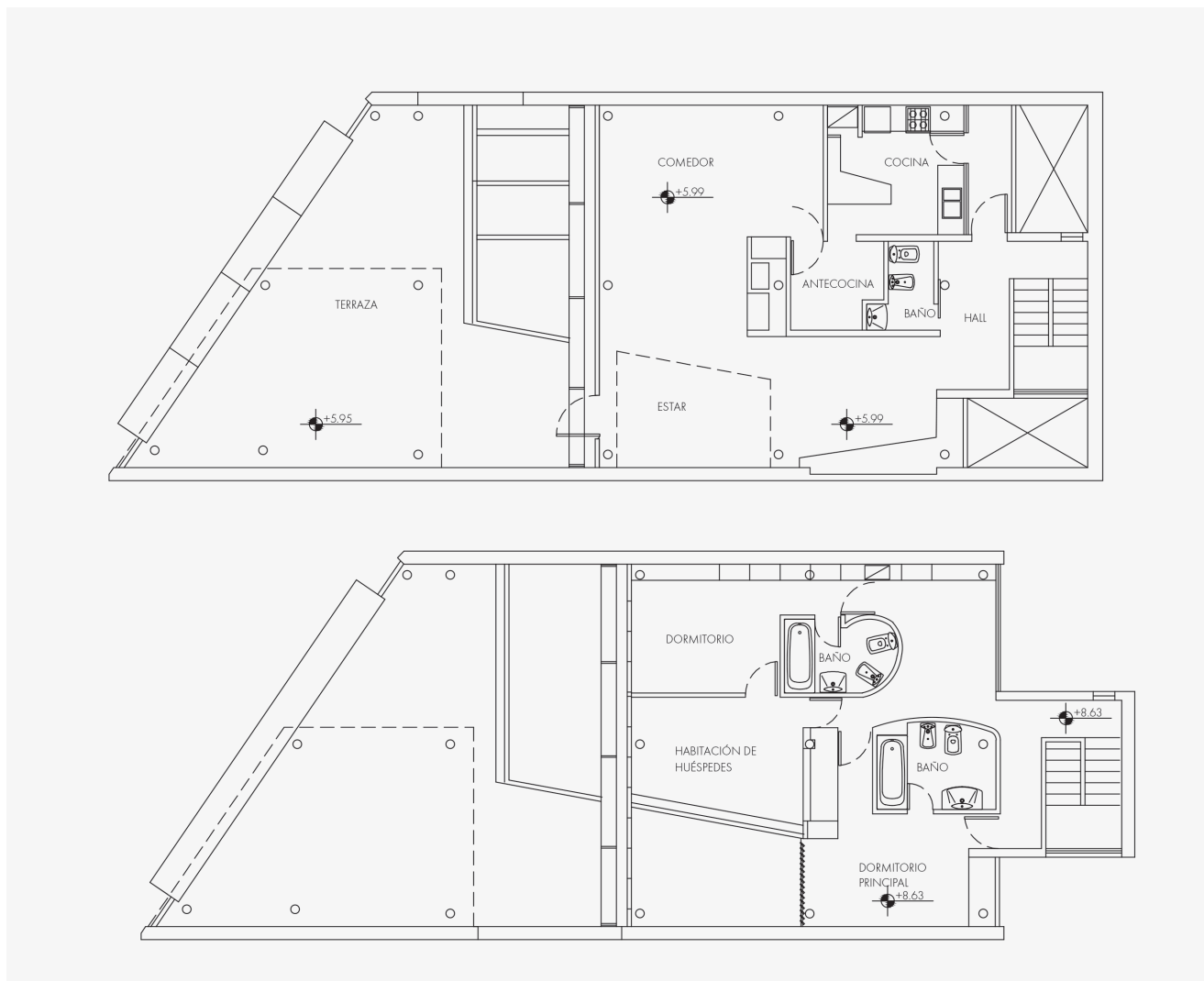
In 2013–2014, in order to ensure the continuity of CAPBA's administration of the house, value adding studies and actions were undertaken. These were jointly coordinated by CAPBA's Enhancement Research Institute, led by the architect Pablo Mastropasqua, and directed by the architect Julio Santana.

The building's value adding undertaken in this period can be labeled as deep maintenance. Any activity that required structural intervention was made but, due to the fact that the house is in very good condition from that aspect there was no element of the house whose stability was at risk.

All interior and exterior surfaces were treated. *Pilotis*, *brise-soleil*, walls, internal partitions, roofs, ceilings, floors, and joinery were repaired. Completion of those tasks required public access to be restricted to certain areas: the old garage, which now works as a reception area, and the services' areas at the lower level.

Surface treatment to walls, roofs and exterior floors consisted of a deep cleaning with mechanical means such as low pressure water, a chemical treatment to eliminate mildew from the surfaces, and being finished with total waterproofing.

Interior walls and ceilings innumerable small and medium size imperfections, produced by usage over several decades, were corrected. These included dents, damp, material degradation, removal of added external conduits for telephone and data supply and electric cabling. These irregularities were explored to check for deterioration or unseen corrosion in elements such as plumbing and metallic framework.



11 Le Corbusier, *Maison Curutchet*, La Plata, Argentina, 1949-1955. Plans, 1st and 2nd floors.

When sections of rusted plumbing were found, they were replaced with new ones. A similar criterion was taken with rusted metallic framework; they were uncovered and treated with paint as a protection and recoated with compatible materials. Once the imperfections in the substrate were fixed the surfaces were painted.

Regarding metal and timber joinery, they were sealed and waterproofed in order to avoid moisture infiltration and damp; they were completely painted as well.

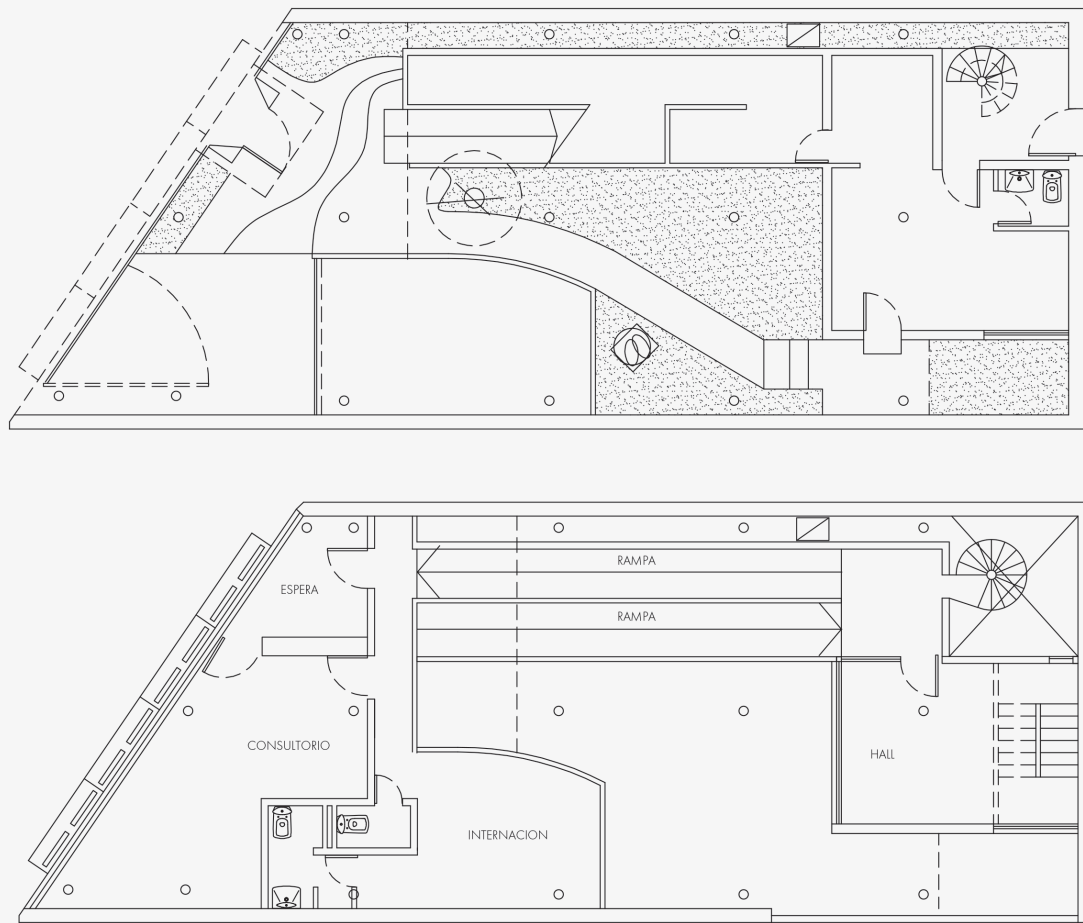
Besides the previously-mentioned intentions of the CAPBA, the collaboration and assessment of problems by SIKA Argentina SA, regarding the waterproofing, and Tersuave SA regarding paint, should be noted.

The enhancement process was done with the strict criteria of minimizing the impact on the house and using as a reference the original documentation. The documentation included that produced by Le Corbusier at his Parisian studio, Amancio Williams' documentation produced in Argentina, and the letters they wrote to each other and with Dr. Pedro Curutchet.

Academic Value

A third working aspect is currently being developed and will transpire in the next few months: the creation of a Corbusian Documentation Center where graphic and written elements, that marked the design process of the *Maison Curutchet*, can be kept and be accessible. Nowadays, most of this documentation is not available at the house because it is not in Argentina as it is at the *Fondation Le Corbusier* in Paris and at Harvard University in the United States. Another part of it is in the Williams File in Buenos Aires. A large number of articles, theses, texts and books, written by architects, artists and intellectuals from Argentina and all over the world, interpreting and investigating the house and the Corbusian universe, are already being systematically compiled and organized.

CAPBA, and the prestigious institutions mentioned, are already in contact and have offered their collaboration. Therefore it is expected that soon the *Maison Curutchet* shall be part of a reference documentation for all those investigators and academics who want to investigate it and Le



12 Le Corbusier, *Maison Curutchet*, La Plata, Argentina, 1949-1955. Plans, 0 and -1 floors.

Corbusier's activity in Argentina and South America. This Documentation Center will be located in the space where Doctor Curutchet had his medical surgery.

Corollary

Maison Curutchet is a small masterpiece located at the end of the world as viewed from Europe where the Master developed his works. Few could guess the enthusiasm with which the possibility of taking part, together with sixteen other Le Corbusier works located in seven countries on three continents, in the UNESCO World Heritage Sites serial Le Corbusier listing.

It has been sixty years since the day the *Maison Curutchet* was inhabited for the first time and fifty years since the day when Le Corbusier swam towards the sun for the last time. This is the year when the nomination is received by the World Heritage Committee to make possible that reality. ■

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Julio Santana

(b. La Plata, Argentina, 1962). Architect, graduated from the National University of La Plata (1989). He held various positions in the civil service at national, provincial and municipal levels, and was Professor at the College of Architects of the Province of Buenos Aires. Since 2011, Julio Santana is the Director of *Maison Curutchet* and is part of the Committee that supports the candidacy of the House to the World Heritage List of UNESCO.