Searching Paradise

BY LOUISE NOELLE AND HORACIO TORRENT

Alvar Aalto (1898-1976) stated:

> *Architecture has an ulterior motive... the thought of creating a paradise. It is the only purpose of our houses. If we did not always carry this thought around with us, all our houses would become simpler and more trivial and life would become – would it be at all worth living? Each house, each product of architecture that is worthwhile as a symbol is an endeavour to show that we want to build an earthly paradise for people.*[1]

Presented in a lecture in Malmö, in 1957, where, facing the predominance of the technical and economic dimensions of those times, he claimed for architecture the ability to create a place for human beings' happiness in all its complexity. According to Alvar Aalto, raising the quality of life did not lie in technical and economic capabilities but in the creative work of architects, whose "houses are built where people can lead happy lives," and only reachable "by concentrating on human happiness."

This search for paradise, magnificently expressed by the Finnish architect, has guided countless projects in modern architecture. The house, the place of home, the world and container of the everyday individual and family life has been the privileged set of this implicit exploration, where many paradises can be recognised. It is about achieving adequate protection and getting a space where satisfaction becomes a daily joy for those who live in it: happiness as an attainable goal.

The idea of house

From time immemorial, the house has been present as one's place; one need only recall the home dominant role in Ulysses' journey in *The Odyssey*. However, this is rather an ideal perception of domestic space since architectural creations took the form of palaces or mansions for many centuries. In the Renaissance, not only rich merchants had access to the construction of important dwellings, but also some artists had this privilege, as was the case of Giorgio Vasari (1511-1574), with two residences richly decorated with frescoes by him, in Arezzo and Florence. It was also the case of Federico Zuccari (1540-1609) and Michelangelo Buonarroti (1475-1564), in the same Italian city, while Andrea Mantegna (1431-1506) and Giulio Romano (1499-1546) settled in Mantua, among others.

Yet it would be at the end of the 19th century that private houses would acquire greater presence and relevance, resulting from the growing well-being of the bourgeoisie, who sought not only better places to live but also publicly demonstrate their prosperity. Besides, advances in materials and construction techniques, as well as new studies in health and hygiene and a series of theoretical writings strengthened this progress. In this sense, books such as Eugène Emmanuel Viollet-le-Duc's (1814-1879) *Histoire d'une maison* encouraged the possibility of building private houses by offering a kind of manual for the domestic architecture of the 19th century French bourgeoisie. In a way, it was to be expected that a year later, in 1875, he would publish the controversial *Histoire de l'habitation humaine*[2] to show the various modes of inhabiting across the globe since ancient times. It was an attempt to reflect the fact that people weave affective and emotional ties with architecture, especially when, with its structure, bricks or mortar, it makes up what we call "home".

Attractive residences from just over a century ago by renowned architects, such as Charles Garnier (1825-1898) in Bordighera (1884-1886); Victor Horta (1861-1947) in Brussels (1898-1901); Antoni Gaudí (1852-1926) in Barcelona (1883-1906); Frank Lloyd Wright (1867-1959) in the Chicago area (1893-1914); and many others come to mind. It is therefore not surprising that the presence of private houses with a particular stamp multiplied exponentially at the end of WWI. At the beginning of the Modern Movement, pioneers built for themselves a series of paradigmatic dwellings which they set out in the form of manifestos. It is proper to recall Rudolf M. Schindler's (1857-1953) manifesto (1921-1922) and Richard Neutra's (1892-1970) manifesto (1932-1963), both in Los Angeles; Konstantin Melnikov's (1890-1974) in Moscow (1927-1929); Alvar Aalto's in Muuratsalo (1952-1953); or Jean Prouvé's (1901-1984) prefabricated house in Nancy (1954). Without forgetting a good number of Le Corbusier's (1887-1965) precursor examples in France, the houses that Walter Gropius (1883-1969) made for the director and teachers of the Bauhaus in Dessau (1925), as well as the early models of Latin American masters, such as Gregori Warchavchik (1896-1972) in 1927, Lucio Costa (1902-1998) in 1928-1930 and Juan O'Gorman (1905-1982) in 1931.

Likewise, the house is an architectural genre that in the first half of the twentieth century could integrate *avant-garde* concepts and disseminate novel ideas with creative cases. By studying the domestic spaces of the Modern Movement, it is possible to trace its growth and its undoubted contributions. Habitability was a central theme in the development of the modern house promoted by some of the pioneers, most notably Le Corbusier and his approach – "the house is a machine for inhabiting" – in the search for a house for the common man. But also, the need to think of it as a whole, as Bruno Taut (1880-1939) did, as a single body, with its internal

functions and its radiation towards the exterior, including its context, garden and landscape.[3]

In addition to the fact that the house has always been considered as a shelter, the concepts of comfort and well-being were added, sometimes based on technological advances and mechanical processes. Furthermore, the careful study of dimensions, spaces and furnishings that were not only pleasant but also suitable for the inhabitant and his or her household goods, became a priority in the design process. Not only is it an intimate and personal space, but it becomes an individualized environment. The examination of basic design principles thus led architects to incorporate new ways of thinking and acting, which had a positive response from users.

The fundamental architectural typology of a dwelling and climate and economic factors were central to many of the avant-garde projects. The immediate surroundings became an intrinsic part of them, because of the clear relationship between interior and exterior that modernity proposed through the transparency and openness of the architectural box. In fact, this integration can be seen as a distinctive feature from the houses of the past. In some privileged cases, the architect appreciated the environment and the landscape, taking advantage of the existing nature and the views generated towards the distance. We have often considered paradise to be nothing more than a garden.

House's footprints

The idea of creating a paradise has had multiple manifestations in modern architecture, both the notion of an earthly Eden and its repercussions in the forms that buildings have taken.

This issue of **docomomo** *Journal* offers a series of monographs and an extensive bibliography. The examples presented have been little referenced in reflections on the modern house, despite having been recognized as part of the work of their creators. The selection was made up of a casuistry which allowed to show different configurations of modernity in different times and latitudes, seeking to broaden the perspective on diverse lifestyles and habits, as well as the dissimilar conceptions in the opening up to its surroundings.

Considering architecture as a geographically and temporally localized discipline, the guiding idea was to include projects from different territories to avoid generalizations in the interests of a review of the facts themselves. There are several ways – both theoretical and practical – through which architects confronted their repeated aspiration to build paradise or at least an adequate approximation to this ideal. To this end, it was necessary to place the works on a plan of common recognition, which would supply greater clarity in the correlations and affinities.

In 1953, when he was teaching at Tulane University, the Argentine architect Eduardo Sacriste (1905-1999) began a recognized work of what he called the footprints of the buildings. This consisted of a drawing on the same scale of many paradigmatic buildings from different periods. The first version of this collection was published in 1959, by students at North Carolina University, and a more definitive one in 1962 in Buenos Aires.[4] His intention was pedagogical and should be seen as part of the formation of experience, visual education, and the training of students' powers of deduction. He considered the floor plan as the image of the footprint of a building, the impact it leaves on the ground, close to the idea of the ruin that proposes the hypotheses for the recognition of the building that has disappeared. He said: "The comparative method is the only one capable of giving us a grasp of reality and of bringing before our eyes the volume and dimensions of a building, this knowledge being fundamental for any subsequent intellectual speculation about the space or the plastic values of an edifice."[5]

Ludwig Hilberseimer (1885-1967) had the opportunity to see these drawings when they were shown at the Illinois Institute of Technology in Chicago. He recognized how irritating and misleading maps drawn at different scales could be, as well as the usual representations in the history of architecture, where small buildings were often shown on a larger scale and large buildings on a smaller scale. He therefore considered a good move to have found a representation method, a system "in which all floor plans are drawn to the same scale so that the relative size of buildings are immediately apparent to the eye." He pointed out how some works propose systems of absolute proportions and others are based on systems of relative proportions, while noting that Eduardo Sacriste "has hereby introduced a superior method of studying buildings comparatively, a vital new aid to the appreciation of their relative size, and thus he enables us to acquire a fuller understanding of architecture."[6]

In a similar exercise, drawings of the plans of the houses in this publication, were organized in chronological order, from 1928 to 1968. What is striking about these plans, put in relation to each other, is the simplicity with which they show different project strategies for a common theme, that of the abode for family life, as well as the variety and richness of the architectural principles applied in each work. They show the search for a relationship between a universal subject such as the house and its contexts, which are so different from one another. It is thereby possible to see the choices made regarding different geographical positions and latitudes: while some show the clear distinction between winter and summer in temperate climates, others, located in tropical zones, demonstrate how the undeniable force of nature was present in the design.

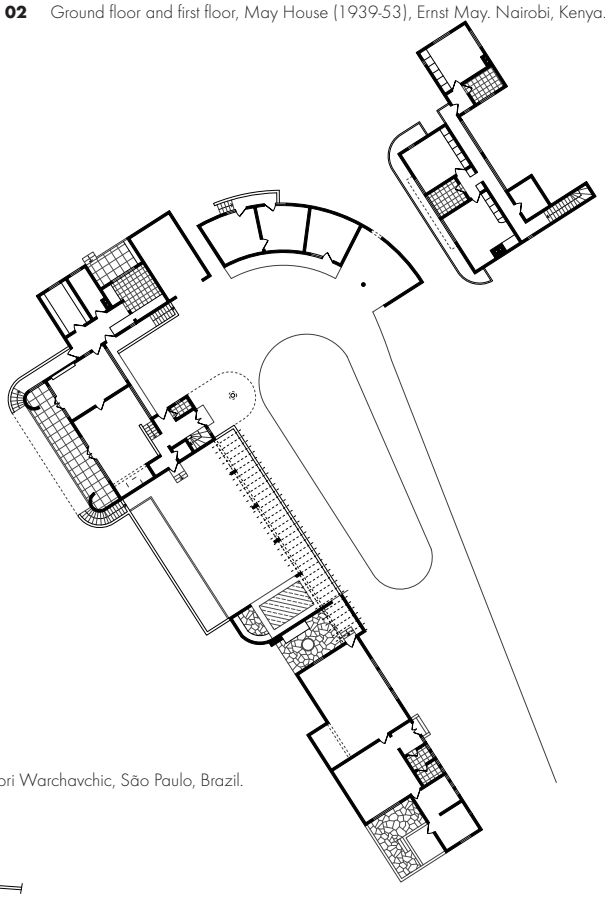
Simply putting the floor plans of these works together confirms that the richness and variety of the house, as a work of architecture, is not only given by the conditions of its materialization. The comparative appreciation of the plans shows the diversity of solutions and the traces of the spatial strategies that proposed the shaping of the intimate world in a distinctive link with the exterior, in a dialectic that is reaffirmed as typical of the Modern Movement.

Modern design, modern living

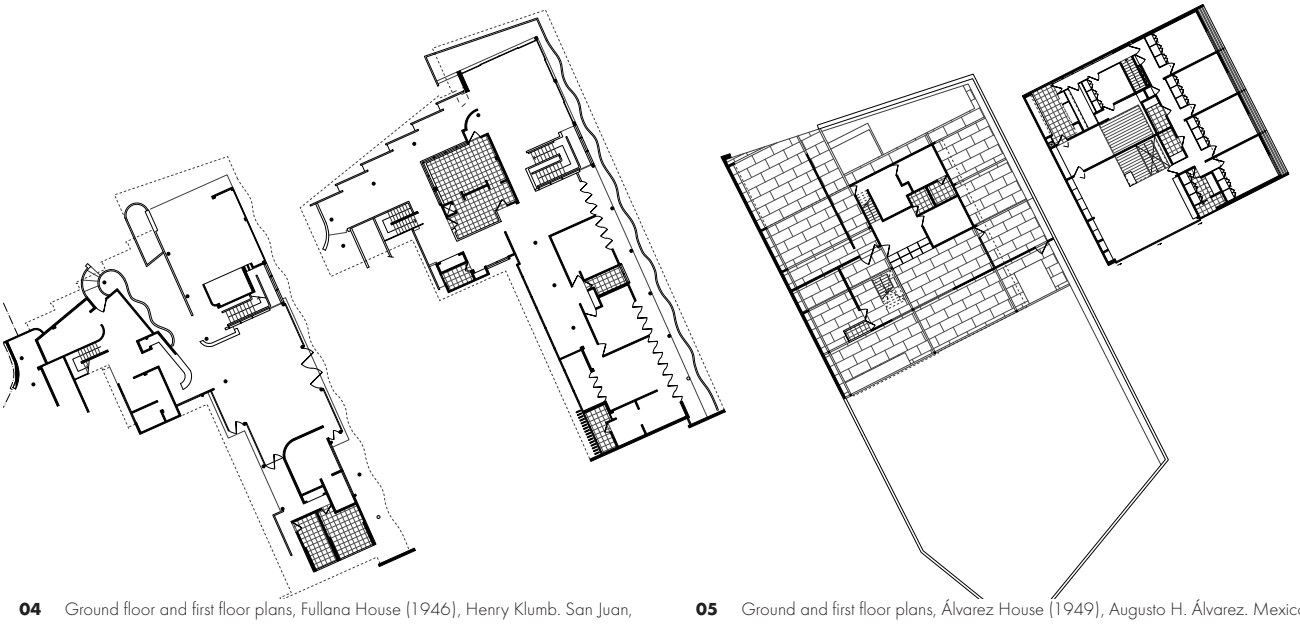
We usually recognize the transformation of formal paradigms that modern architecture carried out. Ideas about the relationship between space-time and the circulation spaces articulation; the design operation based on a pure form;

01 Ground floor plan, Chochikukyo House (1928), Koji Fuiji. Kyoto, Japan.

02 Ground floor and first floor, May House (1939-53), Ernst May. Nairobi, Kenya.



03 Basement, ground floor, first and second floor plans, da Silva Prado House (1930). Gregori Warchavchic, São Paulo, Brazil.

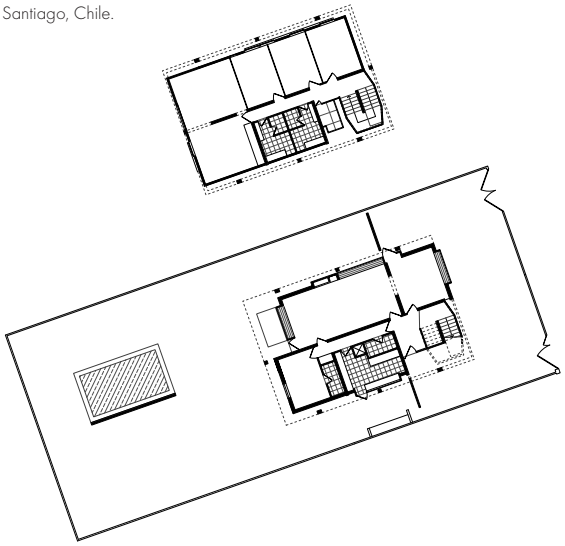


04 Ground floor and first floor plans, Fullana House (1946), Henry Klumb. San Juan, Puerto Rico.

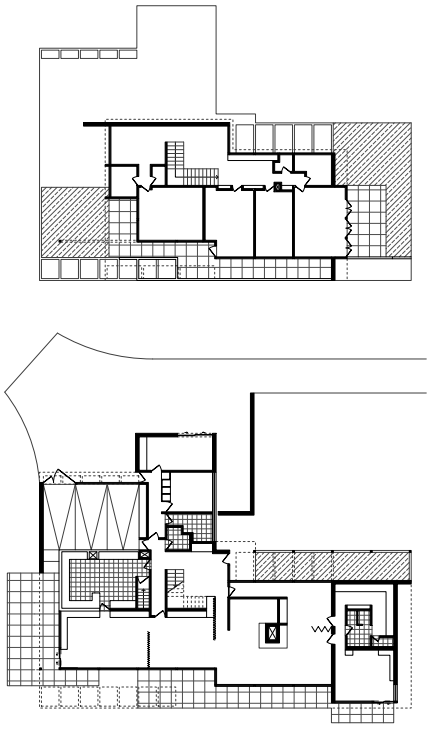
05 Ground and first floor plans, Álvarez House (1949), Augusto H. Álvarez. Mexico City, México.

06 Ground floor and first floor plans, Torres Posse House (1957-58), Eduardo Sacriste. Tafí del Valle, Argentina.

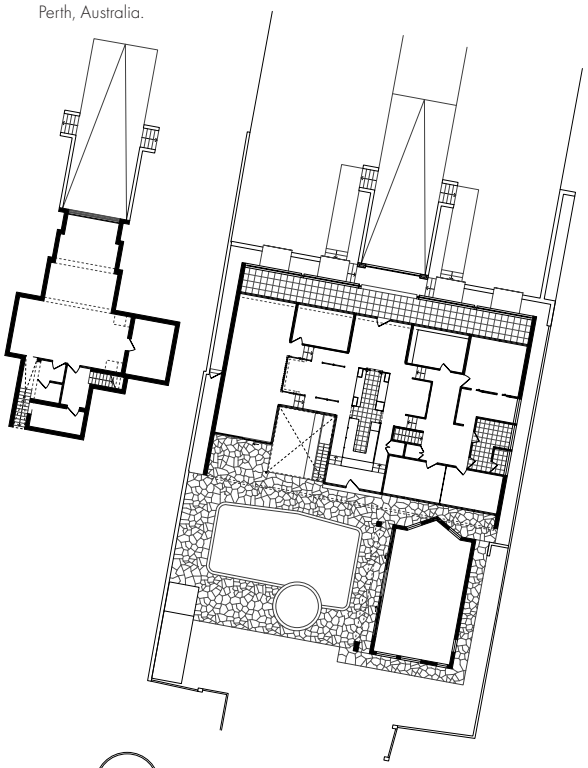
07 Ground Floor and first floor plans, Herman House (1963-65), Emilio Duhart. Santiago, Chile.

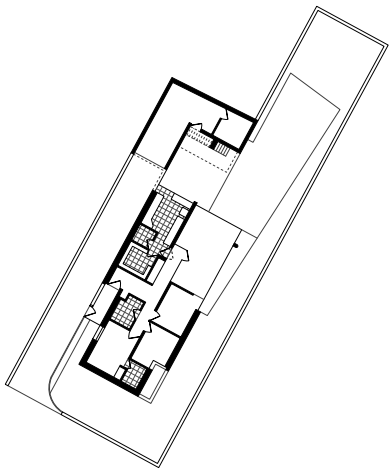


08 Ground floor and first floor plans, Delcourt House (1968), Richard Neutra. Croix, France.

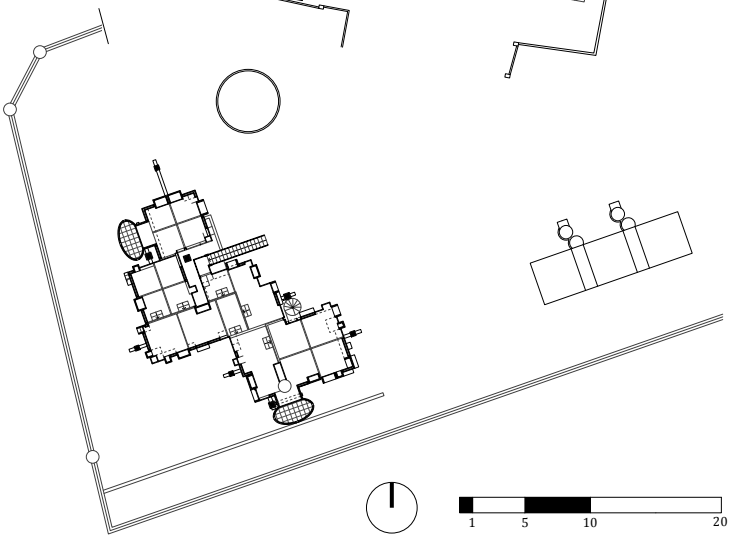


09 Basement and ground floor plans, Paganin House (1966), Iwan Iwanoff. Perth, Australia.





10 Ground floor plan, Magalhães House (1967-70), Alvaro Siza. Porto, Portugal.



11 Ground floor plan, Albero House (1968), Giuseppe Perugini. Rome, Italy.

the opening of the architectural box in a full connection between interior and exterior; transparency in all its forms; and the climate and nature enjoyment were key to transforming the house, as space or container, and the life in it. But behind the spatial and formal conceptions was also the intellectual effort of modern architects to modify at least two fundamental aspects: on the one hand, that of the practice and direct experience of domestic life; and on the other, that of *habitus*, as "lasting dispositions" that functioned as generating and organizing principles of these practices and their representations.[7]

The house was the privileged laboratory for this change, which would include both the architecture's thought structures and the design strategies for the dwelling, as well as ways of life and social and cultural pretensions of those who would inhabit it. Modern architecture overturned, through the project of the house, many of the social conditioning factors that already had a consolidated history in the bourgeois family modes of inhabiting, and in those of the popular sectors big families. It incorporated the idea of efficiency in organization, comfort, and the enjoyment of space as the keys to a good life.

The modern house was then thought of not only in itself, as a problem of fine-tuning the discipline and domestic space, but also as a fine-tuning of the instruments of architecture itself, to carry out space's transformations in all its registers and scales. This desire to adapt domestic life linked spatial and material ideas with cultural, social, and even political meanings that were present in the aims for change of society. To achieve this, it generated new strategies and techniques for the architectural project, which made it possible to set up ties with transcendent meanings, such as the aspiration for paradise on earth. That ulterior motive always latent – as Alvar Aalto said – suggested the search for new ideas and instruments to design the house, and they become clearer from the joint reading of the plans, in which the conditions assumed by the modern project in architecture, in different times and places, can also be read.

If the traditional house had been conceived fundamentally as a shelter, the modern house also had to ensure a series of minimum conditions to allow maximum use and enjoyment in circumstances dominated by the economy and new technological possibilities. But it was a question of transforming the living experience, according to the conditions that modern architecture proposed – both in design and materiality – in its commitment to a new culture of inhabiting. Hence, a new link between the interior and the exterior went beyond the idea of mere shelter and made it possible to establish a new relationship with nature.

It is also interesting to note the vocation of these dwellings, which varies from urban houses to suburban residences; this can be understood from the land size and condition on which they are placed. They combine the ideas of rational organization found in the conception of the floor plan's typological configuration, but they set up a particular connection with the site, its width or narrowness, its orientation in search for the sun and how courtyards and gardens expand the interior experience. On the one hand, there are houses with the pursuit for a greater relationship between the program components and their articulation in a concentrated floor plan which combines the different areas in a configuration dominated by the geometry of the volume or the massiveness of the walls. On the other hand, there is the idea of an expansive or centrifugal floor plan which seeks a greater continuity relationship with the exterior. In these cases, there is a greater articulation between the different spaces, especially the semi-covered or open ones, when the climate permits.

These are dialectical positions, concomitant with the Modern Movement in its various stages. The concentrated floor plan appears in the earliest houses, which do not yet assume the full potential of steel and reinforced concrete technologies. Meanwhile, the expansive floor plan frees itself from the constrained spaces, seeking full continuity made possible by better use of the notion of the free floor plan, which also allows greater continuity with the exterior, where courtyards and gardens become an extension of the interior. In both cases, to a greater or lesser extent, the open floor plan allows the public and private spheres to be combined, and transparency makes possible various degrees of integration with the exterior, whether towards small plots of land or attractive distant views.

The modern house favored diverse formal and material conceptions, based both on new social ideas and family organization and on the use of novel technical solutions, some of which compromised their durability over time. It also promoted the incursion into mechanisms for achieving interior comfort, which were not always fortunate. These enquiries and trials looked to configure the architecture of well-being and bring an optimistic future. But primarily, they highlighted a new culture of inhabiting which, based on a new spatial experience, that would bring the home closer to the idea of paradise.

Preserving architecture: preserving the search for paradise

There are many interventions that modern houses have been suffered of in recent times, when only a few of them can be recognized as paradigms of modern architecture and preserved in their integrity. They have become museums of themselves or exhibition centers for the work of their architects; some have been declared National Heritage or, in the best of cases, UNESCO World Heritage Sites, although unfortunately they are in the minority.

It is possible to point out that the most common transformations come from the demands proposed by the change of their inhabitants, rarely those who requested the original project. On other occasions, they are linked to their surroundings modifications. However, most of them have been and still are homes, places that adapt to new family organizations, changes in social conditioning and adjustments that their inhabitants consider necessary. But also, some coercions weigh on residents or owners, many of them based on the need for updating, enhanced by new patterns of consumption or new pretensions to social representation.

Transformations related to changes in their geographical

context are increasingly common. They correspond to the excessive increase in land prices, in places that at the time of their design and construction assumed quite different urban characteristics. Houses that were conceived in suburban environments thus now coexist with other city scales, or have definitively disappeared, in many cases due to the profitable expectation that is imposed on a small property as opposed to the chance of greater use of the land.

The works included in this publication show the wide range of possibilities for intervention that the houses of the Modern Movement have undergone. Some of them have kept their presence and have only needed simple maintenance or small modifications of installations and infrastructures, due to their materiality – the Torres Posse House and the Fullana House – or the careful first configuration, such as the Manuel Magalhães House. Others demand advanced operations to adjust the first technical improvements to current requirements, such as the Delcourt House; or even to assume a reconstruction – by decision of the owners after a disaster – such as the Paganin House, a dilemma that also arises for the Klumb House, which recently burnt down. The unacceptable modifications to the May House in Kenya, which was completely disfigured when it was turned into a suburban club, make it necessary to reflect on the possibility of rebuilding it. In some cases, the renovations are carried out to adapt the spaces to new use, as in the house in Sao Paulo; in others, substantial changes are made, such as the interior liberation and recomposition of the Herman House, as well as the extreme case of the Augusto H. Alvarez House, which was divided into two dwellings. Finally, the Albero House, near Rome, proposes the challenge of a recovery that assumes the powerful experimental dimension of its origin.

The Eindhoven-Seoul Statement establishes that one of the aims of **docomomo** International and the National Working Parties is to "promote the conservation and re(use) of buildings and sites of the Modern Movement", as well as to "foster and disseminate the development of appropriate techniques and methods of conservation and adaptive (re)use." For this reason, the diverse actions undertaken in most of the works presented below can be said to follow these precepts.

Modern houses stood for the breaking down of ways of life's conditioning and the incorporation of freedom modes in the evolution of architecture in the last century. These conditions are embodied in the spatial continuity, the integration of uses, circulations, the opening of the architectural box, and the relationship between interior and exterior, giving rise to countless new social and spatial experiences and practices. They make up today a particular dimension of the modern architecture heritage; a series of intangibles that go unnoticed by force of habit and about which it is necessary to warn that they can disappear when the material conditions are altered. These intangibles form the immaterial dimension which, through the modern house, has transformed life forever.

Today it is necessary to preserve these intangibles that architecture carries with it, those that formed the central *corpus* of that ulterior motive of modern architecture: the search for paradise.

Notes

1 Alvar Aalto, "The Architects Conception for Paradise", in *Villa Mairea*, Helsinki, Alvar Aalto Foundation, 1998, 2.
2 Eugène Emanuel Viollet-le Duc, *Histoire d'une maison*, Paris, 1874; *Histoire de l'habitation humaine*, Paris, 1875.
3 Bruno Taut, *Ein Wohnhaus.* Reihe der Kosmos-Baubücher, Stuttgart, Verlag Franckh'sche Buchhandlung, 1927.
4 Eduardo Sacriste, *Building Footprints*, Raleigh, NC: A Student Publication of the School of Design, North Carolina State College, 1959.
5 Eduardo Sacriste, *Huellas de edificios - building footprints.* Buenos Aires, EUDEBA, 1962, 9.
6 Ludwig Hilberseimer, "Introduction", in Eduardo Sacriste, *Huellas de edificios - building footprints*, Buenos Aires, EUDEBA, 1962, 3.
7 Pierre Bourdieu, *El sentido práctico*, Siglo XXI Editores Argentina, 2007, 93.

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