



Richard Neutra, Delcourt House, Croix, France, 1967-1970, lateral view of the hall. © Richard Klein, 2018.

## The Delcourt House: the last house by Richard Neutra

BY RICHARD KLEIN

The only French building by the architect Richard Neutra (1892-1970), Delcourt house, built in Croix near Roubaix, France, is frequently forgotten in publications on his work, and is generally considered to be of little significance in the largely American career of its designer. At the end of the 1960s, Marcel Delcourt (1923-2016), a young Chief Executive Officer at the head of the mail order company *Les Trois Suisses*, was attracted to the American way of life. As the final work of Richard Neutra, the Delcourt residence is a fragile heritage, the result of complex and fruitful exchanges between Europe and the United States of America (USA), between architects and the client, but also between the customized design of most of the features and the use of sophisticated techniques, products that the interior finish industry was able to supply at the end of the 1960s. The edifice now stands as a repository of domestic architecture techniques.

The only French building by the architect Richard Neutra, the Delcourt house, located in Croix near Roubaix, is frequently forgotten or relegated in the publications devoted to the work of Richard Neutra. Neutra designed several villas in Switzerland and Germany and his only French house is also his last achievement.

The itinerary of the Austrian-born American architect goes through the agency of Adolf Loos (1870-1933), emigration to the USA in 1923, meeting with Frank Lloyd Wright (1867-1959) and Rudolf Schindler (1887-1953), and the elaboration, at the end of 1920s, of his architectural language applied mainly in Southern California. The first achievements of Neutra are then considered as European demonstrations on American soil whereas the development of American architectural activity after WWII presents towards Europe the image of an American architecture open to modernity and wide open spaces.

### Architecture of houses in the USA

Marcel Delcourt ran the *Les Trois Suisses* mail order business from 1957. As a member of the CIL Roubaix-Tourcoing,<sup>1</sup> the young CEO went to Berlin in 1965 to visit the *International Architecture Exhibition of Berlin* (IBA 1957), the Hansaviertel district and the collective housing projects designed by Walter Gropius (1883-1969), Oscar Niemeyer (1907-2012) and Alvar Aalto (1898-1976). It was during this trip that Marcel Delcourt discovered the publication of Helmut Borchardt and Volker Traub: *Maisons individuelles aux USA*.<sup>2</sup>

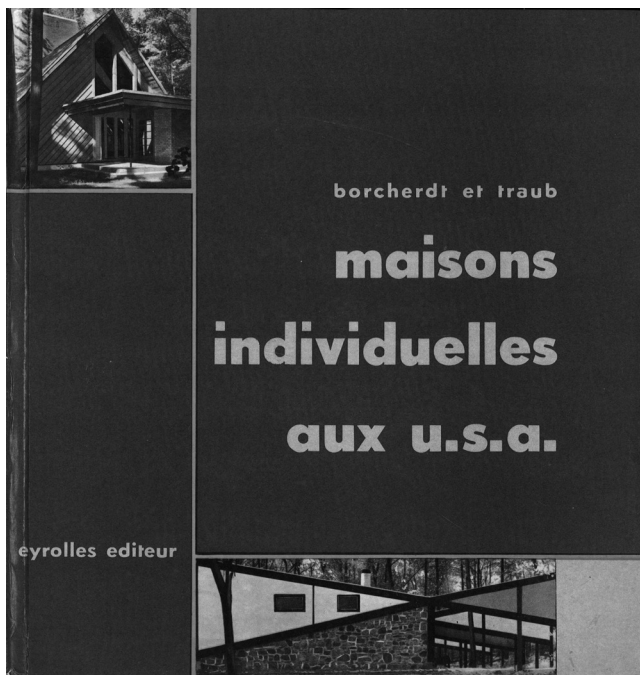
The introductory text emphasized the specificities of American architecture and, more generally, the qualities of a modern architecture that had become the new style of an era. The authors pointed out the USA's advance in terms of individual housing while recalling the fundamental contribution of the emigration of European architects such as Walter Gropius, Mies van der Rohe (1886-1969), Richard

Neutra and Eero Saarinen (1910-1961). In the register of singularities, Helmut Borchardt and Volker Traub mentioned a relationship to landscape shared between integration or detachment and the influence of lifestyles on architectural forms, the expression of a kind of life and an individual way to live in the USA. A generation of clients less attached to appearances, living in a new, unconventional family structure that was concerned with education attentive to child psychology, and a less formal way of life were presented as the foundations of a home atmosphere that was very different from that of European dwellings. The program that the authors deduced from it was obviously the one that Marcel Delcourt would adopte.

Tempted by the American way of life, as a part of the milieu of the late 1960s Europe, Marcel Delcourt finds in the book a vast panorama of the architecture of individual houses built between 1951 and 1961 in the USA. Among the achievements of Marcel Breuer (1902-1981), Craig Ellwood (1922-1992), Philip Johnson (1906-2005), John Lautner (1911-1994) and George Nelson (1908-1986), the Singleton House (1959-1960) designed by Richard Neutra in Los Angeles caught his attention. He appreciated, thanks to the four photographs by Julius Shulman (1910-2009),<sup>3</sup>

*the interpenetration of the interior and exterior spaces. The portico coming out of the room to span the pond. The glass windows join at a sharp angle and the mirror of water with its reflections gives an impression of depth which favors the irruption of the landscape in the room. The volumes remain very open between the vertical and horizontal walls.*<sup>4</sup>

The north-south elongated and swaying plan, typical of Richard Neutra's series of American houses, shows how the topography, the view to the west and the landscape in the distance of a Californian valley conditioned the provisions of the villa.



01 Cover of *Maisons individuelles aux USA*, Helmut Borchardt and Volker Traub, Paris, Eyrolles 1965.

Marcel Delcourt and his wife confirmed their interest after visiting several of Richard Neutra's works in Germany, Switzerland and Los Angeles. The site plan and the planned program<sup>5</sup> were sent to Richard Neutra in May 1966 and Neutra visited the site during the same year, taking advantage of his visit to one of his projects in Germany. The site upon which Marcel Delcourt plans to live is in an environment completely different from the vast expanses of America. The site is located in town, in the heart of a block occupied by an old house to be demolished. The land is, however, large enough and wooded<sup>6</sup> to accommodate an architecture that is intended, according to its designer, to be the synthesis of the observation of life, geometry and technology. Starting from the program that Marcel Delcourt specified, the architect took special care of the layout of the house according to the orientation and inclination of the sun. The plans were co-signed by Dion Neutra (1926-2019), associated with his father Richard Neutra for several years. The execution part was entrusted to Bruno Honegger (1935-2007),<sup>7</sup> architect in Zurich and collaborator of Richard Neutra.<sup>8</sup>

The Delcourt house includes all the ingredients that have made Richard Neutra's formula in the USA a success: an abstract and open plan that seems boundless, crossings and overhangs, the pursuit of floors and ceilings beyond the largely glazed walls, the emphasized horizontality, the "spider's leg" consisting of the extension of a beam held by a metal end post located outside the envelope, temporary partitions, curtains and movable partitions, sophisticated illusionist devices such as outdoor water ponds, interior mirrors or the polychrome of the first floor partitioning.

In 1996, the house was sold by Marcel Delcourt and then escaped a proposed indelicate and out-of-scale neighboring

building only thanks to the inscription of the Delcourt House on the list of Historical Monuments. The inscription proceeded despite the unfavorable opinion of the house's new owner who intended to subdivide the land.<sup>9</sup> The inscription's description, arguments and the debates aimed at protecting the building underlined the originality of the construction, the typical American character of Richard Neutra's unique achievement in France and the illustration of the theories of biorealism that he defended in the work published in 1954, *Survival through design*.<sup>10</sup>

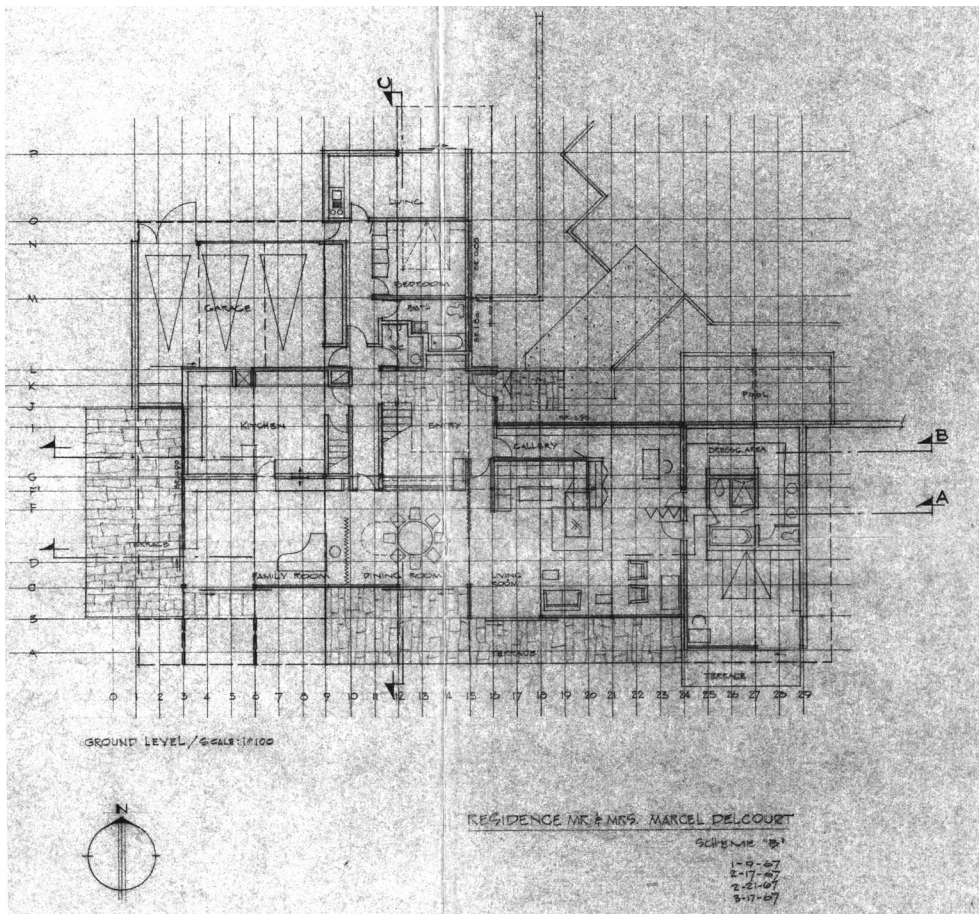
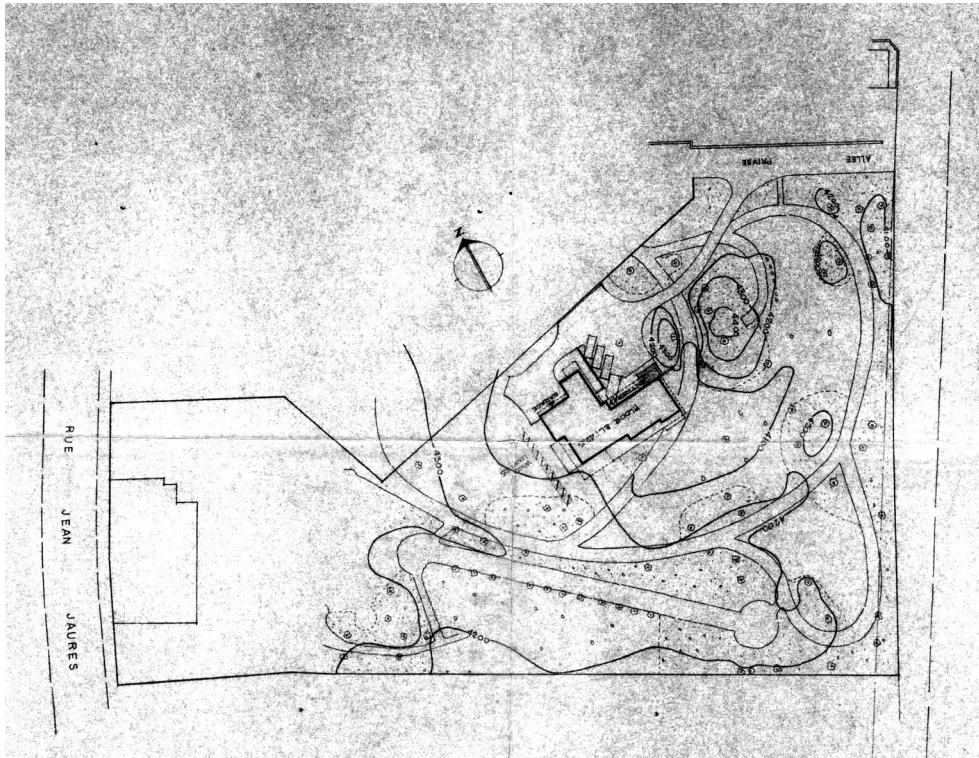
But, does the legacy of the Delcourt House rest solely on this transplantation on the lands of the North of France from a model designed for the USA? Commentators, when they do not simply forget the realization,<sup>11</sup> underestimate the real implication of Richard Neutra and the adaptations of his architecture to this singular context and its execution.

### Europe – USA and back

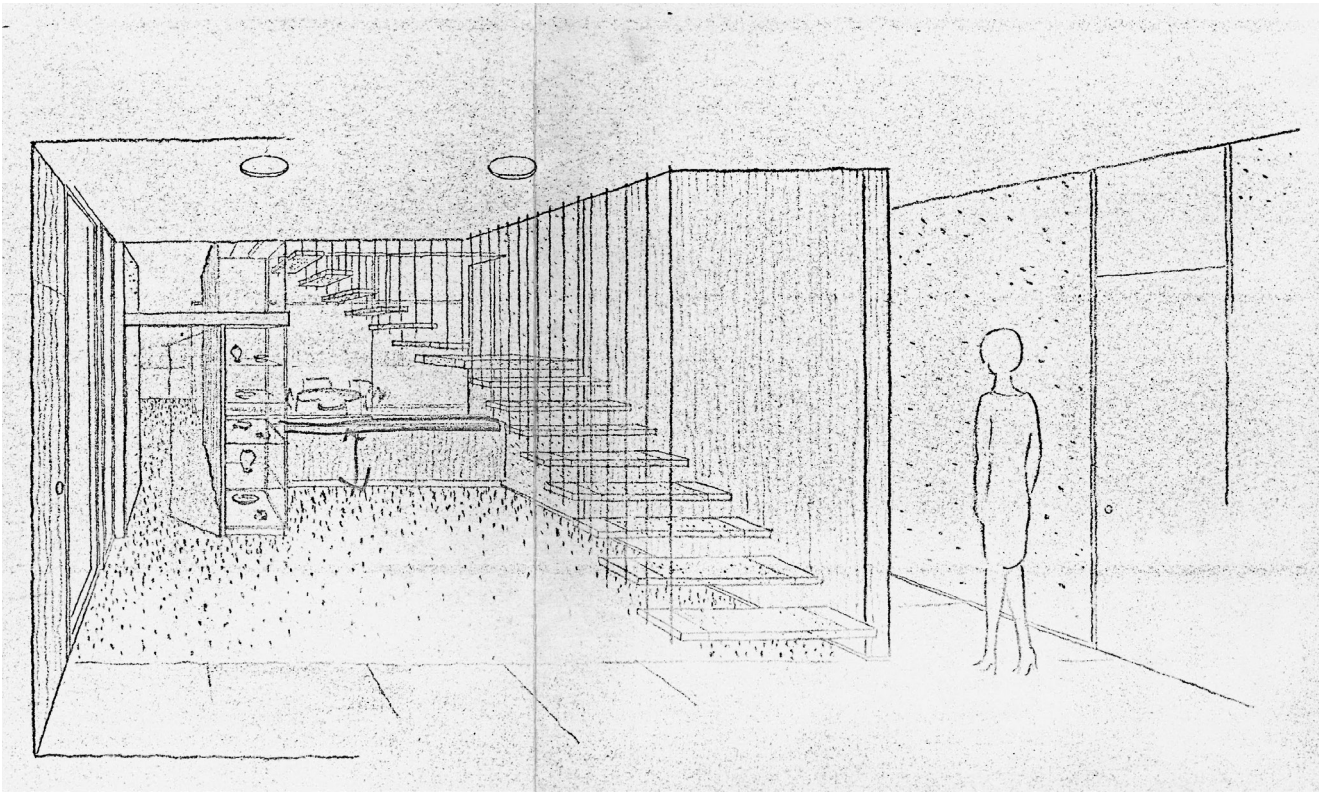
Since the 1930s, mirrors and their reflections have been systematically used by Richard Neutra to create illusions of grandeur, to multiply views, to create false perspectives and to make vertical structures disappear. The use of mirrors is a constant in the work of Richard Neutra, which represents a tangible trace of his affiliation with the practices of Adolf Loos that he exported and adapted to the USA. The Water Mirrors that Richard Neutra has been using since 1937, such as at the Miller House at Palm Springs, are one of the developments that generate a reflection and, in some cases, act as a horizontal guard rail to ensure a safe distance from the edge of accessible roof terraces. Because of the urban situation and a much more constrained visual relationship with the landscape than in his Californian houses, Richard Neutra multiplied the recourse to the mirrors in the Delcourt House: in the interior, perpendicular to the windows, above a piece of furniture or storage as in the dining room, at the junction of a wall with the ceiling to remove the partitioning; outside, perpendicular to the bay windows of the south facade by replacing the presence of a masonry wall by the reflection of joinery and their transparent windows and thus masking a border between the living room and the private spaces located to the east. The different pools, east of the entrance or terraces on the upper floor complete these illusions of their horizontal reflections.

Several specific requests from Marcel Delcourt modify the original plan and have resulted in substantial differences between the initial draft and the final design. At the level of the entrance and the north facade, Richard Neutra initially envisaged a transparency which left the view towards the south from the entrance of the house. Marcel Delcourt asked him to overcome this too ostentatious perception. The library is finally placed against the closed north wall. Thus, the initial transparency of the entrance was abandoned during the sketches in favor of a solid wall, with library inside, and an entrance wall which masks the direct sight of the neighborhood. One of the most fascinating details resulting from this compromise between closing and opening the entrance is the mechanism of the glass shelf located on the side of the door to the living room from the

02 Richard & Dion Neutra architects, Delcourt House, Croix, France, 1967, situation. © Private archives.



03 Richard & Dion Neutra architects, Delcourt House, Croix, France, 17 March 1967, plan of the Ground Floor level. © Private archives.



hall. Depending on the case, a rotating mirror reflects the contents of the window or lets the garden appear from the hall. Marcel Delcourt was also involved with the choice of the tiling of the floor and with the choice of a local brick for the masonry of the fire place. Thus, Artois sandstone, with staggered joints, which seems anachronistic to some visitors, was chosen with the architect's consent instead of the architect's white marble.<sup>12</sup> Many other traces of adaptations to the wishes of Marcel Delcourt exist such as the Japanese steps in the garden made from slabs recovered in old spinning mills through to the enlargement of a room which disturbs the initial composition of the sections of glazing. Marcel Delcourt was also the source of a slight reduction in the size of metal frames that allowed him savings on the supply of joinery.<sup>13</sup>

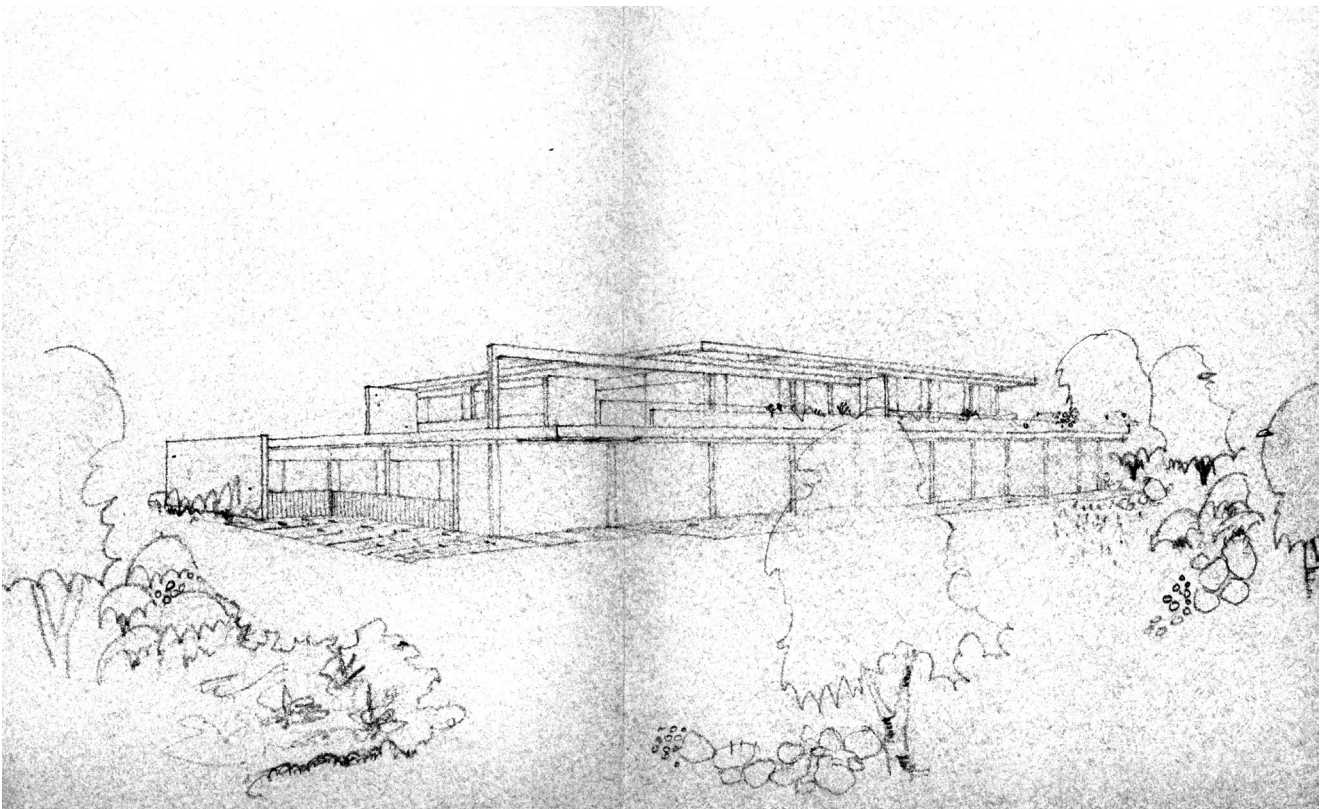
### Swiss quality, American envelope

The reputation of Richard Neutra rests not only on the plastic qualities of the houses he designed but also on many inventions. The technical improvements he developed and the patents he took out cover topics ranging from metal frames and sliding glass doors to the use of plywood in construction. But the supplies of equipment and materials for the Delcourt House can reveal an unsuspected depth, that of a true conservatory of the techniques of the domestic architecture. The structural work company adapted to a mixed construction to which it was not accustomed. The masonry components of the structure, the walls and the floors, are therefore associated with the metal frame parts which include a 230 mm primary beam structure and

a secondary vertical structure consisting of square columns of 100 mm side. The documentation and inspections by Bruno Honegger introduced an uncommon finishing level to the execution and the supply of the components. The heating, developed by Alberto Marki, a Swiss engineer based in Locarno,<sup>14</sup> combines several differently regulated systems. The first network that provides low-temperature heating in the floor, is completed by a forced-air system that blows warm air along the bays of the south facade from fine metal floor grilles, thus avoiding condensation on the windows. Radiators and hot water convectors are distributed in the other rooms. In the main bathroom, the side of the bathtub is actually a radiator that ensures the thermal comfort of the room. Finally, the awning of the south facade incorporates a series of electric radiant heaters that allow the use of the terrace in cool weather.<sup>15</sup>

Lighting devices complement spatial arrangements throughout the dwelling. For example, recesses in the interior ceilings and undersides of awnings systematically extend point or linear lighting systems by providing visual continuity between the interior and the exterior. The linear illumination of the ceiling of the entrance is extended under an outer beam in a perfect continuity that can make the visitor hesitate between the view from a side window and the reflection of a mirror. The lighting of the covered terrace extends that of the living room thus ensuring another visual continuity. More generally, the electrical plan includes, in terms of power supply network or lighting, all the requirements for use and comfort. The design of installations and their extreme precision are supplemented by the

05 Richard Neutra, Delcourt House, Croix, France, 1967-1970, view of the south facade. © Richard Klein, 2018.



06 Richard & Dion Neutra architects, Delcourt House, Croix, France, 5 May 1967, view south west. © Private archives.

# GRIESSER

le dernier mot du confort-lumière

## ELECTROMATIC





08 Advertising for the Maxmatic food waste disposer. © Private archives.

specification and the supply of the most efficient products and components of that period.

As the ultimate work of Richard Neutra, who died in Wuppertal on 16 April 1970, this fragile swan song is the fruit of complex and fruitful exchange between Europe and the USA, between the architects and Marcel Delcourt but also between the custom-design of most of the facilities and the use of sophisticated off-the-shelf technical solutions that the building industry was able to supply in the late 1960s. The *Trash* soap holder and the Swiss KWC faucet, the Italian toilet paper holder *Indo*, the *Arnould* switches of the *Europa* series, the *Ericsson* telephony, the *Griesser* Swiss venetian blinds of the *electromatic* model, the *Maxmatic* food waste disposer<sup>16</sup> integrated into the kitchen sink are still visible traces that reveal how much the inheritance from Richard Neutra's last house of would be incomplete without these components. The historian and the restorer, if they wish to relate accurately or preserve the integrity and substance of the architecture of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, will have to pay more and more attention to *just what is it that makes today's homes so different, so appealing?*<sup>17</sup>

#### Notes

- 1 CIL Roubaix-Tourcoing (the Roubaix-Tourcoing Housing Interprofessional Committee) administered the 1% housing parity system that was created in 1943 by the unions and the employers of the North of France on the initiative of Albert Prouvost, boss of the *Lainière de Roubaix*. The contributions to the various Interprofessional Housing Committees were intended for the financing of social housing.

- 2 Helmut Borchardt and Volker Traub, *Maisons individuelles aux USA*, Paris, Eyrolles, 1965. The book was also published in Italian, Spanish and German editions.
- 3 *Ibid*, 55-57.
- 4 *Ibid*, 57.
- 5 Marcel Delcourt was then 44, like his wife. The couple had seven children aged 3 months to 19 years. The program was precise, it included the area of the rooms that the couple intended to dedicate to the various functions as well as the list of some old furniture to be integrated into the future house.
- 6 The Belgian landscaper Guy Capart (1906-1991) was consulted by Marcel Delcourt about the existing afforestation, the future garden and its vegetation.
- 7 Marcel Delcourt remained in professional relations with Bruno Honegger for several years. The architect designed a house in Brittany for Marcel Delcourt as well as premises for his company, *Les Trois Suisses*. A lot of information about the house came from interviews conducted by Rodolphe Gissinger and Carlos Torres with Marcel Delcourt on 14<sup>th</sup> February and 23<sup>th</sup> May 2001 in Marcq-en-Barœul. These interviews were held in the framework of the research seminar led by Richard Klein and Marie-Céline Masson during the 2000-2001 academic year, ENSAP of Lille.
- 8 The plans of the house were developed during the year 1967, the work began at the beginning of the year 1968, and the Delcourt family settled into the house in the month of February 1969.
- 9 The Delcourt House was listed in the inventory of Historic Monuments on 28 July 2000.
- 10 Richard Neutra, *Survival through Design*, New York, Oxford University Press, 1954. The French edition was published in 1971 by Casterman (Tournai, Belgium).
- 11 Many publications devoted to the work of Richard Neutra do not mention the Delcourt house.
- 12 The very precise layout of the tiles was developed by Bruno Honegger (plans of February 1968).
- 13 The metal frames of the Delcourt House were supplied by Chamebel in Vilvoorde (Belgium). Window joinery on the south facade was fitted with Thermopane insulating glass.
- 14 Alberto Marki was a member of the Swiss Society of Heating and Air Conditioning Engineers but also of the American Society of Heating, Refrigerating and Air Conditioning Engineers.
- 15 The production of heat from the cellar boiler required the installation of a refrigeration system in the nearby wine cellar.
- 16 The installation of the food waste disposal unit required a request for exemption from the Departmental Directorate of Sanitary and Social Action.
- 17 *Just what is it that makes today's homes so different, so appealing?* is the title of a collage by Richard Hamilton presented in 1956 at the London exhibition *This is tomorrow*.

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