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## Soft or Modern? Delineating Curtains in Domestic Interiors of Modern Architecture

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**Soft or Modern?**  
**Delineating Curtains in Domestic Interiors of Modern Architecture**

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“My windows hung with lace curtains (Valenciennes, Venice, Bruges, Scotland)  
combined according to the formula:

$$A_m^n = m(m-1)(m-2) \dots (m-n+1)”$$

These are the words of the Bourgeois, the fictive character in Le Corbusier’s seminal book, *The Decorative Art of Today*.<sup>1</sup> Le Corbusier’s witty attack on curtains was common in the dominant rhetoric of modern architecture in which drapes and curtains were regarded as superficial, fleeting, and effeminate. In spite of this, curtains were never a legitimate discussion among modern architects. Conceivably this explains the lack of scholarship on the use of drapery and curtains in modern architecture. In this paper I will deal with domestic interiors; exploring the correlation that exists between the re-presentation and function of curtains in modern architecture: display, excess and luxury. I will not offer a history of curtains, but I will explore certain aspects of them and the ways in which they have been used in the domestic interiors of the early twentieth-century. How did they emerge? What roles do they play? How do we define “modern curtains”? Tracing the different roles drapes and curtains played in the domestic interiors of the nineteenth and early twentieth-century, I will show that curtains – as opposed to drapes – reappeared, yet in a different role, namely practical, anonymous, impermanent, and unobtrusive.

### **Curtain Wars**

The primary association of curtains with windows is comparatively recent. Before the seventeenth-century curtains were rarely present in domestic interiors.<sup>2</sup> The eighteenth- and nineteenth-centuries saw an abounding presence of curtains and draperies, which caused a persistent tension between architects and interior designers.<sup>3</sup> This tension (what Joel Sanders called “Curtain Wars”) turned into clear attacks by the mid-nineteenth-century and continued in the early twentieth-century (Fig. 1).<sup>4</sup> These attacks on curtains by A. Pugin, John Ruskin, and William Morris become apparent when one looks more closely at a group of writings by these architects. The most prominent British architect of the 19th century, Pugin, for example, wrote in 1841 on the real use of curtains accusing the upholsterers of his time:

All the modern plans of suspending enormous folds of stuff over poles, as if for the purpose of sale or of being dried, is quite contrary to the use and intentions

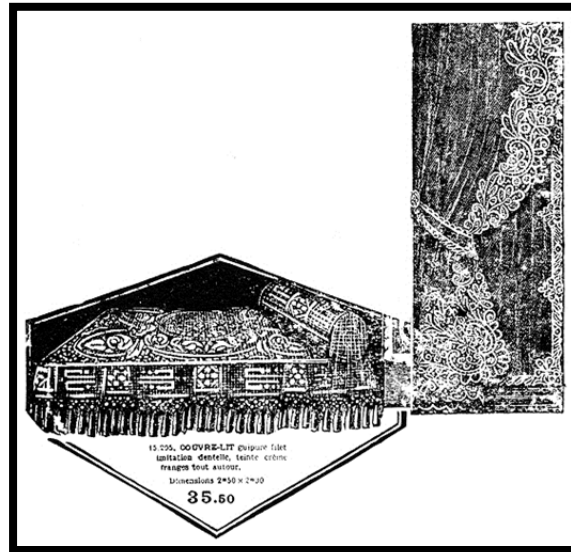
<sup>1</sup> Le Corbusier, *The Decorative Art of Today*, trans. James Dunnet (Cambridge, Mass.: The MIT Press, 1987), 52. Originally published as Le Corbusier, *L'art décoratif d'aujourd'hui* (Paris: G. Crès, 1926).

<sup>2</sup> Peter Thornton, *Seventeenth-Century Interior Decoration in England, France and Holland* (New Haven: Published for the Paul Mellon Centre for Studies in British Art by Yale University Press, 1978).

<sup>3</sup> For the appearance of the modern professional decorator see “The Emergence of Interior Decoration as a Profession,” in Ann Massey, *Interior Design of the Twentieth Century* (London; New York: Thames & Hudson, 2001).

<sup>4</sup> Joel Sanders, “Curtain Wars: Architects, Decorators, and the 20th-Century Domestic Interior” *Harvard Design Magazine* 16 (Winter/Spring 2002): 14-20.

of curtains, and abominable in taste; and the only object that these endless festoons and bunchy tassels can answer is to swell the bills and profits of the *upholsterers*, who are the inventors of these extravagant and ugly draperies, which are not only useless in protecting the chamber from cold, but are the depositories of *thick layers of dust*, and in London not infrequently become the *strong-holds of vermin*.<sup>5</sup>



**Figure 1.** Illustration of unacceptable fabrics from *The Decorative Art of Today*.

Overuse of draped fabrics was condemned by many writers. Charles Eastlake, one of those reformers, wrote in 1872: “[draperies as such] just represent a milliner’s notion of the “pretty” and nothing more. Drapery of this kind neither is wanted nor ought to be introduced in such places.”<sup>6</sup> Eastlake’s attack was by no means uncommon in this period. Many others followed his line of reasoning. However, there were advocates of drapery as well. Janet E. Ruutz-Rees, for example, wrote in *Home Decoration* (1881): “So many delightful possibilities are concealed by a curtain; not to mention the skillful hiding of defects made visible with such means, or the softening of angles and happy obliteration of corners.”<sup>7</sup> What is revealing about this essay is the way in which Ruutz-Rees validated curtains as a way of softening or correcting defects.

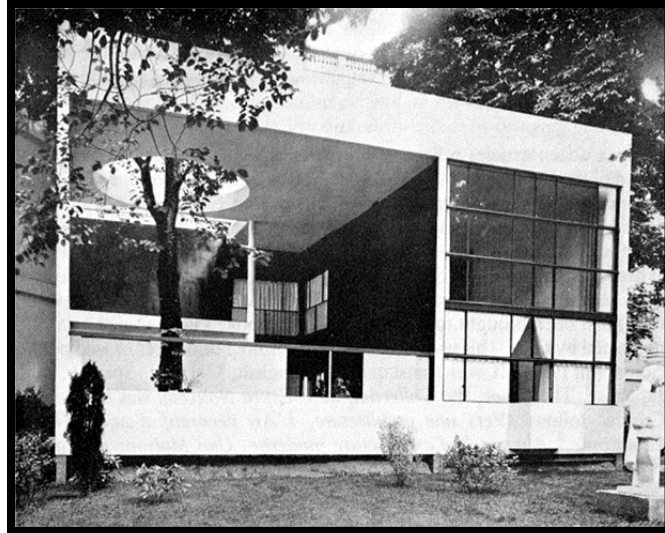
However, these extravagant draperies captured all the values that modernism wanted to reject. In the dominant rhetoric of modern architecture, they were associated with the feminine, the frivolous, the irrational, and the sensory - the very qualities modern architecture suppressed. Le Corbusier, for example, protested the taste for decorative “in the name of happiness, in the name of well-being, in the name of reason, in the name of culture, in the name of morality, in the name

<sup>5</sup> A. W. N. Pugin, “On Metalwork,” *The Theory of Decorative Art: An Anthology of European and American Writings, 1750-1940*, ed. Isabelle Frank (New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 2000), 40-41.

<sup>6</sup> Charles Eastlake, cited in Penny Sparke’s book on English household drapery since the mid-nineteenth-century. See Penny Sparke, *As Long as It’s Pink: The Sexual Politics of Taste* (London: HarperCollins, 1995), 64.

<sup>7</sup> Janet E. Ruutz-Rees, quoted in K. C. Grier, *Culture and Comfort: People Parlors and Upholstery, 1850-1930* (New York: The Strong Museum, 1988), 1.

of good taste, in the name of ancestors whose work we respect.”<sup>8</sup> Despite his notorious attacks on decoration, if we look at the probably most reproduced photograph of his *L’Esprit Nouveau* Pavilion, we can see the existence of curtains, which were earlier, associated with the frivolous, the feminine, the irrational, and the sensory (Fig. 2). One wonders why Le Corbusier installed curtains after despising them.



**Figure 2.** Le Corbusier, *L’Esprit Nouveau Pavilion*, Paris, 1925.

### Modern Curtains

*L’Esprit Nouveau* Pavilion stood in sharp contrast to the interiors produced by others in the Decorative Arts Exposition in Paris. It was a contrast to such an extent that according to the exhibition committee “there was no architecture” in it.<sup>9</sup> The committee concealed it behind a six-meter high fence at the far end of the exposition, which was removed only through the intervention of the country’s minister of fine arts. Though what Le Corbusier advocated was a serial production of architectural elements and furnishings, it seems that he plunged into a paradox with the curtains of the pavilion: Was the geometry of Le Corbusier’s mass-produced windows commensurate with that of the curtains? Are curtains congenial to mass-production at that time? Fabric was being sold in the department stores in Paris – *Printemps*, *Bon Marche*, *Magazins du Louvre* – since the mid-nineteenth-century. Mass-produced curtains with standard dimensions, however, were not available at the time. Even today, custom-made curtains are still the most common way of curtaining.

In the *L’Esprit Nouveau* Pavilion, therefore, the dimensions of the windows should have been measured carefully. Most likely, Charlotte Perriand, the only woman designer working at the office at the time, would have been responsible for this task. Only then, the custom-made (tailored) curtains would fit to the windows according to the measurements taken. The paradox is that Le Courbusier, in an attempt to create a serial production, in essence, created custom-made curtains.

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<sup>8</sup> Le Corbusier, *The Decorative Art of Today*, 8.

<sup>9</sup> Tim Benton, Charletto Benton, and Denis Sharp, *Form and Function: A Source Book for a History of Architecture and Design* (London: Open University Press, 1975), 739. See also Maurice Dufrene, *Ensembles mobiliers: Exposition internationale 1925* (Paris: C. Moreau, 1925).

*L'Esprit Nouveau*, as a matter of fact, was not a true realization of serial production in many ways. As Mary Mcleod has noted, "The modulator storage units, streamlined bicycle stair, and factory type windows were all custom manufactured. Perhaps most ironic were the especially made copies of Maple's leather club chairs: The market models were too big for Le Corbusier's new 'standard' doors."<sup>10</sup> The idea of looking standardized replaced that of being standardized in the *L'Esprit Nouveau* pavilion. Apparently, curtains only partly reflect his ideals. In other words, Le Corbusier saw no need to carry on his ideas when it came to the curtains.

Moreover, this question about standardization takes another for granted, perhaps one that is more important: can we call curtains an article of furniture? To answer, let me turn to the meaning of the word "furniture" in French. The French word "*meubles*" – coming from Latin "*mobilis*" – means things that can be moved around. So, furniture should be able to move. However, what enters into this category is still problematic. Chairs, sofas, tables, etc can easily fall into this category, but how about curtains? Curtains can move too, though only on a pre-given axis – that is along its rod. But could you bring your old curtains into your new house? The answer is, probably not, unless you are lucky to have the same window dimensions. That is the reason why curtains stand midway between furniture and an architectural member.<sup>11</sup>

### Curtain Walls

It is ironic that the "curtain wall," the icon of modern architecture, takes its name from curtains. The essential idea in a curtain wall is to separate the exterior wall from the primary structural system.<sup>12</sup> Although curtain walls are non-load-bearing, they must still carry their own weight and transfer the wind loads to the supporting structure of the building. They are often assembled from pre-finished panels in a variety of materials. By far the most commonly used system in curtain walls is the combination of glass and a metal (often aluminum). The light-weight quality and availability of these materials make the building construction economical and thus many architects, since the turn of the twentieth-century, preferred to use the curtain wall system. A notably early example is the *Hallidie Building*, in San Francisco (1918) by Willis Jefferson.<sup>13</sup>

Early twentieth-century saw the production of many buildings exploring the curtain wall system. Walter Gropius's Bauhaus Dessau (1925-26) is just one example of continuous glass façade where one can see the edges of the floor slabs and radiators behind the glazing. In a number of large department stores in Europe, such as *Bon Marche* or *Samaritaine* in Paris, the glass curtain wall was treated as a *display* window. As David Yeomans noted that "the reason for adopting this form seems to be that either their architects or owners saw the buildings as showcases."<sup>14</sup> While the glass curtain wall worked well for factories and department stores, difficulties arose in apartment buildings and office buildings due to the loss of privacy and lack of sufficient insulation. Ironically, the use of curtains became inevitable due to the limitations of curtain walls

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<sup>10</sup> Mary Mcleod, "'Architecture or Revolution': Taylorism, Technocracy, and Social Change" *Art Journal* 43 (1983), 141.

<sup>11</sup> Although curtain "type-funtions," it is not a "type-furniture" at least in Le Corbusier's time, in 1925.

<sup>12</sup> See the two articles by David Yeomans, "The Pre-history of Curtain Wall" *Construction History: Journal of the Construction History Group* 14 (1999): 59-82 and "The Origins of the Modern Curtain Wall" *APT Bulletin* 32, no. 1 (2001): 13-18.

<sup>13</sup> Keith W. Dills, "The Hallidie Building" *Journal of the Society of Architectural Historians* 30 (1971): 323-29.

<sup>14</sup> David Yeomans, "The Origins of the Modern Curtain Wall," 14.

that sustain practical functions like providing privacy and keeping the sun out. Although there are exceptions to this: apparently, the issues of privacy and the possibility of being seen from outside were not considered as a problem for Mies van der Rohe in many of his buildings. Alice T. Friedman likened the effect in his famous Farnsworth House to that of “domestic theater – in which Farnsworth became a domestic scrutiny, a moving figure in a landscape of immovable forms.”<sup>15</sup>

Contrary to the fascination with transparency, the aim of curtaining is to achieve *obscurity* (apparent opposite of transparency). Karsten Harries described the situation well: “Who of us would want to live in a glass house? Soon we will be searching for some corner that was really our own, enclosed, offering protection from the world and others.”<sup>16</sup> Therefore, enclosed curtains satisfied the need for privacy, the need to be left alone in that period of “transparency-mania”.

### **Built-in Curtains**

Curtains are extremely interesting for the scope of this study in another respect: the role of curtains as a partitioning element. This particular role of curtains is completely different than the decorative aspect of curtains applied to an architectural interior. It is a practical and temporary arrangement in dividing the large spaces into smaller sections. It conceals the presence of anything that has an odor or makes a noise and also cuts off drafts and light. With the disappearance of bearing walls – one of the fundamental points of modern architecture - curtains have conferred a new attitude.<sup>17</sup> This new role of curtains was widely promoted by the modern architects who incorporated numerous curtains in the modification of their interiors. In what follows I will illustrate this point with a few examples.

The American architect Frank Lloyd Wright (1867-1959) could be held responsible for the detachment of curtains from windows and their incorporation into the plan of the house. The windows, shorn of curtains, were filled in with ornamental lead decorations. The curtains between the living room and dining room in the *Robie House* (1909) in Chicago illustrate his typical spatial organization. Curtains took over the space-defining role of walls thus allowing flexibility and mobility. Similarly, the curtains dividing the living and dining rooms of the *Albert Jeanneret Villa* (1923-25) by Le Corbusier in Paris can be used to illustrate this new role of curtains. The same was true of his *Villa Savoye* (1928) in the outskirts of Paris, in which the famous bathroom with its reclining bathtub is separated from the bedroom through curtains. In fact, this is a highly unusual role for curtains. However, if there was a built-wall instead of the curtains, there would not be such a dramatic view of the bathroom, which is achieved only through pulling the curtains aside in a way very reminiscent of a theater environment. These curtains transcend their initial function as a space-defining element. When the curtains are drawn aside, they reveal a deep view of the bathroom with its skylight at the end and create a theatrical effect.

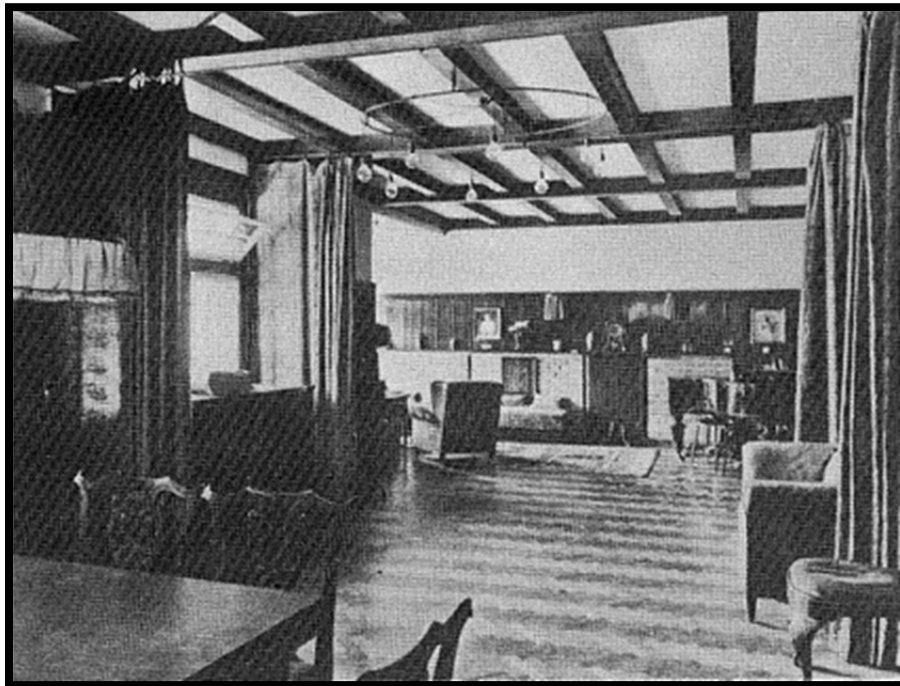
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<sup>15</sup> Alice T. Friedman, *Women and the Making of the Modern House: a Social and Architectural History* (New York: Harry N. Abrams, 1998), 147.

<sup>16</sup> Karsten Harries, *Ethical Function of Architecture* (Cambridge, Mass.: The MIT Press, 1997), 196.

<sup>17</sup> On the disappearance of bearing walls, see H. Allen Brooks, “Frank Lloyd Wright and the Destruction of the Box” *Journal of the Society of Architectural Historians* 38 (1979): 7-14.

The curtains of Le Corbusier or Wright were by no means atypical in this period. For example, in the residential oeuvre of the Austrian architect Adolf Loos – from his own house (1903) to the *Tzara House* (1933) – one can see many instances of curtains. His own house, featured in the journal *Kunst* in 1903, is an early example. The living room (also used as the dining room) and the adjacent room with the fireplace were differentiated by the ceiling height difference, a common Loos feature.<sup>18</sup> Besides the differentiation of the ceiling heights, curtains hanging from a rod mark the boundary between the two rooms. So that “the two spaces were distinguished from each other both psychologically and functionally: the smaller was more intimate, with an exposed-brick fireplace and two adjacent alcoves for fireside reading and relaxation.”<sup>19</sup> The bedroom of his wife, Lina is particularly interesting. The bedroom, as expected, was the most intimate and the most private place house in the entire house. Consequently, Loos draped the room’s walls with cambric curtains and covered the floor in white Angora sheepskin. The ultimate goal was to create an intimate environment for his wife. Draping the walls apparently accomplished his purpose.



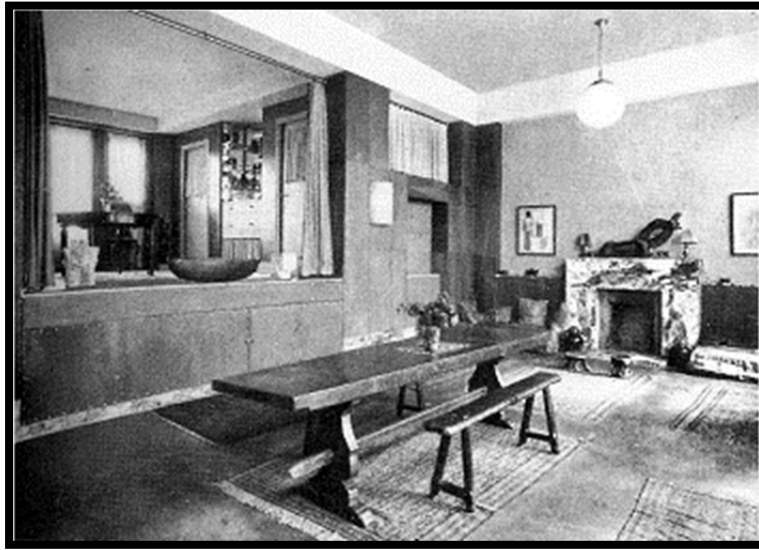
*Figure 3. Adolf Loos, Steiner House, Vienna, 1910. View of the dining room.*

The dining room curtains, covering one face of the room, in Paul Khener’s apartment in Vienna (1907) are in the same spirit as Lina’s bedroom. Without paying attention to the size of the two rectangular windows, Loos draped one face of the room entirely. Furthermore, at night, in the absence of the daylight coming from the two windows, the curtains resemble to theater curtains, adding a certain sense of drama into the dining room. The house that Loos designed for Hugo and Lilly Steiner (Vienna, 1910) is another example of this (Fig. 3). The living room, the dining room and the music room on the ground floor served as a large room when the curtains were drawn aside. The Tristan Tzara House in the *Montmartre* section of Paris (1925-6) illustrates a

<sup>18</sup> These rooms are reconstructed at the Historical Museum of Vienna in 1958.

<sup>19</sup> Panayotis Tournikiotis, *Adolf Loos* (New York: Princeton Architectural Press, 1994), 35-36.

similar intention (Fig. 4). Naturally, curtains first and foremost provide a division of space and privacy among other things.



*Figure 4. Adolf Loos, Tzara House, Paris, 1930. Sitting room and raised dining room at left.*

I should note, that the curtains (not draperies) I illustrated so far are simply hung from tubular horizontal rods in the manner of hospital room dividers or shower curtains. The distinction between curtains and drapes is fundamental to their investigation. Here I would like to refer to Georges Banu's clear distinction between the two:

The curtain is not static and maintains the intrinsic possibility of movement. It lowers and rises, its immobility is only passing and its opening ephemeral. This is what distinguishes it from mere drapes, which remain open, like a tent made of ornamental material, devoid of all mobility and assigned a mainly decorative function. Drapes allow us to see right away without subsequently performing any sort of transformation, even a mental one. Drapery has none of the curtain's dialectical role of hiding/uncovering. Drapes create an atmosphere; they do not introduce a situation. They are part of the scenery, while curtains are part of a scenography intended to be mobile.<sup>20</sup>

Curtains have a certain ephemeral character. Beyond this issue of temporality that distinguishes curtains from drapes, curtains serve as an architectural element allowing the division of the space providing comfort, privacy and intimacy. Although they were regarded as superficial, fleeting, and effeminate, they were not completely removed from the domestic interior. Therefore, curtains shorn of aesthetic significance and of independent artistic principle survived in practice, even though the amount of folds and swags was dramatically reduced. And yet, their dichotomy of excess and necessity, obscurity and transparency, permanency and temporality are still valid even today.

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<sup>20</sup> Georges Banu, "Le Rideau ou la 'Fêlure du Monde,' The Curtain, Symbol of Fracture" *Art Press* 226 (1997): 58- 60.