

“VILLA MOISSI”-ITS INFLUENCE IN MODERNIST AND POSTMODERNIST ARCHITECTURE-A MEDITERRANIAN CIRCLE

Anna Yunitsyna ¹, Ernest Shtepani ² Artan Raça ³

¹Anna Yunitsyna, Faculty of Architecture, Epoka University, AL

²Ernest Shtepani, Faculty of Architecture, Metropolitan Tirana University, AL

³Artan Raça "studio raça arkitektura", AL

*Corresponding Author: e-mail: ayunitsyna@epoka.edu.al

Abstract

The design of Adolf Loos, Villa Moissi comes at an important time in 1923. It is a time when Europe is changing. The “roaring 20s” just 10 years before the rise in power of Nazi Germany, 5 years after “World War I”. The generation of those idealists and artists that formed the Viennese artistic milieu was still there. Adolf Loos was a friend of Ludwig Wittgenstein, and Viennese intellectuals of the time, including the international renown actor Alexander Moissi. Adolf Loos designed the unbuilt work supposed to be built in Lido, Venice. The Avant guard work of Villa Moissi was revolutionary. Not only it was innovative through modernism and that can be analyzed through its plan and facades and consequently its three-dimensional look, but later analysis shows that even it opens the path for postmodernism, for a kind of architecture that we find later in Hasan Fatih's works. It would become an inspiration for postmodernist Aldo Rossi. The house demonstrates a volume that is cubic and without a classical element. This is completely new compared to other works of Adolf Loos such as Rufer House in Vienna where he uses a big freeze with ornamentation that was inspired by Ancient Rome. The plan distribution is such that the living room and services are placed on the ground floor and sleeping rooms on the first floor. Also, some element of the house reminds me of the Mediterranean character, the simple cubic volume, the finishing with a rustic touch, the positioning of the terrace, the pergola, and the external stairs that come around. What is characteristic of this house is that is typically Mediterranean and looks like the as distant image of the memorized houses that Adolf Loos may have seen on his early trip to the Greek Island of Skyros. The paper will provide more information about the influence of Villa Moissi on other architects of the modernist and postmodernist movement, and its roots embedded in the Mediterranean culture.

Keywords: Adolf Loos, Villa Moissi, Aldo Rossi, transition from modernism to postmodernism, Greek and Mediterranean architecture, closed circle.

1 Introduction

This paper is about the unbuilt project of Adolf Loos, Villa Moissi, its inspiration, and its impact on other architects. This paper aims to demonstrate that Villa Moissi has its roots embedded in Mediterranean architecture and that its innovation is more a rediscovery, rather than an invention.

Also, the paper offers an analysis of the functionality of the building and its particularities of the architectonic expressions situated between modernism and postmodernism. The aim is as well to show the influence of the building on other architects including postmodernists like Aldo Rossi. The root of its expression is, perhaps an image that Adolf Loos had seen in the vernacular architecture of Greece, thus the very bases for its equally “postmodernist” look. The fact that this project was exhibited in the Salon D’Automne in 1923, in Paris could influence modernist architects. Equally famous is the publication in the architectural magazine Casabella nr. 233 of the year 1959 which shows also a photo of Villa Moissi that would be a reference for Villa ai Ronchi in Versilia (Rossi, 1959).

This paper starts from the transition of the paradigm of “Ornament is Crime” and “New Objectivity”. The next part is devoted to the inspiration of Adolf Loos from vernacular Mediterranean Architecture in Skyros, Greece. Further, it explains the relationship of Alexander Moissi and Adolf Loos as part of the Vienna Cultural Milieux. In the end, Villa Moissi is a design that stands equally well in modernist and postmodernist which can be an example of a house for the Mediterranean context.

2 Villa Moissi between Modernism and Postmodernism

2.1 From “Ornament is Crime” to “New Objectivity”

“I have discovered and given the world the following notion: the evolution of civilization is synonymous with the elimination of the ornament from the object of use. I thought I was bringing this new joy into the world, but it was not grateful to me” (Adolf Loos, 1908)

“Ornament is Crime” would write Adolf Loos at the beginning of the 20 Century. (Loos, 1962) This would sound as racist and weird today, but it was written in a period when utopic ideas and paradoxes were in fashion. Just some 20 years later Johannes Itten would draw “House of the White Man” (Drawing of the year 1921), which controversially looks very similar to “Villa Muller” of Loos. The discourse of arts and architecture at the beginning of the 20 Century with its avant-gardes, its “hopes” in “new technology” and change in politics was heading towards “New Objectivity”. Things would never look the same: No ornaments, geometric straight lines, white surfaces, flat roofs, all “seemingly” totally new elements that demonstrate the evolution or rather revolution of architecture and form in the new era of technology. The “New Objectivity” shows that “man is capable of simplifying forms”: Cubes, cylinders, and straight lines take the place of complicated ornaments or forms. Even the drawings of Oscar Schlemmer show the “Vitruvian Man” made from simple circles. Man, and machine get closer and according to Le Corbusier “A house is a Machine for Living in”. (Le Corbusier, 1931)

All this is fine and there is also the Futurist Manifesto which expresses the view of total discontinuation of the past. Loos is a pioneer of “New Objectivity” ...Perhaps the innovation of this project is that it anticipates Master Houses of Walter Gropius (1926), Le Corbusier’s Villa Savoye (1928), Giuseppe Terragni L’Asilo Sant’Elia (1936) and all other architecture that would come after.

2.2 Travel in Island of Schyros

Adolf Loos had a wonderful journey in the island of Skyros in 1904.

He was deeply impressed by the white stucco color, the cubic shape, the lack of ornament and the Mediterranean touch of these settlements. Even if we look at the typology of houses in Skyros today (Figure 1), we notice a distant similarity with Villa Moissi.



Figure 1. View of Schiros, Greece

This journey just had a profound impact on the author's architecture.

Also, in Villa Moissi we find the concept of "Promenade Architectural", going around the house and entrance on the first, rather than the ground floor. This expression can be found in the traditional architecture in the Balkans through the slow entrance from external stairs, potentially covered by rain. Le Corbusier would also follow Loos's footsteps as he traveled to the Balkans and visited Serbia, Bulgaria, Turkey, and Greece and also spoke about these visits in his last book, "*Le Voyage d'Orient*". (Morel, 2015) Le Corbusier would also praise the white color and architecture of vernacular Greek cities, especially that of Mikonos.

Therefore, it may be deduced a remote inspiration from Villa Moissi since Le Corbusier was present in the exhibition in 1923. Further Le Corbusier's "Promenade Architectural" was based on their observation of Arabic Cities where architecture is best appreciated through walking from one place to another, or from ground to terraces. It seems that Le Corbusier used the lessons of Salon D'Automne for his masterpiece of Villa Savoye.

2.3 *Alexander Moissi and the Vienna cultural Milieux.*

Adolf Loos was a friend of Ludwig Wittgenstein, Josephine Baker, and Viennese intellectuals of the time, including the international renown actor Alexander Moissi.

Stephan Zweig writes about the actor "Man of the South, always Man of the South. In order not to be frozen he takes the sun of his country wherever he goes. Whenever you are with him, you'll learn something new about life in this world." Was this quote an inspiration, for the project of Adolf Loos in Lido? Perhaps yes. There is no good architecture without an inspiring client. Moissi was the most famous Viennese actor of the time and therefore, Loos held him in great esteem.

Villa Moissi is to an extent radical and different. It is very different from what Adolf Loos designed in the same years for other clients in Austria. These other projects namely Rufer House (Figure 2) and Villa Stross at about the same time show contradictory Loos. Rufer House still holds a touch with an ornament

that Adolf Loos “did not get rid of”. Some degree of eclecticism probably emphasized by the presence of a bourgeois existing context.



Figure 2. Decoration of Rufer House, Vienna. (Project by Adolf Loos, 1922)

The decorative elements seen in villa Rufer, show the necessity of combining modernist architecture with elements of classical architecture. The same can be told about the Villa Stross a project of 1922, designed with a front facade with a porticus with Doric Columns which are symmetrical, and create a feeling of an austere building. Meanwhile, Villa Moissi contains no ornament something which is more audacious than other project and Loos theory about ornament and minimalism find its complete expression.

2.4 *Villa Moissi between modernism and postmodernism*

The main volume of the house is a cube without a classical element or other decoration. (Figure 4) The functions of the building are such that the living room and services are placed on the ground floor and sleeping rooms on the first floor. (Figure 3) Also, some element of the house reminds the Mediterranean character, the simple cubic volume, the white rustic stucco, the positioning of the terrace, the pergola, the external stairs.

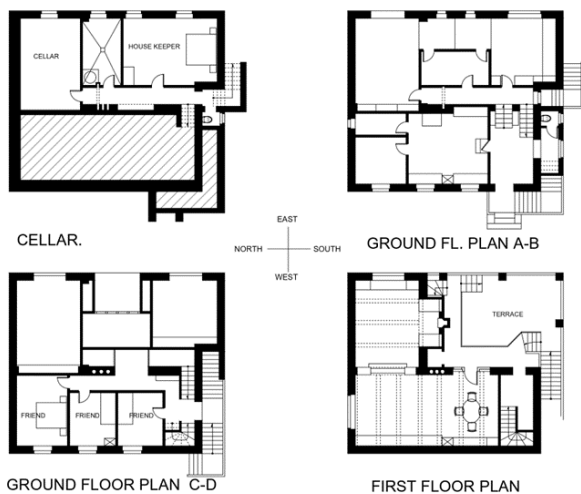


Figure 3. Villa Moissi Plans, 1923

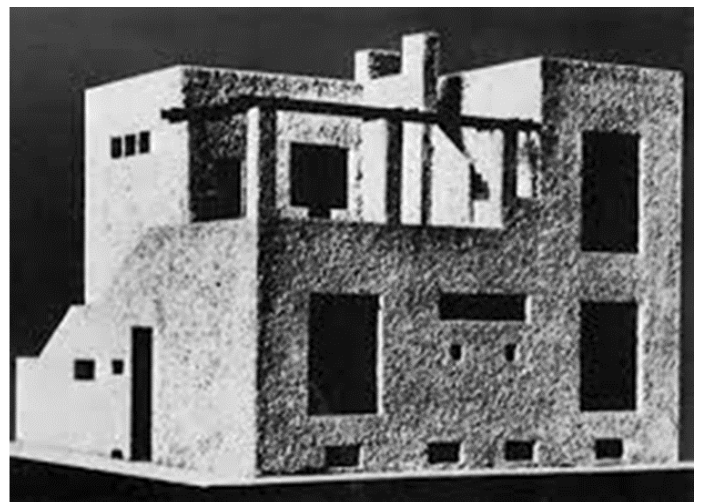


Figure 4. Villa Moissi Model, 1923.

The peculiarity of Villa Moissi is that not only Loos did get rid of all the ornaments but also the design is so radical that allows for the juxtaposition of terraces in a very different way. The underground floor and the cellar are positioned underground level which also can be accessed from external stairs. The entrance is anticipated by a lobby that connects to the kitchen and service as opposed to the rooms. Also, the bathroom can be accessed from both sides. The stairs from the main hall connect with the intermediate floor which has three rooms. The corridor has natural light. Also, the living room has access to the terrace which in itself is connected by a staircase that comes from the ground floor.

The theoretical framework dedicated to this unbuilt masterpiece is not so coherent. Perhaps this comes from the unconscious support of the architects and the public for the built projects.

The “Salon D’Automme exhibition of 1923, and the presentation of the project at Casabella 233 of the year 1959 are the two key success moments. Therefore, understanding the impact of this project on other architects’ works is still a matter of research.



Figure 5 (left) Villa ai Ronchi in Versilia, Italy. (Project by Aldo Rossi 1960)

Figure 6 (right) Álvaro Siza, Quinta da Malagueira, Portugal 1973-77.

Villa ai Ronchi in Versilia (Figure 5) designed by Aldo Rossi shows extreme similarity to Villa Moissi.

Aldo Rossi was inspired by Adolf Loos. When he worked as the main editor of the architectural magazine entitled Casabella. Volume number 233 of the year 1959 was also showing a photo of Adolf Loos’ Villa Moissi. (Fiorelli, 2016) It seems that this was an inspiration for Rossi, who famously was one of the forerunners of postmodernism. The image was abstract enough to become inspiring with its rustic character reminding the expression of Gio Ponti that modernist architects replicate ancient architecture. (Ponti, 1934) Adolf Loos visible influence can be found also on Alvaro Siza if we look at Quinta da Malagueira (Figure 6), with its cubic shapes, white stucco color, and no decoration. Malagueira neighborhood was constructed during the 70s and includes cubic geometry, lac of ornaments, and an equilibrium of forms that reminds very much of Villa Moissi. (UKEssays, 2018)

The postmodernist elements of the villa Moissi, are visible in the inclined silhouette of the stair as opposed to the straight angles of modernism, “the traditional” type of stair that borrows from Mediterranean tradition or what can be found as the “çardak type house” and finally the seeming stucco that reminds of “architecture for the poor” concept of Hassan Fathy.

Conclusion: Villa Moissi-“A house for Mediterranean Context”

Adolf Loos has been instrumental in imposing new ideas about architecture and the exclusion of ornament and his influence can be seen throughout the modernist period including Jonanes Itten and Le Corbusier. Villa Moissi although unbuilt has been highly influential. This project is somehow different from the various works of Adolf Loos. It has a stronger Mediterranean effect that reminds the architecture of the Greek Island the original inspiration for Loos. Cubic form, simplicity, white stucco, and beautiful terraces including the “Promenade Architectural” are very bold characteristics of Mediterranean vernacular architecture. So much of this has been taken into consideration that almost the project has a postmodernist effect, a “return” to contextualization and local architecture. It almost escapes the International Style. Postmodernist architects such as Aldo Rossi have been fascinated with this Villa.

In conclusion, although unbuilt, the project remains one of the most influential projects of Loos and it has been so for a longer period.

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Figure 4: UKEssays. (November 2018). Alvaro Siza Architecture Style. Retrieved from <https://www.ukessays.com/essays/architecture/alvaro-siza-architecture-analysis-6318.php?vref=1>

Figura 5: <https://www.famous-architects.org/aldo-rossi/villa-ai-ronchi-versilia/>

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