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Immeuble-villas between Le Corbusier and Albert Gessner

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One of the open questions for contemporary urban living in the city is the issue of density. What level of urban density is sustainable and appropriate for a healthy, enjoyable lifestyle as well as for the unfolding of public life? If in Brisbane or in Auckland, the predominant models are either the high-rise apartment building or the detached suburban house. Solutions may lie in the vast zone between these two extremes. One such alternative model is Le Corbusier's notion of Immeuble villas of 1925. Despite its age of nearly a hundred years it is not outdated; nonetheless it has rarely been given sufficient attention by practitioners and historians. Le Corbusier's term of the Immeuble villas should not simply be reduced to its one built manifestation as Pavillon de l'Esprit Nouveau, exhibited at the Exposition Internationale des Arts Décoratifs in Paris in 1925. This term rather encompasses a principle of urban living for which a number of architects found architectural expression at the beginning of the twentieth century, not so much in taking Le Corbusier's idea as precedent but rather in fundamental concurrence of the idea and the underlying principle of the Immeuble villas. One such architect was Albert Gessner, a prominent architect in Berlin of the early 1900s. Throughout his career he devoted his attention primarily towards the urban tenement block. Instead of Le Corbusier's interest in type and standardization, Gessner valued individuality within the standardized model of the urban block. This paper traces various manifestations of the Immeuble Villas in the first half of the twentieth century—for example Milan's Domus Fausta, Carola and Julia by Gio Ponti and Emilio Lancia, Michel Roux Spitz' houses in Paris and Charles Abella's house at the Avenue Foch in Paris. In doing so, the paper explores the underlying architectural principles of this overlooked hybrid typology, using Gessner's and Le Corbusier's contrasting methods as point of departure.



The *Immeuble-villas* (tenement house of villas) is a rare type. It is regrettable that it was never built in its pure form of Le Corbusier's 1922 design. It could have become an important argument in today's debate on the possibilities of high-quality, high-density urban dwellings. In order to explore its nascent possibilities this paper compares his model to German architect Albert Gessner's tenement blocks in Berlin of the time before the First World War. Some fifteen years before Le Corbusier would design his *Immeuble-villas*, Gessner, a Berlin architect (1868-1953), had investigated possibilities of developing individualized dwellings within the standardized type of the Berlin tenement block. Gessner designed numerous tenement houses in Berlin, publishing his theory and practice as *Das deutsche Miethaus* in 1909.¹

1. Albert Gessner, *Das deutsche Miethaus* (Munich: Bruckmann, 1909).

This paper analyses and compares these two, in part overlapping, in part contradictory methods of designing for the city, in order to explore and argue the inherent conflict between individuality and repetition or standardization. However, the obvious differences in style—German *Heimatstil* (National Romanticism) on the one side and Le Corbusier's white modernism on the other—are not considered here. The paper thus focuses on a small but crucial topic within the greater debate on the most suitable types of urban dwelling as they were explored in theory and practice in Europe before and after World War One.

Albert Gessner and the Nineteenth-Century City

During the second half of the nineteenth century, the need for expansion within the great European cities like London, Paris and Berlin was normally answered with extreme, and standardized, densification. This happened either through Haussmann's reorganization of the existing structures—the famous *percement*, the cutting of boulevards through existing built-up areas—or through the extension of the existing city, as can be seen in James Hobrecht's plan for Berlin of 1862, which laid the foundation for the “biggest tenement city of the world” to come into being after ca. 1870.² Nevertheless, in most cases urban residential buildings were a task for a builder, not for an architect. This means that the residential dwelling was characterized by pragmatism, schematic designs and repetition. At a standard height of 22 metres, in Berlin standard floor plans were combined with historicist façade elements that could be chosen by the builder. Thus the

2. Werner Hegemann, *Das steinerne Berlin. Geschichte der größten Mietskasernenstadt der Welt* (Berlin: Kiepenheuer, 1930).

potential of the residential dwelling for a spatial disposition which could have added positively to the urban context was not tested, let alone exhausted; and similarly, the floor plan organization remained unchallenged for several decades, as was the standardized system of historicist façade structures.

Berlin architect Alfred Messel (1853–1909) had been one of the first to steer into a direction which accepted the (Berlin) tenement block as the basis for housing but his designs from the early 1890s onwards provided apartments of higher quality through improved kitchens and sanitary facilities, and, in particular, more green space within the interior of the blocks. Architects like Hermann Jansen (1869–1945) and others added to Messel’s experiments, and by circa 1910 a series of models had been developed that, according to historian Julius Posener, would have made Berlin a wonderfully liveable city.³ Posener and others have, over the last 30 years, explored aspects of this development that so abruptly got cut off by the First World War: after the war—for a number of reasons—the focus shifted to small, inexpensive housing schemes.

3. Julius Posener, *Berlin auf dem Wege zu einer neuen Architektur* (Munich: Prestel, 1979).

Against this background, this paper compares solutions by Albert Gessner and Le Corbusier; the one part of the constant reform development of the tenement block up to 1914 in Berlin, the other a declared modernist. This comparison is not fortuitous because both architects searched to develop a type that was not normally accounted for in the inner cities, neither before nor after the war: the type of the villa. Both Gessner and Le Corbusier sought to design villas within the density of the city, attempting to keep some of the villa’s characteristic qualities while submitting them to the necessary compromises that come with stacking and repetition. As the paper will show, for Gessner the important aspect to keep was the individuality of the villa, whereas for Le Corbusier it was the added green space, the hanging garden, combined with the two storeys of his maisonettes that turned his designs into villas in the city.

As one of the reformist architects of his time, Berlin-based architect Albert Gessner took on the task of further developing the urban residential dwelling, through his writings as well as through his built practice. Attempting to incorporate the quality of the freestanding villa into the urban tenement block, he challenged existing conventions. Gessner said: “Even if the aesthetician values the single house more highly because of its individual



character, why should it be impossible to find, for the tenement house, an artistic expression that offers, within the pre-defined type, enough scope to develop rich diversity?”⁴

4. Albert Gessner, “Das Miethaus, ein Stiefkind der Architektur!” *Architektonische Rundschau* 22 (1906): 27–30.

For Gessner, the value of the type as such consisted in creating exactly the right amount of similarity of the dwellings, necessary to open up the possibilities for diversity, within the context of the repetitive nature of the urban stacked dwelling. His designs for such dwellings, townhouses along the street in the established dimension of the urban building plot, simultaneously include the functional principle of typification and the maximum of individuality. According to Gessner the architect’s task lies in developing an underlying design structure for the tenement house which allows an individual character of each apartment without losing the sense of unity of the building as a whole.⁵ He solved this dilemma in such a way that no term could sum up his achievement better than *Immeuble-villas*—“something of a compound of single villas, a tower made up of modern country houses,” a contemporary critic asserted.⁶

5. Gessner, *Das deutsche Miethaus*, 132, 136.

One example is his so-called “Green House,” at Niebuhrstraße 2 in Berlin-Charlottenburg (1905-1906). The site of this tenement house was enclosed by three firewalls. Here, Gessner introduced a setback of the central part of the façade; such sculptural façade treatment allowed him to place six rooms per floor facing the street. Thus, each of the two four-bedroom apartments per floor had three rooms towards the street, and two facing the courtyard. Between these spacious halls were placed, equipped with a large window and facing a light well. This single light well gathered around itself the side rooms and kitchen of each apartment, as well as the two stairwells. While the apartment to the right of the building led into a short side wing, the other apartment extended into an oriel towards the street which, in plan, shows as an extra room. Thus, the remaining courtyard space could be used for an intimate garden. In a similar fashion to the (English) country house, each room seemed to be allowed to articulate itself as much as its function required it—creating a close relationship of the different rooms inside the apartment, while creating manifold occasions to articulate the façade in a sculptural manner. Setbacks and protruding building elements such as loggias establish a close relationship between the indoor spaces and the space of the street or the courtyard. Thus, if one stood in the doorframe towards the dining room (of the apartment to the left), one could grasp the complex spatial arrangement towards the street, could see through

6. Max Osborn, “Berliner Mietshäuser,” *Velhagen & Klasing’s Monatshefte* 23 (1908/09): 225–40.

7. See also Gessner, *Das deutsche Miethaus*, 60.

8. For example Gustav Assmann, *Grundrisse für städtische Wohngebäude mit Rücksicht auf die für Berlin geltende Bauordnung* (Berlin: Ernst & Korn Berlin, 1862).

9. Hermann Muthesius, *Das englische Haus. I–III* (Berlin: Wasmuth, 1904–11).

10. Walter Gropius, “Grundsätze der Bauhaus-Produktion (Dessau),” in *Programme und Manifeste zur Architektur des 20. Jahrhunderts*, ed. Ulrich Conrads (Berlin, Frankfurt am Main & Vienna: Ullstein, 1964), 91.

11. Le Corbusier, *L’Art décoratif d’aujourd’hui* (Paris: Crès, 1925), in the English translation, *The Decorative Art of Today*, trans. James I. Dunnett (London: Architectural Press, 1987), 72.

bedroom and loggia into the courtyard, and through the hall and the light well into the kitchen and towards the side entrance.⁷ Compared to the schematic floor plans of the time, Gessner’s decisive innovation is the hall, which functions as an independent room of its own, and the unorthodox grouping of rooms around it.⁸ With these two priorities of the planning—the hall and the grouped rooms, each of which was designed according to their own internal size and needs—Gessner took inspiration from the English country house, as Hermann Muthesius had made it known in Germany at the time.⁹ And in this concept of villa-like apartments in the house he demonstrated his conviction that human needs were divergent, and, to a certain extent, individual.

By contrast, Walter Gropius wrote in 1926: “In general, the everyday needs of a majority of humans are of the same kind.”¹⁰ Thus he expressed the notion that the house was an object of mass demand and therefore was prone to a certain functionalist uniformity in its design, a conviction that gained acceptance after the First World War. As is all too well known, the Modernist movement settled on “Zeilenbau” as the preferred type for mass housing. Architects like Bruno Taut and Ernst May, to name some of the most prolific German representatives, designed endless variations of a type that dramatically changed the appearance of cities from the 1920s on. The reasons are familiar: in order to protect the population of the cities from serious health threats, “Licht, Luft and Sonne”—light, air and sun—were introduced into mass housing designs. This was achieved mostly through opening up the building blocks and turning them into “Zeilen,” into free-standing lines of slab apartment buildings. But whereas, in the early 1920s, these examples of “Zeilenbau” still actively shaped open space around themselves, the solutions moved towards more and more uniformity, and later examples, as for example Walter Gropius’ or Ludwig Hilberseimer’s designs, put rationalization and standardization higher than the need for the creation of public urban space.

Similarly Le Corbusier, in *L’Art Décoratif d’aujourd’hui* (of 1925), asserted that human needs were not numerous, and that “they are very similar for all mankind, since man has been made out of the same mould from the earliest times known to us.”¹¹ But even Gessner who had, before 1914, so strongly—through words and buildings—argued for individual and bourgeois situations, did not pursue his own line of thought. After 1918, Germany was focussing on fulfilling immediate needs for minimal-standard



housing, and the theme of spatially complex and differentiated urban dwellings was not pursued any further. Gessner answered briefs for minimum dwellings, developing “Zeilenbau” solutions himself. This development makes his own pre-1914 contributions to the idea of the inner-city villa so exceptional. And at this time, in the 1920s, Le Corbusier developed his idea of a standardized urban densification, the *Immeuble-villas*.

Le Corbusier’s Immeuble-villas: Term and Origin of a Rare Type

Le Corbusier first described his Immeuble-villas, a single freestanding building with 120 stacked maisonette dwellings, in *Vers une architecture* (1923).¹² In 1930, in the first volume of his *Œuvre Complète*, he illustrated the idea of this never-executed project at some length.¹³ In the meantime, he had also presented it in *Urbanisme* (1925), but adding, for his visions of the *Ville contemporaine*, a derivative of the original *Immeuble-villas*. The building had grown into large perimeter blocks of a dimension of 400 by 200 metres, containing 340 villas per block. But despite all this self-promotion, the only ever built element of the *Immeuble-villas* was one sample dwelling, well known as the *Pavillon de l’Esprit Nouveau*, exhibited at the Exposition des Art Décoratifs in Paris, 1925.

12. Le Corbusier, *Vers une architecture* (Paris: Crès, 1923).

13. *Le Corbusier und Pierre Jeanneret. Ihr gesamtes Werk von 1910–1929*, ed. and transl. by Oscar Stonorov and Willy Boesiger (Zurich: Girsberger, 1930), 36–39 and 94–107.

The Spatial Concept of the Stacked Villa

In the *Immeuble-villas*, the basic villa element is developed over a square of ca. 11.5 metres in length, which gives the whole dwelling a footprint of approximately 130 square metres. The plan is organized in an L-shape, with a “terrasse-jardin” in the space left over. This terrace covers approximately 50 square metres. On its ground floor, the villa connects to the rest of the building via a corridor of a width of 2.5 metres, whereas on its first floor, this surface is added to the villa’s plan. In sum, the indoor space of each villa is approximately 170 square metres. It contains a large shared bedroom for the children, one bedroom with attached boudoir for the parents, a study, a bathroom, a sports room and an open-plan dining-living-room. But then, this plan contradicts Le Corbusier’s own modernist descriptions! On the one side, there is his proud—and detailed—claim that here is a whole system of services provided for the inhabitants of the *Immeuble-villas*:

Servants are no longer attached to particular households; . . . an alert staff is available day and night. Raw and cooked foods are provided by purchasing service, which leads to quality and economy. A vast kitchen provides meals for either the villas or a communal restaurant, as preferred. . . . [O]n the roof there's a large communal sports facility and a 300-m track. Likewise on the roof, a recreation hall for use by the residents. . . . [A] doorman receives visitors here day and night and directs them to the elevators. In the large open courtyard and on the roof of the underground garage, tennis courts.¹⁴

14. Le Corbusier, *Toward an Architecture (Vers une architecture)*, Paris: Crès, 1923), ed. Jean-Louis Cohen, trans. John Goodman (Los Angeles: Getty Research Institute, 2007), 274–75.

15. Stanislaus von Moos, *Elements of a Synthesis (Elemente einer Synthese)*, Stuttgart and Frauenfeld: Huber, 1968), rev. and expanded ed. (Rotterdam: O10 Publishers, 2009), 143.

16. “Ils [les Immeubles-Villas] sont nés d'un souvenir après un déjeuner, d'une Chartreuse d'Italie (bonheur par la sérénité) et crayonnés sur le dos d'un menu de restaurant.” Le Corbusier, *Œuvre Complète*, vol. 1, 1910–1929, trans. and ed. Willy Boesiger and Oscar Stonorov (Zurich: Ed. Girsberger, 1930), 40–41.

17. Christian Sumi, *Immeuble Clarté Genf 1932 von Le Corbusier und Pierre Jeanneret* (Zurich: gta/Ammann, 1989), 90.

Thus, it can be argued that the dwellings in Le Corbusier's *Immeuble-villas* are not villas in the traditional sense, rather that they are overblown hotel rooms, or as von Moos says: “What the *immeuble-villas* proposes is thus a new life-style for an increasingly nomadic urban middle class.”¹⁵ But on the other hand, we find both a room for *la Bonne*, the maid, and a properly sized kitchen, despite all the announcements to the contrary. These rooms clearly identify the dwelling as a villa, not as a hotel apartment. Did Le Corbusier not trust his own proclamations?

Le Corbusier's *Immeuble-villas* can be traced back to his earliest travel and study time. Le Corbusier himself indicated a source of inspiration, writing in the first volume of his *Œuvre Complète* (1910–1929): “They [the *Immeubles-villas*] were born from the recollection, after a meal, of a Carthusian monastery in Italy (happiness through serenity) and sketched on the back of a restaurant menu.”¹⁶ Le Corbusier had visited the Certosa del Galluzzo, outside Florence, on his first Italy trip in 1907. This Carthusian monastery with its cells built as separate houses, each equipped with their own little garden and surrounded by a stone wall, perfectly fits as a formal precedent of Le Corbusier's 1925 *Pavillon de l'Esprit Nouveau*. Christian Sumi, in a thorough analysis, has described the similarities of the *Immeuble-villas* and the Certosa as their respective arrangement of a—more or less—L-shaped plan (monk's cell, villa) around a garden surrounded by walls, with the circulation as an open corridor towards an inner courtyard of some description.¹⁷ Even if this is not the only precedent, it highlights Le Corbusier's interest in the dichotomy of the relationship between individual and society.

Architecturally speaking, the play of voids and volumes is the central point of interest. It is not just the double-height void of the terrace-garden that adds to the complexity of the villa. Following



the concept of his contemporary Maison Citrohan, Le Corbusier also provided a double-height space over ca. 30m² of the living-room. Additionally, he designed a continuous void of approximately 12.5 square metres through all storeys, situated behind the terrace-garden, in order to provide sufficient natural light for the rooms situated in the depth of the building (maid, kitchen). This is a cleverly devised, complex arrangement of spaces, walls and openings that goes far beyond the simplicity of the basic L-shaped layout of the Certosa, and might even have served as inspiration for the complex void space in the Villa Stein-de Monzie.

Comparing Le Corbusier's with Gessner's designs it could be argued that the decisive characteristic of a freestanding villa would lie less in Le Corbusier's almost sculptural play with double-height and void than in a complex arrangement of spaces, with a hall in the centre, and rooms grouped according to functional requirements (social functions), with a rich variety of paths through the building. Despite the compromising situation of having to stand wall to wall with a neighbouring building, Gessner was able to fulfil this requirement in his own designs by realizing complex floor plans with large central halls, groups of rooms, complex circulation and views through the apartment, as well as through varying heights of the rooms. Despite the conceptual differences of their approaches, Gessner and Le Corbusier both employed a high degree of spatial complexity in their respective *Immeubles-villas*.

“Jardin suspendu” or the Collective Garden on the Ground

Apart from the spatial complexity, Le Corbusier's specific innovation lies in his introduction of individual gardens into the otherwise repetitive formula of the stacked villas. As mentioned, Sumi pointed at the similarity of the Certosa del Galluzzo with the *Immeuble-villas* through their respective arrangement of the L-shaped plan around an enclosed garden.¹⁸ But this is not Le Corbusier's only source of inspiration. During his 1910 sojourn in Munich, he read Hermann Muthesius' contemporary work on the English Arts and Crafts House, *Das englische Haus*, with great care. Muthesius who had studied the Arts and Crafts movement as a cultural attaché to the German Government in London, analysed the role of the English garden in detail, concluding: “The garden can be seen as a continuation of the rooms of the

18. Sumi, *Immeuble Clarté Genf 1932*, 90.

house, as it were a series of individual outdoor spaces, each of which fulfils—in itself—a separate purpose. Thus the garden extends the house into nature.”¹⁹

He saw the garden as an integral part of the house, in fact another room—or several rooms—of the house, situated outdoors but of the same formality and relevance as the indoors rooms. Le Corbusier did not only study this book but also visited Muthesius’ own realizations of Arts and Crafts houses in Berlin. He wrote: “[I should] say that the garden which borders directly on the house should not be a memory of nature but a continuation of the halls, the vestibules etc., of the fresh or sunny rooms.”²⁰ With these precedents in mind, one can see the *Immeuble-villas* as transforming the individual garden of a villa or a country house into an architecturalized garden.

20. “Dire que le jardin attenant à l’habitation ne doit pas être un rappel de nature, mais une continuation des salles, vestibules etc., des chambres de soleil ou de fraîcheur.” Charles-Edouard Jeanneret (Le Corbusier), “La Construction des villes” in *La Construction des villes. Le Corbusiers erstes städtebauliches Traktat von 1910/11*, ed. Christoph Schnoor (Zurich: gta, 2008), 406.

However, the garden, as Muthesius described it for the country house, is not an urban phenomenon as such. Since Muthesius took his inspirations from England, we might look to England for a collective version of the individual garden, to find the garden introduced into the urban context for the terraced town house. Started by Inigo Jones’ Covent Garden in London, of the early seventeenth century (1631-37), we find the collective, enclosed garden to which only residents possessed a key. And even if this specific English form of combining town house with collective garden was not emulated in other parts of Europe, the collectivization of the garden on the ground seems to have been preferred over the individualized garden “of stone.” This collective version exists in variations ranging from the (purely decorative) front garden to the courtyard in form of a semi-public garden. The development of the courtyard into a semi-public garden was a central topic of the tenement reform movement in Berlin, to which not just Gessner, but also architects like Alfred Messel and Hermann Jansen contributed. Light and air was to be brought into the far too tight standard courtyards of the tenement block.

Is Le Corbusier’s *jardin suspendu* not just an enlarged version of the smaller architectural elements of bay-window, conservatory, balcony and loggia? These elements can also be interpreted as references to the garden, denoting a threshold towards the cityscape rather than towards the landscape. But the larger version of the *jardin suspendu* is not just a quantitative change; together with its sibling, the roof garden, it does introduce a different quality into the tenement house.



Context and Building Shape are of Central Importance

It is a fundamental condition of the urban house to stand wall to wall with its neighbour, to be situated at a street, to be higher than houses in the suburban context and be of a limited width. This has consequences for the floor plans in that lighting is not available from all sides of the building, and it has consequences for the façade since it is only on the face towards the street that the house's character can be articulated. Particular importance is assigned to the entry situation since this is the transition from the street—the public sphere—to the private sphere of the house. And lastly, the roof designates an upper closure of the building's figure and thus allows the formulation of an individual architectural character.

Unlike Gessner some fifteen years earlier, Le Corbusier made no attempt at individualizing the single villa elements. Instead, he almost endlessly multiplied them; the drawings for the *Ville contemporaine* are overwhelming in this regard since the same element is repeated for more than 300 times within one oversized perimeter block. The 1922 drawing of 120 villas is comparatively “tame”, and it has other qualities, as well. As much as Le Corbusier did not show himself interested in the specific place of the building—denoting it as a universally applicable building type—he did nevertheless cater for the specific architectural elements that turn a collection of repeated elements into one whole building, as Gessner or his contemporaries would have required. These are the entry foyer, the roof as a formal closure of the building, and the inner courtyard.

Le Corbusier planned a large entry hall for the concièrege of the whole block, as depicted in the *Œuvre Complète*.²¹ As for the upper end of the building, Le Corbusier did not just stack them without coming to a formal closure of the building's body. In the perspective of the 1922 version (with 120 villas), he drew two penthouse floors which showed one strongly accentuated horizontal line, made from flower boxes. These acted like a cornice for the whole building. This reminds of his early designs, of ca. 1915, for the *Maison Dom-Ino*, in which he experimented with a large cornice—of the kind that the Villa Schwob has. And—in addition to the individual *jardins suspendus*—Le Corbusier designed a large collective courtyard equipped with tennis courts; this grew into a veritable park in his 1925 design.

21. Le Corbusier, *Œuvre Complète*, vol. 1, 38.

Alternative Versions by Le Corbusier that Respect Place and Context

Additionally, a house has a specific place. And as such, a principle such as the *Immeuble-villas* would need to acknowledge its position in a city, in a certain street, with particular neighbouring houses. The concept of the *Immeuble-villas* necessarily does not react to such specific conditions. But in looking more closely at two built manifestations of it we find that Le Corbusier did address place and context, as well as the question of the uncompromising standardization. These manifestations are the *Immeuble Clarté* in Geneva of 1932 and the *Immeuble Molitor* in Paris of 1933, on top of which Le Corbusier designed his own apartment. With Colin Rowe, it could be argued that only the necessary compromise of the contextualization turned the principle—such as the *Immeuble-villas*—into a veritable building.²² The *Immeuble Clarté* in Geneva of 1932, not only had a potent and active client, but also that this client managed to individualize Le Corbusier's design to a certain degree. Edmond Wanner, an industrialist and owner of a metal factory, reacted to the first sketch, in which Le Corbusier had suggested a close variation of the *Immeuble-villas*, with the following comment:

I have received your scheme of which the idea is acceptable but not perfect. . . . Corridors: Despite the two gardens that you have designated to light up the corridors, there remains not less than 12 metres in each of the corridors without natural light. . . . The apartments are too big. . . . I therefore send you a scheme with my idea in which direction to push the exercise.²³

Surprisingly, Le Corbusier did not reject Wanner's suggestions which, on the one hand, were based on a useful dimensioning of the steel structure that was envisaged for the building, and on the other hand contained a variety of apartments, ranging from single storey studios to a six-bedrooms maisonette.²⁴ Through this change the idea of the concept of the stacked villa may have suffered slightly, but the individuality of the floor plans and therefore an adaptability to a larger range of possible tenants was enabled. Still, in the *Immeuble Clarté*, Le Corbusier kept the built form as close to the idea of the building as object as he could, whereas in the *Immeuble Molitor* this was not possible at all, since this building was inserted into a site in the fabric of Paris, close to the Bois de Bologne, with neighbouring buildings on each side. Here, Le Corbusier had to react to the same conditions as Gessner in Berlin.

22. See also Colin Rowe's comparison of the Renaissance church Santa Maria della Consolazione in Todi and Sant'Agnese in Rome, in Colin Rowe and Fred Koetter, *Collage City* (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 1978).

23. "J'ai bien reçu votre schéma dont l'idée est acceptable, mais non parfaite. [...] Couloirs: Malgré les deux jardins que vous prévoyez pour l'éclairage des couloirs, il n'en reste pas moins que chacun des couloirs à environ 12 mètres sans être éclairé. [...] Les appartements sont trop grands. [...] Je vous envoie donc un schéma à mon idée sur lequel il faudrait pousser l'étude." Edmond Wanner to Le Corbusier, 26 April 1930 (FLC). Quoted after Sumi, *Immeuble Clarté*, 88.

24. The *Immeuble Clarté* contained, per two-storey unit: 1x 6 bedroom maisonette, 1 x 5 bedroom maisonette, 2 x 2 bedroom maisonettes, 4 studios, 4 x 3 bedroom apartments.



Alternative Contemporary Versions

Le Corbusier's concept was not without effect. Thus, a number of architects emulated the idea of the *Immeuble-villas*, particularly—and not surprisingly so—in Paris of the 1930s. In Montmartre and along the Boulevard de Clichy several studio houses were built, partly relying on the 1902 municipal permission to lay out private outdoor spaces (winter gardens, bow-windows, patios, loggias and accessible roofs). These studio houses displayed double-height windows and small balconies in their central axis. To be named are the studio houses of architects Bruno Elkouken (Boulevard Raspail, 1932), Charles Abella (rue Cassini, 1930) and Michel Roux-Spitz (rue de la Cité Universitaire, 1930-31). Abella's house near the rue Cassini seemed to be an expressly sculptural version of the *Immeuble-villas*, with its unusual concrete bow-windows, a curved tower containing a spiral stair case and double-height studio windows at the back. Equally, his residential building in the Avenue Foch of 1939—a much more classical appearance, with stone façade and somehow monumental aspirations—indicated, by its double-height windows and the interplay of volumes in the upper storeys, an internal stacking of double-height central rooms with smaller rooms to their side.

Compromise or Realistic Approach? Ideal vs. Context

Le Corbusier's and Gessner's approach are fundamentally opposite, but they did attempt to solve the same task. William Curtis posed it as the following question: "how to best combine individual and community, privacy and social life, nature and city?"²⁵ Or one could say: how to reconcile the contradictory aspects of living in the dense city with the maximally available amount of freedom and individuality. Le Corbusier started from an ideal type which he had to compromise—and maybe the concept only developed a sense of reality once he did—whereas Gessner did never attempt to create one single type which he could endlessly reproduce, but rather developed alternative versions of an overall—flexible—concept for each different site. The transformations that were necessary for both architects (stemming from the task itself), could vary, but it was important that the architectural topics of garden, spatial concept, interior concept and the notion of creating *one* building were made

25. William Curtis, *Le Corbusier: Ideas and Forms* (Oxford: Phaidon, 1986), 63.

explicit subject of their architectural exploration. Like no other term, “Immeuble-villas” speaks in a meaningful way of a complex concept for urban dwelling. This idea has the potential to be carried further today.

Gessner and Le Corbusier never met. But Le Corbusier saw Albert Gessner’s houses in Berlin, during his 1910 visit of the *Allgemeine Städtebau-Ausstellung* (the great urban design exhibition). More than that, Le Corbusier saw a group of Gessner’s residential dwellings in Bismarckstraße corner Grolmanstraße, took photos and drew the façade and the collective courtyard laid out like an urban garden.²⁶ When, some twelve years later, he designed the *Immeuble-villas*, he surely knew of the arguments and the achievements of the Berlin architects of circa 1910.

26. Coloured sketches and notes in Le Corbusier, *Les voyages d’Allemagne. Carnets* (Munich/Paris: Bangert/FLC, 1994), Carnet I, 31-39.

