Picon, Antoine. "Dom-ino: Archetype and Fiction" Reprinted from Log, 2014.

Log

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Antiparos, Greece
Take a half-day ferry ride southeast out of Athens to Paros, then a short trip across the Amfigeio strait and you will land on Antiparos, a hardscrabble Cycladic island that in 1981 was the unlikely site of a project by Elia Zenghelis, then of the fledgling Office for Metropolitan Architecture. Without the bigness or urban complexity that the firm had up to that point harnessed with vitality in its projects and drawings, the design and placement of 16 villas on the island begged the creation of some sort of fabric from the ground up; the site a blank canvas awaiting its first brushstrokes. In painter Zoe Zenghelis's oil-on-paper rendering of the project, 16 delicate shapes are scattered like confetti across an unearthly ground, barely hinting at the underlying composition by which the villas are arranged. Such a technique of representation led to what the architect today would call an emblematic image: a visual presentation that illustrates "architectural form juxtaposed with programmatic idealism" and "highlights the ideological features without relinquishing the real-life concreteness of a project." The project was not realized, but its image and idea endure.

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Antoine Picon

Dom-ino: Archetype and Fiction

Like many Le Corbusier projects, Dom-ino appears under two very different guises, depending on the degree of familiarity one has with the work of its author. For the layperson, Dom-ino consists primarily of an image, one of those iconic images that is endlessly reproduced in architectural journals and books. With its three slabs, six columns, and staircase in the background, the picture, a perspectival view of an allegedly "monolithic" structure, ranks among the most famous illustrations produced by modernist architecture [see page 176]. Because of its pervasive, at times subliminal presence in architectural discourse, it has overshadowed the technicalities of the system itself and the various examples of its application given in Le Corbusier's *Oeuvre complète*. The situation is quite different for the student of the architect, for whom the system and its applications are also present. There are other examples of this duality between icon and layered system. Plan Obus for Algiers presents the same two-tiered structure, which explains the highly differentiated reception of some Le Corbusier's projects. In this case too, a highly emblematic iconography has eclipsed a far more complex and ambiguous proposal than what has been generally retained by architectural theorists and historians.[1]

More than the system, it is the iconic image that I would like to question here. Where does its power come from? What does it tell us about the way Le Corbusier conceived its role as an author of general or rather archetypal proposals susceptible to a wide range of applications? As I will argue, the Dom-ino icon reveals the role played by fiction in the architect's approach. For the drawing is to a large extent rooted in fiction, just like many other spectacular images produced by Le Corbusier. This fictional dimension may prove useful for interpreting other archetypal projects such as Plan Voisin for Paris or Plan Obus. Above all, it could account for their productive character, despite their highly unrealistic features.

In the first volume of the *Oeuvre complète*, the perspectival view of Dom-ino appears in stark contrast with the other illustrations of the system and its various applications

1. See my essay, "Les Projets d'Alger et la Dimension de l'Infrastructure," in *Le Corbusier: Visions d'Alger*, ed. Jean-Lucien Bonillo (Paris: Editions de la Villette, 2012), 130–45.
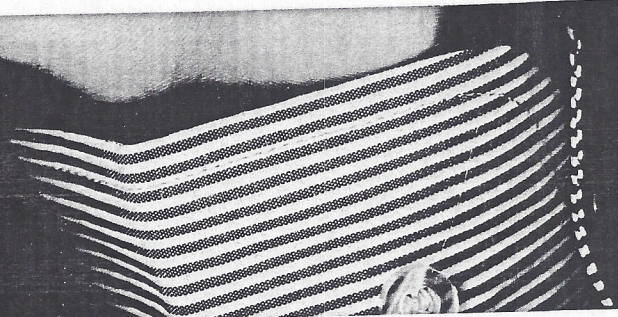
to individual villas, as well as to collective housing programs. The line is stronger, without the slight waves and distortions that affect some of the other drawings, like the ones showing the application of the Dom-ino system to a mansion and to a group of more simple houses. The overall appearance of the perspectival view is more technological and precise, like the representation of an engine by a professional draughtsman. Interestingly, on the same page, cross-sections that are supposed to carry essential technical information on Dom-ino lack this degree of clarity, as if the synthetic view were imbued with a special matter-of-factness.

A closer look reveals that this objective appearance is actually the result of a careful graphic construction that owes a lot to traditional visual codes of architectural representation in addition to its evident debt to early 20th-century advertisement techniques. First, the view is not axonometric. The protruding angle and the use of two vanishing points are reminiscent of the *scena per angolo* used by various Enlightenment-century artists, from Ferdinando Galli da Bibbiena to Giovanni Battista Piranesi. The marked contrast between light and shadow seems also indebted to 18th-century graphic techniques. In addition to the importance they both give to the frame, to the tectonic, this 18th-century touch accounts for the frequent parallel made between Dom-ino and Marc-Antoine Laugier's primitive hut as represented by French artist Charles Eisen on the frontispiece of the second edition of the *Essai sur l'architecture* (1755). In this regard it is worth recalling that Le Corbusier was an avid reader of French 18th-century architectural theorists at the time he was working out Dom-ino.

How does one not subscribe at this stage to Peter Eisenman's penetrating observation regarding the dual character of the system as both modernist in its self-referentiality and rooted in a more ancient architectural tradition?[2] This hybrid status is conveyed by the Dom-ino image, which blends two seemingly incompatible orientations: a concern for matter-of-factness, or objectivity, and illusionistic rendering techniques.
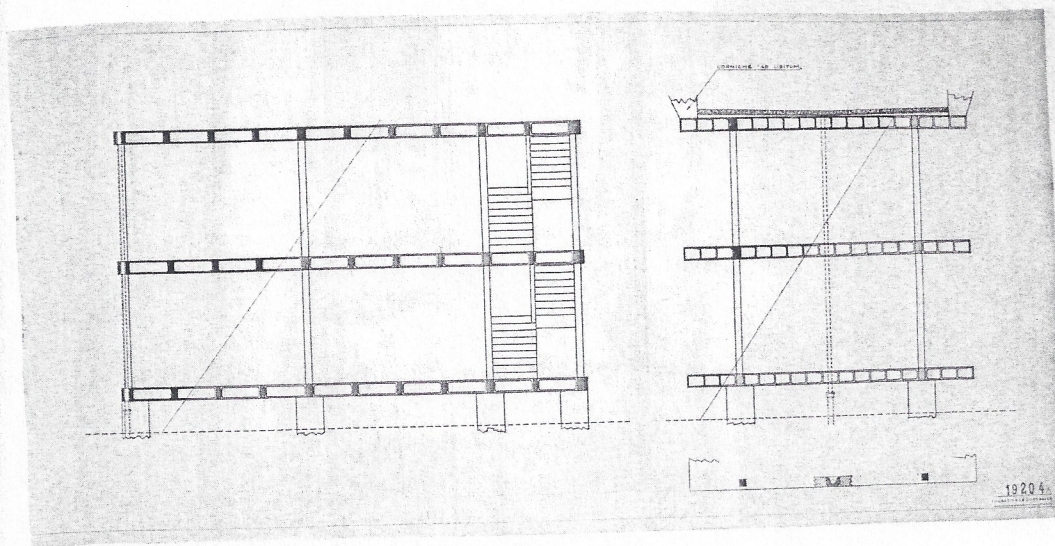
Like Laugier's hut, Dom-ino raises multiple problems of constructive interpretation. Historians have shown how the theorization of the origins and proper principles of architecture presented in Laugier's *Essai* led to a somewhat contradictory tectonic model in which Greek trabeation met with a Gothic structural interpretation of the overall transmission of strains in the structure of vaulted buildings. How was one to understand such a Graeco-Gothic model? The problems

2. See Peter Eisenman, "Aspects of Modernism: Maison Dom-ino and the Self-Referential Sign," *Oppositions* 15/16 (Winter/Spring 1979): 118–28. Reprinted in *Log* 30: 135–47.

Le Corbusier, Maison Dom-ino, 1914. Sections. © 2014 Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York/ ADAGP, Paris/FLC.

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3. See Wolfgang Herrmann, *Laugier and Eighteenth Century French Theory* (London: Zwemmer, 1962) and Antoine Picon, "The Freestanding Column in Eighteenth-Century Religious Architecture," in *Things That Talk: Object Lessons from Art and Science*, ed. Lorraine Daston (New York: Zone Books, 2004), 67–99.
4. See Eleanor Gregh, "The Dom-ino Idea," *Oppositions* 15/16 (Winter/Spring 1979): 61–87.

that plagued key late-18th-century buildings like Jacques-Germain Soufflot's church of Sainte-Geneviève, now the Parisian Pantheon, had to do with the difficulty of answering this challenge.[3]

In one of the most thorough studies of the Dom-ino system ever published, Eleanor Gregh insists on the difficulty of understanding fully its technical aspects, how it is assembled in particular.[4] In addition, some of the architect's own statements are themselves puzzling. How can the system be considered prefabricated when its main elements, columns and slabs, are actually poured on site? The Dom-ino perspectival view also seems to negate some key anatomical features of the construction. Its slabs look massive, where in fact they are made of hollow tiles cemented together. This hollowness is revealed by the cross-sections found on the same page of the *Oeuvre complète*. Again, we seem to be confronted by the absolute concreteness of an industrialized product, but the picture is carefully staged to convey an almost monolithic appearance that is partly fictional.

Laugier's primitive hut and Le Corbusier's Dom-ino share this mix of matter-of-factness and fiction, which may underlie their common ambition to propose a new architectural archetype – namely, a configuration that appears both foundational and generic to the point that it may even be considered as situated on the threshold that separates mere construction from architecture and, more generally, the non-architectural from the architectural, whether the nonarchitectural be structural, urban, or even related to landscape. In the case of Dom-ino this borderline status proves quite

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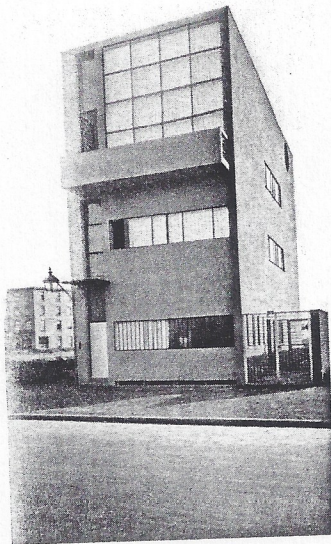
Le Corbusier, Maison Guiette, Antwerp, 1926. Photo: G. Mansy. © 2014 Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York/ADAGP, Paris/FLC.

5. See Georges Baines, "Du 'Système Dom-Ino' au 'type Citrohan': La Maison Guiette à Anvers," in *Massilia 2011. Annuaire d'Etudes Corbuséennes* (Paris: Fondation Le Corbusier, Marseilles: Editions Imbernon, 2011), 50–80.

evident. The matter-of-factness of the project as conveyed by the perspectival view is directly linked to its ambition to appeal as much to engineers as to architects, as a highly rational prefabricated system independent from any architectural specification. Let us not forget that the project was initially developed in cooperation with Swiss engineer Max Du Bois. As a customizable platform, the equivalent of a blank page enabling the architect to design with the greatest possible freedom once the frame is in place, Dom-ino is meant to exist before architecture, just as Laugier's primitive hut is supposed to predate any kind of artistic design. But the paradox of the archetype, which corresponds also to the ultimate contradiction within the architectural discipline itself, is that architecture needs to be present before its birth, so to say. In other words, to provide architecture with a foundation, one needs architecture. Dom-ino is both anterior to architecture and already architectural, as Eisenman has convincingly shown. The decision to position the columns close to the perimeter of the structure, although not exactly at the same distance from the edge of the slabs on the long as on the short sides of the structure, is architectural, as are the position of the staircase and the somewhat enigmatic missing square at one corner of the construction.

An archetype is not a type. As a generic condition, as a limit, it can inspire very different types of buildings. In this respect, Dom-ino is even more archetypal than the 18th-century primitive hut, which was translated mainly to churches that share the same basic features: freestanding columns carrying barrel vaults, with the occasional presence of flying buttresses borrowed from the Gothic tradition. Contrary to this deterministic pattern, Le Corbusier's scheme represents a more open point of departure leading to results that seem sometimes to drift very far away from their initial source of inspiration. The Maison Guiette in Antwerp, for example, owes something to Dom-ino despite very different organizational choices that derive more directly from the Citrohan type.[5]
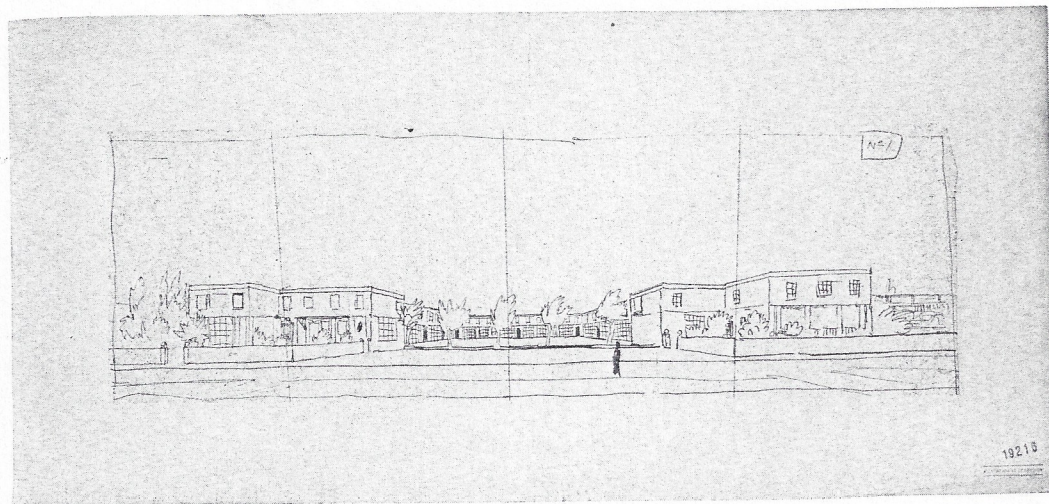
In classical mythology, thresholds, boundaries, and frontiers were inhabited by fabulous creatures like the Sphinx, which guarded the entrance to the Greek city of Thebes. These creatures were usually hybrids, blending features borrowed from diverse living beings, the woman and the lion in the case of the Sphinx. Positioned like those mythological characters on a frontier, on the limit between the nonarchitectural and the architectural regimes, archetypes also merge discrepant features. They can only exist fully as operative fictions that

Le Corbusier, Maisons Dom-ino, 1914. Perspective sketch. © 2014 Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York/ADAGP, Paris/FLC.

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produce effects in the built world while being unsustainable in practice because of the contradictions they conceal.

This fictional dimension is usually linked to an elaborate narrative intended to reveal the full meaning of the iconic archetype. Both Laugier's and Le Corbusier's stories deal with the transmutation of pure need – of the necessity to make shelter – into architecture, and both narratives try to conceal discontinuities in the sequence of events and in their underlying logic. In Laugier's case, for example, the circumstances surrounding the first transposition of the hut into stone in order to give birth to the Doric temple remain unclear. As for Le Corbusier, the story begins with a spectacular gap between the lightning intuition that the architect was supposed to have experienced in 1914 and the possibility to apply it that arrives only 15 years later, with the new housing law passed by French politician Louis Loucheur. At a deeper level, one must note the ambiguity that surrounds the respective roles of engineers and architects in the use of Dom-ino, an ambiguity indicative of a nagging set of questions. Are we really facing an architectural blank page or the very negation of architecture? What could save architecture in an industrial world in which mass production was becoming an economic necessity was also what could kill architecture itself if improperly used.

Interpreting a proposal like Dom-ino as an archetype – that is to say, as a partly fictional entity that occupies an almost impossible position between the nonarchitectural and the architectural, as if the two regimes were actually compatible – may enable us to better understand the status of some of Le Corbusier's key projects. The common temptations have
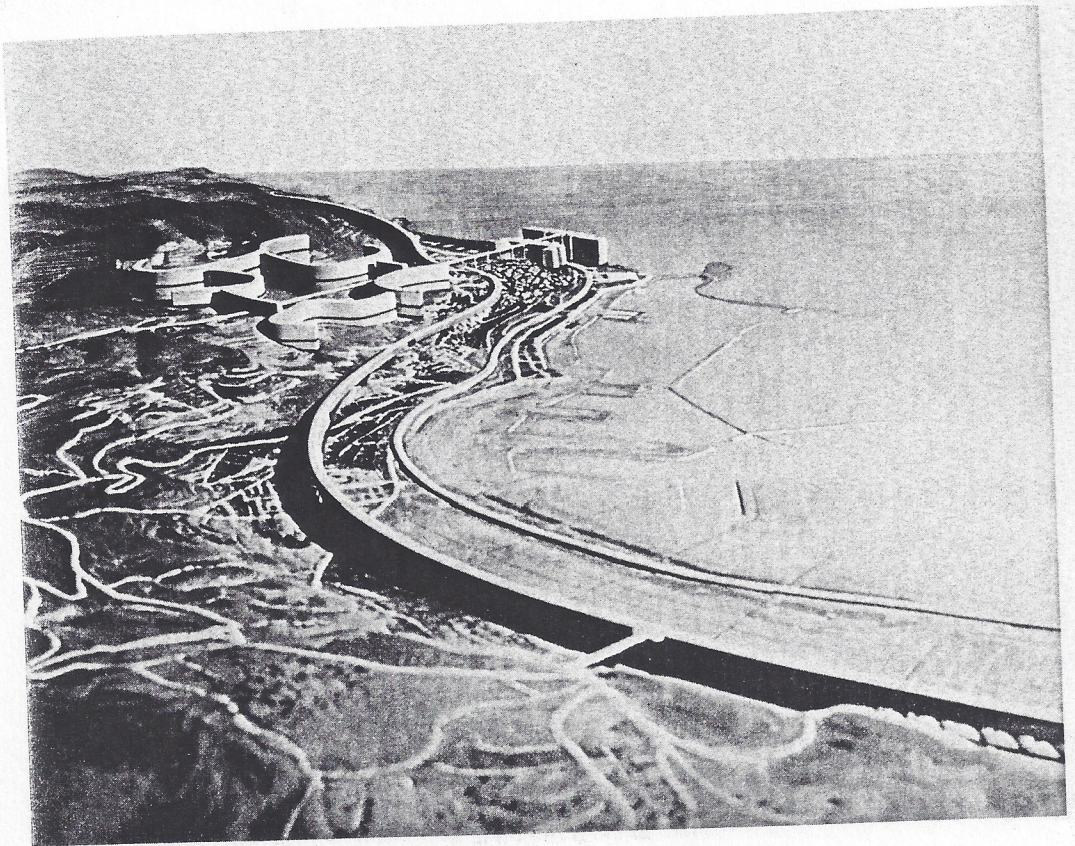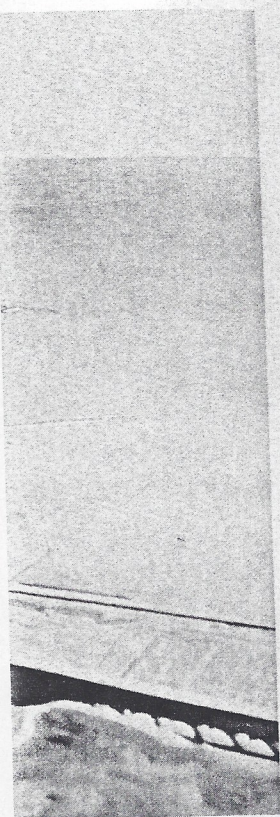
Le Corbusier, Plan Obus, Algiers, 1930. Model photo: Lucien Hervé. © 2014 Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York/ADAGP, Paris/ FLC.

6. On the familiarity of Le Corbusier with media and advertising, see Beatriz Colomina, *Privacy and Publicity: Modern Architecture as Mass Media* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1994).

been to consider them either as utopian, inspired by an excessive hubris, or as provocations inspired by the architect's intimate knowledge of mass media and advertising techniques.[6] Is Plan Voisin utopian, or is it a mere provocation that the author himself did not believe feasible but conceived as a means to attract attention? The problem with this type of historical approach is that it often involves reconstructing a posteriori a clear-cut intention and an alleged state of mind of Le Corbusier, as if the architect were following a univocal agenda when designing a project. Instead of considering Plan Voisin or Plan Obus as utopias or provocations, it might be useful to consider them as fictions imparted with a generative power that stems from their borderline position. Where Dom-ino stands on the threshold that separates structure and architecture, Plan Voisin is situated at the limit between architecture and urbanism. Plan Obus occupies an even more complex position, at the junction where infrastructure meets architecture, the urban, and landscape. In these three cases, the intricacies of the projects are counterbalanced by an iconic presence that possesses an enigmatic quality.

In Dom-ino's case, one could be tempted to relate the

enigma to the spectacular emptiness of the space defined by the columns and the slabs, a space both visible and invisible. Nothing stops the gazing; but there is also nothing to be seen, since the architect has not yet started to customize the frame, to dispose obstacles to the view, and to allow for transparencies. Ultimately, Dom-ino might have to do with the new status of the architect in an industrial world that tends to make artistic authorship problematic. In such a world the architect can either be everywhere, as a universal promise of architecture, or nowhere, should his agency be denied. In front of this spectacular blend of absolute clarity and emptiness that produces the same effect as opacity, we are also reminded of another of Le Corbusier's consummate paradoxes. Here we have one of the most famous architects of the 20th century, someone who chose from early on in his life to keep everything – diaries, drawings, manuscripts – and who imagined a foundation in order to preserve them and make them accessible to the public after his death. But this desire to reveal everything to posterity, as if one's life had been spent in a transparent house a little like the Dom-ino frame, generates the opposite sensation: that of opaqueness. Perhaps because we know so much, thanks to the documents and their numerous commentators, there are still many things that we do not understand and probably never will about the man and his work. Dom-ino, or the enigma of the architect?

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