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MYTH OF THE ORIGIN OF LIVING

MIT O POCZĄTKACH ZAMIESZKIWANIA

Abstract

The Greek word *mýthos* refers to the narration of a distant and fantastic time which constitutes a symbolic link between the present and the origins of the world.

In architecture, the myth of the origin of living represented, from Abbot Laugier to Gottfried Semper, to the masters of the Modern Movement, a central theme in the evolution of 19th- and 20th-century architectural theories, based on the difference between stereotomy and tectonics. In our age, the interest in architecture seems to focus exclusively on the envelope which no longer represents a solution of continuity between inside and outside but is substantiated as a surface, as an image now devoid of any tectonic foundation.

Keywords: myth, primitive hut, stereotomy and tectonics

Streszczenie

Greckie słowo *mýthos* oznacza narrację o zamierzczłym i fantastycznym czasie, która stanowi symboliczny łącznik między terażniejszością a początkami świata.

Począwszy od opata Laugiera, przez Gottfrieda Sempera, do mistrzów modernizmu, mit o początkach zamieszkiwania stanowił w architekturze centralny temat w rozwoju XIX- i XX-wiecznych teorii architektonicznych, opartych na różnicy między stereotomią i tektoniką. W obecnych czasach zainteresowanie architekturą wydaje się koncentrować wyłącznie na przegrodach zewnętrznych budynku, które nie stanowią już ciągłości między wnętrzem a zewnętrzem, ale są uzasadnione jako powierzchnia, jako wyobrażenie pozbawione tektonicznego fundamentu.

Słowa kluczowe: mit, prymitywna chata, stereotomia, tektonika

The Greek word *mýthos* refers to the narration of a distant and fantastic time which constitutes a symbolic link between the present and the origins of the world.

In the Jewish-Christian tradition of “Genesis,” humanity survives the universal flood by taking refuge on Noah’s Ark, an archetype of salvific shelter from the adversities of nature, which represents the origin of human construction, a recurring topos in architectural treatises. Already Vitruvius in the first chapter of the second book of *De Architectura* tells how fire constituted, even before language, the first form of aggregation of primitive man. To protect himself from the elements, he first dug caves, then built shelters imitating the structures of birds’ nests, and finally built huts with tree trunks.

Over time, the myth of the origin has represented, from Abbot Laugier to Gottfried Semper, up to the masters of the Modern Movement, a central theme in the evolution of the

architectural theories of the 19th and 20th centuries, based on the difference between stereotomy and tectonics, or between the Roman idea and the Greek idea of building.

In the “primitive hut” described in his famous *Essai sur l’architecture* of 1753, Laugier identifies an ideal model referable to the tectonics of Greek architecture that becomes the rational foundation for the renewal of architecture in the Age of Enlightenment. A century later, Semper identifies the characteristics of the “primitive hut” in the Caribbean hut (which he had seen in London at the 1851 Universal Exhibition) and defines the nature of the different construction elements: the stone stereotomy of the base, the wooden tectonics of the roof frame, the textile character of the cladding and the hearth, the functional core of living.

If Laugier and Semper refer to the tectonic and material aspects of the original house, Fustel De Coulanges¹ notes that the foundation of the house of the ancients originates from a precise symbolic act: the enclosure of the altar of Gods of the family, which refers to the Roman cult of the Lares and Penates inside the house. In the stereotomic space of the *domus*, any direct relationship with the landscape, and with the city, is intentionally denied and the relationship with the elements of nature becomes abstract: the compluvium measures the sky, projecting a square of light inside the atrium, changing over the hours and seasons. Thus, the representation of a cyclical time that daily marks the rites and rhythms of family life, takes shape. In this way, around the void defined by the impluvium and the compluvium, the bond of the domestic space to the earth and the sky is substantiated, that “sojourn of mortals on earth, under the sky, before the divine” of which Martin Heidegger speaks in his famous essay of 1951.²

This symbolic relationship between space and time, as Francesco Venezia notes, is then transferred and dilated by the simple human cube of the atrium, to the divine limits of the Pantheon’s sphere.³

The original stereotomic and tectonic forms of living, as mentioned, have constituted, for many masters of the Modern Movement, a fertile field of experimentation, starting precisely from the spatial archetype of the *domus* and the principle of the structure of the “primitive hut.”

Le Corbusier, interested in the standardization processes of the industry of his time, imagines two residential prototypes that can be replicated and combined in series: the Dom-ino *maison*, a frame structure that allows a free arrangement of the floor plan and the fronts, and the Citrohan *maison*, defined from walls and characterized by a double-height space.

It is evident that the Dom-ino constitutes a reinterpretation of the tectonic system of the “primitive hut,” theorized by Le Corbusier in his *Five Points of Modern Architecture*, of which Villa Savoye is the manifesto.

The layout of the Citrohan *maison*, on the other hand, refers to the space of the *domus* that Le Corbusier also experiences in the double-height of the living room and the loggia of the Esprit Nouveau pavilion. This research on the value of the void as a compositional nucleus of the domestic space is a legacy of the youthful suggestions of the *Journey to the East*. In 1911, Le Corbusier visited Pompei: two *domus*, in particular, attracted his attention. The first

¹ Cfr. N.D. Fustel De Coulanges, *La città antica*, cit. in A. Monestiroli, *L’architettura della realtà*, Umberto Allemandi, Torino 1999, p. 62.

² Cfr. M. Heidegger, *Costruire Abitare Pensare* [in:] G. Vattimo (ed.), *Saggi e discorsi*, Mursia, Milano 1991, p. 99.

³ Cfr. F. Venezia, *Usque ad infera usque ad coelum* [in:] F. Venezia, *Scritti brevi 1975–1989*, Clean, Napoli 1990.

is the House of the Silver Wedding which impresses him with the height of the vestibule and the spatial sequence that leads to the garden, the second is the House of the tragic poet of which he captures the refined axial construction of the plant.⁴

The interest in the original forms of living characterizes the research of other masters of the twentieth century, Mies van der Rohe among them. The design of the three-court house reaches an absolute degree of formal abstraction and, as Antonio Monestiroli states,

[...] contains all the historical depth of the house, even if primary elements such as doors and windows are omitted in this project. There remains a roof and a fence, yet in this house, you can recognize the old house, 'the sound of ancient songs echoes in it'.⁵

The later Farnworth house is an obvious reinterpretation of the Semperian hut. The four elements of the architecture, however, are declined in abstract form: the base becomes a podium raised from the ground; the white frame returns an immaterial image in which the pillars, external to the roof, no longer denote the tectonic function of supporting; the transparency of the envelope then cancels any solution of continuity between the architectural space and nature, defining a timeless place, now devoid of the characteristics of domestic intimacy; the only symbolic element that refers to the function of living is the hearth of the fireplace.

Mies' research, therefore, investigates the reasons for living through some foundational actions: enclosing, covering, lifting, or connecting, as in the case of the extraordinary project for the Resor house. A house in the form of a bridge in which the domestic space becomes a representation of the surrounding nature, revealing the invention of place in the Heideggerian meaning of this word: "the place does not already exist before the bridge. [...] The bridge is a place, it grants the space, in which earth and sky, mortal and divine, have access."⁶

The wide circulation of Kenneth Frampton's text *Studies in Tectonic Culture: The Poetics of Construction in Nineteenth and Twentieth Century Architecture*, published in 2001 and translated into various languages, confirms the interest of contemporary architectural culture for stereotomy and tectonics and the Vitruvian archetypes of the cave and the hut, an interest also declared by one of the most attentive architects of our time: "By stereotomic architecture," writes Alberto Campo Baeza,

we mean the one in which gravity is transmitted continuously, in a continuous structural system, where constructive continuity is complete. It is massive, stony, heavy architecture. The one that rests on the earth as if it were born of her. It is an architecture that seeks light, that pierces the walls to ensure that the light enters it. It is the architecture of the podium, of the base. That of the stylobate. It is, in summary, the architecture of the cave.

By tectonic architecture, we mean that in which gravity is transmitted discontinuously in a structural system with nodes where the construction is syncopated. It is bony, woody, light architecture. The one that rests on the earth as if on tiptoe. It is the architecture that defends itself from light, the one that must veil its openings to control the light that floods it. It is the architecture of the envelope. That of the abacus. In summary, it is the architecture of the hut.⁷

⁴ Cfr. Le Corbusier, *Verso una architettura*, Longanesi, Milano 1984.

⁵ A. Monestiroli, *Le forme e il tempo* [in:] L. Hilberseimer, *Mies van der Rohe*, CittàStudi, Torino 2003, p. 16.

⁶ M. Heidegger, *op. cit.*, pp. 102–103.

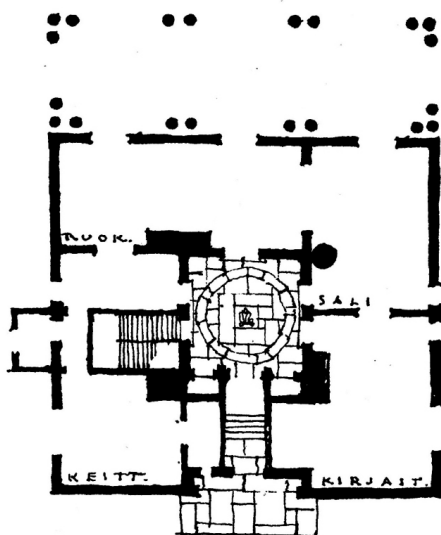
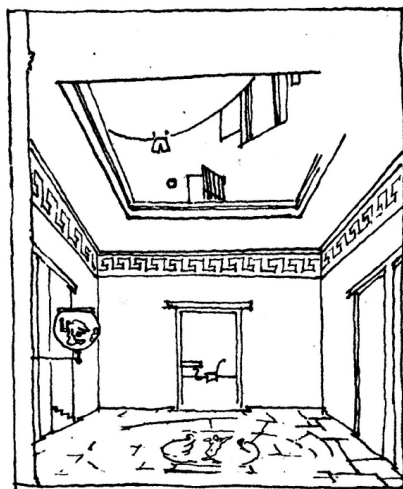
⁷ A. Campo Baeza, *Pensar con las manos*, Nobuko, Buenos Aires 2009, p. 31.

What appears singularly evident is how precisely these original forms have constituted a fundamental tool for the renewal of the domestic space of the twentieth century, as if modernity could only be implemented through a return to the ontological condition of living.

In architecture, the myth of the origin refers to the idea of a cyclical time, of an eternal present in which, in the words of Alvar Aalto “what is past never returns. But it doesn’t completely disappear either. What was always reappears but in new forms.”⁸

Perhaps one of the reasons for the impoverishment of our age lies in the fact that the interest of architecture is concentrated, beyond any constructive reason, on the shapes of the shell and the envelope that no longer denotes a solution of continuity between interior and exterior but appear as a surface, as a screen, as an image devoid of any tectonic foundation.

⁸ Cfr. A. Aalto, *Idee di architettura. Scritti scelti 1921–1968*, Zanichelli, Bologna 1987, pp. 5–7 [*Maalarit ja muurarit*, Jousmies, 1921].



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III. 1. Alvar Aalto, project for the house of his brother Väinö (P. Reed (ed.), *Alvar Aalto 1898–1976*, Electa, Milano 1998, p. 154).



III. 2. Mies, Farnsworth House (L. Hilberseimer, *Mies van der Rohe*, CittàStudi, Torino 2003, p. 79).

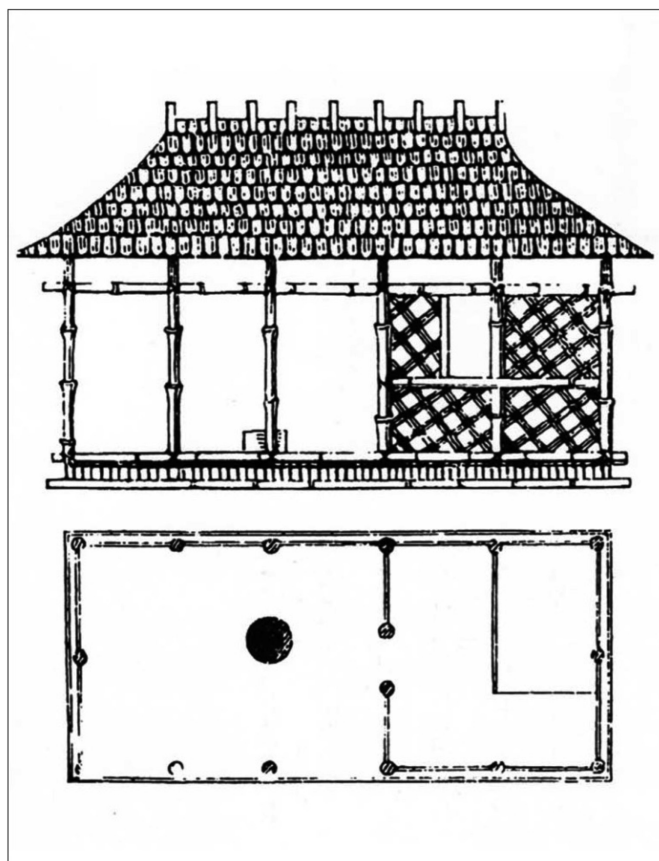
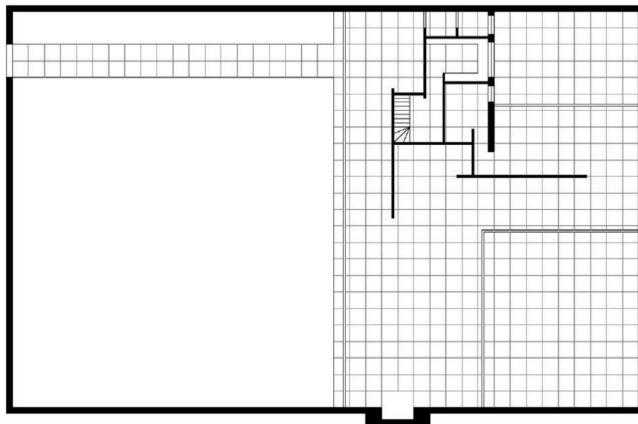


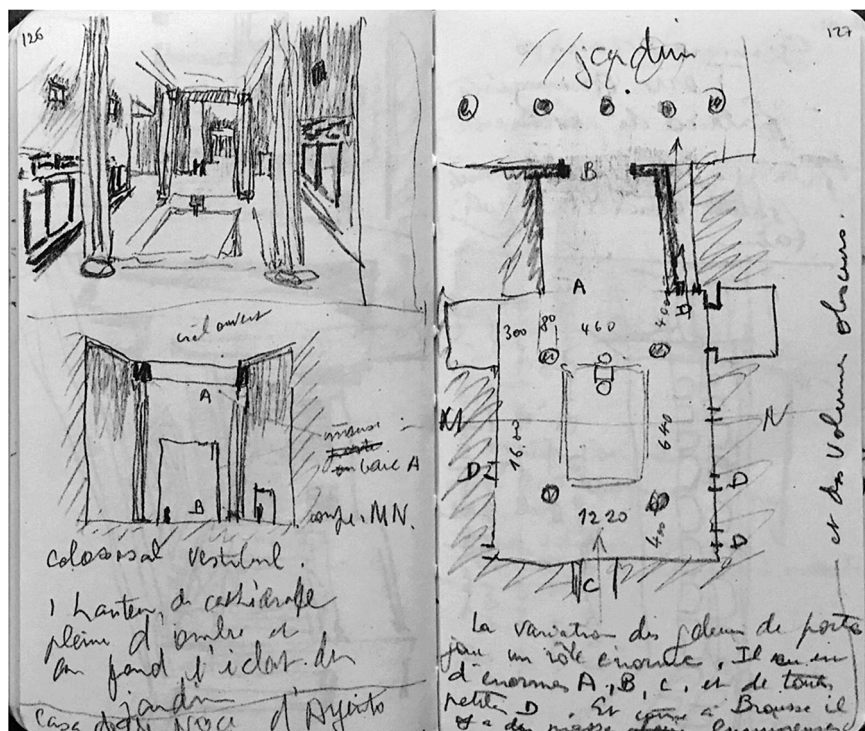
fig. 1_Gottfried Semper, La capanna caraibica

III. 3. Caribbean hut (G. Semper, *Der Stil in den technischen und tektonischen Künsten oder praktische Aesthetik : ein Handbuch für Techniker, Künstler und Kunstfreunde*, vol. 2, *Keramik, Tektonik, Stereotomie, Metallotechnik*, Bruckmann, München 1863, p. 276).



CASA A TRE CORTI, 1934
LUDWIG MIES VAN DER ROHE

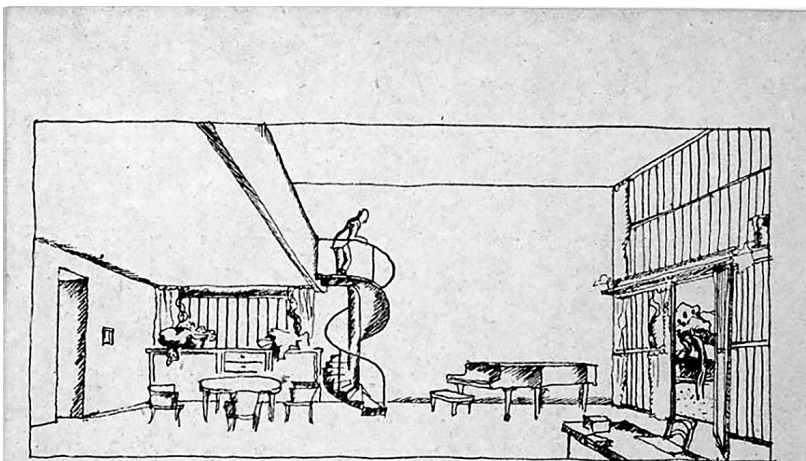
III. 4. Mies, three-court house project (plan redesign by the author).



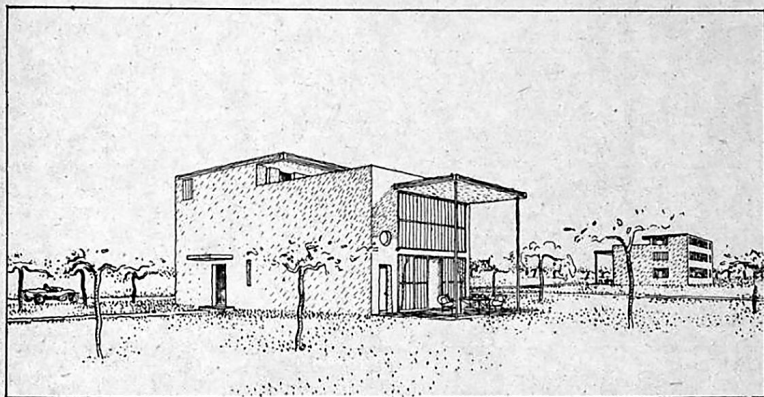
III. 5. Le Corbusier, sketch of Nozze d'Argento house in Pompei (Le Corbusier, *Voyage d'Orient*, Electa, Milano 1987, carnet 4, pp. 126–127).



Ill. 6. Nozze d'Argento house, Pompei (A. Maiuri, *Pompei*, Istituto Poligrafico dello Stato, Roma 1975, p. 151).



L.C., 1921. Maison en série « Citrohan » (pour ne pas dire Citroën). Autrement dit, une maison comme une auto, conçue et agencée comme un omnibus ou une cabine de navire. Les nécessités actuelles de l'habitation peuvent être précisées et exigent une solution. Il faut agir contre l'ancienne maison qui mésusait de l'espace. Il faut (nécessité actuelle : prix de revient) considérer la maison comme une machine à habiter ou comme un outil. Lorsqu'on crée une industrie, on achète l'outillage ; lorsqu'on se met en ménage, on loue actuellement des appartements imbéciles. Jusqu'ici on faisait d'une maison un groupement peu cohérent de nombreuses grandes salles ; dans les salles il y avait toujours de la place en trop et toujours de la place en pas assez. Aujourd'hui, heureusement, on n'a plus assez d'argent pour perpétuer ces usages et comme on ne veut pas considérer le problème sous son vrai jour (machine à habiter) on ne peut pas construire dans les villes et une crise désastreuse s'en suit ; avec les budgets, on pourrait construire des immeubles admirablement agencés, à condition, bien entendu, que le locataire modifie sa mentalité ; du reste, il obéira bien sous la poussée de la nécessité. Les fenêtres, les portes doivent avoir leurs dimensions rectifiées ; les wagons, les limousines, nous ont prouvé que l'homme passe par des ouvertures restreintes et que l'on peut calculer la place au centimètre carré ; il est criminel de construire des W.-C. de quatre mètres carrés. Le prix du bâtiment ayant quadruplé, il faut réduire de moitié les anciennes prétentions architecturales et de moitié au moins le cube des maisons ; c'est désormais un problème de technicien ; on fait appel aux découvertes

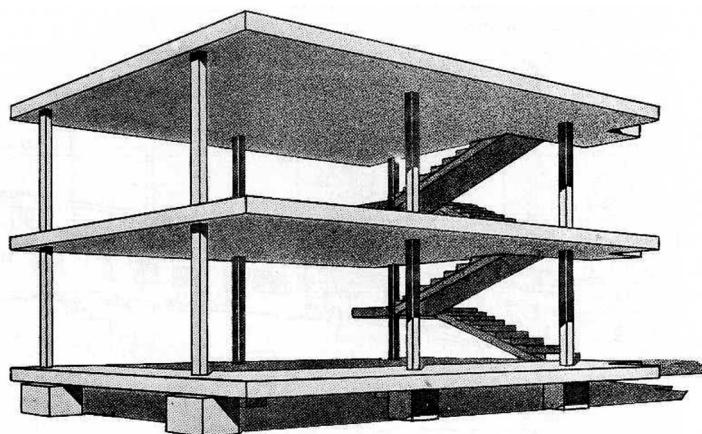


L. C., 1922. Villa en série, 72 m². Ossature de ciment, ciment-gun. Une grande salle de 9 x 5 ; une cuisine, une chambre de bonne ; une chambre à coucher, salle de bains, boudoir ; deux chambres à coucher, un solarium.

III. 7. Le Corbusier, Maison Citrohan (Le Corbusier, *Vers une architecture*, Editions G. Crès et Cie., Paris 1923, p. 200).

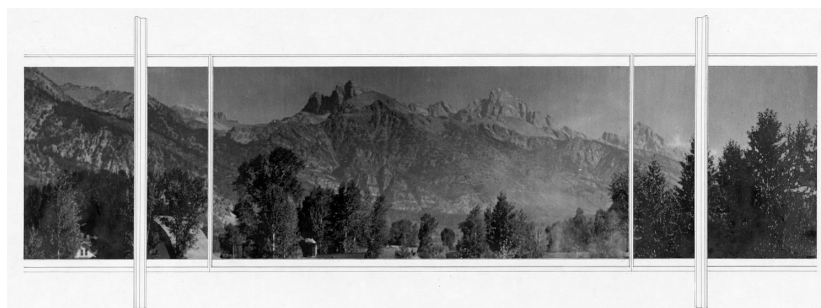


Ill. 8. Le Corbusier, Pavillon Esprit Nouveau, autor's picture.



L'ossature standard « Dom-ino », pour exécution en grande série

Ill. 9. Le Corbusier, Maison Domino (W. Boesiger, O. Stonorov, *Le Corbusier et P. Jeanneret, Œuvre Complète 1910–1929*, Editions d'Architecture, Zürich 1964, p. 23).



Ill. 10. Mies, Resor house internal view (L. Hilberseimer, *Mies van der Rohe*, CittàStudi, Torino 2003, p. 50).

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