



Imagine coming across the most radically modernist house you have ever seen, in the middle of Paris. It's deserted and falling into ruin, its interior unchanged since it was built eighty years ago. Perched on a hillside with a distant view of Montmartre, it is today a sad sight: its street façade cracked, the elevations leaning alarmingly and the steel-framed windows askew. The house is supported – rather precariously these days – on cruciform pillars in reinforced concrete, rising almost five metres from the ground.

With its piloti and its long façade at right

angles to the street, the casual eye might attribute the house to an amateur Corbusier. In its present state, it is an image of modernism gone shabby – or *moche* (ugly), as an elderly neighbour described it, ironically referring to the house as 'Le Château' – but a monochrome photograph of the building when it was built presents a very different image.

We can learn more about the house by peeling back the historical layers to 1918 Vienna, when a young would-be architect arrived there to study under Josef Hoffmann

but soon fell under the spell of Adolf Loos, arch-critic of Hoffmann. That student, Jean Welz, would go on to become one of South Africa's leading painters, and by the time of his death in 1975 his architectural past was almost forgotten. Even the house in question is listed in the local town hall under the name of another architect.

There is a remarkable group of three modernist houses just outside the Paris *périphérique*, the first by Mallet-Stevens, the second by Le Corbusier (Maison Cooke). The third is credited to Raymond Fischer,



but according to Welz's family, that house should be attributed to him. Welz worked for Mallet-Stevens and then with Loos on a house in Paris for Tristan Tzara, before becoming *chef de cabinet* in the Fischer practice. Welz was also a friend of Le Corbusier, who wrote him a letter of recommendation when he left for South Africa. Two houses were credited to him in the leading French magazine of Modern architecture of the time, *L'Architecture de l'Aujourd'hui*. The first, in 1931, has a short text by Fischer praising its 'maison

minimum' contribution. The second, dated 1933, is credited to Wetz (sic). This is the radical house shown in these photographs.

The site is an unstable hillside, created from the waste extracted to build the Parc des Buttes Chaumont in 1867. The most distinctive aspect of the site is hardly visible from ground level, but is perfectly served by Welz's house on stilts, for few houses could claim such views. One large window faces west towards Montmartre and the basilica of Sacré Coeur, while the other faces south, with a view of the Eiffel Tower. Welz



House on stilts: on completion in 1933 (top). Note the sandpit next to the small child.

Inside (above) the fitted table was made by a Greek sculptor friend. Opposite page, the house in 2013

Peter Wyeth discovers an important modernist house in need of urgent repair

# A Paris oddity



conceived a long box 20m by 4.5m, high enough to see beyond the building-line of its brick-built neighbours.

Apart from the priceless views, the budget must have been kept to an absolute minimum, as the house is very cheaply constructed. The street elevation exceeds the plainness of his master Loos, and must have been a slap in the face of its bourgeois neighbours. The long south facade bears comparison with the Villa Savoye, but it was neither skimmed nor painted, and it does not hide the fact that it was made in sections. It was topped by an extraordinary balcony (destroyed by the local prefecture without objection from the Architectes des Bâtiments de France) with its 10cm *beton brut* supporting blade bearing the marks of its wooden shuttering construction. This is perhaps the first such finish in the history of Modern architecture, fifteen years before Le Corbusier's *Unité d'Habitation* in Marseilles and forty years before Denys Lasdun's National Theatre.

That striking balcony had a built-in desk and seat, an outside office facing Sacre Coeur - echoing the view from the big 'l'Esprit Nouveau' end window. Loos's *Raumplan* concept held that interiors should be divided into split-level spaces according to their functional importance, and his influence on Welz is clear, with three levels on the main floor alone. Altogether, the house is an oddity, but one intimately influenced by the heroic era of Modern architecture, while also making a highly distinctive contribution to it.



**Loosian plainness: the street facade in 2013 (above). Above right: the original fitted table has been pulled from the wall by burglars, but proved too heavy to remove**