

Congress CATH 2004

Session 603

Dwelling in Architecture I

Lenko Plestina:

**Apollonian & Dionysian Sensibility in Architecture  
with Modern House Examples**

Many family houses are made of brick, concrete, wood, glass and other materials, but also some of them are made of imagination. My talk is about them.

Gods are made of imagination.

Apollo and Dionysus are made of imagination, too.

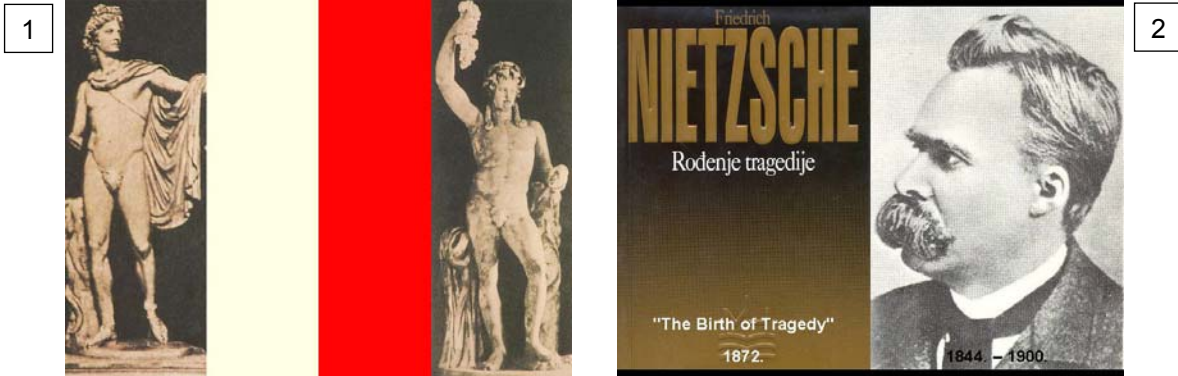
God of beauty, the guardian of life and order, Apollo was the patron of art, poetry and music. He was equally respected for his divine rule over the Sun and light which give life and for his patronage over harmony and beauty which give meaning to that life. He led the choir of the Muses, goddesses of art and science. This god was inspiration for many sculptors-Apollo Belvedere from the 4th century BC has been the model of masculine beauty through the centuries.

Even though, like all Olympian gods, he had several lovers, it is curious to note that opposite sex did not find him at all so attractive, regardless of his divine beauty and distinguished position on the Mount Olympus- was the second in rank, next to Zeus. He was not refused only by nymphs (alike in tragic story with Daphne), but also was shunned by mortal women. This handicapped situation when everything is perfect and fine, but finally something is wrong, let's call ' the Apollonian paradox '.

Apollo is associated with a number of glorious antique pieces of architecture. Tens of temples were dedicated to him. Ictinus the architect, one of the Parthenon builders, is author of temple in Basse. In the Apollo temple in Delphi, standing just next to Dionysian theatre, there were two remarkable inscriptions: gnothi seaton (know thyself) and meden agan =nothing in excess.

Dionysus, corresponding to the Roman Bacchus, was the god of fertility, enjoyment, intoxication and wine, the symbol of resurrecting nature power. People worshiped him because he lifted their worries and gave them joy. He was raised by nymphs. When he discovered wine, he would make everyone drunk: his guardians, his wanton followers the silens and satyrs, as well as himself. Particularly wild

were the evening rites with women followers, Bacchantes and Maenades. From his love affair with Aphrodite Dionysus adventurer, got a son Priapus, who become symbol of male potency and fertility. Dionysus encouraged companionship, infatuation and entertainments, and helped artists to reach their full creative power. Ceremonies held in his honors dionysias- led to the ekstasis =everything in excess.



\*

Human nature embraces both Apollo and Dionysus. The great German philosopher Friedrich Nietzsche recognized the opposing principles which determine human life and culture and named them Apollonian and Dionysian. Apollo embodies order, reason and moderation; he stands for all that is rational, static, harmonious and moderate. Dionysus, on contrary, is driven by passion and wantonness, and stands for all that is restless, instinctive, secretly ecstatic and destructive-creative. If all arts and Fine arts are in these dual cultural models, it means that architecture might be observed in this way, too. In paintings or sculpture, it is much easier to feel one of these two sensibilities.

Where shall we look for the Apollonian versus the Dionysian principle in architecture? Where shall we seek the beauty of static tranquility against dynamic vehemence? Does value lie in the Dionysian principle of unmediated, spontaneous, biological, 'gut and groin' experience or in the Apollonian principle of sublimated, complex, spiritual being, residing in the eye, in the 'mind and soul'?

Maybe we could separate them as - food & flowers?

With some speculations and hypothesis we might differ Apollonian and Dionysian architecture.

The subject of my research is the architecture of modern family houses, designed and built in the XX century. Observation will be made in several categories:

\*

## SLOGANS

Architecture in creation is much more generated with short statements than with complex theory, with simple slogans rather than with hardly understandable proceedings. Here are the most known motivating slogans split into the two:

### Apollonian

- 'meden agan' (Delphi Temple)
- 'clear and understandable is beautiful' (Socrates)
- 'less is more' (Mies van der Rohe)
- 'prisme pour is beauty' (Le Corbusier)
- 'Ornament and Crime = ornament is crime' (Loos)
- 'Sacer Simplicitas = minimalism is beauty'

### Dionysian

- 'exeburance is beauty' (F.L.Wright)
- 'destruction of box is beauty'(F.L.Wright)
- 'less is bore' (Venturi)
- 'complexity &contradiction is beauty' (Venturi)
- 'learning from L.V.= learning from chaos, is beauty' (Venturi)
- 'no rule architecture is beauty'

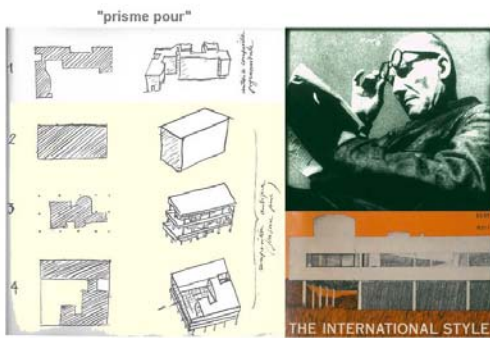
Mies translated meden agan in less is more, and produced divine beauty of the house-pavilion with a concept parallel to the Greek temple. Installation and service room is in an island in an open house plan. That core corresponds to cella, and total space around to peristyle of temple.

Mies mentioned once as a 'almost nothing' house, and some other commented 'less costs more'. The house beauty didn't attract Mrs.Farnsworth. Although her name became immortal, she lived rest of her life in despair with house that she hated. At that time this house raised dispute and scandal, it is of doubtful functionality and hardly accepted of popular taste, but it has become masterpiece of modern Apollonian architecture, and also proved that the'Apollonian paradox' exists.

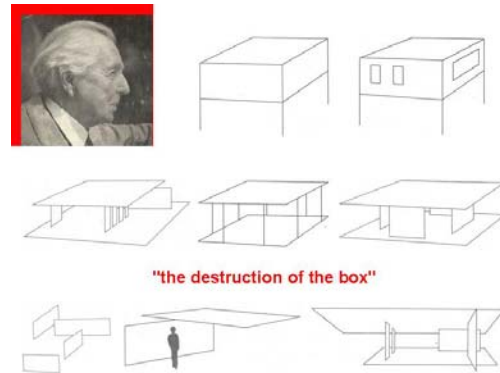
Three of the Corbusian 'four compositions' are prisme pour. Light-White-Abstract are general characteristics of that Style, named also The International Style. The villa Savoye with nick-name 'Daylight Hours' is triumph of that kind as well as majority of villas he designed in the '30s. Le Corbusier would have stayed a pure architectural Apollo if he had not shifted his position towards an

immediate pleasure of brick, concrete, wood and arch as in Maison Jouel in fifties. Maybe he wanted to solve the 'Apollonian paradox' in particular met with the Villa Savoye.

3



4

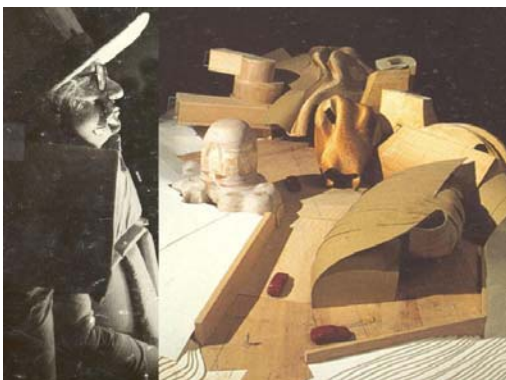


Contrary to the beauty of prisme pour, FLW promoted just opposite beauty - beauty of broken cubes, a sort of ecstatic destruction of box beauty. The passion to destroy the static cube was stressed with flying cantilevered beams, stretched planes and connection of interior and exterior. (He thought that it would be a new American, Usonian, architecture, although many would recognize in it concept of traditional Japanese wooden house).

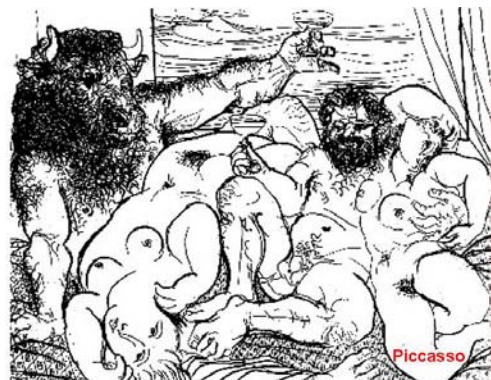
Rooted in Wright's experience of neoplastic forms, De Stijl also fought against heaviness to achieve no gravity architecture. It meant that facade can be put in any position, even upside-down, and artistic feeling would be the same. Dionysian couple Rietveld-Schreder succeeded to deconstruct cube of house with shifted and overlapped planes, missing corners and intensive color accents.

Connecting ornament and crime, Loos fought for clean and neat architecture- an Apollonian stand, but with raumplan, play of platforms and room heights, he was Dionysus. Project for the Josephine Baker house is almost completely Dionysian, just as the public life of his client was.

5



6



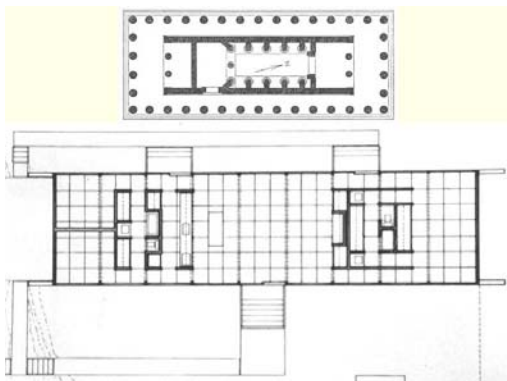
When Dionysus wants to design the 20th century no rule architecture modern family house he assumes the appearance of Frank Gehry. His , orgiastic volumes, bent, twisted, broken apart and

rejoined are an ecstatic game that produce random and unusual forms, alike in Lewis Residence. What Gehry had in his mind I would rather find out, but I feel that in his soul might be one wild Picasso drawing of an orgiastic Dionysus scene.

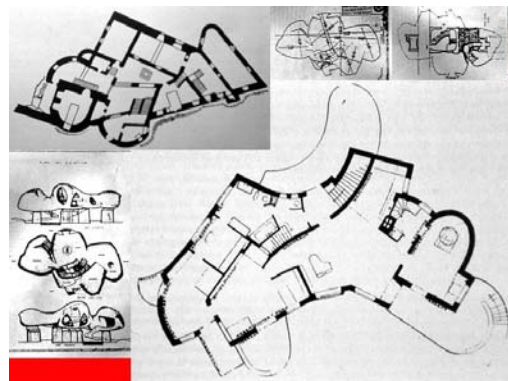
## GEOMETRY

The Apollo Temple in Basae is a model of clarity, just the same way as contemporary house of less is more follower, C.Elwood's. Only material is changed, steel instead of stone. Here we can find right angle geometry, modular grid, repetition, straight line and reductive ness.

7



8



Opposite geometry is given with example of Bakar, the medieval Croatian castle. Complex matrix and curved lines as in H.Haring's family house project, or F.Kiesler's 'Endless house'. Organic free flowing lines come from unconsciousness or from emotion. Broken lines in the Himmelblau's project are product of 'drawing with closed eyes, not caring for function, for client and for costs' as they said.

Pryapus, son of Dionysus and Aphrodite might be an inspiration for Ledoux's brothel. The same was with design for the Chicago night club owner's family house. Phallic shape plan fits rather fine for the functional organization. Signs of female anatomy are given also on this, a little bit bizarre house.

## MATERIALS

Abstract, painted, industrial prepared and rationally used materials are Apollonian repertoire – Dionysian are natural, craft done, emotionally used. Examples are 'cold' glass with steel contrary to the 'warm' wood in a 'romantic' arrangement.

9

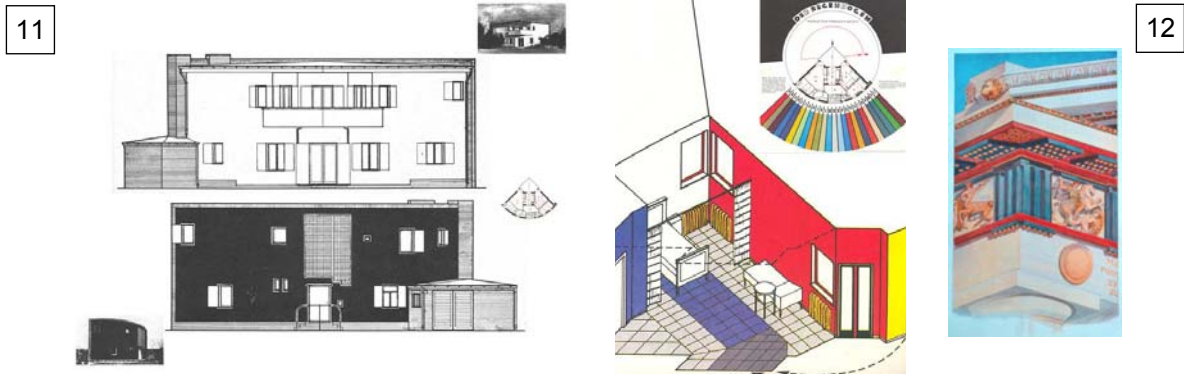


10



## COLOURS

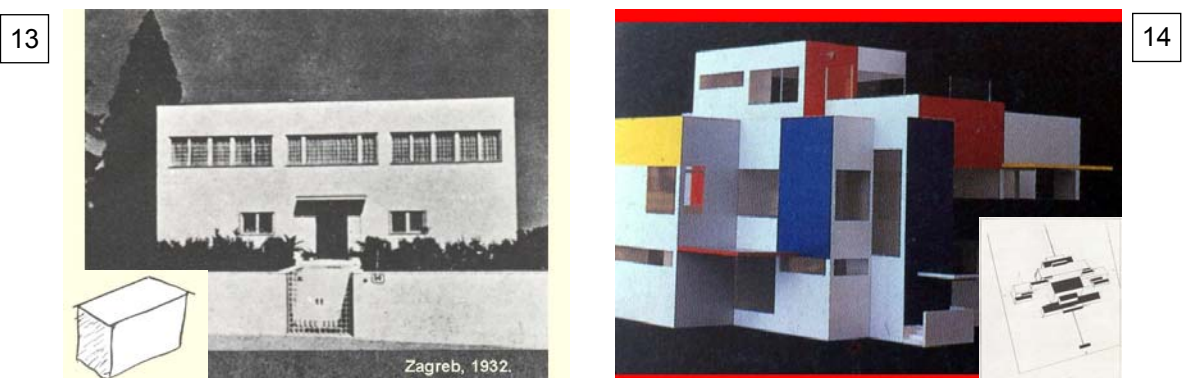
White-light-bright colors are sanitarian and medical colors, and they belong to Apollo (father of Asclepius- god of medicine). Ideal is white walls on the white floors just as alike the Malevitch's 'white square on the white field'. Mono-colors and pale tones are familiar with the Apollonian decency. Black-dark-'drunk', intensive colors, polychromatic is what fits to the vehemence and exuberance of Dionysius. It is curious to note that Greek temples, originally were painted in many colors, even when it was noble material, as a marble.



Very intriguing house with symbolic color duality is Bruno Taut's own house: black (+curved and mysterious) 'eastern' façade vs. white (+ right angled and clear)'western' façade. Statement about East (Dionysian world) and West (Apollonian world) is given on the exterior. Inside, all is in Dionysian explosion of 22 tones of colors over the walls, floors and ceilings, installations and doors.

## FORM

Simple solids, one cube with plain planes, to be as simple as the Corbusian sketch of the Villa Stein- that is characteristic of Apollonian purity. It is a shape of contemporary minimalism, boxes with translucent facades (without windows) or house with 24 the same openings (Ungers own House)- Sacer Simplitas. Examples from Croatia are in this line, too. Nice family villas built in the '30s followed decency of that moment promoted modern style feeling. A number of them are built at that time.

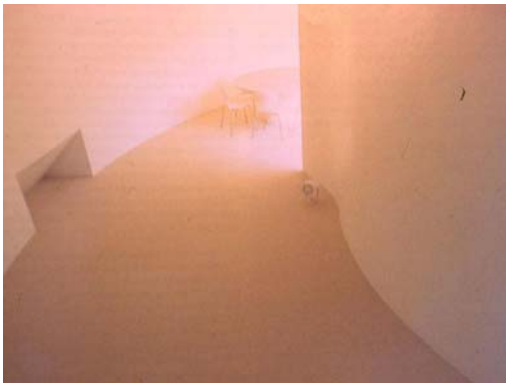


More volumes, complexly accumulated or ad-hoc arranged is Dionysian game, of De Stijl or Paul Rudolph's. Callahan House that might had been three floors edifice, become game with 12 different levels. Interior raumplan par excellence got the same exterior expression.

## INTERIORS

The best presence of 'Apollonian paradox' might be seen in nice and beautiful, scarcely furnished almost empty interior spaces. Some are hardly real, more gallery than dwelling space- less ad absurdum. Contrary example is R.Venturi's own living space, overcrowded alike the painters studio stuffed with furniture, paintings and decoration – more is not bore.

15



16



Two stands, modesty and luxury, are illustrated in Lilly Reich functionalistic arrangement of bed place, and the same with royal exaggeration in bedroom of Ludwig II Bavarian.

## OWN EXPERIENCE

My own Dionysian momentum can be observed in the intensive colors on one urban villa in the posh quarter of the Croatian capital Zagreb. Ten years after my position was shifted. The family house that I designed in the same quarter, in modern –revival style is much more on Apollonian stand.

17



18



To be more Apollonian or to be more Dionysian, that is the question now?

Nietzsche in the first sentence of 'The Birth of Tragedy' says: 'development of art is connected with duality of Apollonian and Dionysian'.

Looking for Apollo and Dionysus in architecture, we have very often difficulty to separate one from another. Some layers are Apollonian, while some others are Dionysian. Even their antique sculptures are not at all so different, both are handsome fellows. Sometimes Dionysus looks more apollonian, more than Apollo himself, and in Apollo sculptures we could also often recognize some dionysian characteristics.

19



20



Going through different aspects of architecture, different elements of an architectural being, we can notice similar complexity, contradiction and confusion, because we may discover both of them on the same edifice.

And, what would be recommended approach?

Is their synthesis making value?

Maybe, a general stand should be Apollonian, but with some Dionysian addition, in purpose to eliminate the 'Apollonian paradox'?

Or, we can make a bit less serious conclusion.

\*

Story says that:

Observing the rice bowl by the graves in an African village, a white explorer in surprise asked his black host:

-Do you believe that your dead eat rice?

The black host replied calmly with counter question:

-Do you believe that your dead smell flowers?



General references:

- Fridrich Nietzsche, *Rodenje tragedije (The Birth of Tragedy)*, Zagreb: MH, 1999
- \*\*\*\*\**Enciklopedija likovnih umjetnosti*, Zagreb: JLZ, 1959-1966
- \*\*\*\*\**Opća enciklopedija*, Zagreb: JLZ, 1977-1982
- Philip Johnson, *Mies van der Rohe*, New York, MOMA, 1953
- Hitchcock & Johnson, *The International Style*, New York: Norton, 1951
- Le Corbusier, *Oeuvre Complete*, Zurich: Erlenbach, 1947
- Frank Lloyd Wright, *An American House*, New York: Horizon Press, 1955
- Paul Overy, *De Stijl*, London: T& H, 1991
- Theodore Brown, *Rietveld*, Utrecht: Bruna, 1958
- Adolf Loos, *Ornament ili zločin*, Zagreb: Mladost, 1952.
- F.R.S. Yorke, *The Modern House*, London: The Architectural Press, 1957
- Sybil Moholy-Nagy, *The architecture of Paul Rudolph*, New York: Praeger, 1970
- Robert Venturi, *Complexity and Contradiction*, New York: MOMA, 1966
- Richard Weston, *The houses in the twentieth century*, Glasgow: Laurence King, 2002
- Oliver Boissiere, *Twentieth-Century Houses*, Terrail, 1998
- John Welsh, *Modern House*, London: Phaidon, 1999
- Clare Melhuish, *Modern House 2*, London: Phaidon, 2000
- Deyan Sudjić, *The twentieth –century house*, Glasgow: Laurence King, 1999
- Camilo Semenzato, *Svijet umjetnosti*, Ljubljana: Mladinska knjiga, 1979
- Tomislav Premerl, *Hrvatska moderna*, Zagreb: NZMH, 1990

Figures:

1. Apollo & Dionysus
2. 'The Birth of Tragedy' & Nietzsche
3. Le Corbusier: 'prisme pour ' & Savoye
4. F. L. Wright: 'destruction of box'
5. F. Gehry: Lewis Residence
6. Picasso: Bacchus and Nymphs
7. Apollo Temple & C. Ellwood's House
8. The Bakar Castle, H. Haring's House & 'Endless House'
9. Glass envelope
10. Wood ceiling
11. B. Taut: Dalewitz House & Greek Temple Painting
12. Dalewitz House interior & Greek Temple detail
13. F. Cota: Villa in Zagreb, 1932 & Le Corbusier: Villa Stein, sketch
14. Van Doesburg, van Esteren: Villa & Malevich: Planit House
15. T. Ito: House for Sister
16. R. Venturi: Own apartment & D. Rivera's painting
17. L. Plestina: Urban Vila Zelengaj, 1991
18. L. Plestina: Villa Pantovcak, 2002
19. Apollo & Dionysus
20. Flowers & Rice

Note: All graphic materials are taken from the sources without particular prohibition to be used.