THE SEARCH FOR CONTINUOUS SPACE OR UTOPIA IN MODERN ARCHITECTURE

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HISTORICAL PRECEDENTS:

If we look at Europe after the industrial revolution we find a period of renewal and a rethinking of the many values which until then had been considered immovable. The incipient modernization process had already begun to generate new searches in the world's conceptual and formal repertoires. The growth of idealism and criticism, together with rationalism and positivism, which along with new social thinking renewed the concepts of art and science, led to a definition of what we now know as "modern". By the beginning of the 20th century, the prevailing conceptual model of "the world" (as it had existed) had collapsed and a new interpretation was needed of the phenomenon we call "reality", in order to locate oneself within the world. This first (de)composition of the present in many fields heralded the dawn of a new way of "conceptualising" the world, of interpreting the complex universe known as "culture". This is what historians call "modernity" and – although many "modernities" have existed throughout history (the fall of the Roman Empire, the Renaissance, the medieval period, etc. have all been labelled as such) – the "modernity" of the current century has been characterised by the following dichotomies:

- **The division between the real world and the world of thought:** The abandonment of "magical thought" which had prevailed thus far. Positivist theories like those of Descartes began to question the "meaning" of existence, which created a favourable environment for Darwin (with his theory of evolution) and Marx (with his first theories on the influence of society and the system of exchange of values) would eventually bury all vestiges of "religious determinism" in society. Henceforth "modern" man would have to steer a new course and be his own guide – using his own interpretation of existence – in order to define not just the future but also his immediate (philosophical) present.

- The breach between essence and appearance: The differences between content and form have been dealt with by the Dadaists, surrealists, cubists and purists in order to differentiate in their work appearance from content, even subverting figurative representation (the signifier) which had previously prevailed and replacing it with the "personal" vision of the artist (the aesthetic).
- The division between the conscious and the subconscious: Deliberate acts and Freudian slips, discovered and revealed of course by Freud, buried the Manichaean concepts of good and evil and the associations – which had existed until then – between the offence and guilt. The frontiers – previously clearly defined – between the intimate and the collective (the psychic) began to crumble.

- The juxtaposition of public and private: Public behaviour and private behaviour, which until that historic moment were defined by puritan morality, were exposed by the collapse of repressive systems of social censure set by conservative tradition. What had been semi-public became shared common experience (social).

- The homogenization of "self" and "other": The hegemony of civil society ceased to classify members of society according to social strata and this, in its turn, meant that identification with the collective would grant the same identity to all individuals (political).

The summation of these changes in history, which were produced as cultural manifestations ("collective representations" of society) finally led to a new way of seeing the world: divided, dual, a dichotomy. The logic of science (and even of scientific positivism) began to divide the world into its opposites (at least in terms of "tautological proposition") even though the aim was "integrationist".

It fell to architects to translate these historical conditions and elaborate an object, a space (architectural but also urban) and a "project" (in the broadest sense of the term) in accordance with the new conception of society, thought and the social objectives of the time. Certainly, architecture (positioned as it is between the technical-scientific and the aesthetic-artistic) provides an excellent laboratory for ideas and the intrinsic drift of thought and feeling in a period, or "***zeitgeist***".

***MODERN* ARCHITECTURE:**
Discussion of what is considered Modern Architecture (in terms of "modernity" and the establishment of "past" and "present" or the conceiving of "a" *past* from "*the*" present) has led historians, critics and theorists into many disputes, many of them based simply on "categories" rather than a true "conception" of "modernity" (many books laud Gaudí, Loos and Schinkel as architects of "modernity" without having seriously evaluated whether or not they fit such a definition).

Therefore, it is necessary to differentiate "modern" architecture (the aforementioned architects, as well as Sullivan, Wright, Horta, etc.) from the truly radical or "early" (represented by De Stijl, Mies or by Terragni and Le Corbusier) in which the aspirations of society were "understood" and the legitimate - and new – parameters for the development of "space" were established, while at the same time these architects began to configure the "image" of what modern architecture *ought* to represent in order to become a mirror of society in many of these radical examples, art anticipated life whereas art usually *follows* life).

Given that the "project" architects (those who have eventually set the course of architecture throughout history) have been the only ones charged with resolving or "elaborating" in practice each new stage of history (or "modernities") in the best way they could - by "making" architecture – often such developments or "practical theories" (although the definition way sound self-contradictory) have found themselves floating in a kind of conceptual "limbo". And this has been basically because - on one hand – not all architects have had the time, ability or, finally, the consciousness needed to explain their own methods of arriving at the "project", and – on the other hand – many critics, theorists or historians have classified, registered or integrated them (in the name of legitimate historical methodology) but in this process they have focused on the structure of the forest whilst forgetting to analyse the trees themselves. In this way many of the architectural processes of many architects have been overlooked by the main body of subsequent generations of colleagues simply because they were not adequately analysed (in many of these cases, and even in biographies and studies dedicated to a single architect, there has been no emphasis on "projectual" thought due to a timid fear of converting the analysis into a "recipe" or "magical formula" which, in the eyes the architect-as-reader, can appear reductionist).

But it would be worthwhile making here the first differentiation between the different "architectures" of "architects" (in terms that are more "conceptual" than "practical"). For an architect to create a project (or a "constructed idea"), it is necessary first of all to formulate a "system of thought" to serve as a guide during the process (whether or not the architect is conscious or not of such a process given that, quite apart from other considerations, it is by the work and the project that the "process" or "system" used will be eloquently defined).
In any case, for practical purposes and to define conceptual approaches to an architectural project, we can differentiate between two types of architect:
A.- The architect who seeks to "trace" the different variables necessary to a project "deductively" (integrating "the parts" within "the whole") until the end of the process is reached (or "starting point").
B.- The architect who works "inductively", in other words by allowing each of the said variables to interact until arriving at – or stumbling upon - a definition of the structure (the whole) at its true point of equilibrium (or "starting point").

The difference between these two types is not qualitative, but rather quantitative in terms of information (contained and lost). In other words, one is not better than the other. Nevertheless, while the first attitude obeys an "exclusive" thought process (which sees the "division" between the whole and the parts, between form and function, etc.) opting always for one over the other, the second is "inclusive" (involving absolute extremes as part of the complexity of the project) and it is already installed within the parameters of modern thought (dual, contradictory and dichotomous).

Therefore, "Modern Architecture" cannot be defined in terms of its product (although there do exist "modern" architectures in terms of image just as there exist "surrealist" paintings in terms of formal, rather than conceptual, expression) but rather in terms of the system that precedes it, plus the alternative, or other, spatial qualities which such projects might possess. And, finally, it is space (in spite of the post-modern opinions of many critics who have reduced architecture to the search for common tendencies, images and forms) which has really always concerned architects.

THE SEARCH FOR THE MODERN SPACE 1:
In this way, all of these conflicts (between the "whole" and the "part") which are present in many branches of thought or science were introduced into architecture to a degree. But, as mentioned, only a few exponents of early radical modern architecture were able to work *from* existing dichotomies: between the different parts that comprised (and still comprise) the totality of a project. It was these architects who were able to openly detect the first contradictions and managed to incorporate them into their concept of architecture with the aim of creating a new way of seeing and of "making" architecture. The changes – and divisions – which they detected were:
Form and function: Previously, function had been an element "exogenous" to the conception of the project because function was confined within a pattern or the corresponding part of the stylistic catalogue. This meant that any use (a theatre, a church or a residence) would almost always correspond (as a representative institution of society or of collective use) to an "order" or "absolute form previously determined (or determinist). This conceptual "implication" was dissolved when technology, production systems and, above all, the "demystification" of rites meant that form need no longer necessarily exceed content (use) in terms of "meaning".

Inside and outside: The physical limits between inside and outside became narrower (due to the abovementioned fusion of public and private) and eventually started to blend through the use of glass – which previously had been treated as a method of sealing a space – which began to integrate both spaces through the use of large panes, generating in this way a juxtaposition of spatial sensations (creating exterior spaces that came indoors, as well as interior spaces that were prolonged as far as the exterior).

The mass and the skin: The body and its covering no longer formed a single unit, but instead began to decompose within the limits of the project (both in the interior and exterior) so that the space began to transform itself into the result of a linked and progressive sequence which, defined by its own "planes", achieved "volume" via a "temporal" journey (in this sense the process followed to a degree the "modern" sequences of cubist painting or of Le Corbusier's purism).

The disappearance of the axis of symmetry: With no "supreme" will in the project (be it the representation of a form or of a "significant symbol") which would have formed the starting point (or "typology" to use the term coined by Aldo Rossi and the Italian *tendenzza*) of the project; the axis of mirror symmetry ceased to be a recurring paradigm. Symmetry was replaced by "equilibrium" and projects began to be centred on "space" and not the ground plan or elevation. Conceptually, this meant an enormous challenge that forced architects to imagine the project in terms of the disappearance of the "centre" as the following point mentions.

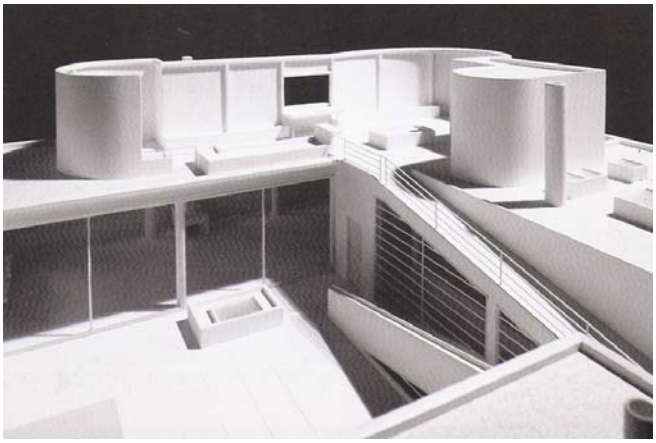
The centre and the limits: With the disappearance of the "symbolic charge" of the central project (sponsored by the monarchy, religious institutions or the prevailing "magical beliefs" of the time) the idea of a "central space" (the place of the "God-King") as the beneficiary of all the spatial content was suppressed. The conceptual space (or "celebrated space" according to some authors) ceased to be an opposite or contradictory entity, now that the "centre of gravity" of the modern project had become "mobile", flowing ideally through the entire project and being defined only by the relative position taken.

The rigid and the free: Previously, the structure had been a physical corset that prevented architects from giving expression within the project to the "borders" of their own creativity. But this was not only a physical but also a conceptual corset for in many respects – once liberated from the rigidity of "load-bearing walls" – many architects did not know what to do with the flexibility offered by "open plan". It was not until it was understood that "freedom" could not exist unless it was concomitant with "the structured" (or forced) that the true potential of space in architecture was realised. Loose volumes and exogenous angles and figures demonstrated the perfect "liberation" of the plan because they displayed "their own" independence in – and within – the space.

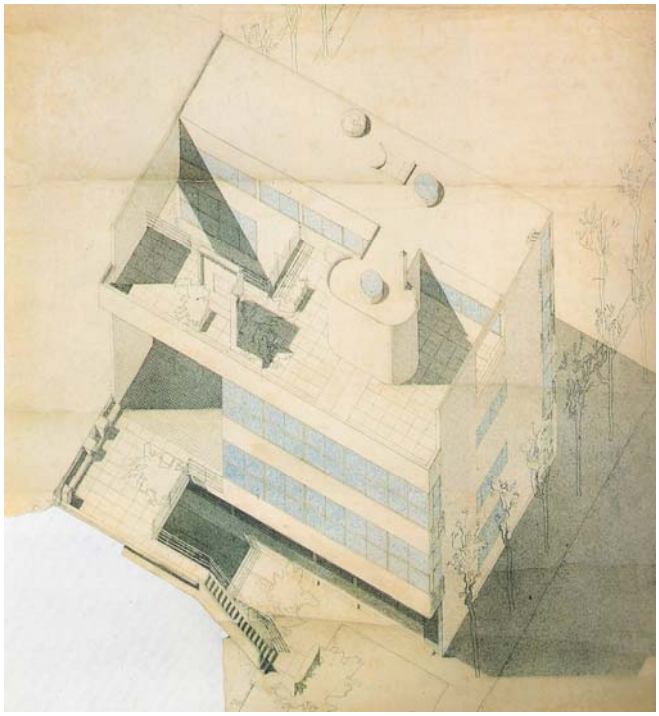
The solution found in many cases (and which finally produced our conception of "Modern Architecture") was *necessarily* the incorporation of all these variables, but only because progress was made through conflict and the subtle (but relevant) differences raised. In many of the cases described, the process of conception of the project separated the juxtaposed from the superimposed, absolute from relative, indefinite from concrete. The only way of arriving at a modern architecture in a creative way (which is what one tends to demand of an architect) was to convert the contradictions into "inclusions" rather than "exclusions" in the sense of resolving them inductively (and here we have again the difference between previous and "modern" architecture) until they became a new

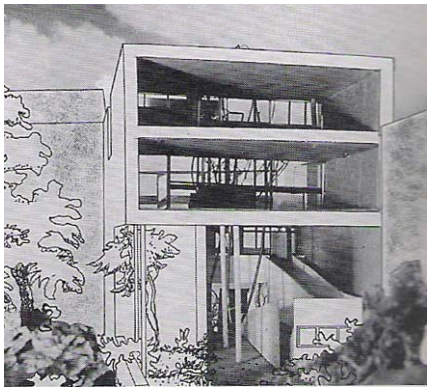
contradiction – one much more relevant due to its originality and conceptually more experimental than safe, more unstable than immobile, more complex than simple.

THE SEARCH FOR MODERN SPACE 2:



It was Le Corbusier who was perhaps the first to represent the previously-mentioned division and to define five models of possible representations (his “five points of architecture” were dichotomies in themselves) which left the way open for future explorations that would lead to more complex relationships between “transparency” and “spatial sequence”, but above all the inclusion of “time” by allowing – visually and physically – not only access to each stage of the process but also the crossing of space along any axis. This has been clearly defined in the Villa Savoye, where not only is space perforated (or accessed) along the “x” axis (the approach to the project from the entrance), but also along the “y” axis (via the ramp) in order to finally conclude via the “z” axis (via the helical staircase that perforates the floor. This same conceptual “freedom” can be appreciated in many other projects, such as the Villa Stein-De Monzie (where volumes are an excuse to speak of encompassing space) or the La Roche-Jeanneret house with its ramp and helical form combined in a single element that moves through the entire space, giving us three axes (x, y and z) in one trajectory (subsequently this constant search for the “transparent” and multiple space would find its greatest expression in the project of the Parliament Building of Chandigarh, or in the Villa Shodan, where space becomes a “temporal” element which only exists as far as one travels through it, depending on the position in which one finds oneself). One project in South America should also be mentioned, which was one of Le Corbusier’s first projects: La Casa Curutchet, where the public space of the street enters to form the nucleus of the project (a private garden) and climbs until it has covered the entire verticality (via a ramp first and then a terrace), leaving us disorientated regarding the true direction of our body relative to the space, and at the same time allowing the light to guide us and give us always a new way of perceiving ourselves in space.

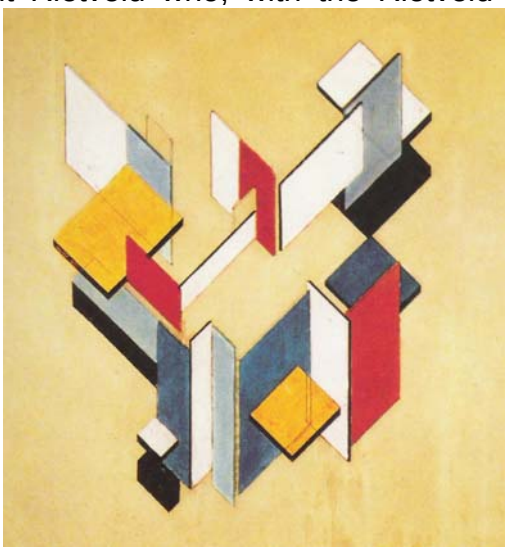




Another important (and little-studied) architect is Guiseppe Terragni, who intensifies the sensations of “body” and “skin” with his “Monument to the Cube”: La Casa del Fascio. In this project the architect separates the mass of

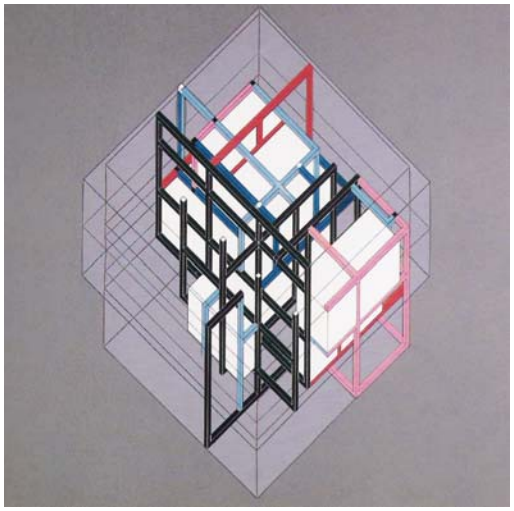
the epidermis in order to show the axes that comprise it, at the same time as he challenges above from below (contrary to Le Corbusier, who distinguishes “above” from “below” to force us to journey through the whole) to create a pure form which dematerialises as we enter it. In the same way, the axes begin to (de)compose within, rivalling one another, leaving a space without direction and, at the same time, open to transit (in contrast with the trajectories imposed by Le Corbusier) towards all of its parts and from them all also. The space becomes, then, not a trick involving “volumes that hide” but rather something clean, diaphanous and without “turns” or “starts”, leaving us with the absolute sensation of finding ourselves not in a project but rather within an enormous virtual fortress.

Finally, there is *D’Stijl*, the Dutch group led by Gerrit Rietveld who, with the Rietveld-Schröder house, was the first to experiment with the sequence of planes that, reinforcing the original concept of including “time” in architecture (although starting from a pictorial premise) dematerialised the mass of the building in visual “sequences” which (unlike Terragni or Le Corbusier) were aimed at “redefining” each previous architectural code (balusters, frames, doors, balconies, etc.) and incorporating them within a “dematerialization” of the parts in such a way that the “whole” does not exist any longer as a visual summation. In this way – and although space still does not manage to “paralyse” at every turn – the aforementioned decomposition is achieved in each axis (x, y and z) of the project (to such a degree that each plane of each “wall” is painted in different colours to emphasise the separation of each vector).



THE SEARCH FOR MODERN SPACE 3:

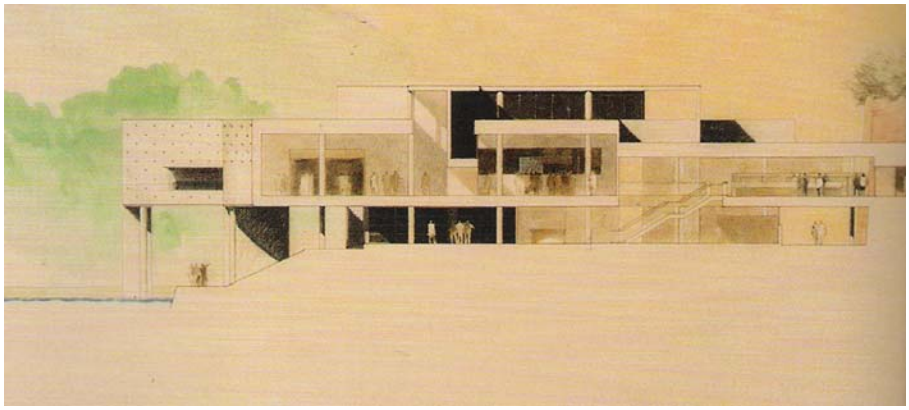
Subsequently, Peter Eisenman (a great admirer of Terragni and Le Corbusier), with his famous sequence “House of Cards” (with House II, House V but particularly House X), would carry the theme of “modernity” to the second level and propose the possibility of a kind of “Moëbius Strip” to define the planes of volume, platonically establishing a constant movement which – with no beginning or end – envelops the mass, from and towards all of its sides. What is interesting about these projects is that they fuse two variables. On one side the dematerialization of the projects and their axes (hence the interest of Eisenman and Terragni), exposed in each joist, column and plane marked with different variations of the same colour (the inheritance of D’Stijl) and defined within a solid purist structure (almost always a cube) which is dynamically crossed by different substructures which demonstrate mathematically the geometry of the project. This dedication to “algebraic



conflict" is particularly evident in House X, where four cubes are separated by their axes and little by little are each "peeled" in such a way that each plane finds its own position within this formula of three variables (x, y and z) whilst at the same time displaying its independence or freedom with regard to the mass that conceived it. In this perverse game the victors are always tension and invasion and, above all, freedom. Eisenman's final manifesto has changed over the years, but the idea of an architecture dedicated to "modernity" and experimentation and the re-creation of itself has not changed.

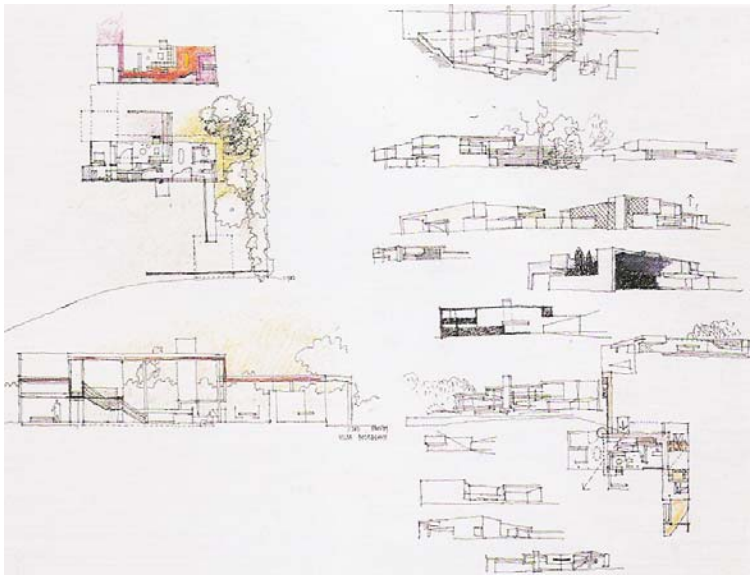
The French-Peruvian architect Henri Ciriani, with a body of work in France stretching over a thirty-year period, proposed a recovery of the principles of modernity, influencing an entire generation of architects who learned to make architecture from such postulates and principles. In his own projects he has tried to recover – and to defend with his theoretical, academic and "projectual" position – the processes (forgotten by post-modernism) of Le Corbusier (especially those that strive for the "total space") and create a method (which he calls "The Folded-Plane") which postulates the possibility of "altering" or "folding" space, linking together different heights and directions (once again, the axial freedom of space in all its vectors) until a single element is formed the formal definition of which is expressed as the result of a collision (or equilibrium) in all the vectors.

Ciriani's projects in France are a search for this equilibrium. In one of his first constructed projects, the Marné-la-Vallée College, he proposed the separation of two volumes – apparently unconnected – only to then envelop them in a "Folded Plane" that brings unity to them. Within this process (and referring to the master Le Corbusier) he proposes the freedom of a different angle to articulate volumes, generating an isotropic space, balanced and omni-directional at the entrance, which he makes the patella of the whole complex. At the same time the double and triple heights inhabit the length of the "folded plane", rising and falling in accordance with the function but also in order to express the "freedom" of the skin over the mass.



Later, with the "First World War Museum" in Peronné, he would return to the idea of experimenting with two volumes slightly separated (by longitudinal axes that follow the entrance of

light) whilst at the same time linking spaces transversally via a “folded plane”, (but this time in its interior, rather than exterior sense). In this way the different levels serve to show how the floor plan is folded to become a wall, and then is converted into a beam which precedes the zenithal gash which allows for the passage of light and displays the triple fold in its three vectors. All within a structure free of the piles which, like mute witnesses to this architectural game, maintain their position, showing again the freedom conferred by the established structural (and conceptual) frame. And this is an important factor in Cipriani’s architecture: the constant definition of a three-dimensional grid which is interrupted, crossed or blocked in order to emphasise the idea of absolute “freedom” (which it is only possible to define by contrasting it with the rigidity of the “mother-structure”) The nucleus of Ciriani’s projects is, therefore, absolute independence: the possibility of creating space from each direction, without confining it more than is necessary, possible and – of course – desirable to the architect.

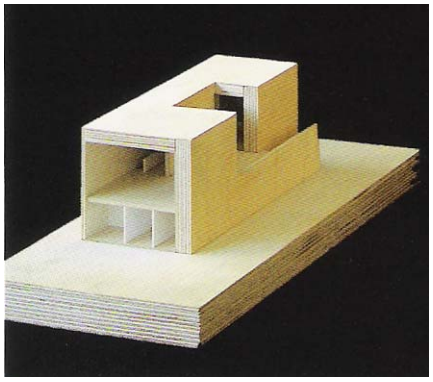


The idea of this “folded plane” was not consolidated until the “Single Family House” in Le Cher (France), in which the idea of “representing” an “ideal” sequence of planes defining a “free” space achieves a new meaning: that of composition. This was the first time that Ciriani decided to experiment openly with the concepts – and forms – of his method to achieve a single structure – linear, powerfully consecutive in its spatial implications as well as its architectural image, and in this way demonstrating great coherence between form and function (without sealing the contradiction between the two) whilst at the same time permitting an eloquent representation of a “model to be assembled”, as if the whole project, rather than being a “constructed fact”, were instead a lesson in architectural “gymnastics” in space and the “place” that could – and should – be occupied by others, by his own students (or those architects who wish to learn, somewhat in the style of Le Corbusier).

But it was not until a very small Beach House project in Peru that Ciriani managed to fully apply (at least as a building, for many drawings exist that illustrate his intention) his “folded

plane” theory. In this house it is the plan which is the real protagonist of space for – because it was a project facing the sea – Ciriani was able to experiment with the inside and outside without climatic restrictions, but more importantly he was able to create a free object (like the context) which communes with the views, opens itself up to the perspectives and defines intervals of interior spaces which become smaller when it is needed, and taller when contact with nature is required. This “folded

plane" also creates its own interior space, a centre which is exposed like a vacuum, almost like a space that does not enjoy the acrobatic gymnastics of the plan spreading towards the periphery in order to demonstrate its own freedom, its "disconnection", or the desire of its architect to express himself within a vacuum: with what he has decided not to touch.



This path – or method – of Ciriani's has been followed by several architects interested in these same issues of "modernity". These include John Pawson, with his "Walsh House", where a simple turn of the "Infinite Strip" achieves resolution in a domestic project, separating both sides of the development of the strip to include – like Cipriani did with his beach house – a vacuum which demonstrates the "continuous" development of the plan in space.

In the same way, the architect David Chipperfield makes use of this method, but this time in an urban setting. His "Hamburg Hotel" develops the "Infinite-Strip" as a series of volumes – or "bodies" – which define the scale of the building's relationship with the street, using the windows as a method of describing, in the urban setting, the "dynamic withdrawal" of the volume, permitting in this way a "slow" and "silent" coupling with the context of the surrounding buildings.

THE SEARCH FOR MODERN SPACE 4, OR THE "INFINITE STRIP":

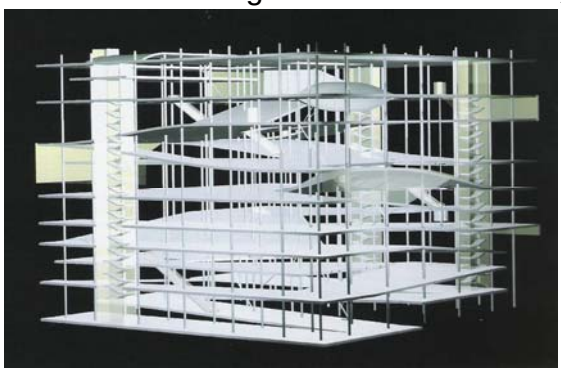
The "Infinite Strip" is not a "method" in itself, but rather a deductive systematization of an architectural process. It is an exercise which sums up the postulates of "modern" architecture, exploring them and taking them to their limits. It is not unique but it is exclusive: it does not allow for another "non-modern" method to interfere with it. However, it is open to revision and contributions, given that it is based on the freedom of space. What is interesting about this method – or "system of teaching and practice of architectural design" – is that it takes in the spirit of modern space, of the true search for a "revolutionary" spirit that still impregnates contemporary projects. The true versatility of the "Infinite Strip" (however it is applied) lies in its ability to be unconnected, entropic, omni-axial, multi-directional and exempt.

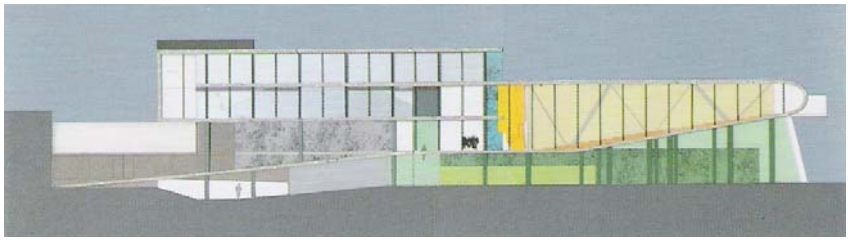
Therefore, the values defined by the space contained by the "Infinite Strip" are the primary concepts defined by the first Modern Architecture, which are, specifically:

- **Isotropy:** Space acquires the same physical quality (gravity does not affect direction).
- **Transparency:** Space flows from and towards all sides, being interrupted only by a sequence of spaces.
- **Decentralization:** The centre of gravity of space tends not to be located in the geometrical centre, but rather at any point where the Strip is "folded".
- **Dematerialization:** Space and the planes it contains tend to blend.
- **Equilibrium:** Space flows freely without ceasing to maintain a relationship with its limits.

- **Time:** The time factor is incorporated by travelling along the Strip (visually and physically).

In architecture there exist many examples – without using an actual method – in which the work refers to the "tensionality" of the modern space as seen in the "Infinite Strip". Given that many architects work within a series of similar concepts of "modern architecture", many fragments of such spatiality can be found in the projects developed by them. This means that the "Infinite Strip" method can be seen reflected in the work of many contemporary architects although this may be due only to formal coincidence or the use of certain architectural resources. Currently, many architects – consciously or unconsciously – are searching for such an "ideal", "continuous" or "infinite" space. As well as those already mentioned and totally dedicated to the exploration of the "limits" of modern space and the different subversions that can be expressed within it, there are other architects who have reflected this approach through specific works, such as Rem Koolhaas with his "Free-Section" theory (an extension – or variation – on the Corbusian approach to the "modern" space) within which the idea of a "continuous" floor is displaced by the curvature of the floor itself or the continuation of the floor by converting it into a ramp – thereby allowing an uninterrupted continuation between different levels. He performed this exercise for the first time in the project "2 Libraries at the University of Jussieu", where – as he himself describes it -: "… *we imagined that the surface could be foldable, like a social magic carpet; so we folded it to create greater density…*" Here the idea of the "foldable" plane (similar to the "folded" one of Cipriani) not only creates many possibilities for experimenting with a new quality of space, but it also serves to "demonstrate" that the space is of "another" category, a modern one.





Later Koolhaas would experiment again with this resource in the "Utrecht Educatorium", where the idea of a "folding plane" is evolved until it becomes a "curl" (or loop) which envelopes and runs throughout the entire project, from the first level (as a ramp) to the final level where it is interrupted, creating a new "folding plane" in order to repeat the circuit.

It was a student of Koolhaas, Irakí, who would apply this knowledge to develop one of her first buildings, the "Hoenheim-Nord Parking and Tramway Terminal", which, as the architect herself says, "*is a series of lines and superimposed fields which interweave to form a whole in constant movement*" which breaks the limits between the road and the covering, creating a spatial and volumetric continuum that merges the project with its context (the effect used in the "Rosenthal Centre of Contemporary Art" in which the street becomes the hall of the building). Within the same tradition – but with a more radical approach – is Neil M. Denari, who uses the "Infinite Strip" as a "creative" element of the Section which (contrary to Koolhaas) is not defined by linked

spaces but rather by a single formal – and hazardous – journey which twists as much as it needs to. The paradigm example of this process is the "Multi-Section Office Block" which, through the exercise just described, deforms the space developed as if it were a great dented container. The architects Diller & Scofidio also worked within this framework with their project for the "Eyebeam Institute" in which – in the middle of New York – they planned a "twisted structure" folded against another in a kind of architectural gymnastics that explores the limits of the "Infinite Strip" as if it were an enormous elastic band which, as it "stretches" the space in all of its vectors, allows us a sense of uninterrupted freedom to travel through it even as it confronts us (on seeing the "parallel" "band") with its intricate architectural system. It is as if the process by which it came about is as important as the construction itself.

It would take too long to include here all the contemporary projects which try to solve the system of new "spatial interrelations" using the "Infinite Strip", given the sheer number of approaches, interpretations and "visions", but it is precisely the versatility of this method that has made it such a great promoter of values forgotten – or at least mourned by many students and architects – and yet inherent to architecture and which deserve our attention – and architectural allegiance – in the 21st century: the true "Modern Architecture".

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