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HOUSE, STREET, CITY:
ARS RHETORICA
AS A TOOL FOR COMPOSITION

DOM, ULICA, MIASTO:
ARS RHETORICA
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A b s t r a c t

The essay is about the issue of the façade, the architectural device which holds together the private and the public, the inside and the outside, and at the same time becomes the face of the building, and at a larger scale, of the city. A face which also expresses, as happens with texts, discourses and narrations: so the instruments of *ars rhetorica* becomes important, as some buildings by the masters of the Modern Movement can reveal.

Keywords: façade, figure of speech, Ars Rhetorica, Le Corbusier, Behrens

S t r e s z c z e n i e

Tekst odnosi się do zagadnienia fasady, narzędzia architektonicznego, które spina prywatne i publiczne, wewnątrz i zewnątrz, będąc tym samym twarzą budynku, a w większej skali twarzą miasta. Twarz, która również wyraża, jak zdarza się w wypadku tekstów, dyskursów i narracji: zatem, jak ujawniają niektóre budynki mistrzów ruchu modernistycznego instrumenty *ars rhetorica* stają się ważne.

Słowa kluczowe: fasada, figura retoryczna, ars rhetorica, Le Corbusier, Behrens

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1. ARCHITECTURE, FAÇADE AND ARS RHETORICA

“I will show you the little parcels of gold which remained at the bottom of Nicholas Flamel’s alembic, and you shall compare them with the gold of Guillaume de Paris. I will teach you the secret virtues of the Greek word, ‘peristera’. But, first of all, I will make you read, one after the other, the marble letters of the alphabet, the granite pages of the book. We shall go to the portal of Bishop Guillaume and of Saint Jean le Rond at the Sainte Chapelle, then to the house of Nicholas Flamel, Rue Manvault, to his tomb, which is at the Saints Innocents, to his two hospitals, Rue de Montmorency. I will make you read the hieroglyphics which cover the four great iron cramps on the portal of the hospital Saint Gervais, and of the Rue de la Ferronnerie. We will spell out in company, also, the facade of Saint Come, of Sainte Genevieve des Ardents, of Saint Martin, of Saint Jacques de la Boucherie”.

For a long time, Gossip Tourangeau, intelligent as was his glance, had appeared not to understand Dom Claude. He interrupted.

“Pasque dieu! What are your books, then?”

“Here is one of them,” said the archdeacon.

And opening the window of his cell he pointed out with his finger the immense church of Notre Dame, which, outlining against the starry sky the black silhouette of its two towers, its stone flanks, its monstrous haunches, seemed an enormous two-headed sphinx, seated in the middle of the city.

This dialogue is taken from “The Hunchback of Notre Dame”, published in 1831 by Victor Hugo. The page continues with the famous “Ceci tuela cela”, “This will kill that”, referring to the book that in the future would be the most important way of transmitting knowledge and information, taking the place of the “books of stone” represented by the important buildings of the city. Apart from this opposition, what it’s interesting, in my opinion, is to consider how the city can be “read” as a text, in which the “words” of the narration are the important buildings, as solitary statements like the representative monumental architectures, or, connected one to the other, like the residential urban tissue that builds the city, as fragments of a discourse. So, not just the monuments can assume this function. As Ernesto N. Rogers wrote, “Monument is not only the house of God, or the house of the King, but first of all the *house of man* and every other architectural organism, which keeps together utility and beauty, and useful for the society”¹.

House (of man) as a tool for working (to build the city), as Le Corbusier wrote².

Houses conceived as words of the architectural discourse, as Le Corbusier wrote, describing his famous four residential types³.

And talking about text and discourse, it’s very interesting recognizing how the techniques of narration can be used in the architectural discipline, in particular when it’s important to speak to people, to communicate, to give a message through architecture: and this happens in the façade of the buildings, in the façade of the cities (as in the page of Hugo’s masterpiece quoted above). Façade is the element of the building most directly connected

¹ E. N. Rogers, *Gli elementi del fenomeno architettonico*, Milano 1961 (translation by P.M. Martinelli).

² Le Corbusier, *Urbanisme*, Paris 1925.

³ Le Corbusier, *Mein Werk*, Stuttgart 1960.

with the public, it's the place of mediation between private and public, it's the architectural "face" that can speak, capable of transmitting a message, a feeling, a statement, like the human face. The architect can use the façade to reveal the inside (as the rationalism's dogma wanted), or design it as a reaction to the outside (an open façade facing a wonderful place or landscape; a closed façade to protect the interiors from cold or ugly surroundings), or imagine it as an independent mask, and independent architectural device. Instruments useful for working on this topic are the same instruments of narration, written and spoken: the rhetorical figures (or figure of speech), which come from the noble and ancient *ars rhetorica*. This imaginative way of building the discourse through rhetorical figures becomes a powerful instrument for the writer and the speaker to express himself; and in architecture it happens the same.

We can find a lot of examples of application of the rhetorical figures in architecture, and many studies deal with this issue. Maybe it's a matter of interpretation by the critics. For sure, in some architectural works it's a very aware choice of design. For sure, in some cases, it's something that comes from a "stream of unconsciousness".

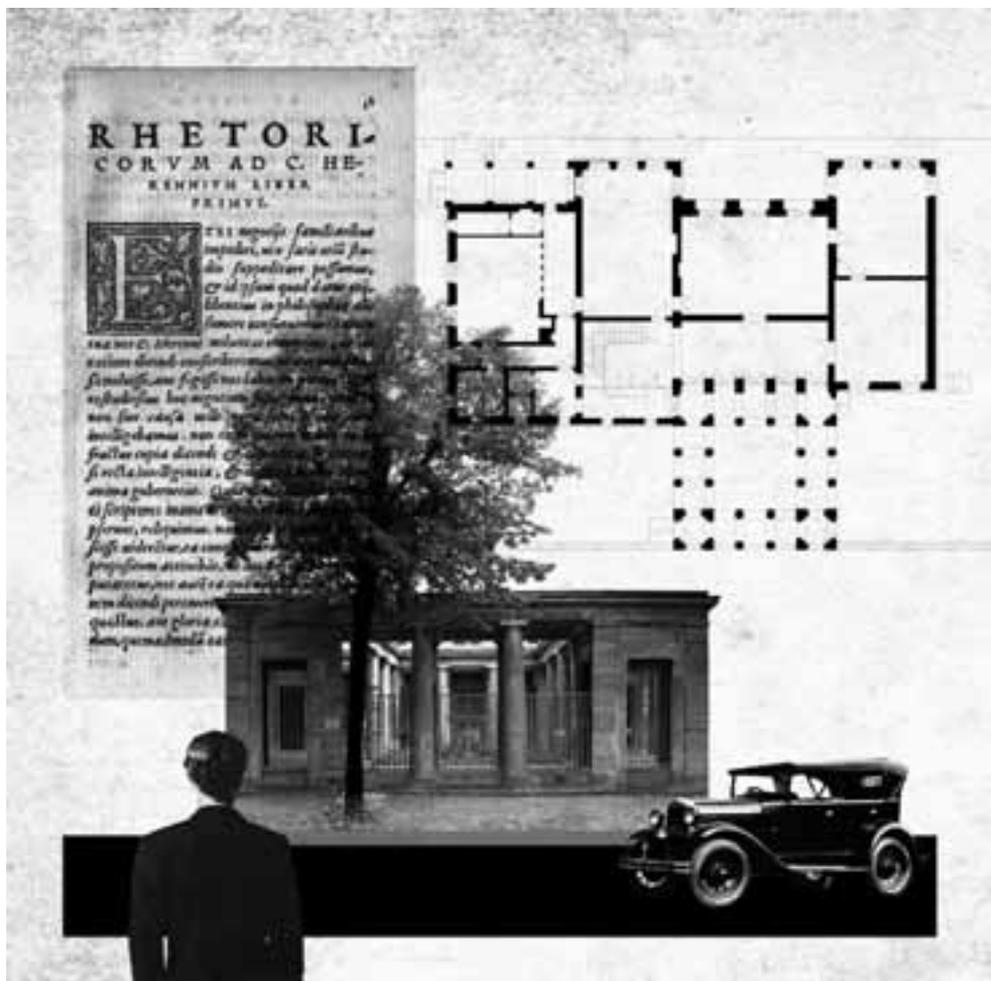
I would like to pick from the huge and amazing archive of the Modern Movement, as testimonies of this topic, a few buildings which clearly can be interpreted as application of *ars rhetorica*'s figures of speech. In particular Le Corbusier's work is rich in this relationship between architecture and rhetorical devices. For example, Bruno Reichlin⁴, recognizes the figure of *chiasmus* in the organization of the Pavillion Church's façade by the Swiss master, with the diagonal tension between the big *pan de verre* and the vertical windows. *Chiasmus* is "the figure of speech in which two or more clauses are related to each other through a reversal of structures in order to make a larger point; that is, the clauses display inverted parallelism. (...) *Chiasmus* is applied fairly broadly to any 'criss-cross' structure"⁵.

The same "fatal disposition" through the *chiasmus* is recognizable in other Corbusian façades, where the elements which participate in the design of the "face" of the building are in a diagonal compositional tension. For example, in House Stein's façade (1927) which overlooks the garden, the two poles of the *chiasmus* are the staircase on the ground floor and the elliptical cylinder on the roof-terrace: here the two elements have also a key role in the functions of the house, as a starting point (the stairs) and the final stage (the roof) of the *promenade* through the internal domestic spaces.

Another figure of speech we can find useful to understand the relationship between building and street, in Le Corbusier's work, is *emphasis*, which is a "special weight or forcefulness given to something considered important (...), special attention or prominence given to something, (...) prominence given to a syllable or words, by raising the voice or printing in italic or underlined type" "Emphasis" in *Wiktionary*. In the architecture of the façade, the syllables or words are the door, the window, the roof. So, giving *emphasis* to the façade means underlining them (or one of them) through material, colour, dimension, position. This is what happens, for example, in Le Corbusier's Immeuble Clarté in Geneve (1930): the apartment building is a huge parallelepiped with a glass façade, in which the ground floor is a concrete basement clad in travertine stone. The entrance to the building consists of two 6 x 6 metre-square portals, two huge doors which clearly define the place of the relationship between

⁴ B. Reichlin, *Il Pavillion Church* [in] C. Palazzolo, R. Vio, *Sulle tracce di Le Corbusier*, Venezia 1989.

⁵ "Chiasmus" in *Wikipedia*.



Ill. 1. "Rhetorical/Architectural/Compositional", collage by P.M. Martinelli

public and private, inside and outside, closed and open. And Le Corbusier emphasizes this, through the dimensions of the two portals, in a way that seems to transform them into the doors of a city: and the city, as in many Corbusian projects, is the building, and the building is the city (but isn't this another figure of speech? Isn't this a *synecdoche*?).

2. BEHREN'S VILLA WIEGAND AS A FIGURE OF SPEECH

For sure the importance that Le Corbusier gave to the architectural device of the façade is a lesson he learned in his formative years, thanks, first of all, to the knowledge of the ancient buildings he studied in his journeys all over Europe. But I think that a fundamental experience was his practice in Peter Behrens' office, between November 1910 and April 1911. The relationship with the master is very difficult: Behrens is, when described in Le Corbusier's letters, rude, tyrannical, authoritarian; about the work in the office he states, and this is very interesting, "I don't learn anything from him, absolutely nothing but the façade of everything"⁶. In fact, in the period in which the young Charles-Edouard is in Berlin, he works on two projects by the German master, both dealing with the topic of the façade: the boat club Elektra and, in particular, the Villa Wiegand, for an important client, the archaeologist Theodore Wiegand.

The elegant villa is placed in Dahlem, a few kilometres from Berlin, and its position is right in front of a street, leaving the most of the space of the lot to a garden in the back of the house. This means that for Behrens the relationship with the street and how the path from outside takes us to the entrance was very important; also, it was necessary for him to represent with a clear architectural strategy the importance of the client, and his professional role.

To do this, Behrens plays with the elements of the house and with a smart use of rhetorical devices, to build a clear text and a strong message from inside to outside: the villa seems to talk to the viewer, and tell a story.

The most important idea in this project is to take a classical element of the Roman house, the *peristylum*, and transform it into the focus of the villa. This is a clear device of narrative strategies (very often used by architects): *quote*. This is very appropriate, also: the client is an archaeologist, so the choice of this classical element is a direct reference to the profession and interests of the person living in the house. What is extraordinary in this project is how Behrens uses this strong element: instead of building the villa around the *peristylum*, as happens in the Roman house, the German master moves it outside, putting it between the limit of the street and the entrance door, as a filter between the public space and the private space. We can read this gesture, so original and out of the classical schemes, as another figure of speech: *hysteron proteron*.

From Greek "hysteron proteron", which means "the latter (put in place of) the former" it's "a figure of speech in which what naturally would come last is put first"⁷, "in which the normal order of two sentences, clauses, etc., is reversed"⁸. Here, the process is clear and strong: the *peristylum*, which originally should have been in the heart of the house, has been moved

⁶ Letter by LC, published in F. Tentori, *Vita e opere di Le Corbusier*, Bari-Roma 1979 (translation by P.M. Martinelli).

⁷ "Hysteron proteron" in oxforddictionaries.com.

⁸ "Hysteron proteron" in collinsdictionary.com.

outside, in direct contact with the street. The “natural” order of the entrance sequence of the Roman domus *street-entrance-vestibule-atrium-peristylum*, is changed through the *hysteron proteron* device into *street-peristylum-entrance-vestibule*.

In conclusion, Behrens in Dahlem deals with the problem of the relationship with the street on one side (and this will be one of the central topic in Le Corbusier’s studies about the critics of the *rue corridor*) and to represent clearly, thanks to a piece of *architecture parlante* (“speaking architecture”), for whom the villa was built.

And he gives an answer to this two design issues, as an architect but in effect also as a master of narration who knows to choose and use the powerful instruments of *ars rhetorica*.