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Endogenous Spatiality in Architecture and Art: Blurred Boundaries since the First Artistic and Architectonic
Vanguards of the Twentieth Century to Contemporaneity

Gabriela Raposo

Member of the Research Group IHA
Institute of History of Art

University of Social Sciences, Lisbon (FCSH)

Portugal

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Athens Institute for Education and Research

8 Valaoritou Street, Kolonaki, 10671 Athens, Greece

Tel: +30 210 3634210 Fax: +30 210 3634209 Email: info@atiner.gr

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Endogenous Spatiality in Architecture and Art: Blurred Boundaries since the First Artistic and Architectonic Vanguards of the Twentieth Century to Contemporaneity

Gabriela Raposo Member of the Research Group IHA - Institute of History of Art University of Social Sciences, Lisbon (FCSH) Portugal

Abstract

In this paper I want to discuss the importance of the user's body and movement on the comprehension of contemporary architectonic and artistic space. I believe that the contaminations we assist between these practices, in the first vanguards of the twentieth century, still influence its understanding nowadays.

I shall examine the artistic work Proun Room (1923), of the Constructivist Russian artist El Lissitzky, and the term Architectural Promenade (1929), applied to Maison la Roche (1923-24) and Villa Savoye (1929-31), that the Swiss architect Le Corbusier used referring to the viewer's experience when circulating through a building. I believe both references witness the abovementioned paradigm, as well as question the motionless contemplative aspects attached to Modernism. Through the analysis of these works I hope to reach an understanding on the influence both authors left, as heritage to the comprehension of contemporary space.

Therefore I will present three arguments: i) the turning point of a motionless viewer to an active one, while experiencing art and architecture, even though it became most notable since the 1960s, it had already began with Russian Constructivism and Modernism; ii) the notion of endogenous spatiality, in contemporary architecture, arises due to the contaminations existing between architecture and art since the beginning of the twentieth century, and due to a reflection on the user's movement, habitability and a cultural knowledge of 'savoir habiter' space; iii) the selected case-studies, the *Proun Room* and the *Promenade Architecturale*, introduce a new concept of space into both disciplinary areas.

Finally I want to argue about the converging aspects between architecture and art, as a central theme for the comprehension of contemporary space. Supporting that, presently, both disciplines establish interstitial connections observable, not only in an aesthetic level, but in a deeper conceptual one.

Keywords: Architecture, Art, Space, Contamination, El Lissitzky, Le Corbusier

Introduction

'The architect, by his arrangement of forms, realizes an order which is a pure creation of his spirit; by forms and shapes he affects our senses to an acute degree and provokes plastic emotions; by the relationships which he creates he wakes profound echoes in us, he gives us the measure of our world, he determines the various movements of our heart and of our understanding; it is then that we experience the sense of beauty.' (Le Corbusier, 1923, 1)

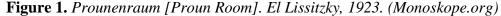
The experience of architecture has always been associated with the viewer's movement whilst *travelling* through a building. To experience an art work (whether sculpture or painting), at least until the twentieth century, was associated with a motionless contemplation of the object. Nowadays the contemporary experience of being an art viewer attaches movement and viewing as two inseparable conditions in order to apprehend an art object (Krueger, 2013).

My first argument is that this formal change, although it became most notable in the 1960s attached to art's 'expanded field' (Krauss, 1979) notion, was in the Russian Constructivism and Modernism that it arose. Since the first artistic and architectonic vanguards of the twentieth century we witness the importance of the user's body and movement in the definition of space, which I argue that it can represent a contamination between art and architecture. We assist to Constructivist artists exploring affinities between art and architecture, while come to fore with movement in space as a fundamental aspect to apprehend their work, connecting the following entities: art, movement, three dimensional space and, finally, architecture. While modern architects, as exploring transparency in their buildings, associate movement and reflect on the viewer's gaze, as a cinematic and photographic view – where 'the point of view of modern architecture is never fixed' (Colomina, 1994, 6) – translating an interest on space, not only from the architecture point of view, but transporting their reflections to other disciplinary fields of knowledge where framing, movement and viewing are premises attached to their conception of architecture.

My second argument is that in contemporary architecture the notion of *endogenous spatiality* arises due to the contaminations existing between art and architecture. Since, from the beginning of last century, we assist to important reflections on the user's movement, habitability and cultural knowledge of 'savoir habiter.' Aspects that influence what architecture is today and also what we understand as contemporary architectonic space.

In the first section of this paper I shall examine the notion of *endogenous* related to the *architecture and art contemporary paradigm* and, specifically its *endogenous spatiality*. Afterwards I will analyze the artistic work *Proun Room* (1923, Figure 1), of the Constructivist Russian artist El Lissitzky (1890-1941), and the term *Promenade Architectural* (1929), that the Swiss architect Le Corbusier (1887-1965) used referring to the experience of a viewer when

circulating through a building, applied to Maison la Roche (1923-24, Figure 2) and Villa Savoye (1929-31, Figure 3). Both case studies witness the mentioned paradigm and will contextualize the premises I wish to discuss in this paper since, it is my third argument that, the selected works introduce a new concept of space in architecture and in art. The final section will be dedicated to what characterizes architecture as a result of the problematic suggested between architecture and art - I believe that it is possible to identify three converging aspects between both disciplinary areas, leading to three methodological approaching perspectives: space as a physical and *real* place; space as aesthetic and *matter*; and space as investigation and *conceptual*.



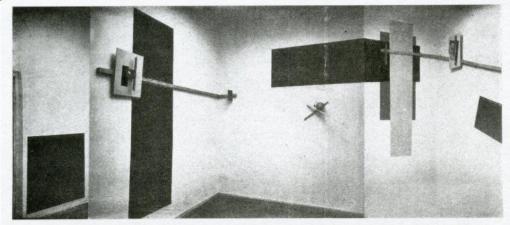


Figure 2. *Maison la Roche. Le Corbusier, 1923-24. Photographer: Charles Gérard, Photographie.* © FLC, 2014



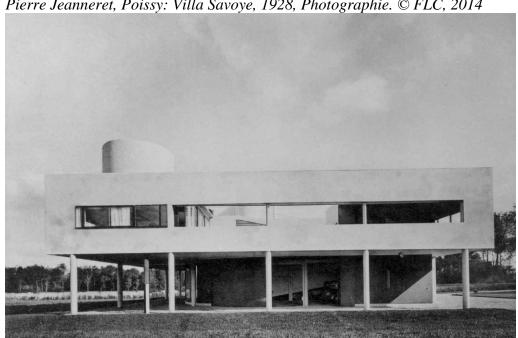


Figure 3. Villa Savoye at Poissy. Le Corbusier, 1929-31. Le Corbusier and Pierre Jeanneret, Poissy: Villa Savoye, 1928, Photographie. © FLC, 2014

Endogenous Spatiality

It is important to clarify my view of the relation between *endogenous*¹ with space - namely *endogenous spatiality* - which is related to my argument that the contaminations arousing between architecture and art are due to the possibility of understanding space from within. Therefore space is perceived as an entity constituted by different *internal* elements, which can generate understandings conceptually integrated in theories related to both disciplinary fields. It is due to that internal existence that it generates itself again with a new understanding common to both disciplines.

The concept of endogenous spatiality can also be understood through Henri Lefebvre's (1974, 169-170) reflection on space where the author, referring to 'spatial architectonics', questions what occupies space, to which he answers: 'a body – not bodies in general, nor corporeality, but a specific body, a body capable of indicating direction by a gesture, of defining rotation by turning round, of demarcating and orienting space'. Moreover Lefebvre affirms that the body's action has the capacity to create space not in a sense of 'manufacture spatiality' (1974, 169-170) but through an expansion, evolution and outspread, coming from within, therefore supporting that endogenous spatiality is generated, as well, by the user's movement.

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¹Understanding endogenous as: *adj.* growing from within. in Pg. 446. In *Ihe Concise Oxford Dictionary*.

Spatiotemporal Relationship

To support the relevance of the selected case studies with the argument in discussion, it is important to trace a time-space relation between both. The Proun-Room was 'built' in the context of the "Grosse Berliner Kunstausstellung" [Berlin's Great Art exhibition] in 1923, where Lissitzky used an enclosed exhibition space to present a composition of geometric, three dimensional elements related to his previous Proun paintings (developed between 1919 and 1925 - Figures 4 and 5) - involving the spectator not in the classic viewing of a painting but in a contour of physical movement, in order to perceive the exhibition's design space. By then Lissitzky was already well known in the Russian and Western art world – the latter due to a stay in the West between 1921 and 1925. Therefore Eva Foegács (2003, 48) defends that the Proun Room is a result of the artistic triangle of Moscow-Berlin-Amsterdam of 1923. Le Corbusier (1929, 24) first used the expression Promenade Architecturale while describing the Villa Savoye at Poissy (1929-31, Figure 3): 'In this house occurs a veritable promenade architecturale, offering aspects constantly varied, unexpected and sometimes astonishing.' Nevertheless, according to Flora Samuel (2010, 9) the first time the *Promenade* Architecturale seems to be present, however in a subliminal way, is in the letter that Le Corbusier and Pierre Jeaneret addressed to Madame Meyer (1925, Figure 6). In this letter the architects describe the first proposal of Madame Meyer's house under a promenade sense of appropriation of the spaces, 'beginning at the entrance and described in terms of light, view and magnitude of space' (1929, 89), accompanied with sketches by Le Corbusier representing a sequence of images of the several described spaces, which demonstrate already Le Corbusier's reflection on the subject of the viewer's movement in space.

Figure 4. Proun Study 1A (Proun S. K.) the Bridge. El Lissitzky, 1919. (Wikimedia Commons)

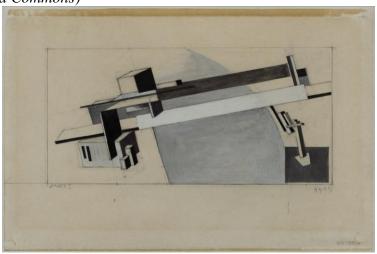
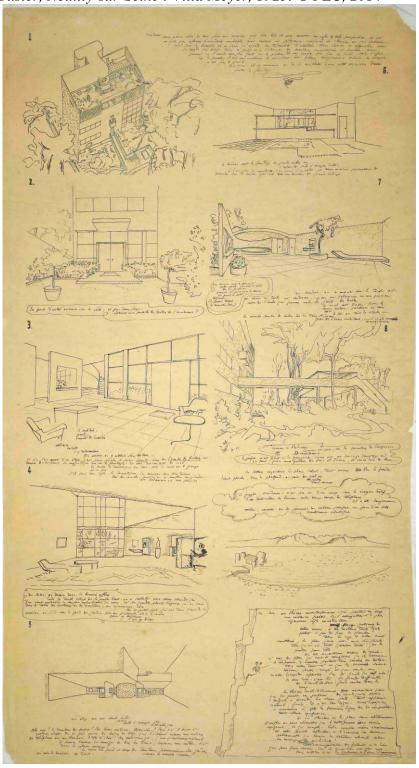


Figure 5. Proun 19D. El Lissitzky, 1922. (wikimediacommons)



Figure 6. Letter to Madame Meyer. Le Corbusier and Pierre Jeaneret, 1925. Le Corbusier, Neuilly-sur-Seine: Villa Meyer, 1925. © FLC, 2014



So here we bring together two personalities, coming from two different worlds, coincidently with many common interests such as technology, industry, architecture, space, art, Man and society - who even had contact in 1924 and knew each other's work (Weber, 2008, 333, 338, 382). Who, with the distance of approximately two years, present works on art and architecture, which relate to each other due to a special concern with the spectator's movement in space. In conclusion, what we have established is that we can identify specific aspects of the work of a constructivist artist and a modernist architect in which, despite their cultural distance; the use of different formal languages; and having different objectives in their work, there resides, in both authors work, a thematically proximate conceptual reflection on the importance of mobility in order to apprehend and comprehend space.

Lissitzky and the Proun-Room

The *Proun Room* represents a starting point of the encounter between art and architecture – a three dimensional painting installed in a room, therefore involving the concept of *installation*, which we will return to later on. With the *Proun Room* (*proun* – an acronym for project for the affirmation of the new – translation from Russian) Lissitzky goes beyond the bi-dimensionality and gravity of his former work (Foster, 2004, 209), and represents an artistic experience focused on space, as well as a contamination between art and architecture where space questions the viewer's position and movement, in order to visualize the art piece (Figure 7). The essay accompanying the *Proun-Room* Lissitzky (1923, 365) affirms, about the space (to which he refers as a *box*) given for him to occupy, that

'One of these boxes has been kindly put at my disposal. The six surfaces (floor, four walls, ceiling) are the given factors. They are to be designed. It should not be a living-room; this is, after all, an exhibition. One keeps on moving round in an exhibition. Therefore the room should be so organized that of itself it provides an inducement to walk around in it.'

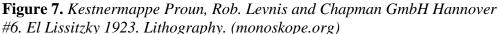
²Since Le Corbusier maintained an artistic practice as a painter, with emphasis on his sensibility and knowledge of cubist art.

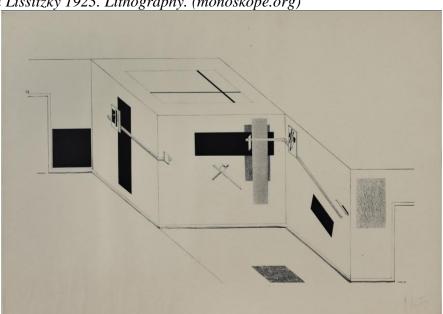
¹Lissitzky was trained as an engineer, at the Technische Hocheshule in Darmstadt between 1909 and 1914.

³There are four correspondence letters of Le Corbusier to Lissitzky from 1924 in *Le Corbusier Foundation*.

⁴Here should also be referred: Lissiztky's critical article on Le Corbusier: 'Idoli I idolopokonniki.' Strotelnaia Promyshlennost 7, nos. 11-12. 1929, in Cohen, Le Corbusier and the Mystique of the USSR. 108.

⁵Considering the letter to Madame Meyer (1925) as the first *application* of the *Promenade Architecturale*.





With this work Lissitzky builds a surrounding painting, close to the concept of *installation*, developed in the 1960s, where the walls seem to exist not only to allow the shapes to float, as if not attached to the wall, but to stress on the limits and presence of the body movement of the observer in space – therefore an *architectonic painting*. Lissitzky, about his *Prouns* mentions that the canvas became too small for his ideas; nevertheless I believe that it was not only due to that thinking that he started developing the mentioned *Prouns*, but due to an actual interest in architecture, therefore transforming his *Prouns* into *Proun Space*. The curator Ulrich Loock (2005, 10), defends that

'architecture represented for the artists of the Russian vanguard the factual possibility to participate actively, with their knowledge and experience, in the construction of a new egalitarian society.'

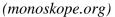
The *Proun-Room* represents a breakthrough for a new working phase in Lissitzky's oeuvre - between 1927-8 he builds another space subject to the notion of art combined with architecture – involving the spectator movement in order to apprehend space – *Abstraktes Kabinett* (Abstract Cabinet, Figure 8) – built in Hanover's Provizialmuseum, where pieces of abstract art are exposed

¹ 'The painter's canvas was too limited for me. The connoisseur's range of colour harmonies was too restricted; and I created the Proun as interchange station between painting and architecture. I have treated canvas and wooden board as a building site, which placed the fewest restrictions on my constructional ideas.' In El Lissitzky, 'The film of El's Life'. 1928, pg. 329. in Lissitzky-Küppers S. (1967). El Lissitzky, Life Letters Texts.

²Before this he made the design of the *Raum für konstruktive Kunst* [Room for Constructivist Art], for the Internationale Kunstausstellung, Dresden, 1926.

but, in order to visualize all of them, the viewer has to physically interact with the space moving the sliding panels which, by the viewer's body movements, would offer different scenarios of the exhibition. Moreover, the result of *Proun Room* can be subject to several influencing aspects, like Lissitzky's relation with the UNOVIS group, with the painter Kasimir Malevitch (the founder of Russian Suprematism), and his four years of experience in the West, especially his closeness to the Stijl Movement due to his friendship with Theo van Doesburg - Forgács (2003, 66) defends that 'Lissitzky presumed a correspondence between his version of Russian avant-garde – Proun – and the work of the international progressive art community in Germany.'

Figure 8. Abstraktes Kabinett (Abstract Cabinet). El Lissitzky, 1927-8.





Furthermore, Loock (2005, 11) argues that Lissitzky and Kurt Schwitters - an artist of the Russian vanguard who created the *Merzbau* (1923-36/7, Figure 09), another example of an art work closer to an architectonic object, imbued of *endogenous spatiality* - had two divergent positions, which will orientate incursions of art in the domain of architecture since the 1960s, though 'not through influences but conceptual principles' (Loock, 2005, 11).



Figure 9. Merzbau. Kurt Schwitters, 1923-36/7. (wikimedia commons)

We can conclude that Lissitzky, besides reflecting on architecture through the construction of the *Proun-Room*, the effect of the use of body movement to comprehend and define space, left an artistic and spatial heritage fundamental for the concept of *installation* - a concept that, although had its major development in the 1960s, is still a contemporary subject - it is a recurrent form of art, which engages a medium, an object, an observer and a space.

Le Corbusier and the Promenade Architecturale

Le Corbusier, through his oeuvre, also meant to leave an architectonic heritage to society. Namely with the *Promenade Architecturale*, where he would 'assist people in the process of savoir habiter [knowing how to live]' (Samuel, 2010, 9) - he wanted to teach people how to experience his buildings and did so by suggesting a circulation of recognition through space. Emphasizing how, during the design process, the future inhabitant movement was taken into account as an attached aspect of his architectonic reflections,

since 'it is while walking, moving from one place to another, that one sees how the arrangements of the architecture develop' (Corbusier, 1934, 24).

Flora Samuel's work *The Promenade Architecturale* (2010) is fully dedicated to its understanding, defending the 'presence' of the *promenade* in Le Corbusier's projects, demonstrating its possible dematerialization in a kind of identification *formula* based on the following elements: 'threshold; sensitising vestibule; questioning – savoir habiter; reorientation and culmination' (Samuel, 2010, 10, 25). Samuel's mentioned work was a very useful source on the addressed theme nevertheless, despite the mentioning of Le Corbusier's concern with body movement in space (2010, 35, 39), it does not relate with my view of the *promenade* in its relation with motion in space as a breakthrough boundary in modernist architecture - the *Promenade Architecturale* is understood as a fundamental aspect that will influence contemporary architecture and its relation and contaminations with art.

The two projects of Le Corbusier's earlier career where the *Promenade Architecturale* has a more evident emphasis are the Maison la Roche (1923-24, Figure 2) and Villa Savoye (1929-31, Figure 3). The first one was composed of two houses, one of them built for an art collector, which might have influenced Le Corbusier's (1929, 60) description of the project in a promenade sense due to its similarity with a museologic approach to space, in order to view the works of art, offering the viewer a sequence of sensorial experiences (Le Corbusier and Pierre Jeanneret Oeuvre Compléte Volume 1, p. 60).

'One enters: the architectural spectacle then offers itself to the gaze; one follows an itinerary and the perspectives develop with great variety; one plays with the influx of light brightening the walls or creating shadows. The bays open perspectives onto the exterior where one finds the architectural unity. On the interior the first essays in polychrome, based on specific reactions to colors allow the "architectural camouflage", that is to say the affirmation of certain volumes or in contrast, their effacement. The interior of the house must be white, but in order for that to be appreciable, a well-regulated polychrome is needed; the walls in shadow will be blue, those in bright light will be red.'

To illustrate the importance of the *Promenade Architecturale* in Villa Savoye Le Corbusier (1929, 187), besides using metaphoric expressions referring to it as a place 'to go and find the sun', after the villa's construction, he uses a picture of the ramp and names it: *Promenade Architecturale* (1934, 30) (Figure 10). Moreover he understands the ramp as the fundamental architectonic element of the house, and of the *promenade*, emphasizing the fluid movement of the inhabitant through the house, using the ramp as an element of slow circulation – inviting the experience of contemplation. *Contemplation promenade* associated also with the amplitude of space, of the 'planlibre' and the 'fenêtre longueur' (Le Corbusier, 1929, 128), and all aspects that focus a cinematic view – framing our look, therefore our

movement, in order to emphasize the moments of freedom – where body limits seem to be destroyed with visuality and movement, that the body can imagine, but not possess entirely.

Besides being, according to Samuel (2010, 15), a 'key term in the language of modern architecture,' Le Corbusier's Promenade Architecturale reflects the user's capacity to adjust his habitability to space. Furthermore, it influences space characterization and witnesses Le Corbusier's sensibility to the creation of a 'savoir habiter' far away from the motionless contemplative aspects attached to Modernism.

Figure 10. *Promenade Architecturale*. Le Corbusier. Le Corbusier and Pierre Jeanneret, Poissy: Villa Savoye, 1928. Photographe: Marius Gravot, Photographie. © FLC, 2014



Beatriz Colomina (1996) seems to understand the importance of the *Promenade Architecturale* suggesting a new problematic concept, which signifies a step further in the understanding of architectonic space. The author relates the boundaries between interior and exterior space, as if a fusion is suggested through the route described, from entering the space to getting to the roof-top which, through Le Corbusier's description, does not mean leaving the space (going out) but going in a space of a different nature.

'Such a promenade necessarily involves a transformation of our sense of architecture. The way we think about architecture is organized by the way we think about the relationship between inside and outside, private and public. With modernity there is a shift in these relationships, a displacement of the traditional sense of an inside, an enclosed space, established in clear opposition to an outside.' (Colomina, 1996, 12)

Therefore we can conclude that the *Promenade Architecturale* is a fundamental concept on space's perception and definition, but that it also adds new possibilities in the concept of inside and outside architectonic space.

Architecture and Art Convergence

Now I shall proceed to the final section of the paper. This last part is dedicated to what characterizes architecture as a result of the problematic suggested between architecture and art on conceptual, aesthetic and real aspects. I will start by arguing that the present contaminations, existing between architecture and art, started during Constructivism. contaminations have been approached, from an architectural point of view, by the architects Anthony Vidler (2000) and Beatriz Colomina (2006). In Warped Space: Art, Architecture and Anxiety in Modern Culture (2000) Vidler presents several studies establishing the connection between architecture, art, philosophy and space. But, above all, he argues about the existence of an 'intermediate art' (Vidler, 2000, VIII) as the intersection of the manifested interest by architects in exploring forms and artistic methodologies, as well as artists who integrated architectonic premises in their work. Finally, he defends that his analysis focused on notions of space, not as a container for objects, ideas and man but, instead, space as a container for psychological and perceptual manifestation (VIDLER, 2000, 1). While Colomina, in Doble Exposition: Arquitectura a Través del Arte [Double Exposure: Architecture through Art] (2006), finds in Cubism the motto to emphasize the architectureart convergence considering that 'cubism was a guest of architectonic speech' (2006, 12), listing concrete examples: from Le Corbusier and Amédée Ozenfant, to Colin Rowe and Robert Slutzky² as authors who reflected on this theme. Therefore, through these architects' reflections, we witness the beginning of an assumed relationship between architecture and art, from an architectural point of view, although accepting that art, as a disciplinary field of knowledge, is 'a foreign language' (Colomina, 2006, 6) which architects have felt attracted to for a long time.

From the 1960s we assist to the emergence of art as an 'expanded field' – translated in the exploration of space, not as a container, but as a motto for artistic expressions. Artists identified with Minimalism, Post-Minimalism and Conceptual Art, including Donald Judd, Robert Morris, Carl Andre, Dan Flavin, Gordon Matta-Clark and James Turrell (amongst others), through the expanded view of the arts, seemed to revisit aspects of Expressionism,

¹There is a variety of studies of the relationship between art and architecture but most of them coming from professionals with an artistic background.

²Le Corbusier's and Amédée Ozenfant's manifesto *Après le cubism* (1918) and their magazine *L'esprit Nouveau* (1920-25); Siegfired Giedion *Space, Time and Architecture* (1941); Henry-Russell Hitchcock study Painting toward Architecture (1948); Reyner Banham: Theory and Design in the First Machine Age (1960); Colin Rowe and Robert Slutzky's *Transparency: Literal and Phenomenal* (1963).

Constructivism and Futurism (Foster, 2011, 74). Furthermore, the questioning of the institutional spaces to exhibit art, namely gallery spaces and museums, increased a cultural interest in art and therefore the emergence of cultural institutions (O'DOHERTY, 1979, 27), which will also reflect in contemporary architecture. The artistic transformations of the 1960s are still influencing architects 'for whom art was a key point of departure' (Foster, 2011, VIII). Since then we assist to contaminations between architecture and art which go from collaborations between architects with artists, to an exchange of conceptual approaches, to the use of similar formal languages, to a more recent concept of the relation between architecture and art with an emphasis, from the 21st century on, on curatorial practices in architecture.

Therefore the architecture and art contaminations we assist today have a possible closeness to Krauss's 'expanded field' (1979), to Vidler's 'intermediate art' (2000), to Loock's 'transition to architecture' (2005), to Foster's 'art-architecture complex' (2011) and, finally, to endogenous spatiality.

I believe that there are, at least, three identifiable *converging aspects* in the comprehension of contemporary space, in architecture and art's scope, which represent the heritage of the *endogenous spatiality* developed in this article, also leading to three methodological perspectives, namely: (1) space as a physical place; (2) space as matter, and (3) space as investigation. Nevertheless I am not stating that these entities have defined and closed borders but have different methodologies with *blurred boundaries*. Moreover I believe it is possible to identify which of the previous *converging aspects* is most notable in some architects and artists' works – an investigation to proceed in future research projects.

Conclusion

In this paper, we first examined the concept *endogenous spatiality* having seen that it is a concept which translates the importance of the user's body in space as an internal generator of space itself, and that, therefore, it influences contemporary space attached to architecture and art.

Before analyzing the selected case studies we have set a time-space relation between the *Proun Room* and the *Promenade Architecturale* and realized that there was only two years separating both (1923 to 1925), and that the authors knew each-other's work - they even exchanged correspondence in 1924 - which might bring forth information on the possible influence that Lissitzky's work had on Le Corbusier's thinking of the importance of body movement as a space generator.

Through the analysis of the selected case studies we reached the following two conclusions: both case studies reflect on the understanding of endogenous spatiality; and, represent an important heritage for the contemporary experience of being an architecture and art observer, as well as a space beholder, attached

to movement and viewing, as two inseparable conditions in order to apprehend space, whether architectonic or artistic.

Then we discussed the interaction between the *Proun Room* and the *Promenade Architecturale* with *endogenous spatiality*. This relationship proved its importance because it outlines a correspondence that has not been previously explored, and sheds light on issues that help advance our understanding on the paradigmatic definition of contemporary space *located* somewhere between an architectonic and artistic experience.

Finally, we approached the relationship between endogenous spatiality with the contemporary contaminations between art and architecture, defending the existence of, at least, three converging aspects which can be dematerialized into three different methodological possibilities, namely: (1) space as a physical place; (2) space as matter, and (3) space as investigation.

Therefore, besides developing, in future research projects, this thinking through the analysis of contemporary examples, where the concept of *endogenous spatiality* can be found, and the *converging aspects* can be identified, it would also be important to go on investigating this theme with other examples of the first vanguards of the 20th century where blurred boundaries between architecture and art can be found, such as Kurt Schwitters, Vladimir Tatlin, Walter Gropius, Adolf Loos and Mies van der Rohe. I believe that these authors' oeuvres manifests a special awareness of the viewers' movement in space, as well as express contaminations between architecture and art, which are still fundamental to identify, examine and comprehend, in order to inform the subject of the contemporary art-architecture contaminations.

Much has been said about the relationship between architecture and art from an art's point of view, including reflections from the field of theory and critics of art and, most recently, from curating. Nevertheless it is urgent to rethink this theme - of the convergence aspects, between architecture and art, not from the usual artistic point of view, but from architecture's point of view. Therefore, although it might seem a 'foreign language,' it is time for architects, coming from different fields such as theory, critics and practice, to stand on this theme and express their thoughts on the architecture-art convergence paradigm.

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