

Model, by the way of the home in Frontenex. Realization: Charles Pictet, architect.

The temperature is soft. It is raining. A particular atmosphere reigns in this month of January; a curious winter does not know either to come or leave.

I visit together with Jacques Pictet a work recently finished by his atelier of architecture¹. It is placed over the plateau of Frontenex, in the borders of the commune of Geneva, there where the city yields its character and density in favor of protected and private spaces.

Everything here is magnificent. The place is large, wide and smartly treed. The lot is, by itself, a piece of conviction of the great Genevan manors of the XVIII and XIX centuries. The buildings rising over the terrain compose, in an architectural way, the extremely organized character of this place. The landscape still contains rests of the knowledge shared by botanists descendent of the great local families and by horticulturists at their service.

Remarkable, this is the sense of this comment, the home made by Charles Pictet. At first sight, it is hardly perceptible from the entrance of the farm. Attached to the old orange greenhouse, it develops a character of independent and autonomous architecture.

Remarkable is the realization by means of contrasting effects, understand opposition, that it makes up together with its environment. Remarkable, finally, the plastic game this "object" expresses. Its shape, its materiality, they are provided by the pursued status of exception.

We interchange different impressions, implantation, articulation, size, organization, but, to my astonishment for this architecture, I cannot understand its nature nor the influences marking its spirit.

We know that contemporary architecture and, particularly occidental contemporary architecture emerges from two contradictory perspectives, opposed since the advent of modernity. One is its inscription inside the syntactic composition of order and rule, whereas the other one, more sensual, finds its legitimacy in the search of a "liberating reason"². Present architecture is interested in trying a third way. While dominating rigorously the sense and syntactical language of an architectural composition, it affords a certain "freedom" or distortion in the use of the applied geometry, asserting more strongly the importance of conception. The hallmark of this architecture is looking like the absent piece of a composition, a set on stage³.

With no intention to fall in a justification that could be revealed as dangerous and certainly discussable, I would like to be able to interpret the home in Frontenex as a mould. A resemblance of what the models made by André Bloc, the home in Frontenex is presented, absolutely, as a strong and remarked plastic work. The comparison with the works of André Bloc is placed in a very precise field. The formal search by means of the techniques of plastering that, by extraction of material, offers us the "môdel" as a concluded work⁴.

More prosaically, the amazement this home provokes emerges from the relationship it makes with the oranges greenhouse⁵.

Of functional, narrow and enlarged architecture, this old nave organizes a part of its territory thanks to its oblique implantation with respect to general geometry of the enclosed garden. This annex is understood, no doubt, more similar to a greenhouse, facing South and inserted in the ground 1 meter beneath the level of natural terrain, than to a classical oranges greenhouse. Using this difference in levels, the home in Frontenex applies this particularity, exaggerating the role of the steps and instituting a game of slopes between the interior and exterior.

The transition between the entrance hall and the interior vestibule of the house is executed by means of a slight ascending slope and a descending slope. It is here where we understand that the reference floor level of the new home is placed at the same level as natural terrain. Out of this, the walkway suggests two alternatives: crossing the successive spaces of the different levels by means of a massive staircase, of double section, or heading, following the slight descending slope, towards the original estate, the oranges

greenhouse, which gathers in a sole volume the kitchen, the living-room and the lounge.

Interior spaces are distributed by means of sloping slabs, or even accessible sloping ceilings, thus expressing the clear and obvious distinction between buildings. This archetype becomes the argument. A French reference also brings me to this realization. "The oblique function", theorized and expressed by Claude Parent and Paul Virilio in number 1 of the magazine "Architecture Principe", from February 1966⁴ offers true formal similarities. There is no doubt that the relationship between the home in Frontenex and the whole trajectory of the editors of this magazine manifests is disproportionate.

Even though, the application of the slope as spatial component is a little or never used principle by all of the contemporary architects, and thus it seems interesting to be highlighted as remarkable attempt.

Linked to the principles of the articulated plan, the realization of Charles Pictet offers in its spatial organization several surprises eager to be emerged. The walkway in this architecture is made around the staircase. Massive and expressive, it takes a very mineral expression when we reach the first floor, because there is just one reference material: concrete. The succession of bedrooms around this staircase, in the first floor or in the ground floor, makes several spaces from different surfaces appear, although generally small ones. The projection around this "core" of distribution allows every single space to have a privileged relationship with landscape. In this sense, the points of view and their framing through the large windows have been highly privileged. The oranges greenhouse, recovers by means the restoration of the existing windows the spatiality own of their original use, a unique volume, headed towards the garden.

Materiality in this realization is, no doubt, exemplar. A sole material, concrete, institutes not only a very assertive relationship with natural environment, but also it exposes the principle chosen by the architect of the monolith, or the rock. The choice of conglomerates and the treatments of surfaces is, equally, very assertive. The stone cladding of the exterior faces, including the roof that neither does nor present any watertightness nor visible covertures, makes the concrete⁵ composition emerge. The natural dye of this concrete, linked to the old oranges greenhouse, is gently realized, I mean, with a certain material similarity. There is no doubt that the material is applied with elegance and therefore has nothing to do with the expressive representations of the architectures realized with raw concrete in the course of the 50 and 60 years of last century. Once said this, the choice is directed towards the will defended by multiple present architects to conceive architectures that I name as "paradigmatic". Autonomous, they are the expression of a strong idea, remarkable enough to transmit the concept, and are not in relation with other forms of language. They confirm the choice of masses and volumes studied. A kind of scale sketch.

Perhaps this is the matter, a model with a belonging sense, due to its features, to the representation or the association of a category to a genre. Due to its conceptual trajectory, to its relationship with the historical or cultural reference or, even, its material expression, the home in Frontenex uses all the effects to assert its autonomy and, by it, justifying the commitment of its architect.

Christian Dupraz, architect.

1. Reunion with Charles Pictet and Christian Dupraz, by the way of the home in Frontenex (Geneve). 26th of January of 2007.

2. Formulae extracted from Frédéric Migayrou in "Pour une architecture du Factual". Introduction to the catalogue edited due to the French participation in the IV International Architecture Exhibition of Venice, September-November 1996, Editions HX, Orléans, 1996.

3. The Gypsum Pavilion realized by André Bloc for Batimat in 1965, and also the livable sculptures or spatial, amazing compositions, evidence the notion of the gesture and, therefore, of the engineer/autor in the search of a shape. In this point, the comparison between the Works by André Bloc and the home in Frontenex is interesting. See the text by André Bloc. "La plastique architecturale et l'art de l'ingénieur", in "Architecture d'aujourd'hui", n°99, December 1961 and January 1962.

4. "In fact, given that the vertical/horizontal static does not correspond with the man's dynamics, from now forth architecture will have to be realized in the inclination to place in the new plan of human awareness, missing this, the entire architectural program will rapidly become useless." Paul Virilio, Avertissement, "Architecture Principe" n° 1, Paris, 1966.

5. Notes by Charles Pictet during our conversations about the materiality of this work, Geneve, 9th March 2007. "The exterior concretes are of smashed conglomerate in beige color, coming from Hauterive (Ne) and have a great granule up to 3 cm. They have been chosen so that flat faces of conglomerates are placed in parallel to the framework and reappear in the wall siding. The cement putty is normal, grey and without dyes. Just the wall siding gives a grey/beige color according to the plasterboard of the old greenhouse, made with sand of the terrain, because there are around 2.5 meters of sand beneath the 30 cm of plant soil.

Charles Pictet architecte FAS | SIA

SINGLE-FAMILY HOME

FRONTENEX, GINEBRA - Suiza

CHARLES PICTET, ARQUITECTO

COLLABORATORS	Philippe Le Roy, Architecte EPFZ
ENGINEER	Jean Regad, Ginebra
PHOTOGRAPHER	Francesca Giovannelli

COLLABORATING COMPANIES

Civil Engineering	Jean regad ingenieros
Electricis	Montanier-Schwitzguebel
Heating	Formica
Masonry	Bonnet
Metalwork	Biedermann charpente
Roofs	Hanhart toitures
Wooden Carpentry	Carpintería Rodríguez
Coatings	Multisol
Locksmith	Metallover
Excavations	Chemin de Delay 16

DATES

EXECUTION PROJEC	2003
WORK START	Marzo 2005
WORK END	Noviembre 2006



23

6

REHABILITATION IN HOUSING

