

## Charlotte Perriand: Graphic Analysis of the 'Maison du week-end'

The 20th century was characterised by a radical modernisation not only in the built environment but also in society, particularly in the condition of women. This article proposes a graphic reinterpretation of one of the most significant of Charlotte Perriand's projects which was a response to the social problems arising in the early 1930s in France during the establishment of the Popular Front's new socialist government. It regards the unrealised project known as *Maison du week-end*, designed in 1934 for the competition organized by the journal *L'Architecture d'Aujourd'hui*.

In particular, in her project of the private holiday house, the small temporary home turns into a manifesto of the new architectural culture and into an experimental field through which Perriand investigates a theme common to her whole work: the definition of interior spaces as instigators of a new way of living.

Starting from this definition, Perriand offers a new point of view on the minimum living space for leisure and a radical architectural interpretation of French industrial modernity. The graphic reading of this never realised project gives us a valuable demonstration of one of the most emblematic figures in the history of modern architecture through which the drawing interprets forms and spatial reasons.

Keywords: representation, graphic analysis, Charlotte Perriand, Modern Movement

The period that is the background of the architecture project analysed here was characterised by the important innovative laws of the 1920's and 1930's. Indeed, the French government had given more rights to the working-class including, for the first time, paid holidays. Several architectural competitions were organised for the realisation of areas for leisure or, at building scale, of minimal week-end housings through which it was possible to experiment with the latest innovative technologies. Among the most important figures who worked with rigorous and sophisticated survey methodologies was Charlotte Perriand (1903–1999), who presented her vision of the minimalist architecture for leisure and holidays.<sup>1</sup>

With this contribution she identified a part of her architectural philosophy of economic and functional composition of volumes.

An independent and anti-conformist figure, Charlotte Perriand, established an important role in the architecture of the 20th century becoming one of the Modern Movement pioneers and contributing to the definition of a new femininity thanks to her determination and her view of modern woman. Even if in that period Art Déco spread in France, Perriand understood that the emblems of that art belonged to the past and that spaces, pure geometry, light, new materials, machines and factories would take the place of the decorative art.

Charlotte Perriand loved the present but she looked to the future and she was fascinated by cars and by their curved shapes and their bodywork. She realised that the age of machines represented an humanist ideal, which would make human life easier and more comfortable. Reading *Vers une Architecture* and *L'art décoratif d'aujourd'hui* by Le Corbusier gave her insight into the views of a new man close to her modern vision of life, a vision that was evolving from a domestic ideal anchored in the decorative art, to a functional and rational one. Today she is still known mostly for her interior

<sup>1</sup> For Charlotte Perriand and this topic, see Charlotte Perriand, *Io, Charlotte tra Le Corbusier, Léger e Jeanneret* (Roma-Bari: Edizioni Laterza, 2006); Charlotte Perriand, *Charlotte Perriand: Un art de vivre* (Paris: Flammarion, 1985); Jacques Barsac, *Charlotte Perriand: Complete works, vol 1:1903–40* (Zürich: Scheidegger & Spiess, 2014); Jacques Barsac, *Charlotte Perriand: Un art d'habiter 1903–1959* (Paris: Editions Norma, 2005); Elisabeth Védrenne, *Charlotte Perriand* (Paris: Editions Assouline, 2005); Arthur Ruegg, *Charlotte Perriand: Livre de bord 1928–1933* (Basel-Berlin-Boston. English Edition Birkhäuser, 2004).

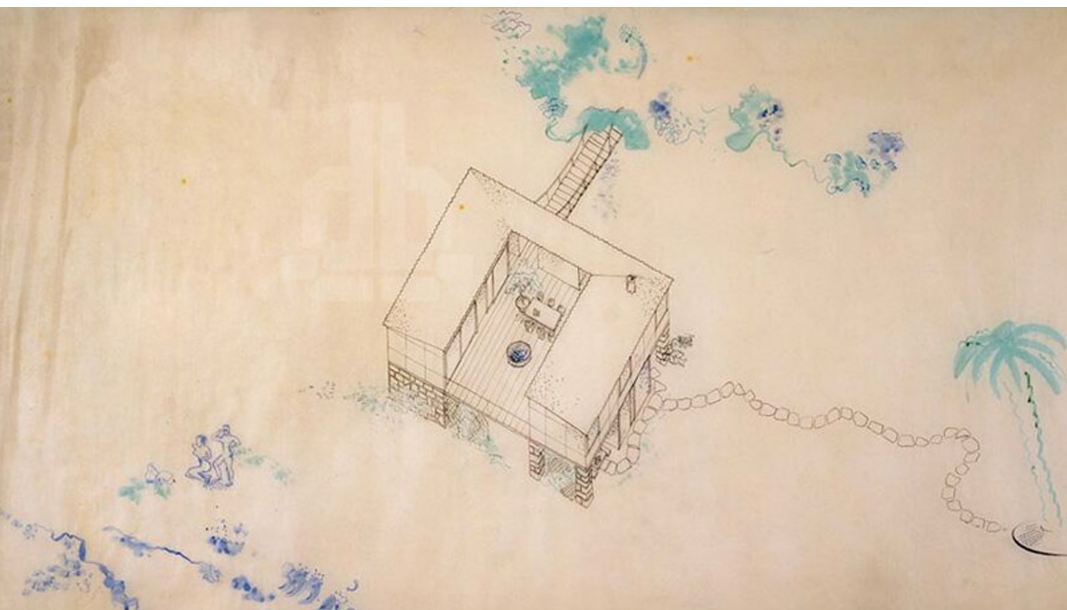


Fig. 1. Sketches of the 'Maison au bord de l'eau' by Charlotte Perriand. Published in Jacques Barsac, *Charlotte Perriand: Complete works, vol 1:1903-40* (Zürich: Scheidegger & Spiess, 2014).

designer activities rather than for architecture, even if many documents testify to her experience as building designer.

Charlotte Perriand's trajectory was neither linear nor premeditated. She proceeded by leaps that led her from one setting to the next, with return loops to themes that inspired her.

She started her work in the rue de Sèvres studio, to the left of Le Corbusier and where Pierre Jeanneret was partner in charge of furniture. Le Corbusier selected Charlotte to complete his program on the humanisation of interior design and to develop his concept of 'furniture to live'. After the first years of collaboration, Perriand specialised independently in prefabricated architecture for recreational purposes and built a series of vacation houses that could be used by a great number of people.

In the early 1930s, before the Popular Front rose to power in France in 1936, Perriand found the organisation of leisure one of the most 'urgent problems' to resolve. Le Corbusier wrote about it:

The recreations of the age of the machine, from the first day of the reorganisation of production, emerge as a social danger: imminent threat. Soon, inevitably, the organisation of production will open up vacant hours each day for everyone... This is one of the most troubling problems of contemporary sociology. We therefore feel the need to quickly transform the unformed acceptance of leisure into a disciplined function. We cannot abandon seven to eight hours a day to millions of men and women and young people in the streets.<sup>2</sup>

Similar to other architects, Perriand participated in various competitions, including one organised by the journal *L'Architecture d'Aujourd'hui* to design a week-end house. The competition was to plan

an inexpensive week-end house, designed to be built on a river bank, and to lodge a five-person family and two guests. Perriand worked out two solutions: the first was the *Maison du week-end*, for which she received the second prize, and the second known as *Maison au bord de l'eau* (Fig. 1), remained on paper. However, under the direction of Perriand's daughter, Pernet, and Louis Vuitton's support, prototype was faithfully built by Cassina according to the vintage plans.

The project itself was most likely inspired by the modest fishermen's houses built on pilotis around Arcachon Bay, which she had seen while she was on vacation with Le Corbusier and Jeanneret in 1934.<sup>3</sup>

Main elements could be built industrially: metal frame, floor panels, interior and exterior walls, ceilings. These elements could be mounted in various arrangements depending on the site. Inspired by the inventiveness of campers, Charlotte Perriand planned a flexible house, produced in series, designed for modules and delivered in mounting box, whose foundations would be realised with local stones.

Through graphical analysis, like a critical-communicative tool, it is possible to investigate the *Maison du week-end*, one of the most important *habitation minimum* projects designed by Charlotte Perriand providing recreation at an economic price. This graphic practice is very useful to interpret the design process, particularly because it is an unrealised project about which it is impossible to have any direct information on formal and spatial values. The vintage drawings include a plan, three sections, three facades and an axonometric scheme.

The graphic reworks realised of the drawings listed above, concern a plan, four sections, four facades, an axonometric scheme, functional schemes and a digital model. The latter represents the synthesis of all other representations and the various hermeneutics declinations resulting from these<sup>4</sup>.

The design presented two symmetrical volumes facing one another and opening into a wood terrace raised on pilotis above the level of the river. The whole structure was designed and supported by stone pillars. In this way, one could be at a distance from the river and have a healthy and livable construction without interferences. As she said in the competition text, she intended to design a wooden tent, a free space without further internal developments. Charlotte Perriand gave up defining interior spaces in order to allow the tenants who lived there the ability to participate in the formal interior composition.

Through studying the plan it has been possible to get much information about the interior organisation. According to records drawn by Perriand, the A volume was intended for the family, instead the B volume for the guests and the kitchen (Fig. 2).

<sup>3</sup> Cf. Barsac, *Charlotte Perriand*, 302.

<sup>4</sup> Cf. Riccardo Migliari (ed.), *Disegno come modello: Riflessioni sul disegno nell'era informatica* (Roma: Kappa, 2004), 6.

<sup>2</sup> Le Corbusier, *La Ville Radieuse* (Boulogne: L'Architecture d'Aujourd'hui, 1933), 64.

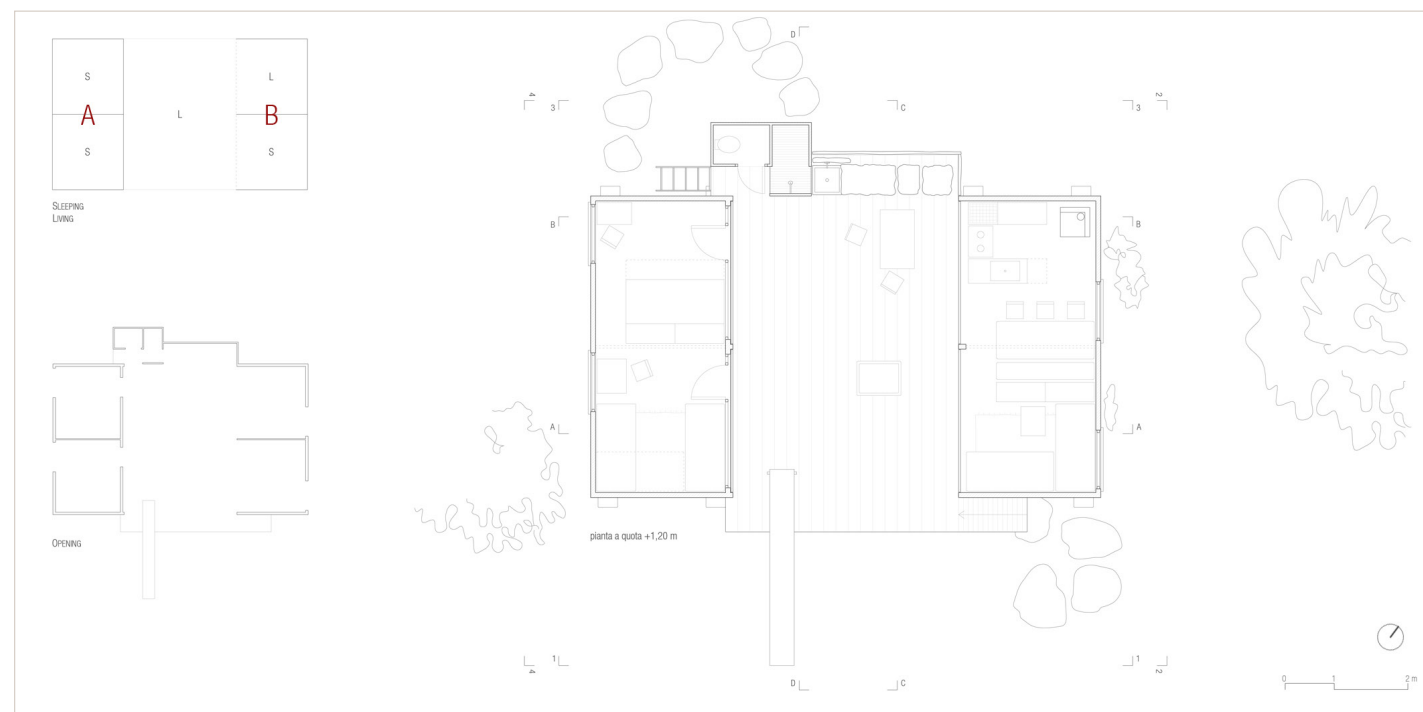


Fig. 2. Graphic interpretations of the 'Maison du week-end', Plan and schemes.  
Graphic produced by the author.

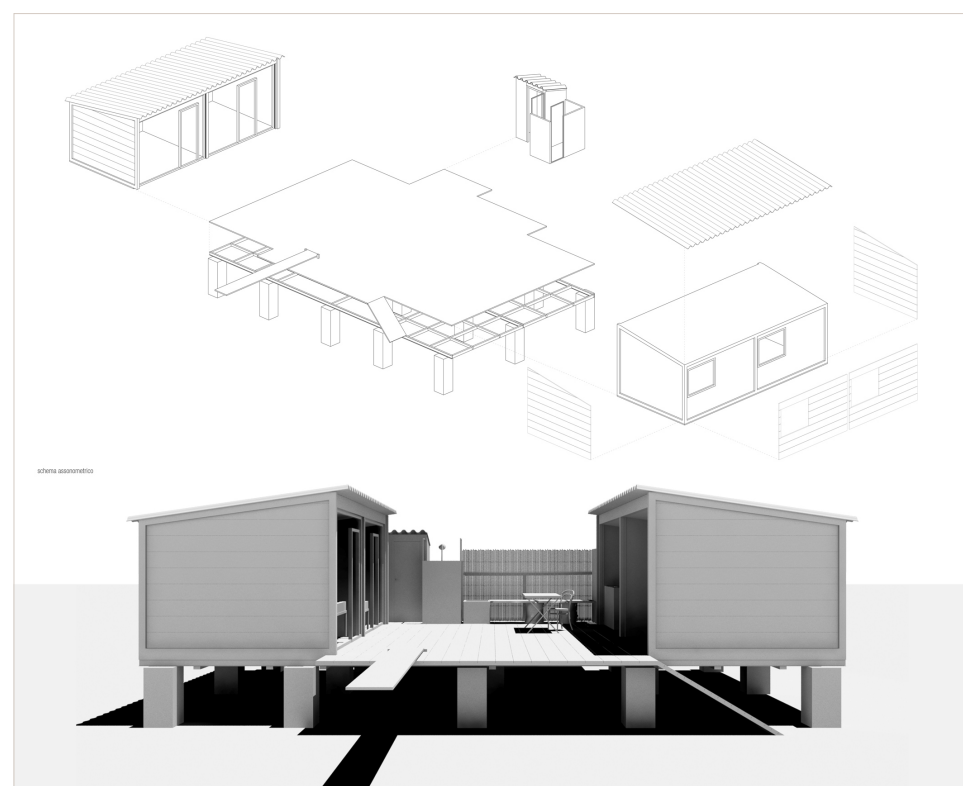


Fig. 3. Graphic interpretations of the 'Maison du week-end', Axonometric scheme and render.  
Graphic produced by the author.

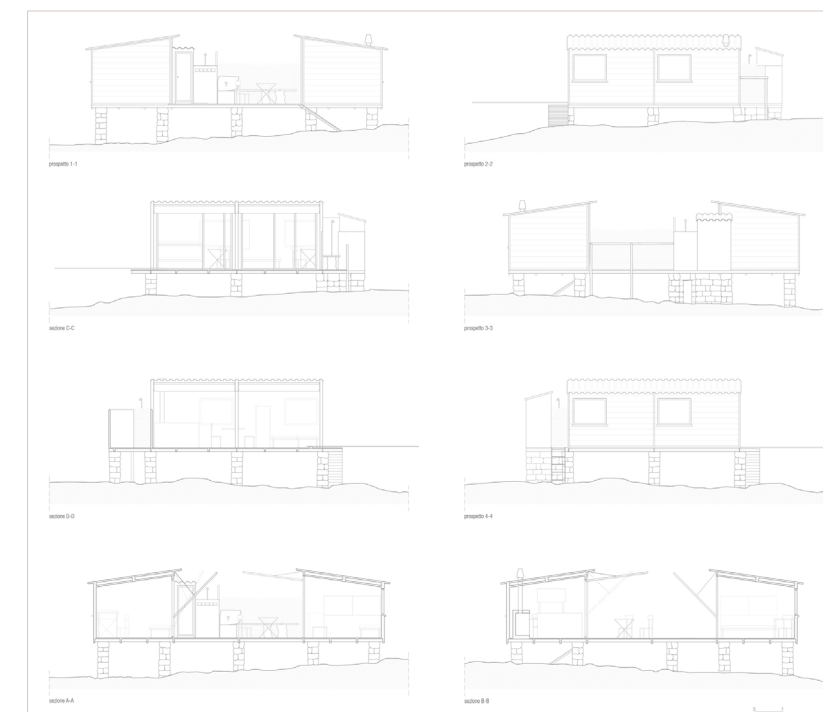


Fig. 4. Graphic interpretations of the 'Maison du week-end', Sections and facades.  
Graphic produced by the author.

The terrace was the living place, the real meeting place of the house. Wooden movable panels could isolate parts of the platform without removing the light or open to protect it from the sun and the rain. This smart cover system allowed to doubling of the floor space of the house. There were four movable provided panels. Each of them was independent of the other and enabled the partial or total isolation of the different rooms according to the needs of the tenants, as is evident from the sections. Through the plan you can also see that only two movable panels of the A volume show two little doors which allow the possibility to isolate oneself, while the B volume does not have this. This solution induces the tenants to come out of their indoor shelter and to enjoy the open space of the platform. Perriand, moreover, specifies the recommended orientation according to which the WC and the kitchen are on the north to protect the other spaces from cold winds, the parents' bedroom on the north-west, the children's bedroom on the south-west and the guest bedroom on the south-east. The rooms, placed in this way, are visually connected by diagonals which intersect and translate in movement axes. The first diagonal lies between the two stairs, one of which is in the garage and the other goes towards the river. A second diagonal axis lies between the living area of the platform and the diving board. The parallel axes that connect the parents' bedroom to the kitchen and the children's to the guest bedroom emphasise the role of the bridge-platform.

The axonometric scheme permits one to better capture the spirit of Charlotte Perriand's idea (Fig. 3). The fireplace, the garage, the diving board, the barbecue and the WC, are all elements that show

how Perriand was trying to offer every possible comfort through simple and inexpensive solutions, following not only an economy of volumes but also of materials.

From the A-A and B-B sections one can ascertain much information about rotating panels, their operation, the covers as well as way of life that Charlotte Perriand was trying to introduce with this plan (Fig. 4). From the C-C section it is evident that the placing of the WC on the platform gives an added value to the whole project. This section is also useful to make clear the height of the wooden panel which separates the two bedrooms of the A module which, unlike that in the B module, only partially separates the two rooms without the guarantee of soundproofing.

Her solution to resolve the problem of the natural slope of land is interesting. Presenting her proposal about a slope, she demonstrates how this plan could be available to every place, because the main structure is completely free from the ground below.

At the same time, Perriand employs this aspect to place the garage below the platform. This solution clearly reveals the influence of Le Corbusier in her work. As in his *Villa Savoye*, the car has its own role in the house. Since the modern family uses the car as principal mean of transport, Charlotte Perriand explains that here, as in every residence, there will be a specific place to shelter it.

Perriand's experience in planning houses like these, examples of minimal and economic price architecture, was important because it introduced her to the fundamental rules of human life in a limited space and also because it made her fight for flexible, new and practical solutions useful for her future works. Through this plan, she emphasised a collective and rational way of life. Her work, in fact, reflected her age tendencies towards economy and prosperity of the middle classes. Through *habitation minimum*, she found new directives for integration and safeguard of public health. Besides the influence of Le Corbusier's residences in Weissenhof especially for the organisation of inner spaces inspired by the sleeping car, Charlotte Perriand was affected by other innovative architects of that time.

About twenty years before, in 1913, Adolf Loos wrote the rules to follow for the mountain buildings:

Do not build in a picturesque manner. Leave such effect to the walls, the mountains and the sun....Pay attention to the forms in which the locals build. For they are the fruits of wisdom gleaned from the past. But look for the origin of the forms. If technological advances made it possible to improve on the form, then always use this improvement....Be true! Nature only tolerates truth.<sup>5</sup>

<sup>5</sup> Adolf Loos, *Die potemkinsche Stadt: Verschollene Schriften 1987–1933* (Vienna: Adolf Opel, G. Prachnercop, 1983), 16.

Therefore, Perriand refused the total integration with the environment based on natural shapes; on the contrary she presented rational shapes that declared their artificiality and she approached the natural through the use of organic materials.

In her autobiography, she wrote:

Architecture proceeds from interior towards exterior, it is a coming and going movement. It must satisfy our needs, offer us the extension of our daily gestures, both in a house, in a hospital, in an embassy... It is necessary to keep in mind the man in his individual or collective dimension and his habits, his idiosyncrasies, the society in which he lives, the climate, the environment.<sup>6</sup>

In her plans, Perriand introduced some basic but innovative concepts, such as the use of high technology materials in different combinations, the emphasis on improved interior comfort, the sizing and rationalisation of spaces, the cooperation between factory and handicraft, and the packing speed. All these elements confirm the diachronic universality of her solutions.

Starting from the minimum, she reached the whole, keeping in mind that the new social conditions required houses for a modern, practical and independent man and woman. Even if many her works were not realised, she revealed a fresh methodology of a free and a creative mind.

<sup>6</sup> Perriand, *Io, Charlotte*, 28.



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