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## Spectral returns of domesticity

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**Abstract.** This is a study of the link between the house and the city, based on a close reading of three historical statements from Western urban theory by Leone Batisti Alberti, Le Corbusier, and Paul Virilio. Sexualized metaphors of the house as the feminine, private realm and the city as the masculine, public realm proliferate in the modern period. However, rather than conforming to this conventional opposition, these three authors define the city in terms of the house. Their statements provide a curious link across temporal and geographical boundaries, with significant theoretical implications. In all three cases both the feminine figure and themes of loss and death underlie the desire to project the ideal city. In this paper I argue that these themes intertwine in complicated ways to assert urban identification in terms of a masculine desire of total control and mastery by silencing the feminine figure.

“If a *city*, according to the opinion of philosophers, be no more than a great *house* and, on the other hand a *house* be a little *city*; why may it not be said, that the members of that house are so many little houses.”

Leone Batisti Alberti (1986 [1485], page 13, emphasis mine)

“A detail in a *city* means a *house* multiplied a hundred thousand times; therefore it is the *city*.”

Le Corbusier (1987 [1924], page 71, emphasis mine)

“[The] protocol of physical access gave all its meaning to the space of a *dwelling* and of a *City*; both were linked to the primacy of the sedentary over the nomadic ways of our origins. And all of this is being swept away by advanced technologies, especially those of domestic teledistribution.”

Paul Virilio (1991, page 34, emphasis mine)

The definition of the *city* in relation to the *house* provides an extraordinary link between these three quotations from paradigmatic texts of radically different historical locations. Alberti's statement comes from early modern Italy, the birthplace of the Renaissance city. Le Corbusier's proclamation echoes from the center of modernist urban planning ideals. Virilio summarizes present-day anxieties over the disappearance of familiar notions of urbanity and domesticity. These authors' juxtaposition of the city and the house is striking considering the long history of their separation, at least in the Western world. From the ancient Greek notions of the *polis* and the *oikos* this separation has been sexualized and accentuated in material and metaphorical terms.<sup>(1)</sup> The polis is the center of politics and decisionmaking. It is the place of (male) citizens. The oikos is women's space, protected from the intrusions of the polis by its tall walls with few openings.

<sup>(1)</sup> On the basis of texts of ancient Greek philosophers such as Aristotle, Richard Sennett provides one of the most inspiring accounts of the Greek city in these terms in *Flesh and Stone: The Body and the City in Western Civilization* (1994, pages 31–86). In a different context, Christopher Reed states that the domestic figures are the opposite of the heroic at least since Odysseus (1996, pages 15).

Sexualized images of the city and the house, in which a public/private divide is marked, proliferate in the modern period, when the notion of home emerges as a refuge from the chaos, pollution, and intensity of the industrial city. The modernist imagination insistently opposes the eroticized thrill of the metropolis to the familial haven of home (see Best, 1995).<sup>(2)</sup> As contemporary feminist work has theorized, the sexualized discourse of the public/private divide is neither neutral nor innocent in its operations.<sup>(3)</sup> The association of the public realm with the masculine codes of rationality, politics, and action and of the private realm with the maternal sphere of emotions has ethical and political connotations. Most seriously, perhaps, the neat separation of these spheres conveniently overlooks the emotional and sexual operations within the public realm and depoliticizes the private. A number of contemporary feminist theorists have analyzed the investments rooted in masculinist discourses on urban space, whereas others have exposed the power structures inscribed in notions of domesticity and domestic spaces.<sup>(4)</sup>

Alberti, Le Corbusier, and Virilio clearly participate in a masculinist discourse of space that privileges the public realm in terms of its virility. Yet, for all three, the structure of the city depends on the house. The city is “no more than a great house” for Alberti and “a house multiplied a hundred thousand times” for Le Corbusier. According to Virilio, domestic teledistribution technologies are responsible for the failure of the contemporary city. The feminine realm of the house, then, is the condition of possibility for the city. Its role is reminiscent of the Platonic notion of *chora*, which is the condition of the genesis of material existence.<sup>(5)</sup> *Chora* corresponds to the feminine sphere, which gives birth to the intelligible universe. Without any qualities of its own, it engenders, nurtures, and supports structured form and matter. Following Luce Irigaray, Elizabeth Grosz argues that *chora* enables the perpetuation of patriarchal modes of domination that rely on “the silencing and endless metaphorization of femininity as the condition of men’s self-representation and cultural domination”.<sup>(6)</sup> If the feminine house structures the city, the repetitive use of the house has ethical implications in theorizing the city.

The repeated notion of loss in Alberti’s, Le Corbusier’s, and Virilio’s discourses deserves attention in terms of the relation between the virile city and the feminized house. All three architects redefine the city on the basis of a perceived crisis rooted in technology: military technology occupies a central position in Alberti’s discourse, as does transportation in Le Corbusier’s discourse, and communication technologies in Virilio’s discourse. All three describe the technological crisis in terms of fragmentation and disappearance and lament the loss of the city. Their project is the recovery of lost

<sup>(2)</sup> For a related discussion in the context of 1950s Hollywood melodrama see Mulvey (1989, page 64).

<sup>(3)</sup> Nancy Duncan points out that “the public/private dichotomy (both the political and spatial dimensions) is frequently employed to construct, control, discipline, confine, exclude and suppress gender and sexual difference preserving traditional patriarchal and heterosexist power structures” (1996, page 128). Duncan quotes Gayatri Spivak, who says that “the deconstruction of the opposition between the private and the public is implicit in all, and explicit in some, feminist activity” (Spivak, 1988, page 103).

<sup>(4)</sup> Sue Best and Rosalyn Deutsche wrote extensively on the sexualized production of contemporary urban discourse by leading (male) theorists (Best, 1993; Deutsche, 1996, pages 203–244). For an extensive account of the critique of the public/private opposition by feminist artists who problematize the domestic ideal and politicize the private realm see, Sharon Haar and Christopher Reed (1996).

<sup>(5)</sup> For a detailed account of *chora* in relation to sexuality and space see Grosz in “Women, *chora*, dwelling” (1995, pages 111–124).

<sup>(6)</sup> Heidi J Nast and Mabel O Wilson emphasize this point in relation to the architecture of the house, stating that, “The materiality of the body is metonymically equated with the materiality of the house, the ordering element being identified as paternal; the woman of the house, a maternal figure, is constructed in material and discursive ways as guardian and supporter of law” (1994, page 51).

urban identification. If the city is the masculine realm and if its loss signifies the loss of masculinity, what is the role of the feminine figure in this economy of loss and recovery? The architectural background of Alberti, Le Corbusier, and Virilio renders their use of the house in urban discourse significant. Their use of the house is rooted in their knowledge of its architectural and spatial materiality. The materiality of space produces subjects, concepts, and experiences as much as it is produced by them.<sup>(7)</sup> The city and house envisioned by Alberti, Le Corbusier, and Virilio produce critical sexualized identification, implicit in their discourses and architectural representations.

My chronological alignment of the opening three quotations is not of historical interest per se. I do not intend to construct a linear historical narrative of the city/house conjunction but to analyze the persistent return to the house in the architectural discourse of the city, despite historical differences of where this return takes place. The return is structural, that is, embedded in Western architectural discourse regardless of historical and contextual changes. The house marks the structural limits of the city. The house is what the city is not. Psychoanalytical theory states that any identity category is constituted both by its relationship to the Other and by an unsymbolizable kernel that cannot be incorporated into the social symbolic order.<sup>(8)</sup> As I argue below, the house covers up the unsymbolizable kernel, the lack that constitutes the identity of the city.

At first sight it may appear contradictory to claim a seemingly ahistorical component (offered by psychoanalysis) in a historical field identified on the basis of the study of contextual differences (architectural history).<sup>(9)</sup> However, my claim is that the city/house opposition and the repetitive return to the house in the definition of the city *have* a history that is embedded in Western architectural discourse. Our historical categories of Renaissance, modern, and contemporary architectures does not always account for some of the structural similarities that underlie these historical discourses. The use of the house as the basis of urban identification despite the city/house opposition points to such a similarity and calls for analysis.

Instead of a history of the city, I am interested in the invocation of the house in the discursive construction of the city. The notion of a history of the city involves the city as a pre-given and stable identity and describes and names its changing contents. To recognize historicity means to acknowledge urban identity as a historical constitution.<sup>(10)</sup> Only then can new urban symbolics emerge to structure both the house and the city. Rather than taking the city and the house as pre-given objects of architecture, we need to understand how they are produced as sexualized categories and linked by the disciplinary strategies of architecture.

<sup>(7)</sup> In this respect it is not surprising that much feminist art practice which is critical of traditional notions of domesticity subverts the architecture of the house. These range from Louise Bourgeois's *Femme-maison* series of drawings (1948) to the "Womanhouse" project directed by Judy Chicago and Miriam Shapiro (1972). For a discussion of these and other projects see Rosser (1994). In an architectural historical context, Beatriz Colomina offers an inspiring analysis of the spatial production of subjects in Adolf Loos's and Le Corbusier's houses [see section on "The split wall: domestic voyeurism" (Colomina, 1992, pages 73–130)].

<sup>(8)</sup> Renata Salecl argues this point very explicitly in her section on "For the love of the nation: Ceaușescu's Disneyland" (1998, pages 79–103).

<sup>(9)</sup> I am indebted to an anonymous reviewer of this paper who pointed to the methodological issues in working in an interdisciplinary terrain between architectural history and psychoanalytical theory.

<sup>(10)</sup> The distinction between history and historicity is made by Slavoj Žižek. With reference to the psychoanalytical notion of the traumatic kernel that is the condition of (im)possibility of any given terrain, Žižek says that "*historicism* deals with the endless play of substitutions within the same fundamental field of (im)possibility, while *historicity* proper makes thematic different structural principles of this very (im)possibility" (2000a, page 112).

## Scene I

“... a city ... be no more than a great house and ... a house be a little city ... ”

Alberti (1986 [1485], page 13)

“He contains or envelops her with walls while enveloping himself and his things with her flesh. The nature of these envelopes is not the same: on the one hand, invisibly alive, but with barely perceivable limits; on the other, visibly limiting or sheltering, but at the risk of being prison-like or murderous if the threshold is not left open.”

Irigaray (1984, page 11)

A number of contemporary theorists have argued that the concept of the city as a built object and coherent entity did not exist before the 15th century (Choay, 1997, page 49; Lefebvre, 1991, page 271). Indeed, architectural treatises of the Renaissance are preoccupied with the city. Earlier texts present it as an aggregation of public and private buildings but not as a spatial unity. Hence, Western architectural discourse exists prior to its incorporation of the city. Renaissance theorists embraced the Vitruvian precept that ‘the well-shaped man’ provides the measure and proportion of all architectural elements in a building (figure 1) (Vitruvius, 1960, page 72). The city, when it becomes an architectural subject, is absorbed into this framework, the law of perfection preceding the perfect city. Alberti’s statement that the city is no more than a great house and the house is a little city and that every edifice “should appear to be an entire and perfect body and not disjointed and unfinished members” (1986 [1485], page 13) is exemplary in this respect. Here, the body, the house, and the city are conjoined, their intact boundaries ensuring wholeness.

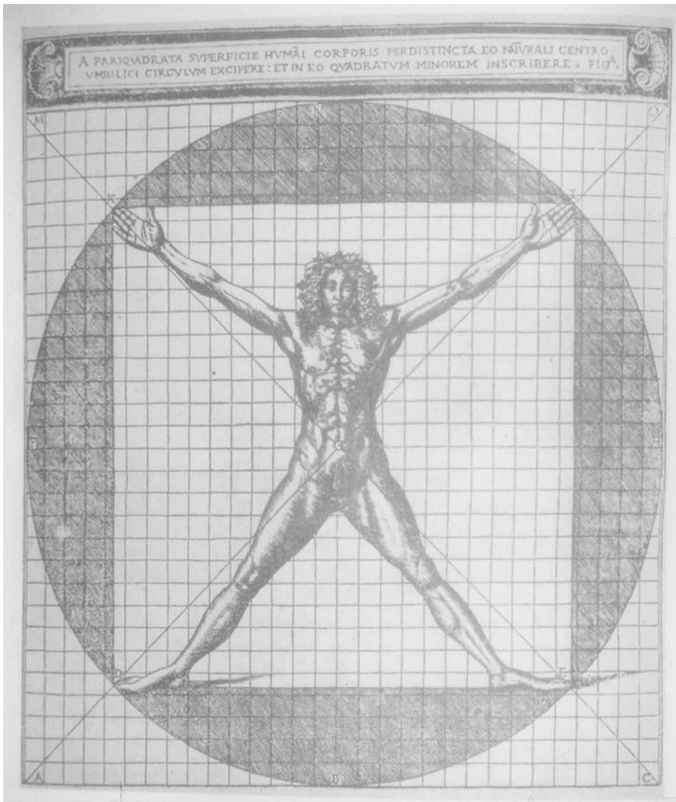


Figure 1. The Vitruvian man, by Leonardo da Vinci (source: Cesariano, 1521).

Images of the ideal city of the Renaissance emerge in a striking historical narrative. In 1430, Poggio Bracciolini, who first inventoried the fragmentary remains of ancient Rome, declared that “once the most beautiful and magnificent of cities, ... today, stripped of all her adornments, lies decaying like a gigantic corpse, every part having been mutilated” (quoted in Choay, 1997, page 53). Indeed, existing Roman ruins have been as instrumental in formulations of the Renaissance city as Vitruvius’s treatise. What makes Bracciolini’s statement remarkable is its reference to the disintegration of the city in relation to woman’s body.<sup>(11)</sup> The imagery is that of rape. To recover the city would mean to re-member the mutilated body of the fallen women and to protect her from further assault. How is this to be done?

Going back to the texts of Renaissance architects, the threat of military assault clearly occupies central stage in their theories of urban form. Consequently, city walls occupy the highest priority in their treatises. Walls both define the city as a contained entity and ensure its survival against war technologies. Paradoxically, the city’s architecture is based on the threat of dissolution. In other words, the city is stigmatized by its dissolution at the very moment of its emergence as a finite unity. The boundary gains priority as the guarantee of an intact and inviolable form. The metaphor of the female body enters this scenario in interesting ways. A powerful illustration in Francesco di Giorgio Martini’s late-15th-century treatise is exemplary. Di Giorgio says that,

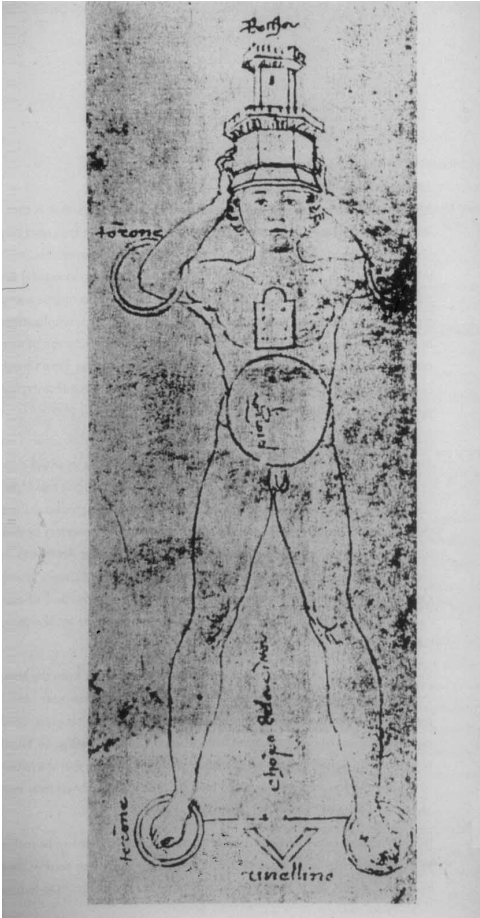
“One should shape the city, fortress, and castle in the form of a human body, that the head and the attached members have a proportioned correspondence and that the head be the rocca, the arms its recessed walls, which, circling around, link the rest of the whole body, the vast city” (quoted in Agrest, 1991, page 183).<sup>(12)</sup>

In the illustration that accompanies the text, the contours of the body literally mark the boundaries of the city (figure 2, over). They stand in for the walls. The dissolution of the city, then, means the dissolution of the body. The body metaphor functions as a marker of the desire for controllable boundaries. Bracciolini’s metaphor of the mutilated body seems consistent with Di Giorgio’s use of the intact figure. The former refers to the demolished city while the latter symbolizes the ideal city. The relationship between the two figures becomes more complicated, however, when considering the sexuality of the bodies in question. As opposed to Bracciolini’s use of the female figure, in Di Giorgio’s illustration the body is explicitly marked as male. As the ideal city is naturalized by its parallelism to the body, the male body is naturalized as the ideal form.<sup>(13)</sup>

<sup>(11)</sup> Mario Gandelsonas states that “the city has been the object of architectural desire from the moment architectural discourse was established with Alberti’s theory: An articulation of two illegible texts, one written (Vitruvius’s *Ten Books on Architecture*) and one built (the Roman ruins)” (1998, page 130). Bracciolini’s statement is not the only historical instance where an association is made between a woman’s body and the city. In an inspiring commentary on the architectural/archeological discourse that surrounds the impression of a woman’s breast on a piece of earth in Pompeii, Mirjana Lozanovska states that, “there are spontaneous, almost automatic gestural, spasmodic links between woman, death and buried city: eroticism as subtext can only be symbolized within an economy of death” (1999, page 236).

<sup>(12)</sup> Here, pointing to the sex of the idealized body, Diana Agrest offers an inspiring feminist account of how sexuality figures in Renaissance treatises.

<sup>(13)</sup> This is not an isolated case in terms of the naturalization of the body in relation to cultural or political artifices. As Grosz points out, many 17th-century liberal political philosophers drew the parallel between the body and body politics to legitimate various forms of ideal government. There, as here, the body politic hardly refers to a generalized human body. It is always already coded masculine. Pointing to the slippage from conceptions of the state to those of the city, Grosz calls for the liberation of the body from statist investments (1995, pages 105–106).



**Figure 2.** The body as the city (source: Di Giorgio Martini, 1482).

Di Giorgio's and Bracciolini's sexual codes reinforce both the masculine investments in the idealization of a coherent and controllable city and the hierarchy that is inscribed in the male/female dichotomy, by providing specific images. The male body, parading as the universal ideal, appears as intact and integrated, with clearly delineated boundaries. The female body is stripped and mutilated. Lying "like a gigantic corpse", she violates the neat distinction between the inside and outside, death and life. As such, she symbolizes the disintegration of urban structure. To recover the demolished city, then, would mean to replace the mutilated female body with the intact male. It seems like the appearance of the coherent male figure depends on the inscription of violence on the body of woman. Re-membering her turns out to be impossible perhaps because she was never membered in the first place. If the privileging of one figure (the intact man) over another (the mutilated woman) indicates a psychic investment, the concept of the city is laden with masculine desire. Sexualized body images—the mutilated woman, and the intact man—are produced by, but also produce, specific ways of conceiving, perceiving, and constructing urban space.

In an inspiring study on Alberti's texts, architectural theorist Mark Wigley demonstrates that sexuality plays a significant role in the Renaissance discourse on the house (1992, pages 327–389). In doing so, he complicates the commonplace juxtapositions

of the city and the house with male and female identifications, respectively. In a remarkable instance, Alberti says:

“Women ... are almost all timid by nature, soft, slow, and therefore more useful when they sit still and watch over things. It is as though nature thus provided for our well-being, arranging for men to bring things home and for women to guard them. ... The man should guard the woman, the house, and his family and country, but not by sitting still” (quoted in Wigley, 1992, page 334).

As Wigley argues, woman’s duty is to guard the house but according to the law that precedes both her and the house. This is the law of the father, the law of marriage as the taming of desire, and the law of order and surveillance. Hence the Albertian notion of the house is based on masculine control over sexuality and desire. As Wigley explains, “if the woman goes outside she is more dangerously feminine rather than more masculine” (page 335). The house, on the other hand, is a site of order and purification. The primal scene of the mutilated woman as a metaphor of the destroyed city, and the construction of the city in the image of the male body make more sense now. The woman outside is a fallen woman. She is not to be visible in a proper city. Her place is in the house, which is ordered by the law of the father—that is, in the image of man. As Bracciolini’s and Di Giorgio’s texts show, her invisibility is the precondition for the intact appearance of the male body. The city as a large house contains and controls the feminine element but is identified as male. In this scenario of the ideal city, which depends on woman’s body, woman’s body is either immobilized (in the house) or violated (in the city).

If the house is the site of masculine authority where the feminine element is disciplined to guard the law of the father, the city as a large house marks a fantasy of total control. The house, where domestication and mastery are always already established, provides the structure for the ideal city. The reality of a coherent and intact city depends on the control of the feminine element, which the house makes possible. The order of the house guarantees a consistent urban identification. The dead woman’s body, then, marks the symbolization of the loss that an idealized urban identification is based on. The city can be symbolized as an architectural reality with the support of the house (which encloses and traps the woman) and the body (which is marked as male). The city as a large house is bounded and intact. It controls and regulates the feminized elements of disorder, eroticism, and desire. The city as a large house is a city of masculine order and control. It is the city of man.

## Scene II

“... a house multiplied a hundred thousand times; therefore it is the city.”

Le Corbusier (1987 [1924], page 71)

“Exiled, away from his home, he is always seeking the same land, in a mediate and hidden way. Accepting oblivion with an eye to his future conquest.”

Irigaray (1999, page 115)

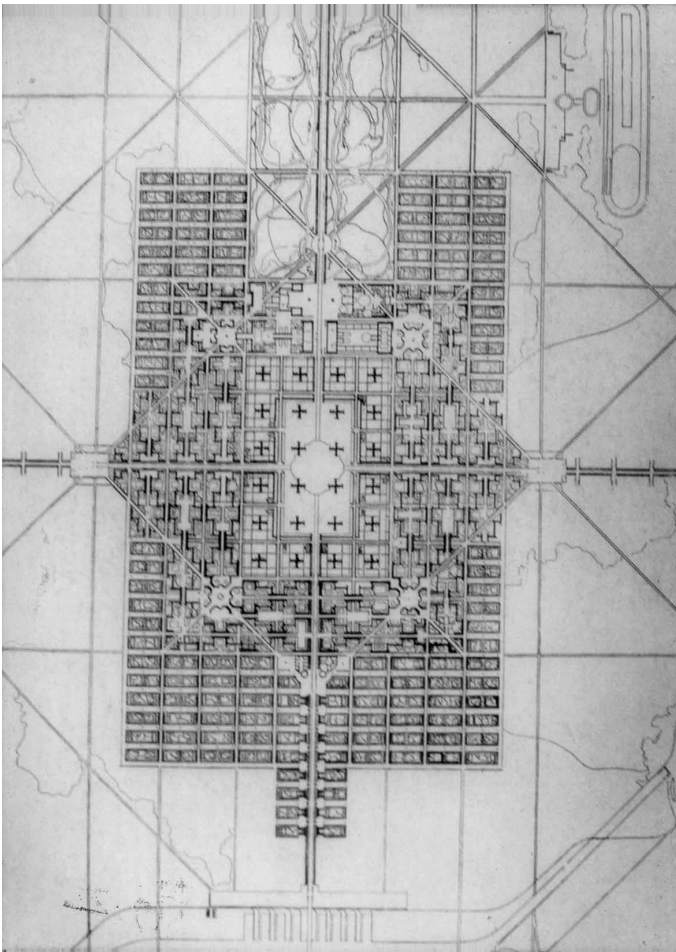
An autobiographical anecdote sets the stage for Le Corbusier’s 1924 publication *The City of Tomorrow*. As the author narrates, the book was written during the emptiness of a Paris summer when the city was quiet and underpopulated. “Then came the autumn season”, says Le Corbusier, and:

“Day by day the fury of traffic grew. To leave your house meant that once you had crossed your threshold you were a possible sacrifice to death in the shape of innumerable motors. I think back twenty years, when I was a student; the road belonged to us then; we sang in it and argued in it, while the horse-bus swept calmly along.”

With a striking change of tone he continues:

“On that 1st day of October, on the Champs Elysees, I was assisting at the titanic reawakening of a comparatively new phenomenon, which three months of summer had calmed down a little—traffic. Motors in all directions, going at all speeds. I was overwhelmed, an enthusiastic rapture filled me. Not the rapture of the shining coachwork under the gleaming lights, but the rapture of power. The simple and ingenuous pleasure of being in the centre of so much power, so much speed. We are part of it. We are part of that race whose dawn is just awakening. ... Its power is like a torrent swollen by storms; a destructive fury. The city is crumbling, it cannot last much longer” (1987 [1924], page xxiii).

For Le Corbusier, the city is on the verge of disappearance. Leaving the house means facing death. Here, the safe house stands in opposition to the deadly streets. Le Corbusier notes the disappearance of the idea of the ‘old home’ as well. On several occasions in both *The City of Tomorrow* and *Towards a New Architecture* (1986 [1923]), he criticizes old houses. These, the architect contends, contradict the “real existence” of contemporary urbanites: “Rooms too small, a conglomeration of useless and disparate



**Figure 3.** Le Corbusier’s design for the Contemporary city for three million inhabitants (source: Le Corbusier, *Cité Contemporaine de 3 millions d’Habitants*, 1922, Plan FLC 31006, ©FLC).



objects, and a sickening spirit reigning over so many shams—*Aubusson, Salon d'Automne*. styles of all sorts and absurd *bric-a-brac*” (1986 [1923], pages 18–19). Yet, as the shift of tone between the first and second paragraphs in the above quotation shows, the architect does not remain in despair for long.

The first part of Le Corbusier's account resonates with nostalgia: a yearning for the familiar city of his youth, akin to Alberti's desire for the city to be a large house where everything is under control. Indeed, Le Corbusier's later writings on cities reveal his conservative desire to perpetuate a patriarchal urban order that is sexually and racially inscribed.<sup>(14)</sup> The second part of his account is joyful and celebratory. The architect is apparently attracted by the uncontrollable power that overtook the familiar city: “The simple and ingenuous pleasure of being in the centre of so much power”. This is a paradoxical pleasure rooted in displeasure. Here, the architect and the city, the subject and the object, are momentarily conjoined by the flow of speed and power: “an enthusiastic rapture filled me ... we are part of it”. The second part of Le Corbusier's account marks a brief moment of *jouissance* in the text. In psychoanalytic theory, *jouissance* is a special form of happiness enjoyed by the subject when she or he is not concerned with the symbolic law. It is not surprising, then, that Le Corbusier's moment of *jouissance* coincides with the apparent limit of urban identification based on the metaphor of the house. In his account, a “rapture of power” threatens the symbolic order of the city. The price of his urban bliss is the very city itself: “The city is crumbling, it cannot last much longer”. The sudden turn of the text strikingly reveals that death and *jouissance* are embedded in the same *mise-en-scène*.

How does Le Corbusier reconcile his nostalgia for familiarity and his bliss in the death of the city? How can we explain his design for his project “Contemporary city for three million inhabitants” that is the focus of *The City of Tomorrow*? The city of tomorrow, with its strict rectilinear geometry, carefully monitored hierarchy, and rigid zoning, bears no trace of the rapture that the architect enjoyed prior to its conceptualization (figure 3). Clearly, had he succumbed to his *jouissance* any projected urban identification would have been impossible for him. At this point Le Corbusier's encounter with the crumbling city and his ensuing plan can be interpreted in tandem with Salecl's inspiring comparison between the mythological figures of sirens and muses (1998, pages 59–78).

As Salecl explains, the sirens in *The Odyssey* are half-woman and half-bird creatures and live on an island, enticing men with their singing. Those who succumb die immediately. Odysseus, whose ship passes their island, deals with the seduction by filling his men's ears with wax and having himself fastened to the mast. The sirens drown themselves from vexation at his escape. Salecl argues that the sirens' song conjoins seduction and death. It “stands as an empty, unutterable point in the *Odyssey*”, and “has to remain unspoken for the narrative to gain consistency” (1998, page 61). The sirens' song defies symbolization, its function is similar to sheer power emptied of material content, the force of which explains the failure of Le Corbusier's city. In the conceptualization of the “Contemporary city for three million inhabitants” Le Corbusier's *jouissance* remains absent.

In contrast, muses are singers presiding over thought and creativity, singing songs of past glories to make men forget their troubles. “Inspired by the memory that the

<sup>(14)</sup> This point is extensively articulated by Wilson in relation to *The Radiant City* (Le Corbusier, 1967) and *When the Cathedrals were White* (Le Corbusier, 1947). Wilson's argument is an important reminder that not only feminized corporeality but also racialized corporeality persistently disrupt the patriarchal urban order envisioned by Le Corbusier. She states that the black body, the source of both fear and fascination, underscore the architect's idealized urban vision, which unmistakably privilege the white male as the bearer of transcendental intelligence (1998).

muses provide, their listeners are able to create works of art, while those who hear the knowledge offered by the sirens' song immediately die" (Salecl, 1998, page 62). Is the "Contemporary city for three million inhabitants" a response to the call of muses? Despite sirenic inspiration, is it inspired by a yearning for 'the city as a large house' rather than by the unsymbolizable power that marks the death of the city? For Le Corbusier, the city is not a large house. He says that it is "a house multiplied a hundred thousand times". Indeed, *The City of Tomorrow* overflows with statements of determined insistence on mass-produced houses and the notion of the house-machine. The possibility of the coherent and consistent city in the industrial age is linked to an industrialized notion of the house.

Le Corbusier describes the house as 'a machine for living', an exhausted aphorism often quoted to represent an architectural move away from traditional notions of domesticity.<sup>(15)</sup> Critical of the 'sentimental hysteria' that surrounds the dream of a permanent home, the architect asserts that,

"The house will no longer be an archaic entity, heavily rooted in the soil by deep foundations, built 'firm and strong', the object of the devotion on which the cult of the family and the race has so long been concentrated" (1986 [1923], page 263).

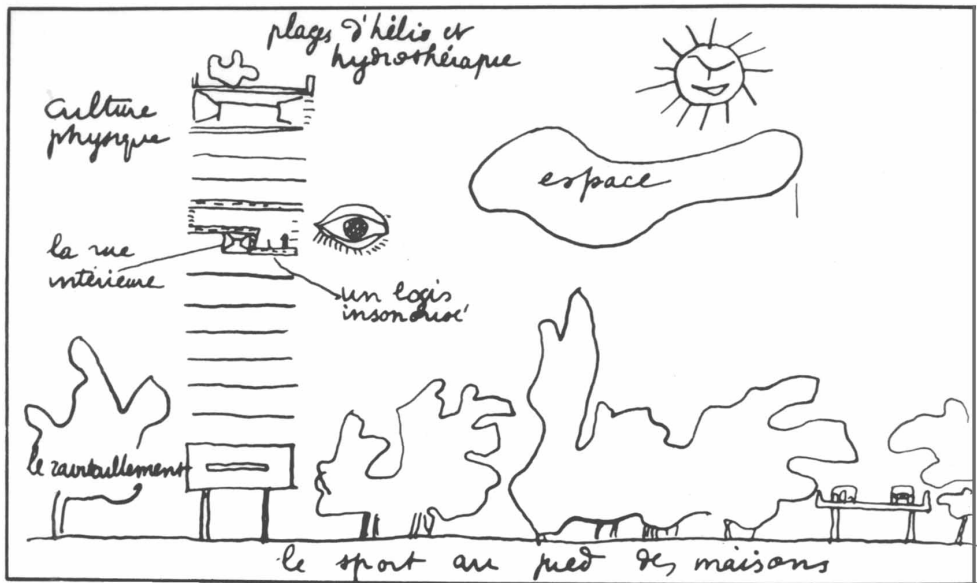
Despite his insistence on the need for a renewed notion of the house, Le Corbusier does not view the modern house as devoid of sentimental burdens. In writing about 'a new spirit' and advocating a house built on the same principles as the Citroen car, he mentions the necessary coalition "between architects and men of taste, and *the universal love of the home*" (page 264, emphasis mine). In the same context, he says that,

"The emotions will not be aroused unless reason is first satisfied, and this comes when calculation is employed. ... And one can be proud of having a house as serviceable as a typewriter" (page 241).

Whose universal love and whose pride are in question in these statements? The complicated articulation between Le Corbusier's discourse and his architectural representations clarify his position. Drawing on his architectural drawings and photographs, architectural theorist Colomina argues that for Le Corbusier the house is not defined on the basis of domestic interiority (1992, pages 73–130). On the contrary, with its large glass surfaces, it is a device to frame the exterior. In this scenario, to inhabit the house means to have visual access to its exterior. The look that is envisioned by Le Corbusier is sexualized. As Colomina points out, the architect depicts women facing inward while men peer outward. The Albertian figures of the mobile man and static woman reappear in Le Corbusier's architectural imagination, and are perhaps most concretely manifested in his relation to a house built and occupied by Eileen Gray. Le Corbusier drew murals on her walls and built himself a wooden shack overlooking her house. His gaze from the shack and his inscriptions on the walls turned Gray's house into a site of entrapment and invasion—once again, men's mobility is attained by women's enclosure (Colomina, 1996).<sup>(16)</sup> Le Corbusier loves and takes pride in the house because it is a means by which his own mobility is ensured, helping to explain why he uses the car and the typewriter as epitomes of the machinic: both machines enable mobility and inscription (of the symbolic).

<sup>(15)</sup> See, for example, Reed's "Introduction", in *Not At Home* (1996, pages 9–10). Although in the first part of his paper Reed insists on the antidomestic attitudes of European modernists, he later points to such critics as Maurice Dennis and particularly Clement Greenberg, who despise the decorative and the domestic as specters that haunt modernist art. Reed does not address Le Corbusier's work in the latter context.

<sup>(16)</sup> Sylvia Lavin's commentary on this piece is a justified call for Gray's agency in this complex exchange of gazes, inscriptions, and movements, which is absent in Colomina's analysis. Interestingly, Lavin locates Gray's agency in her own statement "that the house had been designed in the 'camping style', a style of territorial impermanence, of being on the run, being mobile" (in Lavin, 1996, page 187).



**Figure 4.** Le Corbusier's drawing for an urban residential block (source: Le Corbusier, Extrait de "les Trois Etablissements Humains", 1945, page 30, ©FLC).

If the house is the locus of vision, movement, and inscription of masculine law, the drive to multiply the house a hundred thousand times is linked to a masculine drive to possess the gaze and inscribe the symbolic. Unlike desire, which is linked to prohibition and which, by definition, remains unsatisfied, drive is unconcerned with the law and finds satisfaction. Salecl explains that, "on the level of drive there is no identification anymore, there is only *jouissance*" (1998, page 51).<sup>(17)</sup> Based on Le Corbusier's earlier account of his *jouissance* in viewing Parisian traffic and feeling absorbed by speed and power, one may expect to view intense urban environments from his houses. On the contrary, however, all traces of traffic, speed, and urban intensity are eliminated from the views that his houses frame (figure 4). What we get are domesticated picturesque landscapes. The architect says that, "the city is a house multiplied a hundred thousand times", but his urban representation of a hundred thousand houses annihilates the city, the power that annihilated the city being the source of his *jouissance* in the first place. In his ideal city, Le Corbusier turns away from domestic interiority and eradicates the city in the process. The loss of the city of his youth is accompanied by another, more traumatic loss—the loss of the city itself. Salecl states that "in the final instance, drive is always the death drive, the destructive force that endlessly undermines the points of support that the subject has formed in the symbolic universe" (page 50).<sup>(18)</sup> Le Corbusier's drive to multiply the house a hundred thousand times results in the death of the city and ultimately in his death as a (masculine) urban subject.

<sup>(17)</sup> For a lucid explanation of the relationship between the notions of *jouissance*, desire, and drive see Salecl (1998, pages 48–53).

<sup>(18)</sup> Žižek further explains that, in the late work of Jacques Lacan, the symbolic order is identified with the pleasure principle, beyond which lies a traumatic, unsymbolizable core. At that level, the death drive is the opposite of the symbolic order, "the radical annihilation of the symbolic texture through which the so-called reality is constituted. The very existence of the symbolic order implies a possibility of its radical effacement, of 'symbolic death'—not the death of the so-called 'real object' in its symbol, but the obliteration of the signifying network itself" (1989, page 132).

The “Contemporary city for three million inhabitants” is a complicated project. At one level, it is a magnificent manifestation of an ideal modernist city. Its ordered layout, zoning, and transportation system positively respond to Le Corbusier’s anxiety over the disappearance of the city. At another level, the project reveals its limits in interesting ways by the paradoxical role played by the house. First, as Le Corbusier says, the house structures the architecture of the city. “[A] house multiplied a hundred thousand times” covers over the image of the disappearing city that the architect experienced in his moment of *jouissance*. At the same time, however, this incessant repetition marks the obliteration of the city itself. The house as the machine that enables man’s mobility and inscription ends up leaving him astray in a picturesque landscape with no trace of urbanity. That is why the “Contemporary city for three million inhabitants” cannot merely be the product of the drive to repeat the house a hundred thousand times. With its careful zoning for different functions, it is the result of the architect’s desire for an ordered urban environment rather than a result of his drive to annihilate the urban environment. Masculine urban order is restored after an inadvertent glimpse into its limit.

### Scene III

“... the space of a dwelling and of a City ... all of this is being swept away...”

Virilio (1991, page 34)

“This mourning, the measure of which he never takes and which he does not think through, leaves him with the concern to build a place, and places, over and over again. Shelters that they fashion around a void, using earth, water, fire.”

Irigaray (1999, page 77)

Both Albertian and Corbusian responses to the loss of the city are urban ideals. They posit *ideal* cities as objects of desire to enable *real* urban intervention. The house provides both the image and the concept for recovery strategies of urban identification. Albertian and Corbusian idealizations respond to the perceived loss of cities that preceded them. The contemporary discourse on cities of the information age marks the beginning of yet another narrative based on loss. Virilio is one of the most vocal critics in that respect. In an exemplary paragraph in *The Lost Dimension* (1991), he states:

“Today, the *abolition* of distances in time by various means of communications and telecommunications results in a *confusion* in which the image of the City suffers the direct and indirect effects of iconological *torsion* and *distortion*, in which the most elementary reference points disappear one by one. With the *decay* of urban centrality and axiality, the symbolic and historic reference points go first. Then, when the industrial apparatus and the monuments *lose* their meanings, the architectonic references *vanish*. Most decisively, the *demise* of the ancient categorization and partition of the physical dimension leads to the *loss* of the geometric reference points” (page 30).

Terms like ‘abolition’, ‘confusion’, ‘torsion’, ‘distortion’, ‘decay’, ‘loss’, ‘disappearance’, and ‘demise’ point to dissolution and death. Interestingly, in Virilio’s discourse, the figures of the body, the house, and the city are linked one more time. Stating himself to be ‘a materialist of the body’, Virilio criticizes the derealization of the city by the invasion of transplants, biogenetic devices, and developments in nanotechnology. For him, similar to the disappearance of the ‘real body’, the dissolution of the city and the dwelling, too, are linked to technological developments. The issue here is the breakdown of physical boundaries. The city gate is replaced by the security gateway at the airport and the window of the house with the screen interface. The protocol of

physical access, as opposed to advanced technologies and teledistribution systems, he contends, “gave all its meaning to the space of a dwelling and of a City; both were linked to the primacy of the sedentary over the nomadic ways of our origins” (1991, page 99).

Virilio’s arguments are multilayered and complex but the above quotation connotes emasculation, sexuality explicitly interwoven into his statements on the progressive loss of habitable space. As Verena Andermatt Conley argues, “repeatedly, Virilio claims that woman is man’s first vehicle in a series of relays that leads from the prehistoric *pugilat* (fight) to present-day teletopia and that goes along with the progressive loss of ‘Mother Earth’”<sup>(19)</sup> (1999, page 202). Referring to Genesis, Virilio ascertains that man’s seduction by woman led him astray on his search for the perfect technological object. His position is in line with the eroticized feminization of loss in Alberti’s and Le Corbusier’s discourses. In Alberti’s discourse, the city is literally lost as the result of warfare and is associated with the mutilated woman’s body. In Le Corbusier’s work, physical disturbances such as noise and traffic bear the burden of loss and the sign of seduction. In both cases the house provides the phantasmic frame that holds the image of a meaningful and consistent city.

Today, the house is often seen as a source of urban dematerialization rather than as a source of meaning. We hear of how the home computer collapses the office, the marketplace, the neighborhood café, the main street, and all aspects of formerly ‘urban’ life. Alarmed voices proliferate. Architectural historian and theorist Anthony Vidler says that “‘a machine for living in’ has been transformed into a potentially psychopathological space populated by half-natural, half-prosthetic individuals, where walls reflect the sight of their viewers, where the house surveys its occupants with silent menace” (1996, page 174). For him, the traditional spatial order of the home, its rooms, and its furnishings carry less and less meaning today. Referring to Virilio, Grosz states that the body interfaces with the computer, forming part of an information machine in which machine parts, limbs, and organs are interchangeable. She argues that a crossbreeding of body and machine “will fundamentally transform the ways in which we conceive both cities and bodies, and their interrelations” (1995, page 110).<sup>(20)</sup> Virilio says that the ‘image’ and ‘meaning’ of the city are vanishing. The figure of the house (supported by the intact male body) that provided the image and meaning to Alberti’s and Le Corbusier’s ideal cities is no longer valid in that the house is now invaded by the city. Has the Albertian ideal come full circle then? Has the house literally become a small city?

Unlike Alberti and Le Corbusier, Virilio is too pessimistic to project an ideal for the city and the house. Celebrating rather than condemning the present situation, Bill Gates’s ‘home of the future’ in Seattle monumentally exemplifies the conditions diagnosed by Virilio and others. In keeping with its owner’s fame, the ‘home of the future’ is supplied with the most advanced electronic technologies and provides an exemplary case for present-day claims of the collapse of the city into the house. Gates describes his house in *The Road Ahead* (1995), in a section of his book appropriately entitled “Plugged in at home”. As he explains, the house is made of wood, glass, concrete, and stone, the wood consisting of recycled Douglas fir from an 80-year-old

<sup>(19)</sup> Conley’s ultimate project is to point to rare turns in Virilio’s texts, where the space opened to movement in connection with eros might enable transformations outside of the totalitarian closure that Virilio anticipates. Other papers in the same issue further illuminate the multiplicity of interpretations evoked by Virilio’s position.

<sup>(20)</sup> I am puzzled by Grosz’s reference to a generic body in this part of her argument, as the rest of the paper explicitly problematizes the sexualized discourse on cities.

lumber mill (page 214). The lumber stamps the house with the mark of stability, authenticity, and history—that is, unmistakable signs of domesticity. However, the house is also made “of silicon and software”. Gates explains:

“First thing, as you come in, you’ll be presented with an electronic pin to clip to your clothes. This pin will connect you to the electronic services of the house ... will tell the house who and where you are, and the house will use this information to try to meet and even anticipate your needs—all as unobtrusively as possible” (pages 217–218).

Thanks to the pin, the occupant is accompanied by a moving light zone, personalized music, movies, and news as she or he moves around the house. Telephone calls register only on the handset nearest the addressee. All evidence of silicon microprocessors, memory chips, and software equipment is concealed behind the traditional building materials. “My hope is that the view and the Douglas fir, rather than the electronic pin, will be what interest you most”, says Gates (1995, page 217). This statement is a striking response to counter the prevalent conviction about the diminishing role of architecture in the age of electronic technologies.<sup>(21)</sup> What can we make of the architecture, which is meant to outshine the image of electronic technologies?

The Gates house is indeed a little city, at least at two levels. On the one hand, it is physically endowed with public meeting spaces, such as a theater and a reception hall. On the other hand, electronic communication devices enable the entire house to absorb such urban functions as museums, concert halls, movie theaters, and offices. The body enters this scenario in a very significant and peculiar way. For, here, it is neither the Albertian body of perfect proportions nor the Corbusean body of vision that is in question. The body in the Gates house relates to the house/city via a prosthetic device—that is, an electronic pin—which provides access to most facilities. Movies, telephone calls, music, and light *enter* the zone of bodily perceptions by means of the pin. As the city invades the house, the house invades the body, and the uncanny limit of the Albertian ideal is realized as boundaries that demarcate the city, the house and the body are obliterated.

Yet, the architecture of the Gates house covers up the dramatic limit of the Albertian fantasy. The Douglas fir conceals the microprocessors and memory chips and the uncanny operations that collapse familiar identifications of city, house, and body. It provides a mask of familial domesticity covering over the loss of private interiority. Like the muses who sang songs of past glories to make men forget their troubles, the Gates house supplies its occupants with the memory of a comfortable past. It provides reassuring memories of the fantasy that enabled conceptualization of a coherent and stable city, house, and body in perfect continuum. How does the sexuality of the body figure in this context? His interviewer narrates:

“Gates chose the austere and natural architectural style before he got married, but Melinda is now putting her own imprint on it. The exposed concrete is going to have to go, he says, expressing some concern about how the architect might take this” (Isaacson, 1997, page 36).

<sup>(21)</sup> In a recent and informative paper, which includes extensive discussion on the Gates house, Adi Shamir Zion says that, whereas, historically, architecture had an implicit connection to building technique, information technology seems not to require architectural response and participation. Her project is to reform architecture in the light of a ‘new modern’, harking back to the transformations in spatial perception in the early 20th century. In a sense, this is yet another narrative of a golden past, unwanted present, and future recovery. In relation to the Gates house, Zion offers insightful interpretations of the concurrent use of wood and electronic technologies as it reverses the relationship between the symbolic and the technical as understood by the 19th-century architectural theorist Gottfried Semper (1998, page 78).

The house, which clearly belongs to Gates, receives its final touch of domesticity from the woman or wife. Gates's choice of Douglas fir concealed the traces of electronic technologies exposing his desire to operate 'the home of the future' smoothly and securely without the (masculine) ideal of domestic enclosure being threatened. In the interview, Melinda Gates is *represented* as the one who secures this ideal, confirming Virilio's *representation* of women as man's vehicle leading him in his conquest of technology. Melinda Gates has no public voice on this issue. As the interviewer put it, "she zealously guards her privacy and doesn't give interviews" (Isaacson, 1997, page 36). Woman is silent for the smooth functioning of the order of the house/city.

The Gates house is a desperate attempt to cover up the loss of meaning that Virilio theorizes in relation to advanced electronic technologies. The house materializes a fantasy frame of coherence and consistency. The Douglas fir, a sign of history and stability, is haunted by the specter of domesticity.

### Remembering the city

"Horizons and bodies that cannot inter-belong to one another in the sameness of the one. The place where they dwell together necessarily requires a certain polemic before it reaches relative rest in a more or less distant future. A rest that is never eternal. Never perfected. That is always to be taken up again, and to be given again. Which does not mean: to be repeated."

Irigaray (1999, page 135)

If, as Virilio and others argue, we are at the threshold of a radical transformation in our understanding of the city and the house, can there be a different politics that avoids the historical violence of the repetitive return to domesticity? Can the city and the house be conceived away from the law of the father? Notions of home and city are highly operative identity categories that structure our discourses and subjectivities. However, this does not imply a necessary return to their historically rooted and almost embarrassingly familiar meanings. In fact, the apparently contradictory calls for denial and return may be equally instrumental in the repetitive return to domesticity.

Le Corbusier's house-machine and Gates's house clearly illustrate this point. The house-machine rejects (and simultaneously invokes) domesticity and is inscribed by the repression of the figure of woman. In fact, 19th-century and 20th-century art and architecture are consistently burdened with anxieties invested in domesticity, which is always entangled with issues of sexuality.<sup>(22)</sup> The Gates house is one of the most recent interpretations of a tradition dating back to the Arts and Crafts Movement, which emphasized nonindustrial domestic expressions.<sup>(23)</sup> Preoccupied with the past, such approaches hinder productive engagement with the complex entanglement of the material and psychic components of the present. Quests for denial and return end up being two sides of the same coin, both premised on death and loss.

Indeed, death and loss appear in the discourse of the city at a number of inter-related levels. The very question of what to do about the city appears simultaneously

<sup>(22)</sup> A broad range of papers in Reed (1996) focus on this point from different perspectives.

<sup>(23)</sup> Nonindustrial domestic expressions have also been emphasized by the surrealist references to the maternal or uterine space. For the relationship between modernist rationalism and the surrealist call for the maternal space see Vidler (1996). Vidler's point is that, "Surrealism and purism, indeed, fetishized precisely the same types of objects: what for Surrealists were 'objets trouvés' or vehicles of oneiric desire and for Le Corbusier were 'objets-membres-humains', or the physical extensions of the body" (page 169). Vidler's interest is the blurring of the distinctions between the biological and the technical. Issues of sexuality remain conspicuously untheorized in his argument.

with the experience of its loss. Bracciolini's Rome, Le Corbusier's city of his youth, and Virilio's preelectronic city exemplify the emergence of new urban conditions that render the symbolization of an impeccable past as loss. Psychoanalytic theory states that loss is retroactively constituted. The lost quality emerges at the moment that something is experienced as loss—hence the impossibility of its recovery as such.<sup>(24)</sup> Recovery in that sense is always re-recovery—that is, covering over the perceived loss. Hence, Alberti's figure of the intact male body (which covers over the image of the mutilated woman) and Le Corbusier's figure of the industrially reproducible house (which covers over the unsymbolizable power that destroys the city of his youth) function as phantasmic objects re-covering the experience of loss in the name of recovery. The Gates house performs the same function, in relation to Virilio's claims of the loss of the urban and domestic.

Recovery is a masculinist desire for mastery, the cost of which is the body/space of woman. Re-recovery involves violences inflicted on the figure of woman. The female body is mutilated (Bracciolini), trapped (Le Corbusier), or silenced (Gates), perpetuating a masculine order of city and house. She indispensably symbolizes the loss that enables urban structure. In all three cases, loss is retroactively constituted as a loss of mastery and control, ultimately over the feminine. In the Albertian instance, the dead woman symbolizes the disintegrated city and the impossibility of its recovery. In the case of Le Corbusier, the lost city is the source of a seduction that needs to be domesticated. In Virilio's case, woman causes man's loss of 'mother earth'. These architects' ultimate desire is to reconstitute the city as a coherent and integrated entity—that is, to restore its masculinity. The house, importantly, guarantees control over secure and finite boundaries. The Gates house provides a paradigmatic contemporary example of how the house, once again, covers over loss by means architectural materiality.

The repetitive return to the figure of the house is tied up with a repetitive violence inflicted upon woman's body, whose proper place is the house. She represents the limit of urban signification, in psychoanalytical terms the domain of the real. As Lacan explains, "an adequate thought, *qua* thought, at the level at which we are, always avoids—if only to find itself again later in everything—the same thing. Here, the real is that which always comes back to the same place—to the place where the subject in so far as he thinks, where the *res cogitans*, does not meet it" (1977, page 49). Once the figure of the woman is intact, set free, and allowed to speak, both urban order and its domestic supplement break down. She is the surplus that erupts from the repetitive conjunction of the figures of the city and the house.

If our task is to imagine the house and the city outside the notion of domesticity and re-recovery, how can this be done without the violence involved in re-remembering them? Although the answer may not be immediate, psychoanalytically informed feminist critics offer a number of important clues. The idea is not to denounce the experience of loss that is the condition of any identification. Our choice may not necessarily be limited to a choice between the (always already failed) recovery of loss and its renunciation. Once loss is critically reexamined, there might be imaginary identifications for the house and the city other than those embedded in the notion of domesticity. Kaja Silverman argues that, as every remembrance involves a displacement and hence alterity, a productive involvement with the past is possible by capitalizing neither upon the return of the old, nor on the particularity of the new term, but on the

<sup>(24)</sup> Zizek explains this point as a fundamental paradox of the Lacanian *object a* (which emerges as being lost) and in relation to narrativization. According to Zizek, narrativization occludes this paradox as it describes the process as the loss of an object that had first been given and then lost (1999, pages 12–13).



possibilities opened up by displacement.<sup>(25)</sup> The key issue here is to distinguish between the necessity of the replacement of the lost term and the necessary failure of its recovery. The appearance of new terms in our urban and domestic realms may point to productive spaces of displacement that call for care and attention rather than for jubilation or despair.

If woman has been the ahistorical limit of urban identification, she may also enable a different historical figuration of the city.<sup>(26)</sup> Irigaray's notion of the *female imaginary* is helpful in this respect. The female imaginary is fluid, mobile, and indifferent to the laws of identity and noncontradiction. It is "an imaginary that will bind or attach the scraps and debris together into something which gives women a 'home' but which does not prevent their mobility, their becoming, and their growth" (Whitford, 1991, page 35, 138).<sup>(27)</sup> As such, the female imaginary is based not on lamentation of a lost entity but on the promise of a future yet to come. The structural changes in present-day cities and homes often turn them into sites for regressive nostalgia. However, their unpredictability and fluidity also hold the promise of materialization for the female imaginary.

The fragmentation and loss that Virilio and others lament in the cities of today may provide the sites for other architectural and urban imaginaries. For these sites are marked not only with the loss of familiar references as a result of electronic communication devices but also by the proliferation of new subject positions and infinite cultural differentiation as a result of unprecedented forms of migration and diaspora and their consequent urban reconfigurations. Familiar protocols of physical access may have diminished but other forms of body-space relations proliferate. Indeed, recent critical work on specific urban sites suggests that the immediacy of the present is embedded with abundant urban instances that are yet to be symbolized.<sup>(28)</sup> Each time we allow these instances to appear in architectural and urban terms, we have the opportunity to turn away from the urban enclosure that is based on the violence inherent in re-membering the house. As our perceptual and enunciative positions are always historically, geographically, and socially located, these instances proliferate ad infinitum. Today, as war and disasters, as much as electronic communication devices, literally obliterate urban boundaries and reconstruction projects proliferate,

<sup>(25)</sup> See Silverman (2000, especially the section entitled "Eating the book", pages 29–50). Silverman's argument explicates the Lacanian notion of 'the thing' as 'the impossible nonobject of desire', which is substituted by a first love object that marks the beginning of libidinal symbolization. The loss of the originary love object is the precondition for the emergence of the subject's signifying capacities. Her argument is based on the basic Lacanian proposition that meaning (language) can only be produced on the basis of loss (of being). As the identification can only be constituted within language, the backward path to satisfaction is always already blocked and the desired object (related to the state of being) can only be recovered in the form of a substitute. The point where my argument differs but does not deviate from that of Silverman is my insistence that a form of violence is involved in both re-membering and forgetting. This, however, may only be the other side of Lacan's definition of ethics as keeping the greatest possible distance from the first love object, which Silverman also cites.

<sup>(26)</sup> Žizek explains that "Lacan's point is unearthing the 'ahistorical' limit of historicization/resignification is thus not that we have to accept this limit in a resigned way, but that every historical figuration of this limit is itself contingent and, as such, susceptible to a radical overhaul" (2000b, page 221).

<sup>(27)</sup> This parallels Grosz's proposition of "a model of the relations between bodies and cities that sees them, not as megalithic total entities, but as assemblages or collections of parts, capable of crossing the thresholds between substances to form linkages, machines, provisional and often temporary sub- or micro-groupings" (1995, page 108).

<sup>(28)</sup> The scattered examples that I have in mind include Lozanovska (1997), Baydar Nalbantoğlu (1999), and Sherif (1999).

our experiences and perceptions of loss can lead to different bodily, domestic, and urban imaginaries not rooted in domesticity.

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