

Kostas Tsiambaos
Architecture, narration and the art of living

Abstract

This paper draws from the idea of philosophy as a “life art” - as discussed by philosopher Alexander Nehamas in his book *The Art of Living* - in order to highlight a hidden connection between architecture, as a creative practice, and the narration of the self. Can the criteria for a great architecture be reduced to standards and values that are deemed ‘universal’? Or should concepts such as “originality”, “authenticity”, and “uniqueness” be regarded context-dependent and determined retrospectively, only relevant within the narration of a unique personal creative course? Through a short, imaginary story - which is based on actual historical events - I will argue that the value and impact of every architectural creation cannot always be inherently defined but are usually directly related to what is called “the care of the self”.

Keywords

Art of living — Self — Narration

Introduction

This paper draws from the idea of philosophy as a “life art” - as discussed by philosopher Alexander Nehamas in his book *The Art of Living*¹ - in order to highlight a hidden connection between architecture, as a creative practice, and the narration of the creation of the self. The life art approach to philosophy has a long history; initiated in “ἐαυτοῦ ἐπιμελεῖσθαι” (the care of the self) encountered in the early Platonic texts, it was then transformed into the pursuit for the perfect “blend of life and theory” in Aristotle, and was later promoted by modern thinkers such as Montaigne, Nietzsche and Foucault as the cultivation of an “aesthetic dimension of life”. Friedrich Nietzsche in particular, one of Le Corbusier’s intellectual heroes, only considered artistic creation in its dynamic as a story of self-creation and not as an expression of a transcendent representation.

Through a short, imaginary story I will argue that the value and impact of every architectural creation cannot always be inherently defined since no ‘recipe’ for great architecture exists for someone to follow, precisely because every exemplary architectural creation is always constructed on the scaffolding of a personal biography. Likewise, if every influential architectural work is based on the architect’s biography, then the creative potential of architecture cannot but be intertwined with the question of a narrative of the self. In other words, architecture’s value, impact and command are related to the creation of the architect as a person as much as, if not more than, architectural creation itself. The following fantastic narration, which is however based on actual persons and events, is offered as such an example.



Fig. 1-2
Illustrations by Kostas Tsiambaos.

Jeannerex

Our story begins somewhere around 1890, at the office of the famous Professor of Beaux-Arts Georges. One day, Georges receives an anonymous letter (Fig. 1). He opens it and reads horribly: “Eclecticism is doomed to die by the hand of a young boy who will someday create a new kind of architecture.” Immediately, and without a second thought, he decides to take action. He orders one of his best students, Auguste, to find the boy and make him ‘disappear’ (Fig. 2). Auguste actually finds the young boy but hesitating to hurt him, he guides him to a remote cliff on the Jura Mountains. He ties and abandons the boy there, hoping for someone to find and save him (Fig. 3). Fortunately Charles, a local artist, finds the boy in the middle of nowhere and decides to grow him up like his own son. “I will teach him all I know”, he thinks. “I will make him a painter, a decorator, or an architect.” (Fig. 4). After a while he even gives him a name. “I will call him Jeannerex!”

As Jeannerex grows up, he is increasingly interested in architecture. At some point, however, he realizes that all that he had read in the books of architecture was not the only truth. That is why, full of curiosity, he decides to travel to Delphi in order to find out what real architecture is (Fig. 5). Arriving in Delphi, he is looking for an oracle. But the oracle he receives does not answer his question (Fig. 6). It instead tells him that he is meant to attack the architecture of the past and create his own architecture. Rather disappointed Jeannerex decides to leave his unanswered queries aside and travel further away...

Approaching the city of Athens while on the boat, he sees a hill from afar (Fig. 7). Something odd is over there. He knows it, he had seen it before in the books, but from here it looks unfamiliar, uncanny. He has to walk up there.

Without wasting time, he decides to reach the Acropolis. The view of the rock up close is rather disturbing, if not shocking. The Parthenon is white and shiny, its marbles look bright and frozen. Jeannerex stands against the temple, unable to move forward, fixed by the spectacle. “So this is reality... this is the only truth!” He thinks. He has to do something... he has to react before it is too late. He will either fight or crash!

The battle is tough and without a clear winner (Fig. 8). Jeannerex defends himself but he gets hurt, losing his left eye. The Parthenon is powerful but its identity is now revealed. Its image is altered, its story is rewritten (Fig. 9).

Hurt and exhausted, Jeannerex decides to leave Delphi and return home. On his way back, however, he meets the Sphinx, which stops the passers-

Fig. 3-4
Illustrations by Kostas Tsiambaos.



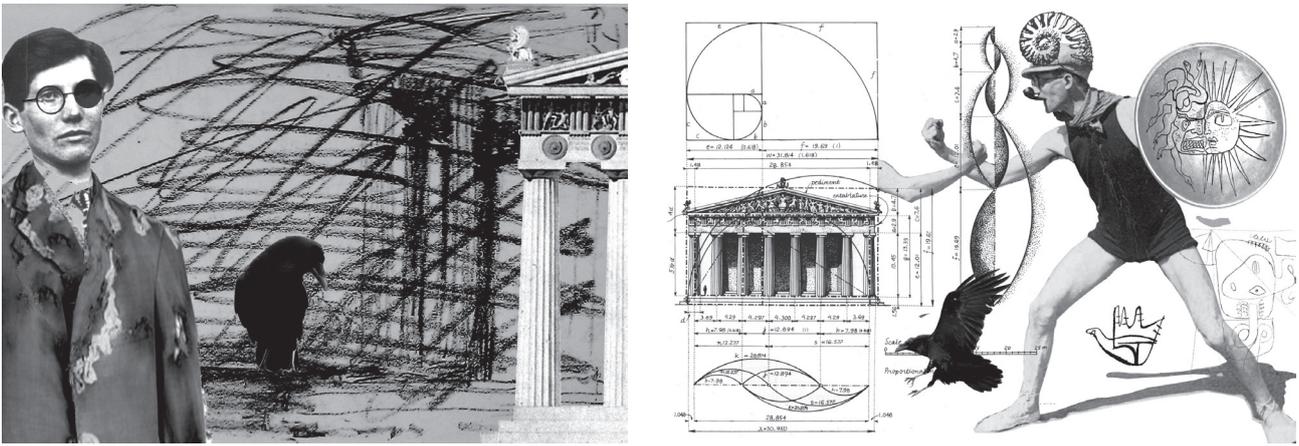


Fig. 8-9
Illustrations by Kostas Tsiambaos.

by and puts them in a puzzle (Fig. 10): “Before its birth it is inside us. After its birth we are inside it. What is it?” Jeannerex stands silent, thinking for a while and then he answers: “It is architecture! Before being built it is within us, as an idea, but when built, we can enter it, inhabit it.” The Sphinx replies: “Yes, that’s the correct answer.”

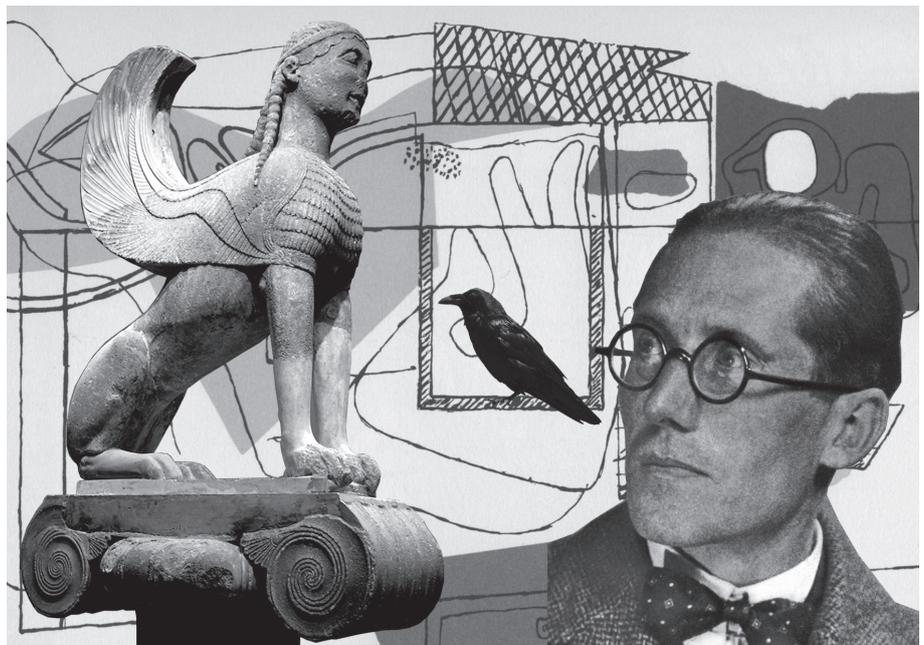
Arriving in Paris, Jeannerex is certain that he wants to become an architect (Fig. 11). On his desk, his gaze pulls a small book. On its cover he reads: “Who knew the famous riddles and was a man most masterful.” He looks out the window. Behind the glass, he imagines a new name for himself... As time passes, he begins to talk, write, draw, construct something that has not appeared ever before. It is a new architecture. The architecture of Jeannerex or, after his new name, the architecture of El Corbusier! (Fig. 12).

That was my little fantastic story, in which, however, one could recognize, in a fragmented and random order, some real facts, persons and events from Le Corbusier’s life. One could recognize, for example, Auguste Perret, at whose office the young Jeanneret worked for 14 months in 1908-1909, and Charles l’Éplattenier, Jeanneret’s first teacher at the Ecole d’Art of La Chaux-de-Fonds from 1900 to 1904. One could also recognize the places where the architect toured and traveled; from the mountains of Jura, where his was unwillingly hiking together with his father, Georges, to Delphi, the Athenian Acropolis and, of course, Paris the modern city that marked the start of a new life and the creation of a new name (the name Le Corbusier) by the young Jeanneret himself.²

As equally real is the rupture with the academic eclecticism of the Beaux-Arts, which was symbolically introduced at the beginning of our story. The ‘struggle’ against the Parthenon can be also recognized as a central theme of Le Corbusier’s creative life as this has been described in a dramatic way by the architect himself as well as by most historians-researchers of his early life, ideas and works. Finally, Le Corbusier’s partial blindness from the left eye was another fact although this was not something that took place on the Athenian Acropolis in 1911 but an event that took place in 1918, the night when the architect was completing his painting titled *La Cheminée*; a purist painting on which Jeanneret abstractly illustrated the Parthenon, as he himself had written.³

All of the above, real or fantastic ingredients were reconstructed on the scaffolding of a very well known ancient myth, *Oedipus Rex* by Sophocles, which seemed to fit. And it is true that it did not take much effort to link the biography of Le Corbusier with the myth of Oedipus. But I will discuss more on this connection a bit later.

Fig.10-11
Illustrations by Kostas Tsiambaos.



The person before the architect

We are discussing emblematic architects, such as Le Corbusier, through their work, a seminal project, a work of reference that has the power to enrich over time and in multiple ways the work of other architects or students of architecture. This influence of important architectural works can be immediate and obvious - to a degree of a direct copy of the form itself - or indirect as a more general reference to conceptual ideas, design practices or construction techniques. This indirect influence is considered the only legitimate, since the formal reproduction of an architectural work seems to be totally meaningless. Indeed, it is not difficult to agree that if, supposedly, a contemporary architect could accurately reconstruct, again today, ten of the most important works of the 20th century he would not be a great architect even if all of the pure architectural qualities (geometry, composition, layout, scale, construction, materials, details) were exactly the same. This may sound obvious but it is at the same time a paradox since it tells us that: a. The criteria of great architecture *cannot be only* architectural and b. A great architect *is not just* one who makes great architecture. Let's just keep this paradox in mind for the time being.⁴

We are also talking about the work of an architect through his biography. Such a person is Le Corbusier about whom it seems that we know everything: where and how he grew up, who were his family and how good or bad were the relationships with his father, his mother and his brother, who were his teachers, where did he work and who did he worked with, where did he travel and what exactly he did during his journeys, what did he write or think, what did he paint or sketch, what letters did he send and to whom, which were his relationships with women and of what kind, how did he spend his summers, what did he like to eat, how did he like to sleep, what did he love and what did he hate.⁵

This special interest, by architects, on the biography of another architect is also explained by something else: by an established - although not always obvious - belief that the narration of a creative person's biography can tell us something important about his work. There is somewhere, under the surface, a mentality that relates the uniqueness of the work to the uniqueness of the person; a certain logic according to which the architectural work would not have been as important if the life of the architect was not as interesting. And this logic becomes more provocative and challenging the moment we realize that many important architects, including Le Corbusier, did not attend a School of Architecture, did not even have the degree of an Architect, but emerged as great architects only through an impressive and unique course of self-creation; a course that included diverse influences, readings, apprenticeships, travels, friendships etc. etc. As Le Corbusier himself had once said: "I am self-taught in everything, even in sports".⁶

This epic aura surrounding the project of self-creation is a shared characteristic among the 'heroes' of modern architecture. Beyond common values, priorities and concepts, every important architectural work is recognized as unique precisely because the path followed by its creator could only be his own and no one else's. Here we are no longer talking about the project-as-a-model but about the biography-as-a-model. The thing is that if repeating the first one (the work) seems unlikely, resembling the second (the person) is impossible. Biographies, by definition, *cannot* be repeated. How can one become as great as his heroes then?

Philosopher Alexander Nehamas discusses how the idea of philosophy

El Corbusier

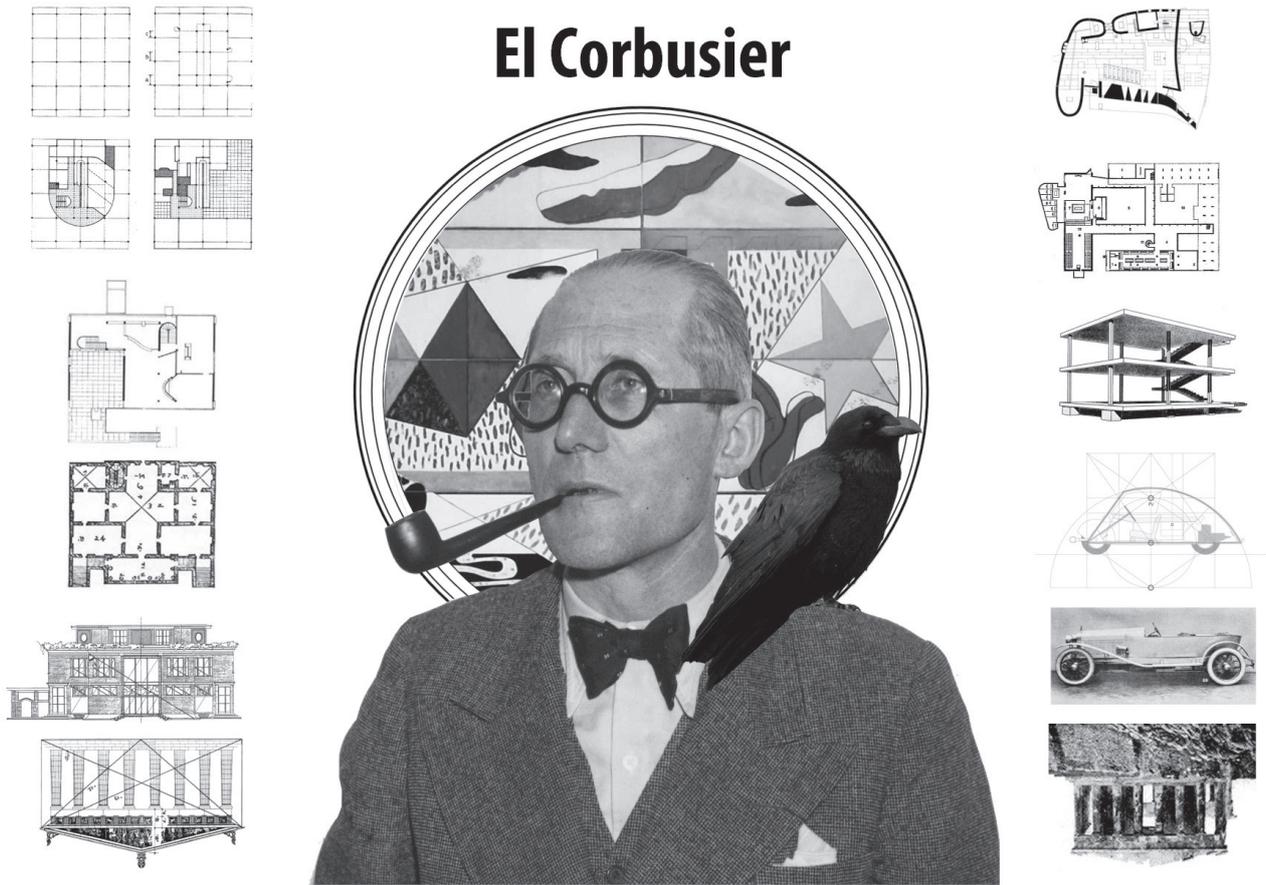


Fig. 12
Illustrations by Kostas Tsiambaos.

as an art of life (what is called “the philosophical life”) lasts over the work of great modern and contemporary thinkers such as Montaigne, Nietzsche and Foucault.⁷ This idea started with the “care of the self” (ἐαυτοῦ ἐπιμελεῖσθαι)⁸, which we encounter in the early Platonic texts as a knowledge of the soul,⁹ and then into the ideal mix of life and theory in Aristotle as a reflective desire,¹⁰ until the great thinkers of modernity. The difference is that the latter are gradually downgrading the regulatory or incentive framework of “living well” (εὖ ζῆν) keeping the debate about self-care as an art that neither follows an exact method nor obeys strict rules.

In this perspective it is accepted that a virtuous human life cannot be defined in advance since there is not a common, optimal life-standard for all. Thus, even if ancient societies could agree on common ethical frameworks and typical patterns of life - and to a certain extent impose them - in modernity, on the contrary, people are describing and following an *aesthetic* dimension of life based on a narration of their biography as the analogy of an artistic creation.¹¹ And in art, even if there are some standard or universal models and values, the criteria for what is beautiful, successful, good, new, correct, unique, important etc. etc. are becoming much more free, unstable and open.

Furthermore Nehamas, using the example of platonic Socrates, implies that things were open from the very start and never clearly defined.¹² He also emphasizes that just as in art, success is directly related to self-care since originality, authenticity, uniqueness etc. are concepts that are related *only* within the framework of a strictly personal course. That is why, when we talk about art, the theoretical ‘recipe’ does not pre-exist but it is always determined afterwards.

In order to relate the above to our case, we would say that the concern for an architect’s biography is justified to the extent that it can describe, *in retrospect*, some kind of theory. While the criteria of great architecture are not written somewhere in order for someone to read and follow, narrating the life of an important person comes to justify the unquestionable value and success of his extraordinary work.

What is interesting in Le Corbusier’s case is that the man himself stated this link between his life and his work from the very start. The ways in which he dramatized events in his life, told his experiences, recorded documents, published opinions, justified his choices, rewrote his story etc. all these defined a re-construction of his own life, a “technology of the self”, to quote Michel Foucault.¹³ That’s why many historians and theorists have written about how, in Le Corbusier’s case, this parallel construction of his life and his work was entirely conscious and targeted.

As a matter of fact, the famous architect never did he hide his ‘secret’ from the young architects who would like to follow a similar path. In his well-known booklet titled *Entretien* one reads:

One day, some young students from the Ecole des Beaux Arts in Paris asked me to open a studio. I declined their request. “Well then, give us some words of advice” [...] Some years have passed. With great insistence, some students of the Beaux-Arts once again appealed to me to start a Corbusier workshop. “Thank you, dear young friends, but I must say no. What should I teach? A philosophy of life?”¹⁴

The “philosophy of life”. That was the only lesson in architecture that Le Corbusier could teach. But could he really teach this lesson? And what exactly were to teach? Can the philosophy of life be taught? Le Corbusier

was rather doubtful and left the question floating unanswered. However, he insisted. He criticized any kind of teaching that was supposed to guide architectural creation but had still not managed to approach its essential core. And it had not accomplished it because it had not realized what was the original creation that preceded every other creation:

Teaching in this country has hardly inspired you to devote yourselves to the creative struggle or to the constant battle with yourselves.¹⁵

This is how we get back to the self-care, the construction of the self, the Corbusian “philosophy of life” that was identified as a “constant battle”, as a “creative struggle” with oneself. It is in this struggle, that young architects should focus before they - and in order to - become creative architects. In addition, Le Corbusier had defined early enough architecture as a “pure creation of the mind”, setting the mind as the foundation of architecture that desires to become Art.¹⁶ But what did that mean and why was this accessible only to those who had succeeded in winning the battle with themselves?

Nehamas would tell us not to look for something more tangible because, anyway, when we talk about the art of living and the care of the self, there is no recipe. And he would also remind us that a person like Socrates could be a reference, even if neither he nor anyone else could describe the pattern of (his) good life. Who would expect, anyway, that someone like Socrates who had started his career from architecture (his actual profession was a stonemason)¹⁷ would end up being a great philosopher?

Wie man wird, was man ist¹⁸

It is well known that the myth of *Oedipus* existed long before Aeschylus, Euripides and Sophocles, already since the Homeric Era. And, of course, it continued its course in history, through various readings, interpretations and variations: the Oedipus by Aristotle, Ovid, Seneca, Hegel, Nietzsche, Freud, Cocteau, Pasolini, Ricoeur and many, many others. In my narration, which I presented at the beginning, one meets again all the basic motifs of the myth to the extent that an indirect identification with Le Corbusier’s biography seems easy.

Another variation of the myth, Corbusian this time, is legitimate at the moment we isolate the common reference to self-care, to the delphic “know thyself”, and we read the myth as the analogous of a “promenade architecturale”,¹⁹ as an evolutionary journey of self-knowledge.²⁰ Having this in mind, as well as the reconstruction of Oedipus myth by Sigmund Freud,²¹ we may argue that in the case of Jeannerex the conflict with the father had its analogue to the conflict with the established architectural history while the desire to union with the mother was transformed - following the psychoanalytical process of sublimation - in a new (modern) architecture both as an artistic activity as well as an intellectual search. As for his blindness, this had happened already during a real, psychic, battle against the Parthenon, the reverent ‘father’ of western architecture. And, as in Sophocles, here too, the ignorance of truth can be complete even if the eyes are open, while the knowledge can be terrifying even if the eyes do not see.²²

According to one of Le Corbusier’s intellectual heroes, Friedrich Nietzsche, the model of the creative person was clearly the artistic genius.²³ The artists were really creative personalities, the most important ones²⁴ or, conversely, only truly great personalities could become great artists.²⁵ Jeannerex’s narration becomes thus instructive while at the same time it remains inaccessible; instructive because it offers an example to imitate

but inaccessible because the example it offers (the narration of the person's life) is an example impossible for someone to copy.

At the same time narration is used as a means to transcend the objective foundations and limits of architectural creation in order to further establish a social distinction; a distinction (in Bourdieuan terms) between the architects and the Architect. Recent films about the life and work of important figures such as Louis Kahn, Rem Koolhaas and Bjarke Ingels are nothing but contemporary efforts to narrate a unique biography and at the same time rhetorical constructions used in the framework of a persuasion strategy.²⁶ Although there is always a certain tendency to present their architects-protagonists as normal persons with typical human inclinations, fixations, or passions, these narrative documentaries cannot but communicate the message of their architect's uniqueness. In fact, the more 'normal' these architect-professionals seem the more distanced, as architects-models, become since it is impossible for someone to explain how or why someone who is 'just-one-of-us' can, at the same time, stand out as someone unusual, famous and exceptional.²⁷

This is, in short, the moral of all these narratives: the person actually matters more than the project. Architecture's value, impact and command are related to the creation of the architect as a person as much as - if not more than - architectural creation itself. That is why the creative project is always built on the scaffolding of an exemplary life; exemplary not in a moral sense but in the aesthetic sense of the care for the self. But what does this exactly mean, this is something that each and every one of us will have to find out on his own.

Investigating the uses of narration in relation to the architect's personal biography allows for a critical stance towards architecture's foundation, identity and context. This is the only way for us to solve the paradoxical enigma: if you want to become like me do not try to imitate me.

Notes

¹ Nehamas, Alexander. *The Art of Living, Socratic Reflections from Plato to Foucault*. Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1998.

² The change of the name is indicative as the first step towards the construction of a (new) self. For an interpretative approach to the micro-history of Le Corbusier's *Voyage d' Orient* see: Tsiambaos, Kostas. "Après l'écrasement: d'Eleusis à Delphes" in *L'invention d'un architecte. Le voyage en Orient de Le Corbusier*, Paris: Fondation Le Corbusier-Éditions de la Villette, 2013, pp. 340-351.

³ I am referring to the painting titled *La Cheminée*. See: Iuliano, Marco. "Montage d'Orient" in *L'invention d'un architecte*, op.cit. pp. 414-423.

⁴ On the question of authenticity in works of art see: Goodman, Nelson. *Languages of Art, an Approach to a Theory of Symbols*. Indianapolis: Bobbs-Merrill, 1968, pp. 99-123.

⁵ See: Baker, Geoffrey H.. *Le Corbusier, the Creative Search: The Formative Years of Charles-Edouard Jeanneret*. New York: Van Nostrand Reinhold, London: E & F N Spon, 1996, Brooks, H. Allen. *Le Corbusier's Formative Years, Charles-Edouard Jeanneret at La Chaux-de-Fonds*. Chicago and London: The University of Chicago Press, 1997, von Moos, S. and Rüegg, Arthur (eds.). *Le Corbusier before Le Corbusier*. New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2002, and Richards, Simon. *Le Corbusier and the Concept of Self*. New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2003.

⁶ Le Corbusier. *Entretien avec les étudiants des écoles d'architecture*. Paris: Éditions Denoël, 1943.

⁷ Nehamas, op.cit.

⁸ Φέρε δὴ, τί ἐστὶν τὸ ἑαυτοῦ ἐπιμελεῖσθαι - μὴ πολλάκις λάθωμεν οὐχ ἡμῶν αὐτῶν ἐπιμελούμενοι, οἰόμενοι δέ - καὶ πότ' ἄρα αὐτὸ ποιεῖ ἄνθρωπος; Ἄρ' ὅταν τῶν αὐτοῦ

ἐπιμελῆται, τότε καὶ αὐτοῦ; Plato. *Alcibiades A'*, 128a.

⁹ Ψυχὴν ἄρα ἡμᾶς κελεύει γνωρίσαι ὁ ἐπιτάττων γυνὼνα ἑαυτὸν. Plato. *Alcibiades A'*, 130e.

¹⁰ For Aristotle living-well is related to a reflective gaze on life, a constant asking about its meaning. See: Hughes, Gerard J.. *The Routledge Guidebook to Aristotle's Nicomachean Ethics*. London: Routledge, 2013.

¹¹ "On the Philosophical Life, An Interview with Alexander Nehamas". *The Harvard Review of Philosophy*, vol. VIII, 2000, p. 32.

¹² *Ibid.*, p. 24.

¹³ Martin, L. H., Gutman, H. and P. H. Hutton (eds.). *Technologies of the Self: A Seminar with Michel Foucault*, University of Massachusetts Press, 1988.

¹⁴ In Le Corbusier's *Entretien*. I am using the 1961 English translation by Pierre Chase as published in *Le Corbusier Talks with Students, from the schools of architecture*. New York: Princeton University Press, 1999, p. 4.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 16.

¹⁶ For Aristotle whether someone is a good architect is determined by the kind of houses he builds. But the point of the good life just is the living of it. In Gerard, *op.cit.*, p. 120.

¹⁷ Socrates followed the profession of his father, Sofroniskos, according to Porphyry but also according to Diogenes Laertios. Pausanias even conveyed to us that in Propylaea there was a marble relief, which Socrates had said to have been made. "You are a sculptor, Socrates, and have made statues of our governors faultless in beauty" (quoted in Plato's *Republic*, Book 7).

¹⁸ From Friedrich Nietzsche's last book titled *Ecce Homo, Wie man wird, was man ist*.

¹⁹ As in Le Corbusier's promenade architecturale.

²⁰ See: Segal, Charles. *Oedipus Tyrannus: Tragic Heroism and the Limits of Knowledge*. New York: Twayne Publishers (Macmillan), 1993 and Dawe, R. D.. *Sophocles. Oedipus Rex*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006.

²¹ The phrase: ὃς τὰ κλεῖν' αἰνίγματ' ἤδει καὶ κράτιστος ἦν ἀνὴρ (Who knew the famous riddles and was a man most masterful) from Sophocles's *Oedipus Rex* was written in Sigmund Freud's ex libris according to Ernest Jones. The design of this ex libris stamp, depicting Oedipus against the Sphinx, was designed for Freud by the Viennese Bertold Löffler in 1901. See: Pichler, Gerd. "Bertold Löffler's Bookplate for Sigmund Freud". *Psychoanalysis and History*, vol. 12, issue 1, January 2010, pp. 7-14.

²² Le Corbusier's phrase "Des yeux qui ne voient pas" describes a similar, Oedipean mechanism: eyes wide open can be also blind when they cannot 'see' (understand) the 'real' architecture.

²³ One of young Jeanneret's favorite books was an edition of *Ansi parlait Zarathoustra* (Thus Spoke Zarathustra) translated by Henri Albert. See: Brooks, *op.cit.*, p. 174.

²⁴ Leiter, Brian. *Nietzsche and Morality*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007, chapter 9.

²⁵ This admiration for artists and all those elements who can express through their art can be found, similarly, in Freud.

²⁶ I am thinking of Nathaniel Kahn's *My Architect* (2003), Tomas Koolhaas's *Rem* (2016), and Kaspar Astrup Schröder's *Big Time* (2017). The fact that some of these films were directed by the sons of the famous architects sets an undoubtedly Oedipean (albeit unresolved?) framework.

²⁷ Such a postmodern narration usually avoids a critical view on the evolution and promotion of the protagonist as a internationally recognized professional. At the same time the typical representations of a 'hero' or a 'genius' cannot but keep emerging. It is characteristic that in the recent film *Big Time*, the narration of Bjarke Ingels's life and work follows such a typical heroic-Oedipean structure: a. the first years (his family / Bjarke as a child) b. the challenge - threat (going to the US / threatening headaches) c. the victory (success at the US / overcoming the health problem) d. the woman - marriage (he finally finds his significant other / he will make his own family).

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