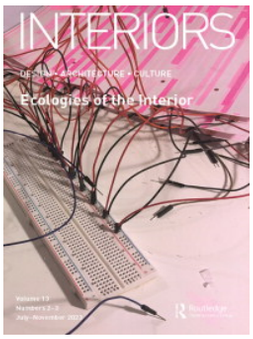

Routledge
Taylor & Francis Group

Interiors

Design/Architecture/Culture

ISSN: 2041-9112 (Print) 2041-9120 (Online) Journal homepage: www.tandfonline.com/journals/rfin20

Urban domestic spaces as experimental workshops—the homes of the modernist architects Le Corbusier and Sven Markelius in the 1930s

Anna Ingemark

To cite this article: Anna Ingemark (24 Jun 2025): Urban domestic spaces as experimental workshops—the homes of the modernist architects Le Corbusier and Sven Markelius in the 1930s, Interiors, DOI: 10.1080/20419112.2025.2505348

To link to this article: https://doi.org/10.1080/20419112.2025.2505348

Published online: 24 Jun 2025.

INTERIORS

Urban domestic spaces as experimental workshops—the homes of the modernist architects Le Corbusier and Sven Markelius in the 1930s

Anna Ingemark

In this article, the homes of two pioneers of the Modern Movement are in focus—Swiss-French Le Corbusier (1887–1965) and Swedish Sven Markelius (1889–1972). They both belonged to a progressive avant-garde and contributed to a radical change of architecture and urban planning through several polemical texts, exhibitions, and projects in an international context. In 1934, Le Corbusier designed a

Interiors DOI: 10.1080/20419112.2025.2505348

Routledge
Taylor & Francis Group

multi-storey building at 24 Rue Nungesser-et-Coli in Paris, while Sven Markelius' collective house (*Kollektivhuset*) at John Ericssonsgatan 6 in Stockholm was constructed in 1935. In my study, I analyze the two interiors through the concepts of *space*, *rhetoric* and *identity*. Different experimental aspects, with a strongly developed sense of spatiality and aesthetics, are clearly reflected in these domestic spaces. Furthermore, my study shows that, in addition to verbal and visual rhetoric in manifestos such as *Vers une Architecture* and *acceptera*, the architects' own homes can be interpreted as *spatial rhetorics*, challenging the prevailing norms and patterns.

KEYWORDS: Le Corbusier; Sven Markelius; modern movement; architects' homes; domestic space; collective housing; identity; spatial rhetorics

Introduction

Architects, with their ability to visualize, verbalize and concretize in texts, images and buildings, have belonged to a progressive avant-garde during periods of transformation. In this article, my aim is to examine two pioneers of the modern movement and their homes: the Swiss-French Le Corbusier (1887–1965) and the Swedish Sven Markelius (1889–1972). They were both committed to finding solutions to the challenges of modern society, such as housing in the expanding, overcrowded cities and were acquainted through the international association CIAM—*Congrès Internationaux d'Architecture Moderne* (Rudberg 2017: 8). In the formative years of the 1930s, both were designing their own apartments in urban areas, which are interesting to investigate as "experimental interiors" according to the theme of this issue.

In the penthouse of a building at 24 Rue Nungesser-et-Coli in Paris from 1934, you will find the home and studio of Le Corbusier.[1] This project materialized the architectural principles he had formulated and illustrates his views on interior design. The apartment shows both traces of a conventional, bourgeois lifestyle and radical, non-normative ideas of living (Ingemark 2023). In 1935, an innovative collective house (*Kollektivhuset*), designed by Sven Markelius, was built in a functionalist idiom at John Ericssonsgatan 6 in central Stockholm.[2] The house was a groundbreaking project with both individual units and common services to facilitate everyday life, not least for working mothers. Markelius himself chose to move from his modernist villa in the wealthy suburbs into one of the larger flats to try this rather unconventional way of living for ten years (Rudberg 1989: 80–83).

Gennaro Postiglione, the author of *The Architect's Home*, argues that in order to reach a deeper understanding of "the ongoing interchange of thoughts, ideas and values that has been the hallmark of the modern era, we must of necessity take a close look at the

houses architects have created for themselves" (2013: 7). Homes of architects have repeatedly been the subject of richly illustrated articles and books, usually with an emphasis on aesthetics or ingenious solutions. However, there is remarkably little written from a more pronounced critical perspective (Postiglione 2013: 7–12). Isabelle Doucet and Janina Gosseye confirm this in the research anthology *Activism at Home* and further reason that: "Architects frequently use their own homes to criticize not only the status quo within the discipline, but also to challenge prevailing social, political, economic, and cultural conditions" (Doucet and Gosseye 2021: 11). From this point of view, the design of an interior space can be explored as an experimental, radical workshop, and not only as a creation of a beautiful, functional home.

The philosopher Henri Lefebvre explains the interpretation of space (1991: 38–39) with a triad: *spatial practice* (ideals embodied in a society), *representations of space* (the dominant conception of space), and *representational spaces* (the experienced and symbolic spaces). Concerning my case study on architects' homes, during the beginning of a new era, I believe this to be a relevant perspective. I would, however, like to add the aspect of both verbal and visual *rhetoric* in convincing others of one's opinion, not least important in periods of change. In the field of architecture, this is not only expressed in architectural theory or criticism—but also in drawings, models and actual buildings—influencing the current discourse. Hence, I am interested in the theoretical intersection between space and rhetoric, in the sense that Jessica Enoch has explored in her research on feminist rhetoric. She underlines that "spaces are not neutral backdrops for human dramas but are/ … /practiced in ways that play out assumptions regarding gendered behavior and social expectations" (2011: 116). Further, she shortly defines the concept *spatial rhetorics* as "the discursive and material means used to engender spaces with value" (Enoch 2011: 116; Enoch 2019). Domestic spaces produce or reproduce social patterns closely linked to the prevailing ideals and discourse of the time (Björk 2016).

Penny Sparke, professor of design history, points out that the interpretation of the modern interior is two-folded—the function of an aesthetically organized interior *space* and the idea of a socially and culturally defined *place* (Sparke 2010: 8). Where the former reflects the current discourse on spatial and aesthetic qualities, and the latter concerns taste, identity, and lifestyle. Inspired by the cultural sociologist Pierre Bourdieu and his theory on *distinction*, the home can, furthermore, be seen as a scene where you stage your class, gender and *habitus* emphasized by a conscious selection of objects of your taste (Bourdieu 1994).[3] The home consists of more than its architectural framework and spatial disposition—artefacts such as furniture, textiles, objects and books are other material traces that create a living space.

In this article, my main starting point is Le Corbusier's and Sven Markelius' common role and identity as progressive male architects

of the Modern Movement, rather than their individual personalities. I will describe and contextualize their apartments with the following questions in mind: What is the relationship between the views on housing that these two architects rhetorically promoted and the design of their own homes? How are the identities and values of each architect reflected in these examples? And in what sense are the interior spaces experimental?

Since we once again find ourselves in an important shift (now towards a more sustainable and digitalized society) where architecture and design have proven to be important tools in a process of change, I find it interesting to highlight these experimental interiors. Although the change goes far beyond aesthetically designed artefacts or buildings, new ideals and lifestyles are expressed in the interior architecture (Armstrong 2019: 17–18, 39–40).

The historical and discursive context

At the end of the 19th century, everyday life had changed radically due to the great economic and social transformation linked to the process of industrialization. The home was a physical framework built around the ideals of the bourgeois nuclear family—a place where ideology and values materialized in both gendered floor plans and furnishings (Forty 2005: 100–102; Sparke 2008). However, the housing conditions were very different depending on your social class. Gradually, the severe living situation in the rapidly growing cities became alarming. A new approach to urban planning and residential architecture emerged. Progressive architects in Europe were inspired by industry and engineering—rather than being limited by the classical vocabulary—and wanted to translate technological innovations into a modern form characterized by simplicity and standardization (Svedberg 1988). The approach could be described through the phrase "form follows function" (Frampton 2007: 56), but they did not consider the new design idiom to be a style. In Sweden, the severe housing situation had been in focus since the beginning of the twentieth century. Investigations such as *Praktiska och hygieniska bostäder* (Practical and Hygienic Dwellings) from 1921 were important for the future development of residential architecture (Nylander 2018: 51; Movilla Vega 2017: 21–28).

Modernism was launched with the help of powerful rhetoric—often referring to sun, light and air with subtexts of cleanliness, morality and discipline (Saarikangas 2003). The dirt was to be swept away and the bad smell aired out—both figuratively and literally. Materially, the ideology was translated into clear, geometric forms without ornamentation made of glass, steel and concrete, while the interiors were characterized by light and space. The focus was on new technology, but also to produce affordable, functional housing and objects for all social classes through rational mass production. The radical ideas were, in the beginning, mainly manifested in texts, drawings, and exhibitions, before the opportunity emerged to carry out full-scale projects (Eaton

2002; Conrads 1990). Le Corbusier's first book, *Vers une Architecture* (Towards a New Architecture) from 1923, describes his view of architecture, shaped by an interplay between abstract art, classical proportions and technological achievements. Furthermore, he is interested in how new materials, such as glass, steel and reinforced concrete, can reform contemporary architecture. He argues for the mass production of standardized housing and shows a number of examples of how these can be designed. There is a span in the reasoning between the quest for efficient serial building and universal beauty—where the polemical text oscillates between rational and emotional arguments (Kruft 1994: 395–402).

The *Pavillon de L'Esprit Nouveau* by Le Corbusier in the Paris Exhibition of 1925 can be seen as a three-dimensional display of his conception of an ideal dwelling. A cubic shape with an open floor plan, double ceiling height with a mezzanine loft, airily furnished with built-in cabinets and light, flexible furniture—which often illustrates Le Corbusier's idea of the home as a machine to live in—"*une machine á habiter*" (Le Corbusier 1989: 240).

When visiting Paris in 1925, the Swedish architect Uno Åhrén was impressed by Le Corbusier's avant-garde "housing machine," which contrasted with the exhibition's more decorated objects. He enthusiastically described his impressions in an article called "Brytningar" (Crossroads), paving the way for these new ideas in Sweden (Åhrén 1925).

Two years later, *Svenska slöjdföreningen* (the Swedish Society of Crafts and Design) and several other actors visited Stuttgart to see the innovative *Weissenhof Siedlung*, a housing exhibition with architecture by Mies van der Rohe, Walter Gropius and Le Corbusier, among others (Svedberg 1988: 83–84). In 1928, Le Corbusier participated in the founding of the international association CIAM, which greatly contributed to the spread of the modernist view of architecture (Frampton 2001: 84–87). Soon, there were representatives from around the world in CIAM, including Scandinavian architects such as Sven Markelius, Uno Åhrén and Alvar Aalto (Rudberg 1989: 50).

An important manifestation of the new influences from France and Germany was the *Stockholm Exhibition* in 1930, initiated by Gregor Paulsson and the Swedish Society of Crafts and Design, with Gunnar Asplund as chief architect. The design language of the pavilions was characterized by a lightness and playfulness, with simple, undecorated façades, horizontal ribbon windows and flat roofs in line with the ideals of early modernism. In Sweden, there was a particular emphasis on function (in a socio-economic and political context), which explains why the movement came to be called *functionalism* (Movilla Vega 2017: 31–34).

The entire *Stockholm Exhibition* area signaled a belief in the future and a desire to change society. Not least in the housing department, which consisted of different types of domestic architecture, designed by several of the progressive architects at the time. Hygienic,

laboratory-like kitchens, separate bedrooms and bright, spacious living rooms—furnished with modern furniture and textiles—were all on display in the same forward-looking spirit (Rudberg 1999). Markelius participated in five projects, such as a small apartment with a mezzanine loft and a detached functionalist villa, with a similar approach and aesthetics (Rudberg 1989: 59).

Even though this well-attended exhibition is considered the major breakthrough of functionalism in the Nordic countries, not everyone was thrilled about this modernistic turn. In 1931, the architects Gunnar Asplund, Wolter Gahn, Sven Markelius, Eskil Sundahl and Uno Åhrén, together with the art historian Gregor Paulsson, wrote the manifesto *acceptera* (accept) in order to emphasize the message even strongly (Asplund et al. 1931; Creagh et al. 2008). The 200 pages thoroughly discuss aspects such as housing, interior design and urban planning with socio-economic overtones. On the one hand, the argument shows a historical continuity (a kind of deterministic inevitability) where today's modern lifestyle should be reflected in architecture, but on the other hand, it demonstrates how people are to be transformed and become more updated through the designed environment. Quite simply, the authors mean that what is needed is not only contemporary architecture, but also a new type of human being who is healthy and has a modern mind. The visions, as well as the rhetorical approach and the aesthetics (including the graphic form) in *acceptera* are reminiscent of manifestos written by predecessors such as Walter Gropius and Le Corbusier (Ingemark 2022). In conclusion, it is evident that the pioneers of the Modern Movement were connected both ideologically and aesthetically, sharing the same view on the inevitable path forward. Some of them met regularly in both private and professional contexts, even though living in different countries, continually influencing each other. Their homes, where they sometimes received colleagues and journalists, were often consciously designed spaces showing their identity and ideals in this important period of change (Postiglione 2013: 9).

Le Corbusier's private spheres

During the formative years from 1917 to 1934—when Charles-Èdouard Jeanneret-Gris transformed himself into Le Corbusier—the architect lived in a traditional 17th-century house at 20 Rue Jacob, close to the bohemian Latin Quarter (Frampton 2001; Rüegg 2012). The difference between the cramped, but charming, attic and the ideas he persistently advocated was obvious, and is also said to have given rise to some sarcastic comments (Burri and Rüegg 1999: 149). In the beginning, most of his visions existed only in text and images, in a time of transition, which seems to have caused frustration. After having built innovative private houses for others, such as *Maison La Roche* (1925) and *Villa Savoye* (1928–1931), Le Corbusier's desire to design a home in harmony with his own needs and ideals is understandable (Figure 1).

Figure 1
The apartment building at 24 Rue Nungusser-et-Coli in Paris. Source: Photo by Sailko, Wikipedia.

In 1931, Le Corbusier and Pierre Jeanneret (his cousin and colleague) had the opportunity to get hold of a plot of land in an expanding district, near the recreation area *Bois de Bologne*.[4] The apartment building, with its raster-like glass façade at Rue Nungesser-et-Coli, was finished in 1934. It is a full-scale model of the principles previously formulated by Le Corbusier, and is, although one of the least noticed examples of their works, an important milestone (Sbriglio 1996: 12).

The penthouse on the seventh and eighth floors, planned for himself and his wife Yvonne, consists of 240 square meters with an additional roof terrace. The plan for the ground floor is divided into two parts, with a sculptural spiral staircase as a centerpiece. A large studio occupies half of the space and faces east, while the separate living area is located to the west (Figure 2).

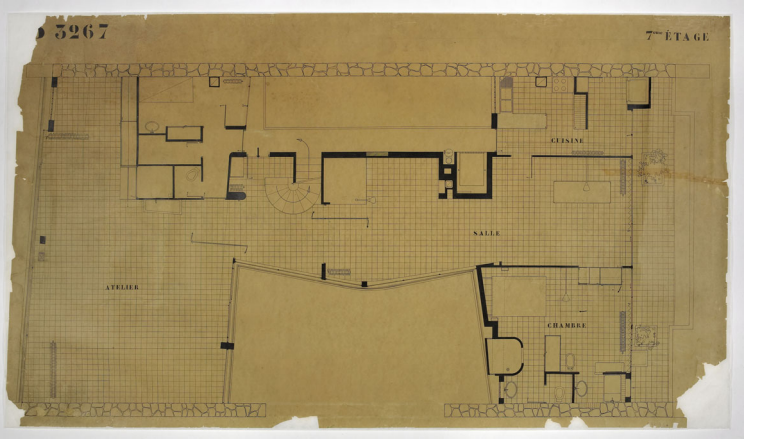

Figure 2
The plan shows the ground floor of Le Corbusier's apartment. Source: © Fondation Le Corbusier.

The studio, where Le Corbusier continued to paint throughout his life, is spacious and characterized by a stone wall (foreshadowing the material-oriented brutalism he developed in later years) and an intricate natural light. Inside the studio there is also a small workplace for Le Corbusier's writing, where the window in front of the desk under the softly shaped ceiling is made of concrete glass. The arrangement of two such differently dimensioned rooms with varying ceiling heights—which also marks the different parts of his work—creates a striking contrast. In the living quarters, you first come to a rather small niche, painted in black and red, with a *grand confort* sofa and a rustic tree-trunk table opposite a fireplace. Next is the spacious dining room dominated by a large window section and furnished with a substantial marble table surrounded by bentwood armchairs by Thonet. Inside, there is the kitchen with wall-mounted cabinets designed by Charlotte Perriand and a small maid's room—which shows a traditional lifestyle despite all the modernity. From the representative, public part of the apartment, you come to the couple's more private sphere. The floor plan is thus reminiscent of the nineteenth century bourgeois apartment, which was so common in large parts of Haussmann's transformed Paris. That is, the opposite of what the modernists claimed to strive for in their goal of mass-producing rational housing for the vast majority of people, regardless of social class (Sparke 2008: 154). In practice, you can see how the hierarchical and gender-stereotyped structures remained for a long time, even though dressed in a modernistic vocabulary (Björk 2016: 149–154).

In the private part of the penthouse, you encounter the most intriguing solutions. Except for the swivel door with an integrated cupboard between the living room and the bedroom, there are no other closed partitions. The area is only divided by arches and organically sculpted niches—which include a toilet, a shower and a bathtub without any privacy. The double bed is raised on high tubular steel legs (similar to his ideal of placing buildings on *pilotis*) to provide maximum views of the surrounding area, although it seems a bit impractical. This part of the home is strikingly experimental and unconventional—and shows a norm-breaking design (Figure 3).

Figure 3
The bedroom with toilet and bath in Le Corbusier's apartment. Photo by Albin Salaün © Fondation Le Corbusier.

On the next floor, you find the softly shaped guest room next to the warming chimney wall, covered in wood paneling, and an extra bathroom. Here you also reach the terrace (which continues on another level)—a green oasis high above the noisy city. An important element that shows Le Corbusier's search for nature, fresh air and sunlight, even in urban environments (Le Corbusier 1976: 38).

In general, the interior is characterized by its open space with plenty of natural light and the meeting between right angles and organic shapes. Likewise, a rhythm arises between contrasting spatialities, where one moves between the large and small scale, probably adapted to both function and experience. The rooms are brightly painted with occasional touches of red, but in the studio, for example, the back wall is made of bricks and stone, which adds warmth and texture (Figure 4).

Figure 4
The Studio of Le Corbusier in 24 N.C. Photo by Peter Willi © Fondation Le Corbusier.

The apartment (which is now partly reconstructed) shows the interior-design philosophy that Le Corbusier often applied: a mix of built-in cabinets, simple, mass-produced furniture such as Thonet's bentwood chairs and his, Jeanneret's and Perriand's iconic club armchair with a tubular steel frame (Graf and Marino 2022; Marcus 2000: 12–17). The goal was a minimalist, functional home with a sense of flowing space (Sparke 2008: 152–154). However, if you look at photographs taken during the 30 years he lived here, you can see a much more vibrant home full of traces of an intellectual and creative activity. Books piled on the floor, lots of sketches and notes, works of art, unfinished paintings on the easel, and artefacts from his *collection particulière* (Rüegg 2012: 129–131). This emphasized his *habitus* and identity as a creative artist and radical architect belonging to the avant-garde (Ingemark 2023).

Le Corbusier and his wife Yvonne continued to live in their specially designed duplex apartment at 24 Rue Nungesser-et-Coli for the rest of their lives, although spending more and more time in the small, very simple *cabanon* (built in 1952) at Roquebrune-Cap Martin in the south of France (Frampton 2001: 224–227).

The modernist pioneer Sven Markelius

Sven Markelius (1889–1972), born Jonsson, became one of the most notable representatives of functionalism in Sweden. He had a long professional life and devoted himself to the designed

environment in a broad sense—everything from furniture and textiles to entire buildings and urban plans. Furthermore, he made his voice heard through about 200 articles on architecture and urban planning over the years (Rudberg 1989).

In 1927, he travelled to the continent and was strongly influenced by Walter Gropius, then head of Bauhaus school in Dessau, and his view of architecture. Gropius' social commitment was expressed, among other things, in the projects with terraced housing areas with modern hygienic housing for the working class. When in Germany Markelius also visited the above-mentioned exhibition *Weissenhof Siedlung*. The aesthetics and housing ideas appealed to Markelius, who, like many other Swedish architects, wanted to contribute to a modern and better and society (Rudberg 1989).

After coming home, Markelius started to plan the Student Union Building at the Royal Institute of Technology in collaboration with Uno Åhrén (1933) and updated the final design of the Helsingborg Concert Hall (1932). Both projects are early examples of modernism in Sweden—with right-angled volumes, un-decorated walls in white plaster and flat roofs—and are still considered as master pieces of the epoch (Bedoire 2015: 243–246).

In 1930, Markelius also designed his own villa in Nockeby (in the outskirts of Stockholm), which is another display of the new age. The cubic shape, with an extended semicircular apse, and ribbon windows, was constructed in reinforced concrete, and raised from the ground on pillars—clearly inspired by Le Corbusier. Five years later, Markelius moved to John Ericssonsgatan 6, which I will return to below. Eventually, besides other assignments, he designed another detached villa for his family, where he once again experimented in material, construction, and layout. His relatively simple, wooden house from 1945 in the green suburb Kevinge consisted of standardized, prefabricated elements—an idea that Markelius promoted for being both economic and flexible. The family home was depicted in several international journals and became a symbol of the pragmatic, post-war architecture in Sweden, sometimes called New Empiricism (Rudberg 1989: 108–110; Postiglione 2013: 260–263).

Sven Markelius was also involved in urban planning and housing issues on a more general level. During the years 1944–1954, he was employed as City Planning Director in Stockholm and thus had a great influence on the city's development during this expansive period. The satellite suburb of Vällingby, which was officially opened in 1954, became internationally famous for its modern architecture and city planning with separate zones for dwelling, service and traffic. Furthermore, Markelius' status was confirmed by being the only Scandinavian architect invited to participate in the building of

UN headquarters from 1947 to 1951 (Rudberg 1989: 127–131, 158–161).

Collective housing as an experiment

Sven Markelius belonged to the avant-garde, who strived to change architecture, urban planning and dwelling. It was clearly expressed in the simplified, geometric forms and a modern, standardized construction, but below the surface there were radical thoughts on another level. In Markelius' opinion the collective form of living, in the intersection between one's own home and the rented apartment, could meet the needs of a modern family.[5] This type of social experiment was not included in the *Stockholm Exhibition* in 1930, but the idea was developed the following year in the functionalist manifesto *acceptera*. The key concept was to have access to all possible services in a tenement building, such as prepared meals, cleaning, laundry and childcare, to make everyday life easier (Movilla Vega 2017: 39; Vestbro & Horelli 2012: 322–324).[6]

Important driving forces were Markelius himself, the writer Viola Wahlstedt (his first wife) and the sociologist and debating author Alva Myrdal—all motivated by a conviction that this form of housing could contribute to a more democratic and equal society (Markelius 1932; Myrdal 1932). An intense debate arose in media, since it was considered quite controversial. In the exhibition *Standard 1934* at Liljevalchs Art Gallery, the collective housing programme was introduced as an "individual culture through collective technology" (Rudberg 1989: 80). Primarily it was presented as an opportunity for women to be married, have children *and* have a career. A sort of equality, although the responsibilities for men actually remained unchanged, since the domestic work still was achieved by employed female labour (Saarikangas 2003). The collective life was not a goal in itself, but rather a way to be able to gain more individual freedom. Despite the changing society, it proved to be difficult to realize this radical idea.

In 1935, when the initiative finally was accomplished at John Ericssonsgatan 6, close to Norr Mälarstrand at Kungsholmen in a central part of Stockholm, the public could visit eight of the in total 57 apartments, in an exhibition organized by the Arts & Crafts Society and the Swedish Association of Architects (Markelius 1934). The flats were individually furnished for different types of tenants to show a variety in professions and incomes (Näsström 1935). In reality those who moved in were mostly well-educated, left-wing intellectuals (Wisselgren 2006: 141; Widmark 1998) (Figure 5).

Figure 5
The collective house with a detail of the façade towards the street John Ericssonsgatan. Photo by author.

The typically functionalist building is characterized by a pleated façade in warm yellow, bay windows and softly curved balconies, from where you could get a glimpse of the water. Towards the back-yard the façade is straight with squared balconies. It mirrors the ambition to let the sun, fresh air and greenery into every dwelling in the urban environment. The seven-storey building with a roof terrace consisted of 18 one-room apartments, 35 with two rooms, 1 with three rooms and 4 with four rooms each. The shared facilities, such as kitchen, restaurant, and kindergarten, were placed at the ground floor, while the roof terrace had a paddling pool, sand pit and a shower. During the early years, 21 people were employed to maintain this level of service. Except for the smallest flats, they all had a kitchenette and bathroom, which suggests that the building was not only intended for families with children (Rudberg 1989: 80). Every

apartment had a small service lift, where food from the restaurant could be sent up and a chute for dirty clothes in marked bags, directly sent to the laundry in the cellar. A common feature of the dwellings Markelius designed is to have separate functions, with small kitchens and bedrooms, and larger living rooms—something you can also see in the collective house. Here, however, it has been pushed further, as practically all housework is placed outside the individual apartment (Figure 6).

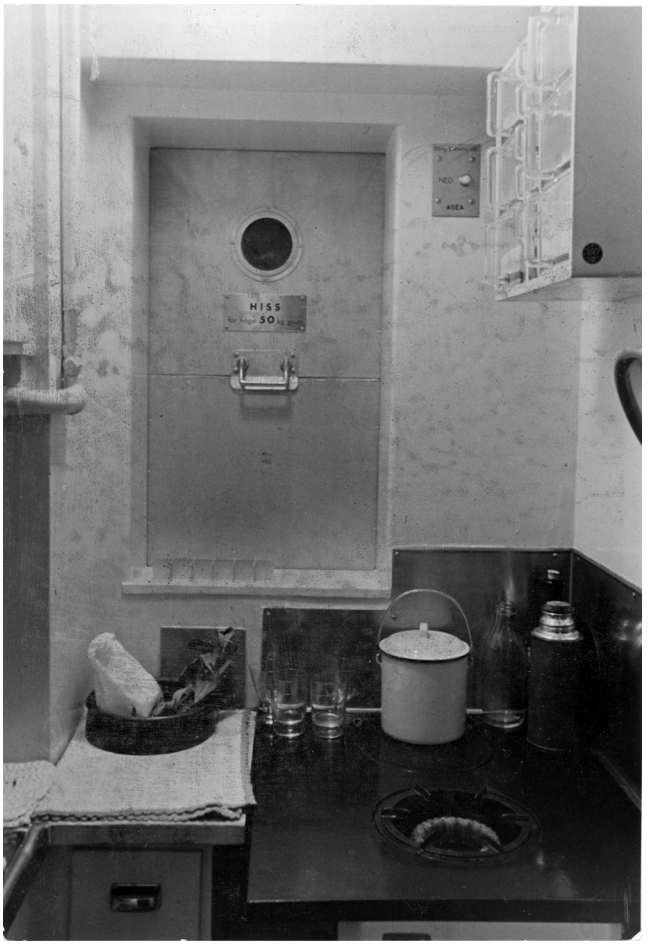

Figure 6
The food elevator is in one of the apartments in Markelius's collective house.
Source: ArkDes_ARKM.1962-101-0015. Public Domain. Unknown photographer.

The architect, Sven Markelius, moved in with his partner Ka Simon, while his former wife Viola Wahlstedt stayed in another apartment in the same building. This was, not least in the 1930s a rather unusual, and norm-breaking arrangement. After ten years the growing family (now with five children) moved to the experimental house in Kevinge built in 1945.

Markelius' own apartment (number 53) on the sixth and seventh floor in the building was one of four identical in the building. [7] The four-room apartment consists of 85 square meters in two floors, with two balconies. First you encounter a minimal, well-organized vestibule with built-in cupboards with daylight coming through a window section above the division wall to another room. Next is the spacious living room with (partially) double ceiling height, stairs leading up to the mezzanine floor, and an organic shaped fireplace in the corner. The room is remarkably light, with a large window section (towards the balcony facing the street to the west) and skylights in the ceiling high above (Figure 7).

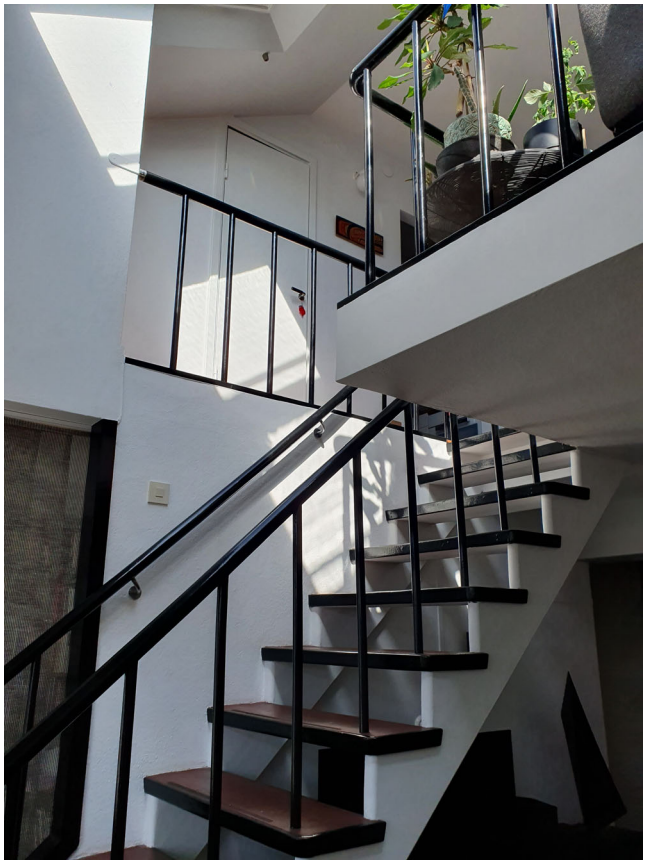

Figure 7
The stairs to the loft above the living room in Markelius' apartment. Photo by author.

Placed centrally, the staircase is a defining element, with its almost graphic construction in black and the original red-brownish linoleum carpet. To the right, beside the stairs, there is an opening to a narrow room, probably meant to be some sort of study. Upstairs, on the mezzanine, with its black-painted railing, there is a dining place, and

the tiny, but efficient kitchenette in an alcove. Furthermore, on the second floor, you find two bedrooms with access to the second balcony (facing the backyard in east) and the typically functionalist bathroom with white tiles. The overall impression is an effectively planned apartment with an airy openness *and* secluded spaces with practical built-in storage and well-thought-out details. There is a lot of daylight and access to both sun, fresh air and view to the urban landscape from the balconies (Figure 8).

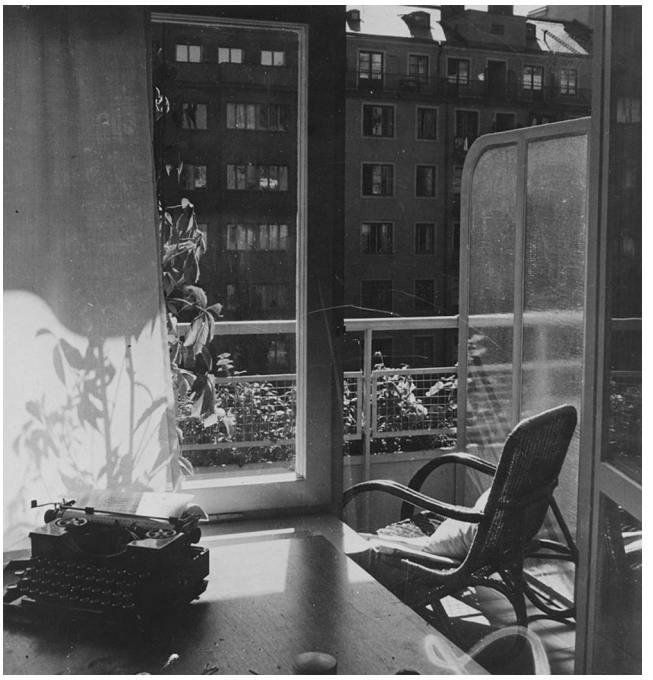

Figure 8
Inside the collective house by Markelius. Source: ArkDes_ARKM.1962-101-1717. Public Domain. Unknown photographer.

The interior is paradoxically both spectacular, mainly because of the double ceiling height and flowing space, and simple in its expression of efficient functionalism. Unfortunately, there is sparse documentation of the original furnishing, but if you look at the apartments from the opening exhibition of the collective block in 1935, there is a combination of straight lines and rounded curves with focus on equally function and comfort (Nässtrom 1935).

The domestic spaces of Le Corbusier and Sven Markelius

It is intriguing to examine how influential architects, such as Le Corbusier and Sven Markelius, chose to design the frame of their

own lives. 24 N.C. from 1934 and *Kollektivhuset* from 1935 are both a sort of full-scale model of an architectural experiment, although partly in different aspects. Aesthetically, they show the same fondness of pure geometric shapes and open spaces with a care for functional details—very typical for the prevailing style of early modernism. Even though the avant-garde's initial ambition was a rejection of both tradition and style, these visual markers communicating modernity became important. However, in both cases, my impression, looking at contemporary photographs, is that their homes (which they of course shared with their families) had a warm, cozy atmosphere far from our preconception of the austere, minimalistic modernism.

Sven Markelius, who left a large, lavish villa in the suburbs for a much smaller apartment and an alternative life in the collective house, seems to be very consistent with his beliefs. Le Corbusier's urban multi-storey building largely follows the architectural view he spread in several fora, even though the apartment is spacious in relation to his compact living ideal. I find it especially interesting that two of the most successful architects of their time chose to live in apartment buildings—although their own flats, not surprisingly, were among the larger and at the top floor—where many would have chosen a representative villa.[8] In the penthouse of Le Corbusier, the feminine-coded areas, such as the kitchen and maid's room, are discreetly inserted beside the representative dining room, while almost every trace of female household labour in the collective house was placed outside Markelius' actual apartment. Although they believed in a modern life, these two apparently had the male privilege to engage wholeheartedly in their work, without too much distraction.

Furthermore, when Le Corbusier and Sven Markelius designed their own homes according to their convictions, the results can be interpreted as three-dimensional displays of the ideals they had advocated in the public debate. The rhetoric of their modernist ideology, where a better urban living environment for the majority was to be achieved through simplicity and standardization, had a focus on modernity, function, and purity. Important aspects of a healthy and equal living were, according to the architects, to provide sunlight, fresh air and greenery in every residential area and home. Additionally, efficiency, flexibility and openness—concerning everything from dwellings to city planning—were desirable qualities.

Hence, the prevailing *spatial practice* was challenged by the avant-garde's rhetorical *representations of space* and materialized in *representational spaces* with Lefebvre's terminology (1991: 38–39). Radical ideas thus materialized in designed spaces, influencing everyday life and living patterns, linked to both class and gender (Vestbro and Horelli 2012). Furthermore, in addition to verbal and visual rhetoric in manifestos by Le Corbusier and Markelius, such as *Vers une Architecture* and *acceptera*, their own homes thus can be interpreted as *spatial rhetorics* (Enoch 2019; Bessette 2020). Their

domestic spaces emphasize the unconventional, modern way of living through both floor plan and interior architecture.

There are, as I have shown, several similarities between the two architects in this study, although it is evident that they acted in different countries and contexts. Sven Markelius worked in a more pragmatic, social-democratic spirit with a rather modest lifestyle in Stockholm, while Le Corbusier had a more bourgeois lifestyle in Paris (even though he increasingly withdrew from urban life to his very ascetic *cabanon* at the French Riviera). Le Corbusier had a pronounced elitist and, sometimes, extreme approach in his radical view on housing and humans (Frampton 2001: 116–129). In another perspective, perhaps the most radical of the two was the more toned-down Markelius, who shows an unusually great interest in equality between class and gender in a democratic discourse. An additional difference, in my opinion, is that while Le Corbusier obviously stages his *habitus* and identity in his home, Markelius rather materializes a social experiment in which his own self-image is more subordinate. Except their common identities as male architects with a high position in society, however, it is the creative and experimental aspects, with a strongly developed sense of spatiality and aesthetics, that are mainly reflected in the interiors.

Conclusion

Sometimes critical voices point out a discrepancy between the dwellings architects plan for others and how they choose to live themselves. Nonetheless, I do not find it especially surprising that architects often design their own homes more creatively and experimentally, since it is an opportunity to implement new ideas in real life, without having to compromise with a client.

In this article, I have described and analyzed two modernist pioneers' homes through the concepts of space, rhetoric and identity. Le Corbusier, as well as Sven Markelius, were at the forefront of the process of changing housing and urban planning into a new age of industrialism, technology and democracy. Within the Modern Movement, there are a number of tensions and contradictions—such as the relationship between *rhetoric* and *practice*, between *tradition* and *modernity,* and also between the *individual* and the *collective*. Furthermore, the separation of the *private* and the *public*, as well as *male* and *female*, was accentuated in the emergence of industrialization and the urban lifestyle. These themes are evident in my study above, both concerning the ideas the architects promoted and their own dwellings.

Le Corbusier's and Markelius' interdisciplinary and broad approach—with the ambition to educate, write and debate besides designing houses, furniture, textiles and urban plans—is quite extraordinary compared to today (Rudberg 2017: 37). They shared radical views on architecture and planning, where an integration between economics, politics, science and building was pursued (Widmark

1998: 76). The modernists were convinced that architects, as social engineers, were suited to solve the problem with overcrowded cities and unsanitary dwellings. In the early modernism the forerunners left the traditional, classical constructing and vocabulary behind to experiment with minimalism and rationalism, where "form follows function". These, initially radical, thoughts were transferred to everything from manifestoes and exhibitions to buildings and spaces.

Seen through the theoretical framework I have presented, Le Corbusier and Markelius used their domestic spaces to materialize modernity, accentuating their identities as architects of the avant-garde, and further, to challenge prevailing norms. The interiors in 24 N.C. from 1934 and *Kollektivhuset* from 1935 occur as three-dimensional, spatial rhetorics, staging new conventions concerning both aesthetics and lifestyle.

Finally, I would like to underline that the homes of the modernist pioneers Le Corbusier and Sven Markelius from the 1930s can be interpreted as experimental workshops, where they explored new aesthetic expressions, bold architectural solutions and alternative ways of organizing everyday life. Almost a 100 years later, these domestic spaces are still interesting to investigate, especially now when we are once again meeting new challenges in a changing world.

Notes

1. The apartment is since 2016 on the Unesco World Heritage list and is open to the public through the Fondation Le Corbusier. For more information see www.fondationlecorbusier.fr
2. The building is protected as a building heritage (byggnadsminne) since 1992, but is still used as a residential building. For more information see www.markeliushuset.se
3. Donald Broady explains *habitus* as follows; "By habitus, Bourdieu refers to *systems of dispositions* that allow people to act, think and orient themselves in the social world./ … /Bourdieu's habitus theory actually rests on a simple idea: people's habitus, shaped by the life they have lived up to that point, governs their conceptions and practices/ … /", Broady 1990: 228.
4. The description that follows is based on my own visit to 24 N.C. (as Le Corbusier himself called the building) in March 2019, and in addition on a very detailed account in Sbriglio 1996.
5. Similar ideas on collective housing already had occurred in for example Denmark, United States and Russia (Caldenby 1992). *Kollektivhuset* differs in comparison to collective housing later on, where the tenants actually share some of the living spaces and household labour. Another term used by Markelius is *familjehotell* (family hotel), and in our time it would be considered as a *servicehus* (service house).
6. Noteworthy here is that Le Corbusier had similar thoughts, later materialized in the project *Unité d'Habitation* at Marseilles 1946-52, which is also a collective housing (Frampton 2001: 155–162).

7. There is a very limited documentation and research on specifically the apartment where Markelius lived. This description is based on my visit to current tenants in May 2024.
8. Even though Markelius lived in his own detached houses both before and after staying in the collective building during 1935–1945.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

ORCID

Anna Ingemark http://orcid.org/0000-0003-3147-6821

References

Armstrong, Rachel. 2019. *Experimental Architecture. Designing the Unknown*. London: Routledge.

Asplund, Gunnar, et al. 1931. *Acceptera*. Stockholm: Tidens förlag.

Bedoire, Fredric. 2015. *Den svenska arkitekturens historia 1800–2000*. Stockholm: Norstedts.

Bessette, Jean. 2020. "Making Space." *Journal for the History of Rhetoric*, 23 (3): 366–369. https://doi.org/10.1080/26878003.2020.1815416

Björk, Christian. 2016. *Den sociala differentieringens retorik och gestaltning. Kritiska perspektiv på funktionalistisk förorts- och bostadsplanering i Stockholm från 1900-talets mitt*. Diss. Stockholm: Stockholms universitet.

Bourdieu, Pierre. 1994. "Distinktionen—en social kritik av omdömet." In Donald Broady och Mikael Palme (eds.). *Kultursociologiska texter*. Stockholm/Stehag: Brutus Östlings förlag.

Broady, Donald. 1990. *Sociologi och epistemologi: Om Pierre Bourdieus författarskap och den historiska epistemologin*. Diss., Stockholms universitet. Stockholm: HLS förlag.

Burri, René, and Arthur Rüegg. 1999. *Le Corbusier: Moments in the Life of a Great Architect*. Basel: Birkhäuser.

Caldenby, Claes. 1992. *Vad är ett kollektivhus?* Göteborg: Arkitekturens teori och historia, Chalmers tekniska högskola.

Conrads, Ulrich. 1990. *Programs and Manifestoes on 20th-Century Architecture*. Cambridge, Massachusetts: The MIT Press.

Creagh, Lucy, Helena Kåberg, and Barbara Miller Lane (eds.) 2008. *Modern Swedish Design. Three Founding Texts*. New York: The Museum of Modern Art.

Doucet, Isabelle, and Janina Gosseye (eds.) 2021. *Activism at Home: Architects Dwelling between Politics, Aesthetics and Resistance*. Berlin: Jovis Verlag.

Eaton, Ruth. 2002. *Ideal Cities. Utopianism and the (Un)Built Environment*. London: Thames & Hudson.

Enoch, Jessica. 2019. *Domestic Occupations: Spatial Rhetorics and Women's Work*. Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press.

Enoch, Jessica. 2011. “Finding New Spaces for Feminist Research”, Octalog III: The Politics of Historiography in 2010.” *Rhetoric Review* 30 (2): 115–117.
Forty, Adrian. 2005. *Objects of Desire. Design and Society since 1750*. London: Thames & Hudson.
Frampton, Kenneth. 2007. *Modern Architecture: A Critical History*. London: Thames & Hudson.
Frampton, Kenneth. 2001. *Le Corbusier*. London: Thames & Hudson.
Graf, Franz, and Giulia Marino. 2022. *The Many Lives of Apartment-Studio Le Corbusier*. Lausanne: EFPL Press.
Ingemark, Anna. 2022. “‘Förstör alla doriska, joniska och korintiska kalkstenskolonner’: den tidiga modernismens radikala arkitekturdiskurs.” In Kjell O. Lejon (ed.). *Radikalism—perspektiv på radikala uttryck och handlingar inom konst, filosofi och religion*. Stockholm: Carlssons.
Ingemark, Anna. 2023. “Visionären Le Corbusiers egna hem: en rumslig gestaltning av arkitektens modernistiska ideal och radikala persona.” *Bebyggelsehistorisk Tidskrift* 84: 7–20.
Kruft, Hanno-Walter. 1994. *A History of Architectural Theory: From Vitruvius to the Present*. London: Zwemmer.
Lefebvre, Henri. 1991. *The Production of Space*. Oxford: Blackwell Publishing.
Le Corbusier. 1989. *Towards a New Architecture*. Oxford: Architectural Press.
Le Corbusier. 1976. *Vår bostad*. Stockholm: Prisma.
Marcus, George H. 2000. *Le Corbusier: Inside the Machine for Living*. New York: The Monacelli Press.
Markelius, Sven. 1934. “Kollektivhuset.” *Byggmästaren* 16: 101–103.
Markelius, Sven. 1932. “Kollektivhuset: Ett centralt samhällsproblem.” *Spektrum/Arkitektur och samhälle:* 53–64.
Movilla Vega, Daniel (ed.). 2017. *99 Years of the Housing Question in* Sweden, Lund: Studentlitteratur.
Myrdal, Alva. 1932. “Kollektiv bostadsform.” *Tiden* 10: 601–608.
Nylander, Ola. 2018. *Svensk bostadsarkitektur: utveckling från 1800-tal till 2000-tal*. Lund: Studentlitteratur.
Näsström, Gustaf. 1935. *Hem i kollektivhus. Svenska slöjdföreningens utställning*. Stockholm: Svenska slöjdföreningens förlag.
Postiglione, Gennaro. 2013. *The Architect's Home*. Köln: Taschen.
Rudberg, Eva. 1989. *Sven Markelius, Architect*. Stockholm: Arkitektur Förlag.
Rudberg, Eva. 1999. *Stockholmsutställningen 1930: Modernismens genombrott i svensk arkitektur*. Stockholm: Stockholmia förlag.
Rudberg, Eva. 2017. *Sven Markelius and Uno Åhrén*. Stockholm: Royal Swedish Academy of Engineering Sciences.
Rüegg, Arthur. 2012. *Le Corbusier: Furniture and Interiors 1905-1965. Paris: Fondation Le* Corbusier, Zürich: Scheidegger & Spiess.

Saarikangas, Kirsi. 2003. “Skaparen av det moderna hemmet. Alva Myrdal och planeringen av vardagslivet.” *Arbetarhistoria* 2–3: 50–61.
Sbriglio, Jacques. 1996. *Immeuble 24 N.C. et Appartement Le Corbusier/Apartment Block 24 N.C. and Le Corbusier's Home*. Paris: Fondation Le Corbusier, Basel: Birkhäuser.
Sparke, Penny. 2008. *The Modern Interior*. London: Reaktion Books.
Sparke, Penny. 2010. “The Modern Interior: A Space, a Place or a Matter of Taste?” *Interiors* 1 (1): 7–17. https://doi.org/10.2752/204191210791602276.
Svedberg, Olle. 1988. *Planerarnas århundrade: Europas arkitektur 1900-Talet*. Stockholm: Arkitektur förlag.
Vestbro, Dick Urban, and Liisa Horelli. 2012. “Design for Gender Equality: The History of Co-Housing Ideas and Realities.” *Built Environment* 38 (3): 315–335. https://doi.org/10.2148/benv.38.3.315.
Widmark, Henrik. 1998. “Kollektivhuset på John Ericssonsgatan 6 i Stockholm. En idéhistorisk artefaktsstudie.” *Polhem. Tidskrift För Teknikhistoria* (2): 67–91.
Wisselgren, Per. 2006. “Kollektivhuset och Villa Myrdal. Om samhällsvetenskapens rum i folkhemmet.” In Erland Mårald and Christer Nordlund (eds.). *Topos: Essäer om tänkvärda platser och platsbundna tankar*. Stockholm: Carlsson.
Åhrén, Uno. 1993. “Brytningar.” In Peter Sundborg (ed.). *Svensk arkitekturkritik under hundra År*. Stockholm: Arkus.

Biography

Anna Ingemark is an architectural historian, docent and senior lecturer in Art History and Visual Communication at Linköping University. Her doctoral thesis from Lund University in 2010 analyzes architectural criticism in media with a focus on two case studies: the critical reception of the Stockholm Public Library and the Museum of Modern Art in Stockholm. Today, Ingemark mainly conducts research on the critical and theoretical discourses of the built environment with a particular interest in the idea of home and dwelling. Email: anna.ingemark@liu.se