

Charlotte Perriand's *Équipement*: Beyond Modern Furniture

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Équipement as Furniture: the Problematic of the Definition

On December 6 1929, the exhibition stand *Équipement intérieur d'une habitation* ["Interior equipment of a dwelling"] opened its doors to the public as part of the *Salon d'Automne*,¹ a traditional display of modern and trendy art, architecture, and decoration in Paris. The stand "Equipment of a dwelling" was the result of two years of work by Charlotte Perriand, Pierre Jeanneret and Le Corbusier, and represented their proposal for the image of the "new dwelling" corresponding to the shape of modern architecture. (Fig. 1) When becoming part of Le Corbusier-Jeanneret's *Atelier* in November 1927, Charlotte Perriand, a 23 years-old designer from the *Union Centrale des Arts Décoratifs* — not an architect by title, just as Le Corbusier — was commissioned with the development of the program *chaises, tables, casiers*² [chairs, tables, storage units]. The program had been a core matter in Le Corbusier's theory of domestic architecture since 1925, when he published *L'art décoratif d'aujourd'hui*³ and exhibited the model for a modern dwelling in the *Pavillon de l'Esprit Nouveau*, as part of the same year's *Exposition des Arts Décoratifs*. Both actions — the book and pavilion — were undertaken simultaneously as part of a strategic movement, focusing on criticizing the prevailing traditional styles in the *Salon* and the popular taste of Parisian society. The book *L'art décoratif d'aujourd'hui* demanded the complete abolition of decorative arts, proposing to eliminate the term "decorative," leaving only the "art" in place. Le Corbusier proposed a new approach to furniture: a rational, organized, and typological one, that would only respond to our human needs and would not have a representative or symbolic content. The *meuble-type* — referring to furniture — as the correspondent term to the *objet-type* theory, should only respond to functional requirements.⁴

Taking into consideration the revolutionary ideas on furniture that Le Corbusier published in 1925 in *L'art décoratif d'aujourd'hui* — which Perriand had read and agreed to, and that inspired her to introduce herself to the "master" to ask for a job — the *Esprit Nouveau* Pavilion didn't express the same assertiveness towards furniture in material terms. The pavilion was supposed to present the home display for the new humanity but, in terms of furniture, it was far from representative of those ideas (Fig. 2). When comparing the book to the pavilion, we

- 1 The *Salon d'Automne* was a popular show, gathering avant-garde proposals in arts and decoration that had a specific section dedicated to architecture since 1903. The 1929 Salon was held between November 3rd and December 22nd at the *Grand Palais*. As Le Corbusier returned from Latin America on board the *Lutetia* Ocean Liner around December 22nd in Bordeaux, it is highly unlikely that he would have arrived on time to see the display.
- 2 *Casiers* is the French word used by Le Corbusier for defining storage units, characterised for being modular, stand-alone, or embedded inside the walls. From now on, we'll use the word *casiers* for defining specifically this type of storage units.
- 3 Le Corbusier, *L'Art Décoratif d'aujourd'hui* (Paris: G. Crès et Cie, 1925).
- 4 For a profound analysis on Le Corbusier's proposal of *objet-types* and furniture see: Renato De Fusco, *Historia Del Diseño / Renato de Fusco ; Traducción Miquel Izquierdo* (Barcelona: Santa & Cole, 2005). Mary McLeod, *Charlotte Perriand: An Art of Living* (New York: The Architecture League of New York, 2003).

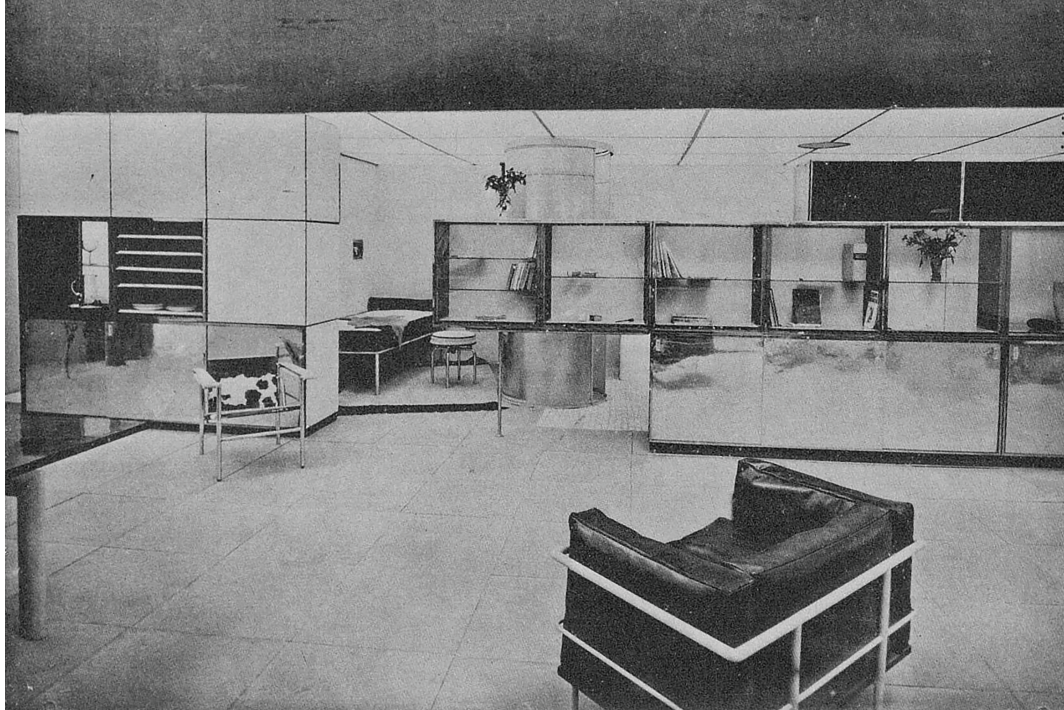


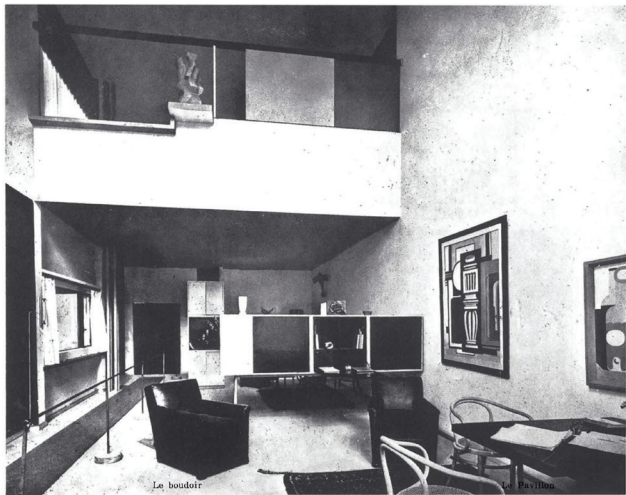
Fig. 1: Interior view of the stand "Equipement d'une habitation" showed at the Salon d'automne (November-December 1929) as published in *L'Architecture Vivante*, spring-summer 1930.

Fig. 2: Interior views of the *Esprit Nouveau* pavilion, exhibited at the *Exposition des Arts Décoratifs*, Paris 1925, as published by Le Corbusier in the first Volume of his *Œuvre Complète*, page 101. The *casiers* can be seen in the salon and boudoir.



A droite: La salle avec la sonpente au premier étage, le boudoir.

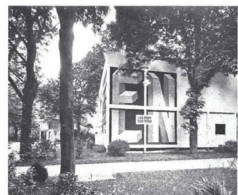
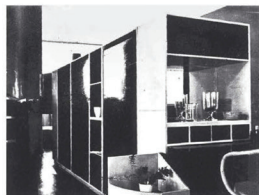
En bas à gauche: La salle à manger.
Polychromie: Plafond bleu, mur gauche blanc, mur de droite brun et blanc, les casiers jaune.

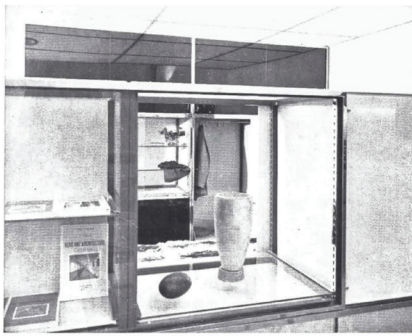


La salle

Le boudoir

Pavillon

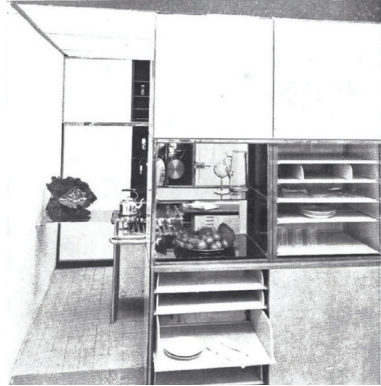
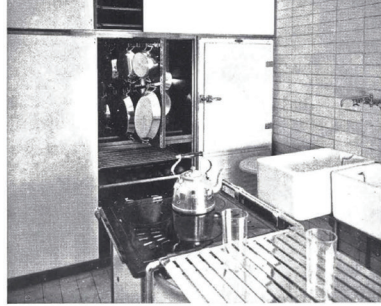




Un casier dans le salon. Le principe de ces casiers a une importance capitale. Avec la même carcasse standard, il est possible de créer des équipements extrêmement différents suivant les destinations de ces casiers.

A côté des destinations variées, varie également la manière de disposer ces casiers. Ils peuvent être disposés en épine libre, ou adossés au mur, ou constituant le mur de séparation de deux pièces, ouvrant d'un côté ou de l'autre, etc... Diversité énorme de combinaisons, variété dans la destination, unité de principe dans l'ensemble, calme. Le logis est débarrassé de tout son fatras d'articles encombrants.

La cuisine



Panor entre la cuisine et la salle à manger

Fig. 3: Image of the *casiers* standard used as storage units and also as stand-alone divisions for the kitchen of the *Équipement d'une habitation* show of 1929, as published in the second volume of Le Corbusier's *Œuvre Complète*, 1934.

can conclude there was a gap between Le Corbusier's theoretical propositions and the latter's completion. Later, it would become an increasing problem: in 1927, the interior arrangement of the modern houses built by Le Corbusier for the *Weissenhof Siedlung* was completed in a hurry, with designs by Alfred Roth and some Thonet curved wooden chairs painted in grey,⁵ as consequence of the Atelier failing to achieve the completion of the program "*chaises, tables, casiers.*" Of the three elements composing the program, only the *casiers* — presented in the 1925 pavilion — would be used as standard cabinets in the houses of the *Weissenhof Siedlung* which confirms (what we can also deduce from Le Corbusier's writings of the time) that chairs and tables were set aside. (Fig. 3) Conversely, by taking care of the interior as an integrated entity in the architectural program, the *Weissenhof Siedlung* proposals of the Bauhaus team⁶ and of the couple Mies van der Rohe – Lilly Reich demonstrated their respective advance in the field of modern interior. Back from his visit to *Weissenhof*, in October 1927, Le Corbusier met Perriand at his studio. Despite first declining her services,⁷ he changed his mind after seeing Perriand's stand *Bar sous le toit* [Bar under the roof] displayed at the *Salon d'Automne*:⁸ a domestic space that applied concepts defended by Le Corbusier in his books by introducing the bar as a modern alternative to the traditional salon. A fresh, delicate, and informal approach to

5 Le Corbusier, *L'Art Décoratif d'Aujourd'hui*. 17. Despite being 19th century furniture, Thonet chairs were considered by Le Corbusier as icons of modernity, as well as Maple armchairs.

6 As recent studies have suggested, there was an extended group of students and teachers Bauhaus – beyond the well recognized work of Walter Gropius and Marcel Breuer – who were involved in the furniture design. Many women among them, mostly uncredited, took part on the transformation of furniture as well as domestic spaces. For further information see: Hervás y Heras, Joseña. *Las Mujeres de La Bauhaus: De lo bidimensional al espacio total*. Buenos Aires: Diseño, 2015.

7 The famous quote "we don't embroider cushions here" by which Le Corbusier rejected Perriand has been appointed numerous times to reflect the misogynistic approaches of the time and particularly Le Corbusier's behaviour around women. After changing his mind, Perriand became associate of the Atelier, a position that only Pierre Jeanneret, his cousin, would have.

8 *Salon d'automne, Catalogue Des Ouvrages de Peinture, Sculpture, Dessin... Exposés Au Grand Palais Des Champs-Élysées Du 3 Novembre Au 22 Décembre 1929 / Société Du Salon d'automne...* (Paris: Impr. E. Puyfourcat fils, 1929).

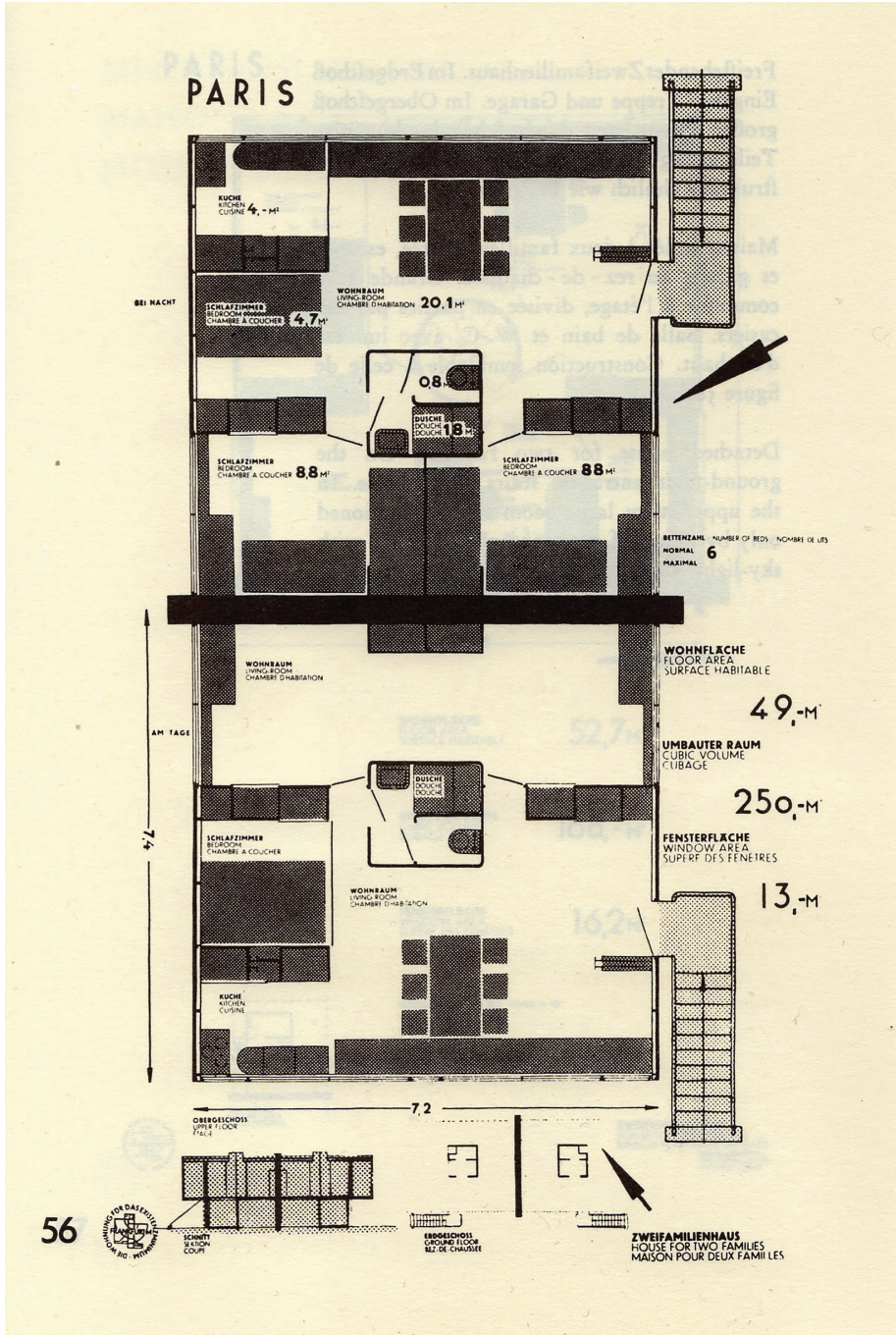


Fig. 4: Floor plan for the *Maisons Loucheur* as presented, and published, in the Second International Congress of Modern Architecture, Frankfurt, October 1929. The interior arrangement, including the *casiers*, was designed by Charlotte Perriand.

the interior of the dwelling that reflected the ideas on furniture intended to become an essential element of the domestic productions of the *Atelier* for the years to come.

Between the end of 1927 and 1929, Perriand developed mainly the prototypes shown in the “Equipment of the dwelling” exhibition: first, along 1928, the chairs and the system for the tables, and later, in 1929, the constructive system of the *casiers*. This program was intertwined with the central concern of the moment: small spaces in domestic architecture. The first *International Congress of Modern Architecture* (La Sarraz, 1928) specifically addressed the issue of modern furniture as a significant problem that should be solved, as well as the minimum dwelling, by translating the principles of Taylorism into domestic spaces, attending to the most efficient way of satisfying the domestic needs.⁹ For the second congress held in Frankfurt in 1929, dedicated to the *Existenzminimum* [minimum dwelling], the Le Corbusier-Jeanneret-Perriand *Atelier* presented the project defined on the outlines of the Loucheur Houses, a contest promoted by the French government to build a series of houses in minimum space of 45 sqm for a family of four. (Fig. 4) Perriand was in charge of the interior design of the houses, a two-family prefabricated module that Pierre Jeanneret and Le Corbusier had designed as a container, and where Perriand started developing the idea of the *casiers* more as an organizational system than as stand-alone furniture.¹⁰ When presented at the *Existenzminimum* congress, in October 1929, the text addressed the equipment in a long description as the internal system of organization for the dwelling based on the *casiers*, leaving aside the chairs and tables.¹¹ It was almost as if the *casiers* had an autonomous entity, and chairs and tables were not precisely the object of his attention. Later, in 1929, when presenting the ensemble “Equipment of the dwelling,” the word “equipment” would have a different meaning: it covered it all, *casiers*, tables and chairs. We intend to analyze the critical change between 1925 proposals and 1929 executions, and its relation to the presence of Perriand in the *atelier*, especially since she was not acknowledged as an author in any of the publications of the period in which these pieces of furniture were reproduced pieces that are, even today, only attributed to Le Corbusier.

“It is undoubtedly thanks to Charlotte Perriand that this *Équipement intérieur d'une habitation*, presented in 1929, was put together in less than two years. (...) However, the overarching theme had been set by Le Corbusier.”¹²

It is common to find a quote like this in studies related to Charlotte Perriand's role in the Le Corbusier-Jeanneret *Atelier*; it is a consequence in part due to her confessed drive to the machinist principles set by Le Corbusier in his books, but it is also rooted in bias towards a young woman among a men-driven environment, a professional in the field of decorative arts (historically considered a “minor” discipline, as opposed to architecture). Still, there is an

9 For example, the principles of Taylorism remain in the idea of “utilillage,” where Le Corbusier defines useful objects as mere tools for fulfilling a utilitarian goal. Le Corbusier, *L'Art Décoratif d'Aujourd'hui*. 86: “Utilitarian needs require tooling, perfected in all respects, just as the industry has shown a certain perfection. And this is the magnificent program of decorative art (definitely, what an inappropriate expression!).”

10 Le Corbusier, *Précisions Sur Un État Présent de l'architecture et de l'urbanisme* (Paris: Éditions Crès et Cie., 1930), 130

11 “L'équipement intérieur sera satisfait par des casiers de deux formats, pouvant contenir tous les objets employés par une famille (...) En dehors de ces casiers, il ne reste que les sièges et les tables.” Le Corbusier and Pierre Jeanneret, “Analyse Des Éléments Fondamentaux Du Problème de La ‘Maison Minimum’,” in *L'Habitation Minimum: Résultats Du 2me Congrès International d'Architecture Moderne et d'une Exposition Créée Par Le Service Municipal d'Architecture à Francfort s.M.: Cent Plans Introduits* (Zurich, Stuttgart: Julius Hoffmann; Congrès Internationaux d'Architecture Moderne, 1929), 24–33. The text was read by Pierre Jeanneret in the Second International Congress of Modern Architecture dedicated to the *Existenzminimum*, held in Frankfurt, 1929. It would be later published in the spring issue of *L'architecture vivante* signed by Le Corbusier and Pierre Jeanneret. No credit to Perriand was given in any of the publishing.

12 Arthur Rüegg, “Équipement Intérieur d'une Habitation: New Furniture for a New World,” in *Charlotte Perriand: Inventing a New World* (Paris: Fondation Louis Vuitton, 2019), 53.

accepted straight relationship between Perriand and the evolution of the idea of *équipement* in the studies that present her as an active designer, but not a theorist, resulting in attributing all the theoretical developments to Le Corbusier. Consequently, the most relevant studies on Charlotte Perriand, Pierre Jeanneret and Le Corbusier's furniture have taken into consideration, mainly, his writings to set the definition of the word *équipement*.¹³ As he wrote in the first volume of his *Ceuvre complète*, the idea was a late one. Despite being outlined in 1925, it would remain undefined until 1929, coinciding with the exhibition stand at the *Salon d'automne*:

“In 1929 we realize, looking back, that the *Pavillon de l'Esprit Nouveau* was a turning point in the design of modern interiors and a milestone in the evolution of architecture. A new term has replaced the old word *furniture*, which stood for fossilizing traditions and limited utilization. That new term is *equipment*, which implies the logical classification of the various elements necessary to run a house that results from their practical analysis.”¹⁴

The quoted text can be found in the first volume of Le Corbusier's *Ceuvre complète*, first published in 1929, as a closure to the explanation of the *Pavillon de l'Esprit Nouveau* (1925) alongside its illustrations. Although written in 1929, most historians have taken this definition as the first stage to theorize the transformation of the modern dwelling, setting the origin of the idea of *équipement* in the *Pavillon de l'Esprit Nouveau* when only the *casiers* were a consolidated proposal, therefore, becoming the core of the debate and leaving apart the chairs and tables.¹⁵ (Fig. 5a) A few pages ahead, the image of the iconic *chaise-longue* designed in 1929 can be found next to the interiors of the *Weissenhof Siedlung* houses (1927). (Fig. 5b) Therefore, a deliberate straightforward reading is promoted: it establishes a convenient but mismatched relation between those early projects and the subsequent definition of *équipement*. Based on this connection, we intend to place a doubt or, at least, to suggest a different interpretation given the events that occurred between 1925 and 1929 and whose influence in the development of the term has been omitted.

Shifting Concepts

In a typical shifting of concepts in Le Corbusier's approach to modernity, as pointed out by Alan Colquhoun,¹⁶ the term *équipement* was borrowed from the machinist language in a search for unattributed terminology, in order to enhance the disregard of tradition. Transferred from Taylorist¹⁷ theories, the word was quickly assimilated by avant-garde decorative artists, being

13 AA.VV, *Charlotte Perriand : Inventing a New World*, Fondation Louis Vuitton (Paris: Fondation Louis Vuitton, 2019); Arthur Rüegg, *Le Corbusier: Furniture and Interiors 1905-1965* (Zürich: Fondation Le Corbusier, 2012); Tim Benton, “Charlotte Perriand: Les Années Le Corbusier,” in *Charlotte Perriand* (Paris: Centre Pompidou, 2005), 12–24; Jacques Barsac and Yvonne Brunhammer, *Charlotte Perriand: Un Art d'habiter: 1903-1959* (Paris: Norma, 2005); McLeod, *Charlotte Perriand: An Art of Living*; George H. Marcus, *Le Corbusier: Inside the Machine for Living* (New York: Monacelli Press, 2000).

14 W. Boesiger and O. Stonorov (eds.), *Le Corbusier. Œuvre Complète 1910-1929* (Basel: Birkhauser, 1929), 100. Underlined is ours, italics in the original.

15 A recent analysis of the idea of the equipment has been published in Shoichiro Sendai, “The Conception of ‘Equipment’ by Charlotte Perriand: Cross-over between Le Corbusier and Japan,” *Journal of Asian Architecture and Building Engineering* 18, no. 5 (3 September 2019): 430–438, <https://doi.org/10.1080/13467581.2019.1678473>, which is one of the key notions of French creator Charlotte Perriand (1903–1999). The author focuses on the equipment dual feature of mobile and fixed elements, and mostly analyses the organization system of distribution achieved by the use of the *casiers*, leaving the chairs and tables aside.

16 Alan Colquhoun, “Desplazamiento de Conceptos En Le Corbusier,” in *Arquitectura moderna y cambio histórico: ensayos 1962-1976* (Barcelona: Gustavo Gili, 1978), 113–126.

17 Taylorism (after Frederick W. Taylor, author of the book *The Principles of Scientific Management*, 1911) is a term that references the system of organization following scientific principles focused on increasing efficiency of production by analyzing and standardizing repetitive processes. On the relationship between Taylorism and domestic ideas see: Mary McLeod, “Architecture or Revolution: Taylorism, Technocracy, and Social Change,” *Art Journal* 43, no. 2 (1983): 132–147.

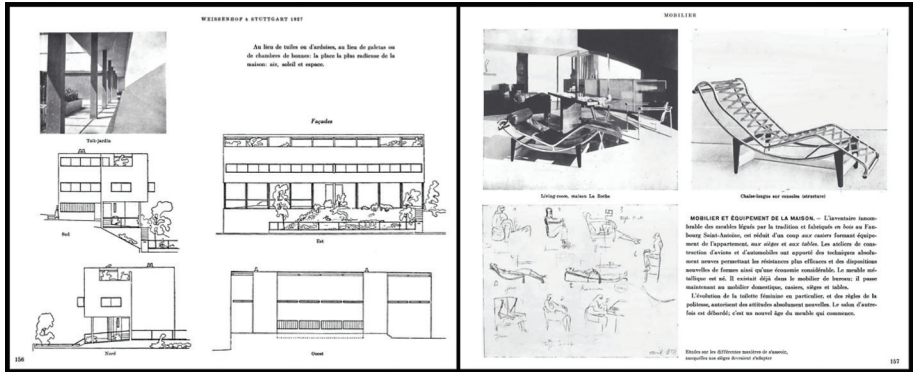
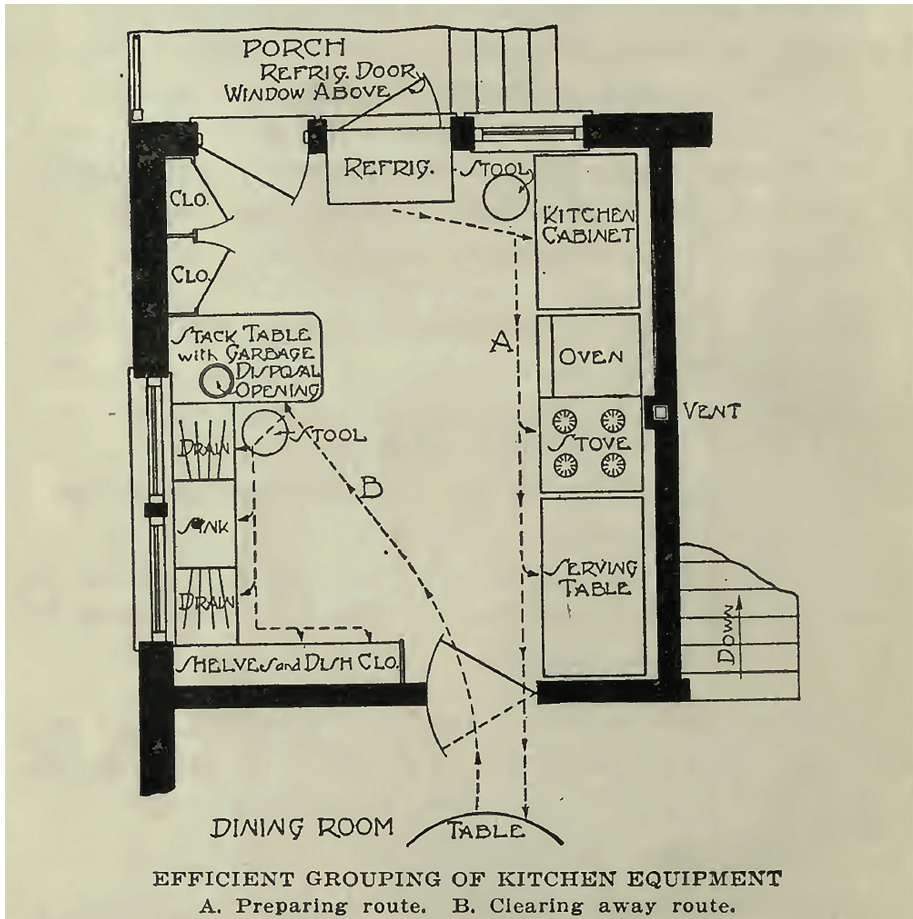


Fig. 5: Pages 156-157 of the first volume of Le Corbusier's *Œuvre Complète* where a second definition of *équipement*, *Mobilier et équipement de la maison* can be read opposite to the page dedicated to the *Weissenhof Siedlung* houses.

Fig. 6: Illustration of Christine Frederick's "Household engineering. Scientific management of the home," 1923 showing a floor plan of a labour-saving arrangement of equipment inside a kitchen. Notice the distributed paths of movement according to the organized work.



used to name objects and furniture associated with ideas of domestic modernity, in addition to household appliances. It was defined — according to the quote from the *Ceuvre Complète* — in opposition to the traditional furniture, setting the necessary distance with tradition and emphasizing the relevance of the usefulness and the fulfilling of everyday practical needs. Nevertheless, in his writings *équipement* doesn't appear until 1929's *Ceuvre Complète*. The term Le Corbusier used in 1925¹⁸ was *outillage*. In 1929, *équipement* was a word related to the machinist language, that was commonly used to define the electric appliances and sanitary systems of the modern house. In the French context, we had to trace back the use of the idea of equipment related to architecture to the books of American domestic engineer Christine Frederick. In her treatise *Household Engineering* published in 1915 in Chicago,¹⁹ Frederick showed a correct distribution of the domestic apparels that she called *equipment* in a saving-labor kitchen floor-plan.²⁰ This distribution was republished by German architect Bruno Taut in 1924 in a book undoubtedly oriented towards women as house managers.²¹ (Fig. 6) The ideas of Taylorism were easily assimilated in Europe, and modern architects were aware of them, but also, the critical mass of housekeepers in France. In 1924 the *Ligue d'organisation ménagère* [Association of Domestic Efficiency] was created, with the journalist and domestic scientific Paulette Bernège as a leader. In 1926, Frederick's treatise *Household Engineering* was translated as simply "Taylorisme chez-soi"²² [Taylorism at home] as a clear insight on how popular the term was at that moment.²³ The exhibition of "equipment of a dwelling" was a consequence of these ideas, looking for an extended field of implementation. The use of the title *équipement* by Perriand-Jeaneret-Le Corbusier brought to life the image of modern dwelling in terms of the Taylorist ideas shifted to the objects at home. Its use in the show was placing the limits of the concept beyond the popular perception of the kitchen, as the working space of the house, household appliances, tap water or heating systems, by extending its meaning to the furniture: tables, chairs, and storage systems, the old *casiers*.

The use of the term *équipement* for defining all the items in the display must have been Perriand's, who was, after all, in charge of the definition of the program. Despite being a major part of the assembly of the *Salon d'Automne* stand, the role of Perriand as coordinator of the exhibition has been deeply ignored for decades. Due to Le Corbusier being in Argentina during the month of October 1929, as Pierre Jeanneret was attending the *II International Congress of Modern Architecture* in Frankfurt, precisely at the time the setting up of the stand for the *Salon d'automne* was in process, Perriand must have assumed the managing of the installation and got no credit for it. There has been a gender bias towards women associated to Le Corbusier's personality.²⁴ In his book *Précisions*, consisting in the

18 The foundational books on Le Corbusier's decorative arts theory taken in consideration, besides the writings for the *Ceuvre Complète* are: Le Corbusier, *Almanach d'architecture Moderne* (Paris: G. Crès et Cie, 1925); Le Corbusier, *L'Art Décoratif d'Aujourd'hui*.

19 Christine Frederick, *Household Engineering; Scientific Management in the Home* (Chicago: American School of Home Economics, 1925). First edition, 1915.

20 Although the tradition of domestic scientists in the United States dates back to the second half of the 19th century with Harriet and Catharine Beecher and their studies for the application of Taylorist theories to domestic efficiency, we are interested in establishing a later relationship point with Christine Frederick because of the popular reception of her work and the existence of household appliances whose impact is comparable to that of Europe during the 1920s.

21 Bruno Taut, *Die Neue Wohnung: Die Frau Als Schöpferin / Bruno Taut* (Leipzig: Klinkhardt & Biermann, 1924). No English translation of the book was found, the title could be read as "The new dwelling: woman as creator." For this work the Italian version was used. Bruno Taut, *La Nuova Abitazione: La Donna Come Creatrice. Introduzione Di Paolo Portoghesi; Traduzione Di Margherita Gigliotti* (Roma: Gangemi, 1986).

22 Christine Frederick, *Le Taylorisme Chez-Soi* (Paris: Dunod, 1924).

23 McLeod, "Architecture or Revolution: Taylorism, Technocracy, and Social Change."

24 For further information see: Benton, "Charlotte Perriand: Les Années Le Corbusier," Hélène Frichot, Catharina Gabrielsson, and Helen Runting, "Architecture and Feminisms," in *Architecture and Feminisms* (Routledge, 2018), 1–7, <https://doi.org/10.4324/9780203729717-1>; McLeod, *Charlotte Perriand: An Art of Living*.

transcription of his conferences in Buenos Aires,²⁵ some references to Perriand — both veiled and specific — can be found to infer the modernity associated to women at the time. As such, he compares modern architecture to women, and thinks that liberating acts like shortening their skirts, sleeves and hair, should serve as an example for men.²⁶ Women, consequently, must be trusted because in terms of domestic modernity they know what they are doing. That line of thought is only valid inside the framework that defines the home as the corresponding sphere of a modern woman.²⁷

“Finally, in 1928, our associate for the interior organization of the houses, Mme. Charlotte Perriand (sic) (...) While I’m here in Buenos Aires talking to you, we have a big stand in the *Salon d’automne* in Paris, showing in a decisive way the principle of the ‘equipment of a modern dwelling’ with the standard cabinets.”²⁸

She was, in fact, an associate for the equipment of the dwelling, as she used to call it herself²⁹ who knew very well how to shift concepts: first with the “bar under the roof” in 1927, and then, in 1928, by presenting the “shock unit”: a home that “wouldn’t be the proper place for a *femme au foyer*.”³⁰ For the 1928 *Salon d’Artistes Décorateurs* — the official display of the Decorative Arts discipline — Perriand presented a group-stand with designers Djo Bourgeois and René Herbst, depicting modern domestic spaces in an avant-garde language. The reactions to the stand were contradictory: on one side, the critics were fascinated with the ensemble, but the Decorators’ Society (UCAD), on the other side, was not pleased by the attention they received, arguing that its success was at the expense of the ‘traditional’ part of the Salon. Perriand referred to that ensemble as a “shock unit,” a military reference where the idea of attacking the standard displays and the conventional taste of the Salon can be intended.³¹ The “shock unit” was a media success, also causing the 1929 banning of collective proposals for the *Salon des Artistes Décorateurs*, where the trio Perriand-Jeanneret-Le Corbusier intended to present the “equipment of the dwelling.” Consequently, it was displayed at the *Salon d’Automne*, following a quick strategic movement towards Franz Jourdain, Perriand’s colleague and the son of Francis Jourdain, the director of the *Salon d’Automne*. Perriand left the UCAD after the banning and founded the *Union des Artistes Modernes* (UAM).³² In the light of the “shock unit,” the title “Equipment of the dwelling” can be understood as a second part of a subversive switching of terms. Concerning this approach Arlette Barré-Despond notes:

25 Le Corbusier, *Précisions Sur Un État Présent de l’architecture et de l’urbanisme*, (Paris: Crès et Cie., 1930).

26 Le Corbusier, *Précisions ...*, 123.

27 On the relationship between women and the professionalization of housekeeping in France during the interwar period see: Martine Martin, “La Rationalisation Du Travail Ménager En France Dans l’entre-Deux Guerres,” *Culture Technique* 3 (September 1980): 156–165; Martine Martin, “Ménagère: Une Profession? Les Dilemmes de l’entre-Deux-Guerres,” *Le Mouvement Social*, 140 (July 1987): 89, <https://doi.org/10.2307/3778678>; Jackie Clarke, “L’organisation Ménagère Comme Pédagogie Paulette Bernège et La Formation d’une Nouvelle Classe Moyenne Dans Les Années 1930 et 1940,” *Travail, Genre et Société*, 13, no. 1 (1 April 2005): 139–157, <https://doi.org/10.3917/tgs.013.0139>.

28 Le Corbusier, *Précisions ...* 135.

29 Charlotte Perriand, *Life of Creation* (London: Monacelli Press, 1998), 29.

30 Silvana Rubino, “Bodies, Chairs, Necklaces: Charlotte Perriand and Lina Bo Bardi,” *Cadernos Pagu* 2 (2011), <https://doi.org/10.1590/S0104-83332010000100003>.

31 “I suggested requesting a shared space at the *Salon des Artistes Décorateurs* of 1928, with the aim of creating a shock unit.” Perriand, *Life of Creation*, 33. See also Arlette Barré-Despond quoting Perriand regarding the shock unit: “At that time, it was about creating a block: to build a shock unit inside the salon” in Arlette Barré-Despond and Jean-Baptiste Rouault, *UAM: Union Des Artistes Modernes* (Paris: Editions du Regard, 1986), 40.

32 Among them René Herbst, Jean Fouquet, Gérard Sandoz, Jean Puiforcat, Hélène Henry, joined architect Robert Mallet-Stevens and formed the foundational core of the UAM association. Later Le Corbusier, Jean Prouvé and other relevant names became members. The Association was legally established on March 15th, 1929, and the legal address was that of the designer Helène Henri. Barré-Despond and Rouault, *UAM: Union Des Artistes Modernes*, 40.

“The equipment of the house, as a substitute for decoration of the house, was a cover for an overwhelming transformation in the ways of living; it was quite true that changing the designation would probably arouse a violent reaction by the Salon Committee.”³³

The possibilities of industrial production set the basis for the UAM members to find a prolific territory to grow their proposals: the house. In the years to come, the UAM took a relevant place in the dynamics of the decorative arts by pretending to establish an aesthetic link between luxurious craft and industrial production, as well as the quest for a synthesis of the arts that would commit to gathering major and minor arts. This was thus supposed to create a fertile scenario for debating the main goals of decorative arts, fine arts, and architecture. Defining and developing the ideal domestic equipment was one of the recurrent matters among the debates inside the UAM, which did not always result in a general agreement or consensus. They were, more than anything, theoretical explorations that made it possible to establish the limits and objectives of a profession that was being affected by the changing situation of French and European inter-war society.³⁴ As a result of these debates, the term *équipement* quickly started to be used extensively for domestic designs, as the following review of the first UAM exhibition of 1930 states:

“The architects and decorators that we know as Mallet-Stevens, Le Corbusier, Francis Jourdain, Chareau, René Herbst — to name just a few — have proclaimed for a while the need of setting the new conditions of the equipment for the modern dwelling according to the new conditions of existence.”³⁵

The decorative arts and furniture magazines adopted the term *équipement* for defining objects inside the house much more quickly than architectural ones.³⁶

The UAM exhibition ran from 1930 to 1933. Affected by the economic crisis derived from the crash of 1929, the display became part of the *Salon des Arts Ménagers*³⁷ [Salon of Domestic Arts] since 1934, under the title *Salon de l'habitation* [Exhibition of the dwelling] supported by the architectural magazine *L'architecture d'aujourd'hui*, whose main goal was to spread the ideas of modern living to a bigger audience. The *Salon des Arts Ménagers* was a major event running since 1921 that gathered half a million attendees each year, showing the latest novelties in domestic appliances as well as the traditional revival-style furniture entrenched in the popular taste. In order to guarantee the selling of domestic goods, the *Salon* also dedicated a great effort to the education of the *ménagères* [housewives] on the use (and consumption) of domestic appliances associated with the ideas of modernity and scientific management of the domestic load.³⁸ Innovation, as a concept, would spread only to domestic appliances, but not to furniture, leaving an empty space in the middle. In Perriand's words:

33 Barré-Despond and Rouault, 43.

34 The manifesto of the UAM was written only in 1934, by the art and decoration critic Louis Cheronet, under the title “Pour l'art moderne, cadre de la vie contemporaine” [For modern art, contemporary life's frame]. It gathered the discussions and theoretical approaches to modern decorative arts that took place in the core of the association since its foundation. It was also a defensive text that responded once and for all to the attacks of the conservative designers, in a repetition of the old discussion between the ancient and the moderns during the 19th century. See Barré-Despond and Rouault, 62.

35 G. Rémon, “La 1ère Exposition de l'Union Des Artistes Modernes,” *Mobilier et Décoration* 01 (1930): 1–13.

36 For example, when reviewing the *Salon d'Automne's* “equipment of the dwelling,” the journal *L'architecture* does not give any attention to the aesthetics of furniture, the review focuses only in architectural terms of program or privacy. See: Raymond Cogniat, “L'architecture et l'ameublement Au Salon d'Automne,” *L'Architecture* XLII (1929): 421–56.

37 The *Salon des Arts Ménagers* was an annual show established in 1921, originally called *Salon des Appareils Domestiques* [Salon of domestic appliances]. In 1926 it moved to the *Grand Palais'* premises, and changed the name to “Salon of Domestic Arts” to become more attractive to housewives, who were in the target of the products showed in the *Salon*, mainly domestic appliances.

38 As the critic Pascale Saisset explained: “To attract young women to a deprecated profession as domestic work, they now call art what used to be domestic economics. Art is much fancier, less obvious and bourgeois and is much more distinguished to say that one dedicates to domestic arts, as well as it goes

“All the items that would transform daily life could be found at the *Salon des Arts Ménagers*: telecommunication, gas, electricity, fashion — absolutely everything. Champions of the contemporary and connoisseurs of the past rubbed shoulders (...) objects d’art and curios in displays of Gothic-style dining-rooms and Louis XIII bedrooms, under titles such as ‘Yesterday’s art on today’s dwelling.’”³⁹

The UAM goal was to fill in this gap by promoting new approaches to modern living through *l’Architecture d’Aujourd’hui*’s “exhibition of the dwelling.”

In the third edition of the *Salon de l’habitation*, 1936, Charlotte Perriand showed a surprising proposal of domestic furniture. As a result of her individual research regarding low-cost equipment for the house, the *Salle de séjour à budget populaire* [Low-cost living-room] was her first attempt to address practical and inexpensive solutions, unavailable in the furniture offer at the time. (Fig. 7) The “low-cost living-room” was one of the first furniture prototypes focusing on the basic needs of living, affordable by a middle-class family and considering the sizes of small apartments,⁴⁰ disassociating from the class aspiration of the historic-revival ensembles. As politically engaged as Perriand was, her focus was on popular classes and their needs of practical and simple solutions.

Along the ten years of the collaboration between Charlotte Perriand, Pierre Jeanneret and Le Corbusier (1927-1937) Perriand kept her own professional and ideological independence. In fact, most of the commissions for the Jeanneret-Le Corbusier Atelier, were developed in her private studio;⁴¹ and it will be due to her independent character and her political affiliations that the collaboration would end abruptly in 1937. It was a time characterized by political conflict when the shade of fascism was looming over the country. In 1936, the French Popular Front, a leftist coalition including the Communist Party — of which Perriand was an active member — won the legislative elections. She got some visibility as a photo-montage artist, using propaganda language for the promotion of the Party’s ideas.⁴² As such, in the same year as “exhibition of the dwelling,” Perriand’s display was politically engaged. She developed the early 1928 design for folding low-chairs in a low-cost tube, resulting in a very light and dismountable furniture — thus, easing cleaning — combined with modular shelves produced by office furniture company Flambo and a free-form table in solid wood. The combination of materials, wood, fabric, and metal, was a statement on widening her scope beyond the shine and the symbolic glances of progress of the strictly metallic epoch, demonstrating those were past times.⁴³ Wood was presented as a potential material for reducing costs while the new path of the free form would be eventually incorporated in future developments of an innovative image of the domestic interior. To undoubtedly state a distance from other proposals in the *Salon*, the UAM section included a historical revival interior display designed by Jean-Paul Sabatou that,

with decorative arts.” Pascale Saisset, “Le Taylorisme Ménager Au Grand Palais,” *Grande Revue* 129 (1929): 61. Cited in McLeod, *Charlotte Perriand: An Art of Living*, 266.

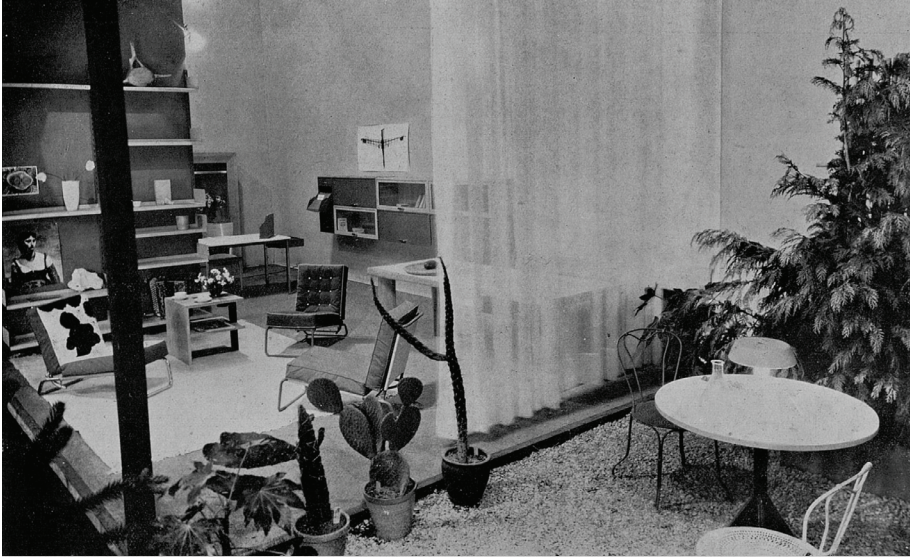
39 Perriand, *Life of Creation*, 78.

40 Barsac and Brunhammer, *Charlotte Perriand. Un Art d’habiter: 1903-1959*, 164.

41 The drawings kept in her archive show the development of some major commissions as the Minimum dwelling cell of 14 sqm among others of the time. Perriand itself said the prototypes of furniture displayed at the *Salon d’Automne* were assembled at her apartment in Place Saint-Sulpice, and the anecdote quoted by Mary McLeod explicitly went over Le Corbusier’s opinion on the prototypes “they’re coquettes.” See McLeod, *Charlotte Perriand: An Art of Living*.

42 She started her political commitment by being an active member of leftist associations, as the AEAR (*Association d’Écrivains et Artistes Révolutionnaires*) or the *Maison de la Culture*, both influenced by communist ideology, to finally become a member of the French Communist Party. Further development on Charlotte Perriand’s political militancy can be read in: Mónica Cruz Guáqueta, “Domestic Transformations in Time of the Modern Pioneers: Charlotte Perriand and Political Militancy,” in *2011 Design History Society International Conference - Design Activism and Social Change* (Design History Society, 2011) and Danilo Udovicki-Selb, “C’était Dans l’air Du Temps,” in *Charlotte Perriand: An Art of Living* (New York: The Architecture League of New York, 2003).

43 Charlotte Perriand, “Wood or Metal,” *The Studio* 433 (April 1929): 278-279.



ENSEMBLE PRÉSENTE PAR UN GROUPE DE JEUNES ARCHITECTES: BARRET, DROUIN, HERMANT, JOURDAIN, LOUIS, PERRIAND, SABATOU ET VAGO

LA 3^E EXPOSITION DE L'HABITATION

ORGANISÉE PAR L'ARCHITECTURE D'AUJOURD'HUI AVEC LA COLLABORATION DU SALON DES ARTS MÉNAGERS

Fig. 7: View of the "Low-cost living-room" designed by Charlotte Perriand for the 3rd *Exposition de l'habitation* organized by magazine *L'Architecture d'aujourd'hui* and the UAM as part of the *Salon des Arts Ménagers*, 1936.

Fig. 7a: Front view of the "Low-cost living-room" displayed in the 3rd *Exposition de l'habitation* organized by magazine *L'Architecture d'aujourd'hui* and the UAM as part of the *Salon des Arts Ménagers*, 1936. Folding chairs can be noticed upfront.



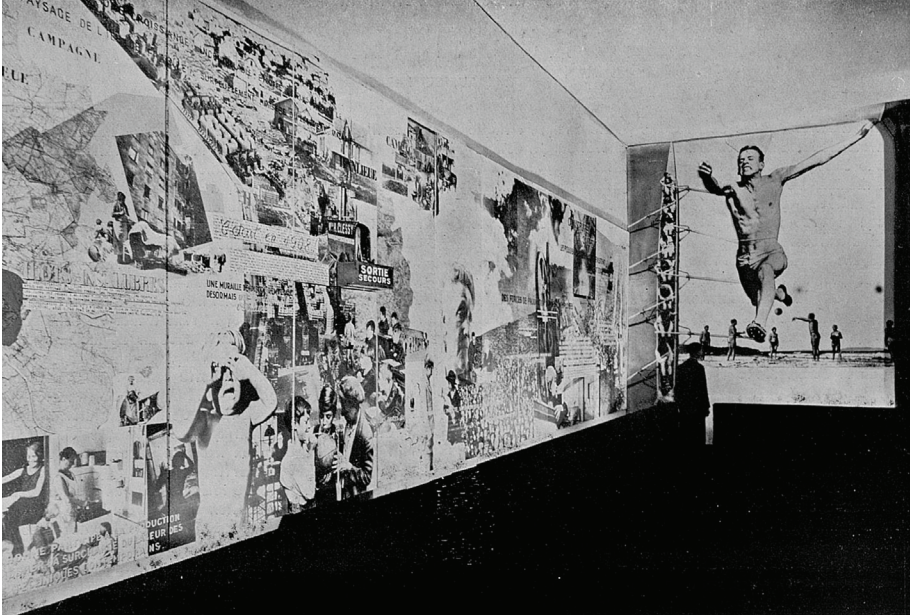


Fig. 8: View of the “Poverty-stricken Paris” photomural designed by Charlotte Perriand for the entrance to the 3rd “Exposition de l’habitation” organized by magazine *L’Architecture d’aujourd’hui* and the UAM as part of the *Salon des Arts Ménagers*, 1936.

set next to the Flambo shelves and the tube chairs was expected to blow up the popular taste. It questioned the need for the styles in the modern space and, consequently, the symbolic load of domestic spaces inherited from the bourgeois tradition.

The low-cost proposal of the living room presented in this context by Perriand was singular and, without a trace of a doubt, disruptive, even more so, if we take in consideration the enormous photomural complementary to the exhibit. Entitled *La grande misère de Paris* [Poverty-stricken Paris], it was a photo-collage located along an unavoidable corridor leading to the “Exhibition of the dwelling” section (Fig. 8). It has been said that when the jury of the *Salon* passed it by, they cried: “Charlotte Perriand, never!” as if she was the designers’ *enfant terrible*.⁴⁴ In Perriand’s words, the location of the photomural was a deliberate decision, focusing on openly displaying the condemnation of unlivable conditions for a major part of Paris’ population. The mural also included graphic design by the UAM colleague André Hermant, including data on infant mortality, property speculation and unhealthy urban conditions, intertwined with Perriand’s photos of Paris’ suburbs (*banlieue* and *îlots insalubres*) placed over aerial images of the city — an urban background condemning the neglect of the city’s more vulnerable population. By presenting both at the *Salon*, the photomural as a denunciation of the lack of solutions for social problems of popular classes, and the living-room as a domestic proposal, Perriand questioned the way popular taste was not corresponding to the popular needs. Perriand’s exhibition intended to address women (major attendees) to offer them an alternative: a different approach to domestic life. Even though women seem to be the focus of their proposals of this epoch, and despite being an active member of the Communist Party’s affiliated groups, there’s no clarity that Perriand was part of any of the feminist branches of the French Communist Party. This could partly be due to the masculine-driven environment in which she was developing her career, but also to her status of a professionally independent

44 Charlotte Perriand’s interview with Jacques Barsac in 1985 for “Charlotte Perriand, créer l’habitat du XXème siècle,” quoted in Barsac and Brunhammer, *Charlotte Perriand. Un Art d’habiter: 1903-1959*, 266.

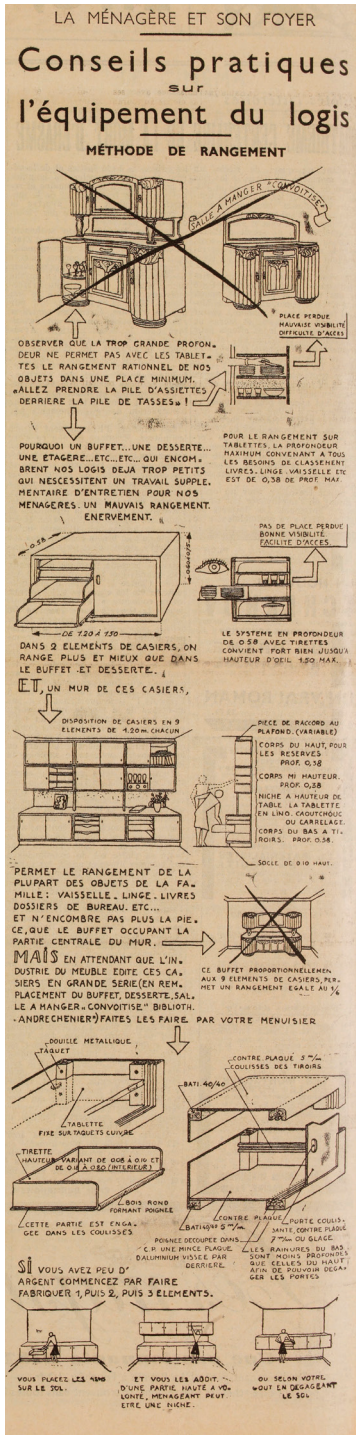


Fig. 9: Page of the weekly newspaper *Vendredi* (May 1, 1936, page 6) showing the feminine section where Charlotte Perriand's third article was published: "La ménagère et son foyer. Conseils pratiques sur l'équipement du logis."

Fig. 10: Francis Bernard, 1931. Poster of the 8th *Salon des Arts Ménagers*, depicting the image of the salon: the female automaton.

woman (a modern, a pioneer) very different from the profile of housewives who commonly militated in feminist associations during the First Wave of Feminism. As Karen Offen points out, the delicate political situation of Europe during the 1930s and the imminent Fascist threat affected the feminists' claims by shifting the focus to concentrate on fighting Fascism, leaving women's demands in second place.⁴⁵ Complementary birth policies based on the nationalization of women's bodies to increase the population were also promoted by the political establishment. The dual situation led by the war period placed men in the front line of the battlefield, the *avant-garde*, as women were needed in the care-section, the *rear guard*. This situation defined the beginning of a slow but persistent setback for women, from the public sphere to the private one, a strategy that would eventually be stressed in the second half of the 20th century, when domestic life became the ideal field where women should be encouraged to develop their own particular freedom. Perriand's work, according to her time, was dedicated to the domestic sphere and, in the aim of her political militancy, focused on improving the working conditions of women by questioning the mainstream tendencies in decoration, posing questions on practicality, hygiene and efficiency of middle-class homes. The rising success of the *Salons des Arts Ménagers* through the 1930s is related to an early stage of that particular situation. Within this framework, it is common to find women such as Charlotte Perriand, whose anonymous participation in the definition of theories on domesticity and domestic spaces has been overlooked by architectural historiography, until recently, like Margarette Shütte-Lihotzky, Eileen Gray, Lilly Reich or Alma Siedhoff-Buscher.⁴⁶

Antagonizing the image of fashion, modernity and distinction featured by the publicity of the *Salon*, the modern domestic worker represented as a female automaton, (Fig. 9) Perriand depicted domestic work in the photomural through "the image of three women engaged in cleaning and caring in precarious conditions. A quote can be read on top of those images: "The housekeeper who, equal to men, takes part in productive life, is still carrying the overload of ancient centuries: washing, cooking, cleaning without getting any benefit from the contemporary technical progress." Perriand used the same quote for the opening of a later article published in leftist weekly magazine *Vendredi* in the column *La femme et la vie* [Woman and life] whose title called on the ideas of equipment for explaining the efficiency at home: *La femme et son foyer. Conseils pratiques sur l'équipement du logis*⁴⁷ [Women and her home. Practical advice for the equipment of the house]. Published in a leftist magazine, as part of the section dedicated to women, the intention of the three articles was clear: to complete the strategy of attracting women's attention as a consumer of domestic goods and questioning the traditional taste in furniture by emphasizing the need for applying principles of efficiency — meaning *équipement*, to refer to furniture and storage. (Fig. 10)

The first of a series of three articles was published in May 1936, as a manifesto condemning the social problems of Paris, following the path of the photomural exposed in the *Salon des Arts Ménagers* three months earlier. Thus, it pointed out the lack of interest from industry and politics in creating formulas that would have a real impact on the population. A couple of weeks later, Perriand's second article summarized a series of interviews with women regarding their taste in furniture and their opinion on modern designs.⁴⁸ Facing her interviewers' rejection of modern furniture, Perriand always replied in an educational tone, arguing efficiency benefits and their translation to the well-being inside the home. Regarding the revival furniture, she made clear the only purpose of those "bibelots" was to represent an inexistent social status, with no purpose to solve real domestic problems. The third article, including the subtitle "Practical

45 Karen Offen, *Feminismos Europeos, 1700-1950: Una Historia Política* (Madrid: Tres Cantos : Akal, 2015).

46 Carmen Espegel, Kenneth Frampton, and Angela Giral, *Women Architects in the Modern Movement, Women Architects in the Modern Movement*, 2017, <https://doi.org/10.4324/9781315189154>.

47 Charlotte Perriand, "La Ménagère et Son Foyer. [I]," *Vendredi: Hebdomadaire Littéraire, Politique et Satirique* 26 (May 1, 1936): 8.

48 Charlotte Perriand, "La Ménagère et Son Foyer. [II]," *Vendredi: Hebdomadaire Littéraire, Politique et Satirique* 29 (May 22, 1936): 8.

advice for the equipment of the house, arranging method,”⁴⁹ was mostly graphic: in a series of drawings occupying the whole column, one of the *bibelots* referred to in the previous article was crossed out. Below, Perriand’s illustrated explanations showed how a traditional cupboard made the objects inaccessible and promoted the waste of space. Opposite this example, she drew a rational, square equipment, from wall to wall, solving common arrangement problems by encouraging space-saving systems, better visibility of the content and modest production of the models. The article taught its readership what to reject and then showed an alternative proposal using rational equipment. In the end, a detailed drawing of some modules was included so that the reader could take them to the carpenter and have them made on her own. It was a forceful call for action complemented by the text: “if you have a little money, start by making one, then two, then three elements manufactured.”⁵⁰ It was a modular, simple, cheap, and well-organized strategy focusing on the lack of serial production of rational equipment for the home.

Perriand’s commitment to the transformation of the houses was motivated by improving the well-being of people, especially women, through rational equipment ideas. Her creations were disruptive in aesthetic terms and in the way they addressed particular and concrete problems of women. This marks a difference in the dominant discourse from women’s magazines, in which the revival-style furniture was understood as fancy and refined, as a symbol of social status. Perriand wanted to satisfy the practical needs of women who had to take care of their home, not the symbolic ones. That is how *équipement*, as a concept lacking attributes, was used to personalize the anonymous user in a way that differs from the general standardization approach of modern architecture. She strips the furniture of the representative character of social status and endows it with a utilitarian and rational charge that she raises under improving well-being in the living space.

Conclusion

Charlotte Perriand played a fundamental role in the transformation of the meaning of the concept domestic *équipement*, taking the concept further than the specialized sphere of architecture. Like many other women who structured this process of change, she can be found among those names relocated to the footnotes. The term *équipement*, as a theoretical construction, was developed in relation to the efficiency of the home: a field where the feminine presence and domain was implied and even expected, as their natural sphere. The use of the word “equipment,” as well as the “shock unit” to name the displays oriented towards the feminine consumer reflect a tactical transposition of using terms unaffiliated to the standard architectural or decorative language to break with tradition and create a particular atmosphere: that of a new dwelling.

We can conclude that the term *équipement* achieved an extended dimension by including social and political significance through the works of Charlotte Perriand and its impact on the larger professional context of the Decorative Arts. Thus, it permeated beyond the scope of the machine and household appliances and extended to furniture and decorative art as well. As a result of a deep social conscience and holistic approach, Perriand’s drive was based on the strong conviction that architecture could improve people’s existence. In this sense, Perriand shone a light on the women in charge of the house, suggesting *équipement* as the way to solve specific problems of the dwelling. The idea that a good domestic space has the ability to make day-to-day more bearable is present throughout her career, not only in the sense of lightening domestic work, exceeding the proposals of the “domestic scientists” focused on the domestic organization, and including the idea of well-being. It is, therefore, not only about making life easier for them, but also happier.

49 Charlotte Perriand, “La Ménagère et Son Foyer. [III] Conseils Pratiques Pour l’équipement Du Logis,” *Vendredi : Hebdomadaire Littéraire, Politique et Satirique* 35 (July 3, 1936): 6.

50 Ibid.

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