



Living, Literally, in a Glass House: A User's Guide

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How can one be an occupant of a historic house without being an occupier? How do you make a historic house a home, rather than a museum, or, worse yet, a mausoleum? These were the questions facing my wife, Stéphane, and me when we became the owners of the Maison de Verre in 2005.

We had been introduced to the family of the original owners in 2004. Brian Brace Taylor made the connection after he saw Jean Prouvé's 1950 Maison Tropicale, which we had restored outside of Paris after repatriating it from Brazzaville. In contrast to the Maison de Verre, the Maison Tropicale is as much about occupation (of the colonial kind) as it is about habitation. There was never any question of restoring it as something to inhabit in the present. It is a prototype of an unrealized building system for an extreme climate. The Maison de Verre is also a prototype (albeit of a poetic rather than a pragmatic sort), but it is first and foremost someone's home. We acquired it to live in it. By doing so, we hoped to bring it back to life, to demonstrate its continuing relevance to the practice of architecture in the twenty-first century.

Although it had not been lived in for some time, the house was eminently visitable. The family had kept it intact and maintained its originality with scrupulous care. Given the parlous state of the wiring, plumbing, and building systems generally, however, it was not

really habitable. We saw it as our task to make the structure habitable while maintaining, and where possible enhancing, its visitability—that is, the legibility of its original program.

Building on the foundational work of Marc Vellay, Bernard Bauchet, and Inigo Fernandez de Castro, and drawing on our own experience with the Maison Tropicale, we developed the following guidelines:

1. Nothing original as of 1932 could be irreversibly modified. On the other hand, original elements that were missing did not need to be replicated. (The exception that proves the rule—the reproduction of the exterior light projectors—is discussed below.)
2. Anything done after 1932 could be undone.
3. Surfaces would be cleaned but not refinished.
4. Contemporary interventions would be reversible, overtly new, and not “contextual”; that is, they would be clearly identifiable.
5. All activity would be carefully documented and all removals archived.

The grand salon of the Maison de Verre.

The first major undertaking was the rewiring of the house. The Maison de Verre is famous for having all its wires in visible tubes (page 213), with control buttons and switch boxes affixed to those tubes, and for having a lighting system of theatrical complexity. On the other hand, it lacked the power for refrigerators and vacuum cleaners. We preserved all the original tubes, outlets, and switching systems while changing the wires within to bring them up to code. (We left one spot untouched and exposed for reference: the uplighting of the wood veneers in the grand salon.) Where we added outlets, they are clearly contemporary interventions.

This was followed by a series of relatively mundane (and invisible) but necessary revisions. The exposed service wing was given a new roof; the deterioration of the original one was a clue that the forced insertion of the building under the recalcitrant tenant in the attic apartment had been a blessing in disguise. A new hot-water heater was installed, and thousands of hours were spent cleaning the various surfaces by hand. The sophisticated forced-air heating system posed a particular problem. Heat in the house is conducted through a series of plaster ducts. In what was probably one of his last acts, Chareau made one access hole with an elegant trapdoor in a prominent duct, as if to show how to empty the ducts of eventual (and inevitable) accumulations of plaster dust. Rather than modernize, we chose to follow the "instruction" that had been left for us, and made another dozen apertures sufficient to receive an industrial vacuum. After a few hundred kilos of plaster dust had been removed, we had clean heat.

We are conscious of the legibility of the house's architecture and original program. In that spirit, we have chosen to furnish the house sparsely, so as to privilege Chareau's profusion of grids over our personal effects. Even where a room's original function has disappeared completely, we try to leave evidence of its intended use. The medical offices have hardly changed: the waiting room is our sitting room, the receptionist's office is occupied by our administrator, and the doctor's private office is my private office. Of course, the presence of the original examination table in the inner examination room is a pretty strong signifier of gynecological practice circa 1930, as is the exposed plumbing in the separate operating room. The latter provides a surprisingly effective context for a sculpture by the American artist Tom Sachs, *L'il T's Toilet* (2000), which channels the house's mid-century obsession with hygiene in a more lighthearted, postmodern spirit.

Apart from the medical offices, the room whose operations have evolved most considerably is the kitchen, which once accommodated several servants. Today, except on special occasions, we eat in the

kitchen, and Stéphane does the cooking. None of the original appliances survive. We do avail ourselves of the natural refrigeration of the original *garde manger*, which we restored.

During the day, the house is flooded with natural light. Chareau's intention was to light it after dark principally by exterior projectors, or floodlights, that pointed at, and shone through, its translucent facades. There were five on the courtyard side and four on the garden side. Of the nine projectors, four survived, so we remade five, along with the courtyard armature, which had gone missing. (At some point the five courtyard projectors had been taken down, apparently because the light they emitted was bothersome to the young married homeowners and their small children, who were then occupying the newly renovated and expanded upstairs apartment.) Clearly, lighting the house from the outside is an integral element of the architecture. It needed to be put back. This artificial light, subaqueous in quality, is sufficient for most nocturnal activity.

The next major project may well be to refabricate the Nevada glass bricks to restore the courtyard facade, which failed in the 1960s. (Its manufacturer, Saint-Gobain, had predicted this when advised of the intended span of Chareau's facades.) At that time, the glass bricks were replaced with more pedestrian bricks, the only kind Saint-Gobain was then making. Were this to happen, the black metal cross-banding on the front facade would disappear. This was added when the bricks were replaced in order to shore up the span, but it is not what Chareau had in mind. This could be a shock to the system of architectural history, which has become accustomed over the years to an apparent Japanese influence in the house's facade, frequently featured in photographs.

Visitors to the house can immediately detect the difference between the two types of glass bricks. The garden facade, more protected from the elements by the third-floor balcony, has fared better than the exposed courtyard facade. Stepping into the garden, one sees the far more dematerializing effects of the bricks without cross-banding. From inside the house, the difference between the originals and the replacements is striking, especially when one turns on the exterior projectors. The originals create a wall of translucent depth, each brick housing a little green-hued glass dome specked with tiny bubbles, evidencing its artisanal fabrication. In comparison, the replacements are flat and industrial. Saint-Gobain is taking an interest in this project, and has graciously provided us with a full chemical analysis of the composition of an original Nevada glass brick from the house.

Having completed our first wave of interventions, we have recently commissioned a comprehensive structural study of the house. Our intention is to understand what may be necessary to secure it for its next century of existence, but also to determine with some precision why the glass facades are showing signs of accelerating deterioration. Is the cracking of the glass bricks due to structural loads, moisture, weather, modernity in general (for example, a large university was constructed next door in the 1950s, replacing a small *hôtel particulier*), or the properties of the cement in the joints itself—or all of the above?

In the meantime, we spend a few months a year in the house, and keep it a family affair. Stéphane, a landscape designer, has taken charge of the restoration of the garden. Our young son and his friends enjoy the house's techno-Surrealist gizmos in much the same way the Dalsace grandchildren did half a century ago. Our musician friends marvel at the perfect acoustics of the grand salon, and we never fail to be charmed by visitors who tell us the first time they came to the house was *in vitro*, because their mother was a patient of Dr. Dalsace or Dr. Vellay.

Windows in the service wing swivel open.

