

Villa Cavrois at Croix by Mallet-Stevens - 20th-century Architectural Heritage

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The achievements of Robert Mallet-Stevens (1886-1945), the founder of the *Union des Artistes Modernes*¹ and of the "L'Architecture d'Aujourd'hui," – an architect, a decorator, a set designer and a professor of architecture – were presented to the public during a retrospective exhibition organised by Centre Pompidou in 2005.

1. UAM (1929-1958). Other founding members included celebrities like André Bloc, Le Corbusier, Pierre Janneret, Andre Lurcat, Charlotte Perriand, Jean Prouvé.

Mallet-Stevens' last realised architectural design², the villa for an industrialist from Roubaix, known as villa *Cavrois* (at 60, John-Fitzgerald Kennedy Avenue, Croix) is certainly intriguing. The villa was completed in 1932 and a board displayed at the gate says "it is modern architecture tinted with 18th-century

2. Earlier constructions include a fire station in Paris, houses in street *rue Mallet-Stevens*, the villa of coutourier Poiret, the villa of viscount de Noailles.



1. Villa Cavrois, a scale model displayed at Ecole d'Architecture de Lille in 2005, during an exhibition devoted to Mallet-Stevens (scientific supervisors: Marie-Céline Masson and Richard Klein, exhibition programme: Anne-Sophie George and Alexandre Slusarski, production: Sébastien Frémont). Photo by Weronika Wiśniewska

Classicism" (sic!).

The villa, in fact a small palace on a five-hectare estate, is a modernist version of a luxury residence. Its composition and layout, the way the garden has been arranged, are certainly reminiscent of the old days. At the same time, its articulated, geometrical volumes and the reinforced concrete structure are purely modernist. Mallet-Stevens, fascinated with the possibilities offered by reinforced concrete, is quoted as saying that architecture is by nature a geometrical art... A house, a palace, forms a set of cubic volumes. Reinforced concrete makes it possible to accomplish architecture as a geometrical art³.

The origins of the villa are interesting. On the one hand, Mallet-Stevens drew inspiration from the Stoclet House in Brussels by Joseph Hoffman, therefore Vienna *Sezession*, giving an interesting example of how tradition can be continued in a creative way. On the other, he was imbued by the architecture of the town hall in Hilversum by Willem M. Dudok, i.e. an architect from the *de Stijl* circle and the works of Frank L. Wright. Researchers claim that Mallet-Stevens' fascination with the output of the two architects is reflected in his realised designs.

Villa *Cavrois* is situated on the southern slope of a hill. It is connected with the surrounding land by terraces, stairs and richly articulated ground-floor façade, parallel to which there is a 27-metre-long outdoor swimming pool. Below, at a right angle to the building, monumental garden stairs extend into a hundred-metre water axis, closed with an orchard and a nearby rosarium, a children's garden, a fresh-flower garden, a kitchen garden and a henhouse. The whole estate was fenced and a pavilion lodge was built at the gate.

The external layout of the 60-metre long house is horizontal; the interior is arranged along corridors. In the central part, a large, two-storey vestibule with a fireplace is situated next to a tower housing a staircase, which is the vertical accent of the horizontal block. Above the top storey there is a large terrace with a reinforced concrete *brise-soleil*. A spacious dining room, an equally spacious kitchen and a smoking room are adjacent to the vestibule. The "wings" contain parents' and children's bedrooms, the governess' room, studies, a boudoir, bathrooms or rather bath suites and a huge, one-and-a-half-storey playroom. A library was not envisaged... The

servants' rooms were behind the kitchen. The swimming-pool changing rooms, larders, a fair-sized wine cellar, a laundry room and a boiler house (heavy oil) were situated in the lowest storey.

This luxury house was really modern, hygienic and functional. It was designed together with the interior and the furniture – both movable and built-in. Interior decoration, close to Le Corbusier styling – scanty and without ornament – included fresh flowers, modern sculpture and painting (among others, Picasso and Marie Laurencin) only. No expense was spared on modern furnishings and fittings (a lift and a thermostat-controlled heating system; a telephone set, an electric clock and a sound system in every room), or the finishing materials – marble, wood, wool, chromium-plated brass and leather. The exterior walls were carefully clad with yellow brick.

Until 1986, the villa was owned by the industrialist's family. Then it was bought (still in good shape) by a little-known *société*. After the change of ownership, the house was not used and gradually fell into disrepair, while the interior decoration was vandalised or removed. The condition of the villa was of little interest to the *société*, which was busy planning how to divide the estate and sell plots of land for development.

These plans were foiled by vigorous and effective efforts of the *Association de sauvegarde de la villa Cavrois* (an association to preserve villa *Cavrois*). The efforts of the Association to bring the villa back to its previous glory have won support of, among others, Tado Ando, Gae Aulenti, Leonardo Benevolo, Mario Botta, Paul Chemetov, Giancarlo De Carlo, Norman Foster, Massimiliano Fuksas, Hans Hollein, Charles Jencks, Rob Krier, Richard Meier, Frei Otto, Dominique Perrault, Renzo Piano, Richard Rogers, Oswald Mathias Ungers⁴.

In the 1990s, the villa became the property of the city of Lille and was listed as a *monument historique*. This made a state subsidy for conservation work possible – a total of 6.1 million euro, or 100 per cent of the anticipated expenditure. Work schedule covered a period of 3 years and was divided into three stages: restoration of the eastern wing, the western wing and the central part of the building. Reconstruction of the furnishings is not covered by the programme.

In the absence of the original designs (Mallet-Stevens' drawings were not filed), detailed

3. After: Catalogue de l'exposition « Robert Mallet-Stevens, architecte », présentée du 27 avril au 29 août 2005 au Centre Pompidou, page extraite du site internet (no pagination) de l'Association de Sauvegarde de la Villa Cavrois Robert Mallet-Stevens, L'œuvre complète sous la direction d'Olivier Cinqualbre, Edition du Centre Pompidou, Collection *Classiques du XXe siècle*.

4. Richard Klein, foreword to a reprint of *Rob Mallet-Stevens, Une demeure 1934*, „L'Architecture d'Aujourd'hui" 1934, reprint published by Jean-Michel Place éditions, Cahors 2005 (no pagination).



2. i 3. Villa Cavrois at Croix. The lodge at the gate. Photo by Weronika Wiśniewska

inventory had to be made. This was followed by experts' reports, which showed that some of the reinforced concrete walls and floors were faulty and needed to be replaced. During the construction work, interior refitting was done and finally, the costly exterior re-cladding was performed. Nevertheless, nobody seems to know yet how the Villa Cavrois will be used in the future...

In supplementing the above information, we should mention the literature about Rob Mallet-Stevens' work. Literature in Polish is scarce. Piotr Biegański⁵ mentions Mallet-Stevens only as the founder of UAM (*Union des Artistes Modernes*) and of the journal "L'Architecture d'Aujourd'hui". Izabella Wisłocka mentions Mallet-Stevens as the author of *the famous tourist pavilion for the Paris exhibition of 1925*.⁶ In Pierre Cabanne's *Encyklopedia art déco* (Polish translation, supplemented by Anna Sieradzka) Mallet-Stevens is referred to several dozen times, among others as: the founder of UAM; the creator of a unique architectural language, in which (...) *his geometry was an element of harmony and order and his puristic language resulted from his care for the proper space and light relation; the starting point was the gentle and hierarchical setting of grounds and solids, like in a cubist painting*;⁷ as an avant garde artist connected with *de Stijl* group; as the author of film sets⁸ and an artist who laid the foundations for the French *design*.⁹ There is also an intriguing and undocumented note on Mallet-Stevens' work as an inspiration for Julian

Puterman and Antoni Miszewski (The Ministry of Post and Telegraph) and for Szymon Syrkus (Artificial fertilizers factory)¹⁰. Literature in other

10. Pierre Cabanne (supplemented by Anna Sieradzka) *Encyklopedia Art Déco*, translated by Joanna Guze, Wydawnictwo Naukowe PWN, Warsaw 2002, p.208



4. Villa Cavrois at Croix, south-western corner after renovation. Photo by Sébastien Frémont



5. Villa Cavrois at Croix, south-western corner after renovation. Photo by Sébastien Frémont

5. Piotr Biegański, *U źródeł architektury współczesnej*, PWN, Warsaw 1972, p. 402.

6. Izabella Wisłocka, *Awangardowa architektura polska 1918-1939*, Arkady, Warsaw 1968, p. 51.

7. Pierre Cabanne (supplemented by Anna Sieradzka) *Encyklopedia Art Déco*, translated by Joanna Guze, Wydawnictwo Naukowe PWN, Warsaw 2002, p. 45.

8. ibidem, p.108.

9. ibidem, p. 280. The catalogue of the exhibition „Design - miroir du siècle” (ed. Flammarion), which took place at Grand Palais in Paris in 1993, on page 24 mentions Mallet-Stevens' film sets. It also says that (...) *the French design was a continuation of the concepts of the artists grouped in UAM*”.

languages treats¹¹ Mallet-Stevens inconsistently. Henry-Russel Hitchcock, for example, considers his output to be of minor significance, mentioning *rue Mallet-Stevens* buildings only.¹² Richard Klein has a completely different opinion and says that of all the Modern Movement architects, only Mallet-Stevens was capable of formally expressing the superiority of technology over handicraft and of architecture over decoration¹³. Siegfried Giedion, (*Przestrzeń, czas, architektura*, PWN, Warsaw 1968) makes no mention of Mallet-Stevens...

11. Probably the first post-war publication on Mallet-Stevens is *Robert Mallet-Stevens, l'architetto cubista* by Pierre Vago, Bari 1979. Ten years later a copiously illustrated article by Pierre Joly *Mallet-Stevens à Croix: un chef-d'oeuvre de modernité* appears in the journal of *L'oeil* (October 1986). Major publications of the last decade in French are: *Robert Mallet-Stevens, L'oeuvre complète*, sous la direction d'Olivier Cinqualbre, Edition du Centre Pompidou, Collection Classiques du XXe siècle, Paris 2005; Richard Klein, *La logique de la disparition: la villa Cavrois (1929/1932) de Robert Mallet-Stevens*, „Revue Faces”, n°42/43, Autumn/Winter 1997, pp. 29-33 and *Robert Mallet-Stevens, la villa Cavrois*, Paris 2005 by the same author.

12. Hitchcock Henry-Russel, *Architecture: Dix-neuvième et vingtième siècles*, Bruxelles Liege 1981, p. 524.

13. Richard Klein, *La logique de la disparition: la villa Cavrois (1929/1932) de Robert Mallet-Stevens*, „Revue Faces”, n°42/43, Autumn/Winter 1997, p. 30 (quotation translated by Suzanne Hirschi).

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