

# SCENT AND MODERN ARCHITECTURE

## Heritage, desire and exclusivity in fashion and design

María Agustina Coulleri

### *PATRIMONIO ARCHITETTONICO, CULTURA VISIVA, APPROPRIAZIONE SIMBOLICA*

Questo articolo esamina la trasformazione simbolica di un'icona dell'architettura moderna, Villa Savoye, nell'ambito di una campagna pubblicitaria contemporanea dedicata a un profumo di lusso. Originariamente concepita come manifesto della progettazione dell'era industriale e degli ideali collettivi domestici, la casa è stata riproposta come simbolo visivo di esclusività e desiderio. L'analisi si concentra su come, una volta privato del suo contesto storico e sociale, questo oggetto architettonico divenga un elemento distintivo all'interno di un sistema di consumo simbolico.

La campagna crea una narrazione sensoriale in cui la casa e il profumo sono presentati come oggetti del desiderio. Questa associazione suggerisce la promessa di poter accedere a un mondo esclusivo, non attraverso l'abitazione, ma attraverso l'appropriazione visiva. Piuttosto che offrire profondità storica o discorso architettonico, la campagna si affida a codici culturali condivisi e al potere dell'immagine per creare un senso di distinzione.

Il presente studio sottolinea come questa ricontestualizzazione rifletta una dinamica più ampia in cui il patrimonio architettonico viene estetizzato e riprogrammato per funzionare all'interno della logica della cultura del *brand*. Le strategie visive impiegate trasformano l'ambiente costruito in un simbolo aspirazionale, il che porta a chiedersi se l'architettura possa mantenere la sua funzione critica o se sia stata completamente assorbita dai meccanismi dello spettacolo e del valore di mercato.

### *ARCHITECTURAL HERITAGE, VISUAL CULTURE, SYMBOLIC CONSUMPTION*

*This article examines the symbolic transformation of the modern architectural icon, the Villa Savoye, within a contemporary luxury fragrance campaign. Originally conceived as a manifesto of machine era design and collective domestic ideals, the house has been reintroduced as a visual symbol of exclusivity and aspiration. The analysis focuses on how, when stripped of its historical and social context, this architectural object becomes a sign within a system of symbolic consumption.*

*The campaign creates a sensory narrative in which the house and perfume are presented as objects of desire. This association suggests the promise of access to a selective world, not through inhabitation, but through visual appropriation. Rather than offering historical depth or architectural discourse, the campaign relies on shared cultural codes and the power of the image to create a sense of distinction.*

*This study argues that such recontextualization reflects a broader dynamic in which architectural heritage is aestheticized and reprogrammed to function within the logic of brand culture. The visual strategies employed transform the built environment to an aspirational symbol, prompting the question of whether architecture can retain critical agency or has become wholly absorbed by the mechanisms of spectacle and market value.*

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For its latest fragrance campaign, the Loewe brand has chosen one of the most paradigmatic works in the whole compendium of modern European architecture: the Villa Savoye. This choice —by no means accidental— is striking for those of us who have studied the work in question as a manifesto built by one of the avant-garde thinkers of the last century. The fact that, on this occasion, it is exhibited as a vehicle for certain corporate ideals and as a brand emblem, forces us to question a series of associations that are made explicit in 48 seconds of video.

The house is impregnated with the essence of perfume as an object of desire. Both are presented as symbols of exclusivity, evoking that which seems distant, unattainable, reserved for the few. It is an image that condenses the sign of the times: desire is constructed from a distance, and distinction is staged as rarity. House and perfume are evoked and then denied for mass consumption.

This construction is carried out on the basis of totalising ideals preached by the *brand*, in its work as a spokesperson for consumption through a series of evocative images. Baudrillard, in the consumer society, explains it in this way: "The shop window, the advertisement, the producing firm and the brand, which plays an essential role in this, impose a coherent, collective vision, as of an almost inseparable whole, as of a chain, which thus ceases to be a chain of mere objects and becomes a chain of signifiers, insofar as the objects signify each other reciprocally as more complex super-objects, thereby awakening in the consumer a series of more complex motivations." (Baudrillard 2025, 5).

The following article analyses how modern architecture, originally associated with collective domestic ideals, is today recontextualised as a symbol of exclusivity and desire, articulating a critique of the symbolic and visual use of architectural icons.

### *Modern icon*

The construction of the Villa Savoye, in the late 1920s, coincides with a time when its author was fully aware that he was forging —through his works and their meticulous compilation in the *Œuvre Complète* series— the foundations of a new way of thinking and designing architecture. As William Curtis points out, "the project was treated as if it were a chapter in a book of revelation, unveiling the correct forms for the 'spirit of the age'" (Curtis 2010, 93).

In previous years, Le Corbusier had already tested radically innovative ideas, many of them derived from the language of the automobile industry, as can be seen in the various prototypes of the *machine à habiter* Citroën and in his participation in the *Weissenhofsiedlung* in Stuttgart. Through these projects, he sought to insert his architecture into contemporary production conditions. Together with Pierre Jeanneret, he had also tested a minimal housing unit in the *L'Esprit Nouveau* Pavilion, designed to be stackable and modular, capable of responding to the housing crisis of the post-war period. All these technical and conceptual experiments would be put to the test once and for all in the Villa Savoye, a work in which he reached great design maturity and achieved a geometric synthesis of a classical nature, as Colin Rowe reveals in his essay of 1947.

The work was built between 1928 and 1929, and quickly became a built manifesto of Corbusier's ideology. The use of pilotis, the continuous window, the route defined by the architectural promenade, the liberation of the wall as a load-bearing element, among other design decisions, made the *Villa* the canonical model of modern architecture in the 1930s. This and a handful of works from the same period and by the same author have had an enormous relevance in the subsequent development of late modern architecture: "All have had a seminal influence on the work of at least four generations of architects worldwide,



1  
Distant view of the northwest  
and southwest façades of Villa  
Savoye, Poissy. Photograph by  
the author, 2015.

and have therefore fallen more usually prey to the refracting and distorting power of later ideologies" (Curtis 2010, 93).

Certainly, the propagation of the *Villa* as a model has meant the loss of its original meaning, of its 'here and now', of the essence contained in its creation. The loss of its aura, in the term chosen by Walter Benjamin to refer to what technical reproduction takes away from the work of art (Benjamin 2021), is not limited to its repeated use as an architectural type. It also happens when it is re-signified, that is, when it is loaded with new signs in accordance with the demands of the 21st century, as happens in the advertising campaign carried out by the luxury brand Loewe.

#### *Image, silences and signs*

"Once upon an afternoon. The sun shines through the window of a Villa on a summer day. The house is quiet, still, each room has a different scent, a different purpose. The sound of water spilling from a bathtub drip down the stairs. Splashing puddles cool on the Le Corbusier floor and steam rises from the crackling bubbles. Where would you rather be?" (LOEWE 2024).

In this excerpt from the text accompanying the video advertisement, the intention to generate a dreamlike atmosphere through a short visual and sensory narrative that seeks to attract potential consumers is evident. Brands call these formats *stories*. They are visual narratives that accompany each new collection and in each of them a different story is told with the aim of consolidating the 'brand values'. In this case, *Les Heures Claires* —as the Villa Savoye is also known— is chosen as the location for the presentation of a new fragrance, suggesting a choice loaded with symbolic resonance.

The route proposed in the video, from the outside in, is reminiscent of the itinerary we would take on a guided tour, although here the hosts are haute couture models who, through their gestures, indicate the route. Water acts as a thread running through the story, at all times it can be heard or seen flowing. The sequence of images gives way to the vegetation

outside and to the curves, human and architectural, which can be seen between infinitely white surfaces. The house appears frozen, as if trapped in an unreachable dream. It is not an attempt to evoke a home or to present a *machine à vivre*, as the author would have wished. Rather, the aim is to stage exclusivity, to encourage the desire for that which appears distant, coveted, restricted to a few, as the sign of the times indicates.

In short, the aim is to seduce the public through a visual and sound montage that suggests that home, beauty and status can be achieved through a design object. In this sense, it is revealing to compare this sequence with the report Le Corbusier devoted to the Villa Savoye in volume 2 of the aforementioned *Œuvre Complète*. As Curtis points out: "There the building lives for evermore, in the mood of a summer's afternoon, the sharp planes floating above grass and in front of trees, the under crofts picked out by gashes of shadow. The photographs take us for an imaginative walk through a world of limpid cylinders and semi-reflecting panes of glass up a ceremonial ramp. Golf clubs and expensive gloves on the landing hint at a life of sporting chic, while in the kitchen broken bread and a Purist coffee pot suggest the sacramental. The roof terrace rides above the landscape like the deck of a well-to-do liner. Each vignette is carefully posed" (Curtis 2005, 94).

Through his 'treatise' on architecture, Le Corbusier not only validated his concepts, but also constructed atmospheres, suggested ways of life, projected desire through his images. His aim was twofold: to publicise his vision of modern life and, at the same time, to legitimise his professional work. In this gesture, architecture became not only a disciplinary argument, but also an aspirational product. From this point of view, Loewe's campaign merely continues—albeit with a different discourse and other aims—this effort to turn the work of architecture into a sign of social distinction.

This strategy of presenting the house as a symbol of exclusivity, when disseminated through the media, helps to build a collective consensus. As has been analysed, the campaign uses the work as an unquestionable symbol of distinction, and this ends up being naturalised by the audience itself. By working on modern heritage, the brand not only signifies its aesthetic logic, but also contributes to establishing its cultural value as a synonym of exclusivity. Stripped of all critical and historical baggage, the Villa Savoye re-emerges as a fashion icon and as the legitimate setting for an aspirational lifestyle.

Le Corbusier has no introduction, nor does the house. The silence about the historical context suggests that the campaign is aimed at a public capable of recognising the icon without explanation. No less certain is the fact that if you don't know who designed the house or its place in the discussion around 20th century architecture, the symbolic message is equally conveyed: you will desire the house as much as the perfume and it will make you belong to a select group of people.

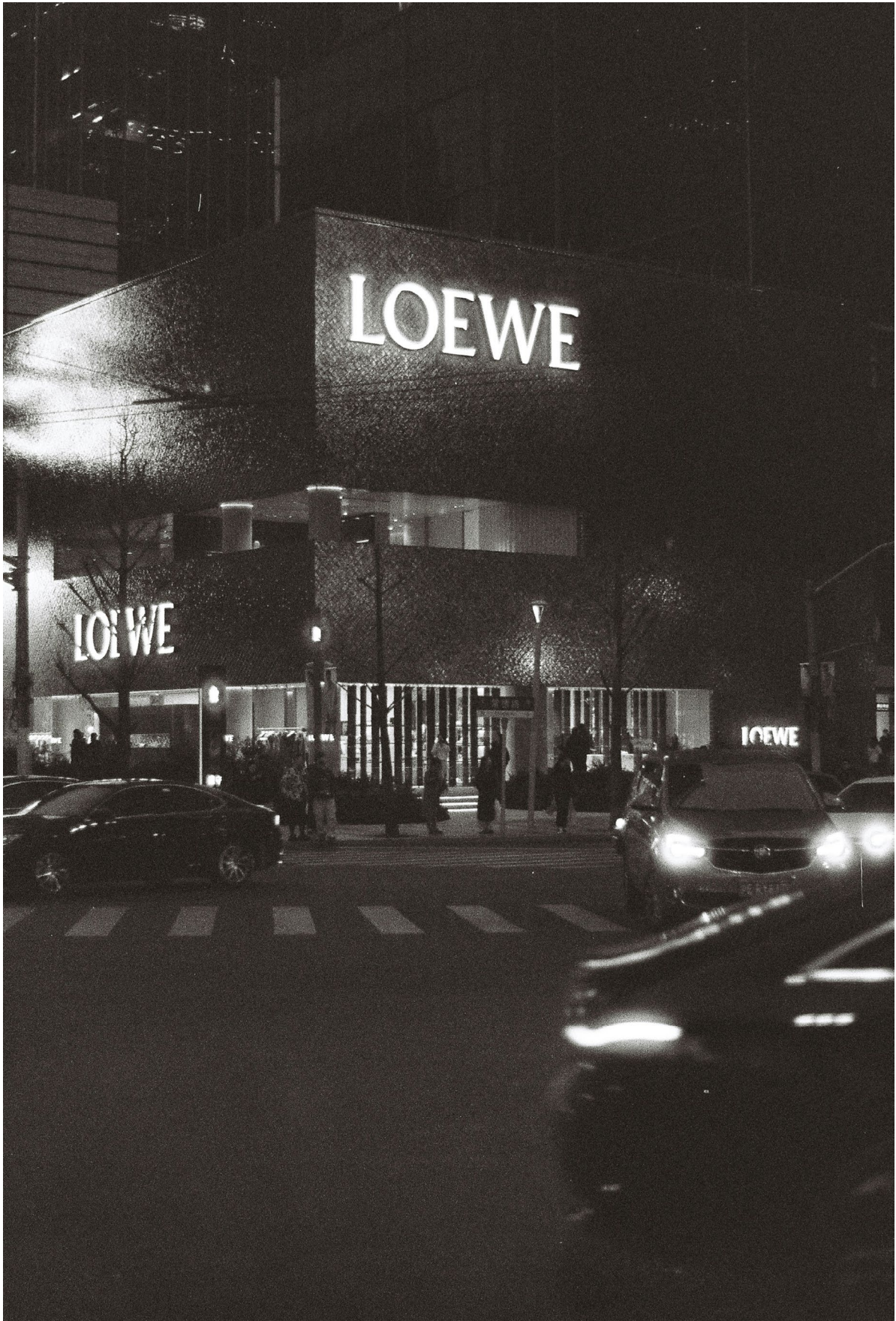
As Baudrillard warns in defining the *praxis of consumption*, "we are given to consume signs as signs, accredited, however, by the guarantee of the real" (Baudrillard 2025, 15). In this case, architectural reality is transformed into the legitimising wrapping of a palatable fiction.

### *Mass exclusivity*

Inviting the public to approach the world of luxury through a fragrance is a good commercial strategy for the brand. Perfume is probably one of the most accessible products in the range offered by each new collection. It brings a new potential customer into the brand's regular portfolio. But, although the product in question is offered as an exclusive shopping experience, and therefore as an access pass to a select club, it is available to a wide audience, easily acquired in urban shops or in airports with a high level of people flow.

The desire for exclusivity is constructed even within mass consumption. This apparent gesture of democratisation of luxury coexists with a logic that goes beyond the pleasure of consuming. As Gilles Lipovetsky has pointed out, "the hedonistic ideology underpinning consumption is but the alibi for a more fundamental determinant: the logic of social differentiation

3  
Loewe symbol on a building.  
Photograph by George  
Dagerotip, 2025. (Free use  
Licencia Unsplash).





and super-differentiation. The race of consumption and the desire for novelty do not find their source in the motivation of pleasure, they operate under the impulse of class competition. [...] Objects are no more than 'exponents of class', signifiers and social discriminators; they function as signs of social mobility and aspiration" (Lipovetsky 2002, 194).

Following this logic of consumption, it is possible to draw a parallel between the relationship constructed by the perfume-exclusivity binomial and the Villa Savoye. Today, the house is a museum, and as such is not within anyone's reach, no one can get hold of the house, no matter how appetising the idea may seem. However, its image creates a bridge between the object that is being promoted and the world that is desired. The architectural work is used not to be lived, but to build an imaginary of social belonging. For the brand, it is not so much the physical space of the house that is important as its symbolic charge. The campaign sells signs that are constructed between the perfume, the atmosphere and the *Villa*.

Perfume and the house as aspirational symbols renew a strategy that is not entirely new. As Beatriz Colomina suggests, modern architecture cannot be understood without the mass media. The work is known more through the dissemination of its images than through its observation *in situ*.

#### *From icon to sign*

To consider the Villa Savoye solely as a disciplinary icon is a partial —and even somewhat naïve— reading. Although its relevance in the history of the search for a modern language for architecture has already been exposed, its value as a sign within a system of consumption is equally undeniable. In the Loewe campaign, the house forms part of a representational structure constructed from a sequence of images that expose the intimate: from the garden to the bathtub, from a clothed woman to a naked man. The advertising of the private, as Colomina rightly points out, forces us to ask ourselves whether we are in front of a house or an object for exhibition (Colomina 2010, 18).

The transition —from icon to sign— that is evident here has its roots in the very genesis of the project, in the hand of a Le Corbusier who used to pay as much or more attention to the image and its dissemination than to the work itself. In his books and numerous articles, the architect resorts to strategies typical of modern advertising to manipulate the images of his works and mix them with other consumer products —aeroplanes, fans, turbines, boats, etc.— which reinforce his visual rhetoric. It is an absolutely conscious decision that the architect himself promotes as his ideological stance.

"Le Corbusier's interest in contemporary conditions of production is necessarily an interest in the mechanisms of consumption that sustain such production: propaganda, mass media and advertising" (Colomina 2010, 117).

By the time the *Villa* project was commissioned, the market was undergoing a stratification in which it was no longer so important to reach the undifferentiated masses as to produce for a segmented public, arranged in culturally defined social groups. The aforementioned publication of the house in the *Œuvre Complète* reinforces the idea that the house and the objects photographed in it constitute the message: to evoke sophistication aimed at an upper-middle class that can afford to consume these objects —the golf clubs, the cigarette case, the designer vase, the coffee pot— but also the house as a symbol.

The route proposed in this article has attempted to show how a paradigmatic work of modern architecture such as the Villa Savoye has been recontextualised in contemporary visual culture as an emblem of exclusivity. What was conceived as an architectural manifesto within the framework of a functionalist utopia, today circulates as a coded image within a system of symbolic consumption. Its incorporation in Loewe's advertising campaign allows us to think about the way in which modern architecture, stripped of its transformative pretensions, becomes the legitimising stage for a desire constructed through marketing.

Fragrance is sold not only for its olfactory notes, but also for the visual atmosphere that envelops it: a select, silent world, inhabitable only by those who symbolically access it. In this process, the house and the perfume act as interchangeable signs that condense

4 (left)  
Curves and space suspended  
in time. Photograph by the  
author, 2015.



aspirational values. As authors such as Baudrillard, Lipovetsky and Colomina have pointed out, consumption does not operate on objects, but on systems of signification; the exclusive is not the inaccessible, but that which is presented as such. Modern architecture thus becomes a form of cultural capital reprogrammed to function as a consumer good.

As José Quetglas suggests in *Les Heures Claires* (2004), the Villa Savoye was never fully habitable. It was, rather, a luminous fiction, a scenography of modern habitation that from its origin operated in the register of myth. From this perspective, Loewe's campaign does not invent a betrayal, but rather shifts its symbolic function from the promise of a rational order to the emblem of an exclusive desire.

5  
Curves and space suspended  
in time. Photograph by the  
author, 2015.

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