

**Research Spotlight*****Locating Adolf Loos's House for Josephine Baker***

NICOLAS PACULA

Adolf Loos's 1927 design of a house for Josephine Baker has never been assigned a site because it was never built.<sup>1</sup> Numerous biographies, book chapters, and academic papers acknowledge that Baker lived on Avenue Bugeaud in the sixteenth arrondissement in Paris in the years between 1926 and 1928, but none of these works offers a specific address.<sup>2</sup> Where exactly did Baker live? Where might Loos have intended to build his design? Can answers to these questions be found through shared investigatory methods?

To probe these issues, I would like to present a method of historical research that aims to produce a site for the Baker House. My method links a close reading of Loos's drawings to Baker's contemporaneous real estate holdings in Paris. My findings suggest that recasting the existing historical narrative of the Baker House yields a compelling alternative in the form of a creative reconstruction. Such a reconstruction is needed because producing a site for the Baker House affects a variety of existing scholarship and provides a platform for future inquiry. In addition to architects and architectural historians, sociologists, cultural anthropologists, and biographers of Baker have all devoted time and resources to studying Loos's project.<sup>3</sup> Establishing a specific site thus prompts reconsideration of several questions about, for example, the professional and social relationships between Baker and Loos, the architectural design of the house as it relates to an urban context, and the debate surrounding a possible commission on the part of Baker.

In 1927 Adolf Loos produced a number of architectural drawings and a single model under the project title *Maison Josephine Baker Paris*.<sup>4</sup> The scheme was never built, and it has never been assigned a site in scholarship to date. This is probably because Loos's drawings do not depict any surrounding context and therefore appear to suggest that the project was designed without one. It warrants mentioning three key points: no drawing attributed to Loos includes a street address, there is no drawing corresponding to a site plan, and the model did not include neighboring buildings. Despite all this, historiography on the home's intended occupant provides clues to situating Loos's design. Scholars generally agree that in 1927 Josephine Baker owned two neighboring apartment buildings on Avenue Bugeaud in the

---

<sup>1</sup> See, among others, Beatriz Colomina, *Privacy and Publicity: Modern Architecture as Mass Media*, (Cambridge: The MIT Press, 1994). Beatriz Colomina, "The Split Wall: Domestic Voyeurism" in *Sexuality and Space*, ed. Beatriz Colomina (New York: Princeton Architectural Press, 1992). Ines Weizman, "Architecture Copyright: Loos, Law, and the Culture of the Copy," *101st ACSA Annual Meeting Proceedings, New Constellations, New Ecologies*, (2013): 829-835. Accessed March 13, 2017. doi: ACSA.AM.101.112.

<sup>2</sup> See, among others, Anne Anlin Cheng, *Second Skin: Josephine Baker and the Modern Surface*. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011). Bennetta Jules-Rosette, *Josephine Baker in Art and Life: The Icon and The Image*. (Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 2007). James Donald, *Some of These Days: Black Stars, Jazz Aesthetics, and Modernist Culture*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015). Mathew Pratt Guterl, *Josephine Baker and the Rainbow Tribe*, (Cambridge: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2014).

<sup>3</sup> Op. cit. 1 and 2.

<sup>4</sup> The Albertina Collection owns ten drawings of the Josephine Baker House project. All of these drawings are attributed to Adolf Loos and dated 1927/8. They also own two photographs of the model Adolf Loos commissioned for the project. The photographs were taken by Martin Gerlach in 1927.

sixteenth arrondissement in Paris, but the precise location of these neighboring apartment buildings remains unknown (fig. 1).<sup>5</sup>

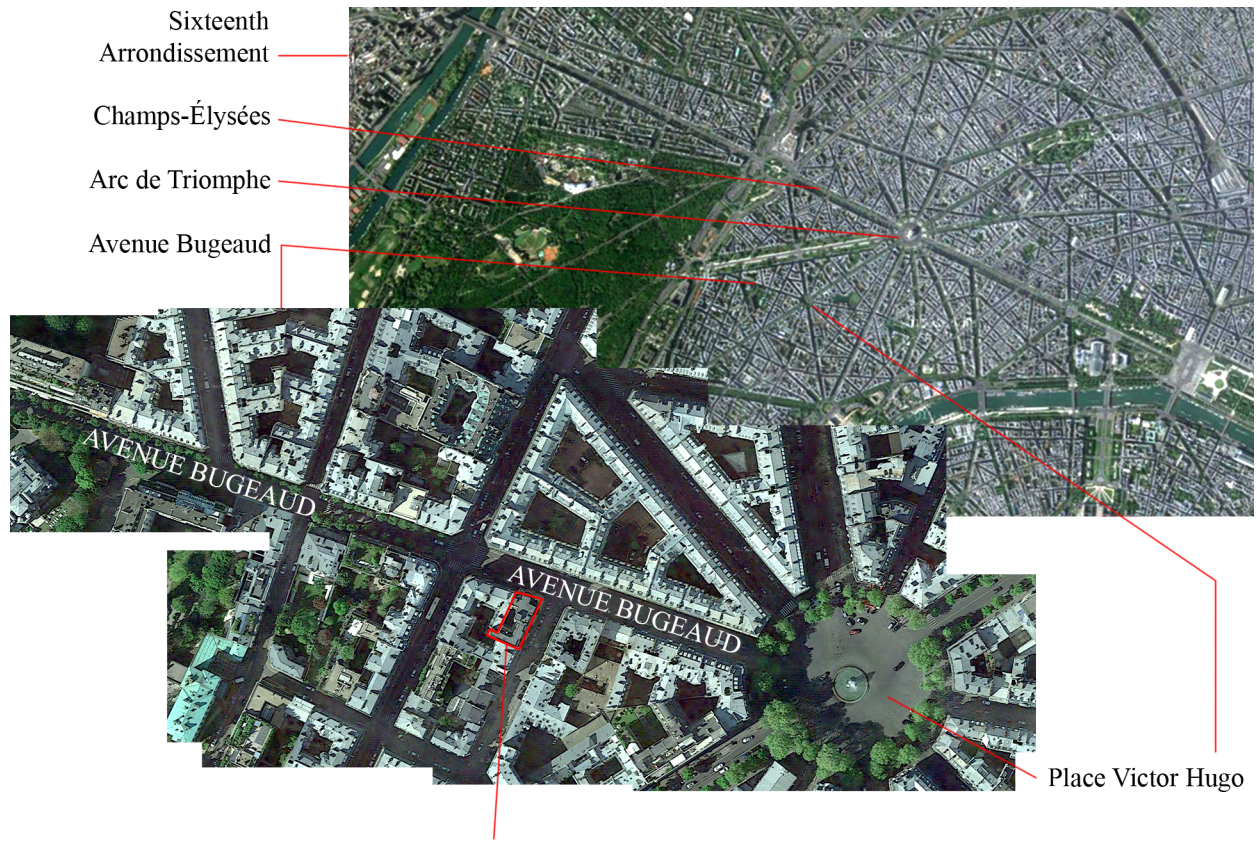
Can Loos's drawings be located on Avenue Bugeaud? The planimetric drawings and existing photographs of the Baker house model show that only two of the home's four sides were windowed. These sides of the house are not only windowed but also are perforated by a small garage and multiple points of entry on the ground level. The positioning of these windows suggests two things: that only these two sides of the house were street facing and, subsequently, that the house was to be located on a corner lot. The planimetric drawings also evidence that the footprint of Loos's design does not correspond to a perfectly square city block. The meeting of the two street-facing façades at the *sous-sol* (below ground) and *rez-de-chaussée* (ground floor) datums does not result in a right angle. They meet at an acute angle of eighty degrees. Why might these façades meet at an acute angle rather than a square or obtuse angle? The streets intersecting Avenue Bugeaud do so at an angle. Some of the buildings located on corners where Avenue Bugeaud is intersected by other streets have street-facing façades that meet at obtuse angles while others have façades that meet at acute angles. Loos's drawings of the Baker House belong to the latter group. Based on the angle at which streets intersect Avenue Bugeaud, potential sites to host Loos's design are reduced from nearly forty to twelve. It can also be said that the building footprint of Loos's proposal, as represented in the plan drawings, is irregular. This irregularity is a small protrusion on the southwest corner of the house, which further limits the scope of inquiry to one corner site (fig. 2). At the corner where Avenue Bugeaud meets Rue du Général Clergerie, there is a building whose street-facing façades meet at an eighty-degree angle and whose uniquely shaped roof plan matches that of Loos's design. With these considerations in mind, Adolf Loos's house for Josephine Baker, as it was designed in 1927, fits the existing site at 11 Avenue Bugeaud (fig. 3).

Images and captions:



<sup>5</sup> Op. cit. 2. A thorough search did not reveal any record of residence for Josephine Baker in 1926-1928. We can be certain that she was living in Paris at this time because she was performing *La Revue Nègre* (1926) at the Théâtre Champs Élysées. Her nightclub Chez Josephine opened in 1926. In 1928 Baker left Paris with her fiancé Jo Bouillon to embark on a world tour.

Figure 0 (this image should go at the top and won't have a figure number in the text). Author's reconstruction view showing the Josephine Baker house in its suspected urban context. Image courtesy of the author.



Possible site for Adolf Loos's house for Josephine Baker, 1927

Figure 1. Satellite imagery of Paris and Avenue Bugeaud. Image courtesy of the author.



Site for Adolf Loos's house for Josephine Baker, 1927

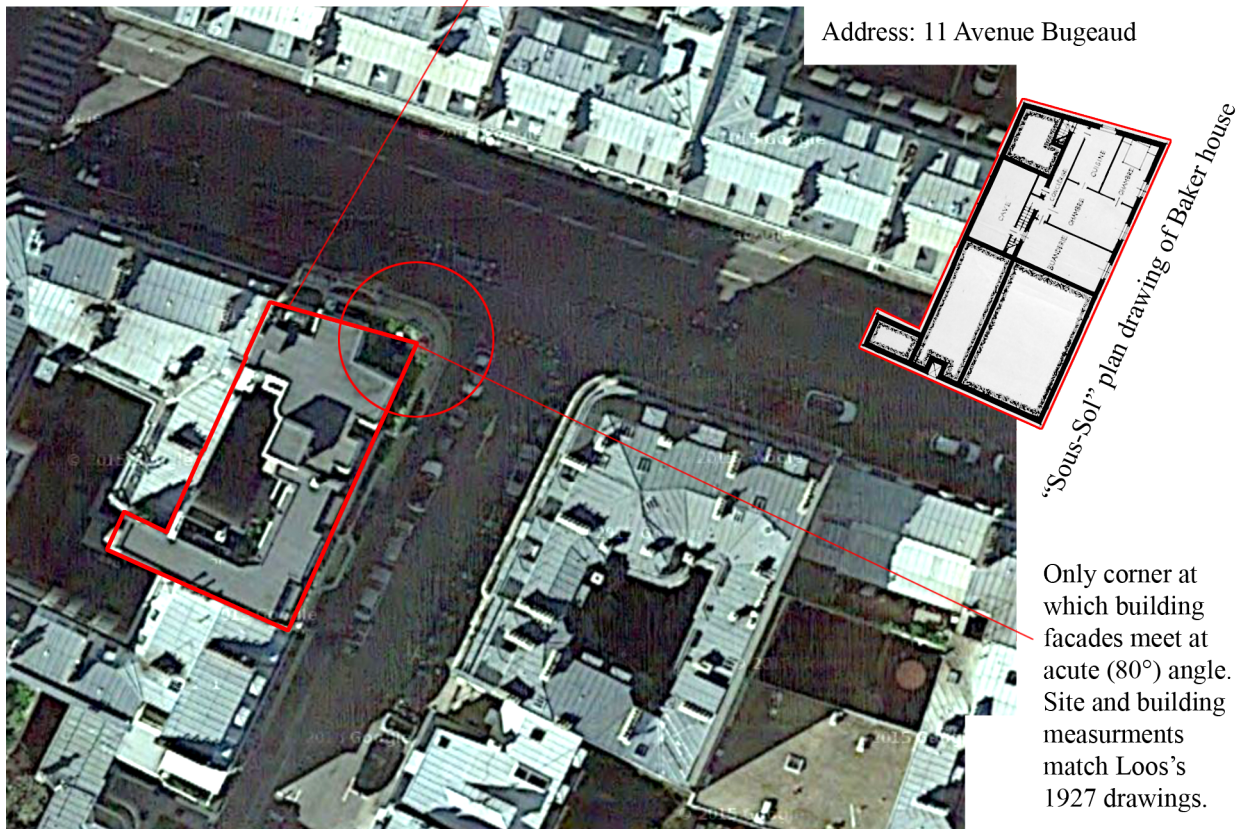


Figure 2. Testing a potential site for the Baker house. Image courtesy of the author.



Figure 3. Loos's plan drawing superimposed on the site at 11 Avenue Bugeaud. Image courtesy of the author.