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THE GLASS HOUSE OF ANTOINE DE PARIS

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Abstract

Antoni 'Antek' Cierplikowski was born in Poland in 1884, but made his name in Paris as Monsieur Antoine, hair stylist to the stars. In 1924, he purchased the top four floors of a Parisian apartment building that he later set about remodelling as a School of Beauty and an apartment with a sculpture studio, which he called the 'Glass House'. Construction began in 1929 and the Glass House occupied the topmost floors of the building. Glass was supplied by Saint-Gobain, of whom Antoine claimed at one time to be the biggest client. While Antoine took credit for the creative vision, much of the interior decoration can in fact be attributed to Sarah Lipska and Marcel Cabs. Despite press attention at the time of its construction, the Glass House on the Rue Saint-Didier is now largely forgotten. Nonetheless, it represents a fascinating intersection between fashion, art, design, and architecture. This chapter pieces together fragmentary accounts and images of the Glass House; it briefly considers the project in relation to other contemporary buildings that employed glass; and it suggests four factors for the lack of attention paid to it in architectural history.

Keywords

Antoine de Paris, the Glass House, Paris, Sarah Lipska, Saint-Gobain

Introducing 'Monsieur Antoine'

The Glass House was constructed in Paris from 1929 for the celebrity hairstylist Antoine de Paris (1884–1976). While initially feted, the project—a remodelling of a Parisian apartment with innovative uses of glass as an architectural material—is today largely unknown. Antoine's autobiographies provide a rich source of information, but they are unreliable and exclude the contributions of other designers, such as Sarah Lipska and Marcel Cabs.

'Monsieur Antoine' was born Antoni "Antek" Cierplikowski in Sieradz, Poland, in 1884. He studied hairdressing from an uncle in Łódź and in 1901 moved to Paris, where he adopted the name Antoine. In 1909, he married Marie-Berthe Astier (1887–1969), who

was then working as a manicurist. She would become a vital figure in the management of Antoine's business. They opened their own salon at 5 Rue Cambon (near Place de la Concorde) in the early 1920s. Antoine established a reputation for innovation when he broke with the tradition of long hair for women and created a short hairstyle known as *à la garçonne* for the actress Ève Lavallière, which brought him overnight success. He eventually owned dozens of salons around the world, a beauty academy, and his own line of beauty products. He styled numerous celebrities of his age, including Sara Bernhardt, Greta Garbo, Josephine Baker, Édith Piaf, and Brigitte Bardot. His celebrity was such that he inspired the film *Coiffeur pour Dames*, which was released in 1937 and remade in 1952.

Jean Cocteau wrote of him: 'Antoine is a poet, and this natural talent of his has enabled him to transform a hairstyle into a real work of art.'¹ There are frequent references to Antoine's hairdressing as an artform, and he also worked as a sculptor. He exhibited with the Société des artistes indépendants, and one critic described his work in an exhibition of young Polish artists as showing real talent and promise.²

The Glass House at 4 Rue Saint-Didier

In 1924, with a thriving business, Antoine and Marie-Berthe purchased an apartment building at 4 Rue Saint-Didier in the 16th arrondissement of Paris for 800,000 francs.³ Antoine recounted that they bought four floors on the Rue Saint-Didier, two for a School of Beauty and offices, and two for a sculpture studio and living quarters.⁴ The apartment and studio were on the top floors, but Antoine found the attics claustrophobic. He then set about remodelling the upper floors as the 'Glass House'. In his autobiography he wrote: 'Since boyhood I had dreamed of a glass house, perhaps a hang-over from fairy stories. The purity of glass, the possibility of cutting it in square clean lines, made it in my eyes a perfect building material.'⁵

Before the Glass House was completed, it excited international interest, notably in the British press, although initially the name of the 'barber' who commissioned the building was withheld. The British United Press agency overstated the scale and ambition of the house: '[A] house built entirely of glass and furnished throughout with the same material is about to be erected for a Paris barber [...]. The house will be glass from foundation to roof. Pilasters of glass will support great balconies of crystal. The walls will be glass and the cornices, gables and chimneys will also be glass. This does not necessarily mean transparency or even fragility. The glass will be coloured and translucent. In the bedrooms it will be almost opaque. In strength it will be equal to steel. The acoustics in each room will be excellent, but every room will be sound-proof.'⁶

The *Daily Mirror*, perhaps unsurprisingly, compared the residence to London's Crystal Palace: 'Antoine, [...] most Parisian of Poles, [is] building a crystal palace for himself [...]. Everything about him will be of glass. A glass lift will carry the visitor swiftly up to the studio, lined and adorned with transparent white glass, and illumined by pillars of ruby glass.'⁷ While the glass lift seems not to have been realised, the *Mirror* correctly



1 Thérèse Bonney, House of Antoine Cierplikowski: Music Room with Mezzanine.

noted that it was only the upper floors that were constructed using glass—and not foundations to roof.

According to Antoine's biographer, Hubert Demory, the construction permit was issued in March 1929, and while there is no record of this in the Paris city archives, the timeframe is consistent with the press reports quoted above. The pre-eminent French manufacturer Saint-Gobain supplied the glass, and Antoine claimed that for a time he was the company's largest client (despite the relative modesty of the scale of the building). However, there is no record of him or the building in the company's archive: he would have likely bought the glass through a local supplier rather than directly from the company. *Glaces et Verres* magazine reported that 12 tonnes of glass were used in the construction of the Glass House, and a 1955 article suggested Antoine spent a 'fortune' on the building.⁸

A studio was constructed on the fifth floor with a mezzanine on the sixth, with a large, glazed bay that opened onto a small terrace. The outer walls facing the street were made of large sheets of glass. Antoine claimed that inhabitants could look out, but others could not look in. This was, he said, 'so we could dispense with curtains. Curtains, to my mind, have no place in the modern interior.'⁹ External lights facing inwards allowed the interior spaces to be illuminated through the glazing at night.

The living room was reportedly lined with blue and red slabs of glass with a red crystal dome over the double-height space (Fig. 1). Antoine was photographed sculpting in this space (which also featured a pipe organ), suggesting that this doubled as the



2 Antoine de Paris in front of the organ in the Glass House, with *Maternité* by Xawery Dunikowski on the right.

sculpture studio (Fig. 2). It was also used for lavish parties. When the Glass House was completed, invitations to one such party were sent on engraved squares of crystal to fit in with 'the glittering modernity of the house'.¹⁰

A staircase was covered in thick glass from Saint-Gobain that had a non-slip finish; this was achieved, according to Antoine, by blowing bubbles into the glass (Fig. 3). The balustrade was constructed in slabs of glass, and the handrail was made from glass embedded into the curved wall. A mezzanine was constructed with a glass floor and the radiators throughout were clad in glass panels.

Hand-blown crystal plates from Bohemia graced the dining table, and the dining room itself was clad in red-gold overlapping glass panels (Fig. 4). The kitchen was Antoine's pride (see Fig. 3). He described it as: 'All glass and tiles, it was as all kitchens should be, a perfect laboratory. It could be cleaned with a garden hose within five minutes.'¹¹ Compared to what he called the half-hearted novelties of new apartments, he saw it as a paradise for a cook with foodstuffs stored in transparent glass containers with measurement marked on them. Despite the proclaimed efficiency of the kitchen, the couple did advertise for the services of a maid.¹² While the surfaces of the kitchen were white, the bathroom was decorated with green opaline glass, mirrors, and frosted illuminated-glass ceiling tiles (Fig. 5).

Contested Authorship

Antoine claimed it took five years to draw up the plans in the face of opposition from what he called 'specialists' and 'experts', who said the project was impossible.¹³



L'escalier en colimaçon. La cage de l'ascenseur est dissimulée par un revêtement circulaire en dalles de glace brute avec monture en chromé. La rampe est en dalles de glace brute. Cette vue représente l'arrivée de l'escalier à l'étage supérieur.

Photos Studio Art et Industrie.

Les murs et les meubles de la cuisine sont en opaline blanche et les accessoires en métal chromé. Cuisinière électrique. Un frigidaire. Sur la table une série de douze boîtes chromées et à lettres métalliques contenant les épices et ingrédients divers.



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3 Art et industrie, September 1931, showing the staircase and kitchen at the Glass House, 4 Rue Saint-Didier.



4 Thérèse Bonney, House of Antoine Cierplikowski: Dining room.



5 Thérèse Bonney, House of Antoine Cierplikowski: Bathroom.

Indeed, in his autobiographies he does not name any architect who worked on the project. However, Hubert Demory writes that Antoine put the architect Charles Thomas (1897–1967) in charge of the scheme's realization. Antoine only refers to an architect dismissively as having claimed Antoine's invention of a spray-on wall-cladding that was a mix of sand, colour, and adhesives mimicking stone as his own. This is consistent with the self-congratulatory tone throughout his two autobiographies. For example, he recounts how he improved the design of the Panhard automobile for Citroën which was 'streamlined before the word existed'.¹⁴

While Antoine takes credit for the creative direction of the house in both his autobiographies, *Glaces et Verres* magazine reported that the company Le Verre en Décoration was responsible, which suggests that the Glass House may in fact have been a show-piece for the company. *Glaces et Verres* also credited the direction of the interior design to Marcel Cabs with artistic collaboration by Sarah Lipska (1882–1973), while *Art et Industrie* credited Lipska as decorator in collaboration with Cabs, Dachary, and the furniture designer Maurice Lafaille (1898–1987).¹⁵ It is difficult to identify the designer of individual elements, though since Marcel Cabs was a designer of light fittings, he was likely responsible for the lighting design.¹⁶ Due to the highly reflective effect of so



6 Thérèse Bonney, House of Antoine Cierplikowski: Bedroom, featuring the glass bed designed by Sarah Lipska and the portrait of Antoine de Paris by Kees van Dongen.

much glass, traditional lighting methods were deemed unsuitable. The designers therefore experimented with indirect lighting (concealed behind frosted glass panels, ceiling tiles, or mouldings) to reduce the amount of glare.

Sarah Lipska was born in Poland, where she had studied with Xawery Dunikowski, another artist patronized by Antoine. She worked as a costume and set designer (including for the Ballets Russes), as a textile and interior designer in Paris, and later as a sculptor. Lipska is credited as designer in a series of images of the Glass House by the renowned architectural photographer Thérèse Bonney.¹⁷ The furniture in the house has stylistic similarities to her work with René Martin on a printer's office in 1926, and in 1927 *Art et industrie* published another example of her use of glass in design—a table with a sea-blue glass top.¹⁸

The *Derby Daily Telegraph* also credited Lipska with the design of Antoine's glass bed, which generated much media attention (Fig. 6). The paper reported that according to Lipska, 'when he dies the bed will serve as his coffin', which would be transferred to a tomb designed by Dunikowski.¹⁹ In the press, reporting of the glass bed frequently overshadowed other aspects of the house. In England, the *Daily Mirror* reported that: 'Antoine's bed will be built entirely of blocks of transparent white glass, which are being made for him at the St. Gobain works. It will have strong handles introduced on either side, for the bed is destined to be his coffin, and in it he will be carried down some day to his country villa to be laid beneath the tomb he is building in his garden.'²⁰ The coffin-like form of the bed was apparently inspired by the novel, *Le Cerceuil de Cristal* (*The Crystal Coffin*) by Maurice Rostand, which was published in French in 1920 and the following year in English. While a crystal casket is not explicitly described in the novel, it functions as a metaphor for an autobiographical journal that would clearly and transparently show the author's personality.²¹ Maurice Rostand and Antoine knew each other as young men, and Antoine claimed their conversations on death inspired Rostand's novel.²²

Antoine insisted that the high sides of the glass bed protected him from electric rays in the air. While this indicates a hesitancy around electricity, Antoine was in fact often quick to embrace new technologies. He was, for example, a keen aviator and he used film to show women their hair in the round. He had a small movie theatre installed at 4 Rue Saint-Didier for this purpose. Perhaps it was the strong electrical current required to power the theatre that provoked Antoine's caution in this regard, presumably based on the use of glass as an electrical insulator. He admitted that it may seem unlikely that the bed afforded any protection, but questioned the contemporary knowledge of electricity and claimed that he found such perfect rest nowhere else.

While Antoine claimed to have dreamed of a glass house as a child, the architectural use of glass in his house also aligns with the use of glass in his business. The material features prominently in the design of his salons and beauty products. Indeed, glass is prevalent in the design culture that surrounds the beauty industry, where its dual qualities of transparency and reflectivity help reinforce notions of luxury. This is evident in the magazine, *Antoine Document*, which was published by Antoine de Paris's



7 Gilbert Boisgontier, Exhibition of headdresses, 4 Rue Saint-Didier, 1937.

company from 1932 to 1937. Glass is omnipresent in design objects and perfume bottles, and in the spaces of the salons, with large sheets of glass used in mirrors and display cases.

Leaving the Glass House

The construction of a glass house may have been a long-held dream for Antoine. However, he and Marie-Berthe found the proximity of their living quarters to their work was crowding them out of the building. In the 1930s, Astier commissioned a new multistorey apartment building at 1 Avenue Paul Doumer, which was designed by Jean Fidler and B. Lochak. The couple moved to the top two floors of the new building. While less eccentric than the Glass House, the building is still emphatically modern, with a rounded façade (said to evoke a glamorous transatlantic liner). The use of glass was more conventional, largely confined to the windows, although it was used dramatically in the stairwell.²³ The infamous glass bed also moved to the new residence.

The former living quarters in the Glass House were then adapted for use as a museum of headaddresses through history (with exhibits supported on glass plinths); this opened during the *Exposition Internationale des Arts et Techniques dans la Vie Moderne* in May 1937, which was centred on the neighbouring Trocadero (Fig. 7). The space at the Rue Saint-Didier had previously been configured as an exhibition venue, in 1932, when it hosted an *Exposition des Coiffeurs Modernes*.²⁴ While the key buildings constructed for the 1937 international exhibition, such as the Palais de Chaillot and the Palais de Tokyo, embraced robust neoclassical forms, the architectural use of glass figured elsewhere, notably in the pavilions of the glass manufacturers Saint-Gobain, designed by Jacques Adnet and Rene-Andre Coulon, and the pavilion for the Union des Artistes Modernes, designed by Frantz-Philippe Jourdain, Andre Louis, and Georges- Henri Pingusson.

A Culture of Innovation: The Emergence of 'Glass Houses' in Paris in the 1920s

Concurrent with the departure of Antoine and Marie-Berthe from the Glass House as a residence, *Antoine Document* published an article by the art historian Bernard Champigneulle exploring current design trends and looking ahead to the 1937 international exhibition.²⁵ Champigneulle argued that confusion reigned, as designers were too focused on individualism rather than collective efforts, a charge that might readily be levelled at Antoine's Glass House. The thinking of Le Corbusier was briefly outlined as embodying rationality, hygiene, and a break from the past, with cement, steel, and glass playing pivotal roles in the construction of this new order. The work of Robert Mallet-Stevens and the 'rational' and 'functionalist' constructions of Pierre Chareau were among those referenced; all of these designers were associated with the Union des Artistes Modernes, and all experimented with the use of glass in architecture. Antoine's Glass House may be a little idiosyncratic, but it sits within this wider architec-

tural culture.²⁶ Innovation was promoted too by manufacturers, such as the dramatic translucent showcase built by Saint-Gobain at the 1937 *Exposition Internationale*.

Antoine's Glass House shares its name with the celebrated Maison de Verre by Pierre Chareau, Bernard Bijvoet, and Louis Dalbert. The Maison de Verre was constructed just a few kilometres away on the other side of the Seine between 1928 and 1932.²⁷ It was commissioned by Annie and Jean Dalsace and incorporated the latter's medical office in the couple's home. The façade is dominated by grids of glass tiles (manufactured by Saint-Gobain) contained within a steel frame. Like the house at the Rue Saint-Didier, the Maison de Verre has large external lights that could illuminate the interior through the glass façade. Despite their names, neither construction is a standalone house; both are reconfigurations of existing apartment buildings.

The two buildings are contemporaneous, as construction of Antoine's Glass House began in 1929 and images of the finished scheme were published in design magazines in 1931.²⁸ However, both of Antoine's autobiographies (published in 1946 and 1962) state that his house was completed in 1927.²⁹ It may be uncharitable to Antoine to suggest this, but his rewriting of history may have been an attempt to present himself as the innovator, with his house predating its more celebrated namesake.

Antoine's dating of the project in 1927 would place it the same year as another 'glass house'—the apartment and studio designed for the sculptors Jan and Joel Martel by Robert Mallet-Stevens in the 16th arrondissement. The light-filled double-height sculpture studio created for the Martel brothers may have served as a model for Antoine's studio and Mallet-Stevens's embrace of light as a design element serves as an appropriate reference point.

However, Bernard Champigneulle's 1937 article in *Antoine Document* advocated a different position from the likes of Chareau and Mallet-Stevens, arguing that luxury is the flower of the civilized spirit, a position presumably supported by Antoine as publisher and consistent with his business interests (Fig. 8). Champigneulle distanced himself from the work of members of the Union des Artistes Modernes and praised those who sought to bring a touch of fantasy, seduction, and pleasure to the machine age. While embracing fantasy, the decoration of the Glass House was relatively austere, with hard lines and surfaces. As publisher of Champigneulle's article, it is likely that the text echoes Antoine's own thinking at the time. Although his later autobiographies praised the innovation of the Glass House, one might ask whether Antoine became somewhat disillusioned with the design (by Lipska, Cabs and others, rather than solely his own hand). Was the move to Avenue Paul Doumer prompted by comfort (or lack of it in the Rue Saint-Didier), or a changing design ethos as much as proximity to work?

The Omission of Antoine's Glass House from Architectural History

However Antoine's attitudes towards his Glass House may have shifted, it is a building that is largely absent from architectural histories. Its physical position may have



Ensemble de LELEU

MARIUS GRAYOT

1937 Les tendances de LA DÉCORATION

Depuis cent ans l'art décoratif s'était borné à tourner en rond, grapillant son bien à travers tous les âges et tous les pays du monde. Personne ne semblait plus trouver étonnant de prendre ses repas dans une salle à manger inspirée de la Renaissance italienne, de dormir dans un lit Louis XV et de boudoir dans un boudoir japonais. En 1900, la fusée du touchant modern-style s'était éteinte aussitôt allumée. Des architectes, des ébénistes, des verriers, des ferronniers, des céramistes, des orfèvres se mettaient au travail pour créer des formes neuves inspirées de leur époque. L'Exposition des Arts décoratifs de 1925, après un quart de siècle, allait-elle révéler à nos contemporains ce qu'ils attendaient : un style ?

Des efforts méritoires, sérieux et charmants, logiques et spirituels, avaient été accomplis. Mais on fut bien obligé de s'apercevoir que des constructions rationnelles et « fonctionnalistes » de Pierre Chareau aux étincelantes fantaisies de Paul Poiret, chaque décorateur présentait son style propre. Aucune tradition, aucune base généralisée ne permettaient de relier ces charmantes inventions à cet

harméd its profile: buried within the attic floors of a 19th-century apartment building, its exterior form was difficult to photograph (although the hidden nature of Chareau's Maison de Verre, which is entered from a courtyard, not visible from the street, has arguably added to its mystique). Counter to this, as we have seen, the house at the Rue Saint-Didier did attract considerable attention in both the general and design press during and after construction.

The Glass House also lacked a clearly identified designer (other than Antoine himself) whose authorship might have elevated its status. Sarah Lipska was clearly important to the building's realisation, but she remains an elusive figure today. Female artists and designers have traditionally been excluded from the historical record, but this is changing and further research on Lipska is undoubtedly warranted.

While Antoine portrayed himself as the creative force behind the project, he was not an architect and even expressed disdain for the architectural profession. Antoine's camp flamboyance also does not sit entirely comfortably within certain narratives of modernist art and architecture. The Antoine de Paris brand espoused glamour and luxury, which is hard to place alongside the utopian ideals advocated by many modern designers.

After the death of Marie-Berthe in 1969, Antoine returned to Poland where he later died, aged 91. Despite his celebrity during his days in Paris, his star faded, and his business declined. In publishing autobiographies, he was clearly conscious of his legacy and proud of the Glass House. The residence was a quirky experiment in the architectural use of glass, which brought together the worlds of fashion, art, design, and architecture. It was a fascinating project that requires further untangling and deserves at least a footnote in architectural history.

1 Antoine 1962, 143.

2 La Lanterne 1922, 2.

3 Demory 2006, 69.

4 Antoine 1946, 101.

5 Ibid., 99.

6 Derby Daily Telegraph 1929, 12.

7 Park Lane 1929, 6.

8 *Glaces et Verres* 1931; Ratcliffe 1955.

9 Antoine 1946, 101.

10 Ibid., 107.

11 Ibid., 102.

12 Le Figaro 1931.

13 Antoine 1946, 101.

14 Ibid., 101.

15 Art et industrie 1931, 30; *Glaces et Verres* 1931, 17.

16 Art et industrie 1928.

17 The photographs are held, for example, in the collections of the Médiathèque du patrimoine et de la photographie, Charenton-le-Pont, and Cooper Hewitt, Smithsonian Design Museum, New York.

- 18 Art et décoration 1926; Art et industrie 1927.
- 19 Derby Daily Telegraph 1929.
- 20 Park Lane 1929.
- 21 Rostand 1920, 140.
- 22 Antoine 1946, 47–48.
- 23 Dornès 1937.
- 24 'Vernissage Chez Antoine', Antoine Document 2, July–August 1932.
- 25 Champigneulle 1937.
- 26 Eskilson 2018.
- 27 Vellay 2007.
- 28 Art et industrie 1931; Glaces et Verres 1931.
- 29 Antoine 1946, opp. 64: a photograph of the White Ball that marked the opening of the Glass House is dated 1927.

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