

Insight Series #6

The primus-inter-pares of architecture, or does Le Corbusier transcend this by far?

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The first time I came into physical contact with his work was in India, in Ahmedabad in 1992. I was totally overwhelmed by the brutalism, which he used to transform the surroundings. However, once inside the megalomaniac building there was a softness, an architectural softness. A softness that is so characteristic of his work. This play with light, the unexpected light, has made a big impression on me, far away in India.

Later on I visited Notre-Dame-du-Haut, Villa Savoye and maison La Roche. Never as a series, always separately.

The annual trip with our department to visit many works of Le Corbusier was

established after Ben Zegers (director of the Bachelor courses at the Gerrit Rietveld Academie), gave me a leaflet about Marseille, the cultural capital of Europe in 2013. Without a further thought I said to him: “Le Corbusier, yes, we will organise a Le Corbusier tour.”

Viewing a series of buildings, studying and drawing them. Preferably not visiting a single other building in between, but a total focus on the works of Le Corbusier. We did it! We visited maison La Roche, Villa Savoye, Unité d’habitation, the church Église Saint-Pierre and the stadium in Firminy, La Tourette (also stayed overnight) and Notre-Dame-du-Haut. A dream I have had to wait for almost 50 years to realise, the question why I’ve waited this long I often wondered about during the tour. It has made me emotional, it has touched me deeply and made me richer.

He has had so much influence on contemporary architecture, inspired so many people and hopefully our students. I’m also

wondering what we will be able to see in the work of our students as a result of this excursion. Or is it perhaps too early to discuss this, does it need time, time to take root, time to mature? I hope so. One thing has become clear to me; he was the best, ‘the one and only’.

Henri Snel, Head of inter-architecture,
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Experiencing Le Corbusier's architecture

The uniqueness of the oeuvre of Le Corbusier (1887-1965) results not only from the architect's distinctive choice of materials, spatial dimensions and use of light, but should also be seen in light of his in-depth knowledge of history, humanity, philosophy, and parallel art forms, such as music, literature, and the visual and performing arts. Le Corbusier's rich and multi-layered oeuvre is not bound to architecture alone, but also relates to other fields and scales of designing space, including urbanism and interior design. Le Corbusier was able to convince his clients and the world around him, expressing himself in clear spoken language as well as in persuasive writings: articles, books and numerous letters.

These talents, in addition to his outspoken ideas about society and his ambition

to develop a 'new architecture' that would belong to the 'new era' – 'the machine age' as he called it – made him one of the leading figures of the first international congresses on architecture (CIAM). At these congresses held between 1928 and 1959, more than half a century after the peak of industrialisation, an international elite of architects, urban designers and artists was rethinking the role of architecture. In 1926 Le Corbusier formulated his five points of architecture, proposing that the architect create a maximum of space, light and freedom in and around buildings; liberate floor plan and facades by using a constructive skeleton of reinforced concrete; intertwine environment and building; and optimise the positioning of buildings towards the sun. During 'architectural promenades' through the spaces, people would no longer perceive these spaces as static but as dynamic experiences. Le Corbusier stated in 1931 in his book *Towards a New Architecture*, that in the machine age the architect should design the house as a

machine to live in but should never forget architecture, as the 'engineer achieves harmony', while the architect, 'by his arrangement of forms, realizes an order which is pure creation of spirit'.

Experiencing the work of Le Corbusier in September 2013 helped us to understand his views on modern society and provided insight into the radical way in which he reformulated architecture – always with a remarkable sense of beauty – at a time of societal change.

In the following pieces, the participating students describe their own modes of thinking and working in relation to their experiences of the architecture of Le Corbusier.

Vibeke Gieskes, teacher of Theory and History of Architecture

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Intentional mistakes

Although there are at least three major lessons I learned from visiting several spaces designed by Le Corbusier, I will only discuss one. I felt with my own body and mind that experiment is crucial and that it is necessary to make mistakes. At the cultural centre in Firminy, Le Corbusier attempted to combine steps with seats. But he made the distance between each step too large and they were too narrow for my feet - it made me feel highly unsafe. Suddenly I remembered that at age 3, I walked down the stairs backwards, facing the stairs and holding the steps with my hands. An eyeopener and clear indication that spatial imbalance can evoke different dimensions of experience. Later, at the monastery in La Tourette, again there were steps that were too narrow. They were made from concrete and had rounded edges. The guide mentioned that the monks





learned to appreciate this mistake: when they walk the steps, they are forced back into the here and now of the physical world. So did Le Corbusier design the narrow steps by mistake or intentionally? Why would he make the same mistake twice? Maybe this was intentionally designed for the monks to get into a different state of awareness. It made me realize that experimenting with human scale and measurements are necessary design choices that lead to variable experiences. I'm inspired to use such aspects in designing spaces, shifting from invitations that allow the mind to wander and then coming back to the issues of daily life; mere bodily awareness. It fascinates me that a small detail such as the size of steps could change one's state of mind in one and the same space. One space with transitional elements that could evoke a variety of mental levels. Bravo!

Space and a game between us

I stand alone, in a room. I have never felt that quiet before. I can hear my own footsteps. As I move, the whole landscape is moving with me. Following me. So I move forward. I want to see where it leads. Left and then right, going up to the unexpected. Relation of different horizontal surfaces, inside and outside spaces. A light falls on the southern wall describing its form, texture, sensibility. The openings on the opposite wall are hiding and revealing different parts of the other side of the building. As if the whole space was a game inviting me to play it.

A thoughtful game. Space-time concept with the idea that you can not grasp the whole space with one glance from one spot. It forces me to look from every angle, to move through it, to climb the stairs, to see the bottom and up high

into the endless ceiling. As I am trying to capture the space with my eyes, a ray of light hits them. At first very soft, dim light and few steps further it has been transformed into bright yellow. With my hand touching the wall, that very rough, but pleasurable surface I continue my walk. A dialogue between warm red and fresh green light in front of me. Competing and supporting each other at same moment.

I found myself lost in time. I am not sure how long I was there. The complete silence, the light, the proportions of the space, the not knowing of what else is out there. I was trying to cover the presence of my own footsteps, wanting to be as absent as possible, but the echo in the room didn't allow me.





Architecture for humanity

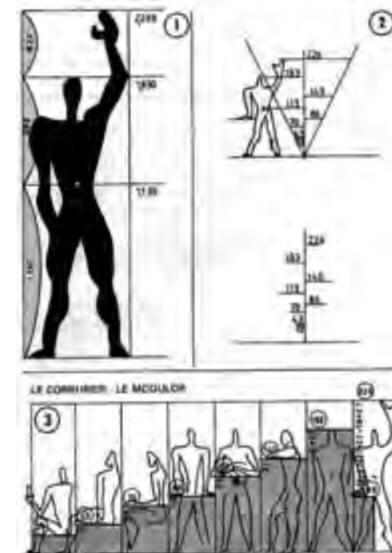
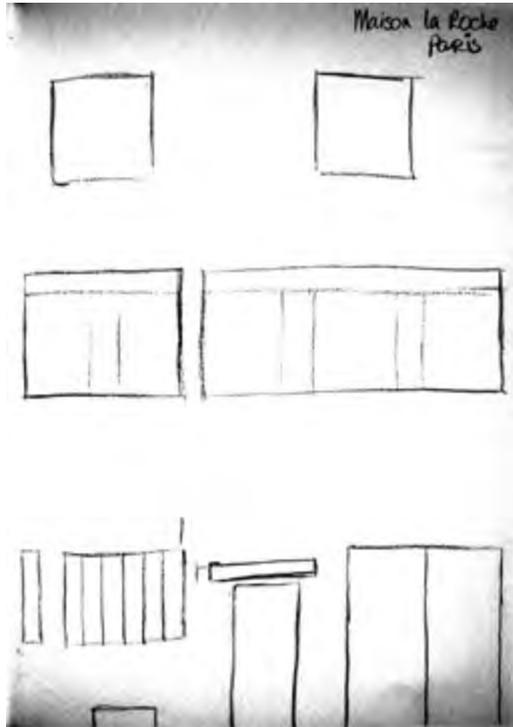
What is architecture? A question that even the greatest architects don't agree on. It is a wide topic, and I is explained in multiple ways. One of the answers that I can relate with is: Architecture deals with humanity and their environment. The human part in designing is really important. In the end, it is us who are giving meaning to space, and therefor also the way we move in space in relation with our body. Le Corbusier came with some translations of the human part in designing.

Le Corbusier created 'Le Modulor' in the 1940s to set standards for the human body in architecture. Throughout history more models like this were made, ranging back to Da Vinci's 'Vitruvian Man'. The Modulor was an attempt to define the 'range of measurements to suit the human scale' (Le Corbusier, 1954). He presented the perfect man as 1.75 meter high. The rest of the

scale is based on that size in combination of the golden ratio.

With the help of the Modulor, he gave measurements to a space. He also tried to find the perfect conditions and scale by interpreting a space by its needs. If the space was, for example, meant to have a conversation with one or two other persons, he would adjust the size of the room to only that activity. We saw this in practice with his design of a monastery in La Tourette, France (Saint-Marie de La Tourette).

I don't think this is a perfect example of what architecture is about, but at least it has some kind of solution of how to deal with human bodies. At the same time I have the feeling of by making a standard, you cut out a lot of people with different measurements, places with changing functions and human emotions



Experiencing the Modulor

Le Corbusier's thoughts about the Modulor seem very strict and inflexible. It feels as if he was looking away from reality when he developed this antropometric scale of proportions. The Modulor is used intensely in the monastery of Sainte-Marie de La Tourette. The measurements of the rooms are not only based on the Modulor, but also on the function and the amount of people that utilize the room. The Modulor dictates the atmosphere and the way of living. The cells (loggia) for example are the smallest rooms in the monastery. You can almost touch the ceiling and when you spread your arms you can touch both walls. The cells function as a room where one can study and sleep.

And it was in this very room that I understood why Le Corbusier designed the cells according to the Modulor. This



The tribal roots of firmity

room closed off the world around me. There was nothing that could distract me. There was no sound from the other rooms, nor from the hallway, nor from outside. Whenever I was in this room, I was the center of it. I came to myself.

But it hit me. I felt unprepared. It was not my intention to find myself here. My state of mind was with the group and suddenly I was disconnected from it.

It's been three weeks since I stayed at the monastery and I feel that I should go back. This time in a state of mind that needs silence. In order to reflect, think and learn. To be subjected to the architecture and really wanting that too.

In our modern time society we all tend to take the individual path in life. Most of us live in comfortable insulated and elegant 'cages' that we call home. Very few know their neighbors; consequently, we are thrown on our own resources.

We gave up on the tribal way of life but it turns out that we still need what the tribe used to give to its members. Our sense of belonging to a group made us feel that we were part of something larger that empowered us. We all need the acceptance and the unconditional love of our tribe. Our need is so deep that when it doesn't get fulfilled, we experience anguish and mental distress.

In his innovative approach, Le Corbusier in his 'UNITÉ D'HABITATION' succeeded, in my opinion, to bring us back to our tribal times.



Le Corbusier designed a building that provides all that a person needs. Next to apartments, it includes a school, shops, a gymnasium, a library, lecture rooms, small businesses, etc.

By proximity of those components, a person gets to know his neighbors; he meets them in the shopping centers, and in the library, in the elevators and in the hallways. The children learn in the same school and play together in the same park. In that way people develop strong bonds and relationships with each other, something we need so much in modern times.

The conditions in these kinds of buildings allow social interaction, creating circles which I believe, strengthen the sense

Pure artistry

of belonging to one another. People then begin to develop directions such as: mutual support, caring, and sharing, which lead to a meaningful life in which one is a part of something larger.

I believe that when people interact in all areas of life, they return in a way to tribalism.

What caught my attention the most during the trip of Le Corbusier is how he puts elements in contrasts to one another. The thin light streams touching the massive volumes at la Tourette in a perfect harmony. Or the convex shaped stair, dancing its way through the horizontal villa. These are two of many examples that took my breath away. I'd like to think that it's impossible to reach the same level of depth in some of his buildings without sharing a holistic view on architecture. He was aware of the relationship between body and space. Aware of body and soul, how they depend on each other. How nature enters in and contradicts the plasticity of the building.

While entering his works, his thoughts and emotions are exposed. It gives you a glimpse of the same state of mind that he must have experienced during the time. It leads you to question the space and its elements, sometimes you understand him, other times you don't. At la Tourette I found myself in a split state of mind. From



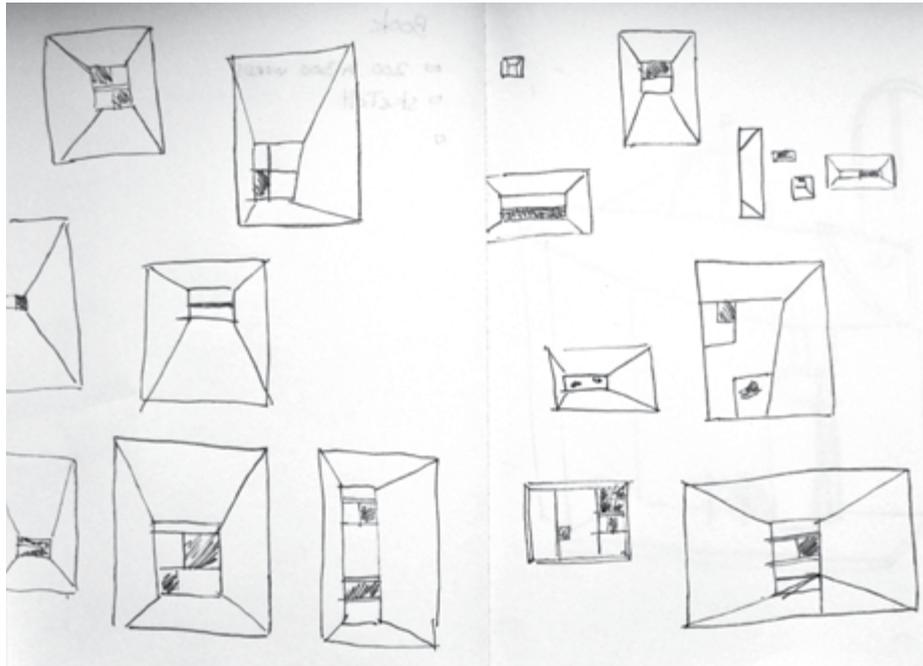
A play of light

my emotions it was an intimidating brutal building, and it felt somewhat misplaced in its location. From inside, it was reflecting the beauty of the outside, almost in a selfish way. It was hard not to get overwhelmed by the perfection of lines and organic shapes merging together in a perfect harmony by the luminous light rays breaking through. Walking in the narrow hallway, you suddenly felt insecure and small, as if the building had claimed you and controlled your emotions. As if the building was playing a game with you. It was intimidating and interesting at the same time.

Pure beauty doesn't make us ask questions. Pure beauty doesn't intimidate us, and make us reflect over why. Le Corbusier clearly wanted to achieve more than beauty, something that breaks into your soul and gives you a sense of awareness. And whether I liked the building or not, I still left from all places with an emotion. That to me is true artistry.

Green, yellow, blue and red light falls on my arm. My freckles light up as dots in a composition of Piet Mondriaan. I move silently through the space. Every step echoes around me; STEP, step, step... The silhouette is changing every second. I forget the people around me. The combination of space, light and shadows makes me humble. My mind turns blank. There is no yesterday, no tomorrow, there is just this moment...present space.

Above, I have tried to describe my experience of the chapel of Notre Dame du Haut. The visit shows me another aspect of the modern architect/urbanist Le Corbusier. An important point in his design is; standardization of sizes [Modulor], use of new materials [concrete] and optimization of use and space. He was looking for a new way of living, building and society. The auto industry was one of his major source of inspiration; the mass production at the assembly line.



If I look at the design of the chapel of Notre Dame du Haut, you see another side of Le Corbusier, it shows the artistic and poetic side of him. The thick wall on the south side is a beautiful example, he used stones from the old chapel in combination with concrete. This gave him the opportunity to create unique windows. The windows in the facade are grouped in spontaneous forms. Each light frame has its own perspective and influence on the space. The intensity of light in the church is so different. It is a geography of light.

Playing with the aspect of light is new for me. I always preferred large open spaces with lots of light, but Le Corbusier adds an extra layer to it. Let the light determine the use. No standard sizes, only irregular patterns and unique frames. Think about the use and adjust the amount of light to it, in the other hand control the light to create an experience in the space. Let the people be in the present space.



Color and materials



White, gray, black, yellow, red, blue and green. These are the main colors of the Le Corbusier's works. Vivid, fresh and contrastive. They are combined with massive amounts of concrete volumes, big unexpected and rare for that time. Seeing his projects for me in real was an amazing experience, each time I had to realize myself, that they were constructed more than 60 years ago.

I am the most astounded by the fact that, Le Corbusier cared about every

single detail, from the light, to the complete design of the interior and finishing with projecting the way of communication, interaction of people.

The great example can be La Tourette. The refined details as painting the water pipes according to the fact which of them delivers warm and cold water. Later we could find Modulor's rules, entrance, dormitories, studying rooms adapted to the golden rules of the perfect dimensions. And at the end an impressive design of the general paths for that young Dominican students.

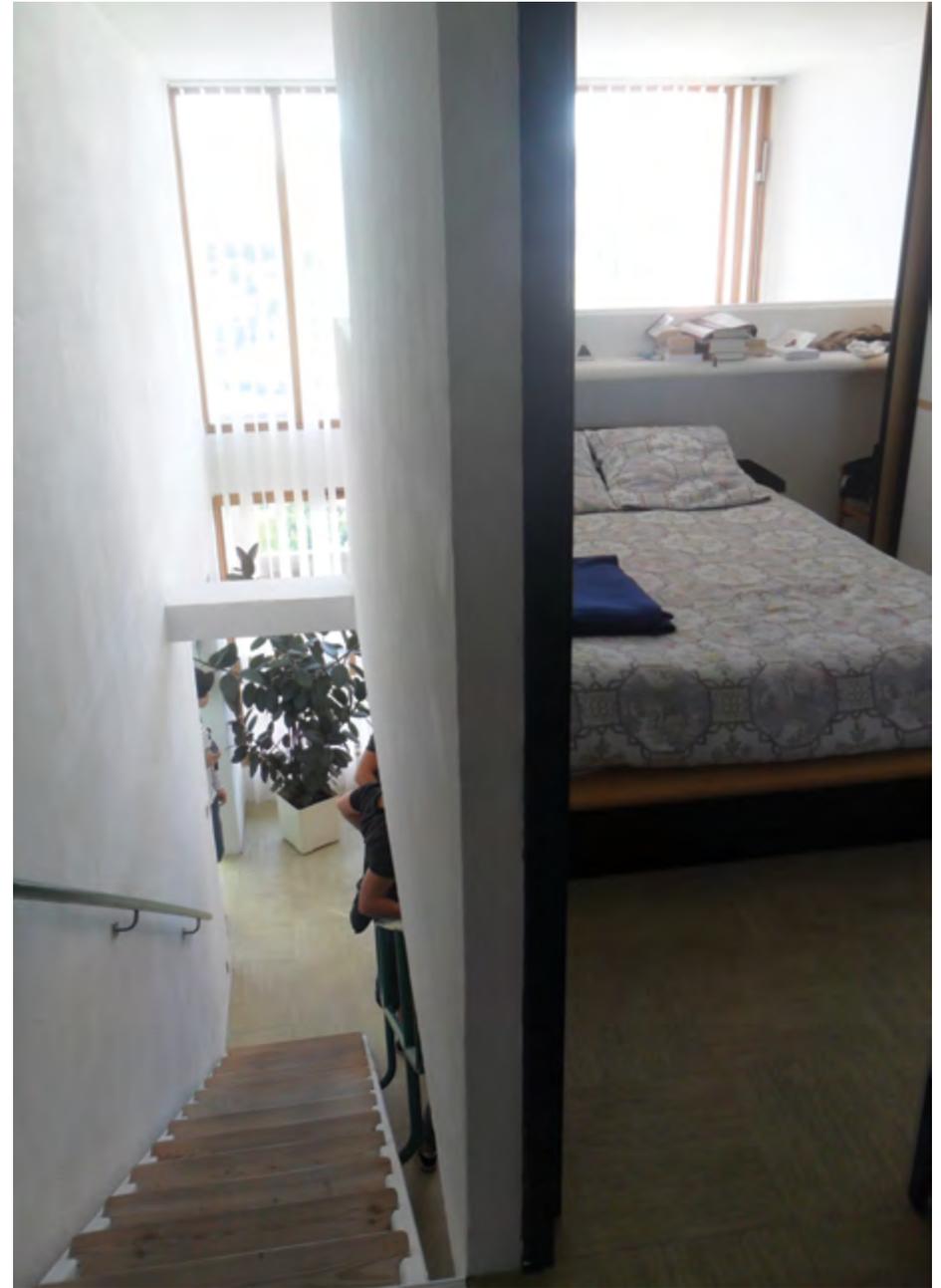
I interpreted the whole building as it was a big theology study book. The future monks, start by entering to light, white rooms, even the oratory is a relatively light place, having in mind the fact that it is a meditation space, which mostly tend to be darker. As they are gaining the knowledge, they are getting deeper into their studies, the corridors, which lead them to the main chapel are smaller, not that bright anymore.

The chapel then, according to my interpretation, is the final climax, different to the rest of the convent. The space is huge, dark, but also surprises with unexpected

focuses of colours. Changes the feeling of proportions. All the sudden I feel extremely tiny, gives me a sensation that it was a final goal, the point to reach.

Le Corbusier; inspired by the human body but not by the human life

The visit to the numerous architectural classics of Le Corbusier was really interesting. I prefer this kind of education above studying from books or the internet. Especially with the work of Le Corbusier it is necessary to visit the sites because his conceptual and built work is really specified on the golden ratio related to the human body. As everybody is already known with his 'measurement' values; perfect body height is 183 cm, perfect eye height is 170 cm and a stretched body height is 226 cm. With this modular he designed all of his work. For this the Dominican Order Priory, Sainte Marie de la Tourette, has intrigued me the most. The consistency of his work is remarkable



Light in Villa Shodhan

Villa Shodhan (1951-1956) in Ahmedabad, India, is built according to the traditional ways of a Ahmedabad houses combined with Le Corbusier's ways of thinking about how a building should be designed.

The villa is positioned according to the view and orientation of the sun. The rectangle structures are used as the sun breakers, on the northwest and the southwest to protect the interior spaces from the glare.

The most important part is how the natural light is distributed through the entire building. It depended on the tropical climate due to the use of terraces, veranda or open spaces and prevention of much hit.

On the ground level a timber frame is found on which windows and wooden doors are fixed. By the opening and closing up of these doors, much or less light is

experienced. Here also, the arrangement of the engraved small windows in the wall play a big role in the regulation of light.

Going to the upper levels, the same sphere of the light from the windows and doors is experienced on one side. On the side, the light passes between the spaces connecting them with outside. It becomes even more and more because of the semi-closed spaces. There are open spaces and voids, which add in the total amount of light and causing the exposure of the stairs. The enclosed spaces have very little light and fewer walls are used.

The roof-like parasol also gangs on the columns leaving a strip of light a long side the walls and the through on this roof let the light fall in these spaces.

In all his work, Le Corbusier followed the same direction, his system of building seemed to be more important than his thoughts. It rolled out like a beautiful poem.

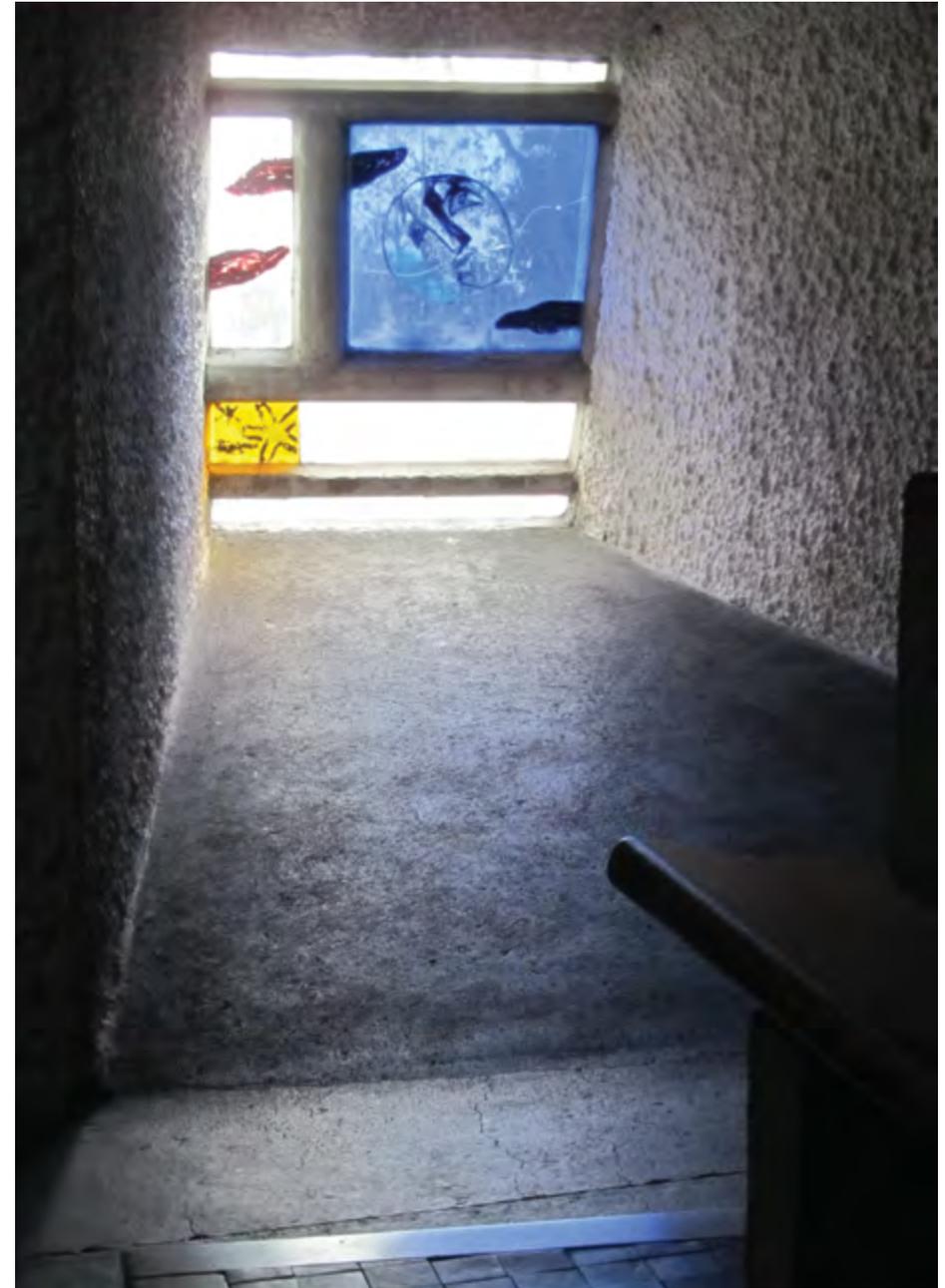


Learning from Le Corbusier

When it's really silent it's not easy to concentrate. There is space for thoughts to flow without finding any sort of connection that could help creating a clear idea.

Visiting Ronchamp

It's not the most elegant work of Le Corbusier I've seen, but it's charming like a sculpture with some personal painting involved. I won't try to give a definition of a sculpture, but to guide my words write what makes it different from other buildings. It feels as if someone made it by hand, it makes you want to make something, by doing without having a terribly clear end picture in mind. This quality I find in the handle of an ondulatoire in La Tourette or the positioning of the bathtub in an open space in Villa Savoye. This villa feels as experiencing someone's life, made possible



by the building's interior. For me Ronchamp is like a sketch that could have been different, but he decided that this would be it. You cannot completely imagine what each side of the building looks like. Some shapes are the continuation of what you've seen by starting your walk, but what stays curious are the objects around the building and the positioning and shapes of the windows. It's as if he started around the corner cutting openings and continued. These windows fascinate me like the memories of a childhood. A melancholic positive atmosphere comes from the colorful paint with poetically provocative words, bringing light to the space. The building does create a strong whole, I guess because it's one handwriting, his. It's interesting to observe the outside and only then go inside to see what the effect is of all the 'adjustments' he made in his strangely shaped wall. That the inside space was being built at the same time as the outline was being shaped.





When form connects to your body

Le Corbusier created the monastery La Tourette with a sculptural sensitivity for form. He took the main function of the building and created poetry of the space. When I walked around in the church of the monastery I could feel the space: the cold breeze from my movement made me aware of myself in relation to the space. I had a spatial experience that felt like an metaphor for how spirituality can go beyond yourself. The dynamics of the form created the space between the floor and the high ceiling as a symbol for the continuing. When I was standing on the floor looking up to the ceiling I was a part of those dynamics. My eye could perceive the light to a spiritual experience of form.

Le Corbusier brings the quality of concrete into his buildings when he used a variation of texture of the surface. The way he worked with the material makes it easier



to connect with the space and the strong geometrical shapes. Only strong form elements without the texture would make the spatial experience presumably feel more clinical and distant.

The function is strongly connected with form. The shape of the windows creates the specific, indirect light. Where the light gets into the room, details are created of lightened spots and shadows. The vague light through the whole space brings the forms together. With an awareness of the space, colours play with the light and the choice of colours bring identity to the room.

When I walked through the room form was connected to my body. The light created an intensity. The forms communicated the function of a spiritual space, created to reach the human. La Tourette is a place to get in contact with yourself through form.

Light and the interaction of open and closed.

“Architecture is the learned game, correct and magnificent, of forms assembled in the light.” - Le Corbusier

Le Corbusier's way of working is a sculptural and artistic approach to architecture. The themes that inspire and interest me most in his work are light and the spatial relationship of open and closed. The space is determined by the relationship of open to closed surfaces, the play of heights and widths, the blurring of inside and outside.

The space is designed to be discovered by walking, looking in all directions, reaching different viewpoints.

Le Corbusier is able to achieve a sense of interaction of open and closed



Formulae

by elective sources of illumination which distinguish different parts of a building. They can have all sorts of shapes and sizes to achieve the precise effect of his intention: triangles, tubes, slots and points. In residential buildings he also uses ribbon windows where you can see the reflection of the outside world.

For my own work I find it important to design space which creates the right atmosphere for its use and users. My definition of atmosphere is the character or mood that you associate with a space. It can have various aesthetic qualities or effects on you. The atmosphere is defined by the shape and forms of a space, the light, the acoustics and the materials. My goal is to achieve this with as little as necessary. The space should be a response to its environment but also have an autonomous architectural language.

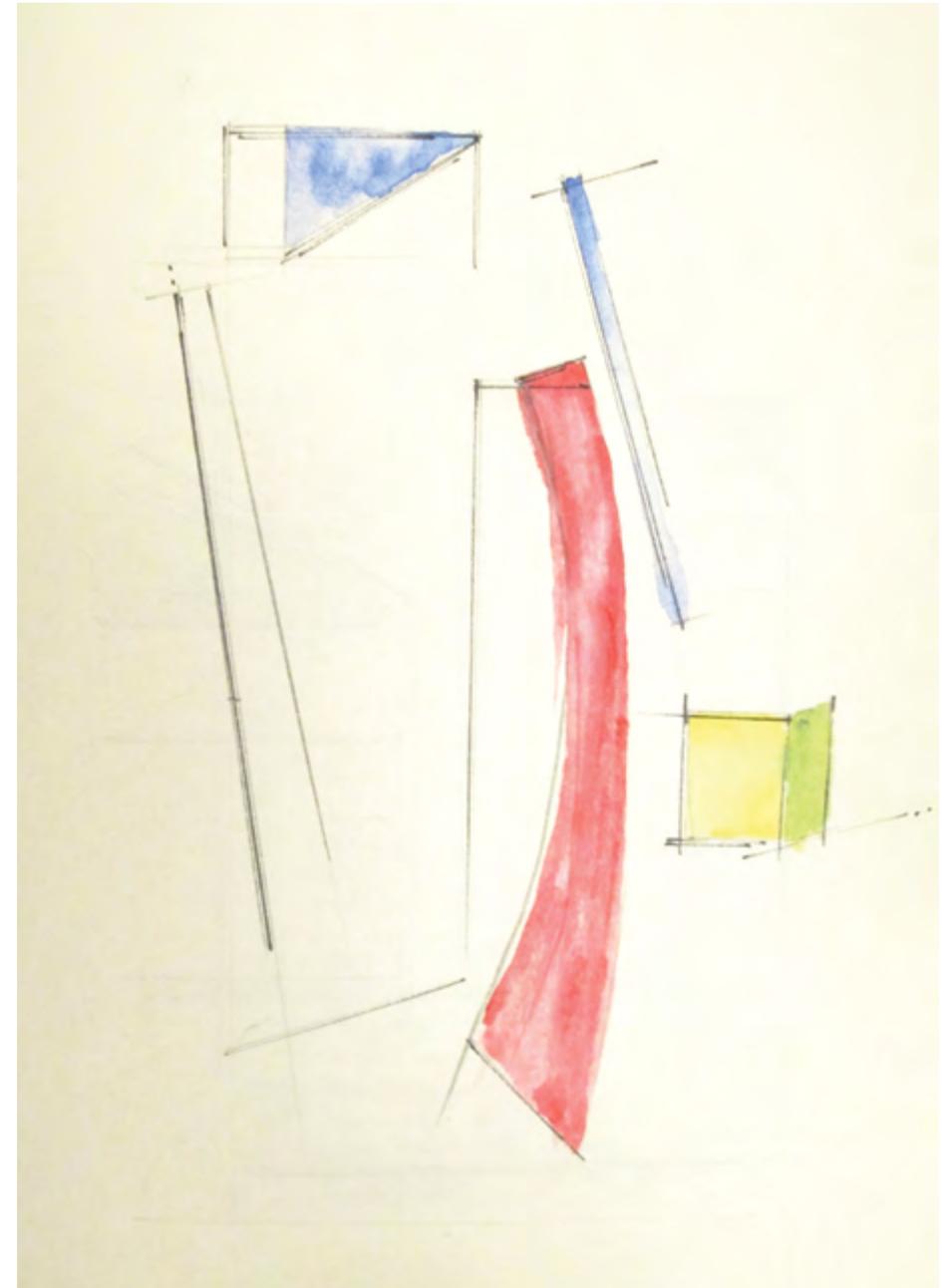
Le Corbusier's architecture conveys strong atmospheres which can be even spiritual. He found his own architectural aesthetic which is recognisable as his work.

Point, line, shape, form, volume. A process by which a drawing, a sculpture or architecture may be created. I have become most interested in a deconstructed or disassembled way of looking at Le Corbusier's work. Rather than seeing his structures as a whole, they become exploded views. The elements pulled apart, the forms, volumes and shapes become separated and we begin to see the architecture as a set of components.

I am most intrigued by what this approach to viewing his architecture will offer up. I can only liken it to when we pull apart a working machine and put it back together. At the end of this process we gain knowledge as to what components the machine is built with, how and why they fit together, and how the machine functions. It is interesting that Le Corbusier constantly refers to architecture as a 'machine' for working and living and that not only his architecture but also his art offers up opportunities for a breaking down of their most

basic elements and components. It is almost impossible to ignore Le Corbusiers scientific and systematic approach to architecture, a prime example of this is the 'Modulor'.

There is a correlation between the title of this work and my area of interest. Formula can be defined as a mathematical relationship or rule expressed in symbols. I am not looking at formula in strict or scientific terms but perhaps formula as a process. I have always been intrigued by the strength of the symbol or graphic language within design and architecture. The graphic language a universal means of communication and a process by which we can design. Can different combinations of components offer up new ways of creating objects or spaces? Do these objects or spaces become devices that can be moulded and rearranged to suit ones own needs?



Le Corbusier – Failed Utopia

Le Corbusier was a visionary architect that understood his time very well and above all, had the courage to plan for the future. He had the ability to recognize contemporary problems of world's cities and focused on finding solutions for the new world. He understood he lived in a time of transition and that people were facing a major change in their lives as soon as the industry was taking over the traditional establishments. The old cities were unfit for the modern man, he thought, and that is why he proposed a complete new way of urbanism, serving and organizing all of the aspects of modern life.

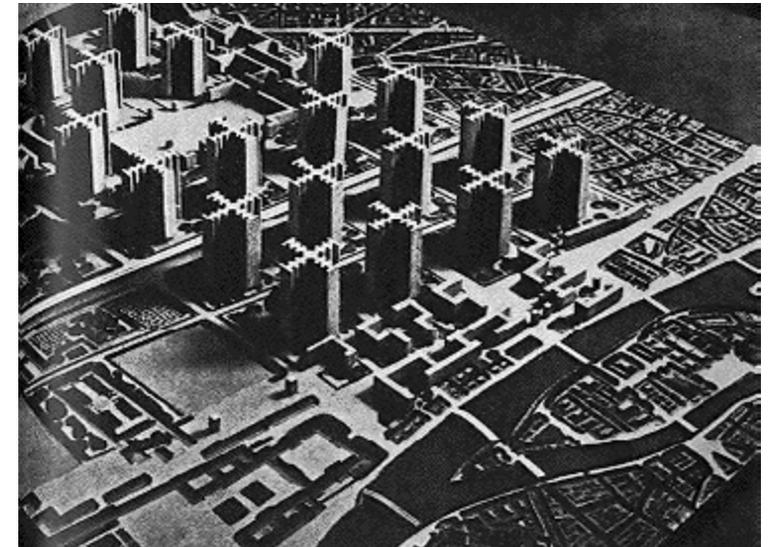
His utopian visions for the new cities are incredibly beautiful and sound completely functional. Although most of his plans were never realized, we can imagine what kind of impact it could have made on

society. Judging from my own experience in Romania, I cannot help associating his grandiose views with the Soviet visions and how it was implemented in the communist city planning. Superficially we can find a lot of correlations between Le Corbusier's ideas and those of the Soviet leaders. They were both looking for a fundamental change in people's lives and how they function in society, and the main tool to achieve this is by combining architecture and urbanism.

Le Corbusier got in touch with the Soviet leaders a couple of times and some of his plans got even realized in the USSR. He thought he found a safe haven within the communistic regime that was supporting his ideals at that moment. The architect was surprised by the approach of the eastern block that wanted to go big and even bigger. But the reasons why the two parties were reaching so high were different. Le Corbusier envisioned a vertical city that could host the fast pace of the modern working man, facilitating his life by traveling

efficiently, shortening the distances in the city center, finally concentrating all activities in a lively compact center surrounded by green spaces. However, on the other side, the Soviets were building big because they wanted to impress, but in the same time house as many people as possible in the least amount of space with the cheapest methods. It sounds very practical but in fact it is very inhuman.

“Plan Voisin” for Paris is amazing and terrifying in the same time. Analyzing it in a logical way, it makes total sense and would be the perfect solution to a lot of problems related to city planning. However, it shocked its audience and got a lot of bad critic. People in charge were appalled at the idea of leaving their historical heritage behind and giving place to a completely new city, which was probably more fitted to their current needs. Le Corbusier believed so deeply in his ideas that he couldn't understand this adverse reaction. He confessed he wanted to protect the old city center by



making it part of the suburbs, in a safe quiet area. But in fact it seems that it is not human to want to live in concrete towers when they have the choice to enjoy the culturally charged landscapes of the old towns, even though it may not function all too well.

In my opinion, the cities of Le Corbusier were very well planned. And that was their flaw as well. Every detail was meticulously thought of, every element of the city was designed with a specific purpose, serving particular activities, life functioning under a very strict schedule. I find this alienating, excluding all charm about natural human behaviour and its marks on public and private space. It can only lead people in falling in a tragic routine. And this brings me back to Communistic propaganda and how they wanted to control their masses using this standardized way of building. Every sign of personality was erased, constructing a world of robots, easy to manipulate and obey the dictatorship regime.

I am aware that Le Corbusier was not involved so much in Soviet planning but we can't deny its similarities. Both ideologies sound fascinating in theory, seem to find the easiest and most effective solutions to modern needs, but implemented, it reveals a different, more obscure side, ending in failure.



“The scientist makes the world available, the artist makes it liveable.”

Merleau-Ponty

Le Corbusier’s works and thoughts tend to ally both these functions: the architect shall make the world not only available but liveable as well.

Bringing back together machinery and life is in my view the point of design: it is working on the esthetic experience of a production based on technical constraints.

La villa Savoye impressed me most for its look and its efficiency as a building. It is a hymn to modernity, futuristic in its idea of movement, and however so still, tranquil and confident. Le Corbusier used two important expressions for the building: ‘la machine à habiter’ who reminds of Merleau-Ponty’s intuition on art and science, and ‘la promenade architecturale’. This last expression is vibrant and understandable as one visits the inner spaces: movements are fluent within the space, which, even though its complexity, is one. The villa is a space designed so one feels he is everywhere at the same time. Open spaces, windows, ramps work together so one being

“The scientist makes the world available, the artist makes it liveable.”

Mai-Loan Gaudéz

on the terrasse is as well in the living room, on the solarium and on the ground garden. This global idea of the space means that the structure is composed on the stream of life, the movements of people as a flowing dance.

The main point in Le Corbusier theories, is that industrialisation and other new mechanical means should enable a revolution of forms and esthetic. Technic is serving art and the new poetry of forms allied to the new means and textures is modernity.

Although looking a little bit out of style, Le Corbusier’s building are definitely not for looking, they are designed to be lived in. They are meant for life.

“The scientist makes the world available, the artist makes it liveable.”

Mai-Loan Gaudéz



The Multi-disciplinary

When visiting the Church (Notre Dame du Haut) in Ronchamp I could really see how he was so multidisciplinary and how he could work on so many different scales in the same work.

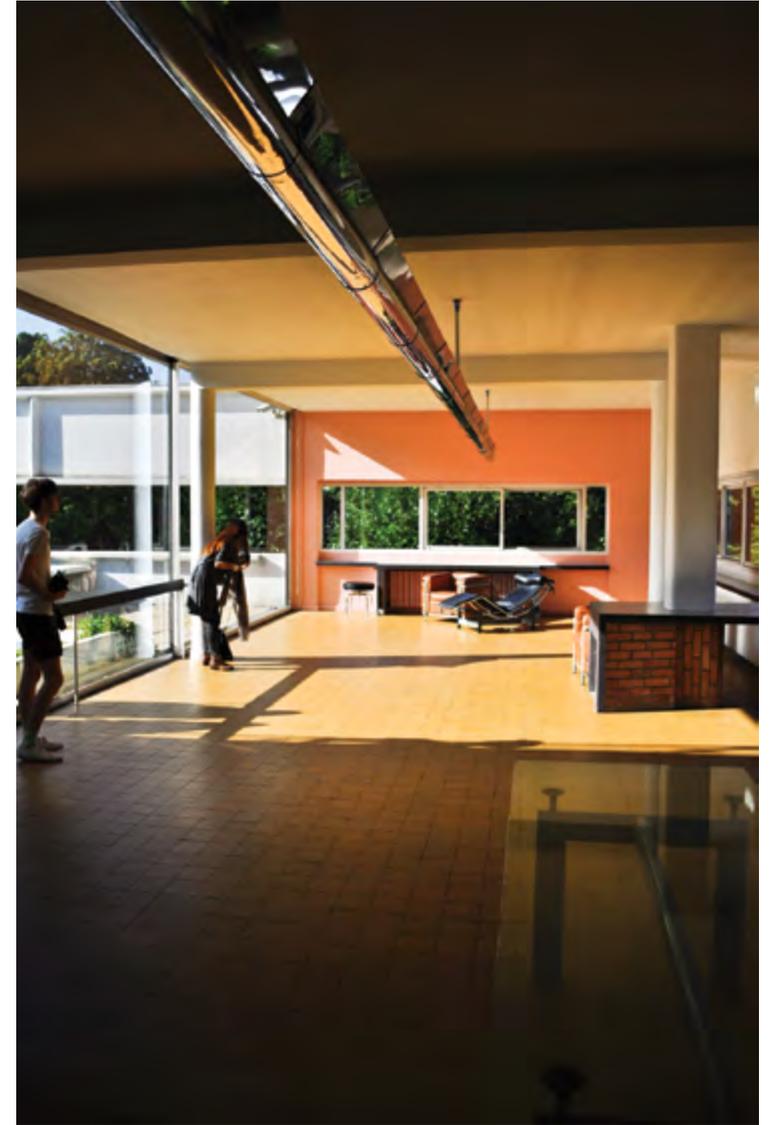
You can walk around in the church and no matter at what spot you stand, it always gives a beautiful perspective. Whether it is a small seam in the concrete wall, or a more open area with a wall with windows. It all shows the amount of detail and sense of different scales and how they work together in the building.

What I liked the most were the shapes of the armrests of the stairs, the prayer-benches and the undescribable kind of leaning/kneeling rest in front of the altar. When you touch those, you know Le Corbusier must have had created prototypes

before to test the experience to see how the shapes feel to touch and to lean against.

One more thing that I really liked in most of his buildings, is the way he used artificial lighting in an indirect way. By having it shine on the ceiling and reflecting back into the room he created a very calm but well-lit area, this is one of the things that annoy me a lot when done wrong. Le Corbusier did it right!

Indirect lighting, is to me, about one of the most functional uses of light. Great to work in, great to dine to, and it gives a calmer impression to the overall room when done right, thus making this way of lighting more human, or more suitable for humans. From personal experience it is clear that coming up with a correct way of using indirect light, is very hard to accomplish.



My Little Eye



I spy with my little eye something ...

The stair skirting that extends in the wall skirting
 The radiator that is standing independent on his feet
 The button of the banister
 The hook that closes the window
 The view through to the other stairwell in Maison La Roche
 The round staircase without steps
 The combination of light switch and door lock
 The mechanism that closes a higher window
 The small door handle with tapered handle and balls
 The tiny oval hinge
 The ceiling light with just one light bulb
 The cistern with a pipe that gracefully goes down along the wall
 The way the ceiling becomes the stairwell
 The stately row of pillars
 The ballet of the stairs in Villa Savoye
 The lock of the door where craftsman placed carefully the screws
 in the same position
 The sink in which each tile has its own function to be all to-
 gether a sink
 The shadow play in the parents room
 The directness with which indirect light was present
 The narrow doors or even if that is tailored
 The simple manner the way a door closes
 The space that is impossible to capture on picture
 The composition of the windows in La Chapelle de Notre Dame du
 Haut
 The building that seems to move
 The structure of the inner walls that keep the light on the place
 The interplay of lines of the windows

Not that one little thing, not one single detail, but the harmony
 that is created in the designs of Le Corbusier.

The harmony that brings all small parts together as a whole.

Your turn...

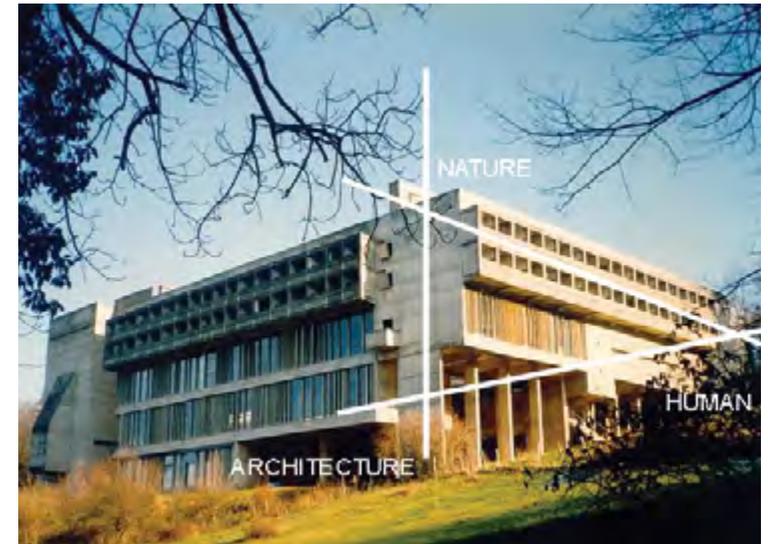


The upper spirit

Contrary to the majority of our department, I grew up in France. I used to live in 'sophisticated sceneries' full of ornamentations, outrageous in my mind. I was tired by the pretentious appearances of my country's glorious past, because unjustified most of the time. But Le Corbusier reconciled me with home.

Through his elaborate minimalism, I felt for the first time in my life, more than the connection, the harmony between human, architecture and nature. Those three dimensions seemed to get more powerful together as they even couldn't work without each other. Although I am an atheist, my piece of mind reaches its top in the convent of La Tourette. It's also one of the first French monuments based on an inverted pyramid because of its integration on a hill, information I found interesting as it reinforces Le Corbusier's game with triangulation.

I not only a question of subtlety, Le Corbusier was a genius in the way to conciliate opposites such as:



- dualities between art and technique
- rule and arbitrary
- geometry and nature
- light and shadow
- individual and common life
- compactness of concrete and glass transparency...

His 'promenade architecturale' let me also realized that architecture is not only a space that people adapt according



to their wishes. People have to take care about their home, as it takes care about them, and change their habits by living with it and not only in it.

As he said in his manifesto Vers une architecture "Architecture is the game, learned, correct and magnificent of volumes under the light (...) to supply in silence, solitude and in front of the sun, to space, to greenery, a lodging house which is the perfect receptacle of a family. Raise in front of God's nature, under the sky and face to sun, a masterful architectural work, shown rigour, greatness, nobility, smile and elegance."

Lina Bo Bardi: architecture and people's empowerment

Lina Bo Bardi (1914-1992) was an Italo-Brazilian architect who as most architects of her generation was very influenced by Le Corbusier's concepts and aesthetics. Lina was interested in the development of spaces built for the people, unfinished spaces that would actually gain meaning in its daily use.

An example of the accomplishment of this idea is the São Paulo Modern Art Museum (MASP), one of her most famous works. Located in the core of this big metropolis, the iconic building is one of the city's landmarks. It was a very modern building for its time (1968) but what interests me the most is the public space underneath. Four concrete red pillars sustain the main



building complex 8 metres high from the ground leaving under it 74 metres of empty space.

The use of pilotis was highly disclosed by Le Corbusier years before and I believe that his ideal of land, people and building working together optimally becomes reality in this “empty space”. Along the years it has become a place for the city's citizens encounter, even the ones that never entered the museum itself. It has been

the shelter and starting point of many different manifestations: political, cultural etc.

I, myself, many times used it as a meeting point with friends and ended up staying there because something interesting and unexpected was taking place.

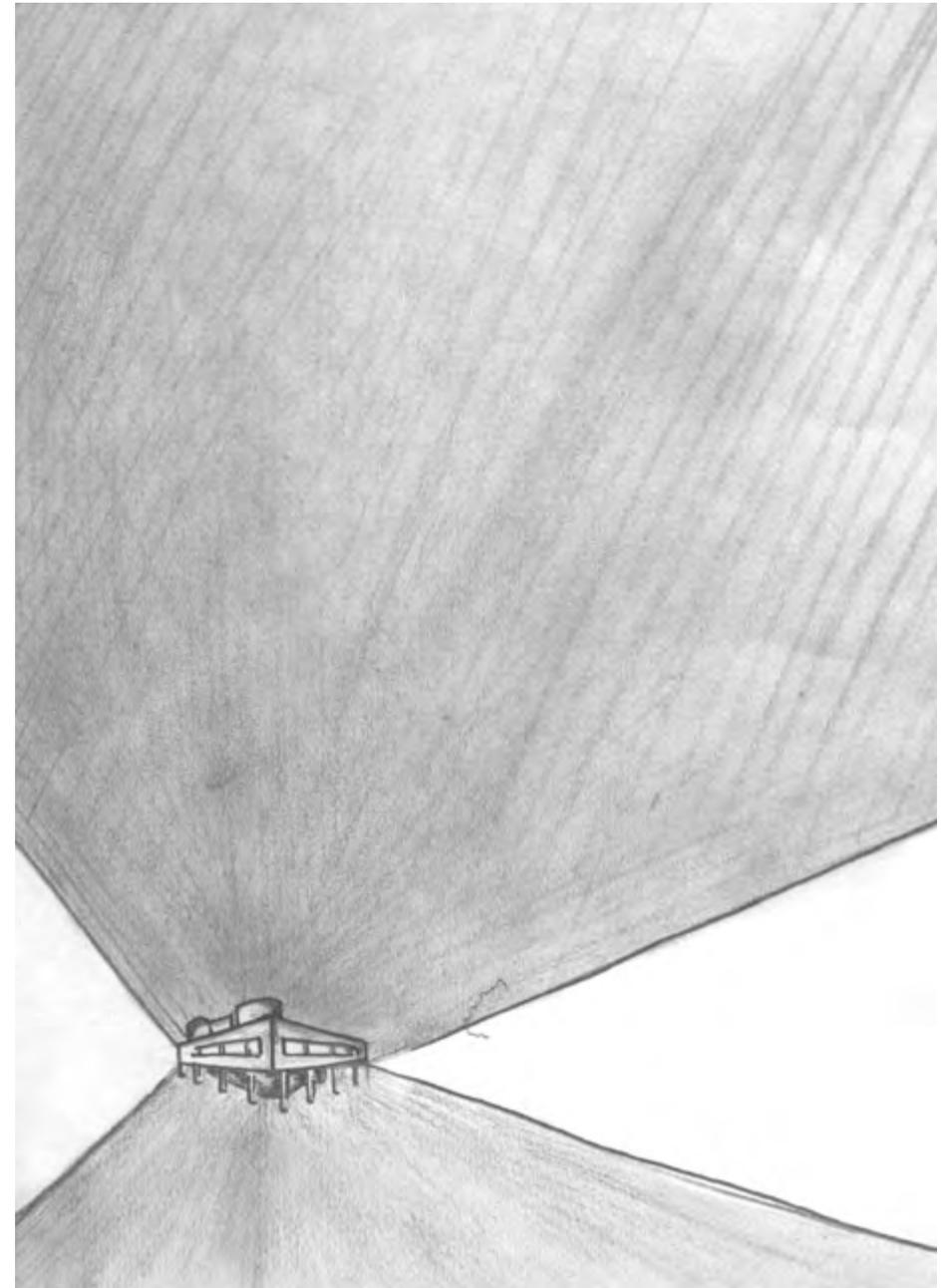
It amuses me so much because many architecture projects intend to gather people together but fail it. I asked myself: what are the elements there that make it so welcoming while other pilotis areas are just passageways. Is it the location? The dimensions? What in its design makes São Paulo citizens actually feel it belongs to them, even though the museum above is private?

I think the answer lies in the fact that this void is so free in the possible ways of using it. It is being used so intensely that it became a place on itself; it is a space with a very powerful identity.



The space around

The most beautiful about Le Corbusiers work, especially Villa Savoye, is the peace and quietness it emits. It is a result of the combination of surrounding space and the building itself. Villa Savoye reminded me when I studied it in a book, of a spaceship, landed on an uninhabited but well maintained planet. Standing at the field near the villa, it seems to be stretching out for kilometers. The harmony of the field and building gets you the delusion of a dream world where nothing else exists. I think it was Le Corbusiers goal to let the building become one with the surrounding space by means of his 5 points of architecture. The piloti, thin pillars to raise the mass above the ground, so the surrounding nature wouldn't be intermittent. Horizontal windows, preferably over the whole length of the wall, to be continuously in contact with nature. Flat roofs for gardens bring nature to the building. The exterior doesn't consist of bearing walls: they can become thinner and give a more airy feeling to it. And last the



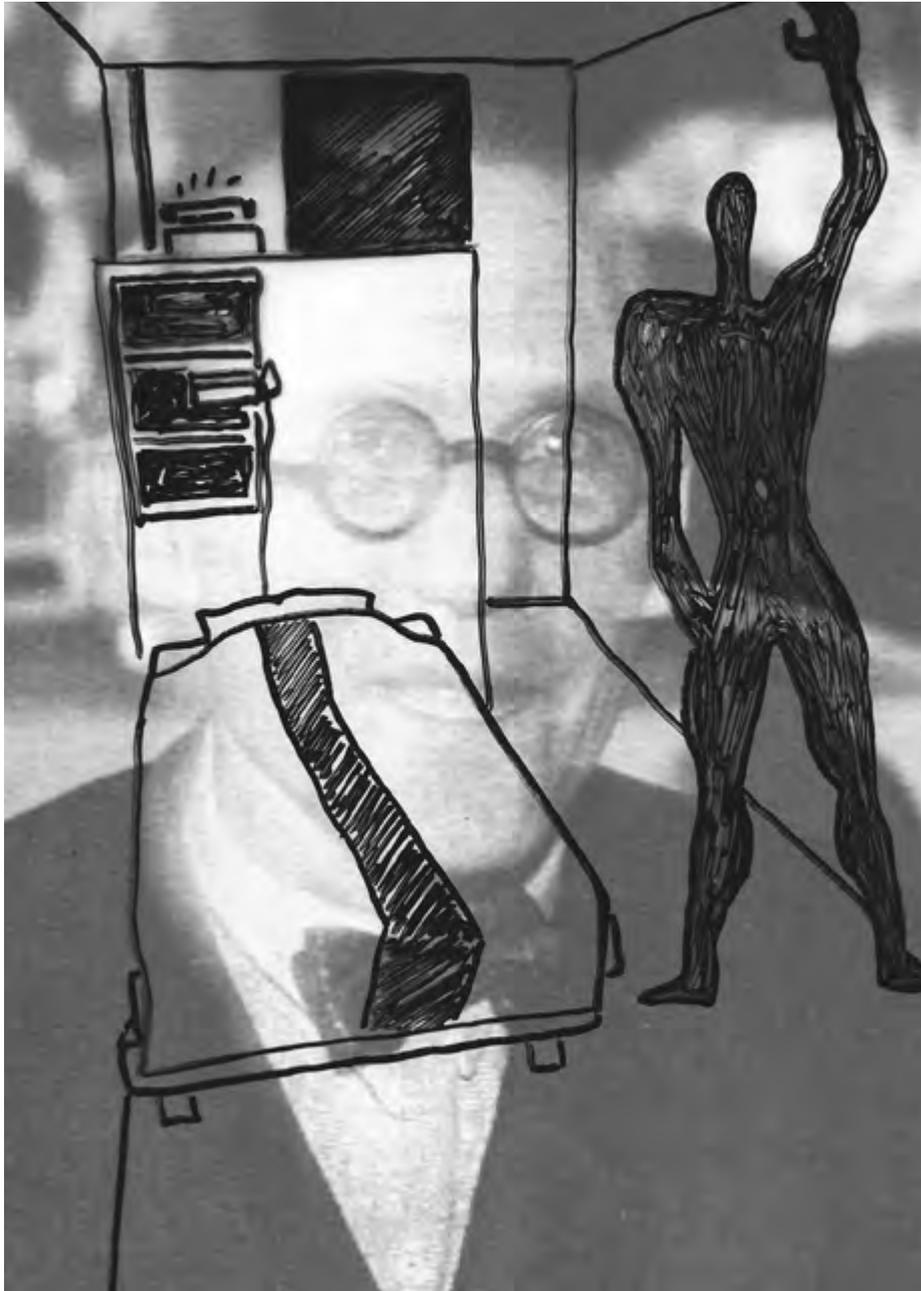
floor plan is designed freely because the inner walls are also not bearing, so light gets free game. The whole house is designed for the surrounding nature.

Arriving at Villa Savoye, the house happened to be situated in a suburb. The villa was built in by all these grey social housing blocks from the seventies. The dream world I used to be in, looking at it in a book was scattered. The field around it was so small. Le Corbusier's work and like every other work, building or sculpture deserves the space to breathe. The space around a work is just as important as the object itself. Villa Savoye will always be beautiful from far but also not far from beautiful when you look closer.

Does the perfect harmony exist?

When I started to research the Modulor of Le Corbusier, I was reading a lot about Le Corbusier's thoughts; that architecture is very often not related to the human body anymore. He wanted to solve this problem with the Modulor. I do agree with him that architecture has very often been growing totally out of proportions and that because of this people are not in balance anymore with the place they live, work or study in. I was very interested in the way Le Corbusier had set these design rules to create the perfect harmony between people and a building. But the more I learned about it, the more I started to think that Le Corbusier was a bit lost in his own search for a working-tool to find the perfect harmony.

We went to France to visit his buildings. I thought I would feel connected to the buildings or at least that the spaces



would feel comfortable. But I experienced the opposite... To me the spaces were cold and chilly, I often got the feeling of being watched or locked up. I didn't feel comfortable at all. This was my experience, but for other people it was totally different and very positive.

This is what fascinates me. It is very important to create objects, buildings or spaces that relate to the human size so it would connect to people and influence the way we feel. But this is something we cannot generalize. The perfect harmony is different for every individual person and it should be like that. Otherwise we would all live in exactly the same house and all the buildings around us would look the same. I see it as a gift that everyone has his own preferences. And I love to work with those differences!

Ronchamp, Le Corbusier

As I climb to get to that strange looking church, the building did not fit with the image I had of the churches I had visited before: no big building, no crosses everywhere, no glory of Christ. Instead, I felt curious to see the inside of this church, of this shell that made me feel so welcome and intrigued to walk in. As I walked in, serenity and peace washed over me, I was swept with the feeling of religion and safety. It was a place where I could sit and wish. The simple yet open space shocked me and invited me all at once in one harmony.

The difference of light and dark inside the church has a very dramatic effect on the space, it gave me the feeling of going from night to day, a sense of enlightenment which is a big part of religion where people go from being in the dark to the light where god is and all is good.



This sense is what made this space so spiritual, the only place I felt like just sitting and having a “chat” with my god and reflect on my life, the space gave a peace of mind that allowed me to feel free to have those “godly thoughts”. As a strong non-believer god does not come so often in my mind. As I walked around I saw how the playfulness of shadows, that Le Corbusier designed to specify the space, helped to name it. It gives people a mental map of where to go, to sit and pray.

After having all those experiences inside, I walked outside where the panorama view gave me new air in my lungs. I was ready to make a fresh start. IS THIS WHAT YOU MEAN? I walked to the pyramid, at the border of the terrain. I climbed to look at this strange building in a shape of a shell and examined it: how the looks were so different from inside and outside, how the harmony makes you feel enlightened from the inside and afterwards, going out and having a fresh start.

As I was standing there, I could only think of my wish and pray for myself to be able to follow my dreams. I thank you to having reminded me how to wish.



Light and Spirit

The opposition of light and dark was of profound importance to Le Corbusier's life and work.

The track of the movements of the sun from above and below, the use of light and dark to create modules and the game of light and shadow to reveal forms of subjects are some of Le Corbusier's ways to express the space.

One other aspect that inspires me is Le Corbusier's use of both direct and spread light inside a space to evoke a sense of spirituality. I believe that the spaces we visit should lift and connect us with our own spirit, experience it with our inner-self and share it with each-other. Small details of natural light can create deep meanings, strong shapes and spiritual experiences.

In The Chapel of "La Tourette" and as well in the Church of "Saint-Pierre" Le Corbusier has used pointed and spread light to reveal the important spiritual elements of these religious spaces. The light cones from above that shine and spread



upon the preacher's praying tables, small light holes in the wall behind the choir which look like shining stars, horizontal hatches shine and color the prayer benches, the church's door entry intersecting with the horizontal hatch from behind creates the shape of a cross, the large window in the preachers' dressing room resembles a transition to the sacred experience of praying.

All this made me wonder, did Le Corbusier try to inspire people to get

more attached with their spirit through his use of natural light? I found in one of his texts he says, 'use the blessings of God, the sun and the spirit that he has given to men to' enable them to achieve the joy to living on earth.

I am not a religious person. and in a way I don't think Le Corbusier was either. But I can feel his connection to spirituality through his use of light and symbols. I can sense his approach to the space and the experience of it, I am moved by his work.

Ideology

Le Corbusier not only is an architect but also a writer, a painter and an urban planner. You can see that clearly from his buildings as they are designed to emerge into the surroundings. Le Corbusier was a man with ideologies; he was up to changing the world. Although that sounds unrealistic, he wanted to try at least. I admire that he faced his ideologies and confronted people around him with these thoughts. I find it hard to tell people how I see the world and what I think that should change. Because many people around me just accept the way they live while I think there still can be a lot improved.

In his Plan Voisin, Le Corbusier thought that if you collect all the houses and facilities in to one building there would be more space left for green. This combination provides the well-being of the users and it creates a communal live, he thought. In my opinion a dared thought to realise. Because it is a huge project and the only way to get to know if the ideas of Le Corbusier would



work, is by building it. He was convinced and he was driven to convince others as well.

At the end of the Second World War he was asked to build his researches into reality. He built the Unité d'Habitation, a building that contained everything like a small city. It was a utopian thought. And I still cannot understand how it was in that time. How it was for the citizens of Marseille to perceive this ultra-modern building, built out of concrete, combined with fresh colours. Visiting the Unité d'Habitation in Firminy, the idea still didn't feel outdated for me. Only little details like the light switches revealed that the building was not built recently. It felt timeless and thoughtful.

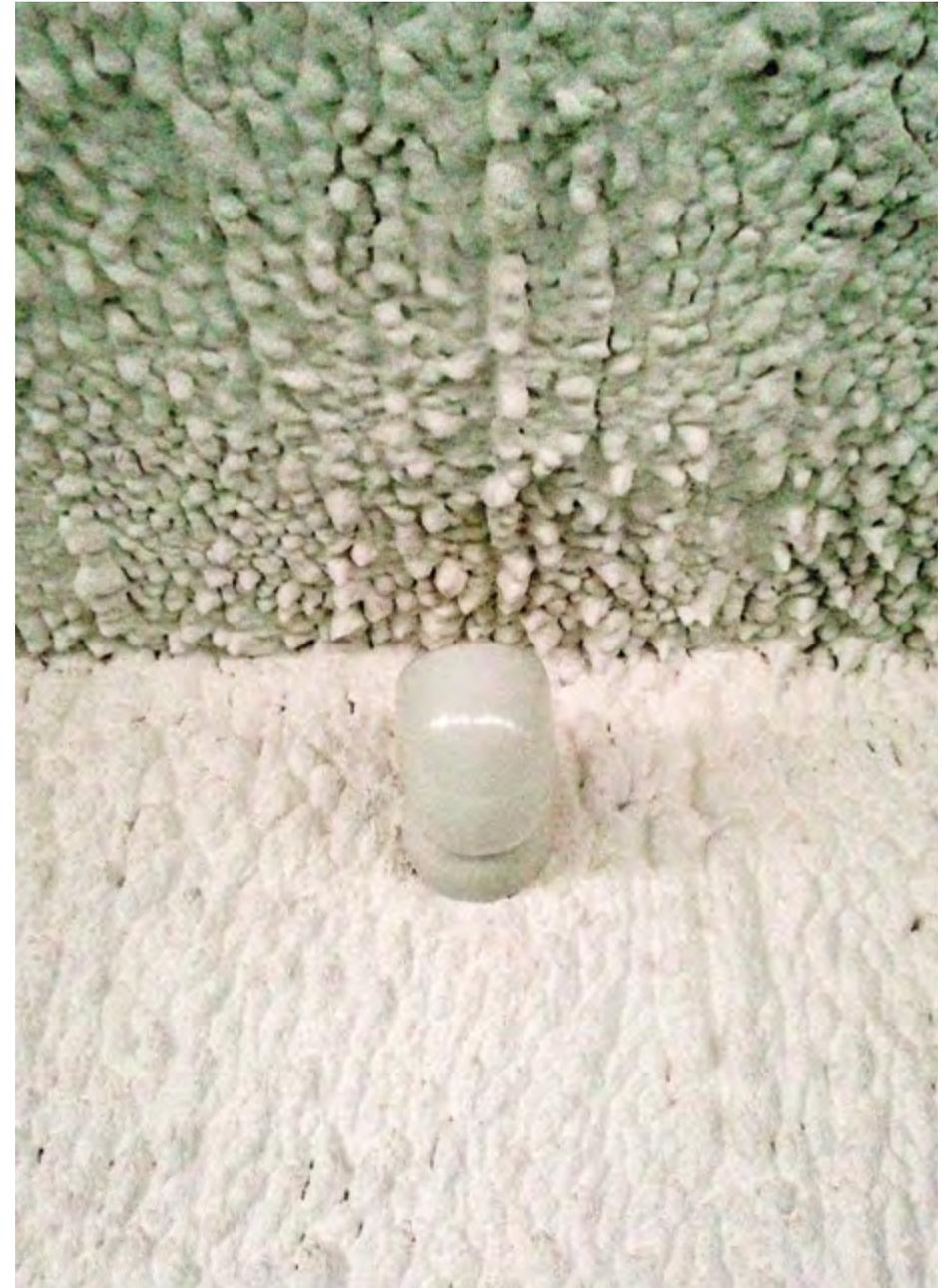
Le Corbusier knew how to convince people about his ideas, and he could face his thoughts. A quality I like to improve.

Me, Tadao Ando, and Le Corbusier

When I was in Taiwan, I know nothing about Le Corbusier but just his famous chair--LC1. And I happened to find out that one of my favorite Japanese architect Tadao Ando was deeply influenced by him, especially by the chapel at Ronchamp. He wrote down this incredible feeling in his book, *安藤忠雄の都市彷徨* (ISBN 957-0406-60-7). But when I got there, I did not experience the astonishing light nor the magical atmosphere.

I was expecting to see light dancing around the chapel and people would be surrounded by these beautiful beams. Though the building was in the vanguard of the time, it did not touch my heart. Maybe it was not the right time to visit it, I told myself.

I have had visited two of Ando's works in Japan. The one at Tokyo is Omotesando Hills. Like Le Corbusier, Ando uses



All in one

a massive concrete(exposed concrete) in his design, let alone decorated and also plays the game of light.

Even the main material is the same, the feeling is totally different. What I feel about Le Corbusier 's works is unconstrained and rough by the images of those strong colors(blue, red, yellow, green) and the concrete façades often being sandblasted to create a a stone-like surface. The one impressed me very much is the room where I stayed for one night in the convent of La Tourette, the walls are white, the floor is green and there is a wooden window with red curtain. Once when I drew the curtain, it was so dark. Without the sense of vision, I felt like I was living in the cave because of the rough

It was great to get an insight in the work of one person during one week. Le Corbusier managed to communicate his vision with the public without needing to say a word. He let his work speak for itself. So I thought it was bit of a pity to already know about his 'Cinq points de l'architecture moderne' before we could have looked for them ourselves.

When walking through his work, his aims spoke to me in such a clear way, I could have guessed for it. In 'La Tourette' Le Corbusier used materials and colors to indicate the different functions of the building. I believe it's not necessary to show the public how every piece of the architecture has a function and what that function is, but it's great to see how every piece is really part of the total work.

Le Corbusier thought of every little detail. In my own work, I always aim to make things as simple and clear as possible, but that it will still function. I noticed Le Corbusier must have thought almost the

same in the two examples I'm showing in the pictures. In both situations it is one object but with more functions. You can see he really thought of how to make low cost, but high quality work.

I think by setting up some 'rules' for yourself and by strictly following those, you'll stay close to yourself in every situation. It's a method to not lose yourself in a project and always having a point to refer to.





The sun is the oil that makes the machine do its job

For his urban plans as well as his buildings, sunlight was carefully exploited. Sometimes it felt that every space was dedicated to it. He was able to control sunlight, because he understood how it could appear under certain circumstances. Materials and sculptural forms were of major importance to lead sunlight through space.

With this in mind I'd rather see his buildings as a narrative, that leads you from the entrance until the roof and back. Transitions between spaces are in balance, and therefore a harmony between spaces is necessary. Those poetic circumstances are definitely mechanisms to create an environment that enforces creativity.

For my own practice, I am aware of the fact that a lot of my choices are purely aesthetic responses. In moments of doubt, I just do what I find beautiful.

That has been very helpful, but I need to ask myself more often what the space and user actually needs. Aesthetics is not an add-on, but something that already lies in rational choices.

A minimal approach makes maximum effects. To create a space, you build up with one or some details. A dialogue between function and form is always present. Therefore it is striking to see how aesthetic experiences can be so present within a rational way of looking at architecture (for example: adapting the five points of architecture, clearly visible in Villa Savoye).

I can honestly tell that it is a big consolation to see how arts and architecture can be intertwined with each other. He shows us that architecture should involve poetics which we find in the arts, music and nature. Architecture is not just about four walls and a roof; rather about making environments, whose can only be experienced by walking through them.

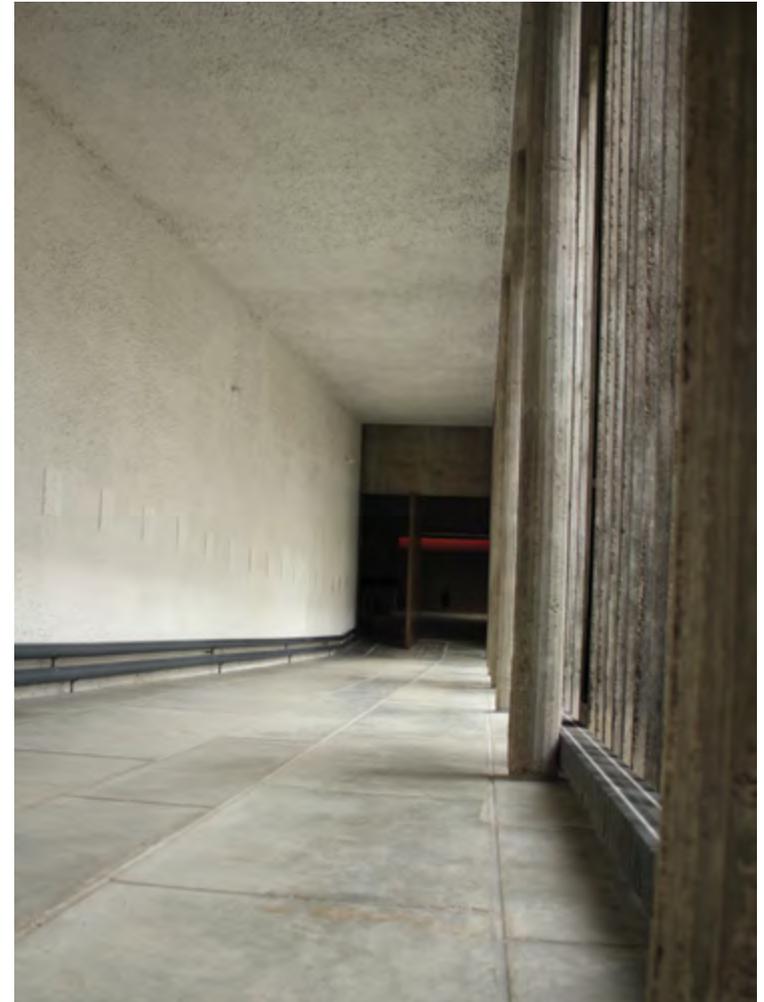
The sun is the oil that makes
the machine do its job

Stefan Voets



The sun is the oil that makes
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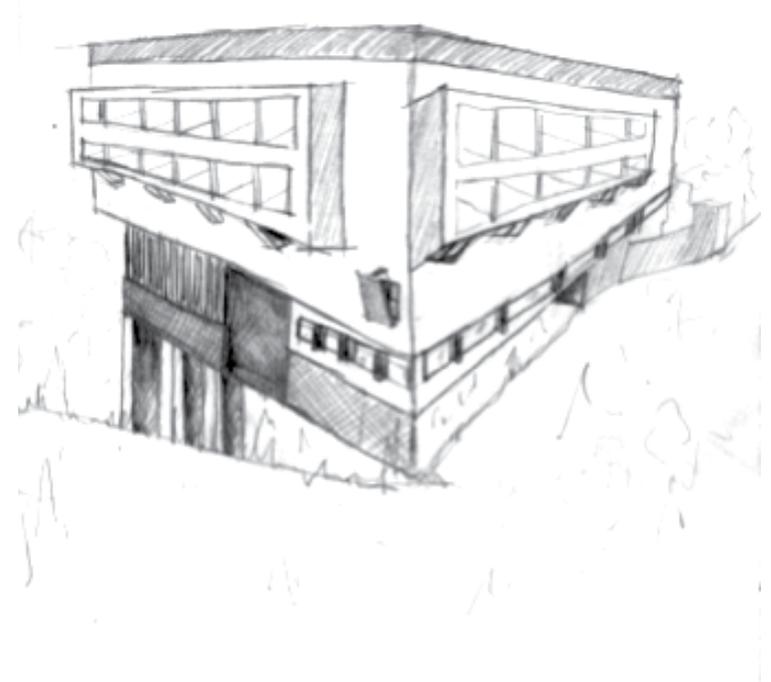


Dominican Monastery

During our trip to France we were exposed to several buildings built by (in) famous architect, Le Corbusier. The building I have chosen to write about is the Dominican Monastery in La Tourette.

To me this monastery wasn't this solidly-built thing which sets out to defy time and decay, and which is an expensive luxury by which wealth can be shown; it was to be a tool as the car is becoming a tool. Built to function in its surrounding environment and to serve the specific needs of the monks living there on a long term basis.

Architecture should use those elements which are capable of affecting our senses, haptic perception, and of rewarding the desire of our eyes, and should orient them in such a way that the sight of them affects us immediately by their delicacy or their brutality. I found that the monas-



tery was to no extent just an archaic entity, heavily rooted in the soil by deep foundations, but a structure built solidly and in an imposing manner, reflecting a chosen way of living and at the same time expelling invitations to people passing by to enter.

Le Corbusier was also quite successful in my opinion in instigating these two parallels.

The monastery exhibited both tension and compression, stimulating the

Framing

senses with a feeling of openness and density, allowing the visitor to question his/her awareness of architecture and surroundings.

To conclude, Le Corbusier conveys that the elements of the site itself come into play by virtue of their cubic volume, their density and the quality of the material of which they are composed, bringing sensations which are very definite and very varied. And from this, we get a possible definition of harmony, that is to say, a moment of accord. And where is a better place to feel this 'moment' than in a monastery built for such ententes?

“The necessary corollary of the partition, or the plane, is the gap –another type of frame. The strategic use of the gap is absolutely characteristic of Le Corbusier’s approach to detail. He always built gaps into his work where otherwise a less than happy joint would have occurred... Perhaps his favorite trick was the use of the shadow gap, used primarily at the junction between exterior walls and floors, eliminating the need for skirting in the process.”¹

The idea of Le Corbusier is framing living, framing every function. Every frame focusing our attention on the details outlines them. Le Corbusier would always make a feature of a detail rather than hide it away.

Each element is like a picture. When the room openings, joints details are framed creates a sense of completion of the composition. There are many techniques to underline structure and forms such as gaps, shadows, stripe of paint, and throughs in the concrete around the perimeter. When I started sketching, I did not notice the



through in the concrete, and I sometimes had to sketch again the detail to understand not only the joining of the elements but also the articulation joint gutters elements.

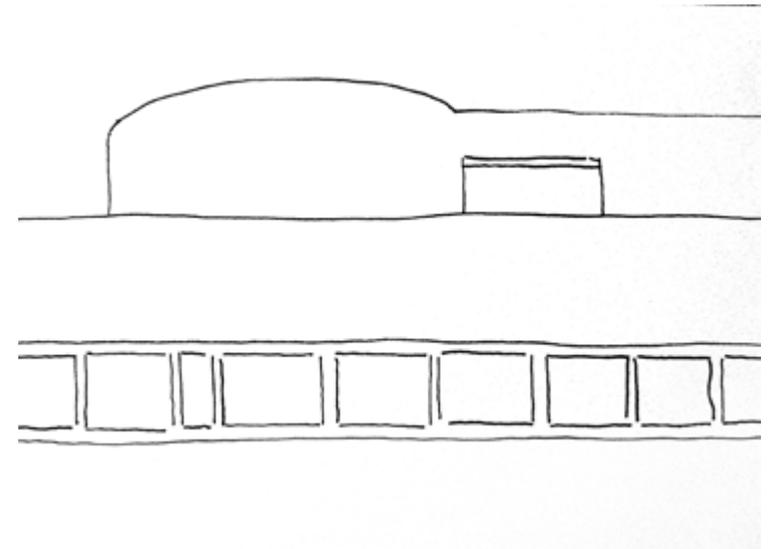
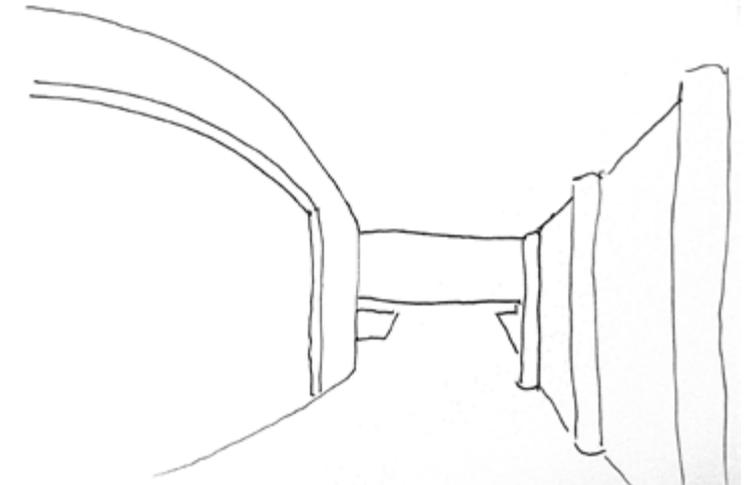
The buildings of Le Corbusier, is not limited to the walls. It's amazing to notice the details of the building covered the ground with concrete panels. The doormat at the front door is framed by a concrete. I was thinking about that each building has a doormat we step on them every day, but I have never used it like a part of the building like the first element in the building which you touch. The doormats are a smooth transition between outdoor and indoor space in Villa La Roche and Villa Savoye.

¹ Le Corbusier In Detail, Flora Samuel, 2007

Concrete matters

It has something poetic, concrete. It is manmade but it has the pureness of a natural material. The smooth but then again rough texture of the surface. And the cold rock-like feeling when you touch it. It has the smell of ancient times. And of course the weight of it, you can almost feel it without touching. It is the anchor to the ground for itself and many others. The process of making is relatively simple. The three elements, water, rock and lime (as the Romans used it) come together to form a pourable material that after hardening can carry the weight of a mountain.

And then the most beautiful building I've ever seen, Le Corbusiers church in Firminy, France. Only finished in 2006. From the outside the building seems to be sculpted out of concrete. It doesn't look like a building, especially if you don't know its purpose. The concrete elements form a structure that has the looks of a solid futuristic sculpture. Inside the building the space that he created is astonishing.



You can hardly understand it's the same building you've seen on the outside. It almost seems to be double the size. The air feels fresh and it smells like you're inside a cave. The building seems to be sealed off from the outside, but the amount of light let in is so subtle the building seems to be somewhat floating in the air and the whole space becomes a poem itself.

And so, concrete, the material that so many only see as a cold, grey, heavy and thus an unpleasant, boring and ugly material, can become anything you wish it could be, and even more. Concrete and sunlight, the only ingredients you need for a five star dinner. If the chef's called Le Corbusier that is...



To perceive

When coming through the foliage catching a glimpse of the Convent Sainte Marie de La Tourette I had a special sensation in my stomach. A feeling I can't really determine but that appeals to me and my way of working.

When seeing the building I wonder "is it really there"; like something otherworldly it's situated on the hillside in the outskirts of a wooden grove far off from any bigger city. It's like a sculpture or an exentric creature that for me encloses and radiates an arcane yet serene ambience. When entering the gate at the convent in La Tourette you face another world with a completely different atmosphere. To walk through Le Corbusiers architecture is to be told a story, a relationship is established between different architectural and artistic elements creating a "poetry" that mediates an atmosphere.

In my work what makes an atmosphere in a place is what I'm in search of. Not necessarily decide on what the actual elements are that make a certain atmosphere,

but working intuitively with ambiances and trying to apply it into the work. The art lies in being able to translate what you sense into something visual/physical and to communicate it.

Le Corbusier said "the spirit of architecture finds itself raised by a higher intention than that of simply serving and tends to manifest the poetic powers that animate us and give us joy."

I believe because Le Corbusier was also a sculptor and artist, he had a profound way of constructing a building not only considering the technical and functional aspects but also what kind of feeling the building should convey. This is something that makes him an accomplished creator still current today.



Nature, Peace of Mind and Progress in Life

The three elements, nature, peace of mind and progress in life, can be combined to form a perfect formula that can be the foundation for a better quality of life. I believe that the first element, Nature, encompasses elements such as water, wind, trees and the sun, which give us health and happiness.

The second element, Peace of mind, is one of our main goals that we try to achieve in life, and we all pursue it in different ways. It helps us improve our life quality. And it gives us energy to continue.

The third element, Progress, can't be achieved without the other two. From time to time we all need a vacation, a break and a hug. A healthy spirit enables us to continue our journey towards our goals and dreams.

In Le Corbusier's work Villa Savoye, the interaction of the house with nature



can be clearly observed. This is achieved through the five points of architecture. For example the Pilotis allow nature to blend with the building. The roof gardens blend with Nature, lend respect to nature, and compensate for the lack of green space. The horizontal windows bring nature into the house with welcoming arms.

Le Corbusier succeeded, in my opinion, to bring Peace of mind to the residents of Villa Savoye. By using a minimalist and efficient arrangement of space,

Corbusier gives his residents almost a monastic experience which influences the state of being. He accomplishes this through a lack of ornamentation, an awakening of the imagination and letting the mind become silent.

Le Corbusier created a new and revolutionary approach to architecture. 'The Machine for Living' was based on 'The Five Points', which he incorporated in many of his buildings. It made a significant change in people's quality of life and gave the residents new opportunities to live in harmony with each other and with 'Nature' as well. In his sketches and drawings Le Corbusier focus on the human - he cared about interaction between people, family life and he always had a close relationship with the clients and their needs. Although Le Corbusier called it 'The Machine for Living', it was by far the most human machine ever built.



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Colophon

Insight Series #6

(Re)Thinking - Le Corbusier

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