

william j. r. curtis

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William J.R. Curtis

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the
image
and
idea of
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at
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To make a plan is to determine and fix ideas. It is to have had ideas. It is so to order these ideas that they become intelligible, capable of execution and communicable. ... A plan is to some extent a summary like an analytical contents table. In a form so condensed that it seems as clear as crystal and like a geometrical figure, it contains an enormous quantity of ideas and the impulse of an intention.

Le Corbusier, 1923

The last chapter examined the validity of the notion of the 'International Style' and found it strong in some respects, weak in others. It seems that the early apologists of modern architecture were over-preoccupied with defining a generalized historical identity for the style and were not sufficiently attentive to individual and personal intentions. There *was* a broadly shared language of expression in the 1920s in certain countries of Western Europe and parts of the Soviet Union and the United States, but this possessed deeper complexities than defined by the lexicon and supplied a transitional phase for most of the architects involved. Moreover, it was only one of a number of visual options, and the most interesting works conceived within it were so individual as to remain virtually uncategorizable.

Beyond even the personal language of the artist there is another level which has to be grasped if the inner meaning of a new tradition is to be understood. This lies in the special intellectual chemistry of the individual work of a high order. Here one is interested in the unique site, context and intentions, as well as the artist's usual themes and vocabulary; in the expression of a particular social vision in resonant forms, as well as the pervasive mood of the times. In this case the Villa Savoye at Poissy of 1928–31 by Le Corbusier has been singled out for monographic scrutiny. For, like the Barcelona Pavilion, this building 'contains an enormous quantity of ideas', embodies a myth of modern life, and contains echoes of the past. To probe into its underlying meanings is to penetrate still further Le Corbusier's patterns of imaginative thinking in early maturity.

Architecture works with four dimensions, not just three. By nature it is involved with time and change. The form of a building is understood gradually as one moves through it, comparing scenographic incidents, and fitting them into a growing sense of the whole. The same building varies with weather and light, as silhouette, shape, or depth are accentuated. Movement and change lie near the heart of the Villa Savoye's conception. A description of the building is best conducted as a promenade.

The Villa Savoye (also known by the evocative name Les Heures Claires) stands some twenty miles (30 kilometres) north-west of Paris on the outskirts



335 Le Corbusier, Villa Savoye, Poissy, 1928–31, view from south-west

336 Villa Savoye, axonometric sketch showing relationship of roof terrace to sun and the processional character of the automobile approach

337 Villa Savoye, entrance

of the small town of Poissy; the site is bordered by trees on three sides, yet has a long view towards the softly rolling fields and valleys of the Île de France beyond the fourth. Perhaps one arrives by car, in which case one leaves the road and passes by a small, white, cubic gate-lodge guarding the entrance to the drive. The gravel way turns slowly into the trees, its destination mysterious. Then one catches the first view of the villa standing fifty yards away towards the centre of an open meadow.

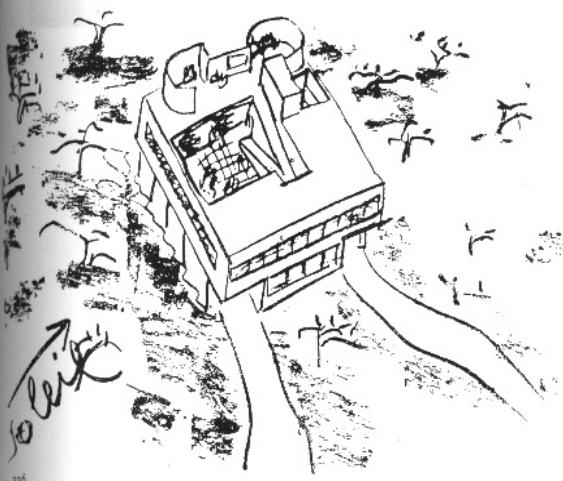
The first impression is of a horizontal white box, poised on *pilotis*, set off against the rural surroundings, the far panorama and the sky. The driveway passes through the undercroft, whose walls are deep green, circles the building beneath the overhang, and re-emerges to return to the road on the other side. The main first-level box is surmounted by curved volumes (once painted in vivid colours) just visible to the rear. Bit by bit one gathers that the villa is not as detached as it first appears. It is sculpted and hollowed to allow the surroundings to enter it, and its formal energies radiate to the borders of the site and to the distant horizon.

The main 'façade' is somewhat blank and forbidding and gives the impression (later to be disproved) of a completely symmetrical building,

rooted to the ground in its middle part. The strong horizontal emphasis is supplied by the overall shape, the single strip window running from one end to the other of the (main) upper level, and the repeated horizontals of the factory glazing at the lower level (hiding the mundane functions of servants' and chauffeur's quarters). The predominant verticals at this stage are the ranks of cylindrical *pilotis* receding on each side behind the suggested façade plane; they supply an airy sense of lightness and are placed so that the box above appears to hover.

The approach to the building has a curious quality of ceremony, as if one were being drawn without choice into some Corbusian machine-age ritual. The car passes beneath the overhang as a forceful reminder of a guiding point of the artist's doctrine. The entrance is found at the apex of a curve formed by the glazed lower level. A chauffeur is assumed, and as one is put down on the main axis, the car continues to follow the curve, then to slide in diagonally beneath the rectangular superstructure.

One passes through the main doors into the vestibule, a space defined by curved glass surfaces to either side. The main choices are clear. A ramp rises straight ahead along the main axis of the building to the upper levels. To the left is a spiral stair linking the servants' zone to the world above. Ahead and



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slightly to the left a washbasin stands mysteriously on its own in the hall leading to the chauffeur's quarters. The surfaces all around are brittle and smooth, the atmosphere clinical. The space is set about with the pure forms of cylindrical *pilotis*. Those near the door are grouped to form a sort of portico and – a subtle touch – one of them is made square in plan to correspond to the corner of an interior wall flanking the other side of the base of the ramp. Another refined detail catches the eye: the small white tiles in the floor are laid out on the diagonal, and effect a subtle link between the various curves and rectangles of the building.

The ramp is the very spine of the idea: in plan it stands on the axis and passes between the grid of *pilotis* (not so regularly spaced as one might at first

imagine); in section it suggests a dynamic passage through the horizontal floor slabs, bringing with it a gradual expansion of space the higher one goes. The plan of the Villa Savoye is nearly square, one of the ideal shapes which the architect so admired, and part of the richness of the building comes from the dynamics of curved forms within a stable perimeter. The ramp guides the '*promenade architecturale*' and links the various events; in turn it supplies an ennobling character to the ascent.

After turning back on its original direction, the ramp emerges on the first floor, the main living-level of the house (as at Garches, a *piano nobile*), where the most formal and public spaces are situated. They stand around the roof terrace, a sort of outdoor room concealed from the exterior by a uniform strip

338 Le Corbusier, Villa Savoye, Poissy, 1928–31, view on first floor looking towards roof terrace

339 Villa Savoye, view from roof terrace to salon and ramp rising to solarium



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window without glass. This catches the sun at all times of the day (it faces in a southerly direction) and helps to fill the house with light. The biggest room is the salon, with a large expanse of glazing giving straight on to the terrace and a strip window facing the best view – that of the distant hills, to the north-west. To the other two sides of the roof terrace are the more ‘private’ areas: the kitchen (in the corner) with its own tiny terrace; the guest bedroom; Madame Savoye’s bedroom, boudoir and bathroom; and her sons’ bedroom and bathroom. The Villa Savoye was not an all-the-year home, but a country retreat or summer weekend residence – a villa in an old tradition, where the well-to-do might retire and enjoy the greenery and fresh air of the countryside. Among other curiosities on the main

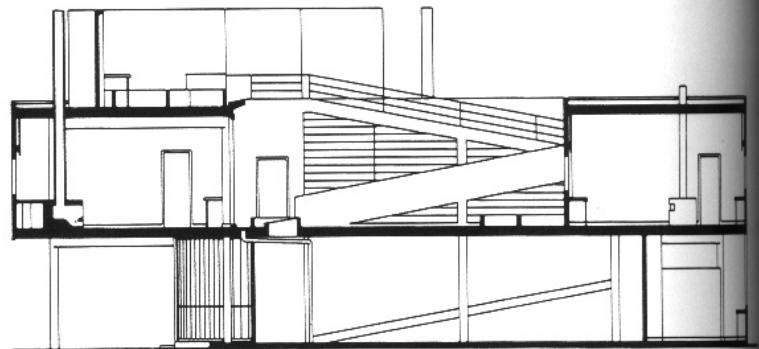
level are the fireplace in the salon expressed as a free-standing stack, and a blue-tiled reclining seat next to the main bathroom, suggesting something of both Madame Savoye’s and Le Corbusier’s obsessive interest in cleanliness and athleticism.

The interrelated themes of health, fresh air, sunlight and intellectual clarity are reinforced as one continues up the ramp to the topmost level, again making a return at a middle-level landing. The floor of the ramp is finished in paving laid on the diagonal to reinforce the sense of movement, in contrast to the orthogonal details of analogous flagstones on the main terrace. It is in these upper regions that the artist’s nautical fantasies are felt most vividly, especially in the delicate tubular ‘ship’s’ railings and the curious stack containing the top of the spiral

stair. This is a relative of other cylinders in the composition; the spiral stair can be seen 'peeling' away below it, behind liquidly dark and semi-transparent areas of glazing. As at Garches, and in Le Corbusier's paintings, the richness of the effect comes from the harmony and similarity of basic geometrical forms, from the control of proportion and ratio, and from effects of illusion whereby objects are glimpsed through layers of glass or through windows cut clean through the plainest of white surfaces. Ambiguity constantly reinforces visual tension. Sigfried Giedion referred to the villa as a '*construction spirituelle*', and claimed to see in the dynamic experience of the building an example of 'space-time' – supposedly an architectural equivalent to notions of relativity. Be this as it may, the Villa Savoye clearly exploits the ideas of variable view-points and simultaneous perceptions of multiple layers and levels.

The final slope of the ramp ascends towards the solarium – seen first from the outside as a hovering curved volume, but from this position as a thin, strip-like plane with a small window cut clean into it. It is this which now holds the attention – a rectangle of blue sky and passing clouds, seen in an entirely monochrome surround. As one draws level with it, one has the breathtaking view of the distant valleys which captured the attention in the very first approach. Then the building was seen surrounded by the setting; now the setting is framed by the building. The adequate provision of greenery was a central part of Le Corbusier's machine-age mythology. At the Villa Savoye nature is celebrated as dramatically as the idea of the house as a *machine à habiter*, or the theme of procession by car; views of trees and grass are carefully orchestrated and framed. These vignettes of the exterior have an almost super-real intensity, as if the artist has clipped bits of the outside world and spliced them together in a collage.

At the Villa Savoye several formal ideas are fused together. There is a symmetrical armature which is reinforced by the square plan, the central ramp and the curvature of the drive. Within this there is an asymmetrical counter-theme, expressed by the dynamic action of the curves on top, by the asymmetry of the main roof terrace, and by the lateral expansion of the free plan. In fact the design also contains an implied rotational movement, while



340 Le Corbusier, Villa Savoye, Poissy, 1928–31, view across terrace to temple

341 Villa Savoye, section showing salon, terrace and boudoir at first level

342 Le Corbusier, Still life with Numerous Objects, 1923. Oil on canvas, 48 x 57 1/2 in (124 x 146 cm). Fondation Le Corbusier, Paris

the actual transition from floor to floor allows one to link together inner vistas and events with outer ones. The Villa Savoye might be understood as an analogue to the flux and relativity of modern experience; equally it might be seen as an architectural equivalent to the transparencies, simultaneities and illusions of Cubist painting. Interestingly, Le Corbusier evoked the dynamism of his conception in terms of an 'Espace Arabe':

Arab architecture provides us with a precious lesson. It is appreciated on the move, on foot; it is in walking, in moving about, that one sees the ordering devices of architecture develop. It is a principle contrary to Baroque architecture which is conceived on paper, around a fixed, theoretical point...

In this house there is a true architectural promenade, offering ever-changing views, some of them unexpected, some of them astonishing. It is interesting to obtain so much diversity when one has, for instance, admitted a constructive system based on an absolutely rigorous schema of beams and columns.

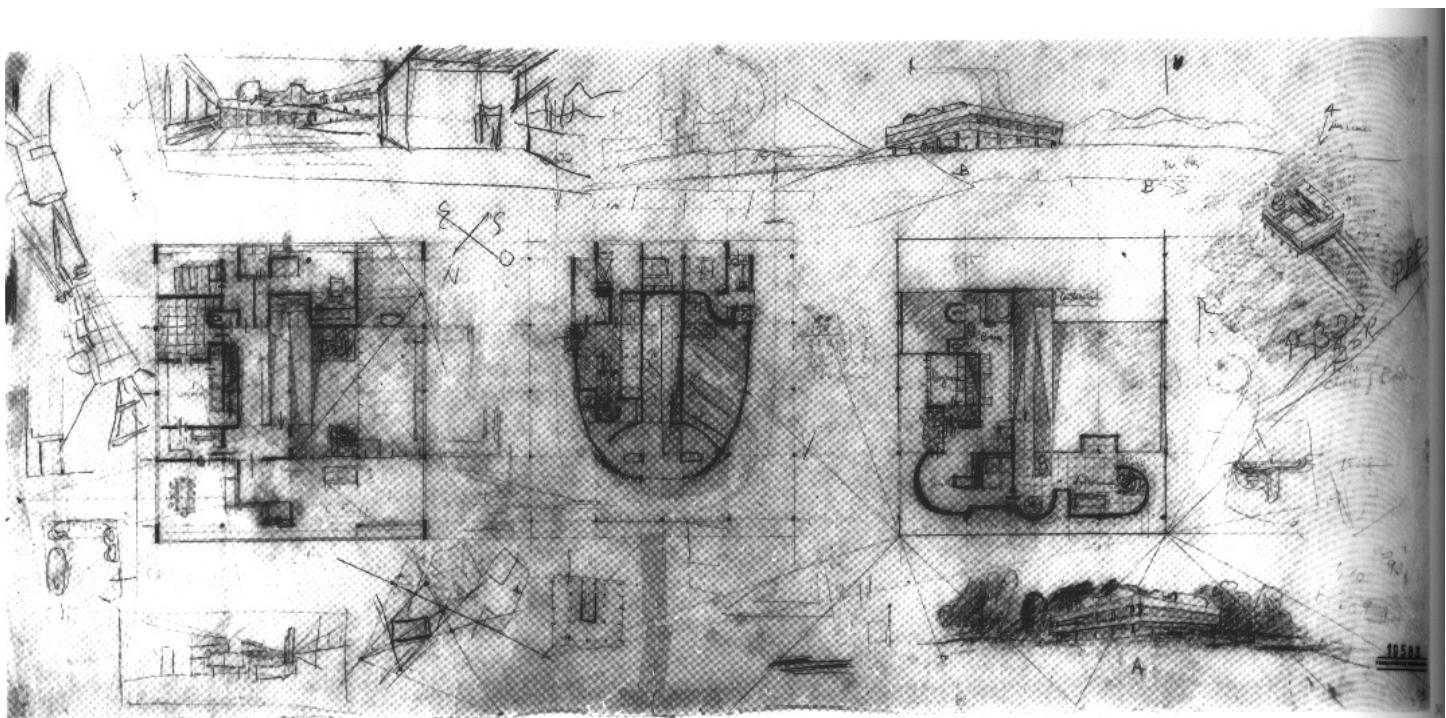
The Villa Savoye drew together a number of the architect's earlier themes and formal experiments. In *Vers une architecture* Le Corbusier had referred to the idea of setting down 'standards' and then, through a gradual process of experiment and refinement, 'perfecting' them by paring them down

to their most essential characteristics. He claimed that this had occurred for the Greek temple in the development between Paestum and the Parthenon (Chapter 10, fig. 189). In a sense one may see the Villa Savoye as a culmination of a similar path of refinement but telescoped into the single decade of the 1920s. The propositions of the Maison Citrohan, the principles of the Five Points of a New Architecture, the proposals of *Vers une architecture*, the suggestions of the various intermediary schemes (e.g. Maison Cook, the unrealized Maison Meyer, Villa Stein/de Monzie) were here ennobled, dignified and simplified to an extreme degree. One is bound to say that the Villa Savoye, like the Robie House, and like certain of Palladio's mature villas, represents a high point of expression within a vocabulary of type forms.

When Le Corbusier was first approached with the commission in 1928, he had at last achieved his synthesis; he was a mature architect of the highest order. It is intriguing to speculate on his possible initial responses to the Savoye's suggestions for a country house and to a site which was not, for once, hemmed in by other buildings. He described his

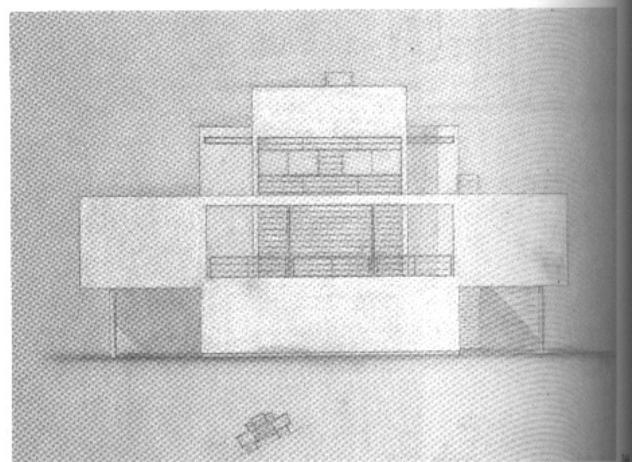


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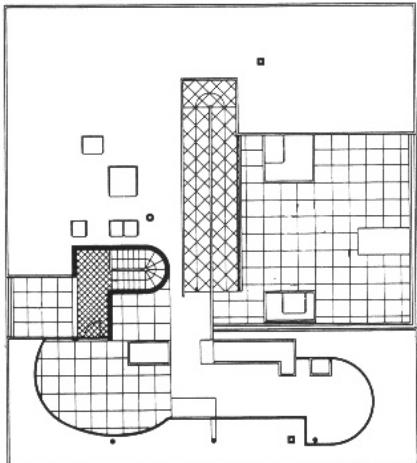


clients as 'completely without preconceived ideas, modern or ancient': 'Their idea was simple: they had a magnificent park formed from meadows surrounded by forest; they wanted to live in the countryside; they were linked to Paris 30 kilometres away by car.' Le Corbusier was no doubt intrigued by the possibility of weaving his own fantasy of modern life around a sort of ritualistic celebration of his client's high bourgeois habits – the arrival by car, the 'ablutions' in the chauffeur's hall, the companion stair for the servants, the ramp for the initiated or the well-to-do. One guesses, too, that he must have realized immediately that this site allowed the possibility of a sculpture in the round – rather than a building with a single façade like Maison Cook, or a front and back like 'Les Terrasses' at Garches.

Unfortunately, the evidence of Le Corbusier's sketches for the Villa Savoye is incomplete, patchy, and not firmly dated. It seems that there were five different schemes between September 1928 and April 1929. As was often the case in his design processes, some ideas which emerged early were discarded, only to be picked up again later

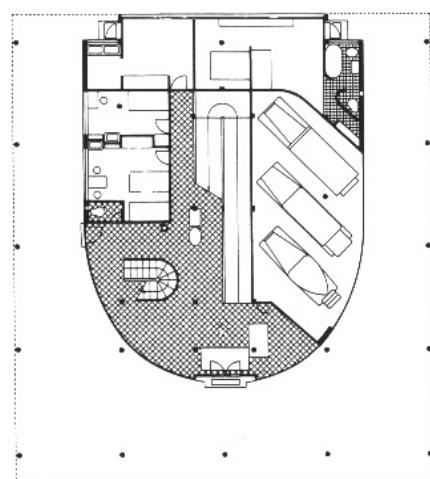
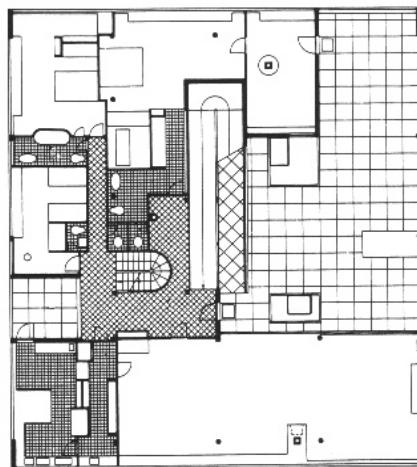


343 Le Corbusier,
development sketches for
the Villa Savoye,
September 1928. Pencil
and colour on paper, 20
x 43/4, (51 x 110 cm).
Fondation Le Corbusier,
Paris



344 Le Corbusier, study
of symmetrical scheme
for Villa Savoye, late
November 1928.
Pencil and colour on
paper, 17 1/4 x 25 1/4 in
(44 x 65 cm). Fondation
Le Corbusier, Paris

345 Villa Savoye, plans
of second-, first- and
ground-floor levels



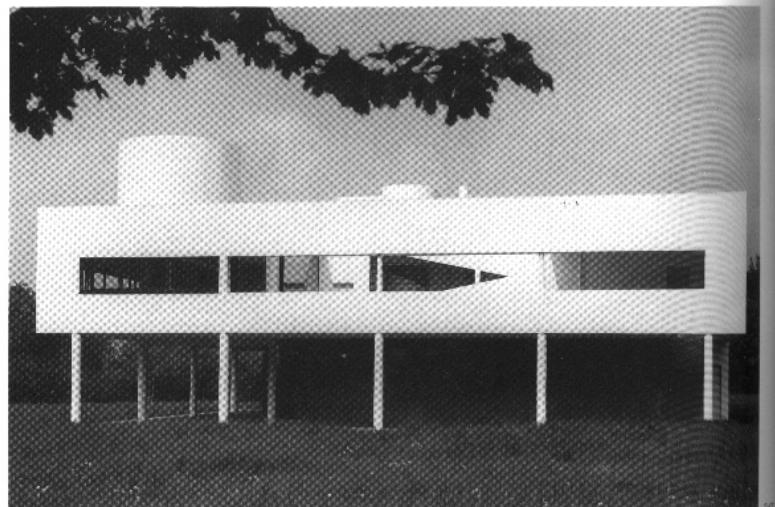
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and reincorporated into the final project; for the earliest sketches are in fact quite close to the finished building. Among the intermediary explorations was one of an almost neo-classical formality with a symmetrical box protruding behind the screens of the façade; and another in which the top level was made curved and habitable. To follow these drawings is to see an architectural system in action. It is also to gauge the conflicts between function and form, client and architect. There were many programmatic problems along the way, among them the difficulty of garaging the cars and giving them enough room to turn at the lowest level, especially when, for a short phase, the entire scheme was reduced in size. A synthesis had to be sought which accommodated the 'external' constraints of practicality and the 'internal' requirements of the architect's own ideal intentions.

Although the Villa Savoye must be understood as a relative of Le Corbusier's earlier designs, it was not as if he simply took pieces from old designs and stuck them together. Rather, a vital new image was created, which articulated new possibilities of form and meaning in an unprecedented synthesis. This is why it is only of limited value to point out that the idea of the automobile passing under the building was first made clear – with all its urbanistic and architectural implications – at Maison Cook, or that the ramp first occurred as a principal feature in the studio wing of Maison La Roche, for in the Villa Savoye these devices were employed in a vital new combination. A similar observation can be made about the accent given the 'five points of a new architecture': the strip window had never been used so potently to unify all four sides of a design, and the *pilotis* – employed as a major device in the *intérieur* of Garches, was here used as a dominant feature of both interior and exterior design. In 1929, in the first volume of his *Oeuvre complète* (*Complete Works*), Le Corbusier published a series of sketches of his principal villa designs of the decade, including La Roche, Stein/de Monzie at Garches, the Villa Baizeau for Carthage and, finally, the Villa Savoye (Fig. 202). In each case he attached notes describing salient features such as the pure, formal character at Garches, or the internal and external interpenetrations of the Carthage dwelling. The Villa Savoye managed to combine qualities of all the other three.



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But every time Le Corbusier reused a form it had many levels of practical and mythical significance in its new context. An example of this at the Villa Savoye is the curved solarium on top of the building. Within Le Corbusier's overall syntax this screen was clearly a relative of numerous other curved 'free-plan' partitions which served to sculpt different functions independently of perimeter walls or grids of columns; here it even had a double identity as a 'partition' and a curved 'exterior wall'. In this particular design the curve began its life as the shelter for a small terrace and as the sinuous wall to the boudoir of Madame Savoye (placed suggestively at the culmination of the ramp procession in the earliest scheme). Formally it defined a counterpoint with the rectangles beneath it; perceptually it had a shifting identity, at times appearing as a cylindrical funnel floating above the glazed zones below, at times as an uncurled plane. The plan shape of the solarium had strong affinities with the guitar outlines in Le Corbusier's earlier Purist pictures, but it was not as if he traced out the discoveries of his paintings on to his building plans; rather, the same formal intelligence working in different media achieved analogous results. The long, distant view of the Villa Savoye has, understandably, been compared with a Purist still life on a table-top and the associations with ships' funnels or machine parts are not hard to make. Yet all such 'references' are held in check by a

prodigious force of intellectual abstraction, as if the curve were *all* of these things at once – or none of them, only itself.

Like any work of a high order, the Villa Savoye evades facile categorization. It is simple and complex, cerebral and sensuous. Laden with ideas, it still expresses these directly through shapes, volumes, and spaces 'in a certain relationship'. A 'classic' moment of modern architecture, it also has affinities with the architecture of the past. It was a central concern of Le Corbusier's philosophy that a vision of contemporary life be given expression in architectural forms of perennial value, and in the Villa Savoye one recognizes echoes of old classical themes: repose, proportion, clarity, simple trabeation. If the Villa Stein/de Monzie at Garches reiterates the classical French *pavillon* as a type, then the Villa Savoye surely represents Le Corbusier's reinterpretation of the basic idea of a classical temple but in machine-age terms. One may even suggest a reminiscence of the Parthenon, which had so obsessed Le Corbusier during the '*voyage d'Orient*': the mechanized procession culminating in an entrance point at the far end of the building has affinities with the ceremonial route he had noted on the Acropolis nearly twenty years before. In its tense mathematical relationships and tight contours, its clear geometry and slight optical distortions, the Villa Savoye also invoked qualities Le Corbusier had admired in this classical prototype. A caption from

346 Iktinos and Callicrates (and, according to Le Corbusier, Phidias), the Parthenon, Acropolis, Athens, 447–32 BC

347 Le Corbusier, Villa Savoye, Poissy, 1928–31

the chapter in *Vers une architecture* called ‘Architecture: Pure Creation of the Mind’ might apply to the ancient or the modern building equally well.

From what is emotion born? From a certain relationship between definite elements: cylinders, an even floor, even walls. From a certain harmony with the things that make up the site. From a plastic system that spreads its effects over every part of the composition. From a unity of idea that reaches from the unity of materials used to the unity of the general contour.

It is tempting to regard the *piloti*, that central element of Le Corbusier’s architectural language, so resonant with meanings related to Purism, standardization, the definition of concrete, and the creation of a new urbanism, as being a reinterpretation of the idea of a column as well. The cylinder was one of those ‘absolutely beautiful’ Platonic forms singled out for special attention in *Vers une architecture*; it was a primary form capable of touching the mind at the deepest levels. At the same time the *piloti* was conceived as the correct expression for concrete, and an *objet-type* in the class of supports; it embodied the essential idea of a free-standing support, stripped of all accidental or ornamental effects. It supplied yet another instance of the unity of Idealism and Rationalism in Le Corbusier’s thought.

Thus the Villa Savoye drew together a number of strands of its creator’s philosophy and gave poetic expression to his world-view. Its language was based on a modern structural technique, as Viollet-le-Duc had required, and its imagery referred to objects of modern engineering which were regarded as symbols of the modern age. Its idealization of a way of life addressed the needs of industrial society, positing a Utopian order, while its forms were intensified through proportional expertise and the discoveries of Purist painting. Its individual elements – the *piloti*, the strip window, etc. – like the columns and triglyphs of a Greek temple, were elevated to the level of ‘timeless’ solutions; the abstraction of its forms implied a lofty and spiritual aim for architecture. Above all, the architectural language of the Villa Savoye was the result of a radical quest, a returning to roots, a rethinking of the fundamentals of the art. That is why it may be compared to that paradigm of simple trabeation, the ‘primitive hut’, an architecture supposedly reflecting natural law.