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The Ground Shapes What Stands Tall

As far back as the 3rd century a hilltop just outside of Ronchamp, France has attracted worshippers. Possibly being home to a pagan temple at some point, and then being converted to Christian chapel in the 4th century. Since then, the church built atop the hill has taken several different shapes, from a simple meeting hall to a gothic chapel. In 1949, after World War II, the church on the site had sustained too much damage and needed to be rebuilt. That hilltop is now home to the world-renowned Chapelle Notre Dame du Haut, designed by Le Corbusier. Initially Corb was apprehensive about working on a church, but he was smitten by the beauty of the “four horizons” during a 1950 visit to the site and accepted the commission.

The church was designed from 1950 to 1953 and construction lasted two years from 1953 to 1955. The groundbreaking ceremony was on June 25th, 1955. The long design period reflects the delicacy, and attention to detail present in the final build. This painstaking attention to detail can be seen in the walls, windows, and the curved concrete roof which appears to float. The walls on the north end appear solid and smooth, but underneath the structure is made up of the bricks recycled from the previous church on site. The windows are unusual in the fact that they are sunken deep within the wall and take advantage of with shapes that increase in size or decrease in size to diffuse the light throughout the church. Much like windows in many other church’s they are colored and have art on them, but in this church that art is sketches and phrases drawn up by Le Corbusier himself. This makes the church feel informally human, and the windows seem at home in this chapel. The special concrete roof appears to float on its southern and eastern edge, like a rock sitting on a dolmen. Le Corbusier was able to create this illusion A group of people outside of a building

Description automatically generatedusing thin concrete columns spaced deep inside the thick southern wall. Concrete columns can also be seen supported the north-east end outside of the chapel. (Fig 1.)

While Le Corbusier has built several religious buildings, he was not known to be a particularly religious person. He was known to have said before being convinced to build this chapel that he “didn’t want to work with a dead institution.” In this case, speaking of the catholic church. According to Simon Unwin in his book *Twenty-Five Buildings every architect should understand*, Le Corbusier was making the point that “human spirituality is older than Christianity” in the dolmen like construction of his Chapelle Notre Dame du Haut. Perhaps Unwin’s take best represents Corb’s view on religion, that it is a necessary part of humanity in whatever form it takes.

Figure 1: The thin concrete columns are visible on the south wall at the forefront, the outermost northeast column is visible in the back-right of the photo.

https://www.collinenotredameduhaut.com/en/the-chapel-notre-dame-du-haut/

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