

Architecture

A Cultural Fable For Our Time

By ADA LOUISE HUXTABLE

A GLIMPSE of tragedy is not the most entertaining activity for a summer Sunday afternoon, but anyone who has not seen the July architecture show at the Museum of Modern Art and is interested in the current cultural climate would be advised to go today, since this is the last day. Called simply, "Villa Savoye: Destruction by Neglect," the exhibition documents, in a dozen appalling photographs, the decline and fall of one of the most important buildings of our time. It may record the architectural crime of the century.

The Villa Savoye was designed and built by LeCorbusier in 1929-30 at Poissy-sur-Seine, 25 miles from Paris. It was constructed in a grass country meadow, in what is now a crowded suburb connected to Paris by a superhighway. One of the most famous landmark structures of the modern movement, the Villa Savoye is featured in every textbook of the contemporary arts. (By ironic coincidence, it is the cover illustration of the brand new paperback reissue of the classic text of 1932 by Henry-Russell Hitchcock and Philip Johnson, "The International Style.")

The respect accorded the Villa Savoye by critics and historians is equaled only by that given to a limited number of domestic structures in the course of architecture; among them, the Villa Rotunda by Palladio and the Robie House by Frank Lloyd Wright. These are houses that have helped shape societies, centuries, countries and styles. They are structures of international import and influence, the cultural touchstones of an age.

The pictures on this page, from the Museum's exhibition, show the Villa Savoye as it appeared shortly after completion in 1930, and as it appears, in ruins, today. But this is not a story of simple neglect or decay. It is a cultural fable for our time.

The tale reflects no glory on anyone. It adds little to the luster of the French, or their self-appointed stance as the arbiters and guardians of western civilization. Calling attention to it in New York is a prime case of the American pot calling the French kettle black, since the United

States probably holds the all-time championship for landmark destruction. But Americans are supposed to be barbarians, and the French are not. At least, they practice a far subtler brand of cultural savagery.

The most direct destruction of the house occurred during World War II. It was occupied and damaged, successively, by German and American forces. The Germans, with a total lack of subtlety, poured concrete down the toilets when they left. The Americans took pot shots through the windows. The owner, Madame Savoye, widowed and bankrupted, moved to a small house and farmed the land, using the villa as a barn. She refused to sell it, because she hoped her grandson would eventually be able to effect its restoration.

Observers and students making the pilgrimage to the Villa Savoye reported that it was shabby and deteriorated and filled with hay and potatoes, but still structurally sound and repairable, as late as 1959.

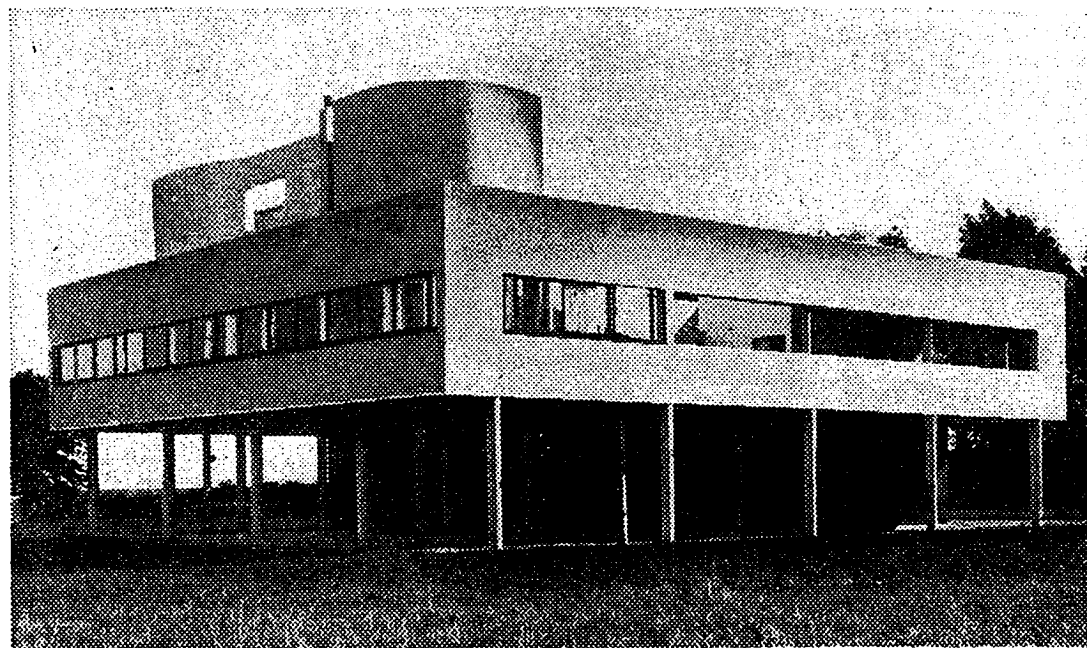
Double Play

In that year, however, the municipality of Poissy decided to demolish the house and build a school on the site. The outcry was immediate and international. Led by the noted Swiss historian, Sigfried Giedion, protest from many countries resulted in intervention by France's Minister of Culture, André Malraux. He announced that the building would be saved.

It was a curious salvation; a classically oblique Gallic double play. The house was not torn down, but nothing was done to preserve it. The municipality was permitted to build a large school on the site, anyway. This wrecked LeCorbusier's concept of free-floating, raised white volumes in an open field against the sky, completely and forever. Deterioration was allowed to continue and accelerate.

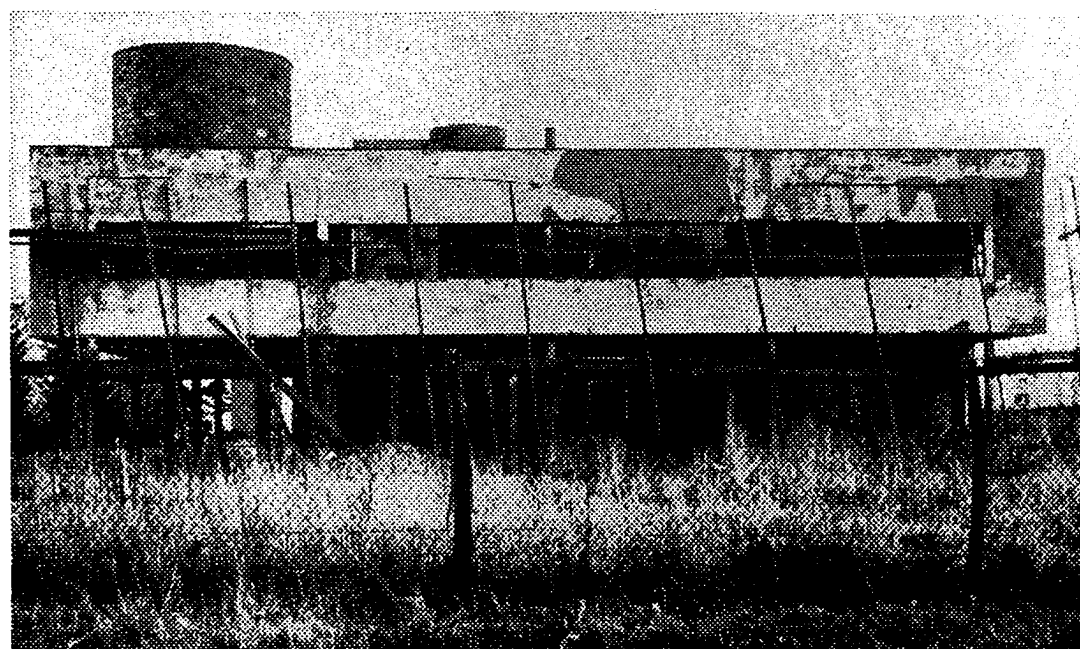
With LeCorbusier's death last year, the French Government declared the Villa Savoye a *Monument Historique*. It was already a monumental ruin. Peeling stucco, rusted window frames, broken and missing glass, cracked walls and signs of structural deterioration made the gesture seem one of ignorance or cynicism.

In June of this year, the Museum received photographs



Above, LeCorbusier's Villa Savoye shortly after completion in 1930, and below, as it appears today

The architectural crime of the century



of the present condition of the house. According to Arthur Drexler, director of the Department of Architecture and Design, shortly after the decision to hold the exhibition was made and transmitted to France workmen appeared to patch up the exterior stucco. There is considerable leeway between the Museum's chronology and the official French date of April 25 for the start of repairs, which the Museum frankly calls superficial.

There is nothing superficial, however, about the implications of the story. One of the century's great works of art is probably irretrievably lost. Even if there were to be complete reconstruction, the school that crowds it has destroyed its siting and design.

A foundation inaugurated by LeCorbusier just before his death is now embroiled in another French specialty, lengthy and time-consuming litigation. It could have been instrumental in setting up the Villa Savoye as a strikingly appropriate LeCorbusier museum, an idea that is still being explored with the government.

Universal Tragedy

The tragedy of the Villa Savoye is universal. It implies a cultural carelessness or callousness totally inconsistent with the standards being bruited as the "cultural explosion" of our time. If we destroy our finest cultural monuments, how meaningful are those "cultural centers"

proliferating at great expense to immortalize our so-called artistic sophistication?

At the state funeral for LeCorbusier, M. Malraux, as the presiding dignitary, remarking on the fact that the world had been late to recognize LeCorbusier's genius, observed that no other revolutionary of modern architecture had been "insulted so thoroughly and for so long."

"Glory shines brightest through outrage," he said. The question is whether any artist needs this much insult, and whether any civilization that treats its monuments with this degree of outrage is not in serious trouble. Its values are as shaky as the Villa Savoye's deteriorated walls.