Monestery by 'Corbu'
By ADA LOUISE HUXTABLE
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CHAPEL—Raw reinforced concrete in brutally simple forms makes the monastery's unconventional church. The monks' cloisters are seen beyond.

Monastery by 'Corbu'

By ADA LOUISE HUXTABLE

IN the rolling countryside at Eveux-sur-Arbresle, near Lyons, France, a Dominican monastery is nearing completion. A somewhat startling sight in the French fields, it is a radical modern work that bears little resemblance to any other monastery in history. Designed by the internationally known Swiss-born French architect, Le Corbusier—familiarly called "Corbu"—it is a unique blend of religion and art.

Though unconventional, the architecture of Le Couvent Sainte Marie de la Tourette serves well its traditional needs and purposes. The Dominican Order emphasizes a life of prayer, poverty, and private meditation in surroundings of starkly functional simplicity — a made-to-order program almost perfectly suited to Le Corbusier's tastes and talents.

Le Corbusier.

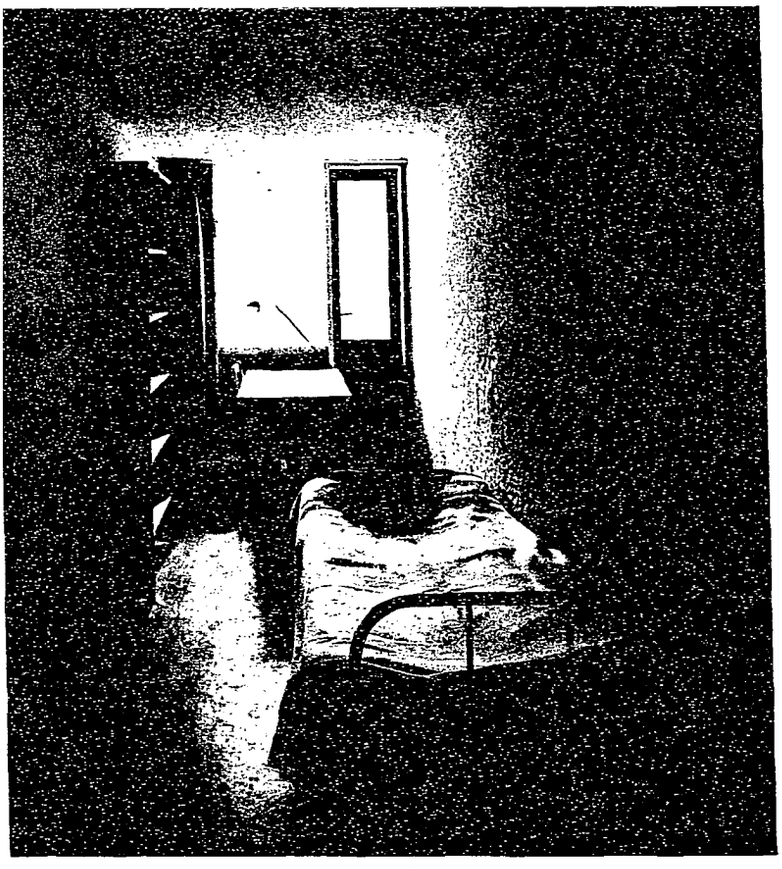
A man who admires the visual impact of stripped - down structure, primitive surfaces and abstract forms, Le Corbusier found himself in sympathetic accord with the austerity of his Dominican clients. He built a severely rectilinear monastery of great serenity and strength, adjoining a church as rugged and plain as a box, its belfry housed in a concrete square atop a concrete pyramid. Together church and monastery make a rectangle around a central court. The church forms one wall; the monastery completes the other three. The simplicity of the scheme is both an esthetic and economic necessity.

This is simplicity, however, of a very unusual sort. The buildings' primitive, almost brutal appearance belies a sophisticated use of well-proportioned parts, artfully arranged. Their only enrichment is in projecting balconies, concrete divisions of glass walls, and oddly shaped structures for skylights and stairways. Here architecture has become large-scale abstract sculpture.

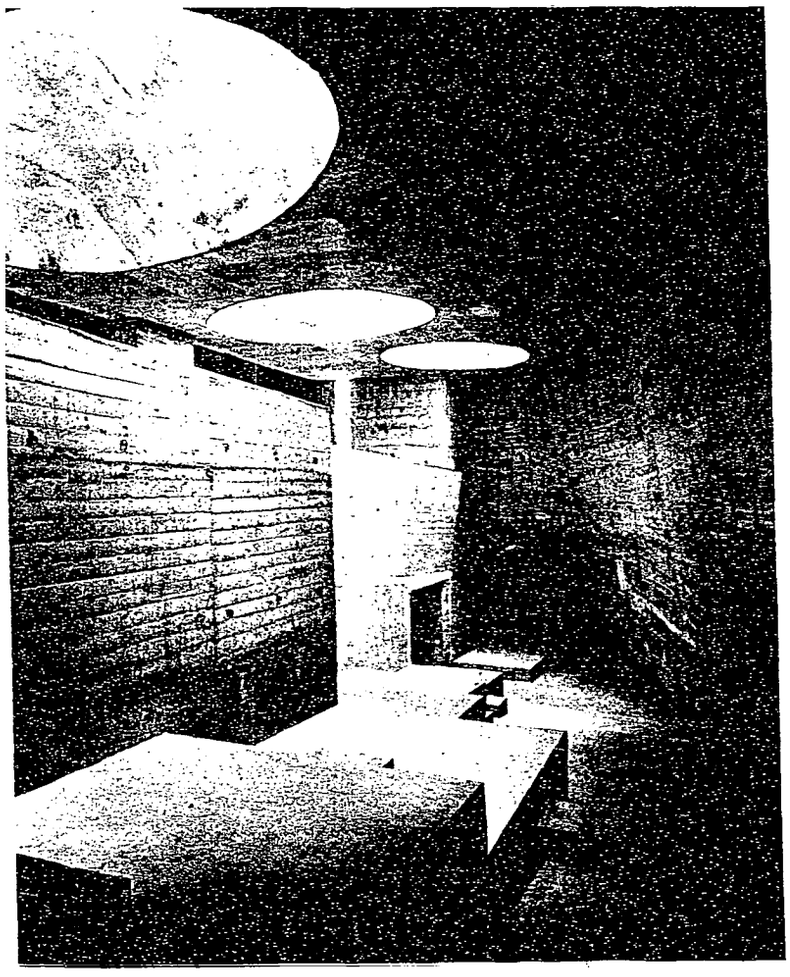
Over a three-year period, Le Corbusier learned the rituals and procedures that determined his design. The Dominicans emphasize solitary meditation; one hundred private cell-bedrooms have been provided. The communal rooms, refectory, oratory, library and classrooms, occupy the lower levels of the structure, which is built into the side of a hill. The compact plan places the two cloister floors above ground, with a walled, grass-planted roof—a local waterproofing custom—as an outdoor promenade.

The architect is as unusual as his building. Now 73, and a leader of the modern movement for the past forty years, Le Corbusier's innovations and ideals—and structures like La Tourette—have helped set the course of contemporary art. His painting, sculpture and philosophical writings are respected as much as his architecture. The firm mouth and coolly intellectual eyes, framed by his massive round-rimmed glasses (now almost an architectural trademark), make it clear that he will build as he believes. In this case, his personal aims were in perfect harmony with spartan monastic needs.

ADA LOUISE HUXTABLE regularly comments on aspects of art and architecture.

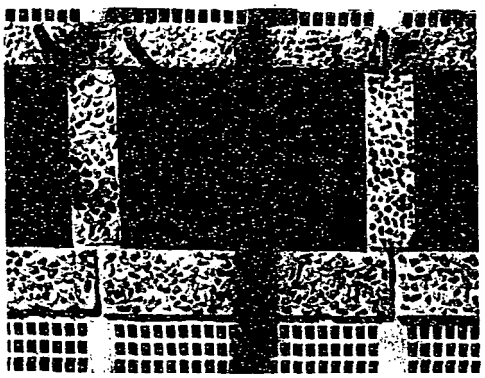


CELL—The cloisters contain one hundred cells, reduced to an ascetic minimum in size and furnishings. Walls are rough sprayed concrete. Each opens onto a balcony, with dividers insuring the solitude required by the Dominican Order. Corridors are narrow and somber.



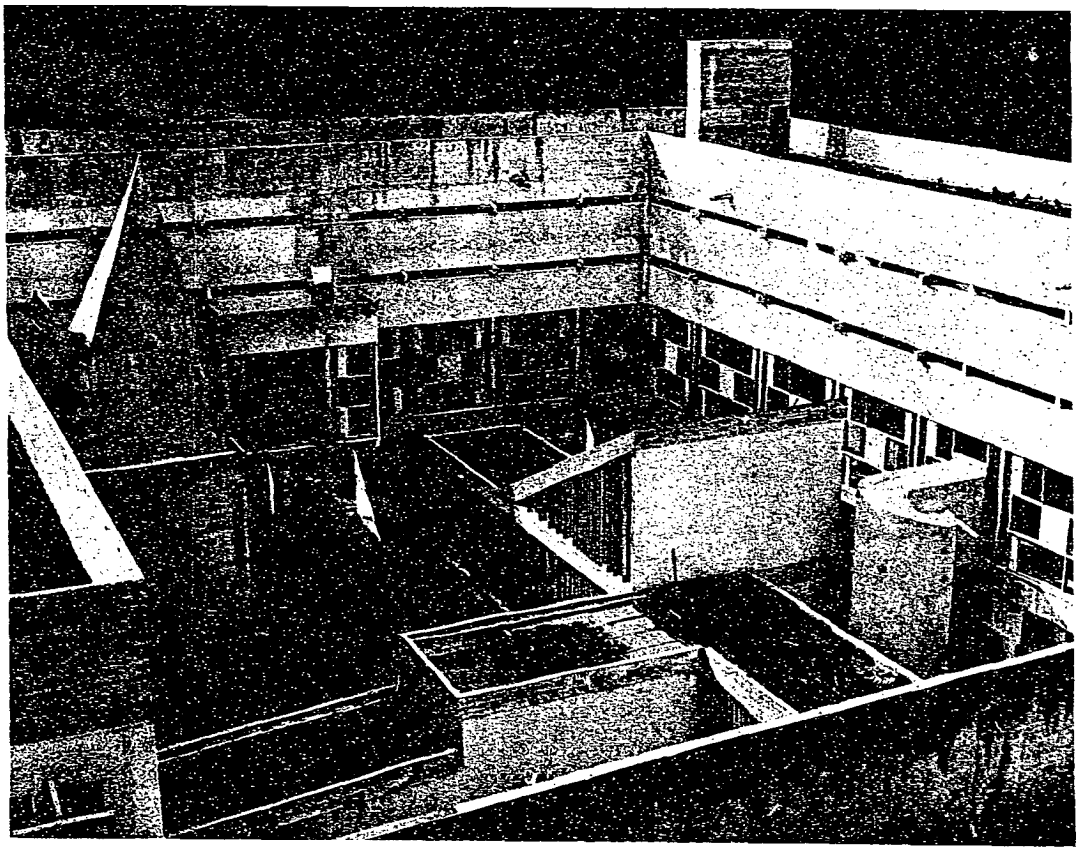
ALTARS—Three stepped platforms on the north side of the church will have altars at each level. Round skylights illuminate them from above. Because the Order's beliefs preclude rich furnishings, much of the stark drama of the architecture will be maintained.

MONASTERY — The main structure, built into a hillside above a rolling meadow, has communal spaces — refectory, library and classrooms — on its lower levels. Two stories of monks' quarters, marked by balconies, continue around three sides of the building. The only contrast to the solid, unfinished mass is the pattern of the rough textured projecting balconies of the cells. There is no ornament or decoration. Dominican doctrine dictates simplicity, austerity and poverty; the severe concrete architecture is both economical and ruggedly expressive of these ideals.



TEXTURE—A closeup of the cloister shows the open grid pattern of the balconies and the framing slabs embedded with rough local stones for surface contrast.

SCULPTURE—The architect's love of form for its own sake is seen in his design of a free-form plaster mound in the central court, for purely esthetic effect.



COURT—Looking down from the church into the open courtyard of the monastery: covered corridors divide the court and connect the buildings. These corridors, the pyramid-roofed oratory (left) and curved stairs (right) serve two purposes. They are practical elements of the plan, but are also used as independent geometric forms, like full-scale abstract sculpture.