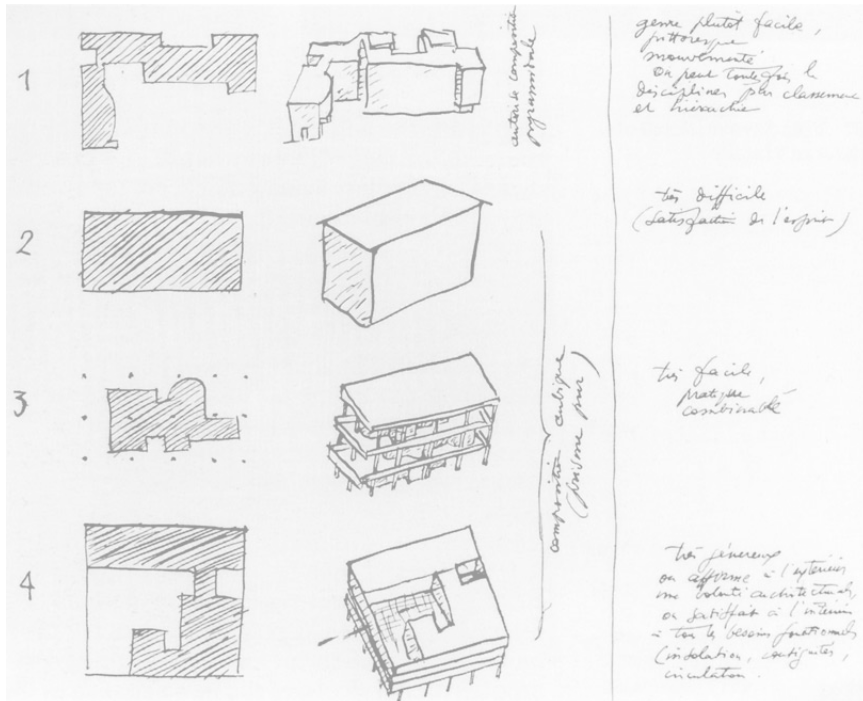




# Villa Savoye 1929-31

Space Analysis - Daniel Morrissey

Le Corbusier 1887-1965

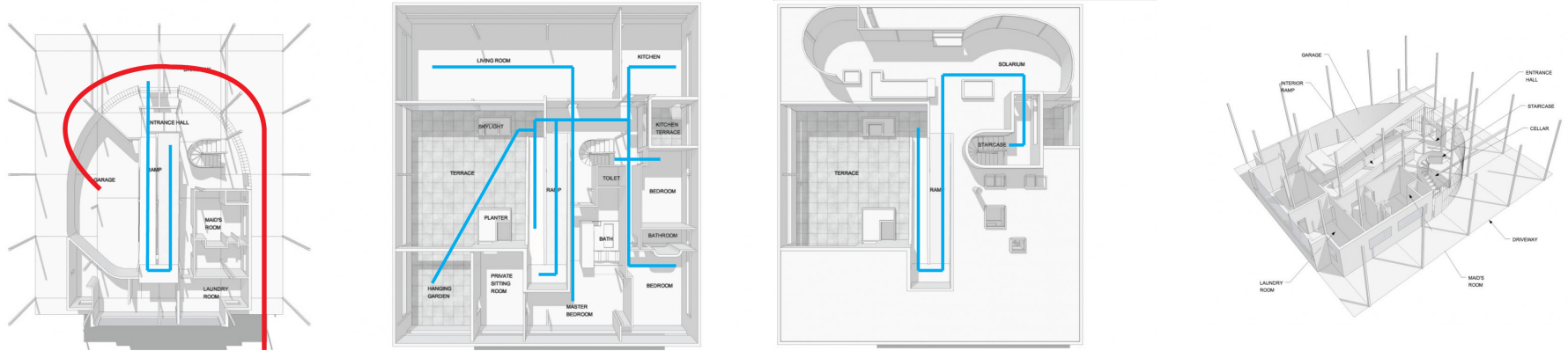


One of the last of Le Corbusier's purist villas, and the last of his four compositions, the Villa Savoye (named "Les Heures Claires" by Le Corbusier)<sup>1</sup> is recognized as the most faithful to his five points of architecture: "the columns [pilotis], the roof garden, the free plan, the long window, the free façade."<sup>2</sup>

Designed and constructed between 1929 and 1931 the Villa Savoye (the Villa) has become an icon of Le Corbusier's ideals and methodology. This unique building is focused on Le Corbusier's ideas of how space should be arranged and experienced.

As the last purist villa, the Villa is Le Corbusier's attempt to reconciliation between the Platonic attributes of nature and man.<sup>3</sup> He deliberately raises the first floor off of the ground so that it (as Le Corbusier put it) will be out of the wetness and damp of the earth, raising its gardens as well to provide healthy and dry garden space.<sup>4</sup> While Le Corbusier seeks to separate nature from his machine for living, in a way liberating the Villa from its environment, he does design the villa to be about the view from the inside to the outside, primarily via the use of the long horizontal windows to re-embrace the nature that is removed from the Villa by the spatial level changes. His planned hanging gardens also demonstrate the need to control how nature interacted within and with the structure. This ordered scripting and selective disconnect from nature ties into the concepts discussed by David Orr in his article Ecological Design and Human Ecology. Rather than separate man from nature via technology, Orr proposes that nature and technology can coexist and we must try to get a deeper connection to nature. Orr further proposes that design that does not integrate nature will ultimately fail.<sup>5</sup> Does Le Corbusier fail in these respects?

Le Corbusier is careful to tie the building to the landscape, the horizontal windows emphasis the ground plane, while the rooftop gardens do bring in nature. Perhaps they are scripted,



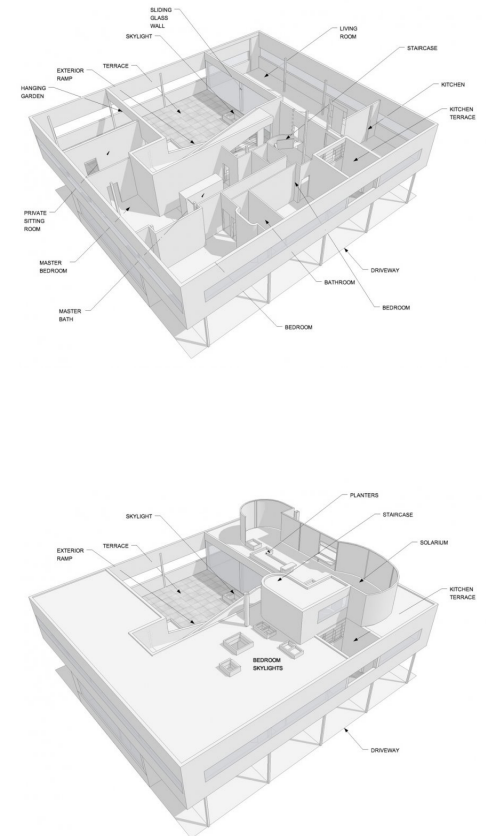
Previous Page: Le Corbusier Sketch of Four Compositions, Exterior of Villa Savoye  
 Top: Circulation Diagrams of Villa Savoye  
 Right: Perspective Floor Plans, Lower Main and Roof Levels

but Le Corbusier emphasized minimal impact to the site in his design in an effort to preserve the beauty he saw in the nature located on site. The building space is also not completely devoid of its relationship to nature and ecology.

The exterior of the lower level is roughly equal in proportions with the front and read slightly elongated, de-emphasizing the front and rear. The building is approached on an old roadway that comes at the villa from the side, hiding the full view until one is upon it. The drive wraps around the lower level through the pilotis, creating a scripted entry path that leads to the entry and Le Corbusier's architectural promenade that runs through the building interior.

This architectural promenade is in the ramp that extends between the floors from the lower level to the rooftop solarium and also mimicked in the spiral staircase that complements the ramp. This promenade creates a unique series of viewing moments as one rises through the structure. This prescribed routing allows those experiencing the space to experience it in a "series of partitions of infinite space."<sup>6</sup> The infinite space that one is seeing is bounded and defined by the structure and geometry of the building. Le Corbusier allows glimpses outward that allow the interior to flow out toward this infinite space.

Le Corbusier incorporated the ramp because "...one rises imperceptibly by means of a ramp, which is a completely different sensation from going up a flight of stairs. A staircase separates one floor from another; a ramp connects."<sup>7</sup> This ramp is an important element as it is dynamic



and serves as an important contrast to the house's inherent horizontality. The ramp also allows a sense of moment through the structure; this is an important relationship to the observer that has become vital to modern architecture.<sup>8</sup>

While the pilotis are present, they do not dominate the interior and instead offer a method of adding interest in the building by "bursting into view, in the form of columns rising awkwardly in the middle of the room, or just clear of the wall."<sup>9</sup> Le Corbusier has found a way to relegate this structure to being seen but not being intrusive to the spaces of the interior, utilizing it to add walls where he wants according to his dictates.

Le Corbusier pays particular attention to the inside and outside space. He carefully incorporates the terrace and solarium into the structure so that they flow into the inside space and vice versa. The spatial flow of the building, being organized around the ever-climbing promenade orients and directs through the space. These elements, along with Le Corbusier's

Below: Main Entry looking from Ramp, Layer effect of ramps

Right: Terrace looking out from Living Room, Terrace looking into Living Room, Solarium



balance of dynamic and rectilinear elements brings a character to the building that sets it apart from any other. This character helps to establish it as a place. As Norberg-Schulz points out in his *Phenomenon of Place*, character and space come together to create a spirit of place.<sup>10</sup> The character or atmosphere created by Le Corbusier creates an environment that continually surprises and draws one in. With such strong character and clever employment of boundaries.

The Villa Savoye is truly a space for generating sensory experiences. The textures, materials, colours and methods of emphasis of the horizontality, such as the built in ledges, juxtaposed with the upward climb of the ramp and staircase combine to create an atmosphere that draws the visitor through the space. This sequencing is not unlike that being examined by the Bauhaus during the same time period. The Bauhaus was examining the global space of architecture.<sup>11</sup> They focused on moving around the object in space and tying this to a temporal sequencing to allow for a new consideration and consciousness of space. Now doubt Le Corbusier influenced or was influenced by or simply knew of the research that the Bauhaus was working on and incorporated some of their ideas into the Villa Savoye. Comparisons with Mies van der Rohe's work of the time can be drawn. Le Corbusier was using the structure to allow for the façade to be reduced and relegated to a screening function, lending to a feeling of the structure being lighter or weightless, a principle heavily looked at by the Bauhaus.<sup>12</sup>

The space created by Le Corbusier in the Villa Savoye is indicative of the feeling that modern architecture strived to accomplish. A space that was global, yet connected on some plane with nature and the site. The approaches taken were fresh and unique and were a culmination of Le Corbusier's work in this style.

Right: Interior Ramp looking from lower floor, Ramp up to solarium



Notes:

- 1 Benton, Tim. *The Villas of Le Corbusier and Pierre Jeanneret 1920-1930*. Basel; Boston: Birkhäuser, 2007. pp. 183
- 2 Meier, Richard. *Villa Savoye, Poissy, France, 1929-31*. *Global Architect*. 13, Yukio Futagawa. Tokyo: A.D.A. EDITA, 1972. pp. 2
- 3 Benton, Tim. *The Villas of Le Corbusier and Pierre Jeanneret 1920-1930*. Basel; Boston: Birkhäuser, 2007. pp. 183
- 4 Baltanás, José. *Walking through Le Corbusier : A Tour of His Masterworks*. London: Thames & Hudson, 2005. pp. 56
- 5 Orr, David. *Architecture, Ecological Design and Human Ecology*. In: *The Green Braid: Towards an Architecture of Ecology, Economy and Equality*. K. Tanzer and R. Longorio. Routledge, 2007.
- 6 BanHam, Reyner. *Space and Power*. In: *Age of the Masters*. Architectural Press, 1975. pp. 51
- 7 Baltanás, José. *Walking through Le Corbusier: A Tour of His Masterworks*. London: Thames & Hudson, 2005. pp. 63
- 8 BanHam, Reyner. *Space and Power*. In: *Age of the Masters*. Architectural Press, 1975. pp. 51
- 9 *ibid.*
- 10 Norberg Schulz, Christian. *The Phenomenon of Place*. In: *Theorizing a New Agenda for Architecture: An Anthology of Architectural Theory 1965 - 1995*. Kate Nesbitt. New York: Princeton Architectural Press, 1996.
- 11 Lefebvre, Henri. *The Production of Space*. In: *Architecture Theory since 1968*. K. Michael Hayes. MIT Press, 1998.
- 12 *ibid.*

