Villa Savoye 1929-31
Form Analysis - Daniel Morrissey
Le Corbusier 1887-1965
Le Corbusier’s Villa Savoye is an exploration in the use of primary form. It has been described by William Curtis as an industrial extension of Laugier’s first typology, the form of the primitive hut (as discussed by Vidler, this typology is concerned with the rationalization of nature). Myself, I feel that the Villa Savoye tends to fall into the second typology that is concerned with production techniques. I say this because Le Corbusier was concerned with manipulating the pure geometric form and utilizing new mass production techniques to make a final form. While it is true that some of the forms Le Corbusier used required shaping by hand, overall his work, and the Villa Savoye is included in this, falls into the second typology.

Le Corbusier incorporated the structural ideals from the Maison Domino, called the Domino Structure it is characterized by planar slabs connected by a dogleg staircase. In the Villa Savoye, a ramp was added to the mix, allowing for a form with a dual role of being meant to be viewed while simultaneously allowing for viewing Le Corbusier’s architectural promenade as it flows upward travelling inside and outside from the ground floor to the solarium. Colin Rowe saw these structural details of the Villa Savoye and Maison Domino as modern symbols of emancipation carrying implications of social liberty.
Le Corbusier started with a cubic volume and eroded elements to create the final form. The Villa Savoye uses rectangles, cylinders, and cubes to fill in the voids created by his erosion of the overall cubic volume (which is actually stretched along one axis making it a rectangular volume). By carving out the volume Le Corbusier creates a form that appears to float above the horizontal plane, one that draws a person into the building. This exterior form accommodates the preferred and intended method of travel into the building, the automobile, by carving out the lower level sides to form a driveway that is contained under the upper level and informs the lower level exterior wall as it wraps around in a semi-circular pattern that is based on the turning radius of the car as it follows its predetermined path from the drive, around the entry and to the garage.

Intentionally leaving voids within the wall spaces and roof meant that he could open the structure up to frame the surrounding environment. The top of the ramp to the roof garden illustrated this point quite well. As one looks up the ramp, they are presented with a void in the wall. This void was intended as a window for Le Corbusier’s original idea to locate the master bedroom on the topmost level, but by leaving it in Le Corbusier uses this void to frame the top of his architectural promenade and allow it to extend outward from the physical form into the environment. Rooftop windows form voids...
in the ceiling that are employed to bring light into the structure in calculated spots to create specific pools of light, such as in the master bath.

Le Corbusier’s treatment of windows on the exterior belays his attention to the detail and treatment of the overall form. While most of his contemporaries were using steel framed windows he chose to instead use wood framed windows to allow for the glass to be pushed nearer the edges and to allow the wall to be seen as a series of parallel planes. As Le Corbusier himself said: “To evoke attention, to occupy space powerfully, a surface of perfect form was necessary first, followed by the exaltation of the flatness of that surface by the addition of a few projections or holes creating a back and forth movement. Then by the opening of windows (the holes made by windows are one of the essential elements of the reading of an architectural work), by the opening of windows an important play of secondary surfaces is begun, releasing rhythms, dimensions, tempos of architecture inside the house and outside.”

Le Corbusier would often create interplays of light and shadow. He uses light and shadow to bring the forms he uses to life. As in painting, dark lines can be used to frame or outline elemental forms, Le Corbusier also inverted this relationship, using light instead of dark to bring emphasis to the form. Using gaps around the form he refutes
the structural characteristics and load bearing capabilities making the presence of the primary form both more intense and more on a human scale.

The Villa Savoye was the culmination of Le Corbusier’s experiments in his five points utilizing pure geometric forms. He was a master at blending these forms together to create a unique spatial experience through his use of form. He emphasized these forms with combinations of parallel planes, light, shadow and void. His work typifies the modern ideals of the pure geometry, and the machine for living, (aside from his nod to the Doric order with his columns, and some other minor details) but is it truly successful? Experientially I believe it is, as it is a very livable layout that exemplifies the use of primary form while being aesthetically pleasing, however, there were problems that arouse from designing with the purity of modern geometry and using mass-production techniques. These issues will be discussed at length when we discuss tectonics, but suffice it to say that the issues that plagued the building seriously shed doubt on the enduring quality of the building.

The primary forms of the Villa Savoye combine to create a unique sensual form that provides a truly unique experience as one travels through it. These forms work together in the harmony of the massing, light and shadow he creates by eroding and combining
the forms. While it is a prime example of the purist approach of modernism (though not so much as his later work, or that of Mies Van Der Rohe), it also shows us that modernism has its faults and drawbacks and was not the end state that it was desired to be. Architectural form is constantly evolving and dynamic and cannot be constrained to one simple style.
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