

Jacques Sbriglio

**THE VILLA SAVOYE**



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# **LE CORBUSIER: THE VILLA SAVOYE**

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## FOREWORD

The Villa Savoye (1928/1931) marks an end to the series of white “Purist villas” constructed by Le Corbusier and Pierre Jeanneret <sup>1</sup> in the city and suburbs of Paris. This sequence of dwellings, initiated in 1922 with the construction of the Villa Besnus in Vaucresson, corresponds to a successive line of creations: the Ozenfant studio-house (1922), the La Roche and Jeanneret Houses (1923), the Lipchitz Mietschaninoff Houses (1923), the Villa Cook (1926), the Villa Stein/de Monzie (1926), the Maison Planeix (1924) and the Villa Church (1927).

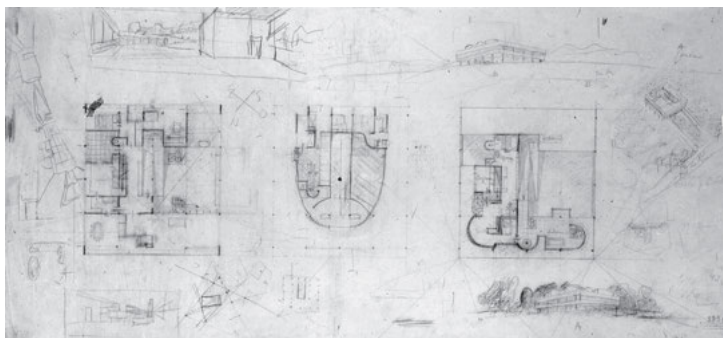
The Villa Savoye is a synthesis of the urban themes and architectural vocabulary developed by Le Corbusier throughout the 1920s – the ultimate experimental phase in a set of design schemes. “Total purity”, as the architect was wont to say, an œuvre whose formal radicalism and innovative style have propelled it to the ranks of the most symbolic architectural works of the 20th century, within the realm of private housing.

Similarly, the Villa Savoye represents an innovative house type whose design concept has achieved dual status: an assertion of classical values – the temple that surveys the surrounding landscape – and a contemporary paradigm of the modern dwelling.

The villa can also be read as both a model of the Palladian country residence, through the formal unity of its structural envelope, and as a symbol of vernacular architecture, articulated in its flows of interior heterogeneous volumes. Le Corbusier himself provides the key to this interpretation in his famous drawing entitled “Four Compositions” <sup>2</sup>: “Of highly generous proportions, the exterior is conceived from an architectural ambition while the interior satisfies functional needs (insulation, contiguity, circulation).”

Designed as a sun trap, a box of light floating above a meadow, the Villa Savoye translates into an exercise of great architectural virtuosity whose creative poetic force is underpinned by spectacular imagery: solarium, ramps, spiral staircases and strip windows. Like a Purist painting, this pattern of volumes and plans generates impeccable proportions, resulting in a sublime fusion between architecture, the dwelling and nature.

The commission and construction of this private residence afforded an ideal opportunity for Le Corbusier – an architect strongly committed to contemporary debates on art, architecture and the city – to put his theoretical concepts into practice and achieve the



First project:  
sketches (FLC 19583)

international renown he was seeking. He hence made no architectural concessions, stamping the edifice with provocative forms and a rigorous functionality.

On the one hand, the programme responds to that of a bourgeois country retreat – garage and outbuildings, gardener’s lodge, servants’ quarters, large living room, kitchen and pantry, master bedroom, boudoir, son’s bedroom, guest room, combined with innovative “Corbusian” elements, such as the hanging garden and solarium. On the other hand, nothing in the volumes, spatial arrangement or interior layout resembles this particular type of upper-class dwelling. Neither a luxury residence, despite its size, nor an ordinary country house, the Villa Savoye stands unique – notably by way of the somewhat ambiguous relationship it enjoys with its terrain. Its totally innovative architecture can be perceived as a flagship, a masterly, slightly surrealistic montage, uniting classicism and modernity in a tripartite composition: hellenistic order of the *pilotis* poised on the ground level, the stark cube that delineates the first floor and the free forms unlocked by the roof terrace.

The villa’s architectural language is also a play on contrast: it is a celebration of the *machine à habiter* (machine for living in), conveyed via its uniform white-painted concrete volumes and clear-cut edges, yet it is also a *machine à émouvoir* (machine for feeling) – an ode to lyricism, expressed through the syntax of its forms and

spatial language. This ambivalence reappears in the entire repertoire of Le Corbusier's later works: the Unité d'Habitation in Marseilles (1945/1952), the Chapel of Notre Dame du Haut at Ronchamp (1951/1955), the Convent of Sainte Marie de la Tourette (1953/1960) and his last projects in India.

The Villa Savoye, whose design was drawn up at the same time as a number of other schemes, including the Villa Baizeau in Carthage, the first urban plans for Algiers and South America, the construction of large-scale buildings such as the Cité de Refuge in Paris and the Centrosoyus in Moscow, can perhaps be rightly perceived today as a turning point for Le Corbusier. It closed the chapter on the twenties and paved the way for the thirties – a new architectural episode.

But that is another story.





# ORIENTATION GUIDE



**PROMENADE ARCHITECTURALE**

1



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