

From Earth To Sky, From Darkness To Light: Le Corbusier And The Promenade Architecturale

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Among the theoretical foundations of some of Le Corbusier's most important projects, such as the *Villa Savoye* [6a,6b] and others lesser-known, is the concept of the 'promenade architecturale'; an architecture where movement and circulation are given precedence over the static¹. Yet it is precisely here, in the name of the concept itself, where the first paradox lies: Le Corbusier's alternative use of a word with an otherwise well-established meaning. Although the term 'promenade', in the usual sense of the word, generally refers to a walk outside (to a 'walk' 'en plein air' as opposed to within the oppressive gloom of a house, which became a key tool for Rousseau's thought process), Le Corbusier distorts this

meaning by using the same word, applying it to the context of architecture. His 'promenades architecturales', which mostly take place from 'within' houses, eventually connect to the outside, yet invariably begin inside. These constitute just one of the devices used in a Corbusian house to enable the inside and the outside to merge together to form a hybrid that embodies a new idea of home and living. Since Le Corbusier, it is now possible to 'go for a walk' within what was traditionally thought of as the immobile, stationary area, or rather the inside of a house, along a route which inevitably ends outside, suggesting the integration of the inside with the outside world.

This 'promenade' was often associated with the significance that Le Corbusier is known to have ascribed to the intrinsic differences between the two basic systems of vertical communication: the staircase and the ramp. If a staircase separates and a ramp connects, then the ramp must surely constitute the most suitable device as an intermediary for this architectural walk.²

However, this does not simply refer to circulation, or rather the movement needed for fixed and definite points to communicate with each other. Le Corbusier's architecture is certainly abound with designs that stand out for their wealth of circulation and movement, such as the circulation



6a,b / Le Corbusier: *Villa Savoye*. Poissy. 1929.

of patients and healthcare staff, which formed the basis for his project for the *Venice Hospital*; the different paths taken by workers as they make their way around the Duval and Olivetti factories; the route embarked upon by a visitor as they wander through the *musée à croissance illimitée* or in the *Pavillon des temps nouveaux*, and the collective 'promenade' of his project for the *Palace of the Soviets* (designed to convey and communicate Walter Benjamin's so-called aestheticisation of politics). Interestingly, at the very beginning of his career, the ramp already played a key role in both of his slaughterhouse projects in 1917, serving as the race for the cattle to move along.

However, unlike simple circulation, the 'promenade architecturale' does not aspire to lead the walker to any place in particular, or to seal off its route, but rather it constitutes an end in itself and becomes one of the keystones of the architecture that contains it. According to Le Corbusier, the 'promenade' is what allows the senses to contribute as a whole, rather than just sight alone: by viewing a walk as a means of encountering an experience that is just as physical as it is emotional, the 'promenade' involves the entire body, becoming a comprehensive tool for knowledge. The 'promenade' introduces the temporal dimension into architecture; the experience of the progressive passing of time based on a succession of fragmentary moments as opposed to a single moment captured by the fixed, frontal gaze.

The extensive revision of historiography over the past few decades has called into question Modernism's canonical text, the

'Grand Narrative', which has provided us with greater insight as to the 'other' Le Corbusier; a character who was far more complex than his lesser image as a guardian of machinist functionalism. In this new, historiographical context, we can now fully appreciate the extent to which the concept of the 'promenade architecturale' goes far beyond the purely architectural and firmly plants itself in Le Corbusier's complex world view: a patchwork of hermeticism, alchemist thought, more heterodox versions of Christian piety and his dualist view of a world in two halves (built on the foundations of dual tensions between light-dark, man-woman, sun-moon, night-day, earth-water, earth-air, reason-passion, etc.). His was a divided world where the only task of the architect or designer was to lay down bridges and to establish connections, no matter how momentary these may be. From the time of his studies until his most brilliant visual-theoretical views expressed in the *Le Poème de l'Angle Droit* (1955), the 'promenade', whose poetics of walking involve both the body and intellect together, transforming a walk into the means of encountering the human experience, is nothing other than the architectonic translation of an ancient initiatory journey from the material to the spiritual world; from earth to sky, from darkness to light: a journey that turns the act of wandering into the path to man's spiritual purification and refinement.

In his description of the *Villa Savoye* in his *Oeuvre complète*, for the first time Le Corbusier describes the 'promenade' as one of the keystones of the building. The

very essence of this villa lies in the variety granted by this 'walk', even within such a strict constructive and structural setting. The 'promenade architecturale' is a source of diversity and allows for a range of different viewpoints, producing a series of discoveries that are specific to a concept of architecture that sees beyond the frontal perspective; these discoveries evoke the idea of an intellect that is pursuing a continual quest to understand the relationship between man, his artificial creations and the natural environment in which these arise.

This 'promenade' in the *Villa Savoye* also allows us to reflect on the special role that history plays for Le Corbusier; a role that is both evident and conducive, despite the long-standing idea of a supposed 'tabula rasa' that would entirely disregard lessons of the past. More specifically, Le Corbusier introduces us to his concept of the 'promenade', not as his own invention but rather as the (re)-discovery of a principle which, according to him, was already present in Islamic architecture: the concept of an architecture that rejects the use of a fixed viewpoint and that can only be fully appreciated by walking around it⁴.

The *Villa Savoye* also allows us to appreciate more clearly the deep, cosmological meaning of this 'walk' along the ramp. The journey embarks in a deliberately dark area, shaded by the 'pilotis', where the ramp is in direct contact with the earth; it rises upwards towards the light, freeing itself from heavier, material aspects. Initially from inside, it leads out onto the terrace, turning the 'toit-jardin' into the first stage, not the goal, of a promenade which often ensues in a vertical direction: from Mother

Earth to sky, from the dense and dark to the aerial and luminous; an element that serves to connect human constructions with nature.

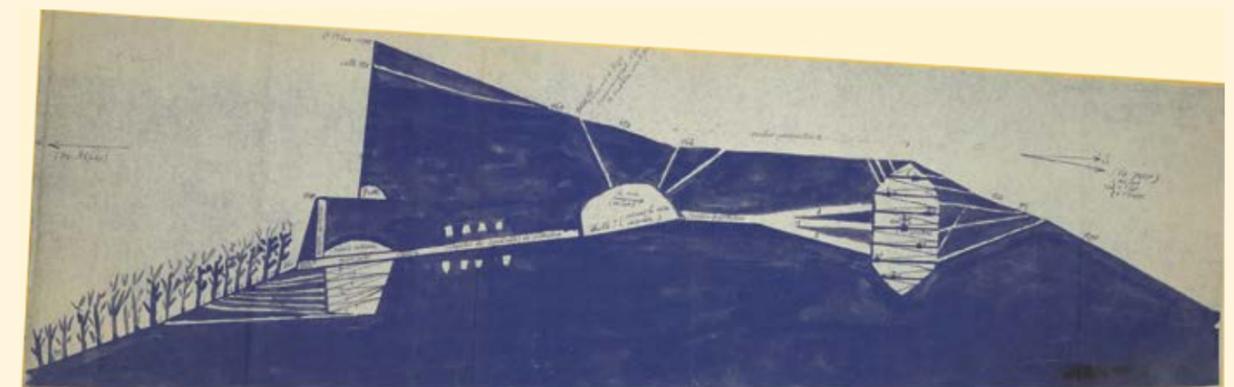
From this 'toit-jardin', which is far more 'designed' than one would expect of a simple roof, the ramp leads to a window which provides a spectacular, framed view, like the pavilion in Zurich⁵ would later, of the ever-changing sky of the world seen through the prism of the geometry of this window/frame. The 'promenade' does not finish on the roof of the house, but rather continues its virtual route through this very window; the spiritual meaning of this can only be understood by those who have completed this initiatory journey.

Almost 20 years later, Le Corbusier published his article titled "L'espace indicible" in 1946, in which he formulates the idea of an immeasurable space, one which is linked to the experience of 'the

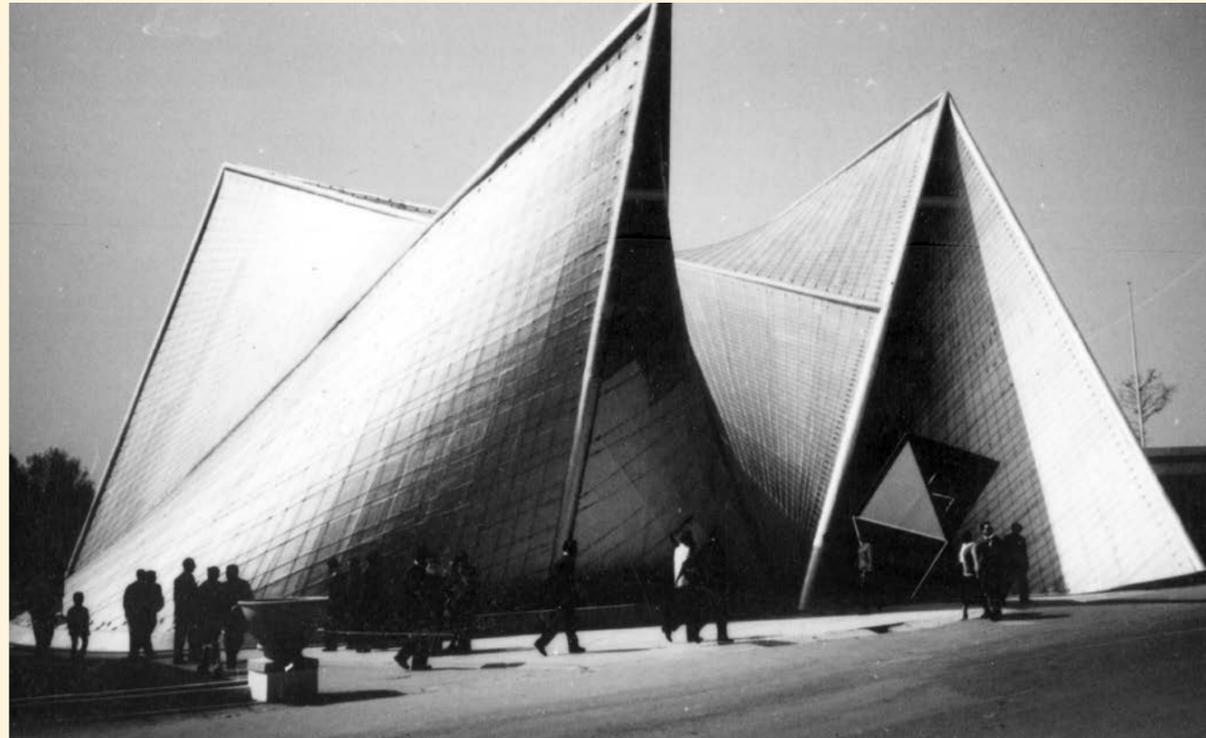
sacred' and where the senses would be reunited (leaving behind the exorbitant privilege of sight) and synthesis would occur between architecture and the arts. In the same year he began work on a project that he would continue to improve and amend until the end of his days, despite the fact that it was unsuccessful: the underground cathedral in Sainte-Baume.

In Marseille, Le Corbusier became acquainted with Édouard Trouin; a visionary character and landowner of territory in the area (between Toulon and Marseille) known as *La Sainte-Baume*, which was named after the legend of Mary Magdalene who was said to have lived in a cave in one of the hills. Trouin was determined to preserve this territory, which he had already predicted would be closely tied to seasonal tourism in the future. This union between ancient spirituality, 'genius loci'

and modern 'protoecology', gave rise to Le Corbusier's project. The key player of this project was the *Basilique universelle de la paix et du pardon*: a telluric temple dug out of the rocky mountain side that would pass through the mountain from one side to the other, from the sacred cave all the way to reach the Mediterranean Sea. [6c] The route, which was truly initiatory in its most hermetic sense, with its sloping planes designed to represent access to higher levels of spirituality by means of physical strength, would begin from the dark mouth of the cave and lead all the way to the opening at the other end, where the traveller would be greeted with the glaring light of the Sun (representing Light and Fire) and the Mediterranean Sea (Water). This path was illuminated by both natural light (through skylights, which clearly resemble the drawings created in Hadrian's Villa



6c / Le Corbusier: Design for the subterranean *Basilique de la Paix et du Pardon*. La Sainte-Baume. 1948.



6d/ Le Corbusier: *Pavillon Philips*. Exposition Internationale Bruxelles. 1958.

in 1911, similar to those that appeared much later in Ronchamp) and by electric light that was cleverly altered so as to represent the spiritual 'tempi' of this route which takes the wanderer from light through to more dappled, thinner light as it filters through the shadows.

Research carried out by Flora Samuel and others⁶ revealed a marked connection between this project and the concept of Santa Teresa's mystical, interior journey, and between the influences of Rabelais's hermetic thought. The reason behind this particular combination appears to be steeped in Le Corbusier's rather personal religious devotion and his dualist view of the world⁷. Although the *Cathe-*

dral of Sainte-Baume was rejected by the hierarchy of the Catholic Church, a large part of the symbiosis between ancient religious piety and modern spirituality would be echoed several years later in both *Chapelle Notre Dame du Haute* in Ronchamp and *La Tourette*: two religious places where special kinds of *promenade* were also meaningfully placed (in Ronchamp, the memory of the old pilgrim path and the idea of the large glazed door as the threshold; in *La Tourette*, the cloisters which are no longer 'hortus conclusus' but instead form a spiral of crossroads of all kinds of sacred routes.

Some years later, the *Philips Pavilion* for the 1958 Brussels World's Fair constituted a new

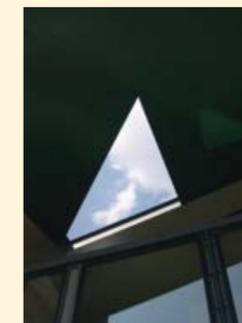
kind of *promenade*, one which passed between the ancient history of mankind and its latest technological developments⁸. [6d] With the unity of architecture, film and music by Le Corbusier, Iannis Xenakis and Edgar Varèse, the *Philips Pavilion* represents Le Corbusier's 50-year aspiration to achieve synthesis between the arts and the human senses. Despite the use of advanced construction techniques, the shape of the pavilion resembled the form of a nomad tent, recalling the architecture of travel (this concept of a modern form of nomadism led Le Corbusier to call his tapestries 'mural-nomads'). This modern 'tent' housed a 'promenade' which provided a total, sensory experience:



6e/ Le Corbusier: Stair in *La Maison de l'Homme*. Zürich. 1960–1967.



6f/ Le Corbusier: Ramp in *La Maison de l'Homme*. Zürich. 1960–1967.



6g/ Le Corbusier: Opening in the roof in *La Maison de l'Homme*. Zürich. 1960–1967.

spectators who penetrated into this den, which was hyper technological, natural and tellurian all at the same time, would be met with an astonishing display of oversized images projected on the walls, playing out the main themes behind Le Corbusier's world view in a dramatic, captivating way. The entire inside of this real stomach/space, which was designed to 'digest' and transform the conformist spirit, forced the visitor, who was perhaps absorbed in the multisensory experience of Le Corbusier and Varès' *Le Poème électronique*, to move about, abandoning the tranquility of the usual stationary position assumed for cinema.

Finally, in the early 1970s, Le Corbusier began the final chapter of his series of *promenades* in *La Maison de l'Homme*; the pavilion that he designed for his art dealer Heidi Weber in Zurich: neither a house nor a museum, this iconic construction was capable of providing a comprehensive summary of Le Corbusier's architectural ideas and harbours a variety of contemporary artwork. [6e, 6f, 6g] Between 1960 and 1967, the design and construction of the Zurich pavilion underwent several changes⁹, without ever losing that quality of *synthesis* which lay at the very essence of the architecture itself and which had characterised both the architect and the dealer from the outset.

This concept of synthesis bestowed all its glory on the last of these 'promenades architecturales' designed by Le Corbusier. In the quintessence of the idea of home that is the Zurich pavilion, the main area is constructed of ridged cubic pieces measuring 2.26 m in length (Modulor) screwed together by means of metal beams.

However, the roof, which rests above the interior space, assumes its original role as 'shelter'. The vast metal roofing had to be built first, independently and separately from the main body. In the shape of a double umbrella and supported by 9 tall, steel pillars, it grants the roof of the building a remarkable, truly sculptural appearance; beneath the top layer, rather than the traditional attic, lies a new kind of intermediary space between the inside and the outside; a real terrace that creates synthesis between the flat terrace and the sloping roofing.

In this final stage of his trajectory, Le Corbusier began to experiment with other variants of the 'promenade'. A fundamental aspect of the centre of the Mill Owners' Association in Ahmedabad, India was access to the building itself, facilitated by a pedestrian walkway via a ramp; similarly, the ramp was the keystone to the beginning a journey inside the *Palace of Assembly* in Chandigarh. In the Carpenter Center in Harvard (1961-1964), the 'promenade architecturale' takes on an entirely urban meaning: the ramp crosses the building, just like any other street in the city, all the while inviting those who follow it to engage with the artistic activities taking place on either side in the studios that occupy the two main areas of the building. In 1964, the project for the *Palais des Congrès* in Strasbourg featured a long ramp that stretched from the core of the building all the way to the terrace on the roof, not unlike the *Villa Savoye*, but on a rather different scale.

However, it was not until more than 30 years after the brilliant partnership of the ramp and the

staircase in the *Villa Savoye* that the joint presence of both these elements would feature yet again in Zurich as one of the keystones of the project. Here, the staircase and ramp represent the emphatic invasion of concrete (with visible traces of the wooden timbering) into the light, airy world of metal and glass. The choice to construct the main body of the building out of metal, and not of concrete as originally planned in the first project, creates another kind of synthesis: the original combination of three classic building materials seen in modern construction (concrete, glass and metal), which is also open to new discoveries such as neoprene, which was very recent at the time.

The staircase floats in the internal space, almost independently, like a concrete sculpture textured with metal 'passementerie', whilst light also plays an important role, streaming in from the terrace above. But perhaps the most remarkable aspect of this project is the sheer size of the ramp, which rises up from the basement, or cavern, on the ground floor and, with its upwards climb, is gradually flooded with more and more light from wide, lateral slats; it flows out beyond the alveolar cubes in the north side of the building to exit outside, climbing further upwards before returning to the edge of the building and eventually to the terrace.

By just tracing this relatively short route, we are transported from the darkness of the earth in the basement to the lightness of metal and glass, and finally to the union with nature and the victory of light on the roof. The magnificent triangular aperture on the roof plays an essential role in

enabling sunlight to pass through the metal, allowing it to move whilst still being enclosed in a frame. The house is the 'daughter of the sun', proclaimed Le Corbusier in his *Le Poème de l'angle droit*, and the aperture on the roof conveys this solar 'affiliation', turning the roof into an area of contact between the two elements, where human creation exists in harmony with the course of nature.

Finally, from Poissy to Zurich, Le Corbusier's 'promenade architecturale' is not only a system of movement, nor is it just a way of using and appreciating architecture, rather it is a complete sensory, spiritual experience designed to transform man and prepare him for a new way of living.

- 1 Josep Quetglas: "Promenade architecturale", in Josep Quetglas: Artículos de ocasión, Barcelona, Gustavo Gili, 2004, p. 205-208. Flora Samuel: Le Corbusier and the Architectural Promenade, Basel-London, Birkhäuser, 2010.
- 2 «Du pilotis on monte insensiblement par une rampe, ce qui est une sensation totalement différente de celle donnée par un escalier formé de marches. Un escalier sépare un étage d'autre: une rampe relie» (Le Corbusier y Pierre Jeanneret (1935): Oeuvre complète, vol. 2: 1929-1934, ed. Willy Boesiger. Zürich: H. Girsberger, p. 25).
- 3 «Dans cette maison-ci, il s'agit d'une véritable promenade architecturale, offrant des aspects constamment variés, inattendus, parfois étonnants. Il est intéressant d'obtenir tant de diversité quand on a par exemple, admis au point de vue constructif, un schéma de poteaux et de poutres d'une rigueur absolue» (ibid., p. 24).
- 4 "L'architecture arabe nous donne un enseignement précieux. Elle s'apprécie à la marche, avec le pied; c'est en marchant, en se déplaçant que l'on voit se développer les ordonnances de l'architecture. C'est un principe contraire à la architecture baroque qui est conçue sur le papier, autour d'un point fixe théorique. Je préfère l'enseignement de l'architecture arabe" (ibid.).
- 5 Pavillon d'exposition ZHLC (Maison de l'Homme), Zurich, Suisse, 1963
- 6 Flora Samuel: "La cité orphique de La Sainte-Baume", in Le Corbusier. Le symbolique, le sacré, la spiritualité, Paris, Fondation Le Corbusier, 2004, p. 121-137. Id.: "The Philosophical City of Rabelais and St. Teresa. Le Corbusier and Edouard Trouin's Scheme for St. Baume", Literature and Theology, 13, 2, 1999, pp. 111-125. J. Birksted: Le Corbusier and the Occult, Cambridge (Mass.), The MIT Press, 2009. Juan Calatrava: «Mito, historia, memoria y arquitectura: cinco episodios en la obra de Le Corbusier», in José A. González Alcantud & Juan Calatrava (eds.): Memoria y patrimonio. Concepto y reflexión desde el Mediterráneo, Granada, Editorial Universidad de Granada, 2012, p. 243-307.
- 7 Juan Calatrava: «Le Corbusier y Le Poème de l'Angle Droit: un poema habitable, una casa poética», in Cat. Exhibition Le Corbusier y la síntesis de las artes: el Poema del Ángulo Recto, Madrid, Círculo de Bellas Artes, 2006, p. 9-49.
- 8 Le Corbusier: Le Poème Electronique, Paris, Forces Vives, 1958. M. Treib: Space Calculate in Seconds. The Philips Pavillon, Le Corbusier and Edgar Varèse, Princeton, 1996. A. Capanna: Le Corbusier. Padiglione Philips, Brussels, Milan, 2000. Vincenzo Casali: «L'imaginaire du 'Poème Électronique'», in Le Corbusier. Le symbolique, le sacré, la spiritualité, quote., p. 139-157.
- 9 Juan Calatrava: «Una casa para el hombre: Heidi Weber Museum - Centre Le Corbusier» in Le Corbusier. Museo y Colección Heidi Weber, Cat. Exhibition Madrid, Museo Nacional Centro de Arte Reina Sofía, 2007, p. 212-241.