

The Creation of Le Corbusier's "Primitivistic" Regional Style: a Study in Resolved Dialectic Oppositions

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At the outset of this paper, I would like to clarify my usage of the term "primitivism." Rather than implying any value judgment, I am using the term as a means of conveying information about forms and motifs in their primordial, essential, or primary states. Furthermore, I am using the term as Le Corbusier used the term in reference to his works of the period under discussion. Additionally, Le Corbusier refers to the Greeks as a "primitive" civilization, from which he drew much inspiration.

Clearly, one of the most influential architects of the twentieth century, Le Corbusier (born Charles Edouard Jeanneret, October 6, 1887-August 27, 1965) had a celebrated, although rocky career from 1910-60.¹ Early in his career, he utilized a balanced harmony of proportion so important to the ancient Greek civilization, which he admired and regarded as a "primitive" or primary civilization. His use of essential geometric forms, based on the Golden Section, was a result of his desire to evoke primordial, familiar chords within people. Le Corbusier felt he was expressing universal feelings in his quest for harmony and balance. His reduction and synthesis of all that was around him helped him derive "type-objects," which he also considered primordial due their reductiveness and universal appeal. His early "primitivism" was, therefore, based on Classical ideas which he merged with French Classical tastes and the modern functionalism of new materials. These early Classical works are exemplified by his masterwork, the Villa Savoye. Built in 1929, at Poissy, near Paris, the Villa is a beautifully proportioned International Style building based on strict geometric forms. During this period, he also painted in the Purist style—a strict geometric style with an emphasis on essential forms.

Towards the end of 1929, however, his renowned career took another twist. Fully retaining the ideas of Classical "primitive" harmony, he promoted a new style of regionalism.² His world-wide travel had exposed him to folk, peasant, and vernacular dwellings. Distinct from what had been seen before, his new style incorporated Classical proportion, primordial natural forms, new technology, and new materials, which were innovatively altered and juxtaposed. Softening his machine aesthetic, he embraced a more emotionally evocative style.

Kenneth Frampton and William Curtis have both remarked that Le Corbusier's change reflected a change in personal ideology, as he lost hope that the machine could better mankind.³ As usual, Le Corbusier was the vanguard, presaging both the biomorphic movement of the 1950s and the post-modernists' vernacular movement in the 1970s. After a disastrous commission in Soviet Russia, from 1926-30, and trips to North Africa, Spain, and Greece, Le Corbusier sought a genial blend of landscape and vernacular traditions. He was acutely aware that local styles and traditions were valid signs of regional importance. Rather than remain artistically within the confines of a particular regional style, however, he extracted local signs from several areas, and subsequently recombined them elsewhere, changing the signification. Le Corbusier's actions reflect, once again, a conscious choice on his part to make his style universal. His innate dialectic mind allowed him to continually reconcile oppositions such as these. In his early career it was the reconciliation between Classical harmony and modern materials and techniques that occupied his thoughts. From the 1930s forward, his predominant thought was the resolution of vernacular styles and traditions with modern materials and techniques.

In this paper, I will show how Le Corbusier employed "primitivism" in his later works, developing a regional style based on primordial elements. In 1935, Le Corbusier wrote about his quest for the "primitive," stating, "I am attracted to the natural order of things. . . in my flight from city living I end up in places where society is in the process of organization. I seek out the primitive men, not for their barbarity, but for their wisdom."⁴

His use of modern tectonics, that is, construction and structure, did not constrict his ability to provide a new primitive vocabulary. Rather than confine him, his use of tectonics gave rise to new forms and techniques. However, these innovations did not replace or dismiss his use of Classical proportion. Le Corbusier rarely dismissed an idea, instead, he constantly reinvented it. I will use three of his buildings to exemplify his use of "primitivism" and its change from its former classicism. The Petite Maison de Weekend, built in 1935, for example, is an

¹ Le Corbusier was a French-speaking Swiss, born in La Chaux de Fonds, near the French border.

² William J. R. Curtis, *Le Corbusier: Ideas and Forms* (Oxford: Phaidon, 1986) 116. Curtis is the only author to attach a name to Le Corbusier's style of the 1930s-60s. Others refer to it chronologically.

³ Kenneth Frampton, *Modern Architecture: A Critical History* (London: Thames and Hudson, 1992) 224. Curtis 115. Both authors feel that Le Corbusier was disenchanted by the manner in which the machine aesthetic had been appropriated by architects and designers who displayed little respect for proper proportion.

⁴ Curtis 115.

early, fully integrated “primitive” statement of a Parisian suburban dwelling intended as a getaway house (Figure 1).⁵ It is a blend of sophistication and rusticity, which serves as a metaphor for its function. Secondly, the Unité d’Habitation, Marseilles, built from 1947-53, is a multi-family dwelling still in use today (Figure 2). The huge apartment block differs from the previous example in size and function, but like the Petite Maison de Weekend, it incorporates numerous “primitive” symbols. The third building under discussion is the Chapel of Notre-Dame du Haute, at Ronchamp, 1951-53 (Figure 3). An impressive example of wholly incorporated “primitive” symbols, techniques, and materials, Ronchamp is a unique building which still resists description. Little attention is given by scholars to this period, with most preferring to discuss Le Corbusier’s earlier landmark International Style. However, with the current emphasis on the vernacular accent of Post-Modernist architectural language, Le Corbusier’s prescient works of this period require a closer examination.

The earliest break from Le Corbusier’s International Style comes in the form of a small holiday house in St. Cloud, on the outskirts of Paris, the Petite Maison de Weekend. Built in 1935 for a wealthy client, the structure is based on a butterfly vaulted construction. Its “primitive” association to a cave cannot be overlooked; however, its creative origins are a sophisticated combination of modern and local materials, most of which are left exposed. Concrete, glass block, brick, wood, stone, and turf all merge into a harmonious composition. Frampton calls it a tectonic montage, meaning that the construction and the structure are pieced together as a whole.⁶

Based on the bay-like proportion of the vaulted pavilion in the garden, the dual-vaulted interior is constructed of reinforced concrete with an integrated asbestos compound and covered in finished plywood (Figure 4). The roof is partially buried under the hillside turf, keeping the house naturally insulated, and providing the majority of the cave-like interior as a retreat. In writing about the house, Le Corbusier stated:

The designing of such a house demanded extreme care since the elements of construction were the only architectonic means. The architectural theme was established about a typical bay whose influence extended as far as the little pavilion in the garden. Here one was confronted by exposed stonework, natural on the outside, while on the interior, wood on the walls and ceiling and a chimney out

of rough brickwork, with white ceramic tiles on the floor. Nevada glass block walls and a table of Cippolino marble.⁷

Always aware of the grand approach and automobile reception areas, Le Corbusier placed a rubble wall along the entrance façade. Besides framing the area for guests to park, it set the tone for the house to be understood as a rustic retreat. Created largely out of local stone, this house represents a clear break with his International Style buildings, with their sleek, geometric façades and pristine white walls. Here, Le Corbusier exposed the natural and man-made elements of construction, evoking a primordial response tinged with a sophisticated sensibility. The building has been called “womb-like,” and an “elegant cavern, [or] ironic grotto. . . . Ironic, because there is an intelligent distance [from] the building.”⁸ The dialectic between “primitive” and modern is resolved with the aesthetic merging of “primitive” elements and machine-made materials. The viewer must pause to visually dismantle the building in order to fully ascertain what is natural and what is manufactured. Tucked into its site and blending with its natural setting, the small house clearly evokes the sense of a retreat from urbanity, but remains urbane in its precise elocution.

Less overt in its “primitive” qualities is the multi-family dwelling built by Le Corbusier in Marseilles from 1947-53. The site was an ancient Roman one, containing cypress trees, olive trees, and boulders. Based on Le Corbusier’s use of Classical proportion, the building reflects his interests in ideal cities, the machine aesthetic of ocean-liners, and a number of “primitive” elements which resonate from his travels to the Mediterranean and North Africa; the block structure commands the north-south axis of a city block. On the exterior, Le Corbusier arranged the apartments so that they capture the daily trek of the sun from its rise to its setting. However, the effects of a blazing sun are offset by the façade’s honeycomb element, called a *brise-soleil*, or sun-breaker. Deriving this device from vernacular architecture in North Africa, Le Corbusier used this “primitive” element numerous times throughout the 1930s - 1960s as a means of keeping glare and heat on interiors to a minimum. At Unité, he painted the *brise-soleils* in primary colors, which he likened to the concept of polychromed surfaces of the Parthenon.⁹ The concrete façade was designed in *béton brut*, or raw concrete, in order to accommodate the uneven surface work of the many local construction workers. However, it was not solely for practical purposes that Le Corbusier initiated the use of *béton brut* in this building; he sought another

⁵ The Petite Maison did have predecessors created by Le Corbusier, but not as fully realized. They are the 1919 Monol development in which he experimented with the butterfly vaulting found at Petite Maison, as a component of modular housing. Additionally, a 1930 house in Chile, is an early example of his use of local stone and rubble on the exterior.

⁶ Kenneth Frampton, *Studies in Tectonic Culture: The Poetics of Construction in Nineteenth and Twentieth Century Culture* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: The MIT Press, 1996) 345.

⁷ Frampton 345.

⁸ Curtis refers to the building as “womb-like,” while Vincent Scully calls the building an “elegant cavern.” Scully is quoted in Curtis 115. As a post-modern architectural historian, Scully has interest also in the ironic as found in architecture.

⁹ Le Corbusier took several trips to Greece, however, his first one left an indelible mark on him. In 1907, the young, unformed architect developed an attachment to the proportion and harmony of the architecture. Further, he recognized the oppositional dialogue between nature and architecture; he strove to resolve this. The Parthenon featured prominently in his *Vers une Architecture* of 1923, and was never far from his mind in any of his work.

"primitive" element in his design repertoire. *Béton brut* is a surface finish that exposes the rough, unfinished look of cast concrete, with its pebbles, air pockets, wood frame marks, and—at Unité, seashells—as a symbol of the Mediterranean. With the imprinted seashell, Le Corbusier has left an indexical sign of the site in the slab. Furthermore, much like the chisel marks of wooden sculpture, the grain of the wooden frames is imprinted into the concrete, leaving a record of the construction process for all to see. This rough-hewn look is countermanded in the Unité, however, by the building's Classical proportions and its precise execution in joining of the slabs. Based on the repetitive quality of Roman aqueducts, and of the Coliseum's façade, the Unité is abstractly rhythmic as well as "primitivistic." Further, it serves as a modern metaphor for Classical architecture located on an ancient site.

There are other references to "primitive" conditions, as well, at the Unité d'Habitation. For instance, the pilotis which hold up the building, are also "primitivistic" in their form, resembling the morphology of bones. In addition, the vertical ridging, created from the wooden framework of its production, can be read as fluting. Therefore, an indexical mark of production becomes a Classical quotation. Pilotis are Le Corbusier's modernist sign of anticanonical French Classicism. He subverted the French Classical use of columns, as usually decorative or symbolic architectural elements, by making them actually support the building. Of course, this structural use of columns originated with his beloved "primitive" Greeks.

Additionally, Le Corbusier took advantage of the original rocky site which overlooks the Bay of Marseilles. These features evoke other associations with the designs and tectonics of the "primitive" Greeks. His favorite site, the Parthenon, counts among the associations. The rustic view inspired Le Corbusier to integrate the feeling of living in nature into the building. His merging of architecture and nature is exemplified by the panoramic view experienced from the roof top terrace of the rocky terrain, with trees, and the bay beyond. The roof top terrace which houses a children's pool, a running track, a garden, and a gymnasium, is also enmeshed with references to the ancient Roman geological site by its irregularly placed artificial concrete mounds, which significantly echo the surrounding landscape. A feeling of nature is evoked by the view from the roof, because the view places nature within the observer's realm, distorting the reality of the surrounding modern aesthetic. Yet, paradoxically, one can feel as though atop the deck of an ocean liner, with a view of the bay beyond. This oppositional dialectic is intentional: once again, Le Corbusier resolves the tension between "primitivism" and the machine aesthetic. The viewer must disassemble the elements in order to reveal the symbolic underpinnings of the design. Le Corbusier's painting of the time also reflected his change to a softer, more organic shape. For

example, in 1931 in his *atelier* in Paris, he had several paintings in progress which reflected an organic, more curvilinear form emerging in his work.

If the viewer must struggle to untangle the signs and symbols of Petite Maison de Weekend and of the Unité d'Habitation, then the challenge reaches heroic proportions when viewing the Chapel of Notre Dame du Haute at Ronchamp. Placed at the crest of a hilly site, near the Swiss border, the pilgrimage chapel is only fully visible when one arrives at the summit. Like the Acropolis, the natural site was capped with a man-made structure. Le Corbusier saw this relationship as an opposition of architecture versus nature, and from the beginning of his career, he felt compelled to resolve its tension.

The rocky terrain, and site of the building create the first "primitive" association for this unique building. That is, the feeling of being in nature, is evoked here. Like the Petite Maison, and the Unité, the building is located within a natural setting. At Ronchamp, however, nature is also reflected in the fluctuating, splayed walls, and crustacean-like roof. The use of curvilinear forms abstracted from their natural sources indicate that Le Corbusier had not forgotten his early education in La Chaux de Fonds under the tutelage of Charles L'Eplattenier, a Ruskin follower.¹⁰

Constructed of both manufactured and natural materials, the Chapel signifies the harmonious blending of the natural and man-made world. Therefore, it represents the world of spirit where all is in balance. The concrete frame is infilled with the rubble remaining from the previous chapel, and is sprayed with two inches of gunnite, rusticated to look like stucco. Lacking the sleek and smooth appearance of Le Corbusier's International Style façades, the textured white gunnite surfaces offer a warm Mediterranean feel to a high altitude building, creating a feeling of warmth in a cold climate. This juxtaposition distorts the reality of place and climate in the viewer's mind. Exterior walls undulate in various positions from one another, to suggest an organic animation of the whole. The concave façade on the east side of the chapel offers its comforting curve as shelter to the priest during outdoor services. The interior of the chapel is finished in *béton brut*, recalling the interiors of great churches constructed of stone. Furthermore, the interior is lit by natural light which flows in from irregularly placed windows and a nine-inch glazed section which runs lengthway along three walls between the roof and the top of the wall. There are wooden pews, a high altar, and two semicircular side chapels. The floor rises organically, echoing the hilly site, and the crustacean-inspired roof droops like a rain-soaked tent. The building is often seen as a mystery, and scholars seem at a loss for words when discussing the unrivaled roof, yet Le Corbusier seemed unruffled for an explanation of its design origin. In 1965 he wrote, "A crab shell picked up on Long Island near New York, in 1946,

¹⁰ Le Corbusier's early education is discussed by numerous authors. His first artistic training was achieved in an applied arts school in La Chaux de Fonds. Throughout his life, his teacher Charles L'Eplattenier, performed as a mentor, and helped Le Corbusier get scholarships and com-

missions. L'Eplattenier taught in an Arts and Crafts manner, following the teachings of Ruskin. Therefore, many years of Le Corbusier's early training were spent in abstracting nature.

lay on the drafting table. It became the roof of the chapel."¹¹ What better "primitive" source than the life-giving sea?

Signifiers of "primitive" sources abound in this chapel. In addition to the site, and the placement of the building, previously mentioned, there is the obvious reference to a "primitive" form in the design of the shell-like roof, derived from nature but abstracted. Moreover, chapels lit from above evoke the grotto at Hadrian's villa in Tivoli and refer to the oculus at the Pantheon in Rome. Le Corbusier makes sole use of the primary source of natural light to illuminate the entire building. It is also interesting to note that there was a pagan sun temple on the site previously, which, of course, was oriented to the trajectory of the sun. Le Corbusier invokes this previous "primitive" temple as he positioned his chapel with its windows and skylights to capture maximum natural light. Light dances off of the whitewashed and painted walls, subtly changing with the constant movement of the sun.¹² Yet, an evocation of the Gothic use of light as spirit or pure life force cannot be dismissed here, nor can the vaulting which appears in response to the sagging roof. In both cases the evocation of medieval references can be seen as a primordial signifier of the divine. Therefore, another oppositional dialectic can be seen as resolved here, that of the Classical and the Gothic. Furthermore, the roof does not join the wall proper on three sides of the building. This allows for the illusion of the apparently heavy roof floating above the wall, evoking the feeling which occurs with the great dome at Hagia Sophia. Granted, the seemingly floating dome of Hagia Sophia is banded by framed windows at its base, but the same expression of primordial light lifting the weight of the canopy is present at Ronchamp. Additionally, we can view the narrow band of glazing as a self-referential symbol of his *fenêtres en longueur*, or long, ribbon-like windows which Le Corbusier originally designed for his International Style buildings as subversions of canonical French windows.

Finally, we see an amalgamation of references to ships, such as the prow of the roof; the rounded tower resembling a ship's horn, also seen at Villa Savoye and Unité; and references to vernacular dwellings in Greece, Algeria, and Spain. For example, the whitewashed exterior is derived from Greece, the Chapel cross unit from Spain, and the south wall with its

perforations—an Algerian Mosque.¹³ The forms are tightly knit to one another, evidencing Le Corbusier's mania for meticulous precision, but at the same time the building changes its character from one façade to another. As in the interior of the Villa Savoye, there is a continual vista with every progressive turn. Multi-faceted, wholly incorporated with "primitive" and modern materials, techniques, and motifs, the unique building is an exemplary vernacular construction.

In conclusion, we have seen Le Corbusier bring the full force of his career into motion during the 1930s when he began to develop his regional style. We have seen that this style is based on his earlier Classical "primitivism," but enjoins his new quest for "primitive" and vernacular forms which could be transmitted universally. Usually seen oppositionally, the universal use of the vernacular was just another antithesis to be reconciled. Furthermore, Le Corbusier's entire *corpus* was built on oppositions, and subsequently, his merging of classical "primitive" and regional "primitive" designs was just part of his ability to reconcile seemingly disparate concepts.

Furthermore, Le Corbusier resolved the opposition of a primary or essential vocabulary versus modern technology by utilizing modern materials, which he "primitivized." In the case of reinforced concrete, he left the maker's mark, so that it signified hand-crafted stone; and, he even left the mark of the primordial sea at Unité. He created symbolic Mediterranean stucco exteriors by blowing synthetic-based gunnite on his buildings. He created vernacular buildings by utilizing local stone, designs abstracted from nature, and a precise understanding of the site. He evoked the primordial past with his use of light, and his references to ancient sites. He transformed time, repeatedly, by conflating images which distorted the viewer's acclamation to temporality. He juxtaposed modernity against whichever primordial past he was culling, and thereby created a new present. Le Corbusier simply synthesized everything he saw, and recombined it to fit the construction task at hand. But nowhere is that more apparent than in his later works, those of his regional style beginning in the 1930s.

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¹¹ Stanislaus Von Moos, *Le Corbusier: Elements of a Synthesis*, 1979. Quote from Le Corbusier attributed to his writings of 1965, *Textes et Dessins pour Ronchamp*, Paris.

¹² Von Moos is the only author who mentions that some portions of

the interior walls were painted; two colors he mentions are liturgical purple and a light yellow.

¹³ Von Moos 98.

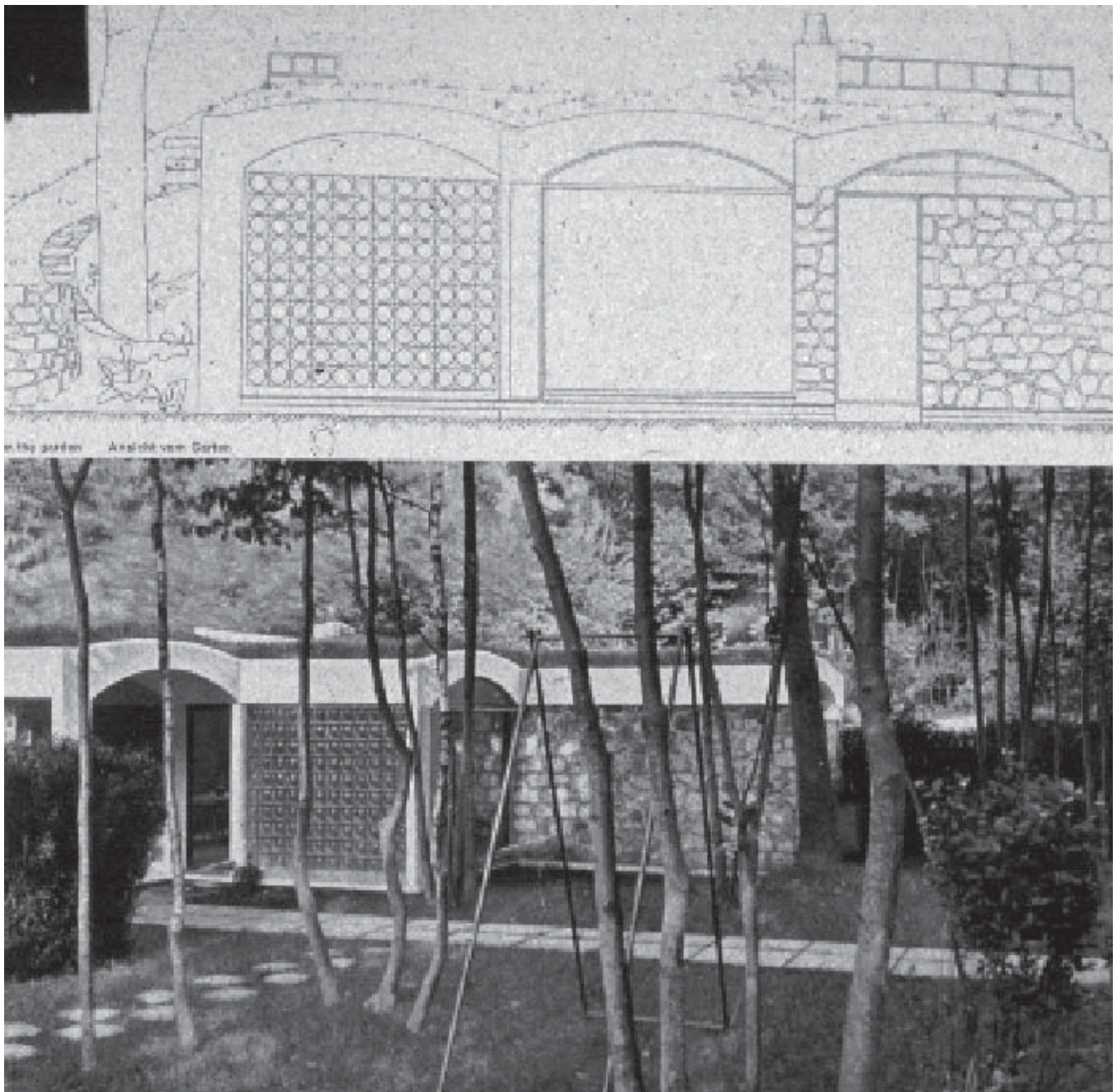


Figure 1. Le Corbusier and Pierre Jeanneret, Weekend House, La Celle Saint-Cloud, France, elevation and exterior, 1935.



Figure 2. Le Corbusier, La Cité radieuse (Unité d'Habitation), exterior, Marseilles, France, 1947-53. Credit: Giraudon/Art Resource, NY.

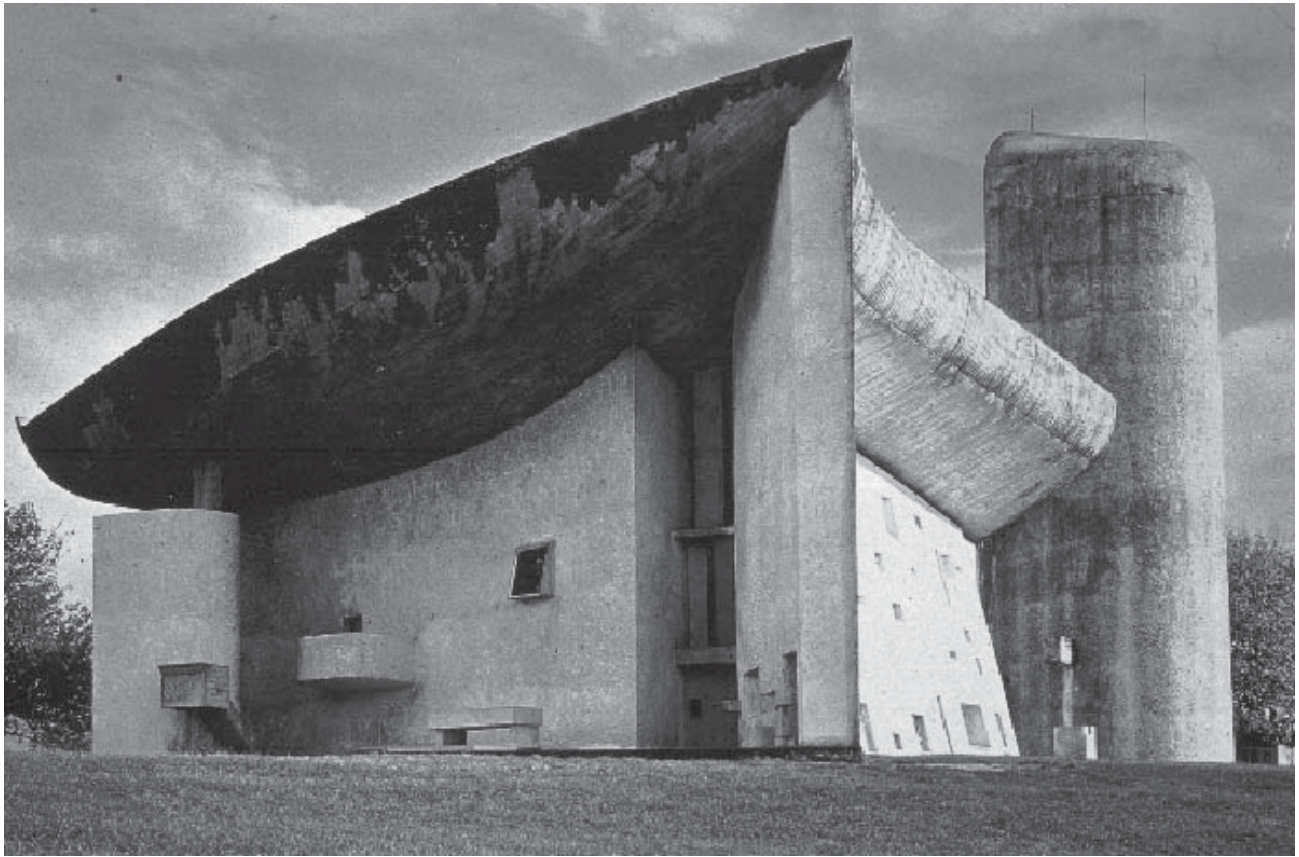


Figure 3. Le Corbusier, Chapelle de Nôtre Dame du Haute, Ronchamp, France, exterior, 1951-53. Credit: Giraudon/Art Resource, NY.

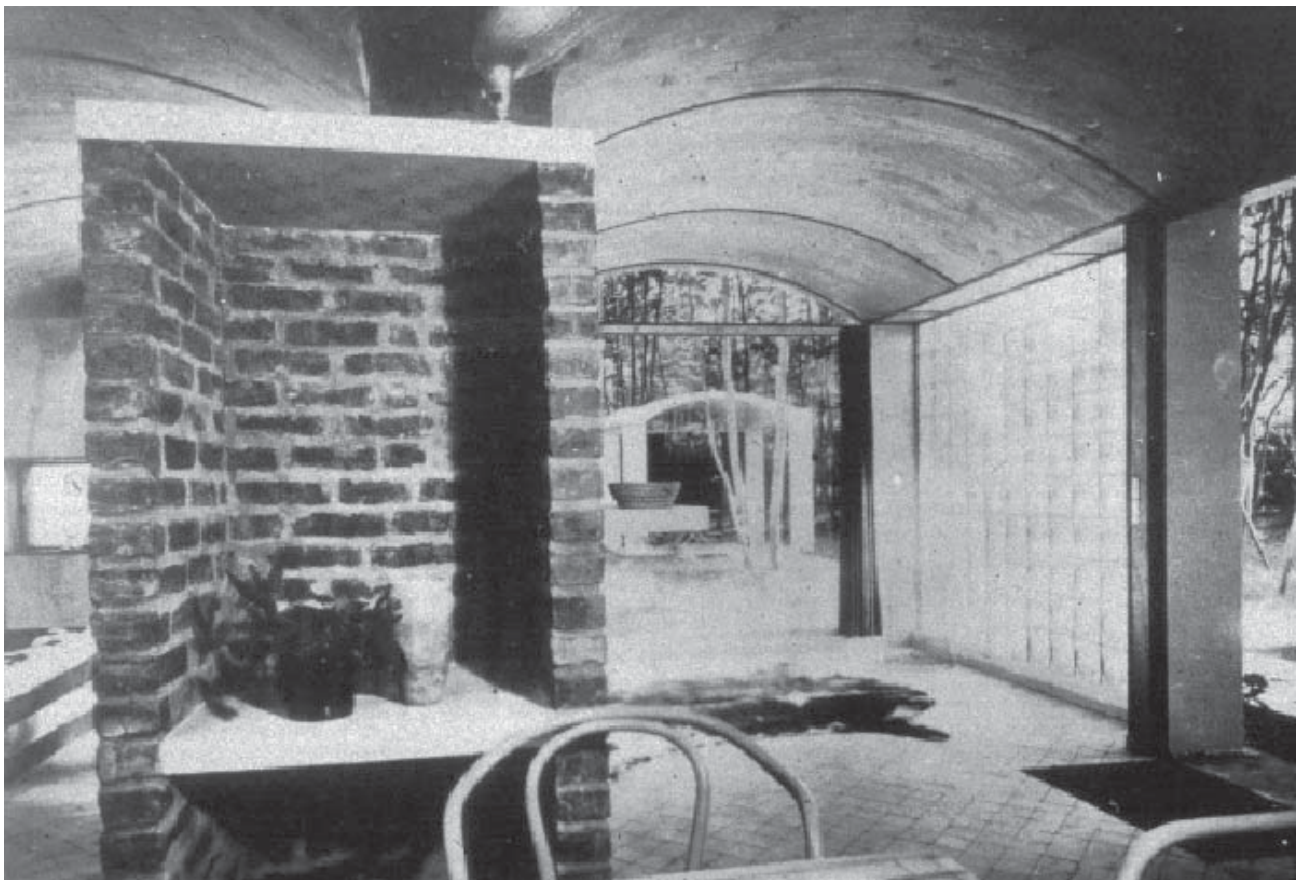


Figure 4. Le Corbusier and Pierre Jeanneret, Weekend House, La Celle Saint-Cloud, France, interior, 1935.