Εμμέσως – Η Villa Savoye του Le Corbusier στο Poissy / In a Mediated Manner – Le Corbusier’s Villa Savoye at Poissy

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Abstract

If Le Corbusier’s works are rather easily divided into two sorts – pre-Depression, slick and white; and post-Hiroshima, brutal and gray – it is the Villa Savoye that most often represents the early period. Yet Savoye is not the best work of this period, nor is it representative of Le Corbusier’s larger concerns for individual buildings as candidates for a new urban order. Badly built, within a dozen years of its completion, the Villa Savoye was so dilapidated that it was used as a kind of storage barn by German troops occupying France. Its site is pastoral, removed from the urban environment and as such it stands as an indictment of, rather than solution to, urban conditions that Le Corbusier regularly condemned. …

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For Pavleena

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In answering these questions, it is important to recognize that canonical works — especially remote, residential works — are known widely only in a mediated manner. With the 1990s completion of its restoration, the Villa Savoye was made easily accessible to visitors, yet historically its popularity has been based not on the experience of the building itself but on the vision of the building manifested in drawings and photographs originally and most impressively published in Le Corbusier’s Œuvre complète.

Le Corbusier published the villa in two successive volumes of the Œuvre complète: initially as a yet-to-be-built project in three pages of Œuvre complète, 1910 — 1929,1 then later, as a finished house in eight pages of revised plans and photographs in the Œuvre complète, 1929 — 1934.2 In Volume 1, Le Corbusier described only the project’s objective attributes: its ‘magnifique’ site, ‘frontless-ness’, openness to the four horizons, ‘jardin suspendu’, pilotis that accommodate the car and ‘services domestiques’, solar orientation, and ultimately ‘quatre murs semblables percés en ceinture tout autour, d’une fenêtre unique.’3 The plans showed Madame Savoye’s suite located on the third level, reached externally by the major ramp that bifurcates the plan and internally by a straight, single-flight stair. This stair began at the ground level servant’s quarters, accessed the piano noble second level, and continued on to the Madame’s penthouse bureau and boudoir (Fig. 2a, 2b).

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kínito kai tis oikiai késis euxippeíasies, ton píiaso kai tělos tous 'qua-
tre murs semblables perçes en ceinture tout autour, d'une fenêtre
unique' [tésseris parádoymous taikous, pou ékouv triuphèi perimektikó
ápi éna monadikí paráthuro].1) Ta skhédia èdeiéxan ti diadímería tis
Kúrias Savoye topóthetiménov sto tríto epípeido, prósastélásio euxi-
trikí apó tìn kúria rámía, pò.xml diáxe tìn kástis, kai apó to eustekí
ápò mia móni schála. H skálka autì ekzívous apó tì diamekrítiá
uprpeíasis tou isogêu, paraíxe próbasia sto deúteró epípeido pou
éixe xaráktiría rípió nóbile, kai sunékize méhri to garapho kai to
moupetúndiá tis Kúrias Savoye sto en eixoch ónó orofo (Eik. 2a, 2b).

'Onan apò miá prosakartikí ektímpn tis kóstous fánkine uperbó-
lni na èxei tìn ókia trí epípeido, o Le Corbusier metéferè tìn súuita
tis Kúrias sto plápio nóbile, elipatiánonta apó tìs diateíasis tis
sémantikí. H ókia skála karaarthíkse. Oi idiódimoi, apó genéna-
dúrois, égenan miákaston evó. H kóhui xóhtise se mia
ynia pou proypouménwes katalambónánan apó tìn trapezóaria, me
apoteletína tìn méwia tón diastáseon kai tìn syndikopéiasis tou
árhou diábíasis-éstasis. Ónìa arxikà sto xáro autò éknan apo-
dóbei dúo gynies kai tésorferes euxterikú tókoi (perilambanoménou
évós uaphdráktou anámymatos sto ton tóiko pros tìn bebrásta), sto
anáthefesmonó skédiá pou ulopoiithkése diáthe te plénon móna miá
euxterikí gynia kai tréies euxterikuxis tókous (Eik. 3a, 3b, 3y).

H aláthia einai semantikí orofo metéferè tìn sygplasiontikí xáro
 tou kathistiko-trapezóaria se éna xáro axíopieráno, éna xáro pou
prósgei tìn parakánavi kínito, pará tìn órfei kai tìn nánaspí. H
skála-trapezóaria stin pragmatikóttita égnas éna megaló plátosukalo
stis rámias, pou sunekízexe éxova apo tì apítj, kathós prospleplanánei
apó ton járdin terrace [khíno se démía]. Koi ómws, tìn rámía dén oðn-
egi plénon stin spoudádia souità tis Kúrias Savoye sto retíri.
Aptóthet tìn episkáptia se éna en polisoi plenévanon solarium [-
xáro pléthishapía], pou epistéréi autò to peó 'koua se xútopó-
tóaro'. To solarium orízexe apó mia naigmw diáthe ethéterias, diáthe na dén
parartpeita stin etnóton svntupunympo euxterikóu sto apitioi.

Ayn kai tis aláthies pou égína gia lóghous ioonomoum metrísa tìn
ploutiáttis tis zvís ston ókia, oi aláthies stin meléthe kai, syne-
kóllousa, stin pararousía autías tis meléthis, diatropína sto
airstokratikí áthnas stis zvís se mia énapoú, anadíneomouno tautó-
chrona kai tìn eufonías poitikí emétería tis oikías. H parousíasan
stis 1934 svntúzhve tìn epitúptma xaráktiristiká tis arxikís melé-
tis me tìn evnsxaménon pínvo euxterikou eukóxos.

H anáthevnevmén meléthe diéxouloun auti tìn exeílian. Ayn kai stin
práxei tìn rámía plénon dén oðngei puìthen, to teramati to
estakó

When preliminary cost estimates proved too high for a three-level
house, Le Corbusier removed the Madame’s suite to the piano
noble, substantially reducing its size. The straight stair was elimi-
nated. Corridors, once generous and spacious, were made long and
narrow. The ‘cuisine’ was bumped into the corner formerly occupied
by the dining room consequently reducing in size and stature the
living-dining area. Where initially this area was awarded two cor-
sers and four external walls (including a glazed wall opening onto
the terrace), in the revised and built plan it has a single exterior cor-
ner and three external walls (Fig. 3a, 3b, 3c).

The change is significant for it converted the compelling living-din-
ing place into an intriguing space, one that favors ‘moving on’ over
arrival and rest. In effect, the living-dining room became a large
landing for the ramp that continues outside the house, accessed from
the jardin terrace. Yet the ramp no longer leads to the impor-
tant penthouse suite of Madame Savoye, rather it delivers the visi-
tor to a largely redundant solarium that crowns the prosaic box-on-
stilts. The solarium is defined by a flowing, pastel-colored wall
that suggests a sense of playful freedom not evident in the tightly
compacted interior of the house.

Though changes made for economic reasons diminished the luxury
of life in the house, changes made to the design and subsequently
to the presentation of that design retain the aristocratic air of villa
life while enhancing the apparent poetic experience of the house.
The 1934 presentation combines the would-be attributes of the ini-
tial project with the reinforced poetry of the final version.

The revised design accommodates this. Though, in effect, the ramp
now leads ‘nowhere,’ its terminal focal point is not a blank wall but
‘the view.’ Because of this, the curvaceous wall of the solarium does
not curtail the promenade, rather it removes it from the realm of
the functional to place it in the realm of the poetic. An aperture
opens the wall to the vista beyond. The view that it frames is of
nature itself –cultivated, corralled and re-presented-. Not architec-
tural objectivity, but the phenomenal and ever-changing image of
nature, concludes the promenade architecturale (Fig. 4). By reliev-
ing the ramp of its functional raison d’être, Le Corbusier effectively
releases the entire house from its ‘object-hood,’ converting it
from a rather feeble essay on the ‘five points of modern architect-
ture’ to the manifestation of his famous proclamation that ‘L’ archi-
itecte, par l’ ordonnance des formes, réalise un ordre qui est une
pure création de son esprit: par les formes, il affecte intensivement
nos sens, provoquant des émotions plastiques; par les rapports qu’
Il crée, il éveille en nous des resonances profondes, il nous donne la
mesure d’ un ordre qu’ on sent en accord avec celui du monde, il
προτύπα κατοικίας Ι’ RESIDENTIAL MODELS III

σημείο δεν είναι ένας δύσκολος τάξις, αλλά η θέση. Εξ αιτίας αυτού του
γεγονότος ο καμπυλόσχημος τάξις του solarium δεν περιορίζεται τη
προμανέδα (πορεία), αλλά την απομακρύνει από τον χώρο του ιερο-
τουργικού για να την τοποθετήσει στον χώρο του ποιητικού. Ένα
άνοιγμα διανοίγει τον τάξις στην θέα πίσω του. Η θέα που πλαισιώνει
είναι της ίδιας της φύσης - καλλιεργημένης, μαντηρωμένης και ανα-
πρισμένης. Ως λοιπόν η αρχιτεκτονική αντικειμενικότητα, αλλά η
φαινομενική και σένα μεταβλητή, είναι η φύσης της αντλείται και
η κατακλυστική αυτής της προμανέδας αρχιτεκτονική [αρχιτεκτονική
πορεία] (Εικ. 4). Αποφασίζοντας την ράμμα από τον ιεροτουργικό όγο
προπέρας της, ο Le Corbusier στην πράξη αποφασίζει το σπίτι συνοδι-
κά από την ιδιότητα του ως αντικειμένου, μεταφέροντός το από ένα
μάθημα και κύριο επάνω στο 'πέντε σημεία της ομονύμης αρχι-
τεκτονικής' σε μια επίδειξη της περίφημης διακήρυξης ότι 'I' archite-
cte, par l' ordonnance des formes, réalise un ordre qui est une pure
création de son esprit: par les formes, il affecte intensivement nos
sens, provoquant des émotions plastiques; par les rapports qu'il
crée, il éveille en nous des resonances profondes, il nous donne la
mesure d'un ordre qu'on sent en accord avec celui du monde, il
détermine des mouvements divers de notre esprit et de notre
ceur; c'est alors que nous ressentons la beauté. [ο
προχώρησε στην αρχιτεκτονική, με την
διάταξη των μορφών, υπολογίζει μια τάξη που συνιστά καθοριστική δημιου-
ρία του πνεύματος του: με τις μορφές επηρεάζει ένουν τις συνθήκες
μας προκαθέτοντας ανάλυση συνιστάθμητα: με τις σχέσεις που
δημιουργεί, έμβαλε μας βαθύτατος απήχησης, μας δίνει το μέτρο
μιας τάξης που συστάθμησε τη βρίσκεται σε συμφωνία με την τάξη
του σύμπνου, προσδιορίζει τις διάστασεις κινήσεως του πνεύματος και
tης καρδιάς μας: είναι αυτός, λοιπόν, που νοιώθουμε ως κάθοδος].4

Ο Le Corbusier είχε πλήκτρο επίγνωση του γεγονότος ότι, στην διαδικα-
σία της ενσωμάτωσης των απαραίτητων τροποποιήσεων, είχε αλλάξει
την σύσταση του σπιτιού. Παρουσιάζοντας την ολοκληρωμένη έπαυλή
σους αναγνώστες του στο Σιένα complete του 1934, υπογράμμισε
την ανωτάτης της προμανέδας αρχιτεκτονικής του σηματικής
πρόσληψης της σχέσης, κατά που δεν είχε αναφέρει στην αρχική του
παρουσίαση της σχέσης στο σιένα της πρόσληψης. Περιέγραψε την ύπα-
ρη όπως στη θεωρητική αντικείμενο, θεωρούμενο στον τόπο, αλλά ως θεω-
ρημένη, που βρίσκεται εναλλακτικά εν κινήσει. Αναβαίνοντας την
ράμμα μαζί με τον αναγνώστη, σημείωσε ότι 'είναι εν μέρος, en se
dépiaqontai que l' on voit se développer les ordonnances de l' architectur-
t' (περιστατικών κανόνων, καθώς μετατρέπεται, είναι που βλέπει
και αναπτύσσεται οι διάταξες της αρχιτεκτονικής).5 Συνέχισε τον
τρόπο αυτό γνώσης της αρχιτεκτονικής με τον τρόπο που η αρχιτεκ-
tονική προσαρμόζεται 'αι μαρτη, avec le pied' [βαθιάν-
νια, πεζί] αναδυόμενης της με την αρχιτεκτονική Μπαρόκ που
έληξε ότι έχει συγκρούσηται επί χάρτου γύρω από ένα θεωρητικό και
ορισμένο εστιακό σημείο.

Εικ. 1a Αερική από αόρα της Villa Savoie, σχέδιο.
Fig.1a Aerial view of Villa Savoie: sketch 1.
Le Corbusier. Croquis de Conférence 1929. Plan FLC 33493 FLC/ADAGP
Fig. 2a Plan of the living room with the roof garden.
Le Corbusier. Poissy: Villa Savoye 1928. Plan FLC 19412 © FLC/ADAGP

Fig. 2b Solarium level plan.
Le Corbusier. Poissy: Villa Savoye 1928. Plan FLC 19412 © FLC/ADAGP
Fig. 3a Piano nobile with roof garden.
Le Corbusier. Poissy: Villa Savoye 1928. Plan FLC 19440 © FLC/ADAGP

Fig. 3b Floor plan of the solarium.
Le Corbusier. Poissy: Villa Savoye 1928. Plan FLC 19440 © FLC/ADAGP

Fig. 3c Section.
Le Corbusier. Poissy: Villa Savoye 1928. Plan FLC 19418 © FLC/ADAGP
Fig. 4 Architectural promenade. Le Corbusier. Poissy: Villa Savoye 1928 © FLC/ADAGP L2(17)47

Fig. 5 Photo-mural. Le Corbusier. Paris. Cité Universitaire, Pavilion Suisse 1930 © FLC/ADAGP L2(8)78
Le Corbusier was very much aware that he had changed the essence of the house in accommodating the necessary alterations. Introducing the completed Villa Savoye to readers of his 1934 Œuvre complète, he underscored the importance of the promenade architecture, a way of somatically perceiving the house that he had not mentioned in his initial exposition of the house as project. He described the Villa not as a static object viewed in the landscape, but as one experienced sequentially in motion. Ascending the ramp with the reader, he noted that "c'est en marchant, en se déplaçant que l'on voit se développer les ordonnances de l'architecture." He compared this way of knowing architecture to the way that Arabian architecture is apprehended "à la marche, avec le pied" contrast it with Baroque architecture which he said is conceived on paper about a fixed theoretical point.

And it is exactly this perceptual apprehension of architecture as constantly changing phenomenon—changing as the viewer's point-of-view changes, or changing as the light that renders it perceptiblechanges—that elevates the Villa Savoye to canonical stature. Not the five points, but the promenade make this possible. Certainly, other works of architecture have achieved something similar. However, it is Le Corbusier's peculiar genius that he captures this condition on film to convey the sensation vicariously to those who were not and never were there.

But how might one employ photography—with its reputation for accuracy, truthfulness, objectivity and impartiality—in the service of the phenomenal? At the time, Le Corbusier believed that design was a scientific endeavor, a 'patient search.' This belief was underscored in nearly all of his publications in the 1920s and 1930s. Photography—"the manipulation of light" as Moholy-Nagy had defined it—assisted him in illustrating the conviction. Photography was regarded not as a self-expressive art but as a technically sophisticated form of documenting reality. 'The camera,' it was said, 'never lies.'

Yet the year before he issued his exposition on the completed Villa Savoye, Le Corbusier had successfully 'phenomenalized' his architecture and did so through the use of scientific photography. In the spring of 1933 Le Corbusier was asked by the director of his recently completed Pavillon Suisse to 'de-brutalize' the rubble wall of its library, and despite his adamant opposition to the decorative arts in architecture, he compiled by designing a photomural to cover the offending curved wall. The photomural extended floor-to-ceiling...
to epitomize the new architectural order. Le Corbusier later described the mural (Figure 5). The mural’s one-meter-square, black-and-white photographs were scientific in subject and demeanor, yet the photomural was praised by the Surrealist André Breton not as realistic documentation but as ‘irrationally wavy.’ For Breton, the curious conjunction of photomural and rubble wall served as prime example of what he deemed the ‘object in crisis,’ and he described the results as indication of a ‘desire for ideal things,’ an attempt on the part of contemporary architecture ‘to break through all limits.

In the hands of Le Corbusier and aggrandized to the size of an architectural exposure, photography had the potential to image the scientific and catalyze the phenomenal at one and the same time. Le Corbusier employed this potential the following year in the ‘illustrative text’ of Œuvre complètement exposé of the Villa Savoye. The Parisian photographer Marius Gravot made all of the images featured in this expose. Le Corbusier cropped and captioned them and designated the page layouts.

For the most part, the photographs of the building’s exterior record the design as it was revealed in the first volume of Œuvre complètement exposé, yet Le Corbusier’s captions in the later exposé suggest an ‘aura’ to the villa unlike the objective, fixed, and scientific description offered in the initial publication of the house as a project. The most romantic of the exterior images, for instance, is one taken from a distance: the house as a box elevated on cylinders with a continuous ‘ribbon’ that insists its geometry is volumetric, not planar (Figure 6). Le Corbusier captioned the image: ‘On a conservé un ancien chemin rural qui est bien en bordure des prés.’ When combined with the image, the suggestion of this caption is that we, the viewers, unexpectedly come upon the machine-like contraption of highly unusual form residing confidently, purely, in a clearing of the wood. Did it land just yesterday, or has it been there forever? The object is neither new nor old but is simultaneously the future and the past. Phenomenal, not actual, it is the pre-ence of light manifested: a dreamlike mirage, but inevitable, indisputable.

This phenomenal inevitability is reinforced again and again in the black and white images of the villa’s ‘interiority.’ An image captioned ‘Arrivée des voitures sous les pilotis’ visually describes the initial step in the promenade architecturale (Figure 7). Though the arrival is decisively asymmetrical, the two-dimensional image features a near-square focal point (the left edge of the square is a light post, not a pilotis) centered in the photograph with similar gray fields top and bottom and similar alternating bands of gray and white to the right and left. It is, in other words, a balanced and syn-
Fig. 6 View of the Villa Savoye 1928.
Le Corbusier, Poissy, Villa Savoye 1928 © FLC/ADAGP L2(17)8
Fig. 7. Arrival of the automobiles under the pilotis.
Le Corbusier, Poissy: Villa Savoye 1928 © FLC/ADAGP L2(17)23

Fig. 8. View of the kitchen.
Le Corbusier, Poissy: Villa Savoye 1928 © FLC/ADAGP L2(17)176
Even as photographs of the Villa Savoye imaged aura and the sensation of phenomenon in architecture, they illustrate as well Le Corbusier’s famous five points of a new architecture: free plan, free façade, ribbon windows, roof garden and pilotis. Yet a close examination of the exposé’s illustrative text can only provoke doubt about these points as essentials. For the free façade is nearly identical on all four sides and the free plan is highly determined by the need to place partitioning precisely on the pre-determined regularly spaced mullions of the exterior elevations. Ribbon windows prevail on the house’s exterior but are redundant to the interior experience of the house and have little regard for solar orientation. The roof garden at its most effective is not a roof garden but what Le Corbusier called a ‘suspended garden,’ a kind of court around which the piano nobile is organized. The true roof garden of the building is the solarium, a disappointing fragment of the far larger roof plan. Exterior pilotis are pronounced in photographs of the house, yet these pilotis serve only to prop up the edge of the ‘boîte en air.’ The box is partially supported by both lower level walls—painted forest green and consequently not evident in the shadows of high-contrast black-and-white photography—and a grid of interior columns. However, because Le Corbusier altered the spacing of the interior grid to provide for a centered ramp, this grid does not often align with the grid of exterior pilotis so evident in photographs. Even the apparent lightness of the house as a whole is deceptive. Its construction is of concrete and utterly heavy. Its walls are thick and immutable. Yet photography records the ‘intra-thin’ layer of high-gloss paint, not a building of mass and weight.

This is perhaps to state the obvious. Le Corbusier employed photography in the service of modern architecture. That the Villa Savoye only superficially conformed to the dicta of that architecture as issued by Le Corbusier earlier did not diminish but enhanced the house’s capacity to act as a ‘focal point’ of void or blackness at the center of the photograph can be found to organize nearly all of the truly remarkable images of the Villa Savoye: most evidently in the famed photograph of the villa’s cuisine (Fig. 8) and in the image of its lower level dominated by the diagonal of the ramp (Fig. 4). Both of these renowned images resulted from changes made to the kitchen and lower level in the revised design.
autêς της αρχιτεκτονικής, όπως τις είχε διατυπώσει νωρίτερα ο Le Corbusier δεν ελάττωσε, αλλά αντίθετα ενδώσα την δυνατότητα του απ'ποι να λειτουργήσει ως κανόνας για το κίνημα. Όταν οι οικονομικοί περιορισμοί επέβαλαν τροποποιήσεις της μελέτης της υπανελικής φωτογραφίες με προσεκτική ερμηνεία παρουσίασαν τα αποτελέσματα όχι ως στερμένα από κάτι, ή παραδοσιακά κάτσα με την λειτουργικότητα, μα ως φαινομενικικά και ποινικά. Ταυτόχρονα εκινογράφησαν αντικειμενικά στοιχεία, που ο Le Corbusier είχε συνάντησε και κατ' επανάληψη υπογραμμίζει. Το δύο αυτά σε συνδυασμό 'φαινομενικό και αντικειμενικό' είναι, που καθιστούν από κοινού την Villa Savoye ένα αξιόθαυματος. Ασφαλώς όμως, ήταν η ιδιοφυΐα του Le Corbusier, να μεταφέρει σε εικόνες την επιεικειμενικότητά του, που ανάγγει την αρχιτεκτονική αυτή στο επίπεδο του κοινόνα.

Notes
4 Le Corbusier, Vers une architecture, Paris, Éditions Arthaud, 1977, (έτος πρώτης δημοσίευσης 1923), σ. 4
5 Le Corbusier and Pierre Jeanneret, Œuvre complète de 1929-1934, p. 24
7 O Gravot φωτογράφησε και άλλα κτίρια του Le Corbusier, πάντα ορειχώριες φωτογραφίες και της Maison Clarté, αν και εκείνες, που συνήθως δημοσιεύονται είναι του Boissonnas. Φωτογράφησε επίσης το διαμέρισμα Belstegui. Η φωτογραφία τού του solarium, με την Αύξηδα του άριθμού στο φάτο, είναι αντικειμένιο συνέχης αναπαραγωγής, από την όμως αποδέχθηκε στον Gravot στις δημοσιεύσεις του Le Corbusier. Η επαγγελματική σφραγίδα του Gravot γράφει επί Λέοντες M. Gravot & Co./Photographie Artistique & Industrielle/159, Boulevard St. Germain, PARIS (VII).

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