LE CORBUSIER
AN ANALYSIS OF POISSY'S
VILLA SAVOYE

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thesis

While Le Corbusier espouses the belief that a “house is a machine for living in,” he in fact often draws inspiration from nature, as in his design for the Villa Savoye that features expressive curves, a roof garden, and careful use of natural light.

background

Charles-Édouard Jenneret-Gris, or otherwise known as Le Corbusier, was a Swiss-French man of countless capacities. Over the course of fifty years, Le Corbusier’s stern drive for architectural progress matured into a binary philosophy of modernism and classicism, resulting in a legendary modernist architect whose work is still celebrated today (Curtis, 1986).

“The rhythm of his steps was the cadence of his personality: precise, uncompromising, but contradictory”

(Wogenscky, 2006, p. 5).
The Concept of the Self

Over the course of his career, Le Corbusier felt that the human being was commonly misunderstood and it was this idea, the concept of the self, which he attempted to define. Le Corbusier clearly indicated that the self was explicitly linked to architecture. While he felt that one should not allow itself to be affected by the external environment, he stressed it is nevertheless continually affected by the events and experiences it has there (Richards, 2003). Thus, it is impossible to conceive the self separately from its surroundings, which is why it is imperative that attention is paid to the built environment.

“Architects are the professional keepers of the knowledge and skills that render the built environment”
(Richards, 2003, p. 8).

The Machine

While Le Corbusier advocates the belief that a “house is a machine for living in,” it was this idea that greatly harmed him (Wogenscky, 2006). More than the machine, it was in fact the potential and technicality in the machine by which he was inspired. “Science, technology, and the machine are nothing... it all depends on what use mankind makes of them” (Wogenscky, 2006, p. 53). Overall, it was the possibility of the machine which Le Corbusier found so utterly desirable.

Organic Detail

Further illustrating Le Corbusier’s appreciation for technicality, is his attention to detail. Le Corbusier had a tendency to continually draw and improve the small details (Wogenscky, 2006). Moreover, Le Corbusier was an outright manual worker, a quality that allowed his forms to be “felt and shaped by the hand” (Wogenscky, 2006, p. 31). Le Corbusier’s manual work assured that his work was not random, but instead was an organic, life form. Le Corbusier’s architecture was intentional, shaped according to the movements, actions, and thoughts of the self (Wogenscky, 2006).
visual characteristics

International Style

Le Corbusier’s design style is commonly characterized as International Style. International Style involves an explicit volumetric approach, asymmetrical balance, and little or no ornamentation. In addition to the prevalent International Style characteristics, Le Corbusier’s work frequently exhibits what he called the Five Points of New Architecture. Among these points were pilotis, ribbon windows, roof gardens, and the free design of ground plan and façade. Specifically, Villa Savoye demonstrates these principles and is even coined the work in which Le Corbusier’s Five Points of New Architecture are best demonstrated.

Rationalism

In addition to International Style, Le Corbusier was commonly associated with rationalism and purism. These aspects are commonly exhibited in his works through simplistic form which serves to meet human needs. However, it was this concept which was quite commonly misinterpreted. While Le Corbusier’s work lacks ornamentation and meticulous surface design, it compensates for this aspect with his thorough design of the pure form.

“Rationalism was a point of departure, but not the aim”

(Curtis, 1986, p. 98).
Among Le Corbusier’s most widely known works is the Villa Savoye. The building process continued from 1929 to 1931, just during the prime of new architecture and rise of modernism. This iconic building is located in Poissy, France and was situated in a grassy meadow. Moreover, as seen in the following image, it was built on *pilotis* specifically to create an air of weightlessness as one overlooks the nearby orchard. Originally built as a summer retreat home for the Savoye family, Villa Savoye now remains as a frequently-visited architectural landmark.

The following analysis of the interior Villa Savoye, exterior Villa Savoye, and LC4 Chaise Lounge Chair, all of which are designed by Le Corbusier, will annotate specific details in which Le Corbusier’s inspiration of nature can be illustrated.
exterior

The exterior of the Villa Savoye explicitly demonstrates evidence of its nature-inspired qualities. This image primarily demonstrates the *pilotis*. Beyond their function of support, the *pilotis* are used to raise and lighten the architectural volume in an effort to enhance and refine the connectivity with the land. This connectivity with the land is seen in several other aspects of the home.

Further, the use of ribbon windows, seen in the leftward image, allows for the presence of natural light within the home. These windows can be seen on all four sides of the structure and were strategically planned according to the orientation of the sun. Also seen in the photo are alternate windows leading to the rooftop garden, which allow for additional natural light to be seen and utilized.

The rightward image illustrates the rooftop garden. This rooftop garden demonstrates the importance of a direct relation to the outdoors. Overall, the integration between interior and exterior spaces is noticeably present and it is clear that Le Corbusier desired to have an experience with nature.
Likewise, the interior of Villa Savoye demonstrates aspects that overtly express their relation to nature. Through the sketches provided, we see many uses of the right angle. According to Le Corbusier, the right angle is the “basis of human thought” (Wogenscky, 2006, p. 83). Therefore, upon basing this work on the human brain, we see another, yet differing aspect of nature. Right angles are not only seen on the surface of the structure, but can also be seen in primary sketches through the primary form and the organizational idea of the grid.

Moreover, Le Corbusier takes advantage of these angles and manipulates void spaces to create a distinctive reflection of natural light. The black and white image provided, enables the strong play of shadows and natural light to be highlighted and additionally guarantees the idea that “each morning his architecture comes to life again in the elongated shadow, in a warm light, it bursts at noon in the contrasts of the shadows, and it dies a bit every evening, as the night covers it all, to be born again the following day in light” (Wogenscky, 2006, p. 68). Le Corbusier’s philosophy that “architecture is the skillful, judicious, magnificent play of volumes against the light” solidifies that not only was nature important to Le Corbusier, but it was something on which he established his entire design approach (Vigne, 2009, p. 14).
Finally, nature is additionally illustrated in Le Corbusier’s LC4 Chaise Lounge Chair. Primarily, one can note a clear inspiration of the machine with the use of little ornamentation and honest use of materials. Further, it demonstrates the concept of the machine in accomplishing the desired task of the human; in this case to provide a place on which one may sit, unlike the task of the Villa Savoye which provides a useful shelter in which one may live. When considering the form and structure for the LC4 Chaise Lounge Chair it becomes clear that this form is altered to fit the needs of the comfort of the human body. As seen in the image provided, the elongated curve of the chair fits the natural curvilinear form of the human body. The prevalence of this idea demonstrates Le Corbusier’s inspiration by nature and the human, the concept of the self.
In conclusion, it can be argued that while Le Corbusier espouses the belief that a “house is a machine for living in,” he in fact often draws inspiration from nature, as in his design for the Villa Savoye that features expressive curves, a roof garden, and careful use of natural light.

Moreover, it has been said that from adolescence, Le Corbusier was characterized by an “insatiable curiosity” in nature (Vigne, 2009, p. 7). Villa Savoye serves as just one representative model for the idea that nature is a primary inspirational factor in Le Corbusier’s work. Furthermore, this structure can be also used to demonstrate the idea that Le Corbusier was commonly misunderstood. He desired a “spatial organization that was rational, intelligent, and conducive to the development of life” (Wogenscky, 2006, p. 46). While rationalism had a heavy influence, it was not the sole purpose, the purpose was instead to gain the ability to partake in and absorb nature. While Le Corbusier is widely known for utilizing the machine as an inspirational element, he simultaneously uses nature as a primary factor for inspiration. This is seen through his attention to detail in the use of careful curves and natural light, relation to the human self, and meticulous arrangement of spaces around nature.

“And modern life demands and expects a new plan for the house and for the city. Sun, space, trees: that is what all cities need”

(Vigne, 2009, p. 12, 24).
Text Sources


Image Sources


