

La maison La Roche et les ateliers d'artistes de Le Corbusier

It is not always easy to accommodate the other arts – painting, sculpture, music and dance – in architecture. And this is particularly so in the case of the Modern Movement in architecture in Europe. The engraver and historian Charles Blanc had noticed the problem in the 1860s:

Abandoning their common cradle in architecture, two of the arts in turn liberated themselves from the maternal breast : firstly sculpture and then painting.¹

If the modern house is a box (a box of miracles according to Le Corbusier) we might imagine various ways of putting art into architecture. There is the obvious case of the artist's studio (a common Modernist genre) but also the house of the art collector. The former is a special case, because there we might expect to find a close aesthetic fusion and living style between architect and client.



Figure 1 Le Corbusier, projet de maison d'artiste, 1922, vue de l'intérieur (*Œuvre Complète 1910-1929*, p. 53)

When Le Corbusier drew a small artist's studio, in 1922 (Figure 1), he visualised the painter at work on an unnaturally wide canvas, as if the painting would be a reflection of the proportions of the architecture. We must suppose that the artist is in perfect sympathy with the forms of his studio.

¹ Blanc, C. (1867) *Grammaire des arts du dessin*, Paris, 1867

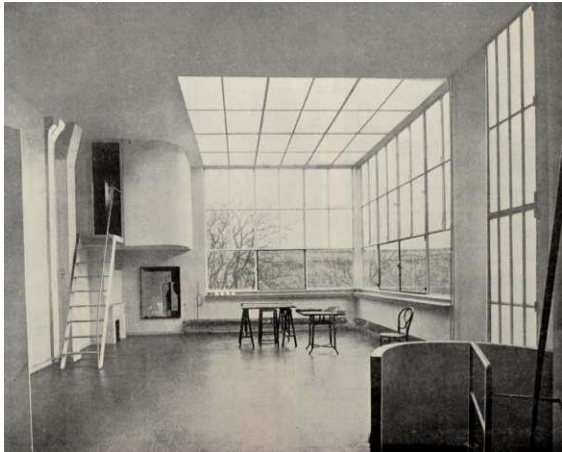


Figure 2 Le Corbusier, atelier Ozenfant, 1922-3, intérieur (*Œuvre Complète 1910-1929*, p. 55)

When Le Corbusier created a studio in 1922-3 for Amédée Ozenfant, his friend and fellow founder of the Purist art movement and the review *L'Esprit Nouveau*, we find, as we would expect, and almost total aesthetic coincidence between the artist inhabitant and architect creator (Figure 2).² It's in just such a space – this cube of light – enclosed by walls subject to the 'Loi du Rippolin' (a good coat of whitewash) that the Purist artist could best represent the type objects of the machinist era. The draughtsman Loustal even imagined Le Corbusier himself at work on a canvas in the Ozenfant studio, as if the architect and his client were one and the same.³ Today, the spare studio has been converted into an elegant modern interior, complete with reproduction furniture by Le Corbusier, Pierre Jeanneret and Charlotte Perriand. The tasteful and comfortable modern furnishings are a long way from the extreme austerity of the original. By a narrow and steep metal ladder, Ozenfant could reach his little library. In almost all the house of the 1920s, Le Corbusier provides a library or study at the top of the house, close to the sun. For Charles-Édouard Jeanneret, from the Jura mountains, as for Friedrich Nietzsche, wisdom was to be found on the hilltops, and derives from the sun. *Thus spake Zarathustra*, which Le Corbusier read in 1908 or 1909, had a profound impact on him.⁴

Another of Le Corbusier's close friends was Jacques Lipchitz. Le Corbusier and Ozenfant characterised Lipchitz's Cubist reliefs and sculptures as belonging to the tendency they

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- 2 See Benton, T. (2007) *The villas of Le Corbusier and Pierre Jeanneret 1920-1930*. Basel ; Boston, Birkhäuser pp. 34-43. Francoise Ducros makes the reasonable suggestion that Ozenfant, who was trained as an architect, may have had a hand in the design of his studio, although there is no documentary proof to support this Ducros, F. and A. Ozenfant (2002) *Ozenfant*. Paris, Cercle d'art
- 3 Institut français d'architecture. Département Diffusion. (1987) *Corbu vu par*. Liège, P. Mardaga , p.89
- 4 Turner, P. V. (1987) *La formation de Le Corbusier : idéalisme et mouvement moderne*. Paris, Macula , p. 67

admired, and which they called ‘Crystal Cubism’.⁵ Lipchitz’s work revealed a clear geometric construction which Le Corbusier and Ozenfant considered more ‘architectural’ than much of post-war Cubism. The studio which Le Corbusier designed for Lipchitz in Boulogne sur Seine (Figure 3) derives from the vernacular tradition of the Parisian artist’s studio, typically adapted from craftsman’s workshops or factories. Invariably organised around large North-facing windows – on the ground floor for sculptors, on upper floors for the artists – these spaces offered little comfort but plenty of light.⁶



Figure 3 Le Corbusier et Pierre Jeanneret, Atelier Lipchitz, grand atelier (Photo Tim Benton 1986)

For Lipchitz, Le Corbusier created two studios, one large and one small, on the ground floor. In 1986, when I took these photos, they were perfectly preserved in the state when Lipchitz died, in 1973.⁷

5 Jeanneret, C.-E. and A. Ozenfant (1925) *La peinture moderne*. Paris, G. Cres See also Green, C. (1987) 'The architect as artist' in, *Le Corbusier architect of the century*. London, Arts Council of Great Britain: 110-130

6 Banham, R. (1960) *Theory and Design in the First Machine Age*. London, Architectural Press , pp. 217-8 and 232.

7 For an analysis of the designs for the Lipchitz, Miestchaninof and (unbuilt) Canale studios, see Benton, T. (2007) *The villas of Le Corbusier and Pierre Jeanneret 1920-1930*. Basel ; Boston, Birkhäuser , pp. 87-96



Figure 4 Le Corbusier et Pierre Jeanneret, salon de l'atelier Lipchitz, deuxième étage (Photo Tim Benton, 1986)

The living quarters are on the second floor (Figure 4), with access to the roof terrace by a row of narrow clerestory windows. In 1986, the house was inhabited by Mr. Schimkevich, the son of Lipchitz's first wife. He remembered living in the studio as a young boy, and his mother passing up dishes from the living room to the roof terrace.



Figure 5 Brassai, portrait de Le Corbusier dans son appartement rue Jacob, c 1933

These two very sparse artist's studios raise the question of Modernist ideas of comfort. The life of the avant-garde artist was not meant to be comfortable. The photograph Le Corbusier commissioned from Brassai (**Figure 5**) shows him in his apartment in rue Jacob, surrounded by his books, his pots, his African masks and his art works, in the studied disorder of the intellectual. As published in *La Ville Radieuse* (1935) the photograph was captioned 'The closed door'. The life of the avant-garde artist is that of the prophet, the monk, who works at night while everyone else sleeps, for the salvation of mankind. And it was, precisely, in the Charterhouse of Ema, near Florence, that Le Corbusier decided that the model of public housing could be found. He wrote to his parents on 14 September 1907 :

Yesterday I went to the Charterhouse ; I hope that I have not already mentioned this. There I found the perfect solution of the single housing unit for the workers. Only, the landscape would be difficult to reproduce. Ah, those monks, what lucky devils.⁸



Figure 6 Le Corbusier et Pierre Jeanneret, Villa La Roche, Paris, 1923-5 (TB photo)

Let us turn now to the Villa La Roche because here is another way of inserting art into architecture (Figure 6). The house is at the end of a short cul-de sac called the Square du Dr. Blanche and design work began in April 1923.⁹



Figure 7 Le Corbusier et Pierre Jeanneret, Villa Jeanneret-Raaf, Paris, 1923-5 (TB Photo)

The house is twinned with one for his brother Albert and the latter's newly wedded wife, a Swedish dancer, Lotti Raaf (Figure 7). Apart from Albert and Lotti, there were a number of other possible clients pencilled in for the other houses in the settlement. La Roche appears as a client late in the day. Raoul La Roche, a Swiss banker and a loyal patron of the review

8 FLC R1(4)13.

9 For a detailed history of the genesis of the La Roche and Jeanneret-Raaf villas, see Benton, T. (2007) *The villas of Le Corbusier and Pierre Jeanneret 1920-1930*. Basel ; Boston, Birkhäuser pp. 46-77 and Benton, T. (1998) "'Villa La Rocca'" Die Planungs- und Baugeschichte der Villa La Roche' in K. Schmidt and H. Fischer, *Ein Haus für den Kubismus; Die Sammlung Raoul La Roche*. Basel, Gerd Hatje; 227-243

L'Esprit Nouveau, had managed to accumulate a unique and important collection of Cubist paintings and sculptures, profiting from the sales of the sequestered collections of the German dealers Daniel Kahnweiler and Wilhelm Uhde (1921-3).¹⁰ These important collections were auctioned off by one of Kahnweiler's and Uhde's rivals, Léonce Rosenberg. Le Corbusier, Amédée Oznfant and their friends helped in this process, bidding anonymously on La Roche's behalf and obtaining very low prices without alerting the art market. On 21 May 1923, La Roche rewarded Le Corbusier for his role in putting together his collection by giving him a painting (Braque's *Clarinet and Bottle of Rum on a Mantelpiece* 1911), now in the Tate Modern Gallery, London).¹¹ We know from Le Corbusier's personal diaries (the *agendas*) that he was designing furniture for La Roche and redecorating his flat at 25 bis rue Constantine from the spring of 1923 and payments for this work continued until January 1924¹².

The first documented evidence that Raoul La Roche was involved as a client in Jasmin comes on 6 August with his request to Le Corbusier to purchase 300 m² of land.¹³

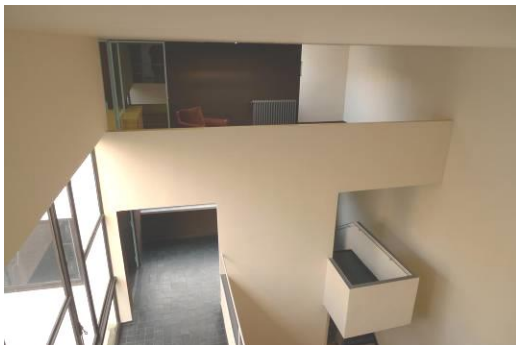


Figure 8 Le Corbusier et Jeanneret, Villa La Roche, hall, 1923-5 (TB photo)

And it's a very strange house (Figure 8). La Roche called it 'Villa la Rocca'¹⁴, giving it a reference to Italian hill town fortresses, as well as playing on his own name and a memento of

10 Malcolm Gee included a history of the Kahnweiler and Uhde sales (1921-3) in his book Gee, M. (1981) *Dealers, critics, and collectors of modern painting : aspects of the Parisian art market between 1910 and 1930*, Garland Publishing. See also Schmidt, K., H. Fischer, et al. (1998) *Ein Haus für den Kubismus : die Sammlung Raoul La Roche : Picasso, Braque, Leger, Gris-Le Corbusier und Oznfant*. Ostfildern, Hatje

11 La Roche to Le Corbusier, 21 May 1923 (E2(7)129). The fourth of the Kahnweiler sales was held at the Hotel Drouot on 7-8th May 1923, when several excellent Braques, including this one, entered the La Roche collection.

12 La Roche to Le Corbusier 4 January 1924, paying him 500frs royalties on decoration and design of furniture for the apartment in rue Constantine. (FLC E2(7)130)

13 La Roche letter of 6 August 1923 (FLC P5(1)152)

an interest in Italy which he shared with Le Corbusier¹⁵. Siegfried Giedion thought of Baroque chapels, Kurt Forster has looked to the House of the Tragic Poet in Pompeii¹⁶. Raoul La Roche, thanking Le Corbusier and Pierre Jeanneret for the house in March 1925, saw the great achievement of the house as presenting 'those constants which we find in all great works of architecture but rarely in modern work.'¹⁷ Bruno Reichlin has perceptively established a connection with the De Stijl exhibition at the Léonce Rosenberg gallery in Paris (15 October - 16 November 1923)¹⁸, while others have compared the house's colouring and handling of form to Cubism or Purism¹⁹. It's difficult to see how all these interpretations can be right. Despite considerable familiarity with the La Roche house, over nearly thirty years, I am still struck by the '*unheimlich*' and other-worldly qualities of the internal spaces²⁰. One thing is certain, however, its function is that of a house for an art lover.



Figure 9 L'appartement Doucet (*L'Illustration*, 1930)

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- 14 In a dedication of a copy of *L'atelier de la recherche patiente*, to La Roche in 1960, Le Corbusier referred to the house: 'On l'a baptisé: 'la villa della Rocca' pour faire entendre qu'on y avait mis certaines intentions bien intenses, bien novatrices, bien créatrices' (FLC E 2-7 (151))
- 15 La Roche and Le Corbusier had made a trip to Venice and Vicenza together in 1922, and the architect later gave his friend an album of watercolours from this trip, as well as many sketches of landscape on the North side of lake Geneva and some architectural and town planning drawings (La Roche to Le Corbusier, 4 January 1924 FLC P5(1)142).
- 16 Kurt Forster, 'Antiquity and modernity in the La Roche-Jeanneret Houses of 1923', *Oppositions*, 15/16, Winter/Spring 1979, pp. 131-153.
- 17 La Roche to Le Corbusier 13 March 1925 (FLC P5(1)193). IT was also in this letter that La Roche offered Le Corbusier a 5HP Citroen motor car (an offer he had already made on 17 January (FLC P5(1) 192).
- 18 Bruno Reichlin, 'Le Corbusier vs De Stijl', *De Stijl et l'architecture en France*, Liège, 1985, pp. 91-108
- 19 Chris Green, 'The architect as artist', *Le CORbusier Architect of the Century*, London 1987, pp. 110-118
- 20 Anthony Vidler, *The architectural uncanny*, Cambridge Mass, 1996, pursues the literary and psychological roots of the uncanny in detail, not without perpetuating the ambiguity about whether the uncanny can reside in the form of buildings or whether, as he says: 'If there is a single premise to be derived from the study of the uncanny in modern culture, it is that there is no such thing as an uncanny architecture, but simply architecture that, from time to time and for different purposes, is invested with uncanny qualities' (p.12).

This genre has an uncomfortable pedigree for modern architects, belonging more to the sphere of Classicism and Art Deco and carrying suggestions of luxury and possessiveness which sit strangely with the aims for social emancipation underpinning most Modernist rhetoric. For instance, the couturier Jacques Doucet had a fabulous collection of modern art, furniture and objets d'art, assembled with the help of André Breton, and his apartment in Neuilly (1928), with its mixture of Art Deco furniture and paintings by Picasso (*Les Demoiselles d'Avignon*), Modigliani, Picabia and Le Douanier Rousseau, expresses the joy of ownership, of luxury and the sensual pleasure of a sumptuous decor (Figure 9). In this photograph (Figure 9), you can see the fabulous 'Lotus' table by Eileen Gray in front of a chimney piece carved by Jacques Lipchitz framed by cabinets of Chinese and other ceramics.²¹



Figure 10 Fred Boissonas, view of the gallery of the La Roche house in 1926 (FLC L2-12-148)

There's nothing like this in the La Roche house. Austerity reigns (Figure 10). The only pieces of furniture allowed in are some cheap bentwood chairs manufactured by Thonet, some comfortable leather armchairs by the English department store Maples and some simple tubular steel tables (Figure 11).

21 See Benton, C., T. Benton, et al. (2003) *Art deco 1910-1939*. London, V&A Publications , p. 72 and 134.



Figure 11 Fred Boissonas, Gallery in 1926, with relief by Lipchitz, drawing by Braque and paintings by Ozenfant and Picasso. (FLC L2-12-144)

Benefiting from the Kahnweiler and Uhde sales, La Roche had been able to acquire some first rate Cubist paintings, such as Picasso's *Aficionado*, 1912 and the *Violon et Cruche* (1909-10) by Braque. At the same time, La Roche paid Ozenfant and Le Corbusier high prices for their work. For example, he paid a mere 1,650 francs for *Le Guéridon* by Picasso, but 2,200 francs to Le Corbusier for his *Nature morte verticale*. Le Corbusier and Ozenfant had written a short book *Après le Cubisme* in 1918, to demonstrate that their art movement, Purism, was the natural successor to Cubism.²² In 1924, as the Villa La Roche was being built, they wrote a series of articles in *L'Esprit Nouveau* which was gathered together into a book in 1925 under the title *La Peinture Moderne*.²³

In these articles, they criticised post-war Cubism for its decorative aspect. It was essential, they asserted to maintain a firm link with the modern world, mass produced objects and the geometry appropriate to the machinist era.

²² Jeanneret, C. E., Ozenfant, A. (1918) *Après le cubisme*, Turin, 1975

²³ Jeanneret, C.-E. and A. Ozenfant (1925) *La peinture moderne*. Paris, G. Cres . La Roche wrote to thank Le Corbusier for the receipt of this book on 18 October 1925 (FLC P5(1)148)



Figure 12 Le Corbusier Nature morte à la cruche blanche sur fond bleu, 1920 (FLC)

But in fact we can identify a progression in Purist paintings between 1918 and 1924, increasingly moving away from realistic representation of everyday industrial objects towards an increasingly ambiguous and painterly merging of contours. In their early work, Ozenfant and Le Corbusier drew bottles, plates, glasses and jugs, in elevation and plan, almost like engineering drawings.



Figure 13 Le Corbusier, Nature morte aux nombreuses objets 1923

Then, in a series of sketches and then paintings, they combined these objects into compositions which accentuated the geometric purity of the forms without losing the realism of the representation (Figure 12). But as time passed, these precisely delineated objects began to be lost in the play of overlapping outlines. For example, in the *Nature morte aux nombreuses objets*, de Le Corbusier (1923), forms and background are blended together in an almost completely ambiguous spatial arrangement (Figure 13). I will show that a similar progression from a precise and rational relationship between architectural forms and their functions was transformed into a more elastic and symbolic relationship as the design of the La Roche house progressed.

First, however, I would like to consider the role of the collection in the design of the interior. Le Corbusier used the phrase ‘promenade architectural’ to describe the architectural sensation of the Villa La Roche, but we could also talk of an artistic promenade.



Figure 14 Fred Boissonas, view of hall (1926) with Braque's *La musicienne*, Léger's *La femme et l'enfant* and Lipchitz's *Composition a la guitare*

On entering the house, the main lines of the argument of *La Peinture moderne* are demonstrated (Figure 14). On the left Braque's *La musicienne* (1917-18) represents post war Cubism. On the right is an example of Crystal Cubism, Lipchitz's *Composition a la guitare* (1918) which Le Corbusier and Ozenfant see as transitional between Cubism and Purism. In the centre, Léger's *La femme et l'enfant*, 1922, standing in for Purism, points the way to the staircase and the artistic promenade.



Figure 15, Gallery in 1927, with paintings by Léger, Picasso, Braque, Gris, Ozenfant and Le Corbusier, and relief sculpture by Lipchitz.

In the gallery (Figure 15), the masterpieces of Cubism are placed in confrontation with the paintings of Le Corbusier and Ozenfant, as if calling for judgment. On a shelf on the curving

wall of the ramp, another relief by Lipchitz sits above Braque's drawing *Le Gueridon*, which is usually shown leaning against the wall. This is one of the 'places of contemplation' which Le Corbusier provided for La Roche to sit and read, or look at selected pieces from his collection (Figure 11).



Figure 16 'Place of contemplation' at top of ramp, next to library, with Ozenfant's *Nature morte et verre de vin* and collage by Picasso. (FLC L2-12-146)

At the top of the ramp is another 'place of contemplation' (Figure 16), with a divan placed where collages and prints, stored on adjoining concrete shelves, can be inspected by the light of a window. On the wall, Ozenfant's *Nature morte et verre de vin rouge* keeps an eye on his patron. In the adjoining library, only Purist paintings, one by Le Corbusier and one by Léger are allowed and in La Roche's bedroom, there are only three paintings (Figure 17).



Figure 17 Fred BOissonas, view of La Roche's bedroom, with paintings by Ozenfant, left and e Corbusier, right. (FLC L20120145)

On the left is Ozenfant's *Carafe, bouteille et guitare dans une cave*, while at the head of the bed is Le Corbusier's *La cruche blanche au fond bleu*. The 'promenade artistique', from the entrance to its culmination in the library and in La Roche's bedroom, constitutes a classic argument: premise, debate, conclusion. That this strategy was conceived at the outset is clear from the fact that Le Corbusier had already persuaded La Roche to hang his collection in his apartment in a similar way:

I am very anxious to express my gratitude to you for the priceless assistance that you have given me in the assembly of my little collection of paintings in the last few years. ... You would give me great pleasure, consequently, in accepting as a souvenir from me the Braque painting which you picked out among the latest acquisitions at the Kahnweiler sale. Your large painting has been hung in front of my bed ; it is truly admirable and gives me great joy. The Purist paintings are concentrated in the bedroom and constitute a group almost as perfect as the Cubist works in the Salon.²⁴

The hanging of La Roche's collection did not pass off without incident. With the help of his cousin Pierre Jeanneret, Le Corbusier had made a first attempt, only to find his selection and positioning completely changed by Ozenfant. Relations between the two were distant, not to say hostile by this stage. Le Corbusier wrote, frostily:

It's about La Roche's paintings: He had asked me to take care of the hanging of the paintings in such a way that the arrangement should fit in with the architecture. With Pierre, I had carried out a preliminary hanging on La Roche's precise instruction. He had insisted on reserving the gallery exclusively for Purism, having himself removed the Picassos which I had hung there. When I dropped in at La Roche's yesterday on a practical matter, I noted the great transformations which you made. Nothing could please me more than that you should carry out the hanging, but I would like it done by agreement with me – not with the aim of protecting my own interests (since you will have seen that I kept a good place for you) – but simply with the intention of ensuring that the La Roche house should not take on the look of a house of a collector (of postage stamps). I insist absolutely that certain parts of the architecture should be entirely free of paintings, so as to create a double effect of pure architecture on the one hand and pure paintings on the other. Since this intention appears to have been modified by the new

24 La Roche to Le Corbusier, 21 May 1923 (FLC E2(7)129)

arrangements which you have made, I appeal to you as a good friend, first to take note of it and secondly to come to an agreement with me over it' ²⁵

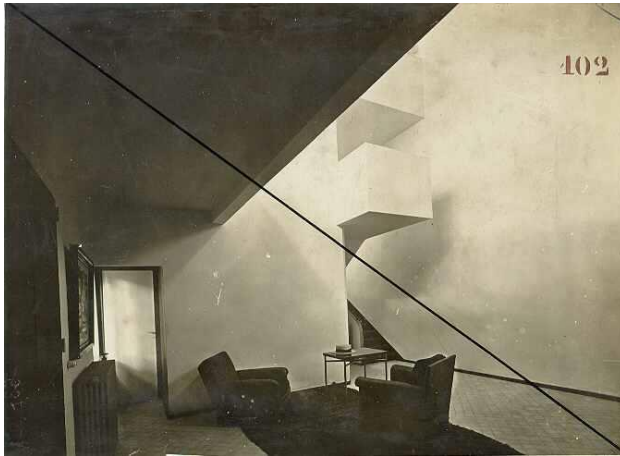


Figure 18 Gérard, contact print of hall without paintings (FLC L2-12-73)

And it is true that Le Corbusier often selected photographs of the house without paintings to illustrate his books and articles (Figure 18). By contrast, the set of photographs commissioned by La Roche from the Swiss photographer Fred BOissonas shows the painting collection installed (Figures 10, 11, 14, 16, and 17).

Le Corbusier raised the question about inserting paintings into modern houses in an article in 1926. The ever conciliatory La Roche tried to soothe his architect :

Reading between the lines of your article in the *Cahiers d'Art*, No. 3, I was aware of some criticisms levelled at me. Indeed, you loyally warned me in advance of them. What can I say? No doubt you have reason for complaint if the impact of your walls, of whom I have been one of the chief admirers, is ruined... Do you recall the origin of my undertaking? "La Roche, when you have a fine collection like yours, you should have a house built worthy of it." And my response: "Fine, Jeanneret, make this house for me." Now, what happened? The house, once built, was so beautiful that on seeing it I cried: "It's almost a pity to put paintings into it!" Nevertheless I did so. How could I have done otherwise? Do I not have certain obligations with regard to my painters, of whom you yourself are one? I commissioned from you a "frame for my collection". You provided me with a "poem of walls". Which of us two is most to blame?'²⁶

²⁵ Le Corbusier to Ozenfant 16 April 1925 (FLC P5(1)208).

²⁶ La Roche to Le Corbusier, 24 May 1926 (FLC P5(1)209)

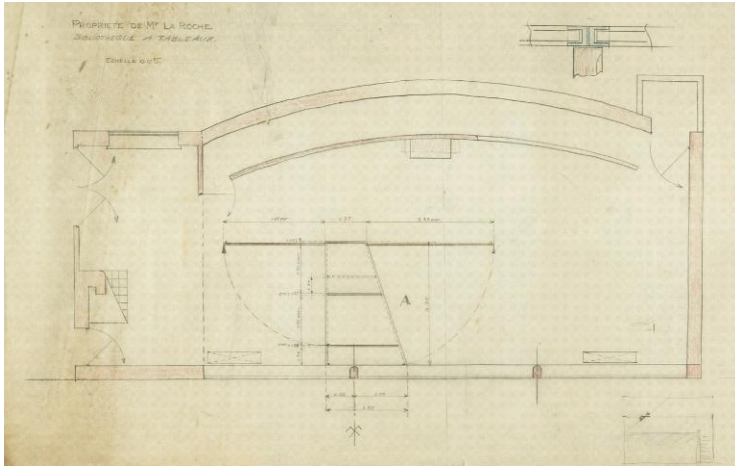


Figure 19 Le Corbusier and Pierre Jeanneret, design of a large painting store, 1924 (FLC 15243)

The solution, for Le Corbusier, was to liberate the walls as much as possible and to store the paintings out of sight, taking them out from time for close inspection and spiritual delectation, like a good book. Accordingly, he designed an enormous cupboard, which would have divided the gallery in two (Figure 19). Two metres high, large and small paintings could be stored and accessed by a two metre door which would swing open. It was La Roche who refused this project, saying that he already had enough antechambers in his house without acquiring another.²⁷

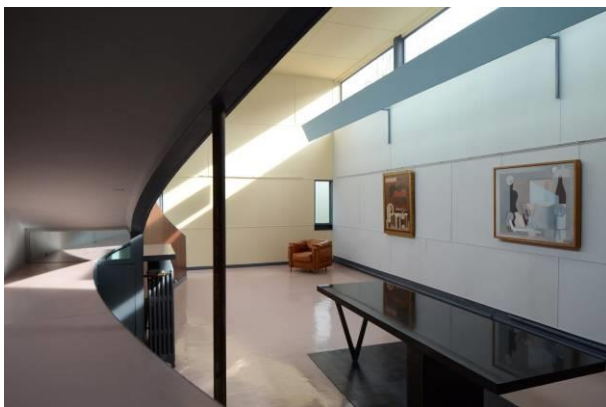


Figure 20 View of gallery showing changes made by Charlotte Perriand and others, 1928 (TB photo)

In 1928, after a cold winter had led to burst pipes, Le Corbusier made some changes in the gallery, giving Charlotte Perriand a role in designing the furniture (Figure 20). She designed a new lighting fixture which both projected light up onto the ceiling and down onto the

²⁷ The 'casier à tableaux' was rejected by La Roche in a letter of 12 May 1925 (FLC P5(1)57).

paintings. She also worked on the new arrangement under the ramp, where the old painting store was replaced by an elegant cupboard with curved glass sliding doors.

Charlotte Perriand recounts, in her autobiography, that Le Corbusier had really tricked her, introducing her to the La Roche house to the sounds of a Bach chorale, playing on the gramophone. The gramophone, which was evolving rapidly in the 1920s, plays a significant role in the Modernist aesthetic. The German architect Eric Mendelsohn always worked to music and sometimes identified his drawings with the title of the piece he was listening to. Many modern artists also worked to music on the gramophone. In the house for Albert Jeanneret, Le Corbusier provided a special place in his concrete bookshelves for a large square gramophone. One of the ideas for the redesign of La Roche's gallery in 1928 was to create a divan and fitment in the centre of the space and in the drawings for this fitment you can see a place for the gramophone.²⁸ All that was left of this feature is the table designed by Charlotte Perriand, with its black marble top supported by a 'V' shaped leg in tubular steel.

It is a fact that architecture is perceived through all the senses, not only sight. Black and white photography greatly exaggerates the fragility and delicacy of the surfaces which frame the interior. When you move through this space, you are all too aware of the hard sound of footsteps on tiles and the reverberation of the underlying reinforced concrete. You feel the cold radiation from the walls and observe the slight variations of surface which indicate the mass of the walls.



Figure 21 Hall looking towards the library (TB photo)

For Le Corbusier, however, the most important of the senses is sight. He famously defined architecture as ‘the masterly, correct and magnificent play of volumes assembled in light’

²⁸ See the drawing FLC 15244, which shows the gramophone next to the divan.

(Figure 21). In the first English edition of *Vers une architecture* (1928), the word ‘volume’ was translated as ‘mass’ and this was corrected in the recent edition. Raoul La Roche himself used another word, which he had undoubtedly learned from Le Corbusier. He wrote enthusiastically: ‘Ah, those prisms! You have to believe that you and Pierre have the secret, because I cannot find them elsewhere.’²⁹ Like the word ‘volume’, ‘prism’ defines a weightless geometric form, but it also implies a substance, glass or crystal, which evokes both an optical effect and a spiritual association. In 1926 Le Corbusier wrote an article, ‘Notes à la suite’, in which he asserted:

Architecture is a function of light; it is a matter of volumes in light. Without light, you cannot see anything. Without sight, there is no feeling. No architectural emotion without light... Windows bring sunshine into our home. For centuries, man has struggled with the technical difficulties of windows which can bring in a lot of sunlight. Suddenly, reinforced concrete has unlocked the treasures of sunlight. .. Now the room is full of light because the walls are illuminated. There are no walls in shadow or half-light. Our senses are enchanted; our animal being is delighted. We have the sun in our room. *It is bright in our house.* And we say: *Our house is cheerful.*³⁰

The revolution of modern structural methods, using reinforced concrete beams, allowed wall to wall windows to be opened, flooding the interior with light. But, as Le Corbusier admitted in this article, night-time illumination was more difficult. He wrote: ‘I tried to illuminate two houses in Auteuil without any ceiling lights; it wasn’t a great success’.³¹



29 FLC P5(1)151, Raoul La Roche letter to Le Corbusier 1/1/1927

30 Le Corbusier (March 1926) 'Notes à la suite' *Cahiers d'Art* 1: 46-52, p.46

31 *Ibid*

Figure 22 Hall seen in late evening, showing the internal illumination, which has been recently restored. (TB photo)

The plan of the Villa La Roche creates other difficulties for illumination at night. There is only one 60 watt light in the hall, the remaining illumination deriving from tungsten tube lights fixed behind the adjoining walls. The whole becomes a kind of lampshade (Figure 22). The problem is that the spaces are not subdivided from each other. Let us imagine La Roche in his library, at the top of his house, overlooking the hall. It's late at night and he is reading by the light of a standard lamp. The hall, which he looks down into across his bookshelves, is dark, so are all the windows which, in day time, would be brilliantly illuminated. It is late. How does La Roche go to bed?

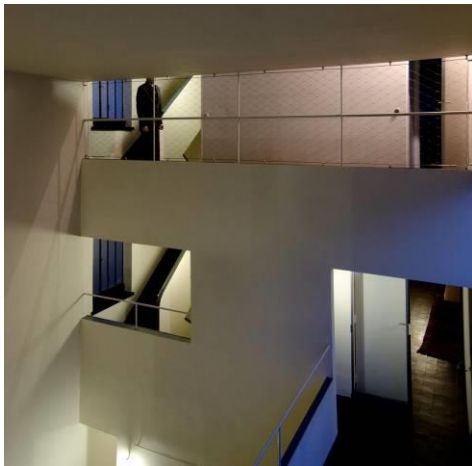


Figure 23 Hall seen at night, looking towards the domestic side of the house, and the corridor leading to La Roche's bedroom (TB photo)

First, he must descend the steep ramp into the darkened gallery. Then he must cross the bridge to the other side of the house, with a huge, black plate glass window on one side and the void of the darkened hall on the other side. He then climbs the service staircase to the narrow gallery which leads to his bedroom. But this gallery is very strange. Its ceiling is higher than the ceiling of the hall, so that the heads of people walking along it appear cut off (Figure 23). Furthermore, the parapet is below knee-height (50 cm), so that a tubular steel barrier had to be put in place to stop people falling down into the hall.

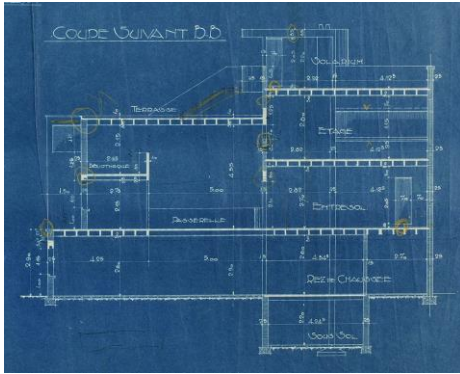


Figure 24 Georges Summer, construction drawings of concrete frame, section, February 1924, detail of section showing difference in ceiling heights and balustrade corrected by Le Corbusier, detail (FLC 15221A)



Figure 25 View of hall showing the alignment of the parapet of the upper corridor with the top of the big window (TB photo)

The mason, George Summer, in his construction drawings, had assumed that a conventional 90 cm parapet would be required, but Le Corbusier corrected this dimension in a pencil annotation (Figure 24). Why? The parapet has to be kept low in order to line up with the top of the great window (Figure 25), which in turn lines up with the parapet of the library (Figure 8). This derives from the fact that one side of the house is lower than the other. One reason for this was the proximity of the gallery wing to the neighbours' houses. The Director of the bank Mr Esnault had already commented on this in his letter of 24 April 1923: 'It would be a great inconvenience to the little houses on the rue Henri Heine to have a 10 metre high building only 10 metres from their rear elevation'.³² Another reason, as we will discover, is that this side of the house, with its domestic functions, originally belonged to a different house altogether.

32 Letter of Esnault to Le Corbusier 24/4/1923 (FLC H1(2)59)

Soll der Beschauer dagegen einen konkaven Hohlraum, der ohne alle Vorsprünge gedacht sei, erleben, so muß seine Vorstellung gezwungen werden, sich mit der Raumform als dem Gegebenen auseinanderzusetzen: der Raum selbst wird das Material des nachschaffenden Kunstlerlebens.

Diese Dinge werden vielleicht klarer in Verbindung mit zweidimensionalen Vorstellungen, die man durch Abbildungen unmittelbar anschaulich machen kann.



Abb. 1

Die wiedergegebene Zeichnung erkennt man als das Bild einer schwarzen Vase; man kann sie aber auch als zwei weiße Gesichter, die einander entgegengerichtet sind, vor einem schwarzen Hintergrund auffassen. Es ist aber nicht möglich, die Vase und die beiden Gesichter zu gleicher Zeit wahrzunehmen. Ebensowenig ist es möglich, gleichzeitig räumlich und plastisch zu denken. Man muß durch einen völligen Vorstellungswechsel von der einen Anschauungsform zu der anderen gelangen.



Abb. 2

Figure 26 Detail of Steen Eiler Rasmussen's article 'Le Corbusier, die kommende Baukunst'

The Danish critic Steen Eiler Rasmussen, who visited the house in July 1926, wrote an article 'Le Corbusier the architecture of tomorrow' which he began with an interesting discussion of the figure-ground problem.³³ Illustrating a famous diagram (Figure 26) which can be read either as a black vase or as two white faces separated by a black void, he argued that the eye cannot see both vase and faces at the same time. This is true of all figure-ground ambiguity. The same is true, he claims with three-dimensional environments, which cannot be seen as space and enclosing walls at the same time. By emphasising the outlines of the wall surfaces, however, the eye can resolve the problem, keeping the spatial and volumetric readings in balance. This, he suggests, is the solution adopted by Le Corbusier in the La Roche house interior. The alignment of wall surfaces creates a balanced composition which implies a flow of space through and behind the wall surfaces. Bruno Reichlin, in a well known article, argued that Le Corbusier was influenced by the exhibition of de Stijl drawings and models opened at the Léonce Rosenberg gallery on 13 October 1923, which Le Corbusier visited.³⁴ There may be something in this, despite Le Corbusier's explicit criticisms of de Stijl aesthetics, but the key elements of the La Roche hall were fixed in September 1923. Rasmussen makes the interesting observation that the overlapping of surfaces and spaces in the La Roche hall can be compared to the 'marriage of contours' in Purist painting which we have already noted.

33 Rasmussen, S. E. (1926) 'Le Corbusier Die Kommender Baukunst' *Wasmuths Monatshefte für Baukunst*: 378-393

34 Reichlin, B. 'Le Corbusier e De Stijl' *Casabella* 50(520-521): 100-108

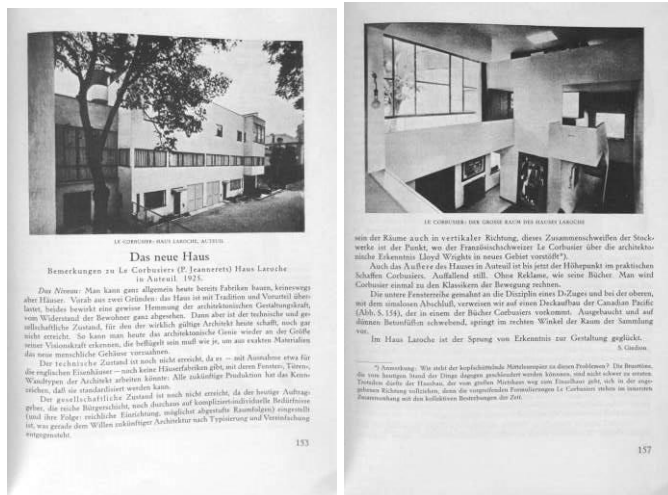


Figure 27 Sigfried Giedion, 'das neue Haus' article.

The Swiss historian and critic Sigfried Giedion, who would become a close friend and ally of Le Corbusier, also wrote an article on the La Roche house in 1926, called 'the new house' (Figure 27).³⁵ His analysis is radically different from Le Corbusier's emphasis on light. For Giedion, the essential quality of the house was its transparency and lack of subdivision. The problem with designing houses today, he asserts, is that the structure of the family is still hierarchical and possessive, requirements countless separate rooms in order to create privacy for each member of the family. In the future, he claims, families will not be organised in this way; the next generations will live more collectively. Thus, the relative lack of partition walls in the La Roche house was a proof of modernity. Furthermore, the transparency of interior and exterior produced by the large windows and the flow of space from one 'room' to another, creates a new and modern perspective. Giedion coined the term 'Durchdringung' (interpenetration) to describe the two senses – social and visual - in which the house could be thought of as transparent. This would become a key term in his later book *Bauen in Frankreich...* in which he returned to the La Roche house in even more ecstatic terms³⁶.

Corbusier's houses are neither spatial nor plastic; air flows through them! Air becomes a constituent factor! Neither space nor plastic form counts, only RELATION and

35 Giedion, S. (April/May? 1926) 'Das neue Haus' *das Kunstblatt*: 153-157

36 Giedion, S., S. Georgiadis, et al. (1995) *Building in France, building in iron, building in ferroconcrete Texte imprimée introd. by Sokratis Georgiadis trans. by J. Duncan Berry*. Santa Monica [Calif.], Getty center for the history of art and the humanities, first published as Giedion, S. (1928) *Bauen in Frankreich; Eisen Eisenbeton*. Berlin, Leipzig

INTERPENETRATION! There is only a single, indivisible space. The shells fall away between interior and exterior.³⁷

It is clear that Giedion is regarding the La Roche house in a particular way. His attention is to the 'public' side of the house – the hall with the spaces immediately adjoining it and the library – rather than the 'domestic' side, with its dining room, pantry, bedroom, bathroom and dressing room all contained within more conventional 'rooms'. Furthermore, Giedion exaggerates the anti-monumental role of Le Corbusier's work.

Corbusier has ventured pioneering work like no one else in our time. He attempts to translate into the housing form that suspended equilibrium, that lightness and openness that iron constructions of the nineteenth century expressed abstractly. ... The reinterpretation of lean ferroconcrete construction in the redesign of the house demanded by the age and its will is what we call the true productive aspect of Corbusier's achievement. Why should the house be suspended and be made as light as possible? Only thus can we put an end to that fatal legacy of monumentality.³⁸

But Giedion was aware, by 1928, of the criticism of Le Corbusier's work, and he adds :

Le Corbusier's houses can be attacked on several points. He has been reproached for his romanticism, as when he – for instance, when he started out – takes over a whole series of formal motifs from shipbuilding. There is also a certain danger of a strong, aesthetic emphasis, which today's architects understandably fear. Architecture today – like nineteenth century construction – proceeds gradually, for it must lay down foundations for a long time to come.³⁹

Giedion finished his 1926 article, however, giving Le Corbusier the preeminent role as prophet of modernity, asserting 'The La Roche house represents the successful leap from understanding to creation.'⁴⁰

How can we square Le Corbusier's emphasis on a purely visual aesthetic with Giedion's more complex analysis? I will suggest to you that if the La Roche villa is to be accepted as a break-through in the aesthetic of modern architecture, it is precisely because it owes most of

37 Giedion, S., S. Georgiadis, et al. (1995) *Building in France, building in iron, building in ferroconcrete Texte imprimé introd. by Sokratis Georgiadis trans. by J. Duncan Berry*. Santa Monica [Calif.], Getty center for the history of art and the humanities , p, 168-9

38 Ibid. , p. 186

39 Ibid.

40 Giedion, S. (April/May? 1926) 'Das neue Haus' *das Kunstblatt*: 153-157, p. 157

its innovations to a process of design which is closer to painting than to architecture.

Although Le Corbusier insists, in his theoretical work, that architecture is a rational process and follows a logical sequence derived from the programme, orientation, site, materials and so on, the genesis of the La Roche house points to a different process, closer to collage and the marriage of contours which we have seen in Purist painting. .

I believe that these processes of transformation are particularly revealing in those designs in which Le Corbusier is transforming his practice and 'rediscovering' in the products of his own intelligence and observation, the materials of a new imaginative world. The La Roche house, the Villa Baizeau⁴¹, the Villa Savoye⁴² and the Villa de Mandrot⁴³ are all poignant examples of this kind of transformation. The period March 1923 to February 1924, when the La Roche and Jeanneret-Raaf houses were designed, was by many measures one of personal transition in Le Corbusier's life. His brother Albert married his Swedish divorcee student Lotti Raaf in June, Le Corbusier's book *Vers une Architecture* was published in October and sent to all his friends and contacts⁴⁴, a deal with Jean Budry to relaunch *Esprit Nouveau* for one last year was signed on 20 April 1923, with No 18 appearing in November after a gap since June 1922. This was a prolific time for writing (1923-4), when the articles for *Urbanisme*, *La Peinture Moderne* and *L'Art Decoratif d'Aujourd'hui* were researched and written. Most importantly, his first two new Parisian houses were built and published⁴⁵, and by October 1924, the Lipchitz and Miestchaninoff studios were nearly complete, work on the Ternisien house had started as had the house for his parents in Vevey and the Maison du Tonkin in Bordeaux. With the *honoraires* mounting, Le Corbusier and Pierre Jeanneret were able to open their new studio at 35 rue de Sèvres between 27 September and 4 October 1924⁴⁶. The partnership with Pierre Jeanneret was developing from requests to help with drawings⁴⁷ to a fully shared

41 Tim Benton, 'La matita del cliente', *Rassegna*, 3, July, 1980, pp. 17-24

42 Tim Benton, 'Villa Savoye and the architect's practice', *Le Corbusier*, vol. 7, Garland, 1984, pp. ix-xxxi

43 Tim Benton, 'La Villa Mandrot i el lloc de la imaginació', *Quaderns*, 163, Barcelona, Oct-Dec 1984, pp. 36-49.

44 The *Agendas* (Le Corbusier's diaries), record a number of books to be sent by the publisher Cres to clients, neighbours and business contacts (autumn 1923).

45 His earlier extension and redecoration of an older property in the nearby Villa Montmorency for Mr and Mrs Berque (1921-July 1922) was a substantial project, costing more than the Besnus house in Vaucresson and the Atelier Ozenfant.

46 The first letter by Pierre Jeanneret to Louis referring to the 'nouvelle adresse' was dated 4 October 1924, while only a week earlier, he was writing to the same entrepreneur from 29 rue d'Astorg.

47 The *agendas* for 1922 and early 1923 record notes to visit Pierre to ask for or receive drawings; eg the *Agenda* (3/7/22 ff.) p. 11: 'Pierre p. dessin d'ensemble meuble Berque' or (20 11 22 - 20 1 23), p. 6: 'Aller Pierre chercher dessin...'

practice in which Pierre played the leading role in the day to day running of the office⁴⁸. The interaction between Le Corbusier and Pierre Jeanneret was an important element in the development of Le Corbusier's finest work, and the La Roche and Jeanneret-Raaf houses are the first real instance of this discourse.

The history of the designs for the Jasmin site has been told many times⁴⁹. The site was a difficult one, the back lots enclosed behind the gardens of new terrace houses being built by speculative builders or private clients following a *lotissement* offered by the Banque Immobilière de Paris and its academic architect M. Plousey.

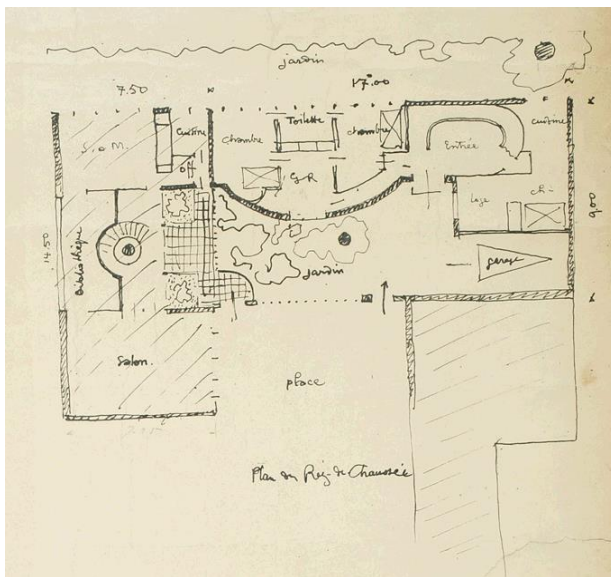


Figure 28 Sketch of ground floor plan of July 1923 scheme for La Roche house, detail. The left hand part of the plan is of a different house, for Sigismond Marcel (FLC 15254)

In July 1923, a project for the La Roche house existed which retains a rational relationship between form and function (Figure 28). Each room had a space and dignity appropriate to its importance, and the main functions of the interior could be read from the outside.

48 According to H el ene Cauquil, *Pierre Jeanneret la passion de construire*, M emoire de Diplome, U.P.8, Paris, the first project on which Pierre Jeanneret and Le Corbusier worked together was the 'Ville pour 3 millions d'habitants', for which Pierre did the drawings. According to Cauquil, Pierre worked for Perret from 1920 until December 1922.

49 Russell Walden, 'New light on Le Corbusier's Early Years in Paris: The La Roche-Jeanneret Houses', *The Open Hand*, MIT, 1977, pp. 117-161. Walden discovered interesting material from Lotti Raaf's daughters but made no attempt to reconstruct the design history of the house and misinterpreted the documentation. Kurt Foster looked more closely at the documents, *op.cit.*, but equally did not manage to put together the written evidence with the drawings, misunderstanding the sequence of drawings he chose to discuss (FLC 15116, 15113, 15101, 15100, 15111 and 15114). I sorted these out in my book *Les Villas de Le Corbusier*, Paris, 1984, and again in 'La collection et la villa La Roche', in *L'Esprit Nouveau*, Zurich and Strasbourg, 1987, pp. 80-93. Jacques Sbriglio, *Le Corbusier: Les Villas La Roche-Jeanneret*, Birkhauser, Basel, 1997, follows my chronology closely.

Furthermore, the private and public functions of the house were integrated, as in the classic typology of the house of an art lover.

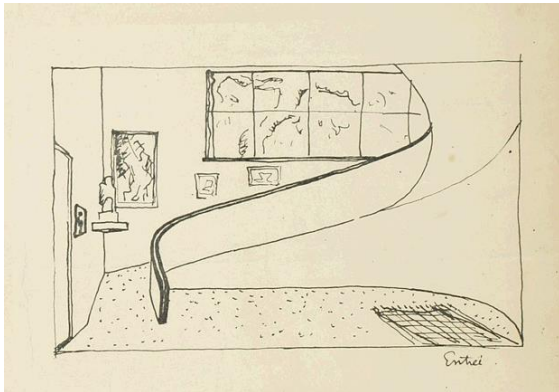


Figure 29 Sketch of entrance in July scheme for La Roche house, detail (FLC 15254 detail)

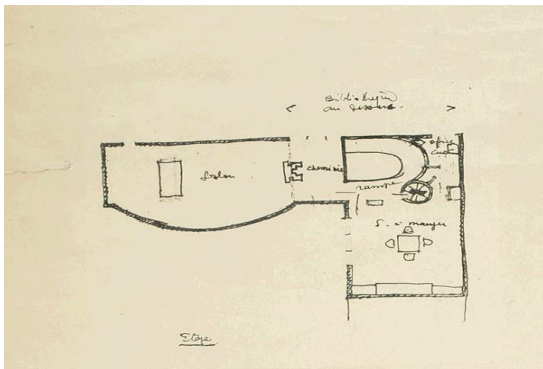


Figure 30 Sketch plan of upper floor plan for La Roche house (FLC 15254 detail)

From the entrance (Figure 29), a ramp leads to an upper level (Figure 30), while a door on the left leads to a luxurious bedroom suite for La Roche, located in the curved wing which forms the end point of the vista down the drive.

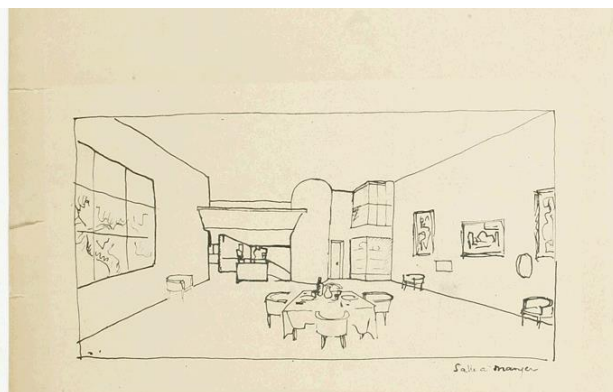


Figure 31 Sketch for dining room on upper floor of La Roche house (FLC 15254 detail)

On the first floor, the ramp leads to a large dining room (Figure 31) lit by a great window. An enclosed spiral staircase leads to a mezzanine which houses the library. Adjoining the dining room is the Salon. The perspective sketches show works of art displayed throughout the house.

Unfortunately, on 18 September 1923, on his return from his vacation, Le Corbusier learns of a catastrophic event, which threw his July scheme into crisis. The first 5.45m of the site, where the house for Albert Jeanneret and Lotti Raaf would have been built, had been lost, due to the reluctance of one of the neighbours to give up rear access to his house on the rue Raffet. The plans for the Jeanneret-Raaf house were complete and fully costed so there was no question of changing this. Instead of a house which exactly mirrored the Jeanneret-Raaf house, all that was left was a square of 7m. What to do? A few studies were made of a small house on this plot, mysteriously labelled 'his aunt', with one room on each floor (Figure 32).

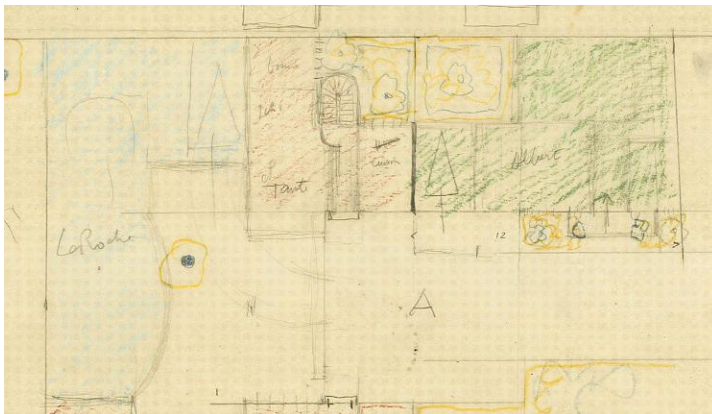


Figure 32 Sketch plan of site of La Roche and Jeanneret-Raaf houses, reduced by 5.45m, with 'aunt's house in between' (FLC 15127)

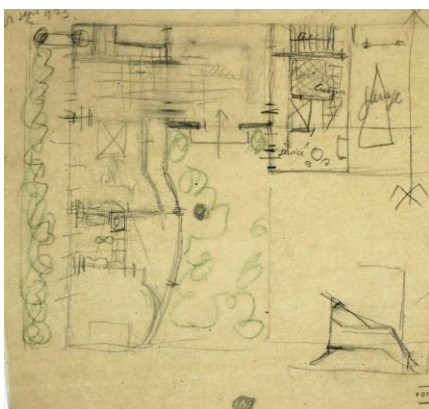


Figure 33 Le Corbusier sketch of ground floor plan of La Roche house, incorporating the adjoining 7m square 'Aunt's house', 22 September 1923, detail (FLC 15291)

On 22 September Le Corbusier persuaded La Roche to add the site of the 'aunt's house' to his plot and in a few minutes sketched out a new plan (Figure 33), which threw all the cards in the air. The entrance is displaced to the original site of the garage, which in turn is moved into the aunt's house, along with the apartment for the servants, and the kitchen. The ramp is moved from the entrance up a floor to the gallery. The large dining room is eliminated completely and a smaller space found for it in the aunt's house (Figure 34). What had been the most important room of the house, with its big window, became a three storey hole, crossed by a bridge. On the second floor of the aunt's house was to have been a guest bedroom but, in a slightly later development, La Roche's bedroom is moved from under the gallery into this small space.⁵⁰

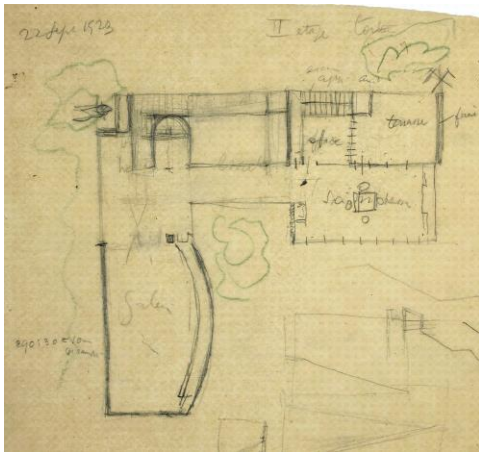


Figure 34 Le Corbusier sketch of first floor plan, 22 September 1923 (FLC 15276)

It is evident from the 22 September sketch of the ground floor plan (Figure 33) that Le Corbusier tried out several possibilities for the main staircase, before recessing it away on the left side. We are aware that all the most striking features of the house as we see it today emerged, almost by accident, in the sketches of 22 September 1923 and soon after. The striking open space of the hall, with its *Durchdringung*, (Figure 35) the inexplicable ramp in the gallery, the empty space under the gallery with its single, spectacular piloti (Figure 36).

50 The model made by the plasterworker Lasnon for exhibition in the Salon d'automne was paid for on 13 November 1923 (FLC P5(1)155 but was probably made early in October. La Roche saw the models on 3 November 1923 (FLC P5(1)154). In this model, the La Roche bedroom suite was still located under the gallery. One of the photographs of the model (FLC L2-12-4-001 has been doctored to remove the ground floor bedroom suite. The change was probably made in November.

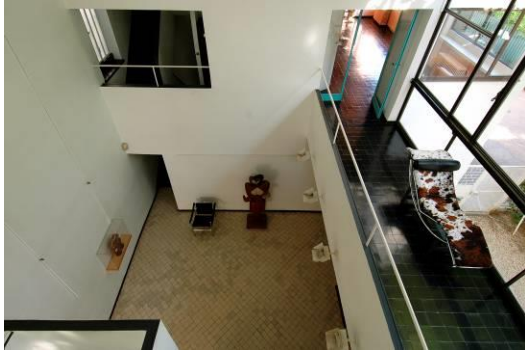


Figure 35 'Empty' hall, where the dining room was originally intended, looking towards the domestic side of the house (TB photo)



Figure 36 Space under the gallery, originally occupied by La Roche's bedroom (TB photo)

The Villa La Roche, which in 2015 will celebrate its 90th birthday, remains still modern and full of light, but also surprising and difficult, resisting intellectual analysis⁵¹. The redistribution of spaces, the absence of clear fit between form and function, the blatant lyricism of its visual effects echo the development of Purist painting from evocation of the machinist era to celebration of formal ambiguity. I suggest that the Villa La Roche is not the first mature work of the modern movement in architecture but its first work of art.

51 Elisabeth Blum refers overtly to the 'detective skills' required by the visitor, 'Promenade architecturale oder: "wie das Zauberwerk in Gang gesetzt wird"', in Le Corbusier, R. La Roche, et al. (1987) *Le Corbusier und Raoul La Roche : Architekt und Maler, Bauherr und Sammler : eine Ausstellung im Architekturmuseum vom 6. Juni bis 9. August 1987*. Basel, Das Museum pp. 27-31. This article, with its fetishised drawings chopping up the spatial sensations, resumes nicely the sense of unreality and abstraction which never fails to surprise the visitor.

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