

UWTSD

History and Theory 1 – Part 2

# The Villa Savoye



Cover Image: Photo of the Northwest Elevation of Villa Savoye  
(The Architectural Digest, 2018).

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Throughout his life, the globally regarded architect, Le Corbusier, has designed and built 78 buildings, many of which have pushed the standards and abandoned the conventional, yet it is one of his earliest, the Villa Savoye, that has cemented itself as a major turning point in the architectural world (Rose, 2008).

Designed in 1928 for the Savoye family in Poissy, Paris, who, according to Gans (2006), knew Le Corbusier through their involvement in the modern art scene. It was clear that despite the budget, the family wished for the architect to fully express his revolutionary ideals upon the form of the weekend house. He quickly surpassed his budget, however, having designed the structure on a steel, concrete grid, was able to simply shrink the framework, and the Villa started construction in 1929. Despite his efforts, the building experienced many difficulties during the 3-year construction, after raising the first-floor level, and re-fabricating windows, the budget had already doubled. Furthermore, while the Savoye family used the residence, the building's gutters, skylights and concrete walls all failed multiple times. This caused expensive damages and many heated arguments until 1940, when the family finally renounced the building to the elements (Sully, 2009).

After the abandonment, the building survived World War II, and stood as a ruined monument of the early exploration of modern architecture (fig. 1) (Gherardini, 2015). In 1963 the building was finally restored, sparked by the threat of its demolition, through the advocacy of many architects and artists including Le Corbusier himself (Gherardini, 2023).

(Metalocus, 1963)

Fig. 1: Abandoned between the years 1940 and 1963. Villa Savoye.



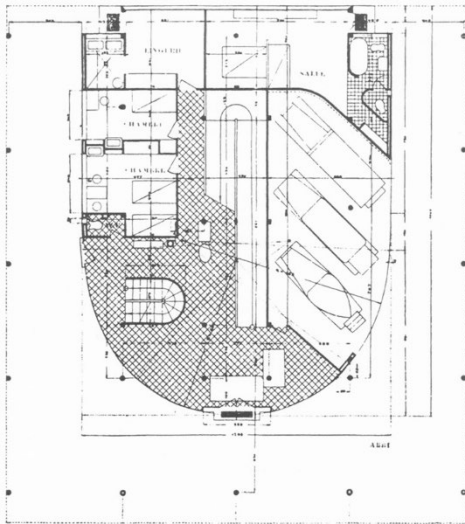


Fig. 2: Ground-Floor Plan.  
(Metalocus, 2016)

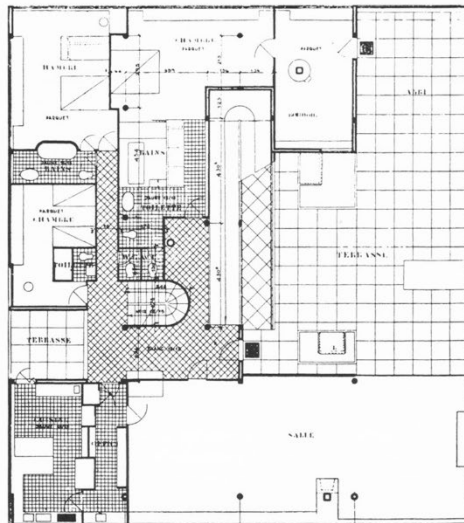


Fig. 3: First-Floor Plan.  
(Metalocus, 2016)

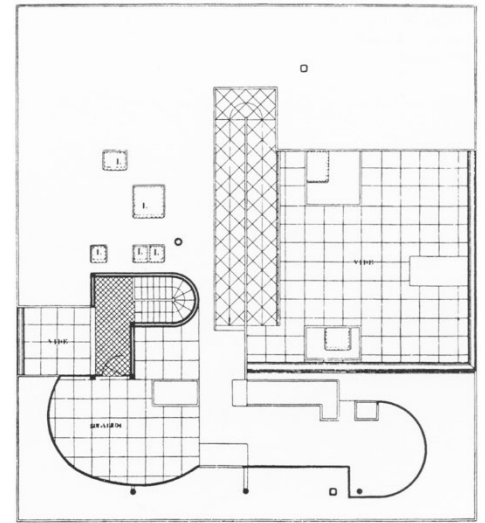


Fig. 4: Second-Floor Plan.  
(Metalocus, 2016)

The building has an abnormal plan, with the largest interior area being on the first floor (fig. 3). This is due to the reinforced concrete grid that is visible as thin columns present on the ground and first floor (fig. 2). These columns are inset from the outward façade of the building, and the internal walls run almost independently to the grid (fig. 5). The walls follow straight and curved lines, all defined by their intended use, the columns simply intersect the spaces created.

Under most of the perimeter of the first floor, the building is held up on pilotis that lift the main form and allows the inhabitants to drive under the structure in an integrated garage. Hidden inside the continuous façade of the building sits a large courtyard that brings light into the centre of the villa, while integrating an outdoor space directly into the buildings plan (fig. 3). Connecting the levels of the villa is a small staircase and a large central ramp that continues up the structure, through the courtyard, and up to a roof terrace that covers a small portion of the form (fig. 5).

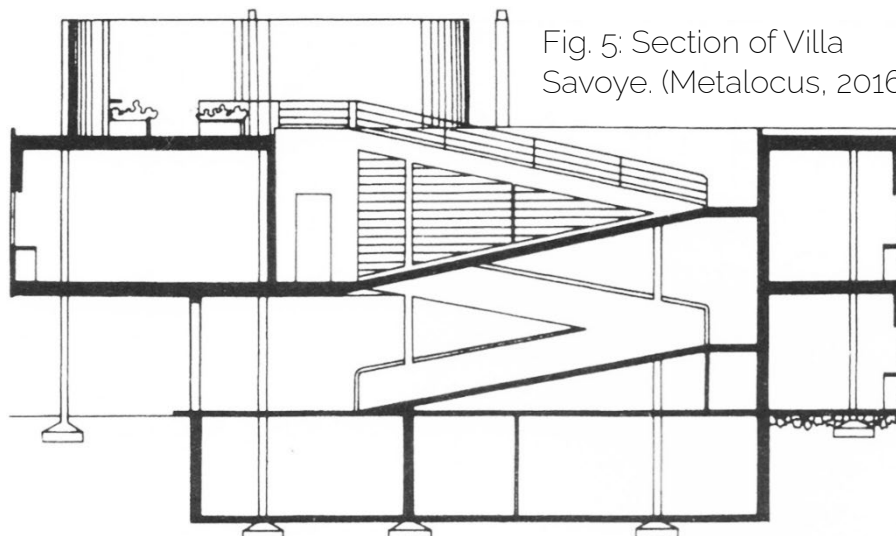


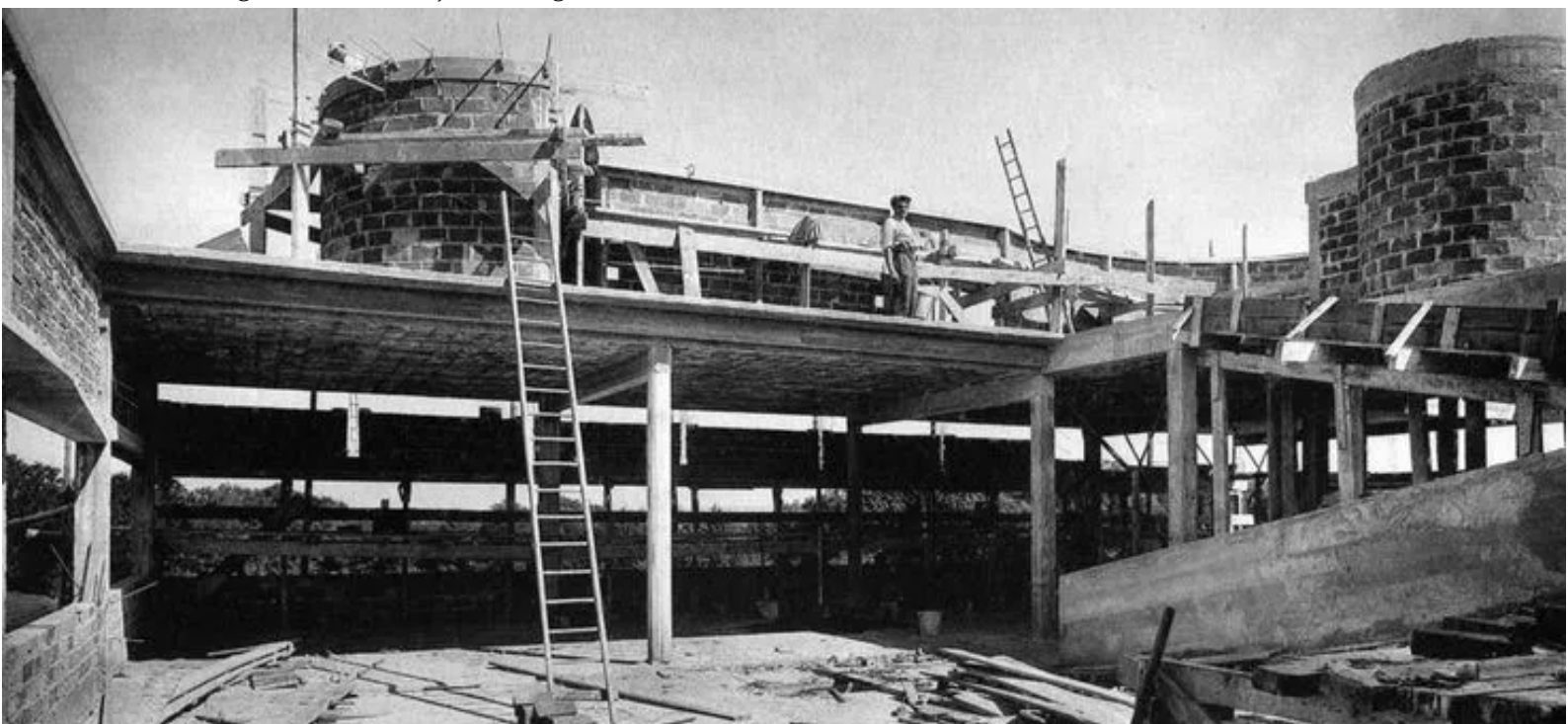
Fig. 5: Section of Villa  
Savoye. (Metalocus, 2016)



Fig. 6: West perspective of the Villa. (Metalocus, 2016)

The façade continues across the entire perimeter of the building, with only the roof terrace and the Southeast elevation divulging its orientation. White is heavily used, plastered over the concrete, to brighten the form, and highlights the positive and negative planes which separates it from the lush landscape (Unwin, 2014). Even where the courtyard on the first floor meets the façade, the concrete is continuous, mirroring the ribbon windows on all sides.

Fig. 7: Villa Savoye during Construction. (Foundation Le Corbusier, n.d.)



The primary materials are concrete and steel, Le Corbusier wanted the structure to be incredibly advanced and progressive in materials, however, he still utilised brick masonry in multiple walls to reduce the cost (fig. 7) (Gherardini, 2023). In 1928 reinforced concrete was unpopular in domestic construction, nevertheless, he viewed it as the future and built the form to emphasise its opportunities (Wight, 2016). Glass was also heavily used in the extensive ribbon windows wrapping the form, and the internal courtyard, where the lounge and ramp border the outdoor space. This was to flood the interior space with as much light as possible, from both sides of the internal area. According to Dummett (2007, p. 47), Le Corbusier was a big advocate for the inclusion of natural light in architecture, as he believed it was very important for one's mental health.

The decisions made in the design of the villa are previously explained in a short manifesto released by Le Corbusier and his cousin Pierre Jeanneret in 1927 (Le Corbusier, 1927). Here he describes five principles: firstly, the raising of the structure off the ground level using pilotis. Secondly, the free plan, the organisation of walls and rooms, liberated by the use of reinforced concrete pillars, instead of load bearing walls. Thirdly, the free façade, a front completely independent to the structure. Next, the horizontal ribbon windows that allow light to flood all corners of a room, and finally, the garden flat roofs, that allow for more private recreational space as well as contributing to his focus on social wellbeing (Marcos, 2021).

This building was designed in between World War I and II, and at this time there was a massive push for modern architecture and modern construction practises to both quickly fill the demand for housing after World War I, and to distinguish a new style of architecture to represent the 'machine age' (Le Corbusier, 1927). Le Corbusier encompassed this perspective within his designs, using machines to incorporate modern technology construction methods. Le Corbusier saw buildings as products, to be refined and eventually perfected, in parallel with automotive design (Cohen, 2004).

Proceeding the modern architecture movements of the early 1900s, was the development of many fine art styles like cubism and De Stijl. The ideas and perceptions of Le Corbusier's designs were derived from concepts communicated in these movements (Moore, 1979). He also participated in the development of the fine art style of purism, a visual representation of a simplified world using classical principles and proportions (fig. 8) (Murphy, 2002). Classical architecture has also influenced the villa in the layering of forms in conventional proportions and utilising columns to lift the façade of the ground (Qi, 2024).



Fig. 8: Still Life  
(Le Corbusier, 2016)

It's influence today is clear, Le Corbusier and many of his contemporaries have continued to refine his ideas, contributing to the development of a new movement of architecture, the international style (Murphy, 2002).

While the building itself has been criticised for its excessive cost and many defects. The Villa Savoye will live in history as a massive leap in modern architecture, from the contemporary forms to the revolutionary construction, Villa Savoye's influence on modern architecture has been undeniable. Le Corbusier's ideas have resonated across the world and inspired an age of design that refines the standards of a home.

## Table of Figures

### Cover Image – Photo of the Northwest Elevation of Villa Savoye (p. 1)

Le Corbusier (1930) *Northwest Elevation of Villa Savoye*. [Architecture]. Poissy, France. Available at: <https://gocity.com/en/paris/attractions/villa-savoye> (Accessed: 31 March 2025).

### Figure 1 – Abandoned between the years 1940 and 1963. Villa Savoye. (p. 2)

Metalocus (1963) *Abandoned between the years 1940 and 1963. Villa Savoye*. Available at: <https://www.metalocus.es/en/news/villa-savoye-le-corbusiers-machine-inhabit> (Accessed: 02 March 2025).

### Figure 2 – Ground-Floor Plan (p. 3)

Metalocus (1963) *Ground-Floor Plan*. Available at: <https://www.metalocus.es/en/news/villa-savoye-le-corbusiers-machine-inhabit> (Accessed: 02 March 2025).

### Figure 3 – First-Floor Plan (p. 3)

Metalocus (1963) *First-Floor Plan*. Available at: <https://www.metalocus.es/en/news/villa-savoye-le-corbusiers-machine-inhabit> (Accessed: 02 March 2025).

### Figure 4 – Second-Floor Plan (p. 3)

Metalocus (1963) *Second-Floor Plan*. Available at: <https://www.metalocus.es/en/news/villa-savoye-le-corbusiers-machine-inhabit> (Accessed: 02 March 2025).

### Figure 5 – Section of Villa Savoye (p. 3)

Metalocus (1963) *Abandoned between the years 1940 and 1963. Villa Savoye*. Available at: <https://www.metalocus.es/en/news/villa-savoye-le-corbusiers-machine-inhabit> (Accessed: 02 March 2025).

### Figure 6 – West perspective of the Villa (p. 4)

Le Corbusier (1930) *West perspective of the Villa*. [Architecture]. Poissy, France. Available at: <https://www.metalocus.es/en/news/villa-savoye-le-corbusiers-machine-inhabit> (Accessed: 02 March 2025).

### Figure 7 – Villa Savoye during Construction (p. 4)

Foundation Le Corbusier (n.d.) *Villa Savoye during Construction*. Available at: <https://archeyes.com/the-villa-savoye-le-corbusier/> (Accessed: 02 March 2025).

### Figure 8 – 'Still Life', purist painting by Le Corbusier (p. 6)

Le Corbusier (1920) *Still Life*. [Oil on canvas]. Available at: <https://www.wikiart.org/en/le-corbusier/still-life-1920> (Accessed: 04 March 2025).

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