

Villa Savoye

Background

Villa Savoye is one of the foremost examples of Modernist Architecture in the world, breaking many precedents for architectural style at the time of its completion. It is located within Poissy, a quiet, leafy suburb 15 miles west of the centre of Paris. (Weston, 2010) Constructed during the interwar period between 1928 and 1931, an era of rapid and consequential social change following the complete industrialisation of post-war France. This post war mentality for many saw a drastic change in aesthetic, condemning the ornament and detail as the architecture of empire that the new world must rid itself of, if it wanted to escape the disaster of the previous decade.

The visionary architect Le Corbusier was selected for the task, to design a weekend house for the wealthy Savoye family. Le Corbusier is an architect whose name has come to dominate Modernist architecture. Most commonly associated with his major commissions in France, he was born in Switzerland in 1887 and died in France in 1965. By the time of this commission, he had already become a pre-eminent Modernist working in France, and had published his treaty on the future of architecture "Towards A New Architecture" in 1922. Le Corbusier, whose real name was Charles-Édouard Jeanneret-Gris, had worked under Peter Behrens, one of the most dominant architects in Europe at the time, who had designed the revolutionary AEG Turbine Hall in 1909. Other assistants to Behrens at that time were Mies Van Der Rohe and Walter Gropius (Britannica, 2023), together with Le Corbusier they would dominate the 3 major European styles of the period, De Stijl, Bauhaus and Modernism respectively.

The clients of the project were wealthy enough to give Le Corbusier creative freedom, something he greatly appreciated as his ideas were often far too great in scale than was feasible and consequently many never got further than concepts, such as Plan Voisin.



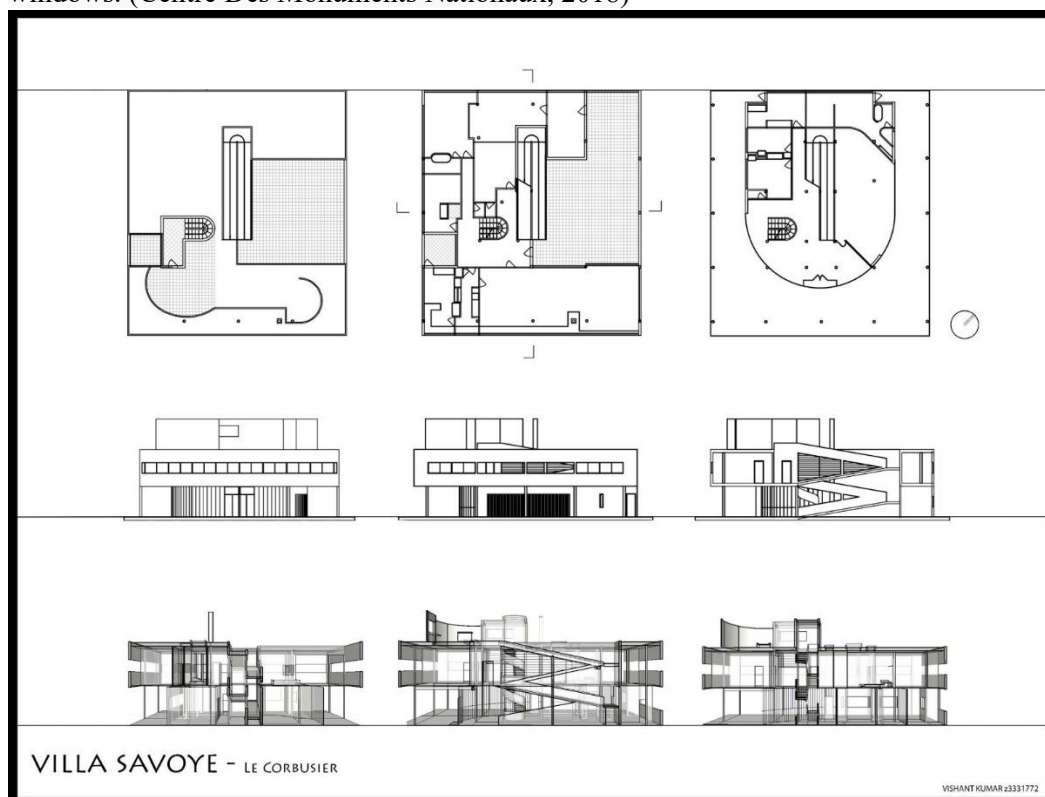
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Plan and Section

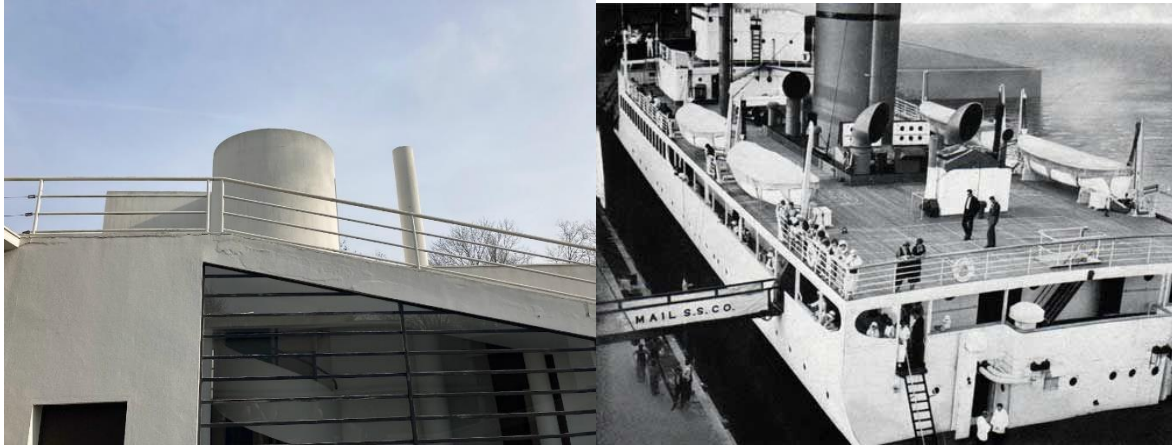
Undoubtedly, the plan and sections of Villa Savoye are the most evident displays of the architectural significance in the building. Le Corbusier had developed a theory for architecture, titled the "Five Points of New Architecture". Within Villa Savoye, the 5 points can be examined as follows:

1. The ground floor best displays Le Corbusier's use of pilotis, the columns on which the building is formed. They form grids of columns that are unobtrusive when standing alone but are occasionally integrated into the walls where applicable.
2. Pilotis revolutionised how interior space could be handled within a home, permitting large, unobstructed, open spaces. This allowed for another point – a free ground plan design. They remove the need for structural loadbearing walls, allowing the design of the ground floor to be based on the functionality of the space. In the ground floor of Villa Savoye, a semi circular end constructed largely of glass is allowed by the pilotis, creating a functional driveway for the owners car. This shaping of the plan to fit the owners car links to a core tenet of modernist architecture, that “form follows function”.
3. By creating an internal frame, the façade was no longer determined by its traditional function of providing a structural base for the entirety of the building. This allowed for the façade to be free of constraint and consequently could be tailored to aesthetic and internal practicality. In Villa Savoye, the lower façade is tucked back from the edge of the building while the upper façade floats effortlessly above the piloti.
4. This free façade allows for Le Corbusier's famed horizontal windows. Most buildings of merit in the 18th and 19th centuries were dominated by individual vertical windows that created singular focal points and lighting points, the long ribbon of windows generated by Le Corbusier were revolutionary in allowing consistent and uninterrupted light to fill the rooms.
5. The garden roof is elegantly championed in Villa Savoye, providing an integral and functional space in the house. All space is utilised within this concept and no ground is lost. The elevated terrace allows for greater appreciation of the surrounding landscape and a greater influx of natural light within the building, generating spaces such as the Salon that are surrounded by windows. (Centre Des Monuments Nationaux, 2018)



(gtrdgitar.cf, 2023)

Stylistically, the interior and façade of the building is often compared with the aesthetic of a cruise ship of the period. Combined with car-centric ground floor, this highlights Le Corbusier's interest in the technology of the period and its relevancy in architectural design.



-(Wilson.W, 2023, Villa Savoye,)

-(Pinterest, 2023, <https://www.pinterest.co.uk/pin/298996862730618170/> (accessed-22/2/2023))

Materials and Light

Modernism was of the age, entirely cutting edge, and so it is expected that the materials used in Villa Savoye would be new and innovative. The previously mentioned piloti constructed of steel form a large portion of the structural integrity. Steel structures had advanced heavily over the course of WW1 and, as mentioned, Corbusier was very familiar and inspired by nautical design, in which steel was the dominant material. Metal handrails reminiscent of those on a cruise ship can also be seen, creating an all encompassing aesthetic.

The majority of Villa Savoye is formed with reinforced concrete (Anon., 2023), a new and experimental building technique. The reinforced concrete allowed large structural plains with minimal support, further allowing Le Corbusier to develop an open floorplan.

Nearly all the surfaces in Villa Savoye are plastered and painted, including integrated furniture within the house. These large, plastered surfaces represent the height of minimalism and have remained hugely influential to this day. By plastering the exterior, Le Corbusier was able to hide all the joints in the concrete to give the illusion of an unbroken entity. The use of colour has an intriguing history with Villa Savoye, the palette presently being White, Dark Green and Black. Originally the house was decorated with other colours.

The piloti allowed for the minimal structure in the corners of the building, allowing an unbroken row of windows to circulate certain rooms. This creates an incredible openness to the rooms that would have been extremely difficult to produce without these advancements in technology.



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Concept

The designs of Le Corbusier are highly theoretical, Villa Savoye is no exception and the theories that underpin it have left an indelible mark on architecture ever since. The house could be said to be designed, and is often treated as, a statement and manifesto for the nascent modernists. Modernism and the International Style followed a period of heavy revivalism in the 19th century, where Neo Gothic architecture had become a dominant style, at least for public buildings and large private houses. Buildings such as the Palace of Westminster and the work of Viollet Le Duc in the reimagination of many French gothic buildings had cemented the prestige of ornament in architecture to the mind of the Victorians.

The Modernists rejected these Victorian principles in the belief that true beauty lay in what could be perceived as simplicity in aspect, while there was still immense complexity in the use of subtle structural form (Master Class, 2021). While Modernism emerged before the First World War, the war undoubtedly had an important impact on the movement. Many buildings that had taken long periods of time to create were swept away in France, and a psychological change began to occur with people trying to move away from the old fashioned imperialist ideas that had caused devastation across Europe. The new machine age drove a desire for efficiency (Kroll, 2010) and so architects like Le Corbusier attempted to create an architectural style that would be suitable for the world, thus Villa Savoye is one of the preeminent buildings associated with the International Style of architecture.



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Conclusion

As a functional house, Villa Savoye was plagued with a hard life and design defects. The render was prone to staining and cracking, meaning the exterior often needed repainting. The house also suffered heavily from an ingress of rainwater due to the flat roofs. The house was inhabited until 1940 when the war caused the family to evacuate, mistreated by allied and axis armies, the house was set for demolition when a campaign set out to restore it. The restoration began in 1963 and then a more thorough scheme was launched in 1985, being finished in 1997. It has the rare distinction of having been declared a historic monument in its architect's lifetime, emphasising the importance it is deemed to have. (The Getty Conservation Institute, 2013) The Villa Savoye could easily be considered one of the most influential buildings in the history of architecture and it is often used as an emblem of the modernist and internationalist styles. Looking past its defects, it was a successful experiment in an entirely new and rational way of building that has created a lasting and highly influential legacy.

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