

This piece of writing is from the author's bachelor of architecture graduation dissertation "A Sense of Community through Promenade Architecturale" written in spring, 2004. It analyses two buildings by Le Corbusier to identify possible consistencies in his approach to "promenade architecturale".

Case Studies of *Promenade Architecturale*: Two buildings by Le Corbusier

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Villa Savoye, (1928-31, Poissy, France)

*"Movement and change lie near the heart of the Villa Savoye's conception. A description of the building is best conducted as a promenade."*¹

William J. R. Curtis

If the Robie house is centered on a hearth signifying domestic stability and the traditional Gujrati house on a courtyard signifying communal living, Villa Savoye declares its *raison d'être* with the folded ramp that forms its core; a rich *promenade architecturale* is woven through a contained cuboid.

The intention is clearly one of making the Villa a belvedere from where to contemplate the natural surroundings. The building seeks to celebrate the *genius loci* of the site; its situation as a free-standing object in a meadow allows the villa to interact with the outside environment on all sides. The open *piano nobile* is the most important zone, meant to be reached without lingering on the enclosed ground floor. This emphasis on ascent is achieved by placing the ramp prominently on axis with the main entrance and by situating only service spaces on the ground floor.

The longitudinal (north-south) section is tripartite not only in height but also in length along which two masses sandwich the central space containing the ramp. Whereas the northern mass, containing service and private spaces, faces the approach road and is largely solid, the permeable southern mass opens towards the natural landscape to be viewed and therefore consists of semi-transparent glazing on ground, long ribbon windows on the *piano nobile* and the final framing window of the solarium. The ramp is oriented such that its redirections between the vertical layers return one to face south upon reaching each of the three levels. This reflects the significance given to the natural side.

The movement and change William Curtis speaks of occur mainly along the vertical axis. In transverse (east-west) section an interlock of light and dark zones can be identified; the ramp rises through a zone of complete enclosure on ground, through the *piano nobile* open and enclosed in parts, to a culminating rooftop solarium of complete openness and light. The relationship of the main path with the parent form of the villa therefore keeps changing; the ramp is embedded inside the building form as well as contained in the void of the court. This makes for a richly varied experience of changing light and views. The use of an open court is combined with an expansive ribbon window along the east side. These two elements are in turn inextricably linked with the ramp from where the moving person attains a dynamic viewing of the exterior environment consisting of the court in the foreground and the green landscape in the middle-ground and background. This is not the last instance in his career that Le Corbusier deploys an element of vertical circulation as a viewing trajectory within a multiple-height space containing a window to the outside.

There could have been more straightforward and direct routes into and through the Villa. However, a deliberate indirectness is essential to the circulation. Within a relatively small building it serves to lengthen the path while affording greater experiential richness and affecting psychological transitions. Asymmetrical, off-axis approach is followed by an entry on-axis albeit indirect, and reorientation occurs between spatial layers. Broadly, there are four such layers at Villa Savoye: the vehicular approach ending in a curved arrival at entrance, the ground floor, piano nobile, and the rooftop solarium.

The promenade at Villa Savoye relies for its richness on varying sensorial experience. This variety in turn comes from letting nature in the form of light and idyllic views freely enter and become part of the building. "At the Villa Savoye nature is celebratedviews of trees and grass are carefully orchestrated and framed. These vignettes of the exterior have an almost super-real intensity, as if the artist has clipped bits of the outside and spliced them together in a collage." ²

Points of reference abound in the villa where fenestration, open court, structural grid, and the circulation route itself constantly orient the promenading subject. This makes movement a highly coherent experience in which a sense of place is felt both in relation to the interiors and the surrounding context.

In a fairly small building, Le Corbusier offers a choice in vertical circulation and therefore in locomotive experience. The straightness of the ramp is also contrasted with the white spiral of the service stair in a sculptural play of white ribbon-like forms – one folding, the other twisting – awash with shadow and light. Circulation elements such as the staircase, ramp and main door have been clearly articulated as independent objects, symbolizing the significance of movement through the villa.

Le Corbusier derives maximum benefit from the roof plane. Its place in the promenade is crucial as a denouement. The flat roof has been exploited to maximize experiential richness rather than achieve only compositional effect. The solarium not only presents the final framing window over the landscape but also adds a curvaceous crown to the whole composition.

Mill-owners' Association Building (1954, Ahmedabad, India)

The Mill-owners' Association Building is situated on the banks of the Sabarmati River across which lies the old half of Ahmedabad. Unlike the Villa Savoye, it has always existed in an urban context. However, Le Corbusier, by adapting his strategy accordingly, creates another pavilion open to nature and the outside, a belvedere dedicated to the river and the old city's skyline. The site is linear, entered from the main road on one short side, flanked along both long sides by neighboring buildings and culminating at the edge of the Sabarmati.

Le Corbusier reinforces the dominant axis by placing a monolithic cubic building on it, simultaneously dividing the site into two unequal zones, one an approach apron and the other a back-garden facing the river. Whereas its situation allows Villa Savoye to be open on all sides, the skewed fins in the *brise-soleil* façade and solid side walls of the Millowners' Association Building create an enclosure that directs attention to the rear window wall framing the river and city beyond. The building therefore essentially modulates movement towards discovery of a single culminating view.

Themes at Poissy reappear at Ahmedabad. The building form is very simply configured: a cubic parent volume to which are appended two vertical paths. An open, centrally aligned ramp draws the visitor straight up to the first floor. Its grand, expansive gesture is juxtaposed with the fast zig-zag of a staircase, also open, affording efficient circulation through what is basically an office building. The implied symmetry of the façade conceals free, asymmetrical plans while a recessed double-height wall ending the axis of the ramp reveals nothing of the interior beyond. The direct

approach is turned subtly within this monumentally scaled entry void. On the first floor one moves freely through an open plan set about with a columnar grid, towards the back wall. Whereas the front wall's *brise-soleil* had been angled and therefore shutting views through the building, this rear wall is a screen that forms a monumental open window to view the landscape behind the building.

Movement to the second floor is via either an elevator at the center of the floor or the front staircase at which the visitor is once again taken towards the entry plane to gain views of whence he first arrived. The second floor is really the culmination of the entire experience and entry to it is through a low, free-standing portal with a pivoted door. The space on this floor is double-height with a free-form wooden council chamber to the right. Next to this is another, smaller free form containing toilets. The ascent to an intermediate deck overlooking this space and onwards to the roof garden is along a small open staircase that affords changing views of the space and free-form objects as well as the landscape till the horizon. The rooftop of the building is conceived as an open plane from where to take in the urban scenery. This roof-garden is also used to sculptural effect with the stair-tower and skylights to the council chamber designed as freestanding objects.

Recurrent Ideas

Is it possible to identify ideas reappearing throughout Le Corbusier's oeuvre that might be the building-blocks of a design strategy for his idea of "*promenade architecturale*"? In solutions for two contrasting programs more than twenty years apart, one of a private pastoral retreat in France and another of an office building in a bustling Indian city, one may begin to discern a consistency of approach in the creation of promenade. One may glimpse certain themes that Le Corbusier may have considered fundamental and unchanging in the experience of human beings moving through space and therefore through architecture.

The following features shape the promenades at both Villa Savoye and the Millowners' Association Building:

1. Symmetrical, on-axis approaches are offset by indirect entries, and facades of implied symmetry conceal asymmetrical floor plans. Also at both places the front elevations are fairly solid entities that retain the mystery of what lies beyond them, giving away nothing of the generous views to be taken from inside the buildings. A similar contrast also animates Villa Stein de Monzie at Garches (1926-28) where the implied symmetry and reticence of the entry plane conceals the asymmetry and generous openness of the rear side.
2. A variety of locomotive experiences are provided: ramps and staircases as well as an elevator at the Mill-owners'. Alternative circulation systems meet experiential as well as functional objectives; the staircases at Villa Savoye and the Millowners' are efficient, serviceable alternatives to the picturesque routes offered by the ramps. At another building in Ahmedabad – the Shodhan House (1951-54) – Le Corbusier provides a similar variety of choices between a staircases scattered throughout the house and a monumental ramp running the entire height of the house.
3. Circulation elements such as doorways, ramps and staircases are clearly articulated, signifying to the visitor the importance of movement in the architectural experience that awaits him. These different elements have furthermore been used in sculptural juxtaposition.
4. The relationship of vertical circulation elements with the form of the building is diverse. At the Millowners' there are an externalized stair and a ramp appended to the parent form as well as a stair and elevator embedded within it. At Villa Savoye the ramp weaves its way through various degrees of enclosure. These changing relationships constantly move the promenading subject between inside and outside realms.
5. Multiple-height or open-to-sky spaces for visual continuity are combined with a generous window to the outside. In addition an element of vertical circulation such as a ramp or

staircase is placed in these spaces so that the moving person has a dynamic visual experience of interior and exterior layers of space. Such a strategy is redeployed at many other projects of diverse function including Villa Stein de Monzie, Chandigarh (1951-63) and Unite de Habitation, Marseille (1947-53).

6. Le Corbusier seeks dynamism both in circulation and form. He frequently places free-form, curved surfaces in multiple-height spaces in which these surfaces are viewed as sculptural objects from varying heights afforded by ramps or staircases. This happens at Villa Savoye as the visitor, moving up from the court to the solarium, perceives the curved rooftop volume from different levels. At the Mill-owners' Association Building the council chamber and toilets are viewed from the staircase in the second floor multiple-height space. The twofold dynamism of form and circulation also appears at Carpenter Center, Harvard University (1959-63) where the sinuous central ramp passes between the elevated free-form halves of the building. A monumental interior version of this idea can be seen in the Assembly Building at Chandigarh where the central multiple-height space juxtaposes the conical assembly chamber and the ramp to the first floor.
7. Points of reference are provided to the promenading subject. The primary reference is the landscape itself which is viewed through an array of openings. At the Millowners' the rear window wall itself becomes the reference point because of its scale. Secondary orientating devices such as the columnar grid and the building envelope also contribute to a highly coherent experience of movement.
8. The roof is made to meet both compositional and experiential aims. Not only does the roof-scape provide a crown for the elevation, it also becomes a sculptural garden from where to view the surroundings. A similar approach is evident at Shodhan House, Villa Stein and Unite de Habitation.
9. Physical journeys culminate in and launch journeys for vision and imagination through windows that frame grand views. "Thus the ramp in the Villa Savoyedoes not simply lead through the building but has a beginning and an end, and when one end is reached it begins to lead us once more to another place."³ Through this combination of physical and visual continuity both buildings seek to celebrate the genius loci of site by modulating discovery of a powerful natural presence.

¹ Curtis, William J.R., *Modern Architecture Since 1900*, Phaidon, London 1996, pg 275

² Curtis, William J.R., *Modern Architecture Since 1900*, Phaidon, London 1996, pg 280

³ Joedicke, Jurgen, *The Ramp as Architectonic Promenade in Le Corbusier's Work*, www.tu-harburg.de