Le Corbusier's Changing Attitude toward Form
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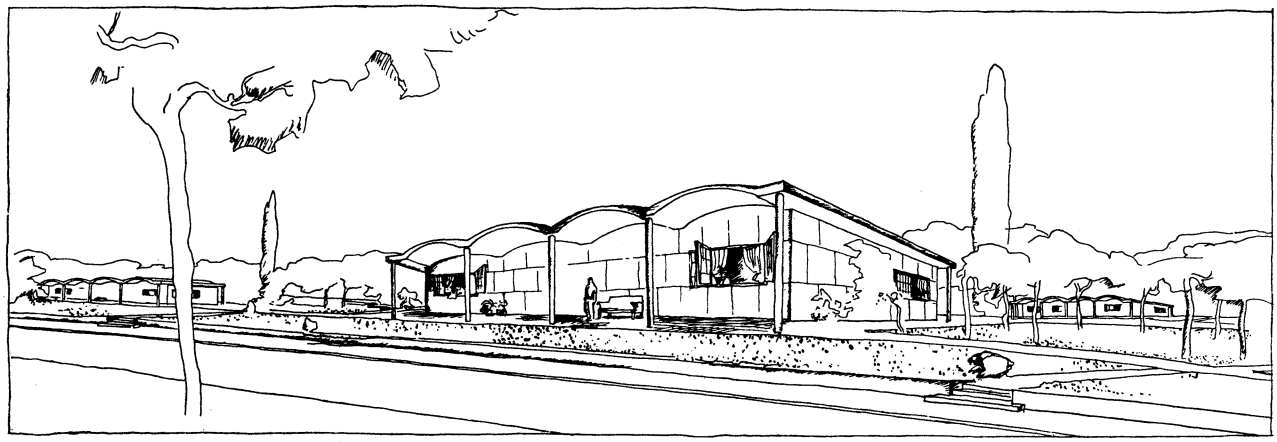


Fig. 1. Maison Monol, 1919.

Le Corbusier's Changing Attitude Toward Form

PETER SERENYI

No discussion of Le Corbusier's architecture of this decade can begin without considering, however briefly, his earlier development. Between 1919 and 1922 Le Corbusier embarked on a new path which he has never entirely abandoned since. In the realm of domestic architecture the Maison Monol of 1919 (Fig. 1) and the Maison Citrohan of 1920–1922 (Fig. 2) mark the beginning of a new style. In these two projects lie the roots of all his later houses, culminating in the Maison Jaoul of 1954 and the Villa Shodan of 1956. Moreover, all his *unités* owe their origin to the Immeubles Villas of 1922; while the Ville Contemporaine of 1922 is the ancestor of Chandigarh.

The historical events that preceded Le Corbusier's "Period of Invention" provide us with the best clues to a better understanding of the origins of his style; for the chaos and disorder resulting from World War I made him painfully aware of the need to create a new order based on a more stable world. It is not surprising, therefore, that both the Maisons Monol and Citrohan as well as the Ville Contemporaine revert to a distant past. While the former find their sources in the architecture of the tribal societies of the Eastern Mediterranean world, the latter recalls a Platonic order based on numbers. In his desire to create order in face of disorder, Le Corbusier conceived two kinds of utopias altogether too familiar to Western thought: the "Ideal Paradise," with its particular emphasis on the individual, and the "Ideal City," with its primary concern for the many. His private houses, placed in a garden setting, embody the rural concept of the good life, which Plato called *Kronos*: the seat of a distant tribal world characterized by peace and tranquility. The Ville Contemporaine, on the other hand, corresponds to Plato's Republic and its later derivations, expressing an urban concept of an ideal world.

More than once Le Corbusier has referred to the immediate postwar years as the starting point for modern architecture. "If we pose the question," he proclaimed in 1928, " 'Has the architectural moment of our epoch arrived?' the answer is 'It has; because since the end of the war period we possess a modern conception of architecture.' This fact is certain and can be verified in every country."[1] Let me add that Gropius, who has always been more articulate in verbal than in visual images, summed up the effect of World War I on modern architecture even more precisely. He declared that "the full consciousness of my responsibility in advancing ideas based on my own reflections only came home to me as the result of the war, in which these theoretical premises first took definite shape. After the violent interruption . . . every thinking man felt the necessity for an intellectual change of front. Each in his own particular sphere of ac-

1. Le Corbusier, "The Town and the House," *Architectural Review*, LXIV, 1928, p. 224.

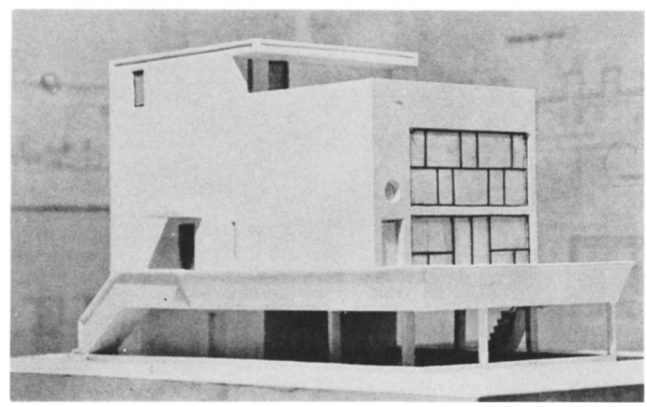


Fig. 2. Maison Citrohan, 1920–1922.

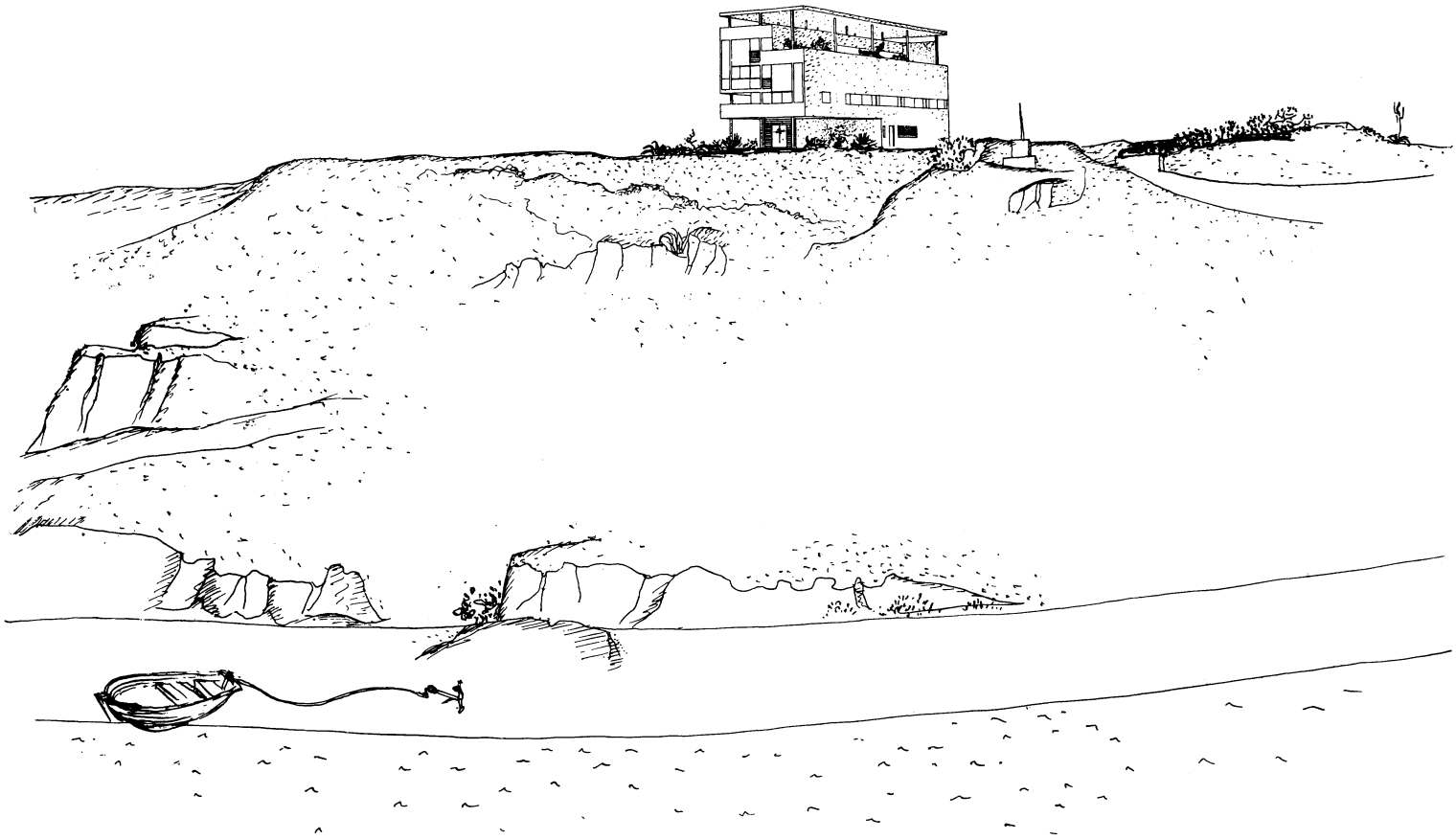


Fig. 3. Villa at Carthage, 1928.

tivity aspired to help in bridging the disastrous gulf between reality and idealism. It was then that the immensity of the mission of the architects of my own generation first dawned on me."[2]

As mentioned earlier, Le Corbusier invented two kinds of private houses shortly after the war: the Maisons Monol and Citrohan. The latter, angular and firm, stands erect on the ground, dominating the setting; while the former, undulating and soft, rests on the ground, absorbing the setting. To use Le Corbusier's own words: "In the one, strong objectivity of forms, under the intense light of a Mediterranean sun: *male* architecture. In the other, limitless subjectivity rising against a clouded sky: *female* architecture."[3] In his private houses, then, it is the individual human figure—isolated and lonely, to be sure—that is expressed symbolically. It is no coincidence, therefore, that most of his houses were built for single men or women, who were either artists or intellectuals.

Before turning to the period under discussion, let me preface my brief remarks by proposing a chronology for Le Corbusier's artistic development: I. Formative Years, 1905 to 1919; II. Period of Invention, 1919 to 1922; III. First Mature Phase, 1922 to 1928; IV. Period of Reassessment, 1928–1929 to 1945; V. Fulfillment, 1945 to the present.

Although the terminating date for this Symposium has no particular relevance to Le Corbusier's development, the years 1928–1929 do mark a turning point in his style. As is well known, it was during these years that he designed the finest, and indeed, the last house in the Purist style: the Villa Savoye. Yet it was also during these very same years that he conceived the Villa at Carthage—an entirely fresh interpretation of the well-known Citrohan type (Fig. 3). This renewal of artistic imagination was made largely possible through his encounter with Rietveld's work, more specifically with the Schroder house and with the project for a house of 1923–1924 (Fig. 4). On the façade of the Villa at Carthage, for example, two earlier elements—the studio and the ribbon window—are fused with the help of De Stijl vocabulary. As in Rietveld's project of 1923–1924, there is a strong interplay between lines and planes, between solids and voids, and between verticals and horizontals. But unlike Rietveld's design, the various parts of the Villa at Carthage enjoy a lesser degree of independence, owing this quality, among others, to the tightness of the composition and to the uninterrupted nature of the roof line. But in later versions of the Villa at Carthage the spaces and masses are gradually loosened up, culminating in the dynamic composition of the Villa Shodan (Fig. 5).

2. Walter Gropius, *The New Architecture and the Bauhaus*, London, 1935, p. 48.

3. Le Corbusier, *Modulor*, Cambridge, 1958, p. 224.

Another example of the Citrohan project—the Maison Errazuris of 1930 (Fig. 6)—marks the second change in his style during the period under discussion. In this case it is primarily Le Corbusier's attitude towards nature that leads him to a reassessment of form. For example, the exterior silhouette now becomes an active form, jutting upward from the ground itself. During the 1920s such visual activity was restricted to ramps or stairs, carefully concealed behind the external envelope. In fact, a comparison between this house and the Villa Savoye (Fig. 7) shows how the outline of the ramp is transformed into the space-inclosing mass, thus anchoring the entire interior volume to the site. There are, of course, a number of variations on the theme of the Maison Errazuris which were designed during this period, but with one exception, none of them was ever executed.[4] The exception is the house in Mathes of 1935. Here the functional independence of the wall—so characteristic of his houses of the 1920s—is entirely given up in favor of creating a masonry structure that serves both as a space-defining and as a load-bearing element, hence foreshadowing his houses of the past ten years.

Unlike its opposite, the Maison Monol had no successor during the 1920s. Some of its basic features, such as the vaulted roof and the long, continuous spaces, first appeared in Le Corbusier's own studio-apartment of 1930–1933. Yet the first Monol type house was built only in 1935. This well-known structure, located in the suburbs of Paris, occupies an important place in Le Corbusier's *oeuvre* (Fig. 8). Unlike the Maison Citrohan and its later derivations, this week-end house does not stand upright on the ground, dominating the setting; instead, it rests on it, spreading its parts on the terrain itself. In this house—as in all Monol type structures—Le Corbusier expresses a more subservient attitude toward nature. This is most

4. For other examples of the Maison Citrohan with the butterfly roof see: Clarke Arundell of 1939; Lannamezon House of 1940; MAS prefabricated house of 1939–1940.

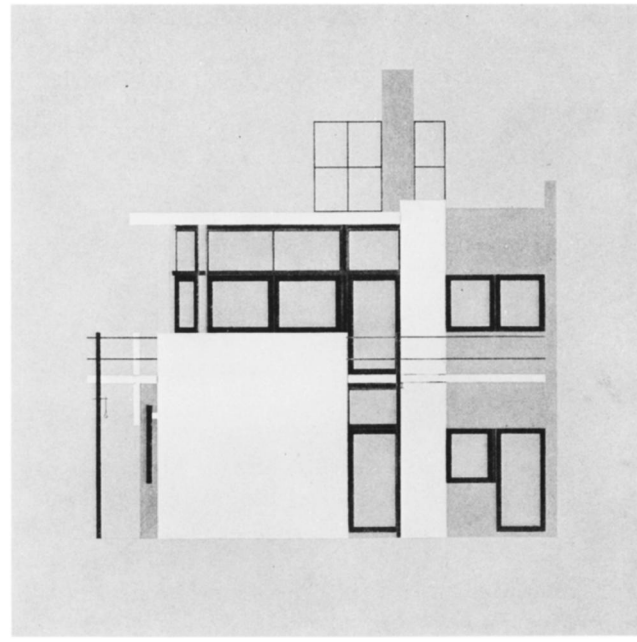


Fig. 4. Rietveld, Project for a House, 1923–1924.

visible in the low, earth-hugging structure, built partially of natural materials, and covered with grass. Moreover, the area defined by the external walls of the house and the small pavilion is transformed into an outdoor room, whose space becomes at one with nature. As is well known, the later descendants of this house range from the project of La Sainte Baume of 1948 to the Maison Jaoul of 1954.

Before leaving the discussion of Le Corbusier's houses, let me turn, however briefly, to their interiors. During the 1920s his houses were built around staircases and ramps, creating an air of tension which was only resolved on the roof garden. As Le Corbusier has pointed out, the roof garden is a place "where the sky is always open; and far from the street, one can experience a feeling of security

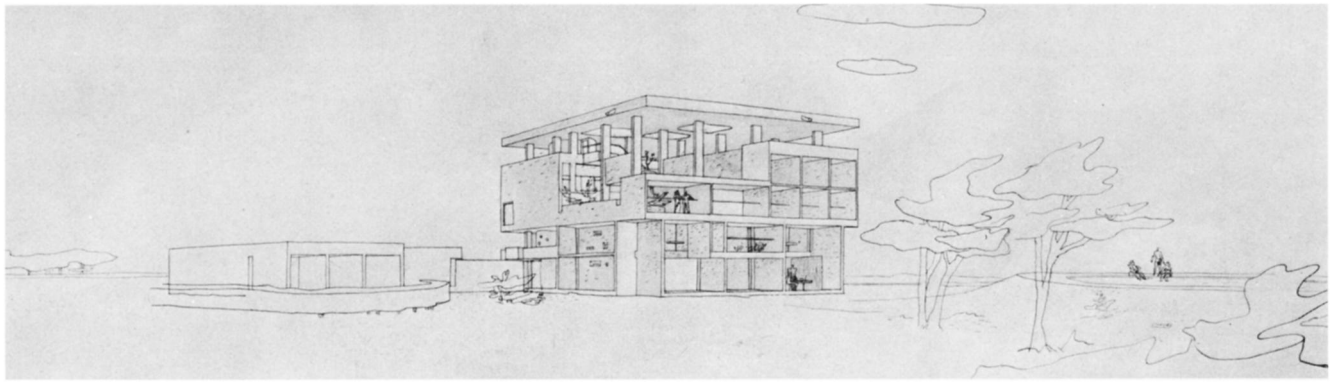


Fig. 5. Villa Shodan, Ahmedabad, 1956.

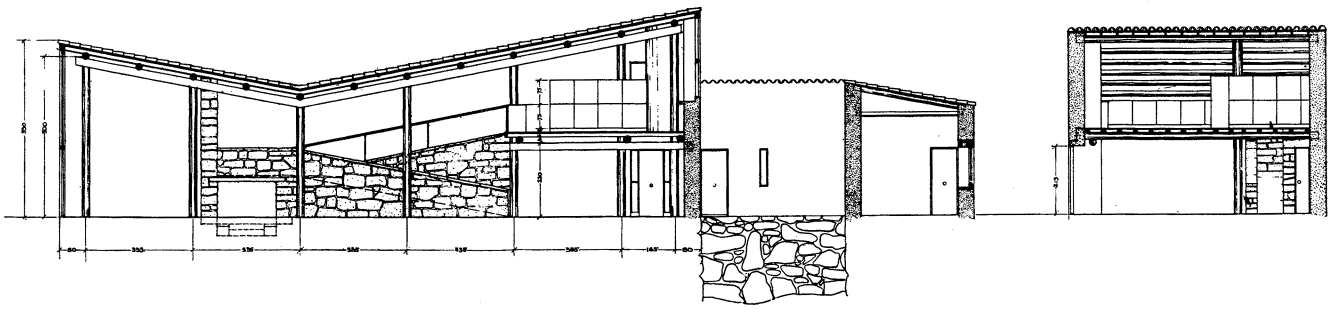


Fig. 6. Maison Errazuris, Chile, 1930.

and well being."[5] This secluded area, high above the street and removed from the tensions of everyday life, must be understood as an Arcadia—an earthly paradise, as it were—an area where the isolated and lonely man can become at one with nature in peace and tranquility. In this decade, however, Le Corbusier abandoned the roof garden in favor of creating a more restful interior space. Moreover, the importance of the ramps and stairs was taken over by the fireplace. In the 1920s his fireplaces were isolated and often fragile sculptural forms, whose primary function was to define or to divide space. This can best be seen in the living room of the Villa Church at Ville d'Avray (Fig. 9) and in the library of the double house at Stuttgart. In the 1930s, however, Le Corbusier's fireplaces acquire a more plastic quality, serving as a means to anchor the house more emphatically to the ground. Such fireplaces can be found in the house of Mme. de Mandrot, in the Errazuris project, and in the house at Mathes, not to mention his numerous unexecuted projects.

Turning to his public buildings, let me restrict my comments to some aspects of his apartment houses and office buildings, mentioning only two important changes that occurred during the decade under discussion. First, the flatness of the roof line, so characteristic of his projects for large buildings in the 1920s, is abandoned in favor of creating a more complicated superstructure on the roof tops. Moreover, while the roof garden is gradually given up in his private houses during this period, it acquires a significant role in his public buildings, foreshadowing the spacious roof gardens of the past twenty years. Also, the relationship between the public space on the roof and the natural surrounding is now firmly established. The project for the Rentenanstalt of Zurich, designed in 1933, serves as a good example to illustrate these points (Fig. 10).

More important, however, is the realization of Le Corbusier's best known trade-mark: the *brise soleil*. One of the first projects in which this feature appears is the apartment house for Algiers of 1933 (Fig. 11). To enumerate the various sources for this motif lies outside the scope of this brief essay. Let me mention only one source whose origin goes back to Le Corbusier's peculiar use of window frames in the 1920s. In one of the windows of the living room of the Villa Church, for example, the glass pane is surrounded by a freestanding frame so as to give it the

5. Jean Badovici, ed., *Le Corbusier et Pierre Jeanneret*, Paris, (1928?), 1, p. 13.

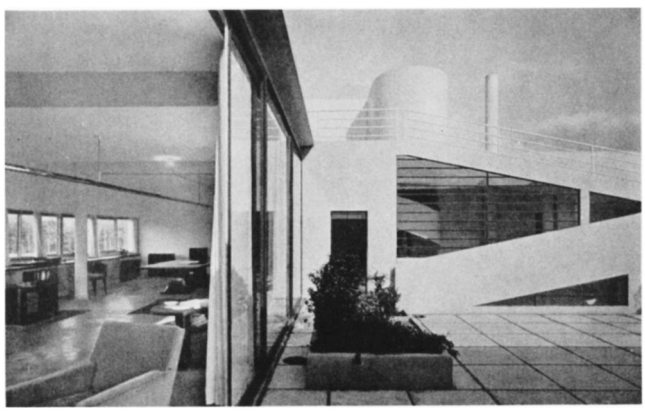


Fig. 7. Villa Savoye, 1929–1930.

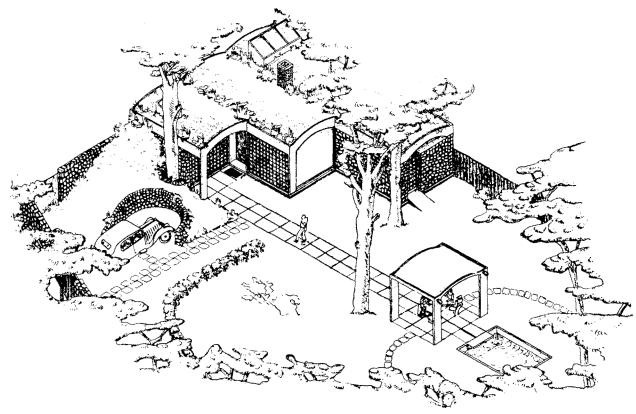


Fig. 8. Week-end house, near Paris, 1935.

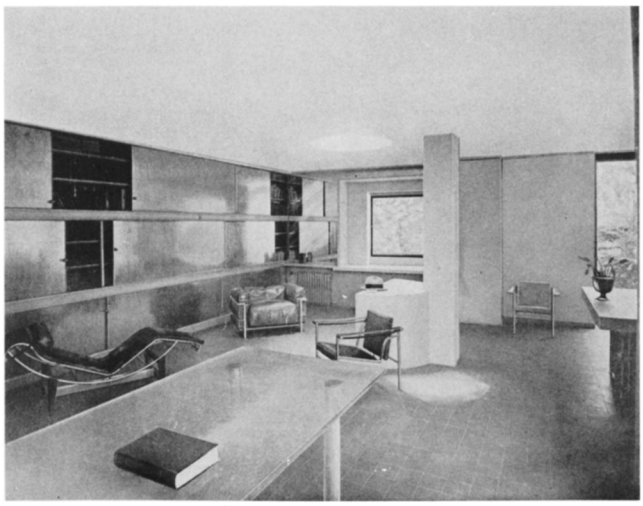


Fig. 9. Villa Church at Ville d'Avray, 1928–1929.

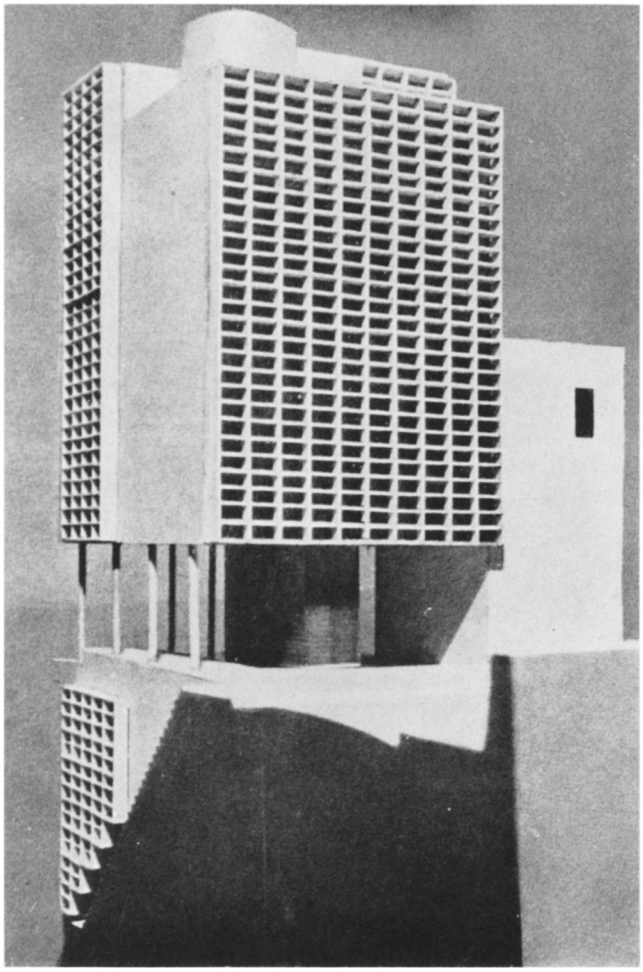


Fig. 11. Project for an Apartment in Algiers, 1933.

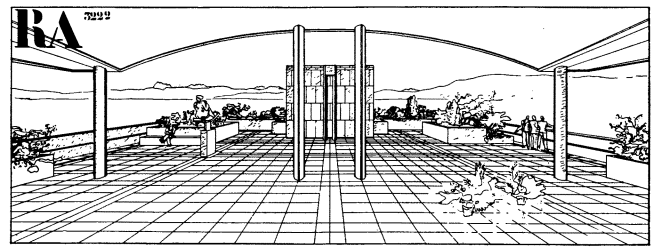


Fig. 10. Project for Rentenanstalt.

effect of a painting (Fig. 9). In Algiers, on the other hand, the freestanding window frame of the previous decade is turned outside and is treated monumentally.

There is another kind of *brise soleil*, which has, as it were, an independent life of its own. This type first appeared in the project for a Law Court for Algiers of 1938 (Fig. 12). Its composition has many visual sources. The one which I would like to emphasize particularly is van Doesburg's project for a house for an artist of 1923 (Fig. 13). As in the van Doesburg project, large rectangular frames make up the façade of Le Corbusier's Law Court, creating a rich, plastic effect. Although the rigidity of Le Corbusier's *brise soleil* has little to do with van Doesburg's looser and more fragmented composition, the original qualities of De Stijl spirit were later incorporated into the *brise soleils* of Chandigarh (Fig. 14).

The year 1929 also marks an important change in Le Corbusier's attitude towards the city. His various projects for the rebuilding of Paris of the 1920s were essentially utopian diagrams, based on a neoclassical tradition best summed up in Laugier's dictum: "uniformity in detail and variety in general effect." The Mundaneum of 1929 (Fig. 15), intended for an actual site near Geneva, marks the first real effort on Le Corbusier's part to create a civic space based on the Acropolis. In this city plan the rigid symmetry of the earlier 1920s is given up in favor of a more open composition so that the various buildings acquire a greater sense of independence. Moreover, the axis of the city links the mountains with the lake. But it was only in the project for the University of Brazil of 1936 (Fig. 16) that most of his ideas first adumbrated in the Mundaneum were more fully developed. Here the dynamic asymmetry of the Acropolis is reinterpreted in a vigorous modern language. The buildings of the University are indeed "animated by a single thought, drawing around them the landscape and gathering it into the composition," to use Le Corbusier's own earlier words.[6]

Needless to say, the development of what one might best call Le Corbusier's "Acropolic style" of city planning was not the only significant event of this period of reas-

6. Le Corbusier, *Towards a New Architecture*, London, 1927, p. 188.

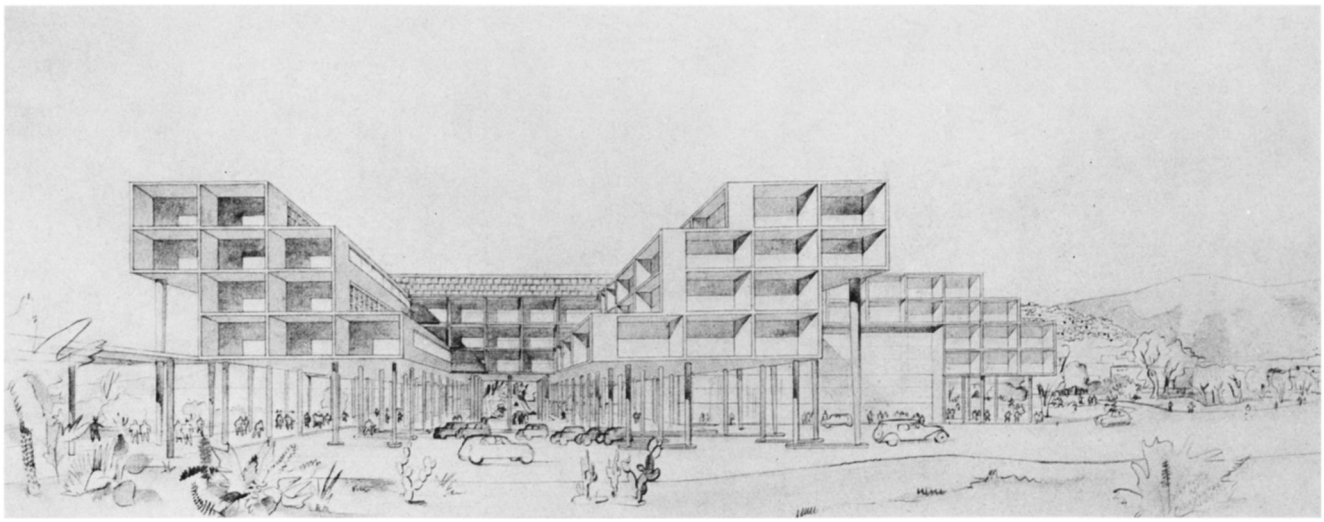


Fig. 12. Project for a Law Court, Algiers, 1938.

sessment. There were also his "anti-city" city plans and the plan for a farm, which played an equally significant role in preparing the way towards fulfillment. Let me begin with the former.

Ever since 1920, when Le Corbusier made the first sketches for the Ville Contemporaine, his cities contained an element of fear—a fear of the big city, to be more exact. The most amusing illustration of this fear can be found in the various cartoons reproduced in *The City of Tomorrow*, accompanying the chapter, "Newspaper Cuttings and Catchwords." The best of these, of course, is at the head of the chapter, with the caption: "Heartrending farewells of the father of a family about to cross the street in front of the Gare de l'Est."[7] On the more serious side, there is his long diatribe on the evils of the street, first published in 1929.[8] Here he condemns all conventional streets and boulevards, urging the immediate adoption of his elevated

7. Le Corbusier, *The City of Tomorrow and Its Planning*, London, 1947, p. 141.

8. Le Corbusier, *Oeuvre complète, 1910–1929*, Zurich, 1937, pp. 118–119.

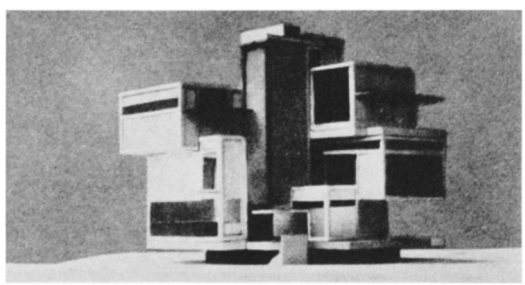


Fig. 13. van Doesburg, Project for a House for an Artist, 1923.

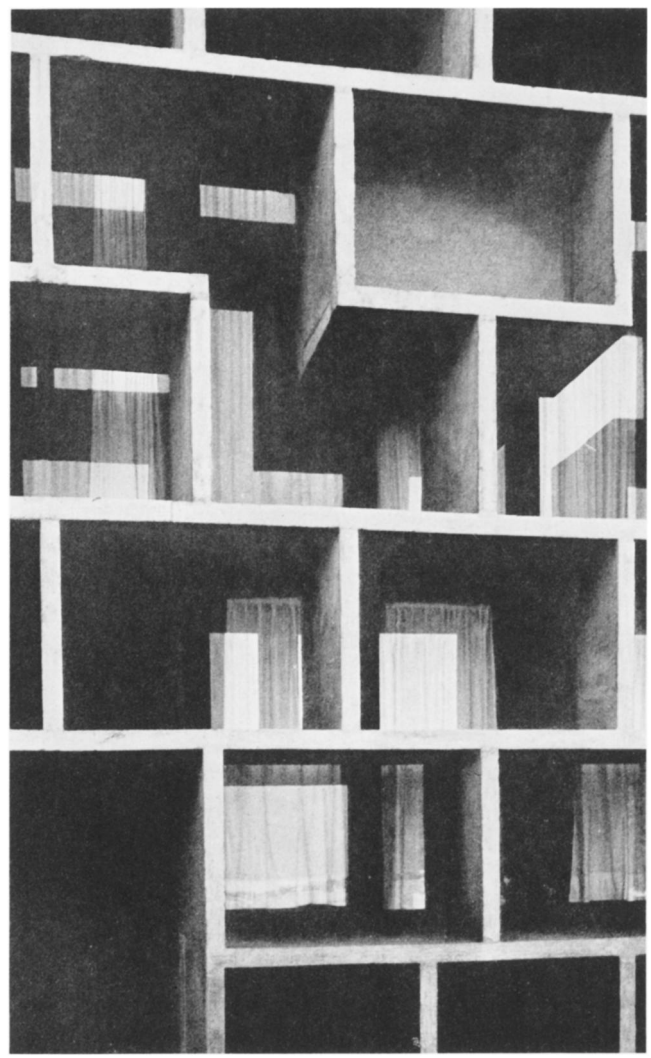


Fig. 14. Chandigarh, Law Court, 1956.

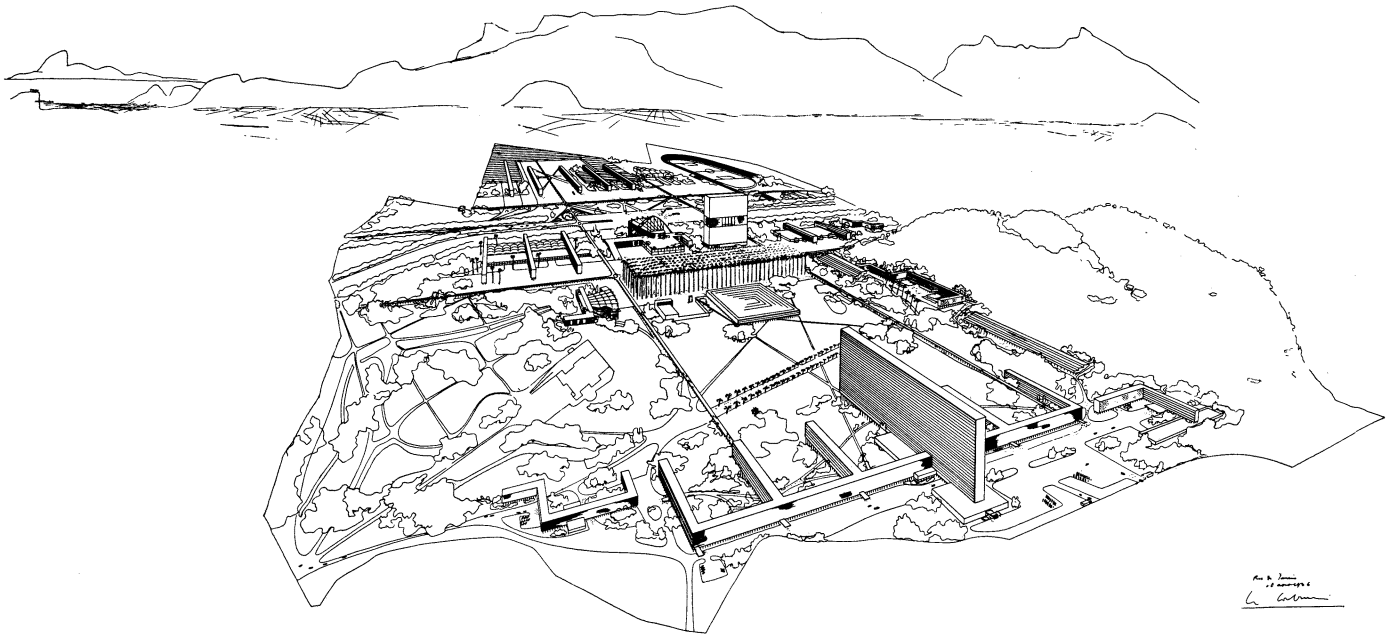


Fig. 16. University of Brazil, 1936.

arteries of circulation, which would, as we know so well, not only separate pedestrian from vehicular traffic, but also trucks from cars and cars from bicycles. But this is not all. There is also his Ville Contemporaine and the "Plan Voisin" for Paris in which, to paraphrase John Summerson, the park is not in the town but the town in the park.[9] Nothing done before or after, however, surpasses the plan for Hellocourt of 1935 in terms of being an "anti-city" city. With the pretentious title "urbanisation d'Hellocourt," Le Corbusier introduces a few scattered skyscrapers, separated by wide open spaces and large areas of greenery (Fig. 17). Aristotle once said that "men come together in cities in order to live; they remain together in order to live the 'good life,'—a common life, for noble ends."[10] In Hellocourt, how-

9. John Summerson, "Architecture, Painting and Le Corbusier," in his *Heavenly Mansions*, New York, 1963, p. 191.

10. Aristotle, *On Civics*, quoted by Frederick Hiorns in *Town Building in History*, London, 1956, p. 10.

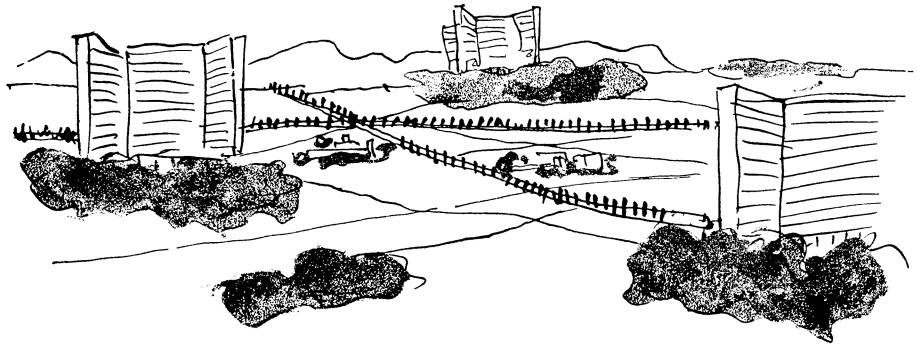


Fig. 17. Urbanisation d'Hellocourt, 1935.

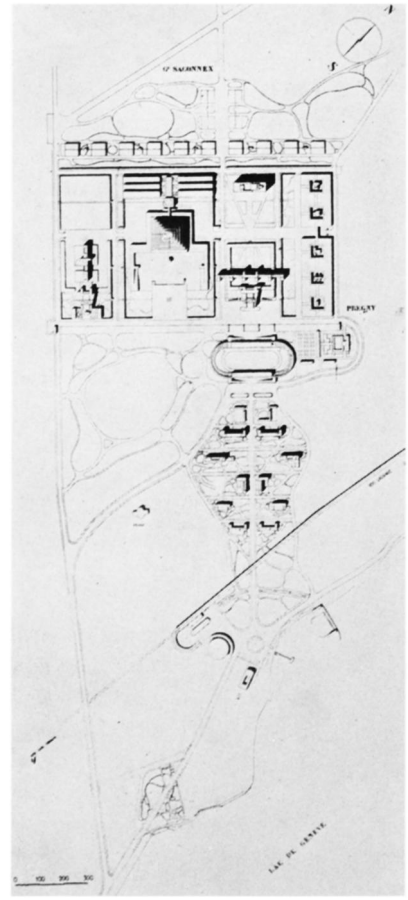


Fig. 15. Mundaneum, 1929.

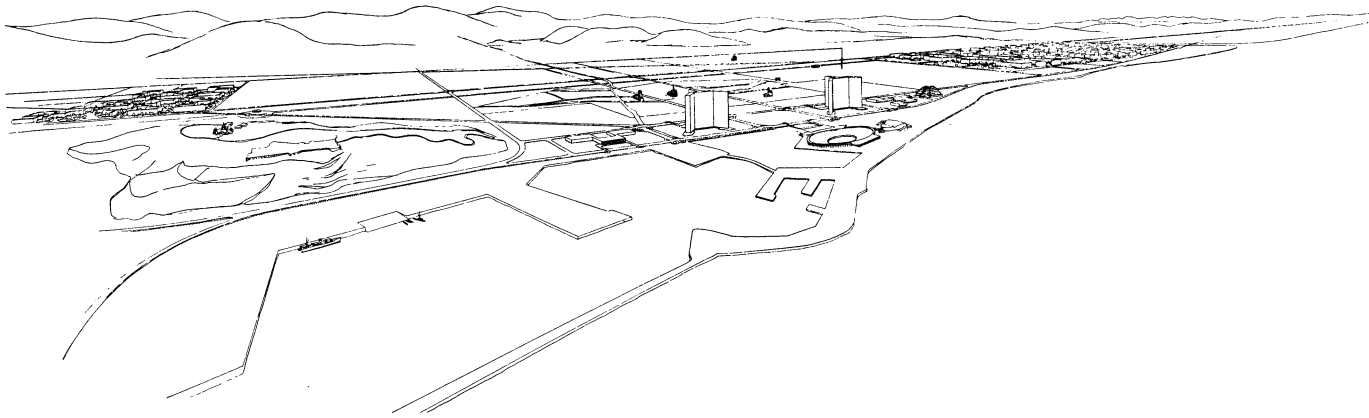


Fig. 18. "Plan Maciá," Barcelona, 1932.

ever, men stay apart; in fact, they escape from one another by isolating themselves in lonely towers, or "lookouts"—to use Le Corbusier's term—to live a private life freed from communal responsibility.

It should be noted, however, that the degree of isolation that permeates the plan of Hellocourt is rather rare in Le Corbusier's city plans. It first appears in the "Plan Maciá" for Barcelona of 1932, where two isolated skyscrapers are placed in a vast and deserted landscape, far outside the city boundaries (Fig. 18). It again reappears, although in a considerably modified version, in the project for Nemours of 1934. Here the plan calls for eighteen *unités*, each housing 2500 people, with every building standing separately on a sloping terrain, facing the sea (Fig. 19).

It seems that during the decade under discussion Le Corbusier devised two entirely different approaches to city planning. The first, embodied in the plans for the Mundaneum and the University of Brazil, can best be called classical, following the tradition of the Acropolis. The second, expressed in the plans for Hellocourt, Barcelona, and Nemours, to name just the most significant examples, can perhaps be called "existentialist." In the former, Le Corbusier envisages a collective order based on the interaction between man and man, and between man and nature. In the latter, he views man as an isolated being, fulfilling himself through the act of living a solitary life in nature.

While addressing himself to these two entirely different attitudes towards human order, during these very same years Le Corbusier also searched for a means to reconcile them, for if seen in the proper light, the Ferme Radieuse of 1934–1938 (Fig. 20) must be understood as a desperate effort on Le Corbusier's part to reconcile the one and the many, the country with the city, individuality and collectivity, indeed existentialism with classicism. In it, he combined the sense of freedom and openness of such plans as Hellocourt with the more formal organization of his "Acropolic style" of city planning. Unity between these two is achieved with the help of De Stijl vocabulary. As a comparison with van Doesburg's painting *Rhythm of a Russian Dance* of 1918 (Fig. 21) indicates, the fragmentation of form combined with the continuity of space—so characteristic of De Stijl compositions in general—reappears in Le Corbusier's plan for this civic space. The two buildings at each end serve as primary space definers, while the others mark the boundaries for the space that flows between the first two, creating a spatial and formal

Fig. 19. Plan for Nemours, 1934.

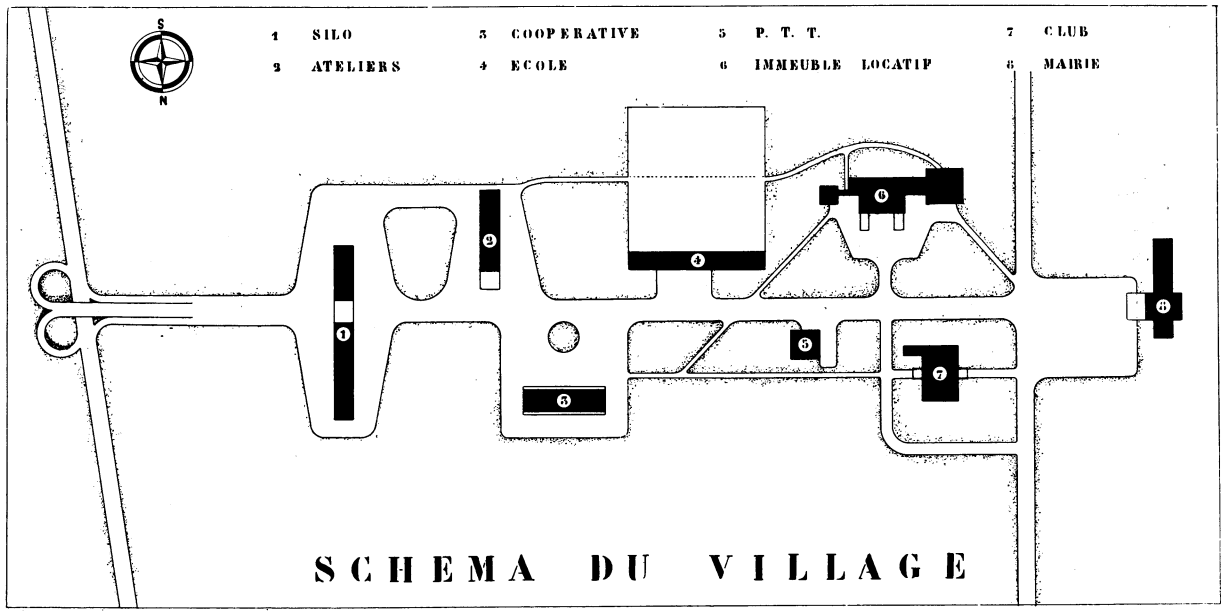


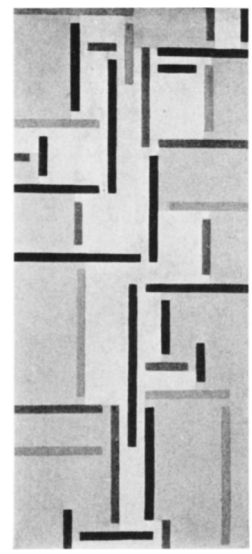
Fig. 20. Ferme Radieuse, 1934–1938.

rhythm that is closely reminiscent of van Doesburg's painting. Though each building is treated as a separate unit, the whole composition is brought into unison by a flowing space. Unlike in the plan for Nemours, for example, where only a series of diagrammatic roads links the buildings together, here the whole town revolves around and emanates from a space that is both living and active. Moreover, in order to achieve a greater sense of unity between man and nature, each building is covered with a Monol-type vaulted roof, which firmly anchors the interior spaces to the ground (Fig. 22).

Although it is an ideal town, planted not on an actual site but simply on a blank sheet, the Ferme Radieuse is far removed from its ancestor, the Ville Contemporaine. The gradual reassessment of form and content which is first visible in the plan for the Mundaneum of 1929 comes to an end here. It is a process of transformation without which such mature plans as St. Dié and Chandigarh would remain incomprehensible.

To conclude, the numerous important changes that took place in Le Corbusier's style during the decade under discussion were realized: first, through his reassessment of nature; second, through his renewed encounter with De Stijl; and third, through his fresh attitude towards his own work of the 1920s. All these changes paved the way for his most mature style of the post-1945 period. One can, therefore, justly call these years a period of reflection and reassessment.

Fig. 21. van Doesburg, *Rhythm of a Russian Dance*, 1918.



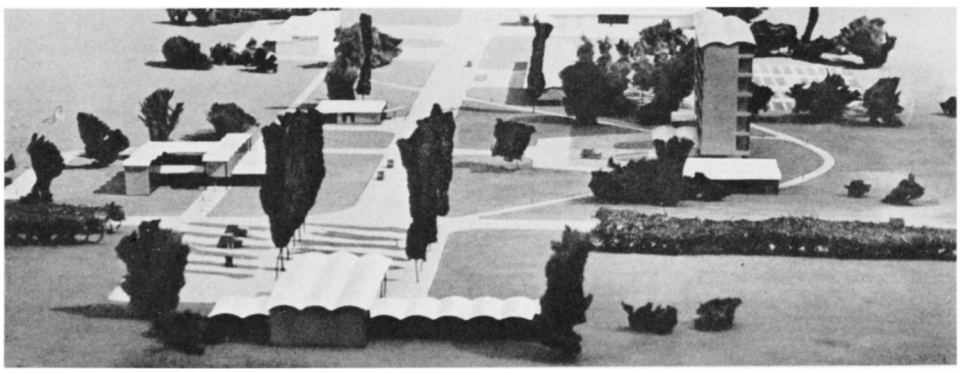


Fig. 22. Ferme Radieuse, 1934–1938.