

Le Corbusier, Giedion, and the Villa Savoye: From Consecration to Preservation of Architecture

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1. Le Corbusier and Giedion at the fancy-dress ball that followed the signing of the Declaration at the First International Congress of Modern Architecture (CIAM), on June 28, 1928 (FLC L4-14-60). Photograph copyright Fondation Le Corbusier, Paris.

# Le Corbusier, Giedion, and the Villa Savoye

## From Consecration to Preservation of Architecture

In its final verdict, on December 22, 1927, the League of Nations rejected the modern building that Le Corbusier and Pierre Jeanneret had proposed for its headquarters next to Lake Geneva, choosing instead a palace that featured conservative architecture of an academic character. This verdict was the starting point for an explosive campaign by Le Corbusier for the formulation of programmatic principles and strategies to ensure that modern architecture would prevail internationally. The campaign was very successful in Switzerland, which recognized in his person a child of its own. In this militant environment, Le Corbusier was the principal lever in the formation of the International Congresses of Modern Architecture (CIAM), which was achieved on June 28, 1928, at the Château de La Sarraz in Switzerland, near Lausanne, by the signing of the Declaration. Another Swiss from Zurich, Sigfried Giedion, proved to be an ally of Le Corbusier from the very beginning. Giedion had published a book on construction in iron and ferroconcrete in France that had included the works of Le Corbusier.<sup>1</sup> Together they wrote the *Working Programme* of the Congress and formulated the text of the Declaration, which was published by Giedion in German. Le Corbusier was the mastermind of the founding Congress and Giedion the secretary.<sup>2</sup> At the meetings it became apparent that there was no unanimity among the delegates, who were divided into different factions, but the common constituent of the views of Le Corbusier and Giedion was obvious and found expression in the dominance of the logic of construction as distilled into the five points of the new architecture—pilotis, free plan, free façade, flat roof, and ribbon windows, all of which were allowed by the functional independence of skeleton and wall. By this time, the channels of communication between Giedion and Le Corbusier were numerous and open.

On his return to Paris, Le Corbusier undertook, in September 1928, the design of the Villa Savoye, in which he tried to realize programmatically the basic principles of modern architecture that he had recently upheld, in dialogue with Giedion, at the La Sarraz Congress. Construction began in April 1929 and was virtually completed within a year, but much still remained to be done before the house was finally habitable in 1931. At the same period, Christian Zervos attempted to enlarge the

circle of interest of the *Cahiers d'Art* in the direction of modern architecture and entrusted the editing of the relevant pages to Giedion. During the course of their collaboration, Giedion authored numerous articles and promoted architecture from the international modern scene, together with other subjects such as cinema and photography.<sup>3</sup>

In the fourth issue of 1930, Giedion wrote his most interesting article, "Le Corbusier and Contemporary Architecture."<sup>4</sup> The article was illustrated with twenty-one pictures of the Villa Savoye, and its last four pages were dedicated exclusively to the Villa, after the intervening title of "La Maison Savoye à Poissy, 1928–1930." In three successive moves, Giedion recognized in the "new architecture . . . a movement that can *today* be defined with precision,"<sup>5</sup> attributed to Le Corbusier the leading role in shaping the ideas and works of this movement, and pointed to the Villa Savoye as an exemplary building of the new architecture. The definitive factor in the progress of this architecture was not the evolution of its forms but the manner of construction, which was highlighted in a frame of supporting pillars and which permitted horizontal windows, gave flexibility to the façade and the ground plan, transformed the roof into a terrace, and left the ground floor space free: in other words, it was a built transcription of the five points of the new architecture.

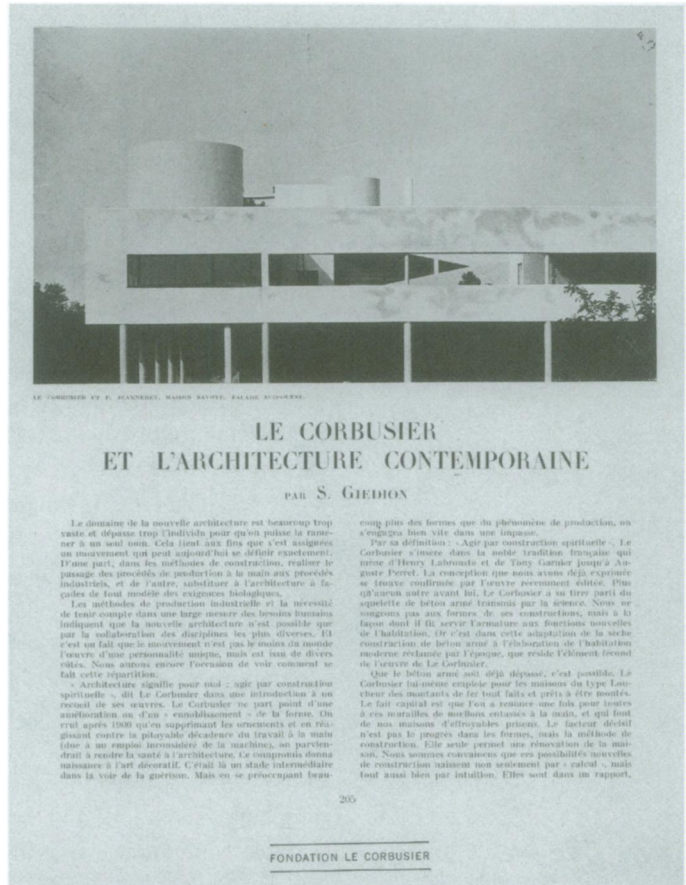
This founding schema linking the new architecture to Le Corbusier and the Villa Savoye was written as the villa was under construction. Giedion visited the site at regular intervals and began the second part of his article by writing:

We publish Le Corbusier's Savoye residence, which has just been completed. We have followed its construction at intervals of a few months until it took its present form, and we have tried to depict by means of photographs some of the views of the house as we saw it.<sup>6</sup>

In a series of letters exchanged between Giedion and Zervos from February through June 1930, there is a record of Giedion's difficult labor pains to photograph the unfinished building in a way that would make it appear finished. This exchange culminated in a letter from Zervos to Giedion dated June 4, 1930:

Jeanneret has taken 30 photographs of the Savoye residence. His photographer told me that they are good. I shall have them this evening. In this way I shall supplement the photographs and I shall choose the best. Tomorrow we will send you the films and a print of the photographs that you took with me. . . . I have given the new copy of the text to be translated.<sup>7</sup>

2. The first page of the article by Sigfried Giedion "Le Corbusier et l'architecture contemporaine" in *Cahiers d'Art* 4 (1930): 205 (FLC X1-11-92). Copyright Fondation Le Corbusier, Paris.



And on June 10, 1930, Zervos wrote to Giedion again: "I trust that your love of photography will not be offended if I tell you that we have kept very few of the photographs which you took, since those of the photographer are based on your experience."<sup>8</sup>

The result is impressive. Giedion's photographs show us a house in various stages of construction, with the presence of the human figure providing the scale.<sup>9</sup> In one of these, Le Corbusier and Pierre Jeanneret are walking, deep in thought, on the formwork of the sitting room ceiling.<sup>10</sup> In a number of photographs, the planting of the "hanging garden" is well advanced, but the house is not yet habitable.<sup>11</sup> It would be no exaggeration to say that Giedion followed closely the gestation of the Villa Savoye and recorded every moment of its slow birth, thus giving by means of photographs and text a symbolic dimension to a work that was in creation, before it had been completed. The consecration of this residence as a supreme work of the new architecture was thus proposed in the process of its construction and was confirmed symbolically four years later. In 1934, Giedion wrote the introduction to the second volume of Le Corbusier's *Oeuvre complète 1929–1934*, which opens with nine richly illustrated pages on the

Villa Savoye.<sup>12</sup> In his introduction, Giedion argues that “Le Corbusier is at the very center of contemporary architecture” and goes on to an account of the five points of the new architecture, of which “the Villa Savoie [*sic*] is the purest and clearest example.”<sup>13</sup> The circle closed with *Space, Time and Architecture*, in which Giedion gave an account of the five points of the new architecture and the Villa Savoye, with reference to his article of 1930 and the repetition of a number of its paragraphs.<sup>14</sup>

The *script*—the words and the photographs together—constituted the real construction of the Villa Savoye as an architectural symbol of the modern movement, and Giedion took part in this process as a real godfather. It is, then, in no way curious that thirty years later, when Le Corbusier learned that his “consecrated” work was threatened, he immediately turned to Giedion for support, who was then a professor at Harvard University.

The facts are well known.<sup>15</sup> The Savoyes lived in the villa until World War II; it was then commandeered by the Germans and subsequently passed to the Americans. When it returned to the Savoyes, they were no longer in a position to live as they had done before the war. Poissy had changed strikingly, the estate was large, and the house was abandoned. The municipality expropriated the Savoye property in order to put up school buildings. Le Corbusier was informed by the family on February 24, 1959, and immediately took action in every direction. The following day, he sent a telegram and wrote a letter to Giedion—who was at sea, on his way from Paris to New York—to report the situation and seek his help.<sup>16</sup>

Le Corbusier had specific aims that he desired from Giedion. The first of the desiderata was an intervention in the expropriation of the estate and the villa by the Municipality of Poissy.<sup>17</sup> However, the cancellation of this procedure was out of the question; instead, what was at issue was saving the villa, to be achieved by its purchase. Le Corbusier informed Giedion of actions already taken over the matter: the interest in saving the villa shown, regardless of his own wishes, by the Circle of Architectural Studies of Paris; his personal contacts with André Malraux, Minister for Cultural Affairs, “which took place in the best of conditions”; and the contact with UNESCO, which had been briefed on the matter by the mediation of a third party but did not have the money for the purchase. Le Corbusier had conveyed to UNESCO, however, that “Giedion is in touch with an American foundation (?) in order to secure the necessary sum and to determine the use of the villa and its park.” There is absolutely no indication of the slightest intention of having the Villa Savoye listed as a historic monument. The objective was, rather, that the money should be

located for a new owner to buy the villa and to determine its new use at a later date. To that end, Le Corbusier expected much of Giedion: that he should find money from American institutions, that he should make proposals on the villa's future use, and that he should mount a communications campaign to prompt the interest of the public in the architectural value of the villa and the need to preserve it. He stressed to Giedion at the end of the letter that "if there is a serious proposal from America in collaboration with UNESCO in Paris, an intervention by Malraux could probably be ensured," and he added: "this is, my dear Giedion, the program. Give the details of your proposal at once (financial data, administration, intentions, aim of the foundation, etc., etc.)."

It is clear that Le Corbusier did not expect much from the French, that he put a large part of his hopes in American money and institutions with cultural aims that were as yet undefined, and that he had a directness of communication with Giedion, on whom he believed he could rely. And he was right, to judge from the correspondence that followed. Giedion replied to him on March 5, 1959, from Harvard.<sup>18</sup> He had mobilized everyone, he had written to Roth, he had spoken to the Museum of Modern Art to get them to telegraph Malraux, and he had ensured the publication of an article in *Time* titled "The Story of the Savoye House." But the problem was, Giedion wrote, "the money is not deposited in the bank. Much more effort and work is needed for us to find it, but . . . I believe it is possible." In order for this money to be found, he asked Le Corbusier to immediately clarify three things for him: "1°/The price which Poissy paid for the expropriation. The Americans do not pay out in a vacuum! We must know this in order to prevent the disaster and to be able to ask for the SUM. 2°/Your own estimate of the cost of renovation. 3°/For what purpose would you want to use the house and the sums you have already secured."<sup>19</sup> Giedion proved himself as able a manager as he was a historian. He did not lose himself in sentimental details, he did not use superfluous and empty words, and he did not extol (again) the value of the Villa Savoye; rather he spoke directly and in command like a general with a mission. He ended the letter in the same spirit: "From the American point of view it is impossible to ask for money without knowing the exact sum and the use to which it will be put." Giedion promised to mediate with the ideal American of whom Le Corbusier had dreamt since the 1930s. Significantly, Giedion did not raise question of the preservation of a historic monument.

Le Corbusier added his own comments to Giedion's handwritten letter and a few actions he thought of taking. Then he replied to Giedion on March 11, 1959, clearing up two of the

(3) mais, c'est encore loins.  
à quel but vous voudriez avoir  
utilisé le maison et les sommes nécessaires  
pour ce but.

J'étais déjà en contact avec le Museum  
of Modern Art, qui a, j'écris, appelé aussi  
à Malraux et qui voudra, comme j'en  
entendu de Jean Burckhardt en 1900  
à Washington.

J'avais la visite du représentant du  
TIME - MAGAZIN, qui publie probable-  
ment the story of the Savoy House. I did  
what I could and say too. mais il faut  
savoir l'argent qu'il faut. Il est du point  
de vue américain impossible de demander  
des sommes sans savoir combien et exacte-  
ment sous quelles conditions.

Amicalement

Giedion

que le document commission d'arbitrage en  
de réaliser par

formal a est a Malraux but just me solution

574

3. The first page of the letter sent by Giedion to Le Corbusier on March 5, 1959 (FLC H1-12-187). Copyright Fondation Le Corbusier, Paris.

three issues with precision: "One hundred millions. Install Le Corbusier Foundation." These six words were repeated in the letter, as (?) he unpacked his reasoning.<sup>20</sup> The calculation of the necessary sum was based on the estimates of the specialist agronomists as to the estate and its fruit trees, which amounted to 105 and 25 million francs, respectively, with Le Corbusier considering that "a hundred million is a good compromise." The important thing, however, was the use. The following is the complete passage:

4. The letter sent by Le Corbusier to Giedion on March 11, 1959 (FLC H1-12-188). Copyright Fondation Le Corbusier, Paris.

LE CORBUSIER  
35 rue de Savoie  
Paris-8<sup>e</sup> 75008

H1-12

Paris, le 11 Mars 1959

Professor J. GIEDION  
Robinson Hall  
Harvard University  
Cambridge, Mass.

31001

Mon cher Giedion,

Je vous confirme mon telégramme de ce matin : "One hundred millions. Install LeCorbusier Foundation".

La propriété Savoys pourrait être achetée aux environs de cent millions. Les experts aéronautes ont estimé à 25 millions le plan-tailon d'Arènes fruitiers; le terrain est estimé à 1500 frs. le m<sup>2</sup> (prix raisonnable) : 70,000 m<sup>2</sup> x 1500 = 105 millions. Donc cent millions est un arrangement admissible.

Objet de l'opération: "Fondation Le Corbusier".

J'ai créé une Fondation Le Corbusier. Les notes sont préparées chez Maître Maguet, l'un des plus grands notaires de Paris. Cette Fondation devient son héritier exclusif. Il y a un actif d'une valeur certaine considérable: Des milliers de dessins; peut-être deux cents tableaux la totalité des plans d'architecture et d'urbanisme depuis 1922 (tous sont dans nos archives dans le sous-sol de la rue de Sèvres); Les droits d'auteur de près de cinquante livres qui se font maintenant en quatre ou cinq langues, etc., etc... Tout cela, c'est de l'argent devant nous; qui n'est pas dans nos poches car dans nos poches, il n'y en a pour ainsi dire jamais car je dépense cet argent en frais d'atelier dont les études sont partagées entre environ 25 % d'études pour clients réels et 75 % d'études sans clients (c'est là, ma manière de vivre, idiote ou intelligente, peu importe!).

Mon appartement de la rue Nungesser et Coli sera partie de la Fondation; la petite maison du Lac également. La Roche ayant été questionné à plusieurs reprises a déclaré vouloir donner sa maison au square du Docteur Blanche à Paris comme Siège Social de la Fondation.

Il faudrait, à temps utile, qu'un délégué des Américains fasse visite à La Roche pour appeler toutes choses ensemble.

Objet de la Maison Savoys (par exemple) servir de point de départ pour certaines études avant pour tout le recenser en Occident l'enseignement architectural de l'antiquité à nos jours par des démarches faites chez nos collègues américains.

J'ai eu connaissance par la secrétaire privée de M. Malraux qu'il s'occupe de l'affaire.

Attentivement à vous.

Objet de la Maison Savoys (par exemple) servir de point de départ pour certaines études avant pour tout le recenser en Occident

Object of the operation: "Fondation Le Corbusier."

I have set up a Le Corbusier Foundation. Its articles have been prepared by Maître Maguet, one of Paris's greatest notaries. This Foundation becomes my sole heir. There is an asset of very significant value: thousands of drawings; some two hundred paintings; the whole of the architectural and urban planning designs from 1922 onward (which are in our archives in the basement in the rue de Sèvres); the royalties on about fifty books which are available now in four or five languages, etc., etc. . . . All this money which is in front of us (*sic*) it is never in my pockets because my pockets never had it, since I spent it on the expenses of the atelier, the designs of which were divided into approximately 25% of designs for actual clients and 75% of designs without clients (this is a way of life, idiotic or smart, it matters little!).

My apartment in Nungesser et Coli Street will be part of the Foundation; the little House on the Lake as well. La Roche, who has been asked many times, has said that he wants to give his house in the Square du Docteur Blanche in Paris as the official Headquarters of the Foundation.

A representative of the Americans should in due course visit La Roche in order to tie all these things together.

The aim of the Savoye House: (for example) to be a base for some studies which will have the purpose of investigating in the West the course of architecture from antiquity to our own time by methods different from academic methods.

This is in effect the whole of the letter, though Le Corbusier significantly mentioned in a final sentence that he also “met M. Malraux’s personal assistant who is dealing with the affair.”

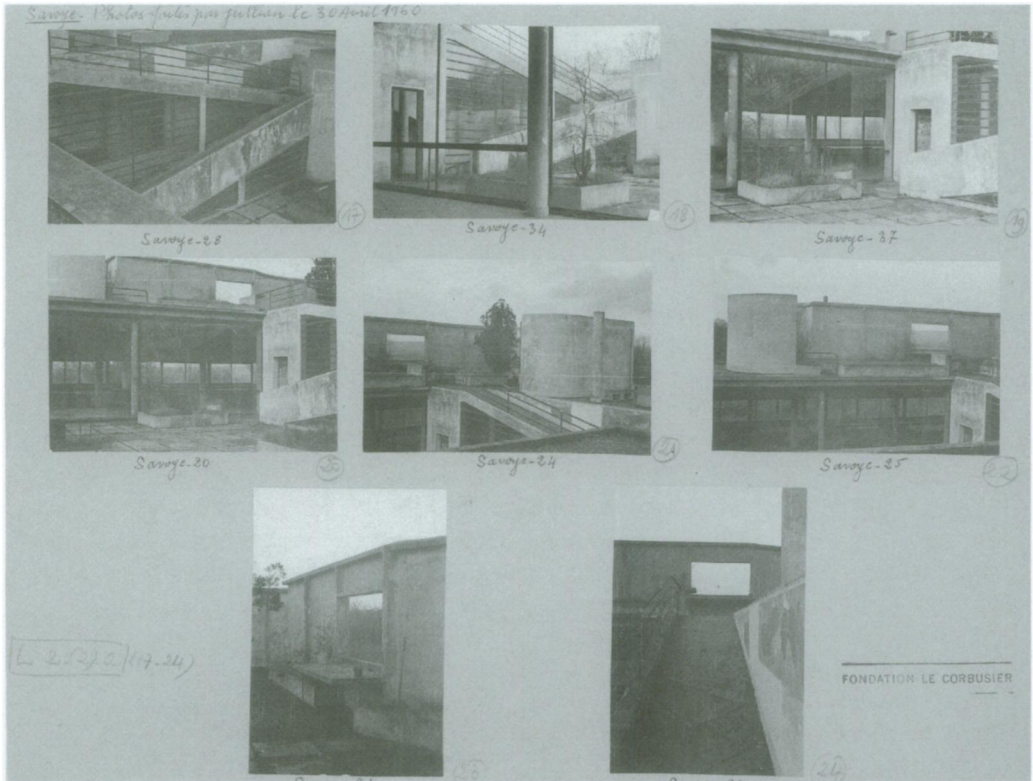
The American money was not found, nor did it need to be found. The villa remained in the ownership of the municipality. The Le Corbusier Foundation was set up, and everything that Le Corbusier had outlined happened, except for the directive on the Villa Savoye. In that direction the French energy was decisive, with the personal intervention of André Malraux, to whose desk, it seems, telegrams and letters arrived from all over the world, thanks to Giedion, who played a major role. We can read their impact and the intelligent *mise en scène* of the whole protest in a letter that Le Corbusier addressed exactly a year later, on March 11, 1960, to Pierre Sonrel, president of the Circle of Architectural Studies of Paris, who, although he had played a part in the rescue operation from the very beginning, clearly had other aims.<sup>21</sup> Le Corbusier attacked him to secure his own participation in the decisions on the use and status to be accorded to the Villa Savoye and at the same time defended himself over the major operation he had orchestrated:

The Savoye affair broke out totally and completely unknown to me by the agency of a foreign architect who was passing through Paris, and hearing talk about the demolition of the Villa Savoye, informed Giedion at Harvard, who was able and knew how to act, from where he was, in a particularly brilliant way, because within a few days M. Malraux received on his desk 250 telegrams from all over the world. I was in India. I learned of all this when I returned. There was an important meeting at the Ministry of M. Malraux on the status to be accorded to the Villa Savoye, on the status of the estate and its probable intended use. Decisions were made. I also made proposals on the use of the Villa Savoye.”<sup>22</sup>

But the die had been cast on March 9, 1959, when Giedion wrote from Harvard, for reasons that had been predetermined in the cultural policy of Malraux without having yet been recorded. André Malraux, famous *homme des lettres*, was State minister in January 1959 and had launched the first French Ministry of Cultural Affairs in February 1959 as well as proclaimed a new

policy for the preservation of cultural heritage, including architecture. Hence the Villa Savoye easily received the “protection d’un véritable monument historique,” as requested by Alfred Roth, an old working fellow and disciple of Le Corbusier and, in 1959, dean of the Zurich School of Architecture, in a letter to the French minister, also on March 9, 1959, written at the prompting of Giedion.<sup>23</sup> The reaction was lightning and the timing perfect. However, through this, the paradigmatic building of the new architecture that in 1930 was establishing Giedion’s new tradition and the ambitious headquarters for research into the history of architecture by nonacademic methods that Le Corbusier envisioned thirty years later was strikingly recognized as a *historic monument*. The Villa Savoye would be the first building of modern architecture listed as historic in France<sup>24</sup> and the first building to be the object of a preservation order while its architect was still living, partly as a result of the architect’s own initiative.<sup>25</sup> The Ministry of Cultural Affairs made Jean Dubuisson, architect of the École des Beaux Arts, Premier Grand Prix de Rome, and Architecte en chef des bâtiments civils et palais nationaux—precisely titles and institutions that Le Corbusier curtly rejected throughout the 1920s and 1930s—responsible for the restoration of the Villa Savoye. Nevertheless, Le Corbusier worked with him, and on June 3, 1965, Dubuisson submitted to him the plans and the report on the design for the full restoration of the historic monument. Le Corbusier studied it carefully, added to it, confirmed it, and disagreed with it on twenty-six typewritten pages on July 6, 1965, less than two months before his death on August 27, 1965. But the villa was “re-baptized,” now unchanged by the decay of time, its sole use the image of itself. Consecration and preservation at one and the same time.

The meeting and collaboration of Le Corbusier and Giedion, which began in 1928 and continued in 1930 with the paradigmatic publication of the Villa Savoye, reached its culmination in 1959 with the integrated communications operation for its rescue, even if that rescue was not in the terms they had in mind. They attempted to find sponsors and a new cultural use that would be in keeping with the architectural shell and would indirectly ensure protection in the fullness of time, but it did not cross their minds that the villa should become a historic monument. This was sought by the disciples; it was demanded by the moment in history, it was Malraux’s wish, and the first case for preserving modern architecture in the terms we understand nowadays. In the case of the Villa Savoye, the book in the end *did not kill the building*, as Victor Hugo, with a view to preserving the past, warned one hundred and twenty years earlier in *Notre-Dame de Paris*. The book *became* the eternal building. For Giedion and Le Corbusier, and



5. The Villa Savoye as photographed by Julian on April 30, 1960, before any preservation work (FLC L2-17-136). A comparison of these photographs with those of the *Cahiers d'Art* of 1930 reveals a remarkable resemblance. Photograph copyright Fondation Le Corbusier, Paris.

for the history of modern architecture, the *script*—the words and the photographs together—was the definitive construction of the architecture.

#### Author Biography

Panayotis Tournikiotis is associate professor of architectural theory at the National Technical University of Athens, School of Architecture, and chair of the DoCoMoMo International Specialist Committee on Register. He studied architecture, town planning, and philosophy. He is author of *Adolf Loos* (1991), *The Historiography of Modern Architecture* (1999), and *Architecture in Our Time* (2006). He is also editor of *The Parthenon and Its Impact in Modern Times* (1994), and the Greek translator of Le Corbusier's *Vers une architecture* (2004). His current work is concerned with Le Corbusier in the 1920s and 1930s.

#### Endnotes

Translated by Geoffrey Cox. I would like to thank the Fondation Le Corbusier in Paris for its ready support of my research in 2005 and 2007—particularly its director, Michel Richard, and its archivist, Arnaud Dercelles. My thanks also go to the John F. Costopoulos Foundation, in Athens, for its kind support of my studies of the work of Le Corbusier.

<sup>1</sup> Sigfried Giedion, *Bauen in Frankreich, Bauen in Eisen, Bauen in Eisenbeton* (Leipzig: Klinkhardt & Biermann, 1928); *Building in France, Building in Iron, Building in Ferroconcrete*, trans. J. Duncan Berry (Santa Monica, Calif.: Getty Research Institute for the History of Arts and the Humanities, 1995).

<sup>2</sup> On the first CIAM, see Jacques Gubler, *Nationalisme et internationalisme dans l'architecture moderne de la Suisse*, 2nd ed. (Geneva: Archigraphie, 1988), 145–61, and Martin Steinmann, *CIAM Dokumente 1928–1939, Internationale Kongresse für Neues Bauen* (Basel: Birkhauser, 1979).

<sup>3</sup> Christian Derouet, "Siegfried Giedion: la page d'architecture des Cahiers d'Art, 1928–1934," *Les Cahiers du MNAM* 82 (Winter 2002–2003): 42–65.

<sup>4</sup> S. Giedion, "Le Corbusier et l'architecture contemporaine," *Cahiers d'Art* 4 (1930): 204–15.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*, 205. The emphasis is mine.

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*, 212.

<sup>7</sup> Derouet, "Siegfried Giedion," 55. Giedion's correspondence with Zervos is kept in the archives of the GTA in Zurich. The photographs that Giedion took during this collaboration have been deposited in the Kandinsky Library of the Centre Pompidou in Paris.

<sup>8</sup> Ibid.

<sup>9</sup> Giedion, "Le Corbusier et l'architecture contemporaine," 207.

<sup>10</sup> Ibid., 211.

<sup>11</sup> Ibid., 213–15.

<sup>12</sup> S. Giedion, "Préface aux œuvres de Le Corbusier 1929–1934," in *Le Corbusier et Pierre Jeanneret, œuvre Complète de 1929–1934*, ed. Willy Boesiger, 7–9 (Zurich: Girsberger, 1935). The Villa Savoye is described in pages 23–31, after Le Corbusier's introduction. The only features in the rich illustration of the Villa Savoye that it has in common with the description in *Cahiers d'Art* are the three floor plans.

<sup>13</sup> Ibid., 7.

<sup>14</sup> Sigfried Giedion, *Space, Time, and Architecture* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1941; 5th edition, 1965), 524–30.

<sup>15</sup> See Kevin D. Murray, "The Villa Savoye and the Modernist Historic Monument," *Journal of the Society of Architectural Historians* 61, no. 1 (March 2002): 68–89, and Jacques Sbriglio, *Le Corbusier: La Villa Savoye / The Villa Savoye* (Basel: Birkhäuser, 1999), 150–68.

<sup>16</sup> FLC H1-12-182.

<sup>17</sup> The compulsory purchase appeared to be a *fait accompli*, but the arbitration committee that fixed the sum of the compensation met on April 28, 1960, and payment was made on December 30, 1960 (FLC U1-15-214). The sum paid amounted to 90,000,000 francs (approximately 1,300,000 € at 2005 prices).

<sup>18</sup> FLC H1-12-187.

<sup>19</sup> The underlining and capitals are in the original (see Figure 3).

<sup>20</sup> FLC H1-12-188.

<sup>21</sup> Pierre Sonrel had approached André Malraux—even before Le Corbusier had made a move—seeking to rescue the villa and accommodate the Circle of Architectural Studies of Paris there. On March 8, 1960, he reverted in writing to Malraux on precisely the same matter.

<sup>22</sup> FLC H1-12-299.

<sup>23</sup> FLC H1-12-191.

<sup>24</sup> It was the second building of the twentieth century listed, after the Theatre des Champs Elysées by Auguste Perret.

<sup>25</sup> The decree listing the Villa Savoye in the "bâtiments civils" is dated February 7, 1964, before Le Corbusier's death. The decree listing the Villa in the "monuments historiques" is dated December 16, 1965, four months after he died.