The Ghost in the Machine: Surrealism in the Work of Le Corbusier
Author(s): Alexander Gorlin
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The Ghost in the Machine: Surrealism in the Work of Le Corbusier

Alexander Gorlin

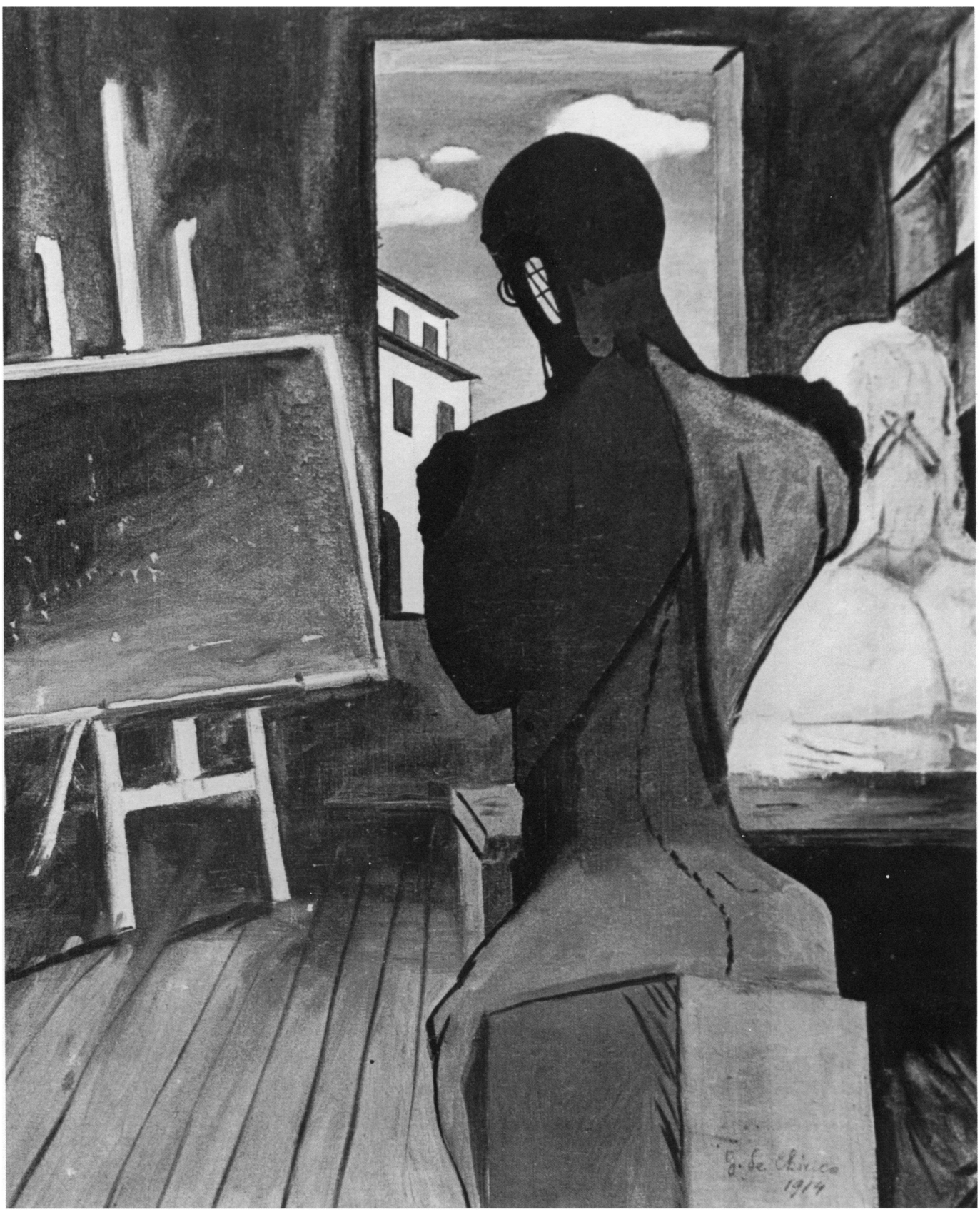
A strong surrealist element exists in the architecture of Le Corbusier, although he never explicitly acknowledged its presence. Le Corbusier's review of a "madman's" drawings in the Surrealist's *Minotaure* magazine attests to his intimate knowledge of their work.[1] It was not Le Corbusier's intention to relate directly to the decadence of surrealism as he described it in *When the Cathedrals Were White*, but the coincidence of imagery is too close to be accidental.[2] For although Le Corbusier's early work appeared to be the triumph of rationality, a white architecture of "sunlight, space, and greenery," it is pervaded by a slightly sinister atmosphere in contrast to and commenting on the major themes of the work. This dialogue between the rational and the surreally anti-rational creates an ironic tone, a questioning, even in his most self-assured modern statement, the Villa Savoie. In Le Corbusier's later work, the surrealist themes of the ambiguity between inside and outside, ghostly presences, ruins, petrification, and the occult become more prominent, dominating, for example, the chapel at Ronchamp.

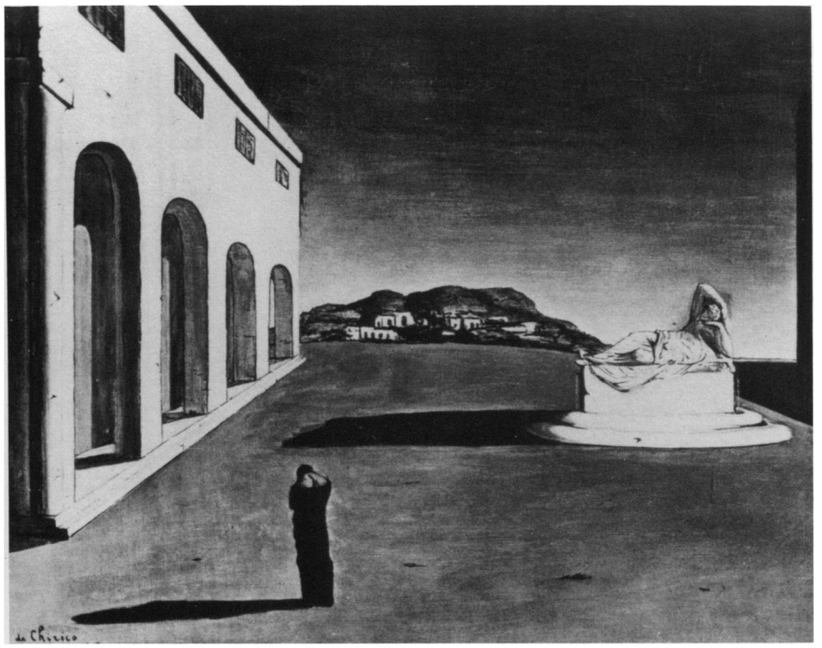
Le Corbusier and the surrealists alike sought to jolt man's perception of the world through the deliberate reversal of the expected, and the juxtaposition of the banal with the extraordinary. For the surrealists, the goal was the transcendence of everyday reality. For Le Corbusier, it was ostensibly the promulgation of his social program, itself an "extraordinary" imposition and transformation of the existing societal and architectural order of the day.

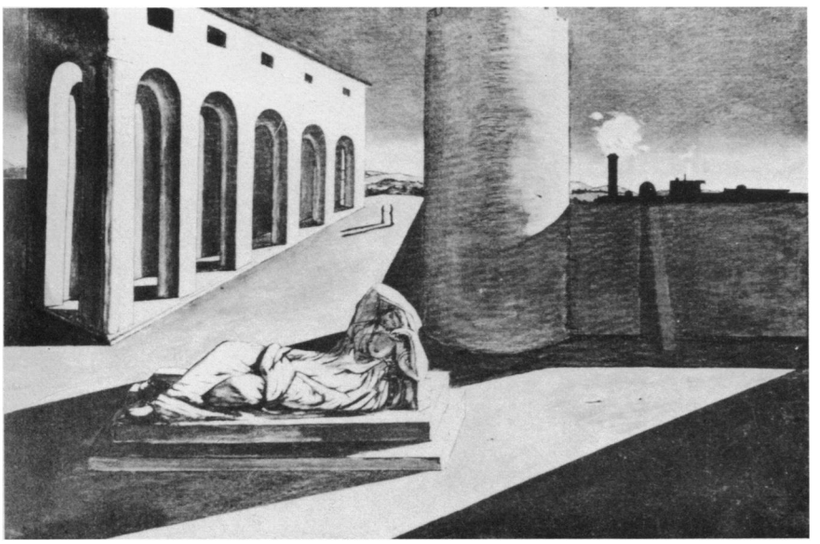
Giorgio de Chirico, the surrealists' most important precursor, had a profound effect on Le Corbusier's early drawings. One of the themes of De Chirico's metaphysical interiors and his series of empty plazas is the exploration of the ambiguous relationship between interior and exterior space. His painting, *Man Seated Before a Window*, is a series of frames within frames, that of the painting itself, an empty canvas within the distorted perspective of the room, and a window framing the distant shutters of a villa (Illus. 1). The viewer is included in the space as he is contrasted to the white stone bust in the painting, the abstracted black mannikin mediating the transition between the live observer and the man of stone inside. Space extends both in front of the canvas and beyond the open window to the space outside.

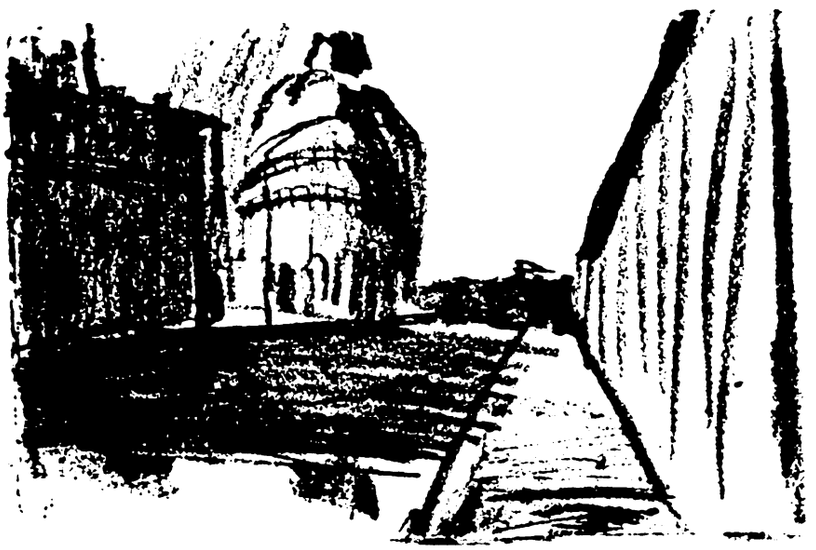
The view from a metaphysical interior could be the plaza in De Chirico's *Lassitude of the Infinite* (Illus. 2). Space is defined by intensely lit arcaded buildings, distorted in perspective like the walls of the interior, and defining a void in which are placed strangely isolated objects. A small figure in black turns from the viewer to a white statue of Ariadne, the Goddess of Sleep. They stand alone in the plaza, defined on two sides by the works of man and on the horizon by a wall of mountains.

1 Giorgio de Chirico. *Man Sealed Before a Window*, 1913.









2 Giorgio de Chirico. *Lassitude of the Infinite*, 1913.

3 Giorgio de Chirico. *Joys and Enigmas of A Strange Hour*, 1913.

4 Le Corbusier. Travel sketch of Pisa.

Le Corbusier's travel sketches of Pisa and Hadrian's Villa, published in *Towards a New Architecture*, are similar to De Chirico's *Joys and Enigmas of A Strange Hour* (Illus. 3). In the sketch of Pisa, tiny figures and the huge cylinder of the Baptistry stand between visually skewed walls (Illus. 4). In one of Le Corbusier's sketches of Hadrian's Villa, the wall defining the De Chiricoesque plaza is marked A, while the horizontal wall of mountains is marked B, diagramatically contrasting man and nature. Small sentinel-like poplars recall the lonely figures of the painting.

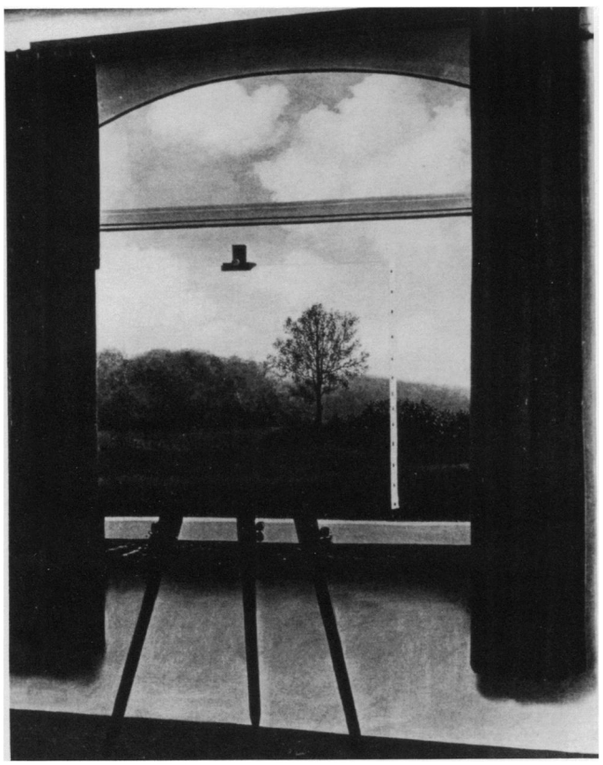
For Le Corbusier, as he plainly stated, "the exterior is always an interior," in that the natural elements of sky, earth, and horizon were to be treated mythologically as the elements of a vast outdoor room, an extension of the single room shelter.[3] Conversely, the interior was always an exterior, as in his drawings of ruined rooms from Hadrian's Villa and Pompeii which emphasized missing walls or ceilings allowing nature to define the space normally enclosed by man. They recall René Magritte's *Anxious Journey* where a room opens onto either the reality or the painting of a shipwreck in a storm. *Human Condition III* is Magritte's clearest exposition of the theme of ambiguous interior-exterior space where a painting of a landscape reproduces the actual scene from the window (Illus. 5). Since both the "real" landscape and the paint-

5 René Magritte. *Human Condition III*, 1933.

6 Le Corbusier. Pavilion de L'Esprit Nouveau, Paris 1925.

7 René Magritte. *The Childhood of Icarus*.

8 Le Corbusier. Villa Stein, Garches, 1927.



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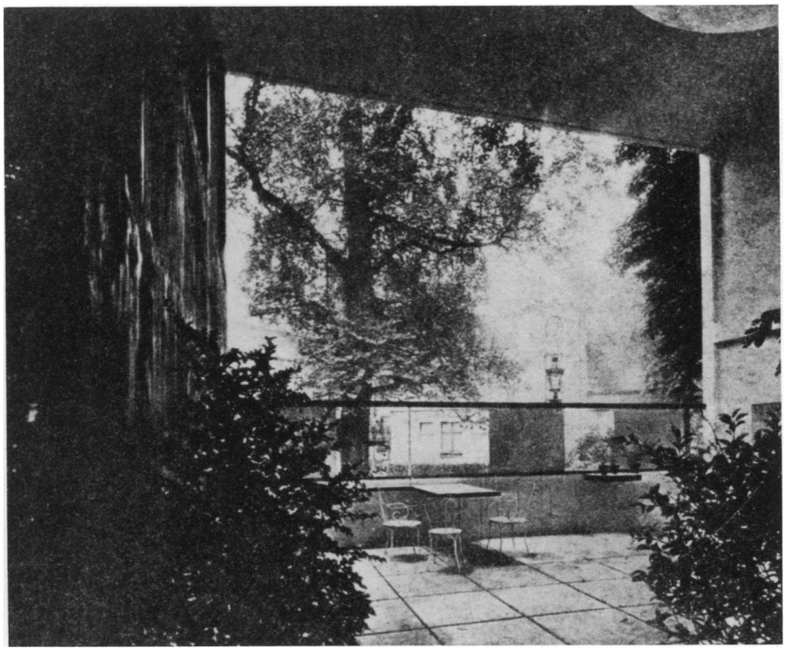

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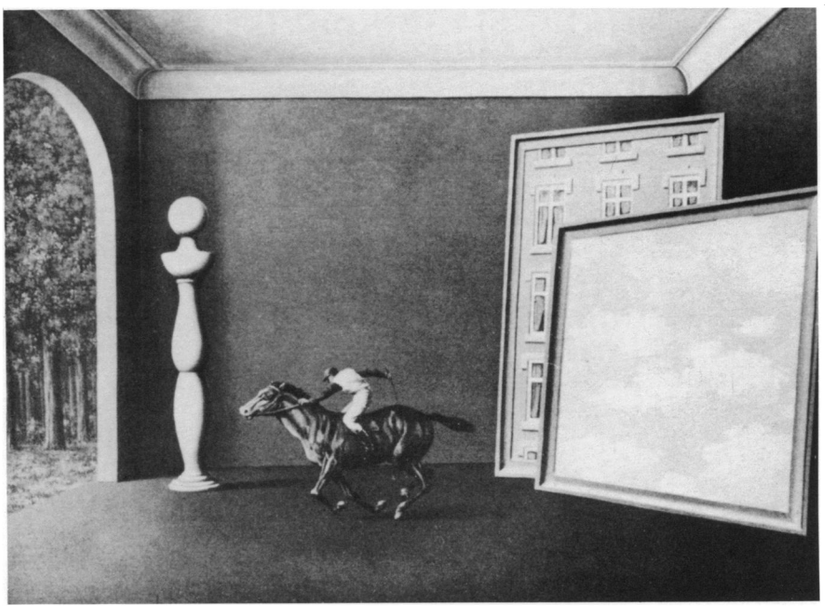

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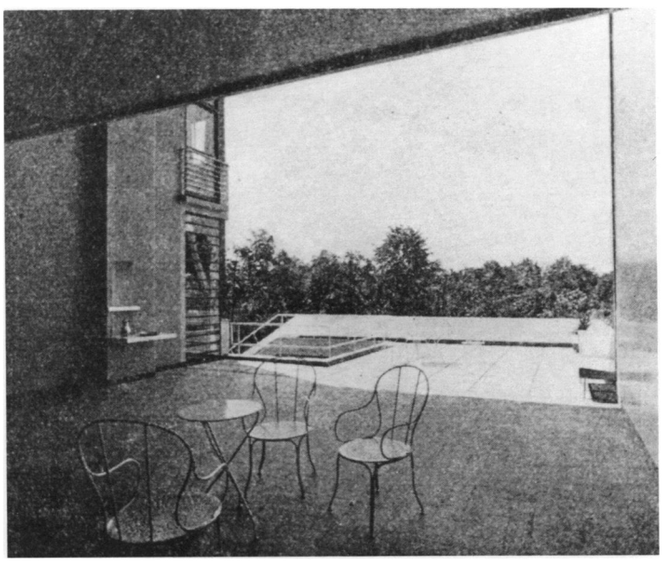

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ing of the landscape are, in fact, mere two-dimensional depictions, our entire perception of reality is questioned as it is now possible that the view from any window could be real or illusory.

In painting, three-dimensional space must be created before it can be questioned, whereas in architecture, already in the third dimension, the reverse procedure occurs. In Le Corbusier's Pavilion de l'Esprit Nouveau, one wall of the outdoor terrace has been opened to the foliage, the scene flattened and stretched like a painting across the frame of the two-story opening (Illus. 6). Before this enormous "painting," a table is set for tea. Tiny, wiry chairs are strangely out of place in this surreally overscaled outdoor room, reminiscent of the space in Magritte's *The Childhood of Icarus*. In this gargantuan room open to the forest, stacked with paintings of windows and the sky, a diminutive jockey on a horse gallops toward the outside (Illus. 7).

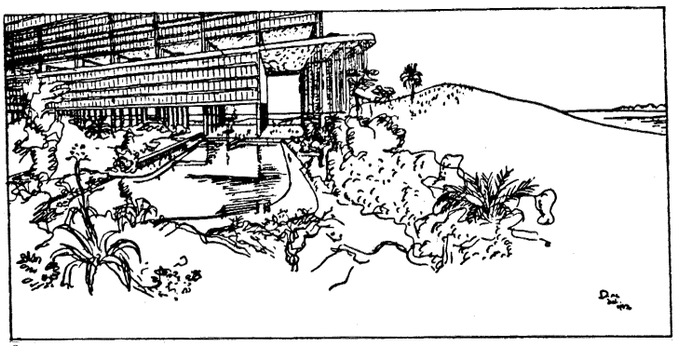
Similar themes inform the design of the Villa Stein at Garches. Early sketches reveal that the Villa was a series of promenades and stairs, semi-enclosed by walls, a stage set of architectural elements, balanced between the inside and outside. As constructed, the elaborate promenades were drawn into a compact prism. As opposed to the flat plane of the entry facade, a two-story void is carved out in the back, opening onto and framing the

9 Le Corbusier. Redent Blocks, Algiers, proposal, 1930.

10 Le Corbusier. Villa Savoie, Poissy, 1929–1931. Roof garden.

11 Villa Savoie. Detail.

12 René Magritte. *The Voice of Silence*, 1928.



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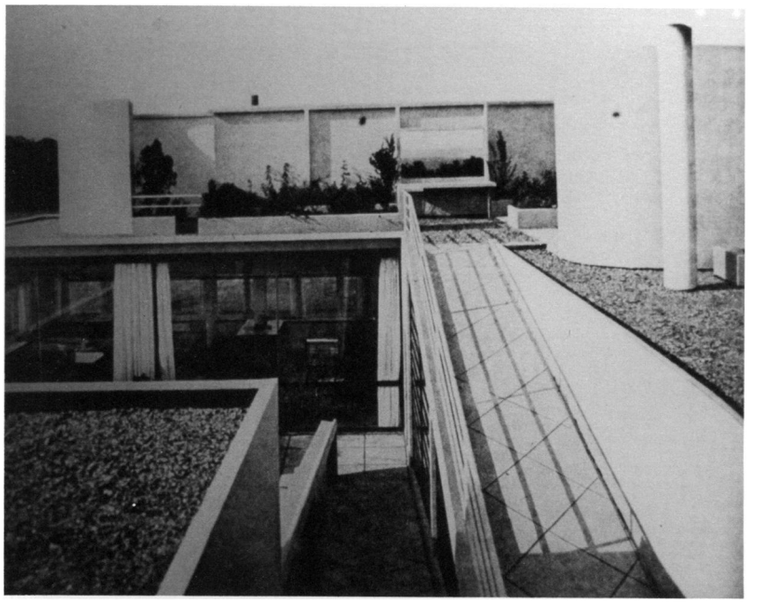

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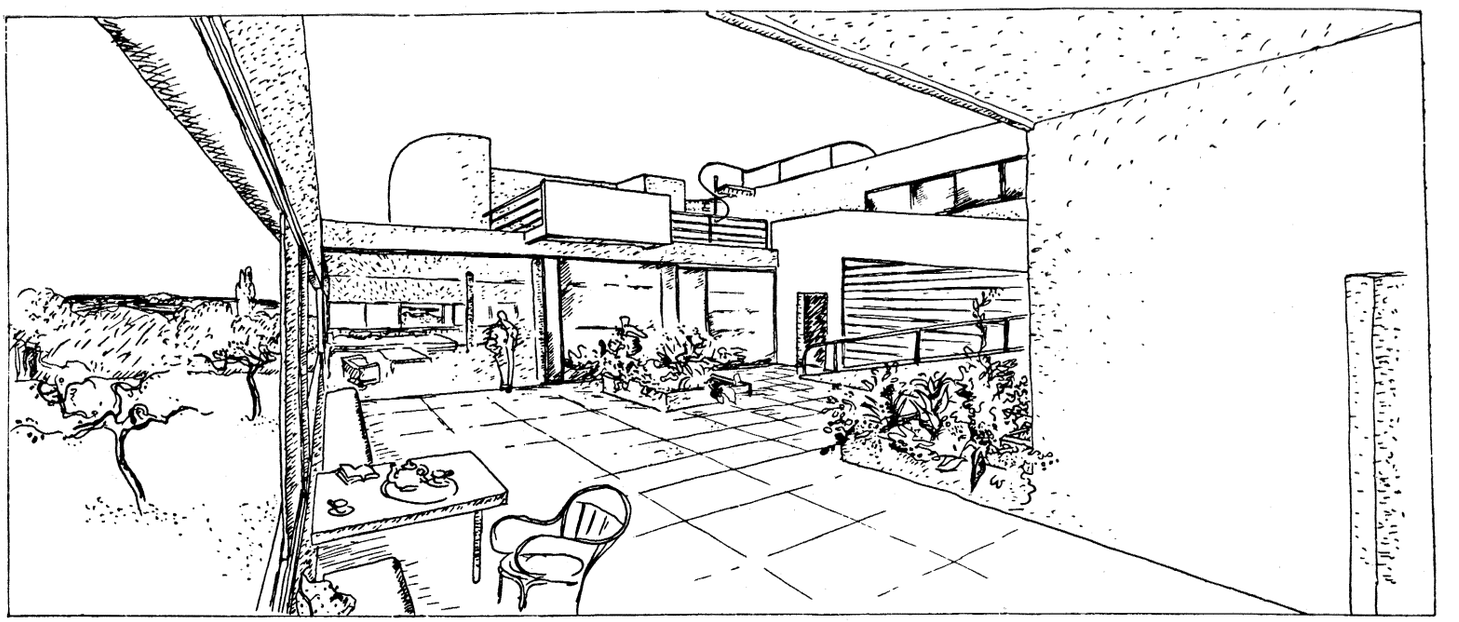

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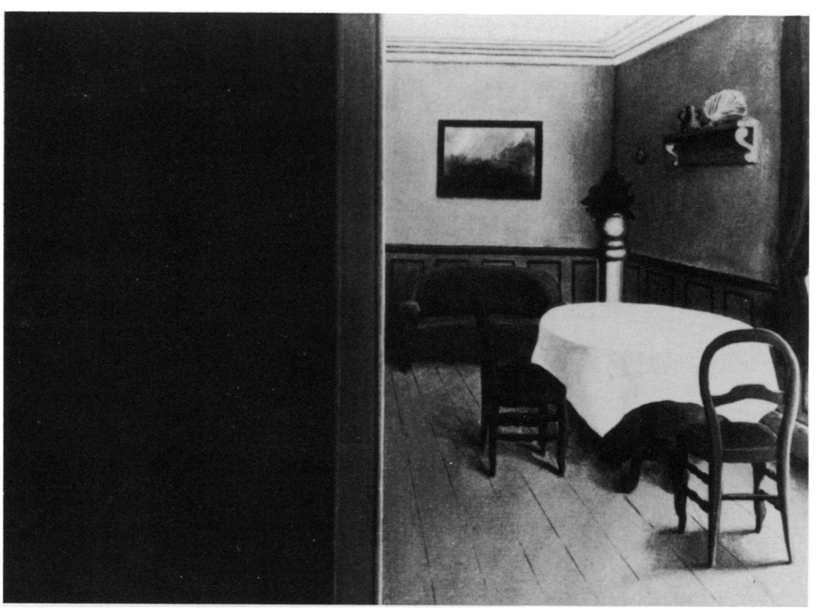

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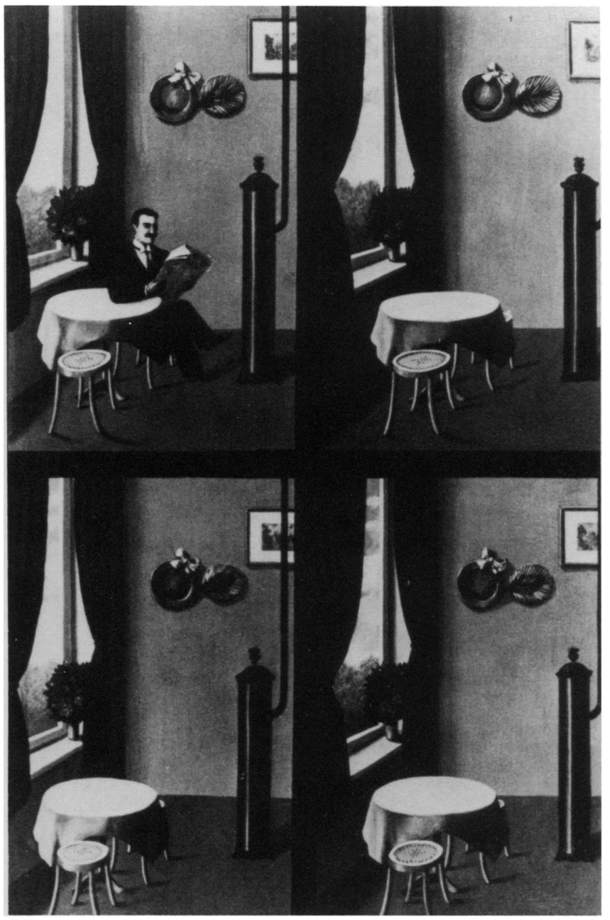
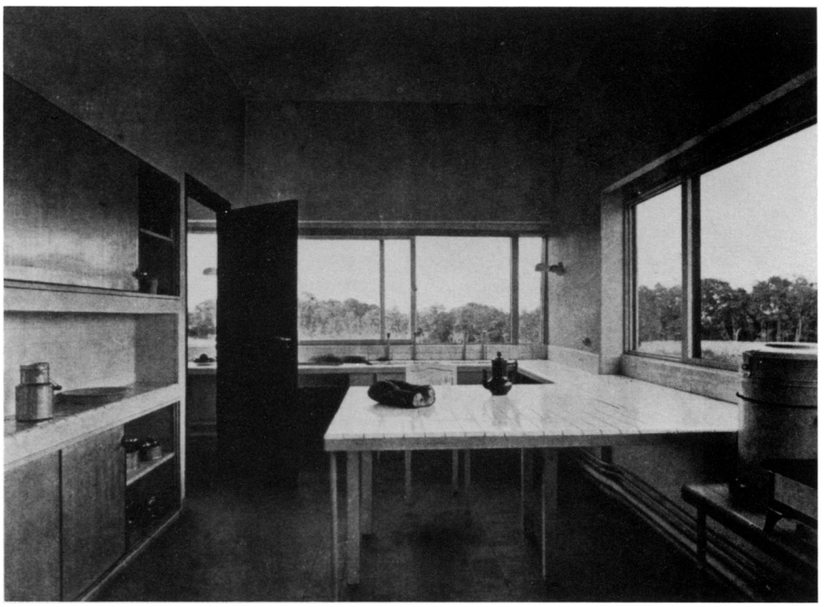
13 René Magritte. *Man Reading a Newspaper*, 1928.



14 Le Corbusier. Villa Savoie, kitchen.



garden, recalling the cavernous hollow of the Pavilion de l'Esprit Nouveau (Illus. 8). The same wiry chairs reappear, discordantly out of proportion to the scale of the terrace.

The idea of the frame, the grid ordering the view of nature, was used by Le Corbusier at immensely different scales; at the domestic scale in the lakeside outdoor window of his mother's house; at the urban scale of the multi-story resident apartment block, and at the scale of the landscape in the undulating wall of the Algier's apartments under the highway, where the opening forms a giant gate between the mountains and the Mediterranean Sea (Illus. 9).

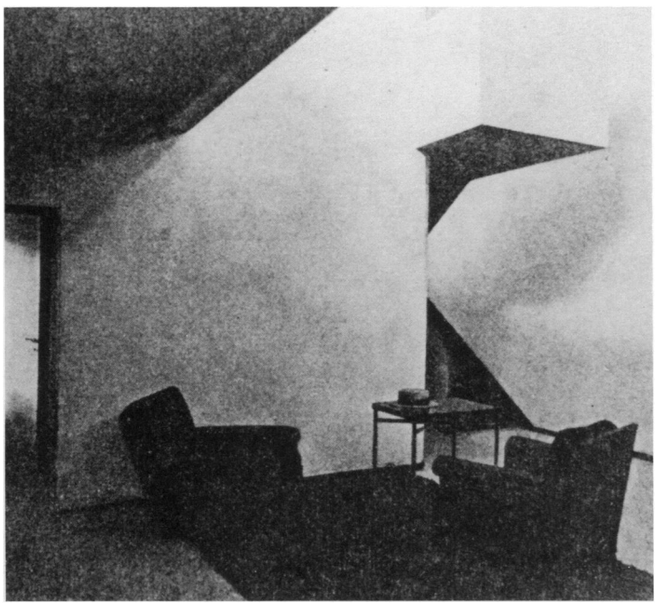
In the Villa Savioe, a window in the roof garden wall frames the view, but here the emphasis is vertical, as the walls enclose a space open primarily to the sky (Illus. 10). The entire villa is virtually a roof garden, enclosed on four sides, open to the landscape only through narrow strip windows, like the eyes of a Kachina doll. In one drawing, the horizon line stretches across the window boundary, connecting the outside with the gridded roof terrace, where a table is set for tea. (Illus. 11). A vertical line divides the scene in two, the landscape of nature on one side, and on the other, the artifacts of "civilized" man, a bentwood chair and teacup. This duality recalls Magritte's *The Voice of Silence*, where a bourgeois living room, furnished with the same chairs but empty of people, is juxtaposed to the menacing black void on the other side of the wall (Illus. 12).

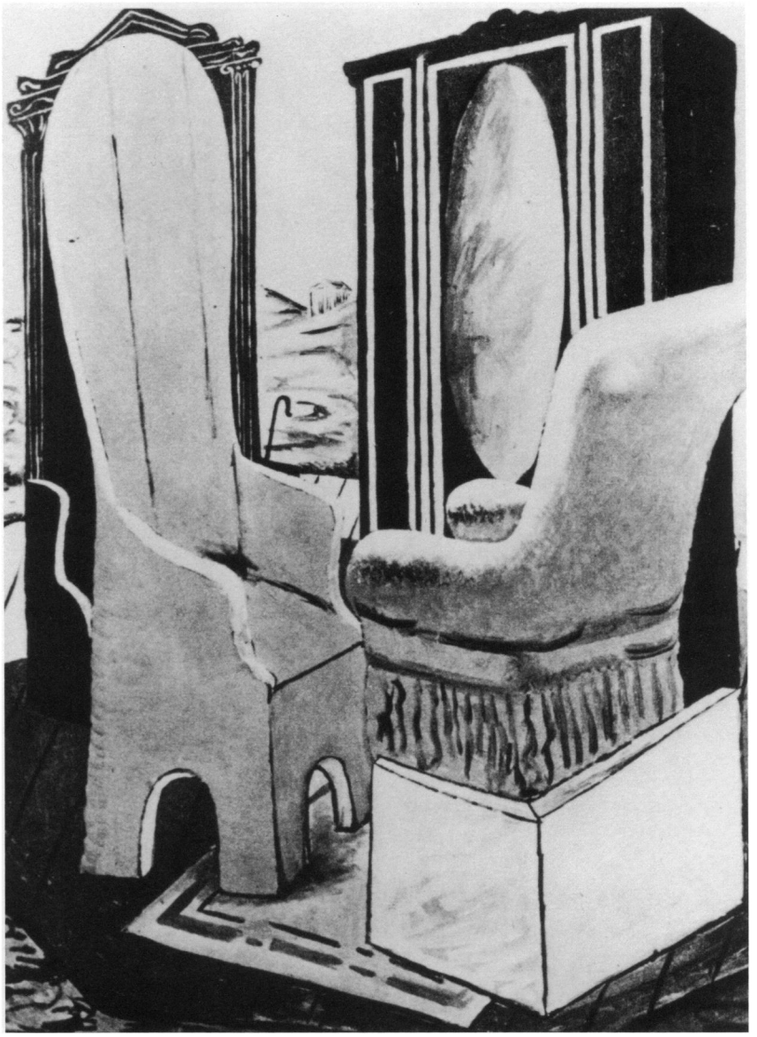
In both these images there is a strong contrast between the otherwise normal setting and an image of disorder or chaos, the emptiness of either the void or wild nature. There is also a feeling that human beings are absent from a place that they had just occupied, a theme previously noted in the work of Le Corbusier by Kenneth Frampton as he explored "the visible/invisible which seems to have been the phenomenological touchstone of his [Le Corbusier's] metaphysical sensibility."[4]

The presence of these human ghosts is evident in Magritte's *Man Reading a Newspaper*, where within a grid, a man sits uneventfully by the window only to disappear, his conspicuous absence repeated in each of the remaining three frames (Illus. 13). A similar feeling pervades Le Corbusier's photographs of the kitchen of Savoie, the table set with a teapot and a loaf of bread, the black door ajar, open for the one who has just left or will soon arrive (Illus. 14). The scene recalls the painting by De Chirico, *The Philosopher*, where artichokes and a stone bust share a table, one is alive and one frozen, petrified by a Medusa-like vision. The two objects cast shadows from a glaring light, not unlike that in certain surrealist photographs in *Minotaure*.[5] In one, the intense light al-

15 Le Corbusier. La Roche–Jeanneret house, Auteuil, 1923.

16 Giorgio de Chirico. *Furniture in a Valley*, 1927.





most obliterates the silhouettes of the identically aligned sewing machines, their machine-like repetition recalling Le Corbusier's photograph of his floating Salvation Army Hospital. The beds are in a room distorted in perspective and illuminated from behind by a sinister, antiseptic light from an unshaded window.

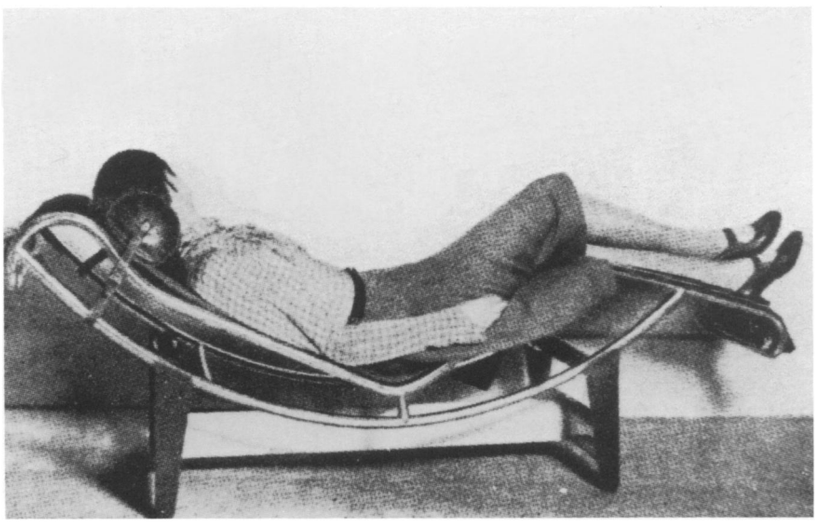
Le Corbusier's photographs of his architecture are highly intentional; not passive recordings, but an active commentary on his work. In the interior photographs there is meaning in whether a room is empty or not, what furniture is inside and where it is placed, and the size and position of the human figures. Like the plan and elevations, the photographs are an integral part of the presentation of Le Corbusier's architecture. In a way, the photographs in the *Complete Works* are as important as the buildings they represent.

In the early work of the 1920s human beings are noticeably absent; only the forms intimately related to their physical form and scale, i.e., chairs, tables, cups, are retained as evidence of their presence. The appearance of people and their size and place forms a continuous theme developed in Le Corbusier's interior photography beginning with the La Roche-Jeanneret house. In a stark, white room, two empty chairs sit in conversation with each other, as in De Chirico's *Furniture in a Valley* (Illus. 15, and 16).

17 Le Corbusier. Port Molitor, Paris, 1933, puppet.

18 Le Corbusier. Chaise lounge, 1929.

19 René Magritte. *The Lovers*, 1928.



An intermediate stage between the absence of figures and their materialization occurs with the presence, seven years apart, of the same marionette puppet in the Villa Cook of 1926 and in Port Molitor 1933 (Illus. 17). This small, articulated doll is a strangely anonymous human, a person once removed. Dolls were a surrealist obsession, evident in the *Minotaure* presentation of disembodied, grotesquely contorted *poupée*, contemporary with the Le Corbusier photographs of 1933.[6]

At first, people in this set of photographs appear facing away from the camera, as the female model does in Le Corbusier's chaise lounge, her face anonymous like the draped couple in Magritte's *The Lovers* (Illus. 18 & 19). In the houses, the figures are initially tiny, on the same scale as the dolls, mass produced humanoids taking their place alongside the other machined object-types. Alienated, these figures turn away, as in a De Chirico painting.

At the height of Le Corbusier's interest in the machine, in photographs of Port Molitor and the Salvation Army, a chilling sequence can be constructed portraying his view of the relationship between people and architecture. Although not adjacent to each other, the following photographs can be grouped together and assembled as a series. In one, a lone figure, probably of Le Corbusier himself, stands in the background of a room grossly distorted in the perspective of a wide-angle lens (Illus. 20).

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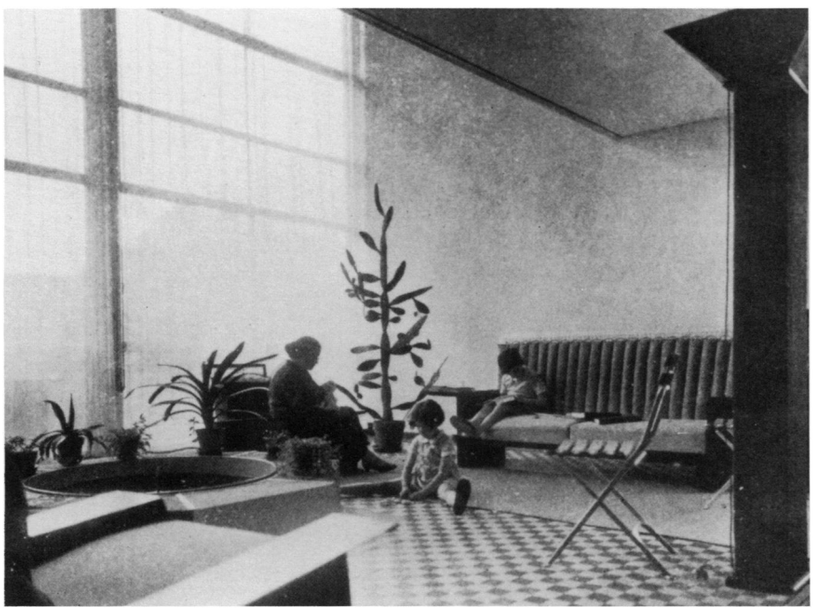

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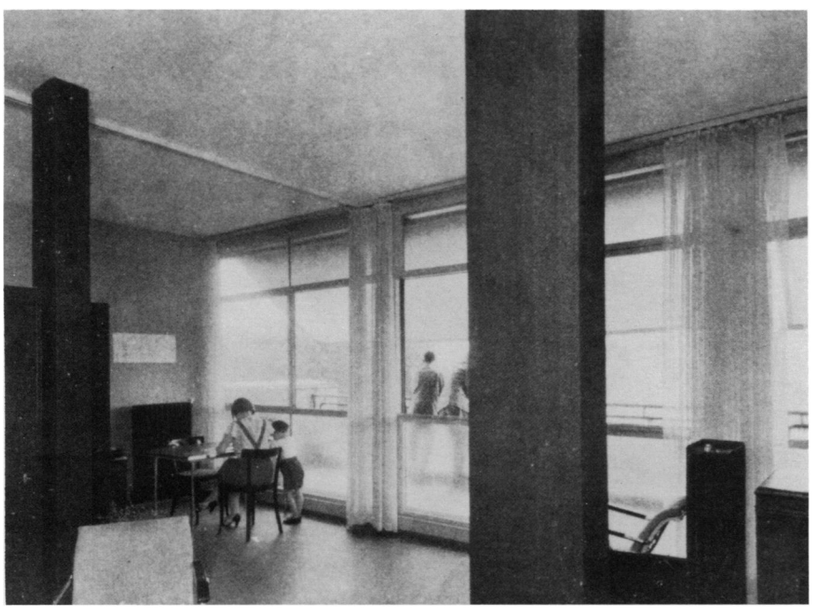

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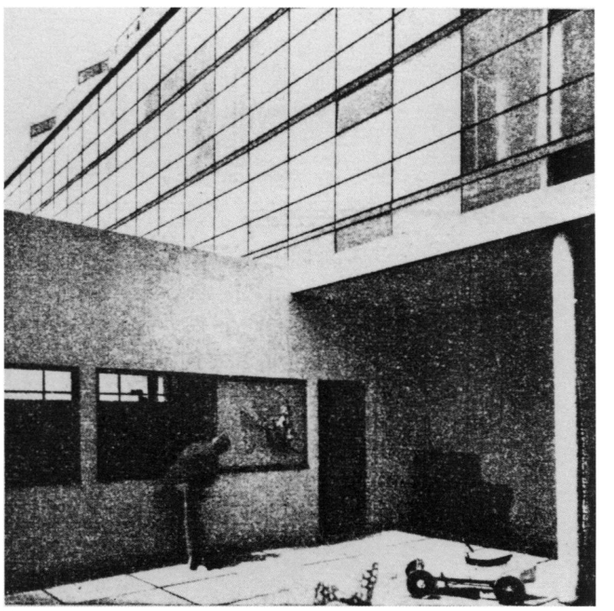
20 Le Corbusier, Port Molitor.

21 Le Corbusier. Immeuble Clarté, Geneva, 1930–32.

22 Immeuble Clarté.

23 Le Corbusier, Salvation Army, Paris, 1929–33.



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In another photograph, the semblance of a family appears, still doll-like in size and posture (Illus. 21). There, a mother and child are shown at play, while two men stand outside, partially obscured by the glare (Illus. 22). Finally, the children are gone, only their toys remain under a broken window as a strange man stares into their playroom at the Salvation Army (Illus. 23). These human dramas occur within the shifting framework of an architecture of neutral walls and thin, wiry furniture, the forms suffused by a not entirely beneficent light, and dislocated by the wide angle lens.

Another theme that recurs in Le Corbusier's work is his use of the roof garden (one of his five points of the new architecture) as an outdoor room, an ambiguous place between inside and outside. This idea is handled in a similar way in certain paintings of De Chirico and Magritte. In Le Corbusier's stated purpose for the roof garden, to introduce "sunlight, air and greenery" into the house, there is an uneasy opposition between architecture as shelter and its exposure to nature, the garden often becoming an overgrown ruin, as implicitly intended. And human beings, the supposed beneficiaries of these healthful elements, are often absent, although their ghosts are implied.

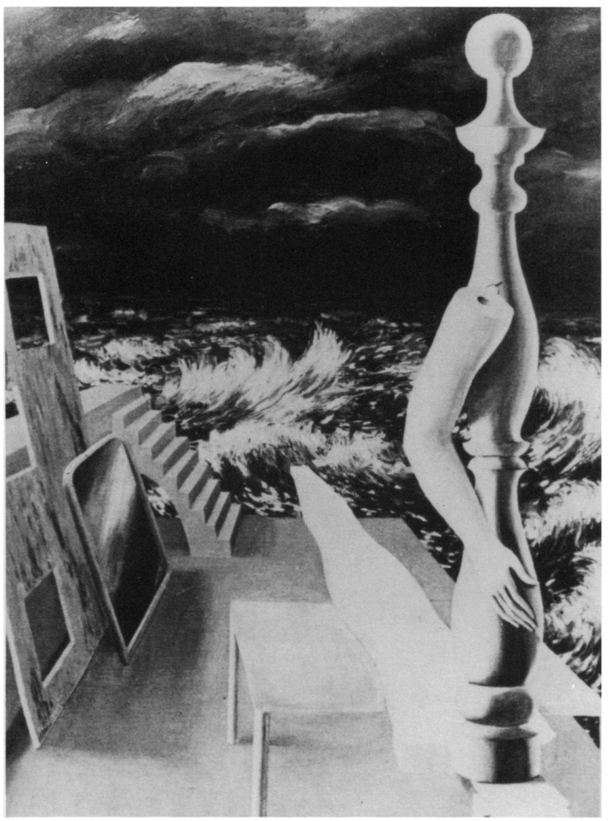
These surrealistic tendencies in Le Corbusier's work reach a culmination in the Beistegui apartment of 1930.

24 René Magritte. *Birth of an Idol*, 1926.

25 Le Corbusier. Beistegui, Paris, 1930–1931.

26 Beistegui. Fireplace and Arc de Triomphe.

27 René Magritte. *Time Transfixed*, 1938.



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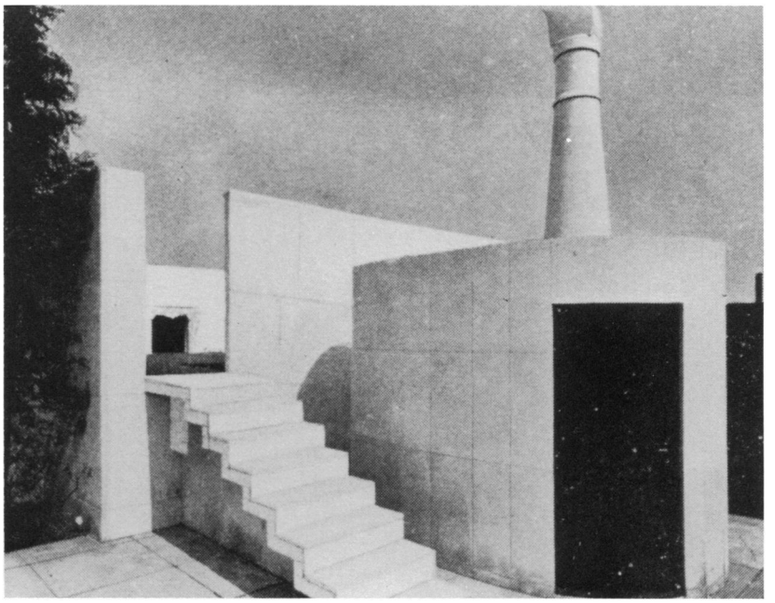

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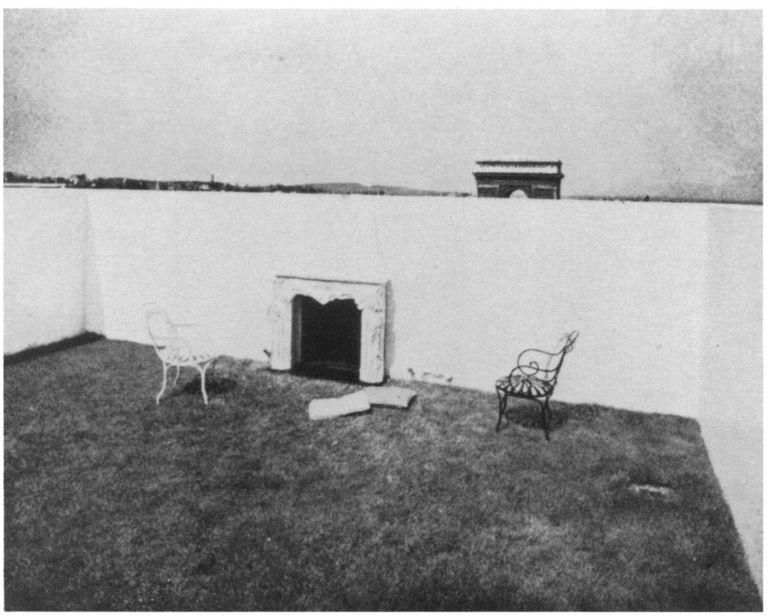

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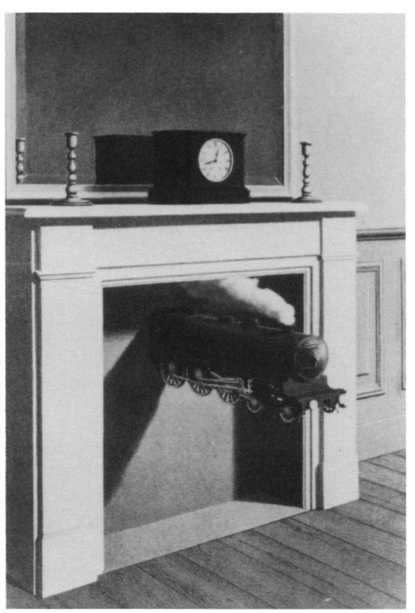

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This roof garden is the clearest statement of the outdoor room, a sparsely furnished living room enclosed by four walls, only the ceiling is missing. As in the roof garden of the Villa Savoie, designed at the same time, there is a shift away from the horizontal view of the landscape to the framing of the emptiness of the sky. It recalls the setting of Magritte's *Birth of an Idol*, in which an anthropomorphic form, the bibloquet, stands on a table atop a cut-out of a person, adjacent to a platform of stairs surrounded by a raging sea (Illus. 24). It could almost serve as a model for the Beistegui, especially in the photograph in Hitchcock and Johnson's *The International Style* (Illus. 25). A bibloquet-like tower stands next to a stair leading to the platform of the outdoor enclosure, an island of order above what Le Corbusier considered to be the urban chaos of Paris, and, therefore, the equivalent of Magritte's stormy sea. In this outdoor room, with the sky for a ceiling and a carpet of grass for the floor, there is a useless fireplace much like Magritte's hearth with the locomotive steaming out, frozen in its tracks (Illus. 26 & 27).

Visible above the walls of the garden are only the great monuments of Paris—the Arc de Triomphe, the Eiffel Tower, and Notre Dame. It is like Le Corbusier's drawing of the *View from Behind a Cemetary Wall*, where the different architectural styles of the mausoleums rise

28 Le Corbusier. Drawing of Paris (with his new monuments), 1929.

29 Le Corbusier. Beistegui, as seen from radiant tower with Arc de Triomphe in distance.

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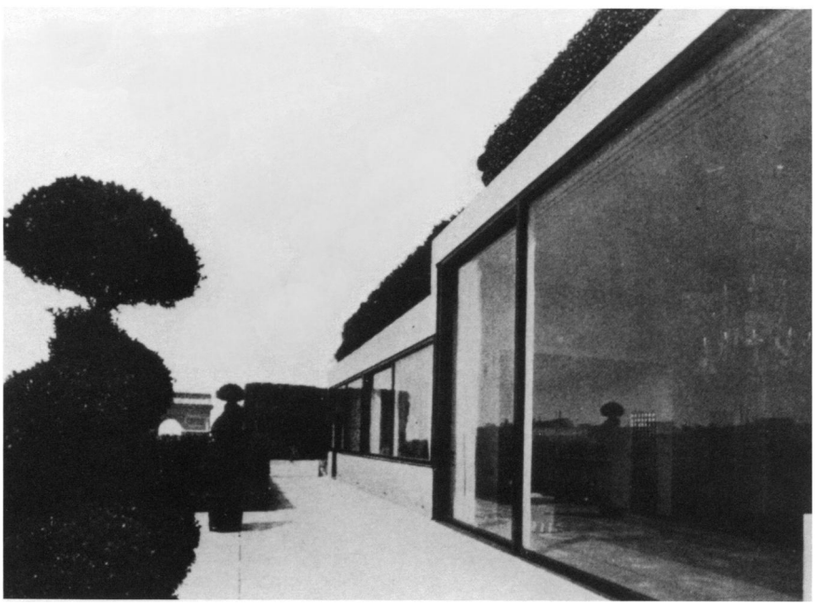

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above the horizon line of the wall. They are decapitated monuments, severed from the past and their context in the city, standing in isolation like temples in an English romantic garden.

The outdoor room of the Beistegui is implied by the interiors of Le Corbusier's houses of this period. Many are drawn as if outside, for the ceiling is not graphically indicated. The rounded volumes of the rooms stand against what could be the sky. In plan the Beistegui is similar to the Cook House, organized by two framing walls. The sliding doors between the walls of the Beistegui, though, are of natural materials, hedges set into electrically controlled slots that part to reveal a vista of Paris.

The meaning of the Beistegui is clear as a model apartment of Le Corbusier's Radiant City, where one sees Paris according to his vision of the future. For in Le Corbusier's plans for Paris, the low-rise urban fabric was to be demolished, replaced by a garden park. Only the great monuments were to remain, with the addition of a new one, Le Corbusier's immense glass apartment towers on the scale of Notre Dame and the Eiffel Tower (Illus. 28). From the summit of the Beistegui all these monuments are visible except one, the glass towers; therefore, this would be the view from atop one of the Radiant apartments.

The Radiant City would be a garden of historical monuments, each tower a temple in the park. Le Corbusier writes in an often overlooked chapter in his book *Urbanism* that not just the major monuments would be preserved but on a smaller scale, historical fragments of the city, "the Voisin plan shows, still standing among the masses of foliage of the new parks, certain historical monuments, arcades, doorways, carefully preserved, it safeguards the relics of the past and enshrines them harmoniously in a framework of trees and woods . . . these green parks with their relics are in some sort of cemetary, carefully tended in which people may breathe, dream and learn."[7]

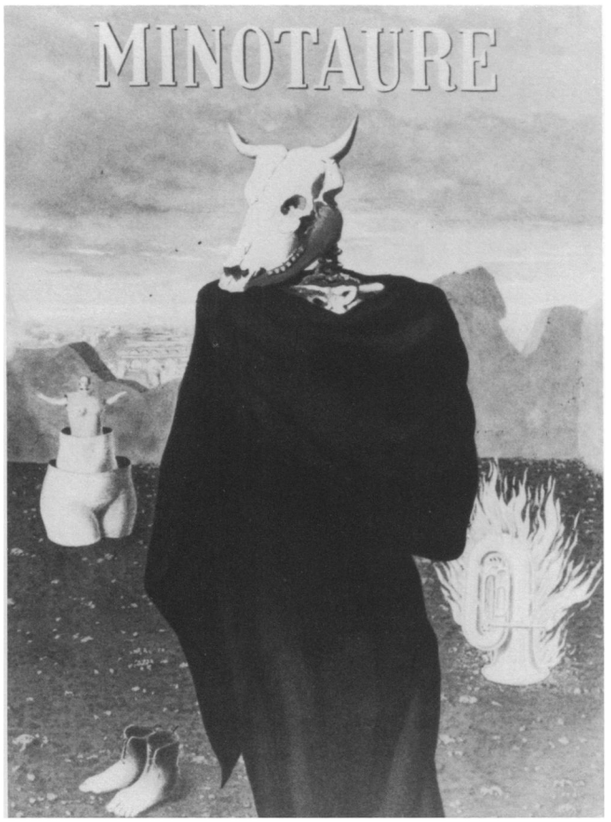
Supporting the theory of the Beistegui as a paradigm of the future is a photograph of it where the rooftop topiary statue (recalling a primitive fertility figure) stands sentinal-like opposite the glass wall of the apartment with the Arc de Triomphe in the distance (Illus. 29). It is very much like a drawing of the Radiant City where the glass wall of the apartment tower defines one side of the central plaza framing the monument of the same Arc de Triomphe.

The glass towers were to be set amidst a part of trees, not carefully manicured, but a wild and romantic garden reminiscent of a Caspar Frederich painting, evocative of nature's unrestrained moods. An unnamed roof

30 Le Corbusier. Roof Garden (probably Beistegui), 1931.

31 Benjamin Peret. *La Nature Devore, Le Progrès el le Dépasse.*

32 René Magritte. *Minotaure* cover.



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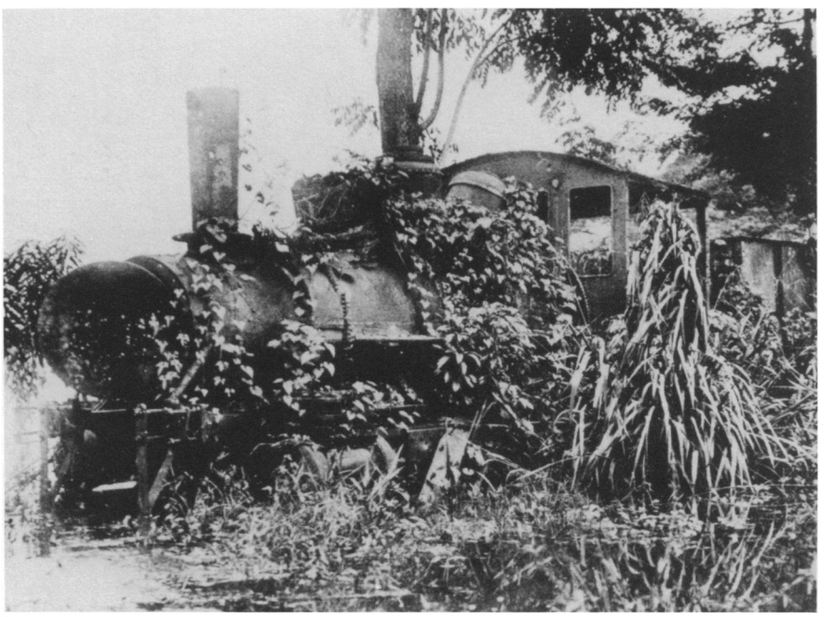

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garden, probably the Beistegui, is presented in 1932, showing the effects of time and vegetation on the once well-maintained garden (Illus. 30). Completely overgrown with vines and weeds, the garden has become an abandoned ruin, to the obvious delight of Le Corbusier.

The fascination of the surrealists by ruins and vegetative decay is well-known. Specifically linking them to the outdoor room of the Beistegui in its forgotten state is the bedroom at the Surrealist Exposition of 1938 where the bed lies entangled in a swamp. *Minotaure* also published Benjamin Peret's photograph of the locomotive, powerful symbol of the machine age, immobilized by the jungle, entitled *La Nature Devore, Le Progrès et le Dépasse* (Illus. 31).[8] The ruins of the Beistegui contain the memory not only of its former state, but relates to the cycle of creation and destruction admired by Le Corbusier. He even saw the effects of war as an opportunity and a "proof" of the major steps necessary to reconstruct the overcrowded and chaotic cities.[9] The final incarnation of the image of the Beistegui is in Magritte's cover for *Minotaure*, where various impossible magical objects, a black shrouded cow skeleton, a flaming tuba, and the boot feet stand on the charred remains of a roof garden overlooking Paris, the Eiffel Tower in the distance (Illus. 32).

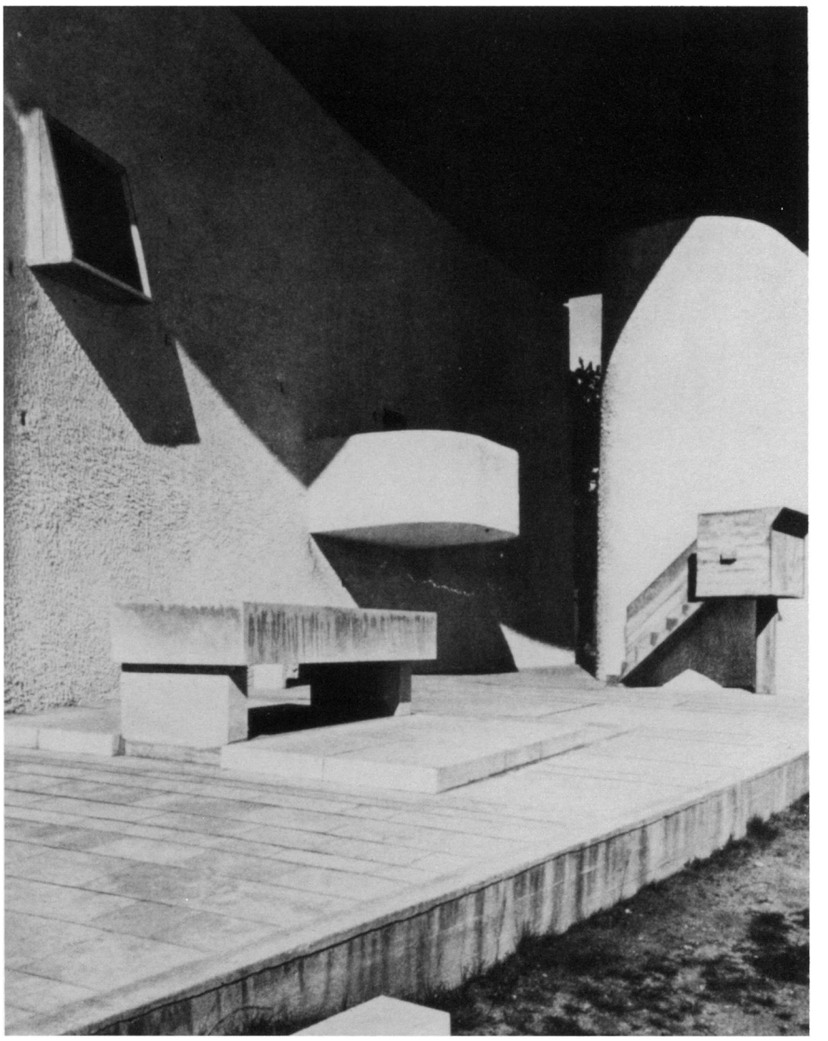
33 René Magritte. *Remembrance of a Journey* III, 1951.

34 Le Corbusier. Ronchamp, 1950–1955.

35 Ronchamp. Waterspout and pool.

36 René Magritte. *Promenade of a Monster*, 1926–1927.

33



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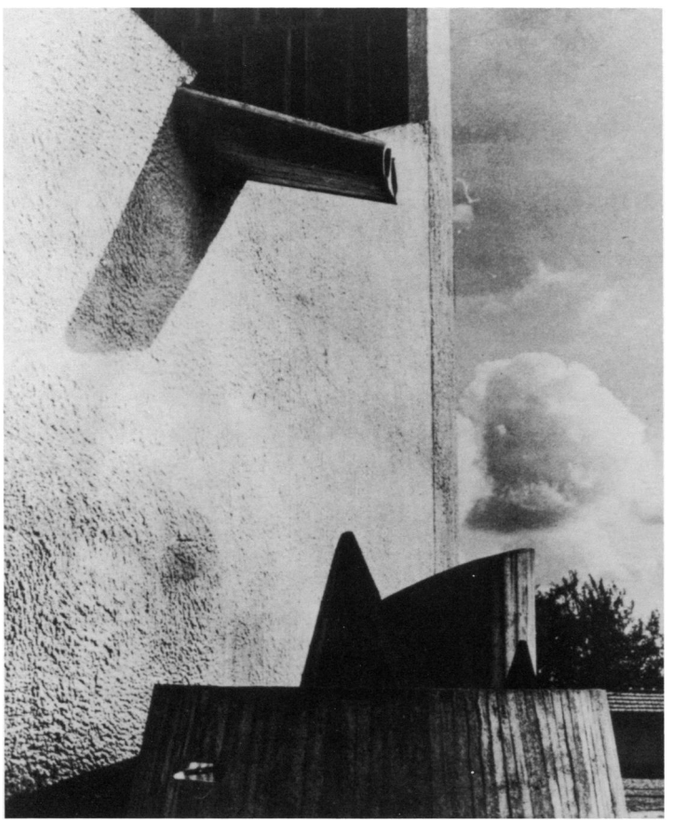

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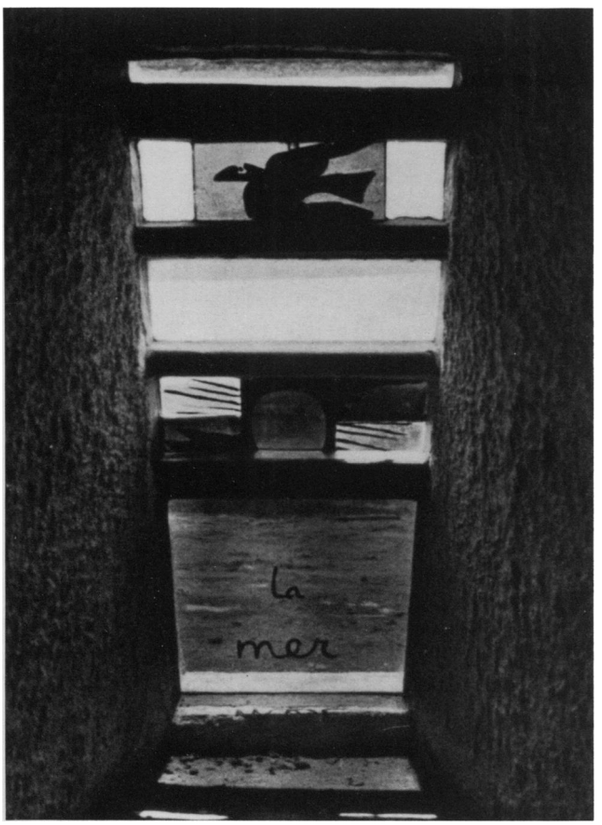
37 Le Corbusier. Ronchamp window, raven.

38 Le Corbusier. Chandigarh,
Self-portrait as a raven, 1953.



The dark vision of the future in both Magritte's and Le Corbusier's portrayal of the outdoor room could have occurred partly from Le Corbusier's disillusionment at the continuous rejection of his plans for Paris and from the imminence of World War II. In both artists, a similar, literally petrifying reaction resulted after the war. Magritte embarked on a series of "stone age" paintings, such as *Remembrance of a Journey*, in which everyday objects, a bowl of fruit, the table, even the tablecloth have fossilized into solid rock. The table stands before an open window, threatened by an avalanche of boulders, seemingly frozen in place (Illus. 33).

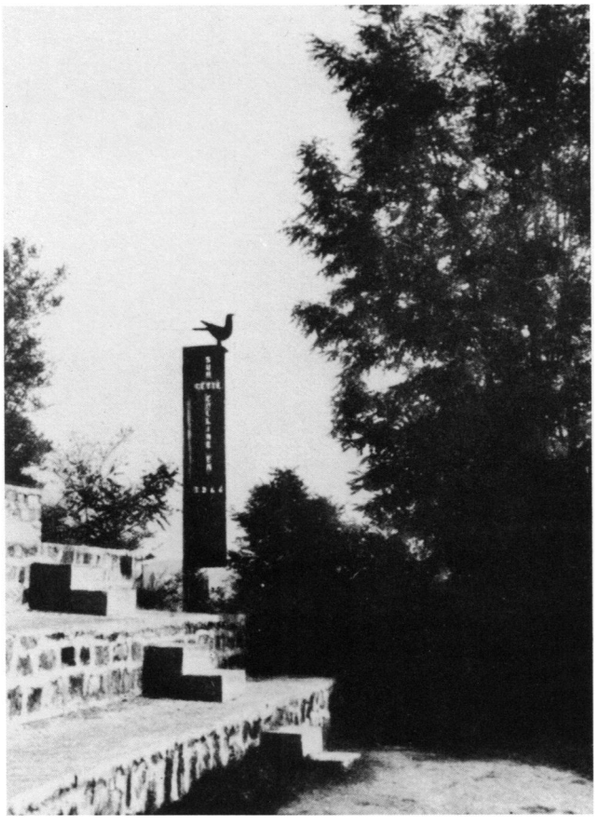
The image recalls the outside altar of Le Corbusier's chapel at Ronchamp, especially as a transformation of his earlier conceptions of the outdoor room. Situated on the summit of a mountain, the wall of the chapel opening to the landscape is the archaicized open-air roof garden, its mythological realization as a transcendent place, an "acropolis" atop the roof of a house, an apartment, or a mountain.

The walls of Ronchamp are covered with a sprayed on, rough cement coating giving the appearance of stone (Illus. 34). Gone is the wiry, movable furniture of the early work; in their place is the table-like altar, a massive and blocky form.

The inside-outside ambiguity is clearly stated in the placement of the two altars, one facing the landscape and the other the interior, each a mirror image of the other, identical in elements and their relation to the curved wall and mysterious balcony. In these drawings, people are again small or absent, the forms of meaning; the table, balcony, window, and cross are themselves called "witnesses" to the religious events.

The surreal implications of the opposite side of the chapel (the solid as opposed to the hollow of the altar) are evident in the relation between the bull-nose water spout and the jagged forms of the pool below to Magritte's *Promenade of a Monster*, in which a tentacled, amoebic shape is attached to a wall, poised above the same sharp, pyramidal forms as at Ronchamp (Illus. 35 & 36).

Specifically uniting the Beistegui and Ronchamp is the image of Le Corbusier as the black raven (Illus. 37). Le Corbusier's nickname, Corbu, from corbeau, meant raven, and he often portrayed himself as such—sometimes humorously, as with a menagerie of his co-workers in Chandigarh, at other times mysteriously, as on the roof garden of the Governor's Palace or in the stained glass of Ronchamp, where the raven is linked to the howling man in the moon (Illus. 38). Le Corbusier, the bird as a silent witness, is placed atop a column adjacent to the ziggurat memorial to the war dead at Ronchamp, the hard edged square of the stepped pyramid in contrast



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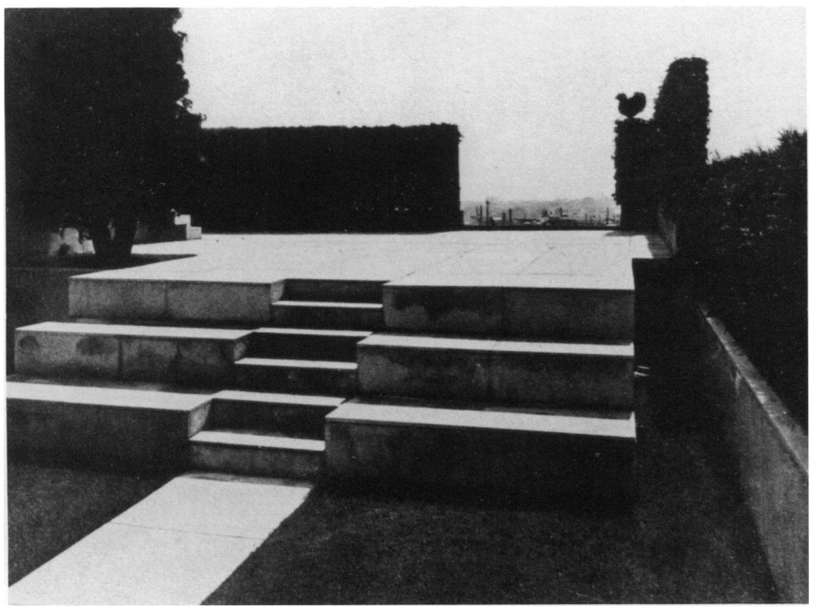
39 Le Corbusier. Ronchamp, memorial to the fallen war dead.

40 Le Corbusier. Beistegui, topiary bird and steps.

41 René Magritte. *Les Fanatiques*, 1955.



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41

to the fluid curves of the main chapel (Illus. 39).

Surprisingly, the same relationship exists in a photograph of the Beistegui twenty years before, where a topiary bird similar in shape and stance to the raven at Ronchamp is silhouetted against the city of Paris. It is atop a platform of steps, like the altar to the fallen dead at Ronchamp (Illus. 40).

The moon and the raven as the witness appear in two Magritte paintings, the first contemporary with the construction of Ronchamp in 1955. Called *Les Fanatiques*, a raven circles above a mysterious fire within a Stonehenge-line enclosure of boulders (Illus. 41). In *Gasparade de la Nuit* (Raven of the Night), the raven looks on as a house burns under a crescent moon. It recalls Le Corbusier's conclusion to his book on Ronchamp, a photograph of a bonfire in front of the caverous wall of the outside altar, surrounded by a ring of people, while in the night, the black raven of Le Corbusier and the howling moon behold an unknowable and primitive ritual (Illus. 42).

42 Le Corbusier. Ronchamp, bonfire.