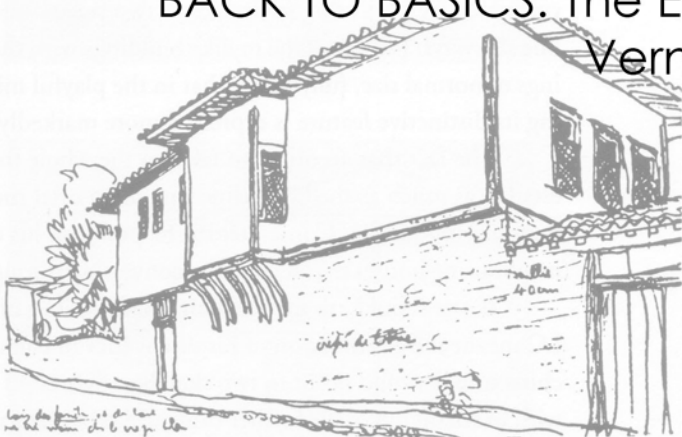


# BACK TO BASICS: The Evolution of the Primitive and Local Vernacular in the work of Le Corbusier

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While often regarded as one of the founders of a modern, white, machine driven architecture, an astounding amount of the work of Le Corbusier has a basic founding in the primitive form and consideration for a local vernacular. Instead of recognizing this return to the primitive as a mere 'period' in a scopic career, it should instead be credited as a comprehensive style of the sensuous and visceral that can be traced back to even the purest innovations of the 'machine-age' period. This codification developed and is strongly exemplified in both his conceptual and built work with notable shift most specifically between the years 1927-37.

Among the most famous examples in tribute to a simple, primitive aesthetic include, perhaps most predominantly, the theoretical Errazuris House of 1930, the summer home for Mme de Mandrot in Le Pradet, and finally the weekend home of Monsieur Félix in La Celle-Saint-Cloud designed and built in 1934-5. However, this ideology can also be traced back all the way to Villa Savoye. The most celebrated of the conceptually pure products of Le Corbusier's prolific 'machine-age' period. Villa Savoye incorporates simple primitive rationale, with the modern Parisian vernacular predominantly displaying the primitive as a comprehensive style that was not just a brief 'period', but characterizes a career long endeavor.

As summarized by Le Corbusier himself, "Architecture is one of the most urgent needs of man, for the house has always been the indispensable and first tool that he has forged for himself"<sup>1</sup>; hence, it's only natural for man to start with the most basic of forms. It cannot be

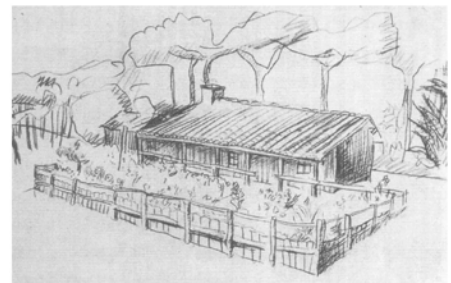


Fig. 1: "If one wants to build a palace, one should not forget the hut"<sup>2</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Le Corbusier, *Towards A New Architecture* (Oxford: Reprint; Architectural Press, 1989): 13

<sup>2</sup> Fig. 1: Adolf Max Vogt, *Le Corbusier, the Noble Savage: Toward an Archaeology of Modernism* (Cambridge: The MIT Press, 1998): 153

emphasized enough the profound influence that the classical tradition and the foundations of primitivism had on the work of Le Corbusier and how 'surprisingly neglected' it has been by contemporary historians.<sup>3</sup>

Beginning early with his first trips of 1911 and subsequent publishing of *Voyage d'Orient*, the influence of Turkey, Greece and the Mzab can be assessed as his first exposure to a simple way of life. As explained by a student in tribute, "He loved [the Mediterranean] because of its light...the shape of the house is the luminous envelope of the life inside. To see it is to perceive the sun in the cosmos. The house is a link between life and the universe."<sup>4</sup> This fascination with the simple attributes of light and most primitive forms of everyday life stuck with him and subsequently reemerged in his later work.

In his 1930 publication of *Precisions* he claims, "It is not useless...to keep rereading one's own work. The awareness of one's own steps is the springboard of progress."<sup>5</sup> Consequently, as his career progressed and this fascination with the simplicity of Mediterranean construction and light had all but faded, it markedly resurfaced seemingly without explanation.

Several historians have attempted to pinpoint the reason for the sudden disjunction between theoretical ideas. Kenneth Frampton conjectures that "immediately after the debacle over the Société des Nations competition [of 1927] (the fundamental crisis of his life, after which he abandoned the naïve optimism of his youth). He seems to have begun to question whether the

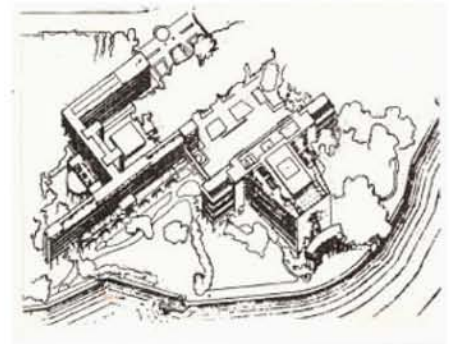


Fig. 2: "In 1927, after 65 meetings of the Jury at Geneva, the project by L-C and Pierre Jeanneret for the Palace of the League of Nations was the only one of 360 schemes (7 miles of plans) which received 4 votes out of 9. The others had only one. It was at this moment that M. Lemareshquier, the delegate from Paris, pointed out: 'This scheme has not been drawn in Indian ink. It breaks the rules. I insist that it should be disqualified...'", and it was. A world-wide protest by architects followed. CIAM founded at Chateau of Sarraz in 1928."<sup>6</sup>

<sup>3</sup> Kenneth Frampton, *Le Corbusier 1905-1933* (Cambridge: The MIT Press, 1979): 129

<sup>4</sup> André Wogenscky, *Le Corbusier's hands* (Cambridge: The MIT Press, 2006): 68

<sup>5</sup> Le Corbusier, *Precisions on the Present State of Architecture and City Planning* (Cambridge: The MIT Press, 1991): 134

<sup>6</sup> Fig. 2: Le Corbusier, *My Work* (London: Architectural Press, 1960): 49

rational promise of the machine would ever be fulfilled and even to have doubts—evident in his partial return to primitive iconography and technique—as to whether such a *fatidique* was ultimately desirable.”<sup>7</sup> Other speculations for the sudden shift include Flora Samuel’s hypothesis stating, “Possible reasons for the transformation in his architecture may lie in the disillusionment he began to feel at the soulless way Modernism was progressing, in his marriage to Yvonne Gallis and in the introduction of women into his paintings.”<sup>8</sup> Still others hypothesize that the shift was inspired by his two trips to South America in 1929 and Algiers in 1931 and took place “while watching plump women cavort on the beaches of the Bassin d’Arcachon, in 1928.”<sup>9</sup>

Whatever the actual cause, a revisiting of early ideas and possibly sketches perpetuated a new direction in Le Corbusier’s architecture. Markedly summed up as a “change in character from his trade-mark crisp white boxes with muted colored interiors into something far more sensuous and tactile,”<sup>10</sup> the disjunction can be summed up conceptually as nothing more than an evolution of architectural conviction.

By 1927, the first notable shift, a dramatic resurfacing of early ideals and techniques was finally poised to shine through based on a new confidence of several successful buildings as well as publications. Echoed in argument by Brades, Walker, Raeburn, and Wilson, Le Corbusier constantly moved ahead of his

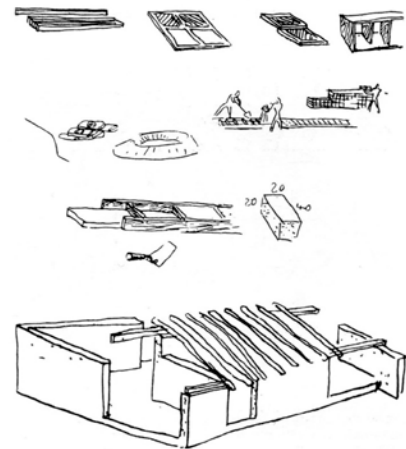


Fig. 3: “Le Corbusier, Murondins housing, 1940. Le Corbusier’s plan for inexpensive forms of post-war construction employing reinforced 20 x 20 x 40 cement blocks cast on site or alternatively traditional rammed earth or *pisé* construction, the forerunner of *in situ* concrete. The axonometric sketch shows the system of wood framing in the relation to the loadbearing walls.”

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<sup>7</sup> Frampton, *LC, 1905-1933*, 9-10

<sup>8</sup> Flora Samuel, *Le Corbusier: Architect and Feminist* (West Sussex: John Wiley & Sons Ltd., 2004), 2

<sup>9</sup> Charles Jencks, *Le Corbusier and the Continual Revolution in Architecture* (NY: The Monacelli Press, Inc., 2000): 190

<sup>10</sup> Samuel, *LC: Architect and Feminist*, 2

<sup>11</sup> Fig. 3: Le Corbusier, *My Work*, 50

followers and the shift from “the white machine aesthetic toward a hybrid, rough mode”<sup>12</sup> is one of the many incessant revolutions that comprise his manifesto and comprehensive architectural style.

With Villa Savoye and the perfection and complete understanding of a modern architectural system, “a page turn[ed]” and it was consequently “time to move on.”<sup>13</sup> The resulting shift in focus is therefore the product of not only the evolution of a way of thought, but a development in the purification of architectural ideals. Thus allowing for the primitive and local tactics that were present, but by some means hidden and regarded as secondary (until the perfection of the machine-age system could be realized), to emerge full-fledged with a shift in architectural focus.

Consequently, primitive building techniques and rustic materials began to appear “as consciously express elements” beginning what Frampton contended was a period after 1930 when Le Corbusier no longer believed in the Purist project as “the manifest destiny of the machine-age civilization” and indicating for the first time a conscious shift and evolution in thought and reasoning.<sup>14</sup>

The theoretical “pitched-roof rough hewn timber and rubble stone” Errazuris house projected for Chile in 1930 started the visible trend and sense of discovery of a “different and satisfying lifestyle and vernacular architecture.”<sup>15</sup> This ‘New Brutalist’ approach that would become the new direction of architecture some twenty years later marked the beginning of a new direction in Le

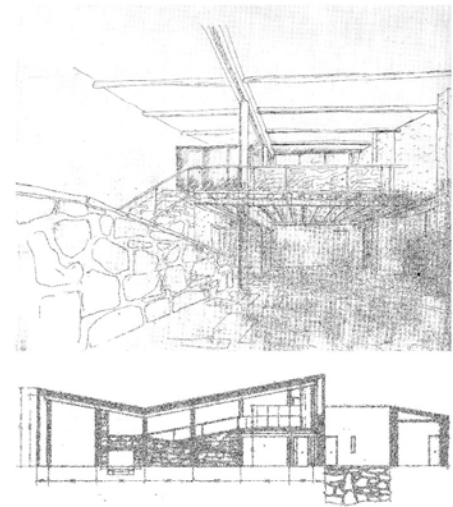


Fig. 4: “This house was built on the edge of the Pacific Ocean. Since a technically skilled labour force was not available, we employed elements existing on the site that were easily handled: walls made of large blocks of stone, a framework made of tree-trunks, a covering of local tiles and as a result a pitched roof. / The rusticity of the materials is in no way a hindrance to the expression of a clear plan and modern aesthetic.”<sup>16</sup>

<sup>12</sup> Brades, Walker, Raeburn, Wilson, *Le Corbusier: Architect of the Century* (London: Arts Council of Great Britain, 1987): 189

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.*, 29

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid.*, 30, 65.

<sup>16</sup> Fig. 4: Le Corbusier and Pierre Jeanneret, *Oeuvre complete*, vol. 2 (Zurich: Girsberger, 1952): 48

Corbusier's approach to material, site, client, and function.<sup>17</sup> The Maison Errazuris, for the first time, made use of the simplest materials found locally and provided tectonic solutions to the simple problem of having to build a modest vacation home on an extremely remote site.<sup>18</sup>

The relatively narrow house was divided into two storeys and built of load-bearing, rough-cut stonework enclosed by an asymmetrical butterfly roof covered in a native Spanish tile. The highlights of the interior included a dynamic ramp connecting the two floors as well as an exposed rubble fireplace allowing the raw material to provide function to the space. These rather 'brutal' materials, along with stripped tree trunks of the exposed structural frame, collectively express a feeling of 'primitive rusticity'.<sup>19</sup>

As Le Corbusier explains in his own words in the third volume of the *Oeuvre complete*, "This house was built on the edge of the Pacific Ocean...The rusticity of the materials is in no way a hindrance to the expression of a clear plan and modern aesthetic."<sup>20</sup> While the house was never actually built, Le Corbusier speaks of it as though it was in fact constructed and frequently references Antonin Raymond's summer home in Karizawa, Japan as the intention for its built form.

As he would write a short time later in *Une maison—un palais*, this new architecture, like that of the primitive hut he became so fascinated with, is 'an organism' that unfolds and 'expresses itself': "Nothing is rejected.



Fig. 5: "Primitive building techniques and sophisticated components appeared as expressive elements in Le Corbusier's architecture from the Maison Loucher onwards. We encounter comparable mixtures of off-site, in-situ construction in the shop-built timber windows and rubble-stone walling of the vacation house that he build for Madame Helene de Mandrot near Toulon in 1931"<sup>21</sup>

<sup>17</sup> Jencks, *Continual Revolution in Architecture*, 208

<sup>18</sup> *Ibid.*, 210

<sup>19</sup> Frampton, *Le Corbusier*, 133

<sup>20</sup> Le Corbusier and Pierre Jeanneret, *Oeuvre Complete*, vol. 2 (Zurich: Girsberger, 1952): 48

<sup>21</sup> Fig. 5: Frampton, *Le Corbusier*, 136

Everything is put to use. No surplus, no unnecessary repetition, but a total efficiency."<sup>22</sup>

With the beginnings of a successful career around his belt and the formation of CIAM<sup>23</sup>, another project of similar genre appeared in the form of Madame de Mandrot, the CIAM hostess and patron of modern architecture. Her vacation home near Toulon was built in 1931 and is among the first of the 'primitive' order to reach the construction phase. The 'in-situ' fabrication and 'rubble-stone' walling combine with sophisticated components of off-site construction including manufactured steel windows and segments of cement walls.<sup>24</sup> Revolving around a curved terrace "bedded into the slope" the house is full of oppositions from the steel to the low-cost rubble, the 'ready-made' to the local stone and the 'architectural promenade' to the landscape.<sup>25</sup>

Being one of the first of the built projects dealing with a local vernacular and synthesis of primitive and modern materials, the remote villa location, limitations of the local craftsmen and an incomplete understanding of the local stone's characteristics led to unforeseen complications. Refusing to obscure the surface of the stone with paint, the permeable exposed stone on the interior caused the house to be "beset by damp as well as other problems to the extent that de Mandrot proclaimed it uninhabitable".<sup>26</sup> The desire to leave the stone exposed



Fig. 6: "Corbusian oppositions of steel versus low-cost rubble, ready-made elements versus local stone, and architectural promenade versus the landscape—an ironic house for a rich hostess of CIAM. She left the house because of leaking windows, damp walls, and the blinds that did not work."<sup>27</sup>

<sup>22</sup> Max Vogt, *LC: the Noble Savage: Le Corbusier, Une maison—un palais* (Paris: G. Crès et cie, 1929): 50

<sup>23</sup> CIAM (Congrès International d'Architecture Moderne): founded in June 1928 at the Chateau de la Sarraz in Switzerland, by a group of 28 European architects organized by Le Corbusier, Hélène de Mandrot (owner of the castle), and Sigfried Giedion (the first secretary-general).

<sup>24</sup> Frampton, *Le Corbusier*, 136

<sup>25</sup> Jencks, *Continual Revolution in Architecture*, 208

<sup>26</sup> Deborah Gans, *The Le Corbusier Guide* (NY: Princeton Architectural Press, 2006): 122

<sup>27</sup> Fig. 6: Jencks, *Continual Revolution in Architecture*, 208

and the need to paint it over in a sense “summarizes the intended confrontation between nature and artifice found throughout the villa.”<sup>28</sup>

In response to her complaints, Le Corbusier maintained that her house was one of his best and “it seemed that Madame de Mandrot, after the act of La Sarraz<sup>29</sup>, which made her enter by the gate of honor into the world of modern architecture, would have been ready to live in a modern house. You have told us you cannot.”<sup>30</sup>

Four years and a few buildings later the maturation of the style is clearly displayed and almost perfected in une petite maison de week-end for Monsieur Félix just outside of Paris. The single-storey, vaulted form “was to remain influential for the rest of his career” and is a perfect fusion of “time-honoured agrarian building methods” and advanced building technique.<sup>31</sup>

The client made special request that Le Corbusier be discreet about the commission and made clear that privacy was a principal deliverable in the design.<sup>32</sup> Hence the design of the house demanded extreme care making, in Le Corbusier’s own words, the “elements of construction the only architectural means”.<sup>33</sup> Learning from his mistakes in the Maison de Mandrot, the finished building professionally integrates natural materials including rubble stone walls with an integrated plywood lined interior surface and vapor barrier preventing any moisture from seeping into the house and causing any basal damage. An early green roof and an approach to bedding the



Fig. 7: “As built, the [Maison de Week-End] has a fireplace, with its associated primitivist art work in a niche ...rather than the more efficient stoves, [the client claimed he could not] feel ‘at home’ without the comfort of a real fire.”<sup>34</sup>

<sup>28</sup> Gans, *The Le Corbusier Guide*, 123

<sup>29</sup> CIAM was founded at the Chateau de la Sarraz in Switzerland, the home of Mme de Mandrot who hosted the group and aided in their creation

<sup>30</sup> Jencks, *Continual Revolution in Architecture*, 208

<sup>31</sup> Frampton, *Le Corbusier*, 137

<sup>32</sup> Brades, Walker, Raeburn, Wilson, *LC: Architect of the Century*, 66

<sup>33</sup> O.C. Vol. 2, 125

<sup>34</sup> Fig. 7: Benton, “The ‘petite maison de week-end’ and the Parisian Suburbs”, 133-134



house down into the soil combine with the most advanced of building technologies to create the basic strategy for the building.<sup>35</sup>

In a sense the integration tells a story beginning with the most basic local materials establishing the primary structure which in turn provides support for modern innovations and technologies. In effect, the thin reinforced concrete vaults are held in place by the thick rubble walls providing an allegory for the evolution of building materials over time. Le Corbusier himself emphasizes the fact that both concrete and whitewash "had their origins in ground stone, a natural material".<sup>36</sup> Which he felt in no way hampered a 'clear plan' or 'modern aesthetic'.<sup>37</sup>

In an excerpt from the *Oeuvre Complete* he describes similar intentions:

I will create beauty by contrast, I will find the opposite element, I will establish a dialogue between the rough and the finished, between precision and accident, between the lifeless and the intense and in this way I will encourage people to observe and reflect. The detailing of the building would thus be used to create an opportunity for a lesson on the meaning and resolution of oppositions in people's own lives.<sup>38</sup>

As built, the house classifies and "orders its spaces".<sup>39</sup> The two rubble walls orient the house toward the garden and a well imposed structural grid lays out six 'approximately square vaulted cells'.<sup>40</sup> The structural bays in effect stretch to incorporate the garden and patio into

<sup>35</sup> Tim Benton, "The 'petite maison de week-end' and the Parisian Suburbs", *Le Corbusier & The Architecture of Reinvention* (London: AA Publications: 2003): 128

<sup>36</sup> Sarah Menin, *Nature and Space: Aalto and Le Corbusier* (NY: Routledge, 2003): 81

<sup>37</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>38</sup> Menin, *Nature and Space*, 81

<sup>39</sup> Benton, "The 'petite maison de week-end' and the Parisian Suburbs", 135

<sup>40</sup> Menin, *Nature and Space*, 131

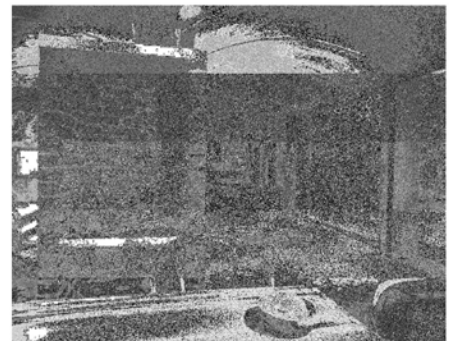


Fig. 8: "The designing of such a house demanded extreme care since the elements of construction were the only architectural means. The architectural theme was established about a typical bay whose influence extended as far as the little pavilion in the garden."<sup>41</sup>

<sup>41</sup> Fig. 8: Brades, Walker, Raeburn, Wilson, LC: *Architect of the Century*, 30.

the main grid of the house creating a seamless integration of nature with the built form.<sup>42</sup>

Le Corbusier felt strongly that the "preparation of food and drink were important events in the life of the house" and accordingly they needed to be perpetuated and even enhanced. He felt the family meal was 'too often neglected' and the 'ancient family tradition must live again'.<sup>43</sup> Likewise, he created through simple detailing and natural materials specific places for this to occur and wished to encourage those who lived within the house to lead an "ascetic existence, in harmony both with nature and with one another."<sup>44</sup>

The Petite Maison de Weekend marks a 'culminating point' in the 'quiet transformation' of Le Corbusier's work.<sup>45</sup> It displays an evolved assessment of the integration of local vernacular and advanced technology that developed strongly over the course of a decade and yet can be traced back to even the most famous of the Purist constructions and even the five points of architecture.

Villa Savoye<sup>46</sup>, although it contains virtually no rustic materials or seeming concern for the local vernacular, can also be tied back to a primitive train of thought. Beginning with its adherence to the Five Points of Architecture<sup>47</sup> as well as suggested influence from travels to the



Fig. 9: "Can the house of the poor but austere farmer be compared with the villa of affluent city dweller? Börekçi house versus LC's Villa Savoye: they have in common the same basic construction."<sup>48</sup>

<sup>42</sup> Brades, Walker, Raeburn, Wilson, *LC: Architect of the Century*, 30

<sup>43</sup> Menin, *Nature and Space*, 131

<sup>44</sup> *Ibid.*, 132

<sup>45</sup> Benton, "The 'petite maison de week-end' and the Parisian Suburbs", 126

<sup>46</sup> Built in 1928, two years before the Maison Errazuris

<sup>47</sup> Developed throughout the 1920's and published by Le Corbusier and Pierre Jeanneret in 1926 in a manifesto/declaration entitled "Five points towards a new architecture" summarized as: (1) the pilotis elevating the mass off the ground, (2) the free plan, achieved through the separation of the load-bearing columns from the walls subdividing the space, (3) the free facade, the corollary of the free plan in the vertical plane, (4) the long horizontal sliding window and finally (5) the roof garden, restoring, supposedly, the area of ground covered by the house.

<sup>48</sup> Fig. 9: Max Vogt, *LC, the Noble Savage*, 75

Mediterranean early in his life. The primitive influence, although subtle, is still traceable.

The conception and function of the 'ribbon window', the fourth tenant of the modern ideal, relates directly to sketches (Fig. 10) and observations of primitive techniques made on his trips to the Mediterranean, specifically in Köprülü<sup>49</sup>. As Adolf Max Vogt points out in Le Corbusier's sketches and analysis of the local conditions, "A necessary precondition for [the] staging of daylight is the long window that dominates the Köprülü kiosk."<sup>50</sup> This awareness of the environmental factors and direct value that's given to the play of light reappears in Villa Savoye in its use of a continuous strip window. This presents the opportunity to take advantage of both the main view directed to the north and the passive solar heating that can be taken advantage of with southern facing windows.<sup>51</sup>

A second relative point is the realization of pilotis, the first point of the five. The raised dwelling relates directly back to the 'self-supporting poor' of unrecorded times. Sketches and pictures published in *Voyage d'Orient* display renderings of both cantilevered construction as well as buildings on stilts. While the modern raised dwelling may be of the affluent (in stark contrast to the primitive counterpart), it is interesting to note that while the same construction method was chosen for completely different reasons, it was suitable for each completely different style of living.<sup>52</sup> Villa Savoye, raised on its pilotis, therefore can



Fig. 10: "LC draws the top-heavy example of an all-around oriel [ribbon window]"<sup>53</sup>

<sup>49</sup> City in Turkey – travel date c. 1911

<sup>50</sup> Max Vogt, LC, *the Noble Savage*, 54

<sup>51</sup> Jacques & Margaret Guiton, *The Ideas of Le Corbusier on architecture and urban planning* (New York : G. Braziller, 1981): 53

<sup>52</sup> Max Vogt, LC, *the Noble Savage*, 74

<sup>53</sup> Fig. 10: Max Vogt, LC, *the Noble Savage*, 41

be related somewhat loosely back to this primitive idea of living high above the ground.

One of the most notable qualities of modernism, the pure white that epitomizes modern architecture, can also be related back to a primitive mentality. As argued by Sarah Menin, "whitewash has been associated with human habitation since the birth of mankind" and "whitewash exists wherever peoples have preserved intact the balanced structure of a harmonious culture".<sup>54</sup> In his own words, commenting on his travels, Le Corbusier states, "I found whitewash wherever the twentieth century had not yet arrived. But all these countries were in the course of acquiring, one after the other, the culture of cities, and the whitewash, which was still traditional, was sure to be driven out in a few years by wall-paper, gilt porcelain, and tin 'brassware'..."<sup>55</sup> The primitive then, in effect, becomes the modern through the use of white walls.

Relative to this topic also is the desire while traveling in Istanbul for the city to be white, "brittle like chalk, and the light falling on it to crunch as it hits it" as he describes in the final chapter entitled "Confession" of *L'art decorative d'aujourd'hui* published in 1925.<sup>56</sup> This idea of a white city is carried throughout many of his housing projects and is displayed proudly in Villa Savoye as the natural choice for a finish and may even indicate a 'kinship with nature' and educated decision on the revival of the primal.<sup>57</sup>

While the materials of Villa Savoye may not relate directly to a local vernacular, it, like the previous examples, relates directly to time and setting. Unlike the remote sites

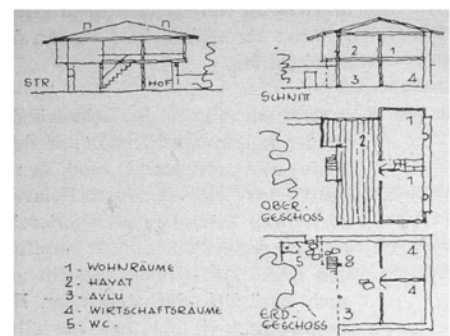


Fig. 11: "The Turkish projecting upper story (cikma) explained by E.A. Kümürçüoğlu."<sup>58</sup>

<sup>54</sup> Menin, *Nature and Space*, 125

<sup>55</sup> Mark Wigley, *White Walls, Designer Dresses: The Fashioning of Modern Architecture* (Cambridge: The MIT Press 1995): 30

<sup>56</sup> Max Vogt, LC: *the noble savage*, 35

<sup>57</sup> Menin, *Nature and Space*, 125

<sup>58</sup> Fig. 11: Max Vogt, LC, *the Noble Savage*, 39

of the Maison Errazuris and Maison de Mandrot, this site was serviced with water, electricity and direct roads allowing for the import of materials and an assortment of technologies. The Parisian suburb allowed for 'individualistic self-expression' that couldn't be found elsewhere and therefore allowed the Villa to take shape the way its surroundings permitted similarly to the more primitive examples of later years.<sup>59</sup>

To conclude, Le Corbusier said early in his career with the publication of *Towards a New Architecture*, "There is no primitive man; there are primitive means. An idea is a constant power, effective since the earliest times."<sup>60</sup> Likewise a basic founding in primitive form and construction paired with a local vernacular has had influence on not only a small period of time, but the lifelong career of Le Corbusier from the modern Villa Savoye to the most tectonic and primitive stone wall of Maison de week-end: "Simplicity is not equivalent to poverty; it is a choice, a discrimination, a crystallization. Its object is purity. Simplicity synthesizes...synthesis is an intellectual act."<sup>61</sup>

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<sup>59</sup> Benton, "The 'petite maison de week-end' and the Parisian Suburbs", 124

<sup>60</sup> LC, *Towards A New Architecture*, 53

<sup>61</sup> Le Corbusier, *Precisions on the Present State of Architecture and City Planning* (Cambridge: The MIT Press, 1991): 81

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