

**FIG. 2**  
Jorge Silvetti's skyscraper entry into the "Late Entries to the Chicago Tribune Competition" (1980) can be seen as a witty priapic ode to Adolf Loos. Cyan diazotype with Prismacolor pencil on vellum, 60 x 30 inches. (Courtesy of the Frances Loeb Library, Harvard University Graduate School of Design)

# LE CORBUSIER'S SECRET ARCHITECTURAL LANGUAGE

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**Abstract:** This essay analyzes Le Corbusier's most important architecture and uncovers in them a previously untranslated private and personal language with extended narratives. It offers a fresh look at a number of specific compositions by finding deep resonances in his sketches, writings, private correspondence, and others' recorded memories. The main representational devices used in these compositions are faces and phalluses; however, geometric objects and other representative elements comprise their own lexicon and are interwoven throughout. These compositions follow themes of wit, virility, revenge, self-memorialization, and grief. It appears that LC intentionally paired the profound and the puerile in certain works of architecture, which may have made them complete for him. This may have been directly modeled on the writing of François Rabelais, whom he deeply admired. One central and oft-repeated self-portrait construct advanced here is the "two-eye diagram", which LC created to explain how the matter-spirit dialectic played a fundamental role in portraying himself and expressing his world view and creative process.

**Keywords:** Villa Savoye, Ronchamp, Chandigarh, the Open Hand, Taurus, Firminy, Physiognomy, Figuration, Anamorphosis, Pareidolia, Wit, Rabelais.

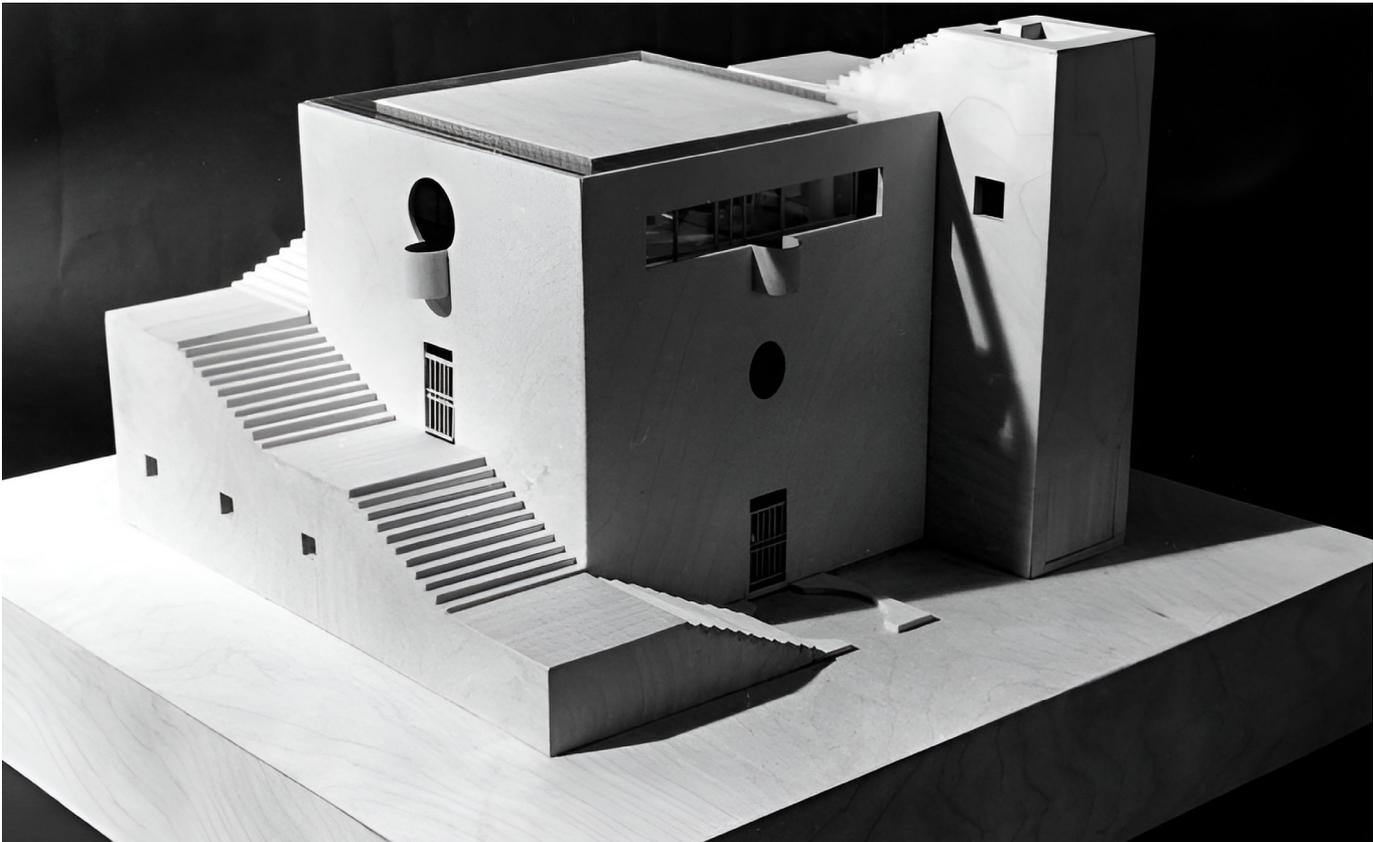
**Résumé :** Cet essai analyse l'architecture la plus importante de Le Corbusier et y découvre un langage privé et personnel jusqu'alors non traduit avec des récits étendus. Il offre un nouveau regard sur un certain nombre de compositions spécifiques en trouvant des résonances profondes dans ses esquisses, ses écrits, sa correspondance privée et les souvenirs enregistrés d'autres personnes. Les principaux dispositifs de représentation utilisés dans ces compositions sont les visages et les phallus; cependant, les objets géométriques et autres éléments représentatifs constituent leur propre lexique et sont entrelacés partout. Ces compositions suivent les thèmes de l'esprit, de la virilité, de la vengeance, de l'auto-mémorialisation et du chagrin. Il semble que LC ait intentionnellement associé le profond et le puéril dans certaines œuvres architecturales, ce qui les a peut-être rendues complètes pour lui. Cela peut avoir été directement calqué sur l'écriture de François Rabelais, qu'il admirait profondément. Une construction centrale et souvent répétée de l'autportrait avancée ici est le « diagramme à deux yeux », que LC a créé pour expliquer comment la dialectique matière-esprit a joué un rôle fondamental dans sa représentation. Cela exprimait également sa vision du monde et son processus créatif.

**Mots clés :** Villa Savoye, Ronchamp, Chandigarh, la Main Ouverte, Taureau, Firminy, Physiognomie, Figuration, Anamorphose, Paréidolie, Esprit, Rabelais.

**FIG. 1**  
 Model photo of Jorge  
 Silvetti's House in Djerba,  
 Tunisia (1976), features a  
 physiognomic composition.  
 (Courtesy of the Frances  
 Loeb Library, Harvard  
 University Graduate  
 School of Design)

**Resumen:** Este ensayo analiza la arquitectura más importante de Le Corbusier y descubre en ella un lenguaje privado y personal no traducido previamente con detenimiento. Ofrece una nueva mirada a una serie de composiciones específicas al encontrar profundas resonancias en sus bocetos, escritos, correspondencia privada y recuerdos grabados de otros. Los principales dispositivos de representación utilizados en estas composiciones son rostros y falos; sin embargo, los objetos geométricos y otros elementos representativos forman su propio léxico y están entrelazados en todas partes. Estas composiciones siguen temas de ingenio, virilidad, venganza, rememoración de uno mismo y dolor. Parece que LC emparejó intencionalmente lo profundo y lo pueril en ciertas obras de arquitectura, lo que puede haberlas hecho completas para él. Es posible que esto se haya inspirado directamente en los escritos de François Rabelais, a quien admiraba profundamente. Una construcción central y frecuentemente repetida del autorretrato que se presenta aquí es el "diagrama de dos ojos", que LC creó para explicar cómo la dialéctica materia-espíritu jugaba un papel fundamental a la hora de retratarse a sí mismo y expresar su visión del mundo y su proceso creativo.

**Palabras clave:** Villa Savoye, Ronchamp, Chandigarh, la Mano Abierta, Tauro, Firminy, Fisonomía, Figuración, Anamorfosis, Pareidolia, Ingenio, Rabelais.



The architect and town planner Jane Drew (1911–1996), one of Le Corbusier’s close friends and associates, fondly recalls his wonderful and broad sense of humor with two anecdotes. In the first, a pompous architect visiting her office, a very “unbending” type, mentions that he has lost his umbrella. LC leans over to her and murmurs, “C’est en dedans” (It’s up his butt). The second is a postcard of a pyramid he sent to her from Egypt, on top of which he sketched himself sitting. He wrote, “This time it is not a square peg in a round hole”<sup>1</sup>. These jokes related to one’s posterior illustrate a concealed but integral facet of Le Corbusier’s personality that he did not reveal to everyone but which was integral to his self-expression. Notwithstanding his occasional over-familiarity, he and Drew remained close friends. The two collaborated during the design and construction of the city and government center of Chandigarh, India. In fact, he expressed his admiration for her when he depicted her prominently as a mother goat and himself as crow on the enameled entry door of the Assembly Building in Chandigarh. He also showed his genuine affection and respect for her, arguably a bit oddly, by revealing his more playful persona.

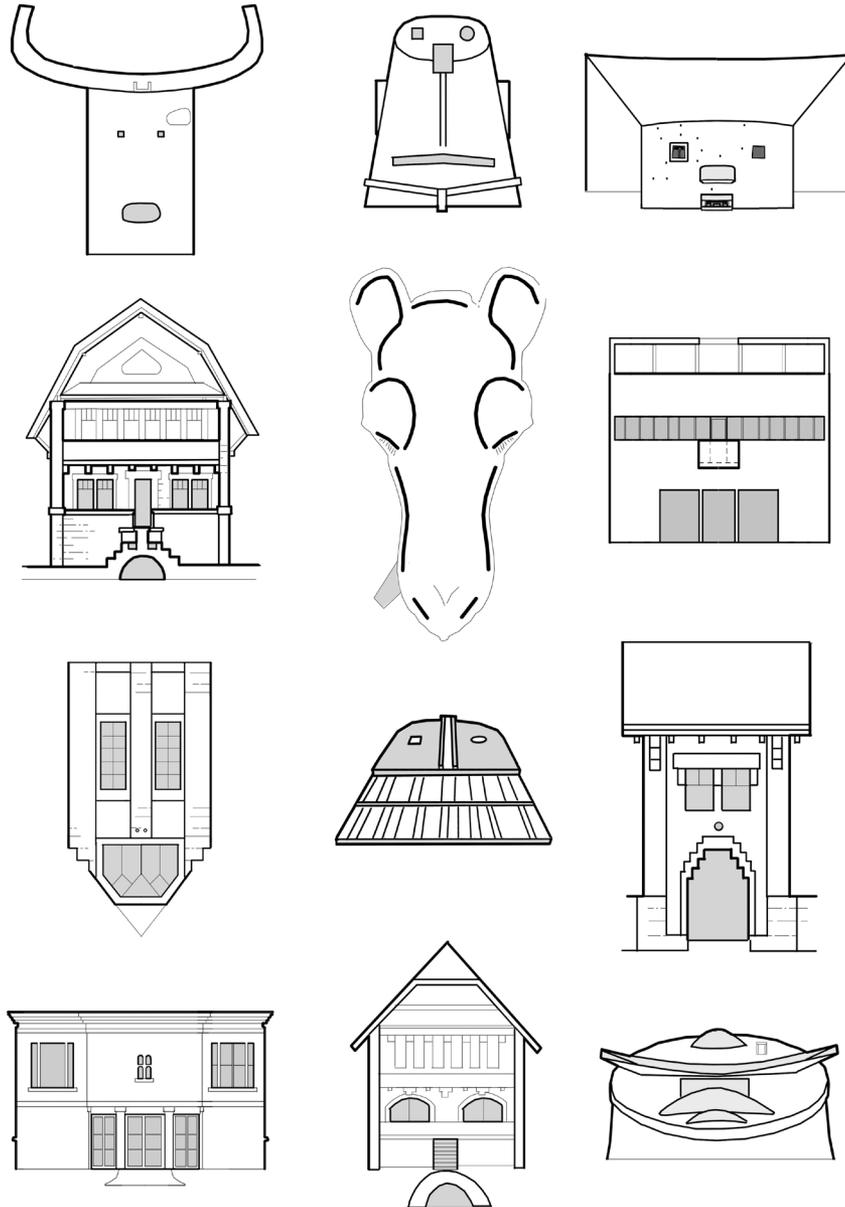
This alternative image of a playful, even childish<sup>2</sup> and clownish<sup>3</sup> Le Corbusier is diametrically opposed to the one generally painted of him either as the monkish Père Corbu—creator of a vast artistic oeuvre across a startlingly wide array of media—or the sui-generis “Le Corbusier”, the cerebral and strident prophet dramatically remaking the world of architecture for modern times. These anecdotes point to a dualism and dialectic that LC valued deeply within himself between the profound and the profane, the sacred and the silly, the serious and the humorous. This was an ingrained chameleonic character trait, nourished in LC from childhood and from his Swiss Protestant family and shaped by their embrace of the writings of François Rabelais (1494–1553), author of the five comedic masterpieces “Gargantua and Pantagruel”<sup>4</sup>. LC spoke of his deep love of Rabelais throughout his life. The novels describe the fantastical adventures of the two giants, the reckless-but-witty Panurge, and the jovial-but-wise Friar John. Rabelais used absurd humor and philosophical discussions to satirize important issues of the time, such as societal conventions, education, the Church, politics, marriage, and the pursuit of knowledge itself. The term “Rabelaisian” is often shorthand for scatological and coarse humor, but Rabelais applied these themes in the pursuit of larger issues. It is this search for the profound and the sacred, emphasizing their opposite qualities, the coarse and the base, which bound Le Corbusier to Rabelais and inspired him to unconventionally recreate this paradigm in another medium—architecture.

This raises the question: How could LC, let alone any architect, incorporate “Rabelaisian” commentary into a work of architecture? In this essay I will argue that, to accomplish this goal, he created a personal language in his designs and built forms consisting of faces and phalluses—as well as geometric elements and other figural objects—to tell stories important to him. Strictly speaking, abstract modern architecture should be incapable of conveying literal narratives, akin to other arts such as dance and instrumental music, but LC took this on as a direct challenge to solve.

This essay presents evidence on a project-by-project basis, showing that concise narratives lie unusually smoothly over specific compositions within Le Corbusier’s architecture. Some of these narratives are empirically evident while others lack specific evidence and have been “read into” the architecture as tentative interpretations<sup>5</sup>. Here I combine formal analysis of the built works with a review of the design processes (sketches and drawings)<sup>6</sup>, insights by other scholars, and granular biographical evidence. The fact that I am a practicing architect with a highly specific set of professional experiences predisposes me to perceive wit and narrative in architecture. For example, I interned with the noted architect Jorge Silvetti (professor emeritus of architecture, Harvard University), whose work often courted the witty and sometimes incorporated semi-concealed faces and phalluses. (Figs. 1 & 2) Another fascination in Silvetti’s office was anamorphosis, that is, when an image is intentionally distorted until viewed from a specific vantage point. I have used my visualization skills as an architect to put together a series of analytical diagrams to highlight the visual phenomena I am describing. This diagram, for example, features a variety of LC’s apparent face compositions, abstracted into more normative and symmetrical positions. (Fig. 3)

Several architectural historians have referenced physiognomic and anthropomorphic compositions in Le Corbusier’s architecture, including Vincent Scully, Charles Jencks, Colin Rowe, Luca Richibini, Daniel Naegele, and Manfredo Tafuri, as well as the biographer Nicholas Fox Weber<sup>7</sup>. Others have pointed out the sexual and the phallic in LC’s architecture<sup>8</sup>. One method of uncovering these hidden figures and narratives is to explore them from a deeply personal standpoint. In 2006, with the publication of Nicholas Fox Weber’s biography “*Le Corbusier: A Life*”, a large body of this specialized

knowledge has been made accessible to the general public. One common and prosaic framing mechanism that the historians mentioned above have used as a label for these odd compositions, and the one that is adopted into the title of this essay is to present it as a secret or private language<sup>9</sup>. These compositions are understandably seldom analyzed in depth, perhaps because pursuing deeply personal and literal meanings touches on the “deeply human” complete with “insecurities, flaws, and failings”. It is a double-edged sword of historiography and historians’ unspoken dual role as curators of his legacy. Engaging in them might seem overly critical or sensational, but if they were deeply important to Le Corbusier and the creation of his most important works of architecture then they must be seriously considered.



**FIG. 3**  
 Author's analytical diagrams of select Le Corbusier architectural compositions, highlighting latent physiognomic characteristics:  
 Top row, left: Assembly Building, Chandigarh, India (1964); middle: St.-Pierre Church, Firminy, France (1960–2006); right: Notre Dame du Ronchamp, Ronchamp, France (1955).  
 Second row, left: Villa Stotzer, La Chaux-de-Fonds, Switzerland (1907–08); middle: Plan Obus, Scheme “A”, Algiers, Algeria (1932); right: Villa Church, Ville-d’Avray, France (1927–30).  
 Third row, left: Villa Fallet, La Chaux-de-Fonds, Switzerland (1906–07); middle: Notre Dame du Ronchamp, Ronchamp, France (1955); right: Villa Stotzer, La Chaux de Fonds, Switzerland (1907-08).  
 Fourth row, left: Villa Schwob, La Chaux-de-Fonds, Switzerland (1916-17); middle: Study for a House Elevation (likely Villa Stotzer), La-Chaux-de Fonds, Switzerland (1907–08); right: Assembly Building, Chandigarh, India (1964).

It is highly significant that these same historians imply that physiognomic and phallic compositions were intentional and not products of their own pareidolic interpretation. This suggests that these historians do not believe that all of LC's compositions are necessarily "profoundly ambiguous"<sup>10</sup> and that some may be subject to interpretations far more literal than traditionally understood. Pareidolia is the human phenomenon wherein the brain makes sense of random visual stimuli by substituting a known image. It is a concept often used by scholars to analyze LC's architectural compositions, but without actually using the term. For example, it is often discussed that LC's organic and abstract forms, most famously evidenced by the roof of the chapel of Notre-Dame du Haut at Ronchamp, can evoke (pareidolic) associations and meanings in viewers (such as a nun's habit, a ship's hull and prow), but that does not mean that he intended to imply them. On the other hand, LC was obsessed with seeing images in the natural world around him, images that told a story that resonated with him. Often, for example, he would see faces in rocks, sometimes even seeing himself<sup>11</sup> (Fig. 4).

### ***The Houses at La Chaux-de-Fonds (1906–1908)***

Let us consider Le Corbusier's earlier work. The young Swiss architect, Charles-Édouard Jeanneret (and who adopted the name, "Le Corbusier" in 1920), incorporated faces into villas he designed in his home city of La Chaux-de-Fonds, near the French border. There is a semi-concealed face on a small rear entrance at the Villa Stotzer (1907–08)<sup>12</sup>. (Fig. 5) There is another face that appears on a study of the Villa Jaquemet façade, as recorded in a watercolor<sup>13</sup>. (Fig. 6) And there is an even more detailed upside-down face on the side elevation of LC's Villa Fallet (1906–07). (Fig. 7) These inclusions can be said to foreshadow Le Corbusier's desire to see his architecture as animate and even literally anticipate the deep humanist underpinnings of his later works. But at such a young age, another simple reason for including faces in his houses was for the sheer cheekiness of the act and his desire to be *l'enfant terrible*. He probably did not intend to convey involved personal narratives with these compositions.

### **FIG. 4**

Photograph of Le Corbusier next to a rock in a dry riverbed in India on which he has playfully placed his own glasses to complete a humorous physiognomic and pareidolic composition he sees as himself. He inscribed a separate copy of this photograph to Helena Strassova, his literary agent, with, "Un jour, au milieu du lit à sec d'un grand fleuve de l'Inde, / Corbu a rencontré Le Corbusier. Ils se sont reconnus et, chacun / à sa manière, ils ont souri..." (One day, in the middle of the dry bed of a great river in India, / Corbu met Le Corbusier. They recognized each other and, each / in his own way, they smiled...) French transcription by Isabelle Godineau. English translation by author. (FLC L4(3)26)



**FIG. 5**

Charles Jencks writes of a physiognomic composition at the Villa Stotzer (1907–08) in the caption, "...as with all the symmetrical façades of his buildings the face motif— windows as eyes, door, as mouth—is more veiled". (Photograph by Charles Jencks. Courtesy of The Jencks Foundation at The Cosmic House)



**FIG. 6**

William Curtis includes this full-page watercolor study of a Jeanneret's Villa Jaquemet in his LC monograph, possibly because it includes an obvious physiognomic composition. (Bibliothèque de la Ville de La Chaux-de-Fonds, LC105-1139)



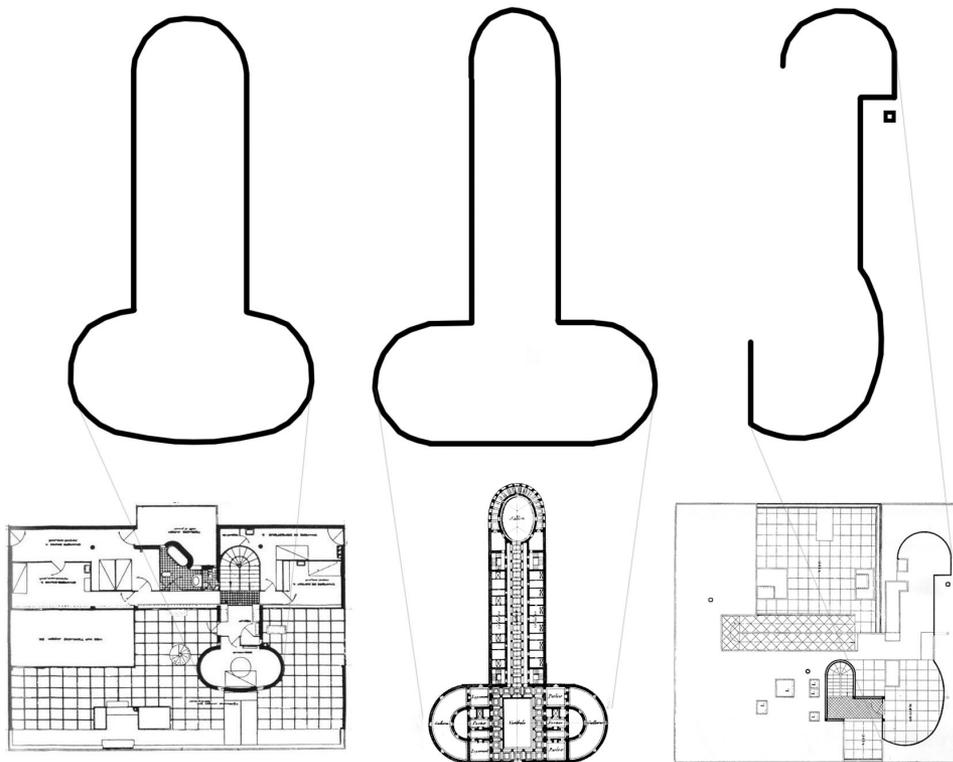
**FIG. 7**

The side elevation of the Villa Fallet (1906–07) features a complicated upside-down face, complete with two nostrils depicted by (what might be) snow-capped light fixtures. Le Corbusier often encouraged viewers to look at compositions upside down, so as to figure out the "game" (FLC L3(16)5)



### Villa Stein (1928) and Villa Savoye (1929)

The architectural historian Colin Rowe implies that Le Corbusier inscribed a “temple of love” on the rooftop of the Villa Stein (1928; Fig. 8 Left) as a witty allusion to Claude-Nicholas Ledoux’s “Oikèma, House of Pleasure” (1804; Fig. 8 Center), which infamously depicted a bordello planimetrically as an erect phallus<sup>14</sup>. Ledoux’s composition was an example of “architecture parlante” (speaking architecture), or architecture designed in the form of its purpose. Arguably, LC went on to depict an even more complex phallus, this time in elevation, with his famous rooftop solarium of the Villa Savoye<sup>15</sup>. (1929; Fig. 8 Right) It even appears to feature an errant emission depicted by the sublime and poetically detached chimney, like a droplet. Labeling such features as witty and moving on, as Rowe did, may be the wisest course of action<sup>16</sup>. Why go further? Because there is substantial biographical evidence for LC’s views on this subject, and compounding evidence is presented later in this essay that can help explain why LC decided to express his virility in the Villa Savoye. Again, it is Fox Weber’s biography that exhaustively consolidates the minutiae of LC’s life for the public. We learn of the young Charles-Édouard Jeanneret’s late sexual development, periods of impotence, and complicated love-hate relationship with prostitutes. Fox Weber insightfully writes, “The act of love and the making of buildings were inextricably linked in Charles-Édouard Jeanneret’s mind. Going to brothels and realizing architecture required similar determination; the challenge was to get from the fantasy stage to efficacy...”<sup>17</sup>. Much later, LC inscribes a book on the Villa Savoye for the Mayor of Poissy, “The little villa was happy in its limpid clarity, and so was I”<sup>18</sup>. That LC remembers the time of designing this house as happy speaks to several things. He was happy in his relationship with his first long-term romantic partner, Yvonne Gallis, and he was aware that the Villa Savoye, still on the drawing board, would be a masterful summation of a decade of modern house inventions, cementing his growing worldwide reputation. He was fully Le Corbusier—*The Corbusier*—and he felt an overpowering need to express this happiness and triumph in the very work of architecture on his drafting board. A review of the archival drawings suggest that the inclusion of a phallus occurred at the very end of the process just after the removal of Madame Savoye’s rooftop bedroom suite. Thus, as



**FIG. 8**  
 Left: the roof level stair volume of the Villa Stein (1928, FLC 10492(1));  
 Center: Claude Nicholas Ledoux’s “House of Pleasure” (1809);  
 Right: the solarium on the roof of the Villa Savoye. (1929, FLC 19440) Their respective phallus shapes are highlighted above. (Upper diagrams by Author)

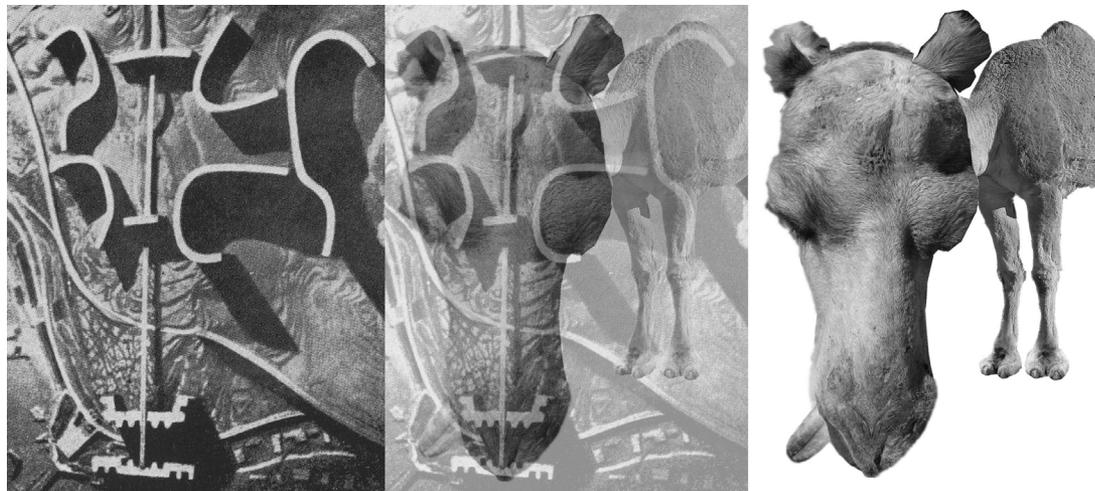
a final touch, the exceptionally precise curves of the solarium were inscribed for posterity and a recurring pattern was set. This seems to have been an odd but personally relevant “meta” act of celebration and a triumph for both the man and the architect. It is possible to see veiled face compositions in LC’s other projects of the 1920s<sup>19</sup>, but an even more elaborate encoding appears in his plans for Algiers, Algeria, a few years later.

### ***Plan Obus, Algiers (1932)***

In the early 1930s LC began a series of city plans for Algiers that he called Plan “Obus” (artillery shell). (Fig. 9 Left) He referred to the curved housing blocks on the hills above the city as “A lyrical event. Of utmost importance” and as a “tiara”<sup>20</sup>. And this composition, in conjunction with his new artistic attention to the nude body in his art, have often been held as signifying his stylistic change from the rational and functional to the more emotive and poetic<sup>21</sup>. This interpretation is accurate, but the hilltop composition—including the two tower blocks of the Business City below Project “A”—also represents a self-portrait in the form of an anatomically precise camel’s head, depicted complete with abstracted hump and foreleg to the right. (Figs. 9 Center and right) The angled, keystone-shaped building (possibly the Place du Gouvernement) to the lower left, and aligned with the breakwater, can be seen as the camel’s tongue wittily drinking from the Mediterranean. That LC identified as a camel is evidenced by two self-referential artworks: One is his 1932 painting “Le Chameau hypothétique ou Perspective animée” (The Hypothetical Camel or Animated Perspective, FLC 256) and his 1942 physiognomic collage “Crise du tabac et vie de chameau” (Tobacco Crisis and Life of a Camel, Papier collé FLC 75). Additionally, after the Royal Danish Academy of Fine Arts in Copenhagen made him a member, LC wrote, “But I see that your Academy is ready to open its door even to camels, which is very generous, hospitable, and as a matter of fact praiseworthy, since the camel is a funny kind of animal and watching it is very worthwhile. Believe me, gentlemen, I am not jesting, but telling you one more truth”<sup>22</sup>.

### ***Unité d’Habitation, Marseille (1952)***

The one example of literal narrative in LC’s architecture that is most widely known and yet arguably least studied is his Unité d’Habitation in Marseille (1947–54) and its metaphor of the housing block as a cruise liner. (Fig. 10) This metaphor, of course, is often analyzed for its sophisticated meanings. It is not only an architectural model for replicating the traditional functions of a city, but it also uses the roof deck as social condenser, has a high parapet that frames views of nature, and celebrates its detachment by appearing to float above the landscape on piers. The project’s great success is, and always has been, indivisible from this metaphor. But what is often overlooked is that this nautical metaphor goes as far as it does, uncomfortably so. The architectural critic Martin Filler defines kitsch as, “when an architect goes out of his way to overly explain his metaphors”<sup>23</sup>. Thus, the “smokestacks” on the roof, the rounded “hull”, the spiraling exit



**FIG. 9**  
Left: Photograph of the physical model of Le Corbusier’s Plan Obus-Project “A”, Algiers, Algeria. (*Ceuvre complète, Volume 2: 1929–34*, p. 142, cropped) Middle and right: the model superimposed with images of a camel’s head and an abstracted body. (Montage and photograph of camel by Author).

**FIG. 10**

Aerial view of the Unité d'Habitation, Marseille, showing the fire escape to the lower right as an "anchor rope", the rooftop gymnasium as an "upturned lifeboat", and the building's exhaust stacks as "ship's funnels".

(Photograph by Denis Esakov, cropped [<https://www.flickr.com/photos/denisesakov/40365942273/sizes/o/>] CC BY-NC-SA 2.0 DEED).

stair as an "anchor rope", and the gymnasium as an "upturned lifeboat" on the roof, can reasonably be seen as veering into the territory of kitsch<sup>24</sup>. Of all the projects analyzed in this essay, the ultimate reason why LC pushed his metaphor so far at the Unité thus remains the most mysterious. He may have delighted in the implausibility of a metaphoric concrete ocean liner beached on the outskirts of Marseilles. Perhaps he enjoyed thinking of the Unité as a kind of Noah's ark, wherein all of his disbelieving critics would shortly meet their fate<sup>25</sup>. Or maybe he delighted in cynically thinking of the building as a metaphorical rescue boat to escape the next European conflagration. Regardless, we can see that this well-known and literal metaphor at the Unité was not a singular, ignorable anomaly, but the proverbial tip of an iceberg.

### ***Notre-Dame du Haut, Ronchamp (1955)***

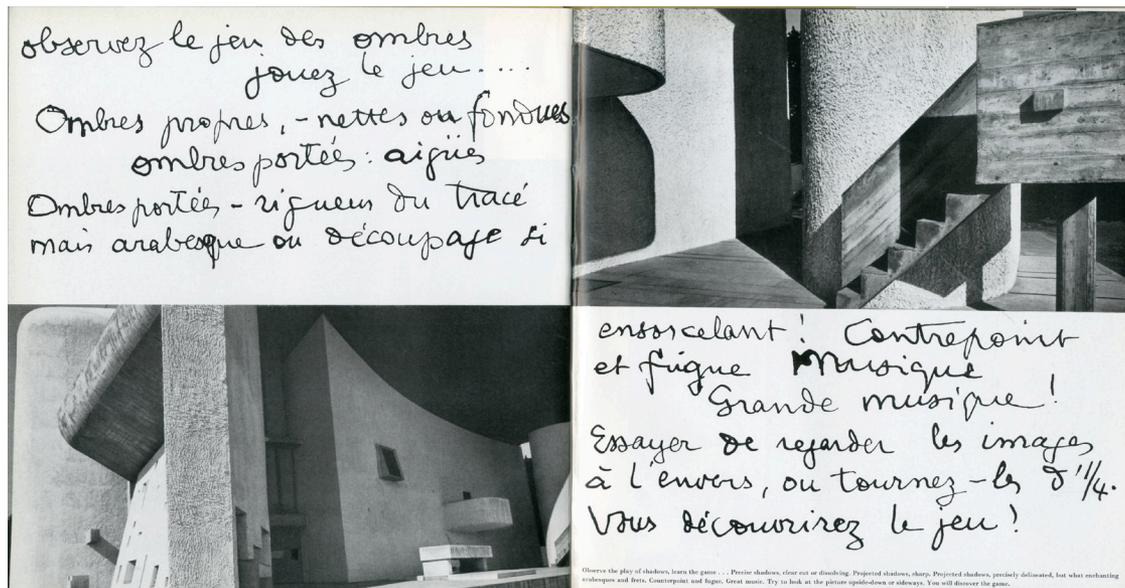
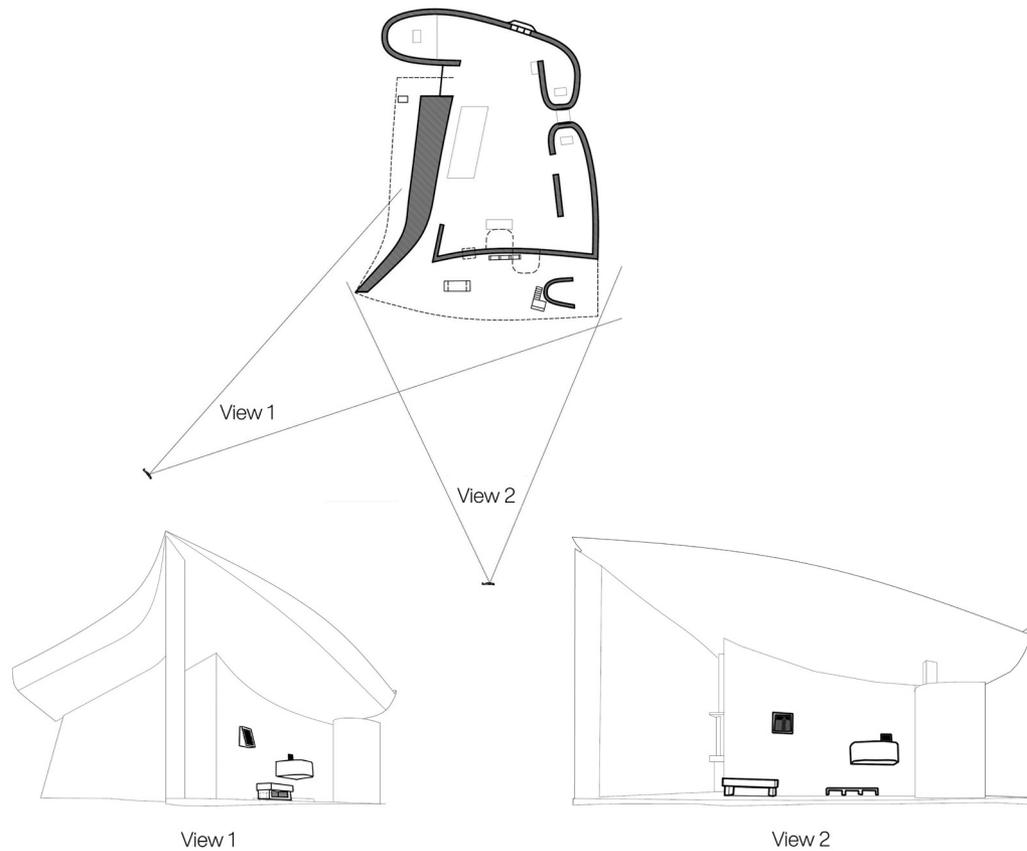
Returning to allusions to the human body, Daniel Naegele (architect and associate professor emeritus at Iowa State University) goes into depth regarding Le Corbusier, Picasso, and the Surrealists' forays into concealed physiognomic compositions in his essay "Finding Faces"<sup>26</sup>. In a separate essay, "Un corps à habiter: The image of the body in the œuvre of Le Corbusier", Naegele posits that LC crafted an enigmatic one-eyed face composition on the east façade of Ronchamp<sup>27</sup>. Essentially, he sees it as "profoundly ambiguous", that is, as having the same gestalt as LC's best abstract architectural works. But the composition may not be at all ambiguous if it is understood to be an anamorphic composition. When the east façade of Ronchamp is viewed from a precise point opposite the famous southeast corner, it appears as a (two-eyed) face composition. (Fig. 11, view 1) It is fairly complex in its rendering in a three-quarters, perspectival configuration so as to gaze out over the assembled pilgrims opposite the exterior altar. The left eye is depicted by the statue enclosure and the right eye (perspectivally smaller) is delineated by the recessed balcony door. Both eyes are square. The balcony forms a rounded nose, and the altar is the mouth. The bench is a visual alignment device, such that "teeth" appear in the "mouth" when the face comes into anamorphic alignment.

**FIG. 11**

Diagrams showing the east elevation of Ronchamp. In view 1 (left), elements of the face are highly distorted; however, the face appears in anamorphic alignment when seen from view 2 (right). Its depiction in three-quarters suggests it is gazing eastward over the assembly lawn. (Diagrams by Author)

**FIG. 12**

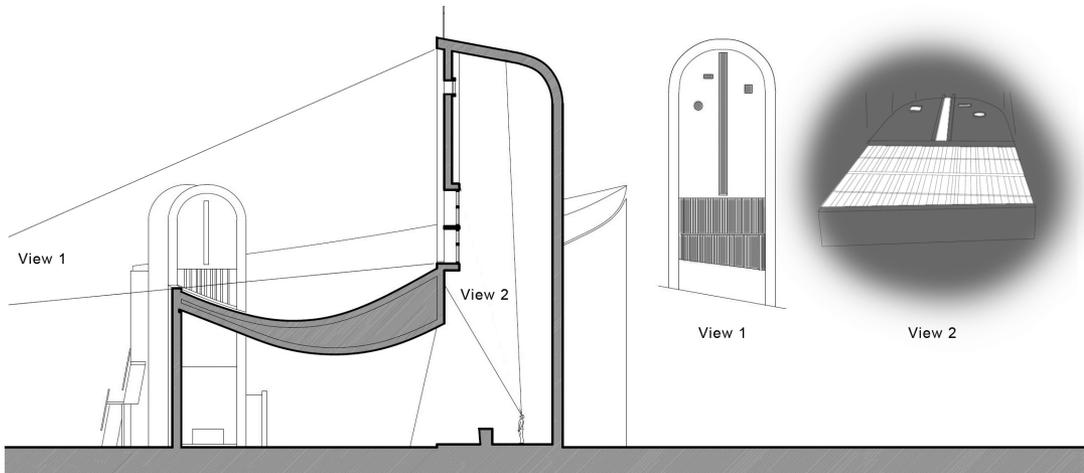
Le Corbusier's book *The Chapel at Ronchamp, les carnets de la recherche patiente* (1957, pp. 46 and 47) includes a photograph (to lower left) of the east façade of Notre Dame du Ronchamp taken from the precise anamorphic point at which the composition comes into alignment. The "teeth" of the bench may not have been installed when this picture was taken.





**FIG. 13**  
Diagram of a common type of French nun's habit Le Corbusier would have been familiar with that features a sharply flattened veil at top. (Diagram by Author)

**FIG. 14**  
There are two photographs by Lucien Hervé included in Le Corbusier's book *The Chapel at Ronchamp, les carnets de la recherche patiente* (1957, pp. 34 & 38), looking upward from the base of the south tower at what appears to be an anamorphic and physiognomic composition featuring Le Corbusier's "dual eye" composition. (Photograph by Lucien Hervé. The Getty Research Institute, Los Angeles [2002.R.41 & LC(2)237])



**FIG. 15**  
Section diagram of Ronchamp showing anamorphic viewing position (view 2) of the south tower's "dual eye" composition. When viewed from the exterior (view 1), the face is vertically elongated and the blind eye and the seeing eye are reversed. (Diagrams by Author)

Anamorphosis, again, is the artistic construction wherein a given image is highly distorted at first glance, but then comes into alignment when viewed from a very specific vantage point. The more distorted and initially unrecognizable the composition, the more successful is the anamorphosis. LC's fascination with this phenomenon is credibly documented. For example, while being driven in India in 1955, he sees a branch by the side of the road that appears to actively change from a dead branch into a rearing horse, and he excitedly stops to record it in his sketchbook<sup>28</sup>.

In his 1957 book *The Chapel at Ronchamp: les carnets et la recherche patiente* (Sketches and Patient Research), Le Corbusier includes a rare photograph depicting the east elevation face in this perfect alignment, and immediately adjacent invites us to "jouez le jeu" (play the game) and "découvrez le jeu!" (discover the game!)<sup>29</sup>. (Fig. 12) Little more can be said with any certainty about LC's intentions for this surprisingly precise anamorphic face composition, other than the fact that it is generally a witty physiognomic "game" and an apparent flexing of his creative muscles<sup>30</sup>. Yet, LC may have again intended an extended narrative—a highly personal one. Here is just one possibility: From his sketches, drawings, and models, he seems to have discovered this face relatively early in the design process. And, like one early critic, he may have come to see the voluptuous roof as a habit or wimple—thus making it a nun and representative of the Catholic Church, namely the Vatican (Fig. 13).



**FIG. 16**

The geometric shapes at both the rear scupper composition at Ronchamp and at Le Corbusier's own grave appear to be geometrically-coded "self-portraits".

(Photograph by Rory Hyde <https://www.flickr.com/photos/roryrory/2500990131/sizes/l/> CC BY-SA 2.0 DEED)

**FIG. 17**

Le Corbusier and his wife Yvonne's tomb at Roquebrune-Cap-Martin. LC may have intended the amorphous triangular shape at the grave to be read as a square, thus making an additional reference to his "dual eye" motif. (Photograph by Colin Bisset)

The Vatican had shut down his previous project for Ste. Baume in Provence. This, together with the Church's ongoing resistance to Ronchamp<sup>31</sup>, may have encouraged him to add layers of narrative to this image of a nun so as to encode his displeasure. For example, during construction of Ronchamp he embraced the compelling idea to retain the holes for scaffolding in the façade as points of light surrounding the statue of the Virgin, but he may have also relished the fact that these holes would represent pockmarks on the nun's face, making her look sick<sup>32</sup>. Furthermore, if the final lectern shape was intended as an abstracted and upturned palm, the pithy and sardonic narrative encoded into Ronchamp would thus be that the Church is sick and in need of healing itself instead of soliciting funds from the gathered pilgrims. LC was reading and rereading Rabelais during the design of Ronchamp, and thus criticizing the Church would have been decidedly on point<sup>33</sup>. LC was highly critical of the Church not only for what he saw as its venomous attitude toward architectural innovation, but also for its denigration of human pleasures, such as love and sex. These sentiments resonated with Rabelais' frequent criticisms of the Church for its own gluttony, greed, and lasciviousness<sup>34</sup>. If it seems preposterous that an architect would inscribe his revenge on a client in the very building they paid for, let us remember the similar historical event, as just one example, wherein Michelangelo depicted his displeasure of his critic, Cardinal Biagio da Cesena, in his Last Judgement fresco in the Vatican's Sistine Chapel.

Another anamorphic face composition, in the south tower at Ronchamp, can be seen when one stands behind the altar there and looks up. (Figs. 14 & 15) Considering the evidence to be presented in this essay, that face is a self-portrait. It is less successful than the anamorphic composition in the east façade because the distortion of the face viewed from the exterior is only vertically attenuated and not unrecognizable. Due to the quirky representation of the eyes, it is important to step back and introduce what will be identified here as LC's "dual eye" composition. LC saw the world through many unique dualisms, and one of the more significant examples concerned the spiritual and material halves of himself. This was well-formulated by Paul Turner in his "Education of Le Corbusier" where he highlighted Le Corbusier's readings of the French philosopher Édouard Schuré, the artist Henry Provensal, and others<sup>35</sup>. Likewise, it is important to remember that, in 1917–1918, LC suffered from a detached retina, which destroyed most of the sight in his right eye<sup>36</sup>. Clearly this was a traumatic experience for him. He may have been aware of the historical concept in Western art of one's left or "sinister" eye being of the flawed material world and the right eye being of the spiritual world<sup>37</sup>. Given his immense interest in mythologizing anything and everything related to his life story, it is conceivable that LC exalted in the



coincidence of this concept applied to his own eyesight and spirit-matter dualist world view. Thus, he chose the square to depict his blind eye looking upward to heaven. The left and seeing eye is depicted as round and looks down at us in the living and material world, and with a humorously raised eyebrow. Two rows of *brise-lumière* (vertical light shields) form an equally mischievous and toothy mouth. And if the signifier of square for blind eye is rigorously transferred back to the nun, she would be both a sick and a blind nun soliciting alms.

The rear downspout and basin composition on Ronchamp's west façade is one last personal narrative that LC inserted at Ronchamp, but it is simultaneously the most impenetrable and cryptic. (Fig. 16) It consists of a downspout, the bulge of the confessionals, and a raised cistern with geometric shapes. Charles Jencks perceptively writes, "if [Ronchamp] had been systematically coded..., then we can be sure that somewhere its very didactic creator would have left explicit comments and a reader's guide as he did with other such works"<sup>38</sup>. Let us look to one such Rosetta Stone that Le Corbusier left us, his design for the grave he would share with his wife, Yvonne, at Roquebrune-Cap-Martin in southeastern France. (Fig. 17) He designed it upon her death in 1957, only a few years after he designed the scupper composition for Ronchamp.

The architectural historian Deborah Gans states that within the grave composition "...stands a hollow cylinder as a feminine vessel for Yvonne and an ambiguous angular solid for Le Corbusier". Reinforcing the basic autobiography of the composition, she says, "Embedded in the plinth are their respective signs of faith, Yvonne's cross and Le Corbusier's seashell"<sup>39</sup>. In 1911 Charles-Édouard Jeanneret explained his future intentions succinctly: "The obsession for symbols that lies deep inside me is like a yearning for a language limited to only a few words.... I would prefer geometric combinations, the square, the circle..."<sup>40</sup>.

Should we consider, then, that the similar geometric shapes at the Ronchamp cistern are also autobiographical<sup>41</sup>? LC apparently dedicated each of the three towers to the women in his life: the Virgin Mary; his mother, Marie; and his wife, Yvonne<sup>42</sup>. It is also known from Paul Turner—again through LC's early readings of such authors as Schuré, Ruskin, Provencal, and specifically Ernst Renan's "Vie de Jésus" (Life of Jesus)—that Le Corbusier deeply identified with Jesus Christ, feeling a deep kinship to his formation, struggles, and role as a revolutionary prophet<sup>43</sup>. In pondering the core

**FIG. 18**  
An upside down image of a Schnauzer's nose. (Photograph by Adam, cropped and rotated [<https://www.flickr.com/photos/kristin-and-adam/286435965/sizes/o/>] CC BY-NC 2.0 DEED)

story of Mary during Ronchamp's design process, LC identified with how she gave birth to Jesus, and how his own mother, also named Marie, gave birth to the modern prophet, Le Corbusier. In this reading then, he may have felt compelled to record the tragic reality of his decision to not have children. LC certainly spoke disparagingly of children (at least when bluntly propositioning an English journalist Taya Zinkin in India)<sup>44</sup>. But Jane Drew, his associate in India and close friend, convincingly stated the exact opposite in a candid interview. She said, "Oh, I know he [regretted not having children] ... After he went to stay with ... Nivola [and] the children ... [LC told] me directly afterwards ... 'I made an awful mistake' ..."<sup>45</sup>. Is it possible that encoded in the cistern was an expression of this regret? After all, there is a second and smaller pyramid in the basin between Yvonne and him that could be a regretful allusion to their unborn male child, a child who would have completed the symmetry between these three women<sup>46</sup>. The "pregnant" bulge of the confessionals (and similarly intuited by other scholars) could thus be an allusion to all three pregnancies. Supporting this interpretation is the presence of a second, smaller conch shell next to Yvonne's grave marker. Finally, the roof scupper or "snout" (which specifically and anatomically resembles a dog's nose, not a bull's) could refer to their beloved schnauzer, Pinceau ("paintbrush"), who tragically had to be euthanized in 1945, and can be seen as "filling up" Yvonne, but memorialized upside down, as in death. (Fig. 18) Le Corbusier writes in his "Poème de l'angle droit (1947–53), "Être rempli, se remplir, s'être rempli ... devenir un jeune chien content" (To be full, to be filled, to have been filled ... to become a happy young dog)"<sup>47</sup>.

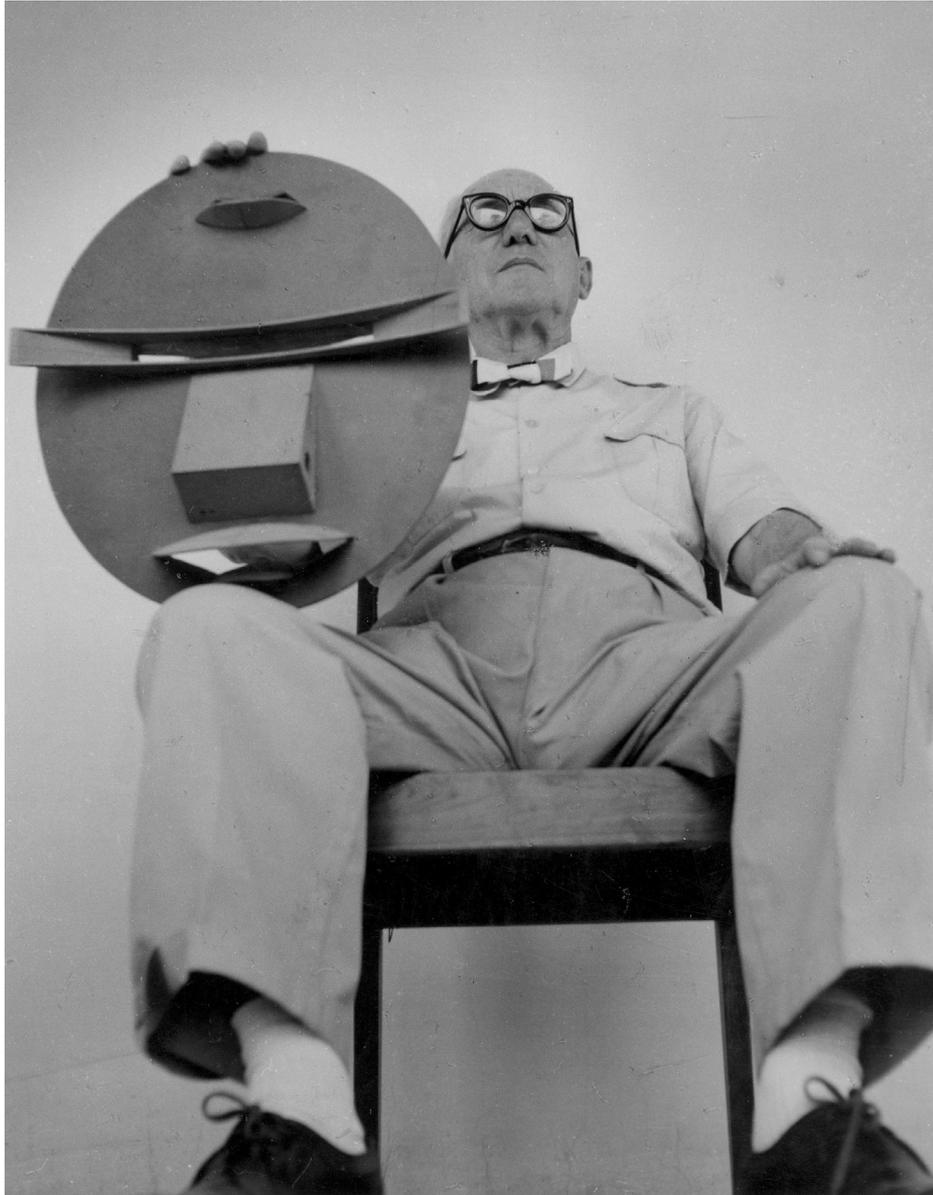
Yvonne was nothing short of a deeply tragic figure during LC's long periods of travels. He was prone to numerous romantic affairs and visited prostitutes during these trips. All the while, she became physically weaker and declined into alcoholism, often falling and breaking bones. LC must have felt deeply conflicted by this sad state of affairs, which was to some extent of his own making. On the one hand he deeply craved being the great international architect and sexually confident man of the world, but on the other hand, he sincerely and deeply loved Yvonne. In any event, he went on to encode the deepest, darkest parts of his guilt in a building for which he surely must have had deep personal and emotional connections. LC could have been specifically referencing this scupper and basin composition when he said that Ronchamp is representative of, "the whole of an earnest life of struggle ... and constant fight" and that the design incorporates "a thousand factors which ... no-one ought or would wish to speak of .... I am filled with turmoil and undercurrents"<sup>48</sup>.

As an aside, there is a contingent of Le Corbusian scholars who suggest that themes of the mystical, occult, alchemical, and mythological appear in Ronchamp —ideas most famously elaborated in LC's book *Poem of the Right Angle* (1955). While it is clear that these alchemical and mythical themes often do appear in his artwork, this analysis suggests that, at least in the strictly architectural compositions analyzed here (and exclusive of the art program), these themes do not seem to have played a critical role. Instead, what emerges is the deeply personal and confessional along with what can be described as Rabelaisian humor and wit.

### **Chandigarh Assembly Building, India (1963)**

During the design of the Central Assembly Building at Chandigarh, Le Corbusier declared that the sloped cap on the top would be "a veritable physical laboratory" and "lend itself to possible solar festivals recalling to men, once a year, that they are children of the sun"<sup>49</sup>. Since then, historians have naturally analyzed it in those terms, making connections with other works that incorporate the sun—such as Abu Simbel and Jantar Mantar. Often overlooked in such analyses, however, is the simple observation that the resulting composition completely lacks function as a working sun chamber. The architectural historian Stanislaus von Moos, in a moment of frankness, expresses this frustration by saying that the composition is a "vaguely cosmological still life" and later, "somewhat clumsy"<sup>50</sup>. But a photograph taken during the design process shows LC holding a model of the near-final cap design on his knee and staring meaningfully into the distance might hold clues to other design intentions. (Fig. 19) The cap is a fairly precise symmetrical face or mask, and represents an Indian woman. In addition to crescent-shaped eyes, nose, and mouth, there is a distinctive bindi, tikka, or chakra (third eye) on the woman's forehead (Fig. 20), and there is even the impression of a circular nose stud. The fact that LC apparently depicted the face of an Indian woman, as "child of the sun" (and anamorphically) on the cap of his most important building at Chandigarh is about all that can be said objectively about any potential narrative.

Each of the eight piers in front of the same Assembly Building also appear to have abstracted, face-like compositions. There are two protruding square eyes and a large open mouth below, expressing surprise or dismay<sup>51</sup>. (Fig. 21) Seen as faces, the enormous and upturned crescent entablature above would then depict the distinctive construction baskets that were used when building Chandigarh manually. In fact, looking back through LC's sketches, photographs, and "Œuvre complète", we see him entirely taken by Indian women (and those of other cultures) dutifully carrying loads on their heads. There is even a photo taken of him playfully putting one on his own head. (Fig. 22) He may have envisioned a symmetry to the caryatids on the portico of the Erechtheion, a famous architectural expression in another well-known democracy. (Fig. 23) In both instances, the women perpetually carry their loads in alternate contrapposto positions. These compositions could thus be a general homage to Indian women and their role in building their capital city.



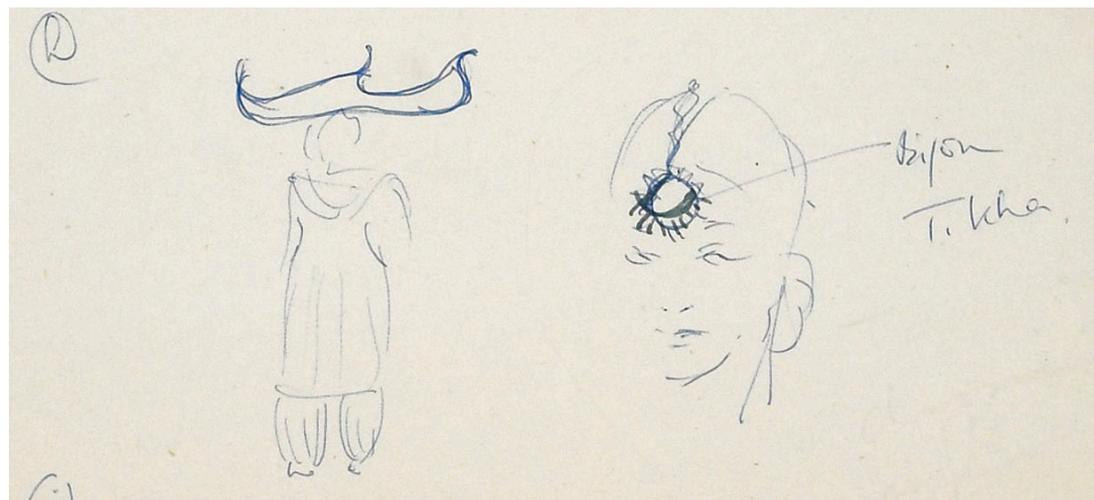
**FIG. 19**  
 Photograph by Balkrishna Doshi (Le Corbusier apprentice and Indian architect) of Le Corbusier holding a model of the then-current design for the "cap" of the Chandigarh Assembly council chamber, which can be said to represent an Indian woman's face. There is a forehead bindi and a nose stud, but it does not yet have the errant mark to the upper right. (Balkrishna Doshi Archives, Vastushilpa Foundation, Ahmedabad, India, FLC L4(3)25)

But if one takes into account other candid statements that Le Corbusier made to Jane Drew in India regarding his attitudes toward sex, there is a less appealing interpretation of both sets of faces at the Assembly Building. She said, "... he was also tinged with a view of sex which I didn't like.... It was ... something coarse.... He talked a lot about poetry, but in actual fact I think the poetry of affection missed him. [Pierre] Jeanneret used to use a brothel [in India], and he (LC) also. And the way he talked about this and that. It was very derogatory in some funny way ..."<sup>52</sup>.

The private narratives examined here in Le Corbusier's architectural compositions typically consist of the precise minimum of formal devices required to tell a story, but in the Assembly building there are indecipherable errant marks on the upper right of each face, both on the cap and on the caryatids. There is one uncomfortable "personal erotic narrative" that might explain these. The shocked expressions on the caryatids' faces could be some form of "coarse" sexual allusion or witticism with the enormous scupper adjacent to the portico and the entry bridge attached to the "male" pyramid both being phallic symbols. Perhaps, as Flora Samuel says, like LC, "Rabelais made fun of that which he took most seriously..."<sup>53</sup>. Or maybe LC took inspiration in this instance from another of his literary inspirations, such as Alfred Jarry's more nihilistic play, "Ubu Roi" (1896)<sup>54</sup>.

**FIG. 20**

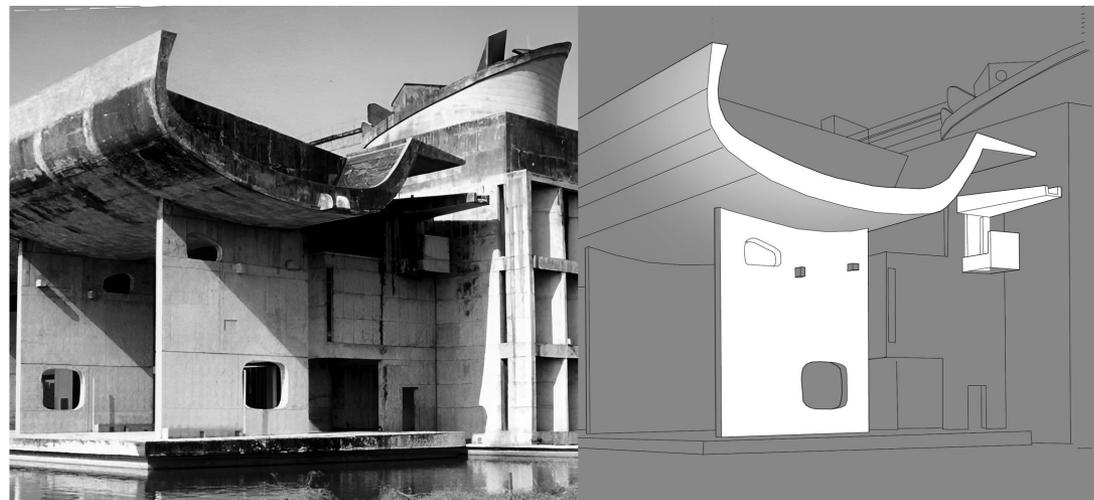
Sketch by Le Corbusier of an Indian woman with a jewel bindi or tikka on her forehead, perhaps in the shape of an eye (right) drawn in January, 1956 just after his thirteenth trip to India. The sketch of an Indian woman with a traditional Indian shoe on her head (left) could be yet another playful interpretation by LC of the very specific upturned curves of the Assembly portico. (FLC 05597G)



**FIG. 21**

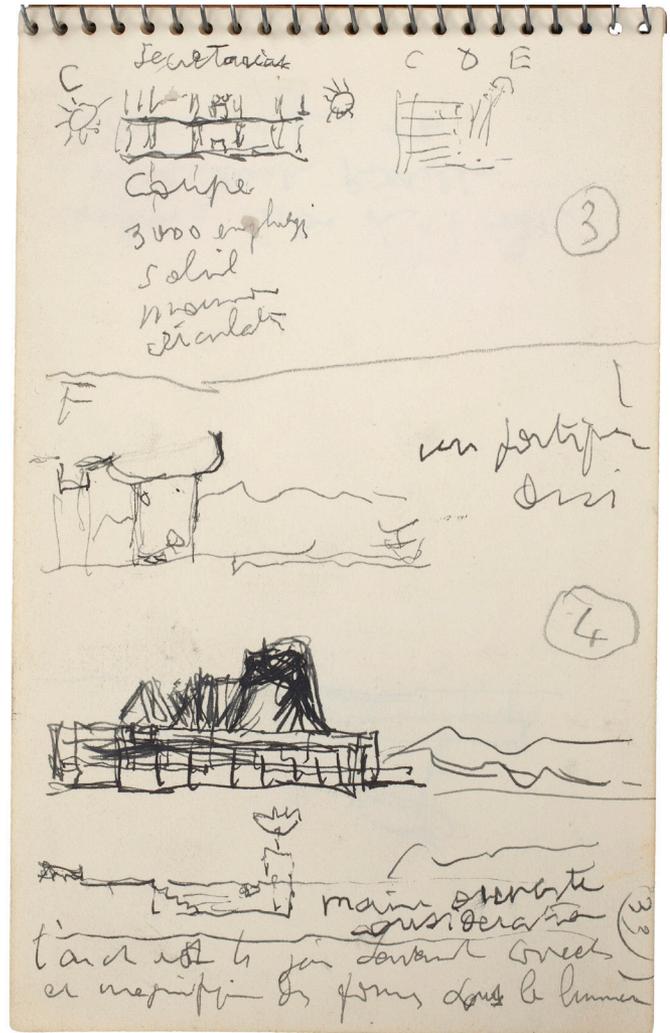
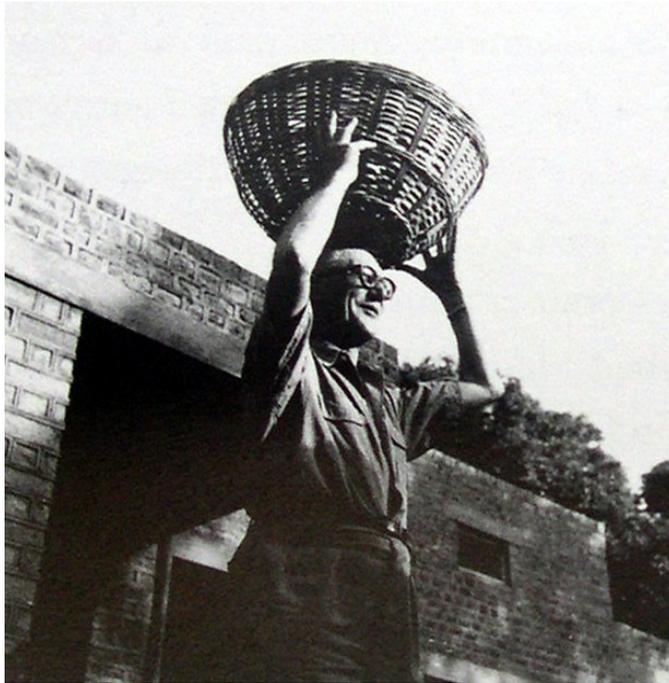
Left: View of the portico of the Chandigarh House of Assembly from the northeast, wherein the eight "caryatids" appear to carry construction baskets, as though dumping the contents onto the building. The end figure may also be seen as gazing in surprise at the enormous phallus-shaped scupper to the upper right that would release a torrent of water into the reflecting pool below during frequent rains. (Photograph by Immanuel Nicholas Iyadurai).

Right: Analytical diagram emphasizing face, construction basket, and phallus. (Diagram by Author)



**FIG. 22**

Photograph of Le Corbusier toying with a construction basket on his own head, presumably at a construction site in Chandigarh. [Photograph from Jean Petit, "Le Corbusier: lui-même". (Geneva: Editions Rousseau, 1970), p. 105, Unknown photographer]



**Chandigarh Government Center, Symbol of the Upturned Crescent and the Open Hand (1951-1964)**

The central and organizing symbol of each of the sequentially designed and constructed buildings of LC's government complex at Chandigarh is well-known to be the upturned crescent. This was apparently chosen early in the design process as an organizing symbol to tie the future buildings together as they were designed and built. One significant interpretation of the shape is as bull's horns, which he sketched extensively; its meaning, however, is also assumed to be an ever-growing compilation of other India-related symbols that LC and scholars have gathered over time, such as cart axel, airplane wing, crescent moon, Buddhist umbrella, and the inverted diurnal cycle. I now add construction basket to this list.

But the Open Hand monument is another central unifying symbol of the Chandigarh enterprise. It would lend a tidy historical simplicity if the upturned crescent and the open hand can be shown to have been one and the same for LC. To this end, the French Modernist architect André Wogenscky (1916-2004) stated that there were at least two versions

**FIG. 23**  
In a sketchbook Le Corbusier hurriedly draws the end view of the Assembly colonnade and writes, "un portico! Oui" (a portico! Yes) perhaps recording what he saw as a fortuitous allusion to the Greek Erechtheion's famous portico of the maidens. Sketch drawn around June, 1956 after his tenth trip to India. (Le Corbusier Sketchbooks no. 3 1954-57, Image no. 672. FLC Carnet K43672)

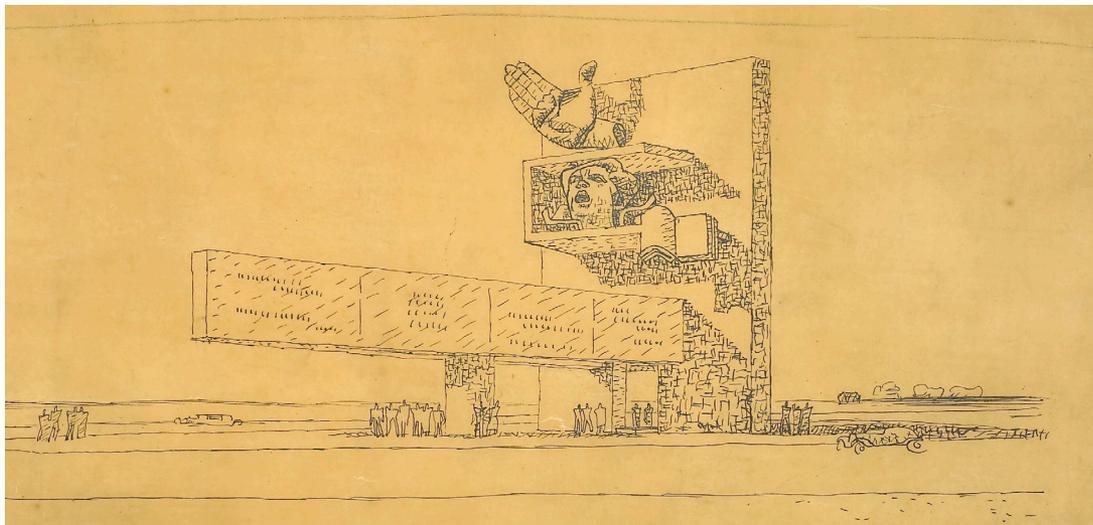
**FIG. 24**

Photograph of the Open Hand Monument as built in 1985 at Chandigarh, India. (Photo by Anamdas [[https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Open\\_Hand\\_Monument,\\_Chandigarh.jpeg](https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Open_Hand_Monument,_Chandigarh.jpeg)] CC BY-SA 3.0 DEED)



**FIG. 25**

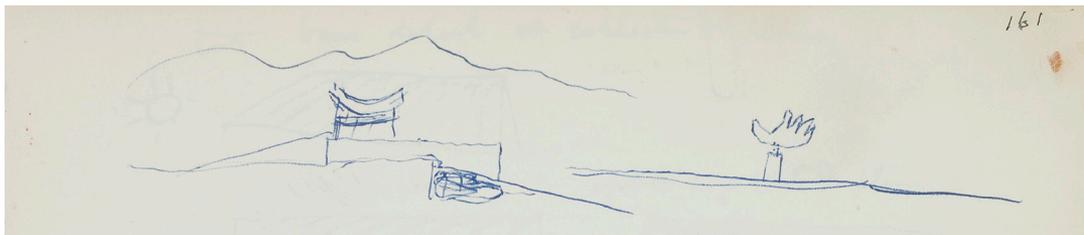
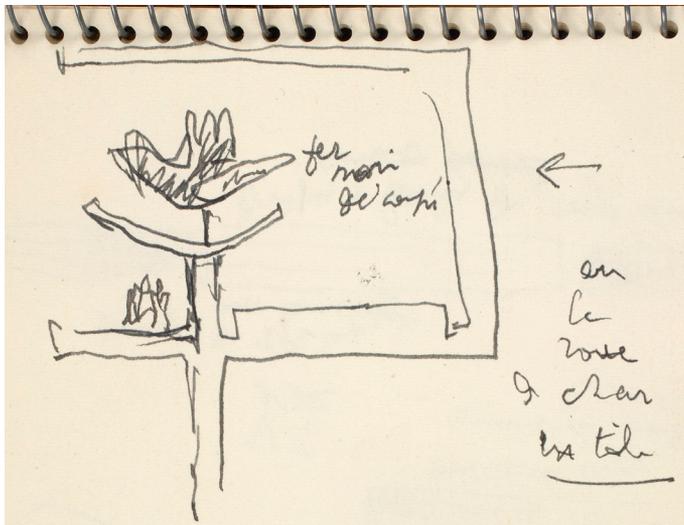
The monument to Paul Vaillant-Couturier (1937) outside Paris, with hand in the “horizontal” position as described by Le Corbusier’s associate André Wogenscky. (FLC24146)



of the open hand symbol<sup>55</sup>. One version is the upright and final version of the monument with dual reading as a bird (Fig. 24). Wogenscky described the second one as “tending to the horizontal”, and this is the version that LC used in his Paul Vaillant-Couturier monument (1937) outside Paris. (Fig. 25) Here is essentially an asymmetrical and horizontal crescent shape. An abstracted version of this second open hand appears above the entrance to the Secretariat Building in Chandigarh, the first structure in the complex to be designed and built. A telling study sketch of this Secretariat composition clearly shows these two different versions of the open hand, one above the other, as LC apparently struggles to choose between them. (Fig. 26) At one point, early in the process, Le Corbusier even considered this horizontal version as the stand-alone Open Hand monument (Fig. 27).

Eventually, LC appears to come up with a solution reconciling these two separate versions by awkwardly hyper-extending the last finger and thumb of the upraised version so as to simultaneously form an upturned crescent. (Figs. 28 & 29) The result appears painful, both figuratively and literally. LC went on to pitch the upraised Open Hand monument, (with only slightly concealed dual-reading as a dove of peace), to Jawaharlal Nehru, who was then prime minister of India. Thus, one important narrative of the monument was peace after the painful period of sectarianism following independence. LC retained the upright and sometimes asymmetrical crescent as the unifying symbol of all the buildings. Still, each of the crescent-shape variations as manifested in each of the structures in the Chandigarh Government complex appear to be as intentionally different from one another as possible. This plethora of iterations may have been in part due to the conundrum between the various open-hand shapes—as a way of adding intentionality to what he may have initially considered a problem.

Another obvious but less common interpretation of the Open Hand monument (and thus about the upturned crescent itself) is that it appears to be another literal self-portrait motif.<sup>56</sup> This project celebrated LC's "crowning work"<sup>57</sup> created by and symbolized by his own right hand<sup>58</sup>. The stylized lines on the palm of the Open Hand monument (Fig. 24) are patterned after LC's own palm<sup>59</sup>. (Fig. 30) In fact, a broad examination of the many study sketches for this monument show a far deeper, even frenzied examination of the actual lines on the palm rather than the outline of the hand. LC was apparently searching for a mythological story here, just as he did with his monocular sight. In the end, he placed an emphasis on two pronounced metatarsal bones on the palm beneath his index and middle finger, a breast-like shape that he often incorporated into his artwork, including the Taurus. This shape will be referred to in this essay as the "double-upturned curve"<sup>60</sup>. While Le Corbusier was often cryptic in his explanations of the Open Hand, he was nevertheless fairly direct from time to time when he stated, self-referentially, that the Open Hand monument represents "a lifetime of struggles" and "un travail intérieur ininterrompu" (uninterrupted interior work)<sup>61</sup>. Ironically, he encodes into his "Edict of Chandigarh" his set of rules for public art in the city: "The age of personal statues is gone. No personal statues shall be erected in the city or parks of Chandigarh"<sup>62</sup>.



**FIG. 26**

Le Corbusier's study sketch of the entrance to the Secretariat Building in Chandigarh drawn during his eleventh trip to India in December, 1956 and during the Secretariat's construction. The sketch appears to consider the addition of the upright and representational version of the open hand sculpture above the abstract, upwardly cupped and horizontal crescent as a tautology. (Le Corbusier Sketchbooks no. 3, 1954–57. Image no. 792. FLC Carnet K45792)

**FIG. 27**

Conceptual sketch of the Open Hand monument in the landscape adjacent to the Governor's Palace at Chandigarh from his first visit to India in March, 1951. It shows that Le Corbusier considered the "horizontal crescent" shape as the final monument form at this early stage—a solution which would have been far more consistent with his choosing the upturned crescent as the unifying symbol for the Chandigarh Government center. But it would not have had the alternate reading as a symbol of peace. (From *Ceuvre complète* vol. 5 (1946–1952), p. 118 and *Album Punjab Simla*, verso 27)

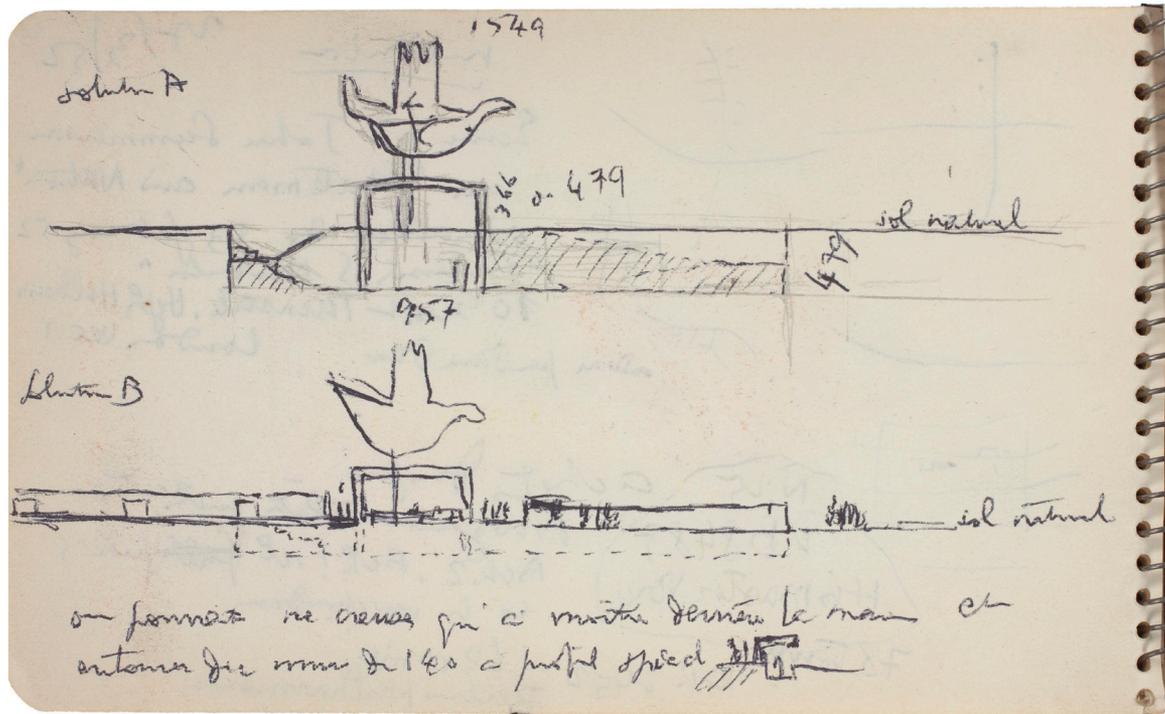
**FIG. 28**

Photograph (presumably of Le Corbusier) holding his hand in an awkward position with thumb and little finger hyperextended so as to have the secondary reading as an upturned crescent. The final version still has an extended little finger, but the formal reading of a dove of peace is a primary reading, and the upturned crescent is largely lost. (Photograph by Frank Lutz FLC L4(3)88)



**FIG. 29**

Sketches of Solutions A and B, representing LC's open hand/upturned crescent dilemma during his third trip to India in March, 1952. (Le Corbusier Sketchbooks no. 2, 1950-54. Image no. 732. FLC Carnet F24732)



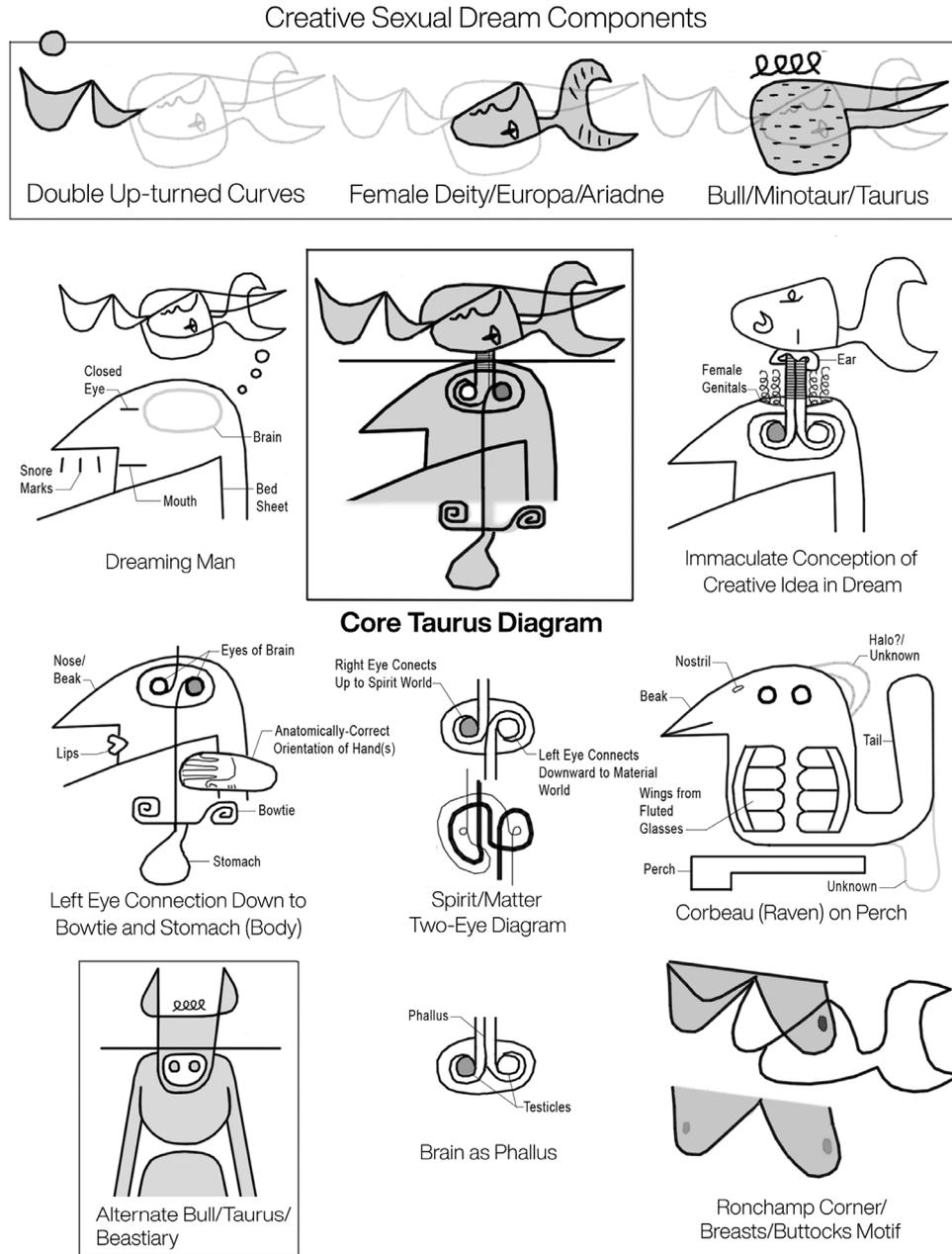


**FIG. 30**  
 Photograph of Le Corbusier's own upraised palm, showing the two pronounced bumps at the base of his index and middle fingers. He later abstracted this shape into the double-upturned curve or breast shape on the final Open Hand monument design. (Photograph by MRU FLC L4(1)99)

### **Taurus Artworks (1950–1965)**

While an analysis of Le Corbusier's Open Hand sculpture and Taurus-themed artworks may not seem directly pertinent to an essay on architectural language, they are included here due to their unique qualities of literal self-representation and narrative, a distinct feature of the private architectural language examined here. The early paintings and related artworks in Le Corbusier's "Taurus" (bull) series (1950–1965) appear to follow a fairly consistent core pictogram with minor divergences. In time, however, the formal oil paintings became improvisational in character as he began to produce them for exhibitions and public consumption<sup>63</sup>. The focus here will be on the earlier paintings and artworks that more closely adhere to the core pictogram. I have created a diagram that formally analyzes the major components of the core Taurus diagram and its many variations. (Fig. 31) By comparing all variations in the series, the pictogram appears to describe an unusually concise and extended personal and mythological story among his paintings. One early painting, "Métamorphose du Violon" (1952), can reasonably be said to represent Le Corbusier himself, asleep and dreaming<sup>64</sup>. (Fig. 32) The painting depicts a head in profile with a large nose or beak as though a crow (*corbeau*); two red eyes within an ellipsoid brain; as well as mouth, torso, pillow, and bedsheet. In consideration of the "dual eye" diagram at Ronchamp, this image is also a self-portrait and another way of representing the same spirit-matter dialectic that he apparently felt defined him. The dream at this early stage is only suggested by upward emanations, but the downward connection, attached to his seeing left eye, passes through a stylized bow tie and a stomach, the world of man and matter<sup>65</sup>. This painting marks an early iteration of the "dual eye" composition that he would implement just a few years later at the Ronchamp south tower. In time, LC came up with a story and a tidy pictogram of the dream itself, and this was likely one of his *voilà* moments that he came to refer to as the "birth of the Taurus"<sup>66</sup>. He excitedly recorded this final diagram, incorporating the dream in a series of sketches he made on his third trip to India in April of 1952 (Fig. 33) and later as a mural at his vacation cabin in the South of France. (Fig. 34) All interpretations of the upper parts of the composition are naturally far more conjectural than the lower half, given the more abstract and constantly changing depictions involved. Such is the world of dreams.

**FIG. 31**  
 Various elements of the core  
 Taurus diagram, isolated and  
 labeled for clarity.  
 (Diagrams by Author)



Nevertheless, some things can be said empirically about the dream again by comparing Le Corbusier's many iterations of this theme. He consistently incorporated a firm "horizontal line", which he often described as dividing the worlds of spirit and matter<sup>67</sup>. Here it divides the dream world from the waking world. Additionally, the two "eyes of the brain" take on additional signification as two testicles at the base of an erect phallus. (Later, these two circles become nostrils of yet another bull's face he "finds" and that extends upward). (Fig. 31 Lower left) Because this erect phallus extends into the dream world, we can deduce that it is a sexual dream. To this point, Nicholas Fox Weber writes how LC compared

his responses to art and music to his sexual emissions when he was sleeping. His aesthetic reactions resembled “the effervescence of carnal dreams”<sup>68</sup>. Le Corbusier considered nocturnal emissions and sexual fulfillment in a dream akin to the highest creative acts.

A consensus among scholars, in regard to the upper dream portion of the diagram, is that it appears to represent a woman’s head intertwined with a bull, and this must be one reason for the series name. A print of a related Taurus diagram that Le Corbusier made in 1963 is particularly clear about this. (Fig. 35) Many commentators lean toward versions of the Ariadne and the Minotaur myth with varying degrees of complexity<sup>69</sup>. But art historians Naïma and Jean-Pierre Jornod suggest the less-considered myth of Europa and the Bull that seems more aligned with the story of creativity and the spirit world. Just as Europa is whisked away by the Bull to be “fully realized”, so too did LC see his immersions in the “East” (and highly relevant to his new Indian adventure) as becoming “initiated” both sexually and creatively.

The next highly consistent element in the Taurus series is the curious placement of the female’s head horizontally, just above the erect phallus. It was a common refrain in medieval times that “the Virgin Mary became pregnant via her ear”, and LC may have been aware of this mythology<sup>70</sup>. He could have been depicting the birth of his ideas in the spirit world



**FIG. 32**  
 Le Corbusier,  
 “Métamorphose du violon”  
 (oil on canvas, 1920/1950,  
 160 x 130 cm, FLC 432).  
 In this painting one can  
 arguably make out a  
 head in profile, two red  
 eyes superimposed on  
 an ellipsoid brain, the  
 protruding lips of a mouth  
 on a crow-like profile, a  
 pillow, an oblong upper  
 torso, a bedsheet, a bow  
 tie, and a stomach. At this  
 early point in the series,  
 the dream consists only  
 of effervescent squiggles.  
 (Used with permission of  
 the Musée National d’Art  
 Moderne, Paris, France)

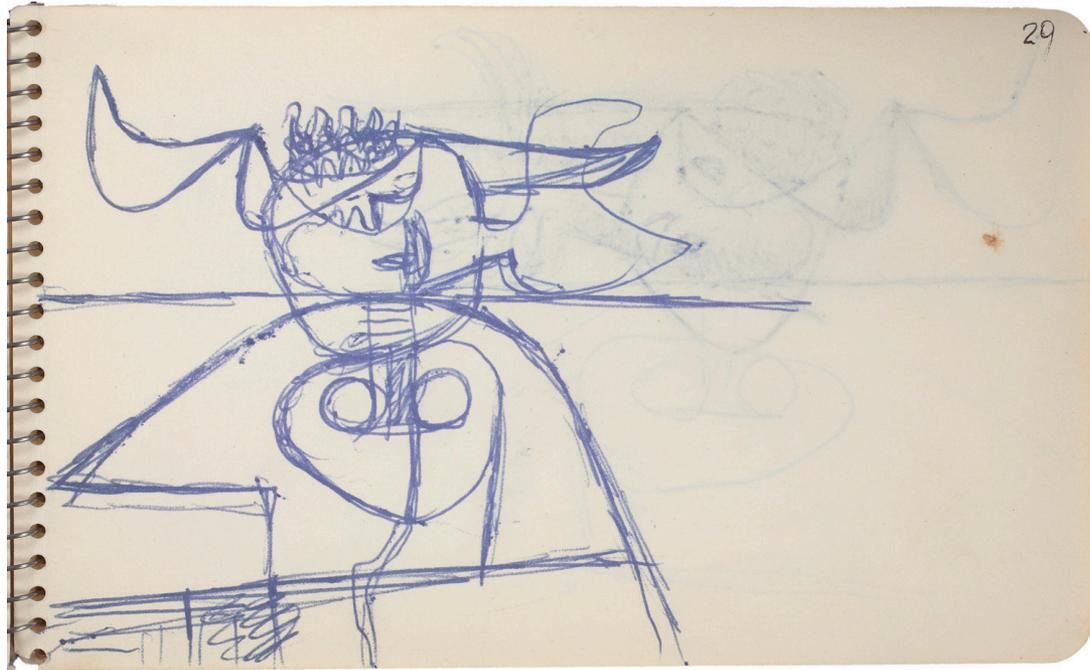
**FIG. 33**

The core Taurus diagram that Le Corbusier repeatedly sketched on his third trip to India in March/April of 1952.

Here, the cryptic dream portion of the diagram comes into focus. (Le Corbusier Sketchbooks no. 2, 1950–1954. Image no. 759. FLC CAF25787)

**FIG. 34**

The version of the Taurus, which Le Corbusier painted on a wall in his own vacation cabin in August, 1952 (and repainted in 1956), is the most sexually explicit of all. A woman's genitals are clearly depicted at the horizontal line, complete with pubic hair. Perhaps a bloody bandage attests to the requisite pain of "birthing". Scare marks frequently appear under his nose. (Photograph by Oliver Martin Gambier)



as akin to the Virgin Mary's Immaculate Conception. Furthermore, the double upturned-curve motif to the left represents the famous double-curve corner of Ronchamp, one of his greatest artistic and otherworldly creations, though it likely has several other meanings.

It is worth noting that, in all depictions of the Taurus, there is a strict coordination of the left and right eyes such that in the rare instance when the man's profile faces to the right, the up/down connections of the eyes also switch. This highly consistent pattern further suggests that the face composition in the Ronchamp south tower was intended to be viewed from the interior not exterior.

In 1961 Le Corbusier wrote in a sketchbook, "These 'Taureaux' = total and intimate Corbu—Yvonne my constant, sick, dying, dead wife = the "Taureaux"!! Incitements! From whom? Subconscious acts! Yes. Divinations, uplifting of the heart and spirit. Yes!"<sup>71</sup> This statement is sometimes seen as proof that the series was about his wife, Yvonne. But it more likely suggests he came to apply his "conscious/unconscious" label for Yvonne to the Taurus series after the fact, meaning the series was not originally about Yvonne just unconsciously so. In the later improvisational Taurus paintings, however, Yvonne was likely intentionally incorporated.

### ***Carpenter Center for the Visual Arts, Harvard University (1963)***

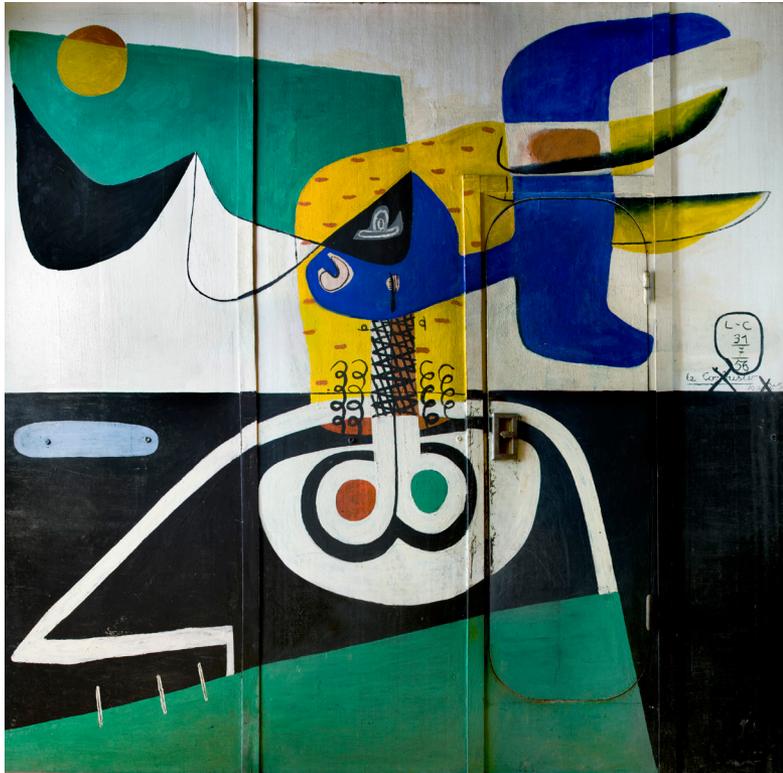
It is hard to overstate the antagonism LC felt for the United States and what he saw as its ongoing and cruel ambivalence toward him and his visions. Only his bitterness toward the Catholic Church, reporters, and academia could compare. His entire 1935 exhibition and lecture tour of America had, in fact, resulted in no commissions<sup>72</sup>. He felt that American "gangsters" had stolen his idea for the United Nations project and debased it<sup>73</sup>. Then, to make matters worse, the US had vetoed him as architect for the UNESCO headquarters in Paris<sup>74</sup>. Thus, when he was contacted in 1961 to create his first US commission of a new Visual Arts center at Harvard University, he saw it at one level as yet another insult given the building's small size. He thus may have had an irrepressible urge to encode his negative feelings for posterity similar to the Unite' d'habitation and Ronchamp.

Besides his many vituperative comments about America, he often referred to Americans as timid. In fact, he once wrote to his mother saying that “Americans have no balls”<sup>75</sup>. Elsewhere, he stated that Americans have a perpetual “spoonful”, a colloquial reference to a limp phallus and impotence<sup>76</sup>. It is worth considering that LC intended from his very initial sketches to encode his essential feelings about the US in a thoroughly Rabelaisian way. Specifically, the two art studios of the project could have been intended to represent the two oval testes that the United States “did not have”. (Fig. 36) The final and more complex curved shapes of the two studios likewise bear an uncanny similarity to dangling scrotums<sup>77</sup>. (Figs. 37 & 38)

**Saint-Pierre Church, Firminy (1961–2006)**

A close analysis of every decorative element on the front façade of LC’s church at Firminy (1960–2006), as seen from the south entry path, can be said to represent the elements of a caricaturized face. These are: two eyes; a distinctive, angular nose; an exaggerated philtrum (vertical groove above the upper lip); and a frowning mouth. (Fig. 39) The distinctive and functional slopes of the gutter coincide fairly neatly not only with the interior mezzanine but also with an elegantly horizontal bow tie. The crescent on the right could be an abstracted ear. This face, like the ones at Ronchamp and Chandigarh, is depicted in an elaborate anamorphic perspective in the three-quarters position. Again, LC maintained rigorous adherence to the “dual eye” composition, with the right eye depicted as square and blind, and the left eye as circular and seeing, thus making the entire building an enormous self-portrait bust. This face, however, appears to have both eyes looking mournfully upward, as if to Heaven. The reason for this depiction is apparent when considering the situation in his life when he designed it. His beloved mother and his wife had died, and he knew he had a heart condition. Many of his colleagues speak about his changed nature, and this composition seems to reflect his melancholic acceptance of his impending death<sup>78</sup>, as if in resignation of his moving to the spirit world—and a time when he would find himself, “...in the celestial spheres amid the stars of God Almighty”<sup>79</sup>.

**FIG. 35**  
One version of Le Corbusier’s Taurus diagram is captured in a 1963 lithograph of the Taurus that can be seen as a “reader’s guide” to the Taurus series. Here the figural signifiers are scrambled from the standard diagram but arguably tell precisely the same story. LC’s own sleeping figure is substituted for a corbeau (crow) on a perch, and the dream is condensed to an intertwined woman and bull. The pink shape is the contorted, but elegant, position of the woman’s body as she extends her left arm and clearly presents her left ear to the phallus below. (Image size: 110.5 x 74.5 cm) (Taireau, 17-2-1963; see also Le Corbusier Sketchbooks no. 3, 1954–57. Image no. 140)



**FIG. 36**  
An early concept sketch  
by Le Corbusier of the  
Carpenter Center featuring  
the two art studios as  
overlapping ellipsoids.  
(FLC 31197)

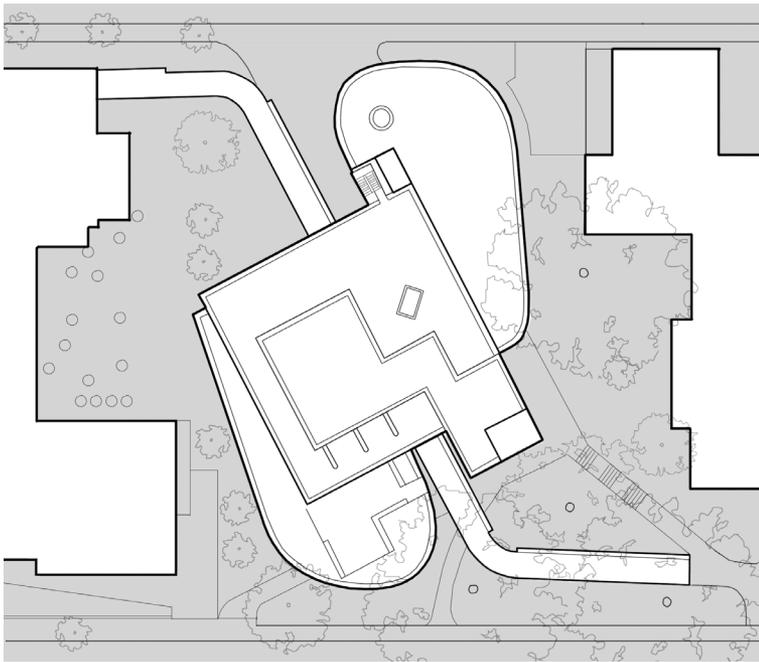


### Conclusion

Architecture has not traditionally been considered a medium for figural narrative or deep personal expression, but Le Corbusier managed to invent his way around this traditional limitation. He encoded his most important works of architecture with the themes that mattered most to him such as virility, revenge, self-memorialization, and grief. He felt that these extra layers completed his great works. For him an architectural masterpiece combined the high and the low, spirit and matter, the profound and the kitschy, and perhaps even good and evil. He said, after all, that “in a completely successful work of art there are hidden masses of implications that reveal themselves only to those who care, that is, to those who deserve it”<sup>80</sup>.

Who are “those who deserve it”? This is an interesting phrase within the context of this analysis insofar as these unnamed individuals would have been the audience for the coded stories here. Were these other architects or an abstract body of “cognoscenti”, who were willing to countenance low themes within high art? He almost certainly did not mean the same academics he spent nearly his entire career denigrating. Or are these open-minded friends of his, friendly critics? There seems to be little evidence that Le Corbusier divulged much of this coded narration during his lifetime, other than hints here and there. The most likely answer is simply and unsatisfyingly, “posterity”. Another tentative thesis could be that in his identification as a painter (arguably his first and ongoing love) he instinctively sought to replicate the long history, at least since the Renaissance, of painters inserting their own portraits into their paintings. Le Corbusier may have felt a deep affinity to this brotherhood of artists. Michelangelo’s willingness to introduce self-referential elements in his sculpture and frescoes also offers a compelling model, though Michelangelo did not attempt this “impossible task” in his architecture that we know of.

One entrée into this odd body of research into figuration and personal narrative in Le Corbusier’s architecture would be to consider them as examples of wit and humor. His attachment to François Rabelais’ irreverent writing and its embrace of humor and all things carnal speaks to this. While the themes analyzed here are certainly witty, they are perhaps better described as extreme forms of literal artistic self-expression. Investing his most personal messages in his best buildings was Le Corbusier’s way of sharing in the work’s prestige and even ensuring a bit of immortality for himself. After all, he



was fully aware that it was his architecture of all of his creative output that would be continuously respected, admired, and beloved. By contrast, Le Corbusier's paintings were never widely embraced or appreciated in his lifetime. Similarly, deep confessional writing would have been embarrassing to his professional image, such as in his last publication *Mise au point*<sup>61</sup>.

Le Corbusier was constantly creating mythologies about himself and his works. It must have delighted him as the construct as the “two-eye diagram”, introduced in this paper, cohered over time in his sketchbooks. The diagram communicated a surprisingly detailed story of how the matter-spirit dialectic was at the core of both his self-identity and his creative process. He then used it repeatedly in his paintings and architecture as a code. It is the rigor and frequency with which LC used it that speaks to the intentionality behind the “two-eye-diagram”.

The balance between these coded personal stories and the more recognizable universal themes in Le Corbusier's best architecture changes over the course of his career. At one end of the spectrum sits the Villa Savoye. Here LC's hidden message celebrating euphoric sexual virility sits ambivalently on top of the more profound and traditional meanings of the work as a “poetically functional” modern temple floating in the landscape. Personal narratives like this can be seen, as the architectural historian Alan Plattus stated, “thin bands of meaning” meant to sit side-by-side with, or even behind, more profound and complex ones—albeit in an exceptionally uncomfortable alliance of sorts<sup>62</sup>. This would be similar to how Michelangelo's occasional self-portraiture in his art is often mentioned as a curious addendum in critical analyses. But towards the end of LC's career, a project such as the church at Firminy is an extreme case where self-expression can be argued to take center stage, leaving behind the shadow of the hidden and implied. It is also here that we see Le Corbusier's insistence on the “two-eye diagram” to bear witness on his life and character. After all, this building is an inhabited and gargantuan self-portrait: a bust of the architect created out of a fear and anxiety of death. The personal narrative shapes the overall form of the building at Firminy, making the architecture a medium for expressing the self rather than the original nominal function of this building as a church for the town of Firminy<sup>63</sup>. And it is here where normative explanations and analyses of his forms and meanings must adapt for better or worse to accommodate the personal messages that Le Corbusier encoded into his later buildings.

**FIG. 37**  
Roof plan of the Carpenter Center showing the very specific organic shapes of the two studios.  
(Diagram by Author)

**FIG. 38**  
Anatomical cross-section of a phallus, scrotum, and testis.  
(Diagram by Author)

FIG. 39

L'église Saint-Pierre, Firminy-Vert, France (1960–2006). Photograph taken from the general anamorphic viewpoint along the main entry route, arguably depicting a caricature in three-quarters of his own likeness. The sloped gutter system mimics a frown and the geometry of one of his tight, horizontal bow ties, and the projecting bell enclosure arguably captures the distinctive angles of his own nose. The “dual-eye” composition is a poetic symbol of his own capacity to see simultaneously into the spirit and matter worlds; however, in this, one of his last works, both “light cannon” eyes are depicted gazing mournfully upwards as though in contemplation of his impending death. (Photograph by Richard Weil [<https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/File:EgliseSaintPierreLeCorbusierFirminy.jpg>] CC BY-SA2.0 DEED)



Auteur

**Stephen Atkinson** was born in 1967 in Baton Rouge Louisiana. He studied architecture at Texas A&M University and then the Harvard Graduate School of Design—graduating with distinction. He worked for six years in the office of his thesis advisor, Jorge Silvetti, and then founded his own architectural practice in 2000. The office, Atkinson Architecture, is located in Palo Alto, California. One project of particular note is the Zachary House which has been featured in numerous international publications and was the recipient of numerous awards. Atkinson has also written an analysis of the supposedly mute residential facades of the architect Adolf Loos entitled, “Subversive Figurations of Adolf Loos, Le Corbusier, and Josephine Baker: A Speculative Reading”. He has taught architectural courses within the Stanford Continuing Studies department for a number of years.

Notes

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4 See Jorge Torres, *Pensar La Arquitectura: “Mise au Point” de Le Corbusier* (Madrid: Abada Editores and Fondation Le Corbusier, 2014), pp.148–154; Flora Samuel, “Le Corbusier, Rabelais and the Oracle of the Holy Bottle”, *Word & Image* 17, no.4 (October-

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7 See: Vincent Scully, “Le Corbusier, Late Modernism (Modern Architecture Course)”, video, beginning at time mark 11:51, accessed February 14, 2024, at: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=9UTEMvOndN4&t=752s>; Charles Jencks, *Le Corbusier*

- and the *Continual Revolution* (New York: Monacelli Press, 2000), p. 44; Colin Rowe, "The Provocative Façade: Frontality and Contrapposto", in *Architect of the Century* (London: Arts Council of Great Britain, 1st ed., January 1987), p. 24; Luca Ribichini, "Villa Savoye, Icon of the Twentieth Century", *Disegnare Idee Immagini* 23, no. 44 (June 2012): pp. 56–67; Nicholas Fox Weber, *Le Corbusier: A Life* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2008), p. 686; Daniel Naegele, "Un corps à habiter: The image of the body in the œuvre of Le Corbusier", *Interstices: Journal of Architecture and Related Arts* 5 (2000): pp. 8–25; Manfredo Tafuri, "S.v. Le Corbusier," *Enciclopedia Europea*, vol. 6 (Milano: Garzanti, 1978), pp. 771–773; William J. R. Curtis, *Le Corbusier: Ideas and Forms* (London: Phaidon Press, 2001), p. 131; Robert Slutsky, "Aqueous Humor", *Oppositions* 19/20 (1980), pp. 34–36.
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- 10 Naegele, "Un corps à habiter", p. 10.
- 11 Le Corbusier sketches the shadow of a bicycle seat in India (April, 1954) that appears to represent the two-eye diagram and therefore himself, *Le Corbusier Sketchbooks, Vol. 3, 1954–1957* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1982), Sketchbook H31, Image 3.
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- 73 Curtis, *Ideas and Forms*, p. 217.
- 74 Fox Weber, *Le Corbusier: A Life*, p. 563.
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- 80 Le Corbusier, *New World of Space* (New York: Reynal & Hitchcock; Boston: Institute of Contemporary Art, 1948), pp. 8, 16.
- 81 Zaknic, "Mise au point", p. 1.
- 82 Alan Plattus, "Foreword", in Deborah Gans, *The Le Corbusier Guide*, 3rd ed. (Princeton, NJ: Princeton Architectural Press, 2006), pp.13-14.
- 83 I find the as-built Church of St. Pierre at Firminy, regardless of its surprising hidden meaning proffered here and valid caveats of authenticity, very much an example of Le Corbusier's most compelling works of architecture. It has gravitas, a timeless sense of the numinous, and a spatial grandiosity combined with a compelling intimacy. It is extraordinary that the architect's semi-concealed figurations were translated as faithfully as they have been in the 2004-2006 construction of the church even though José Oubrière (director of St.-Pierre construction, architect, professor emeritus of architecture at Ohio State University, and LC protégé) was apparently unaware of them.