

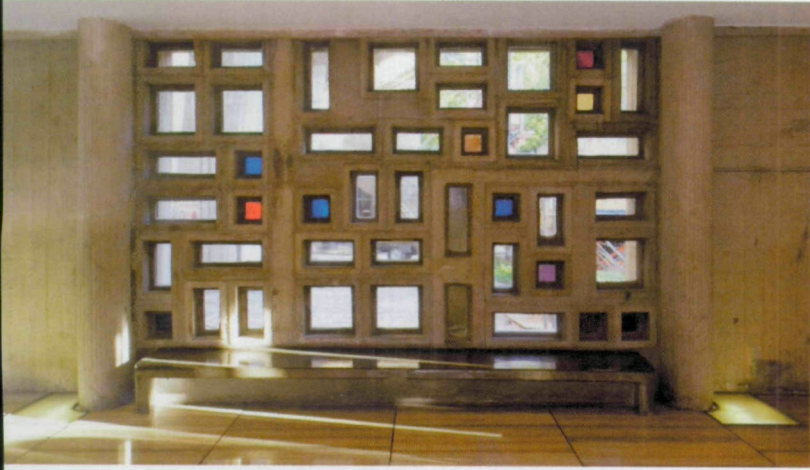
Passed over for
UNESCO protection,
can these Corbusier
buildings find a
savior?

rescue mission

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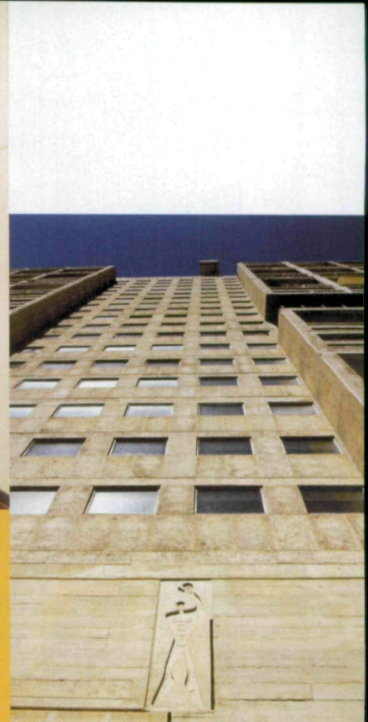
See page 194 for the Pavillon
Suisse at the Cité Internationale
Universitaire de Paris.



Unité d'Habitation

site Marseille, France.

date 1952.



Planned and developed over a quarter century, the Unité d'Habitation represents the realization of Le Corbusier's utopian vision of a vertical community. This 18-story building, perching over the landscape on muscular columns, was an influential precursor of inexpensive modernist housing around the world—and a harbinger of brutalist architecture. The *beton brut*, aka rough-cast reinforced concrete, that gave the movement its name and the building its texture was a substitute for steel, in short supply in postwar France.

Along with downstairs "streets" of shops and other amenities and a rooftop garden, track, gymnasium, kindergarten, and theater, the building contains 337 apartments. They're laid out according to Corbusier's universal modular principles of dimension and plan and, while small, achieve an airy brightness owing to his meticulous attention to fenestration, proportion, and spatial arrangement, such as the placement of staircases. Details everywhere distill larger propositions and suggest visual consistencies: A hallway door looks like the facade of a Corbusier-designed cabinet; a longer shot of that same hallway becomes a representative composition of color, shape, texture, and light. ➤

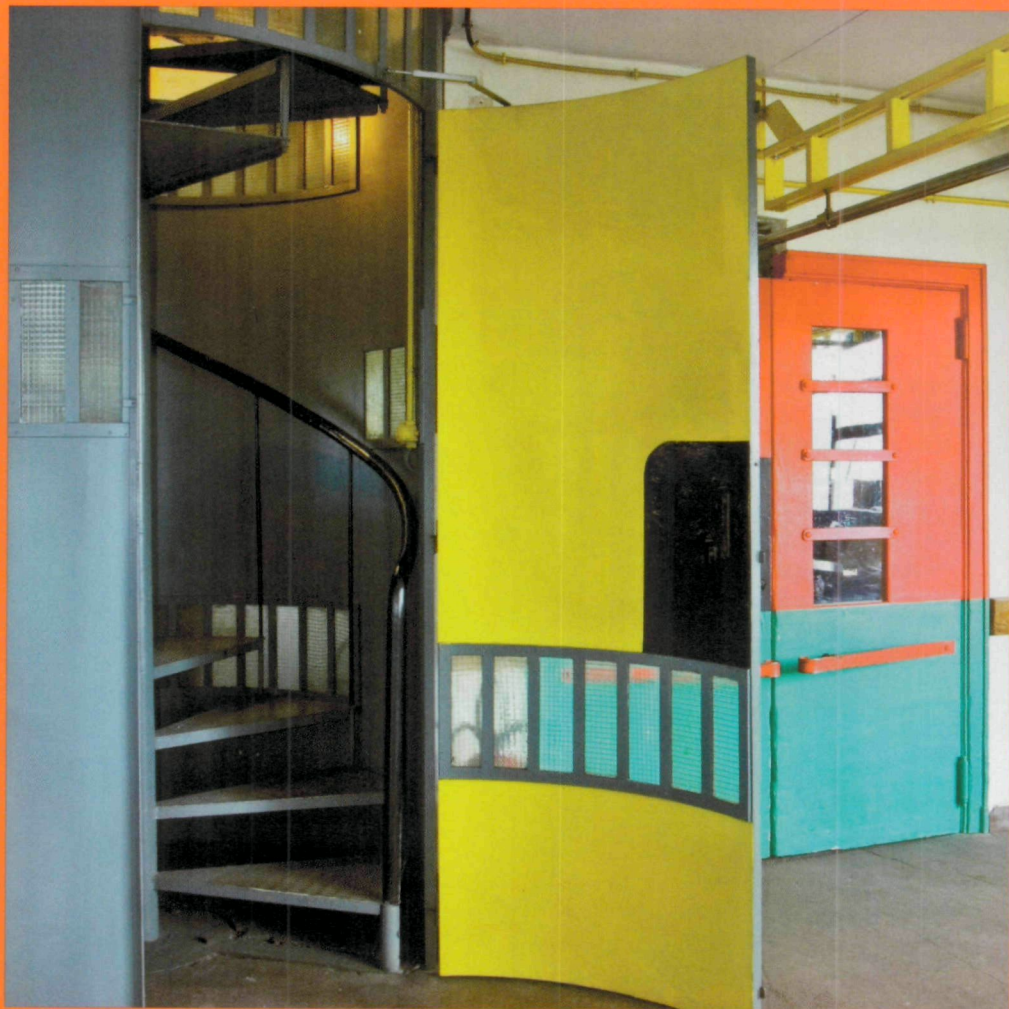
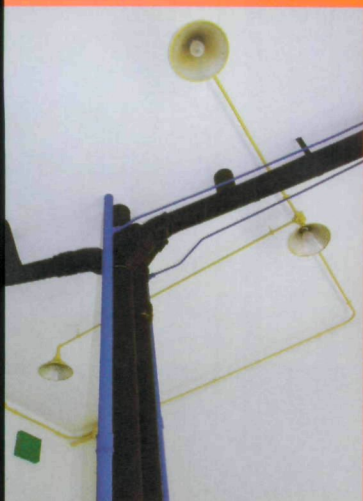




This textile mill, still operational, is typical of Le Corbusier's postwar buildings, set on structural columns and constructed in expressive *beton brut*. The interior boasts a rational organization of factory floor, small workshops, offices, and meeting rooms, all designed to maximize light and to facilitate the circulation of goods and of people. What's transformative here are the primary colors of paint. These color-block experiments turn even the most prosaic aspects of the

Manufacture Claude et Duval

site Saint-Dié-des-Vosges, France. date 1952.



physical plant—a stairwell, industrial ceiling lighting—into a Fernand Léger-esque composition. In the offices and meeting rooms, furniture by Charlotte Perriand and Jean Prouvé both complements and domesticates the aesthetic.

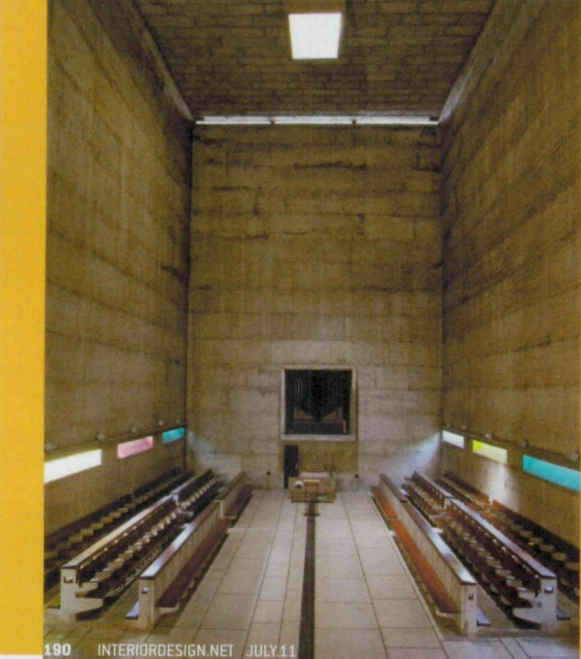
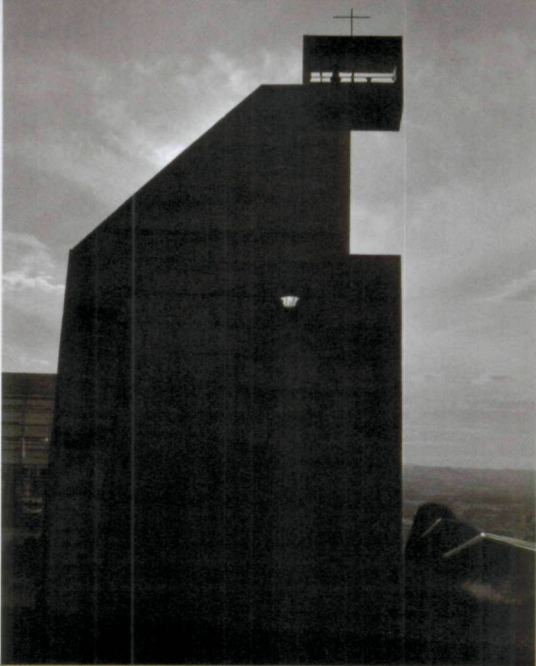
A glance at the project shows it to be paradigmatic Corbusier. However, a longer look reveals a strikingly fresh-looking series of spaces akin to Piano + Rogers and Gianfranco Franchini's Centre Pompidou in Paris or to current commercial spaces by *Interior Design* Hall of Fame member Clive Wilkinson. Which reminds us that little in the way of modernist building preceded Corbusier, and much followed him. ➤



Couvent Sainte-Marie-de-la-Tourette

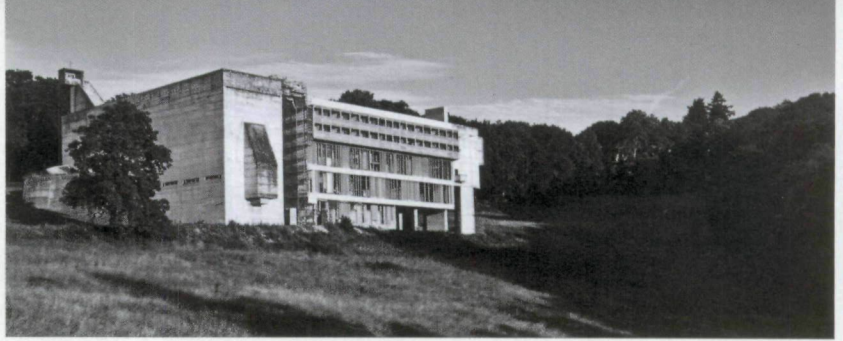
site Éveux, France.

date 1960.



This monastery, on a hillside near Lyon, was Le Corbusier's last major work in Europe. He and Iannis Xenakis designed the building as a complete, self-contained world for Dominican monks who have taken a vow to study in silence—a “domestic theater for virtuosi of asceticism” in historian and professor Colin Rowe's formulation. Together, the church, roof cloisters, library, work and recreation halls, refectory, and 100 sleeping cells represent a masterpiece of brutalist architecture.

Despite Corbusier's professed agnosticism, he was a perfect choice for the project, given his personal tendencies toward material simplicity and self-denial. Not only did the spareness and roughness align with the austerity of the monks' lives, but the absence of sound amplified the visual eloquence as well. He and Xenakis shaped rhythms of form and layered textures to create vistas at once tranquil and spiritually stimulating. A master's photographs can capture this ecstatic beauty. With colored light filtering through tinted windows, the interiors appear as minimalist art. In a silent world, a picture is worth more than the proverbial 1,000 words. ➤





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Maison Planeix

site Paris.

date 1927.

A house in a working-class arrondissement, commissioned by a funerary sculptor, Antonin Planeix, and his wife, was an early project for Le Corbusier, collaborating with his cousin Pierre Jeanneret. The Planeixes were dedicated readers of *L'Esprit Nouveau*, the magazine in which Corbusier outlined his philosophy of purist art and principles of modernist construction, and the designer-client collaboration resulted in a residence deemed by architectural historian William J.R. Curtis to be grand on the exterior yet modest in interior scale and materials. Corbusier called the effect "*une maison, un palais*," both a house and a palace. Indeed, instead of his famous "machine for living in," the house might be considered habitable art—with emphasis on both terms.

The exterior features a symmetrical facade, terrace and roof gardens, and an external staircase. Living and studio spaces, laid out as intersecting boxes offset by curvilinear partitions, create a tension that became a recurring theme for Corbusier. That external staircase, too, juxtaposes right angles with curves.

With even his precise color schemes intact today, the house is occupied by descendants of the original owners. It's open to the public by appointment, a relatively underpublicized glimpse into the past. ▶





Pavillon Suisse

site Paris.

date 1932.

A dormitory for Swiss students at the Cité Internationale Universitaire de Paris marks a shift for Le Corbusier: away from the cubist rigidity of the 1920's, toward a greater expressiveness. With reinforced-concrete base columns assuming more massive and sculptural proportions, the building became more plastic and biomorphic. The organic sensibility is heightened in the lobby by undulating walls and the incorporation of abstract paintings—Corbusier himself contributed a mural in 1948.

In the brilliantly proportioned bedrooms and common areas, the ideas of both comfort and disciplined simplicity were expressed through a prescient use of furnishings by modernist legends-to-be Charlotte Perriand and Jean Prouvé. Even a built-in magazine stand, balanced on a slender stem, reveals a unity of conception.

The Pavillon Suisse also makes an early statement of Corbusier's abiding interest in planned communal living as a vertical village. His universalist philosophy, expressed here on a small scale, would later be writ large in other projects. Somewhat overlooked by the critics at first, the building is now recognized as a transitional masterpiece. ■

