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La Tourette

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The dimension of depth, whether of space or time, whether visual or aural, always appears in one surface, so that this surface really possesses two values: one when we take it for what it is materially, the other when we see it in its second virtual life. In the latter case the surface, without ceasing to be flat, expands in depth. This is what we call foreshortening. Vision in depth is made possible by foreshortening, in which we find an extreme case of a fusion of simple vision with a purely intellectual act.

—José Ortega y Gasset, *Meditations on Quixote*

In 1916, at La Chaux-de-Fonds, Le Corbusier erected a house with a centrally disposed blank panel (Plate 17). Forty years later, and at a heroic scale, he has repeated something very like this device. At La Chaux-de-Fonds the blank panel is the central figure of a facade. At La Tourette a largely blank wall comprises the north side of the church (Plate 70). But in both cases, in the Villa Schwob and the monastery, as the building is first experienced, the focus of the visual field is provided by a motif without high intrinsic interest; one which, while it absorbs the eye, is unable to retain its attention.

In 1920-21, running through the articles in *L'Esprit nouveau* which were later to be collected as *Vers une architecture*, there appeared the first public evidence of Le Corbusier's intense preoccupation with the Athenian Acropolis:

The apparent disorder of the plan could only deceive the profane. The equilibrium is in no way a paltry one. It is determined by the famous landscape which stretches from the Pireaus to Mount Pentelicus. The plan was conceived to be seen from a distance: the axes follow the valley and the false right angles are constructed with the skill of a first rate stage manager. . . . The spectacle is massive, elastic, crushingly acute, dominating. . . . The elements of the site rise up like walls panoplied in the power of their cubic coefficient, stratification, material, etc., like the walls of a room . . . The Greeks on the Acropolis set up temples which are animated by a single thought, drawing around them the desolate landscape and drawing it up into the composition.

It is not necessary to continue. But at La Tourette, while Pireaus and Pentelicus are alike lacking; while we are rather presented with a species of Escorial than a type of Parthenon; and while the old chateau, partly a farmhouse and partly a piece of Second Empire wish-fulfillment, is certainly not the most likely candidate for the role of Propylaeæ—though differences are so obvious that they need scarcely be stressed—there are still certain patterns of organization, e.g., a compounding of frontal and three-quarter views, an impaling of axial directions, a tension between longitudinal and transverse movements, above all the intersection of an architectonic by a topological experience—which may, to the initiated, suggest that the spatial mechanics of the monastery’s precinct are just possibly some very private commentary upon Acropolisian material.

But the casual visitor to La Tourette will have little conscious time for this precinct. He has climbed a hill, penetrated an archway, and arrived in a gravelled courtyard to find himself in what certainly appears to be no more than the picturesque hiatus between two entirely discrete buildings; to be a merely incidental space. To his left there is a mansarded pavilion. It carries a clock with blue Sevres figures. To his right is a kitchen garden of uncertain extent. But these, of which he is dimly aware, are the very subsidiary components of the scene. For right ahead, obsessively prominent and unsupported by any shred of conventional artifice, there is the *machine à émouvoir* which he has come to inspect (Plate 70).

Secretly the casual visitor is a little dismayed. He is no longer to be shocked by the absence of a facade to a work of architecture. He feels that by now he can take any lack of introduction quite in his stride. He is hardened to a very good deal. But he still scarcely expects to be so entirely cold-shouldered as here seems to be the case. A vertical surface gashed by horizontal slots and relieved by a bastion supporting gesticulating entrail; an enigmatic plane which bears, like the injuries of time, the multiple scars which its maker has chosen to inflict upon it; by any standards an inference of his own complete irrelevance—the visitor had anticipated something either a little less or a little more than this. And thus, while the three entrails, the so-called *canons à lunéire*, might seem to quiver like the relics of a highly excruciating martyrdom, while the general blankness of the spectacle might seem to be representative of religious anonymity and while a variety of fantasies infiltrate his consciousness, the visitor, since he feels himself to be presented with a random disclosure of the building, is at this stage disinclined to attribute any very great importance to his experience (Plates 71 and 72).

The north side of the church this wall is instinctively known to be. It is doubtful if any other element could be so opaque. So much is evident. But, therefore, while the visitor interprets it frontally, he also attributes to this inscrutable visual barrier the typical behavior patterns of an end elevation. This wall may indeed be a great dam holding back a reservoir of spiritual energy. Such may be its symbolical reality. But the visitor also knows it to be part of a building; and he believes himself to be approaching, not this building’s front, but its flank. The information which he is being offered, he therefore feels, must be less crucial than simply interesting. The architect is displaying a profile rather than a full face. And, accordingly, since he assumes that the expressive countenance of the building must be around the corner, rather as though the church were the subject of a portrait *en profil perdu*, the visitor now sets out to cross an imaginary picture plane in order to grasp the object in its true frontality.
A certain animation of contour—the oblique cut of the parapet and the intersection with the diagonal of the belfry—will focus his eye and lead him on. But if, for these reasons, the building first insists on rapid approach, as he climbs the hill or moves along the alley within the trees, the visitor is likely to discover that, somehow, this gesture of invitation has vanished and that, the closer he approaches it, the more unsympathetic the building seems to come toward his possible arrival.

This is one aspect of a disconcerting situation; but another should be noticed: that, at a certain stage in the approach route, the building comes to seem utterly drained of importance. For, as one leaves behind the courtyard of the old château, which is the socket of the enclosure in which one had believed oneself to be, one is obliged to exchange a reliable womb for an unpeopled arena. The whole deserted sweep of the upper valley of the Turdine has progressively come into view; the field of experience is transformed, and the nature of the stimuli to which one is subjected becomes systematically more concentrated and ruthless.

Thus, the eye which was previously directed towards the left of the church façade, towards the point of entrance, is now violently dragged away towards the right. The movement of the site has changed. The visual magnet is no longer a wall. Now it has become a horizon. And the wall, which previously acted as backdrop to one field of vision, as a perspective transversal, now operates as a side screen to another, as a major orthogonal which directs attention into the emptiness of the far distance but which, by foiling the foreground incident—the three entails—also serves to instigate an insupportable tension between the local and the remote. In other words, as the church is approached, the site which had initially seemed so innocent in its behavior becomes a space rifted and ploughed up into almost unbridgeable chasms.

This may be to provide too lurid an analysis; but, though it may exaggerate the intensity, it does not seriously distort the quality of an experience which is as unexpected as it is painful. It would be possible, and maybe even justified, to interpret this preliminary promenade architecturale as the deliberate implication of a tragic insufficiency in the visitor's status. The wall is exclusive. The visitor may enter, but not on his own terms. The wall is the summation of an institutional program. But the visitor is so placed that he is without the means of making coherent his own experience. He is made the subject of diametric excitements; his consciousness is divided; and, being both deprived of and also offered an architectural support, in order to resolve his predicament, he is anxious, indeed obliged—and without choice—to enter the building.

It is possible, but it is not probable, that all this is uncontrived. However, if one happens to be sceptical of the degree of contrivance, and if one is temperamentally predisposed to consider the game of hunt-the-symbol as an overindulgence in literature, then it will be desirable to continue an inspection of the building's exterior. It is not an easy decision to make. For the vertical surface of the church wall slices both the higher and lower approach roads like a knife; and, when this psychological obstacle is penetrated, though something of the interior workings of the convent is at last presented, a further discovery is made. The visitor now finds that the anticipated frontal views never do, in fact, materialize. He becomes aware that the only surface of the building which actively encourages a frontal inspection is indeed exactly that north wall of the church which he had supposed was never to be interpreted in this way.

Thus, while other exposures, east and west, at the price of uncomfortable scrambling around, may certainly be seen in frontal alignment, they are usually presented, and apparently intended to be seen, only in a rapid foreshortening. Thus, the south elevation, although generally visible in far less abrupt perspective, is still evidently to be seen from oblique points of view (Plate 73); and thus, though on three sides the monastery of La Tourette is entirely open to the landscape, the conditions of its visibility lead, not to the seeing of the real and tangible voids, but to a consciousness of solids (Plate 74), to an awareness of ranges of verticals implicated in quick succession, of the returns of balconies rather than the presence of the windows at their rear. While, in addition, since externally the building has an extremely high visual center of gravity, it must also be noticed that the same solidity, the same optical closure which issues from the lateral foreshortenings, is further affirmed by the vertical movements of the eye. Here again, as the eye moves up and down, there is a distinct tendency for it to register the density of undersurfaces and to infer the closest interrelation of horizontal members.

Once more, this elaborate divorce of physical reality and optical impression may possibly be uncontrived; but, to the degree in which it sustains images of concentration and inwardness, and in the manner by which it makes prominent the behavior of the approach façade, it is a phenomenon which may at least begin to suggest that we are in the presence of the most self-conscious resolution. On the Acropolis, the Greeks, we are told, 'employed the most learned deformations, applying to their contours an impeccable adjustment to the laws of optics''; and, though we are by no means on the Acropolis, if at this stage the patience can be summoned to reexamine the north wall of the church, there may now be detected admonitory signs which seem to rehearse the types of experience to which one is later subjected.

First, just as at La Chaux-de-Fonds, where the blank panel generates a fluctuation of meaning and value and is incessantly transposed from a positive to a nega-
tive role in the facade, so at La Tourette: the wall of the church, which is constantly invested with high figurative content and then deprived of it, acts both to call attention to itself and simultaneously to shift attention outward onto the visual field of which it is the principal component. But, while at La Chaux-de-Fonds the fundamental structure of the ambiguity is simple, while this structure is confined to a plane and causes largely an oscillation in the evaluation of surface, at La Tourette we are presented with a far more evasive condition. It is a condition which involves above all readings of depth; and, while from it there issues a series of disturbances scarcely amenable to any accurate generalization, there are still two approximate tendencies which might be noticed: that the building tends to revolve, to pivot around an imaginary central spike, and, at the same time, that the building also tends to a supremely static behavior.

As has been inferred, Le Corbusier presents the north side of his church to the visitor in very much the same way that in Towards a New Architecture he chose to illustrate the Parthenon (Figure 22). He provides, that is, a type of foreshortened frontal perspective which gives importance to the receding orthogonals, but which firmly insists on the priority of the transversals. He offers, in other words, a modified three-quarter view rather than a definitely oblique condition; and the visitor is thus made aware of the monastery’s western exposure as a significant, but as a nevertheless subordinate, component of the principal figure.

But not to labor this point: at the same time that he does this, it is remarkable that Le Corbusier has also built into this frontal plane a depth which by no means exists in reality. The oblique cut of his parapet should now be noticed. It is a line so slightly out of the horizontal that the eye has an instinctive tendency to ‘correct’ and translate it for what average experience suggests that it should be. For, being eager to see it as the normal termination of a vertical plane, the eye is consequently willing to read it, not as the diagonal which physically it happens to be, but as the element in a perspective recession which psychologically it seems. Le Corbusier has established a ‘false right angle’; and this fausse équerre, which in itself infers depth, may also be seen as sporadically collaborating with the slope of the ground further to sponsor an intermittent illusion that the building is revolving.

Something of the vital animation of surface, the small but sudden tremor of mobility, in the area between bastion and belfry certainly derives from the torsion to which the wall is thus subjected; but, if this phenomenal warping of surface may be distinctly assisted by the real flexions of the bastion wall itself, then at
this point it should also be observed how the three canons à lumière now introduce a counteractive stress.

For the spectacle of the building as seen on arrival is finally predicated on a basis, not of one spiral, but of two. On the one hand there are the pseudoorthogonals which, by the complement they provide to the genuine recession of the monastery's west facade, serve to stimulate an illusion of rotation and spinning. But, on the other, are those three, twisting, writhing, and even agonized light sources—they illuminate the Chapel of the Holy Sacrament—which cause a quite independent and equally powerful moment of convolution. A pictorial opportunism lies behind the one tendency. A sculptural opportunism lies behind the other. There is a spiral in two dimensions. There is a contradictory spiral in three. A corkscrew is in competition with a restlessly deflective plane. Their equivocal interplay makes the building. And, since the coiled, columnar vortex, implied by the space rising above the chapel, is a volume which, like all vortices, has the cyclonic power to suck less energetic material in towards its axis of excitement, so the three canons à lumière conspire with the elements guaranteeing hallucination to act as a kind of tether securing a tensile equilibrium.

Now it is of the nature of optical illusions not to be apparent. They would have no value if they were. To operate, their behavior must be insidious; and to be justified, they must, probably, be something over and above 'mere' exercises in virtuosity. An estimate of the critical problem which they present—how surface becomes a revelation of depth, how depth becomes the instrument through which surface is represented, how a feeling of almost Romanesque density may be induced by a largely perforated construct—can scarcely be reached without some theory of the role which dissimulation must necessarily play in all perceptual structures; and such a theory can scarcely be presented here. Indeed so much time has here only been devoted to this matter—to this frontispiece which is also a profile, to these voids which act as solids, to this manifold intercourse between the static and the mobile—because, in certain ways, these manifestations seem to constitute an important datum which, if we fail to interpret it, may hopelessly distort any analysis of the building which lies behind these externals.

"The struggle goes on inside hidden on the surface" says Le Corbusier in another context; and, for the moment, enough may have been said to suggest the perceptual intricacies of La Tourette even before the building has been entered, it must now be possible to approach it with entirely opposite and wholly conceptual criteria in mind. Thus, though the normal way of seeing a building is as here described—from the outside in, since the normal way of conceiving one is supposed to be from the inside out, it may now be convenient to withdraw attention from the more sensational aspects of the monastery and to consider instead its ostensible rationale.

The program for the building was explicit. There was to be a church to which the public could, on occasion, be admitted. There were to be one hundred cells for professors and students, an oratory, a dining room, a library, classrooms, and spaces for conference and recreation. There was a certain problem of institutional decorum. But, though the architect was therefore subjected to certain very definite limitations, and though he was involved with a religious order whose regime was established rather more than seven centuries ago, it cannot truthfully be claimed that the operational requirements with which he was confronted were so very rigid and inflexible as to predicate any inevitable solution.

It is possible to imagine the Wrightian version of this program: a major hexagonal volume, proliferating by an inward impulse a variety of minor hexagonoids, terraces, and covered ways. A Miesian solution can be conceived. Embryos of the Alloesque, the Kahnian and a whole forest of other variants swarm in the imagination. But the number of choices available to any one man, like those available to any one epoch, are never as great as those which, in fact, exist. Like the epoch, the man has his style—the sum total of the emotional dispositions, the mental biases, and the characteristic acts which, taken together, comprise his existence; and, in its essential distributions (though with one great exception), Le Corbusier's building is coordinated very much along the lines that previous evidence of his style might have led one to predict.

The solution which he has presented—a quadrilateral pierced by a courtyard; with the church on its north side; with the cells deployed to east, south, and west in two tiers immediately below the roof; with the library, classrooms, oratory, and principal entrance on the floor below this; with the refectory, chapter house, and major circulations at the still lower level adjacent to the floor of the church—is entirely evident from the published plans of the building; and, like all Le Corbusier's solutions, it is both a highly generalized as well as a highly particularized statement.

It could be said that La Tourette, like any other building by any other architect, is primarily determined by a formal statement which is felt to be a logical one. Obviously it reflects Le Corbusier's insistence on volumetric economy; and it would be reasonable, therefore, to suggest that the final premises of the arguments on which it is based are not really susceptible to empirical proof. Secondarily, the monastery would seem to be determined on the basis of category, i.e., by
its relation to a series of propositions which postulate the ideal form of the Dominican establishment, conceived in the abstract, and presumed to be valid irrespective of the circumstances of place or time. And, finally, these more or less aprioristic deductions are brought into antithetical connection with specific conditions of locality.

The site was allegedly of Le Corbusier's own choosing. It could be supposed that other architects might have chosen otherwise. But, if a superb prospect verified the selection, it does also seem probable that this particular terrain was chosen for its inherent difficulties. For at La Tourette the site is both everything and nothing. It is equipped with an abrupt slope and a lavish accident cross fall. It is by no means the local condition which would readily justify that quintessential Dominican establishment which seems to have been preconceived. Rather it is the reverse: architecture and landscape, lucid and separate experiences, are like the rival protagonists of a debate who progressively contradict and clarify each other's meaning.

Above all, the nature of their interaction is dialectical; and thus the building, with its church to the north, liturgically correct in orientation, separated from but adjoining the living quarters which face the sun, is presented as though it were a thesis for discussion; and thus the site inevitably rises to function as counterproposition. There is a statement of presumed universals and a contrary statement of particulars. There is the realist proclamation and the nominalist response, the idealist gesture, the empiricist veto. But if this is a procedure with which Le Corbusier has long since made us familiar, and if such is his particular mode of logic, there is, of course, here in the program a curiously pragmatic justification for its exercise. For it was, after all, a Dominican monastery which was here required. An architectural dialectician, the greatest, was to service the requirements of the archosophistics of dialectic; and there was, therefore, a quite specially appropriate dimension which inhered to the approach.

But, if the building thus answers to the ethos of the institution, this was surely the mere accident of parallel attitudes, of equivalent rigor. The architect scarcely set out deliberately to provide the plastic analogue of scholastic debate. It was only that his state of mind and that of his clients were coincident in their astringent quality, and that both parties were ironically aware of their common identity and difference. Above all, it was not a case of the architect mimicking scholastic reasoning so much as it was the presence, on both sides, of irreproachable intellectual integrity which has disinfected the logical conclusions of the argument of all those conciliatory flavorings which are apt to be the outcome of attempts to bring religious institutions and modern architecture into accord. At La Tourette there are no turgid atmospherics. There is nothing ingratiating or cheap; and, as a result, the building becomes positive in its negation of compromise. It is not so much a church with living quarters attached as it is a domestic theater for virtuosi of asceticism with, adjoining it, a gymnasium for the exercise of spiritual athletes. The figure of the boxer and his punch bag on the terrace of the 1928 project for Geneva has become conflated with the image of Jacob wrestling with the Angel.

However, this is to discuss effects before causes. The play on spiritual exercise as physical gymnastic may be one of the more invigorating themes at La Tourette; but it is a result rather than a determinant, and the immediate causation of the building, apart from the dialectic of architecture and site, ought now at least briefly to be noticed. While, since Le Corbusier has always been frugal with ideas and has never mistaken mere experiment or intellectual profanity for thoughtfulness, the more obvious causation is not far to seek.

There is the famous structural scheme for the Maison Domino (Plate 12), with its conception of space as something horizontally stratified like the layers of a Neapolitan wafer; and there are the corollaries to this drawing: A denial of the spatial expression of the structural cell, a relegation of the column to the status of punctuation or caesura, and a penetration of the resultant product by a labyrinthine construction of miscellaneous partitions which propagate a centrifugal stress. This seems to be almost all. Basically, it is all by now very old; and, as a result, there appears to be very little to say about the living quarters of the monastery taken by themselves.

There are the usual elements of wit: an entrance which is possibly a little too Japanese, and the five parlors adjoining it; a spiral staircase which parodies something from a mediaeval building; and the astonishing Ledolian fantasy of the oratory as seen from outside (Plate 74). But these are the quodlibets of the scholastic discourse; and more important are the distinctions of emotional tone which the different levels of the living quarters support. These are affected by an orchestration of light. There is a movement from the brilliance and lateral extension of the refectory and chapter house, through the more somber tonality of the library and the oratory, to the relative darkness and lateral closure of the cells. There are the progressive degrees of concentration and intimacy; but if, in their turn, the cells—each equipped with its own blank white panel—are like a hundred private recapitulations of the church, it is now necessary to close the circuit and to approach this most problematic element.

And, in this context, let us first notice Le Corbusier's passion for walls:
The elements of the site rise up like walls, panoplied in the power of their cubic co-efficient, stratification, material, etc.; like the walls of a room.

Our elements are vertical walls.

The ancients built walls, walls which stretch out to meet and amplify the wall.

There are no other architectural elements internally: light and its reflection in a great flood by the walls and the floor, which is really a horizontal wall.\(^5\)

The inordinate significance which the vertical plane has always possessed for Le Corbusier has been somewhat obscured by his own polemic, so that we are apt to think that the logical development of the Maison Domino structure is no more than its packaging in a suitable cellophane envelope. And, in such an envelope, the conceptual reality of this scheme is, of course, entirely clear. There are pancakes supported on pins. It is all visible; and it is all somewhat like the diagrams which recur again and again as we turn over the pages of Précisions or the earlier volumes of the Œuvre complète.

But, although brilliant and cogent analysis of conceptual reality has always been one aspect of Le Corbusier's achievement, he has rarely, in his constructed works, pared analysis as solution. He is one of the few architects who have suppressed the demands of neither sensation nor thought. Between thought and sensation he has always maintained a balance; and therefore—and almost with him alone—while the intellect civilizes the sensible, the sensible actualizes civility. This is the obvious message; and thus, with Le Corbusier, the conceptual argument never really provides a sufficient pretext but has always to be reinterpreted in terms of perceptual compulsions.

Hence, at La Tourette, all elements can be referred to two distinct structures of argument. The inclination of the parapet of the church may be related to optical desiderata; but it may also, and just as well, be related to the necessity of articulating a functionally distinct volume as something to be identified as separate from the other three sides of a courtyard. Hence also, even though the plan may be "the determination of everything ... an austere abstraction, an algébrization and cold of aspect,\(^6\)" the generational prime cause of Le Corbusier's buildings may be just as much a matter of their vertical as of their horizontal planes.

"The floor which is really a horizontal wall": an assertion of this order would have offended the structural sense of Frank Lloyd Wright. Nor would the inference that floors and walls are interchangeable planes, capable of identical determination, be any more acceptable to a Miesian rationalist. But, though it is not so much a definition as a casual aside, this sort of pronouncement could very possibly be pressed into service partly to explain the church, the most audacious inno-

vation which La Tourette presents. For, if floors are horizontal walls, then, presumably, walls are vertical floors; and, while elevations become plans and the building a form of dice, then the complete aplomb with which Le Corbusier manages his church may, in some faint degree, be explained.

The quality of the church, in which chiaroscuro effects reach their maximum, in which negation becomes positive, is not to be photographed. But, perhaps as a form, it is to be related, not as at first may appear to a late Gothic prototype—some King's College Chapel or Franciscan structure in the Valley of Mexico—but to Le Corbusier's own (and contemporaneous) Boîte à Miracles from the Tokyo Museum (Figure 23). This 'Box of Miracles,' intended as the stage of an open-air theater, although it scarcely displays the same attenuated volume, does show the same slightly oblique cut in its roof, a similar entrance condition from the side, and an identical hangarlike appearance. To borrow a term from Vincent Scully, it is one of Le Corbusier's megaron volumes,\(^7\) one of those tunnel spaces compressed between vertical planes which, deriving from the Maison Citrohan (Figure 24), have persisted in his work alongside those more advertised sandwich volumes where the pressure of the horizontal planes is the more acute.

A history of the cross-fertilization of the megaron and sandwich concepts throughout Le Corbusier's career would be entirely relevant to the discussion of La Tourette; but it is scarcely an account which can fall within the scope of a short critique. Here one can only distinguish that Poissy is a sandwich and that the Maison Citrohan is the basic megaron, that the sandwich concept emphasizes floors and the megaron concept walls. But though, like all oversimple classifications, this one, if pressed, could easily become facetious, what is remarkable about it is that such a differentiation of species is less easily made than at first seems likely. For we are faced, yet again, with a house like Garches and we ask what it is. Is it a sandwich? Or is it a megaron? Do we feel the pressure of the floors or do we feel the pressure of the end walls?

The hybrid condition of Garches perhaps establishes some rather crude platform from which to view the intervening years. A megaron which is anxious to become a sandwich (or vice versa), it partly illustrates a line of development leading through to Poissy and to the Le Corbusier of the early thirties. But, at Garches, there are also those two frontispieces, the entrance and the garden elevations, which are scarcely connected with either the sandwich or the megaron idea. In terms of the lateral walls of the house they do not logically exploit the theme of an open-ended box. In terms of the floors, these facades conceal rather than expose the reality of the structural components. They are articulated—by a series of
Figure 24  Project, Maison Citrohan. Le Corbusier, 1920.

Figure 23  Project, Tokyo Museum, Tokyo. Box of Miracles. Le Corbusier, 1956 (?)..

Figure 25  La Tourette. Plans. Le Corbusier.
horizontal dissections and antigravitational cuts—so as to comply with a structural argument; but, in terms of an entirely literal induction from the physique of the building, they can only be considered a non sequitur.

Like so many other Corbusian elements they are obedient to the exigencies of the eye rather than those of the work, to the needs of the conceiving subject rather than the perceived object. They are the stimulants of heightened sensation. Their predicament is optical. Their logical reason for existence is stereographic. They delineate. They are the superintelligences by which the eye measures the specific gravity of the block behind, the two-dimensional surfaces on which the density of a three-dimensional substance is registered and inscribed, they are the planes which volatilize the reading of depth.

But this is to parenthesize. For, though the ability to charge depth with surface, to condense spatial concavities into plane, to drag to its most eloquent pitch the dichotomy between the rotund and the flat is the absolutely distinguishing mark of Le Corbusier's later style, the cerebrality which typifies Garches is not prominent at La Tourette. In spite of its dialectic, the Dominican convent is far from an intellectualistic building; but if, like Garches, it presents itself as a single block, then, unlike Garches, it is a block which, if examined in terms of plan, appears at first to contain in the church a major violation of all logical consistency (Figure 25).

To a block one attributes a structural continuity, a textural consistency of space, and a homogeneity of spatial grain or layering. While recognizing it to be hollow and to be empty, one still conceives of its emptiness as, in some way, the metaphor for a block of stone or a block of wood. It is exploitable only on the condition of collaborating with the nature which it has been assumed to possess.

Or so it might have been thought. But, at La Tourette, these precepts—which one may believe Le Corbusier himself to have taught and which one may feel to be a norm of procedure—are conspicuously breached, and breached with a sophistication so covert as to provide a new area of experience. By cramming a Tokyo-type megaron, the church, and a Poissy-type sandwich, the living quarters, into the closest proximity, by jamming two discrete elements into the same volume, from the violation of a unity of conception, it has become possible, simultaneously, to manipulate all spatial coefficients. In other words, by a combination of themes that one might have thought were obliged to remain forever separate, Le Corbusier has been able to instigate sensations of both tension and compression, openness and density, tension and stability; and, by doing so, he has been able to guarantee a visual stimulus so acute that only very retrospectively does the observer begin to be aware of the abnormal experience to which he has been subjected.
Plate 70  La Tourette. Aerial view from the north. Le Corbusier, 1956-57.
Plate 71  La Tourette. North wall of church.
Plate 72  La Tourette. View from the north-west.
Plate 73  La Tourette. View from the south-east.
Plate 74  La Tourette. Detail of east elevation.