A Review of Le Corbusier’s Chapel at Ronchamp

Walker Thisted

Abstract: This work presents an interpretive framework for Le Corbusier’s renowned Notre Dame du Haut in Ronchamp. This essay investigates the nature of transcendence posited by the building, the manners in which the building supports religious experiences, and the formal techniques used to do so. This investigation leads to an understanding of how Le Corbusier turns Platonism – and specifically Platonic form and hierarchy – on its head and how his buildings can be understood as educational devices. We come to understand the importance of turning the discourse of architecture as well as the ground on which it is constructed and the forms that result ninety degrees both literally and metaphorically. The work arrives at an understanding of how Le Corbusier offers a universal framework to those who experience his work by making a place for continuity and discontinuity with his system just as a makes room for his own continuity and discontinuity with the present moment of encountering the building as well as the historical time in which the building might ultimately sit.
What happens when we are confronted with the word “god”? What occurs when we experience a moment or work that we feel is touched by “god”?

In what follows, I will present a story of just such a confrontation. It will be about a moment when we encounter something that our native language is incapable of describing. When one sees the chapel designed by Le Corbusier at Ronchamp, we are without the tools needed to re-act. This strangely contorted building leaves us unclear as to exactly what the act is. Like other great buildings, we are held captive by its presence and forget everything that we have read or been told.

I am beside myself, seeing what I am about to become after this encounter. I feel the weight of the building pressing me to the ground. I want to run around and try and embrace this thing. Yet the joy is so great. Such is not the feeling of having missed the train seven hundred years ago as it is with the gothic cathedrals. This building is for us and yet it is alien. Has fifty years, half the time that it would take to build a gothic cathedral, been too long for us to remain close and comprehending of its logic of creation? While the building is vexing and immediately informs one that using the word ‘building’ is incorrect, it shows signs everywhere that if you start looking, you will learn rapidly and never stop wanting to learn from Notre Dame de Haut above the town of Ronchamp.

The things that you see are always literal, metaphorical, and even perhaps metaphysical. I will not dwell on the building as being formally in motion, how it materializes light, conveys the crushing of the heavens and the bulging of the earth. I wish to speak to how the building exists in the mind of the observer. What does this building prompt one to think about? How is it that a judgment is made by the observer that importance lies here? If one takes importance of architecture to reside in a sense of stunning beauty or in the reputation that a site holds, it is clear that this building is exceptionally important. But how is it different than the setting sun on the inner court of a 19th century apartment house in front of a blue sky? How is this fame different than that of the Pompidou? What I will try to make clear is that this building allows for imagination to run wild at whatever point the building is understood.

From the moment that we encounter the building, it is clear that a statement is being made through its form as to the role that it plays in an historical lineage of art and architecture. The position taken is both overwhelmingly decisive and allows for every participant to put forth their own interpretation. Specifically, Le Corbusier overturns the purity of Platonic form in order to create a gateway to a transcendent experience derived precisely from this overturned order. The ideal shapes now turned on their head are subject to distortion and, as a result, take on a new level of plasticity that offers myriad openings to the pilgrim who decides to stop at the chapel while travelling along their personal spiritual journey. For Le Corbusier to accomplish this overturning, in many cases a literal turning of the table ninety degrees to the ground, he was required to become absorbed in the dogmatic building traditions of Western culture that in many cases were connected Christian representation. As he undertook this education, he became obsessed with methods of subverting these traditions in order create his own set of mythico-religious symbols as the foundation of his particular variety of modern architecture.
The first thing that we notice at Ronchamp is the ritualized approach to the chapel. The first thing that is seen is the portal and ceremonial entrance door. Because this door is not for every day use, one must move around the corner twice in order to arrive at the opposite side of the chapel to enter. In spite of a desire to see the rest of the building, you feel that you must go in and experience the sanctuary. Once within, the other side of the door that you were not allowed to pass through is shown. He has established one axis of the cross. This axis is enforced a second time by the two light filled chapels that create a sense of motion at the rear of the sanctuary. The first is below the highest tower. In order to access the second, one must retrace their steps towards the entrance and make a right turn in order to enter. They are both filled with light as light. Once you escape the wonder of these places, having crossed the prime axis of the cross twice, you come again to face forward. And this is where and when we walk towards the altar. Again, you go left to see the cross and right to see the box in the wall that houses a statue of the Virgin. To the right your eyes move along the field of colored light.

We return to the outside in order to better understand the games that this building plays. The lines of the roof take you from point to point. There is no stability and yet the building is able to remain fixed by virtue of being entirely in motion. Because the mind becomes accustomed to always moving, it can adapt to the condition. Formally the building requires the inhabitant to always be thinking about another element and its overall continuity. The general statement of this motion prompts a corollary motion of contemplation in the mind. If the mind remains static, the ugliness will come to light and the sublime intuition had at first sight will be negated. An opportunity to go back on this first judgment is not allowed as more layers enter. Through the continual repetition of the theme stated by this motion, variations on a variety of scales can be used to keep pushing in and back out again. A respect is given via such a formal technique. Rather than being required to arrive at a particular position that unlocks the construction of the building through a perspectival technique, every position is valid and yet threatens to deceive through tricks played on the eye. These tricks are objective in the sense that they rely on a system common to Man. They become subjective as each of us is told that we can chose whatever point we fancy and be able to understand the space equally well as at any other point. Such a position is intuited before any other one of Le Corbusier.

We generally notice the difference between a straight line and a curved one rather easily and with great satisfaction. Sometimes we regard the curve to be of nature and the straight to be of Man. The roof system relates most obviously to the ground and sky while still being composed of the marks of the straight formwork that created it. Thus the roof system is man referring to nature through the use of a natural medium (wood) that leaves its curved grain within straight lines. The walls act as the bridge between roof (which relates us to the heavens and ground that relates us to the earth. These walls are also in most cases curved. They are white on both the inside and the outside. This ‘white’ is understood in a different manner depending on whether one is within or without. We wonder if whether the fundamental lesson of this chapel is that we are to find transcendence or even God within, rather than without.

We begin to sense that Le Corbusier has trapped religious dogma within his system rather than founding an entirely new order. He makes this turn by insisting that something lies beyond the text in which dogma is inscribed. His work relies on our
ability to be morally based solely on the attribute that we are human. It is this connection between language and our innate humanity that is often lost in many interpretations of religious buildings of the past. They are not dogmatic in the sense that we hold them to be. We simply no longer have the linguistic tools for them to speak to us as Human. When Le Corbusier rants against past systems, he is not ranting against the system subject to a sort of historicity, but against the system taken within a notion that we still exist continuously with those men that have come before.

If Le Corbusier overturned Platonism, we must ask both very similar, and altogether different questions of his work. The walls that support understanding achieve their required contradiction through our ability to move into them and look out at the place from which we came. They are about this simple dichotomy of our desire to be both within a system that we create and free from that system. If this desire is ours, we are always unable to get sufficiently far from it in order to be able to understand what allows for it to exist. We never know how thick the walls are or really where we stand in relation to them. To get far enough away would require us to fall off the hill. While our perspectival powers are always faithfully at hand, they can never be used to grasp the manner in which the system works. Thus we are turned away and towards thought.

These games played by the walls take place twice on the outside, once literally and once semi-literally. As we round the final corner in order to arrive at the first façade, we find that a little place has been provided for us to hop into. It is precisely where one arched faced ever so carefully touches the first. From here you are to the right of the outside altar. This altar is oriented towards the town of Ronchamp that lies below. The first façade is the one holding the primary entrance. The second façade teaches us about the tools that we will need in order to understand the chapel. The third is about how both literal and abstract these tools can be. The last façade is about the ‘good-ness’ of this church as expressed through its desire to not only to speak a physical language to man, but a verbal one.

It is at this point that we notice that a stepped pyramid – a foreign object – has been placed on top of this French hill. This objects informs us of the deep history to which Le Corbusier believes all great works of architecture must become subject. It simultaneously pacifies the oddity of Le Corbusier’s own structure. It is with this understanding that we are prepared pass beyond the interior and exterior of the chapel and enter the wall itself – the space in-between – and, in so doing, encounter a realm between heaven and earth. This wall that Le Corbusier has allowed us to enter is filled with objects and light. It is a table turned ninety degrees and is derived from his early obsession with the table, the house as table, and the table as house. Le Corbusier is perhaps just playing the latest round of a game obsessed with ‘placing’ objects and, in turn, making place. But, is something more at stake?

From this orthogonal carving into the wall, all the materials used to build functional things have been taken. Everything we use is drawn from this right angular cut into the curve. We are told that we must make the gesture / decision out of which we draw everything else. It is from the outside that we understand how the thing came about formally and from the inside that we understand how it is spiritually. To enter this system we must use the straight line. Straight pieces of concrete break the curves of the roof and allow for three entrances into the church – or, perhaps 2 entrances and an exit. The arrangement of these straight forms falls into the realm of rotation. Above the ritualized door – which rotates on its center to allow for entrance on either the
right or the left – there are volumes of concrete that are broken and rotate to allow for the entrance of light. We cannot help but wonder why these planes have been fragmented in this specific manner. There is something mysterious: the second semi-literal occupation of the wall from the outside when one realizes that one of the two sets of confessional which is placed flush against the wall within makes a huge bulge in the surface of the rough white wall. Certainly many ideas could be derived from this formal position taken towards the role and effect of confession.

In order to understand the formal games, one must be within the chapel and thus the realm of the mystical. Certainly Le Corbusier had the Abbot Suger in mind when he created this place. While we are able to understand the hierarchy of a gothic cathedral, the lighting system does not give itself away quite as easily. This is essential. As the signs indicating the location of the chapel tell us, this is the Chapel Le Corbusier. Resultantly, the logic is entirely his. While it is completely logical, by the time that Ronchamp came from the office, it had evolved into something that appears entirely subjective. It is a gesture that came after years of inaction upon his climb up the side of the hill. Our need and desire to understand the chapel requires us to investigate the logic that we can find apparent in the window system. We attempt to see if their location is in fact random. On the wall with the pilgrimage door we count 25 different windows. This is not an easy task since we must determine what we call “a window.” The number “25” comes from looking at what appear to be windows (albeit containing subdivisions that we be discussed shortly).

Above this wall there is a sliver separating the wall and roof. This is a place that has been pulled together and arrested just prior to fully congealing. Structural elements must be employed in order to support this roof. They divide this sliver, which allows for light to enter, into five “windows.” On the wall behind the altar we count 15 much smaller holes that let light in. Above, the divisions are 3. Divisions divided by number of windows gives us 5 – 5 by 5 (or to the second power) and 5 taken 3 times. We now notice that there are 3 ways in and out. 2 of which are for entering and 1 is for exiting to the outside alter. If we move to the 3 chapels – 2 on one side and 1 on the pilgrimage door side – we look up at the way that light enters the shaft. In the main tower we have 5 ways of letting light in. A circle, a rectangle, a square, a long rectangular vertical line, and a long rectangular horizontal line. The long vertical is divided into 7. The long horizontal divided into 5 via sets of 2 small rotated planes that could be un-rotated to cover the opening and restore it to its participation as part of the wall. The other two chapels, which lie on the same side of the chapel, are rather similar. The vertical strip has been reduced to 3 divisions and the long horizontal strip has been altered a bit. Now the sets of rotated planes has been reduced to 3 sets of 2 and mullions have been added in front of them. There are 20 of these. Below we notice that there are 9 divisions in the floor tile. The final chapel is virtually the same, but has 2 rows of mullions divided by 20. We now understand the significance of the strangely rotated ‘things’ above the entrances: they allow us to understand that all this will happen immediately upon our entrance. The division is by 3 here: 1 area for the door and 2 for windows. The windows have panes that deflect the light. In the division immediately above the door, the large plane, undivided, faces us. Above that, it faces outside. The walls to either side bow outward and we are sure that the entrance must be in structural tension: 1 makes 2 and leads to 3. Returning to the pilgrimage entrance wall with the 25 paths for light to enter we find that, moving from alter to entrance
door, there are five entrances “into” the wall. The cramp us down and allow us to see out. The fifth one is the door in and out. Within each, there is an equally elaborate play of numbers. There are actually 27 windows. Have we made a mistake? No, we have just found that we define windows differently on each side of the wall.

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Through the chapel we find that such indicators go far beyond abstract things like numbers. The L shape is rather important. It takes one around to the unexpected. We find it in the confessionals that contain an upside down cross showing us an equality between confessor and hearer of confession under the great weight of the act, in the stairs, the benches, the line of the strange cross on the ground, and the lectern. They seem to all be places that have to do with some sort of climbing. The T form is found generally in places that have to do with light. We also find play with planes and perhaps purity. The stairs to the pulpit are in front of a wall that is white, have stairs that are grey, and a railing that is black. These stairs do not touch the ground plane and the railing does not touch the place where the sermon is given. On the way up the right hand feels the railing, on the way down, it is the left.

And then you leave the church for a bit of air. Outside you find that everything has been explained over and over again to you. On the side that you found after being rejected by the first door is an amazing ‘drainpipe’ and collecting pool. This “‘drainpipe’” looks like the horns of a bull caste in concrete. You remember all of those cows on the road to the chapel and hear the sound of them in the distance. The water filled paths blur a proper sense of space and time by way of the construction made in the mind in order to understand. You know that you are still on the pilgrimage path. They have two channels. The flow in each is not equal. Below they allow water to enter into a cylinder. There is one large and one small pyramid to the right. Out of the cylinder, water flows into a basin around the triangles. They are covered in moss. They are in front of the bulge of the confessional. They are really there for no reason other than to delight and educate. The echo of dropping water is just this. In the distance there are bells to call to worship and sound in the glory. The analogy is fitting.

Le Corbusier has not abandoned any of his fascination with the machine at Ronchamp. The façade on which you enter on a daily basis is certainly a rather strange one. It is, in fact, a cleansing machine. Sins are washed away in the same way as in the confessional. There are 2 doors. One flight of stairs takes you to the first – one of which is green. The ground supports this flight of stairs. The second flight of stairs takes you to a red door and is supported by the building. The green door has a tiny bit of window at the top right that points to the red door. The red door has a large L shaped window that points over and back to the green door. When climbing these steep stairs, one would use their left hand to go up the first 12 steps. After a rest and the restraint of not going in the green door you would use your right hand to climb up the next set of 12 steps. After going in the red you would get a glimpse into the red and orange chapel from within the tower volume. If you then followed the formal logic, you would come out the green door and use your right hand to go down to the ground. You have now been purified.

The value of such an understanding lies in the fact that it is just that. One could feel that neither is for going in. The red could be the door that you exit because of a
similar use of the left hand as guide to the pulpit within. The green might be the door to enter because you use your left hand as guide to enter. We could continue. The importance is that the formal combination of elements merits consideration. The entire building requires this level of commitment by the viewer. Such is placed in stark contrast to the landscape that surrounds. The world outside of the chapel does not require contemplation. It is there as given and is known as such. To have an authentic religious experience, a sense of mystery must be given. Whether the pilgrim understands the building by way of the formal logic that Le Corbusier has set up or as a place of mystery, a similar experience results. Either one is given a sense of awe by way of the Church, or a sense of awe in the Church through the sublime experience of contemplating the genius of Le Corbusier.

Such concepts become blurred during the act of contemplation. It seems, however, that the aggressive manner in which Le Corbusier has allowed for his hand to remain in the work, suggests to us that his mediation is essential in whatever religious experience we will have at Ronchamp. Is this all that different from the condition that one might have experienced in a church designed by Alberti? Primarily, we experience this as a work that is both built and designed by Le Corbusier. A change in the way that we understand closeness and time has been fundamentally altered. We stand only fifty years removed from this genius. Such would be about half the time that it would take to build a church designed by Alberti. Resultantly, the designer must put forward an attempt to reconcile such a change with the notion of ‘architecture’ properly so-called.

If the building is to speak to the metaphysical condition of man, it will have to speak to the overriding modality whereby man comports himself in the world. Towards architecture this implies an increasingly shortened period of realization and judgment. One might characterize the history of modern architecture as such. The prime difference between Le Corbusier and Rem Koolhaas is that they must cope with two different manners in which architecture stands in Time. In order to accomplish such a task, the architecture must be rather paradoxical. At once there is a need to posit Time as a dialectic and a work of architecture both within that dialectic and beyond it through the way in which it calls to imagination the ability of each man to construct such a dialectic. On the other hand, the building must deny that any such understanding can be arrived at and thus must exist solely for itself by way of its existence for and via its creator. To build a wall that might be read as a machine for purifying sins does not necessarily say that it ever is this purifying machine or that it is not. All that it can be is a collection of planes that play with light. But through the play of light, we are common to the building.

By way of the combination this is made clear to whoever sees the building. Once this path is cleared, I am required to attempt a construction towards Time through the architecture. If I do not attempt such a construction, the building remains just that. Yet, if I have the tools and education, I am able to place Ronchamp within the continuity of the machines for living that Le Corbusier gave us throughout his career. I can understand his work as continuous and discontinuous at the same time. After my tools have been exhausted, I can posit Le Corbusier as something other than a builder. He can become a concept that is Absolute via the construction of him that I have given my self and my reader. Nevertheless, I must require my reader to see Le Corbusier as a transferred construction. I cannot ask for their belief in His absolute existence.
This is very similar to the process by which architecture is created. We are never able to give our client the same sense of understanding. But, this is true throughout all types of life. An understanding then might be found that the mode that I construct for the appreciation of Le Corbusier allows for a circular referentiality that is constantly in compression and expansion. No other architect of the 20th century has showed this with such clarity. While we may be able to say that there were other equally great architects of the century, it is only Le Corbusier who is so transparent to allow for such an understanding. We can see him less as an architect and more as a guide. Certainly Rem Koolhaas has understood this. The question then remains, are we at the end of something if we must refer back to the lessons learned years ago? The answer comes if we can grasp that we are in a period of perpetual generational renaissance via technology. This technology is the driving force, the counterpart to capital, and what always allows for a romantic temperament.

Finally, we come to painting on the pilgrimage door. It is fundamentally related to Le Corbusier’s work of 1955: *Le Poème de l’Angle Droit*. It is done on eight panels of metal and shows us, among many other things, a right hand (blue) and a left one (red). Let us explore the right and the left then. The pilgrimage door cannot be opened from the outside. From within the left hand is used to allow the entrance to the outside world. After entering through this door, the altar is at your right while the holy water is to the left. Before entering, you wipe your feet on the right. Through the non-pilgrimage door, the altar is on your left along with the holy water. Immediately to the right there is a confessional. If you are facing the altar, the red and orange painted chapel is on the left and the large chapel is to the right. The door to the right of the altar is a bit ambiguous. The handle is on the left to go out and the right to go in. On every façade there are “strong” and “aggressive” concrete forms. They are always to the left. The profound nature of the play between right and left hand is not something that needs to be argued. What is more essential is that this play exists. The intention is that we are conscious of the action undertaken and the decision made. Taken into our own mind as subject of contemplation, it enforces our knowledge of this place as one of control.

This control is certainly a subjective type put forward by Le Corbusier. We can always step around and out of his system. We are referred, however, back to the universal difference in using the right hand versus the left. Always the manner in which the building is for each of us exists in our mind very forcefully. Never can the building come close enough. It must always be placed at hand. Through these intentions, there must be, for each of us, an interpretation and a stance taken towards the directing that we are faced with. We are allowed to understand this place as both controlled by the rituals of religion and by our own free will to interact with them in whatever way we choose. Such a choice, however, must come about at a specific point in time. For this decision of the wanderer through the space could only come about as the rituals of religion are subverted by the place as monument to design. The non-believer must enter this space in order for the entirety of the system to come forward. Experienced today the place can become a drawing. As a drawing it is able to speak to the intentionality of existing in the world and the desire for it to only exist in the mind through imagination. We understand each of the lines both as autonomous and having been conceived within the vacuum of the piece of white paper. When this vacuum is experienced we understand it as our own for us to do what we will with.
As you leave this building you are thankful that its sight on the top of the hill will always remain embedded in the mind just as you left it for all time. The grass is enclosed by concrete blocks and provides the final mediation before you begin to slip down the slope. When you come to the building intended for the permanent residents, the last lesson comes. As you look out into the world there are 12 alters in 2 groups. 7 of these face southeast. 5 face southwest. They are supported by L shaped concrete slabs. When you stand between the two groups they appear to be T shaped. The 5 altars seem to be pointing towards the chapel and the 7 seem to be pointed out. The final statement is one of alchemy. 5 will always come in from the West and 7 will always leave to the East. This place is magical and always in a state of transformation.

Epilogue

Offering (The Open Hand)
It is open because all is available knowable
Open to receive
Open also that others might come and take
The Waters flow the sun provides light Complexities have woven their fabric the fluids are everywhere.
Tools in the hand Caresses from the hand Life is tasted through the kneading of hands eyesight resides in palpation

Full hand I received full hand I now give

Instrument
With carbon we have traced the right angle the sign It is the answer and the guide the fact an answer a choice It is simple and naked yet knowable
The savants will talk of relativity and rigour But conscience makes it a sign it is the answer and the guide my answer my choice.
We cannot Know anything from education alone. To a certain extent, we can understand the appearance of this work after WWII as a tool that allows for a place that is always shifting. While governments change, this tool allows for a constant grounding. Everything about this work is conveyed in the title after one has reached the end of the work. Understood as a thing as such, it rotates the discourse of architecture 90 degrees. It changes the focus and tells us that questions of dwelling in our world cannot be reduced to anything singular. We always must view an attempt to dwell within the continuity of an individual’s life – whether it be an architect who takes revolutionary formal stances or a father who adds rooms to a house to make room for his family – within the context of the discontinuous world in which they work. We are able to dwell to the extent that we can be authentically individual within the company of Man.