

Le Corbusier

Chapel of Notre-Dame-du-Haut, Ronchamp, 1950-1956

The *Chapel of Notre-Dame-du-Haut* in Ronchamp (near Belfort, on the border between France and Switzerland) is Le Corbusier's most famous work and dates to the last period of his career. His design includes some almost neo-Baroque elements, which represent a radical departure from the Rationalism that informed his early architecture.

Rising like **nature's culmination point** at the centre of its landscape, the church is characterised by a grey wing-like roof that stands out, as if soaring away, from the white curving walls. In fact these façades do not serve a function of support with respect to the roof but conceal the pilasters that lift the grey structure just high enough to allow a thin strip of daylight to filter into the interior. The inspiration for making this roof came from a crab shell that Le Corbusier had found on a Long Island (New York) beach some years earlier.

The whole **structure** – with its single hall, three chapels and an outdoor choir – is **strongly asymmetrical** with **three semi-cylindrical bell towers** which lead off from the same number of indoor chapels. The plan is vaguely quadrangular but tends to confer the idea of a triangle.

The church perimeter contrasts the solidity of a balcony and other overhanging elements to the window apertures; these small, irregular openings, which are sealed with transparent or coloured glass, allow different amounts of natural light to penetrate indoors.

Next to the central liturgical space inside there are areas designed to communicate a sense of the sacred as it relates to a feeling of magic, recalling pre-Christian pantheistic cults.

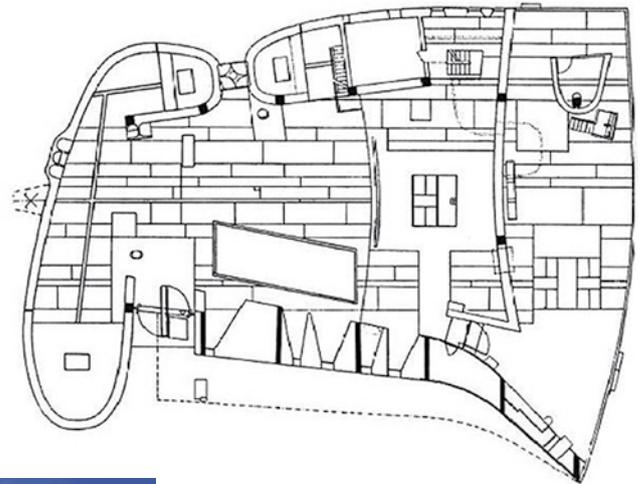
The striking window splays are very deep, each one different from the next. The polychrome stained glass plates were designed by various artists in keeping with theological tradition; this is why no unified, white light enters the church but rather a multi-coloured light that has been mediated by Man and by his capacity to create with his hands (symbolized here by the hand crafted glass). It is the same principle that informed the rose windows in Medieval times, but here all references to geometry and symmetry have been banished. This project

addresses the need felt by the Catholic Church to renew ecclesiastical architecture.

In the Ronchamp work Le Corbusier demonstrates his ability to interpret **expressionistic aspects**, in a sharp break with the prevalently Cubist and Rationalist character underlying most of his work. In fact here we can see an approach similar to the one that led Picasso from Analytic Cubism in the 1910s to the emotional release of *Guernica* (1937). Already in 1923 Le Corbusier had stated, «*Architecture is a fact in three dimensions [...] Right from its plan and, therefore, in all its elevation architecture demonstrates its three-dimensional intention*».

One of the most notable elements of Le Corbusier's style is the **abolition of a privileged point of view**. So there is **no predominant façade** and, moreover, the whole exterior has been adapted to mirror the interior's functions. Indeed it followed that, having conceived the inside space as a grotto with a variety of surprising niches, the chapel had to have **an irregular plan**.

Fig. 1, 2
Le Corbusier, *Chapel of Notre-Dame-du-Haut*, 1950-1956.
Ronchamp (Belfort).
Plan and exterior view of the eastern façade.



On the following page Fig. 3, 4, 5, 6
Le Corbusier, *Chapel of Notre-Dame-du-Haut*, 1950-1956. Ronchamp (Belfort). View of the northern façade (above), view of the eastern façade (centre), view of the interior (lower right), view of the steel door (lower left) decorated with shapes referring to earth and sky.

Although not well-received by critics, who considered it a late-career betrayal of Rationalist principles, the chapel has very often been imitated by other architects.

Its greatest contribution has been the way it proposes **new freedom in designing religious space**, now independent of Holy Cross symbolism. If anything some aspects of the design seem derived from trinitarian symbolism and the unforeseeable nature of Divine Providence. Here the church loses its traditional symmetry and, therefore, its authoritarian structure, which had always been based on a clear separation of spaces for the clergy and for the congregation. Le Corbusier returns the church to its function as **a space for community** (*ecclesia*, in Greek). The faithful, in a secular world of science and industry, no longer base their belief on the fear of worldly and other-worldly authority but rather on a strong adherence to their own need for spirituality. In this way the Ronchamp church expresses the flexibility necessary to a religiosity which is, using Le Corbusier's own term, «*inexpressible*», a feeling which tries to recover a sense of **solidarity between man and man as well as between man and nature**.

Le Corbusier's church establishes a new relationship with regard to the rules of statics and the use of perpendicularity; his architectural innovation suggests a loss of faith in *ratio* (the Latin for rationality) or in the Enlightenment's *reason*, which decreed that Man was capable of understanding everything. Instead this explosion of architecture's emotional power seems to declare a miraculous and divine force.

These theoretical motivations as well as the building's technical characteristics express doubts and make it a forerunner of the deconstruction movement prevalent in international architecture between 1990-2010. This is particularly reinforced by the chapel's strongly sculptural design which almost completely avoids right angles and relationships of orthogonality.

