

# ARCHITECTURE WITH AND WITHOUT LE CORBUSIER

JOSÉ OUBRERIE ARCHITECTE



editors Luis Burriel Bielza and Oscar Riera Ojeda  
foreword George Ranalli  
introduction Kenneth Frampton

*Architecture with and without Le Corbusier* documents two architectural Masterpieces, both from the hands of the architect José Oubrierie: the parish church of Saint-Pierre and the Miller House. The church, one of the last projects of Le Corbusier, was born on the drafting board of the Studio Rue de Sèvres and took nearly 50 years to be completed. José Oubrierie, his assistant from 1959 until 1965, developed the project from its inception and worked throughout his life to complete and built this canonical work, adapting it to current needs and standards while respecting the integrity of the original idea. The Miller House, Oubrierie's own late masterpiece designed in the 90's, has already become a landmark in Lexington, where the architect devoted his mature years as a teacher and Dean at the University of Kentucky. It is securely on its way to achieve a place of its own within the history of 20th Century American Architecture.

The thorough documentation of the two buildings with an extensive collection of previously unpublished drawings, sketches and photographs builds a precise and vivid testimony of Oubrierie's unique architectural trajectory with Le Corbusier's formidable legacy as a formative and creative influence. The two seminal works, presented side by side with texts from George Ranalli and Kenneth Frampton yield insight into the evolution and current resonance of these two masterworks that span four decades and two distinguished careers. This publication was prepared to accompany an exhibit on José Oubrierie's held at the Bernard and Anne Spitzer School of Architecture in New York City, from February 16th to May 14th 2010.

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JOSÉ OUBRERIE ARCHITECTE

TO LE CORBUSIER AND GUILLERMO JULLIAN DE LA FUENTE. J-O



# **ARCHITECTURE WITH AND WITHOUT LE CORBUSIER**

JOSÉ OUBRERIE ARCHITECTE

THIS BOOK IS MADE POSSIBLE THROUGH THE  
GENEROUS SUPPORT OF ELISE JAFFE + JEFFREY BROWN



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# THE ARCHITECT'S APPRENTICE

FOREWORD BY GEORGE RANALLI

Recently, after introducing Jose Oubrierie's lecture at the school, I sat in the darkness of the auditorium watching the images come across the screen. The first pair shocked me: a study model of the Firminy Church and a photo of Le Corbusier in his studio with a very young Oubrierie at his side. At that moment I was struck by the enormity of what I was witnessing. Jose Oubrierie had worked with Le Corbusier! One of the greatest architects of the twentieth century, Le Corbusier produced a powerful body of work and Firminy was one of a remarkable series of religious buildings that had produced a singular, mystical, emotionally striking space.

Oubrierie was one of the last of the apprentices to work for Le Corbusier and his responsibility was to develop the sketch design that Le Corbusier had dashed off for Firminy. As in every architect's office, the role of the assistant is essential to the formation and development of the project. It is not simply a matter of redrawing the design more definitively but rather an elaboration of the implications of the original sketch. Since Le Corbusier spent much of the day painting, Oubrierie and the other assistants were left to interpret and redefine the design by infusing it with their own ideas. At the end of each day Le Corbusier came back to the studio to review the work and decide what conformed to – and confirmed – his original impulse and what was to be jettisoned as irrelevant.

Much has been made over whether the executed project for Firminy is Le Corbusier or Oubrierie. This is not a useful question: The building was produced in much the same way as other Corbusier projects. Although Corbusier never completed the construction documents for Carpenter Center at Harvard University nor visited the project during its construction or after its completion, no one

doubts the impact of Le Corbusier's hand – or of the influence of Jose Luis Sert. The drawings were, in fact, completed by Sert's Boston office and Sert supervised the construction. This was a method used by Corbusier to complete a number of projects, although with differing results. Clearly, the hand of Oubrierie can be strongly felt in the Firminy project, from concept to completion. Firminy is the work of collaboration across many years between an architect and his apprentice, only completed years after the master's death. The apprentice himself had grown to mastery over the decades, a maturity that infused the original work with new ideas and techniques nurtured slowly over time.

The Miller House, built while Oubrierie was Dean of the School of Architecture in Lexington, Kentucky, is more clearly the work of Oubrierie after he emerged from the Le Corbusier studio. Although traces of other Corb houses can certainly be seen in this building, Oubrierie has taken the house into another realm altogether. The Miller House grows from questions of form and space that developed after Le Corbusier's time and these are evident in the development of the design. Intricate ideas about the program and the form of the house interweave throughout. Although the house at first appears to be a platonic solid, it is formed out of a collection of fragments brilliantly assembled into a tour de force of space, form, structure, texture, and surface. The interior passages from level to level are beautifully orchestrated around the central vertical space across which rooms can be seen and through which the landscape expands beyond. The design is deeply considered down to the details – including built-in furniture and color panels – and the resolution is impeccable, delivering an exceptionally executed work both outside and in.

The Firminy Church and the Miller House bear testimony to the imprint of Le Corbusier's work on the younger architect's imagination. Far from the disconnected and incoherent pastiche of so much current form, work that pretends divorce from the ever-immanent traditions of architecture, Oubrierie has taken the history he inherited through Le Corbusier and subtly and richly transformed it into his own formal lexicon of space, program and design. The result is astonishing and deep in its elaboration of the eloquence of a language that bears the connection from ages past to the current moment. Jose Oubrierie has achieved one of the most difficult qualities in architecture: through rootedness he has achieved timelessness.

George Ranalli, Architect  
Dean  
Bernard and Anne Spitzer School of Architecture  
City College of New York  
January 2010

GEORGE RANALLI has been Dean of the Bernard and Anne Spitzer School of Architecture at City College since 1999. He was born in New York City. He received his Bachelor of Architecture from Pratt Institute in 1972 and Master of Architecture from the Graduate School of Design at Harvard University in 1974. From 1976-1999 he was Professor of Architecture at Yale University, and in 1988-1989 he was the William Henry Bishop Chaired Professor in Architectural Design. Mr. Ranalli recently completed his fourth monograph, *Saratoga*, devoted to his Saratoga Avenue Community Center for the New York City Housing Authority. That project has been widely praised in the New York Times, notably in a May 13, 2009 article by Ada Louise Huxtable in the Wall Street Journal and in December 2009 Paul Goldberger in New Yorker Magazine selected it as one of the Ten Most Positive Architectural Events in 2009.

His architectural and design work has been published internationally in numerous journals including *Domus*, *A+U*, *Progressive Architecture*, *L'Architettura*, *G.A. Houses*, *Architectural Digest*, *Architecture D'Aujourd'hui*, *Architectural Design*, and *Lotus*. His work has been exhibited and collected at the Cooper-Hewitt Museum, Sperone-Westwater Gallery, the Museum of Contemporary Art in Chicago, the Museum of Finnish Architecture, Centre Pompidou in France, Deutsches Architekturmuseum in Frankfurt, the XVII Triennale Di Milano in Italy, the Denver Art Museum, the Indianapolis Museum of Art, the Metropolitan Museum of Art and a one man exhibit at Artists Space Gallery in New York 1998. He designed the exhibition *Frank Lloyd Wright: Designs for an American Landscape, 1922-1932* for the Whitney Museum of Art in 1997 and designed the installation for the exhibition of work of Carlo Scarpa, in 1999 at the Canadian Centre for Architecture Montreal, Canada.

in the western corner of the house. This circulation is linked at the first floor to a free-standing straight flight that juts out into the surrounding greensward. A second stair provides an equally serviceable access from the master suite to the exterior:

Looking up towards the first and second floor passerelles which service, in pin-wheel fashion, the upper and lower levels of the double-height bedrooms, one is reminded of Pierre Chareau's masterly *Maison de Verre* of 1932, not only because of the metal mesh to the steel balustrading and the vertical character of the interstitial space but also because of the way in which each successive component is articulated within the larger envelope of the house. The cabinetwork also reminds one of Chareau in that precisely detailed wooden fittings were installed in the house as the construction proceeded. The peculiarly rich, tailor-made approach that stemmed from this unusual working method resulted in a level of articulation that gave it the aura of being a "house/machine." At the same time this machinist aura is offset by high-quality woodwork in birch and beech and by colored wall planes (predominantly red, white, blue, and green) that cause the internal volume of the house to vibrate. This contrapuntal play is enlivened throughout by horizontal slots, square picture windows and plate glass corner fenestration; a variation in window shapes and sizes has been partially determined by the desire to provide picturesque landscape views from various parts of the house. This pin-wheeling play of openings around the house remind one of the syncopated mass-form of the Rietveld-Schroeder House from 1923.

Although the central fireplace with its free-standing tubular flue and the private terrace of the master bedroom testify to the presence of domesticity, there is nonetheless a certain feeling of monumentality that pervades the structure as a whole. While this is surely in no small measure due to the highly rhetorical exterior, it also derives from the overall size and the treatment of the bedrooms as though they are small, independent pavilions clustered around a top-lit atrium. This expansive interpretation of the Palladian tradition gives the house the aura of a public building. In other circumstances one might imagine it serving as the embassy of a small nation state. It is a plastic and conceptual tour de force; a canonical work which owes its density and complexity to a concentration of architectural tropes which might ideally be distributed over a much larger work.

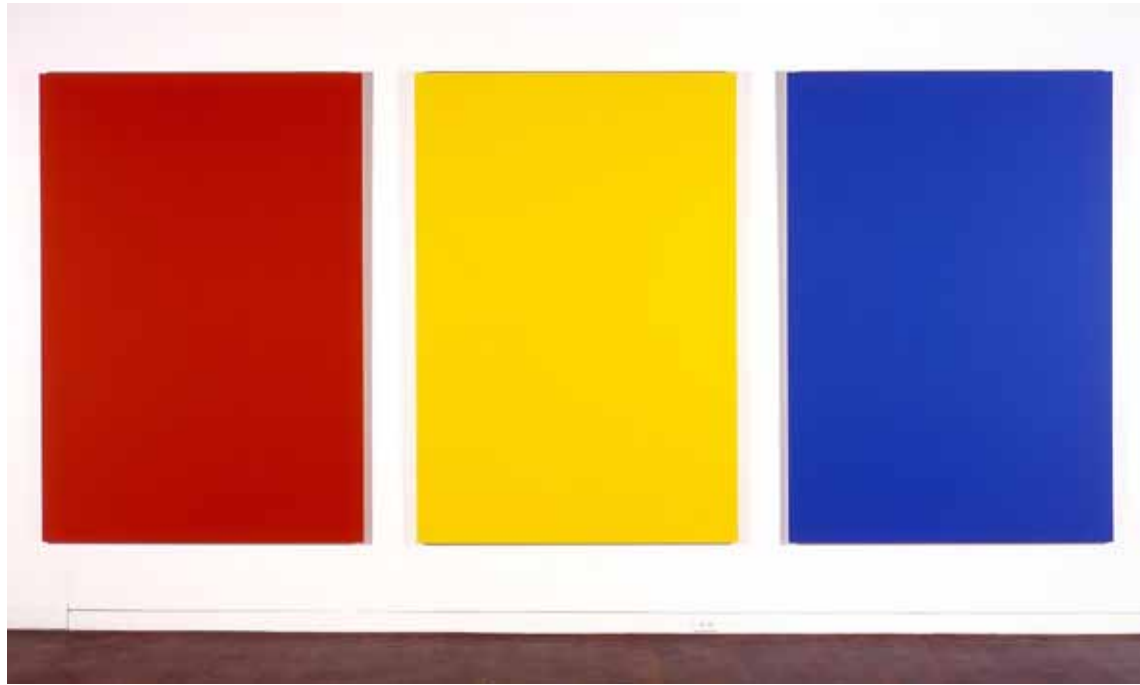
**KENNETH FRAMPTON** was born in the United Kingdom in 1930 and trained as an architect at the Architectural Association School of Architecture, London. After practicing for a number of years in the United Kingdom and in Israel, he served as the editor of the British magazine *Architectural Design*. He has taught at number of leading institutions including the Royal College of Art, the ETH Zurich, EPFL Lansanne, the Accademia di Architettura in Mendrisio, and the Berlage Institute in The Netherlands. He is currently the Ware Professor of Architecture at the GSAPP, Columbia University, New York. He is the author of *Modern Architecture and the Critical Present* (1980), *Studies in Tectonic Culture* (1995), *American Masterworks* (1995), *Le Corbusier* (2001), *Labour, Work & Architecture* (2005), and an updated fourth edition of *Modern Architecture: A Critical History* (2007).





EGLISE SAINT-PIERRE DE FIRMINY-VERT





Red, Yellow, Blue II" 1965, acrylic on canvas, each panel 82x61 in. Gift of Mrs Harry Linde Bradley.

All of the effects of the Firminy building that emanate from the original concept seem to move it toward the political/ conceptual discourse of the Seattle Library. In addition to those we have mentioned, consider the four corners of the church. All the drawings from 1961-63 and 1970-74 demonstrate Le Corbusier's conceptual intention for the shell to join to the base smoothly as a monolith. While the models and drawings show the solid concrete of the base cut away at the corners to become glass, the line of the glass corner is brought flush with the corner of the shell in every instance. In the actual building, however, whether by Oubrierie's design or technical necessity, the glass corners of the base are recessed, leaving the skirt of the shell to blouse over them. While the dimension of the cantilever is minimal, the effect is unmistakable: the shell appears to alight weightlessly atop the base. Whether that difference between the drawings and the buildings would have been as important without the influence of Seattle we cannot know, but in light of the Library, it cannot be underestimated. And then, there are those holes in the apron on the west side...

Of course, the Firminy Church is neither as relaxed nor as sexy as the Seattle Library; it is, after all, still a place of worship. But by virtue of the strange relationship it forges with

the Library, the... Interruptus of Firminy becomes part of a favorite theme of imaginative literature, in which a parent finds themselves to be younger than their offspring through time travel or numinous exchange of bodies. A variant of "a sleeper awakes" tales like Rip van Winkle, the child-becomes-parent motif first appears in the 19th century but proliferates in the 20th once it finds its native medium: movies. Tracking modernism's increasing discomfort with received wisdom, these stories confound the orderly succession of authority dictated by a linear conception of history, and so dramatize our desire for deliverance from what literary critic Harold Bloom terms the anxiety of influence, whether Freudian or Darwinian. Our desire, that is, for more freedom.

**JEFFREY KIPNIS** is a professor of architectural design and theory at the Knowlton School of Architecture, Ohio State University. His writing on art and architecture has appeared in many different publications, including *Log*, *Hunch*, *Harvard Design Magazine*, *Quaderns*, *2G*, *El Croquis*, *Art Forum* and *Assemblage*. He has also published the books *Choral Works: The Eisenman-Derrida collaboration*, *Perfect Acts of Architecture*, and *The Glass House*, amongst others. His award winning film, *A Constructive Madness*, looks at Frank Gehry's work on the unbuilt but seminal Peter Lewis house project. His most recent study, of Stephen Holl's Bloch Addition to the Nelson Atkins Museum, is featured in his new book, *Stone and Feather*.

NOTES:

Neither does the posthumous completion of unfinished works of art belong to architecture exclusively. After extensive study of Edith Wharton's notes and drafts, Marion Wainwaring completed her unfinished last novel, *The Buccaneers*, a half century after the author's death; Literary critics consider the finished novel flawed, though whether this is the fault of Wharton or Wainwaring continues to be debated. Mozart's *Requiem*, on the other hand, is regarded as one of the composer's most enduring masterpieces. Yet, at the time of his death, the *Requiem*, though well-outlined, remained barely half-completed. His widow, who desperately needed the balance of the commission fee, begged a series of composers to finish the work. Eventually, a young friend of Mozart, Sussmayer, did so with contributions from others.

Pilotis and free-facades complete the five.

Cf. *The Twentieth Century American House: Masterworks of Residential Architecture*, David Larkin and Ken Frampton, ed., 2000

Alice Jarrard, "[http://www.italica.rai.it/rinascimento/parole\\_chiave/schede/teatri.html](http://www.italica.rai.it/rinascimento/parole_chiave/schede/teatri.html)" "[http://www.italica.rai.it/rinascimento/parole\\_chiave/schede/teatri.html](http://www.italica.rai.it/rinascimento/parole_chiave/schede/teatri.html)

Cf. Le Corbusier's books, *When the Cathedrals were White*, and *Travels in the Orient*.

Anthony Eardley points out that his ambivalence might have been further exacerbated, given that all of his religious commissions were from the Catholic Church, by the fact that Le Corbusier "came from a Cathar family whose Protestant heresies embraced the sun as the provider and regulator of all human life..." In the Firminy Church, signs of that heresy are insinuated not only in the symbolism of the circular top reigning over the square base, but covertly in the dualist yellow sun and red moon oculi in the ceiling and the pagan constellation that replaced the rose window. See "Grandeur is in the Intention;" Le Corbusier's Firminy Church, *IAUS catalogue 14*, Kenneth Frampton and Sylvia Kolbowski, eds., (New York: Rizzoli, 1981)

Oubrierie began his career as a painter and maintains an active interest in modern and contemporary painting. Though the door is certainly a device derived from his knowledge of minimalist painting, its uncanny resemblance to Kelly's *Red Yellow Blue II* is a coincidence. Still, though there is nothing to it, it is fun for the imagination to mull over some circumstances that surround the coincidence: the painting is one of a number of works by the artist treating the same three colors in similar formal arrangements; both horizontal and vertical. Most date from 1961-65, but Kelly has continued to revisit the theme occasionally ever since to the present day. *Red Yellow Blue II* itself dates from 1965, the year of Le Corbusier's death, and finally, Oubrierie began his studies at the *Ecole des Beaux Artes* in Paris the year after Kelly completed his own at the same school.

"Architecture before Geometry, or the Primacy of Imagination" *Assemblage 39*, pp. 94-105, August 1999, MIT press

Oubrierie's caution that the computer's seductiveness might lessen the responsiveness of the architect is in contrast to that issued by the author Joyce Carol Oates. She warns that the computer's power to cut and paste threatens to transform the novelist from a focused story teller into a compulsive editor who cannot stop adding to and changing the story. "I used a word processor for two years (in the composition of *American Appetites*) and found that I was too obsessively attached to the process, reluctant to move away from the screen and back into the 'real' world. I realized that such an addiction was a very bad idea..." What makes this dichotomy interesting is that it is not a result of the ethos of the different disciplines, but at least in part technical: a matter of a computer's relation to file size and memory. Text files are small and all too easy for a computer to manipulate, three dimensional digital models of buildings are very large, complex files which are very difficult to edit piecemeal.

# HISTORICAL PRECEDENTS 1960-1965

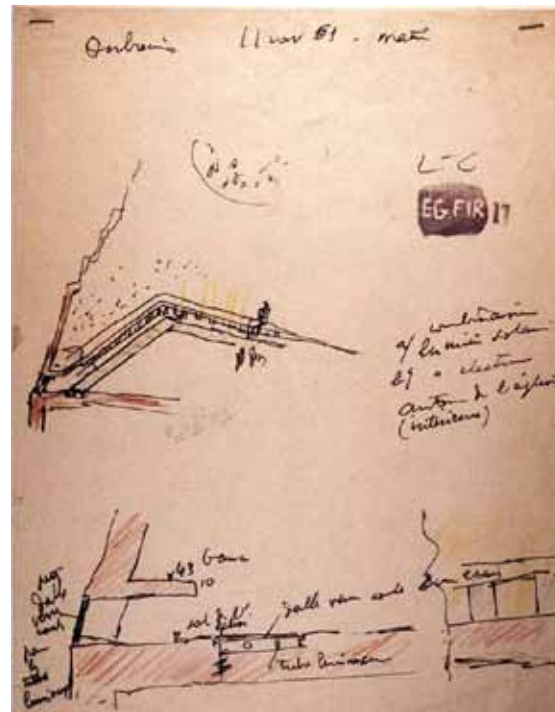
## ATELIER LE CORBUSIER



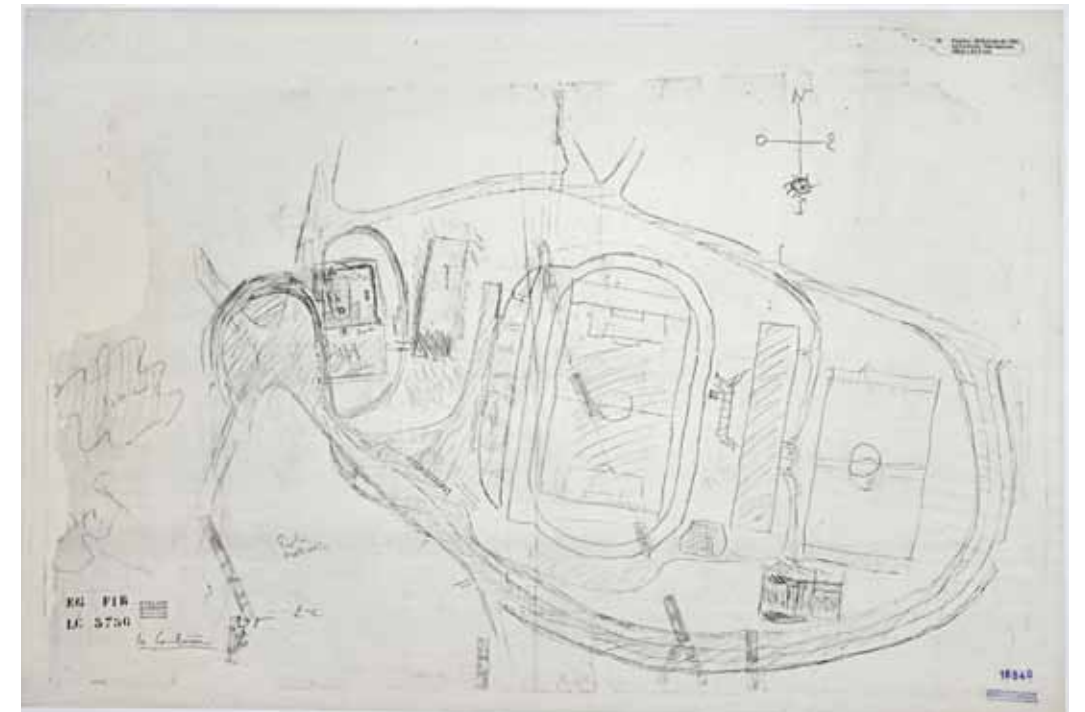
Le Corbusier with Members of the Parish Association to determine the placement of the church, June 19th 1960 .



Monastery of La Tourette, church, looking West, horizontal slits of light illuminate the monks' stalls.



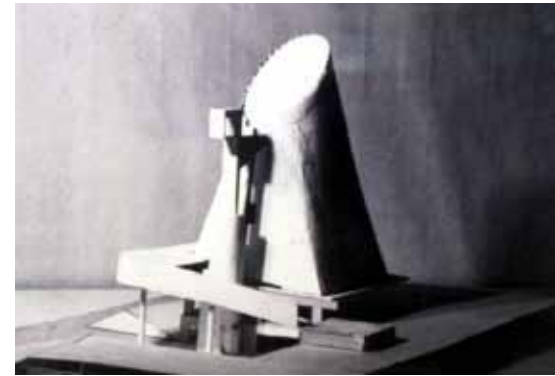
Firminy church, natural and artificial lighting study, Le Corbusier's first sketch, 11 November 1961.



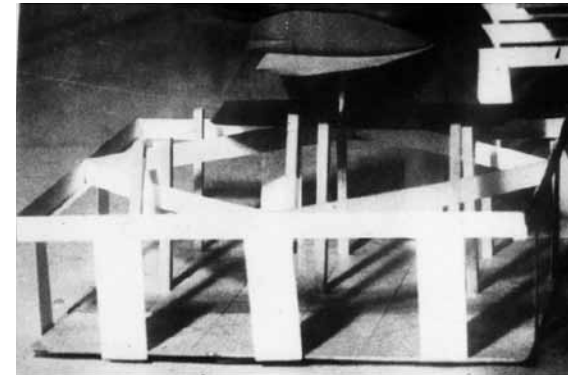
Le Corbusier's first site plan of the Cultural and Sports Complex including the Parish church, June 10th 1961.



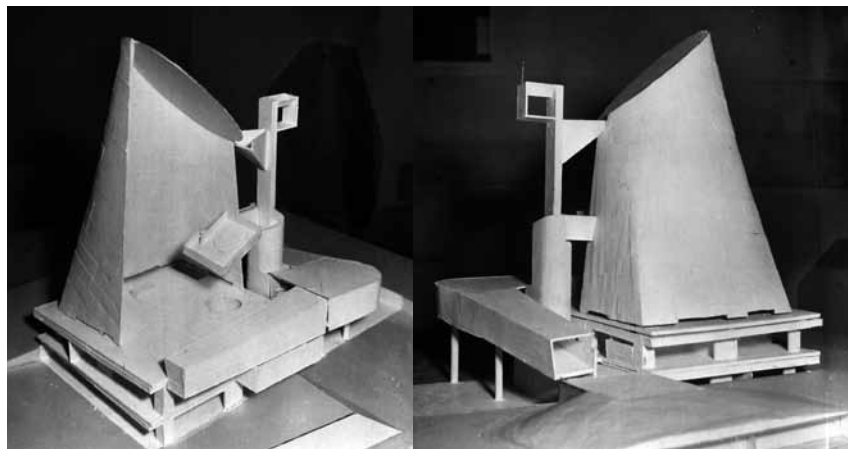
Meeting at the Atelier: José Oubrière, Eugène Claudius-Petit, Le Corbusier, RP Cocagnac, father Tardy, October 30th 1961.



Study model, November 1961.



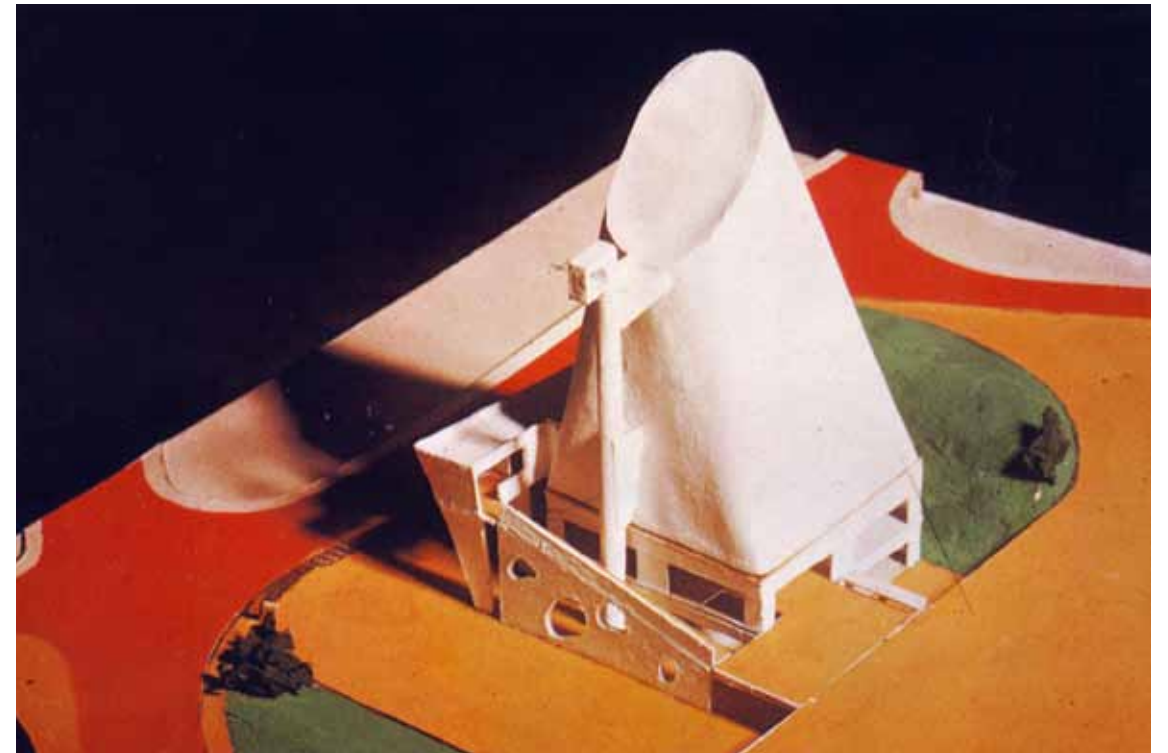
Study model: structure, December 1962.



Study model, November 1961.



Study model: geometry of the shell, November 1961.



First project, site model, October 1962.



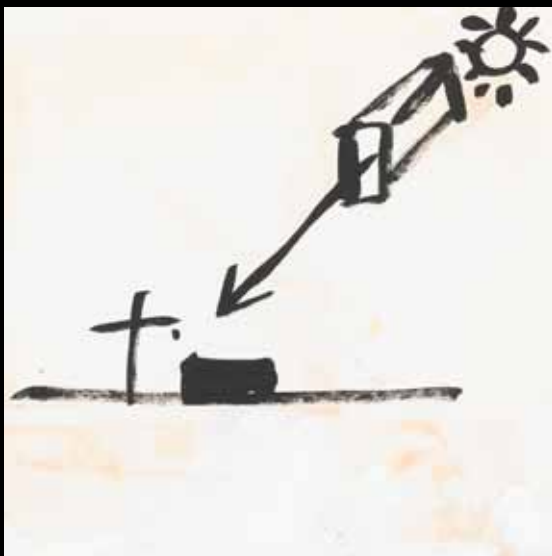
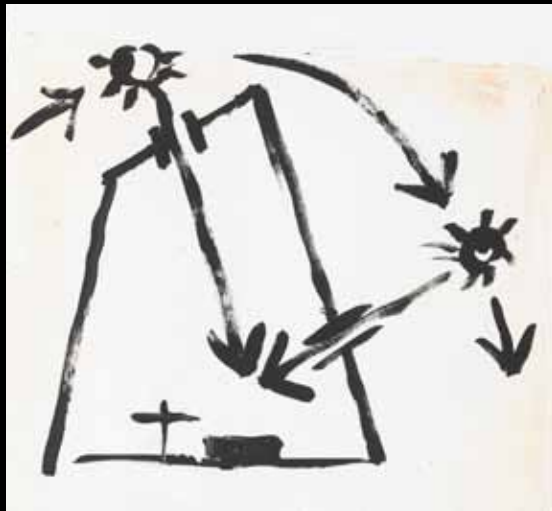
SKETCHES & MODELS 1970-2006  
ATELIER WYLDE-OUBRERIE

Hd

"ideograms"

Joe Brown  
April 29  
1981 NYC



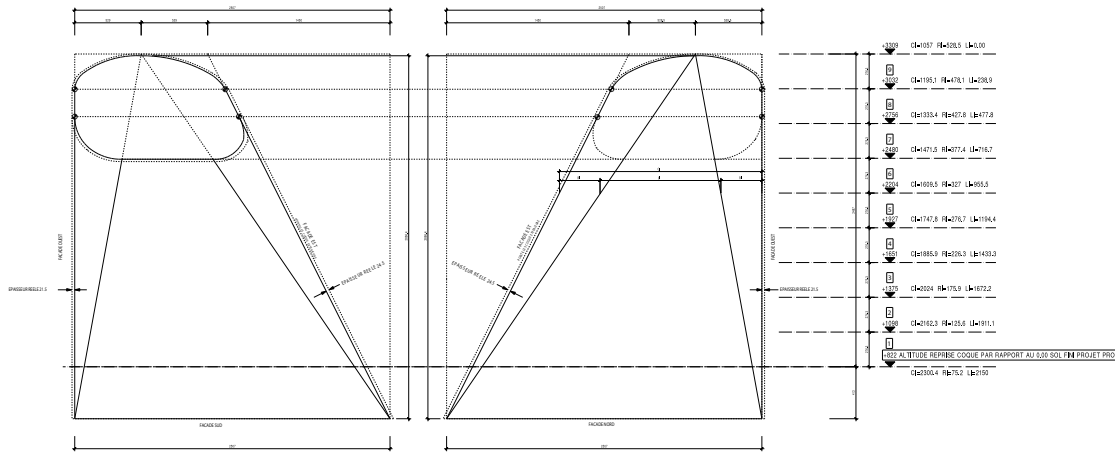




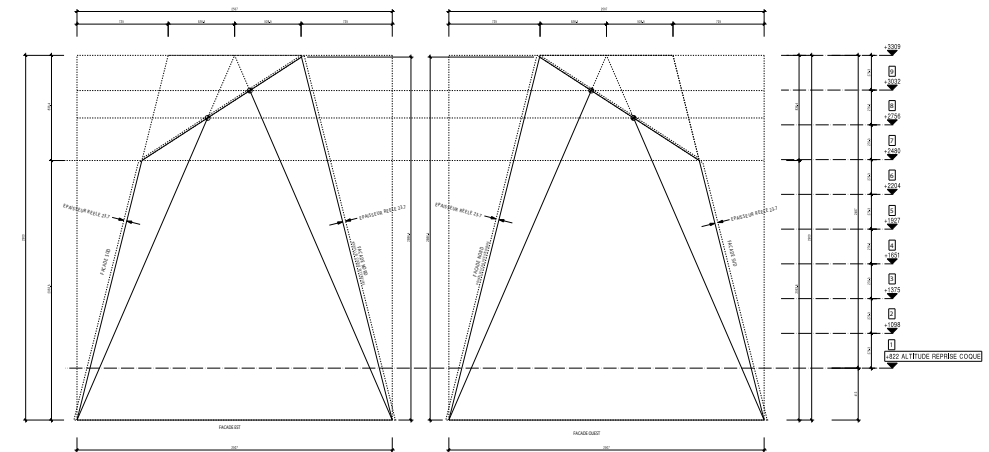
Model Atelier Oubriere architecte, 1970-79 (modified several times).



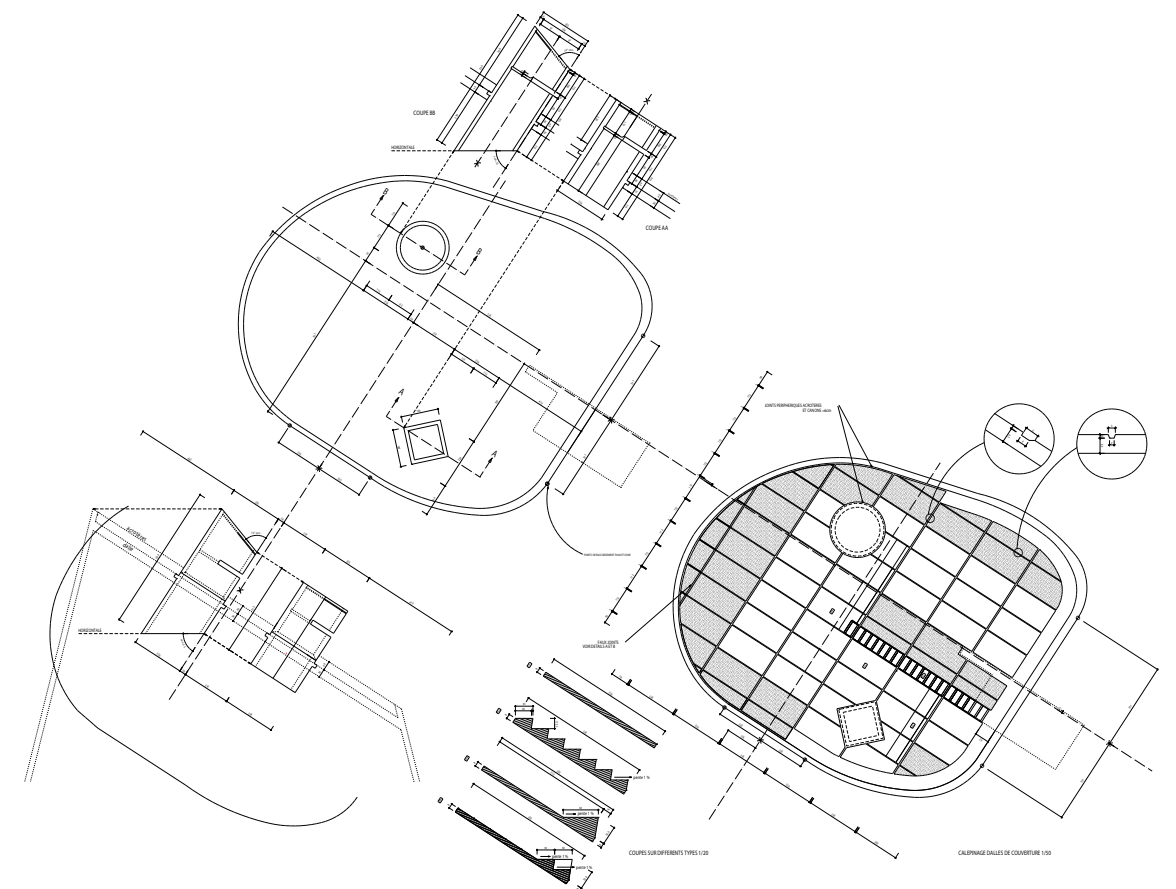




The transition from the circle of the top to the square of the base of the shell is achieved by the means of a simple geometry of triangular shaped planes and portions of cones, all cut by a tilted plane, the "cork" of the shell.



The light-cannons surge like extruded pieces from the "cork" surface, their geometry recalls the generating figures of the shell.



Next spread: The "cork" closing the shell shaft with two light canons, the "bell" tower and the cross.







Crossed visuals in the ground floor.







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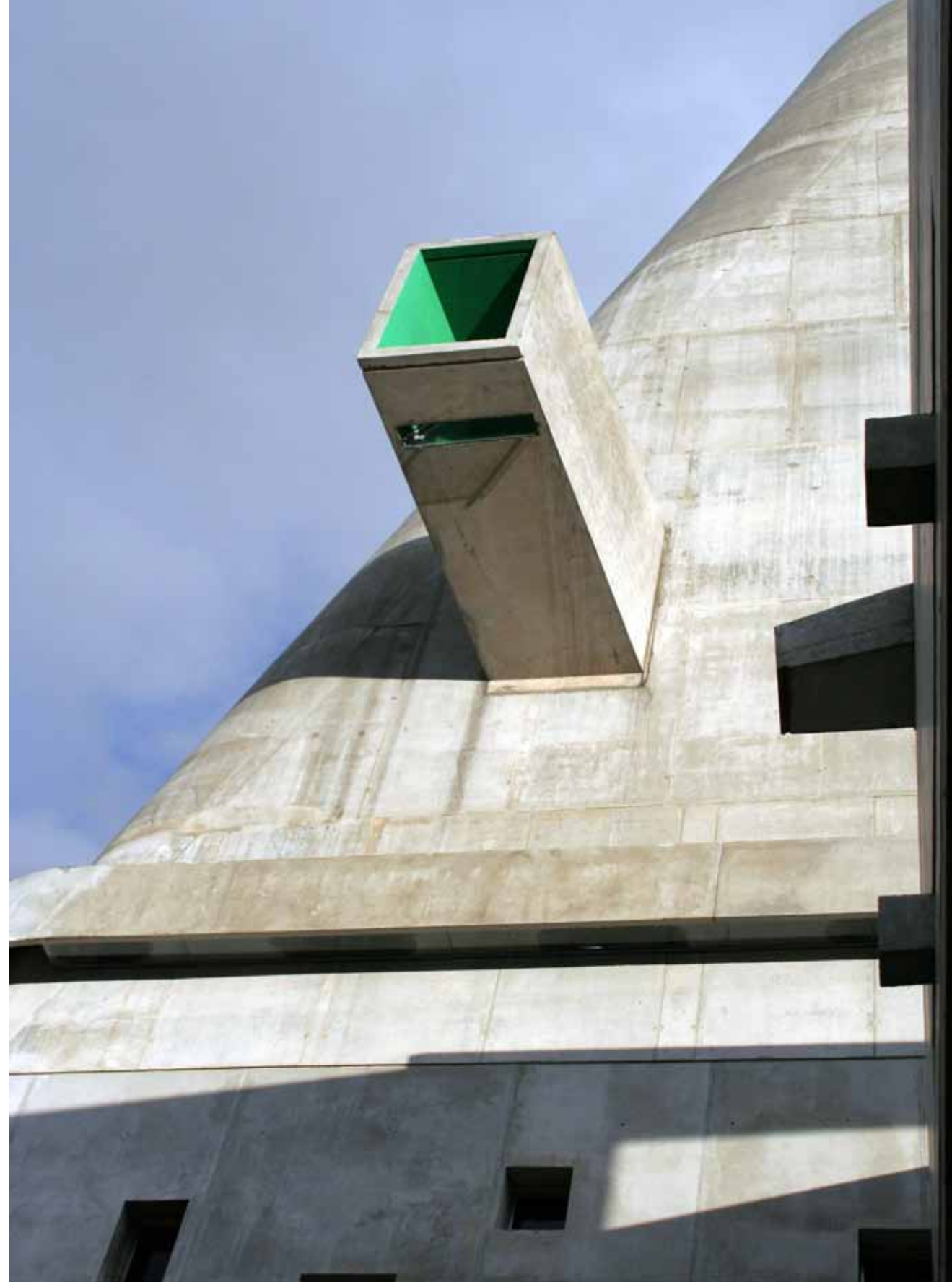


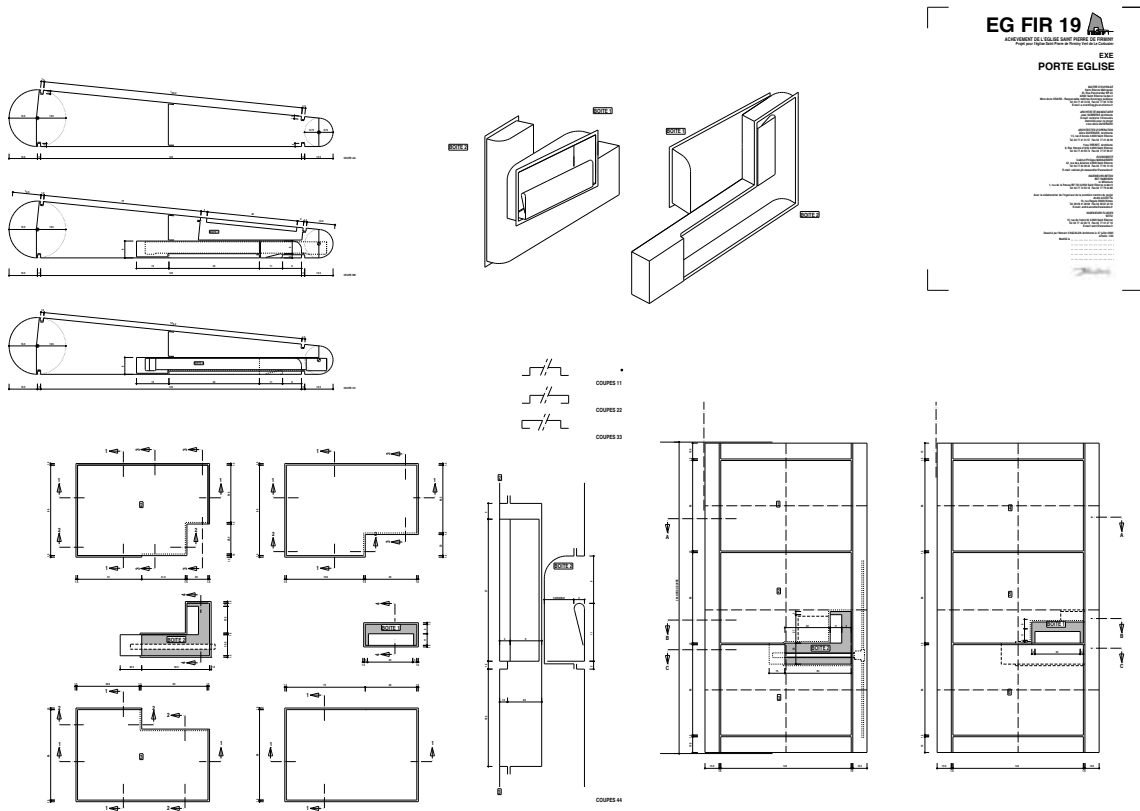
The water runs in the peripheral gutter and is led to a canal surrounding the "base" by means of a vertical shaft.





The west light canon, right over the entrance to the church.





As the entrance door slowly opens up, the low dark hall and the mezzanine level compress the space, reinforcing the visual connection with the altar placed along the same axis.



Above and Next Spread: Once inside, the play of light helps to establish a spatial hierarchy.





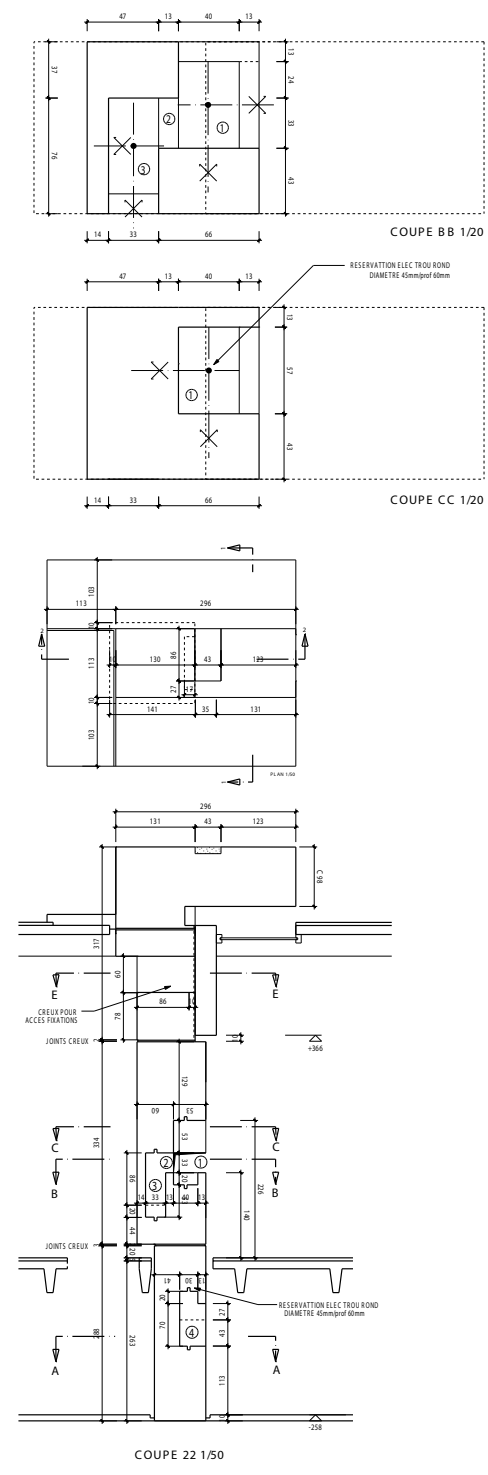
Left: the south light canons: square and circle.



The western light canon illuminates the altar at sunset.







Details of the main altar.



Seat of the assembly president. Place of the red candle representing the presence of Jesus..





The church during its official opening ceremony, 24th-25th November 2006 with illumination by Daniel Charpentier.  
Above, west façade. Right, south façade.



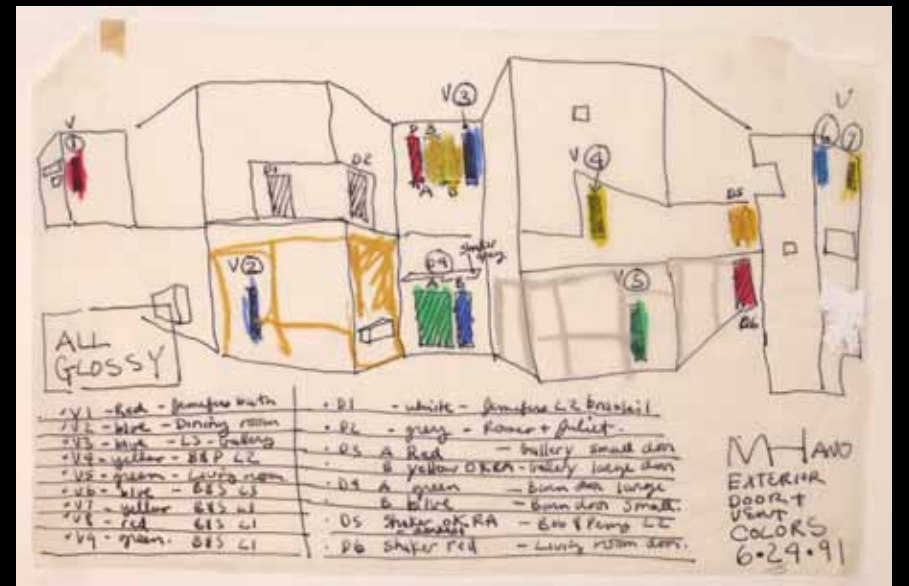
Next Spread. East facade with the House of Culture in the foreground.

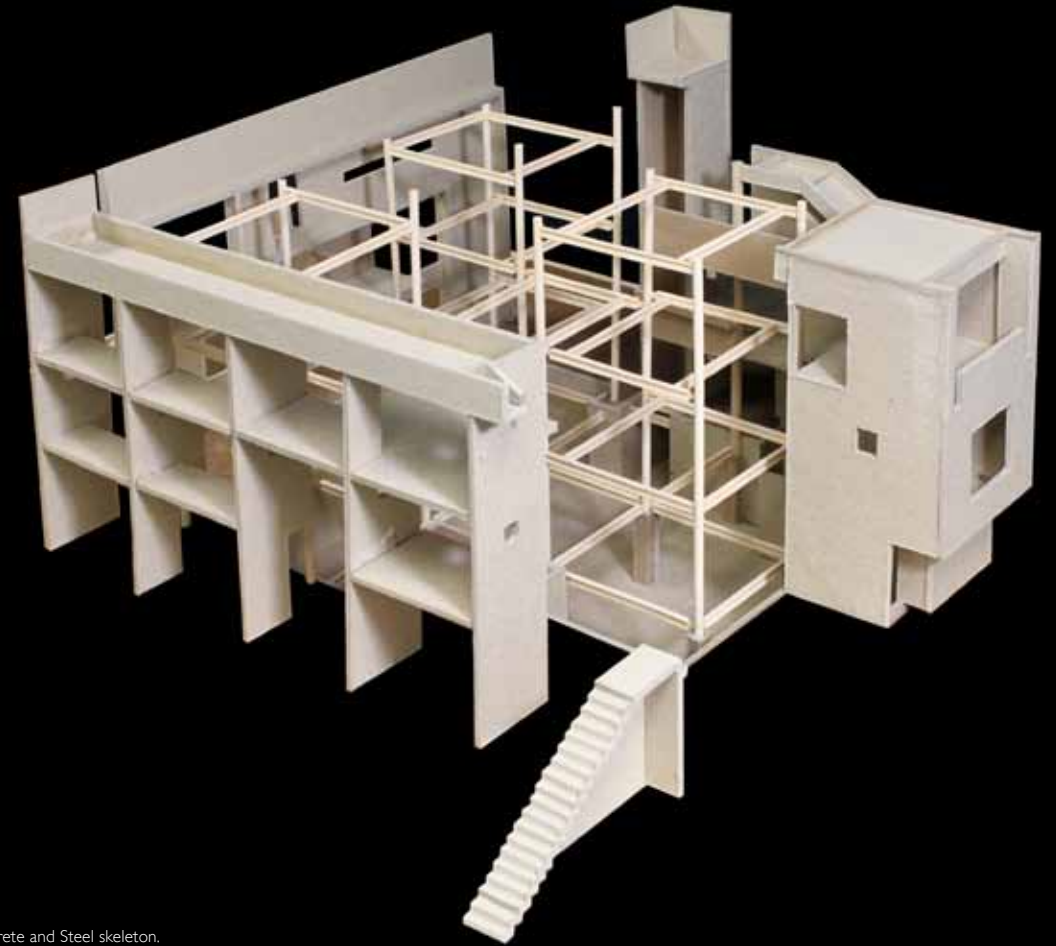
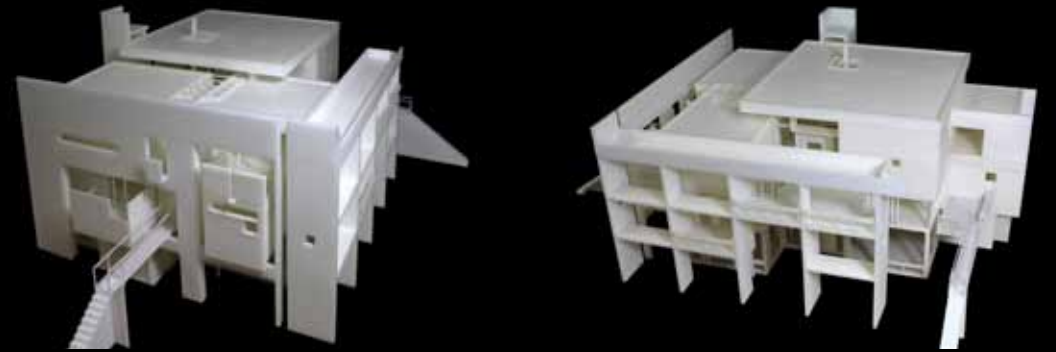
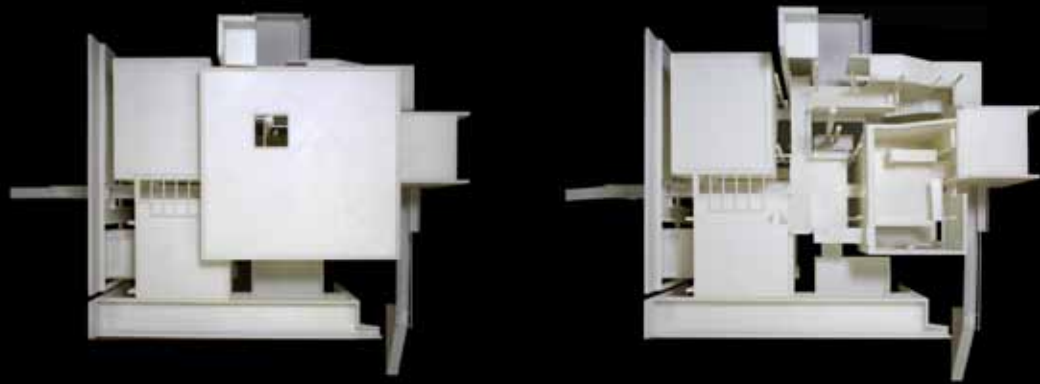


MILLER HOUSE



Color Studies - 1991.

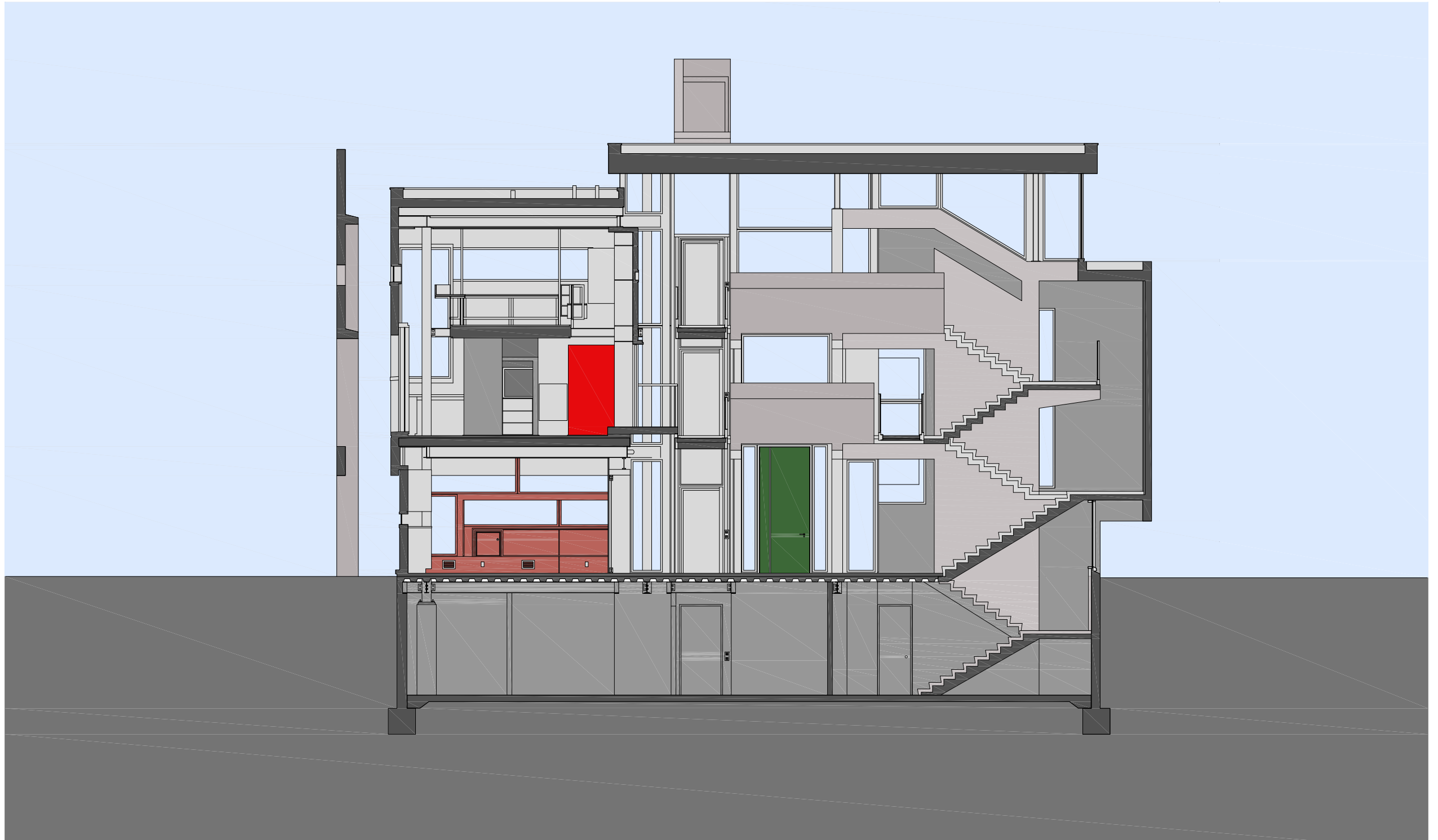




Model for CCNY Exhibition - 2010.

Concrete and Steel skeleton.





Section West-East on west wall, sons' house above kitchen, catwalks and center space , main stair.

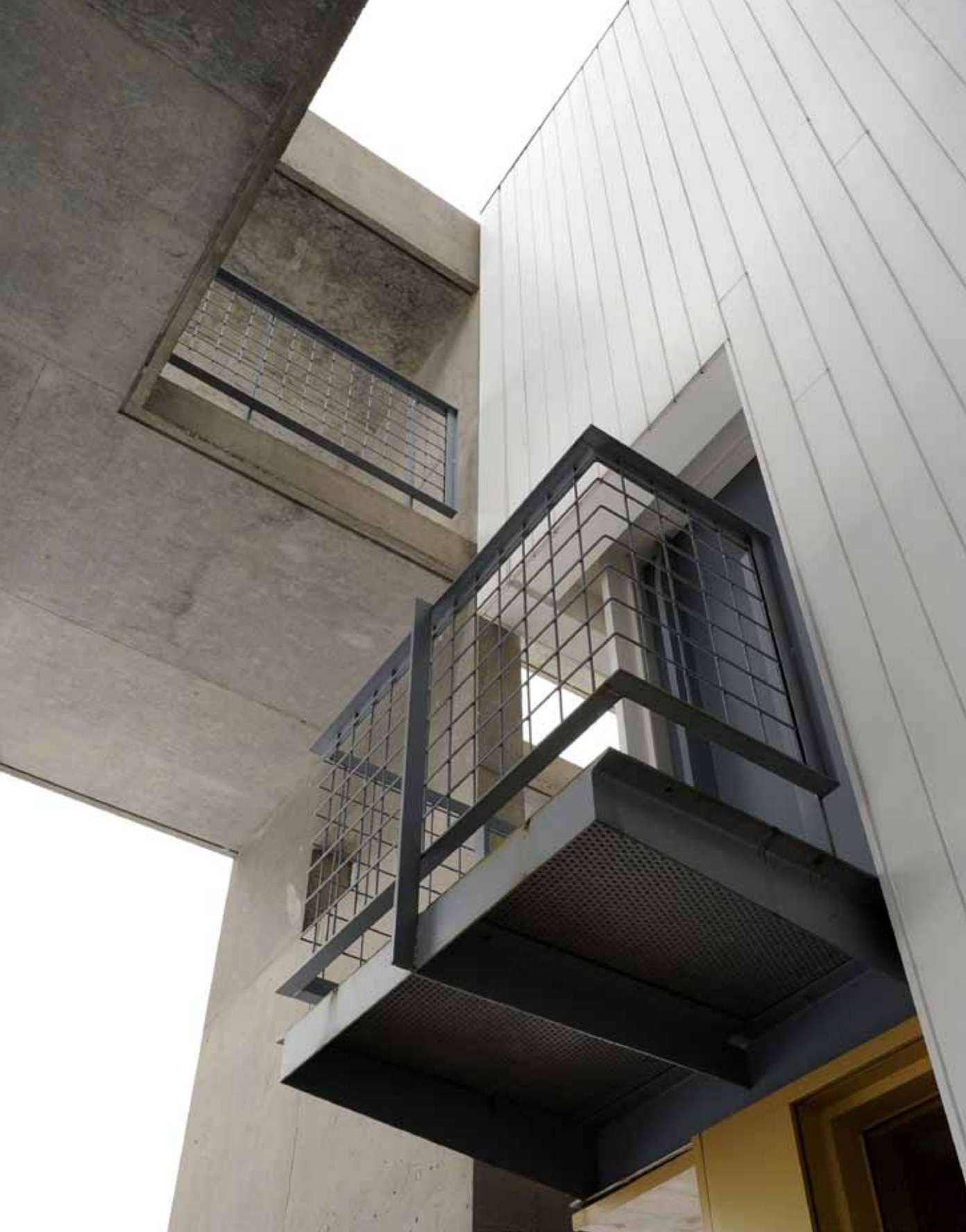




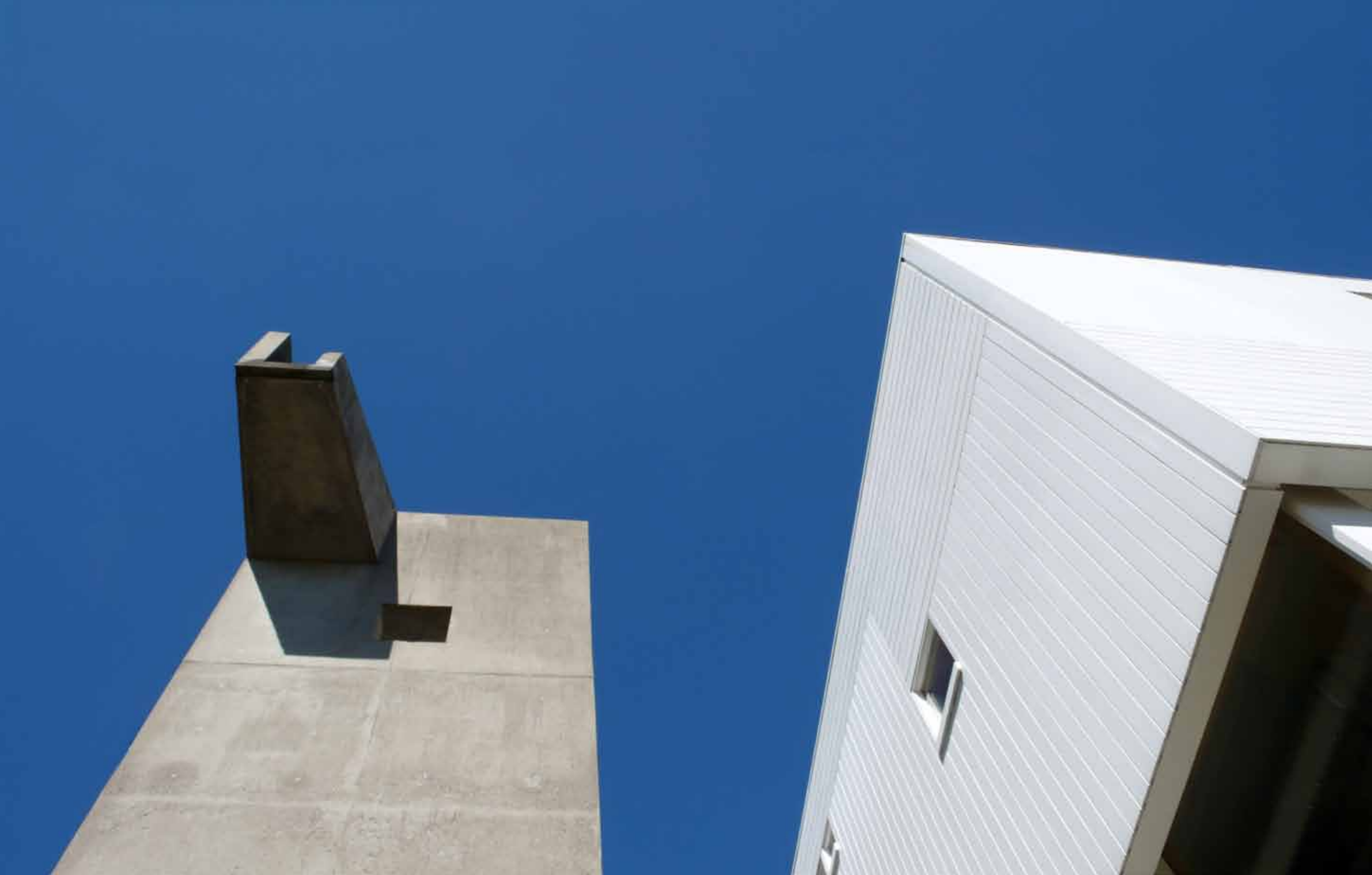
West wall facade details.







South Portico details (until page 255).  
Left: "Romeo and Giulietta" daughter's balcony.



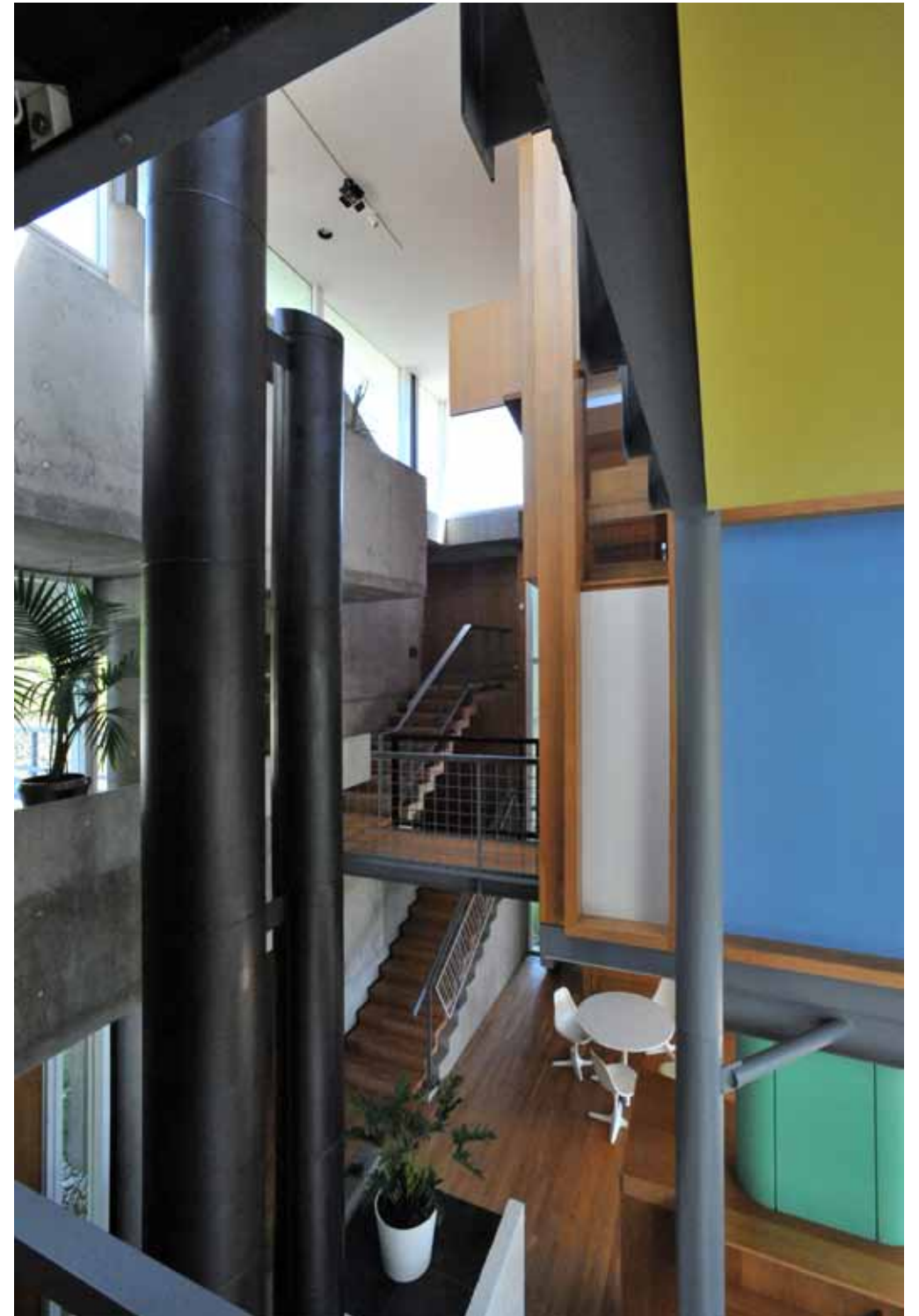




North facade: main stair and elevator, canopy above entrance.



Center space views from catwalk second floor.







Upper living room third floor.



Kitchenette and access to portico terrace.  
Left: Upper living room and center space view from third floor catwalk.



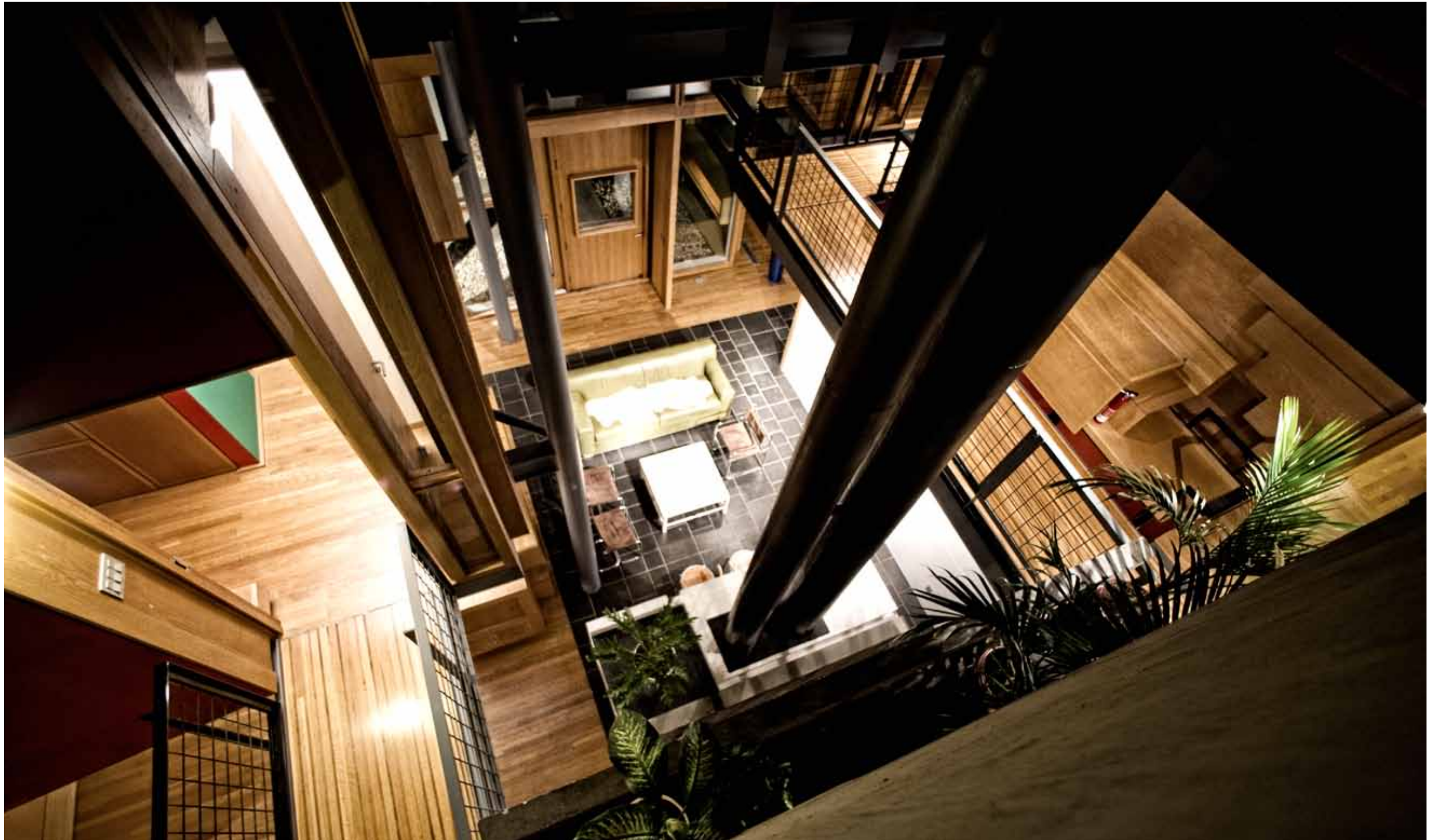
Horizontal window on mezzanine level.



Daughter's interior stair.







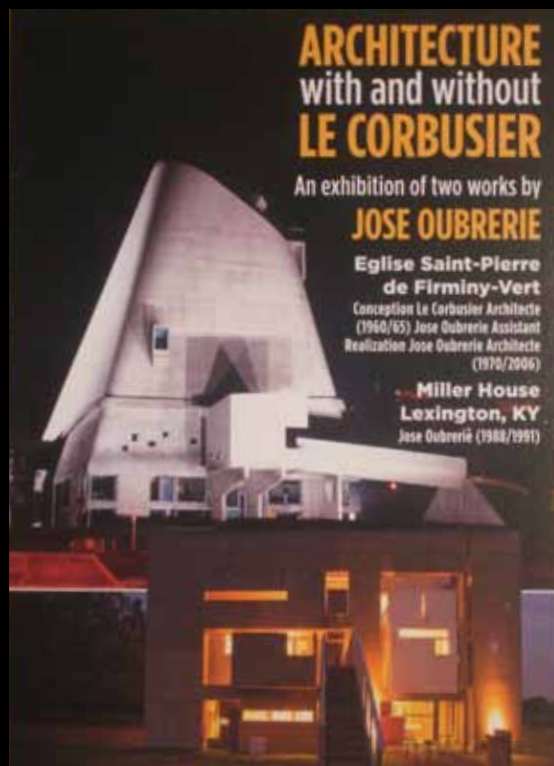
Top view of center space.







# THE EXHIBITION



Kenneth Frampton, José Oubriere and George Ranalli.









