Le Corbusier  

Sainte-Marie de La Tourette - Eveux, France

**Housing Type**
*Past: Monastery*
*Present: Study Center*
*1956-1959*

**Total Square Footage**
*16,500 sq. ft.*

**Structure**
*rough reinforced concrete*

**Comments**
*functional with monumental hardness and plays of light*

**Bibliography**


**Site / Context**

Sainte-Marie de La Tourette is a monastery of the Dominican order in Eveux France, near Lyons. It is located in the country because it was an addition to the already existing part of the monastery to the North. The countryside location is out of the ordinary for monasteries, as they are typically located within a city’s boundaries; the site was originally intended as a school.

Le Corbusier was inspired by Le Thoronet, a Cistercian monastery in the South of France. The irregularly sloped site allowed the architect to explore a unique concept - the upside down city. By raising the structure on pilotis that lets the terrain undulate at will, circulation was provided at the top of the structure. One enters and circulates downward through the building to reach the atrium and church, and the interior courtyard is reminiscent of monasteries of the past. The design allows for maximum views as well as provided a secure, enclosed environment.

Today, the monastery serves as a study and research center - the Centre Thomas More, much like Le Corbusier originally intended it to be.
Building

The main entrance is located towards the top of the scheme, and it leads to the U-shaped residence and study units, which are on the top two floors. There are one hundred modest sleeping rooms, and the study halls and lecture rooms are located on the entrance floor. There is also a hall for work and a hall for recreation, and circulation connects all parts. One can circulate down into the atrium, and proceed to the spiritual and service rooms on the ground floor. The spaces include the refectory, main church, sacristy, high altar, and side chapel.

With La Tourette, Le Corbusier departed from his previous style of flowing indoor and outdoor spaces, and manipulated light through modest openings in the thick concrete. His goal was "to discover, to create a different, other architecture, unique and original in its essential nudity" (Le Corbusier, "The Monastery of La Tourette", pp. 143). This is an efficient, machine of a building with its exposed painted ducts, yet is not overpowering in its overall design (for example, with the delicate screens exposed to the exterior of the building).
Chapel Plan

**Single Significant Element**

Corbusier stated “Light for me is the fundamental basis of architecture” (Le Corbusier, Elements of a Synthesis, pp. 98). The side chapel to the side of the main church at La Tourette appears to be the most powerful and intriguing. It is a personalized chapel in that it allows the monks to read mass silently each morning at their own altar. These altars are in the form of a block and table that rise from six platforms. This symbolizes the rise from earth to heaven, the paths the monks tock everyday. It also symbolizes Christ in the Sacrament descending onto the altar, and hope rising afresh.

All of this takes place in the innermost domain of the monastery, with a lower ceiling bringing the monks closer to the earth. This space on the lower floor bulges out into the sloping landscape, engaging with the outside through its free form shapes, which contrasts greatly from its tall, rigid neighbor. Giant domes of light also make this space quite unique, which pour light over colored walls. Le Corbusier called them “light guns”, and they help create a powerful and inspiring space.
The Monastery of La Tourette has panes of glass on three exterior faces, forming "an undulatory glass surface." These openings allow for maximum light to penetrate, for air to circulate through to the inner courtyard, as well as provide a view out to the woods. The garden-facing sides have large concrete elements from floor to ceiling with glazed voids and are separate from each other by "ventilators" (vertical slits covered with metal mosquito netting). The corridors to the cells are lighted by a horizontal opening located under the ceiling.

The longitudinal section above demonstrates how the sloping site makes this monastery unique. Users and visitors enter from the top, while allowing the cells maximum vantage points from above (A) and the service areas to fit below (B) and (C). The church acts as a massive wall on the north side that focuses the circulation and interaction inwards to the courtyard, while maintaining a sense of enclosure and protection. This entirely introverted church is also set apart physically from the rest of the building, further emphasizing its strength of form and function.
On the upper two floors of La Tourette are the one hundred cells that overlook the woods to the exterior and the courtyard to the interior. These cells were primarily meant as sleeping rooms for teachers and students, but housed monks for many years. They became a place to meditate and study in privacy, and fulfills their necessary required hours of solitary. Each cell contains a table, cupboard, a bed, both walls lined with books, and a small patio.

Even though the dimension of these rooms is small, approximately 8' x 24', they permit the monk to breathe freely. Le Corbusier’s extensive study into human proportions and their relationship to the environment seems to have been proven very useful. The conventional design of the repetitive units around a courtyard seems quite the opposite in Le Corbusier’s case. He manipulates light and space in a unique way that create incredibly powerful spaces.
Diagram 1 indicates the spatial hierarchy of La Tourette. Although the church is only slightly taller than the remainder of the building, its sheer massiveness, lack of openings, and location separate from the rest of the building give it a definite presence over the rest of the building. Diagram 2 indicates the surrounding rural terrain, natural ventilation that enters and exits the courtyard, and the sunlight that enters primarily from the south and east. Diagram 3 shows the most public spaces in light gray, the most private spaces in dark gray, and the transitional/circulation areas in medium gray. Diagram 4 highlights the circulation path of the monastery, including the main entrance. Diagram 5 indicates the privacy created in the scheme through its enclosure, as well as the privacy created within the structure as a result. Finally, Diagram 6 is an original sketch by Le Corbusier indicating his original intentions for the building. The main entrance and the atrium spaces changed, but the rest of the scheme remained solid throughout.