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## Une lumière de l'Architecture—Memories of Santa Maria in Cosmedin

**JOHAN LINTON.** In this interview Guillermo Jullian de la Fuente – one among Le Corbusier's most trusted collaborators – in a personal and animated way, shares his insight into Le Corbusier's architecture. Jullian de la Fuente also supplies significant information on the church of La Tourette and its relation to Santa Maria in Cosmedin in Rome. As is well known Le Corbusier visited the church during his Voyage d'Orient in 1911. A photo of Amédée Ozenfant, with the campanile of Santa Maria in Cosmedin in the background, makes it very probable that Le Corbusier also visited the church during his trip to Rome in August 1921. In his article "La leçon de Rome" from 1922, he then singled out Santa Maria in Cosmedin and Michelangelo's part of San Pietro as the architectural highlights of Rome's churches.<sup>1</sup> While San Pietro became a point of reference in Le Corbusier's continued discourse on architecture, his relation to Santa Maria in Cosmedin seems to have been confined to silence. One might note however that Ozenfant, in his review of *Vers une architecture* (1923), mentions the church together with San Pietro, the Capitole and the Parthenon as "ces lumières de l'Architecture".<sup>2</sup>

Since the interview was made I have not had the opportunity to continue my investigation regarding Le Corbusier's relation to Santa Maria in Cosmedin and its significance for the creation of the church of La Tourette. Hopefully future research will throw further light upon these matters.

My interview was made by telephone and recorded on the 18th of December 1997. The transcription of the interview was then approved by Jullian de la Fuente, and presented in a thesis for a Masters Degree in Architecture at Chalmers University of Technology in Göteborg, Sweden, March 1998.<sup>3</sup> It was then published in Italian in the publication *Le Corbusier, il programma liturgico* (2001).<sup>4</sup> This, however, is the first time that the interview is officially published in its original version. It is presented here as in 1998, except for some footnote additions.

### INTERVIEW

J L :

Mr. Jullian de la Fuente, as you know from my letters I'm interested in Le Corbusier's relation to the church Santa Maria in Cosmedin in Rome. By chance I met Mr. Trancik in Rome and he told me that he remembered that you had mentioned this church in relation to Le Corbusier.<sup>5</sup> Later I found a note in the archives of the Fondation Le Corbusier in Paris that refers to a visit to Rome (for a meeting with Nervi<sup>6</sup>) in September 1960, where it is written "Voyage de MM. LE CORBUSIER - PRESENTE - JULLIAN".<sup>7</sup> I then guessed that you might have received information about Le Corbusier's interest in this church during this, or some other, visit to Rome together with Le Corbusier.

G J F :

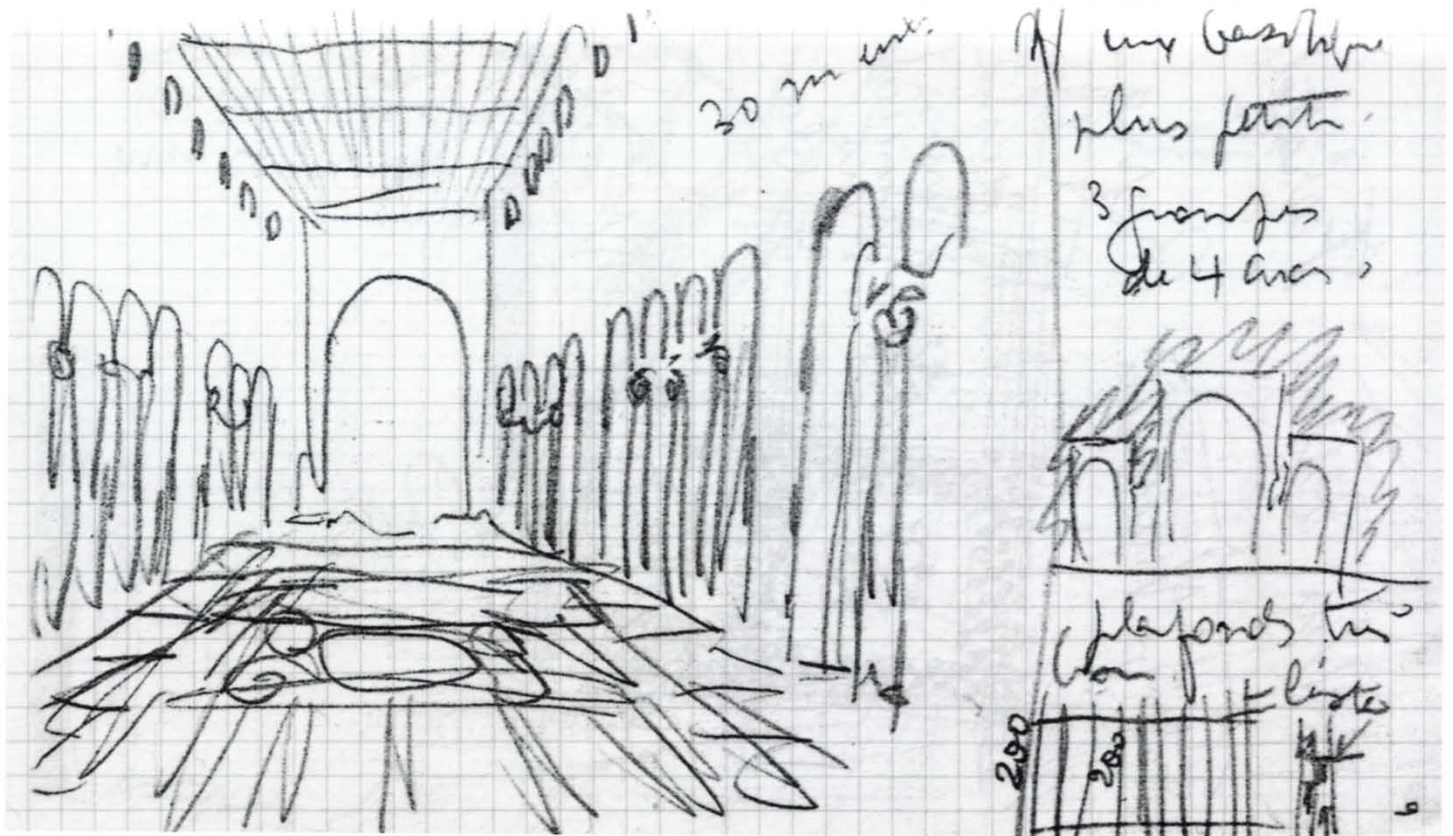
Well, I think I can tell you exactly about the things you wish to know and also answer some of the questions in your letters. The visit I made with Le Corbusier to Rome was in fact the only time I heard him speak directly of Santa Maria in Cosmedin. I remember how we went there – I can't remember what day, but it was during that trip. We were in Rome to study some of the sports buildings, stadiums and things like that, which they had made for the Olympics, and Le Corbusier decided that one of the things he wanted to do was to go and make a visit to Santa Maria in Cosmedin. So we went together that morning – I don't remember exactly who else was with us, but professor Nervi might have been present as well, we had a lot of contact with him by that time. We went to the church and Le Corbusier called me to his side and asked me:

- Jullian look at this church, does it remind you of something?

And I said, well..., - I didn't know what to tell him, you see. And he said to me:

-This is where I got the idea for the church of La Tourette. Literally, the idea is here.

—1 Le Corbusier [sign. "Le Corbusier-Saugnier"], "Architecture I, la leçon de Rome", *L'Esprit nouveau*, n. 14, 1922. —2 Amédée Ozenfant, "Vers une architecture", *L'Esprit nouveau*, n. 19, 1923. —3 Johan Linton, *San Pietro serien – en serie arkitekturövningar och översättningar med texter av Jacques Derrida, Le Corbusier, Enric Miralles & Eva Prats*. Diploma work, M Sc Architecture. Göteborg: Chalmers, 1998. —4 Giuliano Gresleri, Glauco Gresleri (eds), *Le Corbusier, il programma*



And then he told me about the relationship between the space of Santa Maria in Cosmedin and the space of the church of La Tourette. As you know, in the church of La Tourette you have a big vertical volume. But at the same time you have the openings to the sides where you find the altars and the sacristy. That means that you have some space going up and some space going in the vertical way; and also: the central space in la Tourette is not completely horizontal but it goes up in some steps to rise to the altar. And you can find these relationships of space in Santa Maria in Cosmedin as well. In Santa Maria in Cosmedin, as you know, you have the nave as the central space. Well, that central space has a series of colonnades that are lowered by rapport to the central volume, so that, when you enter the church, you have these two types of relationships: first, the very marked height of the church that is like a box put on top of the columns and with openings for the light; and, secondly, you have the horizontal space in which you move and where the light passes through the columns. In the case of la Tourette it's not exactly the same thing, but you have the big space that is, simultaneously, like a big volume and opens to the two sides, to the sacristy and to the altars. You also have the light coming from the top, you remember the

"canon à lumière" or the "mitraillettes à lumière" as I think he called it in that place. So you have the space created by these two relationships and that is also fundamentally marked by the way that you move in the nave or the central space, and the position of the altar. And then in the case of Santa Maria in Cosmedin you have a schola cantorum space, but it doesn't matter what name it has, the important thing is the relationship. It's not exactly as in La Tourette, but the spatial relationship between the vertical space and the horizontal space and the way that you move in the church is there. I remember how incredible it was standing in Santa Maria in Cosmedin listening to Le Corbusier, comparing in my mind the two churches.

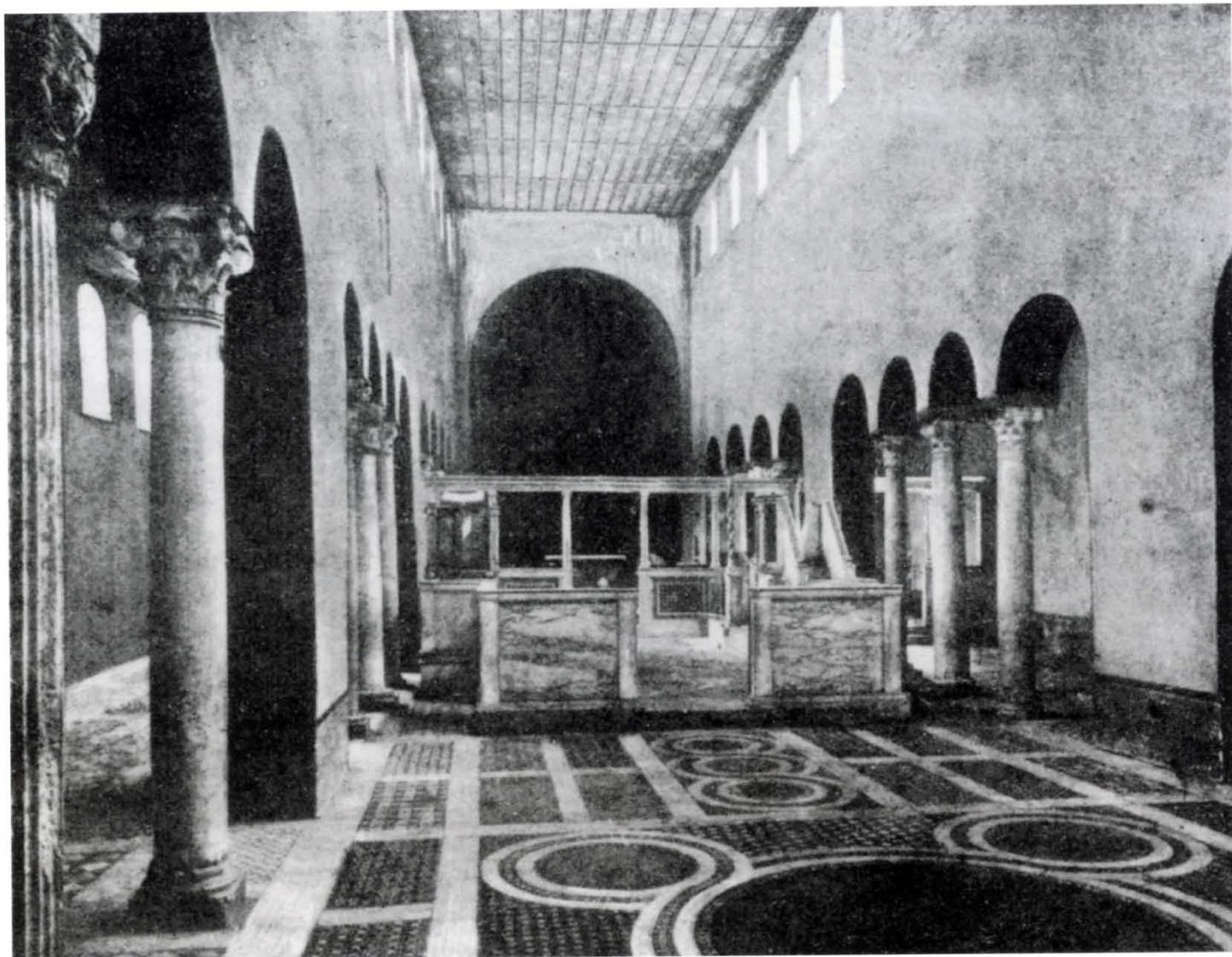
J L :

So Le Corbusier never mentioned Santa Maria in Cosmedin before that morning in Rome when you visited the church together?

G J F :

Well, you see, when we worked together Le Corbusier was always referring to his memories and to the buildings he had seen during the trips he made to Italy and other countries in

*liturgico*. Bologna: Editrice Compositori, 2001. —5 Prof. Roger Trancik was at the time teaching Landscape Architecture and Urban Design at Cornell University. —6 Pier Luigi Nervi is not mentioned in the particular note, but the document was found in an archive folder regarding Nervi. —7 FLC, E2 (17), 22.



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his youth. But it was only at this time that he mentioned the church directly and made the remark that he had this space in mind when he was doing La Tourette. I knew before that Le Corbusier was interested in Santa Maria in Cosmedin, but that was the first and only time he told me directly about it. You see, all the things Le Corbusier did in his life were like memories of the trips he made to different parts of the world and which he transformed into contemporary architecture. I find this very beautiful. I was very fascinated when we went to see the church of Santa Maria in Cosmedin.

Another more anecdotal thing I remember from that visit is the Bocca della verità, you know, the big stone sculpture like a face at the entry of the church. As you know, there is a tradition that says that if you put your hand in the mouth and

tell a lie the mouth will bite your hand off. Well, when we came there Le Corbusier put his hand in the mouth, and then he said to me: Jullian I forbid you to put your hand in the mouth, because I can't permit that you should risk losing your hand.

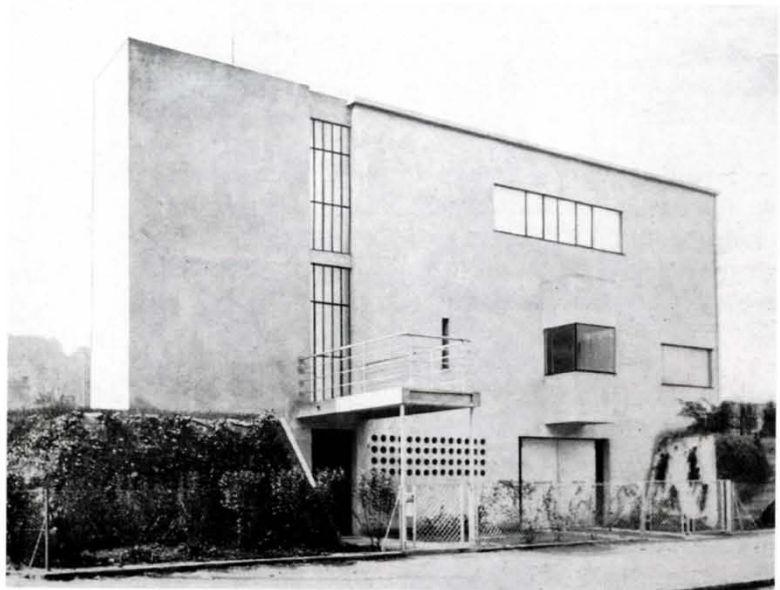
J L :

I am puzzled by his silence on the subject. Of course, I know of the sketch in the *Carnets du Voyage d'Orient* that he made during his first visit to Rome.<sup>8</sup> It's the only drawing of the church by Le Corbusier that I know of. In the small notes next to the drawing there is nothing to suggest the strong impression that is later evident in the article. I have also seen the material related to the publication of the article "La leçon de Rome". I have found two manuscripts. The first of

—8 Ch.-E. Jeanneret, *Le Corbusier, Voyage d'Orient, Carnets*, en Giuliano Gresleri (ed). 6 vols. Milano: Electa Moniteur, 1987, Carnet 5, p. 9. —9 FLC, B2 (15), 162. —10 FLC, B2 (15), 87-91. —11 FLC, B2 (15), 97. —12 FLC, B2 (15), 96. —13 FLC, B2 (15), 122-124. —14 Alinari has, since I first presented the interview, confirmed that the picture mentioned is the photo of the interior space of Santa Maria in Cosmedin, published in the article "La leçon de Rome" (1922) and then in *Vers une architecture* (1923). As is mentioned above, the photo was retouched by Le Corbusier who, among other things, erased the tabernacle. It might be



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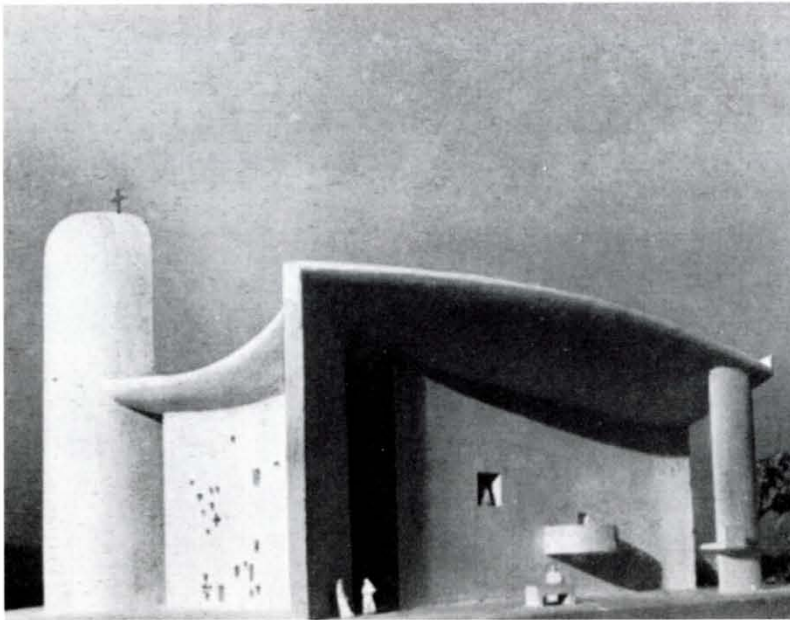
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- 1 Le Corbusier's drawing of the interior of Santa Maria in Cosmedin from the Voyage d'Orient 1911.
- 2 The Alinari photo 26560 showing the interior of Santa Maria in Cosmedin – retouched by Le Corbusier. In a well known note referring to the photo is written “enlever tabernacle // décor sous les arcs // les fenêtres blanches dans bas côté”
- 3 Amédée Ozenfant in front of the so called Vesta Temple and the campanile of Santa Maria in Cosmedin in 1921.
- 4 Exterior balconies of the Villa à Vauvresson.

them, treating the three articles “Architecture” together, have a few general notes about “les Byzantins/Esprit”, without mentioning the church.<sup>9</sup> The “original” manuscript speaks of the church in similar terms as the article.<sup>10</sup> The notes that relate to the illustrations in the article don't provide any further information about his relation to the church.<sup>11</sup> The notes where he writes about retouching the three images of the church are interesting but give no further information.<sup>12</sup> One image of the church is mentioned in notes as well as in a letter concerning reproductions for the article.<sup>13</sup> The image mentioned is the “Alinari 22560”, and, unfortunately, I have not been able to trace the code - so I don't know which one of them it is, or if it may be an image not reproduced in the article.<sup>14</sup> Nor is there, in these notes, any explicit information

about Le Corbusier's relation to the church. I have also found a photo from Le Corbusier's and Ozenfant's visit to Rome in 1921 that shows Ozenfant in front of the Vesta Temple, with the church tower of Santa Maria in Cosmedin in the background.<sup>15</sup> Apart from this, I haven't found any material whatsoever where Le Corbusier mentions the church. I find this rather curious. Many of the buildings he paid attention to in Rome appear in his texts, drawings and notes over and over again. In contrast, Santa Maria in Cosmedin seems to be mentioned as having made a strong impression, as a building he admires greatly, only once. It is then confined to total silence. Take, for example, the document cited by Jean Petit in *Le Corbusier parle* where Le Corbusier mentions his visit to St Peter's with Nervi. Alongside St Peter's, Le

interesting to note that when he much later revisited San Pietro with Nervi, he was critical about almost everything in the interior except Bernini's tabernacle or baldachin that he found “beautiful, marvellous, well proportioned and full of emotion” (“beau, étonnant, proportionné et plein d'émotion”). Le Corbusier, *Le Corbusier parle*. Jean Petit (ed). Genève: Forces vives, 1967, pp. 37-38. —15 FLC, L1(6) 4-5.



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5 Exterior balcony in Ronchamp-model.

6 Exterior balcony or chair after Viollet-le-Duc.

Corbusier mentions other buildings in Rome, such as the Coliseum, the Basilica of Constantine, and St Lorenzo. But there is not a word on Santa Maria in Cosmedin, the only building in the article on Rome that is given the same amount of positive attention as St Peter's.<sup>16</sup>

G J F :

Yes, that is curious. Santa Maria in Cosmedin was one of the most important moments when I was with Le Corbusier in Rome, you see.

J L :

Another question to which I have tried to find an answer is whether Le Corbusier was familiar with other opinions on Santa Maria in Cosmedin before he visited the church for the first time. Had he been influenced by other opinions on this church – the views of, for example, Ritter or L'Éplatténier, or from books he had read? Surely, he must have read the information in his Baedeker.<sup>17</sup> Could he have been aware of the fact that Stendhal, for example, regarded it as one of the most curious churches in Rome?<sup>18</sup>

G J F :

That I can't tell you, but I know that Le Corbusier had a love for the Romanesque, the Romanic type of architecture. He found it more pure, and, in my opinion, that is why he loved Santa Maria in Cosmedin. Another illustration of his love for the Romanesque is Le Thoronet, which, as you know, he also had in mind when he was working with La Tourette. But the reference was always to the way in which the space worked, and never to style. The important thing with Santa

Maria in Cosmedin was the purity of the construction, the way the space worked, the way that light was let in. He drew upon his memories, but he did his own work – as we are all trying to do.

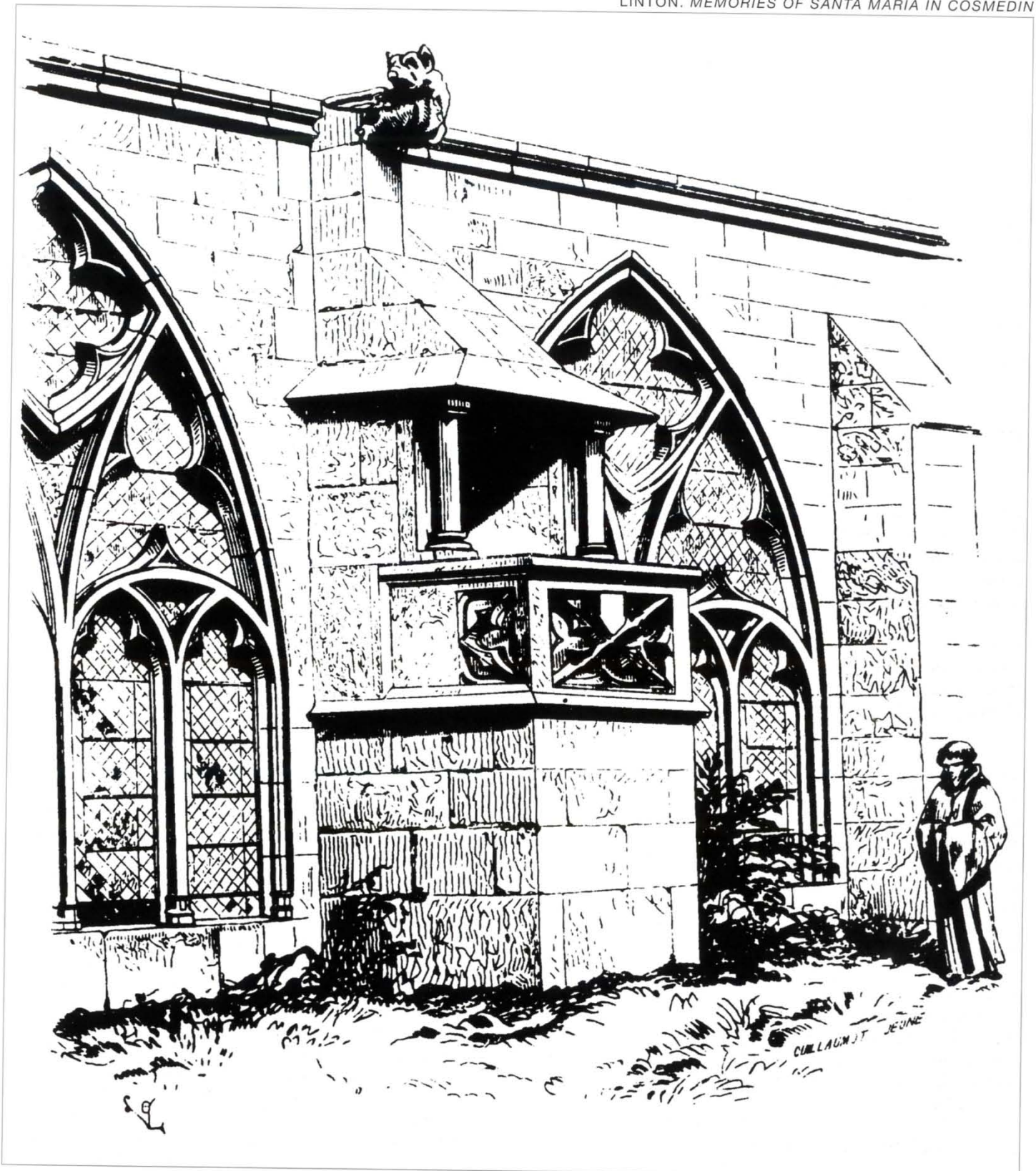
J L :

In the article, he lends a great deal of weight to the pulpit and the ambo in Santa Maria in Cosmedin. Did he mention those architectural features when he spoke to you about the church?

G J F :

Well, in a way no and in a way yes. You know that Le Corbusier when he designed his big spaces was always very interested in the things he called "objets à réaction poétique" that means the objects he put in the architecture like furniture which gave a certain tone, a musicality to the space, a sort of punctual thing. I think he was interested in the way the pulpit became like an element, like an anchor of the space where you can fix your view by rapport to the big space. In all the architecture of Le Corbusier you can find that at the same time as he puts a lot of effort in the big spaces - in the way that he organizes the territory of his buildings - he also gives great importance to the small objects and details, because it's through them that your view begins to have reference by rapport to the space. In a way it's similar to some primitive paintings in which you can see this type of "furniture" at another scale in the central part of the painting where it becomes like a small building inside of a big building. I'm making a supposition here, but I think he sometimes looked at spaces in this way. I mean, in a way where such an element creates a focal point

—16 Le Corbusier, *Le Corbusier parle*, cit. —17 Karl Baedeker, *L'Italie. Des alpes à Naples. Manuel abrégé du voyageur*. 3d ed. rev. and enl. Leipzig, 1909, p. 296. AFLC, J 142. —18 Stendahl, *Promenades dans Rome*, V. Del Litto (ed). Paris: Gallimard, 1997, p. 394. William Ritter, Le Corbusier and Ozenfant all showed



acquaintanceship with Stendahl. See for example: Ritter to Le Corbusier, Nov 27, 1922, AFLC, R3 (20), 25; Le Corbusier, *Le Corbusier parle*, cit., p. 54; Susan L. Ball, *Ozenfant and Purism. The evolution of a style. 1915-1930*. Diss, Yale University, 1978. Rev. ed. Ann Arbor: UMI Research Press, 1981, p. 43.



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from which your view begins to relate itself to the big space, and for me it's very evident that the pulpit of Santa Maria in Cosmedin belongs to this kind of element.

J L :

I have also been wondering about the fact that in his article on Rome he singles out these two elements, the pulpit and the ambo, in such an extraordinary way. It would even be possible to say that it's the only time in the whole of *Vers une architecture* where such space installations are marked out in this remarkable way; with two photos, and the comment: "the pure and simple beauty that architecture can give".<sup>19</sup> I think, myself, that this reference of his must have something to do with the balcony motif in Le Corbusier's architecture. Can you comment upon that?

G J F:

Yes, I have a comment. As I mentioned before, fundamentally the architecture of Le Corbusier deals with space. You can say that all architecture deals with space, but the architecture of Le Corbusier is a very spatial type of architecture, and a way to handle the perception of space is with this kind of motif that you mention: the balcony. The balcony is a way to make evident that the space is there. You can find it in the Villa La Roche, and you can find it also at the terrace floor of L'Unité d'habitation in Marseille, you remember the balcony that comes out of one of the towers. And you may ask yourself: why is that balcony there? but when you go there you get a certain type of perception of the space in a very strong way. It also appears in the Maison Plainex, for example. In the façade of the Maison Plainex there is a little balcony that comes out. It's a motif that appears all the time because it's the way that you perceive space, sometimes at the inside of the architecture, like in the case of Villa La

Roche, and sometimes at the outside of the architecture, like in the case of Plainex or Marseille. How can I tell you more clearly? It's a bit like the attitude of a cat; I'm going to mark my territory and, pop, I make the balcony. You see, a balcony in a way marks the territory of a house. I'm sitting here looking at a picture of Santa Maria in Cosmedin and of the schola cantorum with the balcony and, yes, I'm sure his idea came from that kind of thing.

J L :

I have been wondering, too, about the time at which the article appears. In Le Corbusier's collection of postcards one can find postcards of pulpits very similar to the one in Santa Maria in Cosmedin that he bought long before 1921.<sup>20</sup> There are also drawings of such pulpits in Viollet-le-Duc's *Dictionnaire raisonné* and in Auguste Choisy's *Histoire de l'architecture*, books which were important to him long before the 1920's.<sup>21</sup> We know as well that he visited the church itself already in 1911.

It's also evident that balconies are present in Le Corbusier's architecture as early as back in La Chaux-de-Fonds. The motif I'm interested in here, though, is the single, pure balcony whose purpose is to create a sort of look-out place. The closest one gets to this in Le Corbusier's La Chaux-de-Fonds architecture is perhaps the balcony over the entrance to Villa Favre-Jacot. But at that time the theme is not developed. It is after the visit to Rome with Ozenfant in 1921 that he first writes about this, and then in 1922 it appears in projects like *Maison d'artiste*, *Maison ouvrière en série* and "Immeubles-Villas". In the same year it is realized in the Villa à Vaucresson. So although it's evident that he was familiar with this kind of architectural motif before the trip to Rome in 1921, it seems very probable to me that he got the impulse to use it in this explicit way after this trip. I have found no archive material, though, that either confirms or contradicts this idea.<sup>22</sup>

—19 Eng. trans. by Frederick Etchells from Le Corbusier, *Towards a new architecture*, 1923. Eng. trans., 1927. Reprint, 1931. Reprint. and enl. London: The Architectural Press, 1987, p. 163. —20 See for example the postcard of the Cathedral of Ravello, AFLC, Cartes Postales, Boîte 6. ITA 204. —21 Auguste Choisy, *Histoire de l'architecture*, 2 vols., 1899. Facsimile. Bibliothèque de l'image, 1996, Vol. 2, p. 67; Eugène-Emmanuel Viollet-le-Duc, *Dictionnaire raisonné de*

7 Le Corbusier in the Olympic village in Rome in 1960. From left to right: unknown, Pier Luigi Nervi, LC, Annibale Vitelozzi, Guillermo Jullian de la Fuente.

G J F :

Well, sometimes ideas are good. I'm looking here at a photo of one of Le Corbusier's paintings which he dedicated to me, and when you begin to look at how the painting is organized you find these flat territories of space in two dimensions, and you have like schola-cantorum-balcony-forms coming from the inside of the painting. For me that element of plasticity in Le Corbusier is something that makes the space become more evident, like in music where an instrument has it's own sound to make the other instruments valid. It's an important motif in this painting as well as in his architecture. So I think your remarks on Santa Maria in Cosmedin are right. I'm sure he must have had this in his mind when he was there in 1921. Even if he didn't tell me about the pulpit on the occasion when we visited the church together, it was evident that he had studied all of the church very carefully. And you know that people like Corb, or you and me who are architects as well, we have all these images and memories from our travels and things like that. We don't speak about them all the time, but sometimes, evidently, they come out. Even if we are not aware of them, they are there somewhere, in the corners of our minds, and suddenly, when we least expect it, they come out. You know that I made the hospital of Venice together with Le Corbusier, and that I was in charge of the whole project. Well, when you look at the first drawings Le Corbusier made for Venice, you also begin to find all these types of thematic elements that later appear also in the drawings of the hospital, even if we never spoke explicitly about it. They came out, they came out as if they were in a secret garden waiting for the moment to appear. So, I think that the more you do this kind of ordered analysis the more you will discover these things. That's an important part of what Le Corbusier is all about.

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*l'architecture française du XIe au XVIe siècle*. 10 vols, 1854-1868. Facsimile. Paris: F. de Nobele, 1967, Vol. 2, pp. 407-409. — 22 The earliest example in *The Le Corbusier Archive*, seems to be an undated sketch for *Maison ouvrière en série* (declared to be of 1922); Le Corbusier, *The Le Corbusier Archive, Early buildings and projects, 1912-1923*. H. Allen Brooks (ed). 32 vols, 1982-1984. Vol 1. New York: Garland, 1982, p. 287.