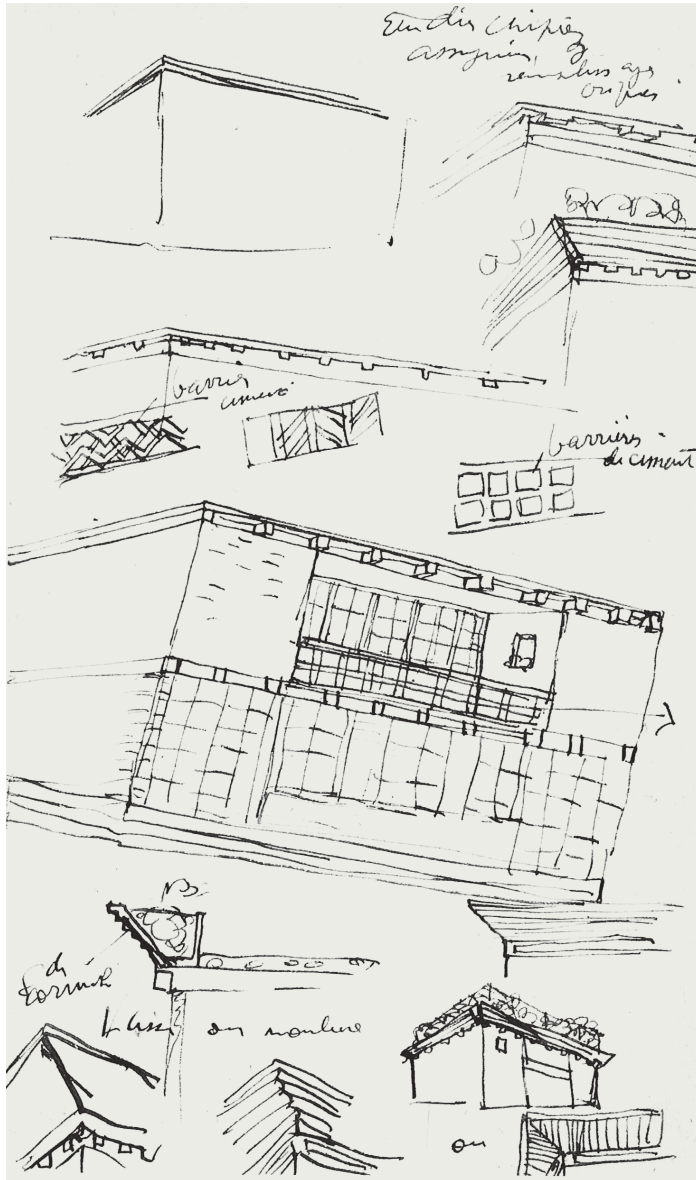


Le Corbusier's Cornice

Maxime Zaugg

"I want to talk about the suppression of the cornice, which nowadays has raised a serious problem and unleashed antagonistic passions. Just as there are no longer any load-bearing walls, [and] no longer



any pitched roofs, one almost normally comes to formulate this heroic principle, which has serious consequences: there is no longer any cornice possible. No wall, no roof, no cornice, the troubling outcome of a technical evolution. What aesthetic consequences, then!" (Le Corbusier, 1924)

In a lecture entitled "L'esprit nouveau en architecture" given at the Sorbonne in June 1924 (and published the following year in the *Almanach d'architecture moderne*), Le Corbusier pleaded for the omission of the cornice. For the first time, he indicated that a cornice was not compatible with new architectural language. Since columns (pilotis) were replacing conventional walls and roof gardens (*toits-jardin*) were replacing conventional roofs,

the cornice was no longer needed for its original function — to protect the wall from rain — and therefore its construction was no longer necessary. In his essay “Où en est l'architecture?” (published in the journal *Architecture vivante* in 1927), Le Corbusier presented six points intended to lead the way for architecture. The fourth point, “la suppression de la corniche,” emphasized the abandonment of the cornice. Le Corbusier would later remove this point from his list when creating his better-known five points of modern architecture. He indicated that the reason for the removal of the cornice was the search for the *technique pure*, a new construction method for a new architectural language. The movement to suppress the cornice thus became obsolete once this concept was promulgated. But Le Corbusier might have had another, more personal reason to not only abandon the cornice but also subsequently to abandon its abolition. The architect had been a keen advocate and designer of cornices and its representative values in his earlier, pre-Parisian life.

From the days of his early interest in architecture and construction, Charles-Édouard Jeanneret had been fascinated by the constructive and visual aspects of the facade meeting the roof of a house. A roof overhang is necessary to protect the facade from rain. This and other structural properties of the cornice are noted in Jeanneret's various personal records, writings, sketches, and technical drawings from around 1910. Sketchbooks from trips to

Switzerland, Germany, and Italy contain a substantial number of technical details and cornice measurements. The architect identified a practical role for the Swiss rural cornice, but later, during visits to Turkey and Greece, he gave more attention to the cornice's visual perception and proportion. He repeatedly drew continuous horizontal lines and the slightly inclined roofs typical of Southeastern Europe, giving the impression of a flat roof. The cornices were drawn in greater detail: their lines are accentuated and thicker in his sketches. Following his return to Switzerland and the beginning of his architectural practice in La Chaux-de-Fonds in 1912, Jeanneret incorporated the cornice in his project drawings and architectural visions. fig. 1 Inscribed with "Assyrien" or "Etudier Chipiez" (in reference to Charles Chipiez, a French architect, Egyptologist, and Iranologist), the sketches highlighted the Middle Eastern inspiration behind the cornice for the then ongoing designs of the Dom-Ino system and the Villa Schwob. Hence, the new construction methods and questions of visual representation of a new type of architecture anything but abolished the cornice, instead making it a celebrated element of architecture.

In Le Corbusier's early work, particularly in the conception of the Dom-Ino construction system in 1914 and the realization of the Villa Schwob in La Chaux-de-Fonds in 1916, the cornice played a conflicting role. The essential concern in working on the Dom-Ino, originally planned as a patent application, was

the visual representation of a new, radical construction method. Here, the cornice assumed the role of a concluding element for the unfamiliar flat roof and a distinctive ornamental attribute. In the section drawing of the Dom-



Ino, the cornice, the only element highlighted with a written comment, is mounted additively to the construction system and marked with "AD LIBITUM." (See fig. 5, page 9) This is remarkable, as it anticipates that the cornice was no longer required by constructional logic but mainly played a visual role in the exterior appearance of the Dom-Ino. fig. 2 As the architect was no longer able to assign it any constructive necessity, the cornice was charged with another function, as indicated by the corrugated lines: it was to be a plant pot.

The cornice was also a dominant element in the Villa Schwob's architectural language. Called the "Villa Turque" by locals because of its unusual design, the building featured a distinctive and ornamental cornice that served to bind its parts together. A photograph of the Villa Schwob retouched by the architect even exaggerates its monumental effect. fig. 3 Conversely, the cornice's technical drawings point out Jeanneret's preoccupation with the proportion, ornamentation, and general appearance of the cornice for the house. Even though the cornice served

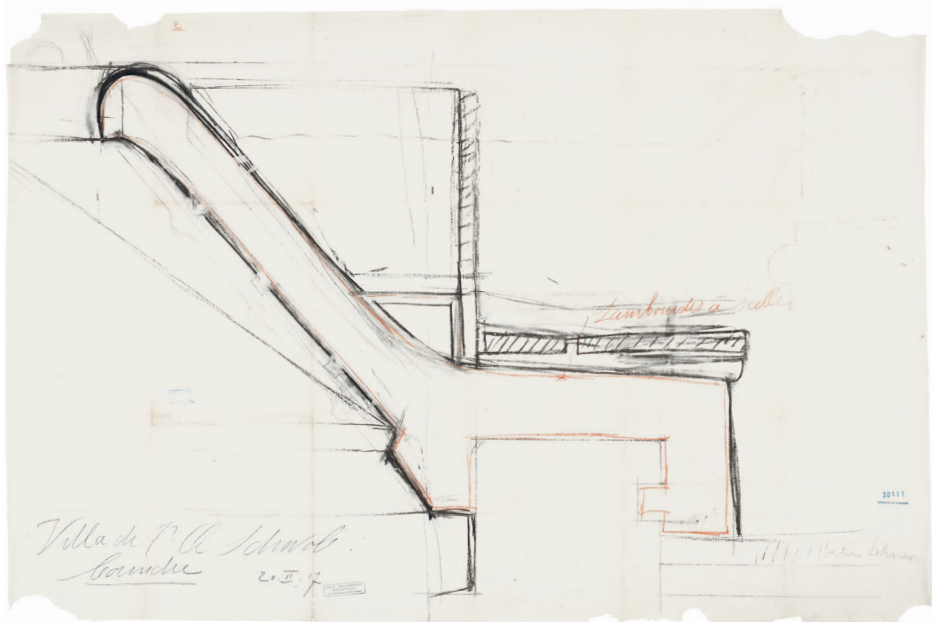
no functional purpose for the roof or the wall, it can be interpreted as an important element necessary to the villa's visual and monumental appeal. As with the Dom-Ino system, the cornice was given additional roles in the villa. Further technical drawings reveal the idea of incorporating a bench to allow people to sit on the inner side of the cornice, and also gave the cornice the function of a flowerpot, positioned on the edge of the roof as a prefabricated concrete element. fig. 4 The cornice's multiple



roles and strong presence in the house's appearance suggest that Jeanneret had begun to look for a functional reason to hold on to an element that he would later discard as unnecessary.

At the beginning of the 1920s and his move to Paris, however, Le Corbusier not only left behind his birth name but also pleaded for a radical new way of thinking in architecture: for an "Esprit Nouveau." Le Corbusier's ambiguous position on the cornice, oscillating between functional necessity and visual expression, significantly influenced his "Esprit Nouveau." As he stated during his Sorbonne lecture in 1924, the cornice was no longer needed as a support for the rafters of a pitched roof. The emergence of a new construction paradigm had led to a logical ban of the cornice and thus, as the architect proudly declared, to an aesthetic revolution in architecture. The architect thus discarded both the cornice and his own past as a designer under a different name.

"To remove the value of the cornice is to inflict a serious breach to acquired habits. But from the aesthetic point of



of view, to admit that the cornice must be suppressed is to contribute a capital element to the creation of a new code of architecture ... it is to arrive at a considerable and truly revolutionary aesthetic consequence." (Le Corbusier, 1924)

Maxime Zaugg is a doctoral candidate at the Chair of the History and Theory of Urban Design, the Institute for the History and Theory of Architecture (gta) at ETH Zurich.

fig. 1 A study of the possibilities of the cornice from Le Corbusier's sketch books. Le Corbusier, Françoise de Francieux, André Wogenscky, and Maurice Besset, *Le Corbusier Sketchbooks*, vol. 1: 1914–1918 (New York: Architectural History Foundation; Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 1981), A2:109
Source: © F.L.C./2021, ProLitteris, Zurich

fig. 2 Le Corbusier, Plan FLC 30291 Maison Dom-Ino. Two dwellings, type B. Sketch, facade elevation with silhouette. Charcoal, coloured oil pastel, 35 × 85 cm / #30.291, 1914
Source: © F.L.C./2021, ProLitteris, Zurich

fig. 3 Le Corbusier, Photographie L3(16)63, Villa Schwob, La Chaux-de-Fonds, 1916. Photographer: unknown
Source: © F.L.C./2021, ProLitteris, Zurich

fig. 4 Le Corbusier, Plan FLC 30111, Villa Schwob, La Chaux-de-Fonds, corniche. Study sketch, section on the cornice with material indications and notes. Fixed black charcoal, red chalk, 99 × 150 cm, February 20, 1917.
Source: © F.L.C./2021, ProLitteris, Zurich