



# **The Unité d'Habitation and the collective dimension**

**The key role of *toit-terrasse***



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## The key role of *toit-terrasse*

Candidate

Francesca Annè 987890

Supervisor

Prof. Lavinia Maria Dondi

School of Architecture, Urban Planning, and Construction Engineering - AUIC  
Bachelor's Degree Program in Architectural Design

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Unité d'Habitation of Marseille (<https://www.fondationlecorbusier.fr>)

# Abstract

This thesis examines Le Corbusier's revolutionary architectural proposal through an analysis of the Unité d'Habitation, which redefined the concept of living within the modern urban context. Le Corbusier envisioned a "vertical city" as a response to increasing urban density, while simultaneously preserving surrounding natural spaces. He conceived these buildings as "machines for living", integrating all the functions necessary for daily life within a single structure: housing, commercial facilities, community services and recreational areas. The structure of the Unité d'Habitation was designed to foster interaction among residents through the inclusion of shared and collective spaces. Particular attention is devoted to the innovative concept of the *toit-terrasse*, a roof transformed into an open communal space, anticipating contemporary needs for well-being and social interaction. Although the Unité d'Habitation remains subject to criticism on several grounds, this essay explores the key design themes that shape collective spaces, particularly roof terraces, aiming to highlight their potential to enhance overall well-being and strengthen social cohesion within urban communities.

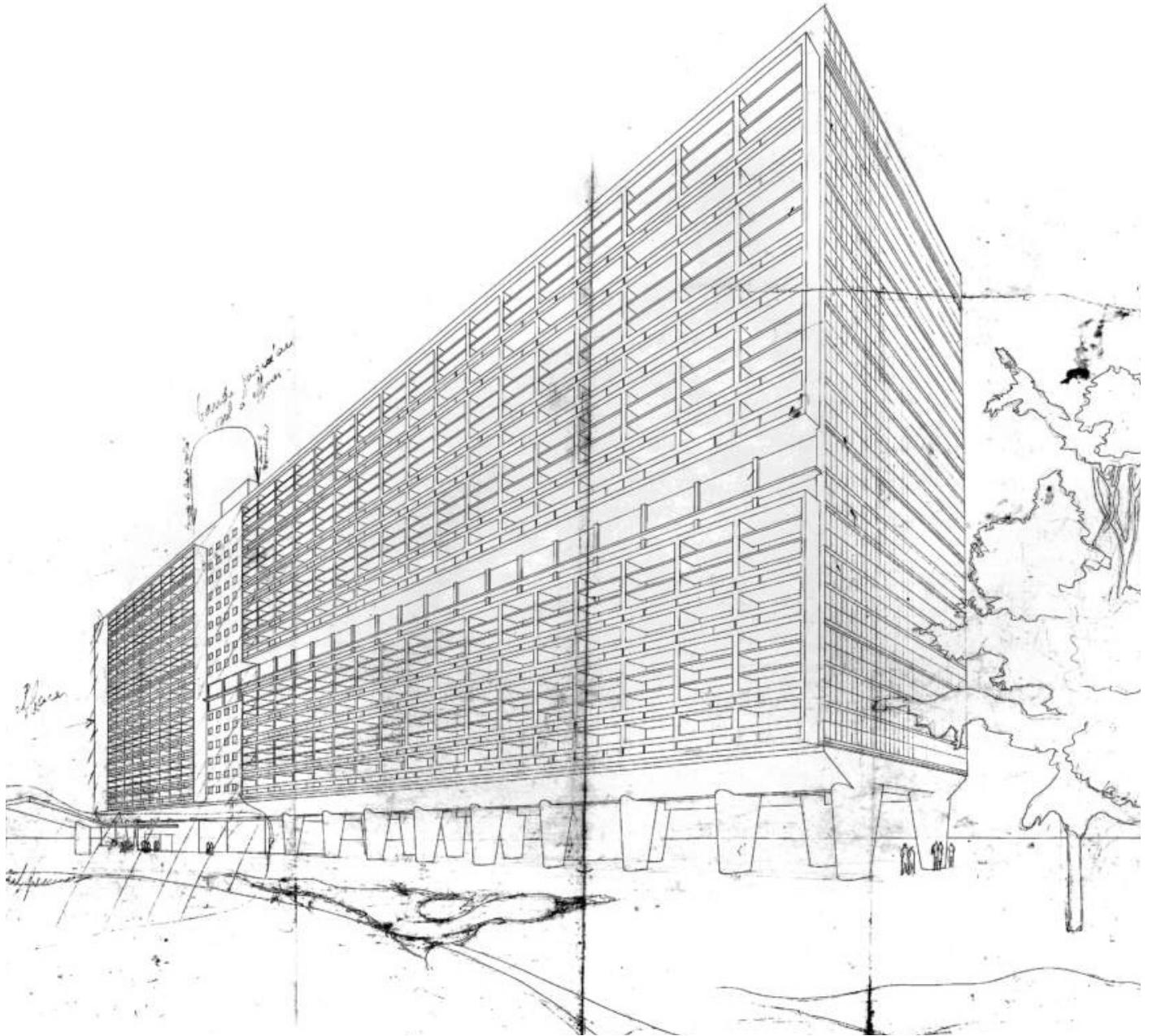


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**From theory to practice:  
the visionary research  
of Le Corbusier and the  
Unité d'Habitation**



Perspective sketch of the Unité d'Habitation, (<https://www.area-arch.it/itinerario/unite-dhabitation/>)

# 1.1 For a new idea of the city

The Unité d’Habitation is a modernist housing typology developed by the Franco-Swiss architect Le Corbusier. These residential complexes embody the concept of a “machine for living”, integrating several essential functions of daily life within a single building. These vertical structures combine apartments, shops, community services and recreational facilities, creating a self-sufficient microcosm. Each dwelling unit is designed to maximize natural light and ventilation, while communal spaces, such as the rooftop terrace, provide areas for social interaction, sports and relaxation. The Unité d’Habitation represents a pioneering approach to urban planning, aimed at addressing increasing urban density while preserving a strong sense of community.

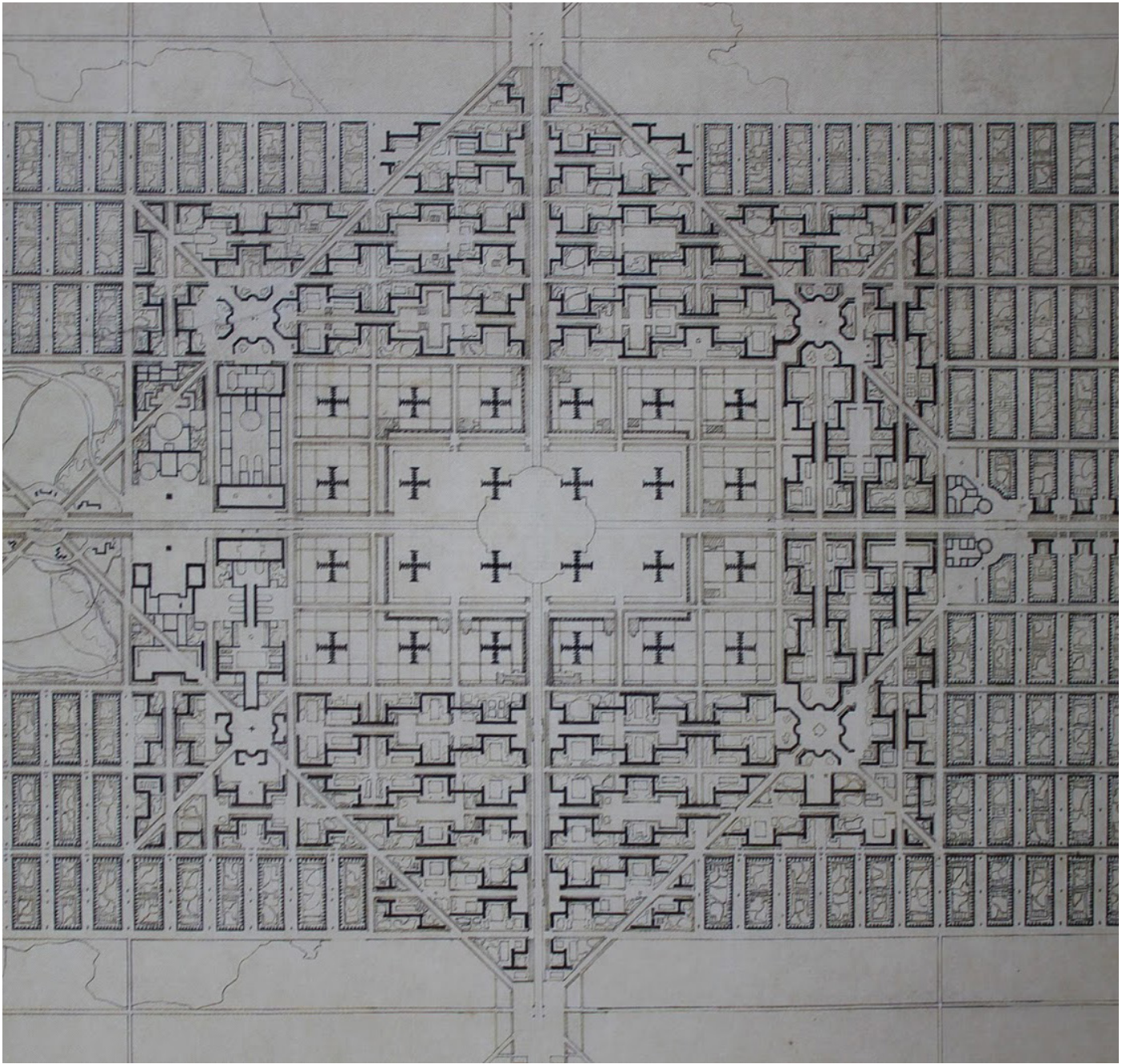
The Unité d’Habitation emerged from extensive research and reflection. Le Corbusier closely examined the conditions of 19th- and early 20th-century industrial cities, which were characterized by unhealthy living environments and inadequate infrastructure to support rapidly growing populations. The issue of mass housing was a critical concern at the time: although society was experiencing extraordinary economic and technological development, the quality of living conditions had significantly deteriorated. Industrialization had drawn large numbers of workers to urban centers, where housing and services were insufficient to meet the rising demand. Le Corbusier strongly criticized these conditions and

proposed a radical vision of urban transformation aimed at improving housing standards and social life in metropolitan areas. Industrial cities were typically overcrowded, sanitation was poor and urban infrastructure was often insufficient or nearly nonexistent to accommodate the influx of new residents. These problems were further exacerbated by the lack of green spaces and recreational areas, which he considered essential for the physical and psychological well-being of inhabitants.

In response to these challenges, Le Corbusier developed three of his most visionary and utopian urban planning proposals: the Ville Contemporaine (1922), the Plan Voisin (1925), and the Ville Radieuse (1930).

## **The Ville Contemporaine**

The Ville Contemporaine was a project for a city of three million inhabitants, characterized by a comprehensive urban reorganization aimed at addressing overcrowding, inefficiency and the unhealthy living conditions of the time. The proposal sought to create a modern, functional and harmonious city through a rational and innovative approach to urban planning. It envisioned the construction of cruciform skyscrapers raised on pilotis and arranged within an orthogonal grid. These towers were set within a vast central park, while lower-rise buildings in the surrounding areas were designated for working-class



Ville Contemporaine, (<https://proyectos4etsa.wordpress.com/2013/07/02/6438/>)

housing, specifically, six-story residential blocks in the intermediate zone and 120-unit apartment buildings on the outskirts. The skyscrapers were intended to accommodate offices, luxury residences and other urban functions, thereby minimizing land consumption and freeing ground-level space for green areas and communal facilities.

At the heart of the city, Le Corbusier planned a major transportation hub integrating buses, trains, elevated highway intersections and even an airport located on the roof. Pedestrian pathways were clearly separated from vehicular roads and the automobile was designated as the primary mode of transportation.

The Ville Contemporaine also included extensive green spaces, with parks and public gardens integrated throughout the city. Le Corbusier believed that nature should play a central role in urban life, providing a healthy and restorative environment for residents.

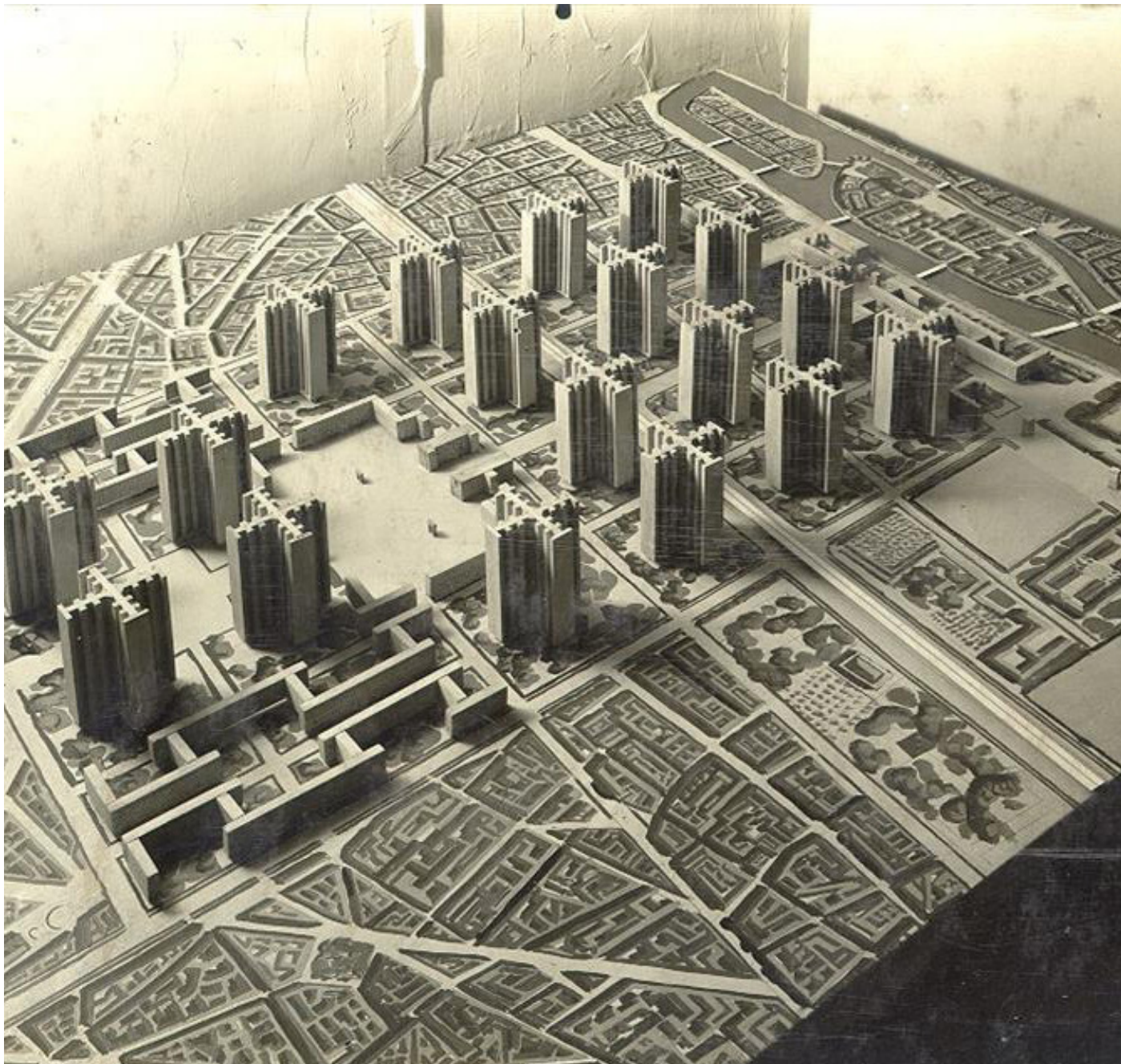
This innovative vision generated both enthusiasm and criticism. Some observers questioned its practical feasibility and social implications, particularly the authoritarian character of its centralized planning, which risked producing impersonal and homogeneous urban environments lacking diversity. Moreover, the demolition of existing urban fabric to make way for the new structures would inevitably have led to the loss of historical and cultural heritage.

### **The Plan Voisin**

In 1925, through the Plan Voisin, Le Corbusier envisioned a new Paris by applying the principles of the Ville Contemporaine to an existing, fully developed city. This proposal reflected his ambition to radically transform the urban fabric in order to address the challenges of modernity. The project not only challenged established architectural and urban planning conventions, but also aimed to offer a comprehensive solution for improving the quality of urban life, one that could serve as a model for other cities.

During the 1920s, Paris, like many European capitals, was facing severe overcrowding. The Plan Voisin proposed the demolition of a large portion of the historic center and its replacement with a grid of modern skyscrapers set within expansive green spaces. The objective was to create a functional, rational and orderly urban environment capable of enhancing the well-being of its inhabitants. The proposed skyscrapers were sixty stories high, cruciform in plan and designed to optimize land use by freeing ground-level space.

The main objectives of the plan included the creation of extensive green areas, considered essential for healthy living; the strict separation of urban functions into distinct residential, commercial and industrial zones to reduce congestion and pollution; the development of an efficient and highly functional transportation infrastructure. This system would



Plan Voisin, ([https://www.researchgate.net/figure/Plan-Voisin-1925-The-well-known-utopian-redevelopment-plan-for-Paris-proposed-by\\_fig2\\_354038828](https://www.researchgate.net/figure/Plan-Voisin-1925-The-well-known-utopian-redevelopment-plan-for-Paris-proposed-by_fig2_354038828))

have included elevated roads, a well-integrated public transportation network and a clear separation between vehicular traffic and pedestrian circulation. However, the Plan Voisin was widely perceived as a threat to Paris's architectural and cultural heritage. The proposal to demolish much of the historic center, characterized by narrow streets and centuries-old buildings, appeared to critics as an act of destruction of the city's urban fabric and collective memory. This radical approach was often interpreted as the beginning of a broader tendency toward the standardization of cities, in which urban character and identity risked being subordinated to functionality and formal order.

### **The Ville Radieuse**

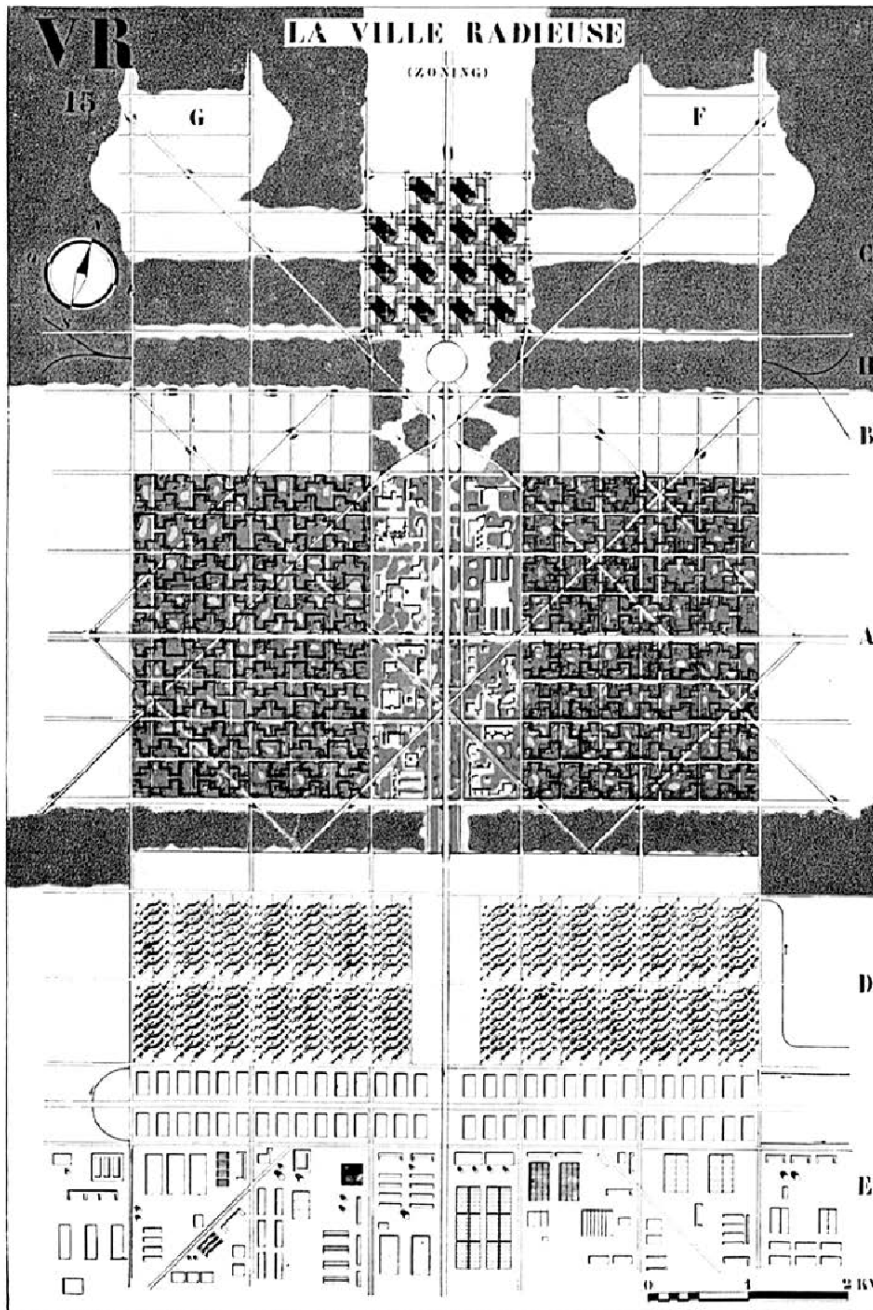
The Ville Radieuse is one of Le Corbusier's most emblematic projects, developed as a continuation and refinement of the earlier Ville Contemporaine. Conceived according to the principle of *tabula rasa*, the city was intended to rise on the cleared foundations of demolished European urban centers and to be composed of prefabricated skyscrapers emerging from vast green spaces.

At the core of the project was the residential unit. Le Corbusier proposed large, eleven-story linear buildings arranged at right angles along east–west or north–south axes. This folded configuration, forming a wave-like pattern, is known as a *rédent*. A central

element of the Ville Radieuse was the *Unité d'Habitation*, conceived as a self-sufficient residential complex integrating housing, services and green areas within a single structure. These units were designed to accommodate entire communities, with apartments equipped with modern amenities, as well as communal spaces for social activities, shops, schools and other essential facilities.

Buildings and highways were spaced at intervals of approximately 400 meters and elevated on pilotis, thereby freeing ground-level space and transforming it into a continuous park accessible to residents from all directions. The built footprint covered only about 12 percent of the total area, while the remaining land was left open and largely dedicated to greenery.

The urban grid was strictly orthogonal to ensure clarity and efficiency of organization. The only exception was represented by diagonal roads designed for fast-moving traffic, which were also elevated on pilotis. The main roads were accompanied by lateral tramways and were classified into three categories according to carriageway width, while secondary roads were likewise differentiated into three types. Pedestrian circulation was protected through the provision of dedicated pathways and shelters, reinforcing the clear separation between vehicular and pedestrian movement.



Ville Radieuse, ([http://www.cittasostenibili.it/urbana/urbana\\_L\\_10.htm](http://www.cittasostenibili.it/urbana/urbana_L_10.htm))

All of these urban planning projects share several common elements: most notably the strict separation of urban functions into distinct residential, commercial and industrial zones, intended to create a more orderly and livable environment. Another recurring feature is the use of skyscrapers to maximize land efficiency and free up ground-level space for green areas and pedestrian circulation. These high-rise buildings were elevated on pilotis, further ensuring that the ground plane remained open and accessible.

From these shared characteristics, it becomes evident that green space represents the unifying principle underlying the three projects, serving as a fundamental component for the physical and psychological well-being of residents. At the same time, each proposal was supported by an efficient transportation system, particularly public transit, facilitated by a clear separation between vehicular roads and pedestrian pathways, with the aim of improving safety and ensuring smoother traffic flow.

« The origin of this research [...] dates back to my visit to the Certosa di Ema, near Florence, in 1907. I saw, in this musical landscape of Tuscany, a modern city crowning the hill [...]. I thought I would never find such a joyful interpretation of the dwelling [...]. This 'modern city' dates back to the fifteenth century. The radiant vision has stayed with me forever. »

# 1.2 The concept of Unité d'Habitation

The first of the five Unités d'Habitation was built in Marseille. In this postwar context, Le Corbusier was given the opportunity to realize his vision of the city through the design and construction of this residential complex. The project was made possible thanks to Raoul Dautry, Minister of Reconstruction and Urban Planning, who, sharing the architect's principles, promoted concrete solutions to provide housing for those left homeless by the war. This commission represented an extraordinary opportunity to bring to fruition a design process that had begun in the 1920s.

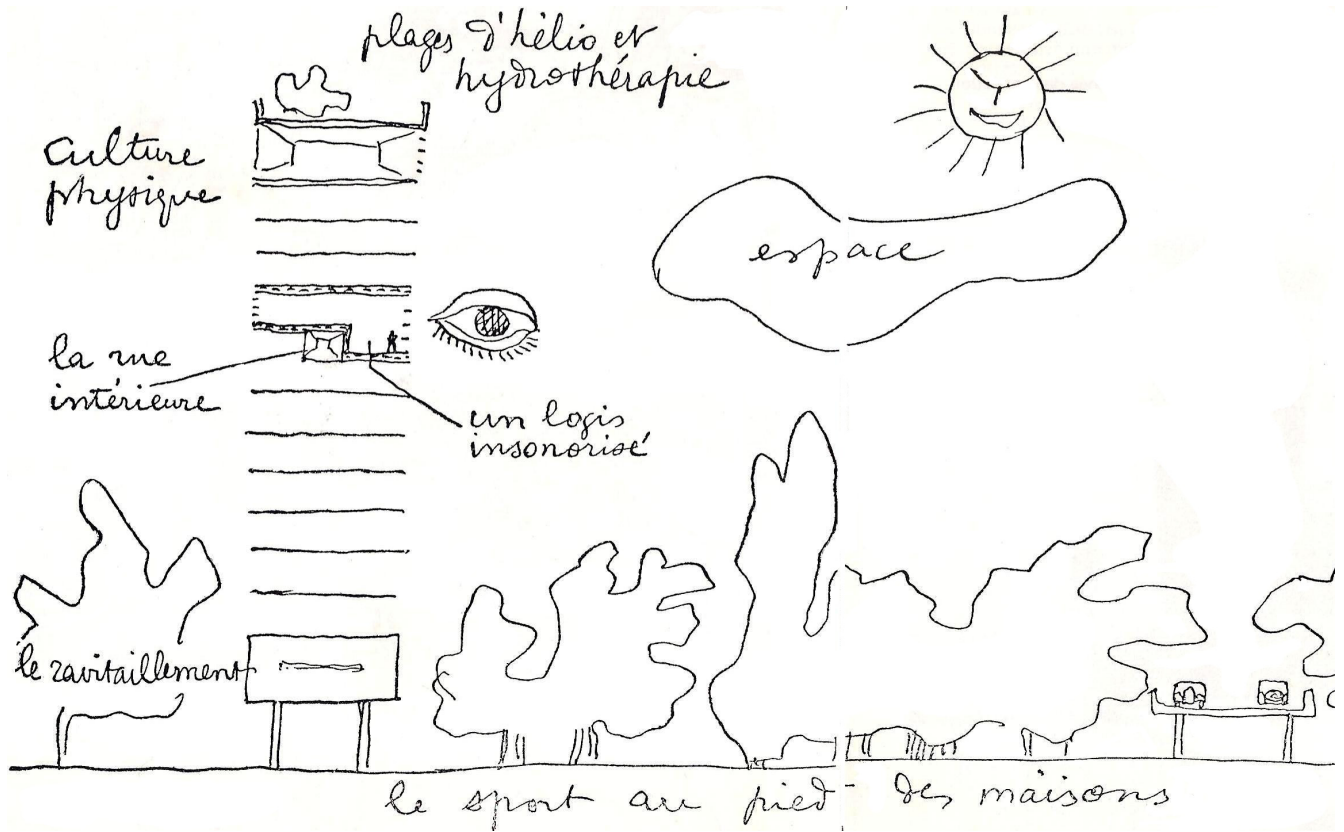
In his 1942 book, *La Maison des Hommes*, Le Corbusier described the idea of a "vertical garden city" that, by developing upward, would incorporate all essential urban functions within a single structure, thereby freeing the surrounding land and returning it to nature. This vision, although innovative, drew, more or less explicitly, on earlier precedents, such as Charles Fourier's nineteenth-century phalanstery and the collective housing experiments developed in the Soviet Union after the Revolution. The underlying concept was relatively simple: a modular structure composed of duplex residential units (two-story apartments) integrated with a range of services within the same building (Eardley, 2013).

The Cité Radieuse in Marseille was constructed between 1947 and 1952. The seventeen-story bu-

ilding contains 337 apartments and includes a nursery school, shops, a gymnasium, a hotel and a rooftop terrace equipped with various recreational facilities. The project's success led to the development of additional Unités d'Habitation and over time the construction techniques were refined, allowing for continuous improvement of the model.

In 1955, a second building was completed in Nantes-Rezé. This complex contains 294 apartments distributed over sixteen floors and integrates shops and services for residents, along with a rooftop terrace. The structure partially overlooks a lake and is situated within a park of approximately 90,000 square meters.

In 1957, a third Unité d'Habitation was constructed in Berlin as part of Interbau, an international architecture exhibition. This building, which includes 530 apartments, shared many characteristics with the previous projects. However, Le Corbusier later distanced himself from the project due to unauthorized modifications that limited his design autonomy, including restrictions on the intended use of the rooftop terrace. In 1959, another Unité d'Habitation was completed in Briey-en-Forêt, situated in a more rural context. The building contains 339 apartments and, like the previous projects, integrates private and communal spaces while maintaining the concept of the vertical city. A shopping center was installed on



Sketch Unité d'Habitation, ([https://es.wikiarquitectura.com/unitc3a9-berlin\\_croquis/](https://es.wikiarquitectura.com/unitc3a9-berlin_croquis/))

the ground floor; however, the kindergarten planned for the rooftop terrace was never realized.

Finally, in 1965, the last Unité d'Habitation was constructed in Firminy-Vert, as part of a larger architectural complex designed by Le Corbusier. This building accommodates 414 apartments and includes communal facilities, such as a rooftop terrace, although these shared spaces are less fully developed than in the Marseille project.

Despite initial criticism and the construction challenges they faced, these buildings have demonstrated the enduring relevance of Le Corbusier's ideas, exerting a profound influence on modern architecture and urban planning. While they introduced revolutionary concepts, such as the "vertical city" and a new model of collective living, they were not free from controversy. Critics have pointed, in particular, to their highly standardized approach, which at times may have sacrificed the personalization of domestic space in favor of a rigorous functionalism.



# **Architecture and community: between functionalism and urban autonomy**



Unité d'Habitation of Firminy-Vert, (<https://www.fondationlecorbusier.fr>)



Unité d'Habitation of Nantes-Rezé, pilotis, (<https://www.fondationlecorbusier.fr>)



Unité d'Habitation of Marsiglia, pilotis, (<https://www.fondationlecorbusier.fr>)



Unité d'Habitation of Briey-en-Forêt, (<https://www.fondationlecorbusier.fr>)

## 2.1 New (peri)urban landscapes

The Unité d'Habitation stands in isolation within the landscape, dominating it like a large ship anchored in open space. It recalls ancient monasteries, the first collective "housing units", often located in remote areas chosen for their natural beauty and panoramic views, rather than aligned along urban streets. The "neighborhood" envisioned by Le Corbusier consists of the surrounding countryside and the sky itself. This vertical city establishes an immediate and direct relationship with nature at the base of the building. By contrast, the horizontal city, or garden city, disperses greenery across the territory, potentially diluting its spatial coherence and intensity.

Concrete is the fundamental material of this architecture, much as stone was for the pyramids. Here, concrete assumes a monumental quality proportionate to the scale of the structure. The building can be understood as a concrete sculpture: deliberately left exposed, like bronze, marble, or stone, the material reveals its expressive power both on the exterior façades and within the interior spaces, such as atriums and corridors. This is not an architecture that merely provides an external shell for an internal organism; rather, it is a solid mass sculpted and hollowed out from a single material, shaped to create habitable spaces within. The Unités d'Habitation represent an architectural paradigm, embodying an innovative model of residential design that profoundly influenced modern architecture.

These buildings are characterized by several distinctive elements that reflect Le Corbusier's core principles: relative isolation from the traditional urban fabric, the use of pilotis, the integration of services within the building, the roof terrace, duplex apartments and the application of the Modulor system. Isolation from the city responds to the desire to create a healthy and protected environment, removed from urban congestion, fostering a direct connection with nature and a higher quality of life.

The pilotis elevate the structure above the ground, freeing up open space at ground level and improving the circulation of light and air, while visually lightening the building's mass. The integration of services transforms the Unité d'Habitation into a self-contained community, reducing the need for residents to leave the building for daily necessities and reinforcing the idea of self-sufficiency. The roof terrace, equipped with recreational facilities, extends the internal communal spaces, offering an elevated setting for social interaction and relaxation, thereby challenging conventional notions of the roof as a purely technical element. The duplex configuration of the apartments optimizes spatial organization and functionality, clearly separating living and sleeping areas. Finally, the Modulor, Le Corbusier's proportional system based on human measurements, ensures that both domestic and collective spaces are designed at a human scale.

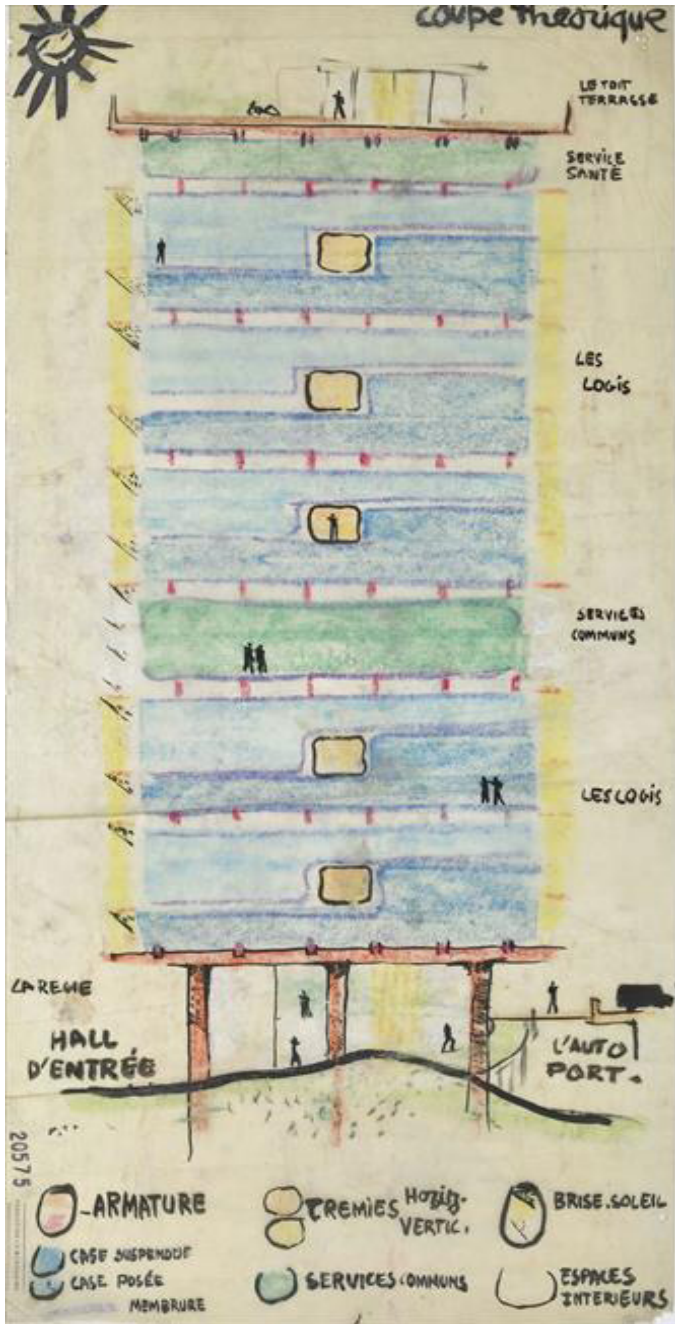
« To provide, in silence, in solitude and facing the sun, the space, the greenery, a home that is the perfect refuge for a family” but also “to erect in nature [...] facing the sun, a masterful architectural work; made of rigor, grandeur, nobility, smile and elegance. »

The idea of situating a building within a much greener environment than the traditional city is one of the most distinctive aspects of the Unité d'Habitation. The twentieth century was marked by rapid urbanization and Le Corbusier was confronted with increasingly congested and chaotic urban conditions. His vision of the ideal city was based on the separation of urban functions into distinct zones in order to facilitate the organization and management of activities. This concept is rooted in the principles of the Ville Radieuse, which he had already explored in earlier urban proposals such as the Plan Voisin and the Ville Radieuse itself. According to this approach, cities were to be reorganized by separating residential areas from commercial and industrial zones, with large green spaces acting as buffers between them. A building immersed in greenery was intended to guarantee calmness and a sense of protection for its inhabitants, qualities that an isolated setting could provide, even when located near an urban center. However, this isolation also generated significant criticism. While the prospect of living in a healthy and sheltered environment may appear appealing, it risked producing a self-contained enclave in which residents were detached from the surrounding urban reality. Over time, such separation could foster a sense of alienation, as inhabitants, despite enjoying modern comforts, might be deprived of the vibrancy and complexity of city life. Furthermore, the

isolation of the Unités d'Habitation raised concerns about their integration into the existing urban fabric. Le Corbusier conceived these buildings as autonomous and clearly defined entities, yet this approach could clash with the surrounding context, potentially creating spatial and social discontinuities within the city (Boesiger, 1970).

Another iconic element of Le Corbusier's architecture is the use of pilotis, the columns that elevate the building above ground level. Although seemingly simple, this architectural device carries important functional, aesthetic and symbolic implications that are central to understanding his vision. By lifting the structure off the ground, the pilotis create new possibilities for the use of the space beneath, generating an open yet sheltered area. This space can serve multiple purposes: landscaped areas, public gathering spaces, parking, or simply improved circulation of air and light.

From an aesthetic perspective, the pilotis confer a sense of lightness and suspension, breaking with the tradition of massive, heavy buildings characteristic of earlier architecture. By elevating the structure, Le Corbusier established a new relationship between architecture and the ground. The building becomes a permeable and visually lighter presence, capable of engaging more harmoniously with its surrounding environment.



Sketch Unité d'Habitation, (<https://www.fondationlecorbusier.fr>)



Unité d'Habitation of Firminy-Vert, nursery school, (<https://www.fondationlecorbusier.fr>)



Unité d'Habitation of Marseille, internal corridor, (<https://www.fondationlecorbusier.fr>)

## 2.2 Centrality of collective spaces and roof terraces

The Unité d'Habitation cannot be regarded merely as a residential building, but rather as a fully self-contained center equipped with all the services necessary for everyday life. Each complex incorporates shops, restaurants, hotels, schools, offices, recreational facilities, public spaces and gyms, all integrated within a single structure. This concept of the “vertical city” was highly innovative. In response to the challenges of modern urban environments, Le Corbusier sought to overcome urban fragmentation and the lack of accessible services by addressing the issue at its core: providing essential facilities directly within the residential structure.

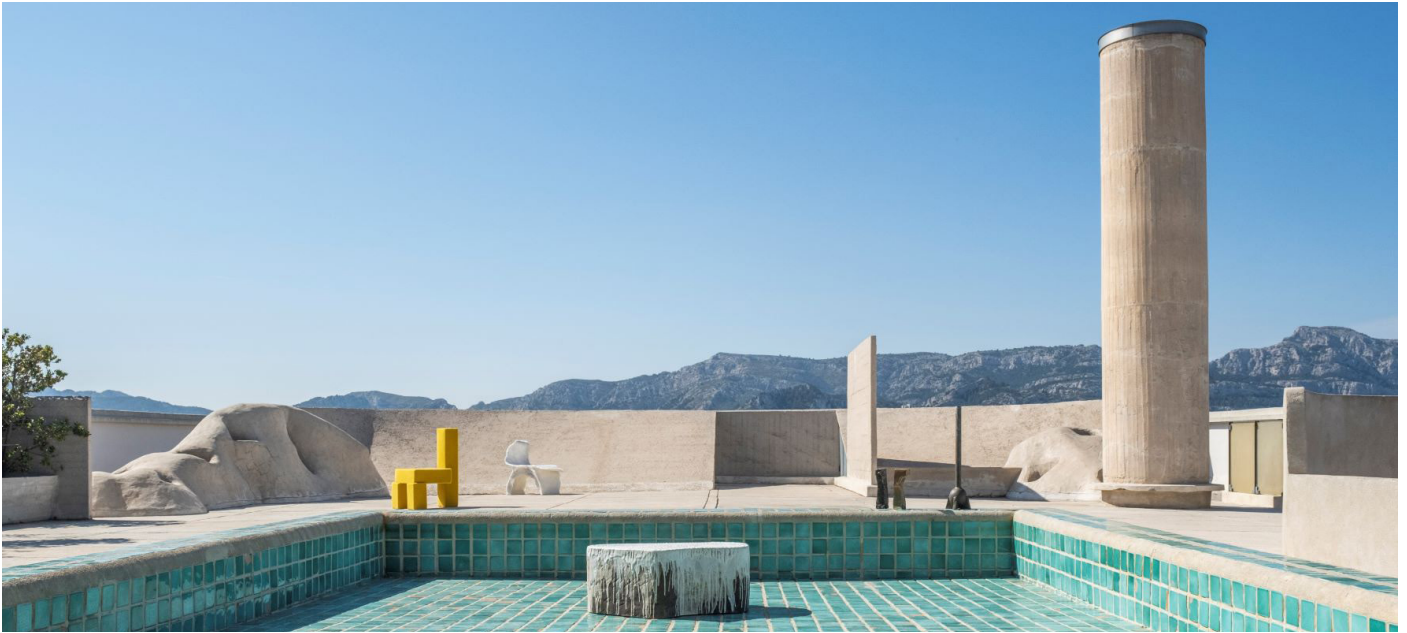
The centralization of services reduces the need for daily travel and offers residents immediate access to what they require, reflecting one of Le Corbusier's primary objectives, to create a practical and comfortable environment that simplifies and enhances daily life. A clear example is the two-level commercial street in the Marseille project: the lower level accommodated a department store supplying everyday goods, while the upper level functioned as an internal shopping street with smaller shops and artisan workshops.

Another highly symbolic space is the nursery school, located just below the roof in some of the Unités. Within the building, a ramp provides direct access to the rooftop terrace, which serves as a play area for

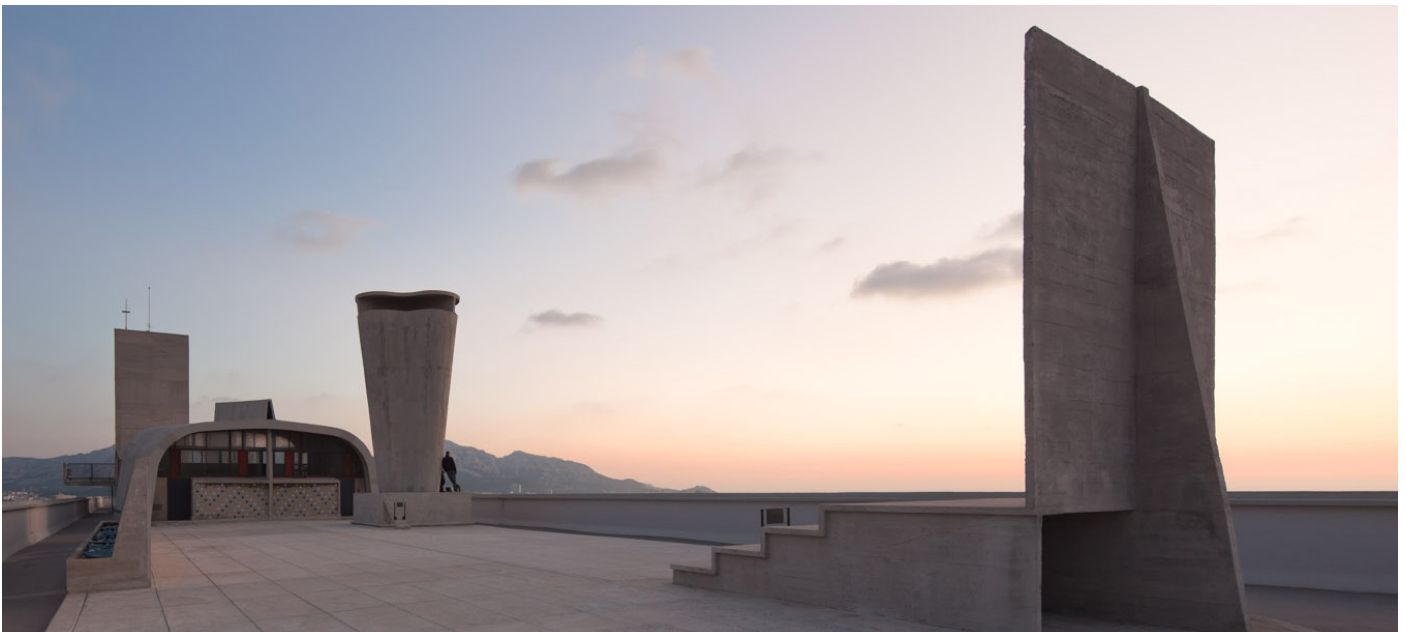
children. The decision to position the nursery school within the structure assigns it a central role in the organization of the “vertical city”. The uppermost level thus becomes a symbolic space, emphasizing that daily life, well-being, and education are fundamental components integrated into the architectural design. Placing the school at the top of the building also strengthens the connection with nature, as it occupies a multifunctional area designed to ensure greater safety and separation from busier communal zones. Moreover, its elevated position offers a natural buffer from urban noise and pollution, contributing to a healthier environment for children.

The areas leading to communal services are themselves conceived as important meeting spaces for residents. In the Unité d'Habitation in Marseille, for example, the third floor functioned as an internal promenade, featuring offices on a mezzanine level, a library, public seating areas, and a glazed wall overlooking the sea. Le Corbusier aimed to create generous circulation spaces, transforming them into genuine internal “streets”. He famously compared the circulation system of a building to biological systems, such as the bloodstream or the nervous system of the human body.

The architect envisioned a system of overlapping internal streets serving different levels of the building. In the various Unités d'Habitation, there are approxi-



Unité d'Habitation of Marseille, rooftop terrace, (<https://design.fanpage.it/l-unite-d-habitation-di-le-corbusier-diventa-un-albergo/>)



Unité d'Habitation of Marseille, rooftop terrace, (<http://www.acaixanegra.com/works/unite-dhabitation-marseille/>)

mately seven such streets, typically located every three floors, with one exception at the level of the shopping arcade, where two are superimposed. Measuring 2.96 meters in width, these corridors were designed not only for circulation but also for the transport of goods necessary for the building's functioning. They extend from one end of the complex to the other and are accessible via elevators or one of the emergency staircases positioned along the façade. What distinguishes them is their spatial generosity: unlike the narrow corridors typical of many collective housing projects, these internal streets are wide and conceived to evoke the character of an urban street rather than that of a conventional hallway (Le Corbusier, 2003; Blundell Jones, 2007).

Nevertheless, this vision of the vertical city generated criticism, particularly concerning its social implications. Although concentrating services within a single structure reduced the need for daily travel, it also risked fostering a sense of alienation among residents. Living in such a self-sufficient environment could confine inhabitants within a kind of microcosm, detached from the broader urban context. Paradoxically, the very strategy intended to simplify daily life through shared services could contribute to the exclusion of the Unité d'Habitation from the surrounding city.

One of the most innovative features integrated by Le Corbusier was the rooftop terrace. This element

reflects his commitment to improving quality of life and creating spaces that promote residents' well-being. Located at the top of the building, the terrace was conceived as a multifunctional open-air space, incorporating green areas, recreational facilities, a swimming pool, and exercise zones. It was designed as a true extension of the internal communal areas, an elevated urban oasis where residents could experience direct contact with nature while enjoying panoramic views of the surrounding landscape. Accessible exclusively to inhabitants, this space was intended as a haven of tranquility, where architecture and nature merge to create a comfortable and inclusive environment.

The rooftop terrace represents a key architectural component of the Unité d'Habitation. It is not merely a sculptural crown to the building, but an open public space conceived as an urban plaza in the sky. Its fluid and sculptural forms stand in marked contrast to the regularity of the structural grid below. At the same time, these forms engage harmoniously with the surrounding landscape, exemplifying the expressive maturity of Le Corbusier's architectural language.

More broadly, the presence of communal spaces, such as the rooftop terrace, recreational facilities and internal streets, encourages collective life. These areas are deliberately designed as places for encounter and social interaction.



Unité d'Habitation of Marseille, double bedroom and staircase, (<https://www.fondationlecorbusier.fr>)



Unité d'Habitation of Nantes-Rezé, children's bedroom, (<https://www.fondationlecorbusier.fr>)



Unité d'Habitation of Marseille, living room and kitchen, (<https://www.fondationlecorbusier.fr>)

## 2.3 Private living and standard accomodation

Le Corbusier believed that efficiency within the complex had to be reflected at the scale of the individual dwelling. For this reason, he developed a new housing typology: the duplex apartment. Designed to optimize space within a compact unit, the duplex is organized over two levels, allowing for a clear separation between the different functions of domestic life. The living areas are located on the lower floor, while the sleeping quarters are placed on the upper level. The living spaces are conceived as bright and open environments, encouraging visual and spatial continuity between rooms, whereas the upper level provides a more intimate and quiet setting, suitable for rest and privacy.

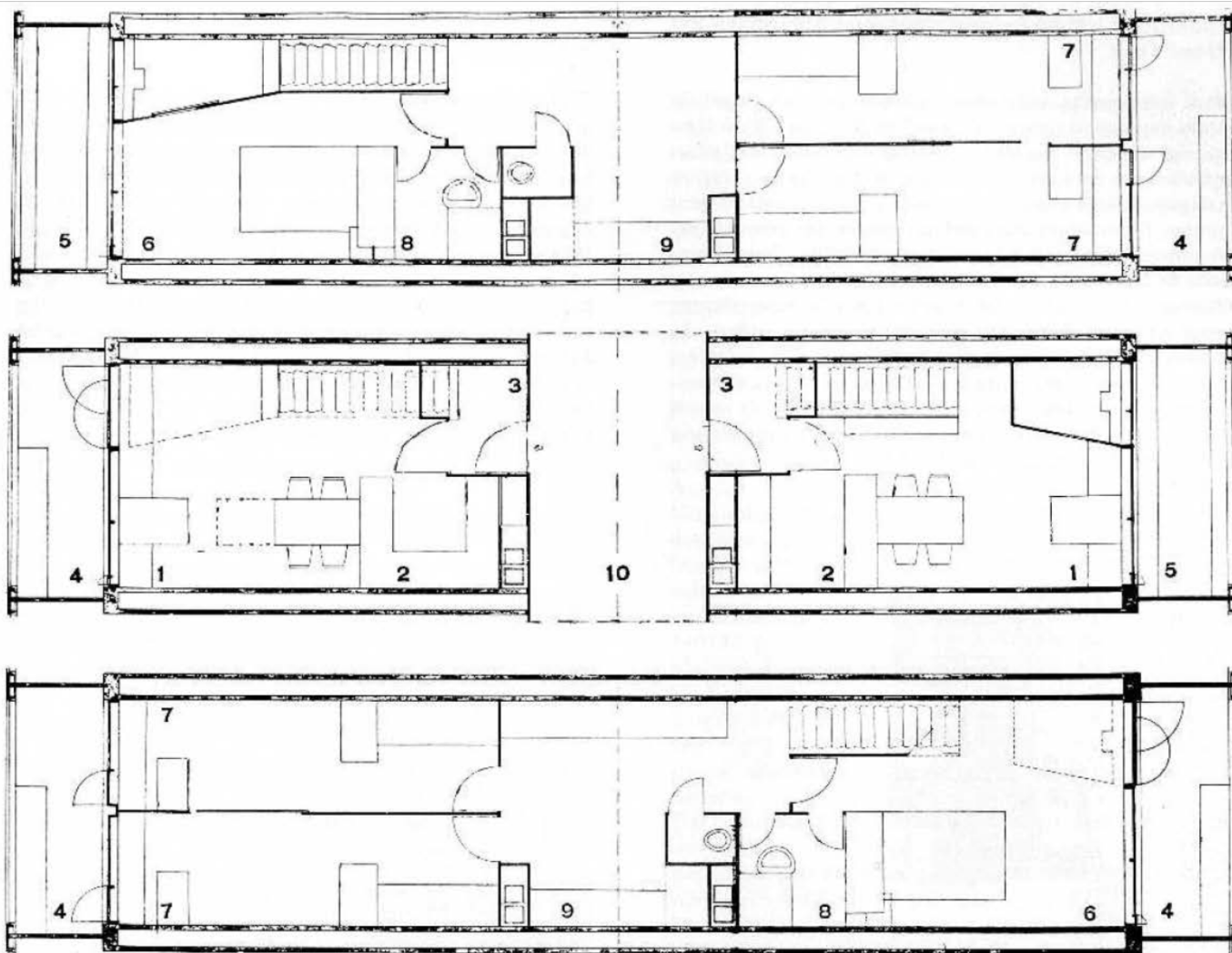
The Unité d'Habitation includes approximately twenty variations of the basic apartment type, ranging from studios to large family units. The principal typology consists of interlocking duplex apartments arranged in a mirrored configuration, one oriented upward and the other downward, accessed via the internal streets.

In the Marseille Unité, for example, there were 213 duplex apartments of approximately 98 square meters, extending across the full depth of the building and benefiting from dual exposure, with loggias on both the east and west façades. In addition, there were around twenty larger units and seventy-nine smaller ones, twenty-six of which were single-level

apartments.

A closer analysis of Le Corbusier's standard apartment reveals a strong emphasis on functional rationality. The kitchen, for instance, was designed as a compact and highly efficient workspace, where all essential operations could be performed within an area of approximately 2 × 2 meters (about 4.8 square meters in total). The architect conceived it as a practical and streamlined space, open to the dining area through a serving hatch. This space connects to the entrance hall and dining room, forming the primary sequence of the lower level. This sequence, often illustrated in publications, emphasizes the dramatic double-height living room and the overlapping mezzanine that partially conceals the upper-level sleeping area.

An internal staircase rises from the dining area, marking a shift in spatial experience and reinforcing the architectural promenade. Its placement requires a change in direction after passing the glazed façade, enhancing the sense of movement through the space. The staircase leads to the upper floor, where the bedrooms and bathrooms are located. The master bedroom, positioned on a mezzanine overlooking the living room, has nearly square proportions. Although the upper level is narrower than the spacious family area below and appears primarily functional, it does not feel confined, thanks to the visual exten-



- |                 |                       |
|-----------------|-----------------------|
| 1 Salle commune | 6 Chambre des parents |
| 2 Cuisine       | 7 Chambre d'enfants   |
| 3 Entrée        | 8 Salle d'eau         |
| 4 Loggia        | 9 Salle de rangement  |
| 5 Brise-soleil  | 10 Rue intérieure     |

Unité d'Habitation of Marseille, floors' division, (Boesiger, 1955)

sion provided by the loggia.

The façades of the Unité are composed of approximately 700 loggias, combining the qualities of a terrace and a balcony. Each loggia measures 1.45 meters in depth and 4 meters in width, corresponding to the width of the apartment, and is enclosed laterally by colored concrete walls.

The apartments of the Unité d'Habitation also reflect the use of innovative materials introduced to the construction industry in the early 1950s. These included plasterboard for interior partitions and ceilings, plywood for built-in furnishings, cast aluminum for kitchen components, folded sheet metal for the staircase, and synthetic materials or oak for certain floor finishes. Le Corbusier employed color as an architectural device, using it to articulate planar surfaces, structural elements, and spatial sequences. The color schemes vary from one apartment to another and are derived from the Purist palette he developed in his paintings of the 1920s and 1930s. The contrast between the robustness of the building's public structure and the lightness of the materials used within the apartments creates a distinctive architectural effect. The outer shell appears massive and imposing, while the interior spaces are light and essential. Externally, the building is characterized by a strong monumentality that gives it an almost sculptural presence. The envelope conveys a sense

of protection and stability, a kind of modern fortress rising against the chaos of the city. With their severe and imposing appearance, the Unités d'Habitation embody the idea of refuge: a secure and cohesive community contained within an architecture that organizes and dominates the surrounding space.

Upon entering the building, however, one perceives a radical shift. The apartments are conceived according to a different philosophy, where lightness and essentiality prevail. This interior delicacy contrasts sharply with the heavy exterior, as though the dwellings were refined, carefully crafted volumes enclosed within a protective armor. The resulting impression is comparable to a house of cards: from the outside, the structure appears monolithic, solid, and immovable; inside, however, the layered and interlocking arrangement of living spaces, light and articulated across multiple levels, suggests a carefully balanced composition, in which each element contributes to the overall harmony (Boesiger, 1955; 1965; 1970).

Le Corbusier described life in the Unité d'Habitation as a synthesis of isolation and community. Although residents inhabit a dense collective complex, the architectural design allows them to experience solitude and quietness. This equilibrium is achieved through the careful organization of private and communal spaces. The layout of the apartments ensu-

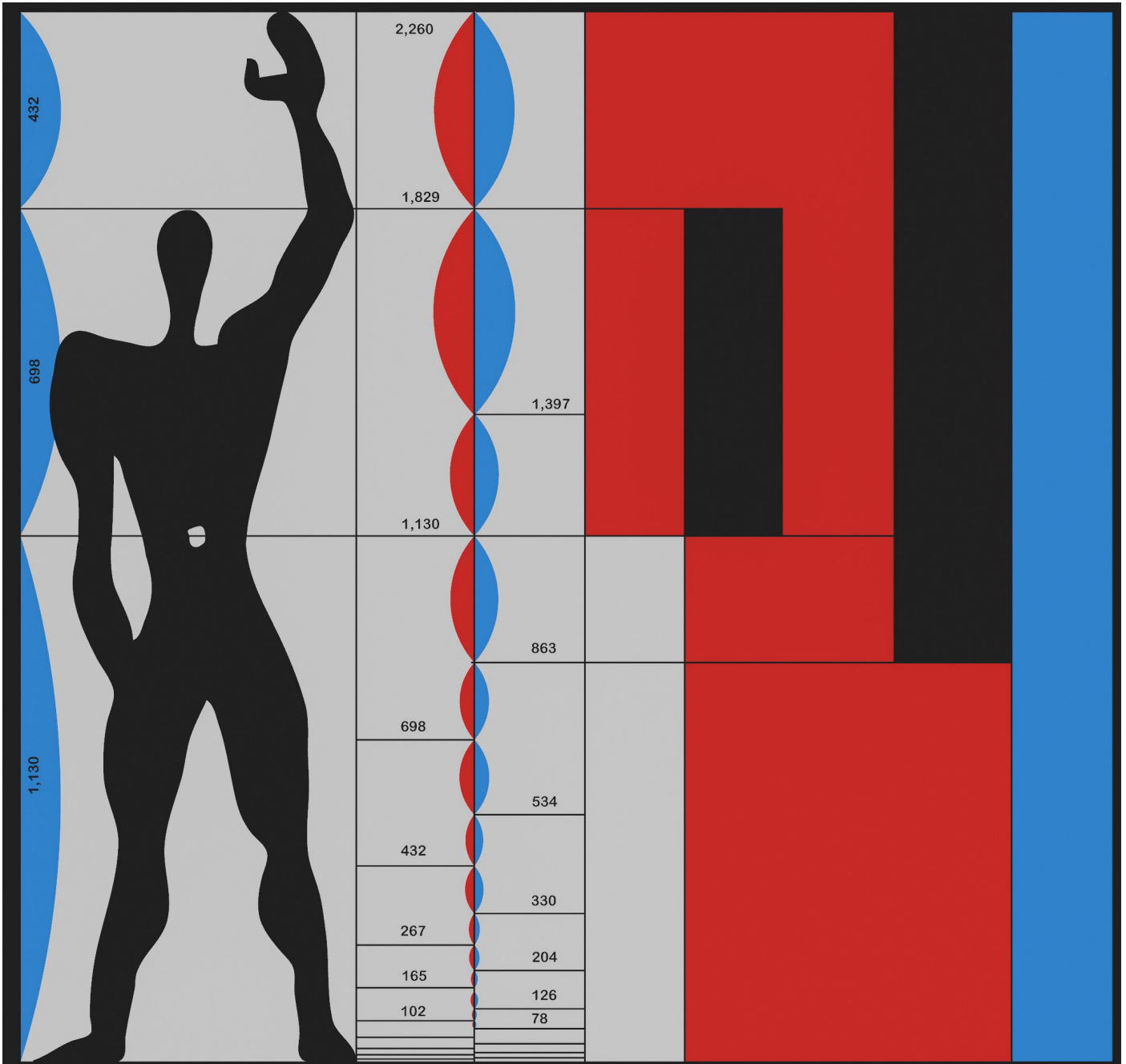


Unité d'habitation of Berlin, (<https://www.inexhibit.com/it/mymuseum/le-corbusier-unite-dhabitation-cite-radieuse-marsiglia/>)

res effective acoustic and visual insulation, enabling each resident to maintain a sense of privacy within the collective framework.

The materials employed were selected for their durability and their capacity to harmonize with the overall architectural concept. Le Corbusier favored simple, natural materials, such as concrete, wood, and stone, which confer a sense of solidity and permanence. The rough texture of exposed concrete, for instance, interacts dynamically with light, generating subtle variations across surfaces and expressing an essential beauty that transcends ornamentation, elevating structure itself to an aesthetic principle. Wood, used primarily for furnishings and detailing, introduces warmth into spaces otherwise dominated by the hardness of raw concrete, creating a balanced contrast. Stone, often employed in flooring and selected details, reinforces a connection to nature and further mediates between material heaviness and sensory refinement.

Le Corbusier believed that architecture should endure beyond changing trends and historical contingencies, maintaining an intrinsic and timeless quality. Through the combination of durable materials, geometric clarity, and the careful modulation of light, the Unité d'Habitation achieves an atmosphere that is simultaneously modern and enduring, preserving its aesthetic relevance across generations.



Modulor, (<https://postils.wordpress.com/2018/04/09/il-modulor/>)

## 2.4 The Modulor

Underlying and unifying all these design elements is the Modulor. The term Modulor derives from the French words *module* and *or* (golden section). It is a proportional system based on a mathematical grid that integrates anthropometric data. Le Corbusier developed two interrelated scales: the “red series”, generated from a square with sides of 113 cm, and the “blue series”, derived from a rectangle measuring 113 × 226 cm. The dimension of 226 cm corresponds to the height of a man standing with one arm raised, while 183 cm (1.83 m) represents the height of the “ideal” standing man used as a fundamental reference.

By comparing architecture to the human body, Le Corbusier aligned his work with the proportional traditions of classical Greece and the Renaissance. Through the Modulor, he sought to establish “a range of harmonious measurements suited to the human scale, universally applicable to architecture and mechanical objects”. The system aimed to define new standards of architectural quality, ensuring that both large-scale buildings and everyday domestic elements were designed according to human-centered proportions.

In the *Unité d’Habitation*, everything is conceived according to human scale. The Modulor governs the dimensions of both interior and exterior spaces, ensuring that each element of the building adheres to

harmonious and functional proportions. This proportional system responds to human needs in a rational and systematic manner, regulating dimensions from entire rooms and windows down to the smallest architectural details.

While such clarity and efficiency yield significant functional benefits, this approach also carries certain risks. The strict application of proportional rules may reduce living spaces to their minimum dimensions, potentially producing environments that feel rigid or overly constrained. The inherent minimalism of the Modulor can result in spaces where each element is reduced to its essential function, with limited accommodation for the diversity of individual needs and preferences.

A notable example is the ceiling height in the apartments of the *Unité d’Habitation*, which measures 2.26 meters, directly derived from the Modulor proportions. For some residents, this relatively low height may create a sense of spatial compression and limit the perception of openness. Thus, although the proportional rigor of the Modulor aspires to theoretical perfection, it may at times sacrifice the sensory richness and spatial generosity that contribute to a fully satisfying living experience (Le Corbusier, 1955).



Unité d'Habitation of Briey-en-Forêt, (<https://www.fondationlecorbusier.fr>)

Architecture thus becomes a means of harmonizing the social and personal dimensions of existence, creating an environment that enables collective living while preserving individual intimacy. The Unité d'Habitation represents both an architectural and a social experiment that, although conceived with progressive intentions, has generated profound debate and critical reflection on modern architecture and urban life. Le Corbusier's vision, marked by both strengths and limitations, constitutes a fundamental chapter in the history of modern architecture, demonstrating how design can shape everyday life and influence the relationship between individuals and their environment (*A Machine... to Live in*. Le Corbusier, *Unité d'Habitation in Marseille – Part One*, 2019).

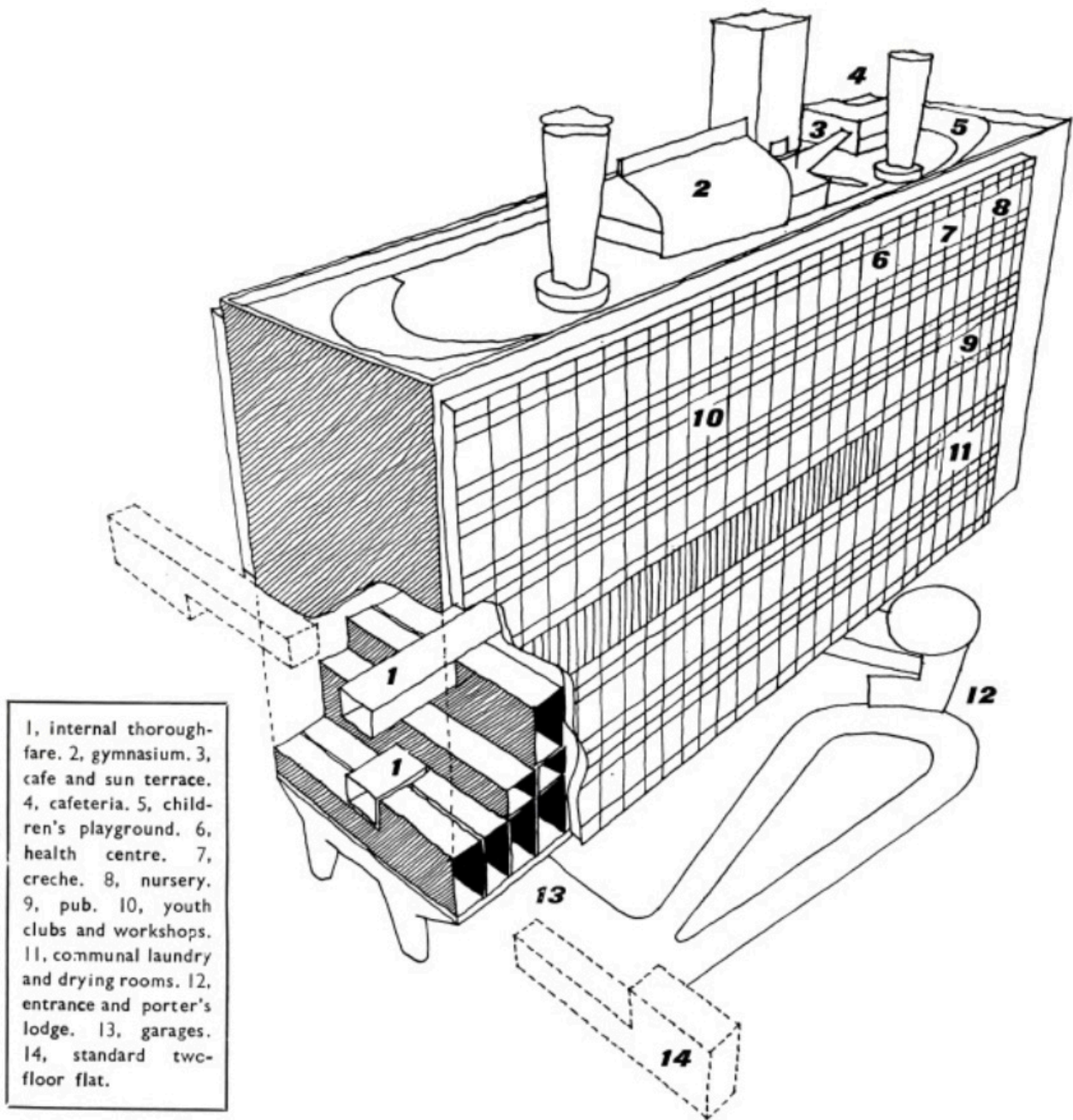
The Unité d'Habitation embodies an inevitable confrontation between the complexity of urban reality and fundamental human needs, producing a tension between idealism and practicality, between utopia and lived experience. Its defining principles, relative isolation from the city, the centralization of services, the standardization of spaces, and the emphasis on order and proportion, respond to a coherent functionalist logic. Yet these same principles risk diminishing the diversity, spontaneity, and unpredictability that give urban life its vitality and distinctiveness.

In this sense, Le Corbusier's work offers an enduring lesson. While his projects stand as remarkable

examples of architectural innovation, they also remind us that architecture cannot be reduced to a purely functional exercise. It must engage with the full complexity of human existence, balancing rational order with freedom, individuality, and social diversity. The Unités d'Habitation, with their innovations and inherent contradictions, remain a powerful testament to Le Corbusier's ambition to improve human life through architecture, even as they reveal the challenges and limitations embedded within such an ambitious vision.



**The *toit-terrasse*: design  
themes for a renewed  
collective dimension**



Unité d'Habitation of Marseille, floors' division (Boesiger, 1965)

## 3.1 Collective activities to “aim for the sky”

The Unité d’Habitation represents a revolution in the way collective housing is conceived, embodying an ideal of the modern city that seeks to combine urban density with quality of life. The roof terraces, in particular, are among the most innovative elements of the project, as they epitomize the interaction between architecture, landscape, and community. Their analysis reveals the complexity and richness of Le Corbusier’s thinking.

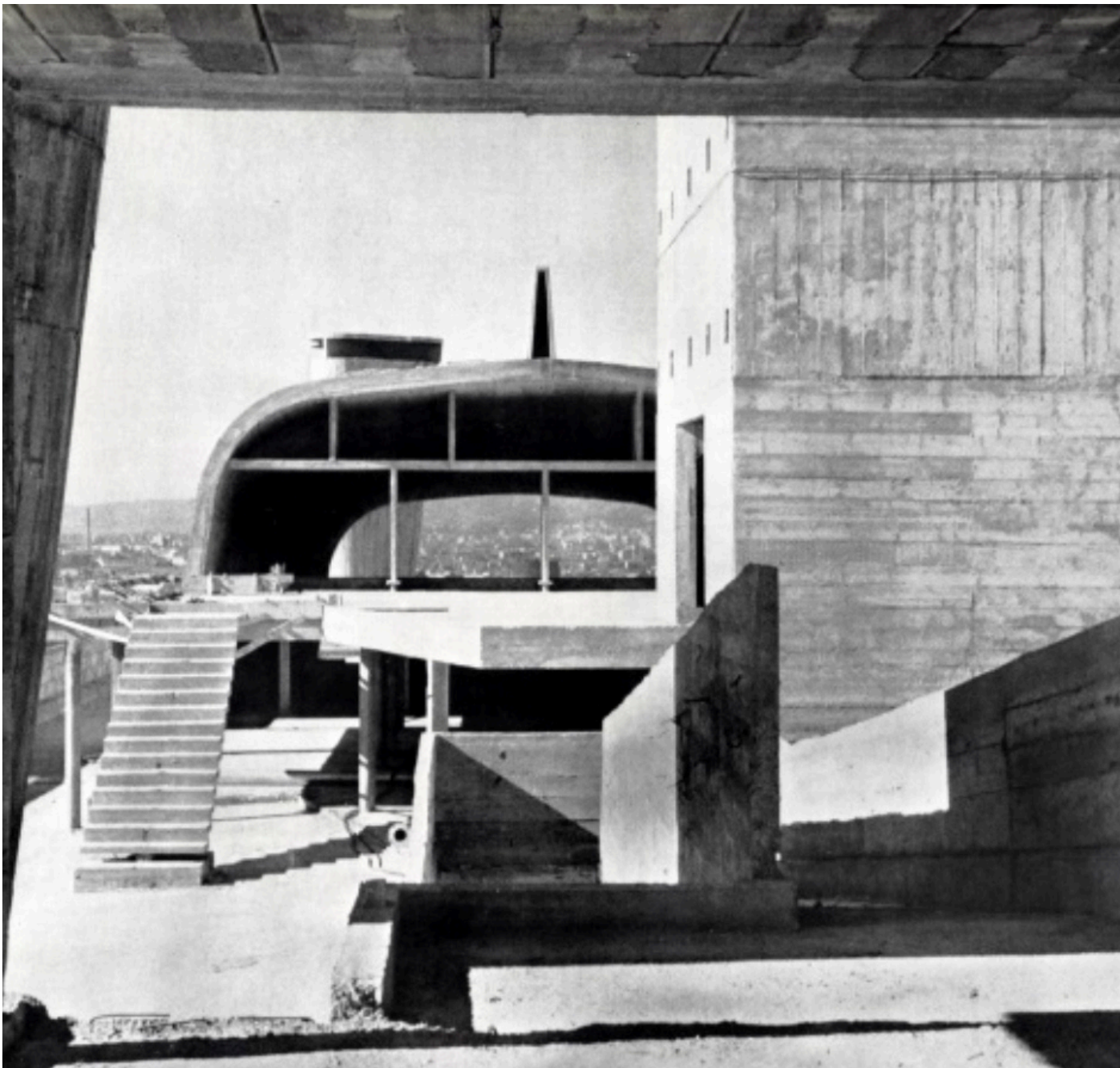
Le Corbusier was deeply convinced that architecture should engage with the landscape, not merely by inserting itself into it, but by reinterpreting and reorganizing it. His vision of the modern city was based on buildings rising from the ground, thereby freeing space at ground level. Within this framework, the roof terrace plays a crucial role: it represents a reinterpretation of *common ground*, a suspended plane that reconciles architecture with the surrounding environment, yet on an elevated level, detached from the chaos and noise of the city.

The concept of the roof terrace as a substitute for ground level finds one of its most complete expressions in the Unité d’Habitation. The building rises like a gigantic floating ship, and the terrace functions as its bridge, a place from which residents can observe the horizon, contemplate the city, and at the same time enjoy the tranquility that only an elevated and semi-isolated space can offer. This “bridge”

becomes an intermediate zone between the private realm of the dwelling and the public dimension of the city.

The terrace allows residents to experience the landscape in a unique way. The elevated viewpoint offers a privileged perspective on both the urban fabric and the surrounding natural environment, fostering a sense of detachment, reflection, and contemplation. As a reinterpretation of “ground level”, the terrace proposes a new architectural approach: rather than simply occupying the land, the building symbolically elevates it, suggesting an alternative way of relating to the environment.

In this sense, the terrace becomes a manifesto of Le Corbusier’s idea of the vertical city, where high density is not perceived as a limitation but as an opportunity to reinvent the relationship between human beings and nature. For Le Corbusier, contact with the landscape was essential to well-being, yet he believed this contact should be mediated and framed by architecture. The terrace thus becomes the central element of this relationship, a constructed space that, despite its artificial nature, enables a profound and conscious connection with the external environment. It exemplifies Le Corbusier’s ability to reinterpret traditional architectural elements, transforming the terrace into far more than a simple outdoor space.



Unité d'Habitation of Marseille, terrace, (<http://www.acaixanegra.com/works/unite-dhabitation-marseille/>)

One of the most revolutionary aspects of Le Corbusier's Unité d'Habitation is its conception of community space. Architecture, in his view, must respond to collective needs by creating places that foster social interaction and a sense of belonging. The roof terraces embody this ideal: they are open to all residents and designed to accommodate a wide range of social and recreational activities.

The layout of the terraces was conceived to encourage interaction among residents. Rather than imposing rigid separations between different functions, the design promotes spatial continuity, allowing fluid movement between areas intended for relaxation, leisure, and play. Each zone responds to specific needs, yet all are closely interconnected; this configuration fosters socialization and reinforces a sense of community. In this sense, the terraces can be understood as a reinterpretation of the traditional urban square, a collective meeting place that reproduces, in a new architectural form, the dynamics of civic life (Eardly, 2013).

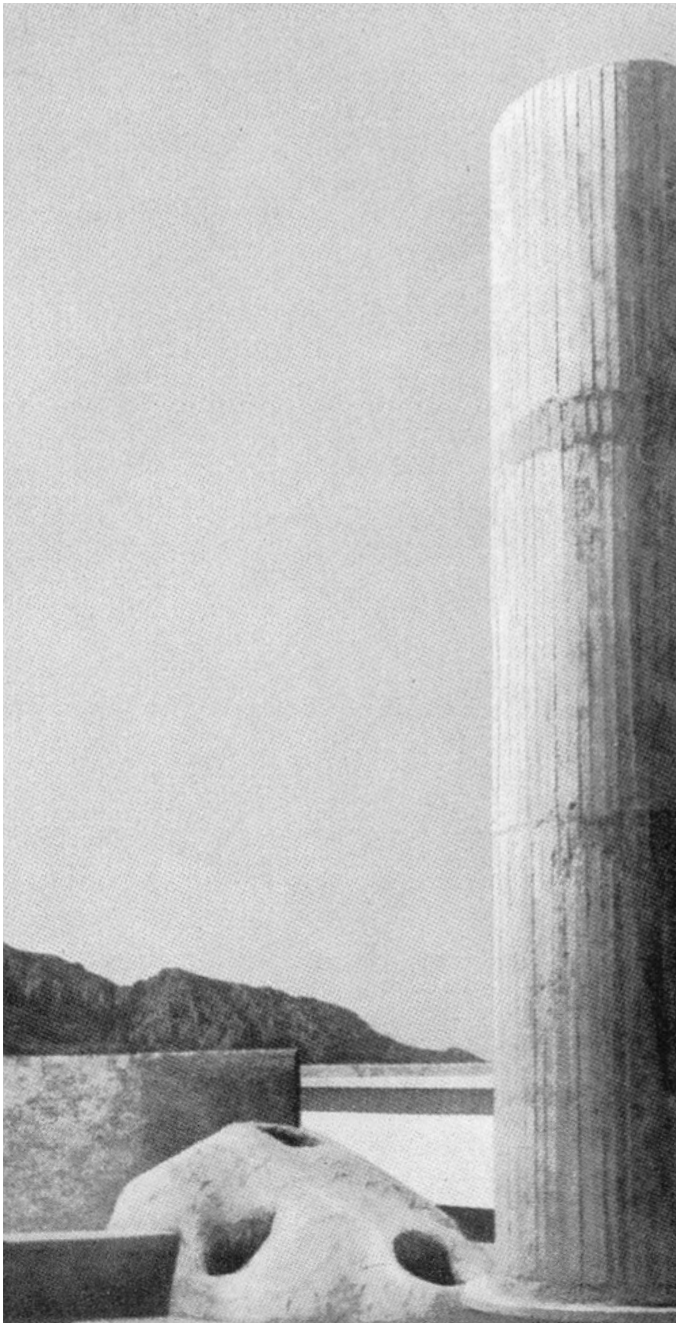
Unlike traditional squares, however, which are typically enclosed by buildings and streets, these terraces open toward the sky and the surrounding landscape, offering a radically different experience of space and freedom. This conception of communal space as an extension of the domestic environment also reflects a central aspect of Le Corbusier's philo-

sophy: the need to rethink the relationship between private and public spheres. The terraces operate as an intermediate realm, mediating between the private life of the apartments and the shared life of the community.

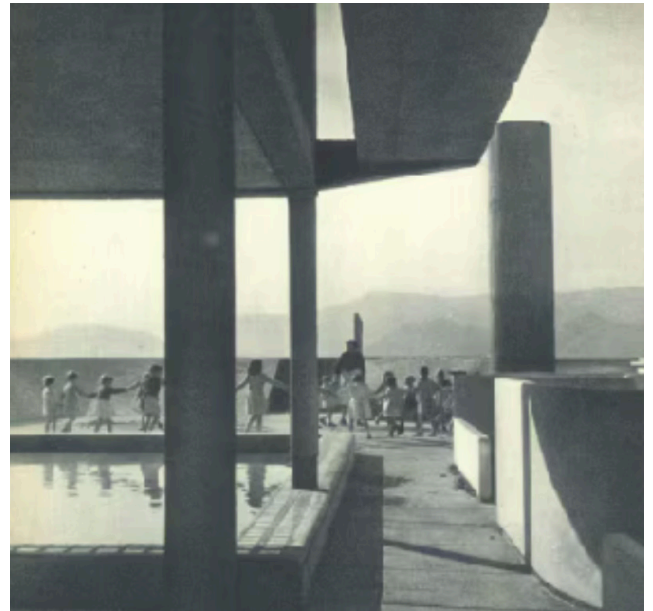
Flexibility and adaptability are key characteristics of these spaces. For example, the stepped seating of the open-air theater can function both during performances and as informal seating at other times. This versatility demonstrates Le Corbusier's capacity to design hybrid spaces capable of adapting to the evolving lives of their inhabitants. The recreational areas were conceived with careful attention to residents' physical and psychological well-being, offering places to relax, socialize, and engage in leisure activities.

The presence of swimming pools within the Unité d'Habitation represents a significant innovation in residential architecture. Although originally intended primarily for preschool children, they were accessible to other residents as well. Their minimalist design integrates seamlessly with the architectural composition, while the presence of water introduces a sensory and symbolic dimension that enhances both relaxation and vitality.

Children's play areas constitute another essential element of the terraces. Recognizing the importance of safe and dedicated spaces for children, Le Cor-



Unité d'Habitation of Marseille, terrace, (<http://www.acaixanegra.com/works/unite-dhabitation-marseille/>)



Unité d'Habitation of Marseille, terrace, (<http://www.acaixanegra.com/works/unite-dhabitation-marseille/>)



Unité d'Habitation of Marseille, terrace, (<http://www.acaixanegra.com/works/unite-dhabitation-marseille/>)

busier designed environments that encourage play, creativity, and social interaction. The equipment stimulates imagination while maintaining aesthetic coherence with the overall architectural language.

Running tracks and pedestrian paths located along the perimeter of the terrace further contribute to the multifunctional character of the space. These circulation routes allow residents to engage in outdoor physical activity without leaving the building. Designed along strong geometric lines, they guide the eye toward the horizon while subtly defining the boundary of the terrace, framing views and structuring movement (Easton, 1951).

Perhaps the most striking feature of the terraces is the presence of green areas. Le Corbusier consistently emphasized the importance of nature within the urban environment, and these elevated gardens materialize that vision. Positioned high above the city, they mitigate the visual heaviness of exposed concrete and soften the architectural composition through vegetation. The integration of greenery transforms the terrace into a suspended landscape, reinforcing the connection between architecture and nature.

With residents' well-being in mind, Le Corbusier also designed a solarium, offering a dedicated space for rest and exposure to sunlight. Adjacent to it, the open-air theater, with its stepped seating, was

conceived as a venue for cultural events, performances, and collective gatherings. The combination of horizontal planes and inclined surfaces creates a distinctive spatial composition adaptable to diverse uses. Durable materials such as concrete and stone ensure resilience against weather conditions while maintaining architectural coherence.

Concrete tables distributed across the terrace serve as informal meeting points. Solid and functional, they are designed to withstand the elements while harmonizing with the surrounding urban furniture. These elements encourage residents to gather, converse, eat, or simply enjoy the panoramic views. Similarly, the outdoor gym, sometimes accompanied by climbing walls, multipurpose equipment, and even changing facilities, promotes a healthy lifestyle and reinforces the terrace's role as a space of both vitality and social interaction.

In some Unités d'Habitation, a café or bar further enhances the social dimension of the terrace, functioning almost like a small urban center. As a meeting place for residents, it contributes to a lively and welcoming atmosphere (Gans and Kinney, 2006).

Beyond recreation, Le Corbusier also recognized the importance of education. The inclusion of a nursery school within the terrace design reflects his commitment to family life and intergenerational integration. Designed as a safe and stimulating environment,

« Making architecture is  
like making a creature:  
being filled, filling  
oneself, exploding,  
exulting, remaining cool  
in the midst of complex  
circumstances, becoming a  
happy dog.»

the nursery contributes to the creation of a cohesive and inclusive community.

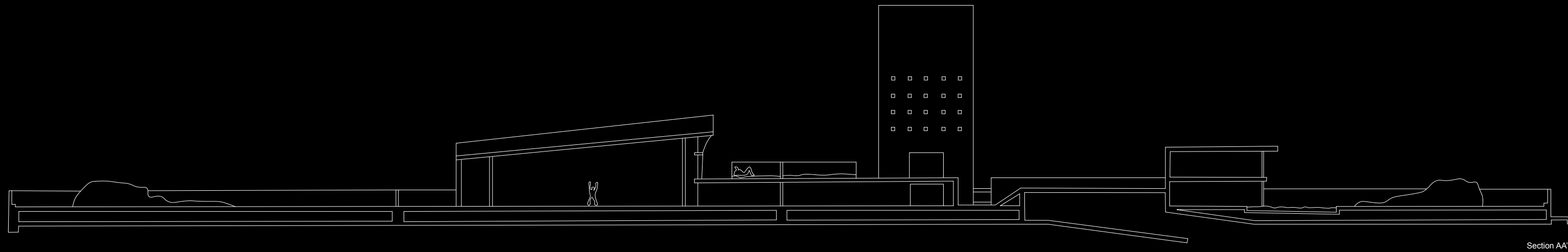
Recurring elements across the terraces, artificial hills, planters, sculptural ventilation chimneys, outdoor gyms, solaria, concrete tables, cafés, running tracks, nurseries, swimming pools, gardens and open-air theaters, are conceived as parts of an integrated and multifunctional environment. Each component fulfills practical needs while also contributing to a broader spatial and social experience that merges functionality with aesthetic intention.

Through this design approach, Le Corbusier demonstrates how architecture can transform rooftop space into a vibrant, dynamic, and welcoming environment, one in which everyday life and collective experience are harmoniously intertwined.

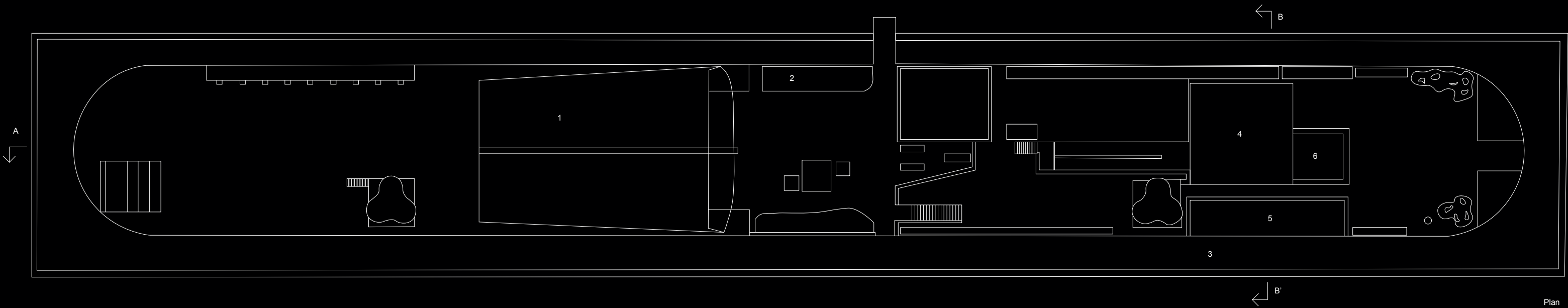
# Unité d'Habitation of Marseille

## TERRACE ACTIVITIES

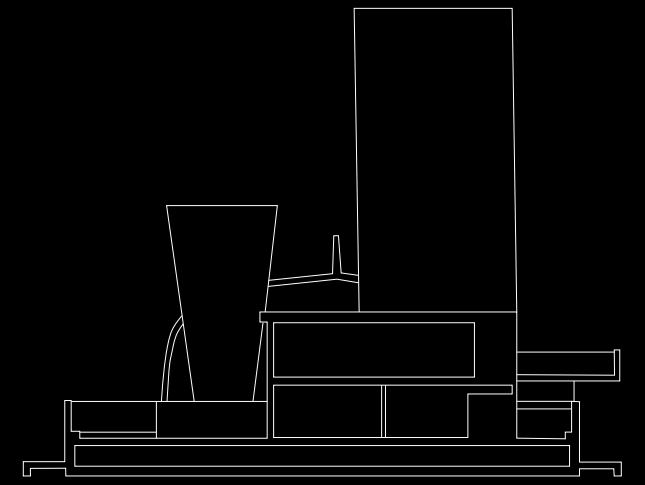
- 1 Gym
- 2 Solarium
- 3 300-meter running track
- 4 Kindergarten
- 5 Kindergarten garden
- 6 Swimming pool



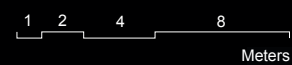
Section AA'



Plan



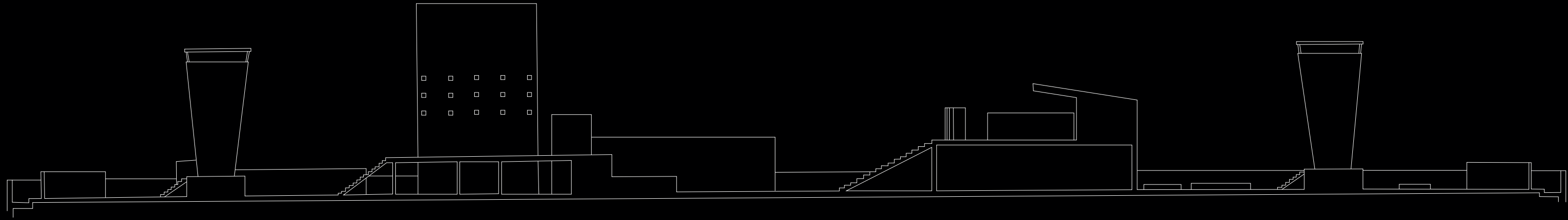
Section BB'



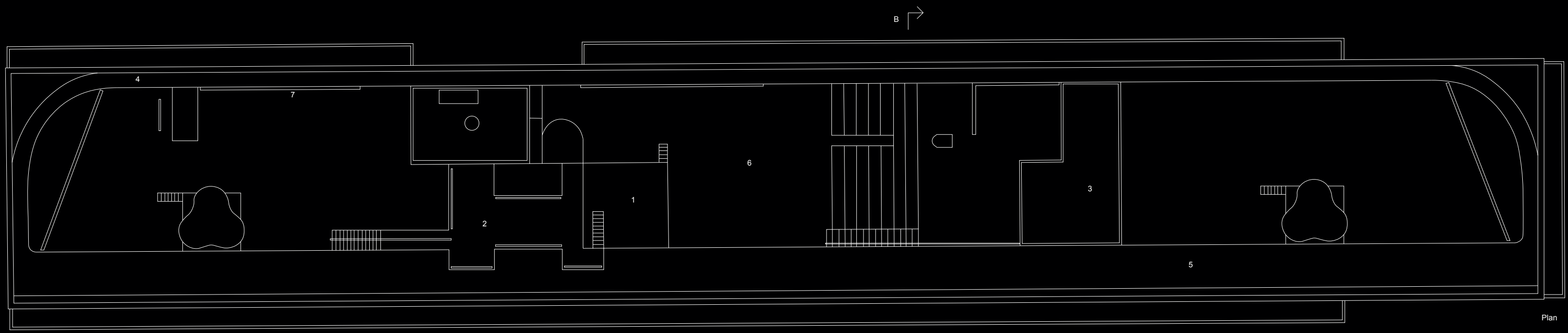
# Unité d'Habitation of Nantes-Rezé

## TERRACE ACTIVITIES

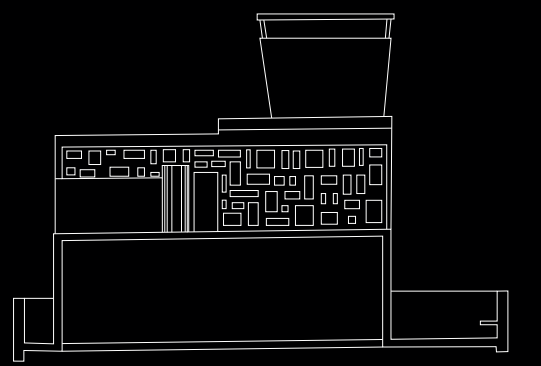
- 1 *En plein air* theater stage
- 2 Solarium
- 3 Condominium committee office and library
- 4 Pedestrian path
- 5 Running track
- 6 Orchestra
- 7 Climbing wall



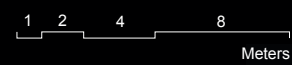
Section AA'



Plan



Section BB'

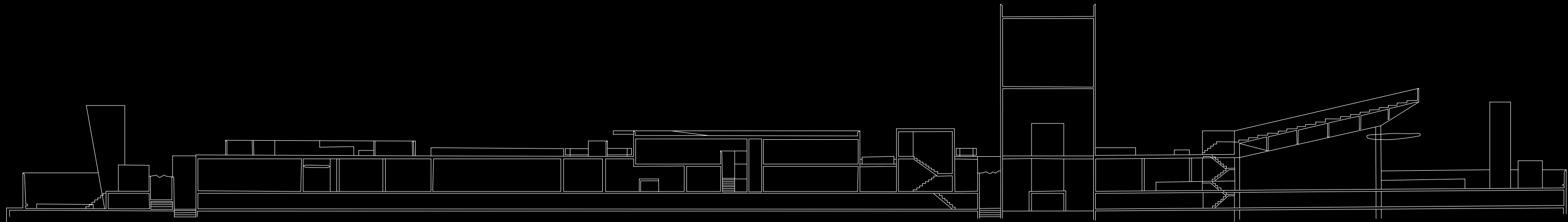


Meters

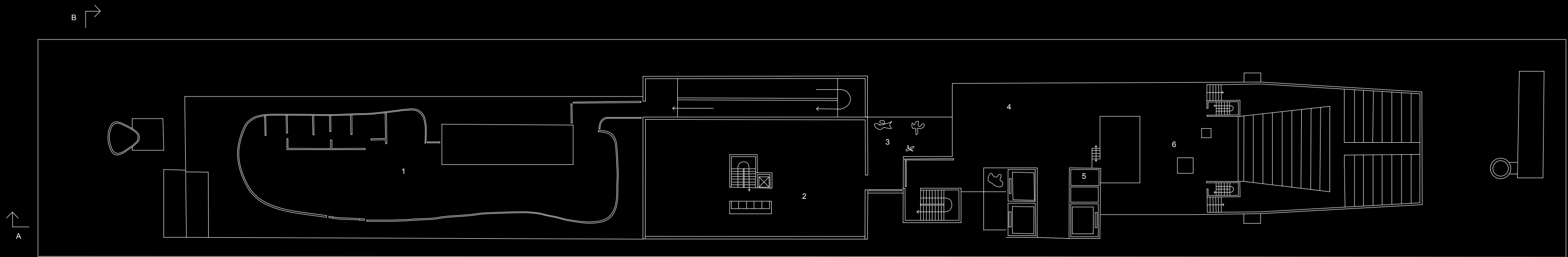
# Unité d'Habitation of Berlin

## TERRACE ACTIVITIES

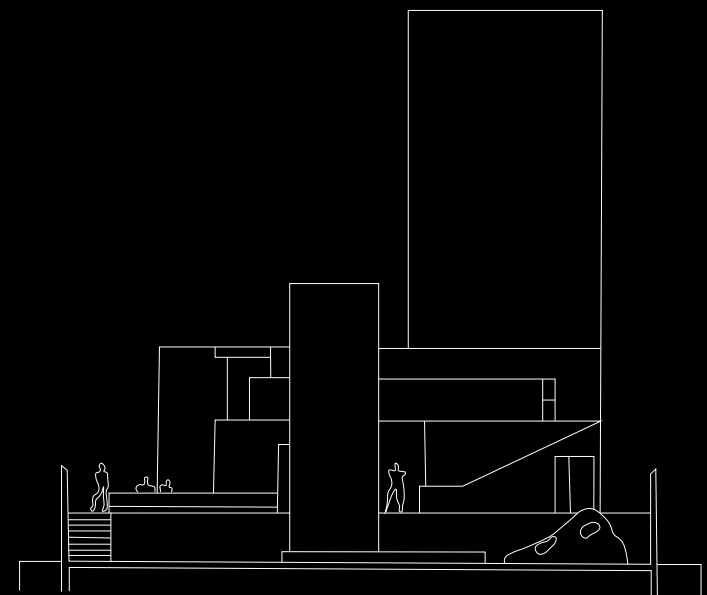
1. Preschool garden
2. Kindergarten
3. Kindergarten garden
4. Refreshment area
5. Bar
6. Theater stage



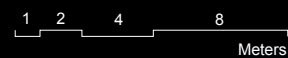
Section AA'



Plan



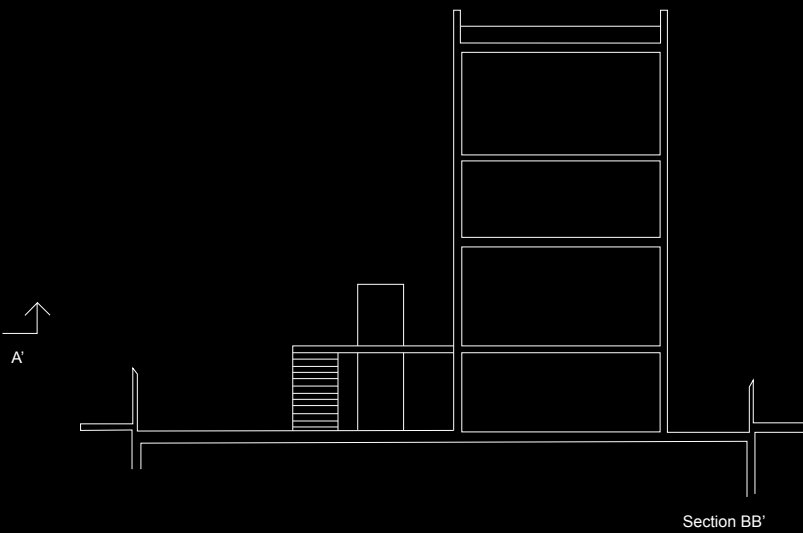
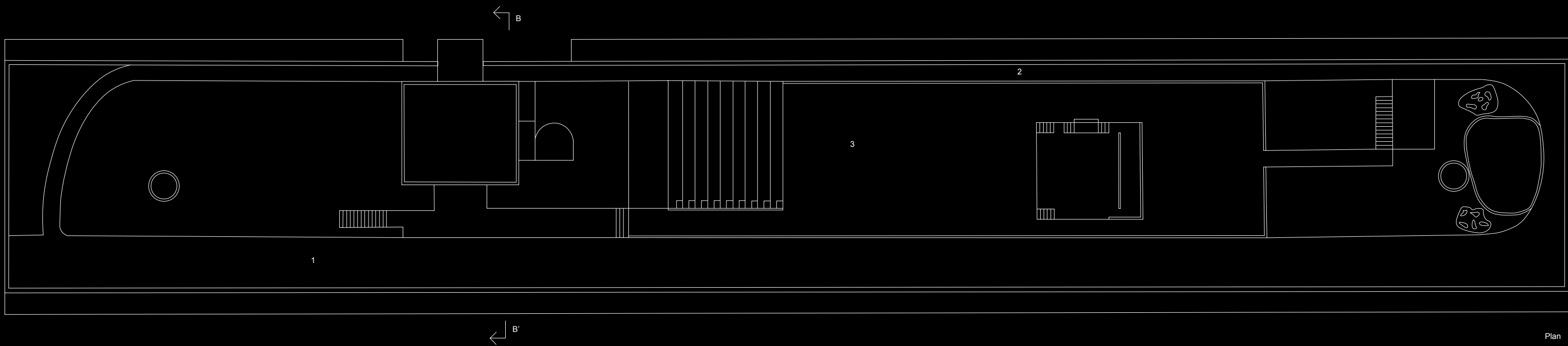
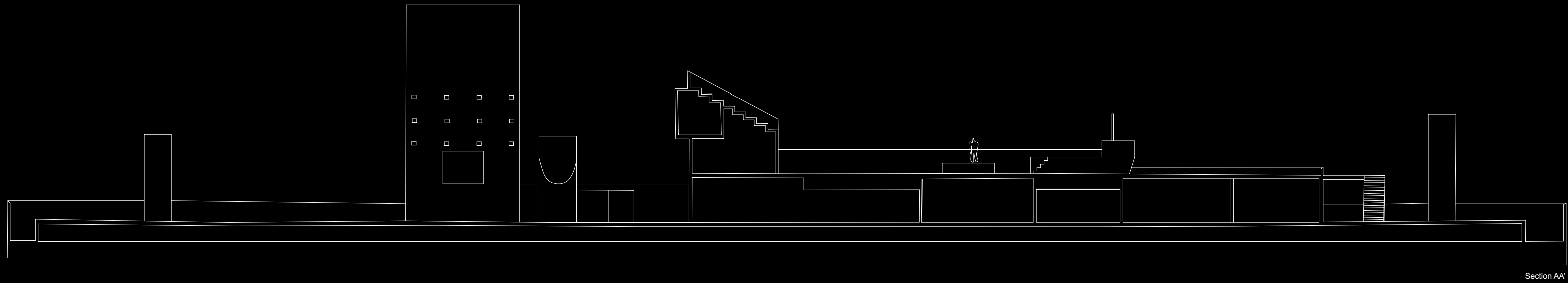
Section BB'



# Unité d'Habitation of Briey-en-Forêt

## TERRACE ACTIVITIES

- 1 Running track
- 2 Walking path
- 3 Theater stage

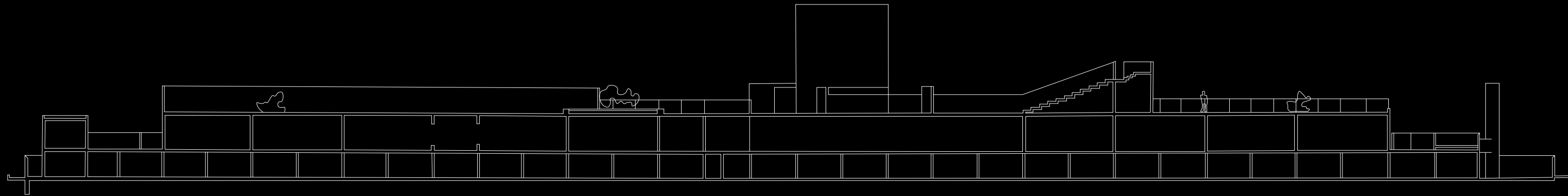


1 2 4 8  
Meters

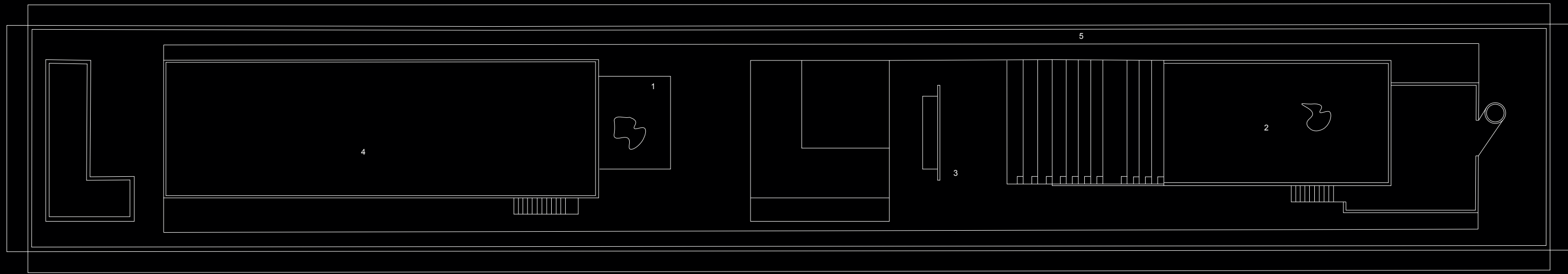
# Unité d'Habitation of Firminy-Vert

## TERRACE ACTIVITIES

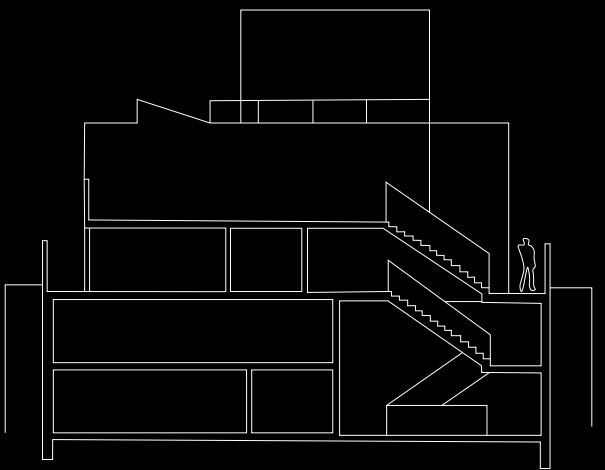
1. Swimming pool
2. Garden
3. Theater stage
4. Kindergarten garden
5. Pedestrian path



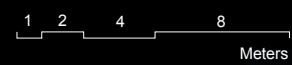
Section AA'



Plan



Section BB'



Meters



Unité d'Habitation of Marseille, terrace, (<https://www.inexhibit.com/it/mymuseum/le-corbusier-unite-dhabitation-cite-radieuse-marsiglia/>)

## 3.2 Places of permanence and sharing

A striking example of how these central components operate simultaneously as functional and architectural elements is the stepped seating of the open-air theater. Often positioned at the center of the terrace, these steps embody the idea that functionality can be combined with strong aesthetic expression. This highly visible and volumetrically powerful structure, characterized by its sloping form and clean lines, becomes a sculptural feature that enriches the architectural landscape of the terrace.

Similarly, the roofs of the various terrace structures often serve as visual vanishing points toward the horizon. By playing with differences in height, they contribute to a diversified and articulated use of space. These structural elements, essential to the building's technical functioning, are deliberately shaped to create an environment that is both meaningful and enjoyable for residents.

For this reason, spaces such as the theater steps, concrete seating and tables, artificial hills, and solariums are designed with careful attention to both functionality and aesthetics. Their versatility allows them to be used in varied and efficient ways, making them integral to daily life on the terraces. Concrete seating and tables are seamlessly integrated into the open-space design and strategically arranged to encourage social interaction and relaxation.

Artificial hills represent another innovative device,

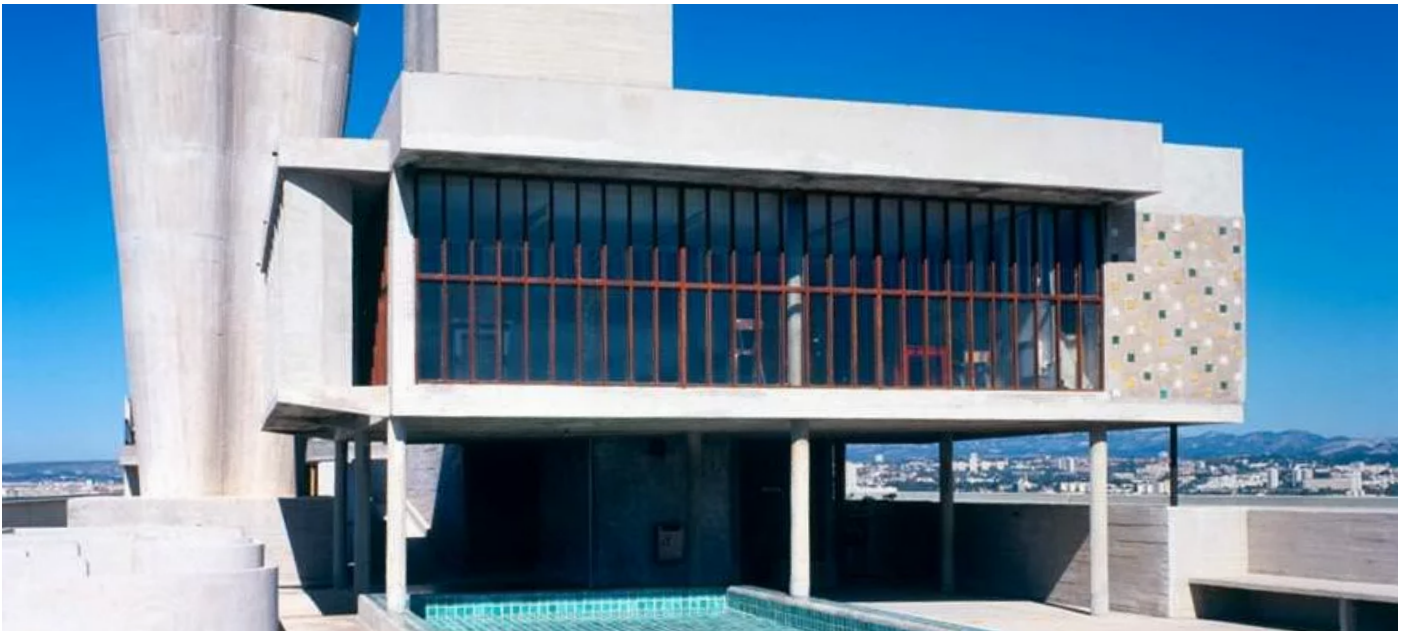
introducing dynamism into the outdoor environment. These elevated forms, with their undulating surfaces and varied inclinations, are designed not only as play areas for children but also as informal seating and gathering spaces for adults. By softening the rigidity of architectural geometries, these elements create a more fluid and welcoming atmosphere, encouraging spontaneous interaction and a freer use of space.

Planters, while primarily intended to accommodate vegetation, also perform an additional function as informal seating due to their substantial edges. Their proportions, height and width, are carefully calibrated to provide minimal but sufficient comfort, allowing residents to sit and enjoy the surrounding greenery. Together, these elements demonstrate how Le Corbusier combined architectural composition with a deep understanding of human needs.

The terraces thus evolve from mere accessory spaces into genuine hubs of community life, where each component is designed to enhance quality of life and promote residents' physical and psychological well-being (Cohen, 2012).



Unité d'Habitation of Marseille, terrace, (<http://www.acaixanegra.com/works/unite-dhabitation-marseille/>)



Unité d'Habitation of Marseille, terrace, (<http://www.acaixanegra.com/works/unite-dhabitation-marseille/>)

Le Corbusier's terraces ultimately represent an extraordinary example of how architecture can harmoniously integrate functional requirements with aesthetic innovation. Every element was conceived not only to meet everyday needs but also to enrich the urban environment, transforming it into a vibrant and inspiring setting. The stylistic and functional coherence of features such as artificial hills, solariums, pedestrian paths, and various elements of urban furniture exemplifies how architecture can positively shape human experience. In this way, the terraces become more than designed spaces, they stand as a compelling demonstration of how urban form can foster both individual well-being and collective cohesion.



Unité d'Habitation of Marseille, terrace, (<http://www.acaixanegra.com/works/unite-dhabitation-marseille/>)

## 3.3 Moving along the edge

A striking example of how these central components function simultaneously as utilitarian and architectural elements is the stepped seating of the open-air theater. Often positioned at the center of the terrace, these steps embody the principle that functional necessity can coexist with strong aesthetic expression. This highly visible and volumetrically assertive structure, characterized by its inclined planes and clean geometric lines, assumes a sculptural presence that enriches the architectural landscape of the terrace.

Likewise, the roofs of the terrace structures frequently serve as visual vanishing points toward the horizon. Through subtle variations in height, they contribute to a spatially articulated and diversified environment. Although essential to the building's technical performance, these structural elements are deliberately shaped to create surroundings that are both meaningful and pleasurable for residents.

For this reason, elements such as the theater steps, concrete seating and tables, artificial hills, and solariums are designed with equal attention to functionality and aesthetic coherence. Their versatility enables varied and efficient use, making them integral to everyday life on the terraces. Concrete seating and tables, for example, are seamlessly integrated into the open-space composition and carefully arranged to facilitate social interaction and moments

of rest.

The artificial hills constitute another innovative device, introducing movement and dynamism into the outdoor setting. With their undulating surfaces and varied inclinations, these elevated forms serve not only as play areas for children but also as informal seating and gathering spaces for adults. By mitigating the rigidity of orthogonal architectural geometries, they foster a more fluid and inviting atmosphere, encouraging spontaneous interaction and flexible patterns of use.

Planters, while primarily intended to accommodate vegetation, also function as informal seating due to their substantial edges. Their dimensions, both height and width, are carefully proportioned to provide basic comfort, allowing residents to sit and engage with the surrounding greenery. Collectively, these design elements illustrate how Le Corbusier combined formal architectural composition with a nuanced understanding of human needs.

In this way, the terraces evolve from secondary or accessory spaces into genuine centers of community life, where each component contributes to enhancing quality of life and promoting residents' physical and psychological well-being (Cohen, 2012).

Ultimately, Le Corbusier's terraces represent an extraordinary example of how architecture can harmoniously integrate functional demands with aesthetic



Unité d'Habitation of Marseille, terrace, (<http://www.acaixanegra.com/works/unite-dhabitation-marseille/>)

innovation. Every element was conceived not only to accommodate everyday activities but also to elevate the urban environment, transforming it into a dynamic and inspiring setting. The stylistic and functional coherence of features such as artificial hills, solariums, pedestrian paths, and various items of urban furniture demonstrates how architectural design can positively shape human experience. In this sense, the terraces transcend their material configuration: they stand as a compelling demonstration of how urban form can foster both individual well-being and collective cohesion.



Unité d'Habitation of Marseille, terrace, (<http://www.acaixanegra.com/works/unite-dhabitation-marseille/>)

## 3.4 Sculptural dimension and horizontal level

The design of the terraces in the Unité d'Habitation represents a perfect synthesis between sculptural dimension and flexible use. Le Corbusier crafted spaces that not only meet the needs of residents but also elevate the living experience through attention to the sculptural implications of form and the architectural quality of the spaces.

The ventilation stacks are among the most iconic elements: these are not simple ventilation ducts, but become true sculptural elements that enrich the architectural landscape. Their complex and sinuous forms, inspired by natural elements, form an interesting contrast with the more sober lines of the structure. They reflect Le Corbusier's ability to unite art and architecture in a synthesis that completes the living experience, transforming a functional component into a sculptural, aesthetically satisfying element.

In composing the terraces, the architect followed the principles of the Modernist Movement: emphasizing purity of form, simplicity of line, and a thoughtful use of materials. The straight lines that dominate the composition, where each element is carefully calibrated to contribute to the overall balance, are designed to promote a clear spatial perception, while the occasional appearance of curved geometries helps residents orient themselves and feel at ease in these spaces, which would otherwise appear too

austere and cold, also due to the predominant use of concrete.

The sculptural elements on the terraces are an integral part of the architectural design; in fact, Le Corbusier always maintained that art should be an essential component of architecture, capable of elevating the quality of spaces and contributing to the well-being of individuals. These elements, often abstract and inspired by natural or linear forms, are positioned at strategic points on the terraces, identifying visual focal points that enrich the spatial experience, interacting with the surrounding architectural forms and natural light, creating an interplay of shadows and reflections that changes throughout the day.

Natural light plays a fundamental role: the architect designed these spaces to be optimally illuminated throughout the day, enhancing the architectural forms. Likewise, the terraces are oriented to capture sunlight during the most pleasant moments of the day, while also creating shaded areas that offer shelter from the heat. This clever use of light helps create an environment that is both welcoming and dynamic, where contrasting lighting adds depth and complexity. (When Domus published the first photos of Le Corbusier's Unité d'Habitation, 2023)

Elements such as the swimming pools, planters, concrete tables, and theater seats were designed



Unité d'Habitation of Marseille, terrace, (<http://www.acaixanegra.com/works/unite-dhabitation-marseille/>)



Unité d'Habitation of Marseille, terrace, (<http://www.acaixanegra.com/works/unite-dhabitation-marseille/>)

with a dual purpose: to be useful in everyday life and to create a space that encourages socialization, sharing, and community interaction. Le Corbusier successfully combined aesthetics and practicality in a harmonious whole. The choice of materials, such as concrete, wood, and stone, reflects a dual focus on durability and aesthetics, giving the terraces a modern yet timeless look, capable of maintaining their relevance and beauty over the years. (Von Moos, 2009)

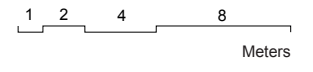
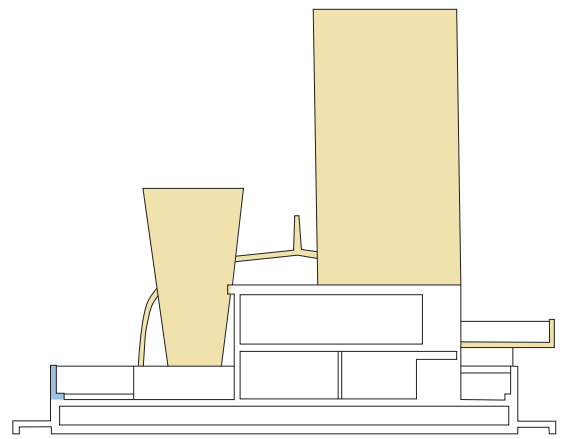
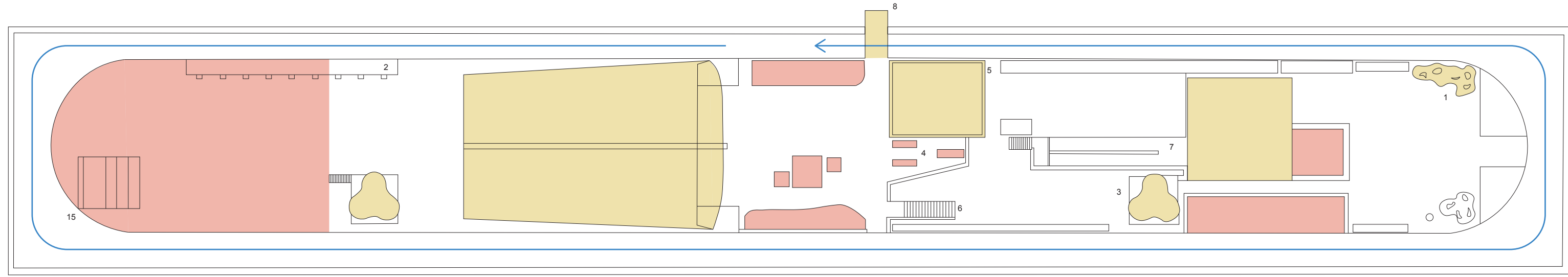
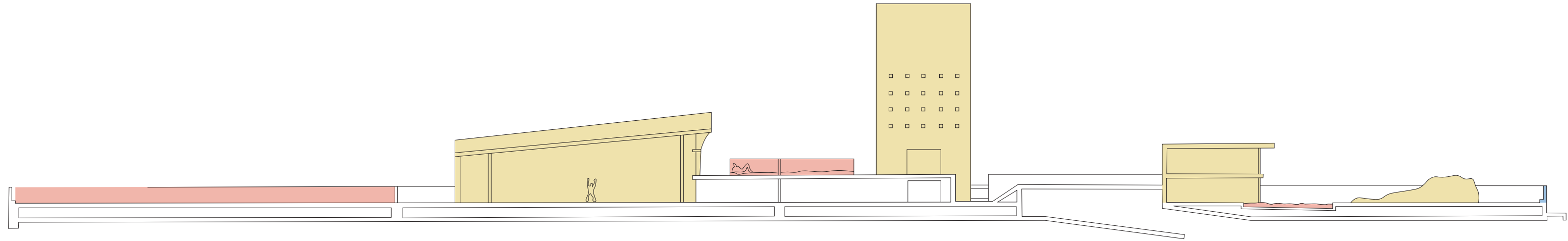
Le Corbusier's vision continues to inspire contemporary architectural design, offering a model for how to design spaces that are simultaneously practical, aesthetically pleasing, and intimately connected to the social and environmental context in which they are inserted. In an era when cities face growing challenges related to urbanization, pollution, and the lack of green spaces, Le Corbusier's terrace concept takes on even greater relevance; modern challenges require architectural solutions that not only address housing needs but also improve the quality of life in densely populated cities. Le Corbusier, with his conception of terraces as multifunctional and socially inclusive spaces, offers us an example of how architecture can contribute to creating more livable urban environments.

# Unité d'Habitation of Marseille

## TERRACE ELEMENTS

- 1 Artificial mountain
- 2 Planter
- 3 Ventilation chimney
- 4 Concrete tables
- 5 Elevator tower
- 6 External staircase
- 7 Ramp connecting the terrace and nursery
- 8 Overhanging balcony
- 9 Windbreak wall (*en plein air* theater)

- Edge
- Sculptural elements
- Places of stay

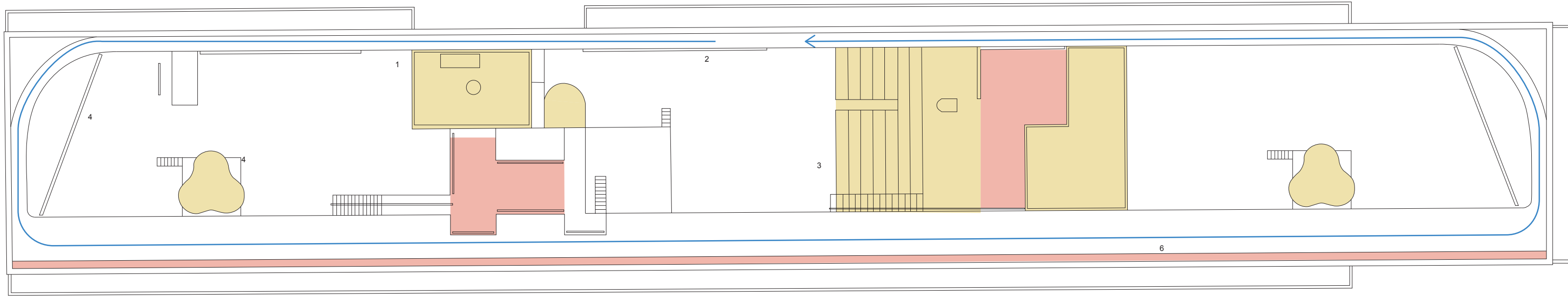
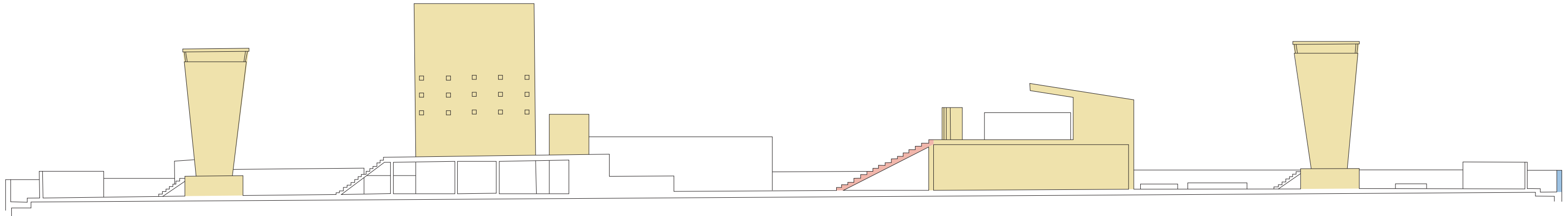


# Unité d'Habitation di Nantes-Rezé

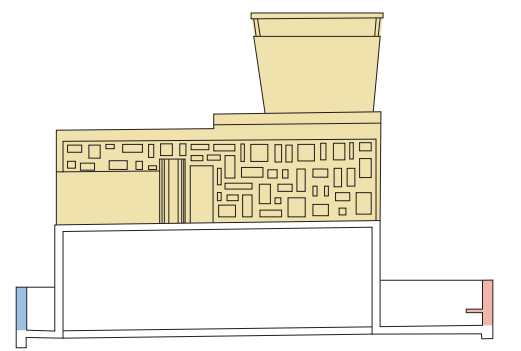
## TERRACE ELEMENTS

- 1 Elevator tower
- 2 Acoustic wall
- 3 Theater bleachers
- 4 Ventilation stack
- 5 Wall
- 6 Concrete seat

- Edge
- Sculptural elements
- Places of stay






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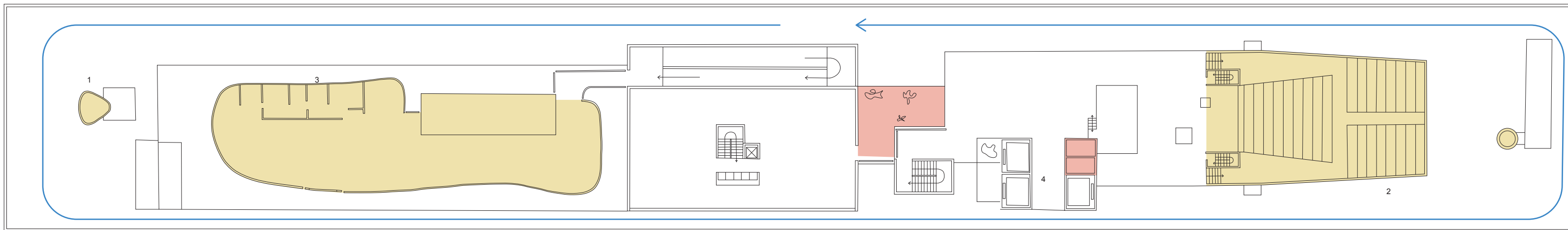
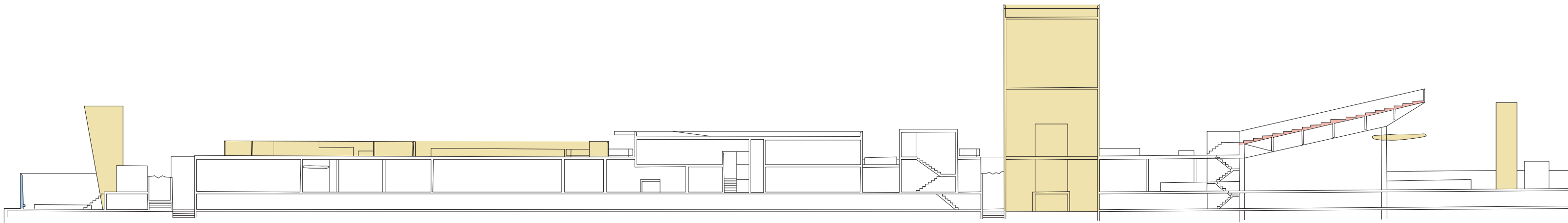


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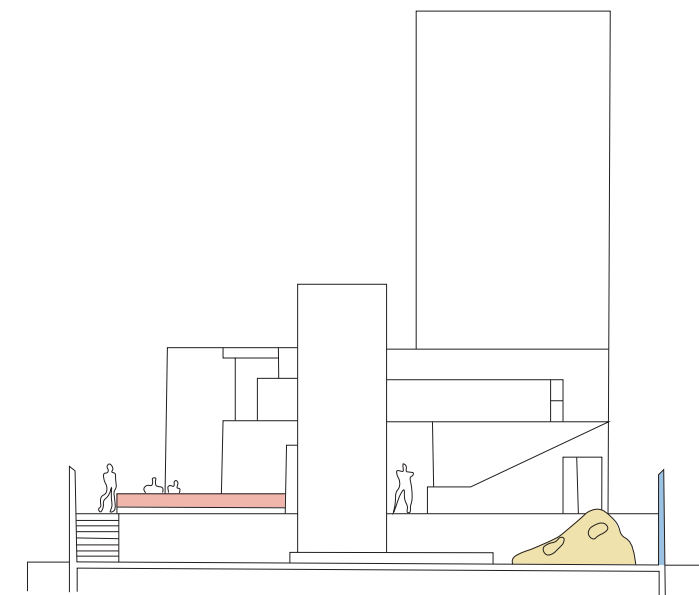
## TERRACE ELEMENTS

- 1 Ventilation chimney
- 2 Theater bleachers
- 3 Concrete tables
- 4 Elevator tower

-  Edge
-  Sculptural elements
-  Places of stay






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Meters

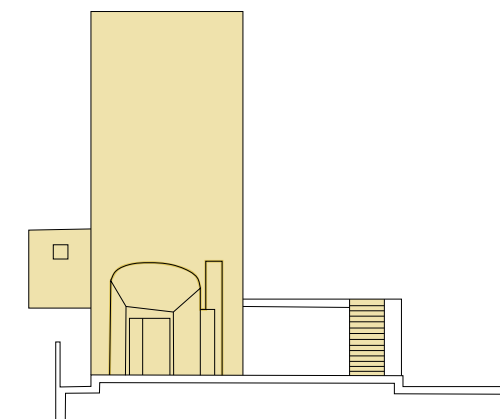
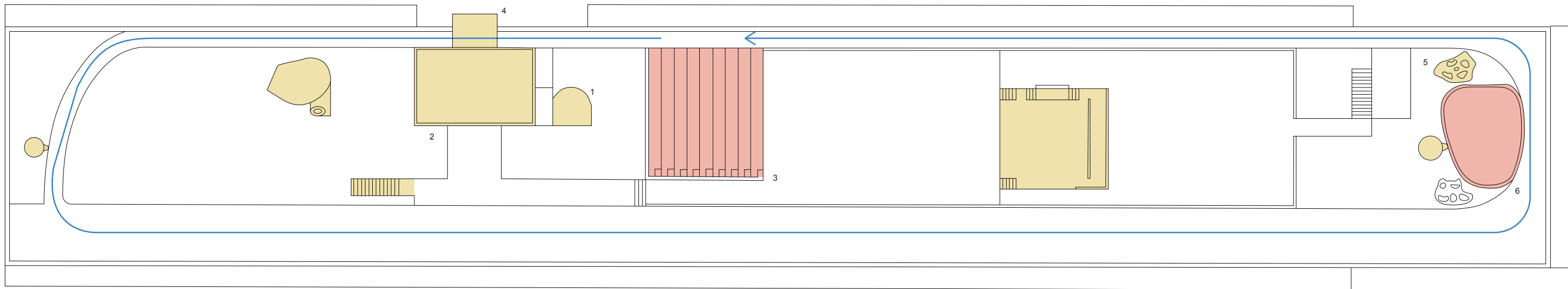
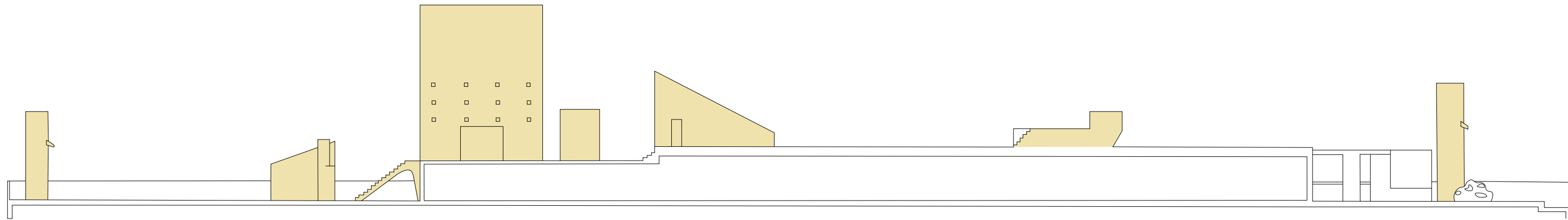


# Unité d'Habitation di Briey-en-Forêt

## TERRACE ELEMENTS

- 1 Ventilation chimney
- 2 Elevator tower
- 3 Theater steps
- 4 Overhanging balcony
- 5 Artificial mountain
- 6 Planter

-  Edge
-  Sculptural elements
-  Places of stay






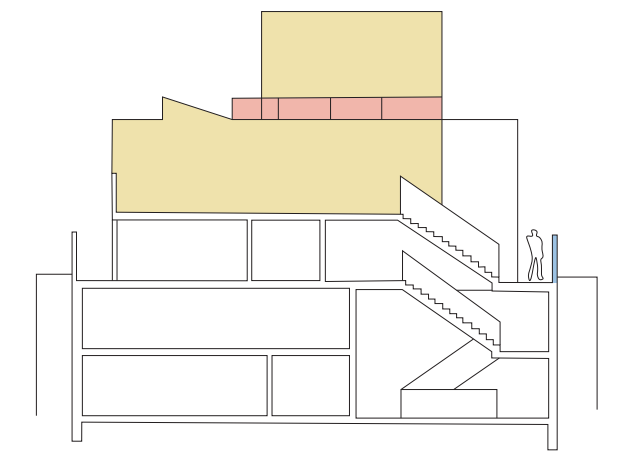
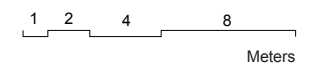
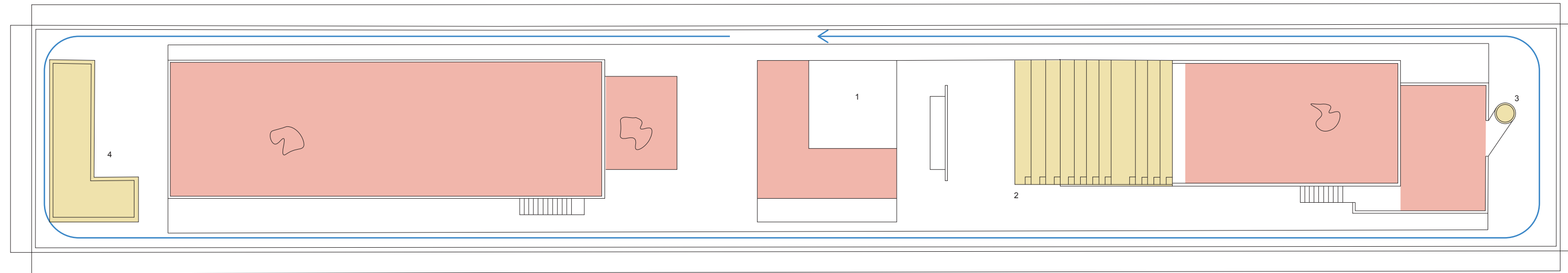
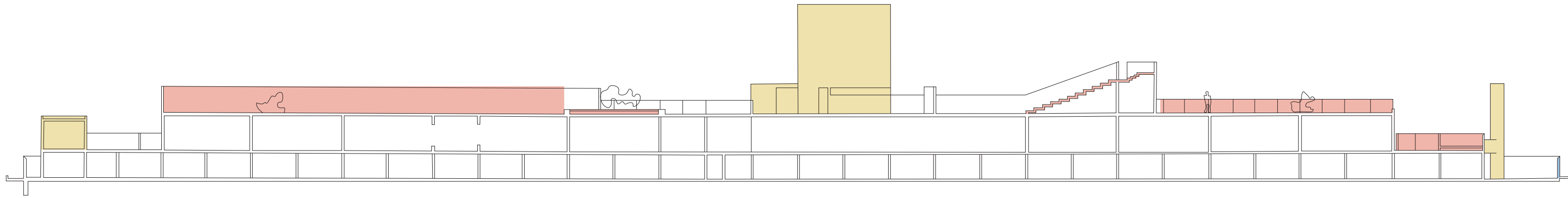
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# Unité d'Habitation di Firminy-Vert

## TERRACE ELEMENTS

- 1 Elevator tower
- 2 Theater steps
- 3 Ventilation stack
- 4 Machine room

-  Edge
-  Sculptural elements
-  Places of stay





**Le Corbusier's legacy:  
the Unité d'Habitation  
and the challenges of  
contemporary living**



Unité d'Habitation of Marseille, terrace, (<https://www.elledecor.com/it/arte/a41085186/linstallazione-di-daniel-arsham-a-marsiglia-mette-le-corbusier-faccia-a-faccia-con-michael-jordan/>)

In this context, it is crucial to examine more deeply the revolutionary proposal of Le Corbusier, who, with his *Unité d'Habitation*, sought to redefine the concept of living within the modern city. His vision aimed to create a new urban paradigm: a vertical city that, in contrast to the horizontal expansion of traditional urban planning, would preserve and enhance the surrounding natural spaces. Le Corbusier conceived the *Unité d'Habitation* as a “machine à habiter”, a machine for living, capable of integrating all the functions essential to the daily lives of its inhabitants into a single architectural organism. Shops, nurseries, supermarkets, laundries, pharmacies, post offices, and other collective facilities were to coexist within a single building, thus freeing up the surrounding land for greenery and open spaces, offering a balance between nature and the city that addressed the challenges of growing urban density. A particularly forward-thinking aspect of the architect's vision, which takes on new significance in light of recent experiences of social isolation during the pandemic, is the idea of the “collective roof”. Traditionally, the roof has always represented a symbolic element of refuge, a place of protection and safety; however, Le Corbusier, with his innovative and progressive spirit, envisioned the possibility of transforming the roof into something more: an open-air community space, accessible and habitable. This

revolutionary concept reflected his vision of a modern city (*La Cité Radieuse*), where the roof was no longer simply a covering, but a place for the community to gather, socialize, and enjoy leisure.

On the terrace, the space becomes multifunctional: residents can run on a fitness trail, play, swim in the pool, read, stroll, gather in a small auditorium, sunbathe, and experience true collective living in a setting that is both protected and open to the surrounding environment. This concept anticipated the importance of outdoor spaces as places of well-being and health, an idea that resonates with particular relevance today.

Despite Le Corbusier's innovative vision, the *Unité d'Habitation* was not without its critics. Many misunderstood his ideas, to the point that the building was nicknamed the “*maison du fada*” (madman's house). Some saw it as too rigid a structure, almost utopian in its ambition to control every aspect of its inhabitants' lives. Others criticized the very idea of a vertical city, considering it a challenge to the traditional notion of the city as a space for encounter and exchange.

However, it is undeniable that the *Unité d'Habitation* has had a lasting impact on contemporary architecture and urban planning. What is truly significant is how Le Corbusier's original vision has been progressively distorted and trivialized; the excessive



emphasis on technique, construction processes, and tools has caused the essence of the principles that inspired the original project to be overlooked. The offshoots of this innovative idea have often manifested in superficial and elitist forms, such as luxury green roofs or “vertical forests”, which, while representing aesthetic evolutions of the concept, have failed to fully grasp its vision. These modern interpretations have focused primarily on the visual aspect and the marketing of green spaces on buildings, ignoring the community and social value the architect intended to promote.

It is therefore essential to reflect on the fact that Le Corbusier’s architecture was more than a simple aesthetic expedient or a commercial selling point; it was a profound and complex search for a new way of living and interacting with the urban environment, an attempt to balance population density with quality of life through shared and functional spaces. In light of these considerations, it becomes crucial to ask whether the time has come to rethink the use of technology in architecture, not only as a means of construction but as a tool in the service of a higher vision, a vision that places the true principles of architecture at its center, those that can genuinely lead to meaningful advancement for humanity.

In a world where the balance between urbanization and nature is increasingly precarious, Le Corbu-

sier’s legacy offers a valuable lesson on how to design spaces that are not only aesthetically pleasing but also profoundly connected to human and social needs (The provocation of the Unité d’Habitation, 2020).

Today, the city, traditionally considered the quintessential space for sharing, seems to be losing ground; inadequate services are the norm, and the city continues to perpetuate forms of exclusion, generating a sense of powerlessness. If we analyze the history of collective housing, the undisputed protagonist of urban space, it becomes clear that, especially in Italy, it has always struggled to integrate functionally at various levels. This problem is particularly evident in urban peripheries, where, during post-war reconstruction, entire “dormitory neighborhoods” emerged. These settlements, often isolated and lacking essential infrastructure, were used simply as places to sleep, with residents avoiding spending too much time there. Under these conditions, any alternative becomes preferable to escape isolation and the lack of connections with the rest of the city.

If the term “collectiveness” naturally evokes an idea of sharing among a group of people, then Le Corbusier captured its true meaning with his Unité d’Habitation, designed to connect residential and non-residential functions, allowing inhabitants to feel simultaneously at home and connected to the

« A man like Le Corbusier cannot die. [...] Le Corbusier is not dead, and this without transcendental lucubrations: he is a man among men, because works, thoughts, even aphorisms, expressed with the unparalleled capacity for synthesis, typical of genius, are still part of the process. »

outside world. The Unité d’Habitation represented a small, self-sufficient world that, while ensuring a sheltered life, fostered strong social interaction. Even if the building were neglected in the future, the Unité would remain a self-sufficient environment, containing everything necessary for a dignified life. Decades later, Le Corbusier’s vision remains surprisingly relevant, especially considering the uncontrolled growth of modern cities, where orienting oneself and using public spaces has become increasingly difficult and inconvenient. Consider the rise of so-called “condominium nurseries”, which seek to reduce the inconvenience of children’s daily commutes, or home delivery services, which reflect the idea of comfort and self-sufficiency that Le Corbusier envisioned. The architect had long anticipated the challenges of collective living in modern metropolises, where chaotic growth discourages the sharing of public spaces.

Le Corbusier, with his “vertical garden city”, challenged the conventions of his time, proposing a model in which self-sufficiency and community coexist in perfect balance. The concept of connection between spaces and people is central to his vision; he anticipated modern problems related to urbanization, such as isolation and lack of functional integration, offering solutions that remain relevant today. The Unité d’Habitation is not just a place to live but a

microcosm where daily life is enriched by social interaction and access to services, combining the comfort of privacy with the vitality of community.

This reflection leads us to consider how important it is, even today, to design living spaces that not only meet material needs but also promote social and psychological well-being. Le Corbusier’s legacy invites us to rethink architecture as a means of improving urban life, creating spaces that not only accommodate but also inspire and connect people. In an age when cities are becoming increasingly larger and more complex, the example of the Unité d’Habitation offers a valuable lesson on how architecture can contribute to building a more cohesive and humane society.



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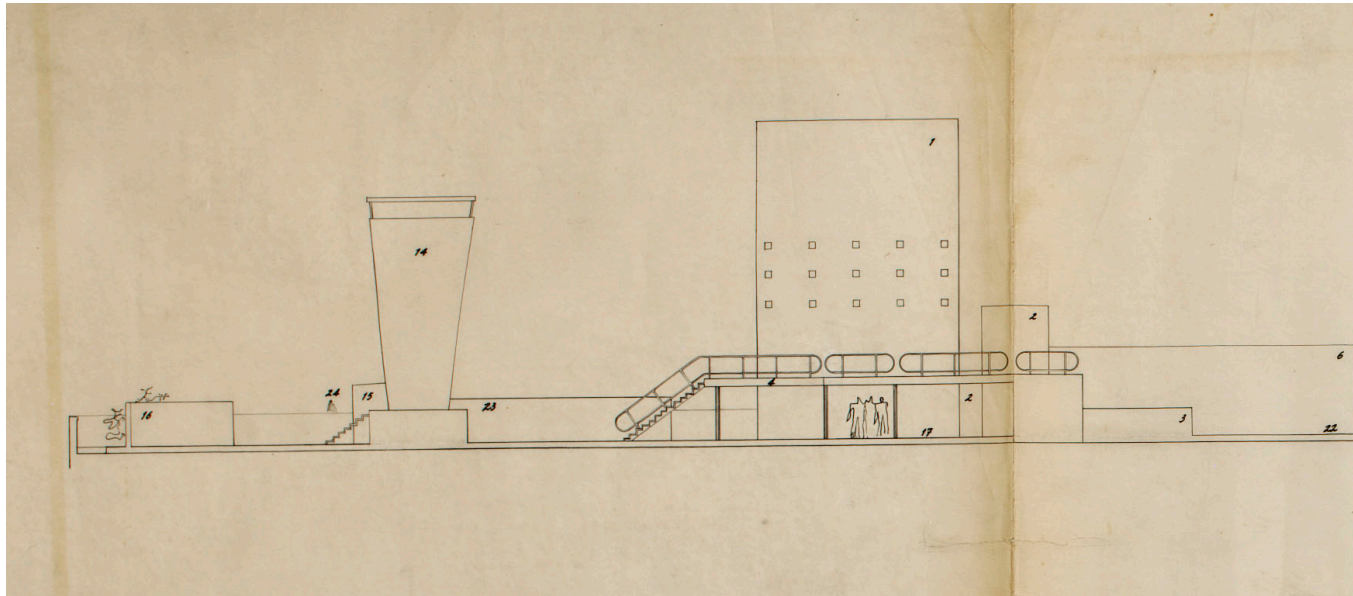
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# Sitography

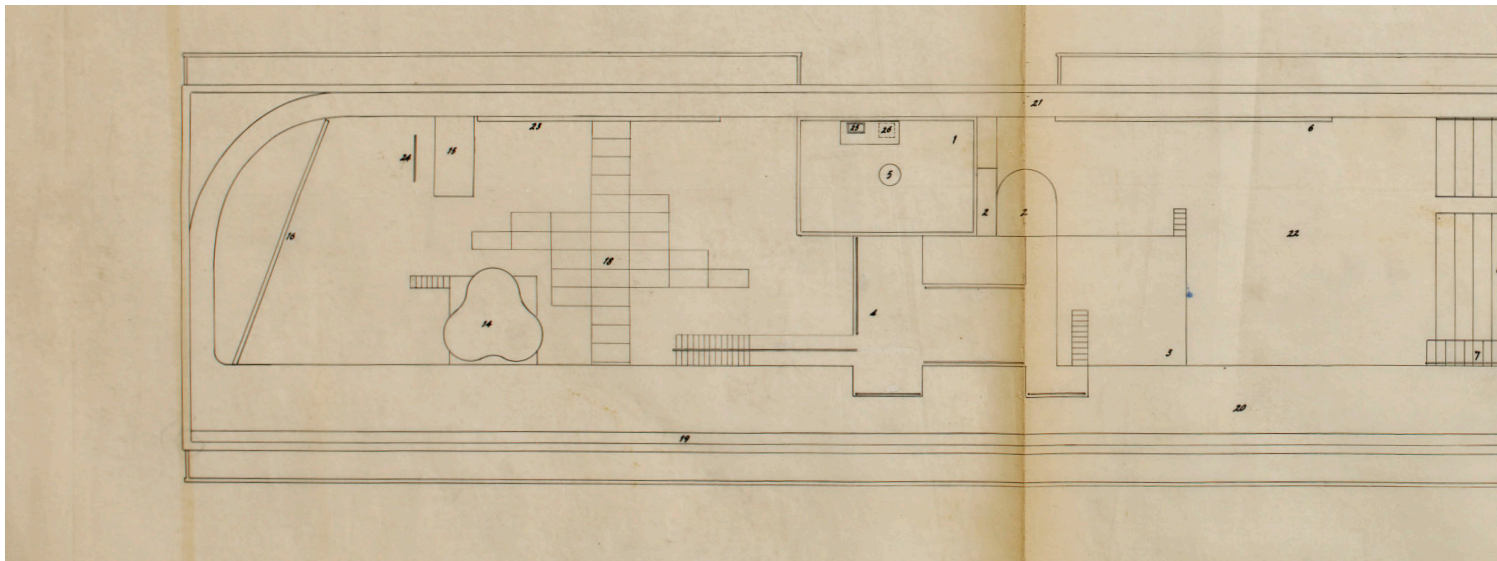
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# Archive documentation

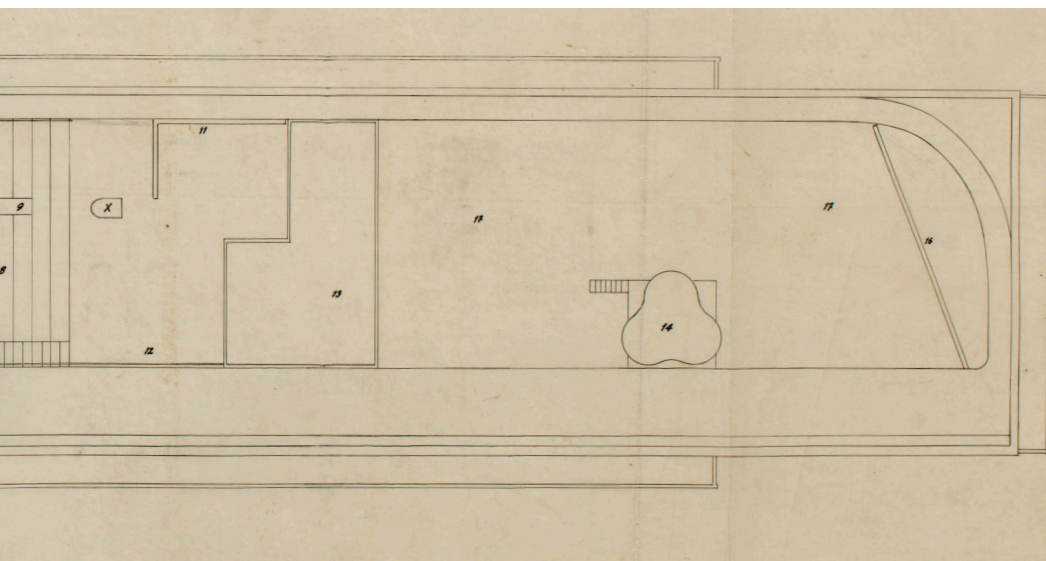
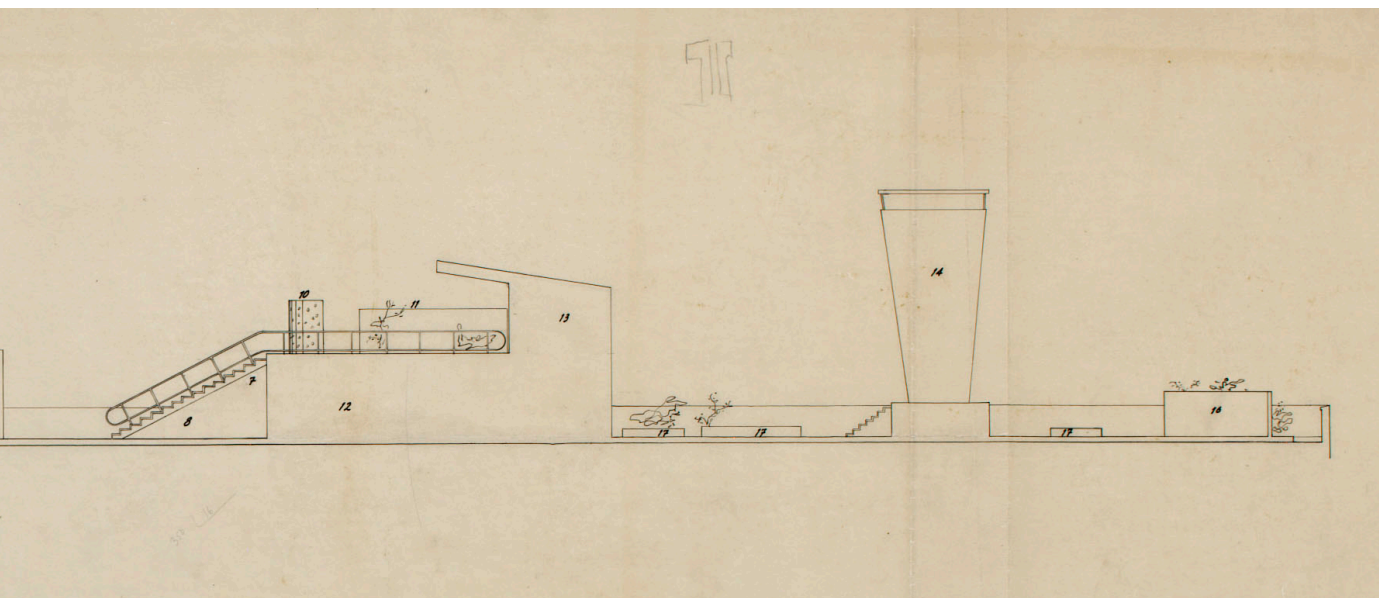
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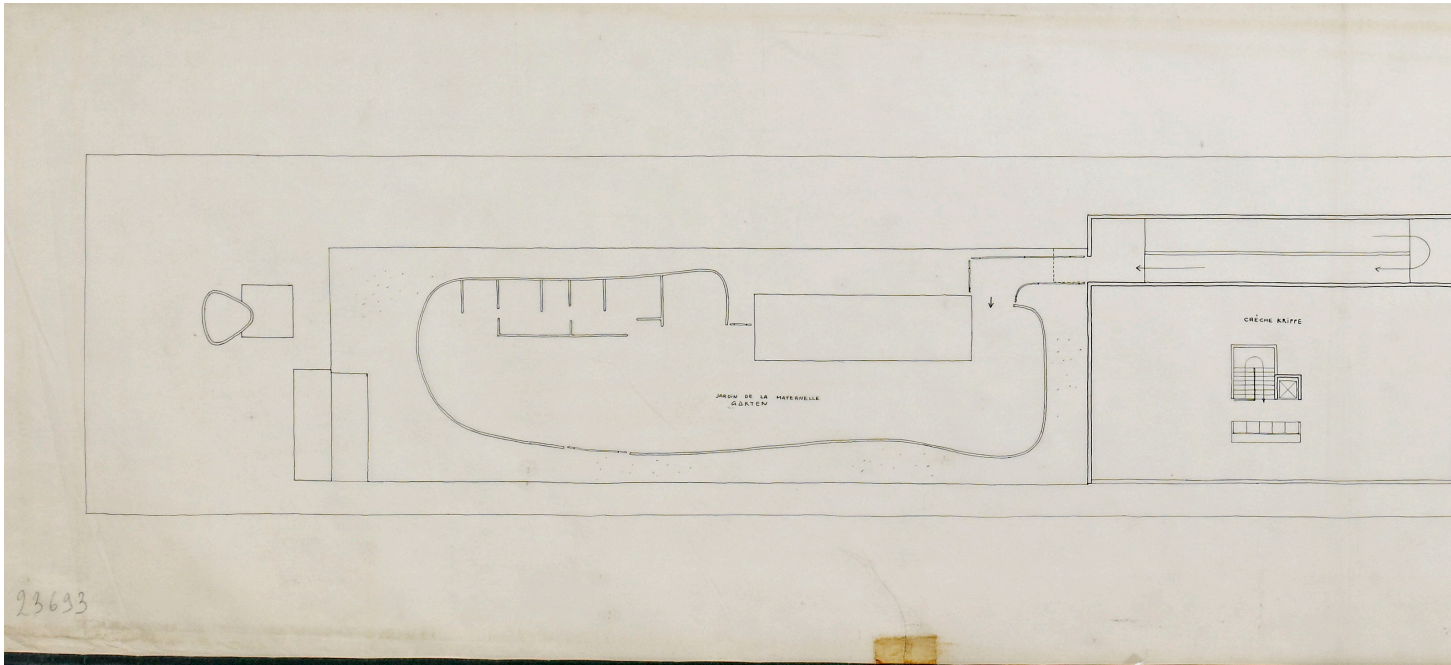
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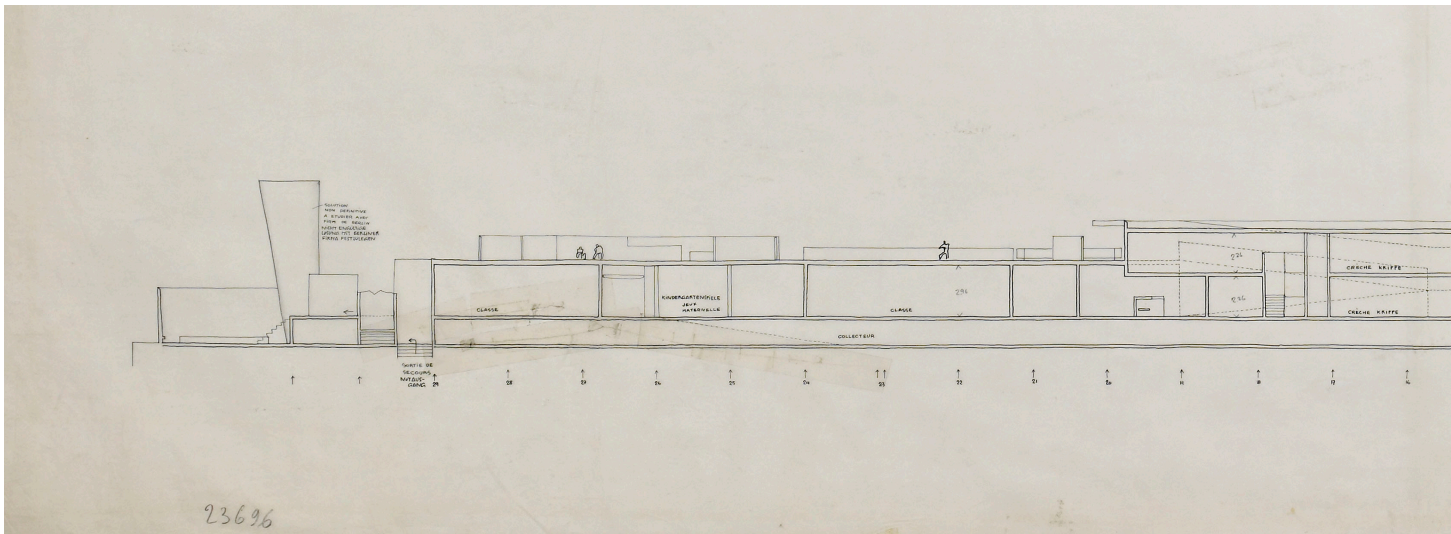
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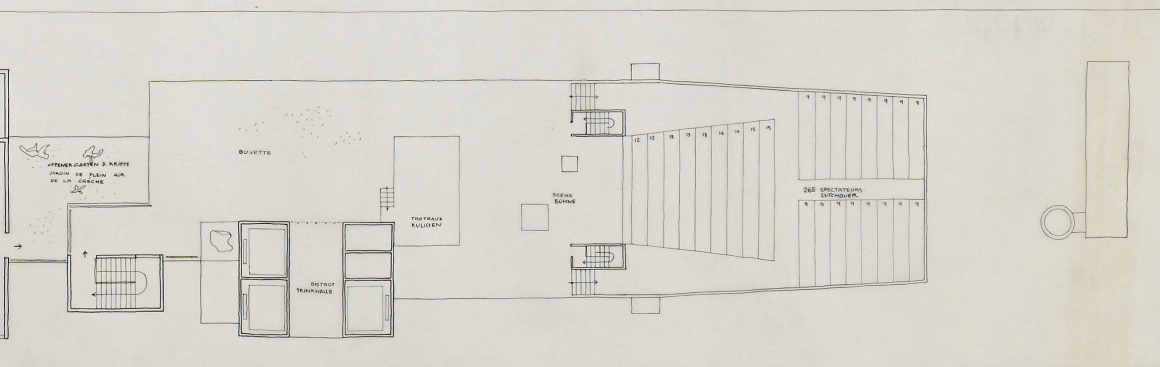
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  6. Mur monumental.
  7. Escalier d'accès aux gradins et au 13.
  8. Gradins plein air.
  9. Sortie de la salle de projection.
  10. W.C. et lavab.
  11. Mur.
  12. Salle de projection et de conférences.
  13. Bureau du Comité et bibliothèque.
  14. Cheminée d'évacuation de l'air vicié.
  15. Douches des sportifs avec W.C. et lavab.
  16. Mur.
  17. Banc de 37 m. sur 43 m. en béton avec de la terre végétale et de la pierre. Élévation des escaliers de 103.
  18. Banc en béton.
  19. Promenade en pavé et asphalté.
  20. Piste des courses à pied.
  21. Prothèse.
  22. Mur des sports.
  23. Toiture pour protéger des sportifs.
  24. Cheminée de la centrale thermique.
  25. Trémie d'accès à la centrale.
  - X. Projeteur.
  26. Bancs de la salle de projection.
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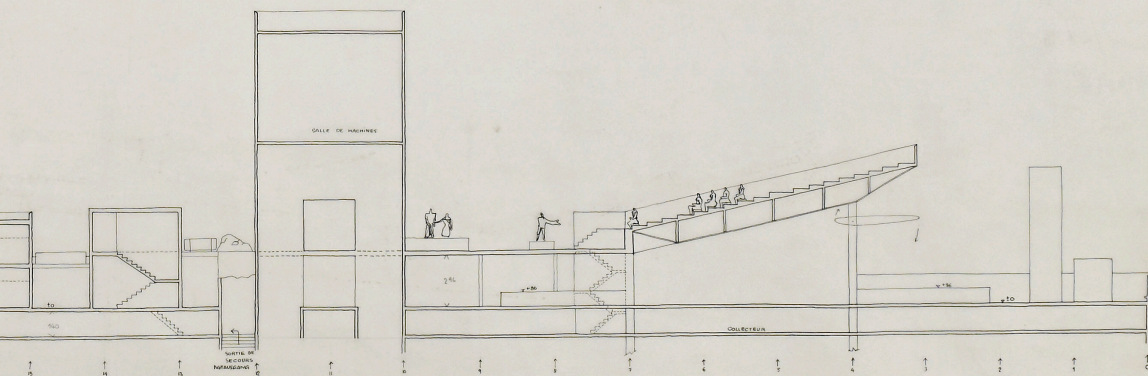


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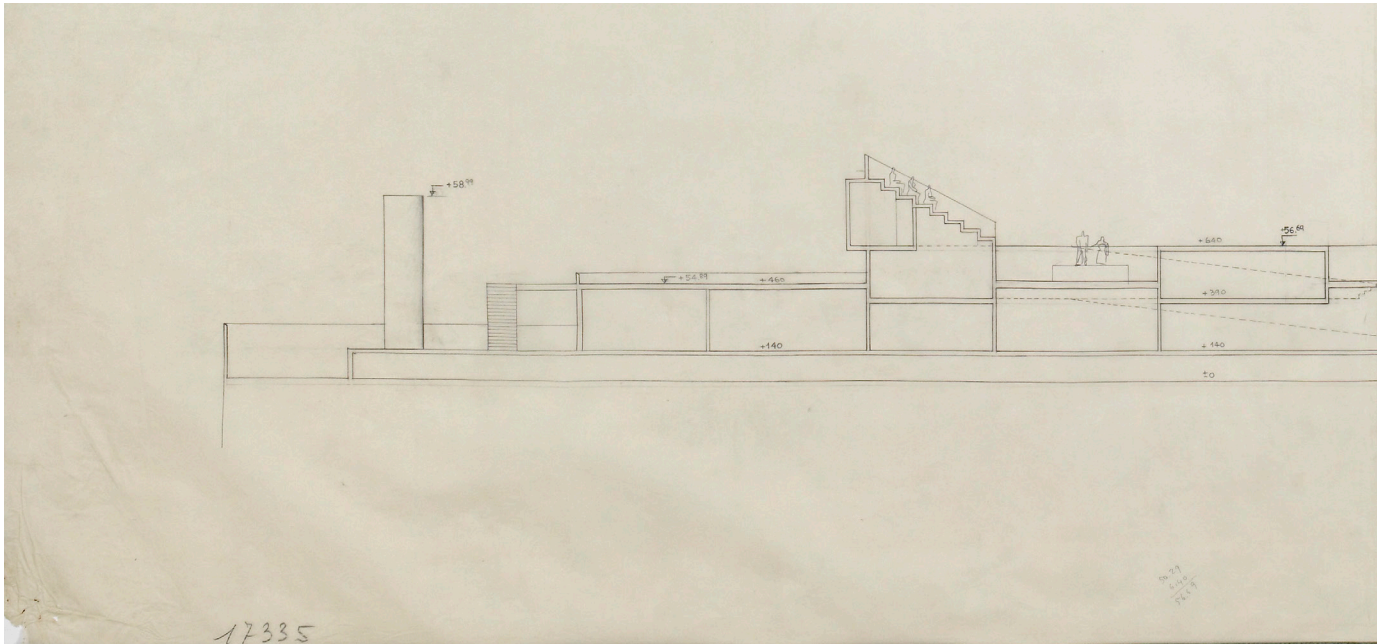
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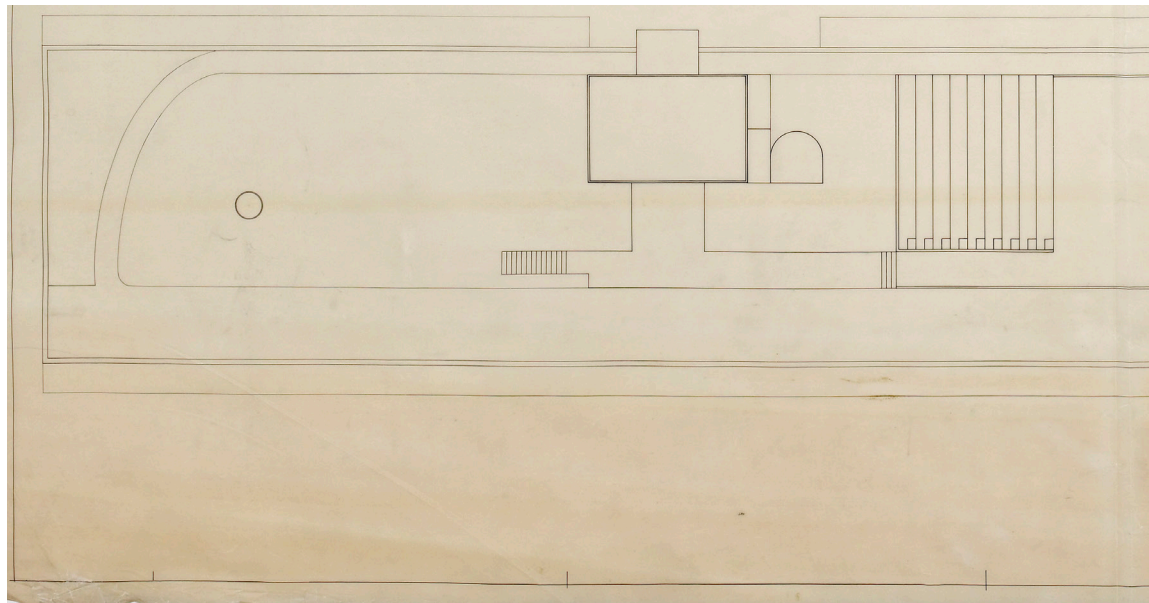
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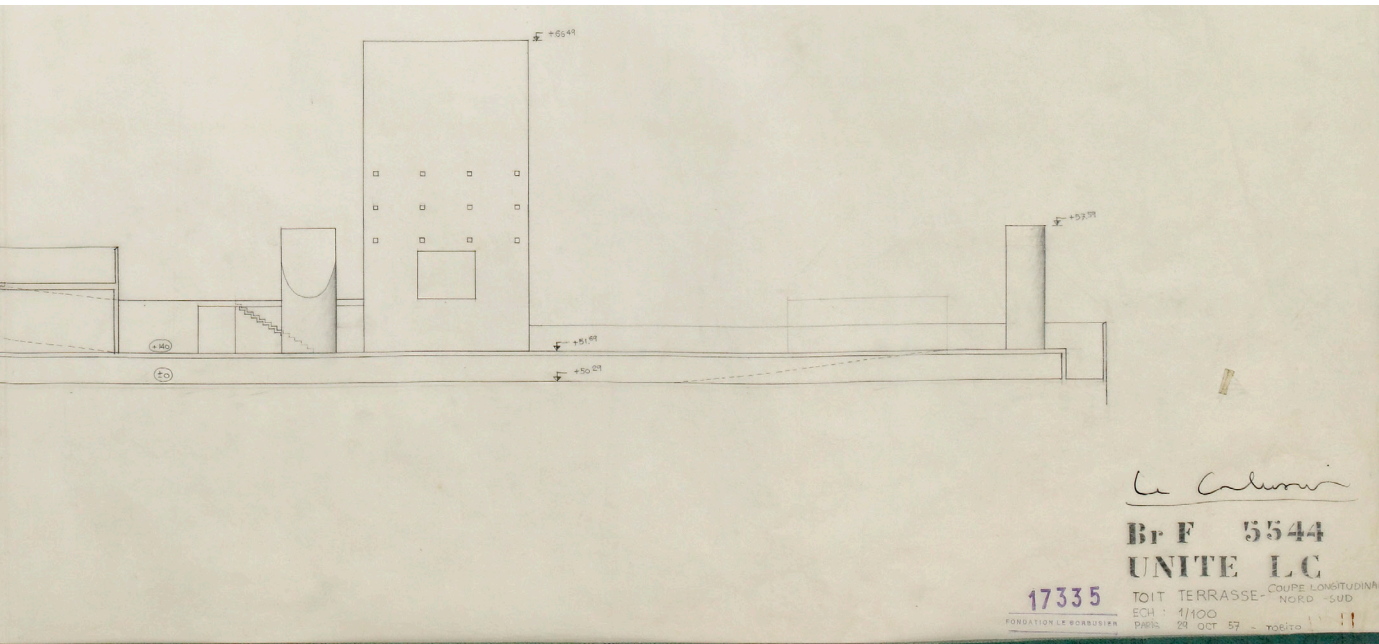
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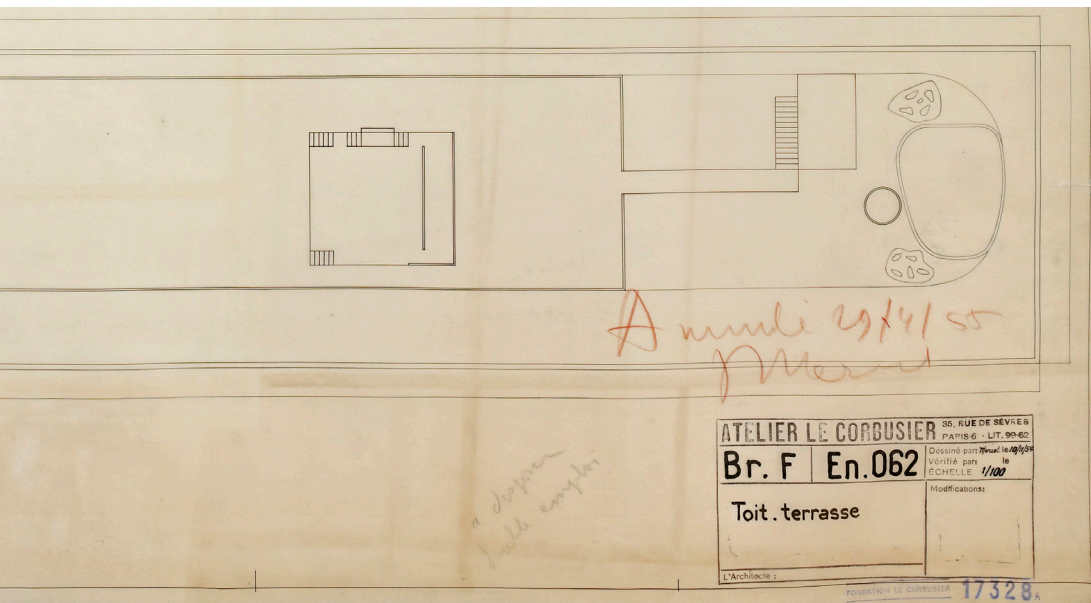
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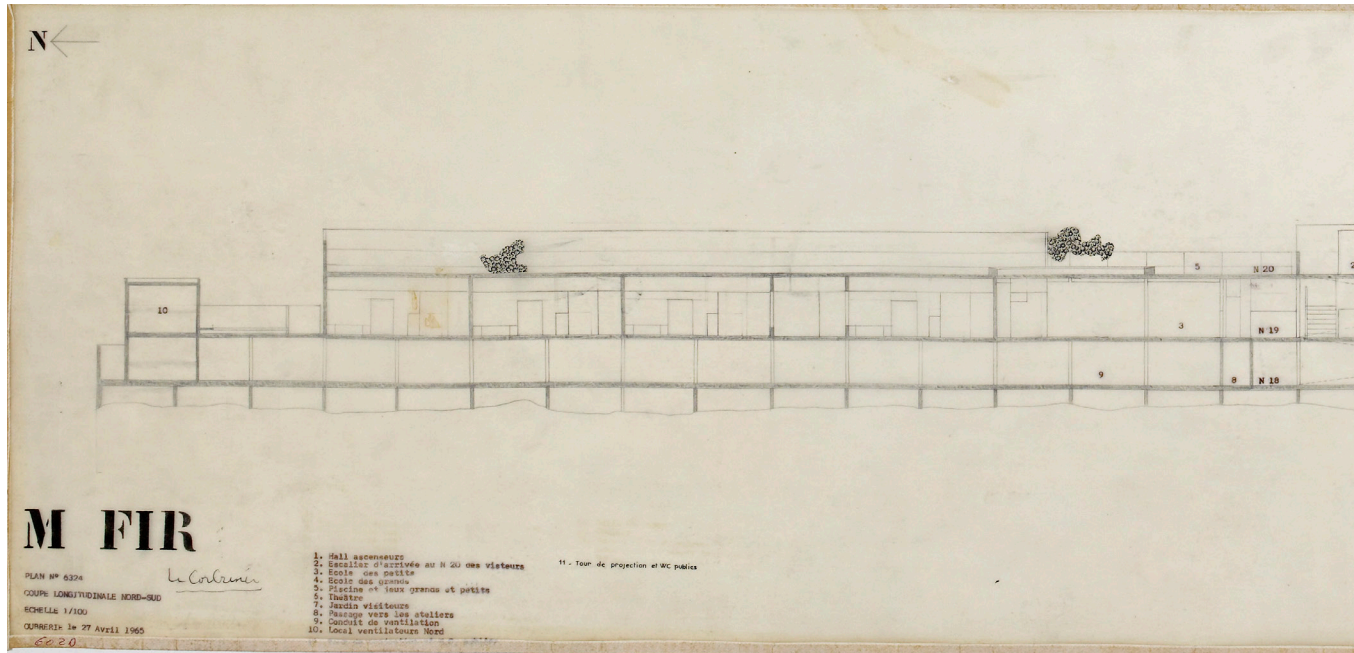
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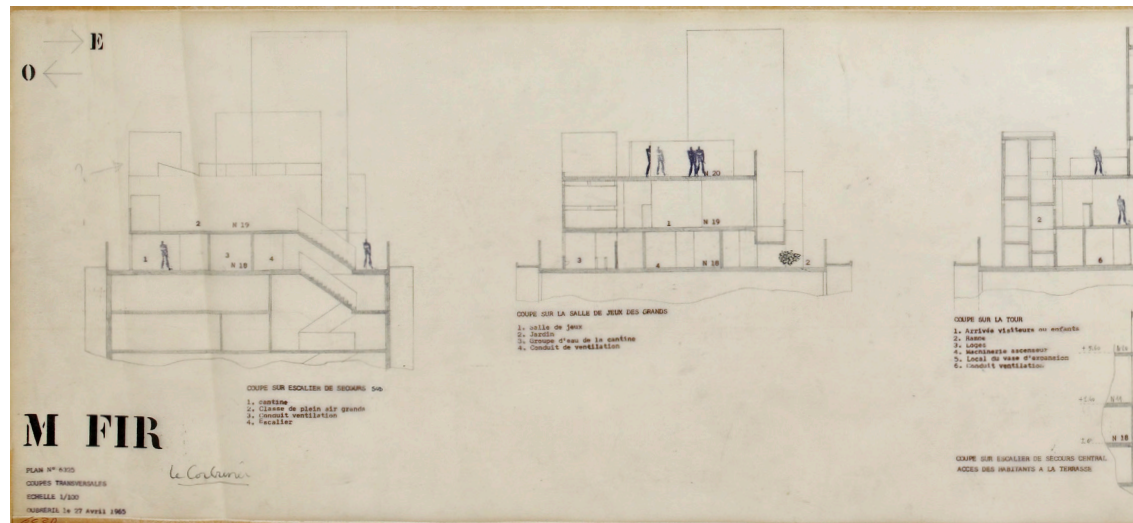
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Source: Fondation Le Corbusier



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