

# The Museum of Modern Art

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## VILLA SAVOYE: DESTRUCTION BY NEGLECT

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### WALL LABEL

The Villa Savoye was built in open farmland in Poissy, some 40 kilometers outside Paris. From the moment it was completed in 1930, admirers of the emerging new architecture hailed it as a revolutionary masterpiece. In the years since then the Villa Savoye has become world famous -- a classic that can be compared with the most brilliant achievements of the past. It demonstrates perfectly Le Corbusier's theories of design and planning, but it is more than a demonstration: it is a unique and glorious work of art. That is why its slow destruction through neglect is scandalous.

During World War II the Villa Savoye was occupied successively by German and American forces. When the Germans left they poured concrete down the toilets; when the Americans arrived they shot bullets through the windows. Mme. Savoye, widowed and impoverished by the war, moved to a nearby farm. But she refused to sell the house because she hoped her grandson would one day be able to restore it. Meanwhile the quiet village of Poissy was linked to Paris by a super highway. It is now a crowded suburb.

For many years Mme. Savoye farmed the land, using the building as a barn. Although it was closed to the public, visitors who were able to get in picked their way over potatoes and hay, admiring an architectural composition so powerful and subtle that it could survive all indignities. But as the years went by visitors were appalled by an increasingly serious deterioration. Private individuals began a campaign to turn the Villa into a museum of Le Corbusier's work, but their efforts made little headway.

Then, in 1959, the municipality of Poissy decided that the only land available for a new school was the beautiful meadow occupied by the Villa Savoye, and so the house  
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would be torn down. This development provoked world-wide indignation. André Malraux, France's Minister of Culture, was prevailed upon to intervene, and it was announced that the building had been saved. Everyone assumed that the Ministry of Culture would undertake restoration.

"Saved," however, turned out to mean only that the building was not actually torn down. Instead, the state acquired all but one acre and the community put up a large school -- so close to the Villa as to deprive it irrevocably of the open landscape which gave it its original point. Restoration was not undertaken. On August 27, 1965, Le Corbusier died and was given an elaborate state funeral, directed and produced by M. Malraux. The Villa Savoye was declared a Monument Historique. It continued to deteriorate.

Last winter a heavy snow load inflicted great damage. Unheated, its windows gone, the metal frames rusted, and the exterior stucco peeling away, the building is now completely vulnerable to the effects of structural strain. There is little reason to think it will still be standing by the end of this decade.

Every country has to face the difficult problem of preserving its great buildings, and few countries have as many buildings worth preserving as France. Americans are in no position to criticize the failures of others in these matters, having allowed Frank Lloyd Wright's Larkin Building to be torn down to make way for a parking lot-- to cite only one among hundreds of shameful examples.

But there are also preservation problems that have been happily solved. (Wright's Fallingwater -- a masterpiece equal in quality to the Villa Savoye -- is a gratifying success: in 1964 the house and its land were given to the Western Pennsylvania Conservancy and are now open to the public.)

There may yet be a happy ending to the story of the Villa Savoye. The Museum obtained these photographs in June, and shortly after deciding to exhibit them received word that workmen had appeared at the building to patch up the exterior stucco.

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Since the damage is already so great this repair can scarcely be called a restoration, but the Ministry of Culture is to be congratulated for its interest and applauded for its enterprise. At a meeting in Paris on June 24, André Woginsky, José Luis Sert, and others conferred with representatives of the Ministry of Culture on plans to establish the Villa Savoye as a museum of Le Corbusier's work; it is hoped that their long efforts ultimately will be successful.

Even if it is satisfactorily restored, the Villa Savoye can never again be seen as a pure form in an open landscape, because of the recently built school. No doubt an incomplete success is better than a complete failure, and if the building can still be saved the students in that school will be able to look out of their windows at a Monument Historique that belongs, in a sense, to the whole world.

Arthur Drexler