

Response to a call for thought – the foundation of La Tourette  
Saturday, June 13, 2009 - Chris Schellhammer

pre-thought:

In a lecture by Bill Galloway (Fall of 09) the question of 'what makes a beautiful foundation' was asked. Consequently, I authored a short essay ([http://www.schellhammer.info/aesthetic\\_of\\_the\\_invisible.pdf](http://www.schellhammer.info/aesthetic_of_the_invisible.pdf)) that dismissed the notion, based on the imposed limitation that only the visible had a chance of being beautiful. Thus, only buildings that express their connection to the earth, beyond the utilitarian requirements of foundation, had a chance to suggest a beautiful foundation. I argued further, that a foundation of only utility could not be beautiful because a physical connection of utility is a given and beauty is not a given. Because every construction addresses this requirement, does it mean that every foundation is beautiful?

Professor Galloway rightly corrected my viewpoint on this matter. That something can be beautiful to the mind without being seen. In other words, the very utility I circumvented as a no-show can be the object of intellectual beauty. I was reminded of this discourse during Frank Wiener's remarks on the foundations and space below La Tourette. Le Corbusier's Church in Firminy was used as an example of a beautiful foundation, and while La Tourette would have been a fine example of a beautiful foundation, the fact that these two buildings engage the earth differently for similar programs goes beyond a specific response to site. Moreover, in the case of La Tourette, it might just be the space, and not the piloti that reveal the beauty of this foundation.

thought:

La Tourette does not hide its foundation and because of the differences in piloti, one can certainly argue that there is more at work here than mere utility and response to site. To build on a site, such as La Tourette, one can excavate and dig into the slope, or one can as Le Corbusier did, raise the building up on stilts to create a platform on which to build. Or, a combination of the two can be employed. Given Le Corbusier's tendency, and given the slope of the site, a fine solution is offered. Yet stopping the speculation here would be a shame, and false...for it would do nothing to explain the combs and space under La Tourette.

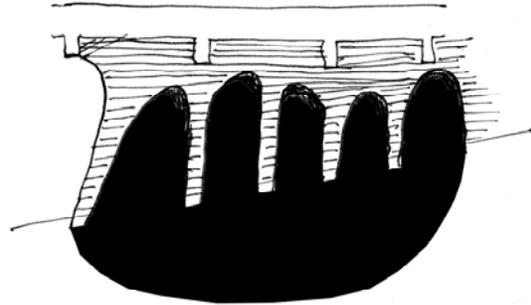
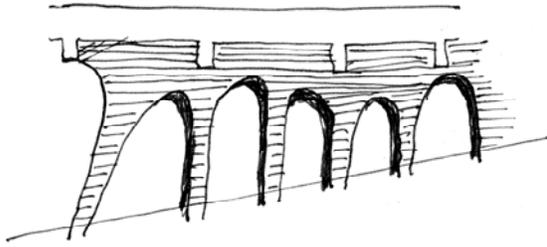
If we can agree that it is impossible to resolve a definitive and utilitarian answer to why the foundation of La Tourette is what it is, then we open the door to multiple readings. And when multiple readings are wrought from a single physical form as an expression to multiple issues (site, program, representation) architectural richness is the result. The fact that La Tourette offers us this opportunity simply within the combs and piloti is a testimony to the richness of this work. The way Le Corbusier lets the building take flight, while simultaneously tethering it down, is the basis for duality and opposition that is offered here as one possible reading and explained in the following text and sketches.

*It should be noted here that these observations are made only from photographic and sketch study. Additionally, no research was conducted to determine if this interpretation has been suggested by others.*

One can interpret the combs as roots gripping the earth – holding down if you wish, and counterpointing the infinite nature of the straight piloti that surround this core. Like a tree, we see a straight trunk, yet at its core, its fibers, and root structures, hold it to the ground. Yet a biological analogy is not the end, not the whole truth, nor the purpose of this reading. It is an analogy that leads to a deeper expression.

Before this idea is presented, another reading should be revealed based on what is seen. The duality of the form Le Corbusier creates can be seen in the solid, as just explained, or in the space created by the piloti. This evokes a more anthropological reading in which the earth is the actor, the one whose gravitational grip holds us down. The spaces within the combs are digits, interlocked with the solid digits of the piloti, holding La Tourette fast.





Le Corbusier's paintings, showing interlocked fingers might be reliable evidence to suggest this could be a legitimate design decision on the part of the master. Yet, other works where this occurs suggests this might have been simply a quest for form, without any underlying idea about what the form might express.

Yet, if these readings are fully exhausted by asking "why?", the duality of the human condition is revealed – particularly when linked to the program.

Conceptualized together, these readings suggest contradiction and duality: 1) one part, in which a spiritual life is tied down and limited by one's own humanity, 2) the other part, where we stand erect and for a short time rise above the earth, but ultimately yield to its grasp (the idea of catacombs is applicable here – returning to the earth via a void shaped for a person). While it can be said this is true for all people, it is particularly powerful, due to the distance in opposition these conditions are in the life and habits of people of faith.

Spiritual peoples, holy men and women: their outward appearances are real and projected. They motion skyward, erect in praise, and then bow and kneel in prayer. Spiritual people, in reaching skyward, get closer to the sky and closer to the object of their faith. Yet despite this practice people of faith are, as we all are, bound to the human condition. The combs are a metaphor for the struggle for physical and spiritual immortality. Under this human condition, people are physically tied to this earth and spiritually tied by sin, and this opposes everything holy that is sought. What the combs evoke is a sense of this – earthly existence (walking, standing, rooted) and earthly domination, despite all attempts to rise above its unyielding grasp on us.

Le Corbusier has managed to express this idea, with multiple readings, even if he did not intend to do so, with a form that is as pleasing to observe without seeking an explanation as it is to consider why it might be so. The circumstance that this expression reveals itself in the physical foundation of La Tourette, rather than the rest of the building dedicated to a spiritual life, adds symbolic importance and plausibility to this interpretation.