

Le Corbusier and Vernacular Architecture: A Newly Discovered Drawing for the Bergerie at Sainte Baume

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Le Couturier *était notre ami,*
ami de ce qui nous est le plus sacré:
la foi dans notre art."

- Le Corbusier

In 1994, the author discovered an unpublished Le Corbusier sketch for the bergerie at Sainte Baume. The sketch, located in the Foundation Le Corbusier, was executed in 1959, eleven years after Le Corbusier's grandiose scheme for a vast basilica and pilgrimage city was rejected by the Roman Catholic Church.

Why did Le Corbusier return to a project which caused him so much distress? The answer lies in his relationship to Father Alain Marie Couturier who played a prominent role in the architect's professional and private life after World War II. Couturier had been a principle player in the tragicomedy surrounding the Sainte Baume project. Later, he advised Le Corbusier on the liturgical aspects of the design for Notre-Dame du Haut at Ronchamp and was instrumental in gaining for Le Corbusier the commission to design the Dominican monastery of Notre-Dame de la Tourette at Eveaux-sur-Arbresle near Lyon. Not only was Couturier an advisor and patron of Le Corbusier, he became a close friend of the architect and his wife, Yvonne. Couturier's death in 1954 profoundly affected Le Corbusier.

Before we discuss the bergerie at Sainte Baume, it is necessary to gain some knowledge of how Le Corbusier became involved in this stillborn project which for a time cast a shadow on his relations with the Roman Catholic Church. Edouard Trouin, a Marseilles surveyor and agriculturist (Geometre-Expert et Agronome) who possessed large land holdings on the Plan d'Aups near Mary Magdalene's shrine at Sainte Baume, approached Le Corbusier about the Sainte Baume project in 1945. Trouin wanted to preserve the site because of its sacred nature and to keep the landscape in a primitive state, free from speculative building because of its associations with Mary Magdalene.'

The association between Mary Magdalene and Sainte Baume date to the fifth or sixth century AD. According to tradition, Mary Magdalene, Martha, and the Virgin Mary,

traveled from Ephesus, where they had taken refuge with St. John the Evangelist, to Provence in 48 AD. A small church commemorates the spot where they landed after making a miraculous trip in a boat without oars or sail. Mary Magdalene sought the solitude of Sainte Baume where she spent her last years as a hermit praying and fasting in a cave or grotto (baume in Provencale). According to legend, angels came to her cave each morning and lifted her 200 meters up the mountain to its summit, "Le Pilon," from which today overlooks Marseilles and Toulon, as well as Mount Sainte Victoire behind Aix-in-Provence. She spent her days atop the mountain in prayer and meditation.

Edouard Trouin proposed a basilica on the Plan d'Aups below the Magdalene's hermitage. Le Corbusier's first design was a basilica rising 350 meters (about 1000 feet) which would dominate the surrounding countryside like the cathedral domes of Florence and Siena.² The design was in the form of a great cone with spiral ramps, a variation on the stepped pyramid Le Corbusier envisioned for the Musee Mondiale of 1929 (which recalls Boullée's grandiose schemes of the late eighteenth century).

On June 10, 1948, Trouin founded "l'Association de la basilique universelle du Pardon et de la Paix."³ The basilica concept served two purposes: it commemorated peace after World War II and at the same time sought divine pardon. Trouin organized a National Committee for the project which was highly seductive to Parisian intellectuals, including Paul Claudel, the playwright and diplomat, Ferdinand Leger, the cubist painter and Raoul Dautry. All were acquaintances of Le Corbusier. Among those serving on the committee was Father Marie Alain Couturier, a Dominican priest, who was editor of *L'Art Sacre*, a magazine which championed modern art and architecture in Roman Catholic churches. Apparently, Couturier envisioned Sainte Baume as a place of reconciliation between French and German youth after World War II and a celebration of modernism in the arts within Catholicism. Thus, there is little doubt that he promoted Le Corbusier as architect for the project

Despite those auspicious beginnings, Le Corbusier, Trouin, and Father Couturier underestimated the influence of the

Dominicans of St. Maximin who controlled the Shrine of Sainte Baume.

As Dominique de Menil states: "The project was idealistic and poorly studied and, worse, poorly handled. Pere Couturier failed to talk to his brothers Dominican of St. Maximin, who were in charge of the site(?), nor to the Bishop, and on top of that he was unaware that promoters had bought real estate nearby and were actually using Pere (him) Couturier for their own interests. For all those reasons, the project was bound to collapse. It was abruptly stopped by the Dominican superiors of Couturier and the Bishop."⁴

The collapse of the Sainte Baume project caused a painful rupture between Couturier and Le Corbusier. Dominique de Menil describes how Father Couturier later went to Le Corbusier's office before the design of Ronchamp was advanced and the two men resolved their differences. Couturier subsequently became an important influence for Le Corbusier in questions of the Catholic rituals and the Marian iconography that pertained to the chapel's design.

There was an intellectual, if not an emotional, attraction between Couturier and Le Corbusier. Each needed the other to accomplish his goals. Couturier understood that Le Corbusier was the greatest European architect of the twentieth century and wanted him to work for the Church. And Le Corbusier intuitively sensed that he had to create religious architecture at this point in his life. The spiritual or mystical and rationalistic 'progressive' sides in his personality had been at war for most of Le Corbusier's adult life. In the Post War he sought to express the mystical side of his nature. Father Couturier was the catalyst for this metamorphosis.

No documentary evidence indicates when Couturier and Le Corbusier first met. Possibly it was through Leger, an old acquaintance of Le Corbusier. Or they may have become acquainted in 1948 when Trouin publicized the Sainte Baume proposal. Because Le Corbusier and Couturier were both in Paris much of the time during the creation of Sainte Baume, the Ronchamp project, and the conceptual phase of the monastery of La Tourette, there is little correspondence between them. We can assume that discussions about these projects were carried on face-to-face. The correspondence that exists found both using the salutations "Cher ami and Bien cher ami," confirming that they were good friends. Photographs of Couturier at dinner with the architect and his wife, Yvonne, in Le Corbusier's Paris apartment provide further evidence that the priest was a close family friend.

This closeness is surprising given that Couturier was a Dominican. Le Corbusier's said at one point: "I do not hold a grudge against all Dominicans because they persecuted my *Albigiansian* ancestors."⁵ He blamed the Dominicans for the 12th century annihilation of the *Cathars*, a proto-Protestant sect. In spite of, (or perhaps because of) the Dominicans' rejection of Le Corbusier's Sainte Baume project, Couturier persevered in his efforts to obtain additional Catholic commissions for Le Corbusier. Couturier convinced his fellow Dominicans to choose Le Corbusier as the architect for La Tourette at *Eveaux-sur-Arbresle* near Lyon, their new monastery. Con-

structed between 1953-1960, the project was the consummation of the architect's passion to create an organized community similar to the Certosa di Galluzzo or val d'Enza outside of Florence which Le Corbusier visited in 1907.

The collaboration between Father Couturier and Le Corbusier continued even as Couturier health rapidly deteriorated in the early 1950s. He suffered from myasthia or myasthenia and was in hospitals and sanitariums a number of times during these years. Le Corbusier made extraordinary efforts to obtain the latest in American treatment for the Couturier's myasthenie or myasthenia. This temporarily improved the priest's condition.⁶ Then he rapidly declined.

Couturier's death on February 9, 1954, deeply shook Le Corbusier. Later he wrote that Father Couturier was "un ami de ce qui nous es le plus sacre: la foi dans notre art." Thus, it is not surprising that Le Corbusier wanted to create a memorial to Father Couturier at Sainte Baume. After Couturier's death, Le Corbusier and Trouin immediately began discussing the nature of the memorial. Their choice seems bizarre at first: the ruined bergerie. Possibly, Father Couturier was the first to think of the bergerie in the 1940's as a museum of the Magdalene's iconography or he was, perhaps, an important contributor to its conceptual development. In a letter to Le Corbusier, Trouin noted that Father Couturier wanted to preserve "la paille in the bergerie, as well as "le simple trou dans le mur Nord, ou les bergers mettaient leur lampe a huile."

If we turn to Le Corbusier's drawings of the bergerie, we see how he combined his original conception of a museum for the iconography of the Mary Magdalene with a memorial to Father Couturier. The earliest sketches in the *Oeuvre Complete*, 1946-1952 demonstrate that Le Corbusier wants to keep as much of the bergerie intact as possible. The bergerie consists of two stone structures set at right angles which form an 'L'-shaped composition. In his sketches, Le Corbusier transforms the lower, windowless structure which had been used as a sheep fold into a museum dedicated to Mary Magdalene. The sheep fold's roof sloped from a height of twelve feet at the north end to five feet above ground at its south end. Perpendicular to it was a larger structure, originally two stories. Its character suggests it was a house; however, by the 1940's it stood roofless and the walls had partially fallen in. (Illus 1)

Le Corbusier's sketch 'la Bergerie', 09 Oct. 51, shows that he was going to retain the uneven natural stone floor of the sheep fold. His scheme 'C' indicates intentions to replace the open east and west portals with windows. The heavier masonry wall on the south would host an exhibition of Mary Magdalene's iconography and bear directly the weight of a new roof supported by light metal trusses. (Illus 2)

The design transformed the ruined shepherd's house into a snack shop or wine tasting bar (... un bar de degustation). (Illus 3) Possibly this was Trouin's idea because he already owned a small hotel nearby. There is historic precedence for religious votive article and food shops near pilgrimage shrines. Such stands have been set up at pilgrimage shrines

on feast days all over Europe since pilgrimages began and the custom continues to this day.

The walls of the bar de degustation do not support the building's roof in Le Corbusier's 1951 scheme. N.4166 (FLC 17728) (Illus 4) Rather, the roof is carried on pilotis (reinforced concrete?) set outward six feet from the original stone walls of the bergerie on the south side. This would have create a colonnade along its entry facade. Moreover, the roof dramatically curves upward to admit the warming southern sun during the winter. In contrast, the pilotis (potelets) carrying the north portion of the roof are set close to the wall. Another series of pilotis in the center of the bar's interior support a gallery opening onto several upper level rooms overlooking the main public space. Le Corbusier designed the roof as a freestanding system so that he would not have to impose any weight on the original walls. A new metal and glass grid wall system based on his Modulor rises from the ruined original structure. It is divided into doors, windows, and light panels to relate to the interior functions. Thus, Le Corbusier affirms a dialogue between old and new in the walls of the south and north facades.

As Le Corbusier comments in a 1954 letter to Father Piprot d'Alleaume, the stone walls "ses murs traditionnels" serve as the frame for extracts from books, paintings, and sculptures of past centuries illustrating the iconography of Mary Magdalene in a manner which would bring new grace to the semi-ruined bergerie.¹ He points out that the character of the walls in their ruined state will be preserved by a covering of cement to protect them from further decay. Before 1952, he was unsure of the material for the roof of the bar de degustation: it was to be either reinforced concrete or aluminum, "une toiture en beton ou en aluminim." Two years later Le Corbusier settled on aluminum.

Le Corbusier's letter to Father Piprot d'Alleaume notes: "This modest enterprise will be powerfully evocative and at the same time a great lesson. And it will consecrate the memory of Reverend Father Couturier." To reassure the Dominicans at Sainte Baume that he is not going over their heads, Le Corbusier sent a copy to Father Rzewuski the monks' superior of Saint Maximin, who was in charge of the Magdalene's shrine.

During 1954 and 1955, Trouin wrote prominent patrons of the arts in France for assistance in funding the Couturier memorial. Several of the Rothschilds signed on, as did the Comtess Jean de Polignac and Kahnweiler, the art dealer who supported Braque and Picasso in their earliest Cubist efforts. Trouin contacted Picasso and other artists about decorating the bergerie memorial.⁸ Despite the participation of these luminaries in the Parisian cultural scene, Trouin was unable to collect enough funds for the memorial. Indeed, there may have been hidden antagonism towards the Couturier memorial. Father Rzewuski said to Trouin: "You are heretical. The Church only advances thanks to the hereticals."⁹ And there was opposition from the hierarchy in the Vatican who had the ear of Pius XII.¹⁰ Whoever sought to stop the transformation of the bergerie into a museum dedicated to

the Mary Magdalene and memorial to Father Couturier was successful."

Trouin sent Le Corbusier a copy of a letter to Yvonne Delrieu at St. Gobain in early 1959 concerning the response of Msgr. Gaudel, the bishop of Fejusz and Toulon, to the bergerie at Sainte Baume.¹² Msgr Gaudel remarked that a man as devote as Couturier does not need to have his name inscribed on the building. The bishop points out that Couturier's friends know the Bergerie is implicitly dedicated to him.¹³ Trouin saw through this ruse: the bishop's remark about Couturier's vows was a convenient excuse. Ruefully, Trouin recalls Couturier's comment to Menil and himself after the first meeting with the Dominicans of Sainte Baume at the inception of that project: "Non, Mais avez-vous vu ces gueules?. .Et dire que ce sont elles qui nous ont empeche de realizer la Basilique!" ("But did you see their mugs...And they are the ones who are opposing us in realizing the Basilica!")

Even though the Bergerie memorial was a dead issue, Le Corbusier persevered in sketching ideas for its design. Indeed, his last thoughts on Sainte Baume appear on a small scrap of paper dated June 22, 1959 (FLC 13(1) 178).¹⁴ (Illus 5) Whether or not he showed this sketch to Trouin is not known, but it is in the Trouin dossier of the Foundation Le Corbusier. In it Le Corbusier develops an entirely different approach to covering the bar de degustation. He conceives of a roof in the shape of an airplane wing in cross-section. (Illus 6 and 7) The roof echoes the lightness of the archetypical twentieth century symbol of flight. Obviously, it was to be constructed of aluminum and is very similar to the wing which he illustrated in his *The Chapel at Ronchamp* in conjunction with his design for the chapel's roof. How did Le Corbusier arrive at this new conception of the roof for the Couturier memorial?

Although the wing form appears in a model of Ronchamp, was it part of Le Corbusier's original conception of the chapel? This is unlikely since it is not present in early sketches for the chapel. Indeed this concept appears to be derived from a revision of the Cite Permanente d'habitation's plan at Sainte Baume into the "forme de la barque" (1951?). Moreover, it appears in the museum portion of the Bergerie in a sketch made in October 1951. (Illus 4) Among the low stone tables, one in the foreground is in the form of a barque. Thus, Le Corbusier's June 22, 1959 sketch for the roof of the bar de degustation is a return to the barque imagery of eight years before.

Conceptually, Le Corbusier's 1959 version of the bergerie roof is notably different from that published in the *Oeuvre Complete, 1946-1952*.¹⁵ Structurally, the 1959 sketch for the Bergerie roof suggests two possibilities: first, he intended to carry the new roof on a series of closely spaced delicate metal rods or thin aluminum panels, much like the vertical brise soleil he used on the commercial floor of his United d'Habitation in Marseilles. Each support system probably was to be placed inside the perimeter of the stone wall and carried on a separate reinforced concrete foundation. If he intended to use numerous slender rods to carry the wing roof, Le

Corbusier would have stressed its lightness. Probably he intended to use a series of stronger supports internally which would have carried most of the weight of the large aluminum panels. The panels, like the great beams in Ronchamp, would have had the same profile as the external roof or skin. In either case, the reflectivity of metal rods or thin panels and the aluminum wing covering the bar de degustation would have further denied materiality. By keeping the partially ruined walls of the bergerie in their "found" state, Le Corbusier not only contrasts them with his "new" construction, but comments on the transmutation from one state of existence to another: the old, decaying structure is resurrected for a new function. He sets up a dialogue between the traditional natural organic materials of architecture and the new technology of machine civilization. This duality is central to his conception of the project. Thus, Le Corbusier's last plan for restoration of the ruined bergerie superbly expresses his dualism, a theme which plays through most of his architecture. In a Cubist/alchemical interpretation, this can be read as a metamorphosis in which new life grows from death and decay. The 'base' material of stone gives birth to the 'higher' new material, aluminum. "What was becomes what will be." This theme also symbolizes what Father Couturier worked to create: a fusion of Roman Catholicism's timeless dogma with the new forms and materials of the contemporary world.

As in Ronchamp, Le Corbusier sought to defy gravity in his new roof design for the Bergerie, but with far more delicacy. In both instances, his symbolic theme in the roof was the apotheosis of a woman from human to the divine. Thus, the 1959 Bergerie design is more than just 'roof.' In the context of the Mary Magdalene iconography, it symbolizes the barque in which she and her saintly companions made their miraculous voyage from the Holy Land to France in AD 48. The barque shape can also be read as the mandala or the Vescia Piscis, which is usually reserved for Christ or the Virgin Mary in Glory in the Roman Catholic tradition. Moreover, it has strong sexual connotations.

Fusing the winged roof and the ruined walls refers to the end of Magdalene's life at Sainte Baume. The decaying stones of the bergerie symbolize a body ravaged by asceticism. The aluminum 'barque' wing rising from these ruined walls can be read as her daily levitation above Sainte Baume to meditate on top of the mountain during her final years on earth. Ultimately, it must be interpreted as her soul released from the bonds of her corrupted body at death and taking flight into paradise.

How does it relate to the Couturier memorial? On a mundane level, Le Corbusier's decision to use aluminum for the roof is especially appropriate in the case of Couturier, for the priest had fostered modern art and architecture in service of the Church. What could be more appropriate for Couturier's memorial than the most popular of materials which symbolized the postwar era's hopes for a better world through science and technology?

Le Corbusier revered Father Couturier as saint-like. As he

wrote: "...ami de ce qui nous est le plus sacre: la foi dans notre art." Le Corbusier's ethereal, shimmering aluminum wing symbolized Father Couturier's soul released from the bondage of his disease ravaged body into the pure realm of the eternal just as it represented the Madeleine release from physical reality to the spiritual plane.

Sadly, the Bergerie was not to be. Couturier's prophecy that his own religious Order would be the undoing of their great dream came true. The Bergerie concept was left to gather dust as did the larger concept of which it was a part: a basilica, cave-church of initiation, hotels for pilgrims and a permanent city. Even after Le Corbusier's death in 1965, Trouin struggled on with the great dream, writing letters to his former assistant Wognesky and Jean Petit about the Bergerie, but nothing came of it. If completed, the Bergerie would have been Le Corbusier's sole meditation on preservation and rehabilitation, an architectural genre which he had disdained in his earlier career. For all of Trouin's "tonnere du Dieu," the most personal of Le Corbusier's religious projects ended in a whimper.

NOTES

- ¹ Le Corbusier and Trouin had made plans as early as 1950 to rehabilitate it into a museum of Mary Magdalene's iconography. (Le Corbusier In the Oeuvre Complete, 1946-1952. Zurich: Editions Girsberger, 1953, pp.22-39). Le Corbusier named the project, la "Trouinade," La Basilique de la Paix et du Pardon. Obviously "La Trouinade" is a homage to Trouin. Some 400 letters between Trouin and Le Corbusier are to be found in the archives of the Foundation Le Corbusier.
- ² Gilles Ragot, Mathilde Dion. Le Corbusier en France; Realisations et projets. Milan-Paris. Electra Moniteur, 1987. pp. pp. 161: "apparaît comes les domes de Florence ou de Sienne: lys en pleine terre, comme Marie Mary Magdalene."
- ³ Tourin published his prospectus for his La Paix et du Pardon in Paris on the 1st of December 1948, FLC(C-G).
- ⁴ Dominique de Menil. Letter to the author, August 21, 1991.
- ⁵ Le Corbusier. Camet m, 316. See Echanges, February, 1984, No. 180, "La Pensee religieuse de Le Corbusier," pp. 3849.
- ⁶ FLC(PS(2) 10) Pauline Shulman wrote to Le Corbusier on June 23, 1953 from Connecticut, suggesting a doctor in the U.S.A. and several in Paris who were using the latest techniques in treating the disease with Prastigmine. Couturier was a severe asthmatic who did not respond to the latest cortosteroid treatment of the disease.
- ⁷ (FLC P5(2)-16) Trouin wrote to Le Corbusier on the 6th of March 1954 reporting that he had communicated with the conservative Parisian newspaper, Le Figaro, asking for space in the paper to call for the formation of le Comite de la Chapelle du Pere Couturier at Saint Baume. The editor, Brisson, responded favorably. Trouin also wrote the new Provincial of the Dominicans in Paris, P. Ducatillon, concerning the project. On the 5th of April 1954 Le Corbusier wrote Father Piprot d'Atleau at the Institute d'Etude des Relations Humaines in Paris about Trouin's scheme to transform the bergerie of Sainte Baume into a memorial to Father Couturier. With the letter he included plan number 41669 (dated 31.3.1954)
- ⁸ (FLC P5(2) 46) In early 1956 Trouin wrote Picasso asking him to fresco the four stone piers in the bergerie.
- ⁹ In his letter to Le Corbusier, Trouin says: "I have already written you: in response to the Pope of Rome, who came to condemn explicitly the great thought or concept of Father Couturier."

- ¹⁰ Trouin's suspicions were confirmed by M. Belot, curator of the Archives Couturier, of the Menil Foundation in a conversation with the author in March, 1994. The Vatican's antagonism towards Couturier apparently began with Germaine Richier's painting of Christ in N.D. du Grace at Assy.
- ¹¹ Two years later, on the 16th of October, 1958, Trouin wrote Gentil to discuss financial aspects of the memorial for Father Couturier (P5(2) 44). From the letter it is clear that Trouin had enough of the Dominicans in charge of Sainte Baume He complains that the "Dominicans at Sainte Baume who are exhibiting a new meanness in every way in his efforts to create the exact history of Basilica in his banquet hall and hotel." Even this pathetic effort to mount an exposition of the Basilica (and Le Corbusier's subterranean complex?) to gain publicity and funds to transform the bergerie was stymied by the monks of St. Maximin.
- ¹² The Bishop wrote to Trouin: On the contrary, I am not opposed in principle, to a place for the cult in the new quarter of Plan d'Aups. You can envision the transformation of the old bergerie to this effect. Your idea of calling the new chapel La Resurrec-

tion seems good to me. It does not appear necessary to recall the name of R P. Couturier in the edifice itself. There is no advantage of being seen. It seems to me, souls of the quality of P. Couturier require discretion and not publicity. As true friends of P. Couturier we understand that, I believe, without difficulty.

- ¹³ Possibly Gaudel's disdain of public expression of gratitude to Couturier has its basis in the traditional effacement of the individual's identity within the monastic orders. However, there is more than the whiff of, if not revenge, at least pique about the public uproar which Couturier had brought to the diocese through Le Corbusier and Trouin's grandiose project for Sainte Baume.
- ¹⁴ In March of 1993, the author discovered the sketch among Trouin's papers in the Foundation Le Corbusier. Members of the foundation's staff confirmed that the sketch and loosely scrawled comments beside it were in Le Corbusier's hand.
- ¹⁵ Le Corbusier used metal membranes in his roofs for the Pavilion des Temps Nouveaux of 1937 and Philips Pavilion after the second world war.



Fig. 1 Photograph of the Bergerie c.a. 1948. Courtesy of the Foundation Le Corbusier and SPADEM, Paris.

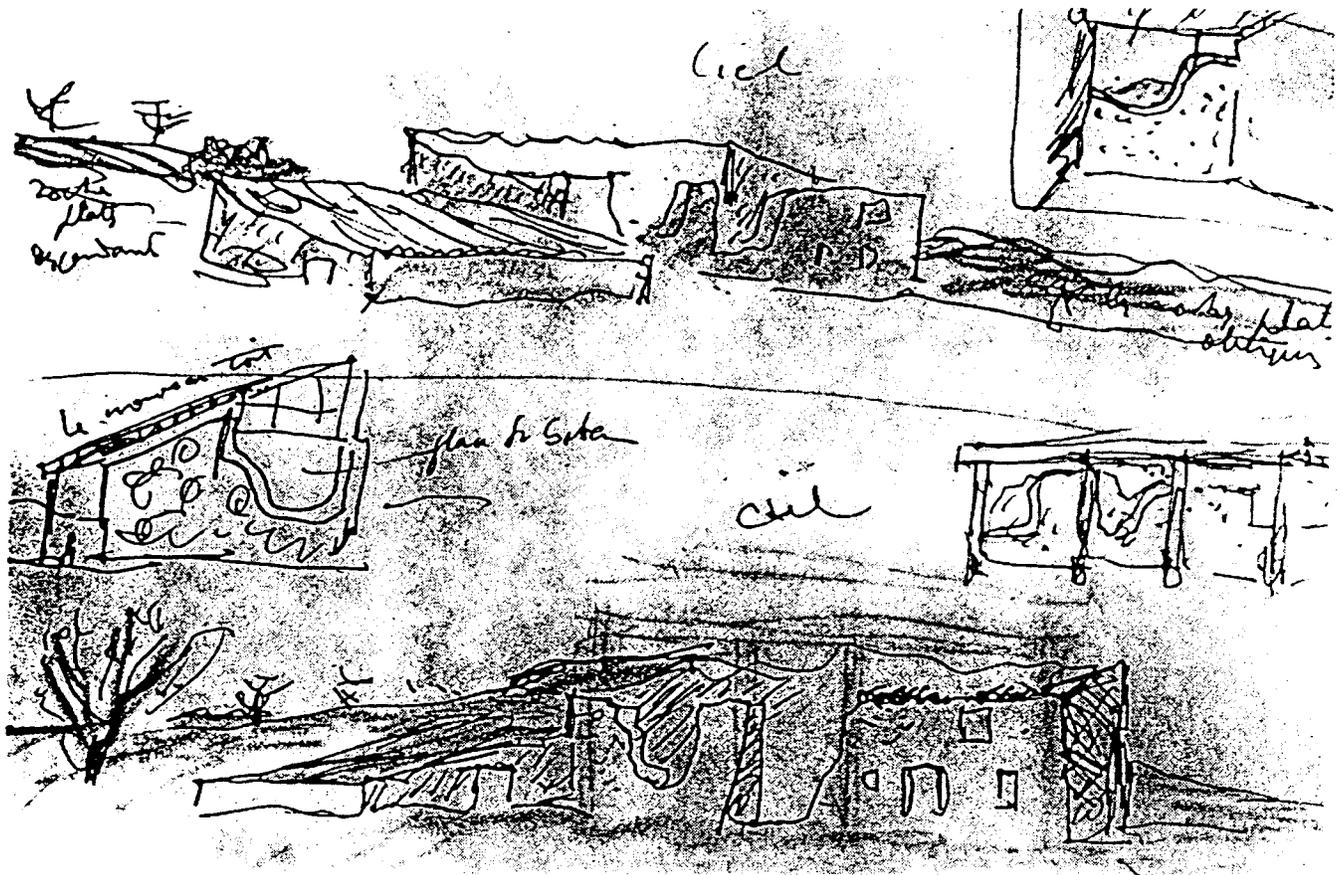


Fig. 2 Le Corbusier. Sketches of the Bergerie probably done in 1951 indicating how he proposed to transform it into the museum of the Magdalene's iconography- and the bar de degustation. Courtesy of the Fondation Le Corbusier and SPADEM, Paris.

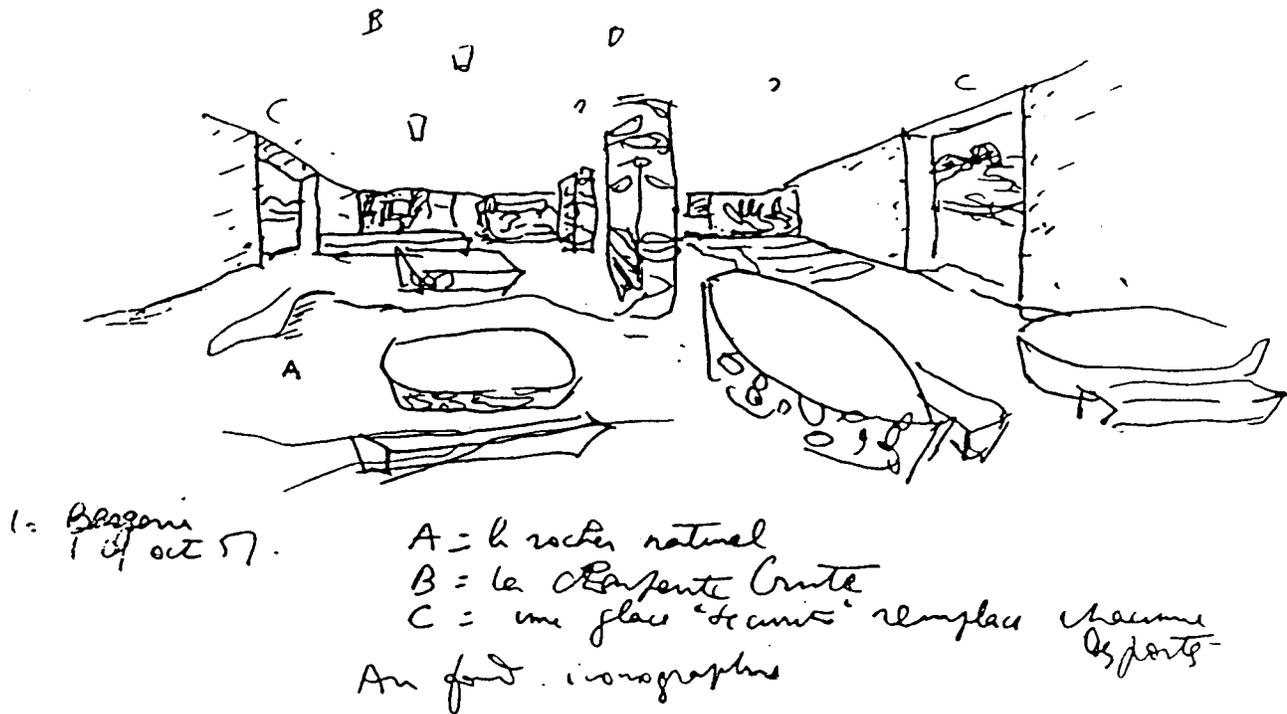


Fig. 3 Le Corbusier. Bergerie October, 1951 showing the sheep fold transformed into the museum of the Magdalene's iconography. Courtesy of the Fondation Le Corbusier and SPADEM, Paris.

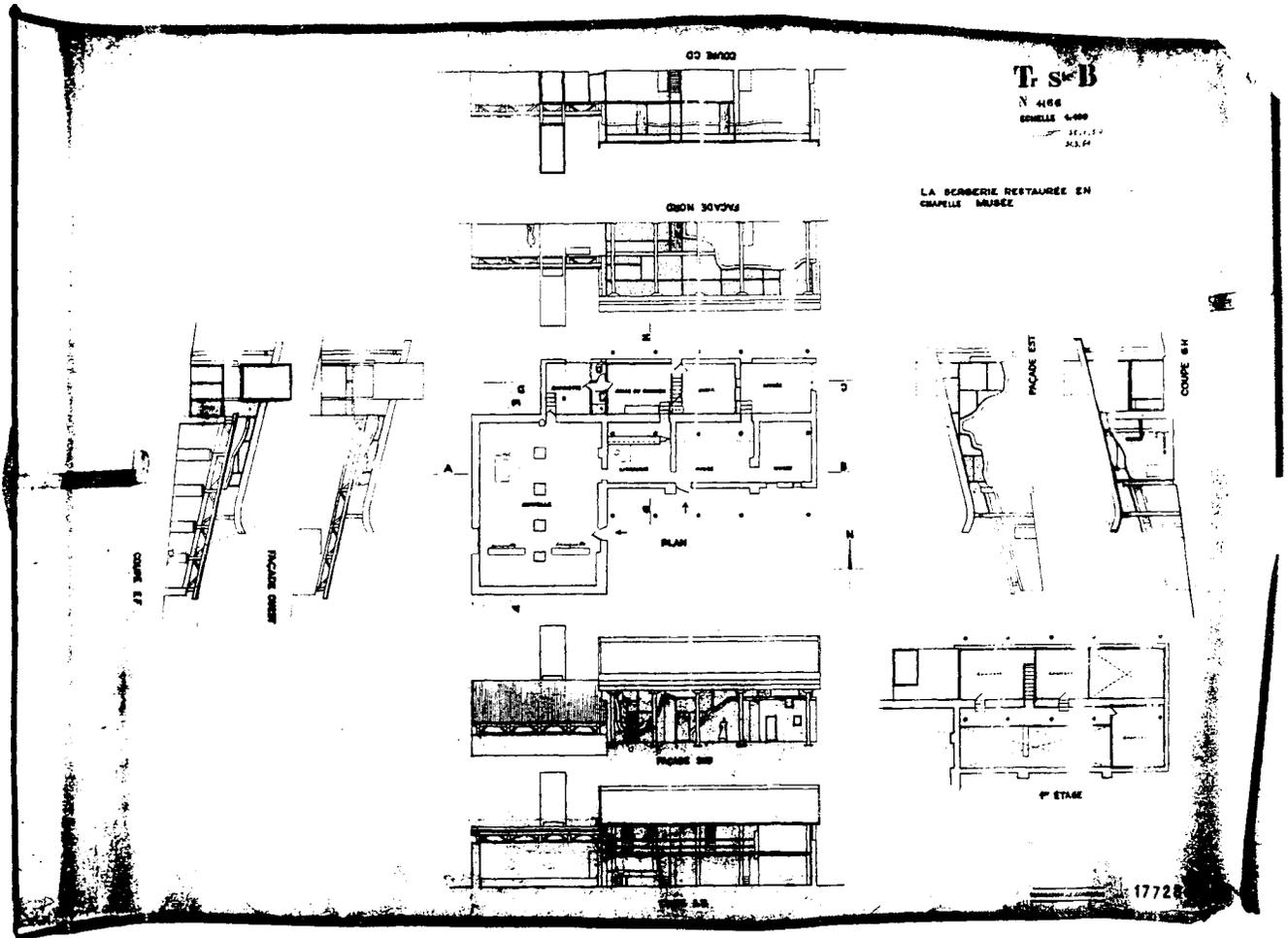


Fig. 4 Le Corbusier. Scaled drawings from his atelier N 4166 (FLC 17728) for "La Bergerie Restaurée en Chapelle Musée" dated 31-3-54. Courtesy of the Fondation Le Corbusier and SPADEM, Paris

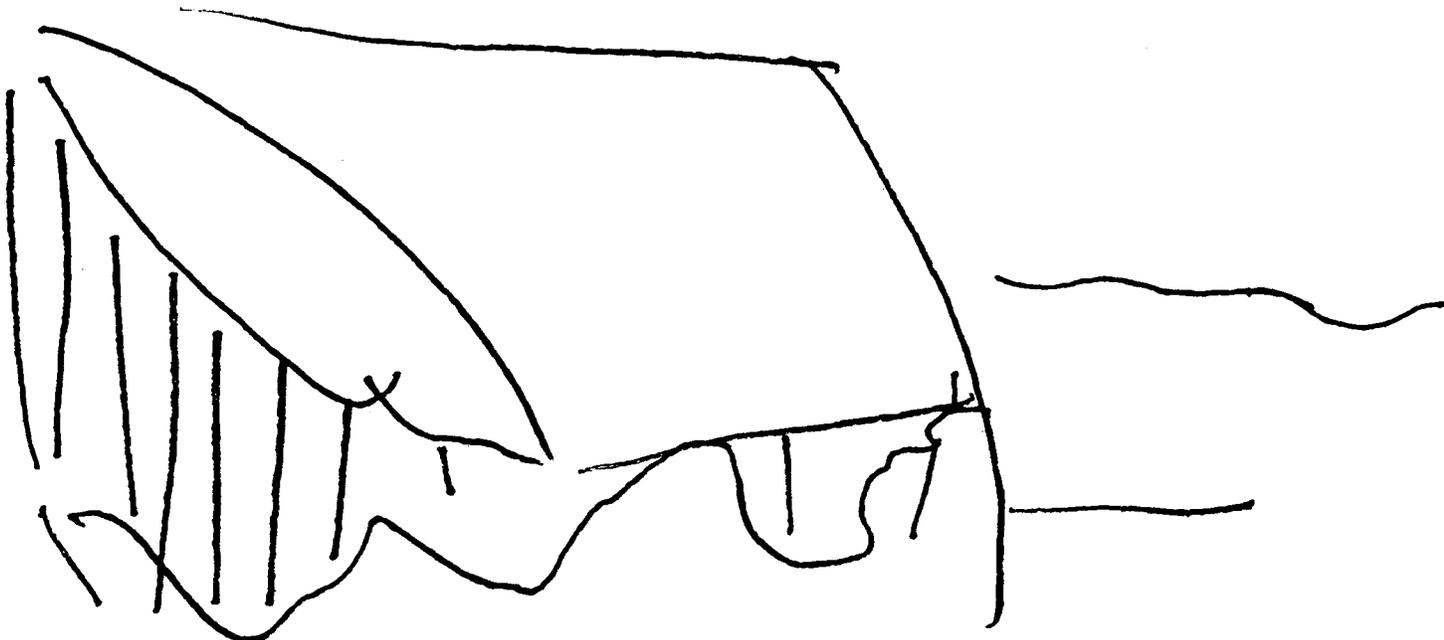


Fig. 5 Le Corbusier. Sketch of proposed covering for the bar de degustation, dated June 22, 1959 (FLC 13 (1) 178). Courtesy Fondation Le Corbusier and SPADEM, Paris. Copied by Justin Krueger for publication

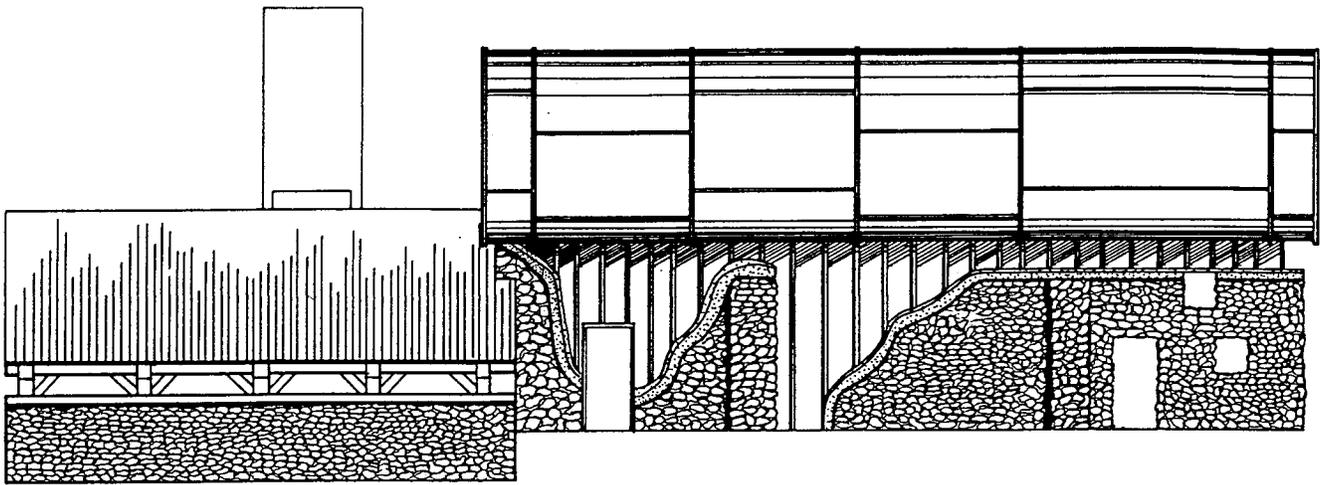


Fig. 6 Interpretation of the 1959 roof scheme superimposed on the east facade of the bar de degustation Drawn by David Watkins.

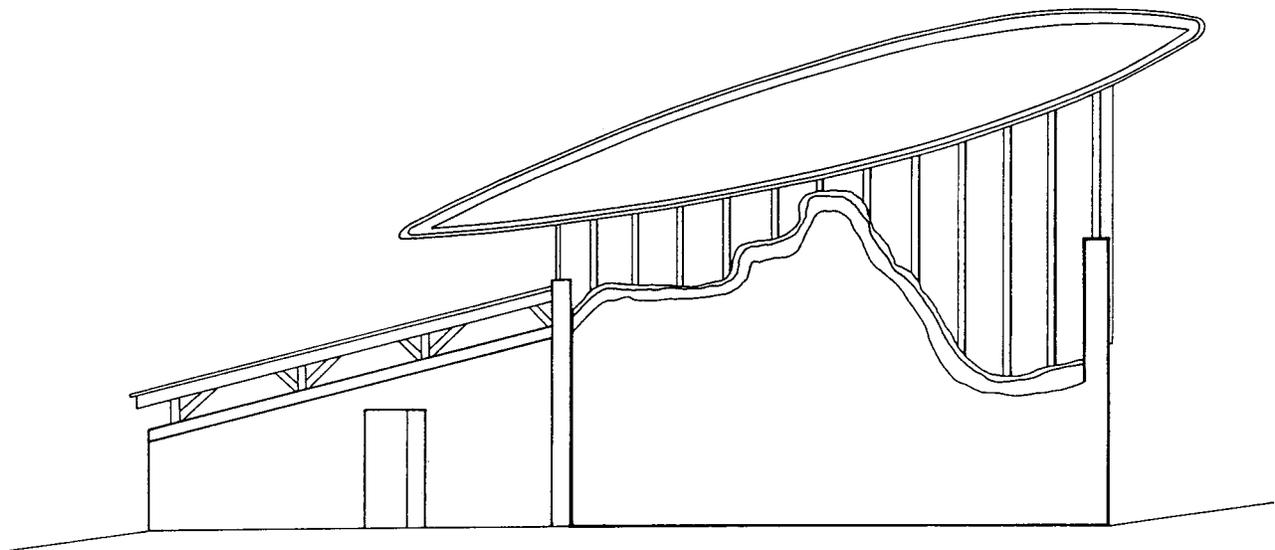


Fig. 7 Projection of the 1959 roof scheme united with the walls of the bar de degustation Drawn by David Watkins.

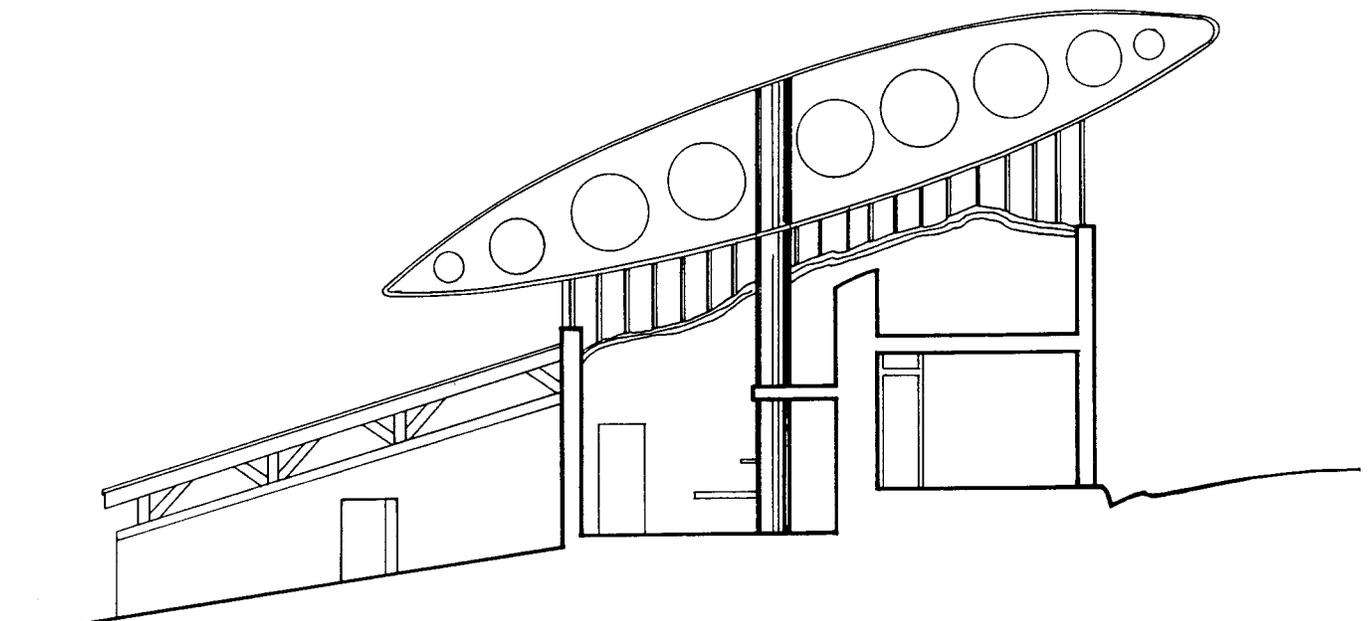


Fig. 8 Projection of the 1959 roof scheme in section. Drawn by David Watkins.