archetypical solutions to contemporary programmes Le Corbusier tended to show them wrested from context. Yet visiting the buildings reveals that, unlike those of his followers, they are full of subtle accommodations to and dialogue with their setting. His work is full of such contradictions. Often presented as highly rational, it far transcends the rational in the pursuit of poetry. The canonical Five Points for the new architecture are mere inversions and displacements of the old Classical system. And though these Five Points theoretically replace the facade with a tight skin, he was one of the greatest masters of facades, designing them in such depth that some of their layers were to be found deep within the building.

Le Corbusier built and wrote when there were prejudices against some of what he considered essential dimensions of a complete and logical architecture, and when an expression of interest in such things would have prejudiced the technocratic image deemed necessary to secure the commissions he sought. So, although he acknowledged his master as his teacher and though he dropped clues, he left it to others to discover that many buildings were in some degree modelled on historic example and most were rich in historic and exotic allusion. Hence the Puriat villas described by Richard Stil (opposite) now look least avant-garde, in the sense of looking forward only, than Janus-like. Yet it is more complex still, for just as the palace was dignified by the forms of the sample, so these villas allude to ancient temple, either directly, or via the intermediary of specific palaces or villas of the past. Le Corbusier was hoping not just to reinterpret and reinvigorate tradition, but to sacramentalise daily life to make the everyday epic. Hence the raised piano noble of the Villa Savoye (p27) not only addresses the four horizons as did Villa Rotonda, but its occupants stroll on the pool like the gods on Palladio’s cornice, and are also framed in a horizontal opening that renders this living tableau into a contemporary equivalent of the Panathenaic frieze of the Parthenon.

In retrospect Le Corbusier’s work represents less a break with history than a leap of the Humanist values of the Renaissance, telescoping selected aspects of the past and contemporary potential into a vibrant new culture centred on Man. In today’s jargon, his buildings are a case of double-codings, or better, multiple codings. Indeed the two essential hallmarks ascribed to Post-Modernism, a conscious re-use of history and double-codings, are in fact two of the essential hallmarks of Modernism. Unless of course Le Corbusier was not a Modernist — nor Piranesi, Joyce Eliot, or Stravinsky.

Most of the ideas in this article touch on the very topical subject of Le Corbusier’s use of history. Together they give some sense of the many dimensions of his work and of the different kinds of study and interpretation it is now being subjected to. Let us hope that all the attention focused through the year on Le Corbusier will lead to a better understanding of both his work and of the as yet unrealised potentials within modern architecture. In the current state of conflict and confusion in architecture, we can use Le Corbusier’s towering legacy to help once again architecture with human ambition and democratic understanding, and to get some sense where we have come from and where it is possible still to go.

La Corbusier & Pierre Jeanneret’s 1920s’ villas were machine-for-living-in. Just as the Villa Savoye, Pessay, 1929-31, 1, recalled the storm superstructure of the Aquitanian as shown in Vere Urquhard’s book Architecture, 2, so all the vies were full of machine metaphors and imagery. Yet as we are now increasingly aware, each also alluded to buildings from various areas in the Classical tradition. But the connections to the past were deeper still, for the compositional approach was itself rooted in fourteenth-century theory and practice.

Le Corbusier’s villas of the 1920s

A paradoxical avant-garde

The Romantic legacy

One way to understand Le Corbusier’s paradoxical use of both history and scars of modern culture in the seemingly abstract 1920s is to remember the principal concepts and strategies to create a new architecture that came from what has been termed the Romantic Revolutions. Toward the 1820s, a cultural rebellion ensued whose architectural consequence was to convey a sense that every major historic civilization had forged a characteristic architecture expressing important aspects of its culture. In an age of cultural nationalism, it seemed that the contemporary architect should create an architecture that was modern and romanised. This goal continued in the twentieth century, with a new debate on nationalism and internationalism, but with the success, albeit temporary, of Art Nouveau, and continuing through the ensuing decades, between the Romantic Revolutions and Le Corbusier’s avant-garde. (Permanently, these fundamental ideas about how a new architecture should be) were to form Le Corbusier’s own attempts to solve these dilemmas.

The architectural system: The ‘word’ style was decisively insinuated for conveying the complex nature of architecture. Rather, there were the word, the architectural system; to designate the integration of materials, methods of construction, structure, programme, form, and aesthetics into an indissoluble whole. Since architecture can be understood as grounded in the set of building, the architectural system was thought to be centred on an original mode of construction. Studies of historical architectures — Egyptian, Assyrian, Greek, Roman, Byzantine, Gothic, Chinese, and so forth — confirmed nineteenth- and twenty-century observers in this idea.

2 Philosophical eclecticism: Although the revival of a particular style or the eclectic making of visual motifs from various styles have been, the most obvious ways of appropriating the past, a third strategy was developed by opponents of stylistic revival and stylistic eclecticism. This extracted principles from the past to guide the creation of a new architecture: principles that recalled throughout history in various guises in different ways and which had a particular historical period and a particular civilization. Since the modern architect might combine several of these principles in a contemporary architecture, this approach might be described as ‘philosophical eclecticism’. Philosophical eclecticism was the theme of many of the nineteenth-century figures of world architecture, especially Viollet-le-Duc’s Élénques sur l’architecture (1863-72) and Auguste Choisy’s Histoire de l’architecture (1888).

3 The architectural promenade: Throughout the nineteenth century, the picturesque was essentially inspired to guide the creation of a new architecture. picturesque design, in contrast to what was considered the dry and rigid symmetry of academic architecture, could import an architectural sequential quality. Derived initially from landscape design, the nineteenth-century treatment