Le Corbusier’s most famous villas of the 1920s achieved the same wish through the multiple images that the buildings express. With the Villa at Grisbi, Le Corbusier reached a highest level of synthesis with the Cubist image defined thus than in his earlier villas. Here the same image became “two realities so distinct but at the same time so aptly related.”

Villa Savoye, the Acorpus, and the Second Machine Age

Le Corbusier’s most complete statement of all of these images was Villa Savoye (1931-3) at Poissy. Set in a gently dented field, the villa is both the reflection of the new code of the town’s future Acropolis, and a reification of the architectural promenade across the Acropolis through the medium of the car, as zone for the new machine civilization. 26 In Villa Savoye, Le Corbusier presented a visual as well as aesthetic equivalent to the picturesque architectural promenade at the Acropolis by creating a parallel between the journey from Paris in the suburban villa and back and the culminating ceremonial procession of the most important civic and religious festival in ancient Athens, the Panathenaea. As an architectural analogue of the automobile, the Villa Savoye was designed as a function of the tightest possible turning radius for the car that passed under its elevated roof 27 The drive from Paris and back, signaled by Le Corbusier in a pair of captioned photographs in the L’Oeuvre Complete, substitutes for the Panathenaea procession that ascended from the main entrance of the city to the Acropolis on foot and in chariots. As a modern equivalent of the Panathenaea, the strip windows that ring Villa Savoye and capture the form of the moving automobile window, are an equivalent to the Parthenon’s frame depicting the Panathenaea procession. The transect view of the landscape seen from the moving automobile establishes the principal theme of the architectural promenade: the relationship between man, nature, and the machine.

Upon entering Villa Savoye, the visitor encounters a powdered stone pavement of the view in front of the Propylaea. As at the Acropolis, where one proceeds through the colonnaded hall of the Propylaea via a stepped ramp, at the Villa Savoye a ramp leads the visitor up through the centre of the house to the roof garden on top. It facilitates a smooth, gliding motion that underscores the sense of movement of the automobile, but now at the slower pace of the pedestrian. At the top of the ramp, the promenade ends with a framed view of the landscape situated between the organic shapes of the Venetian. This scenic composition re-enters the initial, framed view through the car window that begins the sequence. With the Villa Savoye the machine fully enters the garden. Through the automotive promenade, man and machine have become one, with the machine fully humanized.

This desire for harmony between man and the machine would be the subject of reflection for Le Corbusier and an incitement for the remainder of his life to explore new architectural forms to realize this goal. In an international symposium on the arts in contemporary life held in Venice in 1934, Le Corbusier would even go against the dangers posed by a machine civilization that, with the advent of the railroad 100 years earlier, had destroyed the traditional equilibrium between man and both his physical environment and social milieu. With the experience of the Villa Savoye behind him, Le Corbusier could announce in the meeting that 1934 had marked the opening of "the second period of machine civilization," this one connected to harmony—so harmonizing the new and revolutionary factors placed in the presence of the eternal and permanent desire and needs of the human mind and spirit. 28

27 In a building such as the Pavilion Saint-Exupéry (1930–32) at the Crillon Universitaire, Paris, presented as a dialectic between the curved, enunciated form of the machine, set in concrete with the modern glass and steel facade of the domed room to the side, Le Corbusier gave metaphorical expression to the balance between the ‘hand’ and the ‘machine’ that pervaded his thoughts at this time. 29 By the end of his life, with architecture such as his Carpenter Center (1960–65), the integration between the two was complete. Yet, even here, where the ‘mask’ of the 1920s’ prisms has been replicated by sculpturally articulated volumes and where the iron of modern interpretation has been supplanted by biological images, the concept of the architectural system organized according to the picturesque architectural promenade guides the entire design.