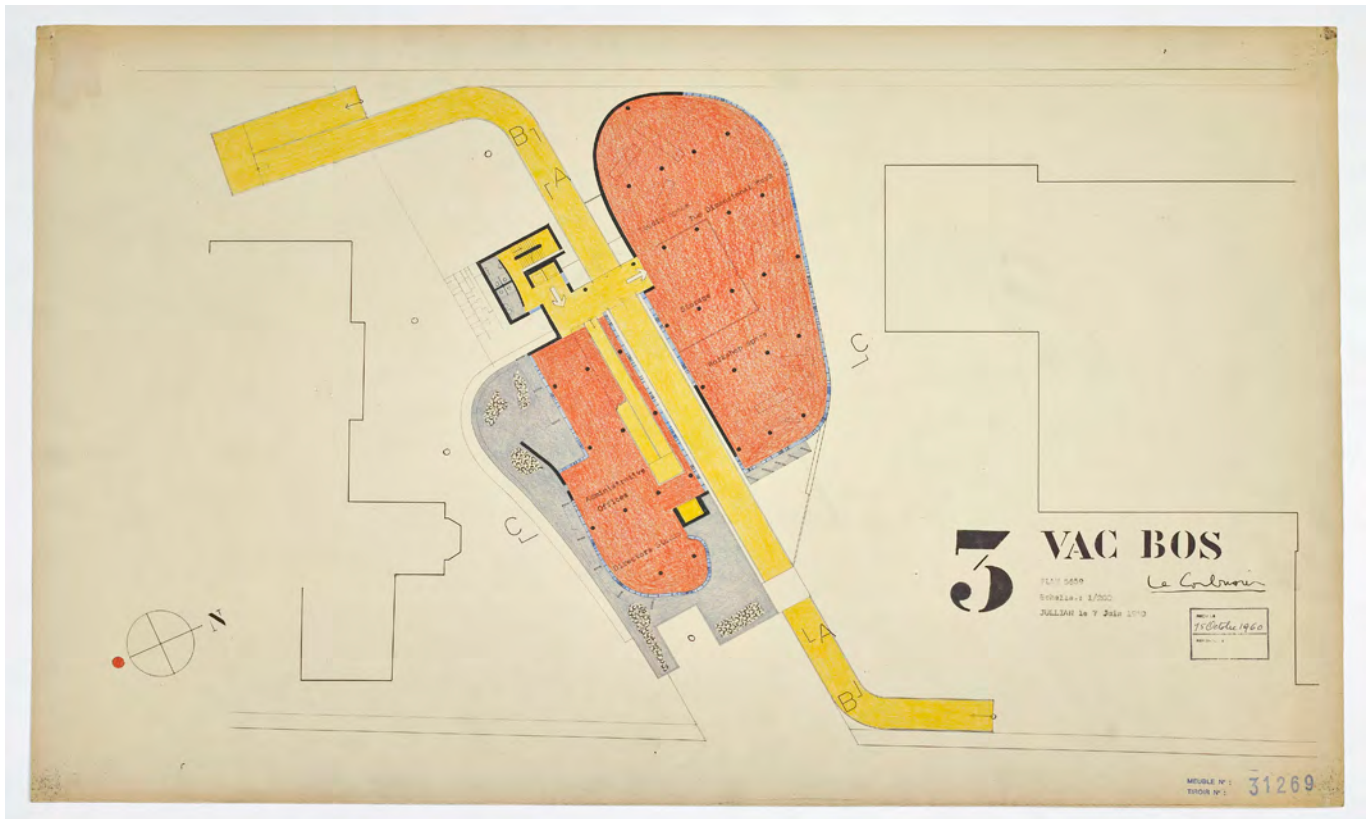


LC. #11 LE CORBUSIER CONTEMPORAIN

Le Corbusier and Julian della Fuente. Presentation plan of level 3, first project for Carpenter Center for the Visual Arts, Harvard University, Cambridge, Ma., USA. 7th June, 1960, 1:200, 43 x 70 cms, coloured crayon and pen and ink on thick trace, VAC BOS, 5659.



***On Le Corbusier's work, transcendence, and legacy ...
and much more, a conversation with William J. R. Curtis.***

Alejandro Lapunzina

Ideas and Forms: a Conversation with William J. R. Curtis /

William Curtis et Alejandro Lapunzina



FIG. 1

Le Corbusier, Couvent
Sainte-Marie de la Tourette,
L'Arbresle, 1953-57. Divine
ray of light penetrating the
pyramidal Oratory. Photo
WJRC, 2011.

ON LE CORBUSIER'S WORK, TRANSCENDENCE, AND LEGACY ... AND MUCH MORE, A CONVERSATION WITH WILLIAM J. R. CURTIS

Alejandro Lapunzina

<https://doi.org/10.4995/lc.2025.23975>

William J. R. Curtis is undoubtedly one of the most important architectural historians and critics of the last fifty years, especially - but certainly not only - with regard to the work of Le Corbusier. Insightful, incisive, profound and occasionally polemical, his writings cover a wide range of subjects, from the history of Western architecture, particularly since 1900, to mud dwellings in the Sahara, the architectures of India, education, photography and abstraction. The work of Le Corbusier occupies a prominent place in the vast universe of his interests and investigations, from his seminal and groundbreaking study of the Carpenter Center for the Visual Arts (1972-1978) to his monograph *Le Corbusier: Ideas and Forms* (1986), which in its second edition (2015) has reached an almost monumental scale. While his writings are certainly familiar to anyone interested in Le Corbusier's work, the inner origin and structure of Curtis's unique understanding of such work may not be. This is precisely what motivated this interview, to have a conversation with William in which he could freely share the reasons that led him to study Le Corbusier's work and reveal more about his lifelong passionate dedication to it.

I first met William in 1987 in St. Louis, USA. I was in the second semester of what for me was a two-year postgraduate Master of Architecture degree at Washington University. The course catalogue for that semester announced a seminar devoted entirely to Le Corbusier, taught by William J. R. Curtis. Although he was already a very well known architectural historian, I had never heard of him; my "architectural history references," the books with which I had studied modern architecture at the University of Buenos Aires (Argentina) were those of Leonardo Benevolo, Nikolaus Pevsner, Sigfried Giedion, Bruno Zevi, Reyner Banham, Peter Collins and a few others. But a friend recommended that I enroll in the course because, he said, "you'll see, he knows a lot and he's a very good teacher; and it's particularly timely, a special 'Corbusian' moment, because it's the centenary of Le Corbusier's birth".

Having been educated in a completely different system, I was unfamiliar with an entire course dedicated to a single architect, so I enrolled without any specific expectations beyond a personal interest and enthusiasm for learning more about Le Corbusier's work. This changed very quickly with the first few lectures: it was obvious that I was learning more, but the most important thing was what and *how* I was learning it. William's approach to the work of Le Corbusier (and, as I later learnt, to architecture in general) was very different from my previous experience; his dissection of *Vers une architecture*, and his knowledge and ability to relate Le Corbusier's buildings, ideas and postulates to a wide range of subjects, sources and references were absolutely enlightening. It was certainly much more than a history seminar; it was a course on Architecture and, more importantly for me, the nature of architectural ideas. It was exactly what I had unconsciously been looking for when I decided to embark on a two-year postgraduate master's course far from home. My monograph on Le Corbusier's *Maison Curutchet*, in La Plata (1949), published a decade later, in 1997, grew directly from the paper which I presented in the course.

FIG. 2

William J. R. Curtis,
'Horizon of the Mind', in
the black and white series
'Cosmologies'. The photo
was taken in 2001 in the
Canary Islands on the way
to El Hierro.



Years later, when I became Director of the Illinois Architecture Study Abroad Program in Versailles of the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign, I invited William to teach a seminar course; the first two editions (1997 and 1998) consisted of short, intensive sessions on Le Corbusier's work mostly in the Paris area. Later (in the mid-2000s and early 2010s), we transformed it into two full-week intensive courses on modern and contemporary architecture with Le Corbusier's work naturally at the center. The course typically ended with a three-day trip with La Tourette and Ronchamp as the highlights of the learning experience. The intensive focus on experience, annotation through observation (mental, written, and graphic), and reflection that William promoted in these courses invariably left a powerful impact on the students' *architectural thinking*, as well as an indelible memory of an enhanced architectural experience. On a more personal level, the many long hours of bus travel were always filled with enriching conversations, especially after visiting Le Corbusier's masterpieces or the other buildings we visited along the way (e.g., Claude N. Ledoux's Arc-et-Senans, the Cistercian monastery of Le Thoronet, Pierre-Louis Faloci's archaeological museum at Mt. Beuvray, and others).

During these trips, I was also a direct witness to his passionate defense and preservation of the built works, not only of Le Corbusier, but also of many other architects. I personally witnessed his fervent reaction to insensitive interventions in buildings, such as the inadequate "restoration" of joints at La Tourette's onduloires, or Renzo Piano's projects in the immediacy of Ronchamp, all of which triggered tireless campaigns through the press and other means with the aim of preserving the integrity of an architectural heritage which, in his view, had transcended time and place to become timeless and universal.

Indeed, the word 'integrity' is key to understanding William's work on more than one level. While, as noted above, he can be seen at times as a polemical figure, this is often because of the intensity with which he, on the one hand, assumes his responsibility as a historian, while on the other firmly sustains his intellectual independence. In fact, both are inseparable; the former is a reflection of his commitment to truth and long-term quality, the latter, a consequence of having decided to free himself from all sorts of institutional ties, such as tenured teaching positions or research affiliations. This has obvious pros and cons, but it has not prevented him from teaching and lecturing at the world's most prestigious institutions and receiving numerous international awards. I would even venture to say that this 'shield of independence' –which may bear a resemblance to Le Corbusier's own *quixotic* adventure— is a key to understanding his work.

Returning to the intentions of having this text, the preservation and restoration of Le Corbusier's work was one of the subjects that I wanted William to talk about when we began talking about this "interview project." But the agenda was completely open, and this was just one among many possible topics. In short, I had defined three broad themes that I wanted to discuss with William, three "umbrellas" that could encompass as many subjects and topics as might arise. These three umbrellas were the work of Le Corbusier, his own work on Le Corbusier and in particular the second edition of *Le Corbusier: Ideas and Forms*, and finally the projection or legacy of Le Corbusier. The latter, in particular, would cover issues as diverse as the preservation and restoration of Le Corbusier's work, current and future research, and the impact or influence of Le Corbusier's work on others, a subject that I know is very dear to him, as his books and essays on other architects and the long chapter entitled "On Transforming Le Corbusier" in the second edition of *Ideas and Forms* clearly demonstrate.

We still had to decide where to meet. Barcelona, where I live, was one of the options, but it was quickly discarded; two other alternatives sounded more appropriate, "more Corbusian"; one was Paris, where we both have family, the other was Marseille, at the Unité d'Habitation, somewhat equidistant for both of us. But I thought it should be in a more personal place, one that could be 'a mirror and a lens' (to borrow the title of one of his writings on Le Corbusier) of William as a writer and an artist, a place that would reveal his more personal dimension. So I decided it was time to accept his long-standing invitation to visit his home in Cajarc, in the south-west of France. I thought that there, in his own environment, surrounded by his books, his paintings and the landscape garden that he and his wife Catherine have made surrounding their home, would be the most appropriate setting for a relaxed conversation, and William immediately agreed. So that is where we had our conversations, in a room looking over the River Lot towards a 13th century fortified château on the opposite bank. This landscape with its limestone cliffs, ancient churches and grottoes with Paleolithic rock paintings, encourages a long-term perception of time.

For several weeks before our meeting I immersed myself in his work, rereading many texts with which I was already very familiar, but also reading many others which, to be honest, I had not yet read. This period of immersion in William's writing included some texts on Le Corbusier and other architects, but also those in which he talks about his own work as a photographer and artist, with the recurrent themes of the importance of drawing and the transformation of experience into a language of forms through abstraction. Then, in mid-March, I travelled to Cajarc and spent almost four full days with William and Catherine, enjoying their warm hospitality and wonderful conversations on subjects ranging from architecture, of course (Catherine is an architect), to their travels around the world from India to Mexico and beyond. From time to time, we would break off for meals of roast duck and Cahors red wine, or to wander into the garden which they have created with its terraces and platforms recalling ancient ruins, and its banks of cypress trees evoking Mediterranean reveries.

During those four days we recorded just over ten hours of conversation on the pre-set topics, the aforementioned 'umbrellas', as well as many other things, resulting in over two hundred pages of written transcripts. As expected, these 'umbrellas' were not structured as separate sections (or recording sessions). Most of the time, throughout the conversation (or William's narration), the various themes were inextricably intertwined, constantly crossing and overlapping their respective boundaries.

The following text is a synthesis of those recordings, which involved the 'post-production' work of reorganizing the salient parts of the transcription as if it were a complex, multifaceted puzzle. However, we have carefully and deliberately preserved the casual and relaxed tone and atmosphere in which our meetings took place. The end result, in my view, is a very personal text, rich in autobiographical overtones, as well as a deeply personal reflection and meditation on the themes central to William's work and the essence of his lifelong contribution to architectural ideas, in general, and, in particular, to the work of Le Corbusier.

Alejandro Lapunzina
Sant Cugat del Vallès, April 2025



FIG. 3
Le Corbusier, Assembly
or Parliament Building,
Chandigarh, 1951-65.
Photo WJRC, 1985.