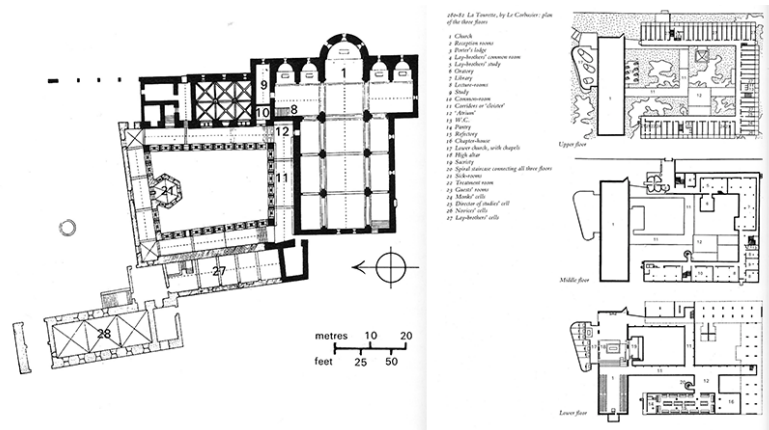


## Some thoughts on architecture

*Cistercian Abbeys: History and Architecture*. Text by Jean-Francois Leroux-Dhuys

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Cistercian Abbey of Le Thoronet, (XII century)  
La Tourette by Le Corbusier (1961)

Following my recent preoccupation with the notion of function and [architecture](#), I reread a portion of the book *Cistercian Abbeys: History and Architecture* by Jean-Francois Leroux-Dhuys, published by Könemann. Below, I have included a brief excerpt from this book related to these topics. [Links in article are mine]

“The “miracle” of Cistercian architecture lies in the White Monks’ ability, over a period of more than a century, to build churches and monastic buildings using a variety of different architectural techniques that obeyed the same program and the same aesthetic points of view—both of which were instantly perceived equally by the monks and by outsiders.

### Freedom in architecture

Every master builder in a Cistercian abbey had to combine the demands of a general program with the particular local situation, adapting the building to the chosen site, the characteristics of the available water source, the possible need for special facilities to be added to the basic layout, the materials available in that region, and even the climate or amount of daylight depending on latitude. In each case, the result was a specific and unique architectural solution.

This is the essential truth of architectural creation, made up of a succession of reiterations between program and constraints, where the architect attempts to get around the difficulties, assessing, through a permanent dialogue with the builder, the pertinence of his obligations, while the same time seeking to give the possible solutions a spatial coherence. This was the price of architectural quality, and so it was in every Cistercian abbey.

Thus, we see the absurdity of the debate, wrongly evoked by certain architectural historians, that seeks to dwell on the excessive constraints of the Order’s program and the lack of freedom given to the designer.

Fernand Pouillon, in [Les Pierres Sauvages](#) has recreated an illuminating dialogue between the abbot and the monk who became master of works at Thoronet, the daughter house of Clairvaux that so slowly followed its spirit.

“The fundamental design of our monasteries is laid down by the strict *Rule*, that determines from the start the form of the church, the cloister, and the order of the rooms surrounding it. Do you, who have passed your whole life under this program, find it oppressive? Did it prevent you from expressing yourself?”

“No, Father, quite the contrary, I love the framework of our plans, which nevertheless allowed the builder great freedom.”

**A functional architecture** If, in the words of Thomas Aquinas, “beauty is the light of truth,” then Cistercian architecture is a permanent homage to function, something that is intrinsic to architecture.

“Functionalism is the analysis of the true necessity of an object, a place, a building [...]. It requires imagination to find the most suitable form for a given function that is judged to be essential. For any building, then, functionalism is the analysis of all its parts, of the way in which they are ‘inhabited’.

**Modernity** Although contrary to the beliefs of the Cistercians, who did not consider their abbeys as works of art, a contemporary reading of Cistercian architecture, ignoring the religious, economic, and social context of its creation, has led many to admire the elements of its architectural vocabulary. Its striking modernity made a great impact on [Le Corbusier](#), who was prompted to write a preface to an excellent book on Le Thoronet.

Le Corbusier found in Cistercian architecture a confirmation of his own ideas. Materials should be used in their original state, “with their rough skin,” the surface of stone or rough concrete. Captured light should be seen, like shadows, as another form of material. Cistercian architecture is “the intelligent, correct, and magnificent interplay of volumes assembled under light.” The true and visible decoration of architecture is to be found in the affirmation of structure, and act of faith in technical progress similar to that which allowed the master builder of Clairvaux to pass without any qualms from groin vaults to rib vaults. Despite the fact that this vault symbolized heaven, for Le Corbusier and the modern movement the orthogonality of Cistercian architecture was a perfect illustration of the “poetry of right-angles.”