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Definition: **Le Corbusier** from *Philip's Encyclopedia*

Swiss-born French architect (Charles Édouard Jeanneret). His early work exploited the qualities of reinforced concrete in cube-like forms. His Unité d'Habitation, Marseilles (1946-52), was a modular design widely adopted for mass housing. Later, he evolved a poetic style, of which the Chapel of Notre-Dame-du-Haut at Ronchamp (1955) is an example. In the 1950s, he laid out the town of Chandigarh, India, and built its Supreme Courts. His last major work was the Visual Arts Center at Harvard University, Cambridge, Massachusetts (1963). His book *Towards a New Architecture* (1923) is a key text of the international style.

Summary Article: **Le Corbusier**

From *Encyclopedia of Urban Studies*

Le Corbusier was one of the most influential yet controversial architect-planners of the twentieth century, as well as being a prolific writer, painter, sculptor, and poet. He occupies a troubled place in architectural scholarship. Some cannot forgive him his arrogance and political opportunism. Others see a designer of genius and a polemically brilliant writer.

Early Years

Born Charles-Édouard Jeanneret in Switzerland in 1887, he seemed destined for a career in watch-case engraving before developing an interest in architecture. The first house he built was the Villa Fallet (1907), which reflected his hometown vernacular with its steep roof and ornamented façade. Between 1908 and 1911, however, Jeanneret was apprenticed to Auguste Perret and Peter Behrens, early pioneers of reinforced concrete construction and industrial design.

He traveled extensively around Europe and the near East, where the Hagia Sophia and Parthenon had a profound effect on him. It was also around this time that he read the works of the Viennese architect Adolf Loos, in particular *Ornament and Crime* (1908). These influences inspired Jeanneret to devise an architectural style that eschewed decoration and combined the latest building technologies with the monumentality of ancient architecture.

During World War I, Jeanneret attempted to patent a new housing prototype for postwar reconstruction. The Dom-ino had six columns, a staircase, and three slabs for the ground, first floor, and roof. This design encapsulated the theory that would characterize his architectural work in the 1920s, the *Five Points of a New Architecture* (1926): *pilotis*, open plan, free façade, strip windows, roof garden.

Moving to Paris in 1917, Jeanneret met the painter Amédée Ozenfant, and together, they published *Après le Cubisme* (1918), the founding manifesto of the Purist movement. Their Purist still lifes had interlocking forms spread calmly across the canvas, often in gentle pastel colors, unlike the swirling, fragmented forms of Cubist still lifes. This pictorial orderliness was part of a more general return to order that Ozenfant and Jeanneret hoped to see in Europe after the upheavals of the war.

Architecture and town planning were part of the plan and these were discussed in the Purist journal, *L'Esprit Nouveau*. Le Corbusier was invented as a pseudonym for Jeanneret when writing about these topics, but soon the name stuck, and his articles were collected into books that define the Modern

movement, including *Vers une Architecture* (1923) and *Urbanisme* (1924).

A Theory of Architecture

Vers une Architecture outlined Le Corbusier's theory of architecture as the sculptural arrangement of volumes under light, which he derived from his analysis of the Parthenon. It discussed also the architectural promenade, where the complexities of space are revealed as one passes through them in a carefully orchestrated sequence. These principles were put into practice in a series of elegant homes, including the Villa La Roche-Jeanneret (Paris, 1925) and the Villa Savoye (Poissy, 1929).

Urbanisme introduced Le Corbusier's theory of town planning. It focused on his designs for the Ville Contemporaine, exhibited at the Salon d'Automne of 1922. The centerpiece of this “city for two million inhabitants” was a transport hub complete with airport and surrounded by 24 skyscrapers, each of them 60 stories high, clad in glass and cruciform in plan. Further out were residential blocks arranged according to set-back and perimeter-block patterns. Each residence was soundproof and had a double-height living room and an internal garden, and each block enjoyed catering and cleaning services as well as allotments and sports facilities. The buildings were to be lifted up on pilotis, and the different grades of vehicular traffic were segregated, some running underground. This allowed the entire ground surface of the city to be cultivated into a vast park.

Le Corbusier observed later that this centralized design was flawed as it could not grow but only be duplicated. He remedied this in the 1930s with proposals for linear cities such as the Ville Radieuse: the different zones—commercial, industrial, residential—were arranged in linear bands that could be extended indefinitely. Even so, the central tenets of Le Corbusier's urbanism were contained in the Ville Contemporaine, not least his commitment to social engineering. Run by the managerial elite in the skyscrapers, the city would defuse revolutionary tendencies in the working classes by giving them better homes and the leisure time and facilities to cultivate body and mind.

The question of how to implement such grand plans seemed to resolve itself fortuitously around this time. In 1927, Le Corbusier submitted his competition entry for the League of Nations building. He appeared to have won, but his designs were later dismissed on the technicality that they were reproductions rather than original drawings. Le Corbusier and others saw this as a conspiracy, and the following year they formed the Congrès Internationaux d'Architecture Moderne (CIAM). CIAM became the official body of modern architecture and planning and included influential figures such as Hannes Meyer, Gerrit Rietveld, El Lissitzky and Josep Lluís Sert.

Members would gather for conferences to thrash out design policy, and although there was never perfect consensus, there was considerable agreement. CIAM delegates lobbied successfully to get their principles adopted in the building and land-use legislation of governments around the world, as well as in the educational curricula of the schools of architecture and planning. The reductionist tendencies of CIAM are represented best in *The Athens Charter* of 1943, where the city was presented as a simple puzzle with just four functions: dwelling, working, circulation, and recreation.

In addition to CIAM, Le Corbusier courted others whom he thought had the power and finances to implement his plans. He was scornful of the parliamentary infighting of France between the wars and believed the remedy was to adopt nonparliamentary means. This found an echo in the Redressement Français, a technocratic organization formed in 1925 that campaigned for society and the economy to be reorganized according to scientific principles and managed by experts.

But Le Corbusier was attracted to antiparliamentary movements more generally, such as the French fascist movement, Les Faisceau, and the paramilitary leagues that toppled the Radical government in the riots of February 1934. Working in Vichy during German occupation in 1941 to 1942, Le Corbusier lobbied Marshal Philippe Pétain to sanction his plans to redevelop Algiers, and imagined a postwar France that would see him crowned The Lawgiver with a mandate to remold the built fabric of the empire.

Le Corbusier was frustrated in these ambitions and after the war he appears to have given up on politics, and this is when he completed some of his most important work.

Masterpieces

The Unité d'habitation (Marseilles, 1952) was an opportunity for Le Corbusier to put his ideas on high-rise living into practice. The double-height apartments and amenities like shops, a gym, and school recall the mid-1920s, but they were presented here in a bold new sculptural style that became known as Brutalism. The concrete was untreated and retains imprints from the wooden forms, and deeply cut *brise-soleil* transform the exterior into a play of light and shade. This new expressiveness reached its zenith in the Chapel of Notre Dame du Haut at Ronchamp (1954), a building of wild exuberance, symbolism, and color.

The largest work undertaken by Le Corbusier was the city of Chandigarh, commissioned as a new capital for the Punjab after Indian independence and partition in 1947. The original design team was headed by the American military engineer Albert Mayer and the Polish architect Matthew Nowicki. The project stalled, however, and Le Corbusier was contracted to head a new team that included the civil engineer Pierre Jeanneret and the English architect-planners Maxwell Fry and Jane Drew. They arrived in India in 1951 with a mandate to implement the original plans, and while they kept certain ideas, such as neighborhood units and a capitol complex of government buildings, they straightened out the Garden City layout with a CIAM gridiron and increased the overall scale.

The residential sectors reflected the socioeconomic status of the residents. Luxurious homes for government officials are in the topmost sectors, space and amenities getting squeezed as one proceeds literally down. Sector 17 is the city center, with a cinema, banks, restaurants, and shops. Running the length of the city is a park containing fitness trails, fountains, and a museum. Le Corbusier divided traffic into seven different types—*les sept voies*—and provided routes for each, motorized traffic being privileged over foot and cycle paths. But he concentrated most attention on the buildings of the capitol complex, including the Palace of Assembly (1962), High Court (1956), and Secretariat (1958). These buildings are monumental in scale and sculptural in impact, the Secretariat being 250 meters long while the Palace of Assembly looks like a combination of industrial furnace and astronomical observatory.

Chandigarh suffered many problems, and Le Corbusier is often blamed. The scale made walking and cycling difficult, and relatively few early residents could afford cars. The commercial rents were too expensive for many shopkeepers, and there was little provision for markets and street vendors. Also, the house rents were too expensive for the very people who built and serviced the city, leading to the growth of squatter settlements that were periodically bulldozed by the authorities. But the question of blame is moot: Chandigarh was consistent with Jawaharlal Nehru's vision of a modern, technological India.

Le Corbusier died of a heart attack while swimming in 1965, leaving several major projects incomplete.

See also

Architecture, Brasília, Brazil, Sert, Josep Lluís, Urban Planning

Further Readings

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