

Le Corbusier : 1887-1987

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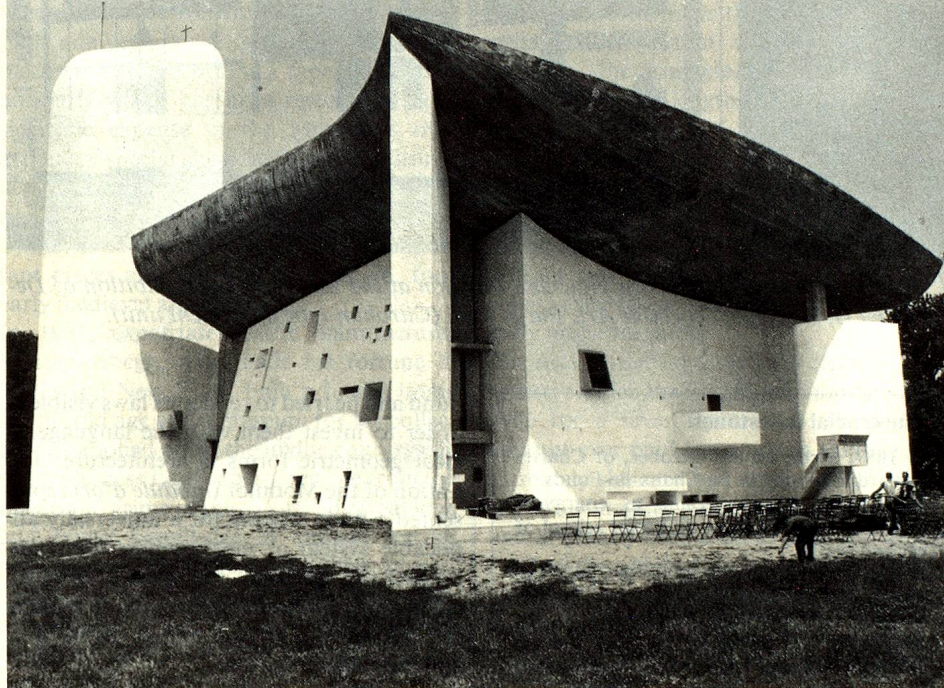
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1887–1987

Le Corbusier



Synthesis of nature and geometry: the chapel at Ronchamp (photo: René Burri, Magnum).

Twenty years ago, just after the death of Charles Edouard Jeanneret, known under the name of Le Corbusier, it was too soon to pay tribute to him, viewed from the perspective of the history of art, as a phenomenon of the past. How is it today? Are the many exhibitions this year in Switzerland and abroad to celebrate the 100th birthday and the diversified work of the greatest architect of the 20th century the mirror of an aloof judgement or are they not still rooted too much in his ideas and conceptions?

Mostly, the exhibitions fall into two basic types: all-encompassing portrayals of his life and work, as in the exhibition «Le Corbusier – Architect of the Century» in the Hayward Gallery in London or systematic examinations of selected aspects, as in the *Museum für Gestaltung* in Zurich, with its show: «*L'Esprit Nouveau: Le Corbusier and Industry, 1920–1925*». Despite the wide range and variety of the subject matter on display, the impression remains that the distance needed to view this «erratic block» of modernism both historically and critically is lacking. Yet even today Le Corbusier is either applauded as a genius or – as a protagonist of functionalism – is held responsible

for undesirable trends in town planning and architecture. What are the reasons for these so markedly diverging trends?

That Le Corbusier is indeed held responsible for the «ghastly» and «antisocial» buildings of post-war modernism, may stem from his reflections on the machine, from the principle evolved therefrom of the «machine for living in» and from his city-planning concepts.

Not only for Le Corbusier did the fledgling years of the 1920s bring in an unbelievably innovative phase. Revolutionary changes took place. The machine era dawned anew. The new age demanded a new architecture. Le Corbusier saw models for it in the forms of the engineering, the motor cars, the aeroplanes and the steamships of the time. Industrial production brought with it standardization and development of prototypes, then of models. Le Corbusier was to discover modern aesthetics in these mass-produced goods.

For him, machines represented economical designs which manifest themselves in a clearly-legible, graphic – and thus beautiful – form. Like the engineers who, when building an aeroplane, have to heed the problem

of flying, the architects should henceforward find an adequate solution for living. A house, too, was thus to function in the future without a hitch – like a machine. And so with the Citrohan project, Le Corbusier's «machine for living in» took shape. Not altogether by coincidence does the name Citrohan call the Citroen car to mind; like the car, the Citrohan house was to be produced and distributed in large numbers. It was a type of dwelling not primarily intended as a detached villa but as a basic element for larger neighbourhood units. The *Unité d'Habitation* in Marseilles consists solely of these housing modules which were fitted like drawers into a reinforced concrete frame.

Le Corbusier's model project, designed for a «contemporary city of 3,000,000 inhabitants» signalled a further increase of scale, within a town-planning context.

In the 1950s, many ideas – including Le Corbusier's concept of «*la ville radieuse*» – were taken up for what they were, although they were intended more as a contribution to the architectonic debates of the period than as concrete plans or projects.

If, today, Le Corbusier is judged harshly, there are various reasons: on the one hand, everything that has to do with machines and standardization is nowadays suspect – for



Le Corbusier in Zurich, 1938.

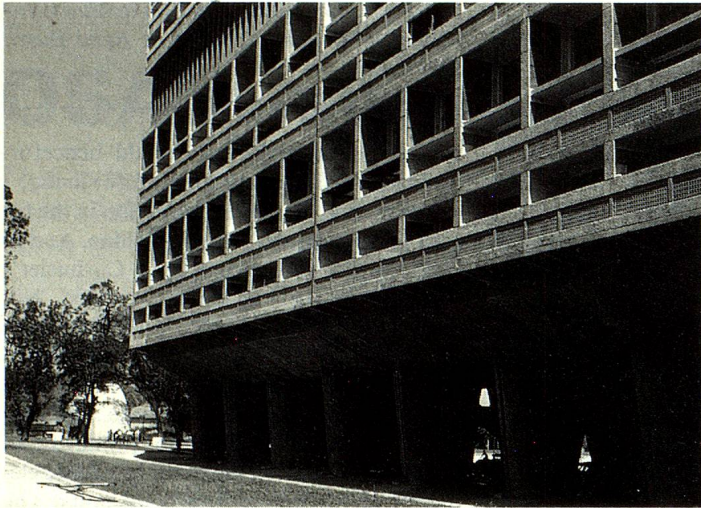


Figure 1: A diagram showing the construction of a human figure from a series of overlapping circles. The figure is a silhouette of a man in a dynamic pose, with his right arm raised. The construction is based on a vertical axis with various points labeled with numbers. To the right of the figure, a series of overlapping circles are shown, with their centers marked by dots and labeled with numbers. A horizontal line is drawn through the center of the figure, and a vertical line is drawn through the center of the circles. The diagram is labeled 'Figure 1' at the bottom.

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