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# Le Corbusier

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On 27th August, 1965, while swimming at Roquebrune, St. Martin, 78-year-old Le Corbusier (Charles Edouard Jeanneret) died of a heart attack. Designer of Chandigarh, the new capital of the Punjab, of the world-famous Pilgrim's Chapel at Ronchamp and of the Unité de Grandeur Conforme in Marseilles, Le Corbusier is universally acknowledged to be the most gifted architect of our day. After many years' struggle for recognition, he was besieged with commissions for major works in all parts of the world, especially in the period after the war. A vast number of books have been written about his work. Of the many marks of honour he received, we would single out the honorary degrees from Zurich University and from the Swiss Federal Institute of Technology, the Order of Merit awarded by Queen Elizabeth, and the highest order of the *légion d'honneur*, which he received personally from President de Gaulle shortly before his death.

For Le Corbusier the road to fame was hard and frustrating. He continually met with lack of understanding, intellectual complacency and prejudice. That he eventually achieved success was due entirely to his own imperturbable spirit, his uncompromising will and unbending determination.

Le Corbusier was born at La Chaux-de-Fonds on 6th October, 1887.

*Le Corbusier*



His father and grandfather were engravers, his mother a musician. He showed a talent for drawing at an early age, entering the *Ecole des Beaux Arts* of his native town when he was only 14. Here L'Eplattenier, a teacher whom he held in great esteem, introduced him to works of art from all periods and from all nations, and aroused his interest in architecture. His first building — a villa for a member of the board of governors at the art school at La Chaux-de-Fonds — was commissioned just after his eighteenth birthday. With the money he got for this work he set out on a journey that took him through Italy to Budapest and Vienna, where he made the acquaintance of Josef Hoffmann, director and founder of the "Viennese Workshops".

In 1908, when he was twenty, he came to Paris where he got the chance to work with Auguste Perret who was one of the first to understand the architectural possibilities of reinforced concrete as a building material. After working with Perret for fifteen months, he spent a few more years travelling abroad. In Germany, he first worked for some months with Peter Behrens and then for a short time with Heinrich Tessenow. He paid close attention to German efforts to produce a contemporary architecture but did not give them unqualified approval. He took away lasting impressions from the Balkans, Hungary, Rumania, Turkey and particularly Rome and Athens.

Responding to a call from L'Eplattenier, he spent some years teaching at the La Chaux-de-Fonds Art School. However, feeling his style was cramped in his native town, he transferred to Paris in 1917 and made it his permanent home.

In the French capital he first worked as a painter and founded, with Ozenfant, what came to be known as "purism". Being at odds with the contemporary movements in art (which he considered inappropriate for our times and therefore false and inartistic) and feeling he had to give his artistic efforts a theoretical basis, he joined forces with Paul Dermée in 1928 to found the

"Esprit Nouveau". In numerous articles which he wrote for this periodical he expressed his ideas on the pictorial arts including architecture.

Le Corbusier believed that more than any pictorial art, architecture had been bogged down in the past, that it had taken a wrong turning. From 1922 onwards, when he opened an architect's office in Paris with his cousin Pierre Jeanneret, he devoted all his energies to architecture.

This was the beginning of a long struggle to make architecture an expression of *our* times and not just a weak or feeble imitation of the art of bygone days. His first important written work, "Vers une Architecture" was published by Crès in Paris in 1923.

Le Corbusier felt that the most important contemporary task was to provide decent accommodation for the masses. This could be done only through the industrialised building of standard houses and through organic town-planning. In 1914, under the impression of the war destruction in Flanders, he designed the assembly building system "Domino", a method whereby structural scaffolding, supports, ceilings and staircases are prefabricated and can be arranged in a great variety of possibilities. The building-in operation also makes use of the prefabricated elements. The walls having no bearing function, the ground plan is entirely free. The idea of standard industrialised dwelling units as the foundation of all housing, from the small building to the gigantic block, has since been adopted in countless variations. Its most convincing expression was in the *unité d'habitation de grandeur conformes* for 1,600 residents, which Le Corbusier built in Marseilles for the French Ministry of Reconstruction (building begun in 1945). With a two-storey living-area and a garden of its own, each flat is a sort of self-contained, single-family house largely adapted to the individual needs of its occupants. This *unité d'habitation* which was the first of its kind, was followed by others in Nantes, Meaux, Briey-en-Forêt and, as part of the international building exhibition in Berlin in 1957.

In itself, industrialised building can do little to redress the chief evil of the big city, the lack of light and sunshine in the residential districts, or to remedy bad traffic conditions. This is the task of town planning whose function is to give back to the town its open spaces and to regulate its traffic. Le Corbusier exhibited his first great town planning project for a town of three million people at the *salon d'automne* in Paris in 1922. His scheme

contained all the features of modern town planning, *viz.* separation of traffic from residential district, of residential district from place of work. All the houses are sited in open countryside, residential areas being garden cities forming a belt around the town. Twenty-four high buildings house the administration, are used as business premises, or serve as hotels. Typical of a later project, the *Ville Radieuse*, is the detailed consideration which Le Corbusier gives to the problem of traffic, a subject which was to be very much in his thoughts in the future. His ideas about town planning find expression in his building plans for Algiers, São Paulo, Buenos Aires, Stockholm, Antwerp, Paris, Marseilles, etc., which, however, have not yet been realised. In 1950, the India Government commissioned him to build a new capital in the Punjab. This was his first chance to put his town planning ideas into practice. Chandigarh, an administrative centre with a population of 500,000, will be built in stages. The first stage, for 150,000 residents, has been under construction since 1951. Le Corbusier assumed responsibility for the overall plan as well as for the "Capitol" as he called the group of administrative and ministerial buildings. The Parliament Building, the ministry buildings and the Law Courts, which have already been built, bear the unmistakable stamp of Le Corbusier's artistic personality.

Always new, always indicative of new trends, were Le Corbusier's designs for individual buildings. To mention only a few, the Constanța built in Moscow in 1928, the design for the League of Nations Building in Geneva (1928), the Paris Salvation Army shelter for the homeless (1932-33), the factory he built in St. Dié in 1945, the design which received first prize for the United Nations Building in New York (1945), the Pilgrim's Chapel at Ronchamp (1956), the de la Tourette Monastery near Lyons, are landmarks in a new architecture which, in addition to meeting contemporary needs, are superlative works of art.

The range of his work extends from the "dwelling machine" and buildings made of prefabricated elements to ecclesiastical buildings. Two major projects for which he was responsible in the last few years of his life, are the vast group of hospital buildings in Venice and the French Embassy in Brasilia.

The most recent Le Corbusier building to be erected for which plans were completed only a few weeks before his death, is the exhibition building in Zurich. Completed in the summer of

1967, it is intended by Frau Heidi Weber by whom it was commissioned, to be a "Le Corbusier Centre" exclusively devoted to the great architect's work. All his life, whether as architect, painter, sculptor or writer, Le Corbusier was first and foremost an artist. So comprehensive are his achievements that we might doubt whether his work is really that of one man, were it not that in its clarity of conception, inner logic, refusal to compromise and boundless imagination, everything he created bears the unmistakable stamp of his personality. Though reason and logic may determine his work to a large extent, they are never decisive. What mattered to him most is best expressed in his own words: "C'est par le rayonnement spirituel, par le sourire de la grâce, que l'architecture doit apporter aux hommes de la civilisation machiniste la joie et non pas une stricte utilité... L'architecture doit siéger dans le cœur et dans la tête, dans le cœur avant tout".

When Le Corbusier died, he was admired by many people as the greatest architect of the century. The French Government rendered him the last honours at a funeral ceremony held in the courtyard of the Louvre.

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Hans Girsberger