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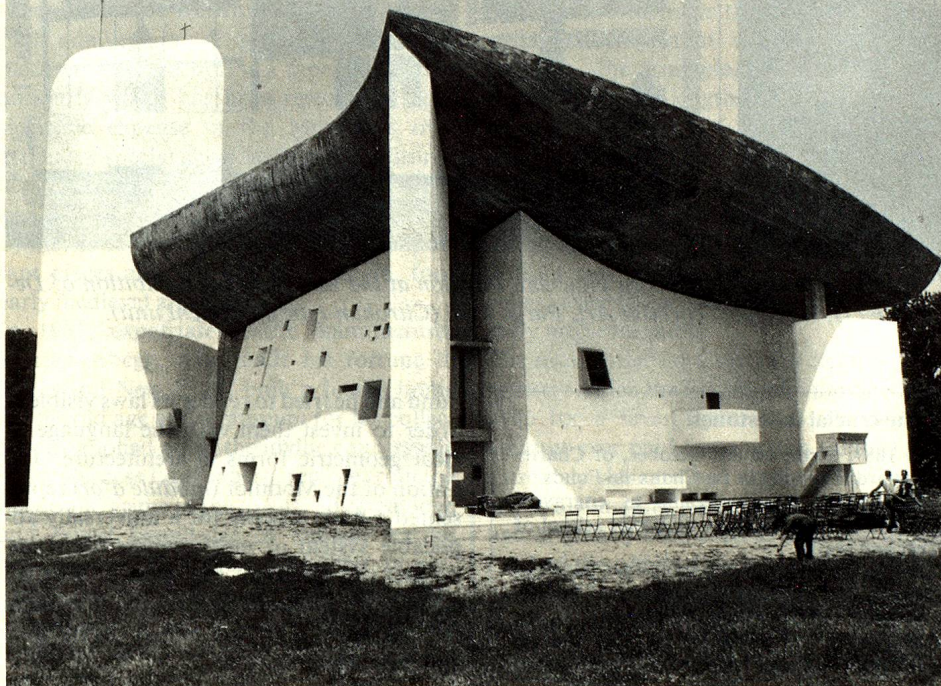
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1887–1987

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.

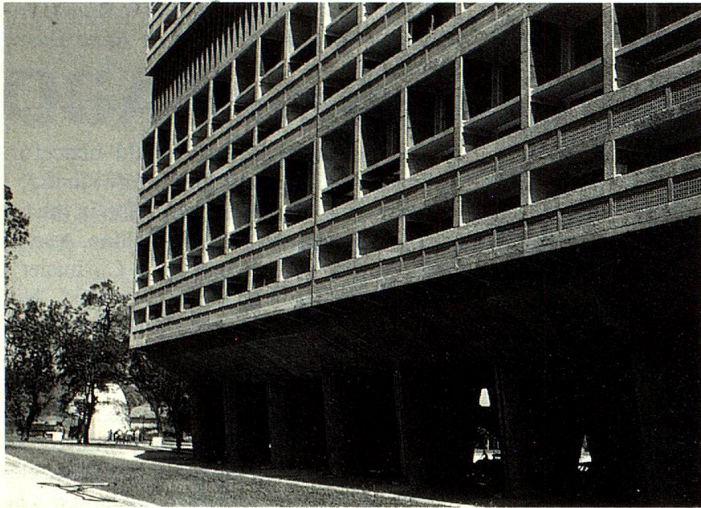
Le Corbusier's model project, designed for a «contemporary city of 3,000,000 inhabitants» signalled a further increase of scale, within a town-planning context.

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.

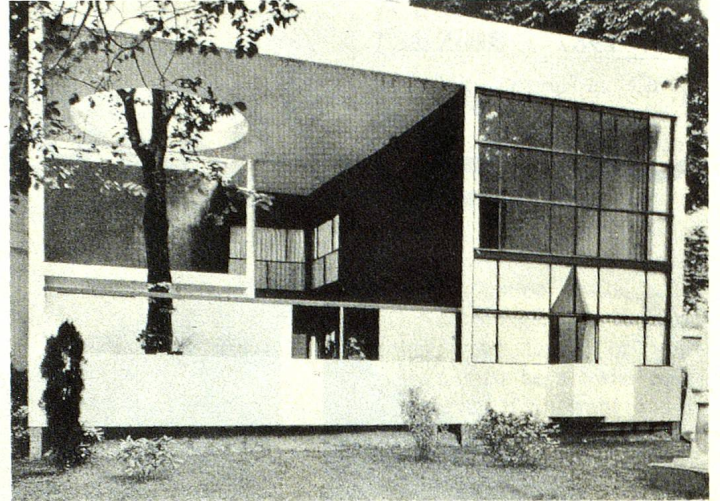
If, today, Le Corbusier is judged harshly, there are various reasons: on the one hand, everything that has to do with machines and standardization is nowadays suspect – for



Le Corbusier in Zurich, 1938.



Unité d'Habitation in Marseilles (Bernhard Hoesli Archives, Institute for the History and Theory of Architecture, ETH, Zurich).



L'Esprit Nouveau Pavilion at the International Exhibition of Decorative Art, Paris, 1925 (Citrohan-type apartment unit).

us; on the other, we make no distinction between his concepts and their realization by the planners of the 1950s.

The indeed stronger tendency to accept and adopt his ideas, however, applauds Le Corbusier as one of the greatest figures in the history of modern architecture. The reasons therefor are evident: hardly anyone apart from Le Corbusier, with his scarcely-believable visionary ideas, perceived the problems of the burgeoning big city – ideas, concepts, which have moulded the imagination of architects and town planners for two generations. Alone, the conceptions of Le Corbusier, such as the separation of traffic levels or the combining of the advantages of a detached house and those of living in great closeness and density, are still today in the forefront of every town-planning scheme.

Although the time is past when Le Corbusier's architectonic and town planning

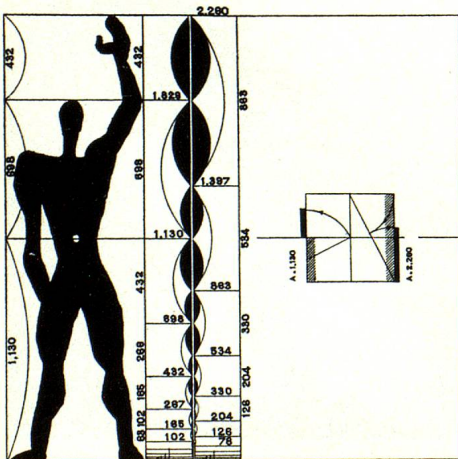
The crucial milestones

- 1887: Birth, on 6th October, of Charles Eduard Jeanneret in La Chaux-de-Fonds
- 1900-04: Apprenticeship as engraver/chaser at the La Chaux-de-Fonds school of art and crafts
- 1905-16: First buildings in La Chaux-de-Fonds
- 1917: Finally settled in Paris
- 1920-25: Publication of the journal *L'Esprit Nouveau*. Use of the pseudonym «Le Corbusier». Design of the Citrohan house. Most of his projects and publications were realized during this period.
- 1928: Co-founder of CIAM (International Congresses for Modern Architecture)
- 1929-31: Villa Savoye in Poissy
- 1930: Received French citizenship
- 1947-52: *Unité d'Habitation* in Marseilles
- 1951-55: Notre Dame du Haut in Ronchamp
- 1952-58: Town buildings for Chandigarh, India
- 1965: Death of Le Corbusier on 27th August.

mind and he tried to render its laws visible in order to invest them with the language of clear geometric forms in architecture. The notion of the Modulor (*module d'or*) represented a basic schema for a universally-applicable system of measurement and symbolized the climax of this debate. With an elementary geometrical pattern, it reduces the proportions of the human being to a common denominator.

The tensions and contradictions which arise through the anthesis-duo of nature and geometry in Le Corbusier's architecture – the «both... and...», the attitude of compromise – are acclaimed by the post-moderns. The new architecture generation again «thematizes» the pictorial language of architecture, takes up anew the one-many-ness, the equivocality, that Le Corbusier's architectonic *œuvre* always already possessed.

Eva Bechstein



The Modulor.

ideas were promptly tried out like recipes, we still stick so much in his footsteps that today it is hard for us to make any critical assessment of his work. Perhaps at an even greater distance in time, it will be only the exponents of post-modern trends who will be able to throw new light on the work of Le Corbusier; they wrest new qualities from his buildings. The question is not the much-criticised rationality, but Le Corbusier's architecture, for this fulfils not only functional considerations. Indeed, functionalism was never his goal, but at most a means for the refinement of form. He strove all his life for a synthesis of nature and geometry. The forms of nature occupied his

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