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The Normed Man

Marc Angélil & Cary Siress

Norms exclude. As a construct and an index of prevailing ideologies, norms idealize a condition and set standards which tend to omit anything beyond the established model that might call into question the truth of its conventions. Not even Le Corbusier could avoid the endemic trap of normativity and its selective logic that sees only the fittest of specimens included as paradigm of the norm. Indeed, norms are the measure of what one wants to see. When asked in 1943 by the French National Organization for Standardization to consider their objective to systematize construction with the introduction of new industrial standards, Le Corbusier developed what he considered to be a fitting scale based upon a man with arm raised to 2.26 meters.¹ The Modulor, as it came to be known, offered the ideal and harmonic human proportions to be used in anything related to the built environment. His own version of the Vitruvian Man became famous, built as it was into all of his buildings thereafter, which worked to immortalize this height as ageless standard and elevate it to the quintessence of ›good‹ and ›beautiful‹ architecture. Notwithstanding the much discussed

flaw inherent to Le Corbusier's mathematical ingenuity – 2.26 actually turns out to be 2.2741 when properly calculated – there was a more serious oversight in his normative vision.² Man, at the height of his potency, was the universal module, a standard that excluded anything from youth, gender, ethnicity, and class to ageing, and in doing so, narrowed the social relevance of his scheme. Had Le Corbusier taken into account such matters, his ambitions to establish a universal rule might have found more traction, with the modular man or modular woman seen through the lens of time, embedded in a social context, and marked by difference. Only then could norms be said to come of age, so to speak, and perhaps overcome their ideological provenance by becoming, for example, finally color blind and not discriminatory, no more fixated on eternal youth, nor allied with the interests of a dominant class. And, no longer would a simple silhouette serve to wash away other difficult realities of the human condition.

¹ See Le Corbusier, ›The Modulor: A Harmonious Measure to the Human Scale Universally Applicable to Architecture and Mechanics‹, first English edition 1954 (Basel: Birkhäuser Verlag, 2000).

² See Richard Coyne, ›Le Corbusier's Error, Reflections on Digital Media & Culture‹, essay posted on Coyne's webpage, February 11, 2012.

Illustration: Sketch of the Modulor Man and its revision as prepared for a research proposal to the Swiss National Science Foundation in 2006 concerning the impact of gender issues and ageing on territorial organization (courtesy of Deane Simpson and Inge Beckel).

