

Le Corbusier and the quiet and sure spot

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Charles-Edouard Jeanneret, 1887-1965, is an architect and sees himself as a remarkable person. From the beginning of his development he must have been aware of his talent. After finishing his first important job, Villa Schwob in Switzerland in 1923, he leaves for Paris to establish himself. Shortly thereafter he assumes another name. He chooses a name that can only contribute more to his future fame: Corbusier, with Le placed in front of it, an extra prefix which only a great artist can claim, someone who is well appreciated for his performances.

Le Corbusier is a visionary, who is occupied with many disciplines. He starts out as a watchmaker in his father's company, starts writing and painting, designs furniture and architectural buildings. Le Corbusier, however, thinks that above all he is a writer. In his passport of around 1930 his profession is stated as: 'literator'. In his life he writes over 55 books. He wants to be a man of the word, and is admired as such by his fellow writers. Even famous writer and poet Paul Valéry is impressed with Le Corbusier's literary qualities: *I envy, Sir, the effectiveness of your style... You write like an angel.*

The time in which Le Corbusier is born, at the end of the 19th century, goes hand in hand with big changes, unparalleled in human history.

*... The power of labour, that is not just acceleration, mobility or display of power. For millennia people were able to exist sedentary, interrupted, indeed, by mass migrations, but nevertheless specified and directed by the longing for certainty and stability. The start of the New Times is the start of a new way of existence, that of the multiplication. The static, basalt Human World became a mobile world that didn't obtain its stability from invariability, but from growth, increase, the will of power after power... *11*

('Het vrije woord', Cleverda's protest speech and the Dutch identity. Essay Th. W. Oudemans, www.Filosofie.info 2004)

Le Corbusier is raised with the evolution of cars and planes. In his early years he is aware of both sides of the technological modernizations, the motor of economic and societal changes,

but also of the destruction in World War I. Le Corbusier has the remarkable talent to view and put into words all these changes from a portrayal of mankind.

In one of his most important books, *Vers une architecture* from 1923, he touches on a multitude of themes. The most important in those themes is the fact that the emerging architecture is specified by the innovative technological tendencies. For instance he discusses the increasing automobile production and the conveyor belt used in that process and comes to the following conclusion: why not apply mass production to housing construction?

He also suggests with a remarkable imagination, that a sculpture by a sculptor is of the same beauty as a mechanical object. That there is a similarity between the Parthenon in Athens and Delage's car.

In another essay he discusses a new organizational principle that he borrows from the golden section. It is about a drawn construction, *The regulating lines*, that serves as a pattern and must eliminate capriciousness. He applies this organizational principle to the classical façades of the renaissance as well as on his own new façades of modern times. Here he sees *the regulating lines* as a universal construction for both epochs.

Vers une architecture is an empirical book. It describes the changes Le Corbusier sees in the world around him and how this influences the architecture.

The supporting words in the book, that should support his vision on architecture, are economy and calculation. He immediately makes this clear on the first page, when he describes the distinction between the engineer and the architect. According to Le Corbusier the new epoch must build on the technological findings of the engineer from the second half of the 19th century. In that period the engineer took the lead by the realizing big engineering works, such as bridges, big silo's and factories. By using new techniques, for instance modern steel profiles are possible. Le Corbusier writes that the engineer is inspired by the laws of economy, governed by mathematical calculations.

He places the architect opposite of the engineer. He thinks the latter finds himself in a unfortunate state of decline. Architects occupy themselves with styles.

Architecture is stifled by custom

The 'styles' are a lie...

*Economic law inevitably governs our acts and our thoughts *1*

(Vers une architecture, 1923)

But, says Le Corbusier, the architect must become an engineer to face the problems of building. There is a new task in building, which consists mostly of good housing for the masses, where health and wellbeing must play a crucial role. This distinction that Le Corbusier makes between the engineer and the architect, is intended to show his fellow craftsmen that times have changed.

In addition to the supporting words of economy and calculation, Le Corbusier in *Vers une architecture* uses another special word and with that centralizes the human appearance: his pairing of the word *mind* with mass production is remarkable.

A great epoch has begun

There exists a new spirit

We must create the mass-production spirit

The spirit of constructing mass-production houses

The spirit of living in mass-production houses

*The spirit of conceiving mass-production houses *1*

(Vers une architecture, 1923)

With these statements Le Corbusier evokes two questions:

Does mass production require a special mind?

How can Le Corbusier create such a special mind?

He seems to indicate a possible direction for an answer later on in the book, as he expresses himself on the questions and problems of the architect.

On the one hand the mass of people look for a decent dwelling, and this question is of burning importance. On the other hand the man of initiative, of action, of thought, the LEADER, demands a shelter for his meditations in a quiet and sure spot; a problem which is indispensable to the health of specialized people *1 (*Vers une architecture*, 1923)

He knows the answer to the burning question: mass production housing. But in addition to the mass production Le Corbusier simultaneously sees a problem arising for civilized accommodation, for what he calls the *specialized people*. This human being can not be part of the masses, but must be able to keep his distance.

He makes this clear by roofing *a quiet and sure spot*.

Le Corbusier is of the opinion that the mind must be fed, although he doesn't say what he means by that. He does however say that the conditions of *a quiet and sure spot* are needed for this. A roof as minimal temple. Meditation is for body and mind.

What does Le Corbusier mean when he says *a quiet and sure spot*? Is he looking for a real place to stay or is he referring to something else?

Le Corbusier no longer views his spot for the mind within the new arrangement as a religious place in the traditional sense. His view is that an old, community forming institute, such as the church, is lacking. In addition the power of the state had changed by the emerging democracy and the fight for equal rights.

At any rate, Le Corbusier views his quiet and secure place as part of living and undisputable as a component of community life. Although he uses the word temple.

For my part. I devoted fifty years of my life to the study of housing. I brought back the temple to the family, to the home *5

(Mise au point, 1965)

The big question for Le Corbusier is: what would a possible living community look like?

From his early years on, Le Corbusier develops several possibilities to solve the demand for housing in a cheap and modern way. For instance, after the devastation of parts of France in World War I, he, together with engineer Max du Bois, thought of the Dom-ino-house (derived

of the Latin words *domus* and *innovatio*). The structure is in the form of a skeleton of concrete posts and floors.

He is one of the first to abandon the prevailing urban development model of a closed building block as housing type for the city. This doesn't anymore satisfy his requirements regarding the community, the house as temple for the family.

*...As far as building is concerned, the decision on the form, taking into consideration the proximity of man and the use, was complicated by the requirements of a big scale production. They had to differentiate between creating a one time monument and the potential advantages of the application of rationalized production methods for the general housing construction..... This appears to have been the reason why Le Corbusier abandoned the closed building block and focused on a building form that was better suitable for mass production . *6*

(Moderne architectuur, p. 219, K. Frampton)

Then it takes a while before Le Corbusier realizes his innovative ideas in the form of apartment buildings, partly because World War II happened. The first time was a living community in Marseille with his *Unité d'habitation* from 1952.



Because of a combination of his 'living unit in standard format' and shared provisions, by way of stores, a garden and a swimming pool on the roof, internal streets, child care, a sports complex, Le Corbusier sees his social living complex as a living machine. The terms social and machine are connected to a community machine. As we walk through the building

and ask ourselves whether we would find *a quiet and sure spot* in this building, we can't give an answer. There is, however, a new structure to living, social housing and luxury provisions are accommodated in one residential building. It is this structure that Le Corbusier views as a possibility for a social living community that could exist independently. He compares his building with an ocean steamer.

After Le Corbusier has celebrated his sixtieth birthday, he starts a new life. By breaking with the glorification of his technical esthetics, he strives for creating *a space that can not be expressed*. *2 He receives two important assignments that after realization, will become the most important works of his later period. In 1951 he starts his famous chapel in Ronchamps in France, which he will finish in 1955. From 1953 he will work on the convent La Tourette close to Lyon in France. This isn't finished until 1960 after a slow performance and a limited budget.

What makes these two assignments special, is that they are both inextricably linked with religion. Despite his congenital distrust of the catholic church he does accept the assignments. It turns into a perfect opportunity to, more or less outside of religion, *unite the people with the cosmos*. *2 The initiative is from a movement that supports the introduction of modern architecture and painting in religious buildings.

According to Le Corbusier the building must be *directed to location*. He comes up with the idea of *a word that is directed to the location*. *2

Although Kenneth Frampton's passage makes clear that mass production is hard to unite with the one-time monument, Le Corbusier nevertheless tries to find in both apparent incompatible architectonic expressions, the unspeakable quality of the space. In the *Unité* in Marseille it is the mobility as component of the several programme functions, that makes the whole seem like a machine living community. Whether or not he could in this residential building express his *quiet and sure spot* remains unclear, regardless of his statement that he has returned the temple to the family.

The *quiet and sure spot* is expressed in the traditional institutions of old, of the chapel and the convent, Ronchamps and La Tourette. The only reason the *quiet and sure spot* is there because the buildings are, as he says, *directed to the location*.

An actual spot to unite the people with the cosmos.

LITERATURE

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