

THE OPEN HAND

Hans Moor



*This symbol of the open hand, open to receive the wealth created, to distribute to the people of the world, must be the symbol of our age. Before I find myself one day (a little later on) in the celestial spheres amid the stars of God Almighty, I shall be happy to see at Chandigarh, in front of the Himalayas, which rise up straight upon, this Open Hand, which marks for père Corbu a deed, a certain distance covered. From you, André Malraux, from you, my associates, from you, my friends, I ask help in realizing this symbol of the open hand in the skies of Chandigarh, a City desired by Nehru, Gandhi's disciple*5* *Mise au point, Le Corbusier, 1965*

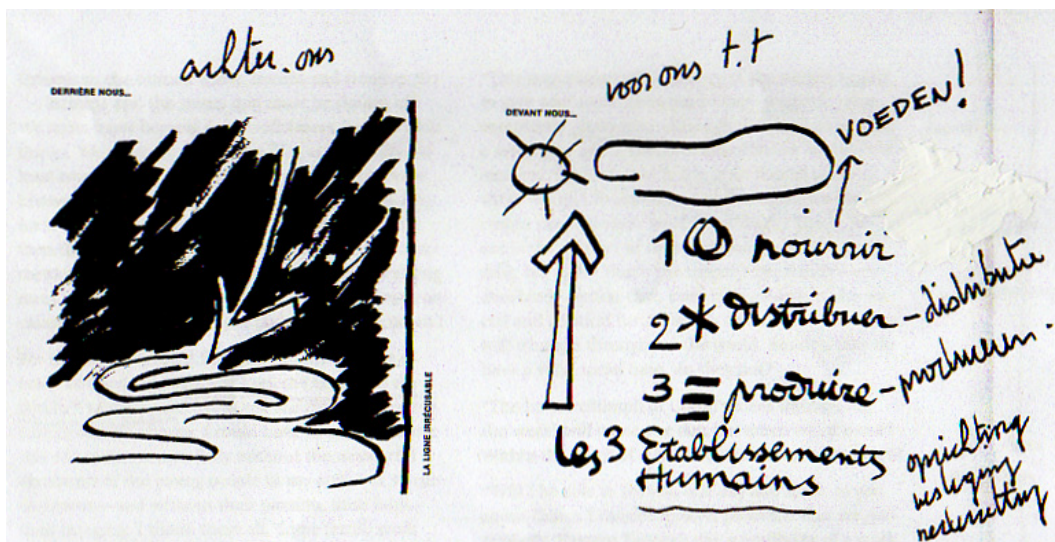
One of the most remarkable letters from Le Corbusier is known by the title *Mise au point*. It was written in the summer of 1965, a few weeks prior to his death while swimming in the Mediterranean Sea. The letter is expressed in a sort of 'spiritual' testament. Le Corbusier philosophizes, just like his earlier inspirer Friedrich Nietzsche, like a happy scientist. *Mise au point* is an attempt to get his life into perspective with all that was part of that life, like an attempt to explain it all. At the same time, with this rather retrospective vision, he aims his focus towards the future like a visionary man. For example, he spots the upcoming use of drugs:

... medication is becoming as natural as eating for everyone...a new industry has been created...

and he, as always, is not easily followed in his expressions:

...only those who play are serious ... all within the rules! Nothing outside of the rules! That's the key. Reason for being: to play. To participate, but as a human being, that is to say, within a clear and orderly system. But first of all, one must have scrutinized, seen, and observed. Only then can one differentiate sensations, perceptions, and ideas. Metaphysics is but the foam of the surface of a conquest... * 5

He even positions a new order in reference to the era of the continuously evolving technological man (*Les 3 Etablissements Humains*).



Maybe the most remarkable part about the letter is his last request to his coworkers and friends. It concerns a request to found his open hand symbol in Candigarh, India, which he described as *the end of the race*. At that moment he wrote that he had long lived with the idea of the open hand symbol. Le Corbusier was obsessed by that image since 1948. The first possibility to realize this was brought to the Prime Minister of India in 1951, Nehru... Le Corbusier would like to locate it close to the Capitol in Chandigahr, with the Himalayan mountains as background.

Why is this monument after seventeen years still alive in the mind of Le Corbusier? Why is it his greatest concert, while he as an architect realized two architectonic masterpieces in the same period, the abbey of Sainte Marie de la Tourette near Lyon and the Chapel Notre Dame du Haut near Ronchamps, both of which were located in France.

In March of 1965, he wrote to his nephew Pierre:

*... I count on your friendship to watch over the sheet metal work in the factories of Nangal so that you especially, along with Prabhawalkar and Malhotra (all three artists), can be proud of making this for Corbu, who is now in his seventy-seventh year, having created this open hand, which is no doubt the expression of an intense moment in the life of modern society. **It is not politics, it is modern 'history'**. This thing standing up against the sky of the Himalayas is worth implementing and must be executed...* * 5

The abovementioned quote again shows the value of the open hand symbol to Le Corbusier. It is modern 'History'. Apart from that, he clearly says: It is not politics.

Does Le Corbusier mean that the symbol of the open hand is history and that something should be remembered? It seems that he has given a confirmative answer himself above a sketch of the open hand in 1950. *La fin d'un monde*, (the End of the World), it says in his handwriting. This text generates surprise, right after the end of the Second World War.

With this symbol, Le Corbusier wanted to present a new form to be create an appearance of man, interspersed with upcoming telecommunications, television, and even, in 1960, the computer.

... Open to receive newly created wealth, open to distribute it to its people and to others. The open hand will assert that the second era of the machine age has begun: the era of harmony..

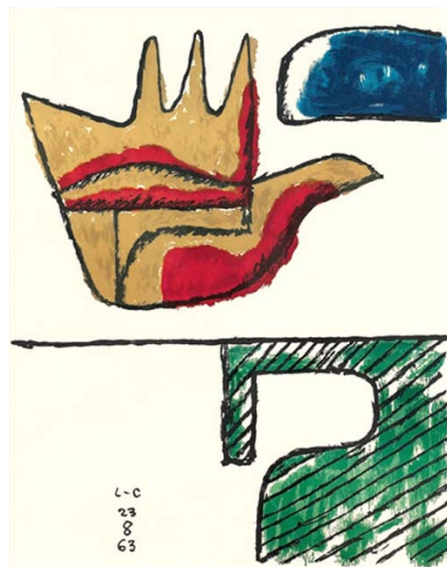
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He cannot bring his globalizing renewal into an architectonic structure. He uses this other creation for it, the open hand symbol, an art form that stands 'apart' from his structured architecture.

There is something to say for the expression of Charles Jencks in his book *Le Corbusier and the continual revolution in architecture*, which he finds the techno-progressivism of Le Corbusier to be naive and self-serving. Especially when Le Corbusier finally speaks of reaching the *era of harmony*. Deriving from that thought, Le Corbusier stays utopical. But the

question is whether this should be valued. Le Corbusier is most certainly not naive at the end of his life. To him it is about a new order, that he can only say little about at this point in his career. He also sees a problem arise from this modernization: freedom of the individual. This all becomes clear when he shows an unsuggestive relation to politics in his writing. Politics that he more or less loathes. The open hand symbol might not be politics to him, but in a letter from 1964 Le Corbusier calls it indeed his only political move.

*... I never involved myself in politics (all the while respecting those who are involved therein – the good ones); but I made one political gesture, which was the open hand. The day that one of the two parties dividing the world in the interests of two different natures made me choose sides, as a moral duty. On the plane to Bogota, at that moment in 1951, I drew ‘the open hand’... * 5 (September 1964, Letter to a close friend, Eugene Claudius-Petit)*



In the letter, Le Corbusier indicates his moral duty to make a political gesture against the Cold War, the arms race between the two major forces, the USA and the USSR. Le Corbusier concludes that the arms race during the 1960s indicates again another threat for war, and this time a nuclear war. This race is entirely impregnated by future technological renewals, nuclear tipped rockets, and space travel that would enable the colonization of the impossible: the space of weightlessness. His comment in *Mise au point* indirectly addresses politics and suggests that technological renewals should be used especially to overcome newly arising

problems, although he does not indicate what these new problems are or how they should be treated.

Le Corbusier's position concerning aspects of politics is ambiguous, because he thinks that politics overemphasize technique, and that he himself, in a strange manner can stay free of this technique as well as politics and stay outside of the range. Besides for this, he also sees the new communications technology emerging, in which the television is used to manipulate the public as a medium for politics. Le Corbusier makes it clear in *Mise au point* that he as an architect can claim a position outside of politics, in which he can defend the individual. The individual as an identity, which is driven by ideals and a strong will to choose his or her own destiny. To him the open hand is a political gesture, without the picture itself being political. He does not want to put himself on the same line as politics, the two fighting powers, the USA and the USSR.

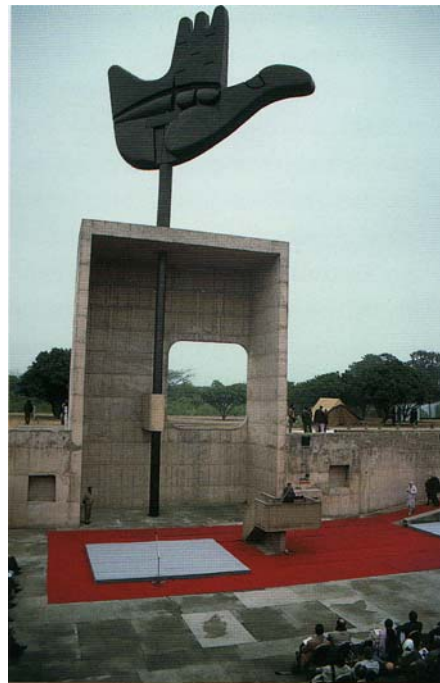
Here, Le Corbusier brings forth equality and uses the word *harmony*. As he says: *The creation is a specific case of human neutrality*. It is a 'place' for the individual, which is accessible to everyone. The symbol of the open hand is not religious (believing versus not believing) and is not political (communism versus capitalism). It is the sheer abundance that is under the influence of the second machine age (computer, telecommunications, etc), that should be divided honestly.

*... The open hand, for example, of which Soltan speaks, is not a political emblem, and not the creation of a politician. It is an architect's creation. It is the fruit of architecture. Creation is a specific case of human neutrality: he who creates something does so by the virtue of the laws of physics, chemistry, biology, ethics, and esthetics, all bound in a single sheaf: a house, a city. This is different from politics in that the architect's equation requires physics, chemistry, the strength of materials, the laws of gravity, biology – without which everything cracks, everything breaks, and everything collapses. It is like the airplane: either it flies or it doesn't, and the verdict is delivered quickly... * 5*

During the same period (1966), the philosopher Martin Heidegger was interviewed by the periodical *Der Spiegel*, in which he remarked the following:

...The technique in itself is something that people cannot control themselves. We still don't know how we have to answer to the being of technique...

*...Everything is functional, and that is really the scary part, that it functions and that this functioning leads to further functioning and that the technique will uproot and separate men more and more from the earth. I don't know if you have already been frightened, in any case I was frightened when I saw the images of the earth taken from the moon. We don't need another atom bomb, the uprooting from men is already there. We only have pure, clean technical relations. This is no longer earth on which men live... *8 M. Heidegger*



n Chandigarh, India

LITERATURE

*4 C. Jencks, Le Corbusier and the continual revolution in architecture, The Monacelli Press, New York. 2000

*5 I. Zaknic, The final testament of Père Corbu, Yale University Press. Connecticut, 1997

*8 M. Heidegger, Alleen een god kan ons nog redden, Heidegger in gesprek met Der Spiegel, Klement, Kampen 2002