

This is a section of [doi:10.7551/mitpress/5146.001.0001](https://doi.org/10.7551/mitpress/5146.001.0001)

# The Open Hand

## Essays on Le Corbusier

Edited by: Russell Walden

### Citation:

*The Open Hand: Essays on Le Corbusier*

Edited by: Russell Walden

DOI: 10.7551/mitpress/5146.001.0001

ISBN (electronic): 9780262367882

Publisher: The MIT Press

Published: 1982

### OA Funding Provided By:

OA Funding from National Endowment for the Humanities/Andrew W. Mellon Foundation  
Humanities Open Book Program.



The MIT Press

One might not like the personality or the architecture of Le Corbusier—indeed, in the transatlantic correspondence between critics Lewis Mumford and Frederic Osborn, Mumford called him “a menace.”<sup>1</sup> Osborn regarded him as “godlike,”<sup>2</sup> as “fundamentally stupid,” as “a pernicious influence,” with the “controversial manners of a ranting political columnist,” and said that as a “pseudo-sociologist-economist he is a babbling baby.”<sup>3</sup> Yet no one can look at twentieth-century architecture without considering Le Corbusier very seriously—even in his demythologized form.

For architects who have an individual approach to design in modern architecture, and for scholars whose experiences are sufficiently broad to appreciate the difficulties involved, it is time to look objectively at the work of one of the important architectural masters.

In this book, under the symbol of the Open Hand (Fig. 1), the enigmatic figure of Le Corbusier is examined. In organizing this collective endeavor, I have been conscious of the fact that genius evades classification. Neither have I forgotten Maxwell Fry’s timely warning to those “who hope by pecking over the remains of the great—the diaries, letters, reported conversations, photographs, and so on—that they will be permitted to pierce to the heart of the mystery that makes men great.” It was not simply for fun that Le Corbusier went to the trouble of preserving the historical evidence from his office: working drawings, models, sketches, job

## Introduction

dossiers, letters, *carnets* or notebooks, spanning the period from 1914 to 1964. Obviously, as a man with human problems and an architectural message to preserve, he hoped for some form of intelligent and patient reassessment from history. Indeed, if one takes the divergent poles of universal acclaim and hostility as representing the extremes of response which his work has always aroused, it is time, now that he and his period are no longer with us, to begin to set the record straight. Moreover, if his achievement is ever to be seen clearly, then serious commitment to reassessing it is essential.

Progress toward a comprehensive view of Le Corbusier's work, in the words of Eduard Seker of Harvard, will "take the sustained efforts of many individuals to chart it and to make its full comprehension possible. While treatments in exhibitions and books no doubt will continue to give impressive evidence of the scope and richness of Le Corbusier's achievement, an increase in genuine understanding of his contribution will only follow from studies in depth of individual works."<sup>4</sup>

Conscious of this need, I have carefully arranged the contributions to capture the multiplicity of interpretations current among Le Corbusier scholars. Thus, the structure of *The Open Hand* is formed from a nucleus of archive-based papers, which are interspersed with essays by interpretative critics. In addition,

I have included the personal responses of architects who worked with Le Corbusier—Maxwell Fry and Jane Drew. Their personal experience, combined with specific professional skills, puts them in a unique position to draw interesting observations and conclusions about the summation of Le Corbusier's life work, as expressed at Chandigarh. In this way, through a combination of archive, interpretative, and personal observations, the book seeks to capture an integral sense of Le Corbusier's personality as a thinker, designer, and propagandist. The reassessment is therefore divided into five sections: the intellectual formation of Le Corbusier; *Habitation* and Le Corbusier's Purist position; the urban utopia; the spiritual and technological paradox of Le Corbusier; and finally, Chandigarh.

*The Open Hand* brings together a wide variety of contributors of different backgrounds, from as far afield as the United States, England, France, Switzerland, New Zealand, and India. By including contributions from this wide cultural horizon, I have aimed at capturing a measure of what Maxwell Fry calls the "gift of sympathy" in dealing with some of the simplicities and complexities of Le Corbusier's career.

I believe that from this book emerges a coherent and consistent view of Le Corbusier's approach to architecture. While Le Corbusier's de-

sign process was an intimately personal one and closely linked to his patient search for meaningful symbols, one must not forget that it was conditioned by an idealistic view of the world and nourished by the life energy of the divinity of nature. And if one were asked to describe his design sensibility in a sentence, one could reply that Le Corbusier's approach was inevitably a compound of the emotional and intellectual energy that had its source in the French Romantic tradition. It is this very point that has largely been unappreciated by English-speaking commentators when they have presented their arguments in the past. Indeed, if one examines the ideas that have produced so many tensions in French life today, one cannot fail to realize that these ideas have their roots in the utopian thinking of Jean-Jacques Rousseau, Claude-Henri de Saint-Simon, Charles Fourier, Victor Considérant, and Pierre-Joseph Proudhon. When one examines this sociopolitical yet spiritual background where the sincerity and integrity of the individual were stressed, one can see that Le Corbusier came to terms with problem solving in the spirit of precisely this tradition.

In his sketchbook dated 21 May 1964, Le Corbusier wrote down his thoughts on the design process:

When a task is assigned me, I usually put it aside *in my memory*, which means not to allow

myself any sketch for months. The human head is so formed as to possess a certain independence: there is an area where the elements of a problem can be left to work themselves out. They are left thus "to waver," "to simmer," "to ferment." Then one day, with spontaneous subconscious initiative the inspiration comes: you take a pencil, a carbon, some colored pencils (color is the key to the procedure) and you let it flow out onto the paper. The idea comes—as the child comes—it is brought into the world, it is born.<sup>5</sup>

The sincerity of this method of thinking leaves one in no doubt about Le Corbusier's spirit of independence and intellectual lineage. Le Corbusier understood design to be a wholesome activity involving the whole man, both emotional and intellectual. To design in this spirit involved the expression of a full range of problems from functional to symbolic. In fact, the way the functional and symbolic elements are put together was the essential creative concern of Le Corbusier. It demanded a ruthless integrity in expressing the rich and varied life of clients.

And in this matter, the degree of emphasis that Le Corbusier places upon design is where he parts company with most architects. While it is a relatively simple matter to describe the limited concern of the commercial practitioner under headings like profit and economics, land tenure and site ratios, structure and techniques, energy services and materials, it is a somewhat fruitless task to attempt a comprehensive ex-

planation of Le Corbusier from this point of view. Not that Le Corbusier did not have to contend with the everyday realities and contingencies of professional life. He did. Yet the inevitable limitations before all twentieth-century architects were appreciated and exceeded in Le Corbusier's office. Above and beyond these realities, the overriding concern of those who labored at 35 Rue de Sèvres was the struggle to preserve the ideological intentions of Le Corbusier. What was of importance was the *idea* in architecture, and that is perhaps why Le Corbusier used the analogy of birth when talking about his design process.

In attempting to describe the design position of Le Corbusier, one cannot undervalue his sincerity nor his monklike devotion and quest for the expression of a higher consciousness through the medium of symbolic architecture. To acknowledge such a consciousness, this book adopts the symbol of the Open Hand. Le Corbusier's idea of using a duality of imagery, part human and part birdlike, simultaneously linked yet detached in space, was essentially a highly potent symbolic statement of intention. The derivation of this symbol, from the silhouettes of snow-laden Jura boughs to *la main ouverte* designed to be placed above the hot plains of Chandigarh, is a linear progression within the French idealistic and intellectual tradition.

In Volume Five of his *Oeuvre complète*, Le Corbusier describes the birth and development of the Open Hand:

The Open Hand is an idea which was born in Paris, spontaneously, or more exactly, as the result of reflections and spiritual struggles arising from the feelings of anguish and disharmony which separate mankind, and so often create enemies. The first sketch appeared spontaneously—a sort of cockle floating above the horizon, but the stretched fingers showed an open hand like a vast shell. Later, in the following year . . . the idea returned in a different form. It was no longer a shell but a fan, a silhouette. It is the value of the silhouette which developed through the years. Little by little the open hand appeared as a possibility in great architectural compositions.<sup>6</sup>

Thus, in the creation of the Open Hand, Le Corbusier affirmed his belief in a spiritual reality. In his last intellectual testament, written a month before he died in August 1965, he said of the Open Hand, "It was not a political emblem, a politician's creation. It is an architect's creation . . . a symbol of peace and reconciliation. . . ." He concluded his explanation by asserting that the symbol was "open to receive the wealth that the world has created, to distribute it to the peoples of the world" and, therefore, "it ought to be the symbol of our age."<sup>7</sup>

His interest in the Third World helped to confirm his belief in the salvation of contemporary man. In this respect Le Corbusier sought a new idealized order—a renewing spiritual di-



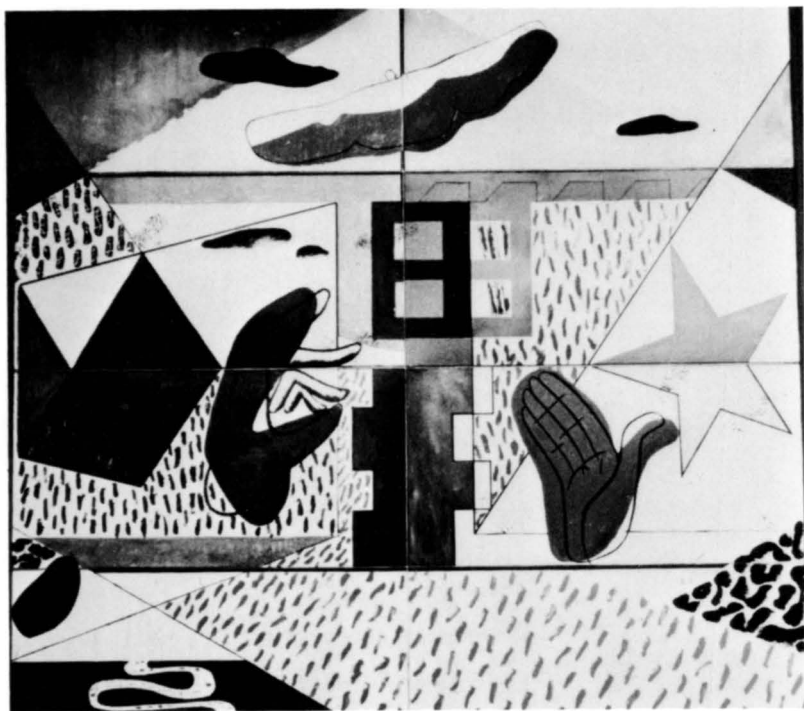
mension for industrial man. In his search for a symbol to express this consciousness, Le Corbusier went back to one of the oldest gestures in the mythology of the human race. Indeed, the theme extends right back to the cave painters of Pech-Merle (Dordogne) and has remained a major symbol for artists and scientists ever since.

This historical line of imagery was not lost on Le Corbusier. When he came to paint the doors to his pilgrimage chapel on the heights at Ronchamp, he took the theme of the hands to express the spiritual dilemma of twentieth-century man (Fig. 2). He took this strong and unfeared gesture of the human hand to be the symbol of the giving and receiving man.

The red and blue hands were set within a geometrical framework involving a full range of imagery designed to draw attention to man's relationship with nature, with the sky, and with the earth where he works. Therefore, the giving and receiving imagery was interlocked with cogwheels symbolizing this relationship of work. Such an idea was not only central to the concept of life's twisting, tortuous journey as personified in this pilgrimage chapel, it was also a symbolic expression by Le Corbusier of his great human hope for the salvation of contemporary man. But as Alexander Solzhenitsyn warned in his Nobel Speech on Literature:

Figure 2

The south exterior door of the Chapel Notre-Dame-du-Haut at Ronchamp. (Photograph by Russell Walden.)



One artist imagines himself to be the creator of an independent spiritual world, burdens himself with the act of creating and peopling this world, accepts responsibility for it—but he breaks down, because no mortal genius is capable of withstanding such a burden; just as, in a more general sense, man, who has declared himself to be the centre of existence, has been unable to create a balanced spiritual system. And if he is overwhelmed by failure, he lays the blame on the eternal disharmony of the world, on the complexity of the distraught contemporary soul, or on the lack of comprehension of the public.<sup>8</sup>

The predicament described by Solzhenitsyn is precisely that of Le Corbusier. He was a spiritual son of Jean-Jacques Rousseau and a product of late nineteenth-century Romanticism. He found himself stranded as the twentieth century advanced and his vision became increasingly unattainable.

When Le Corbusier's professional reputation has been scrutinized and demythologized for the last time, he will still be a great romantic designer who made mistakes but who left the world richer by the products of his creative soul. The epigram from his *Le Poème de l'angle droit* supports this conclusion:

Pleine main j'ai reçu  
pleine main je donne.<sup>9</sup>

The Open Hand symbolizes an essentially human warmth of response and a reciprocity between the creative artist and his public. It

can, therefore, be understood as an all-embracing metaphor for Le Corbusier's creative struggle to bring a new degree of harmony and humanity into modern architecture. The task of this book and future reassessments is to decide how far he succeeded.

Russell Walden

Easter 1975

- 1 Lewis Mumford to Frederic Osborn, 11 August 1967, in *The Letters of Lewis Mumford and Frederic J. Osborn*, Bath, 1971, p. 423.
- 2 Ibid., p. 334, Osborn to Mumford, 15 February 1963.
- 3 Ibid., p. 420, Osborn to Mumford, 3 August 1967.
- 4 See Eduard Sekler's preface to Brian Brace Taylor, *Le Corbusier at Pessac*, Cambridge, Mass., and Paris, 1972.
- 5 Le Corbusier's unpublished sketchbook, dated 21 May 1964, held in the Archives Fondation Le Corbusier, Paris.
- 6 Le Corbusier, *Oeuvre complète 1946-52*, Zurich, 1955, p. 159.
- 7 Willy Boesiger (ed.), *Le Corbusier Last Works*, London, 1970, p. 176.
- 8 Alexander Solzhenitsyn, *One Word of Truth*, The Nobel Speech on Literature 1970, London, 1972, p. 4.
- 9 Le Corbusier, *Le Poème de l'angle droit*, Paris, 1955, p. 144.

First MIT Press paperback edition, 1982

Copyright © 1977 by

The Massachusetts Institute of Technology

All rights reserved. No part of this book may be reproduced in any form by any means, electronic or mechanical, including photocopying, recording, or by any information storage and retrieval system, without permission in writing from the publisher.

The following figures © F.L.C. / ADAGP, Paris / Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York 2020: fig. 1, fig. 3, fig. 4, figs. 7-9, fig. 12, fig. 18, figs. 22-24, figs. 31-38, fig. 43, figs. 45-51, figs. 54-55, fig. 58, figs. 61-73, fig. 83, fig. 86, fig. 98, figs. 100-101, fig. 108, fig. 117, fig. 120, fig. 123, figs. 129-131, fig. 133, fig. 138, fig. 140.

Open access edition funded by the National Endowment for the Humanities/Andrew W. Mellon Foundation Humanities Open Book Program.

The text of this book is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution-Noncommercial-No Derivatives 4.0 International License:

<https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-nd/4.0/>

This book was set in Univers by DEKR Corporation printed on R&E Book by Murray Printing Company and bound in G.S.B. #9 by Murray Printing Company in the United States of America.

Library of Congress Cataloging in Publication Data

Main entry under title:

The Open hand.

Includes index.

1. Jeanneret-Gris, Charles Édouard, 1887-1965—

Addresses, essays, lectures. 2. Architecture,

Modern—20th century—Addresses, essays, lectures.

I. Walden, Russell.

NA1053.J4063 720'.92'4 76-40046

ISBN 0-262-23074-7 (hard)

0-262-73062-6 (paper)