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# The Open Hand

## Essays on Le Corbusier

Edited by: Russell Walden

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This foreword is perhaps paradoxical, because I am writing it before I have read the book. It would not have been possible to write an afterword in the same way. But a foreword can be an anticipation of the book itself. And from the introduction by Russell Walden, and especially from my conversation with him, I feel I can visualize this book.

It is very difficult to understand Le Corbusier fully. I knew him very well for thirty years; I worked with him. And yet sometimes I have the impression, ten years after his death, that I am still discovering him. In order to understand him, one has to discover him. And in order to discover him, one has to look for him.

Great credit is due to Russell Walden, for he has set out to look for Le Corbusier with fifteen or so different personalities, so that this search, and this discovery, may be contradictory in its findings. Thus the rich content of this book will raise questions, stimulate reactions, and thereby further research, further discoveries.

One should not be afraid of contradictions. Le Corbusier is so rich a personality that he reconciles contraries. If one is not content simply to read his books, but if one studies all his projects, of which only a few have been realized, one will find such a wealth of ideas, thoughts, intentions, feelings, wishes, endeavors, and even desires that one swings from one extreme to another, from one position to its very opposite, and finally one is projected beyond to a point where the contraries are no longer op-

## Foreword

posed but convergent, where a unity is found. Le Corbusier evades classifications; he perplexes the classifiers. He embraces contraries, refuses dilemmas, reduces oppositions, and builds his thought on an integrated whole, on a totality.

I am by no means sure that the term *utopian* can be applied to Le Corbusier. In a utopian thinker, the artist takes second place to the inventor. Le Corbusier stands on that thin line that separates the ideal from the utopia. He knows how to judge the degree of perfection it is possible for him to achieve, and he does not go beyond this. I believe that Le Corbusier is first of all a realist, but by the power of his creative energy he leads this realism toward an ideal. The *Unité d'habitation*, the Radiant City, are first of all thoughts in terms of what people are today, as individuals, families, and societies.

All Le Corbusier's architecture and urbanism are based on a vision of social structures. But he is not resigned to them as they exist. He measures how far he can lead these social structures toward an ideal that is possible.

The first two motivating ideas of the *Unité d'habitation* are simple and objective: first, to protect individuals and families from all outside intrusion or disturbance. To do this, he set out to design a dwelling in which the family should not see or hear their neighbors, and therefore

should neither be seen nor heard by them. Second, he sought to reconcile this protection of privacy with the collective life, to resolve the individual/society dilemma by integrating the dwelling units into a community—what he called the vertical village.

Those who claim that the high-rise or tower blocks, the scourge of our present age, are the result of Le Corbusier's ideas, are fools. For these large blocks do not fulfill either of his two conditions. Families are grouped together indiscriminately. These blocks simply contain a number of dwelling units, and therefore families, in a juxtaposition that is only an arithmetical addition and not an integration into a community. They do not create a collective nucleus, a village, a *unité*, so the society is de-structured and destroyed.

For Le Corbusier, the dwelling unit is the shell, the matrix. He has a profound understanding of the fact that the need to have an identity, to be oneself, which every individual feels, necessitates both the opportunity of being alone and of being protected from other people and the possibility to think oneself part of a group, to be recognized by others, and to recognize oneself in a habitat, in a *unité*, in an architecture.

In order to understand Le Corbusier, one must dig deep and must understand, even feel beyond the words his real intentions, his secret

<sup>1</sup> Lecture at Princeton in 1930. Quoted by Michel Ragon in *Histoire mondiale de l'architecture et de l'urbanisme*, vol. 2, Tournai (Belgium), 1971.

desires. His famous saying: "The house is a machine for living in" has brought him much criticism. Many people failed to understand it; some did not want to understand it. Yet "let us get it firmly into our heads that a chair is a machine for sitting in. A house is a machine for living in. . . . A tree is a machine for bearing fruit. A plant is a machine for bearing flowers and seeds. . . . A heart is a suction pump." Now, this quotation is not from Le Corbusier, but from Frank Lloyd Wright.<sup>1</sup>

I do not understand why some writers contrast Le Corbusier's architecture, which they call functionalist, with Frank Lloyd Wright's, which they call organic. Le Corbusier forbade the use of the word *functionalism* in his office. He hated the word. He thought it a stupidity to believe that a functional form is necessarily beautiful.

And it is easy to find nonfunctional forms in his work! I was criticized by him several times when I said to him "it's more logical" or "it's more rational." His creation of architectural forms goes beyond reason and logic. In him, the artist always comes first, before the inventor and the organizer. Le Corbusier can only be grasped within the process of his creating, for it is a continuing process. The organization of form is subjected to all the functional requirements, but it then goes beyond them in order to attain the plastic and the emotional. Le Corbusier's creating is a continuum that passes

from the logical and from the rational to the nonrational and aesthetic state of thought. He then attains what he calls "the ineffable space."

Through this organizing continuum Le Corbusier tries to create organisms. He wants to create living forms. "Making architecture is making a creature."<sup>2</sup>

<sup>2</sup> Le Corbusier, *Le Poème de l'angle droit*, Paris, 1955.

Le Corbusier's architecture, led thus to the extreme edge of his thought, reduces the complicated to the simple, chaos to order, all directions to the vertical and to the horizontal, all lines to the right angle, all the noises of space to spatial music.

His architecture is built on an immense human hope of solidarity and complementarity, instead of opposition between men. The ultimate lesson of Le Corbusier to his followers lies beyond architecture: to build oneself. To make a man of oneself.

This wish is contained in the idea of the open hand.

André Wogenscky  
Fondation Le Corbusier, Paris  
December 1975

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