

Cyclic ^{and} Progressive

Le Corbusier's Dualistic View ^{of} History

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Le Corbusier, one of the most influential architects of the twentieth century, held a vision of the avant-garde that celebrated the past instead of opposing it overtly. He believed in contemporaneity and tradition, and was inspired by both of them. History to him was a rich resource and a panorama of human adventure. Facing the imperatives of history, he avoided academicism but reinterpreted history progressively. The course of history in his mind is both cyclic and progressive. In the late 1920s, Le Corbusier's works were not only dominated by Purism but also turned into plurality. This paper focuses on the 1920s and 1930s, on his critical attitude towards history, course of history in his mind, and how he was inspired by history.

I. INTRODUCTION

The early development of European modernism witnessed the response of artists and architects to the vast changes in society brought about by technology and industrialization. Le Corbusier, one of the most influential architects of the twentieth century, held a vision of the avant-garde that celebrated the past instead of opposing it overtly. He believed in contemporaneity and tradition, and was inspired by both of them. History to him was a rich resource and a panorama of human adventure. Facing the imperatives of history, he avoided academicism but reinterpreted history progressively. In the late 1920s, Le Corbusier's works were not only dominated by Purism, but also marked a stage of transition towards diversity, in which the machine aesthetic was enriched by his growing interests in primitivism, surrealism and nature. This paper focuses on the 1920s and 1930s, on his critical attitude towards history, course of history in his mind, and how he was inspired by history.

II. CRITIQUE OF THE PAST AND THE MODERN

There is, in fact, almost no avant-garde manifestation which is not a new variation on the attitude defined by Apollinaire as "antitradition."¹

Did the past shackle the progressive modern movement, and therefore needed to be negated, or was it conversely a stimulating resource? Many theoretical statements made by modern architects around 1920 stressed the need to reject tradition in favour of the new spirit. The manifesto of Futurist architecture insisted, for example, in 1914, 'This architecture cannot be subject to any law of historical continuity... Architecture is breaking free from tradition. It must perforce begin again from the beginning'.² Similarly, the *De Stijl Manifesto 1* of 1918 asserted: 'Tradition, dogmas and the predominance of the individual stand in the way of this realization [of the new consciousness of the age].'³

Conversely, Le Corbusier stood for the past in many ways, even though he discarded a certain tradition as well. His discussion of tradition in *L'Esprit Nouveau* seems contradictory:

Decorative art is dead. Modern town planning comes to birth with a new architecture. By this immense step in evolution... we burn our bridges and break with the past.⁴

In the same chapter, as he compared the mature European civilization with that of America in the twentieth century, he maintained the opposite:

The fact that we have been nourished by earlier civilisations enables us to disperse the clouds and to judge with clearness... Our spirits, nourished by past ages, are alert and inventive.⁵

As a successful avant-garde architect, Le Corbusier did not simply maintain a radical manner to resist the past. He delved profoundly into the quest for the essence of architecture. Compared with other modern manifestoes, such as 'The lifts must not hide like lonely worms in the stair wells' by Sant'Elia⁶ and a emphasis on materials 'This [the transformation of our architecture] can be done only through the introduction of glass architecture' by Paul Scheerbart,⁷ Le Corbusier's argument is more fundamental. Architecture, to him, is 'the masterly, correct and magnificent play of masses brought together in light'.⁸ As man's eyes are around five feet six inches above ground, and can only look at one aspect of architecture at a time, an architectural plan, to Le Corbusier is 'not a pretty thing to be drawn... it is an austere abstraction',⁹ and the drawing of plans in the Ecole des Beaux Arts, as he remarked, 'has become a piece of paper on which black marks for walls and lines for axes play a sort of mosaic on a decorative panel making graphic representations of star-patterns, creating an optical illusion'.¹⁰ The arrangement of architectural elements with an appreciable rhythm 'is the grading of aims, the classification of intentions'.¹¹ These fundamental tenets allowed him to relate his own work both to contemporary and historical models and to draw inspiration from both.

In his article, 'Lesson of Rome', Le Corbusier stated that 'the business of Architecture is to establish emotional relationships by means of raw materials... Architecture is a plastic thing, spirit of order, unity of intention'.¹² (Fig. 1.) Based on these points he denounced the education of the Ecole des Beaux Arts:

...The lesson of Rome is for wise men... Rome is the damnation of the half-educated. To send architectural students to Rome is to cripple them for life. The Grand Prix de Rome and the Villa Medici are the cancer of French architecture.¹³

The Ecole taught principles of design based on symmetry, axial planning and an

appropriate historical style, which were quite contradictory to Le Corbusier's 'Five points of a New Architecture'. There were many other modernists and their predecessors such as the Enlightenment architects who were concerned about breaking with the past. Even in the Ecole des Beaux Arts, some students struggled to break the rigid Classicist mould of their educational programmes. Henri Labrouste, a winner of the Grand Prix de Rome, whose archaeological research at Paestum overturned the classical norm, is a good example. He applied new materials and a structural system to the Bibliothèque Nationale in Paris. In its grand reading room, the structure of the interior columns and the roof is separated from the exterior walls. Le Corbusier spent much time studying in this library in the 1910s and this served as a prelude to his Purist doctrine. Additionally, Viollet-le-Duc, the author of *Dictionnaire*, retained an anti-academic bias all his life. As evidenced by his spending his first salary from the Perret Brothers on the *Dictionnaire*, Le Corbusier was clearly influenced by Viollet-le-Duc.

STIMULATION BY THE PAST

Whether or not an artwork could be simultaneously avant-garde and traditional depends on the timing and situation in history. Traditional works might have been regarded as avant-garde instead of conventional when they first appeared, but an advanced work may soon become history with the passing of time. Nevertheless, history always repeats itself:

All the great traditional works, those that without exception constitute the classical chain, link after link, were revolutionary when they first appeared. The essence of creation is necessarily to equate new relationships.¹⁴

Le Corbusier was not only an architectural designer; his other artworks, such as paintings, were also architectonic. Searching for a new design is creative because it conceives and reorganizes relationships among all the elements and their surroundings in the historical chain. These historical elements are often revealed in Le Corbusier's works both literally and metaphorically: 'The past is not infallible... There were ugly things as well as beautiful...'¹⁵ To Le Corbusier, the past should not be negated; on the contrary, he had studied it for a long period of time as a rich source of stimulation, as he argued in his lecture 'To free oneself entirely of academic thinking' in 1929:

Today I am considered a revolutionary. I shall confess to you that I have had only one teacher: the past; only one education: the study of the past. Everything, for a long time, and still today: the museums, travels, folk art... It is in the past that I found my lessons of history, of the reasons for being of things...¹⁶

It is unlikely that Le Corbusier could have been such a radical avant-garde artist only by studying the past, as he provocatively stated. The issues are what the past meant to him and how he studied the past, which provoked him to become a revolutionary modernist. He always sought after the profound reasons for the relationships among every event and object rather than simply accepting them as they were. His master at the Ecole d'Arts at La Chaux-de-Fonds, Charles L'Eplattenier, said to him, '...don't treat nature like the landscapists who show us only its appearance. Study its cause, forms and vital development, and synthesize them in the creation of ornaments'.¹⁷

History to Le Corbusier is not only a timeline but also 'the lesson of movement, the balance sheet of human actions, the panorama of human adventure. The lesson of history is an order to advance'.¹⁸ The innovations of modern science do not deny the knowledge of the past but are instead built on it.¹⁹ History was a rich resource for him, as is evident from his annotation of a series of photos of the Parthenon, Pisa cathedral, the Colosseum and the apses of St. Peter's:

Forms taken by culture in areas of concentration. Flowerings of the human spirit... These are the high peaks of human thought. Necessary human nourishment.²⁰

Having seen that history was so meaningful to Le Corbusier, what was his understanding of it? This issue can be traced in his Christian background, his interests in nature and Greek antiquity as well as the intellectual atmosphere in Paris of his time.

III: COURSE OF HISTORY: CYCLIC AND PROGRESSIVE

It seems as if the two great conceptions of antiquity and Christianity, cyclic motion and eschatological direction, have exhausted the basic

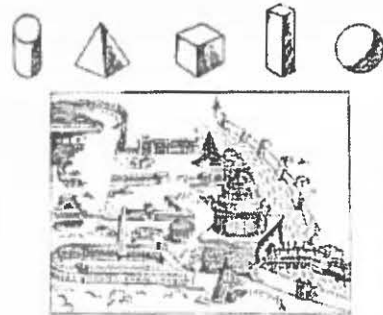


Fig. 1. Rome is crystallized into pure forms. Drawing by Le Corbusier from 'The lesson of Rome', *Towards a New Architecture*, p.159.

approaches to the understanding of history.³¹ Le Corbusier celebrated a new and progressive epoch, yet maintained a strong connection with the past. It is intriguing to review his standpoint on history from both a cyclic and a linear, progressive standpoint. Darwin's theory of progressive evolution, Rousseau's Romanticist quests for the primitive and classical view of cyclic history were all influential for Le Corbusier.

AVISION OF A SELECTIVE CYCLE

Here, in widespread use in books, schools, newspapers, and at the cinema, is the language of our emotions that was in use in the arts for thousands of years before the twentieth century.³² History often repeats itself. The past and the present can echo each other directly if meaningful elements in common between the two are discerned and a parallel is built up as a bridge; thus past issues can recur in a cyclic way. This is also argued by Nietzsche in his doctrine of eternal recurrence.³³ Yet in the early twentieth century there was still a deep chasm between the modern epoch and earlier periods of history. Le Corbusier was seeking for a reconciliation between the present and the ancient past. 'The really useful thing would be to draw up a parallel table of its [this age's] activities - intellectual, social, economic and industrial - not only in relation to the preceding period at the beginning of the nineteenth century, but to the history of civilizations in general.'³⁴ His numerous writings on the Parthenon are a good example of this recurrence.

The past may return, connected and united with the contemporary in a diachronic pattern. The Greek view of the course of history is cyclic: '...everything moves in recurrences, like the eternal recurrence of sunrise and sunset, of summer and winter, of generation and corruption.'³⁵ The Greeks also believe that 'human nature and history imitated the nature of the cosmos.'³⁶ Le Corbusier's cyclic vision can be clearly discerned in his article for the exhibition 'Les arts dits primitifs dans la maison d'aujourd'hui' in 1935:

'The works of the spirit do not age. By periods, cycles, series, returns take place; same hours pass, once again, to the minutes of concordance. Thus the works which animated the same potential of energy are connected, unified...

The architecture which currently appears is contemporary with works of these other cycles.'

*'Les oeuvres de l'esprit ne vieillissent pas. Par périodes, cycles, series, les retours s'opèrent; mêmes heures passent, une fois encore, aux minutes de concordance. Ainsi sont apparentées, sont unes, les œuvres qu'anima le même potentiel d'énergie... L'architecture qui apparaît actuellement est contemporaine des œuvres de ces autres cycles.'*³⁷

Le Corbusier studied Greek architecture and art extensively. The past and present, to him, were not only connected with each other but were also able to form a series or a unity out of different periods. Primitive works exhibited at his apartment were to render the 'excitement and novelty to those things which man created at some point in the past.'³⁸

Le Corbusier's cyclic view of history was likely to have been incorporated with the cyclic phenomena of nature, a perennial resource deeply rooted in his mind (fig.2). Since man is a part of nature, 'the laws he lays down for himself must accord with those of nature.'³⁹ The natural phenomena of meandering rivers and astronomical cycles were discussed in many of his writings across decades. He observed cyclic phenomena in nature:

How much deeper is my feeling for the admirable clock that is the sea, with its tides, its equinoxes, its daily variations according to the most implacable of laws, but also the most imperceptible, the most hidden law that exists⁴⁰

SECULAR SALVATION AND PROGRESS

A new world: a high-speed world.

A new life: the machine age.

A new ideal: use of the machine to liberate the individual.

A new daily round: productive, recuperative, joyful, healthy.⁴¹

Other than the cyclic vision, Le Corbusier held another linear progress for the new epoch, and the latter somehow contained prophetic overtones. In the West, all history is associated with Christianity to various degrees in moral, intellectual, social and political realms. Christians see historical time as begin

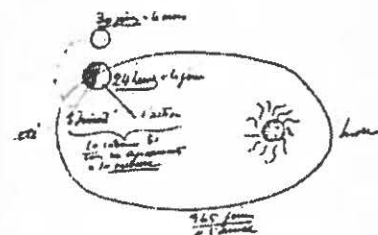


Fig 2: Cycle of nature (Le Corbusier, *Radiant City*, p.77)

with God's creation of the world, to an *eschaton*, the end of the world. History to them is not a qualitative timeline but primarily a process of salvation and a faith in an ultimate purpose.⁴² In a modern historical consciousness, grounded on reason, Darwinian theory of evolution and individual volition, the Christian belief in the fulfilment of the world's history through 'final' events like the Last Judgement has generally been discarded; as a result, the history of salvation is reduced to 'the impersonal teleology of a progressive evolution.'⁴³ For the architects, 'the goal was less concerned with Christian redemption than with the man made paradise.'⁴⁴

Le Corbusier's Protestant faith 'had left a deep, indelible impression upon his mind.'⁴⁵ Although he reproached religions as unchangeable dogmas,⁴⁶ many of his works do have sacred connotations, such as the sign of the lantern in his paintings.⁴⁷ Even the Modular was accorded a spiritual dimension: mathematics is 'the majestic structure conceived by man to grant him comprehension of the universe. It holds both the absolute and the infinite...It has walls...sometime there is a door: one opens it, enters, one is in another realm, the realm of the gods.'⁴⁸

Echoing the Biblical and Romantic Golden Age, Le Corbusier referred to 'primitive man'⁴⁹ as an ideal model to justify his regulating lines: 'The great architecture is rooted in the very beginnings of humanity and that it is a direct function of human instinct.'⁵⁰ Before him, Enlightenment predecessors such as Abbé Laugier, Quatremère de Quincy and later Viollet-le-Duc also sought for legitimacy of the primitive.

Le Corbusier's major concern within the course of history was in fact about what he called 'the new epoch', which meant his own time and the near future. In his writing, as in that of his contemporaries, prophetic overtones were occasionally revealed, but whether or not there is a Biblical ultimate future was rarely clearly stated. In *Urbanisme*, for example, Le Corbusier mentioned that his project, 'City of Three Million Inhabitants', had been adapted by journalists to 'The City of the Future', and he argued that it was 'a Contemporary City; contemporary because tomorrow belongs to nobody.'⁵¹ Occasionally, he did use 'tomorrow' to refer to the future, which conveyed his anticipation of the near future, such as his conception of the City of Towers that will 'prove a reasonable idea, as regards the towns of to-morrow.'⁵²

Progress was the leitmotif of Le Corbusier's new epoch, suggesting the notion of salvation and man-made paradise. To him the machine was a means towards progress, the metaphorical salvation of the new world. He proposed in his *Radiant City* a new life in the machine age and an advanced ideal of using machines to 'liberate' the individual. A new 'daily round' was 'productive, recuperative, joyful and healthy'. He admired ocean liners for their economy, standardization and perfection. Reinforced concrete, a new architectural material, could offer flexibility in design, and thus his new urban projects of high-rise towers for the new society could be implemented. Mass-production was his ideal of building production. It was tested in the *Bordeaux-Pessac* project by applying the standardised system of Domino modules and windows. Le Corbusier said:

'it was decided to make a clean start... For the first time perhaps, the pressing problems of Architecture... were solved in a modern spirit... a new solution, using new methods'.⁵³

A 'clean start' in terms of building production implies a metaphor of baptism. The whitewash is the basic colour in this and all other projects this period suggested spiritual cleaning. When one follows the 'Law of Ripolin', he maintained, 'His home is made clean...Then comes inner cleanness... Whitewash existed wherever peoples have preserved intact the balanced structure of a harmonious culture'.⁵⁴

IV. RETROSPECTION AND EVOLUTION: ROMANTICISM AND DARWINISM

Longing for the lost paradise that might perhaps live again, Romanticism is a prevalent but retrospective vision. Jean Jacques Rousseau, the father of the Romantic movement, admired the 'noble savage' and thought that 'Europe is the unhappiest continent, because it has the most grain and the most iron. To undo the evil, it is only necessary to abandon civilization, for man is naturally good.'⁵⁵ Le Corbusier owned three of Rousseau's books and knew his philosophy well.⁵⁶ Rousseau wrote a letter to d'Alembert while passing through La Chaux-de-Fonds which Le Corbusier quoted in his writing about his homeland:

These fortunate peasants...cultivated with the utmost diligence their



the run of the whole thing and in all the details. That we get the study of minute points pushed to its limits. Progress. A model is necessary for order in human effort.



Fig.3. Through selection, standard and perfection, both cyclic and progressive vision are manifested in this intersection of the Parthenon and Delage, 'Grand-Sport.'

(Le Corbusier, *Towards a New Architecture*, 1923)

own holdings, of which they enjoyed the produce, devoting their leisure to making countless objects with their hands...I continually admired in these people a remarkable mixture of refinement and simplicity.⁴⁷

Many historians and critics 'have affirmed the continuity of the ideological and historical line between romanticism and avant-gardism',⁴⁸ as they are both similarly against tradition and academicism, but celebrate the novelty and strangeness that belong to minority cultures.⁴⁹

Contrary to the retrospective view on history, Darwin's theory of evolution had no clear-cut starting point or ultimate destination. The process of evolution moved from a rudimentary to a sophisticated state, but did not originate in sudden creation: 'The gradual diffusion of dominant forms, with the slow modification of their descendants, causes the forms of life.'⁵⁰ The historical course of evolution therefore is not a cycle of eternal recurrence but is rather steadily changing and moving forward. Le Corbusier studied zoology and botany at school in 1900-01 and certainly knew the Darwinian thesis.⁵¹ Indeed, some of his writings have clear evolutionary sentiments: 'Civilizations advance...Culture is the flowering of the effort to select.'⁵²

V. AVOIDANCE OF ACADEMICISM AND REINTERPRETATIONS OF HISTORY

Since Le Corbusier's understandings of history were both cyclic and progressive, forward-looking and retrospective, we can see clearly that concerning a cyclic history, Le Corbusier avoided academicism but was inspired by and then reinterpreted history progressively. To him, 'conventions and customs are words of surrender!'⁵³ He defined academicism as 'accepting forms, methods, concepts because they exist, without asking why... the Academy of Fine Arts determines the standards of what is beautiful.'⁵⁴

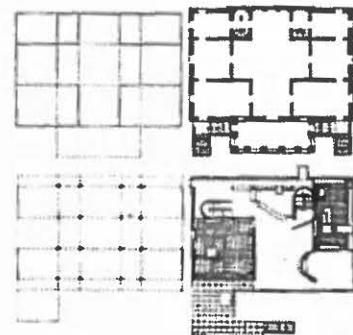
To Le Corbusier, once one has got away from the academies of design, one can find a harmony and 'adjust one's nascent dream to the countless elements which must ultimately accept its products as useful.'⁵⁵ Adopting a similar approach to the study of art objects in museums, he paid least attention to the works of 'high art': 'Works in museums are good schools. The museums are large; I put my questions only to what is not called Great Art'⁵⁶

Since Le Corbusier disproved of academicism, how was he inspired by history to think progressively? In his design work, traditional architectural elements were always reinterpreted. One example is what Alan Colquhoun has called the 'displacement of concepts, and by this to indicate process of reinterpretation rather than one of creation in a cultural void'.⁵⁷ Le Corbusier constantly referred to architectural tradition either by 'invoking its principles and adapting them to new solutions', such as the parallel of structural grid between Villa Stein de Monzie and Palladio's Villa Malcontenta (Fig.4),⁵⁸ or by overtly contradicting them, such as the use of pilotis as 'a reversal of the classical podium'.⁵⁹

The stepped pyramid form of the World Museum in his Mundaneum project (Fig.5) 'recalls Nineveh or Mexico'.⁶⁰ It also bears an unmistakable resemblance to an ancient Mesopotamian ziggurat,⁶¹ a fact questioned by Karel Teige.⁶² The pyramids in Nineveh and Mexico were temples for religious rituals, but Le Corbusier transformed them into a museum. The exterior spiral ramp allows the museum of human creation to assure the 'absolute continuity of events in history'.⁶³

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Palladio's Villa Malcontenta 1560
Le Corbusier and Jeanneret, Villa de Monzie
Garches, 1927

Fig.4. Villa Stein de Monzie and Palladio's Villa, Malcontenta.

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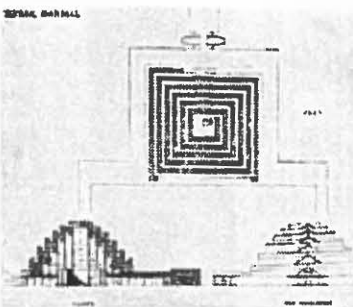


Fig.5. World Museum, Mundaneum, 1929.

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