

Architecture: Le Corbusier

Introducing a brief discussion by Sturken and Cartwright (2001), will be presented to point out why large cities are a feature of modernity. A concise analysis of two artists will then be put forward for an example to reveal the experiences of city living through some of the artists work. The main body of this essay will be based on aspects of modernist architecture, and the experiences and effects of urban living, analysing the architectural work and experiences of Charles Edouard Jeanneret, better known as Le Corbusier.

Why are large cities a feature of modernity? According to Sturken and Cartwright (2001, p. 241) modernism is "...characterised by the experience of upheaval and change, yet also of optimism and a belief in a better, more advanced future. The experience of modernity is thus that of increased urbanisation, industrialisation, and technological change that results from industrial capitalism with its ideological faith in progress." Therefore, cities are major features in modernity because they are perceived to portray a changing society and these ideas are to improve, or bring about, new development. Since cities contain most of the world's population, it is more evident that modernity arises in cities and is seen by the population.

Sturken and Cartwright (2001, p. 241) indicate that one of the metaphors for modernism is the sentiment of living in a modern city with social alienation; "...the urban experience of being in a crowd of strangers whom one will never know". Cities exhibit many aspects of modernist ideas; in addition cities influence many artists to express modern issues within their art. Alfred Stieglitz's work is a remarkable example of city life captured through photography. He stated that his work aims "to hold a moment, to record something so completely that those who see it would relive an equivalent of what has been expressed" (Kleiner 2005, p. 938).

Georgia O'Keeffe's city painting, *New York Night*, is another significant example. She stated that "you have to live in today... Today the city is something bigger, more complex than ever before in history. And nothing can be gained from running away" (Kleiner 2005, p. 937). *New York Night* portrays the fascination of city life and the buildings that dominate an urban landscape (Kleiner 2005, p. 938). Stieglitz has in some

ways, changed the style of photography and the perception that society has toward ordinary photography, or as Stieglitz declares, 'straight' and 'un-manipulated' (Kleiner 2005, p. 938). Modernist artists like Stieglitz and O'Keeffe have given a new and modern style for the world to examine.

Modernists aimed to seek new tactics in art and transform or purge traditional values. With the intention to create new styles, modernists had to eliminated and thereafter reject the traditional styles, for example the Victorian style of decorativeness. Modernist architecture was also a fresh style and in total contrast to the earlier architecture; it conveys a new expression, construction and technique. Woods (1999, p. 7) explains that Modernists searched for an individual design that are fresh and unique, thus breaking all the rules of traditional Victorian art.

It is evident that well known architects such as, Le Corbusier, Walter Gropius and Ludwig Mies van der Rohe, were leading figures in a new style of architecture, who designed significant contemporary designs and structures during the modernist period. Kleiner (2005, p. 963) indicates that these leading architects had a widespread popularity with a new architectural development called the 'International Style'. Looking at numerous styles of architecture around the world, it is unmistakable that the style of Le Corbusier, Mies van der Rohe and Gropius are still present; they were artists that designed the future in architectural styles.

Tom Fletcher discusses a section in Hitchcock's and Johnson's book that explores and defines the 'International style'. According to Hitchcock and Johnson (cited on Fletcher 2007), the 'International Style' had three different principles of design, these are "the expression of volume rather than mass, balance rather than preconceived symmetry and the expulsion of applied ornament" (Fletcher 2007). Two crucial characteristics that were important to Le Corbusier and his architectural designs are the simplifications of form and the elimination of decorative elements.

Le Corbusier implements the use of steel, concrete and glass for his most desired materials, as these would have been different to work with in comparison to timber, clay or stone. Moreover the materials which he used had a modern appearance however, the completed structure would have changed wholly if timber, clay or stone were

alternatively used; his designs would not have exhibited the ‘modern’ appearance as successfully. Fletcher claims that there are four phrases that encapsulate the modernist style, “ornament is a crime, truth to materials, form follows function, and Le Corbusier's description of houses as machines for living” (Fletcher 2007).

Logically it seems that the ‘International style’ focused more on the volume and the boldness of three-dimensional forms in architecture, rather than décor ornaments and intricacies that often had no use. Woods (1999, p. 89) discusses that buildings or architectural designs have a high public profile that affect people’s lives. Continuing with this statement it is clear that throughout most of our society, architecture has been built to capture the viewer’s eye and compel them to contemplate the urban design. Winston Churchill wrote, “[w]e shape our buildings; thereafter they shape us” (Churchill cited on Brainy Quotes, 2009), meaning we build them and they affect our lives afterwards.

Le Corbusier argues that essentially not all architectural designs and buildings need any reference to what is practical or descriptive, some structures do not hold any purpose or practical fundamentals at all; they are merely formations or artworks from the architect’s mind; for aesthetic pleasure. “They are a mathematical creation of your mind. They are the language of Architecture” (Corbusier, 1987, p. 203). He continues to claim that architecture is a ‘plastic thing’; it is the visual interpretation of a viewer and exists only when there is a ‘lyrical sentiment’ (Corbusier, 1987, p. 203). It seems obvious that Le Corbusier was apathetic with the decoration style and preferably chose to create completely new and simpler designs.

According to Matthews (1994-2008), Le Corbusier's early work was mostly related to the natural environment however, as years went by and changes occurred Le Corbusier’s ideas also changed. One of Le Corbusier’s first modern or industrialised designs was the Maison-Domino, 1914 (figure 1), which was widely mass-produced, the main features being “free-standing pillars and rigid floors” (Matthews 1994-2008). This simple design is used for many structure designs in architecture because of its uncomplicated design for an armature in building designs.

During 1929, Le Corbusier designed the Villa Savoye (figure 2) in Poissy-sur-Seine, France. His idea was to combine essential elements into one building, for example, ample space, appropriate aeration, sunlight, temperature, and insulation against detrimental or objectionable noises from the city. These ideas are very important in many contemporary designs (Kleiner 2005, p. 963-964). Trachtenberg and Hyman give further details about the surrounds and interior of the Villa Savoye.

Unlike the confined urban locations of most of Le Corbusier's earlier houses, the openness of the Poissy site permitted a freestanding building and the full realization of his five-point program [five aspects for architecture]. Essentially the house comprises two contrasting, sharply defined, yet interpenetrating external aspects. The dominant element is the square single-storied box, a pure, sleek, geometric envelope lifted buoyantly above slender pilotis, its taut skin slit for narrow ribbon windows that run unbroken from corner to corner...

(Trachtenberg & Hyman 1986, p. 530).

Le Corbusier explained that his idea and motive of designing living areas, dwellings or apartments was so they could be mass-produced and still encompass the idea of aesthetics. Examining architecture today, it is noticeable that Le Corbusier's ideas have become a large industrialised feature in the modern world. Le Corbusier wished people to abolish the traditional concepts of a house and look at new designs in a serious and rational way, hence his conclusion slogan of 'House Machine'. "[T]he mass production house, healthy (and morally so too) and beautiful in the same way that working tools and instruments which accompany our existence are beautiful" (Corbusier 1987, p. 210).

In contrast to the *Villa Savoye*, Le Corbusier's *Notre-Dame-du-Huat* (figure 3) is presented with the opposite of geometric forms. *Notre-Dame-du-Huat*, situated in Ronchamp, France, was built between 1950 and 1955, replacing a prior building destroyed in World War II. Its appearance is flowing and organic, achieved by the construction and formation of steel frames, metal mesh and spray-on concrete. Many interiors of Le Corbusier's designs could hold a large mass of people; this building holds at least 200 people, which formerly gathered into the chapel for Christian services.

Original sketches of this design illustrates and represents praying hands, dove wings and the prow of a ship, thus representing peace and the Holy Spirit (Kleiner 2005, p. 1004). This building design was one of Le Corbusier's final designs in his life; perhaps he wanted to try something different or more personal than his plan to develop the 'ideal city'. One of Le Corbusier's first proposed plan for this particular idea, 'ideal city plan' was *The Contemporary City of Three Million Inhabitants* (figure 4). Fishman (1982, p. 191) discusses more in-depth that this plan was intended to be a city of the time, rather than a historical object because Le Corbusier had placed no public monuments or historical tributes in this city plan design.

Fishman (1982) also discusses that Le Corbusier's main task and ideology for the contemporary city plan, was to design an inclusive "...environment in which humans, nature and the machine would be reconciled" (Fishman 1982, p. 189). Le Corbusier explained his plan as being "an act of faith in favour of the present" (Fisher 1982, p. 189). Le Corbusier compared himself to a scientist working in a laboratory, as if putting together a precise theoretical composition; his main goal being the formation and developmental process of denoting urbanism (Fishman 1982, p. 190).

Kleiner (2005, p. 964) points out that Le Corbusier had three ideal cities; "Vertical cities would house workers and the business and service industries. Linear-industrial cities would run as belts along the routes between the vertical cities... [and] separate centres would be constructed for people involved in intensive agriculture activity". Le Corbusier's main idea and aim was to provide cultural needs along with individual comforts and living conditions; the ideal city for everyone (Kleiner 2005, p. 964). Fishman (1982, p. 193) fittingly states that Le Corbusier believed in putting the world in order.

Comparable to the Contemporary City plan, Le Corbusier designed a new and exciting plan in 1925 that featured 18 identical skyscrapers; the plan, entitled *Voisin* (figure 5), was to be built in Paris near Seine. However, in order to complete such a task as this, the existing city had to be demolished, including historical buildings. It is noticeable that some of Le Corbusier's ideas were to redesign and rebuild entire districts from scratch, thus, breaking down the previous establishments and rebuilding his own modern or stylish designs.

Obviously Le Corbusier was very much influenced by the beliefs or ideologies of Modernism, for example, eliminating traditional building styles. Although this plan never eventuated, Le Corbusier's idea of skyscraper cities are well distinguished in today's culture. Cities such as Chicago, Tokyo, Singapore, Los Angeles and even Australian cities such as Brisbane are ideal examples of skyscraper surrounds. The only difference is that not many city designs are as uniform or symmetrical as Le Corbusier's designs; this is because the city was built over time, therefore the majority of cities today contain historical and contemporary buildings.

After the war Le Corbusier designed and constructed the *Unite Habitation* (figure 6), 1947-1952, which is one result of his vertical building designs. According to Trachtenberg and Hyman (1986, p. 541) this twelve story apartment was built to accommodate 1600 people and improve on the severe post-war housing facilities. The design appears complex in many ways but structurally this building is simple, Le Corbusier stated that the design is like putting 'bottles into a wine rack' (Trachtenberg & Hyman 1986, p. 541). The effect of the war in numerous cities had an impact on many people, including architects like Le Corbusier, and many issues had to be alleviated, changed and accounted for, as a consequence the *Unite Habitation* was established.

During World War II, opportunities for city planning in Germany started to look promising for Le Corbusier, as the destruction of buildings created space for new design plans. Kunstler (2001) discusses that after the attacks from the war, Berlin needed to be reunified; The *Hauptstadt* competition was instigated and many architects including Le Corbusier entered into the competition to present new design plans for the city (Kunstler 2001, p. 131-132). Muller (2005, p. 104-105) discusses in-depth about the participants in the competition however, due to other on-going developments in the early 1960's, neither Le Corbusier nor any other competitor won the competition. The main development of that time was the establishment of the Berlin Wall in 1961 (Timeline Index 2004).

During all of these events Le Corbusier designed the city of Chandigarh in Punjab, India. With the help of architects Maxwell Fry and Jane Drew, Le Corbusier commenced the completed plan of the city in 1951. This major development contained building complexes and establishments including Government housing, shopping centres, schools and hospitals (Chandigarh Administration 2008). The layout and design of this city has beneficial organisation and symmetry with 800 by 1200 metre sectors which are surrounded by several roads with individual allocations for city traffic.

Significantly a green strip runs centrally along the sectors in the direction of the mountains, which provides recreational facilities for the city. Most importantly, all traffic is forbidden, as this expanse of the natural environment acts as a space for tranquillity where the "...curse of noises shall not penetrate" (Chandigarh Administration 2008). According to Chandigarh Administration (2008) the plan was considered as a post-war idea, labelled 'Garden City', moreover high-rise buildings were not established because of socio-economic conditions and living habits of the people. Like many of Le Corbusier's completed designs, this city today exists as an important landmark, a memorabilia and a distinguished result of Le Corbusier's style of design.

In conclusion, it is clear that Le Corbusier has changed the urban idea of architectural styles and will possibly continue to influence many more designers in the future. Providing cultural needs and individual comforts in living conditions is an ideal aspect for everyone; this initiative was Le Corbusier's fundamental aim in planning and designing urban environments (Kleiner 2005, p. 964). He wanted to put the world in order (Fishman 1982, p. 193); to express a new idea, style and approach in architecture and city planning. It is obvious that Le Corbusier's refined and completed styles are well distinguished in much of today's society around the world. Even though some of Le Corbusier's plans never eventuated, his ideas will assist in forthcoming examples and projects for future architects, progressing further with more contemporary styles.

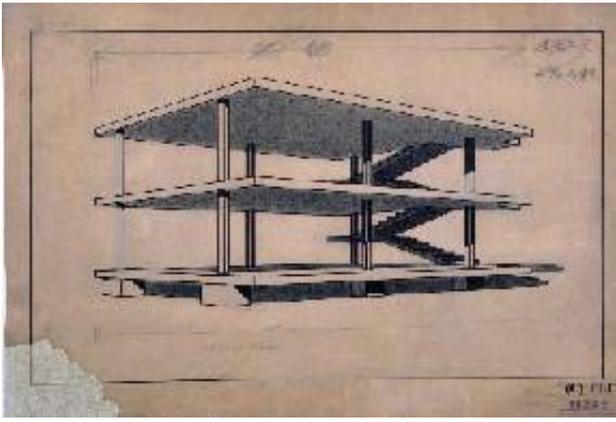


Figure 1: Le Corbusier, Maison-Domino, 1914 (FLC n.d.).



Figure 2: Le Corbusier, Villa Savoye, 1929, Poissy-sur-Seine, France (FLC n.d.).



Figure 3: Le Corbusier, Notre-Dame-du-Huat, 1950-55, Ronchamp, France (FLC n.d.).

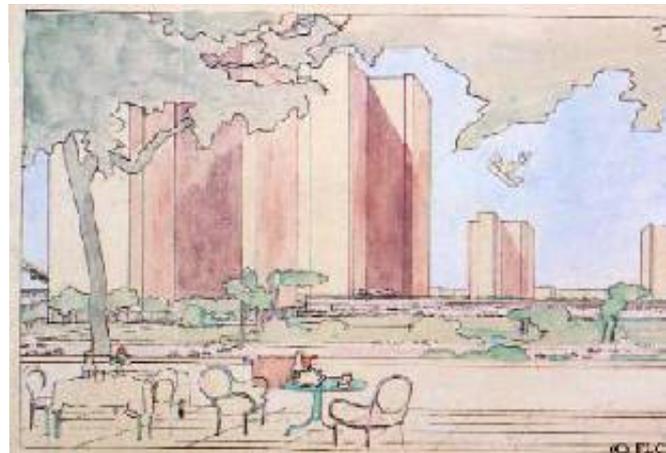


Figure 4: Le Corbusier, The Contemporary City plan, 1923 (FLC n.d.).



Figure 5: Le Corbusier, Voisin plan, 1925, (FLC n.d.).



Figure 6: Le Corbusier, Unité d'Habitation, 1945-52, Marseille, France (FLC n.d.).

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