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Excerpt

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PART ONE

Modernism in Conflict

CHAPTER ONE

*Architectural Modernism:
Le Corbusier*

Architecture is the masterly, correct and magnificent play of masses brought together in light. Our eyes are made to see forms in light; light and shade reveal these forms; cubes, cones, spheres, cylinders or pyramids are the great primary forms which light reveals to advantage; the image of these is distinct and tangible within us and without ambiguity. It is for that reason that these are *beautiful forms, the most beautiful forms*. Everybody is agreed as to that, the child, the savage and the metaphysician. It is of the very nature of the plastic arts.

A house is a machine for living in. Baths, sun, hot-water, cold-water, warmth at will, conservation of food, hygiene, beauty in the sense of good proportion. An armchair is a machine for sitting in and so on.

Our modern life, when we are active and about (leaving out the moments when we fly to gruel and aspirin) has created its own objects: its costume, its fountain pen, its eversharp pencil, its typewriter, its telephone, its admirable office furniture, its plate-glass and its 'Innovation' trunks, the safety razor and the briar pipe, the bowler hat and the limousine, the steamship and the airplane.

Our epoch is fixing its own style day by day. It is there under our eyes.

Eyes which do not see.

Le Corbusier, Towards a New Architecture, 1923¹

Wyndham Lewis was much in Paris [in the spring of 1921] and would often join Joyce at the Gipsy Bar near the Pantheon or at a small cafe. Alcohol helped to make them companionable, though they often disagreed. So, when Lewis objected to the cathedral at Rouen because of its heavily encumbered façade, which he described as a 'fussy multiplication of accents, demonstrating a belief in the virtue of

ARCHITECTURAL MODERNISM

3

quantity', and argued against Gothic . . . Joyce remarked that he liked this multiplication of detail and added, 'As a matter of fact, I do something of that sort in words.'²

Le Corbusier was the pen-name, or *nom de guerre*, of Charles-Edouard Jeanneret (1887–1965), the dominant figure in the modern movement in architecture from the 1920s to the 1960s. Born in Switzerland, widely travelled, he established himself in Paris as a city planner, architect, designer, painter, sculptor. He felt his face resembled a raven (*corbeau*), and indeed he was throughout his life a fierce polemicist, not least against his fellow architects. His manifesto *Vers une architecture* was published in Paris in 1923 and was translated into English in 1927 by Frederick Etchells as *Towards a New Architecture*.

In *Towards a New Architecture* Le Corbusier scorns conventional architects for still insisting on the suffocatingly dead styles of the nineteenth century. Present architecture, he felt, was in a state of 'retrogression', stifled by 'custom', by an obsession with inherited 'styles', a term Le Corbusier can only bring himself to mention with repeated lashings of contempt.³

The present architecture and interior design of our houses are ruining our health and our morale. The architects of today keep designing houses that are too crowded with features, with decorated façade, pilasters, 'foliage', lead roofs. Surfaces have become parasitical, obscuring what is beneath. Inside, such houses are gloomy, secretive, with rooms that are too small, and with a conglomeration of useless disparate objects, of absurd bric-à-brac. People can barely navigate the labyrinth of their heavy furniture: chandeliers ('these horrors' that fill up the middle of a room and are bad for the eyes at night), mantel-pieces, thick carpets, washstands, commodes, elaborate bookcases, consoles, china cabinets, dressers, sideboards, draped curtains, cushions, canopies, damasked wallpapers thick with colour and motley design, carved and gilt furniture, faded or arty colours, mirrored wardrobes. It's like a bazaar, a Western bazaar. No wonder, Le Corbusier feels, people fly from their homes to frequent restaurants and night clubs. People should rise up and demand the resignation of all the professors in the architectural schools.⁴

Towards a New Architecture particularly dislikes the reliance of conventional architecture on surface effects, on the decorative, the ornamental, the symbolic. Such effects promote the sensation, 'so insupportable to man', of shapelessness, disorder, wilfulness. They promote heterogeneity, ambiguity, capriciousness, riot, stitching together elements which have nothing to do with each other. Le Corbusier was not impressed by the contemporary arts decoration

movement which was supposedly regenerating French art and interior design. On the contrary, such a movement, he averred, was at the dangerous height that goes before a fall. The tail pieces and garlands, exquisite ovals where triangular doves preen themselves, boudoirs embellished with poufs in gold and black velvet, all such stifling elegancies, as well as the follies of Peasant Art, are intolerable witnesses to a dead spirit. The decorative arts are not part of the new modern architecture to be.⁵

The sense of 'plan', of overall structure, clarity, and ease, inside and out, has been lost for the last hundred years. Conventional architecture was indeed contributing to the almost apocalyptic crisis history and society were now facing. The various classes of workers of today, from artisan to intellectual, no longer have dwellings adapted to their needs. In Le Corbusier's view, the question of building was at the root of contemporary social unrest. We should repudiate the existing layouts of our towns and quarters where the congestion of buildings grows ever greater, interlaced by narrow streets full of noise, petrol fumes and dust, and where on each storey the windows open on to the foul confusion below.⁶

Society, Le Corbusier feels, is threatened by a violent desire for change. People are conscious that there is a new world coming into being, yet feel hindered from enjoying it by their living environment, of town, street, house, flat. The symptoms are alarming, but revolution can be avoided by a new architecture that clears away the stifling accumulation of age-long detritus, an architecture that is in tune with the emerging modern world. It is 'Architecture or Revolution'.⁷

Architects have to catch up to other arts and sciences. They could, for example, look to cubism, which has taken the aesthetic lead in attuning itself to the modern epoch; it is not distracted by realism, and it has purged painting of 'wall decoration, tapestry and the ornamental urn'. Above all, however, we should look to the engineer's aesthetic as the key to the new architecture. Like the cubists, engineers employ forms which satisfy our eyes by their geometry, our understanding by their mathematics.⁸

Towards a New Architecture presents a paean of praise to the engineer as heroic modern figure. Engineers are healthy and virile, active and useful, balanced and happy in their work. Architects have forgotten what engineers know, that our eyes are constructed to perceive simple primary geometrical forms. Engineers are governed by the mathematical calculation which puts us in accord with universal natural law, thereby achieving harmony. Engineers conceive of what they create as a living organism. The engineer of today knows the best way to construct, to heat, to ventilate, to light. While architects have been

asleep, engineers having been busy creating bridges, Atlantic liners, mines, railways.⁹

Building too should be in accord with universal natural law generated by primary forms and masses. Architecture then will become 'plastic', will achieve order, economy, rationality. It will be not only utilitarian but 'poetic'. Here is architectural emotion, where the 'work of man' rings in unison with 'universal order', where architecture moves us as a pure creation of spirit. We have to strip decoration and ornament away, to bring out the geometry that is the primal 'language of man'. Architecture, says *Towards a New Architecture* in a saying that became almost a byword of the modern movement, is the masterly, correct and magnificent play of masses brought together in light, and the great primary forms which light reveals to advantage are prisms, cubes, cones, spheres, cylinders, pyramids. How such forms are arranged creates an appreciable rhythm, a unity of idea. It is the regulating lines which create beauty and grandeur. In the great epochs of architecture, an astonishing diversity is created, not from the play of decoration, but from different combinations of primary forms.¹⁰

Throughout *Towards a New Architecture* Le Corbusier constructs a cultural history of architecture and design guided by the standard of the geometric. As we might expect, he vigorously dislikes examples from the past not based on the mathematical, on axes, the square, the circle. Italy does not come off well. Le Corbusier admires Michelangelo's creations as a 'gigantic geometry of harmonious relationships', Michelangelo having learnt from the 'rare proportions' of the coliseum of old. But foolish and thoughtless Popes dismissed Michelangelo and destroyed his work by extensions and additions. After Michelangelo's cupolas, there is nothing. Rome, Rome in particular, is and has been for the last four centuries a disaster, a merely picturesque 'bazaar'. In Rome the uglinesses are legion, for everything is too huddled together. To send architectural students to Rome is to cripple them for life, and indeed emulating Rome has become the cancer of French architecture.¹¹

Wrong stones

The Gothic cathedral, so beloved of nineteenth-century English romantics like John Ruskin in his essay 'The Nature of Gothic' in *The Stones of Venice* (1853), also scores badly in *Towards a New Architecture*. In Ruskin's view, influenced by nineteenth-century race theories about the supposed differences between northern and southern Europeans, medieval Gothic architecture derives from the tribes of northern Europe. It is to be distinguished from the art originating from south of the Alps, in particular from the Greek and Roman styles of architecture.

Ruskin is opposed to Greek and Roman art because, like the aesthetic attitudes which came in with the Renaissance, it demands perfection. In insisting on art as finished and complete, Greek and Roman architecture becomes 'artificial', divorced from nature, for in nature nothing is ever complete, nature is always in a state of becoming, of change, growth, and decay, and then new growth.

Like the changeability and unpredictable richness of vegetation and foliage, Gothic follows 'natural forms'. Ruskin argues that a key element of Gothic is its quality of redundance, and he describes a cathedral front which was like a study of the 'minute and various work of Nature' so that the façade was 'at last lost in the tapestry of its traceries, like a rock among the thickets and herbage of spring'.

The very imperfection of Gothic art allowed the participation and inventiveness of the workmen involved. As in the freedom of nature, they are permitted to 'imagine, to think, to try to do anything worth doing'. The element of the grotesque in Gothic reflects not the supposed barbarism of the Middle Ages, but the imagination of the workmen, a 'delight in fantastic and ludicrous, as well as sublime, imagery'. Against the alienating division of labour of the industrial age, the Gothic style enables the creation of wholeness, the romantic ideal of unity of humanity and nature, art and daily life, mind and sense, intellect and feeling. It is the very 'rude and wild' quality of Gothic that deserves the most reverence.¹²

Ruskin's 'The Nature of Gothic' was greatly admired by William Morris, who had the essay reprinted by itself at his Kelmscott Press in 1892, with a preface hailing Ruskin for possessing the key to the problem of human happiness in his concept of pleasurable work.¹³ Morris argued that art, as craft, as the design and making of household items and features, from pottery to chairs to wallpaper, should be seen as useful in daily life. Pre-Raphaelite, poet, novelist, pamphleteer, designer, libertarian socialist, utopian, Morris was important in the late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century period in trying to counter the astonishing crowdedness and clutter of high Victorian interiors and design, and restore principles of rationality and usefulness. In Australia as in Britain and Europe, Morris proved influential in the Aesthetic Movement, Arts and Crafts, and to some extent Art Nouveau, movements which helped prepare the way for the modernist surge in architecture and interior design.¹⁴ Morris also was influential in the early Bauhaus in Germany, however severe and functionalist it later became.¹⁵

Towards a New Architecture is, nonetheless, vastly unimpressed by the Gothic cathedral. (Le Corbusier doesn't mention Ruskin by name, though he does at one point enigmatically tell us that relating architecture to mathematical order is of greater value than 'many

dissertations on the soul of stones'.) Gothic architecture is not based on spheres, cones, and cylinders; it does not proceed from the great primary forms; it even fights against the force of gravity, and so is not an example of plastic art. It is, therefore, not very beautiful.¹⁶

Gothic also suffers in terms of being of a female orientation. It can, says Le Corbusier, arouse sensation only of a sentimental kind. Like other decorative styles, it is to architecture what a feather is on a woman's head, sometimes pretty, though not always, and never anything more. Further, Le Corbusier is opposed to Ruskin's conception of architecture growing like nature. He dislikes decorative 'foliage'. He is highly approving of the way the industrial age replaces heterogeneous natural materials with artificial products.¹⁷

The architecture of the past that *Towards a New Architecture* admires, in Europe and the East, includes the Pyramids, the Temple of Luxor, the Towers of Babylon, the Parthenon, the Colosseum, Hadrian's Villa, Constantinople's Santa Sophia, the Mosques of Stamboul, the Tower of Pisa, the cupolas of Michelangelo. Above all, it is the classical Greek, in particular, the Parthenon, that again and again stirs *Towards a New Architecture* to eulogy. Of a photo of a section of the Parthenon, Le Corbusier writes: 'Brutality, intensity, the utmost sweetness, delicacy and great strength'. Where Ruskin dislikes the idea of perfection in classical architecture (as preventing participation by craftspeople, as permitting only an admiring gaze), Le Corbusier hails the Parthenon as raising the possibility precisely of perfection. The Parthenon is the 'apogee' of the development of profile and contour in an architecture of geometric forms: 'The sum of its inevitable elements gives the measure of the degree of perfection to which man can attain when he is absorbed in a problem definitely stated.' We are ravished by its 'pure forms in precise relationships'.¹⁸

The Parthenon gives us sure truths and emotion of a 'superior, mathematical order'. It is a triumph of ancient mathematics, and the ancient mathematicians would, Le Corbusier feels sure, have loved to live in the twentieth century, because it represents a new age of standardisation. If Ruskin and William Morris disliked the standardisation that was part of the industrial age, Le Corbusier gratefully welcomes the 'spirit of mass-production and industrial organization', as in the way the car is produced. He also welcomes something Morris, like other socialists, excoriated: capitalist competition. For in competing with each other, manufacturers search for harmony and beauty in the cars they make, attaining a 'state of perfection universally felt'.¹⁹

Towards a New Architecture celebrates modernity, modernity as technological 'progress'. Part of the reason the Parthenon is so admired is that its marble gives the impression of 'naked polished steel'. The new architecture and design, using modern materials like steel and reinforced

concrete, and based on the engineer's aesthetic and geometric forms, can already be observed in factories ('the reassuring first fruits of the new age'), the steamship, the airplane, and the automobile.²⁰

Look at these photos of steamships, ocean-going liners, built not by architects but by engineers, like the Cunard *Aquitania*. Unlike the small hole-like windows in our present dismal houses, the ship's saloon, for example, is a wall all windows, full of light. Architects, says Le Corbusier, please think how a seaside villa would be like if designed like the stern of the *Aquitania*, whereas such villas now are spoilt by their heavy tiled roofs. (This exhortation certainly rings true for Sydney; its harbourside hills feature many a ship-like house.) Liners are free of the 'styles' that afflict architecture and offer interesting contrasts between powerful masses and slender elements. The liners' saloon type decks are pure, clear, clean, and healthy. Indeed, underneath a photo of the Canadian Pacific *Empress of Asia*, Le Corbusier places his definition of architecture as the masterly, correct and magnificent play of masses brought together in light. The steamship, he concludes, is the first stage in the realisation of a world organised according to the new spirit. It has the same aesthetic as that of a briar pipe, an office desk, a limousine, a lorry. (The insistence in *Towards a New Architecture* on the significance of the briar pipe escapes me.) It is the triumph of the new, of a beauty that is calm, vital and strong; of freedom from enslavement to the past, from a lazy respect for 'tradition'.²¹

Our dwellings, too, must make use of modern materials. At present they lag sadly behind. The house, says Le Corbusier in another to-be-famous saying, is a machine for living in. By using reinforced concrete, the roof can be suppressed and replaced by terraces, with windows going right round the 'square-built' house. Inside, remove the present clutter with built in fittings. Get rid of the old tapestry covered seats and install rush-seated adjustable chairs with a movable reading-desk, a shelf for the coffee cup, and an extending foot-rest. Get rid of the enormous chandeliers and install electric lighting, concealed, diffused, or projecting. Use modern plate glass instead of the small panes of old. Instead of a riot of all manner of things, demand bare walls in your bedroom, living room and dining room. Eliminate heavy furniture and thick carpets, keeping the house full of light and air; make sure you acquire a vacuum cleaner. Insist on one really large living room instead of a number of small ones. Take advantage of a refrigerator. In general, houses will be far more quickly built ('months of work are saved') in the factory, with standardised materials, as with cars, cannons, airplanes, lorries, wagons.²²

Towards a New Architecture reveals a remarkable historical optimism, even utopianism. A 'great epoch has begun', conceived in a 'new spirit',

the spirit of 'industrial production', which will create new cities, towns, quarters, dwellings, design. The great city is now part of a rising tide; in particular, we can start envisaging a City of Towers. We can think, for example, of bringing together at certain points, relatively distant, the great density of our modern populations and to build at these points enormous constructions of 60 storeys, using reinforced concrete and steel. Cafés and places for recreation would be transferred to the flat roofs. ('Cafés . . . would no longer be that fungus which eats up the pavements of Paris'.) There can also be roof gardens. All the windows would have an uninterrupted view of vast airy and sunlit spaces. At the foot of these towers would stretch parks, covering the whole town: Le Corbusier is not opposed to nature as such, only that building and façades themselves be geometric, with rich contrasts to the surrounding vegetation. There will be green sward, sportsgrounds and abundant plantations of trees. Well away from the towers would flow the noisy arterial roads, full of a traffic which becomes increasingly rapid. By such means shall we round Cape Horn into new horizons of town planning; we shall enter upon a period 'that no epoch has known'.²³

What the Old World has to do is catch up to the New, in particular North America. *Towards a New Architecture* abounds with admiring references to and photos of Canadian and US grain stores and elevators. Such indeed, along with American factories, are among the magnificent first fruits of the new age, for the 'American engineers overwhelm with their calculations our expiring architecture', revealing the beauty and grandeur of geometric forms. The American skyscraper has also proved to be a vital constructional event, and opposite the title page of *Towards a New Architecture* is a provocatively placed photo of the Telephone Building, New York. New York's Equitable Building also earns a photo, opposite one of an American steel bridge; the next page has a photo of 'America', a high-speed racing car.²⁴

The architectural new world represents 'evolution' for humanity. Civilisations 'advance'. They pass through the age of the peasant, the soldier and the priest, and attain what is rightly called culture, the flowering of the effort to select. Selection means rejection, pruning, cleansing, the clear and naked emergence of the Essential. Evolution is a move towards the establishing of an architectural and urban standard that is clearly 'rational'. Evolution is a movement from elementary satisfactions ('mere decoration') to the 'higher satisfactions' (mathematics). Evolution is a movement from the female to the male, from styles of architecture like the Gothic, to an architecture of graver ends, capable of the 'sublime', impressing the most brutal instincts by its objectivity, calling into play the highest faculties by its abstraction. It is a movement from the 'frivolous' to an art which is 'austere', of 'severe

and pure functioning elements', which has 'discipline' and 'economy'. In these terms we can admire the airplane for its imagination and 'cold reason' (the same spirit, after all, that built the Parthenon). To build the new house and town we need men who are 'intelligent, cold and calm', governed by standards which are a matter of 'logic, analysis and precise study'. For Ruskin in *The Stones of Venice*, the Gothic included the grotesque, the ludicrous, play, laughter. For Le Corbusier, to attain austerity is to reach for the highest levels of mind and sensibility.²⁵

The ideal city

In 1924 Le Corbusier published *Urbanisme*, which quickly went through many editions; the eighth French edition was translated by Etchells in 1929 as *The City of Tomorrow*. The translation includes Le Corbusier's Voisin plan for Paris which had been shown at the Exhibition of Decorative Art, Paris, 1925, and was named after the Voisin motor car company that had agreed to sponsor it (Peugeot and Citroen had turned him down). Le Corbusier notes that he experienced enormous difficulties in being part of the Exhibition at all.²⁶ The plan caused outrage, and in much of *The City of Tomorrow* we see Le Corbusier answering his critics and opponents. He evidently felt that he was unfairly being accused of ignoring emotion, the poetic, and nature.

While nature seems to us chaotic, the spirit which animates it is order, in particular the equilibrium that comes with the balance of the horizon, the horizontal, the straight line, with the vertical, giving us the right angle, and so the universal foundation of the geometric. The right angle has superior rights over all other angles, because it enables order, coherence, and so keeps before us the idea and possibility of perfection. In founding building as geometric, as in houses, or towns planned according to rectilinear patterns, we are at one with Nature's deepest law. With horizontals, prisms, pyramids, spheres and cylinders we enjoy serenity and joy, the Hellenic spirit.²⁷

As well, the human body demands sunshine. Skyscrapers, for example, create a 'vertical city', rising upwards, open to light and air, clear and radiant and sparkling. Their immense geometrical façade, all of glass, reflect the blue glory of the sky. They are 'bathed in light'. Furthermore, skyscrapers, these 'clear crystals of glass', are set far apart, so that their outlines are softened by distance, and at their feet are parks, making the city 'one vast garden'.²⁸

Here is Utopia, city of skyscrapers in the midst of green spaces. It is only when we are on high, looking down at a city from a skyscraper, or from the platforms of the Eiffel Tower, that we can see how geometric a town or city should be; and looking down from such heights gives us a