The Legacy of Le Corbusier.

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Modernist practices present an affront to many religions, by denying their architectural expression (not only on religious buildings, but by denying organized complexity from the entire built environment). They oppose the basic principle of connecting an individual to the universe — hence to God — through color, design, sculpture, and calligraphy. Geometrical fundamentalism denies sensory connections. With its insistence on homogeneous surfaces showing minimal information, it questions the continued validity of architectural masterpieces that are also powerful symbols of faith. For example, temples, mosques, and churches conveying meaning via polychrome sculptures, tile work, reliefs, frescoes, and mosaics are all rejected. In Le Corbusier’s words: “Decoration is of a sensorial and elementary order, as is color, and is suited to simple races, peasants and savages” (Le Corbusier, 1927: page 143). He appears not to know that the buildings on the Athenian Acropolis, which he professed to admire so much, were originally painted with bright contrasting colors.

Geometrical fundamentalism also forbids the word of God (and God’s name) from being used in an architectural setting. Classical Islamic calligraphy constitutes a major art form that has always played a central role in architecture. Arabic script, with rich variation in each stroke, lends itself even more than Latin or Greek letters to visual connectivity using internal scaling. The informational meaning of ornamental Islamic calligraphy on architectural surfaces escapes most non-Muslims. People who understand the language and respect its content connect instantly with a building through the message of the text, which establishes a deeply emotional link to an individual. Those who cannot read the script can only imagine the powerful meaning it endows on a built structure. All of us can observe the incredible degree to which the calligraphy achieves meaning just in design terms. This is also true for Chinese and Japanese calligraphy.

As geometrical fundamentalism competes head-on with religious expression through built structures and the informational content of surfaces, it qualifies as a substitute religious movement on those terms alone. It certainly possesses its own moral precepts,
admitting freely that Brutalism (the use of raw concrete surfaces) is founded on ethical rather than aesthetic concepts. Its dogma insists that “honest” architecture should not hide its structure: architectural “honesty”, however, is never defined, nor are any reasons given for why Brutalism has any value. Instead, we are offered arguments only in terms of other parts of the dogma. Even those of the early modernists who were sincere in their attempts to better society through a new architecture didn’t notice the negative consequences.

The towers of utopia.

The negative consequences of “urban renewal” programs have been well-documented. At the height of modernist dominance in the post-World-War-II years, it was standard practice to bulldoze poor neighborhoods and to build a concrete utopia of high-rise apartment blocks on the site. An alternative was to move the poor people far away and use the vacated land for more commercially lucrative ends. This process presupposes a series of abstractions. The first is that people are a “class” whose dwellings can be destroyed without any consideration, and who can be relocated, again as a “class”, to another location chosen by the planner. In order to do this without pangs of conscience, the class of people must be treated as an abstract set — individual human beings cease to exist in this abstraction; people become a class and thus lose their identity. Nothing has changed today.

How can we justify forcing a class of people into a high-rise tower? Because it is good for them, according to architectural beliefs (i.e., residents would benefit from the geometric idea we impose on them). Never mind that environmental psychologists have discredited this assumption with extensive experimental data. This urban typology reflects the use of another abstraction (buildings) to justify the uprooting and displacement of the first abstraction (people). Planners considered high-rise buildings as ideal residences or workplaces for people who can be treated as abstract classes: the poor and the blue-collar working class should inhabit towers of apartments, while the middle and upper classes should work in towers of offices. Despite the usual justification of economic efficiency, this flawed idea follows simple geometrical abstractions that ignore the principles of urban form.

In the history of architectural theory, one text stands out as a polemic advocating geometrical fundamentalism: Le Corbusier’s 1923 work *Towards a New Architecture* (Le Corbusier, 1927). This is where the geometry of modernism was best articulated, and where the plan to create sprawl, implemented so obligingly in the postwar years, originated. Here, in detailed drawings and impassioned arguments, are the wide freeways, sprawling office “parks”, concrete shoebox towers, and boxy retail centers set far back from the street.

Like Mein Kampf.

*Towards a New Architecture* is undeniably a landmark document of twentieth-century architecture and planning. While this book is used in almost every university as a textbook on architectural theory, we propose reading it not as a serious text, but rather as a propaganda manual for destroying architectural and urban coherence. In the same way,
Adolf Hitler’s book *Mein Kampf* is widely read at universities, not as a rational reference on politics and government, but (putting aside one’s reaction of disgust) in order to understand how its author was able to manipulate a nation so as to destroy Europe and implement the Holocaust.

Le Corbusier’s *Plan Voisin* (labeled *A City of Towers* in his book) shows the center of Paris destroyed and replaced with enormous high-rise buildings. The imposition of a simple, powerful, almost authoritarian abstract idea (towers, ostensibly to remove one from noise, smells, and dust) severs the urban relationships, the web of interconnections that weave the urban fabric of a city and make it part of human life. While the intention of cleaning up dark and unhealthy alleys was good, these radical changes were totally untested. Yet a vast experiment was tried (in many other cities) on thousands of lives without any controls. The proposed monolithic geometry, when applied, erased an intricate connective network and replaced it with a grandly simple non-hierarchy. In so doing, it destroyed both complexity and life.

**A mortal desert.**

The Swiss architectural anthropologist Nold Egenter aptly summarizes our own assessment: “Imagine Paris today with Le Corbusier’s plan realized! A deadly desert. No tourists come to Paris anymore”. Coincidentally, Hitler, also a master propagandist with architectural pretensions, wished to destroy Paris in 1944.

This grand abstraction (which precipitates disconnection) is the essential idea of modernism, and its ultimate flaw. It exists at all levels, from the urban plan to a building plan, all the way down in scale to individual ornament and detail. Under this regime, the complex organic relationships of life and the world are totally severed. In 1923 Le Corbusier was a man clearly taken by the simplistic, totalitarian philosophies then taking root in society. He succumbed to simple abstract geometries that he saw in the reductionist machines around him, saying:

“The Engineer’s Aesthetic and Architecture are two things that march together and follow one from the other: the one being now at its full height, the other in an unhappy state of retrogression ... The Engineer, inspired by the law of Economy and governed by mathematical calculation, puts us in accord with universal law. He achieves harmony.”  
(Le Corbusier, 1927: page 11).

Le Corbusier’s words at first glance might appear to support the point of view of this book; but what he proposed for architecture and urbanism does the opposite. Following the tactics of all great propagandists, he said things that sound plausible and even attractive in order to promote an agenda. A crude, primitive geometry captured him: certainly not even as sophisticated as mathematics and science were at the beginning of civilization. He confused the superficial appearance of technical solutions with progress. *Geometrical fundamentalism* is not an enlightened advance, as some imagined, but a reactionary embrace of the pure geometrical abstractions of Euclid, Pythagoras, and the ancient Egyptians:

“Gothic architecture is not, fundamentally, based on spheres, cones and cylinders. Only the nave is an expression of a simple form, but of a complex geometry of the second order (intersecting arches). It is for that reason that a cathedral is not very beautiful and
that we search in it for compensations of a subjective kind outside plastic art. A cathedral interests us as the ingenious solution of a difficult problem, but a problem of which the postulates have been badly stated because they do not proceed from the great primary forms.” (Le Corbusier, 1927: page 30).

**Questions of superiority.**

So a cathedral is not very beautiful? Then what is beautiful? Le Corbusier explains:

“Thus we have the American grain elevators and factories, the magnificent FIRST FRUITS of the new age. THE AMERICAN ENGINEERS OVERWHELM WITH THEIR CALCULATIONS OUR EXPIRING ARCHITECTURE.” (Le Corbusier, 1927: page 31).

This is the “Grand Idea” sweeping away all detritus and preparing for the new age: the age of the machine. Of course the detritus happens to encompass all the greatest creations of humankind spanning the entire globe and built over millennia. These were to be replaced by buildings mimicking American grain elevators. It is obvious to us today that the machines of the 1920s Le Corbusier praises and illustrates in his book are quite crude by any later standard. But Le Corbusier is completely, utterly taken by them, so much so that he considers them actually superior to the realities they crudely reflect. This is a striking and rather extreme example of the phenomenon Whitehead called “the fallacy of misplaced concreteness” — an idolatry of abstractions to the point where one loses connection to the richer and more complex concrete reality they represent. The abstractions replace the reality.

It is easy to be captured by such simple, strong, bewitching abstractions. Let us boldly go forward, Le Corbusier says, into this program of imposing these simple abstractions on the world on a massive scale. His proposal for Paris shows no mercy for the rich nuances and complexities of human life; only contempt. According to him, cities should be bulldozed and rebuilt — this time with enlarged children’s blocks on a huge, totalitarian scale. Le Corbusier was a master at providing totally crude abstractions that ignored deeper and subtler relationships. Obsessed and seduced by his own grand abstractions, he either misses or deliberately ignores the richness and subtlety of traditional buildings, the kind of subtle organic relationships that his crystalline mechanical architecture could never create.

**The weight of a pseudonym.**

In hindsight, it is astonishing the degree to which Le Corbusier’s program was so successfully implemented on a vast, global scale. How did this happen? Who was Le Corbusier, anyway? Charles-Edouard Jeanneret-Gris was an unknown Swiss architect working in Paris, making a living mostly by selling commercial advertisements in his journal *L’Esprit Nouveau*. He wrote and published whatever he wanted in it, and later collected these unrefereed articles into his books. After he adopted the pseudonym “Le Corbusier”, people began to pay more attention to his architectural and urban ideas. He came along at the precise moment when the western world hungered desperately for a utopian “new world”. His ideas served the brutal new industrialism. Le Corbusier and the
other modernist pioneers were happy to oblige the revolutionary fervor of the times, encouraging it to sweep away all vestiges of the past.

**Social engineering, as usual.**

A few initial works by early modernist architects were either commissioned by wealthy individuals who championed the artistic avant-garde; or by European cities run by politically radical local governments that promoted collectivism. It was these two types of client that bought into the architects’ bold promises that their geometrically singular style of architecture was able to transform society. Other governments sincerely wished to provide a better environment for their citizens, but this promise appealed directly to totalitarian regimes either on the right or the left. The possibility of social engineering via geometry was seductive to those in power. Having designed the Centrosoyuz building (1929-1934) and unsuccessfully competed to build the Palace of the Soviets (1931) in Moscow, Le Corbusier urged France’s successive governments (including the collaborationist one) to implement his plan for destroying Algiers. It was tragically carried out after the War by a different government.

**Reference.**