

Des écrits nombreux, tous aussi complexes que son répertoire bâti, plaçant Le Corbusier dans ce mouvement d'Avant-Garde qui existe depuis 1850. L'examen de quelques unes de ses œuvres démontre ce désir d'une esthétique nouvelle.

The context of Le Corbusier needs to be re-examined. A small aspect that this article will draw into question will be the fallacy of Le Corbusier being connected to a notion of avant-garde. A scenario for comparison will be provided by an examination of the term avant-garde and a subsequent examination of some of Le Corbusier's writings and buildings. There has been and will continue to be a concern over art and architecture as art. This debate can be enriched once a more historically placed definition of art is protracted. Since around 1850 there has been a notion of art which functions as what has been termed the avant-garde. There has been no path delineated in architecture. However, a unique situation exists in the case of Le Corbusier wherein a substantial amount of complex architectural work is matched by equally complicated written information. The writings and the works of Le Corbusier attempt to procure/pose a complicated art/architecture relationship. Analysis is necessary in order to see how his work functioned.

If one looks for a notion which could define modern art of the 20th century, then the term avant-garde has been historically legitimized to do this.

...avant-garde, as an artistic concept, had become comprehensive enough to designate not one or the other, but all the new schools whose aesthetic programs were defined, by and large, by their rejection of the past and by the cult of the new.¹

This avant-garde was not, as would be expected, a group of artists who researched, discovered and led the way for other artists to follow (a process contained in the military connotations of the term). True avant-garde exists only in retrospect, that which is avant-garde today avoids co-optation and is thus outside of mainstream present day discourse. "The avant-garde does not announce one style or another; it is in itself a style, or better, an anti-style."²

The critic, poet, theoretician Guillaume Apollinaire was a leading exponent of the French avant-garde in the first decades of the 20th century. His use of the words *esprit nouveau* (in his important lecture *L'esprit nouveau et les poètes* of 1917) were meant as a synonym of *avant-garde*. Apollinaire saw the 20th century avant-garde as somewhat anarchic. "To destroy is to create."³ Thus all anti-traditional movements would be incorrectly termed by these words—the avant-garde.

It is believed that the modernist notion of the avant-garde developed when certain artists became socially alienated and felt the need to disrupt and overthrow the bourgeois value system, "with all its philistine pretensions to universality."⁴ Under the present system (capitalism), every attempt to criticize its values fails as it is quickly subsumed and co-opted by the system.

An avant-garde man is like an enemy inside a city he is bent on destroying, against which he rebels; for like any system of government, an established form of expression is also a form of oppression. The avant-garde man is the opponent of an existing system.⁵

By this reasoning, the avant-garde developed from the very beginning as a "culture of crisis". Barthes points out how in his/her defiance of the bourgeoisie (*épater le bourgeois*) the avant-garde artist tried to resolve a specific historical contradiction.

That of an unmasked bourgeoisie which could no longer proclaim its original universalism except in the form of a violent protest turned against itself; initially by an aesthetic violence directed against the philistines, then, with increasing commitment, by an ethical violence, when it became the duty of a life style to contest the bourgeois order (among the surrealists, for example): but never by a political violence.⁶

The rejection of the elitism of art and its institutions became a fundamental precept for the avant-garde. A continual challenge had to be put forth to place the culture in a dialectical position. The avant-garde is specifically defined as having a social role. The avant-garde's embodiment of the "culture of crisis" then guided its activities in discovering or inventing new forms of crisis. This notion became built into its concept.

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CULTURE

Aesthetically, the avant-garde attitude implies the bluntest rejection of such traditional ideas as those of order, intelligibility, and even success (Artaud's "No more masterpieces!" could be generalized): art is supposed to become an experience—deliberately conducted—of failure and crisis.⁷

With the large amount of writing done about the art and by the artists/poets/critics of the early 20th century, including the cubists, futurists, dadaists, and surrealists, one can easily see the slot into which Le Corbusier was trying to place himself.

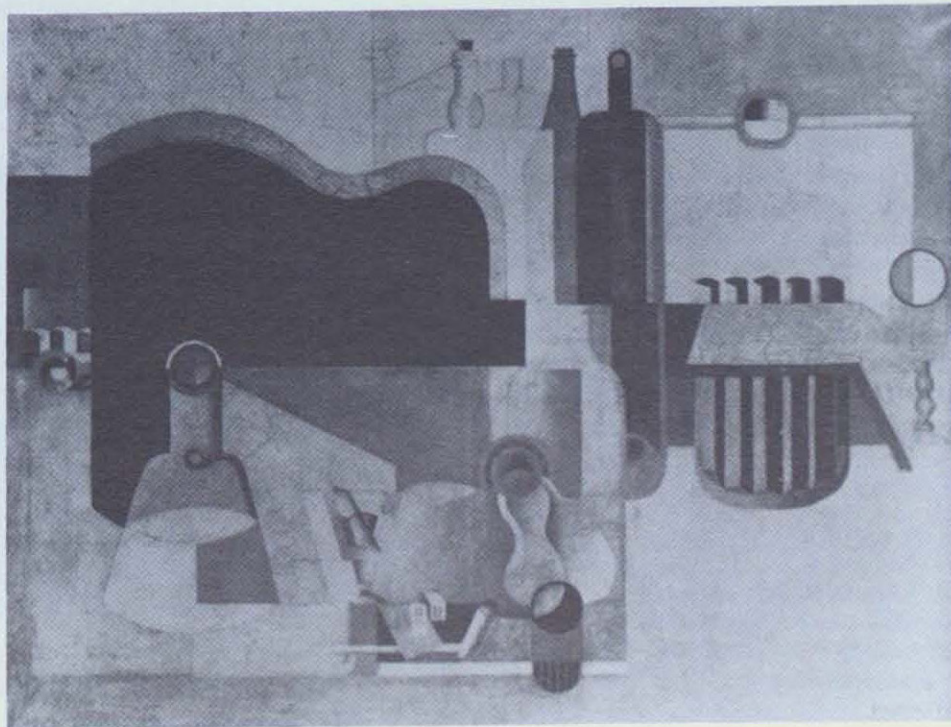
By the time of his and Ozenfant's Purist manifesto (*L'Esprit Nouveau*) of 1920, there was a well established tradition of "Modern" manifestos. The term *L'Esprit Nouveau*, commonly assigned to Le Corbusier, had three significant historical precedents.

In 1890, Havelock Ellis published a book entitled *The New Spirit* which approaches the modern sensibility as a reconciliation of religion and science. The following year François Paulhan applied almost identical analysis to *l'esprit nouveau* in a work aptly called *Le nouveau mysticisme*.⁸

Closer to the time of Le Corbusier was Apollinaire's use of the term in his critical lecture of 1917. The text described the new aesthetic as "a particular expression of the French nation, just as the classic spirit is a sublime expression *par excellence* of the same nation."⁹ The excitement and energy contained in these thoughts is similar to that of the Italian futurists who also adored everything modern (including warfare) but to an extreme.

George McCutcheon

George McCutcheon is a third year architectural student at the Technical University of Nova Scotia.



purist painting, 1922

Le Corbusier jumped into the dialogue with his *Après le Cubisme* (1918) which he wrote with Ozenfant. There was something very different about how these ideas were expressed as compared to those of avant-garde critical writing. Le Corbusier's writings lack an edge. Le Corbusier was comfortably challenging with his notions, and hopeful in the new rational way of modernity (unlike the fascist futurists). He saw reason, order and "Purism" as the guide for modernism. Le Corbusier embraced the new technology rather than questioning it and sold himself to the new bourgeoisie. In defying the possible role of avant-garde artist, Le Corbusier accepted a position which he felt bridged art and architecture but in fact operated in an architectural realm only.

In his *The Theory of the Avant Garde*, Renato Poggioli states:

...purism served the classical and neoclassical need for elegance and correctness and formulated a series of rigid norms applicable only to the grammar of art.¹⁰

The key word here is grammar. Purism added nothing on the level of social content or regard for context. Purism merely updated old ideas with new practices and failed to change the way the world was perceived because of its failure to deal with *issues* due to complacency and a lack of "ethical violence". Thoroughly caught up in the new materials and new techniques of modern construction, Le Corbusier saw the truth in materials as a means to an end. This attitude led to the development of the notion of the *objet-type*.

Ultimately this led to the abandonment of context and the elevation of form. Le Corbusier states that he

...stopped exhibiting (painting and sculpture) in Paris in 1923. He retreated because the battles of painting, sculpture and architecture can not all be fought at once.¹¹

Finally, in 1925 he says he reached a point of catharsis.

Between architectural forms born of reinforced concrete and painting there was now complete agreement. His paintings, like his architecture and even his town planning are animated by a love of pure form.¹²

Le Corbusier acknowledges his lack of content and utter formalism at this point. The idea and search for pure form overwhelmed Le Corbusier. In his and Ozenfant's essay on Purism, which appeared in *L'Esprit Nouveau* in 1921, there are some very telling ideas expressed about art.

An art that would be based only upon primary sensations, using uniquely primary elements, would be only a primary art, rich, it is true, in geometric aspects, but denuded of all sufficient human resonance: it would be an ornamental art.

An art that would be based only upon the use of secondary sensations (an art of allusions) would be an art without a plastic base. The mind of some individuals—only those in intimate resonance with the creator—could be satisfied with it: an art of the initiated, an art requiring knowledge of a key, an art of symbols. This is the critique of most contemporary art; it is this art which, stripped of universal primary elements, has provoked the creation of an immense literature around these works and these schools, a literature whose goal is to explain, to give the key, to reveal the secret language, to permit comprehension.

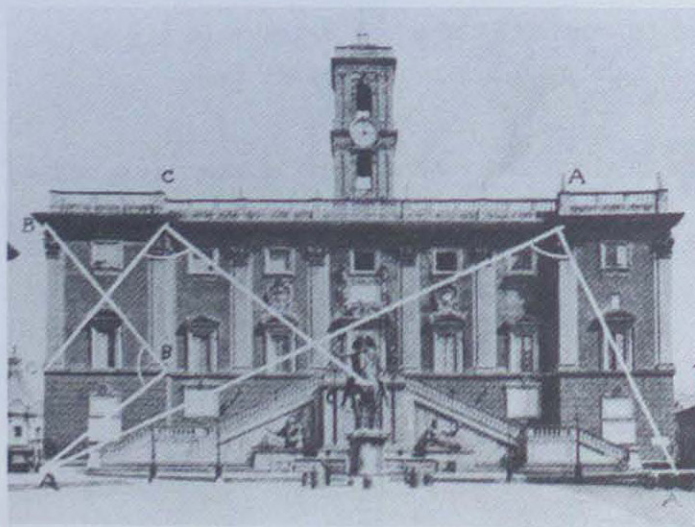
The great works of the past are those based on primary elements, and this is the only reason why they endure.

Superior sensations of a mathematical order can only be born of a choice of primary elements with secondary resonance.

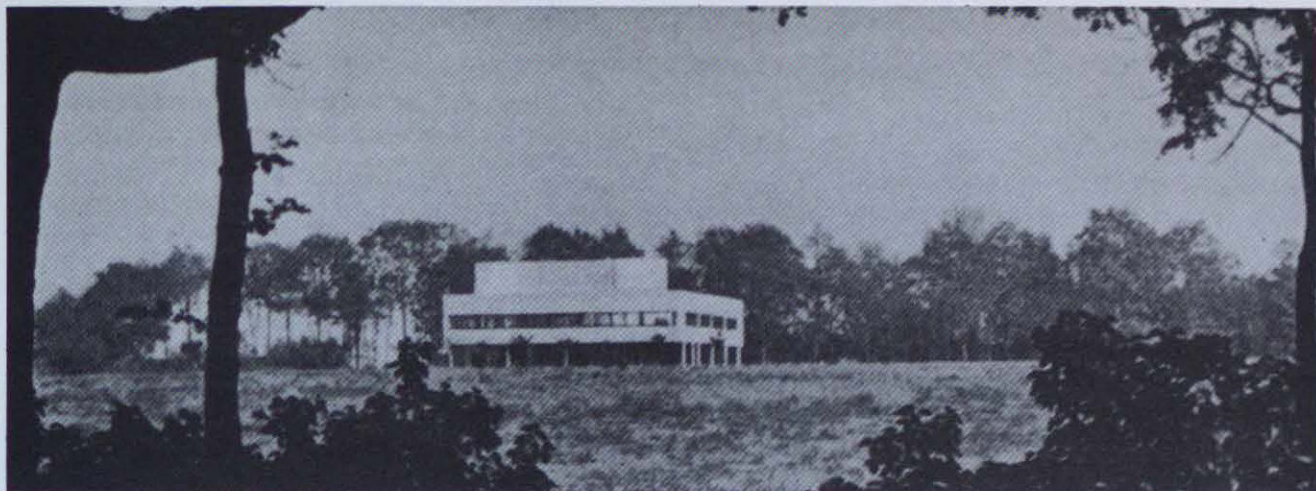
Purism strives for an art free of conventions which will utilize plastic constants and address itself above all to the universal properties of the senses and the mind.¹³

Though this passage confuses other statements made by Le Corbusier, it does define the idea of pure form and the position to which he aspired—that of the procreative genius. His striving for universals is an admittedly simplistic stance without dialectical intonation or any sense of crisis. Geometric relationships have some mathematical principles which one might want to consider universal but it is ridiculous to go as far as Corb's colonizing clichés. To say that there are universals, without questioning or situating the idea is pure elitism. Le Corbusier's writing poses the notion of himself as genius whereas the avant-garde poses questions about society.

The notion of pure form progressed to the idea of the object-type and developed into an incredibly useful one for Le Corbusier. He thought that an idea, if totally developed would



classical regulating lines



villa savoye

reach a specific form, thus becoming its own object-type. This idea is presented in *Vers Une Architecture*.

Our modern life...has created its own objects: its costume, its fountain pen, its over-sharp pencil, its typewriter, its telephone, its admirable office furniture, its plate-glass and its *Innovation* trucks, the safety razor and the briar pipe, the bowler hat and the limousine, the steamship and the airplane.¹⁴

In architectural form, Charles Jencks considers "the ramp or bridge, the double-height space, the scissor and spiral staircase; the curved bathroom or curved solarium (a tertiary space)..." as "elements of a new architecture as comparable to the *objet-types* in a Purist painting."¹⁵ Jencks does not carry this idea further, which is a mistake since the most fascinating aspects of Le Corbusier's buildings are the forms that are developed from the notion of the *objet-type*.

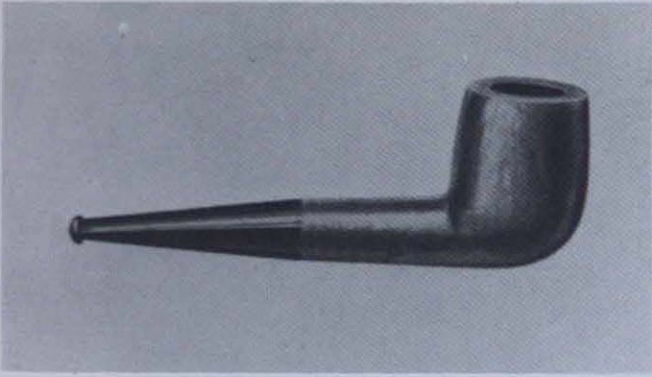
Le Corbusier describes the house as "a machine for living in."¹⁶ He continues and deals with objects viewed as modern objects and their functionality and purity. He states "Our epoch is fixing its own style day by day."¹⁷ By this he says that the methods and utilization of modern objects and techniques should be utilized in a pure method (the medium is the message). In order to simplify this far reaching and significant stance it is valuable to see how Le Corbusier had seen the potential use of the architect's materials. With his *Maison Domino* concept of 1914 Le Corbusier has reduced the house to the absolutely basic physical elements (floors, stairs and columns) necessary to support three levels of living space. He shows the extent to which modern building techniques via engineering have cleared a new path for the architect (artist). Now he finds the architect is free to use the various formal elements at his disposal. The relationship of

the built form to the space around is probably the primary thrust of architecture for Le Corbusier (a sculptural problem), whether the building was a pure prism or not. The integrity of the building and the surrounding space remain an important aesthetic concern.

The Villa Savoye at Poissy is an example of the way Le Corbusier looked upon the building as a form unto itself. Arguably this building more than any other stands "alone" as a statement of "architectural" form controlled by a master of architectural/sculptural form. The Villa Savoye is challenging in terms of how it attacked notions of what house or home meant at the time of its construction. However, the style of presentation is a neoclassical reinterpretation. The columns, balance, order and openness to the sky are as visible at Pompeii as at Poissy. The physical functioning (circulation, zoning) of this building is clearly worked out and seems to conform to a formal simplicity stated with the same abruptness as of the form.

The point to Le Corbusier's work is that it does have an "artistic sensibility", one rooted in the myth of the creative (male) ego. This "artistic sensibility" strives for and determines its own aesthetic and formal viewpoint and does *not* operate as a dialectic. Le Corbusier was concerned with the development of his own personal architectural expression based on the ideas about pure forms. It disregards what has been defined as an artistic avant-garde in favour of an unabashedly subjective stance. It is in this realm that words such as genius abide. This is a very dangerous position since criticism from this viewpoint directs artistic notions and rarely vice versa (hegemony). That is, supporters of the notion of genius are not interested in trying to create an objective position through dialectics.

Le Corbusier, with his constant stream of publications, was somewhat able to control the viewing of his own work, a further step up from the critic. He imposed a rationale on his work that many architects/critics/formalists would say worked better without one. Starting with *Vers Une Architecture* through to the development of and subsequent addition to his Modular system, Le Corbusier maintained a modern movement aesthetic. His writings were aimed not at changing the status quo, but at making people understand his own genius. He was not avant-garde because the avant-garde required art to be socially critical. An important aspect to the avant-garde, its negativism, was lacking in Le Corbusier. In addition, Le Corbusier denies himself the



a briar pipe—the final image of *Vers Une Architecture*

possibility of reaching a public too far below his good taste and prophetic insight.

Le Corbusier blatantly states in *Vers Une Architecture*, "Art is in its essence, arrogant."¹⁸ From here he says he wants to overthrow this circumstance and has determined that an enrapture of the new age and rejection of the "contemptible enslavement to the past" is the solution to a love of nostalgia.

A line of thought that is worth pursuing is this idea of rejecting the "enslavement to the past". Since Le Corbusier goes on in the book to deal with specific examples of fine architecture from the past, he is saying something apart from disregarding everything from the past. If anything, he identifies exquisite spaces in Pompeii and Istanbul and he sees distinct qualities in each which show respect and integrity of the period of time and the culture in which each was created. The context in which these places are viewed is constantly changing and progressing, but for Le Corbusier the essential character of a space does not change. In this description of Casa Del Noce in Pompeii, Le Corbusier states—

Out of the clatter of the swarming street which is for every man and full of picturesque incident, you have entered the house of a Roman. Magistral grandeur, order, a splendid amplitude: you are in the house of a Roman. What was the function of these rooms? That is outside the question. After twenty centuries, without any historical reference, you are conscious of Architecture...¹⁹

After reading this, Poggioli's definition of Purism becomes very clear. In effect Le Corbusier hangs himself.

Though Le Corbusier tried to challenge the art/architecture world with his writings and work, there remains his idealistic and self-supporting attitude. As a result of this pursuit of genius or superman there was an inability to criticize the society which he fed and which very effectively fed him. By his methods he affirmed and reinforced the position of an elite group in society. It is because of the lack of questioning throughout his methods that one can conclude that Le Corbusier was not the avant-garde artist he imagined himself to be.

It is interesting to note that while Le Corbusier was delivering sermons on the refinement and simplicity of objects which end in their resolution as object-types or pure forms, a group of artists were questioning the entire notion of reality and form and its perception of/through the senses. The surrealists worked in a direction opposed to Le Corbusier and his vaguely concealed neoclassical understandings. Rene Magritte's painting *The Treachery (or Perfidy) of Images* quotes Le Corbusier directly and confronts the viewer with a contradiction unresolved and curious. The dialectic of this work is absent in the work of Le Corbusier. Le Corbusier chose form without content. The genuine lack of social criticism, directed at established social and cultural values negates the possibility of Le Corbusier being considered avant-garde or an avant-garde artist.



the treachery (or perfidy) of images, Rene Magritte

NOTES:

1. Matei Calinescu, *Faces of Modernity: Avant-garde Decadence Kitsch*, Bloomington, Indiana University Press, 1977, p. 117.
2. Ibid, p. 119.
3. Ibid, p. 117, quoted from Bakunin.
4. Ibid, p. 119.
5. Ibid, p. 119, quoted from Ionesco.
6. Ibid, p. 120, quoted from Barthes.
7. Ibid, p. 124.
8. Roger Shattuck, *The Banquet Years. The Origins of the Avant-garde in France. 1885 to World War I*, New York, Vintage Books, 1955, p. 295.
9. Ibid, p. 295.
10. Renato Poggioli, *The Theory of the Avant-garde*, Cambridge, The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1968, p. 201.
11. Le Corbusier, *Le Corbusier 1910-65*, Zurich, Les Editions Girsberger, 1967, p. 295.
12. Ibid, p. 295.
13. Robert L. Herbert, ed. *Modern Artists on Art. Ten Unabridged Essays*, Englewood Cliffs N.J., Prentice-Hall Inc., 1964, p. 62-3, 73.
14. Le Corbusier, *Towards a New Architecture*, New York, Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1982, p. 89.
15. Charles Jencks, *Le Corbusier and the Tragic View of Architecture*, Cambridge, Harvard University Press, 1973, p. 87.
16. Le Corbusier, op. cit., p. 89.
17. Ibid, p. 89.
18. Ibid, p. 96.
19. Ibid, p. 170.