



Le Corbusier and the mechanistic trends of modern architecture

ROBERTO PANE

Original publication: Roberto Pane (1948) "Le Corbusier e le tendenze meccanicistiche dell'architettura moderna", in: *Architettura e arti figurative*, Neri Pozza Editore, Venezia, pp. 25-42.¹

Translation by Valerie Magar

The most typical aspect that the life of the world acquired during the two decades between the wars is provided by the mechanistically-inclined architecture which has been given the name of functional or rational.

That men's homes have always been an eloquent mirror of their times is an old cliché which, for the brief interval closed with World War II, appears truer than usual, perhaps never before implemented with such widespread and uniform adherence to a predetermined program.

Among the proponents of the new trends, the most highly regarded and influential was certainly the Swiss-French architect Le Corbusier, far better known for his polemical writings than for his works. Although his works were not numerous, one could draw from them the most frequent subjects for exemplification and discussion.

Le Corbusier's influence is comparable to that which, in a perfectly antithetical direction, Ruskin exerted in the same field, in the name of an artistic morality inspired by the laws of Mother Nature. However, in both of them, a common aversion for the spirits and forms of the Italian Renaissance is recognizable. For the English writer, the evil of classical architecture is incurable "because it is unholy down to its roots; because it is its moral nature that is corrupt." For the more cautious modern theorist, the Renaissance missed its greatest work, the basilica of St. Peter's, its relations marked by Michelangelo having been altered; and, as for the rest, it produced nothing but "a bunch of talented men!"²

¹ Text originally published in 1944 in *Arethusa* (I (5-6): 15-30). A second version, slightly modified and with an afterword, was published in *Città antiche edilizia nuova* (1959: 15-43) and in *Attualità e dialettica del restauro: educazione all'arte, teoria della conservazione e del restauro dei monumenti* (1987: 41-56). The changes have been included as notes in this text for scholars interested in this philological study.

² In French in the original text: "un tas de bonshommes à talent."

Le Corbusier's polemical and popularizing work can be summarized in certain tendencies and ideas that constitute its foundation and which, moreover, are continually reiterated in each of his writings. The purpose of the present essay is to examine them critically so that it may be possible to overcome the dilemma that until now has consisted in the terms of easy repudiation and even easier acceptance.

The author constantly appeals to the revolution that the machine has brought to the modern world. For the past few decades, he says, a new era has begun: that of mechanism. Today's society must adapt to the new conditions of life by abandoning the old means of expression, "The styles."³ The machine has made extraordinary progress, while the home still remains, almost everywhere, faithful to illogical compromises. It should be conceived according to a strict compliance with its practical purposes and executed with the materials that modern industry places at our disposal; for it is itself a machine, "a machine for living."⁴ Here is Le Corbusier's famous definition, the one that is constantly found, as a stated or implied assumption, in all his books.⁵ As is always the case when confronted with a statement of extreme positivism, this definition provoked violent protests in the name of tradition, art, human personality, etc., etc., but it also garnered wide support because it reduced problems of a complex and varied nature to the status of pure and simple logic by a process of simplification very much akin to that of extremist theories in the fields of politics and economics.

What were the criticisms most frequently raised against the new trends? It was said that rational architecture denied the instinctive sense of statics, building a house supported only by a few slender columns or pillars, like the typical "houses on piles,"⁶ conceived and built by Le Corbusier and later imitated by many others. But the appeal to statics had no critical basis, because the sense of statics is subject to renewal like any other that is founded on habit, and to appeal to it in aesthetics is but a repetition, under another guise, of the forbidden preconception of verisimilitude in painting. Ancient error, moreover, already found in Vitruvius, who blamed Hellenistic painting because, according to him, it was wrong to take pleasure in similar oddities. In this regard it has also been said that while against pictorial absurdities one can, at times, remain disarmed against architectural ones. Nevertheless, statics provides by not making them feasible, or by making them collapse. The truth is that the extraordinary constructive means at our disposal today make it possible to build oddities that were previously absolutely unthinkable, and that it is only up to the unscrupulous and always free aesthetic sensibility to accept or reject, without such judgment being influenced by a misunderstood tradition or sense of the verisimilar.

It has also been said that the normal proportions of windows were not to be, nor could they be altered because they met needs that had been confirmed for centuries. This is less true than it seems, because the exceptions offered by the past are very numerous. One thinks of the strong variations in the openings of a Renaissance or Baroque façade, in which it is not a constant relationship between the lighting and the environment that appears to be sought. It is, rather, a plastic concept that limits and subordinates practical needs to itself, or perhaps ignores them, simply because they were neither felt nor required. If our present means allow us to vary the size of windows, tradition will, therefore, have no good reason to prevent us from doing so, while the search for better hygiene and that of a different plastic expression may support us in adopting entirely new relationships.

³ In French in the original text: "Les styles."

⁴ In French in the original version: "une machine à habiter."

⁵ 1987 version: "Here is Le Corbusier's famous definition, the one that is found present [...]."

⁶ In French in the original version: "maisons sur pilotis."

Yet another critique consisted in asserting that reinforced concrete could not, like stone and brick, give rise to a style, because it is, by its very nature, amorphous: as if the materials had their own virtue of style, and were not, all indistinctly, the inert matter waiting to be enlivened by the creative spirit.

Again, in opposition to the new trends, another mistake was to invoke arches and columns as elements that architecture, as art, could never do without. Who does not remember the controversy that took place in this regard in Italy? The proponents of the new architecture said that by now these traditional elements belonged to the old academy and that they had exhausted all their expressive possibilities. Thus, in other forms, the same error as above was repeated, for just as materials cannot be beautiful merely because they are old or new, arches and columns cannot cease to be susceptible to new interpretations merely because they are almost as old as the world.⁷ On the other hand, the misunderstanding of the traditionalists and the old academies consisted in believing that talking about Doric columns or Gothic and Renaissance arches meant talking about art, and was not instead the mere enunciation of abstract forms of figurative language, destitute of all concrete meaning from the moment they had ceased to belong to a particular artistic work to cancel themselves in the didactic function of a symbol.

Yet, as is always the case, such erroneous judgments have had their historical justification, and this is to be recognized in the weariness produced by so much recent architecture that has passively abused classicist language, confident that, to save face, it was enough to more or less remake the pieces of glorious works. Thus, in our country, the emptiness of so-called Umbertine architecture has led to the belief that the expressive use of classicist language is now impossible; in the same way that an exhibition of mediocre paintings leads the sensitive observer to think, at least for a moment, that there is now to be despair over the impossibility of seeing good painting done. In other words, both the architects of the first capital Rome and their rationalist successors have, in their opposing intransigence, erred in exactly the same way, because, with very rare exceptions, they have attributed expressive value to abstract elements and have lacked that true freedom which arises from the intimate sense of architecture as art. And here, departing for a moment from the more serious and general discourse on the subject of controversy, it is worth recalling, again the one that took place years ago in our corporate Chamber.⁸ Having to, here, accept or reject an official expression of the new tendencies, many national councilors, animated by holy indignation, branded this one with infamy, saying that it denied our best tradition and could only suit a country like Russia. They ignored what had taken place in Russia! Here, after the first and widespread rationalistic experiments, and after having found that people did not like geometric nudity, they had returned to the Corinthian capital, agreeing with the good soul of Palladian Quarenghi! Confirming all of this, Le Corbusier himself said in Rome that in Russia he was treated with manifest suspicion because he was considered linked to European capitalism, while in Italy he was suspected of being an emissary of the Soviets. As for the Italian controversy, it is still to be remembered how in it, he who was always right, was not slow to intervene, crediting the new forms under the unequivocal sign of the fascist revolution.

⁷ 1987 version: "The above error was thus repeated, in other forms, because, just as materials cannot be beautiful merely because they are old or new, arches and columns cannot cease to be susceptible to new interpretations merely because they are almost as old as the world."

⁸ 1987 version: "And here, departing for a moment from the more serious and general discourse, it is worthwhile for me to recall, again on the subject of controversy, the one that took place years ago in our corporate Chamber."

Returning now to mechanistic theories, let us look more particularly at what Le Corbusier writes about the architecture of the past and so-called styles. In his best-known book, *Vers une architecture*, we read, "The 'styles' are a lie. Style is a unity of principle animating all the work of an epoch, the result of a state of mind which has its own special character."⁹ Wrong definition, because style, in the only possible meaning of the word, namely aesthetic, animates the works of a particular artist and not those of an entire era with which they may have only affinity of culture and taste. Moreover, while he rightly says that styles are not to be believed in, he generalizes style as an attribute of all the works of an epoch, and thus, considering the various epochs together, falls back on styles again. Then, in the same book, he concludes even more categorically, "If we set ourselves against the past, we are forced to the conclusion that the old architectural code, with its mass of rules and regulations evolved during four thousand years, is no longer of any interest; it no longer concerns us."¹⁰ And elsewhere, in *Précisions*, we read the following judgment regarding Vignola's canons: "These canons are false, but to such a degree that you can't imagine; it's something like a prodigious buffoonery,"¹¹ and further on, the wrong centuries are no longer forty but only four: "The orders of architecture! The orders of whom and of what, the architecture of what? And to think that the machinery of the architectural world has been stuck in this mess for four centuries!"¹²

In rereading similar expressions, so far removed from any critical seriousness, one thinks with some amazement of the favor and lively success with which they were received. What fault did Vignola have if, like so many other architects of his time, he wrote a treatise on the five orders? Every person of some culture knows that he can find in it nothing but the personal taste of the master, and thus an interesting guide to the interpretation of his work as an artist.¹³ If then the treatise has become a practical manual, in use almost to the present day, the fault lies not with the author but only with those who made use of it, for an artist is never guilty of the more or less numerous stupidities and "buffooneries"¹⁴ that are perpetrated in his name. In Renaissance men, the tendency to derive general theories from one's personal experiences is a widespread evidence of naïve enthusiasm and positive love of knowledge. Vignola certainly believed that he had found good rules for everyone, and so did Alberti and Palladio; but this error did not prevent others from following entirely different paths, without feeling paralyzed by rules or regulations, because they too had something to say. On the other hand, it is worth mentioning that it was the French who made such systematic use of Vignola that they felt the need to publish pocket editions of it: *Le Vignole de poche*.

All this may seem obvious, but there is certainly no point in repeating it, since similarly crude judgments are often based on and disseminated in historical interpretations. If I were then to be told that expressions such as those quoted are not to be discussed with undue effort because they were uttered for the mere purpose of propaganda, I would reply that already too much political propaganda has afflicted us for it to be the case that we should also endure

⁹ Original quotation: "Les styles sont un mensonge. Le style, c'est une unité de principe qui anime toutes les œuvres d'une époque et qui résulte d'un état d'esprit caractérisé."

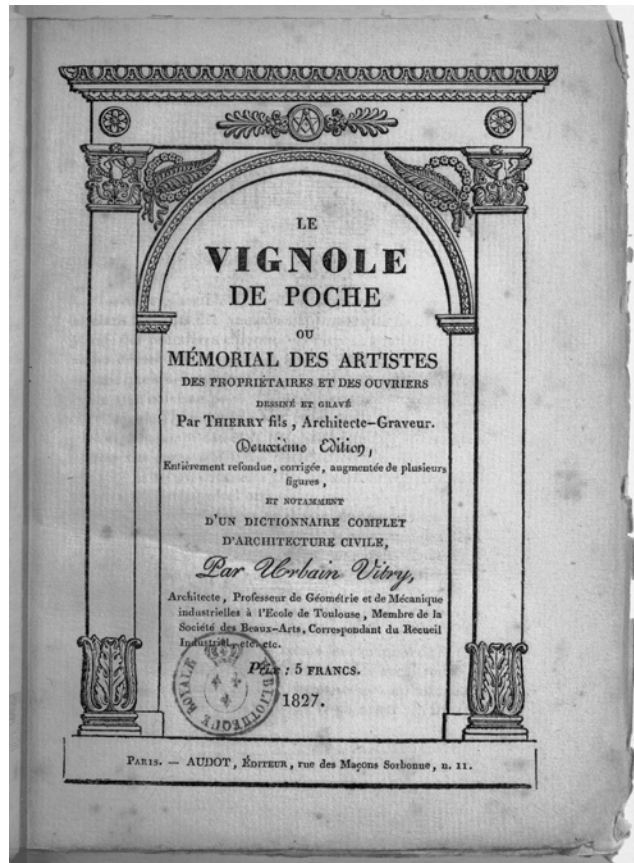
¹⁰ Original quotation: "Si l'on se place en face du passé, on constate que la vieille codification de l'architecture, surchargée d'articles et de règlements pendant quarante siècles, cesse de nous intéresser; elle ne nous concerne plus; il y a eu révolution dans le concept de l'architecture."

¹¹ Original quotation: "Ces canons sont faux, mais d'un tel degré que vous ne sauriez imaginer; c'est quelque chose comme une prodigieuse bouffonnerie."

¹² Original quotation: "Les ordres de l'architecture! Les ordres de qui et de quoi, l'architecture de quoi? Et songer que la machine du monde de l'architecture est ensablée depuis quatre siècles dans ce désordre-là!"

¹³ 1987 version: "Every person of some culture knows that he can find in it nothing but the personal taste of the master, and thus an interesting guide to the interpretation of his work as an artist."

¹⁴ In French in the original version: "bouffonneries."



COVER. *Vignole de poche*.

that of pseudo-culture. Nor can and should the fact that the writer is an artist justify those distortions and errors that we have reason not to tolerate in a critic or historian. It has already been said that an artist ceases to be an artist when he writes about criticism; but never has the reminder of this truth seemed so necessary as it does today, namely, at a time when all too many are those who give the impression of cheating at the game.¹⁵ On the other hand, it is still worth insisting about the concept of style, which is then that of architecture as art, because the error of Le Corbusier and the so-called rationalists is not limited to the appreciations mentioned before, but is made fundamental by a perfect coherence. This coherence is implemented in the pursuit of those modes of construction and those forms that are suggested by the most typical materials of our time, namely steel and reinforced concrete. “Reinforced concrete automatically provides us with a window in length,”¹⁶ writes our author in his book *Une maison, un palais*. That is, we will not adapt reinforced concrete to what we want to express but, conversely, we will make windows in length because they are automatically suggested to us by the material itself. A de facto originality would already be achieved by the logical employment of the new means; however, he himself realizes how such originality of material is not enough for art because art always has “something lyrical.”¹⁷ He therefore, reproves the tendency he observed in the most gifted young people to deny the very word of aesthetics because, according to them, what is sought is the useful,

¹⁵ 1987 version: “It has already been said that an artist ceases to be an artist when he writes about criticism; but never has the reminder of this truth seemed so necessary as it does today, that is, in a time when all too many are those who give the impression of cheating at the game.”

¹⁶ Original quotation: “Le béton armé nous dote automatiquement de la fenêtre en longueur.”

¹⁷ Original quotation: “quelque chose de lyrique.”

and the useful is already beautiful.¹⁸ At the conclusion of the critique carried out against this tendency, which we might say of the extreme left, he acknowledges that the elements determined by pure utility are still insufficient: "The elements born of analysis are gripped by a rhythm that binds them together, assembles them, composes them, orders them, an act emanating from the will."¹⁹ In any case, rhythm emanates from the creative spirit and not from the will that is its conduit. "This will... is the conception particular to each of us, individual.... In aesthetics, then, there is a factor that fixes the immortality of the work and assures us that immortal works will always be able to emerge: it is the individual."²⁰ But how to reconcile with the individual work a mechanical program all based on rationality? Here's how: a certain number of individuals elicits unanimous adherence to the modes expressed by the "provocative" work. Thus "an aesthetic is grammatized (*sic*), even if it means becoming petrified."²¹ There would thus be, first, products born of the new method and technique, the serial products, and from these, then, the work of art would be born. It is a matter, in other words, of arriving at art by an entirely different route from that of art itself, which, on the other hand, is born of itself and never assumes the commitment to make use of what others may have prepared for its emergence. All this recalls the sacrifices and pains that modern absolutisms have imposed on men in the name of a happiness that would later be enjoyed by their children: a convenient way of evading judgment by saying that it is for posterity to pronounce it. For that matter, the banality of the cliché is felt here too: who has not heard that the attempts and approximations of present art would then be assimilated and justified by the work of future genius? However, the Parthenon, says Le Corbusier, is itself the product of a series, and would not be conceivable without the innumerable experiences made earlier in the same direction. This is true, but only in a very general sense, that is, because nothing would be conceivable in history if every event were not preceded by a complex of conditions of civilization and trends. In the specific case, it should be borne in mind that the predecessors of Ictinus and Callicrates also implemented their own ideal of form, accomplished and defined in itself, and whose analogy with that expressed in the Parthenon by the collaborators of Phidias was only mechanical in nature.²² To say that a century earlier the constituent elements of the Parthenon were already determined is more or less accurate, but only in the mechanical sense and not in the aesthetic sense; what matters is to see what relationships imprinted these abstract elements with a new value and in what way the temple of Neptune at Paestum is expressive for a clear individuality that has nothing in common with the Athenian temple.²³ On the other hand, what is worthy of arousing the highest admiration in the latter is not pure geometric functionality, for it, as pure, would not admit the expression of any feeling, but instead it is the feeling of a rigorous formal accomplishment that idealizes functionality itself. In other words, wanting to identify, as rationalists so often do, the document of a simple

¹⁸ 1987 version: "He therefore, reproves the tendency he observed in the most gifted young people to deny the very word of aesthetics because, according to them, what is sought is the useful, and the useful is already the beautiful."

¹⁹ Original quotation: "Les éléments, nés de l'analyse, sont empoignés par un rythme qui les lie les uns aux autres, les assemble, les compose, les ordonne, acte émanant de la volonté."

²⁰ Original quotation: "Cette volonté... c'est la conception particulière à chacun de nous, individuelle.... Il est donc, dans l'esthétique, un facteur qui fixe l'immortalité de l'œuvre et qui nous assure que toujours il pourra surgir des œuvres immortelles: c'est l'individu."

²¹ Original quotation: "une esthétique se grammatise (*sic*), quitte à se pétrifier."

²² 1987 version: "[...] and whose analogy with that expressed in the Parthenon by Phidias' collaborators was only of a cultural nature."

²³ 1987 version: "To say that a century earlier the constituent elements of the Parthenon were already determined is more or less accurate, but only in the sense of technical and figurative experience; what is important is to see what new relationships have imprinted in that culture to the new value and in what way the temple of Neptune at Paestum is expressive for a clear individuality that has nothing in common with the Athenian temple."

necessity of a mechanical nature at the origin of every architectural form, does not consider the fact that, already in its first manifestation, this necessity presents itself configured in an artistic form in which it is not possible to isolate the practical program from its aesthetic realization. This is, in the reverse sense, confirmed by the critique we make of a failed work when we discover, in its unattained transfiguration, the un-exceeded necessities of the practical program, that is, when we find that an inseparable and autonomous unity does not stand before us. On the other hand, having recognized that both as every work of art is perfect in itself, and presupposes no further unfolding, any theory based on evolution will turn out to be abstract and conventional, and the due distinction will be made between the turn of cultural and aesthetic trends and the individual and vital individualities of artistic works.



PARTHENON, ATHENS. *Image: Roberto Pane, 1952 (AFRP, GRE.N.14).*

That architecture is essentially geometry must have been thought, before the modern mechanists, by many architects of antiquity, and especially those of the last Gothic age, who, complicating the still elementary geometry of their predecessors, sought exquisite subtleties of compasses and squares, and reduced to a fragile and dangerous texture those tendencies that, at first, had been expressed in solid and clear organisms. "Gothic architecture" Renan sharply wrote, "was afflicted by the same illness as philosophy and poetry: subtlety."²⁴ And it is still a "logic

²⁴ Original quotation: "L'architecture gothique était malade du même mal que la philosophie et la poésie: la subtilité."

subtlety” that induces today’s mechanists to conceive architecture as a true geometry made of juxtapositions and interpenetrations of solids, affirming as a complete program of figurative representation what can only have a value of metaphor. In fact, architecture is only in symbol a geometry, since, as has been wittily observed, geometry would not cease to exist if the world had an end, while the fate of architecture is linked to that of the much-stirred surface of the earth. On the other hand, the white sharp edges, thundering for tens of meters against the background of the sky, the vast smooth and immaculate surfaces, the long openings of crystal and iron defend very poorly, against the ravages of time, their aspiration to a geometric purity. We have seen how a few years were enough for the modern factory to take on the dreary appearance of an abandoned fairground pavilion and to make one feel the need for new plasters and new glazes capable of renewing the illusion of a perfect mechanism. While the machine does not have time to age because it is soon replaced by another, rational buildings should at least be able to age and they cannot; over them the drippings and stains, which elsewhere take on the value of a patina, are as intolerable as a hair in a glass of clear water.²⁵

Elsewhere Le Corbusier questions what is really essential in architecture. For him in a prism, in a cube, one can find “the definitive, the fundamental of the architectural feel;”²⁶ and, before functional architecture began to make many proselytes he wrote, “If the essence of architecture is spheres, cones and cylinders, the generators and accusers of these forms are based on pure geometry. But this geometry scares today’s architects,”²⁷ while the engineers, free from all academic entanglements and aimed solely, at practical utility, “reach the generators and accusers of the volumes...; they find themselves to be in line with the principles that Bramante and Raphael applied long ago”²⁸ (*Vers une architecture*). All this brings to mind the much-abused cliché of the poetry of building sites and workshops. Many will recall how some bad philosopher here even wrote that in our time the true essence of poetry was to be found in construction sites and workshops, confusing a possible pretext, or subject of poetry, with poetry itself. In architecture the essential is not the mechanism, whether manifest or concealed, of the structures, but simply the art, and this, with respect to its static whole, may appear coherent or incoherent, sincere or insincere as the case may be, while it is always to be considered in its entirety; so that, even when we contemplate those parts in which it seems to us that the artist has achieved his purest expressive synthesis, we know that we cannot separate them from the rest, considering this as non-essential, because that rest has an indispensable motive of connection and support; and thus performs a function that is not simply practical, but aesthetic, since the best could not subsist outside the whole in which it participates. This, it is also worth recalling the memory of much modern painting, in which the concern to produce only golden spaces leads many artists to elaborate refined formal speculations, keeping as far as possible from what might, in some way, have a narrative character or a more cordially human accent. Considered in this light, much modern art, and with it much exquisitely formalistic criticism, conceals, in its refined and intelligent control, what was called, with happy expression, a moral cowardice.

²⁵ 1987 version: “While the machine has no time to age because it is soon replaced by another, rational buildings should at least be able to age, if not last, and they cannot; over them early drippings and stains, replace what elsewhere the value of a patina, and succeed as intolerable as a hair in a glass of clear water.”

²⁶ Original quotation: “est le définitif, le fondamental de la sensation architecturale”.

²⁷ Original quotation: “Si l’essentiel de l’architecture est sphères, cônes et cylindres, les génératrices et les accusatrices de ces formes sont à base de pure géométrie. Mais cette géométrie effare les architectes d’aujourd’hui”.

²⁸ Original quotation: “aboutissent aux génératrices, aux accusatrices des volumes...; ils se trouvent être en accord avec les principes que Bramante et Raphael avaient appliqués il y a longtemps déjà”.

"Once the functions were satisfied, we had not added a cubic centimeter,"²⁹ writes Le Corbusier in defense of his design for the palace of the League of Nations, intending to imply that here nothing had been conceded to decorative velleities; which is not true, moreover, because in the center of its façade we see outlined, or rather shorthanded, a group of statues, whose volume would, if executed, have largely exceeded that of a cubic centimeter. Now such considerations lead us to the error that it is really the case to call fundamental and essential to the mechanistic program. It consists in the deliberate elimination of every detail that does not have its logical function and, consequently, everything of expression, of lyricism and fantasy should be in a field that, by its very nature, is quite foreign to such expression, just as general logic is foreign to the internal and particular logic of every work of art. In this sense, the aforementioned extremists, who deny art by claiming that the useful is already the beautiful, prove more consistent in their error than those who confuse structure with the idealization of structure. As Geoffrey Scott well wrote in his book *The Architecture of Humanism*, "The Mechanical Fallacy, in its zeal for structure, refuses, in the architecture of the Renaissance, an art where structure is raised to the ideal. It looks in poetry for the syntax of a naked prose." Here, of course, the reference to the English writer's effective judgment is not meant to be an exhortation to follow in the footsteps of the Renaissance masters. What I care to clarify is how in mechanistic architecture the lyrical and fantastic detail is inevitably absent, and that architecture is still not in a mass or geometrical pattern, just as poetry is not in the narrative plot, but in the lyrical and musical detail of verse. I agree that the detail need not necessarily be a pilaster, a cornice or a capital; but let it be hollowed out by what you will, it will always be something that cannot be identified with the functional element, because it is an idealization that transcends function.

To understand the origins of the rationalism of Le Corbusier and the other mechanists, it is enough to call to mind the architectural theories of the historians of the last century, and especially of many Frenchmen such as Choisy, Viollet-le-Duc, Enlart, Reymond, etc., all of whom were more or less inclined to use the yardstick of traditional Cartesian logic in a field where it was necessary to proceed with another unit of measurement. These writers certainly had the merit of being among the first to provide material for teaching and dissemination, but they were also influential assertors of past doctrinaire academicism and the related equivocation of styles. Here it will suffice to cite, as a typical example of "raison cartésienne," the following passage from Viollet-le-Duc, which Le Corbusier relates in support of his theses in his book *Une maison, un palais*. The French historian declares that there will be an architecture when the public really wants to have it and, to achieve that end, he suggests the following method: "...give a fixed program, improve it as much as possible, make sure it meets the needs exactly, then ask the artist, when he brings in his plans, the reason for everything: –Columns on this façade? why? –Cornices between floors? why? –Windows wider here than there? why? –Arches on this side, flowerbeds opposite? why? etc.– If, to these questions, the architect answers just once: –The rules of art tell us...– don't let him finish..., because the rules of art consist above all, in architecture, in doing nothing without reason..."³⁰ One could not be clearer and simpler than this and at the same time more perfectly unaware of the very nature of art. As we can see, this is the same *raison* that we find in the mechanistic polemic, and Le Corbusier is perfectly consistent in recalling, among the "voices from beyond the grave," that of Viollet-le-Duc.

²⁹ Original quotation: "Les fonctions satisfaites, nous n'avions ajouté un centimètre cube".

³⁰ Original quotation: "...donner un programme arrêté, l'améliorer autant que possible, s'assurer qu'il remplit exactement les besoins, puis demander à l'artiste, lorsqu'il apporte ses plans, la raison de chaque chose: –Des colonnes sur cette façade? pourquoi? –Des corniches entre des étages? pourquoi? –Des fenêtres plus larges ici que là? pourquoi? –Des arcs de ce côté, des platesbandes en face? pourquoi? etc. – Si, à ces questions, l'architecte vous répond une seule fois: –Les règles de l'art nous...– ne le laissez pas achever..., car les règles de l'art consistent avant tout, en architecture, à ne rien faire sans raison..."

What has been said so far may, perhaps, suffice to show the reader the motives and anxieties of the aesthetic polemic of which the French architect was the most typical and most influential proponent. But it would be doing him a great disservice if, alongside his misinterpretations of criticism and the errors that have resulted, we did not remember the rich contribution he has made especially in the field of modern urban planning programs. As early as 1922, when there was still an urgent need to solve the problems posed by the destruction of the other war, he showed the practical and aesthetic inefficiency of the building systems then universally adopted; the insalubriousness and the misunderstood sense of tradition expressed in the sad four- or five-story rental houses; and proposed, in schematic form,³¹ plastic ideas that suggested new and harmonious possibilities in recent urban layouts, substituting, for the indifferent fragmentary nature of successive blocks, the continuity of masses responding to a unified perspective vision; thus "crescent-shaped streets, tower cities,"³² etc. The concept of the house on piles was also extended by him to the possibility of allowing, for areas of heavier traffic, the circulation of cars and pedestrians below the buildings; and here it should be noted, that, although in an entirely different form, this concept was partially realized during the Middle Ages in our northern centers, by means of the porticoed spaces below the public buildings.

In a more general sense, the vision of an organic continuity of wall masses, alternating with green areas, can offer aesthetic results far superior to those of the vague and uncontrolled picturesque, just as a meditated composition can be superior to a purely accidental gimmick. Already for more than two decades we have been shown a building program which, unlike those of the past, involves the transformation or reconstruction from scratch of vast areas of the city in such a way that the character of the new layouts not only responds to the distributive needs of traffic and urban densification, to liberation from the noisy chaos and narrowness of the old centers, but also aims at a broader mass composition to achieve aesthetic effects both in the individual episodes of the buildings and as a whole. We have felt and feel how all this can provide the material conditions for a renewal, but on the part of many it has been believed that such novelty of program was also sufficient to bring about expressive novelties, and such a narrow rationalism has enacted our passive subordination to that which, instead, should be subordinated to us. Will it be possible for us today to discover, in the endless mass of so many impersonal expressions such as those that preceded World War II, anything with the accent of art? It is probable, but to this that same unprejudiced sense of form with which we have been able to enjoy the beauty of so many ancient works will guide us, and, as in these, in the new³³ we shall find the eternal exception, the sign of the victorious spirit of every fashion and every predetermined program.

Moreover, against the dangers of the new trends, Le Corbusier himself, with generous contradiction that uncovers at once his temperament as an artist and his weakness as a critic, issues a cry of alarm. It is contained in one of his last books, *Croisade*, published in 1933, and that is, after the interval of about a decade since the publication of *Vers une architecture*, rationalist currents had become increasingly widespread in the world. In *Croisade* he even goes so far as to declare tolerable the academicism of the big wigs, especially, those same ones who were previously at fault for him in comparison with the indifference and bad faith of so many false moderns: "...I consider this ossified formatting of a current architectural renaissance in its infancy to be cretinous and criminal, and I denounce these people who

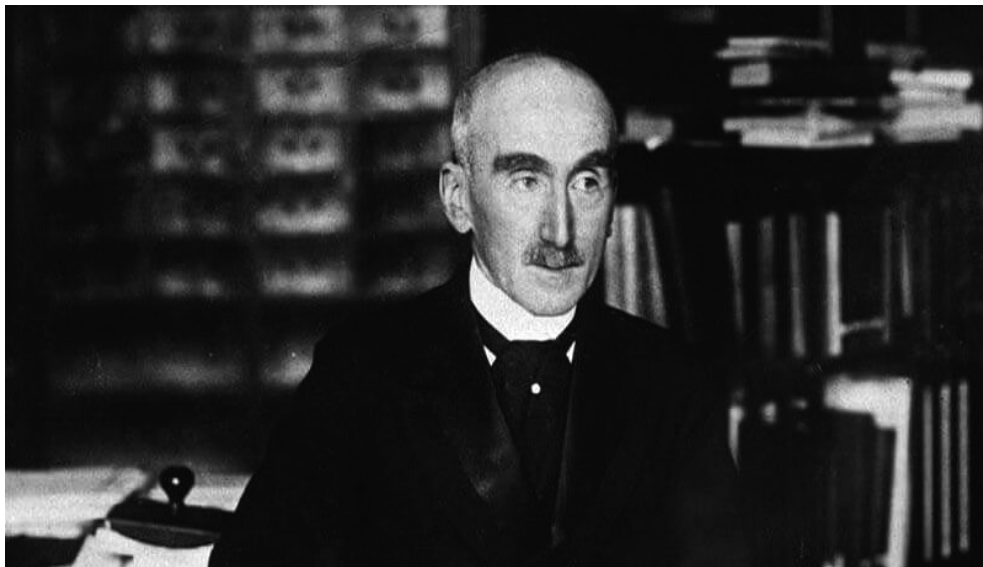
³¹ 1987 version: "He, and proposed, in schematic form [...]."

³² Original quotation: "les rues à redents, les villes tours".

³³ 1987 version: "of the beauty of many ancient works, and, as in them, also in the new ones."

only got involved with us to lie and make money!”³⁴ Quite right! The *académisme des pérruques* may in fact even manage to be tolerable, just as one tolerates the one who does not understand but has a great longing to understand. Better, perhaps, an error than the indifferent mechanical play of a formula reduced to everyone’s grasp. But what is to be thought of an initial revival that, instead of remaining the proud domain of a few initiates, is mortified by too easy a victory and risks being no longer recognizable in the inflation of serial products? “We are already academizing the modern,”³⁵ deplores Le Corbusier. But why does this happen? Precisely because nothing is as easy as the new academy.

Referring to more general trends, it seems to me that the mechanistic trend agrees with the widespread illusion that consists in seeing in the machine the means by which man will be able to achieve his spiritual liberation. Even today, for example, very often one hears people say: When the machine has reduced the number of working hours to a minimum, man will have much more time for himself and will be able to enjoy the beauty of art and the other divine futilities that elevate the tone of life. As if these things had not been cultivated enough so far only because of lack of time and insufficiency of wealth. This optimistic cliché reminds me of the experience years ago in Italy regarding free admission to museums: it was thought that by abolishing the entrance fee, museums would be much more frequented, and instead it was found that the only new guests were couples eager for a lonely and quiet place. It is certainly legitimate to wish for better living conditions, but it is foolish to believe that the achievement of such conditions necessarily leads to the spread of higher culture. The extraordinary increase in mechanical means seems to have diminished confidence in the implementation of a humanistic ideal. The dizzying industrial progress has become an end in itself and, failing what Bergson defined as an original mystical impulse directed to contribute to the liberation of man, it drags along man himself who no longer has the strength to control it; like one who, having lost the reins, becomes the prey of a maddened horse. The world’s most authoritative voices warn today that our problems are, first and foremost, moral in nature, but they do not seem to have much hold on a disheartened humanity, whose only hope seems to be reduced to the expectation of renewed prosperity and the mirage of higher production figures.



HENRI BERGSON. *Image: Public domain.*

³⁴ Original quotation: “Je tiens pour crétin et criminel cette mise en formules ossifiées d’une actuelle renaissance architecturale à ses débuts et je dénonce ces gens qui ne se sont mis avec nous que pour mentir et faire de l’argent!”

³⁵ Original quotation: “On académise déjà le moderne.”

The forms of recent architecture are thus to be understood as the plastic image of broader currents and tendencies of our time, and the criticism carried out on them can bring us back, by analogy between the aesthetic world and the moral world, to the criticism which, in the name of a renewed Christian ideal, has been raised against the hateful and barbaric simplicity of recent materialism. In any event, as is the case with every experience, which, though mistaken, has been fully lived and discarded, it is not to be believed that that of architectural rationalism has not also borne fruit. The most important seems to me to be this: that, after having for many years interrupted a misunderstood continuity of tradition, it is now possible to turn back and look at architecture's past with a new eye, discovering art beyond those patterns that for so many have represented, and still represent, the measure of critical judgment.

On the other hand, the reconstruction task before us today is of such vast proportions and of such urgency as to demand the employment of all modern industrial and technical possibilities. It is to be expected that many mechanistic experiments, already accomplished before the war, will be taken up again for adaptation to the new needs, and that houses will be mass-produced in the same workshops that have hitherto produced instruments of war. But this is not to say that the housing machine should necessarily be a reality of tomorrow. Immediate and vital necessities will prevail, perhaps, for many years against all other needs, and mass-produced houses, already widespread before the war in many countries of Europe, will provide the typical appearance of rebuilt cities; but this should not, in any case, constitute a condition inevitably contrary to art and good taste, for it is not necessarily the case that the product of the machine cannot satisfy aspirations that transcend mere necessity. To this end, however, it is necessary that it is not the machine that thinks but man, and that man feels how his effort must overcome rationalistic and utilitarian narrowness in order to strive for a higher and more human satisfaction. Le Corbusier preached that, having built mass-produced houses, it was necessary to create "the state of mind to live in mass-produced homes,"³⁶ adding then, consistently, that it was necessary for this purpose to arrive at the "standard emotion."³⁷ But from the standard emotion to the automatic man the step is a very short one, and if we feel as no longer tolerable the false rhetoric of the old Umbertine, Wilhelmine or Victorian houses, we equally refuse to embrace the verb of pure and simple utility, since we know that, in this case, we could not consider ourselves participants in a true civilized society, since this society starts at the very moment when pure and simple utility is surpassed.

The influence of mechanistic tendencies was also profound in Italy, although here the first experiences began more than ten years later than in the countries of northern Europe. Here, unfortunately, less than elsewhere had the teaching of our great architecture been understood in a right way; and so, opposition to the spread of the so-called 20th century did not overcome the superficial critical empiricism recalled at the beginning of this writing. Let it be added, moreover, that since our industrial production could not compete with that of other countries, those qualities of a technical order and that boldness of building programs which are found to be widely present elsewhere were also scarce in the great majority of our rational buildings. This condition of practical inferiority has served to make our most gifted architects better understand that the way forward had to be different and that, in any case the intransigence of any program had to be rejected by a more mature aesthetic consciousness. Thus, in the midst of so many works whose inventive poverty is poorly disguised by the sumptuous covers of travertine and marble, some artistically worthy expressions have not been lacking, even though their practical program may almost always have been provided by political propaganda; for, among the many possibilities, this is by no means to be ruled out as well, namely, that propaganda has sometimes constituted a pretext for the work of art and not the other way

³⁶ Original quotation: "l'état d'esprit d'habiter des maisons en séries."

³⁷ Original quotation: "émotion type."

around, as has usually been the case.³⁸ On the contrary, I believe, in this regard, that those who rage today to define as negative every Italian artistic activity belonging to the last two decades, risk being mortified tomorrow by a more serene critical judgment.

In every country, the current production of architecture reflects certain common features, always mediocre precisely because they are common, and which, in essence, coincide with the generic tendencies and customs of individual peoples. In Italy, the most widespread vice of modern production seems to me to have consisted in what might be called the misunderstanding of the monumental. In our country, if it is well observed, every recent building, even of modest size, always seeks to distinguish itself among the others by means intended to be clearly visible even to the uncultured public. Not the pursuit of simple relations, made to be discovered only by the eyes that can see, but something that, for fear of not being individual enough, vulgarly accentuates the adjectives and highlights every possible gimmick. This negative ostentation appears almost always present, both in the vague neo-Baroque production, which preceded the so-called Novecento style, and in that of the latter. The intimate vulgarity of these forms is especially prevalent in the most active centers such as Milan and Rome. One thinks, as one of the most recent examples, of the houses and villas of the Parioli district, of that display of stylistic essays and rational novelties, peering among remnants of green and which, in their bad assortment, give the impression of looking at each other with hostile and cold curiosity. Those who live in the midst of all this without feeling at least a vague sense of mortification can be well assured that they have nothing to do with a sense of art and good taste. In this connection I recall that a foreign architect, speaking with an Italian colleague, said that his ideal would be to be able to build an ordinary house on Via Sistina that would stand in such good company with the others that it would go unnoticed. While he was thus expressing a sincere love for that air of civilization that is present even in the modest walls that chorus our monuments, he was also giving, in a witty and kindly way, advice worthy of acceptance and meditation.



PARIOLI, ROME. *Image: Postcard, public domain.*

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³⁸ 1987 version: “[...] a pretext to the work of art and not the other way around, as was normally the case.”