

Le Corbusier, Excerpts from Towards a New Architecture (1923)

Argument

The engineer's aesthetic and architecture

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.

The Architect, by his arrangement of forms, realizes an order which is a pure creation of his spirit; by forms and shapes he affects our senses to an acute degree and provokes plastic emotions; by the relationships which he creates he wakes profound echoes in us, he gives us the measure of an order which we feel to be in accordance with that of our world, he determines the various movements of our heart and of our understanding; it is then that we experience the sense of beauty.

Three reminders to architects

Mass

Our eyes are constructed to enable us to see forms in light. Primary forms are beautiful forms because they can be clearly appreciated. Architects today no longer achieve these simple forms. Working by calculation, engineers employ geometrical forms, satisfying our eyes by their geometry and our understanding by their mathematics; their work is on the direct line of good art.

Surface

A mass is enveloped in its surface, a surface which is divided up according to the directing and generating lines of the mass; and this gives the mass its individuality. Architects today are afraid of the geometrical constituents of surfaces. The great problems of modern construction must have a geometrical solution. Forced to work in accordance with the strict needs of exactly determined conditions, engineers make use of generating and accusing lines in relation to forms. They create limpid and moving plastic facts.

Plan

The Plan is the generator. Without a plan, you have lack of order, and willfulness. The Plan holds in itself the essence of sensation. The great problems of to-morrow, dictated by collective necessities, put the question of "plan" in a new form. Modern life demands, and is waiting for, a new kind of plan, both for the house and for the city.

Regulating lines

An inevitable element of Architecture. The necessity for order. The regulating line is a guarantee against willfulness. It brings satisfaction to the understanding. The regulating line is a means to an end; it is not a recipe. Its choice and the modalities of expression given to it are an integral part of architectural creation. Eyes which do not see

Liners

A great epoch has begun. There exists a new spirit. There exists a mass of work conceived in the new spirit; it is to be met with particularly in industrial production. Architecture is stifled by custom. 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. Our own epoch is determining, day by day, its own style. Our eyes, unhappily, are unable yet to discern it.

Airplanes

The airplane is the product of close selection. The lesson of the airplane lies in the logic which governed the statement of the problem and its realization. The problem of the house has not yet been stated. Nevertheless there do exist standards for the dwelling house. Machinery contains in itself the factor of economy, which makes for selection. The house is a machine for living in.

Automobiles

We must aim at the fixing of standards in order to face the problem of perfection. The Parthenon is a product of selection applied to a standard. Architecture operates in accordance with standards. Standards are a matter of logic, analysis and minute study; they are based on a problem that has been well "stated." A standard is definitely established by experiment.

Architecture

The lesson of Rome

The business of Architecture is to establish emotional relationships by means of raw materials. Architecture goes beyond utilitarian needs. Architecture is a plastic thing. The spirit of order, a unity of intention. The sense of relationships; architecture deals with quantities. Passion can create drama out of inert stone.

The illusion of plans

The Plan proceeds from within to without; the exterior is the result of an interior. The elements of architecture are light and shade, walls and space. Arrangement is the gradation of aims, the classification of intentions. Man looks at the creation of architecture with his eyes, which are 5 feet 6 inches from the ground. One can only deal with aims that the eye can appreciate, and intentions that take into account architectural elements. If there come into play intentions that do not speak the language of architecture, you arrive at the illusion of plans, you transgress the rules of the Plan through an error in conception, or through a leaning towards empty show.

Pure creation of the mind

Contour and profile are the touchstone of the architect. Here he reveals himself as artist or mere engineer. Contour is free of all constraint. There is here no longer any question of custom, nor of tradition, nor of construction nor of adaptation to utilitarian needs. Contour and profile are a pure creation of the mind; they call for the plastic artist.

Mass production houses

A great epoch has begun. There exists a new spirit. Industry, overwhelming us like a flood which rolls on towards its destined ends, has furnished us with new tools adapted to this new epoch, animated by the new spirit. Economic law inevitably governs our acts and our thoughts. The problem of the house is a problem of the epoch. The equilibrium of society today depends upon it. Architecture has for its first duty, in this period of renewal, that of bringing about a revision of values, a revision of the constituent elements of the house. Mass-production is based on analysis and experiment. Industry on the grand scale must occupy itself with building and establish the elements of the house on a mass-production basis. We must create the mass-production spirit. The spirit of constructing mass-production houses. The spirit of living in mass-production houses. The spirit of conceiving mass-production houses. If we eliminate from our hearts and minds all dead concepts in regard to the house, and look at the question from a critical and objective point of view, we shall arrive at the "House-Machine," the mass-production house, healthy (and morally so too) and beautiful in the same way that the working tools and instruments which accompany our existence are beautiful. Beautiful also with all the animation that the artist's sensibility can add to severe and pure functioning elements.

Modénature. The nearest equivalent of Le Corbusier's use of this word. - trans. 4

Architecture or revolution

In every field of industry, new problems have presented themselves and new tools have been created capable of resolving them. If this new fact be set against the past, then you have revolution. In building and construction, mass-production has already been begun; in face of new economic needs, mass-

production units have been created both in mass and detail; and definite results have been achieved both in detail and in mass. If this fact be set against the past, then you have revolution, both in the method employed and in the large scale on which it has been carried out. The history of Architecture unfolds itself slowly across the centuries as a modification of structure and ornament, but in the last fifty years steel and concrete have brought new conquests, which are the index of a greater capacity for construction, and of an architecture in which the old codes have been overturned. If we challenge the past, we shall learn that "styles" no longer exist for us, that a style belonging to our own period has come about; and there has been a Revolution. Our minds have consciously or unconsciously apprehended these events and new needs have arisen, consciously or unconsciously. The machinery of Society, profoundly out of gear, oscillates between an amelioration, of historical importance, and a catastrophe. The primordial instinct of every human being is to assure himself of a shelter. The various classes of workers in society to-day no longer have dwellings adapted to their needs; neither the artizan nor the intellectual. It is a question of building which is at the root of the social unrest of to-day: architecture or revolution.

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