

Le Corbusier, the Dishonest Architect

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By

Malcolm Millais

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‘Le Corbusier has designed houses that are disorienting to the user and which he himself would never inhabit. The reason for this is the architect’s antisocial nature, the great distance that separates him from the expectations of the great mass of people.’

—*El Lissitzky 1929*

‘Let’s look at the architecture of our time, look at these new cities we call large ensembles, with their horizontal boxes as railway wagons out of use and abandoned in a disused railway yard, with vertical boxes that want to resemble towers and watchtowers are reminiscent - the image of a concentration camp immediately comes to spirit.’

—*Michel Ragon 1971*

‘All the destructive forces of the 20th century are manifest in his life and work: machine-worship, utopianism and megalomania. Like other ‘seminal figures’ Le Corbusier was a man of colossal vanity and egotism.’

—*Gavin Stamp Daily Telegraph 9 June 1977*

‘A terminal inhumanity—what one might almost call “ahumanity”—characterizes Le Corbusier’s thought and writing, notwithstanding his declarations of fraternity with mankind.’

—*Theodore Dalrymple 2009*

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Malcolm Millais

INTRODUCTION

“Modernism, Nazism, and Communism were, after all, of a piece: the hideous box was a pluperfect symbol of twentieth century evil, every bit as potent in its own way as the swastika or the hammer and sickle.” Brothers Judd

“Modernism is, by its very nature, a monopolist ideology.” Jan Michl

The twentieth century was one of the worst in the history of humanity. Many of its horrors can be laid at the door of two dominating isms – Communism and Nazism. They shared a central feature: both were totalitarian. A third destructive ism was modernism. This was the response of some intellectuals and artists to a world changed by industrialisation. Based on the totalitarian edict that there must be a decisive break with art of the past, Modernism was for the elite.

“We then have an art which can be comprehended only by people possessed of the peculiar gift of artistic sensibility – an art for artists and not for the masses, for “quality” and not for hoi polloi.”¹

It may seem fanciful to compare an artistic movement to dictatorial political movements; after all, there is no coercion to look at modern art if you don't like it. But this changes when it comes to modernist architecture: there is no escape, as buildings cannot be avoided.

Here one name dominates: Le Corbusier. Countless books and articles claim he is a genius, a Renaissance man, the greatest architect of the twentieth century. None of this is true. He wasn't competent to draw or paint, let alone design anything. He was nearly blind. He was ignorant of basic technology, even though technology was one of his most frequently unfurled banners. His writings were elliptical, so endlessly different interpretations could be made.

However, a small group of architects and members of the avant-garde found Le Corbusier's propaganda infectious, exciting and revolutionary. It promised an end to the dominance of architecture in the beaux-arts style. With its roots in classicism, the relevance of this style to an industrialising

¹ Ortega y Gasset, 1925, p12

world was disputable. However, his propaganda, seductive as it was to some, was based on fallacy and fantasy: taken seriously it could only lead to disaster. It was taken seriously, and it did lead to a disaster, a disaster that's ongoing.

Le Corbusier was noticed in avant-garde circles during the twenties, but only had a wide impact on architecture after the Second World War. By then, his followers had infiltrated the architectural profession in many countries, which led to a modernist takeover on a global scale. Unlikely allies in this takeover were Hitler, the recently defeated dictator, and Stalin, the new enemy. They favoured classical architecture for prominent buildings and disliked modernism; that turned modern architecture into the *sine qua non* for the free world.

Nevertheless, Le Corbusier didn't want fascism defeated: on the contrary, he enthusiastically courted the French Vichy government that was a puppet of the Nazi regime. Once the war ended, he successfully covered his tracks as a collaborationist. He emerged as the dominant influence on the elite that imposed dysfunctional modern architecture on an unsuspecting world. In an article outlining the social destruction that came in the wake of this architecture, Ian Nairn, a respected critic, asked, "How many have been killed by Le Corbusier and his influence?"²

Over the ensuing decades, the technical, financial and aesthetic failures of Corbusian-inspired architecture have become all too evident. Nevertheless, he is still worshiped by an artistic and intellectual establishment that has embraced modernism. In spite of numerous detractors, his international standing remains almost unassailable. What Lionel Brett wrote admiringly of him in 1947, remains true.

"Le Corbusier remains in power because no Robespierre, no smiler with a knife, has appeared on the horizon. This is fortunate."³

Champion of modern architecture, Reyner Banham seemed ambivalent about what will happen to Le Corbusier's reputation when inevitably the smilers do advance from the horizon with their knives.

"When the dead genius has attained a measure of acceptance as widespread, total and unquestioning as that enjoyed by Le Corbusier, when his supporters are in such total command of the media of communications as were Corb's, the chances are that the festering resentments of his detractors, when they finally burst through the crust of conventional

² Sunday Times Magazine 20 February 1977.

³ Murray, Irene & Osley, Julian, editors p144.

approval, will provoke a reaction so destructive, so explosive and disastrous that the reputation will be destroyed finally and forever.”⁴

The following chapters expose the endless failures, persistent dishonesty and fallacious declarations that characterised Le Corbusier’s life. These ought to provoke the result that Reyner Banham either hoped for – or dreaded.

⁴ Murray, Irene & Osley, Julian, editors, p230

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*The following is a list of **primary sources**; these are frequently referred to in the text. In the case of Le Corbusier's books they are referred to by their titles.*

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CHAPTER ONE

A FALSE START

“I had a horror of architecture and architects, but I accepted the verdict and obeyed; I committed myself to architecture.”

– Charles-Edouard Jeanneret-Gris

Charles-Edouard Jeanneret-Gris, then aged thirty-five, became Le Corbusier in 1922. This was a completely new persona, not a simple name change, and with it he became the most influential architect of the twentieth century. Le Corbusier kept secret his early years – almost half his life – because they didn’t fit the new image he wanted to project. Details of this inconvenient story are now known only because of research by the historian H Allen Brooks.¹

Born in the Swiss town of La Chaux-de-Fonds in 1887, Charles-Edouard Jeanneret-Gris was the second son of Georges Edouard Jeanneret-Gris and Marie Charlotte Amélie Perret. There was only twenty months between the two brothers, who the family called Albert and Edouard.

La Chaux-de-Fonds is the centre of the watch-making industry in the French-speaking Calvinist canton of Neuchâtel. It was destroyed by fire in 1794, and rebuilt using a grid street plan. The result was relentlessly grim – Karl Marx described it as a huge factory town. This was Edouard’s home for the first thirty years of his life. His craftsman father enamelled watchcases, and his mother gave piano lessons. It was here that he received his professional education, and where, from 1911 until 1917, he worked. Between 1907 and 1911, he lived an itinerant life, travelling between Germany, France, Italy and the Near East.

Though surrounded by beautiful mountains, the town had a disagreeable effect on Edouard. While still in his twenties, he described it as an incoherent agglomeration of eyesores, ‘La Chaux-de-Fonds of shit’.

¹ H Allen Brooks, *Le Corbusier’s Formative Years*. This impressive and scholarly work is essential reading for a comprehensive understanding of this period, and this chapter is deeply indebted to this book.

Later in life, he also distanced himself from his country of origin. The family were not really Swiss, he said, claiming that the family roots were the south of France among the Cathars who fled to Switzerland to escape persecution.

As the far less favoured brother, Edouard's early years were not easy and he spent the rest of his life trying to win his parents' approval. When nine-year-old Albert passed his school exams with high marks, his father wrote in his journal, "The boy gives us much pleasure." Then he added, "His brother is less conscientious." Four years later, after Albert had played the violin in public, his father wrote, "The dear child gives us great pleasure," and added, "His brother is usually a good child, but has a difficult character, susceptible, quick-tempered and rebellious; at times he gives us reason for anxiety."

Edouard was hardly a success at secondary school. His algebra teacher reported that he was careless and negligent; in French classes he talked and dropped things; in history lessons he 'left his seat in an unwarranted and noisy manner'; and he played truant. While his brother practised the violin for up to six hours a day, the disappointed father noted that Edouard was making much less effort.

At thirteen, he went to a school that trained watch engravers, and at fourteen transferred to the School of Applied and Industrial Arts, saying that he wanted to follow in his father's footsteps. If it was an effort to please his father, it was doomed from the start. A certificate from an eye specialist, which stated that Edouard had serious problems with his vision, ended his attempt to engrave watches.

Nevertheless, he attended the school for six years, and that is where he came under the spell of Charles L'Eplattenier. The son of peasants, L'Eplattenier had studied painting, sculpture and architecture, both in Budapest and at the prestigious École des Beaux Arts in Paris. L'Eplattenier's influence was crucial to Edouard's future. He had not imagined his entire life spent engraving watchcases, but now that this profession was closed to him, what should he do?

L'Eplattenier came up with the answer: Edouard should become an architect. Edouard's father confided to his journal, "He is about to start architecture, pushed by his teacher L'Eplattenier." This idea did not please Edouard, who later claimed that he did not want to be an architect. "I had a horror of architecture and architects," he recalled, "but I accepted the verdict and obeyed; I committed myself to architecture."² And an architect he became.

² Weber, p34

Edouard joined L'Eplattenier's new course for architects, painters, sculptors and jewellery designers who wanted to specialise in decoration. Architects at that time were trained in academic institutions or apprenticed to experienced architects, so a course in decoration as training for architecture hardly seems apt. Years later, when Edouard had transformed himself into Le Corbusier, he would ban all decoration from his work.

The 1900s were a strange period for architecture. Classical and Gothic competed for dominance; strong vernacular traditions persisted in most areas; and functional industrial buildings appeared alongside new styles like Art Nouveau. Reyner Banham called this 'The Battle of the Styles.'³ At the time Edouard had to give up engraving, his designs were influenced by Art Nouveau. Now that he'd moved to architecture, what style would dominate? L'Eplattenier had studied architecture at the Parisian École des Beaux Arts, so one might have expected Edouard to take up Classicism, but he didn't.

In 1905, L'Eplattenier helped Edouard get his first architectural commission, which was to design a house for a local watch manufacturer called Louis Fallet. He was seventeen years old. L'Eplattenier asked René Chapallaz, a local architect, to help. "I have a young man here who has a house to build," L'Eplattenier told Chapallaz. "He has ideas, but he doesn't know how to realise them. Can you take him in hand?" Chapallaz agreed to 'put his plans in order', and lent him an assistant. The house was built in the local regional Swiss chalet style and decorated with natural forms such as fir trees and pinecones.



Edouard's first design – the Villa Fallet

³ Banham 1960 p9

It was extremely odd for Louis Fallet to entrust the design of his house to an unqualified seventeen-year old. It cost more than it was supposed to, and took a long time to build. However, it's one of the few houses that Le Corbusier designed which later owners did not remodel. He left it out of his *Complete Work*, and said in his old age, "The house itself is probably dreadful."⁴

Having finished with the art school, Edouard started an itinerant life of work and travel. He was not encouraged in this by his parents or by L'Eplattenier; nor did he appear to have any particular goal. His ideas and interests changed constantly and much of the time he seemed aimless.

Edouard went to Italy in September 1907, then to Vienna, and on to Paris, where he arrived in March 1908. He stayed there for almost two years, returning home in December 1909. After staying alone in a traditional Jura farmhouse for the first four months of 1910, he went to Germany in April and returned home at the end of July. In September he went back to Germany, where he stayed until May 1911.

At that point he began his famous *Voyage d'Orient*, a five-month journey which Brooks called a rite of passage. Starting from Dresden, he crossed the Austro-Hungarian Empire to Turkey. After seven weeks in Constantinople, he journeyed to Athens via Mont Athos. Then crossing the Adriatic, he arrived in Italy on his twenty-fourth birthday. He finished the journey by travelling through Italy to arrive back in La Chaux-de-Fonds in November 1911.

It took Brooks over two hundred, fully illustrated pages to describe Edouard's four year odyssey⁵ of aesthetics and culture. From this confusing period, he picked out ten main events.

Visited a monastery at Ema, near Florence.

Designed the Villas Stotzer and Jaquemet while in Vienna.

Worked part time for August Perret in Paris.

Stayed alone in a traditional Jura farmhouse.

Worked on a book on urban design called *La Construction des Villes*⁶

Made a proposal for L'Eplattenier's new school.

⁴ Weber p36

⁵ Brooks p97-303

⁶ Brooks p201 – Jeanneret worked on this in 1915, and again 1922-25, but it was never finished in its original form

Attended the annual congress of the Deutscher Werkbund in Berlin.

Intermittently prepared a report on decorative arts in Germany, *Étude sur le mouvement d'art décoratif en Allemagne*

Worked for five months for Peter Behrens in Berlin.

Visited the Acropolis and made drawings.

On his travels, he filled notebooks with drawings, as well as making hundreds of individual drawings and watercolours. These are surprisingly bad, perhaps because of his poor eyesight – something which is rarely mentioned in books about his work.



A typical sketch drawn by the author in the style of Edouard

During this odyssey, Edouard frequently and radically changed his aesthetic and cultural ideas. He set out with a strong preference for the Medieval and the Gothic, taking Ruskin's *Mornings in Venice* to read on the way. Ruskin believed that architecture is what is added to a building, and both L'Eplattenier and Edouard agreed with him. This preference overrode L'Eplattenier's classical training, his own earlier interest in Art Nouveau, and their joint work for Fallet in the local style. He arrived in Italy with eyes unable to see the Renaissance, and commented that Florence appeared to be *not rich* in architecture.

The monastery at Ema, outside Florence, gave him the most profound architectural experience of his life. "I would like to spend the rest of my life in what they call their cells," he told L'Eplattenier.⁷ "This is the

⁷ These cells were small houses around communal courtyards, which each house having a small individual garden.

solution for the house, perhaps paradise on Earth.”⁸ The experience underlay much of his later architecture which endlessly recreated living spaces like these cells. Forty years later he recollected the effect of this visit. “From this moment on, I saw the two terms, individuality and collectively, as inseparable.”

Nine weeks after leaving Italy, he arrived in Vienna, then in the throes of the Secessionist Movement. The Secessionists were leading contemporary design, and Otto Wagner’s now famous Postal Savings Bank had just been finished. In Edouard’s opinion, their buildings were simply sanitary architecture – nothing more than toilets. Twenty-five years later, Le Corbusier claimed to have been apprenticed under Josef Hoffmann, a leading member of the Secessionists. In fact Edouard never met Hoffmann and had pointedly ignored his work.

While in Vienna, Edouard designed two houses in his home town. These were the Villas Stotzer and Jaquemet, for brothers-in-law of Louis Fallet. Fallet had recommended Edouard, but it’s hard to see how this made sense as Edouard was far away and still very inexperienced. Again Chapallaz was brought in to help; they even formed a partnership: Chapallaz and Jeanneret Architects.

Edouard sent his initial designs to the clients, and learned within a few days that Stotzer wanted something much simpler, and Jaquemet wanted something like L’Eplattenier’s own house – he re-worked the designs to please his clients. But due to the rejection of his own designs, he felt that his world had utterly collapsed. Letters to his mother show just how depressed he became. Archives discovered in 1976 confirmed that his initial designs were *not* used for the construction of these houses. Nevertheless, Tzonis considered that the façades of the two houses revealed an excellent grasp of the classical canon, apparently unaware that they weren’t designed by Edouard.

Edouard left Vienna for Paris with his Gothic views intact, and convinced that contemporary architecture was awful. In Paris he decided to ‘delve into the innermost depths of architecture’ and gain insight that would crystallise his own ideal. He spent three months studying Corroyer’s *Roman Architecture*, though it does not seem that he looked at his later book, *Gothic Architecture*.

By chance, Edouard saw a familiar name in a telephone book and arranged a meeting. It was with Eugène Grasset, a pioneer of Art Nouveau. Having ridiculed Hoffman and Wagner in Vienna, it’s not clear what he thought of Art Nouveau at the time. Although his biographer

⁸ Brooks p106, Footnote 12

Weber said that Edouard was mesmerised by the Art Nouveau buildings of Hector Guimard,⁹ Brooks was convinced that he kept his ‘myopic devotion’ to the Middle Ages, and never mentioned the still popular Art Nouveau.¹⁰

Armed with a letter of introduction from Grasset, he went to see Auguste Perret, who offered him ‘an apprenticeship that fulfilled his fondest dreams’. This eventually had an enormous effect on Edouard, since the Perret brothers were using revolutionary reinforced concrete frame structures for their buildings. Perret advised Edouard to learn about mathematics and engineering. He took lessons from an engineer named Pagès, but it was fruitless. The endless technical failures of subsequent projects show he never even grasped a superficial understanding of mathematics or engineering.

In spite of his sixteen months as a draughtsman with the Perret Brothers, their technically advanced design did not make an immediate impact on Edouard. He used his first wages to buy Viollet-le-Duc’s ten-volume dictionary of French architecture from the eleventh to the sixteenth centuries. “I am reading Viollet-le-Duc,” he said. “So wise, so logical, so clear. I have the Notre Dame which serves as my laboratory, and formulate my own observations.”¹¹ However, his notes on Notre Dame show that he was uninterested in the construction, only in the decoration.

Auguste Perret, a new father figure, was astonished by Edouard’s obsession with Gothic architecture, and shocked that he had never visited the palace at Versailles. “You know Versailles? – No? – You must go there!” Later he asked, “You went to Versailles?” – “No, I won’t go there.” – “Oh, and why not?” – “Because Versailles, and the classical period represent decadence.” He finally went to Versailles in 1909.¹²

Edouard underlined many passages in his copy of *The Life of Jesus*, by Ernest Renan, which he was also reading at the time. Renan argued that Jesus did not work miracles, but derived his strength from an ideal. Brooks suggested that if you substitute Edouard for Jesus in these underlined passages it is uncanny, perhaps frightening, to observe the parallels that Jeanneret drew.¹³

After he had been working for Perret for five months, Edouard wrote to L’Eplattenier explaining his ideal view of architecture. This was now medievalism dipped in reinforced concrete. His vision of the architect for

⁹ Weber p60

¹⁰ Brooks p155 & 157

¹¹ *ibid.*, p171

¹² *ibid.*, p155

¹³ *ibid.*, p174

tomorrow – which *will* come – was an enemy of plastic effects, a new man of science with a heart.

“I chose the most zealous fighters for a cause, those to whom we, we of the 20th century, are now ready to become equals: the early medieval architects.”

“I realised, by the study of Romanesque architecture, that architecture was not a question of proportion and harmony of form but something else, but what? I still don’t know.”

“The architect must be a man with a logical mind, the enemy of the love of plastic sculptural effects, a man of science yet with a heart, an artist and a scholar.”

“One speaks of the art of tomorrow. This art *will be*. Because mankind has changed his lifestyle, his way of thinking. The programme is new. It is new in a new context...of iron...of reinforced concrete.”

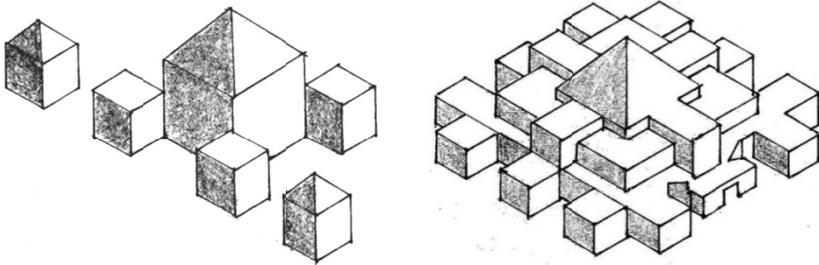
“These eight months in Paris cry out to me: **Logic, truth, honesty.**”¹⁴

Those last three words were the most prophetic. They became the touchstone of the Modern Movement in architecture, but when applied to Edouard’s own architecture, and what followed, they were paradoxically the source of manifest shortcomings.

The close encounter with reinforced concrete and the structural rationality of Perret’s buildings had a disturbing effect on Edouard. He rented a farmhouse for four months in the Jura region. The centre of life in these farmhouses was the kitchen, where the ceiling was a pyramid-shaped chimney that covered the whole room. Seen from the outside, this chimney made an upturned-bucket, pyramid-shape on the roof. Similar pyramids appear in several of his best-known buildings.

While Edouard was away, L’Eplattenier’s course at La Chaux-de-Fonds had become so popular that he decided to make it independent of the Art School. It needed its own building, and Edouard proposed a design that was different from anything he’d previously done, and is the earliest project that he included in his complete work. In fact it was little more than a copy of Behrens’ art gallery built for the 1905 Oldenburg exposition, and showed neither regional nor Gothic influences. It was never built.

¹⁴ Brooks p153



Behrens' pyramidal 1905 Building (L) and Edouard's pyramidal 1910 proposed new school (R)

Then, quite by chance, something happened that had a much greater impact on Edouard, and subsequently the world. When L'Eplattenier was asked to give a paper on the aesthetics of towns, he asked Edouard to help with research, and suggested they write a book together. Town planning (later called urban design) became one of Edouard's passions.

The Edouard and L'Eplattenier were inspired by Camillo Sitte's book, *City Planning According to Artistic Principles*. Sitte was a Viennese architect and theorist of urban planning who wanted cities to be warm and welcoming, and used the medieval town as a model. When Edouard went to Germany in 1910, he bought postcards of medieval townscapes in Ulm, Stuttgart and Karlsruhe.

Then Edouard heard that he'd been given a grant to write a report on applied arts and architecture in Germany. Now he had money and a reason to travel about the country. He arrived in Berlin when the congress of the Deutscher Werkbund (German Association of Craftsmen) opened in June 1910. This was an association of artists, architects, designers and industrialists with the motto, 'From sofa cushions to city building'. It promoted *Neue Sachlichkeit* (new objectivity) in architecture and design, which is how the Modern Movement's functional design began.

Three years before, Allgemeine Elektrizitäts-Gesellschaft (AEG, General Electricity Company) had a revolutionary idea and appointed the painter, Peter Behrens, as their designer. His work ranged from letterheads to packaging, from cookers to desk lamps. Two years after that, when the company needed a huge new turbine factory, Behrens designed that too. The turbine factory was still new when Edouard went on a tour of the company's buildings and saw a presentation of their products.

Unaccountably, because he was still a medievalist, Edouard felt overwhelmed by what he saw. His enthusiasm spilled over ten pages of his notebook. "The turbine hall showed the integral architectonic creations of

our time—rooms with admirable moderation and cleanness, with magnificent machines, which set solemn and impressive accents, as the centre of attraction.”

He met Behrens a few days later at a reception, and resolved to work for him. Clearly a conversion was beginning. Meanwhile, he went on collecting information for his report and the book on urban design for a month before returning home. He didn't go back to Germany until the autumn, and started working in Behrens' office in November. This was a momentous experience for Edouard, but he was strangely reticent about what he learned there.

“Le Corbusier remained remarkably silent about the year he spent in Germany, and what little he revealed was negative and derogatory. Yet his experience there was of decisive importance to his development, because in Germany he established many of the views and values that he nurtured throughout his life.”¹⁵

This deliberate reticence had a particular reason: by the time Edouard had become Le Corbusier, he found it virtually impossible to give anyone else credit for what he thought. The silence about Behrens is especially understandable, as he's considered a forerunner of modern architecture. Much that Edouard claimed as original thinking, or ascribed to non-German sources, was the result of what he learned in Germany. He found Behrens a 'colossus of daunting stature, a terrible autocrat, a regime of terrorism, brutality on parade'. While it was still an illegal organisation, Behrens joined the Nazi party in Austria.

What Edouard did not conceal is that after working for Behrens he had a conversion where he rejected his most dearly held architectural values. “I have been through a crisis of profound anxiety,” he said.¹⁶ Classicism ousted Medievalism; now he was interested in harmonious proportions which led him to ‘regulating lines’.¹⁷ He was persuaded that buildings should be white, and that standardisation and industrialisation were the way forward for architecture. It was a complete revolution of ideas.

Instead of returning home to put his new ideas into practice, Edouard then went on a long trip with his friend August Klipstein – the famous *Voyage d'Orient*. There were plenty of flat-roofed, whitewashed houses to see; he visited monasteries on Mount Athos, and went back to the monastery at Ema; but the high point for him was the Acropolis.

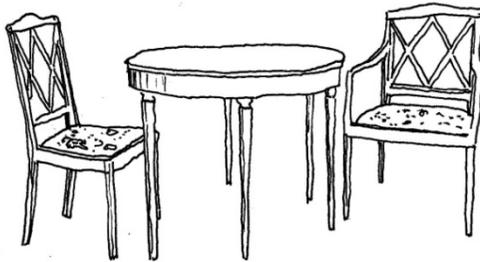
¹⁵ Brooks p209

¹⁶ *ibid.*, p245

¹⁷ See chapter 8 for regulating lines

Edouard went almost every day to the Acropolis during his three weeks in Athens. “Never in my life have I experienced the subtleties of such monochromy,” he wrote. “The body, the mind, the heart gasp, suddenly overpowered.”¹⁸ Edouard apparently didn’t know that ancient Greek buildings were painted, often in gaudy colours. Later he claimed that the Acropolis caused his sudden conversion to classicism. It implied a spiritual revelation due to his aesthetic sensibilities, rather than a brush with the colossus of AEG.

Despite his almost religious experience before the Acropolis, during the next six years in La Chau-de-Fonds, Edouard’s aesthetic posture leaned this way and that; eclectically, even incoherently,. He did part-time teaching for L’Eplattener’s course on decoration, where instead of having a consistent style, his students’ work was a mixture of the classical, the local vernacular and a type of geometric abstraction.



Edouard’s table and chairs from 1915

He also enjoyed working as an interior decorator, and often went abroad to choose fabrics, wallpaper, light fittings and furniture. Along with that, he designed furniture. The pieces were derivative and mainly influenced by the German classical revival, though he did not acknowledge it. He cheated over fees for this work: after charging the client a fee of 10%, when the normal one was 5%, he secretly demanded a 10% kickback from suppliers.

Along with all of this, Edouard was doing a lot of writing. He wrote very often to the music and art critic, William Ritter, whom he treated as a father confessor. Unusually for that time, Ritter led an openly homosexual life. There were also many articles for local magazines and newspapers, and his report on architecture and decorative arts in Germany was finished and published. He also worked on *Les Constructions des Villes* (The Construction of Towns), a book that would never be published.

¹⁸ Weber p95

Uninfluenced by Classicism, and without a hint of Gothic, in 1915 he designed an innovative standardised house – a concept which became a motif in his professional life. The construction came from his experience with Behrens, the Werkbund and the Perret Brothers. His innovative methods, when incorporated in a reinforced concrete structure, would allow a variety of building plans and internal arrangements in a standardised house. Edouard called this the Domino House; it became an icon of Modern Movement architecture. So it had a success of some sort, though no-one would have been able to build an actual house using these innovative ideas due to their complete impracticability.¹⁹

After the Domino House came the scandal of the La Scala cinema: a saga of stolen designs, suing and counter-suing. Edmond Meyer wanted a combined cinema and variety theatre and asked Chapallaz (Edouard's former partner) to design it. Chapallaz made a design for Meyer and produced a complete set of drawings. Edouard wanted the commission for himself. Unethically, he approached Meyer who – also unethically – gave him the Chapallaz drawings, and Edouard made sketches from them to send to the Perret Brothers for technical advice.

Quite unaware of this, Chapallaz went on developing his design. At the same time, Edouard was preparing blueprints based on the drawings from Meyer, which he submitted to the local commune. Except for one façade perhaps, they might just as well have been the Chapallaz's originals.

La Scala was built by Alfred Riva, and opened in December 1916. It leaked so badly because of technical faults that Meyer sued Edouard, Edouard sued Meyer and Riva, and Riva sued Meyer. How these lawsuits turned out, and what Chapallaz did about his stolen design, no one knows. As the local boy who made a name for himself, when Le Corbusier died, articles appeared in the town newspapers saying he designed La Scala. Since he never mentioned the cinema after he became famous, its design had not been an issue. Now it was. Chapallaz wrote to the papers, accusing Le Corbusier of stealing his design, and followed this up with a legally certified statement.

Most books about Le Corbusier ignore this sordid episode. His biographer omits it completely, and so do Tzonis and Cohen. Chapallaz does get a nod from three other critics: Frampton says the cinema was *based* on his plan; Gans says that he designed it 'at least schematically'; and Jencks mentions 'his scheme for *La Scala Cinema*'. Blake's eulogy leaves out the whole building, along with the stolen plans and betrayal of Chapallaz, writing "I am indebted to the complete record of Le

¹⁹ See the next chapter for a detailed critique.

Corbusier's work published over the years."²⁰ This was so complete that it omitted all the buildings in La Chaux-de-Fonds.

Still, the cinema did actually get built. So did three houses in La Chaux-de-Fonds that Edouard designed at this time, though two of the owners would regret that they ever had the idea of building a house – Anatole Schwob and his parents.

Things went smoothly when the first of the three new houses was finished in 1913. Georges Favre didn't want the local chalet style, and was happy for Edouard to give him something classical looking. It drew heavily on an Emanuel von Seidl house that Edouard had seen in Munich.

Edouard's luck didn't last: the other two houses were problematic in their own ways. Maison Blanche was built for his parents on the outskirts of town. He started the design as soon as he got back from Italy, and his parents moved into the new house in 1912, though work went on around them for another six months. It was hugely over their budget, it was too hot in summer, and too expensive to heat in winter. After seven years, his parents had to move away, having seen their hard-earned savings almost wiped out.

The third house was not like anything La Chaux-de-Fonds had seen before. Villa Schwob was commissioned by an important local businessman called Anatole Schwob, and is the most important building of Edouard's secret career. What stunned the town were its flat roofs and brick walls. Locals nicknamed it Villa Turque, which was slang for weird. They saw a big rectangle with two semi-circle extensions on each side, oval windows, glazed screens, stepped eaves, and blank plaques – maybe for decoration? Who knows? Unusually, and expensively, Edouard used reinforced concrete to build it, and claimed later that the structure was carefully proportioned with regulating lines, though there is no evidence to support this.

Anatole Schwob was happy with the design, but far from happy when costs spiralled out of control and he discovered that Edouard was taking illegal kickbacks. Schwob suspended him from the project and took him to court. Edouard sued Schwob for non-payment of fees. After two years of litigation, this was eventually settled out of court. His reputation as an architect now ruined in his home town, Edouard left for Paris before the house was finished.

Edouard's new persona as Le Corbusier did not allow knowledge of his early work. Villa Schwob is the only house that he acknowledged from

²⁰ Blake 1963 in *Acknowledgements*

his pre-Paris days; even so, he excluded it from *Oeuvre Complète* (1929). His early designs were unearthed only after research in the 1960s.²¹



The Villa Schwob

Despite Edouard's intention to delve into the innermost depths of architecture, decoration was his main interest during the Swiss phase, with its patchy and inconsistent styles. Later, as Le Corbusier, he would ridicule decoration, so it's not surprising that he suppressed almost all his early work.

This early phase was marked by unethical and sometimes downright dishonest behaviour. Although Edouard went on to change himself into Le Corbusier, this behaviour didn't change.

²¹ Brooks p415-20

CHAPTER TWO

IT'S THE DOMINO EFFECT

“Perhaps because it was never been put into practice, as such, the Domino system, as a system, has never been examined.”

—*Eleanor Gregh*

The First World War broke out in 1914, with a devastating effect on millions of Europeans, but Edouard Jeanneret was Swiss, and Switzerland remained neutral, so the war had little effect on his life. He continued painting, visiting friends and travelling to Germany and France.

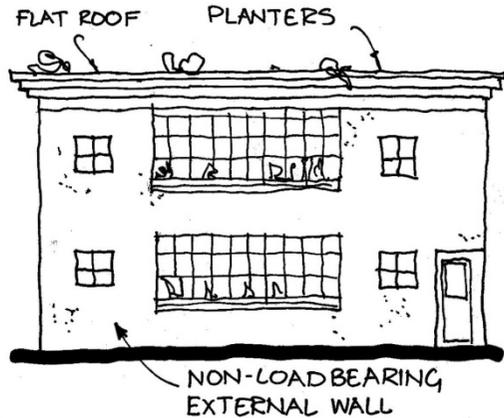
However, news of suffering from the war deeply upset his father.¹ Maybe this was what alerted Edouard to its consequences, but what distressed him was the destruction of buildings rather than people. Nevertheless, this had a positive side for him as an architect. “The the ruin of so many workers’ and farmers’ homes in Belgium was a great opportunity,” he said.

This prompted his interest in some form of standard housing, which became something of a holy grail for Edouard – solving the housing problem, with its logical extension, the design of whole cities. His aim for housing was something economic to build and functional to use. He planned to use modern materials, concrete, steel and glass, instead of brick, stone and timber. To reduce costs, he decided also to use modern methods of construction: pre-fabrication and mass production.

His first attempt at this was the design for a cheap house which he worked on in 1915. He called it the Domino House. It was his first modern design, and one of only three projects from his early years that found their way into his *Oeuvre Complète* (*Complete Work*).² Edouard worked hard on standard plans and elevations for a promotional business brochure, so it seems that his interest in affordable social housing was largely a scheme for his enrichment.

¹ Brooks, 1997, p382

² *ibid.*, 1997, p381



A possible elevation for a Domino house

His sketches don't provide any information about the construction of his proposed house. How was the flat roof to be drained and made waterproof? How were the cornice and planting boxes constructed? What were the external walls made of? How was the house heated? How did the plumbing and sanitation work? Not one of these questions is answered let alone addressed in a way that would make his design importantly different from standard practice at that time. Mass production and pre-fabrication for housing were already established by 1915. Between 1908 and 1940, Sears Roebuck, the mail order firm, ran a Modern Homes division that sent plans and materials for timber kit houses anywhere America. In 1911, the legendary architect Frank Lloyd Wright designed a pre-fabricated house for American System-Built Homes. The company sent materials and skilled craftsmen to those who bought a complete home.

Americans could also buy standardised houses made of concrete. Thomas Edison announced one in 1906 that he said would revolutionise American life. It was made entirely of concrete that was not reinforced: an entire house was cast in one piece in a steel mould. The first Edison house was poured in just six hours, and six days later the moulds were removed to reveal the completed building. Every item in the house, from tiles to baths to picture frames, were cast as a single piece of concrete. People ordered a number of his houses, and some are still in use, though the system was not a commercial success.

Edison's choice of unreinforced concrete was odd, since reinforced concrete had been widely used since the late 1800s. John Brodie, the City Engineer of Liverpool, pioneered pre-fabricated, reinforced concrete