

Architectural Giant

Le Corbusier's Plans Shaped Cities And He Was Always Ahead of Field

By ADA LOUISE HUXTABLE

A RENAISSANCE man who turned the 20th century into a one-man renaissance, Charles - Edouard Jeanneret - Gris, called Le Corbusier, was one of the major shapers of today's world.

As an architect, his work shocked and influenced three generations and changed the

An Appraisal

look of cities everywhere. A painter and sculptor, his abstract compositions hang in major museums and

collections. An ardent polemicist for the modern movement, his writings reached heights of poetic power that led to a cult of personality rivaled only by professional admiration for the equally poetic power of his trend-setting buildings.

These buildings, spanning half a century, are few in number compared to their far-ranging effect. Each new structure, from the coolly cubistic Villa Savoye built outside of Paris in 1931, to the rough, exposed concrete forms of the High Court Building at Chandigarh in the 1950's, the Le Corbusier-designed new capital of the Punjab, has been a bomb exploded in architectural circles, with international repercussions.

Revolutionary Force

Professionally he was a giant, and with two other giants Lloyd Wright and Ludwig Mies of the same stature, Frank van der Rohe, he is credited with the revolution in building known as modern architecture.

Personally, he was a contradictory combination of cool, detached Gallic intellectualism and equally Gallic fussiness over petty details. He faced a public that he always believed misunderstood and undervalued him with a brusk reserve; to his friends he displayed a quick, warm wit.

The slight, irascible architect, his gaze owlishly hypnotic behind circular, horn-rimmed glasses, became legend and prophet in his own time.

His style was intensely personal. Le Corbusier buildings stress strong, sensuous forms, very close to the shapes of abstract sculpture, and each structure is a highly individual concept.

At the same time, he sought universality. He devised a unit of measurement, which he called the Modulor, or Golden Section. It was based on the height of a man with his arm upraised, and according to Le Corbusier, any structure based on multiples of this unit of measure would be beautiful and have a human scale. His own use of the Modulor, however, proved to be as personal as everything else he did.

He defined architecture as the correct play of light and shade on the forms enclosing space, a highly intellectual and esthetic approach to building that made the product difficult for many to appreciate or understand.

Uncompromising Vision

Le Corbusier's uncompromising, unconventional vision was always his own, and each building was a textbook of ideas and a well spring of the contemporary spirit. No one ever really caught up with him. He was a modern Michelangelo, still far ahead of the field at 77, putting his inimitable stamp on a world already modeled in his own image, but only beginning to grasp his lessons.

For years, few listened. Most of his work before and after World War I consisted of paper schemes or private houses, with a few larger landmark buildings, like the Swiss Pavilion at the Cité Universitaire in Paris.

His largest commissions came in his old age, when the battle for modern architecture was won.

His only building in this country is the Visual Arts Center at Harvard, completed in 1963, a building bursting with new ideas and images, on a site too restricted to hold it. It was a goodwill gesture to a country whose newness and vitality aroused his enthusiasm in the 1920's, but to which he became increasingly hostile in later years.

In the United States, his legacy is especially alive. Architecture has never been more indebted to a single man. But if the movement is still young, the men who started it are old; Mies van der Rohe is 79, Walter Gropius is 80. And two of its irreplaceable leaders, Frank Lloyd Wright and Le Corbusier, are gone.