ARCHITECTURE VIEW

ADA LOUISE HUXTABLE

Le Corbusier's Housing Project — Flexible Enough to Endure

I have been to Pessac to see the future and contrary to popular belief and the conventional wisdom, it works. Pessac is the town near Bordeaux, in France, where Le Corbusier designed and built a community of 51 houses in the 1920's under the sponsorship of the French industrialist, Henry Frugès, who meant them to be a laboratory of new domestic, structural and esthetic ideas.

I went to Pessac prepared for the worst. Everything I had ever heard about it led to expectations of a failed experiment and an esthetic slum, a testament to the miscarriage of modernism and the arrogance of its architects. This did not turn out to be the case. The Pessac housing, a landmark of early modernism, is now more than 50 years old. It looks, and it doesn't look, like Le Corbusier's original design.

These are not "landmark" houses in the usual sense. They were not commissioned by those who were to live in them, and they are not, like Frank Lloyd Wright houses, objects of curatorial pride, or a responsibility that has led some owners to breakdown, divorce or flight. Pessac was built as experimental "workers" housing; there was no personal contract between occupant-patron and famous architect in which the owners' tastes, and even lives, are subordinate to the maintenance of a work of art, in which any change is a violation. With half a century of additions and remodelings, Le Corbusier's houses have been "violated" over and over. They have come a long way from his "prisme pur" or "machine to live in," and even from their concept as a social experiment. But Pessac is alive and well today and making an entirely different kind of history than intended.

The Quartiers Modernes Frugès, as the project was called, has been put down in the literature of modernism almost since it was built. In his avant-garde 1929 book, "Modern Architecture: Romanticism and Reintegration," the historian Henry-Russell Hitchcock referred to Pessac as a "serious disappointment." He had some praise for the variety of the planning, which embraced detached, semi-detached and row houses and three-story multiple dwellings that the Bordelaise called "skyscrapers," all with individual gardens. But he scorned the interiors of the houses as "uncomfortable for the small-salaried employees for whom they were designed," and called features like roof terraces more suitable for the artists and millionaires who were usually Le Corbusier's clients.

• • •

"Effective Pessac admittedly was," he wrote, "but practical not at all, even in elementary matters . . . As the first executed housing scheme of the New Pioneers in France it has actually done more harm than good to the development of modern housing there." Over the years, by way of the pilgrimage grapevine, have come vivid descriptions of how disgruntled and uncomprehending occupants have sabatoged the architecture.

With this background, Pessac has become a convenient whipping boy for those who are currently busy singling out every defect of the modern movement while declaring its demise. Pessac is the model failure. Say Pessac now, and you have said everything there is to say about all that ever went wrong with modern architecture. It is grouped ritually with that other example of modernist housing failure, Pruitt-Igoe, the public housing project in St. Louis that was dynamited after severe socio-economic problems made it uninhabitable. Pessac was supposedly finished off by the occupants' rebellious rejection of Le Corbusier's doctrinaire modernist esthetic and elitist ideas about how they should live.

This neat doomsday script, with the Pruitt-Igoe blast signalling the end of modern architecture, is favored over more complex realities by those rewriting history. It was the scenario presented in Robert Hughes's visually stunning program on architecture in "The Shock of the New" series. There is, of course, nothing more effective in the shock department than blowing it all up, even if that means compromising art and history for a tidy dramatic cliche.

And so I walked down the Avenue Frugès and Rue Le Corbusier in Pessac on a late January day expecting the shock of the old, or the future that died, but the script didn't fit. I tried blaming the spring-like sunshine and the wines of Bordeaux as I found myself thinking, "If this is so bad, how can it be so good?"

The scale and relationship of the houses to each other and to the gardens was excellent; the shapes and proportions of the buildings were unusually strong and good. There was a feeling of a cohesive whole. Even with the loss of key elements of the Corbusian style — the precise repetition of open and closed geometries, the visual sense of the thin concrete, the painterly abstraction of the original colored facades — the settlement retained an impressive and recognizable integrity. Pessac was a very pleasant place to be. And these houses were clearly survivors.

It was also clear that Pessac was a survivor precisely because of its architecture. Its strong identity absorbs almost anything. Structurally, the houses are incredibly solid. One can read the original features, and then read the way they have been used or assimilated. Pessac continues to give something to the eye and the spirit that only buildings shaped and informed by a superior and caring eye and spirit can. This still holds true, with all of the changes made by the occupants over the years.

Le Corbusier once said, in a statement usually turned against him, "You know, it is always life that is right and the architect who is wrong." This was not a confession of error. It was the recognition of the validity of process over the sanctity of ideology. Few architects are capable of making that observation, because it speaks not to some fixed ideal, but to the complexity and incompleteness of architecture, to how life and art accommodate to each other. And that is what Pessac is really about.

The process of accommodation has been thoroughly documented in a study published in 1972 called "Lived-in Architecture, Le Corbusier's Pessac Revisited," by a French architect, Philippe Boudon. Mr. Boudon carried out a systematic analysis of exterior and interior changes and attitudes toward the architecture through extensive occupant interviews. I have only acquired the book now, although I remember scare pictures in an architectural journal at the time. The study was almost universally misinterpreted or misunderstood — or just not read — by those who considered it proof that Pessac had been destroyed. Photographs of garage doors where there once were open entrances, small, shuttered windows replacing large expanses of glass, tile roofs and endearing touches of kitsch were cited as evidence of architectural failure.

Mr. Boudon's conclusion was exactly the opposite. "The Quartiers Modernes Frugès were not an 'architectural failure' " he wrote. "The modifications carried out by the occupants constitute a positive and not a negative consequence of Le Corbusier's original conception. Pessac not only allowed the occupants sufficient latitude to satisfy their needs, by doing so it also helped them to realize what those needs were."

The then-radical open plan could be reorganized and subdivided in many ways; a terrace could be roofed over for an extra room; windows of one's choice could be fitted into the large openings without knocking out a wall. There is no sense of "the architect's will imposed," or of an unyielding, authoritarian design. The houses rolled with the punches. The transition from a cool and uniform International Style to personalized, somewhat Mediterranean-look villas has led to an air of solidity, rather than openness; of individuality, rather than continuity; of enclosed volumes rather than screen walls. Because the planning is good, each owner has a sense of privacy, with no loss of a collective ensemble.

• • •

One row-house resident, who generously invited our small sightseeing group inside, discoursed knowledgeably on the strength, solidity and longevity of Le Corbusier's reinforced concrete construction, while we stood on a roof terrace that had been resurfaced in colored tiles. Downstairs, a corridor had been created from the front door to the living room, and a formal dining space had been added by extending the living space into the garden. There was flowered wallpaper, overstuffed furniture, and the accessories of a comfortable bourgeois life style.

Another owner, according to Boudon, who had never heard of Le Corbusier, was busy "restoring back" the interior of his house to the original open plan without knowing it, by removing earlier partitions; he cited Le Corbusier's own reasons of space, light and view. Many speak with reasonable understanding of Le Corbusier, and most of the residents are aware and rather proud of the fact that the houses have been "listed" for their esthetic and historical importance. None feel that they have attacked the architecture.

Like all of Le Corbusier's houses, these were based on five design principles that he enunciated repeatedly. The raised ground floor, wide windows, roof terraces, open facades and open plans were all made possible by the uniquely strong and ductile new material, reinforced concrete, which freed the architecture from the traditional restrictions of thick masonry walls. Corners could be breached, openings placed almost anywhere and made much larger, spans increased and walls treated as screens, rooms opened to each other and to the light and view; the building could even be levitated to become a six-sided prism.

This unprecedented structural and design freedom was intoxicating. But if it created the challenge of a new kind of architecture that was to make the 20th century unique, it also led to wildly overreaching ideas that went beyond making better buildings to making better cities and better people. This assumption was more innocent than arrogant, and like all Utopian dreams, it was doomed.

• • •

Le Corbusier's vision of the city of the future proved exhilarating and seductive in such an atmosphere, but it never ceases to amaze me that his superblocks of slabs and towers raised above flat landscapes laced to the horizon with superhighways were ever taken seriously. Those of us who refused to take them seriously were the unconverted heathens. Those who did, and lived to see the sterile fallout in our cities, are now bumping into each other recanting.

But Pessac, even if it had been built to double its size, as intended, was no helicopter view of the world of the future; it was housing on a small, intimate scale. Its module was human and it was both strong and flexible enough to endure. Many of its features have long since become standard. It was truly designed in the measure of man.

What everyone remembers with varying degrees of disapproval was Le Corbusier's announced wish to build "a machine to live in," based on the early 20th-century's enchantment with the belief that only good could come from mass production. What everyone has forgotten is what he said in the next sentence. "But since men also have hearts," reads his dedication speech at Pessac in 1926, "we have also tried to insure that men with hearts would be able to live happily in our houses." They have. ■

Jean Didier

A view of Pessac—"a survivor precisely because of its architecture"