ARCHITECTURE VIEW: THE CHANGING 'TRUTH' OF LE CORBUSIER
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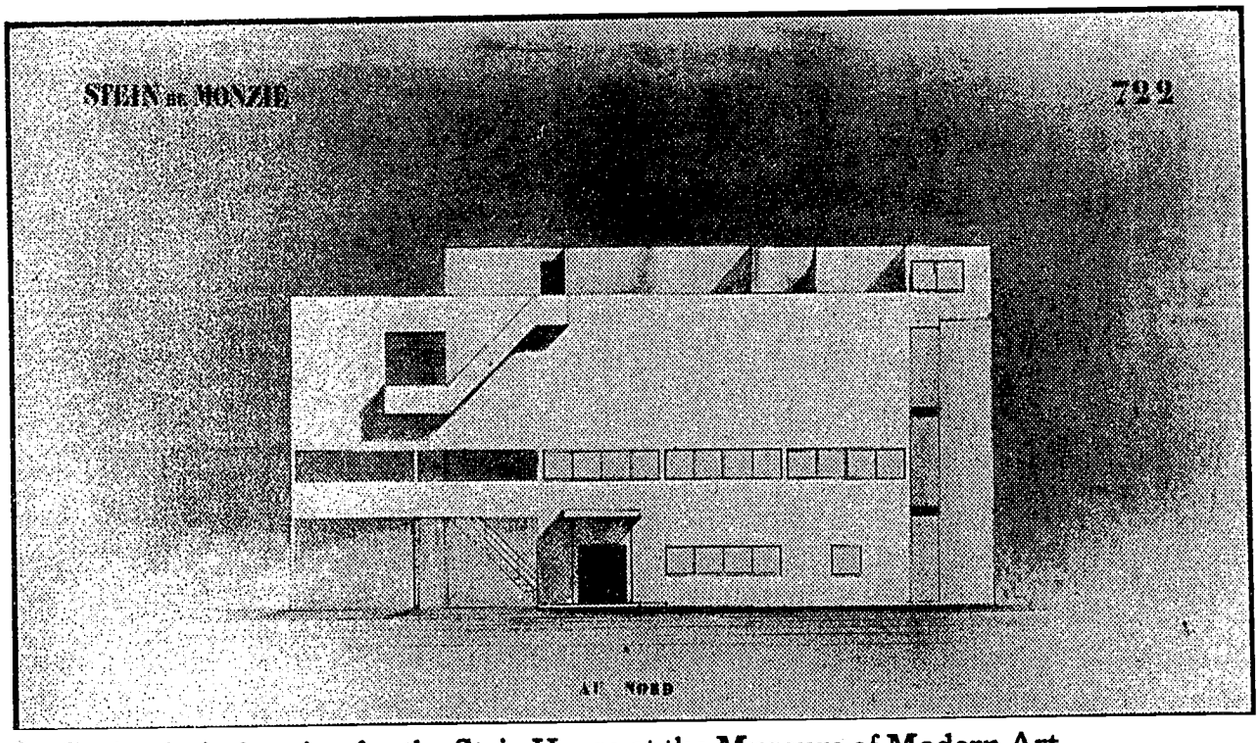
The Changing 'Truth' of Le Corbusier



Le Corbusier's drawing for the Stein House at the Museum of Modern Art

How does one look for truth? In art, the truth must be in what comes directly from the artist's hand, where the creative intent is most personal and direct—before other visions and interpretations garble the message from artist to viewer. That has always seemed clear enough. The meaning of the work is to be "understood" by the immediate response of eye, mind and heart.

Or so I once thought, in more innocent days. The only thing that seems certain now is that the art object is absolute; the result of the creative act does not change. But the "truth" about it shifts with the calendar, and its coloration alters with every season of the mind. Vision depends on a moment in time. A different message is delivered for each generation.

Nothing could illustrate this dilemma with more exquisite impact than the current exhibition of Le Corbusier's architectural drawings at the Museum of Modern Art (through March 26). There are 88 drawings on display, ranging from illustrated letters to sketches, elevations and perspectives of monumental structures, almost all from the master's hand and covering 50 buildings designed between 1912 and 1962. Most are from the Fondation Le Corbusier in Paris, and many have never been exhibited before. The selection and installation are by Arthur Drexler, director of architecture and design, with the help of a grant from the New York State Council on the Arts.

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The drawings are supplemented by models, but there are no photographs of the completed buildings. The intent is clearly to show the anatomy of creation, the moment at which the design idea takes form, the intensity and complexity of the search for the architectural and esthetic ideal. It is a quiet show that staggers one's perceptions and challenges one's assumptions; it is full of stunning subtleties and moments of overwhelming impact. From the early Stein and Savoye houses of the 1920's to the East Punjab capital of Chandigahr in the 1950's, all of this work has had an enormous effect on the cultural and building style of our time. But most of all, these drawings offer the primary and most "pure" documentation of Le Corbusier's vision. From this conceptual moment on, both the building and the understanding of the artist's intent are compromised in a thousand ways.

A rare sequence of beautiful renderings, 10 pastel elevations for the Stein House at Garches of 1927, are a revelation of invention and refinement. But what is the architectural "truth" of these elegant drawings? Certainly not the exquisite paper-thin elevation, seen as a cream-colored cutout against a sky-blue scrim, with mauve windows and russet doors that suggest not openings or transparency so much as a play of delicately recessed and tinted planes. No house could ever look like this or was ever meant to.

Is the truth in Le Corbusier's own definition of architecture, recorded in the same year as the Stein House study? He spoke then of pure structural systems expressed as a pure architectural esthetic. Time reveals this as a seductive bit of sophistry, at best.

But it was that kind of engineering rationale, plus the Utopian promise of health and happiness through space, sun and greenery, that sold the new architecture in the 1920's and 30's. It was the rejection of the "lies" of old techniques and styles, the command to be true to one's time, to live and create in the spirit of the new age, that pervaded Le Corbusier's manifestos from 1917 to 1923.

Those "truths" of "Vers une Architecture" have become irony in 55 years. Le Corbusier's Voisin and other Paris plans that would have superimposed a superhuman scale and order on land ruthlessly cleared of all signs of humanity and centuries of urban culture are models of Cartesian logic and clarity in his cool correct drawings. But they are also quite mad—arrogant, wrong-headed schemes insensitive to the values of civilization and art. The messianic message got through strongly enough to sabotage the cityscape for the past 30 years, in the hands of both housing theorists and speculative developers.

As early as 1929, discussing the New Pioneers in his trailblazing book, "Modern Architecture," Henry-Russell Hitchcock called the Voisin plan "megalomaniacal" and speculated on the danger of Le Corbusier's polemical writings turning younger architects toward a false sociology. Le Corbusier's own buildings, Hitchcock pointed out, were the painstaking result of "extreme esthetic research."

In Hitchcock and Johnson's "International Style," the book that introduced this work to the American public in 1932, that esthetic research was formularized in a how-to-be-a-modern-architect kit: volume was to be emphasized over mass, irregularity stressed over symmetry, and ornament outlawed. The wall became a thin, taut membrane around flexible space. These radical design rules were justified in the name of the structural revolution. It is little wonder that once this pattern of "correct" perception was set, Le Corbusier puzzled and horrified so many by a virtually traitorous change of style in the 1950's that began with the rough-hewn, sculptural poetry of the Jaoul Houses and culminated in the chapel at Ronchamps.

The elusive truth about his work may be much closer to a point Le Corbusier made originally in "L'Esprit Nouveau" and repeated later in life: Cubism, he said, was to be celebrated as "one of the most creative and revolutionary movements in the history of thought . . . a radical reform in the plastic arts [that] penetrated into architecture." All of his buildings are conscious and powerful exercises in abstract composition, from strict geometry to free form. They are full of enough esthetic complexities to keep several more generations busy with interpretations.

And that is exactly what is going on now. The text for this generation is an article by Colin Rowe and Robert Slutzky with the impenetrable title of "Transparency: Literal and Phenomenal." In this interpretation, the transparent and overlapping planes of Cubist painting, with their many ambiguous readings of the picture plane, are transferred to the composition of the Stein House at Garches. Almost limitless meanings are suggested in the arrangement of clear and opaque surfaces, of physical fact and visual effect.

In the 1970's, then, a Le Corbusier house is no longer viewed as a "machine to live in," or as an instrument for revolutionary social change. These drawings reveal houses, and other buildings, as objects of intense esthetic research and analysis. And thus today a sophisticated high art game has supplanted social reform. This is the "truth" of Le Corbusier's work for a generation concerned with a return to the art of architecture, beyond technology, sociology and politics. Perhaps tomorrow still another truth will emerge. ■