

Vernacular architecture, nature and the sacred: Le Corbusier and the influence of the 'journey to the east'

Emma Dummett (University of Edinburgh)

This paper will focus on the influence of the vernacular buildings studied by Le Corbusier¹ during what he called his 'journey to the east' of 1911, an influence which helped form two of his most strongly held beliefs: the need for human society to reconnect with the natural world, and the importance of finding a new form of sacred or spiritual experience for the sceptical world of the twentieth-century, industrialized West. The traditional narratives of architectural history tend to progress from those buildings which the author considers to be the greatest of their period to those of the next, leading us to believe that the grand palaces, monuments, and places of worship were the only significant buildings of their time.² Neglected by this approach are the buildings which are, in fact, the most ubiquitous of any period: the houses of ordinary people, often in rural rather than urban locations, built by those who had no architectural training, but were simply concerned to make a shelter for themselves which fulfilled their needs and was suitable for the local climate. Such buildings, which we can call vernacular, only began to be deemed worthy of study within the last half-century, with the publication of Bernard Rudofsky's *Architecture without Architects* in 1964, and the exhibition at the Museum of Modern Art in New York which it accompanied. By taking an interest in the vernacular buildings which he encountered on his journey to the east, Le Corbusier was therefore ahead of his time. While his trip can be seen as emerging from the eighteenth-century

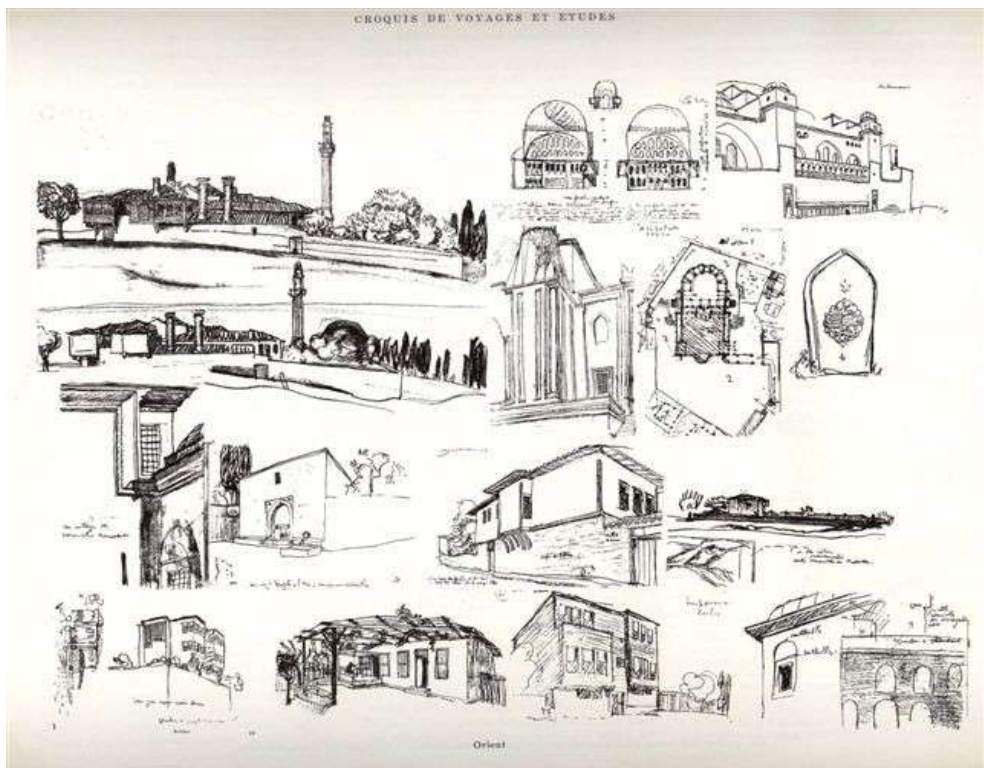
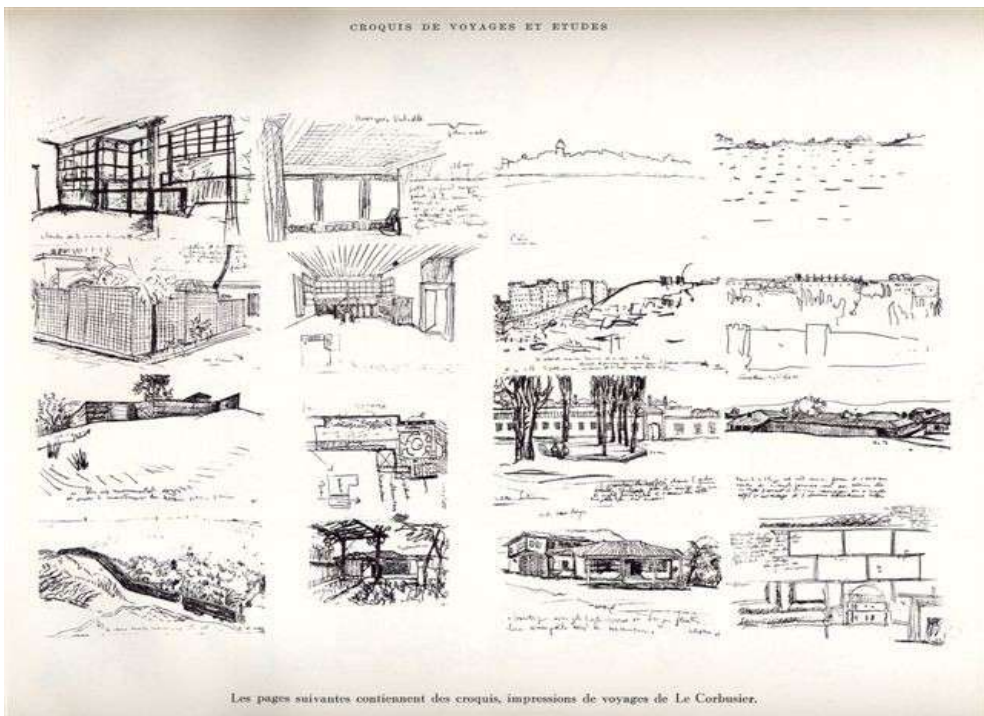
¹ Le Corbusier, 1887-1965, was one of the principal creators and exponents of architectural modernism in the twentieth century. His mature career began in the 1920s in Paris, where he built a number of private houses, each an exercise in his 'five points for a new architecture': the free façade, the free plan, the roof garden, the strip window and the raising of the house above ground level on pilotis. Later in his career he was able to work on a larger scale, with the housing block, or Unité, at Marseilles (1945-52), the Chapel at Ronchamp (1950-55), the Capitol buildings at Chandigarh, India (1950s-60s) and the monastery of La Tourette (1953-60) being some of his best-known works. Le Corbusier was born in Switzerland, but moved to Paris in 1916 and based himself there for the rest of his life.

² This is, for instance, the approach taken by the eminent architectural historian Sir Banister Fletcher in his *A History of Architecture on the Comparative Method* (London: Batsford, 1896), now in its twentieth edition.

tradition of the grand tour, in which travel abroad, particularly to Italy, was an essential part of a gentleman's education, Le Corbusier ventured beyond the conventional itinerary, both in the countries which he visited and the buildings which he admired.

Le Corbusier set out from Germany in May 1911 at the age of twenty-four, after a period of apprenticeship in the Berlin office of Peter Behrens, for the first stop on his journey, Prague. From there he travelled through Austria to Hungary, Serbia, Romania, Bulgaria, and Turkey, from where he headed back into Western Europe, visiting Greece and Italy before returning to his home town of La Chaux-de-Fonds in Switzerland in November of the same year. He was accompanied by an art student he had met in Berlin called August Klipstein, at whose instigation Istanbul and Athens were included in the itinerary. Le Corbusier documented the trip in numerous sketchbooks, photographs, letters, and articles for a La Chaux-de-Fonds newspaper, which he had persuaded to pay him for his dispatches. Several of these, along with two pieces written in 1914 on Mount Athos, Greece, and at the Parthenon, were published posthumously as *Voyage d'Orient* in 1966, with the English translation appearing in 1987. Le Corbusier attempted to publish the manuscript in the years immediately following his return, but when this proved unsuccessful he left it aside until the last months of his life, when he made only a few minor adjustments to prepare it for publication. References to the trip crop up in several of Le Corbusier's other books, adding to the already sizeable amount of documentation and interpretative material concerning this period of his life.

Many of the sketches made on the journey to the east were of small rural dwellings; notably, so were a large proportion of the sketches from this trip which Le Corbusier decided to include in the first volume of his *Complete Works* in 1929.



Oeuvre Complete I & II

How did these modest and, on the surface, architecturally unremarkable buildings influence the development of Le Corbusier's mature style? This is

a broader question than it first appears: Le Corbusier is often associated with the technological advances of the machine age, but his equally strong interest in the low-tech and the vernacular is less well acknowledged.

One of the dominant features of Le Corbusier's brand of Modernism as developed in the 1910s and 1920s was its visual simplicity. Conceived as a reaction against the decorative excesses of the nineteenth century and, more recently, of Art Nouveau, architectural Modernism attempted to recover the essence of building, to create forms which spoke of purity, order, and rationality rather than of wealth and the desire to display it. The use of whitewash was pivotal in the creation of this stripped-down aesthetic. For Le Corbusier, the colour white represented the intellectual clarity and rigour necessary to tackle the challenges of twentieth-century living and to exploit the potential offered by its new technologies. In *The Decorative Art of Today* of 1925 he declared,

in the confusion of our tumultuous times many have become accustomed to think against a background of black. But the tasks of our century, so strenuous, so full of danger, so violent, so victorious, seem to demand of us that we think against a background of white.³

He goes on to imagine what the results would be if it were a legal requirement for everyone to paint his or her house white:

[the] home is made clean. There are no dirty, dark corners. *Everything is shown as it is*. Then comes *inner* cleanness [sic], for the course adopted leads to refusal to allow anything at all which is not correct, authorised, intended, desired, thought-out: no action before thought. Once you have put Ripolin on your walls you will be *master of yourself*. And you will want to be precise, to be accurate, to think clearly.⁴ (Le Corbusier's italics)

³ Le Corbusier, *The Decorative Art of Today*, trans. by James I Dunnett (London: The Architectural Press, 1987), p. xxvi. First published as *L'Art décoratif d'aujourd'hui* (Paris: Editions Crès, 1925).

⁴ *Decorative Art*, p. 188.

In the same book, which draws heavily on the experiences of the journey to the east, Le Corbusier links with vernacular architecture in order to make a claim for the superiority of those cultures which had not embraced extraneous ornamentation over those which had:

whitewash exists wherever peoples have preserved intact the balanced structure of a harmonious culture... In the course of my travels I found whitewash wherever the twentieth century had not yet arrived.⁵

Moreover, Le Corbusier comments earlier in *The Decorative Art of Today* that during his journey to the east,

he was searching the countryside and the town for signs of the times, past and present, and learning as much from the work of ordinary mankind as from that of the great creative figures. It was in these encounters that he discovered architecture.⁶

Taking these last two quotations together, we can conclude that Le Corbusier saw the whiteness of the vernacular houses of the journey to the east as evidence of a true architectural authenticity, and of an architecture which had grasped the essentials of the discipline without even conceiving of itself as part of that discipline. It is important to mention at this point that Le Corbusier was not the only modern architect who approved of the use of whitewash in vernacular architecture. Adolf Loos (1870–1933) was an early architectural modernist based in Vienna. Both his buildings and his writings, particularly his essay ‘Ornament and Crime’ of 1908, in which he argued that architecture should eliminate all ornament, were highly influential. In his 1910 essay ‘Architecture’, Loos describes the method by which a (hypothetical) farmer builds his house by the side of a lake. After the foundations have been laid and the mason, the carpenter, and the joiner have done their part, the farmer ‘makes a large tub of distemper and paints the

⁵ *Decorative Art*, p. 189.

⁶ *Decorative Art*, p. xix.

house a beautiful white'. Loos then sums up the farmer's achievement:

he wanted to build a house for himself, for his relatives and livestock, and in that he succeeded. Just as successful as his neighbours or his ancestors were. Just as any animal succeeds that allows itself to be guided by its instincts. Is the house beautiful? Yes, just as beautiful as the rose or the thistle, the horse or the cow.⁷

Shortly after the publication of Loos's essay, Le Corbusier was recording his admiration for the white houses in the small town of Turnovo, Bulgaria, in a passage which would later be published in *Journey to the East*. He praises their 'sparkling white' facades and 'perfect cleanliness'.⁸ While he does not go as far as Loos in referring to their makers as 'animals', he touches a similar vein when he writes of them as 'men who do not reason', who have 'an instinctive feel for the organic line'.⁹ The crucial point for both Loos and Le Corbusier was that the vernacular builders needed neither knowledge of the history of 'high' architecture, nor a theoretical framework, in order to create beauty in their built forms. Clearly, contemporary architects involved in the modern project of regaining architecture's lost authenticity, purity, and order had much to learn from these 'peasants'. There is no doubt that Le Corbusier had a great respect for the creators of vernacular buildings; rather than seeing civilization as an unstoppable march forward, with the achievements of the industrialized West always leading the way, he considered that a greater degree of aesthetic sophistication could be found in those cultures which had remained untouched by Western influences, and so had managed to maintain a building tradition unchanged over hundreds of years. The influence of Rousseau's *Confessions* can perhaps be felt here, but Le Corbusier goes beyond Rousseau's conception of the 'noble savage' in writing to his friend Leon Perrin that 'we, we others from the centre of

⁷ Adolf Loos, 'Architecture', trans. by Wilfred Wang, in *The Architecture of Adolf Loos* (London: Arts Council, 1985), pp. 104-109, p. 104.

⁸ Le Corbusier, *Journey to the East*, ed., trans. and annotated by Ivan Zaknic in collaboration with Nicole Pertuiset, (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1987), p. 59. First published as *Le Voyage d'Orient*, ed. by Jean Petit (Paris: Forces Vives, 1966).

⁹ *Journey to the East*, p. 16.

civilization, are savages'¹⁰ by comparison with those people he was meeting in small Serbian villages.

As well as the use of whitewash to enhance strikingly simple, beautiful forms, the vernacular buildings encountered by Le Corbusier in 1911 very often incorporated spaces such as balconies, verandas, loggias, and enclosed courtyards, whose location as inside or outside is not precisely determined. Such spaces give their users the feeling that they are sitting outside while protecting them from the elements; they are therefore perfectly adapted for the hot climates through which Le Corbusier was travelling. Continuing his description of the white houses of Turnovo, he singles out the balconies as 'charming small spaces' where 'men sit on sofas and quietly smoke'¹¹, taking advantage of the unique quality of a space which allows them to be inside and outside at the same time. Le Corbusier's writing on such spaces is at its most lyrical when describing the domestic architecture of Mount Athos. He starts off in the main room of a café, which, he tells us,

opened out onto a wide wooden balcony, a true example of construction on piles [...]. The vine branches over the ancient pergola [...], like the painted trellis over the house illuminated from below by hanging lanterns, were rippling in the night air [...] The hill stretched down toward the sea, and from a high suspended terrace [...] we caught a glimpse of the sea, framed by the nervous architecture of a wooden trellis covered entirely with vines whose clusters of blue and golden grapes hung heavily down.¹²

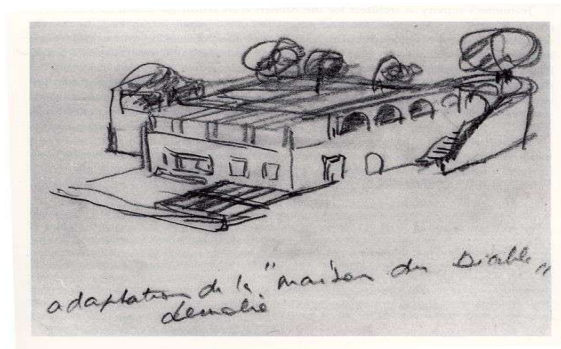
Here Le Corbusier describes an extremely rich built environment characterized by inside/outside spaces: a balcony, a pergola, and a terrace. He showed no particular interest in such spaces prior to the journey to the east; after his return home in November 1911, however, spaces in which interior and exterior are fused immediately begin to show up in his designs in the form of 'summer rooms', loggias and terraces, for instance in the house which he built for his parents in 1912–13, his proposed remodelling

¹⁰ *Journey to the East*, p. 23.

¹¹ *Journey to the East*, p. 62.

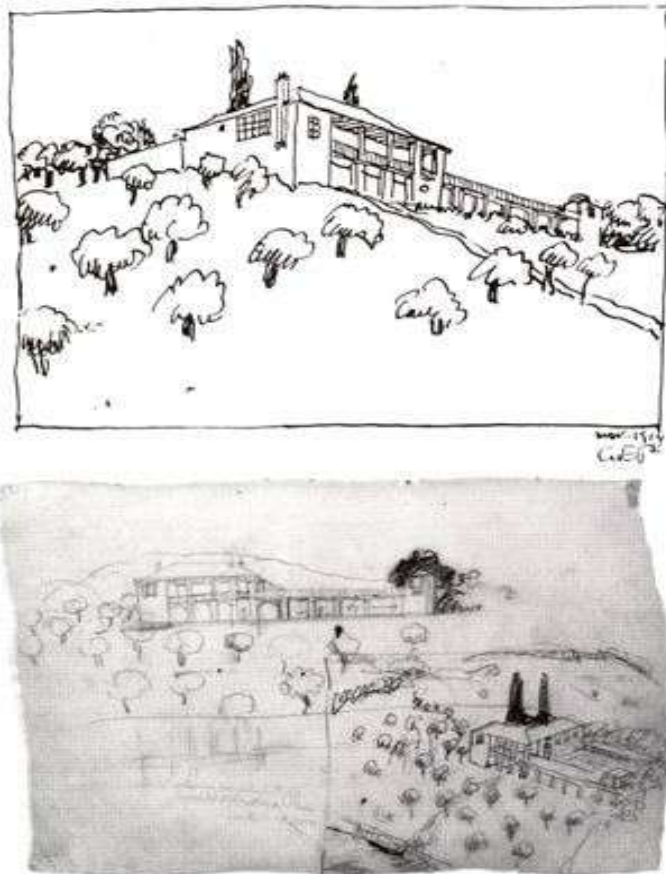
¹² *Journey to the East*, p. 179.

of an old Swiss farmhouse of 1912,



Le Locle farmhouse sketch

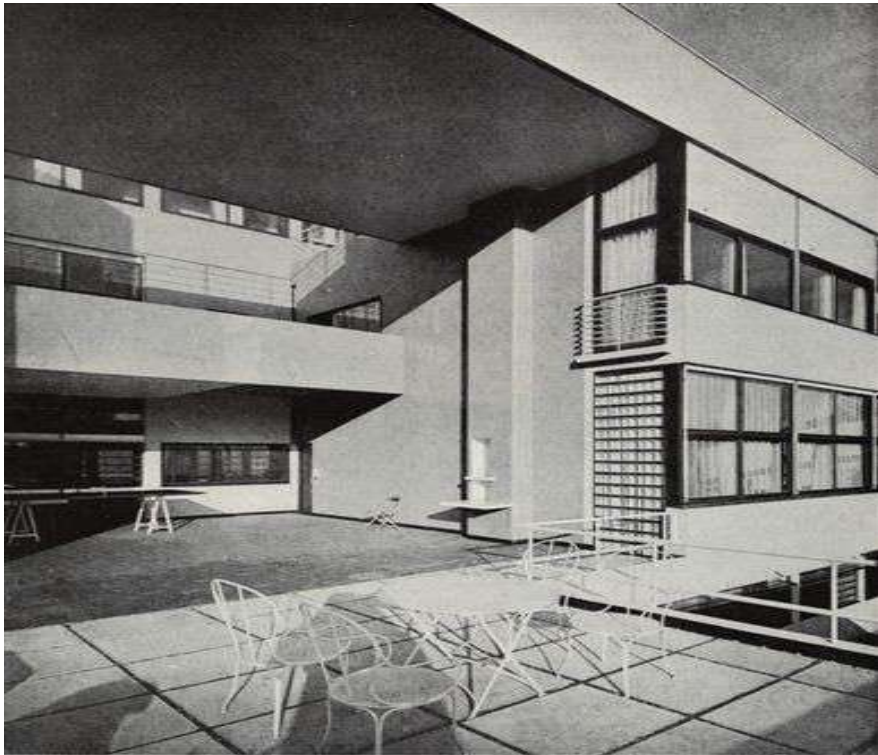
and the designs for the Felix Klipstein house of 1914–15.



Klipstein house project

Le Corbusier's famous villa designs of the 1920s show him exploring the

idea of the architectural promenade which links internal rooms with quasi-external terraces and roof gardens. The Villa Stein-de Monzie at Vaucresson, near Paris, was called ‘Les Terraces’ after its complex spatial arrangement, which takes the visitor on a journey between inside and outside.

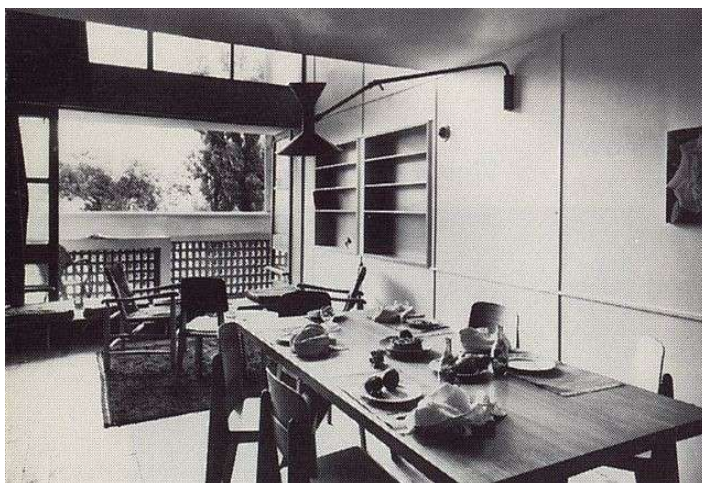


The Villa Stein-de Monzie at Vaucresson



The Villa Stein-de Monzie at Vaucresson

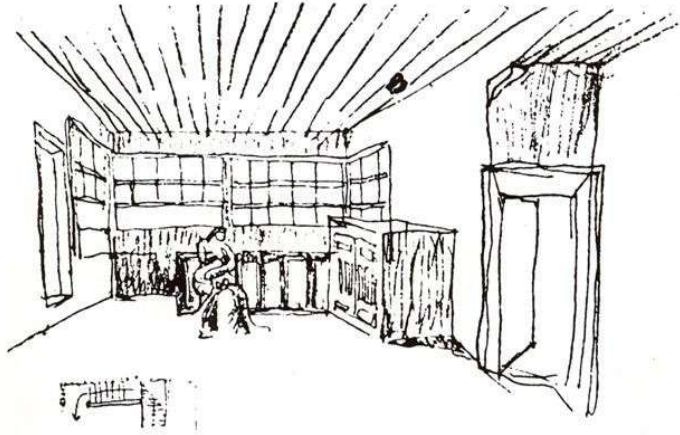
The theme of inside/outside spaces continued to occupy him for his entire career: the balconies at the Marseilles Unité, a large-scale housing block built between 1945 and 1952, give the occupants of each apartment a space which is essentially an extension of the sitting room, in which they can get some air and admire the magnificent view.



Marseilles apartment interior

Le Corbusier's sketch of the interior of a house in Turnovo, Bulgaria,

perhaps provides a source: the far wall is entirely glazed, beyond which, as he tells us in his description, is a balcony.



Turnovo house interior

The apartments at Marseilles show exactly the same arrangement. The monks' cells at the monastery of La Tourette, near Lyon, completed in 1961, are laid out in a similar, but more modest way. The dominant axis of each cell is between the entrance and the window, part of which forms a door onto the balcony.



La Tourette cell interior

Again, this is reminiscent of a description in *Journey to the East*. Writing about his ‘whitewashed room’ in the monastery of Karakallou on Mount Athos, Le Corbusier emphasizes the position of the window and the view beyond it:

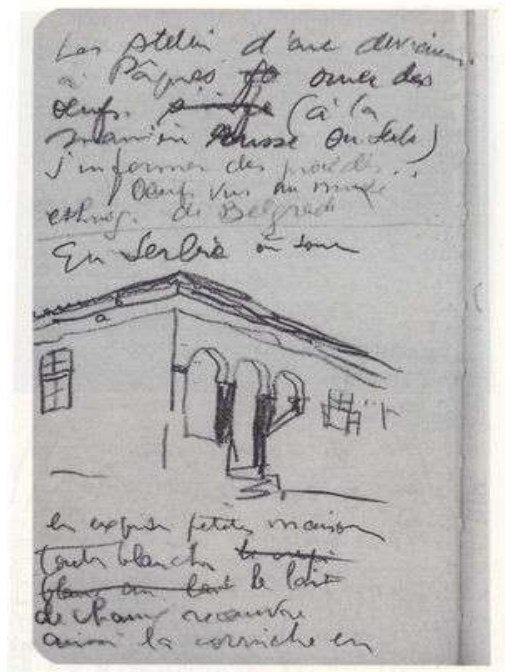
from the window lodged at the end of the deep splay, three times, I watch at dawn the light invade this endless space, while below, at the foot of the walls, the olive trees looked like tiny lichen.¹³

Le Corbusier has often been credited with the creation of a new fluidity between exterior and interior space through the use of roof gardens, balconies, and so on. Such fluidity was hardly new, however: as we have seen, it is one of the defining characteristics of vernacular architecture. It is therefore to the small white houses of Turkey and the Balkans that we must look to find an important source for the blurring of the boundaries between inside and outside which was so crucial in Le Corbusier’s conception of architectural modernism.



Romanian house

¹³ *Journey to the East*, p. 185.



White Serbian house

One of Le Corbusier's principal and most frequently stated aims was to bring about a reconciliation between man and nature through the medium of the built environment. Here, again, the journey to the east exerted an important influence. He wrote in *The Radiant City* that 'we will learn more from the savages, from men close to nature who the Academies have not touched'¹⁴, stating his belief that the unfailing instinct for ideal architectural form with which he credits the vernacular builders was rooted in their connection with the natural environment, a connection, he felt, which had been completely lost in the West. The rise of the industrialized city in the nineteenth century, Le Corbusier argued, had created a situation in which fresh air, sunlight, and greenery had become inaccessible to most people, creating an artificial divorce between the realms of the man-made and the natural. In distancing itself from the natural world, architecture was losing its authenticity, an authenticity which Le Corbusier had encountered in the pre-industrial cultures of the journey to the east. He made a close

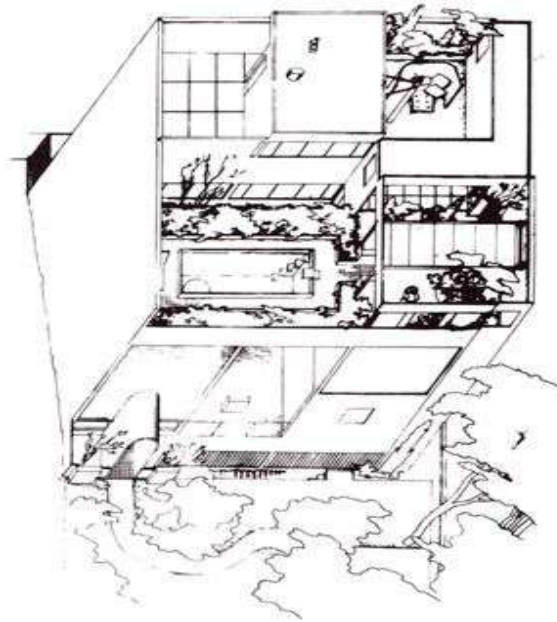
¹⁴ Le Corbusier, *The Radiant City*, trans. by Pamela Knight, Eleanor Levieux and Derek Coltman (London: Faber & Faber, 1964), p. 33. First published as *La Ville Radieuse* (Paris: Vincent, Fréal et Cie, 1933).

connection, moreover, between the reconciliation between man and nature which he wished to bring about and his notion of modern architecture as a promoter of good health. Once again, we find him praising in the cultures he encountered on the journey to the east those qualities which he most wanted his own buildings to embody:

what I have seen on the way takes away from me forever all faith in the ingeniousness of new races, and I place all my hopes in those who, having started from the beginning, are already well advanced and know much. [...] Purification is a vital necessity, and as we avoid death by the simple desire to live, we shall return – yes, to the health that belongs to this epoch, a health appropriate to our contingencies, and then from there to beauty.¹⁵

The most obvious results of Le Corbusier's obsession with health are the running tracks, swimming pools, and sun terraces in his buildings and projects, all of which provide spaces open to the elements and hence encourage a reconnection with the natural environment, as well as promoting the value of exercise. Such sporting facilities are found in his built work on rooftops or terraces, that is, in the inside/outside spaces discussed above, which Le Corbusier used as a way of encouraging good health in his clients. More than this, he created in them an ideal vision of nature by giving access to its more benign aspects, such as sunshine, fresh air, and a view of greenery, while providing protection from extremes of climate.

¹⁵ *Journey to the East*, p. 171.



Villa Meyer axonmetric roof

This approach to nature is undoubtedly an idealized one—Le Corbusier incorporated those aspects of nature which are easily controllable into his designs, in a way which implies that the natural world has a role to play in servicing human needs. Considered in another way, however, it seems like a practical approach, bringing natural elements into people’s homes in a usable way. What building, after all, could embrace the full spectrum of the natural world and still fulfil its function, which is bound to be, at some level, a shelter? The whole question bears comparison with Le Corbusier’s approach to what he called ‘the East’. Western contact with eastern countries has often been theorized, most famously by Edward Said, as being defined by an exoticizing vision, which filters the East through the pre-existing fantasies of the visitor’s imagination.¹⁶ To what extent was the young Le Corbusier guilty of this tendency in his reactions to non-Western cultures, both on his journey to the east and subsequently? The occasional passage of purple prose betrays a strong idealizing vision: in *The Radiant*

¹⁶ Said, Edward, *Orientalism* (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1978).

City, for instance, he launches into a flight of lyricism on the subject of ‘la ville Arabe’, captioning an illustration of two women on a terrace overlooking Algiers:

oh inspiring image! Arabs, are there no peoples but you who meditate daily in the splendid sunset hours? [...] The Casbah is nothing but an enormous stairway, a lofty gallery where thousands come each evening to worship nature.¹⁷

Le Corbusier credits an entire race with his own veneration of the natural world, based on no stronger evidence than a postcard he picked up in Algiers, a clear case of a pre-existing notion of a culture colouring one’s impression of it.

However, for all his idealization of non-Western or ‘primitive’ cultures, Le Corbusier found in the east a symbolic richness and spiritual meaning which he felt had been completely lost in the West. For instance, he writes in *Journey to the East* of the highest of the monasteries on Mount Athos that

so far out to sea, so high in the sky, and on the road to Jerusalem, we have really reached a sanctuary—as ultimate as the last notes of a modern symphony. The Orthodox faith, a greenhouse warm with mysticism, transports the faithful into beatitudes.¹⁸

Deeply suspicious of Western organized religion, Le Corbusier sought alternative ways of finding meaning in contemporary life. For him, architecture was a spiritual discipline, a high calling which demanded a sense of the sacred. Inspired by the monasteries of Mount Athos he wrote,

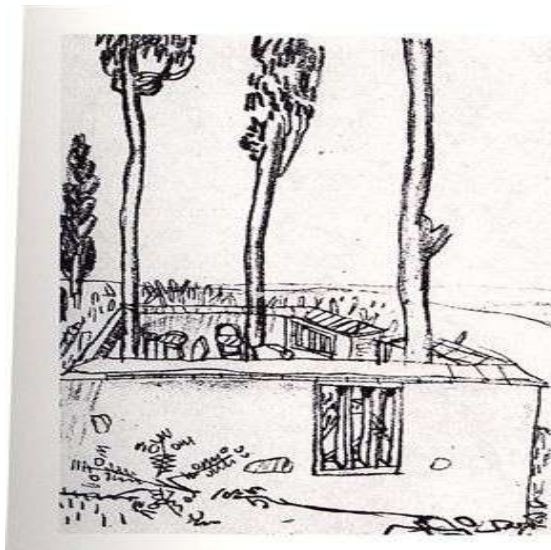
I felt quite strongly that the singular and noble task of the architect is to open the soul to poetic realms, by using materials with integrity so as to make them useful. To provide the Mother of God with a house of stone sheltered from old

¹⁷ *The Radiant City*, pp. 230-33.

¹⁸ *Journey to the East*, p. 189.

misdeeds and to arrange the volumes of that sanctuary in such a way that a spirit emanates from it... – what a divine calling for the ancient builders!¹⁹

Space itself, therefore, could be sacred, or, in Le Corbusier's phrase, 'ineffable', but only if it was the right kind of space, created in the right spirit. Through pure forms, untrammelled by needless decoration, and a close connection with nature which encouraged physical, mental, and spiritual health, a new kind of architecture that was capable of rediscovering its original sacred meaning, as preserved in vernacular architecture, could be born. This conception of the relationship between architecture and the sacred is not unproblematic, however. Can one reinvest symbolic meaning in the buildings of a society which has lost a symbolic mode of thought? Can such an appropriation of motifs and models from other cultures in an attempt to reanimate one's own result in a truly authentic experience of the sacred? The value systems and world views of twentieth-century Western Europe had so little in common with those underpinning, say, a village cemetery in Turkey or the monasteries of Mount Athos that Le Corbusier's attempt to evoke a sense of the sacred by reference to such traditions rests on shaky foundations.



Turkish cemetery

¹⁹ *Journey to the East*, p. 193.

Although the purity and beauty of vernacular buildings helped him to create the new aesthetic of modern architecture, and although he was inspired by them to call for a reconciliation with nature in his own culture, Le Corbusier's attempts to imbue his own work with a new, secular sense of the sacred based on his impression of non-Western cultures throws up some difficult questions which are still relevant in our own contemporary context.

Bibliography

Primary sources

Le Corbusier, *Journey to the East*, ed., trans. and annotated by Ivan Zaknic in collaboration with Nicole Pertuiset (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1987) First published as *Le Voyage d'Orient*, ed. by Jean Petit (Paris: Forces Vives, 1966)

Le Corbusier, *The Decorative Art of Today*, trans. by James I Dunnett (London: The Architectural Press, 1987) First published as *L'Art décoratif d'aujourd'hui* (Paris: Editions Crès, 1925)

Le Corbusier, *The Radiant City*, trans. by Pamela Knight, Eleanor Levieux and Derek Coltman (London: Faber & Faber, 1964) First published as *La Ville Radieuse* (Paris: Vincent, Fréal et Cie, 1933)

Loos, Adolf, 'Architecture', trans. by Wilfred Wang, in *The Architecture of Adolf Loos* (London: Arts Council, 1985)

Secondary sources

Benton, Tim, *The Villas of Le Corbusier 1920-1930* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1987)

Brooks, Harold Allen, *Le Corbusier's Formative Years* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1997)

Fletcher, Sir Banister, *A History of Architecture on the Comparative Method* (London: Batsford, 1896)

Said, Edward, *Orientalism* (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1978)

Vogt, Adolf Max, *Le Corbusier, The Noble Savage: Towards an rchaeology of Modernism*, trans. by Radka Donnell (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1998)