

The *Unité* *d'Habitation*

had an enormous impact when it was completed in 1952. It belongs to a group of mature works which represented a new phase in Le Corbusier's development and which confirmed and enhanced his reputation as one of the most inventive and radical architects of the twentieth century. Only 25 years later however, following his death in the mid 1960s and the reaction against modernism of the 1970s, Le Corbusier's reputation was under attack. Although still acknowledged as a great innovator he was increasingly associated with the perceived failures of modern architecture. It is perhaps only now, at the beginning of the twenty-first century, that we can look back and see how clearly the *Unité d'Habitation* at Marseille illustrated the problem of assessing Le Corbusier's legacy.

Taken on its own terms, the *Unité* is an astonishingly impressive building that has stood the test of time. It continues, in many respects, to feel contemporary and fresh to this day. This is because the building expressed, one might even say helped to define, a particular contemporary lifestyle; that of the sophisticated, upwardly mobile, twentieth century urban middle class professional. Now that this lifestyle is promoted in innumerable fashion and design magazines and TV programmes it is difficult to imagine just how startlingly novel the *Unité* must have been in the 1950s. Indeed the remarkable thing is that few projects built since the *Unité* can match the completeness of its proposition of a self-contained, serviced environment with its own apartments, shops, laundry, restaurant, bar, hotel, children's nursery, playground and running track. Indeed the closest parallels to the *Unité*, in terms of social provision, are the tourist hotel or the holiday village.

In addition to the social proposition expressed in the *Unité*, the building occupies a very significant place in the development of aesthetics. It belongs to a group of projects built by Le Corbusier in the 1940s and 1950s in which he developed an architecture in profound contrast to the smooth, white aesthetic of the "international style" of pre-war modernism, of which Le Corbusier was himself a leading exponent. Through the use of raw,



exposed materials, vivid primary colours and powerful sculptural forms he created, in his post-war buildings, a monumental and tactile architecture that was at once playful, witty and urbane and solid, earthy and monumental in character. This style is known, in English, as "Brutalism".

But the reputation of the *Unité* does not depend solely on its significance as a brilliant one-off example of the work of a great architect. Le Corbusier managed to create a building that seems to be a specific response to the site and the landscape in which it stands; but it was built as a conscious prototype for a new kind of urbanism. It was intended to have a universal application. Implicit in the design of the *Unité* is the idea that it was but one component of a new kind of city, the industrial garden city. Le Corbusier's ideas for such a city had been developed by him, and by other modernists, over many years in urban projects such as the *Plan Voisin* of 1922-30, a proposal to demolish and redevelop a large part of central Paris, and in theoretical works such as the *Chartre d'Athènes*.

Many of his contemporaries, seduced by the beauty and logic of his buildings, were prepared to be persuaded that Le Corbusier's urban theories would, if implemented, carry the same conviction and success as his built works. The impact of Le Corbusier's urban ideas on a younger generation of architects during his lifetime was considerable. His followers absorbed the ideas, which he publicised in a series of gestural projects and polemical writings on architecture and urbanism. These included concepts such as the large-scale rationalisation and redevelopment of traditional cities, the segregation of pedestrian and vehicle circulation, the zoning of cities according to function, the elimination of the traditional street and the opening up of cities to landscape, parks and trees.

Although in the 1950s Le Corbusier's proposals must have looked astonishingly innovative and radical, they were in fact a reflection of social ideas that had their origins in nineteenth century Europe and America. The unplanned and uncontrolled growth of the industrial metropolis, with the associated problems of disease, poverty and social unrest, had caused widespread concern, particularly amongst the opinion-forming urban middle class. These were the people most directly involved in trying to manage and govern urban life and whose persons and property were most directly threatened by any breakdown of social order.

As a consequence, nineteenth century social reformers, entrepreneurs and scientists produced a wealth of practical, theoretical and utopian ideas for addressing the 'evils' of urbanism.

The more utopian and radical of these took many forms, ranging from a return to an idealised pre-industrial and religious way of life to the emergence of an idealised classless, post-capitalist, industrial society based on science and reason. The belief in progress and in the beneficial potential of science and technology were ideas that were embraced by modern movement planners and architects, and with good reason, for well into the twentieth century the problems created by uncontrolled urbanism continued to require remedy.

Examples, in France, of ideas that may have influenced the modernists, consciously or unconsciously, include the social and environmental theories of Fourier and the practical achievements of Baron Haussmann. Charles Fourier believed in the power of architecture and social organization to create a stable and hierarchical social order, and his architect follower, Victor Considerant, developed design proposals to illustrate his concept of social palaces called Phalansteries. Though stylistically nineteenth century in character, these proposals had much in common with Le Corbusier's later version of a palace for working people, the *Unité d'Habitation*. The replanning of Paris by Baron Haussmann, on the other hand, provided a different exemplar to the modernist. Although they rejected his town planning theories and designs as precedents, the sheer scale of his work in Paris demonstrated the potential of town planning as an instrument of social renewal and regulation.

In the early twentieth century such precedents were transformed in the fertile imaginations of architects and engineers into town planning projects that intended to reform society through the reform of its physical environment. One of the earliest of these in France was Tony Garnier, whose work and career must have been a particular inspiration for Le Corbusier, combining as it did both the production of radical new architectural ideas and their partial realisation in his projects for the city of Lyon.

When Le Corbusier took up the cause of these ideas, he brought to it his extraordinary talent as a polemicist and publicist. He possessed the ability to create a seemingly clear and simple vision of a utopian future in which all social life would be rendered harmonious through the mechanism of a regulated environment. And while his cartoon-like images of the ordered industrial city, with citizens walking in the green open spaces between shining towers, must have looked both innovative and benign, this was in fact the most potent contemporary artistic expression of a century-old dream of environmentally engineered social regulation.

With hindsight, we now accept that these ideas – if they had ever been fully implemented – would not have brought the order and harmony that was desired. Even their piecemeal implementation, in developments the world over, far from heralding a new social order, has created a whole new class of urban ills. It has become clear that the urban strategy proposed by Le Corbusier and his contemporaries, though it contained ideas of interest and value, was too simplistic to sustain the richness and diversity of traditional forms of urban life.

Returning, then, to the *Unité d'Habitation* in Marseille, how do we judge this building? Seen as a universal model for urban housing it is flawed. Ideal though the serviced environment may be for a small section of the population, it is not suited to the needs of the majority. For most, it represents an artificial, exclusive and no doubt expensive way to live. Had Le Corbusier succeeded in building all three of the *Unités* he proposed for this area of Marseilles, it would almost certainly have detracted from rather than enhanced the appeal of the one that was realized.

The other problem with the *Unité* as a prototype is its aesthetic. Many copied the Brutalist style developed by Le Corbusier, but none of his imitators were able to create the poetry of the original. Indeed, the tragedy is that his imitators were responsible for many of the most ugly and alienating buildings of the post-Second World War period.

And yet, whatever one feels about the appropriateness of Le Corbusier's grander utopian intentions, the *Unité d'Habitation* is a beautiful and inspiring building. So let us be thankful that he was allowed to build his prototype, for it is one of the curiosities of his career that in translating his theoretical ideas into reality he was transformed from being a somewhat naive idealist into a great artist. And let us be thankful that he was not encouraged to rebuild the rest of Marseille, which no doubt he would have been quite prepared to do. Marseille is lucky to have the *Unité*, but it really only needs one of them.

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