

## EXHIBITION REVIEWS

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### Le Corbusier – The Art of Architecture

Curators: Mateo Kries, Stanislaus von Moos, Arthur Rüegg

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Nederlands Architectuurinstituut (NAi), Rotterdam

26 May to 2 September 2007

Vitra Design Museum, Weil am Rhein

29 September 2007 to 10 February 2008

Museu Berardo, Lisboa

15 May to 15 August 2008

The Crypt, Metropolitan Cathedral of Christ the King, Liverpool, presented by the Royal Institute of British Architects (RIBA)

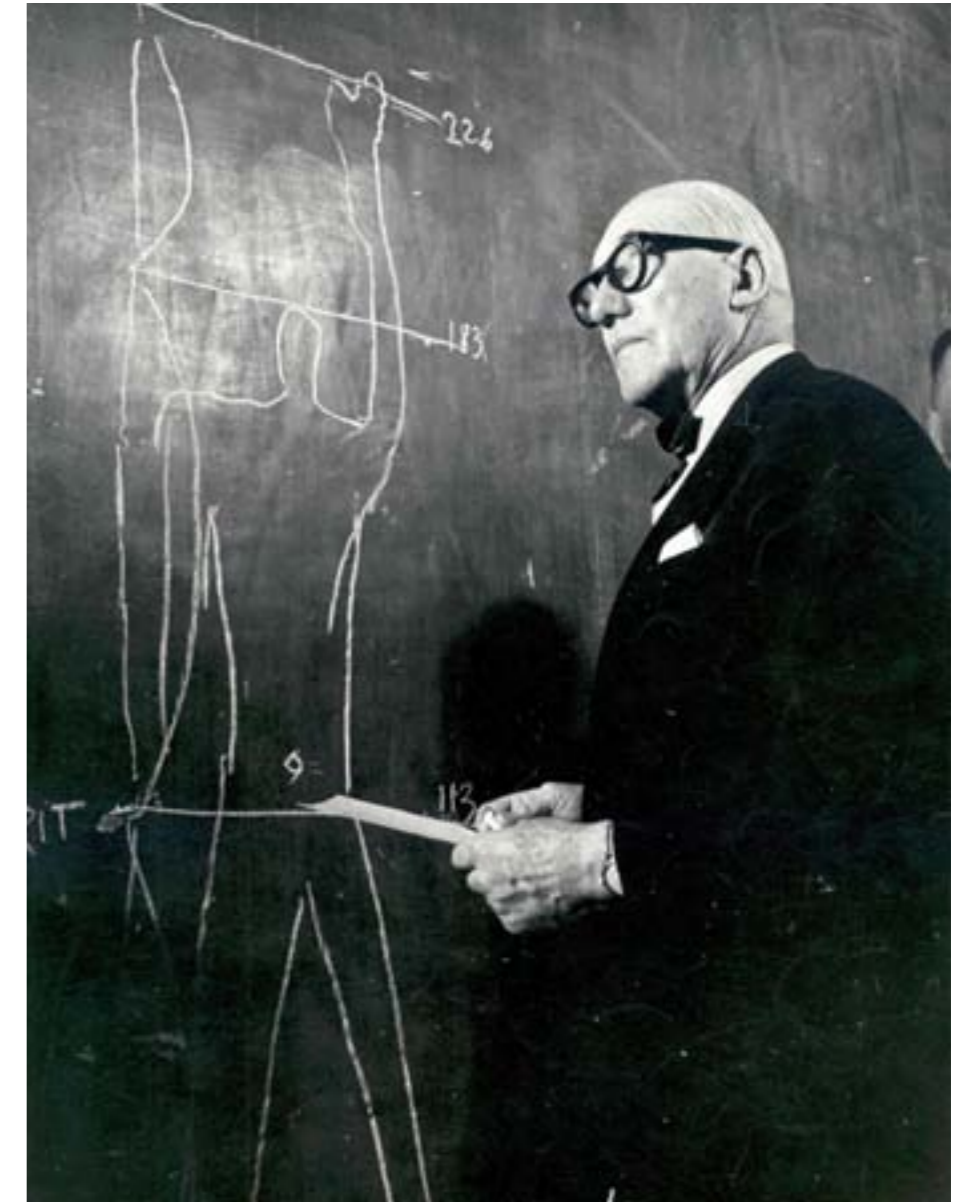
3 October 2008 to 18 January 2009

Barbican Art Gallery, London, presented in collaboration with the RIBA

19 February to 24 May 2009

*Seen in Rotterdam, May 2007*

This is the first major exhibition devoted to Le Corbusier since the many exhibitions and books that appeared twenty years ago, in 1987, to mark the centenary of his birth. But try Google and you will experience that Le Corbusier is still the world's most talked-about architect. For many he is also the most important architect and urbanist ever, but just as many others disdain him as the infamous urbanist. He has even been blamed for the riots in the *banlieues* of Paris. Only one article in the catalogue, by Charles Knevitt on Le Corbusier's British legacy, refers explicitly to the god-like stature of Le Corbu with his fellow architects and the almost devil-like perception of him by the general public, especially in Britain. So it is even more remarkable that the Royal Institute of British Architects joined forces with the Vitra Design Museum and the Netherlands Architecture Institute to prove that Le Corbusier "remains highly significant and relevant in today's architectural discourse." At the same time, however, their intention is to situate the whole of his oeuvre and public life in its historical cultural context.



Portrait of Le Corbusier, 1960-65  
© FLC / VG Bild-Kunst, Bonn, 2007

These two aims seem hard to combine: presenting a contemporary view of Le Corbusier's work by incorporating the results of recent scholarly research, while simultaneously providing a comprehensive introduction to the subject for younger generations. This double approach also plays an important role in the presentation. The show is divided into three sections entitled "Contexts," "Privacy and Publicity" and "Built Art", but it also focuses on themes that played a role throughout virtually his entire career, like the Mediterranean and the Orient; his shift to or ongoing interest in the organic, the vernacular, the primitive and the archaic; his fascination with and exploration of new technologies and media; and last but not least, his belief in the "synthèse des arts."

The first section, "Contexts," presents six cities which repeatedly played a role in Le Corbusier's life and sketchbooks: La Chaux-de-Fonds, where he grew up and made his first designs; Paris, which he wanted to transform almost beyond recognition but which was also his capital; Rio de Janeiro and Algiers, where he entered into competition or dialogue with these fast-developing metropolises, then considered exotic; New York, the only city which really seems to have impressed him (although he tried not to show it); and Moscow, as he believed for a moment that socialism was the future. This last item was shown in a dead-end corridor created within the exhibition space in Rotterdam, and his later enthusiasm for the Vichy Regime is hardly mentioned. But included in "Contexts" are also paintings, furniture and other objects, films and photographs of him or by him, and works by artists almost equally famous, such as Fernand Léger, Georges Braque, Jean Prouvé and his collaborators Charlotte Perriand, Pierre Jeanneret, and Amédée Ozenfant.

"Privacy and Publicity" is the next section and seems a tribute to Beatriz Colomina's most famous book, where Le Corbusier is the main character even more than Adolf Loos. In both the catalogue essay of the same name and in the exhibition she presents newly discovered films by Le Corbusier and explores his play with old and new media. But the real focus of this section in the show is instead on reconstructed interiors and, as in the first section, furniture. So a strange kind of competition for attention emerges between the Vitra Collection, which receives a separate part in the catalogue, and the majority of objects exhibited, which belong to the collection of the Fondation Le Corbusier.

Living area in the Pavillon de l'Esprit Nouveau with original furniture and paintings.  
Reconstruction by Arthur Rüegg and Silvio Schmed, 1987  
© Betty Fleck, Museum für Gestaltung, Zürich / VG Bild-Kunst, Bonn, 2007



The third section is called "Built Art" and focuses on the architect's change in direction, beginning in the 1930s, towards a more "organic" architecture as highlighted in the famous Ronchamp chapel. But equal attention is drawn to a large model of the Philips pavilion, which hosted the first multimedia show with music by Xenakis at the World's Fair in Brussels in 1958. Although authorship is a bit nebulous in this case, it is an important phase in Le Corbusier's life and work, even if it is tiny in comparison with building the new town Chandigarh in India or the Unité d'Habitation in Marseilles. Questions of authorship also arise with the church in Firminy. The temptation to include the beautiful model is understandable but problematic. The church was completed only last year, despite the fact that the ruins of the original unfinished building (1961-64) were declared a national monument already in 1996. It is a very uneasy case, as the church should have been the crown of the architect's only large urban project executed in France, but Firminy with its many authors (Castex, Panerai, and others) has become an example of how ideals can get lost in realization.

Did Le Corbusier die too early in 1965, or could his dream only turn into nightmares because the people who believed in him always seemed to believe in just one carefully constructed image? Whereby the real Corbu seems to have reinvented himself every two to ten years, as at least the majority of writers in the catalogue attempts to demonstrate.

Publication related to the exhibition:

Alexander von Vegesack, Stanislaus von Moos, Arthur Rüegg, Mateo Kries, eds., *Le Corbusier - The Art of Architecture*, Weil am Rhein: Vitra Design Stiftung, 2007, 397 pp., ca. 500 illustrations, about 375 in color. ISBN 978-3-931936-72-3. € 79.90

The catalogue is not really a catalogue but a bundle of sometimes brilliant essays in words and illustrations disguised as a coffee table book. Sometimes the portfolio of illustrations is a direct extension of the argument of the essay, sometimes it seems to be meant as a commentary. The book starts with a compact biography with contemporary photographs and illustrations of designs, and continues with essays by Stanislaus von Moos, Arthur Rüegg, Mateo Kries, Jean-Louis Cohen, Beatriz Colomina, Niklas Maak, Juan José Lahuerta, and Charles Kneivitt. Portfolios treat topics such as *Metamorphoses of the Orient*; *the Technical Object*; *Surrealist Poetics*; and *the Unité d'Habitation*. The book concludes with an annex on furniture and a compact bibliography.

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Le Corbusier surrounded by his  
"Collection particulière" in the  
second story of the Rue Jacob 20,  
around 1931  
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