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Le Corbusier's Fatal Flaws – A Critique of Modernism

Alessandro Hsueh-Bruni

The Modernist movement at the turn of the century brought about a radically innovative set of guiding philosophies regarding urban design and the arrangement of space. The movement's leading practitioner, the Swiss-born Charles-Édouard Jeanneret-Gris, more popularly known as Le Corbusier, is remembered for his highly ambitious and iconoclastic rejection of thousands of years' worth of architectural tradition. After traveling and immersing himself in foreign approaches to architecture, Le Corbusier developed a series of trademarks, theories, and beliefs that would end up birthing a legion of followers and contemporaries. His stubbornly utilitarian style was based on the simple grandeur of American architectural and design, where classical motifs and overly stylized flourishes were nowhere to be found. The experimentally minded man left behind a legacy of fascinating conceptual designs, from solid blocks of commerce to icons of refined elegance. Though his theories and projects attempted to create a utopian society, the lingering aftereffects of his influence, specifically regarding urban planning, have aged horribly, and are symbolic of Modernism's willingness to experiment on the poor, along with other marginalized groups.

In his iconic book *The City of Tomorrow and Its Planning*, published in 1929, Le Corbusier marked a transition in his career, going from being a private architect to working as someone who primarily constructed public spaces. The book is most notable for rejecting the unsystematic, organic, and sprawling planning that grew out of Medieval-era chaos in favor of Le Corbusier's own innovative imagined version of the modern Western metropolis. He wanted to distance himself from the Parisian planner Haussmann, whose city was ornate, beautifully constructed and symbolic of consumerism. His ideal model was steel-and-glass based and centered around rigid and simple geometric concepts. To Le Corbusier, "the result of repetition is a *standard*, the perfect form."¹ He hoped that his obsession with architectural perfection would remedy the urban blight and social ills characteristic of early industrial development. Above all, he wanted a flawless "democratic" and utopian society.

Le Corbusier's concepts relating to the urban form are best expressed by his "City of Three Million" model, released in the 1920s. This series of diagrams and captions further demonstrated his intention of crafting cities as single-purpose "machines for living in."² He desperately advocated for the replacement of what existed in then-contemporary Paris with a crisscrossed city divided into distinct zones. Le Corbusier planned for the construction of twenty-four glass skyscrapers in the center, designed for business purposes, protected greenbelts, and satellite towns on the outskirts of the urban core. The lower classes were relegated to the fringes, far from any available amenities. The blueprint predicted the end of private housing ownership, the dominance of the automobile, and low density living. With an aircraft landing pad in the center of the city and driveways on all sides of the building complex, this model of uniformity was supposed to usher in a new era, one of industrialized convenience.

¹ Le Corbusier and Etchells. *The City of Tomorrow and Its Planning*. 3rd ed. (London: Architectural Press, 1971), 372-378.

² Le Corbusier, *Towards a New Architecture*. (London: Architectural Press, 1946), 151.

The functionalism and simplicity of Le Corbusier's innovative blueprints gave rise to a generation of Modernist thinkers. As the New Urbanism school of thought brought to attention, however, his plans were hardly well-thought out. Not only was this model aesthetically unpleasing, with its prevailing theme of uniformity, but it presented several flaws that would be ignored until the advent of New Urbanism. Robert Hughes, the famed art critic, brought attention to Le Corbusier's model's negative legacy. In healthy cities, according to Hughes, a polycentric approach to planning, with sites of financial, political and economic productivity within close proximity to each other, is necessary. The ideal urban form combines public and private spaces – in recent years, it has become apparent that mixed-use development is most desirable. Despite what Le Corbusier might have claimed, the pros of the transit oriented development, highly livable communities, and increased sustainability that stem from mixed zoning are undeniable. To Robert Hughes, if Le Corbusier had his way, “the car would abolish the human street, and perhaps the human foot,” which would have led to “the surrender[ing] of the inhabitants' freedom of movement to their omnipresent architect.”³ In the 21st century, there is a common understanding that cities would benefit from a reformed public transportation system, downsizing and increased densification⁴. This consensus is only seen after Le Corbusier influenced the most poisonous advancement in 20th century planning, suburbia, with its car-dependent insanity.

In addition to setting the stage for infrastructural developments to come, Le Corbusier's blueprints and models, while not so well-regarded by urban planners and street dwellers alike, also examined the sociological side of cities in great detail. World War II left millions dead and transformed the urban landscape throughout much of Europe, from England to the Soviet Union, and housing on a mass scale was necessary. Le Corbusier personally took this as a challenge to accommodate the masses on an unprecedented scale. This mission statement manifested itself in the form of “Cité Radieuse” (The Radiant City), located in Marseille, France. The construction of this utopian sanctuary was dependent on the destruction of traditional neighborhoods – he showed no regard for French cultural heritage and tradition. Entire neighborhoods were ravaged to make way for these dense, uniform concrete blocks. If he had his way, Paris' elite Marais community would have been completely destroyed. In addition, the theme of segregation that plagued earlier models of Le Corbusier's continued in this supposed utopian vision, with the wealthy elite being the only ones to access the luxuries of modernism⁵.

Le Corbusier often liked to portray himself as an idealist who wanted the best for Europe's struggling cities, but the unfortunate truth is that, at heart, he was a totalitarian whose decisions led to widespread social unrest. The cold, concrete-based appearance shares many parallels with the inhumane character of both communism and fascism. In his native country, France, banlieues, slums populated by immigrants often thought of as breeding grounds of crime and urban blight, stemmed from his proposals and theories regarding urban planning. The segregation encouraged and celebrated by Le Corbusier has triggered unnecessary feelings of exclusivity and isolation for the modern-day banlieue's settlers. These complexes feature

³ Lang, Jon. T., and Walter Moleski. *Functionalism Revisited: Architectural Theory and Practice and the Behavioral Sciences*. (Farnham, Surrey, England: Ashgate, 2010), 10-14.

⁴ Webb, Flemmich. “Sustainable Cities: Innovative Urban Planning in Singapore.” *The Guardian*. Accessed December 11, 2015. <http://www.theguardian.com/sustainable-business/sustainable-cities-innovative-urban-planning-singapore>.

⁵ Le Corbusier. *The Radiant City*. New York, New York: The Orion Press, 1967.

members of marginalized groups who live on the outside of French society, who look inward without being able to actually participate. To this day, despite being modeled on the “Cité Radieuse” (the Radiant City), there is little productivity coming from these parts – in 2005, Parisian banlieues were rocked by riots between youths and police, and according to *The New Yorker's* George Packer, are still serving as “incubators” of terrorism.⁶ Clichy Sous Bois, the most infamous banlieue, one that sports an unemployment rate that is twice as high as the French national average, is, in the pattern of Le Corbusier's settlement suggestions, intentionally placed far away from the glamour of inner city Paris, with no access to railways or the metro system.

The effects of Le Corbusier's inhumane and deeply flawed planning techniques were felt in his native France, but the sheer newness of his architectural style and his radical concrete-clad fortified towers became a global symbol of industrial and economic prowess, leading people to buy into his naïve vision for the future. After witnessing Le Corbusier's grandiose (though cold and detached) industrial-inspired housing pieces, he was enlisted to craft a new city in India, Chandigarh, by the nation's first Prime Minister, Jawaharlal Nehru. Nehru recruited Le Corbusier to craft a bold and contemporary image for a newly independent India. Above all, he wanted a something to represent “the nation's faith in the future,” though this vision has hardly held up. As was the case in much of France, with India, Le Corbusier served as an overly obsessive modernist maniac. The city is frighteningly rational, as there is nothing organic or quaint about its sprawling, separated-by-income grid format. There is no architectural variation in Chandigarh whatsoever, since everything follows Le Corbusier's preferred pseudo-Fascist minimalistic and simple concrete-clad style. The entire city features an unoriginal form of centrally controlled development and has row upon row of identical city blocks. Today, in spite of the fact that it sports the nation's highest income per capita, Chandigarh, despite only being crafted 70 years ago, is in a state of disrepair. Its strict socioeconomic hierarchy, collapsing infrastructure, space shortages, all results of Le Corbusier's planning guidelines have prompted the local chief minister, Bhupinder Singh Hooda, to suggest the government to vacate the city. To him, Chandigarh and its layout “are completely unethical,” and “one should not copy it.”⁷

Most of Le Corbusier's plans for entire cities never made it beyond the blueprint stage, with the exception of India's Chandigarh experiment, however, Brasilia, a city designed to bring its host country (Brazil) into the global age, is a Corbusian failed utopia that has much in common with its predecessor. Its construction was ordered by the French architectural team organized by Le Corbusier, the International Congresses of Modern Architecture, or as its known amongst French speakers, CIAM. Brasilia, chosen to be Brazil's new capital in 1960 by President Kubitschek, was supposed to usher in a new era of urban enlightenment, and is equally indebted to both of Le Corbusier's leading plans, the “City of Three Million” and “Cité Radieuse.”⁸ Referring to his vision for Brasilia as destructive is an understatement. At first glance, Brasilia is a striking testament to modernity's supposed perfection, but under close speculation, it becomes apparent that this is a failure of an urban area. There are the ubiquitous housing projects and massive superblocks that have become characteristic of Le Corbusier's work. The city is also representative of the 20th century's new obsession with the automobile and the convenience that it was supposed to bring along. Unfortunately, the city, which is

⁶ Packer, George. “The Other France.” *The New Yorker*, August, 31, 2015.

⁷ Artemel, AJ. “Will Le Corbusier's Chandigarh Fall to Ruin?” Architizer. August 21, 2013. Accessed December 12, 2015. <http://architizer.com/blog/changes-in-store-for-chandigarh/>.

⁸ Scott, James C. *Seeing Like a State: How Certain Schemes to Improve the Human Condition Have Failed*. (New Haven, Connecticut: Yale University Press, 1998), 125-130.

crisscrossed by major highways on all ends, failed to facilitate economic success or come anywhere close to Kubitschek and Le Corbusier's dream of the ideal city. Jane Jacobs, a renowned urban reformer and critic of modernism, once famously shutdown the irrationality of Brasilia, and in her landmark book, *The Death and Life of Great American Cities*, stated that "You can't rely on bringing people downtown, you have to put them there."⁹ Jacobs, along with many renowned enemies of modernist thought have cited Brasilia as a city of preventable class-related tension, segregation, and inconvenience, all thanks to CIAM. The sprawling nature of Brasilia's grid layout and its car-oriented design prevent activities that should be staples of modern living; for instance, the city suffers from a crippling lack of nightlife due to the fact that street level interaction does not exist.

American architects drew heavily from the ideology of Le Corbusier, and the Pruitt-Igoe Housing Project in St. Louis is a particularly strong reminder of his negative impact on the organization of urban spaces. It is now well-known as the most infamous housing project in 20th century America. Designed by Minoru Yamasaki, a professed Le Corbusier enthusiast, Pruitt-Igoe had a very idealistic goal, as it was intended to house the poor and working class masses of what was then a booming industrial town. At the beginning of its construction, it was hailed as a remedy to St. Louis' problems – it was supposed to remove people from slums that lacked structure. Like Le Corbusier's "Cité Radieuse," this project presented challenge relating to relocation and integration. The city-within-a-city consisted of 33 11-story high-rise buildings, and was on the city's far north end, a world apart from downtown's corporate wealth¹⁰. This form of large-scale public housing proved to be terribly unproductive, with its racially segregated and violent character. It was a site without much hope, a place of concentrated poverty. As was the case with Le Corbusier's completed forays into urban development, the Pruitt-Igoe project was guilty of imposing an overly ambitious Modernist agenda on unsuspecting residents who were unaware that they were a part of a vicious experiment. As people left the city due to the migration pattern known as "white flight," St. Louis lost huge chunks of its population, and the Pruitt-Igoe complex ended up with absurdly a high vacancy rate. By the 1970s, even local government officials acknowledged that this was an architectural disaster – it was demolished over the course of several months.

Le Corbusier was a stubborn man who held strong, but often contradictory opinions on what was best when it came to the urban form. He shied away from architectural trends and motifs of the past, and instead wanted to create a new set of vocabulary for future designers to draw from. He was a fanatic who wanted to craft the perfect city, a place of stunning efficiency and fortified strength. The utopian model that he had envisioned, a place that would act as a "machine for living in", has yet to be successfully carried out. As the *New York Times* journalist Rachel Donadio liked to put it, Le Corbusier often portrayed himself as someone who was deeply concerned with "improving people's living conditions," but the truth is much more complex.¹¹ His high-rise towers, obsession with control, uniformity, and artificial order (often in the form of segregated societies) are, from France to India, more symbolic of totalitarian rule

⁹ Jacobs, Jane. *The Death and Life of Great American Cities*. New York, New York: Random House, 1961.

¹⁰ "Why the Pruitt-Igoe Housing Project Failed." *The Economist*. October 15, 2011. Accessed December 10, 2015. <http://www.economist.com/blogs/prospero/2011/10/american-public-housing>.

¹¹ Donadio, Rachel. "Le Corbusier's Architecture and His Politics Are Revisited." *The New York Times*, July 12, 2015. Accessed December 11, 2015. <http://www.nytimes.com/2015/7/13/arts/design/le-corbusiers-architecture-and-his-politics-are-revisited.html?r=0>

than anything else. The damage that Le Corbusier, his modernist philosophy, and his followers have done to the urban form are undeniable. His policies have led to the isolation and marginalization of certain groups, the creation of an unsustainable car-dependent society, and a shift away from the organic feel of traditional cities, which are all issues that are still being dealt with in the 21st century.

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