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### Abstract

Tim Benton is an extraordinary historian of Le Corbusier. Thirty years ago, he published *Villas of Le Corbusier, 1920–1930*; in 1987, the prized catalogue to the London centennial exhibition *Le Corbusier: Architect of the Century*; and, in 2007, *Rhetoric of Modernism: Le Corbusier as a Lecturer*. In *LC Foto: Le Corbusier Secret Photographer*, Benton combines his knowledge of the architect with a remarkable understanding of architectural photography to reveal Le Corbusier's personal activity as a photographer during the only two periods of the architect's life when he took pictures: 1907–17 and 1936–38.

### Disciplines

Architectural History and Criticism | Architecture

### Comments

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It was precisely this overly “mechanical” approach, as one contemporary described it, that attracted criticism—what was seen in some quarters as rather more a type of “scientific antiquarianism” than proper historical explanation. As Willis’s writings on architecture were not concerned with meaning, iconography, or style per se, they provided very little guidance to debates over the development of contemporary architecture. Indeed, Willis repudiated the study of history as any practical guide to modern architectural design—something that limited his influence in the world of British architecture. We also discover here that it was Willis, not the now better-known German architect and archaeologist Karl Bötticher, who first proposed a division between structural and decorative aspects of architectural construction (what Willis referred to as “mechanical” versus “decorative” construction—what Bötticher later termed *Kernform* and *Kunstform*), predating Bötticher’s theories by nearly a decade (88).

The book is long, perhaps a little too long. For some readers it goes into too much detail about the scientific side of Willis as a Cambridge academic and student of architecture—indeed, there are some parts that, as interesting as they may be in themselves, could well have benefited from some editorial pruning without losing their point. In this respect, one gets the sense that Buchanan was aiming her account at a history of science audience as much as an architectural history one. Overall, Buchanan’s account is lively, erudite, and readable. The book is also nicely produced with clear and pertinent illustrations. Chapter 7, which deals with Willis’s impact upon the world of contemporary architectural design, however, seemed—to me at least—somewhat strained and unnecessary, mainly because he had none. His greatest impact was in the world of restoration, which was a significant movement during the Victorian period. The introduction is also a little over-egged in its justifications and therefore rather too dissertation-like. Despite these minor flaws, there is no question that Buchanan has produced a fascinating, authoritative, and most necessary study—one that is essential for anyone either teaching or researching

in this area. As she rightly points out, Willis has been conspicuous by his absence in recent accounts of the discipline of architectural history (358). This can no longer remain so—Buchanan has put Willis firmly back at the center.

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### Note

1. For example, see Paul Frankl, *The Gothic: Literary Sources and Interpretations through Eight Centuries* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1960), 491–539; Carla Yanni, “On Nature and Nomenclature: William Whewell and the Production of Architectural Knowledge in Early Victorian Britain,” *Architectural History* 40 (1997), 204–21.

Tim Benton

### LC Foto: Le Corbusier Secret Photographer

Zurich: Lars Müller Publishers, 2013, 416 pp., 103 color and 628 b/w illus. \$65 (cloth), ISBN 9783037783443

Tim Benton is an extraordinary historian of Le Corbusier. Thirty years ago, he published *Villas of Le Corbusier, 1920–1930*; in 1987, the prized catalogue to the London centennial exhibition *Le Corbusier: Architect of the Century*; and, in 2007, *Rhetoric of Modernism: Le Corbusier as a Lecturer*. In *LC Foto: Le Corbusier Secret Photographer*, Benton combines his knowledge of the architect with a remarkable understanding of architectural photography to reveal Le Corbusier’s personal activity as a photographer during the only two periods of the architect’s life when he took pictures: 1907–17 and 1936–38.

Benton divides his book into two distinct parts, presenting the photographs and films chronologically in fourteen albums. The first part comprises four albums and examines photographs made by the young Charles-Édouard Jeanneret—before he adopted the pseudonym “Le Corbusier”—at a time when, as Benton notes, “he was uncertain in his vocation between art and architecture” (43). Made with different cameras mostly on extensive tours of Europe in 1907 and 1911, these photographs are

housed in the city library of Jeanneret’s hometown, La Chaux-de-Fonds, Switzerland, and were the subject of Giuliano Gresleri’s 1985 *Le Corbusier; viaggio in Oriente: Gli inediti di Charles-Édouard Jeanneret, fotografo e scrittore*, which reproduced 600 of them. Benton describes the young Jeanneret’s three cameras, elaborating on the properties of each instrument and explaining in detail the physics of the camera and the manner in which it sees. By aligning the cameras Jeanneret owned with the photographs he made, Benton determines which images were made when, as well as how the images were affected by the limitations of the photography equipment employed. Using this knowledge, he gently corrects Gresleri’s earlier findings.

The second and much longer part of the book, “Le Corbusier, the Cinema, and Cinematographic Photography, 1936–38,” introduces photographs and films that Le Corbusier—the great publicist—never published. Benton discovered this work at the Fondation Le Corbusier in Paris, a find one imagines to have been the genesis of the book. Ingeniously, he determines that both still photographs and films were made with the same camera, a Siemens B 16 mm movie camera equipped with a stop-frame feature. Some of the films that Benton found were left undeveloped by the architect; others were featured in film director Jacques Barsac’s three-part documentary on Le Corbusier made for French television in 1987. In *Le Corbusier Secret Photographer*, Benton provides “QR patches” behind which are “seven montages of film sequences shot by Le Corbusier on his Siemens camera” (4) while reproducing many strips of these films as stills for us to study.

The nine albums show photographs of subjects that are for the most part very different from those pictured by the young Jeanneret. Some, although of little relevance to Le Corbusier’s public concerns, reveal a private persona of unexpected warmth: photographs of his mother, his wife, his dog. Others are vacation photos taken with the eye of an architect, often reveling in forms and shapes that did and would populate Le Corbusier’s paintings and architecture: a month in Brazil; a transatlantic crossing and the ocean liner’s deck;

the beach at Le Piquey; Vézelay; the rocky coast of Plougrescant, Brittany; Algeria; and even E1027, the Roquebrune house designed by Eileen Gray for herself and Jean Badovici.

Many of the images from this period show little concern for technical exactness. They tend to be underexposed and slightly blurred, and as noted above, are sometimes presented as small frames in a strip of film. At other times, they are enlarged and isolated. The best of them use darkness and blur to great effect, creating a silhouetted frame that renders the scene as layered space. Some of these are shown as full-page reproductions: Le Corbusier's mother writing; pottery in front of a veiled window; Madame Le Corbusier in profile echoed in a Léger painting; a foregrounded hand and bottle with the horizon line of the beach; the mountains of Rio behind swaying palms. In addition, there are wonderful images of amorphous shapes of zeppelins, rocks, boats, and ship-deck machinations. Most memorably, there is a photograph of Le Corbusier himself, headless and in full frontal nudity, a much-welcomed alternative to the rear-view image of Le Corbusier outside his Cap Martin *cabanon*, painting with his pants off.

Occasionally, the photographs seem indebted artistically to contemporary European photography and films. Some photographs—of stacked building materials, for example, or of beaches and sand—follow themes set out earlier in the photographs selected and assembled by Le Corbusier and Pierre Jeanneret for the 1933 Pavillon Suisse photomural in Paris. Still others are similar to works made by André Kertész in Paris in the late 1920s, while film shot on the deck of the SS *Conte Biancamano* is reminiscent in subject matter and montage technique of *Battleship Potemkin* made by Le Corbusier's friend Sergei Eisenstein in 1925.

Although stills made with a movie camera dominate the second part of the book—and, presented as photographs, complete the definitive survey of photographic activities begun in the book's first part—the “movies” that Benton found in the Paris archive are a great treasure. In a way very different from still photography, and of a form that does not lend itself

to book reproduction, movies parallel Le Corbusier's approach to architecture. Filmmaking permitted him to experiment in a spontaneous, playful manner with the presentation of visual forms in space and light over time. It offered a way of seeing time through sequence—time being central to Le Corbusier's concept of architecture as promenade, an environment that comes into being only as one walks through it. Famously, twenty years after making these films, in the Philips Pavilion for Expo '58 in Brussels, Le Corbusier made architecture of the film experience.

The book's title, *Le Corbusier Secret Photographer*, implies that Le Corbusier was a photographer and that his photographic activities were covert. Both implications are questionable. Certainly, Le Corbusier purchased cameras, took a lot of pictures, and in the early years made a concerted effort to become technically proficient in photography. But there is little indication that he pursued the medium beyond this. He left much film undeveloped, published few of his photographs, and seems not to have engaged in dark-room work at all. His filmmaking activity in the mid-1930s was never pursued with the seriousness of intention with which he pursued painting and later sculpture and seemed more like a hobby than an engagement in a disciplined art. He was known to talk against photography, and as Benton points out, he objected to being photographed with a camera in his hand. In announcing Le Corbusier a *secret* photographer, the book's title suggests the exposition of something once hidden. But Le Corbusier never hid his engagement with photography; he simply did not publicize it as he had so often announced much of his creative activity.

The title scarcely diminishes the magnificent achievement of this book, however. *Le Corbusier Secret Photographer* is an invaluable addition to the considerable literature on Le Corbusier and photography. With the exception of Gresleri's 1985 book, most writing on the subject to date has addressed the architect's appropriation and reworking of the photography of others in the making of illustrative text for his early books. Benton's book is different. A complete account of the personal

photographic activity of Le Corbusier, it shows us how the architect visualized the world in which he lived through the logic and limitations of mechanical means. It intimately portrays his family and friends; reveals his special interests and unique way of seeing; and illuminates certain previously unknown times in the architect's life. Even more than this, in *Le Corbusier Secret Photographer*, Benton explains with great storytelling talent the workings of the camera itself, the physics of photo making, and how this affected Le Corbusier. By detailing the impact of technology on the medium—the methods and means of popular photography in the first third of the twentieth century as the medium moved from big format to small and the resultant less-challenging cameras that encouraged image making of greater personal expression—he constructs a fascinating history of everyday photography. Benton does all of this with authority and verve and with great sensitivity to the photographer and his times. Comprehensive but never exhausting, intelligently written and always wonderfully visual, *Le Corbusier Secret Photographer* is already a classic in Corbusiology. It will be valued not only by scholars of architecture and modernism but also by scholars of photography, technology, and filmmaking.

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### **Renaissance Architecture**

Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013,  
258 pp., 151 color illus. \$29.95 (paper),  
ISBN 9780192842275

We are all familiar with the narrative of Italian Renaissance architecture: Filippo Brunelleschi produced a series of technically and stylistically innovative structures in Florence in the first half of the fifteenth century that are taken as the starting point of a new kind of architecture. This foundation gave way to Leon Battista Alberti's buildings and writings in the next generation, then in turn to Giuliano da Sangallo, Donato Bramante, Raphael, Michelangelo, Vignola, and Palladio. Other architects are usually included, as are excursions to