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Building Books: Le Courbusier's "Word-Image" Pavilions, an Architecture of Representation

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Abstract

What happens when representation becomes architecture? Representation was vital to both the formation and conveyance of a new architecture. Nowhere is this more evident than in the oeuvre of Le Corbusier. The pavilion, initially dismissed by Le Corbusier, ultimately proved his second most popular building type.
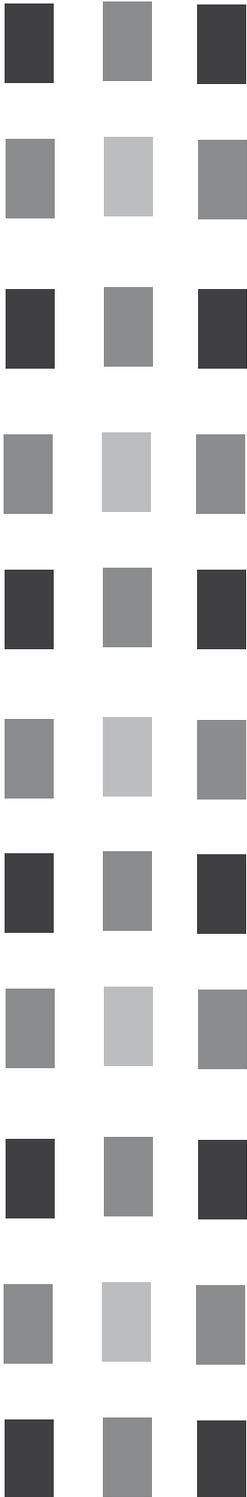
Disciplines

Architectural History and Criticism

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What happens when representation becomes architecture? Representation was vital to both the formation and conveyance of a new architecture. Nowhere is this more evident than in the oeuvre of Le Corbusier. The pavilion, initially dismissed by Le Corbusier, ultimately proved his second most popular building type. The pavilion was building-sized representation. Le Corbusier's *Pavilion Esprit Nouveau*, for instance, was not a permanent building, but it represented a permanent building. Its side-wall supergraphic, a colossal 'E-N', owed allegiance to both the realm of the word and that of image. His demountable and polychromed Nestlé Pavilion was in many ways a word-dominated billboard – quite literally a sign – into which the viewer could walk. The interior structure of the *Pavilion des Temps Nouveaux* paralleled a book, with its text-covered walls like pages, walls that were photographed and later re-presented as pages in Le Corbusier's 1938 book documenting this work. The Philips Pavilion was a concrete tent that Le Corbusier described metaphorically as both a bottle and a stomach and which he dubbed the *Poème électronique*.

Each pavilion survives only in two-dimensions. The photographs that re-present them return their script to the printed page, where, reduced in size, they mingle with the book's actual script. These pavilions and the books that Le Corbusier made to illustrate them fuse word with image. In each instance, Le Corbusier re-presents representation. Both word and image are de-stabilized. The notion of a single, dominating authority is questioned. What follows, then, is a brief look at each of these pavilions, a look intent on suggesting that, by building books, Le Corbusier very consciously undermined the assumed opposition of non-discursive and discursive architecture. But to what end?

To begin, though, it might be noted that Le Corbusier was not the first Modern-movement architect to attempt an architecture of representation. In the Twenties, Bauhaus master Oscar Schlemmer envisioned a school in which all walls were representation in the form of abstract yet decidedly anthropomorphic murals, while Bauhaus student Herbert Bayer, under the influence of the De Stijl of Theo van Doesburg, proposed a polychromed newspaper kiosk in which letters and words played integral parts. Bauhaus master Ludwig Hirschfeld-Mack designed "an apparatus for projecting coloured light shows in accordance with a quasi-musical score," and in 1924 Moholy-Nagy proposed a 'theater of surprise' that sought, in his words, to "achieve total theater effects by the use of noises mixed with music, of optically blown-up images and (...) sudden contrasts ..."[1] At the same time, Walter Gropius designed the 'Totaltheater' project in which a rotating center allowed a director to employ either an arena, thrust or prosceni-um stage, and a continuous screen surrounded both stage and seating. Films could be back-projected onto this screen, creating a panorama-like effect, enveloping the audience in the work of art, insisting that they participate in its production. Le Corbusier, whose first public building was a cinema, was intrigued by such possibilities, and in the mid-20's, he planned an issue of *L'Esprit Nouveau* on new theaters and cinemas, soliciting projects from both Gropius and Frederick Kiesler.[2]

At first, at least, Le Corbusier's pavilions differed from these more 'cultured' suggestions. In his hands, the pavilion was *publicité*; it was architecture as propaganda art.[3] Literally a sign, a billboard, a display intended to call attention to itself, the exhibition pavilion provided a program for building in which portability and graphic art were essential attributes. The function of the pavilion was to provoke. Le Corbusier's attempts to integrate this function with architecture resulted in highly ambiguous word-image paradoxes.[4] Habitable structure wrapped in words exemplified what Duchamp – in reference to his own art – once termed 'the infra-thin': a referent layer (most often of paint) that formed an aphoristic visual contradiction. Needless to say, any move in this direction threw the 'objective-ness' of architecture into crisis.

In 1925, then, in defiance of the theme of the Paris exposition that insisted on elevating Art Deco to the status of architecture, Le Corbusier built the *Pavilion l'Esprit Nouveau* (fig. 1). The pavilion was habitable representation. It represented modern architecture itself. It was quite literally a full-scale model, a mock-up of a typical living unit in Le Corbusier's urban housing complex.[5] With its fixed concrete frame supporting 'Solomite' compressed-fiber panels, it served as a testing ground for new materials and techniques. Le Corbusier regarded it as a portable building, intending for it to be sold, dismantled and reassembled in a Paris suburb after the exposition.

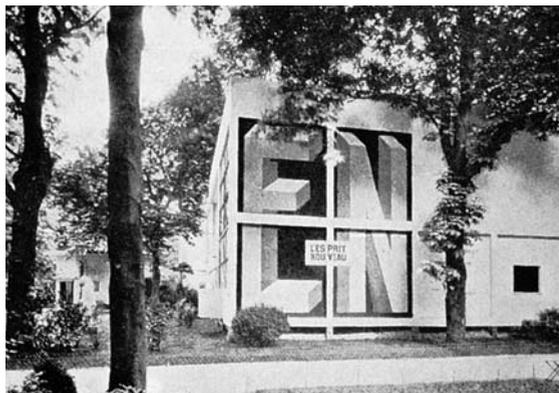The *Pavilion l'Esprit Nouveau* translated architecture into visual space. By concealing structure

1 | *Pavilion L'Esprit Nouveau, 1925*

and by resolving dynamic lines of force in rectilinear composition, it eschewed traditional notions of building. Its colored walls and right angles relieved the structure of apparent tactile and kinetic pressure. Phenomenon was divorced from structural fact. An architecture of visual space was promoted. The *Esprit Nouveau Pavilion* easily assumed the function of a billboard. Purist colors enhanced its "blind side elevation" where the anonymity of cubic container architecture was conjoined with the signification of the written word. The initials 'E N', painted on the building's unused side-a blank elevation that was to facilitate close-packing when the unit was multiplied to fill a city block-were enlarged to the size of primary architectural elements. These letters both label and add visual interest to the pavilion. In their size and placement within the frame, they echo the glazed opening of the adjacent front façade. Continuity in the upper horizontal band is maintained, containing the cube and suggesting openings of similar size.

In this graphic gesture, Le Corbusier underscored the spatial form of letters. Though flat (fig. 2), the E and N are construed to suggest a dimension of depth; they appear to recede into the building itself. This illusion of depth is then countered by the much smaller L'ESPRIT NOUVEAU on a white field that seems to overlap but in fact occupies the same plane as the 'E N.' Escapees from a language that belongs to books, these words and letters were later returned to the printed page when a carefully cropped and colored photograph of them was featured the following year as cover for Le Corbusier's *Almanach of Modern Architecture*.

In 1928 Le Corbusier designed a publicity pavilion for Nestlé, again a demountable building, one that was erected at local fairs in Paris, Marseilles, and Bordeaux (fig. 3). With its butterfly roof, taut planes, open metal trusses, and continuous glazing, it assumed the aesthetic of high technology. Seamless and without a trace of traditional construction: with no pronounced foundation wall, no overlapping materials, no cornice line, it was, like

a machine, precision-made. Nestlé canisters levitated effortlessly before the structure.

Here, the front facade served as a billboard. Occasionally, letters aligned with architectural openings or edges, suggesting integration. Occasionally, non-alignment and overlapping reinforced a notion of appliqué and encouraged signification. Thus letters exhibited a double allegiance. Letters were both word and image. Always they were shapes that signified-sometimes specifically, other times not-so-specifically. In this container, Nestlé products exhibited their mass-produced nature and contributed to architectural composition. Building and product were united as one.

In all of this there is a sense of the Nestlé Pavilion as a decorated shed. It's only when one sees colored photographs of the building that it takes on a second metaphor[6] (fig. 4). For the whole contraption was painted baby blue and red, rendering the structure mirage-like and helping to fuse words and machined form into a unity. In such

3 | *Nestlé Pavilion, 1928*

4 | *Nestlé Pavilion, 1928*

2 | *Pavillon L'Esprit Nouveau, 1925*

images, the Nestlé Pavilion seems like a large-scale, figurative painting, a kind of collage through which one walks and thus a duck rather than a decorated shed. Or might it have been both, simultaneously?

All of this was done at a time when Le Corbusier was adamantly opposed to the painted figurative mural. He had, however, constructed his early buildings not as material presence but as surface presence, buildings architecturally construed as a kind of three-dimensional palette intended to register a visual effect. At the Villa de Mandrot, for instance, he applied a blue 'chalk' finish to the stone wall of the living room, in effect de-materializing this heavily rusticated wall. At the Pavilion Suisse *bibliotheque*, Le Corbusier adorned the sensuously curved and brutal stone wall by unabashedly applying a photomural to it (fig. 5). The photomural was inherently appliqué. It concealed, rather than revealed the wall that supported it. As photomural and chalk dematerialized walls, object became image. And if concealment seemed to violate modern architecture's belief in the honest expression of materials, the photomural, Le Corbusier argued, was both tectonic and technically sophisticated. In this sense it exuded modern ideals. More importantly, this modern *guise* allowed architecture not just to include the figurative but to *become* the figurative.

Signs and symbols – 'functional' in a world given over to advertisement – increasingly became an integral part of the aesthetic of avant-garde architecture. The sign could be inhabited. Oscar Nitzchké's 'Publicity Building' project of 1935, for example, proposed as façade a reticulated metal frame on which was to be hung messages in neon and billboard-sized images of faces.[7]

For Le Corbusier, too, the wall, once a pure plane of color or light, now could be construed as text. Architecture and exhibition become one as evidenced in his Pavillon Publicitaire, an unbuilt design executed in 1937 for the Czech shoe and airplane manufacturer Bat'a[8] (fig. 6). Here, colored

photomontage publicité covered the walls. One ceiling was of luminous, translucent glass with a planisphere painted on it.[9] Another was a cinema screen onto which various 'wearers of shoes' were projected. The pavilion featured neon signs, battered walls painted in primary colors, a yellow aggregate floor, and a full-size airplane suspended from the ceiling. The Thirties equivalent of an ancient Egyptian tomb, in this pavilion one walked within representation itself. The interiority of this picture book environment of color and image cannot be escaped. Like the sets built by Caspar Neher for Brecht's 1928 *Threepenny Opera*, Bat'a's walls of text exude what Brecht once described as "a deliberate confusion of concepts (in which) sayings, photographs and images surround the character's actions."[10]

Later that year for the same exposition, Le Corbusier built the *Pavilion des Temps Nouveaux* (fig. 7). An inexpensive, expeditious response to a last minute, under-funded program, this 1937 tent structure was a temporary building that housed an overtly polemical exhibition. The pavilion's curvaceous space, with its compelling illusionism, evoked a peculiarly 'phenomenal' atmosphere, a sensation of the unreal in reality. Its outer walls and ceilings were of canvas, thus here, surface was material. Daylight-the presence of celestial movement – filtered through translucent polychromed
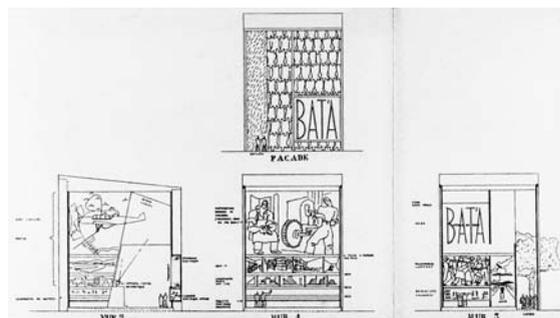
6 | *Plans for Bat'a, 1937*

5 | *Pavilion Suisse, bibliothque*

7 | *Pavilion des Temps Nouveaux, 1937*

canvas to animate space and manifest palpable co-
lor. Fluid form and the luminosity of colored light
provoked a sensation of unreality. Equally impor-
tant, under this tent but entirely separate from it,
was a contrasting structure: a rectilinear post and
beam frame that carried not only photo murals
made by Le Corbusier, Léger, and other artists, but
an illustrated text[11] (fig. 8). To walk within its
walls was to walk within the pages of a picture
book. Its sculptural centerpiece was a colossal
open book. And in Le Corbusier's *Des Canons, des
Munitions? Merci! Des Logis … s.v.p.,* the 1938
book that documented this ephemeral tent, the
pages were sometimes legible photographs of
'written walls'. In addition, in this book, the appa-
rent size of the relatively small pavilion is magni-
fied in collage images in which Le Corbusier added
diminutive scale figures, thus increasing the appa-
rent size of the interior but also bringing to the
image another space.[12] The illusory space evoked
in this re-presentation of the pavilion – what one
might term 'the space of representation'– seemed
intentionally to contradict the 'real' space of the
tent structure.

When Hiroshima brought human existence to
the brink of extinction, technology appeared a du-
bious ally to modern architecture. Le Corbusier no
longer cast himself as high-technologist of the Me-
chanical Age, but as poet-painter-architect of the
Electronic Era, a humanist concerned not so much
with current conditions but with all of mankind
throughout all ages. In 1955 he published *Poem to
a Right Angle*, a book that in both tone and theory
contrasted with his renowned 1923 *Vers une archi-
tecture*. A visual book, *Poem to a Right Angle* was
simultaneously print and visual media, an artifact
intended to surround its reader/ spectator. Its
words were visual writing that in their size and
shape were also images. The book promoted cryp-
tic transformation of a mythic, cult-like sort.

The atmosphere that *The Poem* advanced, as
well as the decidedly illusory sensations evoked in
the *Pavilion des Temps Nouveau*, were expanded in
the 1958 Philips Pavilion (fig. 9). Built for the Bel-

gian electronics giant at the Brussels International
Exhibition, the pavilion was construed of curious
sounds and figurative apparitions of light in space.
Here architecture was an event, a multi-media
spectacle. But it was also writing of a different
sort. Le Corbusier described the tent-like structure
to his client. "I shall not give your pavilion a faca-
de," he said, "but I shall compose an Electronic
Poem contained in a 'bottle'. This bottle will be
your pavilion, devoted to the harmonious expres-
sion of the unexploited resources of electronics.
The Poem will be composed of pictures, coloured
rhythms, music. The Electronic Poem will combine
in a coherent whole what films, recorded music,
colour, words, sound and silence have until now
produced independently. The Poem will last ten
minutes. It will be performed for 500 spectators at
a time … ."[13]

The crowd quite literally entered into the work
of art. Huddled together in the dark, they experi-
enced 10 minutes of the music of Varèse and
Xénakis as it emanated from 400 amplifiers.[14]   A
sound recording was heard comprised, according
to Le Corbusier, of "all noises of the universe, big
ones, small ones and humble ones, that of the cat,
mosquito and flooring, those the poet imagines,
cries of joy and pain of all nature."[15] Over this the
voice of Le Corbusier was heard announcing:
"Attention! Attention! All is accomplished subtly:
a new civilization, a new world. It is urgent that
we establish natural conditions once again in our
own minds and bodies. Sun, space, greenery. A
mathematical universe..."[16]

The pavilion was a kind of black box into which
minimal light was admitted in the form of piercing
rays. Enormous images appeared unexpectedly.

8 | *Pavilion des Temps Nouveaux, 1937*
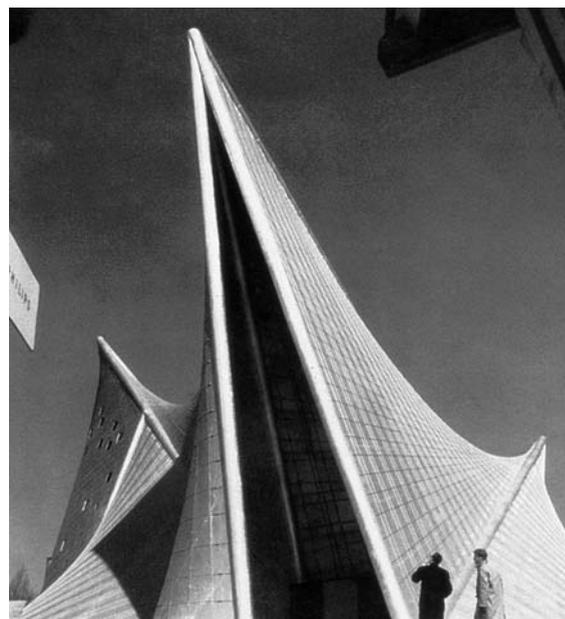
9 | *Philips Pavilion, 1958*

Many represented representations of 'man': festive masks, the face of the Buddha, a sculpted head of Christ, a skull, holocaust corpses, African totems, tattooed and painted faces, a skeletal hand, a model of Le Corbusier's 'Open Hand', the mushroom clouds of nuclear destruction[17] (fig. 10). The narrative of the Brussels Pavilion was non-linear and, one supposes, disorienting. Its strange music and 'emissions' – both aural and visual – pushed the poem beyond language. Le Corbusier described this electronic moment as a, "(...) new celebration, that long cry of a rediscovered community, the sense of drama, passion and faith, present in the collective soul (...)"[18]

At Brussels, technology became environment. Spectators were immersed in fictive space of an instinctual, sensational sort – a space of light, sound and time. Here, Le Corbusier combined exhibition with cult value to create an architectural poem, writing without words, building without walls. He accomplished what the Bauhaus masters had envisioned three decades earlier. In contrast to the orthogonal *Pavilion l'Esprit Nouveau*, the *Philips Pavilion* was a primitive, non-cubistic construct that encouraged a kind of tribal experiencing of a poetic spectacle. Pure phenomenon, had replaced

10 | *inside the Philips Pavilion, 1958*

a portable architecture of industrial container and mass production. A kind of architectural transubstantiation occured. That which 30 years earlier in the *Pavilion l'Esprit Nouveau* was written, immutable, and clearly defined, here gives way to that which is only and quite literally 'in the air'. Architecture is atmosphere – a pure phenomenon, a dream-like mental state imbued in the collective memory.

In conclusion, then, it might be said that with Le Corbusier, the pavilion was never simply a frame for display but was also the display itself, never simply a decorated shed, but was rather a duck of a decorated shed. 'Interior' walls were images, first of color, then of words, and ultimately of light and sound. Its space was both visual and acoustic. Objects – including the building itself – ceased to exist. More and more, for Le Corbusier, the building became a kind of contraption, an instrument, a machine that provoked a wholly fictive environment, an architecture of ephemeral but always essential attributes: color, light, space, time. By evoking a different way of thinking, the written word assisted Le Corbusier in this movement from the object to aura. At first, the word made flesh challenged the present-ness of wall, of enclosure. Eventually, word and wall co-existed, each evaporating the authority of the other. Ultimately, in the Electronic Era, both became instantaneous events comprised not of physical matter but of resonance-of aural and light rays that mimicked the interior human mind, apparitions of an advanced, technically sophisticated sort that seemed to many to predict a future state.

Words, then, the writing on the wall, discourse, were ingredients in a formula that advanced an architecture not of objectivity but of a phenomenal sort, in the most basic sense of that word. When representation became architecture, architecture became phenomena.

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Notes:

References below to FLC documents (Fondation Le Corbusier, Paris) are to the boxes and numbers as categorized in that archive in 1993. Since then, the Fondation has digitized much of its material and has changed nearly all the reference numbers. No system of cross-referencing was established. Thus, at the time of this publication, the box numbers below do not correspond to the FLC categorization.

1 Willett, John: *Art and Politics in the Weimar Period, The New Society, 1917–1933*, New York, 1978, p 156.

2 See FLC Box B2-16, #1-15, letters written to *L'Esprit Nouveau* in April–June 1921 in response to requests from its editors for reproductions of drawings and photographs of new theaters and cinema buildings.

3 For a history of the pavilion see Edward N. Kaufman, *The Architectural Museum from World's Fair to Restoration Village*, in: *Assemblage 9*, June 1989, pp 20–39.

4 Initially *New World of Space* was to be titled either *L'Espace Indicible* or *Space Beyond Words* as indi-

cated in an agreement made May 27, 1946 between Le Corbusier and Reynal & Hitchcock, Publishers, New York City (FLC, Box D1-15, # 87).

5 See *Procédés et matériaux nouveaux*, in: Le Corbusier: *Almanach d'architecture moderne*, Paris, 1926, pp 190–197, as well as the many advertisements that appear in the back of this book.

6 Two 'colored' photographs were featured in *L'Architecture Vivante*, Spring/Summer 1929, pl. 28.

7 See *Encyclopédie de l'architecture*, Paris, Tome X, plates 5–7. Born in 1900, Nitzchké worked in Le Corbusier's office before collaborating with Paul Nelson in the early and mid-thirties.

8 See Jean-Louis Cohen's entry on Bat'a in: *Le Corbusier, une encyclopédie*, pp 62–67. See, also, Gilles Ragot: *Le Corbusier et l'exposition*, in: *Paris, 1937: cinquantenaire de l'Exposition internationale des arts et techniques dans la vie moderne*, ed. Bertrand Lemoine, Paris, 1987, pp 72–79.

9 The multi-colored world map was an acceptably modern 'mural' popular in the thirties. See, for example, George Howe's Evening Bulletin Building in Philadelphia as presented in *Architectural Record*, Novembre, 1937, pp 76–77.

10 "This is no less natural an environment than any other," Brecht continued. „Centuries of general reading have allowed inscriptions to assume the character of reality." As translated in John Willett: *Caspar Neher; Brecht's Designer*, London/New York, 1986, p 102.

11 These others were Beauquier, Gischia and Mazenot. See André Lejar: *A propos d'une conception nouvelle de la publicité murale: Lucien Mazenod*, in: *Arts et Métiers Graphiques*, Jan 1 1938, pp 44–48.

12 See p 90 of *Des Canons, des Munitions?* for instance, though the book offers many examples of this 'scale-confusion'.

13 Le Corbusier: *Creation is a Patient Search*, trans. James Palmes, New York, 1960, p 186.

14 „480 (seconds) were allocated to Edgar Varèse and 120 to Xénakis.", Ibid..

15 Jean Petit: *Le Poème Électronique Le Corbusier*, Paris, 1958, as quoted by Tim Benton in: *The sacred and the search for myths*, in: Le Corbusier: *Architect of the Century*, London, 1987, p 244.

16 FLC Box A3-2, #658. In the archival material, this typed announcement is divided into five sections and is configured as poetry. I have changed the punctuation to reflect sentence structure common to English.

17 These are documented in: *Le Poème Électronique Le Corbusier*, Op. cit. note 14, and in B. Lootsma: *Poème électronique: Le Corbusier, Xenekis, Varèse*, in: *Le Corbusier Synthèse des Arts. Aspekte des Spätwerks 1945-1965*, Karlsruhe, 1986.

18 Op. cit. note 14.