Touch My Axis - Vers une Architecture before, L'espace indicible after

Daniel J. Naegele
Iowa State University, naegele@iastate.edu

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Abstract
In 1946, shortly after the end of the Second World War and as the rebuilding of Europe began, in a special issue of a professional architectural journal dedicated to the synthesis of the arts, Le Corbusier, perhaps the world's most influential architect at the time, published a short, seemingly innocuous treatise titled "L'espace indicible." It opens with the author recognizing nature's "harmonious orchestration of space" as entirely phenomenal, as "the reflection of light." Ineffable space is, Le Corbusier writes, a "vibration" between the "action of the work (architecture, statue, or painting)" and the "reaction of the setting: the walls of the room, the public squares ... the landscape." It is a "phenomenon of accordance ... as exact as mathematics, a true manifestation of plastic acoustics."

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This chapter is from What Moves Us? Le Corbusier and Asger Jorn in Art and Architecture (Zurich, Switzerland: Scheidegger & Speiss, 2015). Posted with permission.
The work of art is an artificial object which lets the spectator be placed in the state desired by the creator. The sensation of order is of a mathematical quality.

Le Corbusier and Ozenfant, 1921

And never does the great work of architecture, participating in the site that surrounds it, say its last word. Rather, the light changes and the seasons pass, and the young see not what the old see, and the old have a soul which predisposes them differently than the young to things offered to their passion.

Le Corbusier, Une Maison, un palais, 1928
In 1946, shortly after the end of the Second World War and as the rebuilding of Europe began, in a special issue of a professional architectural journal dedicated to the synthesis of the arts, Le Corbusier, perhaps the world's most influential architect at the time, published a short, seemingly innocuous treatise titled "L'espace indiscible." It opens with the author recognizing nature's "harmonious orchestration of space" as entirely phenomenal, as "the reflection of light." Ineffable space is, Le Corbusier writes, a "vibration" between the "action of the work (architecture, statue, or painting)" and the "reaction of the setting: the walls of the room, the public squares... the landscape." It is a "phenomenon of accordance... as exact as mathematics, a true manifestation of plastic acoustics."

Though Le Corbusier states that the effect of this evocation results from the proportions of the work, not its subject matter—and in what he wrote in his famed Vers une architecture twenty-three years earlier—his elaboration suggests psycho-sensorial sensations extending well beyond proportions. He emphasizes the importance of intuition to the creative act—"that miraculous catalyst of acquired, assimilated, even forgotten wisdom"—and notes that in the work of art, there are "hidden masses of implications," a "veritable world which reveals itself to those whom it may concern." Returning to architecture, he writes: "Then a boundless depth opens up, effaces the walls, drives away contingent presences, accomplishes the miracle of ineffable space." The experience of ineffable space is a transcendent event. "I am not conscious of the miracle of faith," he says in the penultimate paragraph, "but I often live that of ineffable space, the consummation of plastic emotion." And, as if this invocation of the supernatural were far too personal and his equating of space to spirituality too subjective, he concludes: "Here I have been allowed to speak as a man of the laboratory, dealing with his personal experiments carried out in the major arts which have been so unfortunately dissociated or separated for a century."

Published in 1946 as Europe began to rebuild after the Second World War, the treatise was undoubtedly opportunistic, for if, as Le Corbusier states, "the movement of time and of events" had led architecture, sculpture and painting toward a synthesis, who was better qualified than he, architect-sculptor-painter, to effect such a synthesis? Yet the statement was much more than this. It constitutes a significant change—albeit subtle and quiet—in Le Corbusier's notion of the effect of "beauty" in art and architecture. At the same time, it underscores an obvious change—a movement from object to space—in the conception of the work of art in the twentieth century.

In 1923, Le Corbusier began his search for a new architecture with the now famous treatise, Vers une architecture in which he described the sensation of beauty as the "trace of an indefinable absolute preexisting at the core of our being." At our core and "beyond our senses," he wrote, beautiful proportions "give rise to a resonance, to a kind of sounding board that is set vibrating." This vibration is "our criterion of harmony." It is "the axis along which man is organized, in perfect accord with nature and, probably, with the universe... If we stop before the Parthenon, that is because the sight of it makes the inner chord sound: the axis is touched." Le Corbusier makes no mention of space in Vers une architecture—space was not yet popular currency in French discussions about architecture—rather he writes that it is the object that moves the spectator. Specifically, it is the mathematical relationships of the beautiful proportions of an object that make our "inner chord sound," that touch our axis.

But the authority of the object was questioned by art critics and artists at this time, a criticism that persisted throughout the 1920s and into the 1930s. As early as 1913, Kandinsky had written of the need to eliminate the object from his paintings; and in his famed Diaries, the Swiss artist Paul Klee asserted: "The object is surely dead. The sensation of the object is of first importance." In 1929, Carl Einstein wrote that "The history of art is the struggle of all optical experiments, of invented spaces and figures... To transform this space... it is first necessary to eliminate rigid objects, conventional receptacles: One must question the view itself."

By the mid-1930s, the question of the demise of the object was extended to public art as the mural grew in popularity with depressed economic conditions, tremendous political unrest, and new technologies that allowed for easy enlargement of "art."

Yet this demise seemed not to affect Le Corbusier's painting in the 1920s and 1930s. In his archi-
tectural design, he regularly polychromed buildings – occasionally even collaging advertising, words and color into an ephemeral exhibition architecture – and in his writing, he persisted, famously, to rail against the decorative arts in architecture. In April 1933, however, he found it necessary to reconsider his position. At that time, the dormitory he had designed for Swiss students in the Cité universitaire in Paris, the Pavillon suisse, was nearly completed. Le Corbusier had intended that the long, gently curved rubble wall of the Pavillon’s ground-level library salon be left exposed as rough stone on the interior. The president of the Cité Internationale rejected this idea, however, and demanded that the wall be covered over with something pictorial, something that would remind the students of their homeland. What the president wanted was decoration - an idea anathema to Le Corbusier and in marked contradiction to his stance against the decorative arts in architecture. But what to do that would not be decoration yet would satisfy the president’s concern? In a few days he and his partner, Pierre Jeanneret, made what he termed the “first photographic mural,” not documentation, but a work of art.”

Scientific, technically sophisticated, the photomural extended the full length of the wall from floor to ceiling, concealing the stone wall entirely. It was not just on the wall, it became the wall.

The photographs were one-meter square, micro- and macro-, black and white, and for the most part scientific – images of both natural and man-made worlds. Many were two-dimensional patterns, yet some brought with them the illusion of three-dimensional space. Le Corbusier reported extensively on the mural as object in the second volume of his Œuvre complete in 1934, showing a photograph that visually relates the mural’s abstract patterns to those of the real marble tabletop that he had built into the salon.

Though the photomural was an expedient solution to the president’s concern for the “nature” of Le Corbusier’s palette, and though in many ways it was an unintended work of art, it provoked thoughtful commentary almost immediately. In 1935, the renowned artist André Breton gave a lecture in Prague titled “Surrealist Situation of the Object.” Breton was no fan of Le
20 / Left half of Le Corbusier and Pierre Jeanneret's 1933 photomural in Pavilion suisse, Paris

21 / Detail of the Pavilion suisse photomural as shown in volume two of Le Corbusier's Œuvre complète, 1934
Corbusier – the opposite was true – but in this Prague talk, he heartily praised the photomural noting that although it met “all the conditions of rationality and coldness that anyone could want in recent years since it is the work of Le Corbusier,” because it made manifest a “concrete irrationality,” and was a clear indication that architecture was again – as it had done earlier in the work of Antonio Gaudi and the postman Ferdinand Cheval – attempting “to break through all its limits.” The mural, Breton said, was a clear indication that “the desire for ideal things” could no longer be suppressed. Le Corbusier’s “irrationally wavy” wall was evidence of that. It was, he concluded, an example of the “object in crisis”; and it was exactly for that reason that he praised it.

Yet the pavilion’s curved wall was not an irrational wave but rather a simple geometric shape. And certainly Le Corbusier had not intended his photomural to provoke the irrational; quite the contrary. Breton, however, recognized in the photomural what was not evident to Le Corbusier. The mural was a representational overlay. It placed another order over the rational order of Le Corbusier’s architecture. Yet the ambiguity resulting from this collusion appeared irrational to Breton. It placed the object in crisis.

Le Corbusier painted daily, but for a decade beginning in 1923 he did so only privately. In 1933 he once again exhibited his paintings, but only in New York City. In 1936, the Atelier Marie Cuttolli executed his first tapisserie – the size of a painting, not a wall. And that same year, in the house that Eileen Grey designed for herself and Jean Badovici on the French Riviera, he painted his first figurative murals: images on walls, paintings that did not substantially affect the space of the house. “I love walls, beautiful in their proportions, and I am apprehensive at turning them over to unprepared minds,” Le Corbusier explained that year in a conference dedicated to the synthesis of the arts. “For if a wall is spoiled, if it is soiled, if we kill the wholesome clear speech of architecture by the introduction of an inappropriate style of painting or statuary, if we are not in the spirit, but against the spirit – it will mean just so many disappointing crimes.” Clearly, he was apprehensive. “Tumults can be disciplined by color,” he said, “lyrical space can be created, classification realized, dimensions enlarged and the feeling for architecture made to burst forth in joy.” But, he added immediately, “this is not yet painting; it is architectural polychromy.” Still, he recognized the possibilities of mural painting with architecture. “I can, when walls overwhelm me by their presence, dynamite them with an appropriate color,” he said. “But I can also, if the place is suitable, have recourse
to a painter, ask him to inscribe his plastic thoughts in the spot, and with one stroke open all the doors to the depths of a dream, just there where actual depths did not exist.⁸

The following year, 1937, the mural reached a high point in popularity in Paris with the Exposition Internationale des Arts et Techniques dans la Vie Moderne. For the exposition's Spanish Pavilion, Pablo Picasso, the artist Le Corbusier most revered, painted the 3.49 meters x 7.76 meters politically charged Guernica. For the same exposition, Le Corbusier built the inexpensive Pavillon des temps nouveaux, a tent of colored canvas supported by steel posts and wires which enclosed a highly didactic promenade of successive panels in a metal frame. Some panels carried words but many featured murals painted by several different artists, one of them Asger Jorn. The panels were photographed and their images made into the pages of Le Corbusier's Des canons, des munitions? Merci! Des logis ... S.V.P., published the following year. For the book, Le Corbusier extended the collage technique of the pavilion's murals to the book's space, collaging figures into the images – figures not of the space of the illustrated mural but figures floating in their own space. The collision of the two distinct spaces makes space itself a clear – if minor – theme of the book's images.

In 1938, after fifteen years as an avant-garde architect and having built very little since the Great Depression began, Le Corbusier re-introduced himself as a painter with a major retrospective in Zurich. The exhibition was accompanied by the publication of a new treatise on painting that anticipated "Ineffable Space" by eight years. The short article addressed literary and symbolic values in painting, values that were called "associational" and believed secondary by Le Corbusier and Ozenfant in their 1923 Le Purisme.⁹ Le Corbusier defines painting as "a game for which the author has created the rules, rules which appear to those seeking to play the game." The game, he writes, "is comprised of signs of sufficient intelligence," signs neither too obscure nor too private, but signs commonly known, signs of "frequently experienced objects, old, worn down by habitual use," signs of "simple patterns that are likely to be recognized." He employs road signs and railroad signals as examples and illustrates this section with sketches of logs, melded human bodies, folded hands, and the well-honed objets types (lanterns, stacked plates, bottles, pitchers, pipes, and opened books) of his Purist paintings.¹⁰

In the key section, "The Creative Event," Le Corbusier describes the spirit of creativity as "a thought in permanent effervescence, a searching mind, an eye that continues to see, measure, record." No longer does he view painting as exclusively an "objectification of a 'world.'" He still understands it as certifiable and measurable structure – "a construction that the most rigorous of science (rich, profuse, unlimited) makes concise and pure" – but he now recognizes painting as lyrical and profoundly personal, "an endless investigation into the world of appearances ... the transposition of external events transferred to interior consciousness."¹¹ The purpose and reward of painting is the siège de l'infini, (seat of infinity), he says, and concludes his treatise by evoking sensations of time and space in art and by commenting on the nature of human intelligence:

At certain moments, we are moved and we know not why. The genius of nature (like the genius of the painter) plays its part. Waves affect our sensibilities. They exist because we feel them ... Exegesis is illusory! Words cannot define the subtlety of sensation. It is decidedly illusive. Man has his knowledge of things (limited, or subtle, or sublime). With his meticulous ways, the painter detects the moment of infinity. Poetry.¹²

Poetry, the moment of infinity, mystery, sensations have replaced Purism's "provoked emotion" as ends. Yet the means to the ends, even if more cryptic, remain mechanical: waves acting on our sensibilities, waves that exist in as much as we feel them. The esthétique scientifique (scientific aesthetics) prevails, but the effect it renders differs with the circumstances. "Poetry has no formula, no attitude, no fixed appearance," Le Corbusier writes in concluding. "Its circumstances always vary. Its premises are always diverse. It is a new word every time, unpredictable."¹³

During the Second World War, the Swiss art historian Sigfried Giedion published Space, Time and Architecture, an immensely popular book that posited space as the essence of twentieth century architecture and featured a lengthy chapter on Le Corbusier that related his architecture to his painting.¹⁴ In January 1946, as noted above, shortly after the war ended, Le Corbusier published "Ineffable Space" in L'Architecture
over the next few years he painted several murals—largely private, and often on walls of existing residential buildings. In 1947, he painted a mural on the end wall of his 35, rue de Sèvres studio in Paris.

In 1948 he replaced the damaged *Pavillon suisse* photomural with an 11-meter-long painted mural, a horizontal composition comprised—not unlike Picasso’s *Guernica*—of a series of distinct vertical scenes. That same year, he exhibited his paintings at Boston’s Institute of Contemporary Art and published, in conjunction with that exhibition *New World of Space*, a compilation of black and white photographs of his paintings that featured ten pages of biographical notes and an English translation of “Ineffable Space.” In 1951, on adjacent walls that turn a corner in the remote farmhouse of Constantin and Ruth Nivola on Long Island, Le Corbusier painted one of his finest and least known murals, and in 1955, the year he completed the chapel at Ronchamp, he published the lyrical *Le poème de l’angle droit* (*Poem to a Right Angle*) comprised of large lithographs that were to be removed from the book and mounted on a wall to form a tree-like composition, a sort of portable mural. Also that year, in *Le Modulor-2*, he recognized what he had not known in 1923. “I see—looking back after all these years,” he wrote, “that my entire intellectual activity has been directed towards the manifestation of space. I am a man of space, not only mentally but physically...” And in a footnote in that book, he told of a two-meter-wide wall in his house, a wall under an almost ideal light on which he regularly hung his paintings: “One day at a very pre-
24 / Le Corbusier's mural at the Pavillon suisse, 1948

25 / Le Corbusier's 1951 mural in the Nivola house on Long Island, New York
cise moment, I saw ineffable space come into being before my eyes: the wall, with its picture, lost its limits: became boundless.”

Until his death in 1965, the ideas put forth in “Ineffable Space” persisted in Le Corbusier’s architecture, though he seldom employed murals to provoke such space. In 1956, he proposed a photomural for the central lobby of the National Museum of Western Art in Tokyo, but the museum was built without the mural. Its central lobby is inhabited by elements of architecture – columns lit by light from above, the ramp, the balconies, the concrete and colored walls, the pattern of tiles – as well as by Rodin’s sculpture and the composition of these elements provokes the sensation of space. The “representational space” of the Rodin sculpture makes present another space, another order, that questions the space of the architecture, effecting – without the mural – ineffable space.

The most elaborate and probably the least subtle exhibit of ineffable space was Le Pavillon Philips built for Expo 58, the Brussels World’s Fair. A “machine for provoking emotion” (Amédée Ozenfant’s definition of painting forty years earlier), the Pavillon Philips employed projected images, colored lights, and a myriad of syncopated sounds to persuade and mystify the spectator. At Brussels, the spectator, it would seem, had little choice. He was affected – stunned – as a Purist painting might have stunned him.

Ineffable space differed from the object-oriented, Purist venustus. It sought to induce a sense of wonder and mystification in the spectator, but without insisting on this. The waves had to be just right. The waves had to be receptive. The spectator would sense the mystery and ultimately know – but without having been told. Affectation would be beyond the logical, the intellectually understandable. Space, an architecture of space, would be felt. Intuition would prevail.
In memory of Mogens Krustrup


3 Though “space” had been theorized in the late 19th century by the German philosopher August Schmarsow and the topic had then been taken up by August Endell, Theodor Lipps and Herman Sörgel; and though German and Dutch art historians had discussed space in great detail in the 1920s, Le Corbusier seems not to have thought about architecture in terms of space in France in the early 1920s. On those rare occasions in which he did use the term “space,” he most often did so in reference to painting, not building.


5 Felix Klee (eds.): The Diaries of Paul Klee, Los Angeles, The University of California Press, 1964, p. 670, as quoted in: Gillian Naylor: The Bauhaus Reassessed, New York, 1985, p. 90. Naylor traces these preoccupations with “sensation” and “making visible” to the Munich lectures (1894–1913) of Theodor Lipps and his books on perception, The Aesthetics of Space and Geometrical Optical Illusions (1897) and the 2-volume Aesthetics: the psychology of beauty and art (1903 & 1906).


9 The most public publication of this treatise was an introductory essay titled “Peinture” in Le Corbusier, Oeuvre Plastique (1938), the eighth and final issue in Morancé’s L’Architecture Vivante series devoted to the work of Le Corbusier and Pierre Jeanneret. This issue featured twenty-nine plates of the paintings, graphic work, and studies for tapestries of Le Corbusier, seven plates of the Pavillon des temps nouveaux, and four original lithographs in color by Le Corbusier. Le Corbusier illustrated its unpaged written text with sketches. The treatise was also published as preface to Le Corbusier, Oeuvre plastique, peintures et dessins, architecture, the catalogue for Le Corbusier’s 1938 exhibition at the Galerie Balay et Carré in Paris. Here all quotes are from the unpaged text as published in Le Corbusier, Oeuvre plastique, unpag.

10 All of this follows beliefs set out in “Le Purisme” in which Le Corbusier and Ozenfant eschewed “an art of the initiated, an art requiring knowledge of a key, an art of symbols” and described the representational “subjects” of their still-lives as “theme-objects endowed with elementary properties rich in subjective trigger actions.”