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Seeing what is not there yet: Le Corbusier and the architectural space of photographs

Abstract

Le Corbusier (1887-1965) was both a great architect and a graphic designer par excellence. Though he built only 62 buildings, he wrote 56 books, including 8 volumes of his renowned *Œuvre Complete*, reports on himself that he published every five years beginning in 1929. The *Œuvre Complete* featured photographs of buildings designed by Le Corbusier. Though Le Corbusier, himself, did not take the photographs, he did select them, crop them, edit them, and place them on the books' pages together with other photographs, text, titles, page numbers, and drawings. Le Corbusier understood that photography, rather than simply picturing an architecture that was, could visualize an architecture that could be. While one purpose of the photograph was to document recently built works, another purpose of the same photograph was to image that which was not there yet. Le Corbusier employed several strategies that evoked new space in the photographs of his completed architecture. This paper describes three: (a) the truncated pyramid point; (b) the 'built-in' physical focal point; and (c) anthropomorphic representation. It shows how images resulting from the application of each of these three strategies became physically available in Le Corbusier's next buildings.

Keywords

Le Corbusier, Photography, Architectural space, Illusion

Disciplines

Architectural History and Criticism | Architecture

Comments

"Seeing What is Not There Yet: Le Corbusier and the Architectural Space of the Photograph," presented at the international symposium, "INTER--Photography and Architecture", at the University of Navarra, Spain, November 2 - 4.



Maison Cook, Paris, 1926

Third-level bibliotheque, looking through doors to toit jardin. From L'Architecture vivante, deuxième serie

seeing what is not there yet. le corbusier and the architectural space of photographs

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Le Corbusier (1887-1965) was both a great architect and a graphic designer par excellence. Though he built only 62 buildings, he wrote 56 books, including 8 volumes of his renowned Œuvre Complète, reports on himself that he published every five years beginning in 1929. The Œuvre Complète featured photographs of buildings designed by Le Corbusier. Though Le Corbusier, himself, did not take the photographs, he did select them, crop them, edit them, and place them on the books' pages together with other photographs, text, titles, page numbers, and drawings. Le Corbusier understood that photography, rather than simply picturing an architecture that was, could visualize an architecture that could be. While one purpose of the photograph was to document recently built works, another purpose of the same photograph was to image that which was not there yet. Le Corbusier employed several strategies that evoked new space in the photographs of his completed architecture. This paper describes three: (a) the truncated pyramid parti; (b) the 'built-in' physical focal point; and (c) anthropomorphic representation. It shows how images resulting from the application of each of these three strategies became physically available in Le Corbusier's next buildings.

keywords Le Corbusier, Photography, Architectural space, Illusion

Architecture is the skillful, accurate and magnificent play of masses seen in light!

Le Corbusier

Photography is manipulation of light.

Laszlo Moholy Nagy

Photography's illusory space of representation informed Le Corbusier's creation of a new architecture. Present in photographs of his architecture was an illusory space not yet created in that architecture. In images of what was, Le Corbusier saw *what could be*. He then proceeded to build it.

A painter and graphic designer *par excellence*, Le Corbusier built only 62 buildings but wrote 56 books including 8 volumes of his renowned *Œuvre Complète*, reports on himself that he published every five years beginning in 1929². Most of the books were abundantly illustrated –sometimes with drawings and diagrams, but always with photographs. The photographs came from many sources: from catalogs, newspapers, popular press journals; from other books and sometimes from photographs made by Le Corbusier's partner Pierre Jeanneret. But during the 1920s and 1930s, mostly they came from professional architectural photographers hired to make images of Le Corbusier's completed buildings. After the War, photographs of newly completed buildings were made by amateurs – architects and students of architecture who visited the buildings– but also by Le Corbusier's new staff photographer, Lucien Hervé³. From these many photographs, Le Corbusier chose the images for his *Œuvre Complète*. He cropped them, edited them, and placed them on the books' pages with other photographs, texts, titles, page numbers, and drawings.

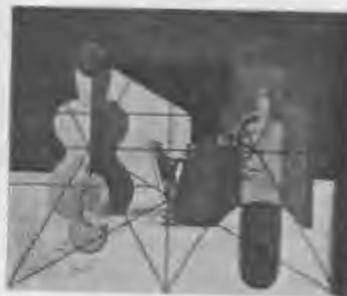
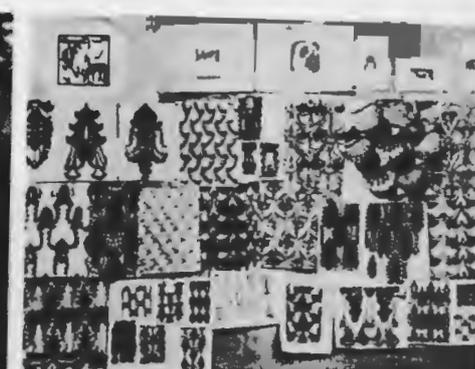
When in the early 1920s, Le Corbusier *began* being a modern architect, photographs were regarded as 'the new means'. The essence of this new means paralleled what Le Corbusier understood as the essence of his proposal for a new architecture. In 1920, famously he defined architecture in phenomenological terms as "*le jeu savant, correct et magnifique des volumes assemblés sous la lumière*". A few years later, Bauhaus master and renowned filmic artist, Laszlo Moholy-Nagy, defined photography as "the manipulation of light". Architecture was "volumes assembled under light"; and photography was the manipulation of this light. It was expected that photography, a medium reputed to never lie, would *document* the architecture that Le Corbusier made. Le Corbusier understood, however, that photography could *create* an architecture that he had not yet made.



f1

Le Corbusier had had considerable experience in the abstraction of literal imagery. In 1905, in his hometown in Switzerland, he decorated his first house with abstractions of pine trees. (f1). In 1911, he traveled to Istanbul and took photographs of its architecture. Many of these photographs were technically flawed, their literal content obscure and therefore abstracted⁴ (f2). In 1915, he taught visual design in his Swiss hometown, assigning exercises that instructed students to draw visual abstractions of the natural surrounds (f3).

And in 1918, after he moved to Paris, he composed Purist paintings on perfectly proportioned canvasses organizing his pictures –which showed abstracted everyday objects such as lanterns, guitars, pipes, and plates– with regulating lines intended to insure, through geometrical means, that the painting would resonate with the viewer (f4). He applied these organizational strategies both to photographs and to the composition of the pages of the books that would carry them (f5).



f2-f5

This paper describes three of the strategies Le Corbusier employed to order images: (f1) the truncated pyramid composition; (f2) the false focal point; and (f3) the anthropomorphic imaging of otherwise faceless architecture. Each strategy edits an image of a Le Corbusier building, picturing it in a realistic but unusual manner, implying space that *could* be there, but isn't there quite yet. Truncated pyramid and false focal point underscore perspective –the camera's vision being relentlessly perspectival, Le Corbusier's persuasion being relentlessly a-perspectival. By making perspective *very* present, Le Corbusier revealed its graphic representation as an illusion that could reverse itself. The third strategy suggests Le Corbusier's buildings as far more than factual constructs. The buildings are creatures and carefully controlled photographic imaging renders them mythopoic. "Faire une architecture", Le Corbusier wrote in 1955, "c'est faire une créature"⁵.

II

The truncated pyramid composition is the most easily digestible of the three. Le Corbusier's own 1911 photograph of a long, deep, street in Edirne, with the Old Mosque, *Eski Camii*, in the background, is a good example of the strategy (f6).



f6

The photograph is not particularly good. The contrast is too great and details which would normally appear in the gray areas of the image are absent or obscure. The street scene is shown in dense blacks and brilliant whites. The descriptive middle ground is gone. The image is reduced, if only momentarily, to two-dimensional shapes. This failure to represent the scene literally, however, has merit. The highly configured, diagrammatic pattern presents us with 'tunnel vision,' a one-point perspective view normal to the manner in which the camera sees. But because the image is abstract, the tunnel we're shown in abstraction can reverse itself. Instead of dragging us deep into the space of photograph, it can be seen as coming out of photograph, as jumping out of the page and coming toward us.

This illusory phenomenon of the truncated pyramid composition was well known to visual artists in the teens and the twenties and frequently discussed in perceptual psychology circles in Central Europe. Le Corbusier employed it often in his Purist painting at that time (f7), and by the end of the decade, Jacques Villon had distilled the phenomenon in his Op-Art-before-its-time, 1929 painting, *Abstraction*. (f8)



f7 and f8

When Le Corbusier began showing photographs of his modern architecture in his books in the 1920s, he edited some of the images to conform to this truncated pyramid composition, most evidently the photographs of the interiors of the Ozenfant studio (f9) and the Villa Cook (f10), as well as of an exterior space at the Villa Savoye created when the villa's *piano nobile* was elevated on *pilotis* (f11). Though all three spaces are imaged by the camera as truncated pyramid spaces, in actuality, they are not. Though these spaces do exist in the built architecture, it's doubtful that they would 'appear as such' to the unaided eye. The camera found that space and recorded it. Subsequently, Le Corbusier found the pyramids –only a small part of much larger images– in the photographic recordings and cropped them to bring prominence to the condition, that is, to make the truncated pyramid the focus of the pictures of his architectural creation. His editing rendered the space visible, making it available to his audience. Picasso's famous declaration, "I do not seek, I find", comes to mind⁶.



f9 and f10

So Le Corbusier found the truncated pyramid in the photographer's work, cropped the photographs, and enlarged the pyramid to bring it forth as an essence of the space of the building. He did not direct the photographer to look for these spaces, rather the camera found and recorded them first, and then Le Corbusier noticed them –in their mediated presence. The space was already there, of course, but only the combination of the extra sensory perception of a machine recording light on film with Le Corbusier's exceptional vision could make it appear.

One assumes that this sort of space, once found, was of particular value to Le Corbusier and that he wanted to offer it to his *actual* architecture, to make it present for the unaided eye to see and appreciate. His initial creation of the pyramid space in actual architecture was subtle when first made available to a *live* audience of visitors –though, of course, there were few ‘live’ visitors to the Villa Savoye in the 1930s. By contrast, many thousands saw (and continue to see) *photographs* of the Villa Savoye.



f11

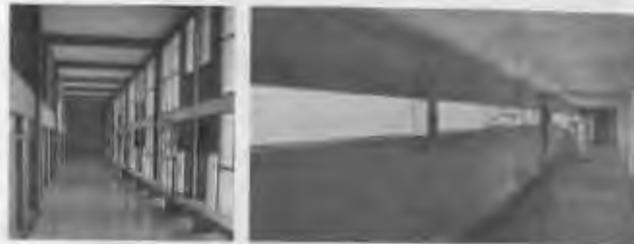
So when Le Corbusier re-designed the Villa Savoye at the request of the clients, removing the third floor and thus making redundant the segment of the renowned ramp that accessed that level, he built a ‘real’ truncated pyramid space into the revision. By adding an aperture in the previously unopened, free-standing wall at the terminus of the ramp on top of the villa, in effect, Le Corbusier added a rectilinear focal point to the place. The truncated pyramid was realized three-dimensionally. The diagonals of the ramp and of its shadows, leading to the aperture, help render this space visible. In presenting this new space to his readers, Le Corbusier’s photographs –stills– captured the space under ideal conditions, rendering the scene with light and shadow that contribute to the effect (f12).



f12

The passageway promenade thus became a place. One could look through the aperture in the wall to a view of the French countryside. The ramp –which seemed gratuitous when the villa was changed from three-stories to two– now seemed to lead not merely from entry to roof but from earth to sky⁷.

Le Corbusier built almost nothing from 1933 to 1946, but immediately after the War ended, in 1946, he built this truncated pyramid space into buildings that required long corridors. More than simply conduits for people, in Le Corbusier’s hands, equipped with the idea of the truncated pyramid place, the corridors became remarkable experiences, significant moments in the *promenade architecturale* (f13 and f14).



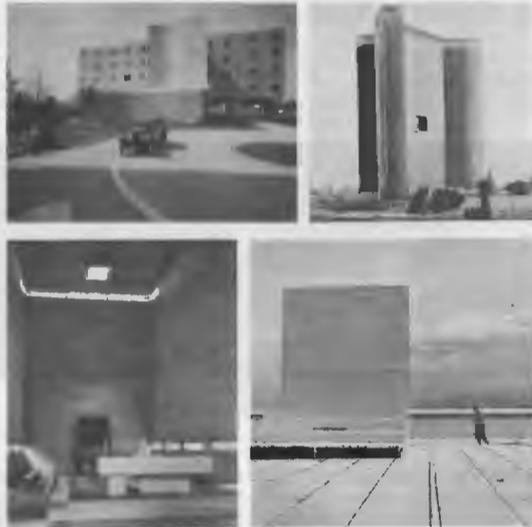
f13 and f14

A second strategy –one related to the truncated pyramid– is again evident in technically flawed *Voyage d’orient* photographs made by the 24-year-old Le Corbusier’s in 1911 near Istanbul. In these photographs, a ‘black square’ –sometimes an object, sometimes a space, but always a very definite black– seems to levitate prominently in the picture (f2 and f15). The blurring graininess of the photograph empties it of strong content, allowing the form to dominate the figurative content. Like the truncated pyramid, the black square can be understood as either a geometric hole in the fabric of the composition or as an object that projects towards the viewer.



f15

This blank, square shape –sometimes white, sometimes black– appears in the built (or ‘projected to be built’) architecture of Le Corbusier often: at the Pavillon Suisse, the *Grandes Esplanades* skyscraper in the B and C projects for Algiers, at the *Marseilles Unité*, and in a variety of details in Le Corbusier’s postwar architecture, most noticeable, perhaps, at La Tourette (f16, f17 and f18). It finds its most poetic manifestation as an isolated object in the ‘floating backdrop screen’ on the rooftop of the *Unité* in Marseille (f19)⁸.



f16-f19

The third strategy seems always more contentious than the others, though to me it is far more obvious. The photographic image can find a face for architecture – a face that often was not intended by the architect when he designed the building, but that he found in photographs of the built work later, and then worked to make apparent by cropping, framing, and editing the photographs. Photography abstracts reality. Framing and editing assist this abstraction. Technical flaws empty the image of its content and so they, too, help abstract the image.

Abstracted photography might reveal the virtual life of the object as with Le Corbusier's technically flawed photograph of the *Üçserrefeli Camii* in Edirne (f20). A high-contrast image, it resists the standard depth rendering of the camera. The mosque it pictures appears to be flattened, pushing against the picture plane. Something strange is revealed. Uncannily, the image looks back at us. Two black eyes, a snub nose, a slightly rounded top to an otherwise blockhead: the portrait is unmistakable. *Üçserrefeli* is alive. Flawed photography has shown us his face.

An odd reading? Perhaps. Yet anthropomorphic imagery appeared frequently first in the books and then later in the architecture of Le Corbusier. One has only to open his *Vers une architecture* (f21), to find page after page of portraits in photographs mined from catalogues then cropped and edited by Le Corbusier to reveal Surreal presences, the faces of contemporary machines.

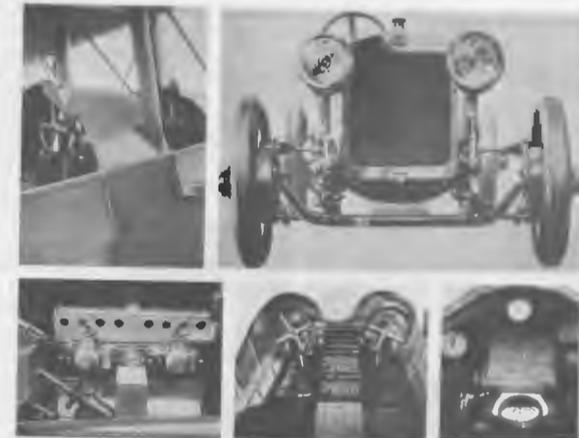
The anthropomorphic image, like the truncated pyramid composition, was not uncommon among Parisian artists in the 1920's and 1930's. Pablo Picasso's 1924 important still life, *Mandoline et guitare* (f22), for instance, depicts objects on a table set before an open window with sky and sea beyond, a scene that he had painted many times in his St. Rafael studio in southern France. Picasso did not, however, paint the 1924 *Mandoline et guitare* in his



f20

St. Rafael studio, but rather he painted it from one of his own paintings made these. Ostensibly it shows two musical instruments and a variety of fruit on a table before an open window through which one can see the sky and the sea. Yet when you look at this large canvas long enough, the holes in the instruments seem to look back at you. Picasso has construed the still life as portrait of a pirate (f23): the holes of the instruments, the pirates eyes; the fruit, his nostrils; the frills at the table legs, his beard; the colorful background, his headdress. Did I invent this pirate, or did Picasso put him there for me to find? Certainly, Le Corbusier found the pirate face, too. In 1937, he painted *Two Musicians* from his earlier *Three Musicians*, converting the 'straight' earlier painting into one that oscillates from a pair of musicians to a bulging-eyed funny face, not unlike that found in Picasso's *Mandoline et guitare* (f24).

After *Vers une architecture*, as early as 1929 with the premier volume of the *Œuvre Complète*, Le Corbusier found and edited photographs of his own buildings that portrayed them as anthropomorphic (f25). This tendency continued to the end of his life and is



f21

employed most profoundly in the anthropomorphic portrayal of his best-known work, the chapel at Ronchamp (f26) Photography invested it with life and cosmological significance. It is mythological, the images imply. It has always been, and will always be. A masterpiece of 20th Century architecture, no doubt, but the chapel transcends the century, transcends architecture. Given new life in representation, it seems to make manifest the collective body of humanity. A colossal head looking out over the vast landscape, it is buried in the earth, illuminated from within. One can inhabit this head; walk inside it; hear its hollowness; feel its colored light; realize and know the weather in which it resides.

III

The camera was reputed to 'never lie', but it could be made to tell a truth that was *not* obvious, a truth that was not available to those with, as Le Corbusier put it, "eyes which do not see"¹⁰. In depicting the objects of architecture, it created a space that, in reality, was not there



f22-f24

but that could be found in the *representation* of these objects. This created space could then be made into actual space in the next building. Through the careful editing and arranging of the photographs of his architecture, *without lying*, Le Corbusier depicted possibilities for future architecture as well as offering poetic interpretations of the buildings he had built.

So, while one obvious purpose of the photograph for Le Corbusier in the late-20's and early-30s was to document and promote recently built works, another purpose of the *same* photograph—at least when directed to those with eyes that see—was to suggest an architecture that *could* be. Representation offered Le Corbusier new space. He translated this representation into a three-dimensional architecture. An architecture of illusion evolved which valued phenomenal sensation over the thing itself. With illusion the basis of a new architecture, a dialectical relation with material reality itself was established. In this way, representation served Le Corbusier not only to record Modern architecture, but to transform it, opening a door to an architecture seemingly antithetical to its convictions about material reality.



f25 and f26

endnotes

1. Le Corbusier-Saugnier, "Trois Rappel à MM. LES ARCHITECTES", *L'Esprit Nouveau* 1 (Oct. 1920): p92. In French, architecture is "le jeu savant, correct et magnifique des volumes assemblés sous la lumière".
2. Le Corbusier and Pierre Jeanneret. *Œuvre complète*. Ed. Willi Boesiger (vol III ed. Max Bill). 8 vols. 9th ed. Zurich : Les Éditions d'Architecture Artemis, 1991.
3. See my "An Interview with Lucien Hervé" *Parametro*, no.206 (Feb., 1995), 70-83.
4. For the 1911 travel photographs, see Giuliano Gresleri, *Le Corbusier, viaggio in Oriente: gli inediti di Charles Edouard Jenneret, fotografo e scrittore*. 1985.
5. Le Corbusier, *Le Poème de l'Angle Droit* (Paris: Editions Verve, 1955).
6. Pablo Picasso, "Statements to Marius de Zayas" (1923), as quoted and translated in Edward F. Fry, *Cubism* (NY: McGraw-Hill, 1966), p165, initially published in *The Arts* as "Picasso Speaks" (NY: May 1923), 315-326.
7. For an elaboration, see my, "In a Mediated Manner: Le Corbusier's Villa Savoye at Poissy" *ΔΟΜΕΣ (Domes) International Review of Architecture* (Jan, 2007) pp82-93, and my "Savoye Space: The Sensation of the Object", *Harvard Design Magazine* (Fall, 2001), 4-13.
8. With the exception of Colin Rowe's minor obsession with the "unrelieved, blank, white surface" [...] of the entrance façade of Le Corbusier's 1916 Villa Schwob, Le Corbusier's fondness for prominently placed 'levitating blankness'—possibly originating in the photographs—has never been awarded the attention it deserves. See Colin Rowe, "Mannerism and Modern Architecture", republished in *The Mathematics of the Ideal Villa and Other Essays* (Cambridge MA: MIT Press, 1976), p31. In that essay, Rowe elaborates:
 [...] but the blank surface is both disturbance and delight; and it is the activity of emptiness which the observer is ultimately called upon to enjoy. Since this motif, which is so curiously reminiscent of a cinema screen, was presumably intended to shock, its success is complete. For it imbues the façade with all the polemical qualities of a manifesto: and it is the blank panel, with its intensifying frame frame which endows other elements of the façade—columns and canopy—with a staccato quality seeming to foreshadow Le Corbusier's later development. [...]
9. *Deux musiciennes au violon et à la guitar*, 1937; and *Trois musiciennes*, 1936. Picasso's famed 1924 *Mandoline et guitare* is in the collection of the Guggenheim Museum in New York City. See my "Encontrando rostros", *Ra 11 (Revista De Arquitectura)* (June, 2009), pp15-24; full English translation, 127-130.
10. The phrase "eyes which do not see" is used repeatedly by Le Corbusier in his *Vers une architecture*. (Paris: Librairie Arthaud, h 1977).

CV

Daniel J. Naegele. Is an architect and architecture historian with a Master in Environmental Design and a PhD. from the university of Pennsylvania: "Le Corbusier's Seeing Things: Ambiguity & Illusion in the Representation of Modern Architecture". He has been studied also at University of Cincinnati, Architectural Association and Yale University. Currently he is a docent at the Iowa state University of architectural design studios, option studios, seminars and history of architecture. He has been also teacher at the university of Missouri. He is contribution to different scientific magazines and Foundations with his writings and research (AA Files, Scheidegger & Spiess, Alvar Aalto Foundation, etc...). His latest presentation was done in the June 2016 on the Edinburgh school of architecture called "Silence in 1967" inside the symposium "The Place of Silence: Environment, Experience and Affect". His range of study is base on the modern movement, Le Corbusier, Collin Rowe and architecture and photography as well. He has been traveled all around the world due to his research methodology and interest.