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The Marseilles Unité & Le Corbusier's edicts governing photography

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Abstract

The photographic representation of the Marseilles apartment block is indicative of these postwar changes. A key component of the urban vision put forth in Le Corbusier's 1935 La Ville radieuse, the Unité d'Habitation, was the fruit of thirty years of speculation regarding collective living. It was offered as solution to the worldwide housing shortage that had been brought on by the destruction of the war and the postwar population boom. Like much of Le Corbusier's earlier work, it was proposed as a 'standard type' and was intended to be reproduced throughout the world. It would be one of Le Corbusier's most important and necessary buildings, and undoubtedly he understood it as such from its inception.

Disciplines

Architectural History and Criticism | Architecture | Historic Preservation and Conservation | Photography

Comments

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The Marseilles Unité & Le Corbusier's edicts governing photography

The photographic representation of the Marseilles apartment block is indicative of these postwar changes. A key component of the urban vision put forth in Le Corbusier's 1935 *La Ville radiieuse*, the Unité d'Habitation, was the fruit of thirty years of speculation regarding collective living. It was offered as solution to the worldwide housing shortage that had been brought on by the destruction of the war and the postwar population boom. Like much of Le Corbusier's earlier work, it was proposed as a 'standard type' and was intended to be reproduced throughout the world. It would be one of Le Corbusier's most important and necessary buildings, and undoubtedly he understood it as such from its inception.

For these reasons, the *reportage* of the Marseilles Unité was critical and needed to be quite different from that of his earlier buildings. Housing was of interest to the general public, and Le Corbusier understood that public awareness of the project was vital to its success as a standard for mass housing. But provoking and sustaining interest while at the same time controlling the photographic representation of the building—managing the image of his architecture—was very challenging. He needed to keep the project before the public, to present it in *his* terms not theirs, and to present it as a viable vision, one that was currently materializing, a building that could and should be repeated. But construction would take six years. It was therefore necessary

for him to allow this work to be visually reported well before its completion, though to do so was in violation of mandates he had imposed for twenty-five years.

Le Corbusier approached this challenge enthusiastically. While exercising careful control of all images made of the *chantier*, he actively encouraged media coverage and attempted on several occasions to have films made of the Unité.⁶² These involved actors, a moderator (Albert Camus was contacted), large-scale models of the interiors, helicopter shots of the *chantier*, and often a good deal of rather preposterous, inflated dialogue.⁶³ The films were intended to be circulated worldwide as cinema newsreels and perhaps aired on television. In addition to these films, the building's

62 Scripts for the Unité were proposed and written throughout the 1950s, but many went unrealized. Two of the early films that were completed and are in the holdings of the FLC are the 8-minute long, 1951 “Le Corbusier Travaille,” directed and produced by Gabriel Chereau, and the 12-minute long, 35mm, 1952 “La Cité Radieuse,” with sound and color and directed and produced by Jean Sacha. The earlier film, shot in black and white, shows Le Corbusier at work at the chantier in Marseilles.

Much has been written on the early films of Le Corbusier’s architecture of the 1920s, particularly on the film “*L’Architecture d’Aujourd’hui*.” See, for instance, Helmut Wehsmann, *Cinetecture: Film, Architektur, Moderne* (Vienna: PVS Verleger, 1995), a work that includes a complete listing of all films related to Le Corbusier. Regarding Le Corbusier’s unique 8mm films as well as his own still photography, see Tim Benton, *LC PHOTO: Le Corbusier Secret Photographer* (Zürich: Lars Müller, 2013).

63 In late 1951–early 1952 Le Corbusier organized a film on Marseilles to be directed and produced by M. Tenuzzi [*sic* “Tenoudji”], 7 rue de Presbourg, Paris XVI [FLC B3(10)215]. On 1 August 1952, he wrote Albert Camus at 29 rue Madame, Paris [FLC B3(10)220] saying that he had seen Tenudji [*sic*] that morning and that Tenudji [*sic*] was delighted that Camus would be participating in the film. He then went on to describe the film:

Il faut un drame du “Tonnerre de Dieu” qui soit l’armature totale de l’affaire. Il a demandé que vous et moi mettions sur pied ce drame en quelques pages. L’action se passe innocemment dans notre Bâtiment de Marseille, et autour, et en plus, Marseille, la Ville; Marseille, le port; Marseille, les cabanons, etc.... tout ce que l’on veut de pittoresque, de lamentable, de retardataire, souvent à l’abri de beaucoup de mousquetarisades. >>

progress would be covered both by standard professional journals and by the popular press. No longer would the audience be limited to architects and students of architecture. And the circulated photographs of the building were not always made by architectural photographers. The building was a novelty in its size, its insistence on collective living, and its use of the rooftop for daycare, recreation, and entertainment. It would be built of raw concrete, its exterior concrete decorated in dabs of brilliant color. Presenting it to the public properly was essential to Le Corbusier and necessitated a change in approach to photographic representation.

Concerns established during the interwar years—for artistic control, technique, and the cost of photographic services—persisted after the war, but as Le Corbusier increasingly depended on the un-commissioned, unsupervised photography of amateurs inexperienced in architectural work, standards for control, technique, and remuneration necessarily were modified. The photographer Simone Herman's relationship with the atelier underscores the predicament free-lance photographers posed for Le Corbusier. Herman had photographed the Unité d'Habitation at Marseilles and sent a bill to Le Corbusier's office for her services. In March 1949 Le Corbusier's associate, André Wogenscky, wrote to Herman in response to the bill. "It seems to me that it was made explicit that you could not charge the

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- >> Le Corbusier himself wrote a script abstract for the film and went so far as to price for Hervé the cost of a helicopter needed for shooting the aerial views (65,000 francs/hour and needed for two hours) [FLC B3(10)228]. Presumably the film was never made although in late 1953 José Luis Sert wrote to Le Corbusier from Harvard requesting the film. As late as 25 September 1957 it was still a possibility, albeit remote, when Le Corbusier wrote to Hervé [FLC B3(10)281] regarding an advertising/propaganda campaign that he wished to stage in the Berlin media for support of the 'Unité de Dreieck', noting: "*Il faut proposer même des films. Celui de Tenudji (Films Marceau) est sans espoir, mais il y a celui de Pierre Kast (dont j'ai oublié de vous parler au téléphone) qui est un film extrêmement instructif.*"

atelier for your photography,” he stated, adding, “[...] we agreed to reimburse you simply for the direct cost of the prints.”⁶⁴ In her scathing reply to Wogenscky three months later, Herman stated that the price she billed the atelier (500 and 600 francs) was half of what she usually charged and that his offer of 100 francs per print “is exactly as if you proposed to your employees to pay them the cost of their metro tickets to come to work.”⁶⁵ She continued on a personal note, “You whom I had imagined so humane, so understanding and so devoted, as soon as you become the boss, only the interest of the company counts.” To this she added, “I have not forgotten your kindness in allowing me to photograph the construction at Marseilles and I recognize that you and your office have sent me a certain number of journalists but I must maintain the price of my work,” and then closed by expressing her desire to continue coverage of Marseilles in mid-August. In his reply Wogenscky transcribed the notes Le Corbusier had written directly on her letter: “We are not the clients of Simone Herman, but the authorizers of photography. It seems to me that we authorize photography on the condition that we receive free of charge proofs in 5 copies for our archives and files. Failing this, we will not authorize photography.”⁶⁶

Yet Wogenscky was deeply disturbed by the misunderstanding and arranged for a payment of 5,000 francs to be sent to Herman. In the summer of 1950, with the *Unité* nearing completion, he encouraged Herman to come again to Marseilles, enticing her with the prospect of photographing an “entirely equipped

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- 64 FLC T1(1)426_001 & _002. Two-page letter on a single sheet dated 23 March 1949 from André Wogenscky to Simone Herman, rue Vaneau, Paris VII.
- 65 FLC T1(1)437_001 & _002. Two-page letter on a single sheet dated 20 April 1949 from Simone Herman to André Wogenscky.
- 66 FLC T1(1)453 & 454. Two-page letter dated 7 July 1949 from André Wogenscky to Simone Herman.

apartment” interior and adding that for her, of course, Le Corbusier’s consent was always given.⁶⁷ In November of that year, Herman wrote directly to “*Mon cher Corbu*” sending him her latest photographs of Marseilles, photographs destined for the Ministry of Reconstruction. “In fact, everyone imagines that my reports on Marseilles are financed by your office,” she wrote. “This is false, as you know. It is therefore necessary to organize it in such a way that when the Ministry requests photographs from me, *they* pay me for my work [...] I’m certain that you understand this and that you will agree.”⁶⁸ Herman continued her work on the Unité d’Habitation, with Wogenscky prompting her to “make beautiful photographs of the building in color when it is completed.”⁶⁹

Perhaps because of the initial misunderstanding with Herman, and because dealings with her ultimately had resulted in a working relationship that was acceptable to both architect and photographer, Le Corbusier issued his “*AVIS à l’USAGE de Messieurs les PHOTOGRAPHES*”,⁷⁰ the first of two written notices which attempted to regulate the photographing of his architecture. To be given to each photographer who wished to enter the *chantier* at Marseilles, this

⁶⁷ FLC T1(1)571. Letter dated 10 July 1950 from André Wogenscky to Madame Simone Herman, 54 rue Vaneau, Paris.

⁶⁸ FLC T1(1)598_001 & _002. Two-page letter dated 17 November 1950 from Simone Herman, 54 rue Vaneau, to Le Corbusier. Other photographers had done work at Marseilles and were also asked to send prints to the Ministry. Marcel de Renzis, 4 Quai du Port, Marseilles, made photographs of the Unité. Le Corbusier was particularly interested in his shots of the interior of ‘notre appartement’. On 6 December 1949 [FLC T1(1)509] André Wogenscky requested Renzis to send five complete sets of all the photos of the Unité apartment to Marcel Roux, head of the Cabinet du Ministère de la Reconstruction. Later, in a letter dated 11 July 1950 [FLC T1(1)572], Wogenscky asked Renzis to send two images from 28 June 1949 to Charlotte Perriand and to send ‘*la facture*’ for these to *Technique et Architecture*.

⁶⁹ FLC T1(1)607. Letter dated 29 December 1950 from André Wogenscky to Simone Herman.

⁷⁰ FLC T1(1)484. “*AVIS à l’USAGE de Messieurs les PHOTOGRAPHES*.” Not dated.

edict required the photographer, at his own expense, to send to the Atelier Le Corbusier in Paris three copies of all photographs taken. Further, Le Corbusier explicitly stated that he reserved all rights “to employ these documents, or any fragment thereof, for my personal use such as exhibitions, books, etc.” This “Notice” went on to state that when a journalist requested photographic documents from Le Corbusier, Le Corbusier would select the appropriate image from his files and would then refer the journalist to the photographer responsible for that image. At this point the journalist would deal directly and only with the photographer who was free to set his or her own price for the photographs without, Le Corbusier stressed, “the need for me ever to intervene in this operation.” In this manner, Le Corbusier sought to obtain for free the services of many diverse photographers, to retain artistic rights to photographs made by others of buildings he designed, and to maintain substantial if not complete control of the photographic representation of his architecture as every publisher had first to obtain his approval to publish any photograph of his architecture.

The Unité d’Habitation at Marseilles opened in 1952. While it was being built, it was photographed extensively by the Bordeaux company, Photographie Industrielle du Sud-Ouest. [33] In early 1953, the company’s Monsieur C. Héreau wrote a proposal in reply to a request from Madame Strassova who wished to publish a book on the building and had contacted Héreau for photographs. Presumably, Héreau thought his firm entitled to “*droits d’auteur*.” Le Corbusier thought differently. “I was the one who indicated each photograph to take at Marseilles and it was I who put my head under the black cloth to frame them,” he wrote to Héreau. “It would therefore be reasonable that you be paid for your work as photographer [...] but that you renounce your claim to authorial rights.”⁷¹

71 FLC T1(2)183. Letter dated 10 April 1953 from Le Corbusier to C. Héreau of Photographie Industrielle du Sud-Ouest/ 45, rue du Pas-Saint-Georges / Bordeaux.



FIG. 33

When Héreau persisted, Le Corbusier wrote him: “You are industrial photographers, you made photographs that I myself framed with your camera; you have no claim to the rights of authorship. This attitude of photographers today hinders simply everything in the making of illustrated books.” Le Corbusier then suggested Héreau be content with his usual 250 francs per photographic print and advised him to “Leave the rights of authorship to those who are the authors and leave the photographers to their laboratories and equipment.” In closing he made the consequence of Héreau’s infringement clear. “If these claims are repeated, I will be obliged never again to use your negatives and never again to cite your name in conjunction with my work.” To this warning he added what Héreau certainly already knew: “I hope by now it is well understood that the Atelier Le Corbusier, 35 rue de Sèvres, is not an *atelier d’affaires* and that it is not with us that you will grow rich.”⁷²

⁷² FLC T1(2)197. Letter dated 16 July 1953 from Le Corbusier to Photographie Industrielle du Sud-Ouest / 45, rue du Pas-St-Georges / Bordeaux.

The following April, perhaps in response to the Héreau conflict, Le Corbusier issued a second notice regarding ‘*relations d’affaires*’ with the Atelier Le Corbusier.⁷³ This edict applied to no specific *chantier* but was addressed to ‘*Messieurs les Photographes*’ in general. In it, he attempted to make clear that, regarding the photography of his buildings, all “*droits à la propriété artistique*” rightfully belong not to the photographer but to Atelier Le Corbusier. The Atelier, Le Corbusier noted, “designed the buildings [...] built the buildings [...] and often wrote or provoked the news articles under consideration.” Artistic rights, the edict continued, applied only to photographic documents “of individual value,” the “*pâturage naturelle*” of periodicals of immense circulation. The photographs in question, however, were destined, he wrote, for the somewhat less spectacular “*ouvrages de science ou de vulgarisation scientifique*”: journals or art books with small circulation and not one or two but “ten, twenty, or a hundred” illustrations. “You might well appreciate,” Le Corbusier wrote, “that such works cannot support tariffs applicable to magazines.” He continued, “When I ask you for 2, 4, 10, or 30 photographs of my work (not yours), I am requesting from you a service of a mechanical nature only.” He concluded by assuring these ‘technicians’ that their cooperation would result in a greater demand by the press for their photographs and that this, obviously, would be of benefit to them since, when dealing directly with the various journals, they legitimately could claim “*une part raisonnable de droit*.”

73 FLCT1(2)179. “*Note à l’adresse de Messieurs les Photographes en relations d’affaires avec l’Atelier Le Corbusier*,” dated April, 1953 and signed, ‘Le Corbusier’.

This dispute over authorial rights and the resulting *avis* marked a turning point in Le Corbusier's relationship with photographers. He sought simpler, more accommodating relationships: the loyal collaboration of trusted and talented technicians. This became increasingly necessary as nearly all of his work after the war was remote from Paris and he could not directly oversee the photography of these buildings himself.