

LE CORBUSIER – 1887 to 1965

Le Corbusier once said - “A house is a machine for living in”. This famous statement defined his ideology for his whole life. Le Corbusier is responsible for the idea of our modern cities- high-rise buildings, green spaces, and large motorways. He still inspires countless modern architects. I was first introduced to Le Corbusier when I visited the organised and beautiful city of Chandigarh. Chandigarh is a city very close to my heart. A lot of my family resides there. In fact, the only designed city



Figure 1 - Architect Le Corbusier (front right), Notre Dame du Haut (front left), Unite d'Habitation (background)

in India- the city is very different from all the other cities in India which are chaotic with messy, tangled streets and sporadic shops and houses. Chandigarh on the other hand emanates order, elegance, and efficiency. No overcrowded blocks. The city is instead broken up into a grid of sectors. Each sector is a neighbourhood of its own with planned roads, homes, shops, and schools surrounding a central park and recreational area. In the north, the political hub of the city, Le Corbusier created the Capitol Complex- a cluster of modernist buildings- big, bold, geometric structures made of raw exposed concrete, they weren't “pretty” in the traditional sense, but they carried a sense of power and purpose. They were meant to reflect democracy, strength, and a modern India.

My love for architecture is inspired by my Nanu (maternal grandfather). He is the one who still resolves my math doubts. While he reminisces about his experiences as an architect and his learnings while studying architecture and town planning about 60 years ago, there is one phrase he always reiterates - **“Form Follows Function”**. This adage was embodied by Le Corbusier. Le

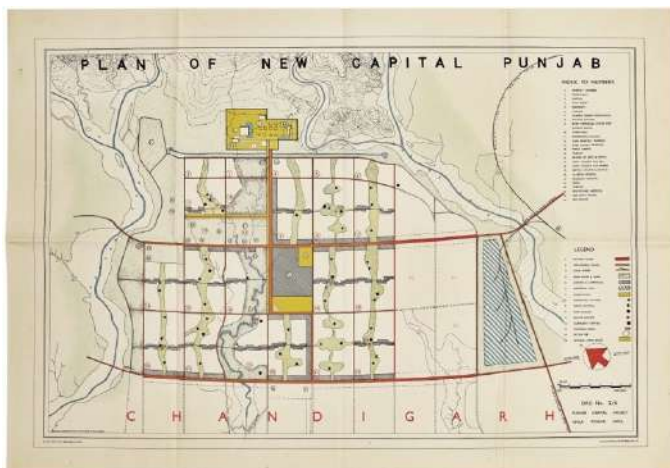


Figure 2 - Le Corbusier's design of Chandigarh

Corbusier was more inspired by engineers than by the architects of his time. He said in *Engineers Aesthetic and Architecture* - “Our engineers are healthy and virile, active and useful, balanced and happy in their work. Our architects are disillusioned and unemployed, boastful or peevish. This is because there will soon be nothing more for them to do. We no longer have the money to erect historical souvenirs. At the same time, we have got to wash! Our engineers provide for these things, and they will be our builders. Nevertheless, there does exist this thing called ARCHITECTURE, an admirable thing, the



Figure 3 - Villa Savoye

loveliest of all. A product of happy peoples and a thing which in itself produces happy peoples. The happy towns are those that have an architecture. Architecture can be found in the telephone and in the Parthenon. How easily could it be at home in our houses! Houses make the street, and the street makes the town, and the town is a personality which takes to itself a soul, which can feel, suffer and wonder. How at home architecture could be in street and town!"

Five Points became the blueprint of his design:

1. Pilotis - those clean, elegant supporting columns that free the ground beneath the building
2. Open floor plans with no structural constraints
3. Horizontal windows to allow maximum natural light
4. Flat roofs used as gardens or terraces
5. Facades free of ornamentation

These ideas were realized in projects like the **Villa Savoye (1930)**, at Poissy, a landmark of modernist design that perfectly embodies these principles.

Once asked by a magazine editor to name his favourite chair - Le Corbusier cited the seat of a cockpit and described the first time he ever saw an aeroplane in the spring of 1909 in the sky above Paris. It was the aviator Charles Comte de Lambert taking a turn around the Eiffel tower, as the most significant moment of his life. He observed that the requirements of flight of necessity rid aeroplanes of all the superfluous decoration of buildings and so unwittingly transforms them into successful pieces of modern architecture. To place a classical statue on top of a house was for Le Corbusier as silly as to add one to a plane. But if the function of a plane was to fly what was the function of a house? - Le Corbusier arrived at a simple list of requirements beyond which all other ambitions were no more than, as he put it 'romantic cobwebs':

1. a shelter against heat, cold, rain, thieves, and the inquisitive
2. a receptacle for light and sun
3. a certain number of cells appropriated to cooking work and personal life

So much of what defines our current architectural identity traces back to Le Corbusier. Known for his pioneering designs, Le Corbusier envisioned a world built on order, efficiency, and modernity. From the bold lines of Villa



Figure 4 - Unite d'Habitation rooftop terrace



Figure 5 - Purism

Savoye to the utopian city of Chandigarh, his work remains as impactful today as it was nearly a century ago.

Le Corbusier was born in 1887 in La Chaux-de-Fonds a small town of Switzerland known for its watchmaking industry. He began his studies at the Aldar focusing on engraving and watchmaking but under the mentorship of **Charles L' Plattenier** his interests expanded to architecture and other artistic disciplines in his early days. Le Corbusier travelled extensively throughout Europe visiting cities like Florence, Vienna and Istanbul observing the works of leading architects and the richness of classical architecture. He worked briefly in the offices of **August Perret** in Paris where he learned about the use of **reinforced concrete**, and later with **Peter Barren** in Germany where he was introduced to **industrial design and modernist ideas**. These experiences laid the foundation for his radical architectural vision.

Le Corbusier moved to Paris and began collaborating with painter and designer **Amedee Ozenfant**, at the age of 30. Ozenfant initiated Corbusier into **Purism** which emphasized clarity and order in art, contradictory to the complicated abstractions of Cubism, reflecting **Le Corbusier's growing obsession with functionality and efficiency**. This philosophy soon extended into his architectural work where he sought to create buildings that met the needs of modern living.

Le Corbusier's work was deeply influenced by the social and economic challenges that emerged after World War I. The devastation and instability caused by the war highlighted the urgent need for efficient functional and affordable housing to accommodate rapidly growing urban populations. The articles written by Corbusier were collected and published as '**Vers Une Architecture**' in 1923. In this manifesto he outlined his vision of modern architecture advocating for the **use of industrial materials like steel and concrete, and emphasizing the need for simplicity, functionality and efficiency**.

Le Corbusier's urban designs were focused on purely **functional design** and gave great premise to the **functionality of automobiles**. One of his most controversial proposals was the '**Plan Voisin**' for Paris, presented in 1925. Le Corbusier envisioned demolishing large sections of central Paris, including parts of the historic Marseille district, to make way for a grid of **eighteen identical Cruciform** skyscrapers surrounded by green spaces. The plan aimed to solve the problems of overcrowding and inefficiency in urban areas emphasizing open



Figure 6 - Plan Voisin



Figure 7 - Unité d'Habitation

spaces, sunlight, and traffic efficiency. While it was never implemented, the Plan Voisin sparked heated debates about modern urbanism and the balance between heritage and progress.

During the 1930s and the Second World War, Le Corbusier completed fewer buildings than in his fertile early years. The end of the war saw an explosion in commissions. By now, however, he was working in a very different style unlike the smooth, machine-like modernism of the 1920s, favouring exposed concrete and monumental scale. Widely adopted by Le Corbusier's many followers, the style came to be known as **Brutalism**, so named for the French *béton brut* meaning **raw concrete**. It was during this period of around

twenty years that Le Corbusier completed many of his most admired works including:

Unité d'Habitation in Marseille, 1952; as well as similar designs in Nantes, Berlin, Briey, and Firminy

Chapel Notre Dame du Haut in Ronchamp, 1955

Convent of Sainte-Marie-de-la-Tourette near Lyon

Carpenter Center for the Visual Arts at Harvard University—his only building in the United States.

In the 1950s, Le Corbusier was finally able to realize a synthesis of his architectural and urban planning visions when he was invited to complete the design of **Chandigarh, the new capital of the state of Punjab in India**. Le Corbusier designed a functional city layout, and for the city's capitol complex he designed three buildings himself — the Secretariat, the Palace of Assembly, and the High Court (Palace of Justice). The city became a living example of his vision for a radiant city- with its orderly layout, open spaces and emphasis on community living.

Although Le Corbusier left a lasting mark on modern architecture, his career was marred by several controversies. One of the most debated episodes involves Eileen Gray's (a pioneering modernist designer and architect) E-1027 Villa on the French Riviera, which she designed between 1926 and 1929 with her partner Jean Badovici. In 1938 and 1939, Le Corbusier painted a series of large



Figure 8 - Chandigarh: Palace of Assembly

murals directly onto its walls while staying there as a guest of Badovici. Gray was not consulted about the murals, and many view this as an intrusion on her artistic vision and a symbolic act of dominance over a female designer's work. The incident has sparked ongoing debates about artistic ownership and gender dynamics in the modernist movement. Le Corbusier's ideas were often seen as too **rigid or utopian**, particularly his urban planning



Figure 9 - Chandigarh: Palace of Justice

concepts, which some argued ignored the complexities of human behaviour and social diversity. However, his influence on architecture and design is undeniable. Throughout his life, Le Corbusier continued to push boundaries, blending art, technology, and social vision in ways that changed architecture forever. From furniture design to urban planning, his legacy endures in the **minimalist aesthetics and functional layouts** we see today. His ideas continue to inspire architects and designers around the world.



Figure 10 - Interior of Palace of Assembly, Chandigarh

Summing up le Corbusier's study, is his famous statement "A curved street is a donkey track, a straight street a road for men" which portrays him as a polemicist.