

# IS LE CORBUSIER STILL RELEVANT?



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**"The house is a machine for living in." A sentence written nearly 100 years ago by a Swiss architect (famously wearing black thick-rimmed glasses. In rejection of the common Victorian style, this radical idea demanded a new view on housing. Inspired by modern engineering and technology, Le Corbusier (1887-1965) created a radical new way of living: back to essentials.**

There are two ways to look at 'radical domesticity'. The term either describes the idea of radically coming back to domesticity, or the re-thinking of domesticity in a radical way. The first of those celebrates a home with cosy pillows, self-made bread and decorative vases. The second of these pares down domesticity to the essence of a home, with its mass produced furniture, simple forms and clean colours. Today, however, we – the common people – find ourselves in the middle of these two interpretations: living in somehow functional, somehow sentimental homes – but never only the one or the other. Our standardised functional homes are dressed up like individual homes. We exist in a mixture of poor imitations and varieties of styles that were once a trend. On my Ikea bed is a decorative pillow.

The way we live today is the result of Modernist architecture and design at the beginning of the 20th century. My Ikea table is to some degree inspired by architects like Le Corbusier, Mies van der Rohe, and the other Modernist suspects. Mass-production, functional planning, efficient building, and designing with simple/clean forms was their credo. It was radical at the time to focus on material and form over ornament. Derived from the Latin word *radicalis*, meaning: of or having roots, *radical* means going back to the origin, the essential. Le Corbusier pursued this idea. Architecture should go back to the essentials of house-making. It should start with the problem and end with the solution. In his book 'Towards a New Architecture' from

1927, he observes the architecture of Victorian buildings: "Architecture today is no longer conscious of its own beginnings." For him, the way to avoid the uneconomical production of ornamented buildings is to look at engineering: "The Engineer, inspired by the law of Economy and governed by the mathematical calculation, puts us in accord with universal law. He achieves harmony." Le Corbusier demanded a radical rethinking of architecture inspired by the methods of engineering and in tune with technological developments and industrialisation.

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While he praised modern engineering, he dismissed decorative Victorian architecture. "The Styles are a lie," he states, and thereby discriminates against the architecture of the present-day. A new epoch had begun. A new entity entered the field of production: machinery. The (common) styles were over and Le Corbusier wanted architecture to evolve or even revive. He was not alone in his hatred of uneconomical decoration. Modernist architects in general did not like decorative stucco. A must-read at the time was 'Ornament and Crime' (1908)

by Austrian theorist and architect Adolf Loos. In this essay/lecture he dramatically describes 'some ornamentation is a crime to human lives because it is a waste of human labour, material and money'. Le Corbusier once said: "Loos swept right under our feet, and it was a Homeric cleansing – precise, philosophical and logical. In this, Loos has had a decisive influence on the destiny of architecture."

Function, systems, logical thinking, and the use of geometrical/mathematical forms became the key to designing Modernist houses. Le Corbusier writes: "These forms, elementary or subtle, tractable or brutal, work physiologically upon our senses (sphere, cube, cylinder, horizontal, vertical, oblique, etc.), and excite them." By narrowing his visual language to the essential forms and elements, Le Corbusier created a powerful and recognisable vocabulary.

This vocabulary and the attention to non-geometrical/organic forms is the subject of Galerie Philia's recent exhibition *Héritages*. In collaboration with art magazine *Eclipse*, Galerie Philia invited contemporary artists and designers to respond to Le Corbusier's language – to question it, to use it, to criticise it. Taking place in the architect's seminal apartment block 'Unité d'Habitation' in Marseille, also called 'La Cité Radieuse', the exhibition is divided into two parts: *Resonances* and *Divergences*.

*Resonances* presents objects that visually follow and/or extend Le Corbusier's theories: a vase by

Riek Ouwens, an armchair by Pietro Franceschini, a daybed by Arno Declercq, a brass light by Paul Matter, and artworks by Edgar Sarin and Mateo Revillo. *Divergences* articulates the resistance to Le Corbusier's limitations and gives space to more organic expressions: a ceramic table by João Corvão, a pedestal table by Rosane Lahkij, a sculpted oak piece by Jérôme Pereira, candlesticks by Nicklas Wohl, and drawings by Sam Scalfan, Fabrice Hyber and Flora Termonche.

Similar to the *Héritages* exhibition, the new installation *Le champ des possibles – micro-architectures à experimenter* by Doppél Studio is a contemporary reaction to Le Corbusier's theories. As winner of a competition organised by Site Le Corbusier for the 12th Biennale Internationale Design Saint-Étienne, Doppél Studio designed six micro-architectures, which are installed in Le Corbusier's Saint-Pierre church in Firminy. These micro-architectures are inspired by the architect's vacation home, Cabanon, in Roquebrune-Cap Martin (France).

Le Corbusier wrote in his book 'Towards a New Architecture': "A house: a shelter against heat, cold, rain, thieves and the inquisitive. A receptacle for light and sun. A certain number of cells appropriated to cooking, work, and personal life." Doppél Studio asks (while relating to the pandemic): "What do we need to live? How much space is necessary?" Le Corbusier's anthropometric scale of proportions, *Modulor*, might indicate the answer. The scale of the *Modulor* refers to standard human height. This body-based measurement system was created to optimise architecture and design objects by giving shapes, sizes, and other creative elements a mathematical reason. Unfortunately, this tool excludes female measurements, indicating how women and their needs were

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ignored at the time. However misogynistic the *Modulor* was, Le Corbusier's radical thinking paved the way to postmodernist ideas and second-wave feminists. No post- without a pro-movement. No second-wave without a first-wave.

The *Modulor* was a product of its time and surely today when Doppél Studio asks: "How much space is necessary?" we shouldn't try to find an answer using Le Corbusier's misogynistic anthropometric scale. However, looking at how domesticity has changed over the last two years, the question becomes more relevant than ever. At the start of the pandemic, another function was added to our homes: the office. The house became a machine for living and working in. Our homes became an all-in-one-space. Digitalisation plus a pandemic leads to a new peak of domesticity and a glimpse into our *MB-future*. On my Ikea bed is a decorative pillow. Somehow *lay-sitting*, I start working at my computer in my bed. <



Six yellow micro-architectures  
developed by Doppé Studio (Paris)  
in Corbusier's notion of functionalité  
during his school at Strasbourg - Site Le  
Corbusier, 2022. © Alamy/Getty Images

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