Modernism, Architecture and LeCorbusier

At the beginning of the twenty-first century our relationship to Modernism is complex. Although we live in an era that still identifies itself in terms of Modernism, as post-Modernist (or even post-post-Modernist!) Modernism was not conceived as a style but rather was a loose collection of ideas.

Modernism was a term which covered a range of movements and styles that:

- largely rejected history,
- rejected applied ornament,
- embraced abstraction,

The built environment that we live in today was largely shaped by Modernism. The buildings we inhabit, the chairs we sit on, the graphic design that surrounds us have all been influenced by the aesthetics and the ideology of Modernist design.

Born of great cosmopolitan centers, it flourished in Germany and Holland, as well as in Moscow, Paris, Prague and New York. They believed in technology as the key means to achieve social improvement and in the machine as a symbol of that aspiration and fostered a somewhat utopian desire to create a better world. All of these principles were frequently combined with social and political beliefs (largely left-leaning) which held that design and art could, and should, transform society.

For LeCorbusier it was particularly the technological innovations of the early 20th Century which offered the most promising way forward for modern architecture. While working for a structural engineer in Paris LeCorbusier was introduced to the concept of frame-structures which lead him to develop his ‘domino-house’ (figure 1).

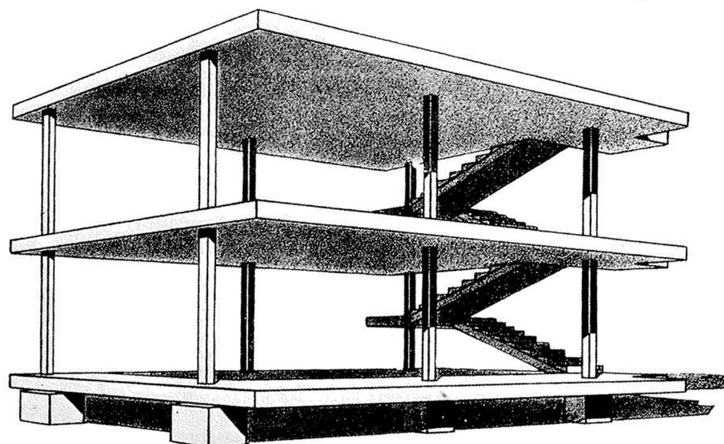

Fig 1. L’ossature standard « Dom-ino », pour exécution en grande série

LeCorbusier's framed architecture was the 'concept that liberated his forms'. During his life he further developed this approach, embracing all areas of design from furniture to city planning.

In the 1910s and '20s European culture was ready for modern designs and LeCorbusier, ever an enthusiastic salesman of his own brand, was not alone in seeing the possibilities offered by new building techniques. Along with those members of the Bauhaus that survived German National Socialism and others LeCorbusier had a profound impact on the modern 'International Style'.

The ideas that informed LeCorbusier and his fellow modernists also stretched far wider than individual concerns reaching into social and political beliefs (largely left-leaning) which held that design and art could, and should, transform society.

One of the key themes incorporated into Modernist ideas was the search for 'Utopia'. At the core of Modernism lay the idea that the world had to be fundamentally rethought. The carnage of the First World War led to widespread utopian fervour, a belief that the human condition could be healed by new approaches to art and design – *more* spiritual, *more* sensual, or *more* rational. At the same time, the Russian Revolution offered a model for an entirely new society.

Communist utopia

The Russian Revolution of 1917 set out to build utopia. Art was to become part of everyday life, and technology was to be extended to its limits and beyond. Avant-garde architects and artists threw themselves into the collective effort. They evolved new theories and institutions, developed new types of buildings and produced all kinds of innovative propaganda. Many worked under the banner of Constructivism, proclaiming that the task of art was 'not to adorn life but to organise it'.

Social utopia

Designers and artists working from a socialist perspective believed that utopia could be achieved within existing social and economic structures. They saw the machine and industrial production as ways of creating greater equality. Different visions of utopia were not exclusive of one another. The Dutch group De Stijl believed in the spiritual as well as social dimensions of their work. The Bauhaus school in Germany abandoned its initial spiritual emphasis for the 'New Unity' of art and technology.

Spiritual utopia

In the years before and after the First World War there was a wave of spirituality. Artists and designers rejected the sterile materialism of the modern world and instead sought a form of expression that would reflect the human intellect and soul.

German Expressionist design, with its organic forms and crystalline structures, conveyed its spirituality very directly. But the geometry and abstraction of Dutch De Stijl or Russian Suprematism also embodied spiritual and metaphysical truths.

Dionysian utopia

Many artists were intoxicated by the endless possibilities offered by science and technology. The Italian Futurists based their vision of utopia on the potential power of technology. They envisaged a world entirely recreated in terms of the machine: everything from clothing to architecture, from music to theatre. The Futurists celebrated the energy, violence and dynamism of contemporary urban life. This wild Dionysian response was essentially emotional and sensual rather than practical.

Rational utopia

Rational utopia rested on the idea that mechanisation could improve daily life and transform the products of the designed world. Like much of Modernism, it was formulated in opposition to the perceived evils of the present – above all, the repressive political structures and glaring social inequalities. Its solutions were highly rational and practical. A new environment – clean, healthy, light and full of fresh air – would transform daily life. There was no need for revolution, only for social change.