

An Interpretation of the Classical Spirit of Le Corbusier

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Abstract: The architectural thought of the modern architectural master, Le Corbusier, has an extensive and profound influence. His modern thought is a modern development based on traditional western architectural theories. This article tries to summarize his architectural thought and illustrate his development of western classical architectural spirit by three aspects.

Key words: Modernism, Le Corbusier, Classical Spirit

Le Corbusier, as one of the four modernist architectural masters, has a wide influence throughout the world and is admired by teachers and students of architecture as well as many architects. His book *Vers Une Architecture* thoroughly subverts the hypocritical theory of classical architecture and has opened up a new era of modern architecture. However, in the meantime this great master of modern architecture has a deep classical complex.

About a year ago, Mr. Jin Qiuye gave a lecture in our college---“A Glorious City and The Ideal Society”, which showed us comprehensively and deeply the exploitation and practice of Le Corbusier’s architectural spirit on urbanization model and residential system. My son, who just finished his graduation exams of primary school, listened to the whole lecture. Afterwards, his comments on Le Corbusier impressed me very much. He said that the architect must have suffered from typical *obsessive-compulsive disorder*. That is reasonable. Facing with frustrations in reality, he could’ve drifted with the current. However, what he chose was to keep on going even though he knew it was no use. Here what the audience have got is the classical qualities contained in his thought: architecture provides service to individuals, to communities, then to the whole society; architecture is a cell in the social organization, therefore, it has a responsibility to undertake its social work and to fulfill its social obligations. But in fact, this thought has been already expressed in *Architecture Theory*, written by L.B. Leon Battista Alberti, a humanistic scholar in 15th century, who clearly defined the role of an architect as a responsible builder of human’s living environment.

It is a fact that there is a simple expression of city planning thought in the first book of *The Ten Books on Architecture*.

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site selection, and for the first time, city planning is described as the central task of architecture. However, Le Corbusier advocated that architects should use modern technologies to transform a city, reduce the land usage of city constructions, increase the population density, and therefore improve city living environment. He made his voices in the planning schemes of “A Tomorrow City” in 1922 and “A Brilliant City” in 1931. The ideas of high-rise buildings and slab-type apartment buildings in a row in order to solve high residential density turned into the precursor to the Marseilles Apartment Building he designed which is a practice of a super intensive apartment building. Thus, to comprehend the aims and meanings of architectural design from the angle of city planning while upholding the classical spirit and to regard city planning thought as a starter of architectural plan are what Le Corbusier pursued in his whole life.

The Ten Books on Architecture, written by Marcus Vitruvius Pollio, talks about the equilibrium problem of temples. He gave a detailed account of the proportion concept of Greek, who obtained the quantitative relations among different body parts by measuring them, and then naturally created human body in accordance with the proportion. Therefore, when designing a building, the classical architectural aesthetics argued that every detail and the whole outlook of architecture should keep accurate quantitative relations. The module theory of Francesco di Giorgio, the humanistic architect in Italy in the 15th century, is especially the forerunner of Le Corbusier’s “Modular Person” theory. In *Vers Une Architecture*, Le Corbusier said that a module endows us with the capability of measuring and unification, and a reference line could help us with architectural composition. Afterwards, starting from dimensions of human body, Le Corbusier chose four parts, namely hanging arms, naval, overhead and rising arms as control points to build a red & blue vertical and horizontal coordinate system using Fibonacci Number Series and Golden Section Ratio. And then subsequently formed squares and rectangles of different sizes are called Modular. Since the birth of Modular System, Le Corbusier considered it an important designing tool. To various degrees, the tool played a proportion-controlling role in the graphic designs of Marseilles Apartment building, the city of Chandigarh and even Notre Dame du Haut. His treatise *Module— Harmonious scale in proportion of human body is applicative in Architecture and Mechanics* is an obvious modern development of classical architectural theories.

As a pioneer of modern architecture, Le Corbusier firmly argued against the ideas of traditional architectural schools, and strongly criticized the main-stream classical architectural styles. He insisted that only the exposure of the simplicity, refinement and outstanding structure of classical architectures in the sun in ancient Egypt, Greece and Rome, could truly reflect the nature of Arts. With the purity spirit of classical architecture, he returned to the origin of architecture and came to a striking conclusion that architecture is nothing to do with styles while art is nothing to do with decorations. He upheld the rational spirit of classical architecture and interpreted modern architecture with the usage of materials, techniques and structure in a new way. Therefore, he is not only a leader of modern architecture, but a role model of spreading the classical architectural spirit.

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