

Icy Genius With a Taste For Order

By ROBERTA SMITH

Near the close of "Le Corbusier Before Le Corbusier" at the Bard Graduate Center, there is a scary display of irreconcilable differences: a suavely domestic mahogany commode and, hanging above it, an architectural rendering of an immense city suffused with a futuristic, totalitarian chill. The combination suggests a posh dining room, but the clash of world views — *gemütlichkeit* versus the Soviet *Poltbüro* — is enough to ruin one's appetite.

The commode was designed by Charles-Édouard Jeanneret in 1915, when he was 28, for the smoking room of Hermann Ditisheim's apartment in La Chaux-de-Fonds, Switzerland (Jeanneret's birthplace and, until 1919, his home). A reduction of Biedermeier and neo-Classicism streamlining toward Art Deco, it is sophisticated in its proportion and plainness and would be at home in just about any well-considered interior.

The architectural rendering is "Plan for a City of Three Million Inhabitants," an enormous aerial view drawn up by Jeanneret in 1922. By then he was living in Paris and had modified his maternal grandfather's name, *Lecorbézier*, into a noun. The Corbusier. One part aristocrat (Le Grand Duc), two parts force of nature (Le Mistral), Le Corbusier, sometimes shortened to Corbu or LC, was the banner with which he rode into history.

The city plan is dominated by 24 identical skyscrapers, each with a footprint suggesting an iron cross or, more benignly, a plus sign. Surrounding them, like the framing hedges of a formal garden clipped wafer thin, are lower but still monolithic apartment buildings and a vast square buttressed by four monumental arches. All is orderly, evenly spaced and symmetrical, and there's not a sign of life anywhere.

This plan is, of course, the fountainhead of the low-income housing projects, apartment blocks and industrial parks that have figured so deleteriously in postwar urban planning, as well as of the separation of residential and commercial districts that blights suburbia. The tragic effect of both was chronicled in "The Death and Life of Great American Cities," Jane Jacobs's masterpiece of empirical criticism, which helped ignite the preservation movement. In Ms. Jacobs's furious book, Corbu is something like the devil incarnate.

"Le Corbusier Before Le Corbusier: Applied Arts, Architecture, Painting and Photography, 1907-1922" is a dense, informative show about the early years of the precocious polymath who became, as the introductory text panel states, "arguably the most influential, admired, and maligned architect of the 20th century."

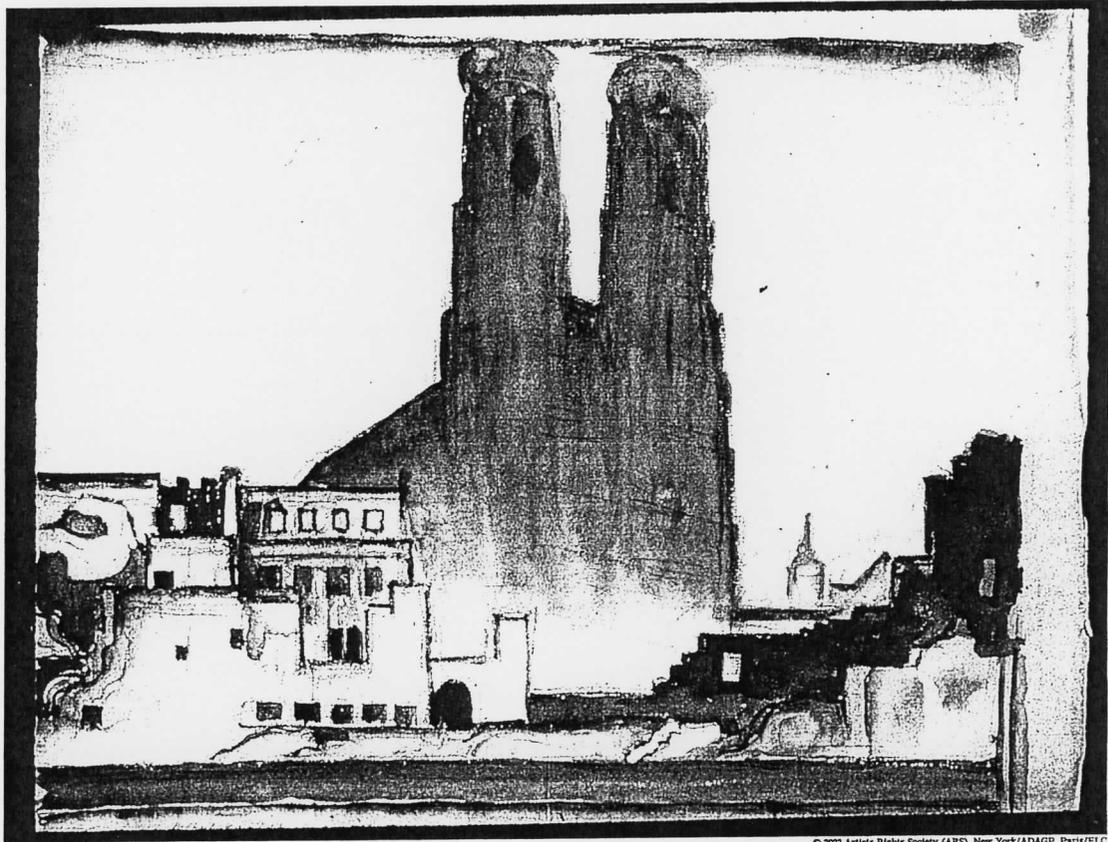
Today the polymath presents an intimidating blend of modern master characteristics. Like Mondrian, whom he resembled in both his physical features and his preference for quiet Quakerly suits, he was a visionary with monastic leanings who loved the grid and wrote prolifically, producing 57 books and pamphlets. His 1911 watercolor of Munich's Frauenkirche as a nearly featureless lavender monolith could be a Mondrian if not for the boxy white villa detailed in the lower left corner.

Like Malevich, he helped make white the signature color of modernism and was drawn to the plain and the geometric. The glacial white cube that appears in "The Mantelpiece," a stripped-down still life from 1918 that evokes levitating architecture, is the orthogonal equivalent of Malevich's flat, floating "White Square."

But Le Corbusier is most frequently compared to Picasso, with whom he shared a brilliant imagination, an omnivorous curiosity, dotting parents, gifted mentors, supreme self-confidence, a tendency toward gulf-free meanness and manipulation, and repeated appearances in Museum of Modern Art exhibitions.

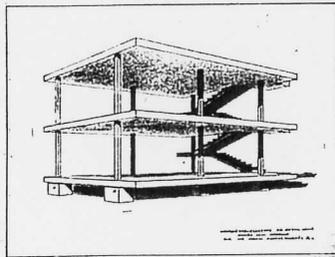
With a little help from friends and patrons, Le Corbusier designed and built his first house when he was only 17. He often predicted great things and then achieved them, opening huge swaths of unexplored territory for successive generations of architects, yet he

"Le Corbusier Before Le Corbusier: Applied Arts, Architecture, Painting and Photography, 1907-1922" is at the Bard Graduate Center for Studies in the Decorative Arts, Design and Culture, 18 West 86th Street, Manhattan, (212) 501-3000, through Feb. 23.



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A 1911 watercolor of Munich's Frauenkirche by Charles-Édouard Jeanneret before he took the name Le Corbusier, at the Bard Graduate Center through Feb. 23.



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A model of Le Corbusier's 1915 Dom-ino Module.

also reinvented himself regularly before he died in 1965. Nothing evokes Picasso in this exhibition so much as its prevailing sense of appetite and forward momentum.

Organized by Stanislaus von Moos, a Swiss art and architectural historian, and Arthur Rüegg, a Swiss architect and design historian, this exhibition has been jointly sponsored by the Bard Center and the Stiftung Langmatt in Baden, Switzerland, where it was seen last summer. Its goal is to sharpen the image of Jeanneret, the precursor, and demonstrate how his contradictions and multiple ambitions persisted in the mature Corbu. Le Corbusier, of course, preferred to obscure the activities of the privileged youth who loved Ruskin, first opened shop in the watchmaking capital of the world, and selected wallpaper and ordered or designed chairs for wealthy bourgeois clients. Perhaps he was disinclined to be seen as a prophet who began as an interior decorator.

But that does seem to be how he started — the clean lines and simple Classical oppositions of his buildings seeded by designs for commodes and built-in library walls, like the one for Villa Schwob included here. He

also made gouaches that pushed Swiss pine trees into abstract patterns and copied Egyptian motifs from Owen Jones's "Grammar of Ornament." Taking a Grand Tour that started in the East instead of the West, he took photographs of the Hagia Sofia, the Parthenon, St. Peter's Basilica and Pompeii that indicate a penchant for monumental simplicity.

With extensive loans from the Corbusier foundations in Paris and Switzerland, the exhibition includes a lot of rarely seen material and also takes every design opportunity. The walls are painted the quiet but substantial colors that Le Corbusier developed for Salubra, the Swiss wallpaper company, in 1921 and topped by a prominent text frieze devised by Venturi Scott Brown that quotes from Corbu's writings in foot-high letters. It sometimes feels as if the whole show is shouting at the rafters of Bard's 1906 Buchman & Fox town house.

The show's excellent 57-page guide mitigates against its density, as does the curators' healthy respect for the impact of real things. They have included four of the rustic peasant vases that Le Corbusier accumulated on his many travels, and even an 1841 portrait of Grand Père Lecorbézier. They have also gathered examples of the common French glassware that Le Corbusier depicted in his Purist still-life paintings, which rendered Cubist space whole again and experimented with geometric forms in an airless borrowed style. Also here is the British club chair that inspired the 1928 Grand Confort, the cube of caged leather he designed with Charlotte Perriand and his cousin Pierre Jeanneret that may be the emblematic chair of the 20th century, and a wardrobe trunk like the one that helped him formulate his notion of rational organization and efficient use of space.

His evolving understanding of form and structure is symbolized in three beautiful, progressively austere cane-seated chairs, antique farm furniture that he purchased for the Villa Jeanneret-Perret, designed for his parents in 1912. Further along, the growing simplification of form is played out in earnest in the model for the villa itself and two others, Fallet and Schwob in La Chaux-de-Fonds. By 1915, Le Corbusier had connected the dots between industrial and residential with the

Dom-ino Module, seen here in a stark white model. Its floors of reinforced concrete slabs and its pared-down load-bearing posts eliminated the need for a frame and accommodated various interior walls (or none) and any number of windows. This revolutionary skeleton found full expression in Le Corbusier's first mature work, the Villa La Roche-Jeanneret in Paris, and would be basic to the International Style, whose descendants line Park Avenue.

Past and future mingle repeatedly, as befits an alert, influential artist: a strong hint of Charles Rennie Mackintosh's earlier designs is present in the slatted wood divan he designed for Marcel Levaillant's apartment in La Chaux-de-Fonds in 1917; the arched roof of Louis Kahn's Kimbell Art Museum can be found in a preliminary drawing for workers housing in Molon. Debts are acknowledged with the inclusion of paintings by his most important teacher, Charles L'Éplattenier; his friend Fernand Léger; and of course Amédée Ozenfant, who was something like his Braque. From 1920 to 1925, the two laid out the argument for modernist architecture in their seminal magazine, *L'Esprit Nouveau*, several elegant issues of which can be seen in a large vitrine.

As it goes, the show provides another close-up look at the caldron of traditional, folk and revolutionary influences in which the 19th century gave way to the 20th. It reflects some of the ways industrial design and the ideal of machine-like efficiency influenced both the practice and the theory of domestic architecture. It may make you further consider Jane Jacobs's wrath at the large-scale redesign of cities imposed from above, especially by people who neither liked nor understood them.

Writers who like Le Corbusier a lot more than Ms. Jacobs — Charles Jencks, for example — have reflected that he may have been one of these people. In the frieze text of the show's final gallery, the master builder complains about the ugliness of New York City, which he had not yet visited. Beneath his words, a huge enlargement of a page from *L'Esprit Nouveau* juxtaposes images of the dense tip of Manhattan with one of his own city plans. It looks like the difference between life and death.