

## Summary

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### **Living in Le Corbusier's *Unités d'habitation* (housing units)**

Architectural Theory, social practices and the place of women

Le Corbusier's architectural and town-planning ideas, expressed in numerous buildings, opened the way to a significant revival in housing and town management. These works were test laboratories for theories about housing, varying in size from the private house to urban complexes, and became the emblems of modernity. From the designer's perspective, the five "unités d'habitation", known as "cités radieuses", constituted a starting point for what 20<sup>th</sup> century town-planning could and should be, while from the social perspective, they were a form of revolution in collective housing. These units, which Le Corbusier hoped would be widely reproduced, emerged from a humanist and centralizing approach to the need for social housing. They were designed to resolve the problems of the housing crisis and also to provide a new way of living for the residents. One of the major features of these changes concerned the lay-out of the accommodation and the modernisation of housework. Another is the organisation of areas for leisure activities etc. All these new features had a crucial impact on the lives of women in their role of housewife, worker, mother, neighbour etc. While recognizing that Le Corbusier was not specifically concerned with the place of women in society as a whole, any assessment of his architectural revolution must take into account changes which from his point of view were aimed at modernising society and which perhaps for that very reason became factors in changing women's lives.

While Le Corbusier's ideas have been discussed frequently in the half-century following the creation of these works, there has been very little sociological appraisal of the results. In our research, we have undertaken an analysis of social practices and social relationships in the *Unités d'habitation* of Firminy and Rezé-les-Nantes with a view to evaluating diachronically the consequences of Le Corbusier's theory on the way people live. I will discuss more specifically the connection between modernist architecture, particularly its technical aspects, and the social practices of women.

There is a very large body of written and documentary work on the architectural and town-planning theories which governed the design of these buildings, and as they have now been in use for half a century, it is possible to meet several "generations" of residents, from people who were involved in carrying out the project and the first residents, to people who have recently moved into the units, with all the historical stages of occupation between.

The very circumscribed nature of these buildings and their social visibility makes it possible to form hypotheses about the connections between their architecture and the life style of their occupants. It is very rare to be able to look directly at the impact of architecture on the life of inhabitants, and specifically on the life of women, which is our particular concern. The research which we have just started involves different disciplines of social sciences, including anthropology, sociology, history of architecture and architectural analysis, and I see it as forming an important part of the discussion about the relationship of women to the town, with regard to both housing and town-planning.

## Living in Le Corbusier's *Unités d'habitation* (housing units)

### Architectural theory, social practices and the place of women

Charles-Edouard Jeanneret, known as Le Corbusier, spent many years developing his town-planning and architectural theories, but although widely recognized by the intellectual and artistic world, he experienced great difficulty obtaining public commissions. It was not until after World War II that he was able to design large-scale works which allowed him to put his theories into practice. In 1946 he received a commission from Raoul Dautry, Minister for Reconstruction and Urban Planning, for "an apartment block of standard design" in Marseilles. It was here that Le Corbusier experimented with different aspects of modernist concepts (living space, building techniques, social policy, town planning). The "*cit  radieuse*" in Marseilles was completed after many difficulties in 1952. Between 1953 and 1955, Le Corbusier designed and built the *Unit  d'habitation* in Rez  near Nantes for a private cooperative. It was designed for social housing and was funded by a system of cooperative renting which ultimately allowed tenants to become not only owners of their apartments but also co-owners of the public areas. The Briey-la-For t complex was built between 1955 and 1958. By then, Le Corbusier had become recognized as a master, particularly following his religious buildings at Ronchamp and La Tourette. Public commissions became easier, and with the constant support of the Minister Claudius Petit, the elected representative of Firminy, he undertook a large urban-planning project in that town, including a stadium, a youth club, a church and the fourth *Unit  d'habitation* in France, completed by Wogenscky after his death. All these buildings, to which must be added work in Berlin, expressed the avant-garde ideas developed by the architect since the beginning of the century, laid down in The Athens Charter.

Le Corbusier's vision was of a radiant, light, organised and functional town in which modern man could find fulfilment. A technologically new world required a radically different style of architecture – open, vertical, geometrical, industrialized and totally rethought. In the town, the functions of work, business, transport, network systems, housing and leisure must be separated. For this reason, complexes of "*unit s d'habitation*" would be created away from the industrial world and traffic pollution, in green spaces which would be areas for leisure and relaxation.

In contrast to the traditional horizontal garden-towns which occupied large areas of land, the architect developed a vertical townscape. Le Corbusier designed a radically different living space for working class populations, both from an architectural point of view and with regard to its social principle, as the buildings included not only one- to seven-roomed flats but also the provision of services such as shops, schools, laundries, sports fields, post offices, etc. The buildings were organized around passage-ways which Le Corbusier called "streets" and which gave access to the three-storey flats, and had a radically new approach to services and lay-out. A street bordering the roof-top plaza led to a nursery school, as well as to a complex of cultural and physical structures ranging from a pathway to a theatre. In short, the complex was designed for living in and for developing social relationships and self-fulfilment. In the words of the architect, it was a matter of developing a real "machine for living". In this way, Le Corbusier sought "to use the living space to even out social inequalities" (Bory, 1990). Everything in his plan reflected this important principle. "It suggests a community life within the complex based on social clubs, opportunities for tenants to meet, games for children" (id.)

The social reorganisation plan underlying Le Corbusier's designs is of particular interest to us because of its implications for domestic and family life, as well as for work and leisure. What is at issue is in fact the western way of life in the mid-20<sup>th</sup> century: family structure, the relationship with work, leisure and travel. Jeanneret's idea was relatively simple but admirably utopian: to bring modernity, particularly its technical aspects, into the social order. However, what makes this idea particularly interesting is both the consistency with which the architect pursued it throughout his life and the way that it followed trends in society, although perhaps only after his death. It is also interesting in that he managed to convince decision-makers to go along with his largely forward-looking ideas.

For the sociologist, the "*unités d'habitation*" are an experimental realization of future social change. It is therefore particularly interesting to examine what was actually planned and achieved, and what did not match social developments. By rethinking the way people live, Le Corbusier was taking issue with the private world of family life, but in rethinking the town he was also looking afresh at the relationship between private and public life. These two aspects (family life and relationship between private and public life) are of immediate concern to the place of women in society. It does not appear that Le Corbusier had this specifically in mind, but the consequences of his theoretical views had a direct bearing on the development of the social roles of women. Analysing the utopian vision, it can be said that society has changed in ways unknown to the designer but that his modernist ideas crossed with ideological developments (those of the social roles of the sexes), which, and this is the line I take, are closely linked to modernity at its height<sup>1</sup>. It could be said that what distinguishes the visionary is that certain aspects of his model which become apparent after they are implemented were not explicitly part of his original plan..

If we look in more detail at features which specifically concern the social relationship of men and women in the architectural and town planning designs of the "ville radieuse" or the "maison radieuse"<sup>2</sup>, three important points can be identified: the organisation of housework, the management of services, the approach to organising social time and mobility. Evidence suggests that these issues are closely linked, and they all remain at the heart of current concerns in urban management, precisely because social practices in these respects have developed significantly, raising highly sensitive questions for contemporary designers. It is this that leads me to see Le Corbusier's theory as a Utopian vision whose realization can largely be measured distinct from its designer's original intention.

Le Corbusier's plan concerns humanity as a whole, changing the way people live so that they can lead more fulfilled lives in a happier society. There is almost nothing in his writings about the profound changes taking place in the relationships between men and women. His attention was entirely focused on healthy life-style, the improvement of living conditions for everyone in society, the organisation of space for social relationships. For Le Corbusier, family and social organisation was based on the couple and their children, the man working to finance household needs, the wife staying at home. In this respect, Le Corbusier was perfectly in line with the social models of his time. And yet, his architecture was to encounter changes in society which have profoundly transformed family structure.

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<sup>1</sup> See S.Denèfle Social norms and modernity HDR Lyon 2 1996.

<sup>2</sup> Name given by the inhabitants of the Rezé complex to the building.

## **1- UThe organisation of housework**

The first feature that can be observed in the interior design and lay-out of the living space in the “*unités d’habitation*”, is that in spite of seeking to standardize construction units and industrial methods, there was a wide variety in the plans aimed at meeting the needs of different-sized families. However, the most remarkable feature was the design for the space for “social life” in the apartments: a two-level arrangement with a living area comprising entrance hall, kitchen and sitting room, and a separate area for bedrooms, study, bathroom and toilet. Furthermore, it was probably the interior lay-out, especially that of the kitchen, which revolutionized the designs of the 1950s. The kitchen opened into the sitting room to allow full participation in activities there. It had functional fitted units to facilitate the work of the housewife, with modern equipment such as a rubbish chute, fridge, etc. Other appliances, less common in those days, such as washing machines, were provided collectively.

The idea was to open up household tasks and to make them simpler, more hygienic, more comfortable. For Le Corbusier, it was not explicitly a matter of making work easier for women who worked outside the home, but his ideas would be picked up and used by later generations of working women. It is moreover interesting to note that Le Corbusier gave the task of planning all the interior lay-out of the “*Unité d’habitation*” of Marseilles to a woman, Charlotte Perriand. It was this housing complex which served as a pilot site for all the later “units”. All the furniture used in the new flats was also the result of collaboration between Le Corbusier and Charlotte Perriand.

Modern housing as conceived by the architect corresponded to the use required by future generations, and particularly to trends in the lives of women.

## **2 – Management of community services**

As we know, the great novelty of the “*unités d’habitation*” was above all the communal areas and the way these affected the provision of services. The “streets” which were reached by lift led to the flats and community services of the building. These included shops for essential goods and services: bakery, grocery, hairdresser, hotel, post office etc. which were to enable the inhabitants to obtain all their daily requirements. Moreover, the architectural plan included provisions for household delivery services, each flat having access through a side-entrance on the internal streets. Schools built on the plazas of the buildings enabled the parents (mothers) to take their children to school quickly and easily, and even for children to go to school on their own without danger. Leisure activities were also provided on the plazas, for example sports’ grounds, a pool or areas for putting on plays or shows. Other forms of socializing were also involved, with the introduction of residents’ associations to manage libraries, fêtes etc. The *Unité d’habitation* was designed to bring together all the services needed for private life so that residents could manage their time in the best possible way, avoiding unnecessary journeys to services and offering leisure and relaxation activities away from their place of work.

It is important to note that the town-planning design, which was intimately interlinked with the whole architectural project, set the residential buildings apart from the main thoroughfares and areas of economic production. They were built on pilotis to free the ground below for green areas which would provide the “ville radieuse” of the future with places for social contact and leisure activities, sports, walking, children’s playgrounds etc., as well as traffic-free roads.

Clearly, these architectural and town-planning arrangements were not planned specifically for women. However, it was essentially women who made use of them. Moreover, they constituted neighbourhood areas, places to meet and establish local social contacts, which affected women in particular.

Looking at these projects now, we can see in what ways the Utopian vision has been positively and adversely affected by trends in social practices. Present-day residents say that the community services and special social relationships in the “unités d’habitation” make life easier, although developments in the economic sector have made it difficult for small shops to survive. However, it is interesting to note that in the Rezé and Firminy estates, the people in charge during the construction period were reluctant to allow these services to be set up, while in Marseilles a wide range of small businesses emerged after a period of general economic crisis, not only food stores but also in the service sector, providing employment opportunities in the building. This is again a development which was not planned by Le Corbusier but which affects a significant proportion of women and their entry into the world of work.

We can observe that these ideas are still relevant today in the search for solutions to the ever-present issues of sustainable development in urban management.

### **3 – Management of social time and mobility**

This is another recurring issue for both sustainable development and the place of women in the urban environment.

Our Italian colleagues have been highly active in recent years in striving to create towns which answer the needs of their inhabitants, and particularly those of women, with regard to the organisation of daily life. This work has inspired many experiments throughout Europe. In France, where there has as yet been relatively little effective work on the subject, the creation of “time offices” (“bureaux du temps”) has become a leading issue for local elected representatives; by managing the time organisation of the residents as a whole, women’s issues are given particular importance. The direction these actions take is almost always dictated by women and centres round the dual day of women (household duties and professional work), safety (particularly night-time), transport etc. Here again, community services in the “Unités d’habitation” provide an answer to questions which only became relevant well after Jeanneret’s death.

As far as the question of transport is concerned, we have already reached the point of suffocation by road traffic that Le Corbusier warned of as early as the 1930s. While his diagnosis was correct, it is more difficult to see what solutions his urban plans might have brought, the experience of Chandigar for example suggesting that his univocal town-planning solutions left many questions unanswered, if only with regard to the consideration of cultural diversity.

Nevertheless, and without trying to vindicate Le Corbusier’s work, it is interesting to observe to what extent his perception of modernity led him to ask questions which we are still asking 40 years after his death, and to see that it is still relevant to consider in what ways those views are in line with current social practices. Because his ideas centred round the home and the



town, it seems to me that they are closely linked to the way the social roles of women have evolved.

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The research outlined here started this year with a series of sociological and ethnological surveys in the “Unités d’habitation” of Firminy and Rezé. Our aim is to make a sociological assessment of the experiences of these estates. Through observation of daily life in the housing units, we have been studying the communal areas and social relationships, particularly of women, which develop in them, while also looking at ways of living in them. We are looking particularly at how developments in the work of women could have modified these social relationships, and examine how informal links have led to the very active social club life in these blocks. We have met residents who have been living in the blocks since they were constructed, tenants who have become owners, new tenants, people who have chosen these flats, and others for whom the choice was imposed, people who are conscious of the patrimonial character of the buildings and others who wish to leave them, etc.

These ideas of social relationships range from the quasi-village of the fifties to the recent revival of actions to reconstitute the social links destroyed by individualism, and all the changes in family models and gender-specific social roles which have developed over the fifty years of collective history of these buildings. This is what we have been examining both through our investigations and by looking at studies carried out at different times over the last 50 years (P.H. Chombart de Lauwe in the sixties, P.Boudon in the seventies, P.Bataille in the eighties, etc.). For these reasons, we feel it is relevant to complete this series of appraisals of how Charles-Edouard Jeanneret’s modernist ideas of housing have developed. Moreover, by comparing the views of the designer with those of several generations of users over a time-span in which major social changes have occurred, it should ultimately be possible to modify town-planning uses.

We think that the specific history of how the “cités radieuses” have been lived in, and particularly the social nature of the Rezé and Firminy sites, need to be examined in relation to liminal spaces. But over and above the communal uses provided by this type of housing, we believe that the social relationships which develop there must be intimately linked to the type of housing itself. Sharing such a particular relationship with the sunshine, the dimensions of space and the design of the housing programme cannot leave one indifferent. The choice made by the first residents for modernism and the gradual waning of that choice is undoubtedly part of the history of the “*unités d’habitation*”. The Rezé and Firminy sites, with their working class residents, have harboured a militant spirit; today they are home to a heterogeneous community associated with the different social motives for living there: the expression of architectural excellence for some, a place on the fringe of society for others, a search for cultural fulfilment or the restrictions of poverty.

It is important for us to examine how people live here and their relationship with these concrete vessels, and in particular the place of women. It is they who carry the collective social relationships, who organize domestic life, who manage questions of how to use the services provided, and it seems to us that the female residents of the “cités radieuses” can teach us much about the effects of urban and architectural designs aimed at resolving current problems, because they are the main users of one of the Utopias based on theories on the

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subject. This example can give sociologists a rare opportunity to apply their skill in measuring the practical effects of the theoretical designs of architecture and town-planning.