Le Corbusier

History and Tradition

Edited by Armando Rabaça
1. Window wall with paintings from Le Corbusier’s collection in the apartment at 20 rue Jacob, ca. 1931.

Above: Georges Braque, *Clarinet and Bottle of Rum on a Mantlepiece*, 1911 (Tate Modern, London).


Photo: Brassaï
From the 1920s to the 1930s, Le Corbusier’s visionary reform of the polluted traditional city underwent a number of changes. In the final version of his studies, he proposed meandering high-rise ribbons where workers might live high up in the fresh air, surrounded by sunlit green spaces, and far away from their workplace. Their transformable living units of only 14 square meters per occupant were to be artificially ventilated, according to the most recent knowledge of the respiration exacte. The conception of these spartan minimalistic apartments was not primarily determined by the pressures of the global economic crisis as one might assume, but—as Le Corbusier firmly stressed—“by the fundamental notion of human happiness, which is: a man in the city, a man at home, comfortable at home, happy in that home.” In fact, he could not think of a more convincing justification for the unrelenting logic of his urban studies “than their own origin, the cell,” and he himself would have lived in one of those cells “destined for the proletarians if you like, with the greatest of pleasure.” Le Corbusier’s rigor was frightening, not only for the general public: “That his curiosity for cities and for city building
should have resulted in the bureaucratic abstraction of the Plan Voisin or the Ville Radieuse was the most irritating aspect of his entire work,” summarizes even Stanislaus von Moos. In spite of this, it is quite a surprise to catch, right at the beginning of the opulent album that documented the studies of the Ville Radieuse (The Radiant City) in 1935, the very first glimpse that Le Corbusier ever allowed of his own old-fashioned and sympathetically messy living quarters, which represent quite the opposite of the tiny “machines for living” he was proposing to the inhabitants of his new city (Fig. 6). The subtitle is “The Free Man,” and the unerring comment to the photograph: “When the door is shut, I can freely enter my own world . . . At certain times I need solitude.”

rue Jacob 20: A World of Objects

During the whole of the heroic phase of modern architecture and city planning, Le Corbusier was still living in an old, narrow, back-lot house at 20 rue Jacob, in the heart of the Latin Quarter, which had been the Parisian residence of the legendary tragic actress Adrienne Lecouvreur (1692-1730), as he liked to point out. He had settled there in early 1917 after his move from La Chaux-de-Fonds. From his three-room apartment under the steep mansard roof—probably the lodgings of Lecouvreur’s valet or chambermaid—he had an unexpected view of tree-filled gardens beyond the back façade of the courtyard, complete with a small temple built for the actress by Maurice de Saxe: an idyllic setting right in the midst of intellectual Paris that did not hide the reality of a mercilessly frugal lifestyle. It was in this austere historical building that the young Charles-Edouard Jeanneret (his legal name) lived, wrote, and painted until 1934, giving little heed to his own radical postulates for all of 17 years.

Jeanneret had spent most of the first thirty years of his life in Switzerland, where he had achieved some measure of success with the construction of six private homes (several quite luxurious), a movie theatre, and numerous