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Lynn E. Palermo
Susquehanna University

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The 1925 Paris Exposition des Arts Décoratifs et Industriels Modernes and Le Pavillon de *L'Esprit Nouveau*: Le Corbusier's Manifesto for Modern Man

Lynn E. Palermo

With the 1925 Exposition des Arts décoratifs et industriels modernes in Paris (Paris Decorative Arts Exposition), the French intended to reclaim commercial and aesthetic leadership in the decorative arts, an industry which France had traditionally dominated.¹ According to the exposition organizers, development of an original style to signal a clear break with the pastiches of the nineteenth century would be crucial to this enterprise. When the project was first proposed in 1909, French art critic Roger Marx predicted that “an exhibition of this kind would bring an end to the scorn to which the machine has been subjected, and end the longstanding antagonism between architects and engineers [in France].”² A new aesthetic for the machine age would demonstrate a French decorative arts industry evolving in tandem with the modern technology of mass production. Indeed, the French were being outpaced by competing nations. The 1902 Exposition of Decorative and Modern Arts in Turin had insisted that all submissions show a renewed aesthetic with a marked departure from styles of the past.³ In Germany, the Deutscher Werkbund,⁴ was developing comprehensive approaches to the decorative arts, bringing together designers and industrialists to produce aesthetically pleasing, high quality, mass-producible furniture and accessories adapted to urban lifestyles and moderate income households.

Despite calls for revolutionary thinking, the Paris Decorative Arts Exposition ended up still valuing artisan production over industrialism in pavilions brimming with furniture and accessories that featured exquisite craftsmanship and expensive materials, including exotic wood imported from the French colonies. This style, named “art deco” for its exposition debut, clearly targeted the haute bourgeoisie, more than broadening the market.

The modernist Pavillon de *L'Esprit Nouveau* (Fig. 1), designed and built by the architect Le Corbusier, stood in stark contrast to the other pavilions on the fairgrounds. Built entirely of industrial materials (concrete, steel, and glass), Le Corbusier's pavilion exposed the Exposition's vision as complacent, even timid. His own vision extended far beyond questions of style to encompass everything from the design of chairs to the design of houses to the design of cities. Le Corbusier claimed that his work reflected universal modern values, from

which emerged a new aesthetic. Spurning the exposition organizers' invitation to design "an architect's home" with the elitism it implied, he famously preferred to present a house for the new, modern "everyman" or "cultivated man" emerging in the age of machines.⁵ Le Corbusier also termed this modern man *l'homme tout nu*, or "naked man" in his book *L'Art Décoratif d'aujourd'hui (Decorative Art Today)*, published to coincide with the exposition.⁶

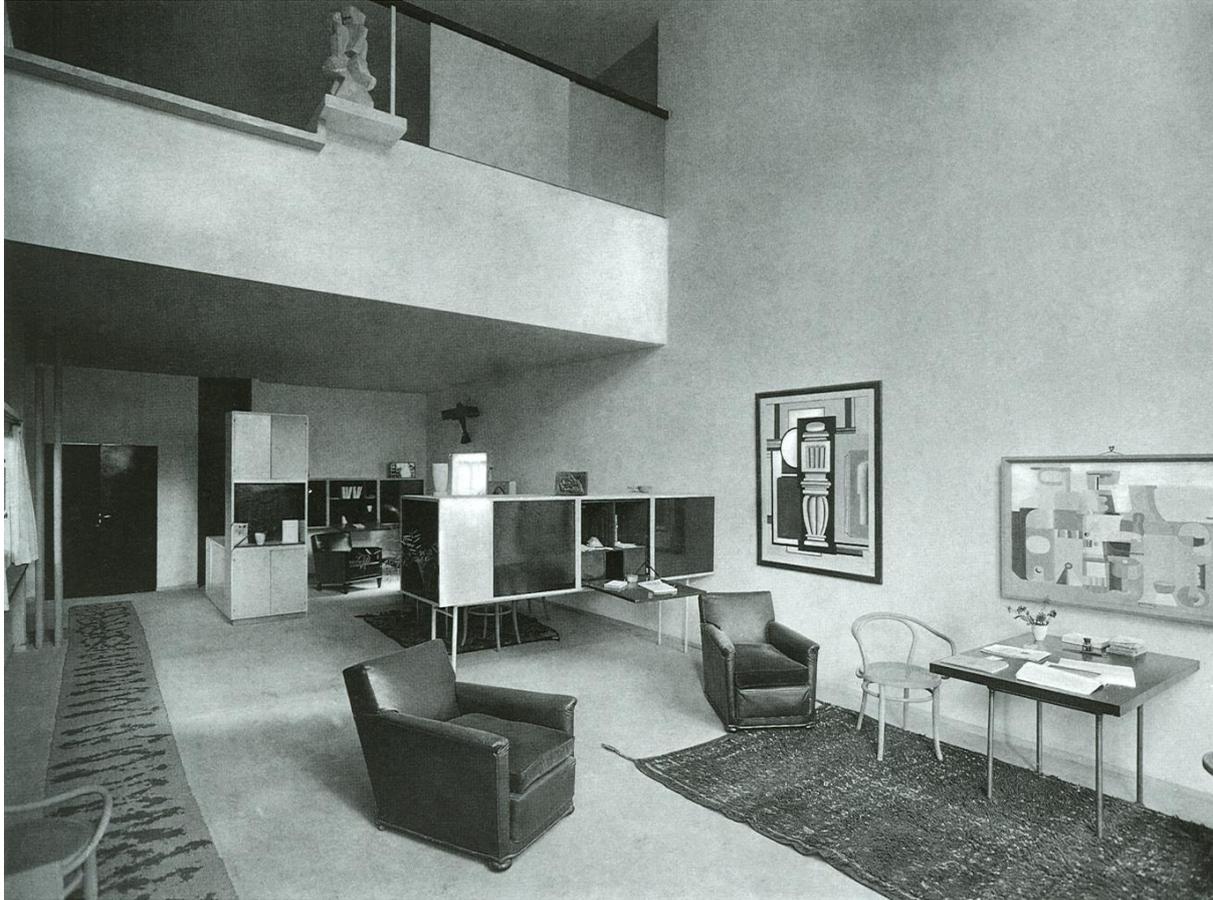


Figure 1. Le Corbusier Pavilion de *L'Esprit Nouveau*, a home for the modern *homme tout nu*.

Le Corbusier's withering criticism of the ostentatious Decorative Arts Exposition and the values it implied originated in part in the housing crisis facing France in the wake of World War I. Most of the combat had taken place on French soil with the result that 11,000 public buildings and 350,000 houses were damaged or destroyed. In the ravaged north, where some villages were completely obliterated, restoration and reconstruction would not be declared complete until 1931.⁷ In Paris, wartime conditions had exacerbated already poor housing conditions. Many of the densely populated working class tenements had never been modernized, leading to a high risk of fire and disease. Even so, Le Corbusier's call for architecture to address the needs of the people was seen as radical because the architects at the Académie des Beaux-Arts had always focused on the privileged classes.

Thus, the Pavilion de *l'Esprit Nouveau* stood as Le Corbusier's "protest against the crepuscular program of the Exposition."⁸ The 400 square meter pavilion was divided into two parts, with the right half representing "in real full-size a whole unit" of housing.⁹

This “cell,” to use the architect’s term,¹⁰ was a basic element in his plan for a Contemporary City of Three Million Inhabitants, which (as we shall see below) was displayed in diorama form in the left half of the pavilion. Theoretically, this cell could be inserted, along with hundreds of other identical units, into the frame of an *immeuble-villa* (townhouse-villa), which would constitute the highest grade of housing in his urban plan. The structure of the cell was based on the principles of Le Corbusier’s 1914 Dom-INO building method, which he had developed after touring a devastated Flanders earlier the same year.

Dom-INO proposed a solution to the problem of mass-produced housing. To create a two-story home, three superimposed concrete slabs (6x9 m.) were held apart by six concrete columns. This made possible the elimination of load-bearing walls, resulting in an “open plan” house with maximum flexibility, and filled with natural light streaming through the ribbon windows that stretched almost the length of the wall. The resident would then be left to finish out the house according to his preferences, selecting standardized built-in interior cupboards, wardrobes, windows, etc.¹¹

The Pavillon de *l’Esprit Nouveau* was much more spacious than the Dom-INO house, with 200 square meters in a two-level plan that became a hallmark of Le Corbusier’s design. Still, it was anchored in the same principle of mass-producible housing and constructed in the same manner as the modest and practical Dom-INO house. A façade of windows, two stories high, illuminated the “open plan” communal living quarters downstairs (living room, dining area, small kitchen) and the second-floor mezzanine that held the private living space (bedrooms and bathroom).

As Le Corbusier noted, his plan eliminated all “cabinetmakers’ furniture.”¹² Instead, it provided substantial built-in storage space in the form of shelving and *casiers* or pigeonholes that also served as room partitions. Although Le Corbusier exaggerated in claiming that every element of the apartment, including furnishings and accessories, had been fabricated through mass production techniques,¹³ the pavilion’s design and construction did underscore the value of standardization. The windows and doors were commercially available; laboratory glassware served as vases, and some of the chairs had been purchased from a hospital supplier.¹⁴ In his inauguration speech, Le Corbusier stated, “Our pavilion [...] will be architecture and not decorative art; it will even have, thanks to this strict intention, an anti-decorative art attitude.¹⁵ He referred to the sparse unadorned furnishings as “equipment” to emphasize their functional purpose. These objects receded before the eye, allowing the visitor to focus on the architectural forms of the house and the art (the only handcrafted items in the house): paintings and sculptures by Picasso, Lipchitz, Ozenfant and Le Corbusier, himself. In the age of machines, art was the highest form of human expression, according to Le Corbusier. A “disinterested object” that cannot be mass-produced, it serves no practical function but satisfies the spirit.”¹⁶

A chair, on the other hand, was in Le Corbusier's view, a "machine for sitting" and a cog in the house, which was "a machine for living." A house should provide physical and spiritual comfort through the most efficient possible use of space, material, and labor. Furthermore, the lodging unit must itself be considered in the context of hundreds of replications assembled in the *immeuble-villa*, which in turn should not be conceived in isolation from the urban environment in which it would be situated. To demonstrate this intimate relationship linking chair, lodging, and city, Le Corbusier used the terrace attached to the pavilion to display the Plan Voisin, a plan for the urban renewal of an ancient Paris choked by the modern automobile and its accompanying pollution. The plan essentially applied his earlier utopian plan, the "Contemporary City of Three Million Inhabitants" (dating from 1922 and also on display in the pavilion), to the center of the capital city. The Plan Voisin created a scandal because it proposed razing most of central Paris to clear the way for the construction of twenty-four identical futuristic apartment towers standing sixty stories high. In Le Corbusier's diorama, the skyscrapers were lined up on a great expanse of grass punctuated with occasional planted trees. Cars zoomed along straight roads that had no visible walkways (which were relegated to another level). Tiny, privately owned airplanes dotted the sky, in the implicit assumption that they would one day be as mundane a form of transportation as the automobile. On the outskirts of the city stretched more horizontal apartment buildings, only a few stories high. These were the blocks that would contain apartments like the one on display in the Pavillon de *L'Esprit Nouveau*, each with a "hanging garden" like the terrace of the pavilion.

Visitors and critics expressed outrage at Le Corbusier's brutal proposal for Paris, under which virtually everything between the Seine and Montmartre would be demolished. Only a few historical monuments such as the Louvre, the Palais Royal, the Place des Vosges, Place de la Concorde and the Arc de Triomphe would be preserved.¹⁷ But the architect was making a provocative argument, more than proposing a real plan for execution.¹⁸ The neighborhoods slated for demolition in the plan contained many of the cramped apartment buildings not meeting modern standards of living and hygiene. He maintained that decent housing with access to sunlight and fresh air was a basic human need, indeed a right, and one that must be respected to calm the social unrest of the age.

Le Corbusier's radical departure from the concepts of furnishings, housing, and cities equally implied a radically different image of the residents targeted by his plans. In *L'Art décorative d'aujourd'hui*, he lashed out at prevailing assumptions linking social class to the accumulation of expensive possessions. In his opinion, this erroneous logic had led national values astray and corrupted the "proper" relationship between people and objects. He pointed to Louis XIV as the nadir in this trend. His era, still regarded in the twentieth century as the glory days of France, had invested objects with more power to make social distinctions than ever before. As such, they defined the elite of society. The ultimate confusion between iconic objects and human accomplishment could be summed up in Louis's devise, "L'Etat, c'est moi." In the same book, Le Corbusier describes a certain twentieth-century statesman:

Lenin is sitting on a caned chair at the Café Rotonde. He has paid for his coffee, twenty centimes, plus two more for the tip. He has drunk from a little white ceramic cup. He is wearing a bowler hat and a clean, smooth collar. For hours, he has been writing on sheets of typewriter paper. His inkwell is smooth and round, made of bottle glass.

He is preparing to govern one hundred million men.¹⁹

The contrast is sharp. In Le Corbusier's description, we see the modern "everyman". Lenin blends in with all the other café customers wearing clean collars and bowler hats. To his mind, objects serve their intended function efficiently and without fanfare. Realizing this, he has freed himself from the temptation to distinguish himself through luxury goods and is instead concentrating his efforts on the work before him. He understands that thought and action are what will earn him distinction. He will rise to the leadership of one hundred million men through his own capabilities and work ethic. This sums up Le Corbusier's thoughts on the difference between the anonymity of the modern statesman and the hyper-individualism of the absolute ruler, between meritocracy and absolute monarchy. Of course, even in 1925, the example of Lenin was provocative and problematic, but he was known to be unpretentious in manner and needs.²⁰

In Le Corbusier's estimation, the practice of using objects to create and mark social distinctions should have died out with the *ancien régime*, after which the Revolution ushered in a meritocratic social order. Instead, the French seem to have lost their way: in the Third Republic, "we find the bourgeoisie, teachers, editors, publishers, merchants, museums, even craftsmen, perpetuating the same monarchical values."²¹ Of course, he counted the Decorative Arts Exposition and, indeed, the decorative arts industry among the offenders.

Le Corbusier posited the Pavillon de *l'Esprit Nouveau* as an antidote to the anachronistic Louis XIV-type forces still in existence. The house and accompanying city plans gave concrete form to the *esprit nouveau* or "new (modern) spirit" embodied by Le Corbusier's *homme tout nu*. The "naked men," who formed the modern, meritocratic elite would value the concepts underlying the house: the healthful qualities of sunlight and fresh air; the efficient dimensions of the rooms, much as in an ocean liner stateroom;²² the mathematical proportions based on the human form²³ and the poetic geometry of walls intersecting the planes of floor and ceiling at right angles. The spirit of synthesis, in this case melding art, science, engineering, and nature to address the problems of the day, was a central characteristic of the "esprit nouveau," as Le Corbusier conceived it. His multidisciplinary journal of the same name (founded in 1920 with associates), presented another example of the thinking of *l'homme tout nu*. Along with synthesis, the architect valued clarity and purity of thought. Practicing this kind of intellectual rigor and discipline also carried a moral dimension that eschewed ornament or empty luxury.

Le Corbusier's *homme tout nu* sought freedom through order²⁴ at all levels—and here we see a parallel with his example of Lenin. This placed a paradox at the heart of the architect's vision, for his Pavillon de l'Esprit Nouveau and urban plan both addressed problems and set aspirations. All elements of the house were precisely reasoned right down to the pigeonholes and shelves, whose purpose and dimensions were assigned by the architect. For him, this microscopic level of organization minimized the chaotic and time-consuming details of daily life, freeing the mind for the creation of art. On a collective level, organization meant less waste of human labor and materials. At the same time, Le Corbusier believed in the power of architecture to shape societal values. He imagined l'homme tout nu, the aspirational man for the machine age, standing stripped – or rather freed – of the divisive markers of class (to some extent), culture and nation, distinctions which had been catastrophic for Europe and beyond. Among the first to advocate publicly and insistently for the development of an architecture for the masses, his hope was to mold humanity into a worldwide society of “naked men.” However, with the Pavillon and his urban plan, he was imposing idiosyncratic ideas in concrete forms under the guise of universal human proportions and basic human needs. Le Corbusier, architect and urban planner, viewing himself as foremost among the “naked,” had a blind spot when it came to seeing his own clothes.

¹See Nancy Troy, *Modernism and the Decorative Arts: Art Nouveau to Le Corbusier* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1991) and Yvonne Brunhammer and Suzanne Tise, *Les Artistes décorateurs, 1900-1942* (Paris : Flammarion, 1990) for context.

²Carol S. Eliel, *L'Esprit Nouveau: Purism in Paris, 1918-1925* (New York: Harry N. Abrams, 2001), 48.

³*Exposition internationale des arts décoratifs industriels modernes, Paris 1925 : Rapport General*, v. 1, 19.

⁴Eliel, *L'Esprit Nouveau*, 48. The Deutscher Werkbund in Munich was founded in 1907 as a professional association bringing together artisans, scientists, engineers and industrialists to join forces in developing a modern aesthetic. These groups took a more holistic approach to producing items for daily life.

⁵Le Corbusier, *Urbanisme* (Paris: G. Crès et Cie, 1924), 220-2.

⁶Le Corbusier, *L'Art Décoratif d'aujourd'hui* (Paris: G. Crès, 1925), 22. I am using James I. Dunnett's translation in Le Corbusier, *The Decorative Art of Today* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1987), 22.

⁷Jean-Jacques Becker and Serge Bernstein, *Nouvelle histoire de la France contemporaine* vol. 12, *Victoire et frustrations: 1914-1929* (Paris: Editions du Seuil, 1990), 169.

⁸Le Corbusier, *Precisions*, 92, my translation.

⁹*Ibid.*, 92.

¹⁰Le Corbusier's use of this term reflects both the inspiration he felt before the simple adequacy of the monks' cells at the Ema Monastery in Italy, and the analogies he makes between his architectural concepts and natural organisms.

¹¹Le Corbusier, *Precisions*, 93.

¹²Ibid., 115.

¹³Mary McLeod, “Urbanism and Utopia, Le Corbusier from Regional Syndicalism to Vichy,” (Dissertation. MIT, 1986), 16.

¹⁴Eliel, *L'Esprit Nouveau*, 115.

¹⁵Le Corbusier, *Almanach d'architecture moderne* (Paris: G. Crès and Cie, 1925), 134

¹⁶Le Corbusier, *La Peinture moderne*.

¹⁷Eliel, *L'Esprit Nouveau*, 53.

¹⁸Nicholas Fox Weber, *Le Corbusier: A Life* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2008), 218.

¹⁹Le Corbusier, *L'Art Décoratif d'aujourd'hui*, 8.

²⁰See, for example, Bertrand Russell's comments in *The Practice and Theory of Bolshevism* (1921).

²¹Le Corbusier, *L'Art décoratif d'aujourd'hui*, 6.

²²Le Corbusier, *Precisions*, 115.

²³These proportions would take shape as the “Modulor,” developed by the architect in subsequent projects. See, for example, the Unité d'habitation de Marseille, built in 1947-1952.

²⁴Le Corbusier, *Urbanisme*, 202.

IMAGE CREDITS

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