

FROM THE CITY TO THE BUILDING *APPROACHES TO MODERNITY - LA TOURETTE AS A LANDMARK*

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1. La Tourette: a new approach towards modernity

1.1 Inspiration of Le Corbusier reinterpreting architecture

The products of architectural and urbanistic practices have always been linked with society and the epoch in which they occur.

In this sense, two new approaches can be identified with the arrival of modernism and the changes that it brought in terms of architecture and spatial planning practices and, in the manner in which architects and urban planners started to design their projects; the buildings or the cities. On the one hand, building practices changed due to the introduction of new construction features such as the concrete and pillar, the cross-beam and the slab system.

These construction tools became an omnipresent duality i.e. architecture vs. structure in modernist architecture. On the other hand, the meaning of space and nature gained new dimensions in terms of urbanistic practices, and the way of thinking the city, with the Charter of Athens, the main issues being the housing question and the collective role of space.

The medieval monastic heritage inspired not only artists but also architects to produce new works re-interpreting the old types. One example of this influence

is the medieval stone work serving to find the missing link between the truth that its use represents and the modernist concrete work, in its most straightforward way, the apparent concrete.

The new approach that characterized the modern architecture and spatial planning didn't mean that everything was new and different from the past and the previous practices. In this context, a new approach could mean a different i.e. new interpretation of the building or the space, using an existing type and not necessarily a new type and "Le Corbusier's monastery of La Tourette (...) is an illuminating example of such approach" (Leupen et al., 1997: 143).

In the convent of La Tourette there are multiple perspectives of reinterpretation of spaces and a multiplicity of looks. It should not be seen as a manifest but rather as an elaborated work for architectural meditation and studying. Consequently, La Tourette could be seen as a landmark of the modernism tendency, of re-interpreting the types from the past, designing new projects.

1.2 Assumptions of the project of La Tourette

The project of the Dominican Convent of Sainte Marie de La Tourette, Éveux-sur-Arbresle, in France, by the architect Le Corbusier was inspired by his visits in 1907 to the Charterhouse of Ema, in Italy; and in 1953 to the Cistercian monastery of Le Thoronet, in France. This project was proposed to him, representing the opportunity for Le Corbusier to put in practice a new approach to modernity based on the idea of collective forms of life.

The project of La Tourette was born from a meeting in 1952 between the Dominican Marie-Alain Couturier and Le Corbusier. In this epoch there was an exchange of correspondence between the two of them about the ideas that should be present in this convent project.

Marie-Alain Couturier was the promoter of the movement of sacred art and dedicated his work to the renovation of liturgical art with a particular attention given to modern art. It was in this context that he contacted Le Corbusier as an expert on modern architecture, in order to be the author of the new convent.

From the meeting between these two, there arose an architectural, philosophical and spiritual dialogue, resulting in the assumptions of the project of La Tourette. In this dialogue, Couturier played the role of being mentor of modernity in the church, and a defender of a renovated faith by means of contemporary art. Le Corbusier was seeking to renew values in the spirit of modernity, through the architectonic project.

In the process of defining the assumptions for La Tourette, Couturier and Le Corbusier were like two opposing personalities confronting each other on a single project view and interpretations. Marie-Alain Couturier represented the spiritual view, sought spirituality by architecture and Le Corbusier represented the spatial and architectonic view, sought architecture by means of spirituality. The inspiration of Le Thoronet; a Romanesque religious complex built in the late 12th century, in southern France near Toulon; was present in La Tourette in the pure volume of 'béton brut' remembering asceticism, and as a consequence, the inevitable re-encounter with the sacred. Just like the stone of Le Thoronet, the concrete of La Tourette shows the true reality.

The significant influence of Le Thoronet upon Le Corbusier can be seen in his opinion about this building, representing a witness of the truth, using the stone, and where the "sharp edge enforces clarity of outline and roughness of surface (...). Light and shade are the loudspeakers of this architecture of truth, tranquillity and strength. Nothing further could add to it" (Le Corbusier in Hervé, 2001). This idea shows a new approach to modernity in architecture in which light and shadow are understood as being the loudspeakers of truth.

2. From the city to the building of La Tourette

2.1 Charter of Athens rules on the building scale

In Europe, the bad conditions of living in the industrial city brought about spatial planning as a discipline and modern architecture focused on the question of housing and urban regeneration, not only in spatial terms but also in social terms.

In the beginning of the 20th century, in the spatial planning domain, the garden city became a very popular model to follow, based on the single house. In the domain of architecture, in the decade of 1920, the idea of rationalization not only in terms of housing but also in economic terms resulted in a strong importance given to collective forms of life i.e. collective dwellings as a model to follow in architecture, and the work of Le Corbusier is not an exception (Stanislaus, 2009: 135). Consequently, the building process should be quicker and cheaper. In this context, the project of La Tourette represented for Le Corbusier an opportunity to design a building, putting in practice his concern with the 'collective forms of life'. In this domain the project is characterized by the importance of the collective spaces such as the refectory, the church or the meeting halls. The private spaces are confined to the individual cells of the friars i.e. the dwelling units. Private cells and collective spaces were designed to permit meditation, reflection and studying.

The convent of La Tourette functions as a micro-city which inserts within modernism.

Actually some authors suggest about this matter that the final solution of La Tourette is based upon the idea of an urban mega-structure (Stanislaus, 2009: 168). There is a strong parallel between the lives in the city of men (occurring at the city scale) and the lives in the city of friars (occurring at the building scale). Such as in the real city, in this micro-city i.e. the convent of La Tourette, everything is functional, self-sufficient and according to cyclical movements.

As such, it must respect certain rules i.e. the rules that were defined in the Charter of Athens in 1933 having as the main mentor Le Corbusier. These rules identified four aspects proposed as elements of the city's organization: living, working, physical and mental recreation and circulation.

This classification of city elements and their functions are not only the keys of spatial planning but also of the modern architecture of buildings and they are present in the project of La Tourette: the living function corresponds to the individual cells of friars; the working function corresponds to the classroom for



Figure 1. Charterhouse of Ema, Italy.
Google maps.

intellectual work and study; the physical and mental recreation corresponds to the church and to the refectory; and the circulation function is present in the interconnecting corridors and footbridges of La Tourette.

In summary, it can be said that in La Tourette project Le Corbusier has the opportunity to put into practice in a building the rules that in the Charter of Athens were defined for the city as a whole. La Tourette could be considered a landmark of the application of the rules of the city planning defined in the Charter of Athens on the building scale.

2.2 Modern architecture in the project of La Tourette

‘Béton brut’

The project of La Tourette reflects modern architectural ideas and construction processes in which the result is shown through the use of ‘béton brut’, the absolute fidelity to the model and a perfect reproduction of the mould.

In this pattern, concrete is seen as a construction material that “does not cheat; it replaces; it cuts out the need for that trickster – coating.” (Potié, 2001: 102).

Church

The religious buildings such as monasteries or convents are founded on the basic principle of architectural centrality with their epicentre in the cloister. Cloister means something closed or able to be closed-off.

The cloister of La Tourette is unusual and doesn't have the characteristics of its predecessors which follow a 'promenade', interconnecting the structure and the building in order to understand the simplicity of the plan. In this sense could be said that La Tourette is a reinterpretation of traditional medieval monastery types, built around a cloister (Leupen, 1997: 143). However, the central point of spiritual functionality of La Tourette is found within the church, which is the most significant place of the entire building. The church is the epicentre of the building and for Le Corbusier its proportions should provoke enthusiasm. The church means the place of the centre of the Dominican spirituality, that is the celebration of the Eucharist, and its main altar represents the most relevant sacred place for the religious community.

Unit cell

About fifty years separate Le Corbusier's visit to the Charterhouse of Ema and its project of La Tourette. However, just like in the case of Charterhouse of Ema, the convent of La Tourette allows individual and collective experiences; time for individual working, relaxing and meditation in the unit of the cell and time for collective work, relaxing and meditation in the refectory or the church.

Just as in the concept of the 'units of habitation', the cells for friars were inspired in the model of the smallest living space which was to become a symbolic figure of connection between the internal space i.e. the inside (the private space of the friars) and the external space i.e. the outside (the exterior of the building) through the facade.

Simplicity

The sequence of cells would permit the study of a portion of facade which would be applied with rhythmic repetition. This fact gives through the simplicity of the image of the facade (the visible skin of the building), the perception of lack of comfort and a certain sense of poverty.

All these characteristics are according to the modern way of building (quickly and cheap) and to the way of living of a religious community (the relevance of the spirituality to the detriment of the materiality). Despite huge amount of money financed by gifts, the building of La Tourette not only looks cheap because of the use of 'béton brut' but also gives a perception of lack of the most primitive comfort (Stanislaus, 2009: 168).

2.3 Justifications and annotations of the project

Since the 13th century that Dominican convents gained fame and became very popular for their theological and philosophical ways of thinking. After the Second World War, the regional government of Lyon decided to build a convent has a school and research institution of the Dominicans and by the year of 1960 the construction of Sainte Marie de La Tourette was nearly complete.

The extreme simplicity of this project could be characterized by the combination of two aspects: a reinterpretation of ancient monastic architecture of medieval abbeys with a particular focus on the abbey of Le Thoronet; and the sobriety offered by a modernist architecture language, consisting of elements such as 'pilotis', stairs or ramps, which contradicts somewhat the former static spirit of the Dominican order.

Though humanism for Le Corbusier meant something independent of the Dominicans' faith, it could be said that for him, the architect is inseparable from the humanist i.e. the regeneration of the society through architecture. In this way, his work is marked by the effort of shaping a better social order through functionalist architecture forms and construction techniques. Consequently, the architect is open to spiritual values in the sense of the mystery of being. His defi-

nition of soul allowed him to make a convent suitable for its function, respecting certain architectural rules previously established by conventional practice i.e. by the lifestyle of Dominicans, putting in practice in La Tourette the architecture gifted with a spirit.

The poverty of the materials, the brightness of colours, and the majesty of volumes, all lead towards an architectural expression which would enable the friars to understand the ascetic life, the spiritual joy, and the most solemn of silences. In fact, the project of this convent has as much grandeur as it does simplicity with especially evident in the church. Le Corbusier did not just create a living space for the religious community but also a church where the mystery of the Eucharist could be celebrated in a perfect match between the container (the building) and the contained (the friars).

La Tourette shows that the action of praying and religious life is not only linked with conventional forms of architecture such as the medieval convents, but could also happen in a modern architecture building. Knowing the work of Le Corbusier designing the religious building of Chapel Notre Dame du Haut, Ronchamp, in France, completed in 1955, and his inspiration, the project of La Tourette doesn't mean faith for him but rather an understanding of what architectural terms would provide in terms of conditions for faith. In fact, La Tourette shows that Le Corbusier was sufficiently open mind faced to the notion of the sacred.

The understanding of Le Corbusier about the architecture of a religious building is present in his own expression: "my profession is to shelter men, by giving them an envelope of concrete which allows them to have a human life (...) to build a church as a place of habitation (...) would make sense to me" (Petit, 1961: 17-18). By being asked to build the convent of La Tourette, not only was Le Corbusier requested to provide shelter for hundreds of men, but also a place which would afford them silence.

The site where the convent was built is on a deep slope, ending on a plain and being partially surrounded by forest, localized in the countryside.



Figure 2. Localization in the countryside. La Tourette.
Google earth.

The building is designed starting from the top to the bottom, and its composition began by the line of the covering; a great horizontal ending with the accentuated downwards slope where the building rested by means of 'pilotis'. In a word, the architecture of this building is organized in terms of descent.

In terms of architectonic composition, this project represents an answer to the requested program, organized following a descending vertical. Each architectural body of the building touches the ground in distinctive ways.

The church, the chapel and the sacristy are anchored in the hillside. The other three wings of the building corresponding to the unit cells i.e. to the space of single dwellings are localized above the ground supported by 'pilotis' of several shapes. This organization allows the catching of glimpses of the central open space which contains the cloister, functioning as an open space, so characteristic of this type of religious buildings.

3. Conclusions

This article has aimed to show the work of Le Corbusier in the project of La Tourette has a great influence in the medieval architecture of religious monasteries and convents.

On the one hand, his visits to the Charterhouse of Ema and to the monastery of Le Thoronet come to confirm that in doing the project of La Tourette, Le Corbusier had had a way to compensate many years of work, in order to achieve a reinterpretation of the medieval architecture of religious buildings, rather than to create new types or meanings for these buildings. On the other hand, his humanistic concerns resulted in the project of Sainte Marie de La Tourette as a place of meditation, search for God, and of prayer for the Dominican community.

In summary, the humanism presented in the architectonic program of La Tourette guided his work can be seen as an adventure in which he imagined the shapes and the circuits that would be necessary for prayer, liturgy, meditation and study. The collective spaces such as the refectory, the church or the meeting halls; and the single dwellings i.e. the unit cells of Dominicans friars, were perfectly proportioned for what this religious community most needed: silence and peace.

In this sense, Sainte Marie de La Tourette is a silent dwelling place for one hundred bodies and hearts (Potié, 2001: 7). The role of the religious community lifestyle, inside this silence, was to worship God and this convent of 'béton brut' is considered a labour of love. Consequently, for Le Corbusier there is no need to speculate about it, because its life happens inside.

Sainte Marie de La Tourette represents a micro-city i.e. an example of a parallel between the lives occurring at the city scale and the lives occurring at the building scale, where everything is functional and self-sufficient, just like in the principles of city planning of Charter of Athens.

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