



CORBUSIER'S CRAFT

The International Style brought us some of the most innovative design of all time, and it was never better expressed than at Le Corbusier's Cité Radieuse in France, the architect's blueprint for better living Words Sue Herdman Photography Bertrand Limbour/House of Pictures

left La Cité Radieuse's shared roof space, with its curvy ventilation stacks, originally included a running track, paddling pool and theatre
right Apartment 50, formerly owned by Lillette Ripert, who ran the building's nursery school in the sky on the roof
below right Communal areas such as the lobby, with its pierced concrete and coloured glass wall, were given as much design attention by Le Corbusier as the apartments themselves



Hail a cab on arrival in Marseille and, if your destination is to be one of the city's monuments, La Cité Radieuse, prepare for interest from your driver. 'Ah, Le Corbusier!' he'll cry, as you hurtle through the streets towards the Radiant City, the showcase housing unit that was one of the architect's signal works. Completed in 1952, this building was the physical manifestation of Le Corbusier's vision for a clever, self-sufficient, post-war city. Made from *béton brut* (raw concrete) and balanced on *pilotis* (both classic Corbusier details) it sails up over 18 floors, reminiscent of the sleek ocean liners the architect loved so much.

Le Corbusier created this *Unité d'Habitation*, as he called his blueprint for living, for blue-collar workers – those who were busy rebuilding the parts of the city damaged by war. Inside were more than 300 apartments, designed for differing domestic lives: that of the single person, the working couple and the busy, boisterous family. Each had two levels and was generously proportioned, with L-shaped plans and light-flooded rooms warmed by the sun. And each had a balcony with *brises-soleil* (sun shades) painted in either red, blue, green, orange or yellow, colours that are repeated over and over again on banisters and doors throughout this curious concrete commune.

For Le Corbusier this building was to be much more than mere accommodation. It was to offer a new way of urban life. There was space: space for green below, by lifting the building above the ground. Space, too, for some 1,600 people: a real community. It had its own →

interfoto/Alamy

internal shopping 'street' (and all the corridors here were 'streets'). It had (and still has) its own hotel and restaurant, as well as a gym, medical facilities and, on the roof, a nursery school, paddling pool, running track, open-air theatre, views out over Marseille to the sea, and even a concrete beach. But Corbu didn't stop there. Why not have catering sections, he mused, where meals could be ordered for those not wishing to cook, to give them more time for leisure?

Such radical ideas, melded with the avant-garde aesthetic (for some, the Radiant City was the early inspiration for the Brutalist school) proved to have less appeal for the blue-collar workers Le Corbusier had envisaged, and more for the local artistic and professional classes. On completion, it filled up with medics, academics and architects for whom his style and standing was a seductive draw. They were intrigued by his measurement system, known as *Le Modulor* and based on the proportions of the human body. They loved the internal spaces: the Charlotte Perriand-designed kitchens, with their ice-boxes and double-sinks – as seen in the images here, of the apartment that was the former home of Lilette Ripert, a teacher who was director of the Radiant City's nursery school in the sky. One of the first residents, she lived here until her death in 2000. Today the apartment has new owners, enticed, as others, by details such as the double-height thermopane windows, wooden floors, skilled division of space and perhaps most of all the Le Corbusian ideals for a modern good life.

For this prolific architect, the Radiant City was just one chapter in an extraordinary career that spanned 50 years and saw his work appear in Europe, India, Russia, Japan, North and South America. Of the 500 or more projects that he designed, he created more than 60 buildings, wrote some 34 books and designed the type of furniture that reflected the excitement of his spaces ('chairs are architecture,' he once exclaimed: 'sofas are bourgeois'). He was, famously, the man who invented homes that were 'machines for living'. Fascinated with the materials of the time, the iron, the forced concrete, but inspired, too, by the classical lines of the past, he created a new architectural language with his early white villas (the seminal Villa Savoye outside Paris) and later lyrical designs, among them the chapel of Notre Dame du Haut in Ronchamp, its roof allegedly inspired by the shape of a crab shell gleaned from a Long Island beach. Le Corbusier, like many of his contemporaries, was a keen collector of natural forms – twisted bleached wood, beautiful broken shells – for inspiration.

A key figure of the International Style, Le Corbusier had been born Charles-Edouard Jeanneret in 1887 in the Swiss town of La Chaux-de-Fonds. His father was a watchcase engraver, his mother a piano teacher. Both, records tell us, had little sense of the shape his life would take and in early years saw him as something →



left The architect's *Modular Man*, cast in concrete, whose proportions echo that of his buildings *below left* The mezzanine dining area: each of the apartments has two storeys, to retain a traditional domestic feel *opposite, clockwise from top left* Open-plan spaces were one of Le Corbusier's most influential ideas; the building's exterior, with apartments shaded by coloured brises-soleil, the double-height main living area; built-in furniture and storage niches emphasise the practical nature of the architect's ideas about modern living



LE CORBUSIER THE TIMELINE

The architect was at the height of his powers when he created the Radiant City: here are some of his other biographical milestones



1922: he opens an architectural office together with his cousin Pierre Jeanneret. This collaboration lasts until **1940**.

Charles-Edouard Jeanneret is born on 6 October in **1887** in the town of La Chaux-de-Fonds in Switzerland to Georges-Edouard Jeanneret and Marie-Charlotte-Amélie Jeanneret.



In **1927** Le Corbusier publishes his *Cinq points pour une architecture nouvelle* (Five points for a new architecture), in which he articulates his design principles.

His *Villa Savoye* in Poissy (right) is built between **1928** and **1931** and he also designs the *Centrosoyuz Building* for the Union of Soviet Cooperatives in Moscow in 1928–36.

1929: in collaboration with Charlotte Perriand and Pierre Jeanneret, he presents tubular steel furniture at the *Salon d'Automne* in Paris.

In **1902** he enters the *Ecole d'Art* at La Chaux-de-Fonds.

By **1908** he is working for the architect Auguste Perret, staying until **1909**, gaining early experience in the use of concrete.

His first independent architectural project comes in **1912:** the *Villa Jeanneret-Perret*, or *Maison Blanche* (pictured above and top), was built for his parents.

From **1918** to **1925** he works with the painter Amédée Ozenfant; they have their first joint exhibition of their Purist-style work in Paris.

In **1919** he founds the journal *L'Esprit Nouveau* together with Ozenfant and the poet Paul Dermée; by **1920** he is beginning to use the pseudonym *Le Corbusier*.

In **1940** Le Corbusier closes his Paris office and flees to the Pyrenees with his wife, the fashion model Yvonne Gallis, following the occupation by German troops. He reopens the office four years later.

Post war in **1945** he receives a commission from reconstruction minister Raoul Dautry for a housing project in Marseille, and creates his preliminary designs for a new system of living he calls the *Unité d'Habitation* (1945–52): the Marseille building is known as the Radiant City.

In **1947** he joins an international panel of architects to work on designs for the headquarters of the United Nations in New York.



In **1950** he starts work on the design of the *Chapel of Notre Dame du Haut* in Ronchamp (below), completed five years later. Soon after, he is appointed government architectural adviser for Chandigarh, the new capital of Punjab in India.

Between **1951** and **1952** he creates his beloved *Cabin* (*Cabanon*) in Roquebrune Cap Martin, southern France. The following year he is awarded a Gold Medal from the Royal Institute of British Architects (RIBA).

On 27 August **1965** Le Corbusier dies while swimming in the sea in Roquebrune Cap Martin, after suffering a heart attack.



left Le Corbusier imagined the corridors of *la Cité Radieuse* as streets, to emphasise their place as part of the community instead of mere connecting spaces
right Starkly contrasting primary colour against raw concrete, a motif that is repeated throughout
below right Shaded balconies look out over Marseilles to the sea

of a disappointment. It was as an artist that he started his career, meeting the Cubist painter Amédée Ozenfant in 1918 with whom he went on to create a new artistic style, Purism. In 1919 the two founded *L'Esprit Nouveau*, a magazine that was devoted to the new spirit of construction and synthesis in architecture and city planning. Using pseudonyms as bylines, Jeanneret chose Le Corbusier based, it is said, on his grandfather's name Lecorbésier.

In architecture, Le Corbusier trained and worked with both Peter Behrens in Berlin and Auguste Perret (a pioneer of the use of reinforced concrete) in Paris. He published five key architectural ideas in his book, *Vers une architecture* (a series of essays that had nearly all appeared in *L'Esprit Nouveau*): he stated that the ideal building should have pillars supporting the structure; a roof terrace that could be made into a garden; an open

floor plan; an ornament-free facade; and windows in strips. All these appear in his Radiant City.

Le Corbusier died on 27 August 1965, swimming in the sea at Roquebrune Cap Martin in the south of France. Here he had built a rustic summer cabin just next to Eileen Gray's wonderful E-1027 house (he was a great admirer of Gray's home and to her horror had 'defiled' it by painting erotic murals on its walls in 1939). Considered by many to be a genius, others saw him as the man to blame for the grim march of post-war housing estates that mushroomed across the world. In the UK his work inspired the Park Hill Estate in Sheffield and Ernö Goldfinger's Trellick Tower in London, both now listed. But whether you are a fan, or not, there is no question that Corbu changed the way we look at buildings today. And those who are still drawn to his Radiant City in Marseille salute him. **GD**