

*A New Era: Le Corbusier and the Revolution at Ronchamp*

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**Abstract** | Early in his career, James Stirling's published, *Ronchamp: Le Corbusier's Chapel and the Crisis of Rationalism*, in the *Architectural Review*, criticizing the most recent work of his favorite architect, Le Corbusier. Villa du Haut of Ronchamp was a building not see before in the modern era and Stirling condemned it for the backward step it was taking in the discipline. Yet Ronchamp offered much more to architecture than Stirling recognized: an appeal to emotions, a marriage between form and function, an accordance to context and site, and above all, a break away from modern tendencies. In order for designers to continue to pursue meaningful architecture, we must consider the fundamental principles addressed by Le Corbusier in his iconic masterpiece constructed over half a century ago.

In the December of 1956 issue of the *Architectural Review*, James Stirling critiques the latest work of his most revered and studied architect, Le Corbusier. The article, *Ronchamp: Le Corbusier's Chapel and the Crisis of Rationalism* analyzes the great master's 1952 chapel, Notre Dame du Haut in Ronchamp, France, determining its regressive significance from contemporary discourse. Corbusier's massive use of concrete failed to utilize modern technological advancements, conceiving an "entirely visual appeal" that "lacked intellectual participation."<sup>1</sup> To Stirling, Ronchamp was such an anomaly that it was completely removed from international architectural thinking and could not be understood as modern architecture. Although Stirling is correct that Ronchamp was not modern, he failed to recognize the real problem in the architectural discipline that Le Corbusier sought to change: modernism. The famed, ubiquitous style had stagnated, reluctant or incapable of developing further, creating a universalized, meaningless architecture that lacked "placeness." What Corbusier had done at Ronchamp was the beginning of a revolution that altered modern thinking, provoking a new era of architectural style, what Charles Jencks has since labeled "Post-Modern."

Before, *the Crisis of Rationalism*, Stirling wrote another piece for the *Architectural Review* in 1953 titled, *Garches to Jaol, Le Corbusier as Domestic Architect in 1927 and 1953*. In it, Stirling compares two of Le Corbusier's pieces, Villa Stein at the Garches and his most recent work, Maisons Jaoul. He praised Garches' display of the "machine aesthetic" and "rationalistic principles" that looks toward an egalitarian utopian future, participating in technological progression of the 20<sup>th</sup> century.<sup>2</sup> In opposition, Jaoul is condemned for its absence of rationalism, technological regression, and empathetic appeal of its unfinished material of fair-faced brick, board-shuttered concrete, and unpainted timber. To Stirling, this real and immediate presence of materials appeals to human emotions and therefore is too great a distraction from the intellect. Rather than focusing on the contemporary logical, schematic, and principled ideas of modernism, Corbusier creates an emotional art, to which Stirling condemns as merely, "art for art's sake...personal and anti-mechanistic."<sup>3</sup> In this text, Stirling articulates a view, similarly in his critique of Ronchamp, that architectural aesthetics should be concerned with the objective intellect over and above the subjective emotional dimension that, to him, lacks programmatic theory and architectural development and should be reserved for art. He attempts to align aesthetics with technology by comparing good rational aesthetics from a bad emotional one.

Stirling makes similar arguments of the art - technology dichotomy in *Crisis of Rationalism*, claiming that the two have, "divided the ideological basis of the modern movement."<sup>4</sup> Parallel to his thoughts on Jaoul, Ronchamp's "sensational impact" cannot be "sustained for any great length of time" and without emotions there is "little to appeal to the intellect, and nothing to analyze or stimulate curiosity."<sup>5</sup> Yet, Charles Jencks praises Ronchamp as a powerful architecture that offers

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<sup>1</sup> Stirling, James. "Ronchamp: Le Corbusier's Chapel and the Crisis of Rationalism," *Architectural Review*, December 1952, v.191, n.1150: 62-67.

<sup>2</sup> Stirling, James. "Garches to Jaol, Le Corbusier as Domestic Architect in 1927 and 1953." *The Architectural Review*, 118 (September 1955), 145-151.

<sup>3</sup> Ibid.

<sup>4</sup> Stirling, James. "Ronchamp: Le Corbusier's Chapel and the Crisis of Rationalism," *Architectural Review*, December 1952, v.191, n.1150: 62-67.

<sup>5</sup> Ibid.

the imagination boundless new discoveries. In *The New Paradigm in Architecture: the Language of Post-Modernism*, Jencks claims this is because of the chapel's multitude of "enigmatic signifiers" which saturate the chapel with "endless possible interpretations and metaphors."<sup>6</sup> To Jencks, the more the metaphors, the greater the drama and the more they are slightly suggestive, the greater the mystery. "A suggested and mixed metaphor is powerful," which Ronchamp has accomplished, erupting the Modernist settlement and passing the era's torch as the first Post-Modern building.<sup>7</sup>

Although James Stirling is critical of Corbusier's Ronchamp for its lack of influence or regression from modernism, other authors claim that the real problem for architecture during the 1950s was modernism itself. It has become static and with the rise of universalization, has induced a loss of diversity and disappearance of local, traditional cultures that are the "creative nucleus for defining a place."<sup>8</sup> In addition, the notion of "form follows function" created a pervasive, boring banality in the discipline. More recently, in the 2010 text *Post-Functionalism*, Peter Eisenman claims that architecture is in need of a transformation in which form and function are not in opposition but in a dialectic relationship.<sup>9</sup> Architects should allow the two factors to evolve alongside each other. Ronchamp is a precedent to this notion. Even Stirling agrees that "as a religious building, it functions extremely well."<sup>10</sup> It's obliquely cut windows adheres to the local climate and utilizes natural light. These windows do not vibrantly illuminate the space, but create a darker, Gothic-like internal atmosphere in which light gently fades inside. Light is key in defining sacred spaces and Corbusier's theatric windows emphasize the drama of light and accents the holiness of the chapel. Additionally, Corbusier designed the shape of the structure in accordance to its acoustic nature in order for church members to dwell, reflect, and listen.<sup>11</sup> The complex plan of the chapel has a practical role as acoustic parabolas on the east wall, reflecting the sound from the outside altar for church members gathered on the hill. The slope of the roof, grid on the floor, and directional dark center line, draws attention to the cross above the altar.

In the iconic 1983 text, *Towards a New Critical Regionalism*, Kenneth Frampton criticized modernism's lack of "placeness," creating structures that could be built anywhere. Instead, he calls for an architecture that simultaneously integrates interpreted solutions of indigenous cultures with modern technology. This notion refutes Stirling's praise for Villa Stein at the Garches, a white box, situated in a flat, grassy field of a western suburb of Paris. The location is not fundamental to the concept of the home: the same white box can be placed in any flat field and it would not matter. In contrast, Ronchamp intentionally and effectively adheres to its site and location. The chapel is situated high on a hill with a horizon visible on all four sides and an ascent similar to the Acropolis, a historical tradition as a place of worship.<sup>12</sup> The slope of the floor follows the natural slope of the hill, and slopes towards the altar. Constructed two decades before Frampton's *Critical*

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<sup>6</sup> Jencks, Charles. *The New Paradigm in Architecture: The Language of Post-Modernism*. New Haven, CT: Yale UP, 2002. Print.

<sup>7</sup> libd.

<sup>8</sup> Kenneth Frampton, *Towards a Critical Regionalism: Six Points for an Architecture of Resistance*, in *the Anti-Aesthetic: Essays on Postmodern Culture*, ed. Hal Foster (Port Townsend, WA, 1983): 16-30.

<sup>9</sup> Eisenman, Peter. "Post-Functionalism." 1976

<sup>10</sup> Stirling, James. "Ronchamp: Le Corbusier's Chapel and the Crisis of Rationalism," *Architectural Review*, December 1992, v.191, n.1150: 62-67.

<sup>11</sup> T,K. "Chapel of Notre Dame du Haut and Braga Stadium." Ktstudiokt.net. Web

<sup>12</sup> T,K. "Chapel of Notre Dame du Haut and Braga Stadium." Ktstudiokt.net. Web

*Regionalism*, Ronchamp was ahead of its time and the first to challenge modernist thinking, juxtaposing the genius loci with programmatic needs.

Besides adherence to site, *Critical Regionalism* can be achieved through tectonic form, adaptability to climate and light, social relevance, and architectural vocabulary—all elements that are inherent to the composition at Ronchamp. Frampton uses Jorn Utzon's Bagsvaerd Church as an ideal example for achieving a self-conscious synthesis between universal civilization and world culture. The church successfully composes the "rationality of normative technique" and the "arationality of idiosyncratic form" by signifying a religious space but in such a way as to mutually include aspects of the Danish setting it is situated in and the Oriental characteristics fundamental in many sacred spaces.<sup>13</sup> Similarly, Ronchamp combines an idiosyncratic form and folksy-mannerisms of the rural, French area with a well-functioning, sacred space of dynamic, organic volumes. The delamination of space through concrete walls, while abstract and geometrically simple, evoke an environmental and cultural quality that adds intimacy and identity to the building. Parallel to Frampton's writings, it promotes the tectonic rather than scenographic with a syntactical form that raises its construction to an art form.

*Critical Regionalism* attempts to counter Western tendencies of modernism that interpret the environment in "exclusively perspectival terms" and, as a result, suppresses sensory perceptions, "distancing a more direct experience of the environment."<sup>14</sup> Instead, it tries to complement the conventional visual experience with a range of human perceptions, supporting Corbusier's use of varying primitive materials that target the senses to allow emotional reactions. This concept counters Stirling's criticism of Ronchamp's materialistic, emotional nature. What Stirling calls an "entirely visual appeal and lack of intellectual participation" is actually a much deeper, sensory architecture that appeals to emotion. This change was not regressive but necessary for the progression of the discipline and still is today. Corbusier gave architecture an interrelation to its setting, an evolving relationship between form and function, and a conscious connection to all human senses, and therefore emotions—elements the modern movement neglected. In order for architectural design to remain relevant in contemporary discourse, architects of the present must consider these necessary principles Le Corbusier addressed more than half a century ago in Ronchamp.

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<sup>13</sup> Kenneth Frampton, "Towards a Critical Regionalism: Six Points for an Architecture of Resistance," in *the Anti-Aesthetic: Essays on Postmodern Culture*, ed. Hal Foster (Port Townsend, WA, 1983): 16-30.

<sup>14</sup> *ibid.*

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