

CHRISTOPHER PEARSON / Le Corbusier in Yaletown: Architecture and Sport

The new False Creek that has emerged over the last decade presents itself as a city of sport. An endless stream of athletic bodies circulates along seaside routes for walking, jogging and cycling, while others perform in gymnasia and yoga studios, on basketball courts and soccer fields, in kayaks and sailboats. The recent Olympics-related building construction on the south shore concentrates attention not only on the social and economic ramifications of high-finance sporting culture but on the relationship between architecture and sport. This pairing has a long history, of course, going back to Olympia and the gymnasia, arenas and amphitheatres of the ancient world. Like the Greeks, our society puts the spectacle of athletics and body culture at the centre of its preoccupations, in both a personal and a collective sense. At the same time, it is now a well-established supposition that the practice of organized sports



Yaletown

constitutes a paradigmatic expression of modernity and contemporary capitalism: both are premised on aggressive competition, necessitating intensive training and specialized regimes of (self-) discipline; the absolute regulation of permissible activities and movements, channeling all actions into predetermined institutional and spatial parameters; the tyranny of the clock, which ruthlessly measures success or failure by the microsecond; and the often questionable role of big business, which continues the drive to expand the scale and market penetration of sporting events.

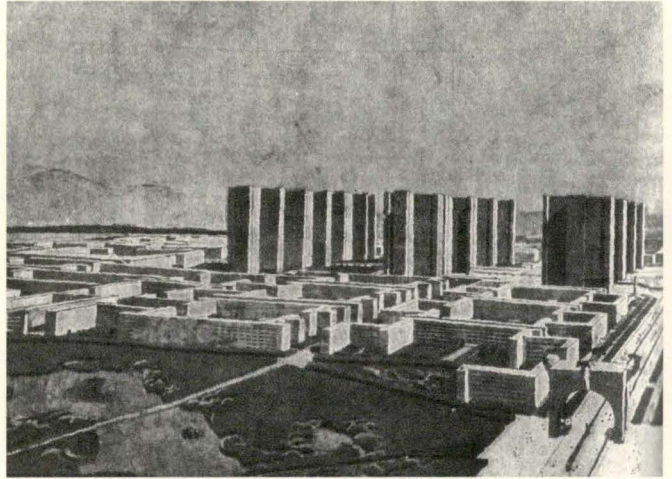
Discourses of sport can thus be traced in many socio-cultural fields within modernism, and architecture is no exception. As a visit to Yaletown or Metrotown—if not Beijing or Dubai—can confirm, much high-profile contemporary architecture is modernist in nature and appearance: pristine, abstract, minimal, ordered, technologically-oriented and of an a-scalar immensity, it has grossly magnified the early twentieth-cen-

tury ideals of modern design. Among the latter was an obsession with sport, hygiene and the healthy body; this was avowedly or tacitly a reaction to the slums, diseases and puritanical bodily repressions of Victorian culture, as well as the mutilations of the First World War. Canonical modernist masterpieces like Richard Neutra's Lovell "Health" House in Los Angeles (1927–29) or Alvar Aalto's Paimio Sanatorium in Finland (1929–32) embraced a new lifestyle of sunshine, fresh air and exercise, while a simple insistence on outdoor living and a connection to nature (by means of extensive glazing, balconies, terraces, etc.) had long been extolled by Frank Lloyd Wright. But as a manifestation of modernism—even hypermodernism—contemporary architecture is necessarily dialectical, and in tracing the parallels and convergences between sport and modern architecture, I would like to ask: does modern architecture—following the example of modern sport—embody notions of repression, competition, coercive social engineering and inhuman ideals of standardization, quantifiability, and mechanized precision? Or, on the other hand, can the encounter with sport still serve to introduce to architectural spaces a salutary embrace of the body and a new consciousness of symbolic or actual liberation?

Many contemporary critical analyses of sports architecture (gymnasias, running tracks, arenas, swimming pools, etc.) base themselves either on Foucauldian notions of discipline or on the suggestive, quasi-Green, quasi-libertarian ideas of Henning Eichberg. Here I would like to look at the sports-architecture connection in reference to the writings of Swiss-French architect Le Corbusier (1887–1965), who first articulated and tried to put into practice many of the characteristic tropes of architectural and societal modernism. Universalizing his experience as young student in Paris, Le Corbusier saw the modern city as an arena of fierce competition, and his stripped-down architecture of the 1920s, conceived rhetorically as a functional "tool" for modern living, visibly manifests a single-minded dedication to the achievement of its given task. And as Charles Jencks once pointed out, an emphasis on sports and physical activity permeates Le Corbusier's buildings. The architect had a great interest in sport, regularly playing strenuous games of basketball with his colleagues and including sports facilities in many of his projected urban schemes. He was particularly influenced by his one-time courtmate Dr. Pierre Winter, a physician with extreme right-wing views who wrote articles extolling "the new body" for periodicals with which Le Corbusier was involved. Sports played an essential role in Le Corbusier's philosophy of living, embodying not only a personal interest in keeping healthy, but a darker world-view which saw modern

life as an implacable competitive struggle as well as a fundamentally chaotic *melée* of personal and class interests which needed strict social and architectural discipline in order to function efficiently.

In his 1925 book *Urbanisme*, Le Corbusier proposed to house large segments of the population in extensive blocks of apartments, two to six stories in height, arranged around large communal areas for sport and recreation. Playing grounds would be accessible through underground tunnels. He specified, “Football, tennis, running tracks, basketball, etc., are all available. You come home, you change, you can take your exercise *just outside your own home*” (205). This proximity to the spaces of sport was necessary, Le Corbusier posited, because gymnasia were often remotely-sited and expensive, while the confines of the home were not conducive to physical exercise. In addition, Le Corbusier hoped to provide rooftop running tracks, gymnasia for children and adults,



Le Corbusier: A Contemporary City (detail), 1922

and “sun parlours,” which, he observed, “have proved so successful in the United States in curing tuberculosis” (216). Le Corbusier’s “Contemporary City” would thus devote 95% of the ground area in the business district and 85% in the dwelling areas to public parks, consisting of grass, trees, and recreational grounds. Versions of this urban scheme were shown at the Salon d’Automne of 1922 and the Paris Exposition of the Decorative Arts of 1925.

Who would use such facilities? Le Corbusier asserted that the working classes, who had spent the day in factories or offices and returned home to their minimal apartments, would be glad of the chance to be outdoors rather than inside a local bar or café. By giving order to the city and by radically “greening” the public space, his paternalistic goal was to grant both social and physiological well-being to the masses. This attempt to impose forced collective happiness entailed the regulation of every spatial and temporal aspect of peoples’ public and private lives—even to the extent of

channeling all available leisure time into organized sport. Such coercive and reductive methods, based on an overdetermined separation of the activities of life into categories of dwelling, work, and leisure, form the ground of several critiques of Corbusian planning that have been made over the years, starting with the caustic and cogent attacks of Pierre Francastel (*Art et technique*, 1956) who did not hesitate to compare Le Corbusier's urbanism to a concentration camp.

Le Corbusier's totalitarian tendencies were to become even more evident in the 1930s when he visited Italy and praised the new architecture of Mussolini. Influenced by Pierre Winter, Le Corbusier now took an interest in the somewhat confused political movement known as Syndicalism, which drew from both left and right. He introduced a revised vision of his utopian metropolis, now termed "the Radiant City." Here co-

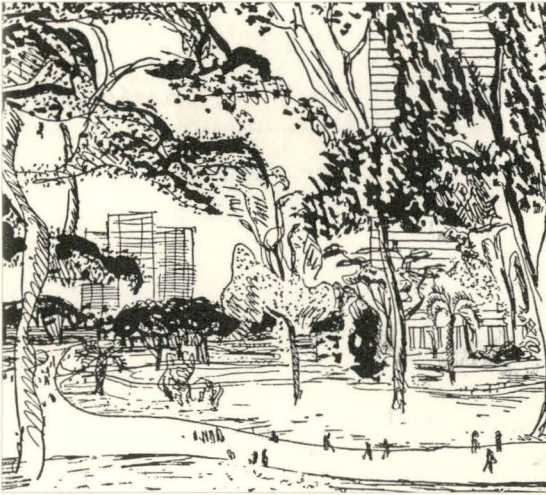


Le Corbusier: La Ville Radieuse, 1930s

operative housing blocks set in green open space would again offer communal facilities to cater to "the essential joys" of collective leisure activities and sport. On the roofs of the buildings he proposed to put tennis courts, swimming pools, and sand beaches for sunbathing. While society was to be strictly organized according to Syndicalist principals, the spaces of sport were meant to symbolize a kind of freedom for the working class, balancing authority with a putative individual liberty. In 1936 he even proposed a scheme for a great

National Center of Collective Festivals: built to hold 100,000 spectators, this colossal stadium with its related sports facilities (running, tennis, swimming, cycling, skating) featured a huge platform from which political leaders could address the crowd and survey a "parade of the masses." Obviously of Fascist inspiration, such a monument presents itself as a symbolic site of competition which both determines and celebrates a given élite's fitness to rule.

After the war, Le Corbusier continued to build sporting architecture, the most famous example being the running track and gymnasium that he installed on the rooftop of the Unité d'habitation in Marseilles (1947–51). He replicated this huge, highrise apartment block several times in other cities, and it went on to serve as a

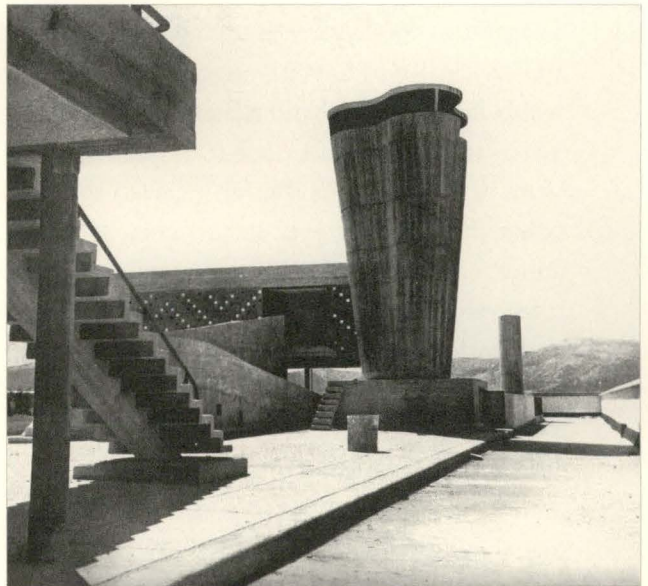


La Ville Radieuse: green space

launched from other directions: the philosopher Erich Fromm, for example, would doubtless have castigated Le Corbusier's mix of technolatriy, rationalization, and body culture as a kind of "necrophilia," a social attitude that produced "cybernetic" or "monocerebral" individuals who see the world in emotionless and purely instrumental terms. Such a figure, Fromm wrote, is characterized by "a special kind of narcissism that has as its object himself—his body and his skill—in brief, himself as an instrument of success." He thus becomes obsessed with looking youthful and healthy while at the same time becoming "so alienated that he experiences his body only as an instrument for success."

This brings us back to Yaletown and False Creek. The area gives the appearance of careful planning, with the putative functions

prototype for urban redevelopment and social housing in both Europe and North America into the 1970s. Many of these later developments proved socially disastrous, and again the blame may be laid on a reductive and paternalistic program of "improvement" imposed on the lives of the urban poor. Sport, similarly, can function as a form of social control while disguising itself as a "natural," apolitical, classless, and physically beneficial activity. Critiques could also be



Le Corbusier: running track and gymnasium on the roof of the Unité d'habitation, Marseilles (1947–51)

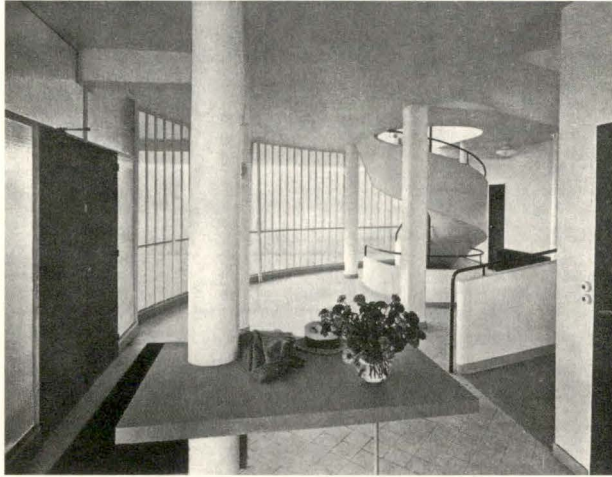


Le Corbusier: running track and gymnasium on the roof of the Unité d'habitation, Marseilles (1947–51)

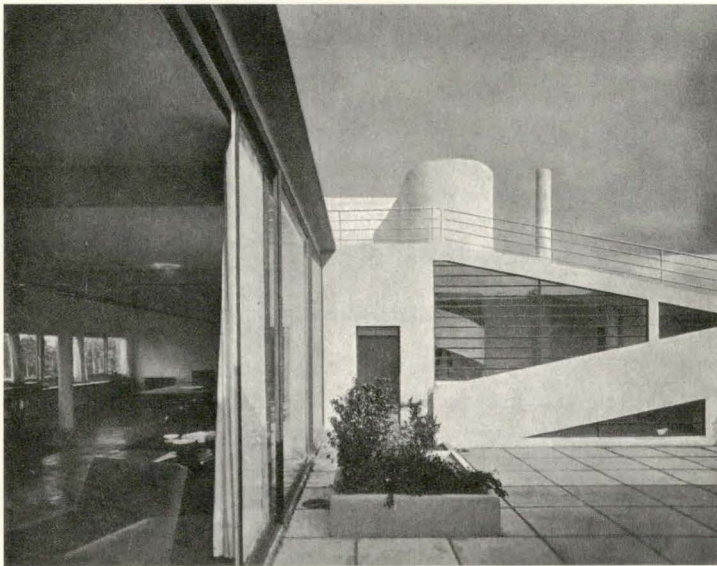
of life rationally divided up, mapped out, and given architectural form as residential towers, community centres, zones of heritage and culture, parks, pathways, and athletic courts. The visual and conceptual parallel to Le Corbusier's city of the future is striking. Here one recognizes the Corbusian competitive paradigm, embodied in hierarchically-stacked apartments with spectacular views

and spectacular prices, or the display of pumped and symbolically competitive bodies moving along the seawall. In this environment, power is no longer seen to be imposed from above through social and architectural regulation, but becomes self-imposed and self-regulated through tropes of desirability.

At the same time, I wonder if Le Corbusier's example might still be able to suggest possibilities for a more humane built environment. A celebration of body culture and physical movement characterizes Le Corbusier's architecture and not just in the visibly light, "toned," and athletic quality of his forms: buildings like the Villa Savoye (1929–31) or the Unité appear to balance weightlessly on minimal or muscular legs. More than this, Le Corbusier believed that architecture is meant to engage the body rather than just the eye. To this end, he often emphasized circulation routes—stairs, ramps, catwalks and balconies—and saw his light-filled domestic interiors as zones of constant movement ("the architectural promenade") rather than static set-pieces or gloomy dens of lethargy. His so-called "free plan," made possible by a gridded internal skeleton of concrete or steel, not only allowed all floorplans of a given building to assume variant configurations, but downplayed the restricting and confining function of heavy walls, bringing the outdoors indoors and providing an open, free and airy spatial environment that provided definition but not full enclosure. Many of the lobby spaces in his public buildings were in fact left as open as possible, allowing unrestricted movement through free space and suggesting a certain existential freedom. Externally, open terraces and balconies gave access to fresh air and sunshine, while roofs were



Le Corbusier: Villa Savoye, Poissy (1929-31)



Le Corbusier: Villa Savoye, Poissy (1929-31)

turned into gardens. If Le Corbusier's buildings appear as blank or Spartan, this is clearly because he saw architecture as a field for action (both mental and physical), not a place of escapism and retreat. This physical optimism should not be eclipsed by the questionable ideologies and heavy-handed social engineering of his urban projects. While the larger political and economic realities shaping our civic spaces will remain in dispute, the full engagement with buildings—the active, sensual, tactile and pleasurable interaction with the spaces we use and inhabit—can at least serve as a point of exploration for contemporary architects.

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