

Figure and Experience: The Labyrinth and Le Corbusier's World Museum

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Le Corbusier declares his interest in the experiential qualities of architecture through the concept of the promenade. He writes of that interest by what appears to be a straightforward description of experience. Straightforward in the sense that the description, of the experience of architecture, is dominated by a particular point of view. Regarding the promenade of his seminal work, the *Villa Savoye*, Le Corbusier notes:

*Arab architecture teaches us a precious lesson. It is best appreciated by walking, on foot. It is when walking, when moving, that one sees the ordering principles of the architecture unfold.*¹

Elsewhere he writes ...

*The plan of a building is a human appropriation of space. We walk about the plan; our eyes forward, for perception is sequential; it takes place in time; it is a series of visual events, just as a symphony is a series of auditory events.*²

Le Corbusier calls up the idea of the promenade by analogy (to 'Arab architecture' and the 'symphony') but the common denominator of these accounts remains the point of view of a strolling spectator and their account of the apprehension of space. This point of view literally becomes the agency of the description of architectural space (its experiential dimension) reiterated time and again in Le Corbusier's writings.³ Yet who is this spectator and what is their point of view? How is this affecting our (any person's) experience? It has been suggested that the promenade, as a point of view, is simply that of our daily experience; a 'natural' aspect of our behaviour.⁴ However in the work of Le Corbusier the promenade cannot simply be reduced to such a claim. The promenade that Le Corbusier devises for his buildings is *not* first of all any person's experience of a building, it is necessarily a constructed one; an experience imagined in a particular way by the architect prior to any person's arrival at the building. So despite the appeals made to confirm the 'naturalness' of the point of view of a promenade it should be acknowledged that the relation of any person's temporal experience (of the building) to the

promenade (as constructed by the work of the architect) is a problematic one.⁵

I will return to some of the issues raised here at the paper's end. But first to the work of this paper which is to revisit a project somewhat sidelined in Le Corbusier's archive to see what it might give up about the way in which a promenade constructs experience. The project re-visited in the name of the promenade is the *World Museum* project of 1928. It is a project treated in the critical literature as of marginal interest to the themes of Le Corbusier's work and, for that reason, it is a project with which the reader may be unfamiliar. I will begin by giving a brief background to the project.

THE WORLD MUSEUM OF 1928

The project for a *World Museum*, designed in early 1928, was intended to be built in Geneva as a 'museum of knowledge' within a World City commissioned of Le Corbusier and his cousin Pierre Jeanneret for the Union of International Associations of Brussels. The philosopher, and officer of the International Bibliographical Institute, Paul Otlet represented the Union in correspondence with the architects. Not only did Otlet provide a brief of functional requirements for this totalised city he also forwarded by mail what amounted to architectural suggestions for the project. These suggestions included drawings of emblematic plan forms which were perhaps intended as models for the design of the city: a prompt for the architects.⁶ In the drawing sent by Otlet there are diagrammatic figures which illustrate variations on the arrangement of simple geometric shapes around open centres, concentric rings and spirals.⁷ The building eventually designed was shaped as a helicoidal ziggurat formed out of a continuous spiraling ramp.⁸

In the archive of Le Corbusier the *World Museum* is a precursor (in plan diagram at least) to a set of projects, hereafter to be referred to as the spiral museums.⁹ Those designs include the scheme for the *Museum of Contemporary Art* in Paris (1931), project for a *Museum of Unlimited Extension* (1939), the *Cultural Centre of Ahmednabad Museum* (1954), the

National Museum of Western Art in Tokyo (1957), and the *Museum and Art Gallery of Chandigarh* (completed in 1970).¹⁰ The spiral museum design also appears in the layout of urban design schemes such as the design for Rio de Janeiro (1929) and Saint-Die (1946).¹¹ As a project the spiral museum occupies the archive in every decade from the 1920s until the architect's death.

In the critical literature little is made of this occurrence, this design's constant return, nor indeed of the spiral museum as a project within the archive. The built versions have not been considered remarkable in their own terms.¹² What little critical interest that there is focuses upon the spiral form itself. Thus the spiral has been seen to stand for the architect's interest in the symbolism of nature and patterns of growth¹³ and archetypal forms.¹⁴ Yet the drawings from the *Oeuvre Complete* of the *World Museum* project are also manifestly setting out a promenade. This is a museum in which a spectator takes up an itinerary of history set out along a continuous wall; an itinerary carrying the spectator from the centre to edge of the museum, and it is this aspect of the design - how this promenade is being figured in the drawings - into which I inquire. In order to map out the promenade of the museum I point to a coincidence of figures - of the figure of this plan with that of a labyrinth.¹⁵ In literally appearing to take up the plan form of the labyrinth figure the project thus might be viewed as rehearsing the qualities of labyrinthine paradox (a recognition of a particular type of doubling).

THE LABYRINTH - FIGURING THE EXPERIENTIAL OF ARCHITECTURE

What is a labyrinthine paradox? Labyrinths 'encode doubleness.'¹⁶ The way in which they do so is observable of any maze figure. The images of which I speak offer a plan view describing the walls which direct the path toward the centre of the maze and out again. On the basis of this privileged (ie. plan) view it is possible, for amusement, to trace out with a finger or a point (and without much difficulty) a line taking in the journey from entry to centre or vice versa. This is especially simple when the maze is unicursal, that is, a maze in which the whole figure is described by one path.¹⁷ However to imagine the experience of being *within* the labyrinth (unaided by this knowledge) and attempting to find one's way is altogether different. At this level of engagement with the labyrinth a myopia of vision is extended through the senses of the occupant into a psychological state of disorientation. It is an interminable and perplexing journey. Thus at one level the labyrinth is a site of

knowledge of movement and, at another, it is a site of blindness.

The difference between these two views, and their accompanying states of being, is not simply marked, it is extreme; and yet these two states are described by the one labyrinth figure.¹⁸ I am arguing that this figure opens a discourse about experience within the archive of Le Corbusier on the basis that it is useful to extend that split of viewing conditions of a labyrinth into two separate embodied subjects (who might be read within Le Corbusier's plans). These spectators upon the promenade of the *World Museum* I name the narrated spectator and the wandering spectator; representing states of knowledge and myopia respectively.¹⁹ So in returning to the drawings of the *World Museum* as they appear in the *Oeuvre Complete*²⁰ and taking up their coincidence with the labyrinth figure, I begin by describing the promenade of that spectator wandering within the museum's walls.

The labyrinthine form of the museum plan is explicit, the general plan illustrates a wall inscribed as a continuous square spiral. The itinerary of the spectator within the museum is prescribed and enclosed by the wall. In the next detailed plan greater detail with regard to the route is revealed, the arrows show the itinerary of the promenade to be from the centre to the periphery. Two runs of columns follow the spiralling wall and divide the route into three parallel portions. The accompanying sketch section illustrates the role assigned to each of the spaces; spaces named for the purpose of cataloguing the contents of the museum. Apart from symbolising the building as a 'catalogue' the section illustrates particular spatial and experiential qualities with consequences for the spectator. The spaces shown in section are 'blind.' They are formed of solid walls and thus a view to an exterior is not offered within the itinerary of the spectator, at least not one by which the spectator might be orientated. The experience of a labyrinth, of a perplexing journey, already set out in the itinerary of the plan is re-described in the space of the route; it encloses and blinds the spectator.²¹

The final drawing produces the plan at a greater level of detail again and introduces a further level of complexity for the wandering spectator on the promenade. At this level the route through the spaces and the relationship between the three portions of that route becomes convulsed. The promenade literally takes on a spatial configuration that closes down movement for the spectator within the space. Partitions effectively chop up the lengths

of the spiraling tunnel space into a finer scale of blind alleys. The meandering pattern of movement that these partitions create literally adds to the extent of the promenade the spectator must take. There is another peculiarity of representation that can be noted of this drawing. The arm of the spiral plan has been carved off, the entire form is not illustrated. This carving off is mirrored in the experience of the spectator. The spectator's placement at any point on the journey is radically disconnected from a view of the overall plan of the space or other markers for orientation. Thus knowledge of a relative position is denied the spectator (what remains of their itinerary or where they might be with regard to any other location). The line of experience is closely contained. In this state of disorientation what does the spectator have to go forward with? Literally what they find of their experience: for by this containment a strange liberty is granted to this wandering spectator, to find their experience at the very point of their movement, in their distracted choice of a way to move.

Yet, in here glancing over the plans, there is a spectator experiencing the journey in another way, like the end of the point held in the hand of those who may view over the maze. This position and movement along the line is of course identified with the hand of the architect, Daedalus/Le Corbusier. The spectator taking up this position upon the promenade is subject to a narration of their experience. They are acting with a tacit knowledge, by in fact, restoring the experience set out by the architect in all its detail, reacting to their journey like a reader to a text.²² They rely on the architect as narrator or guide by following. Thus, within the museum that spectator can be understood to be upon Ariadne's thread rather than without it. The figure of the labyrinth/museum is described by this itinerary in a particular way, that is, in its totality by the movement of the spectator. For the narrated spectator this is a narrative (a thread) clearly identified and unfolding before them.

The coincidence of the figure of the labyrinth with the *World Museum* project is thus revealing in the following terms. There is a spectator wandering, within its labyrinth, who is defined by the limits of their perception (their myopic state) and for whom the museum's architectural promenade is literally 'born' in front of their blind eyes. Yet paradoxically there is also a spectator whose every move is predetermined by a figuration, an incessant narration of architecture as a sequence of experience, placing the spectator, in advance, on a thread that must be taken.²³ The blinded state of the wandering spectator

turns movement into a question; a question requiring an action. The narrated spectator moves with ease along the promenade knowingly indulging the experience that a narration grants. In these terms what appears as an equivalent journey for each spectator is, in fact, a radically differentiated experience.

What assumptions does Le Corbusier make about how we would experience buildings? In a description of a subsequent spiral museum design Le Corbusier expresses some concern and assures the reader that: "The museum can be developed to a considerable length without the square spiral becoming a labyrinth."²⁴ Le Corbusier's concern to distance the labyrinth figure from his work is double-edged: on the one hand, he expresses an anxious disavowal of its complications, yet on the other, he uneasily acknowledges the evident possibilities of a labyrinth being somehow duplicated in the plans he makes. Either way the labyrinth figure appears incorporated in the architect's assumptions of the experience of architecture.

How do these assumptions bear upon the larger idea that Le Corbusier has for the architectural promenade? Or at least for how that promenade appears, or is assumed to be constructed, in his work.

As I suggested earlier, the promenade that Le Corbusier devises for his buildings is not any person's experience it is a constructed one; an experience imagined in a particular way by the architect prior to any person's arrival. This situation occurs despite what appears in Le Corbusier's writings of the promenade as claims to the creation of a purely 'natural' point of view. Thus, as was earlier suggested, the relation of any person's temporal experience (of the building) to the promenade (as constructed by the work of the architect) remains problematic (ie. there is more at stake here than this apparently simple idea suggests). The problematic of the construction of the promenade might be further delineated by putting the following question, namely, how are these spectator's found in the *World Museum* (the spectator who wanders and the spectator subject to a narration) implicated here?

THE PROMENADE AND THE PHOTOGRAPHS OF THE *VILLA SAVOYE*

Beatriz Colomina has proposed a spectator, similar to the one subject to a narration, present in Le Corbusier's representations of his work. Colomina shows how Le Corbusier's architectural promenade

is produced by the images of the media in which it is portrayed. The photographs of the *Villa Savoye* (1928) that appear in the *Oeuvre Complete* are explained by Colomina as such a site of the production of the promenade.²⁵ She points out that the impression taken by the spectator of these photographs is to sense that someone was only moments ago present: “in Le Corbusier’s [spaces] the impression is that somebody was just there, leaving as traces a coat and a hat lying on the table.”²⁶ It is not difficult to imagine that that someone who just left the space is the spectator’s guide or narrator along the promenade of the Villa. Colomina points quite specifically to this particular guide who appears on the promenade before the spectator and the spectator’s role as voyeur.²⁷ She writes of these images:

*We are following somebody, the traces of his existence presented to us in the form of a series of photographs of the interior. The look into these photographs is a forbidden look. The look of a detective. A voyeuristic look.*¹

The narrator, whom the reader/spectator is subject to, makes a graphic appearance in Le Corbusier’s representations of his work. To adopt a legal metaphor it can be said that there is one contract here between a spectator and narrator/architect in construction of the promenade. The potential presence of the wandering spectator (found in the *World Museum*) is effaced because the spectator here present, bound in this contract and described in this representation of the promenade, is being subject to a narration. Yet there is something uncomfortable about this finding - this perfect match between narration and promenade - for it appears to be insisting that architecture is being read purely as pre-determining signs or texts (experience is *just* a matter of subjection to narration). So what of this wandering spectator and their appearance here and the possibility of a second contract? The wandering spectator, rather than being effaced, might also be hidden somewhere within this construction of the promenade.

Returning to the photographs representing the promenade of the *Villa Savoye*, and the reading of them; that second contract of the promenade can be understood in the following terms. That is to suppose that the guide/narrator who appears (or rather disappears) upon the promenade of the *Villa Savoye* is not someone to follow but literally constitutes an invitation to experience the building - as if Le Corbusier were saying to the spectator of these images: “This is the promenade, why not try it for yourself.” The spectator is being asked to take

the place of the narrator on the promenade and the narrator has been erased by this overlay: that spectator (wandering guideless) is alone. How has that erasure of the narrator effected the spectator’s experience?

The spectator subject to a narrator disappears to be replaced by a wandering spectator who takes on the experience of the promenade apparently freely rather than strictly by the narrator’s determination. Both the wandering and narrated spectators’ experience can be delineated; they are imagined differently, as the reading of the *World Museum* as labyrinth has shown. (To return to the labyrinth metaphor, and picture again that delineation, the narrated spectator is identified by their knowledge of an overview, that is possible though withheld, while the wandering spectator, in contrast, remains ignorant or disinterested in the possibility of that overview.)

Thus a gap appears to have opened upon the promenade, revealed by the distinction between a spectator subject to the precise narration provided by the guide upon the promenade and a wandering spectator finding their way on the promenade without it. Yet this is not a gap which might be easily explained as the difference between a representation of experience of the promenade, on the one hand, and an actual experience of any person’s walk along the promenade (a somehow purely ‘natural’ point of view), on the other: between, say, a theory and a practice of the promenade. The wandering spectator I have identified here cannot simply be described as an ‘any person’ experiencing a ‘natural’ point of view; for I have argued that the wandering spectator is represented in the archive of Le Corbusier through a particular figure of experience (the labyrinth) to produce a particular spectator.

The labyrinth, understood as a figure descriptive of paradoxical experiences, has shown something at stake here in the representation of the promenade; a double for how this representation might be read as standing for the experience of a spectator of this architecture, and prompts the question- who is more the perfect subject here?²⁸

“Is it I who dreams, or is it my narrator carried away by his imagination?”²⁹

NOTES

¹ Le Corbusier and Pierre Jeanneret, *Oeuvre Complete, 1929-1934* trans. Pierre-Alain Croset, quoted in “The Narration of Architecture,” *Architectureproduction*

- (New York: Princeton Architectural Press, 1988), p. 201.
- ² Le Corbusier, *The Ideas of Le Corbusier on Architecture and Urban Planning* trans. and ed. Jacques Guiton, (New York: George Braziller, 1981), p. 43.
- ³ Le Corbusier, *Journey to the East* trans. and ed. Ivan Zaknic (Cambridge, Massachusetts: M.I.T. Press, 1987), and *Towards a New Architecture* (London: Architectural Press, 1987), (specifically the "Illusion of Plans," p. 175-198.)
- ⁴ Pierre-Alain Croset argues that Le Corbusier's statement of the promenade of the Villa Savoye captures/represents our temporal experience (direct confrontation) of a built object; succeeding to "evoke all the perceptions the body senses inside a building" "The Narration of Architecture," p. 202.
- ⁵ This problematisation is addressed in Beatriz Colomina's account of architecture in modernity-*Privacy and Publicity: Modern Architecture as Mass Media* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: M.I.T. Press, 1994). Colomina shows that when architecture enters the modern mass media; the multiple possibilities for the representation of the object of architecture; drawings, photographs, writings and films, make for a multiplicity of boundaries for the object. These multiple boundaries, capable of contradicting each other, bring that object's status as singular into question. This in turn makes for difficulties in presuming a unified subject that stands before this fragmented object (p. 13-15). Thus it follows that the relation of any person, standing before and entering the buildings of Le Corbusier, to the promenade, as constructed by the work of the architect, is a problematic one (ie. can there be a totalised and direct translation of these 'constructions' for the 'performance' of the promenade?).
- ⁶ Here I am referring to the work of Giuliano Gresleri who researched the background to the World City project at the Fondation Le Corbusier, Paris, see "The Mundaneum Plan," *In the Footsteps of Le Corbusier* ed. Carlo Palazzolo and Riccardo Vio, (New York: Rizzoli, 1991), pp. 93-114.
- ⁷ Otlet's drawing is reproduced in Gresleri, "The Mundaleum Plan," fig. 81.
- ⁸ The Mundaneum scheme is reproduced in Le Corbusier's *Oeuvre Complete 1910-1965* (Zurich: Girsberger, 1967), pp. 234-235.
- ⁹ Stanislaus von Moos refers to these projects as a typological set within Le Corbusier's work, in *Le Corbusier: Elements of a Synthesis* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: M.I.T. Press, 1980), p. 100.
- ¹⁰ Le Corbusier, *Oeuvre Complete 1910-1965* pp. 234-251.
- ¹¹ See *Le Corbusier: Works and Projects* (Barcelona: Gustavo Gili, 1991), pp. 178-179, 184-185.
- ¹² Deborah Gans comments on the National Museum of Art in Tokyo that the 'lighting (is) so ill-suited to the illumination of art that it renders some of the spiral gallery unusable' *The Le Corbusier Guide* (New York: Princeton Architectural Press, 1987), p. 148. Stanislaus von Moos says that "in Corbusier's work the spiral remained an abstract concept; it never became a powerful architectural image." *Le Corbusier: Elements of a Synthesis* p. 100.
- ¹³ With regard to the spiral museums William Curtis writes "In the 1930s Le Corbusier became fascinated with the ideas of Matila Ghyka on proportion in nature ... and it seems likely that he must have known about D'Arcy Thompson's classic work, *On Growth and Form*, which described growth and transformations in nature in mathematical terms." *Le Corbusier: Ideas and Forms* (Oxford: Phaidon, 1986), p. 117. Stanislaus von Moos quotes from the architect, "The spiral fascinated Le Corbusier because it follows 'natural laws of growth, laws which underlie all manifestations of organic life.'" *Le Corbusier: Elements of a Synthesis*, p. 100.
- ¹⁴ According to Gresleri, "The Mundaneum [World Museum] ... has come to coincide with the image of the 'conical pyramid' ... according to the traditional, classical image that the temple of heaven and the mountain of the world (sacred mountain and ziggurat) has assumed in ancient iconography." Gresleri, "The Mundaleum Plan," p. 103.
- ¹⁵ While I have not found a direct comparison of figures elsewhere the labyrinth does appear (however briefly) in the margins of criticism of Le Corbusier's work. For example, Colin Rowe uses "labyrinthine" as an adjective to describe the disposition of objects - "a labyrinthine construction of miscellaneous partitions which propagate a centrifugal stress." "La Tourette," *The Mathematics of the Ideal Villa and Other Essays* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: M.I.T. Press, 1984), p. 195.
- Kenneth Frampton uses the term labyrinth metaphorically in describing the Venice Hospital project of 1964. "Nothing could surely be more Greek than this last design, laid out like a hospice in the underworld- a Minoan labyrinth suspended over a lagoon." "Le Corbusier and the Dialectical Imagination," *In the Footsteps of Le Corbusier* p. 249.
- Vincent Scully writes of the Villa Savoye: "It is as labyrinthine as a brain." "Le Corbusier, 1922-1965,"

- Le Corbusier: The Garland Essays* ed. H. Allen Brooks (New York: Garland, 1987), p. 50.
- 16 “As images ... labyrinths are convertible and relative: what you see and feel and understand one moment can shift completely the next like a reversible figure, an optical illusion. Thus labyrinths encode the very principle of doubleness.” Penelope Reed Doob *The Idea of the Labyrinth from Classical Antiquity through the Middle Ages* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1990), p. 1.
- 17 The maze may be thought of in two categories, unicursal (single path) and multicursal (many paths). For a description of these categories see W. H. Mathews, *Mazes and Labyrinths: Their History and Development* (New York: Dover, 1970), p. 182-192. See also Penelope Reed Doob, *The Idea of the Labyrinth* pp. 39-63.
- 18 Mark Trieb comments on this difference in discussing architecture and its representation in drawing. He notes with regard to the labyrinth, that “the idea (drawn) is completely different from the experience” “Architecture versus Architecture: Is an image a reality?” *AAQ*, v. 9, n. 4, (1977), p. 8.
- 19 Penelope Reed Doob speaks of “maze treaders” and “maze viewers” as spectators of the labyrinth, “Introduction,” *The Idea of the Labyrinth*.
- 20 Le Corbusier, *Oeuvre Complete 1910-1965* pp. 234-235.
- 21 Gresleri gives this type of description to the space of the museum, of its ‘tunnel’ qualities. Gresleri, “The Mundaleum Plan,” p. 109.
- 22 Roland Barthes, in discussing the ways that a text might be approached by a reader, makes some observations on reading which are useful to compare with this narrated spectator’s journey through a labyrinth. Barthes argues that for the reader to take up an account of the author’s presence in a text (their thread) serves to limit the meaning that can be drawn from that text. In finding its Author, the text will be assigned a meaning that will effectively close it (against further interpretation). See “The Death of the Author,” *Image-Music-Text* (New York: Noonday Press, 1988). In a similar way the narrated spectator would find themselves lost in the labyrinth if they did not consciously take up (read) the architect’s thread.
- 23 This paradox of the spectator of the labyrinth has been put in other general terms. “Often the wanderer in the labyrinth is also its creator, the prisoner of the labyrinth is also the liberated spirit” Wendy B. Faris, *Labyrinths of Language: Symbolic Landscape and Narrative Design in Modern Fiction* (Baltimore: John Hopkins University Press, 1988), p. 8.
- 24 Le Corbusier, *Oeuvre Complete 1910-1965* p. 238.
- 25 Colomina argues that it is this way of ‘looking’ of the mass media that makes architecture modern. *Privacy and Publicity*, pp. 5-9.
- 26 Colomina, *Privacy and Publicity* p. 283.
- 27 To illustrate her case Colomina reproduces two of the seminal images of the Villa Savoye, a view of the entrance hall and a view of the roof garden. *Privacy and Publicity*, p. 285, 288.
- 28 I would like to acknowledge thought provoking discussions with Dr. John Macarthur and Mark Hiley regarding the promenade.
- 29 Le Corbusier, *Journey to the East* p. 83.