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Davis Scherer

Virginia Commonwealth University

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Le Corbusier's Urban Planning and its Lasting Effects on City Design in Imperialist Countries and Abroad

Davis Scherer

Abstract

In the both the periods between and after the World Wars, the French government expressed an increased interest in redeveloping Paris and the surrounding suburbs. It was during this push to renovate the wreckage and to improve the living situation of the impoverished that modernist sentiment first flourished in the country. This paper examines not only the effects of modernism's rise in France, as well as Le Corbusier's urban planning efforts therein, but also the diffusion of modernist principles into colonial holdings of major European powers touched by modernism. Using both analyses of Le Corbusier's work and case studies of modernism in countries such as India, Brazil, Mexico, and China, and iterations both in and outside of France, I have come to the conclusion that as modernism was absorbed into the architectural vernacular of countries such as this, it took on new ideologies based on cultural values. This adaption, often necessary growths in order to promote the acceptance thereof in each country, created distinct forms of architecture and urban planning unique to the cultural context they promulgated in.

French Modernism

In the early twentieth century, the first and second world wars left much of Europe in shambles, and its residents destitute. In Paris specifically, a debate arose as to how to best handle the renovation of much of the city (in particular, the impoverished areas on the outskirts of the city). After World War One, the general sentiment was one that looked towards 'nostalgic modernism,' which is the idea that moving forward as a society encompassed the preservation of historical landmarks and traditional façades into the rebuilt city landscape. As World War Two approached and the Vichy regime took power, a far more brutalist approach arose, and the modernism associated with Le Corbusier grew up in France. Le Corbusier's industrial modernism draws from a stark and linear aesthetic, and utilizes the mass production of a few key elements (primarily reinforced concrete, steel, and glass) to create large scale public works. The projects envisioned by Le Corbusier and his contemporaries recalled the massive scale of Hausmannization, which was the standardization of Parisian façades that has defined its identity in the modern age. However, these twentieth century projects, such as the *Plan Voisin for Paris*, *The Ville Contemporaine*, and the *Ville Radieuse*, were never fully realized. They were all driven by the ideology of 'antisocial urbanism,' a philosophy championed by Le Corbusier, which sought to reduce interpersonal relations outside of the workplace by strategically incorporating mixed-use real estate into large-scale residence projects, reducing transportation time between work and home, and, perhaps most importantly, reducing the time spent at work by implementing a series of reforms not unlike the assembly line to improve productivity and eliminate the waste of energy and time to create a more utopian society.

Main Claim

The modernism manifested by Le Corbusier's urban planning projects in France embodied the culture it grew up in, and as it filtered out into the architectural vernacular abroad, the distributary channels transformed into practices that reflected their own cultural surroundings.



Urban Studies Projects for Montevideo, Uruguay
Le Corbusier, 1929

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Modernism Abroad

As modernism took root outside of Europe, it was adapted to fit the cultural landscape it was meant to thrive in. In Mexico, for instance, the pre-Hispanic architecture was heavily adorned and monumental in scale. For the revolutionary governments that took power in the country, it was necessary to incorporate this ornamentation into the façades of public buildings so the general populous would be more inclined to accept the development into the local architectural vernacular. In Brazil, some of the best known modernist works exist, such as the entire city of Brasilia, the National Cathedral in Brasilia, the National Congress of Brazil, and the Casa Modernista. It is worth noting that Brazil has accepted modernism more than most countries, but it was not initially that way. The Portuguese bourgeois who ruled the country while it was still a colony were advocates for the Neoclassical Revival style of architecture, and when modernism first appeared, it was shunned and disregarded. Brazilian architecture became marked by massive column-like elements, often crafted from concrete, and wide, squat profiles in order to best reflect the previous culture of the country. On the far side of the world, in India, Le Corbusier was commissioned to craft a city plan for the perfecture capital of Chandigarh. In India, there was a need for ease of transportation in part because of its status as a capital and a hub of work and movement, and for that reason, his plans focused around easing transit from area to area by constructing large thoroughways through the city. Culture, in modernism, dictated the form of developments.

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