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1 Charles L'Eplattenier, *Au Sommet* (1907). Oil on canvas



2 Octave Matthey, C.-E. Jeanneret and Louis Houriet working on the sgraffito decoration on the Villa Fallet, La Chaux-de-Fonds (1907)

I

CHARLES-EDOUARD JEANNERET

La Chaux-de-Fonds, where Le Corbusier was born on 6 October 1887, is a frontier town in the north-west of Switzerland, situated between two ridges of the Jura, not far from the French border. The valley, austere and remote, 300 feet above sea level, is almost alpine in character. The broad shoulders of the mountains are cut by ravines and gorges which expose the rock. Charles L'Eplattenier's paintings depict this scenery with its wide horizons, often hung with clouds, occasionally offering a glimpse southward into the sunnier plains of the Swiss midlands.

Even today, the people of La Chaux-de-Fonds like to speak of their history as being revolutionary, and they are proud of their democratic tradition. The same holds true for Le Corbusier: 'I need not be ashamed of my origins. The mountains of Neuchâtel have witnessed a past of liberty, ingenuity and courage.' Since the twelfth and thirteenth centuries, the eras of the Albigensian wars, religious minorities from southern France retreated into the Jura valleys to escape persecution and repression. Protestant refugees from the south and from Burgundy arrived during the Wars of Religion, especially after the Edict of Nantes in the sixteenth century. Le Corbusier liked to think of himself as being part of this tradition. About the region's struggle for independence from the Prussians who had remained rulers of Neuchâtel, and thus of La Chaux-de-Fonds, even after 1814 when the county of Neuchâtel had become a Swiss canton, he reminisced:

On 1 March 1848, my grandfather Jeanneret-Rauss went with Fritz Courvoisier, on foot, from La Chaux-de-Fonds to Neuchâtel and captured the castle without shedding a drop of blood. He was one of the leaders of the revolution. My great-grandfather was a revolutionary too, and died as a result of his imprisonment.¹

Le Corbusier did not, to be sure, always consider his Swissness to be an advantage. In order to ease his way into the Paris establishment, he went far in demonstrating his French ancestry. A group of houses not far from Le Locle, a few miles west of La Chaux-de-Fonds, called 'Les Jeannerets' on a seventeenth-century map, substantiated this version of his genealogy. These sixteenth-century stone houses, which were gutted by a fire in 1918, displayed a form of low-pitched roof similar to the vernacular house styles of the Languedoc, a region in southern France.²

While its conclusiveness may be questionable, the demonstration at least unam-

biguously indicates the architect's determination to be part of the Mediterranean world, suggesting that his emotional links with the Mediterranean were more the result of a cultural choice than that of a natural condition. In fact, more than anything else, this choice reflects the experiences of years spent in a landscape where the snow under the trees does not melt for almost six months.

La Chaux-de-Fonds lives by its watchmaking industry, and both Le Corbusier's father and grandfather worked there as enamellers of watch faces. His father, Georges Edouard Jeanneret-Perret, served as president of the local Alpine Club for many years, whereas his mother was a piano teacher. The authority she exerted over her two sons can hardly be overestimated. She adored her elder son, Albert, who received all the support he needed to become a musician. Charles-Edouard, the future Le Corbusier, was sent to the local Art School in the hope that he would become an engraver and make his career in the field of artistically decorated watch cases. Throughout his entire life, he felt the urge to fight for his mother's love. In turn, her Protestant morality and standpoints appear to have profoundly shaped the architect's own feelings about life, work, and social responsibility. He liked to quote her saying 'Whatever you do, do it.'³

CHARLES L'EPLATTENIER AND THE ART SCHOOL IN LA CHAUX-DE-FONDS

The art school in La Chaux-de-Fonds formed the background to Charles-Edouard Jeanneret's education for sixteen years (1900-1916). The director of the school, Charles L'Eplattenier, a painter and inspiring teacher who had been trained in Paris and Budapest and who was deeply committed to the reform movement in the applied arts, guided the student's first experiences in the arts and later provided him with his first teaching position (1913). Jeanneret spent three years learning the craft of engraving watch cases, an exact and demanding skill requiring precision and strict concentration. One false move and an expensive piece of gold or silver could be ruined.⁴

The school's atmosphere was characterized by an emphasis on craftsmanship and, due to the director's intellectual temperament, a passion for ideas. L'Eplattenier was about twenty-five when Jeanneret entered the school. The Ecole d'Art itself had been founded in 1872, primarily in order to supply the local watch industry with engravers of watch faces, in view of the long-term international success of this product. But in 1903, when L'Eplattenier took over the directorship, a redefinition of the school's purpose was urgently needed. Its narrow pre-professional orientation had become problematic at a moment when watch manufacturing was moving toward industrialization. In fact, the demand for expensive, engraved pocket watches was rapidly diminishing as the wrist-watch was beginning to conquer the international markets.⁵

L'Eplattenier realized that if the school was to survive new fields had to be opened up for the application of the skills that, up to then, had been almost exclusively directed toward the decoration of watch faces.⁶ In 1905, he was able to realize the first steps



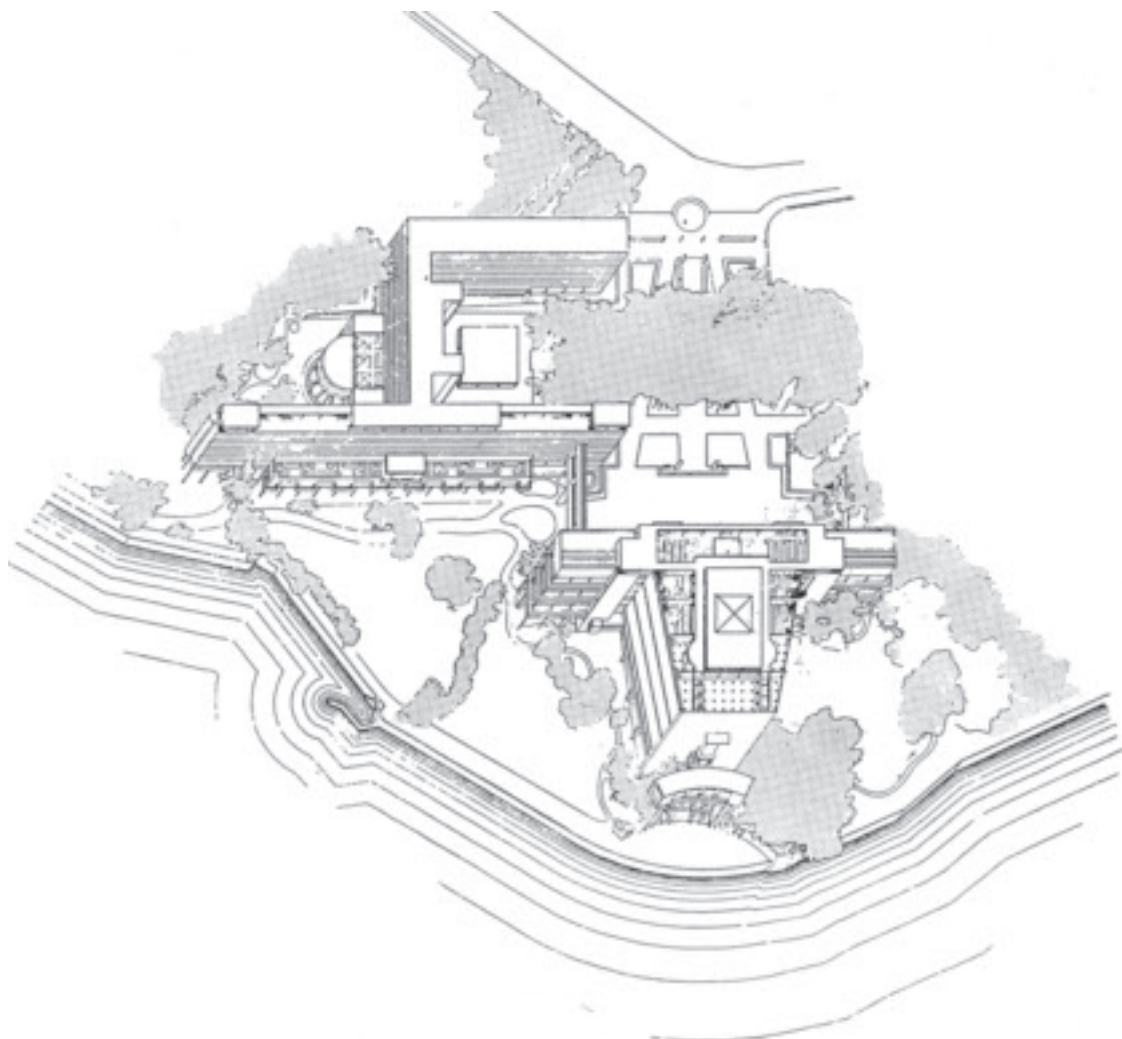
3 La Chaux-de-Fonds, aerial view (c. 1920)



4 Charles-Edouard Jeanneret, watchcase design and realization (c. 1906)



5 Mucha, advertisement for an edition of artistic watches, Georges Favre-Jacot & Co., Le Locle



253 Le Corbusier and Pierre Jeanneret, League of Nations Palace, Geneva (1927). Competition entry. Axonometric view



254 Henri-P. Nénot, Julien Flegenhaimer, Carlo Broggi, Camille Lefèbvre, Joseph Vago, League of Nations Palace as built (1935-36), Geneva. Postcard

VI

PUBLIC BUILDINGS

Town halls, churches, palaces and castles for kings, as well as, more recently, parliaments for delegates of the electorate, have been among the undertakings most likely to bring the architect prestige and perhaps even fame. More than anything else, such buildings demand expertise in the handling of conventional programmes and a sense of representation of the institution involved, whose authority, whether secular or religious, is largely defined by its age. The fact that, in the early decades of modern architecture, commissions for large-scale public buildings were therefore usually assigned to traditionalist architects comes as no surprise. Most protagonists of modern architecture would have regarded the idea of 'representation' as obsolete to begin with.

In his 'Ville contemporaine' (1922), Le Corbusier made no provision for public buildings: anonymous office towers were all that were needed for the functions of government. However, this lack of interest in traditional institutional architectural programmes did not last long. A few years later, he was already participating in an international competition for the public building of the 1920s *par excellence*: the Palace of the League of Nations (1926). The competition as such and its ensuing controversies became a phenomenal platform for his self-promotion as an architect capable of defining the space of political authority. In fact, his massive attacks on academic taste and on the formalized decision-making processes adopted by governmental authorities created little more than the space within which his own imagination as *architecte en chef* of the age now began to unfold. And the eventual debacle of the project left behind a trauma that once again appeared to confirm his tragic role as a martyr to the cause of modern architecture.

THE LEAGUE OF NATIONS COMPETITION In the aftermath of World War I, the League's political ambition of guaranteeing peace in the world had generated considerable enthusiasm among intellectuals, and Le Corbusier was no exception. For the first time in history, something like the building of a world parliament was under consideration. The possible promotional effect that could be expected from the adoption of modern architecture for such a respected official and international purpose could hardly be overestimated. For its headquarters, the League of Nations (founded in 1919, immediately after World War I) had chosen a picturesque lakeside site near Geneva. According to the competition programme, the new palace was to include an office building, accommodation for temporary committees, and a general assembly

hall. Three hundred and sixty-seven projects – a total of eight miles of plans – were submitted to the jury before the deadline at the end of January 1927. Since the jury included architects such as H.P. Berlage (Netherlands), Victor Horta (Belgium), Joseph Hoffmann (Austria) and Karl Moser (Switzerland), all closely allied to the mythical origins of modern architecture (France, the UK and a number of other countries were represented by established Beaux-Arts architects), even competitors who were committed to the new architecture had a realistic chance of success.

At first, the jury seemed to acknowledge the exceptional qualities of the project submitted by Le Corbusier and Pierre Jeanneret; in fact it was the only project of a modern character to be seriously considered.¹ Yet, unable to come to a clear decision, and in contrast to the previously agreed rules, the jury eventually awarded nine tied prizes. Le Corbusier and Pierre Jeanneret were thus among the winners, and had it not been for the fact that the French delegate, M. Lemaesquier, claimed that their plans failed to meet the requirements of the competition (the architects had submitted prints rather than original drawings), their project might have won first prize. Yet with this award of nine tied prizes, the jury passed the choice of project over to the politicians. And they subsequently added to the confusion by requesting four of the winning teams to develop a final project in close collaboration with one another. The resulting neo-classical pastiche was realized several years later in the (by then) International Style of government buildings (Secretariat 1936, Assembly Hall 1938).²

Even though there was no chance of the project ever being realized, shortly after 1927 Swiss experts estimated the cost of Le Corbusier's proposal to be 12.5 million Swiss francs (note that the cost of the Palace that was actually built amounted to 50 million francs). When, in the years following the competition, the architects were obliged to adapt their project to a new location, situated at a greater distance from the lake, their final scheme turned out to have a great deal in common with Corbusier's second project, elaborated in 1929. All Le Corbusier's and Jeanneret's efforts to rescue the commission proved to be of no avail,³ and finally in 1931, they filed a thirty-six page lawsuit. The reply was laconic: the League of Nations cannot comply with the claims of private persons.⁴

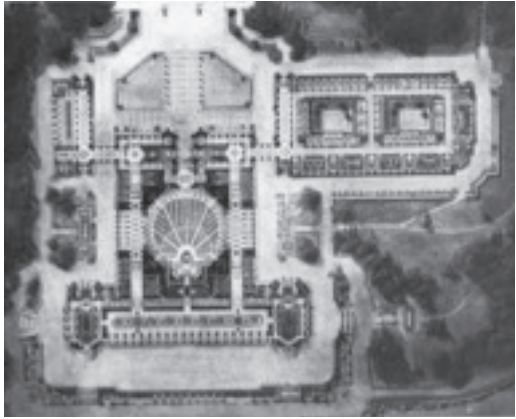
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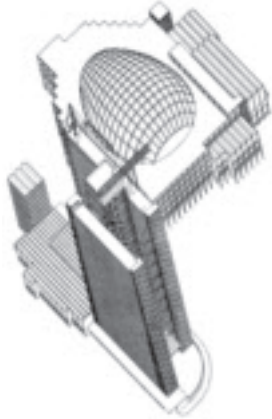
THE HUMANIST VERSUS THE UTILITARIAN IDEAL Le Corbusier and Pierre Jeanneret were not the only figureheads of the modern movement in this competition. In fact, if seen against the background of the projects submitted by Richard Neutra, the Polish group Praesens, Hans Wittwer, Hannes Meyer from Basle and others,⁵ Le Corbusier's and Pierre Jeanneret's proposal is striking in its singular control of the affirmation of a modernist idiom. On closer inspection, it does not even offer a radical alternative to the customary neo-classical composition of such buildings but looks more like an attempt to bring traditional monumentality up to date by the grand-scale incorporation of the 'Five points': pilotis, roof garden, free plan, free façade, and



255 '2 Halls of anti-acoustic format'. From Le Corbusier, *Une maison - un palais* (1928)



256 F.G. Lambert, G. Legendre & J. Camoletti, League of Nations Palace, Geneva (1927). Competition project



257 Hannes Meyer and Hans Wittwer, League of Nations Palace, Geneva (1927). Competition project

MONUMENTALITY AND THE CLASSICAL TRADITION PS TO CHAPTER VI

In his *Architecture, Power and National Identity* (London, 1992; 2nd ed. 2008, 322 f.) Lawrence J. Vale distinguishes three ways by which architects of government buildings most often respond to the problem of political representation that is inherent in this kind of programme. First, they may circumvent the problem altogether, by downplaying the building's political role and interpreting it as a mere problem of architectural aesthetics. Second, they may address it head-on by way of iconographic pastiche, i.e., by characterizing the seat of government as a visualized microcosm of the nation to which it belongs – which generally occurs by using traditional iconography of some dominant group within society. Or third, they may define the building as a symbolic anticipation of a moment in the future when the conflicts and power struggles within the state will have been resolved in harmony.

Le Corbusier, and the architecture of the modern movement altogether, tended to oscillate between the first and the third of these options. The UN Secretariat in New York, basically an office slab with the assembly rooms pushed into a low multi-purpose container at its foot, represents the first type. Its posture is low key and its political symbolism merely implied. The Soviet Palace project, 1931, and the Chandigarh Capitol Complex, 1951-64, in turn, are examples of the third type. In either case, an idealized condition of society is evoked as an industrial metaphor, i.e., via forms derived from engineering. Yet whereas the Soviet Palace's 'Constructivism' is unambiguously imbued with the vision of a future, in the Capitol buildings a high-tech morphology is converted into a personal language of existential drama. At Chandigarh, thus, engineering rhetoric could be said to have been taken over as well as been pulverized in a process of aesthetic sublimation. The result is an almost antiquarian aura – the pathos of ruins.

Paradoxically perhaps, in the logic of today, both levels of symbolism – the public-industrial as well as the highly personal – function as political representation. (Needless to insist that the second among the three options referred to by Vale, i.e., the government building as microcosm of an imagological status quo, has for a long time been considered taboo for modern architects.)



In terms of design, government buildings imply rhetoric to a greater extent than any other building programme. In the early days of functionalism, when the new architecture followed a strict regime of bio-technical functionality, rhetoric was either altogether rejected or merely tolerated as an implicit hierarchy of formal refinement within a homogeneously functional whole. Yet public buildings inevitably have to address their audiences by simultaneously assuming institutional postures that go

from the formal rigour of a state ceremony to the informality of a garden party. And it is here that the question of monumentality arises.

The concept of ‘New Monumentality’ was launched by CIAM during World War II in an attempt to subvert the monopoly held by traditionalist architects in the domain of government commissions for public buildings. Even though Le Corbusier was not directly involved when it first emerged as a concept in 1943, the projects discussed in this chapter are all part of this phenomenon (see ‘Nine Points on a New Monumentality’, a manifesto signed by Sigfried Giedion, José Luis Sert and Fernand Léger and later reprinted in Giedion’s *Architektur und Gemeinschaft*, Reinbek n.Hamburg, 1956 (Eng., *Architecture, you and me*, Cambridge MA, 1958). For a summary of the debates around this issue, see Christiane Crasemann-Collins and George R. Collins, ‘Monumentality: A Critical Matter in Modern Architecture’, in *Harvard Architectural Review*, vol. 4, 1985, pp. 15-35, and Eric Mumford, *The CIAM Discourse on Urbanism, 1928-1960* (Cambridge MA, 2000), 150-2 and *passim*). Interestingly, Le Corbusier was not even mentioned in Louis Kahn’s essay on ‘Monumentality’ that begins with a tribute to the Parthenon, an ‘unequivocal symbol of the civilization initiated in Greece’ (published one year after the ‘Nine Points’, in Paul Zucker, ed., *New Architecture and City Planning*, New York, 1944).

■

And yet, Kahn as a phenomenon is inseparable from Le Corbusier. It was Kahn who was to define the most architecturally accomplished counter-position to Le Corbusier’s Chandigarh – in his Assembly Building in Dhaka, Bangladesh (1967-75). Dhaka did not exist when the present book was first written. It is tempting, in retrospect, to view both Le Corbusier’s and Kahn’s contribution to the ‘New Monumentality’ as part of their ongoing dialogue with the classical tradition; both, after all, had placed the Parthenon at the core of their programme (see Chapter 2 of this book). Giedion had somewhat distorted the issue by discrediting 20th-century neo-classicism altogether as ‘pseudo-monumental’ (see *Architecture, you and me*, *op.cit.*). In the long run, much is to be said in favour of the more complex though admittedly ambiguous position of Giedion’s compatriot, the Swiss architectural critic Peter Meyer. In 1937, Meyer, himself severely critical of Fascist and National Socialist monumentalism, had launched the issue of modern classicism in an article on the newly opened Musée d’Art Moderne in Paris. No less than five articles on monumentality followed between 1937 and 1941, all published in *Das Werk*, and all illustrating Meyer’s view that in architecture, the ‘monumental’ will inevitably be defined by the classical tradition in some way.

Meyer not only offers a suggestive backdrop to the anti-classicist bias of Giedion’s ‘Nine Points on New Monumentality’. Compared to some debates of the 1960s, his arguments have an almost prophetic ring. By then, authors like Colin Rowe and Ken-