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The Le Corbusier Guide: An experience

Sabu Francis

In this Point of View, the author attempts to narrate his own personal experience in the usage of the book "The Le Corbusier Guide".

On the outskirts of Mumbai is a quaint little hillstation called Matheran. A 'toy' train takes you up the hills, and into a pristine green environment devoid of all motorised traffic. I had taken the Le Corbusier Guide with me, in order to study the oeuvre of Le Corbusier; but it so happened that Le Corbusier got sidelined as I got pulled into the immense greenery and red mud of Matheran. I had been reading the book on and off for several weeks now; and I was always interspersing it with my day-to-day activities. The book was gradually forming a backdrop of whatever I was doing. I was hoping that my little sojourn into Matheran will give me the time to concentrate and allow me to read the book fully. I was hoping to jot down some ideas that I could share with the readers. But alas, that was not to be. At least not the way, I had expected it to be. But it did give me some time to concentrate on what the book and Le Corbusier was all about for me.

I guess a review of a book should not be a summary, but a narrating of an experience of the usage of the book.

"The Le Corbusier Guide" by Deborah Gans, (with introductory note by Alan Plattus) Revised edition (2nd) 2000, Princeton Architectural Press, 37 East 7th Street, New York, NY 10003. pp. 285, Price: US \$ 21.95.

I do not want to get into the technical details of Le Corbusier's works here because the book does quite a good job of it, inspite of its slim size (just 285 pages, in a convenient paperback format).

To me the works of Le Corbusier had been a backdrop not just now, but at every waking moment as an architect. (There are a few other architects who also fit into that role. This seems to be the case with everyone I know, and certainly the book also assumes that. To quote from the introduction "Le Corbusier: A dialectical itinerary" by Alan Plattus, at the start of the book: "all roads lead either to or from Le Corbusier")

Being an Indian, it made all the more sense: After Chandigarh, I don't think any Indian architect can get away from Le Corbusier, even if some later generation could successfully prove that he didn't contribute as much to Indian architecture as earlier generations may have thought he did.

This delightful little book, by Deborah Gans, covers all the sixty nine extent buildings of Le Corbusier; in Europe, Japan, Russia, Africa, India, and North and South America. The thought worsed my mind 'should I use the book

like a tourist map?' That will not really do justice to the book, though the layout of the book does make it conducive for such an activity too. The volume goes about describing the projects fairly methodically, all of them laid out exactly in the same pattern. Only the introductory chapter can be considered to be a separate article in its own right. Each project is described with its address as well as little details on how to get to the project. But then there is more: a substantial part of the explanation of each project has the contextual information on the project itself.

For example, the Pavilion De L'esprit Nouveau which is visible today, is actually

a reconstruction from drawings left over by Le Corbusier. It was made fifty years after its demise. It was originally made as the French entry to an international building fair. It seems Le Corbusier was seeking sponsorship for the permanent use of that entry after the fair, but none were forthcoming, and hence it had to be demolished. The fact that it was reconstructed fifty years later, could offer some insights on how Le Corbusier is looked upon nowadays. Are we trying to stick to ideals that no longer are relevant, or are we wanting to reinterpret the works of this master, based on

"All roads lead either to or from Le Corbusier"

what is now happening amongst us? If we are doing the latter then I have no quarrel, but if we are doing the former, then I am sure Le Corbusier would be doing the proverbial turning-in-his-grave act. It would have been particularly vexing for Le Corbusier, who prided himself in envisioning his architecture that was finely tuned to the cultural, political and social ethos at that time. It is because of that capability of his; to be so utterly sensitive to the complete context of that moment; which put his works on much larger canvas than those of most other architects. So it would indeed be tragic, if all we did with this little book, was to merely quote from it.

In the back of my mind, the problem is similar to one we all face daily: when we recollect the past, are we merely quoting history or are we going to learn something from there in context of what we are today? It is often quite easy to get nicely mixed up. To make things more complicated, we sometimes pretend that the influence from the past will happen anyway, whether we bring the issue into our discussions or not. That, too me, is a simple rationalisation for not wanting to face upto reality. I myself mildly wondered whether I was falling prey to such an excuse. After much introspection, I thought that if we need to distill benefits from the past, we need to squarely take the events that happened in the past into our hands and then consciously go through them and only then can we claim that the past indeed was used creatively. At the same time, as noted before, we cannot merely indulge in a superficial quoting of history. But what is meant by "going through the past"? I wondered, and in this review may be I could lay down some salient points that came to me.

Sometime back, some students were asking me how do we measure the 'goodness' of an architectural design. It took me some time for the answer. My hypothesis was to measure the quality of a design using a 'goodness' cube which has got three 'goodness' dimensions, which I call as the *height* of plurality, *width* of issues and the *depth* of time.

The *height* of plurality measures the number of activities and people which the design caters to. For example, if I were to design a specialised air-conditioning plant, then by its very definition; it would have a lower *goodness height* than, say a residential building, which has varied number of usages and user units that it caters to. The number of position statements that a piece of architecture has on various issues that society is talking about at that point in time, will be its measure of the *width* of issues on the *goodness* cube. A private bungalow may have a smaller *goodness width* than say, a residential complex for a mixed income group. The last measure, that is, the *goodness depth* is the amount of time a piece of architecture could be seemed to be relevant to the world that uses that piece

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of architecture. If we roughly multiply (more in the minds eye, rather than using some kind of numbers) these three goodness dimensions, the volume that is yielded should determine how good that design really is to us humans.

Let me reassure the reader, that I am stating this hypothesis here only because I need to lay down how I (and hence the reader) could end up really profiting from this book. My intention is not to start a side debate on this hypothesis or impose this hypothesis on the reader. We need some methods to understand what is a good design, and I need a starting point for such an activity. The reader is free to chose any other hypothesis he/she holds as being valid to check the goodness of a design. I am sure what I speak next could be relevant with any other hypothesis on the measure of the goodness of a design. What is critical is to first agree on what we mean by the term *profiting* from this

book. An agreement is needed apriori, so that we do not end up merely rationalising as we need to use the past sensibly instead of merely quoting it or ignoring it.

Now armed with such a definition on how I can measure up a design, I can now delve into any of the various examples in this book; and then see if I could try to learn some useful lessons from the past. Let us take *Villa Schwob* for example. It is an interesting design, because at first glance an unknowing visitor can mistake it for a Frank Lloyd Wright (FLW) creation. The elevation has nice horizontal lines, and a good massing of the visual style that FLW was famous for. Now, let me see what I could glean from this particular project.

In terms of the *goodness measure* I described above, I could say that it had a fairly low *goodness width*. Though Le Corbusier had stated that he had a position statement to make regarding the impact of this design on the social issues of that time; I felt it did not come through as strongly in this particular case — which saw a law suit between the architect and the client. According to Ms Deborah Gans, she felt that Villa Schwob incorporates "the spirit, if not techniques of the Domino system" which was devised by Le Corbusier along with the swiss engineer, Juste Schnieder and concrete manufacturer, Max DuBois. The Domino system was to be a building system that could replenish housing stock destroyed in the war; something that would have earned a high *width* value, as per my system of design measurement, had it been true in case of Villa Schwob also. Though the editor claimed that the system is similar, I felt disappointed when I learnt that "the structural system, the client's expanding programme, increases in square footage, and superior materials resulted in cost overruns which nearly doubled the budget of the house".

The house was for the affluent Schwob family, and had specialised spaces such as an exclusive smoking room for Anatole Schwob. Therefore, I felt the *height of plurality* was also fairly low in this project, because of its esoteric

nature. And if someone asks me, to how much time-period would that house be relevant for its intended (or even unintended) use, I could possibly state that as it was specifically catering to the esoteric tastes of the family, it may not end up being too relevant after the passing away of the family. Nothing is mentioned regarding other usages of the house, which made me wonder whether after the law-suit, etc. did the house turn into a kind of a sculptural piece; to be dissected by art and architecture historians? Thus, even the "depth of time" factor is low in this house. All in all, in this particular example, I did not find a good *goodness volume* even though the editor has used fairly evocative language to praise the house. To the reader, it should not matter whether I have pointed out a good design or a bad one; what is important to note is I could still profit from the study of the project. At least, I can safely state that I do not have much to learn from Villa Schwob.

The other example I could delve into is the Chapelle Notre-Dame-du-haut at Ronchamp. If once again, I could use my simple system of design goodness measurement; I would give it high marks for the "depth of time" and the "width of issues". Even though "height of plurality" may not be a high one from the simple definition given earlier, it still would be fairly high, because of the ripple down effect that this particular project brought to any religious place designed anywhere. I believe the Ronchamp chapel has relevance to all religions. In fact, I can easily state that there must be hardly any architect who would not have been influenced by this particular piece of architecture,

irrespective of the religion they may be designing for. What is most remarkable in the project, according to me, is that Le Corbusier was not compelled to bring out the "architect's style" into the project. In fact to use Deborah's words: "The chapel is unique if not anti-typological within the work of an architect known for his typologies. Others saw its organic form as a humanistic enrichment of modern architecture and its modular proportions as evidence of its underlying rationality."

I think these two examples should suffice to explain to the reader, how I plan to use the book. Obviously, the exact details on the design measurement method I have proposed here would defer from person to person. The method described here could be a starting point just in case the reader needs such a starting point.

A book such as this cannot be read in a day or two. It could be taken on a guided tour of Le Corbusier's works, and actually the slim size would be handy for such a work. However, my opinion is that anyone embarking on such a journey would require more material than just this book in order to make sense of Le Corbusier's works, especially when they experience them, out there in the real world. If the author had intended such a use, then I am not sure if the intention was well placed. I suspect the book may get misused by those who are seeking superficial profundity in this fast moving world. In order to fully critique Le Corbusier's works, there should have been much more details — which may have made such a paper back edition practically

impossible. For example; I did not get much information on the process of designing that Le Corbusier was famous for. None of his drawings or sketches are included in the project. However, I do see more use of the book for introspecting into one's own projects like the way I am doing with this little book. It can serve as a springing board that could lead to a concrete investigation of one's own works.

As I walked through the dappled moving shadows on the muddy lanes of Matheran, I realised that we should ideally walk our walk of life using such reference books. A little book, with neatly arranged contextual information that will help us compare our present with important events in history, should always help us find who we are. All we need to do is to use it for a process of investigation than just use it for empty quotations from the past.



Mr Sabu Francis obtained B.Arch(Hons) with a First-class first, from IIT Kharagpur in 1984. He was an associate of architect Hafeez Contractor till 1987. He started his own practise which has produced around 3 lakh m² of architecture in Navi Mumbai. In 1991, he won the JIIA (Journal of Indian Institute of Architects) award for excellence in architecture research. This was for a taxonomy he discovered for representing architecture using computers. Mr Sabu Francis has also written extensively on the subject of computers and architecture. His research work on use of his computer software for finding out heat loads of buildings done jointly with Prof Dr J.K.Nayak of IIT Bombay, was well appreciated by the ministry of non-conventional energy sources.

