

A notion of freedom in Le Corbusier's architecture

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“Freedom: Ronchamp. Completely free architecture”¹. This short study about the chapel of Notre Dame du Haut, written by Le Corbusier in the first person towards the end of his life, championed, in his usual apodictic style, a notion of freedom that apparently dispensed plastic works from abiding by academic formulae. Not for nothing is the idea of freedom usually associated with daring, arbitrariness, spontaneity and independence. But freedom also enshrines other semantic nuances that are, in some respects, the opposite of its very essence: its definition, it would seem, is not without contradiction. This is why we will not address here the perhaps more undisciplined and complacent concept of freedom commonly upheld by an artistic practice dedicated to individual expression. On the contrary, we will develop the implications of another option that the same architect could have chosen at the beginning of his creative process, even before inventing the form. The baseline hypothesis could be summarized as follows: in architecture, real freedom means inventing one's own rules.

This undoubtedly applies not only to architecture. The well-known quotes of the composer Igor Stravinsky – “thus my freedom consists in my moving about within the narrow frame that I have assigned to myself for each one of my undertakings”²– and the author Milan Kundera – “the artist invents his own rules for himself; when improvising without rules, he is, therefore, no more free than when inventing his own rules”³– not only support this hypothesis but also endow it with a certain transversality, because its *raison d'être* is presumably none other than to convey a readiness common to all conscious artistic practice in pursuit of its own legitimacy: an aim equally legitimate for the composition of music and writing of novels as for the practice of architecture. Le Corbusier himself regarded music as the freest of the arts and wondered, significantly: “What vows of obedience must music have taken beforehand?”⁴ This is not an anecdote or digression, the truth is that Le Corbusier's writings are sprinkled with countless references to creative freedom as defined in this paper, which is why said writings are used below as examples.

Freedom or liberation

Le Corbusier's diatribes against a form of academicism he regarded as obsolete and sclerotic are well known: “Academicism is

a way of not thinking that suits those who fear the anxious hours of invention”⁵, he warned. Indeed, “To free oneself entirely of academic thinking” was the eloquent title of one of his famous conferences in Buenos Aires in 1929 published in *Precisions*⁶ [Fig. 01]. Le Corbusier declared himself to be tremendously hampered by Beauxartian doctrine, even though he seemed to ignore the incipient freedom latent in a discipline of composition that used classical forms but stripped them of any transcendent meaning on the basis of repertoires that could well give rise to freer configurations than those awarded the Prix de Rome. In fact, despite his repeated declarations, he reserved the right to overhaul some Beauxartian tenets that he tried out with his mentor, Perret, albeit using certain completely revised conceptual bases, including particularly the element-based composition method championed by Julien Guadet, because it bolstered an artist's freedom more than simply adopting a style⁷.

In the first volume of *Œuvre complète*, Le Corbusier inserts, at calculated intervals between his achievements, several chapters devoted to what might be regarded as his general principles: principles because the architect swears allegiance to them in his most representative works, and general because conclusions are drawn from them and their specificities then disregarded to embody new ideals, i.e. what Hanno-Walter Kruft described as “programmatic points of his doctrine”⁸ [Fig. 02]. Le Corbusier knew that, in this way, the Dom-ino system, the ‘regulating lines’, the ‘five points’ for a new architecture and the ‘four compositions’ would be elevated to a higher plane from which his entire work would be viewed as a logical demonstration. Little did it matter that some of those works actually preceded the theoretical statement: their implicit or even unconscious nature would detract not one iota from its value. In the history of art, the example often precedes the rule, and Kant deemed this to be the faculty of the genius. As Le Corbusier himself pointed out about Cézanne and Michelangelo, “The composition of works of art is governed by rules, which can be methods that are pronounced or subtle, deliberate, [...] and even engaged by the artist's creative instinct as a manifestation of an intuitive harmony [...]”⁹.

Le Corbusier managed to cast aside the classic dogma not by challenging or breaching its laws but by encouraging it to be replaced by laws of his own that he could freely commit to. Therein lay the first –and perhaps most important– degree of freedom compared to the handed-down tenet, although to experience it, the architect had to take into account the very tradition he sought to distance himself from and posit his new precepts in contrast. This was suggested by Alan Colquhoun, who regarded Le Corbusier to be also “the only modern architect to define new architecture in terms of a set of rules”¹⁰. However, far from the dogmatism adopted by many of his acolytes and followers –and despite being a dogma based on reason–, the only purpose of the rules formulated by Le Corbusier was to give architects greater freedom as creators: “I intend to proudly safeguard my utmost freedom”¹¹.

Le Corbusier thus fended off the mirage of objectivity to which the strict observance of his new rules might theoretically lead. He understood, for example, that “to arrive at these regulating lines, there is no single, straightforward formula, in actual fact, it's a matter of inspiration or veritable creation [...]”¹². Likewise, sometime later, he reserved “the right to always query the solutions found by means of the Modulor and keep my freedom intact, which should depend only on my feelings about things, not my reasoning”¹³.

So it would seem that his determined plea for freedom referred both to freedom from supposed external constraints and the affirmation of certain principles of his own which could, in any case, only be set forth after confirming that first liberation, and which he himself would reserve the right to query or contravene in each specific work. He believed that academic tradition meant “working according to certain received orders, not according to one's own initiative”¹⁴, whereas “architecture is an act of deliberate intent”. Hence, he declared unhesitatingly, “I have determined my work”¹⁵.

As Jacques Lucan suggests, the use of the terms free or freedom by Le Corbusier always implied by counterpoint “a tradition deemed to be stagnant”¹⁶. Thus the principles meant liberation from the previous universal norm, while the work of architecture aspired to embody the achievement of complete freedom. It was, as Eric Fromm said, a matter of a first ‘negative’ freedom (freedom from) intended to enable, as a corollary, a ‘positive’ freedom (freedom to)¹⁷, in other words, a first act of liberation or liberating that would immediately guarantee the ability to act according to one's own will. Nonetheless, Le Corbusier's exceptionality might stem precisely from his ability not to forgo –as Fromm warned– the right to rebel against himself, that is, the right to object to the dictates of his own laws.

Licence and legality

In order to determine the real scope of Le Corbusier's proposal regarding the architect's creative freedom, it must be compared at this point with the meaning this concept acquired during the Italian Quattrocento under the cast-iron rules of the classic system, which was in turn the cornerstone of the truly French dogmatic classicism that Le Corbusier rebelled against (and in doing so, gained prominence). We are not yet talking about freedom, but licence.

The handbooks and treatises containing the classic theory of architecture, in Italy and France, mention the norm as often as the permitted deviation from the norm, in line with a certain laxity regarding the rules stemming from the architecture of Antiquity that fostered the adaptation of a single language to a host of different circumstances. It is no coincidence that a good few of the masterpieces of canonical classicism were actually intervention artworks –many unfinished– that were, therefore, both influenced by their context and removed from the ideal. In some of

these cases, the circumstances called for a motif, shape or configuration that could, in less compromising situations, be developed freely for no apparent reason. Thus, in a best-case scenario, a specific manner would evolve, despite such licence also being subject to abuse or even mistakes. It is, therefore, understandable that Palladio devoted one section in the first of his Four books of architecture to abuse (abusi) – “the ancients can be seen to have strayed from norms too but they never abandoned certain universal rules necessary for art”¹⁸ – and that, shortly afterwards, Teofilo Gallaccini of Sienna wrote his Treatise about the mistakes of architects as a caution or reprimand addressed to mannerist architecture and early Baroque manifestations¹⁹ [Fig. 03].

Hence, freedom in architecture is not a new idea or restricted to modernity. Vitruvius was already encouraging the use of modifications, subtractions and additions to the external appearance of buildings rather than the rigidity of his experimental system of proportions. Alberti was of the same opinion with his demand for *varietas*. Indeed, from Alberti to Guarini, classical architecture oscillated between strict obedience of norms and creative freedom. Serlio too considered the freedom of the architect to be a faculty underpinned by his judgement (*arbitrio*) which legitimised a great deal of licence regarding form. Despite, or perhaps on account of, the regulatory nature of certain parts of his treatise Serlio sanctioned well-founded variations. This flexibility and pragmatism may have been the main reasons for his success.

So, did Le Corbusier have greater freedom ‘thanks to’ his own rules than Palladio or Michelangelo ‘despite’ the classic norm? It must be admitted that if this matter is somewhat ambiguous it is because the difference between the two premises is not merely one of degree but substance. Where Le Corbusier championed a legality inherent in the work of architecture (in each work) based on the specific laws governing its formal constitution, the freedom exercised by classic architects (even the boldest ones) consisted of a relative difference of scope, always in reference to a general law that they never sought to breach or abolish [Fig. 04]. Said law sprang from a cosmological order with which the principle of imitation of nature was consistent, the principle disregarded by modern architecture in favour of abstraction. In a way, Le Corbusier was to travel the path that Friedrich Schiller had signalled previously as the one to be followed by the creative faculty, from liberating itself from others’ laws to establishing “autonomous, internal regulations” able to guarantee “the imagination the absolute right to impose its laws” solely on the basis of “the supreme internal need”²⁰. Consequently, the type of freedom that an architect like Le Corbusier was to adopt during the creative process would be fully consistent with the new criteria for legitimizing the modern project. Furthermore, whereas in the first instance it was still possible to talk about abuse or mistakes, in the second instance, the mistake would be an aesthetic category in its

own right. Le Corbusier’s stance was simply the derivative of a cultural phenomenon that was to characterize an entire era because it modified the nature of the work of art on the basis of certain inherent fundamentals, independent of any external authority. From this moment onwards, the artist, the architect in our case, had to “create whilst the rules for the creation were being established”²¹.

However – and this comment is particularly pertinent in the case of Le Corbusier – , whilst the individual creative act is part of a search whose purpose extends beyond the specific work, this suggests the existence of a set of rules that is valid for a group of works and, therefore, to a certain extent broadly applicable (but not absolute). This is the case of the ‘five points’ mentioned earlier that Le Corbusier applied during his exploration of the degree of freedom that musical theory attributes to variations on the same theme [Fig. 05]. Upon the gradual decline of these ‘five points’ throughout the cycle of the purist villas of the twenties, Focillon’s words about the mechanics of the life of forms resonate clearly, “The strictest rules, apparently intended to dry out formal matter and reduce it to extreme monotony, are precisely the ones that highlight its never-ending vitality best by its wealth of variations and astonishing fantasy of metamorphoses.”²² Not for nothing can a broad channel for artistic licence be seen in the patient search undertaken by Le Corbusier of his own work and according to his own rules, enabling his work to be analysed and ultimately reorganised into families, series and cycles. Be it the purist villas of the twenties, the masonry constructions built from the thirties onwards, or his creations for vast public programmes that he himself called his ‘great works’, in every case, the first flame of creativity spread through a series of works that confirm or deny earlier themes, successively posing new problems, until a pure, paradigmatic expression would hopefully be attained.

The game of the free plan

An analysis of the countless preliminary sketches of his projects conserved by the Le Corbusier Foundation reveals that during the creative process the architect was playing a spontaneous game. Indeed, according to Johan Huizinga, all games are governed by “absolutely obligatory, but freely accepted rules”²³ which are usually not questioned.

To a considerable extent, the game concept summarizes the questions addressed so far. As Jorge Torres remarked, “the dialectic between the rule and the game is ever present in Le Corbusier’s thought as a dialectical couple that eludes arbitrariness whilst affirming the freedom of the artist, who has the innate ability to create his own legality”²⁴. Indeed, Le Corbusier himself repeatedly refers to play “in which the rules arise at the moment of creation, are developed, affirmed and become essential”²⁵. Playing the game is, therefore, the artist’s *raison d’être* and basis of his freedom. And if this metaphor is so explanatory in the case of Le Corbusier, it is perhaps because he himself meticulously designed his favourite board game: the free plan.

The free plan ‘game’ strikes a balance between the architect’s spontaneous gestures and the demands of composition whilst embodying the more general principle of artistic practice according to which “the power of the formal order alone can enable free, spontaneous creation”²⁶. The freedom Le Corbusier ascribes to the plan represents, perhaps better than any other, the two-fold meaning we associate with this notion: the implicit order – as defined by the load-bearing structure and the geometry of the container volume – guides and limits the particularities of a complex distribution that finally provides “all desirable proximities and separations”²⁷. But this kind of freedom was perhaps not so novel for users accustomed to the variety of paths materialized by the French art of distribution ‘despite’ the construction featuring load-bearing walls²⁸, for the plan paralyse, or traditional plan, was never any such thing in the hands of a skilled architect well versed in the discipline of distribution, like Le Corbusier himself in fact. Be that as it may, the free plan presents us, as Colquhoun suggests, with a dialectic between technical determinism, on the one hand, and freedom and improvisation, on the other²⁹; a dialectic that caught Le Corbusier in its web as he embraced the legitimacy endowed upon his own artistic aspirations by new techniques. He claimed that they were nothing more for him than “liberties taken [...] because they have been acquired, torn from the living sources of modern matter. Poetry, lyricism, contributed by techniques”³⁰ [Fig. 06].

But if “the plan to be free, as per one’s wishes”³¹, then one might wonder who and what such unrestricted freedom is for. Might such freedom benefit users whose needs are not yet all satisfied, theoretically enabling them to adjust the layout over time? Or was it perhaps an attribute of the plan itself to be able to self-determine and adapt to contingencies on the basis of a formal order defined beforehand? Even if these supposed effects of the ‘free plan’ were merely possibilities during the project – because they would rarely be certified in practice – , would the intention of the declared freedom be rather to help its supporter and architect in such a way that the theory indirectly underpins the interests of his creative work?

The concepts of free plan and free façade suggest that Le Corbusier did not just formulate his own rules autonomously but also incorporated into them the very freedom he had used to create them. A curious transitive property indeed, this regulated freedom transferred to its object, i.e. the plan of a house or the city. It must also be said that in this way, the architect reserved two degrees of freedom: firstly, in defining the rule, and then, in the specific way of operating according to it. And the non-explicit purpose of this two-fold freedom might actually be to safeguard the artist’s independence from his own set of rules, like a sort of amendment or exemption in line with those that, as mentioned earlier, Le Corbusier exercised vis-à-vis the ‘regulatory lines’ or the Modulor.

Who knows whether it diminished the complete freedom he granted himself, but

the truth is that finally Le Corbusier would not forget the impact of such freedom upon the lives of the potential recipients of his works, despite being typified according to a new idealization: the 'modern man'. This is the meaning of freedom that he developed in another paper with a decisive title, "Freedom through order", part of his book *The City of Tomorrow and its Planning* (original in French *Urbanisme*). In it, he upholds the planning of cities by means of a new system of aggregated cells – the well-known Villas apartment blocks – in search of an individual freedom that was, he believed, compromised by the cluster arrangements used at that time³². One might infer that, according to Le Corbusier, the rules used to plan a city – and the same could be said of a house – facilitated individual freedom and were nothing more than an epiphenomenon of the rules that had governed the planning itself, i.e. the actual project. As if, in a causal chain, certain dispositions had unleashed others, leaping boldly from the architect's ideology to the drawing board, from design to city governance.

Conclusions

We have seen how the rigor of academicism, the technical imperatives and town planning constituted for Le Corbusier a set of heteronomous considerations that the architect would resort to on many occasions in search of a source of legitimacy, even by opposition, for his own free will³³. But the preceding analysis also suggests that this resource would at all times be compensated by a vector of the opposite sign that would rank the autonomy of the creative individual according to his own set of rules adopted freely, just as the rules of a game are willingly accepted.

On the one hand, at first he was driven to demand the de-Vignolization of architecture, as opposed to the academic tradition handed down, in such a way that this great liberation would enable stagnant, old laws to be replaced by others more in keeping with the new times. On the other hand, the new formulations no longer aspired to the universality of the classical system, but rather, on the basis of the renewed subjectivity of the artist, limited its validity to his own production or even just one of his works. The inherent legality characterising the work of art from the avant-garde onwards, would thus have its correlate, in the case of Le Corbusier, in a set of his own rules that the Franco-Swiss master would repeatedly make explicit. But, at the same time, this would not prevent the 'five points' of a new architecture from being the theoretical foundation of a series of works sharing the same, broadly applicable but no longer absolute principles. Finally, and although the architect found in the new techniques the pretext for the renewed principles of his architecture, other purposes, perhaps unconscious, could also be surmised for the points of his doctrine, insofar as such points served both to develop the potential of the new ways of building and ultimately preserve the creative faculty of the architect: his own freedom. Whereas, generally speaking, the notion of freedom

shifts permanently between the ability to do something and a constraint, the work and thought of Le Corbusier seem to confirm that the architect's work moves incessantly between both extremes. Even when only advocating one of them, the architect tacitly uses the other, either as an alibi for arbitrariness or as a counterpoint for the strictest objectivity. Thus far we have sought to demonstrate that freedom in architecture does not mean a lack of rules or constraints but that architecture is, perhaps, an art of compromise.

1. Le Corbusier, *Textes et dessins pour Ronchamp* (Paris: Éditions Forces Vives, 1965), s.p. Our translation.
2. Ígor Stravinski, *Poética musical* (Barcelona: Acantilado, 2006), 66.
3. Milan Kundera, *Los testamentos traicionados* (Barcelona: Tusquets, 2003), 28.
4. Le Corbusier, *La casa del hombre* (Barcelona: Poseidón, 1979), 118. Our translation.
5. Le Corbusier, *Mensaje a los estudiantes de arquitectura* (Buenos Aires: Infinito, 2004), 41. Our translation.
6. Le Corbusier, *Precisiones respecto a un estado actual de la arquitectura y el urbanismo* (Barcelona: Poseidón, 1999), 39.
7. Alan Colquhoun, *Modernidad y tradición clásica* (Madrid: Júcar, 1991), 62; Antón Capitel, "El racionalismo lecorbusieriano y la composición por elementos," *Massilia: anuario de estudios lecorbusierianos* (2008), 123.
8. Hanno-Walter Kruft, *Historia de la teoría de la arquitectura*, vol. 2 (Madrid: Alianza, 1990), 679.
9. Le Corbusier, *El Modulor*, op. cit., 24. Italics in the original. Our translation.
10. Alan Colquhoun, *Arquitectura moderna y cambio histórico. Ensayos: 1962-1976* (Barcelona: Gustavo Gili, 1978), 113. Patrick Burniat, meanwhile, mentioned more recently the desire for intelligibility that might have driven Le Corbusier "to search for common rules that could be shared, at the risk of being restricted". See Patrick Burniat, "La règle du jeu," *LC. Revue de recherches sur Le Corbusier*, n.º 5 (2022), 58.
11. Le Corbusier, *El espíritu nuevo en arquitectura*, op. cit., 47. Our translation.
12. *Ibid.*, 37.
13. Le Corbusier, *El Modulor*, op. cit., 59. Our translation.
14. Le Corbusier, *Precisiones*, Op. cit., 49. Italics in original. Our translation.
15. *Ibid.*, 90, 93.
16. Jacques Lucan, *Composition, non-composition: architectures et théories, XIX^e-XX^e siècles* (Lausanne: Presses polytechniques et universitaires romandes, 2009), 374.
17. Erich Fromm, *El miedo a la libertad* (Buenos Aires: Paidós, 1976), 59-61. Burniat drew upon later essays by Isaiah Berlin to formulate a notion similar to two-fold freedom (negative and positive). See Patrick Burniat, *Le plan libre de Le Corbusier ou l'architecture mise en tension* (Brussels: Université de Bruxelles, 2021), 241 ff.
18. Andrea Palladio, *Los cuatro libros de la arquitectura* (Madrid: Akal, 1998), 117-118.
19. Teofilo Gallaccini, *Trattato sopra gli errori degli architetti* (Venice: Giambattista Pasquali, 1767). Written in 1621.
20. Friedrich Schiller, *Cartas sobre la educación estética de la humanidad* (Barcelona: Acantilado, 2018), 144, 140, 91.
21. Helio Piñón, *Curso básico de proyectos* (Barcelona: UPC, 1998), 110.
22. Henri Focillon, *La vida de las formas* (Madrid: Xarait, 1983), 13.
23. Johan Huizinga, *Homo ludens* (Madrid: Alianza, 1972), 55.
24. Jorge Torres, *Pensar la arquitectura: "Mise au point" de Le Corbusier* (Madrid: Abada, 2014), 91.
25. Le Corbusier, *Mise au point* (Madrid: Abada, 2014), 19. Our translation.

26. Focillon, op. cit., 22. "The stricter the rules, the more the game is a game" (o.t.), as Kundera would have said, op. cit., 28.
27. Le Corbusier, *Precisiones*, op. cit., 60. Our translation.
28. Raúl Castellanos, *Plan poché* (Barcelona: Fundación Caja de Arquitectos, 2012), 247.
29. Colquhoun, *Modernidad y tradición clásica*, op. cit., 206-207.
30. Le Corbusier, *Precisiones*, op. cit., 160. Italics in original. Our translation.
31. *Ibid.*, 118. Italics in original.
32. Le Corbusier, *La ciudad del futuro* (Buenos Aires: Infinito, 1962), 145.
33. Burniat, *Le plan libre de Le Corbusier*, Op. cit., 247.

Le Corbusier
Free plan
Game
Licence
Improvisation
Composition.