

# Heard and Seen

## LE CORBUSIER'S MONASTERY AT WORK

Now that four years have passed since Le Corbusier's Dominican church and priory at La Tourette burst on an astonished world with the impact of what was described as 'the greatest ruin of the twentieth century', it is possible to have later thoughts and to consider the building not as a major tourist attraction but as a place of prayer and study. It is possible, in fact, to ask whether Le Corbusier's frequent claims for La Tourette as *un lieu de silence, un lieu de repos*, are justified. It is good to be there in the empty weeks of early spring, before the tourist hordes descend, and if the endless rains of a wet March have left the concrete mass a leaden grey and the waterspouts are for ever dripping—and the many leaks reveal themselves in new places—then at least one is spared the coloured illusions of the picture postcards.

One's earlier impressions are on the whole confirmed. The building is a triumphant statement, in terms that match the needs of our time, of what an architect of genius can do to give spatial reality to the sacred. The *jeu de volumes*—that untranslatable phrase that expresses Le Corbusier's primary concern with the use of space—is even more effective now that even a brief period of time has given the patina of use to what has too often been a sort of celebration. These buildings, after all, church and refectory and lecture room and cells, are to be used, not to be written about or even to be admired. And the marvellous counterpoint of solid mass and floating horizontal surface, of the honest concrete and the progressions of the glass, takes on an altogether different meaning when a bell rings and the cloister fills with friars on their way to church or refectory.

It is fair to ask the users of a building what their true impressions of it are, and here it seems—apart from a pardonable missionary need to justify so revolutionary a religious house—there is general agreement that La Tourette fulfils the traditional needs of a Dominican priory. The cells, small and narrow as they may seem to be, are of course classical studies in the *modulor*: and perfect proportions give a sense of rest, extended through the balcony which belongs to each, to the world of nature beyond. The refectory, with its four round concrete pillars and the whole of its outer wall a curtain of glass broken by vertical concrete ribs in irregular progression, is admirable. It perfectly establishes the communal—and indeed the sacred—sense of the meal within the rhythm of Dominican life.

The church remains the unresolved dilemma of La Tourette. Its stark and almost brutal rejection of anything that can distract attention from the single, central altar is justified. The ascending series of private altars below, with their brightly painted concrete walls, is enclosed within the brilliantly lit area of the Blessed Sacrament chapel, to the side. But in the church itself nothing exists but the altar. As yet, the choir stalls are temporary: their permanent design may give some relief to the long, empty walls. And it still seems too uncompromising a

rejection of the decorative use of form and colour to allow nothing to relieve the vast spaces of rough grey concrete. One can imagine that a brilliant tapestry hung on the west wall would add at least a single note of surprise. It might also help the acoustics which are—unless the church is full—alarmingly crude.

It is particularly interesting to see La Tourette after one has visited the three great Provençal Cistercian abbeys—Le Thoronet, Silvacane and Sénanque—all built by the early thirteenth century, and—in the case of Le Thoronet—of obvious importance for the understanding of Le Corbusier's design and its realization. Père Couturier, who was principally responsible for the whole La Tourette project, early on recommended Le Corbusier to visit Le Thoronet—a building of unmatched simplicity and severity. In these Cistercian cloisters one sees realized the relation of building to human dimension which has for so long been Le Corbusier's concern. And in Le Thoronet, whether through conscious rejection of ornament or because of the difficulty of carving the bauxite stone, the pillars are of extraordinary purity, with scarcely a leaf moulding to disturb the given harmony of the square and round volumes of the stone. The church, too, has much of La Tourette's apartness, especially now that it is a national monument, unused for worship and stripped of everything but one or two restored stone altars. Le Corbusier has certainly realized what the Cistercians intended—and he has also paid tribute to the inspiration of the Charterhouse of Ema as leading him to the essential problem of relating the individual to the community. That is why it is not enough to look at La Tourette simply as a masterpiece of a great living architect, full of novelties and surprises, concrete and uncompromising. It has its roots, and as one grows to know it better one appreciates how faithfully it embodies the true tradition of monastic architecture—however 'revolutionary' it may seem to be.

But the question remains: what is the future of a building that already bears, in so short a time, the marks of wear, not to say of improvisation? And does it matter that no longer do we even try to 'build for eternity'? Perhaps one's judgment is too much affected by the sense of at least a quasi-*eternity* as one walks in the cloisters of Le Thoronet eight hundred years after and discerns the fresh strength of the stone, the immemorial mass of chapterhouse and church even after the centuries of revolution and neglect have done their worst. What will La Tourette be like even a hundred years from now?

Perhaps this is an illegitimate question. We are to look at—still more, to use—a building as it stands, geared to a daily work in a particular place at a moment of time. But it haunts one, all the same. And perhaps especially in France, where every acre seems to speak of an ancient destiny, of a continuity that all the violence and tumult have somehow failed to destroy.

But we get the buildings we deserve. And La Tourette is more than most of us deserve, so uncertain is our commitment to the truth in architecture, so deflected is our judgment by nostalgia and the irrelevance of mere 'liking'. Whether it lasts matters less than whether it *is*.

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