



Le Corbusier and the Occult (MIT Press)

By J. K. Birksted

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When Charles-Édouard Jeanneret reinvented himself as Le Corbusier in Paris, he also carefully reinvented the first thirty years of his life by highlighting some events and hiding others. As he explained in a letter: "Le Corbusier is a pseudonym. Le Corbusier creates architecture recklessly. He pursues disinterested ideas; he does not wish to compromise himself... He is an entity free of the burdens of carnality." Le Corbusier grew up in La Chaux-de-Fonds in Switzerland, a city described by Karl Marx as "one unified watchmaking industry." Among the unifying social structures of La Chaux-de-Fonds was the Loge L'Amitié, the Masonic lodge with its francophone moral, social, and philosophical ideas, including the symbolic iconography of the right angle (rectitude) and the compass (exactitude). Le Corbusier would later describe these as "my guide, my choice" and as his "time-honored ideas, ingrained and deep-rooted in the intellect, like entries from a catechism." Through exhaustive research that challenges long-held beliefs, J. K. Birksted's *Le Corbusier and the Occult* traces the structure of Le Corbusier's brand of modernist spatial and architectural ideas based on startling new documents in hitherto undiscovered family and local archives. *Le Corbusier and the Occult* thus answers the conundrum set by Reyner Banham (Birksted's predecessor at the Bartlett School of Architecture) who, fifty years ago, wrote that Le Corbusier's book *Towards a New Architecture* "was to prove to be one of the most influential, widely read and least understood of all the architectural writings of the twentieth century."

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Editorial Review

From Publishers Weekly

Hidden sources and ambiguous inspirations abound in the work of famous, highly influential architect Le Corbusier, who reinvented himself in his thirties, mythologizing much of his history. This book takes a robust, unblinking look at the blanks in need of filling, covering "as much about the secret sources of Le Corbusier's architecture—that is, of what he threw away and did not want us to know—as it is about modernist relations to history." As a child, Le Corbusier (then Charles-Édouard Jeanneret) was immersed in Masonic thought (a big part of social life in his Swiss hometown), which elevates the right angle as a symbol of righteousness and life. Le Corbusier's inspiration by, and celebration of, the right angle is a major theme; he referred to his own Poem of the Right Angle representing "not only the foundation of my being but also... of my architecture and of my art." UK scholar Birksted unpacks a wide range of philosophical and aesthetic meanings resonating through Le Corbusier's work. Though it deepens the scholarship considerably, the exhaustive study's meandering narrative makes the material more than a little confusing. Still, the bold connections he makes should hold the interest of art and architecture fans. 177 illus.

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Review

Birksted performs an important service for the understanding of Le Corbusier. Using sources hitherto ignored, he demonstrates the depth of Le Corbusier's indebtedness to Freemasonry -- its configurations, its associations, and its dream of redemption through the arrangement of things and people in space. At a time when modern artists were seeking orientation in Gurdjieff, Ouspensky, Blavatsky, Steiner as well as in myth, alchemy, psychology, technology, and atomic physics, Le Corbusier seems to have acknowledged in Freemasonry a comprehensive metaphor of architecture's role in the culture. Birksted's significant and original research confirms Roger Aujame's belief and helps to account for Kaufmann's intuition of a deep continuity between the architectural aspirations of the 18th and 20th centuries.

(Peter Carl, Department of Architecture, University of Cambridge)

Reading *Le Corbusier and the Occult*, I felt the voyeuristic interest and morbid fascination of a spectator during an exhumation. Birksted's disinterment of Le Corbusier revealed that, metaphorically speaking, the remains of one of modernism's greatest saints and heroes had not been incorruptible, and that the corpse of the man born as Charles-Édouard Jeanneret had been accompanied by strange offerings associated with secret societies and mystic traditions. Many of the questions raised by the disclosure of Corbusier's occult inspirations and para-Masonic dreams remain unanswered -- but Birksted's brilliant and tenacious investigation into the complex and somewhat murky social foreground and spiritual background of Jeanneret's formative years in La Chaux-de-Fonds has forever changed the ways the Master of the Right Angle will be remembered. A *tour de force!*

(Robert Jan van Pelt, University Professor, School of Architecture, University of Waterloo)

About the Author

J. K. Birksted teaches at the Bartlett School of Architecture, University College London.

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