



# LE CORBUSIER AND THE OCCULT

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# AND THE OCCULT

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Its history can no more be separated from the lands surrounding it than the clay can be separated from the hands of the potter who shapes it.

—Fernand Braudel, *The Mediterranean and the Mediterranean World in the Age of Philip II*

In answer to a predecessor at the  
Bartlett, Reyner Banham, who set the  
problem:

Le Corbusier's book on 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 . . .

—Reyner Banham, *Theory and Design in  
the First Machine Age*

# Acknowledgments

He was inspired by the possibility of reconstructing forms of life as such, and he delighted in bringing out their individual shape, the fullness of human experience embodied in them; the odder, the more extraordinary a culture or an individual, the better pleased he was. He can hardly condemn anything that displays colour or uniqueness; Indians, Americans and Persians, Greece and Palestine, Arminius and Machiavelli, Shakespeare and Savonarola, seem to him equally fascinating. He deeply hates the forces that make for uniformity, for the assimilation, whether in life or in the books of historians, of one culture or way of life to another. He conscientiously looks for uniformities, but what fascinates him is the exception.

—Isaiah Berlin, *Vico and Herder: Two Studies in the History of Ideas*

There is, however, one point of view deeper yet and more important than the love of tasting of the variety of human modes of life, and this is the desire to turn such knowledge into wisdom.

—Bronislaw Malinowski, *Argonauts of the Western Pacific*

This research raises perhaps more questions than answers, and others will have to excavate further to prove or disprove my hypotheses, in order to plug or to further open the breach. The questions raised are both factual and methodological. The research is 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 and the historiographical and ethnographic research methods that are needed in such circumstances.

Malinowski wrote that “an Ethnographer has to rely upon the assistance of others to an extent much greater than is the case with other scientific workers. I have therefore to express in this special place my obligations to the many who have helped me.”<sup>1</sup> Innumerable individuals have helped to locate obscure photographs and documents and answered obscure questions. One curator at the Bibliothèque Nationale de France spent several hours in storage basements searching for boxes of twentieth-century photographs whose exact whereabouts had been unknown since World War II (we found them). Several people have delved into old family archives, stirring up aching memories. Because of the sheer quantity of new materials, I have been bedeviled by the problem of gauging how much background knowledge to assume. For materials already published, I have opted for filling in the broadest background details and indicating references and sources. For new materials, I have opted for immensely long citations, which are the equivalents of social anthropological fieldwork and participant observation.

A special indebtedness goes to H. Allen Brooks who answered questions and gave me access to his archives at Yale. If I critique his findings, it is in the spirit of emulation. The tattered condition of my “Brooks” speaks for itself. In addition, Michel Gallet replied with long and informative letters about François-Joseph Belanger, about the social networks and reader experience at the Bibliothèque Nationale in early-twentieth-century Paris, as did Jean-Pierre Bayard on symbolism. Many others in Paris and La Chaux-de-Fonds—Claude Malécot, David Peyceré, Françoise Ducros, Alexandre Ragois, Christian Charlet, Charles Thomann, Jean-Daniel Jeanneret, Michel Didisheim—helped track down information. Sylvie Béguelin and Christine Rodeschini at the Bibliothèque de la Ville de La Chaux-de-Fonds, Catherine Corthésy at the Bibliothèque de l'École d'Art de La Chaux-de-Fonds, and Arnaud Dercelles at the Fondation Le Corbusier in Paris made this research possible, as did Pierre Mollier and Irène Mainguy and Pascal Bajou at Le Grand Orient de France, Jonathan Giné and François Rognon at the Grande Loge de France, Monsieur et Madame Dousset at the Grande Loge Suisse Alpina in Lausanne, Laurent Bastard at the Musée du Compagnonnage in Tours, Madame Verne at the Librairie du Compagnonnage in Paris, Maurice Favre in La Chaux-de-Fonds, Jean Philippon Bordelais la Constance Compagnon Cuisinier des Devoirs Unis in Lyon. Private owners opened for me remarkable buildings by François-Joseph Belanger in Paris. The library of the Grand United Lodge of England has also been an invaluable resource; likewise, as always, the British Library, the Bibliothèque Nationale de France, the Cabinet des Estampes, and the Archives Nationales. Many other people in other places have spent hours

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I have had precious help with collecting data in Slovakia from Milan Palak, who also helped with translations. Further help with translations from Slovak to English was kindly provided by Timothy Beasley-Murray at University College London. I decided to dispense with sometimes unsatisfactory, sometimes insufferable, published French translations. Because of the extent of new primary materials from hitherto unresearched private and public archives, I have opted for including the original language texts in the endnotes only when the original language is most critically important, or is truly untranslatable, or is needed out of respect for forgotten voices. Here historiography fulfills its role as *tombeau*.<sup>2</sup>

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At times of doubt, several books buoyed me: Michael Fried's *Menzel's Realism: Art and Embodiment in Nineteenth-Century Berlin* and Timothy J. Clark's *Farewell to an Idea: Episodes from a History of Modernism*, with their attempts to observe, describe, and deduct, and their discussions of the notion of reenchantment; also Rosalind E. Krauss's *The Optical Unconscious* with its insights into Sherlock Holmes's methods of reasoning backward.<sup>3</sup>

During this research, I have had three homes away from home: in Paris, at the Breens under the twinkling lights of the Eiffel Tower; in La Chaux-de-Fonds, in the loft apartment of the eighteenth-century farmhouse of Nelly L'Eplattenier and Pierre Zurcher; and in London, an intellectual home at the Bartlett School of Architecture. I am enormously indebted to my Bartlett colleagues, scholarly friends and intellectual sparring partners. Jacob Burckhardt famously said that "the existence of the University of Basel is a metaphysical necessity." The existence of the Bartlett School of Architecture is an epistemological necessity.

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Last but not least, this research has depended entirely on Dana's tolerance of all-too-present absences and absent-minded presences.

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