

# Preface

Although at first sight this ‘case study’ may seem light and insubstantial, in actual fact it is pregnant with meaning. Some forty years ago, at Pessac near Bordeaux, the most celebrated architect and town planner of modern times, a man who contributed at both a practical and a theoretical level to urban development, built a new settlement – the Quartiers Modernes Frugès. What was Le Corbusier trying to do at Pessac? By building in a modern style and by taking due account of economic and social problems he hoped to produce low-cost houses that would be pleasant to live in; he wanted to provide people with a container, in which they could install themselves and live their daily lives; in his dual capacity as architect and town planner he wanted to create a functional system based on technological criteria; and to this end he set out to design predetermined, homogeneous and essentially cubist structures, in which open and closed areas would complement one another.

This was what Le Corbusier wanted. But what did he actually achieve? Perhaps it was because he was a genius and because (for better or worse) men of genius never do precisely what they set out to do, but the fact of the matter is that in Pessac Le Corbusier produced a kind of architecture that lent itself to conversion and sculptural ornamentation. And what did the occupants do? Instead of installing themselves in their containers, instead of adapting to them and living in them ‘passively’, they decided that as far as possible they were going to live ‘actively’. In doing so they showed what living in a house really is: an activity. They took what had been offered to them and worked on

it, converted it, added to it. What did they add? Their needs. They created distinctions, whose significance is analysed in this book. They introduced personal qualities. They built a differentiated social cluster.

Philippe Boudon's subtle analysis of the distinctions, of the 'topical' qualities, introduced, or rather *produced*, by the Pessac occupants in what was originally an undifferentiated urban setting has helped to further urban studies. It may well be that he has carried them further even than he realizes, for he has drawn attention to different *levels* of reality and different *levels* of thought. In his enquiry he illustrates, or perhaps I should say demonstrates, the existence of three distinct levels.

(a) First there is the *theoretical level*, at which theory tends to merge with ideology or, to be more precise, is not usually sufficiently distinguished from ideology. This is the level at which our architects and town planners operate. They deal with empirical problems by reference to town-planning ideologies. And they do so with or without the approval of the public institutions and political organizations, but always at their level, a procedure that is not without its risks. These ideological dangers are discussed by Philippe Boudon in the light of Le Corbusier's experiment and the 'social requirements' formulated by Henry Frugès for the Pessac project.

(b) Then there is the *practical level*, at which ideological considerations are supplemented by other, quite different factors. Here the architect exercises his mind and his will, bringing them to bear on the practical needs of the future occupants. Some of these needs are clearly recognized, others are not. And so Le Corbusier's architectural practice is seen to be more hesitant, more flexible and more vital than his architectural theory. But both ideological and theoretical considerations are forced to give way in the face of reality.

(c) Finally, there is the *town-planning level*, at which a certain way of life, a certain style (or absence of style) makes itself felt. The social activities of individual occupants and groups of occupants, which have been influenced to a greater or lesser degree by the different groupings within the district, are seen for what they are. At this level we find a specific topology, a concrete rationality that is more impressive and more complex than abstract rationality.

In his study Philippe Boudon analyses the relationship between architecture and town planning and also considers the *practical ramifications* of urban design (a form of enquiry which is almost completely new and which has virtually been inaugurated by him). He introduces material that casts a new light on the problems posed by town planning and will help us to form a general assessment covering all aspects of this discipline, which is the only profitable way of tackling and perhaps solving these problems.

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