HOUSE OR HOME

A commentary on le Corbusier's 'Unité d'habitation'[1]

LANCE WRIGHT

EVEN those who are most insistent that architecture is an art will admit that there is a limit to what aesthetics can do to gild distressing human arrangements. The truth of this has been brought home to English people in a painful way by the dilemma of 'housing'. For perhaps no modern building problem has had so much architectural skill lavished on it. But if its fruits are on the whole more seemly than they were forty years ago, this is on the surface only and cannot hide the fact that the conception—whether it is realised in an estate or a neighbourhood or a new town—is humanly unsatisfactory. If we enquire why and how this is so, all objections lead back to the intractable defect that there is altogether too much of it. 'Intractable' because those who still want houses will explain that so far as they are concerned there is altogether too little.

It is not only monotony to the eye which is complained of—though this is at least an indication that there is something wrong—but the great distances which everyone must walk to get anywhere and the social defects which these distances produce and which are generally described as 'thinning of the social fabric'. Distances so 'take it out of' people that they do less, participate less, see less of one another. And it is perhaps this toll on social life which we are chiefly aware of when we remark the lifelessness of our new localities. They are an aggregation of units which do not add up to a commune.

It is surely clear that no urbanity in the architectural arrangements can make up for defects of this kind; but that the fault must lie, if not with basic requirements, at least with the present mode in which they are supplied. We are faced with an example of what the economists call 'the

[1] Cf. English translation, *The Marseilles Block*, by le Corbusier. (Harvill Press; 21s.)

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fallacy of composition'. It was feasible for restrained numbers of the upper middle class to move out to Waterloo Cottage in the Ladbroke Grove in *c.* 1820 in order to enjoy the country while being in easy reach of the town; but it is not feasible for the millions who have come after them to attempt the same in the same way, for they will neither be close nor will they be in the country.

The proposition ought perhaps to have been evident in the beginning. Certainly it ought to have become evident sooner. That we have been so inattentive to it seems to be due to the fact that we are possessed by certain deep-seated convictions about what a home should be. These convictions are common to the Western world. But the precise form they take in England is unique in itself and is all the more remarkable in that they have been held tenaciously throughout one hundred and fifty years of industrialism. The Englishman's mental picture of 'home' is that of an agriculturalist. He sees a cottage in the country, self-contained, independent, standing in its own curtilage—which in turn must be large enough to grow cabbages and potatoes, if not to pasture a cow. Gradually parts of this vision melted. The cow went first. Then the cottage was regretfully collided with its neighbour to make it semi-detached. Last of all the front garden has been merged into the public space. But the core of the vision still remains: the irreducible setting for the 'good life'.

It is important to make a distinction between this vision—which is almost certainly the real power behind the continuance of the housing estate—and the actual physical needs of a household with which it is commonly confused. For the vision is in the end a spiritual concept and goes back to an estimate of what God has ordained for man. This is not to say that it is a right spiritual concept, but only that people are not to be persuaded out of it by material considerations alone. In fact the Englishman's almost fanatical retention of his particular vision of the home is a striking religious phenomenon. It is all the more striking in that the vision itself differs from that of other Western peoples in being strictly *rural*—and therefore all the more impossible to realise in modern cities. But though the particular vision of the other European stocks is of a more urban

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kind, many of its basic factors are the same and it is probably true to say that the ideology of the home has come to be the chief point at issue between popular religious feeling and our technological society everywhere.

People as a whole have always been suspicious of industrialism in so far as it has proposed to them a very different way of life from that to which they have been accustomed by their religious practice. But the fruits of each separate manifestation of industrialism have always proved so desirable that people have learnt to accept them with small resistance. And in fact the only sector of life in which there has been steady and widespread resistance is this sector of the home. The visible effect of this resistance on our environment has been to make our buildings to hark back in their outward appearance to the buildings of the pre-industrial age; which in turn has caused the building industry to retain to a surprising extent both the methods and the organisation of hand craftsmanship. We thus have the extraordinary phenomenon of one single department of life which has not changed with anything like the same speed and thoroughness as the remainder. It goes without saying that it is a costly phenomenon both in terms of money and in terms of the awkwardness of our physical arrangements; but we do not notice it so sharply as we might expect, since it conditions environment and the man in the street can envisage no other. But it must also be conceded that if the religious reaction is well founded, this price is not too high.

In order to understand the issue which has arisen over the home it must be remembered that the religious ideal which European peoples were left with when religious motives became submerged in the seventeenth century was an individualistic ideal and envisaged the soul of man as making, essentially, a lonely pilgrimage to God. This simple bias had a far-reaching effect on institutions and gave to the family a closed, self-sufficient character which in turn became reflected in the idea of the home. The home thus came to be thought of as an autonomous, inviolate thing which could function undisturbed through every public vicissitude. But just as the theological perception which gave birth to this idea represents only half of the story, so does the idea

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itself represent only half of the facts which govern man's social life. So it is not accidental that each development of industrialism tends to throw into relief that other aspect of the solidarity of the human race and of man's dependence on his fellows. For it soon became clear that if man was to enjoy any one of the new facilities he must be prepared to give up the exercise of some corresponding part of his autonomy. Arguing from the parallel of some of the lesser animals which had been known to lose certain of their functions through having ceased to use them, religious people came to fear that the new industrial solutions were in themselves a threat to human personality and initiative. Gas, company's water and electricity were let into the home with some misgivings (though with less on the part of the irreligious Americans), but the home itself—its structure and its setting—was held to be too important a symbol to be risked.

This, in broad terms, is the situation in building and architecture with which le Corbusier set out to do battle, now nearly forty years ago. It will be seen at once that—whatever his specific convictions may be—his life and work has been carried out primarily on the religious plane. It is this which has lent the extraordinary note of urgency and of prophecy to his own writings and which can also be seen in the stubborn, terrifying opposition which he has had to meet. This opposition has not been overtly Christian—let alone Catholic—but has been on the part of the anonymous religious forces—mostly Catholic in origin—which still determine the minds and hearts of Western peoples. The opposition has been for the most part instinctive and—however noisy—inarticulate: the opposition of people who retain a keen sense that life should somehow be governed by religious motives but who have lost the theological key.

Clearly the religious issue comes first and the practical issue only follows it. For to discuss the *Unité* only in terms of whether people are likely to be comfortable in it is to miss the point. In the long run the experiment depends on our being able to evolve a theologically sound religious attitude which will rejoice openly in man's interdependence while leaving personality inviolate.

It is too early to say whether, on the physiological side,

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industrial usage is necessarily damaging to personality. There are signs of deterioration during the last century and a half. But it seems at least likely that this has been caused by the dislocation which the new thing has given rise to and not by enjoyment of the thing itself.

The tragedy is that order—when it is bodied forth with such power as in the *Unité*—is terrifying to people: both for the reason given, but also because it has become associated with recent gross political attempts to achieve it quickly. But by the nature of the case it can only be reached experimentally, by this kind of project. *Unité* therefore must be looked on more as a gesture in favour of the idea of order than as order achieved. But whether it works or not, it is worth pointing to the philosophical skill of le Corbusier in drawing a distinction between the structure—which is the public part and an appendage of the landscape—and the separate homes which are inserted within it on the analogy of the drawers in a tallboy or, to use his own simile, of the bottles in a wine-bin. Each home therefore has its protecting envelope and its integrity is thus no more compromised than is that of the ordinary house immured between the party walls of a street. Thus *Unité* is in a different case from the blocks of flats of familiar and not always pleasing memory, and is certainly in a very different case from the blocks of flatted bungalows which English people try to be happy in. It is in such perceptiveness that architectural originality consists.

It is too early to say whether *Unité* is to be a success; though it is certain that it takes into account all that we already know about housing very large numbers of people within a framed structure. But its chief virtue lies in its positing an idea of urban living which is at least a richer idea than any which has so far been given effect. He is a courageous architect who tells people that the conditions of their time require that they should live in a slightly different manner from what they are accustomed to. The more usual course is for him to listen respectfully to the long story of what they think they want and then to supply it, even though he knows perfectly well that it will bring a harvest of disillusion. In France there is at least a tradition

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of town dwelling which makes *Unité* less hazardous than it would be over here; for English people have never begun to learn how to live in a city. Nevertheless all peoples without exception have still to discover how to make a full and ordered use of the resources which now overwhelm them. The pity is that the religious tradition, which ought to show the way, in fact renders the task more difficult.

ANATHEMATA

DESMOND CHUTE

IN THE ANATHEMATA (Faber and Faber; 25s.) Mr David Jones has rewarded admirers of his earlier period—that of opaque paintings, taut images, rare incised or rounded box-woods—by presenting them at length with another major work of sacred art.

Anathemata: 'things patient of being "set-up to the gods" ': for matter, thoughts stirring as often as not 'in the time of the Mass'; for background, 'the entire world of sign and sacrament'; for magnet and focus, the Body of the Lord.

Incarnation is here 'no hint half guessed, [no] gift half understood'. In lieu of Mr Eliot's 'hardly barely prayable prayer' we have an epic conterminous with recorded and unrecorded time, one vast eucharistic symphony, whose *tempo* is the velocity of thought; its music 'unmeasured, irregular in stress and interval, of interior rhythm, modal', moves stately as in breves, its tone akin rather to woodwind than to strings: 'reeds then! and minstrelsy'. Great play is made with the more sombre vowels—'the stone/ the fonted water/ the fronded wood'. Sharps are not to seek—'if fifth the fire/ the cadence ice', nor clash of consonants—'skirted, kilted, cloaked, capped and shod'.

'The *Vorzeit*-masque is on/ That moves to the cosmic introit/ . . At these Nocturns the hebdomadary is apt to be

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