

THE  
DECORATIVE  
ART  
OF  
TODAY  
LE  
CORBUSIER

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# THE DECORATIVE ART OF TODAY

*translated and introduced by*

James I. Dunnett

The Architectural Press: London

*L'Art décoratif d'aujourd'hui* first published in 1925 by Editions Crès, Paris  
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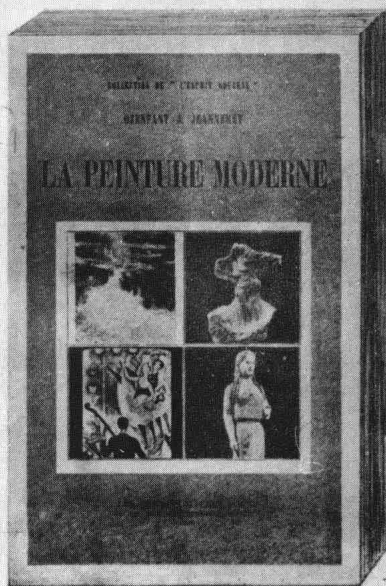
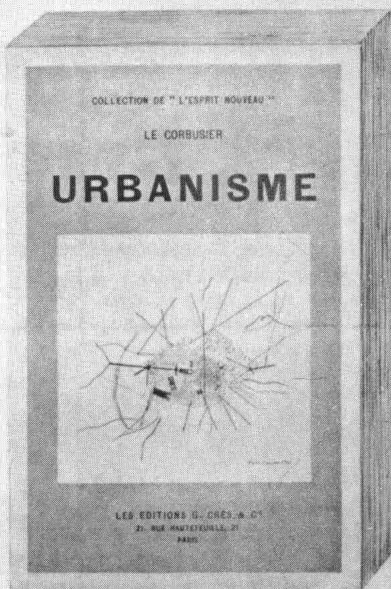
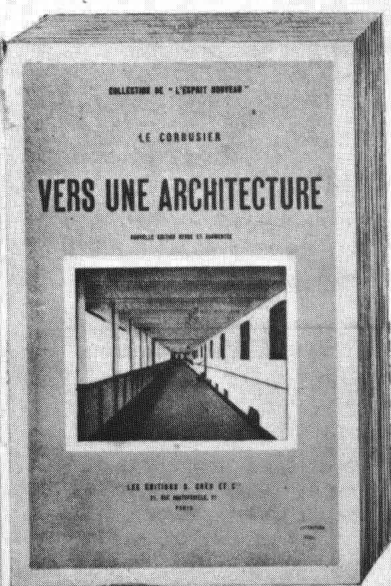
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# THE DECORATIVE ART OF TODAY

for  
ERNÖ GOLDFINGER R.A.  
J.I.D.



AUX ÉDITIONS GEORGES CRÉS ET C<sup>ie</sup>  
21, rue Hautefeuille  
PARIS

Publisher's advertisement from Le Corbusier's *Almanach d'architecture moderne* (1927) showing the original covers of the four books collected from *L'Esprit Nouveau*.

## INTRODUCTION

*The Decorative Art of Today* is a paradoxical title for a book by Le Corbusier, as he was well aware. '*Modern decorative art is not decorated*', he says. Neither, he might have added, is it art: that is the main burden of the book. By 'decorative art' was meant what is now called 'design', in other words the design of objects of use generally, below the scale of architecture. Le Corbusier's book was to appear at the time of the great 1925 Exposition des Arts Décoratifs in Paris, on which it was effectively a commentary, and so he was obliged to use the same name. But the chapter entitled 'The Decorative Art of Today' is pointedly illustrated by 'standard' objects entirely devoid of decoration. The style now popularly associated with that exhibition, known as 'Art Deco', is one of his principal targets.

As a book on 'design' it took its place in the quartet of books based on articles from *L'Esprit Nouveau*, alongside *Vers une architecture* (Towards a New Architecture), *Urbanisme* (The City of Tomorrow), and *La Peinture moderne*. They all followed a similar format and aphoristic style, and together covered the four 'visual arts' fields of architecture, town planning, painting, and design. 'These four volumes', wrote Le Corbusier in 1927, 'comprised the theory of which the Pavilion [of *L'Esprit Nouveau* at the 1925 exhibition] was intended to be the realisation.'

*Urbanisme* and *Vers une architecture* were of course translated into English soon after publication. *L'Art décoratif d'aujourd'hui* has had to wait for the centenary of Le Corbusier's birth, although arguably it provides a more cogent exposition of his general theory of design than either. At a time when his supposed influence is disparaged as never before, it is hoped that this translation will allow his thought to be more fully understood. The changed climate of opinion over the last twenty years has indeed made it now possible to read *Decorative Art* with almost the same reaction as when it first appeared in 1925. Then, according to Maximilien Gauthier in his authorised biography of 1943, *Le Corbusier, ou l'Architecture au service de l'homme*, its publication caused the greatest shock of all Le Corbusier's books. It is certainly an attacking book to a greater extent than its companions, and in our conservation-conscious times its rejection of virtually the whole history of decorative ornament may seem provocative and even offensive in a way that it would not have done twenty years ago. Its iconoclasm was deliberate: 'Since iconolatry [i.e. indulgence in ornament] thrives as virulently as a cancer, let us be iconoclasts.' But its purpose was serious. Le Corbusier had a confidence that few feel now that the 'machine age' could find expression in a different but more beautiful world.

The vigour of Le Corbusier's writing remains immensely stimulating, but our perspective on it has inevitably changed; our interest in it as history has grown. Indeed part of the appeal of *Decorative Art* now lies in the vividness with which it evokes the intellectual milieu of Paris in the early 1920s, with its references by name to contemporary and near-contemporary figures. We see Le Corbusier grappling with the beginnings of Surrealism ('the production of the machine age is a *realist* object capable of high poetry' [my italics]), presenting his version of the recent history of design, constructing a Purist still-life out of standard glassware (c.f. the illustrations on pages 94 and 97), and perhaps making a sly reference to Marcel Duchamp's *Urinal* in his choice of a bidet 'Maison Pirsoul' as the introductory illustration for the chapter devoted to museums. *Decorative Art* has a personal and topical touch, and it was perhaps this which once caused Reyner Banham, more than twenty years ago, to dismiss it as 'a polemical work of only local interest'. The indications are that Le Corbusier did not think so; the issues it raises are so fundamental and its documentary value has become so great that it can now be seen to be a work of major importance.

The purpose of this translation is therefore simply to make the text available in English, with the minimum of commentary, and let it speak for itself – as do Frederick Etchells' excellent translations of its companion volumes. But a very brief indication of the intellectual background may be useful.

The immediate sources of Le Corbusier's argument are very clear – the writings of Adolf Loos and the debate within the Deutscher Werkbund between Henry Van de Velde and Hermann Muthesius and their followers. Loos' essays may first have come to Le Corbusier's notice when a selection was printed in the magazine *Der Sturm* in 1912, and he himself reprinted the most famous, 'Ornament and Crime' written in 1908, in the first issue of *L'Esprit Nouveau* (1920). His absolute rejection of ornament must owe much to the influence of this 'sensational article', and he credits Loos a little grudgingly with the formulation: *the more cultivated a people becomes, the more decoration disappears*. His primary argument asserting the importance of the distinction between a work of art and an object of use can also be found in Loos. Indeed some passages in *Decorative Art* are directly reminiscent of him.

Loos wrote in his essay 'Men's Fashion', reprinted in the collection *Ins Leehre Gesprochen* published in Paris in 1921: 'But the English mock the German's craving for beauty. The Medici Venus, the Pantheon, a picture by Botticelli, a song by Burns – of course these are beautiful. But trousers? Or whether a jacket has three or four buttons?' This seems to find an echo in Le Corbusier's 'first of all the Sistine Chapel, afterwards chairs and filing cabinets: without doubt this is a question of the secondary level, just as the cut of a man's jacket is of secondary importance in his life'.



Le Corbusier was also very familiar with the debates about design in Germany before the First World War, as a result of his travels and research there in 1910–11 on a grant from the municipality of La Chaux-de-Fonds (his native town). His use of the word ‘type’ as in ‘type-needs’ and ‘type-furniture’ clearly owes much to the advocacy by Muthesius, Bruno Paul and others of *Typisierung* and *Typenmöbel*, and carried most of the same connotations. ‘Standardization’ is not an adequate translation, with its predominant sense of a mechanically reproduced uniformity; what was envisaged was rather the dignified and modest consistency exemplified by many folk or vernacular products, an ‘archetypal’ solution which attracted no more attention to utilitarian objects than their role demanded. Van de Velde can be understood as the unspoken target of many of Le Corbusier’s attacks directed at the Arts and Crafts movement in general and its belief, in the words of William Morris, that ‘The true secret of happiness lies in taking a genuine interest in all the details of daily life, in elevating them by art, instead of handing them over to unregarded drudges.’

Political thought at the time may also have played a part. Decoration had been discredited not only by the over-indulgence permitted by mechanical methods of production and the attacks on this ‘fraud’ by the Arts and Crafts movement, but also by attacks such as those of the sociologist Thorstein Veblen, who stigmatised it in his influential book *The Theory of the Leisure Class* (1899) as ‘conspicuous consumption’. He wrote: “This process of selective adaptation of designs to the end of conspicuous waste, and the substitution of pecuniary [i.e. ornamental] beauty for aesthetic beauty, has been especially effective in the development of architecture. It would be difficult to find a modern civilized residence or public building which can claim anything better than relative inoffensiveness in the eyes of anyone who will dissociate the elements of beauty from those of honorific waste. . . . Considered as objects of beauty the dead walls of the back and sides of these structures left untouched by the hands of the artist are commonly the best feature of the building.’ This theme is perhaps reflected by Le Corbusier when he refers to decoration as simply ‘promoting decorum’.

But to the ideas of that generation he added two important ingredients: an enthusiasm for the machine itself, seen as the epitome of intellectual mastery – an enthusiasm made possible by the supersession of the Futurists – and a continuous passionate emphasis on the importance of the work of art, which inspires many of the most moving passages in this book. Unlike his mentors, Le Corbusier was able to envisage a new language of art to match his theory, a language considerably inspired by the discoveries of the Cubist painters around 1910 – a language of pure plane, volume, and space, as expressive as any that relied on applied ornament. This combination produced the potent mixture of Le Corbusier’s ‘propaganda’, which has

inspired more than one generation. Loos and Muthesius ultimately remained rooted in the craft world of the nineteenth century. They were not able to produce a new image, and their writing seemed essentially negative.

Le Corbusier's strength also lay in the scope of his thought. He was able to develop his doctrine into a theory extending from the scale of the ink-pot to the scale of the city. Both were 'tools' (*outils*) and carried the same obligation: the duty to allow and encourage 'meditation': 'Now and always there is a hierarchy. There is a time for work, when one uses oneself up, and also a time for meditation, when one recovers one's bearing and rediscovers harmony.' 'Meditation' was a synonym for the creation of a work of art, a usage inspired by Cubist paintings, which Le Corbusier saw as essentially meditative. The duty of the 'tool' was to free man for 'meditation' as thus defined: 'Making use of these tools, we avoid unpleasant tasks, accidents, the sterile drudgery . . . and, having won our freedom, we think about something – about art for example (for it is very comforting).'

An ink-pot that was a tool should be modest, functional, and self-effacing (smooth and round, like that of Lenin in Chapter 1), to leave the mind free to concentrate on the affairs of the spirit. A city that was a tool should facilitate culture-giving human contact by the efficiency of its circulation, bring peace of mind by the orderliness of its plan, and provide conditions in the home of calm and light, air and space, conducive to meditation. And so the city is built tall and spacious, open to the sky and set in green parks, intersected by elevated roads planned on an orthogonal grid.\* A house that was a tool, or a 'machine for living in', should be whitewashed, for 'There may be some people who think against a background of black. But the tasks of our age – so strenuous, so full of danger, so victorious, seem to demand of us that we think against a background of white.'

As Le Corbusier says in his introduction to the 1959 edition of *Decorative Art*: 'We had undertaken to put up a pavilion of L'Esprit Nouveau which would indissolubly link the equipment of the home (furniture) to architecture (the space inhabited, the dwelling) and to urbanism (the conditions of life of a society).' This book provides the key as perhaps no other does. Essentially, it offers a definition of taste. If the logical extension of its argument that objects of use cannot be works of art would seem to be that they cannot have aesthetic value, that would be a misunderstanding: 'Works of decorative art are tools, *beautiful* tools' says Le Corbusier (my italics), and 'The task of the decorative arts (who will think of a better name?) is above all to make us feel comfortable by serving us politely and helpfully. After that, it is to thrill us, let there be no mistake.' Nevertheless, the problem of 'machines for sitting in, for filing, for lighting, type-machines' remained one

\*I have discussed this more fully in my article 'The Architecture of Silence', *Architectural Review*, October 1985.

‘of purification, of simplification, of precision, before the problem of poetry’.

All this is consistent with Le Corbusier’s own venture into furniture design five years later, when he exhibited the famous tubular metal pieces intended for mass-production. They had been designed in collaboration with Charlotte Perriand, who had herself been fired with enthusiasm by *Decorative Art* when it first appeared. But for the Esprit Nouveau pavilion in 1925 – a ‘show flat’ for the Contemporary City – he had, as a statement of principle, selected only mass-produced items that were already available – Thonet bentwood sidechairs, Maples armchairs, laboratory glassware (all singled out for praise in *Decorative Art*), as well as one or two products of ‘folk culture’. These were ‘type-objects’, whilst on the walls hung major Cubist and Purist paintings – ‘provokers of feeling’. A clear division. Later he was to become more ready to accept intermediate categories, just as machine-symbolism was to find a less obvious place in his work and theory. But the underlying thought remained and continued to provide him with an essential discipline.

*The Decorative Art of Today* is based on a collection of articles from a magazine (mostly published in 1924), and the sequence of thought from chapter to chapter (and sometimes within a chapter) is not always easy to follow. But its import is finally clear enough, and is reinforced by Le Corbusier’s vivid choice of illustrations. In this translation I have attempted to retain as much of the distinctive rhythms of Le Corbusier’s style as possible – for example, the long strings of nouns in apposition – even when these may not be entirely consistent with a smooth English style. The original page layouts have also been followed. Certain French words always present a problem of translation – for example, *système* and *esprit* – and when these come together in a key definition of architecture ‘*L’Architecture est un système de l’esprit qui fixe dans un mode matériel le sentiment résultant d’une époque*’, the problem becomes a crux, one which has to be seen in the context of Le Corbusier’s usage of the words elsewhere. For this reason also I have translated *folklore* as ‘folk culture’ throughout, although ‘the vernacular’ would in some instances give his meaning greater contemporary vividness. The final decisions in this translation have all been my own, but I would like to acknowledge the help and advice of my father, Denzil I. Dunnett.

JAMES DUNNETT

40, rue de Villejust – XVIe

Sir,

*I have only one word to say about your book,\* and it's a word I seldom use: admirable.*

*And I write it with some embarrassment. My thoughts are at one with yours on most of the subjects you touch on. It is too easy for me to approve my own feelings.*

*I may add that in literature, and even in philosophy, there are now analogous or coincidental points of view. But in these fields for insuperable reasons (too long to set out) one has to 'mesh' with the past. Buildings are seen by themselves and impose their presence on the observer, whereas what is written requires from the reader a willingness and good will, which depend on his expectations, and his expectations depend on his habits, etc. One cannot even make a start with the experience of purity except by bringing in the scattered examples of it to be found in the past.*

*Believe me, sir, I hold your work in especial regard, and I am doing my best to make it known.*

*With all my thanks and fellow-feeling,*

(Signed) Paul Valéry

\**L'Art décoratif d'aujourd'hui* (1925, Collection de *L'Esprit Nouveau*) published by Editions G. Crès, Paris.

## PREFACE TO THE 1959 EDITION

Here is a letter from Paul Valéry, of 1925 (opposite).

Under this sign:



about a dozen articles reflecting on the forthcoming 'International Exhibition of the Decorative Arts' had appeared in *L'Esprit Nouveau* (our international review of contemporary activity) during 1924. I did not sign the articles to avoid confusing the scene with personalities. A first series of articles from the 'E.N.' ('The Engineer's Aesthetic and Architecture', 'Three Reminders to Architects', 'Regulating Lines', 'Eyes which do not see', 'Architecture', 'Mass-Production Houses', 'Architecture or Revolution') had been brought together in 1923 in a book, *Vers une architecture*,<sup>1</sup> published by Crès. This was continuously reprinted until Crès ceased publication (in 1932). It was translated into English, German, Spanish, and Japanese. The series, the *Collection de L'Esprit Nouveau* was built up at Crès as follows: *Vers une architecture*, *L'Art décoratif d'aujourd'hui*,<sup>2</sup> *Urbanisme*,<sup>3</sup> *Almanach d'architecture moderne*, *Une Maison: un Palais, Précisions*, *Croisade*.

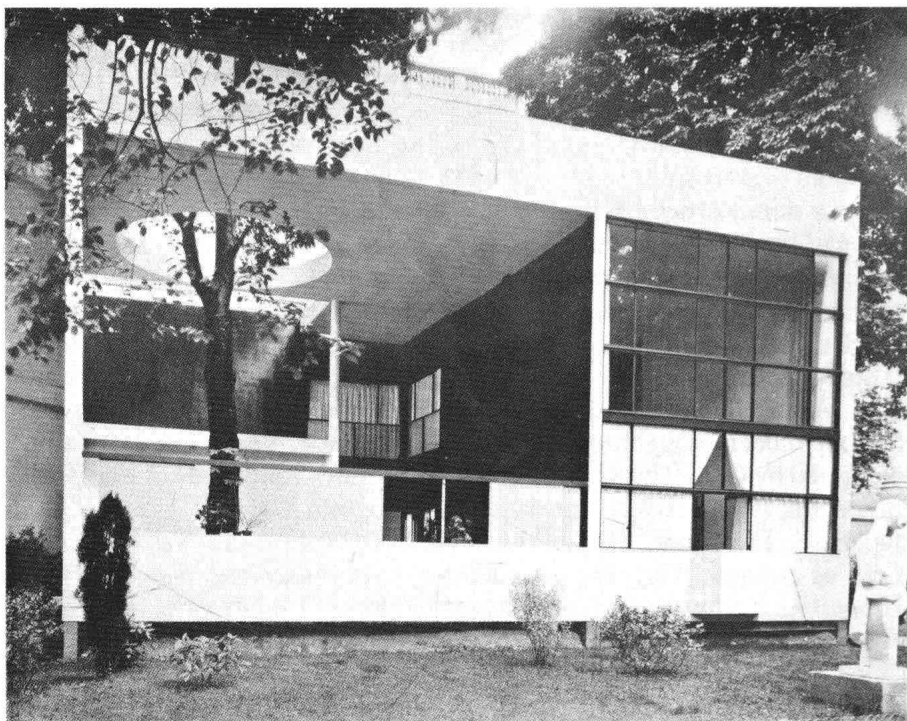
The 1925 Exhibition covered the Esplanade of the Invalides and the banks of the Seine from Concorde to Alma with constructions of plaster.

1. *Towards a New Architecture*. 2. *The Decorative Art of Today*. 3. *The City of Tomorrow*.

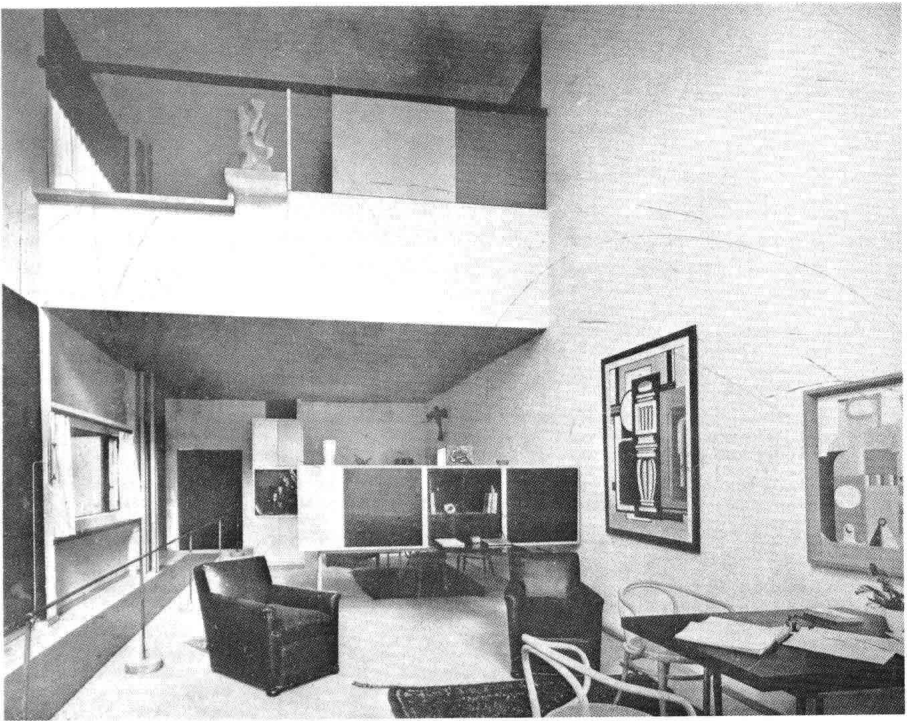
Plaster was king, and there was an astounding display of fancy and foliate ornament. The exhibition left behind some '1925 Yearbooks' which spread the style all over Paris and the rest of France.

We had undertaken to put up a pavilion of *L'Esprit Nouveau* which would indissolubly link the equipment of the home (furniture) to architecture (the space inhabited, the dwelling), and to town-planning (the conditions of life of a society).

In face of a mass of difficulties – without a penny – we had put up the Esprit Nouveau pavilion, built 'for real': an apartment from the *immeuble-villas* ('villa-blocks') inspired in 1907 and 1910 by two visits to the Carthusian monastery of Ema in Tuscany. Furniture as a mass-product for the mass, and mass-produced objects: architectural plans linked to town-planning: architecture and town-planning making a UNITY, i.e. one and the same thing: a diorama of 100 square metres ('A Contemporary City of 3 million inhabitants' from the Salon d'Automne of 1922) and a second diorama 'The Voisin Plan of Paris' (Gabriel Voisin having given us 25,000 francs and Henri Frugès of Bordeaux having given us the other 25,000, making up the 50,000



The Pavilion of L'Esprit Nouveau, built from 'real' materials on the Cours de la Reine in 1925, was a cell of human habitation.



The interior: a complete apartment in 'real' materials.

with which the Esprit Nouveau pavilion (by Le Corbusier and Pierre Jeanneret) was erected); it was in reinforced concrete, on two floors and with an area of 300 square metres. It stayed intact throughout the following winter, while as soon as the autumn of 1925 set in the plaster palaces started crumbling all over the Esplanade of the Invalides, the Pont Alexandre, and the banks of the Seine.

The International Grand Jury wanted to award us the Diploma of Honour of the Exhibition, but the President of the Jury (a great Frenchman) opposed it: 'There's no architecture in it!' he declared.\*



This is the invitation card to the opening.

After overcoming all the snags, we were going to open our doors to the public. Then, one evening . . . we found that a palisade 7 metres high, painted green, had been put up, entirely hiding the Esprit Nouveau pavilion;

\*This was Auguste Perret. J.I.D.

# L'ESPRIT NOUVEAU

**REVUE INTERNATIONALE DE L'ACTIVITÉ CONTEMPORAINE**

LE CONSEIL D'ADMINISTRATION ET LA DIRECTION DE 'L'ESPRIT NOUVEAU'  
LES 'AÉROPLANES O VOISIN' (AUTOMOBILES)  
MR. HENRY FRUGES, DE BORDEAUX  
LES ARCHITECTES LE CORBUSIER ET PIERRE JEANNERET

VOUS PRIENT DE LEUR FAIRE L'HONNEUR D'ASSISTER VENDREDI 10 JUILLET, A SEIZE HEURES,  
A L'INAUGURATION DU PAVILLON DE L'ESPRIT NOUVEAU, SOUS LA PRÉSIDENCE DE  
MONSIEUR DE MONZIE, MINISTRE DE L'INSTRUCTION PUBLIQUE ET DES BEAUX-ARTS.

LE PAVILLON DE L'ESPRIT NOUVEAU EST CONSACRÉ A LA RÉFORME DE L'HABITATION  
(TRANSFORMATION DU PLAN, STANDARDISATION ET INDUSTRIALISATION). IL COMPORTE UNE CELLULE  
ENTIÈRE DE 'L'IMMEUBLE-VILLAS' AVEC JARDIN SUSPENDU; DES ŒUVRES DE GEORGES BRAQUE,  
JUAN GRIS, CH. E. JEANNERET, FERRAND LÉGER, JACQUES LIPCHITZ, AMÉDÉE OZENFANT,  
PABLO PICASSO.

L'URBANISME DES GRANDES VILLES SERA EXPOSÉ SOUS FORME DES DIORAMAS D'UNE VILLE  
CONTEMPORAINE DE 3 MILLIONS D'HABITANTS ET PRINCIPALEMENT DU PLAN 'VOISIN' DE PARIS  
(AMÉNAGEMENT DU CENTRE DE PARIS)

LE PAVILLON DE L'ESPRIT NOUVEAU EST SITUÉ DANS LE JARDIN ENTRE LES DEUX AILES  
DU GRAND PALAIS, CÔTÉ COURS LA REINE, DERRIÈRE LE PAVILLON DU HAUT COMMISSARIAT

CE PAVILLON EST LE PLUS CACHÉ DE L'EXPOSITION

CETTE INVITATION TIENT LIEU DE CARTE D'ENTRÉE DANS L'EXPOSITION PAR LA PORTE D'HONNEUR  
AVENUE ALEXANDRE III

this was by order of the Directorate of the Exhibition, which, moreover, charged us with the cost of putting it up . . .

The palisade came down, thanks to a Minister of National Education whose principal private secretary (whom we had got to come to the functions at our pavilion) has now become head of Electricité de France.

Inside the pavilion (in 1925) a fine placard announced: 'INDUSTRY TAKES OVER BUILDING' – the key premise.

In 1959, i.e. thirty-five years later, industry (AT LAST!) is taking over building . . .



# L'ESPRIT NOUVEAU

TELEPHONES  
44-57  
45-00  
46-01

LE NUMERO FRANCE 8 Pa.  
ETRANGER 7 Pa. 50  
ABONNEMENTS FRANCE 70 Pa.  
ETRANGER 80 Pa.

REVUE INTERNATIONALE ILLUSTREE DE L'ACTIVITE CONTEMPORAINE

35, Rue de Sévres

REVUE INTERNATIONALE

PARIS (8)

EXPOSITION INTERNATIONALES DES ARTS DECORATIFS DE 1925

PAVILLON de " L'ESPRIT NOUVEAU "  
Société Anonyme  
Revue Internationale de l'Activité Contemporaine

SITUATION: Jardins du Grand Palais , sur le Cours La Reine

Ce pavillon reproduit rigoureusement l'une des cellules d'un grand immeuble locatif qui sera construit à Paris à partir de fin 1925.

Ce pavillon servira de démonstration

Ce pavillon par lui-même, constitue en soi, une villa qui sera érigée après l'exposition en bédieu avec la presque totalité des éléments conçus démontables et transportables.

Ce pavillon constitue une démonstration saisissante des transformations radicales qui doivent être apportées dans la conception et dans les moyens constructifs du bâtiment; il est une illustration objective des théories parues dans la Revue l'ESPRIT NOUVEAU et dans ses éditions.

Ce pavillon sera vendu par adjudication au cours de l'exposition.

Suivant les conventions antérieures, les participants apportent leur concours gratuit, c'est à dire qu'ils fournissent gracieusement et abondamment à la Société de l'ESPRIT NOUVEAU tout ce qui concerne leur collaboration.

The images included here\* evoke the 1925 pavilion, which provided the occasion for the appearance of this book with its unassuming title:  
'THE DECORATIVE ART OF TODAY.'

Paris, 1st May 1959

LE CORBUSIER

\*Some of the illustrations which originally accompanied this preface have been omitted from this translation for reasons of space. They are readily available in volume 1 of the *Oeuvre Complète*. J.I.D.