

# *Le Corbusier and the Occult*

by James Rossant

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# HYPERION

On the future of aesthetics



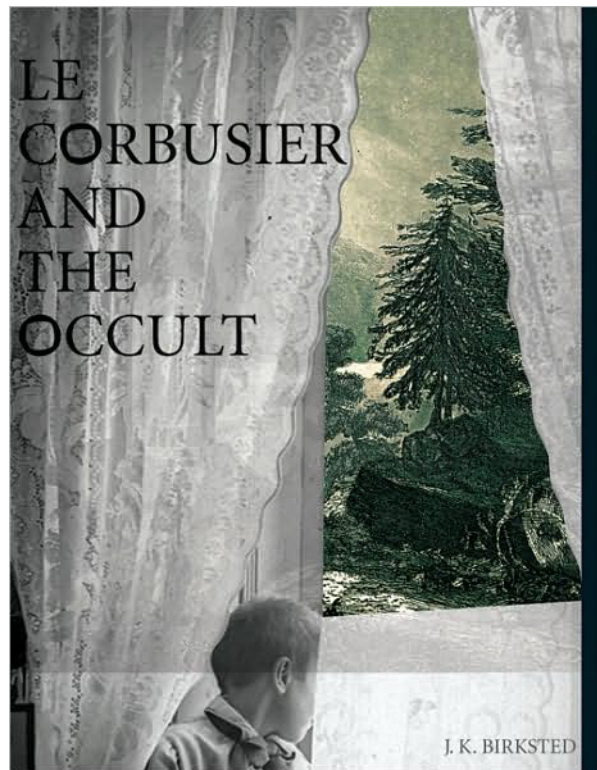
# Le Corbusier and the Occult

**J. K. Birksted**  
MIT Press, 2009

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**W**hen I was a very young student living in Manhattan and a great reader, I would spend Saturday mornings haunting the bookshops of lower Manhattan to look for cheap used books of literature. Many of the bookstores had outsized signs boldly announcing *OCCULT*. Why the great attraction of the Occult? I felt there must be something on the edge of the law here because these signs were just like the *SEX* signs in store windows on Eighth Avenue in the 40's: 100 GORGEOUS SEXY GIRLS, things in those days you absolutely couldn't question your parents about. Later I read about séances, speaking with departed loved ones by Victorian writers like Conan Doyle, and about Spiritualism. Much of this seemed to have been done through the intercession of genuine or fraudulent mediums. The literary figures ranged from Conan Doyle and his interest in spiritualism and occultism to the respected W.B. Yeats, dismaying his English fans with his new found obsession. Actually Yeats was searching for a spiritual aspect to his inherited religious life, the dry, strict Irish Protestant faith.

In France, Scotland, and Germany, however, the occult manifested in Masonic ritual was more philosophical, political, and religious in its nature and had a raging anti-Vatican aspect to it. Masonic Lodges favored democratic, non-



exclusive membership consisting in Free Thinkers, Jewish and Agnostic merchants, Protestants, lapsed Catholics, doctors, and ranking artisans. Birksted sees in the dramatic blindfolded, ritualistic initiation of new members in what must have been austere Nineteenth Masonic Lodge houses (the 18<sup>th</sup> century's equivalent of a meditation room in the Star Trek Spaceship 'Enterprise,') the essence of Masonic belief, especially in the form he admires most, "the Scottish Rectified Rite." In the spatial aspects of the initiation ceremony he recognizes aspects of Le Corbusier's "Architectural Promenade" and borrowing of Masonic forms such as pure white pyramids capping white stone cubes. The author provides, however, absolutely no evidence that Le Corbusier ever witnessed, participated in, or even entered a Masonic Lodge, or believed in the Scottish Rectified Rite or any other Rite.

The "Architectural Promenade" was a trip through a building, which, if the architect were skilled, revealed the brilliance of his spatial concept. Birksted's fascination with the Rites of Initiation, where the blindfolded candidates, by turns, are made to fear what is coming and are reassured once the next step into the Temple is successfully taken. Birksted seems totally disinterested in the rest of Masonic Lodge life. Le Corbusier may have heard of the Occult initiation ceremony, but from all evidence, Le Corbusier's "Architectural Promenade" had other intentions.

Le Corbusier rejected all designs that came before his own modern, new world vision except for a handful of great historic works. The vision he strove for was guided by *L'esprit Nouveau*—the new spirit—producing a new physical world as different from provincial La Chaux de Fonds, Le Corbusier's boyhood village and its Masonic Lodge as it could be. As far from his adolescent water coloring sessions with friends, as far from mountain-hiking clubs, stuffy Sunday lunches, and finely-crafted, boring 18<sup>th</sup>-century technology with its exquisite watches, as it was feasible to get, Le Corbusier, in his dramatic move to Paris, lay the groundwork for an amazing, self-conceived birth of himself as the supreme world architect, artist, and personality, and in the end brilliantly and ruthlessly created by this Swiss son of an enameled watch face.

The self-anointed genius architect, whose mission was to create an operating vision of an entirely new world, and one which provided a fit setting for the things Le Corbusier truly loved: steel steamships, shiny motorcars, and aero planes, light-as-air steel-framed plate glass and reinforced concrete buildings incorporating ramps, flat roofs planted with moveable gardens, so brilliant and attractive as composed by Le Corbusier, that all other current visions would wither, disappear overnight from the scene. His buildings and cities would compete with Greek temples in Athens, Gothic cathedrals in Rouen and Chartres, and Egyptian tombs in Memphis. The new Corbusier world of the future would be seen by politicians, barons of industry, the leaders of the art and intellectual world as the only acceptable vision of the modern.

All the while, Le Corbusier was certain other visions for the future would be seen for their timid and fragmentary nature. Unfortunately, his cities tended toward total lifelessness. But the look of our cities today has been altogether affected by Le Corbusier's vision. Thousands of housing estates all over the world characterized by tall, identical housing towers rising from a low park-like landscape are Corbusier, as are town centers with ranks of even taller towers set within clean, sterile, immense plazas and fed by great geometric boulevards and highways.

As a young architect, I curled up in the university library with Corbusier's thin square volumes. The wonderfully colored drawings and diagrams smeared with great swatches of bright green covering land liberated by Le Corbusier's silly idea of lifting all buildings in the air on stilts. How I then adored those pictures, the pure towers with fifty floors, the lack of low buildings to mess up the views, and the heroic bits of prose, which, to me, soared like his towers. I was determined to be an architect like Le Corbusier. How far this all seems today or ever from Masonic Lodge initiations in gloomy, drafty, neo classic halls.

There is an immense pile of historical scholarship in *Le Corbusier and the Occult*, most of it unreadable, boring, and excessive like endless lists of Swiss Masonic Lodge members, never including Le Corbusier's Swiss name, Charles-Edouard Jenneret Gris except for a spurious Vichy Government document about Le Corbusier's Masonic career substantiated nowhere else. For the jaded, there are delightful photographs of a "Groupe de Gymnastic" of the union of Christians of young people, and sweet photos of garden parties which Le Corbusier did not attend. There is one sentence in a paragraph in which Birksted perhaps inadvertently reveals his sense of unreality, where he claims that Le Corbusier added a Masonic history and dogma book to his library in 1960. Birksted goes on to remark how the very date reveals the soaring importance to the architect's designs, apparently not aware that by 1960 Le Corbusier had done it all: his astonishing Ronchamp Chapel and La Tourette had been built years before and the Garches and Savoye Houses, date from 40 years earlier . . . the Unite d'Habitation in Marseilles, the Pavilion Suisse, the Pavilion of L'esprit Nouveau, and on and on. By 1960, it was about over, and what influence could a 1960 book on Masonic ritual make even if it became the primary influence on Le Corbusier's thought? Precisely none.

These visions of the world of Le Corbusier had a lasting effect on the look of the twentieth century world for better or for worse (I am beginning to think for the worse). It is also true that Mies van der Rohe's vision and Wallace K. Harrison's later modifications did modify the more sculptural and emotional Le Corbusier dream and his version of the concrete UN building was modified beyond all recognition with its slick, gridded, curtain wall. But as I said earlier, vast pieces of the world and thousands of buildings do reflect Le Corbusier's

vision. Le Corbusier built many smaller projects where bits and pieces of other inventive forms are seen. To Birksted, a few of these are of obvious Masonic origin. But although a creative architect does have an enormous storehouse of images piled up in his brain cells, and one could conjecture there were cube buildings of Masonic origin with solid pyramids on top like stubby obelisks in Corbusier's visual storehouse, I wouldn't be surprised. It is unlikely, however, from what we do know that philosophically and artistically the great architect was a believer in the Occult. Even though he wrote a loving poem and a colorful diagram to the right angle, which may or may not have some connection to Masonic beliefs, unfortunately Birksted's attic leftovers shaped into this crushing heavy art book prove nothing.