

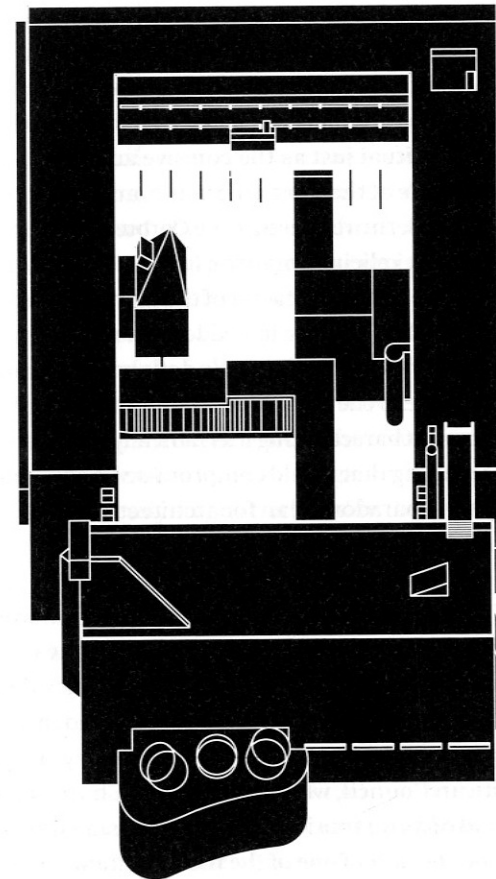
dramatic changes in postwar society than about actual differences between the architects themselves.

#### V. OMUOMA

It is easy to point out everything that OMUOMA has overlooked or done wrong. What OMUOMA proposes, more than anything, is to keep the investigation of the tension between architecture, infrastructure and territory alive, and to keep imagining the culture that this could produce. The image of OMUOMA that flashed through our minds during Koolhaas's lecture is that of an intergenerational pact, the description of an (architectural) history that does not have to erase everything in order to renew itself, resulting in a growing and increasingly complex body of work. What Schinkel did for Ungers, OMUOMA could do for us by reminding us that we cannot step into a predetermined role, and that design should not be mistaken for a solution but can only be a means of understanding (and shaping) the reality around us.

## INDIFFERENCE AND ABSORPTION OF ARCHITECTURAL FORM: NOTES ON LE CORBUSIER'S LA TOURETTE MONASTERY

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1 This is especially evident in many important buildings realized over the last ten years in which design is fully concentrated on the envelope of the building rather than on its internal organization.

2 The notion of the liturgy as public office in the context of the Catholic Church has been most notably discussed in Giorgio Agamben, *Opus Dei: Archeologia dell'Ufficio* (Turin: Bollati Boringhieri, 2012).

3 See Philippe Potie, *Le Corbusier: The Monastery of Sainte Marie de la Tourette* (Paris: Fondation Le Corbusier / Birkhäuser, 2001), 60.

In recent times the issue of programme in architecture has been both celebrated as a “scientific” form-giving process and dismissed as a pretentious excuse for bizarre formal exercises. While in the 1990s programme was more important than architecture, in the last decade it seems that architecture has become more important than programme, to the point that it is a self-evident cliché to rely on architecture’s neutrality and flexibility, its vague allusions, its lack of convincing content.<sup>1</sup> Confronted with both the celebration and the dismissal of programme in architecture, it would be interesting to revisit a kind of architectural form that is indifferent to programme but flaunts this indifference in the face of a programme that is relevant and strong, one that could be strictly defined such as *liturgical*. *Leitourgia* was the ritual service of the temple in ancient Greece and, as such, the essence of public duty itself. Christianity inherited this ritual in the form of the public *officium* (office) of the church.<sup>2</sup> It is thus possible to say that all sacred architecture is strictly functional insofar as it facilitates the enactment of this public office. In sacred architecture, form *must* follow function – form must adhere to the ritual just as the concave adheres to the convex. Such is the case of one of the most enigmatic, and to a certain degree absurd, works of modern architecture: Le Corbusier’s Monastery of La Tourette. Despite its explicit formalism, La Tourette does not dismiss the fact that the most important factor of the monastery is its content – the manner of life of its monastic residents – rather than its form. And yet it is precisely within this strictly defined programme that Le Corbusier offered one of the most intense reflections on the nature of architectural form by characterizing it as radically autonomous, almost indifferent to anything that would compromise its appearance. What does this deliberate paradox mean for architecture?

### Tableaux

The design of the Monastery of La Tourette was commissioned from Le Corbusier by Father Marie-Alain Couturier, one of the editors of *Art sacré*, a reformist periodical dedicated to the revival of religious art in the modern world.<sup>3</sup> The design process started in 1953 and the building was inaugurated in 1960. These were the years just before the Second Vatican Council, when the Catholic Church embarked on a radical renewal of its institutions. The commission was a bold act of self-challenge on the part of one of the most militant and severe mendicant orders, the Dominicans. Despite the cultural openness of Father Couturier,<sup>4</sup> the Dominicans were the most unlikely order to accept

the progressive simplicity of modernist architecture. Born to defend the prerogatives of the Catholic church against the Cathar heresy, the Dominicans were very familiar with the pitfalls of the extreme pauperism held so dear by other mendicant orders, such as the Franciscans.

This is why the aesthetic of La Tourette is not obviously *progressive* or *heretical* the way other religious buildings designed by Le Corbusier are (*in primis* the Ronchamp Chapel). In spite of the many iconoclastic formal solutions that Le Corbusier put forward in the design of the Monastery, the project remained resolute in its adherence to the strict liturgy of monastic life: it consists of a series of shared spaces that reflect the rhythm of life of the monastic community clustered around a cloister ringed by individual cells. In the organization of the plan Le Corbusier remained fairly faithful to a diagram sketched by Father Couturier that he published in his *Oeuvre complète* as the introduction to his proposal. Indeed, what is impressive about La Tourette is its almost pedantic functionalism. Each function is signalled by a different treatment of the façade; in spite of the compactness of its overall form, the building seems like an awkward assemblage of different “boxes”, each containing a clearly defined function.

Le Corbusier raised the Monastery (with the exception of the church) on pilotis, a solution that further emphasized the awkwardness of the building’s siting on a west-facing slope.<sup>5</sup> In the initial steps of the design, the monastery was to be accessed via a long ramp linking the ground to the top of the building;<sup>6</sup> although this solution was later abandoned, the idea of maintaining the roof level as the only stable datum remained the main formal motif. The continuous line of the top profile became the steady background against which a composition of forms was shamelessly staged both inside the cloister and toward the surrounding landscape. If we were to display all of the elevations of the Monastery as one continuous façade, we would obtain a series of tableaux,<sup>7</sup> moving from the self-sufficient concrete frame placed in front of an otherwise unceremonious entrance, to the pyramid of the oratory, to the fragile mullions of the chapterhouse and library (which – regardless of their famously sophisticated proportions<sup>8</sup> – only block what would otherwise be a stunning landscape view). This tableau-like composition reaches its climax on the north side of the church. As is well known,<sup>9</sup> this is the side of the Monastery that presents itself first to visitors, “welcoming” them with an imposing blank wall against which Le Corbusier placed the most gratuitously formalistic composition he ever conceived: the chapel’s curvy wall topped by its

4 A discussion of the cultural and religious agenda that animated Couturier’s project for La Tourette can be found in Nicholas Fox Weber, *Le Corbusier: A Life* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2008), 720–21.

5 “Here, on this site that was so mobile, so evasive, sloping and flowing, I said: I won’t place the base on the ground because it will be hidden. Instead let’s place it up high, along the topo line of the building, blending it with the horizon. And we will use this horizontal top line as our point of departure . . .”; Le Corbusier, quoted in Potie, *Le Corbusier*, 66.

6 As reported by Flora Samuel in *Le Corbusier and the Architectural Promenade* (Basel: Birkhäuser, 2010), 203.

7 We are referring here to the concept of tableau as used by Michael Fried in his critical oeuvre. Fried argues that the English word “picture” fails to convey the exact meaning of tableau because it “lacks the connotations of constructedness, of being the product of an intellectual act that the French word carries”. See Michael Fried, *Why Photography Matters as Art as Never Before* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2008), 146.

8 “[A] screen of lamellas whose delicate rhythms accompany and contradict the massive

bulk of the concrete pillars and sunbreakers" is the fitting description given in Stanislaus von Moos, *Le Corbusier: Elements of a Synthesis* (Rotterdam: 010 Publishers, 2009), 168.

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"The usual approach is from the north, and the first view is of a blank rectangle of concrete which turns out to be the side of the church"; William J. R. Curtis, *Le Corbusier: Ideas and Forms* (London: Phaidon, 1994), 182.

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Colin Rowe, "Dominican Monastery of La Tourette, Eveux-sur-Arbresle, Lyons", *The Architectural Review* (June 1961), 400–410.

11  
See, for instance, the author's photographs published in Hubert Damisch's insightful essay "Against the Slope", *Log 4* (Winter 2005), 29–48.

12  
This feature is particularly well explained by Flora Samuel in *Le Corbusier and the Architectural Promenade*, 186–205.

13  
Nicholas Fox Weber, *Le Corbusier: A Life*, 724.

light cannons. This tableau has been the focus of several readings of La Tourette, most notably the seminal article by Colin Rowe.<sup>10</sup> Rowe suggested that the blank wall, in all its opaqueness, was not an object in and of itself, but rather the projection of something *more* yet to come. Rowe saw the blank wall as "a great dam holding back a reservoir of spiritual energy". Even if he acknowledged the power that the Monastery exercises in preventing a ceremonial approach to it, his analysis still insisted on a kinetic view of the blank wall, as if it were just the invitation to something else. This reading of La Tourette has remained the standard ever since, and indeed most photographers choose to represent the Monastery through views that simultaneously capture two sides of the building.<sup>11</sup> All the critics who have celebrated La Tourette insist upon the importance of impatiently "walking around" the Monastery;<sup>12</sup> however, the formal compositions described thus far are not merely targeted at a peripatetic experience of the building. Due to its lack of grace and balance, Le Corbusier's formal tour de force produces the strange feeling of witnessing a never-ending series of non-sequitur architectural episodes. Each of these episodes is a tableau whose formal workings are so tight and concentrated within themselves that they seem to deny the fact that they have to be seen or inhabited. And yet such a provocative use of architecture is applied not to a gratuitous architectural exercise (like a pavilion or a folly), but to the quintessentially programmatic building: the monastery. The experience of La Tourette ultimately lies in the unresolvable contradictions of its character, which is extremely functional yet extremely formal. With the exception of the church, the monastery's interior architecture is utterly unspectacular to the point that the building has, as has been noted, the atmosphere of a "grim school or administrative building".<sup>13</sup> And yet these functional spaces are constantly contrasted by the most enigmatic formal compositions, which are autonomous and self-referential, devoid of any relationship to the way the building is inhabited. By being exposed to the fact that a structure must be inhabited in order to be *architecture*, formal expression reveals that all its potential is merely to be itself, indifferent toward both its context and the life that takes place within it.

### Absorption

The constructive logic of La Tourette synthesized two of the most important housing prototypes proposed by Le Corbusier: the Maison Dom-ino (1914) and the Maison Citrohan (1922). In these models Le

Corbusier developed a quintessentially modern living space in which architecture is reduced to a minimum and emptiness is maximized.<sup>14</sup> This condition was intended to allow architecture to be never completed in itself, but rather open and adaptable to any unforeseen use. In these two prototypes Le Corbusier made evident the most fundamental fact of modern architecture: its total adherence to life understood as *bare life*,<sup>15</sup> i.e., the most generic characteristics of man. These characteristics are the human species's constant uprootedness, its lack of specialized instincts, its permanent feeling of not being at home.<sup>16</sup> Therefore, what the generic space of the Dom-ino and Citrohan houses manifests with utmost clarity is the instability of the human condition. Paraphrasing Michael Fried's famous attack on Minimal Art, it is possible to say that the space of these Le Corbusier models is *theatrical*.<sup>17</sup> At this point it is crucial for our argument that we briefly review what was at stake in Fried's criticism of theatricality in Minimal Art. He argued that theatrical artworks were only activated or completed by the movement of the beholder. For example, the sculptures of Donald Judd and Robert Morris are never completed in themselves because their appearance involves not only the actual space of the gallery, but also the movement of the spectator around and through them. For Fried, such an experience would blur the distinction between what is art and what doesn't necessarily have to become art. Art is the opposite of the everyday: to behold an artwork is to experience a moment of suspension of our being-in-the-world, a moment in which something does not unfold in time like most events we experience in our everyday life, but rather appears to us in its inexorable presentness. Fried described this experience in an almost religious way by declaring at the end of his essay that "presentness is grace".<sup>18</sup>

In order to oppose theatrical art and reinforce the beholding of art as something removed from the literal space of experience, Fried's subsequent studies of painting proposed the concept of absorption.<sup>19</sup> Absorption refers to a condition in which an artwork is completed in itself without the need to engage the beholder. For Fried, this was evident in Jean-Baptiste-Siméon Chardin's *Young Student Drawing*,<sup>20</sup> in which the French painter portrays a man seen from behind, completely absorbed by his own activity of drawing. Another example of absorption are the paintings by Morris Louis in which the relationship between the rivulets or stripes of colour and the rectangular blank canvas is so strong and complete that it presupposes an arrested or "transfixed" beholder before them.<sup>21</sup> Absorption calls for artworks that

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For a general discussion of the Dom-ino model, see Eleanor Gregh, "The Dom-ino Idea", *Oppositions*, nos. 15/16 (Winter/Spring 1979), 65–87; and Peter Eisenman, "Aspects of Modernism: Maison Dom-ino and the Self-referential Sign", *Oppositions*, nos. 15/16 (Winter/Spring 1979), 118–28. We have previously characterized the Dom-ino as a device that reduces architecture and maximizes empty flexible space in Pier Vittorio Aureli, Maria Shéhérazade Ciudici and Platon Issaia, "From Dom-ino to Polykatoikia", *Domus*, no. 962 (October 2012), 74–87.

15  
We use the term "bare life" as defined by Giorgio Agamben in his seminal text *Homo Sacer: Sovereign Power and Bare Life* (San Francisco: Stanford University Press, 1998).

16  
The condition of perpetual uprootedness typical of the modern subject has been most notably discussed in Paolo Virno, *A Grammar of the Multitude* (Los Angeles: Semiotext(e), 2004).

17  
Michael Fried, "Art and Objecthood", in *Art and Objecthood: Essays and Reviews* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1998), 148–72; originally published in *Artforum* 5 (June 1967), 12–23.

18  
Michael Fried, "Art and Objecthood", 172; originally

published in *Artforum* 5 (June 1967), 23.

19 This is a concept first developed by Fried in *Absorption and Theatricality: Painting and Beholder in the Age of Diderot* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1980).

20 *Ibid.*, 13–14.

21 Michael Fried has written at length about Louis's oeuvre, most notably in the monograph *Morris Louis* (New York: Harry N. Abrams, 1979).

22 Potie, *Le Corbusier*, 80.

23 A discussion of asceticism as a response to an induced sense of guilt can be found in Elettra Stimilli, *Il debito del vivente: Ascesi e capitalismo* (Macerata: Quodlibet, 2011).

are resolutely themselves and do not concede anything to the beholder. In contrast, in a condition of theatricality, artworks are experienced through a situation of radical indeterminacy with respect to the subjective response of the viewer. This means that the intentions of the artists are no longer recognizable because they become confused with the subject's experience of the artwork itself. Fried's attack on the "participatory" nature of Minimal Art (which today is a generalized condition of much contemporary art and architecture) has been harshly criticized as regressive and conservative, or at best nostalgic of a time when art still had the magical aura of the autonomous object. It would be even more controversial to transport this critique to the realm of architecture, for the latter is the "literal space" par excellence – the space to be inhabited, the space whose only purpose is the life that transpires within it.

As said earlier, La Tourette is the final outcome of the constructive logic explored in the Maison Dom-ino and Maison Citrohan, two paradigms of literal architecture that are perennially unfinished and radically reduced to their load-bearing structures. The utilitarian character of the building technique used at La Tourette is made explicit in the *béton brut* of the north side of the church, which Le Corbusier realized using the same method of dams built in the Alps.<sup>22</sup> However, the tableau-like formal compositions displayed at La Tourette contradict the literalness of the project's construction method. While passing through a rationally planned sequence of spaces, the visitor is constantly confronted with the architectural tableaux described earlier, which are, as we have seen, not only utterly indifferent to the use and function of these spaces, but also radically finite compositions. So what sort of beholder do these tableaux imply? These formal tableaux presuppose an arrested or "transfixed" beholder, someone in a condition that embodies precisely the mental and physical experience of asceticism, the form of life fostered by monastic architecture.

### Asceticism

Asceticism is often confused with self-punishment as a way to counter a sense of guilt imposed upon the subject by an external force.<sup>23</sup> But if we consider the way of life of early monasticism and that of the later mendicant orders, asceticism has a radically different meaning. Here asceticism is the constant exercise focused on the body and mind that is designed to test their limits and reveal their potential. The main function of monastic architecture was to create a situation of utmost

self-awareness. This was achieved through the construction of specific spatial moments that engendered what Fried would call a condition of absorption, or of suspension from the time of the everyday. Spaces that display a resolute, finite, uncompromising formal resolution become the best backgrounds for the exercise of self-awareness. Here asceticism becomes an exercise that is fuelled not by guilt or self-loathing but, on the contrary, by the desire to become the absolute master of one's own life: to achieve *happiness* and *perfection*.<sup>24</sup> After all, ironically the ultimate ascetic space is the column of the stylite, an extreme architecture that lost its functional content and became a sculptural, absolute work governed by its own internal aesthetic logic.

At La Tourette, the many formal expedients that look accidental or irrational – from the use of colour to the blocked windows that conclude each corridor with a blank panel rather than a vista – estrange the building from its bare use; life is lived *against* the building, not merely in it. In this respect, La Tourette becomes an ascetic space, for it makes the user more aware of his own body and his relationship to his surroundings through the open display of its many inconsistencies and self-referential formal gestures.

As we have seen in plan, the disposition of the spaces of La Tourette responds to the canonical chronotope of the monastery – a layout that is at once a schedule and the embodiment of a rule. However, in section and façade the actual architecture contradicts at each step the rationality of the plan: a building that hangs from its roof, a cloister that cannot actually be accessed, a hidden entrance, a wealth of lighting devices that seem to do anything possible to force light in in the most unnatural ways. This paradoxical condition of a simultaneous adherence to programme and a development of an intrinsic logic that cannot be argued in functional terms is possible thanks to the specific nature of religious architecture, an architecture that, however informed by practical concerns it may be, can never be measured in terms of performance. In fact, even the term function here loses its meaning and should rather be replaced by *liturgy*. Function is a set of actions in which the sequence is not predetermined; functionalist design is ultimately geared toward offering space that is "easy to use" – and it does this through a careful planning of the user's responses.

Liturgy is a precise set of gestures that forms a pattern which, in its extremely repetitive nature, can only be undertaken voluntarily and always gains a collective dimension.<sup>25</sup> As the direct materialization of a ritual, liturgical spaces tend to force their users into specific

24 "Asceticism means the liberation of the human person[,] . . . a concentration of inner forces and command of oneself"; as Nicolas Berdyaev has experienced from an Orthodox perspective. Quoted in Kallistos Ware, "The Way of the Ascetics: Negative or Affirmative?"; in Vincent L. Wimbush and Richard Valantasis, eds., *Asceticism* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998), 3.

25 Both the strong collective dimension in liturgical activity and the voluntary, individual character of the liturgical action have been clearly articulated by Aap de Jong in his essay "Liturgical Action from a Language Perspective": "Liturgy has to be a collective expression, although it is not essential that all participants express their faith in the same way"; cited in Hans Schildermann, ed., *Discourse in Ritual Studies* (Leiden: Brill, 2007), 117.

movements; they neither seek interaction nor require use, since their purpose is already present in their form regardless of the presence of users. They do not have a time horizon, for the time of the ritual is necessarily cyclical and eternal, whereas functional space is always designed for an incessantly immediate future as a space of potential, growth and "becoming". In their fundamental indifference to the praxis of their users, liturgical spaces allow visitors a paradoxical form of freedom: they turn their back to the subjects because they already *are* the ritual.

While it would be simplistic to see a burgeoning form of resistance against the managerial rationale of the Dom-ino model in the possibility of asceticism put forward by La Tourette, it might not be out of place to consider that modern architecture is not necessarily condemned to being "theatrical", and that architectural form has not exhausted its potential to generate instances of absorption, or chances for reflection that can be born only in a momentary detachment from the practical nature of things.

Neither smoothly flexible nor obtusely programme-driven, the architecture of La Tourette posits the relationship between form and content, and between building and life, as a dialectic that pretends to be not resolved but merely experienced. It is precisely in this gap in the articulation of the distance between liturgy and representation – in the crack between what architecture can define and what cannot be programmed – that La Tourette helps us to understand the potential of architectural form in general. Here, architectural form is a challenge to both the cliché of context and function as disingenuous crutches for form and the supposed neutrality of form. In La Tourette, form is revealed in all its awkward, inexplicable beauty and in its relentless indifference and, thus, *presentness*.

Stefaan Vervoort

To ask whether architecture is indifferent is to ask whether, and how, architecture is political, for indifference is not simply an ideological attitude or idiosyncratic point of departure: it is the opponent of *difference*, that comparative category which enables things to have a stable, normative identity. Like the "duck-rabbit" figure, indifference means refraining from a priori positions and allowing different objects to collide in an open-ended process of semantic redefinition. "Indifference", according to Gilles Deleuze, "has two aspects: the undifferentiated abyss, the black nothingness, the indeterminate animal in which everything is dissolved – but also the white nothingness, the once more calm surface upon which float unconnected determinations like scattered members: a head without a neck, an arm without a shoulder, eyes without brows."<sup>1</sup> Analogous to the condition of the simulacrum, indifference for Deleuze is a potential interruption or overturning of the law.<sup>2</sup> For architecture, this would mean that a building is indifferent when it is integrated into the social and political order of things, only to dislodge and redefine/renegeotiate the "social" and "political" from within. An indifferent building is a political building: it is where architecture infiltrates, occupies and then destabilizes the existing world order.

The work of Belgian artist-architect Luc Deleu and his T.O.P office is highly attuned to such indifference, as it has been allegorizing the disciplinary, social and political sway of architecture since 1968. At a time when simulation and appropriation redefined the landscapes of art and architecture alike (developments for which, in the field of art at least, Deleuze was celebrated as a primary theoretician), Luc Deleu – T.O.P. office engaged with images and image-making in ways

<sup>1</sup> Gilles Deleuze, *Différence et répétition* (Paris: Press Universitaires de France, 1968); quote taken from the English translation *Difference and Repetition* (London: Continuum, 1997), 36.

<sup>2</sup> "In every respect, repetition is a transgression. It puts law into question, it denounces its nominal or general character in favour of a more profound and more artistic reality." By interconnecting repetition and indifference, or "pure difference", this law-disruptive character can be claimed for both concepts; *ibid.*, 3.