

Reflection, perseverance, introspection and process

Antony Moulis's study of the spiral motif in the work of Le Corbusier (arq 14.4, pp. 317–326) raises interesting questions about Le Corbusier's work and about architectural historiography. The article focuses on the design process and on formal correlations, thus avoiding the cultural and symbolic context. My own historiography is contextual, but one cannot do everything all the time, and this approach is as valid as any other. And of course it follows a long tradition of formal analyses of the architecture of Charles-Edouard Jeanneret. But, as I would like to argue, I think that there is here a fascinating overlap precisely between formal design process and symbolism.

Moulis shows how relentlessly Jeanneret pursued the spiral motif throughout his life. And let us not forget that it also of course appears in his art and in his publications. Indeed, spirals are everywhere! It is this proliferation that makes me wonder. I would like to put forward a hypothesis which would, of course, need testing against the evidence. But let me be rash and float a hypothetical idea without empirical evidence, subject to someone else pursuing it ...

Jeanneret, as I show in my book, *Le Corbusier and the Occult*, was brought up in an age (at the cusp between the nineteenth and twentieth centuries) and a context (a small town in Switzerland), which we find it difficult to even begin to imagine ourselves into. This historical moment is so distant from us that my attempt at retracing it led at least one reviewer to say that I must have gone totally barmy. Indeed, the historical context of the late nineteenth century in La Chaux-de-Fonds is simply not acceptable to the modern mind, which it transgresses.

In their otherness, the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries speak of madness and irrationally to the 'modern mind'. So let us try to overcome our preconceptions and imagine ourselves into the bourgeois and official networks of La Chaux-de-Fonds, which Jeanneret's father, uncle, friends and foes belonged to: *Le Club Alpin Suisse Section La Chaux-de-Fonds* and *La Loge L'Amitié*. The spiral was deeply symbolic of the notion of the journey, and more precisely of the *inner* journey. That is, of individuals who turn around themselves, who reflect on themselves and on their journeys,

on their progress and on their lives. The spiral is symbolic of continuous reflection, of continuity in reflection and in effort, of perseverance, of determination, and of doggedness allied to introspective self-questioning. Which seems to be exactly what Moulis is talking about.

I am thus suggesting that what is perhaps deeply symbolic is not the *motif* in and by itself, but the *design process* of this motif. If this were so, there would be a critical historiographical implication, being that purely formal historiography risks missing the most important point. So the next obvious question would be: are there other motifs that recur as persistently as that of the spiral? Are there? ...

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