Le Corbusier

Charles-Edouard Jeanneret-Gris, known as Le Corbusier (1887-1965), was born in La Chaux-de-Fonds in Switzerland, a town renowned for the manufacture of watch cases. After graduating from the municipal school of decorative art, Le Corbusier experienced the new movement of architecture, arts and crafts in Vienna, Berlin and Paris. As an architect, he firstly worked for Auguste Perret and Peter Behrens, but he was mainly self-taught. His design work was the result of very thorough research for each prototype. Then, as needed, he repeatedly considered and refined the design until he was satisfied. It was the best building for the site and environment. Le Corbusier worked mainly in France, pursuing rational, functional and clear design principles, and had an incomparable influence on 20th Century architecture and urban planning.

The National Museum of Western Art, Tokyo

The National Museum of Western Art, Tokyo was established to house and display the Matsumata Collection, returned to Japan by the French government after World War II. This collection was donated by Masayoshi Matsumata, the president of the Kawasaki Dockyard Co., Ltd., who had travelled extensively in Europe and built a vast Collection of artworks. After France stipulated that a French architect should design the museum to house the collection, the works were returned to Japan, and the Japanese government commissioned Le Corbusier to design the building for the new museum in 1955. Le Corbusier asked the three former Japanese apprentices, Shunzo Sekukawa, Kunio Maekawa and Takamasa Yoneda, to help him supervise construction. Many Japanese architects have been influenced by Le Corbusier’s work and his architectural philosophy has made an outstanding contribution to the new architectural movement in Japan.


The Nineteenth Century Hall

Le Corbusier retained the hall located at the center of the building and intended to be the heart of the museum. Its open space rising freely up into places on the mezzanine and second floor allows visitors to appreciate the complex spatial composition.

Triangular Skylight

On a clear day, sunlight fills the hall with natural light from the north-facing triangular window.

Supporting Columns and Beams

Concrete columns and beams are painted in Heisei pine frames so the texture of the wood grain is beautifully visible.

Ramp

Ramps were often included in Le Corbusier’s design. Visitors leisurely striking up the ramp, are treated to slowly changing scenery, and weary paintings appearing and disappearing behind columns, along with the changing appearances of the triangular ceiling.

Floor Lighting

Floor-mounted lights were installed to light the works from below. (They are currently not in use.)

Pilotsis

This was one of the essential elements of “five points of a new architecture” and the idea of a “museum of unlimited growth”, which Le Corbusier proposed.

Panels of Exterior Walls

Unlike in traditional architecture, the exterior walls are not required to support the weight of a building; each wall panel is embedded with pebbles and each panel is removable. (Almost all of the panels have been replaced to date.)

The Second Floor Exhibition Room

This exhibition room is arranged around the Nineteenth Century Hall, and the high and low ceilings and walls with openings allow visitors to appreciate the transition between open and compressed spaces.

Balconies

The two balconies overlooking the Nineteenth Century Hall allow visitors to appreciate the complex spatial composition of the building by providing a view down onto the hall below and into the exhibition room behind the opposite balcony.

Mezzanine Floor (Clerestory Gallery As Lighting Device)

A small corridor like glass walled gallery allows natural light from the roof as well as artificial lighting to filter through into the exhibition room and the Nineteenth Century Hall. (Dry artificial lighting is currently in use.)

Mezzanine Floor (Balcony)

There are three separate balcony-like rooms with narrow staircases made for meetings and for the display of smaller exhibits. (The mezzanine floor spaces are currently not in use.)

Modulor (Interior)

Le Corbusier designed buildings based on the proportions of the human body. The columns are erected at equal intervals of 885cm. Most of the building is constructed based on Modulor measurements including the height of the low awning in the exhibition room on the second floor and on the mezzanine floor (226cm) as well as the height of the balcony handrail wall (113cm).
World Heritage Across Seven Countries

“The Architectural Work of Le Corbusier, an Outstanding Contribution to the Modern Movement”, including the National Museum of Western Art, Tokyo, was added to the World Heritage List at the 40th session of the World Heritage Committee on July 17, 2016. This is the first time the group of 17 sites across seven countries and three continents was listed together. These sites encompass the history of the modern architectural movement, which criticized the style of architecture prior to the 19th Century and attempted to change architecture in accordance with the needs of a new society. The sites are also proof of the movement’s influence around the world. The movement was recognized as an innovative solution to 20th Century social and human needs.

The Five Points for a New Architecture 1926–

Le Corbusier presented “five points for a new architecture” considering such technical aspects as construction materials and methods, while incorporating concepts to create a structure to benefit the lifestyle and wellbeing of its inhabitants.

1. Pilots
A space supported by columns. It is a comfortable light and open space allowing free movement of people and air.

2. Roof Top Garden
Generous rooftop spaces filled with plants enhance the reinforced concrete flat roof—such gardens in the sky are impossible to create on older buildings with their functional sloped roofs designed to repel snow and rain.

3. Free Floor Plan (Flat Surface)
Replaceable and movable partitions (interior walls) laid out in floors supported by columns allow the free design of interior space.

4. Horizontal Oblong Windows
Rooms are filled with light from windows extending the full width of the wall.

5. Free Façade
Supporting the building on columns gives virtually unrestricted freedom to use panels and glass for exterior walls.

The Five Points for a New Architecture

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- **Free Floor Plan (Flat Surface)**: Replaceable and movable partitions (interior walls) laid out in floors supported by columns allow the free design of interior space.
- **Horizontal Oblong Windows**: Rooms are filled with light from windows extending the full width of the wall.
- **Free Façade**: Supporting the building on columns gives virtually unrestricted freedom to use panels and glass for exterior walls.

Le Corbusier repeatedly worked on his plans for the “museum of unlimited growth” concept over a 36 year period from 1909 until his death. “Mundaneum, the World Museum” (1929) was his first museum project. A pyramid shaped building allowed visitors to descend spirally from the center of the top floor exhibition room. The Contemporary Art Museum, Paris (1931) was the first museum of a square spiral form with an exhibition room above pilots. In order to solve the problem of an ever expanding collection, a central room was first created, around which exhibition rooms extending helically and outwardly were to be added as the number of exhibits increased. Le Corbusier continued his research in its building a museum which could be constructed relatively easily. Could accommodate a variety of exhibitions and which looked harmonious. He presented the prototype of a “museum of unlimited growth” in the museum in Philadelphia planning (1939).

The Museum of Unlimited Growth (Museum Projects) 1929–

Le Corbusier repeatedly worked on his plans for the “museum of unlimited growth” concept. In 1955 the design of the National Museum of Western Art was based on the principle of a “Museum of Unlimited Growth”. The characteristics are still relevant today.

- **Entrance Central Hall through Pilots and go around the square spiral exhibition room.**
- **There is a vastawala shaped mezzanine space.**
- **The dimensions and locations of the partitions (walls) in the exhibition room are flexible and allow a variety of different spatial arrangements.**

Modulor

In some cases, the “museum of unlimited growth” is translated as the “museum of unlimited expansion”, and the “five points for a new architecture” is translated as the “five elements for modern architecture”.

-Main references-

- Le Corbusier, “Museum of Unlimited Growth”, 1929
- Le Corbusier, “Modulor”, 1955