The Three Memos---Analysis of “Vers Une Architecture” From the Perspective of Modern Architectural Development Practice

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Abstract. In “Vers Une Architecture”, Le Corbusier presents a complete theory of modern architectural design method and modern architectural aesthetics. Combined with the development of modern architecture, this paper reviews and analyzes the application of this theory in practice. Through these reviews and analysis, this paper attempts to prove that this theory still has a strong vitality in the current architectural practice. From the perspective of the development of modern architecture, some parts of this theory are flawed. This article also attempts to analyze and supplement these defects.

1. Introduction
Le Corbusier (1887-1965) is a famous modern architect in the 20th century. He is a radical and master in the modern architectural movement and is known as the “flag bearer of modern architecture”. In 1923, Le Corbusier published the book “Vers Une Architecture”, which became the most important theoretical literature in the modern architectural movement. In this book, Le Corbusier proposes “three memos” to the architects – block, surface and plane. These three memos constitute a complete theory of modern architectural design methods and modern architectural aesthetics. Since the publication of this book, For one thing, the mainstream development practice of modern architecture has actively or passively followed the guidance of this theory. For another thing, the mainstream development practice of modern architecture proves the validity of this theory.

Based on the author's research results on the history of modern architecture, this paper analyzes the contents of these three memos, and explains the guiding role of the three memos in the mainstream development practice of modern architecture. This paper argues that the mainstream development practice of modern architecture proves that the contents of the first two memos (block and surface) proposed by Le Corbusier are completely correct. It is under the guidance of the design methods and aesthetic theories formed by these two memos that modern architecture has developed into a system like today. This article argues that the content of the third memo (plane) proposed by Le Corbusier is not comprehensive enough. Judging from the development of modern architecture, the content of the third memo does not cover all the mainstream development practices of modern architecture. A large part of the mainstream development practice of modern architecture actually breaks through the theory put forward by Le Corbusier.
2. The first memo: block

“Architecture is a brilliant, correct and clever performance of some of the matching blocks in the light.” [1]

From the mainstream development practice of modern architecture, block is one of the most important foundations of design methods and aesthetic theory. In the first memo, Le Corbusier used the above text to clearly express the importance of block to Architecture on a philosophical level. Judging from the mainstream development practice of modern architecture, most modern architectural masters use block as the foundation of their design methods and aesthetic theories. This can be seen clearly and intuitively in the main works of modern architecture masters such as IM Pei, Louis Kahn, Richard Meyer, Ando Tadao.

Figure 1. Iverson Art Museum designed by IM Pei.

Figure 2. Bangladeshi Parliament Building designed by Louis Kahn.

3. The second memo: surface

“The block is covered by the surface, and the surface is divided by the directrix and the wire; so it shows the characteristics of the block.” [2]

“The architect's task is to make the Surface wrapped outside the block vivid, prevent them from becoming parasites, obscuring the block and eating the block for their benefit: this is the current tragic situation.” [3]

“Leave the spectacular of the block form in the light to the block, but on the other hand, to adapt the surface to the needs of the function, this is the display line and busbar that must be found in the divisions added to the surface.” [4]

When the basic position of block in architecture is established, A task faced by architects is how to carry out further processing of block, and how to “make the Surface wrapped outside the block vivid”. Functionally speaking, an architecture always needs doors and windows; aesthetically speaking, an architecture’s block always needs further processing to produce rich levels. An architecture’s block is wrapped by the surface, and the further processing of the block mainly is the processing of the surface. In the second memo, Le Corbusier used the above words to clearly explain the principles and methods of processing the surface of the block.

Since ancient times, architects have carefully processed the surface of architecture. On classical architecture, architects mainly use the method of adding components to the surface of architecture. On the surface of classical architecture, we can see exquisite pillars, exquisite lines and gorgeous sculptures. Architects enrich the surface through these components.

When the basic position of block in architecture is established, Le Corbusier points out that traditional architecture components are in conflict with blocks. It is possible that these traditional
architecture components will “become parasites, obscure the block and eat the block for their benefit”. Therefore, architecture based on block needs a new surface processing method. This method will “Leave the spectacular of the block form in the light to the block”.

From the mainstream development practice of modern architecture, Le Corbusier's idea of "looking for the form of display lines and buses in the division above the surface" is the main surface processing method adopted by later architects. It is precisely because of this that the classical architecture components represented by pillars have withdrawn from the stage of mainstream architecture.

![Figure 3. An architecture designed by Richard Meyer.](image)

4. The third memo: Plane

“Plane is the generator of the block and surface, it is it, it can't change everything.” [5]

“Plane is the foundation. Without plane, there is no grand conception and expressiveness, there is no rhythm, no block, no coordination.” [6]

In the third memo, Le Corbusier pointed out “Plane is the generator of the block and surface, it is it, it can't change everything.” As a first-generation modernist architect, Le Corbusier recognized the most mainstream view at the time, form follows function. Therefore, he put the carrier of function, plane, in the first place of the design process. He believes: “Plane is the foundation. Without plane, there is no grand conception and expressiveness, there is no rhythm, no block, no coordination.”

From the practice of mainstream development of modern architecture, a large part of modern architecture follows this memo. The design process for these architectures starts with the Plane function. After the plane function is perfected, the block is generated on the basis of the plane. The architecture designed in this way is functional. When the architect has a high design capability, such a architecture will also achieve good aesthetics.

From the practice of mainstream development of modern architecture, there is still a large part of the modern architecture based on block not following this memo. The design process of these architectures is not based on the plane function; the design process of these architectures is directly from the block. In the process of designing these architectures, architects first established the form of the block and then placed the plane function into the block. Architects designed in this way will have a strong sense of form, and their artistic appeal will be much stronger. For example, the architecture shown in the image below, we can clearly see that the blocks of the architecture are not created by planes. Architects can only design such architectural shapes by directly starting from the block. Therefore, from the perspective of the mainstream development practice of modern architecture, there are some architectures that “block itself is the generator”.

![Figure 3. An architecture designed by Richard Meyer.](image)
5. conclusion
From the practice of mainstream development of modern architecture, the three memos proposed by Le Corbusier constitute a complete theory of modern architectural design methods and modern architectural aesthetics. The mainstream development practice of modern architecture follows and proves this theory. In the three memos proposed by Le Corbusier, the third memo is not comprehensive enough. The practice of mainstream development of modern architecture proves that for some modern buildings, “block itself is the generator.”

References
[1] Le Corbusier and Chen Zhizhua translated 2004 Vers Une Architecture. Shaanxi Normal University Press. p 24
[2] Le Corbusier and Chen Zhizhua translated 2004 Vers Une Architecture. Shaanxi Normal University Press. p 31
[3] Le Corbusier and Chen Zhizhua translated 2004 Vers Une Architecture. Shaanxi Normal University Press. p 33
[4] Le Corbusier and Chen Zhizhua translated 2004 Vers Une Architecture. Shaanxi Normal University Press. p 33
[5] Le Corbusier and Chen Zhizhua translated 2004 Vers Une Architecture. Shaanxi Normal University Press. p 41
[6] Le Corbusier and Chen Zhizhua translated 2004 Vers Une Architecture. Shaanxi Normal University Press. p 44