

TRANSCENDING ARCHITECTURE . Contemporary Views on Sacred Space

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Le Corbusier at the Parthenon (Chapter 7)

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Charles-Édouard Jeanneret at the Acropolis, September 1911



The Parthenon as seen from the Propylaea. Sketch by Jeanneret (1911)



Villa Savoye, Le Corbusier, 1929-30

Since *transcending architecture* is fundamentally an action or event (not some esoteric, idealist construct deduced from dogma or philosophy), understanding what it really means to 'transcend architecture' demands a serious and detailed study of its experiential nature. And what better way to do this than by investigating one of the most well known yet less probed transcending experiences of architecture ever recorded: the extraordinary encounter of Charles-Édouard Jeanneret (who was to become Le Corbusier a few years later) with the Parthenon in September 1911.

This example may come as a surprise because, although it is public knowledge that young Le Corbusier had a momentous time at the Acropolis, it is different to claim that the event had a transcendent dimensionality. In fact, if anything remotely numinous had happened in 1911, we should have known about it by now given the large amount of scholarship covering his life. Since we have not, we assume that nothing occurred. Besides, we have been repeatedly told that Le Corbusier was not a religious person, making any spiritual encounter out of character with the man. Yet, a more careful phenomenological study of the event points that many scholarly assertions made through the years rest on shaky ground. This is particularly puzzling considering that most scholars agree on the importance that his visit to the Acropolis played on Le Corbusier's career. This major oversight can be partially explained by the little interest that Modern and Postmodern historians and critics have had for beauty, spirituality, or phenomenology. But the greatest reason for the oversight is the existence of important challenges to the authenticity and accuracy of Le Corbusier's account. As a result, this chapter not only studies the actual visit of Jeanneret to the Acropolis but also addresses the concerns that have kept us from considering this transcending experience beyond an anecdotic tale.

In the end, this chapter offers a thorough phenomenological examination of the event and delivers an array of new insights on the psychological, physical, and spiritual dimensions of the architectural numinous. It also demonstrates the power that such extraordinary moments may have in one's life, not to mention the importance of this particular one in the architectural disciplines given the stature of Le Corbusier — arguably the most influential architect of 20th Century. Focusing on the receptive dimension of ineffable space (something about which Le Corbusier would talk quite often at the end of his life) highlights the central role of experience to an architectural discipline that by training, tradition and job description is vastly more interested in how buildings are produced.