

Le Corbusier's Unité: Is it a modern classic?

Once a year, the World Heritage Committee meets to decide which natural and man-made wonders should be admitted to its hall of fame. Since 1972, nearly a thousand such places of "outstanding universal value to humanity" have been designated by Unesco – the United Nations Educational Scientific and Cultural Organization – including the Egyptian Pyramids, the Great Barrier Reef, the Taj Mahal, the City of Bath and Chartres Cathedral. What you might not expect is the fact that the World Heritage Committee has been considering whether or not to bring a post-war concrete housing block into this distinguished fold. Many will find this odd, distasteful even. A concrete housing block? With its brutal looks, leaks and out-of-service lifts, surely this is the very type of building that gave architecture such a bad name in the second half of the 20th Century?

Given that the concrete housing block in question has also been known as 'La Maison du Fada', or the 'House of the Crazy', by local people and even residents with a sense of humour, you might be forgiven for thinking that the World Heritage Committee has spun completely off its axis. And yet the Unité d'Habitation, a twelve-storey monolith of 337 apartments off Boulevard Michelet in the south of Marseilles is, without doubt, a work of great architecture.

It is one of several masterpieces by Le Corbusier, the Swiss-French architect who has long been portrayed by conservationists and traditionalists as a kind of dictatorial monster, condemning millions of people to life sentences in poorly designed and badly built 'concrete horrors'.

Certainly, Le Corbusier believed the house should be "a machine for living [in]" and, from the publication in 1923 of his radical polemic, *Towards a New Architecture*, his influence was widespread and, in the hands of lesser architects, often unwelcome.

He was, though, much misunderstood. Le Corbusier wanted city dwellers to live in superbly designed blocks of bright high-rise flats set on concrete 'piloti', or stilt like columns, over lush garden landscapes. It took him, though, until 1947 – when he was sixty years old – to win a commission to design an ideal block of flats for families bombed out of their homes during World War II.

Adapted from "www.bbc.com"

Answer the following questions in your own words.

1. Why is the designation of Le Corbusier's Unité d'Habitation by Unesco debatable?
2. What was the architect's idea when planning his houses?
3. Analyse the language used to refer to the Unité d'Habitation. Is the description positive or negative? Why?
4. Describe the building using your own words.