Where to worship Corb

A heavenly abundance of Le Corbusier material is on display in the Lutyens' crypt of Liverpool's Metropolitan Cathedral, writes **Ellis Woodman**

EXHIBITION

LE CORBUSIER: THE ART OF ARCHITECTURE
The Crypt, Metropolitan Cathedral, Liverpool
Until January 18 2009
★★★★☆

It is 21 years since the last major Le Corbusier exhibition was staged in Britain, and perceptions of his work have shifted a great deal in that time. Le Corbusier: Architect of the Century, the Hayward retrospective of 1987, arrived in the midst of the mod/trad banlight which passed for architectural debate in the 1980s, and the press duly co-opted the show as an opportunity to rehearse the battle-weary arguments one more time. Perhaps enough time has passed that we can discuss the work on its own merits rather than saddling it with responsibility for the mod/trad urban calamities that were perpetrated under its influence?

The title of the new exhibition, which opened last week, certainly suggests a shift of curatorial focus in that direction. Indeed, save for a small — and I think unwelcome — wall of photographs documenting Le Corbusier's influence in the UK, it remains tightly focused on his own production.

So framed, it finds no shortage of material. As a subject for an architecture exhibition, Le Corbusier has the great merit that he worked across such an extraordinary range of media. The show includes film, paintings, sculpture, furniture and books as well as the more conventional spread of architectural drawings and models. Much of this material rewards being seen first hand rather than via the pages of a monograph.

Le Corbusier was also, of course, the most mercurial of architects, Picasso-like in his quest for continual reinvention. The exhibition is certainly not monotonous. However, bringing a curatorial focus to this Aladdin's cave of material has clearly proved a challenge. A comparison with the Whitechapel Art Gallery's equivalently scaled 2002 show on Mies van der Rohe is instructive in this respect. Mies's path was a much less wayward one than Le Corbusier's, but the curators of that exhibition still thought it wise to restrict the range of material under consideration by addressing only Mies's Berlin years.

In Liverpool, there really is an extraordinary quantity of stuff to savour and, wonderful as much of it is, the whole makes for a somewhat indigestible meal.

The narrative the curators Mateo Kries, Stanislaus von Moos and Arthur Rüegg have fashioned is divided into three chapters that broadly follow the chronology of their subject's life. The first, Contexts, duly begins with the Le Clausade Fonds period before globe-trotting around five other locations — Paris, Rio de Janeiro, Algiers, Moscow and New York — which were the sites of major projects in Le Corbusier's prewar career. We get a strong sense of Le Corbusier as a figure in constant motion, sketchbook at hand, greedily absorbing influences as various as the Byzantine architecture of Turkey, French surrealism and the industrial production techniques of the American city.

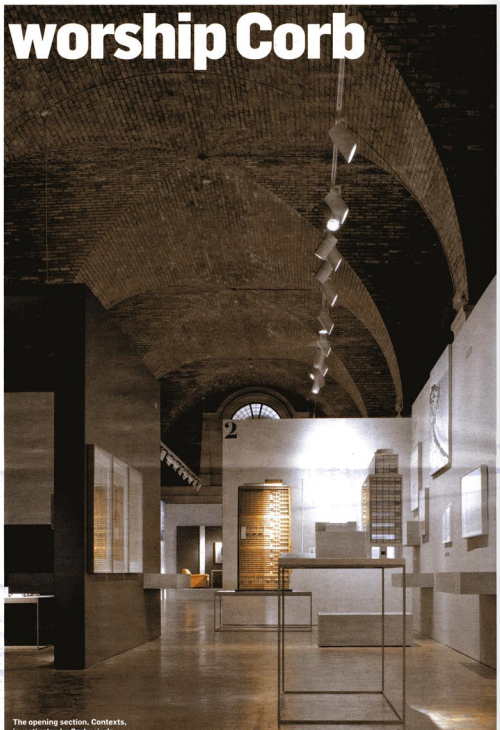
However, the transition to the next chapter feels awkward, as a display of furniture and wallpaper from the beginning of Le Corbusier's career suddenly jerks us back in time. This section, Privacy and Publicity, is devoted to the prewar domestic projects and the relationship of their spatial preoccupations to Le Corbusier's paintings of the period. There are lots of good models, but given his famous remark, "the plan is the generator", the paucity of two-dimensional graphics is striking. That judgment may reflect the curators' ambition to bring a mass audience to the work — it is hoped the exhibition will draw 40,000 visitors in its Liverpool incarnation — but is one of the few concessions in that direction.

The third chapter, Built Art, reasserts the chronology, being a survey of the postwar work. You could spend an afternoon in this section alone, but even then it is very far from comprehensive: the Maisons Jaoul get passed over with a single model; La Tourette gets chopped entirely.

Looking at a beautiful timber model of the recently completed church at Firminy, I was struck by its powerful formal resonances with the battered morphology and attenuated ramps that are features of Rem Koolhaas's recent work. No doubt visitors to the last exhibition saw relationships to the very different structures a figure such as Richard Meier was building at the time.

In another couple of decades we shall surely have the opportunity to view this magisterial work through the lens of another era, and find in it creative avenues still ripe for investigation.

The Built Art section is a survey of Corbusier's postwar works.



The opening section, Contexts, investigates Le Corbusier's relationship with six cities.

Furniture from Unite d'Habitation.

PHOTOS: TIM DAVIES

We get a sense of Le Corbusier as a figure in constant motion, greedily absorbing influences

Profession turns out to sift through a comprehensive collection

JEREMY DIXON
Dixon Jones Architects

What's interesting is that it's a collection of real objects held by the Vitra Design Museum (Germany). In a sense, it's a random collection of his stuff. That's very different to a comprehensive exhibition of his work. I had expected a mega-exhibition. You get a particular collection of material — works of art, sculpture, painting — from which the people who have set it up infer things about Corbusier's personality. There are lots of paintings. Members of the public who didn't know his work might think he was an artist. You could point out lots of things that weren't there. It took me a while to understand what they had done and why; it's interesting.

CHARLES HOLLAND
Fat

I thought it was an excellent exhibition. I like seeing work in strong settings. It's a relief to have a change from the ubiquitous old white box. Corb and Lutyens are obviously uneasy bedfellows but that's the point. The labyrinth-like nature of the crypt and the atmosphere made it a really odd and intriguing layout. The cathedral on top is pretty weird, too. Some great exhibits, particularly the battered original wooden models and the film of Dali in the surrealist Paris apartment.

CLARE WRIGHT
Wright & Wright

It was fantastic to see some of the models: Firminy and Ronchamp. I liked the fact that it was put into context of what else was going on at the time in cities such as Paris. It would be quite difficult for a non-architect, who might see it as about painting and furniture.

The objects and paintings relate to his building from a slightly different point of view, and I liked that. It's important to get crossfertilisation between literature and art and furniture and architecture.

I saw things I hadn't seen before. Corb is an architect who has to be seen in 3D, so the lovely big models were a real treat.

MIKE STIFF
Stiff & Trevillion

I enjoyed it and as an architect you would enjoy it, but it is just perhaps a little dry.

I was slightly surprised by how many paintings and artefacts there were, and I kept expecting the big moment that never came. I enjoyed the paintings, but he was an architect not a painter.

The Philips Pavilion mock-up and Ferminy scale model and drawing are good, studious pieces of work, but there's no big thing that would make it memorable. The show at the Hayward in 1987 was more dramatic and more exciting.

It's dry and studious, and in many ways very good, but I'd give it four, not five, stars.

More events An extended What's On guide is available at bdonline.co.uk/listings

Celebrating a past master of all trades

EXHIBITION

CARTOONS & CORONETS: THE GENIUS OF OSBERT LANCASTER
Wallace Collection, London W1
Until January 11, 2009
★★★☆☆

Trying to encompass all the facets of Osbert Lancaster's career in one exhibition may seem like a losing game. If it didn't already exist, the word multifarious might have been invented just to describe him: wit, dandy, traveller, cartoonist, historian, social critic, clubman, satirist, writer, musician, designer.

This year is the centenary of his birth. In tribute, James Knox has curated an exhibition at the Wallace Collection, selecting from the vast archive of Lancaster's work amassed by publisher John Murray.

Even if his name has been eclipsed from public view, many readers of BD will know of Lancaster because of his sardonic and perceptive analyses of architectural styles, illustrated with brilliant drawings. We might refer to an opulent, 1920s olde worlde style house as "stockbroker Tudor" or use "Pont Street Dutch" as shorthand for the buildings of Richard Norman Shaw and his disciples. These terms appeared, with many other apt descriptions, in Pillar to Post (1938) and Homes Sweet Homes (1939). Illustrations for these works — which like all Lancaster's cartoons sum up the essential aspects of a design or fashion moment — feature strongly in the architectural section of the show, as well as in a few "serious" architectural sketches.

There's only one solution: we must by-pass the by-pass. ("19 January 1939)

Lancaster trained at the Slade School of Art and in 1934 moved to a job at the Architectural Review under Hubert de Cronin Hastings. Here he was part of a dream team including Jim Richards, John Betjeman and Robert Byron, shaking up a cocktail of equal parts modernism, whimsy, and humour — with a dash of Edwardian bitters.

Lancaster began to contribute a daily cartoon to the Daily Express just before the second world war. Naturally, a good deal of space in the exhibition is devoted to these. Their key figure was Maudie Littlehampton, who eventually begat a whole dynasty. Of those on show at the Wallace, readers may enjoy "Capability" Littlehampton as painted by Pompeo Batoni while on the Grand Tour.

James Knox has written a useful companion volume to the exhibition, published by Frances Lincoln, which illuminates Lancaster's long career.

David Brady

OSBERT LANCASTER/LIBRARY CONTRACT / TRUSTEES OF OSBERT LANCASTER

Long span, light weight lattice beams

Metsec lattice beams allow design freedom for individual roof design like Birmingham's Park Central – with long spans, complex valley and feature cantilevers – a development providing city centre living in eight acres of parkland.

- Pre-engineered offsite for faster site installation
- Clear unsupported spans of up to 40 metres
- Easy routing of services through the web lattice.

Register for your FREE Technical Manual and design software or ask about a CPD certified seminar
0121 601 6000 lattice_joists@metsec.com

Metsec is a voestalpine group company
www.metsec.com

voestalpine
ONE STEP AHEAD.

ENQUIRY 180 AT WWW.ENQUIRENOW.COM/BD