

The Feminine as a Metaphor for the New

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The Modern Movement is conditioned by a tension between the desire for permanence and a belief in change. Behind its strong promotion of the *New* lurks the notion of transience, the recognition that even the modern will one day become “history”. The Modern Movement therefore, even with its official rejection of history, could never quite make redundant the notion of architecture’s own historicism; its promotion of change also pointed out its own changability. The topic of this essay is to tentatively look at how the Modern Movement has exploited gendered metaphors to mediate in this conflict between permanence and change. I will suggest that while the masculine body and dress were metaphorically employed by the Modern Movement to guarantee eternal value to the new architecture, the ephemeral quality of the feminine embodied the intangible flux of modernity itself. Further I will suggest that the use of the female as the site for the new also has precedence in a Swedish context. In the modernist manifesto *acceptera*, published the year after the Stockholm Exhibition of 1930, the feminine, I will argue, was also identified with the radical nature of the new.

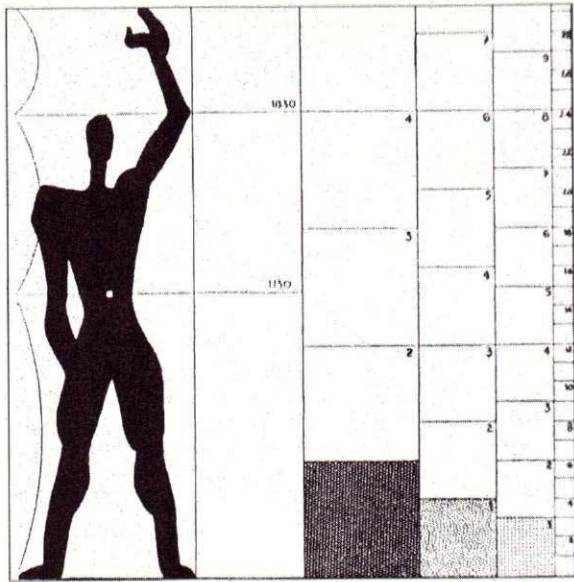
The Feminine in Modernity

The rhetoric of the Modern Movement is marked by both feminine and masculine metaphors. The masculine has stood for stability, continuity and permanence a trait visible in both Loos’ and Le Corbusier’s references to the English male suit as paradoxically both timeless and modern (Agest, McLeod, Wigley). The metaphorical use of the feminine figure on the other hand is more ambivalent. For Le Corbusier the woman of the 20’s with her radical change of dress, cropped hair and short skirt, was a sign of the transformative force of modernity; a miracle of modern times.

The courage, the enterprise, the inventive spirit with which woman has revolutionized her dress is a miracle of modern times. Thank You!

(Le Corbusier 1930 p. 107).

For Loos, writing about ladies fashion thirty years earlier in 1898, similar thoughts were expressed. While male dress was already modern in its simplicity and function, woman’s dress had yet to be transformed to engage with modernity:



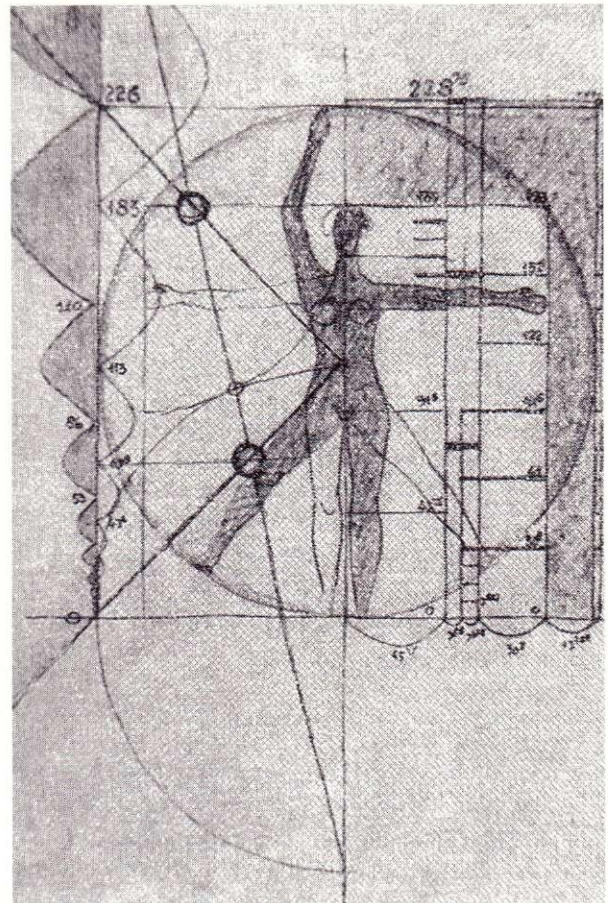
1. Le Modulor (Le Corbusier, *The Modulor, A Harmonious Measure to the Human Scale Universally applicable to Architecture and Mechanics*)

The clothing of the woman is distinguished externally from that of the man by the preference for ornamental and colourful effects and by the long skirt that covers the legs completely. These two factors demonstrate to us that the woman has fallen behind sharply in her development in recent centuries. No period of culture has known as great difference as our own between the clothing of the free man and the free woman. [...]

(Loos, p. 102)

In both Le Corbusier's and Loos' speculation over women's fashion lies the notion that it is the woman, not the man, that is the object for the radical transformations triggered by the new times.

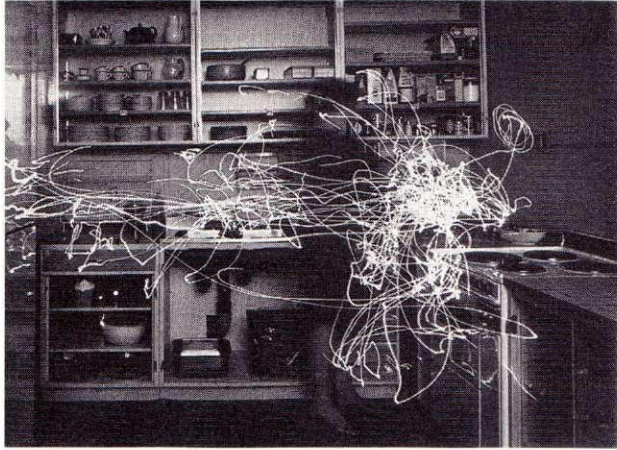
Le Corbusier's use of the male body, *Le Modulor*, as a tool to guide his architecture reveals how the temporality of modernity, so closely associated to the feminine, was also perceived as a threat to architecture. In the text *Le Modulor, essai sur une mesure harmonique à l'échelle humaine applicable universellement à l'architecture et à la mécanique* from 1942 Le Corbusier describes the birth of *Le Modulor*, an elaborate proportion system based on a human body (fig. 1). Le Corbusier traces the origin of *Le Modulor* back to his studies of nature as a young man in the mountains of the High Jura. There, in nature, Le Corbusier found order and law present in plants, animals and changing skies. Later as a practising architect at the age of



2. Modulor study by Serralta and Maisonnier (Le Corbusier, *Modulor 2 (Let the user speak next)*)

twenty-three Le Corbusier felt that architecture lacked the natural order he had found so vividly present in nature: "What is the rule that orders, that connects all things?" (Le Corbusier 1954 p. 26). With his invention of *Le Modulor*, Le Corbusier's search for an answer to this perturbing question seemed at last to be satisfied. The human "natural" body guaranteed an eternal rule that suppressed the disturbing fluidity of modern architecture. With *Le Modulor*'s body the law and order of nature would be re-enter architecture and the broken tradition of a humanistic Vitruvian architecture could be reinstalled.

It is evident in Le Corbusier's writing that this natural "universal body" was of male sex. In the second book he published about his proportion system, *Modulor II. La parole est aux usagers*, Le Corbusier reflects over the international



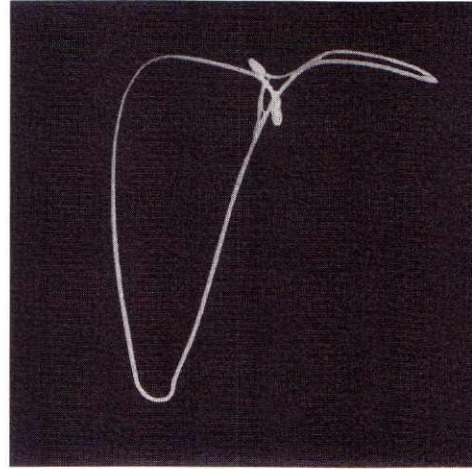
3. Photographic Kitchen study ("Köksstudier. Funktionsstudier, grundprinciper", nr 24 i serien Konsumentinstitutet meddelar från 1969)

success of his "liberating tool"; Le Modulor had generated responses from architectural professionals all over the world. In the *Modulor II* Le Corbusier included a study by Serralta and Maisonnier that related Le Modulor to the ancient Egyptian cubit. This made Le Corbusier excited: "They have found some astounding coincidences." (Le Corbusier 1958 p. 51) The reference to ancient Egypt, to the origin of civilisation, put forward by Serralta and Maisonnier reinforced Le Modulor's trans-historical ambition; Le Modulor was unaffected by the passage of time, gaining an absolute quality that promised a foundation for architecture outside style or fashion. But there was a problem with Serralta's study: inscribed in the circle and the square was not the pumped up Modulor body but a rather gracious female figure. (fig. 2) The male body was replaced with a female; the Le was a La. This disturbed Le Corbusier and he commented on it:

Here is the drawing prepared by Serralta and Maisonnier: you take the square of the 'Modulor man' of 1.83 m. (but, since Serralta has a soft spot for the ladies, his man is a woman 1.83 metre tall: brrh!).

(Le Corbusier 1958 p. 52)

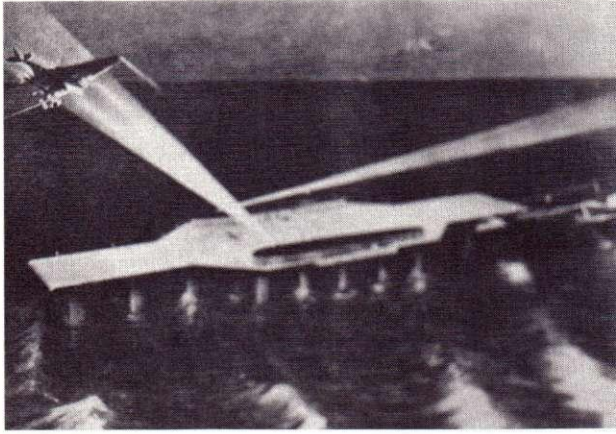
Le Corbusier's rather comic reaction to this tall woman begins to reveal the absurdity of finding a universal measurement in a male body 1.83 metre high: exchanged for a woman, Le Modulor's validity was threatened. The body of Le Modulor



4. Perfect movement, Frank B. Gilbreth (*Mechanization Takes Command, a contribution to anonymous history*, Gidieon, S.)

was suddenly gendered by the appearance of the female figure. No longer just a body, but a male body (*the 'Modulor man'*) Le Modulor's universal ambitions were questioned. For Le Corbusier the body that carried the eternal true measurements had been without reflection of male sex. When he became female (*his man is a woman*) Le Modulor's stability was undermined by the association with sexuality (*Serralta has a soft spot for the ladies*). As an object of desire the female body was unable to embody eternal values. Eternity was replaced with flux and mortality.

Has this conflict between permanence and transience and its representation through the contrast of gender any presence in a Swedish context? Without burdening the examples I will compare Le Corbusier's Modulor with a rather intriguing photograph of an ergonomic study performed in a Swedish laboratory kitchen in the late 60's. (Konsumentinstitutet meddelar 1969, p. 94) (fig. 3). The photograph shows a woman cooking "fish-pie, potatoes and fruit-soup", as the text under the image thoroughly informs the reader. She is provided with small light bulbs attached to her arms and legs with the purpose of recording the total sum of the movements needed to produce a standard Swedish dinner. Photographed with a long exposure the woman's movements are effectively imprinted on the photographic film as an ungraspable net of lines mapping the flux of movement and the passage of time. This method to create space-time representation was invented by Frank B. Gilbreth in his series



5. "The New World" (*acceptera*, Asplund G., Gahn W., Markelius S., Paulsson G., Sundahl E., Åhren U.)

of Scientific Management studies made in 1912 (fig. 4). Gilbreth's objective was to rationalise movement by making visible to the eye the intangible trajectory of movement in space, training workers to perform perfect movements without hesitation and delay. (Giedion) What is intriguing in the photograph of the Swedish study, in comparison with Gilbreth's photographs which document movements as taking place in a void, is the marked presence of the restricted space of the kitchen. It becomes unclear as to whether the woman or the kitchen is the real object of observation; indeed the woman herself is hardly distinguishable in the photograph, she melts in and becomes one with the background.

This study of the woman's performance in the kitchen reads as an almost alchemical experiment to grasp the flux of modernity. Its emphasis appears far removed from that of Le Corbusier's creation of the stable man, *Le Modulor*.

Indeed, although the kitchen study, like Le Corbusier's *Modulor*, generates a system of measurement related to the human body, and although in both cases the such measurements are intended to provide a source for architecture, there is an intriguing contrast between these two investigations. On one hand stands *Modulor*, who with his raised arm seems frozen in an eternal posture; on the other, there is this ungraspable net of lines resulting from the woman's movement in the kitchen: as a sign of modernity, she seems never to stand still. Enclosed in the kitchen she has become both a symptom of the new and the new itself.

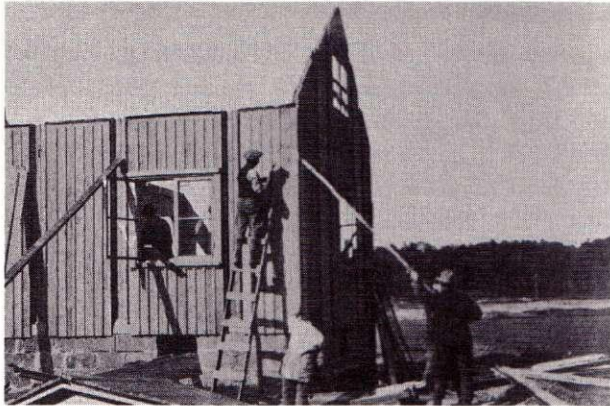


6. The New Being (*acceptera*, Asplund G., Gahn W., Markelius S., Paulsson G., Sundahl E., Åhren U.)

The Timeless and the New

This kitchen study from the 60's can be traced back to a strong functionalistic tradition in Sweden to improve the standard of the home by means dwelling surveys. That the woman as well as the home was the object for these studies is evident in the Swedish modernist manifesto *acceptera* published the year after the Stockholm Exhibition in 1930. In the manifesto, that in many senses together with the Stockholm exhibition established "Functionalism" as a Swedish local alternative to the international Modern Movement, the use of the feminine to locate the newness of modern architecture is also evident. Like so much of the Modern Movement, *acceptera* is imbued with the dream of a prophylactic architecture. The Swede should become healthier both physically and morally with the new architecture. The domestic sphere was the focus for this vision. With energetic ambition *acceptera* mapped the changes that modern life would bring into the home, from the impact of canned food and child-care, to that of ready-made clothing and contraception. These new facilities were all understood as essential parts of a necessary transformation that would re-design the woman as well as the home itself. The border between home and woman becomes blurred in *acceptera*; one could not change without effecting the other.

It is telling that the "*New Human Being*" is of female sex in *acceptera*. On a double page layout the text illustrates a "New World" and a "New Being" that will inhabit it. The



7. New model-home with the traditional pitched roofs and the volumetric character of a traditional Swedish farmhouse. (*acceptera*, Asplund G., Gahn W., Markelius S., Paulsson G., Sundahl E., Åhren U.)

“New World” is illustrated in *acceptera* with aeroplanes, the token so often used to represent modernity; in a futuristic image they take off in the night from a runway constructed on water. (fig. 5) On the opposite page we find the new human; a photograph of Asian woman dressed in western clothes under which is written; “A new type of being”. In the corner of the page we find her origin, her history represented by the image of a geisha. (*acceptera* p. 20–21) (fig. 6). What is communicated in these images is historical transformation. The woman has changed through history; she has become modern through changing her clothes (that she also has become westernised is an issue that I leave behind here). The juxtaposing of the aeroplanes and the woman suggests a sensual promise of the new. This inference is made clear in a reference to clothing that echoes both Loos and Corbusier.

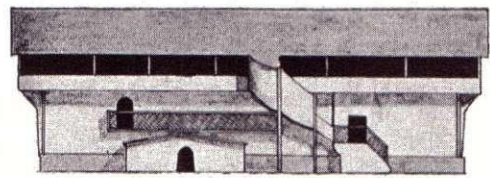
Within this enormous circle from Stockholm to Florence, from Glasgow to Budapest the men wear the same clothes of English cut, and the women the same dress and shoes according to the Parisian fashion. Maybe not the same fashion among women yet, but sooner or later the Parisian woman’s model of dress will reach even the small-town housewife.

(*acceptera* p. 16)

In this New World men will adopt the timeless uniformity of the English suit, while women expose the rapidity of change through the restlessness of Parisian fashion.

Although in many respects *acceptera* promotes the new era marked by mass-communication and endless flow of

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Ett nytt ”funkishus”? Nej, Ornässtugan. Större är alltså inte skillnaden!

8. Ornäs Cottage (*acceptera*, Asplund G., Gahn W., Markelius S., Paulsson G., Sundahl E., Åhren U.)

consumer goods, the desire for a timeless continuity is also present. The new home promoted in the text also carries a nostalgia for the time when the specific of the local was untouched by modernity. In several places *acceptera* suggests that the new architecture with its basic forms is closely related to the Swedish vernacular tradition. In *Vers une Architecture* Le Corbusier juxtaposed the Parthenon with a modern mass-produced car suggesting that they shared similar qualities (Le Corbusier 1987 p. 135). *acceptera* follows the same strategy but, and this is crucial difference, rejects the monument in favour of the vernacular farmhouse. (fig. 7) Just as the farmhouse had slowly been perfected through time and had won timeless qualities so was the new architecture to gain the same self-evidentness through standardisation. The new standardised buildings would carry the same unitary quality as the vernacular buildings did; functions expressed and repeated in the building. Following *acceptera*’s argument the new architecture did not perform a radical break with the old. Rather it was a continuation of the existing vernacular tradition and its evolution of different typologies: “Standardisation is the exploration for production of the natural tendency to form types” (*acceptera* p. 81). In these terms the new becomes paradoxically both modern and timeless. This argument becomes readily apparent in a section on beauty which is illustrated with a vernacular building from the northern part of Sweden abstracted into a modern building by being drawn without its ornament and exposed wooden structure. Under the illustra-

tion is written: "A new functionalistic house? No, the Ornäs cottage. The difference is no bigger than that!" (*acceptera* p. 144) (fig. 8) In *acceptera* the *New* was carefully familiarised with the old, a rhetoric that clearly effected the Swedish type-plan one-family house developed in the 1930's and 40's which kept the traditional pitched roofs and volumetric character of the traditional Swedish farmhouse.

But the rhetoric of the vernacular is dropped when *acceptera* moves inside. The plan of the new home should be arranged and sized according to function; the rationale of the farmhouse's equal repetition of rooms in which different activities shared the same space was unsuitable for the demands of the modern life that *acceptera* promoted. The modern hygienic standard demanded clearly separated spaces for different functions. This argument becomes most obvious when *acceptera* discusses the room most consistently associated with the female, the kitchen: "The kitchen is the part of the home that has to face the most extensive transformation of earlier housing typologies" (*acceptera* p. 67). In this kitchen vernacular tradition was an obstacle rather than a source. Where the farmhouse kitchen had been the main living room *acceptera* promoted a new "minimised" kitchen, akin to those illustrated in American and German kitchen studies made in the early twentieth century (Kirsch K, Lupton and Miller). Carefully closing out any other members of the family, this new space was designed and fitted for the modernised woman in her "one-man" performance to bring the food to the table. Where the outside of the new model-home trusted Scandinavian tradition for its form and imagery, the introduction of the radical new was effectively contained within its walls. In *acceptera's* model for the new home, then, modernity was both introduced and displayed within the feminine sphere. The tension between permanence and change was disguised in *acceptera* by this gendering of the *New* as feminine, allowing the illusion of a masculinity untouched by the forces of modernity.

Denna essä är ett resultat av arbetet i temagruppen "Bygg Miljö ur Kvinnoperspektiv" ett samarbetsprojekt mellan kvinnliga doktorander inom fakulteten för Arkitektur, Väg och Vatten och Lantmäteri, Kungliga Tekniska Högskolan i Stockholm 1995. Essän har även varit presenterad på workshopen "Gender i Staden" 1997. Thordis Arrhenius är doktorand vid Institutionen för Arkitektur och Stadsbyggnad, KTH, Stockholm. Hennes avhandling har arbetsnamnet "Modernity and Restoration – the Enigma of the Old in the Era of the New".

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