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REVIEW

A Review of *Voiture Minimum. Le Corbusier and the Automobile*

Voiture Minimum. Le Corbusier and the Automobile, Antonio Amado, Cambridge, Mass: MIT Press, 354 pages, 205 illustrations, 2011, ISBN: 9780262015363

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Here is a full-on celebration of cars and someone's addiction to cars. In its midst drives Le Corbusier. The book, *Voiture Minimum. Le Corbusier and the Automobile* (Cambridge, Mass. and London: MIT Press, 2011), has recently been published by Spanish architect and academic Antonio Amado. What a curious book. It is something between a detective story circling around determining the date of a single drawing (1928 or 1936) and, simultaneously, it is "Everything you always wanted to know about Le Corbusier and cars but were afraid to ask". But before proceeding to investigate Amado's publication, something else needs to be mentioned:

There is a beautiful book, well-designed, with good illustrations, by Ivan Margolius: *Automobiles by Architects* (160 pages, 22 x 24 cm, Chichester: John Wiley and Sons, 2000). Margolius opens the world of architects and their car designs. He supplies a theoretical background, identifying the car as a "Metaphor for Modernity" and discussing the relationship between architecture and the automobile, raising topics like "Utility and Beauty", "The Question of Style", or "The Automobile as a Work of Art". He does this with style and wit, not failing to tease the architects where necessary. In addition, he provides an outlook into the utopian side of the connection of automobiles and architecture, which may feel a little dated but does not fail to address important topics in all brevity. As the main part of his book, Margolius surveys more than twenty architects' designs for automobiles and – being generous to his subject – trains or buses. Chronologically ordered, Frank Lloyd Wrignt features at the beginning, followed by prominent colleagues like Walter Gropius and Richard Neutra up to Renzo Piano, Norman Foster and Jan Kaplicky. And, of course, Le Corbusier is represented in this collection with a six-page entry and a few images of his Voiture Minimum.

Margolius delights in recounting a story that Czech architect Karel Honzík told after his visit of Le Corbusier in 1935. Honzík felt rather uneasy with Le Corbusier's reckless driving but also with the worn state of his luxury Voisin C7 10HP. "The paint was cracked and almost faded. The windows were broken, fragments of glass tinkled under our soles. […] [Le Corbusier] warned us not to be alarmed by sudden jolting of the car, as he had to change gear directly from the first into third because the second gear was 'stripped'. Really the journey was rather unnerving, because of the irregular noises, the horrific screeching of the first gear and the grating of the gearbox. […] It was obvious that Le Corbusier did not attach great significance to 'small' technical defects." (Margolius, p. 55) Somehow, this account tells more about Le Corbusier's architecture than so many far more in-depth analyses…

Margolius continues to briefly describe and analyze Le Corbusier's 1928/36 design for the Voiture Minimum as very architectural in its process and as "surprisingly, very two-dimensional. No body or chassis structure was shown, nor any means of suspension. This indicates a superficial approach rather than a real understanding of essential car mechanics and structure." (Margolius, p. 57). This acute analysis is complemented by a photograph of a full-scale replica of plywood, as exhibited in the Design Museum in London (1989).

What then, is the position that Amado's book takes in relationship to this successful publication? Amado freely admits his own love for the automobile in his introduction, and as much as the author of these lines can relate to the addiction stemming from the automobile as artefact and object of desire, a little more distance to the object might have gone a long way. But more importantly, Amado fails to list Margolius' publication in his bibliography although he does not baulk at using Honzík's account of Le Corbusier's driving via Margolius.

It is a solid book, hardcover, dust cover, square format (23 x 23cm). And 350 pages. Wow. That is a lot for a very small car, taking into account that, according to Amado, "the Voiture Minimum project has been considered until now as little more than a small and curious footnote to [Le Corbusier's] career" (p. XI). And he cannot convince us that it is anything but a small and curious footnote. That is not necessarily a drawback for a book. It may be argued though that 350 pages are a little much when it comes to a project that, as Amado has found out, did *not* influence other automobile designs. But more about that later.

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To start with the least crucial but most apparent of aspects of this book: the design and layout is not up to the expected standard of such a publication. It is actually a shame that MIT Press should have allowed a publication where layout and print design were done not by professionals but by the author himself. It reflects worse on the publisher than on the author who had better kept away from this task. Since the author of these lines is not a graphic designer, the criticism can only be put forward from the point of view of a reader. And still, the flaws are obvious. Verdana is a useful font for headings but not for continuous text and certainly not as the standard font. The way in which chapter titles, captions and footnotes have been organized is amateurish at best. Syllabic word division? None there. The fake original layout for the letters actually feels like a betrayal. Either reprint the original letter or just quote. And then: the presentation of archival material (p. 120–1). Too much. The computer graphics of the little "voiture minimum" – too much. This is particularly so given the full scale simulation in form of a plywood model at the Design Museum in London. Why do the job again? Has any new knowledge arisen from it? And then: forty-one pages of drawings of the "voiture minimum" (p. 176 – 216). Was all that necessary? Someone has become obsessed with this project, and MIT Press let him do this.

All this bad-humoured gripe aside, the book is actually a lot of fun. But it remains unclear to the last page what the real intention of this publication is – apart from being obsessed by automobiles. What is new in this book? Does Amado significantly go beyond Margolius' book to warrant this publication? What is there that we who have read *Vers une architecture* and *Urbanisme*, have visited the Villa Savoye and are aware of this or that detail about the first 2CV and the first Volkswagen, still needed (and wanted) to know about Le Corbusier and the automobile? The answer is: not much. Not on the level of specialist knowledge; and Amado even fails to provide the theoretical background which Margolius discusses as a matter of course.

Maybe one difficulty lies in that Amado did not decide whether this was to be a scholarly book on a research topic or just and simply – and justifiably! – a celebration of cars, of original car designs by architects and of course, particularly of this one car lover, obsessive designer of everything and architect-painter, Le Corbusier. The scholarly argumentation gets in the way of a book that takes detours into how Le Corbusier's life circled around cars, that presents a whole list of the cars he owned, fully complete with chassis no. and the like, and is that not a shame? Instead of simply presenting a picture book full of stories on and about Le Corbusier and the car(s), Amado attempts to follow scholarly conventions and thus presents his detailed research in the format of a thesis. This feels superfluous. It is not to say that the detective work that Amado has carried out in order to determine whether Le Corbusier did draw the Voiture Minimum in 1928 or 1936 has been done in vain. But it did not have to be rubbed in – it could just be. The book tries to be too many things at the same time, and the publisher was not helpful by not doing their job. It is incomprehensible why such a well-established publisher with a longstanding tradition in Le Corbusier-related publications allows books to be fabricated that do not live up to the necessary standards of well-produced, proofed and designed books. The writer of these lines has had to note this neglect on the publisher's side before.

In short: Much Ado About (almost) Nothing. Or was it that Amado intended to make a parody of Le Corbusier's desire to create a car without understanding their mechanics…?

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