

The National Museum of Western Art Building (Le Corbusier's Design)

The main building of the National Museum of Western Art (NMWA) was designed by the French architect Le Corbusier (born Charles-Édouard Jeanneret-Gris; 1887–1965). A pioneer of Modernism, a school of thought that emerged in the early 1900s and came to dominate architectural thinking after World War II, Le Corbusier argued for standardized, “human-sized” buildings in which function comes before appearance. Several of his key ideas are reflected in the NMWA, which was completed in 1959.

Standing on columns

Seen from afar, the NMWA looks like a giant concrete matchbox raised above the ground on pillars. The pillars carry the weight of the structure, supporting its floors and allowing for a degree of freedom in the placement of both the interior and exterior walls. This distinctive solution, which Le Corbusier called *pilotis*, is a core feature in many of the architect's buildings and clearly noticeable when visiting the NMWA. While most other museums only display art in spaces free of objects that could obstruct visitors' views, the NMWA exhibition rooms are punctured by concrete columns poured into pinewood frames, their imprint a tangible testament to Le Corbusier's vision. The outer walls, which are supported by the *pilotis* and therefore not critical to the building's structural integrity, appear flat from afar but close up can be seen to be composed of replaceable panels embedded with jade stones.

Human-sized architecture

The *modulor*, a scale of proportions based on the human body, is another of Le Corbusier's ideas that is employed throughout the NMWA building. Standardized measurements extracted with this scale were used by Le Corbusier's Japanese protégés to determine things like the height of the handrails on the museum balcony, the distance between the *pilotis* columns, and the dimensions of the forecourt. Le Corbusier devised the *modulor* system to make his buildings “human-sized,” but used a person 183 centimeters tall as his point of departure. Visitors around that height are therefore likely to find the NMWA quite comfortable, while those shorter or taller may at times find themselves having to either stand on their toes or bend over, as the case may be.

Unlimited growth

Le Corbusier's concept of a “museum of unlimited growth” was perhaps the most ambitious idea in his NMWA design. The architect envisioned a museum that could be

expanded whenever necessary, first by reordering the walls inside the exhibition rooms and later by adding rooms and entire floors to the building, which would eventually assume a pyramid-like shape around a central lobby. The NMWA incorporates several elements from this concept, such as an entrance hall in the middle, a corridor-like series of rectangular exhibition rooms that spiral upward from the hall, and movable walls in these rooms. Constructing additional floors, however, was never considered realistic. The building's large front window is indicative of another quirk in the architect's thinking. Le Corbusier placed great emphasis on having natural light enter his structures, but did not consider the suitability of such a solution for an art museum. Today, the NMWA severely limits the inflow of sunlight to protect the artworks on display.