

Le Corbusier : From Paris to Chandigarh, Variations on the Same Theme (1922-1956)

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Les plans sont le monument rationnel et lyrique dressé au centre des contingences. Les contingences sont le milieu: régions, races, cultures, topographies, climats.

— Le Corbusier, *La Ville Radieuse*

The above words reflect the significance but also ambiguity of the term *plan* in Le Corbusier's thinking as it seems to reconcile various phenomena and suggest a pertaining substitute for the idea of project. The plan makes manifest the "ways of settling oneself into a house..., of installing a city in a site."¹ This paper will attempt through a close reading of Le Corbusier's urban schemes for Paris and Chandigarh to gain insight into the persistent interweaving between abstract urban model, *plan* and site.

The whole matter of *planning* is eloquently depicted in the first sketches of *Une Petite Maison*: the plan of the potential house enclosed with a thick black line and given a fixed orientation (*le circuit*), the site (*la région*), the disembodied eye which discovers the site (*on a découvert le terrain*), the plan projected upon the site (*le plan est installé*), and the section (*la coupe*).² Beyond the apparent simplicity of lines and thoughts, one can detect the intricate relationship between concept and site. *Plan* is used to signify a presence in the mind of the architect protected by a purifying enclosure from any

site, the projection of this idea as well as the place upon which it is being projected, whether this place is the piece of paper or the site itself. Having embodied the idea of the house and being dissolved into the site, the plan not only becomes a mediating space which assures the continuity between the two but also "bears within itself a primary and pre-determined rhythm,"³ which operates invisibly underlying any decision. Thus it simultaneously unifies most of the primary intentions and gestures of the creative process and engenders the place where the tension inherent in the transition from the rational model to the setting into a context must be resolved. It becomes, borrowing once more Le Corbusier's metaphors, the "perilous place of the right solution," the resolute moment which mediates between invention and context.

The idea of mediation is in fact assigned a cosmological meaning by Le Corbusier. He refers to the "mediating hands" of the "poet," the "mathematician," the "inventor," the "artist" in which "everything comes to the same thing," a "re-absorbance of chaos into harmony."⁴ Most of all, the enigmatic figure of the eye, merging the idealized gaze with the corporeal glance, forges like the *plan* suggestive links between conceptual idea and reality. The man represented by the figure of the eye becomes the mediator between the universe (*le milieu et les contingences*) and the human milieu

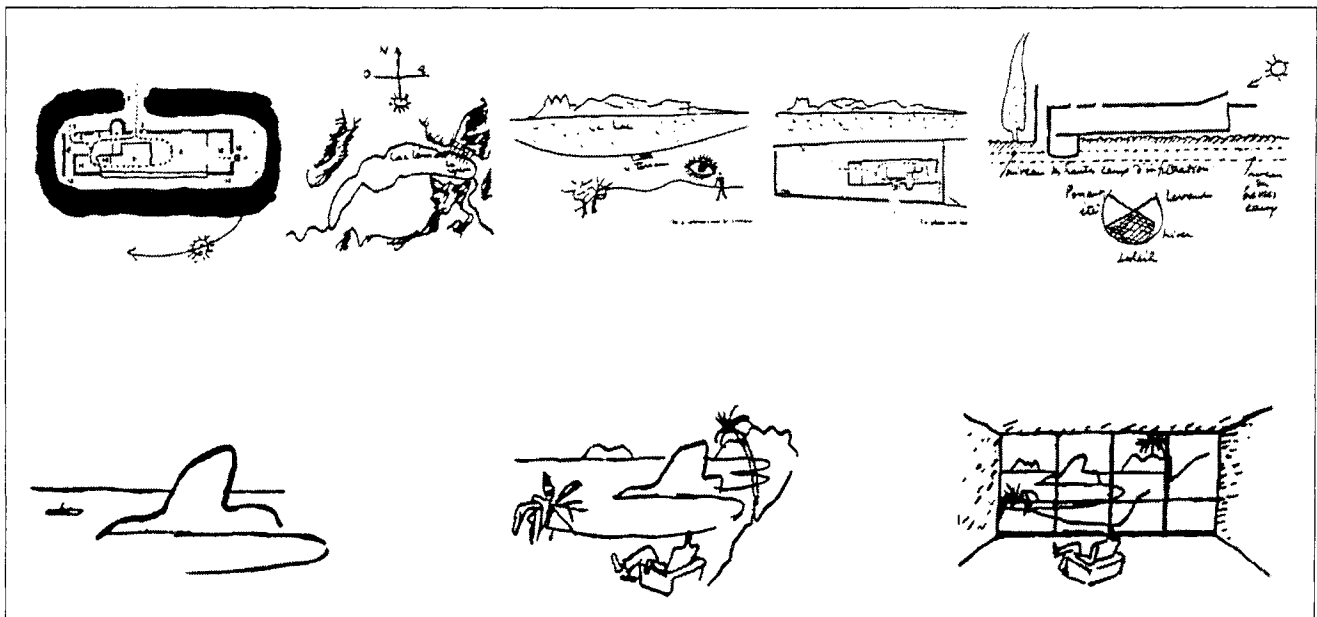


Fig. 1. Le Corbusier, Sketches from *Une Petite Maison*, 1923 and Sketches from Rio de Janeiro.

(l'oeuvre). If the eye is the focal point which absorbs and radiates, the boundary conditions of perspective and the dialectics of framing express at a pictorial level the act of mediation. In the sketches from Rio de Janeiro, the site, the viewing of the site and the framing of this view are juxtaposed. The eye frames and measures the site upon which the *plan* will be projected taking possession of it as well as the view, demonstrating in a succinct way the parallel gestures of defining the *site* as well as the *sight*. In all cases, it seems to be the pull of the eye into a distant landscape that grants the viewer the prospective capacity for foreknowledge.

The ubiquitous, and at the same time, ambiguous presence of the eye is made explicitly manifest when Le Corbusier refers to the planning of the city. At this point, a question arises: which eye, or whose eye, does it concern? The one which is there before any tracing of line, discovering the site and exploring the hidden principles of nature? The eye which is predetermined and fixed during the drawing of the plan, that is, the bird's-eye view of the draftsman which captures the natural or urban landscape and works with it as with a physical element? The disembodied eye which, positioned at the edge of one of the towers of the Radiant City, looks upon the city as a whole order, as landscape; a position of power and knowledge but also of blurring relations between interior and exterior, suggesting the edge as mediation rather than as a line? Or the gaze of the spectator whose main function is to confirm the pre-conceived framing views?

The substance of the city like the various layers or strata of nature can be revealed to the "bird's eye transplanted into man's head." He writes that the new way of looking, meaning the view from above, "can even reveal the movement of the water present in the subsoil, disclosing the patterned progress of the green veins it creates across the yellow of the plain..."⁵ Moreover, the detected "law of the water" ought "never to be out of our minds when the time comes for us, as city planners." The probing, penetrating but also controlling eye, obviously intrigued by the new possibilities of aviation which made physical the metaphoric point of view from above as well as of the microscopic view is seen by Le Corbusier as a legitimization of the active potential in vision.

If the *plan* implies a view from above, and the whole matter of planning is closely associated with the idea of flight able to take one up and see the complete plan, the precision and perfection of its "generating principles" transferred onto the ground reveal order as a visible manifestation of geometry like the distinct, clearly outlined volumes, seen in light without ambiguity. Yet the statement in *Vers une Architecture* that "the plan carries in itself the very essence of sensation" alludes to a space which is articulated in accordance with the specific corporeal organization of the experiencing person. Securing ultimately a relation between geometric order and physical perception, the *plan* not only suggests a reading of the city as urban landscape but also regulates the movement through it. In this sense, it has essentially been an ordering process aimed at systemizing human activities on the urban ground, and determining the activity of the eye. And if the principle of circulation, informed by the "law of the water," defines the activities on the ground, the principle of the right angle sustains the tracing of the profile of the city, the "purity of the urban horizon."

The successive schemes of Le Corbusier for Paris - interventions to an existing capital -, and the planning of Chandigarh - the creation of a new capital and the only realization, though partial, of his urbanistic visions are elucidating examples of the continuity but also unsettling juxtapositions between model, *plan* and site. Sites are the center of Paris, which provides the memory of a cultural paradigm, and Chandigarh, symbol of a sacred landscape and another tradition. In the first case, the projection of the model upon an existing urban body aims to valorize the center. In the second, the intention is to replenish the soil and fix a new status of terrain. Yet within the transformations of multiple and variously expressed in different contexts relations, we witness a consistency of lines of thinking, of intentions and visions.

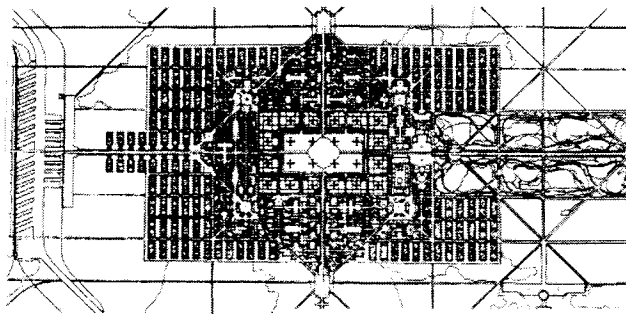


Fig. 2. Le Corbusier, *City for Three Million Inhabitants*, 1922. Planimetrics.

For Le Corbusier, Paris has always been a city-symbol. The echo of its tradition as a "radiant" center and as the city of *Grands Travaux* is readily apparent when he refers to the fundamental axes of the city, Napoleon's grand layouts and Haussmann's interventions and diagonal webs. At the same time, Paris has the significance of a chosen, deeply felt location as he lived there since 1917. The city, in its presence and memory, becomes a continuous laboratory, and its Plan a text that Le Corbusier would write and rewrite many times. The fundamental versions of these writings are the outcome of two main urban models, *The City for Three Million Inhabitants* and *The Radiant City*, expressions of an abstract urban ideal which tries to justify itself in the encounter between model and existing city. Two significant instances are the *Plan Voisin* in 1925 and the *Plan of 1937* along with the publication of two books, *Urbanisme* (1925) and *La Ville Radieuse* (1933).

The Plan for the *Contemporary City for Three Million Inhabitants* was exhibited at the *Salon d'Automne* in 1922, and published later in the *Oeuvre Complète* under the title "1922 Paris est une Ville Contemporaine." As Le Corbusier describes it, it is "a work of the laboratory, which has as its focus that of formulating the basic principles of modern urbanism... The objective is to establish the rules of the game, to give an urbanistic structure to the large contemporary city."⁶ The Plan, a theoretical formula aimed at demonstrating principles and defining urban models (model, in its scientific sense, refers to a concrete image worked out in all its details) is not a process toward construction but a process toward an ideal. In this particular scheme, the ideal is still considered as a single conception, a fragment complete in itself, an approach that would change in later schemes.

Starting from the axes rather than the outline, the plan is rooted in one of the oldest traditions of urban design, the cross; being perhaps the most ancient intuitive gesture by which mankind took possession of space.⁷ The crossing point flanked by four identical cruciform skyscrapers becomes a multi-layered circulation system opening the city to the external world. While the towers contain the "city's brains," the circulation network is its "pulsating heart." The difference now is that the heart of the city-organism alludes to an eventual diffusion of the city rather than the definition of a circumscribed center. Thus the tracing of the two axes crossing at right angles represents at the same time a primordial gesture of installing oneself in the world and the possibility of infinite expansion. Having no outline, it realizes what Le Corbusier refers to when he writes, "I dismissed all the accidents; I gave to myself an ideal terrain." Substitute for the actual ground, the *terrain idéal* is not but a platform punctuated with buildings-objects, each appearing as a free-standing conception, absolute and unconditioned by the other.

Moreover, the Cartesian skyscrapers derived from a layering of horizontal levels, turn the city into an infinite number of viewing platforms unleashing horizontal view lines, continuations of the horizon line. In one of the perspectives the horizon is aligned with the roof-terrace of the residential units, assuring the intersection at right angles of the "two determining constants of all optical sensations -

the perpendicular and the horizontal," in this case, the *immeuble-villas* and the towers, and thereby, the visual effect of unity.⁸ The contrast between the horizontal, which is nothing but the *terrain idéal*, and the perpendicular, which consists of his *objets idéaux* is strengthened by the absence of any mediating space. A continuous boundless depth, an internal infinity suspend the customary dimensions of space as well as of time engendering an ambiguous universality and a qualitatively different temporal rhythm. The horizon line then invokes the ultimate vantagepoint arresting the flux of phenomena. It allows the distant deployment of sight implying a penetrating eye that observes and, at the same time, a projecting eye that "foresees and fixes the direction and spirit of future enterprises." In this sense, the eye, one might say, links together a concept of space with a notion of history. As Alan Colquhoun writes, "it was necessary to replace the notion of a fixed ideal to which historical phenomena should conform, with a notion of potential ideal, which historical events were leading up to ... History was now oriented toward an apocalyptic future and no longer toward a normative past."⁹

The relation between this model and a specific site is defined in 1925 in the *Plan Voisin*. At the International Exhibition of Decorative Arts in Paris, Le Corbusier constructs the *Pavillon de l'Esprit Nouveau*, a full-scale apartment of the *immeuble villas*. An annexed section, the *rotunda*, contains two large dioramas where he stages the *City for Three Million Inhabitants* and the *Plan Voisin*.¹⁰ The two dioramas confront one another, along the curving sides of the rotunda. A relation of images, the mirroring of figures, each one repeating the other, is established between the two. Yet the contact with the site in the *Plan Voisin* demands that the model be altered so that it can provide evidence of its applicability. For the center of the actual city of Paris, is also the place where its memory is kept though Le Corbusier's idea of what retains the memory of the city seems excessively abstract. His various sketches of Paris, and similarly, the views from the roof-terrace of the Beistegui apartment are very indicative. He literally erases on the paper and in the actual view the city except for a few monuments, fragments of history and fragments of urban skyline. Detached and distant, they stand in a silent void, or on the pages of his writings next to ideal platonic forms, not as signifiers of a continuity in history but as paradigms of the tradition of human creativity. Next to them he can then erect his own artifacts, monuments of present time, or better, signs of the future. De-contextualizing the monument though reveals a notion of history as a "matter of perceptual purity: timeless, sequestered from the social domain, universal."¹¹ The monuments are not related to the axes or positioned at their end, interrupting thereby the Haussmannian tradition, but are to be found in the city or perceived from above. They are treated as *objets trouvés* in the expanded park that the city has now turned into. Yet while he re-constitutes the perceptual field, when the model is applied to the actual field of the site, the existing city is still present, undermining the basic premises of the model. An evidence of this is the grid of *Plan Voisin* which is no longer orthogonal, as the two generating axes are rotated to follow the directions of the city. The East-West axis that would traverse the whole city is parallel to the existing *Rue de Rivoli*, the historical axis of the center that Le Corbusier actually leaves out of his intervention. Similarly, the North-South axis faithfully retraces the existing layout of the *Boulevard Sebastopol*.¹² Another evidence is the orientation of the skyscrapers, slightly rotated in relation to the axes. The axial principle remains but the premise of the right angle has to be altered and the ideal order modified to resolve the friction between idea and context while pleasing the eye. The "magnificence of the effect" is still an intention within the derived spatiality of the deviations. The pleasure of symmetry is due not so much to a regularity as to the pleasure we take in emulating the movement through. If the pleasure from a panoramic, God's-eye view of as vast a scene as possible might be traced back to the French Classicism, the pleasure from imagining ourselves in motion through space by

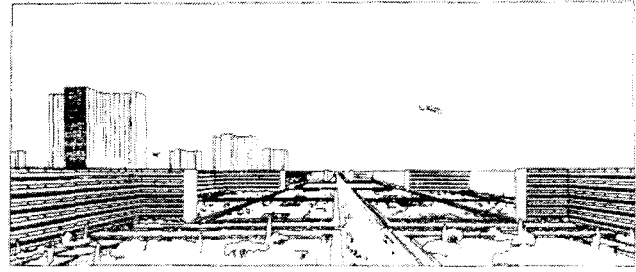


Fig. 3. Le Corbusier, *City for Three Million Inhabitants*, 1922, perspective.

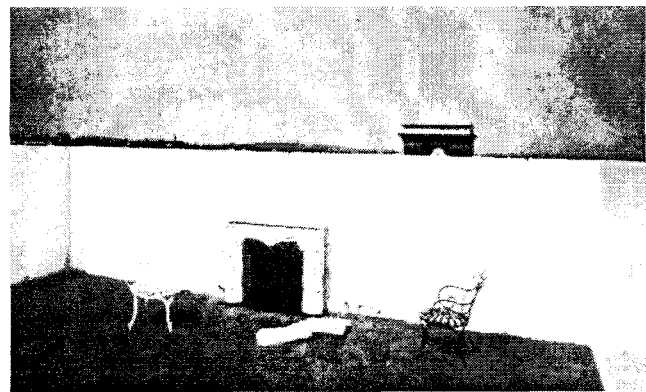


Fig. 4. Le Corbusier, sketches of the center of Paris and roof-terrace, Beistegui Apartment, Paris, 1930-31.

attributing to the immobile lines, surfaces, volumes the movement of the eyes (as the kinesthetic here refers mainly to eye movement) has a strong affinity with the German artistic theory of the 19th century.¹³

Nevertheless such ruminations that reveal a constant ambiguity, due to the fact that the ideal framework is simultaneously established and denied, make us consider the *plan* as a reflective system of order rather than an attempt to transform the existing. In other words, the plan is part of an urban foundation and, at the same time, becomes a principle of its progressive substitution. Through the successive modifications and alterations, not only does the *plan* change in relation to the general theoretical formulation, but the relation that is established between model and city mutates substantially.

The *Radiant City* as a model suggests an entirely different relation to the city. In 1930, Le Corbusier received from officials in Moscow, where he had been at work on the Palace of Centrosoyus, a questionnaire regarding the re-organization of the Soviet capital. In formulating his answer, he submitted 17 panels which later became the 20 panels of the *Radiant City*. Whereas in the previous scheme the city is considered as a single conception, the *Radiant City* suggests the independence of the parts at an urban scale and the

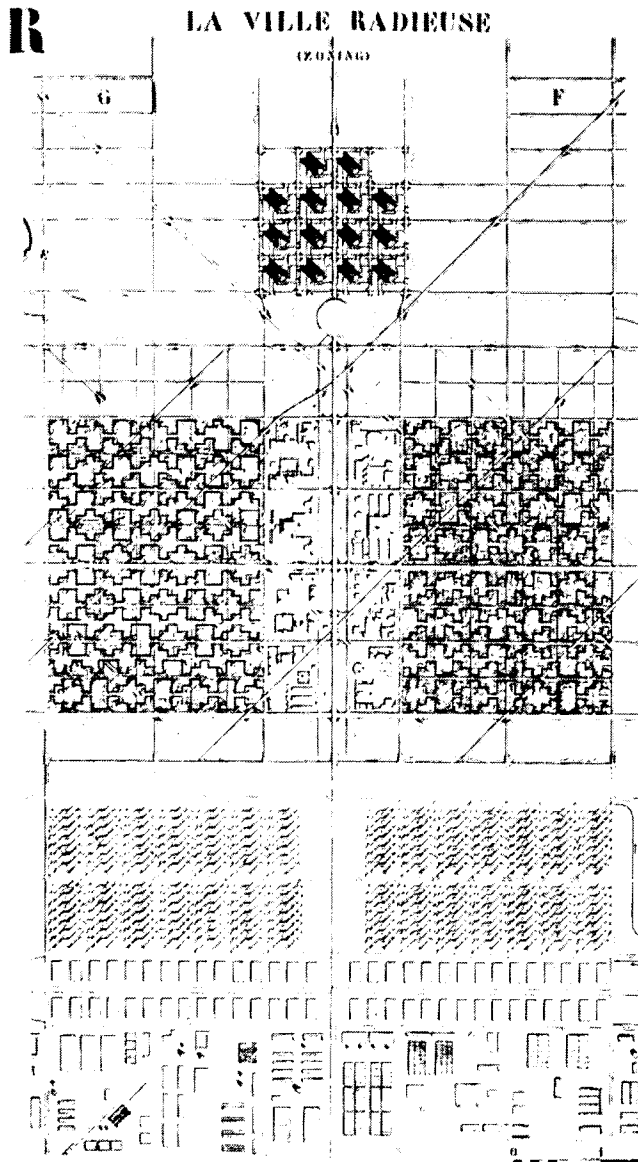


Fig. 5. Le Corbusier, *The Radiant City*, 1930. Planimetrics.

principle of infinite combinations, yet keeping the idea of the city. Le Corbusier proposes that the "cell", in this case the single "urban house" in its diversity and specificity, be proliferated like in the formation of an organism. The scheme, in its whole, is conceived of as an "organism," an "exploding shell," that could eventually "regenerate the society."

The constant this time becomes the structure of relations itself. Relations among all the urban parts or functions occur along the vertical axes and relations inside each part along the horizontal axes. The East-West axis, for instance, is the axis of relations within the residential buildings. The position of the North-South axis with its absolute geometry confirms the assumption of a new strategy in which the *Cité des Affaires*, the head of the city, would be considered as a complete intervention with finite and congruent dimensions, foreshadowing the eventual intervention in Chandigarh. Despite the persistent hierarchical order, the scheme provides a theoretical construct, a system which favors positional relations and can be applied anywhere, valorizing the soil rather than the center of the city and informing a new status of terrain. Ideally the model would be undistorted by the demands of the particular site and imagined to

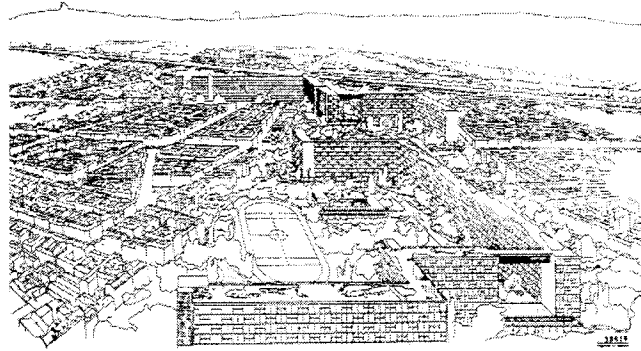


Fig. 6. Le Corbusier, *Ilot Insalubre No. 6*, bird's eye view.

expand beyond the limits of its realization. As a model for, and not model of, it alludes to a perfect future actively pursued as a real possibility. As Le Corbusier notes, "the problem is to create the Radiant City; the Radiant City already exists on paper, and once a technological product has been designed on paper, it does exist."¹⁴ But various attempts to apply it to specific sites betrayed the principle as topological relations always cause alterations of geometry. On the other hand, by introducing the principle of infiltration of elements which do not necessarily have to alter the general frame of reference,¹⁵ it foresees not only the potential of the unlimited development of the city but also its discontinuity.

The *Plan of 1937* for Paris, for instance, as an ensemble and in its specific projects, expresses the tension not only between model and city but also between the parts and the unity of the whole. Redistribution and fragmentation of interventions characterize the plan, which, while having abandoned the unitary criteria of the *Plan Voisin*, brings together different circumstances. To cite Filippo Messina, "the shift in strategy leaves the plan suspended between two concessions: the progressive substitution of the existing city, ... or the plan as an aggregate of circumstances and partial modifications around an idea of the city."¹⁶ The order is this time setting a programmatic rather than a geometric principle, and the device of perspective can hardly unify the derived urban landscape. In the *Ilot Insalubre no 6*, the housing *à redents* infiltrates the existing city imposing itself as an ambiguous entity. It would be difficult to decide whether it inserts the fabric as a tentative part of the existing urban body, as a fragment of the future city, or at last, as an icon of modernity. Defining itself within the context of the real city, it breaks the rule of its placement on the ground as defined by the model but conserves its properties and character. One of the few vistas from inside the plan demonstrates simultaneously a new idea of space and a re-distribution of the existing elements. Model and city are clearly distinct but both are amputated or unfinished like the hardly distinguishable female figure at the beginning of *La Ville Radieuse*.

The research of Le Corbusier toward an urban landscape which is generated by buildings-urban fragments and a body of rules engendering their infinite combinations would culminate though not conclude with the Master plan for Chandigarh and its Capitol Complex. It would eventually represent the sum of previous intentions and a partial materialization of his urbanistic visions.

On the one hand, the Master plan of the city is based on premises set up but not thoroughly developed in the *Radiant City* revealing a similar analogy to the biological organization of the human body.¹⁷ On the other, it is structured according to the Theory of the 7 V (*Voies de Circulation*) and the accompanying strategy of the sector, formulated in the forties and aimed at a total occupation and mobilization of the ground.¹⁸ The Capitol complex, anticipated in the plan for the civic center of Saint-Dié in 1945,¹⁹ recalls the monumental aura of *Plan Voisin*. Intended to provide a symbol for unity and stability after the partition of India in 1947, and as a focal point for the new

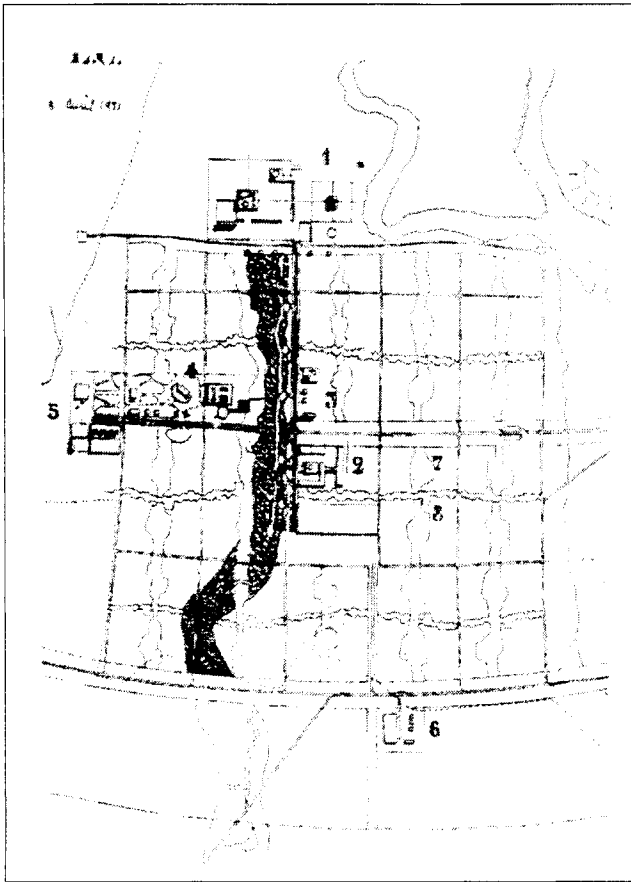


Fig. 7. Le Corbusier, master plan of Chandigarh.

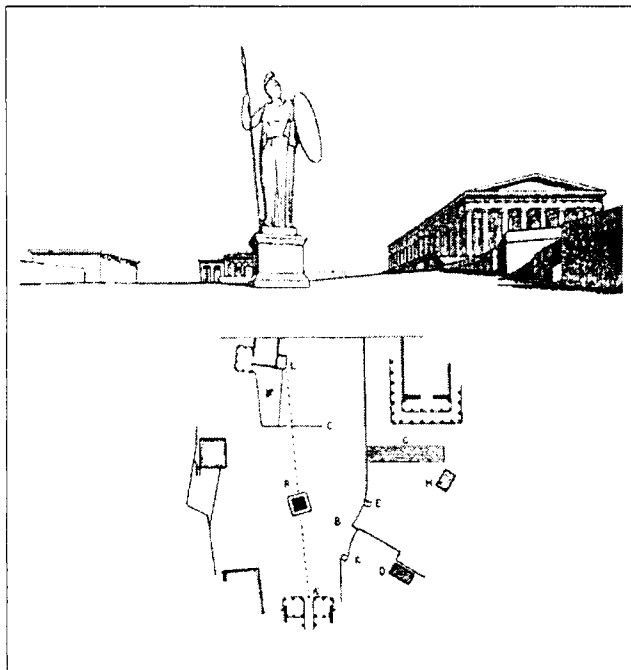


Fig. 8. Plan of the Acropolis, reproduced in Le Corbusier's *Vers Une Architecture*, 1923 from Auguste Choisy's *L' Histoire de l'Architecture*, (1899).

government of Punjab, the Capitol, removed from the circumstances that underlies the earlier designs of Le Corbusier, gives him the ideal condition for the creation of a new urban landscape.

Chandigarh offers a flat, empty site, defined by two river lines and the profile of the Himalayas, a *terrain idéal* that could receive objects-monuments with references to a sacred landscape and another cultural context. It seems that both are reduced and eventually abstracted to formal signs, memory of Le Corbusier's own previous writings. The *plan* then becomes an analogue of the territory, if we apprehend territory as the outcome of an act of appropriation revealing many connotations, mythical as well as political. A new urban condition which mediates the relationship between artifact and nature, and which surface is no longer a veil over the space, but is being modeled with the actual ground eventually fusing with it. Already in the end of *La Ville Radieuse*, Le Corbusier writes on the necessity of a three-dimensional urbanism. "Modern city planning 'sculpts' the site, making the outline and the modeling of the landscape appear. Silhouettes are eloquent and ever varied."²⁰ In a similar manner, the built landscape of the Capitol provides a symbolic profile re-creating the paradigmatic conditions of nature. The gaze discovers pre-conceived views and visual relations rather than an archetypal horizon which alludes to the future or an eternal past.

It is noteworthy to recall the chapter Three Reminders to Architects in *Vers une Architecture*. The third Reminder on the *Plan* begins with the plan and a perspectival view of the Acropolis. The first word is "a view", and continues, "which shows the Parthenon, the Erechtheum, and the statue of Athena in front of the Propylea. It should not be forgotten that the site of the Acropolis is very up and down, with considerable variations in level which have been used to furnish imposing bases or plinths to the buildings. The whole thing being out of square, provides richly varied vistas of a subtle kind; the different masses of the buildings, being asymmetrically arranged, create an intense rhythm." The *plan*, identified with the modeled site itself, ultimately realizes Le Corbusier's words that "plan is a rational and lyrical monument." A permanent link between reason and poetry, conceptual idea and its resolution into a context, and at last, between its own memory and modernity.

NOTES

¹ Le Corbusier, *Précisions sur un état présent de l'architecture et de l'urbanisme*, éd. Vincent, Fréal & Cie, (Paris 1960), p. VIII.

² Le Corbusier, *Une Petite Maison*, 1923, éd. d'architecture, Zurich. This book refers to the house that Le Corbusier designed for his parents by Lake Lemán in Switzerland.

³ Le Corbusier, *Towards a New Architecture* (New York: Praeger Publishers), p. 47.

⁴ Le Corbusier, *The Radiant City*, Orion Press, New York, 1967, p. 131.

⁵ *The Radiant City*, pp.77-78.

⁶ *The City of To-morrow*, p. 168.

⁷ As Norma Evenson writes in *Paris: A Century of Change, 1878-1978*, "it is believed that the oldest symbolic representation of a city is an Egyptian hieroglyph comprising a cross within a circle," (Yale University Press, 1979). For a discussion of the origins of *cardo* and *decumanus* axes as well as the foundation of the Roman town, see Joseph Rykwert, *The Idea of a Town* (MIT Press, 1988).

⁸ "Garret windows, tiles and gutters crown our cities, and occupy in the urban site that privileged position where the two determining constants of all optical sensations — the perpendicular and the horizontal — intersect" Le Corbusier, *The City of To-morrow*, p. 220.

⁹ A. Colquhoun, *Modernity and the Classical Tradition* (MIT Press, 1991).

¹⁰ Diorama has been the most popular of all early nineteenth-century trompe l'oeil entertainments. For an analysis of panora-

mas and dioramas as anticipations of the panopticon and the society of the spectacle, see Eric de Kuyper and Emile Poppe, "Voit et regarder", *Communications*, 34 (1981), pp. 85-96.

¹¹ See Norman Bryson, The Gaze in the Expanded Field, in *Vision and Visuality*, p. 106.

¹² In fact, Boulevard Sebastopol was created by Haussmann in between and parallel to the Rue Saint Denis and the Rue Saint Martin, two of the oldest axes of Paris.

¹³ For a history of nineteenth century's German aesthetics, see *Empathy, Form and Space: Problems in German Aesthetics, 1873-1893* (Getty Center for the History of Art and the Humanities, 1994).

¹⁴ *The Radiant City*, p. 94.

¹⁵ The same principle first appears at the building scale with the

Dom-ino system in 1914.

¹⁶ Filippo Messina, *Paris 1922-46*, in: *In the Footsteps of Le Corbusier* (Rizzoli, 1991), p. 146.

¹⁷ It possesses a "head" and a "heart": the Capitol and the City Center; a "stomach" — the commercial center — and two arms: the industrial zone and the university. Unlike the Renaissance ideal cities where there is a rapport of proportions, here we have a rapport of functions and their organization.

¹⁸ See *Les Trois Etablissements Humains* and *Oeuvre Complète*, Vol.5 194652.

¹⁹ This is further related to a more general discussion on the notion of the "heart of the city" in the post world war period and the renewed importance attributed to the civic center of the city.

²⁰ *The Radiant City*, p.298