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ПЛАН “ОБУС” ЛЕ КОРБЮЗЬЕ: НЕРЕАЛИЗОВАННЫЙ ПРОЕКТ ДЛЯ АЛЖИРА

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Аннотация. Стремление развивать и расширять Алжир, город с глубокой историей и прекрасным географическим расположением на североафриканском побережье, всегда было целью ряда архитекторов и урбанистов, особенно в колониальный период. В этой статье такое стремление можно увидеть на примере плана, предложенного Ле Корбюзье. После своего визита в 1931 г. в Алжир Ле Корбюзье взял на себя смелость разработать план будущего Алжира, он назвал его “план Obus”. В статье этот проект анализируется с разных точек зрения, выявляется роль “Касбы”, влияющей на план Obus. Также рассматривается реальное намерение Ле Корбюзье предложить к реализации этот план будущего Алжира, который является первым в своем роде. Целью статьи является изучение плана Obus с точки зрения взгляда на устойчивое развитие и его соответствия современным принципам устойчивого развития, а также выявление причин, по которым этот мега-проект не только не был осуществлен, но и был далек от того, чтобы быть реализованным.

Ключевые слова: План Обус, Касба, Машина для жизни, Городской апартеид, Дорожный город, Колониальный урбанизм

Original article

LE CORBUSIER'S PLAN OBUS: THE UNREALIZED PROJECT OF ALGIERS

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Abstract. The will to develop and expand Algiers, which is a city with a deep history and a nice geographic location in the north African coast, always has been an ambition for different architects and urbanists through time especially during the colonial period, in this paper, that ambition can be seen in the plan proposed by Le Corbusier. After his visit in 1931 to Algiers, the Corbusier took it upon himself to design a plan for a future Algiers, he called it Plan Obus. This paper discusses this project from different points of view and what is the role of “The Casbah” influencing the Obus plan, we will also look at the real intention of Corbusier of proposing this future plan of Algiers which is the first of its kind, the paper aims to study the Obus plan from a Sustainable development view and if it matches with the Sustainable development pillars nowadays, and what are the causes which made this mega project not realizable and far from to be built.

Keywords: Plan Obus, Casbah, Machine for living, Urban apartheid, Road Town, Colonial urbanism

¹ Le Corbusier. *Poésie sur Alger*. Paris, Falaize. Original pub. 1950. Le Corbusier Foundation, 1989. Pp. 18–19.

² Brades and Walker. *Le Corbusier: Architect of the Century*. London, Arts Council of Great Britain, 1987. Pp. 40–42.

By the time Le Corbusier trained his sights on the development of Algiers, he had already begun to turn away from his machine-age ideology, in part due to a general disillusionment with technology in the face of the market crash of 1929 and the rise of Fascism and Nazism (all frightful by-products of a collective faith in progress)¹. He began searching for new forms of inspiration beyond the stylistic echo chamber that Modernism had become, looking to nature, vernacular architecture and women for inspiration. While mining these spaces of difference, his impulses and thinking shifted away from angular brutalism toward the more plastic and poetic forms of his later work.

Le Corbusier came to Algiers almost by chance. On the occasion of the centennial celebration of French rule in 1931, a new city plan was unveiled by Henri Prost and the French colonial government. Le Corbusier deeply disapproved, and saw it as an opportunity wasted; he wanted to offer the French colony a bold plan that would raise Algiers to the level of an international city². He argued his case to the colonial government by relying on the anti-capitalist flavor of the month, “Syndicalism”, which intended to structure political power around regional industry. He declared that because colonization was over (the startling, naive general opinion of the time), Algiers was destined to become the world capital of Africa, and thus complete his fantasy of a diamond of Mediterranean centers including Barcelona, Marseille and Rome. Without any formal commission or invitation, he took it upon himself to design and submit his own sweeping scheme, called the Plan Obus.

The project became a personal crusade for Le Corbusier and kept him busy for eleven years, though nothing resulted from his obsessive efforts. While it impacted the discourse of architecture, no part of Plan Obus was ever built in Algiers. Its legacy is intellectual, marked by an encounter with difference in the search for new forms (see Fig. 1).

CORBUSIER, ARCHITECTURE AND URBANISM

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Central to Le Corbusier's design work was the idea of the house as a "machine for living". That is to say, he believed the house had a purpose for the individual and society beyond simply storing people and their things. More specifically, Le Corbusier believed that architecture, beginning at the level of individual units of dwelling, is behavioural: it has the capacity to act upon people and society, to shape their tendencies and moods. It is from this radical point of departure that Le Corbusier's idea for architecture is revolutionary in its own way. He believed that social conflicts and disorder were ills that could be alleviated by providing the individual with an orderly, hygienic space of refuge and contemplation: distinctly urban, but also free of the noise, dust, and intermingling of street level habitation. It is from this point that we can also view Le Corbusier as a radical utopian.

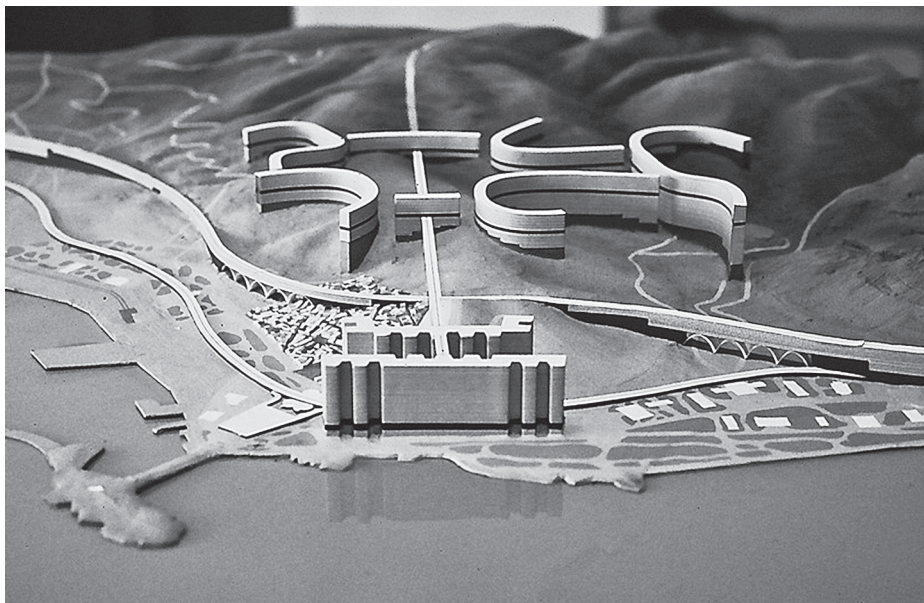
For Le Corbusier, architecture was the last step toward modernity. He believed, however, that the social state of mind necessary to embrace it was lacking.

Le Corbusier's cities were also designed with a very specific idea of the kind of individuals his

1. Photo of Obus model the Le Corbusier Marseille Foundation, House of Architecture

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³ Kries, Mateo. *Metamorphoses of the Orient in the work of Le Corbusier*. Essay found in *Le Corbusier: The Art of Architecture*. Pp. 163–207.



machines for living might "produce", whether in a colonial or metropolitan context. This idea was derived from both Le Corbusier's personal character, and also the archetypal human being he envisioned living in and emanating from his cities. It is well known that Le Corbusier viewed the city as something to get away from. His work constantly emphasized provisions for sunlight, solitude and elevation from street level, as well as the need to remove the distractions of the urban domain: congestion, disease, ornamentation, and so on. Furthermore, Simon Richards has recently argued that Le Corbusier's designs sought to inspire people "to search for more substantial, stable realities within themselves". To facilitate this, Le Corbusier sought to make his cities more comprehensible, digestible, and stable. Fascinated by the harmony of collective and individual life he witnessed in a Florentine monastery, Le Corbusier wanted to make cities whose inhabitants could comfortably withdraw into contemplation. "Le Corbusier had a clear idea of what people should be doing in his cities," writes commentator Simon Richards. "His antisocial urbanism was intentional".

Le Corbusier thus sought to mitigate the distractions of the urban domain, which included discouraging the individual's dependency on the social and political life of the city. His projects had no streets for casual socializing, and formal social engagement happened only in the most predetermined manner, such as sport. Political participation was reduced to maintenance of the otherwise non-negotiable, "perfect" city³.

It is also precisely for this reason that Le Corbusier's Algerian encounter and his fascination with the North African style strikes as somewhat bewildering. Order, hygiene, and solitude were hardly the defining characteristics of Algiers in the 1930s. The historic Casbah was a neglected, calamitous mess, while the European quarter embodied the same ornamental, neoclassical urban forms that Le Corbusier so resented of conventional European style. Le Corbusier was enraptured by the roof terrace culture, closed facades, and interior communal area that marked a common home in the Casbah, creating a sort of complete insular unit within a much larger whole. He was likewise absorbed by the honeycomb-like villages of the M'zab Valley south of Algiers in the northern Sahara.

As alluded to previously, however, Le Corbusier praised the Algerian domicile quite selectively in *The Radiant City*, in much the same fashion as other European Orientalists had before him. He sidestepped the formidable structural contradictions which the Casbah posed to his own notion of the ideal city, and turned a blind eye to the humanitarian condition of the Algerian quarters in his romanticized musings. This indifference seems to pervade many of his plans for Algiers as well.

THE IDEA OF THE PROJECT & INSPIRATION

The Plan Obus consisted of three main elements: a new business district on the Cape of Algiers (at the tip of the Casbah) at a site slated for demolition, a residential area in the heights accessible by a bridge spanning over the Casbah, and, finally, the ultimate expression of his “roadtown”, an elevated highway arcing between suburban cities and containing fourteen residential levels beneath it⁴. These levels were raw space that Le Corbusier believed would fill in “little by little” with homes for the working class that would accommodate as many as 180,000 people. His vision of this new Casbah took the layered domestic spaces of the medina and stacked them as if sweeping up a scattered deck of cards. Obus, which means shell, is often taken to refer to the spiraling form of the plan, but could also reference its infrastructural “shell”, within which homes would be constructed. The plan was a modernist megastructure to be laid directly over the Casbah, with its elevated highway and bridges allowing high-speed travel over the prohibitively narrow and complex streets below (see Fig. 2).

Women provided another powerful source of inspiration. Le Corbusier’s intense encounter with Josephine Baker (“the most erotic woman he had ever known”) in 1929 precipitated the introduction of nude, mythic woman in his painting. While in Algiers, he was taken by the beauty of two girls and returned to Paris with a notebook full of nude studies of them and several racy postcards of “native” women. As his encounter with Baker unlocked his sense of Rio, it has been

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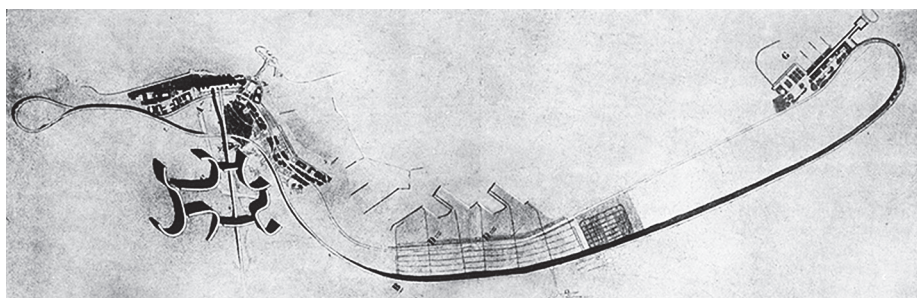
2. Plan Obus

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⁴ Le Corbusier. *Précisions sur un état présent de l'architecture et de l'urbanisme*. Paris: Editions Vincent, Freal & Co, 1960. Pp. 70–79.

⁵ Cohen, Jean-Louis (ed). *Le Corbusier: An Atlas of Modern Landscapes*. New York: The Museum of Modern Art, 2013. Pp. 100–102.

⁶ Richard, Simon. *Le Corbusier and the Concept of Self*. New Haven: Yale University Press, 2003. Pp. 65–68.



suggested that the elegant curves of the Plan Obus, previously uncharacteristic in his work, derived from the fleshy forms of Algerian girls.

Plan Obus was conceived as a collision of the idealized dwelling, mythic feminine and romantic landscape offset by modern technology in the service of colonial needs⁵. Le Corbusier's encounter with Algiers was turning point for his practice that shook his faith in the power of modern architecture to activate large-scale social reform. It also deepened his longing for a poetic primitivism, a desire to escape the industrial world that was quickly heading toward World War II. It was during the war, in 1942, that Le Corbusier was forced to finally abandon his plans for Algiers, which was clearly for the best. Twelve years later the Algerian revolution exploded out of the Casbah and by its end in 1962, European colonialists had fled to France.

FAILURES & COLONIALISM

If built, Plan Obus would have been one of the largest and most ambitious modernist projects ever — an inspiring sight of monument and beauty — and likely one of its greatest failures. Clearly disaster loomed in the project's disregard for Algerian social and religious traditions, the segregation of the workers and the European communities, and of course the abrupt change in the spatial arrangement brought on by its brutal scale. What is most interesting about Plan Obus now is not imagining these problems, but contemplating the extreme disconnect between Le Corbusier's solution for Algiers and the romantic harmony, sensuality and poetry of the exoticized other upon which he drew.

He was, for example, very enthusiastic about discrete examples of vernacular architecture. In his writings, he passionately declared his appreciation for individual houses: "O inspiring image! Arabs, are there no peoples but you who dwell in coolness and quiet, in the enchantment of proportions and the savor of a humane architecture?" Le Corbusier contrasted such vernacular manifestations with the European city in which "'civilized' people are holed up like rats". He also celebrated the "Arabs" because they ignored the street and cultivated the private garden courtyards that delighted him.

Yet when Le Corbusier referred to Algiers at large, he was less compassionate. In his typically self-aggrandizing form he presented his plan: "Here is the new Algiers. Instead of the leprous sore which had sullied the gulf and the slopes of the Sael, here stands architecture... architecture is the masterly, correct, and magnificent play of shapes in the light"⁶. At the urban scale he is no longer enchanted by the Arabs; he is taken with himself and the fantastic syntheses he proposed. Within his rational, formal organization, he envisioned inserting his beloved pre-industrial, one and two-story homes, complete with gardens flourishing on each of the levels under the highway.

The city that Le Corbusier happened upon was the culmination of a century of divergent incursions and a sequestering the native population in the Casbah, while establishing a dominant European quarter on the waterfront forms (see Fig. 3).

From the moment of colonization, the priority of the French had been to imprint their superiority in all forms. Urban planning and the built environment were no exceptions — in fact, they became instrumental to this end.

Le Corbusier's designs for Algiers are ambiguous. It is never clear — explicitly, at least — what type of individual his Algerian “machine for living” was designed to cultivate, although there are sufficient remaining clues to formulate a good idea. The fact that he advocated razing 60% of the Casbah to accommodate the proposed Business Centre is one stark suggestion that his vision for Algiers was specific to one culture⁷, which was not the culture of the Algerians. Furthermore, when we look at his proposed apartment designs for Algiers, to house quarter million newcomers to the city, it is notable how far abstracted

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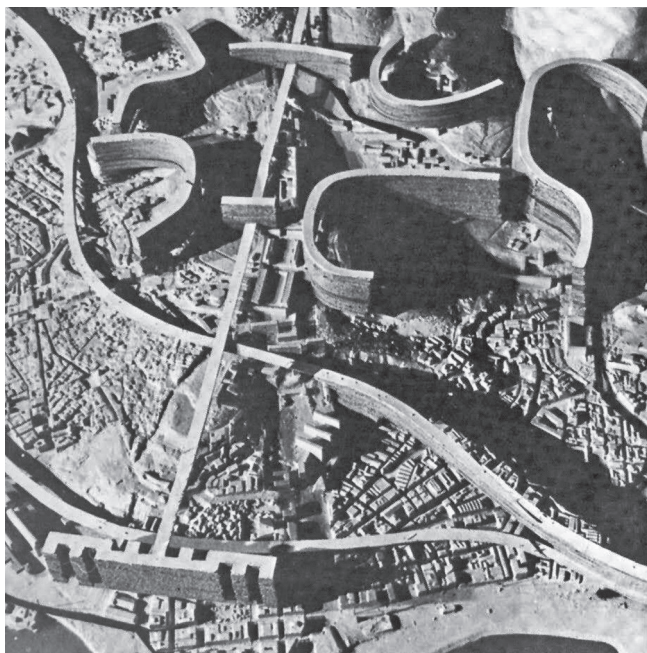
3. Le Corbusier, 1932. Plan Obus A, photograph of original model. FLC

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⁷ Celik, Zeynep. *Urban Forms and Colonial Confrontations: Algiers Under French Rule*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1997. Pp. 87–91.

⁸ Serenyi, Peter. “Le Corbusier's Changing Attitude Toward Form”. *Journal of the Society of Architectural Historians*, Vol. 14, No. 1 (Mar. 1965). Pp. 15–23.

⁹ Celik, Zeynep. « Le Corbusier, Orientalism, Colonialism ». *Assemblage*, No. 17 (Apr. 1992). Pp. 54–58.



they were from the lifestyles and economic means — automobile ownership, compartmentalization between neighbours and within the units, the desire for glass walls — of the Algerians themselves. Between these two features of his Plan Obus, it is difficult not to surmise that Le Corbusier was supportive of increased European colonization of Algiers, and given that he did not envision any “Africans” in the centre or suburbs of the proposed “capital of Africa”, that he did not support the outright displacement of Algerians from the city.

There were six plans altogether, though all of them made more or less the same proposal: a large motorway following the natural curve of the harbour, connecting a proposed business quarter of central Algiers with outlying suburbs to the east and west. The Plan also proposed apartment blocks at Fort l’Empereur to the south of Algiers to house a quarter million people, to be connected by viaduct to the business quarter⁸. This was, again visually and conceptually, one of the most striking features of the Plans, for it necessitated the viaduct intrusively passing directly over the Muslim quarters in the Casbah, essentially creating a sort of urban apartheid⁹.

THE BOOK “POESIE SUR ALGER”

Le Corbusier, leaving the city by boat in 1934, commented: “Algeria disappears from view as a magnificent body, flexible buttocks and full-chested ... a body that can be revealed in all its splendor, through the judicious influence of form and daring”, the Corbusier used the mathematics to harmonize natural terrain and ergonomics in his works, he said: Here equating the site’s landscape with the “alien” female body, Le Corbusier reveals a colonial mode of thinking, declaring that Algeria can reach its own potential only through modern French urban influence. Given the opportunity to modernize, under the guidance of the appropriate architect, Algeria has the potential to represent (Le Corbusier) the ideal site of cooperation between the exotic Orient and the French.

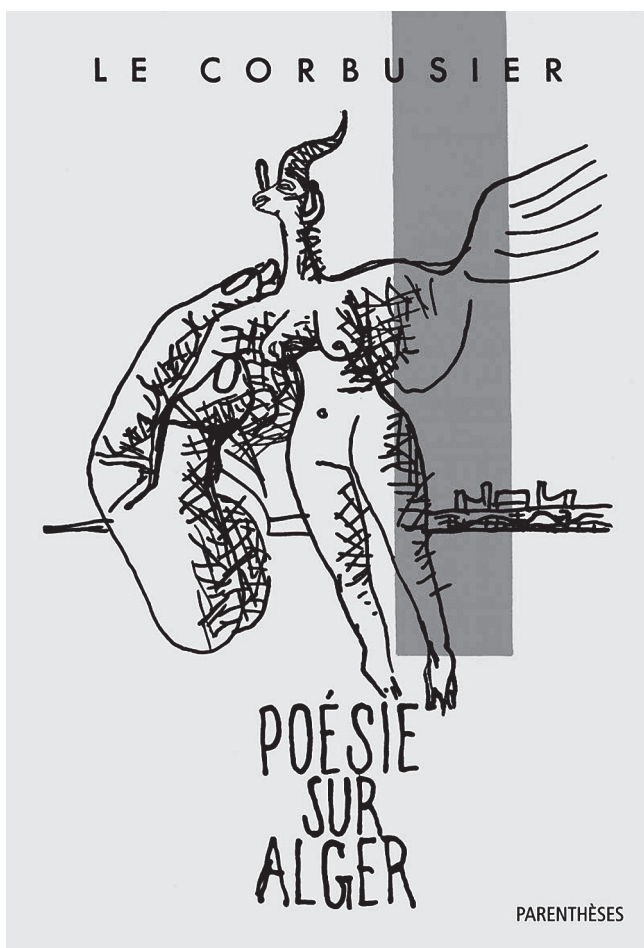
This photograph sets the tone for the discussion of Le Corbusier’s vision for Algeria. It is the cover of his poetic book on the subject of the city, *Poésie sur Alger*, written at the end of his professional interaction with Algiers in 1942, in which the planner reflects on his experience with the city. Therefore, the photographs in this publication reveal Le Corbusier’s enduring impressions and expressions of the city, as he interprets and imagines its future, despite a retrospective approach. As an expression embedded with oriental overtones, this picture depicts a metaphysical hand (presumably of a modernist sketch) guiding the rise of a strange figure between woman and animal, with the skyline of Le Corbusier’s designed Algiers city in the distance (see Fig. 4). Regarding his celebration and fascination

with the Orient dating back to his voyage to Istanbul mentioned in chapter one, Le Corbusier displays a representational style of gender anthropomorphism in his use of a mythical figure with a rhino horn (most likely the goddess Astarte) symbolizing the personification of the city of Algiers. The question of genre and the temptation of the Orient has been a popular motif in European artwork since that time, and many of Le Corbusier's drawings and writings in Algiers adhere to this theme of exotic landscapes as a woman deceived, particularly his many drawings of nude women from the city. Here we can interpret Le Corbusier's concept of Algeria as a site naturally embedded with exotic elements.

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4. Le Corbusier, 1950. Cover of *Poesie sur Alger*

5. Le Corbusier, 1950





In this way, the Algiers project is an argument for Le Corbusier's concept of modern global urbanism. The focus of the plan is to incorporate the exotic landscape of the site (including the Kasbah) into the modern design to bring the city back to the influence of nature on Le Corbusier's discourse. Indeed, Le Corbusier's design for Algeria reflects the confidence that legitimizes the imposition of the modern city system on an existing form (understood as a landscape) and presents the result as a triumph of modernity while ignoring the social realities of the hybrid effects to be created (see Fig. 5). This line of thinking also legitimized the selection of some existing forms to retain over others, as Le Corbusier saw the Kasbah as part of the landscape (so worth preserving) but sought it to demolish many of the existing colonial urban structures in the process of modernization. An image of the model from 1932 provides a clearer understanding of Le Corbusier's proposed city functions. This

model was part of the first draft of a complete plan, Plan Obus A, and it clearly shows the massive scale of the structures designed by Le Corbusier, physically imposing the existing landscape, emphasizing subtle curves and hills. In connection with this idea, the city of the Kasbah, as expressed in Le Corbusier's plans, the type resembles a "museum piece" inside Algiers, for the colonists to see.

He writes of the Casbah in a French publication in 1941: "The Casbah of Algiers ... gave the white name of Algiers to this shimmering appearance that greets at dawn the boats coming from the port. Inscribed on the site is indisputable. It is in harmony with nature". He similarly expresses this feeling. In the city's placement within a natural setting with an emphasis on hills, trees and shrubs, the sea and the kasbah, Le Corbusier articulates the mentality relating to this urban form the nature of the site, rather than an equal participant in the modern functioning of the city. This kind of naturalization of the Casbah can also extend to the people who live within its wall and structures, presenting the indigenous Algerian population as part of the landscape, and thus without agency in the context of the modern city. In connection with this idea, the Kasbah, as expressed in Le Corbusier's plans, is sort of like a "museum piece" within Algiers.

This image also shows more vividly the integration of the Casbah in Le Corbusier's design (between

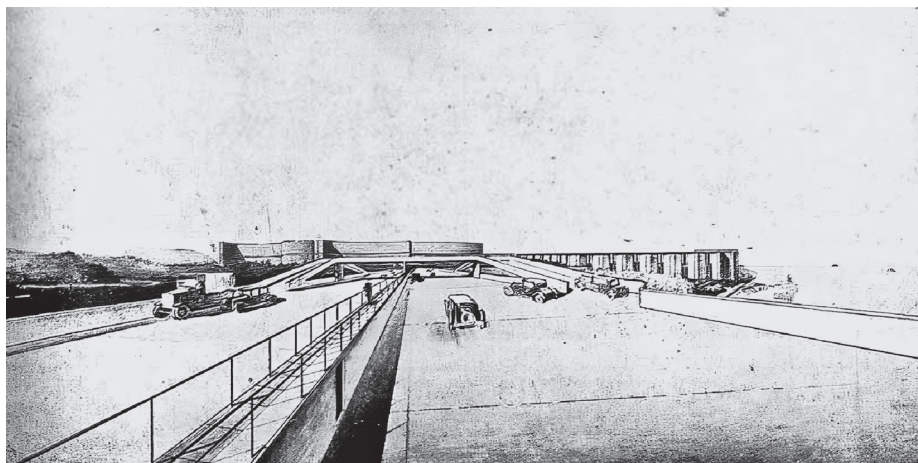
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6. Le Corbusier, 1932. Plan Obus, A. View from level of motorway. *Atlas of Modern Landscapes*. P. 305

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¹⁰ Tanfuri, Manfredo. *Architecture and Utopia: Design and Capitalist Development*. Cambridge, Mass: MIT Press, 1979. Pp. 117–118.

¹¹ Wright, Gwendolyn. *The Politics of Design in French Colonial Urbanism*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1991. Pp. 26–35.



the apartments on the hill and the coastal city center) the bridge connecting the French residential district with the city's business center was placed directly above the Kasbah, bypassing its complex and undisciplined structure, without cutting it. In fact, the bridge serves to "preserve" the existing city while at the same time making it irrelevant in the daily lifestyles of the colonizer's inhabitants of Algiers. The bridge also serves a purpose in representing the kasbah as a natural element of the site, represented as something that must be traversed (such as a valley or a river), rather than being incorporated as an urban form within the city¹⁰.

The bridge and apartments on the hill as well as the highway elevated on the upper deck of the sprawling structure that lines the beach, creates a unique environment for observation from within the city (see Fig. 6). Persons involved in the modern elements of the city have the ability to literally observe the lower city — including the Kasbah — and oversee colonial subjects from a higher level. In this way, the Kasbah is presented as a "museum piece", displayed to the rest of the inhabitants of Algiers who do not live within its walls.

In this transportation system, Le Corbusier also demonstrates confidence in technology and engineering in connecting man and his general environment (both natural and urban). The figure shows the view from the top of this proposed structure, towering above the shoreline and mimicking the height and shape of the ocean ridges.

While Le Corbusier here refers to his plans for Rio de Janeiro (a city with a similar status of observation by building a transport platform) we can see how Le Corbusier saw his designs as extensions of their natural environments. Not only in creating models that reflect nature, Le Corbusier presents a fundamental goal of its kind in Modern Urbanism: to bring city participants closer to nature through their daily interactions with the landscape, re-establishing "the essential intersections of biology, human psychology, and nature". Corbusier's modernist methods express a fundamental belief in man's universal and intrinsic capacity to connect with nature, arguing that this element of modern cities will restore man to an elemental and prosperous existence. For Algiers, these means of transportation and crossing the landscape extend beyond the city limits, just as they did in Buenos Aires, the last sketch from *Poésie sur Alger*, illustrating the international consciousness within Le Corbusier's concept of modern urban planning, again indicating his extension of the perception of cities from During his experience in air travel (see Fig. 7).

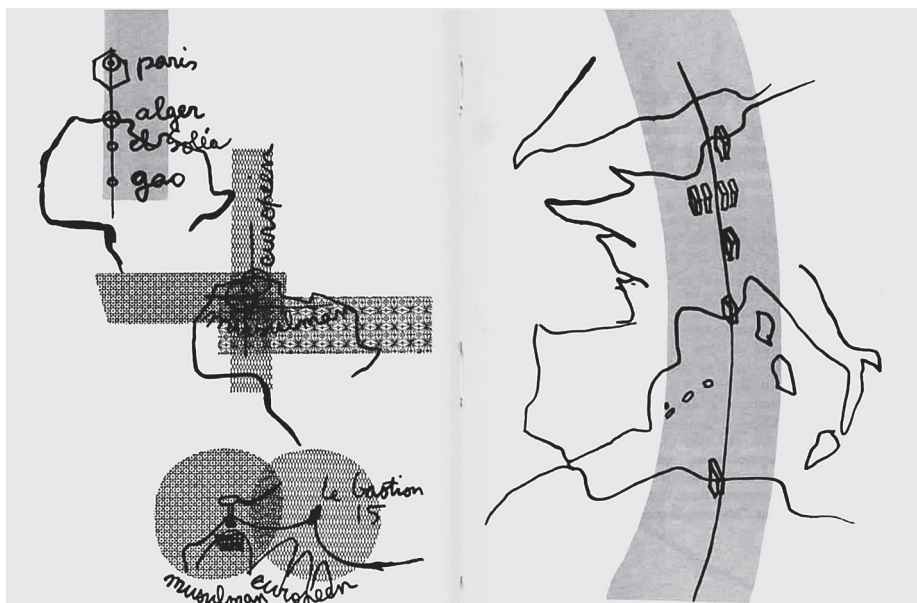
Just as Buenos Aires is presented as the New York of South America, Le Corbusier uses the existing international authority of cities located in France in order to influence the perception of potential in his designs for Algeria. However, in the case in Algiers, this distinctive modern trend includes clear colonial influences specific to the city¹¹. In aligning Algiers with the principal cities of the French Empire, Le Corbusier illustrates how the modern capital

of Algiers would function within the colonial system as the gateway to the continent of Africa. Therefore, the vision of the scheme modern Algeria is presented not only in the context of the African landscape, but also within the framework of the international and colonial dialogue between urban landscapes.

From a sustainable point of view, the Obus Plan project does never represented a sustainable strategy because it missed a big point in that plan which is the social and cultural integration, in Obus Plan Le Corbusier isolated the casbah to make it as a natural museum for French people who will live in the heights part of the project, ignoring the native people and their needs, if the project was created, this fracture between the two cultures and the differences created by the colonial thinking will lead to a war inside the Capital and resistance between the two sides. From another point of view, the natural environment has been ignored in this project, no parks, no green spaces created no plants. The Corbusier has this idea to give his new city new rules, with less interaction and urban areas where people can not meet and talk only in specific places, and the idea behind this is to decrease Social ills, but that is wrong.

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7. Le Corbusier, 1950. *Poesie sur Alger*. Pp. 12–13. Sketch of axial orientation of Algiers within French empire



CONCLUSION

Le Corbusier's encounter with Algiers is undoubtedly the most popular case of colonial urbanism in French North Africa, despite the fact that none of his plans were ever taken up. The Plan Obus was proposed in a period when many young European designers sought outlets for their developing crafts and were given more or less free reign in Morocco and Algeria. Even in comparison with some of the other grandiose housing schemes designed during the late colonial period in Algeria, it seems Le Corbusier's Plans may have simply been too audacious, and too costly.

Finally, it is worthy of note that in 1958, as the Algerian war for independence entered its fourth year, French authorities did borrow some aspects of Le Corbusier's Plan Obus as part of the infamous Plan de Constantine, designed to pacify revolutionary fervour. Specifically, in order to diffuse resistance in the city, authorities staged an incursion into the Casbah, seized a portion of the historic city, and relocated its inhabitants to the newly-built high-rise housing estates on the city's periphery for the remainder of the war (Fig. 3). The Algerians, however, in the words of author Michele Lamprakos, chose revolution over architecture.

In terms of urban development, the Obus plan represents a new type of urban environment, or in other words, it represents a new typology of the city, it is a kind of mega-hybrid project that combines the architectural function with the scale of urban planning, we can say that Corbusier used in this project an architectural approach and put it in a different dimension and scale. this kind of typology has never been used before, but it can be used in the future of urban planning, because technology currently allows us to build a mega project like Obus, in fact, they have already started thinking about it in China (Obus Hong Kong plan). The creation of such a project can change our understanding of urban planning, and the scope of projects is not what it used to be, architecture will somehow take the place of urban planning, and urban life will disappear.

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