

Toward a Gathering Place.

Le Corbusier's City after World War II

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The public spaces in Le Corbusier's plans are usually considered to break with the past and to have nothing whatsoever in common with the public spaces created before modernism. This view is fostered by evidence that highlights their innovative character, and also by misinterpretations of some of Le Corbusier's own observations and liberal use of words like *civilisation machiniste* ['machine civilization'], *l'esprit nouveau* ['new spirit'] and *l'architecture de demain* ['architecture of tomorrow'], which mask any evocation of the past. However, if we manage to rid ourselves of certain preconceived ideas, which underpin a somewhat less-than-objective idea of modernity, we find that Le Corbusier's public spaces not only fail to break with the historical past in any abrupt way but actually testify to the continuity of human creation over time. This is what this article aims to demonstrate through a careful analysis of two of Le Corbusier's public spaces dating from the period immediately after the Second World War.

The findings presented here focus on the reconstruction of the city of Saint-Dié (1945 – 1946), which never actually materialized (Fig. 1), and the Marseille Housing Block (1945 – 1952) built on Boulevard Michelet (Fig. 2). These projects were paradigmatic: for while Le Corbusier considered Saint-Dié to be a prototype of a modern city, he saw the Marseille Housing Block as a prototype of his collective residential buildings. Planning began on both of them at around the same time, in 1945, in the context of the post-war reconstruction of France. The Saint-Dié rebuilding project involved eight housing units, which became the starting-point

for the Marseille Housing Block; then, during a later phase, various stages of the Marseille plan were incorporated into the Saint-Dié units. While the Marseille Housing Block may be understood as an exemplary model of Le Corbusier's housing units, Saint-Dié may also be considered as exemplifying the urbanistic context of these units. However, in these two projects there are two spaces – the Saint-Dié civic centre and the roof of the Marseille

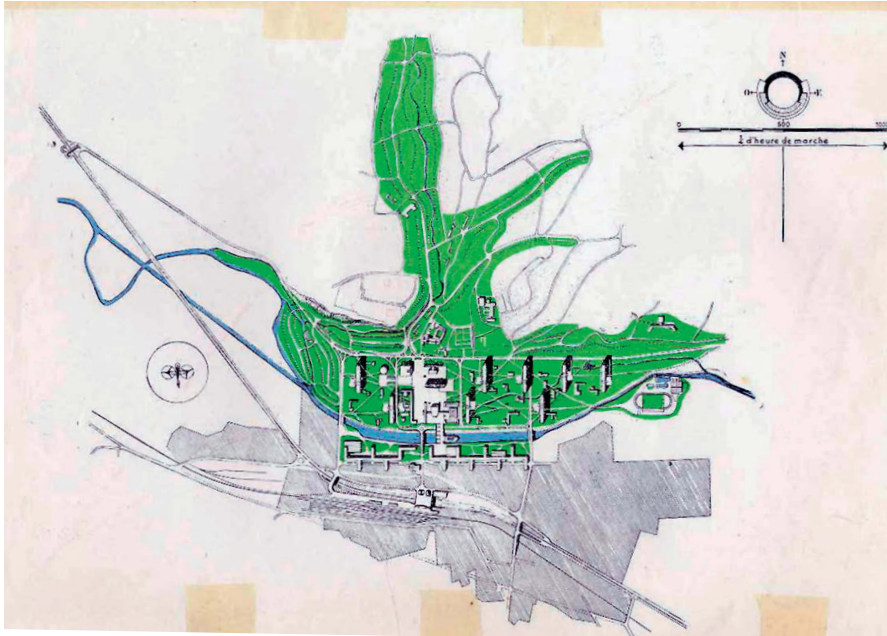


Fig. 1: Plan of Saint-Dié

Housing Block – that have not attracted the attention they deserve. The civic centre is a gathering place serving the entire city. On the scale of the housing unit (effectively a vertical city) the terrace plays the same role. Together these examples epitomise Corbusian thought



Fig. 2: Marseille Housing Block

in the period immediately after the Second World War with regard to the places for the public life of the city.

Thus, the civic centre of the city and the terrace of the housing block are similar kinds of spaces. However, five features revealing the essence of each one and the archetypes that underpin their respective design distinguish them. More than once Le Corbusier demonstrated a strong analogy between Graeco-Roman architecture and the logic of modern production. In *Vers une architecture*, for example, photographs of silos, cars, aeroplanes and ships are mixed up with photographs of Greek and Roman buildings [Le Corbusier, 1923]. A number of authors have also analysed the relationship between some of his individual architectural works and certain buildings of Classical Antiquity (Greek and Roman) that he was personally familiar with. This paper extends the notion of this analogy to Corbusier's design of the public space.

As both the Saint-Dié civic space and the Marseille Housing Block were designed to glorify the collective, clues for identifying the urban spaces that might have served as models for them may perhaps be found in Camillo Sitte's *L'Art de bâtir les villes* [Sitte, 1902]. Although Le Corbusier later disagreed with Sitte's perspective on urbanism, his admiration for the cities of the past was largely stimulated by the writings of that architect and historian. *L'Art de bâtir les villes* had certainly influenced Le Corbusier a great deal in his youth, particularly as regards the choice of urban spaces that should be analysed. Although Sitte's observations focus particularly on the cities of the Middle Ages and Renaissance, his interpretation of later periods is largely informed by Greek and Roman design. Sitte emphasised this fact and, in the introduction to the book which Le Corbusier owned, praised the remarkable qualities of the squares of antiquity:

[...] “depuis l'Antiquité les caractères principaux de l'architecture des villes ont bien changé. Les places publiques (forum, marché, etc.) servent, de notre temps, aussi peu à de grandes fêtes populaires qu'à la vie de tous les jours. Leur seule raison d'être est de procurer plus d'air et de lumière et de rompre la monotonie des océans de maisons. Parfois aussi elles mettent en valeur un édifice monumental en dégageant ses façades. Quelle différence avec l'Antiquité! Les places étaient alors une nécessité de premier ordre, car elles furent le théâtre des principales scènes de la vie publique, qui se passent aujourd'hui dans les salles fermées.” [Sitte, 1902, p. 11]

In the introduction, Sitte's discourse focuses particularly upon the squares of ancient Greece and Rome. He describes two exemplary models: the Forum of the city of Pompeii and the Acropolis of Athens. The Pompeii forum is described analytically, accompanied by

two diagrams – a drawing in perspective that shows what it would have looked like before the eruption of Vesuvius, and a ground plan showing what it looked like after excavation:

“La place est entourée de tous côtés de bâtiments publics. Seul, le temple de Jupiter s’élève sans voisins. Et la colonnade à deux étages qui entoure l’espace entier n’est interrompue que par le péristyle du temple des dieux lares faisant une plus grande saillie que les autres bâtiments. Le centre du forum reste libre, tandis que sa périphérie est occupée par de nombreux monuments dont les piédestaux couverts d’inscriptions sont encore visibles. Quelle impression grandiose devait produire cette place!” [Sitte, 1902, p. 15]¹

He then goes on to the Greek square, claiming that the Acropolis of Athens was the most successful creation of its type, an example to be followed:

“Le place du marché d’Athènes est disposée dans ses grandes lignes selon les mêmes règles, autant qu’on peut en juger d’après les projets de restauration. Les villes consacrées de l’antiquité hellénique (Olympe, Delphes, Eleusis), en sont une application plus grandiose encore. Les chefs-d’œuvre de l’architecture, de la peinture et de la sculpture s’y trouvent réunis en un tout imposant et superbe, qui peut rivaliser avec les plus puissantes tragédies et les symphonies les plus grandioses. L’Acropole d’Athènes est la création la plus achevée de ce genre. Un plateau élevé, entouré de hautes murailles, en est la base. La porte d’entrée inférieure, l’énorme escalier, les admirables Propylées, sont la première phrase de cette symphonie de marbre, d’or et d’ivoire, de bronze et de couleur. Les temples et les monuments de l’intérieur sont les mythes de pierre du peuple grec. La poésie et la pensée les plus élevées y sont incarnées. C’est en vérité le centre d’une ville considérable, l’expression des sentiments d’un grand peuple. Ce n’est plus un simple quartier, au sens ordinaire du terme, c’est l’œuvre des siècles parvenue à la maturité de la pure œuvre d’art. Il est impossible de se fixer un but plus élevé dans ce genre, et il est difficile d’imiter avec bonheur cet exemple splendide ; mais ce modèle devrait toujours rester devant nos yeux dans toutes nos entreprises, comme l’idéal le plu sublime à atteindre.” [Sitte, 1902, p. 16 – 17]²

1 Although Le Corbusier would only have seen this space during his 1911 “Journey to the East”, he had already studied it during his stay in Germany, precisely when he had access to Sitte’s book. He gives it as an example in the sketch of his book project *La construction des villes*. In a passage from Chapter 2 of the book, *Des éléments constitutifs de la Ville*, he writes: “Le Forum de Pompéi, [...], nous signale en A un moyen, employé de tous temps avec grand succès, [...]” [Jeanneret-Gris, 1992, p. 108].

2 Although Le Corbusier only visited this space in 1911 during his “Voyage to the East”, he gives it as an example in his sketch for this project for the book *La construction des villes*. In a passage from Chapter 2 of the book, *Des éléments constitutifs de la Ville*, he writes: “Si on parle de Venise, on voit sa Piazza, [...], [si on parle] d’Athènes, [on voit] l’Acropole, [...]” [Jeanneret-Gris, 1992, p. 135].

Although Sitte denies that it is possible to reproduce the great public spaces of antiquity throughout his oeuvre – rather pessimistically, Sitte says: “Nous ne pouvons plus créer des œuvres d’un art aussi achevé que l’Acropole d’Athènes. Même si nous disposions des millions que coûterait une œuvre semblable, nous ne pourrions l’exécuter. Il nous manque les principes artistiques, la conception de l’univers commune à tous, vivante dans l’âme du peuple, qui pourrait trouver dans une telle œuvre sa représentation matérielle. [...] Le constructeur de villes doit avant tout s’armer d’une extrême modestie, et, à vrai dire, moins par manque de ressources que pour des motifs plus essentiels” [Sitte, 1902, p. 144]. – he nevertheless claims that, as the principles that inspired these constructions were historically contingent, they were always open to reinterpretation. Sitte claims:

“Supposons qu’on veuille créer dans une ville nouvelle un quartier à la fois grandiose et pittoresque, ne servant qu’à la représentation et à la glorification de la vie communale. Il ne suffirait pas de dessiner à l’aide de la règle des alignements parfaits, il faudrait aussi, pour obtenir les effets des anciens maîtres, avoir sur nos palettes leurs couleurs [...] La vie moderne pas plus que la science technique moderne ne permettent de copier servilement la disposition des villes anciennes. Il faut le reconnaître si nous ne voulons pas nous abandonner à une sentimentalité sans espoir. Les modèles des anciens doivent revivre aujourd’hui autrement qu’en des copies consciencieuses ; c’est en examinant ce qu’il y a d’essentiel dans leurs créations et en l’adaptant aux circonstances modernes que nous pourrons jeter dans un sol devenu apparemment stérile une graine capable de germer à nouveau.” [Sitte, 1902, p. 145]

In 1910, Le Corbusier undertook a trip to Germany documenting the journey for his first book on town planning, *La construction des villes*, and precisely in order to obtain Sitte’s book. For some time, he had been particularly concerned with the study of medieval architecture. However, he did not take long to assimilate Sitte’s message and realised that he would have to study the public spaces of antiquity to understand the essence of a public space, medieval or any other.

He was not disappointed when, in 1911, he visited the public spaces of Ancient Greece and Rome recommended by Sitte – the Athens Acropolis and the Forum of Pompeii. During his visit, Le Corbusier intensively studied the composition of public space in Classical Antiquity. Having thus imbibed Greek and Roman compositional strategies, it was natural that he should apply this knowledge when he came to design the two gathering places for his city in the period immediately after the Second World war, creating one in the image of the acropolis and sanctuaries (as happened at the genesis of the first Greek ‘agoras’) and the other with the compositional strategies of the forum.

In fact, while the civic centre of the city and the terrace of the housing block share characteristics of those great urban paradigms of antiquity, the agora and the forum, they are also distinguished from each other by aspects that are also those that distinguish the two ancient models.

Let us look more closely at two exemplary cases, the Agora of Athens and the Forum of Pompeii and the formal characteristics of the two Corbusian models, the civic centre of the city and the terrace of the housing block (Fig. 3):

1. The agora and the civic centre both have a square ground plan while the forum and the terrace of the housing block are rectangular.
2. The agora and the civic centre have no physical boundaries to prevent their overspilling the space allocated to them, while the forum and the terrace are limited all around by a wall.
3. The agora and civic centre are organised non-hierarchically, while the forum and terrace have one particularly feature that stands out in relation to the rest.
4. The agora and civic centre are crossed by pedestrian routes that link various points of the city, while the forum and terrace have a pathway running around their perimeter.
5. From the agora and civic centre, the surrounding landscape is glimpsed between buildings; in the case of the forum and terrace, it appears above the perimeter wall.

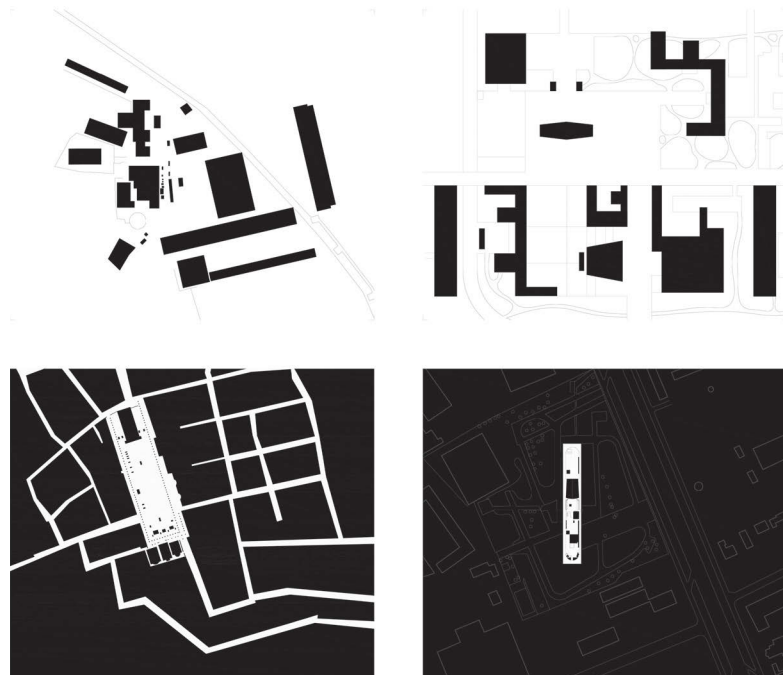


Fig. 3: Agora of Athens and civic centre of Saint-Dié; Forum of Pompeii and terrace of the Marseille Housing Block

Sitte's *Art of Building Cities*, which Le Corbusier read in his youth, sought to demonstrate that life in antiquity was more conducive to the existence of these gathering spaces than modern life. Sitte even went as far as to announce, in a pessimistic moment, the death of the public square, provoked, he claimed, by the drastic transformations that had taken place in the daily life of the people:

“Dans notre vie publique, bien des choses se sont transformées sans retour, partant bien des formes architecturales ont perdu leur importance de jadis. Nous sommes obligés de le reconnaître. Qu’y pouvons-nous si les événements publics sont aujourd’hui racontés dans les journaux au lieu d’être proclamés, comme autrefois en Grèce et à Rome par des crieurs publics dans les thermes ou sous les portiques? Qu’y pouvons-nous si les marchés quittent de plus en plus les places pour s’enfermer dans des bâtiments d’aspect peu artistique ou pour se transformer en colportage direct dans les maisons? Qu’y pouvons-nous si les fontaines n’ont plus qu’une valeur décorative, puisque la foule s’en éloigne, les canalisations amenant l’eau directement dans les maisons et les cuisines? Les œuvres sculpturales abandonnent toujours plus les places et les rues pour s’enfermer dans les prisons d’art nommés musées. Les fêtes populaires, les cortèges de carnaval, les processions religieuses, les représentations théâtrales en plein air, ne seront bientôt plus qu’un souvenir. Avec les siècles la vie populaire s’est retirée lentement des places publiques, qui ont ainsi perdu une grande partie de leur importance. C’est pourquoi la plupart des gens ignorent complètement ce que devrait être une belle place. La vie des anciens était plus favorable au développement artistique des cités que notre vie moderne mathématiquement réglée.” [Sitte, 1902, p. 139 – 140]

Sitte blamed the public's avoidance of the squares on alterations in lifestyle. Le Corbusier on the other hand, noting the same phenomenon, blamed it upon the squares themselves, which had lost their vibrancy largely failing to keep up with the social changes that had taken place. According to him, the solution lay in architecture and in town planning and was therefore within reach of society.

Amongst the rough drafts of his unpublished book, *La construction des villes*, he writes:

“La vie publique s’est retirée de la place, aujourd’hui; il est à se demander si elle s’est retirée de soi-même ou parce qu’il n’y a plus de place. L’Antiquité avait ses forums, où, sous un ciel généreux, se réunissaient les foules pour discuter des intérêts communs, intérêts auxquels participait plus directement qu’aujourd’hui, le citoyen grec ou romain” [Jeanneret-Gris, 1992, p. 103].

In a summary of 1915 he criticised ironically the lack of forum-style spaces in the contemporary period:

“L'Antiquité avait le forum. Le Moyen-Age a encore besoin d'un forum civique à côté de la basilique religieuse pour des cérémonies en plein air, les fêtes religieuses devant le dôme, les fêtes civiques devant l'Hôtel de Ville pour les marches et les foires. Aujourd'hui : une halle pour les marches... ; la vie politique est confinée dans le journal. La vie familiale, le soir. La chaussée à largeur constante est plus utile pour les voitures.” [Jeanneret-Gris, 1992, p. 170]

In studying Greek and Roman public spaces, Le Corbusier was not seeking an archaeological space lost in time, but rather a place that reflected its previous role as a stage for action for the inhabitants of the city. For him, the agora and the forum effectively transposed a human ritual into architecture and town planning. They were public spaces par excellence, the centres of their respective groupings. They constituted true monuments to themselves, the memory of places which, over various generations, had supported a particular community, giving it identity. The agora and the forum were politically and socially the true heart of urban life fulfilling the centralizing vocation of the cities they belonged to. Through their temples, administrative buildings, commemorative monuments and honorific inscriptions, this was where all the signs of municipal dignity were found and where all generations, one after the other, learned or recalled what it meant to belong to a community.

The civic centre of the city and the terrace of the housing block are no more than the modern expression of the Greek agora and Roman forum. They result, in fact, from the continuation of the typological transformation of those spaces according to the criteria of the time they were designed. For Le Corbusier they constituted meeting places, establishing and representing the public domain, where collective activities could take place, as in the square of any city. They constitute the city and the housing block as social places, representing and modelling collective values.

The civic centre thus forms a true agora, performing for the modern city a role that is in all respects similar to that performed by the public square in ancient Greece. Like the Greek public square, the civic centre was the centre of political life, a place of democracy, of decision-making, a meeting-place for the citizens, where collective sentiments were expressed at moments of great exaltation, and where the course of the collective life of the polis was regulated. This was where the administrative services of the city had their headquarters, where the most important theatrical performances and exhibitions took place. The most important trades were concentrated here and it was the meeting point par excellence for the city as a whole. As Le Corbusier indicates, “Le centre civique est le lieu éminent de la cité,

son cœur et son cerveau. C'est là que, par des monuments et par des actes, se développe la vie urbaine et que s'inscrit son histoire." [Le Corbusier, 1945, p. 44]



Fig.4: Donkey giving rides to children during a fête held on the terrace of the Marseille Housing Block

Similarly, just like in a forum (the place for great commemorations, where the most representative dates were celebrated by the inhabitants of the city), Le Corbusier proposed that the important anniversaries of his Marseille Housing Block community (such as its official inauguration on 14th October 1952) should be celebrated on the terrace. The forum was the centre of political life where recent events were analysed, municipal matters discussed, electoral rallies held, candidatures for municipal elections debated, where community representatives were elected, where the duumvirate that presided over the council made speeches to the people from high up on the tribune, and where the temporary prefects, appointed by the emperor, would announce the conclusions of their investigations. Hence, it was on the terrace that Le Corbusier proposed that the residents would make their speeches, just as he himself did, along with Eugène Claudius-Petit, French Minister of Reconstruction and Urbanism, and a representative of the residents at the official inauguration of the Marseille Housing Unit on a rooftop crowded with residents and guests. In the forum, solemn ceremonies were celebrated in honour of illustrious personages; hence, Le Corbusier proposed that the terrace should be used for ceremonies in honour of various

personalities (indeed, it was there that he himself was awarded the medal of Commander of the Order of the Legion of Honour by the minister Eugène Claudius Petit on the day of the official inauguration). In a forum, teachers gave lessons and punished bad students by making examples of them; hence, Le Corbusier proposed that lessons should be held on the terrace for the youngest members of the Housing Block (who were portrayed as beaming with genuine happiness). As in the forum, where athletic and gladiatorial contests were held, Le Corbusier also proposed that the terrace could also be used for physical exercise. Just as the forum was the centre of cultural life, where religious festivals, music festivals and pantomimes took place, Le Corbusier proposed that cultural celebrations of the Housing Block should take place on the terrace, such as those occurring during the annual fête where the whole community would be present. Young or old, all had a role to play in the fête: from the musician playing a traditional melody to the dancer accompanying him, the mother waiting anxiously in the wings, the dancer gyrating on the improvised stage, or the citizen that participated in this place of entertainment and socialization. There was even a donkey to give rides to the children around the terrace (Fig. 4).

In designing these public spaces, Le Corbusier basically recreated the spaciality of the public squares of antiquity, sites for the representation and glorification of the collective. With his refined historical knowledge, but also a sense of abstraction (which presupposes one of the most precious conquests of modern thought, namely the voluntary suspension of succession and temporal compartmentalization, as well as the subsequent evolutionary explanations and cataloguing), he resorted to a synchronic vision of the public spaces of antiquity, binding the past to the present and establishing contacts and overlaps between them. Le Corbusier had already affirmed this in “Esprit grec – Esprit latin – Esprit gréco-latin”, published in the magazine *Prelude* in 1933:

“ESPRIT GREC – ESPRIT LATIN

ESPRIT GRECO-LATIN

Bien entendu, ce sont ici des mots dont le contenu s'évade du vase primitif, antique, et exprime des situations nouvelles, des situations qu'on pourrait appeler 'proportionnelles', c'est-à-dire équivalentes, de même nature.” [Le Corbusier, 1933]

Le Corbusier also had a true historical sense, as defined by T. S. Eliot, an author that figured in his personal library:

“...the historical sense compels a man to write not merely with his own generation in his bones, but with a feeling that the whole of the literature of Europe

from Homer and within it the whole of the literature of his own country has a simultaneous existence and composes a simultaneous order. This historical sense, which is a sense of the timeless as well as of the temporal and of the timeless and of the temporal together, is what makes a writer traditional. And it is at the same time what makes a writer most acutely conscious of his place in time, of his contemporaneity." [Eliot, 1951, p. 14]

The great models of antiquity are not analysed in accordance with their position on a chronological map; rather they become permanently available, ready to be evoked at any moment. These archetypal places, which belonged as much to Corbusier's biographic memory as to the collective memory of the history of architecture, were brought to mind through anamnestic devices (Le Corbusier's postcard collection, his photographs, his travel drawings). These places may thus be understood as a kind of pool of available potential resources. In moving from the great public spaces of antiquity to an architecture of the present, Le Corbusier did not merely copy its forms in a servile way. What he proposed was not a regression, but a reintegration of the values of these forms. He subjects them to analysis, manipulating them and establishing an active relationship with them: he distinguishes the permanent from the temporary, the essential from the accidental, displacing their basic components and extracting their most profound compositional rules. For Le Corbusier, the exemplary models of antiquity become the raw material of the present, ready to be cognitively transformed and thus prolonged and renewed.

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PICTURE CREDITS

Fig. 1: Plan of Saint-Dié (L-C, Fondation Le Corbusier H3-18-205-002)

Fig. 2: Marseille Housing Block (1950s, Fondation Le Corbusier L1-13-6)

Fig. 3: Agora of Athens and civic centre of Saint-Dié; Forum of Pompeii and terrace of the Marseille Housing Block.

Fig. 4: Donkey giving rides to children during a fête held on the terrace of the Marseille Housing Block (Fondation Le Corbusier L1-16-82)