Abstract

This report will look at the work of Le Corbusier and the radical designs he had for Paris and the cities of tomorrow as well as the design process that produced them during the 1920s and early 1930s. In particular the report will detail the impact that the redefinition of Utopia in the early 20th Century played on the design choices made for the evolution of Le Corbusier’s model cities.

Introduction

During the 1920s and early 1930s, Le Corbusier was grappling with the problem of creating a new kind of city that would be the vision for the future. His attempts began with the designing of ‘Une Ville Contemporaine pour trois millions d’habitants’ or the Contemporary City for Three Million Inhabitants in 1922. The grid like urban plan was made up of many different archetypes with a centre of cruciform skyscrapers and surrounding residential areas of bloc à redents, borrowed from Eugène Hénard, and Le Corbusier’s own bloc à cellules. With the residential areas arranged around the perimeter of the design the bloc à cellules would form a permeable wall while the bloc à redents, which is advancing and retreating form would imply a more open urban plan. The plan would be further developed in the coming years, culminating in the Ville Radieuse or Radial City of 1935 where the residential fabric of the plan was made up of bloc à redents elevated above a continuous park. ¹

The Ville Radieuse also developed its urban form by moving the central cruciform towers of the previous plan to the north, with parallel zones for each of the identified needs of the modern machine city. The change from the central business district can be traced to his praise of Peking and the Chinese model of urban planning in Urbanisme. The parallel zoning of the residential, light industry, heavy industry and green zones were designed to be capable of lateral expansion, theoretically allowing for organic growth much like the earlier Utopian ideals of Tony Garnier’s Cité Industrielle. Le Corbusier was convinced that this new plan was a radical improvement upon the Ville Contemporaine:

“Any concentrically designed city makes regular organic development impossible: a biological defect.” ²

The path of Le Corbusier’s design can be viewed through the impact of other Utopian projects of the time, buoyed by the optimism of the 1920s. Utopian thought however was seen by the public as unrealistic and impractical for the needs of a growing society. However this did not deter Le Corbusier from his model cities and he continued to design his view for the future of the modern metropolis.

Utopian City

At the turn of the twentieth century the visions for the future of the industrial city was rapidly changing in Europe and North America. A wide variety of utopian thought ran through many of the urban planning projects, including the work of Ebenezer Howard and the Garden City Movement. Utopian thought also penetrated in the early modernist movement which helped to shape the prevalent modes of planning for the period as shown by the works of Le Corbusier and the Congrès Internationaux D’Architecture Moderne (CIAM). The early modernists, Le Corbusier included, frequently based their urban planning on the proliferation of a standard spatial form. The forms were intended to provide an ordered harmonious society.

¹ Kenneth Frampton, Le Corbusier (London: Thames and Hudson, 2001). p. 51
² Frampton, Le Corbusier. p. 53-55
that would be able to rise above the perceived mistakes of the previous century that the introduction of the Industrial Age had on the cities of Europe. Many of these Utopian projects, like the Ville Contemporaine, we seen as the ‘key’ to changing human social norms and the ideal became to construct the ‘city of salvation’.  

One of Le Corbusier’s commentators Anthony Vidler also cites Fourier for inspiration for the design of Le Corbusier’s urban plans. Fourier’s ‘Ideal City’ proposes that an ideal urban plan should be made up of individual self-sustaining elements. These elements would consist of 100 family units grouped together around an enclosed communal courtyard with covered circulation for the inhabitants around the city. This has powerful similarities to Le Corbusier’s Ville Contemporaine which like many utopian ideals proposed a need for change in regards how the social fabric of a city must change in order to move forward into the machine age.

The design of Le Corbusier’s Contemporary City could also be seen as a critique on the standard courtyard expansion, commonly used in the continental European cities from 1890 onwards. Le Corbusier’s bloc à cellules of the original 1922 plan was meant to address the standard perimeter block which was scantily planted with a ‘green’ urban form suitable for dense inner-city use. Each urban block was also designed to be produced from prefabricated units much like Henry Jules Borie’s Aérodomes project of 1865. The use of machined parts would become a strong design impetus for many of Le Corbusier’s urban projects in the future. These ‘futuristic’ ideals were very common in the design process of many utopian projects of the era with many designers looking to technology for the solution to the social changes deemed necessary for the success of these projects.

Changing Utopia

During the 1920s many historians began to chronicle the development of the Utopian Ideal for the new century. Lewis Mumford in particular began to draw parallels between the currents expansion of modern cities to the development of Ancient Greece. Before the Roman and Macedonian Empires began their expansion in antiquity the ancient Greeks were still grappling with the visions of the ideal city. The rapid expansion in America once again caused many people in the eighteenth century to dream of a civilization that would sweep away the vices, mistakes and superstitions of the old world. The new cities possible with the inventions of the machine age would have once again stirred the thoughts of turning over a fresh page for the twentieth century.

Le Corbusier, as a major figure in the modern movement of architecture has also been criticized for his apparent disregard for the impact that architecture has on the fabric society. Meyer Schapiro, a prominent critic of many of the modern architects, saw that architects of the twentieth century believed that they alone had an independent right to prescribe the social environment of their projects. Schapiro argued that:

“...the assumption of autonomy had given rise to a ‘visionary confidence’ that enabled the architect to believe himself able to ‘correct society on the drawing board’.”

As noted earlier one of Le Corbusier’s influences for his urban planning was Fourier and the creation of an autonomous cell. Fourier’s original ‘phalanx’ of 1500 to 1600 persons was seen as the ideal community for urban development as a self-sustaining stand-alone group. Le Corbusier also perceived a need for a dramatic change in the normal social unit and each of his urban designs incorporated a sense of imposed regulation on the inhabitants as a means of social control for an ideal society.
With the many utopian streams in urban planning at the time Le Corbusier chose to embrace the machine age and the technologies of production and factory labor. This separated Le Corbusier from his mentor John Ruskin, who rejected machine production as brutal. Le Corbusier replaced Ruskin’s obsession with handicraft with a conviction that machine labor would be the way forward for the future.\(^5\) A strong reliance on technological influences were a trademark of Le Corbusier’s urban plans throughout his career, evident in the celebration of transportation infrastructure in his urban plan for the Ville Contemporaine and the Ville Radieuse.

This apparent reliance on technology and science runs contrary to many other utopian ideals of the time. Max Beer, in his History of British Socialism, makes the point that if a focus on simply one aspect of either science or idealism would bring about a real utopia on earth, then Christianity, Islam or Buddhism would have done it at any time within the last two millennia. Many scholars believed that the combination of both idealism and science would be the only way in which an urban utopia could be achieved.\(^10\) However, Le Corbusier makes little or no concession to idealism in his urban proposals, instead choosing to focus on the ‘bright’ future of the machine age.

**Utopian Cell**

During the 1920s Le Corbusier, with the creation of his Ville Contemporaine, designed his normative urban dwelling unit which was exhibited in the Pavillon de l’Esprit Nouveau of 1925. This dwelling unit was modeled after two separate paradigms: one being the Carthusian monastic cell, a deeply religious hermetic sect of the Roman Catholic Church; the second being the Baroque palace appropriated by Utopian Socialist Charles Fourier. This new kind of collective dwelling was a derivation of Fourier’s belief that if society would let go of the individual family unit that people could live as grandly as Louis XIV had done at Versailles.\(^11\) This model of collective living was adopted by many of the Utopian architects including Le Corbusier and Borie.

Furthering this dissection of the family unit within an urban scheme was the idea of class separation through city planning. The Ville Contemporaine was projected as a dense metropolis with a center of apartment blocks and offices separated from the suburban zones of residential housing and light industry by a green belt. The cruciform skyscrapers in the centre of the plan were to house the urban élite with the green belt providing relief from the density of the built-up area and isolation from the suburban proletariat.\(^12\)

Le Corbusier’s obsession with skyscrapers would continue through the development of his ideal city, and by the time of the 1935 publication of the Ville Radieuse he would directly compare his own high-rise form with that of the traditional American form. His cruciform towers were to be clad in the sheer face of a vertical curtain wall but Le Corbusier envisioned a new horizontal plane being created by the flat roofs of the cruciform tower. Le Corbusier saw this virtual horizontal plane as the culmination of Cartesian design perfectly suited to Paris.\(^13\)

However, as is typical of Le Corbusier, the limitations of the cruciform design caused him to redesign the high-rise form for his urban proposals. The Ville Radieuse of 1930 still featured the cruciform tower, but aware of the heliothermic properties of such a design he opted for a sun-inflected tower with a Y-Shaped plan. This would be the final form of the Cartesian High-Rise for Le Corbusier’s urban schemes.\(^14\)

Critics describe the Ville Contemporaine as more typologically developed that any other utopian ideal proposed in the 1920s and 1930s. This was also coupled with the statement that this utopian ideal seemed to be caught between the poles of Utopia and Dystopia as it appeared to be a authoritarian machine city, such as Ludwig Hilberseimer’s ‘Hochhausstadt’ of 1924 rather than the liberal open plan of Tony Garnier’s Cité Industrielle that it wished to be. This was exacerbated by the detailed development of the typical residential block with a warren of underground levels for transport and services, including a sidewalk one level beneath

---

\(^10\) Mumford, The Story of Utopias. p. 268-269
\(^11\) Frampton, Le Corbusier. p. 47-48
\(^12\) Frampton, Le Corbusier. p. 49
\(^13\) Frampton, Le Corbusier. p. 55-56
\(^14\) Frampton, Le Corbusier. p. 56
the lowest duplex dwelling. These we derived from Eugène Hénard and his ‘Rue Future’ but were seen as an authoritarian design choice by many who took it very negatively.\footnote{15}

**Accepting Utopia**

Hostility by the community to utopian ideal was nothing new. The twentieth century created many negative depictions of utopian cities and states, including many famous novels such as Aldous Huxley’s Brave New World of 1932 and George Orwell’s Nineteen Eighty-Four of 1948. Within the realms of social and political theory there were also many attacks on the utopian form exemplified by the works of Karl Popper, Walter Lippmann and Friedrich Hayek among others.\footnote{16}

Many urban planners sought to simplify the problem in order to gain acceptance. One of the earliest techniques used by urban designers was to intervene in the development of a city by zoning particular zones for designated purposes, and this formed the basis of both the criticism and development of many industrial cities. A majority of urban schemes used a land-use separation initiative, with justifiable environmental benefits, to achieve a simplification of the problem of implementing a utopian ideal. Critics of these justifications argued that even though the benefits of such a system were clear to see, any formulaic design solution was just as sterile and removed from the reality of society that they were doomed to failure and considered invalid.\footnote{17}

Le Corbusier saw *Ville Radieuse* as the radical recasting of metropolitan Paris to clear away the old and decayed parts of the busy industrial city to make way for the new needs of a growing society. Le Corbusier believed that big business, or “la Grande Industrie,” would support him in his quest to demolish large parts of historical Paris. Public opinion of the proposal was that such a scheme was utopian at best, seeing such a solution in a very negative light.\footnote{18}

Other commentators on the Utopian effort of Le Corbusier and the CIAM movement believed that utopian planning was a powerful expression of the modernist paradigm, through the *Ville Radieuse*. According to Teresa Caldeira, the motivation behind such a proposal was clear:

“the erasure of social difference and creation of equality in the rational city of the future mastered by the avant-garde architect.”\footnote{19}

Many in the public did not see this as they way forward but as a tool of stagnation of the ever changing entity that was the city into a particular political paradigm. Le Corbusier throughout the design process of his urban proposals went to great lengths to dispel any perceived associations with a certain political ideology.

“I have been careful not to depart from the technical side of my problem. I am an architect: no one is going to make a politician of me. ‘A Contemporary City’ has no label, it is not dedicated to our existing Bourgeois-Capitalist society nor to the Third International. It is a technical work... ‘Things are not revolutionized by making revolutions. The real Revolution lies in the solution to existing problems.”

Le Corbusier paints himself as the neutral doctor solving society’s problems no matter the ideology, and yet certain definite ideologies are favored throughout his designs. This can be attributed to Le Corbusier’s idolization of people such as Louis XIV or Colbert, someone who would be capable of making the grand decision to do away with the old and build the new. With many references to the “Captains of Industry” in

\footnote{15} Frampton, *Le Corbusier*. p. 51-52
\footnote{16} Pinder, “In Defence of Utopian Urbanism: Imagining Cities after the 'End of Utopia'. " p. 230
\footnote{17} Gosling and Maitland, *Concepts of Urban Design*. p. 19
Urbanisme, Le Corbusier was looking to create a new business meritocracy, from which his appeals for a new town builder to appear would be fulfilled.  

**Conclusion**

Le Corbusier’s plans for Paris in the 1920’s and 1930’s can be described as almost blindly utopian with no regard for their practical application. The plans were seen as unrealistic as they required large areas of historic Paris to be demolished to make way for the grand designs of an architect almost always without the support of the public. Le Corbusier believed he has every right as an architect to remake Paris as he saw fit and saw each of his designs as the way forward for the city of Paris.

Architectural Historian Colin Rowe puts Le Corbusier’s work not as an ideal solution to a common problem but merely as an instigator of change within architectural culture. Rowe establishes Le Corbusier’s urban proposals and utopian attitude as a powerful agent of change within the 1920s and 1930s, and follows this through that it would be reasonable to suppose that a utopian attitude might again provide stimulus for a new wave of architectural thinking. Striving for utopia is a worthy goal but the realization of a designed utopia is still seen as a very negative prospect. Adopting the view of Karl Mannheim, Rowe believes utopia to be a reality-transcending orientation that is inherently unrealizable and inimical to life even if, in its very changelessness, it often serves as an instrument of change.

Nonetheless Le Corbusier was, at the level of the single building, one of the most talented designers of our time as well as, on the level of the town plan, one of the most relentlessly totalitarian. By admiring people like Louis XIV, Le Corbusier was right in the view that only a despot like Louis XIV could possibly pave the way to his own New Jerusalem, the Ville Radieuse. Le Corbusier was truly possessed by the idea of the utopian ideal and his personal tragedy was that the plan never came to fruition. But while Le Corbusier’s personal disappointment would be grave, this would be nothing compared to the misery and social dislocation that the Ville Radieuse would have caused in its inhabitants.

However Le Corbusier’s single minded pursuit of the utopian ideal, through the development of ideas preceding him allowed the modern movement impetus and credibility to move forward through the twentieth century. This gave way to many incredibly inspired designs while attempting to reach for the pinnacle of utopia.

---

Bibliography