Le Corbusier’s Modern Landscapes:
Reconciling Site Specific and Universal Trends in Plans For Buenos Aires and Algiers (1929 – 1942)

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Abstract

This thesis explores the structures of thinking within Le Corbusier’s works for Buenos Aires and Algiers as indicators of misconceptions within the standard narrative history of the modern movement of urbanism during the first half of the 20th century. By focusing on the visual and literary rhetoric regarding the role of natural surroundings, differing societal structures and grand-scheme orientation in these Corbusier projects, this paper deconstructs the contradictions posed by site specific, individualistic elements within the idea of a modern city, with its basis on universal truths and inherent uniformity. Through the lens of Le Corbusier’s interpretation of different natural and urban landscapes, this analysis aims to point out the deeper influences within the plans for these cities, revealing a complicated mode of expressing the process of modernity.
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Introduction

The plane, flying over forest, rivers, mountains and seas reveals some fundamental laws, simple principles which prevail in nature, and as a result we may hope that dignity, strength and a proper sense of values will become apparent in the aspect of our new cities.

-Le Corbusier, 1941.

During the first half of the 20th century, new technologies brought about a shift in man’s understanding of his place in the world and his capability to manipulate landscapes. Through wars and destruction developed the ability to see the earth from above and, from this broader viewpoint rose a new internationally conscious citizenry. Informed by these emerging literal and figurative perspectives, the applications of the field of urban planning escalated into a medium that was expected to help bring about the new modern world. At the height of this newfound approach to designing cities of the future, the pursuit of an urban form that would promote a perfect and peaceful society pervaded many urbanists’ works. Differences in ideology led to differences in aesthetics and form from planner to planner, but the objective was the same: a more modern city for a more modern society.

Throughout this era of new beginnings for cities (starting in the 1920s and continuing throughout the early 1950s), Le Corbusier, possibly the most highly studied and controversial modern urban planner of this time, worked to establish his own utopian plans for cities.² Through his work, from painting and lecturing to designing buildings and whole cities, Le Corbusier (1887-1965) became a world-renowned

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urbanist, seeking a platform to build a truly modern metropolis that would accommodate and shape an equally modern and progressive society. This study will focus on the type of modernity expressed through Le Corbusier’s works to determine fundamental principles of his conception of modern cities, as presented in his plans for Buenos Aires and Algiers. Analysis focuses on the contradictions of Le Corbusier’s promotion of these plans as templates for a universal modernity, while revealing his own subjective interpretation of these landscapes within a deeply rooted historical and social consciousness specific to these cities. A comparison of these two plans, embodying very different representations of modernity, demonstrates the pervasiveness and adaptability of Le Corbusier’s understanding of universality in creating modern forms that were presumed to be uniformly effective in any city of the world.

It should be noted that the term “modern” as used here relates specifically to the first half of the 20th century and the changing perception of the future of humankind as a result of the rise of technology and the breadth of destruction throughout the World Wars. The idea of a new start for the human race provided the foundation for new forms of expressions in art, which exhibit the distinctive often idealistic and visionary culture of the time. Inherent in these expressions is the tendency to think across national boarders and connect with fundamental laws and principles associated with the nature of all humankind. In the case of Le Corbusier in

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particular, the conceptual structure surrounding his expressions of modernity revolves around an inherent, universal, and (as Le Corbusier would argue) lost connection between man and natural landscape, to be recovered only through the utilization of new technologies and rational urban forms. In this way, Le Corbusier’s conception of nature is complicated and problematic in compiling cities into natural landscapes, equating built forms and the physical world with the purpose of connecting daily life in cities to the surrounding environment all in the name of universality.

How the plans for Buenos Aires and Algiers could be so divergent aesthetically and structurally yet derive from the same conception of modernity is the central question to be explored through this paper. By focusing on the role of natural surroundings, differing societal structures and grand-scheme orientation in this selection of Corbusier’s projects, this paper deconstructs the contradictions posed by site-specific, individualistic elements within the idea of a modern city, with its basis on universal truths and inherent uniformity. These case studies together reveal the extent of Le Corbusier’s modern mentality, in its ability to change forms and in some respects, contradict itself. Therefore, this individual’s conception and expression of modernity exposes aspects within the modern movement that carry larger implications regarding the evolution of the process of seeing and conceiving of cities. This is not meant to be a critique or a defense of Le Corbusier or the lasting effects of his individual work; instead this paper will function as an inquiry into the dichotomies and intricacies of the emerging concept of the modern world as it was presented through this individual at this point in history.
This paper serves as a study of the intellectual history of modernism as demonstrated through the works of one of the leading ideologues of this movement. Consequently, Le Corbusier’s designs, drawings, and writings for the case studies presented provide the main sources for this investigation, supported by theory-based articles regarding the social and intellectual atmosphere of the time as it played out amid the unique cultural identities of Buenos Aires and Algiers. The visual and rhetorical expressions of specific aspects in these plans illustrates the ideological conception of these two cities as sites of modernity, as well as how they stem from Le Corbusier’s more general conception of a universal modernism. Therefore, this paper focuses on representational sketches and specific aspects of his plans for Buenos Aires and Algiers as the bulk of analytical material. I will not include here a full analysis of exactly how these plans were meant to be implemented or their designed technical functionality. In fact, neither of these Le Corbusier plans was realized by any means. I see their significance not in an interpretation of their technical aspects, but in their representation of Le Corbusier’s highly nuanced and conflicted expressions of modernity, especially given his rhetoric on the superiority of universalism. However, limited discussion of the overall structure and function of these plans is important to support arguments regarding specific elements within the general vision Le Corbusier proposed for these modern cities as well as the day-to-day urban life they would produce.

In chapter one, a discussion of Le Corbusier’s early trip to Istanbul in 1911 serves as an introduction to his process of observing cities and portraying their unique physical
and cultural attributes. Le Corbusier’s expressions and artistic renderings of the city of Istanbul illustrate a departure point for his conception of the relationship between man and nature (as he understood it) in forming landscape. It is also important to note at this point in the paper that Le Corbusier was part of a larger evolution regarding the theory of urban planning and French colonial and neo-colonial influences. A brief discussion of his work through the International Congress of Modern Architecture (CIAM) is necessary to demonstrate the creation of a multifaceted and complex expression of modern ideals during the time between his trip to Istanbul and his work for Buenos Aires and Algiers. However, the type of close analysis found in this paper relies on a perspective of Le Corbusier taken out of this group context in order to study the type of modernity that he alone exhibited in his work.

Next in chapter two, this paper turns to Corbusier’s work for the city of Buenos Aires (beginning with his visit there in 1929) to demonstrate how specific political and cultural motivations play a part in this site versus universal trend. This chapter will discuss the larger implications of Le Corbusier’s visit to the city at the request of the elite and intellectual class of Porteños seeking a modern city for their burgeoning cultural capital. Analysis focuses on the architect’s understanding of Buenos Aires in the context of the vast surrounding pampas of Argentina as well as his attempt to unify the socio-economically and spatially divided city. Le Corbusier’s design (as well as his idealistic rhetoric surrounding this plan) demonstrates how this Plan Director was meant to function as a model for peaceful, utopian cities of the modern technological, "machine” age. In the idealism of this scheme, Le Corbusier expresses a firm belief in
the universality of these forms based on the commonality of man’s relationship with nature. Within this plan, we can see Le Corbusier’s neo-colonial confidence of this modern European mindset: that other cities around the world would and should follow suit in order to create a more rational and peaceful world. However, his impressions and sketches of the city demonstrate an expression of the city clearly founded in its unique historical, cultural, and natural setting.

The third chapter presents Algiers as a different application of the themes of universal modernism proposed in Corbusier’s plans for Buenos Aires. Focusing on the colonial aspects embedded within these plans, this case study reveals how the site informs planning and unique designs, while still exhibiting the foundational ideology regarding universal traits of all modern cities. Here we see a modern plan imposed on a city with centuries of historical and cultural components, most noticeable in the expression of the Casbah as a site of preservation of the old as well as a confrontation with the idea of the modern colonial city. However, this confrontation plays out more as an aesthetic quality of the city than as a real conflict of ideology because Le Corbusier regards the site as a natural element of the landscape. Therefore his incorporation of the Casbah in his plan merely reflects back to the universality of nature in contact with modern forms, upholding the same confidence in the capabilities of modern urbanism as was presented in Buenos Aires.

This work concludes with a final discussion of both the correlating and conflicting themes from the different case studies presented, as well as a review of the shared modern ideals throughout Corbusier’s work for these cities. By presenting the
plans for Buenos Aires and Algiers as representations of a type of modernity that both reinforces and contradicts itself, this project provides a look into the complexity and fluidity of Le Corbusier’s modern ideals, often concealed by the rhetoric of universality.
Chapter 1
Le Corbusier: Foundations of a Modern Philosophy

Throughout his foundational years and career, Le Corbusier framed his work through the act of seeing, observing surroundings, and expressing the character of a space through his work. This methodology of conceiving of cities is most noticeable in Le Corbusier’s first book, *Le Voyage d’Orient*, a detail of his travels throughout the Mediterranean from Berlin to Istanbul in 1911. The 24-year-old Charles-Edouard Jeanneret (as Le Corbusier was known during his youth) enthusiastically and candidly wrote of his enchantment with certain landscapes and cities on this journey, particularly the city of Istanbul, which he revered with a level of holiness. Through this travel journal, Le Corbusier provides insight into the foundation of a mode of connecting people, architecture, cities, and natural settings into a single conception of landscape. Therefore, this work is particularly helpful in illustrating a starting point for Le Corbusier’s understanding of not only how to think about and express cities, but also his early ideas on the forces of modernity.

Along with these writings, Le Corbusier created an array of sketches, drawings and watercolors throughout this trip in an attempt to capture his observations of these places. Many of these images from Istanbul focus on the Mosque as a central figure to the identity of the skyline and landscape of the city. Indeed, Le Corbusier was

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5 Le Corbusier’s first words describing the site of Constantinople: “Pera, Stambol, Scutari: a trinity. I love this word because there is something sacred about it.” Jeanneret, Charles-Edouard. *Journey to the East*. p. 83.
fascinated with the mosques of Istanbul, dedicating a chapter in *Voyage* to the unique architectural traits shared among this religious building type, particularly the “immensity” of these forms and their collective orientation toward Mecca.⁶ However, Le Corbusier also frequently drew the vernacular and individual architecture of the city, showing an early fascination with Islamic society and culture that reappears in his work for the city of Algiers. His most expressive visual works from this trip depict the Istanbul skyline and landscape as a whole from across the river [Figure 1].

Figure 1 Le Corbusier, 1911. Silhouettes of Istanbul. Paris: Fondation Le Corbusier, 1938.

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These works together convey the mode in which Le Corbusier compiled different perspectives into a singular notion and expression of the city. The perspective of these watercolor landscapes indicates Le Corbusier’s adaptation of the built forms and natural setting within one coherent composition. In these impressionistic representations of Istanbul, Le Corbusier only faintly indicates the distinctive mosque rooftops and towers within the city. Therefore, the individual built elements blend into the image as a whole, each component detailed only in its relation to the grander scheme. In this way, Le Corbusier presents a type of landscape defined by equating nature and built forms to produce a single expression of the city. This conception of building cities in conjunction with nature is a common theme throughout Le Corbusier’s works studied in this paper and is integral in understanding the ideological trend of his work.

This interpretation of the city of Istanbul also has important implications for Le Corbusier's initial thoughts on modernity. Le Corbusier lamented the introduction of modern forms and styles to this landscape; wary of the changes they would bring to the “soul” and “harmony” of the city. Reflecting on his time in Istanbul, Le Corbusier wrote:

Believe me, for each of my sentences a hundred more are missing. To speak of Stamboul and not to describe its life is to remove the soul from those things I have spoken of. Had I done it by telling you of the harmony between that life and its milieu, I would have had the opportunity to speak to you about the hideous disaster; the catastrophe that will inevitably ruin Stamboul: the advent of modern times.\(^7\)

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While this writing is very much romanticized, it nevertheless manages to capture a heartfelt vision of an Istanbul that Le Corbusier sought to encapsulate through his work. An element of urgency gives further meaning to his writings and sketches of the city in light of the changes that he saw as inevitably taking effect on the landscape. Although here the young Charles-Edouard opposes the “catastrophe” that is modernity in the context of an established urban culture and aesthetic, he would go on to become one of the modern movement’s early and most outspoken proponents throughout his career as Le Corbusier, gaining a reputation for wanting to demolish existent urban forms as “relics of the past” to make room for more rational urban forms.

It is important to keep in mind throughout this paper that Le Corbusier existed and functioned within a larger context of the development of the field of urban planning as an intellectual and theoretical discourse. The evolution of these ideas is most clearly outlined in the records of the CIAM – Congrès Internationaux d’Architecture Moderne (International Congress on Modern Architecture), which first met in 1928. This group proposed to establish the basis for a new architecture as well as promote these ideas through “official clients and the public at large.”8 As one of the founding members, Le Corbusier worked within CIAM developing his own ideas about modernity while participating in a larger exchange of modern ideals and their applications for cities. Eric Mumford has written extensively on the progression of the CIAM from 1928-1969 in two successive books: The CIAM Discourse on Urbanism, 1928-1960 (2000) and Defining Urbanism: CIAM Architects and the Formation of a

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Discipline, 1937-96 (2009). For the purposes of this study, the CIAM represents a multifaceted theoretical dialogue, within which Le Corbusier was an influential voice.\(^9\)

During the 1933 Congress on the “Functional City,” Le Corbusier gave a talk in which he “combined rational analysis of the possibilities of new methods and technologies that were transforming urban life with a mystical faith in both CIAM and his own ideas for urban reconfiguration...[This] gave CIAM a strong ideological basis...”\(^{10}\) In this way, Le Corbusier’s individual work and the work of CIAM exist within a shared structure of thinking about and expressing the ideals of modernity.

Perhaps the most impressive aspect of Le Corbusier’s work is its prolific and varied nature. Excluding all his work as a painter, sculptor, designer, and architect, Le Corbusier produced multiple books on urban theory as well as many plans for both existing and utopian cities. The progression of his theories is most evident in these works: *Vers Une Architecture* (1923), *Urbanisme* (1925) – containing the utopian *Ville contemporaine de trios millions d’habitants* and the *Plan Voisin* for Paris, *Précisions* (1930), *Ville Radieuse* (1930-33) and *Sur les 4 Routes* (1941). *4 Routes* is particularly relevant in this study as it focuses on the conception of landscape and the ability to traverse urban and natural settings through innovations in the technology of transportation, specifically, aviation and the automobile. The many plans for existing cities that Corbusier developed include Rio de Janeiro, Barcelona, Bogota, Paris, Nemours, Chandigarh, and of course Buenos Aires and Algiers.

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All these explications of theories and diagrammatic plans support Le Corbusier’s conception of modernity centered on a cooperation between man and nature, through technology and rationality in urban forms, to create a harmonious landscape. Le Corbusier’s unique understanding and relationship to nature provided the basis for Jean-Louis Cohen, Sheldon Solow and Barry Bergdoll’s 2013 exhibition at the Museum of Modern Art entitled *Le Corbusier: An Atlas of Modern Landscapes*. In justifying this angle of analysis of Le Corbusier, Cohen writes: “If there is a blind spot in the astonishingly vast literature dedicated to Le Corbusier, it is certainly his relationship to landscape, which provided him with scenes to observe, stimulation for invention, horizons against which to set his projects, and fertile field for metaphors.” It is within this “blind spot” that this study strives to analyze Le Corbusier’s representations of a coherent modernity through his plans for Buenos Aires and Algiers, two cities with strong ties to their respective natural settings. The process through which Le Corbusier interpreted this “nature” gives a mode of analysis to delve further into the contradictions and complications within his expressions of modernity.

Le Corbusier’s perspective on landscape changed literally and figuratively, through his experience with aviation. Flying to Moscow in 1928 and touring South America by plane in 1929 revealed for Le Corbusier a new perception of the relationship between built cities and their surrounding environments. This new outlook, in turn, influenced his expression of modern cities as part of nature. Christine Boyer reflects on this important shift in the urbanist’s understanding of the extent of landscape in her

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article “Aviation and the Aerial View: Le Corbusier’s Spatial transformations in the 1930s and 1940s”:

The aerial view touched Le Corbusier profoundly, for he was a man who “lived to see.” The view from the airplane was decidedly visual: it enabled Le Corbusier to develop a new awareness of the way the entire landscape in its natural setting was configured...  

Le Corbusier’s experience in the air developed his conception of landscape and man’s effect on land, extending the perceived occupied space of a city beyond the borders of its built form. Figure 1 (page 13) provides a clear example of Le Corbusier’s previous understanding of the scope of landscape associated with cities, illustrating Istanbul as occupying a definitive space and providing a limited horizon. As we will see in his subsequent plans for Buenos Aires and Algiers from the 1930s and 40s, this extent was exponentially enlarged to incorporate a broader, globally conscious view of modern cities and an infinitely more expansive horizon.

The aerial view changed not only the scope of Le Corbusier’s perception of city landscapes, but it also shaped his understanding of nature. From the perspective of a plane, Le Corbusier interpreted cities as part of the general natural landscape of an area. In this way, Corbusier’s version of modernity centered on equating built forms with nature. Boyer paraphrases his words from Ville Radieuse describing this conception of the relationship between construction and nature: “The different values the eye observes as ‘characters’ of nature become guides to human creations. These varied elements combine into clear symphonies: counterpoint and fugue, construction and

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Therefore, the type of modernity that Le Corbusier exhibits in his city plans is based on a type of urban form that is informed by and meant to further express the natural surroundings of the site. The plans for Buenos Aires and Algiers demonstrate the enormous implications for how this idea of nature played out in cities with not only a different natural landscape but also a different interpretation of that landscape.

In relating directly to the act of observation and interacting with landscape, these new aerial perspectives had a profound impact on Le Corbusier’s plans for existing cities. Gwendolyn Wright cites Urbanisme in explaining a common conception of Le Corbusier’s interaction with established cities and landscapes:

> In *Urbanisme (p 272, 158)*, Le Corbusier insisted at just this moment [1925] on an absolute commitment to universal modernism, with no sentimentality about specific places and their pasts. He declared unequivocally that the time had come for tearing down “false...sad, and ugly” relics from the past and instead building truly modern cities based on universal “human standards of spirituality and a physiology of sensations.”

This is the standard contemporary view of Le Corbusier’s treatment of existing cities.

While from an overall perspective of his work this statement rings true, a closer look into Le Corbusier’s understanding of built forms in relation to nature reveals the ideological motivations with which the planner approached cities as well as explaining the apparent outliers to this trend (namely Le Corbusier’s call for preservation of the Casbah in Algiers). Le Corbusier’s method of planning modern cities was more complicated than advocating the destruction of all existing forms solely for the sake of making space for his rational and uniform modern forms. Although this was the result

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of many of his plans, this paper argues that his designs were in fact deeply rooted in his interpretation of the landscape, and therefore were embedded with unique historical and social implications of each site, as well as his Eurocentric perceptions of these international cities.

However, the Le Corbusier’s framing of his own work within the larger scope of universal modernism somewhat hides these site-specific qualities. In taking his ideas to the international community, Le Corbusier sought a platform to showcase his theories. In the introduction to 4 Routes he writes:

For the last fifteen years [I have] been asked, all over the world, to state and explain [my] theories, asked to consult and advise Authorities, Trade Unions, Professional Societies, Universities and the Public. Foreigners have found in it a logical extension of French thought in a field in which France has shone for over a thousand years, in which she has shown an uninterrupted sequence of harmonious achievement.¹⁵

This is a pertinent quote for the scope of this paper, focusing on Le Corbusier’s work in the international sphere. Here the planner demonstrates his highly confident (some might say egotistical) personality in claiming such an influential position in the course of international urbanism. However more important to this paper is Le Corbusier’s mention of the larger context of French empire, hinting at the superiority of a uniform modernism designed by European planners such as himself and placing these designs in cities all over the world. By describing his work within a history of French intellectual dominance in the field of urban planning, Le Corbusier demonstrates a Eurocentric, colonial and neo-colonial (depending on the location of his work) mode of perceiving

international cities and reveals deeper motivations found in his plans for Buenos Aires and Algiers. Therefore, Le Corbusiers’ plans and expressions of these cities exhibit a type of representation of the “other; “ urban forms meant to simultaneously encapsulate the identity of the city, while still adhering to the European ideals of modernism all created from the outside perspective of the planner. In this theoretical framework for studying Le Corbusier, we can begin to see how his perspective played a key role in shaping individualistic elements within his plans, contrary to the rhetoric of universalism that even he promoted.
Chapter 2
Buenos Aires (1929–1940): The Rio & Pampas

Le Corbusier came to Buenos Aires in 1929 by invitation of the “Friends of Art,” a group of Porteño intellectuals and elites hoping to engender a coherent cultural identity for their city to have a place in the modern world. They invited the planner (who was well known internationally for his urban theories by this point in his career, as well as a personal friend to members of this society) to give a series of lectures on topics of his work—which Le Corbusier later compiled into the publication Précisions sur un état présent de l’architecture et de l’urbanisme.¹⁶ This book encapsulates fundamental principles of Le Corbusier’s work in South America, as it epitomizes the establishment of his conception of modernity in connection to natural landscapes. As one scholar puts it: “…[Précisions] is the epic of architecture and an urbanism that responds to the turbulent skyline of the mountains, and to the great expanses of the plain, rivers, and seas. The waterways and rivers meandering majestically toward the sea – a view Le Corbusier observed from the plane – added a new verve to his urbanistic ambitions.”¹⁷ A study of Le Corbusier’s sketches in Précisions as well as his subsequent Plan director para la ciudad de Buenos Aires illustrate certain basic and pervasive aspects of the planner’s understanding of modernity at this point in his career, revolving around the relationship between natural and man-made landscapes.

Learning of the unique culture resulting from Buenos Aires’ connection to its setting on the edge of both the vast pampas and the Rio de Plata, Le Corbusier arrived at the site by boat with a romantic notion of the idea of a city serving as a gateway to the extensive and fertile flat lands of Argentina. However, Le Corbusier was initially appalled by the widespread urban sprawl and lack of sunlight in the city, saying its “streets [were] without hope”\(^\text{18}\) and declaring the need for immediate urban modernization in order to fulfill the destiny with which he had prescribed it in his imagination. Figure 2 shows a map of a plan for Buenos Aires commissioned by the building committee from 1925, demonstrating the expansive urban sprawl of the city as it existed, and as Le Corbusier would lament during his visit in 1929. This image reveals the realities of Buenos Aires as Le Corbusier encountered it, serving as a starting point for his interventions to this form suggested in his lectures on the possibilities of modernizing Buenos Aires, through *Précisions*, and later, the *Plan Director*.

Figure 2 Comisión de Estética Edilicia, 1925. Plan for Buenos Aires, signaling the built realities of the city Le Corbusier encountered in 1929. La Red Austral, 2008. p. 43. (Oriented with North at bottom, to correspond with later images 4 and 5).

In this way, Le Corbusier saw in Buenos Aires the opportunity to demonstrate the triumph of modernity by transforming it into a city that would utilize new technologies in urban forms while upholding the ideals of the connection between man and nature. Not only would a successful application of his design for Buenos Aires help raise the international status of the city as a cultural center (while adhering to the
identity of the city in relation to its surroundings) but, as Le Corbusier saw it, this success would also appeal and translate to other cities around the world. Therefore, Le Corbusier presents his Master Plan for Buenos Aires as an attempt to use modern forms to create the city “of the twentieth century”\(^{19}\) and a template for international and universal modernity.

A fundamental aspect to Le Corbusier’s vision for Buenos Aires is related to the city’s (and its society’s) established ties with Parisian art and culture. During the decades surrounding the turn of the 20\(^{th}\) century, elites of Buenos Aires imported French aesthetics, language and art into the city in order to foster an identity of higher culture and education. In this way, Le Corbusier played into a larger and prolonged neo-colonial exchange between Buenos Aires and Paris that had important manifestations in his design for the South American capital. As a result of Le Corbusier’s knowledge of the connection between the two cities, the Plan Director developed as an extrapolation of his earlier composed scheme for Paris, the Plan Voisin (1925). Le Corbusier is clear about the conceptual lineage of the Buenos Aires plan, going so far as to name one of the chapters in Précisions: “Le Plan <<Voisin>> de Paris: Buenos-Ayres [sic] peut-elle devenir l’une des plus dignes villes de monde” (Can Buenos Aires become one of the Great Cities of the World).\(^{20}\) These plans share aspects of planning focusing on business and trade, most especially within the context of an international city on a river and a wish to demolish what had been built previously in order to introduce a new scheme of high-density city blocks to the site. While the Plan

\(^{19}\) Le Corbusier. Précisions, 1930. p. 244.
\(^{20}\) Le Corbusier, Précisions. p 167.
Voisin is undoubtedly an important departure point for the plan for Buenos Aires, this analysis will focus primarily on elements of the Buenos Aires plan on their own merit in order to demonstrate Le Corbusier’s universal conception of modernity in its ability to adapt and conform to different sites, according to the fundamental relationship between man and nature, cities and landscape.

It is important to note that Le Corbusier’s professional relationship with Buenos Aires extended for a decade after his initial visit to the city. He presented his general conception of the city and proposed certain modernizing elements during his series of lectures in 1929. These ideas later provided the basis for the Plan Director para la ciudad de Buenos Aires, which he worked on 1937 and 38 in Paris, along with two Argentine architects, Jorge Ferrari Hardoy and Juan Kurchan. The plan was published in 1940 in L’Architecture D’Aujourd’hui, setting the tone for Le Corbusier’s introduction to the plan, framing this proposal to build a new city in the Americas amidst the destruction of war in Europe. Because of this timing, Le Corbusier’s plan for Buenos Aires takes on greater meanings in implying a hope for the future of the world in building modern cities for a more peaceful society.

An analysis of Le Corbusier’s images and writings surrounding his plan for Buenos Aires reveals an apparent aspect in the urbanist’s conception of modernity: seeking forms that would complement Buenos Aires’ natural orientation within the South American landscape. However, within this universally-oriented scope, Le Corbusier also introduces a change to the transportation system of the city in order to mitigate the negative social effects of the urban sprawl that existed, specifically, the
stark division of the city into the affluent north and the poverty-stricken southern section. Through these elements of the Buenos Aires plan, Corbusier demonstrates the influence of site-specific considerations within his design. A focus on the idealistic philosophy within the plan, most clearly expressed by Le Corbusier in the introduction, demonstrates the extent to which the planner sought to instill change in the cities of the world through his work in Buenos Aires, showing how despite the Plan’s specificity towards the site, Le Corbusier promoted it as a plan embodying the universality of good modern forms.

The most iconic image of Le Corbusier’s vision for Buenos Aires appeared first as a chalk drawing created during his lectures in 1929, adapted as the cover of Précisions in 1930, and later appeared in the Plan Director in 1940 [Fig 3]. The scene shows the skyline of Le Corbusier’s envisioned modern Buenos Aires arriving by boat across the Rio de Plata. Through the darkness of night, only the light from the stars and the simple forms of the city outline the landscape. In this representation, the city becomes an extension of nature: the buildings are presented as part of the coastline, reflected in the water just as the stars. This image also emphasizes the horizontality that Le Corbusier saw as defining the site; the city shown here merges with the endless horizon of the Pampas and into the shoreline of the river.
In a personal account of his own initial view of the city, poetically (and not coincidentally) from the same perspective as that of the image above, Le Corbusier writes:

All of a sudden...I saw Buenos Aires. The smooth sea, flat, unlimited to the left or right, above, your Argentine sky so full of stars, and Buenos Aires, that phenomenal line of light beginning at the infinite right and escaping to the infinite left at the level of the water...\(^{21}\)

The measured rationality of his plan shown here in the simplicity of five high-rises making up the business district of a modern Buenos Aires reveals the connection between Le Corbusier’s first impression of the city and his later expression of hope for its modernization. The city seen here is not only inscribed in the site, it expresses the

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\(^{21}\) Le Corbusier, *Précisions*, p. 201.
identity of the site as Le Corbusier interpreted it. As we will see in other sketches of his plan, Le Corbusier projects buildings and transportation ways as a means of connecting Buenos Aires to its natural setting, creating a modern city that is intimately attached to the greater natural landscape, a common trait throughout the urbanist’s work.

Therefore, Le Corbusier’s presents his plan as a city that reflects its own natural character, while still holding true to universal concepts of modern urban form, set forth in first meetings of CIAM (discussed in Chapter 1).

The image has further connotations in the context of Le Corbusier’s idealistic view of his plan. Representing his hope in the future of modern cities, Le Corbusier presents the city literally as a beacon of light, leading the way into a more modern and peaceful world. Le Corbusier’s introduction to the plan, as it was published in 1940, demonstrates these larger hopes for the Plan Director. The focus of this introduction is on the universal “sickness” of cities created out of the industrial revolution and the methods needed to cure this global disease. He writes:

“...[the Plan presents] a universal inquiry, since the sickness of cities is exactly universal, it is exactly the same, manifesting its effects- its curses- with different appearances, according to the conditions of history, climate, setting, race, culture and customs: New York as Buenos Aires, Río de Janeiro as San Pablo, London as Berlin...etc.

The urbanist’s tone here dismisses the uniqueness of cities only as a source for changing the manifestation of the universal problems of urbanism resulting from the industrial age. Rather than as framing the urban problems facing each city as a result of unique circumstances, Le Corbusier promotes the universal cause of these challenges, implying that their solutions are similarly universal:
A unique phenomenon: a new civilization taking the place of the old; a new civilization cannot be content in the vase of the old. New equipment: material, social, ethical, urban. All the cities of the world are sick; all will be rebuilt (as, moreover, they have been incessantly over the course of the centuries). 22

Just as Le Corbusier conceived of the “sickness” of cities as universal, his proposition for a modern Buenos Aires demonstrates how he thought of the “cure” as inherently universal as well: that is, a modern sensibility towards constructing new cities that would allow for the necessary growth and progression of mankind.

One aspect to this plan that particularly shows the modern mindset with which Le Corbusier approached Buenos Aires, is the formation of an intricate and efficient transportation system. This idea is not unique to Le Corbusier’s plan for Buenos Aires (as we will also see later in his plan for Algiers), nor was it unique to Le Corbusier (as other planners of the time were concentrated on this same need for cities of the mechanistic, modern world). Through this element in the plan for Buenos Aires, Le Corbusier demonstrates how transportation serves as a link between man and landscape through the use of new technologies in addressing the problem of movement through cities, again highlighting a universal aspect to the applicability of these ideas. However, he applies these theories to the unique urban problems and urban culture of Buenos Aires.

Figure 4, a quick sketch of the incipient plan for Buenos Aires as a whole from *Précisions* expresses Le Corbusier’s view of how the city would occupy the space and support movement through the landscape. The top portion of the sketch serves as a
cross-section view of the plan, showing where the river meets the shore and how the modern city would traverse this meeting point of water and land. Here we see the proposed center of commerce and administration jutting out into the river (the main symbol of the modern city, as shown in Figure 1). However, this view reveals the city beyond the iconic wall of high rises. Highlighting the horizontality of the city in this extended sketch of the horizon of a modern Buenos Aires, Le Corbusier emphasizes a subterranean section of the city dedicated to high volume transportation (just to the right of the city’s commercial center) in the form of docks and railways. Not only this, the planner also includes small renderings of airplanes occupying the sky above the city and labels an airport to the far left, an important motif hinting at the growing importance of air travel that appears throughout his work in South America and beyond.

The lower portion of the sketch provides a cursory aerial view of the city as Le Corbusier envisioned it schematically, connecting back to the influence of his experience in the air above South America. Thick black lines and arrows express movement throughout the city, most apparent at the shore of the river and outlining the space the city will occupy. In this way, Le Corbusier confines the urban form of the city in his plan (mitigating the “sickening” urban sprawl that existed) while still allowing for movement and interaction with the landscape beyond these borders. This rough sketch also hints at a specific urban problem Le Corbusier sought to resolve through his plan: the separation of the rich and the poor in the layout of the city as it existed. Le Corbusier points out the existent Avenida de Mayo, which dissects the city through the
middle (creating a pathway directly to his commercial center). Through this representation of the city, the planner hints at the stark division of the Buenos Aires as a result of this Avenida. To mitigate this disparity within the city, Le Corbusier integrated a system of North-South oriented transportation into his plan. In this sketch, he expressly labels the direction of arrows going North and South, parallel to the shore, signifying the importance of newly oriented movement through the city. In this way Le Corbusier somewhat casually proposes to unite the northern and southern sections of the city, through a more comprehensive and inclusive transportation system. Within this idea, Le Corbusier demonstrates how site-specific urban problems could be addressed through the promotion of universal modern forms, such as major transportation ways, as well as showing a high level of confidence in the efficacy of these forms, suggesting a simple answer to centuries of disparity in the city.

Le Corbusier explicitly addresses the divisive layout of the existing city in a chapter of the *Plan Director*. He writes, “la Avenida de Mayo, the axis that currently separates essentially two cities, the north city, rich, and the south city, poor. Would effective methods mitigate the harmful effects of this fateful axis? Rather: Is it possible to provide Buenos Aires a great source of wealth through an inverse of this path, to produce value, rather than destroy?”

Le Corbusier answers his own question in the designs that follow, arguing that a major North-South motorway would change the orientation of Buenos Aires in its entirety and allow for more equitable access to all

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parts of the city. Figure 5, an intriguing diagram from the *Plan Director*, demonstrates this idea through an ambiguous view of the city.

![Figure 5](image-url)

*Figure 5 Le Corbusier, Harasoy, and Kurchan, 1940: *Plan Director*, p. 29: Uniting the north and south sections of Buenos Aires. North at bottom edge; Rio de Plata at left.*

It is unclear whether the image refers to Le Corbusier’s model or his interpretation of the existing city. Nevertheless, this simplified expression of the city into two fragmented shapes without any contextualization within the site (for reference, the aerial view is oriented with North at the bottom, the river at the left) reveals an interesting conception of Buenos Aires. The flat, gray-washed pieces shown here can be interpreted as expressing the mentality of a blank slate, representing the point somewhere between razing the old city and building the new. The arrows seem to function by literally pulling the two pieces together, adding a degree of tension to the image. The figure also contains peculiar aesthetic qualities. Although it appears to be
quite technical, almost as an engineering diagram, this perspective of Buenos Aires is still overly generalized and rather cursory. However, this simplification serves a purpose: to direct the viewer’s attention to the possibilities of connecting the north and south sections through a new major transportation way, in order to create a single unified outline of Buenos Aires.

Both Figures 2 and 3 show Le Corbusier’s focus on transportation as a basic element to the plan. Pathways and roadways, rail lines, boats and airplanes were inextricably linked to the urbanist’s conception of modernity displayed here, not only in the emerging technologies of transportation, but also in how these modes of movement connect man with the landscape he is traversing. As mentioned in Chapter 1 of this study, Le Corbusier’s ideas on transportation directly correlated to the experience of the modern city as an extension of natures. Not only this, but in the case of Buenos Aires, Le Corbusier sought to mitigate a social injustice within the city using modern concepts such as power of paths of transportation. By changing the flow of people through the city in his plan, the planner also presented a different orientation of the city within its prescribed natural setting. Through these proposed forms, Le Corbusier exhibits a complicated mode of introducing modern ideals to a space, while still being influenced by conditions and landscape specific to the city.

Le Corbusier’s conceptualization of the power of transportation also extends beyond the city. The planner’s newfound perspective of cities from above, (mentioned in Chapter 1), relates back to a more internationally conscious city plan for Buenos Aires. Seeing the city as functioning within an international system of exchange, he
envisioned a new role for the city in the context of the Americas, as Le Corbusier
demonstrated through a sketch of New York and Buenos Aires in *Précisions* [Figure 6].

This sketch reveals Le Corbusier’s vision of a modern Buenos Aires as a simile, declaring it to have "the same destiny as New York” (the caption he gives to the image as it appeared in the Plan Director).\(^\text{24}\) In this visual diagram of the role Buenos Aires will play in the international sphere, Le Corbusier includes a horizontal conception of the whole of the northern and southern continents of the Americas. This cross-sectional view (the lower portion of Figure 6) shows how Buenos Aires and New York function as gateways to the natural riches of the western portions of the continents. The web of transportation lines coming through the city and extending out (both eastward and westward) demonstrate how both cities act as funnels for trade and commerce in all forms. Through this view, the buildings are presented as manmade counterpoints to the hills and mountains on the right side of the horizontal plane. Therefore, Le Corbusier equates his built modern forms with the natural forms of the Americas, in effect connecting cities and nature through the same landscape. Le Corbusier includes symbols of different modes of transportation such as trains, boats, and airplanes. These figures express movement throughout the North and South American continents, revealing how technology and transportation function as a tool for man to traverse and interact with different landscapes.

These sketches demonstrate Le Corbusier’s mode of thinking about how cities function within a larger landscape and serve a purpose within that context. In this way, modern cities are presented as points of cooperation between man and nature and

modern forms contain an inherent responsibility in furthering man’s ability to perceive of himself within a larger landscape.

The question mark in this sketch carries multiple connotations. Not only does Le Corbusier ask what will be the destiny of Buenos Aires, he is also asking, who will take control and realize this potential of Buenos Aires. Here, Le Corbusier illustrates an underlying ideological aspect to the *Plan Director* as it was published in 1940 in *L’architecture D’aujourd’hui*, as well as in *La arquitectura de hoy* (the Spanish translation of the Plan) published in Buenos Aires in 1947. In a certain way, the plan serves as a call to action on the part of people in Buenos Aires (namely the elites and people in power) to take the destiny of Buenos Aires into their own hands and to create the modern city he designed. In this way, Le Corbusier reveals a neo-colonial perspective as the basis of this work: once he (as a French urbanist) outlined how to make the city modern by European standards - literally a reapplication of the *Plan Voisin* for Paris– it was up to the citizens of Buenos Aires to make this plan come to fruition. Therefore, Le Corbusier created this plan from an outsider’s perspective, understanding the nature of the site and its cultural importance for the city from neo-colonial conception of the city.

By the 1940s, Hardoy and Kurchan (Le Corbusier’s Argentine associates on the *Plan*) had begun the process of implementing aspects of their model through their position in the planning department of the city. But when Peron assumed power, the building process stopped. By this time however, Le Corbusier was focusing on his next project on another continent, applying his modern theories to the landscape of Algiers.
Chapter 3
Algiers (1932-1942): The Hills & Casbah

Le Corbusier came to Algiers in 1931 by boat after driving through the countryside of Spain. The Friends of Algiers, a group of French colonials, invited him to lecture on the future of urbanism in light of the centennial celebrations of the colonial city. Although he was never formally commissioned by the French government to design a new urban plan for Algiers, by his own volition the urbanist developed many versions of plans from 1932 to 1942. The first, which he revised repeatedly, was the “Plan Obus” - with versions A through E (“Obus” referring to the shrapnel of ammunition). By 1942 he had transformed the Obus scheme into a similarly conceived adaptation: the Plan Directeur, his final Master Plan for the city.

In different ways both these successive plans upheld the urban forces of colonialism and bolstered the power of the resident French citizenry over the native Algerian population. In dividing the inhabitants of Algiers and directing their interactions with one another, the urban forms within these plans for a modern Algiers demonstrate an opposite effect than exhibited in Le Corbusier’s use of modern forms to unite Buenos Aires. In addition to this, sketches and artistic expressions glorifying the exotic Orient as perceived by Le Corbusier as a natural component to the city reveal a complex interaction between the site specific cultural identity of Algiers and the manipulation of urban forms for the benefit of colonial powers. An examination of Le Corbusier’s artistic renderings of the city demonstrates conflicting themes and objectives in his expression of modernity: simultaneously trying to “preserve” the

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authentic and seemingly natural Islamic culture of a city of the past (the Casbah of the original Algerian city, as Le Corbusier interpreted it) while at the same time imposing a new and innovative design for a modern city that would have a pivotal role in the French colonial system. However, further analysis of this conflict reveals a common fundamental element in this particular application of Le Corbusier's conception of modernity: the idea of connecting natural landscape and man through built forms. In the case of Algiers, Le Corbusier regards certain existing native structures, such as the Casbah, as part of the nature of the site. Therefore his plans for this city embody implications that differ from those for Buenos Aires, while still being framed within Le Corbusier’s understanding of a universal modernity. Although many of the designs for Algiers are incredibly specific to the site (and to Le Corbusier’s interpretation of the nature of the site) the urbanist nevertheless integrates his ideas of universal modern forms into the general layout and technological system of transportation. In its stark structural contrast to Le Corbusier’s design for Buenos Aires, the Algiers scheme demonstrates how his fundamental way of conceiving of man and landscape, adapted into a pervasive and flexible modern mentality, could result in two such divergent modern landscapes stemming from the city’s social and natural settings.
This image [Figure 7] sets the tone for a discussion of Le Corbusier’s vision for Algiers. It is the cover of his book of poetry on the subject of the city, *Poésie sur Alger*, written at the end of his professional interaction with Algiers in 1942, as the planner was reflecting back on his experience with the city. Therefore, the images included in this publication reveal Le Corbusier’s lasting impressions and expressions of the city, both as he interpreted it and as he envisioned its future, although from a retrospective
approach. As an expression embedded with Orientalist tones, this image depicts a
metaphysical hand (presumably that of a modern planner) guiding the rise of an exotic
woman-animal figure, with the skyline of Le Corbusier’s designed Algiers in the
distance. Related to his infatuation and fascination with the Orient dating back to his
trip to Istanbul mentioned in Chapter 1, Le Corbusier exhibits a representative mode of
gendered anthropomorphism in his use of a mythical unicorn-headed woman figure
(most likely the Goddess Astarte) symbolizing the embodiment of the city of Algiers.
Gendering and mystifying the Orient is a common motif in European artwork from this
time and Le Corbusier’s many sketches and writings on Algiers adhere to this theme of
the exotic landscape as a beguiling woman, especially his many sketches of nude
women from the city. Here we can interpret Le Corbusier’s conception of Algiers as a
site naturally embedded with exotic elements.

Leaving the city by boat in 1934 Le Corbusier commented: “Algiers drops out of
sight like a magnificent body, supple-hipped and full-breasted...A body which could be
revealed in all its magnificence, through the judicious influence of form and the bold
use of mathematics to harmonize natural topography and human geometry.”
Here equating the natural landscape of the site to an “exotic” woman’s body, Le Corbusier
reveals a colonial mode of thinking, in proclaiming that Algiers can reach its own
potential only through French modern urbanistic influence. If given the chance to
modernize, guided by the right architect, Algiers had the potential to represent (for Le
Corbusier) the site of perfect collaboration between the exotic Orient and the French

26 Le Corbusier. La ville radieuse. p. 260.
modern. In effect, Algiers would become a new type of modern city engaged with the “magnificence” of the natural topography and existent culture. Here, Le Corbusier begins to show a version of his modernity acknowledging and accepting the influences of site-specific elements. However the functional realities of his specific plans for Algiers demonstrate the divided and stratified truth of the modern colonial city he designed, as well as these underlying aspects of the abstraction of the city as it existed.

In addition to this, the modern forms Le Corbusier proposed to introduce to this landscape reflect a mindset similar to that of all the planner’s work, based on the universality of good urban form and its ability to influence social interactions. In this way, Corbusier’s plan for Algiers exhibits a complicated and contentious application of his modern values that involves conflicting forces of the colonized and colonizer, Orient and technology, tradition and modernity.

In another illustration from Poésie sur Alger [Figure 8], Le Corbusier puts forth a slightly more literal representation of his vision for a modern Algiers. This rough expression of the planner’s general idea for the layout of Algiers communicates the interactions between different components of his design as represented by oversized symbols of structures hinting at the function and visual character of each zone: apartments in the zone for habitation (for the French population), high rises for the zone of business and trade, boats connoting the internationality of the city and placing Algiers in the context of the larger French empire. The blue swirls indicate movement through the city, “arteries of transportation” as the planner frequently refers to them, integral to Le Corbusier’s vision of modern cities of the technological age, relating this
plan to the same elements of modernity of those before, including Buenos Aires. Then, completely distinct and conspicuous in the middle of the city, yet separated from the other components, a veiled head appears representing the Casbah.

Figure 8 Le Corbusier, 1950. Poésie sur Alger, p. 10. Sketch of Plan Directeur.

As a symbol of an established culture and urban form predating the colonization of Algiers, the Casbah (and Le Corbusier’s incorporation of the structure into his plans) represents a complicated site embedded with multiple meanings and interpretations. Le Corbusier came to Algiers after a century of French demolition, construction, and re-
appropriation in the name of the betterment of the colonial city. In essence, he was part of a larger tradition of French involvement in reshaping the urban form of Algiers, and the Casbah Le Corbusier encountered was all that was left of the original Islamic city by the time he got there, a de-contextualized piece of a city left dismantled for a new purpose. The unique structural form of the Casbah reflected the Islamic Algerian society within: meandering streets and alleyways, closed off private quarters, passages at different levels (ground floor and public streets for men, balconies and interior courtyards for women) and with mosques and cultural centers placed within the dense urban fabric. This zone within the colonial city was kept more or less intact, as the French built up the city around it, leaving a controlled environment that retained its cultural importance for the native population.

Incorporating a more modern design into the old city was not an innovative strategy at this point in the history of urban development of Algiers (as well as in the histories of other French colonial cities). In fact, it was the policy of other planners before and after Le Corbusier. Since French conquest in the 1830s, Algiers had become a site filled with colonial displays of power in the form of introducing modern European elements into the existing urban fabric. Up until the 20th century, this intervention was militarily and utilitarian focused: cutting boulevards to gain access and allow for movement throughout the city.27 Once Algiers was established as the de facto capital of French Africa, the forms introduced to the city by colonial planners adhered to a more stylistically informed approach in the appearance of grand buildings, plazas and a

garden beltway. Development through the turn of the century focused on waterfront areas and established ‘prestigious’ quarters, contributing to the increasing density of other areas within the city, most noticeably, the Casbah. Figure 9 a plan of Algiers from around the turn of the century illustrates the layout of the city at this time as a result of this French colonial restructuring, adding boulevards through the city and lining the shore. Yet, the Casbah remains a concentration of winding streets outlined in a pentagonal shape (just above Rue de la Liberté (7) and to the left of Rue Randon (11)).

Figure 9 John McKenna, 1997. Map of Algiers from 1900. Printed in Celik, Urban Forms and Colonial Confrontations, p. 66.

By the 1920s and 30s, Henri Prost, René Danger, and Maurice Rotival, supported by the French government, developed plans for Algiers in an effort to instill a rational form within the somewhat chaotic intermingling of existing native and new colonial structures. Reflected in these commissioned plans for Algiers is the broader French colonial tendency for a meeting of modernist and preservationist aesthetics. These designs share aspects with Le Corbusier’s plans in relation to general tenets of modern urban planning at this time, most especially in the zone-by-function approach to the city layout and the incorporation of major pathways of transportation throughout the city. In the case of the Plan Obus however, it seems that Le Corbusier’s approach was more concerned with incorporating the elements of the existing city into his larger modern scheme, rather than the other way around. This idea is most clearly presented in his treatment of the Casbah and in his addition of a monumental multi-purpose structure and elevated roadway. In Le Corbusier’s interpretation and representation of his version of the city, we can note the influence of an underlying conception of the same expression of modernity seen in the Buenos Aires case, again centering on man’s universal and natural relationship to landscape, to be reaffirmed in modern forms. However, these fundamental ideas are reapportioned for the complicated urban and perceived “natural” landscape of Algiers, resulting in a peculiar and revealing appearance of the modern city designed by Le Corbusier.

In his literary and visual rhetoric surrounding Algiers, Le Corbusier highly regarded the Casbah’s historical significance and advocated the need for its

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preservation in all of his plans. He saw in it not only an urban form of the past to be admired by French and other Western tourists, but also an essential part of the natural landscape of the site.

With this conceptualization of the Casbah, we can see how Corbusier’s plan for Algiers begins to depart from what one might expect, given his reception of existing urban forms in other plans (such as the Plan Voisin and the Plan for Buenos Aires). He writes of the Casbah in a French publication in 1941: “The casbah of Algiers...has given the name Algiers-the-White to this glittering apparition that welcomes at dawn the boats arriving from the port. Inscribed in the site, it is irrefutable. It is in consonance with nature.”31 Figure 8 (page 44) likewise expresses this sentiment. In the city’s placement within natural surroundings emphasizing the hills, trees and shrubbery, the sea and the Casbah, Le Corbusier demonstrates the mindset relating this urban form to the nature of the site, rather than an equal participant in the functioning of the modern city. This kind of naturalizing of the Casbah can also be extended to the people living within its wall and structures, presenting the native Algerian population as part of the natural landscape, and therefore without agency within the context of the modern city. Related to this idea, the Casbah, as expressed in Le Corbusier’s plans, resembles a type of “museum piece” within Algiers, for the colonial populations to observe and experience from afar (this idea will be expanded upon later.)32 Furthermore, this

conceptualization of the Casbah demonstrates the way in which Le Corbusier could rationalize its preservation in his modern plan, as a natural element of the site to be accentuated and traversed through his modern forms, rather than as an urban form of the past.

In this way, the Algiers project serves as an argument for Le Corbusier’s conception of universal modern urbanism. The plan’s emphasis on incorporating the natural, exotic landscape of the site (including the Casbah) into the modern design of the city relates back to the influence of nature on Le Corbusier’s modern. In effect, Le Corbusier’s design for Algiers reflects the confidence that legitimated imposing a modern city order over an existing form (understood as natural landscape) and presenting the result as a triumph of modernity while ignoring the actual social implications of the hybrid that would be created. This mode of thinking also legitimated choosing certain existing forms to preserve over others, as Le Corbusier saw the Casbah as part of the natural landscape (therefore worth keeping) but sought to demolish many existing colonial urban structures in his process of modernization.

A photograph of the model from 1932 [Figure 10] provides a clearer understanding of the functionality of Le Corbusier’s proposed city. This model was part of his first draft of a complete plan, the Plan Obus A, and it clearly demonstrates the monumental scale of the structures designed by Le Corbusier, physically imposed over the existing landscape, while still emphasizing the subtle curves and hills of the
surrounding area.

Although the topography of the site is unique to the area, Le Corbusier’s integration of the natural landscape with his proposed urban forms connects back to the basic universality of his type of modern urbanism in general. Again we can also see the separation of zones throughout the city, reflecting a modern functional approach to the layout of these urban forms. However, in the case of Algiers, this separation has an ulterior function, in separating the native and colonial populations. Therefore, Algiers
becomes an example of an instance where modern theory and designs are used as a tool for site-specific motivations. In this case, Le Corbusier’s modern approach to the city furthered the colonial powers over the native population.

This image also more clearly illustrates the incorporation of the Casbah into Le Corbusier’s design (between the apartments on the hill and the shoreline city center.) A bridge connecting the French habitation zone with the business center of the city is placed directly over the Casbah, bypassing its complicated and disorderly structure, without cutting through it. In effect, the bridge serves to “preserve” the existent urban form, while at the same time, making it irrelevant in the daily lifestyles of the colonial population of Algiers. The bridge also serves a purpose in representing the Casbah as a natural fixture to the site, represented as something to be traversed (like a canyon or river), rather than integrated as an urban form within the city.

The bridge, the apartments on the hill, as well as the elevated motorway on the upper surface of the sprawling structure lining the shore, creates a unique environment of observation from within the city. People participating in the modern elements of the city have the capability to literally watch over the lower city – including the Casbah – and supervise the colonial subjects from a higher level. In this way, the Casbah is presented as a “museum piece,” on display for the remaining population of Algiers who do not live within its walls. Mateo Kries writes about this aspect of the Obus Plan in his essay “S, M, L, XL: Metamorphoses of the Orient in the Work of Le Corbusier” explaining the way in which the city’s form allows it to “regard itself”:

This self-referential view in Algiers... is a view of its own history with which the city was satisfying itself. In such a comparison, the traditional city could not be accorded any
potential for development because it necessarily had to represent the antithesis to the modern city.\textsuperscript{33}

While Kries argues that the implied functional realities of the plan would force a contrast between the Casbah and the modern city, for the purposes of this paper, the role of observation is more applicable to allowing residents to understand the scope of the landscape. Including a process of an almost aerial perspective as a fundamental aspect to the plan reveals how this idea of viewing and perceiving the natural setting of the city adhere to Le Corbusier’s universal principles of modernity (as exhibited in the Buenos Aires project).

Not only is there observation of the surroundings, but also there is interaction with those surroundings—albeit, in a limited sense—through movement. The most prominent feature of Le Corbusier’s plan for Algiers, the “viaduct-housing”\textsuperscript{34} structure topped with an extensive highway relates back to the important role of technology and engineering in modern cities. For Algiers this structure has many implications.\textsuperscript{35} In particular, in lining the shore the structure reasserts the natural tendencies of the site, serving a similar role as the commerce center in the plan for Buenos Aires. In this way, the structure reveals the process of Le Corbusier in conceiving of aspects of form that would express the specific nature of the site, while allowing inhabitants of the city to


\textsuperscript{35} Many scholars have written on the subject of this structure in regards to the curves of the roadway evoking that of a woman’s body, taking the biological conception of “arteries of transportation” a step further and connecting it to the exotic female bodies Le Corbusier encountered and was fascinated with in Algiers. Mary McLeod “Alger: L’Appel de la Méditerranée” (1987) and Tim Benton, “Plan Obus, Algiers/Femmes Fantasques” (1987).
engage with that landscape through transportation. This aspect of the plan takes on
greater meanings in light of Le Corbusier’s fascination with describing and designing
pathways through cities as a biological system, “arteries of transportation” in effect
connecting the bodies of the citizens with the body (read: landscape) of the site.

In this transportation system, Le Corbusier also exhibits the confidence in
technology and engineering in connecting man and his general environment (both
natural and urban). Figure 11 shows the view from atop this proposed structure,
towering over the shoreline and mimicking the height and shape of the surrounding
hills.

Figure 11 Le Corbusier, 1932. Plan Obus, A. View from level of motorway. Atlas of Modern Landscapes. p 305.

In the distance, Le Corbusier’s bridge over the Casbah and apartments on the hill are
presented as part of the same horizon of the natural landscape, connecting the hills and
the seashore. Within this single plane, the curves of the apartment structures blends into the hillsides, just as the flat, straight bridge extends into the horizon of the ocean. Therefore, the role of observation in Le Corbusier’s plan is extended past the forms of the city, into the surrounding natural environments. Also included in this image is the expression of the varieties of transportation incorporated into this modern landscape, seen here through the subtle, yet noticeable inclusion of an airplane (in the upper right portion of the image) and a boat in the ocean, in addition to the obvious depiction of automobiles. Le Corbusier comments on the specific type of monumental structures of transportation in *Routes*, revealing the motivations behind these elevated motorways:

> To lay out motor speedways at different levels: at 60 feet, at 200, at 450. We must seek in the very heart of the site a base for our level surveys: and immediately they settle at the foot of the mountain, express the natural movement of the landscape. In suitable places break away from the earth-imposed conditions and in the open circus of vines, of rocks, of orchards, leave the solid basis of the earth, stretch an imaginary cord before our eyes and throw out our motor speedway as a viaduct…

While Le Corbusier here refers to his plans for Rio de Janeiro (a city with a similar mode of observation through the construction of a platform for transportation) we can see how Le Corbusier saw his designs as extensions of their natural settings. Not only this, in creating forms to mirror nature Le Corbusier presents a fundamental goal of his type of modern urbanism: to bring participants of the city closer to nature through their daily interactions with the landscape, leading towards the reestablishment of the “fundamental intersections of biology, human psychology and nature.” Therefore, Le Corbusier’s methods of modernity express a fundamental belief in man’s universal and

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36 Le Corbusier, *The Four Routes*, p. 32.
intrinsic ability to connect with nature, arguing that this element of modern cities will bring man back to an elemental and thriving existence.

For Algiers, these means of transportation and traversing the landscape extend beyond the limits of the city, just as they did for Buenos Aires. Figure 12, another sketch from *Poésie sur Alger*, demonstrates the international consciousness within Le Corbusier’s conception of modern urban planning, again hinting at an extended perception of cities through his experience in air travel.

![Sketch of axial orientation of Algiers within French empire.](image)


Just as he presented Buenos Aires as the New York of South America, Le Corbusier uses the established international authority of existing cities in France to influence the perception of the potential in his designs for Algiers. However, in the case
of Algiers, this characteristically modern trend includes obvious colonial influences specific to the city. In aligning Algiers with major cities of the French empire, Le Corbusier demonstrates how his modern Algiers will function within the colonial system as a gateway to the continent of Africa. Therefore, the planner’s vision of a modern Algiers is presented not only in the context of the African landscape, but also within an international and colonial dialogue between urban landscapes.

Nevertheless, Le Corbusier’s expression of the city in terms of interpreting nature and designing forms to connect participants of the modern city with the natural surroundings of the site exposes the underlying perception of the city Le Corbusier had in mind. For Algiers, Le Corbusier’s interpretation of the city was highly influenced by his colonial and Orientalist perspective, and his vision for the modern city reflects this: choosing to preserve the form (not necessarily the function) of the Casbah while tearing down elements of the colonial city to build forms that represented true modernity and a return to the universal influences of nature. So while the plan for Algiers is presented as a triumph of universal modern form within the context of the exotic landscape, Le Corbusier’s fundamental interpretation of the site was conflated with the site-specific urban history and culture as well as his own Eurocentric conception of these elements. In Corbusier’s endeavor to represent the nature of Algiers, we can understand his plan as an example of European representation of the “other.” Not only this, but also within the plan itself, the role of observation adds to an “us” and “them” mentality within the colonial context. However, this site-specific
colonial conceptualization of the city is masked by Le Corbusier’s commitment to universality and the rhetoric of good urban form.
Conclusions

Studying these designs through the lens of Le Corbusier’s interpretation of landscape provides a revealing frame for comparing certain shared aspects of a modern mentality. The integral role of transportation marks a convergence of man, technology and nature in these designs. Le Corbusier designed monumental forms (in terms of towering height and horizontal extent) dominating the skyline of these cities, provides a definitive shape for each city that could be associated with its natural orientation in the landscape: “seascrapers” blend into the horizontal plane of Buenos Aires and the elevated roadway viaduct clings to the hills of Algiers. The international scope of these designed cities places each within an established multi-national system and demonstrates a more worldly approach to thinking about how cities function: Buenos Aires within the greater American system of production and exploitation of natural resources; Algiers within the French colonial empire lays out the foundation for an economic and cultural presence for these cities in international exchange.

These elements mark a decidedly modern mode of representing cities that relies on a more inclusive way of understanding landscape. Le Corbusier connects urban and natural forms and relates cities through topographies rather than national borders. In this we see the pinnacle of the universality of this mode of thinking based on the intrinsic natural qualities within every person: Le Corbusier was designing these modern cities as a means to link mankind back to his natural environment through a new kind of urban living that would be equally effective anywhere in the world. His designs aimed to mimic nature most clearly demonstrate this conception of the modern city serving as
a universal conjuncture of man, nature, and cities. This might seem counterintuitive because each of these specific sites has a unique topographic landscape. But a consistency lies in Le Corbusier’s mode of expression of the site through his designs. Le Corbusier’s idea of universality therefore both informs this conception of modernity and nature (seeing both as universal elements), while it also embodies the ideal result in striving to create a new world where men are connected by a universal consciousness through his designs. In this way, Le Corbusier’s plans for Buenos Aires and Algiers exhibit a type of modernity reliant upon built forms existing within a global landscape and promoting a modern urban lifestyle highly influenced by Le Corbusier’s belief in fostering through his designs, the universal trait of a connection to nature that all of humankind shares.

While his general mode of thinking about nature and landscape is consistent, Le Corbusier’s interpretations and subsequent expressions of landscapes through his designs differ in the two case studies. In Buenos Aires, the focus was on the historical, cultural and economic importance of the city resting on the horizontal edge of pampas. This specific natural setting provided the idea of the city as a gateway to the interior of the county. In fact, this idea had been embedded in the cultural consciousness of Buenos Aires decades before Le Corbusier came to the city, exhibited in the works of Domingo Sarmiento (Facundo: Civilization and Barbarism, 1845) and other Argentine writers. The flat urban sprawl of the city also provided a platform for Le Corbusier to demonstrate a typically modern urbanistic trend, to concentrate the center of the city in high-rise blocks. However, the existing layout of Buenos Aires created a site-specific
challenge for Le Corbusier as he sought to unite the divided city through a North-South oriented transportation way. The planner demonstrates using international modern ideas (based in universal truths as he understood them) to resolve site-specific urban problems. In this way, the planner presented this plan as an exemplification of the power of universal modernity in curing cities of their global “sickness” – as he wrote in the introduction to the *Plan Director* – while responding the unique urban and social environment of Buenos Aires. Therefore, his expression of Buenos Aires as a “light on the horizon” takes on greater meanings as a template to build modern cities around the world. Yet, this rhetoric obscures and somewhat lessens the impact of the site-specific elements that influenced the plan, in addition to presenting the city in a way that standardized Le Corbusier’s Eurocentric point of view. As a result, Le Corbusier’s expression of modernity in this plan masks a complex relationship between something perceived as universal, while being guided by his interpretation of the specific historical and cultural realities of the site of Buenos Aires.

In the case of Algiers, Le Corbusier’s method of interpreting the landscape had enormously problematic outcomes. For Le Corbusier, the nature of this site was inextricably linked to the Casbah, a structure simultaneously embodying the exotic Orient of the existing culture and the substantial colonial history of the city. Therefore, Le Corbusier’s point of view from within the French empire and seeing himself as within the program of French urbanism is represented in his expression of the city and his vision for its modernity. This is why the role of observation is so central to understanding the implications of his conception of the city: serving as an extension of
the “colonial gaze” and furthering a specific colonial agenda. Despite the fact that elements within the Algiers plan adhere to principles set forth by a structure of modernity insistent on universalism, this plan demonstrates the influence of Le Corbusier’s underlying perception of the city and its unique cultural, social and natural landscape.

Both the plan for Buenos Aires and Algiers share the fundamental trait of being a representation of the “other” (in terms of expressing a different historical, cultural and natural landscape) within a structure of universality and commonality. In analyzing these plans as remnants of a particular point of view, we can see the contradictions often concealed when talking about a uniform international modern movement of urbanism. Therefore this mode of analysis of Le Corbusier’s works has lasting implications for our understanding of how modernity played out in the international sphere.
Epilogue
Return to Istanbul

Le Corbusier never lost his particular fascination with the city of Istanbul. Even after he had become a world-renowned figure of modern urbanism, in 1933 Le Corbusier asked permission from the Turkish ministry to re-design Istanbul, “keeping its historical face and characteristics as it is; but at the same time providing its contemporary needs.” It is particularly intriguing to think how this design would have played out, especially given Le Corbusier’s specific admiration of the existing forms of the city as they responded to the nature of the site and the to the Islamic culture of the people, yet ultimately drawing upon his ideas of universality of modern forms.

Although this plan never materialized, Le Corbusier returned to Istanbul in the fall of 1948. At this time he was in the midst of his “Modulor” project, finding “a harmonious measure to the human scale universally applicable to architecture and mechanics.” In his writings from this trip, Le Corbusier demonstrates a newly oriented obsession with nature and science, through methods of measurements and mathematics. While at this time he retained a conceptual structure of thinking about urban form and architecture universally, he attributed the specific “vigorour and brilliant architecture of Turkey” to its adherence to a universal mathematical formula of

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38 Kortan, Enis. Turkish Architecture and Urbanism Through the Eyes of Le Corbusier. Istanbul: Boyut, 2012. p. 140. Translating a letter speaking of Le Corbusier’s request to re-design Istanbul from the Minister of Foreign Affairs to the General Secretary of the President of Turkey from 1933.
good urban form.\textsuperscript{40} He writes of unique architectural forms within the city, describing their association with this formula:

\ldotsI again stopped at Istanbul. This time it was the doorway of the Grand Seraglio that attracted my attention. (It opens on to the hill with its once unscaleable walls, which sheltered the Sultans and their harems: exquisite kiosks and vegetation, a dream landscape at the confluence of the Bosphorus, the Sea of Marmora and the Golden Horn.) The doorway itself: \(226 + 70 = 296\) (three measures of the 'Modulor'); the side niche: only 2.23 meters.\textsuperscript{41}

Even within the mathematical and detail oriented point of view that Le Corbusier offers here, we can see a remaining infatuation with the nature and built forms of Istanbul: regarding the "dream landscape" as a perfect unification of the built forms and nature of the site. Again, this understanding of the landscape is further romanticized from Le Corbusier's Orientalist point of view, reminiscing of the Sultans and harems of an exotic past. In this short excerpt Le Corbusier demonstrates the comingling of elements within his methods of conceiving of modernity, math, science, nature, man, and architecture: an accumulation of the contradictions and nuances within Le Corbusier's conception of modern landscapes.

\textsuperscript{40} Le Corbusier, \textit{The Modulor}. p. 197.
\textsuperscript{41} Le Corbusier, \textit{The Modulor}. p. 196.
Bibliography


**Images:**

**Figure 1** Paris: Fondation Le Corbusier, 1938.

**Figure 2** La Red Austral, 2008. p. 43.

**Figure 3** Le Corbusier, 1930. *Precisions* cover. View of a modern Buenos Aires at night.
http://www.flickr.com/photos/jorgesiv13/1935469411/

**Figure 4** *Précisions*, p. 206.

**Figure 5** *Plan Director*, p. 29.

**Figure 6** *Precisions*, p. 203.

**Figure 7** Cover of *Poesie sur Alger*.

**Figure 8** Poésie sur Alger, p. 10.

**Figure 9** Urban Forms and Colonial Confrontations. p. 66.

**Figure 10** FLC.

**Figure 11** Atlas of Modern Landscapes. p 305.

**Figure 12** *Poesie sur Alger*, p. 13.