
**Corbu’s Corpus**  
by Ross Wolfe and Sammy Medina

The Museum of Modern Art’s *Le Corbusier: An Atlas of Modern Landscapes*, recently opened to the public, marks the institution’s first exhibit devoted to the archmodernist in over 50 years. As such, it’s already managed to generate a great deal of buzz amongst members of New York’s architectural community. Corbu enthusiasts from up and down the East Coast have thus flocked to the show, turning out in droves. But its impact extends well beyond just the fanboys and devotees, whose attendance might be taken for granted. Many from the general public with only a passing interest in architecture have also made pilgrimages, hoping to catch a glimpse of what once seemed imaginable. Name recognition alone cannot account for this success, however. Part of it has to do with the timing of the exhibition.

In terms of overall curation, the sheer volume of works amassed at the MoMA show is enough to make it worth a visit. Each phase of Le Corbusier’s legendary career is laid out in incredible detail, with multiple models, sketches, and photographs accompanying individual displays. Breadth finds itself matched by depth, as the architect’s corpus is examined across a variety of media. While the exhibit unfolds chronologically - beginning with his youthful pastoral depictions of the Jura mountainsides, up through his post-Cubist collaborations with Ozenfant, then on to his first buildings and forays into urbanism - the astonishing scope of Corbusier’s travels and
commissions is conveyed throughout. This was very much the way Charles-Édouard Jeanneret operated, keeping several fires going at once. At the height of his creative output, while he was writing *La Ville Radieuse* (1930-33), the book’s subtitle grants a sense of how far his projects ranged: Algiers, Antwerp, Barcelona, Buenos Aires, Geneva, Moscow, Montevideo, Nemours, Paris, Piacé, Rio de Janeiro, São Paulo. *An Atlas of Modern Landscapes* chronicles Corbusier’s journeys through space over time, in a chronotopic manner which his friend Giedion, the ‘official historian’ of modernism, would no doubt have approved.

Of course, the curatorial intelligence exhibited by the show’s selection and presentation of pieces should not surprise anyone familiar with the process by which it came together. Assembly was carried out under Jean-Louis Cohen’s encyclopedic gaze, with contributions also coming from numerous other scholars and academics. Cohen, whose brilliance has for too long gone unrecognized in the Anglophone world, has finally begun to enjoy some success of late with the release of his sweeping historical overview, *The Future of Architecture Since 1889* (Cohen 2012), and supervision of MoMA’s blockbuster Corbusier expo. His fingerprints can be seen all over the show. Its contents are not merely exhaustive - they are definitive. For a figure on the order of magnitude of a Le Corbusier, this is an impressive feat.

Strangely, the collection’s very expansiveness serves to highlight the one weakness in its conceptualization: the rather misplaced emphasis on Le Corbusier’s sensitivity to uneven or irregular topographies. Not that it’s unconvincing, mind you. What’s sadder, rather, is that it felt obliged to convince anyone to begin with. “The relationship of building to landscape is manifest in some of his work, but in a large portion of his production it is latent”, Cohen (2013: 24) writes in an essay accompanying
the exhibition. A valid insight, it may well be conceded. More to the point, it stands as a welcome corrective to the defamatory image of the modernist master that’s become popular these last few decades. This is neither the despotic architect of the right angle nor the totalitarian urbanist of sublime orthogonality, responsible for the worst catastrophes (and none of the triumphs!) of post-war city planning, who we’ve all been taught to politely ignore.

That said, the landscape motif can’t help but seem an afterthought when set against the monumental backdrop of the show. Early on the thesis figures in more prominently, and is then often elegantly maintained. But as the exhibition progresses, it slowly loses focus. After a while, the theme feels as superfluous and tacked on as the wide-lensed photographs by Richard Pare perched awkwardly atop the towering monochrome partitions. Museum-goers are forced to crane their necks just in order to see them. Even when they make this effort, the glare from the overheads obscures any clear view. These panoramic snapshots taken by Pare, known for his stunning documentation of the ‘lost’ Soviet avant-garde, try time and again to reintroduce the idea of Le Corbusier’s engagement with specific environments and settings, with diminishing returns. While a relatively minor misstep in light of everything else that goes right in An Atlas of Modern Landscapes, their inclusion in the galleries adds nothing while also performing a disservice to Pare’s undeniable talents as a photographer.

A better angle, given the inventory gathered at the museum, would have been to stress Corbu’s proficiency - if not virtuosity - along a broad spectrum of artistic fields, working with a wealth of different materials. Besides the nuance and chromatic subtlety evinced by the flattened perspective of his Purist canvases, an ability which on its own distinguishes him from such celebrated contemporaries as Gropius and Mies, Le
Corbusier’s craftsmanship and advanced skillset comes out in the models for some of his most famous projects. These are rendered in everything from the standard metal and plaster of his Palais des Soviets and proposals for Algiers, to the chapel at Ronchamp whose smooth contours are miniaturized in carved wood. Yet the oddest piece featured in *An Atlas of Modern Landscapes* is doubtless ‘Sand Cast’, a bumpy, porous affair cast out of sand and painted over in crude brushstrokes. Within the context of a single medium, Le Corbusier was capable of several modalities of expression. Proof of this is amply furnished by comparing the delicate isometric outline of his Société des Nations with his lecture illustrations, scrawled in crayon. The former is hazy and dreamlike; the latter, willfully naïve, verges on primitivism.

Once one wanders past the decanters, pipes, guitars, and coffee cups of Corbusier’s still lifes, the cloistered apartments of Paris gradually give way to the coiled seashells and open vistas of the Algerian coastline. His comically corporeal representation of local women later resurfaces in the suggestive curvilinear shape of his proposal for the further development of Algiers, first drafted in 1932. Le Corbusier envisioned a continuous megastructure hugging the shore, outfitted with ‘plug-in’ modules along a rudimentary highway system. Eventually, these ‘fleshy’, animistic forms would be realized in the shuttered concrete apparatus of the Unité d’Habitation at Marseilles and the civic structures at Chandigarh. Both find their way into the exhibition: a typical apartment of the Unité is reproduced here to scale, appearing alongside buildings from Corbu’s adventure in the Asian subcontinent. These offer example of the architect’s patented Modulor proportioning method, an invention that purportedly gained the approval of Albert Einstein.

Some of the more ambivalent aspects of Le Corbusier’s activism are either
downplayed or skipped over altogether, however - somewhat predictably. His fascination with ‘the mystique of the USSR’ prior to the Stalinist cultural reaction receives some attention, but is fairly meager on the whole. Likewise, the talks he delivered in Rome at Mussolini’s bequest, which roughly coincided with his disillusionment in Russia, are only given a passing mention. The flirtations with the Vichy regime in France during the war are left almost entirely out of the picture. Such political contortions, of course, were hardly unique to Le Corbusier, who can be described as apolitical at best, and opportunist at worst. Ironically, the sole structure to which Corbusier could claim credit in the sphere of international diplomacy was built for the United Nations, arguably a more problematic entity than either the League of Nations or the Comintern. But this, too, would prove a source of great controversy and frustration for the pioneering modernist. It is nevertheless somehow fitting that the one person whose name would be identified with the new style more than any other would turn out to be so remarkably malleable as Le Corbusier. He reflected, with almost mirror-like fidelity, those polar contradictions that characterised the 20th century, the ‘age of extremes’.

The case could easily be made, in fact, that MoMA’s *Le Corbusier* is less an ‘atlas’ than a global retrospective - and not one confined to the legacy of an iconic individual, either. For in many respects, the story of Le Corbusier is more than that of modern architecture’s greatest protagonist. It is the story of modern architecture itself. Through his campaigns and endeavors, whether successful or unsuccessful, and even by his own tireless self-promotion, the French-Swiss architect proclaimed the gospel of the machine age unto every rock and living creature. How much he still speaks to us, and to what extent the vitality of his words endures into the present, remains an open question. It is not a question the exhibit seeks to answer, but at the very least it is forcefully posed.
Today, as the discipline of architecture seems wracked with doubt, the show currently at MoMA acquires a broader significance. *Le Corbusier: An Atlas of Modern Landscapes* runs through September 23rd.

**References**


Sammy Medina is a writer and architecture critic based in New York.

Ross Wolfe is a historian and freelance writer/editor living in New York.

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