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Le Corbusier

History and Tradition

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1. Le Corbusier.

Sketch of the Place Royale (Stanislas/Carrière), Nancy, for the manuscript “La construction des villes.”
Christoph Schnoor

Urban History and New Directions

The Role of Brinckmann and Laugier

For Le Corbusier’s Urban Design Theory

Introduction: Sudden Change or Growing Interest in Classical Urban Design?

Le Corbusier readily made use of history to develop his own designs. He was, however, not interested in historical accuracy. He brought together historical models from periods distant and close, moulding them into one architecture that often did not even allow to easily discern these influences. The same is valid for his urban planning. Already in his early book *Le Corbusier. Elemente einer Synthese*, Stanislaus von Moos made his readers aware of the synthesis of arts in Le Corbusier’s work.¹ And Colin Rowe, noticed an “involvement with a specific rather than ideal Paris . . . an empirical Paris which Le Corbusier so often quoted in his buildings but never in his urbanistic proposals.”² Indeed, Le Corbusier was a master in bringing together material from the most diverse sources—be they persons, places or epochs—into a single, well-designed synthesis. Accepting this as one of the most important traits of Le Corbusier’s design and writing, this essay, however, does attempt to distinguish between the historical and the contemporary themes that influenced Le Corbusier in his understanding of the city. Focusing on the period between 1910 and 1915, the period of his manuscript “La Construction des villes,” leading towards the development of the *Ville contemporaine* and *Urbanisme*, this essay investigates the influence of
urban history on Le Corbusier’s urban design thinking. It wishes to show how Le Corbusier—not necessarily consciously—instrumentalised history, both through his studies and observation of the built reality, to aid in preparing his design thinking to conceive new urban forms.³

As Harold Allen Brooks and others have demonstrated, Le Corbusier, then still Charles-Edouard Jeanneret, started his architectural development with a strong Ruskinian bias. During his first visit to Florence in 1907, he almost completely ignored any building from the Renaissance and concentrated on medieval architecture instead. During his year (1908–09) in Paris as apprentice of Auguste Perret, he studied and endlessly drew and redrew the Cathedral of Notre Dame instead of appreciating any classical architecture or urban design. Similarly, an Arts-and-Crafts bias applies to his early houses in La Chaux-de-Fonds.⁴

For this reason, historians have for a while now attempted to nominate a point at which Jeanneret’s architectural conviction shifted from favouring the medieval and picturesque to the classicist and monumental. Of interest here is the change in his perception of principles of city planning. Antonio Bruculeri and Harold Allen Brooks have set such a point of change in Jeanneret’s view of the city at 1915.⁵ Brooks says: “This time he conducted research at the Bibliothèque Nationale in Paris where he became fascinated with classical principles of town planning.”⁶ However I have already shown that one crucial challenge to his belief in picturesque urbanism clearly happened as early as January 1911. While working for Peter Behrens in Neubabelsberg, Jeanneret read Marc-Antoine Laugier’s *Essai sur l’architecture* (in the second edition of 1755) at the Royal Library Unter den Linden in Berlin.⁷ And even that is not the first instance of a change of mind. Francesco Passanti has suggested such a change may have occurred in June 1910—but without finding a specific event that would have caused this.⁸

The reality may have been a little less black and white. Curiously, an affinity towards the monumental classicism of the French architects and planners of absolutism (Mansart and others) can be observed from the very moment at which Jeanneret developed his notions of a picturesque urbanism,
i.e. parallel to his reading of Camillo Sitte’s *Städte-Bau nach seinen künstlerischen Grundsätzen* in early 1910. It seems that the picturesque and classicist monumental direction fought for his attention, i.e. that he struggled to develop arguments for either, although it is indeed noticeable that he was quite drawn to the grandeur of classicism, as Francesco Passanti has observed.\(^9\) So while absorbing, digesting and reformulating Camillo Sitte’s theories (Fig. 2), and those of Sitte’s followers like Karl Henrici, Paul Schultze-Naumburg, Theodor Fischer and others, he read Albert Erich Brinckmann’s *Platz und Monument* of 1908, and it was through Brinckmann’s discussions of French urban squares and monuments that Jeanneret began to grasp the grandeur of the powerful unified French designs of the 18th century. Thus Jeanneret was able to develop a fascination for seeing the city of Paris in a way he had hitherto completely ignored.

**BRINCKMANN, *Platz und Monument*: History of Urban Squares and Monuments**

From April 1910 to March 1911, Jeanneret composed a complex manuscript on questions of urban design. While he had received a travel scholarship by the town of La Chaux-de-Fonds for research into schools and practices in Germany related to the Arts-and-Crafts, he was also asked by his teacher, Charles L’Eplattenier, to write a piece on urban design, to be presented at the Assembly of Swiss communities, scheduled for September 1910 in La Chaux-de-Fonds. Following L’Eplattenier’s own interest in art and urban design, this piece was to be based on the theories of Camillo Sitte, as outlined in his 1889 volume, *Der Städte-Bau nach seinen künstlerischen Grundsätzen*.\(^{10}\) Directly after having arrived in Munich in April 1910, Jeanneret began his urban design research, mostly in what is today’s State Library, the Royal Library (*Bayerische Hof- und Staatsbibliothek*), and also in the smaller library of the National Museum. Only interrupted by a summer break that was spent with further writing and editing, back in La Chaux-de-Fonds,