

## LE CORBUSIER'S PLAN FOR BUENOS AIRES. USEFUL EXPLANATIONS ON THE BIRTH OF THE CITIES

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**Abstract.** Intuited during Le Corbusier's trip to Sudamerica in 1929 and developed in 1937, the plan for Buenos Aires contradicts general assumptions about his early urban theories. It is not a generic proposal that breaks with the inertia of geographical, historical and formal precedents. On the contrary, it follows Marcel Poëte theory of the cities as organic souls whose destiny is registered in their birth. The Plan is founded on an interpretation of the geographic settings and proposes a metamorphosis of the city on their own footprints, such as they were sketched on a map of 1713. This radical change in Le Corbusier's formal and theoretical presumptions is due to the intuition of buildings with engineering scale in contrast with the magnitude of the American landscape. Also to the material provided by a previous urban project for Buenos Aires by the Comisión de Estética Edilicia (1925) with a clear agenda for the urban future and a historical interpretation of its historical development filled with old maps and photographs: this publication acted as a hidden *dossier* and inspired Le Corbusier's proposal.

**Keywords:** historical maps, landscape, urban plan, Argentina, typological invention.

### Introduction

Le Corbusier's plan for Buenos Aires [*Plan Director para Buenos Aires* (PDBA)] whose preliminary ideas (*parti pris*) Le Corbusier had as intuitions during his 1929 lectures in Argentina and which he would later develop in collaboration with Jorge Ferrari Hardoy and Juan Kurchan in Paris in 1937 and would publish in 1947 (Fig. 1) contradicts general assumptions about his urban theories (see Le Corbusier 1930, 1947; Liernur, Pschepiurca 1985; Pérez Oyarzún 1991; Crasemann Collins 1995; Rigotti 2003; Liernur 2008). It is not a generic proposal for the radical reformulation of nineteenth-century cities that breaks the inertia of geographical determinations and preexisting urban forms. Even though he insists on interpreting urban complexity in relation to constitutive activities which Architecture should figure out through the logic of a typological invention, he respects the pre-existing natural zoning far more complex than the four functions – living, working, recreation and circulation – established by the *Charte d'Athènes* (Le Corbusier, Giraudoux 1943). One may even suggest that he is close to the *Société Française des Urbanistes*

[SFU] and Marcel Poëte's theory on the evolution of cities as unique “beings” whose destinies are written at the moment of their birth in relation to their geographical setting. Thus, the duty of the urban planner was to act according to the primary elements of a city and their growth trends in relation to the territory.

PDBA is based on an interpretation of the geographic framework. It proposes a radical adjustment that instead of transforming the urban structure, aims at a metamorphosis of the city on its colonial imprint as it was sketched in a 1713 map (Fig. 11). This radical change in Le Corbusier's formal and theoretical presumptions was due to his shock in front of the magnitude of the South American landscape which led to his intuitions of engineering scale buildings capable of absorbing city parts within their complex and extended interiors. Also, to the material offered by a previous urban project for Buenos Aires designed by an Aesthetic Committee [*Proyecto Orgánico de la Comisión de Estética Edilicia* (CEE)] (Intendencia Municipal 1925) which had a clear agenda for the future of the city based on an historical interpretation of the development of Buenos Aires plenty of reproductions of old photo-

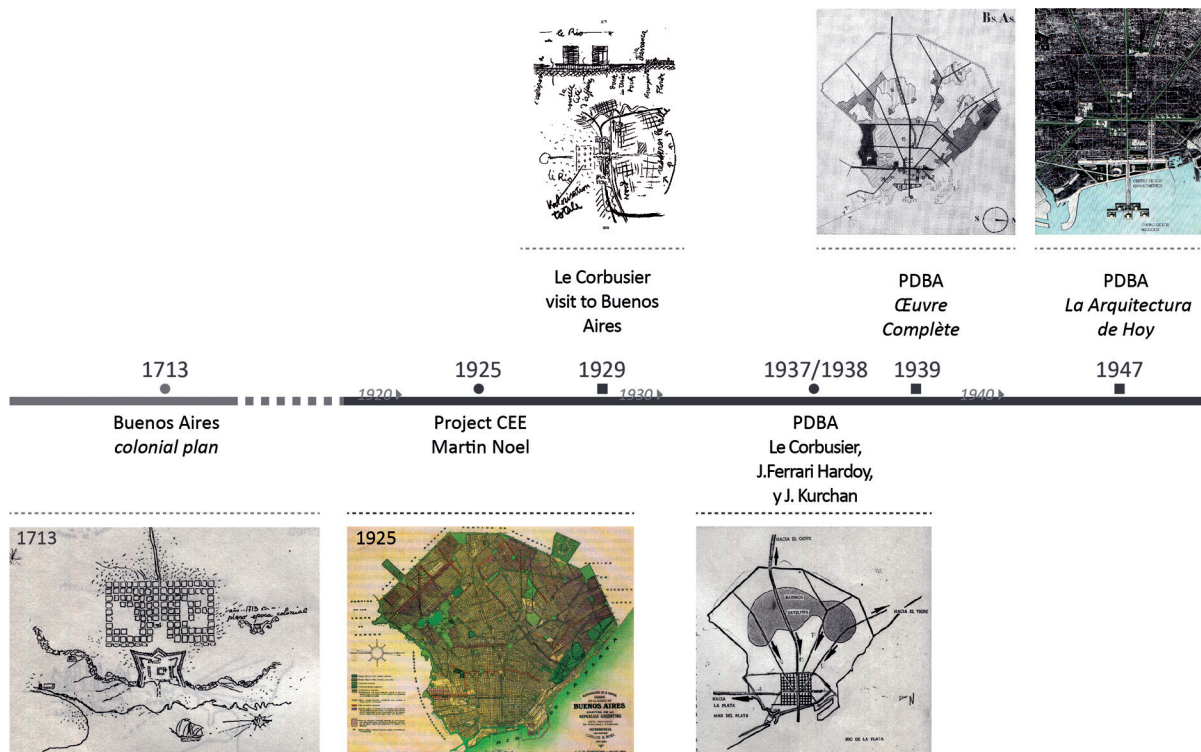


Fig. 1. Timeline (Drawing by the author including Le Corbusier 1947: 16; Intendencia Municipal 1925: 117; Le Corbusier 1930: 206; Le Corbusier 1947: 31; Le Corbusier, Jeanneret 1939: 56; Le Corbusier 1947: 51)

graphs and maps. This urban project acted as a hidden dossier which guided Le Corbusier's desire to recover (by transfiguring them) not only city foundation features but also the plastic relationships between nature and built volumes which he attributed to the colonial urban grid (*carré espagnol*).

We will demonstrate that Le Corbusier's plan for Buenos Aires was consistently inspired by the location of the city and its primary urban elements. The translation of Buenos Aires' natural zoning through large-scale architectures allowed Le Corbusier to transfigure a colonial city into a metropolis, with such transfiguration taking place on the traces of the city's original colonial outline.

### A geographical epiphany

The trip to South America, between September and December 1929, was an epiphany for Le Corbusier: "I saw virgin nature and the way in which man faces an environment filled with huge and indifferent powers – that is, through geometric will. I learned a lesson from this" (AFLC 1929: A3 11 40). It was not a logical derivation, but the result of a real shock in the face of South America's geographic scale and South American cities' disarray. After days of inertia during a long journey by ship, new ideas emerged – distinct and sharp – in face of the unknown continent. Previous meditations

on architecture and urbanism, but also his natural rebellion against academic canons, allowed Le Corbusier to get to the bottom of the matter: "Suddenly, one gets to feel and see things clearly and fairly" (Le Corbusier 1933: 220).

Two lessons led Le Corbusier to change his doctrinal framework.<sup>1</sup>

Nature, the sky and the vegetation ceased to be just abstract elements reduced to a hygienic and contemplative dimension necessary for modern-city life. Le Corbusier realized that climate and topography encourage diversity (Le Corbusier 1933: 220), and thus were determining factors in the shape and fate of a city. Urban solutions had to be reached through a dialogue with this landscape uniqueness. For Rio de Janeiro he devised a megastructure with a road on its uppermost part, which would penetrate the hills and connect a dozen bays; this would give the inhabitants the same overall view of the city which tourists have from a ship or from a plane (Fig. 2). In Sao Paulo, built within valleys and hills, Le Corbusier proposed to drain the traffic by means of two blocks, several kilometers long, with roads on the summit, which reincarnated the *cardus*

<sup>1</sup> According to Ferreira Martins (1994), this journey did not imply a theoretical break with Le Corbusier's previous proposals. The landscape as a formal reference to which the city must be subjected did not alter the continuity of his principles.



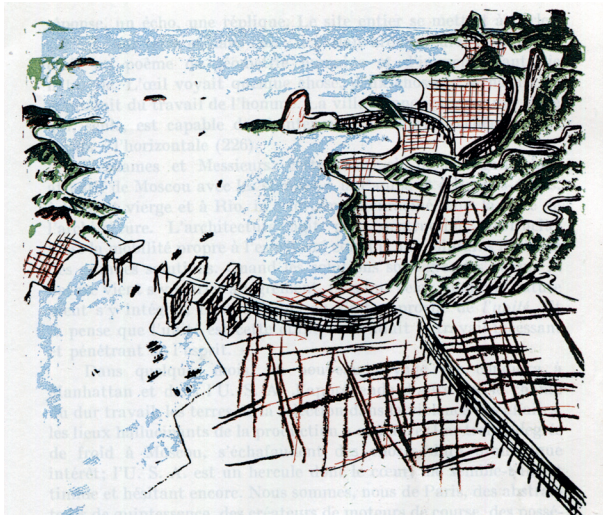


Fig. 2. Rio de Janeiro (Le Corbusier 1930: 245)

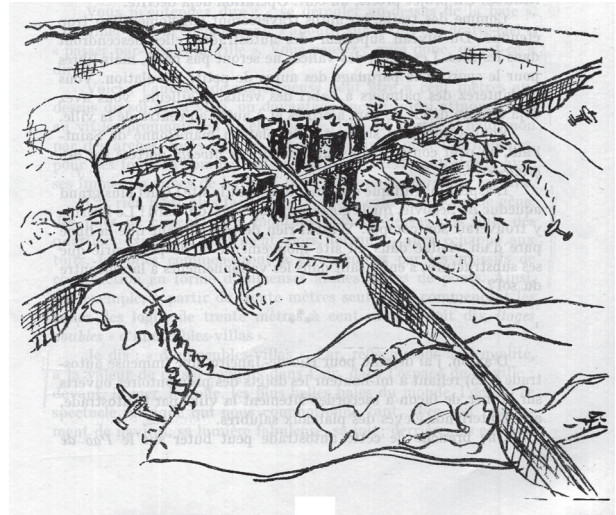


Fig. 3. São Paulo (Le Corbusier 1930: 241)

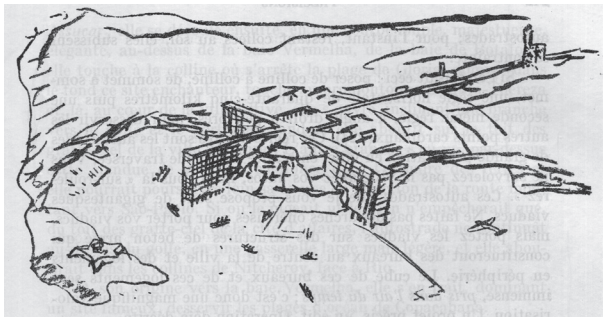


Fig. 4. Montevideo (Le Corbusier 1930: 241)

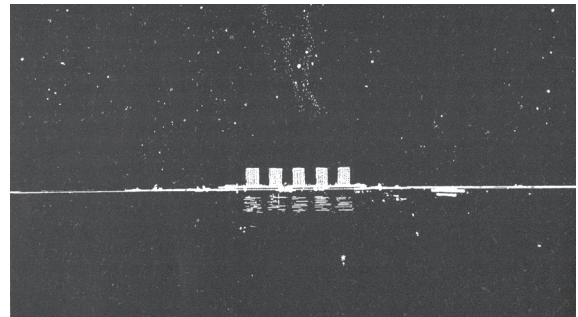


Fig. 5. The Buenos Aires skyline (Le Corbusier 1947 : 40)

and the *decumanus* of the city's original urban grid (Fig. 3). For Montevideo, he suggested a horizontal block and a boulevard that left the steep streets of the old city behind (Fig. 4). And what did he devise for Buenos Aires – “the most inhumane city that one could imagine” – but one lacking topographic excuses? The “fatal urban concentration” of buildings, people and traffic would be solved by centrifugal circulation axes to communicate the city with the distant Hinterland. Also, by building on water, provided that there was no land left due “to the fatal urban concentration” (Le Corbusier 1933: 222–225). Despite Le Corbusier's functional arguments, his reasons were aesthetic, compositional. Before the endless, flat line where the pampas and the ocean meet, he felt inclined to resort to a vertical “gesture” in order to enhance the New World's profile: the skyscrapers of the financial district (*cité d'affaires*) (Fig. 5), a sparkling head which replicated the reflection of city lights on the still waters of the *Río de la Plata* river as were captured in a photograph

which Le Corbusier included in the publication of the PDDBA (Le Corbusier 1933: 220) (Fig. 6). His was not the systematic view of a geographer, but the sensitive approach of a painter who senses the logic of nature in a way that represents and celebrates, a painter who sees beyond appearances as in Konrad Fiedler's pure visibility theory.<sup>2</sup>

The other lesson was linked to the disarrayed scatter of South American cities, which were incapable of having a proper shape despite their low density. They were the perfect scenario to apply a proposition put

<sup>2</sup> Le Corbusier 1933 : 76. “Les lois de la nature sont (...) La mathématique les anime, le jeu des nombres en projette la conséquence dans toute l'étendue du temps et de l'espace. Les lois de la nature nous incitent à créer des lois humaines prodigieusement simples aussi et prodigieusement efficaces aussi. Offrons-nous les joies intenses de découvrir l'esprit des lois de la nature.” (“The laws of nature are (...) They are animated by mathematics, the play of numbers projects consequences in time and space. The laws of nature incite us to create human laws as simple and efficient. Let us offer ourselves the joy of discovering the laws of nature”).





Fig. 6. Buenos Aires (Le Corbusier 1947 : 40)

forward by Le Corbusier in the 1923 SFU Congress in Strasbourg: the solution to the evils of monstrous nineteenth-century cities was extreme concentration – *resserrer les villes* –, limiting city perimeters, suppressing the suburbs and reducing commuting (Fig. 7). In opposition to the garden city paradigm, he recommended high concentration for capital cities in order to boost their condition of heart and brain of a country (Le Corbusier 1923).

For South American colonial cities, he radicalized this hypothesis. Centrality and well-defined limits were vital to cope harmoniously with a new cycle of civilization. This opportunity was lost in the case of New York, but Buenos Aires, with a similar fate determined by geography, had the opportunity to transfigure itself in order to embody “order, efficiency, beauty and poetry.” (Fig. 8)

The solution to a difficult combination of things like the urban concentration required by businesses,

fluent means of transportation and the enlargement of green areas was simple: the freedom resulting from the possibility of tall buildings thanks to the new techniques. On the same area, over the same foundational urban plan, it was possible to go from a 200 to a 3,200 inhabitant-per-hectare density (AFLC 1929: A3 11 48 15). Following Eugene Hénard (1904), Le Corbusier proposed to find the answer to urban problems in Architecture, in the typological research of new and colossal building structures as new dimensions of

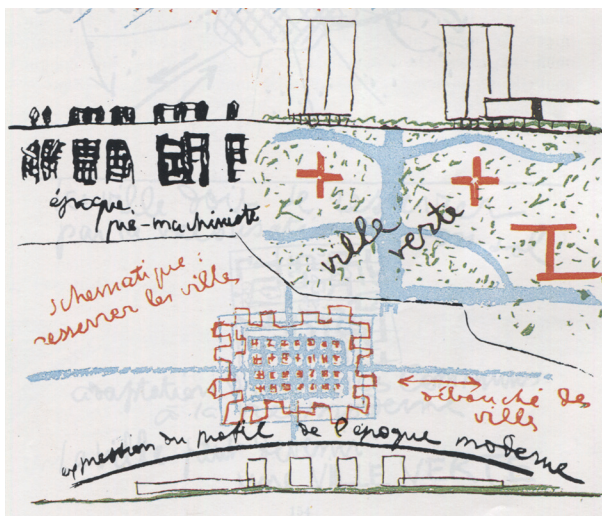


Fig. 7. Concentrate the cities (Le Corbusier 1930: 155)

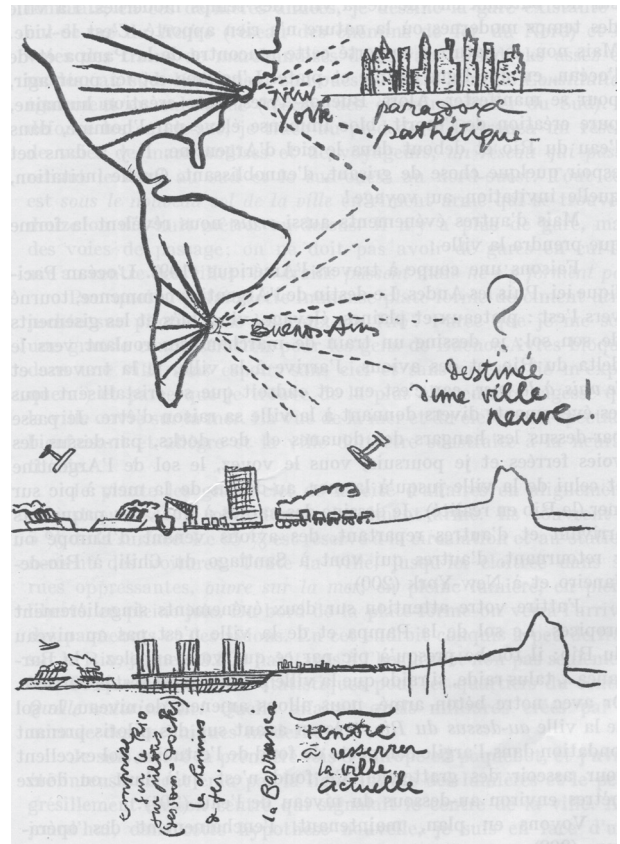


Fig. 8. New York vs. Buenos Aires (Le Corbusier 1930: 203)



human aggregation: “Skyscrapers have decongestant power; they will decongest city centers” (Le Corbusier 1923) (Fig. 9).

**The answer can be found in the birth of the city**

The picture chosen for the front page of *La Arquitectura de Hoy* N° 4 where the PDBA was published was not an image of the future city but a 1713 map (Fig. 10). It had been reproduced in the CEE project.<sup>3</sup> For Le Corbusier it allegedly summarized the “gestures” of the city founder and the actions of the first settlers in relation to a fatal relationship with the geographical environment through “a coming and going of action into reaction”: the meander law (AFLC 1929: A3 11 42). When Buenos Aires forgot that lesson, it multiplied without the timely intervention of an organic classification and it turned into some sort of protoplasm “sunk in a vegetating stagnant sea!” (Le Corbusier 1933: 82).

This map guided Le Corbusier all through the planning process as we learn from the sketches he scrawled in 1929. According to him (AFLC 1929: T2 13 11), in 1583 Juan de Garay predicted that the city would result from the meeting between the sea and the wagon trail which would connect the city with Chile, Bolivia and Peru. Later, in the meeting with the “still sea” (the *Río de la Plata* river) the strong volume of the fortress sprung up, and on the trail towards the West, the colonial urban grid (*carré espagnol*). In the future, the city would close in on itself again, recovering its almost square symmetric profile; on the river, an artificial island for the *cité d'affaires* would echo the shape of the city with cruciform skyscrapers and, further away, the airport (Fig. 11).

The key was to return to the beginnings, as it had been suggested by Martin Noel in his “Brief Historical Summary” that justified the urban proposals of the CEE project on the development of the city closely bound to the river. A member of the “Board of American History and Numismatic” since 1919, aligned with the neo-colonial movement, Noel resented the effects of immigration and cosmopolitanism and concentrated his efforts on finding the foundations of a national aesthetic in History (Noel 1924) resorting to a handful of vivid images -lithographs, panoramas and old maps as the above mentioned 1713 map, he evoked past urban experiences as the substratum for an intuitive historical method. The physiognomy of Buenos Aires,

determined at birth, provided an explanation for the contemporary social conflict associated to “the city’s accelerated and unexpected development”, a solution for which could also be found in the Mayor of Buenos Aires’s program. In order to restore the “normal” development of a city destined to be the jewel and the

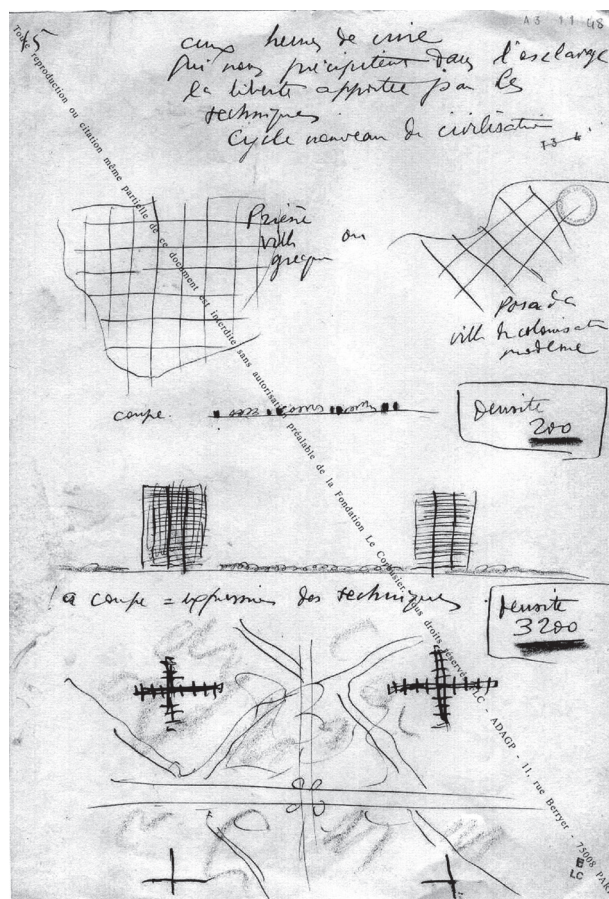


Fig. 9. The section= technical expression (AFLC 1929: A3 11 48)

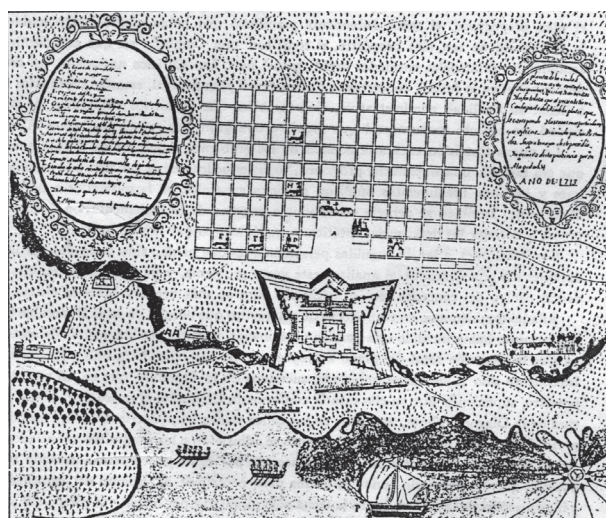


Fig. 10. The 1713 map (Intendencia Municipal 1925: 19)

<sup>3</sup> The project of the Comisión de Estética Edilicia may be considered as the first attempt for a scientific urban plan for Argentina founded on an extensive urban dossier. That is the reason why it was published as a book of 400 pages, which was given to Le Corbusier as a present during his visit to Buenos Aires; he kept it in his library.



beacon of a rural country, the river had to be reconquered. The CEE Plan proposed a direct connection between a new national civic center and the Río de la Plata with a system of avenues running diagonally which would articulate several institutional headquarters and would converge there. It was also necessary to restore the southern quarter of the city, so as to balance the

city's development on the river banks and to accelerate the relocation of poor neighborhood residents to the outskirts of the city, promoting the development of new peripheral neighborhoods. The vivid evocations of the city past justified the gradual replacement of an awkward polycentric agglomeration with a centralized city concentrated around a riverside city core. This urban core intended to be the political power, commerce and culture district and needed to be clearly differentiated from the chain of suburban quarters reserved for factories and workers.

Le Corbusier would later act based on those illustrations and almost the same premises. Those old pictures and maps not only explained the birth of the city but provided useful arguments and ideas for the future. Reconstructing the beginnings of Buenos Aires was not an academic question – cities are not born by chance. These urban traces were interpreted as an expression of a beautiful – yet unconscious – natural rationality which understood the “exact relationship” of the “unavoidable” links between cities and their region. In the beginning, the original urban grid (*carré espagnol*) was a perfect translation of Buenos Aires' vocation to be a command post located between Europe and the New World: the city was located at a point between the coastal profile and the converging roads which communicated the city with the inland, and imposed its will for order through a built mass in relation to a central axis. Now, that initial order needed to be restored by resorting to new technical resources: a symmetrical urban pattern which combined gardens and built cubes in harmonious proportions; distinct limits to the west in order to frame a reasonable extension of the urban fabric; and, last but not least, the encouragement of the city's development towards the river, with a vital city center directly linked to the place where the Spanish conquerors had disembarked – and, there, the head of an axis which “goes deeper into the inland.” Standing on lands reclaimed from the river, in different points of time you could find, first, the Spanish fortress, then the Customs building designed by Edward Taylor (1857), and tomorrow, the *cit   d'affaires* – all of them synthetic expressions of the different stages of the relationship between the pampas and the world.

### Regeneration through metamorphosis

As culmination of their study trip to Europe, Argentinean architects Jorge Ferrari Hardoy and Juan Kurchan visited Le Corbusier's office in July 1937. The visit served as incentive for the development, in the next eight months, of Le Corbusier's first intuitions into a *Plan Directeur* for Buenos Aires (Fig. 12). The blueprints were partially reproduced by Le Corbusier in

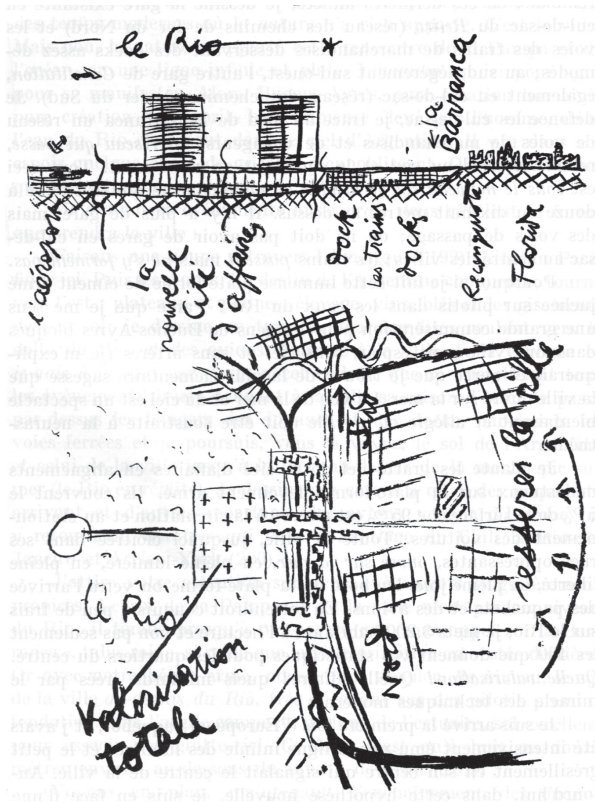


Fig. 11. The 1929 Sketch (Le Corbusier 1930: 206)

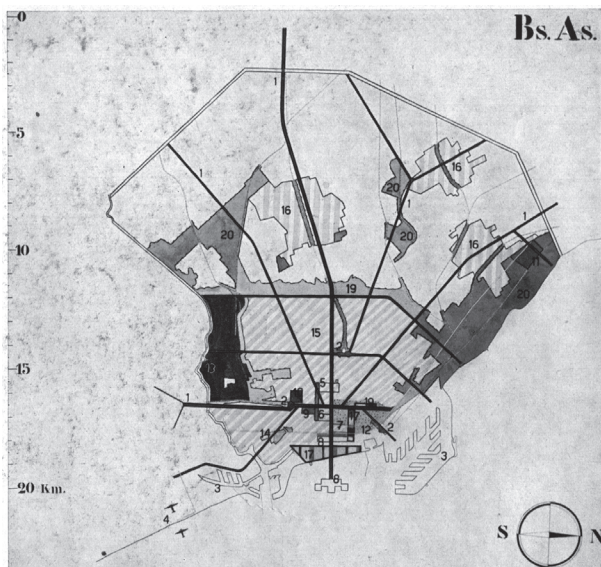


Fig. 12. The metamorphosis (Le Corbusier, Jeanneret 1939 : 56)



the third volume of his *Ouvres Complètes* (Le Corbusier, Jeanneret 1939: 55–56), and after many failed attempts, they were published in *La Arquitectura de Hoy*, the Spanish version of *L'Architecture d'Aujourd'hui*, in April 1947. Here, the plastic power of his first drawings diluted into an analysis of the present condition of Buenos Aires and of the technical, financial and moral factors involved in the urban regeneration of the city. That first 1929 intuitive approach gave way to, apparently, more systematic investigations which involved a collection of aerial photographs and contemporary street scenes, in addition to other images provided by the CEE Report. In the Introduction, Le Corbusier states, for the record, that the Plan had not been the result of simple intuition or improvisation, but of “twelve months of meticulous work and rigorous data use” (Le Corbusier 1947). The product was designed in an advertising style, with pages full of photomontages and demonstrational diagrams which illustrated a project narrative full of slogans and devised to make the plan “accessible, visible, demonstrative and proving” to “attract public opinion and inform the Authority”.

Four aspects were reviewed in the PDBA's introduction: the geographical setting, historical urban patterns, the evolution of city structure and fabric, and the evils of urban extension.

Buenos Aires' geographical location and political situation – between the New World and Europe –, similar to that of New York, had defined the city as place of trade. Its unique situation left little room for doubt about the future and the *raison d'être* of the city that could be traced in historical urban maps (Fig. 8). The chosen reference was the 1713 plan, in which the vague border where the pampas stops and the “ocean” starts was clearly underlined, as well as the command post standing on the river hill – the fortress – and the outline sketch of a beltway enclosing an accessible extension of the urban grid (Fig. 13). The ancient plan predicted that the city would be a gate into an immense territory and provided an optimal initial structure where each function was in a “normal” place that lasted till the city reached 100,000 inhabitants. At the end of the nineteenth century, its consistency was broken by the “pandemonium of immigrants” and the processes typical of the machinist civilization which had “devoured, flooded and submerged” the whole city into anarchy.<sup>4</sup>

<sup>4</sup> When Liernur (1997) analyzed the relationship between Le Corbusier and the Buenos Aires elite group “Amigos del Arte”, he suggested that Le Corbusier's stand was somewhat reactionary; this stand was fuelled by one of the typical topics of conservatives groups: the idea that immigrants were a menace as evil as the machinist civilization and were responsible for the bad situation of the city.

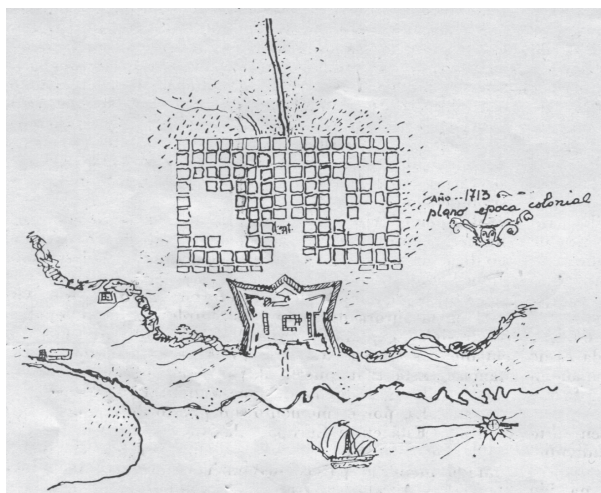


Fig. 13. The 1713 map redrawn (Le Corbusier 1947:16)

The Spaniard grid had been suitable for the colonial era – and still was in the outskirts of the city or in provincial towns.<sup>5</sup> But that harmonious relationship between built cubes and green spaces was destroyed with the first high-rise buildings. The grid became a trap, a compact mass deprived of light with a polluted atmosphere and irrational densities of people and vehicles which made it impossible to move about.

The closing argument rejected the urban expansion as a remedy. It was a “catastrophe” which in the case of Buenos Aires was aggravated by the amorphous, irrational and incoherent network of streets – all of them of the same width regardless of the place where they ran. The victims (the protagonists of the pictures attached) were the workers and employees who had to travel those preposterous distances every day, losing three or four hours a day in commuting.

In short, the introductory chapter to the PDBA added little to Le Corbusier's enlightened improvisations during his lectures in Buenos Aires. It was just a summary of the hypotheses he had formulated nearly ten years before; the only progress was linked to the location and character of the large scale buildings capable to regenerate a centralized city facing the river through its metamorphosis over the traces of its original urban grid by means of a high-density profile.

### The plan as a collage

In 1929, in Buenos Aires, Le Corbusier had lectured on new techniques as the key to big dimension buildings capable of concentrating parts of the city and on the new lyricism they provided in their confrontation

<sup>5</sup> The coincidences with Camillo Sitte in this idyllic appreciation of the potential of the colonial grid are remarkable.





The PDBA just cuts out, from the dull background of the grid, some significant places and pastes on the monumental compositions defined by the interplay of big built volumes in space. This strategy reminds us of Marc Antoine Laugier in his *Essai sur l'Architecture* (1753: 259), where he compares Urbanism to the opening of paths in a forest. But these paths and crossroads have been re-signified as “cardiac systems” and “vital organs.”

These urban centers followed one another diagonally all over the network of big thoroughfares, confirming a natural zoning embodied in some monuments. On the ruins of the Customs building and its long breakwater, the *cit   d'affaires* would reincarnate the regulation of commercial flow between the American continent and Europe. By the National Congress building, the Federal Government Center would be overshadowed by the technocratic powers headquarters: the Ministry buildings. Taking the City Council as reference, the Municipal Center would extend southward to “wake” that area of the city from its lethargy. For the area which was next to Constituci  n Railway Station, Le Corbusier imagined “the beautiful idea of a Pan-American Center.” Between the headquarters of the national government and the city government, the corporate power – dignified as an Associations Center – would be strategically located. The current financial district would be the place for a Financial Center. On Corrientes Street, which would be preserved and enhanced through proper regulations, an Entertainment Center would be found. The layout of Florida Street would be updated and hotels and embassies would be located there. On the traces of the “Alameda” – the old tree-lined avenue following the shoreline – a new Recreation Center would be located, which would wisely combine the cultivation of the body and the soul. The industrial zone in the south of the city would reinforce a “natural concentration” area to which the commercial port would be moved. In the opposite end of the city, as a continuation of the natural zoning of the “Raggio School” and the “Navy School of Mechanics”, the University campus would be located. The only social compensation gesture addressed to those people who would be relocated as a consequence of the proposed metamorphosis of Buenos Aires was a set of new types of dwellings adjoining the poor neighborhood of “La Boca”.

In the PDBA, the recovery of harmony and the symmetry of composition are the same thing; this can be seen in the silhouette of the *cit   d'affaires*, in the two ports, in the latent avenues which run diagonally towards the Argentinean inland, and in the similar development of the southern and northern bulk of the built city.

This recovery of the primitive urban structure, this transformation without movement, had its most complete expression in the insistence on the idea of a monocentric city. Even here, Le Corbusier aligned himself with the priorities of the CEE project and their idea of Buenos Aires as the seat of the country’s political and economic power, clearly apart from the industrial outskirts. However, while the urban 1925 project attempted to achieve this by relocating the poor population to a peripheral area connected with the center of the city – although leaving aside urban form and urban quality – Le Corbusier’s strategy was more extreme. A clear and extensive border of forests, tree nurseries and farms separated the concentrated city of power from the outskirts, which were turned into autonomous satellite cities.

## Conclusions

As we have seen, the *Plan Directeur. Buenos Aires* is a strong evidence of how Le Corbusier moved away from abstract functional principles as a basis for the search of universal solutions to the generic problems of new cities around 1930, as cursory readings of *La Charte d'Ath  nes* have alleged. In spite of the different formal solutions, there are notable links between Le Corbusier’s principles and those of his colleagues in the *Soci  t   Fran  aise des Urbanistes*, for whom the singularity and the soul of a city, imprinted in its urban patterns over time, were the key for their urban proposals. Nevertheless, Le Corbusier was far from advocating a scientific and positivist approach to Urbanism. His solutions are mainly architectural, and his designs and his discourse always fall under the protective statute of Art. This artistic dimension allows him to place himself between the universal principles of technical resources and contingent issues – in this case, the geographical determinations of the urban form embodied in its past. Not surprisingly, on the cover of *La Ville Radieuse* he states that “urban plans are rational and lyrical monuments erected in the midst of contingencies.”

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