Exhibitions

Le Corbusier: An Atlas of Modern Landscapes
Museum of Modern Art, New York
15 June–23 September 2013

This ambitious exhibition, curated by Jean-Louis Cohen and Barry Bergdoll, was the first major retrospective at MoMA to focus on the creative work of Le Corbusier. Organized biographically according to geographic locale, it drew upon a range of media to probe the integral relationship between Le Corbusier’s travels and his artistic and architectural production in scales that range from furniture designs to buildings and urban proposals. In addition to original sketches, architectural drawings, and models, the installation included objects he collected (glassware, shells, bone fragments), numerous paintings, excerpts from films made by Le Corbusier and others, selected images from his travel notebooks (reproduced digitally and projected in series through his design theories and his application of those tenets to specific geographic regions or building sites. While the curators’ aims clearly provided the basis for selecting the artifacts on display, they developed their approach to the works more directly in the accompanying publication, in which essays elaborating on particular themes, buildings, or projects are organized geographically to emphasize the significance of place in Le Corbusier’s design thinking.

In keeping with Le Corbusier’s interest in directing architectural experience through vision, the exhibition focused on landscape as “both the physical and visual form of a specific outdoor space and its graphic, pictorial, or photographic representation” (Atlas, 24). Cohen, citing Michel de Montaigne’s notion of landscape as the result of the artérialisation of nature—its alteration, transformation, and beautification—shows that Le Corbusier’s approach to landscape extended from the microcosmic scale of the garden to the macrocosmic scale of the urban ensemble.

The installation reflected this scalar aspect of the work by juxtaposing more intimate views of travel sketches, watercolors, and design studies to distant views of films and larger urban drawings and models as well as Richard Pare’s panoramic photographs, affixed to the galleries’ upper walls.

Yet “landscape” implies more than an aesthetic vehicle or a product of human manufacture; it is the means for bringing the social, political, and physical structures that give cultural value to the ground into relationship with the immense scale of natural phenomena. It encompasses simultaneously a worldview and one that is anthropologically grounded. Such an understanding of landscape as a cultural phenomenon with communal resonance was fundamental to Le Corbusier’s avant-garde ambition to reintegrate art and life in a manner befitting the modern age. Although the items selected for display could have engaged these aspects of landscape in relation to Le Corbusier’s cosmological interests as well as his social concerns, the exhibition relied on the visitor’s imagination to forge such connections. The lack of attention to this broader understanding of landscape is rectified in part by certain essays in the Atlas—particularly those by Mary McLeod on the ferme radieuse and Maristella Casciato on Chandigarh.

Language, essential to the dialectic of man-made and natural that Le Corbusier probed throughout his career, is a recurring theme in his travel sketches as well as his designs. This preoccupation is evident in his early picturesque approach to urbanism in his Garden City Les Crêts (1914) and his studies of the Parisian landscape, as well as in his more radical urban proposals for Paris, Algiers, Moscow, Buenos Aires, Rio de Janeiro, and Zlín and ultimately his designs for the new city of Chandigarh,
particularly its capitol complex. In accordance with the curators’ aims, the exhibition focused on Le Corbusier’s adaptations of his polemical urban propositions to the specifics of each locale, rather than on the principles themselves. While these proposals clearly comprise formal variations on Le Corbusier’s urban precepts adapted to a local terrain, the exhibition failed to explore the extent to which they engaged the cultural and environmental aspects of their various sites—a lacuna that is a provocation to future research.

Landscape is also an important component of Le Corbusier’s domestic interiors. Bruno Reichlin has explored the significance of the strip window for bringing the distant landscape into the immediate purview of the interior by eliminating the middle ground from view, thereby collapsing the distance between foreground and background. As the exhibition demonstrated, the direct juxtaposition of foreground to background that would become so important to Le Corbusier’s architectural thinking is already evident in several remarkable watercolor-gouaches made during his early artistic training in La Chaux-de-Fonds, and it emerges forcefully in Villa le Lac, a short impressionistic film he made of his mother’s house on Lac Léman in 1936–37. This phenomenon extends beyond the static viewpoint reflected in architectural photographs; as conveyed in Pierre Chenal’s film L’architecture d’aujourd’hui (1940), it is directly associated with Le Corbusier’s focus on the promenade architectural and his interest in the experience of the peripatetic viewer. Yet the effect of the strip window was sadly missing from several rooms re-created for the exhibition, where the landscape was reduced to simple line drawings on a glowing white ground, in stark contrast to the materiality of the installations; as a result, these distant landscapes appeared remote, rather than immediately present in the rooms.

Le Corbusier’s critical approach to his own polemics concerning the strip window is most evident in the rectangular windows of his cabanon in Roquebrune-Cap-Martin (1951–52), where bifold wooden shutters attached to the inside of the windows include both painted and mirrored segments. The mirrors enable the occupant to manipulate views toward the adjoining hillside and sea and thus to achieve the visual effect of the strip window from square apertures (see Richard Pare’s photograph, Atlas, 223). In the exhibition an analogous effect could be achieved by regarding the reflections in the mirror while moving alongside the re-creation of the cabanon interior, which served as the starting point for the show. Yet this aspect of the installation was lost on most visitors. Drawing on that point more explicitly would have reinforced the logic of the exhibition sequence, which began and ended with the cabanon, viewed initially from the intimacy of its interior and ultimately from the distance afforded by Pare’s panoramic image.

The range of work exhibited made palpable Le Corbusier’s enormous capacity for creativity and his critical engagement with the cultural issues of his era. As an “Atlas of Modern Landscapes,” however, the exhibition fell short of the promise inherent in its title. Perhaps the curators sought to avoid the polemizing for which Le Corbusier is well known and which led to the frequent misunderstanding of his concern with issues of site and landscape. Le Corbusier relied extensively on the written word to convey the force of his architectural provocations, and the exhibition would have benefited from more extensive textual elaboration to make such connections explicit for both a general audience and one familiar with twentieth-century architectural history and practice. At the same time, its value lay in exposing current generations to the extraordinary range of thinking that characterizes his prolific output, while opening the door to more substantive revaluations of his oeuvre in relation to landscape. In recent decades, concepts borrowed from landscape architecture have become prominent vehicles for architectural thought and production; the potential of this exhibition was not only to provoke new directions in architectural scholarship but also to positively affect design thinking.

CAROLINE CONSTANT
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Related Publication

Charles Correa: India’s Greatest Architect
Royal Institute of British Architects, London
14 May–4 September 2013

Charles Correa: India’s Greatest Architect was part of the Royal Institute of British Architects “Out of India” season, which also included numerous events running throughout the summer of 2013. Film screenings, discussions, a symposium with Charles Correa, and a lecture by the great man himself were planned to draw in audiences and to subject the work to an extended period of interrogation.

India has become something of a hot topic in the United Kingdom, with recent high-profile visits made to the country by Prime Minister David Cameron, coupled with numerous television programs and radio broadcasts, trade delegations, and educational visits; the country seems hungry for all things Indian.

The exhibition at the RIBA formed part of this renewed interest but was largely impelled by Correa’s decision to donate his personal archive of over six thousand artifacts to the RIBA. This was the largest single gift to the institute’s collection by a non-British architect. This fine array of drawings, models, and writings from 1958 to the present promises to be a valuable resource to scholars and students. And—for those unable to visit London—it has been digitized in its entirety. Correa is at liberty to give his work to whomever he pleases, but the choice of a British institution, and a royal one at that, may raise some eyebrows; it probably came as a shock even to the RIBA.

Correa was born during the colonial era and in his work has consistently sought to develop an architecture that was modern, firmly rooted as Indian, and certainly not European. Nonetheless, he felt that the RIBA would look after the work and