

TYRANNY

in Bricks & Mortar

By James Scott

The Swiss-born French essayist, painter, architect, and planner Charles-Edouard Jeanneret—better known by his professional name, Le Corbusier—was a twentieth-century architect and planner of planetary ambitions. At one time or another he designed buildings or proposed city-planning schemes for Paris, Stockholm, Geneva, Barcelona, Moscow, Marseilles, Algiers, São Paulo, Rio de Janeiro, Buenos Aires, and Chandigarh, India. Le Corbusier promoted hugeness, hierarchy, and centralism in city structure, and was tremendously influential in leading other modern architects in the same direction. He called for “universal...total city planning,” urging “let’s make our plans...on a scale with twentieth-century events.... Big! Big!”

In his designs for a new “business city” for Buenos Aires, for instance, the full plan can be discerned only from a great distance. Buenos Aires is pictured in his drawings as if seen from many miles out to sea. In his vast housing scheme for 90,000 Rio de Janeiro residents, the project is seen as if from an airplane miles high. We behold a six-kilometer-long highway elevated 100 meters, enclosing a continuous ribbon of 15-story apartments. The new city literally towers over the old. Le Corbusier also proposed remaking the center of Paris into a modernist city of 3 million; in his schematic, vehicles on major avenues are but dots.

Upon viewing some small rural properties from an airplane, Le Corbusier complained of “infinitely subdivided, incongruously shaped plots of land...tiny holdings that render the miraculous promise of machinery useless. The result is waste: inefficient, individual scrabbling.” He was offended by unorchestrated disunity, and wished to impose new order at a bird’s-eye view.

Le Corbusier’s proposed cities could be anywhere at all—he refused to make any concession to local tastes, history, or traditions, and had no patience for environments that had grown

up independently over time. “We must refuse even the slightest consideration to what is,” he insisted. A city should be treated by its planner as a “blank piece of paper,” a “clean tablecloth,” upon which a single, integrated composition is imposed. His new cities would be “organized, serene, forceful, airy, ordered.”

It was in this context that Le Corbusier was drawn to the USSR and the developing countries—and their powerful rulers. There, he hoped, the high-modernist social engineer would not be cramped as in the West, where a dispersion of power among many competing groups and individuals made it possible to practice only what he called an “orthopedic architecture.”

In the Le Corbusian city, human needs were scientifically stipulated by the planner. The subjects for whom the plan was made were not thought to have anything valuable to contribute. Common people were referred to by the planner as “a dead weight on the city, an obstacle...human garbage.” He asked, “Is there anything more pitiful than an undisciplined crowd?”

Master designs can powerfully reshape a society, Le Corbusier suggests, but for this to occur the designer must be prepared to act ruthlessly. He warned that in ancient Rome, where “the plebes lived in an inextricable chaos of abutting [warrens]...police activity was extremely difficult.” He noted that “St. Paul of Tarsus was impossible to arrest while he stayed in the slums, and the words of his Sermons were passed like wild-fire from mouth to mouth.”

It is impossible to read Le Corbusier or see his architectural drawings without noticing his mania for simple, repetitive lines, and his horror of complexity. “The human mind loses itself and becomes fatigued by such a labyrinth of possibilities. Control becomes impossible,” he explained. “I eliminate all those things,” he announced proudly, stating, among other things, that “I insist on right-angled intersections.”

Le Corbusier welcomed prefab construction of houses and office blocks from parts built in factories. He called for the standardization of all building elements. Door frames, windows, bricks, roof tiles, even screws should conform to uniform prescriptions. The new standards should be legislated by the League of Nations, and a universal technical language should be compulsorily taught throughout the world, Le Corbusier's followers urged in a 1928 modernist manifesto. Le Corbusier insisted that all measurements, all ventilating standards, all lighting, all equipment and appliances, and all domestic aesthetics should be the same for all latitudes and all needs. "We must find and apply new methods... lending themselves naturally to standardization, industrialization, Taylorization," he wrote in 1929.

One of Le Corbusier's central design dogmas was strict separation of societal functions. There would be separate zones for workplaces, residences, shopping and entertainment centers, and monuments and government buildings. Where possible, work zones were to be further subdivided into office buildings and factories. This principle became standard urban-planning doctrine in Western countries for most of the century.

The logic of rigid segregation of functions is that it is far easier for a planner to shape an urban zone if it has just one purpose. When several or many purposes must be considered, the variables that the planner must juggle begin to boggle the mind. And Le Corbusier liked to control all variables. He calculated the air, heat, light, and space requirements of humans and settled on 14 square meters per person—but reckoned that this could be reduced to ten square meters if such activities as food preparation and laundering were communal.

The very first of Le Corbusier's design principles was his dictum that "The Plan" (always capitalized in his usage) is a "Dictator." It would be difficult to exaggerate the emphasis that Le Corbusier placed on making an entire city bend to one single, rational plan. He repeatedly contrasted traditional cities (products of dispersed power and evolution across history) with the city of the future, which would be consciously formulated from start to finish by one scientific designer.

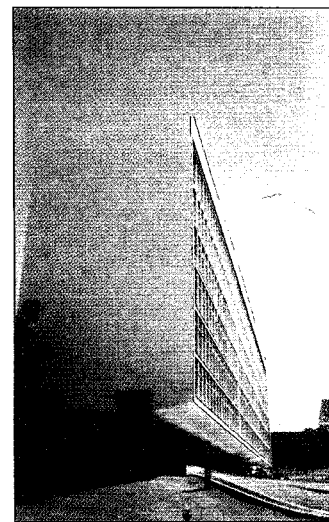
Le Corbusier's doctrine required total centralization. In his cities, a centrally located core performed the "higher" functions. "From its offices come the commands that put the world in order. In fact, the skyscrapers are the brain of the city, the brain of the whole country. They embody the work of elaboration and command on which all activities depend. Everything is concentrated there: the tools that conquer time and space—telephones, telegraphs, radios, the banks, trading houses, the organs of decision for the factories: finance, technology, commerce."

The center does not *suggest*, much less consult; it issues commands. The authoritarianism at work in this modernist view stems from Le Corbusier's love of the order of the factory. In a factory, he effused, "There is a hierarchical scale." Workers

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Yale professor James Scott is author of *Seeing like a State: How Certain Schemes to Improve the Human Condition Have Failed*, from which this is adapted.



Residential neighborhood in
São Paulo, Brazil.



"Superquadra" apartment block
in Brasília.

Photos by James Hinton

"accept it so as to manage themselves like a colony of worker-bees: order, regularity, punctuality, justice, and paternalism."

The urban planner is to the design and construction of the city as the engineer is to the design and construction of the factory—a single brain directs both. And the centralized hierarchy doesn't stop there. The city is the brain of the whole society. "The great city commands everything: peace, war, work." Whether it is a matter of clothing, philosophy, technology, or taste, the great city dominates and colonizes the provinces: The lines of influence and command are exclusively from the center to the periphery.

At the apex of society, Le Corbusier believed, should be a modern philosopher-king who applies scientific truths for the well-being of all. Naturally, the king executes his guidance through his master planner—the uncoverer of these truths. In his book *The Radiant City* (published in 1933 and republished in 1964), Le Corbusier overflows with admiration for his own genius: "I drew up plans, after analyses, after calculations, with imagination, with poetry. The plans were prodigiously true. They were incontrovertible. They were breathtaking. They expressed all the splendor of modern times."

Under his modernist faith, Le Corbusier feels entitled to claim implacable scientific authority. He insists that

"The despot is not a man. It is the *Plan*...drawn up well away from the frenzy in the mayor's office or the town hall, from the cries of the electorate or the laments of society's victims. It has been drawn up by serene and lucid minds. It has taken account of nothing but human truths. It has ignored all current regulations, all existing usages, and channels."

Because there is a single, true answer to planning problems, no compromises are possible.

Le Corbusier was aware that his kind of root-and-branch direction requires authoritarian measures. "Once his calculations are finished," Le Corbusier wrote of the planner, "he is in a position to say...*It shall be thus!*" Much of Le Corbusier's career

can be read as a quest for a prince who would anoint him. He exhibited designs for the League of Nations, tried to have himself appointed as regulator of planning and zoning for the whole of France, pushed for the adoption of his plan for a new Algiers, and lobbied the Soviet elite to let him remake Moscow.

What drove Le Corbusier's captivation with the Soviet Union was the prospect that a revolutionary, high-modernist state might prove hospitable to a visionary planner. After building the headquarters of the Central Union of Consumer Cooperatives (Centrosoyuz), he proposed, in plans prepared in only six weeks, a vast design for rebuilding Moscow in line with what he thought were Soviet aspirations to create an entirely new mode of classless living. He referred often to Sergei Eisenstein's films celebrating tractors, centrifuge creamers, and huge farms, and promised comparable machine-led transformations of Russian cities.

But not even the Soviet Union was quite up to his sweeping centralist ambitions. Stalin's commissars found his plans for Moscow too radical. The Soviet modernist El Lissitzky attacked Le Corbusier's Moscow as a "city of nowhere...a city on paper, extraneous to living nature, located in a desert through which not even a river must be allowed to pass (since a curve would contradict the style)." As if to confirm the "city of nowhere" charge, Le Corbusier later recycled his design—simply removing all references to Moscow—and presented it as a plan for central Paris.

Finally, under the patronage of Jawaharlal Nehru in India, Le Corbusier found a state authority that would give him a free hand. Nehru invited him to finalize the design and

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supervise the construction of Chandigarh, his new capital of the Punjab. Nehru was a centralizing modernist himself, and wanted a capital that would dramatize the beliefs of the new Indian managerial elite. Le Corbusier's modifications of initial plans drawn up by other modernist architects added even more monumentalism and linearity.

For instance, he replaced the housing that had been planned for the city center with an "acropolis of monuments" on a 220-acre site at a great distance from the nearest residences. In place of large curves, Le Corbusier substituted a rigid grid. In place of bazaars crammed with individual merchants and crowds of people he substituted huge squares that today stand largely empty.

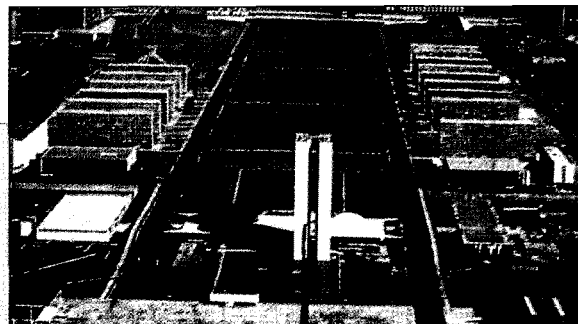
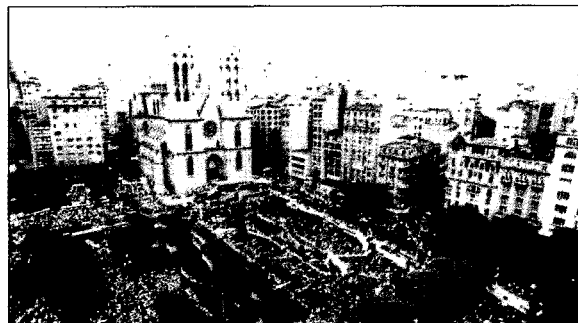
Whereas road crossings in India had typically served as public gathering places, Le Corbusier arranged the zoning and layout to prevent animated street scenes. "The width between meeting streets is so great that one sees nothing but vast stretches of concrete with a few lone figures here and there," one observer noted. Le Corbusier and his sponsors tried to wipe away the old India and present Chandigarh's residents—largely government administrators—with an image of their future.

The upshot, however, was the growth of separate little unplanned cities at the periphery of Le Corbusier's austere, authoritarian, ordered center. In these spontaneous hamlets one finds the small-scale street traders, the meeting places, the hawkers, the social spots that the master architect forced out of his central districts. Human nature and variety, it turned out, could not be banned, merely dislocated.

Photos by James Holston



Top: City street in São Salvador, Brazil.
Bottom: Residential Access Way L1 in Brasília.



Top: Main square in São Paulo.
Bottom: Central plaza, flanked by ministries, in Brasília.

Photos courtesy of James Holston

THE FOUNDERS OF BRASÍLIA

Le Corbusier's intellectual influence on twentieth-century architecture was vast. Planners and designers around the globe undertook projects along the lines he set out in his manifestos and at the international architectural congresses he organized. Perhaps the closest thing we have to a high-modernist city built fully according to Le Corbusier's principles is Brasília. The idea of constructing a capital in the South American continent's interior wilderness was the pet project of Juscelino Kubitschek, Brazil's populist president from 1956 to 1961, who promised his countrymen "50 years of progress in five."

Kubitschek directed architect Oscar Niemeyer, a longtime Brazil Communist Party member influenced by the Soviet version of architectural modernism, to organize a design contest for the new city. It was won by Lucio Costa. Both Costa and Niemeyer worked wholly within the doctrines laid out by Le Corbusier. In the empty site supplied by the president they had the "clean tablecloth" Le Corbusier had always coveted. No private-property owners intruded; no competing visions needed to be negotiated with. The utopian, progressive city would evolve from a unitary plan on land owned entirely by the state, with all contracts, commercial activity, and zoning placed in the hands of the government planning agency Novacap.

In Brasília's elaborate central plan, housing, work, recreation, and public administration were all segregated into different zones as Le Corbusier demanded. The plan made not the slightest concession to residents' habits, desires, or traditions. Brasília provides no clue to its own history; it could have been anywhere. It is to São Paulo or Rio as a tree plantation is to a natural, unregulated forest.

Brasília is a state-imposed city. Many aspects of life that would elsewhere have been left to the private sphere were minutely organized. All residents received similar housing. Following the plans of progressive European and Soviet architects, Brasília's planners grouped the apartment buildings into *superquadra* to foster a collective life. Each *superquadra* (roughly 360 apartments housing 1,500-2,500 people) had its own nursery and elementary school. Each grouping of four *superquadra* had a secondary school, a cinema, a social club, sports facilities, and a retail sector.

In Brasília, no streets function as public gathering places; there are only roads and highways to be used exclusively by motorized traffic. One could fairly say that the effect of the plan has been to design out all those unauthorized locations where casual encounters could occur and crowds could gather spontaneously. There is a square. But what a square! The vast, monumental Plaza of the Three Powers, flanked by the Esplanade of the Ministries, is of a scale that would dwarf even a military parade. In comparison, Tiananmen Square and Red Square are positively cozy.

The plaza, like many of Le Corbusier's plans, is best seen from the air. Arranging to meet a friend there would be rather like trying to rendezvous in the middle of the Gobi desert. And if individuals did meet, there would be nothing to do. This

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plaza is a symbolic center for the state; the only activity that goes on around it is the work of the ministries.

People who move to Brasília discover "a city without crowds." They complain that it lacks the busy corners, the bustle of street life, the small-scale façades that animate a sidewalk for pedestrians. It is almost as if the founders

of Brasília planned not to make a city but to *prevent* one.

Life in Brasília often feels standardized, bland, and anonymous—an existence "without pleasures." The population lacks small accessible spaces they can stamp with the character of their individual activities.

The two most frequent complaints of *superquadra* residents are the sameness of the apartment blocks and the residences' isolation. ("In Brasília, there is only house and work.") The façade of each block is strictly geometric and egalitarian. Nothing distinguishes the exterior of one apartment from another; there are not even balconies that would allow residents to add distinctive touches and create semipublic spaces. Just as the general design of the city conspires against an autonomous public life, so the design of the residential city militates against individuality.

Owing to its architectural repetition and uniformity, Brasília has few landmarks. Each commercial quarter or *superquadra* cluster looks roughly like any other. The result is a macro-order but with a micro-confusion that makes locations hard to find. To the planners of a utopian city whose goal is more to change the world than to accommodate it, these failures—and the general disorientation occasioned by life in Brasília—may be considered a part of their didactic purpose.

From the beginning, however, residents of Brasília refused to behave precisely as the city's master planners intended. Some citizens showed a determination to make themselves heard. For instance, when the number of construction workers outran the temporary housing allotted to them in what was called the Free City, laborers began to squat on additional lands where they built makeshift homes. Where whole families migrated, the houses sometimes became quite substantial.

These pioneers organized to defend their land, and by 1980 fully 75 percent of the population of Brasília lived in settlements that had never been anticipated in the central plan. Meanwhile the *planned* city reached less than half of its projected population.

The unregulated Brasília—one might call it the real Brasília—is quite different from the original vision. Instead of a classless administrative city, it is a city marked by commerce, busyness, self-selection, and segregation. The unplanned neighborhoods of the rich and of the poor are not mere accidents; one could argue that they are unavoidable companions to the artificial order at the plan's center.

How much success has Brasília achieved? Little, if we judge by the city's capacity to inspire love of its way of life. The real Brasília, as opposed to the hypothetical Brasília in the master planners' documents, is mostly a product of resistance and subversion.



The Rise and Fall of the Big, Bureaucratic Corporation

By Joel Kotkin

In an old industrial building in lower Manhattan, Jon Kamen and his workers are creating a future urban economy that relies on the entrepreneurial ethos of the past. The walls and doors in this spartan 1930s factory are black steel and tin, and large windows open on a sweeping view of mid-century Manhattan skyscrapers. But the workers of @Radical Media are not stitching garments, or typing on carbon paper. They are creating the products increasingly valued in our Information Age. The advertising firm is crammed with television monitors, computers, and the latest film-editing and graphics equipment.

More important than the space or equipment, says Kamen, is the spirit of individualism animating his company. Each member of the workforce of highly skilled artists—75 of them on staff with another 100 on contract or free-lancing—has considerable autonomy.

Kamen founded his firm in 1994 and won the coveted Palme d'Or for best advertising in 1998. Today he is able to attract talent that once would have gone to the elite big firms. The problem with large, centralized businesses, Kamen suggests, is

that “the talent walks in and the firm is walled off like a bunch of fiefdoms. There’s no community there.” Much of the higher-order work in advertising, and in many other industries, is now conducted by small, flexible organizations like Kamen’s.

The growth of firms like @Radical Media at the end of the millennium refutes notions that dominated economic thinking at mid-century. At that time all the virtues that make a company like Kamen’s work—artisanship, individualism, collaboration with free-lancers—would have seemed positively archaic. The world was supposed to be dominated by large, centralized corporations. Virtually all the mainstream thinkers of that epoch—David Lilienthal, A.A. Berle, Daniel Bell, Joseph Schumpeter—as well as the entire Marxist academic contingent believed that as the economy grew more sophisticated, Ameri-

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