Le Corbusier's dioramas

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The corbusian city

Imposing in 1922 his project of contemporary city, Le Corbusier's meditative strategy was clear: to propose a theoretical model with the same dimensions of Paris —using facts and numbers from parisian statistics—to make plausible city transformation plans. Ville Contemporaine was both an ideal project and an analogic figuration of the transformations to undertake in it. In 1925 Plan Voisin renews this proposal and applies it to Paris. Both plans are the germ of Ville Radiause, whose theories rule modern urban utopia.

"One day of july 1922 -- he wrote -- after taking Marcel Temporal the direction of Salon d'automne's urban section, he came to propose Le Corbusier to do anything for the next November's Salon. 'Make you a fountain in a square, and as you like imaginative things, draw us at your discretion of a modern city'. I make another thing. Some months later, i summoned to public opinion the theoretical studio of a contemporary city of three millions inhabitants."

Acting as a vanguard artist, Le Corbusier presents as indispensable his city ideal meanwhile he romps brutally with his real city. Dormée named his position: "a cartoony dasimism"? Reminding an aim condition, in 1956 he say: "it was necessary to create a new scale in city by analysis, calculations, and by a violent intuition too. Studies were longs, patients, methodics. Results, conclusions. But, how iptesed i was theren i lived, i dwarfed almost eight weeks. In my head, in my notion of things, it formed new dimensions; i lived them, i feel them. [...] There were need eight years to notice where to find the answer."

"In 1922 I began to enter in a dream of which i don't have exit -- he wrote in Le Ville Radiause -- being in the city of modern times. I did complete studies of a contemporary city of three millions inhabitants. I created new dimensions, i guess the essential joys: sky and trees, partners of each man: sun in dwelling, blue surfaces. Air sain. No noise. Buildings are not seen yet. Under trees. Grass involves us with inmenses green surfaces. Airplane distance: in that, city is not draughted, but its image is panorama. Modern city is understand from airplane distance: since that, it is not draughted, but photographed. Contemporary metropolis reclaims at satellite to reveal and to express with technosthetic's instruments that symbolize earth-space."

At Le Corbusier is a clear relation between the city and its image: that, he wants to communicate. Conscient of the image's power he justasom them showing their connections and their oppositions, since "as hard is contrast, as potent is revolution". Organized to produce a "parabolic discourse" -- he said at Vier ano architecture -- "images must be sousoder envers", giving a new eloquence. What this discourse is, what these images are, and what this superpowers is, is a question to formulate.

"Really there are three levels on those Le Corbusier offer city image. A scientific level, by plans: abstract plans in Ville Contemporane or concrete plans in Plan Voisin as a representative level, with perspectives, sketches, design, photographs and models, that present different aspects of city. And an iconographic level with panoramic images of city, in that spectators not only see the city but also introduces into it. All these images form an uninterrupted chain, of more or less complex links, that maintains constant its thematic and aesthetic origins.

Le Corbusier's capacity to concieve space joins to necessity of represent it, transmit it and expoliate it by his projects. So, his sketches and perspectives show his looking way and evidence how drawing is understand as structural document, where, choose the prospect on a quickly sketch, he traces the geometric perspective, redraw later. Sketches and perspectives are good example of that way of see, that shows how systematic is his sketch's ensemble procedure in faulourse of near cinematographic values. Beside them, aerial perspectives give a new vision and permit to understand problems on a different scale.

Photography suppose a new way to see and to interepret reality that causes a qualitative change on space's perception and communication. City has on it a priviledge witness, both to remain memory as to present Modernism. Photography values urban iconography and streches it. Le Corbusier used it to express himself and transfers project space to real
space, adopting photography as way of expression. He was one of the first modern architects to take advantage of photographic images proliﬁtably. Frequently he served them or his students to design or idealize, as inPlan Voisin where he used phototechnics to give illusion of being true that was no more than ideal projects.

Nevertheless, Le Corbusier reverts not to photography but to dioramas to expose and to diffuse his urban ideals. Ville Contemporaine (1922), Plan Voisin (1925), Mundanoumo (1930) and Plan Maciá (1934) reverted to it. Why? What are Le Corbusier diorama values? And, first, of all, what is a diorama?

Panoramas and dioramas

From the greek diera-os to see through, the word was coined by French sculptor Louis Daguerre to name a panoramic variant invented by him. Spectacles of notable popular success since its invention by Robert Baker at the end of XVII century, panoramas were a scenic representation that at a flat wall picture extended over a circular surface suggests the vision of a wide horizon, showing historic or urban scenes. Panoramas were seen at distance through a wide opening or placing spectators on a central platform around a room panorama, giving illusion of being in the middle of scene.

Diorama renewed painter with décors and sophisticated enlightenment effects. Really it was a panorama on that by a combination of opaque and transparent painting and of changing light, it obtains to see different aspects that simulated daily cycle and spatial conditions. Its perspectives reverts to ‘obscure camera’, that spectators were in the position of spectator’s eye was calculated to place gain the level that permits to observe the diorama, with a psychological depth sensation that it produces. That explains the relative lack of photographic images proliﬁtably. Frequently he served them or his students to design or idealize, as inPlan Voisin where he used phototechnics to give illusion of being true that was no more than ideal projects.

Gradually, dioramas reduced their size, at the same time that the word was applying to minor models referred to miniature scenes showed through a window. So, many present spectators know them as ‘shop contents’ both on scientiﬁc ambits as on popular ones, being good example of them the so-called ‘Christmas dioramas’, that spectators can see it as optical manufacture that established an ideal continuity between spectator and image.

Dioramas as magic boxes

The confection of ﬁrst diorama centennial at 1922 summer; animate Le Corbusier to revert to it to present Ville Contemporaine to the public.

“I would like –Le Corbusier say us[9]–, that spectators could, by an effort of their imagination, concept the new type of high city (but) this rampant city overcome by deformity is less noted. That explains the relative lack of photographic images proliﬁtably. Frequently he served them or his students to design or idealize, as inPlan Voisin where he used phototechnics to give illusion of being true that was no more than ideal projects.

Diorama create an optical illusion of urban realism. It is a ‘machine à émovoir’, a machine to persuade, not to converse for that, there are plans and bidimensional drawings. But ones and the others are not opposed, and it is the union of them all that Le Corbusier wants to present to the public in some ‘mágico box’ where may establish a dialogue in terms of contents and container.

Salon d’Automne. 1922

Ville Contemporaine was presented to the public in the Grand Palais, on the annual mark of Salon d’Automne. It was an alternative art salon created at the beginnings of the century in Paris by institute of France Jourdain, architect and humanist of belgian origin. Source and promoter of these events, which were called ‘Salon d’Automne’, the ﬁrst pictorial revolution in XX century. To this Salon went in 1912 and 1913 Le Corbusier with drawings of his Orient journey, and there he went after War to present Ville Contemporaine in 1922, and to exhibit his present work in 1923 and 1924.

Grand Palais was the place to ofﬁcial exhibitions, witness of art evolution and of technical advances in XX century. Salon d’Automne place, it is a singular exhibition, with Petit Palais and Alexander bridge, conforms since 1900 a monumental zone between Champs Elysées and Invalids. Symbol of social taste at this time, it’s a good Beaux-Arts example. The building was planned by competition, dividing useful between three architects: Deglane, Thomas and Leducot. The ﬁrst one elevated the monumental front; the second, the rear buildings, and the third one, the central space: a vast hall trebled of 20 meters in long and 43 high, with new decorations like the big glass pane’s cover.

Grand Palais was the double mark internal and external, of corbusian dioramas. Internal mark of Ville Contemporaine in 1922; external mark of Ellisipit Neoclassic. A few years after his dioramas on Plan Voisin, in 1925. Reporting spectacle and involving box, both planned a double problem: to see and how to see it.

The ﬁrst one was projected to exhibit Ville Contemporaine inside the hall of Grand Palais, whose bottom was occupied by a monumental metallic staircase. Profiting the preferent place in Salon, Le Corbusier’s stand was ﬁt in its lower hole, with a surface of near 200 m2. 17 m wide and 12,76 meters depth, and it was formed by two parts: an straight ﬁgure, where were exposed rational plans and drawings, and an annex semi-cylindrical ﬁgure, double high, where was placed the diorama. Both were given way to climbing six steps to gain the level that permits to observe the diorama, with the position of spectator’s eye was calculated to place him inside the box, as he had before the imagined city.

The diorama was observed by a 6 m embrace, where it could be placed simultaneously 10 or 12 persons, having besides them expository spaces with plans and images of Ville. The diorama was embraced by a glance, being possible to examine afterwards its surface in
order to study the details of the urban scene and of the project that inspired it. Then all was a publicity machine, as no an optical machine to establish an ideal continuity between spectator and city.  

It was thought in introducing some figures at the first plan, and so explains the well known perspective take from a café-terrace, where contrasts the real Paris and the imagined Ville between real and ideal, although it was resigned profiting simplicity and clarity of communication, considering too that the diorama may be transported to be exposed in other places.

Work of near 100 m2, the diorama had a geometrical layout in the studio and a great scale execution in a workshop at Temple, where Dugas had created 100 years before his diorama. Nevertheless the project is essentially by him, Le Corbusier refers to “a collective work”, in this studio collaborator was Pierre Jeanneret, “admireable on work and constance; without him I nothing could do” , in exhibition collaborated the scenographer Darnatique, that signs the diorama, the painter Poletti that realized it, the architect Provin and the decorator Guéret that build the stand, the Saint-Gobain and Printemps stores that adecuated it, the Electro enterprise that charges with light, and the Franco-american group of Housing that financed his studies. Not forgetting Frantz Jourdain, Salon’s president, “without his generous intervention the adventure would aborted”.

L’Esprit Nouveau, 1925

If the canonic image of Ville in the perspective confronting imagined and real city, that of Plan Voisin is the project that inspired it. Then all was a publicity machine, reinforced by hands or airplanes, reinforces plastic and symbolic contrasts between man and machine. But, with no doubt, the real diadic symbol of corbusian city is the Esprit Nouveau pavilion at 1925 Arts ICONClits Exhibition where Le Corbusier exposed those two images: abstract and concrete, of the city joined with a built sample of his house-type. 

So, thinking again on diorama to convince, in 1925 joined the Villa and Plan Voisin ones. Building that operation insuminated in 1922, the spectator give way, not ideologically but physically, to city from house or vice-versa; so he don’t only implicates himself in the city by his position between the two dioramas, but leaves it like an actor in the other building’s half past  

It is just the dialogue between architecture and city through the aggregate level’s play so characteristic of Modernism. Financed with help of Voisin, airplanes an automobiles constructor, to whom is dedicated the Paris’s urban plan, Le Corbusier devoted to his ideas on architecture and urbanism, joining living cellule and urban studies. “The studies object of this book –he said in Urbanisme-” are exposed in this Pavilion”, showing how comport the cellule in the whole and how art decorative and urbanism problems may be considered as extremes of the same question. The project was refused by exhibition directors, being approved in extremis mercy to minister Monzie. Thanking him, it was obtained a marginal lot near Grand Palais, in the oblique diedre formed by Louvet hall and Thomas corps, where it was realized in few weeks a distinctive building of “immoobile-villas” while in a next room were exhibited two dioramas of Ville and Plan.

In a 800 m² pavilion, the dioramas section occupied near 300 m². This section take form of a rectangular corp with a building in its extremes where he placed his two dioramas. Wide was fixed by these ones: 12 m, and long by its double, 24 m, fitting its curvature to the manual circulation that was placed. As in 1922, next to dioramas there were two expository spaces with plans and images of Ville and Plan. 

The Plan diorama had less surface than Ville’s one. Since its long was the same, it had less high, supporting on a blind plinth that simulate Seine embankment, take as basis of composition  

Conceived as spread mean to promote forms and modern way of life, the pavilion was a model natural scale of one of his type-cellules organized around a garden-court with double levels. Its interior was conceived as a purpur composition, that joined daily objects standardization with work of artists like Picasso, Braque, Leger, Gris, Duthuit, Lipchitz and Le Corbusier. The composite unit between art and objects was completed by the space containing his urban dioramas. Separate from domestic interior, this annex was an isomorphic space where dioramic image was lied to domestic space on a correspondence between home and city that likes showing the continuity between those two, fixing likewise a continuity between city and citizen.

Later dioramas

Le Corbusier don’t limit the possibilities of diorama to those two plans, but he applies them to other urban projects, like those of Mundaneum in Geneva (1929-30) or the plan for Barcelona (1912-34).

The idea of a world city, capital of peace, surged about 1910, drawing up Hilbrand a project very valued at its time. After the Nations Society competition the theme was redifined, converting it in Mundaneum, whose project was charges to Le Corbusier, who proposed a triple nave developed in spiral, from what all cultures would surge. He presented it by a diorama elaborated now in a Buton-Chaumont hangar. “Each time, diorama is bigger and precise. The spiral grows, the place increases”; he writes 1916, joining ambitiously the project and its representation.

The formulae is applied too at the urban project to Barcelona 1932-34, where Gatapec architects, following Le Corbusier, used diorama as a demonstration mean of their global ideas. As Sert wrote Le Corbusier: “the diorama is the great success of the exhibition”. Plastically it is the most brilliant of all these corbusian dioramas. It was presented on july 1934 in ‘La Nova Barcelona’ exhibition, at Cataluña Square. With a clear idea: ‘global project, global vision’; this diorama was drafted with great geometrical rigor and great projective detail; taking Gran Via as compositional axis and Tibidabo as horizon. It was a 6.60 x 1.50 m colored panorama –that is, far lesser size than partisan dioramas–, whose image shows an aerial perspective or the city, fitted in a cylindric screen of 5 m diametre. The authorship is attributed to Torres-Garcia, with drawings by Gröhl and execution at Safiales & Gralena workshop.

It was the most relevant element on the exhibition, that comprehends plans, photographs and graphics that shows its illusion on changing the city, taking care of Cerdá’s organizative reticule, but with a lager module, impelling zoning and giving special attention to the waterfront, as diorama evidences.

To these corbusian dioramas may oppose those presented those years at Exhibitions in Seville or Barcelona, in Marseilles or Paris, in London or New York, where some years later, in 1939 Universal Exhibition, was shown a similar spectacle. Pariserue, a Norman Bel Geddes project inspired in some way at corbusian city, that was offer in contrast with Democracy, ‘tomorrow city’ by Henry Dreyfuss and seen into a great sphere.

In another aspects, diorama takes echo when, on the confront between television and cinema industries, was reinforced its spectacularity by new technics. So, in 1950 were planning some projection systems with great screens that covered all spectator visual camps. After tridimensionnal cinema, short lived, there were essays of magnetoscopics systems, whose first commercial product: Cinerama (1952) aspired to give grandiosity to this involving screen by simultaneous projections with synchronized projectors that, superposing images, give a unit one that offers a relief illusion. Being so complicated this triple projection, it ways to similar but simpler and cheaper systems, as Cinema-scope (1953), Vista-vision (1954) and Todd-ao (1955) that search tridimensionnality by mean of great screen dimensions and curvature, giving a psychological sensation of depth, reinforced using different sonorous bands and loudspeakers.

On another way, the spatial form of 1925 Pavillon, with its two dioramas confronted has seen as precursor of the Pavillon Philip’s interior (1958), the most complex of Le Corbusier ‘‘boîtes à miracle’’, where architecture makes spacial modulation curve convex and concave surfaces, creating an abstract space that became concrete only by light. Face to rotund formal image of another works, here Le Corbusier bets a ‘‘magic hour’’ essential and purist, and affirm: “’’It won’t exist facades. Everything will happen inside. The unique external image may be a scalling”.

Although they share some aesthetically and thematically principles, certainly corbusian dioramas are simplest spacial ambitions, but with more resonance on spectators. Their plastic lyricism and the parallel discourse of their images convert them in ‘‘magic Hour’’ created to join rational and sensitive. A synthesis between rational analysis and communication exigences that Le Corbusier likes to use as a mediation strategy at contemporary city.