

La Construction des Villes

Christoph Schnoor

Review by Tanja Poppelreuter



Christoph Schnoor, *La Construction des Villes, Le Corbusiers erstes städtebauliches Traktat von 1910/11* (Zürich: GTA Verlag, 2008). 648 pp. In German and French.

La Construction des Villes (The Construction of Cities) is the title of a manuscript written by the young Le Corbusier while living in Germany in 1910-11. Prompted by his teacher L'Eplattenier, Le Corbusier critically analyzed the literature on city planning, with the overall question in mind of how cities establish spaces that the inhabitants perceive as beautiful or sublime.

Christoph Schnoor, senior lecturer at the School of Architecture and Landscape Architecture at Unitec in Auckland, teaches – among other subjects – architectural theory and history. In *La Construction des Villes*, Schnoor publishes Le Corbusier's original French text and a careful translation of it into German, and in doing so makes the manuscript amenable for further research. In order to be accessible to a larger scholarly community, an English translation of the manuscript would also be highly desirable.

The experiences and education Le Corbusier drew from in later life can be linked to two early events. In 1907 he departed on a Grand Tour that led him to Italy, Greece, Turkey and other places. In the course of two years, he drew and made watercolours and notes of the highlights of architectural history that he visited. This would be a source for ideas and images for his later publications and helped to shape his architectural standpoint.

The second formative event was the period of 1910-11, during which Le Corbusier wrote *La Construction des Villes*. This part of Le Corbusier's writing and education is now, with the publication of Schnoor's book, fully accessible for the first time.

Le Corbusier researched and wrote most of the manuscript in Munich and Berlin. He summarized the discourses on city planning around 1900 by Karl Henrici, Albert Erich Brinckmann, Camillo Sitte and others. Le Corbusier's main research interests lay in the aesthetic and artistic impacts of city planning. In a concise and careful analysis of the primary and secondary texts, Schnoor succeeds in reconstructing Le Corbusier's understanding and interpretation.

The reason the manuscript for *La Construction des Villes* was not published by Le Corbusier himself lay in his personal life, as well as political developments and the beginning of World War One, which made it impossible to publish a book on a German-centred discourse in France. The manuscript then disappeared in Le Corbusier's estate and was discovered in 1977, but until now was neither wholly published, nor exhaustively analyzed.

Schnoor's book consists of two parts: a critical analysis of the synthesis of the manuscript, and the manuscript itself, together with the images chosen by Le

Corbusier. In the first part, Schnoor carefully retraces Le Corbusier's steps as he researched the manuscript, gives insights as to which texts the Swiss-French architect consulted and what he took from each, and shares his overall understanding of Le Corbusier's interpretation of the earlier texts.

The second part comprises the actual manuscript. This part is very clearly arranged by setting the original French text next to the German translation and using different type-faces and colours. However, the overall design and especially the handling of the images, which are all equally tinted in a greenish hue, make it obvious that this book is primarily about the text rather than the drawings, photographs and sketches. The original manuscript pages and drawings could have been reproduced at a larger scale to aid in readability. Some lack contrast so that details cannot be seen and the greenish hue additionally equalizes and disguises details.

Overall, Schnoor's in-depth analysis of this manuscript sheds new light on the fundamentals of Le Corbusier's intellectual education and background. His understanding of the sixteenth-century Italian architect Andrea Palladio and his reading of the *Essai sur l'architecture* (1753) by the architectural theorist Abbé Laugier are two of the new findings.

In addition, the manuscript conveys background and context for Le Corbusier's urban projects such as *Ville Contemporaine* (1922) and *Plan Voisin* (1925) and will also, in all probability, be used by scholars aiming to reassess the ways he used space in the design of his villas. The book thus belongs with the most significant publications on Le Corbusier and early twentieth-century city planning that have been published in recent years.