



“A Contemporary City”

from *The City of Tomorrow and its Planning* (1929)

Le Corbusier

Editors' Introduction



Le Corbusier (1887–1965) was one of the founding fathers of the Modernist movement and of what has come to be known as the International Style in architecture. Painter, architect, city planner, philosopher, author of revolutionary cultural manifestos – Le Corbusier exemplified the energy and efficiency of the Machine Age. His was the bold, nearly mystical rationality of a generation that was eager to accept the scientific spirit of the twentieth century on its own terms and to throw off all pre-existing ties – political, cultural, conceptual – with what it considered an exhausted, outmoded past.

Born Charles-Edouard Jeanneret-Gris, Le Corbusier grew up in the Swiss town of La Chaux-de-Fonds, noted for its watch-making industry. He took his famous pseudonym after he moved to Paris to pursue a career in art and architecture. From the first, his designs for modern houses – he called them “machines for living” – were strikingly original, and many people were shocked by the spare cubist minimalism of his designs. The real shock, however, came in 1922 when Le Corbusier presented the public with his plan for “A Contemporary City of Three Million People.” Laid out in a rigidly symmetrical grid pattern, the city consisted of neatly spaced rows of identical, strictly geometrical skyscrapers, as illustrated in Plate 37. This was not the city of the future, Le Corbusier insisted, but the city of today. It was to be built on the Right Bank, after demolishing several hundred acres of the existing urban fabric of Paris!

The “Contemporary City” proposal certainly caught the attention of the public, but it did not win Le Corbusier many actual urban planning commissions. Throughout the 1920s, 1930s, and 1940s, he sought out potential patrons wherever he could find them – the industrial capitalists of the Voisin automobile company, the communist rulers of the Soviet Union, and the fascist Vichy government of occupied France – mostly without success. Le Corbusier’s real impact came not from cities he designed and built himself but from cities that were built by others incorporating the planning principles that he pioneered. Most notable among these was the notion of “the skyscraper in the park,” an idea that is today ubiquitous. Whether in relatively complete examples like Brasilia and Chandigar, India (where new cities were built from scratch), or in partial examples such as the skyscraper parks and the high-rise housing blocks that have been built in cities worldwide, the Le Corbusier vision has truly transformed the global urban environment.

Le Corbusier’s “Contemporary City” plan has often been contrasted to Frank Lloyd Wright’s “Broadacre” (p. 345), and the comparison of a thoroughly centralized versus a thoroughly decentralized plan is indeed striking. Le Corbusier’s boldness invites comparison with the original optimism of the post-World War II reconstruction and redevelopment efforts and even with the work of such visionary megastructuralists as Paolo Soleri. Some, however, have seen in the hyper-rationality of the pure Corbusian ideal an elitism and rigid class structure that runs counter to the democratic tradition. Lewis Mumford (p. 91), Jane Jacobs (p. 105), and Peter Hall (p. 373) may be counted as three of the severest critics. Allan Jacobs and Donald Appleyard’s “Urban Design Manifesto” (p. 518) deliberately takes the form of a Le Corbusier pronouncement but rejects his program, opting instead for lively streets, participatory planning, and the integration of old buildings into the new urban fabric. Beneath all the

sparkling clarity of Le Corbusier's urban designs are questions that must forever remain conjectural: how would democratic politics be practiced in a Corbusian city? What would social relationships be like amid the gleaming towers? Many of the "mega-urban regions" of Asia (p. 590) seem to rely on Corbusian principles, but would the "creative class" that Richard Florida (p. 143) writes about be comfortable in a Corbusian city? How would the space-of-flows/space-of-place relationships envisioned by Manuel Castells (p. 572) work, or not work, within a Corbusian environment? And what is it about the Corbusian skyscraper as a characteristic cultural form of modern Western urbanism that made the twin towers of the World Trade Center a target for the Al-Qaeda Islamist attacks on September 11, 2001?

Le Corbusier's writings include *The City of Tomorrow and its Planning* (New York: Dover, 1987, translated by Frederick Etchells from *Urbanisme*, 1929), *Concerning Town Planning*, (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1948, translated by Clive Entwistle from *Propos d'Urbanisme*, 1946), and *L'Urbanisme des Trois Etablissements Humaines* (Paris: Editions de Minuit, 1959).

Excellent accounts of Le Corbusier's ideas may be found in Robert Fishman, *Urban Utopias in the Twentieth Century* (New York: Basic Books, 1977), Peter Hall, *Cities of Tomorrow* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1988), Kenneth Frampton, *Le Corbusier: Architect of the Twentieth Century* (New York: Abrams, 2002, with photographs by Roberto Schezen), and Nicholas Fox Weber, *Le Corbusier: A Life* (New York: Knopf, 2008). For a closer look at some of Le Corbusier's most important urban planning projects, consult Vikramaditya Prakash, *Chandigarh's Le Corbusier: The Struggle for Modernity in Postcolonial India* (Seattle, WA: University of Washington Press, 2002) and Klaus-Peter Gast and Arthur Ruegg, *Le Corbusier: Paris-Chandigarh* (Boston, MA: Birkhäuser, 2000). Jean-Louis Cohen, *Le Corbusier, 1887–1965* (Los Angeles, CA: Taschen, 2005) contains excellent photographs of Le Corbusier's architectural work from all periods as does *Le Corbusier Le Grand* by the editors of Phaidon Press (London: 2008). For background on modernism as a movement, consult Richard Weston, *Modernism* (London: Phaidon, 2001), Christopher Wilk, *Modernism: Designing a New World* (London: Victoria & Albert Museum, 2006), and Peter Gay, *Modernism: The Lure of Heresy* (New York: Norton, 2007). For the broader cultural and literary background of the movement, consult Pericles Lewis, *The Cambridge Introduction to Modernism* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007).



The existing congestion in the centre must be eliminated.

The use of technical analysis and architectural synthesis enabled me to draw up my scheme for a contemporary city of three million inhabitants. The result of my work was shown in November 1922 at the Salon d'Automne in Paris. It was greeted with a sort of stupor; the shock of surprise caused rage in some quarters and enthusiasm in others. The solution I put forward was a rough one and completely uncompromising. There were no notes to accompany the plans, and, alas! not everybody can read a plan. I should have had to be constantly on the spot in order to reply to the fundamental questions which spring from the very depths of human feelings. Such questions are of profound interest and cannot remain unanswered. When at a later date it became necessary that this book should be written, a book in which I could formulate the new principles of Town Planning, I resolutely decided *first of all* to find answers to these fundamental questions. I have used two kinds of argument: first, those essentially human ones which start from the mind

or the heart or the physiology of our sensations as a basis; secondly, historical and statistical arguments. Thus I could keep in touch with what is fundamental and at the same time be master of the environment in which all this takes place.

In this way I hope I shall have been able to help my reader to take a number of steps by means of which he can reach a sure and certain position. So that when I unroll my plans I can have the happy assurance that his astonishment will no longer be stupefaction nor his fears mere panic.

[. . .]

A CONTEMPORARY CITY OF THREE MILLION INHABITANTS

Proceeding in the manner of the investigator in his laboratory, I have avoided all special cases, and all that may be accidental, and I have assumed an ideal site to begin with. My object was not to overcome the existing

state of things, but *by constructing a theoretically water-tight formula to arrive at the fundamental principles of modern town planning*. Such fundamental principles, if they are genuine, can serve as the skeleton of any system of modern town planning; being as it were the rules according to which development will take place. We shall then be in a position to take a special case, no matter what: whether it be Paris, London, Berlin, New York or some small town. Then, as a result of what we have learnt, we can take control and decide in what direction the forthcoming battle is to be waged. For the desire to rebuild any great city in a modern way is to engage in a formidable battle. Can you imagine people engaging in a battle without knowing their objectives? Yet that is exactly what is happening. The authorities are compelled to do something, so they give the police white sleeves or set them on horseback, they invent sound signals and light signals, they propose to put bridges over streets or moving pavements under the streets; more garden cities are suggested, or it is decided to suppress the tramways, and so on. And these decisions are reached in a sort of frantic haste in order, as it were, to hold a wild beast at bay. That beast is the great city. It is infinitely more powerful than all these devices. And it is just beginning to wake. What will to-morrow bring forth to cope with it?

We must have some rule of conduct.

We must have fundamental principles for modern town planning.

Site

A level site is the ideal site [for the contemporary city (Figure 1)]. In all those places where traffic becomes over-intensified the level site gives a chance of a normal solution to the problem. Where there is less traffic, differences in level matter less.

The river flows far away from the city. The river is a kind of liquid railway, a goods station and a sorting house. In a decent house the servants' stairs do not go through the drawing room – even if the maid is charming (or if the little boats delight the loiterer leaning on a bridge).

Population

This consists of the citizens proper; of suburban dwellers; and of those of a mixed kind.

- (a) Citizens are of the city: those who work and live in it.
- (b) Suburban dwellers are those who work in the outer industrial zone and who do not come into the city: they live in garden cities.
- (c) The mixed sort are those who work in the business parts of the city but bring up their families in garden cities.

To classify these divisions (and so make possible the transmutation of these recognized types) is to attack the most important problem in town planning, for such a classification would define the areas to be allotted to these three sections and the delimitation of their boundaries. This would enable us to formulate and resolve the following problems:

- 1 The *City*, as a business and residential centre.
- 2 The *Industrial City* in relation to the *Garden Cities* (i.e. the question of transport).
- 3 The *Garden Cities* and the *daily transport* of the workers.

Our first requirement will be an organ that is compact, rapid, lively and concentrated: this is the City with its well organized centre. Our second requirement will be another organ, supple, extensive and elastic; this is the *Garden City* on the periphery. Lying between these two organs, we must *require the legal establishment* of that absolute necessity, a protective zone which allows of extension, a *reserved zone* of woods and fields, a fresh-air reserve.

Density of population

The more dense the population of a city is the less are the distances that have to be covered. The moral, therefore, is that we must *increase the density of the centres of our cities, where business affairs are carried on*.

Lungs

Work in our modern world becomes more intensified day by day, and its demands affect our nervous system in a way that grows more and more dangerous. Modern toil demands quiet and fresh air, not stale air.

The towns of to-day can only increase in density at the expense of the open spaces which are the lungs of a city.

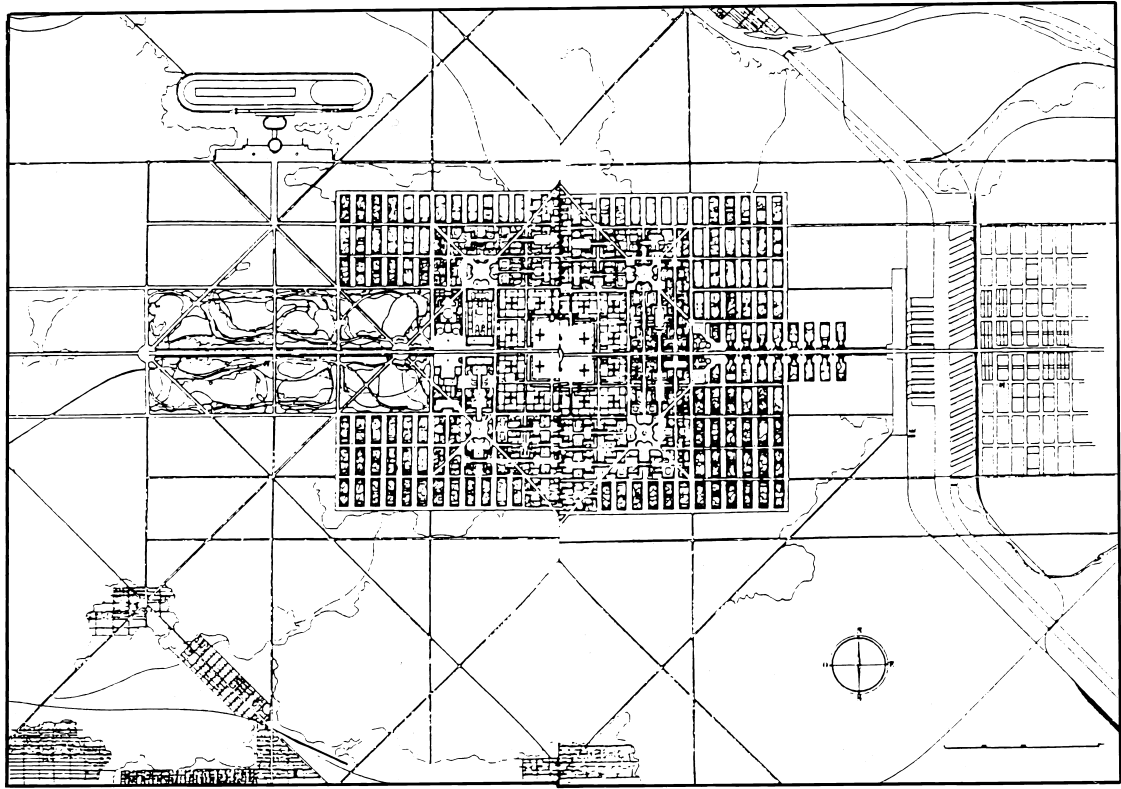


Figure 1

We must *increase the open spaces and diminish the distances to be covered*. Therefore the centre of the city must be constructed *vertically*.

The city's residential quarters must no longer be built along "corridor-streets", full of noise and dust and deprived of light.

It is a simple matter to build urban dwellings away from the streets, without small internal courtyards and with the windows looking on to large parks; and this whether our housing schemes are of the type with "set-backs" or built on the "cellular" principle.

The street

The street of to-day is still the old bare ground which has been paved over, and under which a few tube railways have been run.

The modern street in the true sense of the word is a new type of organism, a sort of stretched-out workshop, a home for many complicated and delicate organs, such as gas, water and electric mains. It is

contrary to all economy, to all security, and to all sense to bury these important service mains. They ought to be accessible throughout their length. The various storeys of this stretched-out workshop will each have their own particular functions. If this type of street, which I have called a "workshop", is to be realized, it becomes as much a matter of construction as are the houses with which it is customary to flank it, and the bridges which carry it over valleys and across rivers.

The modern street should be a masterpiece of civil engineering and no longer a job for navvies.

The "corridor-street" should be tolerated no longer, for it poisons the houses that border it and leads to the construction of small internal courts or "wells".

Traffic

Traffic can be classified more easily than other things.

To-day traffic is not classified – it is like dynamite flung at hazard into the street, killing pedestrians. Even

so, *traffic does not fulfil its function*. This sacrifice of the pedestrian leads nowhere.

If we classify traffic we get:

- (a) Heavy goods traffic.
- (b) Lighter goods traffic, i.e. vans, etc., which make short journeys in all directions.
- (c) Fast traffic, which covers a large section of the town.

Three kinds of roads are needed, and in super-imposed storeys:

- (a) Below-ground there would be the street for heavy traffic. This storey of the houses would consist merely of concrete piles, and between them large open spaces which would form a sort of clearing-house where heavy goods traffic could load and unload.
- (b) At the ground floor level of the buildings there would be the complicated and delicate network of the ordinary streets taking traffic in every desired direction.
- (c) Running north and south, and east and west, and forming the two great axes of the city, there would be great *arterial roads for fast one-way traffic* built on immense reinforced concrete bridges 120 to 180 yards in width and approached every half-mile or so by subsidiary roads from ground level. These arterial roads could therefore be joined at any given point, so that even at the highest speeds the town can be traversed and the suburbs reached without having to negotiate any cross-roads.

The number of existing streets should be diminished by two-thirds. The number of crossings depends directly on the number of streets; and *cross-roads are an enemy to traffic*. The number of existing streets was fixed at a remote epoch in history. The perpetuation of the boundaries of properties has, almost without exception, preserved even the faintest tracks and footpaths of the old village and made streets of them, and sometimes even an avenue . . . The result is that we have cross-roads every fifty yards, even every twenty yards or ten yards. And this leads to the ridiculous traffic congestion we all know so well.

The distance between two bus stops or two tube stations gives us the necessary unit for the distance between streets, though this unit is conditional on the speed of vehicles and the walking capacity of pedestrians. So an average measure of about 400 yards

would give the normal separation between streets, and make a standard for urban distances. My city is conceived on the gridiron system with streets every 400 yards, though occasionally these distances are subdivided to give streets every 200 yards.

This triple system of superimposed levels answers every need of motor traffic (lorries, private cars, taxis, buses) because it provides for rapid and *mobile* transit.

Traffic running on fixed rails is only justified if it is in the form of a convoy carrying an immense load; it then becomes a sort of extension of the underground system or of trains dealing with suburban traffic. *The tramway has no right to exist in the heart of the modern city.*

If the city thus consists of plots about 400 yards square, this will give us sections of about 40 acres in area, and the density of population will vary from 50,000 down to 6,000, according as the "lots" are developed for business or for residential purposes. The natural thing, therefore, would be to continue to apply our unit of distance as it exists in the Paris tubes to-day (namely, 400 yards) and to put a station in the middle of each plot.

Following the two great axes of the city, two "storeys" below the arterial roads for fast traffic, would run the tubes leading to the four furthest points of the garden city suburbs, and linking up with the metropolitan network . . . At a still lower level, and again following these two main axes, would run the one-way loop systems for suburban traffic, and below these again the four great main lines serving the provinces and running north, south, east and west. These main lines would end at the Central Station, or better still might be connected up by a loop system.

The station

There is only one station. The only place for the station is in the centre of the city. It is the natural place for it, and there is no reason for putting it anywhere else. The railway station is the hub of the wheel.

The station would be an essentially subterranean building. Its roof, which would be two storeys above the natural ground level of the city, would form the aerodrome for aero-taxis. This aerodrome (linked up with the main aerodrome in the protected zone) must be in close contact with the tubes, the suburban lines, the main lines, the main arteries and the administrative services connected with all these . . .

The plan of the city

The basic principles we must follow are these:

- 1 We must de-congest the centres of our cities.
- 2 We must augment their density.
- 3 We must increase the means for getting about.
- 4 We must increase parks and open spaces.

At the very centre we have the *station* with its landing stage for aero-taxis.

Running north and south, and east and west, we have the *main arteries* for fast traffic, forming elevated roadways 120 feet wide.

At the base of the sky-scrappers and all round them we have a great open space 2,400 yards by 1,500 yards, giving an area of 3,600,000 square yards, and occupied by gardens, parks and avenues. In these parks, at the foot of and round the sky-scrappers, would be the restaurants and cafes, the luxury shops, housed in buildings with receding terraces: here too would be the theatres, halls and so on; and here the parking places or garage shelters.

The sky-scrappers are designed purely for business purposes.

On the left we have the great public buildings, the museums, the municipal and administrative offices. Still further on the left we have the "Park" (which is available for further logical development of the heart of the city).

On the right, and traversed by one of the arms of the main arterial roads, we have the warehouses, and the industrial quarters with their goods stations.

All around the city is the *protected zone* of woods and green fields.

Further beyond are the *garden cities*, forming a wide encircling band.

Then, right in the midst of all these, we have the *Central Station*, made up of the following elements:

- (a) The landing-platform; forming an aerodrome of 200,000 square yards in area.
- (b) The entresol or mezzanine; at this level are the raised tracks for fast motor traffic: the only crossing being gyratory.
- (c) The ground floor where are the entrance halls and booking offices for the tubes, suburban lines, main line and air traffic.
- (d) The "basement": here are the tubes which serve the city and the main arteries.

- (e) The "sub-basement": here are the suburban lines running on a one-way loop.
- (f) The "sub-sub-basement": here are the main lines (going north, south, east and west).

The city

Here we have twenty-four sky-scrappers capable each of housing 10,000 to 50,000 employees; this is the business and hotel section, etc., and accounts for 400,000 to 600,000 inhabitants.

The residential blocks, of the two main types already mentioned, account for a further 600,000 inhabitants.

The garden cities give us a further 2,000,000 inhabitants, or more.

In the great central open space are the cafes, restaurants, luxury shops, halls of various kinds, a magnificent forum descending by stages down to the immense parks surrounding it, the whole arrangement providing a spectacle of order and vitality.

Density of population

- (a) The sky-scraper: 1,200 inhabitants to the acre.
- (b) The residential blocks with set-backs: 120 inhabitants to the acre. These are the luxury dwellings.
- (c) The residential blocks on the "cellular" system, with a similar number of inhabitants.

This great density gives us our necessary shortening of distances and ensures rapid inter-communication.

Note. The average density to the acre of Paris in the heart of the town is 146, and of London 63; and of the over-crowded quarters of Paris 213, and of London 169.

Open spaces

Of the area (a), 95 per cent of the ground is open (squares, restaurants, theatres).

Of the area (b), 85 per cent of the ground is open (gardens, sports grounds).

Of the area (c), 48 per cent of the ground is open (gardens, sports grounds).

Educational and civic centres, universities, museums of art and industry, public services, county hall

The “Jardin anglais”. (The city can extend here, if necessary.)

Sports grounds: Motor racing track, Racecourse, Stadium, Swimming baths, etc.

The protected zone (which will be the property of the city), with its aerodrome

A zone in which all building would be prohibited; reserved for the growth of the city as laid down by the municipality: it would consist of woods, fields, and sports grounds. The forming of a “protected zone” by continual purchase of small properties in the immediate vicinity of the city is one of the most essential and urgent tasks which a municipality can pursue. It would eventually represent a tenfold return on the capital invested.

Industrial quarters: types of buildings employed

For business: sky-scrapers sixty storeys high with no internal wells or courtyards . . .

Residential buildings with “set-backs”, of six double storeys; again with no internal wells: the flats looking on either side on to immense parks.

Residential buildings on the “cellular” principle, with “hanging gardens”, looking on to immense parks; again no internal wells. These are “service-flats” of the most modern kind.

Garden cities: their aesthetic, economy, perfection and modern outlook

A simple phrase suffices to express the necessities of tomorrow: WE MUST BUILD IN THE OPEN.

The lay-out must be of a purely geometrical kind, with all its many and delicate implications.

[. . .]

The city of to-day is a dying thing because it is not geometrical. To build in the open would be to replace our present haphazard arrangements, *which are all we have to-day*, by a *uniform* lay-out. Unless we do this *there*

is no salvation.

The result of a true geometrical lay-out is *repetition*. The result of repetition is a *standard*, the perfect form (i.e. the creation of standard types). A geometrical lay-out means that mathematics play their part.

There is no first-rate human production but has geometry at its base. It is of the very essence of Architecture. To introduce uniformity into the building of the city we must *industrialize building*. Building is the one economic activity which has so far resisted industrialization. It has thus escaped the march of progress, with the result that the cost of building is still abnormally high.

The architect, from a professional point of view, has become a twisted sort of creature. He has grown to love irregular sites, claiming that they inspire him with original ideas for getting round them. Of course he is wrong. For nowadays the only building that can be undertaken must be either for the rich or built at a loss (as, for instance, in the case of municipal housing schemes), or else by jerry-building and so robbing the inhabitant of all amenities. A motor-car which is achieved by mass production is a masterpiece of comfort, precision, balance and good taste. A house built to order (on an “interesting” site) is a masterpiece of incongruity – a monstrous thing.

If the builder’s yard were reorganized on the lines of standardization and mass production we might have gangs of workmen as keen and intelligent as mechanics.

The mechanic dates back only twenty years, yet already he forms the highest caste of the working world.

The mason dates . . . from time immemorial! He bangs away with feet and hammer. He smashes up everything round him, and the plant entrusted to him falls to pieces in a few months. The spirit of the mason must be disciplined by making him part of the severe and exact machinery of the industrialized builder’s yard.

The cost of building would fall in the proportion of 10 to 2.

The wages of the labourers would fall into definite categories; to each according to his merits and service rendered.

The “interesting” or erratic site absorbs every creative faculty of the architect and wears him out. What results is equally erratic: lopsided abortions; a specialist’s solution which can only please other specialists.

We must build *in the open*: both within the city and around it.

Then having worked through every necessary technical stage and using absolute ECONOMY, we shall be in a position to experience the intense joys of a creative art which is based on geometry.

THE CITY AND ITS AESTHETIC

(The plan of a city which is here presented is a direct consequence of purely geometric considerations.)

A new unit *on a large scale* (400 yards) inspires everything. Though the gridiron arrangement of the streets every 400 yards (sometimes only 200) is uniform (with a consequent ease in finding one's way about), no two streets are in any way alike. This is where, in a magnificent contrapuntal symphony, the forces of geometry come into play.

Suppose we are entering the city by way of the Great Park. Our fast car takes the special elevated

motor track between the majestic sky-scrapers: as we approach nearer there is seen the repetition against the sky of the twenty-four sky-scrapers; to our left and right on the outskirts of each particular area are the municipal and administrative buildings; and enclosing the space are the museums and university buildings.

Then suddenly we find ourselves at the feet of the first sky-scrapers. But here we have, not the meagre shaft of sunlight which so faintly illumines the dismal streets of New York, but an immensity of space. The whole city is a Park. The terraces stretch out over lawns and into groves. Low buildings of a horizontal kind lead the eye on to the foliage of the trees. Where are now the trivial *Procuracies*? Here is the *city* with its crowds living in peace and pure air, where noise is smothered under the foliage of green trees. The chaos of New York is overcome. Here, bathed in light, stands the modern city [Figure 2].

Our car has left the elevated track and has dropped its speed of sixty miles an hour to run gently through the

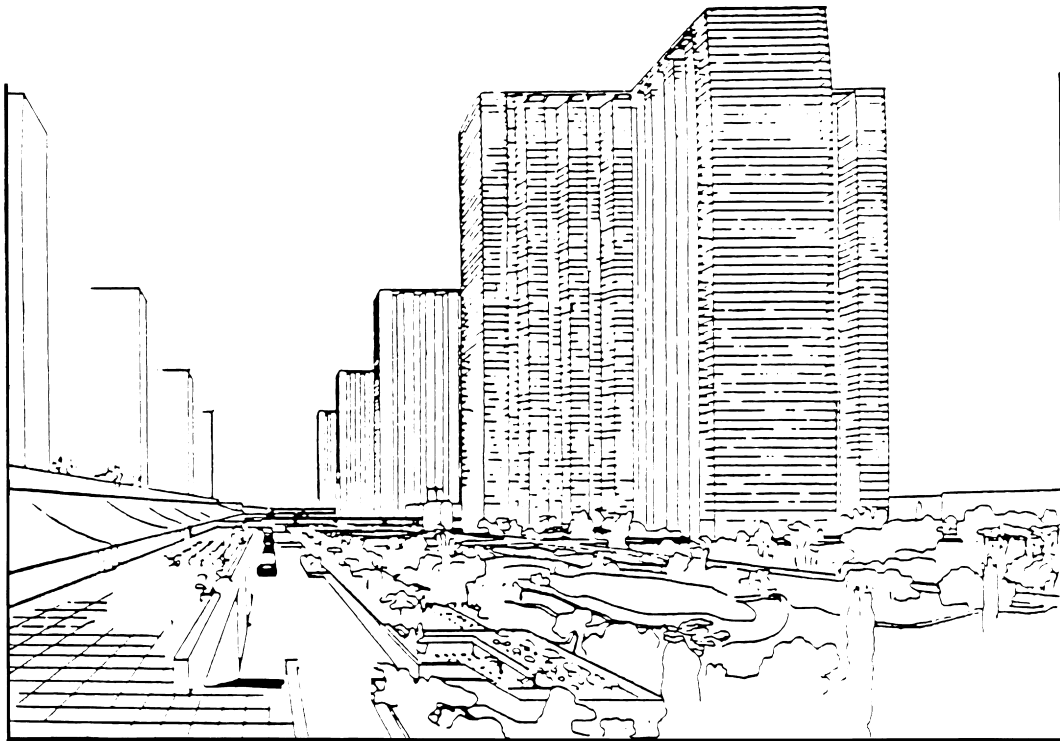


Figure 2 A Contemporary city

residential quarters. The “set-backs” permit of vast architectural perspectives. There are gardens, games and sports grounds. And sky everywhere, as far as the eye can see. The square silhouettes of the terraced roofs stand clear against the sky, bordered with the verdure of the hanging gardens. The uniformity of the units that compose the picture throw into relief the firm lines on which the far-flung masses are constructed. Their outlines softened by distance, the sky-scrapers raise immense geometrical facades all of glass, and in them is reflected the blue glory of the sky. An overwhelming sensation. Immense but radiant prisms.

And in every direction we have a varying spectacle: our “gridiron” is based on a unit of 400 yards, but it is strangely modified by architectural devices! (The “set-backs” are in counterpoint, on a unit of 600 × 400.)

The traveller in his airplane, arriving from Constantinople or Pekin it may be, suddenly sees appearing through the wavering lines of rivers and patches of forests that clear imprint which marks a city which has grown in accordance with the spirit of man: the mark of the human brain at work.

As twilight falls the glass sky-scrapers seem to flame.

This is no dangerous futurism, a sort of literary dynamite flung violently at the spectator. It is a spectacle organized by an Architecture which uses plastic resources for the modulation of forms seen in light.

A city made for speed is made for success.