Le Corbusier’s *The City of Tomorrow and its Planning*

I’m nearly done with Le Corbusier’s *The City of Tomorrow and its Planning*, which is a very fascinating book. The reason I read it now was that I began to suspect that if software architecture and enterprise architecture should use urban planning as a metaphor, it would probably be closer to the use-zoning kind of Le Corbusier and Ebenezer Howard, and not the New Urbanism of Jane Jacobs, with its stressing of the importance of diversity in neighborhoods. Software architecture and enterprise architecture, after all, aim at keeping heterogeneity in check, although EA acknowledges that it can only reduce it to a certain extent.

This book offers some very interesting clues as to the motivations for use-zoning. Le Corbusier has an entire chapter devoted to statistics showing “the exodus of city dwellers” from the centers of great cities, and the “replacement by business.” Le Corbusier seems to take this as evidence that people prefer to live in suburbs rather than in cities, and therefore bases his theory of urban planning on the idea that the center should be for commerce (and some public services), and that it should be surrounded by two belts of residential areas – one with “blocks of dwellings on the ‘cellular’ system”, and one outer garden city.\(^1\)

Le Corbusier doesn’t seem that far away from Jane Jacobs in what he wanted to achieve, but they are lightyears apart regarding their ideas about how cities best are transformed. Le Corbusier believed in knocking down entire districts and rebuilding them from scratch (and he actually makes a convincing case), for instance in his “Voisin” plan\(^2\) for rearranging the center of Paris shown in the picture above. Jacobs, on the other hand, believes that change must be gradual and often affected through indirect measures, as neighborhoods in cities are delicate organisms which must be handled with care or they will be destroyed.

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\(^1\) Le Corbusier’s theories suggest that the center of a great city should consist mainly of skyscrapers – exclusively for commercial use – and that the area occupied by these should be no greater than
5 percent. The remaining 95% should be parks with trees. Also in the center there would be a train station, the “hub” of the city, and three-story buildings with “luxury shops, [...] restaurants and cafés.”

Surrounding the center there would be a belt of residential buildings, in the form of those zigzag blocks with “set-backs” seen in the picture below (from his contribution to a 1933 competition for the renewal of Stockholm’s city centre). Each of these buildings are to be small communities in themselves, offering catering and domestic services. But what bothers me is that I can’t find any mention of shops, cafés, and restaurants in this residential district (or in the garden city, for that matter). Did he really intend for all shopping, out of house dining, and visiting cafés to take place in the center of the city?

As for his garden city, which surrounds the residential belt around the center, I suspect he saw this quite differently than Ebenezer Howard. All across Le Corbusier’s book, there are references to how order = peace and happiness. His garden city was to be “of a purely geometrical kind.” Perhaps this is what Howard advocated as well, but for some reason I’ve interpreted (assumed?) him as being for charming garden cities with curvilinear streets. Le Corbusier continues:

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.

So Le Corbusier’s garden city is rectilinear (as the rest of his Contemporary City). The 400×200 yard blocks are parks surrounded by two or three story “villas.” These parks are said to contain all kinds of arrangements for sports: “Football, tennis, running tracks, basket ball, etc., are all available. You come home, you change, you can take your exercise just outside your own home.” Again no mention of shops, restaurants, cafés, theaters, museums, etc. Somewhere there is a mention which I can’t find to museums and theaters, but as I remember it, these were to be located in the center as well.

I’ll better finish this post before it gets too long. I haven’t quite figured out if he says something that is of relevance to software architecture and enterprise architecture. I’ve written some margin notes about this that I have to review. Also, it is interesting to consider his theories in the context of imageability. See also my previous posts “Le Corbusier and Order” and “Le Corbusier and Monasteries as Cities.”

1 It makes me suspect that Walt Disney was a huge fan of Le Corbusier in his planning the “Experimental Prototype Community of Tomorrow,” EPCOT.

2 Named after an automobile company that financed his pavilion at the Exhibition of Decorative Art in 1925. Le Corbusier also approached Citroën and Peugeot, who both declined his invitation.
The above was posted to my personal weblog on June 25, 2004. My name is Peter Lindberg and I am a thirtysomething software developer and dad living in Stockholm, Sweden. Here, you'll find posts in English and Swedish about whatever happens to interest me for the moment.

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