Le Corbusier's fascination with Islamic architecture and urbanism forms a continuing thread throughout his lengthy career. The first, powerful manifestation of this lifelong interest is recorded in his 1911 travel notes and sketches from the "Orient" — an ambiguous place, loosely alluding in nineteenth- and early twentieth-century discourse to the lands of Islam in the Middle East and North Africa, and in Corbu's case, solely to Istanbul and western Asia Minor.1

The formative role of this voyage d'Orient for Le Corbusier is evident in his theoretical work and practice thereafter.2 References to Islamic architecture and urban forms appear in his writings as early as 1915 and span his numerous publications, among them L'Art décoratif d'aujourd'hui (1925), La Ville radieuse (1933), Quand les cathédrales étaient blanches (1937), and Le Modulor (1949).3 A number of his early villas, such as the Villa Jeanneret-Perret (1912), Villa Favre-Jacot (1912), and Villa Schwob (1916), are inspired by the Ottoman houses in terms of their interior organization around a central hall, their simple spaces, massing, and blank street façades. The Mediterranean vernacular with an Islamic touch surfaces sporadically in his built work — for example, in the Weekend House (1935), the Roq and Rob project (1949), and the Maison Jaoul (1956) — recording its most memorable moment with the Notre Dame de Ronchamp (1950–55), inspired by the sculptural mass of the Sidi Ibrahim Mosque near El Ateuf in the Algerian countryside.

In one episode of Le Corbusier's career, however, Islam no longer only serves as a source of inspiration and reference, but

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1. Le Corbusier, Fathma, 1939
becomes a living challenge: his projects for Algiers, developed between 1931 and 1942, attempt to establish an ambitious dialogue with Islamic culture, albeit within a confrontational colonial framework. The most lyrical of Le Corbusier’s urban design schemes, these projects have been discussed at length by architectural historians of modernism. Yet, aside from brief references, their colonial context and ideological implications for French policies in Algeria have remained uninvestigated—a surprising oversight given their raison d’être: the decision to renovate the city in celebration of the centennial of French occupation and in preparation for its becoming the capital of French Africa. They have been explained as a parable of European modernism, as a poetic response to the machine age, to syndicalism, and so forth, and thus abstracted from the “political geography” of colonial Algeria. Neither have the Algiers projects been analyzed as part of Le Corbusier’s infatuation with Islamic culture, on one side, shaped by the legacy of nineteenth-century French discourse on the “Orient,” and on another, informed by the Parisian avant-garde’s preoccupation with the non-Western Other in the 1920s and 1930s. To fill this lacuna in the extensive literature on Le Corbusier, I will attempt to read the work of perhaps the most controversial figure of modernism from a shifted perspective informed by recent postcolonial discourse.

Not surprisingly, architecture and urban forms constituted the overriding theme in Le Corbusier’s observations of other cultures. Nevertheless, they were accompanied by an inquiry into the social norms, in particular, religious and sexual ones—two of the three realms historian Norman Daniel defines as having characterized Islam for centuries in European discourse. It is my hope that an interconnected analysis of Le Corbusier’s ideas on these issues will provide a comprehensive understanding of the architect’s vision of Islam as the Other and reveal a new level of ideological complexity within the Algiers projects.

Le Corbusier undoubtedly first encountered the “Orient” through literature, travel accounts, and paintings. Certain popular authors, among them Théophile Gautier and Pierre Loti, appear time and again in his writings. Furthermore, the illustrations in travel books must have shaped Le Corbusier’s expectations. His fascination with travel literature and its
visual media is reflected in his own work, for example, by his use of Charles Brouy’s drawings of the Algerian casbah in addition to postcards in La Ville radieuse. As will be discussed later, the impact of the Orientalist school of painting becomes apparent in relation to Le Corbusier’s studies of Eugène Delacroix’s Les Femmes d’Alger in the 1930s, but it is manifested earlier in Istanbul in his speculations about Islamic women and the private life of the Muslim family.

In a rerun of innumerable travel accounts, Le Corbusier first viewed Istanbul from a boat in May 1911. “Thus we did approach by sea,” he wrote, “like in old times, to watch all these things unfold.” This was a strategy carefully planned by Corbu, in order to be welcomed by an image already formed in his mind by everything he had read. Nineteenth-century travel books on the Ottoman capital followed a set pattern, the opening pages describing the striking impressions of the city from the sea, divided into three settlements by water, with Istanbul on one side of the Golden Horn, Galata on the other, and Uskudar yet farther away on the Asian banks of the Bosphorus; they talked at length about the harmony of colors, the skyline defined by domes and minarets, and the reflections of the built and natural forms on the water. To Le Corbusier, then, this was a familiar moment, much rehearsed in his imagination. He knew what he wanted to see:

I want Stamboul to sit upon her Golden Horn all white, as raw as chalk, and I want light to screech on the surfaces of domes which swell the heap of milky cubes, and minarets should thrust upward, and the sky must be blue. . . . Under the bright light, I want a city all white, but the green cypresses must be there to punctuate it. All the blue of the sea shall reflect the blue of the sky.

On that particular day, however, it rained, the sea turned gray, the Golden Horn looked muddy, mosques dirty, and houses flimsy. When he landed on the shore, Corbu was disappointed even further by the cosmopolitan atmosphere of the streets, “swarming with a crowd of Greeks, Germans, and French, all that suspect blend of the Levantine.” Yet the burden of Orientalist tradition compelled him to partake in the collective passion expressed by other Europeans before him: “I had to work at it,” he admitted, “and most of all I wanted to love this place.” As witnessed by his numerous sketches, Le Corbusier often relived the experience of viewing Istanbul from across the sea on the commuter ferries that connected the shores of the city, thus finding something of the mental image he had constructed back in Europe. Indeed, Corbu surpassed the formulas of Orientalist descriptions by reading the urban form analytically: he studied the careful placement of monuments in respect to topography that resulted in “summits formed by really enormous mosques” as well as their relationship to each other in the calculated composition of the skyline.

Like Istanbul, Algiers makes a powerful impression from the sea — one that has also been recorded unfailing in travel literature. Théophile Gautier described the approach:

A whitish blur, cut into a trapezium, and dotted with silver sparkles — each one of them a country house — began to be drawn against the dark hills: this is Algiers, Al-Djazair, as the Arabs call it. We approach; around the trapezium, two ochra-colored ravines define the lower edges of the slopes, and shimmer with such a lively light that they seem as though they are beds to two sun torrents: these are the trenches. The walls, strangely crenellated, ascend the height of the slope. . . . Two palm trees and four windmills stand out in contrast: the palm tree, symbol of the desert and the patriarchal life; the windmill, symbol of Europe and civilization.

Algiers is built as an amphitheater on a steep slope, such that its houses seem to have their feet on the heads of others. Nothing is stranger for the French eye than this superposition of terraces in the color of chalk. . . . When the distance gets smaller, we perceive amidst the general glare the minaret of a mosque, the dome of a sufist convent, the mass of a great edifice, the Kasbah.

Le Corbusier’s drawings and descriptions of Algiers similarly move from distant views to inner city (echoing again the travel literature). The architect’s main focus, however, was to show how his project would complement and enhance the beauty of Algiers, whose “real face” would be a front de mer in his proposals as throughout the city’s history. His essay Poésie sur Alger thus begins with an argument about incorporating poetry into urbanism, but follows immediately with a description of the city from the sea:

We are in Africa. This sun, this space created by azure and water, this foliage have formed the set for the actions of Salambo, Scipion and Annibal, together with those of Kheir-ed-dinn the Barbaresques. The sea, the chain of the Atlas Mountains, the slopes of Kabyle unfold their blue displays. The earth is red. The vegetation consists of palm trees, eucalyptus trees, gum trees, cork oaks, olive trees and
fig trees; the perfumes, jasmine and mimosa. From the first plan to the confines of the horizons, the symphony is imminent. . . . Building their Casbah, the Turks [sic] have created a masterpiece of architecture and urbanism. 16

Elsewhere, Le Corbusier described the casbah as having made the site: "The casbah of Algiers . . . has given the name Algiers-the-White to this glittering apparition that welcomes at dawn the boats arriving to the port. Inscribed in the site, it is irrefutable. It is in consonance with nature." 17

The aesthetic appeal in the image of these two cities, created by the powerful dialogue between geography and architectural form, turned them into unique poems. In Istanbul the poetry resided in the "unforgettable spectacle" of the urban form, with the light coming from behind and giving the city a monolithic appearance. 18 In Algiers the quality of light reflecting on the buildings and the landscape gave the city its poetry, and complementing the geography, the vegetation, and the perfume of the air, created a "symphony." 19

Even in the early stages of his career, for Le Corbusier good urbanism meant formal unity. In Istanbul this unity was achieved by the modular design system that, following an "elementary geometry," underlay the composition of the great mosque complexes; cubic masses covered by domes acted as modules, being "centered, measured, and proportioned in relation to the sanctuary they belong to." 20 The integrity of the urban form depended, therefore, on the cubic elements, making Istanbul a masterpiece of urbanism, because, Le Corbusier stated, "great architecture is cubic." 21

Two decades later, Le Corbusier observed a similar unity in Algeria, again based on a module, the square-shaped cell. He commented on the cellular organization of Ben-Isghem, a town in Mzab, "What an order, what a decision, what a sensible tool to the service of mankind." And he provided an architectural formula for happiness: 22

\[
\text{the key} = \text{the cell} = \text{men} = \text{happiness}
\]

Displaying the historic fascination of Europe with Islam, Le Corbusier attempted to explain architectural and urban forms in terms of religious beliefs. Unversed in Muslim philosophy, he recycled the cliché that the Muslim religion
held an answer to all sociocultural questions and in one short sentence argued that the unity of concept was due to the unity of religion. He considered this a most reasonable explanation because “Asia [was] forever religious” — an ahistorical if widespread reading that fixed the entire continent in some ambiguous place in the past. Then, repeating another cliché, he suggested that the module was derived from the nomadic tent and “religion elevate[d] it to the infinite.”

Le Corbusier’s sole insightful observation on the relationship between Muslim religion and built form might be found in his global diagram for the world of Islam, that is, in his discussion of the unity of religion as expressed in the physical and symbolic “pull” of Mecca: “the orientation of the axis of every mosque on Moslem soil toward the black stone of Kaaba is an awe-inspiring symbol of the unity of faith.” The mihrab of every mosque was indeed “a door to the Kaaba.” Undoubtedly, Le Corbusier’s obsession with the Kaaba also derived from its simple, cubic form, which he illustrated in La Ville radieuse with a postcard, but which he had studied earlier while sketching a tile in the Valide Mosque in Istanbul.

Le Corbusier’s sporadic notes on Islam, otherwise, cannot be considered as products of deep thinking and analytical observation, but they reveal the young architect’s claim to a disposition of superiority toward other cultures. His choice of words in these brief statements tells more perhaps than their subject. He thus referred in Istanbul to the Muslims’ “poignant mysticism before Allah,” their “loud laments . . . in the ritual rhythms of worship,” “their supplication to the Unknown, the mournful credo of their beautiful prayers,” and “the swooning of their souls and those undulating recitals of
all the *muezins* on their minarets when they chant and call
the devoted to prayer.”

His reference to a performance of
whirling dervishes — a ritual transformed dramatically in the
nineteenth century for touristic consumption and one often
drawn and painted by European artists — evokes scenes that
extend the imagination: “We have attended a fiery religious
service by whirling Dervishes, of which I will say nothing just
now because otherwise I would never finish.”

Compared to his curiosity in all aspects of life in the
Ottoman capital, Le Corbusier maintained a marked dis-
tance from the local culture in Algiers. In part stemming
from his mission to redesign the city, his analytical observa-
tions were keyed to vernacular urban and architectural
forms. He did not, as in Istanbul, indulge in specula-
tions about society or religion, neither did he record eyewitness
accounts of religious rituals, although a populist version of
Orientalist vocabulary surfaced every now and then in his
writings. Le Corbusier’s references to the religious monu-
ments (the “high” art) of Algiers were brief and within the
context of his own proposals. For example, he envisioned
clearing the area around the two mosques on the Place du
Gouvernement and returning them to their original condi-
tion, sitting on a rock base. The Marine quarter would harbor
“indigenous institutions” in a “vast ensemble of new [and]
grand Muslim architecture, as monumental as it would be
picturesque.”

This detachment from monumental architecture in Algiers
was connected to current debates among the Parisian intelli-
gentsia, especially around the dialogue between ethnography
and surrealism in the 1920s. Questioning “reality” and
searching for alternatives to local (European) customs and
truths, surrealist ethnographers had turned to the non-
Western, abandoning, in the process, the distinction between
“high” and “low” culture. Influential and rigorous, the de-
bate generated a new emphasis on ethnography, as witnessed
by the extensive literature from the 1920s and 1930s. Not
surprisingly, the majority of the fieldwork was carried out in
the colonies, among them Algeria. Indigenous house forms
and settlement patterns constituted major topics of interest
to ethnographers; their publications were richly illustrated
with examples from vernacular architecture, analyzed in
terms of daily life and rituals. Although Le Corbusier had
always displayed a critical sensitivity to vernacular forms and
fabrics, his deliberate determination in Algeria to turn away
from monumental architecture altogether should be under-
stood in reference to this discourse.

In Istanbul Le Corbusier’s eye and pen had wandered from
the monuments to the side streets defined by blank garden
walls, to the *konaks*, large mansions that he considered archi-
tectural masterpieces, to the simple houses. He rediscovered
the solitude of the residential streets of Istanbul in Algeria,
where, again, the houses — although much different in their
architectural character — were divorced from the street.

“The [Algerian] street is an anonymous corridor,” he de-
clared; life and poetry flourished inside the house. The
narrow streets of the casbah, effectively sheltered from the sun
by the projections of the buildings that lined them, were only
passages and places to shop. Yet a “miracle” occurred
when the door of an Arab house opened onto a lovely court-
yard, one or two stories high, surrounded by sculpted arches.
Here silence reigned. “The street [was] abolished.” By igno-
ring the street, that “violent passage,” the Arab house afforded
a life in coolness (fraisheur) and tranquility. Furthermore,
Arabs had “conquered the view of the sea for every house”
by means of roof terraces that “created a roof over the city.”
The casbah thus became an “immense stairway, a tribune
invaded at night by millions of adorers of nature.” Comparing
the Arab city to the European, the “adorable courtyard” of
the Arab house to the “sinister courtyard” of the European
apartment buildings, the protected passageways to the
“jumbled streets,” Le Corbusier concluded that the “civi-
lized’ live like rats in holes,” whereas “the ‘barbarians’ live in
solitude, in well-being.”

Westernizing transformations in Istanbul’s architecture and
urban forms, a process that had begun in the mid-nineteenth
century, created mixed reactions in the young Le Corbusier.
The hybrid and modern look of Pera, a former Genoese
settlement to the north of the Golden Horn, inhabited
mostly by Europeans and non-Muslim Ottoman minorities
in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, intrigued
him as “a compressed city with the allure of New York”
whose buildings “thrust upward like dominoes, . . . nothing
soften[ing] the severity of [their] height.” Pera was “beautiful and imposing.” Other Europeans had, of course, lamented the Westernized appearance of Galata as not fitting into an Oriental imagery. Gautier, for example, had noted these apartment buildings as negative developments:

Some ugly houses, of six and seven stories, line the road on one side, and rejoice a superb view, of which they are quite unworthy. It is true that these houses pass for the best in Constantinople and that Pera is proud of them — judging them (rightly) as fit to figure honorably at Marseilles or Barcelona, or even Paris; for they are, in fact, of an ugliness the most civilized and modern.39

Elsewhere, Le Corbusier echoed those Europeans who deplored the destruction of the old city by modernization and Westernization. “The catastrophe that will inevitably ruin Istanbul [is] the advent of modern times,” he wrote. “Stamboul will die. The reason is that she is always burning and being rebuilt,” he continued, diagnosing correctly a main factor behind the fast pace of Istanbul’s transformation. He attributed the poor quality of the new architecture in the neighborhoods cleared by fires to the inability of European companies (especially the German ones) commissioned to do the work.39 Another loss was the “majestic coat of whitewash” in mosque interiors to the “ignominy of repugnant and revolting painted ornamentation” — the signature of the Young Turks, according to Le Corbusier.39 While the connection between political reform agendas and painted decoration is far-fetched, Corbu’s critique was broader; he aimed at the turn-of-the-century Ottoman adoption of European fashions that, in order to replace the purity (the modernity) of local historical forms, disguised these truly “modern” forms behind masks of decoration. In 1925, back in Paris, Le Corbusier condemned the modernization programs of the new Turkish republic that had succeeded the Ottoman Empire by referring again to whitewash: “And already today we have Ankara, and the monument to Mustapha-Kemal! Events move fast. The die is cast: one more centuries-old civilization goes to ruin. No more whitewash in Turkey for a long time to come!”39

Le Corbusier expressed similar sentiments about the destruction of Algiers, for which he blamed the French interventions. “The last fifty years of European colonization,” he argued
in 1942, “abolished without any regrets the natural richness and petrified the new city into a desert with its crowded houses leaning onto noisy streets.”41 Like the cities of Europe and America, Algiers had sickened, for it had been torn of its poetry by the engineers.42 Nonetheless, Le Corbusier respected the original achievements of the French colonial oeuvre and credited the first six decades of French rule with good urbanism. He had already clarified his standpoint in La Ville radieuse, where, including a plan that indicated the first interventions (the Place d’Armes and the main east-west artery), he expressed his admiration of the early colonial urbanism: “The military rulers of the conquest knew how to make beautiful city plans. They knew how to urbanize.”43 While Le Corbusier’s scheme to obtain the commission by associating the current administration with the glorified conquerors is quite transparent in this statement made on the centennial of the occupation, his repetition of the same theme in various contexts reflects his firm support of French colonial policies. Celebrating the mission civilisatrice in Morocco, he praised the instruction, loyalty, and justice brought by the French, as well as the network of roads and the cities they had built — all “signs of civilization.” These achievements, he argued, had created an atmosphere of admiration, enthusiasm, and respect among the Arabs:

The Arab discovered his educator, his instructor. He did not bat an eyelid of doubt. With two hands outstretched, leaving all his hopeless deceit behind, he loved, admired, understood the new times and respected France with all his conviction. Architecture and urbanism can be the great educator.44

In accordance with the colonial mission, Le Corbusier’s Algiers — the “French capital of Africa,” the “head of French Africa,” and the “phoenix of France . . . reborn out of the ashes of the mother country” — would reinforce French rule not only in Algeria, but throughout the entire continent.45 The architect expressed this view passionately in his writings, but also in several drawings where an axis originating in the north continues into Africa, connecting France, from Le Havre via Paris to Marseilles and across the Mediterranean, to Algiers and to Gao. Sketches of skyscrapers indicate the cities along the axis, proposing the unification of greater France through the new architecture and urbanism. The notion of a geographical axis between France and Algiers was not unprecedented in colonial discourse; for example, Cotereau, a prominent engineer working for the city of Algiers, argued in 1933 that the city must be renovated by means of a “sane architecture, following Aryan traditions,” because of “its position on the axis of France.”46 Furthermore, Le Corbusier’s sketches depict the idea of la grande France, which stemmed from an “imperial” French doctrine and a colonial consciousness developed in 1930, and which culminated in the Colonial Exposition of 1931.47 As Paul Reynaud, Minister of Colonies, expressed at the time, “the essential aim of the Exposition is to give the French people consciousness of their Empire. . . Everyone among us must feel he is a citizen of the greatest France [la plus grande France] that expands to five parts of the world.”48

Given Le Corbusier’s loyalty to the idea of la grande France and to French rule in Algeria, it makes sense to analyze his projects within the framework of colonial planning traditions in the earlier part of the century. In the history of French colonial urbanism, the name of Hubert Lyautey, governor-general of Morocco from 1912 to 1925, stands out. Under the rule of Marshal Lyautey and the supervision of the architect Henri Prost, France had undertaken extensive experiments in urban planning that expanded Rabat, Fez, and Casablanca according to a well-developed social strategy. Certain ideas and passions connected Lyautey and Prost to Le Corbusier. Like Corbu, Prost had visited Istanbul as a young man while studying at the academy in Rome, which he had convinced to finance a study of Hagia Sophia — not as a monument in isolation, but in its urban context. The historical and cultural richness of the Ottoman capital as well as its formal structure had indeed appealed to Prost and underlined his proposal for a restitution project for the neighborhood around Hagia Sophia.49

Lyautey and Le Corbusier shared an admiration for the vernacular architecture of the Islamic Mediterranean, which reflected on their implementations and proposals in the historic fabrics of the Arab cities they were involved in, as well as on their preference for modernist aesthetics. Lyautey confirmed the latter point clearly: “Islam gave me,” he declared in 1931, “a taste for great white walls and I could almost claim to be one of the forerunners of Le Corbusier.”50 Furthermore, Lyautey and Le Corbusier both believed in the central role urbanism played in changing people’s lives. Lyautey’s urbanism aimed to accommodate his new colonial
11. Le Corbusier, plan showing the first colonial interventions in Algiers

12, 13. Le Corbusier, diagrammatic maps showing geographical axis between France and Algiers
order, based on diversity, where people of different social and cultural circumstances would coexist. His widely quoted statement "A construction site is worth a battalion" meant that city planning would replace the older colonial policies based on military force. The strong social engineering agenda in Le Corbusier's urbanism, especially in reference to the new man of the machine age, is well known. Yet his understanding of diversity, which also seems to imply regionalism and enables us to understand the Algiers projects better, has remained more obscure. On the title page of La Ville Radieuse, Le Corbusier defined urban plans as "the rational and poetic monuments set up in the midst of contingencies": "places, peoples, cultures, topographies, climates... only to be judged as they relate to the entity - 'man.'" The specificity of some of these contingencies in Algiers - the place, the topography, the climate -- surfaces in the unprecedented lyricism of Le Corbusier's Algiers projects. The other contingencies -- different peoples and cultures -- help to explain the parallels between Le Corbusier's and Lyautey's urbanism in the colonies.

The two principles that Lyautey had outlined for Prost at the outset of the latter's arrival in Morocco in 1913 were, according to legend, to preserve the medinas in respect to the local culture and aesthetics and to build new, modern cities for the European populations. Both of these principles underlie the structure of Le Corbusier's plans for Algiers, leading to the separation of the French from the indigenous people, a phenomenon Janet Abu-Lughod has labeled "urban apartheid" in reference to Moroccan cities.

For Lyautey, the preservation of the Arab town held several meanings, some emotional, some practical. Above all, he savored the aesthetic qualities of the Arab town, its "charm and poetry," which he attributed to the sophistication of the culture. To understand the difference between this culture and the European one was essential to building a colonial policy that would endure:

The secret... is the extended hand, and not the condescending hand, but the loyal handshake between man and man -- in order to understand each other.... This [Arab] race is not inferior, it is different. Let us learn how to understand their difference just like they will understand them from their own side.

This major difference between the two cultures required the separation of the indigenous from the European populations in the city:

Large cities, boulevards, tall façades for stores and homes, installation of water and electricity are necessary, [all of] which upset the indigenous city completely, making the customary way of life impossible. You know how jealous the Muslim is of the integrity of his private life; you are familiar with the narrow streets, the façades without opening behind which hides the whole of life, the terraces upon which the life of the family spreads out and which must therefore remain sheltered from indiscreet looks.

Consequently, Lyautey made the conservation of the Moroccan medinas one of his priorities in urban planning. He announced proudly, "Yes, in Morocco, and it is to our honor, we conserve. I would go a step further, we rescue. We wish to conserve in Morocco Beauty -- and it is not a negligible thing." Behind these compassionate words, nevertheless, lay an economic goal: the medinas were essential for the development of tourism, especially for the romantic travelers and artists who would be eternally thankful to Lyautey.

The International Congress on Urbanism in the Colonies, held during the 1931 Colonial Exposition in Paris, recorded the powerful influence of Lyautey's ideas and practice on the new rules of planning in the French colonies. Among the goals of the congress, as listed by Prost, were "tourism and conservation of old cities" and "protection of landscapes and historic monuments"; the "wish list" of the participants included a respect for the beliefs, habits, and traditions of various races and the creation of separate settlements. By then, the implementation of such principles had already expanded to other colonial cities. In Algiers, for example, the casbah was placed under a special regime destined to conserve its picturesque character to promote tourism.

Like Lyautey's Moroccan medinas, Le Corbusier's Algerian casbah was "beautiful," "charming," and "adorable" and it "never, no, never must be destroyed." Its historic significance as the "place of European and Muslim life during centuries of picturesque struggles" was held to be of great interest for the entire world. Therefore, its historical and aesthetic values, the vestiges of Arab urbanism and architecture, should be protected to enhance the "gigantic" touristic potential of Algiers for western and central Europe.
problem of the casbah was, however, an admittedly difficult one. This was mainly due to overpopulation caused by the influx of peasants escaping the miserable conditions in the countryside; the casbah sheltered four to six times more residents than it could contain, sometimes twenty persons in a single room, according to Le Corbusier's figures.\(^6\) If Algiers was to become the capital of French Africa, the misery of its Muslim population had to be addressed, the casbah “purified” and reorganized, its population reduced.\(^6\)

Le Corbusier thus proposed to preserve the upper casbah in its integrity, while restricting the densities and intervening in the patterns of use, following the planning decisions made before him.\(^56\) A number of buildings were to continue to function as residences, but others were to be converted into centers of arts and crafts in order to initiate an indigenous “renaissance.” Indeed, an impressive number of new schools and workshops were established by the colonial authorities in the 1920s and 1930s to develop local crafts — embroidery, leatherwork, metalwork, cooperwork, woodwork, carpentry, pottery, masonry, and decorative arts — with the goal of increasing their commercial value.\(^67\) The lower casbah, on the other hand, would be expurged of its slums; only the mansions would be preserved, converted into specialized museums for the indigenous arts. Parks and gardens would replace the areas cleared from the slums, but the existing street network would be maintained to link the high casbah to the Marine quarter and to the harbor.\(^68\) Following the Moroccan precedent, the Muslim residents of Algiers would be strictly separated from the Europeans.

The policy of establishing separate cities was carried through to such an extent that written into the wish list of the participants in the 1931 urbanism congress was the creation of a “green belt,” sometimes referred to as cordon sanitaire (a term that recalls the practice of evacuating Europeans from epidemic-ridden towns in the Algerian countryside and enforcing quarantine on local people).\(^69\) Le Corbusier reinterpreted the idea of the green belt while wholeheartedly acknowledging its necessity. In his Obus plan of 1932, for example, a giant linear structure that connects the hillside residences for Europeans to the cité d'affaires in the Marine quarter forms a bridge over the casbah, transforming the sanitary green belt into an air band and reversing the horizontality of the former into a vertical element. Repeating the concept in his later plans, Corbu himself emphasized the essential separation of the two settlements: “This artery will be separated entirely from the indigenous town, by means of a level difference.”\(^70\)

Le Corbusier’s dramatic segregation of the casbah has been commonly interpreted by architectural historians as a symbolic gesture. Tafuri sees in Corbu’s treatment of the casbah a “timeless model . . . the metaphor of an ancient time,” which is “foreign to time, foreign to the modern, indifferent to its destinies.”\(^71\) These words from one of the most perceptive historians of our day belong, paradoxically, to the Orientalist tradition that attributes timelessness and a prehistorical existence to the Islamic city, denying it change and process and accentuating the difference between the dynamism of the European modern and the stasis of the ancient Muslim. No doubt, Le Corbusier’s new Algiers would have stood in sharp contrast to the Muslim town, but his reading of the casbah was far more complex than Tafuri suggests. Emphasizing its cosmopolitan nature and its fascinating process of change, Le Corbusier praised the casbah for its houses that recorded the “progress of styles, of periods, of history.”\(^72\) Nevertheless, the implications of the project carry the colonial premises much farther than does Lyautey’s work: Le Corbusier’s plan establishes constant visual supervision over the local population and clearly marks the hierarchical social order onto the urban image, with the dominating above and the dominated below.\(^73\)

The colonial planners envisioned the green belts as places where “contact and collaboration” between races would not be prohibited: they were the potential sites for interaction.\(^74\) Le Corbusier assigned this function to the starting point of his air belt, the Marine quarter, between the casbah and the streets of Bab Azoun and its eastern extension, Bab el Oued. Cleared and rebuilt with large à redents blocks over parks and gardens, harboring the “business center” and “civic center,” the quarter would provide the link between the European and the Arab cities. Certain Arab institutions, such as offices, shops, and meeting halls, would also be placed here.\(^75\) The location was most convenient for overlapping functions, because of its proximity to the port, its centrality in terms of future growth, and its significance as a historical axis for
14–16. Le Corbusier, three views of the Obus plans
Arabs. At the time of Le Corbusier’s involvement in Algiers, this crowded quarter, occupied by residents of diverse nationalities, was the most problematic area for the city administration due to a lack of “material and moral hygiene.” Provisions had already been made for its “destruction and complete reconstruction.” Le Corbusier’s cleansing would be urban and social, at once providing for controlled activities for Arabs and racial contact in an ordered environment.

Le Corbusier’s projects would thus endow the colonial administration in Algiers with a new apparatus for enhancing its political power by means of an urban order that facilitated supervision. In addition, a militaristic signal lies in the curving forms of the building complexes, emphasized by the architect himself in calling the plan “Obus” in reference to the trajectory of an exploding shell. This is not a simple, light-hearted metaphor and should not be dissociated from its political context, from the violent confrontations between the French army and the local resistance forces during the one hundred years of occupation. Curiously enough, the curvilinear forms of Le Corbusier’s project relate to another major aspect of French colonialism in Algeria: its obsession with Algerian women. Under colonial rule, the European fascination with Muslim women had led to controversial policies, among them penetrating the privacy of Muslim family life by “liberating” the women. Women were, for example, strongly encouraged (and at times forced) to discard their veils—perhaps the most loaded symbol of Islam. The rationale was that if women were conquered, the core structure of this unyielding society would be destroyed, leading to its total surrender.

Le Corbusier himself provoked the association between his projects and Algerian women by describing at length his enchantment with the women of the casbah and by likening the city of Algiers to a female body: “Algiers drops out of sight,” he noted, viewing the city from a boat leaving for France in 1934, “like a magnificent body, supple-hipped and full-breasted... A body which could be revealed in all its magnificence, through the judicious influence of form and the bold use of mathematics to harmonize natural topography and human geometry.” The cover sketch for Poésie sur Alger depicts a unicorn-headed (?), winged female body — supple-hipped and full-breasted — (the city/poem?) caressed gently...
by a hand (the architect’s hand?) against the skyline of new Algiers. This type of analogy, which claims mastery over the feminized body of the colonized territory (in this case, claiming that its beauty can be reincarnated through the architect’s intervention), is not unprecedented in the French discourse on Algeria. One author, writing at the turn of the century, called Algeria “a wise and dangerous mistress,” but one who “exudes a climate of caresses and torpor,” suggesting that control over her mind and body was essential. Although the feminization of the “Orient” is a common theme in European descriptions and representations of Islam, the blatant use of the word maîtresse is specific to the colonies.

Le Corbusier was immersed in the discourse that attributed a lascivious sexuality to Islamic culture. This was one of the attractions that had drawn him to Istanbul in his youth. Re-enacting the scenes he had read of in books and had seen in paintings and repeating another favorite association between prison and palace, he fantasized about the life in the seraglio, which would be filled with “divine, thrilling odalisques . . . wearing around their naked ankles and arms . . . solid gold rings . . . like serpents. Loaded with gold and their nails painted in vermillion, they suffocated from waiting so long in their magnificent cages.” The houses on the quiet streets of Istanbul were “perhaps . . . prisons of odalisques,” evoking in young Corbu feelings of “a lightly painful, melancholic, beneficent poem.”

The women of Istanbul, inaccessible to Le Corbusier, intrigued his sense of mystery further with their veils. He could barely make out their eyes through the pieces of cloth that enhanced their beauty: “innocent eyes of gazelles,” he exclaimed, “delicious.” He was more ambivalent about the long robes. At times he described the women in chadors as “impressive bats, with the folds of their capes framing their heads and then fading away from their hips,” reminiscent of “those fiends at the towers of Notre Dame”; at others, as “hidden treasures in burgundy, ebony silk . . . just as exquisite as Persian cats,” “charming in their mysterious black veils, their disquieting anonymity of identical silks, their hidden treasures all alike.”

The Muslim women of Algiers rekindled Corbu’s memories of his youth, with all the associations. He now used the veil as a shorthand to denote the local culture. He included veiled women in his sketches to highlight the poetry and the duality of the city. But more, he also consistently represented the casbah as a veil in his diagrams, thus visually feminizing the colonized Muslim society. He was, of course, neither the first nor the last to do so; in 1933 Lucienne Favre, a French woman writer, had, for example, described the casbah as “the vamp of North Africa,” bearing a “capricious feminine charm” and a great “sex appeal.”

Le Corbusier’s experience with the women of the casbah contrasted with the impenetrable distance he had encountered in Istanbul. Now as an older and more self-confident man, and one bearing the psychology of being French in a colony, he visited the brothels, sketched women in the nude, and claimed to have discovered here “the nobility of the nude thanks to the plastic structure of certain females of the casbah under the intense but nuanced light of Algiers.” Jean de Maisonsoul, who later became the curator of the Museum of Modern Art in Algiers and who had accompanied Le Corbusier on his sight-seeing trips, witnessed to his astonishment the architect’s purchase of popular postcards, “horrible . . . in raw colors, pinks and greens, representing indigènes nues in an oriental decor.” Such postcards, depicting women in the public realm, in prison settings that were homes, involved in “typical” rituals and poses — all loaded with sexual innuendos — have been studied by postcolonial critic Malek Alloula as expressions of the Frenchman’s fantasies about the Algerian woman. In light of the previous discussion, Le Corbusier’s appropriation of these public images
19. Le Corbusier, sketch of the waterfront, Algiers

20. Le Corbusier, sketch of the casbah, Algiers

21, 22. Le Corbusier, sketches of Algerian women
Another painting by Le Corbusier, *Femmes d’Alger*, is the product of a similar process.88 The story of *Femmes d’Alger*, which took its final form in 1938, has been told before, although little has been made of its colonialist implications. It is thus worthwhile to note again the close relationship of this work to the architect’s Algiers projects and the appropriation of the Muslim woman as a metaphor. With *Femmes d’Alger*, Le Corbusier returns to the centennial celebrations of the French occupation one more time: he refers directly to Delacroix’s *Femmes d’Alger* of 1833, a painting that had come to be regarded as a symbol of the conquest of Algeria. I have tried to show here that Le Corbusier’s Algiers projects were expressions of the French “colonial consensus,” which developed from the common French experience based on a shared perception of France’s role in contemporary history, and which protected the French “economic, moral, and strategic” interests in Algeria.89 As such, they must be situated in a broad time frame. They do not belong solely to the 1930s and to modernism’s response to colonialism; they also “speak” the idiom of other periods — nineteenth-century Orientalism as well as the colonial discourse of the first decades of the twentieth century. Furthermore, these projects epitomize a culmination of the long history of French interventions “to represent, to inhabit, and to possess” a territory.90 Had Le Corbusier’s scheme been realized, it would have marked an appropriation of Algiers such as no colonial planner had elsewhere ever achieved. The comprehensive scale of the proposal and its aggressive seizure of the city’s geography from the coastline to the mountains would have transformed the urban image radically — the now miniaturized casbah a symbol of the controlled existence of the colonized people and their “different” culture, a constant reminder of the power of colonialism.

Notes

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has been challenged by Richard
Ingersoll, Journal of Architectural
7. Daniel’s third realm is power. See
Norman Daniel, Islam, Europe, and
Empire (Edinburgh, 1966), xvi.
8. Charles Brouty illustrated many
popular books on Algeria, among
them Lucienne Favre’s Tout
l’inconnu de la casbah d’Alger
(Alger, 1933). According to a letter
from Jean de Maisonneul to Samir
Rafem [sic], dated 5 January 1968,
Brouty, a “very well-known” figure
in the casbah, took Le Corbusier
around the quarter (Alger’s Files, Le
Corbusier Archives, Fondation Le
Corbusier, Paris, hereafter FLC).
9. Le Corbusier, Journey to the East,
88.
10. Le Corbusier wrote in a letter to
Karl Osthaus on 28 July 1911,
“J’avais tant rêvé de Constanti-
nopole” (quoted in Le Corbusier; Le
Passé à réaction poétique, 162).
11. Le Corbusier, Journey to the East,
85.
12. Ibid., 88.
13. Ibid., 90.
14. Théophile Gautier, Voyage
pittoresque en Algérie, ed. Madeleine
Coctin (1945; reprint, Geneva:
15. Le Corbusier, letter to the Gov-
ernor of Algeria, 16 May 1942, FLC.
16. Le Corbusier, Poésie sur Alger
(1950; facsimile reprint, Paris:
Fondation Le Corbusier, 1989), 16.
17. Le Corbusier, “Le Folklore est l’expression fleurie des traditions,”
Voici la France de ce mois 16 (June
1941): 51.
18. Le Corbusier, Journey to the
East, 149.
19. Le Corbusier, Poésie sur Alger,
16.
20. Le Corbusier, Journey to the
East, 103.
21. Le Corbusier Sketchbooks 1-6. In
1915, to illustrate the concept of
unity in city form, Le Corbusier
mentioned one other city, Isfahan.
His other references were to build-
ings — to the interior of the Cathed-
dral of Notre Dame in Paris, to the
gothic cathedrals and to the Egyp-
tian temples (the latter two unspeci-
fied), to the exterior of the Greek
temples, and to the mosque com-
plexes.
22. Le Corbusier, La Ville radieuse
(Paris: Vincent, Fréal, 1933; English
trans., New York: Grosman Pub-
lishers and Faber & Faber, 1967),
230.
23. Le Corbusier Sketchbooks 1-6-7.
The association of Islamic monu-
ments with nomadic tents has been
made before. Consider, for example,
Viollet-le-Duc’s argument that for
Arabs “monuments were nothing
but tents.” See Eugène-Emmanuel
Viollet-le-Duc, preface to Jules
Bourgoin, Les Arts arabes (Paris,
1877).
24. Le Corbusier, Journey to the
East, 104.
25. Ibid., 100.
26. Ibid., 95.
27. Ibid., 143.
28. For example, he referred to the
builders of the casbah as “terrible
warriors,” who, paradoxically,
enjoyed a joie de vivre and knew how
to relax. See Le Corbusier, “Le
Folklore est l’expression fleurie des tradi-
ations,” 32.
29. Le Corbusier, “Proposition d’un
Plan Directeur d’Algérie et de sa
région pour aider aux travaux de la
Commission du Plan de la Région
d’Algérie et comme suite à la séance
du 16 Juillet 1941,” FLC. The
two mosques that Le Corbusier
proposed to return to their original
setting are the eleventh-century El-
Kebir and the seventeenth-century
El-Djedid. It is noteworthy that Le
Corbusier did not even mention
them by name; nor was he intrigued
by their architecture.
30. For a discussion of ethnographic
surrealism, see James Clifford, The
Predicament of Culture: Twentieth-
Century Ethnography, Literature,
and Art (Cambridge, Mass.: Har-
31. The Mission Dakar-Djibouti,
which took place between 1931
and 1933, was the first large-scale
expedition. For the link between
ethnography and colonialism, see
Michel Leiris’s important article
“L’Ethnographie devant le colonial-
isme,” Les Temps modernes 6, no. 58
(August 1950): 357-74. Among eth-
ographic studies of Algeria, see M.
Goichon, La Vie feminine du Maâb:
Étude de sociologie musulmane
(Paris: Librairie Orientaliste, Paul
Gauthier, 1927); Mathea Gaudry, La
Femme chaoua de l’Aurès (Paris:
Librairie Orientaliste, Paul
Gauthier, 1928); and the work of
Thérèse Rivière in Fanny Colonna,
Aurès/Algérie, 1935-36: Photographs
de Thérèse Rivière (Paris: Éditions
de la Maison des Sciences de l’Homo-
me, 1987). A small group of French
women ethnographers focused their
studies on Algerian women.
32. Le Corbusier, La Ville radieuse,
230.
34. Le Corbusier, La Ville radieuse,
230, 233 (Le Corbusier’s emphasis).
35. On nineteenth-century transfor-
rations in Istanbul, see Zeynep
Çelik, The Remaking of Istanbul
(Seattle: University of Washington
36. Le Corbusier, Journey to the
East, 90.
37. Théophile Gautier, Constants-
polé (New York, 1873), 87.
38. Le Corbusier, Journey to the
East, 167.
39. Ibid., 100-103.
40. Le Corbusier, The Decorative Art
of Today, trans. James I. Dunnett
(Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press,
1987), 190.
41. Le Corbusier, Poésie sur Alger,
17.
42. Ibid., 11-13.
43. Le Corbusier, La Ville radieuse,
233.
44. Le Corbusier, Quand les
cathédrales étaient blanches (Paris:
Éditions Plon, 1937), 46-47.
45. Le Corbusier, Poésie sur Alger,
38, 44.
46. Cotereau quoted in J. J. Deluz,
L’Urbanisme et l’architecture d’Algé-
rie (Alger: Office des Publications
Universitaires, 1968), 12.
47. Raoul Girardet, L’Idée coloniale
176-99.
48. Quoted in ibid., 185. There was,
nevertheless, a vocal opposition
to these policies by the French
Communist Party and a group of Pa-
risian intellectuals. Surrealist artists,
writers, and poets — among them
André Breton, Paul Eluard, Louis
Aragon, and Yves Tanguy — named the
concept of la grande France
“intolerable” and, condemning the
standpoint of the socialist party in
its acceptance of colonialism, ex-
plained their version of the real goals
of the exposition in May 1931 as
“nothing other than to give the citi-
zens of the metropole the conscious-
ness of proprietors, which they will

49. While in Istanbul, Le Corbusier, too, had carefully studied Hagia Sophia. Yet he did not share Prost’s enthusiasm for the Byzantine history of the city, which he considered “imperially corrupt” and which he believed “could not be brought to life” because “its spirit [had] departed from the very few stones that remain.” (Le Corbusier, Journey to the East, 89). Henri Prost returned to Istanbul in 1934, when the Turkish government commissioned him with the master plan for the city. He worked there from 1937 to 1951 and his plan was largely implemented. On Prost, see L’Œuvre d’Henri Prost: Architecture et urbanisme (Paris: Académie d’architecture, 1960), and Jean Royer, “Henri Prost. L’Urbanisation,” Urbanisme 88 (1965): 3–31. During approximately the same years, from 1939 to 1949, Le Corbusier was involved on and off in a rocky process of developing a master plan for the city of Izmir, which he completed in 1949, but which remained unimplemented. Originally, in 1928, Prost had designed a plan for Izmir, but Corbu was able to persuade the authorities to substitute Prost’s plan with his own. See the correspondence between Le Corbusier and the French Ambassador to Ankara, 14 February 1939, 23 February 1939, 9 March 1939, and 30 January 1940, FLC. By this time, Le Corbusier was a strong critic of Prost’s urbanism. Previously, he had fluctuated in his evaluation of Prost’s work. As seen in his statement, quoted above, from Quand les cathédrales étaient blanches, he praised Prost (if indirectly) on the success of colonial urbanism in Morocco; however, in 1931, during his visit to Fez, he noted that “Prost’s city planning is nothing but confusion” (“Sketchbook: Espagne//Route 31b/B7,” in Le Corbusier Sketchbooks 1:440).


52. Rabinow, French Modern, 288.

53. See Abu-Lughod, Rabat.

54. Quoted in ibid., 141.

55. Quoted in Daniel, Islam, Europe, and Empire, 489.

56. Quoted in Abu-Lughod, Rabat, 143.

57. Ibid., 142.


61. Le Corbusier, La Ville radieuse, 229.

62. Le Corbusier, letter to the Prefect of Algiers, 18 May 1942, FLC.

63. Le Corbusier, Questionnaire C, 1931–35, FLC; idem, note for M. Sabatier, 6 May 1941, FLC; and idem, La Ville radieuse, 244.


65. Le Corbusier, note for M. Sabatier, and idem, “Proposition d’un Plan Directeur.”


67. See Montaland, “L’Urbanisme en Algérie,” 51, and Pour le paysan et l’artisan indigènes (Algiers: Gouvernement Général de l’Algérie, Direction Général des Affaires Indigènes et des Territoires du Sud, Service de l’Économie Sociale Indigène, 1939), 140–41. To hasten the pace and increase production and to provide more “precision” to the work, these schools and workshops promoted the use of modern machinery.

68. Le Corbusier, “Proposition d’un Plan Directeur.”


70. Le Corbusier, “Proposition d’un Plan Directeur.”


73. In the light of this discussion, I must refer once again to Tafuri’s analysis that sees in Le Corbusier’s megastructures into which residents could insert their choice of buildings “the greatest liberty” allowed to the public (Tafuri, Architecture and Utopia, 131). While this observation is valid as far as the European public in Algiers is concerned, it is disturbing that Tafuri dismisses the city’s Muslim population as a nomenklatura.


75. Le Corbusier, “Note financière annexe au Projet C de l’urbanisation du Quartier de la Marine à Alger,” 1934, FLC.

76. Le Corbusier, Questionnaire B, 1931–35, FLC.


79. One of the most memorable, if sentimental, essays on the topic was written by Frantz Fanon, who traced the origins of this policy to the early 1930s. See Frantz Fanon, “Algeria Unveiled,” in A Dying Colonialism, trans. Haakon Chevalier (New York: Grove Press, 1965), 35–67 (first published in 1959 as L’An cinq de la révolution algérienne).

80. Le Corbusier, La Ville radieuse, 260.

81. J. Lorrain, Heures d’Afrique (1899), quoted in Yvonne Knibiehler and Régine Goutaler, La
82. Le Corbusier, Journey to the East, 83.
83. Ibid., 94.
84. Ibid., 125, 128–30.
85. Favre, Tout l’inconnu de la casbah d’Alger, 10 (“sex appeal” is English in the original).
86. Quoted in Samir Rafi, “Le Corbusier et ‘Les Femmes d’Alger’,” Revue d’histoire et de civilisation du Maghreb (January 1968): 52. Prostitution was rampant in the cashbah, a phenomenon attributed to French encouragement. See David Gordon, Women of Algeria: An Essay on Change (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1968), 42. According to Favre, in the early 1930s there were five to six hundred “girls ... permanently active” in the cashbah, especially in the lower cashbah (Favre, Tout l’inconnu de la casbah d’Alger, 103). The presence of the brothels was so overwhelming that, not to be confused with them, many families residing in the quarter posted signs declaring “honest home” [maison honnête]; others dressed their daughters à la française so that they would not be bothered on the streets of the cashbah. See Sintes, “Le Quartier de la Marine et la Cashbah.”
91. I have borrowed these terms from Said’s analysis of the appropriation of the geography of Algeria in Albert Camus’s fiction. See Said, “Narrative, Geography, and Interpretation,” 88–90.

Figure Credits
2, 3, 6, 7, 9, 11, 14–16. Le Corbusier, La Ville radieuse (Paris: Vincent, Fréal, 1933).
21, 22. Fondation Le Corbusier.