

## Regarding Landscape – Le Corbusier’s formative years

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Despite the vast research on the work and life of Le Corbusier, only in recent years has his relationship to landscape yielded particular attention. Undeniably, the landscape plays a decisive role to a broader comprehension of Le Corbusier’s diverse body of work. Its transversal presence in projects, writings and even paintings and sculptures suggests the primordial quality of the theme. During this presentation we aim to discuss how the landscape, understood as a main condition of Le Corbusier’s design process, can be linked to his formative years - delimited by the Journey to the East.

Supported mainly by primary sources, we are able to outline three evolutionary moments in a plural reflection process regarding the understanding of landscape and the notion of nature: firstly, Le Corbusier’s childhood, which can be characterized by the latent assimilation of the qualities of nature; secondly, the academic years at the La Chaux-du-Fonds Art School – where the approximation towards *nature* is essentially made through the ornament; and lastly a series of voyages and internships in Europe, a period of critical review and affirmation of the landscape as a primary condition of the architectural design process.

Charles-Edouard Jeanneret, dit Le Corbusier, was born and raised in La Chaux-du-Fonds, a watchmaking town in the Swiss region of the Jura. Several times during his life, he will recall the encouragement from his family to explore the region’s natural and landscape qualities, as well as, the incentive to his early interest in drawing. Thus, these circumstances of Jeanneret’s childhood might have been decisive to his inherent sensibility to the meaning and importance of nature and its condition as landscape.

Jeanneret’s higher academic education starts in April 1902, when he joins the *Classe de gravure d’ornements* at the La Chaux-du-Fonds Art School – that is Jeanneret would design and engrave watch cases. From the first exercises, where general

observation of nature was encouraged, as well as, copying ornaments from books to the later abstraction and conventionalizing characteristic forms of nature to be presented as ornamental motives, this period will be characterized by the constant motivation to register and reflect upon the qualities of nature, its qualification as landscape and its meaning in Art.

In June 1905, Jeanneret is invited by L'Eplattenier to join his newly *Cours Superior* in order to start his education in architecture. Jeanneret and his colleagues will be guided under the same ideal: apply the region's natural and landscape qualities into decoration. Indeed, the course's description implies that similarly to the Art School *Art Nouveau* spirit, the ornament will be the structuring object of the exercises. As Jeanneret's academic studies from this period suggest, we can identify as an essential architectural propose the application of the ornament as synthesizing his comprehension of nature.

After concluding the Cours Superieur, Jeanneret begins, in September 1907, a four year period through Europe: a voyage to Italy; stays in Vienna, Paris, Germany and lastly the Journey to the East. During this period, we are able to identify new research premises that allow Jeanneret to surpass his approach to architecture, that was essentially made through the ornament. In this regard, it seems to us that the evolution for a broader architectural par-pa-se will guide Jeanneret to understand landscape as a condition of the design process.

Despite some indications of self-review to Jeanneret's architectural intentions - such as the literature read - his drawing of the Palazzo Vecchio in Florence denotes that ornament still remains Jeanneret's main architectural focus during his Voyage to Italy. As we are able to observe, the drawing is dominated by notes on the individual qualities of the architectural elements. This approach to architecture also extends, in a certain way, to the design process. It appears that in this model for the Villa Jacquemet, projected during his stay in Vienna, Jeanneret explores right from the beginning an ornamental motif in order to develop the general idea of the façade. However, in Jeanneret's own words, Vienna killed his purely plastic conception of architecture – the research only for forms. In this way, the letter sent to L'Eplattenier eight months after arriving to Paris acquires special interest to understand this evolutionary moment. In spite of his previous pledge to continue to apply nature in building with sane materials, Jeanneret identifies the

study of medieval architecture, physics and materials, and the revolutionary forms of the concrete as essential supports to develop his ideal of architect and architecture.

Following Jeanneret's stay in Paris, is also through letters to L'Eplattenier, and to William Ritter, that we can recognize that those new ideals are further explored during his twelve months in Germany. Besides the interest in the search for harmony, rhythm and proportion, Jeanneret reveals that his aesthetical evolution will now be through Greece and Rome, accepting the classical lessons debuted with Auguste Perret. In this regard, we must consider Alexandre Cingria-Vaneyre's book *Les entretiens de la villa du Rovet* in the development of Jeanneret's definition of architecture and consequently reinterpretation of the meaning of landscape, as it helps him relate his new interest in classic architecture to L'Eplattenier's movement to symbolize the cultural and natural values of the Jura.

Having into account all the review in progress, the Journey to the East presents Jeanneret the opportunity to consolidate his new ideals. Additionally, his records, in particularly the pocket sketchbooks, suggest the progressive reinterpretation of landscape's role in architecture. Therefore, the entry on the Danube River adverts us to delimitate a first moment, when Jeanneret's notes reveal the predominance of objects studied independently. That is, even though there is the concern to comprehend the object in all his parts, there is no relationship established with its surroundings. In contrast to the preference for writing over drawing revealed in this first moment, drawing emerges as the main analysis tool in the Istanbul records. If the sketches on the Haggia Sophia still denote the privilege to the isolated study of the object, we can identify in the departure from Istanbul the first interpretations of large portions of territory. The drawings search for landscape as the synthesis of an all. That is to say, drawings seek the unity between edified - the mosques or the fortresses, and nature, as in the topography, the sea.

The Lavra Monastery in the Mount Athos, his next stop after Istanbul, is first drawn in its surroundings, having the different depth plans represented, as well as, for the first time, the appointment of the horizon line. And only after it will be studied by its plans, sections or details. This progression in the method of analysis motivates to understand that landscape is becoming fundamental to the approach of the building. Within this context the visit to Athens appears to confirm landscape as a condition of the architectural project.

The sketches of the Parthenon start by framing it on the Acropolis and how the ensemble relates to the Gulf of Aegina. Furthermore, perspective drawings are made in order to study a selected detail in his surroundings, as well as the relation between interior and exterior.

From Jeanneret's articles, notes and drawings, we are able to understand the intrinsic, independent values of landscape and buildings. Nevertheless it will be in their relationship that Jeanneret finds the sublime: the orthogonality of the Parthenon against the vast horizon or the compositional axe aligned towards the sea, as he will later recall in *Towards an Architecture*. Therefore, landscape is presented as a qualifying condition to the volume and function of the project and it will be signified in the architect's interpretation of the existing natural elements. As Jeanneret explains: "We only pick up the valve for its pearl. The temples are the reason of this landscape".

To conclude, if we consider Jeanneret's first explorations in the Jura, the approach towards nature through the ornament and the debut in architecture at the Art School under L'Eplattenier, the self-guided review through Europe and the progressive appearance of landscape in his records, we will be able to appreciate the simplicity of the sketches made during the last moment in the *Journey to the East*, the return by Italy. Moreover, we will understand how this simplicity is in fact a synthesis of architecture regarding landscape.