



Le Corbusier in New York City

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"A hundred times have I thought New York is a catastrophe and 50 times: It is a beautiful catastrophe."

"Manhattan is hot jazz in stone and steel"

United Nations Headquarters

First Avenue between 42nd Street and 48th Street.

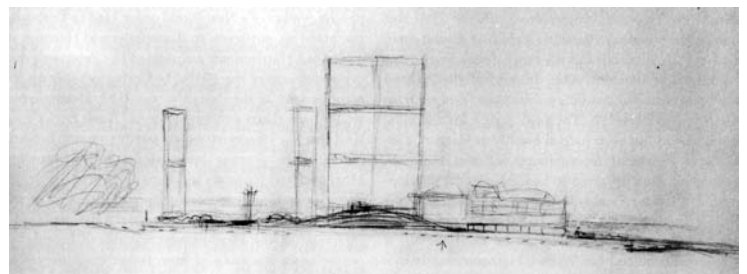
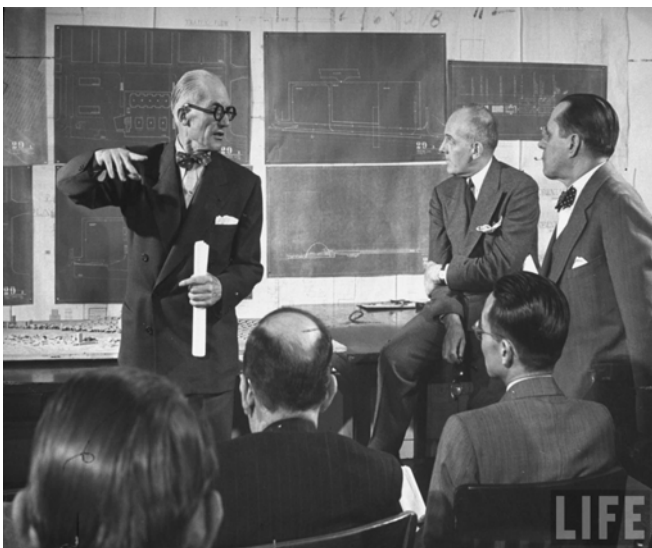
Le Corbusier's only work in New York City, the U.N. Headquarters was actually designed by an international committee directed by American architect Wallace Harrison, and including Brazilian architect Oscar Niemeyer. Harrison ultimately chose one of Le Corbusier's designs as the model for the headquarters, stating that "the only scheme that gets complete satisfaction is an early idea of Le Corbusier's as carried out, drawn up, by Oscar Niemeyer."

"Providing office accommodation for 3,400 employees, the Secretariat is a 39 story building with an aluminum grille to conceal equipment on the roof. The narrow end walls are of white marble; the other two elevations are surfaced with green-tinted glass. Floors devoted to mechanical equipment divide these glass facades into three parts...."

—Henry-Russell Hitchcock and Arthur Drexler, ed. *Built in the USA: Post-war Architecture*. p68.

"Sited by the East River, the scheme is dominated by the towering slab block of the Secretariat Building, which, with its narrow end walls rising like sheer white cliffs and its longer sides clad in glass curtain walling, has had considerable influence on subsequent high buildings throughout the world."

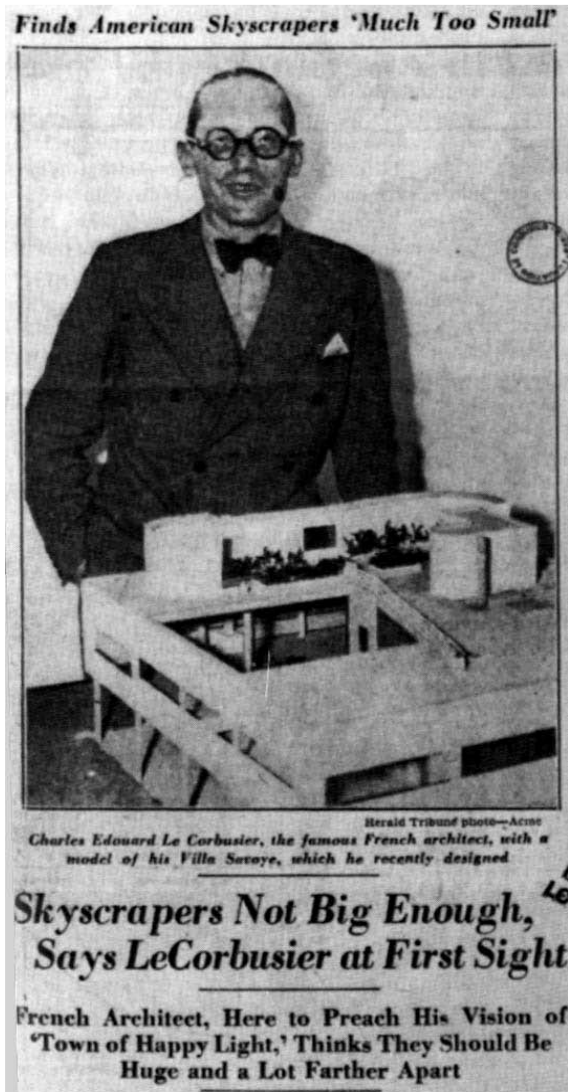
— Sir Banister Fletcher. *A History of Architecture*. p1279.



Clockwise from above: Members of the U.N. Permanent Headquarters Commission, including Le Corbusier (L), Ernest Cormier (R) and others discussing the design for the United Nations; Le Corbusier's early drawing for U.N. Headquarters, 1947; U.N. Headquarters from Roosevelt Island. The green glass-curtain tower was the first of its kind in New York.

When the Cathedrals Were White

Le Corbusier embarked on a well publicized trip to the the United States in 1935. The following excerpts are taken from When the Cathedrals Were White (Quand les cathedrales etaient blanches, 1937) a book which was based on his impressions of the trip . The title comes from his belief that the “modern skyscrapers of the New World, like the medieval cathedrals of Europe, might offer cultural renewal.” (Quote from Mardges Bacon, Le Corbusier in America, MIT Press, c2001. P. 304.)



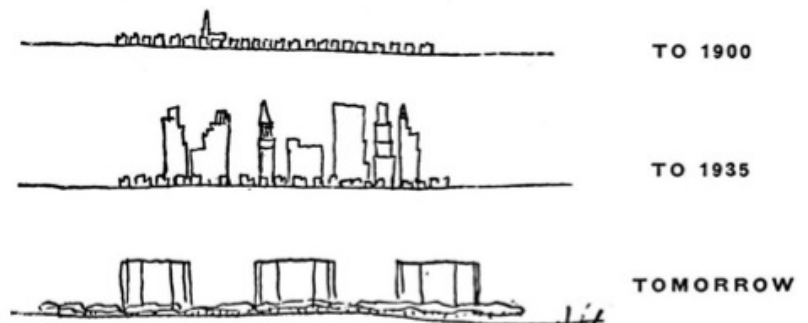
Herald Tribune article about Le Corbusier



Book jacket, When the Cathedrals Were White

On the past, present, and future of New York architecture:

"Up to 1900, the standard city of everywhere and always, before the development of fast machines. Up to 1935, the springing up of modern technique: the conquest of height. The skyscrapers are too small and the tiny houses remain at the foot of the skyscrapers. A modern metabolic change imposed on a pre machine cardiac system. That is the agony of today. The third transformation involves a wise and well-considered program of great public works, on the scale of modern times."



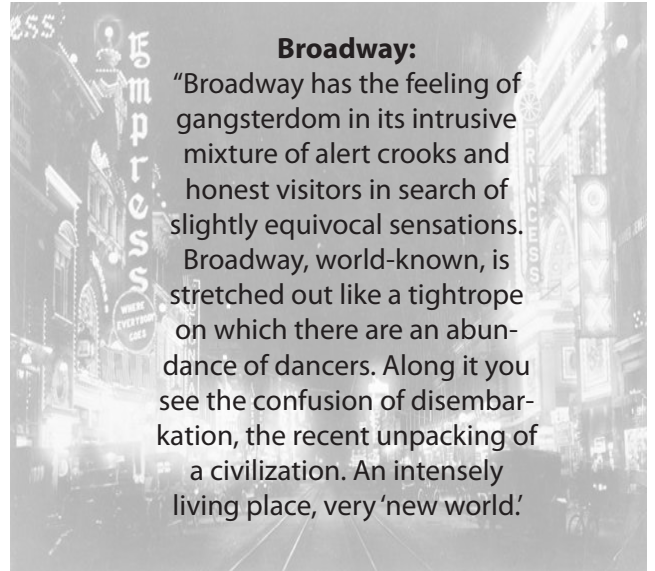
When the Cathedrals Were White cont.



The Manhattan Street Plan

The "Grid Plan," created by The Commissioners of Streets and Roads in the City of New York, 1811:

"The principle on which the streets were planned is useful, simple, true, human, and excellent. You are admirably oriented and Manhattan was well designed. In horse and buggy days! The period of the car has come; it is here with its tragic consequences: circulation in New York is hopelessly clogged." (Italics added).



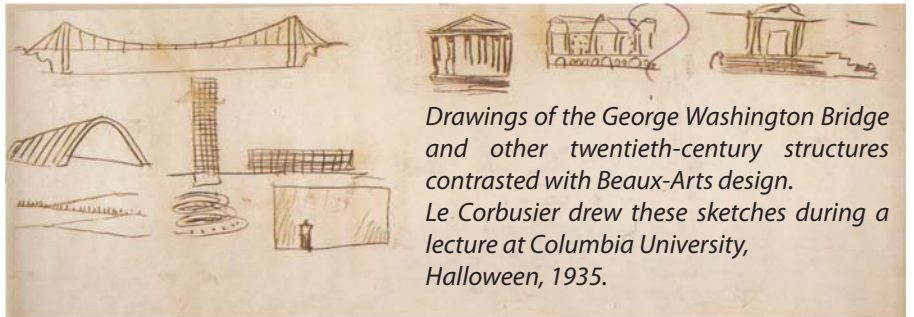
Broadway:

"Broadway has the feeling of gangsterdom in its intrusive mixture of alert crooks and honest visitors in search of slightly equivocal sensations. Broadway, world-known, is stretched out like a tightrope on which there are an abundance of dancers. Along it you see the confusion of disembarkation, the recent unpacking of a civilization. An intensely living place, very 'new world.'



The George Washington Bridge, Othmar Ammann and Cass Gilbert 1927-31

"The George Washington Bridge over the Hudson is the most beautiful bridge in the world. Made of cables and steel beams, it gleams in the sky like a reversed arch. It is blessed. It is the only seat of grace in the disordered city. It is painted an aluminum color and, between water and sky, you see nothing but the bent cord supported by two steel towers. When your car moves up the ramp the two towers rise so high that it brings you happiness; their structure is so pure, so resolute, so regular that here, finally, steel architecture seems to laugh. The car reaches an unexpectedly wide apron; the second tower is very far away; innumerable vertical cables, gleaming against the sky, are suspended from the magisterial curve which swings down and then up. The rose-colored towers of New York appear, a vision whose harshness is mitigated by distance."



Drawings of the George Washington Bridge and other twentieth-century structures contrasted with Beaux-Arts design. Le Corbusier drew these sketches during a lecture at Columbia University, Halloween, 1935.



The United States Custom House 1 Bowling Green Cass Gilbert, 1899-1907

"Done in pure 'Beaux-Arts'..., which, directly inspired by the Orsay Station or the Grand Palais in Paris, strikes a disagreeable note. So much insipidity and pomposity cannot resist the tonic air of the estuary"

When the Cathedrals Were White cont.

Central Park (Frederick Law Olmsted and Calvert Vaux, 1857)

"I am struck with admiration for the strength of character of the municipal authorities of New York who have preserved granite rocks and trees in the center of Manhattan... this unexpected space, a fairylike situation unique in the city without trees... But Central Park is too large and it is a hole in the midst of buildings. It is a lesson. You go through Central Park as if you were in a no man's land. The verdure, and especially the space, of Central Park should be distributed and multiplied throughout Manhattan."



Rockefeller Center



GE Building, originally RCA Building (Raymond Hood, 1933)

"It is rational, logically conceived, biologically normal, harmonious in its four functional elements: halls for the entrance and division of crowds, grouped shafts for vertical circulation (elevators), corridors (internal streets), regular offices.... The sets of bronze and glass doors are constructed with machine-like vigor."



Radio City Music Hall (Edward Durell Stone [architect] and Donald Deskey [interior], 1932)

"Radio City is a machine age temple... solemn, surfaced with somber marble, shining with clear mirrors mounted in stainless steel frames... 'Conditioned' air throughout, pure, clean, at a constant temperature. Am I on the fifth floor or the fortieth?"

