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Autor(en): **Bonsack, Amalia / Dayer, Charline**

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Colonial modernism or the supremacy of white

Amalia Bonsack
Charline Dayer



fig. a Proto-nazi propaganda photomontage depicting Weissenhofsiedlung as an 'Arab village'. Stuttgart, late 1930s. © Stadtarchiv Stuttgart

The polemics illustrated by the postcard depicting Weissenhofsiedlung as an ‘Arab village’ are representative of the controversial meanings of a colour *a priori* neutral.

The proto-Nazi satirical photomontage that appeared in the early 1930s, shows figures of Arabs and camels in the streets of the settlement, reflecting contemporary conservative critiques which considered the modernist buildings as ‘oriental imitations’¹—culturally inappropriate in the European context. In a time when National Socialism was on the rise, the new style was described as ‘un-German’ and the estate was often attacked in racist terms, such as ‘Little Jerusalem’ or ‘Arab village’². Those critiques were referring to specific features of the new modernist style, mainly its flat roofs and whitewashed façades, which evoked Mediterranean vernacular architecture. Such ‘oriental’ features had been imported to Europe since the late 1920s by Le Corbusier and fellow modernist architects, who were fascinated by certain aspects of Mediterranean and Islamic aesthetics. European colonial domination advanced the diffusion and romanticizing of such images, and many architects of the time were familiar with southern European or north African vernacular architecture—through widely-spread books, postcards, exhibitions or even travels. Le Corbusier’s accounts of his ‘Journey to the East’ (1911) or of Algiers’ casbah are some of the most famous examples of such direct experience. To some extent, the use of these timeless references can be seen as a way to veil the ‘rupture’ attributed to modernization.³

On the other hand—and more importantly—white walls were used by the modernist movement as a symbol of purity, reflecting contemporary preoccupations with cleanliness and hygiene, which had become issues of major international importance at the time.⁴ The Weissenhofsiedlung, which, in 1927, embodied the institutionalization of ‘International modernism’, was a showcase of the ‘Neue Wohnkultur’, promoted by the architects of the ‘Deutscher Werkbund’: a modern lifestyle based on hygiene, light and space. The buildings of the estate displayed characteristic cubic shapes, simplified façades and minimal interiors, as well as new building techniques and materials based on efficiency and standardization. For the exhibition, the only restriction imposed on the architects by its director Mies van der Rohe, was the use of flat roofs and white (or off-white) exterior walls. This rule, besides consolidating a unified image for the new style, was clearly expressing the movement’s hygienic obsession.

In a less naïve manner, as some contemporary authors acknowledge⁵, the use of white as a symbol of purity and cleanliness should be replaced in the context of European colonial domination. In this perspective, it can also be seen as a way for white Europeans to differentiate themselves from the colonized ‘Other’. In an article published in 1919, the German critic Adolf Behne had already sparked the debate on such racial associations, claiming that ‘colourlessness is the mark of education,

fig. b Diagrammatic map showing geographical axis between France and Algiers. Le Corbusier, ‘Poésie sur Alger’ 1950. © FLC / 2017, ProLitteris, Zurich

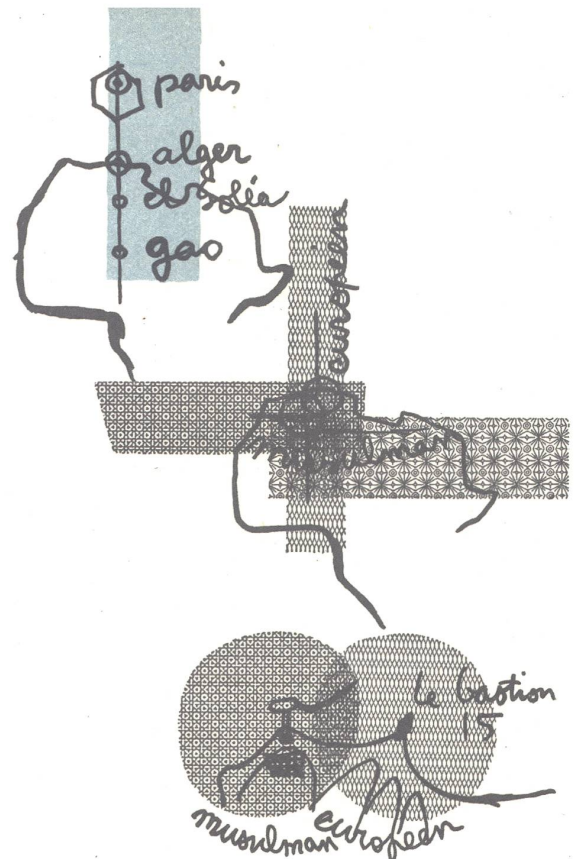
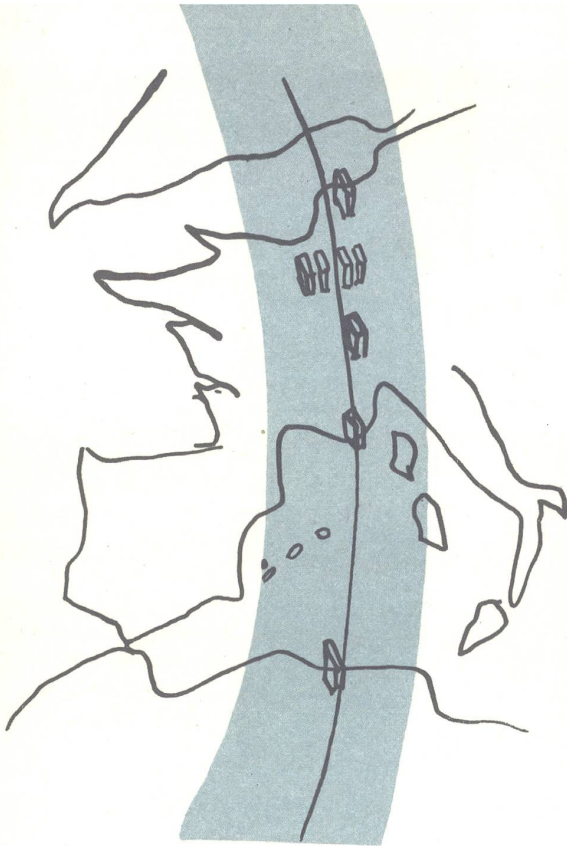


fig. c Diagrammatic map showing geographical axis between France and Algiers.
Le Corbusier, 'Poésie sur Alger' 1950. © FLC / 2017, ProLitteris, Zurich



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white like the European's skin! Civilized people of our climes look down on chromatic art and chromatic architecture as they look down on coloured human bodies—with a kind of horrified shudder»⁶.

In architectural theory, we can already detect such associations of 'purity' with cultural superiority in Adolf Loos's famous lecture 'Ornament and Crime' (1910), which had a major influence on the modernist movement. In his lecture, Loos claims the need to suppress decoration—a sign of degeneration—in order to achieve a purely modern architecture: «The child is amoral. To our eyes, the Papuan is too. [...] The Papuan tattoos his skin, his boat, his paddles, in short, everything he can lay hands on. [...] But what is natural to the Papuan and the child is a symptom of degeneracy in the modern adult. I have made the following discovery and I pass it on to the world: *The evolution of culture is synonymous with the removal of ornament from utilitarian objects.*»⁷ For Loos, modern society has «outgrown ornament», and this disappearance is the sign of a superior civilization marked by progress.

Fifteen years later, Le Corbusier goes further in 'L'art décoratif d'aujourd'hui' (1925), defining the white wall as a moral condition for modern architecture. In a chapter entitled 'A coat of whitewash: the Law of Ripolin', he calls (in a quasi-totalitarian tone) a generalized use of whitewash, claiming it to be the symbol of honesty and loyalty, and the sign of a 'great people': «The white of whitewash is absolute, everything stands out from it and is recorded absolutely, black on white; it is honest and dependable. [...] Whitewash is extremely moral. Suppose there were a decree requiring all rooms in Paris to be given a coat of whitewash. I maintain that would be a police task of real stature and a manifestation of high morality, the sign of a great people.»⁸ Nowadays, we are aware of Le Corbusier's controversial political affiliations⁹ and such associations are not so surprising when considering the context of the time. In the inter-war period, racial tensions were considerable, and modernist features—among many other tools—were employed in order to imply the superiority of white European culture over 'uncivilized' societies.

Back in the colonies, the use of architecture and urbanism as part of the 'civilizing mission' was widespread. At the time, European colonialism was at its zenith, and the implementation of westernized models contributed to the strategy of 'assimilation' promoted by the dominating powers. Modernist ideas and aesthetics were exported to the colonized countries, where they were applied on a larger scale. France, for example, was considering the countries of North Africa (mainly Algeria and Morocco) as 'laboratories'¹⁰, a testing ground for urbanistic projects that were conducted under the guise of politics of *modernization* and *industrialization*.¹¹ Up to WW2, the cities of Algiers and Casablanca—amongst others—were the theatre

of a number of urban plans which were implementing supposedly ‘advanced’ and ‘progressive’ urban and architectural design. Le Corbusier’s unrealized yet famous ‘Plan Obus’ was representative of the segregational character of this type of urban structures, based on the separation of the French from the indigenous people by preserving the vernacular medinas, while building new modern cities for the European population. In one of his sketchbooks, Le Corbusier defined the ‘destiny of the West’ as ‘to act, compose, create modern life’¹²—reflecting the important role of city planning in strengthening the colonial domination.

At the architectural scale, those various projects were implementing modernist imagery such as blank white walls and flat roofs which, while initially influenced by ‘oriental’ vernacular exported to Europe, were then re-imported as symbols of universalism. Again, this hybridization can be seen as a way of disguising the modernization process under an image of tradition and respect. However, the colonial agenda was to impose a westernized ‘modern’ lifestyle on the colonized countries and people. Architecture and urbanism were another way to implement such models in the everyday culture and habits. Ironically, the white wall—which had been criticized by the Weissenhofsiedlung’s detractors as an imitation of Mediterranean vernacular architecture—had been re-appropriated by European modernists and eventually turned into a symbol of white supremacy.

The set of controversies raised by the whiteness of the modernist wall, when replaced in its colonial context, reveals the strong political implications of any choice, however formal, in the practice of architecture. As ‘silent’ as it may seem, the white wall speaks out loud to remind us that architecture is always a matter of politics.

- 1 Karin Kirsch, ‘The Weissenhofsiedlung: Experimental housing built for the Deutscher Werkbund: Stuttgart, 1927’, Stuttgart / London 2013, p. 200.
- 2 Kai K. Gutschow, ‘The anti-Mediterranean in the literature of modern architecture. Paul Schultze-Naumburg’s Kulturarbeiten’, in: J.-F. Lejeune, M. Sabatino (Ed.), ‘Modern architecture and the Mediterranean. Vernacular dialogues and contested identities’, New York 2010, p. 149.
- 3 Paul Overy, ‘White walls, white skins: cosmopolitanism and colonialism in inter-war modernist architecture’, in: Kobena Mercer (Ed.), ‘Cosmopolitan modernisms’, London 2005, pp. 50–67.
- 4 Paul Overy, ‘Light, Air and Openness’, London 2007.
- 5 For a detailed argumentation on the topic, refer to Overy, ‘Light, Air and Openness: (2007) and Mark Wigley, ‘White walls, designer dresses: The fashioning of modern architecture’, Cambridge 2001.
- 6 Adolf Behne, ‘Die Wiederkehr der Kunst’ (1918), in: ‘Schriften zur Kunst’, Berlin 1998, quoted in: Mark Wigley, ‘White Walls, designer dresses’ (2001).
- 7 Adolf Loos, ‘Ornament and Crime’, translated by Wilfried Wang, in: ‘The Architecture of Adolf Loos: An Arts Council Exhibition’, London 1985.
- 8 Le Corbusier, ‘L’Art décoratif d’aujourd’hui’, Paris 1926, pp. 192–193. Translation by James I. Dunnett, ‘The Decorative Art of Today’, London 1987.
- 9 In 2015, three books were published, investigating Le Corbusier’s fascist tendencies: Xavier De Jarry, ‘Le Corbusier, un fascisme français’, François Chaslin, ‘Un Corbusier’, Marc Perelman, ‘Le Corbusier, Une froide vision du monde’, Paris 2015.
- 10 Gwendolyn Wright, ‘The politics of design in French colonial urbanism’, Chicago 1991, p. 85.
- 11 Tom Avermaete, ‘Another modern. The post-war architecture urbanism of Candilis-Josic-Woods’, Rotterdam 2005, p. 34.
- 12 ‘Le destin de l’Occident: agir, composer, créer la vie moderne.’, ‘Le Corbusier Sketchbooks, Volume 1, 1914–1948’, B7, Cambridge 198, p. 437.

Amalia Bonsack and Charline Dayer, born 1991 and 1992, obtained a Bachelor’s degree in architecture at EPF Lausanne in 2014. They are currently pursuing their Master’s degree at ETH Zurich.

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