By the time he designed his Pavillon des Temps Nouveaux for the 1937 Exposition Internationale in Paris, Le Corbusier was internationally recognized as a master at proclaiming, debating, and disseminating architectural matters via images. Only now did he deploy this gift for pictorial rhetoric before a vast public and on a truly large scale: two levels of ramps connecting a series of platforms took the visitor on a promenade along 17,000 square feet (1,600 square meters) of photomurals (fig. 1)<5.118>.1

Photomurals became the medium of choice for the victorious Front Populaire at the Exposition Internationale in Paris. 1937. Main axis of the second floor with the panels on Living and Leisure. Fondation Le Corbusier, Paris. FLC L2-13-120

Photomurals became the medium of choice for the victorious Front Populaire at the 1937 fair. With its takeover of the parliament followed by the election of Léon Blum as prime minister in June 1936, the Socialists had come to power when the exposition was already under construction, with only a few months until its scheduled opening. Under these circumstances, photomurals were a panacea.2 Consisting of photographic montages glued on cardboard, they could be made quickly and on the cheap, and their grand scale guaranteed a strong and all-encompassing visual impact. As such, the Pavillon des Temps Nouveaux could be said to belong to a kernel of pavilions including, just a few yards away, Charlotte Perriand’s collaborative project with Fernand Léger in the small clearing assigned to the French section. These temporary structures for the Communist Party’s Fête de l’Humanité (fig. 5.119)3—whose layout was intended to reproduce in miniature the visual dynamics of the pavilion itself—had already made a virtue of the sometimes problematic site. As Le Corbusier later noted with pride, his structure was rejected by the exposition’s authorities as non-architecture and was omitted from both official publications. For Le Corbusier, this was confirmation that many of his colleagues, as he contemptuously phrased it, dreamed of little more than “pavilloner”—to indulge in the puerile activity of merely decorating architecture as they had done for the Decorative Arts Exhibition of 1925.4 At the closing of the fair, Le Corbusier’s tent was thus promptly pulled down and its contents scrapped. His pavilion and its contents are now known to us only via a photobook published in 1938—Des Canons, des munitions? Merci! Des logis . . . S.V.P.5—whose layout was intended to reproduce in miniature the visual dynamics of the pavilion itself.

Photomurals were not mere spectacle; Le Corbusier claimed; in a Europe beset in 1937 with economic depression and the concomitant rise of totalitarian regimes, they were there to remind farguers that nations had better ways to use the formidable retosting of the Second Machine Age than to gear up for yet another war. His pavilion, he declared, was intended to reproduce in miniature the visual dynamics of the pavilion itself.

In moving his project from solid pavilion to tent, Le Corbusier dropped the bourgeois-sounding name Musée d’Esthétique Contemporaine in favor of Musée d’Art Populaire and reconceived it as a nomadic structure. He asked that a railway carriage be installed on the entrance side. Fondation Le Corbusier, Paris. FLC L2-13-74


Fig. 5.118 Pavillon des Temps Nouveaux at the Exposition Internationale, Paris. 1937. Main axis of the exposition with the panels on Living and Leisure. Fondation Le Corbusier, Paris. FLC L2-13-120

Fig. 5.119 Pavillon des Temps Nouveaux at the Exposition Internationale, Paris. 1937. General view from the entrance side. Fondation Le Corbusier, Paris. FLC L2-13-74

him what he considered to be a poor alternative site, he at first refused. However, wooed and reinvigorated by the victorious Left, Le Corbusier decided to turn the relative paucity of space, time, and funds to advantage. He conceived his pavilion at the Porte Maillot annex as a large, simple, tent-like structure of wood, steel, and brightly colored canvas, anchored by highly visible metal cables (fig. 5.110).6 The idea of using water-resistant canvas apparently came from his cousin and frequent collaborator, Pierre Jeanneret, who had recently experimented with temporary structures for the Communist Party’s Fête de l’Humanité.7

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5 All translations, unless otherwise noted, are by the author.

6 Ibid., p. 5.


eastward across the Russian steppes, stopping in villages and towns to spread word of the October Revolution. Similarly, Le Corbusier saw his itinerant carriage as a “Club des Jeunes” that would include a movie theater, a music room, a library, a museum, a telegraph office, a print shop, and a study room. And yet—symptomatic of the troubled 1930s as well as of Le Corbusier’s notoriously labile political allegiances—his motto in fact originated not from the Left but from the Right. As he later made clear in his 1937 exposition, visualization of which often amounted, with a good dose of sarcasm, to Manichaean juxtapositions of “good” and “bad” urbanism, he provided what he called a sampling (the French word is “échantillonage”) of the possibilities offered by modern urbanism, and left it to the viewer to pull together the necessary threads. It was a creative take on the pedestrian “timeline”; had it caught the attention of Anthony Grafton and Daniel Rosenberg in their recent book Cartographies of Time, Le Corbusier’s effort might have been included among those inspired timelines that blurred the line between charts and art.9

The 1937 pavilion’s program—whose archival documents prominently feature the name and signature of Charlotte Perriand as chief coordinator of the project during its initial stage—was a collaborative multimedia endeavor. Although the Temps Nouveaux pavilion was dominated by photomurals, it included, in a typical Corbusian gesture toward unadulterated creativity, a number of children’s paintings. The Harvest by a twelve-year-old named Laisaffre and four renderings of the Eiffel Tower enlarged to mural scale by one of his assistants on the site, Aager Jorn (who would become a CoBrA member and Situationalist) and Raoul Simon, simply identified as a painter from the town of Vibæk.10 Another work to which Le Corbusier referred repeatedly in De Canons is Grande Plastique suspendue (Large suspended form) <date?>, which he commissioned from Cubist sculptor Henri Laurens: it was a cutout relief in cardboard and polychrome—images of children’s paintings: another work to which Le Corbusier referred repeatedly in De Canons is Grande Plastique suspendue (Large suspended form) <date?>, which he commissioned from Cubist sculptor Henri Laurens: it was a cutout relief in cardboard and polychrome—of a reclining female nude, more than 16 feet (5 meters) across, whose curvaceous outlines floated above a row of photomurals like a lush, mountainous landscape.

Upon entering the tent, visitors were ushered through an impossibly ambitious six-hundred-year history of urbanism (circulation, dwellings, cities, plans), “decades of fits and starts of and increasingly accentuated ruptures between cause and effect,” in Le Corbusier’s words. These he interspaced with contributions from the various declarations he had made at the Congrès International d’Architecture Moderne (CIAM), visualization of which often amounted, with a good dose of sarcasm, to Manichaean juxtapositions of “good” and “bad” urbanism; in the section of the pavilion titled Maisons de Paris, for example, he set the “slums of the rich” (i.e., “the reputedly comfortable neighborhood of Saint Augustine”) next to the “official slums” (low-income housing) and “slums of the poor” (to be destroyed). The remainder of the pavilion was used by Le Corbusier essentially to promote his most recent concept of an ideal city, the Ville Radieuse, developed at the end of 1930.

As they moved along the ramps, fairgoers were introduced first to his Plan de Paris 37 (which he was about to present at the fifth CIAM conference), then, in spirited succession, his myriad ongoing plans: his Stadium for 100,000 Spectators, a park, a summer camp, a nursery school, a high school, a modernized farm, and a cooperative village. Le Corbusier deployed every type of imagery at his disposal to make his point, juxtaposing aerial views of the Roman Colosseum with arrays of Gothic spires jumbled with those of American skyscrapers and his own (“Cartesian”) high-rises, men and women at work in city streets, in fields, and in domestic interiors, mingling with blow-ups of Brueghel paintings, medieval prints, diagrams, newspaper cartoons, and caricatures. Rather than offering an encyclopedic overview of urbanism, he provided what he called a sampling (the French word is “échantillonage”) of the possibilities offered by modern urbanism, and left it to the viewer to pull together the necessary threads. It was a creative take on the pedestrian “timeline”; had it caught the attention of Anthony Grafton and Daniel Rosenberg in their recent book Cartographies of Time, Le Corbusier’s effort might have been included among those inspired timelines that blurred the line between charts and art.9

The pavilion ramps allowed Le Corbusier to strategize spatial situations heretofore unavailable to him on the printed page. The most dramatic—the image and slogan he chose for the cover and title of De Canons—is the installation shot toward the mid-point of the itinerary along the ramps of a photomural featuring a cityscape entirely made up of artillery shells (an image culled, he said, from a World War I–era magazine) pointing straight into the section of his Plan de Paris 37 (fig. 5.121). In the context of a World’s Fair purportedly devoted to peace, or at least to military containment, and yet whose main esplanade, under the new Palais de Chaillot was dominated by the two marble Bismarcks of the Soviet and Nazi pavilions, Le Corbusier was the only contributor to use his pavilion as a warning, cry out, “Cannons? Munitions? Thank you very much! Dwellings, please! Every year France spends twelve billion francs on armaments.” In a typical touch of self-irony, one section of his Paris photomontage combined images of the Arc de Triomphe, the Louvre, Notre Dame, the Panthéon, and the Eiffel Tower—edifices that had survived another type of blitz, one that would have been perpetrated by Le Corbusier himself had he been allowed to carry out the wholesale razing of central Paris called for in his 1925 Plan Voisin (fig. 5.122). In a typical touch of self-irony, one section of his Paris photomontage combined images of the Arc de Triomphe, the Louvre, Notre Dame, the Panthéon, and the Eiffel Tower—edifices that had survived another type of blitz, one that would have been perpetrated by Le Corbusier himself had he been allowed to carry out the wholesale razing of central Paris called for in his 1925 Plan Voisin (fig. 5.122).

The precept “Photomontage can move you” and “Polyphony = Joy” were...
manifested in the solid red, blue, green, and yellow color scheme of the tent interior (its floor covered with yellow gravel) and in the accent of colors in the four photomurals (which Le Corbusier actually referred to as “paintings”) displayed in the quadrangular space devoted to the visualization of the four functions of urbanism: Work, Recreation, Dwelling, Transportation. Work, by Fernand Léger, jarred the senses with huge close-ups of mechanical parts (fig. 6). In the middle of the composition, a worker is tightening the giant bolts of an electric motor larger than himself; this image, drawn from La France travaille, a compendium of more than ten thousand photographs taken by François Kollar in 1932, was the perfect emblem of the “socialisme personneliste,” the Socialism respectful of the individual, advocated by Léon Blum. It reads like a modern evocation of Leonardo’s Vitruvian Man (c. 1490), standing at the epicenter of a mechanical landscape but still the measure of all things. Here was a pointed response, on the part of Léger and Le Corbusier, to the downbeat images of mechanization disseminated in the press in the years after the Wall Street crash of 1929, such as the March 1933 cover of the illustrated magazine Vu: a montage of a worker about to be ground between the teeth of an engine, captioned “Fin d’une civilisation” (End of a civilization) (fig. 7).

Crisp and clear in its composition, Recreation by Lucien Mazenod played on the dual meaning of the verb “to recreate” as both creation and leisure, showing prancing children holding hands in solidarity next to a close-up of a grinning boy and, behind him, two children in a sailboat (fig. 8). Like Mazenod, Le Corbusier focused on children—at school, in boy and girl scout troops, in sports, and at the beach—celebrating the promises made by the Popular Front (in conjunction with the labor unions) to provide the populace with tourist attractions, summer camps, sport facilities, and, most important, the “congés payés” (paid annual leave), which turned out to be the Socialists’ most lasting institution (fig. 10).


roof-terrace of their Paris apartment on rue Nungesser-et-Coli. And, on the right, a small photograph shows Le Corbusier sitting at his desk in his rue Molitor studio, surrounded by some of his recent paintings. And indeed, in typically provocative fashion, Le Corbusier declared that he intended this platform to function as a “salle de repos,” a resting space devoted to degustation, reading, and conversation, but which for lack of time, organization, and money, remained, alas, empty.  

It is ironic that the photomural Transportation, executed by Georges Bauquier (Léger’s assistant), which featured an ocean liner at the center of its composition, should have been the weakest of this beautiful set of four works. As he wrote in Des Canons, Le Corbusier intended his photobook to be read like a “livre de bord”—that is, a log recording the ship’s speed, bearing, and daily progress. One might suggest that what Le Corbusier sought to recapture in this pavilion was the heady atmosphere of the fourth gathering of CIAM, whose medial ferment he wistfully recalled in Des Canons. This congress was held on a liner from Marseilles to Athens, in Athens, then from Athens to Marseilles. A boat filled with effervescence: city plans hung on the walls of the decks, type writers in every room, plenary conferences with speakers, working committees. The whole thing connected by a ceaseless chain of dispatches Xeroxed from hour to hour.  

By the time of its publication, with the fall of Blum’s government in April 1938 and the international arms race in full gear, the memory of a community of architects gathered on shipboard gliding past sunny Mediterranean coasts must already have felt light-years away. With regard to the title, Des Canons, Le Corbusier offered his readers a caustic disclaimer: “The title dates from January 1937; in no way does it allude to the burning issue of rearmament in 1938. It is about yesterday (and we are so very sorry).” The book ends with a last, ghastly photographic glimpse of the Pavillon des Temps Nouveaux: its images dismounted, the frail skeleton stands silhouetted against a barren landscape under a gray autumnal Parisian sky.

14 Le Corbusier, Des Canons, des munitions?, p. 140.
15 Ibid., p. 13.
16 Ibid., p. 41.
17 Ibid., p. 41.
18 Ibid., p. 146.
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