

Fig. 1: Auction Lot 323 - "Plan Oh-la-LA"

In 1925, legendary architect Le Corbusier unveiled the *Plan Voisin* (Footnote 1) for Paris. The controversial plan proposed to replace the dense Quarters on the Right Bank of Paris by iconic cruciform towers situated in an open, garden-like setting. As expected, the *Plan Voisin* was met with strong resistance and skepticism from the citizens of Paris. Who wants to see beloved Quarters like the Marais demolished, only to be replaced by towering behemoths? Had Le Corbusier been able to realize his vision, there would be no Centre Pompidou or the Picasso Museum today! The *Plan Voisin* remained a utopian dream, unrealized in the City of Light!

In 2015, 90 years after the debut of the *Plan Voisin*, an anonymous *Cahier* surfaced at a Christie's Auction in Paris in November. This *Cahier*, referred to as "Auction Lot 323", contains 5 drawings that seem to describe an urban proposal, labeled as "*Plan Oh-La-LA*". The first impression of these drawings - 2 plans and 3 perspective views - evokes some form of mixed-media collage on top of free-hand sketches reminiscent of Le Corbusier's familiar style. But more peculiar about "*Plan Oh-la-LA*" is that the site plan resembles the "negative impression" of the *Plan Voisin* - a dense urban fabric grafted onto a cityscape of larger urban grid. How is it related to Le Corbusier's original proposal?

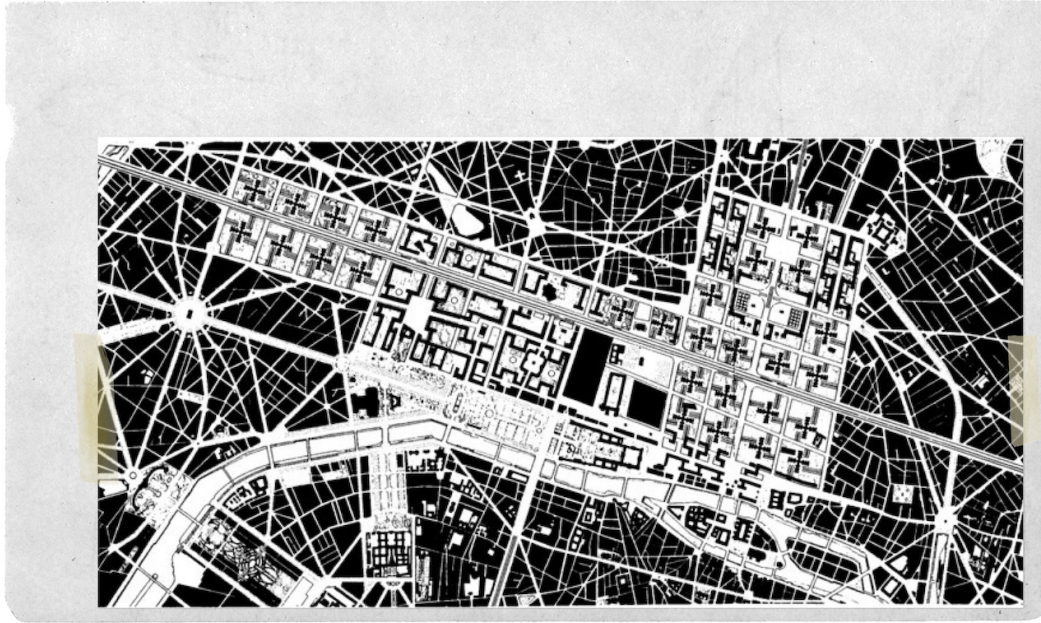


Fig. 2: Plan Voisin by Le Corbusier

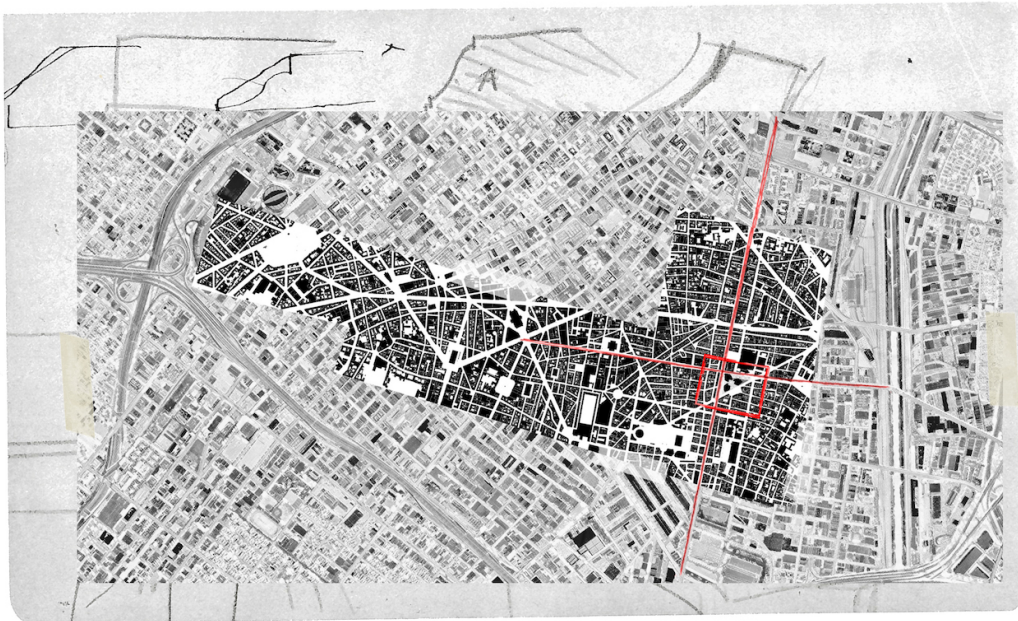


Fig. 3: "The site plan resembles the 'negative impression' of the *Plan Voisin*"

Initial observation of this so-called "*Plan Oh-la-LA*" by the *Fondation Le Corbusier* has identified the dense urban fabric to be the same Quarters on the Right Bank that had been surgically removed from the *Plan Voisin*. Is that a coincidence or by design?

The other drawings describe a structure comprised of a cluster of three towers in different heights situated on a triangular site in the center of the dense urban fabric. Comparison of this structure to Le Corbusier's famous manifesto *Five Points towards a New Architecture* (Footnote 2) yields the following speculations:

- The plan of these towers resembles the geometry of three “leaves”, spreading outward towards the corners of the triangular site. Has the free plan (*Le Plan Libre*) taken on an organic form?
- This structure appears to be floating above the ground surface, which slopes up gently to provide a delicate balance for the towers. Instead of an entry vestibule, the slopes split open discreetly to invite access to the interior. What happened with the structural columns (*Les Pilotis*) favored by the *Five Points*?
- Rather than being constructed by raw concrete (*Le Béton-Armé*) – Le Corbusier’s material of choice, this triangular structure has the appearance of glass – a literal transparency. The free-façade (*La Façade Libre*) and the horizontal window (*La Fenêtre en longueur*) have been transformed into a vertical “glass curtain” (*La Façade Vitrée*). Could this be the logical next step in the evolution of the *Five Points*?
- Finally, in lieu of the roof gardens (*Les Toits-Jardins*), the three towers embrace a landscaped terrace in the middle. What seems to be digital projection of floral bouquets ascends its vertical walls in a continuous loop. Is this a digital-garden for the new millennium?
- What exactly is the function of this structure? Housing? Office? Recreation? Culture? It is not immediately evident. But In the new spirit (*L’Esprit-Nouveau*) of Universal Space championed by Modernism, does it matter?

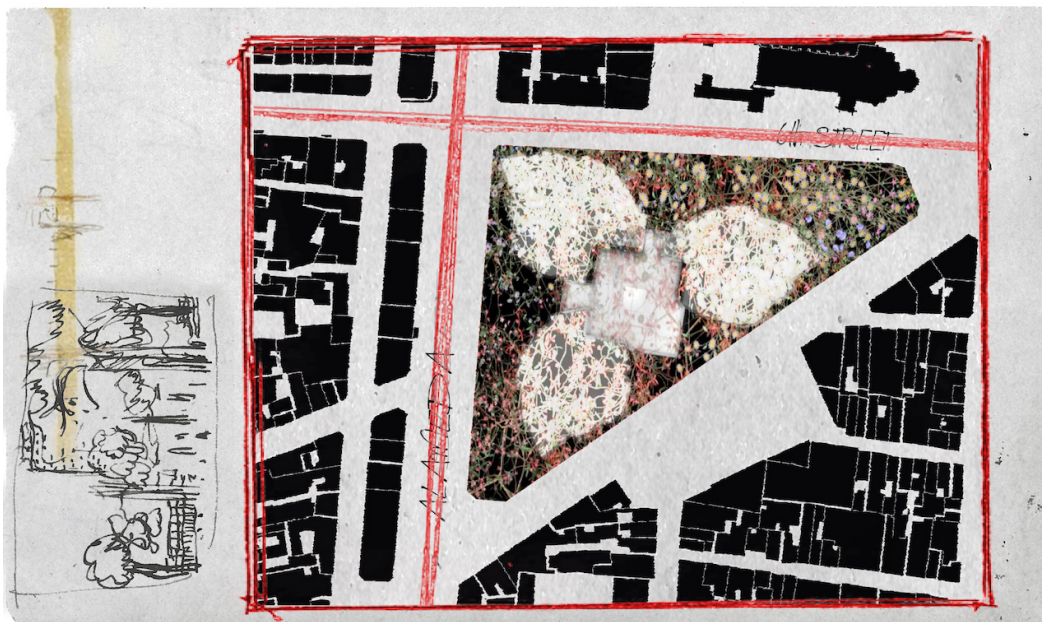


Fig. 4: “a red cross marking the intersection of two streets”

Perhaps, the key to unlocking the mysterious origin of this "*Plan Oh-La-LA*" is to be found by taking a closer look at the site plan. Evidently, the large urban grid is not Parisian by nature; but instead, it is reminiscent of the scale of industrial building blocks generic to the American City. This triangular structure located at the heart of the dense urban fabric is clearly intended to provide a contrast to its surrounding - an ephemeral presence in an industrial wasteland.

The most striking feature of this drawing is a red cross marking the intersection of two streets that traverse from the dense urban fabric to the surrounding cityscape. Obscured beneath the red cross, one could vaguely discern the names of these streets as *Alameda + 6<sup>th</sup> Street* - Are they referring to the same streets at the Arts District in Downtown Los Angeles?

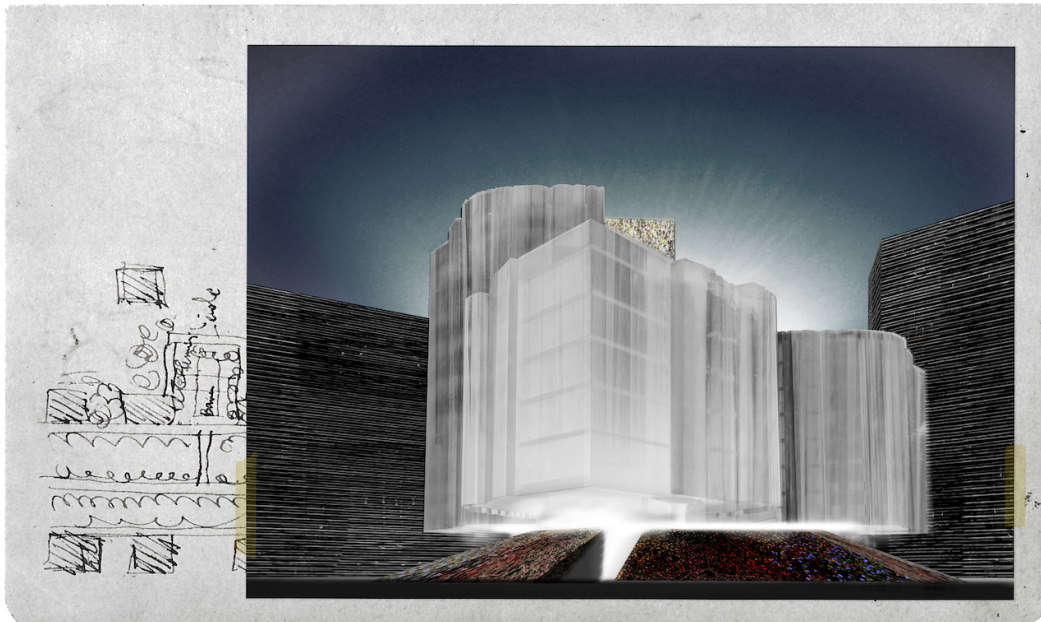


Fig. 5: "The structure is comprised of a cluster of three towers in different heights situated on a triangular site"

Most certainly, Le Corbusier has never travelled to California. However, it is conceivable that after the disappointment of *Plan Voisin*, the legendary architect had continued to develop his urban vision with a counter-proposal, envisioned for a presumably more open society in the New World, in a faraway city like Los Angeles? How ironic if Le Corbusier's progressive urban vision would find its ultimate fulfillment and realization almost a century later in the City of Angels?

Furthermore, although Christie's has attributed "Auction Lot 323" as "Anonymous", its fine print does identify the former owner to be a certain Café Voltaire, located in the heart of the same dense Quarters on the Right Bank of Paris in the "*Plan Oh-la-LA*". How did the *Cahier* come into possession by the Café Voltaire?

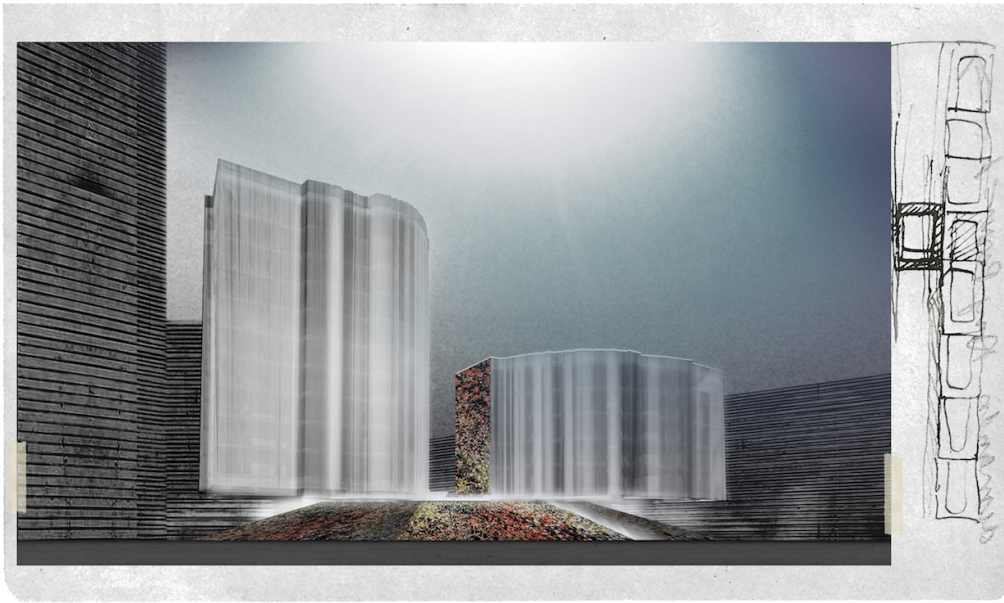


Fig. 6: "This structure appears to be floating above the ground surface, which slopes up gently to provide a delicate balance for the towers"

Coincidentally, it has been well known that Le Corbusier was a frequent visitor to the bohemian cafes and bars of the Marais and St. Denis Quarters during his time. Is it conceivable that, in order to keep at bay from the established Intelligentsia of Paris, the legendary architect had been secretly refining his vision for "*Plan Oh-La-LA*" during his sojourns at the Café Voltaire? It was also common practice for the artistic community in Paris during the early 20<sup>th</sup> Century to consign their work at the cafes and bars where they frequented in exchange for hospitality. Therefore, it is entirely plausible that the proprietor of

the Café Voltaire had kept the *Cahier* under its consignment after the legendary architect's death in 1965. Perhaps the rising concern for public safety in Paris has prompted the decision to put the *Cahier* in the Christie's Auction last November, to ensure that it will be transferred into private hands for future conservation?

*Oh-La-LA* ... Could the "*Plan Oh-la-LA*" be the "Lost" next chapter for the *Plan Voisin*? The evidence so far is inconclusive, raising more questions than providing answers. The *Fondation Le Corbusier* remains doubtful and unconvinced!

By Edwin Chan (with Jordan Squires)



Fig. 7: "The drawings evokes some form of mixed-media collage on top of free-hand sketches reminiscent of Le Corbusier's familiar style"

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Footnotes:

1. *Plan Voisin:*  
<http://www.fondationlecorbusier.fr/corbuweb/morpheus.aspx?sysId=13&IrisObjectId=6159&sysLanguage=en-en&itemPos=2&itemCount=2&sysParentName=Home&sysParentId=65>
2. *Five Points towards a New Architecture:*  
[https://fr.wikipedia.org/wiki/Cinq\\_points\\_de\\_l%27architecture\\_moderne](https://fr.wikipedia.org/wiki/Cinq_points_de_l%27architecture_moderne)