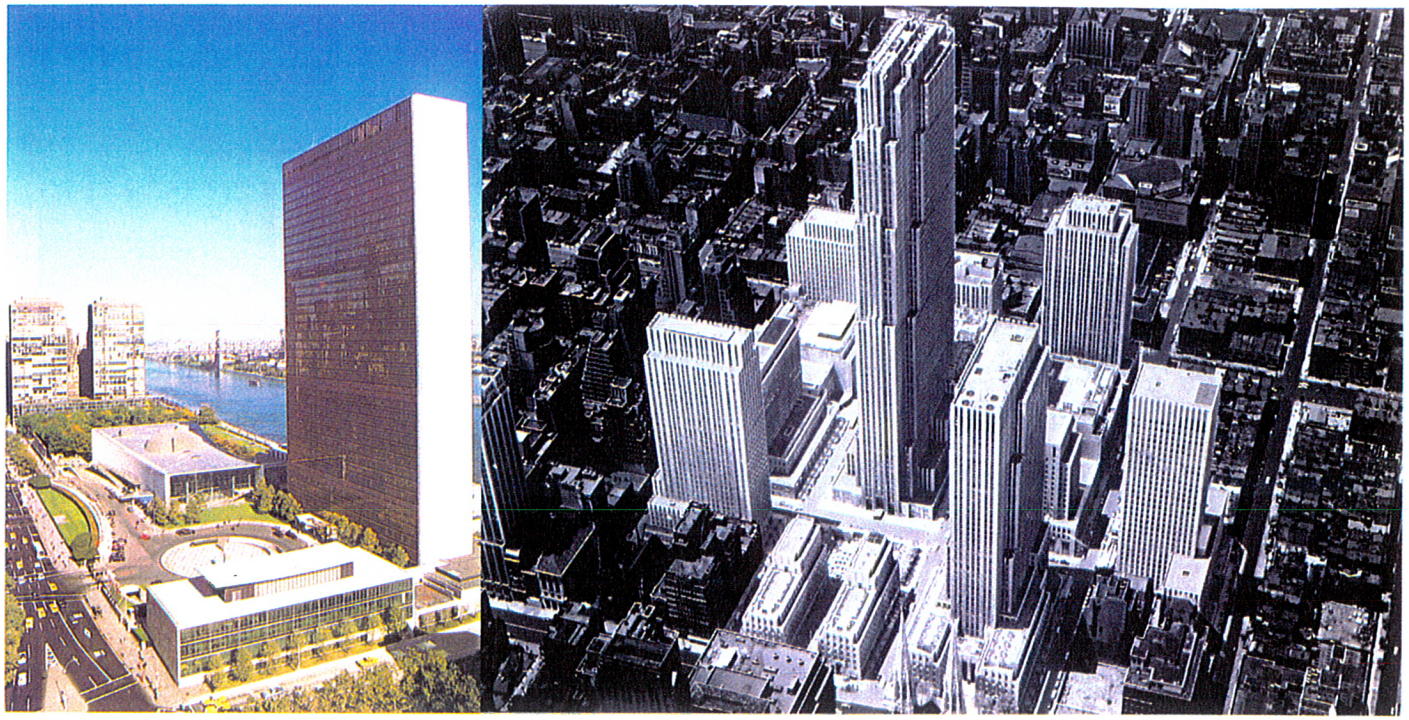
Future cities: contemplative or delirious?

CITY2K+, the RIBA's 'Cities for the New Millennium' conference taking place this coming weekend, should listen more to Le Corbusier than to Rem Koolhaas

By James Dunnett



Above left: the UN Building, 'the first appearance of the Radiant City in Manhattan'. Above right: the Rockefeller Center, Koolhaas' 'delirious ideal'

'Do you understand the damage that architects and planners did in the '60s when they tried the high density approach?' asked John Redwood, Fellow of All Souls and one of the intellectuals of the Conservative front bench, when commenting on the recent Urban Task Force report, *Towards an Urban Renaissance*. 'In my constituency people just don't want to live in this kind of development. They want to feel like they are living in green space.' (AJ 1/6/00.)

Oh Mr Redwood, you haven't read your Le Corbusier! If Le Corbusier demonstrated anything, it was the possibility of combining high density with green space – but the former government minister could be forgiven for not knowing it from the debate during the past 40 years or so – or from the Urban Task Force report itself.

For most recent debate about urbanism has revolved around the supposed antithesis of the city and greenery. Either you were a suburbanite, an advocate of dispersal of garden cities, a Levittowner, or you were an advocate of urban and street life, of the excitement of compression, a follower of Jane Jacobs (*The Death and Life of Great American Cities*) – or of Rem Koolhaas. Koolhaas' *Delirious New York* (1978), which he described as a 'Blueprint for the Culture of Congestion', is built around this antithesis, which he finds in the contrasting attitudes to New York of a rationalist Le Corbusier – deprecated – and a 'delirious' Salvador Dali – admired.

Koolhaas writes that Le Corbusier's 'real intention in the Radiant City is destructive: to *really* solve the problems of congestion. Marooned in grass, his Cartesian convicts are lined up 400m apart (ie eight Manhattan blocks). They are spaced out beyond any possible association.'

There is hyperbole here: the intended spacing of 400m between Le Corbusier's 'Cartesian' office skyscrapers is not eight but two or five Manhattan blocks depending on orientation, since the grid typically measures 213 x 81m. But the key question is whether there would be 'nothing' in between, a dull and useless space, as claimed by Koolhaas, or a bringer of 'sun, space, and greenery', the focus of sport and meditation, and the means to efficient vehicular circulation, as conceived by Le Corbusier.

This question can initially be answered by considering the space around the UN Building, for whose form Le Corbusier was largely responsible. Described by Le Corbusier as a 'Cartesian skyscraper in the New York sky' and 'the first appearance of the Radiant City in the urban fabric of Manhattan', the UN is Koolhaas' particular target. Dull, however, is not the word most people would use for the experience of emerging into the light and space of the UN plaza from the chasm of 42nd Street, nor for walking round its well-manicured gardens overlooking the East River. The sheer slender profile of the tower, free-standing in the 'plaza', is exciting – and would be even more so if complemented by the projected secondary lower tower at right angles to it. It is an architecture of 'forms under light'. Luxurious apartments overlook it.

Koolhaas' delirious ideal, by contrast, is the 1930s Rockefeller Center, by Raymond Hood and others, the intense mid-town office and entertainment complex, which provides no focus for human habitation, but certainly has its drama and reinforces the concept of the street and its congestion.

Le Corbusier – an early enthusiast for the picturesque ideals of Camillo Sitte – was no stranger to the attractions of the street, and when his urban thinking took a different direction he felt the need to mount a sustained case against the old street and in favour of the new. In his essay 'The Street', reprinted in Volume 1 of the *Oeuvre Complète* (1929) he says: 'On Sundays, when they are empty, the streets reveal their full horror. But except during those dismal hours, men and women are elbowing their way along them, the shops ablaze, and every aspect of human life pullulates throughout their length. Those who have eyes in their heads can find plenty to amuse them in this sea of lusts and faces. It is better than the theatre, better than what we read in novels. Nothing of all this exalts us with the joy that architecture provokes. There is neither the pride which results from order, nor the spirit of initiative which is engendered by wide spaces.'

Le Corbusier thought that the city should engender intellectual calm rather than delirium. The home should be a 'vessel of silence and lofty solitude' he wrote in *The Radiant City* (1935). 'To be able to think, or meditate, after the day's work is essential. But in order

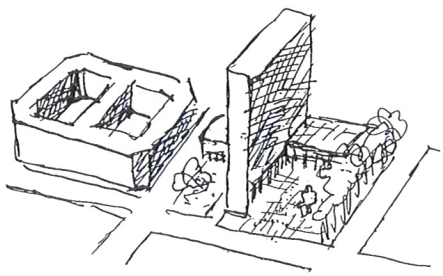
to become a centre of creative thought, the home must take on an entirely new character. And that necessitates... a change in the entire layout of the city, a new arrangement of transport, a new and daring concept of space relationships, a new method of construction for human habitation.' There must also be contact with nature because 'intimacy with nature (radiant spring, winter storms) is a stimulus to meditation, to introspection'.

But the ideal of intellectual life that he sought to promote was a very urban one – that of Cubism: so he could not advocate dispersal of the city to achieve his objectives. He found the answer in his concept of the Vertical Garden City, in which he sought to combine the green Garden City ideals of his youth with the super-density of the metropolis. Essentially he proposed that the mass of a building, rather than be arranged along the perimeter of a site around a central courtyard or lightwell, should be re-ordered as a single taller mass across the centre of the site, thus opening up the ground surface for use by pedestrians, vehicles, and landscaping, and admitting light and air to the building. A very simple sketch of these alternatives as applied to the Ministry of Education in Rio of 1937, a prototype for the UN, illustrated the principle.

In terms of traffic, this arrangement permitted the separation of roads from pedestrians and building frontages, principles now widely accepted, even though Le Corbusier initially clearly overestimated the potential role of the car in urban transport. How successful was he in achieving high density? The work, particularly of the Cambridge School under Sir Leslie Martin in the 1960s, threw his ideas into question. Martin developed a key diagram contrasting courtyard forms with tower forms, which is almost an inversion of Le Corbusier's Rio sketch. He wrote: 'When the built potential is plotted against the number of storeys...then it is seen that after a certain height the tower form ceases to use land with increasing efficiency... This could be one reason why the "City of Towers", free-standing towers in a park-like setting, has never been built.'

His colleague Lionel March, in his paper 'Homes Beyond the Fringe' (1967) posited a linear arrangement of 'semi-detached houses along a small farm road. The house stands with its back to a paddock and has a small flower border in front... There is room for a car alongside the house. This is semi-detached living at 500 persons per hectare.'

If two-storey semi-detached houses could be built at 500 persons per hectare, why was Le Corbusier only achieving 1000 persons per hectare (as he claimed) with 15 storeys in the



The two alternatives in Corb's Rio sketch, 1937

Radiant City? The answer lay in the word 'paddock'. It meant that the land which March's semi-detached houses overlooked was classed as agricultural land, and therefore not part of the residential site area for the purposes of density calculation.

If the residential density of the Radiant City is analysed on the same basis, 71 per cent of the land would be similarly excluded from the site area, being devoted to other use classifications such as playing fields, nurseries, public open space. On this basis the residential density of the Radiant City would be not 1000 per hectare, but 3448. This is seven times as high as the density of March's houses.

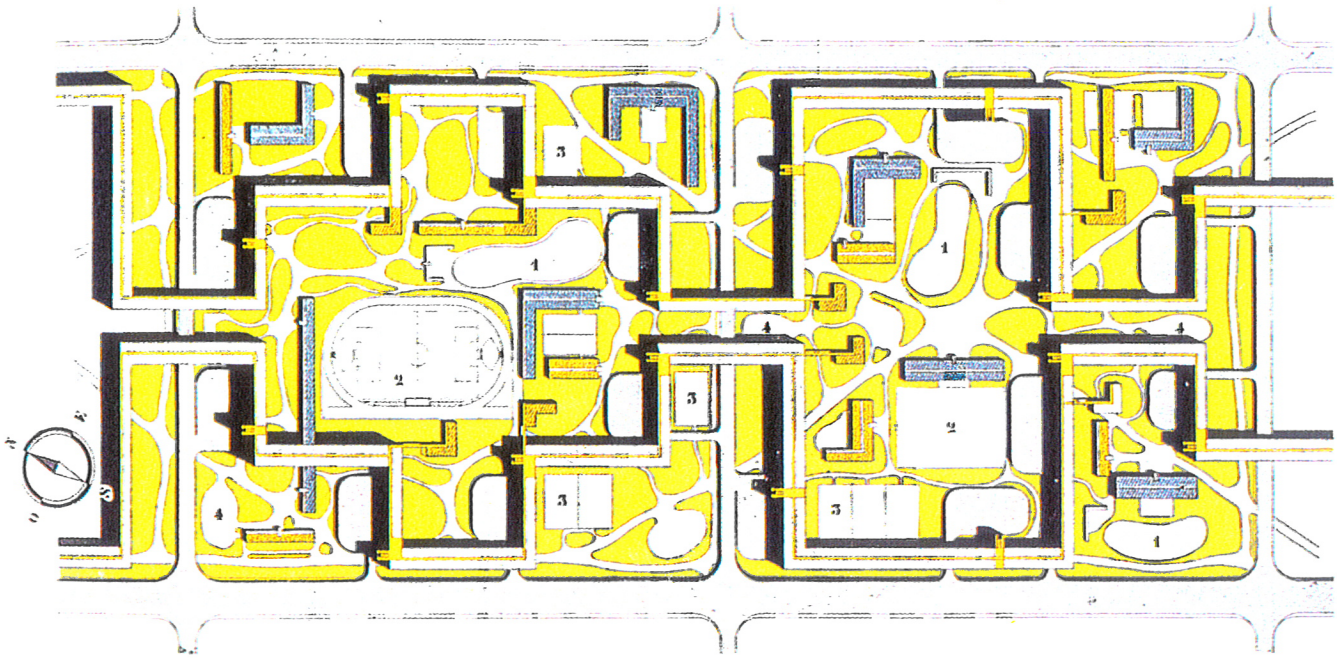
The legitimacy of this calculation depends on the classification of the land: 'small incidental open spaces' are included in the residential site area, 'land proper for appropriation for public open space' is not. What is clear is that the space between the major buildings cannot be 'nothing' (as imagined by Koolhaas) but must be able to accommodate the secondary functions envisaged and illustrated by Le Corbusier in order to maintain its life and utility.

On this basis, there is no doubt of the startling economy in the use of land that he achieved. A comparison of the Radiant City (planned population 1.5 million) with the city of Cambridge (population 100,000) reveals that they occupy a very similar land area.

With the objective of achieving an 'Urban Renaissance', economy in the use of land is one of the key objectives set out in the Urban Task Force's report. It sets out the three options of urban form – tower, street, and courtyard – in much the same terms as Leslie Martin 35 years ago, focusing like him on the courtyard as the solution, with the street and street life also given frequent positive mention. The 'tower' solution, on the other hand, is represented in its most banal form, and the comparison between it and the others is misleading because the issue of the status and use of the land around the tower – and hence its real potential in saving land - is not addressed. Le Corbusier did not use tower forms literally, preferring high-rise forms of horizontal mass, such as the Unité d'Habitation.

To achieve a real urban renaissance we have to build cities in which people wish to live. Delirium may be something we enjoy in small doses, very occasionally, but calm is what most of us need most of the time. Likewise, a city centre that we enjoy visiting may not be where we would choose to live. Le Corbusier sought to create an environment in which to think, and in which to live – and so must we.

This is a summary of an article that will appear in The Modern City Revisited *(E & FN Spon), to be published this September*



The overall plan of one housing sector in 'The Green CIty', as envisaged by Le Corbusier in *The Radiant City* (1935)