

My dear Le Corbusier,

Our recent conversation about city planning and your letter have compelled me to rethink the entire problem, to recall your objections, the objections you made when you visited me and which you now write about in your letter.

Like all my friends, I value you tremendously not only as a subtle master architect but also as a man with the ability to solve radically and fundamentally the important problems of organization.

For me you are today the greatest and most brilliant representative of the profession that gives my life content, goal, and meaning.

That is why your ideas and solutions in the area of city planning have for us a quite exceptional interest and importance.

You have often told me that you adore nature and would like to live always among greenery...You write that you were the first to advocate the luxury of an enormous park in the city...During our stroll on Tverskaia Street [the present Gorkii Street] you told me that Perret and all the best of the French architects had tried to take housing out of the city. In other words, you yourself pose the problem of giving man ideal physical surroundings, a problem for which we are trying, in our projects, to find a radical solution. But you feel obliged to consider such a radical solution possible. In other words, in spite of your brilliant gifts, you find yourself powerless to overcome the objective contradictions of modern capitalism.

A careful study of your work shows that it is in fact a consistent and stubborn attempt to round off the sharper corners of city planning and smooth and soften all its rough edges.

You are the finest of the surgeons of the modern city, you want to cure it of its ills whatever the cost. Therefore you raise the entire city on stilts, hoping to solve the insoluble urban traffic problem. You create wonderful gardens on the roofs of tall buildings, hoping to give people an extra patch of green, you design homes whose occupants enjoy perfect convenience, peace, and comfort. But you do all this because you want to cure the city, because you are trying to keep it essentially the same as capitalism made it.

We in the USSR are in a more favorable position — we are not tied by the past.

History confronts us with problems that can only have a revolutionary solution and, however feeble our resources, we will solve them no matter what.

We are making a diagnosis of the modern city. We say: yes, it is sick, mortally sick. But we do not want to cure it. We prefer to destroy it and intend to begin work on a new form of human settlement that will be free of internal contradictions and might be called socialist. We know that raising a city on stilts (and you have seen that in this respect we are following your

example) does not permit a radical solution of the urban traffic problem. Driving between columns is almost the same as driving through narrow streets.

We know that the roof garden is an excellent architectural solution, but it cannot solve the sanitation problem, the problem of open spaces. And similarly, we would like to find a solution for the living unit, but not in the form of a luxurious private home or a European-type hotel.

You yourself talk of international statistics which show that the birth rate is the highest and the death rate the lowest in the most densely populated areas. But this is only natural. The thinly populated centers are poor villages and without doctors or culture, without means and without decent food. You write that culture develops only where people are concentrated in large masses. But this is perfectly understandable. It describes the situation in a capitalist society, though not elsewhere. We in the Soviet Union must make culture available to the entire population, not merely the urban population, whatever the cost. But to do so we cannot transfer 100 million of our peasants to the big cities, not without destroying our agriculture. Accordingly, we want all the beneficial consequences of concentration for the development of culture and, at the same time, all the advantages of dispersal and decentralization for spreading culture as uniformly as possible over the population. And for this it is necessary to create new socialist forms of population settlement based on elimination of all the disparities between town and country.

You are absolutely right in your high evaluation of the collective in human history. But our disagreement is not along those lines. The higher requirements of collectivism and industrial concentration demand decentralization and dispersal in space; that is the crux of the matter.

I note with pleasure that you consider it necessary to quote Lenin. You say that he thought of saving the peasant by introducing industry into the village, but did not think at all of saving the city dweller.

But you are wrong, my dear Le Corbusier. Not only about Lenin but Engels and Marx thought long and often about both. Or rather for them these were two aspects of the same problem.

Permit me to quote their own words on the subject:

A resettlement of mankind is necessary, with the elimination of rural neglect and isolation and the unnatural crowding of huge masses into the big cities.

– Lenin

The separation of town and country has condemned the rural population to millennia of backwardness and the urban population to being mere wage slaves, it has destroyed the basis for the spiritual development of the former and the physical development of the latter.

– Engels

The contradiction between town and country is the coarsest expression of the subjection of the personality to the division of labor, which transforms the individual into a limited urban animal, on the one hand, and a limited rural animal, on the other.

– Marx

You refer to Perret's unsuccessful attempts to take housing out of the city. But this too is quite understandable. He severed an isolated member from a complex organism. That member inevitably wasted away. We are removing from the city nothing less than the city itself, its entire system of supply and culture. In other words, we are creating a whole new organism. This is quite different from what Perret was trying to do.

You write that the peasant does not love flowers and does not hear the song of the skylark. But of course he doesn't...when he is exhausted with backbreaking labor. But we want our peasant to listen to the skylark. And we know that for this it is only necessary to lighten his labor and bring more culture into his life. And all this will be possible not by smoothing out the contradictions with which the modern capitalist system is riddled, but by creating new forms of human settlement more worthy of the future.

We are aware that we have yet to find the solution to this very difficult problem. But we cannot refrain from posing it, we cannot refrain from trying to solve it. That is our duty, the duty of architects who would like to become the architects of socialism.

Moreover, we hope that in the future, as in the past, we shall be able to learn a great deal from you, and that what we learn will help us to solve our new and difficult problems.

Cordial greetings from myself and my friends,
Yours sincerely,

M. Ginzburg