



## Essay

### THE ATHENS CHARTER

*By Eli Rubin*

The "Athens Charter" was a manifesto written mostly by the Swiss architect and urban planner Le Corbusier, summarizing the Fourth Congress of the International Congress of Modern Architects (CIAM), which took place in 1932 mostly aboard a passenger boat which steamed from Marseilles, France, to Athens, Greece, and back again. It was first published in France at the height of the German occupation and the Vichy government in 1943. It was essentially a condensed version of the core ideas and principles of modern architecture and urban planning, which called for a total remaking of cities in the industrial world, to make them more efficient, rational, and hygienic. Though Corbusier and the CIAM were not the first or only people to call for such total remaking of the urban environment, the Athens Charter became widely circulated after the war, especially among European governments looking to rebuild devastated cities and house millions of homeless citizens. It subsequently also became a blueprint of sorts for American cities coping with the urban poverty caused by the winding down of the war economy and subsequent loss of jobs, especially among African Americans who had migrated to northern cities for those jobs and were now stranded in urban slums. It became a blueprint for the communist world in the 1950s, 60s, 70s and 80s, especially in the USSR and its East European allies, which sought the most rational and efficient way to plan out housing. And finally, it became a blueprint for many developing countries that were seeking to industrialize after achieving independence but did not want to repeat the mistakes of European industrialization of the 19<sup>th</sup> century. In some cases, the Athens Charter served quite well as a blueprint; in others, most notably the American housing projects, its shortcomings and lack of foresight in certain matters led to serious, systemic social problems that have yet to be fully resolved. In both cases, the document had as much impact on the daily lives of the world's citizens as just about any document of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, and the potential success and failures of it are contained, like embedded seeds, within the text of the document itself.

This essay seeks to provide context for the Athens Charter, as well as identify eight main themes that emerge from the Charter, and that reveal the most important ways in which the Charter reflected the historical context from which it emerged, as well as impacted the history of the postwar world. These themes are: 1) the centrality of the natural environment, including air, plant life, and especially the sun; 2) a mystical belief in the spatial layout and symmetrical spacing of urban planning as a panacea for all social ills; 3) elitism, especially in the sense of the superiority of the architect and urban planner; 4) the importance of restoring harmony to the relationship between time and space in modern cities, especially in the case of the speed of mechanized transit within urban space; 5) an almost Manichean sense of morality in which old cities are posited as representing "evil"; 6) a nearly complete absence of any grounding of the Charter's claims in empirical research, natural science, medicine, or social science; 7) a remarkable lack of attention towards the immense financial resources necessary to carry out the program

of radical and profound urban renewal advocated in the Charter; and finally, 8) a tolerance for historical preservation only where such preservation does not interfere with the Charter's program.

Before outlining the historical context that gave rise to the CIAM and the Athens Charter, it is important to highlight briefly the potential parallels and connections that can be drawn between the Charter and the current economic crisis in the United States and the world. Aside from the obvious parallels that are now gaining popular currency between 1932 and 2008, the more profound connection to be drawn is that the current crisis is not only a real estate or financial crisis—it is at its very heart a crisis of housing, in particular, it is the collapse of a particularly (though not exclusively) American solution to living space and class inequality, the so-called "ownership society," which was a bubble, that is, an illusion. It may be that we in the West, especially in North America, will need to revisit documents such as the Athens Charter, with an eye towards its successes as well as its failures, to find a more sustainable model for building and financing future cities, towns, and infrastructure.

The origins of the Athens Charter lay one year before the onset of the First Great Depression, in 1928, when an international architectural competition was held in Geneva, Switzerland. The jury, formed of distinguished professors of architectural history and theory at Europe's most venerable academies, was to select the best design for the proposed Palace of the League of Nations. By 1928, however, a large and influential movement of architects, designers, and urban planners had developed outside the traditional academies, associated with groups such as the Bauhaus and the Werkbund, and they felt strongly that the League of Nations ought to be housed in a building that represented the universal aspirations of the League, rather than the tradition and heritage of European culture. The jury was not inclined towards the modernist, rational designs of the Bauhaus and associated architects, including Le Corbusier and Walter Gropius, who felt strongly that they had been unfairly treated during the competition. It was in protest that Corbusier, Gropius, and others formed the CIAM and held its constituent First Congress in the home of a sympathetic local patroness, the Chatelaine of La Sarraz, Helene de Mandrot, outside Geneva. The Chatelaine's salon provided the perfect venue for the embryonic CIAM to gather near the League of Nations, remaining in Geneva and thus in the international spotlight while constructing an alternative or "shadow" architectural movement.

The core of this "shadow" international architectural movement was the First Congress's founding document, the "Declaration of La Sarraz." The Declaration of La Sarraz was the first incarnation of what would become the Athens Charter. It called for freeing architecture from the "sterilizing hold of the Academies" by linking architecture to the "vast resources afforded by industrial engineering" of the present "machinist age" rather than to the "anemic craftsman class" and thus effect a break with the "glory ages of the past." Corbusier, in particular, was the driving force behind the CIAM and would later be the dominant intellectual influence of the Athens Charter—of all the modernist architects, Corbusier alone combined concern over individual buildings with a comprehensive vision of completely reconstructing cities and urban life in general, lending the La Sarraz Declaration the cast of a new philosophical movement, not simply a new set of architectural principles. In particular, the La Sarraz Declaration gave a name to the philosophy guiding the new organization: "urbanism," very much a creation of Corbusier himself. "Urbanism," the Declaration explained, was applicable to rural areas as well as cities, and sought to reorient architecture and planning around three main pillars:

dwelling, working, and recreation—in contrast to what the "academies" considered the proper domain of the study of serious architecture, namely, important and symbolic public buildings and elite residences, leaving housing, workspaces, and recreational areas to the whims of speculators and slumlords. The Declaration also claimed that Urbanism was concerned with revamping three basic processes fundamental to how cities were built: occupying the ground; organizing traffic; and legislation.<sup>1</sup> The influence of Corbusier, and Urbanism, contained within the La Sarraz Declaration, and eventually the Athens Charter itself, presented a new definition of the architect as less an artist of individual works, and more a social engineer, a city planner, and the direct translator of revolutionary ideals into material, tangible, functioning reality. The importance of urbanism, and by extension the CIAM, the La Sarraz Declaration and ultimately the Athens Charter, lay in the fact that it transformed the architect into a city planner first and foremost.

In general, the first CIAM Congress took place against the backdrop of several decades of what was called the "social question"—that is, the problem of severe class polarization and the concomitant problems associated with urbanization and industrialization. It also took place in at a time when social democrats had managed to begin implementing their ideas across Europe, even though their hold on power was tenuous at best in places like Weimar Germany. One of the most compelling arguments made by social democrats was that they provided the most sensible solutions to the "social question"—namely, by constructing a welfare state that would proactively work to ameliorate poverty, unemployment, living conditions and other serious problems before they caused the masses to revolt, thus heading off either a communist revolution or a fascist counterrevolution. Most of the architects and urban planners involved with the CIAM were in fact social democrats, or heavily sympathetic to the ideas of social democracy, and so the Athens Charter should be seen at least partially within the historical context of the turbulent late 1920s and early 1930s when traditional liberal economic and political philosophies had failed to sort out the social problems within the society, and when the twin specters of communism and fascism seemed to be an even graver threat looming on the horizon. The Charter saw these problems as stemming from a lack of planning accompanying the rise of industrialization and the growth of urban populations first and foremost, locating the source of the problem in the structure of urban space itself, and clearly believed that they way to prevent the masses from becoming radicalized further was to change the physical environment in which they lived. It was not an entirely absurd notion; after all, until the Nazi seizure of power a year later, the bulk of the most serious political violence had been staged in urban spaces, especially the slum districts such as Prenzlauer Berg in Berlin, where the Spartacus Uprising was able to use the narrow alleys and streets as part of their defenses, and were easily able to round up fighters from the local neighborhood. But in a very important sense, the notion that simply rebuilding the city in a more rational and planned way would resolve the deep seated political and economic antagonisms threatening European (and to an extent American) society was indicative of the strong vein of elitist and paternalistic thinking common to social democratic intellectuals, social reformers, architects and planners

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<sup>1</sup> Much of the background to the creation of the Charter in this essay comes from the introduction to the translated and published volume by Le Corbusier, *The Athens Charter*, New York 1973. The original was published by Corbusier in French as *La Charte d'Athènes*, Paris 1943, and the edited version of the same name in 1957.

such as Corbusier and his allies in the Bauhaus and Werkbund. It assumed that 1) if city-dwellers were won over to political extremism, it was not the result of any real decision making on their behalf, but rather because they did not have enough sunlight or fresh air and that this impaired the moral and cognitive judgment and that 2) these architects and designers, almost all of whom were from at least somewhat comfortable backgrounds, were inherently in a better position to decide on behalf of the masses what they wanted and needed as far as what should replace the old cityscapes.

These themes were reinforced as the CIAM met again in 1929, in Frankfurt, and again in 1930 in Brussels. The fourth CIAM Congress then, which took place in 1932 mostly at sea, was mostly an attempt to sum up the conclusions that the members of the previous Congresses had reached. According to Corbusier, the atmosphere aboard the vessel, the *Patris II*, was one of "youthfulness, trust, modesty, and professional conscience" as it sailed from France to Greece and back over the course of two weeks. The results of the Congress were initially published in the official proceedings of the Greek Chamber of Technology in 1933, but revised and annotated by Corbusier in 1941 as the "Athens Charter" and published in Paris in 1943. Though it is not entirely clear why Corbusier published it in 1943, more than a decade after its inception, there is speculation that Corbusier had served on a "reconstruction committee" intended to begin preparing for post-liberation France, even while the Vichy regime still held power. Though Corbusier served on a Vichy government architectural board, Vichy officials grew increasingly suspicious of his political sympathies and activities, and Corbusier apparently decided to publish the Charter as a compendium of the Congresses of the CIAM, and to do so anonymously, worried that if something happened to him, as the center of the CIAM, the ability to synthesize all the work of the CIAM would be lost.

The first and most basic theme in the Charter is the importance of the natural environment to the "urbanist" program advocated by the Charter, which may seem somewhat counterintuitive considering the highly "artificial" character of the highly modern city proposed by Corbusier. However, for Corbusier and the CIAM, it made sense, because they were searching for an entirely new basis or orientation upon which to build a city, and because they were looking for a principle that would be universal, the sun and the natural environment appeared to be a universal factor for all cities at all times. However, beyond the functional utility of using the sun and the landscape as the ur-basis for designing new cities, the Charter reflects a deeper belief in the mystical power of the natural world as the rightful—not merely the convenient—basis of all human building. So, the Charter says in its third point, "It must never be forgotten that the sun dominates all, imposing its law upon every undertaking whose object is to safeguard the human being. Plains, hills, and mountains [...] shape a sensibility and [...] give rise to a mentality." The sun is later reiterated as fundamental to the Charter as one part of a fundamental triad of "sun, vegetation, and space," which are described in article #12 as the "three raw materials" of urbanism. In particular, the Charter makes clear that the "evil" of the city, discussed below, is a result of lacking sunlight and fresh air, and in particular a lack of greenery in the urban slums. In article #11, the Charter claims that "the individual who loses touch with nature [...] pays dearly through illness and moral decay." Though the Charter almost never describes the specific kinds of moral decay to which it is referring (with the exception of numerous vague references to "promiscuity"), it was picking up on a recurring theme present in previous social movements to reform the physical and social "ills" associated with the growth of urban slums, in particular, the notion that reintegrating urban dwellers with green space and nature, and exposing them

(especially as children) to nature and the outdoors would imbue them with better moral character. It also carries with it tones of medieval superstition and pseudo-medicine, in particular the widely accepted notion of a "miasma" (or "bad air") as a mystical force responsible for disease and ill fortune (thus the widespread use of "posies" or pouches of pleasant smelling flowers to ward off infection during the time of the Black Death), or the commonly held belief among 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> century physicians that people—usually of the upper classes—who suffered from chronic physical or psychological conditions could be cured by moving to a better "climate" with better "air," usually in southern Europe or in the Alps.

This kind of magical thinking is carried over into the second theme present in the Charter, namely, the notion that by aligning and placing the angles, streets, buildings, windows etc., of the city with the right symmetry (a symmetry following the arc of the sun and the topography of the landscape) a kind of "cosmic portal" could be unlocked which would allow to good energy to gush forth, curing all "evils" and preventing any more from developing. As the Charter says in article #92, "Architecture presides over the destinies of the city. It orders the structure of the dwelling, that vital cell of the urban tissue whose health, gaiety, and harmony are subject to its decisions. [...] Architecture is the key to everything." In particular, the Charter argues that the relationship between the dwelling and the street needed to be conceived with an entirely different alignment, as article #16 says: "The house will never again be fused to the street by a sidewalk. It will rise in its own surroundings, in which it will enjoy sunshine, clear air, and silence." The alignment of dwellings along transit routes is especially inauspicious because it allows for only a minimum of exposure to the sun, the most important factor of all.

Of course, an architect arguing that "architecture is the key to everything" ought to raise immediate alarm bells, and it is indeed a clear indicator for the often profound sense of self-importance and philosophical narcissism of Corbusier and the other architects of the CIAM, a different kind of elitism than their traditionalist enemies in the academy, but elitism nonetheless. Indeed the magical thinking and mysticism dovetails in many ways with the elitist mentality of the Charter, because one thing conspicuously absent in the Charter is any discussion of real needs, problems, or desires of ordinary city dwellers. By assuming that the problems of the city are a result of angles, spacing, vegetation, sunlight, etc., the CIAM seems to have left out the very important reasons that motivate people, from greed to fear, from lust to despair and everything in between. This is a very important point because the inability of Corbusier and others to see urbanites as individual subjectivities is very much representative of the kind of postwar social democratic solutions, such as the vast housing projects built both in the East and the West. The assumption that the right array of buildings would channel social harmony, like some kind of modernist Stonehenge or Bauhaus/Feng shui hybrid, blinded city planners to the factors that would destabilize that very harmony within these projects, such as racism, drugs, criminality, fear, isolation, etc.

The individual subject is not necessarily present in the Charter, but the subject's automobile certainly is. The fourth theme central to the Charter is the profound and categorical change wrought within cities by the advent of the automobile. For Corbusier and the CIAM, the automobile is more than just a faster means of transport than the horse or walking, because the entire spatial layout of cities derived over centuries and even millennia from the temporality of walking or riding on horseback. Automobiles altered the time necessary to traverse distances, and thus the temporality of cities, so much that the

spatiality had also to be fundamentally changed, rather than altered in ad hoc ways. Thus, one of the fundamental precepts of the Charter is the separation of the street from the dwelling, so that roads are only for traveling, not for parking, picking up, cruising, etc. Not only would such a change make traffic flow more efficiently, argues the Charter, but it would allow people to live in verdant areas without necessarily having to leave the city, it would remove a source of pollution, or, "bad air" from the dwelling, and it would make city life much safer.

The fifth major theme to highlight in the Athens Charter is the repeated use of the word "evil," usually in reference to the problems of 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> century urbanization and industrialization, including specifically the class disparities of certain parts of the city, the poor living conditions of the slums, and the profit motive driving and sustaining the chaotic and dangerous situation in modern cities. Again, it seems a bit counterintuitive for a modernist architect to discuss problems of the city as "evil." To an extent, the use of such a blanket phrase can be attributed perhaps to the elitism of the Charter, such as in article #8, which argues that with the rise of the automobile "chaos has entered the cities. The evil is universal, expressed in the cities by an overcrowding that drives them into disorder." Here, the evil is really disorder and overcrowding, which are subjective categories, and we could imagine that for someone of upper class bearing, someone who did not live or grow up in the midst of such "chaos" or "overcrowding" or "disorder," gazing upon the bustling slums might indeed evoke a kind of blanket sense of utter chaos or panic, so terrifying that it might certainly appear as self-evidently "evil." However, by using such superstitious or quasi-religious language to ground the rationale for change, the Charter immediately reveals its prejudices and the shortcomings of its assumptions about the nature of human society and behavior.

And indeed, though the Charter is a document intended to reform a society rent by class conflict, it is clearly a document that reveals the extent of the lack of understanding between the classes as much as it provides meaningful palliatives to that socio-economic chasm. For only a group of architects who had no serious knowledge of the very slums which they sought to reform, either anthropological or sociological, either experiential or empirical, would make such sweeping assumptions about life in the slums. The sixth important theme in the Charter then is the near total lack of any meaningful data, anecdotal or scientific, to ground any of the truth claims upon which the program of the Charter rests. A good example of this is the assumption that the cramped quarters and labyrinthine courtyards and alleys of the old slums fostered "promiscuity" and criminality, a common focus of social reformers since the Victorian age. The Charter calls upon no studies showing any causal link between the narrowness of hallways, streets, stairwells, etc. and criminality, prostitution, or any other indicator of "promiscuity."

A similar dynamic can be witnessed in the housing projects of communist Eastern Europe, for example, the Berlin-Marzahn "Neubausiedlung" built in the 1970s and 1980s, perhaps the closest approximation to the kind of comprehensive urban plan called for in the Charter. There, criminality and prostitution was nearly unknown, but the wide open spaces, easy access to the buildings and their communications connections, and even the tight levels of control governing who got an apartment in the Plattenbauten made it easier than ever for the East German secret police, the Stasi, to observe citizens closely. If there was any possibility for keeping secrets from the state, it was only in the old city slums in districts of Berlin such as Pankow and Prenzlauer Berg, where a dissident or a spy could disappear easily into a dark alleyway, or hear the

creaking floorboards outside an apartment if someone tried to sneak up to the door to furtively eavesdrop.

The fact that it was ultimately the communist states of the USSR and its Eastern European allies like East Germany that adopted the basic program of the Athens Charter wholesale leads to the seventh theme of the Charter, also a conspicuous absence—the lack of any realistic plan for how much the implementation of this plan would cost and how it would be paid for. In many cases, such as in article #36, the Charter calls for simply razing large swaths of cities, and fundamentally rebuilding roads, industrial zones, residential zones, infrastructure, etc. In other cases, the Charter seems to indicate that new cities will have to be built upon a tabula rasa next to or near the old cities, which will presumably be abandoned in some way. Obviously, such a project would be enormously costly. Only once, in article #93, does the Charter mention the other immediate obstacle to such megalomaniacal city planning: the necessary expropriation of vast amounts of property from its rightful and legal owners. The legal impracticality aside, this points to a very difficult dilemma for the Athens Charter, namely, that this program of sweeping urban reform is meant to head off a coming revolution, either from the right or the left—but in order to expropriate such large amounts of property, a government would, for all intents and purposes, have to adopt the totalitarian, maximalist tactics of communist or fascist dictatorships. The Charter claims that rather than simply "nationalizing" or "socializing" property at gunpoint, government ought to remunerate all property owners for their loss at "fair market value." Again, however, on the scale the Charter is describing, "fair market value" would be so astronomical a cost as to be virtually impossible for any but the most absolutely wealthy municipalities or regional governments to afford. It is not surprising then that this program was only ever realized on the scale it was intended under communist dictatorships, which had no problem with outright expropriation of property, and had near complete control over the finances and economy of the country, and thus were in a position to devote the enormous sums of money necessary to carry out projects such as Berlin-Marzahn.

The issue of completely razing large parts of the city brings us to the eighth and final theme important to understanding the Charter—the loss of any historical heritage with such demolition. Here, Corbusier and the CIAM do make an exception for certain historical monuments or landmarks, but only on the condition that they do not impede the execution of the urbanist plan, and that they are not superfluous. That is, one rococo or baroque church per city is enough to serve as a reminder of what the past looked like, and planners ought to select one that is not in the way of a new thoroughfare or dwelling zone, and destroy the rest. And this is important because it demonstrates a willingness to erase any traces of the past that might serve as a spark for nostalgia and what the Charter calls, in article #67, "a narrow-minded cult of the past."

For all the obvious flaws contained within the Athens Charter, many of which led to serious social and economic and environmental problems in the postwar world as the Charter was implemented on an ever wider scale, it is not clear that a better solution has in principle yet been found for how to erase the inequality built into the very urban fabric of industrial as well as post-industrial cities. It may very well be that the flaws of the Athens Charter are not so fundamental that some of its basic ideas cannot be usefully adapted to the post-2008 world. And just because much of the logic underpinning the Charter's ideas was not grounded in real anthropological, sociological or other serious research does not necessarily make it wrong. One of the most important avenues of research stemming from the Athens Charter, then, will need to be more investigations as

to the depth of connection between the Charter as a text and the projects it inspired as historically contingent projects, and in particular, whether the internal inconsistencies of the Charter as a text correspond in a causal way to the problems experienced throughout the postwar world.

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