

Cartoon Architecture

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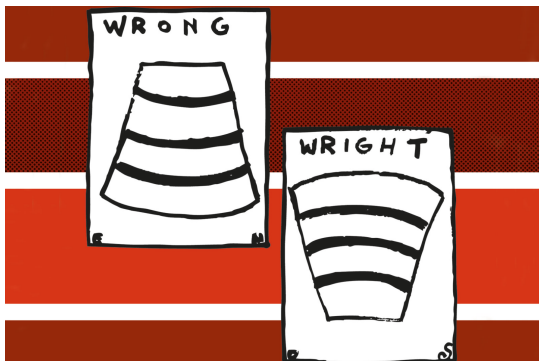
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## Cartoon architecture

16 JANUARY 2017 | BY [GABRIELE NERI](#) | [ESSAYS](#)



Modern architecture first caught the eye of satirists in the mid-19th century, spawning a cutting new species of cartoon

Caricaturists interpret architectural history in the making, turning the concrete shells of the Sydney Opera House into an orgy of amorous turtles, the glass houses of Mies van der Rohe into madness-inducing prisons, and the works of Gaudí into enormous zoos for wild animals, or monolithic hangars for airships. Skyscraper-darkened

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Manhattan was depicted as a shadowland where children could only get sunshine if they used UV lamps at home, *before* they stepped outside. Then there was Russia, where the houses were portrayed as so mind-numbingly identical that people were depicted walking into the wrong one by mistake. The architects themselves were caricatured as detached from reality, insensitive to the needs of ordinary people.

Large-scale urban renewal and development, the building of public monuments, the revolution in housing models, and the flamboyant personalities of architects were an irresistible combination that led artists such as Honoré Daumier, George Cruikshank, Thomas Theodor Heine, William Heath Robinson, Louis Hellman, Alan Dunn, Mino Maccari, Leo Longanesi, Saul Steinberg and George Molnar to sharpen their wit and their pencils.

Written and graphic satire played a key role in the architectural narrative that has unfolded over the past two centuries, yet this trove of commentary and criticism has been neglected, treated as an illegitimate form of discourse when compared with manifestos and journals. However, far from being mere mockery for mockery's sake, the following case studies show that these images and texts were inspired by a complex of issues that crossed disciplinary boundaries, taking architectural debate into the political, cultural, economic, aesthetic and social arenas.

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# ‘A dunghill in the middle of the city’



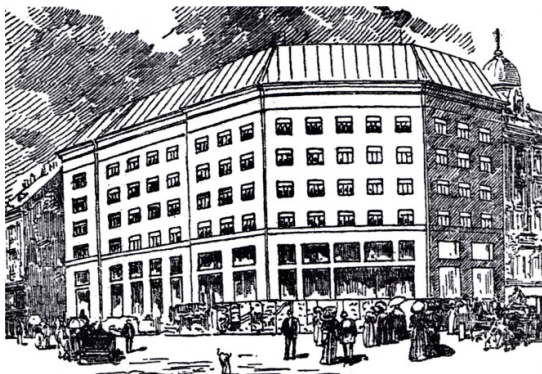
Poster for Loos's lecture 'My House on Michaelerplatz' at the Sophiensaal, December 11, 1911

In the early 20th century, the novelty of modern architecture held the media in thrall. After the scaffolding was taken down from Loos's building on Michaelerplatz in the autumn of 1910, the scandalous bareness of the facade sparked a heated debate among the city councillors and the press.<sup>1</sup>

Although discussion centred on the building's appearance, this was not a superficial analysis driven solely by the local tabloids' desire to sell more copies but instead motivated by a complex of economic, political and cultural agendas. Of the approximately 600 newspapers that covered the Looshaus, the liberal *Neue Freie Presse* took a frontline stance on behalf of the conservative middle classes, using

Loos as a pretext to indirectly attack his friend the writer Karl Kraus. For his part, Kraus had written a number of pieces in defence of the building in which he repeatedly railed against the moral and political hypocrisy of the newspaper.

Then there were figures such as Karl Rykl, member of the Christian Socialist party and also a sculptor and manufacturer of cast stone products. His view was that a stylistic degeneration had been perpetrated and that the total lack of decoration on Loos's 'monstrous' architecture posed a serious threat to the small craftsmen. As well as being motivated by professional self-interest, politics drove him to openly oppose the Looshaus, exploiting the scandal as a ploy to win votes.



**Die Mistkiste am Michaelerplatz, 'Die Neue Zeitung', 7 December 1910**

## Wien in der Karikatur.

XXXVI.

### Das Loos-Haus auf dem Michaelerplatz.



Der selige Fischer v. Erlach: Schade, daß ich diesen Stil nicht schon gekannt hab', dann hätt' ich den schönen Platz nicht mit meiner dunkelerten Ornamentik verhandelt!"

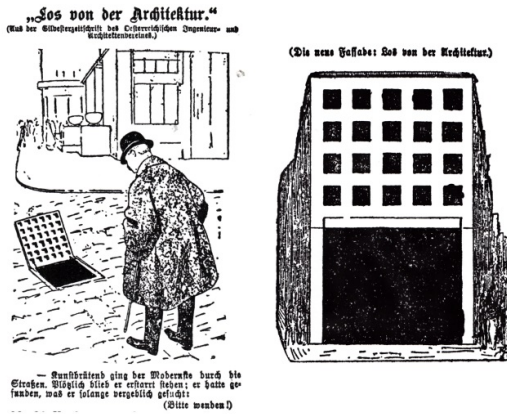
R Herrmann, Das Loos-Haus auf dem Michaelerplatz, 'Der Morgen', 1911

The singularity of the building and the media exposure it received were a clear invitation to the satirical artists of the Viennese press. One example was the vignette featured by *Neue Zeitung* on 7 December 1910, which depicted an even more simplified version of the building, giving it the name 'Die Mistkiste' (the Dung Crate) and a startling caption: 'Dear Reader! If you want to see a dunghill in the middle of the city then go to Michaelerplatz, where you'll see an example of the highest magnitude of perversion in the form of a modern building.'<sup>2</sup>

Many caricatures lambasted the starkness of the Looshaus by comparing it with the opulent Hofburg wing of the imperial palace that commanded Michaelerplatz, designed by Fischer von Erlach in the 1700s. A good example is the cartoon by Rudolf Herrmann in *Der Morgen*, which depicts the ghost of von Erlach as he sardonically eyes the work of his colleague and quips: ‘What a pity I had no knowledge of this style or I wouldn’t have ruined the square with all my stupid ornaments!’<sup>3</sup> As if in response to those words, the *Österreichische Volks-Zeitung* issued a lampoon that completely restyled the Michaelerplatz according to Loos’s vision, its geometrical purity unmarred by a single decoration.<sup>4</sup> Likewise, the satirical journal *Kikeriki* took the same cynical tone to propose a definitive solution to the controversial facade: ‘On its own, the Looshaus is a fairly beautiful addition to Michaelerplatz. It’s just that the imperial palace looks rather out of place. So, let’s get rid of it!’<sup>5</sup>



**E. Friedl, Unser Projekt für das neue Burgtor, 'Österreichische Volks-Zeitung', 26 February 1911**



Los von der Architektur, 'Illustrirtes Wiener Extrablatt', 1 January 1911

However, the most famous satirical assault on the 'modern architect' appeared in the January 1911 edition of *Illustrirtes Wiener Extrablatt*, which showed a rear view of the architect bending over to look intently at a drain while the caption informed readers that, after long-suffering pilgrimage, the architect had finally found what he was looking for: a manhole very much like the design of the now famous facade.<sup>6</sup> The reference to Loos is implicit in the irreverent wordplay of the title: *Los von der Architektur*, which, loosely translated, means 'Away with Architecture'. The cartoon implies that modern architecture is no longer architecture, the proof being an oversimplification that reduces buildings to banal and purely functional objects.

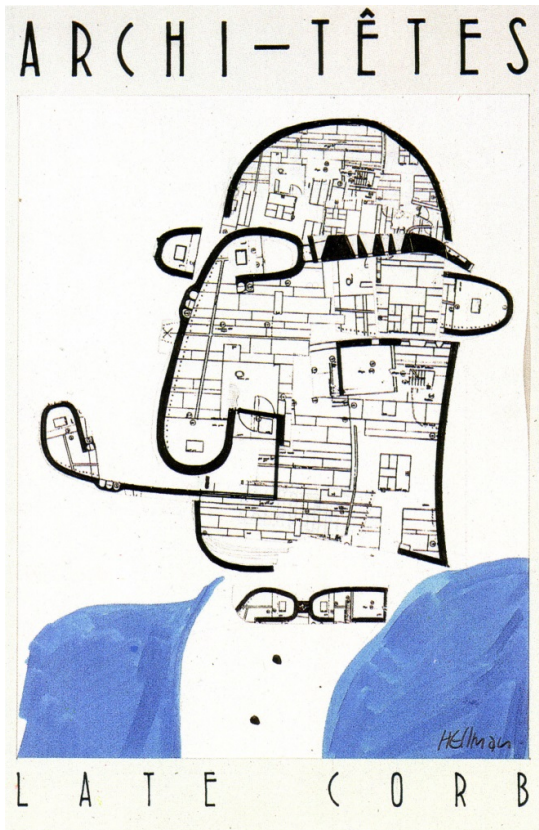
## 'Inconveniences of moral order'

One of the architectonic novelties that 20th-century satirists found most stimulating was the home. In the 1920s, modern architects touched a nerve when they called for a revolution

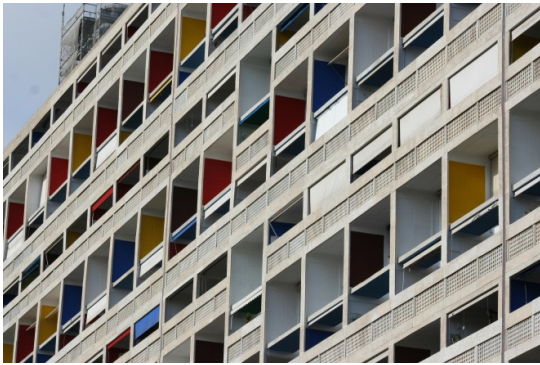


in dwelling. Germany took the lead, building thousands of houses with unheard-of flat roofs, big windows and smaller rooms. As the satire of the time shows, these new models became the whipping boy of the critics but, as in the case of the Looshaus, the criticism veiled deeper political and economic agendas.

This opprobrium endured into the postwar period. Le Corbusier faced much hostility while building the Unité d'Habitation in Marseille between 1947 and 1952; indeed, Anatole Kopp<sup>7</sup> described this experience as the *Bataille de Marseille*. The president of the Executive Committee of the Department of Sanitation opined that these 'boxes' would exude an unhealthy air, even going as far as to say that their rigid, uniform lines could trigger 'psychological and neuropathic consequences'.<sup>8</sup> This led France to create the National Association for General Aesthetics, which promptly filed a lawsuit alleging 'the inconveniences of moral order that go against the French aesthetic'<sup>9</sup> with a claim for moral damages of 20 million francs and a petition to demolish the building.



**L Hellman, Late Corb, (from Hellman, L, Archi-Têtes. The Id in the Grid, London, Wiley-Academy, 2000)**



**Source: Gabriele Neri  
Unité d'habitation in Marseille**



Postcard showing Unité's kitchen

The journal *Architecture Française* further exacerbated the situation by publishing the complete report of the 1947 meeting of the Executive Committee of the Department of Sanitation, which raised profound doubts about the Unité d'Habitation and other modern works. The most criticised aspect of the building was its unusual depth, which would presumably block all light from entering. The report also cited other risks, such as using the centre of the building to house shops, which, it claimed, would attract the rodents 'which are rife in the district'.<sup>10</sup>

This context enables us to better understand the article published in the satirical weekly *Le Canard Enchaîné* in 1954, which was accompanied by an image of Le Corbusier standing before his architectural creation with the subtitle 'The radiant excitation' (*l'excité radieux*), a pun on his famous

*Cité Radieuse*. The article<sup>11</sup> describes a visit to the Unité to learn ‘how architecture can unshackle itself from the Fine Arts’. Picking up the criticism of the Department of Sanitation, the narrator states that ‘this penitentiary building’ shines with modernity, except, naturally, for the fact that ‘it is impossible to see a thing so pitch black are its corners’.



Source: KOPP, A., La «bataille» de Marseille, in *Le Corbusier et la Méditerranée, Marseille, Editions Parenthèses, 1987*

**Le Corbusier a gagné la bataille de Marseille, article published after the inauguration of the Unité d'habitation in Marseille**



Caricature from 'Le Canard enchaîné', September 1954

## 'Horrible Hollywood avocadoburger'

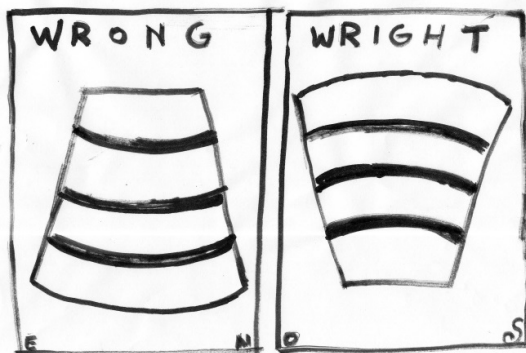
Perhaps even more attractive to satirists of modern architecture than the home was the museum. Indeed, the 1900s saw the type undergo a radical rethinking of the ways in which it was used, and as a consequence it changed its relationship with the city. The seminal example is the New York Guggenheim, designed by Frank Lloyd Wright as an alien organism intended to critique Manhattan's urban and architectonic idioms, which he disliked intensely. The strange object triggered public debate long before it officially opened in 1959, with journalists, critics and citizens alike coming up

with an assortment of imaginative, albeit unflattering slang names, among them ‘inverted oatmeal dish’, ‘indigestible hot cross bun’, ‘washing machine’, ‘washtub’, ‘big, white ice cream freezer’,<sup>12</sup> and ‘horrible Hollywood avocadoburger’.<sup>13</sup> A famous article penned by Lewis Mumford for *The New Yorker* compared the museum building to ‘a gigantic pillbox’,<sup>14</sup> while the *New York Daily Mirror* railed: ‘The museum itself is one of Frank Lloyd Wright’s most joyous monstrosities ... On the outside it looks like a ball of mud ... This imitation beehive does not fit any New York environment ... Well, there it is, a building that should be put in a museum to show how mad the 20th century is.’<sup>15</sup>



Source: Gabriele Neri

Guggenheim Museum, NY York



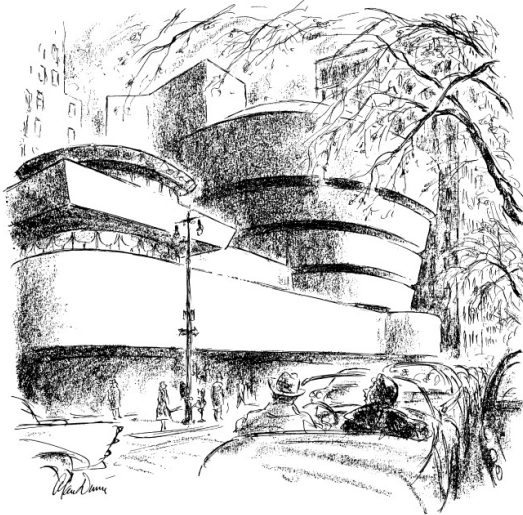
Randall Enos, Wrong Wright, 2012

Many other issues lurked behind the

veil of formal criticisms. One of these was Wright's battle with the New York Board of Standards and Appeals, the city's construction watchdog, to get the green light for his novel idea. This made newspaper headlines nationwide, eliciting both praise and criticism, while Aline Louchheim launched an attack on the Guggenheim Foundation, which she accused of being an esoteric place that speaks the language of mysticism.<sup>16</sup> This narrow-mindedness, typical of those New Yorkers hostile to Solomon Guggenheim and Hilla Rebay's cultural programme, was also a side-swipe at Wright's work, 'inasmuch that it gave tangible expression to those architectonic forms'.

On 25 October 1959, *the New York Times* ran a headline that summed up all the arguments, using a play on words that also inspired satirical sketches: 'That Museum: Wright or Wrong?' with the subtitle: 'Is it a museum, or a monument to Mr. Wright?'<sup>17</sup> The Guggenheim Museum's controversial design and the presence of 'ambiguities' that went beyond the purely architectonic became daily newspaper fodder and sent the cartoonists running for their pencils, with those of *The New Yorker* leading the pack. In one image, the building's inverted cylindrical form so startled the driver of a passing car that, astonished, he asked his friend: 'Are they allowed to do that on Fifth Avenue?'<sup>18</sup> The ambiguous phrase, which could also allude to the short-skirted women standing on the pavement in front of the museum, suggests that the sober institution had

become equivalent to a sex worker.



*"Are they allowed to do that on Fifth Avenue?"*

**A Dunn, 'The New Yorker', 8 November 1958**



*"I agree it's a monument to the genius of Frank Lloyd Wright but as a museum..."*

**W Darrow Jr, 'The New Yorker', 19 December 1959**

However it was interior of the building that garnered the most criticism, with the famous ramp gallery the prime target. The *New Yorker* heralded the opening of the museum with a series of cartoons<sup>19</sup> that parodied the viewing experience of the guests, who had to ascend to the top of the atrium then walk down the entire spiral of the ramp to see the works of art. One cartoon depicts a room where the conversing guests are not standing upright but leaning over at an odd



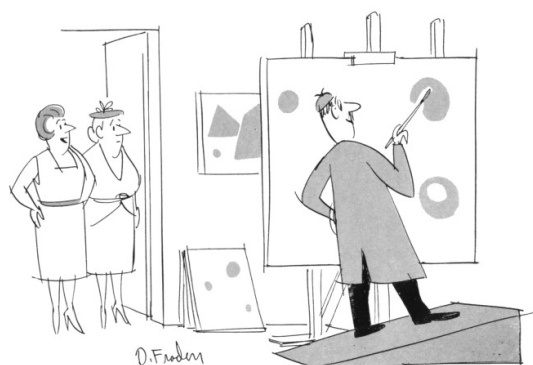
angle, mirroring the tilt of the ramp, prompting one gentleman to admit: 'I agree it's a monument to the genius of Frank Lloyd Wright but as a museum ...'<sup>20</sup> Another portrays a seasick guest gasping with relief as he exits the building and exclaims: 'Ah, *terra firma!*'<sup>21</sup> Then there's the sketch of the boy skateboarding out of the main entrance,<sup>22</sup> highlighting the improper levity perceived in the unconventional design.

Cartoonist Dana Fradon expressed his view on the controversy with a vignette in 1960 that shows a painter in his atelier standing on an oblique pedestal, spurring one lady to remark: 'He had the Guggenheim in mind, I think'.<sup>23</sup> But here too more complex issues simmer beneath the surface. Fradon's idea for the cartoon seems to have sprung from a letter written to James Johnson Sweeney, then Director of the Guggenheim Museum, in 1956 and signed by 21 artists who had come together to publicly raise the issue of the relationship between art and architecture. The artists lamented the 'callous disregard for the fundamental rectilinear frame of reference necessary for the adequate visual contemplation of works of art'.<sup>24</sup> *The New York Times* art critic, John Canaday, also spoke out on the issue, defining the Guggenheim as 'a war between architecture and painting in which both come out badly maimed'.<sup>25</sup>



*"I'll be all right in a minute. I'm afraid I accelerated on the way down."*

**J Stevenson, 'The New Yorker', 7 November 1959**



*"He had the Guggenheim in mind, I think."*

**D Fradon, 'The New Yorker', 9 January 1960**

## 'A counter-history of architecture'

There are many other instances that could be cited here. Several political factions debated the complex design of the Sydney Opera House, an issue that cartoonists such as George Molnar documented well. Other great works that had a significant impact on the public, and hence the satirists, included the Centre Pompidou of Paris, the Guggenheim Museum of Bilbao and the Walt Disney Concert Hall of Los Angeles, while Frank

Gehry was even made the lead character of a 2005 episode of *The Simpsons* cartoon series, which lucidly critiqued certain paradoxes of contemporary architecture. As the preceding examples have shown, architectural satire is more than just mean-spirited ephemera. By attracting a much wider public than the small group of experts that read the specialised press, cartoons open a window on the relationship between architecture and society at large, identifying issues with deep resonance. The use of a few sketched lines and words to deliver a message that practically everyone can understand implies a finely tuned work of analysis that often expressed opinions antithetical to the official propaganda of the books and manifestos issued by the architects.

To clarify the relationship between architecture and society we could do worse than turning to the medium of satire, with its deep political, economic and cultural resonances. Such a holistic analysis can use the rich heritage of cartoons to chart a counter-history of architecture that, while far from objective, would challenge the cherished myths of established historiography. Such a counter-history would be especially useful today, given the even bigger impact of the internet and digital technologies on the communication of architecture.

Indeed, the communicative power of digital imaging has been recognised by architects, whose work often cut across the world of caricatures and cartoons. Aside from those designers

that worked as cartoonists in their youth (such as Alvar Aalto for *Kerberos* magazine in 1920-21, or the Italian Piero Portaluppi with *Guerin Meschino*) and those who left architecture to become famous graphic artists (Saul Steinberg, Alan Dunn, among others), the list of architects that used cartoons and caricatures to communicate their ideas is extensive. For example, the legacy of the Swiss caricaturist Rodolphe Töpffer – father of the first European comics – can be found in the graphic approach to architectural storytelling in the sketches<sup>26</sup> of Le Corbusier, who also inserted cartoons by the French caricaturist Marcel Cappy in his famous book *La Ville Radieuse* in 1935.<sup>27</sup> Then, beginning in the 1960s with Archigram, the comic has become a common type of architectural representation, as books by Rem Koolhaas,<sup>28</sup> among others, testify. The last page of *Content*, for instance, the book Koolhaas published in 2004, ends with a chart where his buildings become little creatures, funny puppets that could be part of an animated cartoon, for example: the Portuguese Casa da Música is a clumsy monster which opens its mouth as if to cry out; the Thai ‘Hyperbuilding’ walks threateningly on awkward legs; the Seattle Public Library is transformed into a millipede. Here the architect absorbs the digestive role of the caricaturist, giving the public a premasticated caricature which will – hopefully – help the building to find its own place in the collective imagination.

1. See H Czech and W Mistelbauer, *Das Looshaus*, Vienna: Löcker, 1984; C Long, *The Looshaus*, New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2011; among others.
2. 'Die Mistkiste am Michaelerplatz', *Die Neue Zeitung*, 7 December 1910, p7.
3. R Herrmann, 'Das Loos-Haus auf dem Michaelerplatz', *Der Morgen*, 1911.
4. E Friedl, 'Unser Projekt für das neue Burgtor', *Österreichischen Volks-Zeitung*, 26 February 1911.
5. 'Los von Fischer von Erlach!', *Kikeriki*, 19 October 1911, p3.
6. 'Los von der Architektur', *Illustriertes Wiener Extrablatt*, 1 January 1911.
7. See A Kopp, 'La "bataille" de Marseille', in *Le Corbusier et la Méditerranée*, Marseille: Editions Parenthèses, 1987, pp179-89.
8. Ibid, p186.
9. Ibid.
10. Ibid, p. 189.
11. J Canard, [pseudonym], 'Le Corbusier ou l'excité radieux', *Le Canard Enchaîné*, September 1954.
12. See H Ballou, *The Guggenheim. Frank Lloyd Wright and the Making of the Modern Museum*, New York: Solomon R. Guggenheim Foundation, 2009, p157.

13. Ibid, p184.
14. See F Dal Co, *Il tempo e l'architetto. Frank Lloyd Wright e il Guggenheim Museum*, Milan: Electa, 2004, p58.
15. See H Ballon, op cit, p217.
16. See F Dal Co, op cit, p93.
17. *New York Times*, 25 October 1959.
18. A Dunn, *The New Yorker*, 8 November 1958.
19. See *The New Yorker*, 28 November 1959.
20. W Darrow Jr, *The New Yorker*, 19 December 1959.
21. A Dunn, *The New Yorker*, 28 November 1959.
22. J Stevenson, *The New Yorker*, 16 August 1976.
23. D Fradon, *The New Yorker*, 9 January 1960.
24. Archives of American Art (Washington, DC), *Artists' protest letter to James Johnson Sweeney*, New York, N.Y., 1956.
25. J Canaday, in H Ballon, op cit, p217.
26. See LM Lus Arana, '*Le Corbusier leía tebeos. Breves notas sobre las relaciones entre arquitectura y narrativa gráfica*', *Revista de Arquitectura*, 15, 2013, pp47-58.
27. Le Corbusier, *La Ville Radieuse: éléments d'une doctrine d'urbanisme pour l'équipement de*

*la civilisation machiniste*,  
Boulogne: Edition de  
l'Architecture d'Aujourd'hui,  
1935, pp88, 112, 120, 208.

28. See R Koolhaas and B Mau,  
*S,M,L,XL*, New York: Monacelli  
Press, 1995, pp354-61; R  
Koolhaas and B Mau, *Content*,  
Cologne: Taschen, 2004, p544.

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