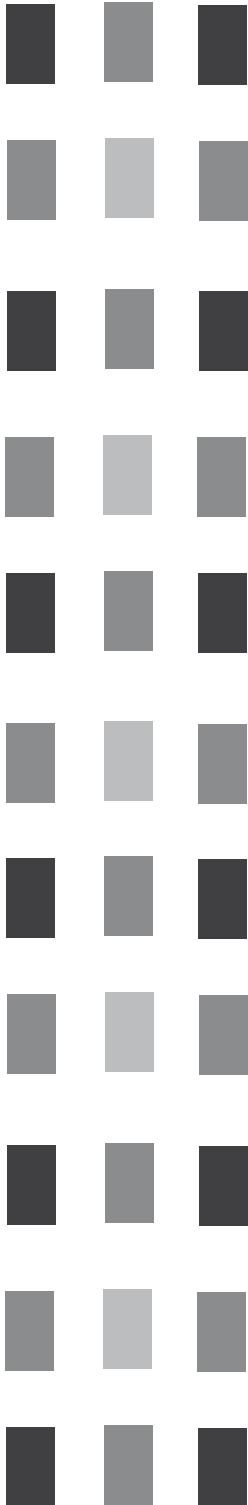


The Book as Urban Metaphor

The Design of Les Plans Le Corbusier de Paris,
1956–1922

Catherine de Smet



Thanks to a few seminal publications, Le Corbusier's bibliography constitutes a key reference for both the specialized and non-specialized public. In her book *The Rule and the Model*, Françoise Choay deems it „the most prevalent and the most widely read urbanistic literature.“¹ We can see today that any major publication by an architect is guaranteed to be compared with Le Corbusier. This was the case for *S, M, L, XL*,² which sparked many commentaries in this vein when it just came out. Although the analogies highlighted at the time rarely alluded to the material aspect of the books and their layout, Hans van Dijk did note, however, that *S, M, L, XL* „can be compared with an amalgamation of Le Corbusier's theoretical essays and his *Œuvre complète* in a single volume.“³ Recently, an article in the French architectural review *Le Visiteur*, by Joseph Cho, further developed this parallel, attempting to demonstrate how the layout of *S, M, L, XL* reflects Rem Koolhaas's vision of architecture, just as the *Œuvre complète* was a reflection of that of Le Corbusier.⁴ Aiming to unearth the connections between designing built space and designing printed space, this approach certainly does open up extremely rich channels of interpretation, but one must take into account the conditions surrounding the publication of each book. The longstanding disinterest for what Paul Valéry called the „physique“ of books has led to a considerable delay in research on their genesis and their material characteristics. This is the case even for the „most prevalent and most widely read“ architectural and urbanistic literature.

Laying out the city in a book

Drawing from Koolhaas's analysis of Manhattan (in *Delirious New York*⁵), Cho asserts: „Both Koolhaas's and Le Corbusier's positions on Manhattan reflect their respective brands of urbanism which appear, not surprisingly, in the text, form, and structure of their respective books.“⁶ He sets out to compare *S, M, L, XL* and the *Œuvre complète* and, in doing so, he presents its eight volumes published by the Zurich editor Hans Girsberger as having the prerogative in Corbusian publication without further examination. For Cho, the triple signature on *S, M, L, XL*, whose cover bears the names Koolhaas, OMA (the architect's firm), and Bruce Mau (graphic designer), indicates that „*S, M, L, XL*, is the product of multiple collaborators, of which the architect is but one.“ Whereas the *Œuvre complète*, according to Cho, is consistent with a „rigid, rational“ approach to the city and it „adheres to a singular vision throughout (that of Le Corbusier).“ Yet we know that, up to the third volume, Le Corbusier cosigns with Pierre Jeanneret. Moreover, throughout the project, Willy Boesiger directed both the editing and the design (together

with Oskar Stonorov for the first volume and with the exception of the third volume, which was directed and designed by Max Bill). The *Œuvre complète* is precisely an example of collective realization and, out of all the books in Le Corbusier's bibliography, it is the one that „belongs“ the least to him. All other publications show his involvement as author and as graphic designer in the fullest sense of the term (choice of size, paper, typefaces, illustrations, and doing his own layout).

We can follow Cho when he presents *S, M, L, XL* as „a single, dense container whose concentrated and congested parts practically compete for attention“; the „Culture of Congestion“ described by Koolhaas is thus incarnated in the book form. But it is difficult to agree when he sees in the *Œuvre complète* a projection of Le Corbusier's plan for Manhattan. He stresses that, „published over a period of sixty years,“⁷ the eight discrete volumes „each adhere to the same design and structure,“ thus reflecting a plan that „arranges discrete objects spaced apart in a thoroughly rational manner.“ According to Cho, the *Œuvre Complète* works like Le Corbusier's alternative proposal for Manhattan. But, first and foremost, the *Œuvre complète* looks and works like a book that was published in a country where rationality rules in graphic design. The eight volumes are pure products of Swiss publishing. In this regard, the involvement of Max Bill, the master of the „Swiss school“ of graphic design, is not insignificant. He not only edited and designed the third volume of the series but also produced several dust jackets.⁸ In contrast, the other thirty-five books published by Le Corbusier are characterized by a great diversity of format and layout.

If we agree with Joseph Cho's premise that a book reflects the author's conception of architecture, let us consider precisely the book *La Ville radieuse*⁹: We see previously published texts reproduced in facsimile mixed in with new writings and abundant illustrations displaying the heterogeneity of its origins. Doesn't this collage technique reveal an approach to the city that is more complex than the tabula rasa principle at the origins of the Plan Voisin? Doesn't the succession of very dissimilar pages evoke the chaos and sedimentation specific to urban space? Maybe this is nothing more than a clever presentation strategy intended to make a radical and authoritarian thinking easier to swallow and pleasing but, even so, rhetorical effects of visual nature always merit analysis. Thus Le Corbusier's physical bibliography represents a vast field of exploration, and a precious source for the historian.¹⁰ But it would appear that the mass distribution of the eight volumes of the *Œuvre complète*, which were reedited relentlessly,¹¹ obscures Le Corbusier's book production as a whole. Many are no longer available today or their reeditions do



1 | *La Ville radieuse*, 1935, p. 106 (detail)

not always preserve the original layout – a layout that nevertheless creates a Le Corbusier book in the same capacity as the reproduced writings. It stands to emphasize, for example, that the principle of the „single container“ followed by *S, M, L, XL* is not unrelated to Le Corbusier, who liked to design a book as a collection of fragments extracted from his existing bibliography and from articles published in various reviews, gathering dispersed literature into a compact volume.¹² The most significant experiment with this approach was *Les Plans Le Corbusier de Paris, 1956–1922*, published by Éditions de Minuit in 1956. It brings together, in a single book, writings already previously published and reproduces them in facsimile. Very little discussed to date, this book presents an exceptional form whose examination significantly elucidates the connections between architecture, urbanism, and the book in the twentieth century.

The 1956 version of *La Ville radieuse*

Insofar as *Les Plans de Paris* essentially combines previously published elements – and not published in reviews but in books – this book constitutes one of the least original in Le Corbusier's bibliography. But its content is constructed and assembled into a form that is completely singular and eminently

original. It is one of the most remarkable demonstrations of the specifically Corbusian „touch“ applied to printed matter. *Les Plans de Paris* came out in October 1956, almost two years after Le Corbusier began to work on it. By this time, Le Corbusier and Éditions de Minuit had already been in regular contact for several years, and the evolution of their various collaborations is not without bearing on the final form of their first completed publishing project. It would appear that *Les Plans de Paris* answers to certain suggestions from Jérôme Lindon regarding a reedition of *La Ville radieuse*. Lindon proposed to „remodel“ the 1935 book by, among other things, adding three chapters: „New American architecture, Marseille, and India“.¹³ The proposed chapters are indeed in the 1956 book, together with many chapters from *La Ville radieuse*. We can consider the principle of this book, built from pre-existing elements, as a literal application of the recommended „remodeling.“¹⁴

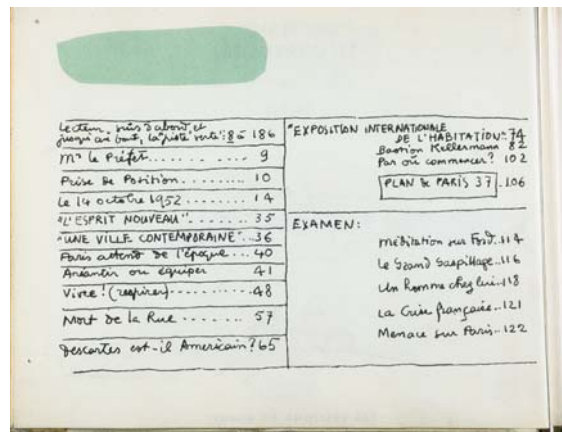
Les Plans de Paris has approximately the same format as *La Ville radieuse* and focuses on urbanism in a similar manner. Second only to volume 5 of the *Œuvre complète*, *La Ville radieuse* was the book from which the author borrowed the greatest number of pages. The homothesis between the format of *Les Plans de Paris* and that of *La Ville radieuse* is at the root of the project. The same format is also found in other books, and *Les Plans de Paris* could therefore reproduce in facsimile pages selected from those books. Seen from this angle, the book can almost be summed up by a list of reuses, that is: a total of one hundred and ten pages from the *Œuvre complète*, thirty-three pages from *La Ville radieuse*, nineteen pages from *Des canons, des munitions*, four pages from *La Maison des hommes*, and two pages from *Quand les cathédrales étaient blanches*.¹⁵ However, although the content of *Les Plans de Paris* seems to offer an extremely small proportion of new material if quantified in this way, what Le Corbusier called the „green path“ aims to introduce an entirely new element that runs throughout the book.

From the first lines of the table of contents, the reader is invited to start with the „green path“ and to follow it right to the end. It is a succession of transparent green areas whose shape varies from page to page. Interspersing the book (which is otherwise printed in black only), it accompanies a text handwritten by the author. Highlighted by the green spots (often by an effect of partial overlapping), this writing runs throughout the book. The overall principle of reuse and assemblage could cast doubt upon Le Corbusier's full implication in this project, but here the high visibility of handwritten text demonstrates the author's intervention.

The irregularity and mistakes crossed out make one imagine the hand getting weary. In short, the



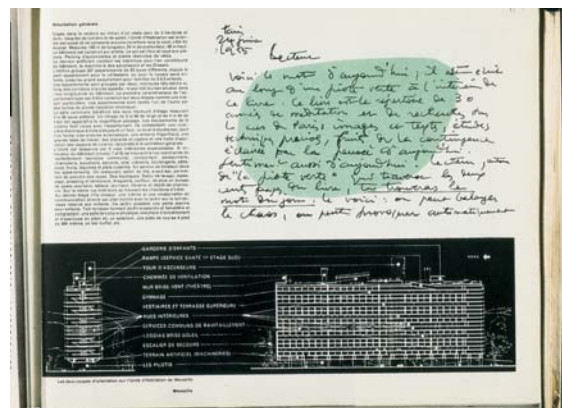
2 | *Les Plans le Corbusier de Paris, 1956–1922, 1956, Cover*



3 | *Les Plans le Corbusier de Paris, 1956–1922, 1956, p. 6 (Table of contents)*

clumsiness of cursive writing reinforces the expressiveness of the end result. We can find the same use of solid areas of transparent color in a special issue of *L'Architecture d'aujourd'hui* from 1948 and in *Poésie sur Alger* of 1951.¹⁶ This technique plays the same role as the handwriting: it provides proof of the author's aesthetic contribution. Often rounded, always irregular, and never repeating, these areas of color unquestionably belong to the domain of fine arts. For the most part, their shapes seem to respond to no figurative need but, rather, to the inspiration of an artist confronted with the constraints presented by the printed surface. Indeed, the handwritten text and the colored pattern that goes with it always adopt a new configuration; this elasticity responds to the need to fill the blank areas of the excerpted pages reproduced in this new publication. Thus the lines of cursive writing are organized differently each time, in columns more or less wide, more or less tall, or even sprawling across the entire width of a page. At first glance, one would think that this handwritten text is a collection of various annotations aiming to comment on the specific content of each of the pages it occupies. But, upon closer inspection, it reveals full continuity. Thematic correlations tying the handwritten text to the excerpts from earlier books are very rare.

Also contrary to what one might expect, given Le Corbusier's well-known interest in Parisian urbanism, the excerpts constituting *Les Plans de Paris* do not contain a high proportion of writings or images pertaining to Paris. The theme appears more as a marker in the succession of pages. The mythic value of Paris serves to crystallize the quintessence of a reflection on the city, housing, and regional development. The handwritten text, too, produced specifically for this publication, is not very focused on the subject announced in the title; it is primarily about the author himself – „your humble servant.“



4 | *Les Plans le Corbusier de Paris, 1956–1922, 1956, p. 17 (facsimile of the Œuvre complète, vol. 5, p. 194)*



5 | *Poésie sur Alger, 1951, p. 40-41*

The artist and „urban core“

Just like *Poésie sur Alger* (though in a much larger format and without the same quality of printing), *Les Plans de Paris* relies on the aesthetic concep-

the other hand, we notice that neither the texts nor the illustrations grant the slightest place for the author's paintings and sculptures. And yet, since 1946, the major shift observed in Le Corbusier's editorial production and his work in general was an increasing importance given to his artistic practice. This absence in *Les Plans de Paris* can only be understood within the dual context of the book's publication. On one hand, the book positions itself within the politically-charged terrain of urbanism, and Le Corbusier seeks to prove, in the course of the book, his expertise in that domain. On the other hand, the artistic side of Le Corbusier's œuvre was not lacking in means of distribution at the time. In 1955, for instance, Tériade had published *Le Poème de l'Angle droit*, and the prestigious lineage in which the book was inscribed guaranteed Le Corbusier artistic recognition (Tériade had already published books by Rouault, Bonnard, Matisse, and Léger). *Le Poème de l'angle droit* definitely played a liberating role vis-à-vis *Les Plans de Paris*: on one hand by affirming more explicitly than any previous publication his aesthetic ambitions; on the other hand, by mastering in a new way the symbolic relationships between the architectural object and the printed object.

The introductory table of contents in *Le Poème de l'angle droit* presents a geometric configuration of a vertical trunk crossed by three horizontal branches, the whole being constituted by squares placed end to end and side by side like in a hopscotch figure.²⁰ It evokes the verticality of a tree or a tower, but it also brings to mind a horizontal projection, and lends itself to being read like the plan of a building. The book's visual organization thus reveals a very subtle coincidence with its subject. The urban metaphor that *Les Plans de Paris* succeeds in developing through its layout, and with very modest means, echoes the architectural structure of *Le Poème de l'angle droit*.

A publication for the „general public“

In search of artistic equivalents for his work as an architect and urbanist, Le Corbusier constructs a master builder metaphor within the two-dimensionality of printed space. He achieves this through both *Les Plans de Paris* and *Le Poème de l'angle droit*. In both cases, we come across the idea of an itinerary, suggested respectively by the hopscotch figure and the „green path.“ The stacking of pages referring to different periods, in *Les Plans de Paris*, reproduces the thin, multiple layering of the urban architecture that is the source of the discourse developed. The insertion of colored shapes distributed throughout the book into this accumulation of documents takes on the eloquence of a theoretical demonstration: the reconciliation of nature and the city. Comparing this book to *Le Poème de*

l'angle droit, published only the year before, helps one pinpoint the issues specific to this unclassifiable compilation. *Le Poème de l'angle droit* implicitly refers to a classical tradition. This is clear in its esoteric allusions,²¹ but also in the fact that it is engraved, unbound, and very large format. In contrast, the 1956 book exploits means that are more specifically contemporary and overtly modest. This can be seen in the „green path,“ the crossed out handwritten text, the use of the informal „tu“ when addressing the reader, the collaging of fragments taken from previous publications, or the offset printing technique. Indeed, offset corresponds to the „Machine Age“ better than the traditional presses of Mourlot, who produced the engraved plates of *Le Poème de l'angle droit*. Economically printed, devoid of any particular bibliophilic qualities, *Les Plans de Paris* is the opposite of the luxurious portfolio with its precious and coded style of writing. With *Les Plans de Paris*, Le Corbusier does not address the limited clientele of Tériade. Quite the contrary, he tries to reach the greatest number of people—an intention that he very explicitly expressed to his editor.²² The book's dedication confirms this objective.

In contrast to *La Ville Radieuse* (dedicated „To Authority“), *Les Plans de Paris* is dedicated to „the French construction industry ... the people of earthwork, cement, steel, ... not to a handful of political figures.“ On the cover, the order of the two dates, 1956–1922, announces the spirit of the book, which invites one to look at the past through the present. *Les Plans de Paris* and *Le Poème de l'angle droit* share an identical project, that is, the visual and material design of a book considered as a formalization of the ideas defended by the author. However, *Le Poème de l'angle droit* is a „highbrow“ version while *Les Plans de Paris* is a version for the „general public.“ Thanks to the superposition of material, and to the „path“ that runs through it, *Les Plans de Paris* succeeds, without resorting to costly techniques, in plainly rendering the two axes on which Le Corbusier sought to leave his mark: the depth of time and the expanse of territory.

Few architects have been as involved as Le Corbusier in the design of their books. The comparison of Rem Koolhaas and Bruce Mau's singular enterprise to Corbusian editorial production is therefore imperative. But, if we really want to measure its true degree of originality, it would be appropriate to situate *S, M, L, XL* in relationship to *Les Plans de Paris* (and eventually other books by Le Corbusier, which were no less meticulously worked out), and not the *Œuvre complète*, as Joseph Cho does. It suffices to look at the clear analogy between the „dictionary“ that runs throughout Koolhaas's book, without connection to the content of the pages it appears on, and the

„green path“ in *Les Plans de Paris* to imagine the resonance such a comparative reading could hold. To conclude, I would like to bring up another book, which came out in 1957, one year after *Les Plans de Paris: Fin de Copenhague*,²³ a book by Guy Debord and Asger Jorn. Printed in a limited edition, it was hailed by critics, particularly for its irony vis-à-vis Le Corbusier and his *Ville Radieuse*²⁴ (we know that Jorn worked with Le Corbusier at the end of the thirties).

The design of *Fin de Copenhague* echoes that of *Plans de Paris* insofar as it pairs a collage of fragments cut out from newspapers and other printed material with an intervention of color. The green spots in *Les Plans de Paris* are not unrelated to the colored spots that Jorn applied to the pages of *Fin de Copenhague*. We can certainly wonder: does the aesthetic form that Le Corbusier gave to his own book not already constitute a form of self-criticism? At any rate, the form of his book distances itself from his vision of urbanism; it is a sort of filter offered to the reader, an invitation to free oneself of all overly unequivocal interpretations. And even if just for an instant, isn't it funny to think of a Le Corbusier book as a Situationist work?

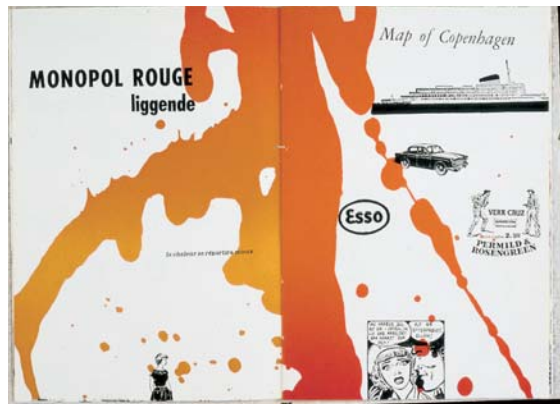
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9 | *Fin de Copenhague*, 1957, Asger Jorn and Guy Debord



10 | *Fin de Copenhague*, 1957, Asger Jorn and Guy Debord

Notes:

- 1 Françoise Choay, *La Règle et le modèle*, Paris 1996, p. 317. English translation: *The Rule and the Model*, ed. Denise Bratton (Cambridge 1997).
- 2 Rem Koolhaas, O.M.A., Bruce Mau, *S, M, L, XL*, Rotterdam/New York 1995.
- 3 Hans van Dijk, "An Anonymous Architect-Hero Is Something to Be", *Archis*, no. 7 (July 1996), p. 65.
- 4 Joseph Cho, "S, M, L, XL, cherchez le guide", trans. Françoise Fromonot, *Le Visiteur*, no. 7 (Fall 2001), pp. 112–133, citations taken from the original manuscript in English.
- 5 Rem Koolhaas, *Delirious New York*, New York 1978; new edition, New York 1994.
- 6 Joseph Cho, *op. cit.*, p. 129. Subsequent quotations from this article are from pages 128 and 129. On the layout of Koolhaas and Mau's book, allow me to refer to my article, "Je suis un livre. À propos de S, M, L, XL, de Rem Koolhaas et Bruce Mau," *Les Cahiers du Musée national d'art moderne*, no. 68 (Summer 1999), pp. 94–111.
- 7 In fact, the installments of the *Œuvre complète* sprawled out over a period of forty years, not sixty (from 1929 to 1969).
- 8 Max Bill designed the cover of the second volume of Le Corbusier, *Œuvre complète* in 1935 and the cover of the first volume's reedition in 1937. Entirely designed and edited by Max Bill, the third volume came out in 1939. See Gerd Fleischmann, Hans Rudolf Bosshard, Christoph Bignens, *Max Bill, Typography, Advertising, Book Design*, Zurich 1999, p. 66.
- 9 Le Corbusier, *La Ville radieuse*, Boulogne 1935.
- 10 See Stanislaus von Moos (ed.), *L'Esprit nouveau und die Industrie, 1920–1925*, exhib. cat., Zurich/Berlin 1987; Jean-Louis Cohen, *Le Corbusier et la mystique de l'URSS. Théories et projets pour Moscou, 1928–1936*, Bruxelles 1987; Beatriz Colomina, *Privacy and Publicity: Modern Architecture and Mass Media*, Cambridge 1994; Daniel Naegele, *Le Corbusier's Seeing Things: Ambiguity and Illusion in the Representation of Modern Architecture*, (Phd., University of Pennsylvania, 1996).
- 11 First published by Girsberger, then successively by Artémis and Éditions d'Architecture (Zurich), the volumes of the *Œuvre complète* are now distributed by the Basel based publisher Birkhäuser.
- 12 Many of Le Corbusier's books are composed of elements previously published, most often in reviews:

Vers une architecture, *L'Art décoratif d'aujourd'hui*, *La peinture Moderne*, and *Urbanisme* reuse articles published in *L'Esprit Nouveau* and much of *La Ville radieuse* came from the reviews *Plans* and *Préludes* (on this subject, see the bibliography in Le Corbusier, *une encyclopédie*, ed. Jacques Lucan (Paris 1987), pp. 482–489). The recycling of his own writings was a characteristic of Le Corbusier's editorial approach throughout his career.

- 13 A letter from Jérôme Lindon to Le Corbusier, dated November 26, 1953 (Fondation Le Corbusier: FLC, U3-12-87).
- 14 *La Ville radieuse* was finally reedited in facsimile by Vincent et Fréal in 1964.
- 15 Le Corbusier, *Des canons? des munitions? Merci! Des logis, S.V.P.*, Boulogne 1938; Le Corbusier and François de Pierrefeu, *La Maison des hommes*, Paris 1942; Le Corbusier, *Quand les cathédrales étaient blanches*, Paris 1937.
- 16 „Le Corbusier," special issue of *L'Architecture d'aujourd'hui* (April 1948), the layout is applied to the entire issue; *Poésie sur Alger*, Paris 1951; *Formes et Vie*, no. 1 (1951), pp. 3–6. Later, Le Corbusier took up this principle of green shapes and handwritten text again in the catalogue of his exhibition at the Musée National d'Art Moderne in 1962.
- 17 On this topic, see Jean-Pierre Criqui, „Reprises," *L'Ivresse du réel. L'objet dans l'art du XXe siècle*, Nîmes 1993), pp. 70–76.
- 18 Note typewritten on May 21, 1948 (Fondation Le Corbusier: FLC, A3-9-4), italics mine.
- 19 See Le Corbusier, „Gardez-nous du pléonasmе", *Formes et Vie*, no. 1 (1951), p. 3.
- 20 Le Corbusier, *Le Poème de l'angle droit*, Paris 1955, p. 6.
- 21 These allusions have been analyzed and commented on by several authors. See in particular Mogens Krustup, *Porte Émail*, Copenhagen 1991, p. 125; Richard Moore, „Alchemical and Mythical Themes in *The Poem of the Right Angle*", 1947–1955, *Oppositions*, no. 19–20 (1980), pp. 111–139; and Daphne Beckett-Chary, *A Study of the Le Corbusier's „Poème de l'angle droit"* (M. Phil. thesis, Cambridge University, 1990).
- 22 I had the opportunity to interview Jérôme Lindon in July 2000.
- 23 Guy Debord and Asger Jorn, *Fin de Copenhague*, Copenhagen 1957.
- 24 *The Architectural Review*, vol. 122, no. 729 (October 1957).

Credits:

Fig. 1–4, 6, 7: Paris, Bibliothèque Forney

Fig. 9, 10: Paris, Bibliothèque Kandinsky, Centre Pompidou