



LE CORBUSIER

An Atlas of Modern Landscapes

MoMA

Saint-Dié: "A Modern Space Conception" for Postwar Reconstruction

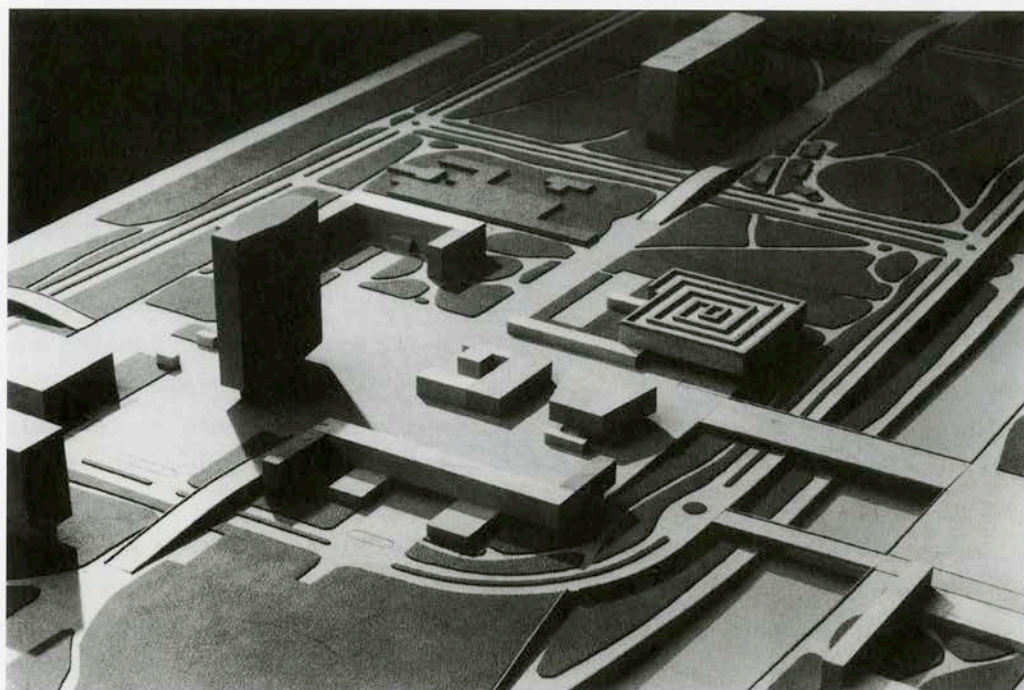


Fig. 1 Plan for the reconstruction of Saint-Dié. 1945. Model. Clockwise from tower at left: administrative center hotels, museum, community hall, and cafés. From Sigfried Giedion, *Architecture, You and Me: The Diary of a Development* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1958), fig. 32a

In 1951 Sigfried Giedion concluded his survey of recent architecture, *CIAM: A Decade of New Architecture*, with a photograph of Le Corbusier's plan for the reconstruction of the small French city Saint-Dié-des-Vosges (fig. 1).¹ It was, he stated, "an important step in the development of civic design—one of the few examples of contemporary city centres that is imbued with modern space conceptions."² Giedion was not alone among his contemporaries in heralding the plan's originality and significance. In 1948 José Luis Sert praised Le Corbusier's project for rediscovering the value of "certain forgotten practices, such as giving 'civic character' to the nucleus of the city."³ A year earlier the British architect Lionel Brett had called the project for Saint-Dié "exhilarating," citing its "Attic grandeur"⁴

These early commentaries allude to two significant aspects of the plan: first, that it embodied a new kind of urban space—asymmetrical and consciously three-dimensional—and second, that it revealed a concern for civic life that had been largely neglected in modern architecture and the doctrine of CIAM (Congrès internationaux d'Architecture Moderne) before World War II, most notably the four-part functional zoning (work, housing, leisure, circulation) outlined in the organization's 1933 congress. These qualities in the Saint-Dié plan were not only seminal to Le Corbusier's own evolution as a designer but also influenced the emergence after the war of a new kind of urban design, involving the juxtaposition of free-standing buildings on paved pedestrian plazas. In essence, Le Corbusier's project proposed a new conception of urban landscape, one that emphasized traditional qualities of community and sociability together with a more open, dynamic spatial arrangement.

¹ This essay is deeply indebted to the late Roger Aujame, who worked with Le Corbusier on the design of the plan for Saint-Dié as a young man. An architect of unusual generosity and vision, Roger spent three days with me and Maristella Casciato in April 2009, discussing his work with Le Corbusier and especially the design of Saint-Dié. I would also like to acknowledge the

support of the Graham Foundation for Advanced Studies in the Fine Arts, which funded this research.

² Sigfried Giedion, "Town Centre, St. Dié, France," in *CIAM: A Decade of New Architecture/Dix ans d'architecture contemporaine* (Zurich: Girsberger, 1951), p. 230.

³ J. L. [José Luis] Sert, "From Architecture to City Planning," in Stamo Papadakis, ed., *Le Corbusier: Architect,*

Painter, Writer (New York: MacMillan, 1948), p. 85.

⁴ Lionel Brett, "The Space Machine: An Evaluation of Recent Work of Le Corbusier," *Architectural Review* 102 (November 1947). Reprinted in Irena Murray and Julian Orsley, eds., *Le Corbusier and Britain: An Anthology* (London: RIBA Trust; Abington, UK: Routledge, 2009), pp. 147–48.



Fig. 2 Saint-Dié. View of the city after its destruction by the Germans in November 1944. From Willy Boesiger, *Le Corbusier: Œuvre complète, 1938–1946* (Zurich: Girsberger, 1946), p. 132

Saint-Dié was one of two projects that Le Corbusier began in 1945, shortly after the war ended, the other was an urban plan for La Rochelle-La Pallice. He had first been asked in 1943, by Jean-Jacques Duval, a young industrialist involved in textile production, if he would undertake a project for Saint-Dié's modernization. Le Corbusier refused, claiming he was too immersed in studies for ASCORAL, then known as the *Assemblée de Constructeurs pour une Révolution Architecturale* (Assembly of builders for architectural revolution), an organization of architects, sociologists, economists, engineers, and other professionals that he had founded to investigate architectural and planning issues.⁵ In reality the architect, having just departed from Vichy, had no commissions at all in Nazi-occupied Paris. As he later explained, the real reason he turned down Duval's request was that he was not interested in "ce pays de sapins" (this landscape of fir trees). Situated at the foot of the Vosges mountains, some fifty miles southeast of Nancy, the provincial city undoubtedly reminded him too much of his hometown, La Chaux-de-Fonds, the small industrial city in the Swiss Jura that he had spent so many years trying to flee; he was drawn instead, he wrote Duval, to "les pays méditerranéens."⁶

However in November 1944 the Germans fire-bombed Saint-Dié as they were fleeing eastern France; ten thousand of the town's fifteen thousand residents were left homeless, and almost all of the city north of the river Meurthe was in ruins, including the commercial sector and the beloved eighteenth-century *mairie* (town hall) (fig. 2). Of the major structures on the river's north side, only the old medieval cathedral (with its eighteenth-century facade) and its Gothic cloister remained partially standing. With new urgency, Duval approached Le Corbusier again, and in February 1945 he succeeded in persuading the architect to visit the city.⁷ Deeply moved by the tragic landscape, Le Corbusier immediately agreed to undertake the project and by June was immersed in its design. As he explained, "The almost complete destruction of the ancient city allows us to value once more the agreeable and charming countryside. It's a complete revelation a treasure regained."⁸

5 This was the original name that Le Corbusier gave to his study group. By November 1944 and the conclusion of the war, he had renamed the group *Assemblée de Constructeurs pour une Révolution Architecturale*. See "Statuts de l'Association 'ASCORAL,'" November 14, 1944, typescript, Fondation Le Corbusier, Paris, FLC D3-8-456.

6 Le Corbusier, letter to Jean-Jacques Duval, quoted in Duval, "La Bataille

de Saint-Dié," in *Le Corbusier et St. Dié* (Saint-Dié: Musée Municipal de Saint-Dié-des-Vosges, 1987), p. 24; and Duval, *Le Corbusier, l'écorce et la fleur* (Paris: Éditions du Linteau, 2006), p. 57. Duval does not give an exact date of Le Corbusier's response but the letter was probably written between December 1944 and January 1945. These two books provide the most complete accounts of Le Corbusier's

involvement in the planning of Saint-Dié and include manuscripts of letters about the project.

7 Duval, *Le Corbusier et St. Dié*, pp. 26–28.

8 Le Corbusier, "A Plan for St. Dié," *Architectural Record* 100, no. 4 (October 1946): 79. Originally published as "Un Plan pour Saint-Dié," *L'Homme et l'architecture*, nos. 5–6 (November–December 1945).

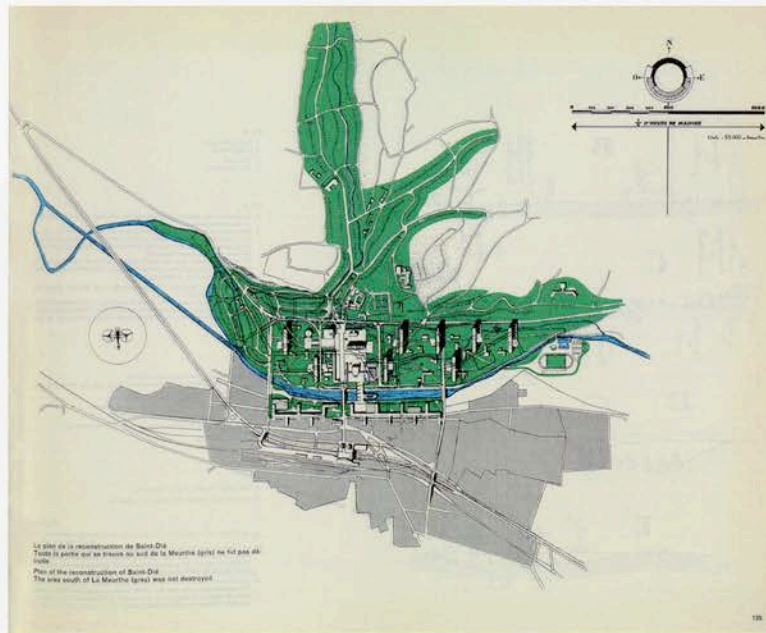


Fig. 3 Plan for the reconstruction of Saint-Dié. 1945. Plan showing the area of town not destroyed in gray. From Willy Boesiger, *Le Corbusier: Œuvre complète, 1938–1946* (Zurich: Girsberger, 1946), p. 135

He was also attracted to the industrial nature of the town and hoped the project might be an opportunity to create a new kind of community, joining workers and progressive businessmen.⁹ In April 1945 Duval persuaded the municipal council to appoint Le Corbusier the city's *urbaniste-conseil* its councilor of architecture and urban planning. This title, however official sounding, was not a position recognized by the French ministry of reconstruction and urbanism, which, at that time, was headed by Raoul Dautry. Although Dautry had previously hired Le Corbusier to design the Usine Verte, a project for an ammunition factory that remained unbuilt owing to France's rapid defeat in the war he had already appointed Jacques André, a talented young architect from the Lorraine, as the planner for Saint-Dié's reconstruction.

Le Corbusier was not deterred. André was a family friend of Jean Prouvé, and both Duval and Le Corbusier considered him a modernist, someone committed to making Saint-Dié a *ville pilote* (model city).¹⁰ With his characteristic combination of hubris and aplomb, Le Corbusier declared that he could have a "collaboration féconde" (fruitful collaboration) with André; he was convinced that the young designer would support his project and even assist him in its realization.¹¹ Meanwhile Le Corbusier directed the small group of designers in his Paris office to begin work on the project, assigning two young architecture students, Roger Aujame and Hervé de Looze, to be responsible for most of the drawings.¹² By August 1945 the preliminary plans were completed.

One of Le Corbusier's principal objectives was to reveal the gentle mountainous terrain just north of Saint-Dié. As he wrote, "It would be criminal to allow a lazy and formulaic urbanism to bury this landscape again at the bottom of courtyards or behind the walls of corridor streets."¹³ But if this rejection of the traditional city fabric had been a constant in his urban designs, his proposal for Saint-Dié also represented a break from his own *tabula rasa* approach to urban planning in the 1920s, as seen, most notably, in the *Ville Contemporaine* (1922) with its abstract geometries and undifferentiated use of landscape.

To provide views of the Vosges mountains and surrounding countryside, Le Corbusier proposed high-rise housing blocks instead of long horizontal indents (the bent-line slabs that were his solution for housing in the *Ville Radieuse* [1930]) (fig. 3) The fifteen-story towers would accommodate approximately 1,500 people each and were meant to be mass-produced, thus helping to energize the long-depressed construction industry. Two structures would be

⁹ Ibid.

¹⁰ Duval, letter to Le Corbusier, February 26, 1945. Published in Duval, "La Bataille de Saint-Dié," p. 27

¹¹ Le Corbusier, letter to Duval, June 1 1945. Published in Duval, "La Bataille de Saint-Dié," p. 30.

¹² Gérald Hanning, Jerzy Soltan, and André Wogenscky were also involved in

the project at different stages of its design.

¹³ Le Corbusier, "A Plan for St. Dié," p. 80.



Fig. 4 Plan for the reconstruction of Saint-Dié. 1945. Perspective view of the administrative center, with the cathedral in the background. Ink on vellum, 19¹³/₁₆ x 14⁷/₈" (50.4 x 37.8 cm). Fondation Le Corbusier, Paris. FLC 18413

built immediately, followed by another two, with four more proposed to accommodate future growth. Even though the towers were meant to stand as independent objects exposing and offering views of the landscape, their placement also respected existing city axes (in contrast to the housing of Le Corbusier's earlier urban schemes), with the first two slabs serving as bookends for the city center. In the rough sketches of the housing blocks, the proportions and wall treatment anticipate the *Unité d'Habitation* in Marseille, a commission he received the following year.

Other features of the site plan included a new road system with a hierarchy of speeds (presaging the "7 Voies," or seven routes of circulation, of his later Bogotá and Chandigarh plans), a sports area east of the city, a station for small planes (*autogires* or gyroplanes) and, along the bank of the Meurthe, a large swimming pool created in the summer by damming a section of the river.¹⁴ With a new pragmatism Le Corbusier called for retaining the factories on the left (south) bank of the river that had been spared the German's dynamite; any future industrial structures would be built along the lines of his *Usine Verte*.

The most important and innovative feature of the Saint-Dié plan was a new civic center. Le Corbusier described it as "the pre-eminent place of the city, its heart and its brain," where "through monuments and through activities, city life develops and becomes part of history."¹⁵ The pedestrian plaza featured a mix of public and private buildings: cafes, movie theaters, tourist center, department store, community hall, administration center, and regional museum. Several of the buildings resembled Le Corbusier's earlier projects—in particular the administration building (fig. 4), a smaller version of his Algiers skyscraper (1938), and the museum, which he described as a *Musée à Croissance Illimitée* (Museum of unlimited growth) akin to those he designed in 1931 and 1939.

Although this focus on the city center was a significant departure in his work and from CIAM doctrine, Le Corbusier's previous urban studies had already revealed an increasing attention to public space. In the *Ville Contemporaine*, for example, there were no public buildings, aside from a few small-scale notations of schools and universities on the site plan; in the plans for the *Ville Radieuse*, completed shortly after his designs for the League of Nations (1927) and the *Mundaneum* (1928), there were schematic indications of public buildings along a green central axis, though still without any designation of function or architectural character. However, by 1934 two of his urban plans showed a new concern for civic

¹⁴ Aujame, interview with the author, April 5, 2009.

¹⁵ Le Corbusier, "A Plan for St. Dié," p. 80.

space. It appears rather surprisingly in his scheme for Nemours, which, with its clear articulation of habitation, circulation, and leisure activities, is usually regarded as his strictest application of CIAM ideas. Less frequently noted is that this project also contained a civic center isolated from the housing sector and arranged in a linear fashion along the water's edge. The second project is his proposal for a Village Radieux or Village Coopératif developed from 1934 to 1938, in which he envisioned similar activities as those featured in the plan for Saint-Dié, though at a somewhat larger scale; his goal in both plans was to foster a vibrant local culture involving resident participation. He did not want to impose on the Déodatians a Parisian vision of culture, whether academic or avant-garde. What increasingly mattered to him was emotional and spiritual vitality, a sense that culture sprang directly—and spontaneously—from life.¹⁶

Saint-Dié's civic center also departed from the linear arrangements of these two projects, especially in its more central organization and pedestrian orientation, evoking traditional town squares in Italy or ancient Greece. While these qualities suggested the past, what was most visually striking and innovative about the design of the civic complex was its spatial quality. The asymmetry, sliding axes, layering of planes, and dynamic tension between verticals and horizontals that had characterized the design of his individual buildings since the 1920s had suddenly become a compositional mode of his urban plans. Like objects in the "free plans" of his white villas, buildings now stood isolated in space, their placement carefully calibrated to accentuate perspective views—not of nature but of other buildings. Le Corbusier was acutely aware that he had created something new, something that went beyond his original desire for a plan that would expose the city's natural terrain. In a caption adjacent to a sketch of the civic center he wrote, "In my opinion urbanism can only exist in three dimensions" and "The volumes compose themselves in the sky."¹⁷ Sert, too, recognized that Le Corbusier had discovered something new: "All these forms have been so integrated in his plans as to satisfy the spiritual need for the new plastic expression that painters and sculptors have been developing the previous decades, and which is here applied to the city."¹⁸

16 Le Corbusier, "The Core as a Meeting Place of the Arts," in J. Tyrwhitt, J. L. Sert, and E. N. Rogers, eds., *The Heart of the City: Towards the Humanisation of Urban Life* (New York: Pellegrini and Cudahy, 1952), pp. 41–48. The essay was a version of the talk Le Corbusier gave at the eighth

CIAM meeting, in 1951 in Hoddesdon, England.

17 Le Corbusier, "A Plan for St. Dié," p. 82.

18 Sert, "From Architecture to City Planning," in Papadaki, *Le Corbusier: Architect, Painter, Writer* p. 85. In this essay Sert was referring generally

to Le Corbusier's recent urban plans, but the project for Saint-Dié is the last project he illustrated, and it received the most coverage.

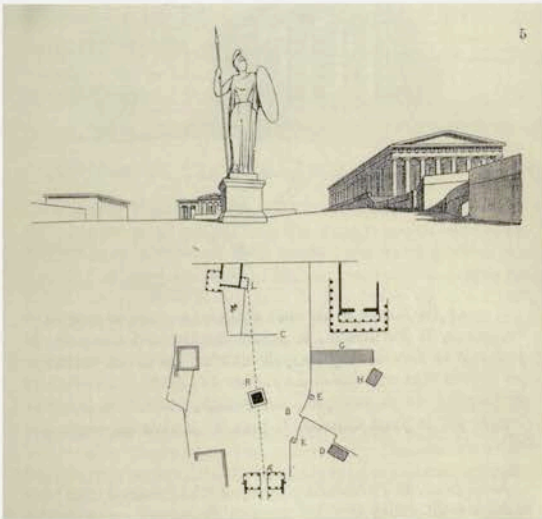


Fig. 5 Auguste Choisy (French, 1841–1909). View of the Acropolis from the Propylaea and plan showing the main visual axis. n.d. From Auguste Choisy, *Histoire de l'architecture*, vol. 1 (Paris: Gauthier-Villars, 1899), p. 415

Fig. 6 View of rue Thiers, Saint-Dié

Le Corbusier's spatial strategy at Saint-Dié seemed to combine the juxtaposition of objects in space already present in his Village Coopératif with the formality of a traditional urban precinct, which he had already loosely reinterpreted in his 1938 plan for the Algiers civic forum. This new synthesis seemed to bring together a wide range of sources: Camillo Sitte's analyses of city squares, which Le Corbusier had studied so carefully in his youth; the Piazza del Duomo in Pisa, with its juxtaposition of volumes in space, captured in the sketches he made throughout his life;¹⁹ and the twice-used diagram of the Acropolis in *Vers une architecture* (*Toward an Architecture*) (1923) lifted from Auguste Choisy's chapter on the *pittoresque*, discussing "the balancing of mass."²⁰ Indeed, Le Corbusier had returned to Choisy in his chapter "L'Art de construire" in *Sur les quatre routes* (*The Four Routes*) (1941) calling the engineer a master who engraved his plans "from the summit of Olympus" and declaring that "by him, and through him, all is great: architecture rises through the interplay of right relationships into a symphony of rhythms."²¹ Just as Choisy had explained the asymmetrical design of the Acropolis as resulting from a sequence of views (fig. 5) so, too, Le Corbusier envisioned the space of the civic complex at Saint-Dié through perspective, changing the disposition of objects accordingly.

But despite a vigorous campaign waged by Le Corbusier and Duval, the project was doomed. Le Corbusier's assumption that André would support it was wrong: the young architect continued to pursue his own design. In addition, local political leaders pushed for the appointment of Paul Résal, a local architect, in order to obtain a more conventional plan, one that would respect the city's former footprint. In the end, the ministry appointed Raymond Malot to adapt André's plan, which, after a long series of compromises, was approved in December 1947. The final plan kept the city's eighteenth-century north-south axis, extended the cross axis further east, and imposed a larger street grid on the old fabric (fig. 6). The buildings were faced in a pink stuccolike material imitating the local sandstone, and were designed in a kind of stripped-down classical mode. The only reminder of Le Corbusier's passionate endeavor is the factory that Duval commissioned in 1946.

19 Giedion compared the Saint-Dié plan to the Piazza del Duomo in Pisa in *Architecture, You and Me: The Diary of a Development* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1958), p. 162.
20 In *Vers une architecture*, Le Corbusier reprinted this diagram

from Auguste Choisy's *Histoire de l'architecture* (1899) both on the title page of "Three Reminders to Architects: Plan" and in "Architecture: The Illusion of the Plan." *Toward an Architecture*, trans. John Goodman (Los Angeles: Getty Research Institute, 2007), pp. 115, 222. Originally published as *Vers*

une architecture (Paris: G. Crès & Cie, 1923).

21 Le Corbusier, *The Four Routes*, trans. Dorothy Todd (London: Dennis Dobson, 1947), p. 142. Originally published as *Sur les quatre routes* (Paris: Gallimard, 1941).



Fig. 7 Plan for the reconstruction of Saint-Dié. 1945. Model. Wood, $4\frac{3}{4} \times 26\frac{3}{16} \times 60\frac{13}{16}$ " (12 x 66.5 x 154.5 cm). Fondation Le Corbusier, Paris

According to local accounts, the residents of Saint-Dié were satisfied with Malot's more conventional solution. However Le Corbusier's plan for the civic center captured the imagination of a generation of architects (fig. 7). The project's greatest impact was undoubtedly in the United States, where it was widely published and a large photograph of the plan displayed in a traveling exhibition, sponsored by the Walker Art Center Minneapolis, and the American Federation of Arts. The image was first shown in September 1945, at Rockefeller Center in New York, and then circulated with the exhibition for more than a decade.²² Most likely owing to the influence of Giedion and Sert, the civic center seemed to have a special hold on the first group of urban designers at Harvard's Graduate School of Design.²³ As late as 1958 Giedion praised the civic center as a "milestone in urban development," bringing "inner forces of modern space conception to fulfillment," and condemned the final result as one of "horrible banality."²⁴ Certainly we can debate what might be considered part of the heritage of Saint-Dié: the Brutalist freestanding structures sitting on concrete plazas. Yet we may also wonder if Le Corbusier's own dream of this "industrious little city" might have become, had it been realized, the symbol of "rebirth" and "the coming of new times."²⁵ Perhaps it did, but in another country and with even greater "Attic grandeur."

²² The exhibition, organized by the Walker Art Center in Minneapolis and the American Federation of Arts, opened September 20, 1945, in the Mezzanine Gallery of the International Building of Rockefeller Center and closed there October 15. An earlier version of the exhibition (without the Saint-Dié plan) was shown at the Walker Art Center, December 14, 1944 to February 20, 1945. By May 1947 the exhibition had already been shown at fifteen art museums and educational institutions all over the country and in Montreal.

The inclusion of a "gigantic" photograph of the Saint-Dié plan (with color) was a last-minute addition, as it had only recently been completed (and the photo does not appear on the original checklist of the exhibition).

²³ Giedion had returned to teach at Harvard from 1954 to 1956. Just prior to that he had taught at MIT.

²⁴ Giedion, *Architecture, You and Me*, caption for plate 32, p. 162.

²⁵ [Eugène] Claudius Petit, "Crossing the Threshold," *Architectural Record* 100, no. 4 (October 1946): 82. Claudius Petit's

essay, which followed Le Corbusier's own description of Saint-Dié, was alluding to the project. His words echo Le Corbusier's description of the project in his *Œuvre complète* as a "decisive sign of France's will to live." Willy Boesiger, *Le Corbusier et Pierre Jeanneret: Œuvre complète, 1938–1946* (Zurich: Girsberger, 1946), p. 132. For two years following the war, the project represented the architect's strongest hope for France's reconstruction, and he published images of it again and again.

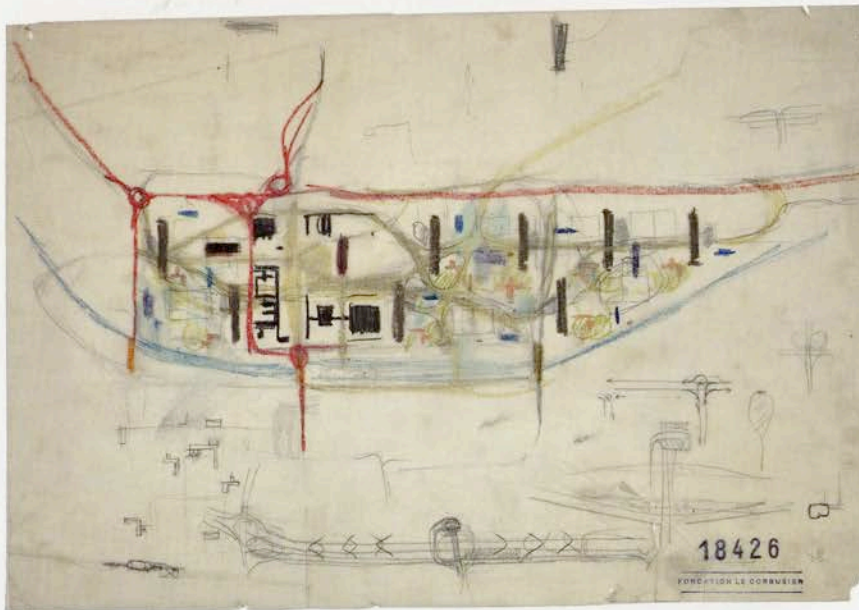


Plate 35 Plan for the reconstruction of Saint-Dié. 1945
Plan of the urban structures on the north bank of the Meurthe
Ink, pencil, and colored pencil on tracing paper,
10⁵/₁₆ x 14³/₄" (26.2 x 37.4 cm)
Fondation Le Corbusier, Paris. FLC 18426

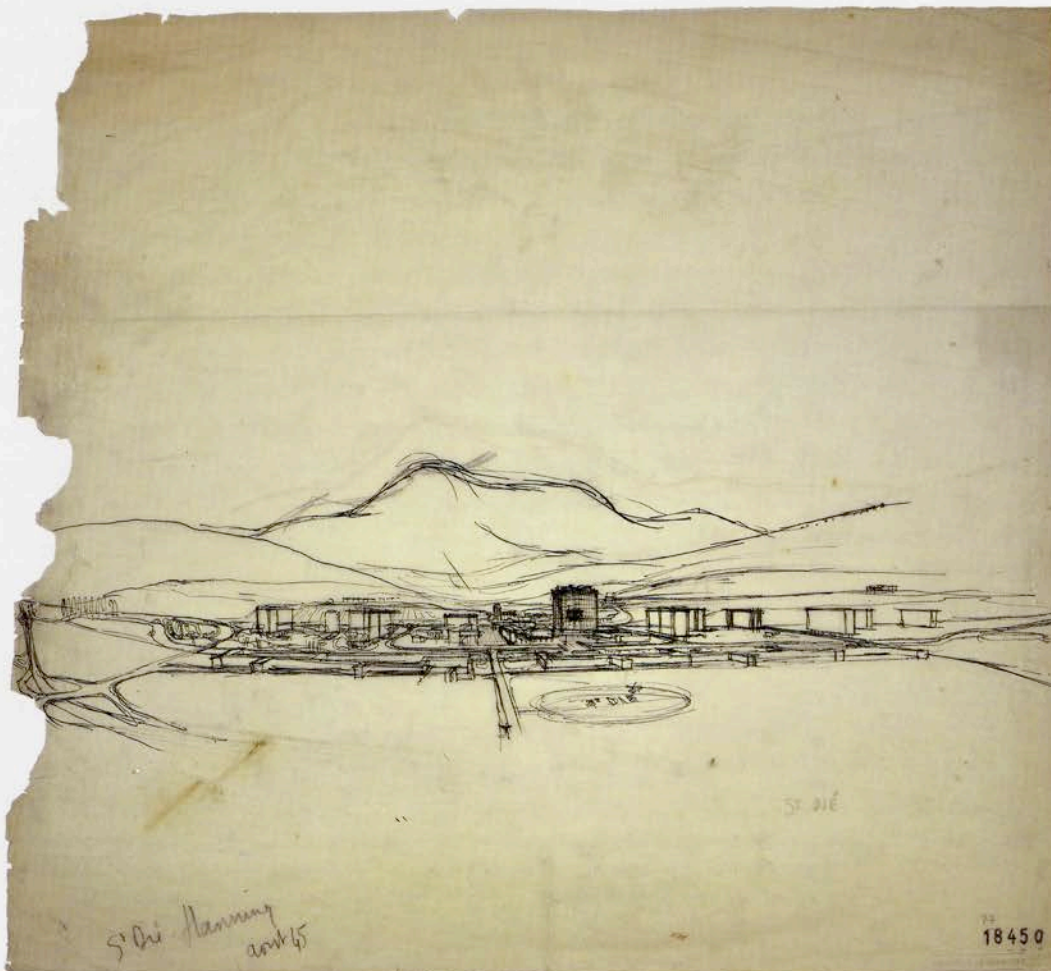


Plate 36 Plan for the reconstruction of Saint-Dié. 1945
General perspective showing gyroplane station
Ink and pencil on tracing paper,
22¹/₁₆ x 24⁵/₁₆" (56 x 61.8 cm)
Fondation Le Corbusier, Paris. FLC 18450