DOI: 10.23817/2023.defarch.2-10

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DWELLING IN THE CITY, BETWEEN TRADITION AND INVENTION: MART STAM'S HELLERHOF SIEDLUNG IN FRANKFURT AND LE CORBUSIER'S IMMEUBLE VILLAS

MIESZKANIE W MIEŚCIE, MIĘDZY TRADYCJĄ A INWENCJĄ: HELLERHOF SIEDLUNG MARTA STAMA WE FRANKFURCIE I IMMEUBLE VILLAS LE CORBUSIERA

Abstract

The investigation into the correlation between tradition and innovation finds a rich domain to explore within the urban context. Cities and architectures serve as a reservoir of enduring symbols and materials, of histories and traditions, onto which new interventions are superimposed through a series of human actions and endeavors. This study delves into this dynamic relationship, focusing on the impact of Mart Stam's work on Ernst May's "New Frankfurt" and Le Corbusier's reinterpretation of the courtyard building in his visionary urban concept for the "city of tomorrow."

Keywords: architectural typology, urban planning, city, dwelling, housing

Streszczenie

Badanie korelacji między tradycją i innowacją znajduje bogatą przestrzeń do eksploracji w kontekście miejskim. Miasta i ich architektura służą jako rezerwuar nieprzemijających symboli i materiałów, historii i tradycji, na które szereg ludzkich działań i przedsięwzięć nanosi nowe rozwiązania. Niniejsze badanie zgłębia tę dynamiczną relację, koncentrując się na wpływie twórczości Marta Stama na „Nowy Frankfurt" Ernsta Maya i reinterpretacji budynku z dziedzińcem przez Le Corbusiera w jego wizjonerskiej koncepcji urbanistycznej „miasta jutra".

Słowa kluczowe: typologia architektoniczna, urbanistyka, miasto, mieszkanie, mieszkalnictwo

1. INTRODUCTION

One of the most fertile aspects in the investigation of the relationship between architecture and the city is how tradition and innovation influence the urban context, in their intertwining, overlapping, and even in their opposition. The city, in fact, is as a repository of

signs and materials that endure and upon which the intervention of the new is grafted, in a succession of human actions and traces that mold the urban environment in layers and juxtapositions. In particular, the question of dwelling offers an opportunity to examine how this theme has been interpreted in the attempt to construct the human environment, in the necessary creative continuity to respond to the demands of life and the aesthetic needs of humans, as they vary and persist over time. In the context of a reflection on the *architecture and the city*, and considering the dwelling as the primal constituent element of this relationship, we can recognize and identify certain forms of dwelling that can be broadly attributed to specific configurations found consistently in European cities, developed based on various motivations (economic, social, land division, formal): the linear block and the courtyard building types.

The direct relationship of the linear block building with the street and other public spaces (the square, the park, the garden) is one of the most peculiar aspects that construct the residence and at the same time structure the city, in its mixture of private and public interests. We could recognize the origin of these configurations in the linear porticoed structures of the Greek city *stoa* and Roman city *forum,* where the repeated and serial element of the colonnade precisely configures a public and semi-private space at the same time, both open and protected: an in-between space defined at the architectural and urban scale and realm. This kind of relationship is evident in the development of the traditional urban fabric of the European city. We can recall Goethe's description of the *porticoes* in Verona, he experienced in his journey in Italy, when he points out that these are not considered part of the property, even if built by individuals, but places that belong to all, where the city population feels at home, using it for every kind of function, public or private[1].

Similarly, the memory of traditional spatial configurations can be found within the urban fabric in the architecture of courtyard building types. As an illustrative example, Palladio's palaces in Vicenza, with their open-air atriums, can be interpreted as a monumental reinterpretation of the Roman courtyard house. But not only: Giorgio Grassi and Aldo Rossi, for instance, have emphasized how the model for this urban building type can be found in rural houses and collective structures such as convents, schools, and hospitals, whether located in urban or rural areas.

With the crisis of the nineteenth-century city, congested and violated in its residential spatial structures by a sudden and uncontrolled development, the building types and urban configurations of the traditional city needed to be challenged. The critique of the *rue corridor* ("corridor street") was the key aspect in Le Corbusier's ideas of renovation of city planning. The Swiss master, in the 1920s, noted how the city has become a "congestion of buildings [that] grows greater, interlaced by narrow streets full of noise, petrol fumes and dust; and where on each story the windows open wide on to this foul confusion"[2]. For him, this was a "picture of the seventh circle of Dante's inferno," in which the fabric of the traditional city, though fascinating in its picturesque aspect, was where "tuberculosis, demoralization, misery and shame are doing the devil's work among them"[3]. The street, according to the narrative of Le Corbusier and the other Modern Movement thinkers, was no longer the harmonious construction of public space and architecture based on human

[1] J.W. Goethe, *Viaggio in Italia*, EDIPEM, Novara 1973.
[2] Le Corbusier, *Towards a new architecture*, Dover Publications, New York 1986, p. 57.
[3] Le Corbusier, *The city of tomorrow and its planning*, The MIT Press, Cambridge, MA 1971, p. 284.

scale and perception, but a dangerous and unhealthy place, poorly lit, noisy, defined by the insalubrious traditional residential blocks.

As a response to that, the masters of Modern Movement turned towards a series of responses to the problem of housing and city construction, which, despite the apparent rupture, we can actually see as interesting references to tradition. In the 1920s, German architects and planners, supported by in-depth studies on housing units and spatial systems, mediated by an analytical and scientific approach that represented the mental habitus of architects at the time, developed the settlement typologies of the *Siedlungen*. The use of geometrical grids and patterns, the orientation following the heliothermic axis and the renewed relationship with nature (private and collective gardens, parks) almost represent a recovery of the historical principles underlying the "origins of town planning" (Leonardo Benevolo) and the "design of cities" (Edmund Bacon).

The linear block, a recurrent residential building type, in its different variations (with an independent access to every unit, or with shared access and circulation – stairs serving two or three units, or a collective balcony corridor), would be recognized by the Modern Movement designers as a natural and virtuous evolution of the urban blocks of the historic city, as May and Pagano argued. All of this is evident, in the Italian context, in the 1938 project for "Milano Verde" ("Green Milan"), proposed by a group of architects formed by Franco Albini, Ignazio Gardella, Giuseppe Pagano, and others. Influenced, beside the German architectural culture, by Le Corbusier's 1920–1930s urban planning ideas, the project, for the area Sempione-Fiera, applies to the existing urban fabric a rigid Cartesian grid, that has been often defined as "abstract" for its unconditional and pure geometry. But, as noted by Raffaela Neri, it is

> abstract in the sense, more precise and more positive, of general, of universal; abstract in the sense of being valid beyond the contingent fact, opposed to the particularity of its implementation. Abstract, and geometric, because it is demonstrative, because its geometric order contains and displays an idea of architecture, and it is the same thing, an idea of a city[4].

And, after all, it has the same virtuous abstraction represented by the long thread that connects the Hippodamus grid of the Greek city and the Roman *centuriatio* that designed the Italian landscape to the Renaissance ideal cities, up to the urbanization of the American continent.

The courtyard type (transfiguration of the courtyard house, or the cloister) and the linear block type (reinvention of the *portico*, the *forum*, the *stoa*) become, in my reflection, references to rediscover the continuity of memory, history, and tradition in the architectural and urban devices that allow the construction of the city.

As emblematic precedents of this reflections, two projects, designed at the end of the 1920s, represent the trajectory between tradition and invention in the architecture of dwelling, at the urban scale, and at the architectural scale: the modernist reinvention of the urban block as a composition of linear blocks in Mart Stam's Hellerhof Siedlung in Frankfurt, and Le Corbusier's project for the Immeuble Villas, that well represents the Swiss master's tendency of embodying the heritage of traditional and historical types and architectural elements.

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[4] R. Neri, *Buon compleanno Milano Verde!* [in:] F. Menegatti, *Milano Verde. Un'idea per l'architettura e la cittá*, Gangemi Editore, Roma 2017. English translation by the author.

2. MART STAM'S HELLERHOF SIEDLUNG, OR THE REINVENTION OF THE URBAN FABRIC FOR A "NEW FRANKFURT"

The Hellerhof Siedlung was designed by Mart Stam in the context of the "Das Neue Frankfurt" program, directed by Ernst May. The project was presented in 1929 at the CIAM in Frankfurt, titled "Die Wohnung für das Existenzminimum" ("Housing for the Existence Minimum"), and later published in issue 4/5 of 1930 of the journal "Das Neue Frankfurt," which was entirely dedicated to five years of planning and developments in the German city. The article highlights the key features of the complex, emphasizing its proper orientation (the living area faces east, while the sleeping area faces west), the appropriate building height, the presence of green spaces, and the use of construction techniques coordinated with contractors to ensure standardization and cost efficiency.

The layout of the project can be clearly related to the final phase of the evolution of the urban block in the European city, as described by Ernst May in the famous diagram depicting the transformation of the traditional compact block into a system of enclosed courtyard buildings, and then into a system of parallel linear buildings that construct a more open new city, which Mart Stam evoked in 1923: "Medieval cities were enclosed by walls (…), so their main characteristic became self-containment and compactness. Modern cities, on the other hand, open up towards the outside"[5].

The Hellerhof Siedlung belongs to the third type expressed in May's diagram, that corresponds to a system composed of linear residential blocks with open spaces in between, arranged in a north-south orientation. The majority of Frankfurt's *Siedlungen* were built according to this organization, including Römerstadt, Praunheim, and Riederwald[6].

This new relationship with the street, the dismantling of compact front on the "street corridor," the study of residential types, and the rediscovered relationship with the natural element (green spaces, which become common assets and tools for city design, as well as orientation relative to the heliothermic axis) are the cornerstones of the Modern Movement's search for an alternative to the traditional city.

The intervention includes 800 apartments distributed across a series of linear buildings of varying heights, some of which exceed 160 meters in length. There are three two-story buildings oriented east-west, served by a balcony, four three-story buildings, and one four-story building oriented north-south, the latter closing the eastern front of the complex. The buildings are spaced approximately 25 meters apart. The apartments have different typological layouts, all on a single floor with a minimum area of 36 square meters. They are characterized by *loggias* and terraces that enrich the internal space of the kitchen and living room, while also contributing to the design of the long facades through these incisions. The service areas (bathroom and kitchen) are designed with minimal dimensions to prioritize the living rooms and bedrooms. Most of the bedrooms are designed with equipped walls that contain niches, shelves, and wardrobes, allowing for a greater availability of useful surface area for living in the house. There is evident attention to the appropriate sizing and placement of the devices necessary for domestic life, reflecting

[5] Cited in W. Möller, *Mart Stam and the Representation of New Architecture*, „Rassegna" 1991, no. 47, p. 17. Originally published in M. Stam, *Holland un die Baukunst unserer Zeit*, „Schweizerische Bauzeitung" 1923, no. 15, p. 270.

[6] A. Porotto, *L'intelligence des forms*, Métis Presses, Genève 2019.

a pursuit of quality living, as stated by Stam himself in an article titled "Correct Scale, Minimum Scale" published in 1929 in "Das Neue Frankfurt":

> If the objects we have at home are supposed to make our lives easier, in the same way, the spaces in our homes should be functional to our needs. They should help us live better, support us in our activities, enhance our performance. The scale of our spaces should take into account the scale of humans, referring to our physical and mental needs.

He continues:

> The doors should be scaled to our bodies. The scale of the windows should satisfy our need for air and light, bringing ample light into every corner, transforming the house into a healthy organism. The dimensions of objects and spaces are correct if they meet our needs and are devoid of any motivation related to appearance, if they simply show themselves for what they are. The dimensions are correct when they cost the minimum and are acceptable, as even the slightest excess would only weigh us down, making life more difficult rather than simplifying it[7].

Particular care was given to the articulation of the facades, which were elaborately designed in relation to their facing onto the street, as a place of interaction between the collective building and the public space for city relations. The south front of the complex is defined by low-rise, two-story balcony buildings, characterized by rhythmic alternation of solids and voids created by the deep recesses of the *loggias*. The ground floor of this section is set back slightly and dedicated to commercial activities.

The north facades feature a system of pillars that support the upper floors, defined by the transparent and aerial appearance for the *loggias*. Some low, enclosed buildings intersect with the facade, perpendicular to the three-story block, set back and detached from the vertical supporting elements. This arrangement, repeated for each linear block, evokes somehow a sort of porticoed streetscape, along the main northern street of the settlement.

Considering the striking uniformity of other interventions built during the same period, the Hellerhof neighborhood is strongly characterized by this differentiation in configurations, both in terms of volume (the varying height of the buildings, the articulation of the facades) and the typologies of the apartments, as well as the layout of the urban fronts. As Jos Bosman noted, it "is characterized by the typical Dutch attention to give special consideration of the 'neighborhood organism,' which made it unique in the context of the new extension of Frankfurt, where it was built"[8].

3. LE CORBUSIER'S IMMEUBLE VILLAS, AS THE REINVENTION OF THE COURTYARD HOUSING BUILDING TYPE

As it is well known, the antecedent of the architectural type of the Immeuble Villa is the Certosa di Ema near Florence, visited by Le Corbusier on two occasions, in 1907 and 1910. Located in the Tuscan countryside, on the crest of a hill dominating the landscape, the

[7] Published in A. Dal Fabbro, P.M. Martinelli (eds.), *Architetture di Mart Stam 1924–1933. Disegni modelli interpretazioni*, Il Poligrafo, Padova 2010, p. 76. Originally published in „Das Neue Frankfurt" 1929, no. 2, pp. 29–30. English translation by the author.

[8] J. Bosman, *Mart Stam's Architecture Between Avantgarde and Functionalism*, „Rassegna" 1991, no. 47, p. 36.

architectural layout of the Certosa combines the collective dimension of living with the independence of individual life within a cell, each served by a small garden enclosed by a "grand wall" that "could hide the view of the road"[9].

The designs for the Immeuble Villas[10] were developed between 1922 and 1925 and are part of a series of building types that we find in the project for the Contemporary City for Three Million Inhabitants (along the *redent* building type and the cruciform skyscraper), and later refined for the so-called Projects Wagner for Geneva, in 1928. The Immeuble Villa type was actually to be the object of Le Corbusier's investigations until at least 1929, when he explained its characteristics during the South American cycle of lectures. It was later abandoned, to the extent that in 1933 he defined it as "the worst invention" he had ever made[11].

The layout of the 1922 project is configured as a big courtyard building, perfectly defined by the street grid, from which there is no separation and detachment. The hallways for the internal circulation are located towards the interior of the courtyard, so all the dwellings are overlooking the streets. The dwelling units, with double-height spaces, are superimposed "villas" with an L shape plan that recalls the cells of the Certosa di Ema, and would be presented by Le Corbusier (as Pavillion de L'Esprit Nouveau) as a stand-alone demonstrative house at the 1925 International Exhibition of Modern Decorative and Industrial Arts in Paris, France.

The 1925 version of the Immeuble Villa, designed for the Contemporary City for Three Million Inhabitants occupies the plots of 400x200 meters, while the base grid of the city plan is 400x400 meters. The public interior hallways are now turned towards the street, so that "the houses have their backs to the streets and look out on open spaces 300x120 meters (nearly ten acres)"[12], an interior courtyard, designed as a garden with sport facilities. Therefore, the main facade is not anymore related to the street and urban life, but overlooks the interior garden. Le Corbusier seems to suggest the idea of bringing the greenery of the central courtyard inside the dwelling: in fact, each villa features a very deep *loggia*, a "hanging garden" inserted in the facade of the Immeuble Villa, creating a sculptural alternation between the *pan de verre* that illuminates the double-height living room and the void of the *loggia*. Furthermore, the different configuration of the facades re-iterates (at the scale of the large building) the same theme realized in Villa Stein: composed, rigorous, "cartesian" towards the street, almost evoking the grid composition of the city; plastic, sculptural, rich of *chiaroscuro* effects towards the greenery of the garden, as a response to the organic nature of the interior landscape. The facade is transformed into an inhabited architectural space where one can reside and enjoy light, air, and greenery: "The building," in the words of Le Corbusier, "resembles an immense sponge for the absorption of air: the whole building breathes"[13]. And the porosity is created recovering the idea of the *loggia*, an element of the ancient Mediterranean Greek, Roman, Italian tradition, reinvented in a modern context and

[9] Written note on a sketch published in J. Petit, *Le Corbusier: lui même*, Edition Rousseau, Genève 1970, p. 43.

[10] On the genesis and development of this building type see P.A. Croset, *Immeuble-villas. Les origines origini d'un type* [in:] Lucan J. (ed.), *Le Corbusier, une encyclopedie*, Éditions du Centre Pompidou/I, Paris 1987, pp. 178–188.

[11] As stated in a letter written by Le Corbusier for the Antwerp competition, cited in P.G. Gerosa*, Le Corbusier: urbanisme et mobilité*, Birkhäuser, Basel–Stuttgart 1978, p. 55.

[12] Le Corbusier, *The city of tomorrow and its planning*, *op. cit*., p. 215.

[13] *Ibidem*, p. 182.

language. In this sense, the images accompanying the drawings of the Immeuble Villa in the *Œuvre complète* are eloquent: the perspectives, collages, and photomontages clearly describe this transformation of the facade, now defined by a profound architectural porosity, ready to welcome natural elements (air, sun, vegetation) and the life of the inhabitant.

Although abandoned in the course of his research on the construction of the city (it is not listed among the types useful for the design of the modern city, in the fourth volume of the *Œuvre complète*, whereas the *redent* type, the Y-shaped and the lens-form skyscrapers are included)[14], the Immeuble Villa remains a reference for the composition of large residential buildings, particularly for the principle of superimposing spacious and equipped apartments with double heights, suspended gardens, *loggias*. In other words, for constructing the depth of the facade, now an in-between space between the interior and the exterior, with a highly plastic and inhabited thickness, where the extension of residential life can find its place: a theme that Le Corbusier developed in many variations, the most famous of which are the unbuilt curved redent for the Plan Obus in Algiers and its multi-faceted facade, and the Unité d'Habitation. The "facade as a mask" of the 19th-century city, with its motionless and falsified expression, is here surpassed: inside the facades of the Immeuble Villa, the curved redent of Algiers, the Unité, the interior life informs the *loggias* and hanging gardens, now places to dwell and experience the exterior world. The facade, in its multiple variations and modulations, is a sincere representation of the facets of human living and an expression of the "tumultuous" multiplicity of individuals with "freedom of speech"[15], all guided towards unity by the serial architectural framework that contains everything.

4. CONCLUSION

Moving from the Modern Movement to more recent times, when the architectural theories and projects tended to question and challenge the modernist dogmas represented by the previous case studies, we can anyway recognize some of these themes and architectural types in two of the most fruitful projects carried out by Aldo Rossi for the realization of residential fragments in urban contexts.

In the project for San Rocco in Monza, that Rossi designed with Giorgio Grassi, the courtyard type is iterated, translated, and opened up to create a piece of the city through a collectively characterized building. It is a fragment that becomes a strong response, based on history (Lombard rural courtyard buildings, Viennese Hofs), to the disastrous situation of the city without quality.

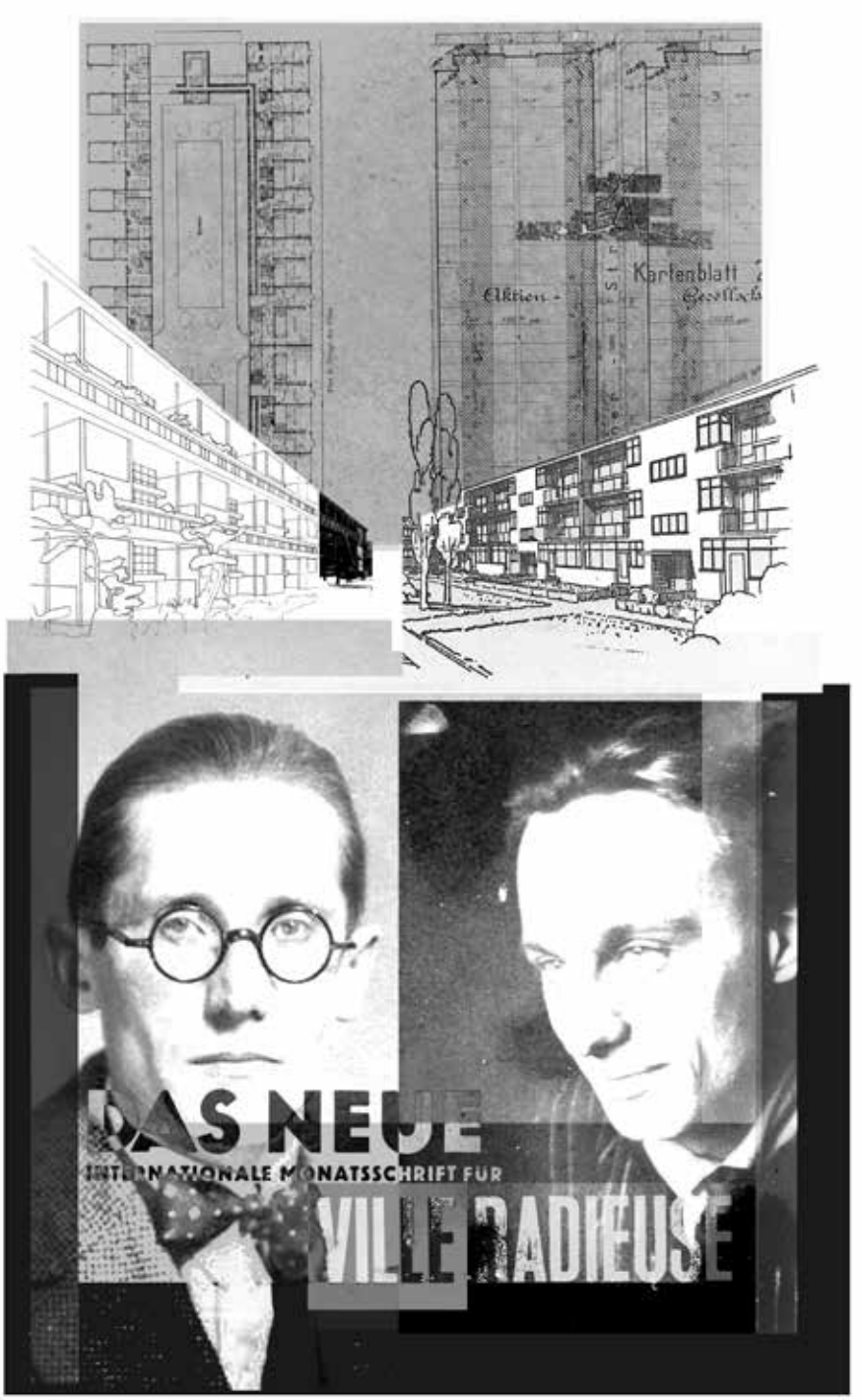
In Rossi's Gallaratese project, the architectural archetypes (the *portico*, the typical Milanese corridor hallway, the square window – a reaction to the ribbon window, the pitched roof – in opposition to the modernist flat roof), are infused with reworkings, assemblages, compositions of familiar and recognizable figures and elements, so that the building seems to take a position of rear-guard, rather than avant-garde. Here, invention becomes, etymologically, an opportunity to "find and rediscover," in an attempt to create, within the architectural context designed by Carlo Aymonino, the variety and complexity that represents a fundamental characteristic of the traditional city.

[14] Le Corbusier, *Œuvre complète*, *Volume 4, 1938–1946*, Birkhäuser, Basel 1999, p. 151.
[15] M. Romano, *La città come opera d'arte*, Einaudi, Torino 2008, p. 18.

Before Rossi, another Milanese architect well represents the continuity between the lesson of the "ancient masters" and the re-invention of modernity. Ignazio Gardella, as already pointed out, was one of the architects that, in the late 1930s, designed the "Milano Verde" proposal for Milan, an urban plan that can be read as an expression of the Modern Movement urban planning that has its roots in the history of Greek and Roman cities. The project was also developed at the architectural scale, not in detail but with a clear idea on how the buildings should have been designed in terms of massing, volumes, facade solutions. One of these is a linear residential block, with a glass curtain wall protected by a three-story height *portico* with columns and balconies overlooking a green area. I see this schematic project as a sort of diagramatic version and fragment of a Greek *stoa*, or of a Roman *forum*. As we know, the "Milano Verde" plan was not developed or even realized, but this fragment took shape in the late 1940s, in Milan, in front of Parco Sempione, when Ignazio Gardella designed and built the Tognella House (also called "House in the Park"). The main protagonist of the building is its facade, designed as a monumental frame of pillars and slabs, as a vertical composition of "hanging *porticoes*" which recalls the giant order of classical architecture, in a sort of reinvention and re-interpretation of Palladio's Palazzo Chiericati in Vicenza, whose origins are clearly related to the Greek and Roman archetypes, as Wittkower stressed: "Palladio therefore visualized its facade in terms of a Roman *forum* and designed long colonnades in two tiers"[16]. In fact, as Rafael Moneo points out, Gardella's contribution to architecture is to "insert on the structure of Modern architecture the principles and criteria established in Renaissance and effective for centuries"[17], in a perfect balance of tradition and invention, of memory and innovation, with the purpose of celebrating the traces and stratification of history, in the construction of architecture and the contemporary city.

[16] R. Wittkower, *Architectural Principles in the Age of Humanism*, Alec Tiranti, London, 1962, pp. 81–82.

[17] R. Moneo, *Ricordando Gardella* [in:] Casamonti M. (ed.), *Ignazio Gardella architetto 1905-1999. Costruire la modernitá*, Milano, Electa 2016, p. 17. English translation by the author.



Ill. 1. Patrizio M. Martinelli, *Das Neue Ville Radieuse*, 2023.

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