

## ***Aircraft* by Le Corbusier**

Marta Sequeira

[martasequeiracarneiro@gmail.com](mailto:martasequeiracarneiro@gmail.com)

Invited Auxiliary Professor at Da/UAL

Invited Auxiliary Professor at ISCTE-IUL

Integrated Researcher at CIAUD-FAUL

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*[...]as an architect and town-planner [...] that I let myself be carried off on the wings of an airplane, make use of the bird's-eye view, of the view from the air, to which end I directed the pilot to steer over cities.*

Le Corbusier, 1935

This review aims to analyze *Aircraft*, a book Le Corbusier published in 1935, the same year as *La Ville Radieuse*, one of the author's most important books<sup>1</sup>. Unlike *La Ville Radieuse*, whose title is that of a project by Le Corbusier, *Aircraft* includes few references to his work and has a unique place in his bibliography. Today, 84 years after *Aircraft*'s first edition, 60 years after the first satellite photos appeared<sup>2</sup> and 14 after their democratization by Google Earth<sup>3</sup> - at a time when you have just to press a key in your keyboard to get a satellite image of any place on the planet - it seems almost impossible to start a project without carefully observing its location from above. Therefore, we need to strive to recreate the context in which this work appeared in order to understand the author's prophetic words, as he claimed that the airplane would undoubtedly change the world and would radically change the way architects designed their projects.

Le Corbusier was invited to write the book on 16 January 1935, by Charles Geoffrey Holme, director of the English magazine *The Studio*<sup>4</sup>, a well-known illustrated periodical on decorative arts: « It is some time since we have had the pleasure of a contribution from yourself, and a new series that we are contemplating provides an occasion when

I think we might very usefully collaborate again. This would be a series of books to which we have tentatively given the general title of *The New Vision*. We propose that each book in the series should be devoted to one characteristic section of contemporary design industry, dealing with the new forms that have been created as the result of the efforts of engineer, architect, designer, and technician. We should, for example, devote one such book to aeroplanes, another to locomotives and so on, and we thought of beginning with a book on the aeroplane. I think you will see what I mean when I say that this is a technical matter of design which would want handling with imagination and with a sense of the development and future progress of this new feature in human life. We should want to include some historical photographs, showing the early developments of the aeroplane, and many showing the most improved and recent designs of aircraft in every country where they are made, and this would mean that the book would have to be sound in technical particulars. We should want, however, to carry it a stage further or to present the subject, as I have said, from a more detached standpoint than that of the technical expert, and that, we feel, is where you yourself would excel»<sup>5</sup>.

Charles Geoffrey Holme's objective was to produce a book on the airplane in which, technical matters aside, the public would be shown the potentials of this invention for society. The book would be launched as part of the collection «The New Vision», aimed at introducing the reader to the world of modern technological inventions. The collection would later include a book by Wilfred Watson-Baker on the microscope and another by Raymond Loewy on the locomotive.<sup>6</sup> Though he later had to fight to receive his earnings on the book, Le Corbusier replied only six days after receiving the offer and rather enthusiastically: «I have received your kind letter dated 16 January asking me to prepare the first book of a new collection you are organizing. This first book would focus on the airplane. By airplane, I would rather mean "aviation", i.e., the wonderful phenomenon that proposes completely new horizons and includes highly relevant equipment. I agree to collaborate»<sup>7</sup>. So that there would be no doubts regarding the book's contents, with no mention of purely technological or historical matters, Le Corbusier firstly made it clear that he would not write a book on the airplane but on the phenomenon of aviation from a wider perspective, one which would include his vision as an architect and urban planner.

Le Corbusier continuously expressed his fascination for technological development and included long references to ships, cars, and airplanes in his first books. Examples are the chapters dedicated to the great inventions of the 20th century in *Vers une architecture*<sup>8</sup>. This book also celebrates the beauty of the air machines and the functional austerity of their elements - an admiration that, in Le Corbusier's words, dated to one the post-war editions of *Salon International de l'aéronautique et de l'espace* in Paris-Le Bourget<sup>9</sup> or when, as a student, on 18 October 1909, in his room at Quai St. Michel in Paris, he heard the sound of an airplane for the first time. This plane was being flown by Charles, Count Lambert (a Russian of French descent but who was born in Portugal), who, having departed from Juvisy, flew around the Eiffel Tower from 395 meters high<sup>10</sup>. However, *Aircraft* also evidences his condition as an urban planner and an architect, since he focuses on the view from above: « Suddenly, by the effort of a generation and the cumulative effect of the discoveries of the century, we have been endowed with THE BIRD'S EYE VIEW ».<sup>11</sup>

Among other matters, his observations focused on the possibilities that the «bird's eye view» would bring, on the collapsing view that it would reveal and on the need to change urban planning methods and the consequences this new point of view would have in future decisions. Le Corbusier even explained how an idea for a project had come to

him during a flight.<sup>12</sup> He described the flight, saying « the airplane itself scrutinizes, acts quickly, sees quickly, does not get tired [...] and there are photographs for those who have not the courage to go and see things from above for themselves »<sup>13</sup>.

During the edition process, Le Corbusier tried to make the book include more images that showed what you could see from the airplane. Le Corbusier wrote the following to *The Studio Limited*, on 7 May 1935: «[...] I have analyzed the photos that you sent: they are somewhat interesting but I think I should complement them with more impressive images. I believe that we are lacking photos that show what we can see from the airplane, i.e.: villages, fields, the sea, forests, etc.»<sup>14</sup>. Though the answer had been that it was impossible to further the idea of what could be seen from an airplane, as this would be a topic for one or two books<sup>15</sup>, Le Corbusier continued to contact several counterparts in order to obtain photos that would portray that view,<sup>16</sup> and he ended up having a large amount of photos from different collections from several parts of the world. Among these, he selected a hundred and twenty-three to illustrate the thirteen topics in the book, whose layout, made at Le Corbusier's office,<sup>17</sup> evokes the Bauhaus product publications or even those of Russian constructivism. Among these images, twenty-five of them do not contain any evidence of the airplane itself and focus exclusively on the landscape you can see from it. All have short and suggestive captions, in which Le Corbusier refers to the airplane as a symbol of a new era<sup>18</sup>, as well as an observation tool: «THE BIRD'S EYE VIEW. THE EYE NOW SEES IN SUBSTANCE WHAT THE MIND FORMERLY COULD ONLY SUBJECTIVELY CONCEIVE. IT IS A NEW FUNCTION ADDED TO OUR SENSES. IT IS A NEW STANDARD OF MEASUREMENT. IT IS A NEW BASES OF SENSATION. MAN WILL MAKE USE OF IT TO CONCEIVE NEW AIMS. CITIES WILL ARISE OUT OF THEIR ASHES».<sup>19</sup>

Originally published in English in 1935, according to Le Corbusier, this book should be published in several languages, such as French, Italian and German.<sup>20</sup> However, this masterpiece on image and architecture thought-process was only republished in English in 1987<sup>21</sup>, published in Spanish in 2003<sup>22</sup> and in a bilingual edition in 2017,<sup>23</sup> in which to the text in English are added the original texts in French, as well as an article by Philip Duboy, followed by the long list of letters written by Le Corbusier on writing the first edition. These letters include a request for a meeting by Antoine de Saint-Exupéry with a proposal for a meeting place that Le Corbusier could not refuse: at Saint-Exupéry's new house, at number 24 of Nungesser et Coli street, from where you can see the sky.<sup>24</sup>

Le Corbusier, "L'avion accuse..." Aircraft. London, New York: The Studio, 1935.

<sup>1</sup> Le Corbusier, *La Ville Radieuse*. Boulogne: Éditions de l'Architecture d'aujourd'hui, 1935. Le Corbusier apologizes for his delay in publishing *Aircraft* indicating that it was due to publishing *La Ville Radieuse*. On this matter, see the letter Le Corbusier wrote to *The Studio*, on 4 May 1935, FLC B3-14-21.

<sup>2</sup> The first satellite photography was taken on 14 August 1959 by U.S Explorer 6.

<sup>3</sup> The program *EarthViewer 3D* was bought by Google in 2004 and on 25 May 2005 it was launched as *Google Earth*. In 2005 it included a free version.

<sup>4</sup> *The Studio: An Illustrated Magazine of Fine and Applied Art* was published in London between 1893 and 1964, when it was incorporated into the magazine *Studio International*.

<sup>5</sup> Letter by Charles Geoffrey Holme to Le Corbusier, on 16 January 1935, FLC B3-14 (1-2). Le Corbusier refers to this order in his book: «The Studio has informed

me of its intention to publish a book on Aviation, the desire of the publishers being to inform the general public, questions of technique apart, as to what stimulus there may be in it for contemporary society, divided at the moment between a desire to retrace its steps and to embark on the conquest of a new civilization.» Le Corbusier, *“L’avion accuse...” Aircraft*, cit., p. 5.

<sup>6</sup> Wilfred Watson-Baker, *World Beneath the Microscope*. London: The Studio, 1935; Raymond Loewy, *The Locomotive: Its Aesthetics*. London: The Studio, 1937.

<sup>7</sup> «J’ai bien reçu votre amiable lettre du 16 Janvier me demandant d’établir le premier livre d’une nouvelle collection que vous prévoyez. Ce premier livre serait consacré à l’aéroplane. Par aéroplane, je veux bien comprendre plutôt “aviation”, c’est-à-dire tout le phénomène si prodigieux qui ouvre des horizons entièrement neufs et qui comporte déjà des équipements de la plus haute signification. Je suis d’accord d’accepter cette collaboration.» See letter by «Le Corbusier, to Charles Geoffrey Holme, on 22 January 1935, FLC B3-14 (3).

<sup>8</sup> On this matter, see Le Corbusier, *Vers une architecture*. Paris: Crès, 1924.

<sup>9</sup> On this matter, see Le Corbusier, *“L’avion accuse...” Aircraft*, cit., p. 5.

<sup>10</sup> On this matter, see, *idem, ibidem*, p. 6.

<sup>11</sup> *idem, ibidem*.

<sup>12</sup> «Two sketches made during a flight in 1929, just when the conception of a vast programme of organic town-planning came like a revelation. » *idem, ibidem*.

<sup>13</sup> «the airplane itself scrutinizes, acts quickly, sees quickly, does not get tired [...] and there are photographs for those who have not the courage to go and see things from above for themselves» *Idem, ibidem*, p. 12.

<sup>14</sup> «[...] le matériel photographique que vous m’avez expédié, je l’ai parcouru : il est en partie intéressant, mais je dois évidemment le compléter par certaines documentations plus vivantes. Je trouve qu’il manque complètement la matière sur ce que l’on voit d’avion, c’est-à-dire les villes ou les campagnes ou la mer ou les forêts etc.» Letter by Le Corbusier to The Studio Limited, on 7 May 1935, FLC B3-14 (21).

<sup>15</sup> On this matter, see the letter from *The Studio Limited* to Le Corbusier, on 9 May 1935, FLC B3-14 (23).

<sup>16</sup> «Pourriez-vous m’envoyer [...] quelques clichés caractéristiques montrant les villes italiennes vues d’avion», letter by Le Corbusier to Pollini, dated 14 May 1935, FLC B3-14 (53). «Pourrais-je vous demander le grand service de demander au ministère de l’Aéronautique des documents assez sensationnels [...] de prises de vues sur le désert ou sur les Apennins, ou sur le mer, etc., etc.» letter by Le Corbusier to Guido Fiorini, on 14 May 1935, FLC B3-14 (54).

<sup>17</sup> Le Corbusier refers: «Le livre sera terminé demain, maquette complète avec toutes les légendes et toutes mises en pages, et je chercherai à vous l’expédier par avion, si possible», carta de Le Corbusier, dirigida a The Studio Limited, datada de 31 de maio de 1935, FLC B3-14 (30); «J’ai fait la maquette complète et j’ai mis toutes les annotations nécessaires en cours de route.» letter by Le Corbusier, to The Studio Limited, on 4 June 1935, FLC B3-14 (32). Charles Geoffrey Holme refers: «The final format of the book necessitates some adjustment of size and arrangement, but we have kept as faithfully as possible to the spirit and general arrangement of your maquette.» letter by Charles Geoffrey Holme, to Le Corbusier, on 21 June 1935, FLC B3-14 (34).

<sup>18</sup> «the symbol of a new age» Le Corbusier, *“L’avion accuse...” Aircraft*, cit., p. 13.

<sup>19</sup> *idem ibidem*.

<sup>20</sup> «J’ai mis en note également l’éventualité que l’on pourrait envisager de faire une publication en français, une en italien, une en allemand», letter by Le Corbusier to The Studio Limited, on 4 June 1935, FLC B3-14 (32).

<sup>21</sup> Le Corbusier, *“L’avion accuse...” Aircraft*. London, New York: The Studio, 1987.

<sup>22</sup> Le Corbusier, *“L’avion accuse...” Aircraft*. Madrid: Abada, 2003.

<sup>23</sup> Le Corbusier, Philippe Duboy, *“L’avion accuse...” Aircraft*. Marseille: Parenthèses, 2017.

<sup>24</sup> «[...] d’où l’on voit le ciel [...]», Letter by Le Corbusier to Saint-Exupéry, on 21 March 1935, FLC B3-14 (50).