

'In pursuit of the intangible'

A translation on Le Corbusier's early urban planning work

As a translator from French and German with a varied general background, I was asked to translate a German dissertation¹ about an early manuscript written by Le Corbusier, in French, based on German-language urban planning sources. The customer for the translation lives and works in New Zealand, so the target text (TT) should not be UK-specific. How to tackle the unfamiliar features of this apparently specialist text?

The interplay of the two source languages is integral to the project; at least I work in the right language combinations. I do not have any special knowledge of French from Switzerland, but the French manuscript does not appear to contain much specific Swiss usage. And I do not feel the source text (ST) period itself (1910/11) poses a major problem for the translator, although I note the need to avoid an excessively modern-sounding TT.

Indeed, the fact that 'urban planning' had yet to emerge as a distinct discipline at that time is of positive benefit to the translator. It means there is less need to refer to a particular canon of specialist vocabulary when translating the period material, although I did join the ITI Construction and Environment Network just in case! Moreover, very few of the German urban planning titles cited by Le Corbusier have been published in English, so for the most part I am not obliged to refer to established existing translations.

However, partly due to the novelty of the discipline, Le Corbusier and some of the authors he studied introduced new concepts, or used familiar terms in new ways. Le Corbusier argued that traditional design was bugged by social, mental and mechanical organisms which were parasitic, anachronistic and paralysing², hence the need for innovation. While it seems that such novel usage is common to architects (and others) introducing new ideas, it is certainly tricky for the translator.

Firstly, what to call the discipline itself? In French 'urbanisme', in German 'Städtebau': in English the choice is between town/city/urban, planning/design. Le Corbusier's 1925 book *Urbanisme*³ is best known in English as *The City of To-morrow and its Planning*, but this phrase is too unwieldy for repeated use in the body of the text. The ST author prefers 'urban design', as do other authors writing about Le Corbusier⁴, but one of the few books quoted in the manuscript and also published in English translation uses 'city planning'⁵. For the first of the two terms, English lacks a single equivalent to 'ville' or 'Stadt', with UK English tending to favour 'town' and US English 'city' planning. 'Urban' covers both 'town' and 'city', although it does sound rather modern. With regard to the second term, 'Städtebau' is used in the German ST and not 'Stadtplanung', so the emphasis is more on aesthetic than planning issues, and I therefore concur with the translation 'urban design'.

Even apparently straightforward terms can pose difficulties: do 'rues'/'Straßen' translate as streets or roads? Once again, French and German each have one term where English has more than one. Do the two English

¹ C. Schnoor 2008, *La Construction des villes: Le Corbusiers erstes städtebauliches Traktat von 1910/11*, Zürich: GTA Verlag. Le Corbusier's *La Construction des Villes* was written before Charles-Edouard Jeanneret adopted his pseudonym. Part of it was first published posthumously as *La Construction des villes: genèse et devenir d'un ouvrage écrit de 1910 à 1915 et laissé inachevé* (Le Corbusier and M. Emery, 1992, Paris: L'Age d'Homme). Schnoor's book contains an essay and the text of *La Construction des Villes*, including previously unpublished material.

² "[...] des organismes sociaux, mentaux, mécaniques qui sont parasites, anachroniques, paralysants", in Le Corbusier 1930, *Précisions sur un état présent de l'architecture et de l'urbanisme*, Paris: Crès, page 143.

³ Le Corbusier 1925, *Urbanisme*, Paris: Crès ; Le Corbusier 1987, *The City of To-morrow and its Planning*, translated from French by F. Etchells, New York: Dover Publishing.

⁴ Brooks H.A. 1997, *Le Corbusier's Formative Years*, Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, page 201.

⁵ Sitte C. 1889, *Der Städtebau nach seinen künstlerischen Grundsätzen*, Vienna: Schroll, translated as "City planning according to artistic principles" in Collins G. and Crasemann Collins C. 1986, *Camillo Sitte: The Birth of Modern City Planning*, New York: Rizzoli.

terms cover different ranges of meaning? I have used 'streets' in general, but 'roads' in specific collocations such as 'country roads'.

A common urban feature is the 'place'/'Platz'. I had never questioned its translation as 'square' until I was required to translate 'sternförmige Plätze': could I really say 'star-shaped squares', given that the range of meanings of 'square' in English includes a different geometric shape? My research indicated that the term 'square' is indeed used in architectural texts. Whilst also noting the use of 'plaza' and 'piazza', I felt these bore inappropriate connotations; 'plaza' also means 'shopping centre' and 'piazza' has a specific architectural meaning in relation to 18th- and 19th-century England, a long covered walkway with a roof supported by columns. The solution here ultimately seems to be that 'square' usually suffices, but sometimes another term needs adding, for example 'urban squares'⁶.

One term specific to this manuscript is 'corporalité', which Le Corbusier deploys to describe space⁷. It seems Le Corbusier's German sources used 'Körperlichkeit', and he uses the French cognate, which he takes to mean a tangible three-dimensional space⁸. The author of the German essay has described 'corporalité' variously as 'Körperlichkeit', 'körperhafte Räumlichkeit' and 'Raumvolumen'. I was struggling to find references to any of these terms, bar a single reference in my Ernst technical dictionary⁹ giving 'volume-space...' for 'Raumvolumen...'.

The closest cognate would clearly be 'corporality', although in English this word does not share its origins with the word for 'body', as both the French and German terms do (corporalité, corps; Körperlichkeit, Körper). One possible translation would be 'physicality', but this also lacks the direct link to the idea of a 'body'. I propose 'embodiment of space', which includes an aspect of explication of the meaning, plus most of the word 'body'.

Potential pitfalls

The famous 'leçon d'âne' (or 'chemin des ânes'; die Lehre des Esels) seems well known in architecture circles. However, it is Le Corbusier's later 1925 stance in *Urbanisme* which is best known. Hence the reference made to this 'lesson' in the 1910/11 manuscript is potentially confusing, since Le Corbusier takes the opposite view here. In essence, in this manuscript he believes donkeys' winding paths are a suitable model for street design, whereas in *Urbanisme* he states that, in contrast to donkeys, people are purposeful and should therefore travel in a straight line towards their destinations. I found that 'ass' was too old-fashioned a term even for use here, and its pejorative (and US English) connotations were unhelpful. Previous translators of and writers about Le Corbusier have used 'the donkey track' and 'the pack-donkey's way'¹⁰.

Another difficulty was encountered with the word 'folle', used in several different contexts in the ST, to mean variously: 'crazy' 'les plus folles imaginations' (die verrücktesten Einfälle); 'wild growth' as in 'la folie des fleurs riches' ('Blumenreichtum')¹¹; and 'folly' (but not in the architectural sense of the English word!) in a description by Le Corbusier of the gardens at Versailles, 'harmonies de choses châtiées et choses folles' (die Harmonie sowohl im Verfeinerten als auch im Überzogenen). I translated this last instance as 'harmony between restraint and folly', in the specific context, although arguably its use here could encompass all three of the above meanings!

⁶ "Open squares and plazas" to translate the chapter heading "Des Places", H.A. Brooks, *ibid.* page 205.

⁷ "Une impression de beauté! Il faut alors que la rue droite affirme le sentiment de corporalité; sa longueur et sa largeur, la hauteur des édifices, seront en un tel rapport que la fuite perspectivée [sic] soit [sic] peu apparente;" C. Schnoor *ibid.* page 328.

⁸ "it is interesting to note Voltaire's use of the term in connection with something ostensibly intangible: he writes of the "corporalité des âmes", or physicality of souls. He means precisely the same thing Jeanneret is seeking to express: actually being able to feel something which in itself is intangible." C. Schnoor *ibid.* page 219, translated by K. Sanderson.

⁹ R. Ernst 1989, *Wörterbuch der industriellen Technik, Deutsch-Englisch*, 5th Edition, Wiesbaden: Brandstetter-Verlag.

¹⁰ K. Frampton 2001, *Le Corbusier: Architect and Visionary*, London: Thames & Hudson, page 55 and G. Collins /C. Crasemann Collins, *ibid.* page 101.

¹¹ C. Schnoor, *ibid.* page 156.

In conclusion I think and hope that ingenuity and lateral thinking are more important for this translation than deep subject knowledge and technical expertise. Creative use of language is required to describe the relevant physical phenomena, meaning this project is where 'art' meets 'technical' translation, as well as where French meets German (meets English).