

## THE GRAND TOUR FRANCE

28.9.23  
Cour carrée + l'oratoire + Rivoli  
Temple protestant

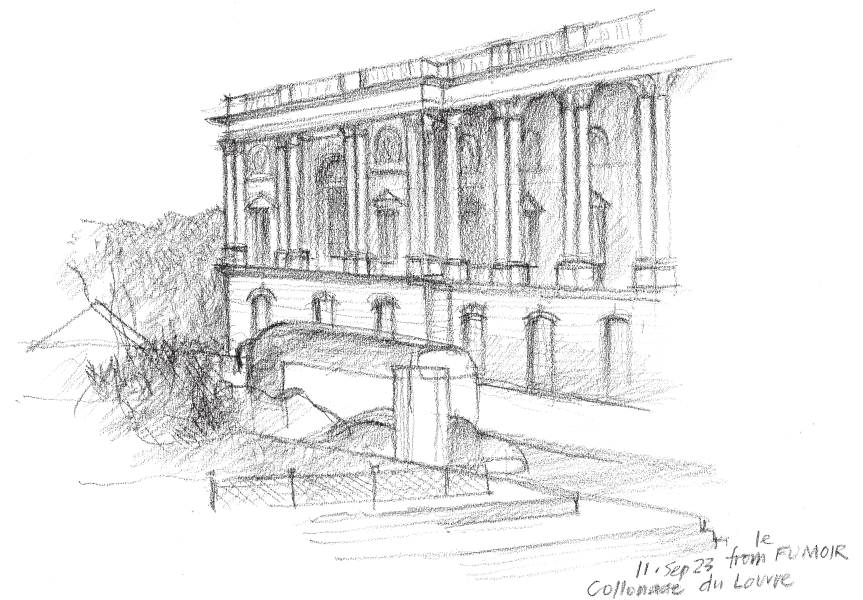
## THE FRENCH LEG AND OUR PARALLEL JOURNEY

The cultural travel referred to as “The Grand Tour” was undertaken by many artists and architects from England usually accompanied by patrons. Their primary aim was to study first hand Roman antiquities, and bring back souvenirs as proof of their education. The tours began in the late 16th century, when conditions allowed travel. Inigo Jones was the first English artist-architect to undertake the tour in 1613, before the 30 Years’ War. He was able to purchase the books of Palladio, and based on those ideas introduced classicism to England. Robert Adam also undertook the tour in 1754, ending with his Herculean task measuring Diocletian’s Palace in Spalatro, and the publication of the resulting engravings in 1764. Adam wanted to be seen as a man of culture and taste, not a provincial Scott, and the publication with learned prefaces became a proof of his learning, and his calling card. He was also looking for a way to energise the prevalent Palladian designs and saw the palace as the best remaining example of “a domestic” Roman building.



Turgot Map of Paris. Michel-Étienne Turgot, 1739. Landmarks and city walls highlighted

The idea of a tour ending in Rome, was institutionalized by 1663 when Louis XIV established the Prix du Rome. This allowed many and various artists to spend upwards of 2 years in Rome, for study purposes at the state’s expense. Its purpose was to encourage French arts and crafts, in many spheres, replacing the Italian artists previously employed, especially in royal works. Following the usual winter route taken by English travellers, Adam crossed the channel, visited Bruges, Bruxelles, then Lille. However, the real tour started in Paris. Some parts of Paris in 1754 would be recognisable by present day visitors. The birds eye map of 1739 by Turgot allows us to recognise the landmarks that still delight the visitor today. He remarked on the east wing of the Louvre, finally completed by Perrault, after Bernini’s grandiose scheme was rejected, that stands today as the most superb example, of French classical architecture. The Palais Royale, Place de Vosges, Saint Sulpice, San Roch the Invalides, the Ecole Militaire, although there then, are never mentioned in his letters. He stayed in the superb Place Vendome, but perhaps restrained classicism was not what he

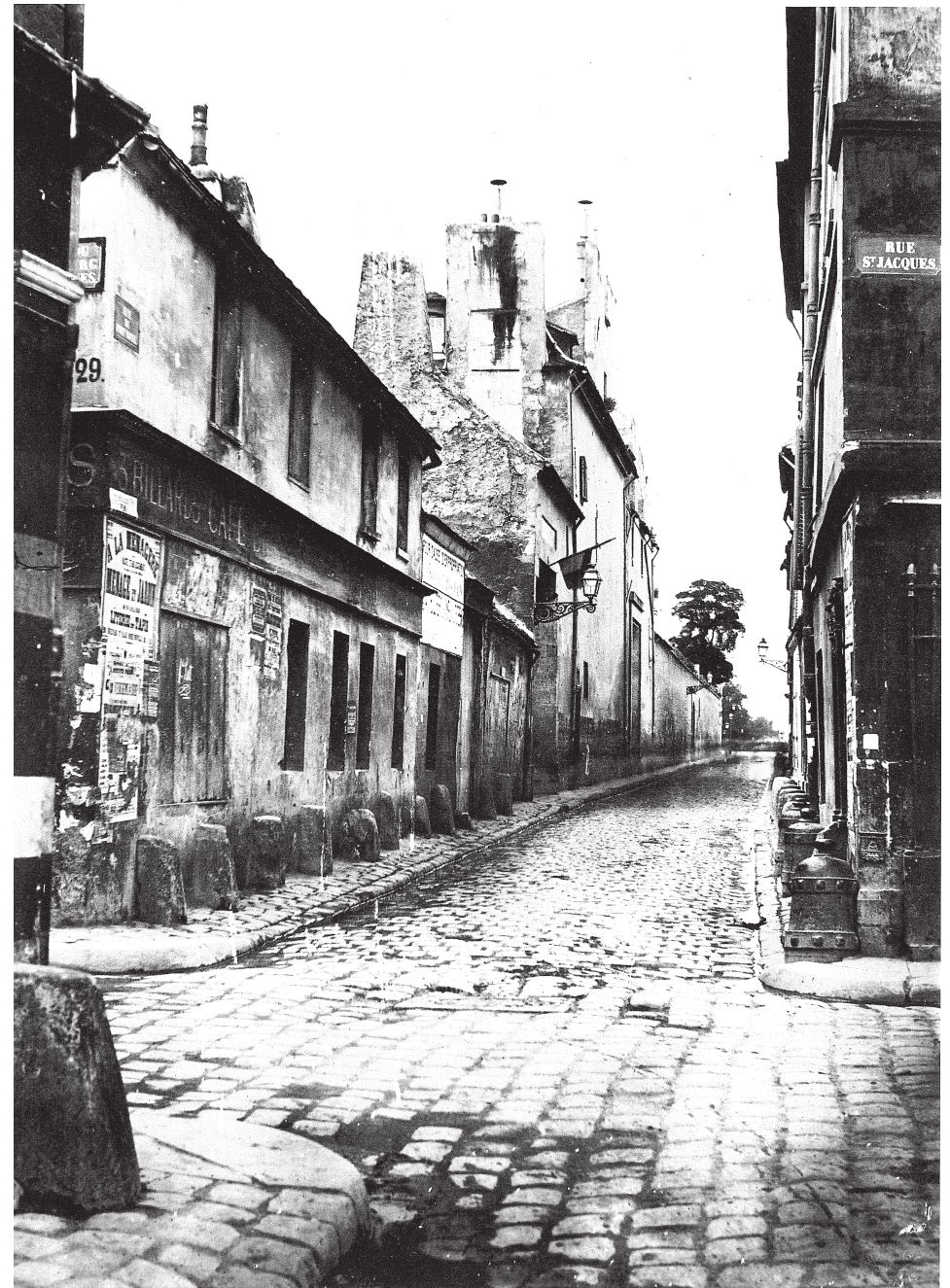


East Facade of Louvre

was looking for. He complained about the aristocracy under Louis XV, the gambling and their supercilious attitude. By this time of course the titles were sold by the king, complicating the strict hierarchy that had plagued the aristocracy. Little seemed to impress Adam. He complained about the lack of invitations, and the excessive gambling he could not afford. He seemed more interested in outfitting himself in the latest fashion than the city, or its treasures. He would have had guidebooks to inform him of sights' customs and regulations.

In spite of the detailed information in the Turgot Map, imagining Paris in 1755, is still a challenge. Paris was a rather sordid medieval city, unpaved streets, and minimal sewerage. The monarchy preferred Versailles and was not interested in improving living conditions for the poor, the lower classes, who made up most of some 600,000 inhabitants. The ramparts were demolished, the space used for the construction of the first of the grand boulevards, allowing integration of the suburbs. Very little remains of the crowded city, vestiges still visible in the narrow streets around St Julien le Pauvre. The buildings were partly in timber, floors added haphazardly to two-storey buildings and in the courtyards to accommodate the many migrants flocking to the city. The random buildings were covered in soot, the streets dirty, noisy and smelly. The streets were used as sewers, with timber footpaths. The courtyards used for artisan industry, a long way from the procession of elegant honey-coloured facades of today. It was not till the 1830's following the cholera epidemic that Paris was rebuilt modernised, by Rambuteau and Haussmann, creating the city we admire today. In fact, when I first visited Paris in 1969, it was still a rather grey dirty procession of freestone facades, until Andre Malraux, encouraged De Gaulle to require the 10 yearly cleaning of facades. The elegant new buildings of the 17th and 18th century, must have seemed like an illuminated stage set, in comparison to the grubby backdrop. Today it's the 19th century that created the image we associate with Paris. The Krier brothers identified this in their research, generic fabric enlivened by "grand projects".

Most tourists would have travelled by post chaise, rather than their own coach, so it is most likely that only Hope and Adam shared the carriage, with a postillion rider, achieving a maximum speed of 15 km an hour,



*Paris before Haussmann. Rue Saint-Jacques, Marville, ca.1865*

changing horses every 4-5 hours. Leaving Paris on 22 November, Adam arrived in Lyon on 2 December. Dijon did not merit a mention, but Lyon impressed him by its location at the confluence of the rivers Saone and Rhone, “the most romantic city”. The hill of Fourviere, the site of the Roman city, is still the defining image of the city because of its commanding presence. Accessed by funiculars, there is a large amphitheatre for 20,000, a smaller odeon for 5,000, remains of the bath and fortifications. As the modern city grew many artefacts were found in excavations and a museum was built adjoining the Roman ruins. Its design was entrusted to Bernard Zehrffuss, a well-respected architect in mid-century France. He chose to bury the building in the adjoining hill, only some large occasional windows giving a clue to the 3-level ramped museum. Its muscular concrete structure is sympathetic with the feel of Roman buildings. This approach is sensitive to both the contents and the location. Zehrffuss was a Prix de Rome recipient, one would expect he had a deep understanding of Roman aesthetics.

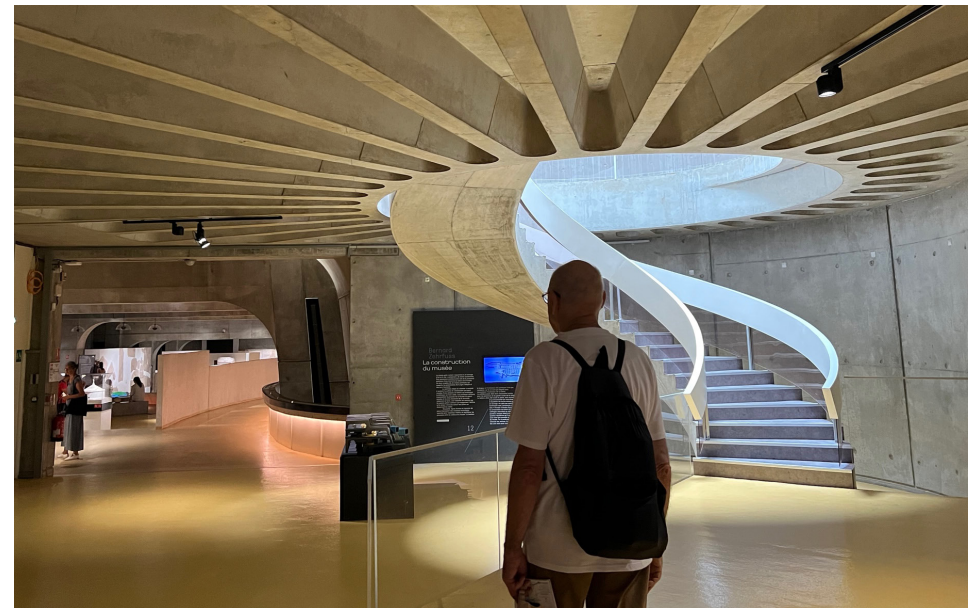
From the top of the hill, the whole of Lyon is visible. The old town, the peninsula and the more recent extension to the east. There is a pleasing



*Model of Zehrffuss' Museum*



*Lyon Amphitheatre*



*Inside the Museum*

harmony in the use of materials, pale stone, and red roofs. A monastery has been converted to a restaurant “Bulle” where a Michelin starred chef served modern French food, contradicting the axiom, great view- ordinary food.

Lyon is still famous for food, the markets there started by Paul Bocuse, where it’s possible to breakfast amongst the meticulous display of elegant produce. One evening we were the only customers at an oyster bar in the Paul Bocuse Halle, when drinks and tastings finished for the stall holders. We tasted 4 different oysters, some freshly cooked prawns, ending with perfectly cooked buchet of mussels. The owners were not in the least worried by the lack of customers. This was some of the best and perfectly served seafood I have ever had. Lyon confirmed its reputation for honest food, and best produce. In the 18th century, it was still known for the excellence of produce, but this was trumped by its silk and fabrics, much to Robert Adam’s delight.

We then took a tram that stopped well short of the new “Temple of the



*Paul Bocuse Halle*



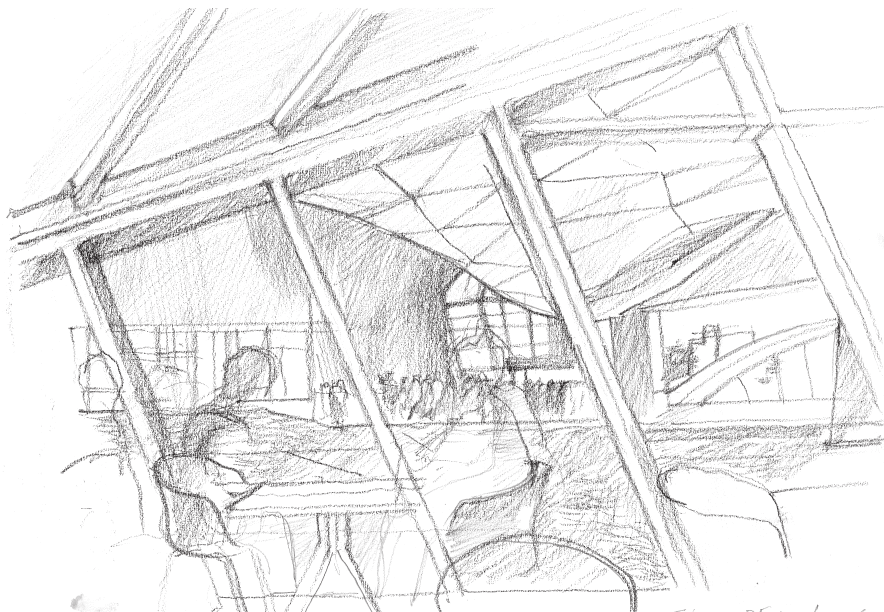
*Roman Glass in Lyon*



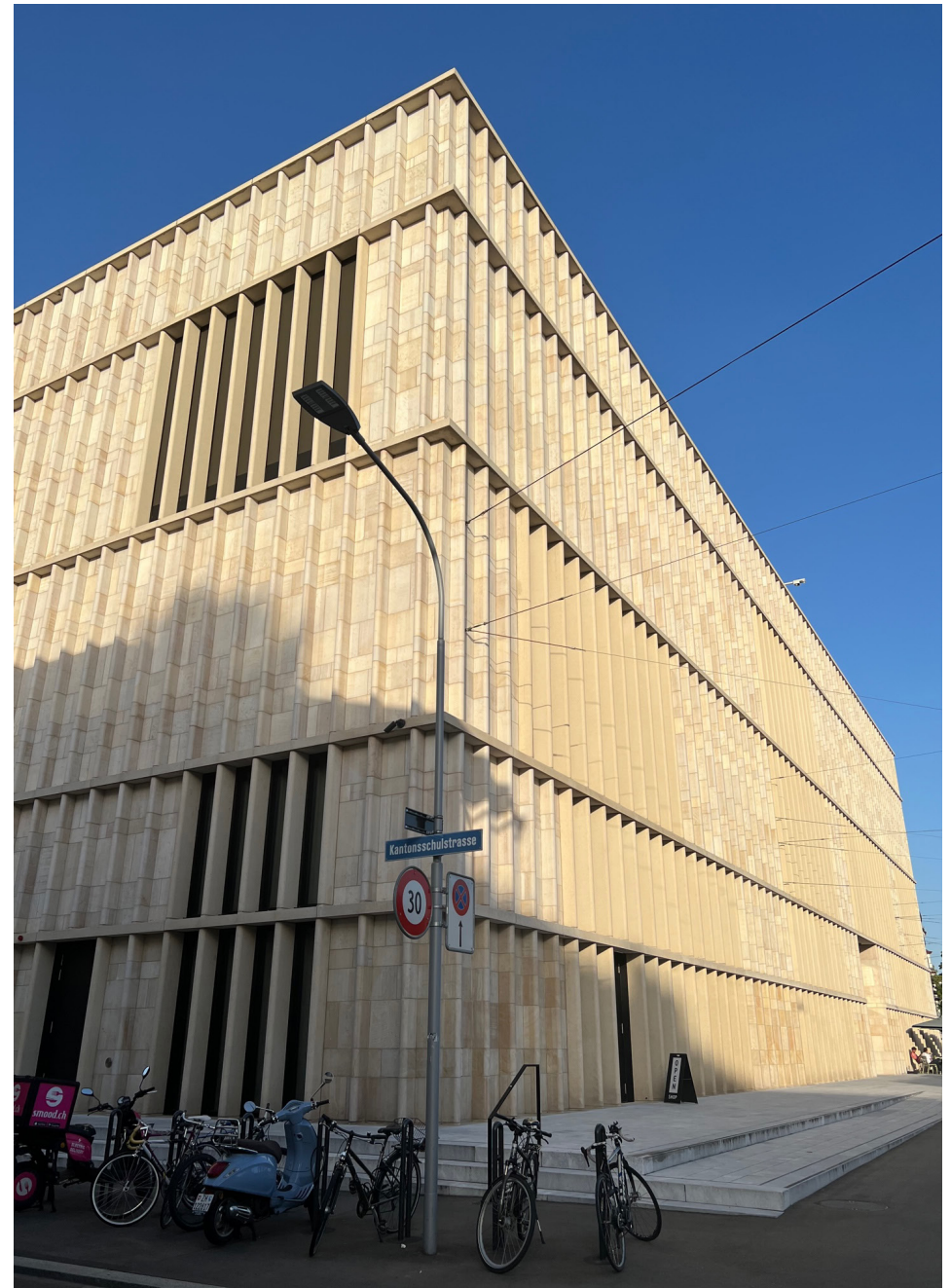
*The Confluence Museum*

Muses”, at The Confluence and had to walk through endless areas waiting for someone to build the planned extension to the city. The new public infrastructure was falling into disrepair. The museum itself sits at the very end of the peninsula, the “Confluence”, surrounded by highways, and can be reached only by a separate new tramline. Designed by Coop Himmelblau it sits like a giant injured bird, its jagged outline, awkward junctions and modest entrance, do not achieve excellence or even the desired Bilbao Effect. Expression of the structure is disregarded. This was far removed from the modest considered and sensitive work of Bernard Zherfuss. The contrast to the Zurich Kunststhal, a new building by David Chipperfield, could not be greater.

The “Chipperfield” as it is affectionately known, has a subtle repetitive modulated façade, its entry almost hidden so all the attention is devoted to creating a vessel for the collection. The internal finishes varied to suit the “art”. There were no extravagant gestures, apart from the entry, where the layout of the gallery is made evident. So much for agreement amongst contemporary architects, on building design and their civic function.



*Inside the Confluence Museum*



*The “Chipperfield”, Kunsthaus Zürich*



*Falkestrasse Apartment in Vienna by Coop Himmelb(l)au*

Rebellion against middle class Vienna, does not contribute to the ancient layered city Lyon is. Admired by Adam, he enjoyed his stay, the food, fabrics and atmosphere. We agree with Adam, the city offered many facets of interest.

Continuing the journey south, the TGV stopped at Pont du Gard station. In the middle of nowhere, the smart new station was designed to seed and anchor another projected development. The station was surrounded by well resolved landscaping and infrastructure, but no development has yet been realized. A bus met the train to take us to Nimes, where we booked in at the IBIS Blue. Our first time in this chain favoured by the young. The person at the desk, must have decided we required an accessible room, looked tired perhaps, at no extra cost. Could have held a party just in the bathroom!! We missed the bus to the real Pont du Gard so a taxi driven by an émigré from Marseilles, took us to the parking area, sensitively integrated into the landscape. He explained the logic of switching to electric vehicles on purely economic grounds and was a great ambassador for the town. The utilitarian buildings, the amenities were underplayed. Nothing prepares



*Pont du Gard TGV station*



*Pont du Gard Aqueduct*



*River fun below Pont du Gard*



one for the grandeur of the aqueduct. The sheer scale, the size of the dry laid stone blocks, it feels like it has been carved from a mountain, the river below, now used for boating picnics, in some ways exaggerating the scale of the aqueduct, as it spans from hill to hill. The supreme confidence in design, the harnessing of resources, organising raw materials and labour all attest to the amazing professionalism of first century Rome.

Nimes is truly a jewel of a city. We made an early morning visit to the food market for breakfast, as the immaculate displays of food materialised, reminiscent of Flemish 17th century still life. A confident women made coffee for the stallholders, accompanied by the heart starter of the day, while preparing lunch. A tagine, making five spice powder, soups and stews, using spices and other unmeasured ingredients. The whole scene a reminder of what has been lost to the rise of supermarkets and fast food.

Nearby the perfectly preserved Temple of Diana, probably originally a library, with an inspired spare building by Foster, forming a square. An information centre, it respected the delicate presence of the temple. It



*Nimes heart starter at markets*



*Aioli in Nimes Market*

was Augustus who built the ramparts, as the town was an important stop on the Via Domitia, only 2 of the gates survive.

The arena, a perfectly preserved amphitheatre, used for performances and occasional bullfights, still performing its original function. It has not been stripped of its covering, and the whole once again seemed to be carved out of solid, rather than built up from blocks. The original sacred source of the Gallic tribes, was incorporated into the Jardins de la Fontaine, designed by Jacques-Philippe Mareshal in 1740 at the behest of Louis XV. As the design developed other remains were incorporated, the Roman pond and the Temple of Diana. The public infrastructure, the fountains, became an integrated work of art, well maintained and landscaped, and obviously much used. There were several well curated museums, especially of Roman remains, and a well-maintained public realm.

The symbol of the town is a crocodile and a palm tree, a reference to the support the town gave to Augustus, in his fight with Mark Anthony, the crocodile a symbol of Egypt where Mark Anthony was murdered. In



*Nîmes Arena*



*Temple of Diana & Foster in Nîmes*



*Nîmes Arena, ready for bullfights*



*Jardins de la Fontaine*



*The emblem of Nimes on a cap*

modern times the manufacture of sturdy well known cotton fabric, that took its name from de Nimes and made the city famous. Called the most Roman city in France, it is a city well worth a visit for its landmarks and harmonious urban fabric.

We did not have the chance to visit Arles, but went on to Marseilles, arriving at St Charles station in the rain. Quite a few stations are named after saints, perhaps on the site of demolished monasteries like St Lazare. I feel ambivalent about Marseille, a port with all the usual characteristics, however with little physical evidence remains of its past. A sixth century Greek colony, then an important Roman Port, it was besieged by Augustus Caesar, when it took the side of Mark Anthony in the civil war. It is still an important port, and manufacturing centre. It was occupied by the German army in the second world war, and was substantially bombed by the allies, yet again requiring extensive rebuilding.

Declared a city of European culture, a series of museums were built, and the foreshore redesigned. The surviving historical quarter restored, but

unable to change its reputation as a “sketchy” city. Robert Adam found the city full of “gamesters and sharpers” and we could not agree more, liking Marseille is an acquired taste. The best museum was the MuCEM, which had very well curated exhibitions relating to the civilisation of the Mediterranean, food, agriculture and culture. Its restaurant served some of the best food of the trip. Returning next day after a disappointing exploration of the town, we were astonished at the relentless force of the Mistral. It practically blew us over, the noise made it unlikely that I would have heard the pickpockets who delicately unzipped my bag, taking my wallet, after following us. A well-dressed couple, in no hurry. The force of the wind made the new waterfront unusable, the overhead access closed.

The main purpose of our visit was to stay in the Unite d’Habitation, by Le Corbusier. A 17-storey public housing block, of some 320 apartments. The hotel, restaurant and shops were part of the original concept of a “vertical village”. Completed in 1952, the budget was exceeded multiple times as did the construction period. Its importance to the development of modern architecture, especially public housing, planning and the brutalist



*Marseille, access to museum*



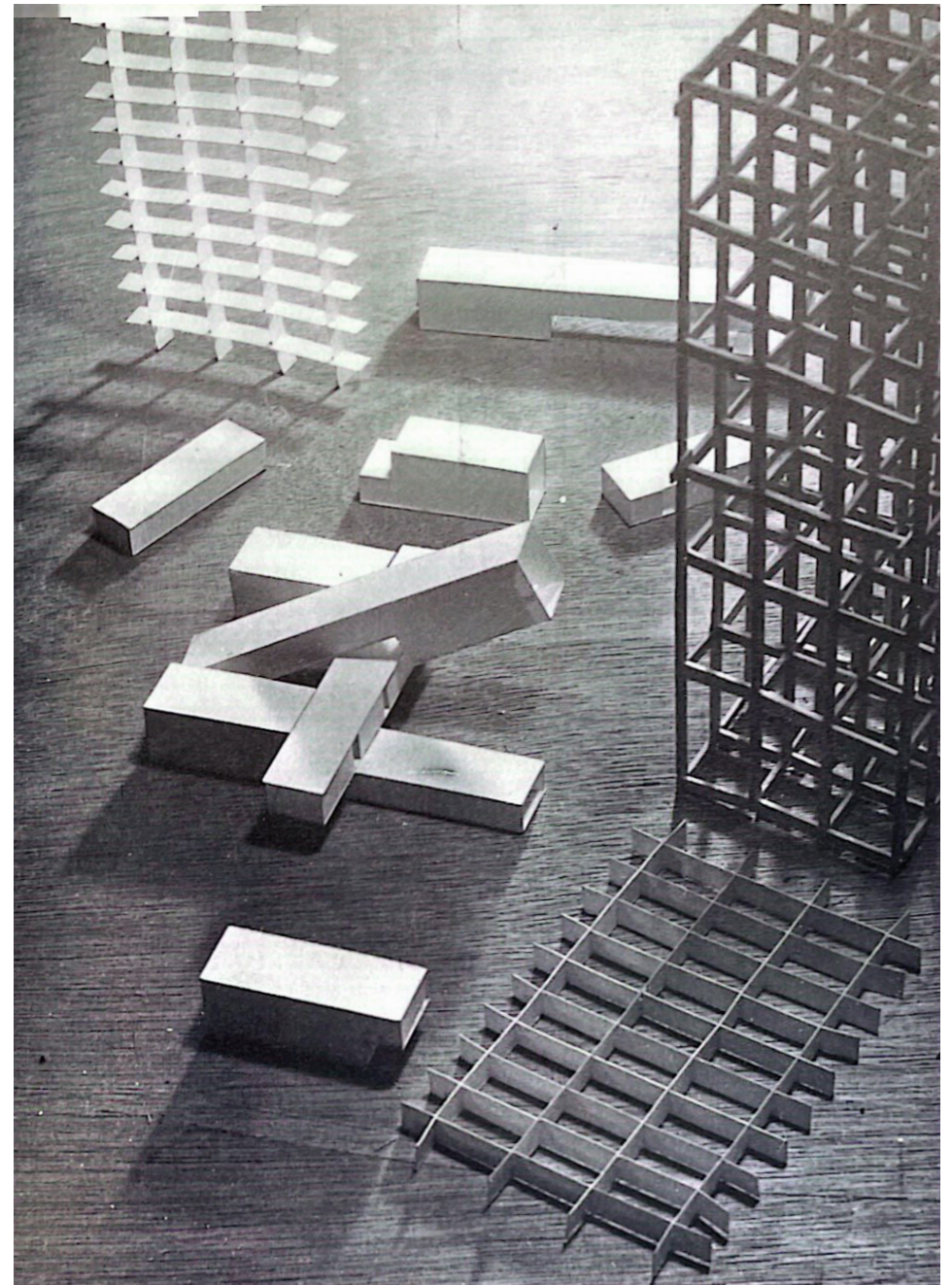
*Unite d’Habitation in Marseille*

movement can hardly be exaggerated. The genesis and realization of Le Corbusier's concept has been the subject of innumerable learned studies, so there is little that can be added, except personal reactions.

While the initial concept was for a steel framework, with maisonette apartments prefabricated, and inserted into the "wine rack" structure had to be abandoned, due to post war shortages. Ever flexible, the scheme was redesigned in reinforced concrete. The through apartments took advantage of the dual aspect, and the double height fenestration reduced the apparent height of the building. The brise soleil was of less practical use. Rather than the slick surfaces intended, the scale and texture of the structure is remarkably rich. The precast balustrades, are roughcast, adding to the texture that gives the whole a human scale. Internally the apartments are built in steel and timber framing, insulation and a mixture of plaster and wood. The idea to make the layout flexible was more an idea than reality. The internal streets are wide and the public areas well intentioned if not viable. This isolated building was intended to be part of a series of similar buildings that never eventuated. It was a federal initiative,



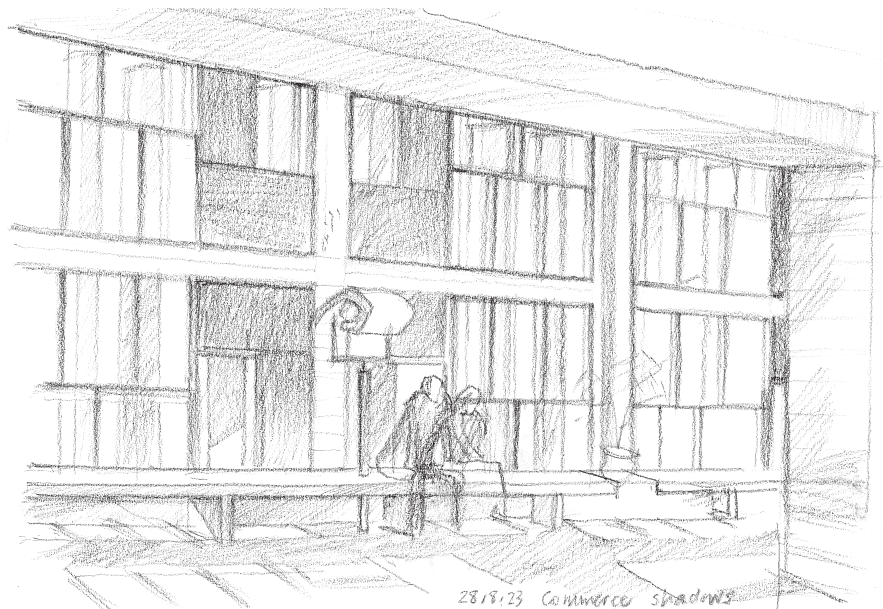
*Rooftop School and Kindergarten in Unite d'Habitation*



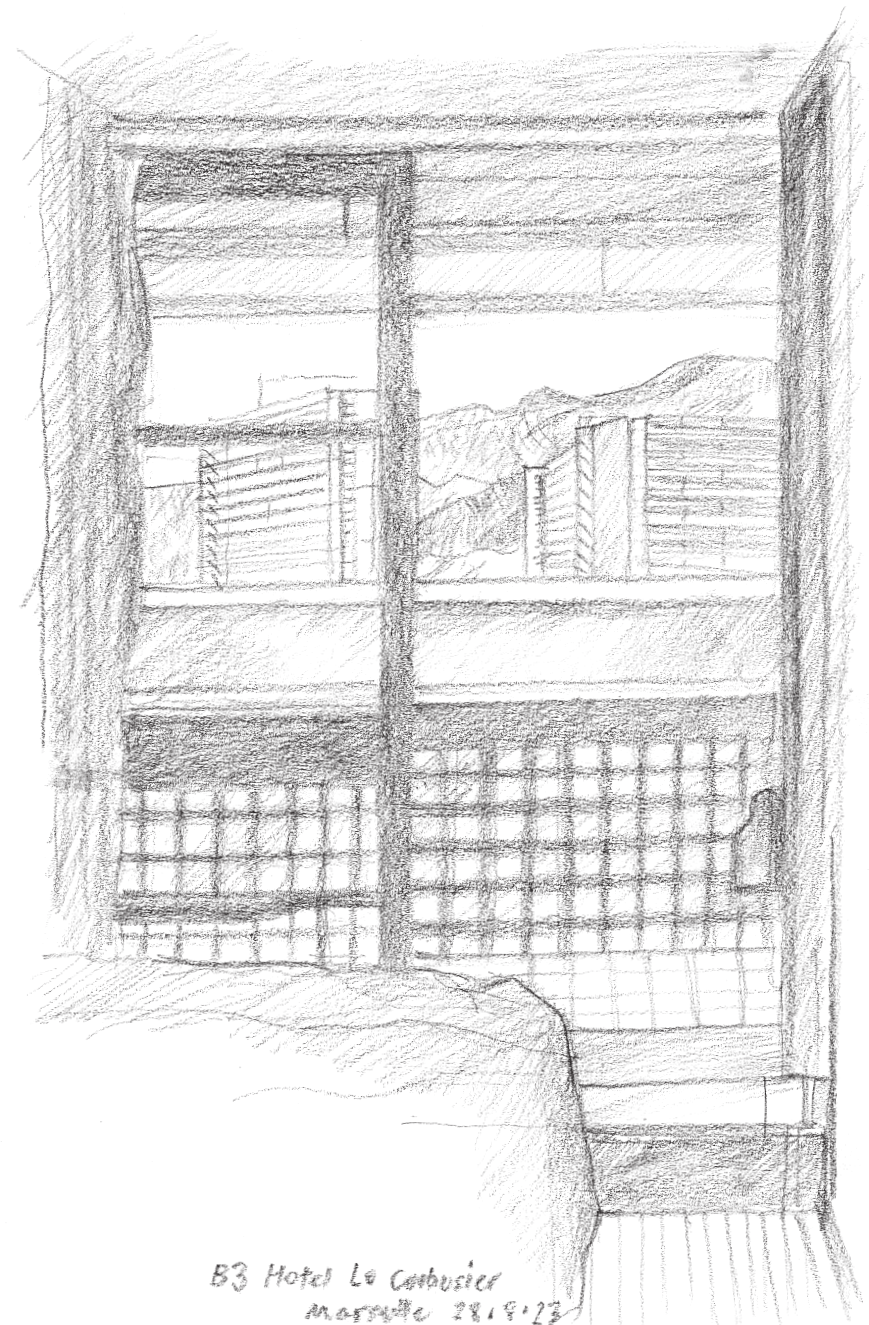
*Model of the initial grid concept*

a post war attempt to provide affordable housing!! There was a vertical common heating system of masonry ducts and similar exhausts. The building never achieved compliance with the building codes, and a fire in 2011 showed up its vulnerability.

In the end, it is an optimistic social experiment, and a wonderful piece of sculpture. One does not realize the quality of the light, the pattern of the fenestration on the floor and walls, so much richer than the quality of the multitude of imitations it inspired. Having 320 apartments in one building in theory made for efficient allocation of resources. It was the internal design of the apartments that was unusual in the attention to detail. In Paris, in the Cite de Architecture et du Patrimoine, amongst the plaster casts of the sculpture of the great gothic cathedrals (Viollet le Duc) contains an incongruous full size model of one of the maisonette apartments of the Marseille Unite. Every living function had been considered. The balcony with its useful bench, storage sensitively provided, the flexibility of the children's room, as well as the use of several materials and colour. Every fitting was custom designed, down to the hardware. A tour de force of



*Wonderful shadows in commercial areas*



*B3 Hotel Le Corbusier, recent poor imitations visible*

invention, the double height space, making the 4.19 metre module (net 3.6) appear spacious.

Like a lot of great projects, it must have tested the patience of the client. In reality, 70 % of the apartments are the same, lip service paid to the supposed diverse needs of the future occupants. Designed with the educated, health conscious (like the architect) in mind, it fails its social brief. As a work of art, it is a success. Its imitators worldwide were unable to capture the same spirit. Looking out our window, there were many examples of poor imitations along Boulevard Michelet. Le Corbusier's love and use of colour harks back to his initial success as a painter.

We were glad to leave Marseilles for Bordeaux, which in the 50 years since I was there has become a vibrant city, full of young students, great public transport, and its old buildings restored. Like us Robert Adam could not wait to leave Marseille to catch a boat from Toulon to Italy.



*Zurich Pavilion, last work of Le Corbusier, all in coloured steel*



*Unite d'Habitation in Marseille*