



Archizoom EPFL

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Territory as Palimpseste
The Legacy of André Corboz
25.09 – 05.12.23

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This exhibition was originally developed and first presented at Teatro dell'architettura Mendrisio from November 4, 2022 until February 5, 2023.

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Acknowledgments

The lenders

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Introduction

André Corboz (1928–2012) reached audiences over an extended historical period and in various disciplines and languages. His subjects ranged from Palladio to the Territorial Grid of the United States, from planning during the French Enlightenment to postmodern Switzerland, transcending the scope of a historian. As metaphor the palimpsest also evokes reuse, a lesser known area within the research of Corboz who coined the term of “re-animation” in the 1970s. Better known today are his writings on Switzerland’s urbanized and polycentric landscape, on its evolving identity in a context of spectacular spatial transformation... questions of an ever more pressing nature since they were raised by Corboz during the 1980s.

Prepared and shown at Teatro dell’architettura Mendrisio, this is the first exhibition ever to provide an overview of Corboz’s body of work as cultural critic, writer and educator of historians and architects. Since 2014 his estate – personal library, photography collection, diaries and scientific papers – have been kept at the library of Accademia di architettura Mendrisio. With its unique source material, Fondo A. Corboz provides is the basis of the exhibition. As a historian, Corboz indulged in meticulous forms of self-observation and notation, keeping records of most of his research projects, as well as his extensive travels. He nevertheless theorising the paradigm of urbanity in the information age, however, he resolutely opposed digital media and remained faithful to the analogue. This premise allows us to take visitors into an intellectual laboratory and a trajectory that spans the second half of the 20th century.

How to present a complex oeuvre essentially based on texts? *Territory as Palimpsest: The legacy of André Corboz* is structured along two main themes: *How to read the territory* and *Knowledge production and historiography*, emphasising contributions to the discourse of landscape and urban development on the one hand, while illustrating, on the other, the evolution of this self-trained historian who travelled through multiple disciplinary fields. True to Corboz's nomadic existence between countries, cultures and disciplines, the documents presented utilise various languages: We aim to situate and contextualise an itinerant form of knowledge production that in itself constituted a performance.

Furthermore, this multi-faceted legacy is interrogated in numerous testimonials by practitioners, contemporaries and former collaborators of Corboz. Together with the exhibition, a website is being developed to present additional layers of his work from the archive along chronological and thematic axes. Drawing from textual and visual sources, the website tracks how Corboz designed and implemented his research projects – in turn producing his own palimpsest.



André and Yvette Corboz on the road, ca. 1990
(Fondo A. Corboz, Biblioteca dell'Accademia
di architettura Mendrisio, USI)



Claude Schnaidt, *André Corboz in Montréal*, ca. 1968
(gta Archiv / ETH Zürich, Claude Schnaidt)

Biography

1928	Born in Geneva
1952	Law degree University of Geneva
1952–56	City administration and private sector positions, Geneva
1953	Marriage to Yvette Hilfiker
1957–61	Legal staff and translator at Federal office of culture, Swiss ministry of the interior, Bern
1956	Birth of son Michel
1962–67	Secretary of University of Geneva
1960	Poetry collection <i>Châtiment des victimes</i> released
1963	Publishes article “Photographier l’architecture”
1964	Birth of daughter Christine
1968	Publishes book <i>Invention de Carouge 1772-1792</i>
1962–80	Correspondent for <i>Journal de Genève</i>
1967–79	Visiting and associate professor of history of architecture, University of Montreal, Quebec
1969–72	Lecturer in history of modern architecture, Université Laval, Quebec
1970	Publishes book <i>Haut Moyen-âge</i>
1973–76	Visiting professor at Centre de recherche sur la rénovation urbaine, Geneva University
1974	Publishes article “‘Spontane’ Architektur”
1975	Advisor to Canadian government for issues of urban preservation. Essay <i>Re-Animation: Alte Gebäude für neue Funktionen</i> published
1978	Book <i>Peinture militante et architecture révolutionnaire: à propos du thème de tunnel chez Hubert Robert</i> released
1980	PhD University of Grenoble (dissertation: <i>La Venise imaginaire de Canaletto</i> , advisor: Gilbert Durand)
1980–93	Professor of history of urbanism, ETH Zurich
1983	Publishes essay <i>Le territoire comme palimpseste</i>
1985	Book <i>Canaletto: Una Venezia Immaginaria</i> released
1986–87	Research fellow at Getty Center, Santa Monica
1992	Book <i>Looking for a city in America: Down these mean streets a man must go</i> released
1993	Essay <i>La Suisse, fragment de la galaxie urbaine européenne</i> published. Research fellow at Getty Center, Santa Monica
2000	Publishes essay <i>La Suisse comme hyperville</i>
2003	Honorary doctorate from University of Geneva
2009	Honorary doctorate from Université de Québec
2012	Deceased at Collonge-Bellerive





HOW TO READ THE TERRITORY

By definition, the territory is form-less, without scale or texture. It becomes space by negotiation and relation. The territory is highly subjected to projection, appropriation, interpretation and representation.

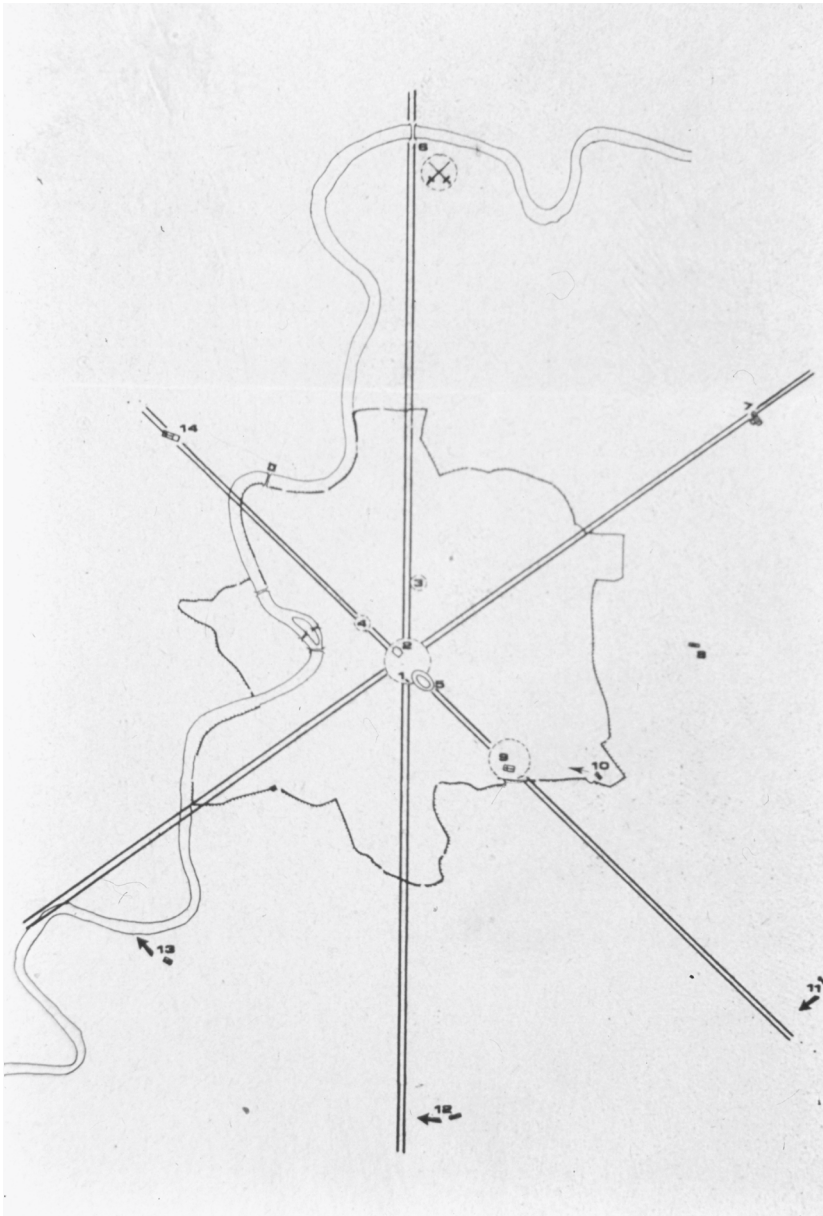
Analysing these acts was crucial for André Corboz. He understood inhabited territories as sites of an ongoing production and transformation of meaning, coining the metaphor of the palimpsest for this process in his well-known essay from 1983. Documented here are the extensive travels and many photographs that provided Corboz with first-hand experience. Furthermore, his photographic gaze onto man-made territories will be compared with Swiss positions in contemporary photography.

How to read the territory presents and situates his work from the 1960s through the 1990s. In this first chapter, we encounter some of the physical sites, environments and landscapes that he sought to understand and that, in turn, had an impact on his critical perspective and his methodology: from historic preservation to Swiss sprawl or the Jeffersonian Grid.

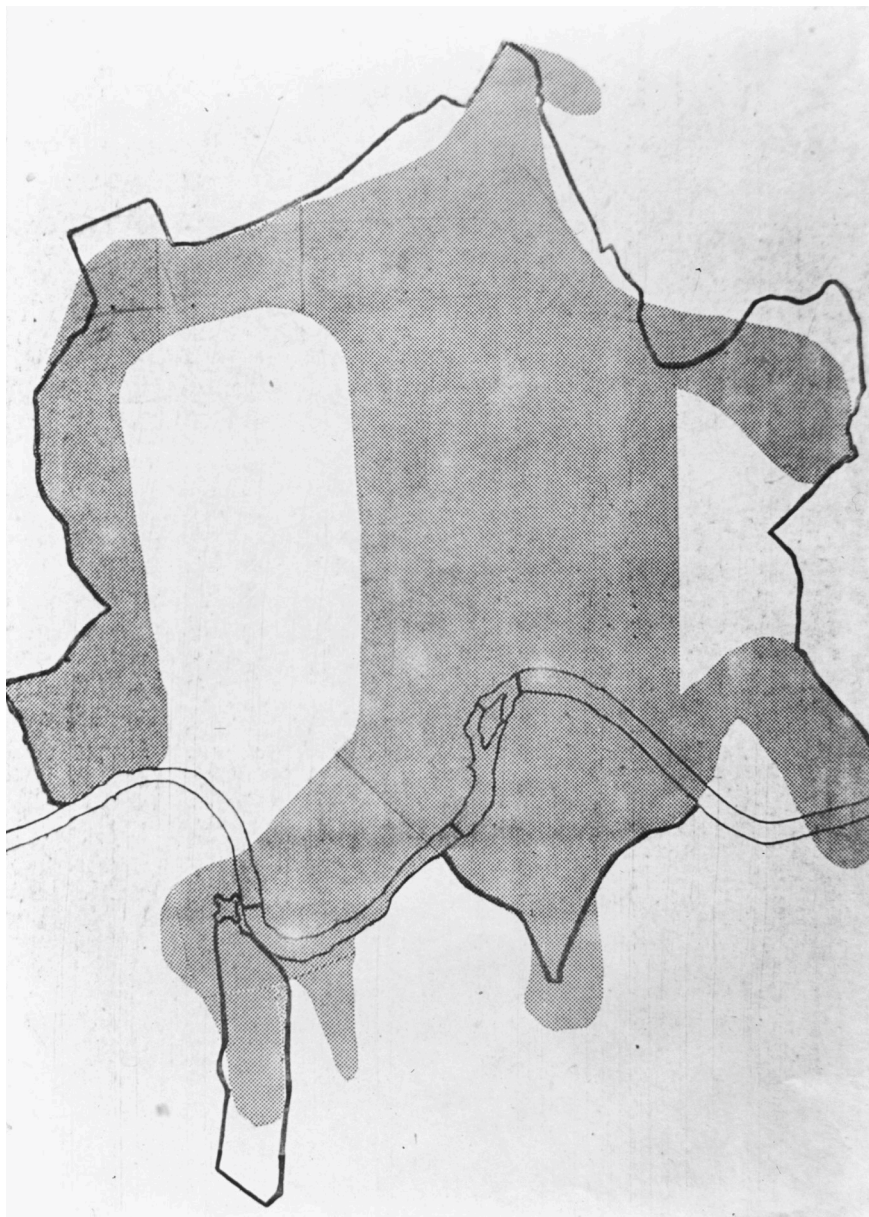
Not only did Corboz address urban plans, cadastral and topographical maps as a historian. He was a keen observer of the present condition and the challenges that it posed to planning. Yet, in a time characterised by facile historicism, Corboz never considered himself a partisan of Postmodernism: legitimising contemporary architecture as a historian was antithetical to his thinking. Instead, his advice to students and practitioners alike was to learn to see and to deconstruct phenomena such as the fully urbanised territory of Switzerland.



André Corboz, Rainbow Bridge National Monument, 1993
(Fondo A. Corboz, Biblioteca dell'Accademia
di architettura Mendrisio, USI)



André Corboz, *Rome, the chrismon* (a graphic symbol representing the name of Christ) as the structure of the city (according to Marcello Fagiolo), slide shown during the Inaugural lecture at ETH Zurich, 1981 (Fondo A. Corboz, Biblioteca dell'Accademia di architettura Mendrisio, USI)



André Corboz, *Rome, tracing of the lion shape*, slide shown during the Inaugural lecture at ETH Zurich, 1981 (Fondo A. Corboz, Biblioteca dell'Accademia di architettura Mendrisio, USI)





KNOWLEDGE PRODUCTION AND HISTORIO- GRAPHY

Corboz's core interest was how the imaginary manifests itself in painting, architecture, the city and landscape. Transgressing disciplinary boundaries, he addressed forms of representation in a wide range of scales and diverse periods. His research opted for a transhistorical approach and drew unconventional conclusions: interpretation as an open, iterative, transversal process all at once. Using a literary genre to instigate a free play of associations, Corboz drew on methods inspired by Umberto Eco and Roland Barthes, as well as surrealist montage and poetry.

His historical analyses often have a reflective tone, the result of his background as an autodidact and an obsessive tendency towards self-observation. Corboz found his vocation in the history of art and architecture after graduating from law school in 1952. He was already active as scholar, critic, poet, journalist and educator for over two decades before gaining his PhD in 1980.

Lacking formal training as a historian, he went to great lengths to chronicle the experience of his knowledge production. Personal impressions, dreams, readings, research topics, especially his extensive travels through Italy, were documented in written form. Several of these records are presented on this floor, along with Corboz's lesser known early research on Andrea Palladio (1972-1978), Hubert Robert (1978), Venice and Canaletto (1980), as well as the sequence of essays on his native Geneva that were published from 1963 on.

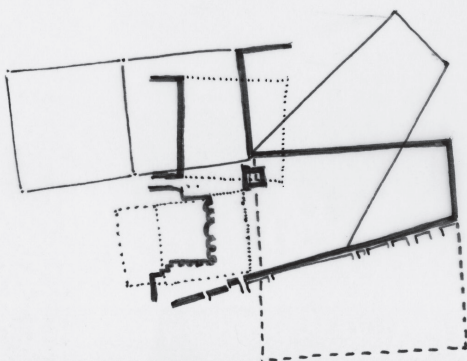
Previous pages : André Corboz, *Office during the stay at the Getty Center in Santa Monica*, 1993
(Fondo A. Corboz, Biblioteca dell'Accademia di architettura Mendrisio, USI)

André Corboz, *View of personal library in Küsnacht*,
ca. 1985 (Fondo Corboz, Biblioteca dell'Accademia
di architettura Mendrisio USI)

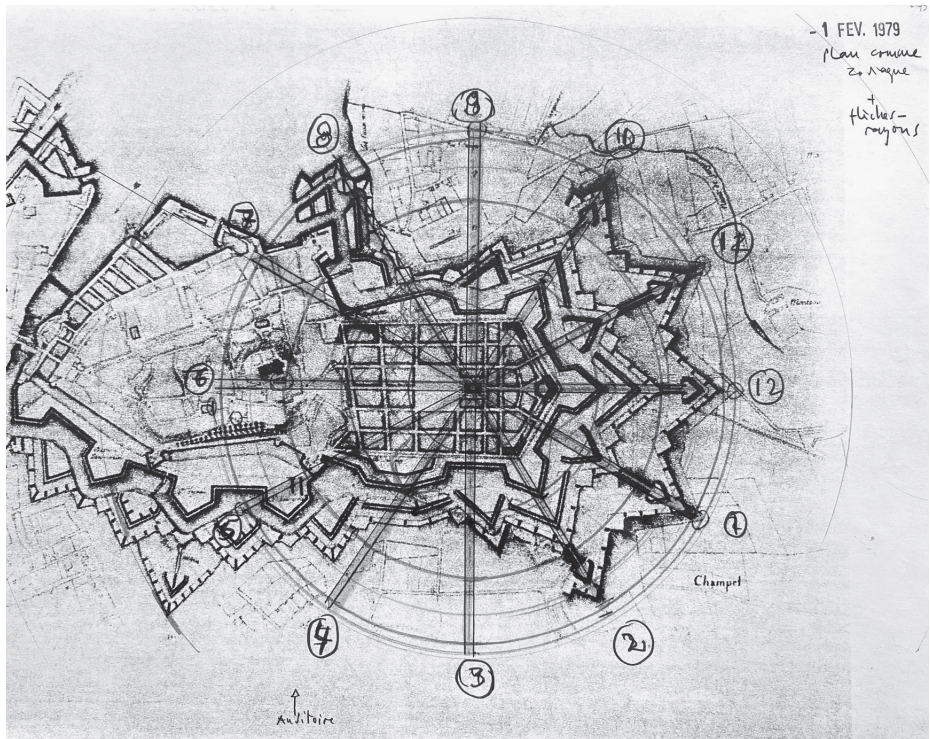


canal esquisse d'illustration
(R: Sanbo Viro, p. 45)
- il sera préférable de juxtaposer
les plans -

x = état actuel
- = C 63 - P 111
x - = C 547 - Partur 60
x --- = C 53 - P 133 A - Partur 62 } C 538
x - = C 54 - P 130 A
--- = C 23 - P 136 A
.... = C 74 - P 184



André Corboz, *analysis of the various perspectives constructed by Canaletto in Piazza San Marco, Venezia*, 1979 (Fondo A. Corboz, Biblioteca dell'Accademia di architettura Mendrisio, USI)



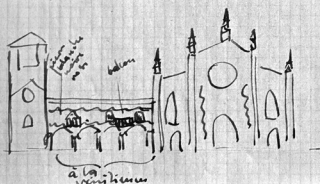
André Corboz, *Plan as zodiac + arrows and rays*, 1979
 (Fondo A. Corboz, Biblioteca dell'Accademia
 di architettura Mendrisio, USI)

Il semble que les certaines choses en Italie, les routes obligatoirement protégées, (les fontaines, les murs, les poutres, les fenêtres) sont, sous l'angle de la prudence, pour dire de la Renaissance.

Donc. Le Donné est bizarrement construite : les murs sont rectilignes, aux campaniles par un corps de bâtiment qui rappelle le palais des Papes, et la campanile est une brèche tout carrée.

L'intérieur du Donné est beau jusqu'à la séparation de voûtes. Quelques horribles autels modernes.

(P. 100)



Le facsimile avant le sien de l'ensemble architectural. Telle place de Ravenne ou de Varèse (pour prendre les plus modestes) sont, sous l'angle de la prudence, pour dire de la Renaissance.

Châtillon l'Blanc.

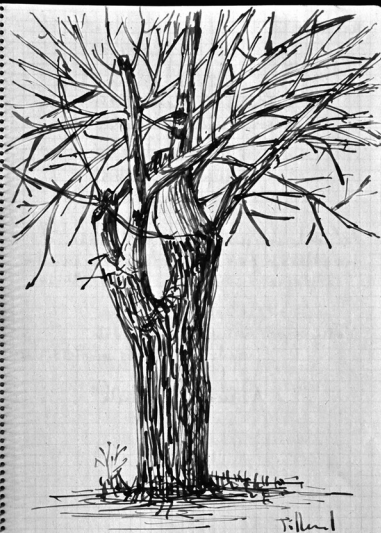
Une rue de la place de la fontaine de Massolino, au baptême. (Elle est inférieure à ce qu'il a pu être au Casanova, à Florence.) Les fresques sont simplement charmantes. On s'en va là si ? On s'en va à Massolino à l'heure de Massolino, ce qui ne peut pas le démentir ?

On se construit ce qui les allumant avaient été sautes aux deux bouts du Pont-Vieux. Mais on conserve la disposition des rues. (Pendant les années modernes, si par là les rues de trois mètres.)

à Ph. D.

Pendant que les vœux
le camp de l'en de Paris
En plein vent pour toujours
Le marcher dans les rues sans
Où les fruits de Crivelli
Sont posés à même le sol
Et sous leurs tentes bleues
Devant tout peuple de villages
Comme pour nous voir passer
Atteints de l'air les fresques

N'écoutez pas dans la foule
La rumeur des pickpockets



PROGRAMME OF EVENTS

Saturday 23 September, 2 p.m.–midnight
Night of the Museums

Monday 25 September, 6.30 p.m., en
Opening and introduction lecture
of the exhibition by the curators
André Bideau & Sonja Hildebrand

Monday 16 October, 6.30 p.m., en
On Heritage
Paul Bouet & Bricklab

6–7 November, 12–8 p.m., fr/en
Salon du livre d'architecture

Monday 27 November, 6.30 p.m., fr
On Territory
Georges Descombes, Rainer Michael Mason
& Ariane Widmer

+ 5 p.m., en
Guided tour by André Bideau

Monday 4 December, 5 p.m., fr
Guided tour by Elena Cogato Lanza

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