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# *Opening the Shrine of the Mundaneum*

The Positivist Spirit in the Architecture of  
Le Corbusier and his Belgian “Idolators”

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*In 1928 Le Corbusier drafted detailed plans for a centre of information, science, and education, called the Mundaneum, to complement the headquarters of the League of Nations in Geneva. The allegedly historicist and academic traits and quasi-religious tendencies of these plans triggered fierce reactions by critics such as Karel Teige and El Lissitzky. Le Corbusier in turn answered these critiques in a long essay entitled “In Defense of Architecture”. This paper aims to shed new light on the Mundaneum debate by exploring the programme of the Mundaneum as it was defined by the Belgian documentalist and utopian internationalist Paul Otlet (1868–1944) and translated in architecture by Le Corbusier. Otlet conceived the Mundaneum as at the same time a concept of a new kind of information service that would eventually absorb libraries, and a complex of institutions that he and Henri La Fontaine directed and had brought together in the prestigious Palais du Cinquantenaire in Brussels. The Mundaneum was his lifelong project in which the design of Le Corbusier was only one, although an important, moment in its development, followed by a series of designs made by Belgian modernist architects in the 1930s and 1940s. By entering into a dialogue with the history of information science, the history of internationalism, and especially the history of positivism in all its spirituality, this paper reinvestigates the symbolism of the spiralling pyramid of the Mundaneum as designed by Le Corbusier and his followers.*





Figure 1. Le Corbusier, Perspective of the Mundaneum (1928) © FLC

In 1928, one year after the contested architectural competition for the Palace of the League of Nations in Geneva, Le Corbusier drafted as a complement of the Palace detailed plans for a centre of information, science, and education, called the Mundaneum. The following year he extended the Mundaneum project into a plan for a complete international city district, called the Cité Mondiale or World City. In the centre of the Mundaneum and the World City stood a monumental spiralling pyramid that housed the World Museum. The pyramidal museum gave the impression of a sort of a sacred temple complex dating from Babylonian or Assyrian times. The publication of the plans of the Mundaneum triggered fierce reactions by contemporary architectural critics regarding the historicist traits and academic tendencies of the Mundaneum, which, in their eyes, ran counter to the function-

alist principles of modernist architecture of which Le Corbusier in particular was considered to be one of main propagators through the organism of CIAM which he had founded during the same year as a reaction to his discrimination from the League of Nations competition and the academic design that was awarded the first prize. The Czech critic Karel Teige drew a bead in the architectural journal *Stavba* in September 1929 on the historical reminiscences of the Mundaneum and the aestheticising, non-functional principles of Le Corbusier's work. He admonished Le Corbusier that, through his reluctance to abandon monumentality, he, of all people, had taken the perilous road toward academicism.<sup>1</sup> El Lissitzky made a similar critique of the Mundaneum in Marxist terms in the journal *Bauindustrie*.<sup>2</sup> In an essay, "Idols and Idolators," Lissitzky focused on the "pseudo-functionalism" of Le Corbusier, against which the Soviet idolaters amid the constructivist and functionalist movements should be on their guard.

1. Karel Teige, "Mundaneum," *Stavba* 7, no. 10 (1929).

2. El Lissitzky, "Idole Und Idolverehrer," *Bauindustrie* 11-12 (1928).

3. Le Corbusier, "Defense de l'architecture," *L'Architecture d'aujourd'hui* 10 (1933).

4. Le Corbusier, "In Defense of Architecture," in *Oppositions Reader: Selected Readings from a Journal for Ideas and Criticism in Architecture 1973-1984*, ed. K. Michael Hays (New York: Princeton Architectural Press, 1998), 599.

5. Le Corbusier, "In Defense of Architecture," 608.

6. Frampton Kenneth, "The Humanist Vs. The Utilitarian Ideal," *Architectural Design* 38 (1968).

In a long essay, entitled "In Defense of Architecture," Le Corbusier answered the accusations of academicism and historicist formalism that were being made in regard to his design of the Mundaneum.<sup>3</sup> Patiently, he built up his counterattack against the value of *Sachlichkeit*, or functional directness of expression, on the basis of which some of the German and Russian protagonists of CIAM—Teige, Lissitzky, Mart Stam, and Hannes Meyer—were building a front against Le Corbusier, starting from a statement made by Meyer, and quoted by Teige, that "all things in this world are a product of the formula: function times economics."<sup>4</sup> In his defence, Le Corbusier directly addressed Teige and told him that in his opinion, aesthetics was a fundamental human function and that he therefore opposed *Sachlichkeit*, or the logic of economic functionality as the sole foundation of modern architecture. Although the Mundaneum was "only a provisional image destined, through its iconography, to work its way into the minds of those who had the means or interest to occupy themselves with it," each building type, Le Corbusier assured us, was "rigorously appropriate to each specific function."<sup>5</sup>

Because of the debate and of its eccentric position in the modernist canon, the Mundaneum project of Le Corbusier has not fallen into oblivion of scholarship. The polemical dispute between the Czech critic Karel Teige and Le Corbusier about the retrogressive monumentality of the project was revisited in 1968 by Kenneth Frampton in his account of the opposition between Le Corbusier's "humanist" modernism and the "utilitarian" radicalism of Karel Teige.<sup>6</sup> Because of the obvious parallels to the



architectural debate of the 1970s, the polemic was republished in Michael Hays' *Oppositions Reader* with an introduction by George Baird.<sup>7</sup> Dario Matteoni and especially Giuliano Gresleri further added attention to the schism of functionalism and monumentalism within the project by retracing the Beaux-Arts antecedents of Le Corbusier's *Mundaneum*.<sup>8</sup> Alfred Willis left the issue aside of how the project digressed from functionalism, and tried instead to demonstrate its esoteric character.<sup>9</sup> Anthony Vidler also tried to explain the meaning of the embedded meta-physical symbolism and its evocation of history as a generative process of unlimited growth.<sup>10</sup>

What these publications didn't explore, however, is the collaboration between Le Corbusier and the Belgian documentalist and utopian internationalist Paul Otlet (1868-1944), and the fact that the *Mundaneum* and the *World City* were his lifelong projects in which the design of Le Corbusier is only one, although an important, moment in their development, followed by a series of designs made by Belgian modernist architects in the 1930s and 1940s. To understand what the *Mundaneum* is, architectural history needs to enter into a dialogue with and open up to the history of information science, the history of internationalism, and especially the history of positivism in all its spirituality. It is within this broader scientific and political context that this paper tries to dig up and understand certain excluded meanings and concepts in the development of this contested modernist project and its immediate and historiographical afterlife, therefore shedding new light on the project.

## The Mundaneum of Paul Otlet

The *Mundaneum* was Otlet's expanded project of what he called "documentation offices," which he defined as a new kind of information service that would supplement and eventually absorb libraries. Otlet had strongly criticised the conservative approach of libraries to information services and their outmoded methods of classification and cataloguing.<sup>11</sup> The main idea that he put forward as a critique on the functioning of libraries was what he termed "documentation," the means of bringing into use, not only textual sources, but "all of the written or graphic sources of our knowledge."<sup>12</sup> Today, Otlet is often made trendy by journalists who depict him in presentist terms as the forgotten forefather of search engines such as Google or the World Wide Web.<sup>13</sup> Indeed, Otlet did describe the utopian dream of what he called the Universal

7. George Baird, "Karel Teige's *Mundaneum*, 1929 and Le Corbusier's in Defense of Architecture, 1933," in *Oppositions Reader*.

8. Giuliano Gresleri, "Le *Mundaneum*. Lecture du projet," *Transnational Associations* 5 (1987); "The *Mundaneum Plan*," in *In the Footsteps of Le Corbusier*, ed. Carlo Palazzolo and Riccardo Vio (New York: Rizzoli, 1991); "Convergences et divergences. De Le Corbusier à Otto Neurath," *Transnational Associations* 1-2 (2003); Giuliano Gresleri and Dario Matteoni, *La città mondiale. Andersen, Hébrard, Otlet, Le Corbusier* (Venezia: Marsilio Editori, 1982).

9. Alfred Willis, "The Exoteric and Esoteric Functions of Le Corbusier's *Mundaneum*," *Modulus/University of Virginia School of Architecture Review* 12, no. 21 (1980).

10. Anthony Vidler, "The Space of History: Modern Museums from Patrick Geddes to Le Corbusier," in *The Architecture of the Museum: Symbolic Structures, Urban Contexts*, ed. Michaela Giebelhausen (Manchester; New York: Manchester University Press, 2003).

11. Boyd Rayward, "The Origins of Information Science and the International Institute of Bibliography/International Federation for Information and Documentation (Fid)," *Journal of the American Society for Information Science* 48, no. 4 (1997): 295.

12. Boyd Rayward, *Mundaneum: Archives of Knowledge* (Urbana-Champaign: Graduate School of Library and Information Science University of Illinois, 2010), 11.

13. Alex Wright, "The Web Time Forgot," *New York Times*, June 17, 2008; Jean-Michel Djan, "Le *Mundaneum*, Google De Papier," *Le Monde Magazine*, December 19, 2009.

Network of Documentation. This would consist of a network of documentation offices stretching out around the globe that would make all knowledge accessible to the entire world. The information network he imagined, however, unlike the World Wide Web, was centralised in what he named the Mundaneum.

But the Mundaneum stood not only for a concept of what we would call today a multimedia library. It was also a term that referred to the complex of institutions that Otlet and Henri La Fontaine directed and had brought together in the Palais Mondial (World Palace) in the left wing of the prestigious Palais du Cinquantenaire in Brussels. At this site, with the permission of the Belgian government, they had set up the International Museum that they had created in 1910 following the world's fair of the same year in Brussels in which they played an active role. By 1920, their organisations and activities occupied hundred rooms on the Cinquantenaire site. These hosted, in addition to the International Museum, the headquarters and collections of the International Institute of Bibliography (founded in 1895), the Collective Library of Learned Societies which brought together libraries of over sixty scholarly societies located in Brussels (created in 1906), and the headquarters of the Union of International Associations (hereafter UIA, created in 1910).<sup>14</sup> The latter organisation posed the problem of the international coordination of intellectual work and as such was one of the first platforms in history for discussing the politics of science on an international scale.

14. Institut International de Bibliographie, *L'organisation systématique de la documentation et le développement de L'Institut International de Bibliographie*, 82 (Bruxelles: Institut International de Bibliographie, 1907).

Despite its vast programme and intense organisation of activities, the Palais Mondial-Mundaneum diminished in prestige after 1924. This was partly due to the fact that Otlet and La Fontaine failed to have their institutions recognised as a cultural branch of the League of Nations. When the League of Nations was founded in 1919, Henri La Fontaine, a member of its Belgian delegation, proposed to the General Assembly of the League to set up an organisation related to international intellectual cooperation.<sup>15</sup> Otlet and La Fontaine hoped that the League of Nations would adopt their Central Office of the UIA in Brussels as the headquarters of such an organisation, but their hopes were frustrated in 1924 when the League accepted a French proposal to set up the International Institute of Intellectual Cooperation (IIIC) in Paris, as the technical organisation for the International Committee on Intellectual Cooperation (CICI). The IIIC is considered to be the predecessor of UNESCO.<sup>16</sup> The decision to establish the IIIC in Paris meant the UIA's coup de grâce. In the same year, the Theunis government in Belgium partially closed their Palais Mondial-Mundaneum for a rubber fair, and therefore obstructed its further development.

15. Jan Kolasa, *International Intellectual Cooperation: The League Experience and the Beginnings of UNESCO* (Wrocław: Zakład Narodowy im. Ossolinskich, 1962).

16. Jean-Jacques Renoliet, *L'Unesco oubliée. La Société des nations et la coopération intellectuelle (1919-1946)* (Paris: Publications de la Sorbonne, 1999).



One of the reasons why Otlet and La Fontaine, who were at the forefront of internationalism before World War I, failed to have the Mundaneum recognised as the League’s cultural branch and were gradually marginalised since the late 1920s, was the spiritualist character of their positivist project. Although they never explicitly formulated its spiritualism in official statements, it is suggested by the sharp critique spawned by Gonzague de Reynold. De Reynold was Professor of French Literature at Berne University, member of a Catholic movement which desired to see Christianity reinstated as a spiritual European unity,<sup>17</sup> and rapporteur for the CICI that investigated the value of the work done by the UIA for the League of Nations. He perceived the attempt to install an institution of intellectual cooperation within the League of Nations by La Fontaine and Otlet as the commencement of “a universal ‘Kulturkampf’ against religious instruction”:

We are, indeed, ... in the presence of a humanitarian syncretism tending to laicize the Christian idea, to make the League of Nations into a Church against the Church. This Church has its mysticism, which is of a pantheist origin; a metaphysics borrowed from rationalism; it has its pseudo-scientific methods; its pedagogy is extracted from Rousseau, and all rubbed in with psychoanalysis; it has its universal language, its Latin: Esperanto.<sup>18</sup>

Some of the connections that Otlet established to the Mundaneum project, however, further support its spiritualist underpinnings. One of these is the work of the French architect François Garas.<sup>19</sup> Garas had devoted his entire oeuvre to the elaboration of fantastic architectural visions, the culmination of which was the “temples for future religions” dedicated to life, death, and thought—Temple à la Vie, Temple à la Mort, Temple à la Pensée (1907).<sup>20</sup> Garas’s Temple of Thought dramatically stages the initiation of novices in a temple on a nearly inaccessible site on a mountaintop. At the Universal exhibition in Brussels in 1910, Garas exposed a model of the Temple of Thought in the French pavilion. Otlet managed to convince Garas to install the huge model of the Temple in his International Museum in Brussels, once the Universal exhibition was finished, and then re-baptised it as the “Allegory of the Mundaneum”.<sup>21</sup>

The spiritual character of the Mundaneum is further confirmed by Otlet’s friendship with the Belgian Idealist painter Jean

17. Virginie Riva, “Les débats intellectuels sur l’Europe au prisme du religieux en France et en Italie,” in *Harmattan politique européenne* 1, no. 24 (2008): 61–81; Philippe Chenaux, *Entre maurras et maritain: Une génération intellectuelle catholique (1920-1930)*, *Sciences Humaines Et Religions*, 0768-2190 (Paris: Cerf, 1999); *De la chrétienté à l’Europe: Les catholiques et l’idée européenne au XXe siècle* (Tours: CLD, 2007).

18. “Nous sommes, en effet,—les documents que nous avons cites le démontrent, et l’on ne saurait assez le répéter,—en présence d’un syncrétisme humanitaire tendant à laïciser l’idée chrétienne, à faire pour cela de la S.D.N. une Église contre l’Église. Cette Église a son mysticisme qui est de source panthéiste, sa métaphysique empruntée au rationalisme; elle a ses méthodes pseudo-scientifiques, sa pédagogie extraite de Rousseau et toute frottée de psychanalyse; elle a enfin sa langue universelle, son latin: l’espéranto.” Gonzague de Reynold, “La reconstruction intellectuelle, les catholiques Et La S.D.N.,” *La revue générale* (June 15 and July 15, 1922): 627.

19. The connection between Otlet and Garas has also been noted by Pierre Chabard and Alfred Willis: Pierre Chabard, “Towers and Globes: Architectural and Epistemological Differences between Patrick Geddes’ Outlook Towers and Paul Otlet’s Mundaneums,” in *European Modernism and the Information Society: Informing the Present, Understanding the Past*, ed. W. Boyd Rayward (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2008); Willis, “The Exoteric and Esoteric Functions of Le Corbusier’s Mundaneum.”

20. François Garas, *Mes temples* (Paris: Michalon, 1907). For a description of the Temple projects of Garas, see: Iain Boyd Whyte, introduction to *Biopolis. Patrick Geddes and the City of Life*, by Volker M. Welter (Cambridge Mass.: MIT Press, 2001), 153–59.

21. Arthur De Rudder, “L’architecture,” in *L’exposition de Bruxelles* (1910), 309–11.



Figure 2. Jean Delville, Prométhée (1907)

Delville (1867–1953). Besides being a painter, Delville was a committed member of the Ordre du Temple de la Rose+Croix, spiritist, esotericist, occultist, freemason, idealist, theosophist, and, finally, follower of Krishnamurti.<sup>22</sup> Delville's monumental canvas *Prométhée* (1907) decorated the conference room in the Palais Mondial-Mundaneum in the 1920s. Prometheus, a Titan who stole fire from Zeus and brought it to mortals, is depicted in the painting as an example of an initiate who has acquired great Truth and wants to open the eyes of those who do not yet see the “light” of the great Truth.

22. Robert Hoozee and MaryAnne Stevens, *Impressionism to Symbolism: The Belgian Avant-Garde 1880-1900* (London: Royal Academy of Arts, 1994), 93–97.



Beyond his friendship with Delville, Otlet maintained relations with several occult societies, which suggests that he supported or at least strongly sympathised with definite theosophist, spiritist, and other occult theories. Probably also through Delville, Otlet was invited to speak about the spiritual aspect of the Cité Mondiale in 1923 for the Société Théosophique of Brussels, of which Delville had become Secretary in 1910.<sup>23</sup> And three years later, in 1926, Otlet gave a sermon in the desert of the temporary city of Ommen in the Netherlands before two thousand members of the Order of the Star in the East, a splinter group of the Theosophical Society founded by Annie Besant (1847–1933) which would be disbanded three years later by Krishnamurti (1895–1986), whom he met on that occasion in Ommen.<sup>24</sup>

The presence of religious symbolism and occult meaning in

23. Paul Otlet, “L’aspect spirituel de la cité internationale,” *Bulletin de l’Ordre de l’étoile d’orient* 1 (Janvier 1924).

24. “La cité mondiale,” *Herald of the Star* 15, no. 10 (1926): 435–42.

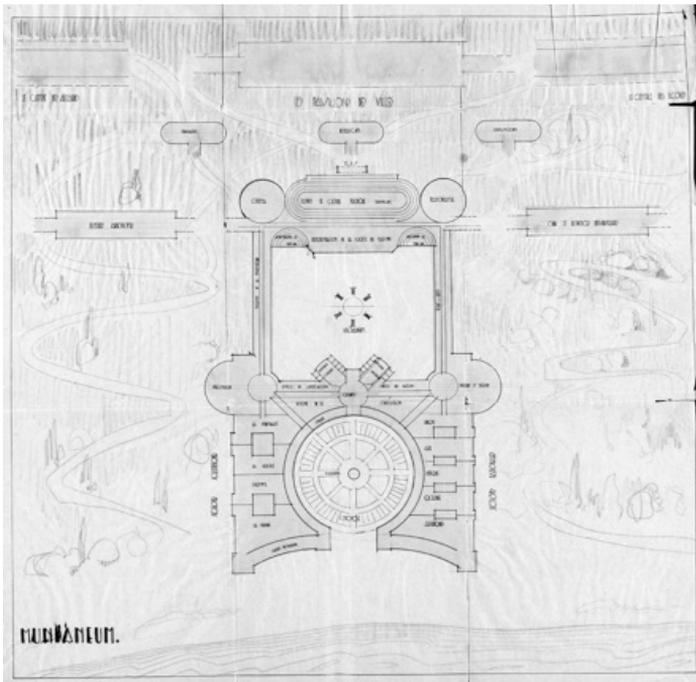


Figure 3. Paul Otlet, Schematic Plan of the Mundaneum at the seaside between Wenduine and De Haan. Version 3 (1927)

Otlet’s conception of Mundaneum is most obvious in an architectural schema of 1927, which situates the Mundaneum at the Belgian seaside, between Wenduine and De Haan.<sup>25</sup> The building has a central court with a “Sacrarium” in the middle, and a “Planetary” that is positioned in the front yard. Symbolically placed between the Earth (Planetary) and the Sacred (Sacrarium), the “Centre” is where internationalist assemblies were imagined to be held following Otlet’s liturgical codes and rituals. The disposition makes the Mundaneum a sort of initiatory trajectory that guides

25. Paul Otlet, *Description de la Cité Mondiale—Mundaneum*. D’après le plan Paul Otlet 1927.09.15 (1927). Archives of the Mundaneum (further abbreviated as MDN), fonds Cité Mondiale (further abbreviated CM), note no. 5589.

the visitor from the chaos of the outside world, through the round square devoted to the natural world, to the rectangular square devoted to the world of ideas. The Mundaneum is imagined as an *imago mundi*, a place that brings down the Sacred to the Profane world.

### The occultism of Le Corbusier's Mundaneum

As a result of the intense correspondence and several meetings between Otlet and his 'cher ami' Le Corbusier in 1928, the structure and secular character of Otlet's diagram of 1927 is evident in Le Corbusier's design of the Mundaneum of 1928. Le Corbusier's design of the World Museum as Karel Teige and El Lissitzky remarked, formally resembled the observatory of the palace of Khorsabad. Otlet included a model of the Babylonian temple in his International Museum in Brussels, in which he gave a personal guided tour to Le Corbusier, and Le Corbusier must have known the reference from Banister Fletcher's *A History of Architecture* (1905) and other architectural treatises.<sup>26</sup> Both the World Museum and the tower of Khorsabad combine the spiral with the rectangular floor plan and have a sanctuary in the base. (Ironically, Teige in 1930 praised the terraced roof structure of Adolf Loos' Grand Hotel Babylon (1923) which lighted up the interior of this pyramidal building of the "Aztec-Mexican type" that consisted not of a sacred mortuary hall but a ballroom and skating rink.)<sup>27</sup> Similarly, for Karel Teige the Mundaneum was "the expression of ideological and metaphysical imagination" and proved that Le Corbusier was unable to break with the historicism of the old capitalist world.<sup>28</sup> According to El Lissitzky, Le Corbusier had in his "encyclopaedic poem" gone back to historic forms of an Egyptian pyramid with "a pharaoh's grave," especially in the Sacrarium at the heart of the World Museum which was nothing less than "a place of worship for Idols and Gods."

Considered in the context of the aftermath of the competition for the Palace of the League of Nations, these alleged references to ancient monuments seem an odd digression in the curriculum of Le Corbusier. It would seem only logical that the Mundaneum was in line with his offensive against historicist academicism. Le Corbusier responded, besides to the accusations of academicism and historicist formalism, also to the accusation of religious symbolism that was being made about his design for the Mundaneum. He argued that the functionality of modern architecture did not exclude it from having a spiritual dimen-

26. Giuliano Gresleri and Marcello Fagiolo both make the comparison: Marcello Fagiolo, "La nuova Babilonia secondo Le Corbusier," *Ottagono* 13, no. 48 (March 1978): 22-29. Gresleri and Matteoni, *La città mondiale*. Le Corbusier refers to the Khorsabad complex in: Le Corbusier, *Urbanisme* (Paris: Flammarion, 1994 [1925]), 80. On possible other references, see: Stanislaus Von Moos, *Le Corbusier: Elements of a Synthesis*, 5th ed. (Cambridge Mass.: MIT Press, 1985), 244.

27. Karel Teige, *Modern Architecture in Czechoslovakia and Other Writings* (Los Angeles, Calif.: Getty Research Institute, 2000 [1930]), 123.

28. Baird, "Karel Teige's Mundaneum," 597.



sion and that the museum of human creation had the shape of a spiralling pyramid to respond to “the absolute continuity of events in history.” The Sacarium was designed in such a way as to show “how great geniuses have, in their time, incarnated the general current of ideas and have convulsed the world. For new things have not convulsed the world, new ideas have: the things being merely the manifestation of ideas.”<sup>29</sup> In the same way that Eiffel had made the Eiffel Tower as a ‘temple to calculation,’ Le Corbusier stated, he had intended to show with the Mundaneum that architecture is “a manifestation of order.”

29. Baird, “Karel Teige’s Mundaneum,” 605.

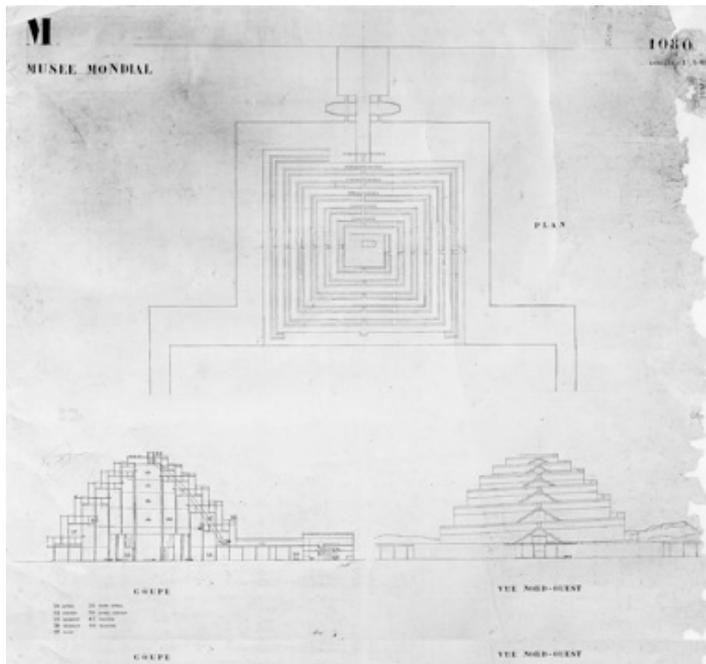


Figure 4. Le Corbusier, The World Museum (1928) © FLC

While Le Corbusier emphasised in his defence the “strictly utilitarian, functional” character of the World Museum, “so violently attacked,” there seems to be good reason to believe that he intended the Mundaneum to be a modern sanctuary charged with occult symbolism. In various other works Le Corbusier had used a mystical and occult iconography that J. K. Birksted characterises as “personal, mysterious, and secretive, if not, at times blank” and which “reveals itself to those whom it may concern” and therefore has an aura that, Birksted argues, “parallels exactly the Masonic and compagnonnique notion of initiation.”<sup>30</sup> The same kind of revelation reserved for initiates can be found in the Sacarium, which Le Corbusier described as “a surrounding cylindrical, smooth and blank wall” which had sculptures on the inside of

30. J. K. Birksted, *Le Corbusier and the Occult* (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT, 2009), 305–06.

31. "Il entre dans cette enceinte cylindrique, lisse et muette qu'il avait aperçue d'en haut, et dedans, il trouve, façonnées dans la Pierre aux époques où elles surgirent, et taillées par la main de ceux qui les adorèrent, les figures des grands initiés en qui l'humanité, au cours de sa marche, incarna toute sa puissance mystique, son besoin d'élévation, d'abnégation, d'altruisme. Grands et indiscutables moments de l'histoire humaine." Paul Otlet and Le Corbusier, *Mundaneum*, 128, de L'Union des Associations Internationales (Bruxelles: Palais Mondial, 1928), 38–39.

32. Vidler, "The Space of History," 174.

33. Édouard Schuré, *The Great Initiates. A Study of the Secret History of Religions* (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1961).

34. Otlet and Corbusier, *Mundaneum*, 38.

35. Alfred Willis makes a similar argument in "The Exoteric and Esoteric Functions of Le Corbusier's Mundaneum," 17–18.

"figures of the great initiates in which humanity, in the course of its history, had incarnated all its mystic power, its need of elevation, self-sacrifice, and altruism."<sup>31</sup> Probably, the notion of 'great initiates' that Le Corbusier used in his description referred to *Les Grands Initiés*, a book by Edouard Schuré (1841–1929) which Le Corbusier is known to have read.<sup>32</sup> Schuré was a member of the Theosophical Society and an acquaintance of Richard Wagner, Rudolf Steiner, and Jean Delville. In *Les Grands Initiés* (1889) he recounts the path of "initiation" or the search for profound esoteric knowledge by figures such as Rama, Krishna, Hermes, Moses, Orpheus, Pythagoras, Plato, and Jesus.<sup>33</sup> The presence of the sculpted portraits of 'the great initiates' in the Sacrarium suggests that the World Museum was projected by Le Corbusier as a centre of initiation in occult knowledge, and throws another light on the "promenade architecturale" developed in the spiral shape that hovers above the Sacrarium. Just as the visitor was introduced to the secrets of the human genius in the Sacrarium, one could interpret the spiral trajectory of the World Museum as an initiation in the "essence" of human history. After all, Le Corbusier mentions how the visitor in that trajectory sees the paintings about "the separation of air, water and the earth", representations of Giotto, Michelangelo, "the portraits of Rousseau and Voltaire," "the Sun King, its men and their works", and of "all Enlightened Europe" until "Hausmann, Napoleon III, and the plan of Paris."<sup>34</sup> In the same way as in the International Museum in Brussels, the World Museum was not just an exhibition about human history; it deemed to reveal the occult dimension of history itself, its "mystic power," the "synthesis of humanity."

In the spatial symbolism of the World Museum, Otlet's formulation of the Mundaneum had remained intact.<sup>35</sup> Otlet meant the Sacrarium to be a symbolic monument which gave a place to the Spirit of History, to the ideals or principles which had acted as the arrowhead of historical progress. The Sacrarium was, like all other religious constructions, a sacred place where one could have direct contact with the sacred; a space that materialised the "Centre" or that place which is sacred above all. The act of climbing and descending established by the World Museum can be interpreted as a constructed ritual in which one first breaks away from the profane space in order to discover the sacred, and then to bring back the divine Spirit to the Earth, symbolised by the Planetarium in front of the World Museum, in the same arrangement as in Otlet's 1927 schema of the Mundaneum. Furthermore, the pyramidal form of the World Museum is reminiscent of the religious metaphors of the mountain and the tower, which we also can be found in the drawings of Garas, the Belgian



architect Geo-Jean Henderick (1879–1957), Jean Delville, and the latter's student Hubert Dupond (1901–82) which Otlet kept in his archives and which symbolise a centre where along a vertical axis the divine comes into contact with the profane.<sup>36</sup> In the same way as the Sacarium sculpted in stone the ineffable Spirituality of Mankind, Otlet imagined the architecture of the Mundaneum to consist of “pierres parlantes,” of “material objects charged with meaning.” For Otlet, the Mundaneum is what Mircea Eliade would describe as a real place that is consecrated by “hierophany,” by a breakthrough or a manifestation of sacred Ideas into the world.<sup>37</sup>

36. Mircea Eliade, *Images and Symbols* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1991), 163. They can be found, e.g., in the descriptions of the temple of Jerusalem, the Babylonian temples, and the myth of the Tower of Babel: Eliade, *Images and Symbols*, 41–42.

37. Eliade, *Images and Symbols*, 27–57.

### **In the footsteps of Le Corbusier**

After the polemic with Teige, Le Corbusier left the Mundaneum aside for some time, while Otlet continued vigorously promoting the idea. When Otlet asked Le Corbusier to exhibit his Mundaneum design on the third CIAM congress held in Brussels in 1930, he tried to preserve silence over it and drew all attention instead to his demonstration of the principles of the Radiant City. Victor Bourgeois (1897–1962), who had hosted the Brussels conference as vice-president of CIAM and presented a plan for a New Brussels on that occasion, developed that plan further in 1931, situating the Brussels world's fair of 1935 in Tervuren, as an extension of the colonial institutions of Leopold II, with the Mundaneum in the form of a coliseum as the centrepiece of the plan. In 1932 Otlet could convince Le Corbusier to pick up again the idea of the Mundaneum in combination with the Radiant City. Together with the Belgian architects Huib Hoste and Fé Loquet, they participated in the international town-planning competition for the extension of Antwerp on the left bank of the river Scheldt. In addition to the new residences organised along the principles of the Radiant City, the competition design included a reduced and restructured version of the Mundaneum in Geneva, again with a World Museum in a pyramidal shape at its centre. Moreover, as the *Nieuwe Rotterdamsche Courant* mentioned, it was remarkable how many projects in the competition besides the team of Le Corbusier took up the idea of a Cité Mondiale and a Mundaneum.<sup>38</sup> There were the teams Raphaël Verwilghen (1885–1963) and Jean-Jules Eggericx (1884–1963); Maurice Heymans (1909–91) and Emile Henvaux (1903–91); Emile Van Leemputten (1887–1970); Pierre Verbruggen (1860–1940) and Georges France (1896–1943); and F. Bodart and Vyvermans. Many of these modernist architects had been trained or were

38. *Nieuwe Rotterdamsche Courant* (August 3, 1933). MDN, CM 7.

39. Jacques Aron, *La Cambre et l'architecture. Un regard sur le Bauhaus belge* (Bruxelles: Mardaga, 1982).

teaching at the Institut Supérieur des Arts Décoratifs in La Cambre (Brussels), the 'Bauhaus belge' as Jacques Aron calls it.<sup>39</sup> The concept of the Mundaneum and Cité Mondiale was well known at the ISAD as Verwilghen had made it an exercise in his studio at the ISAD (1931–32). The Cité Mondiale in their eyes embodied in one city district a programme of worldwide interaction and they included the Cité Mondiale in their competition designs to critique the local minded programme of the competition programme and to demonstrate their universal mindset.

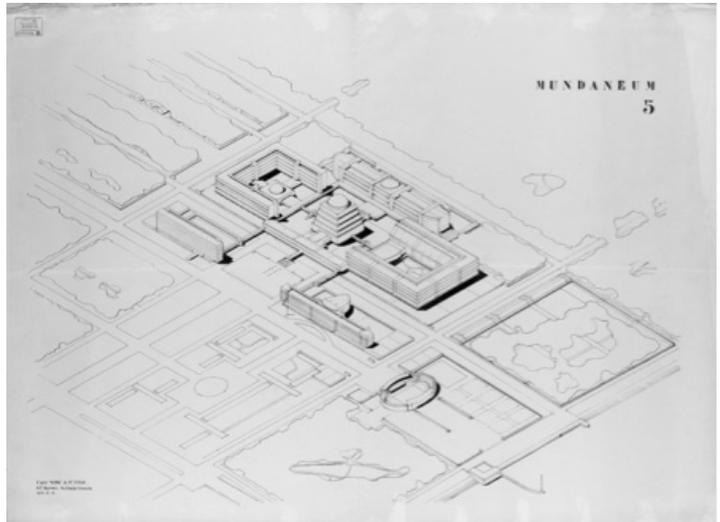


Figure 5. M.C Heymans, Perspective of the Mundaneum (1935.10.15)

40. Wouter Van Acker, "Architectural Metaphors of Knowledge: The Mundaneum Designs of Maurice Heymans, Paul Otlet, and Le Corbusier," *Library Trends* 61, no. 2 (2012): 371-96

41. Maurice Heymans, Note (1935.01.01). MDN, CM, box 8, Correspondance Architecte, Folder Heymans.

42. Maurice Heymans, Note (1935.01.15). MDN, CM, box 8, Correspondance Architecte, Folder Heymans.

Of the architects who followed in the footsteps of Le Corbusier, Maurice Heymans made the most elaborate design of the Mundaneum.<sup>40</sup> In 1935, the year after his participation together with Henvaux in the competition for the left bank of Antwerp, he provided Otlet with two very elaborate designs of the Mundaneum. In a more explicit manner than Le Corbusier's design, Heymans's Mundaneums hesitate between esoteric symbolism and functionalist modernism. On his drawings, he noted that the architecture of the Mundaneum conveyed "neither orthodox materialism nor orthodox religiosity."<sup>41</sup> The hesitation in his project is that between giving the Mundaneum the appearance of a 'temple' or that of a "permanent cerebral (+/- materialist) instrument".<sup>42</sup>

In October 1941, Raphaël Deville (1894–1970) and Stanislas Jasinski (1901–78) gave form to the Mundaneum and Cité Mondiale for a last time and situated their design again on the left bank of Antwerp. Like Le Corbusier and their Belgian modernist friends in 1933, Jasinski and Delville envisioned a new city on the left bank of Antwerp which elevated itself to



the rank of a cosmopolis through a programme of international institutions. At the end of the ‘heliothermic axis’ of the plan stood the Mundaneum, which inverted the spiral of Le Corbusier’s World Museum. The funnel-like shape grew from the ground up to a size of 116 metres across and 36 metres high, supported by columns that were not positioned as in Le Corbusier’s World Museum on the inside of the pyramid, but on the outside. Taking up the spiritual symbolism in the design of Le Corbusier and Heymans, the spiral functioned, according to Jasinski, as a “symbol of the progressive movement” of civilisation (art, science, and religion).

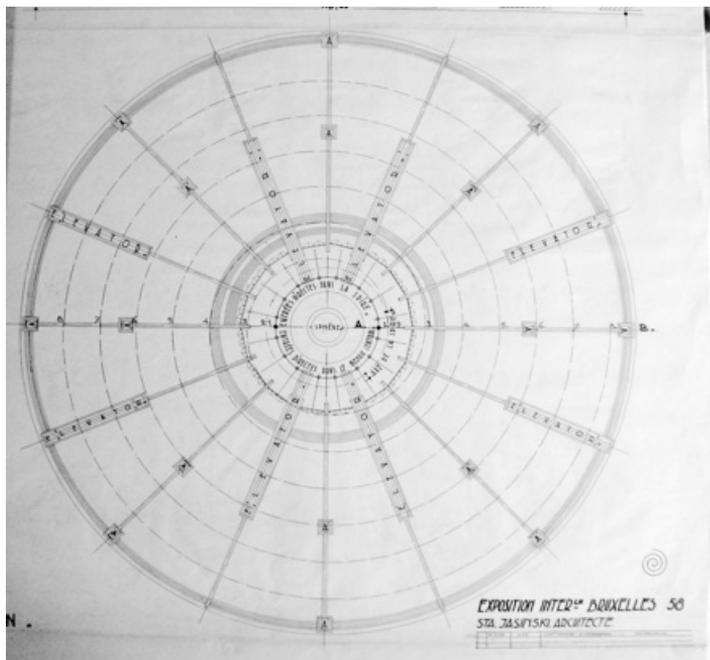
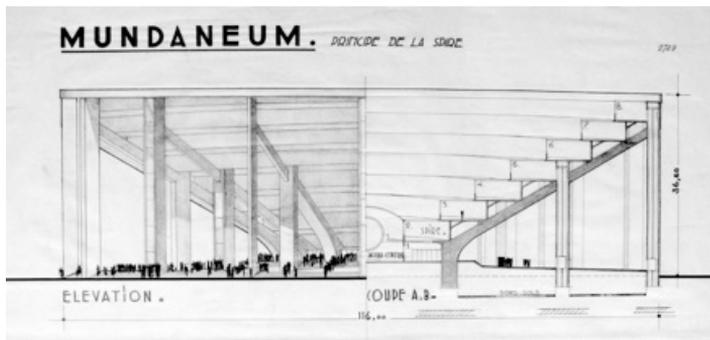


Figure 6. Stanislas Jasinski, elaboration of the floor plan and the sections of his 1941 design of the Mundaneum in the prospectus for the Universal Exhibition in Brussels in 1958 (1954)

## Conclusion

43. Joseph Masheck, "Karel Teige: Functionalist and Then Some," in *Art in America* (2001): 100-105, 128; Karel Teige, *The Minimum Dwelling* (Cambridge, Mass: MIT, 2002).

44. Peter Galison, "Constructing Modernism: The Cultural Location of Aufbau," in *Origins of Logical Empiricism*, ed. Ronald N. Giere and Alan W. Richardson (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1996); Verein Ernst Mach (ed.), *Wissenschaftliche Weltauffassung. Der wiener Kreis. Veröffentlichungen des vereines Ernst Mach* (Vienna: Artur Wolf Verlag, 1929).

In their design of the Mundaneum, Le Corbusier and the architects who had studied at the ISAD in La Cambre and who were a member of the Belgian CIAM group, gave form to and sympathised with Otlet's positivistic conception that can be retraced to Herbert Spencer and Auguste Comte. That conception of universal knowledge and how it should be internationally institutionalised included the idea that by means of international programmes of education introducing people to the spirit of internationalism, the world could be made more 'civilised' and, hence, more peaceful. While Le Corbusier and the members of the "Belgian Bauhaus" translated Otlet's hierarchical, evolutionary and metaphysical encyclopaedism with the figure of the spiralling pyramid, it was this pyramidism that was contested by constructivists as Karel Teige and El Lissitzky.<sup>43</sup> In the kindred view of Teige and El Lissitzsky, architecture was to be elementary and instrumental for the Marxist mission to improve life of the entire society, and to oppose any formalist system, evolutionary historicism or bourgeois metaphysics. A very similar belief in constructivism was shared by the Bauhaus where they Teige and Lissitzsky were invited to give lectures, as were the logical positivists of the Vienna Circle. As Peter Galison has shown, the members of the Bauhaus shared with the Vienna Circle a belief in constructivism based on the ground of empirical science, a rejection of both the past and all forms of metaphysics, and an understanding that *Sachlichkeit* was the necessary outcome of the new forces of production.<sup>44</sup> In this sense, the Mundaneum debate marks on more than one level a breakpoint and shift within the project of modernity between a formalist modernism and a scientific 'techno-modernism' that was mirrored in the emerging divisions of the new born organisation of CIAM.

