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**From the “soft media” to the concept
 legacy of Le Corbusier and his collaborators
 based on Jerzy Sołtan designs and teaching**

Abstract

The relevance of “soft media” – such as charcoal, soft crayons, and clay – is essential in order to reach the very essence of architecture, at least according to Le Corbusier. Along with artistic and visual research, using such techniques contributed to the poetics, meaning, and definition of his work. This article analyses the work and teaching of Polish modernist architect Jerzy Sołtan through the prism of Le Corbusier’s heritage and legacy and it examines how the use of specific tools and techniques could influence development of a design concept. Based on archival data and oral histories interviews, it explains the connection between Le Corbusier, his collaborators, and their own students, looking for the continuity of design approach in the first stages.

Keywords

Architectural sketch — architecture teaching — modern architecture — Le Corbusier — Jerzy Sołtan

«The initial creation moment of the project lies in our soul and in our mind as a fluid thought, an element that cannot be boxed at the beginning with sharper and rigid lines» – these are words on Jerzy Sołtan’s approach expressed by his design studio student from Harvard Graduate School of Design (Guarracino 2020). Within the larger context of the importance of hand drawn sketches for early design stage, this idea underlines the relevance of “soft media” – such as charcoal, soft crayons, and clay. Their relevance can be illustrated by Sołtan’s teaching and by his own work, which had been influenced by his employer in 1945-1949 and lifelong mentor, Le Corbusier. Jerzy Sołtan (1913-2005) was a Polish modernist architect who in addition to his own design work in Poland and in the United States, was committed to teaching architecture at the Fine Arts Academy in Warsaw and later at Harvard Graduate School of Design. His example shows how Le Corbusier’s *modus operandi* influenced his collaborators and how it could be passed onwards to new generations of architects.

The article is based on extensive archival research of designs, drawings, texts, and teaching-related documents illustrating Sołtan’s body of work, in addition to a series of oral history interviews with his students and colleagues from Poland and the United States, contributing to understanding of the role of a specific drawing technique in the creation of an architectural idea. After explaining Le Corbusier’s approach to drawing during the design process, the article concentrates on the role of these initial visual explorations in Sołtan’s own architectural work and practice. Further analysis on the application of these ideas in Sołtan’s teaching at Harvard and of

**Fig. 1**

Jerzy Sołtan, pencil sketch of a monument for 'Diomedes' competition for the end of the Cold War (1989)

the impact it had on the architecture students he taught enables to discuss the legacy of the “soft media” approach.

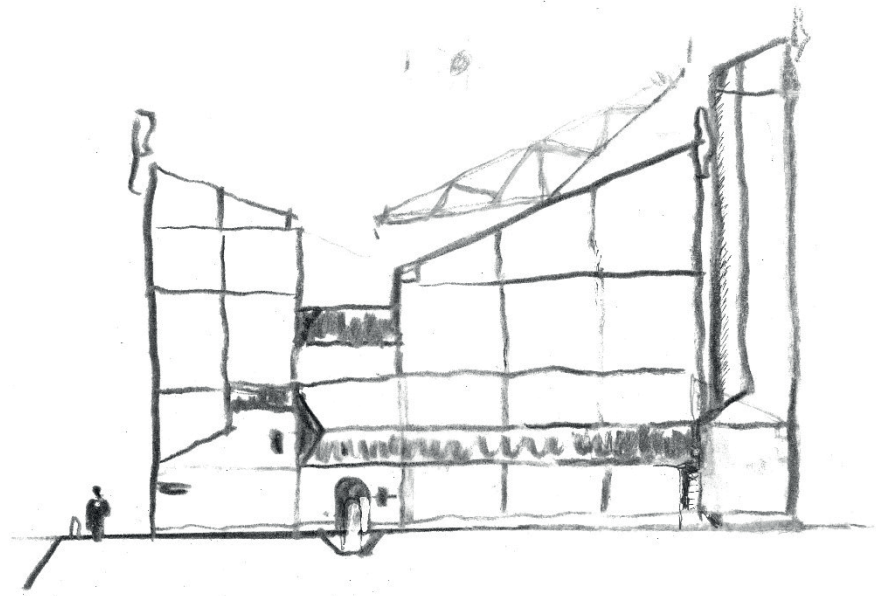
Art, sketches, and Le Corbusier

Thanks to Sołtan, the account of Le Corbusier's work and routine has been very clear, as he explains in the essay ‘Working with Le Corbusier’ (1987), written first in the 1980s and since published several times. He gives testimony of how Le Corbusier was communicating, and of how design work proceeded. He draws the image of Le Corbusier for whom architecture and painting were tightly connected, but also an image of Le Corbusier who wanted to use specific tools when working at the early stages on his designs. In Sołtan's account, the mornings were usually marked by Le Corbusier's absence who was working alone on art in his own apartment. These paintings, artwork, and rough architectural sketches, called by Sołtan «fine arts callisthenics», were vital aspects to the development of Le Corbusier's designs (1995, p. 10). According to Sołtan, «it was for him a period of concentration during which his imagination, catalysed by the activity of painting, could probe most deeply into his subconscious. It was probably then Le Corbusier produced his remarkably sensitive poetic metaphors and associations» (1995, p. 11). In this sense, Sołtan sees sketches and visual exploration as a vital element, not only in Le Corbusier's designs and projects, but also in his theories and ideas. The importance of sketching and painting lies exactly in the possibility of exploring what yet needs to be determined and discovered. It means to work with rough ideas, which only later would become clearer. It becomes evident in the account of Le Corbusier's sketching next to Sołtan, when the former was to comment on mechanical pencils and more technical drawing tools saying, «*il ne faut pas immortaliser des aneries*» – one should not immortalise the “assinine” (1995, pp. 21-22).

The “assinine” refers to the attempts, trials, and uncertainties of the early stages of a design, when the drawings should leave enough space for interpretation and should not limit the further possibilities of development. To «immortalise the assinine» would mean to yearn too early for a definite line that prevents to alter the design. Indeed, Le Corbusier's sketches are called by Sołtan as «more his digging into the subconscious, his guessing, than a finished proposal» (1995, p. 18). It is also important to underline that Le Corbusier wanted to apply these methods in the atelier too – which could be easily understood from the imperative tone he used when talking about drawing tools. Differently from many functionalist designers, inclined to use more technical tools, Le Corbusier wanted to follow his “pictorial thinking” in the atelier (1995, p. 20). Therefore, Sołtan and other collaborators were not only expected to decipher his drawings, but also to continue to work in a similar spirit. As a result, Sołtan's own design workshop and artistic research stand as a manifestation of how this approach could be shared by others.

From Le Corbusier to Sołtan's workshop

Starting from the period of imprisonment in a POW camp in Murnau during the Second World War, Sołtan had always had close contacts with artists. In the camp, thanks to the high number of intellectuals and artists amongst the prisoners, he became close with a number of Polish painters, with whom he collaborated later in the 1950s (Bulanda 1996). During this

**Fig. 2**

Jerzy Sołtan, pencil sketch of a church (1990s).

very same period, he started to paint much more, probably using art as a cure for the harsh reality of imprisonment (Sołtan 2019). That said, the importance of art and visual research for Le Corbusier was aligned with Sołtan's prior experiences and interests, which resulted not only in a close professional, but also intellectual relationship between mentor and mentee. Both contacts with artists and Sołtan's own painting did develop during his stay in Paris: he was taking painting lessons under Fernand Léger, and he entered the circle of artists who were meeting at Le Corbusier's apartment (Sołtan 1995, p. 51). Sołtan's own writings from the 1950s indicate that he was still researching new methods and forms in art, studying paintings of various artists. In addition, a vast archive of his own artworks at the Museum of the Fine Arts Academy in Warsaw testifies of a constant research in visual arts, in parallel to his professional work as an architect.

In addition, he was also often producing charcoal-made sketches, similar to Le Corbusier's. A number of those relate to theoretical studies of churches (fig. 2), which he was working on continuously throughout the years until the 1990s. Similar charcoal-made drawings were produced for other designs, especially at the conceptual stage for a number of designs in Poland and the United States, such as 'Warszawianka' sporting centre in Warsaw or Salem High School in Massachusetts. For example, in the drawings from Salem, he used charcoal in order to visualise shadows, materials, and to accentuate some aspects of the design (for example, brickwork) without establishing precise patterns (fig. 3). As Sołtan explained in his account from Le Corbusier's studio, the lack of precision of these drawings were enabling him to work on the project gradually, being able to interpret some graphical signs left by charcoal on paper in more ways than in case of thin and precise pencil-made lines. In relation to this approach, one of Sołtan's collaborators in America, Edward Lyons, manager at the office where Sołtan was the main designer, recalls, «he would always do sketches on tissue with charcoal; he would not pick up a pencil or a marker. He always wanted yellow too. You could not give him a piece of white paper» (2019). These words relate directly to the sketching practice that Sołtan inherited from Le Corbusier – both charcoal and yellowish tissue or butcher's paper were often used in the atelier in Paris. However, Sołtan's

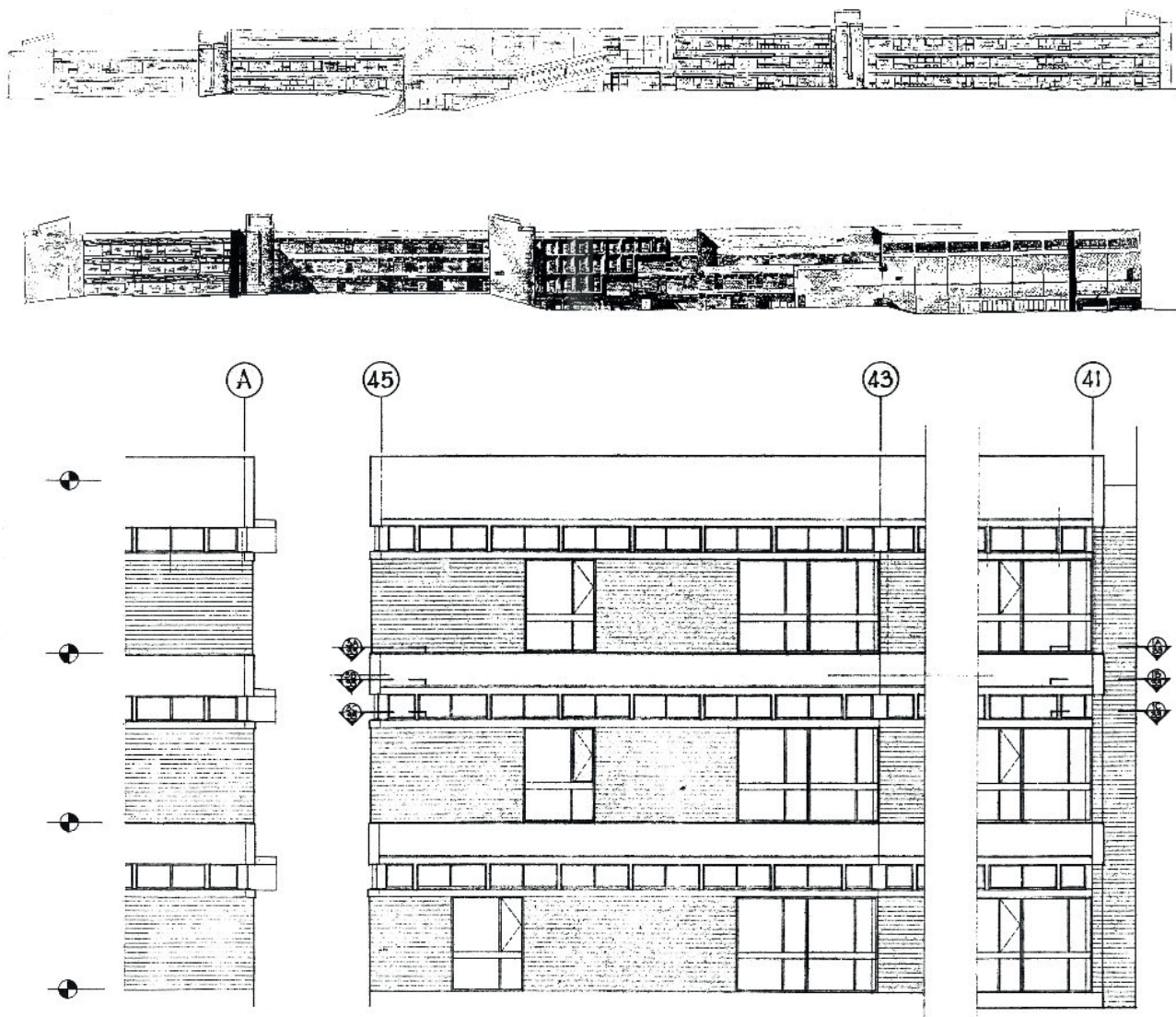


Fig. 3
Jerzy Sołtan, charcoal-made elevations of the Salem High School (1970-1976).

Fig. 4
Jerzy Sołtan, technical elevation drawing of the Salem High School (1970-1976).

approach was not limiting the use of drawing utensils to those preferred by Le Corbusier during the whole design process, but it was specific to the initial conceptual design, as later stages of development of these same projects normally did involve using more technical drawings (fig. 4).

Teaching Le Corbusier and “soft media”

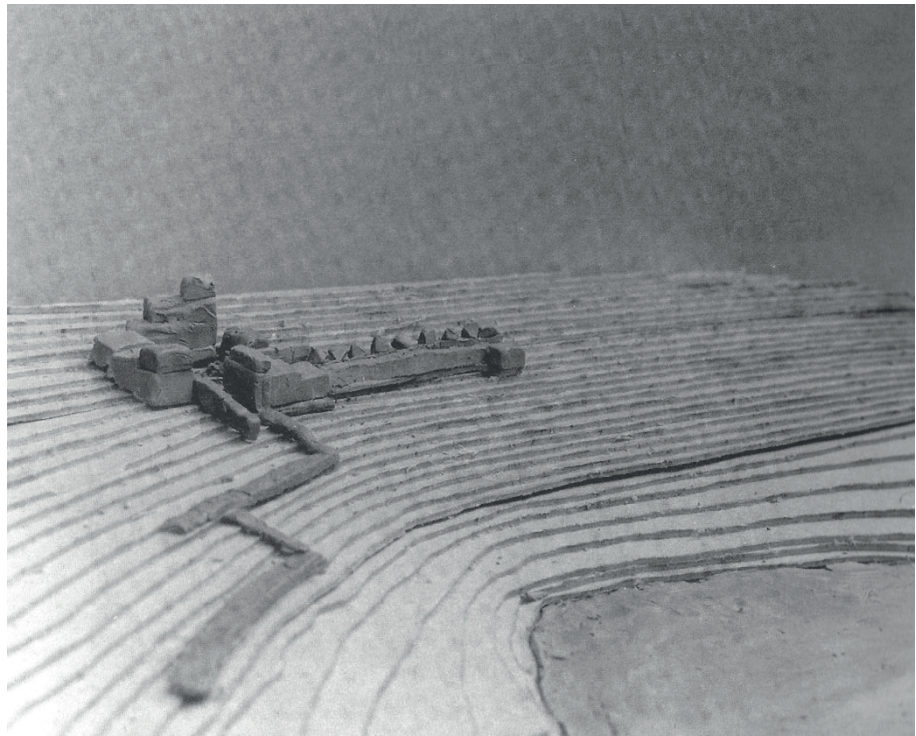
The influence of Le Corbusier was not although limited to Sołtan’s own design workshop: he did refer to the same approach and to the importance of visual research when he was teaching, and many amongst his students from Harvard still remember it from the design studios. Some claim that their interest in art and artistic work were nourished by Sołtan’s influence at the school (Holtz 2019). Indeed, he was much interested in his students’ artistic production – as is shown in his letter to his former student at Harvard, Michael Graves, where he states, «I personally want to compliment you particularly warmly in relation to your paintings» (1974). His contact and correspondence with former student and artist Jacek Damięcki on his work equally point to the importance of visual research for the development of an architect’s mind according to him (2019). These contacts suggest therefore the existence of a thread of continuity of artistic method, coming from Le Corbusier, channelled through Sołtan and his teaching, and then passed on to the latter’s students.

In general, these exchanges illustrate how much Sołtan's vision of architecture was drawings-driven and it implies how much the design process relied on drawing, painting, and graphical exploration. In his design studios at Harvard, specific drawings would become key features to students' projects. While some students remember working with plans, for others the focus was put on sections: the choice of drawings could have been then tailored to the specific needs of a given design or a given student (Davis 2021, Lombard 2020, Wattenberg 2020). However, regardless of the focus on a specific type of drawings, artistic expression was more important. Visual research was in fact helpful in defining the *parti* (a small drawing, which in the 1970s was a common reference in the design process at Harvard) and in defining the main concept idea coming from different layers of single problems. In addition, in theoretical modules at Harvard, Sołtan was both illustrating to the students Le Corbusier's daily routine and underlining the importance of painting for Corbusian architecture, reinforcing thus his suggestions for more artistically skilled students. «I want them really to know, to be able (if they wish) to apply [Le Corbusier's design method]», he mentioned in a note from his theoretical seminar.

Along with illustrating the importance of the visual research in the design process, Sołtan tried to propose the students to use similar drawing techniques while designing. The suggestion to use “soft media” – soft pencils, charcoal, clay – completed Sołtan's contribution to extending Le Corbusier's influence on his students. They were aimed to facilitate exploration of ideas and leaving the possibility for the imagination to complete a more generic drawing. The words «don't be so painfully precise», as he told one of his students, illustrate well this approach (Holtz 2019). According to Sołtan, only afterwards, after having worked with those more malleable techniques, more practical questions related to functionality, technology, and construction appeared, and more detailed drawings were of use. His former student and architect Karl Fender recalls his words from the first studio day (2020):

I want you all [...] to buy clay, I want you to buy charcoal, and I want you to buy butcher's paper [...]. We are going to explore ideas through these mediums, because you are going to get filthy hands, and you are going to have filthy drawings and rough lumps of clay to explore your thinking – and this will focus you on the essence.....you will be confronting the essence of the search for a truthful architecture. With these tools, you will not fall in love with your handicraft. You will have models that honestly and basically test your options and your explorations.

Through getting hands dirty, through drawing these undefined lines, there was more space left for exploring the essentials, the basics of architecture. In some assignments, he suggested the students to submit freehand drawings, and some students recall that their tendency to draw in a less precise manner, using charcoal or very soft crayons (fig. 5), was due to Sołtan's influence (Holtz 2019). As in his accounts from Paris, imprecise drawing during the first phase of design was a tool to find the ideas and to understand the poetics underlying the design. It was to detach the students from drawing beautifully something that was not enough cross-examined, making a direct connection between the design work, the concept (the *parti*), and critical thinking and questioning – referred by some as a constant element of Sołtan's reviews and discussions (Wesley 2006). Another student and architect Christopher Benninger explains this adding (2021), «his

**Fig. 5**

Thomas Holtz, clay model of a 'space of spiritual retreat' design for Jerzy Soltan's studio (1976).

technique was to ask the student a question that needed analysis to answer, and often it would be that there was no possible answer. That silence was the conclusion». Along with the drawings, constant questioning was then another tool, which helped the students to work at the core of their design decisions and push their ideas further.

Legacy: between Soltan and Le Corbusier

Soltan's teaching was widely recognised by his students. «I have won the lottery», commented David Parsons referring to him having Soltan as thesis advisor (2016, p. 54). Amongst direct testimonies from his students, a number of them refer to passion, help, and intensity in teaching, and only a couple remember him as less sympathetic. In 2002, twenty-three years after his retirement from the professorship at Harvard, Soltan was awarded with the Topaz Medallion, the highest recognition the American Institute of Architects and the Association Collegiate of Architecture Schools can give to an architecture educator. Although the award came years after he was teaching at Harvard, the backing was impressive, including support letters from Charles Gwathmey and Michael Graves, from Kenneth Frampton, and from architecture professors and deans from Harvard, MIT, and Berkeley. They all pointed to his contribution to architectural education by teaching modernism: «Jerzy Soltan has brought to Harvard, and to other schools and forums, a sense that Le Corbusier, his own mentor and friend, has been alive for an extra generation» (Chermayeff 1989). It would have not been possible to keep Le Corbusier alive without the importance of visual art, without charcoal, and without getting hands dirty. As to whether his approach is still of value, one can refer again to Soltan's former students, who admit to use their experience of being taught by him when teaching and designing themselves, even nowadays.

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