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Architecture in Translation: Le Corbusier's influence in Australia

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Abstract: *While there is an abundance of commentary and criticism on Le Corbusier's effect upon architecture and planning globally – in Europe, Northern Africa, the Americas and the Indian sub-continent – there is very little dealing with other contexts such as Australia. The paper will offer a first appraisal of Le Corbusier's relationship with Australia, providing example of the significant international reach of his ideas to places he was never to set foot. It draws attention to Le Corbusier's contacts with architects who practiced in Australia and little known instances of his connections - his drawing of the City of Adelaide plan (1950) and his commission for art at Jorn Utzon's Sydney Opera House (1958). The paper also considers the ways that Le Corbusier's work underwent translation into Australian architecture and urbanism in the mid to late 20th century through the influence his work exerted on others, identifying further possibilities for research on the topic.*

Keywords: *Le Corbusier; post-war architecture; international modernism; Australian architecture, 20th century architecture.*

1. Introduction

While there is an abundance of commentary and criticism on Le Corbusier's effect upon architecture and planning globally – in Europe, Northern Africa, the Americas and the Indian sub-continent – there is very little dealing with other contexts such as Australia. Key survey texts on the history of Australian architecture such as J.M. Freeland's *Architecture in Australia* (1968) and Donald Leslie Johnson's *Australian architecture 1901-51: Sources of Modernism* (1980) refer only in passing to Le Corbusier's work as formal inspiration to Australian architects of the mid-20th century, offering little in the way of critical commentary on his influence.¹ Among them, Australia's most celebrated modernist architect Harry Seidler, whose work is full of references to Le Corbusier that have never been closely examined.

Le Corbusier's links to, and influence in, Australia came about in the dissemination of the architect's works through his publications and through professional journals and magazines; via the travels of Australian architects overseas who witnessed Le Corbusier's work at first hand; through direct contact by architects who had met Le Corbusier or had worked in his atelier and subsequently practiced in Australia and also his own personal contacts with architects and individuals.

The paper will offer a first appraisal of Le Corbusier's relationship with Australia, providing example of the significant international reach of his ideas to places he was never to set foot. It will consider the ways that Le Corbusier's work underwent translation into Australian architecture and urbanism in the mid to late 20th century, evidencing its influence in advancing concepts of modernity.

¹ J. M. Freeland, *Architecture in Australia: a history* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1972) and Donald Leslie Johnson, *Australian architecture, 1950-51: sources of modernism* (Forest Grove: Sydney University Press, 1980).

2. Influence through other architects

Le Corbusier's architecture and ideas would have impact in Australia through the work of architect's committed to the modernist project he articulated. Chief among them was the celebrated Austrian-born architect Harry Seidler, who attended the Harvard School of Design under Walter Gropius in 1945-46. Wedded to a modernism through his university training, Seidler worked briefly with Marcel Breuer and Oscar Neimeyer before arriving in Sydney in 1948 to design a house for his parents. By his own account Seidler saw modern architecture as a process of form giving pioneered by 'master' architects such as Wright, Gropius, Le Corbusier and Mies van der Rohe. While Gropius provided an intellectual mentor for Seidler it was Le Corbusier's work that provided the strongest formal cues. Seidler held copies of Le Corbusier's serial architectural monographs, the *Oeuvre Complète*, in his Sydney studio from his first arrival in Australia, which he had brought with him from New York.² The series also provided Seidler with a model for his 1954 monograph *Houses, Interiors and Projects* and his later collection, *Harry Seidler 1955/63* in terms of both presentation and layout.³

Seidler's reception of the work of Le Corbusier can be traced to the period in which he worked with Marcel Breuer. While in Breuer's office in 1947 Seidler produced a sketch design for a house with an associate, Roland Thompson, which was subsequently published in the American journal *Arts and Architecture* in January 1948.⁴ This project has been acknowledged as substantially the Rose Seidler House, the architect's first Australian work realised the same year – a building heralding the arrival of modernism in the public imagination.⁵ Yet both of these plans are based on Le Corbusier's famous Villa Savoye, pointing directly to Seidler's chief source. An overlay comparison shows that the geometry and layout of the Villa Savoye and the Rose Seidler House are very closely related, indicating that Seidler took his source very seriously, seeking to understand Le Corbusier's proportioning systems from his own careful analysis of the villa's plan such that he could then apply it to his own architecture.

² Ann Stephen, Philip Goad and Andrew McNamara (eds) *Modern times: the untold story of modernism in Australia* (Carlton, Vic. : Miegunyah Press, 2008), p. 118.

³ Le Corbusier, *Oeuvre Complète Vols 1-4* (London: Thames & Hudson, 1964), Harry Seidler, *Houses, Interiors and Projects*, (Sydney: Associated General Publications, 1954).

⁴ Harry Seidler and Roland Thompson, 'Preview project', *Arts and architecture*, 65, (Jan 1948), 32-33.

⁵ Kenneth Frampton & Philip Drew *Harry Seidler*, 18.



1. Proportional comparison of Villa Savoye and Rose Seidler House plans. [Drawing by I-wen Kuo]

In two projects designed in 1957 Seidler brings a similar analytical method to his appropriation of works by Le Corbusier, specifically from the *Oeuvre Complète 1946-1952*. For the House in Clifton Gardens (1957) Seidler draws directly upon the form, massing and proportions of Le Corbusier's housing at La Sainte-Baume project (1948) with its distinctive shallow vaulted profile.⁶ At a larger scale but seemingly as directly, Seidler draws upon the urban organisation, massing and proportions of Le Corbusier's mid-rise slab blocks for the concourse of Strasbourg project (1951) for his McMahon's Point Development Scheme at North Sydney (1957).⁷

Seidler undertook extensive international tours to witness modernist architecture at first hand and it is clear that visits to the buildings of Le Corbusier were a high priority.⁸ In 1955 Seidler met with Le Corbusier at Chandigarh and was shown through the Secretariat building (1953).⁹ While in Europe on the same tour Seidler also visited Le Corbusier's then recently completed Chapel at Ronchamp (1950-1955). In 1963 Seidler visited Le Corbusier's Carpenter Centre (1961-1964).¹⁰ This tour also involved a return trip to India with a visit to meet architect B. V. Doshi in Ahmedabad, who had worked with Le Corbusier, and to see Le Corbusier's works there: Shodan House (1951), the Mill owners' Association Building (1954), and the Sarabhai House (1955). Seidler's work would feature characteristic aspects of Le Corbusier's post war architecture such as the adoption of brise-soleil and beton brut finishes in projects including Seidler's own house at Killara, Sydney (1966-67), the Australian Embassy in Paris (1973-77) and the Milsons Point Offices and Apartments (1973-94).

Other architects deserving of attention in understanding Le Corbusier's influence include those that had worked in his atelier and subsequently practiced in Australia. They include the British-born architect and planner Gordon Stephenson, an intern in Le Corbusier's Paris atelier in 1930-32, who arrived in Perth in 1953 and was later Foundation Professor of Architecture at The University of Western Australia, 1960-1972 and Balwant Singh

⁶ Seidler *Seidler 1955/63*, 64-67; Le Corbusier, *Oeuvre Complète 1946-1952* (Zurich: Girsberger, 1955), 34-35.

⁷ Seidler *Seidler 1955/63*, 194-199; Le Corbusier, *Oeuvre Complète 1946-1952*, 112-113.

⁸ Alice Spigelman, *Harry Seidler: Almost full circle* (Sydney: Brandl & Schlesinger, 2001), 199.

⁹ Spigelman *Harry Seidler*, 201.

¹⁰ Letter dated October 31, 1963. NSW Library, Special Collections.

Saini who worked in Le Corbusier's Chandigarh office in the 1950s, becoming Professor of Architecture at The University of Queensland in 1970. Gordon Stephenson, and also Walter Bunning in Sydney, became promoters of the architect's ideas attempting to translate his urban strategies into the national context. Both would have a significant impact on town planning in Australia in the post-war era. Bunning's book on new forms of planning *Homes in the Sun* (1945)¹¹ and Stephenson's Metropolitan Plan for Perth as well as his contribution to planning for the post-war urban expansion of Canberra, are indicative of the diverse ways in which Le Corbusier's ideas suffused not simply architecture but also town planning practice and shaped the developing nation's approach to urban form.

3. Exhibition of Le Corbusier's art

On two occasions in the 1950s, artworks by Le Corbusier travelled to Australia to be shown in public exhibitions of modern European art. Three of Le Corbusier's paintings *Le Femme au livre* (Woman with a Book, 1935), *Les deux sœurs* (The Two Sisters, 1933-47), and *Deux mains et pomme d'or* (Two Hands and a Golden Apple, 1948) were included in the travelling show "French Painting Today: Contemporary painters of the School of Paris," which toured every State Gallery in Australia between January and September 1953.¹² His tapestry work *L'Ennui régnait au dehors* (Boredom Prevailed Outside, 1954) also appeared in "Contemporary French Tapestry," shown at the Art Gallery of New South Wales (Sydney) in March and April of 1956.¹³ Both exhibitions were overseen by initiatives of the Association Française d'Action Artistique (AFAA, French Association for Artistic Action), an art society first founded under the auspices of the French Ministère des Affaires étrangères (Ministry of Foreign Affairs) and the Ministère de l'Éducation (Ministry of Education) in 1923.¹⁴

This showing of Le Corbusier's art may have been small but it was contemporaneous with other exhibitions of Le Corbusier's work – encompassing a span from painting to urbanism – in Europe and North America, literally appearing "at first hand" in Australia as part of a broadly constituted international setting. In Australia, these works clearly had a limited and mixed reception, yet their presence, and the reaction of local audiences to it, mirrored popular and critical attitudes on art and architecture prevalent at the time. As part of the local critical reception of "French Painting Today" Le Corbusier's work received a most direct rebuke. The art critic of Sydney's *Daily Telegraph*, observing the exhibition's mix of art, singles out the work of Le Corbusier, claimed that the architect's art failed to meet the standard set by the exhibition overall.¹⁵ That Le Corbusier's work is judged in Australia to be below that of the art of its day accords with judgements of the architect's painting from within cultural circles in Europe at that time but the silence with which the local architecture community greeted Le Corbusier's work is perhaps more surprising.

¹¹ Walter Bunning, *Homes in the sun: the past, present and future of Australian housing* (Sydney: Nesbit, 1945).

¹² Le Corbusier (1887-1965), *Le Femme au livre* (Woman with a Book, 1935), oil on canvas, 130 x 89 cm, private collection; *Les deux sœurs* (The Two Sisters, 1933-47), oil on canvas, 100 x 81 cm, private collection; *Deux mains et pomme d'or* (Two Hands and a Golden Apple, 1948), oil on board, 100 x 81 cm, private collection.

¹³ Le Corbusier (1887-1965), *L'Ennui régnait au dehors* (Boredom Prevailed Outside, 1954), tapestry work, 200 x 256 cm, Mobilier National.

¹⁴ For further discussion see Antony Moulis, "An Active Silence: Le Corbusier's Art in Australia," *Fabrications – Journal of the Society of Architectural Historians, Australia and New Zealand*, 17:1, June 2007, 6-17.

¹⁵ "French Art in Sydney," *Daily Telegraph* (Sydney), February 27, 1953.

When the prominent Australian architect and critic Robin Boyd was asked by the Melbourne *Herald* for his opinion of the exhibition he omitted to mention or comment on the presence of the work of Le Corbusier.¹⁶ Elsewhere, leading architectural journals such as *Architecture in Australia*, *Art and Architecture* and *Cross-section* failed to note the exhibition at all or the appearance of Le Corbusier's work therein. The reason that Le Corbusier's art received such a cool reception in Australia may have been to do with local debates on the artistic or technological basis of architecture. The perceived failure of functionalism led some to suggest that architecture could achieve renewal through the expression of human and artistic values. Le Corbusier, through his own art and architecture, became an obvious champion. In Australia, however, influential architects such as Boyd were suspicious of the new humanist agenda, preferring to argue that the rational functionalism evidenced in Le Corbusier's pre-war work remained key to the modernist project.¹⁷

4. Le Corbusier's Adelaide plan

In 1950 Le Corbusier made a diagrammatic plan of the City of Adelaide, South Australia, with the assistance of Dr Hugh C. Trumble, a professor of agronomy from the University of Adelaide on secondment to the Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations who was traveling through South America.¹⁸ The drawing, dated 17 September 1950, was made in Bogotá, Colombia, most likely at the Hotel Continental, where the architect stayed while working on his commission for an urban plan for the city.¹⁹ Clearly marked 'Adelaide, Australia' the drawing is made up of several sections. In the central section there is a simple sketch plan of the southern portion of the city with its grid shown indicatively including its squares. There is a further set of rectangles drawn outside on the top edge of the grid indicating generically the civic buildings along North Terrace. Forming a rough circle around the grid of South Adelaide is a series of dash marks, indicative of the belt of parklands that encircle the city.

A model of British colonial town planning, Adelaide was organized out of theories of systematic development proposed by the politician Edward Gibbon Wakefield in England in the 1830s. Le Corbusier's interest in the city's plan, as it existed in 1950, can be seen in parallel with his then current thinking about architecture and urbanism. It is on his return home from this South American trip that Le Corbusier receives a letter from the Indian Embassy in Paris inviting him to participate in the design of the city of Chandigarh, the modern capital of the Punjab.²⁰ This commission, that he later accepts, becomes the most significant of his career. Though the sequence of events that lead to Le Corbusier's drawing of Adelaide are chance events in relation to the Chandigarh commission, the drawing itself provides evidence of knowledge acquired by Le Corbusier that makes a comparison of the two plans potentially significant.²¹

The two plans (as sketches) have obvious similarities in terms of their layout. In both instances the city is drawn as a self-contained rectilinear grid with the major civic buildings located outside it, along an edge of the grid.

¹⁶ "French Art called vital, courageous," *Herald* (Melbourne), June 8, 1953.

¹⁷ R. G. Parker, et al., "A Three Sided Debate: Are we at the Beginning, Peak, or End of an Architectural Era?" in *Modernism & Australia*, eds. Stephen, McNamara & Goad, 854-72.

¹⁸ FLC II16177

¹⁹ A letter sent by Le Corbusier, dated 19 September, 1950, is written on stationery of the Hotel Continental, Bogota, Colombia, FLC R11282.

²⁰ Letter dated 30 September, 1950, FLC P21112.

²¹ For discussion of an earlier version of this research of Le Corbusier's Adelaide plan and its value as evidence see Andrew Leach, *What is Architectural History?* (Cambridge, Polity Press, 2010), p. 89-91.

Both plans feature a city encircled by parks and green space, ‘never to be built upon,’ and each grid is drawn in relation to a landscape ‘backdrop’ – the hills or mountains against which it is viewed.

Beyond these similarities, the Adelaide plan drawing also mirrors Le Corbusier’s ideology on urbanism. Adelaide’s discrete zoning of dwelling, work, transportation and recreation (marked in the drawing) confirms broadly held ideological beliefs about modern urbanism developed by the architect through the CIAM organization, yet here those ideals of planning are represented through the example of a realised contemporary city. Le Corbusier’s overtly rhetorical approach to design would not have admitted the plan of Adelaide – a 19th century British colonial city founded in southern Australia – as a source or influence for the master plan of Chandigarh yet this drawing provides compelling evidence of a covert connection between the two.²²

5. The Sydney Opera House Art commission

One of the most intriguing aspects of Le Corbusier’s contact with Australia is Jorn Utzon’s 1958 commissioning of the architect for tapestries and other artwork for the interiors of the Sydney Opera House.²³ Between 1958 and 1960 Le Corbusier worked actively on the commission producing a 6.5-square-metre wool tapestry, *Les Dés Sont Jetés* (*The Dice Are Cast*) and five small enamel works.

Le Corbusier’s work began in earnest on June 25, 1959 when he met with Le Corbusier at his home and studio in Paris. During the meeting Le Corbusier made a rough sectional drawing over one of Utzon’s drawings indicating where the artworks might be placed in the completed Opera House – a set of enamels to go on a wall of the ground floor corridor and the tapestry to go in the harbour side foyer on the same level.²⁴ At a second meeting on November 1, 1959, details of the production and commission are settled between the two.

²² For more recent discussion see Antony Moulis, “A modern exemplar: Le Corbusier’s Adelaide drawing, urbanism and the Chandigarh plan,” *Journal of Architecture*, 17/6 (2012), 871-887.

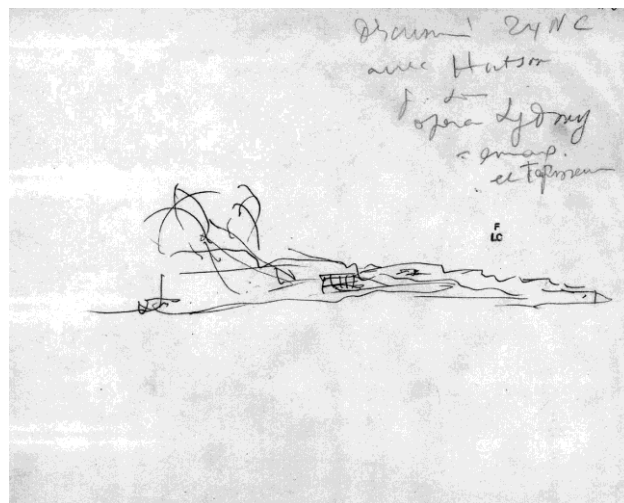
²³ For earlier discussion see Antony Moulis, “A night at the Opera,” *AA Files*, 64 (Spring 2012), 108-111.

²⁴ FLC A3/18/179



2. Le Corbusier, *Les Dés Sont Jetés (The Dice Are Cast)*, 1960 ©FLC-ADAGP

The tapestry, which arrived in Denmark in 1960, contains figurative elements drawn from materials sent to Le Corbusier by Utzon – a copy of his original competition drawings for the Opera House as well as and the 1958 Design Report known as ‘The Red Book’, which contained developed sketch plans and photographs of preliminary models. The elements Le Corbusier incorporated into the tapestry’s composition include a tracing of one of Utzon’s models for the famous shells and an outline of the original site plan that included the footprint of the tram depot with its distinctive round-ended plan form, which previously occupied the site. The elements are gathered together with other figures using a collage technique that brings a diversity of elements into relation with one another while obscuring their particular origin in much the same way the architect drew on images of objects – stones and driftwood – converting them into material for his abstract compositions in painting.



3. Le Corbusier, *Sketch of Sydney Opera House*, 1959. FLC R3/5/370 ©FLC-ADAGP

One of the most extraordinary images in Le Corbusier's preparatory drawings for the Sydney commission is his own representation of the Opera House pictured in its setting on Bennelong Point.²⁵ Drawn as a sketch elevation from the harbour, the image is likely to have been based on the initial Opera House drawings sent by Utzon. It represents a rare moment in Le Corbusier's career in which he privately acknowledges his respect for the work of a fellow architect. The sketch and Le Corbusier's careful approach to the Utzon commission evidences a surprisingly close collaboration between two of the great 20th century architects – one that is until now little studied or known.

After Le Corbusier's death in 1965 and Utzon's resignation from the Opera House project in 1966 the plan to bring the work to Australia fell into obscurity. However, in June, 2015, on the basis of the author's research, the Sydney Opera House Trust purchased the tapestry at auction in Denmark, after it had been held by the Utzon family for over 50 years. The arrival of the work for permanent display in the building will provide testimony to Utzon's original vision for the building's interiors and, at the same time, an entirely unique example of Le Corbusier's *synthèse des arts* – one realised in surprising moment of collaboration with a fellow architect rather than exclusively in the architect's own terms.²⁶

6. Conclusion

While the significance of Le Corbusier to the history and theory of 20th modern architecture and urban planning, and their worldwide impact, is well known his connections to Australia have previously been assumed to be non-existent or indirect at most. Yet there is an account to be made of Le Corbusier's contacts and influence that could add appreciably to the history of modern architecture and urbanism in Australia and provide fresh perspectives to the body of knowledge on Le Corbusier. The dispersed and fragmentary episodes briefly described in this paper touch on significant themes in the architect's post war work – his beliefs regarding modern urbanism, his approach to art practice in relation to architecture, and his performance in collaborating with fellow architects (an aspect of his career that remains little examined). In each case Le Corbusier's contacts with Australia offer opportunities to understand, in microcosm, larger questions and issues. In this sense Le Corbusier's encounters with Australia reveal a two-way exchange, showing the impact of his ideas and projects on Australian-based architects while also revealing counter-influences on Le Corbusier in his post-war career. Despite the fact that the architect never set foot on the island-continent there is more to know of his influence there.

7. Acknowledgements

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²⁵ FLC R3/5/370

²⁶ Rick Feneley, "Sydney Opera House buys Le Corbusier tapestry 57 years after Joern Utzon commissioned it," *The Sydney Morning Herald*, June 13, 2015. <http://www.smh.com.au/national/sydney-opera-house-buys-le-corbusier-tapestry-57-years-after-joern-utzon-commissioned-it-20150612-ghmgcw.html>

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