

EXHIBITION TRACES EVOLUTION OF REMARKABLE CHURCH BY LE CORBUSIER

OHIO STATE ARCHITECTURE PROFESSOR INVOLVED IN THE DESIGN NEARLY 50 YEARS AGO—AND IN THE LONG-DELAYED COMPLETION

SYMPOSIUM ON THE CHURCH TO BE HELD JANUARY 26

Columbus, OH—The Wexner Center presents an exhibition this winter focusing on a remarkable church in France designed by Le Corbusier in the early 1960s, but only now celebrating its completion. Le Corbusier embarked upon the church in the French town of Firminy with the help of his then-young associate José Oubrierie, now a professor at The Ohio State University's Knowlton School of Architecture. The cornerstone was not laid for the church, called Eglise Saint-Pierre, until 1970, by which time Corbusier had died. Due to interruptions in the flow of money, materials, and labor, the project ground to a halt—until Oubrierie revived interest in (and support for) completion of the church nearly four decades later.



Eglise Saint-Pierre
Photo: Luis Burriel Bielza,
2006

The conclusion of this epic architectural achievement will be celebrated with a vivid exhibition at the Wexner Center: ***Architecture Interruptus***. The show, on view **January 26–April 15, 2007**, features recent drawings and photographs juxtaposed against original plans, sketches, and early photographs of the partial “ruins” that stood on the site for many years. **A new large-scale model** of the completed church has been commissioned for the exhibition, allowing viewers to better understand the soaring space within the building. The show also includes video documentation.

Notes Wexner Center Director Sherri Geldin, “This exhibition not only celebrates the posthumous completion of a major building by legendary architect Le Corbusier, but also reveals the significant role played by José Oubrierie in its design evolution over four decades. As such, it raises provocative questions about the nature of architectural authorship, while highlighting Oubrierie’s crucial innovations to the original scheme.”

An illustrated **catalogue** will accompany the show, with essays by exhibition curator Megan Cavanaugh Novak of the Wexner Center and noted architectural theorist and critic Jeffrey Kipnis, as well as reprinted essays by Oubrierie and architecture scholar Anthony Eardley. The exhibition and publication will provide an in-depth look at the 50-year saga of the Eglise Saint-Pierre in Firminy, as well as an excellent teaching resource for architecture and design students. A daylong **symposium** exploring the church’s place in history and in contemporary architecture will be held

January 26, and will feature such architects, architectural historians, and critics as Stanislaus Von Moos (of Zurich University), Scott Cohen (of Harvard), Barry Bergdoll (of Columbia University), Wolf D. Prix (of Coop Himmelb(l)au in Vienna), Kenneth Frampton (Columbia University), Aaron Betsky (director of the Cincinnati Art Museum and former director of Netherlands Architecture Institute), and Aron Vinegar and Jeffrey Kipnis (of Ohio State's Knowlton School).

The **opening celebration** for the show is **January 25**, 5:30–8:30 pm.

MORE ABOUT THE HISTORY

The project was originally commissioned during the formative postwar period when the mayor of Firminy, Eugène Claudius-Petit, developed an ambitious plan to turn his mining town into Firminy-Vert, a lush "garden city" where citizens could live amongst clean air, open gardens, and well-planned civic spaces. He had little trouble engaging the help of his friend Le Corbusier, who by that time was a celebrated architect known for many provocative and often controversial theories on urban revitalization and architecture. In fact, Le Corbusier was engaged to design an unprecedented ensemble of projects for Firminy, including an apartment building, a civic center composed of a cultural center and stadium, and, eventually, the church of Saint-Pierre.

Although Le Corbusier's death in 1965 preceded the completion of much of his vision for Firminy, it was only the church that faced so monumental a struggle to reach fruition. In fact, construction on the church at Firminy did not begin until 1970, and nine years later, the project was abandoned entirely. Only the hulking remnants of the lower two administration levels and an uneven portion of the sanctuary walls above had been completed when money ran out and construction ceased. It was declared an historic monument in 1996, however, and Oubrierie never lost sight of his ambition to finish the project. By 2001 (with the backing of a newly elected mayor), he had enlisted sufficient local and national support to resume construction on the project with a dedicated team of architects and builders.

THE ARCHITECTURE

The Eglise Saint-Pierre is quintessentially Corbusian, showcasing the architect's interest in discrete platonic geometries as well as the complexities they can produce when united. The cavernous sanctuary is wrapped by a distinctly asymmetrical cone, formed by the metamorphosis of the square base into a quasi-circular top, and calling for a leap of geometry that would have been much more difficult to execute in the pre-computer age. The vaulting space of the church is illuminated by three of Corbusier's signature "light cannons" puncturing the concrete wall, as well as a constellation of tiny windows behind the altar. The square base of the church was originally

intended to house the functional rooms, but will now be adapted to serve as a small museum. Clear comparisons can be drawn between the church at Firminy and Le Corbusier's two iconic churches, Notre Dame du Haut and the chapel at La Tourette, both completed during his lifetime. At the same time, the design evidences clearly the hand of Oubrierie, as demonstrated by linkages to such projects as Oubrierie's Miller House in Lexington, Kentucky. Thus, the completion of the "last" building by Le Corbusier at the beginning of the 21st century not only brings his work to the forefront of architectural thought once again, it also forces confrontation with issues of authorship and authenticity that are not easily resolved. And while precise notions of authorship in an atelier-type practice are often elusive, in this instance they loom larger still. Oubrierie's role—first as apprentice and protégé, then as collaborator, and finally as both chief designer and "keeper of the flame"—has clearly evolved and grown significantly over time. So, too, has the impetus for the project morphed; no longer is it driven by a post-war sensibility to rebuild and refresh, but rather by a desire to pay tribute to a once-radical architectural practice by bringing its legacy to historic completion.

EXHIBITION SUPPORT

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Accommodations are provided by **The Blackwell Inn.**

VISITOR INFORMATION

THE EXHIBITION: *Architecture Interruptus* traces the evolution and completion of a remarkable church in France through photographs, drawings, video, and a model.

DATES: January 26–April 15, 2007. Also on view: *Sadie Benning: Suspended Animation* and *Glenn Ligon: Some Changes*. Opening celebration January 25, 5:30–8:30 pm.

SYMPOSIUM: January 26, 10 am–5 pm

LOCATION: Wexner Center for the Arts, 1871 North High Street at 15th Avenue.

GALLERY HOURS: Tuesday–Wednesday and Sunday 11 am–6 pm; and Thursday–Saturday 11 am–8 pm. The galleries are closed on Mondays.

ADMISSION: Free.

PARKING: Ohio Union Garage, just south of the Wexner Center on High Street.

PUBLIC INFORMATION: wexarts.org/ex or 614 292-3535.

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