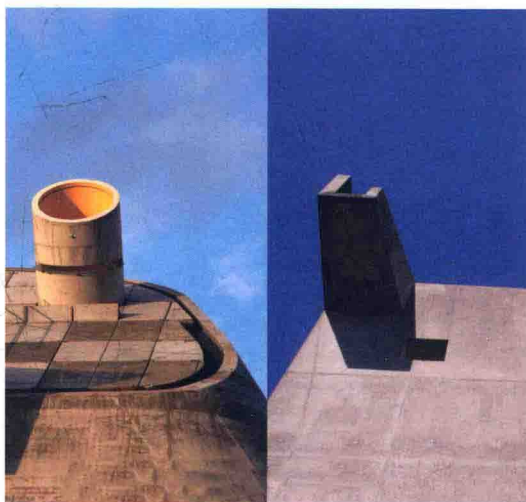


**ARCHITECTURE
WITH AND WITHOUT
LE CORBUSIER**

JOSÉ OUBRERIE ARCHITECTE



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THIS BOOK IS MADE POSSIBLE THROUGH THE
GENEROUS SUPPORT OF ELISE JAFFE + JEFFREY BROWN

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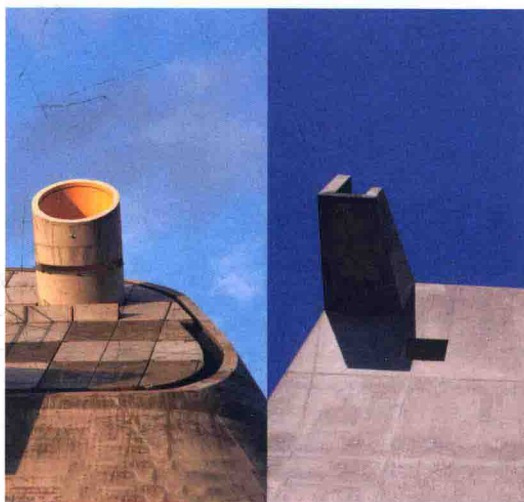
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TO LE CORBUSIER AND GUILLERMO JULLIAN DE LA FUENTE. J-O



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An Exhibition at the Bernard and Anne Spitzer
School of Architecture City College of New York

edited by Luis Burriel Bielza and Oscar Riera Ojeda
foreword by George Ranalli
introduction by Kenneth Frampton
texts by José Oubrierie, Paul Penney and Jeffrey Kipnis



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THE ARCHITECT'S APPRENTICE

FOREWORD BY GEORGE RANALLI

Recently, after introducing Jose Oubrierie's lecture at the school, I sat in the darkness of the auditorium watching the images come across the screen. The first pair shocked me: a study model of the Firminy Church and a photo of Le Corbusier in his studio with a very young Oubrierie at his side. At that moment I was struck by the enormity of what I was witnessing. Jose Oubrierie had worked with Le Corbusier! One of the greatest architects of the twentieth century, Le Corbusier produced a powerful body of work and Firminy was one of a remarkable series of religious buildings that had produced a singular, mystical, emotionally striking space.

Oubrierie was one of the last of the apprentices to work for Le Corbusier and his responsibility was to develop the sketch design that Le Corbusier had dashed off for Firminy. As in every architect's office, the role of the assistant is essential to the formation and development of the project. It is not simply a matter of redrawing the design more definitively but rather an elaboration of the implications of the original sketch. Since Le Corbusier spent much of the day painting, Oubrierie and the other assistants were left to interpret and redefine the design by infusing it with their own ideas. At the end of each day Le Corbusier came back to the studio to review the work and decide what conformed to – and confirmed – his original impulse and what was to be jettisoned as irrelevant.

Much has been made over whether the executed project for Firminy is Le Corbusier or Oubrierie. This is not a useful question: The building was produced in much the same way as other Corbusier projects. Although Corbusier never completed the construction documents for Carpenter Center at Harvard University nor visited the project during its construction or after its completion, no one

doubts the impact of Le Corbusier's hand – or of the influence of Jose Luis Sert. The drawings were, in fact, completed by Sert's Boston office and Sert supervised the construction. This was a method used by Corbusier to complete a number of projects, although with differing results. Clearly, the hand of Oubrierie can be strongly felt in the Firminy project, from concept to completion. Firminy is the work of collaboration across many years between an architect and his apprentice, only completed years after the master's death. The apprentice himself had grown to mastery over the decades, a maturity that infused the original work with new ideas and techniques nurtured slowly over time.

The Miller House, built while Oubrierie was Dean of the School of Architecture in Lexington, Kentucky, is more clearly the work of Oubrierie after he emerged from the Le Corbusier studio. Although traces of other Corb houses can certainly be seen in this building, Oubrierie has taken the house into another realm altogether. The Miller House grows from questions of form and space that developed after Le Corbusier's time and these are evident in the development of the design. Intricate ideas about the program and the form of the house interweave throughout. Although the house at first appears to be a platonic solid, it is formed out of a collection of fragments brilliantly assembled into a tour de force of space, form, structure, texture, and surface. The interior passages from level to level are beautifully orchestrated around the central vertical space across which rooms can be seen and through which the landscape expands beyond. The design is deeply considered down to the details – including built-in furniture and color panels – and the resolution is impeccable, delivering an exceptionally executed work both outside and in.

The Firminy Church and the Miller House bear testimony to the imprint of Le Corbusier's work on the younger architect's imagination. Far from the disconnected and incoherent pastiche of so much current form, work that pretends divorce from the ever-immanent traditions of architecture, Oubrierie has taken the history he inherited through Le Corbusier and subtly and richly transformed it into his own formal lexicon of space, program and design. The result is astonishing and deep in its elaboration of the eloquence of a language that bears the connection from ages past to the current moment. Jose Oubrierie has achieved one of the most difficult qualities in architecture: through rootedness he has achieved timelessness.

George Ranalli, Architect
Dean
Bernard and Anne Spitzer School of Architecture
City College of New York
January 2010

GEORGE RANALLI has been Dean of the Bernard and Anne Spitzer School of Architecture at City College since 1999. He was born in New York City. He received his Bachelor of Architecture from Pratt Institute in 1972 and Master of Architecture from the Graduate School of Design at Harvard University in 1974. From 1976-1999 he was Professor of Architecture at Yale University, and in 1988-1989 he was the William Henry Bishop Chaired Professor in Architectural Design. Mr. Ranalli recently completed his fourth monograph, *Saratoga*, devoted to his Saratoga Avenue Community Center for the New York City Housing Authority. That project has been widely praised in the New York Times, notably in a May 13, 2009 article by Ada Louise Huxtable in the Wall Street Journal and in December 2009 Paul Goldberger in New Yorker Magazine selected it as one of the Ten Most Positive Architectural Events in 2009.

His architectural and design work has been published internationally in numerous journals including *Domus*, *A+U*, *Progressive Architecture*, *L'Architettura*, *G.A. Houses*, *Architectural Digest*, *Architecture D'Aujourd'hui*, *Architectural Design*, and *Lotus*. His work has been exhibited and collected at the Cooper-Hewitt Museum, Sperone-Westwater Gallery, the Museum of Contemporary Art in Chicago, the Museum of Finnish Architecture, Centre Pompidou in France, Deutsches Architekturmuseum in Frankfurt, the XVII Triennale Di Milano in Italy, the Denver Art Museum, the Indianapolis Museum of Art, the Metropolitan Museum of Art and a one man exhibit at Artists Space Gallery in New York 1998. He designed the exhibition *Frank Lloyd Wright: Designs for an American Landscape, 1922-1932* for the Whitney Museum of Art in 1997 and designed the installation for the exhibition of work of Carlo Scarpa, in 1999 at the Canadian Centre for Architecture Montreal, Canada.

ON THE WORK OF JOSÉ OUBRERIE

INTRODUCTION BY KENNETH FRAMPTON

José Oubrierie was one of four young architects who were to assist Le Corbusier during the last seven years of his life. Having been previously trained as a painter, Oubrierie joined Le Corbusier's atelier in 1958, and not only worked on the design of the church at Firminy-Vert, but was also involved in the Venice Hospital project, with which Le Corbusier's career was brought to a close. Oubrierie was as intimately involved in the genesis of the church at Firminy as a medieval mason would have been in the development of a cathedral, at a time when such undertakings extended beyond the life-span of any one individual. Seen in this light, all the controversy as to whether the building should have been finished by another hand is just so much pedantry, given the intimacy of Oubrierie's involvement with the design since its inception. All of this was revealed in the documents depicting the genesis of the church, which were first exhibited at the Institute for Architecture and Urban Studies, New York in the summer of 1981. Then, as now, Oubrierie's plans, photos and sketches documenting the evolution of the design both before and after Le Corbusier's death testify to his continual involvement with the project from 1961 onwards.

Firminy has its origins in two earlier pieces by Le Corbusier; in a sketch for a church at Le Tremblay, dating from May/June 1929 and in the conic shell built over the assembly hall in the parliament at Chandigarh, during the first half of the '50s. Originally, the church was conceived as a conic form set directly over its central axis on a cubic base. Soon after this formulation Le Corbusier opted to make one face of the cone vertical, thereby bestowing an eccentric profile upon the initial form. Subsequent budget restraints would lead to a reduction in its overall height while Oubrierie's re-working of the plan and sec-

tion over time would lead to a subtle modification of the original parti. However, the transformation from a square podium to a truncated cone had already been resolved by the time of Le Corbusier's death and Oubrierie would thereafter, in essence, do little more than realize this geometrical transposition. Moreover, the plasticity of the interior had also been formulated by December 1962 with the ramped seating of the nave assuming a kidney shape in plan. Additional refinements would be made one year later via a wooden model dating from December 1963. This was also the year of a perspectival lithograph by Le Corbusier which would be used to raise money for the completion of the church. Although construction began on January 28, 1965, it would soon cease when the construction company went under. Although Oubrierie would have the chance to take the project a stage further in 1973, nothing extensive would happen until 1977 when another period of sporadic construction followed.

In 1996 the unfinished church was designated a historic monument by the French State and this enabled the creation of a consortium involving the state, the town of Firminy, the St. Etienne metropolitan region and the department of the Loire. However, so much time had elapsed since the beginning of the work that the program had to be modified, firstly because the congregation had effectively disintegrated, and secondly because the population of the area was now more or less evenly divided between agnostics and Muslims. In the event, given Le Corbusier's ambivalence towards religion it is somehow fitting that this space should now have a more secular character, as today it is only intermittently used for services.