



# “À bas l’Académie!”: Le Corbusier and Cambridge

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*On 2 November 2012 three alumni of Scroope Terrace, Sumet Jumsai, Steve Mullin and John Sergeant, delivered a lecture on Le Corbusier’s 1959 visit to Cambridge at the Martin Centre. This is an edited transcript of that lecture, which will appear in its entirety in the forthcoming issue of the Cambridge Architecture Journal, Scroope 22.*

We arrived at Scroope in October 1958, two years after Leslie Martin’s appointment as the first Professor of Architecture. The year groups immediately above us were already making waves, and the intellectual milieu was defined by the competing positions of Colin Rowe and Colin St. John (Sandy) Wilson. So far as we knew both had been there forever, but Martin had brought Wilson with him from London County Council Architects and Rowe had in fact arrived with us, and left for Cornell University at the end of our fourth year. Rowe had already published his article, “Mathematics of the Ideal Villa”, and was well known for his cultural/historical slant on the work of Le Corbusier, which absolutely defined the critical focus of the time.

Colin Rowe was to go on to be recognised as a great architectural philosopher and to be awarded the RIBA Gold Medal. Colin’s honorary MA (enabling him to teach at Cambridge) may have marked him out as the non-team-player who would later have to move on. Instead of walking to the cushion to kneel before the Vice-Chancellor with hands in prayer, he leavened the formality of the Senate House ritual by crawling, ending up with his forehead on the cushion, after the manner of the Siamese ambassadors’

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*Photograph by Richard Einzig.*

audience with Louis XIV at Versailles. It was his idea to suggest Le Corbusier be given the prestigious honorary Doctorate by the University and Professor Martin secured this, with the addition of Henry Moore. And so our first year ended with the pageantry of their investiture. As the procession left the Senate House for lunch at Trinity it was ambushed from the windows of Caius College by Sumet, Steve and Tim Mathias, showering the great man with confetti and shouting "À bas l'Académie!" ("Down with Academia!"), Le Corbusier's well-known tirade against the École des Beaux Arts.

Later that day Moore and Corbu opened the Brutalist extension to the school (designed by Sandy), which had been under construction to that date. The lecture theatre was packed and students from the Architectural Association (who were excluded, not being members of the University), climbed the trees outside for a glimpse of God.

84 During his visit, Le Corbusier stayed with Leslie Martin at King's Mill, his home. This was to be part of a pattern repeated by distinguished visitors who enriched our training. Martin had been a co-editor of *Circle*, an avant-garde arts magazine of the 1930's. He knew Barbara Hepworth and Moore, the sculptors, Ben Nicholson, the painter whose white-on-white geometric reliefs filled the Mill, and Bernard Leach, the potter. With Patrick Heron they became known as the St. Ives group. Martin was Chief Architect to London County Council, then the largest architects' office in the world, and was responsible for the Royal Festival Hall, the only retained element from the 1951 Festival of Britain. Once Professor at Cambridge he advanced the careers of the young-tiger architects of the day, Sandy Wilson, Peter and Alison Smithson, and James Stirling.

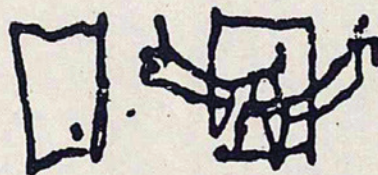
Martin added Colin Rowe and Sandy Wilson to the staff that he inherited; there were in total only eight staff and one secretary. In our third year Bruce Martin, the modular-construction expert, was recruited, and Peter Eisenman registered as the first architecture PhD, supervised by Rowe. Rowe had trained at the Liverpool School, ahead of Stirling, and did his MA under Wittkower at the Warburg Institute. He became a leading member of the group known as the Texas Rangers, who anticipated a Post-

Modern approach to teaching architecture at the University of Texas. He brought a wide intellectual range and a 'non-chronological' historical approach to Cambridge; for historians an unprovable 'what might have been', placing modern architecture within history. The seeds of his later denunciation of modernism, especially with respect to urbanism and the destruction of the city, were already present. This was to become the stratophobia (fear of the street) of his *Collage City*. He drilled early Corbu, 1920's white architecture and the column grid of the Five Points, into us all, nearly boring through our paper to the drawing board beneath. If Colin had already decided that the modern movement was a failure, Sandy thought that it had not gone far enough; he set his position out late in life with his *Other Tradition*, in which he argued that its regional variety and potential richness had been betrayed by Le Corbusier's take-over of CIAM. In our time he ran the 1st Year Studio and was an inspiring teacher. Woe-betide you however if you did not have flat roofs and (preferably) Brutalist detailing.

The visitors came thick and fast. Albini had recently completed his Rinascente store in Rome and showed us museum work that was probably to influence Carlo Scarpa later. James Stirling was the invited critic for our 1st Year project, a library in the school's garden. In our fifth year he became supervisor to the three of us. Ernesto Rogers, uncle to Lord Richard, showed us his new Torre Velasca in Milan and described Neo-Liberty, a revisionist theoretical position that annoyed Sandy. His vote of thanks became a torrent of veiled insults and we all learned how important personal positions were to architects. Aalto, who followed, spoke of his Church of the Three Crosses, with its rolling concrete screens; acoustic privacy, he declared, "is kilograms." Louis Kahn spoke with great modesty; he had by then completed his Yale Art Gallery, and the Richards Medical Laboratories in Philadelphia were on the drawing boards. Peter Eisenman set us a short design project for a pedestrian footbridge over the M1; he was bouncy and told us that we "must work like hell." Finally Richard Neutra stormed up Trumpington Street supported by acolytes. He announced that he was the greatest architect on earth. Sandy took him punting. Years later I learned that Jørn Utzon also came, but Leslie would not let him speak to us: he thought his English was too bad.



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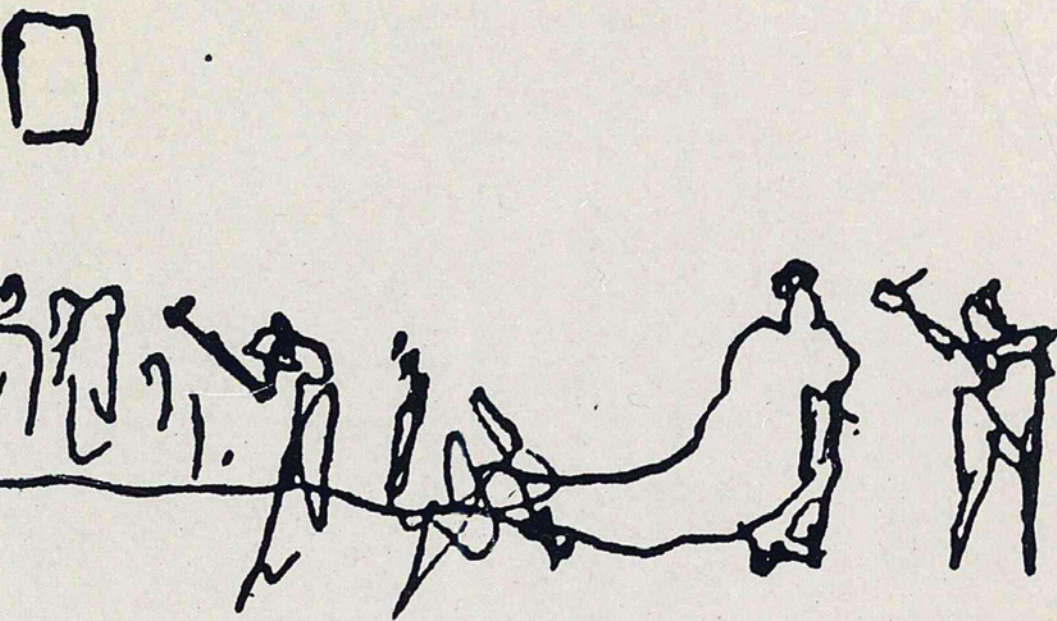
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Sketch by Le Corbusier of the procession.  
*Courtesy of the Fondation Le Corbusier.*