



DISCOVER

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IMPACT



60-YEAR ODYSSEY

An almost-forgotten tapestry commissioned for the Sydney Opera House during its construction was finally displayed in its intended location 60 years later, thanks to UQ School of Architecture's Associate Professor Antony Moulis's dedicated 10-year research quest.

When Associate Professor Antony Moulis, UQ School of Architecture's Director of Research, came across a collection of letters in a Parisian archive in 2006, he had no idea that he had uncovered the first tangible link between two of the world's most influential architects.

While researching the work of world-famous architect Le Corbusier, Associate Professor Moulis entered the keyword search for 'Australia' hoping to find a connection between Le Corbusier and the antipodes. This pivotal choice revealed the correspondence, which was addressed to Le Corbusier from Jørn Utzon, concerning a tapestry Utzon had recently commissioned from Le Corbusier to decorate his latest building.

What really piqued Associate Professor Moulis's interest, however, was that the building in question was the Sydney Opera House, and that Utzon was at this point only a fledgling Danish architect, while Le Corbusier was regarded as one of the most revolutionary architects of the 20th century.

As Associate Professor Moulis would later discover, that very tapestry had hung innocuously more than 16,000 kilometres away from Australia in the town of Hellebæk, Denmark, out of sight and mind from the rest of the world for half a century.

As an Australian researcher digging in the Le Corbusier archives in Paris, Associate Professor Moulis had a unique advantage to analyse the collections with fresh eyes.

When he did understand the nature of the correspondence, he was surprised by the idea of Le Corbusier and Utzon working together at all, since Le Corbusier was known as an architect difficult to collaborate with, and whose transformation of city landscapes from New York City to Chandigarh in India were his own designs. Though he did occasionally unite with other artists to create textile and visual artworks, he rarely worked with other architects.

"A set of letters and receipts showed that the two had met about the tapestry commission and that Le Corbusier had worked on the art project," Associate Professor Moulis says.

It would take years of further research before Professor Moulis could identify the exact purpose of the tapestry and confirm its existence.

Within the pages of a monograph he found a photograph of Utzon's family home with a vivid tapestry in the background – *Les Dés Sont Jetés* (the dice are cast), which was woven in France in 1960, with Le Corbusier's signature and the date adorning the top right corner.

Measuring over two metres high, three metres wide, and made of wool, it appeared to have been designed as an ultimate statement piece for Utzon's daring Opera House venture – a building that took an additional 10 years, a further \$93 million and the invention of computer modelling to realise.

"When I saw the tapestry, which at the time hung in the Utzon family home, I saw in it figurative elements that I believe came from

drawings of the Opera House that Utzon gave to Le Corbusier," Associate Professor Moulis says.

On further research, he concluded that Utzon's own architectural plans and designs heavily inspired the final piece.

Associate Professor Moulis strongly believes that Le Corbusier and Utzon took inspiration from each other. Le Corbusier was known to repurpose and combine graphic elements from his sketchbooks and paintings to create new compositions, and Utzon felt greatly influenced by Le Corbusier's art and architecture, a fact revealed in his letters.

Associate Professor Moulis identified the similarities between a sail-like shape in the tapestry and the Sydney Opera House sails, an inference that is strengthened by knowing that Le Corbusier kept a gifted copy of Utzon's *The Red Book* in his studio.

"Le Corbusier is almost picking up compositional inferences from *The Red Book*. The yellow sail is most emblematic to me," Associate Professor Moulis says.

Further investigation revealed that the tapestry now resided in the Utzon family home, as Utzon's controversial flight from Sydney and the Opera House project in 1966 after disagreements with the NSW State Government meant that the tapestry never reached Australian shores.

"For quite some time we have intended to write to you again in order to tell you how extremely happy we are for your wonderful tapestry," Utzon says in one of his letters to Le Corbusier in 1960.

“It is a daily source of delight and beauty not only for ourselves and our children but for all our friends and guests, too.

“It has endowed our home with a beauty so exquisite that I am at a loss for the proper words to describe our feelings about it.”

After delivering a paper on his discovery at the Society of Architectural Historians Australia and New Zealand conference in 2010, Associate Professor Moulis sent his account to Utzon’s son, Jan, in the faint hope that the piece might somehow make its way to its intended home in Australia.

In 2015, that dream was finally fulfilled when the Sydney Opera House Trust purchased *Les Dés Sont Jetés* for \$540,000 at auction, the most paid for any Le Corbusier tapestry at auction at that time, thanks to the donations of philanthropist Peter Weiss and other benefactors. It was unveiled in the Western foyer of the Opera House the following year, while Utzon’s 2004 work *Homage to CPE Bach*, his first and only tapestry, hangs in the Music Room on the East, creating a delightful symmetry.

Ultimately, the piece and its discovery are incredibly important for our nation’s history, demonstrating that Australia was firmly part of the global community in the 1960s. At its core, Utzon’s Opera House was emblematic of this, with the engineering of the building’s famous shells recognised as a ground-breaking feat of world architecture.

“The tapestry is a critical find for linking two of the 20th century’s most important architects. That the locus of their collaboration was a work intended for the Opera House makes it a significant cultural asset for Sydney and the nation,” says Associate Professor Moulis.

Evidently, the discovery of the tapestry brings to light these international connections and Australia’s role in the global networks of architecture.

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(Photo credit: Sydney Opera House)

The story so far:

1957: Utzon wins competition to design the Sydney Opera House

1958: Utzon sends his first letter to Le Corbusier

1959: Utzon and Le Corbusier meet in Paris and discuss the commission

1960: Tapestry is woven at the French Aubusson workshops under Le Corbusier’s direction

1961: Utzon comes up with solution for the shell design of the Sydney Opera House

1965: Utzon comes up against opposition from the newly elected Askin State Government

1966: Utzon leaves Sydney and the Opera House Project

1973: The Opera House is opened

1999: Utzon is re-engaged by the Sydney Opera House with his architect son, Jan

2006: Moulis discovers the correspondence between Utzon and Le Corbusier in a Paris archive

2010: Moulis delivers his paper on the tapestry at the 27th Society of Architectural Historians, Australia and New Zealand (SAHANZ) Annual conference and is awarded Best Paper

2015: Item is acquired by the Sydney Opera House

2016: Sydney Opera House publicly unveils the Utzon/Le Corbusier tapestry

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