THE ARCHITECTURE POPE’S LAST BLESSING

Firminy chapel in France debuts 41 years after Le Corbusier’s death
Perceiving an important building can happen physically, by interacting with it, or intellectually, by considering how it develops from a conceptual genesis to an inhabitable structure. My admiration for Le Corbusier and his final, unbuilt project, L’Église Saint-Pierre de Firminy-Vert chapel (“Firminy”), goes back 20 years. Then, as a student of architecture, I pored over drawings, photos, and models of a range of modernist architecture; always in Le Corbusier’s portfolio was Firminy, a project of daring mystical theory and compelling incompleteness.

In 1997, while pursuing my master’s degree in architecture at Rice University, I made a Le Corbusier pilgrimage to the south of France, visiting La Tourette monastery (1957–1960), Ronchamp chapel (1950–1955), and his holiday cabin along the Mediterranean coast (1950–1951). Firminy in ’97 was only a partially built square pedestal. As I stood inside it, the massive, bunkerlike concrete walls and sloping floor made a strong impression on me. But being in the base was just the beginning of encountering this great building. The chapel as a structure gained incredible stature when its top portion—the four-sided volume of the paraboloid cone—was completed in 2006.

In the situating of Firminy’s cone form, Le Corbusier explicitly addresses the nearby mountain that rises behind the town so that the dialogue between hill and chapel infuses nature and humanity into the work. A visitor enters into a solid that opens into a metaphorical sky, enabled by the huge interior space of the cone and the perforated holes in the walls that admit sun and starlight. While a pure cone would be a point jutting up into the sky, the way the architect negotiated a fluid form out of the truncated cone is eloquent at Firminy—and a strong trend, also, in contemporary work that melds rigorous geometry with fluid form-making. As I paid my few francs and went inside, I experienced a sense of potential, uncertainty, and mystery.

Firminy was initiated between 1960 and 1965 as a plan for the mayor of the town in southern France, part of a group of four projects including a Unité d’habitation (apartment building) and youth center, which were built at the same time. But when Le Corbusier drowned in 1965, he had been in the midst of schematic design on Firminy—still conceptualizing the work. José Oubrerie, his studio assistant, took up the task of completing the chapel. It was Oubrerie who developed the details of the structure’s relationship with the roof, how water would shed off it, and how light would infuse the building. He completed the construction drawings between 1970 and 1979 and oversaw the construction process.

Last March I attended the Architecture Interruptus symposium and exhibit on Firminy at Wexner Center for the Arts in Columbus, Ohio. The distinction in panel discussions between “historical approaches” and “contemporary currents” indicates clearly how this building, nearly five decades between conception and completion, is hard to fit into either its own period or today’s. Yet its influences are
In his “five points” of architecture, Le Corbusier emphasized the importance of bringing the roof to life in a building’s design. Firminy’s roof shape acknowledges the nearby hill and captures water that runs off the roof in a complex arrangement of sculptural gutters and pipes designed by José Oubrerie.

My trip to Wexner allowed me to contemplate the importance of an architecture of directness and simplicity. The rigor of Oubrerie’s follow-through on the conceptual design is inspirational. His keen attention paid to how water drains off the building—and the way it runs through the channels, designed for drainage, that also admit light into the chapel through glass apertures as they conduct water away from the structure—also demonstrates that Oubrerie was just as attuned to pure functional aspects and their integration into complex structures as Le Corbusier was. The material of the raw, almost roughshod concrete that marks the shift in the building from square base to conical form keeps the project from being too immaculate. Firminy, from theory to completion, is a building of splendid stature and spirit that position it as a critical modern accomplishment.

James Horne, an architect and educator in Santa Fe, has been managing and designing projects at Spears Architects for seven years. He relates that “integrating dynamic spatial and material components into buildings” is fundamental to good design. His projects include residential and commercial buildings, new construction, and retrofits. Horne says that “developing a palette of issues covering light, mass, structure, durability, color, sound, serenity, society, tone, texture, time, and motion are critical to providing a lasting and interesting architecture.”

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