Santa Fe TREND

WHERE ART AND DESIGN MEET

Architectures of Happiness, Belonging, and Imagination

Asia Meets Santa Fe: Costuming a U.S. Premiere Opera

Solar Building Grows Up

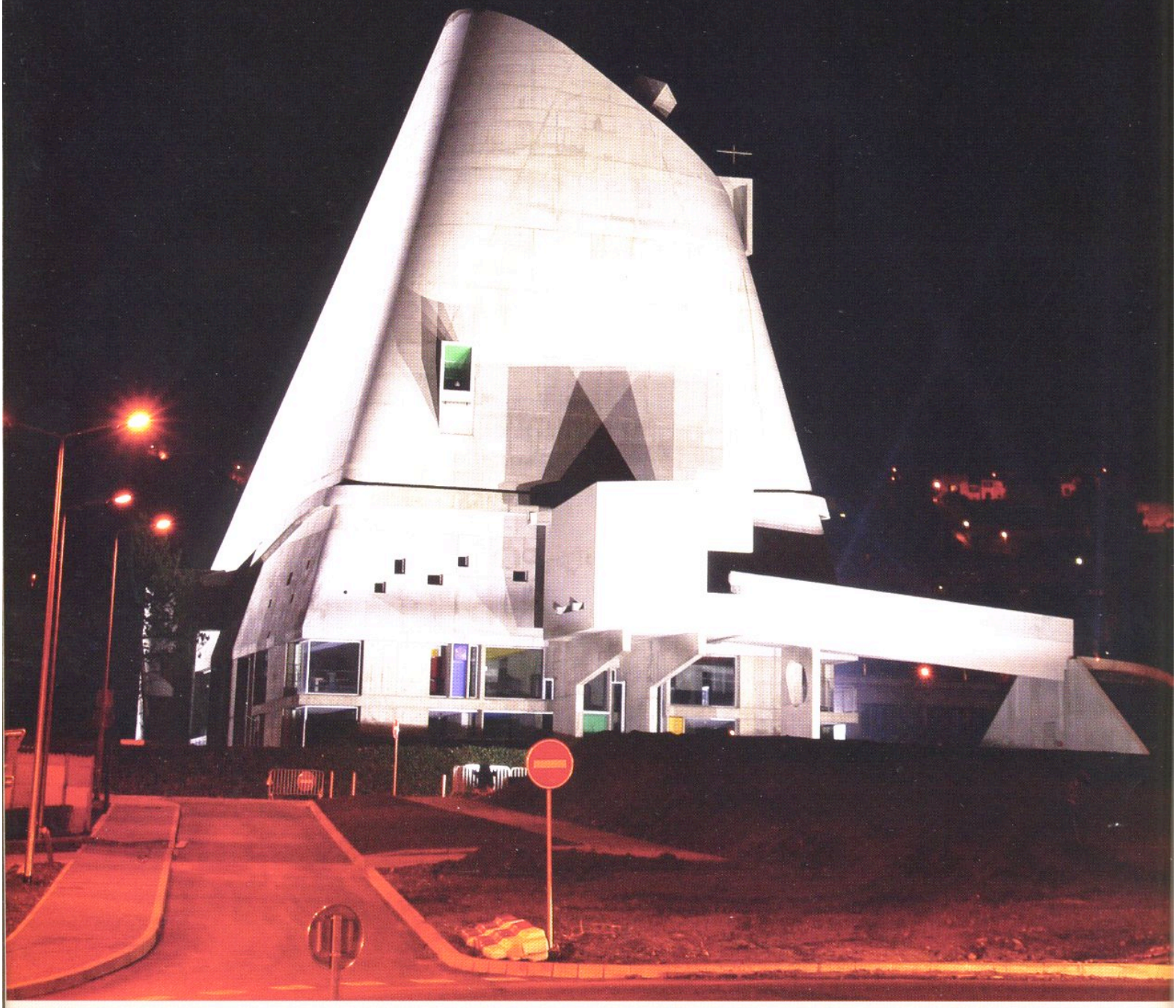
Edgy Landscapes

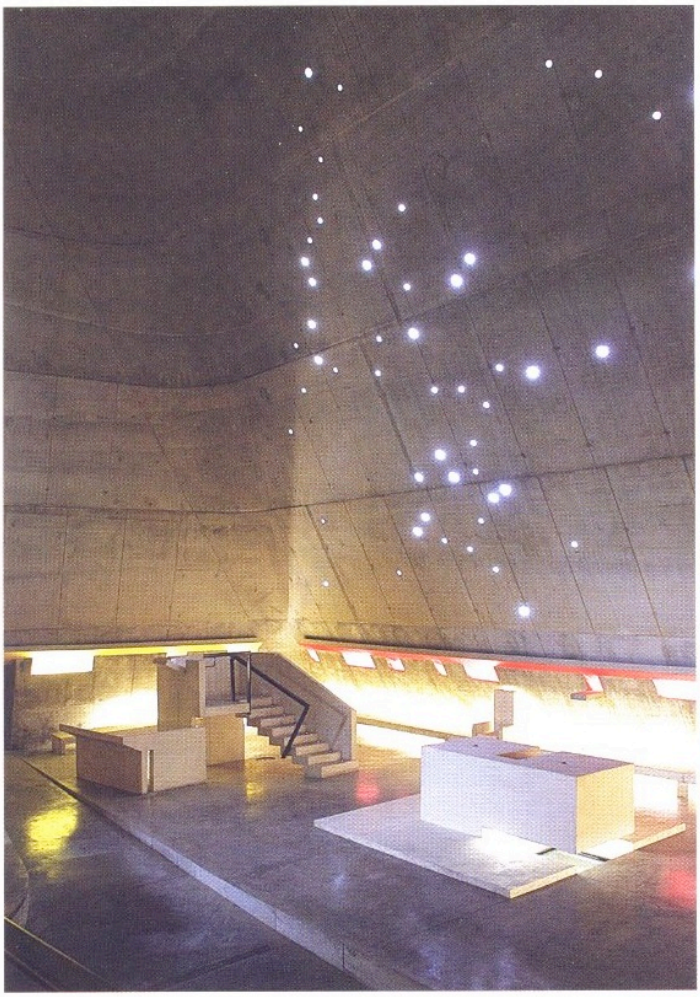
SUMMER 2007
Display through October 2007
U.S. $5.95 Can. $7.95

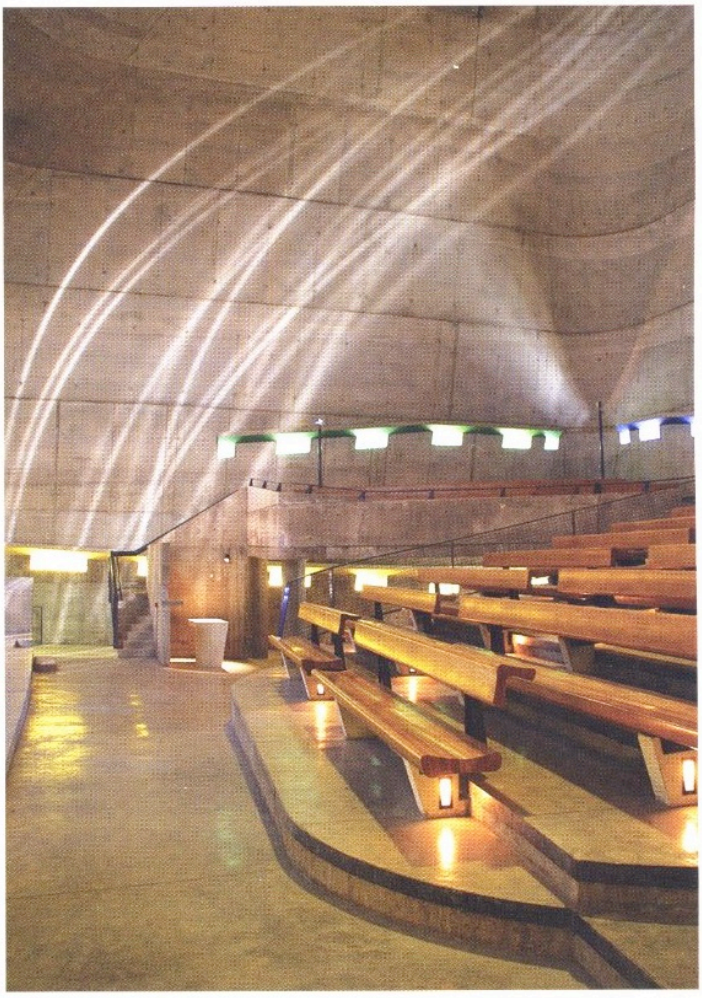
72
0 74470 98945 5

THE ARCHITECTURE POPE'S LAST BLESSING

Firminy chapel in France debuts 41 years after Le Corbusier's death







Above: Perforations in the concrete walls admit starlight—including the constellation Orion—to Firminy. Opposite: Le Corbusier's distorted sculpting of form at the Firminy chapel relates to such earlier work as his Assembly building in Chandigarh, India (1953–61), and the Philips Pavilion for the Brussels World's Fair (1958).

LUIS BURRIEL BIELZA, COURTESY OF WEXNER CENTER FOR THE ARTS

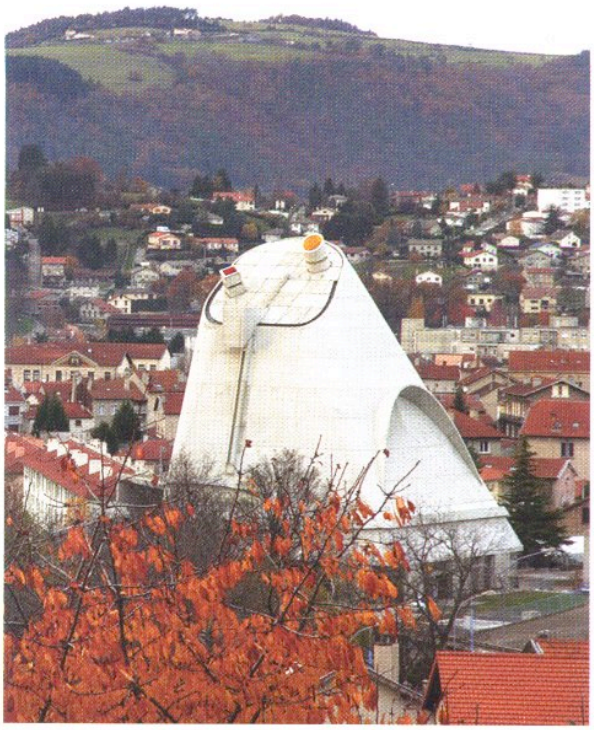
Perceiving an important building can happen physically, by interacting with it, or intellectually, by considering how it develops from a conceptual genesis to an inhabitable structure. My admiration for Le Corbusier and his final, unbuilt project, L'Eglise Saint-Pierre de Firminy-Vert chapel ("Firminy"), 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 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.

evident in key work done since the 1960s by firms and architects including Archigram, Thom Mayne of Morphosis, and Neil Denari of Cor-Tex (formerly the director of SCI-Arc, the Southern California Institute of Architecture).

Panelist Aaron Betsky, director of the Cincinnati Art Museum, raised the point at the symposium that Firminy may reflect a "postmodern" project built after its modernist time.

Kenneth Frampton, a professor in the graduate school of architecture, planning, and preservation at Columbia University, pointed out that Le Corbusier was emphasizing the metaphor of earth and sky in Firminy, as in many of his earlier works. The way the cone projects into the sky symbolically places the chapel in a tradition of classical and medieval church architecture, yet the building retains a unique disposition. Random pinhole perforations in the raw concrete walls—whose grainy texture imparts an imperfect quality to the structure—wash starlight, including that of Orion's belt, into the chapel.

I arrived at Wexner the night before the symposium to see the exhibit that accompanied it, including all of Corbu's original drawings of Firminy—richly collaged emblems of his thought process that showed the striking development of the design from scheme to scheme. Assemblages of colored Kraft paper, ink, stamps, pen, and tape, the drawings in this almost unrefined condition capture the vigor of Le Corbusier's creative process.

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 to 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 Horn, 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. Horn 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." ✽