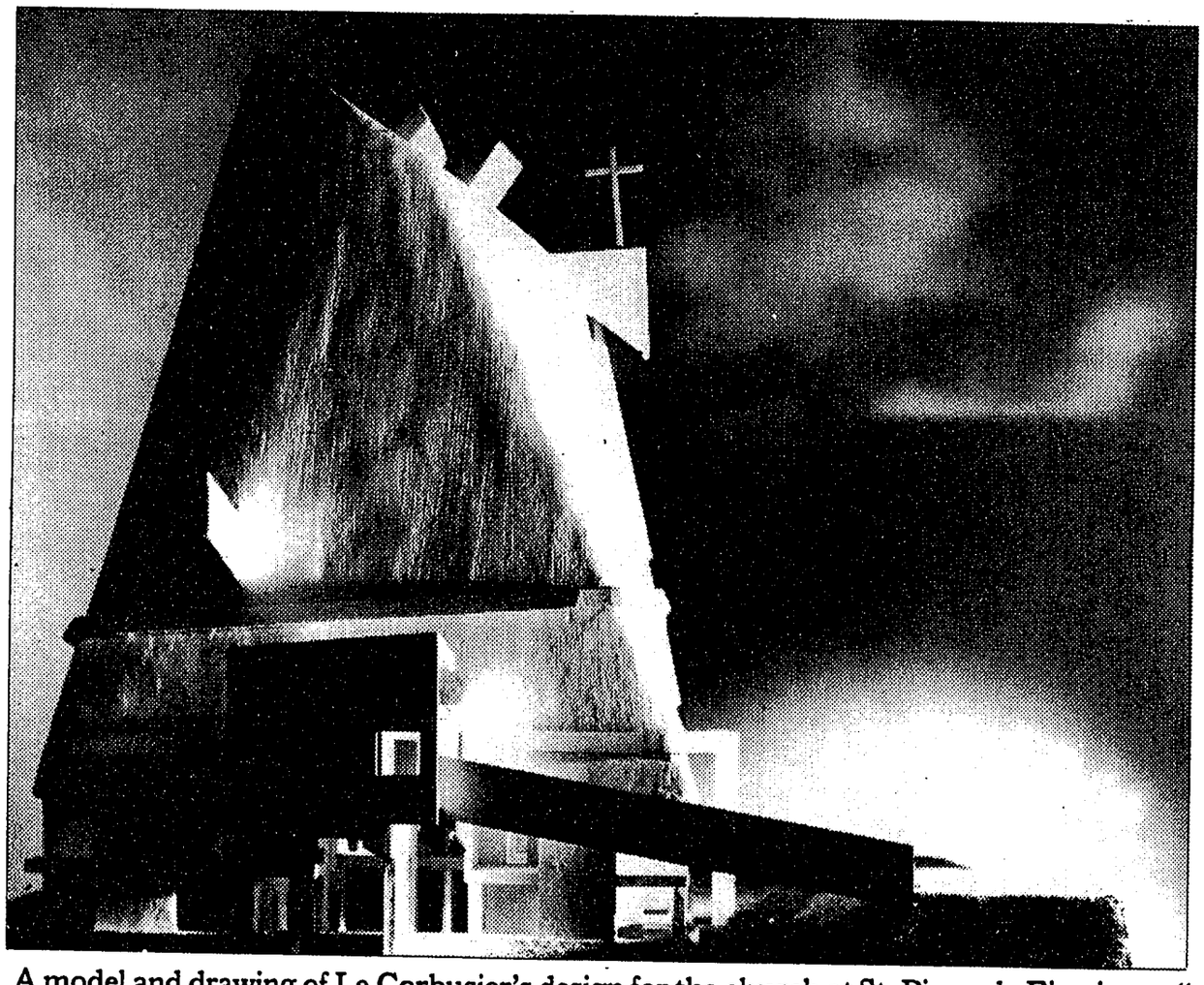
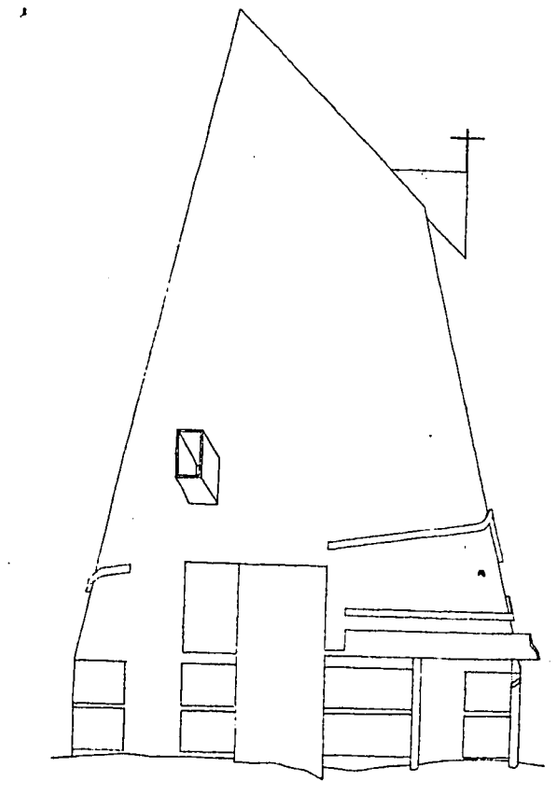
**ARCHITECTURE VIEW**

ADA LOUISE HUXTABLE

# Insights Into Le Corbusier's Genius





A model and drawing of Le Corbusier's design for the church at St. Pierre de Firminy —"great esthetic and emotional power"

In a small industrial town in the south of France, the last work of Le Corbusier is rising slowly: the church at St. Pierre de Firminy. The design of the church was completed before the architect's death in 1965, and construction was begun in 1971 by a group of private sponsors. The building is now about 40 feet out of the ground, with two-thirds of its concrete shell in place, and another 60 feet — the rest of the conical tower and dome — still to go. About $2 million has been contributed for the work thus far, with $1 million more needed, which the sponsors are hoping to raise in this country.

The process of construction has been a 10-year obstacle race of classic proportions. In addition to fund-raising, there have been jousts with local groups and church authorities of the right and the left. That there have been problems is not surprising, because almost everything Le Corbusier ever built proceeded as a stormy drama, in "a lifetime of brave ventures and brutal disappointments."

These words are Anthony Eardley's, from a publication that will be available next month from the Institute for Architecture and Urban Studies, which will serve as a catalogue for an exhibition of the drawings for the church being shown to a New York audience for the first time. The exhibition, which is on view now, is part of the final fund-raising drive.

The show has been assembled by the School of Architecture at the University of Kentucky, under the direction of José Oubrerie, a former associate of Le Corbusier who is carrying the project to completion. The display consists of two parts, in two places. "Early Drawings: 1961-62" is at the Institute for Architecure and Urban Studies, at 8 West 40th Street, and "Late Drawings; 1962-64," with the working drawings of the 1970's by the Atelier Oubrerie, is installed at the Cooper Union, at Seventh Street and Third Avenue.

The Institute's show, with many of Le Corbusier's conceptual sketches, will be on view through June 13; the Cooper Union show, which includes a large, beautiful wooden model and plans, elevations and sections, can only be seen through Wednesday, and the two really should be visited together. These drawings are fascinating and important. They provide the complete documentation of a masterwork of architecture in which the design idea can be traced to its final form, and they include those marvelous, shorthand sketches in which Le Corbusier characteristically reveals so much, with so little, of the specific and universal aspects of the creative act. As a progressive series, they offer an extraordinary insight into the architect's vision and working methods.

St. Pierre de Firminy is not a large building. It is a small parish church for a working-class community, being built as part of the new town of Firminy Vert — the "green" Firminy — one of the planned, post-war developments linked to older towns that the French Government has sponsored. But the structure carries a grandeur beyond its modest size. Mr. Eardley tells us that this project successfully brings together "the plastic and poetic program that Le Corbusier had enunciated so emphatically four decades before in 'Vers une Architecture.'" It was in that revolutionary modernist manifesto that he stressed the relationships of mass, surface and plan, and the purity of a geometric vocabulary.

The church building proceeds from the square and the cube, to the pyramid, circle and cone. Le Corbusier has transmuted this basic geometry into a highly individual biomorphic form, with a resulting shape that defies easy mathematical analysis, and this is also characteristic of his work.

But to describe that geometry and its roots in classicism or Eastern basilicas is too coolly literal and intellectual an approach for what is, in the end, a distinctly Corbusian form of great esthetic and emotional power. And it ignores the skill with which form and plan are integrated, in terms of use, procession, and sheer sensuous and visceral response. The genius of Le Corbusier was his understanding of volume, surface and light, of site and function, movement and symbolism, as a unified, multi-dimensional experience, and his ability to shape that synthesis with an artist's strong, intuitive eye. The indication of all of these concerns and their solution in a few freely suggestive pencil or colored crayon lines, makes drawings that are miraculously illuminating and alive.

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The tower form, and the spiral that leads into it about a third of the way above ground, are repeated themes in Le Corbusier's work. Here, one will enter and go down to the main body of the church and a smaller chapel below, which can be experienced sequentially or together. A warped floor plane reverses the spiral begun outside. Light will enter through the sides of the cone at a point just high enough to establish a sense of human scale while emphasizing the luminous, soaring space; light from the top will illuminate the altar at certain times. Unlike the famous church at Ronchamps, which crowns a height, the building at Firminy is set into a depression — a surface-mined crater in the slope of a hill; the town rises above it.

The eloquence with which Le Corbusier handles these elements is all his own; no one has matched it. His "style" is the pursuit of the most basic and expressive simplification of form as an absolute statement of beauty and need. This is a highly reductive, disciplined and poetic art.

It has become traditional to view Le Corbusier as genius or demon. With the passage of time and the reexamination of the modern movement, his work is beginning to be more carefully evaluated. But as Kenneth Frampton has pointed out in the double issue of "Oppositions" on the architect's early work, published by the Institute in 1979, he is either revered unquestioningly or blamed for everything that has gone wrong with the beliefs and buildings of the 20th century.

What does not change is the way Le Corbusier's buildings can move us. Whether we are admirers or detractors of modernism, we must know that we are dealing with architecture in its highest sense, in a world that his art and approach have helped to shape. As the French architect Claude Parent has written in "Architecture," the journal of the French Order of Architects, "for or against, friend or enemy, with feelings of love, indifference or hate, all architects are his sons."

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It is understandable, then, why there has been so much interest in the completion of this church. There have been two moving spirits behind the undertaking. Eugène Claudius-Petit, president of the Association of the Friends of Le Corbusier, commissioned the church when he was Mayor of Firminy; he is a former deputy to the National Assembly

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