

## My Favourite Room

Charles Saumarez Smith was no advocate of Le Corbusier – until he visited a church designed by the Modernist master

Much the most spectacular interior that I have been to recently is Le Corbusier's church at St Pierre in Firminy, south west of Lyon in central France, next to the mining town of St Étienne. At university in Cambridge I was taught to revile everything about Le Corbusier and his influence on modern architecture, so I was taken on a tour of his buildings to re-educate me. We started at Ronchamp chapel, near the Swiss border with France, which is itself magnificent, much more sensual than I would have expected, with an adventurous use of shape and form that belies Corbusier's reputation for rigid functionalism.

But nothing had prepared me for the experience of St Pierre, which is a relatively recent building, commissioned by the mayor of Firminy, Eugène Claudius-Petit, in the mid-1950s. Designed in the early 1960s, it was only begun in the early 1970s (Corbusier himself died in May 1965), to be left as a ruin before being finally completed by his pupil, José Oubrière, in 2006.

As a reconstruction based only on a memory of Corbusier's intentions, it is regarded by purists as ersatz. The church itself looks like a miniature nuclear reactor all in pale concrete. Next door to a sports stadium – also designed by the architect – it uses architectural form in what appears to be a totally free manner. In fact, the ground plan consists of a square which then converts as the walls rise into a circle. The span of the roof is then punctuated by small holes which let in the daylight, alongside low slits in the walls painted red. The pews are banked in front of the altar in a very theatrical way.

Corbusier himself said that he wanted the space to be "vast so that the heart may feel at ease, and high so that prayers may breathe in it", but, because it was built with government funds, it is now used as a secular cultural center. Yet the church demonstrates how modern architecture can be used to create numinous spaces, free and inventive in a way that interiors seldom are, devising a system of architecture and furniture which is wholly unconventional.

As Oubrière said when the church opened, paraphrasing the French philosopher, Henri Lefebvre, "all cities need big, useless spaces to provide their citizens with calm, concentration and even meditation". I would strongly recommend other Corbusier skeptics to visit it.

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