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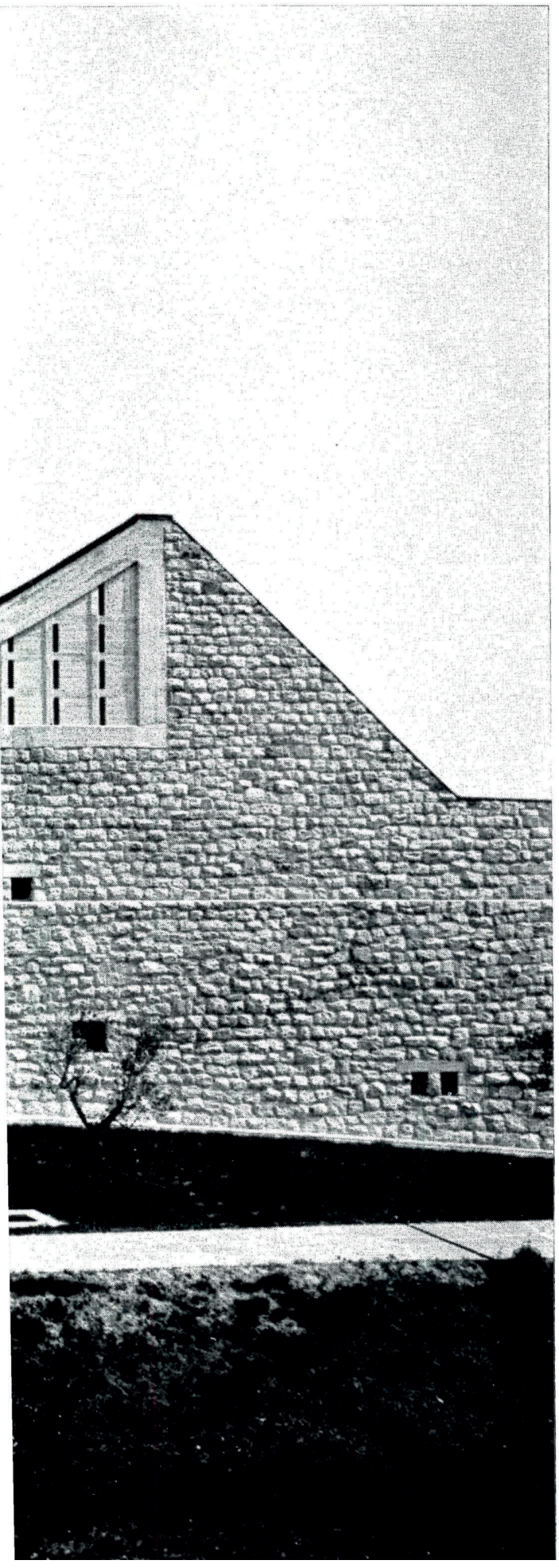
CHURCH OF THE AUTOSTRADA

BY JAMES MARSTON FITCH



Giovanni Michelucci's new Church of St. John the Baptist is an extraordinary building for which there was no real need, no concrete program, no budget—actually, no client, only a faceless patron. It is an architecture authentically dreamlike and irrational and it sits in a landscape of nightmare. Placed in the vortex of a huge American-style cloverleaf, where the new Autostrada del Sole leaps over the older Florence-Pisa highway, its immediate neighbors are a curtain-walled multistory motel and a smaller administration building, a garage-cum-gas station, and a forlorn little huddle of Tuscan farm buildings which have escaped the bulldozer.

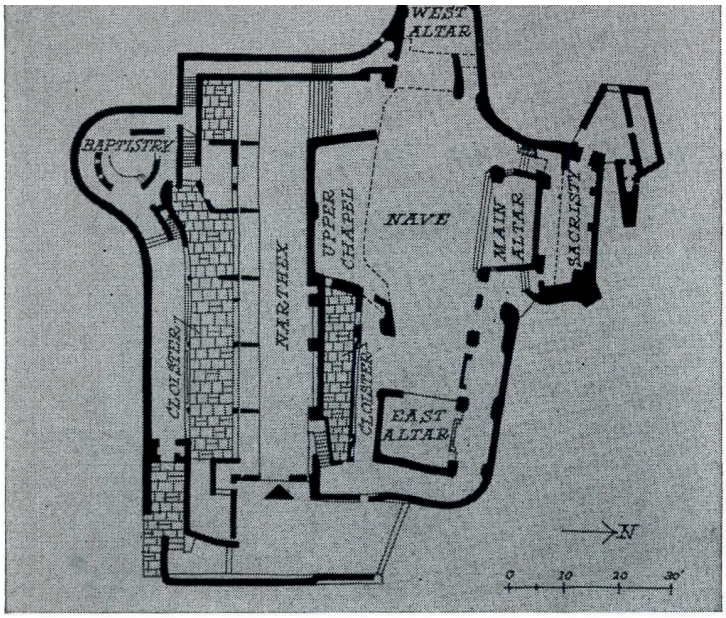
From the center of this vortex, the gentle farmlands of the Arno valley are invisible. Only the profile of the Apennines rises above the ramps and fills. And the church is only partly visible or accessible from the farms themselves. One or two local roads do somehow manage to penetrate the snarling concrete tangle, though it is hard to imagine the *contadini* daring to use them.

As in all such intersections, it is difficult for the tourist to know which exit to take to reach the church or—having overshot the mark—to know how to rectify his error. And it is altogether impossible to imagine any of those mad Milanese motorists, roaring down out of the mountains on their way to a late lunch in Rome, pausing even for a Hail Mary at Michelucci's lovely altars.

Why the church was built—except to satisfy the vanity of the Autostrada administration which in its imperial power and faceless arrogance resembles our own Port and Bridge Authorities, on which it is closely modeled—is anyone's guess. Officially, it memorializes the workmen who died in building the new highway that now runs most of the length of the Italian Peninsula. Why it should have been built just here, when so many other more suitable sites were available, no one to whom I talked could say. And by what miraculous good fortune they seized upon Michelucci to design it, or agreed to give him complete freedom in design and budget and time, is even harder to fathom. Nonetheless, these unlikely circumstances have conspired to produce one of the most significant buildings of the century.

Like Ronchamp, with which it will be inevitably compared, this church has the stunning originality of a dream. When one crosses the gentle berm with which the architect has surrounded it like a magic circle, the church takes complete possession of the spectator. The broken and heaving forms are strange and certainly not, in any conventional sense, either ingratiating or pretty. Yet neither are they self-conscious nor bombastic. On the contrary, the more one sees of the church, the more one is reminded of a great dancer on an empty stage in an empty theater, dancing not for applause but to explicate the meaning of his life, the inner logic of his own career. The church is at once a rehearsal and a summation, as though the artist were trying to formulate, in some final performance, the essence of what he had learned about form and motion in a lifetime of studying them. For this reason, perhaps, the building is wonderfully innocent of cliché or histrionics.

Mr. Fitch is a noted architectural historian, writer, and professor of architecture at Columbia University.



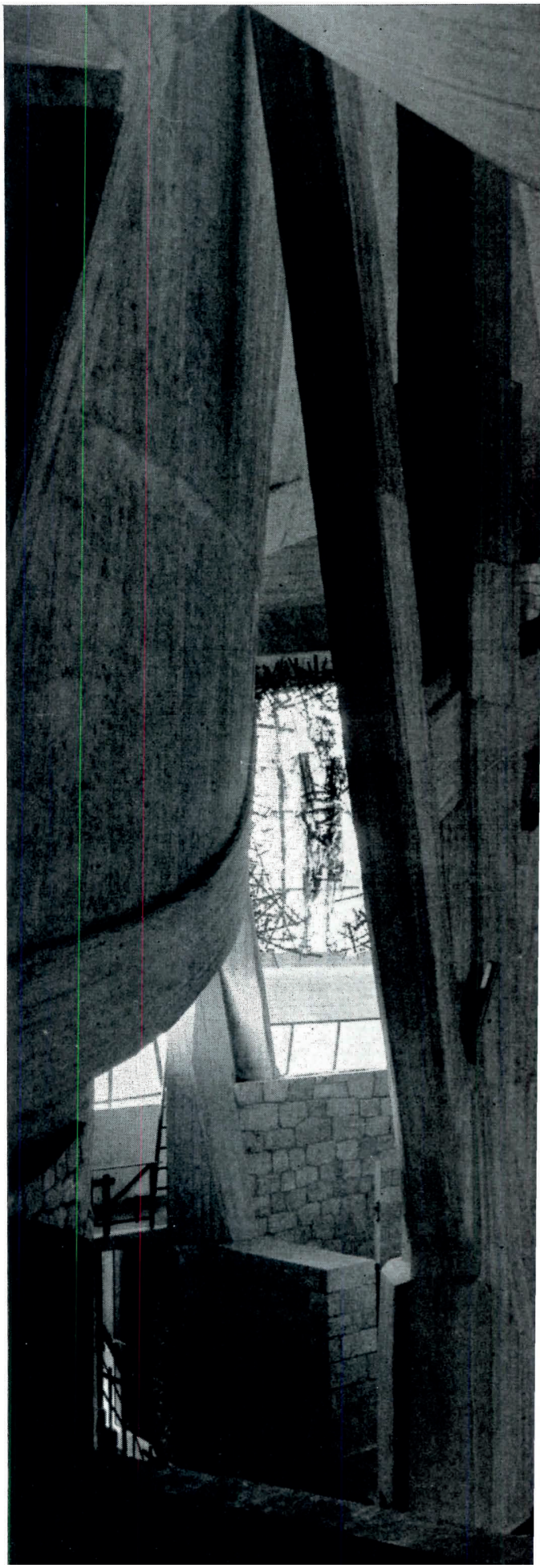
We know that this corresponds, in a certain sense, to objective fact. Michelucci does regard it as the capstone of his career—his unique opportunity to state in almost purely abstract terms his conclusions about his own *mestiere*. The very artificiality of the occasion permitted this: neither priest nor parish encumbered him with programs or prejudices. And his first sketches show that the church assumed from the beginning a plastic configuration. In his hands, traditional liturgical dicta have been manipulated like the sculptor's clay.

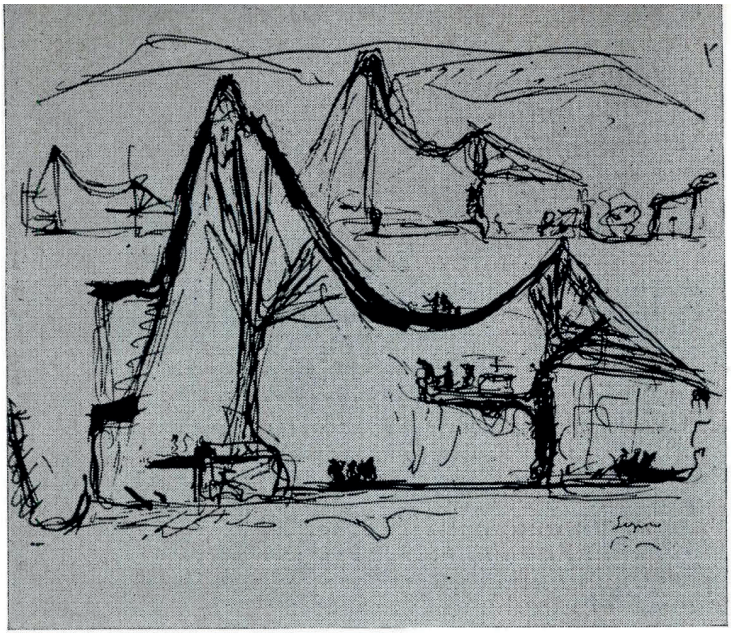
The very freedom permitted him here might have undone a weaker man. With neither deadline nor budgetary limitation (nor even a general contract!) he was limited only by gravity, and the way he has mastered that is often astonishing. He says that originally, he visualized the church as a tent, and from start to finish it has been a tented form. This is sufficiently unorthodox to be disturbing. We are accustomed by now to all manner of thin-shell forms; the same curves reversed in draped catenaries are less familiar. But it would be hard to argue that one is more appropriate to reinforced concrete than the other, and the tented form yields interior voids that are more significant than the exterior suggests.

Some Italian critics have called it heretical, but this new church seems to stand in the truest Tuscan tradition. It is strong, wiry, masculine and slightly sardonic; economic of means—*pietra dura* from the mountains, sand and gravel from the *torrente,* marble from the ubiquitous quarries—and wary of ornament and polychromy. It is illumined by Tuscan sanity, and disciplined always by the bitter tang of scarcity.

This last factor has always protected the Tuscan architect from the self-indulgent lushness of Rome or Naples, and it protects Michelucci now. The great draped curves of the roof are saved from mere sweetness by their crisp intersections with each other and with the ashlar walls, by the way they are punched aloft by the bony forked columns inside. Indeed, the translation from canvas and tent pole into concrete membrane and ossature is almost literal. All this is easy enough to comprehend, now that it is finished. What is more difficult to understand is how, once conceived, it was ever executed.

Four engineers assisted Michelucci in the structural calculations and there were many more studies, models and drawings than usual. Even so, many decisions must have been made on the site, as the building went up, for there are too many examples of sheer intuition, too many incandescent



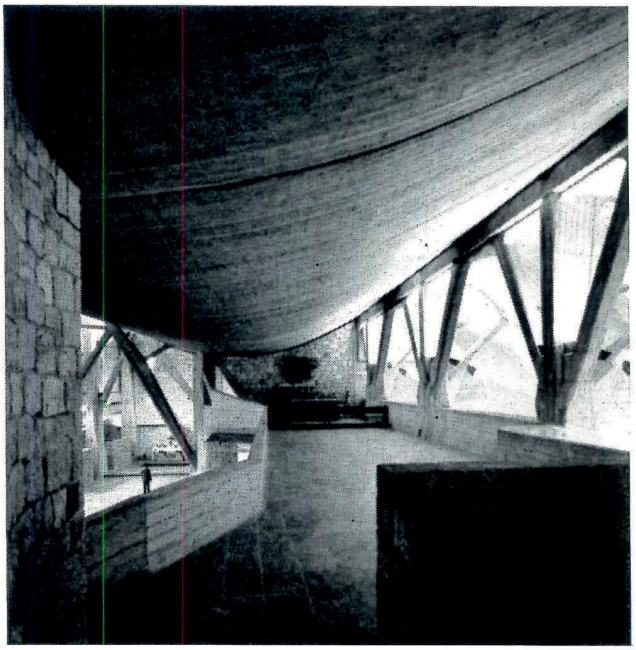


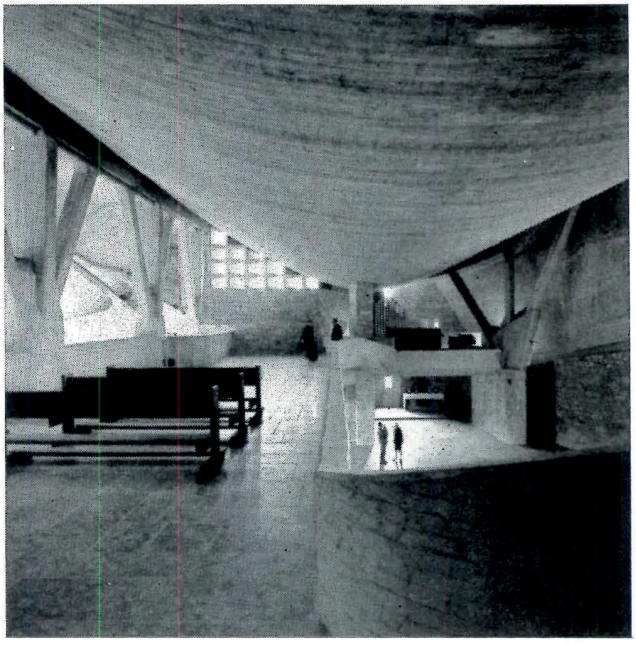
details which would never have survived exposure on a drafting board. The building has that assuredness which is the mark of the *chef d'oeuvre;* it could only have developed in a culture whose intimate knowledge of masonry and concrete is 2,500 years old.

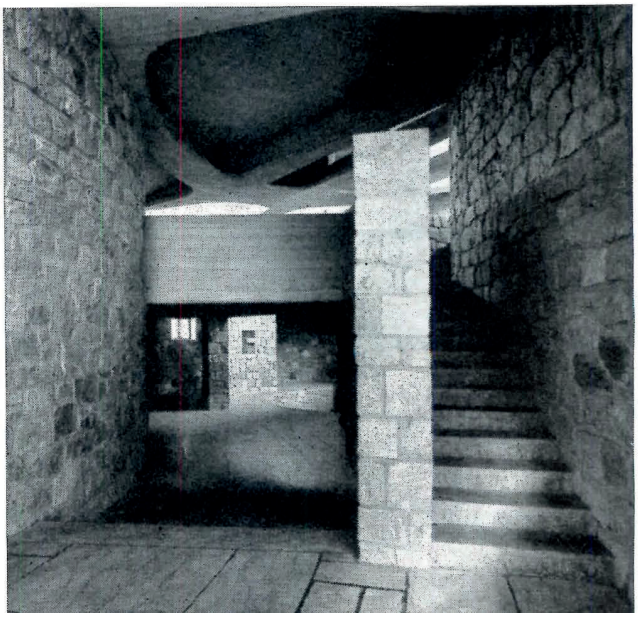
Michelucci had at his disposal a group of artisans whose understanding of the properties of stone and concrete was quite as profound as his (he is the first to point this out). He held daily conferences with the stone masons, the carpenters of the form work, the concrete handlers. The results of their common virtuosity are everywhere apparent, yielding an almost endless succession of ravishing details. Ashlar walls meet concrete members in intersections as elegant as a goldsmith's (It is surprising to note that, for all their lyrical movement in plan, they are everywhere severely vertical. Nowhere is there a stone arch, vault or voussoir. All tasks of spanning are assigned to the concrete.) Copper roofing, windows, bronze doors are handled with immaculate taste.

But this virtuosity reaches dazzling heights in the concrete formwork. Not Perret at LeRaincy nor LeCorbusier at La Tourette have surpassed the effects at San Giovanni's. When Michelucci says he has given years of his life to this structure, he means to be taken literally. One has only to look at the textured surfaces of his concrete elements— let alone absorb the logic of the forms themselves—to realize that he must have been there each morning when the carpenters began. No plywood was used anywhere: the forms were sheathed with rough-sawn boards 4 to 5 inches wide. The technique, of course, is not new. What is notable here is the way it is employed, to yield a texture as important to the structural elements as are the brush strokes of Van Gogh's starry nights or William Lehmbruch's knife marks on his clay.

The formwork of the great catenaries, for example, has been handled in such uncanny fashion as to give them the weightlessness of draped silk or wind-filled sails. The same plain boards, rough and ineloquent as they seem individually, are assembled in another way to dramatize the flow of stress, to mark the hinge and joint, the articulated boniness of the extraordinary "columns." Note carefully, for instance, the slightly irregular chamfers along many of the exterior corners of the skeletal members. They are as deft, as spontaneous, as the last contemplative stroke of the sculptor's knife on the wet clay model. How on earth the carpenter could trim that bit







of wood which gave the concrete that configuration—even with Michelucci standing alongside—is hard to imagine. Never has the sheer liquid plasticity of concrete been more poetically expressed.

The man who designed this church is a mild-mannered, 73-year-old Florentine whose home and studio is in a Renaissance villa on the gardened slopes of Fiesole. He was born in nearby Pistoia, into a family of craftsmen (his brother, a bronze founder, cast all the bronzes of the new church). Four years younger than Corbusier, van de Rohe, and Sant' Elia, Michelucci has never achieved a reputation comparable to theirs outside Italy. His prestige inside Italy, on the other hand, is very high, and this derives not only from a lifetime of good buildings and devoted university teaching but especially from the way he was able to avoid the bombastic vulgarity of Mussolinian architecture. His railway station in Florence (1936), an "official" building, is commonly regarded as the first great modern building in Italy and, as such, the first architectural victory over Facism.

But nothing in this record prepares us for the incandescent originality of San Giovanni del Autostrada. Paolo Portoghesi, the critic, sees two conflicting tendencies in Michelucci: "lucidity and abandon, humility and a full knowledge of his own worth." Such contradictions are nowhere apparent in his earlier buildings, which are reserved, rational, quietly elegant. These contradictions explode now, very much as happened at Ronchamps a decade ago, and probably for the same reasons. It is a sensitive but socially responsible architect's reaction to the tragic contradictions inherent in his very craft: the social priority of the practical over the poetic in most building types; the seldom completely resolvable conflict between the esthetic imperatives of the container and the human requirements of the contained; the sheer *intractability* of social process as a medium of artistic expression.

Perhaps these two churches, placed in the middle of nowhere, created by fiat for a congregation not yet existent, became what they are because they offered LeCorbusier and Michelucci alike an opportunity to create *great* architecture unhampered by any requirement that it simultaneously be *good*. Certainly, Ronchamp permitted an explosive release of poetic imagery, but it surprised no one who had followed Corbu's "other" life as painter and sculptor. For, as his great retrospective show of art in Florence (1963) made poignantly

clear, any new motif which appears in his architecture has first been subjected to a process of distillation in his painting. We have no record of such a parrallel process in Michelucci, but it must exist. His church alone establishes the fact.

Here, however, similarity ends. Now that it has become familiar to us all, Ronchamp appears lyrical, almost Mozartean, in its airy voids and weightless solids, deliberately purified of any structural connotations. The non-load-bearing nature of the embrasured walls is dramatized by their pebble-dash stucco, their failure to touch the convex ceiling. And this ceiling is itself handled in such a way as to discourage speculation as to how it is built or held in place. The resulting interiors seem as calm and pleasant as a farmhouse kitchen.

Things are quite otherwise at San Giovanni. Here there are enormous tensions in play. Sometimes they are wonderfully resolved; sometimes, they clash almost audibly. On the north façade the heaving roof lines reach a crucifix-topped apex over the window of the great altar, in front of which an A-frame appears as a flying buttress. But, as you move around to the east, this frame becomes increasingly ambiguous: is it carrying the crucifix or leaning against it? Such passages are extremely uncomfortable.

San Giovanni seems certain to have repercussions as profound as those of Ronchamp. Toward it, certainly, no one can remain neutral and all who visit it will be richer for the experience. It announces new potentialities in form and technique which ought to be understood. But it will be a pity if anyone tries to copy it, for a more authentically unique work of art—one less amenable to duplication by anybody—would be hard to imagine. In this sense, the Church of the Autostrada cannot have any immediately "practical" application, any more than could a play or a concert or a painting. It can only serve to illuminate our comprehension of the inexhaustible possibilities of architecture.

This, of course, is the cultural function of all great architecture. But Michelucci's intention here seems much closer to that of Antonio Gaudi than to those of Pier Luigi Nervi. Like Gaudi, he has chosen to use highly rational methods of calculation and design to achieve a building that is extremely personal in conception and somnambulistic in effect. This cannot fail to arouse ambivalent responses in us. But it remains our task, not his, to distinguish between the generally true and the specifically exotic in this extraordinary building.