



Richard Meier's Rome church is one event originally planned to mark the celebrations of the Jubilee of AD 2000. This was initiated by the Pope in 1994 when he called for a Special Consistory to prepare for the Great Jubilee at the starting point of the third millennium involving the Catholic world as a whole. Meier's project is the 50th church to be inaugurated in the Vatican's Millennium Project. Each church has a community centre and they are built in various parish districts throughout Rome.

The Jubilee Church commission was the result of an international competition, and the Vatican's shortlist included Meier, Gehry, Behnisch, Calatrava, Eisenman and Ando. The award of the project to Meier was controversial from the outset, in that Meier as a Jew would be working with the foremost Catholic client – the Vatican itself. However, the relationship and the resultant complex are a triumph of this collaboration, and

entirely successful in architecture of outstanding optimism.

The church, named Dio Padre Misericordioso (God our Merciful Father) by Pope John Paul II, was consecrated and inaugurated on 26 October 2003 by Cardinal Camillo Ruini in a four-hour service of celebration, music and ritual. This was attended by a huge congregation both within the church itself and externally on the church piazza.

The church is in an ordinary 1970s 10-storey housing quarter at Tor Tre Teste, a suburb at some distance from the centre of the city. Taken together, church and community centre form a spectacular new focus in an otherwise low-key suburban environment, and define both a religious precinct and a heartening sense of place. Meier has said that '... expression of aspiration, hope and belief, as well as openness and transparency are all aspects of

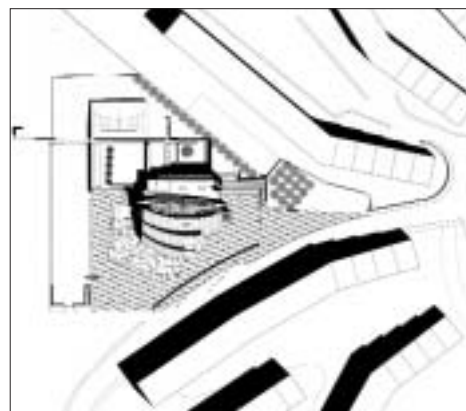
the ideas behind the design of this church'. It is a wonderful gift to the whole community of more than 25 000 people.

The fan-shaped site is approached directly from the east across a travertine paved entrance piazza (*sagrato*), which extends as a base to the church on the south and west of the precinct. The entrance is marked by several external features including a silver cross, and a campanile with exposed bells – the tower marking out both the church to the south and the community centre to the north. The generous entrance hall, defined by a travertine screen wall, is partly enclosed within by a raised organ loft. Once in the nave, the main altar is immediately visible at the west end. Although unconventional, this position is a logical result of the frontal eastern entrance.

Plan-form and section are extremely clear. Three circles of equal radius create three concrete shells to the south and together with a thick spine wall to the north, the main space of the church nave is contained. In a contrasting, plain L plan around a sunken courtyard, is the community centre, on four levels. The centre is separated from the main church by a linear top-lit atrium.

The plan of the church is essentially traditional with nave, altar, side chapel and confessional booths. Introduction of the three shells transforms the project and implies the Holy Trinity. Natural light is the major theme, with skylights between each shell and over the main space, creating ever changing patterns within. Meier has referred to this as '... a luminous spatial experience ... the rays of sunlight serve as a mystic metaphor of the presence of God'.

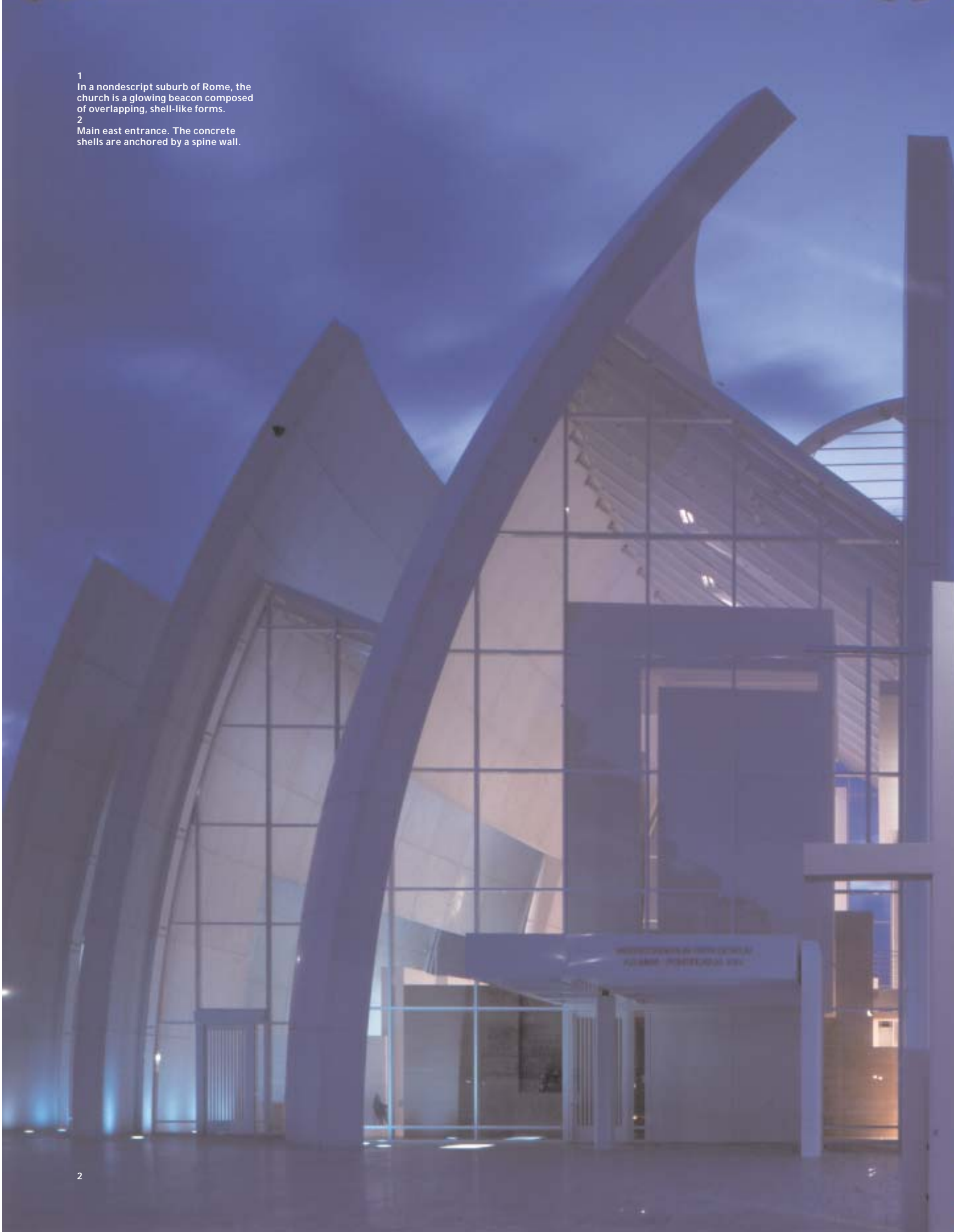
Curving in both plan and in section, the three shell wall planes are the real tour de force in the whole project. They are sweeping vertical cantilevers formed with panels of beautiful white concrete with a finish so fine that it resembles marble. Meier's description of the engineering effort involved in erecting the shells as



site plan

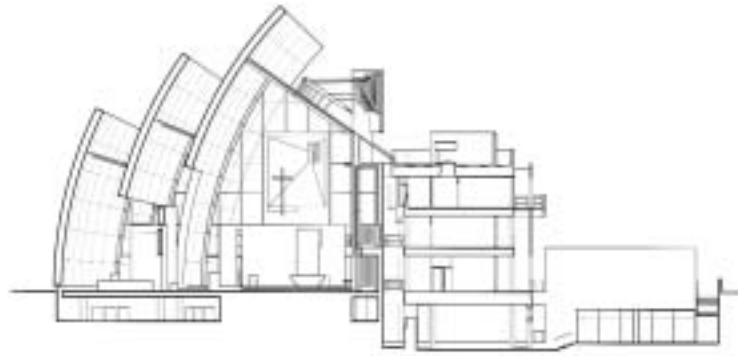
INSTRUMENT OF LIGHT

Richard Meier's long awaited church in Rome is a beautifully honed giver and receiver of light.

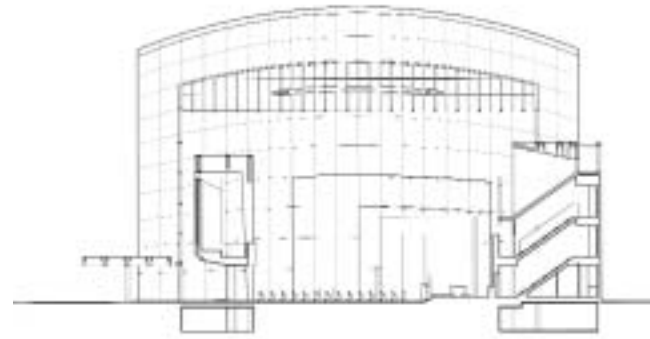


1 In a nondescript suburb of Rome, the church is a glowing beacon composed of overlapping, shell-like forms.

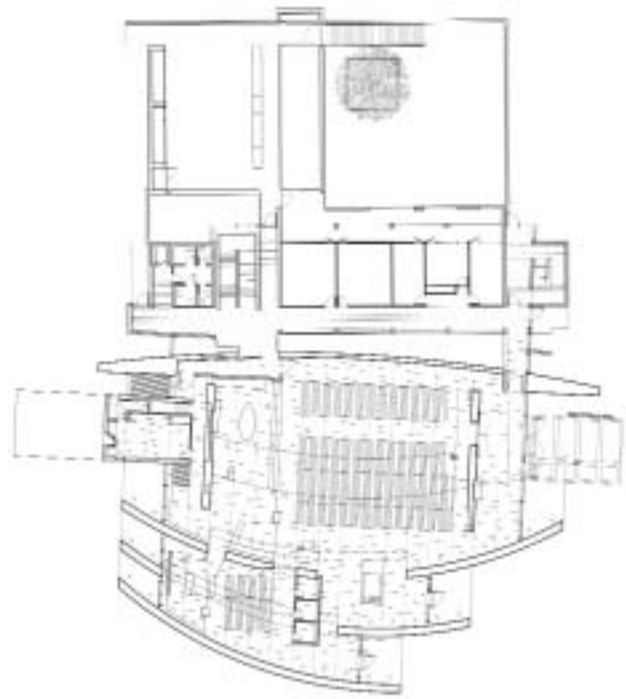
2 Main east entrance. The concrete shells are anchored by a spine wall.



cross section

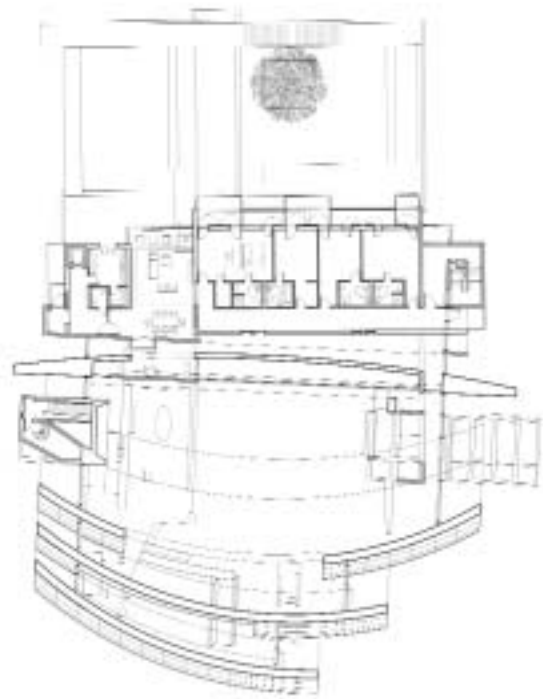


longitudinal section

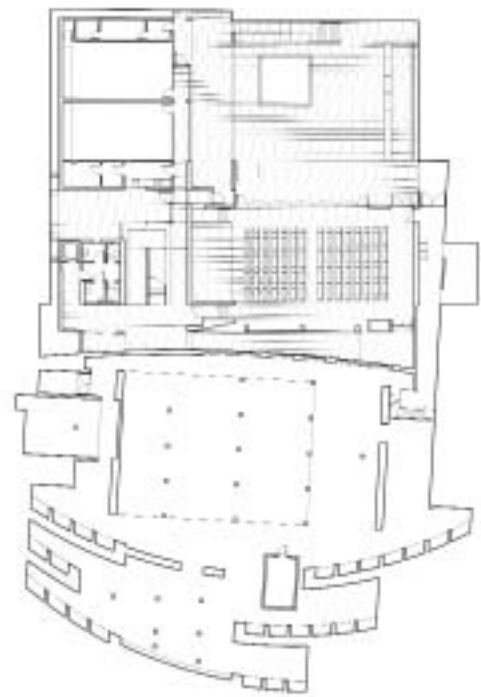


ground floor plan (scale approx 1:500)

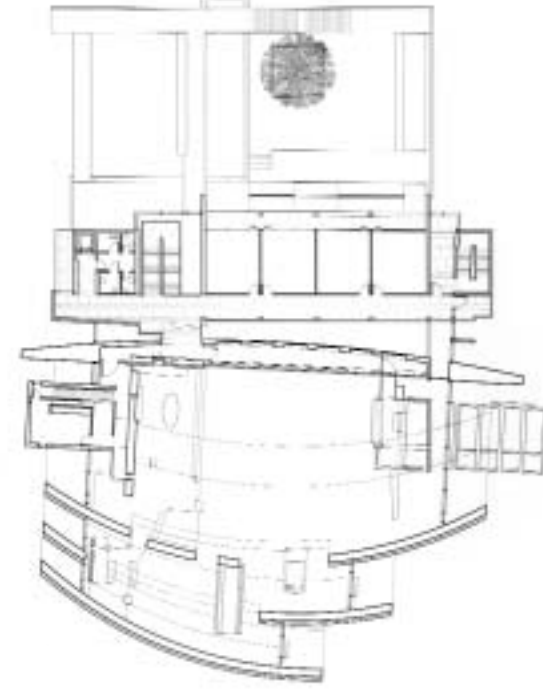
- 1 meeting room
- 2 courtyard
- 3 community centre
- 4 main (east) entrance
- 5 campanile
- 6 nave
- 7 altar
- 8 side chapel
- 9 confessionals
- 10 organ loft
- 11 priest's offices
- 12 pastoral residence
- 13 kitchen
- 14 bedrooms



second floor



50 | 4 basement



first floor



3
The calm, luminous interior. The limited palette of materials (white concrete, travertine and timber) and studied absence of ornamentation enhances the air of serenity.

'Herculean', underlines the task involved in the achievement of the cantilevers. (They are prefabricated post-tensioned concrete panels.)

The three shells, or arcs, form a massive instrument of light – the most monumental gesture of Meier's whole repertoire – and embody the sacred space at the heart of the church. In contemplating the design, Meier has referred to both Le Corbusier at Ronchamp and especially to Aalto and the Church of the Three Crosses in Finland. Aalto's church at Riola, near Bologna, came to mind in visiting the Jubilee Church.

The interior space and materiality of the main nave and side-chapel are serene and beautifully crafted. The limited range of materials – travertine, white concrete and light wood – predominates and there is currently an absence of any decoration. The white concrete shells contrast with the travertine and slatted wood of the spine wall; otherwise the nave is occupied only by the simple ranges of wooden pews. The white stucco organ loft with its silver clusters of pipes, and the sculpted white altar, form counterpoints at the two ends.

The altar plinths and furniture are all formed in the same travertine as the nave floor. Each element of the furniture is exemplary, and some items such as the casket for communion wafers (a gold box in the side chapel) are quite exquisite. The only concession to tradition is a nineteenth-century cross above the main altar.

At night, the whole church is a giver of light to the outer world and again the three shells, and the transparent ends of the church, give a spectacular signal of a sacred entity within the community.

The community centre has its main approach from the eastern church *sagrato*

through the central linear atrium. Secondary entrances are provided from two courtyards. The basement holds the major meeting hall (Sale di Riunione) adjacent to the sunken courtyard. Both courts are intended for staging community events associated with the church.

Upper levels include the parish priest's offices and catechism rooms. The second floor houses the pastor's residence and the kitchen. The residence incorporates a splendid living room with a raised ceiling and top light, and includes a brick hearth and fireplace. It has fine views of the parish: housing and the community at large.

The western half of the site includes discreetly placed parking and a landscaped area, within rising walled ground, planted with olive trees. The whole of the secular precinct and the community centre is in white stucco, with the north elevation enlivened by balconies. The minimal nature of the centre is an appropriate contrast to the exuberance of the main church.

Although this is Meier's first church, the parti of the plan and section are unique within his work, and the beautiful white precast concrete walls of the shells a resounding success in the use of materials and structure. This church is truly part of the twenty-first century – a new landmark and place of pilgrimage for the faithful.

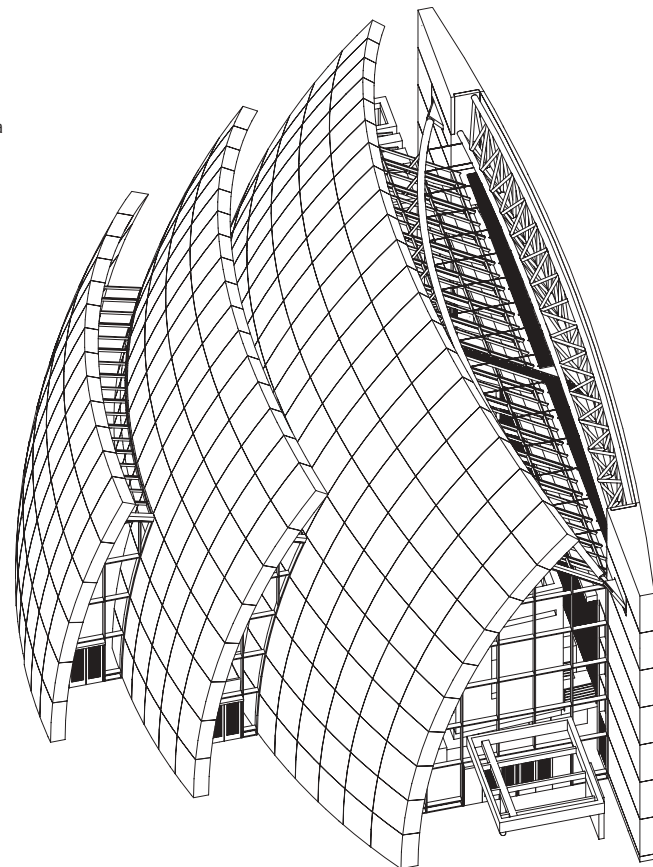
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4 Detail of organ loft.

5 Both literally and metaphorically, the church is a giver and receiver of light.



axonometric projection

CHURCH, ROME, ITALY
ARCHITECT
RICHARD MEIER

