

Divine Inspiration

Designing Monastere Sainte Claire

By David Leslie

Following the fire that destroyed their monastery in January 2003, the Sainte Claire order decided to rebuild their home on the same site. Design for the new Monastere Sainte Claire started in July 2003, construction began a year later, and the project was delivered in the spring of 2005.

The sisters wanted their new monastery to be beautiful but unpretentious, with sober lines and simple forms. At the same time, the order wanted a quality building that was:

- going to require very little maintenance;
- safe to use;
- favourable to prayer and work; and
- ecological and healthy to live in.

As a place of worship, the monastery must facilitate communion with the divine. To establish an appropriate setting, architectural and spatial contexts had to be conducive to inward reflection and contemplation. The chapel is particularly important in invoking a feeling of serenity, allowing people to experience a profound sense of inner peace. Along with other spaces, it must reveal a force between the material and spiritual worlds.

However, as a cloistered community, the monastery must satisfy diverse aspects of the sisters' lives, ranging from the spiritual and the professional to the physical and the social. This article, written by Monastere Sainte Claire's project architect, examines some of the materials and systems specified. While domestic quarters/workplaces for monastics (e.g. monks or nuns) can obviously be quite different from more traditional design projects, many good practices for accessibility, comfort, and sustainability remain universal.

Spirit of design

The new monastery sits on the old building's site in Lennoxville, just south of Sherbrooke, Que., in the Eastern Townships

All photos courtesy David Leslie