



modest **magnificence**

A palette of humble yet unapologetically modern materials blend together to generate a simple, contemplative new home in Toronto for a 123-year-old order of Anglican nuns.

Prayer. Meditation. Reading. Quiet acts of devotion. These are the typical hallmarks of monastic life. Theoretically they can be done anywhere, but ideally a secluded environment that fosters a contemplative spirit is best. So when the cacophonous 16-lane Highway 401 in Toronto was built mere metres from the home of the Sisterhood of St. John the Divine near the Don Valley, it became apparent that a change was necessary.

Founded as an Anglican monastic community in 1884, the Sisterhood chose to build what would be only their third home in the city adjacent to St. John's Rehab Hospital in North York, a hospital founded by the Sisterhood in 1937. The 337,900-sq.-ft. site allowed the building to be set well back from a busy residential thoroughfare to the north, and behind a large earth berm. A ring of mature trees planted by the sisters some 60 years previously serves to further isolate the convent from the din of traffic,

while also emphasizing a design scheme that Terry Montgomery of Toronto-based Montgomery Sisam calls "courts within courts."

This concept is directly analogous to the monastic tradition of cloisters, and in fact, a mediaeval nun would intuitively recognize the structure's private and inward looking layout. Montgomery employed a figure-eight plan, anchored by a pre-existing L-shaped nurse's residence on the site (renovated into a guest house to accommodate visitors attending retreats) that forms the southern section, and a 'sisters' enclosure' that incorporates all the private residential areas for the sisters' at the north end. In between are two enclosed courtyards, shared areas such as the refectory, infirmary and community room, and service areas.

The sister's enclosure, where all domestic life is centred, is designed on two levels: the active sisters bedrooms are located on the second floor, while the infirmary, intended for frail, elderly sisters is located on the ground floor. This arrangement puts those sisters in the infirmary closest to the active heart of the community — the chapel.

Indeed, the chapel is the locus of all physical and spiritual activities for the sisters' lives, and as such was accorded the highest

degree of design attention, reflected in the fact that the chapel is one of the few elements that breaks from the two-storey elemental brick volume that characterizes the rest of the complex. It's high, beech-lined vaulted ceiling has windows facing north towards the entrance of the site, and the design of the ceiling panels "is founded on the metaphor of an open hand raised toward the sky in prayer," says Montgomery. Soft Venetian plastered walls reflect beautiful stained-glass-filtered daylight, illuminating the space, while the spare, elemental design creates a serene backdrop for a number of artefacts, such as a limestone altar designed by Toronto sculptor Jacobine Jones in 1953, the Sanctuary Lamp and the Tabernacle, reclaimed from the convent's previous chapels and carefully incorporated to blend past and present.

Some of the vocabulary of the convent for the Sisterhood of St. John the Divine may be new — the vaulted chapel volume, or the concrete frame for the bell tower, for instance — but the quality of light and proportion, the focus on simple, pared down elevations and detailing and on spatial clarity are completely in-line with the essence of eliminating anything that distracts from communion with the divine. **B**



Photos by Tom Arban



Previous page top, left and above: The complex consists of a two-storey elemental brick volume with a random pattern of vertical window openings. The exceptions to this are the chapel and the timber-frame entrance canopy flanked by a concrete bell tower, elements whose distinct forms give them particular significance in contrast to the simplicity of the brick wall.

Previous page bottom: The chapel has a high, wood-lined vaulted ceiling with windows facing north towards the entrance of the site, creating a welcoming beacon to arriving visitors.