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# Dominican Convent Goes Green

BY P. J. BREMIER



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When the Dominican Sisters of San Rafael commissioned a new convent in 2003, they wanted it to reflect their commitment to good earth stewardship and decided to build it green. As a result, they were given the gold—a gold certificate from the U.S. Building Council recognizing their efforts in sustainable building.

For years, the congregation had been studying the Earth Charter, a global sustainable living initiative, which they

later endorsed. “It’s what we all should be doing,” says Sister Carla Kovack, O.P., one of two members of the order who conferred with the architects on the design of the convent. “We need to live more sustainably and simply and in right relationship with the earth or there won’t be an earth for the global community.”

They chose the San Francisco architecture firm of Van Meter Williams Pollack to design the eight-bedroom residence meant to function as both a home for training new sisters and as a hospitality center for the entire 130-member congregation, some of whom live off-site.

“I thought it was a hopeful approach on the part of the sisters to set a vision for their congregation,” says architect Fred Pollack, who worked with architect Benjamin Chuaqui on the plans. “They wanted a resource-friendly and healthy place to live that would serve them in the future.”

The Dominican Sisters of San Rafael have a long history in California that dates back more than 150 years. The congregation was formed in 1850 when the Bishop of California, Joseph Sadoc Alemany, persuaded Sister Mary Goemaere, a novice, to leave her French convent and open Santa Catalina School in Monterey, the first Catholic school in colonial California. In 1854 the congregation moved to Benicia; in 1889 it moved to its current location on Grand Avenue in San Rafael.

From its original majestic four-story motherhouse on ten acres to a collection of wonderful buildings on more than 110 acres, the Sisters have carefully managed the San Rafael campus, which up until 1969 included the now-independent Dominican University. When the motherhouse was damaged by fire in 1990, it was replaced with three smaller convents and an administration building.

The new green convent, named after Jane D'Aza, the mother of St. Dominic, the order's founder, was completed in 2005. "I knew nothing about building before," says Sister Carla, "but I learned from our architects. It was through their training, experience and commitment to green building that I was really educated. And green building is not just about the building itself, but construction, too. All of our unused materials were recycled instead of going to the landfill."

The 6,200-square-foot, two-story shingle-and-stucco convent, built with strong lines and a vibrant brick-red exterior, takes full advantage of the latest pro-environment technology. It has rooftop photovoltaic panels, solar-powered attic fans and toxic-free insulation of reclaimed materials. With programmable gas heaters in each room, the interior remains at a uniformly comfortable temperature, even with a floor made entirely from a mix of concrete and recycled fly ash.

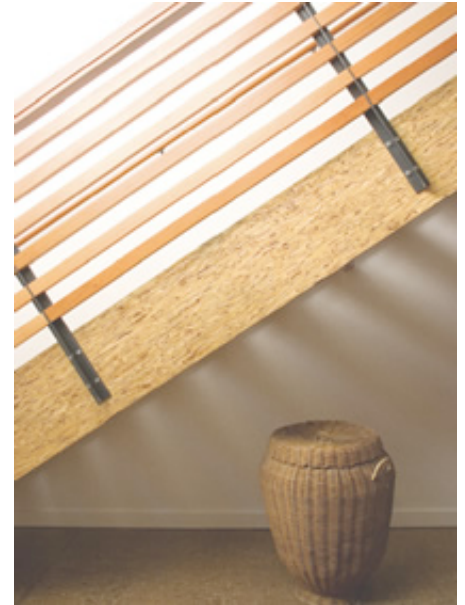
The roof solar panels heat the home's water, all appliances are energy efficient and the toilets and showers are water misers. Lighting is low-energy fluorescent, the paints, adhesives and sealants are made from low-impact materials, and the wood trim is lumber certified by the Forest Stewardship Council.

“There was a simplicity to the materials used, in part because of cost, but also because there was a conscious decision to utilize local materials that use less energy in production and assembly,” Pollack says.

## SIMPLE STYLE, FOUND FURNISHINGS

Two hallways originate from the foyer on the first floor of the ell-shaped home. One runs the length of the stacked bedrooms and bathrooms (a material-friendly method of arranging rooms in the same pattern on each floor), and the other offers access to the three common rooms and a chapel. A staircase to the second floor features a beam of engineered wood, and the railing is made of sustainably harvested wood, as is the rustic sliding barn door to the dining room.

In the kitchen, where the impact of communal living can be highest, traffic flow was a key consideration, so the room has multiple workstations, plenty of counter space and a natural linoleum floor. The recycling alcove and the herb-and-vegetable garden outside reflect the sisters’ respect for nature.



Recycled furnishings were used in every room. “I’m a good friend of Craigslist and the Salvation Army,” Sister Carla says. It took extra effort to coordinate the assorted pieces, but she wanted the rooms to be aesthetically pleasing. The living room, for example, takes its color cue of teal and pink for the rugs and upholstered pieces from a hanging print of Fra Angelico’s Annunciation. A sliding glass door between the room and the hall, rather than a conventional wall, lets in optimal light and exposes an enclosed flower garden beyond.

The chapel was designed to meet both environmental and reverential requirements. There are no pews — only chairs that, along with some important religious pieces, were reclaimed from another Dominican chapel that had closed in Manteca. The cabinets and suspended ceiling are made from sustainably harvested wood panels.



“It’s a distinctive space, and the direction of the ceiling is of exaltation,” Sister Carla notes. The windows, framed on the exterior to reduce glare, were an important design element. “When we were thinking about the



visuals for this room, we thought, what's better than God's nature? So, no matter where you are in this room, you can look out and see it."

### Green Garden, Wild Meadow

The enclosed flower garden takes advantage of a sunny southern exposure and offers the sisters the options of a pergola-shaded stroll, contemplative rest or easy cultivating. The water table is naturally replenished by a simple drainage method and, except for the Joseph's Coat climbing roses that beautifully repeat the color of the stucco, the plants are mostly native or low water use.

Despite the low fence that lends an open feel to the garden, the deer have yet to enter, presumably because they are misled by the overhead arbor. Instead, they graze in the adjacent meadow, a haven for small animals, birds and butterflies that was certified as a National Wildlife Federation wildlife habitat last year.

At about the same time, the Dominican Sisters were also notified of another distinction—the Jane D'Aza convent had received gold certification from the U.S. Green Building Council under its Leadership in Energy and Environmental Design program, one of just 11 such designations in California at the time.

"There's only one higher level and that's platinum," Sister Carla says, "but there are only a few of those certificate-holders in the world."

Then again, there's only one environmentally certified convent in the world and it's right here in Marin.