



Photographs by Kevin Moloney for The New York Times

**THE ABBEY'S HEAD AND HEART** High above the sandstone altar in the chapel, left, a cube of red glass represents the heart of Christ. Above, the copper dome, a visitor's first glimpse of the abbey.

## Nuns and an Architect in a Meeting of Two Credos

By MINDY SINK

VIRGINIA DALE, Colo.  
**F**OR a moment, Sister Ancilla Armijo seemed like any proud new homeowner. Looking heavenward, she swept her hand across the towering, domed ceiling to the skylight windows of the new chapel here. And she extolled the virtues of simplicity, scoffing at the thought of stained glass where there are now views of snowy mountaintops.

"Why do we need those things?" she asked. "The land is beautiful, the building is beautiful — it just lifts you up to prayer."

In this most striking American setting, where the Great Plains meet the Rocky Mountains, a vision of the most improbable sort is materializing: a 21st-century Benedictine abbey. In November, Sister Ancilla and the 20 other nuns of the Abbey of St. Walburga moved into the nunnery, which was designed and built for them here in northern Colorado, about five miles from Wyoming.

What exactly, one wonders, should a nunnery look like today?

It fell to the architect, David Barrett, to bring together the natural setting with the spiritual and utilitarian needs of the cloister — not to mention reconciling his own design instincts with the eager and active advice of 21 nuns.

For two years, the nuns, who integrate a life of contemplative prayer with their daily chores, have lived in temporary buildings on the property. Before moving to this century-old homestead, the abbey had been quartered in Boulder, two hours to the

south, for more than 60 years. The nuns who founded the monastery came from the 11th-century Abbey of St. Walburga in Eichstätt, Germany; they left in 1935, fleeing the Nazis.

In the early 1990's, as growth in Boulder began to encroach on their land and peaceful way of life, the nuns began to look for a new home. On the day they began construction at a site they had purchased south of Denver, word came that an anonymous donor had offered them land here. The sisters headed for the hills.

Throughout the design process, lively exchanges between Mr. Barrett and the sisters centered on God's presence inside and outside the chapel and living quarters.

"You're in the chapel, but the valley and the rocks and the trees are right there, too," Sister Hildegard Dubnick said. "We were really talking about the theology of our life and how it's reflected in the architecture and what does it say about where God is."

Mr. Barrett, of Barrett Steele Architects, in Boulder, had a few questions of his own. "Just like any other home or building, it has functional needs," he said. "But the real soul of the architecture was going to be in their values and their spirituality."

The nuns and the architect found themselves harmonizing opposites: ancient and modern, beauty and frugality, the heavens and earth.

"There is a feeling of groundedness, then ascension," said Mr. Barrett, 51, as he stood on the ruddy tiles of the chapel looking up 42 feet at the triangular windows and into the blue Colorado sky.

The chapel is both the head and the heart of life in the abbey. During



**AMONG TIMELESS FORMS** Cradled by a rocky, gray-brown bluff, the new Abbey of St. Walburga, above, suggests an old stone monastery. Below, Sister Hildegard, in her bedroom.



Abbey of St. Walburga

The mountains are more uplifting than any stained glass.

early prayers, the sisters, facing one another across the chapel, can watch the sun rise through its many windows. On the floor between them is a cross formed from the darkest of the red earth-toned tiles.

The building itself resembles an ancient posture of supplication. The copper-domed chapel sits as the head, and the two-story residential wings are like outstretched arms. Mr. Barrett also evoked the sisters' daily prayers in the exterior buttresses. "They are sort of in a bow, like the nuns are at vespers," he said.

The look of an old stone monastery was evoked with the cement-gray stucco that blends in with the surrounding rocks. The roughness of the exterior walls also appears inside along the pink sandstone stairs and adjoining smooth white walls.

"We wanted the beauty outside to be reflected inside," said Mother Abbess Maria-Thomas Beil, who speaks with a slight German accent.

But it is the simplicity of monastic life that is reflected in the rest of the abbey, in the bedrooms and workrooms of the nuns, ages 27 to 86. There are "cells" for the sisters: 11-by-11-foot rooms with double-wide windows and window seats. Rooms on the upper floor share bathrooms; the older sisters have larger rooms

downstairs with private baths.

In the bedrooms and workrooms the personalities of the nuns are most visible. One room has a pink floral bedcover and flowering plants in the window; another has pine bookshelves and a white spread.

"I love my room," said Sister Maria-Walburga Shortemeyer, 31. "I consider it another sacred space." Pictures of nieces and nephews are arranged on the raw wood shelves.

In Sister Ancilla's workroom, a wooden loom dominates her computer and printer, and large bright spools of tapestry yarns stand out on a neat shelf. Sister Rafaella Di-Bouda, 27, giggled as she described how she had arranged her own tiny spools of thread in her workroom. Over her habit she wore a gingham-checked apron.

Each of the nuns has several duties, from birthing calves and feeding pigs to sewing and baking bread, in addition to a modern "craft" — data entry work they do for outside clients. They hope that their various handicrafts — knitting, candlemaking, weaving — can someday be sold in their gift shop.

The sisters will use the proceeds from the sale of the earlier land to help finance the second phase of this project. To date, the construction here has totaled \$5.4 million. If they raise enough money for Phase 2, each of the wings will be expanded: the sisters will occupy one wing, leaving the other free for guests at ecumenical retreats.

For now, the nuns are excited about their new home, as is, "I think," said Sister Maria Michael Newe, "we feel a little bit more than blessed to be here."