

Italian marble revives sanctuary

Although the Discalced Carmelite Nuns lead simple lives, they felt it appropriate to transform their dated, austere sanctuary into a beautiful house of worship with a selection of fine marble in honor of its 50th anniversary

BY JENNIFER ADAMS

To celebrate the 50th anniversary of the completion of The Monastery of the Infant Jesus of Prague, which is located within 60 acres of wooded land near Traverse City, MI, the Discalced Carmelite Nuns desired a facelift for their sanctuary. They turned to Duncan G. Stroik Architect LLC of South Bend, IN, for the firm's expertise in classical architecture. Working closely with the Discalced Carmelite Nuns, Stroik and his team transformed what was once a stark, austere sanctuary into a place of elegance with a variety of marble from northern Italy.

"Carmelite Nuns always have a call to poverty, but are encouraged to ornament the chapel of the Lord" explained

Project Manager Thomas Stroka of Duncan G. Stroik Architect. "The walls of the chapel were exposed concrete masonry units, and the only stone furnishing in the sanctuary was a trapezoidal freestanding marble altar without any molding profiles. The flooring in the sanctuary was carpeting. To celebrate the 50th anniversary of the completion of their monastery, the Discalced Carmelite Nuns decided to transform the iconography and beautify the chapel, which serves as a place of prayer for the nuns and the local community. It is the most important part of the monastery.

"Mother of Mary of Jesus, who is the Prioreess, first approached us in October 2011,"

Stroka went on to say. "She came to us because of our focus on tradition and classical detailing. She wanted us to transform the austere chapel and sanctuary into a beautiful House of God."

According to Stroka, the presence of the cloistered Carmelites is meant to be felt but not seen, even in the chapel. As a result, they sing for the liturgy, receive the Eucharist and pray the Hours from a private Choir, which is screened from the public.

To set specific design objectives, Stroka and Duncan Stroik, the firm's principal, sat down with the Discalced Carmelite Nuns. The first priority was sightlines from the Choir and from the nave to the altar and



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tabernacle. Secondly, new iconography in the sanctuary had to be developed, and thirdly, there was a discussion of materials, lighting and sound system needs.

"The Carmelite Nuns knew that they wanted to beautify the sanctuary with a variety of marble, and they reviewed possibilities with Duncan and the supplier in Italy," explained Stroka. "The nuns looked at photos of the marble blocks available and at examples of projects cut in those marbles. Based upon the color variation and the beauty of the marble veining, the nuns selected stones for each element in their new sanctuary."

In addition to the architect, the Carmelite Nuns worked closely with a stone consultant, Stone Consulting di Roberto Pagliari & Co. Sas of Sarzana (SP), Italy. "Duncan always finds it appropriate to use as much marble that the client can afford — especially in the sanctuary and at the altars of the church," said Stroka. "Roberto is good

at finding blocks at the quarries that are available right now. He can do mock-ups in terms of book-matching and veining. It helps us determine with the client what will look good. He is also skilled at finding some of these unique marbles."

SELECTING THE MARBLE

Stroka explained that consideration was given to how the nuns and the community of worshipers experience the Mass. "The altar should be raised up on a separate step," he said. "This gave us the opportunity to put in a slab floor."

To create the slab floor in the sanctuary area, White Carrara marble was chosen. The material was also used for the altar profiles, the side shrine mensas and stair nosings throughout the sanctuary.

Stroka explained that after the construction documents phase, it was determined that a new structural floor would be required to support the thick-set marble slab floor

and marble altars. The architect and structural engineer had to devise a low-profile system that would keep the finished floor elevations of the Carrara floor the same.

Adding a subtle contrast to the White Carrara marble floor, the high altar is composed of Verde Alpi marble columns — quarried in Issogne, the Aosta region of Italy — that frame book-matched arched panels of Cipollino Apuano Rosso marble, which provide a backdrop for the crucifix. The column bases are made of Statuario marble.

Additionally, panels of Alabastro Egiziano — known by the Ancient Romans as "Alabastro Cotognino" — were incorporated into the base of the high altar. "The five Egyptian alabaster panels were also book-matched," according to Stroka.

Sitting on top of the high altar is a domed Rinascimento tabernacle, which was designed by Stroik and fabricated out of white marble by Granda Liturgical Arts of Madrid, Spain. "It was quite an endeavor



"It was important to the nuns that their original altar — in continual use since 1962 — was somehow integrated into the new altar," explained Stroka. "One large trapezoidal piece of the Rojo Alicante marble from the altar was shipped to the fabricator in Italy to be cut and included as eight book-matched panels in the new freestanding altar." Additionally, a replica of the original pelican relief was fabricated from Botticino marble. Photo Credit: Duncan G. Stroik Architect

to get in place," said Stroka, adding that Rinascimento means "renaissance." "It arrived a day before the dedication, due to a delay in Customs. It was really cutting it close. On the tabernacle, Duncan included composite columns, which are a combination of Ionic and Corinthian (style)." The tabernacle weighs 477 pounds and stands 3 feet tall.

Brescia Capraia marble was selected for the side shrine backdrop panels. "The

nuns determined that the side shrines of Saint Joseph and Our Lady are the most important," explained Stroka. "The marble came from Massa in the Carrara area of Italy. It has purple, gray and green veins running through it. They loved the veining and subtle color."

REMEMBERING THE ORIGINAL ALTAR

Built of Rojo Alicante marble from Spain, the original free-standing altar

was trapezoidal and the only marble piece in the chapel, which was dedicated in 1962. "The nuns wanted to remember that original altar in the new chapel," said Stroka, adding that it presented an interesting challenge to the design team. "They also wanted to incorporate the pelican relief (that had existed) into the new altar. It was over \$4,000 to ship the pelican and one of the trapezoidal pieces to Italy to be cut and included as



Sitting on top of the high altar is a domed Rinascimento tabernacle, which was designed by Stroik and fabricated out of white marble by Granda Liturgical Arts of Madrid, Spain.
Photo Credit: Dietrich Floeter



The original plan called for the existing pelican relief to be incorporated into the new altar, but it was broken during shipment to Italy. As a result, the Italian stone carvers created a new one in Botticino marble to match the original material. "A piece of history was lost, but it was an opportunity to create something similar and more beautiful," Stroka said. Photo Credit: Duncan G. Stroik Architect

eight book-matched panels in the new freestanding altar."

While repurposing the Rojo Alicante was successful, Stroka explained that the pelican relief had shattered into pieces when shipped. "It was a challenge to overcome that," he said. "A piece of history was lost, but it was an opportunity to create something similar and more beautiful. (The new one) was carved in Botticino marble, to match the original material."

The design process for The Monastery of the Infant Jesus of Prague went on for four months, and the construction was

completed in eight months. "We do all drafting by hand," said Stroka. "It helps to find more creative solutions for things and forced us to look at every corner of the chapel.

The renovation was dedicated in February 2013 and met with enthusiasm by the

community, according to Stroka. "The results of the renovation are splendid," stated one friend of the community. "The chapel looks so beautiful. I hope it will lead to renewed devotion to Our Lord in the Blessed Sacrament and in the celebration of Holy Mass." ■

The Monastery of the Infant Jesus of Prague Traverse City, MI

Architect: Duncan G. Stroik Architect LLC, South Bend, IN

Stone Installer: Booms Stone Co., Redford, MI

Stone Consultant/Supplier: Stone Consulting di Roberto Pagliari & Co. Sas, Sarzana (SP), Italy

Stone Carver: Paolo Costa & Co., Carrara (MS), Italy

Essentials of religious architecture

With the plurality of religious traditions present in the world today, is it possible to speak of common elements of religious architecture? Just as each faith has distinctive qualities and beliefs, so too are those distinctions expressed in architecture. Yet, we find that there are indeed elements shared across the sacred architecture of peoples of various times and places. My own study over the past two decades has led me to the conclusion that there are three crucial dimensions to any sacred architecture: procession, beauty and transcendence.

Religion seeks to bring the human person closer to the God-head through prayer, sacrifices and rituals. A religious architecture, then, should embody and facilitate this communal movement from the profane to the sacred. This procession begins when the exterior of the church (or temple or mosque) is seen and recognized from afar, by its steeple, bell towers, pedimented columnar facade or dome. The entrance into a sacred space marks a transition from the earthly into a heavenly realm. Once inside, the architectural procession continues to the sanctuary, where the holy actions of worship take place, such as proclaiming the Word of God and consecrating the Eucharist. The altar where this consecration takes place is the most important element of a church, the meeting place between God and man.

Because of the sacredness of what happens in a religious building, and because the purpose of worship is to honor the Lord, sacred architecture should be beautiful. The beauty of the building reflects the beauty of God and participates in the assembly's chorus of praise. This beauty comes from using noble materials and appropriate ornamentation that have been well designed by the architect and well constructed by the contractors and craftsmen. Care and attention to detail at all levels of the project are important for any successful building, but especially so for sacred architecture.

The third crucial element is transcendence, which seeks to express the "other," the beyond, the eternal. Fundamental to the experience of transcendence is height. However, it is not sufficient to have a tall building; vertical proportions are also needed. For instance, compare the Houston Astrodome, at 200 feet tall, with

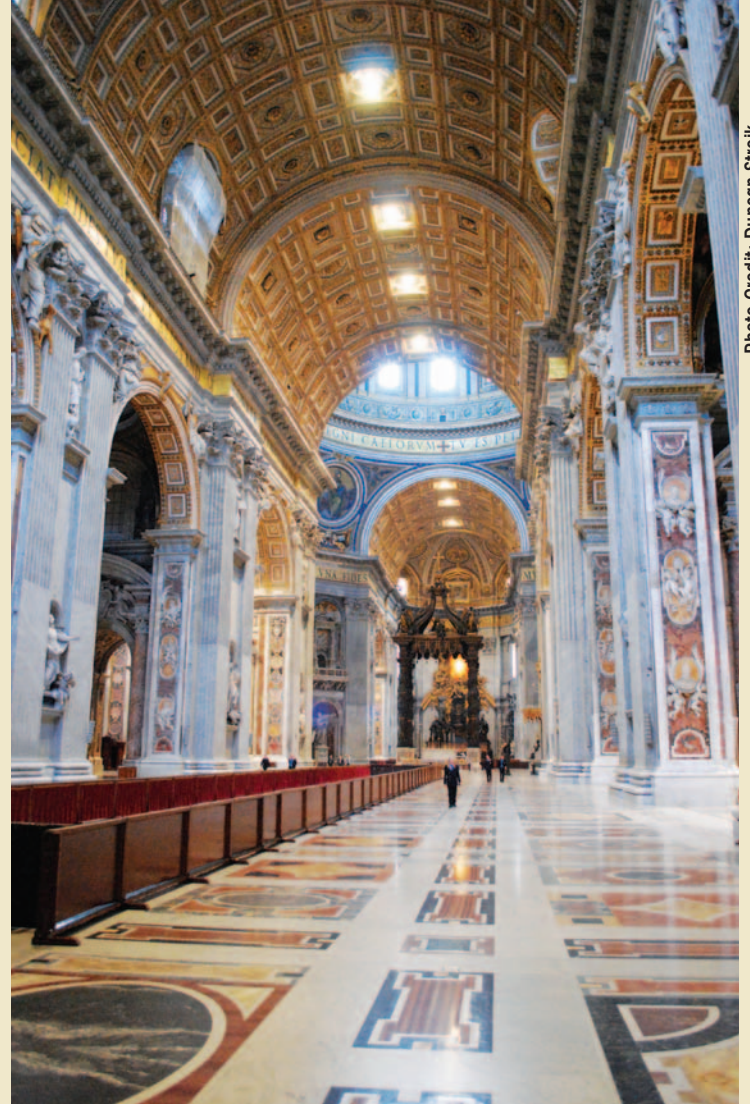


Photo Credit: Duncan Stroik

With a nave only 150 feet tall, St. Peter's Basilica in Rome is smaller than the Houston Astrodome, but it is not transcendent. Elements such as proportion, the way light comes in from above, materials and architectural syntax all combine to express transcendence and give worshippers a taste of eternity, a taste of the Divine.

St. Peter's Basilica in Rome, with a nave only 150 feet tall. The Astrodome was much grander, much more vast, and maybe even more impressive to adherents of the religion of sport. But I would argue that while the stadium is huge and shocking, it is not transcendent. So what are the things that differentiate St. Peter's and make it transcendent? Proportion, the way light comes in from above, materials and architectural syntax all combine to express transcendence and give worshippers a taste of eternity, a taste of the Divine.

Throughout history, sacred architecture has included procession, beauty and transcendence. However, in modern times, we often find them lacking in religious buildings, whether by oversight or deliberate exclusion by the architect. It is essential that we recover these elements of sacred architecture in the projects we ourselves undertake, both to preserve the rich heritage of faith handed down over the centuries, and to create fitting places of worship for the generations to come.

— *Duncan Stroik, Duncan G. Stroik Architect LLC*