

Labor of Love

Jean-Pierre Heim renovates a beloved but rundown Paris church founded in 1890.



LA CHAPELLE DE L'ASSOMPTION, consecrated by the Archbishop of Paris in 1890 and located in the city's 16th arrondissement on the Right Bank, had passed its centenary without undergoing as much as a gentle face-lift. One year short of the millennium, however, the telltale signs of disrepair could no longer be ignored. Hence the parishioners' decision to engage architect Jean-Pierre Heim to handle the pro-bono job of renovating the 1,000-sq.-ft. church. His greatest reward, he says, was the gratitude of the congregation and diocese.

Surveying the damage inflicted by neglect and old age, Heim confirmed that except for the bare-bones structure, little could be preserved as found. Hence he assembled a crew of professionals who, skilled in the tasks of restoration, deftly worked from scaffolding almost touching the 45-ft.-high ceiling vault. Laboring by hand, they cleaned, sanded and refinished marble, wood, and plaster parts. Old paint layers were stripped. Cleaning of Corinthian capitals was another exigent process requiring a light steady touch; integrally colored cement was used mainly to update textured walls. Original oak flooring was renovated too.

Key colors, Heim goes on, come to the fore on the deep blue ceiling and terra-cotta-hued walls, both borrowed from 17th-century Italian baroque cathedrals. Why go to Italy to select the palette for a French church? Because, he rejoins, that was the homeland of many artists working in France at the relevant time. Out of the camera's range is the altar, backed by a 7-ft.-high/10-ft.-wide cross cut into the three-ft.-thick wall. The incision is slightly angled and filled with textured glass casting, as it were, a sunny reflection on late afternoons.

None of the above, reinforced by much research and documentary studies, could have been accomplished without the church's nuns, Sister Thérèse Agnès in particular, says the architect. The pro-bono job took about six months. Budget figures are withheld.

—Monica Geran



Opposite and this page: Three views of the narthex focusing on the rehabilitated oak doors, refinished arches, and repainted iron grillwork. Bands with white-on-black mosaic inscriptions run between balcony level and clerestories. Deep blue and terra-cotta are the predominant colors.

FRESCO/SCRIPTURAL SIGNAGE RESTORATION: CATHERINE FEFF. PAINTING/PLASTERING: COPPER SOCIÉTÉ. CARPET: PIERRE-LOUIS JULLET AT TISCA. CABINETRY, GENERAL CONTRACTOR: MICHEL SOUMOL AT ZACHARIE.