

Prayer-haunted

by [Suzanne Guthrie](#) in the [August 24, 2010](#) issue



The chapel at St. Hilda's House. Image by the [Community of the Holy Spirit](#), licensed under [Creative Commons](#).

Prayers linger in choir stalls, soak into walls. Centuries of prayer can make you feel buoyant in medieval European cathedrals. Gratitude settles over you like a benediction within busy urban shrines. When you can't pray, you can go to a place consecrated for prayer and let the residue of others' prayers carry you effortlessly, wordlessly into a state of prayer.

The sisters of the Community of the Holy Spirit sold their trio of linked brownstones in New York City to Columbia University in order to build a green convent on a vacant lot further uptown. The new convent features environmentally sustainable materials, water heated by solar power, rainwater collection and plant-covered roofs. The choices of stones and bricks and tiles, the uses of light and ventilation, all reflect the sisters' commitment to the reparation of and respect for Earth. They've designed a holy place to live around the act of praying.

I visited the shell of the new convent on a sunny day when the sky glistened with storybook clouds. I made my way from what will be the chapel at the heart of the house, along with the kitchen and refectory, to the upstairs offices and guestrooms, to the future library where French doors open to a garden on the chapel roof. The next two upper stories will be sisters' cells. The elevator will open onto the roof so that elderly sisters can easily enjoy the garden, the sun and the view.

I lingered on the roof, orienting myself. Facing west, the Hudson River runs left to right. To the south you see City College and the tall buildings of midtown Manhattan. From the east—the Bronx and Yankee stadium—you'll be able to hear the crowds cheering on summer evenings. Below, the tree-lined streets of West Harlem fan out like a moss garden.

Even without interior walls, the efficient new convent feels lovely and loved. Nevertheless, the sisters express deep nostalgia for the 60 years of convent life in the old brownstones that they adapted for other purposes. "This is our last Christmas in the old convent," the sisters said, or "Our last Holy Week," "our last Pentecost." The two senior nuns came to live in this building in 1950 and 1958. One of them remembers the flophouse across the street and women shouting to their clients from the windows one warm Good Friday, "Just be patient! Everyone will get his turn!" The nun tells me she expects to meet those women for whom she's prayed all these years like old friends "in heaven."

A unique sense of place in a consecrated building is essential to monastic hospitality. You come as a guest to place yourself purposefully in those prayer-soaked spaces. I came the first time as a heartbroken woman terrified by an impending divorce. For over 20 years I benefited from the community's generosity and deepening friendships as a guest and grateful friend during the changes in my life—my children growing up, the turns in career, a second marriage, life's tragedies, losses, triumphs. On the day I threw myself into the Reverend Mother's arms heaving with the release of pent-up sobs, I could not imagine that a man I'd meet and marry in the future would propose that we live our dreams alongside these very sisters at their upstate organic farm.

As beautiful or as inspiring as a building might be, faithfulness to the order's vision and charism and that plodding, repetitive praying without ceasing create the real atmosphere in a community. A building, like a sacred vessel, can shape the expression of that charism. In *The Architecture of Happiness*, Alain de Botton says,

"John Ruskin proposed that we seek two things of our buildings. We want them to shelter us. And we want them to speak to us—to speak to us of whatever we find important and need to be reminded of."

I recently spent a week with the city sisters. Empty closets, assortments of giveaways displayed on the sidewalk steps, library books in methodically labeled piles, color-coded stickers on furniture and lamps—all reminded me of the impending move. Still, the building itself imparted a sense of peace and an effortless kind of prayer.

My own prayers linger in guest rooms, library, refectory and chapel, but especially in the back stairwell. On more than one occasion insight alighted upon me unexpectedly, as sometimes happens when you're not setting your mind directly on solving a problem or necessarily desiring a solution.

We don't know Columbia's proposed use of the old convent. Those old prayers won't leave 113th Street and settle on Convent Avenue in Harlem. Instead, like love, prayer begets prayer exponentially, never diminishing the source.

If prayer soaks into walls, what sorts of odd influences might haunt the old convent building? Will life-changing revelations come to its employees as they descend the stairs? I suspect so. They won't know what hit 'em.