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w o r s h i p

THE ABBEY OF SAINT WALBURGA

Virginia Dale, CO

The design is in harmony with nature. The building folds well into the natural landscape, offering a warm, inviting liturgical space, blending luminously with the landscape of weathered stone. The symmetry of the interior and the use of materials support a calm, reflective atmosphere.

Faith & Form Millennium Award Jury Comments

A permanent residence for 30 Benedictine nuns and retreat center for 40 overnight guests, the abbey houses education, worship, crafts, hospitality, shop, gardening/agricultural activities, and other functions particular to a communal residence (bedrooms, bakery, kitchen and dining spaces, common laundry, libraries, infirmary, etc.)

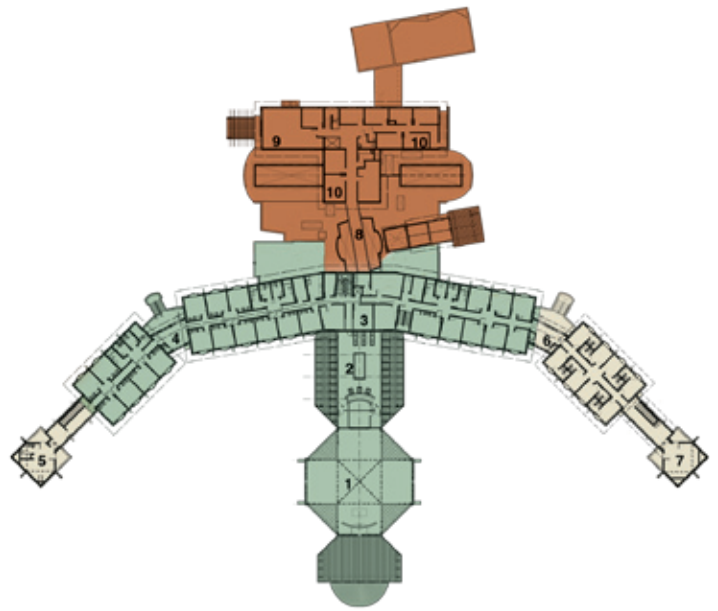
Our involvement began prior to site selection, as we participated in analysis and evaluation of several sites to determine that most suited to unique programmatic requirements. We then adapted our participatory processes to integrate the nuns' traditional communal decision-making processes for programming, planning and design decisions, using workshops to obtain feedback and explore alternatives.

The project's master planning included building siting, roads, emergency service access, fire protection facilities, waste water treatment, agricultural areas, utilities and landscaping. Barrett Studio coordinated the engineering, landscape architecture, and extensive agency review including a Special Use Review, while directing implementation of the master plan. A Benedictine abbey is a study of continuity, where consideration is made for occupants hundreds of years from now. We shepherded the Abbey through reviews and phasing that first relocated the sisters in temporary facilities on site, then commenced construction for a facility that takes their contemplative life into a new millennium.





In keeping with the Benedictine way of life, the program called for simplicity and economy in the design of spaces and use of materials. Rastra Block panels use recycled polystyrene to form thick, highly insulated walls out of waste.



Phasing is accommodated in segmented wings that can grow over time to the East and West.

Sited on a gentle south slope, against a backdrop of ponderosa pines and scrub oaks, the Abbey's East-West axis provides optimal solar geometry for the Colorado climate. The chapel rises as the dominant structure, much as village churches provided community focus in traditional European villages. The architecture is formed by the intersection of two axes running East-West & North-South: geometry rooted in sacred traditions.

Longevity of building materials, site orientation maximizing renewable solar energy potential, and energy conservation are primary strategies for creating this environmentally sensitive community. For smaller detached buildings, a variety of approaches utilizing local sustainable materials (straw bale) and vernacular construction techniques are being analyzed. Using a palette of renewable, healthy materials results in minimal maintenance and graceful aging.

The design challenge involved researching both the functional and symbolic needs of a particular spiritual tradition, and adapting those traditional elements to a particular site and context. While the Benedictine faith and tradition is expressed in the design of the master plan and facilities, it is synthesized through a relationship with its environment. Other "useful dichotomies" included community identity v. hospitality role, function of spaces v. symbolic significance, privacy & silence v. relationship & communication. Above all, we recognized that our role was not merely to resolve these dichotomies at a functional level, but to allow both master plan and facilities to form a whole greater than the sum of the parts — to express the poetry of those aspirations powerful enough to have brought these women together in their spiritual community.

