



This page: from the farm's pond, we look up towards the convent's west wing, which shelters the chapterhouse, the kitchen and refectory, the classrooms and, on the top two floors, the friars' cells. Opposite: instead of a traditional cloister, two glazed corridors intersect in the courtyard. The pyramidion above the oratory overlooks the sloping roof of the atrium



CLOISTER IN THE CLOUDS

Designed by Le Corbusier in the 1950s, the Couvent Sainte-Marie de La Tourette incorporates a roof terrace that's wide open to the sky but whose walls block out most of the Beaujolais landscape. Designed to foster prayer, it's one of several inspired uses of light that the Swiss/French master incorporated into this Dominican monastery, now restored. It's heaven up here, says Philippe Seulliet. Photography: Guillaume de Laubier



Above left: the pebble-encrusted loggia with its fretwork is identical to those at the Unité d'Habitation, Nantes, begun in the same year. Above right: shields deliberately block off views at the end of the cell corridors.

Below left: the boiler-room chimney has the allure of a lookout tower in a Medieval castle. Below right: circulation occurs in the upper part of the convent, while a forest of pilotis below allows the terrain to slope away unevenly.





Above left: Iannis Xenakis, a musician and Le Corbusier's assistant, designed the undulating glass surfaces. Above right: to light this stairwell, a design resembling the blade of a key was cut into the reinforced concrete

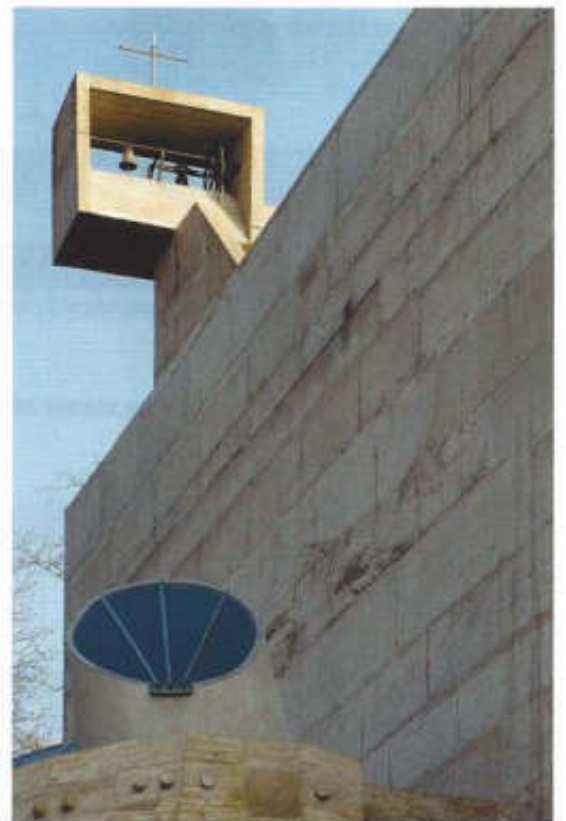
Below left: beside a Mondrian-esque bay of glass and concrete quadrilaterals, three convex walls screen the conciergerie. Below right: the human need for colour, said Le Corbusier, was as fundamental as 'water and fire'





Above left: a trademark 'light cannon' illuminates a little altar, whose cross and candlestick were designed by the architect. Above right: the sacristy lies behind an oblique red wall, to the right of the dominant main altar

Below left: a niche containing the organ overlooks the nave, whose stalls were originally designed for 80 student brothers and professors. Below right: the north wall of the church, with its bell tower, surmounts the crypt





Seven little altars - one for each of the deadly sins - are arranged in stepped terraces in the crypt, thereby compensating for the slope. At first they were employed to perform individual masses for priests, until, that is, the liturgical reforms of the Second Vatican Council between 1962 and 1965. They are lit by three light cannons painted in white, red and blue



LECORBUSIER was at the height of his artistic career when he designed the Couvent Sainte-Marie de La Tourette in Beaujolais. Completed in 1959, it was listed as a historic building by the state two decades later. This 20th-century masterpiece had nevertheless been ravaged by time, and problems with leaks, electricity and plumbing were rife. When it did not conform to certain safety standards, the monastery was even threatened with closure.

The authorities decided to refurbish the building. It took seven years, from 2006 to 2013, and cost €6 million, 80 per cent of which was provided by the state. 'First we had to secure the fabric of the building,' explains Didier Repellin, architect of Historic Monuments. Leakage from the roof terrace was repaired with layers of asphalt, raising the aerial cloister by 20cm. With more efficient insulation, it was restored to its original level, leaving only a view of the hilly horizon from within the precincts. The walls had to be cleaned without destroying the patina of age; an elderly stonemason reproduced the roughcast 1950s plaster using a boxwood-and-laurel brush. Many glass panels have been replaced with ones a millimetre thicker. Some had already broken when La Tourette first opened; the village glazier regularly exclaimed: 'More broken glass at the monastery!'

All the cells have been refurbished and the friars' doubled in size; almost half of them, around 50, house the annual 8,000 visitors – future architects, artists and pilgrims. During our stay, we talked with some women on a retreat: a Zen Japanese, a Buddhist Finn,

a Catalan PhD student and some musicians rehearsing interludes for an evening in the church devoted to Claudel's psalms. During the first three years of restoration, the community moved into the farm down the hill; they then returned to live among the scaffolding, joyfully witnessing the elimination of the stains of time.

The Dominicans are open to the world; their vocation is to teach and preach. Only ten or so now live in this immense concrete building, intended for 100. Aged between 35 and 85, some have had unexpected careers: one is a graduate of the Ecole Polytechnique; one a former professional trumpet player; another, the oldest member, a prolific writer and former head of a religious television programme. Many are teachers; some devote their time to the poor; one takes charge of the visitor accommodation, another of the 70-hectare walled estate.

Brother Marc Chauveau, an art historian, has been organising exhibitions here since 2009, the 50th anniversary of La Tourette. He has hosted shows by Vera Molnar, Stéphane Couturier, Ian Tyson, Alan Charlton, Giuseppe Penone, François Morellet and his students at the Beaux-Arts de Paris, Eric Michel, Anne and Patrick Poirier, Philippe Favier. Morellet, still active in spite of his 88 years, remembers his gigantic white-neon rosary hanging from the church ceiling, transfigured into a flame rising towards heaven – it became 'a symbol that I had not imagined in advance at all'.

Coming from an order renowned for its intellectual curiosity, Father Marie-Alain Couturier had been fighting religious aca-



demicism as editor of the review *L'Art Sacré* between 1936 and 1954. He commissioned the finest artists, from Rouault to Chagall, to decorate the church on the Plateau d'Assy. In 1948, he corresponded with Matisse during the design of his chapel for the Dominican sisters in Vence. And at the end of 1952, he approached Le Corbusier with the project for La Tourette, suggesting he base it on the simple Thoronet abbey in Provence.

With the slight upturn in vocations in postwar France, the Dominicans were keen to create a new monastery for 75 novice friars. When Le Corbusier, then in his sixties, saw the hillside site in the spring of 1953, he designed a plan on the basis of the horizontal line of the roof meeting a 10m incline, which the structure touches where it can, supported by a forest of piles, posts and arches. In the west, the top two floors of the main wing overlooking the valley are still reserved for the friars, with a private lift to avoid the stairs. Since 1970, the public have been accommodated opposite, in the entrance wing, and also the south wing, above the library, which is almost as mysterious as the one in *The Name of the Rose*.

Designing a closed quadrilateral, Le Corbusier had in mind the Carthusian monastery of Ema, near Florence, which he visited in 1907. At La Tourette, the cells' proportions derive from Le Corbusier's Modulor system, which is based on the golden ratio and the human body's dimensions. Frugality and discipline are well suited to standardised minimalism: washbasin, wardrobe, bed, desk and loggia all fit into around 12sq m.

In the courtyard, two transparent passageways intersect. The longer, oblique one draws the faithful towards the sanctuary's revolving steel door, the other to the chapterhouse and refectory. They are lit by broad windows of glass and concrete, *pans de verre ondulatoires* (undulating glass surfaces) designed by Le Corbusier's assistant Iannis Xenakis, according to the mathematical laws of the latter's first musical composition, *Metastasis*. The church, in contrast, serves as a barrier against the north winds, a fortress-like hermetically sealed box, pierced only by a skylight 14m up, a vertical glass screen facing the setting sun, and horizontal slits of bright stained glass. 'Cannons' capture the overhead light in the sacristy and crypt, which contains a succession of seven small terraced altars, once used for daily mass. Ringing with the sound of the organ, this science-fiction catacomb transports us to the hereafter. The bell tower, shaped like a stylised sphinx, and the pyramidion atop the oratory also reflect the esoteric tastes of Le Corbusier, who claimed his status as a heretic descended from the Cathars and who initialled his letters with a crow, the bird of alchemy.

Sadly, two major crises, the Vatican II revolution and the *événements* of May 1968, led to the departure of the students from La Tourette, which instead became a spiritual and architectural conference centre. Since then, the friars have continued their mission of prayer, hospitality and dialogue with contemporary arts ■ *Couvent Sainte-Marie de La Tourette can be visited by guided tour only. For more information, ring 00 33 4 72 19 10 90, or visit couventdelatourette.fr*

Le Corbusier conceived the roof terraces, deliberately aligned with the hilly horizon, as an aerial cloister suitable for prayer and contemplation