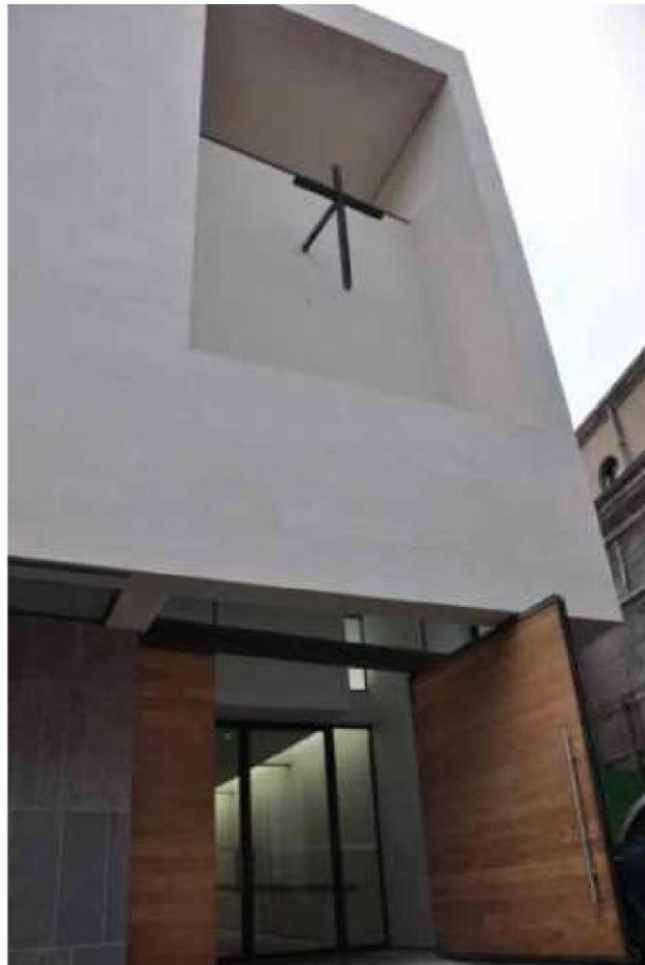


## Notre Dame Rosary Church Les Lilas, France by ENIA Architectes

The Les Lilas church was built back in 1887 as a temporary structure (using superficial foundations, plaster, timber), and was recently threatening to fall into ruin. The Commune of Les Lilas (a commune in the eastern suburbs of Paris, France) and the diocese of Saint Denis (the French 'department' where Les Lilas is located) therefore launched an architectural competition in 2005 for the construction of a new church and an adjoining parish centre. The design development proceeded in close consultation with the Commune of Les Lilas (owners of the church) and the Catholic diocese (assignee of the church and owners of the parish centre). In order for regular worship to continue uninterrupted, the old church building had to be kept in service during construction, which therefore required a phased programme divided into several stages. Phase 1 has now come to an end with the delivery of the new church building, which initiates the demolition of the old church building next door. In its place, the bell tower and parish centre will subsequently be built, physically joined to the new church building. Designed to accommodate a 500-seat church building, a parish centre with living quarters for 3 priests, the parish administration itself, catechisation and other multipurpose rooms as well as an outdoor garden, this ensemble is well inscribed into the wider context of the official urban development zone of the city centre. The Commune of Les Lilas also aspired to use this ambitious operation to create an exemplary project in terms of environmental sustainability.



This new church is inserted into a very diverse urban fabric which is typical of the old working class areas on the outskirts of Paris. Unlike the relatively discreet version of the church in 1887, this new version seeks to doubly affirm its status as a public facility. The use of a simple site plan, a generous forecourt, as well as the forthcoming bell tower, gives the building a certain urban quality and an increased visibility on Paris Street, which is a major road in the city of Les Lilas.



Obliged to ensure the uninterrupted continuity of their liturgical services, which meant having to construct the new before demolishing the old, the new church building is situated on the previously empty portion of the site to the south. Its geometry enlarges the forecourt which increases the amount of public space. As for the pastoral centre, this building angles itself around a garden which is slightly elevated above road level, but which retains a sense of privacy. The two "wings" of the building are set back from Jean Moulin Street and the entry forecourt, where the garden spills out onto. This homogeneous and continuous L-shaped form gives the garden a somewhat inward-looking quality, something which is fundamental to the parish community. However, the garden opens back out to the city at the forecourt, and it is here that the main entrance to the church itself is located, at the crossroads of the forecourt and the pastoral centre.

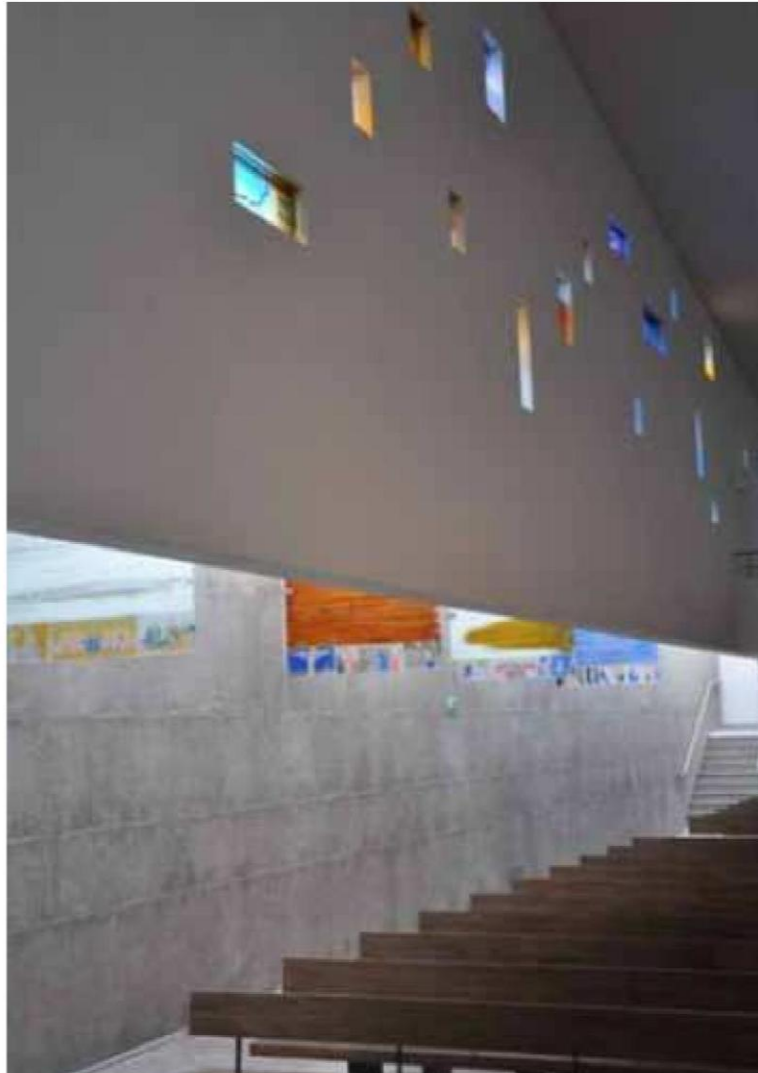


The facade of the church is uniformly clad in stone, in two different shades which are distinguished from each other. The sombre stone visually establishes the base of the building and reinforces its anchorage in the topography. On the main façade, a lower section of wall slants back into the building, elongating the forecourt and therefore inviting the visitor to enter.



Architecturally speaking, this project features an unusual response to the brief, going so far as to subvert the traditional organisation of interior spaces in religious buildings: one enters the nave sideways after walking straight alongside it for three-quarters of its length. This spatial effect, its drama increased by using a double-height volume, turns the entrance into a transitory space, somewhere between the intensity of the street outside and the calm of the liturgical space within.

The nave itself is made from a large rectangular plan which expands upwards to create a generous volume, conducive for worshippers when meeting together. For Sunday mass, the congregation assembles around the choir in a square, which reinforces their sense of unity during the service. Linked to the ground floor by two staircases, a balcony on the first floor surrounds the central assembly area and allows for the possibility of special larger events. This balcony extends right to the choir area, in front of which the organ is situated.



To accompany the worshippers in their contemplation, particular attention was paid to the use of light. This meant trying to create an atmosphere rather than an ambiance, yet maintaining a contemporary feel. Several light fixtures were positioned in line with the orientation of the boundary walls, while the choir area is bathed in indirect light coming from high above, emphasising the feeling of elevation. To the south, the offset boundary wall allows for an overhead slot of light to penetrate into the space, setting off the beauty of the stained glass panels below. Finally, along this very same wall, the light is so finely elaborated that it appears as yet another building material, sometimes revealing itself in the assembly area in the form of luminous projections. These projections were carefully positioned to allow for direct natural light to reach the prayer areas.

To affirm its status as a contemporary project, equally contemporary artists were invited to take part in order to fulfil the spiritual, historical and aesthetic expectations of the stakeholders. With this in mind, the stained glass panels were conferred to Didier and Alice Sancey, creating history with "The Catechism of the Mysteries of the Rosary". As for the figure of Christ, this appears on the apse wall as a low-relief by Claude Abeille, subsequently named "The Wall of Glory".