

St. Paulus Catholic Church | Frommern, Germany  
Klumpp + Klumpp Architekten

# A LIGHT IN THE DARKNESS



A church in the Black Forest provides a tranquil retreat for parishioners.

BY MARY PEPCHINSKI

PHOTOGRAPHY BY ZOOEY BRAUN

**T**he remote, rural town of Frommern, in Germany's Black Forest, is hardly the place one expects to encounter finely crafted works of architecture. Yet the recently completed St. Paulus Catholic Church there brings design excellence to this enclave while offering its congregation a retreat from the trials of everyday life. "The community needs a spiritual *Heimat*," says Father Ewald Ginter, the parish priest, "a place to take time out from an increasingly hectic world."

The new church occupies the site of a former house of worship. Designed by architect Paul Nagler and completed in 1965, it was destroyed by arson in 2011. The original building stood at the center of a wide block and was poorly integrated into its fragmentary context: social housing and a commercial strip to the east, senior housing to the west,

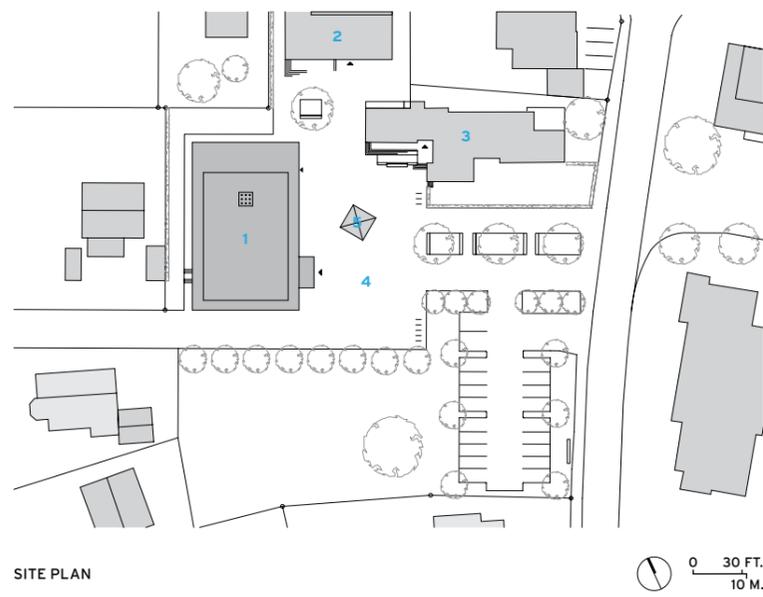
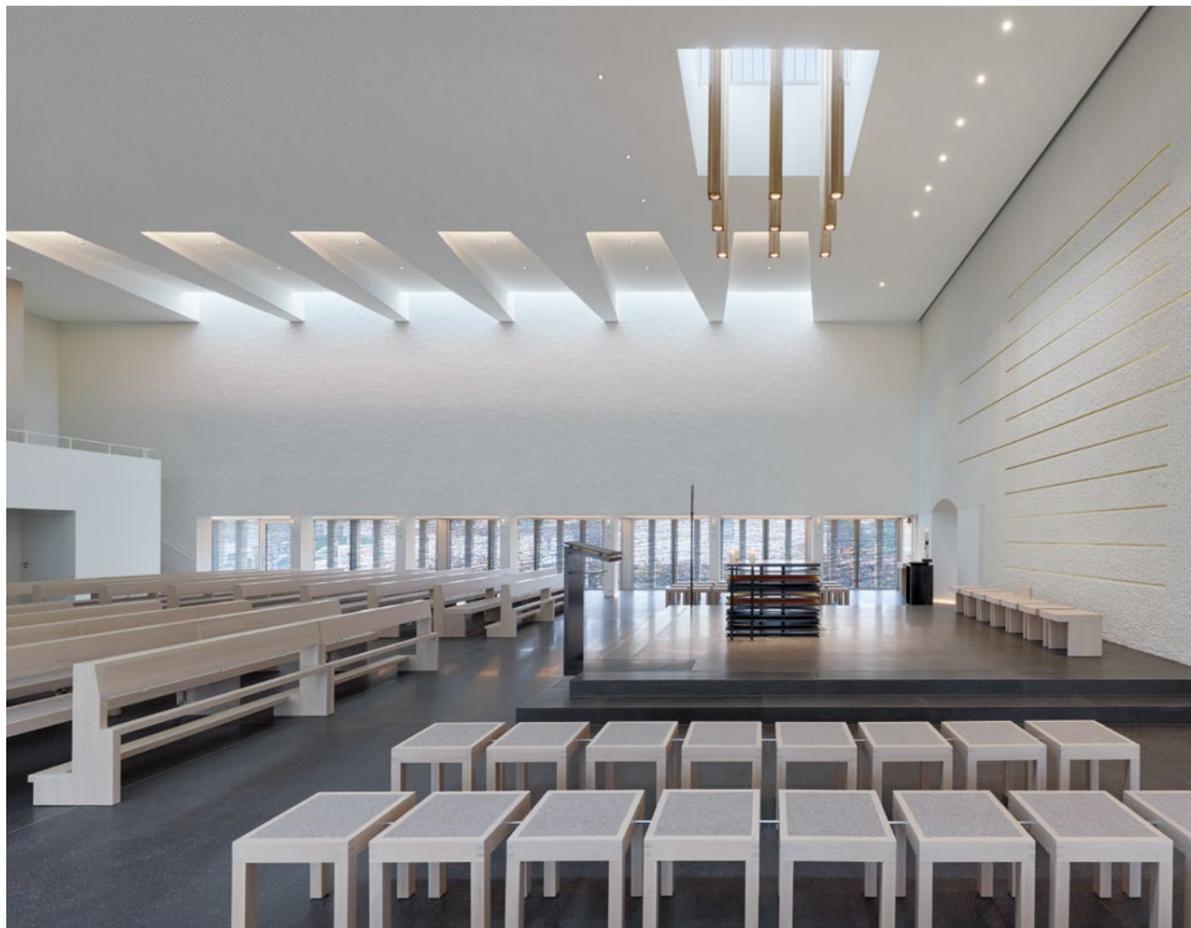
and single-family homes to the south. Only a narrow, through-block street led to the small entry plaza lodged between the church and its 115-foot-tall bell tower, while gardens that adjoined the parish's community center and rectory inhibited pedestrian access from the eastern edge of the block that had a high volume of foot traffic.

The new scheme required a master plan for the existing parish buildings and a 250-seat church with auxiliary religious and support services, totaling 6,000 square feet. Stuttgart-based architects Hans Klumpp and Julia Klumpp, who won a competition in 2012 for the project, understood that a sensitive site design was essential to link the building to its environs and inspire parishioners in this rural community to visit it. "It is easier for residents to accept the addition when it is well-integrated into the context," says Julia.

**HIGHER CALLING**  
The architects applied the same rough-trowel plaster found on the existing bell tower to the nave of the new church (opposite). Hidden luminaires accent the vaultlike ceiling structure (below), and natural light enters the interior through generous windows and gaps between the ceiling and walls.



**RAISED SPIRITS**  
White-bleached oak pews and benches seat 250 congregants (right). Untreated oak posts suspended over the altar have LEDs embedded in their ends. Ledges in the Chapel of the Virgin Mary hold votive candles, and small incisions in the wall contain messages to God written by parishioners.



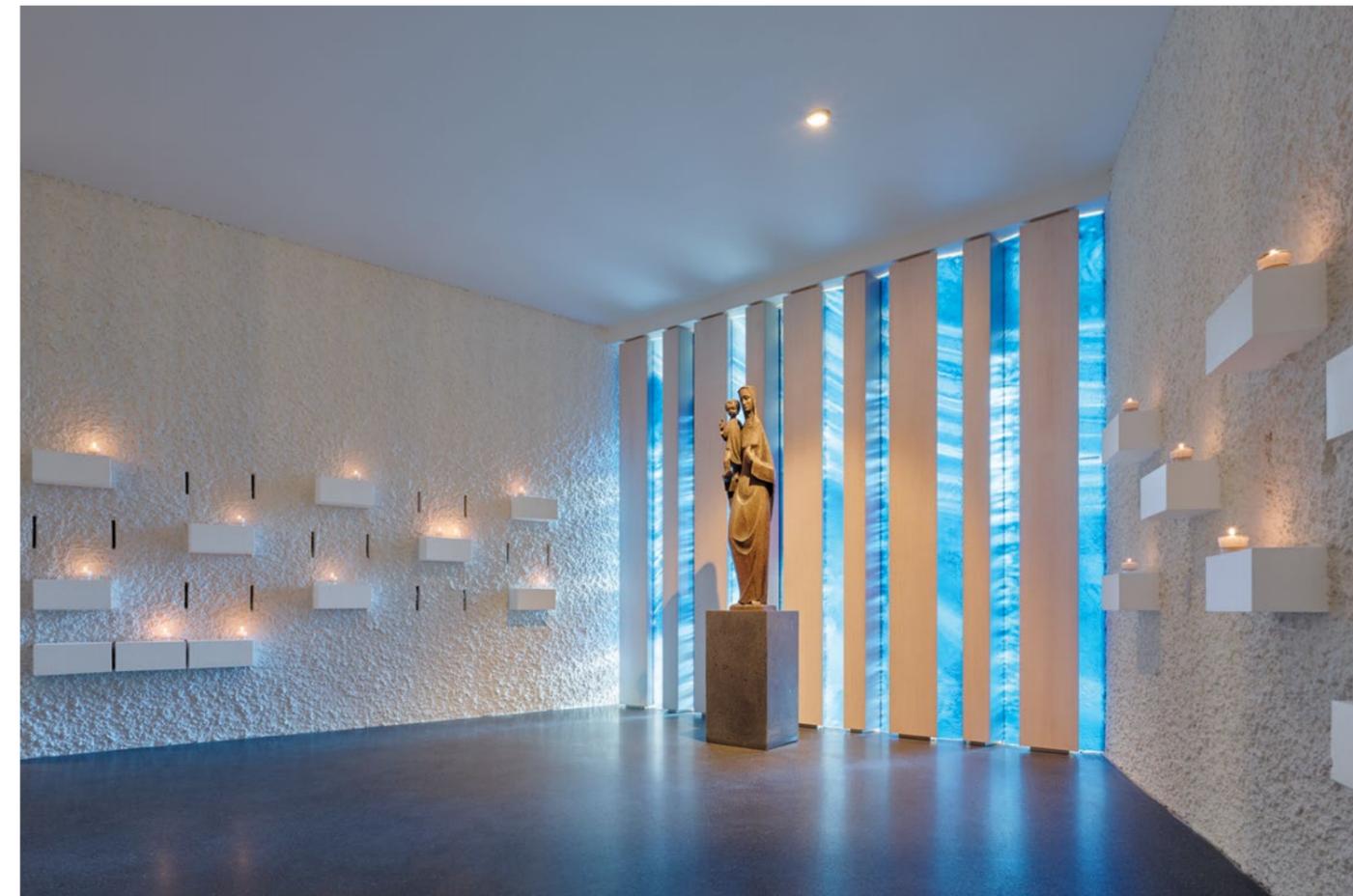
SITE PLAN

- 1 NEW CHURCH
- 2 EXISTING MEETINGHOUSE
- 3 EXISTING RECTORY
- 4 PLAZA
- 5 EXISTING BELL TOWER

The architects eliminated the gardens and situated the church, rectangular in plan, at the block's interior, perpendicular to the community center and rectory. Its long facade defines the western boundary of a new plaza, which extends to the eastern edge of the block. The team turned the through-block street into a pedestrian path that connects to the plaza, and gave old and new buildings white stucco facades. The bell tower dominates the new plaza and provides continuity between past and present.

Just as the architects created a sense of retreat with their well-conceived site work, they also hoped to fashion a refuge with the building's design. In the 1960s, Hans worked for Gottfried Böhm, the 1986 Pritzker Prize recipient known for his expressionist religious architecture rendered in reinforced concrete. Like Böhm, Hans understands sacred spaces as transformative places "where people have a chance to experience life more intensely," says the architect. It is this quality that he and Julia aspired to achieve in Frommern.

On the church's exterior, untreated oak posts, like squat pilotis, surround the base. Behind them, continuous floor-to-ceiling glazing, screen-printed with a pattern of waves, encloses the ground level. From afar, this level looks open and inviting; from within, the translucent graphic obscures the surroundings, temporarily disconnecting occupants from everyday life while allowing light to penetrate the interior.



A bright and serene nave greets visitors entering the church; religious art appears ancillary to the architecture and the carefully orchestrated effects of light and shadow. The pulpit, baptismal font, and altar, constructed from matte-finished black steel plate, by artist Sabine Straub, seem to rise from the anthracite-toned terrazzo floor. Intimate, cream-colored plaster reliefs depicting the Stations of the Cross, by Matthias Maria Heiermann, are embedded in the columns facing the side aisles; at first glance, they are hardly evident. Thin horizontal bands of gold leaf inlay on the wall behind the altar subtly define the shape of a cross.

Directly above the altar, nine oak posts, like those on the facade, hang below a skylight, with LEDs embedded at their ends, marking this ritual spot. Concealed luminaires emphasize flattened, vaultlike recesses in the ceiling, creating the impression that the room is more expansive than its 25-foot height. Beams running between these recesses—as if they were Gothic ribs—are sheathed in plaster. Along perimeter walls, daylight spills down from glazed slots above to illuminate the nave. The ceiling appears to float above the space.

On a midweek afternoon, the church was surprisingly busy. Workers entered and stood in prayer; two musicians practiced on the organ, filling the space with sonorous chords; and, outside, residents crossed the

plaza. Inside, intense sunshine, sometimes obscured by passing clouds, bounced off the articulated ceiling, casting elongated shadows on the side walls of the nave and then receding slowly, replaced by more diffuse illumination. The effect was mesmerizing and calming, and it was difficult to leave.

The St. Paulus Church provides parishioners in this isolated town with a refined venue for exploring their souls. "I can pray in a forest," says Father Ginter, "but being in a beautiful church helps me return to myself and find peace." ■

#### credits

**ARCHITECT:** Klumpp + Klumpp Architekten – Hans Klumpp, Julia Klumpp, design principals; Armin Traubeneck, Thilo Sprenger, Boris Peter, Julia Nele Winkler, project team

**ENGINEERS:** Professor Faltlhauser Ingenieure (structural); Nürk und Partner (m/p); Neher Butz (electrical)

**CONSTRUCTION SUPERVISION:** Roland Göppel

**CLIENT:** Catholic community of Frommern

**SIZE:** 5,900 square feet

**COST:** \$3.6 million

**COMPLETION DATE:** October 2015

#### SOURCES

**MASONRY AND CEILINGS:** Kaupp GmbH

**GLAZING:** Lacker AG (glass, skylights, insulated panels)