

And the sisters said, Let there be light; Nuns look to solar energy and other green renovations as a way to ensure stewardship of the Earth

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In a city filled with shadows, it can be tough to find the light.

Of course, some of us are more proficient than others, as the Sisters of Loretto will ably demonstrate today on the roof of their downtown residence for female university students.

The nuns, whose work is steeped in 400 years of Catholic tradition, will pull back the veil on an anything-but-traditional green retrofit of the Residence of Loretto College. The improvements, part of an \$8-million renovation of the 50-year-old building, include 40 rooftop solar panels, energy-efficient boilers, water-saving plumbing and high-efficiency lighting.

The upgrades will no doubt reduce the sisters' upkeep costs for the five-storey building on St. Mary Street, which serves as a dorm for 100 female students of the University of St. Michael's College, and will house 18 nuns once renovations are complete.

Welcome as the savings will be, a higher purpose propelled the project.

"It's nice to think we've been able to do something that is forward-looking and forward-moving," Sister Doryne Kirby, who lived in the residence as a student in 1959 and returned last year, said yesterday.

"One of the essential facets of our faith and our religious community is that of relationship, not only with God and each other, but also with the Earth," Sister Doryne said. "This is something that's basic and life-giving."

Or, as Sister Evanne Hunter put it, "Creation is not ours, and we need to steward it for future generations."

With these heavenly aspirations in mind, the sisters found help on the ground at Ameresco Canada, an energy-services company with a long history of green projects at educational, municipal, commercial, industrial, health-care and social housing facilities.

Mike Newmarch, project manager for Ameresco, said the biggest challenge during the past two years of construction was carrying it out while the building remained occupied with young students and a handful of sisters.

Another potential hurdle was the sun-blocking effects of a pair of high-rise condo towers, at 45 and 55 storeys, planned for a neighbouring site, "but a shading study showed this is still worthwhile," Mr. Newmarch said yesterday, standing alongside the long row of solar panels tilted toward the southern sky.

From the same vantage point, which offers a view of dozens of rooftops including those of Queen's Park and a good chunk of the University of Toronto, not a single other solar panel can be seen - a fact that leaves the nuns feeling quietly satisfied, and their business manager, Joe Grando, bemused.

"To me it is staggering that we would be the only ones," Mr. Grando said, before asking: "It has to be the nuns who start this, with all the high- technology types around here?"

Evidently the answer is yes, given the common perception that Toronto is too far north to make solar power cost-efficient. That, of course, is a misperception, according to Mr. Newmarch, who calculated that the sisters' investment in solar - half of which has been subsidized by the federal and Ontario governments - will pay for itself in 11 to 12 years.

That's longer than it would take in a sunnier, more southerly locale, but still well worth it; the solar panels on their own are expected to reduce Loretto College's energy use by more than 25 per cent, and its annual carbon- dioxide emissions by 715 tonnes, equal to planting 785,000 trees or taking 200 cars off the roads.

With decent exposure to the sky, other neighbourhood buildings - the provincial legislature, say - could derive similar benefits, Mr. Newmarch suggested. "Institutions like that should be leading the way," he said, indicating Queen's Park in the near distance.

Perhaps the nuns can put that idea to Environment Minister John Gerretsen at today's noon-hour unveiling, where he is expected to congratulate the sisters and speak about the importance of sustainable building design in fighting climate change.

Cutting-edge as it might seem, though, the Sisters of Loretto have long heeded the call to social responsibility. Founded in 1609 by Mary Ward, an Englishwoman, their congregation, officially called the Institute of the Blessed Virgin Mary, has typically worked to address urgent needs of the time.

The first five Loretto sisters in Canada were sent from Ireland in September of 1847 at the behest of Toronto Bishop Michael Power, to tend to the children of poor, and often sick, Irish immigrants who had fled the great potato famine.

Within five years, three of the sisters had died, but over time, their numbers grew with reinforcements from Ireland and new members from among the young women of Toronto.

Today, there are 94 Loretto sisters in Canada and 1,000 around the world. "It's gradually declining, like most religious orders," said Sister Evanne, the sisters' Canadian Provincial Superior.

Notwithstanding that, the popularity of the newly green students' residence, open to young women of any faith, remains strong, despite the changing city that surrounds it.

"We hope that this can become a little oasis," she said.