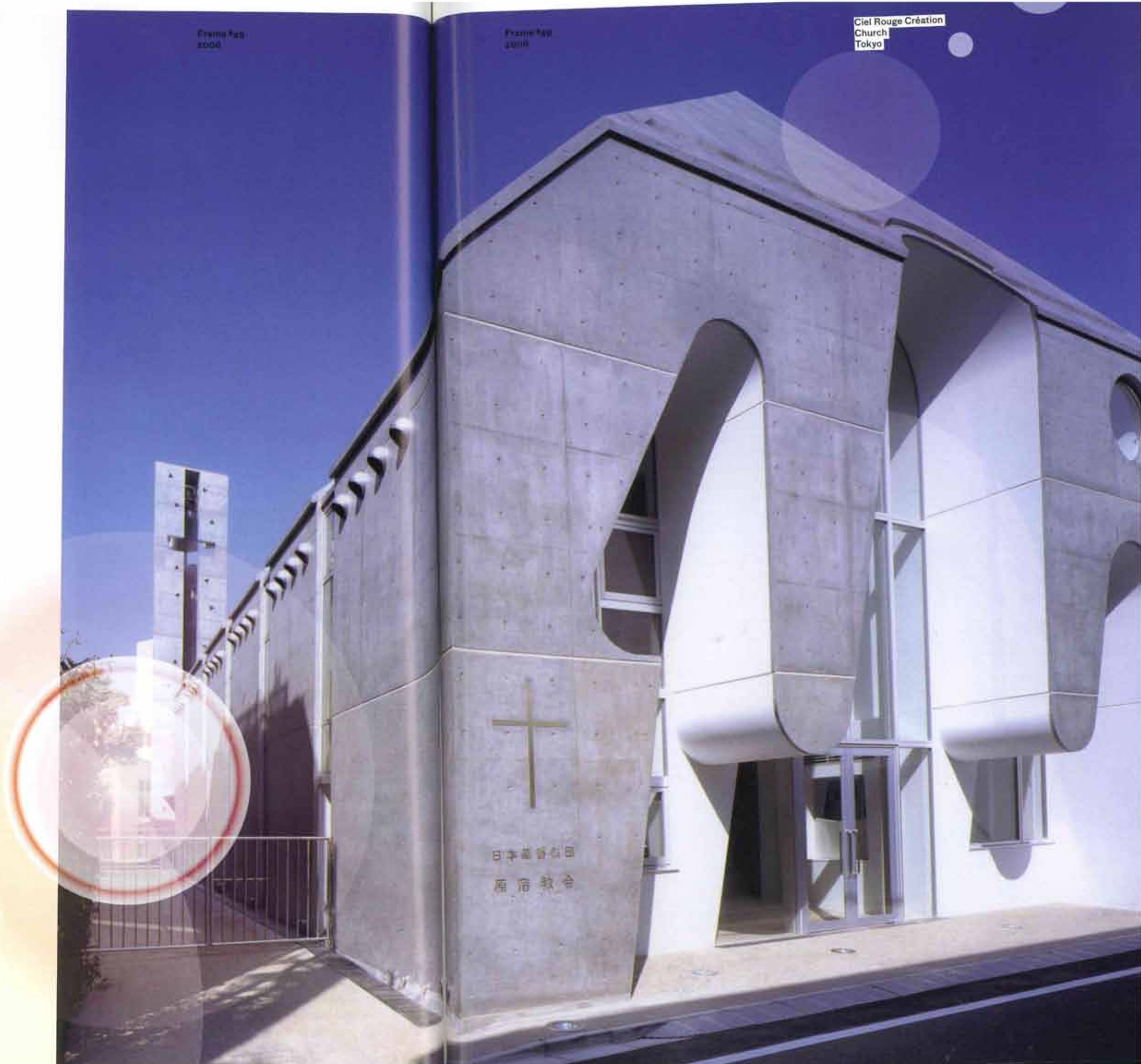


# In God's Hand

Inspired by Biblical illusions, the Harajuku Church in Tokyo by Ciel Rouge Création offers an oasis of serenity for worshippers.

Text by Kanae Hasegawa  
Photography by Toshihisa Ishii

Façade of Harajuku Church in the Aoyama district of Tokyo. The church was completely redesigned by Henri Gueydan and Fumiko Kaneko of Ciel Rouge Création.



It may sound strange to Western ears, but Japanese kindergartens often share accommodations with churches, and Christian pastors frequently serve as the headmasters of such schools. Many people in Japan believe the proximity of a religious institution is important to the education of their children. Harajuku Church, rebuilt in the autumn of 2005, is a good example of how well a church can function in a Japanese community, becoming the pride of its parishioners and a magnet for local gatherings.

'I imagined the chapel covered with the Holy hand, as if Christ's palm were enclosing all people within it.'

Henri Gueydan of Ciel Rouge Création

Originally erected in 1904, Harajuku Church was reconstructed from the ground up following the bombardments of World War II. Even so, after 60 years the wooden framework of the church was found to be too weak to survive an earthquake. Located in Tokyo's Aoyama district and surrounded by shops such as MUJI, Starbucks and McDonald's, the church seemed to be in the wrong place to attract busy Tokyoites rushing by, intent on their destinations. Therefore, when the United Church of Christ in Japan proposed the reconstruction of the church, the pastor and his congregation had two wishes for the new building.

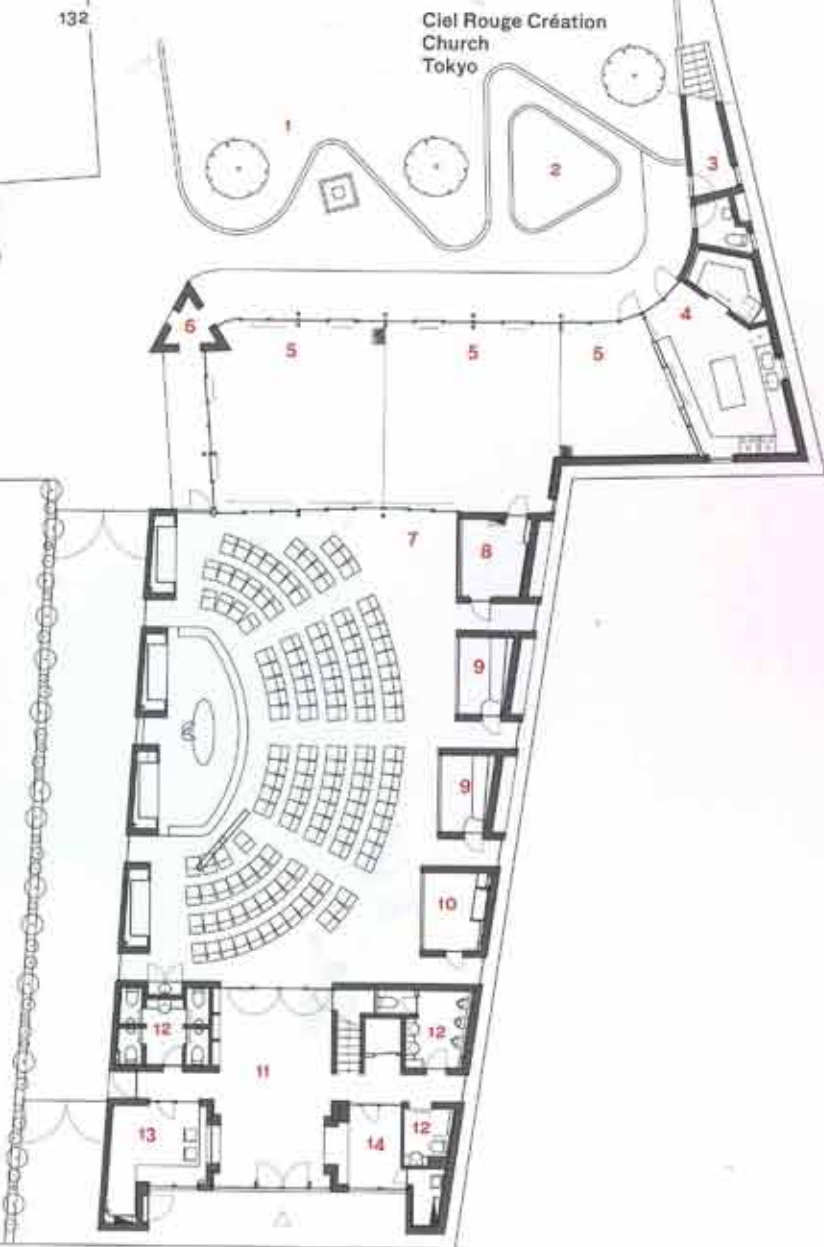
First and foremost, they wanted their new spiritual home to be recognizable to passers-by on the bustling streets that surround the church. Their second request was for an interior design that would show that their church is open to everyone, Christians and non-Christians alike. The selection of an architect started approximately ten years before the church finally settled on Tokyo-based architects Henri Gueydan and Fumiko Kaneko, a Japanese-French duo better known as Ciel Rouge Création. The prolonged decision-making period is attributed to Pastor Akira Tsuchihashi's wish to grant all his parishioners the opportunity to find their voices reflected in the design. 'And eventually everything has been tailored to meet the requirements of the people who visit and use the church,' he says.

Taking their cue from the medieval churches of Europe, whose stained-glass windows depict episodes from the Bible – scenes originally crafted to help the illiterate understand the life of Christ – the architects of Ciel Rouge Création designed a church whose architecture, in and

of itself, relates the story of Christ. To make the tucked-away church recognizable from the streets not only by the sound of its bells but also by its appearance, the architects constructed a 16-m-tall bell tower clearly incised with crosses down its



The highly sculptural ceiling symbolizes the hand of God. Custom-made seating by Japanese manufacturer Hohtoku features an angled backrest that doubles as a ledge for prayer books.



#### Ground floor plan

1. Garden
2. Sandbox
3. Storage
4. Kitchen
5. Hall
6. Bell tower
7. Chapel
8. Storage
9. Nursery
10. Audio room
11. Lobby
12. Toilet
13. Office
14. Cloakroom

undulating ceiling, which has a height of 13 m, is composed of six concrete slabs separated from one another by narrow strips of fenestration. A theatrical play of light is the result.

entire length. This prominent beacon sends out a message to all who pass this place: you are in the presence of the house of God.

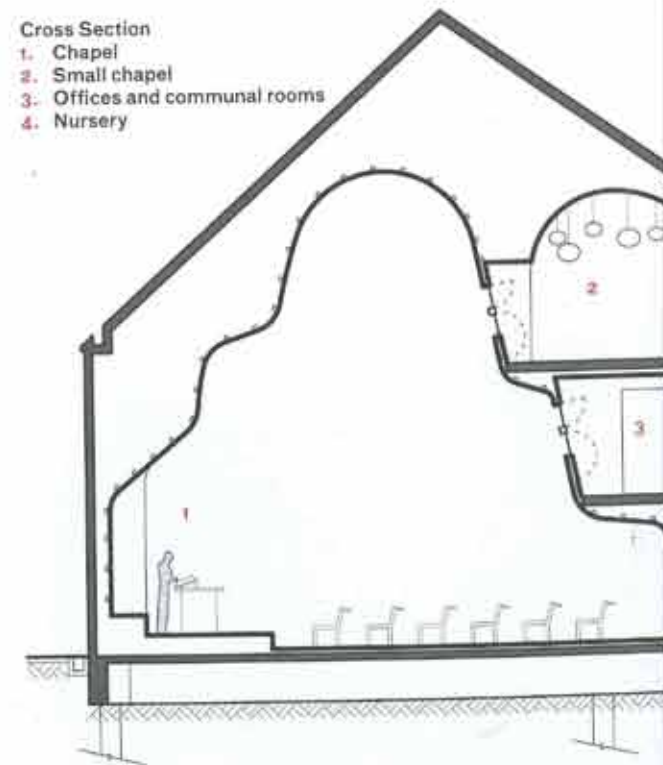
The first encounter with the curvaceous concrete façade of what must strike many an observer as a gigantic contemporary sculpture is not particularly open and friendly, however. A trio of soaring tongues licks the frontage, almost forcing the perils of Pentecost on unsuspecting viewers. A sharp contrast to this rather overwhelming welcome is the interior of the church, a surprisingly light and cheerful space. Visitors enter a 188-sq-m white chapel filled with daylight and capped with a gracefully curving 13-m-high ceiling sliced vertically into six structural concrete modules that are connected by fairly wide strips of fenestration. The components of this voluminously arching ceiling cast a theatrical play of light and shadow into the nave of the church. The organic forms overhead, which resemble the work of Alvar Aalto or even a blanket of clouds with light filtering through, are explained by Henri Gueydan, head of Ciel Rouge Création, who says that 'the design finds its inspiration in the Bible', emphasizing that the Good Book was the architects' sole point of departure. 'I imagined the chapel covered with the Holy hand, as if Christ's palm were enclosing all people within it.'

The cross, which stands beside the altar, can also be seen as the mast of a ship, another biblical image. Even the number of glass openings in the ceiling has an explanation: the bell tower outside and the six structural modules connected by the strips of fenestration add up to seven, a number that symbolizes the seven days of creation recorded in Genesis.



Cross Section

1. Chapel
2. Small chapel
3. Offices and communal rooms
4. Nursery



In addition to the large chapel, Harajuku Church has a smaller chapel on the second floor. The arching ceiling of this traditionally furnished chapel are 3 ball lamps designed by Jasper Morrison.



Entering Harajuku Church takes you into a biblical world whose scenes unfold before your eyes. But 'seeing the story of Christ', says Pastor Tsuchihashi, is not the main experience offered here. 'The service is the most important thing for Christians,' he says. 'The chapel needs to function properly, and the curves of the ceiling are an essential element. It's not just a decorative ceiling. It was also designed to provide our choir with excellent acoustics.'

'I wanted to sculpt the light so that you feel the light and become the light.'

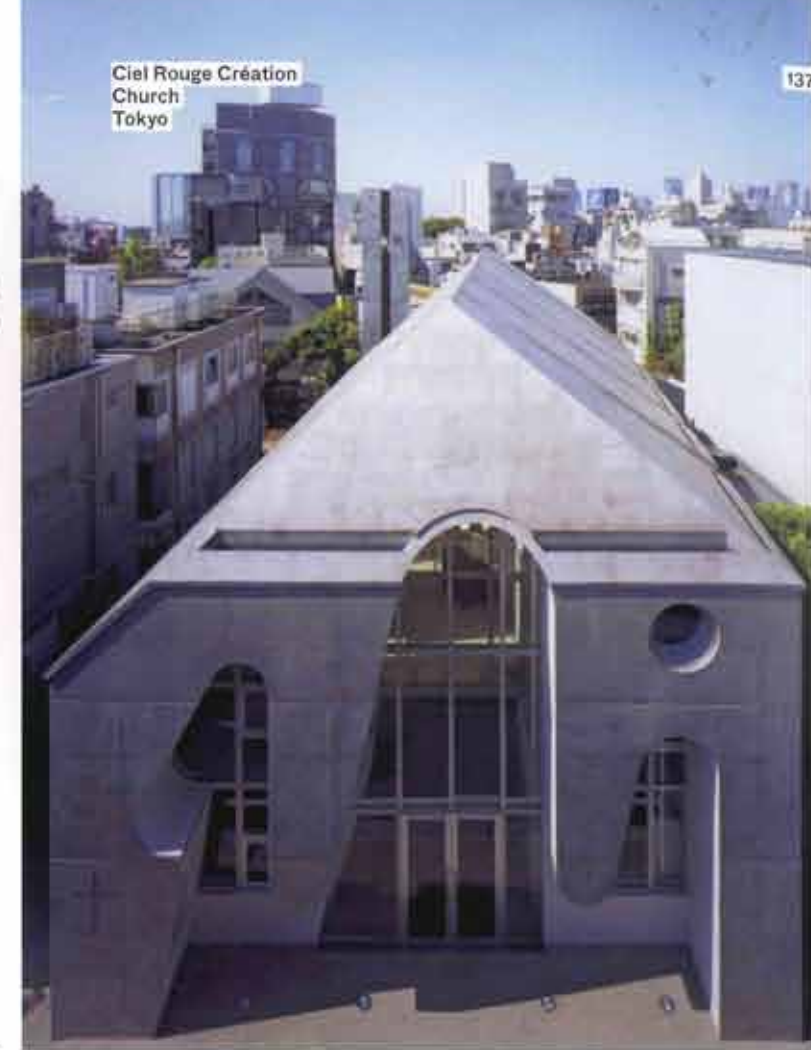
Henri Gueydan

Apart from honouring the wishes of the church to be recognizable from the street and to be visibly open to one and all, Ciel Rouge Création also thought of the children from the adjacent school, of neighbourhood residents and of visitors requiring special facilities. The side aisles and part of the first floor double as a place for after-school workshops for kindergarteners. The interior includes a kitchen where people can prepare food for church holidays and other events, as well as lifts and wheelchair-accessible doorways for mobility-impaired visitors.



Chairs arranged in aisled, semicircular rows facing the altar, which is located at the south side of the chapel, are made by Japanese manufacturer Hohtoku. 'The service should not be about imposing dogmas as the truth,' continues Pastor Tsuchihashi. 'The church offers a time and a place for people to be with God in an open atmosphere.'

Several coloured chairs interspersed among the white ones are another suggestion that this church is not just for Christians, but open to everybody. And during the service, which begins in the early morning and lasts until noon, the sun moves slowly from one opening in the ceiling to another, beaming down on each worshipper in turn, casting a blessing on everyone in the church. Even those without knowledge of the Bible are sure to experience Harajuku Church as a work of art. In the words of Henri Gueydan: 'I wanted to sculpt the light so that you feel the light and become the light.'



The church in Aoyama is sandwiched between office buildings and retail establishments. Thanks to the renovation, which added a striking façade and a 16-m-high bell tower, the church is now far more conspicuous.