

San Francisco Chronicle



Photo by Liz Hapalla / The Chronicle

Stefano Lazzari (left) is one of the artists working on a replica of a 1393 fresco by Ilario da Viterbo for the re-created Porziuncola chapel in San Francisco.

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SAN FRANCISCO CHRONICLE
SEPTEMBER 3, 2008

Obsession with a little chapel inspires copy

Politico Angela Alioto follows dream to build St. Francis' Porziuncola here

By Jesse Hamlin
CHRONICLE STAFF WRITER

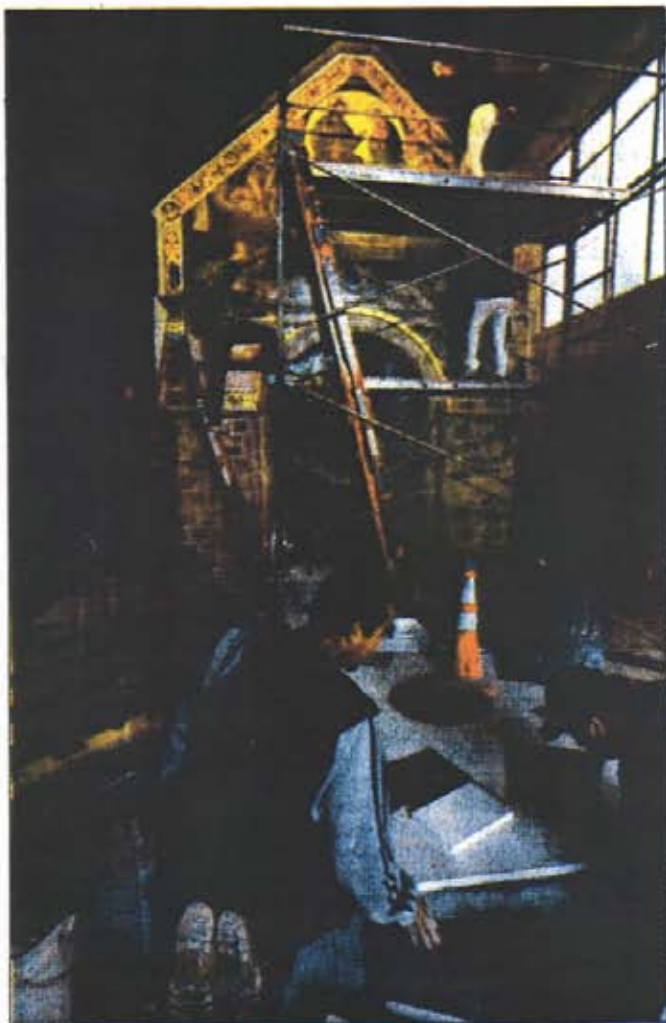
Two years ago in Assisi, Italy, Angela Alioto and some friends got down on their knees in the Porziuncola, the little stone chapel where St. Francis found his calling. But they weren't praying. They were surreptitiously measuring the floor of the holy site with dental floss.

That's because the Franciscan fathers who oversee the mystical chapel — an ancient Benedictine structure Francis rebuilt around 1209 — never allowed it to be photographed or otherwise disturbed. But Alioto would not be deterred.

"I was obsessed with making an exact replica of the Porziuncola here," says Alioto, the feisty San Francisco lawyer, politico and follower of the humble friar who befriended beggars and talked to birds. Her dream of re-creating the chapel is coming to fruition at the National Shrine of St. Francis of Assisi in North Beach, in the Italian heart of the city named for the saint they called *il poverello*, the little poor man. An extraordinary re-creation made with marble and rocks brought from Assisi and adorned with frescoes replicated by Italian artists, it will open to the public Sept. 27 after 14 months of labor.

The \$2.9 million project, whose benefactors include the Catholic Archdiocese of San Francisco, has the blessing of Assisi's top Franciscan official, Provincial Minister

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Artists and builders create a replica of St. Francis' Porziuncola chapel at the site of the National Shrine of St. Francis of Assisi in North Beach.

Porziuncola chapel: Opens Sept. 27. A 9:30 a.m. invitation-only dedication and Mass will be shown live on big screens in front of the church, where a post-Mass concert will feature "Phantom of the Opera" singer Franc D'Ambrosio, Rawn Harbor Gospel Singers and others. The chapel opens to the public at 2 p.m. 624 Vallejo St., San Francisco. For more information, go to www.shrinerenewal.org/porziuncola.

Chapel to have pope's blessing, but is for all faiths

► ASSISI

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Massimo Reschiglian. He'd been alarmed to learn that Alioto and her gang had been stretching dental floss across the chapel's floors and walls. He called her into the basilica that houses the chapel and asked who'd given her permission to measure the Porziuncola (loosely translated as "little corner of the world").

"I pointed up to the sky and said I didn't think I needed anyone else's permission," recalled Alioto, standing in the North Beach chapel as masons laid rosy-red marble on the surrounding floor and Italian artisans touched up frescoes they'd made in their Umbrian hometown of Citta di Castello. The friar laughed. Hearing Alioto's plan, he offered to help. For starters, he gave her the chapel's dimensions, so the dental floss was dispensed with (the original is 13 by 37 feet but the copy was scaled down 22 percent to fit into the small building next to the church here).

Took lots of photos

Alioto was allowed to take hundreds of photographs of the sandstone walls, inlaid walnut doors and wrought-iron work on which local construction crews and craftsmen, among them master metalsmith Eric Clausen, based their re-creations. The friar also gave her one of St. Francis' original rocks — removed from the chapel during a retrofit after the 1997 Assisi quake — to be displayed here.

"It is identical. Isn't it cool?" said Alioto, standing in the literally cool stone chapel where a replica of a 1393 masterwork by Ilario da Viterbo will hang above the altar. It's a six-part fresco on wood depicting scenes from the story of St. Francis, including his temptation by a winged devil and his plea to Jesus and Mary to let the poor enter the Porziuncola and be pardoned for their sins.

"I think we need the love and harmony of St. Francis here," said Alioto. She put more than \$1 million into the project and got big donations from arts pa-



ANGELA ALIOTO

The original Porziuncola, inside the Basilica of Santa Maria degli Angeli in Assisi.

tron Dede Wilsey, Nancy Cline of Cline Cellars and Elisa Stephens, president of San Francisco's Academy of Art University, whose students painted a Giotto-like mural on a wall outside the chapel.

Originally built in 1849, St. Francis of Assisi Church was rebuilt after being destroyed in the 1906 quake and fire. The seismically unsound church was shuttered in 1992 because of dwindling attendance. Alioto and her

By the numbers

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- **35,000 pounds** of Pietra Rosa marble from Assisi
- **300 rocks** from the caves of Mount Subasio in Assisi
- **2,000 pieces** of sandstone from Wisconsin
- **12 copies** of frescoes spanning five centuries
- **16 Italian artisans** working here on the project

father, the late San Francisco Mayor Joe Alioto, helped convince then-Archbishop William Levada, now a top cardinal at the Vatican, to let them reopen it in '98 as a shrine to St. Francis. For the opening of the chapel, Levada will be here with a message from the pope naming it a holy place. Alioto stresses that the sanctuary is for people of all faiths. A rabbi and a Greek Orthodox priest have stopped by to



LEZ HAVALLA / The Chronicle

Mona Rotini works on a replica of an 1829 fresco for the chapel.

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marvel at the work.

The other morning, chief fresco artist Stefano Lazzari, one of 16 Italians here to finish the job, was installing replicas of a work Perugino painted in the 1400s and another done by Johann Friedrich Overbeck in 1829. They were created by Lazzari and his Umbrian crew using their own secret method he called "pictography." It involves transferring digital images onto wet plaster, one small section at a time, then meticulously painting in the work by hand.

"The presence of St. Francis is here," Lazzari said. "I feel it in this place."

'Incredible feeling'

So does master woodworker Lucio Duchi.

"It was an incredible feeling when I walked in, because I just didn't expect it to be so identical," Duchi said in Italian, with Alioto translating. "We expected something much more Americanized, but it wasn't. It's very Italian, very Italian."

Alioto and her friends brought

rocks from the caves of Mount Subasio, where St. Francis got his, for the chapel's front facade. For reasons having to do with weight and permits, however, most of the sandstone comes from Wisconsin. Samples were taken to Assisi to make sure they matched. The stone was painstakingly cut into rough squares and put in place over a three-month period by a crew led by project manager Alfonso Rocciola of Nibbi Brothers Construction.

Working from photographs of the original Porziuncola, "we matched every shape and color," Rocciola said. "We counted how many red, how many of this color and that. We chipped them by hand. In those days, they didn't have the saw cut." A native of Savona near Genoa, he'd never been to the original Assisi chapel until Alioto brought him there. "I hate to say it, because I'm a man, but I got very emotional and choked up. Francesco is there. I feel the same here."

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