

# **The Anglican Cathedral in Québec**

## **The structural and stylistic adaptation of English architectural customs in the environment of Québec**

### **The necessity of a building for Anglican worship after the Conquest**



Detail of supports  
Photo : François Brault

The year 1759 marked the fall of Québec city into the hands of the English following the battle on the Plains of Abraham. After a few years of military rule, the 1763 Paris treaty handed New France over to the British Empire definitively. From then on, the English continued colonisation. The military community settled in first and then, especially after the American revolution (1775-1783), contingents of loyalist colonists came to populate Higher and Lower Canada (known today as Ontario and Québec).

While the local Francophone population cut itself off, retaining an architectural style in keeping with the tradition of the French regime. The new colonists needed their own places of worship. They naturally wished to build churches resembling those of their homeland.

### **Imported English styles by the military stationed in Québec**

Two officers of the garrison in Québec, Captain Hall and Major Robe, drew up the plans for the cathedral, a symbol of the Anglican faith in the conquered land. The cathedral was built between 1799 and 1804, the architects choosing for a model the prestigious London church of St. Martin-in-the-fields, which was built between 1721 and 1726 to a design by James Gibbs (1682-1754). This magnificent edifice shows similarities to the architecture of Sir Christopher Wren (1632-1723) with its scrupulous respect for classical forms evident in the placing of a colonnade at the front and a slender tower crowned with an elegant spire.



Façade  
Photo : François Brault

It is evident that, in the colonial context of the latter part of the 18th century, it was beyond the scope of the society of those days to provide either the funding or the technical ability for the more detailed refinements appropriate to these city buildings. So it is quite easy to see that there has been a considerable simplification in the various constituent parts of the construction. In spite of that, the derivation is still perfectly recognisable.

"The Anglican Cathedral stands out in Québec because of the novelty of its architecture; its unadorned rectangular layout creates a precedent, and it is equally successful in demonstrating an excellent way of using all the available space. In elevation its façade is astonishing with its large classical pediment, its Ionic pilasters and its triple arcade. The spire, amazingly high and complex with its various storeys would remain the tallest structure in the city for a long time." (Luc Noppen, *Les églises du Québec (1600-1850)*, Québec, Éditeur officiel/Fides, 1977, p. 37)

<sup>1</sup> Noppen, Luc, *Les églises du Québec (1600-1850)*, Québec, Éditeur officiel/Fides, 1977, p. 37.

## Architectural features which were to influence religious buildings in Québec

It would take a few more years for the neo-classical façade to make an impression on Catholic religious architecture. However, certain secondary characteristics would have a quicker impact. The double tier of windows which corresponds to the re-arrangement of the interior is a good example of this and is also copied from London architecture.

The longitudinal part of the nave is divided into three, and two colonnades support the lateral galleries thus gaining a lot of space.



The organ loft  
Photo : François Brault

The double row of windows corresponds to the two-level arrangement in the aisles. There is also a balcony on the reverse of the façade from which you can gain access to the side galleries. This architectural style would influence numerous French-Canadian builders. It was appreciated to such an extent that double tribunes were sometimes built on the reverse side of façades.

## Necessary changes due to the climate in Québec



The interior  
Photo : François Brault

The ornamentation on the façade of the Anglican cathedral originally conformed faithfully to the canons of classical architecture with respect to proportion. Here, Hall and Robe favoured the Ionic order. The pediment was therefore built to the required dimensions and the roof of the building, like that of the pediment, had a relatively gentle slope to it.

However, in 1816, scarcely twelve years after the building had been finished, problems relating to drainage and the accumulation and melting of snow made it essential to rethink the general structure of the roof. It was decided to increase the slope and to contravene the fixed proportions of the Ionic form. "It was quickly noticed ... that the transplanting of the formal principles in common use in Europe was impossible." (Luc Noppen, *Les églises du Québec (1600-1850)*, Québec, Éditeur officiel/Fides, p. 38)

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## Bibliography:

- Noppen, Luc. *Les églises du Québec (1600-1850)*, Québec, Éditeur officiel/Fides, 1977, p.159-160.
- Noppen, Luc. *Québec, trois siècles d'architecture*, Montréal, Libre Expression, 1979, p. 162-163.