

The Basilica-Cathedral of Notre-Dame de Québec.

The first cathedral and first basilica in North America.

Notre-Dame de Québec - a church with a special status in the heart of the Catholic Church of Québec



Façade

Photo : François Brault

Several efforts were made to render this small parish church worthy of its new official status in the heart of the Catholic Church. Immediately after its elevation to the rank of cathedral, the diocese looked for an architect to reconstruct it. The ensuing effort to produce a prestigious building resulted in its recognition by the Church of Rome who gave it the honorary title of minor basilica in 1874 during the bicentenary of the institution of the diocese of Québec.



Aerial view

Photo : François Brault

From parish church to cathedral



Exterior after the
fire of 1922

Photo : François Brault

Due to its constant transformation, this monument stands as witness to the involvement of important architects and artists practising in Québec from the time of New France until the beginning of the 20th century. Claude Baillif , Gaspard Chaussegros de Léry, the Baillairgés, Raoul Chênevert and many others were involved in the reconstruction or extension of the building and its interior.

The first church was erected in the French tradition and modestly took on those characteristics prescribed by Jesuit plan widely used in France. The principal features of this architectural type included a Latin cross design finished in a semicircular choir, two side chapels at the entrance to the choir, a bell-tower surmounting the crossing, and, a simple porch surrounding the main entrance in the façade.

In 1684, Claude Baillif, the French architect, undertook to enlarge the building on the request of the diocese. To meet the new expectations of Monsignor de Laval, the reconstruction plans reflected a large-scale project worthy of the function of a cathedral.

Claude Baillif's proposals derived much of their inspiration from the prevailing classic French trends. His plans included a heightening of the façade, the addition of niches containing statues, and the erection of two side towers. In addition to raising the nave and developing the side aisles, the lateral walls had to be lengthened to meet the façade which was built further out than that of the existing



Exterior after the
fire of 1922

Photo : François Brault

church. For financial reasons this reconstruction project was not completed. Only a low façade and one tower were actually built.

In 1742, after an inspection ordered by Intendant Hocquart, another reconstruction was planned. Work was carried out between 1744 and 1748 following plans by Gaspard Chaussegros de Léry, a military engineer. As in 1684, a staged project was suggested. The aim was once again to build on the scale of a cathedral. Once the project was completed, the church would, for the first time, rival in importance that of the mother country. It was the intention of Lery's project to provide the basic essentials required for a cathedral according to the criteria of the French academy. The walls of the church were raised allowing for the addition of galleries. The nave was lengthened at the choir and given side aisles to produce a basilican plan, a sign of prestige in France since the 10th century. An Italian façade, widely used in France at that time, was produced but its ornamentation was left for a later date. During the conquest, in 1759, the church was bombarded.

The work of the Baillairgés



Choir
Photo : François Brault

After this sad episode, a reconstruction of Notre-Dame was imperative. An etching created from a drawing by Richard Short shows that the elevations, façade and tower built before 1759 were still in existence. Following the wishes of the inhabitants, the building constructed between 1766 and 1771 by Jean Baillairgé, carpenter, was taken from the plans of Chaussegros de Léry. It therefore preserved the architectural features which had not been destroyed, and closely resembled the church of 1749.

What really gave the post-conquest building its distinctive character was the interior by Jean Baillairgé and his son François in 1786. It suggested an architectural vocabulary and was inspired by Val-de-Grâce in Paris. To begin with the Baillairgés produced the reredos in the choir, and the cathedra. The whole group was composed of an entablature supported by pilasters against the wall which were themselves supported on plinths. Elsewhere there were spandrels and panels adorned with carved motifs. Later François Baillairgé created the high altar and churchwarden's pew. He also constructed the vaulting in the nave and side aisles and finished the interior of the choir. The work continued until 1822.

The final contribution of the Baillairgé family was from François' son, Thomas. In 1843 he proposed a reconstruction of the façade taking his inspiration from the church of Sainte-Geneviève in Paris. Three projects were presented. The one which was selected was for a monumental structure which was perfectly geometrical in the prevailing Neo-classic style. He added an avant-corps and a bell-tower to each side of the initial façade. Once completed, Thomas Baillairgé's façade was the most elaborate Neo-classic façade in Québec.

After the reconstruction of the façade, several changes concerning the whole project took place. These included: construction of a chapel, erection of a cast-iron palisade, interior restoration, reconstruction of certain parts of the chevet, etc. In 1874, the cathedral was raised in status to minor basilica.

In 1922, a fire completely destroyed the basilica and thus the masterpiece which bore witness to the involvement of several important people in the history of Québécois religious architecture. The story of the reconstruction of Notre-Dame de Québec after the fire of 1922 is as complex as the stages of construction already mentioned. Raoul Chênevert, very active in Québec at that time, was



Façade
Photo : François Brault

commissioned to reconstruct the basilica in its original form. Maxime Roisin, a French architect who was in the country to construct the basilica of Sainte-Anne-de-Beaupré, joined Chênevert for the project. It was finished in 1930 and Québec finally had its majestic basilica.



Interior towards choir
Photo : François Brault

Notre-Dame de Québec and its stylistic influence

The church of Notre-Dame de Québec, played an important role in the history of Québec architecture. On the one hand, its status in the Catholic Church gave it a prestigious position which bears witness to the presence of academic architecture in New France. Also, with the formal renewal it experienced over the centuries, the church served as a reference for numerous others in the territory of New France. This phenomenon thus allows historians in the field of architecture to identify regional trends.

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