

The Basilica of St. Patrick of Montréal.

The desire to equal the great works of the neo-gothic movement



Basilique St. Patrick de Montréal
Photo : CPRQ

A tendency to enter the scene of great international architecture is to be found opening up in Québec mainly from the second half of the 19th century. The neo-classicism of the eighteen-thirties had opened the way to an awareness of the importance of these leanings towards historicism which was transforming building methods in Europe and the United States. The neo-gothic movement was developed in England at the end of the 18th century and during the first half of the 19th century, and in France in the 1830s. One of its principal British supporters, Augustus Welby Northmore Pugin (1812-1852), took on the responsibility for the embellishment of the Parliament buildings in London which had originally been designed by Sir Charles Barry in 1836.

According to Pugin, the reintroduction of gothic forms into religious architecture corresponds to a return to a more coherent expression of Christian values. This was because classical architecture with its pagan inspiration was not able to express these values so clearly. Pugin published several works on this subject including *True Principles*, and his fame spread rapidly even beyond his own country.

Therefore when the Church of St. Patrick was due to be built in 1843, the priest from Notre-Dame, Joseph-Vincent Quiblier, wrote to Pugin. In his letter dated 28 May 1842 he said:

"We are about to start building a gothic style church... It should be able to hold around eight to ten thousand people with about half of these seated in pews. Our severe climate and the abundance of snow during the long winter period do not allow for exterior ornamentation except for a few lightly projecting cordons. Would you, Sir, be able to put forward a design for such a church and submit it to us without delay?" (Cited by Raymonde Gauthier *Construire une église au Québec, l'architecture religieuse avant 1939*, Montréal, Libre Expression, 1994, p. 107.)

History reveals that Pugin's services were not, in fact, retained. This was probably because the church authorities were attempting to construct a building which would convey a character which was rather more French and therefore more Catholic. Instead, two French architects who had settled in Montréal and were also skilful in building in a neo-gothic style were commissioned. Pierre-Louis Morin (1811-1886) planned the construction side and supervised the building work, and Félix Martin (1804-1886) drew up the plans. Martin was a Jesuit who arrived in Montréal in 1842 and became director of the Sainte-Marie college. In order to respect the Québec tradition of a structural work built with a single nave, he took his inspiration from the German 'hall' churches where the three sections, the nave and the two side aisles, are of equal height. The building was finished in 1847 and the church was opened for worship on 17 March, St. Patrick's Day. It has been listed as an historic monument since 1985.



Basilique St. Patrick de Montréal
Intérieur vers la tribune arrière
Photo : CPRQ

An interior with a surprising coherence in spite of a three-stage project

The original interior was produced between 1861 and 1862, from designs by Mgr Philibert, a vicar-general of the archbishopric of Toronto. It was then somewhat modified at the end of the 19th

century and again at the beginning of the 20th century (more precisely, in 1893 and 1922) when a new project drawn up by Guido Nincheri was stencilled on the walls. The altars and the general ornamentation in the choir, which date from the first stage, still survive today.

French gothic forms serve to affirm a Catholic pre-eminence



Basilique St. Patrick de Montréal
Intérieur vers le chœur
Photo : CPRQ

The island was a single parish; accordingly St Patrick's was originally conceived as being a daughter church to Notre-Dame. It was run by the Sulpicians and was intended to serve the anglophone Catholics of Montréal, who were mainly Irish. The church council of Notre-Dame acquired the land at the corner of Rue La Gauchetière and Rue Saint-Alexandre in 1843, and erected the church which now dominates the Basse-ville (Lower town) in the middle of the anglophone community. The positioning of the church, facing the Saint Lawrence river, emphasises the imposing gaze it seems to bestow on the growing town.

The choice of French architects and the rejection of British forms, which Pugin's project would have brought about, illustrate the desire to affirm a Catholic presence in this part of the town which was already occupied by the Protestants. The strategic importance of this building in the budding denominational mosaic of Montréal explains, in part, its being raised to the status of parish church in 1866 after a long debate between the Sulpicians, the bishop, Mgr Bourget, and the religious community.

As was the case with the Church of St. Matthew in Québec (although in a reverse situation) the confrontation of the styles of religious architectural traditions served to affirm the respective membership of the Protestant and Catholic communities in an environment where these two religious confessions co-exist in their day-to-day lives.

Charles Bourget

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