

The churches of Québec

Cultural and social importance and representativeness



Church of Beauceville
Photo : François Brault

The churches of Québec, regardless of the tradition, which they reflect, are built on the spirit and the history of Québécois. They are representative of the various cultures that merged in Québec, which it synthesized, and which survive to this day.

In a colony that was founded by the French, conquered by the British and located a few miles away from the United States, the houses of worship took characteristic forms and colors that were modified by the customs particular to each religious denomination.

For a long time, churches were the only public buildings, and remain so to this day in certain remote areas. They have been used as meeting and reception places, as information and teaching locales or arts centres, and even served as shelters in the event of enemy attacks.

Because the costs of a religious building's construction were defrayed by the whole of the community, its forms and its colors are marked by the taste and the needs of that community. Thus, the structure became reflective of a society's animated history, oscillating between broad jumps forward and long quiet periods, periods when a need for economy supervened sometimes unbridled ambitions.

The history of the churches of Québec follows the history of north-American architecture, bustling with the passion for foreign forms in its culture, while remaining close to its roots.

The French Regime

Construction activity began in the 17th century in a colony founded by the French, who had just expelled all Protestants from their kingdom. The omnipresence of wood allowed fast and inexpensive constructions; a priest passed by for the mass and the sacraments, the small number of faithful and of priests forestalling any expansion.

However, when the colony grew in population, a resident priest was appointed. At first, all the faithful worked hard to build a stone church on the command of the King, who could, on occasion, grant the people a subsidy. The church was small and had a modest ensemble of religious furniture. People were content with this structure until an increase in population required an expansion, which was usually lateral. These increases in population commonly took place in rural areas, when the cultivated land increased in area and yield.

It was in those regions, where the population justified it that one finds the first stone churches: they were built in the late 17th century, and many survive to this date. One can find excellent examples of the religious architecture of the French regime in prosperous agricultural areas, for example on the île d'Orléans . The men who undertook supervision of the construction of these churches were either trained in France or else were educated by Frenchmen who were passing through or had recently immigrated.

Until 1960, at least, the building metier would retain traces of French 18th- century know-how and would apply these skills in its architectural output.

The English Regime

In 1760, the colony came under English rule. The British government spent thirty years to determine how one should control the construction of Catholic churches, constructions of which it naturally did not want to carry the cost.

The French Regime



Aerial view of Saint-Pierre
Île d'Orléans
Photo : François Brault

The law known as "des Fabriques" (concerning parishes) of 1791 ensured that these costs were born only by the people who used the Catholic houses of worship. A committee composed of citizens had to ensure that all Catholics were taxed for the construction of their parish church in proportion to the acreage, which they cultivated. In a largely rural environment, this standard is unequivocal and easily applicable. History would show nevertheless that it is more difficult to apply these rules to an urban setting in periods of potent industrialization.

Initially, a parish had to be defined geographically. Catholics and their descendants residing within the borders established by the committee became the owners of the church, the presbytery and other buildings designed for the use of the parish. They took care of the construction, repairs and maintenance of the religious buildings, and even of their rebuilding in case of a fire or other major accident, always according to their financial means. The amount of individual contributions was determined by the committee and its non-payment could result in civil punishments. The only means of avoiding this commitment was to declare oneself a non-Catholic, which the faithful, threatened with being struck down by lightning from the Heavens, seldom dared to do.

The English Regime



Chapel of St. Mark
Bishop University, Lennoxville
Photo : François Brault

The geographical disposition of a parish obviously dictated architectural predilections at the time of the construction of churches. Parishes located within a certain perimeter entered in a reciprocal competition. Correspondingly, architects, whose reputation preceded them, profited from this rivalry. Some bishops took it upon themselves to recommend certain architects rather than others, especially when their skill safeguarded the parish from problems inherent in a construction. Thus, architects at times saw a diocese as their hunting grounds, enabling the faithful of the district to construct churches with commensurate regional characteristics.

Catholics, who were authorized to decide on materials, dimensions and ornamentation of the interior and exterior of their church, had specific ideas in mind so that they often endorsed projects which were a little beyond their means, provided that the finished work corresponded to their concept of beauty and convenience.

Among non-Catholics, religious buildings were erected with donations. The congregations of religious traditions other than Catholic was not, and is still not subjected to the same geographical criteria as Catholic ones.

The architects whose services were secured by the communities were often of the same religion as the faithful. This means that the majority of Protestant churches were built according to the plans of architects of British origin, in accordance to their country's architectural style, and perpetually in tune with the current construction of religious architecture.

Jews, whose numbers were still very small before the turn of this century, met in small groups in certain residences or small synagogues distributed throughout the towns of Montréal and Québec.

The Second Half of 19th century

Beginning in the middle of the 19th century, and as a result of the growth and change of means of transportation, Québec opened up to the world. At this time, bridges and canals connected it to the United States and the large ports of the East coast. The architects of Canada and Québec quickly discovered the plans that were published by Americans from the end of the 18th century on; they used them in domestic as well as religious architecture, especially after 1840.

From then on, Catholic religious architecture had three sources: the French tradition, information coming from the British Isles, and books by American architects.

The Second Half of 19th century



Church of Champlain (Façade)
Photo : François Brault

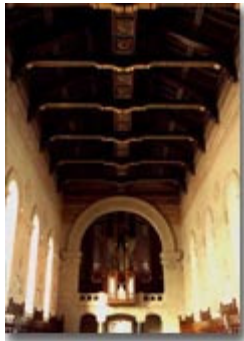
Although French works do not exist in Canada before the turn of this century, construction workers retained in the interior of what is now called Québec, methods of training engineers, workmen and French contractors. In notarized contracts, they continued to employ certain legal terms that were used at the time of Louis XIV. This would continue at least until 1960.

Certain Protestant sects also adopted American models, which circulated freely in Canada. These very practical architectural solutions were illustrated in publications, where one could also find samples of estimates, calculations of costs, and details of trendy structures.

After 1850, architects of all religious denominations had to adapt to the tastes of congregations and thus started to accumulate these books, from which they drew their inspiration, borrowing a plan here, a detail there. This practice was not seen as mere copying, but as a token of respect for "grand architecture", which was produced by the Masters. The method was sanctioned by the École des Beaux-Arts de Paris, the supreme authority regarding architectural theory in the West.

The Turn of the century

The turn of the century



Chapel of Séminaire
de Montréal
Photo: Germain Casavant

At the end of the 19th century, a small number of architects went to France to study at this venerable institution, École des Beaux-Arts. From their cross-Atlantic voyage, they brought back polished methods of construction and models of religious buildings that were commissioned from their Masters.

The free circulation of all kinds of illustrations also allowed architects who had remained in the country to adopt particular architectural details of European origin. From 1893 on, young people who intended to practice architecture could register in one of the new schools of architecture founded in Montréal and later in Québec. These schools were always more or less influenced by Paris.

Beginning in 1880, the massive arrival of French-Canadians in large cities like Montréal, Québec, Sherbrooke, and Trois-Rivières, led to the construction of immense churches whose costs had to be carried by the Catholic members of the parish. At that time, it was no longer possible to determine contributions according to the acreage cultivated by the individuals. Rather, it was based on the urban space they occupied, the inhabitants of certain more prestigious streets paying more than their fellow-citizens of modest streets.

It was at that time that the ambitions of Catholics grew significantly. The large churches that could now be built due to the advent of steel construction competed in their size and ornamentation, while the cost was shared by a large number of parishioners. The imposing dimensions of these buildings allowed all of the parishioners to come together at least once a week, at the time of the Sunday mass.

Protestants retained more modest tastes, chiefly because of the size of their communities and their multiplicity. Whenever a community moved, its church was closed and demolished when it was profitable to sell the land. The preponderance of Protestant traditions and the great number of architects available allowed constructions of diversified designs, commensurate to the financial means of the communities. However, they retained a guarded respect for the architectural forms that they had used throughout the 19th century.

The great Jewish traditions also constructed imposing temples, particularly in Montréal, where many immigrants took refuge at the beginning of the 20th century. In the absence of architects of their religion, they adopted styles utilized by both Catholics and Protestants, identifying their temples through details like the Star of David. The interiors were designed according to their particular rites.

This great period of religious architecture in Québec, which is in fact its most significant one, slowed down during the Crisis of 1929, which stopped all other constructions. However, several large urban churches would still be built until the middle of the Thirties.

The Post-War Period

Activity recommenced after 1950. This era saw the blossoming of the suburbs and the subsequent need for building smaller places of worship that are disseminated on the circumference of the cities. In this regard, Québec followed the North-American trend.

In some regions, architectural traditions survived, but on a reduced scale. In others, new ways were embraced that audaciously used modern materials, such as concrete, which allows the creation of new kinds of structures.

Non-Catholics remained generally conservative, since it was felt that the current solutions were well suited to the needs of the communities.

Nevertheless, times change. What was feared earlier, now unfolded: the faithful began to desert their temples after 1960. A period of stagnation follows, and worries about the future of these houses of worship arise, since communities lack funds for their maintenance. Still and all, a vigorous resurgence movement has just emerged. Communities have become aware of the importance of their houses of worship, which are reflective of their history, and have consequently taken steps to carry out work that is necessary for the conservation of heritage buildings.

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The Post-War period



Basilica Notre-Dame du
Cap-de-La-Madeleine
Photo : Germain Casavant



Basilica Notre-Dame du
Cap-de-La-Madeleine
Photo : Germain Casavant