

The Church of Rapide-Danseur and colonial churches

Colonial churches and architecture of the vernacular

Between the last quarter of the 19th century and the eve of the Second World War the territory of Québec underwent a period of great development. Colonisation brought people to settle in territory which had been uninhabited until then. In the hinterland of the Saint Lawrence valley and on all the territories opening up, the colonists had to build community buildings.

The chapel and small school were generally the first to be constructed. They provided a gathering place for the population and a traditional anchorage. The majority of colonial churches were therefore built in an environment which had not been developed and where specialised labour was very rare. This scenario brought into being an architecture without an architect, in other words, a vernacular architecture. Building took place with the materials available and was often a community effort. The colonists, like those at the time of New France, tried to keep to tradition, and it was only with minimal features that the building dedicated to worship stood out in contrast to the surrounding buildings.



Aerial view



Aerial view of the building

A pattern and its variants

Most colonial churches in Québec are very similar in shape. No matter what the location or period of construction, the principles which influence their construction are evident, and it is the traditional methods in construction which by and large stand behind the architectural forms.

This circumstance was reinforced during the 20th century because the Ministry of Colonisation which gave financial backing for building projects also provided standard plans. The majority of these colonial churches were based on a simple rectangular plan ending in a flat chevet. The windows along the one-storey elevations were modest, and the openings on the façade were organised symmetrically. There was a double-sloping roof and a facade with a small bell-tower. The roof and facing of the walls were generally of wood and shingle. Later, a whole range of new materials would be used such as imitation-brick paper, asbestos shingles and asphalt shingles. The only distinguishing features that differentiate these buildings are the windows on the façade and the shape of the bell-tower. The interiors repeat the simplicity which is characteristic of the whole structure. A nave leads to a choir which itself is very plainly decorated.

The church of Rapide-Danseur - an exceptional case

Families started to arrive in Rapide-Danseur in 1932 under the colonisation plans of the government of Québec. The area had been frequented by many foresters since 1917. It was not until 1939, however, that the first priest, Father Dion, officially settled there. He designed plans for a presbytery which was immediately built by the inhabitants. He also drew up the plans for the church in 1941 and himself did some of the carpentry.

The church of Rapide-Danseur, in Abitibi, sits lightly in some respects on the expected criteria for church building. Construction started in 1942 on a rocky site near the river Duparquet. It was built of stones found in the nearby fields and erected on a rectangular ground plan ending in a semicircular apse. The deep foundations allowed room for a basement, and it was there that Mass was celebrated until 1951. About fifty men worked together to finish the first stage which consisted in completing the stonework and putting eleven windows in the basement.



Intérieur



Exterior

During the following years, work only continued in the summer. In 1944 a second group of about a hundred men built the steps, and it was only in 1947 that the windows of the nave and the doors were put in.

The unpretentious interior reflects the vernacular aspect generally found in these places of worship. The inhabitants along with Father Louis-Joseph Lafrenière, Father Dion's successor, used compressed cardboard to line the inside of the roof as well as to construct false-mouldings and to apply a few religious motifs. The symmetry and balance created by this sober ornamentation expresses the pride of the local people. The first Mass was celebrated there on 1 July 1951.

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