

The Church of Saint-Denis-sur-Richelieu

The importance of side galleries in Québec's larger churches



Façade

Photo : Germain Casavant

One of Québec's architectural gems as far as church interiors are concerned is the church of Saint-Denis. However, this church is still to be listed as an historic monument. It is the third church to be built on the site and its exterior and interior are both very imposing. A first wooden construction was erected in 1740, almost fifty years after the concession of the seigneurie of Saint-Denis in 1694. It was replaced in 1764 by a stone church of a Recollect design. Virtually the only thing that is known about the first church is that it only contained twenty-three pews. Work on the present building began in 1793 and there are several points of interest about it.

The first design with two rows of windows in Québec

The plans for Saint-Denis were drawn up by the priest, Cherrier, and the structural work was completed in 1796. He created the church in the form of a Latin cross with semicircular chevet and central sacristy. His source of inspiration is not yet clearly known, but his use of double bays, more successful than in Cap Santé, leads one to suppose that he referred to architectural manuals where he could have seen this particular arrangement. It is the same method of planning the elevation that had been employed in 1799 for the Anglican Cathedral in Québec by the English officers in charge of that project. Otherwise there appears not to be any connection between the two buildings. The model for the Anglican Cathedral was British whereas at Saint-Denis-sur-Richelieu one can still sense the French inspiration as in Notre-Dame-de-Québec and Sainte-Famille de Cap-Santé. The presence of a cupola at the crossing of the transept likewise indicates the reference to patterns outside of the colonial context.

The double storey of side galleries was added in 1804, still under Cherrier's supervision, immediately after the Anglican Cathedral had been finished. However, the layout of the interior with galleries dividing the elevation into two seems to have been planned as early as 1793. The two storeys of identical windows also leads one to suppose that this was the original intention. Louis-Amable Quévillon carved the two altar-stones for the side altars and then started on the reredos and the entablature of the choir in 1804. The side galleries of the nave were installed in 1807 and Urbain Brien undertook the general décor of the nave and the transepts in 1813. The project was finished in 1844 with the ornamentation of the vaulting by Augustin Leblanc, and the installation of the pulpit and font completed in 1818 by Urbain Desrochers. Today this font can be found in the sacristy.

Minor renovations between 1870 and 1882

The sacristy was lengthened by over eight metres in 1870 and its walls were raised by over a metre at the same time. In 1881 the décor on the 1844 vault was also re-fashioned and the commission was given to the artist, Joseph Rousseau. He took advantage of this to remove many of the carved features created by Augustin Leblanc forty years earlier.



Doorway

Photo : Germain Casavant

Major renovations and changes in 1922-1923

The Montréal architects, Viau and Venne were commissioned to reconstruct the façade because the bad state of its towers was worrying the people responsible for the building. This provided a good opportunity to lengthen the nave by about ten metres and re-design the interior which was to undergo a few changes.

The lengthening of the nave is visible from the outside where the joining of the stonework is easily perceptible. The façade itself is striking due to its sheer size. The choice of a Beaux-Arts style and the way the towers stand out in relation to the structure give an almost ostentatious character to the building. The façade includes five doorways, three in the central part and one at the base of each tower. By choosing the colossal order to support the refined neo-classical pediment in the tradition of Beaux-Arts, the architect has given a sense of strength to the whole structure which is both evocative and majestic.



The arms of the transept
Photo : Germain Casavant

"The proportions of the façade, the horizontal arrangement of the openings and most especially the shape of the bell-towers are all reminiscent of the façade of the church of Saint-Sulpice in Paris. It is, however, only a pale reflection of its Parisian counterpart, partly because of the limited means of the parish and partly because of the methods of construction used in Québec at that time" (Luc Noppen, *Les églises du Québec (1600-1850)*, Québec et Montréal, Éditeur officiel/Fides, 1977, p. 210.)

However, this "pale reflection" remains very impressive in the provincial setting of the small town of Saint-Denis-sur-Richelieu.



The arms of the transept
Photo : Germain Casavant



Detail of the choir décor
Photo : Germain Casavant



Choir
Photo : Germain Casavant

The architects, Viau and Venne, next concentrated on the cupola and the roofs. The sacristy was also completely reconstructed and covered passageways linking the transepts to the sacristy were created. The lower windows of the choir, built in accordance with the two-storey design of the building, had to be blocked off because of these passages. Lengthening the nave provided an opportunity to modernise the interior to some extent. The pilasters which adorned the square pillars supporting the galleries were transformed into round columns. These then provided the total support for the upper arcade passing through the upper gallery giving it the appearance of being suspended on columns rather than reposing on pilasters. The pilasters were then used for the walls of the choir which had been left empty until then because of Quévillon's work on the reredos. The walls of the transepts and choir were re-constructed when the side galleries of the transept were removed. The banisters of the Desrochers pulpit were completely transformed and the balconies at the back were made into an organ loft.

The subsequent importance of side galleries in Québec

Most of the more important churches built between 1820 and 1900 in Québec contain side galleries, with the exception of the neo-gothic buildings such as Saint-Pierre-Apôtre or Saint-Patrick's in Montréal, which keep to the traditional plan of side aisles. Good examples of these side galleries can be found in Saint-Jean-Port-Joli, Saint-Patrice and Saint-Jean-Baptiste in Québec, Notre-Dame-de-la-Victoire in Lévis, Saint-Joseph de Deschambault and Notre-Dame-de-Montréal.



Interior towards choir
Photo : Germain Casavant

It seems that the installation of lateral galleries or balconies provided an acceptable compromise between the basilican plan (which has been a symbol of dignity in most French buildings since the 10th century and used for Notre-Dame-de-Québec in Chaussegros-de-Léry's design in the 18th century) and the single nave plan used in traditional religious architecture in Québec. The basilican plan is very costly because it requires a rather special technique of construction for the framework of the building. The use of lateral galleries has the advantage of creating a triple interior space, as in the basilican plan with three naves, while preserving a relatively simple stonework in those churches with a single nave.

Saint-Denis-sur-Richelieu along with the Anglican Cathedral of Québec are pioneers in architecture which enable us to understand one of the most important preoccupations of Québec builders of the 19th century: the design of a structure which was as magnificent as possible with reference to the cultural heritage of Europe, yet remaining sensitive to the socio-economic realities of a country still in the process of developing.

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- Richard, J. B. Les églises de la paroisse Saint-Denis sur Richelieu, Société d'histoire régionale de Saint-Hyacinthe, 1939, 75 p.