

The Church of Saint-Isidore de Beauce

Two types of "formal borrowing"



Façade

Photo : Germain Casavant

As in most parishes in Québec, the first place of worship was the presbytery, modified for the purpose. Even when the official inauguration of a parish was delayed, as was the case here at Saint-Isidore de Beauce in 1829, it was decided to adopt this very practical idea, adapting it to a place where clearance was required before any building could take place. Taking this step gave importance to a site which until then had been virgin territory. In Saint-Isidore the project for the construction of a church was approved by the bishop of Québec in 1852.

The bishop, as was customary, gave precise specifications. These included the dimensions of the building, the aligned position of the sacristy, the necessity of a covered passageway, which no longer exists, between the sacristy and the church, in addition insisting that the commencement of building work was conditional upon his definitive approval of the plans.



Exterior view of chevet
Photo : Germain Casavant

A rapidly built structure in the middle of the 19th century

The foundation stone was laid in 1853 and Jean-Baptiste Guillot, master mason from Québec, undertook the structural work in 1854. The interior furnishings including tabernacle, altars, pulpits, baptismal fonts and churchwarden's pew were completed between 1855 and 1869 by Ferdinand Villeneuve of Saint-Romuald on the south shore, near Québec city. Local builders, Louis Patry and Jean-Baptiste Saint-Michel worked on the panelling and the general layout of the site.

The façade - an adaptation of the prestigious design used for the Cathedral of Québec

In 1843, Thomas Baillairgé submitted a project for the reconstruction of the façade of the Cathedral of Québec. This adjustment meant adding a projecting central structure decorated by a colossal order surmounted by a pediment. On either side, the side aisles complete the whole design. The horizontal gap between the central part and the sides is modulated by simplified volutes which connect the base of the pediment with the exterior walls of the side aisles.

This idea of dividing the façade into three vertical sections with a triangular pediment crowning the central section, volutes on the roof, and the shape of the spire with its chamfered corners indirectly calls to mind the façade of the Cathedral. However, in order to adapt a fairly sophisticated project such as this to a village church obviously required some simplification.

On the whole, this kind of "formal borrowing" is rather superficial. The builder is seeking to establish some kind of pedigree by which to give authenticity to his work. At the same time, it provides a sort of guarantee of reproducing a minimum coherence and artistic quality because the design being used has already satisfied the high standards of the bishop of Québec.



Choir

Photo : Germain Casavant

The interior copied from Saint-Anselme

The rest is the type of "formal borrowing" which is acceptable in the field of interior design. The interior ornamentation of the church of Saint-Isidore, as specified in the carpenters' and sculptors' contract, was produced, "according to experts and others knowledgeable in the conventions governing the Arts, in the same way as the works of art in the church of Saint-Anselme". The builders were expected to imitate "with scrupulous accuracy" the dimensions, proportions, ornamentation and facings used for the church of Saint-Anselme" (Madeleine Gobeil-Trudeau, *Les chemins de la mémoire*, t. I, Québec, Les Publications du Québec, 1990, 437.)



Vault
Photo: Germain Casavant

The church of Saint-Anselme became the architectural point of reference. One knew what the end result would be like, and the project pleased the developer of the church of Saint-Isidore. The prestige associated with the name of Thomas Baillairgé, who signed the contract for the interior at Saint-Anselme, was guarantee that the project would be in accordance with all the accepted artistic conventions. Rather than give their church its own distinctive character, the church council preferred to ensure that quality would be maintained, mistakes would not be made, and design costs would be kept to a minimum.

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- Groupe Harcart. *Fabrique Saint-Isidore, Saint-Isidore, comté Dorchester*, Québec, ministère des Affaires culturelles, 1982, 132 p.