

# Eclecticism in the architecture of Québec Catholic churches..

There are some 2000 Catholic churches in Québec and almost 60% of them have been built since 1940. However, the turn of this century was also an active period in construction. About 300 Catholic churches representing nearly 20% were built between 1880 and 1910 and still survive today. The latter are generally enormous and provide clear landmarks around Québec's countryside. They were seen to be 'grandiloquent' or 'triumphalist' and received little attention from historians. Consequently the lack of interest in these buildings led to many demolitions and drastic renovations which are greatly regretted today.



Co-Cathedral  
Saint-Antoine-de-Padoue,  
Longueuil  
Photo : CPRQ

## The building boom at the turn of the 20th century

In a similar way to the period following the Second World War, the end of the 19th century was a period of growth. This was true not only for the population but also for the infrastructure needed to service a considerably enlarged area of settled land. Towns had never been so heavily populated, and this was in spite of the development of the backlands of the Saint Lawrence valley and the number of new villages being established. New parishes - there were about 300 created at this time - came into being in towns and countryside. Instead of starting with small chapels, they decided to build permanent churches. The older parishes also decided to replace or enlarge their places of worship which up until then had often been simple chapels which were much too small.

## What is eclecticism?



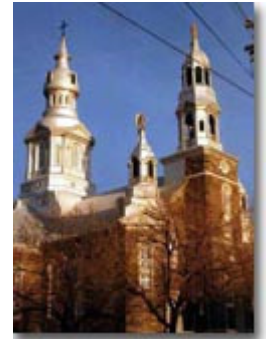
Church of Saint-Mathieu,  
Beloeil  
Photo : CPRQ

Eclecticism in architecture is said to be the movement which came to revolutionise the notion of style. It brought with it a freedom from the more formal canons of tradition and new possibilities for creative expression by reinterpreting the older architectural styles. Eclecticism was very personal and very variable depending on the architect's training and confidence which could vary from one architect to another. As such, it is generally considered to be a style which belongs to each individual architect and is therefore bound to remain for many something of an enigma. On the other hand, Jean-Pierre Épron in his recent work on eclecticism, points out that the eclectic approach not only stimulated discussion about style, but also had quite an important part to play when it came to discussing matters both technical and political. Eclecticism was an approach by which the architect attempted to create for himself a place of authority in the constructional process. He did this through his mastery of technique and formal composition as well as by ensuring that he had a sympathetic understanding of the needs of society. What is more, it

was at this time that the architects in Québec established a professional association (1890), and the first program for the teaching of architecture was introduced (1896).

## Beyond the formal

As well as the renewal of the formal vocabulary (both in composition and ornamentation), other innovations could also be seen in eclectic church buildings. The use of new technologies allowed for an increase in the height and spaciousness of the buildings, and for the demands of the Catholic faith to be met in new ways. In this way churches were created with improvements in the integral and functional design of areas such as the sacristy, the wedding chapel, the baptistery, and circulation areas inside the church as well as in the sacristy, presbytery, parvis and graveyard (for rural churches).



Church of Notre-Dame-des-Neiges, Trois-Pistoles  
Photo : Paul Trépanier

New materials brought variety and colour; polychrome was in part inherited from the neo-gothic. Stonework was used to a degree unequalled in previous religious architecture. Church interiors provided an ample space for artists to create whole sequences of painting, sculpture and stained glass, giving to the churches a profoundly narrative character.

## Eclecticism's place in the architecture of Québec churches

In a country in which the classical tradition was so firmly anchored and where the neo-gothic was never greatly developed, eclecticism marked an important turning point. Such a change can only be explained by a clear ambition on the part of the architects to make their mark and distinguish themselves, and to show how our religious architecture was well on the road to seeking a new identity. From the eighteen-eighties a new style of building appeared in which composition and ornamentation were perfectly mastered.



The bell-tower of the  
Church of Saint-Sauveur,  
Québec  
Photo : Paul Trépanier

In 1882, Joseph-Ferdinand Peachy designed the Church of Saint-Jean-Baptiste de Québec influenced in part by the Church of the Trinité de Paris, a well-known monument of the Second Empire. In the same year, the Montréal firm of Perrault and Mesnard designed the Church of Sainte-Cécile de Valleyfield (the future cathedral). For Peachy, Saint-Jean-Baptiste was the acme of his career which spanned more than 20 years. For Perrault and Mesnard, however, it was the beginning of a bold and varied output in the diocese of Montréal. Although using very different methods, they both had the same approach in producing work which was to show both consolidation and creativity. It was quite remarkable how far they departed from the traditional architectural norms, and yet produced designs which had about them a great sense of coherence and logic together with a total mastery of the language of ornamentation. Their projects gave a considerable impetus to the establishing of the role of the professional architect in the construction of church buildings. No contractor, master builder or 'church builder' could now claim to rival the projects that an eclectic architect was now able to offer.

## Varying stylistic sources

The quality and richness of style of Quebec's eclectic church buildings is most likely due to the great variety of sources available and the obvious ease with which the architects drew from these sources and composed their projects. They also demonstrated that they were well aware of the American, English and French styles both contemporary and historical. The Québec churches are therefore situated at a multiple crossroads.



Church of Saint-Basile,  
Portneuf  
Photo : Alain LeSieur

The Montréal architects were particularly influenced by the American neo-romanesque churches. The neo-romanesque was the international style of religious architecture in the 19th century. It was used in the United States and in France (where it also featured in parish architecture). The architects were also interested in French eclecticism (a mixture of neo-renaissance, neo-romanesque and romano-byzantine) which could be seen in several prestigious buildings such as cathedrals, votive sanctuaries and pilgrimage centres. In the Québec area, the new French monuments would greatly contribute to the renewal of church architecture. The architect J. F. Peachy, derived his inspiration from buildings of the Second Empire, and also used as models the new French pilgrimage churches. He used the latter especially for his bell-towers. Among the most creative church designers was a priest who was an architect in the diocese of Ottawa, Canon Georges Bouillon. Although

only a few of the buildings he designed<sup>1</sup> are still in existence, Bouillon is considered as an exception in the history of Québec architecture because of the way he integrated neo-gothic, early Christian, romano-byzantine and Moorish styles in his work.

## Different regions with local craftsmen

### Montréal area

Several talented architects gravitated around the Montréal firm of Perrault and Mesnard. These included Joseph Venne, Victor Roy, Casimir Saint-Jean, Louis-Zéphirin Gauthier and his associate J.-E.-C. Daoust. Churches were built in the diocese of Montréal which freely experimented with form. Several of these churches can still be seen in the dioceses of Saint-Jérôme (such as Sainte-Anne-des-Plaines and Saint-Jérôme), Joliette (such as Joliette and Saint-Lin), Valleyfield (such as Saint-Anicet), and Saint-Jean-Longueuil (Saint-Antoine de Longueuil). The diocese of Saint-Hyacinthe also made an important contribution to eclecticism because of the work of Louis-Zéphirin Gauthier (such as Saint-Mathieu de Beloeil and Sainte-Hélène de Bagot).



Church of Saint-Casimir,  
Portneuf  
Photo : Alain LeSieur

### Québec area



Church of  
Saint-Jean-Baptiste,  
Québec  
Photo : Denvse Léaaré

The principal architect in Québec was David Ouellet . He also covered the area situated between Québec and the territory east of the Bois-Francs (the dioceses of Québec, Sainte-Anne-de-la-Pocatière, Rimouski and Gaspé). His working career fits into the period when eclecticism was at its height, and during this time he designed almost 80 churches. He was quick to learn the game as far as the practice of architecture<sup>2</sup> was concerned and was soon able to establish himself in the pride of place in the profession . He was especially at ease with the classical style but we also owe to him a few of the great eclectic buildings in the province of Québec. The latter include Notre-Dame-des-Neiges de Trois-Pistoles and Saint-Basile de Portneuf. At the end of his career, the production of Ouellet was more in keeping with the Beaux-Arts movement. This was probably due to the influence of his adopted son and associate Pierre Lévesque.

<sup>1</sup> The most well-known being the interior of the chapel of the convent on the Rue Rideau, reconstructed in 1987 in the new Musée des beaux-arts du Canada.

<sup>2</sup> Sylvie Tanguay, David Ouellet (1844-1915), architecte: exploration de la pratique architecturale relative à l'architecture religieuse en milieu rural, à la fin du XIXe siècle, M.A. thesis, Laval University, mars 1989, 141 pages.

At the beginning of the century, another architect, Jos. Ouellet (no relation to David Ouellet), was also very active in the diocese of Québec. He played a part in the construction of almost 20 churches between 1897 and 1910. Between 1890 and 1910, Jos.-Georges Bussièrès concentrated his work in the region of Portneuf.

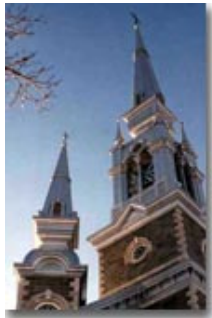
### Western Québec

At the beginning of the century, the architects Louis-Zéphirin Gauthier and Charles Brodeur took over from Canon Bouillon in the regions of Outaouais and the Laurentides (the dioceses of Gatineau-Hull and Mont-Laurier). They became the diocesan architects for these areas.

### Central Québec

Between 1890 and 1910, the architects Louis Caron (father and son) drew up plans for almost 20 churches just for the diocese of Nicolet. Charles Lafond, for his part, was active in the diocese of Trois-Rivières, and Wilfrid Grégoire and J. B. Verret were the most active architects in the diocese of Sherbrooke.

### The end of eclecticism



Church of Sainte-Victoire, Victoriaville  
Photo : Paul Trépanier

It is now agreed that the end of eclecticism can be dated at around 1910 and the beginning of the First World War. The revival of the Beaux-Arts style brought about by the generation of architects who were trained at the École des beaux-arts de Paris, put an end to the eclectic era. Even though it is predominantly influenced by the classical style, the Beaux-Arts movement also borrowed features from other historical styles. This, however, was undertaken with a considerable strictness of form which was very different to the freedom shown by the eclectic masters. J. Omer Marchand, was the first architect from Québec to be trained in Paris. The other Québec architects followed close on his heels and joined this movement which was to have a great impact on the architecture of the first half of the 20th century.

**Paul Trépanier**

**Text translated by Rachel Tunncliffe**

Paul Trépanier, a historian of art and architecture, has worked for more than 15 years in the field of heritage conservation. As a consultant, he has to date delivered about fifty research reports and several dozen articles, which have dealt specifically with Quebec architecture of the turn of the 20th century and the beginnings of modernity.

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