

Plymouth-Trinity United Church of Sherbrooke

And the influence of the federal style imported from New England



Exterior
Photo : François Brault

The style of Québec religious architecture results from the convergence of various international stylistic trends and a regional adaptation (climatic, colonial and material) of construction methods in keeping with the great European traditions of building. The general forms and detail of Catholic churches in Québec were at first greatly inspired by the classical French models, then in the second half of the 19th century, by neo-gothic constructions, also French. Later, the development of eclecticism and the Beaux-Arts style led to an increased number of stylistic options which would make for a much more varied architectural landscape.

The Protestants, on the whole, chose British models recalling the architecture of their mother country. On rare occasions, the architects took inspiration from the forms developed by our American neighbours. One of the styles most representative of the development of a national American identity was the federal style which was developed between 1780 and 1820 in the north-east states. Architects like Samuel McIntire (1757-1811) and Charles Bulfinch (1763-1844) designed new architectural forms inspired by the great British classical constructions like those of Christopher Wren. The federal style presents a strict neo-classicism emphasised by the monumental colonnades supporting impressive pediments, narrow spires, a frequent use of red brick, and a delicacy of the freestone mouldings. The Eastern Townships is an area located in southernmost Québec bordering New Hampshire and Vermont, two of the New England states where the federal style greatly influenced the architecture of the beginning of the 19th century. This style was adopted somewhat belatedly, in 1885, for the construction of Trinity United Church in Sherbrooke.



Colonnade at the entrance
Photo : François Brault

The building for the Congregationalist Church in Sherbrooke

"It wasn't until the Reverend Ammi J. Parker came to the region in 1827 that the first permanent Congregationalist community was founded there. A Shipton man, the Revd. Parker played a leading part in establishing several other communities including that of Sherbrooke-Lennoxville in 1835." (Société d'histoire de Sherbrooke, Les chemins de la mémoire, t. II, Québec, Les Publications du Québec, 1991, p. 480.)

The Congregationalist community met for worship in a temporary location and then moved to the Rue Dufferin in 1855, while the present building was being erected. The German architect, William Footner, who settled in Montréal in 1830, also designed the marché Bonsecours in Montréal and the second building for the law courts in Sherbrooke, amongst other buildings.

He designed a building using the principal characteristics of the American federal style which clearly indicated its Puritan and colonial origins. Between 1800 and 1825 the Mother Church in America split into two distinct communities: the Unitarian Congregationalists (more liberal), and the Trinitarian Congregationalists (more orthodox) a group of whom settled in the Cantons de l'Est. The name of Plymouth Congregational Church was chosen in 1862. In 1925, it was renamed the Plymouth United Church due to the grouping together of the Canadian Congregationalist, Presbyterian, and Methodist Churches.

Each community had its own very distinctive beliefs and organisation. Yet it was necessary that the interior disposition of the building should portray the collective character of their faith. Here in Sherbrooke, the layout of the pews was changed to auditorium style which accentuated the intimacy of the room. A hall was added on the second floor between 1863 and 1880 which also served for various community functions.

The church is a symbol of American emigration to Canada at the beginning of the 19th century and bears witness to an aspect of national history to which attention is rarely drawn. Like the Church of Odelltown, it shows the relatively strong cultural contact between the United States and Canada which is obtained principally near the borders.

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Text translated by Rachel Tunnicliffe

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