

Presbyteries and other private religious residences which are among the finest examples of Quebec dwelling places

The presbytery is an integral part of the complex of parish church buildings and has an intrinsic symbolic value. It is the residence of the priest who is a representative of the bishop, of the Church and therefore, by extension, of Christ himself. In the Roman Catholic tradition, it is often a large building, designed with great care, meticulous in construction, and containing a wealth of unusual details. As a result, the priest's residence stands as a kind of symbol in the parochial context of a sort of ideal dwelling which those parishioners who could afford it would like to use as a model for their own homes. In Québec, both town and country presbyteries thus constitute an invaluable record which helps us to understand the development of domestic architecture from the beginning of the colony.



Presbytère de
St-Joseph de Deschambault, (1815)
Photo : François Brault

The development of housing under the French regime



Presbytery of Saint-François
de Montmagny
Photo: François Brault

The French settlers brought with them their own particular ways of living. Food, clothing and housing habits were faithfully brought to the colonial environment. The first choice of building material was wood. These dwellings were not very durable, which is why there are no real examples left of this type of architecture. It is clear through the various written descriptions that building methods were imported directly from Europe.

In the 17th century most of the buildings were constructed using two different assembly techniques: half-timbering or dressed logs. Half-timbering was achieved by raising a wooden framework and then filling the interstices with clay mixed with straw and stones to complete the walls. For dressed logs, the timbers were piled one on top of the other with the aim of reducing the spaces between them to a minimum. The insulation of these buildings was fairly rudimentary.

From about 1650 onwards, houses in towns started to be built of stone. The houses remained simple, built around one or two fireplaces. The house at this stage of its development closely followed the European styles with the front door at ground level, no cellar, and a pointed, gabled pitched roof. This design was quickly used in the country where the presbyteries and manor houses adopted this new material.

The main inconvenience when using stone was its high conductivity when it came to cold weather. As the years went by, however, wall construction was improved and cavity walls were used. These were filled with sand and gravel forming a type of mortar which acted as an insulating layer inside the wall. This also prevented frosting on the interior of the walls.



Ferme Saint-Gabriel, 1698
Photo : François Brault

One of the finest examples of this French regime architecture is Saint-Gabriel Farm. It was built at the end of the 17th century and at that time belonged to the Sisters of Notre-Dame community which was founded by Marguerite Bourgeoys in 1653. The 'filles du Roy' (orphans who were raised under the auspices of the French Crown) stayed there on their arrival in New France before they were found husbands.

As with church architecture, the traditional Québécois style persisted in domestic buildings until the beginning of the 19th century. The oldest presbyteries still in existence were built in keeping with the styles developed during the 17th and 18th centuries. They allow us an insight into building methods under the French regime. During this time, "the priest lived in a style similar to that of the settler, and his dwelling place was hardly any bigger than those around it. What is more, the authorities in religious construction had ruled that presbyteries should at most measure 30 feet square. Its façade could be extended to 60 feet, but in this case half of the building was to serve as a room for public use."¹.

Québec neo-classicism



Presbytère de Saint-Joachim
Photo : Germain Casavant

Already by end of the 18th century, house-building had parted company with the traditional European design. At first, the roof extended beyond the wall forming gently curving eaves. Then, outside the front door, a sort of balcony was constructed. In the 19th century, wood once again became the most popular building material in the countryside. This provided a lighter structure and allowed the framework to be raised on stone foundations.

A veranda was built around the front and was often covered by the overhanging roof. From then on, the attics were also used for bedrooms, and additional skylights were provided. Finally, summer kitchens were built on to the house. These stopped the houses from getting too hot in summer, which was an inevitable result of cooking on the wood-burning stove, and in winter they could be used as a porch or cool larder.

This structural development was accompanied by an important stylistic change towards neo-classical forms mainly from the eighteen-twenties and eighteen-thirties. The traditional house "was redesigned following the strict rules of classicism, great care being taken to ensure that the proportions were correct. Doorways became more monumental, and the windows were spaced out symmetrically on either side." (Luc Noppen, Claude Paulette et Michel Tremblay, *Québec, trois siècles d'architecture*, Libre Expression, 1979, p. 74).



Presbytère de Saint-Anselme
de Dorchester, vers 1830
Photo : Germain Casavant

This regularity was inspired by the styles of Ancient Greece and Rome and gave a new character to the entrance as well as to the framing around some of the windows. Wooden facings imitating freestone started to appear. These were sometimes finished with imitation stone chain-work in order to complete the illusion of a stone building.

¹ Simard, Jean (textes) et François Brault (photos), *Les arts sacrés au Québec*, Montréal, Éditions de Mortagne, pp. 200-201.



Presbytère de L'Acadie (c. 1820)
Photo : Germain Casavant

The way was open now for the development of monumental style architecture for presbyteries:

"Furthermore, it was precisely at this time, when the seigneuries were being broken up in the middle of the 19th century, that presbyteries adopted the dimensions of the old manor houses. This seemed to give credence to Louis Hémon's judgement to the effect that nothing changed in the country of Québec, at least not at that particular period of time."²

A neo-gothic principally used by the Protestants

The neo-gothic style was revived in the eighteen-twenties with Notre-Dame de Montréal and the eighteen-forties to eighteen-fifties with the Church of St. Patrick and Saint-Pierre-Apôtre de Montréal. From the second half of the 19th century it could also be seen in domestic architecture.

The neo-gothic style was an integral part of the renewal of Victorian-style architecture, and as such, mainly influenced the English buildings. With the developing tastes for suburban villas, and the growing need for picturesque and rustic effects integrated into residential structures, there was a return towards the homely, organic forms of the medieval era.

The Anglican vicarage of Sorel was erected at the same time as the church in 1843. It was one of the first examples of domestic architecture in which the classical forms were adapted in order to return towards the more natural neo-gothic vocabulary.

Eclecticism at the end of the 19th century and during the first half of the 20th century



Presbytère de Baie-Saint-Paul
Photo : François Brault

The structural improvements which were developed at the beginning of the century were systematically maintained right through to the end of the 19th century. Gradually the new techniques in metallurgy, mainly under the instigation of supporters of the Beaux-Arts style at the turn of the 20th century, favoured the incorporation of steel structures in the more important buildings. Domestic architecture, however, both urban and rural, remained for the most part too basic to allow for the use of such expensive materials.

The most outstanding development in domestic architecture from the eighteen-sixties consisted in a change in its relationship with various historical styles.) Some of the new avenues explored by designers of that period included the preservation of classical forms while heightening their articulation, the integration of new motifs such as the mansard roof associated with the development of the Second Empire style in France, a reference to the Renaissance, and the increased emphasis placed on the monumentality of the building.



Presbytère de la paroisse
Sainte-Cunégonde de Montréal
Photo : François Brault

² *Idem*, pp. 201.



Toiture du presbytère de
la paroisse
Sainte-Cunégonde
de Montréal,
Photo : François Brault

One of the finest examples of imitation French classicism can be seen in Baie-Saint-Paul in the tourist area of Charlevoix. It imitates the layout of the French châteaux of the 17th century with a main central body and two wings placed at right angles.

In Montréal a building such as the presbytery of the parish of Sainte-Cunégonde is striking because of the rich and elaborate carving and sculpture of its upper parts. With its monumental façade decorated with giant arches which proceed to the level of the roof, the presbytery building and church together form a very impressive duo.

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