

The United Church of St. James in Montréal

An amphitheatre style church



Exterior from the street
Photo : François Brault



Exterior of community room
Photo : Germain Casavant

Hidden behind a commercial building on the Rue Sainte-Catherine, the former Methodist church of St. James remains a church worth looking at as much for its exterior architecture as for the originality of its layout inside, which is in the form of an amphitheatre. It was listed as an historic monument in 1980.

Towards 1920, financial problems compelled the Methodists to let the empty space around the church situated on the Rue Sainte-Catherine, the most important commercial street in Montréal. A thirty-year lease was agreed with the tenant who then erected a three-storey concrete structure in the form of a U, faced with red brick, and its ground floor designed for commercial occupation. As a result, the Methodist church and its amenities found themselves in a kind of interior courtyard; so the Montréal architect, Frank Peden, responsible for the commercial structure interposed a two-tier entrance porch in the centre of the building to allow access. He provided this porch-cum-narthex with a triple window resembling the former neo-gothic style façade. A vertical notice board affixed to the second tier of this porch indicates the presence of a church and has to compete with a collection of commercial posters.

The community of the United church of St. James, a regrouping of the Methodist, Presbyterian and Congregationalist churches since 1925, is desperately trying to find a solution so that the church might recover its façade on the Rue Sainte-Catherine without depriving it of the indispensable revenue from letting commercial space.

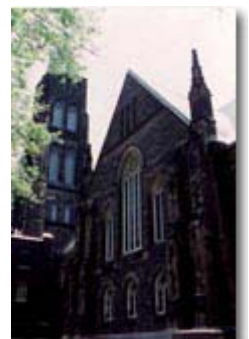
The loyalist immigrants who came to Canada after the American Proclamation of Independence in 1776, brought the Methodist faith to the Montréal region. The first church was built by the architect George Dickinson on the Rue Saint-Jacques and dates back to 1845; it succeeded two chapels which had been built in 1807 and 1821 respectively.

In 1886, the community acquired the site on the Rue Sainte-Catherine from the Canadian Pacific Company. The Montréal architect, Alexander Dunlop, was asked to draw up the plans for a new church. Dunlop was trained in Montréal and Detroit and had been in practice since 1874. Apart from many private dwellings and schools, he also designed the Queen's Hotel (today known as the Château Renaissance) on the Rue Peel, the Eker brewery on the Rue Saint-Laurent, and the pavilion at the Outremont golf club.

The plans were approved on 19 October 1886. It was proposed to build in two separate stages, beginning with a community room which would serve as a temporary place of worship while waiting for the church itself to be completed. Both sections were designed to seat 1000 people.

The foundation stone was placed on 11 June 1887 and from the autumn of 1888, the community room was in use. Less than a year later, on 16 June 1889, the community were able to attend the official opening of what was to be the biggest Methodist church in Canada.

The roughness of the facing stone made of undressed red sandstone (from a quarry in Credit Valley) contrasts with the corner stones and the ornamentation around the doors and windows which are fashioned in fine red and green sandstone (from the Baie des Chaleurs). The modulations in colour and the alternating textures are typical of the general eclectic tendency seen in the architecture of the end of the 19th century.



Exterior of right arm
of transept
Photo : Germain Casavant

The community room is two storeys high in a building which has three and a half storeys. The juxtaposition of the church deprived it of a façade giving it the appearance of a sort of choir apse extending from the main building. The interior space was refitted in 1937. This halved the size of the community room in order to provide for various offices and amenities.



Façade
Photo : François Brault

The façade behind the porch is flanked by two towers and comprises a doorway with three openings beneath a rose-window. A steeply sloping roof covers the single nave. The transept, which does not project out very far, is the main source of natural light to the interior. It has three openings at gallery level, with the central one composed of four lancet windows beneath a small rose-window with tracery. Together with the low windows, these are the only openings which light the nave because the large rose-window of the façade is above the vaulted ceiling of the building.

Like the arms of the transept, the buttresses stand slightly apart from the walls; they are not essential to the structure, and their presence is merely decorative taking the form of narrow, almost flat pilasters giving some rhythm to the whole conception.

The two asymmetrical towers of the façade were the pride of the building. The pinnacles which used to adorn them are no longer there. The bell-towers are of different heights, one approximately 43 metres and the other approximately 61 metres. They are surmounted with wooden spires covered in sheet metal and the smaller of the two supports a sort of lantern held in place by slender flying buttresses.

The interior of the church, with its sloping floor and side galleries, is fashioned in the style of an amphitheatre. The layout was inspired by that used in Akron (Ohio) adopted by the Methodists, Presbyterians and Baptists during the second half of the 19th century. On the ground floor, the seating is arranged in an oval around a sort of stage where the holy table, pulpit, choir stalls and organ are superposed on three levels. Thin cast iron columns support the U-shaped gallery.

The ceiling of the nave is a plastered wooden framework imitating the stonework. Suspended from the roof joists, the pendentive ribbed vaulting is finely carved. The cherry woodwork adds a certain warmth and intimacy to the décor

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Text translated by Rachel Tunnicliffe

Bibliography:

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