Conversion of the Church of *Sainte-Germaine-Cousin* Reaching out to the Community

BY MARIE-DINA SALVIONE

This essay synthesizes a serious concern related to built ecclisiastical heritage in Quebec. Most of all, it intends to present the recent conversion of the church of *Sainte-Germaine-Cousin* in Montreal, built between 1960 and 1962 by architect Gérard Notebaert into a community center related to social housing and child care. Today, after a decade and as the project is nearly complete, it recounts a modern heritage tale that led to an exceptional outcome from social and cultural perspectives and, of course, from an architectural angle. On a larger scale, this project responded sensitively to fundamental issues by creating awareness and a sense of belonging toward modern built heritage.

What happens when churches are closed? In Quebec this has been a matter of serious concern in the last decades. According to the *Conseil du Patrimoine Religieux du Québec* (CPRQ)[1], the facts are indeed alarming. The situation is rapidly deteriorating, as more ecclesiastical buildings are either closed, sold, or demolished. A recent survey by that organization[2] revealed the mounting difficulty of finding a new life for these places of worship that are closing at an increasing speed.

These statistics represent a real challenge for built heritage, be it ancient or modern. Still, since the years following World War 2, modern church architecture has been one of the most important typologies in the province of Quebec, both in number and quality. From an inventory of 2,751 buildings of worship across Quebec (2003)[3], the CPRQ identified that 1070 (39%) were built between 1945 and 1975. In 2013, according to their statistics, 209 of these modern places of worship have been closed and are awaiting a new community, cultural, or residential use, or even demolition.

As in all of occidental culture during the liturgical renewal period, church commissions were considered as structural, material, and artistic laboratories and were highly prized by architects. In some parts of the province, in the *Saguenay–Lac-Saint-Jean* region for instance, some of the concrete slabs and paraboloid buildings were considered most innovative and earned the characteristic title of *églises blanches*. Nevertheless, although closely related to the parish's health, these buildings are in a precarious condition[4]. Most importantly, their distinctive architecture leads to specific conservation issues related to their formal and aesthetic qualities. Structural expression, spatiality, and natural lighting are some of the attributes that must be recognized and preserved in order to sustain an architectural memory of these exceptional buildings. This statement might seem obvious in restoration cases, but how can intrin-

sic architectural qualities that characterize church architecture be preserved and conjured up in a reuse project? From a sociological point of view, these churches represent significant landmarks for the community and benefit from a strong sense of belonging. They should remain part of a lively social environment, and a founding place of the neighborhood. An exemplary church conversion project should therefore consider the needs of the community, the financial possibilities, and the architectural constraints brought by the particular typology of modern churches.

The purpose of this article is to present the recent conversion of the church of *Sainte-Germaine-Cousin* in Montreal. This whole project was led by three community-based companies: Construction Mainbourg, Rayside Labossière architectes, and *Bâtir son Quartier*. In addition, seven organizations and citizens concerned with the development of the district and the historical value of the existing church joined that committee. As this project is almost completed, after almost a decade, this article wishes to salute the rare attitude of the protagonists of the whole project that resulted in an exceptional outcome from social and cultural points of view, and of course from an architectural perspective.

The *Sainte-Germaine-Cousin* conversion project integrated the consensual work of all the parties in order to respect the heritage value of a significant building for the neighborhood as well as the province's built heritage. Ecological concerns were also central to this project. Finally, it cherishes the social and cultural values of this lively neighborhood.

The Church

The church of *Sainte-Germaine-Cousin* was erected in *Pointe-aux-Trembles*, an east-end district of the city of Montreal that experienced a rapid urban development period, starting in 1950. The parish was founded in response to that expansion. The church was designed and built between 1960 and 1962 by architect Gerard Notebaert (1927–1979), who

realized four other churches in the province of Quebec, including the *Christ-Roi Cathedral* in Gaspé (1968–1969), added in 2012 to the *Built Heritage List* by the *Ministère de la Culture du Québec*.

The church of *Sainte-Germaine-Cousin* stands out both technically and aesthetically in the architectural production of the liturgical renewal period in Quebec. Its striking shape makes it a rare example of the *Églises Blanches* movement in Montreal. The building is clearly outstanding because of its monumental size and shape which recall both St. Mary's cathedrals: Kenzo Tange's in Tokyo (1961–1964) and Pietro Belluschi's in San Francisco (1963–1970).

The church building suggests paraboloid forms but is the result of the combination of two simple volumes: a square-based pyramid and a Greek cross crowned with a cylindrical bell tower. At the time, this volumetric proposal was unique in Montreal. The church is implanted obliquely on the lot and was originally continued by the lower building of the presbytery.

The main volume of the church is surrounded by a circular brick wall that creates a quiet space between the building and the busy *Notre-Dame* Street. From the outside, the volume of the church seems opaque and monolithic, although the inside used to be very open and luminous. The soaring vault is 17 metres high. It is formed by continuous reinforced concrete slabs and raised 3.50 metres from the floor. This opening was entirely infilled with clear windows that opened the view on the intramural garden and provided the nave with an introspective quality. The main volume covered the central space while the Greek cross traced the principal axis of the centered-plan nave and also provided striking natural lighting that punctuated the axiality. Zenithal light penetrated from twelve round skylights that were distributed on the arms of the cross, while warm colored daylight was provided by stained glass that infilled its vertical ends.

Twelve round columns punctuated the perimeter of the church. Structurally they supported part of the base volume, but the main support came from the sidewalls of the Greek cross. All the concrete slabs of the church were 20 cm thick and the walls were coated with asbestos insulation, as was the custom at that time. The interior plan had two brick walls (which echoed the one at the exterior). They enclosed the sanctuary, containing the tabernacle and the bible. Combined with the angle of the slabs, they delimited the chapel and baptistery, creating lower and more intimate spaces. Finally, all the timber furniture was conceived by Notebaert.

Preservation
The church *Sainte-Germaine-Cousin* was closed in March 2004 due to a decrease in the congregation, the presence of asbestos, and the Parish's inability to absorb the maintenance costs of the building. During the first years following its permanent closure, the church was vandalized and its organ and original furniture plundered. After two arsons, it was barricaded and surrounded by a security perimeter. In 2005 the investors presented a new building project

that included the maintenance of the parish hall and the demolition of the church. The investors applied to the municipality for a demolition permit. This motion rapidly alarmed preservation groups as well as the city's heritage authorities[5] and closer attention was paid to the patrimonial study of the building and its surroundings[6]. The demolition permit was denied due to the patrimonial interest of the church. The ensuing project propositions thus had to take the existing building in consideration.

Stakeholders
As the heritage process imposed many modifications to the project and numerous delays, the investors showed patience, creativity, and respect towards the existing church. Corporation Mainbourg, *Bâtir son Quartier*, and Rayside Labossière architectes mainly invested in the *Sainte-Germaine-Cousin*'s project. Corporation Mainbourg acted as the promoter and was also very much involved in the development of the district; *Bâtir son Quartier* coordinated the implementation project; and Rayside Labossière was greatly involved from the very beginning in all aspects of the project and mostly in the architectural conception. This agency is dedicated to social sustainable architecture. Founded in 2000, the multidisciplinary team now employs 40 specialists in architecture, design, built heritage, and urbanism that aim to promote social and community development. The group is committed to community networks and creates numerous projects for underprivileged populations. Among them many were conceived to reuse closed ancient and modern churches. The *Chic Resto Pop*[7] in Montreal is one of these original conversions. Since 2011, it has occupied the reused *Saint-Mathias* modern church. The community kitchen is installed in the basement while the former nave constitutes the open and luminous dining hall.

Back to the Project
The project of *Sainte-Germaine-Cousin* was intended as a multigenerational environment that brings community support to its inhabitants. Social dwellings for the elderly and the disabled were to be located in a new building, while the existing church would accommodate a day-care centre for 80 children as well as community spaces.

Between 2007 and 2009 two projects were proposed to the many stakeholders involved in the project[8], but no consensus was reached. Both proposals included two or more buildings that surrounded the church and increased the density of the site. Therefore, in 2009, a design *charrette* was organized and grouped all the participants, from which the idea of the actual main building emerged: its S-shape would integrate the church rather than conceal it and would not divide the lot.

Meanwhile, between 2009 and 2011, due to the delay required for heritage designation, the project was suspended. Nonetheless, no time was lost as during this delay, the investors met with an *ad hoc* committee[9] and identified the main directions to consider for the project[10] regarding the heritage designation. Firstly the church restoration had to be achieved before or during the project. Secondly, the
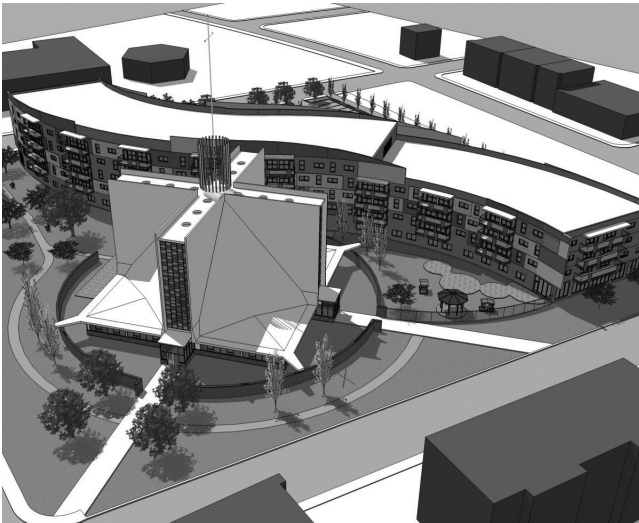
01 Gérard Notebaert, Church *Sainte-Germaine-Cousin*, Montreal, 1960–1962. View of the the church interior.© *Conseil du Patrimoine Religieux du Québec*, 2003.

02 Rayside Labossière Architectes, Chic Resto Pop (former Saint-Mathias church), Montréal, 2001-2013. View of the dinner hall. © Saul Rosales, Rayside Labossière Architectes, 2013.

03 Gérard Notebaert, Church *Sainte-Germaine-Cousin*, Montreal, 1960–1962. Plan of the reuse project of the church building as a daycare center. © Rayside Labossière Architectes, 2014.

04 Rayside Labossière Architectes, *Sainte-Germaine-Cousin* dwellings, Montreal, 2005-2014. Rendering of the project. © Rayside Labossière architectes, 2014.

05 Gérard Notebaert, Church *Sainte-Germaine-Cousin*, Montreal, 1960-1962 and Rayside Labossière Architectes, *Sainte-Germaine-Cousin* dwellings, Montreal, 2005-2014. Outside view of the building site as the new building is almost completed. © Saul Rosales, Rayside Labossière Architectes, 2014.

characteristic elements that embodied the heritage value of the built ensemble had to be considered. Therefore, the project had to respect a *non-aedificandi* zone around the church, mostly on the front part of the site. The new buildings could not exceed five storys in height to maintain the predominance of the church volume as well as its formal and material characteristics. The new project had to be integrated in the diagonal implantation of the site, it had to preserve the mature trees and original landscaping, and finally improve the open spaces on the front part of the lot (toward *Notre-Dame* Street) in order to increase its value.

In the spring of 2012, the project officially started with the decontamination of the site and demolition of certain components of the church: the presbytery and the circular church hall. The construction phase started in December 2012 and, two years later, the first residents moved into their new apartments. The four-story building has a timber rooftop terrace. It comprises 126 adapted apartments, 48 rooms, common spaces, and offices. It connects with the church, which for the moment has been decontaminated, restored, and adapted to its new vocation. The asbestos was entirely removed and a technical floor created to hide the mechanical components in order to preserve the purity of the central vault.

Among the challenges, the architects had to combine the new usage with the existing structure of the church. This was realized by planning the day-care spaces in playful volumes that occupy the circumference of the nave, leaving the centre open for a multifunctional space.

All this time, the main attitude of the *Sainte-Germaine-Cousin* project has been to find creative and simple architectural solutions to face and overcome the technical and financial constraints. During the building project, a website was created to inform the public about the development[11]. This innovative and rare attitude helped create a link between citizens (be they new residents or old residents of the parish concerned about their living environment) and modern heritage experts. The website gives information, provides many original documents regarding the church and the actual project (heritage study, news articles, designation act, etc.), but most of all, it follows the project both through images and articles that use accessible language and define the technical terms when necessary. Our personal favorite: a chapter dedicated to explain the removal of asbestos as it is notorious for being the actual massive argument to justify the demolition of modern buildings. Since the investors had to incur extra costs for the removal of this demonized material, they decided to simply reach toward the community and explain what it was all about, from the description of the material, its common usage in the architecture of the 1950s through the 1970s, and finally the description of the main steps of this delicate task.

Conclusion

From our point of view, the *Sainte-Germaine-Cousin* project responds to fundamental issues of preservation. Among technical considerations, it promotes the acceptance and awareness of modern architecture among citizens and experts. It also values the reuse of architecture as a responsible contemporary approach. In the longer term, it will be interesting to observe how this new project will be adopted and appropriated by its residents. Hopefully this positive process will inspire others and be copied as a good example of sustainable architecture with a cultural twist. Finally, this project responds sensitively to the issue of closing churches by handing over these central buildings to their community. ∎

Notes

1   The CPRQ is a not-for-profit organization which supports and promotes the preservation of the built ecclesiastical heritage at the provincial level.
2   *Conseil du Patrimoine Religieux du Québec, "Situation des lieux de culte en*

06 Gérard Notebaert, Church *Sainte-Germaine-Cousin*, Montreal, 1960–1962. View of the churche's interior while the asbestos removal. © Saul Rosales, Rayside Labossière Architectes, 2014.

mutation au Québec," 2014, [www.patrimoine-religieux.qc.ca/fichiers/ fic141107122812_communique.pdf], consulted on January 8, 2015.

3   *Conseil du Patrimoine Religieux du Québec, "Inventaire des lieux de culte du Québec*", 2003 [www.patrimoine-religieux.qc.ca] [January 8, 2015].

4   Marie-Dina Salvione, "*Trop tard pour Notre-Dame-de-Fatima ?*", *Architecture Moderne au Québec et Ailleurs*, **docomomo** Québec, 2014 [docomomoquebec.ca/patrimoine-menace/170-trop-tard-pour-notre-dame-de-fatima-.html] [January 8, 2015].

5   These groups were: *Conseil du Patrimoine Religieux du Québec, Atelier d'Histoire de Pointe-aux-Trembles*, **docomomo** Québec, dess Architecture Moderne et Patrimoine of the Université du Québec à Montréal, and Conseil du Patrimoine de Montréal.

6   Éric Millette (Con_text_ure), *Étude d'Intérêt Patrimonial. Église Sainte-Germaine-Cousin*, presented to the *Sainte-Germaine-Cousin* Parish, December 13, 2005.

7   This integration and social economy organization has been established since 1989 in the Hochelaga–Maisonneuve district in Montréal. In addition to offering affordable meals to more than 1300 persons every day, the Chic Resto Pop helps both the unemployed to integrate into the labor market, and society through a variety of training services and employability development activities.

8   The future owners, the Archbishop, the District or the Division of Housing of the city center.

9   This ad hoc committee gathered people from the Direction de l'Habitation, the Bureau du patrimoine de la toponymie et de l'expertise de la ville de Montréal, Corporation Mainbourg, Ron Rayside architecte, the Archbishop of Montréal, and the *Atelier d'histoire de Pointe-aux-Trembles*.

10   Marie Lessard (ed.), *Avis Conjoint du Conseil du Patrimoine de Montréal et du Comité Ad Hoc d'Architecture et d'Urbanisme. Église Sainte-Germaine-Cousin — Redéveloppement de la Propriété*. AC11-rdppat-01, *Conseil du Patrimoine de Montréal*, 2011.

11   Sainte-Germaine-Cousin. Un Projet pour la Communauté [stegermainecousin.com] [January 8, 2015].

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