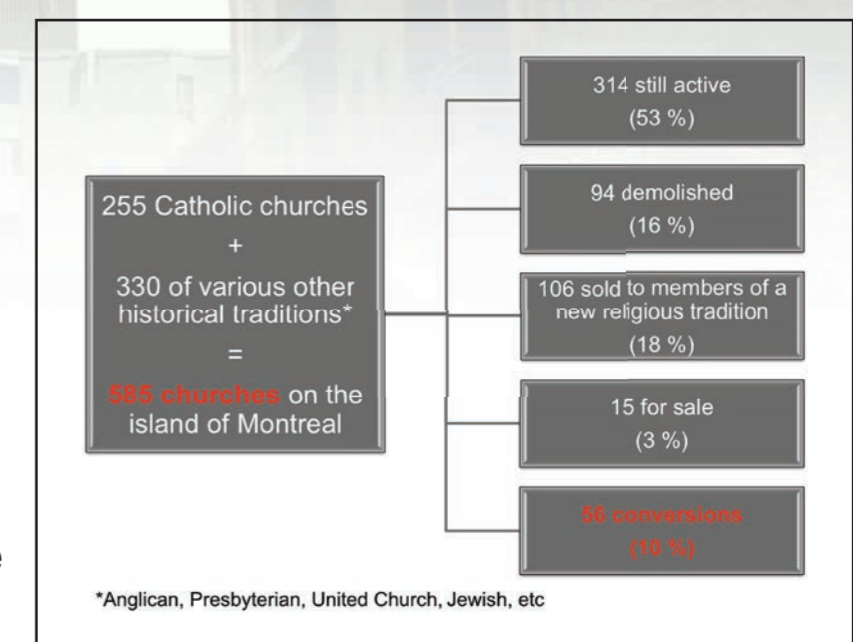


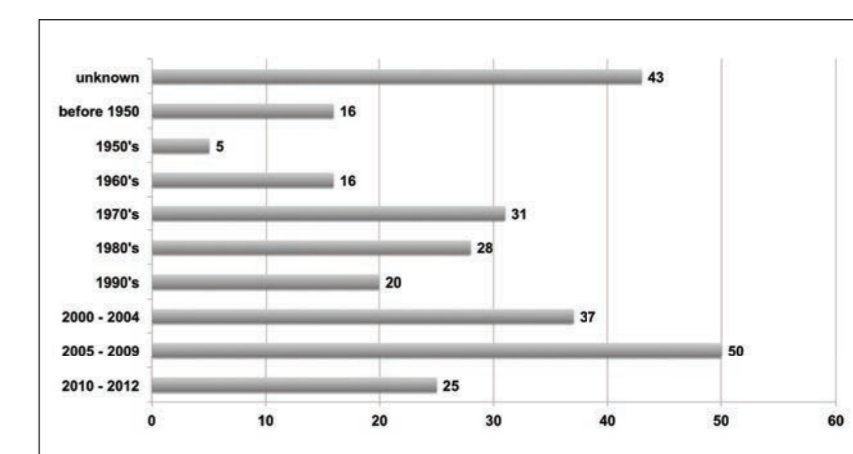
Assessment and issues concerning the conversion of churches in Montréal, Québec (Canada)

Although Quebec's churches belong to a "fabrique" (a parish council in charge of administering parish property), as well as to the dioceses and other legally recognized religious organizations, they are perceived both as high places of communal investment and as a focal point for the historical structuring of the territory, at least among Roman Catholics. Nowadays, declining church attendance, the financial difficulties of the parishes, and a shortage of fresh recruits within traditional religious organizations is causing an accelerated disposal of church property. The shrinking of the ecclesiastical building inventory has not always proceeded smoothly and has spawned a number of questions concerning the sustainability of this nearby heritage whose symbolic value reflects the urbanity of a community that has, until very recently, shared both language and tradition. In Montreal, 255 Catholic churches and 330 others of various historical traditions have been erected since the 17th century, of which over half remain in the hands of their original owners, while the function for which they were constructed has been renewed for nearly 20 percent of this corpus, since these places of worship have been acquired by another religious tradition, often the product of immigration. We should keep in mind that barely 10 percent of the churches sold have changed vocations and are being used for new purposes.



Compiled by Lyne Bernier, 2012

Since the beginning of the 21st century, the disposal process has accelerated, although this is not a recent phenomenon. The first wave began in about 1925 when a shortage of both adherents and resources prompted several Protestant congregations to join forces within the United Church of Canada, resulting in a surplus of buildings. Then, during the 1970s, a number of churches were sacrificed during urban renewal operations, especially in downtown Montreal.



Chronology of church sales in Montreal. Compiled by Lyne Bernier, 2012

Quebec's economic metropolis stands out from the peripheral regions in particular by its status as a land of welcome for new immigrants, by the mobility of its population, and by its cultural, denominational and architectural diversity reflected in a profusion of sites and buildings that will have to be renewed or renovated sooner or later. In addition, property pressure and speculation represent typically Montreal phenomena on Quebec's property market scene, and the churches are not immune to this pressure. Lastly, the new uses assigned to churches are also helping to forge their distinct identity.

Taken over by a new religious tradition

In Montreal, selling to another tradition is far from a recent phenomenon, but it is on the upswing. This polarization around a category of buyers may be explained by the emergence of new religions or sects, generally of Christian origin, that are rooted in a number of metropolitan neighbourhoods, as well as by the growing action of adherents linked to a historical religious tradition originating in Asia or the Middle East. However, unlike Anglicans and the various Protestant denominations, Montreal's Catholic authorities will not sell their property assets to religions outside of Christianity.

A takeover by another tradition does not always have a positive effect with regards to heritage preservation. Often considered community property, a church acquired by another religious group becomes much more "private" by virtue of the sale, while neighbourhood residents no longer perceive it as nearby heritage since this change in religious tradition leaves them feeling rather cut off. Moreover, for a number of groups, the purchase of a deconsecrated place of worship seems most of all to represent leverage on the property market. Given the prevailing tax exemption, it is possible to hold on to the building, sometimes without maintaining it, until the economic situation is more favourable, at which point the owner can choose to demolish the building so as to enable denser property development on the last extensive lots in downtown Montreal neighbourhoods. The transfer of this heritage burden to other religious traditions may therefore suit the churches involved, but often obviates the heritage issue and thus all public interest. Some of these churches have, moreover, undergone a number of changes in their religious traditions over the course of their history.



The former Pointe St. Charles Baptist Church was built in 1900 based on plans provided by architect Arthur J. Cooke. It was acquired by the Gurdwara Sahib Temple in 1986. / Photos: Marianne Charland, 2012

Community and cultural use

Certain conversions are more warmly received than others, and public reaction to such projects is rather favourable. Very often the project originates with the parish or a local initiative, and both the project's promoters and the heritage players are ready to compromise in order to accommodate the new use. An increasingly common use is the conversion of a church into housing for the elderly. These initiatives express a desire to preserve the collective memory of the neighbourhood and also to facilitate a dialogue between the new buildings and the church, redesigned for new community and gathering functions.

When a church is deconsecrated, a frequently recurring idea is to repackage it for cultural use, as a museum, library or concerto hall. This is a normal reflex, but it does not take the cost of this conversion, especially the recurring institutional operating expenses, into account. Montreal can point to some fine conversions for cultural purposes, but they are far too rare compared to what may be observed in other regions of Quebec.

Given the churches' sacred character, especially for Catholics and Anglicans, it was difficult to imagine, only a few short years ago, that these buildings would become the home of sporting and mixed recreational activities. Yet this taboo has fallen by the wayside, and more and more churches across Quebec are being turned into sports complexes, while sometimes conserving a space set aside for worship.



The former Saint-Eugène church in the Rosemont neighbourhood was built in 1954 based on plans provided by architect Bernard Despatie. It was converted into community housing in 2006 by the ABCP architecture + urbanism agency. / Photos: Guillaume St-Jean, 2011



The former Erskine & American United Church, located in downtown Montreal, was built in 1893 based on plans provided by architect Alexander C. Hutchinson. It was acquired in 2008 by the Musée des Beaux-Arts de Montréal. Today its Salle Bourgie receives various exhibits and is home to numerous concerts. / Photos: MBAM, 2009 and Marianne Charland, 2012



The former Saint-Bernard church, located in the Maisonneuve neighbourhood, was built in 1964 based on plans provided by architects Paul G. Goyer and Claude Gagnier. It was acquired by Collège Mont-Royal in 2004, and transformed into a sports complex by the Cardin Ramirez agency. A 150-seat chapel was conserved so as to serve the Christian community. / Photos: Luc Noppen, 2005

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