THE HERITAGE VALUE STATEMENT

BETHEL GOSPEL CHAPEL

CIVIC ADDRESS
4250 de Maisonneuve Blvd., Westmount

HERITAGE DESIGNATION
Municipal - Category 1: Important
(SPAP)
Provincial - None
Federal - None

RELIGIOUS DENOMINATION
Baptist

OVERVIEW

Historical Value
The historical heritage value resides in the church’s deep original roots with the Baptist Church in Westmount and then the Bethel Gospel Chapel congregation.

Contextual Value
The contextual heritage value resides in its urban presence, with a churchyard providing an interruption in the residential fabric and a small patch of greenery along de Maisonneuve Boulevard.

Architectural and Aesthetic Value
The architectural and aesthetic heritage value resides in its Richardsonian Romanesque forms and details. As is typical of the work of the architect, A.C. Hutchison, the masonry, of brick and limestone, is beautifully detailed and disposed into gables and towers. The interior is representative of the Baptist community who commissioned the church. The plan emphasizes community, rather than hierarchy. The organ and central immersive baptistry demonstrate the importance of these two elements in both the Baptist and Brethren services. The historic liturgical furniture, particularly the curved pews, complement the architecture. The church demonstrates excellent functional design, craftsmanship and materials. This is true for both the exterior and interior of the building, which has a high degree of authenticity and integrity.

Spiritual and Community Value
The spiritual and community heritage value resides in the soaring volume of the sanctuary, the tightness of the plan, and the strong presence of the baptistry, organ and choir loft.
SITING

The Bethel Gospel Chapel is located on the south-west corner of the intersection of de Maisonneuve Boulevard and Olivier Avenue in Westmount. It is situated in a residential zone for single and two-family buildings and multiple family dwellings. It shares a party wall with a duplex to the west. It is surrounded by two- to three-storey attached houses or row houses or three- to five-storey apartment buildings.

DESCRIPTION

The Chapel was built in 1893, by members of the Grace Baptist Church; it is therefore the second oldest continuously occupied house of worship in Westmount (after the Church of the Advent, now the House of Prayer for All Nations). The Baptist community sold the building to the Seventh-day Adventist Church in 1925. In 1972, it became the home of the Bethel Gospel Chapel Montreal Inc., which has continued to occupy it until present day. The church facades are of red brick, with Montreal grey limestone trim and the street facades follow a conventional composition of central gable and corner tower. Its detailing is Richardsonian Romanesque in inspiration. The architect was the celebrated A.C. Hutchison, who had been also mayor of Westmount (formerly called “Village of Notre-Dame-de-Grâce”). The plan of the sanctuary is square and reflects the auditorium style that was in favour for certain Protestant sects by the last decades of the 19th century.

FAITH AND COMMUNITY LIFE

The Bethel Gospel Chapel is a house of worship and part of the Christian Brethren Church tradition. It is an Evangelical Christian church, whose origins date from the 1820s in the British Isles. From there, the religion spread to the Caribbean and returned to the United Kingdom with the wave of immigration from the Caribbean nations which began in the 1950s. It was this Caribbean-British community who brought it in turn to Canada. The Brethren believe in a close relationship with Jesus, and in the literal word of God, as revealed in the Bible. Full immersion baptism is an important rite of acceptance into the congregation. The Christian Brethren are committed to missionary work. While much of their theology parallels that of the Baptist Church, the Brethren reject the idea of clergy, instead considering all worshippers as ministers of the faith. As part of its mission, the church offers religious ceremonies, charity services and community activities.

RELEVANT DATES

1893
Construction of the church for the Grace Baptist community. In 1925, the congregation relocates to a new purpose built church on Sherbrooke Street and Roslyn Avenue.

1925
Sale of the building to the Seventh-day Adventist Baptist Church. In 1972, that congregation purchases a church on Westmount Avenue.

1972
Sale of the church to the Bethel Gospel Chapel Montreal Inc.

1992
Creation of a basement community hall by Gersovitz Becker Moss, Architects.
GOVERNANCE

Although Bethel Gospel Chapel is part of the Christian Brethren of Quebec which is headquartered in Sherbrooke, it is an autonomous, self-financing organization. It is directed by a Board with elected members. Donations are used for the maintenance of the building.
HISTORICAL VALUE

DESCRIPTION

The Evolution of the Urban Area
The Village of Notre Dame de Grace incorporated in 1879, at a time when settlement was concentrated near the ancient route of Cote St. Antoine. By 1890, when the village changed its name to the Town of Cote St. Antoine, development was spreading east and south. The area around Clarke and Olivier Avenues, below Sherbrooke Street, was developing steadily, due no doubt to the proximity of the tramway lines. Three years later, in 1893, in response to this growing population, the Grace Baptist Church opened the doors to its new church, at the corner of Olivier and Western Avenues (today de Maisonneuve Boulevard).

A New Home for the Baptist Church Community
The Baptists have been active in Montreal since 1831. The initial congregation met at the First Baptist Church, established on Ste-Hélène Street, in what is now Old Montreal. First established in Westmount in 1893, the Grace Baptist Church continued independently until 1902, when it merged with the Oliver Baptist Church to form the Westmount Baptist Church. In 1925, this congregation inaugurated its new building on Sherbrooke Street at Roslyn Avenue, and the original Grace Baptist building was sold to a Seventh-day Adventist congregation. In 1972, that congregation in turn left for a larger building on Westmount Avenue, and the church was sold again and renamed the Bethel Gospel Chapel.

The Bethel Gospel Chapel has its roots in the beginning years of the 20th century. According to Keith Clayton, in an article in Precious Seed, a small group of immigrants from the British Isles began to meet “in simple fashion” in rented quarters on St. Antoine Street. Known as ‘Plymouth Brethren’ their meeting place was named the ‘Gospel Hall’. Outgrowing this first storefront, they moved to a site that was expropriated in 1967 for the Bonaventure expressway. Five years later, they found a permanent home in Westmount, in the Bethel Gospel Chapel.

CHARACTER-DEFINING ELEMENTS

- The continued presence of the construction on the property, with high degree of authenticity.
- The continual use of the property for religious activities and community worship.
- The continuous use for Christian worship from 1893 to 1925 and from 1972 until present day.
- The association with A.C. Hutchison, architect and mayor of Westmount.
CONTEXTUAL VALUE

DESCRIPTION

An urban setting
The Bethel Gospel Chapel is situated in an urban environment in the south-east sector of Westmount, at the intersection of de Maisonneuve Boulevard and Olivier Avenue.

Its relatively modest scale fits within the residential environment which surrounds it. To the west, it shares a party wall with a two-storey duplex, which is characteristic of much of the surrounding housing stock. There are also apartment buildings, typically three- to five-storeys in height. To the east, lies the commercial sector of Greene Avenue.

A Neighbourhood Landmark
The church sits at the intersection of two streets, with two significant facades, announcing its institutional vocation. Its overall composition hints at the large single volume within and further emphasizes that it is a community building. The large front lawn facing de Maisonneuve Boulevard contains mature trees and plantings.

CHARACTER-DEFINING ELEMENTS

- Its distinctive volume and massing within a residential environment.
- The landmark status provided by the corner lot.
- The generous lawn in front of the building, with mature trees and plantings (green space).
ARCHITECTURAL AND AESTHETIC VALUE (1/3)

DESCRIPTION

A work by a Noted Architect
The Grace Baptist wardens sought out a distinguished architect to design their new church. His biographical entry in the Canadian Encyclopedia reads: “Alexander Cowper Hutchison, architect (b in Montréal 2 Apr 1838; d there 1 Jan 1922). One of Victorian Montréal’s most prolific and prestigious architects, he epitomized the generation of native-born, self-taught men who shaped the city during the second half of the 19th century. Trained as a stonemason, he supervised the cut-stone work on Montréal’s Christ Church Cathedral and the East Block of the Parliament Buildings, Ottawa, before establishing a private practice in Montréal shortly after 1865. The firm was known until 1890 as Hutchison and Steele, thereafter as Hutchison and Wood. Hutchison deserves credit for the careful detailing that characterizes all of the firm’s output, including the Redpath Museum, testimony no doubt to his apprentice years as a craftsman-builder. Hutchison and Steele gained international reputation as ice-palace designers.”

Hutchison was a staunch Presbyterian, and he designed a number of significant churches for the Montreal community: 1868: American Presbyterian; 1878: Crescent Street Presbyterian; 1891: St. Matthew Presbyterian Church in Pointe St. Charles; 1894: the Erskine (and American) Church, now incorporated into the Montreal Museum of Fine Arts and institutional buildings for benefactors such as A.F. Gault (Presbyterian College of Montreal), Peter Redpath and Sir William Macdonald. His reputation no doubt recommended him to other congregations and he was selected for a number of Baptist churches, including the 1868 Baptist Church on Ste. Catherine Street east, followed by the 1875 Baptist Church on Ste. Catherine Street west and the 1893 Grace Baptist Church. Hutchison was also called upon to build churches in Toronto.

He was also active in civic affairs. Hutchison served as mayor of Westmount from 1884-1886 and thereafter he spent another five years as a municipal councilor, retiring in 1891.

An Architecture Befitting its Congregation
Grace Baptist Church benefitted from the research in which Hutchison was engaged for the design of the more imposing downtown Montreal church – the Erskine Presbyterian. Although this church opened after the Grace Baptist, its planning began earlier, and it is clear that Hutchison incorporated planning principles, architectural massing, details and stylistic touches from his studies. The work on the Erskine also exposed the architect to innovative designs coming from the United States, principally Minneapolis. He had visited the city in the late 1880s, when his ice palace commissions ended abruptly in Montreal and restarted in Minnesota. It was probably in this mid-western city that he first encountered Richardsonian Romanesque architecture.
ARCHITECTURAL AND AESTHETIC VALUE (2/3)

The form, with the central gable and corner tower, which is expressed on both street facades, is an archetypical composition, used by Hutchison on a number of earlier commissions, both for Presbyterian and Baptist congregations.

The square plan of the sanctuary, with the podium placed on the diagonal served the Baptist congregation well. Every congregant was seated near the officiants. This sense of closeness is emphasized by the semi-circular arrangement of the pews. The plan was not original to the church. It can be seen in the Erskine; nor was it singular to Canada. Angela Carr, in her biography of Toronto architect Edmund Burke notes that the Jarvis Street Baptist Church built in Toronto from 1874-75 by Langley, Langley & Burke was the “first ecclesiastical amphitheatre construction in Canada”.

The Baptist faith focuses on the importance of informed baptism through immersion, communion and the individual interpretation of scripture. The architecture of the interior reflects the simplicity and non-hierarchical, unadorned practice of faith. The sanctuary was designed to respond to several tenets: the square plan and U-shaped galleries create a sense of community; the centrality of the immersive baptism pool and the flanking arrangement of the liturgical furniture (chairs and pulpit) emphasize its significance. The placement and visibility of the organ and choir seating are symbolic of the importance of music within the service. These architectural planning principles and elements also responded to the needs of the Bethel Gospel Chapel worshippers.

A High Degree of Authenticity
Grace Baptist Church opened its doors in June 1893. The Montreal Gazette of June 5th 1893 provided a description of the event. It is evident that the building today maintains a high degree of authenticity and integrity, despite the several changes in ownership and denomination. Little has changed on either the exterior or the interior, although the plywood pulpit is not original and the sanctuary was probably painted more richly than it is today. The 1992, basement work increased the useable space to be used as a community hall. Although not of heritage value, it does not detract from the original architecture.
ARCHITECTURAL AND AESTHETIC VALUE (3/3)

CHARACTER-DEFINING ELEMENTS

Exterior features
- High degree of authenticity of exterior (and interior) elements.
- The volume, defined by the central gables and the corner tower porch.
- The materials, including the slate roof, the red clay brick walls, the rusticated Montreal limestone of the decorative elements and the wood surrounds and doors.
- The tower porch with its pyramid roof, including two tall, narrow semicircular windows.
- The Richardsonian Romanesque decorative elements, typically indicative of the power of load-bearing masonry, including the rusticated stone supports and lintels.
- The tri-partite windows, with carved mullions, each framed within a semi-circular arched opening, characteristic of the Romanesque style.
- Original windows.

Interior features
- The amphitheatre-style interior plan, based on the necessity of creating physical proximity between the officiants and the faithful.
- The interior layout, including the arrangement of the podium and the main entrance on the same diagonal axis; the square plan, with the curving gallery above, the skylight over the choir that highlights the symbolic importance of the baptismery and the officiant’s podium.
- The arches around the room, delineating the octagonal ceiling.
- The coffered ceiling.
- The staircases.
- The cantilevered organ wind chest.

Furnishings
- The baptismery in the middle of the choir (with the immersion pool behind a curtain).

Interior decoration / integrated art
- The cast-iron balustrade, reminiscent of that in St. James Methodist Church
- Pendant lighting.
SPIRITUAL AND COMMUNITY VALUE

DESCRIPTION

A Building that Reflects the Baptist and Brethren Beliefs
Both Baptists and Brethren adhere to the religious rituals of baptism and communion. The church was designed to respond to Baptist practice and has adapted easily to the denominational change. The simplicity of the finishes, the sense of community emphasized in the shallow semi-circular plan, the prominence of the baptismal pool and the organ reflect the faith of the worshippers who use the building.

Spiritual and Community Events and Charitable Activities
The Bethel Gospel Chapel community participates in musical events and choir. Each year, there is a conference, which brings together the larger community for thanksgiving and prayer. Worshippers also engage in crusades of faith, as part of their missionary work.

CHARACTER-DEFINING ELEMENTS

- The liturgical furniture such as the original curved pews in the nave, and the organ.
- The symbolic layouts such as the shallow plan, bringing the faithful closer to the choir, the skylight in the ceiling positioned over the baptistery and the podium; the baptistery in the middle of the choir (with the pool behind a curtain).

The choir, from the gallery. In the middle is the baptistery, hidden behind a curtain. On the left is the organ wind chest. In front, the cast-iron balustrade on the gallery
Photo by: Bergeron Gagnon inc.

Communion table in front of the choir
The organ wind chest with its exceptional cantilevered placement and cast-iron balustrade
Photo by: Bergeron Gagnon inc.

Pulpit or ambo for the officiant, decorated with the quatrefoil frequently found in Baptist churches – the original denomination of Bethel Gospel Chapel
Photo by: Bergeron Gagnon inc.
PROCESS

This Value Statement is based on a visit made in the autumn of 2016, analysis and a group discussion held on April 18, 2018.

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