THE HERITAGE VALUE STATEMENT
ASCENSION OF OUR LORD CHURCH

CIVIC ADDRESS
4375 Kitchener Avenue, Westmount

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

RELIGIOUS DENOMINATION
Roman Catholic

OVERVIEW

Historical Value
The historical heritage value resides in its deep roots with the Roman Catholic Church in Westmount and in particular the English-speaking Catholics who were dedicated to establishing their own parish church in the neighbourhood, distinct from St-Léon de Westmount. There is a purpose-designed chapel, dedicated to congregants who served and died in World War II.

Contextual Value
The contextual heritage value resides in the urban siting of the church, with its companion presbytery; in the relationship of the complex to the neighbouring institutional buildings and its large, open churchyard, permitting dramatic views of the complex from many vantage points. The imposing size of the church, with its impressive bell tower, establishes it as a landmark in the neighbourhood; however, the impact is reduced by the generous and planted churchyard which surrounds it.

Architectural and Aesthetic Value
The architectural and aesthetic heritage value resides in its early 20th century interpretation of neo-Gothic themes, derived from medieval English ecclesiastical architecture. The rough stonework, the crisp carvings and grouped lancet windows animate the facades. The interior has simple, noble finishes, illuminated by light which floods in from the clerestory windows. The excellence of the design, and the quality of the craftsmanship on both the exterior and interior of the church are notable everywhere. The complex is the result of work by two architectural offices: the church was designed by the American architectural firm of Maginnis & Walsh, with Edward J. Turcotte as the local presence. The presbytery was the work of Turcotte alone and is of complementary value to the church. The complex 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 and the quality of natural light. It is supplemented by the religious and commemorative themes of the windows, and in the consistency of much of the liturgical furnishings and fittings. It has been a Roman Catholic place of worship and community since 1928.
SITING
The site of the Church of Ascension of Our Lord is located within a residential neighbourhood of single, two-family, row houses and apartment buildings. It is a large property, containing the church and its presbytery. The site is lushly planted with mature trees and shrubbery.

DESCRIPTION
The Church of Ascension of Our Lord was built between 1927 and 1928, for the English-speaking Roman Catholic population in Westmount. Its architect, Maginnis & Walsh was based in Boston and was considered the foremost specialist in Catholic ecclesiastical architecture of the period. The church is built on a monumental scale. Although its architectural style looks to the Gothic churches of Europe, its construction was modern for the period: a steel frame, encased in brick or concrete and clad in Montreal limestone, with Berea sandstone trim. The plan is a conventional Latin cross, the intersection of the nave and the transepts marked by an imposing bell tower. The front façade, facing Sherbrooke Street, is dominated by a gabled wall, flanked by shallow buttresses. Three lancet windows surmount a secondary, projecting gable, which contains the central entrance.

The presbytery was built in 1952, according to the designs of Edward J. Turcotte, a Montrealer who was the local architect for the Maginnis & Walsh work during the 1920s. The three-storey building is connected to the church by a single-storey stone-clad passageway.

FAITH AND COMMUNITY LIFE
The Church of Ascension of Our Lord is a Roman Catholic Christian church, in communion with the pope and the Church of Rome. The liturgy is centered on the celebration of the Eucharist, belief in the Trinity of Father, Son and Holy Ghost, veneration of the Virgin Mary and saints. Government of the church is hierarchical, with bishops, priests and deacons, under the authority of the pope. Cardinals are either archbishops or bishops who are responsible for the life-election of the pope. Each diocese is headed by a bishop, who ordains new priests. In turn, the priest is responsible for their own parish and congregation. Within its mission, the church offers religious and charitable activities.

RELEVANT DATES
1927-1928
Construction of the church on land originally belonging to the Grey Nuns. Design by Maginnis & Walsh of Boston, with Edward J. Turcotte of Montreal as Associate Architect.

1929
Installation of the organ.

1930
Installation of the stained glass windows on the front façade and the apse, by the Boston stained glass artist, Earl Edward Sanborn.

c. 1939-1940
Renovations to the basement, William J. Rosenberg, architect.

1941-1944
Installation of seven stained glass windows by Toronto studio of Yvonne Williams and Esther Johnson and one by the Westmount studio of Charles W. Kelsey.

1947
Inauguration of the commemorative chapel to the war dead.

1952-1953
Construction of the presbytery, according to the designs of Montreal architect Edward J. Turcotte.
GOVERNANCE
Ascension of Our Lord Parish, part of the Archdiocese of Montreal, was created in 1926. It is governed by Quebec’s Act Respecting Fabriques. It is administered by a Board of six wardens elected by parishioners for no more than two three-year terms. The church is financially self-sufficient. Donations, tithe and rentals, are the principal sources of revenues used to maintain the surrounding land and buildings. The board has a discretionary spending envelope which it can manage; large expenditures must be submitted to the Archdiocese for approval. The organizational structure of The Ascension of Our Lord is similar to that of Saint-Léon, the other Catholic parish in Westmount.

RELEVANT DATES
1961
Construction of a single-storey garage, according to the plans by Edward J. Turcotte dated 1956.

1969
Acquisition of the archives of St. Ann’s Church.

1981-1982
Installation of a universally accessible ramp at the west entrance, Frank McMahon, architect.

1987
Comprehensive maintenance work.
HISTORICAL VALUE

DESCRIPTION

Development of the Sector
By the beginning of the 1920s, Westmount was an established municipality. There was a new city hall, new community buildings, schools and churches. The residential character of the town was well established, and local shops provided convenient service. There was good public transportation and private automobiles were beginning to appear with greater frequency. Immigration after the war meant that the population of Westmount was growing consistently and rapidly.

A House of Worship for Westmount’s English-speaking Catholic Community
One major tract of undeveloped land in the eastern sector was the Sœurs de la Charité de Montréal (Grey Nuns) property. In 1901, a portion of it was used to create the Parish of Saint-Léon. Initially, the church served both the French and English-speaking Catholics in Westmount, but by the 1920s, a group of mostly Irish-Canadian Catholics wanted their own house of worship. According to the church website, the Archdiocese refused. The dissidents, undaunted, appealed to Rome. In 1926, they received a Papal Decree of Erection. This document trumped all local refusals and on July 5th, 1926, Mgr. Georges Gauthier authorized the creation of the new parish, to be known as The Ascension of Our Lord.

Once again, the site was created from property sold by the Grey Nuns. (A number of lots for residential purposes had been sold after the creation of the Saint-Léon property, so that there is a small interruption in the institutional fabric.) A renowned Boston-based firm of architects, Maginnis & Walsh, was commissioned to design the church. Edward J. Turcotte was the Montreal-based associate architect. John Quinlan & Co. began construction in October 1927 and the church was ready enough for the celebration of Christmas mass in 1928. Finishing of the interior continued during the Great Depression, despite the lack of funds.

The Memorial Chapel
A memorial chapel commemorating World War II was inaugurated in 1947. The four plaques listing the parish’s war dead are carved in Caen stone, referencing one of the bloodiest battle sites during the 1944 invasion of Normandy, hard won by Canadian soldiers.

The Presbytery
The presbytery was originally built as a residence for the priests, and then turned into a community hall. The second floor is now reserved as an apartment for the clergy. The third floor was converted in 1999 from staff quarters into Sunday school classrooms. It has a conventional plan with a central corridor, and simple, durable finishes.

CHARACTER-DEFINING ELEMENTS

- The continual use of the property for religious activities and community worship since its construction in 1928.
- The continued presence of the church since 1928 and the presbytery since 1952, both of which retain a high degree of integrity (interior and exterior).
- The memorial chapel and the plaques, dedicated to those parishioners who served and those who died during WWII.
CONTEXTUAL VALUE

DESCRIPTION

The Relationship of the Site to its Immediate Surroundings
The site of the Church of Ascension of Our Lord forms part of a block of buildings that speak of the Roman Catholic presence in Westmount. The church, with Saint-Léon de Westmount to the south, book-ends the large primary school, which now belongs to the Commission scolaire de Montréal (CSDM). Surrounding these buildings are single, two-family or row houses and apartment buildings. The close proximity of the Church of Ascension of Our Lord to Sherbrooke Street reinforces the institutional presence in the sector with the École internationale de Montréal and with Westmount City Hall, further to the west.

The Church as a Landmark
The church, with its imposing size and soaring central bell tower is an important landmark in the area, and in the city. The generous setbacks permit it to be appreciated from a distance.

An Oasis of Greenery
The Church of Ascension of Our Lord is one of the rare houses of worship in Westmount to have a large and very green churchyard. Both the church and the presbytery are set back from the streets and are surrounded by lawn, heavily planted with mature trees and dense shrubbery. The property provides an oasis of greenery in its urban environment.

CHARACTER-DEFINING ELEMENTS

- Its siting, generously set back from Sherbrooke Street and Clarke and Kitchener Avenues.
- The significant volume and impressive bell tower, which combined with its setting within the churchyard, makes the church a landmark in the area.
- The generous churchyard on three sides, with mature trees, dense shrubbery and lawns.
ARCHITECTURAL AND AESTHETIC VALUE (1/4)

DESCRIPTION

A Canadian Church by Renowned American Architects
In 1926, after the parish was created, its representatives set about the task of choosing an architect to design the new house of worship. They turned to the most prolific and respected architects for the Roman Catholic church in the United States, Maginnis & Walsh. Maginnis trained under Ralph Adams Cram, the foremost Gothic Revival architect of the early 20th century in North America. The following biography is extracted from the Dictionary of Canadian Architects 1800-1950.

“MAGINNIS & WALSH, architects of Boston, Mass., and active there from 1906 to 1934. The partnership consisted of Charles Donah McGinnis (1867-1955), and Timothy Francis Walsh (1868-1934). Best known for their refined ecclesiastical work in the New England region. In 1927 McGinnis & Walsh were commissioned to design the new Roman Catholic Church of the Ascension...WESTMOUNT, QUE., in collaboration with local associate architect E.J. Turcotte. A mature and sophisticated neo-Gothic design, it rivals some of the finest ecclesiastical work executed in this style in Canada by leading architects such as Henry Sproatt, Louis N. Audet, and Hugh Jones.

In the United States, their best known work is undoubtedly that of the Basilica of the National Shrine of the Immaculate Conception in Washington, D.C. (begun 1920; completed 1959), the largest Roman Catholic Cathedral in the country. From the formation of the partnership in 1896 until the death of Walsh in 1934, the firm was credited with over 115 ecclesiastical works, all for the Roman Catholic church. Maginnis served two terms as President of the American Institute of Architects in 1937 and 1938, and was later awarded the Gold Medal from the A.I.A. in 1947.”

As foreign architects, Maginnis & Walsh would have needed a local architectural firm, with which to associate. The selected architect was Edward J. Turcotte (1894-1975). Turcotte, like Maginnis & Walsh, spent most of his professional career in the service of the Catholic Church. He continued to work on the property, after the church construction, designing the 1952 presbytery and the garage.

A Neo-Gothic Masterwork, Reflective of the Past and of its own Time
Maginnis & Walsh were accomplished designers within the Gothic Revival idiom and their mastery of proportioning and detailing is explicit in the Church of Ascension of Our Lord. All of the indicators of the style, influenced by the Early English Gothic – the verticality, the lancet windows, hammer beam ceiling, the carvings – are present. The Latin cross plan; the narthex; the nave with its side aisles; are conventional and well-proportioned. The chancel is short, and does not provide for a choir. As well, the positioning of the bell tower, at the crossing of the nave and transept, is characteristic of English Protestant churches, not of Catholic ones.

The unusual aspects of the church, which mark it as being of the 20th century, are related to the structure and the fact that the masonry is no longer load-bearing. The building has a steel frame, encased for fireproofing either in brick or concrete. The buttresses are vestigial, shallow projections which are no longer needed to resist the thrust of the wall.
ARCHITECTURAL AND AESTHETIC VALUE (2/4)

On the interior, the clustered columns, which would normally carry the weight of the roof, are reduced to a single, etiolated shaft under each truss. These provide a visual connection between the nave arcading and the roof structure, but their slenderness hints at their decorative nature. The ceiling of the church is modest; instead of polychromed plaster panels, the architects opted for an acoustic finish, which would help the speech intelligibility within the uninterrupted volume of the nave and chancel.

The exterior is constructed of noble materials: Montreal limestone, rock-faced and coursed. The ashlar trim around the openings is made of Berea sandstone. As is typical of 1920s institutional buildings, the windows are steel and single-glazed. The roofing is of slate, with copper flashings.

The Interior Design and Finishes

The interior is simple, and like the tower, reminiscent of the principles of the Anglo-Ecclesiastical movement of almost a century earlier. (The lack of ornamentation may have been a reaction to historic events; the majority of the interior finishing took place during the Great Depression of the 1930s. However, it should be noted that the architectural drawings hint of little more than what is visible today, so the economy may have slowed the production, but not influenced the final result.)

Rough cast plaster covers the brick or concrete used to fire-proof the steel structure. The openings are framed in cut stone. The floor is patterned marble on a concrete slab. The ceiling is divided by wood trusses, and wood is used to create the coffers. The ceiling springs from a carved frieze, which from the ground appears to be wood. However the drawings indicate that this band was to be of a composite material, no doubt as a cost-saving measure. The suspended light fixtures are original.

The altarpiece is of oak, panelled with neo-Gothic detailing. The central element contains a crucifix, surrounded by a triptych of painted saints on each side, executed by Frank H. Schwarz (1894-1951). According to the church website, the icons represent the following saints (from left to right): St. George, for England; St. Margaret Mary Alacoque; St. Patrick for Ireland; St. John the Baptist for Quebec; Ste-Thérèse-de-l’Enfant-Jésus et de la Sainte-Face; and finally St. Andrew for Scotland.

Marble and bronze reliefs emphasize the receptacle for the host. The altarpiece has survived intact. The communion table is a companion piece. Wood is used for much of the ornamented surfaces in the church interior, including the confessional fronts, the pews, and the wall panelling. Of note are the linenfold carvings, which are a unifying theme in the paneling, appearing on the wall dados, pew fronts, organ and on the screen which separates the narthex from the nave.

The Organ

Installed in 1929, the Casavant Frères organ (opus 1344), has two wind-chests, disposed symmetrically in the jubé, or organ loft, placed over the west entrance.
ARCHITECTURAL AND AESTHETIC VALUE (3/4)

The Organ (continued)

he company was responsible for the neo-Gothic panelling, designed to integrate with the church architecture. The organ has seen two major maintenance campaigns: in 1972 and 1989.

Stained Glass Windows
The stained glass windows complement the neo-Gothic architecture and provide both decorative delight and narratives related to the Catholic faith. For example, the 1930 Sanborn windows include two pairs of three lancet windows in the east (altar) and west facades. These windows address each other and are thematically linked. Those above the west entrance reference the Crucifixion. Those above the altar describe the Ascension.

The 1960 Poggi lancet windows reference Christ and pay homage through the choice of the stained glass colours to the Scottish and Irish heritage of the donors. The 1940s windows in the Memorial Chapel were commissioned by families and were either executed by Yvonne Williams and Esther Johnson of Toronto, or by Charles Kelsey of Westmount. There is a high degree of authenticity and integrity in both the exterior and interior architecture. This is also reflected in the liturgical furniture: the pews, the altar, the communion table, the pulpit and the furniture for the officiants.

Architectural Authenticity
The building demonstrates a high degree of architectural authenticity and integrity on both its exterior and interior.

CHARACTER-DEFINING ELEMENTS

The Church
Exterior features:
- The overall volumes of the church, with pitched roofs of equal height over the narthex, nave and apse; the bell tower at the crossing of the nave and transepts; the secondary volumes over the side aisles and porches; all facades.
- The materials, including the coursed rough-faced stone over steel/concrete frame on the exterior walls, the smooth ashlar stone of the decorative components and of the openings; the steel windows with stained glass; the wood doors with wrought iron hardware; the slate roof with copper flashings.
- The ornamental carvings, including the spandrels of the five porches. Each one depicts in bas-relief, a different event in the life of Jesus.

Interior features:
- The overall Latin cross plan with central nave, narrow side aisles and rectangular apse.
- The uninterrupted volume of the extremely high central nave, with the light streaming in through tall windows.
- The memorial chapel, with its ribbed ceiling and commemorative plaques.
ARCHITECTURAL AND AESTHETIC VALUE (4/4)

The Church (continued)

Interior features:
- The Gothic Revival inspired woodwork, found in the altar; the partition that separates the nave from the narthex; the confessional fronts; the wall panelling.
- The marble work, found in the altar, the communion table and the flooring.
- The wrought-iron gates in the arcades between the choir and the side-aisles.
- The original radiators.
- The light fixtures.

The Presbytery
- The exterior of the presbytery, including its residential scale, its material palette which mirrors the church, and its stylistic indicators.
- The interior plan with its central double loaded corridor (with rooms either side) and its original interior finishes.
SPIRITUAL AND COMMUNITY VALUE

DESCRIPTION

A Place of Religious Celebrations and Charitable Works
According to Father Lawrence MacEachen, "the church community gathers together to worship, and the Catholic Church has erected edifices that can inspire, uplift and aid in praising God. Since 1926, the English-Speaking Catholic community of Westmount has aspired to do just that. The building itself, and almost every item within it, tell something about the people who form the Catholic Church. The Ascension of Our Lord is a symbol of the Church, and reveals the inner nature and meaning of whom the Church is."

The parish of the Ascension of Our Lord celebrates the sacred rituals of the Catholic Church - the sacraments. The Eucharist is celebrated daily, and enriched by the choir on Sundays. Numerous baptisms, marriages, and funerals are held in the church.

Religious education of the young is done using the 'be my disciples' catechism program. Adults wishing to enter the Catholic Church participate in the Rite of Christian Initiation of Adults (RCIA) program.

The parish has an outreach program and engages in significant charitable works in the larger Montreal community, donating funds to charitable organizations and causes; collecting clothing for disadvantaged people; distributing food baskets at Christmas, and gifts for 'share the warmth'. The parish raised funds to sponsor three refugees from Syria, and continue to help them adjust to Canadian society. There is a strong tradition at Ascension of volunteering, and many of the parishioners do so in various hospitals, nursing homes and other institutions.

CHARACTER-DEFINING ELEMENTS

Liturgical furniture:
- The Gothic Revival woodwork and ornamentation on the liturgical furniture, including the carved altarpieces on the two side altars (with traceries, finely carved bas-reliefs and statues in the round), the wooden confessionals, the pulpit of exceptional proportions, the pulpit beside the Epistle, the seating for officiants; the wrought metal light stands; the stone baptismal font.

Religious Themes of the Integrated Artwork:
- Stations of the Cross and painted figures on the main altar, by the painter Frank H. Schwarz of New York City.
- Religious themes of the stained glass windows: Earl E. Sanborn Studio, Boston (1930); Studio Poggi, Montreal (1960); Yvonne Williams and Esther M. Johnson, seven memorial windows (c.1947); Charles Williams Kelsey, two windows, The Virgin Mary as Queen of Heaven, Standing on a Crescent Moon (1956) and St. Joseph with a Lamp & Staff (1936).
PROCESS
This Value Statement is based on a visit and analysis made in the autumn of 2016, and a group discussion held on May 29, 2018.

SELECTED BIBLIOGRAPHY

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