THE HERITAGE VALUE STATEMENT
WESTMOUNT BAPTIST CHURCH

CIVIC ADDRESS
411 Roslyn Street, Westmount

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

RELIGIOUS DENOMINATION
Baptist

OVERVIEW OF THE VALUE STATEMENT

Historical Value
The historical heritage value of Westmount Baptist Church resides in its long association with Westmount, which began in 1902. The present church dates from 1927, when the community relocated from its former home on the corner of Olivier Avenue and de Maisonneuve Boulevard (today: the Bethel Gospel Church).

Contextual Value
The contextual heritage value resides in its contribution to the urban fabric of Sherbrooke Street. With minimal setbacks on both its main and side façade on Roslyn Avenue, the neo-classical temple is an imposing landmark in the area.

Architectural and Aesthetic Value
The architectural and aesthetic heritage value resides in the neo-classical language used in the exterior form of the building, and in the symmetrical planning gestures. The two-storey volume of the sanctuary includes the continuous balconies which run on three sides of the room. This device brings the worshippers into close community. The focus on the baptismal immersion pool and the organ emphasizes the importance of the ritual and music within the religious practice. The liturgical furnishing complement the architecture. The excellent functional design, craftsmanship and materials are evident throughout the exterior and interior of the church. The architect was Sydney Comber, best known for his industrial buildings. The building has a high degree of authenticity and integrity.

Spiritual and Community Value
The spiritual and community heritage value resides in the high volume of the sanctuary and the planning principles, which bring the worshippers into a close relationship to each other and to the service. The simplicity of the interior finishes and the focus on the baptismal pool and organ are characteristics of the faith. The church has been a Baptist house of worship since its construction.
SITING

Westmount Baptist Church is situated on Sherbrooke Street West, at the corner of Roslyn Avenue, in the western central sector of the City of Westmount. The church is in a residential zone for single, two- and multi-family buildings. Close to institutions such as Victoria Hall and Westmount Library, the church is also near to the commercial area on Sherbrooke Street near Victoria Avenue. The neighbouring buildings are generally three storeys or more in height, with flat roofs. There is little homogeneity on Sherbrooke Street; there is more uniformity on the north-south streets, whose lots were developed before those on this portion of Sherbrooke Street.

DESCRIPTION

Westmount Baptist Church was built between 1923 and 1925. The church has a temple form: rectangular in plan, and symmetrical in its massing. The detailing is neo-classical in its language. The front facade is dominated by a colossal Roman Doric colonnade, which spans the three-storey height of the building. The material palette is sober, of yellow brick with Indiana limestone enrichments.

FAITH AND COMMUNITY LIFE

Westmount Baptist Church is a house of worship in the Baptist tradition. It is a member of the Quebec Association of Baptist Churches, which in turn is part of the Canadian Baptists of Ontario and Quebec. Nationally and for mission purposes, it participates in the Canadian Baptist Ministries. Globally, the church is part of the Baptist World Alliance. Baptists place special importance on the individual, his personal relationship with Jesus Christ as his Saviour, study of and belief in scripture, practice of faith and participation in community and missionary practice. However, despite the emphasis on evangelism, Baptists do not believe in compelling others to believe or worship as they do. Separation between state and church is an important tenet. Full immersion baptism is an important religious rite of passage and is only done for those who understand the meaning of the ceremony. Child baptisms are therefore not done. As part of its mission, the church offers religious ceremonies, charitable works and community activities.

GOVERNANCE

Westmount Baptist Church is an autonomous self-financing institution. Decisions are made by an elected Board of Directors, composed of nine members. The church relies on private donations for the maintenance of the building.

RELEVANT DATES

1923-1925
Construction of the building (the Westmount Baptist Church)

1968
Creation of a multipurpose room in the basement

2004
Repairs to the flat roof
HISTORICAL VALUE

DESCRIPTION

Fitting into an Established Community.
By 1914, facilitated by the extension of the tramways system along Sherbrooke Street and to the south, the area around the site of the Westmount Baptist Church was a thriving residential community. The creation of Victoria Jubilee Park (later renamed Westmount Park) provided easily accessible recreational spaces. As the population increased, it needed to be close to its religious institutions.

A new home for the Westmount Baptist Church Community
According to the website of the Westmount Baptist Church, 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. In 1902, this founding church, together with the Oliver and Grace Baptist Church joined together to create the Westmount Baptist Church. The church was housed in a former Baptist Church built in 1893, at the corner of de Maisonneuve Boulevard and Olivier Avenue (today the Bethel Gospel Church).

Although the land had been acquired, fundraising was interrupted by the First World War and the building construction did not start until 1923. It was completed two years later, according to the design of Sydney Comber, architect.

CHARACTER-DEFINING ELEMENTS

- The continued presence of the building, which retains an excellent degree of integrity.

The continual use of the property for religious activities and community worship by the Baptist community since its completion in 1925.
CONTEXTUAL VALUE

DESCRIPTION

An urban setting
The Westmount Baptist Church is tightly sited to hug both Sherbrooke Street, and Roslyn Avenue. There are entrances on both streets, as well as in the parking lot to the immediate east. The primary entrance, marked by the three-storey colonnade, addresses the main thoroughfare, with a minimal setback. Although there is a narrow strip of greenery along Roslyn Avenue and a parking lot to the east, the overall impression is of a building inserted in, rather than commanding, the surrounding urban fabric.

CHARACTER-DEFINING ELEMENTS

- Its urban presence, marked by the entrances directly off the street.
- Its generally institutional scale, which marks it as a landmark in the neighbourhood.
ARCHITECTURAL AND AESTHETIC VALUE (1/3)

DESCRIPTION

A Work by an Architect of Faith
The Westmount Baptist Church was designed by Sydney Comber (1887-1961). According to the entry in the Biographical Dictionary of Architects in Canada 1800-1950, Comber was born and trained in England. He immigrated to Canada in 1907, and after several years of apprenticeship in the architectural office of J. Adamson, he opened his own office in 1911. He “...quickly became the leading Canadian authority on the design of industrial bakeries and dairy production facilities. His reputation led to commissions for this building type in locations across the country, and no other Canadian architect was as prolific at devising contemporary architectural forms to accommodate these industrial uses....” The practice continued under the name of Comber and Son from 1940 to Sydney Comber’s death in 1961.

According to his obituary in The Montreal Gazette of October 23, 1961, “...active in religious works; he was chairman of the Board of Deacons of Madison Baptist Church at the time of his death. He was also a member of the Religious Education Council of Canada, the Christian Businessmen’s Association and the Gideons International....” These associations are of interest because they go far in explaining why, given his specialization in industrial architecture, Comber was called upon to design several Baptist churches in the Montreal region.

Inspired by Classical Antiquity
Comber’s first religious building in Montreal was the Temple Baptist Church in Outremont. Completed in 1922, it was designed in a neo-Gothic language. For Westmount Baptist Church, Comber turned to the neo-Classical language used in the English Renaissance and popularized by James Gibb. The church - references the iconic form of the classical temple and uses the Roman Doric order for the portico. While the shallow entrance was likely determined by site constraints, the colossal portico gives the building a certain prominence along Sherbrooke Street.

A neo-Classical Church, Marked by its Imposing Façade
The brick exterior wall lies just behind the colossal columns. To express the two-storey volume of the sanctuary, Comber organized the windows into vertical bands, contained within frames. The spandrel panels express the interruption of the volume by the U-shaped balconies. This composition is not typically neo-classical; it is an elegant solution that may have been influenced by the development of the non-load bearing exterior wall at the beginning of the 20th century, and the increasing use of spandrel panels. There is no steeple, which is unusual for Baptist churches of this period.

Comber used an appropriate material palette, but he was careful in the expenditure of funds. The Indiana stonework is finely detailed and executed, providing a subtle contrast to the Flemish bond yellow brickwork. However, the upper cornice that encircles the building is only stone at the front portico. Thereafter, it is rendered in painted sheet metal.
ARCHITECTURAL AND AESTHETIC VALUE (2/3)

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 short nave 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 Casavant organ and choir seating are symbolic of the importance of music within the service. Ornamentation consists of shields on the balustrades, and wooden panelling in selective areas of importance, such as at the front of the church and the organ loft. The ceiling is panelled, with several interior glazed domes.

Architectural Authenticity
The exterior and interior of the church are unusual because of their extraordinary level of authenticity and integrity. (Even the washrooms retain original fixtures and fittings.) The building has had no modifications since its construction, with the exception of the 1968 renovations in the basement to create a community hall.

CHARACTER-DEFINING ELEMENTS

Exterior features

- The monumental volume, including the rectangular footprint and flat apse.
- The neoclassical features, including the columns in the colossal Roman Doric order, supporting a triangular pediment; the entablature along the top of the front façade and the lateral walls; and the pediment on the main door.
- The material palette, including the brick walls and stone decorative components on all facades.
- The double-hung wooden windows with divided lights, set into a stone frame with spandrel panels.
- The wooden paneled doors.
Interior features

- The interior layout, which includes an entry hall giving access to two meeting rooms (symmetrically disposed around the entry vestibule), and to the sanctuary.
- The two-storey uninterrupted volume of the sanctuary.
- The amphitheatre-style interior plan, with its short nave, side galleries and gallery in the apse.
- The layout of the sanctuary, including the choir structured around the baptistery.
- The woodwork of the baptistery.
- The gallery that houses the organ above the baptistery, the huge wind chest, the side and the back galleries.
- The coffered ceiling, with glazed domes.
- The interior woodwork trim (doors, architraves).
- Furnishing
  The arrangement of the furniture in the middle of the choir, including the baptistery, the organ and wind chest, the communion table, the pulpit, and the pews reserved for celebrants and other participants.
  The gallery that houses the organ above the baptistery, the huge wind chest, the side and back galleries.
- Interior decoration / integrated art
  The shields on the balustrades of the galleries, illustrating various symbols from the Gospels; the stencilled work.
  The pediments and urns that decorate the secondary doors.
SPIRITUAL AND COMMUNITY VALUE

DESCRIPTION

A Church Embodying Baptist Principles
As noted above, the Baptist faith stresses communion, informed immersive baptism of adults, individual interpretation of the scriptures, music and close community. These spiritual values are physically embodied in Comber’s architecture.

A Gathering Place for Religious and Community Activities
Westmount Baptist Church as a religious gathering space
The worshippers attend to services (Sundays, weekly) and communions (monthly), in addition to the children’s activities, weddings and funerals through the year. There are also activities such as theological study, biblical study, choirs and organ concerts.

A church hosting several charities
Alcoholics Anonymous, Cocaine Anonymous and Adult children of Alcoholics meetings are held in Westmount Baptist Church. The building also hosts monthly food drives and banks such as S.M.I.L.E Food Bank as part of its community outreach.

A vibrant place at the social and community level
Activities include: physical fitness classes; Children of Suzuki concerts; Voices of Hope; book clubs; social gatherings and cultural gastronomic fairs.

CHARACTER-DEFINING ELEMENTS

- Liturgical furniture such as the baptistery, the organ and wind chest, the communion table, the pulpit as well as the seats reserved for celebrants and other participants.
- Symbolic images such as the shields on the balustrade of the galleries represent various symbols of the Gospels.
- Symbolic layouts such as the arrangement of all the furniture in the middle of the choir; the organization of the choir and the liturgical furniture centered on the baptistery; the shallow nave, side galleries and gallery over the entrance foster closeness with the celebrant.
- The central space of the organ in accordance to the importance of music in the Baptist faith.
- Assembly spaces for religious celebrations, community gathering and activities (wide range of community activities).
PROCESS

This Value Statement is based on a visit made in the autumn of 2016, analysis and a group discussion held on March 20, 2018.

SELECTED BIBLIOGRAPHY


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