

## **Subverting the Disciplinary Silos: The Role of Architectural History in Heritage Conservation Education**

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### **ESTRANGED SILOS**

First, a confession: the evidence that made me want to present this paper is thoroughly anecdotal. If, by the end, it becomes clear that my fundamental premise is wrong, and that no problem exists, I will be the happiest person in the room. But for now, I remain concerned that two disciplines that ought to be siblings have drifted apart, separated by some kind of family rift that is misguided and counterproductive. Those disciplines are heritage conservation, and architectural history.

Last year, the Society for the Study of Architecture in Canada – a scholarly society dedicated to the study of the built environment in Canada – met in Edmonton for its 39<sup>th</sup> annual conference. As I'm sure you know, the Heritage Canada Foundation held its annual conference in Ottawa last year, and its roundtable was held at Carleton University. Group photographs from the two events are striking for what they do not show, which is any appreciable overlap between the two groups. In fact, only one person appears in both photographs. Is it not odd that the professional community devoted to the study of our built heritage, and the professional community devoted to its preservation, should be so completely separate? This gulf even seems to be institutionalized in the University where I work.

At Carleton, we have a Heritage Conservation specialty in Canadian Studies, Architectural Conservation and Sustainability programs in the School of Architecture and in Civil Engineering, and a History and Theory of Architecture program in the School for Studies in Art and Culture. On paper, opportunity knocks – there isn't another school in the country that can bring such diverse yet relevant expertise to built heritage. But in practice, bridging the gap between disciplines is hard. It doesn't help that two of these disciplines are in the Faculty of Engineering, and two in Arts and Social Sciences. Moreover, at curriculum level, neither Heritage Conservation, nor Conservation and Sustainability, require their majors to receive training in architectural history. Some students do so anyway, but the institutional message is that it's fine to become a practicing professional in built heritage conservation without any architectural history. Historically, the two disciplines were intimately tied. What brought about the divorce?

A recent article by Scott Barrett and Patrice Dutil may be of some help. It contrasts what it characterizes as 'traditional architectural values' - formal sophistication, originality, stylistic purity, etc. - with 'cultural heritage values', which are more community-based and independent of

architectural form. In fact, it argues that these two values have been at loggerheads, and that the latter has had no choice but to elbow the former - at least partially - out of the way. Thus, architectural historians, and their quaint obsession with the minutiae of crockets, capitals, and style, are banished to the heritage penalty box. Or if not sent to the penalty box, they are at least benched for much of the game.

But it's a false dichotomy, because many of those 'cultural heritage values' are in fact encoded in the details of the fabric of a building, and more eloquently and potently expressed there than anywhere else. Architectural style, far from being simply a means to deem one building worthier than another, is steeped in cultural meaning. Decoding that meaning is the job of the architectural historian.

I hope to illustrate that with a couple of buildings from my own research. Neither is a building of outstanding architectural merit, in the traditional sense. But both are deeply meaningful statements of community identity in a place where denominational affiliation was a highly significant social category. And understanding their importance requires the kind of close and informed visual analysis that architectural historians traditionally do - not for reasons of connoisseurship, or to assess architectural 'quality', but to recover the meanings these buildings held for the communities that built and used them.

**ENGLAND TO LABRADOR: ST. JAMES CHURCH, BATTLE HARBOUR, NL AND CANTERBURY CATHEDRAL, CANTERBURY, KENT, UK**

At first blush, St. James Church may seem notable for little more than its sublime setting. But in fact, this building is a powerful affirmation of Englishness, English history, imperial power, and the authority of the state religion.

How can this be? St. James is obviously no Canterbury Cathedral. But the Church of England, buttressed by a sense of history and providence commensurate with its status as the Established Church of the world's biggest empire, was expert at showing even the 'smallest' of its subjects where they fit into the grand map of England's great destiny.

The path from the Mother Church to the Labrador Coast is long and winding, but it is not incoherent and was very meticulously thought-out. At the root is the medieval Church, represented here by Canterbury Cathedral. According to nineteenth-century Anglican theology and architectural theory, this era was the ultimate source of the beliefs, values, rituals and sacred spaces of the English Church. Moreover, it was believed that the history of that Church had been uniquely continuous; that its priests derived their authority directly from the Apostles, and that its architecture derived its authority from its unbroken lineage from the Middle Ages.

Of course, Canterbury couldn't be the only model, especially if the end goal was to build churches in remote colonial fishing villages. A group known as the Ecclesiological Society, who were the self-appointed architectural police for all matters pertaining to things built for Anglican worship, had a solution for this. They argued that small, rural medieval parish churches like St. Michael's, Long Stanton were the most appropriate and viable models for colonial churches.

But there was still a problem. Even among parish churches, the English medieval building tradition was overwhelmingly a masonry one, whereas the only practical building material in most colonial locations was wood. The Ecclesiological Society acknowledged the urgency of developing what it called “a national style of wooden Christian architecture”, and devoted considerable energy to doing so. This included theoretical tracts that invoked everything from Noah’s Ark to the 14<sup>th</sup>-century churches of Cheshire, to show that a wooden building could be just as Gothic, and just as English, as a stone one. For practical advice on execution, they also published a series of detailed pattern books, a sample of which is shown here.

All of this theory and advice was to serve one purpose: to make it possible to realize ‘authentic’ English Gothic buildings in wood, in places like Battle Harbour. And they certainly succeeded, at least to their own satisfaction.

The differences between St. James in Battle Harbour and Canterbury Cathedral hardly need to be pointed out. The accomplishment of the Ecclesiologists was to extract not only the forms of Gothic, but what they saw as its fundamental principles, and articulate a way in which both could be realized in wood. Battle Harbour is a simple but flawless execution of that plan. The distinct nave and chancel, the clear articulation of interior spaces on the exterior, the tower and spire marking the entrance to the building, the undisguised use of wood; these are all features that placed this church on the same moral footing as Canterbury Cathedral. The same is true of the interior.

The exposed trusses and steep angles of the roof; the open, accessible seating; the separate and raised space for the chancel and altar; the off-centre location of the pulpit – all of these features conform to the Ecclesiologists’ ideas of how to make a wooden, colonial church in what they considered to be an authentically English, Gothic idiom.

In its conformity to these principles and its simple but effective evocation of Gothic, St. James manages to be faithful both to Ecclesiological demands and to its remote outpost location. This is a specific dialect of the Gothic language; one that was used to spread the Church of England ‘brand’ not only in Labrador and Newfoundland, but elsewhere in British North America as well as places like Australia, New Zealand, Africa and India. But it wasn’t the only dialect of Gothic.

### **ST. PATRICK’S CHURCH, WOODY POINT, NL., ST. JAMES CHURCH, AND ST. AUGUSTINE AND JOHN CHURCH, DUBLIN, IRELAND**

For a strikingly different example of how Gothic can express a group’s identity, we can turn to Woody Point, in Western Newfoundland. If you can divert your eyes for a moment from the breathtaking scenery, you may notice a church spire poking up above the town.

At first glance, St. Patrick’s Roman Catholic Church seems to be of a type with Battle Harbour. It is small, wooden, and Gothic, with pointed windows, steep gables, a tower and a spire. But the interior tells a different story.

The interior of St. Patrick’s, while also Gothic, speaks of a different faith, a different heritage, and

a different national identity. This space, unlike Battle Harbour, is continuous; no sharp division separates nave and chancel. But the most emphatic difference is in the ceiling. Gone is the open truss-work of the Anglicans. Instead, we have the beginnings of a wooden groin vault by the windows, and a ceiling that, while essentially a pointed barrel vault, is adorned by an applied linear pattern that unmistakably, if somewhat loosely, evokes Gothic rib-vaults. Original as this design is, it is not entirely unprecedented – and its precedents tell us a great deal about the cultural and historical affiliations being affirmed here.

The Roman Catholics of Newfoundland were overwhelmingly Irish – “Hiberno Romanists,” as the Ecclesiologists called them. So, it should come as no surprise that the architectural forms seen at Woody Point reflect a tradition that was flourishing in Irish Roman Catholic church-building around the middle of the century. By the time these two Dublin churches were built, the Church of England had already effectively appropriated Gothic for Queen, Empire, and Established Church. But the Catholics took back the style, partly due to the fact that it had originally been invented as a Catholic style, and partly because its first great 19<sup>th</sup>-century champion, A.W.N. Pugin, had been a Catholic convert. So, in mid-century, Irish Catholics were busily re-appropriating what they considered to be their native style – St. Augustine and John was actually designed by one of Pugin’s sons. And the Gothic idiom they evolved was distinctly their own, with continuous spaces along the main axis and wooden rib-vaults. Both of these features would have been unthinkable in an Anglican church – and this was, doubtless, part of the point.

## **ROMAN CATHOLIC CHURCHES AT CARBONEAR AND HARBOUR GRACE, NL**

Somewhere between Woody Point and Dublin on the scale of architectural ambition, the same features can be seen in Roman Catholic churches at Carbonear and Harbour Grace, both among the grandest later 19<sup>th</sup>-century Catholic churches in Newfoundland.

So, idiosyncratic as it doubtless is, Woody Point has a context, and a meaning. It is every bit as demonstrably Catholic and Irish as Battle Harbour was Anglican and English. Both are, as the Canadian Register rather blandly states, “good examples of the Gothic Revival style.” They may both be Gothic, but they come from, and speak of, different worlds. They speak of different faiths, nationalities, and social classes. They stand not side-by-side but back-to-back, their gazes fixed in opposite directions. They look as they do because these forms were a reminder of who they were.

What has all this to do with my central point about architectural history and heritage studies? Simply this: a remarkable and vivid narrative of two cultural solitudes in Newfoundland unfolds in these buildings – but only if you are able to decode the architectural forms and place them in their historical context. Without that, you have merely a couple of small wooden churches built by local craftsmen – interesting enough, but only a fraction of the story. The broader cultural messages and meanings of these buildings are encoded in the minutiae of architectural form, and vividly expressed there.

As we all know, failure to read such messages can have grim consequences for heritage preservation

– a point that was driven home to me a few years ago while living in Nova Scotia.

## **THE CHURCH OF ALL SAINTS, GRANVILLE CENTRE, NS**

The church of All Saints in Granville Centre would have celebrated its bicentenary this year – note the conditional tense. It was one of a group of churches built in the late 18<sup>th</sup> and early 19<sup>th</sup> century under the direction of Charles Inglis, the first Bishop of Nova Scotia and indeed the first colonial Anglican bishop in the history of the Church. Inglis was a fervent United Empire Loyalist, whose bishopric was a reward for faithful service in New York during the American Revolution. For Inglis, loyalty to King, country and Established Church were three notes of the same chord. When he became Bishop of Nova Scotia, he set out to mark his Church's presence in the most distinctly Loyalist part of his diocese – the Annapolis Valley.

The churches he built there were based on architect James Gibbs's church of St. Martin-in-the-Fields, London, called by John Summerson the "type of the Anglican parish church" worldwide. Their Classical proportions, their meticulous Gibbsian detailing – often taken almost verbatim from his pattern book – and their insistence on the presence of a chancel protruding from the east end, all make these buildings unequivocally and unmistakably English and Anglican. Not Catholic, emphatically not of a dissenting Protestant denomination like Baptist or Presbyterian, but *Anglican*. Just as the Gothic church in Battle Harbour would do for a later generation, these buildings speak of the national and religious loyalties of those who built them.

Alas, none of this was talked about in the fall of 2009, when All Saints was sold to a Baptist congregation in Abita Springs, Louisiana.

The building was dismantled and left in storage for five years, while its new owners raised the funds needed to ship and re-assemble it in its new home. One cannot help but think that if the good people of Abita Springs realized just what pains Inglis had taken to make sure his buildings did not look Baptist, or reflect Baptist liturgy, or express Baptist values, they might have thought twice about this. But the connection between architectural form and historical meaning was not part of the conversation. According to the clergyman who oversaw the sale of the building, All Saints was of meager heritage value. The really important church, he maintained, was not in Granville centre but in Karsdale. That building (Christ Church, figure 14), he maintained, was much older and much more valuable. It is twenty-three years older than All Saints.

## **CHRIST CHURCH, KARSDALE, NS**

What occurred here was a failure – possibly a willful one – to recognize the meanings encoded in architectural forms. Those forms – the emphasized keystones, the needle-like spires, the Serliana windows, the full entablatures and pediments, the temple façades – are where many of the narratives that give these buildings meaning can be recovered. It is in these forms and the stories they unlock, and not only the age or architectural sophistication of a building, that heritage value can be sought and found.

## **A TEAM SPORT**

A few months ago, I had lunch with a recently retired English architect, one of whose specialties was the care of historic fabrics. He maintained that the very existence of a 'heritage profession' was a scandal, an indictment of what he called the 'lamentable state' of education in architectural schools. To him, understanding the history of architecture was simply a professional obligation of every architect. Quite apart from the fact that his utopian 'superman architect' would put most of us in this room out of work, I don't think his vision is remotely realizable. Heritage studies have their own discrete body of theoretical discourse; it overlaps with architectural history and visual culture, it involves public policy and global politics, and presents unique challenges of form, process and technique to architects. Heritage Conservation is, and will remain, a team sport.

But we do need to play as a team, and indeed the prospect of doing so is both exciting and inspiring. After all, there's a reason why I painted my 'silos' in *complementary* colours.

**BIBLIOGRAPHICAL NOTE:** This paper is premised upon the assumption that made objects contain cultural information, an art-historical approach known as Material Culture. For a detailed exploration of this method, see Jules David Prown, *Art as Evidence: Writings on Art and Material Culture* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2002). The article by Scott Barrett and Patrice Dutil cited is "Social Learning, Feedback Loops, and Public Spheres: Implementing a Values-based Management Model in Heritage Conservation", *Journal of the Society for the Study of Architecture in Canada*, Vol. 37, No. 1, 2012, 17-26. For more about the Newfoundland and Labrador churches discussed here, see Peter Coffman, *Newfoundland Gothic* (Québec: Éditions Multimondes: Collection

Cahiers de l'Institut du patrimoine de l'UQAM, 2008). For the historical and architectural context of All Saints Church in Granville Centre, Nova Scotia, see Peter Coffman, "The Gibbsian Tradition in Nova Scotia", in *Tributes to Pierre du Prey: Architecture in the Classical Tradition, from Pliny to Posterity*. (New York: Harvey Miller, 2014, 213-29).