

Montreal's Historic Churches Are Being Reborn as Public Spaces

By Will McGough 7.27.2018



SAVE



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Notre Dame Basilica is just one of the many historic churches in Montreal that are finding creative ways to preserve their heritage.

Old religious buildings are finding new life as locals get creative about preserving their city's heritage.

Montreal is known among travelers for its Old-World European feel and its vivacious nightlife. But it is not the new cafés or parks or nightclubs that define the city's landscape—it's the churches.

"We call Montreal 'the city of a thousand bell towers,'" says Danielle Bitton, event space owner at Le Salon 1861, a church turned community center. "There are so many churches in Montreal; you turn this corner and that corner [and they're everywhere]."

For the better part of the past two centuries, these religious buildings served as places of community gathering and worship in Montreal's neighborhoods. Even in 1888, the concentration was so dense that Mark Twain, who visited the city that year, commented that "you couldn't throw a brick without breaking a church window."

However, the city's population has grown increasingly secular in recent times, Bitton says, and many of these beautiful cathedrals have struggled financially. Some are abandoned and unused, left to fall into disrepair or worse—to catch fire and burn down. It has only been in the past decade that private citizens (and in some special cases, the government) have begun fighting for a better future for these special buildings. They've started buying up and converting the historic structures, giving them new, nonreligious functions more in line with the interests and values of the changing society.

A new kind of community impact

In the most drastic of transformations, these abandoned churches shed their religious pasts almost entirely. No mass is held and the property is no longer owned by a religious group. But their core purpose—to unite the community under one roof—often carries over into the new venture.

When Bitton and her business partners came across St. Joseph's Church in the Little Burgundy neighborhood, it had been abandoned for at least five years. To Bitton, it seemed wrong for the city to let the church and its historic footprint become rubble before their eyes.



“It’s an old lady, a beautiful lady,” Britton says of the church. “[We wanted to] do something that would be good for everyone and not leave the church abandoned with no hope.”

St. Joseph’s is one of the best examples of how a former religious epicenter can become a modern hot spot. The new community center, which they named **Le Salon 1861**, encompasses the entire church complex, including the rectory and outside areas. Opened in 2016 after five years of zoning and construction work, the main church is now a collaborative space called **Impact Hub** that hosts a variety of programs open to the general public, including workshops, networking events, skill-building sessions, and speaking events, all of which are posted on its daily event calendar. But perhaps the most crowd-pleasing part of this conversion is **Candide**, a restaurant with red-brick walls, locally sourced fare, and wooden tables made from recycled church pews that is housed in the adjacent rectory.

Finding middle ground

Although the local government lacks the funds to support most of the struggling churches and relies on private investors to save the majority of them, the City of Montreal did make a splash in 2017 when it **purchased the convent of the Religious Hospitallers of Saint Joseph** near Mount Royal and renamed it La Cité des Hospitalières. The city spent more than \$14 million to acquire the site and plans to work with the resident Sisters to convert it into a community center that will preserve the history of the city's cofounder, Jeanne Mance. While the members of the order will continue to live in the space, parts of the convent will be converted into public museums and archives that will provide a detailed look into the origins of the city and its religious heritage.



Opening their doors to the public—little by little

Not every financially troubled church undergoes a full-blown conversion. Often transformation happens on a smaller scale. While they still support religious congregations, many churches have opened up to the public—and travelers—with social calendars that go beyond Sunday mass.

These beautiful buildings are idyllic settings for weddings and work functions. Some also offer tourist programming. In addition to daily mass and the standard church tours, **Notre Dame Basilica** , for example, offers visitors the chance to learn more about its organists via **a special tour**. The cathedral also coordinates **a daily light show** called “Aura” that showcases the church in a contemporary, artsy way.

Saint John the Baptist Church in the Plateau neighborhood has embraced its new role in the community. It’s become known for hosting musical performances, and visitors can attend a full range of classical, religious, and modern shows—some of which feature big-name acts like Arcade Fire.

Religion goes residential

Converting churches into community centers and event spaces that benefit a large portion of the public seems to be the top choice in Montreal. But among the myriad restoration projects are a few that serve the community in more targeted ways. In May, **the Congrégation des Soeurs de Sainte-Anne announced** that it would turn its gray-stone convent in Lachine into a residential building that will offer subsidized housing to families and elderly women. This project is an example of how, even without undergoing complete transformation, creativity can allow Montreal’s many religious institutions to manifest their goodwill and religious beliefs—in this case serving the poor—in unconventional, modern, and very practical ways.

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