

Insertion in an Historical Context: The Case of Saint-Benoît-du-Lac, Québec

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Introduction

This paper will explore the case study of Saint-Benoît-du-Lac, Québec, a Benedictine monastery constructed in three stages between 1939 and 1994. Following a summary of the architectural character of the monastery, the construction of which culminated in the addition of a new monastic church, completed 1994, this paper will address some of the critical issues surrounding the construction of the new church amid an architectural context of recognized significance.¹

Three thematic categories will be employed to isolate theoretical issues germane to a discussion of this monastery. These are:

- artistic integrity;
- abstract reference;
- veiled commentary.

Saint-Benoît-du-Lac, Québec: an Overview of its Architecture

Saint-Benoît-du-Lac enjoys a commanding prospect above Lake Memphrémagog in Québec's Eastern Townships. Today known for its ski-hills and picturesque lakes, this area was isolated when the monastery was founded, particularly during the severe winters

Reference Notes

¹ See *Créer dans le créé: l'architecture contemporaine dans les bâtiments anciens* (Paris: Electa Moniteur, 1986).

characteristic of the region.² The monks bought a lake-side property in 1912 and lived there for several decades in nondescript temporary buildings. When the well-known French Benedictine architect-monk Dom Paul Bellot (1876-1944) came to Québec during the mid-1930s to deliver a series of lectures on sacred architecture, the monks at Saint-Benoît-du-Lac convinced him to design a permanent monastery for them.³ Completed in 1941, the first two of five planned wings comprised a refectory, a chapter house, as well as residences for the monks, brothers, and acolytes. Constructed of reinforced concrete and clad in a local white granite, the building's interiors featured geometrically derived polychromatic motifs in Bellot's unmistakable style. Bellot, a graduate from the École des Beaux-Arts who subscribed to the structural rationalism of Viollet-le-Duc, unabashedly expressed the reinforced-concrete structural system of the building. He was also interested in using color—predominantly brick of several different colors, but also polychromatic tiles, and tinted grouting—as a means of making the building more attractive to its users. In his words, light and color were “...éléments nécessairement requis par toute beauté humaine.”⁴

During the 1950s, Bellot's Canadian disciple, Dom Claude-Marie Côté (1908-1986) designed a guest wing and a monastic church. Although Côté remained generally faithful to Bellot's plan for the monastery, and to his design principles, the new buildings constructed to Côté's designs were larger than the Bellot wings, and were more exuberant in terms of the

² See Geoffrey Simmins, *Building the House of God: The Monastery of Saint-Benoît-du-Lac/Bâtir la maison du bon Dieu: l'Abbaye de Saint-Benoît-du-Lac* (Calgary: University of Calgary Department of Communications Media, 1995). This is a 30-minute video, available in either French or English. See also Geoffrey Simmins, “Insertion in an Historical Context: The Case of Saint-Benoît-du-Lac,” *ICOMOS Canada Bulletin*, 4, no 2 (1995): 22-23.

³ See Nicole Tardif-Painchaud, *Dom Bellot et l'architecture religieuse au Québec* (Québec: Les Presses de l'Université Laval, 1978); Claude Bergeron, *L'architecture des églises du Québec, 1940-1985* (Québec: Les Presses de l'Université Laval, 1987), and the same author's *Architectures du xx^e siècle au Québec* (Montréal: Éditions du Méridien; Québec, Musée de la Civilisation, 1989). See also Dom Jean Rochon, “L'esprit d'un moine bâtisseur: Dom Paul Bellot, 1876-1944,” *Chercher Dieu, Publication des Moines de Saint-Benoît-du-Lac*, no. 16 (printemps 1994): 11-39. In 1995, an exhibition was held at the Institut Français d'Architecture in Paris, with an accompanying 180-page publication promised—*Dom Bellot, Moine Architecte: un bâtisseur du Bon Dieu, 1876-1944*. The IFA may be reached at 6, rue du Tournon, 75006, Paris, fax (1) 46 33 02 11.

⁴ Dom Paul Bellot, *Propos d'un bâtisseur du bon Dieu* (Montréal: Éditions Fides [1948]), p. 81.

treatment of materials and colors.⁵ Realized gradually during this phase of the complex were a guest wing, a new main entrance, and a gallery linking the Bellot and Côté wings. Côté's plans included a new church, but only its foundations were realized. The monks and their visitors worshipped for many years in a basement oratory.

In 1989, the monks held an invitational competition to design a new church—to be built on the existing foundations—and Dan S. Hanganu (1939-) was selected.⁶ The Romanian-born Hanganu had been practicing in Québec since the early 1970s. A series of townhouse designs in the Montréal area gained him favorable notices. According to France Vanlaethem, a professor of design at the Université du Québec à Montréal, who has followed Hanganu's career from its earliest phases in Québec, Hanganu's architecture “étonnait par son ambivalence, son attachement à la tradition moderne et sa forte identité montréalaise.”⁷ According to Vanlaethem, Hanganu's work is strongly modernist in its orientation, in keeping with his training in Romania. Hanganu's work is characterized by an attachment to constructive coherence and clarity, and an avoidance of obvious historical references.⁸ In the late 1980s, Hanganu gained experience designing large-scale institutional designs such as Montréal's archaeological museum at Pointe-à-Callière. In 1992 Hanganu was awarded the Prix Paul-Émile Borduas (one of Québec's highest cultural honors).

Artistic Integrity

⁵ See Dom Gérard Mercier, o.s.b., “Dom Claude-Marie Côté, moine architecte (1909 [sic: 1908]-1986),” *L'ami de Saint-Benoît-du-Lac*, 69 (1986): 14-15.

⁶ See, for example, *Dan S. Hanganu, architecte: projets et réalisations, 1980-1990*, Contributions by Kenneth Frampton, Henri Ciriani, and France Vanlaethem (Montréal: Centre de design de l'Université du Québec à Montréal, 1990); and *Pointe-à-Callière: Le musée d'archaéologie et d'histoire de Montréal*, with texts by François Magendie, and featuring an interview between Georges Adamczyk and Dan Hanganu, in the *Série Architectures*, Collection dirigée par Odile Hénault (Montréal: Section b, 1994).

⁷ For Hanganu's early career, see France Vanlaethem, “Dix ans de pratique pour l'architecture,” *Dan S. Hanganu, architecte: projets et réalisations, 1980-1990* (Montréal: Centre de design de l'Université du Québec à Montréal, 1990), 38-45.

⁸ *Ibid.*, 38 ff.

The concept of *integrity*—taken from the Latin *integritas*, completeness, or soundness—is of crucial significance here, and so is one of the derivatives of this word, *integrate*—to make into a whole by bring all parts together. When adding new construction to existing sites, patrons and architects face a range of options between emulating the character of the existing architecture, or else departing from it. In this case, the monks explored both options, and ultimately left the decision to their architect: although they respected Bellot’s style, they did not require that it be emulated in the monastic church. They wanted coherence and integrity above all things, and looked for an architect with these qualities. Architecture, to them, reflects in full measure an individual’s sensibility. Choosing Hanganu because they sensed in him a strong, perhaps unique, artistic personality, they gave him a free hand as to the character of the church.

Hanganu’s new church does not simply copy the earlier portions of the complex. Rather, it is co-equal with the others. Despite being constrained by the existing foundations of an earlier building, Hanganu succeeded in designing a new building whose integrity makes it both a startling contrast to, and yet also a suitable complement for, the earlier buildings on the site. Rather than emulating the scale, materials, and design vocabulary of the earlier portions of the complex as a means of making his own contribution contextual, Hanganu tried to achieve a non-literal level of relationship.

A key aspect of Hanganu’s approach is his attitude to structural expression. Hanganu articulates the structural logic of the building clearly. The steel columns that support the roof are stepped forward from the masonry walls that define space. There are no decorative elements per se; every element of architectural expression is simultaneously decorative and structural. Steel I-beams are used without any attempt to modify them, or conceal them; drip-mouldings are simply unmodified galvanized steel pipe. Ornament is reductive rather than additive. For example, Hanganu emphasized the interior brick walls by *removing* certain bricks—liturgically significant numbers such as three and seven. There is a link in this approach to Hanganu’s view of the monks’ monastic profession. As he has observed, “We tried to go directly to details which in

some sort identify the monks' life. They withdraw from life to get richer; they abandon in order to get more. So the detail of our walls is done by substitution. We take out certain bricks in order to make the wall richer. So you could make a space, you could make a volume, you could make a detail, rich, by eliminating certain things. The detail is made of the structure itself, rather than following a second step.”⁹

The Côté portions of the complex might be contrasted with this approach. Even though Côté uses the same reinforced-concrete structural system as Bellot, he separates structural expression from ornamental effect. The results are not always felicitous. Effects that in Bellot's hands are subtle and graceful result in Côté's version in mannered repetition. Hanganu, by contrast, has succeeded precisely because of his ability to maintain a more independent attitude.

Abstract Reference

Hanganu works with two main levels of reference in this building—both levels conceived abstractly rather than literally. He refers to the traditions of earlier western Christian buildings in general, and monastic architecture in particular. Hanganu employs specific historical elements such as a large west rose window—rendered with an abstract “tree of life” motif. The bay-by-bay structural cadence of the church recalls French High Gothic, and the overall restraint of the building, and its interest in accommodating the effects of natural light, recalls Cistercian buildings. Many subtle details reveal a profound knowledge of sacred architectural traditions, such as a narrow band of gold tiles located at the transitions between secular and sacred space. Gold tiles have historically been used to suggest the dematerialized space of the spirit. Mindful of the monks' traditional uses of cloisters, he designed the exterior of the church to include a walkway linking the church to an exterior gallery, and thence to the surrounding countryside via a large ceremonial staircase.

Hanganu also selectively repeats a very few specific details visible on the earlier

⁹ Dan Hanganu, interview with the author, included in the video cited above.

designs—more so Bellot’s than Côté’s. Hanganu refers to the more immediate context by echoing in his design certain specific details of the Bellot design, such as a stepped corbel treatment in the triforium of the tribune level, that repeats a stepped corbel visible in Bellot’s adjacent bell-tower. Such a gesture seems like a nod of respect to the earlier design. Hanganu does not copy many other features so directly. In fact he eschews the polychromatic treatment of his predecessors, opting instead for a sober, almost monochromatic, treatment, in which the nature of materials is simultaneously decorative and structural.

Veiled Commentary

If it has been shown that Hanganu’s design possesses artistic integrity, while also making abstract reference both to the Bellot design and also to the underlying medieval attitudes that inform it, then it might now be suggested that the architect has offered veiled commentary—sometimes favorable, sometimes not so—on both the earlier stages of the monastery. This commentary goes beyond the principles already discussed of abstract reference to the Bellot design, and the principles on which it is based—syntactical details such as the stepped corbeling in the upper gallery, and the west rose window. By “veiled commentary,” I mean certain design decisions Hanganu made that seem to have been made as a means of offering a critical commentary on the earlier designs. Three aspects will be singled out: scale; geometry; and color.

The scale of the existing complex posed a daunting challenge to Hanganu. Côté’s clock towers, and guest wing, were particularly imposing. Hanganu’s tower is both smaller and simpler in its character. Veiled commentary is offered here by developing a design characterized by restraint and a reduced scale, rather than trying to compete with the earlier buildings on their own scale.

Color is another important element through which Hanganu offers commentary on the earlier designs. Both the Bellot and Côté sections of the design are notable for their

polychromy—Bellot's characterized by earth-tones (with the notable exception of a deep cobalt on the interior staircase), and Côté's by an even livelier palette. In Bellot's case, the polychromatic effects are seen mainly on the interior, with the tinted grouting and polychromatic tiles and brickwork. The exterior of the Bellot wings are faced with white granite, with the exception of tinted grouting. The Côté wings are more lavish in their use of color. The interiors of Côté's wings are even more brightly colored than Bellot's, and he carries the polychromatic effects to the exterior as well. The clock tower, for example, features not only the white granite of the Bellot wings, but also green and red-colored stones. In contrast, Hanganu's design is notable for its overall restraint. The exterior is nearly entirely faced with the white granite of the Bellot wings. The only place where Hanganu uses contrasting stone-work is on the second-floor exterior walkway above the cloisters—and this was a segment of the building realized early in the construction phase. In later phases, he eschewed even this quite restrained bi-tonal coloristic contrast in favor of a single stone.

The same restraint with respect to color is evident in the interior of the church. The interior bricks, for example, are acid-etched, which results in a very muted color. And yet there *are* strong yet subtle contrasts of color in the Hanganu church interior. Strategically located tiles are the main medium through which color is introduced into the design. In addition to the gold tiles already mentioned, blue and white tiles are subtly distributed around the main altar, and at other strategic places. These colors are rich with traditional religious symbolism: blue, associated with the celestial realm, and the special color of the Virgin; white with purity and the resurrected Christ. A veiled commentary on the virtuosity of the polychromy of both earlier architects may be inferred from this attitude of restraint. Hanganu's design is quite capable of asserting itself amid the sometimes cacophonous earlier designs. If Hanganu responds less overtly to the Côté design, presumably this is because he found less in it to inspire his architectural vision. Silence, and restraint, are sometimes as effective as rebuttal.

What about the underlying language of geometric order that is so important a part of both earlier designs? For Bellot, an adept of the Golden Section, significant architecture was

inconceivable without a hidden language based on geometric figures such as the Golden Section. All of Bellot's designs are based on a geometric pattern-language in which the Golden Section figures prominently. The same is true for his disciple Côté. Hanganu, by contrast, consciously avoided the geometric ratios of the Golden Section.¹⁰ There is nonetheless a very strong sense of order in Hanganu's design. Repetition is the main tool by which Hanganu conveys a sense of order in his design. One of the most important repeated elements is a recurrent forty-five-degree angle design motif. This motif is first seen on the main façade, in the "tree of life" motif on the west window. The motif is repeated in the south tower, and again within the church, in many strategic locations, where it contrasts with the language of rectilinear structural order. These angled forms are effective visually, and they also lend themselves to symbolic readings—architectural analogies to the theological concept of anagogy, the mystical belief in the progression upward from matter to the spirit. A complementary analogy with plant-like forms (tree branches) is also appropriate, given the Benedictine belief that nature reflects the divine order.

In what ways can this be read as a "veiled critique" of the earlier designs? Perhaps in its sheer reductive simplicity. Both the Bellot and Côté design are replete with geometric forms: squares, pentangles, circles, triangles, and other repeated geometric elements, inform both the plans and sections and also the wall details. By contrast, Hanganu restricts himself to three principal design elements: the trabeated rectilinear constructional system; forty-five-degree angled intermediate elements; and circles. Hanganu has reduced, and simplified, thereby conveying an alternative vision of sacred architecture, based on reductive order and characterized by restraint. It is as if a Cistercian architect crept in unbeknownst to the middle of this richly figured Benedictine complex, and offered up a more reduced and austere vision of spiritual architecture. This, too, may be read as a form of commentary.

¹⁰ In conversation the author, Hanganu explicitly stated that he regarded the use of the Golden Section as being an unnecessarily complex addition to the design process.

Conclusions

What lessons can Hanganu's design for the new church at Saint-Benoît-du-Lac offer to a more general consideration of new construction amid an existing context? The Hanganu church impresses the visitor with its restraint and integrity, and suggests that it is possible to contribute a building with its own inimitable character, even in the midst of an existing complex as dauntingly rich and idiosyncratic as this one. To achieve an architectural presence in the midst of this monastic complex replete with medieval-style towers and awash with polychromatic, geometric motifs, Hanganu chose restraint rather than competition. The building is true to Hanganu's design principles, and also pays tribute both to the long-standing tradition of monastic church architecture as well as to the more immediate context of the Bellot design, while simultaneously offering subtle commentary on both.

Perhaps the single most salient point to infer from this is that architects can respect an earlier context without slavishly paying homage to it. A new architectural intervention can speak the language of its creator, and of its times, without either parody or disrespect. In a time when architectural controls in existing historical districts are becoming ever-more stringent and inflexible, perhaps the lesson to be inferred from Hanganu's design is that while contextualism is often appropriate, contextualism without an animating attitude of integrity might well be both futile and inimical to the spirit of architecture.