

International Conference
Religious Houses: A Legacy
October 7-11 2009 – Montreal and Quebec City, Canada
CALL FOR PAPERS

GOALS

The purpose of this international conference is to identify and understand innovative heritage possibilities for the future of convents, monasteries, and -- more generally -- religious houses in Quebec, the rest of Canada, and Western society. By comparing cases and putting them in theoretical, historical, and geographical perspective, we hope to make a contribution to what these urban and rural architectural groupings become. We thus aim to examine specific ways of implementing the proposals and studies conducted in Quebec and to share these experiences in order to identify and explore, but mostly, to help solve some of the problems raised in Western societies.

To this end, the conference will attempt to bring together researchers, professionals and decision-makers from North America and Europe, who have shown particular ability to assess or implement new and original solutions, or who, through historical or epistemological reflections on the problems arising in the secularization, conversion, or governance of former religious houses, are able to contribute to a discussion of the financial, legal, urban planning or memorial implications of changes in the vocation of religious houses and their redevelopment.

OUTLINE OF THEME, DETAILS ON SELECTED QUESTIONS

All through the West (Europe and the Americas), religious communities have been driven by falling recruitment to leave the convents, abbeys, monasteries or missions in which they have traditionally lived and worked. Increasingly abandoned or in the process of becoming so, monumental religious houses still occupy strategic positions in the regional landscape or urban fabric, and maintain an important place in the collective memory and imagination of our societies. These soon-to-be-abandoned buildings also arouse the greed of many developers. The conversion of such structures into high-end office buildings, luxury housing and prestige hotels fires their imagination, particularly as the religious houses are often located on highly desirable sites, shielded by walls of green space—the very lungs of the cities that now surround them—or replete with intimate gardens, cloisters or courtyards protected and preserved from the modern hustle and bustle.

However relatively simple it may appear—technically, at least—the conversion of these convents, abbeys, or monasteries that punctuate our human landscape is nonetheless fraught with weighty questions of heritage. Often inherited from distant historical periods whose architectural imprint they bear, and treasured by individuals who zealously defend them as neighborhood oases, sought out for human rituals or as part of various spiritual quests, and often still invested with a genuine tradition and the heritage claims arising from it, religious houses become flashpoints for conflict when, abandoned by their religious community, they are threatened with demolition, replacement or outright appropriation for commercial or private purposes. But although everyone agrees on the landscape, architectural, historical, or memorial aspects that might in most cases justify government involvement in the vocational change of convents, abbeys, and monasteries, their abandonment and possible reassignment in a secularized society brings with it a broad spectrum of particular challenges, given the financial, legal, urban, and even museological contributions required in changing their ownership and use.

The vocational metamorphosis of convents, abbeys, monasteries and missions calls forth questions on three levels—questions of ownership, questions of use and questions of memory. These are the broad themes that structure the questions we have chosen in putting into perspective the future of these buildings, the character of the surroundings (urban, peri-urban, rural, etc.) they helped create, and the legacy that they constitute both in space and in the collective imagination.

To begin, we will examine the ownership structure of religious houses and its impact on public appropriation and possible designation as heritage. This is particularly significant, given that the debate over the conversion of religious houses involves not only the buildings—as well as some of the furnishings—but also the surrounding natural or green spaces, often subject to considerable developmental pressure. The changeover from one ownership regime (a religious congregation or community) to another (an organization of civil society) involves numerous financial and urban planning issues, including whether to grant property tax credits, zoning, landscape and urban protection mechanisms and others. How can the urban and fiscal ownership framework, with the financial levers it commands and the uses it prescribes, encourage or discourage the heritagization of religious houses?

Second, the future of convents, abbeys, monasteries, and missions evokes the various aspects of how these properties might be used. Although turning these relatively multifunctional buildings and the broad parks that surround them into something new would appear to be simpler than converting a church, for example, the new functions might nonetheless conflict with some of the many heritage dimensions of the properties. Outside the buildings, conversion interposes itself into the relationship between the religious house and the very urban or peri-urban surroundings whose development it motivated—the question of use thus gives rise to a reflection involving

the very meaning of the city. Within the buildings, conversion interferes with the buildings' meaning, since in all cases the property's function in civil society runs counter to symbolic dimensions that structure the whole, whether this involves using the main chapel, often the central feature of the structure, for other purposes than religious services, or more generally when the new function and the various religious symbols characteristic of the religious complex (stained-glass windows, iconography, inscriptions, cemeteries, etc.) are juxtaposed against each other. In short, how do we reconcile the use we make of religious houses with the symbolic content that justifies their heritagization in the first place?

Third, the future of convents, abbeys, monasteries and missions poses a threat to the perpetuation of memory. The conversion problem thus involves both the tangible and intangible contents of the structure. By this we mean the archives, libraries, and carefully preserved collections, which are sometimes highly sought-after treasure troves whose mere preservation puts pressure on our collective ability to store and classify according to recognized standards. Yet the contents of religious houses are also the memory of religious life and, more generally, the work that was embodied within the converted houses. How, when the religious community has departed these walls, can we perpetuate the memory of its activities as historical events? How, in spite of secularization, can we preserve and give value to the memory of the members of the religious orders?

ORGANIZATION

According to these three themes—ownership, use and memory—and the questions they raise, the conference must provide for our putting together, confronting, assessing, and verifying the feasibility of our proposals on a theoretical and practical level that, both historically and for today, break new ground regarding the conversion and management of religious houses. Because here it is a question of confronting the experiences of researchers, decision-makers, and professionals, the work of the conference will be articulated into **workshops focused on one of the three themes** structured around **poster presentations**, and carried out within the framework of **intensive inter-university work sessions** in which Quebec's faculties of architecture will compete on the theme of religious house conversion.

This conference is thus meant to funnel ideas that will contribute to reflection and help resolve the pan-Western problems posed by the abandonment of convents, abbeys and monasteries. For that reason, this conference will require researchers, decision-makers and professionals to contribute through activities and discussions designed to stimulate and multiply the exchange of ideas. In January 2009, before the beginning of the conference, we will open an **electronic forum** on the Internet so that the participating researchers, individuals and decision-makers can get the ball rolling on discussions and

share their concerns and reflections; we hope that, gradually, participants (speakers, presenters, and attendees) can begin to discuss and share their experiences. An anthology will also be published and distributed to all participants before the conference. In order for everyone to have the same basic information as to the diverse dimensions of the targeted problem and have precise data to feed the discussion, the anthology will contain a summary of our current knowledge on the questions and issues involved in the conversion of religious houses. A program of sightseeing tours will also allow participants to experience, and we hope, discuss the solutions explored as applied to actual cases. In addition we will be publishing the **Records of the Conference** following the event (by the Presses de l'Université du Québec), in the shape of a scientific anthology.

PROPOSALS

Interested researchers and professionals are invited to submit a participation proposal before February 28 2009. Submissions, including an abstract (title and 300-word description) and brief summary, are to be sent to the attention of:

Dr. Lucie K. Morisset, chair of the Scientific Committee

by e-mail: Institutdupatrimoine@uqam.ca

or by mail:

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After assessment by the Scientific Committee, authors will be notified of the acceptance of their proposals by March 31 2009.

Please note that the Organizing Committee is prepared to pay for travel expenses of a certain number of speakers.

For information: **Luc Noppen, Director**
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The conference is organised by:
Le Conseil du patrimoine religieux du Québec
L'Université Concordia

L'Université du Québec à Montréal

- La Chaire de recherche du Canada en patrimoine urbain
- L'Institut du patrimoine
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