The changing built Judeo-Christian landscape of the historically immigrant Park Extension neighbourhood in Montreal, Quebec

*A study on the construction of six Judeo-Christian buildings and their varying owners and uses over the past century by Alexandra Ross.*

**Introduction**

Religious buildings have historically been one of, if not the most ornate and revered buildings in a town or city. The Sistine Chapel in the Vatican City and the Dome of the Rock in Jerusalem are examples of highly regarded places of worship that have been maintained and added onto throughout the centuries. However, times are changing, science has become the new guiding light for many people, and this has lead to decreased congregation numbers and less money going into religious institutions.

As a community evolves, either with the changing views on religion, or often in the case of Montreal’s Park Extension, as new people move into the neighbourhood, some religious buildings have found themselves becoming obsolete. Park Extension is a traditionally immigrant neighbourhood, and so has always enjoyed a melting pot of cultures and religions. At some points in history however, there have been more dominant religions in the area, such as Protestants at the turn of the twentieth century, Jews in the 1950s, and Greek Orthodox in the 1970s.

Churches, by their very essence are steeped in a centuries long religious and cultural tradition. Over the years they have pervaded every aspect of peoples’ lives, and the societies they were a part of. In Park Extension, a relatively young neighbourhood, churches influenced many parts of social life such as clubs, societies, and school districts.

There is little research done in the field of the lives of churches, and how those live can be extended. However, Ley (2008, 2058) has discussed the role of the immigrant church and asked the important question of “how does the immigrant church position itself for continuity when it no longer has a congregation of new immigrants, but of hyphenated Canadians?” This is an important question, as the following research will demonstrate the strife that many religious organisations can find themselves in when their poorer working class immigrants members become middle-class second-generation Canadians and move out of the area.

Looking closely at six churches identified as having architectural and historical significance, as an overlay to the immigrant heritage...
of Park Extension, it can be documented that all these sacred spaces have changed proprietorship at least once since their inception. While there may not be an orchestrated effort to maintain these buildings, the continued influx of people into the area has allowed for conservation of these buildings.

The Century Long History of Park Extension

Park Extension, as its name suggests, is the extension of Park Avenue, one of the main streets traversing the island of Montreal. The northern part of Park Avenue was semi-rural with scattered farms and only a few houses (McCutcheon 2012). The Canadian Pacific Railway (CPR) was built in 1881 and where the railway lay began to define Park Extension’s boundaries: the original rail line became the east border, a new line along Beaumont Ave created the south border, and l’Acadie Boulevard separates the neighbourhood from a more suburban area on its west side (McCutcheon 2012).

For much of the early 20th Century this was a working class neighbourhood with high immigration rates from the British Isles and much of Europe. Advertising was done in these countries to entice trades and craftsmen to move to this new area as their skills were needed in the building of the CPR (McCutcheon 2012).

Starting around 1908 these farm plots were bought by realtor developers and subdivided into smaller lots to sell to these incoming men and their families (McCutcheon 2012). These newly subdivided lots were only around 60 by 25 feet but many newcomers built their own homes on them, which was rather different from the speculative 3 and 4 storey tenements that were being built further south along Park Avenue (McCutcheon 2012).

Park Extension began as a very homogenous group of British immigrants who were then joined by Italians as well

Fig 1 Land Plot Map circa 1929 showing Jean Talon, L’Epee, Querbes, Durocher, and Hutchison roads (“The Pure Air of Park Extension” 2010).

Fig 2 Newspaper article circa 1920s advertising Park Extension as a great place to live (“The Pure Air of Park Extension” 2010).
as people from unhealthy industrial parts of Montreal looking to live in a cleaner and fresher part of the city (McCutcheon 2012).

The French came mainly as businessmen to open another branch of their respective tavern or hardware store. However this did not necessarily mean there was a large French population as initially there was no existing parish to entice them to move there (McCutcheon 2012).

The Jews only came following World War II but the population did swell during mid-century. The Park Extension Jewish Community Association was established and through fundraising and donations this association was able to build Congregation Beth Aaron in the early 1950s (Archives) (“Beth Israel Beth Aaron Congregation Of Cote-Saint-Luc”). The Jewish population of Park X has since then significantly decreased, with many moving to Cote St Luc when Beth Aaron merged with Beth Israel of Cote St Luc in 1986 (“Beth Israel Beth Aaron Congregation Of Cote-Saint-Luc”).

There was an influx of Greeks to the area in the 1960s and 1970s which resulted in the creation of two main Greek Orthodox churches, though there were other smaller ones in the area. While the younger generations of Greek Canadians have mostly moved out of Park Extension, many return on Sundays for church and feast days (McCutcheon 2012).

Park Extension’s Immigrant Heritage

Park Extension has been home to many different cultures and ethnicities since it was first annexed by Montreal in 1910, but international immigration substantially increased in the 1950s post World War Two, with the first waves being mainly Jewish immigrants. Later, in the 1960s and 1970s, Greek settlers overtook the area and now the neighbourhood plays host to dozens of nationalities.

It is difficult to understand Park X’s immigrant background without understanding the immigrant population of Montreal. A quarter of Quebec’s full population and 70% of its foreign-born population lives in Montreal (“Montréal region at a glance” 2012). Montreal’s foreign-born population is increasing at nine times the rate of its Canadian born population, and its “share of recent immigration to Canada (14.9%) is greater than its share of Canada’s total population (11.5%)” (“Immigration in Canada: A Portrait of the Foreign-born Population, 2006 Census: Portraits of major metropolitan centres.” 2009).

As for Park X specifically, Centraide of Montreal reports 61.6% of the population are immigrants as compared to 30.7% of the Montreal island population (“Park Extension” 2006).

With these different nationalities, come different religious backgrounds. Between 1996 and 2001, 29% of immigrants listed themselves as Muslim, 25% as Roman Catholic, and 8% as Orthodox Christian. These figures stand in stark contrast to the immigrants pre-1986 who were only 3% Muslim, over half were Roman Catholic at 53%, and 10% Orthodox Christian. The religious landscape of Montreal has changed substantially over the last 20 to 30 years (“Recent Immigrants in Metropolitan Areas: Montreal-A Comparative Profile Based on the 2001 Census.” 2012). While statistics could not be found for Montreal specifically, in Canada as a whole, Greek Orthodox immigration went from around 100 000 in 1931 to 315 000 in 1971, while Jewish immigration grew from 155 000 to 275 000 in the same time period, both increasing more 1941 to 1951 than other decade intervals (“Principal religious denominations of the population, census dates, 1871 to 1971” 2012).
Six Architecturally and Historically Significant Churches in Park Extension

St Francis of Assisi (formerly Eglise Saint Roch I)
For a long time there was no Catholic parish as the French and the English were split and so went to different churches and school in neighbouring areas. However, in the 1920s, the Catholics had decided that they needed a larger more communal building to house everyone, also as a way to help pay for these more ornate buildings (McCutcheon 2012).

Saint Roch Church and School were built in 1927 after the donation of land from the French farming family Le Bou. Many farming families were selling their land to the housing developers at the beginning of the 1900s but the Le Bou’s held onto theirs longer before finally selling when the parents were getting older and one of their children became a priest. The French and the English joined together and worshipped together at Saint Roch, where Saint Francis of Assisi is now (McCutcheon 2012).

The foundation of the Saint Roch Parish led to the formation of two churches as well as two schools. It was created for both Anglophones and Francophones as the residents of the neighbourhood were tired of having to commute to other parishes and so asked for one of their own (Archives). “In January 1927, the Archbishop Coadjutor of Montreal signed the decree of erection of St Roch Parish” (Archives). A month later eight church wardens were elected by property holders of the area (Archives).

However, following the Second Vatican Council in the 1960s, the Catholic church experienced major reform, namely in the decision to switch from Latin to the vernacular for worship. This now meant that congregations had to be segregated according to language. The Saint Roch parish decided that the English should keep the Saint Roch church, now to be named Saint Francis of Assisi, and the French would build a new church (McCutcheon 2012).

Eglise Evangelismos Tis Theotokou (formerly Eglise Saint Roch II)
To continue from the previous section on the first Saint Roch church, the second Saint Roch church was built in 1960 and was specifically for French speakers. Hoping to draw a large number of new parishioners, the French built a large new church, however were soon disappointed with their numbers. The Italians that they had thought would join them, either joined the English Saint Roch or moved out of the neighbourhood entirely, as many younger generations were doing. Younger generations also saw English as more progressive and so the French numbers dwindled. This was at the time that Greek immigration was increasing and so demand for a Greek Orthodox church was strong, this coupled with the declining French
Catholic congregation led to the sale of Saint Roch II and the birth of Eglise Evangelismos Tis Theotokou (McCutcheon 2012).

inside the church, through the garden, and at the little crypt next to the main building (McCutcheon 2012).

Eglise Koimisis Tis Theotokou (formerly Church of the Nazarine)

In the 1950s the Church of the Nazarene had bought a piece of land and attempted to develop it but due to insufficient congregation numbers, were forced to sell to a new Greek Orthodox congregation. The Greeks took over construction and built a large church that is elaborately embellished and adorned. Only a few blocks away from Eglise Evangelismos Tis Theotokou, it is now a museum, perhaps because of competing for parishioners. The church is now a tourist attraction in Park Extension and draws in many visitors who are free to look inside the church, through the garden, and at the little crypt next to the main building (McCutcheon 2012).

Ascension Lutheran

The Ascension Lutheran Church was built by and for Lutheran Slovak immigrants, post World War One. In 1928 worship services commenced and the church continued at this location until recently when another branch was opened in the West Island ("A Brief History of Our Congregation" 2012). Low congregation numbers mean that while the church is still running, other ethnic groups now use the space for worship as well, and other services take place there including children’s day care and language classes.

The Ascension Lutheran is not to be confused with The Church of the Ascension which until just over 20 years ago was the Anglican mainstay in the Mile End neighbourhood. At the northern end of Park Avenue, this church was deconsecrated and sold to the City of Montreal and is now used as public library. However, the Mile End Mission was formed following the transition from church to library and so there is still a strong spiritual presiding influence in the area ("Who We Are" 2012).

Eglise de Dieu de Bethel

Just before the turn of the 20th century, a group of Presbyterians from adjoining neighbourhoods like Outremont founded a new church just south of Park Extension. They named it Livingstone Church after the Scottish missionary doctor David Livingstone. However, it became apparent that the growth and the development in the area was actually happening further north. Therefore, the congregation
bought land and moved into the heart of Park Extension and built Livingstone Presbyterian. Upheaval in the religious framework of Canada occurred just as they finished their second church, putting the congregation in jeopardy. In 1925, the United Church of Canada was established to unite Presbyterian, Methodist, and Congregational Churches in Canada. Ergo, all such churches across Canada had to vote to decide whether to stay with their respective denomination, or join the new church. By a slim margin, the people of Livingstone Presbyterian voted to join the United Church. However that did not mean the whole congregation agreed to or would move over. The people who joined the United Church stayed in the brand new church their congregation had just built. This became the first church in Montreal to be ordained as a United Church of Canada (McCutcheon 2012) (Archives). However, following declining congregation numbers the church was sold and is now in use by a Haitian congregation and is known as Eglise de Dieu de Bethel (“Our Pastor” 2012).

Livingstone Presbyterian

Those who remained Presbyterian moved two blocks away to build Livingstone Presbyterian in 1930-31 (McCutcheon 2012). Recently the church has been renovated due to a bequest and so is being up kept well. While the congregation is not made up of the usual Scottish and British Presbyterians, a recent minister determined to see the church survive has invited numerous nationalities from countries as diverse as Ghana and Pakistan to join in worship (Archives).

Discussion of Methods

Much of this information is reliant on interviews collected on the GENV 4821 Montreal trip, archival supplied by the Park X Historical Society, as well as some very brief church website histories. It would have been preferable to have had interviews with long standing religious leaders, but many emails went unreplied to and it was difficult to attain contact information for other interviewees. An interview had also been scheduled with the city councillor for the borough Villeray-Saint Laurent-Park Extension, however she did not make it to the meeting.

Interviews with people from the area were thought to be most helpful as there is little archival support from provincial or federal institutions for smaller areas of the city. Archives supplied by the Historical Society have been compiled over the years, with many authentic documents, adding to their legitimacy. The interviews gathered from the Park Extension Historical Society’s President and Secretary were invaluable for the breadth of information they provided. However, it is unwise to base an entire paper off the words of one or two people. This is why local archival support was beneficial.

Scholarly research in this area is also deficient. While there is some urban scholarship on the importance of churches to immigrant communities, there was little found in the way of the wish to preserve old churches by new immigrants, congregations, or even the new generation.

The limitations of this study are clear. There is little variation of information to draw upon to ground this paper in peer reviewed urban scholarship. However, because the vast majority of this information are historical facts, they can easily be fact checked against other archival records to confirm authenticity. Despite the lack of
urban scholarship and multiple sources to draw upon, it can be said conclusively that these churches existed, that they were very important to the communities that built them, the children of those communities, and that many are now serving new immigrant communities.

Conclusion

This paper is a compilation of church histories; how these churches came into being, how they interacted with one another, and in what capacity they continue to be in operation today. Some are still being used by their original denomination, and others are shared between denominations as well as community services and activities.

In a community that has been seen to be constantly transforming and evolving with different nationalities and religions moving in every few decades, it is compelling to see that so many churches have continued to be beacons of community life despite being relics from a past that on the surface, have little connection to these newcomers.

Some argue that keeping the history alive is not important to these groups, and that it is rather the practicality of having cheap large places to rent for religious purposes that keeps these churches in commission. Others argue that newcomers can still become part of this longstanding community through social engagement, the type of which can easily occur through a church congregation (Dyck 2012).

This may very well be true, but without more detailed information gathering and analysis it is hard to be certain of the specific factors that have led to these churches continuation in community life.

Fig 3 Map of the general boundaries of Park Extension, with the area highlighted in blue
Works Cited


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