Our Heritage Of Faith
by Laurie Smith

Congregation Emanu-El Temple, Victoria, British Columbia, John Wright architect (1863). [Illustration: Peter Schwartzman]

With its simple, wood-panelled exterior, second-storey verandah and false front, the Abbotsford Sikh Temple (inset) looks remarkably like a frontier town store. Built in 1911 by some of the first Sikh immigrants to British Columbia, it is the oldest surviving Sikh temple ("gurdwara") in North America. Its founders were male labourers who emigrated from India to work in the burgeoning lumber industry of British Columbia's Fraser Valley. Using supplies donated by their employer and carried to the site on their backs, they erected the gurdwara on a traditional hilltop location.
At a time when Canadian immigration laws prevented them from bringing their families to Canada, the temple provided not only a place of worship, but also a place of fellowship and community. Its modest construction and unpretentious design speak volumes about the social and financial status of its builders. Its very existence testifies to the importance of religion in the lives of its members. In 2002, the Abbotsford Sikh Temple was designated a national historic site.

Seventy kilometres to the east, the massive Khalsa Diwan Society Sikh Temple sits on Ross Street in the heart of Vancouver's Indo-Canadian community. Designed by one of Canada's most renowned architects, Arthur Erickson, in 1969-70, it serves as the central place of worship for Vancouver's large Sikh community. The temple's sleek, white design integrates Sikh religious symbols with the formal geometry of modern architecture. Thanks to enfranchisement and more generous post-war immigration policies, Vancouver's Sikh community is both prosperous and large enough to maintain a superb piece of architecture that reflects the community's religious and cultural traditions.

As Canada's multicultural fabric strengthens and diversifies, an increasing multiplicity of places speak to our religious heritage. These buildings, structures and landscapes provide tangible evidence of the religious practices of the past and the present. The heritage community in Canada is embracing this multicultural, multifaith reality because it includes places that are essential to understanding our history. As heritage elements, these religious buildings, structures and landscapes also help to create a sense of place within our towns, cities and rural communities. This inclusive approach to sacred places has the added benefit of making preservation more meaningful to greater numbers of Canadians, and, in the process, creating a larger body of heritage supporters.

The diversity of places used for worship and shared religious rituals in Canada is impressive, ranging from the natural to the purely architectural, from small to large, and from vernacular to high design. Different religious traditions derive meaning from different forms of sacred place. Among First Nations, the various elements that make up the Earth itself are sacred: rocks, water, plants and animals. The Idaà Trail in the Northwest Territories contains several examples of sacred rockfaces associated with legends of the Dogrib people. The cultural landscape of the Dogrib is embedded with intangible heritage, created through traditional ceremonies, legends and rituals.

Some religions allow adherents to create personal sacred places in homes or workplaces. Muslims create a sacred place wherever they lay down a prayer mat. Roman Catholics create personal shrines to honour various Christian saints. Buddhists create shrines to remind them of Buddha's teachings.

A public place for communal worship is essential to most Judaeo-Christian, Middle Eastern and Asian faiths. This usually takes the form of a built structure, with space for shared meals and community events, as well as worship. These buildings serve a functional purpose in providing a shelter for shared religious rituals. Through their design and decoration, however, they also serve to affirm, proclaim or even evangelize religious beliefs. At Our Lady of Good Hope Church, a mid-19th-century Roman Catholic mission established in the Northwest Territories by Oblate priests, the interior is lavishly decorated with

intricate woodwork and painted scenes. Wall murals include cherubim with Native features, snow bunting and white ptarmigan. Through iconography, the Oblates attempted to bridge barriers of language and culture, and teach the Roman Catholic sacraments to the local people.

In southern Ontario, the distinctive three-tiered or “wedding-cake” form of the Sharon Temple proclaims the religious beliefs of its early 19th-century builders, a small, dissident Christian sect called the Children of Peace. More than a hundred years after the sect itself disappeared, the temple continues to convey its religious and political messages through the built form, proportions and detailing.

The apotheosis of the interweaving of function, form and message-making can be seen in the Gothic Revival, an ecclesiastical style brought to Canada by early 19th-century Church of England reformers. In Britain, an Anglican reform group known as the Tractarians were calling for a return to traditional church liturgy and practices, embodied, so they believed, in the Gothic-style church of the Middle Ages characterized by arched windows and a cross-type floor plan. Early churchmen like Bishop John Medley, the first Bishop of New Brunswick, brought this ecclesiastical style to Canada to ensure the faithful transfer of Anglican beliefs to the new world. Medley’s Christ Church Cathedral in Fredericton, designed by British architect Frank Wills, was one of the first Gothic Revival-style churches built in Canada and remains one of the best examples. The Gothic form was quickly adopted by Christian denominations throughout the country and became a pervasive ecclesiastical style. It was repeated in infinite variations across the country between 1825 and the mid-20th century, with adaptations to local conditions and resources. In smaller communities such as Battle Harbour, Newfoundland, the Gothic-style church often appeared as a small, wooden structure with a gable roof, arched openings, and sometimes a small tower or spire.

Traditionally, churches have functioned as highly visible landmarks within the landscape because of their adoption of a common architectural language. Gothic styling and a spire immediately communicate the message of church. Even in the latter half of the 20th century as Christian churches embraced a more modern architecture, Gothic features continued to be associated with Christianity.

Recent religious structures, such as the International Buddhist Society’s Kuan-Yin Temple in Richmond, British Columbia, serve as both landmarks and important religious and cultural institutions, without following the vocabulary established by churches and cathedrals. Built in the late 1970s, the Kuan-Yin temple is one of the finest examples of traditional Chinese palatial architecture in North America. Its grand buildings, temple roofs, high walls, gates, gardens and red trim proudly stand as a sentinel of religious belief to its followers and to the general public. The temple has assumed the role traditionally assigned to churches; it functions as an important part of the city’s landscape and culture, apart from its religious services to its adherents.

Julian Smith, conservation architect, suggests that “religious places are cultural landmarks that organize the way we think about an urban space. Heritage designations allow us to recognize places of high cultural value, whether or not they function as visual landmarks.”

The Historic Sites and Monuments Board of Canada considers places of national historic significance on the basis of their historical or architectural value. For many years the HSMBC avoided designation of religious subjects, concerned that designation might be perceived as favouritism of one religious group over another. When the HSMBC first began to focus on architectural designations during the 1970s, churches were designated strictly on the basis of their architectural value. It is only more recently that the social, cultural and even spiritual meanings associated with churches and other sacred places have begun to be included in the reasons for designation of historic sites. Shannon Ricketts, historian with Parks Canada, reflects, “I think a lot of our changes in attitude have come about because of our dealings with Aboriginal and ethnocultural groups. In their meetings with us, these groups raise sacred places as the types of places they want to commemorate.” These groups find the separation between culture and religion to be artificial.

The construction of sacred built heritage parallels the patterns of settlement and urbanization that characterize Canada’s development. Early mission churches, such as Good Hope in the Northwest

Territories, were an essential component of fur trading posts. In new communities such as those established on seigneuries in Quebec or by United Empire Loyalists in Ontario and the Atlantic provinces, churches were one of the first permanent structures to be built. Across the Prairies, churches accompanied the creation of railway towns and the colonization of frontier areas by Doukhobor, Mennonite and Mormon settlers. Within urban centres, the arrival of new groups of immigrants signalled the construction of new places of worship. The country's first synagogues were built by Jewish immigrants in the mid-19th century, and Congregation Emanu-El synagogue in Victoria, B.C., is the earliest surviving example. Also in British Columbia, Sikh immigrants built four temples in the early 20th century, including the one at Abbotsford. In Edmonton, the country's first mosque was built by the Muslim community in 1938.

The construction of larger, more sophisticated places of worship reflected the later prosperity and growth of communities and congregations. For many Christian denominations, the construction of major churches and cathedrals went hand-in-hand with the rapid urban development that characterized the late 19th and early 20th centuries. These large, often Gothic-style buildings are now fundamental components of our urban landscape. For other denominations, this growth and prosperity did not occur until much later in the 20th century.

The 1960s were a time of religious revival among Christian religions, and a time of growth among other cultural communities in Canada. Many outstanding
examples of religious architecture were built by some of Canada's best-known architects during this period: the Precious Blood Church, St. Boniface, Manitoba (1967, Étienne Gaboury), St. Mary's Church, Red Deer, Alberta (1968, Douglas Cardinal), the Silton Chapel, Qu'Appelle Lakes, Saskatchewan (1967, Clifford Wiens) and the Sikh Temple, Vancouver (1969, Arthur Erickson).

Gaboury's sweeping curvilinear design for the Precious Blood Church (see p. 11) was revolutionary for its time. Inspired by the form of a Native tepee, the church was intended to house a largely Métis, francophone Roman Catholic congregation. Gaboury's work coincided with the Second Vatican Ecumenical Council ("Vatican II"; 1962-65), and the theological changes that resulted are reflected in the design of the church. The nave, sanctuary and baptistery are reorganized here into a cohesive, less formal structure that reflects the new liturgy and role of the church. At St. Mary's (see p. 11), the roof hangs like an enormous hammock across undulating brick walls. The curvilinear forms, warm colours and textures, and elements such as the centrally placed altar reflect the changes in liturgy and approach sanctioned by Vatican II. Wiens designed Silton Chapel as an open-air structure consisting of pew-benches arranged under a massive roof. The roof is supported on timbers arranged in the shape of a cross, and the baptismal font fills with rainwater from the roof. The chapel is nestled in a ravine, and natural forms take the place of chapel walls.

Many designating authorities apply a cutoff date of 40 or 50 years before a place can be considered for its heritage value. As a result, it is the religious buildings or places constructed during the 1960s that will become eligible for heritage consideration over the next few years. At present, heritage designations of sacred places are dominated by buildings constructed by Christian denominations, many of which adhere to the Gothic-style ecclesiastical vocabulary established during the 19th century. The arrival of the decidedly modern sacred structures of the 1960s within the purview of heritage designators may signal a new direction in heritage conservation.

In Burnaby, British Columbia, the Ismailia Jamatkhana Centre is the first Shia Muslim prayer house built in Canada, home to Canada's first Ismaili congregation. Built in 1984 to designs by Vancouver architect Bruno Freschi, the sandstone Jamatkhana (prayer house) combines Islamic architectural principles with contemporary design and materials, including exquisite cast glass windows by Lutz Haufschild. Religious buildings such as this will form the built heritage

St. James the Apostle Anglican Church, 1852-57, designed by Bishop Edward Feild and Reverend William Grey, adapts the Gothic style to Battle Harbour, Newfoundland's conditions.

of the future in Canada.

The increasing awareness of the importance of religious belief in defining Canada's political and cultural history is reinforced by a growing interest in using historic preservation in Canada to reflect the country's diversity. Sacred places speak powerfully and directly to the personal beliefs and values of the people who created them, thereby enriching our sense of identity as Canadians. They also have the ability to express social, architectural, artistic, cultural and religious values appreciated by the larger community. As such, they are important components of the heritage landscape of Canada.

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The distinctive form of the Sharon Temple, 1825-31 (East Gwillimbury, Ontario), conveys religious and political meaning: the perfectly square proportions, with doors on all sides, symbolize the equality of all people.