

Québec City's Role  
in Saving Churches:

# Recycling Saint-Esprit

by Agathe Goulet in collaboration with Serge Viau



Photo: François Bastien

# it Church

Over the past decade, Québec City has dedicated a great deal of effort to the preservation of its churches. It has done so with the assistance of its partners: the Quebec government's Ministry of Culture and Communications, the city's Archdiocese, the Commission de la Capitale nationale du Québec, and Université Laval. The conversion of Saint-Esprit Church is an example of the municipal government's involvement in a concrete project which will hopefully prove informative and inspiring...





Photo: Jonathan Robert – Québec City



# The Circus in Québec

The Saint-Esprit Church, located in the Limoilou district of Québec City, was transformed into a circus school in 2002. Circus activities in Québec, however, started in the late 1980s. Some key dates are:

- 1988: First workshops introducing the circus arts. The courses were delivered in several of the city's community centres.
- 1995: Founding of École de cirque de Québec, a non-profit organization, by Michel Rousseau.
- 1998: Creation of the private company "Les Productions Cirque Éos" by Michel Rousseau and Jocelyne Chouinard.

## The project

In the 1990s, circus activities were in full swing in Québec. The courses proved very popular as the people of Québec (young people and adults) began to discover this cultural activity. But the École de cirque de Québec and the Cirque Éos both had to vacate their premises at various times. Every August, the École de cirque had to leave Expo-Cité's Pavillon de la jeunesse to make way for the Expo-Québec event. For its part, the Cirque Éos occupied the space at the St. Patrick cultural centre on a temporary basis only; the lease was renewed every month, but the company could expect to lose its premises at any time.

Thus, the Cirque Éos and the École de cirque de Québec had no permanent home, either for administrative work or for training and practicing circus activities. Both came to the conclusion that they had to stabilize their operations. The companies joined forces in a project to relocate their two organizations, which resulted in the idea of creating a circus arts centre in Québec, a unique training facility with permanent administrative offices.

Former Saint-Esprit Church. Interior of the École de cirque.

*Ancienne église Saint-Esprit. Intérieur de l'École de cirque.*



Former Saint-Esprit Church. Interior of the École de cirque. The church's height and spaciousness lent itself to the conversion.

*Ancienne église Saint-Esprit. Intérieur de l'École de cirque. La grandeur et de l'espace se sont prêtés à la conversion.*

# Feasibility Studies and the Search for premises

To implement this project, the École de cirque de Québec and the Cirque Éos partnered with Québec City in the search for premises and identified Saint-Esprit Church as a potential location.

In June 2000, the École de cirque de Québec and the Cirque Éos commissioned a pre-feasibility study from the Groupe de ressources techniques Action-Habitation. In May 2001, an assessment of the external envelope and interior layout potential of the Saint-Esprit Church was conducted by Bernard Serge Gagné, a Québec architect.

# Closing of the Saint-Esprit Church

On June 23, 2001, the final mass was held at Saint-Esprit. The church's maintenance fees had reached \$100 a day, even though the building was used for just five hours a week. Urgent repairs costing \$600,000 or more needed to be carried out on the masonry, roof and exterior staircase.

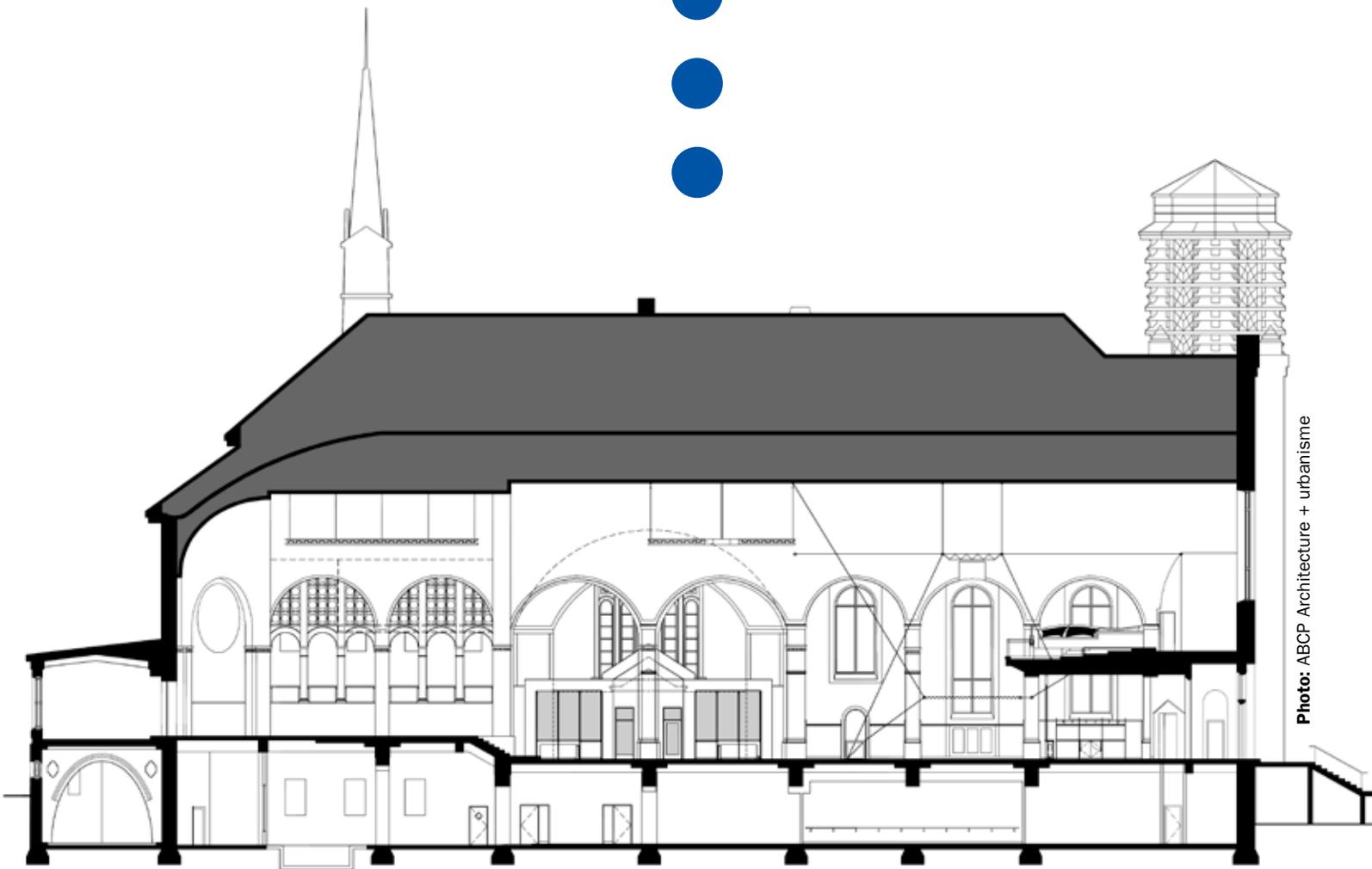


Photo: ABCP Architecture + urbanisme

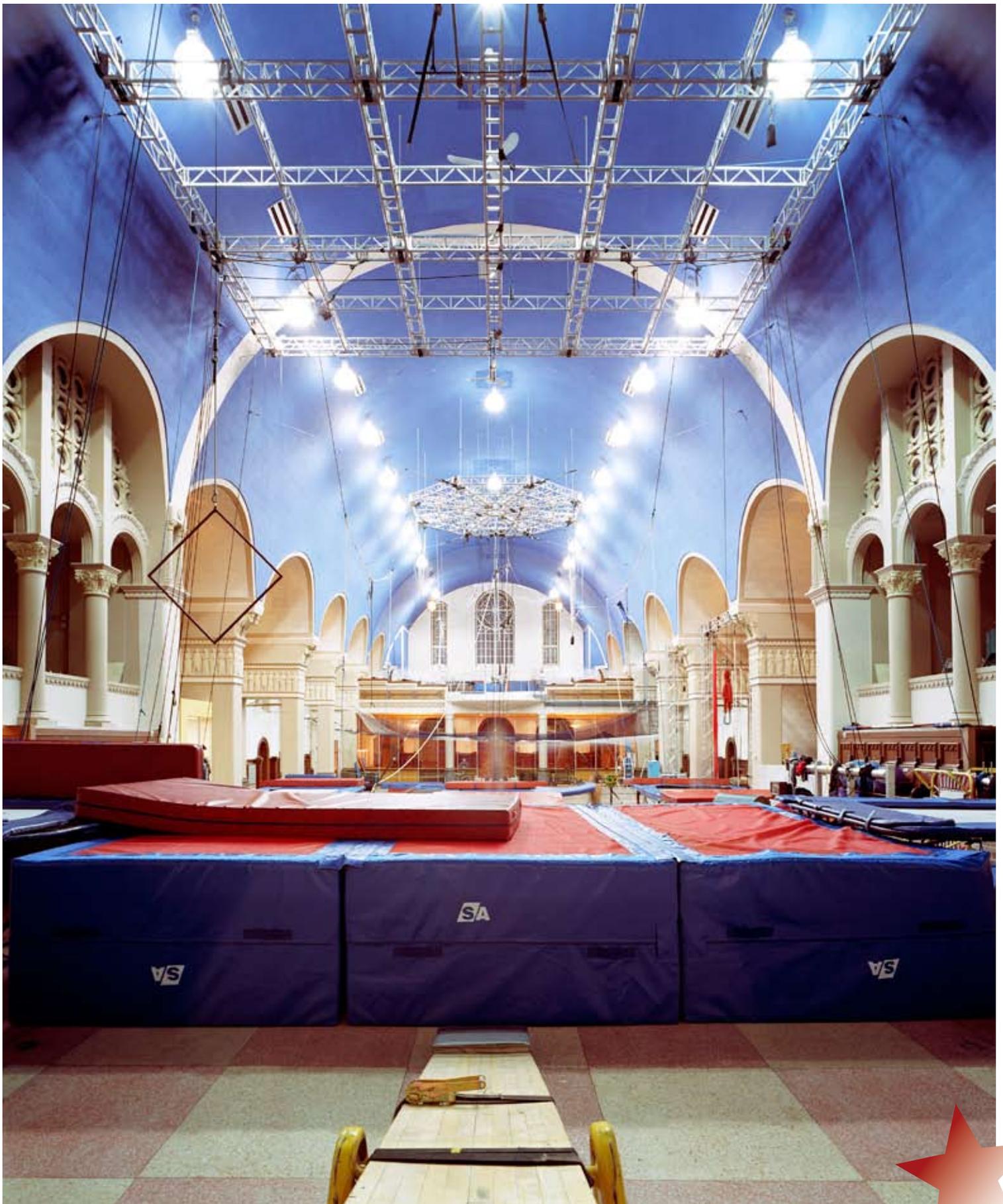


Photo: François Bastien

Many architectural features of the historic church were preserved as part of the conversion.

*Plusieurs des éléments architectural ont été préservé comme parti du projet de recyclage.*

# Offer to purchase the Building



On June 27, 2001, the École de cirque de Québec offered the Notre-Dame-de-Rocamadour parish council \$20,000 for the church, excluding the pipe organ, pews, bells and statuary, which the parish council could sell, transfer or donate. The parish council accepted the school's offer. Thus began the project to convert the Saint-Esprit Church. The location is ideal because of the church's height and spaciousness—invaluable characteristics for practising circus arts.

# Project Objectives

These were as follows:

- Finding a permanent solution to the École de cirque de Québec's annual displacement;
- Finding a permanent location for the Cirque Éos's administrative offices;
- Revitalizing the district;
- Providing local, regional and international visibility for the district and the city; and
- Bringing economic spin-offs to the district.

# Financing package

1.	2.	3.	4.
<b>\$1,000,000</b>	<b>\$900,000</b>	<b>\$600,000</b>	<b>\$156,435</b>
Minister responsible for the National Capital Region	Quebec's Ministry of Culture and Communications (support program for recycling religious heritage buildings)	Québec City (loan agreement – \$300,000 rebate by the Urban Renewal program)	École de cirque de Québec (promoter's outlay)

The Saint-Esprit Church project was made possible through the financial involvement of four partners:

**Total**  
**\$2,656,435**

Also, the Saint-Esprit Church project was carried out without any cost overrun, thus staying within the initial budget.

The École de cirque de Québec moved into the church, and activities took off in 2002.

# Benefits for Québec City



Investing in the Saint-Esprit Church project brought the City several benefits:

- preservation of a valuable community asset
- improved quality of life for all citizens
- installation of an amenity that is unique in all of eastern Quebec
- rejuvenation and retention of Québec City artists



Photo: François Bastien

The church's height and spaciousness proved ideal for practicing circus arts.

*La grandeur et l'espace de l'église se sont avérés idéal pour la pratique des arts du cirque.*



This article is an excerpt from the chapter « Le rôle de la Ville de Québec et de ses partenaires dans la sauvegarde des églises » in **Quel avenir pour quelles églises? What Future for What Churches?** Edited by Lucie K. Morisset, Luc Noppen and Thomas Coomans. Presses de l'Université de Québec, 2006, pp. 548-555.

## Threats to the project

The project is a success. All stakeholders are proud of the outcome. The École de cirque's activities are popular and meet a real need within the population. However, threats still loom over the project. The École de cirque de Québec is experiencing difficulties in funding its activities, including paying the accumulated operating deficit and ongoing building maintenance.

In addition, the project depends largely on an infusion of public funds.

## Support from the City

In 2005, the City granted \$250,000 to the École de cirque de Québec to help

- balance operations
- pay off long-term debt more quickly
- clear the accumulated operating deficit
- provide a reserve fund for building maintenance
- ensure the diversification of its activities in order to maintain client interest

## Conclusion

It is clear that Québec City and its partners are doing a lot for churches. Heritage conservation and the development of historic properties cannot happen in isolation. As with environmental protection, they are shared objectives.

... We believe it is necessary to avoid dogmatism in our approaches to conservation and development. We must imbue them with imagination and creativity. The "all or nothing" era is over. Otherwise, we cannot progress, and protection of religious heritage will be compromised. In other words, how could the City, or any other municipality with limited means, become more involved? It is vital that we all work together and combine our means and resources. ■

**Agathe Goulet** is an executive advisor with the City of Québec's economic development department. Her extensive experience in project delivery and management enabled her to advise and support the École de cirque de Québec in this major transformation project.

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