

Ghostly Presence: An Abandoned Space and Three Religious Communities in Parishville, Quebec

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Résumé de l'article

Once a religiously vibrant society, today Quebec is in the midst of a transition in its religious identity. Yet, the landscape of Quebec still preserves the marks of its perhaps more religious past. In other words, churches stand out in the contemporary panorama of the province. However, the lack of support by an active community has meant that many churches closed or face the threat of closure. Those religious groups that remain struggle to save their places of worship. The faithful of Parishville, both Catholic and Protestant, are no exception. This article explores the narratives of three religious groups (Anglican, United Church and Catholic) about an abandoned building that was once a church and then a Masonic Temple. Through our exploration of the aesthetic and material dimensions of the Masonic Temple we reveal aspects of the contemporary struggle of religious groups to survive as well as the fears, tensions and problems associated with this struggle. As it turns out, the Masonic Temple is a sort of ghostly presence, reminding the Protestant and Catholic parishioners of Parishville their own religious decline—the end of their building and the end of their faith.

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Abstract:

Once a religiously vibrant society, today Quebec is in the midst of a transition in its religious identity. Yet, the landscape of Quebec still preserves the marks of its perhaps more religious past. In other words, churches stand out in the contemporary panorama of the province. However, the lack of support by an active community has meant that many churches closed or face the threat of closure. Those religious groups that remain struggle to save their places of worship. The faithful of Parishville, both Catholic and Protestant, are no exception. This article explores the narratives of three religious groups (Anglican, United Church and Catholic) about an abandoned building that was once a church and then a Masonic Temple. Through our exploration of the aesthetic and material dimensions of the Masonic Temple we reveal aspects of the contemporary struggle of religious groups to survive as well as the fears, tensions and problems associated with this struggle. As it turns out, the Masonic Temple is a sort of ghostly presence, reminding the Protestant and Catholic parishioners of Parishville their own religious decline—the end of their building and the end of their faith.¹

“[This] building is dead. There is no life there. It lacks life, we can’t do anything,” said Yvonne—a self-identified Anglican born Catholic—while trying to understand our interest in a study of an abandoned place of worship (interview August 9, 2016). Yet, Yvonne was, in a way, correct. The building that was the focus of our research in a small town close to Montreal was an historical and crumbled construction without any vocation. It had not been used for more than twenty years. The lifeless old building, left to rot and ruin,

¹ We would like to thank Barbara Thériault for her insightful comments and suggestions that led us to an improvement of this article.



seemed to approach apace the moment of its demolition. So, why study a “dead” building?

We learned about this building through a public controversy over a ban of new places of worship in the town in 2015. It was known mainly as the Masonic Temple and, at that time, it was the only place of worship available for a new religious community in Parishville. Today, the town is predominantly French and Catholic with no visible ethnic and religious diversity. Historically, the area was Anglophone and Protestant, which explains the Masonic Temple’s original identity as an Anglican church. People generally refer to this old building as the “Masonic Temple;” however, the representatives of the town prefer to designate it as the “former [Anglican] church.” Because our primary interest concerns ordinary people and not municipal representatives, in this study we adopt the people’s way of describing the building: the Masonic Temple. As we examined the by-laws issue more closely, we realized that the “dead” building still had the power to tell a story; it mirrored the problems, anxieties, and the struggles of a number of religious groups in the Parishville community. Through people’s thoughts about the Masonic Temple emerged an image of “the last believers” or the communities of “strangers,”² as these religious groups called themselves in formal and informal discussions. In this article, we use the narratives of three religious groups about the Masonic Temple to explore the ways in which the faithful adapt themselves to changes of Quebec contemporary society and deal with the consequences of a steadily declining religious affiliation.

This study is part of a larger project called the *Local Regulation of Religion*,³ which aims to explore how the transformation of space—caught in a circular movement between religious and secular—takes shape in everyday life in the metropolitan area of Montreal. Our fieldwork, based on multiple sites, showed that people often use “things”—such as statues of the Virgin Mary, pews, or the material environments—to express the ways in which they experience a changing world and religious diversity. This observation converges with the growing amount of research that examines the role of material culture in religious practice (Arweck & Keenan 2006; Houtman &

² They were a “community of strangers” because instead of shopping in a mall Sunday morning, they went to the church (fieldnotes, July 31, 2016).

³ The project is attached to the *Religion and Diversity Project*, funded by Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council (SSHRC) and housed at the University of Ottawa.

Meyer 2012; Kaell 2015; King 2010; Morgan 2010b, 2017; Zubrzycki 2016). Along with bodies, artifacts, and imagery, the space mediates people's encounters with the sacred (Brenneman 2016; Orsi 1999; Williams 2010) and becomes an object of negotiation, creation, and appropriation (Beekers & Arab 2016; Engelbart & Krech 2016; Hoover 2014). Several scholars of religion have examined the regulation of religion through places of worship as well as the tensions that these places stir up for residents and for municipal authorities (Beaman & Beyer 2008; Becci et al. 2016; Burchardt & Becci 2013; Germain & Dejean 2013; Dejean 2016; Sullivan 2005). We aim to continue their work by examining the ways people create, use and perceive space. Although sociologists are more inclined to study lived spaces—as they are used and practiced—we chose a “dead” space, one that was ostensibly without a community and not in use. Following the work of anthropologist Yael Navaro-Yashin (2009, 2012) and geographer Tim Edensor (2005a, 2005b), we also suggest that abandoned spaces have the potential to be important markers of tensions, fears and struggles of communities: they are not isolated artifacts but woven into the life of the community over the span of time and memory. In other words, ruins are affective spaces that discharge humans' emotive energies (Navaro-Yashin 2009) because they are spaces inhabited by numerous ghosts that embody the past but also “gesture towards the present and the future” (Edensor 2005b: 15).

Considering the Masonic Temple as an artifact that can be experienced aesthetically (Christmann 2008) and materially, our study is situated at the intersection of material and lived religion or what David Morgan (2017, 2010a) calls “the material culture of lived religion.” According to Morgan, the study of materiality in lived religion means to look at the ways in which different forms of materiality—spaces, things, performances, and sensations—participate in “making and sustaining a life-world” (Morgan 2017: 15). Understood as it is practiced and experienced by ordinary people in everyday life (Ammerman 2007; McGuire 2008; Orsi 2005) religion happens “not *in* spaces and performances as indifferent containers, but *as* them, carved out of, overlaid, or running against prevailing modes of place and time” (Morgan 2010c: 8).

This article is principally based on an ethnographic fieldwork. We completed our data with archive and media material. Between December 2015 and December 2016, we conducted observations at three sites in Parishville: an

Anglican church, a United Church of Canada and a Catholic Church.⁴ All of them are located in proximity to the Masonic Temple. Built at the beginning of the 20th century, all three churches reflect dimensions of Quebec's religious heritage. Each Sunday, the remnants of what were once flourishing communities occupy the church pews.⁵ After the religious service, the Anglican and United Church attendees, most of them seniors, spend some time together drinking coffee. The Catholic parishioners usually leave the church after mass, but some of them join the Anglican and United Church congregants at a local restaurant.

We spent more time in the Anglican Church and more interviews were conducted there than at the other sites. That community built and sold the building that we studied to the Masons in the late 1920s. Their former ownership made the Anglican community, in our view, the most likely to demonstrate an interest in the Masonic Temple. We also attended the ecumenical service during the anniversary of Parishville. In total, we conducted fifteen semi-structured interviews with active members of all three churches. The practicing believers that we interviewed were middle-class people aged between 60 and 95 years old, and included both anglophones and francophones who had an Anglican, United Church and Catholic background. Some of them were born in Parishville, others had lived in the community for more than 25 years. During the interviews, the parishioners talked about their life in Parishville, but also expressed concerns about what they saw as a problematic religious and ethnic diversity in Montreal and some neighbourhoods of Parishville.

An important clarification is necessary: Parishville is a pseudonym as are the names of the interviewees. Because the site was one of controversy (more political and less religious), an important number of our interviewees asked that we protect their identity. Living in a small town where people know each other made people feel more vulnerable. To respect their desire, we have been careful to mask not only their identity but also that of the town.

⁴ We also attended two public consultations held by the town hall of Parishville in 2016, which discussed in a tension-filled atmosphere the future of the Masonic Temple. Because these public meetings concerned the municipality politics and not the life of the three religious communities, we chose to not use them in this study.

⁵ During the Sunday religious service, we could count around 30 people in the Anglican Church, 50 in the United Church and 70 in the Catholic Church.

Photographs of the Masonic Temple, which would illustrate what we are talking about have been excluded from this article as well.

1. The site

The story of the Masonic Temple and the controversy surrounding it must first be understood in a broader context. Historically dominated by Roman Catholicism, Quebec has undergone a relatively rapid transformation in its religious landscape.⁶ Though the vast majority of Quebecers still identify as Roman Catholic, only a minority actually participate in weekly mass or other rituals associated with that religion.⁷ The place of Catholicism and religion more generally in contemporary Quebec is complicated, with many public institutions still displaying religious symbols such as crucifixes and other religious artifacts, but with a persistent claim that these are reflective of culture and history and not religion (Beaman 2013). Alongside with the Catholic Church, the mainline Protestant Churches of Quebec are also confronted with a rapid decline in church attendance (Mair 1984; Marshall 1995; Wilkins-Laflamme 2011). The lack of support by an active community has meant that many churches have faced the threat of closure.⁸ Our broader project looks at several spaces that were once churches but have been converted to other uses. Those religious groups that remain struggle to save their sacred places of worship: the parishioners of Parishville, both Catholic and Protestant, are no exception.

Built in the second part of the 19th century, the neo-Tudor edifice had been a place of worship for the developing Anglican community of Parishville. The building was sold to the Masons early in the twentieth century when the church outgrew it, and functioned as a Masonic Temple for almost seventy years. Eventually, Mason membership diminished drastically and the group sought to demolish their temple and build in its place condominiums. A small

⁶ For more detailed discussions of this, see, for example, Baum (2000), Gauvreau (2005), Seljak (1996, 2000), and Simpson (2000).

⁶ For an excellent overview of Quebec history that takes a multidimensional approach, see Dickinson and Young (2008).

⁷ Though few attend church regularly, 75% of the total population of Quebec's 7.7 million residents identify as Catholic (6.3 million identify as Christian), see Statistics Canada's (2011) National Household Survey from 2011.

⁸ In 1992, the bishops of Quebec released a report based on the findings of a commission (the Laroche Commission) led by Dominican priest Jean-Louis Laroche, which as Baum (2000: 159) points out, concludes that "the Catholic Church in Quebec is dying."

but active group of citizens, historians and official representatives got together and convinced the town hall to buy the temple in order to preserve the architectural heritage of town, which happened in the late 1990s. Since then the building has been waiting for a new vocation.

Its use as a Masonic Temple contributed to the sense of mystery and secrecy surrounding the building.⁹ Efforts to “demystify” it and to render it more welcoming to the larger public were made in late 1990s when the municipality purchased the building: the Masonic symbols were removed and the former Christian symbols were revamped; the temple was opened for visiting for several days and a survey and a public consultation were organized in order to decide the new vocation of the space. Finances, however, were prohibitive and the building continued to languish despite the municipality’s efforts to give it a new life. Finally, in 2016, a local businessperson bought the Masonic Temple with the intention of transforming it into a public business market. Once again, the Masonic Temple will undergo a transformation, with its Christian aesthetics likely to diminish even further: the new vocation of the building as a public market will alter its historical features to transform the Masonic Temple in a practical and “money-making” place. The red-brownish bricks that cover the walls of the building will be removed and replaced with concrete and glass. A new annex will be added to shelter a co-working space for young entrepreneurs.

The Anglican, Catholic and United Church parishioners were familiar with the new project concerning the Masonic Temple through local media reports that conveyed information about it occasionally, especially as it was the focus of controversy over the height of the proposed annex, which would be one level higher than what the zoning by-laws allows. Our research conducted in Parishville showed that people had paid little attention to the transformations in the building over time. During the interviews, people expressed their opinions about the new annex, but also expressed their contentment that finally things were moving for this neglected building. For most of them, even demolition was a better solution than keeping a crumbling construction in the heart of the town. The minister of Anglican Church, Linda Roy, summarized the general feeling about the Masonic Temple and its future vocation in this way:

⁹ For more detailed discussion on this subject, see Mahmud (2014) and Urban (2001).

“They just want to see something appropriate happening there. Nobody likes the fact that [it] is in that way. I mean, the last year, it was a whole family of raccoons that was born there, you see rats and cats and everything. You see pieces of ... falling off in the parking area, you know, it’s ... you just wanted something to be done. (...) Mostly what people want is just something to happen, but to happen in a way that doesn’t make our life miserable.” (Interview, November 23, 2016)

How can we study religion in this setting? And what can we learn about the contemporary life of religious communities by exploring an abandoned space whose identity is a complicated amalgam of religious and secular forces? The interviews conducted with Parishville parishioners offered us important clues about how the Masonic Temple refracted historical narratives, contemporary shifts in religious behaviour and anxieties about the future. Starting from this observation, in the following sections we examine the aesthetic and material dimensions of this abandoned building in order to reveal how Parishville religious communities face the challenges posed by the steadily decline of religious affiliation and practice in everyday life. The story is not an exceptional one; it is one shared by many other religious groups in contemporary Quebec and, indeed, in many parts of the world (Broy 2016; Kong and Woods 2016).

2. Aesthetics of an in-between Space: Mundaneness and Secrecy

From the outside, the Masonic Temple is a one-storey, polychrome and half-timbered building. Its base is covered with bricks and resembles the traditional cottages of Normandy. In our interviews with members of Anglican, United Church and Catholic communities, with few exceptions the Masonic Temple aesthetics were not appreciated. It was usually described as a “false Tudor,” “not distinguished” building with “no value, historically and architecturally.” The inclination to describe a decaying building in a negative way is somewhat predictable. What was surprising was the tendency to make comments about the aesthetics of the *old church*, rather than the temple. The modest style of the building had none of the features of a church, but some interviewed people said while pointing out that the edifice lacked the high ceiling of a church and the stain glass was “ordinary” (interview, Sandra—Catholic parishioner—October 31, 2016) and of “poor quality” (interview, Frank—Anglican congregant—July 29, 2016). Because some of the interviewees visited the Masonic Temple during the open doors days in the late 1990s, they also remembered that the separation between the presbytery

and the nave of the church was still present and also re-created from their imaginations Christian (rather than Masonic) rituals. Perhaps paradoxically, to consider the Masonic Temple a religious space made no sense to our informants. Several of them stressed that the building lost all religious connotations when it was sold to the Masonic Lodge that was of course “religious but not a church, but everything they did, it was religious, Christian” (interview, Evelyn—United Church parishioner—September 23, 2016).

The Masons’ long ownership not only affected the religious character of the building, but also marked the way in which people related to this building. The mystery, secrecy, and richness that defined the Masonic Order in people’s imaginary also filtered through their descriptions of this historical building. For example, Andrew (a United Church parishioner) confessed to us that he visited the building in the late 1990s: “because the Masonic Temple was very secret and they [did] a lot of play acting, King Saul and things like that” (interview, September 12, 2016). Furthermore, some parishioners even speculated that the new owner of the building would keep “some of the secrecy of the temple” (interview, Sandra—Catholic parishioner—October 31, 2016).

The rise and the decline of Masons in Parishville were woven through the interviewees’ narratives of the building’s trajectory: both were in a flourishing condition in 1920s and experienced decline in 1990s. Reflecting on the temple’s fate, William (an Anglican parishioner) remarked: “Things like the Masonic Temple are inevitable. Things are changing...” (interview, August 3, 2016). William’s statement played a double role, describing both the fate of the Temple and the struggle, as he understood it, of traditional Christian religious communities engaged with declining communities and financial challenges related to decreased revenues. The communities are feeling the pressure and the inevitability of the closure of their church building. William and the other interviewees seemed to agree: the future of the traditional Christian communities is uncertain. As we will see, the physical presence of the Masonic Temple stirred up their discomfort and anxiety.

3. Material Excavation: Community Interest and Fear

For our interviewees, the Masonic Temple was “just a building,” “strange and decrepit,” “uninteresting” and “unpleasant.” It was a historical building, but

more than that it was a “safe heaven” for squirrels, racoons, and vagrants. All three religious groups showed no visible attachment to it: neither the Anglicans who had once owned the building nor even those whose fathers had been actively involved in the Masonic Order. The heritage status that ennobled, in our view, the Masonic Temple was rather seen by people whom we interviewed as an inconvenient detail. With one voice, the three religious groups claimed that the temple was not worth being saved. A better solution would be, they said, to tear down the building and to put in place something more useful for inhabitants of Parishville: a bigger parking lot, a small park, an Art Museum, an office building or even condominiums.

If at first glance the fate of the Masonic Temple seemed to stir up nothing more than indifference, our sociological instincts told us something else: different “motives” (Weber 1978 [1921]) were behind this apparent indifference.¹⁰ For Max Weber and his interpretive sociology, the motives “do not necessarily correspond to what the actors report themselves in order to give an account their action,” but they are a “*construction* of the sociologist” (Thériault 2013: 48-49). One way to uncover the actors’ motives is to use ethnological observation as method (Ibid.). In our study, we focus particularly on the ways in which the actors framed their answers. As we listened to the comments of our participants, it seemed to us that there was a gap between what they said and what we saw. Two motives—in Weber’s sense—seemed to explain the parishioners’ refusal to consider a future for the Masonic Temple: community interest and fear. Without being directly stated, these two motives were interwoven into the fabric of the participants’ narratives about the Masonic Temple.

As we sat in the living room of two of our Anglican interviewees listening to them discuss the temple, we witnessed an exchange that was typical of the feelings of most of our interviewees:

William: “What it would be used for?”

Janice: What benefit would it give to the City?

¹⁰ Max Weber defines “motive” as “a complex of subjective meaning which seems to the actor himself or to the observer an adequate ground for the conduct in question” (Weber 1978 [1921]: 11). For a discussion of issue related to “motives,” see Barbara Thériault (2010).

William: It's a hall. And we have a big hall just alongside, which is available. Our memorial hall is available and to spend 5 million dollars having another hall. (...) Well, this year we had our painting exhibition there for our seniors.

Janice: So, that hall is used quite a bit, we've been doing a couple of things there." (Interview, August 3, 2016)

William and Janice spent considerable time trying to explain to us why the Masonic Temple is not worth being saved. In their words, the building was "magané,"¹¹ "in a terrible shape," "unsafe" and "certainly had no future." Yet, for us, it remained unclear why the building displeased them so much that William could exclaim: "I have no sympathy for that poor building. I think it's certainly its time [to go]" (interview, August 3, 2016). Our perplexity diminished as William and Janice sought a meaning for saving the building. The short exchange reproduced above gave us a clue: a renovated Masonic Temple might compete their own church in the field of leasing space. Theirs was not an isolated case: the Catholic parishioners also lacked enthusiasm as they contemplated the conversion of the Masonic Temple into a concert hall, as was proposed by some of the residents of Parishville. For Alain (a Catholic parishioner), this plan was 'unacceptable'. Their church, located in the same area as the Masonic Temple, was a better place for this purpose: it was bigger and had an excellent acoustic. Besides, they already hosted the concerts and the qualities of their space were recognized. As parishioners imagined the day when their church would close its doors, they expressed the hope that their church would be converted in a concert hall.

The seemingly indifferent attitude of our interviewees we had initially encountered transformed as our conversations with them continued. Rather than indifference, their approach to the Masonic Temple was framed by their concerns about their own religious communities. In times of change and when all the religious communities were confronted with financial problems, the presence of another place that might offer the same services with their own was threatening. It could bring to the end the life of their church. To keep their church alive, all three religious groups said that renting the space available in their buildings had become a common practice. They already hosted expositions, sales of books, kindergarten, a choral society, and concerts. The

¹¹ "Magané(e)" means in Quebecois French damaged, beat up, ruined.

United Church was one step further as it rented some of its space to a Buddhist community. The Anglican and Catholic communities also contemplated this option. In fact, the shared space was viewed as the future of the religious communities in Parishville: one single church building could host all Parishville religious groups, Catholic and Protestants. “The Sunday is long enough,” said Janice (interview, August 3, 2016) while explaining how different religious communities could function together. However, each religious group (Anglican, United Church and Catholic) thought that their church would survive and become a “home” for the others.

One thing was certain for our interviewees: to keep so many churches in Parishville was impossible. To survive, religious communities needed money not only to repair the building but also for its daily maintenance. The churches marked as Quebec heritage buildings, as it is the case for these three churches, receive 75% of their expenses from provincial government for renovations.¹² However, churches need money to operate: to pay the heating, the minister, the janitor, the secretary and other expenses. In his discussion of expenses, Frank (an Anglican congregant) stressed that these historic churches fall apart not because the costs of renovation are too high, but especially because the aged and diminished religious communities did not have enough money to maintain their building. From this perspective, the renovation of the Masonic Temple was not very advantageous for these three communities; it could make their space less attractive to potential renters and users and consequently make their survival more difficult. Transformed into a public park, parking lot, condominiums or business building, the Masonic Temple was not a competitor in faith, or to the business strategies the groups used to generate income to prolong the survival of their own buildings.

Community interest thus shaped the parishioners’ narratives about the Masonic Temple, but this motive could not explain their uneasiness when we asked them about the temple. We could not unravel this enigma until a small incident took place during an informal conversation with some of our participants. While we were expressing our interest about the Masonic Temple, we were asked if we were Muslim and questioned about our own

¹² For more details concerning the financial assistance for restoration of religion based cultural heritage, see the website of Conseil du patrimoine religieux du Québec: <http://www.patrimoine-religieux.qc.ca/en/financial-assistance/religious-heritage-restoration>. Accessed June 9, 2017.

religious beliefs. It is possible that their enquiry was prompted by the fact that one of us has dark hair and speaks English with a ‘foreign’ accent. This brief conversation pointed to a vague anxiety about ‘others’ and made us more sensitive to their concerns about reconversion of the Masonic Temple in a place of worship. It was not, therefore, so much religious competition that worried them, but anxiety about the changing nature of diversity in their community, and in Quebec and Canada for that matter. As the interviews progressed various people repeated rumours or produced media articles that alluded to non-Christian religious groups, particularly Muslim and (Hasidic) Jewish, were looking for a space to open a place of worship in Parishville.¹³ The media articles insinuated that the Masonic Temple could become a synagogue or a mosque. Even though the Masonic Temple had not been zoned for religious use since the end of 2015, participants were still apprehensive that the town hall could decide to again change the zoning by-laws.

It seemed that the physical presence of the abandoned temple stirred up fear, one towards the “Other” who might express interest in reconstituting a religious space in Parishville. This anxiety surfaced during interviews, but it was dismissed or downplayed in interviews when we asked about it directly. It was not another Christian denomination that troubled the three religious groups whom we studied, but a Muslim or Hasidic Jewish community whose religious beliefs and practices were seen as very different to what they knew. They pointed to Montreal as exemplifying what they did not want in Parishville: places of worship in schools, residential or commercial spaces. As churches were increasingly empty, the hypothetical presence of a non-Christian other in Parishville seemed to threaten (more than another Christian denomination) the familiar religious ordering, which was an exclusively Christian one.

4. Navigating Changing Times:

The Survival or Disappearance of the Traditional Religious Community

As they contemplate the future of their church, the Anglican, Catholic and United Church faithful of Parishville expressed no doubt that not many churches will survive the crisis due to the decline in membership and the

¹³ An Anglican churchgoer also told us a story, which we could not confirm, about posters that mysteriously appeared on the walls of the Masonic Temple showing a mosque (interview, Dorothy, July 27, 2016).

financial problems. For Sandra, a Catholic churchgoer, every death of a member of her community meant a diminished tithe (interview, October 31, 2016). Furthermore, the parishioners had already started to reconstitute a narrative as a community apart from the building of the church knowing that the end of the physical space was possible. Either Protestants or Catholics, our respondents agreed that having to give up a church building was an unpleasant event in the life of a religious community, but they emphasized that church is a community not a building. The people in the community and the religious services made the church building a sacred space. Without community and with its space deconsecrated, as it is the case of Masonic Temple, the church building becomes an ordinary building.¹⁴ From this perspective, the transformation and the demolition of a church is nothing more than the transformation and the demolition of an ordinary building. However, when the discussion turned to their church building they became much more emotional and more nuanced: “people are aware that many churches will close their doors, but they hope that *their* [church] will survive” (interview, Louise, a self-identified Anglican born Catholic, July 26, 2016). While the Anglicans and United Church congregants were guided by a more practical sense and hoped to keep their building until their death, the Catholic faithful showed a stronger attachment towards these buildings seen as a part of Quebec’s cultural heritage.

Most of parishioners hoped that they would find a way to keep both their community and their church building alive. They attempted to develop realistic strategies, which differed slightly between denominations. On the one hand, the Catholic community appeared to be more conservative in that it did not try to attract new members who have a non-Catholic background. On the other hand, the Anglicans and United Church communities showed more flexibility and welcomed everyone into their church, aware that increasing membership was necessary for survival. Nevertheless, these strategies had not produced the hoped results. New people came for special occasions to church, such as marriages, christenings or funerals, but rarely attended regular Sunday services or other church activities. While talking with Anglican, United Church and Catholic parishioners, we could identify four “strategies of survival:”

¹⁴ In a study on the deconsecration of Highgate United Church, Barry Stephenson (2015) made the same observation.

1) Focus on children. The return of a strong contingent of children to the church community was the strongest desire of all of our participant groups. For them such an occurrence was a necessary pre-condition for the survival of their church community. Sandra, a Catholic parishioner, told us:

“I watch them [the other parishioners] when we have a confirmation service. If you have 40 young persons, you say ‘wow!’ If we could have this each Sunday, the church will survive because a child, a teenager ... it is a young person... We baptize a child, ah, the aged parishioners are all ecstasies and almost all the Mass is about the child. It’s beautiful. Before, when you heard crying a child, you said, darn, it’s tiring. Today, we turn, we laugh ... they accept what is normal” (interview, October 31, 2016).

To rejuvenate their communities, all three churches organized different activities for children: a youth orchestra that is invited to be part of Sunday religious service; an active confirmation group; a Sunday school; a Family Mass;¹⁵ a paid voyage to the (Catholic) international celebration of the “World Youth Day.”¹⁶ Despite efforts made by parishioners and clergy, these strategies were successful only in the short term. Once the children become teenagers they did not return to the church. Yet, all three groups hoped that they were sowing the seeds of a more flourishing religion and that later, some of these children will return in church as adults.

2) Ecumenical activities. Since the early 1990s, Protestant and Catholic communities of Parishville, pushed by “desperation” and by the will “to do some good in the community” (interview, Andrew—United Church congregant—September 12, 2016), gathered together regularly. Each year, they organized a bilingual ecumenical service for the Days of Parishville in a public place if the weather permitted. All inhabitants of Parishville are invited to participate to this religious service. Yet, this activity did not bring new people to the church, which several parishioners noted with regret. This was also the case for their carol singing concert and the downtown walk on Good Friday.

¹⁵ Accordingly, to the Quebec Catholic Bishops Assembly, a “Family Mass” is a liturgy that favors the participation of children and nourishes their spirituality. Thus, the children and their parents get acquainted or deepen the experience of Eucharist. <http://www.eveques.qc.ca/documents/2015/2015-SQF4-Conseils%20messe.pdf>. Accessed May 30, 2017.

¹⁶ The Archdiocese of Montreal says that Pope John Paul II instituted the “World Youth Day” in December 1985 as an annual gathering of youth and young adults for prayers, worship and celebration of the Catholic faith. The event is observed annually in every diocese and every two to three years to an international gathering. <http://diocesemontreal.org/en/services-resources/youth/world-youth-day.670.html>. Accessed May 27, 2017.

Mainly, said our interviewees, the ecumenical life helped Catholic and Protestant faithful to come together as they co-organized several charitable activities (such as a food bank, Christmas baskets, and fund-raising dinners)¹⁷ and to broaden their social life since each Sunday they had lunch together after the religious service.¹⁸ However, for all three religious groups, the most important achievement of the Ecumenical Committee was to sponsor three refugee families, all of them with a Christian background: two from Syria and one from Iraq.¹⁹ They hoped that these refugees would remain in Parishville and become members of one of their churches.

3) Welcoming newcomers. This is the most successful strategy and was pursued mainly by the Anglicans and United Church faithful and less by the Catholic group. First, all three communities welcomed newcomers from other religious communities that had lost their church buildings. Efforts were made to accommodate these orphan faithful by involving them in the life of their host community. They were also invited to bring artifacts from their closed churches.²⁰ These objects helped the newcomers to “feel at home” and to keep alive the memory of their lost place of worship. The Anglican and United Church congregants were open to welcoming immigrants in their church, no matter their denominational affiliation. In a post-denomination era, said the minister of the Anglican Church, people are less concerned whether it is a denomination in which they grew up—mostly, she said, they are searching for a church that would welcome them. Furthermore, many newcomers could find in the Anglican and United Church a good environment to learn and practise English, especially for children. Finally, the Anglican and United Church communities opened their doors to those Catholic believers who were

¹⁷ All our interviewees remembered stories about Catholic-Protestant rivalry in the past. According to them, this tensioned-filled relation gradually disappeared in the 1990s as the church attendance dropped significantly for all religious communities in Parishville.

¹⁸ Alain, a Catholic believer, describe these gatherings like that: “We are a good ten or so at the table and I’ll say that there were seniors, 90-year olds, who try to speak in English. I find this nice.” (interview, November 1, 2016).

¹⁹ Two mainly reasons were invoked by our interviewees to explain the choice to sponsor Christian refugees by our respondents: firstly, as Christian-practicing sponsors, it was easier for them to integrate in Parishville’s community Christian refugees. Secondly, the Government of Canada prioritizes the sponsorship of discriminated minorities.

²⁰ For example, each Sunday a small community that joined the Anglican community in Parishville few years ago gathered near a small statue of Virgin Mary displayed discreetly on one of the walls of the church. They remembered thus their former church and made them feeling at home in the new church.

seeking a less conservative faith community. These included gay couples as well as Catholic divorced couples that wished to have a religious marriage.

4) Introducing a bilingual religious service. This strategy was adopted primarily by the Anglican community, while the United Church community pursued it in a diminished form. The Anglican minister introduced one prayer and a few small parts of the sermon in French and they considered displaying a sign outside the church that announces a bilingual religious service. Both communities offer bilingual websites. Some success was achieved, as both communities gained members that had a Catholic background. However, using French during the religious service did not please all anglophone churchgoers, and some of them expressed their discontentment.

As people talked about these strategies and the pressures to survive, they expressed a mix of disappointment, lack of understanding, and realism. The lack of time, often used as an explanation by contemporary parents, was seen as an excuse when compared with large families of yesteryear. Even if they had fewer resources than the today's parents, explained Sandra (a Catholic parishioner), parents found time to take children each Sunday to the church. The people we talked with expressed sadness, disappointment and lack of understanding as they talked about their own children, for whom they had provided a religious education but who were lapsed members or even agnostics or atheists. When our interviewees looked to the future, they could see the end of traditional Christian denominations in Quebec and they had not easy or simple solutions to stop what they saw as a perhaps inevitable decline.

During our research, we frequently heard these words: "Things are changing." This idea of a changing world seemed to influence the thinking and acting of Anglican, Catholic and United Church faithful. They saw the end of their church communities as well as the end of the traditional Christian denominations all over the Western world. As they talked about the life of the churches in Parishville, they were inclined to frame the evolution of their religious community in a larger context. For example, William (an Anglican churchgoer) said during the interview: "Well this [the change] is all over. It's not just [Parishville], Montreal, or Quebec. I think it's all over Canada, all over the States and I know in England, it's the same. People just don't go to church in the way they used to" (interview, August 3, 2016). Threats of church closure represented, in the parishioners' words, an evolution in Quebec society:

religion, in their assessment, no longer has an important role in today's society and is no longer part of everyday life. The members of the three religious groups looked at this changing environment realistically: they attempted to save their churches, but also accepted the decline of religion and believed that things will get worse in the future.

Accepting the change was not an easy thing to do as it was difficult, the parishioners stressed, to get used to a new environment. Reflecting on the subject, Janice (an Anglican congregant) remarked that accepting the change causes upset and brings forth a sense of loss. The story of the three religious communities and the abandoned Masonic Temple intertwined again. The ruins, Edensor (2005b) argues, are a material remainder of change and loss. From this perspective, the Masonic Temple was a sort of ghostly presence, one reminding our interviewees of their own community decline; the end of their building, the end of their faith and of a familiar environment.

Our investigation of an abandoned building concludes here. Although, the Masonic Temple was a "dead" building, it is of sociological interest. Through our exploration of the aesthetic and material dimensions of this abandoned space we revealed aspects of the contemporary struggle of religious groups to survive as well as the fears, tensions and problems associated with that. Our participants reflected on the place of the Masonic Temple by telling a particular narrative of religious history of the community. For a long period of time during our fieldwork in Parishville we could not understand the lack of interest and sympathy of our interviewees for the Masonic Temple. At the beginning, we suspected that the temple's state of disrepair was responsible for people's attitudes. However, this could not explain their uneasiness when we asked about this particular building. To understand this attitude, we had to become more attentive not only to what people were saying but also to the way they framed their answers. A small observation surfaced that offered clues: while talking about the Masonic Temple, our informants often compared the aesthetics and materiality of the temple with those of their church. This comparison signalled to us that their perceptions of the Masonic Temple were interlaced with their own fears and interests. Likewise, the crumbling temple and the three religious communities were in-between entities that were "trapped between a past and a present,

between that which was valuable and that which now has no use” (Edensor 2001: 46). Through their narratives about the Masonic Temple, the interviewees anticipated the end of their religious communities in Parishville while contemplating other forms of more vibrant religions in other parts of the metropolitan area of Montreal. However, they were not entirely resigned to what seemed a sure fate, but struggled to ensure the continuity of their communities and to preserve a Christian order in Parishville.

The crumbling building of the Masonic Temple was not then an “old and forgotten” building as some of them described it, but rather an annoying building that stirred up discomfort and anxiety. Hence, the Masonic Temple might symbolize a narrative of the decline of once-prosperous religious groups of Parishville and evoke the future story of their churches—one of change, and transformation.²¹

²¹ We would like to thank to Anglican, Catholic and United Church parishioners of Parishville for their kindness and willingness to share their story with us.

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