

OLD ST. BONIFACE



*“we live ...
with our different ways
how we genuflect or not
how we speak or dance
where our ships came from
we live like that
meeting on the bridge
some moonlit nights
the river glittering
beneath us ...”*

*“provencher bridge”
Patrick Friesen (1998)*



St. Boniface is a Winnipeg neighbourhood on the east side of the Red River. The area, however, is more than that. It is, rather, the heart of Franco-Manitoban culture, a place indelibly tied to the foundation of the province, a Western Canadian hub of francophone culture and an important site in the history of the Métis people. Many historic and poetic descriptions of St. Boniface have stressed its distinctness from the rest of Winnipeg. This difference is a significant one. For much of its history the area was an independent municipality. Its culture and roots have their own important story. At the same time, St. Boniface has played a key role in the development and growth of Winnipeg. The architecture of St. Boniface reflects these overlapping definitions, embodying a wide span of cultural, religious and economic history.



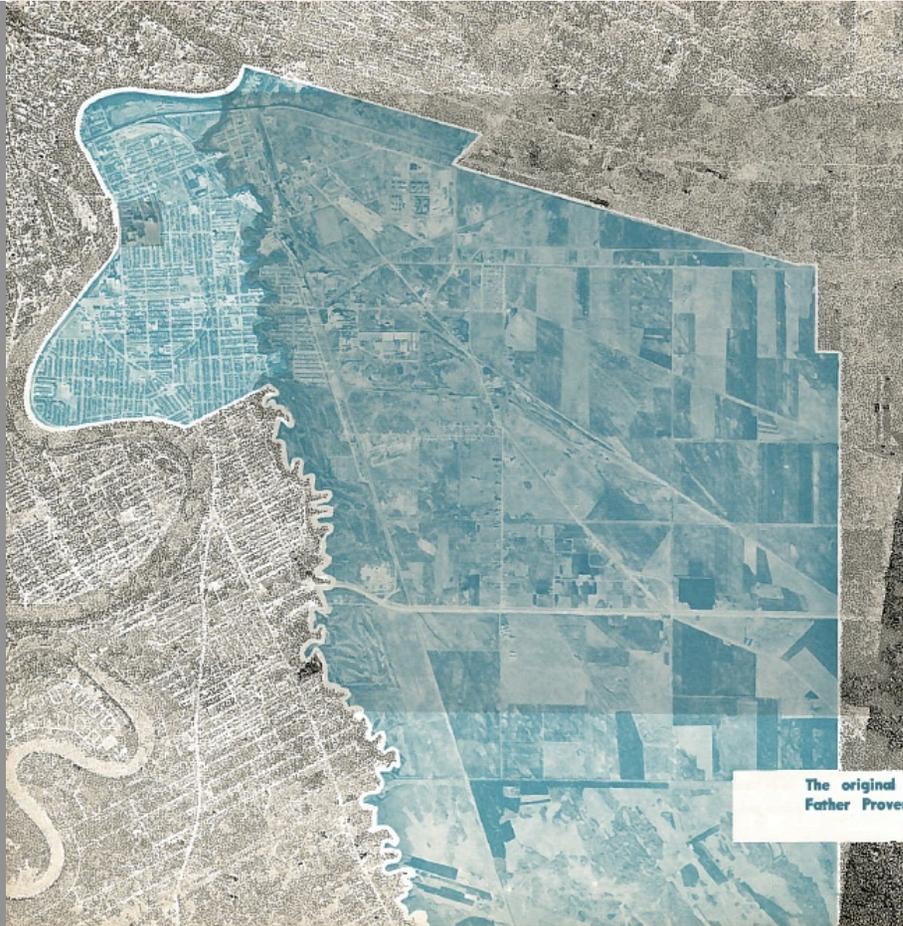
ABOVE LEFT:

Esplanade Riel. Étienne Gaboury and Wardrop Engineering, 2003.

ABOVE RIGHT:

Bird's Eye View of Saint Boniface, Manitoba, 1880. J. J. Stoner, Madison, Wisconsin. Beck & Pauli Lithograph, 1880.

The area around the forks of the Red and Assiniboine Rivers was, for many generations, a site for camping, trading and other activities by indigenous peoples. In the late-eighteenth and early-nineteenth centuries land to the west of the Red River hosted a variety of European settlements, including Forts Rouge, Gibraltar and Douglas and the Red River Colony. The roots of the present built form of St. Boniface can be found in these years. In the early-nineteenth century the area was settled by groups of Métis fur traders and mercenaries hired to protect the Red River Colony; the latter included the German-Swiss De Meurons regiment. (Many of this circle would later move to the United States in the wake the flood of 1826.) Soon after arrived the Québécois Father Joseph-Norbert Provencher. Provencher was sent to Manitoba by Québec bishop Joseph-Octave Plessis at the behest of local citizens, the Hudson's Bay Company governor Miles Macdonell and Scottish Lord Selkirk. In Manitoba he was to found the first permanent Roman Catholic post west of the Great Lakes in present-day Canada. He and the church were given the title to a large tract of land to the east and south of the forks to aide their efforts. These endeavours led, in 1818, to the construction of the first church in Western Canada, not far from the site of St. Boniface Cathedral.



The original land area granted to Father Provencher by Lord Selkirk in 1818.



ABOVE:

Map of St. Boniface.
From St. Boniface 1958
50th Anniversary
Jubilee Pamphlet.

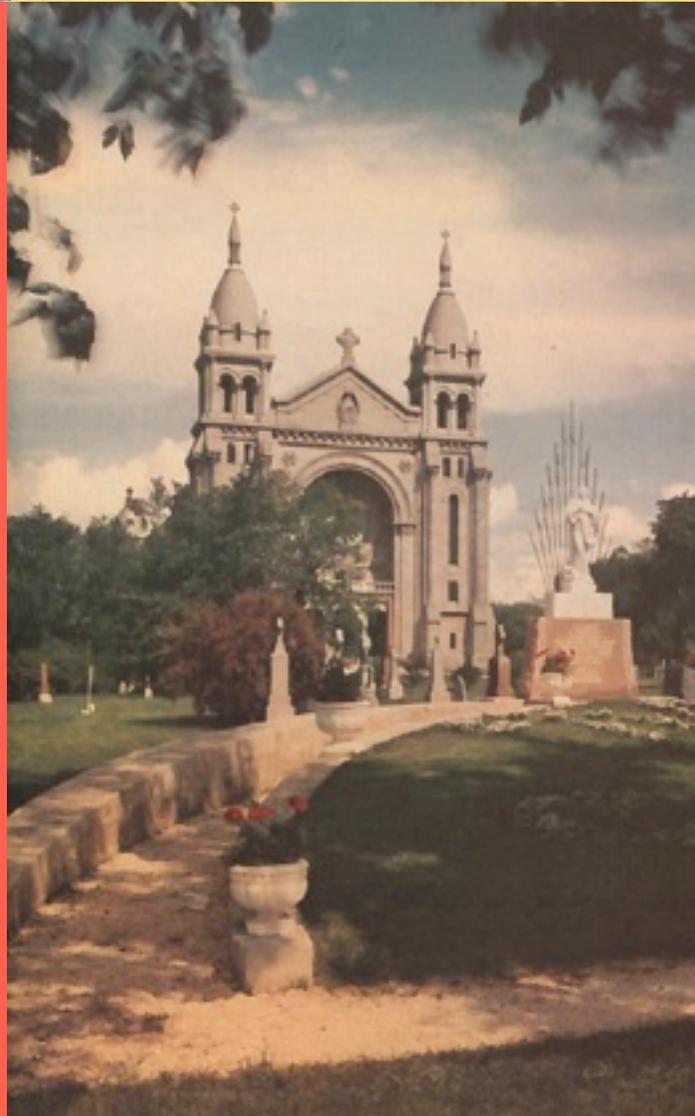
LEFT:

Winnipeg From St.
Boniface Ferry Landing.
George Monro Grant.
Picturesque Canada, 1882.
University of Manitoba
Archives & Special
Collections.



VILLE CATHÉDRALE DE SAINT BONIFACE THE CATHEDRAL CITY

Old St. Boniface is a subsection of the land tilted to the church; its borders are defined by the Red River, rue Marion and rue Archibald. The early development of this district included a school near the 1818 church. These two structures encouraged Catholic colonists to settle east of the Red River. They also set in motion two major themes that would characterise the architecture of the district: religion and academia. Today major monuments exemplifying these traditions remain area landmarks, including, most notably, St. Boniface Cathedral. The present building (partially destroyed by fire in 1968) is the descendent of Provencher's 1818 church. Its façade and walls date to 1905-08. The structure is the third cathedral and fifth church on its site, beginning with Provencher's humble wood building and progressing to ever more elaborate designs after the diocese was granted cathedral status, in 1847. Replacing a building of 1863, the 1905-08 cathedral was designed by Montréal architects Marchand and Haskell. Before the fire of the 1960s its towers soared to 150 feet and it sat a congregation of 2,050. Neoclassical in inspiration, the façade features details from a number of styles, including the Romanesque and the Byzantine, anchored by an enormous arch, a massive round window opening and a triple-arched entryway.



"We'd see the tower of the cathedral, then the dome of the Jesuit college, then spires and other church towers. The familiar outline of our little city against the intense Manitoba sky revealed much more attachment to prayer and education than to business, and it always gave us comfort ... We may not have been numerous in our pious and studious little city but this helped us feel one of heart."

– Gabrielle Roy,
Winnipeg Free Press
28 November 1987

ABOVE LEFT:

"Welcome to St. Boniface"
sign at rue Marion at St.
Mary's Road. From St.
Boniface 1958 50th
Anniversary Jubilee Pamphlet.

LEFT:

St. Boniface Cathedral,
Marchand & Haskell,
1905-08. From St. Boniface
1958 50th Anniversary
Jubilee Pamphlet.





RIGHT:

Le Musée de Saint-Boniface. 1846. In foreground: Louis Riel Réal Bérard. 1985.



The area adjacent to St. Boniface Cathedral is home to a number of Manitoba's most significant historical structures. These include, to the south, Le Musée de Saint-Boniface. Dating to 1846, this former convent was built for the Grey Nuns. The building was constructed using the Red River frame technique, a locally-popular method in which short squared logs are mortised and set into upright log posts. Today it survives as the largest traditional oak log structure standing in North America. Beginning in 1871 the Grey Nuns also operated St. Boniface Hospital as an independent institution south of the convent; in 1914 the hospital was given a large Beaux-Arts addition.

BELOW:

Archbishop's Residence 1864.



To the north of the cathedral stands the Archbishop's residence. This structure is the fourth building on this site erected for this purpose. Constructed in 1864 under the direction of Bishop Taché, the western, riverfront, portion of the residence is one of the oldest stone buildings in Western Canada. The home first featured walls of rougher field-stone. Over time an east wing was added (in 1899) and the stone veneer and roofline were altered, taking the present shape of a mansardic gambrel. Remaining true to the original form are the gable and other windows and the graceful white-painted verandah.

BELOW LEFT:

Archbishop's Residence, ca. 1885. From the Province of Manitoba Archives.

BELOW CENTRE:

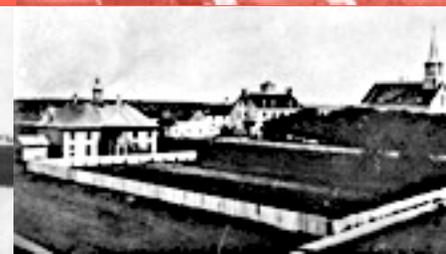
St. Boniface, ca. 1857-58. From the Province of Manitoba Archives.

BELOW RIGHT:

St. Boniface, ca. 1883. From the Province of Manitoba Archives.

RIGHT:

St. Boniface Hospital. From St. Boniface 1958 50th Anniversary Jubilee Pamphlet.





BELOW LEFT:
Université de Saint-Boniface
(Le Petit Séminaire), J. O.
Turgeon, 1911. Photo by
Jeffrey Thorsteinson.

RIGHT:
Statue of Louis Riel at Université de Saint-Boniface.
Riel was first educated in St. Boniface. By Marclien
Lemay and Étienne Gaboury, 1973. Moved to present
site in 2005. Photo by Jeffrey Thorsteinson.



East of St. Boniface cathedral stand the descendants of the early nineteenth-century school facilities established by the Catholic church. Foremost is the Université de Saint-Boniface, the oldest post-secondary educational institution in Western Canada. This school first grew with the 1855 establishment of Collège de Saint-Boniface near the intersection of rues Taché and Masson. 25 years later, in 1880, a new college was built at the present site of Provencher Park, a structure destroyed by fire in 1922. At that time the university was offered a new location at their present address, the Petit Séminaire. Dating to 1911, this neoclassical structure was designed by architect J. O. Turgeon of Montréal. To this day its sparkling silver dome serves as a local landmark. Not far down avenue de la Cathédrale stands the 1906 École Provencher and the Académie Saint-Joseph. The latter, originally a convent and school, was erected in 1912. Its massing and design parallels that of the Séminaire.



LEFT:
Avenue de la Cathédrale,
1916. From the St. Boniface
Historical Society.

BOTTOM:
Académie Saint-Joseph,
J. A. Sénécal, 1912.
Image ca. 1913. From
the St. Boniface
Historical Society.



Beyond its religious and educational activity, by the early twentieth century St. Boniface would also develop into an important transportation and industrial centre for Western Canada. Since 1878 facilities for the Canadian Pacific Railway (CPR) were located in the area. Over time St. Boniface would entice all three of the country's major railways to build locally, with Canadian Northern's main line and the Grand Trunk Pacific-Transcontinental Railway joining the CPR. Early neighbourhood stations for these lines which have been demolished include a 19th century CPR stop near the intersection of Provencher Boulevard and Taché and a 1901 Canadian Northern depot designed by architect J. A. Sénécal on rue Aubert. Remaining vestiges of this era include the 1908 CPR Engine House on rue Archibald; the 1913 Canadian Northern station at 630 Des Meurons (since repurposed as a restaurant); and the 1927 Greater Winnipeg Water District Railway Station at 598 rue Plinguet.

St. Boniface would capitalize on the presence of the railways to become a major industrial hub, housing iron, steel, lumber, brick and flour mills as well as grain elevators and factories. Many of these structures – such as Western Canada Flour Mills – would assume the dramatic, large modern forms of the sort that would influence European modern architects like Walter Gropius and Le Corbusier. This growth, lured by lax legislation (which accounts for the scattershot mix of residences and industry still found in the area) was mirrored in a population boom, with St. Boniface expanding from 1,500 citizens in 1900 to 7,000 by 1909. Early in the following decade the district would score two further large industrial complexes: the Union Stock Yards and the Canadian National Railway's Symington Yards project. The establishment of the first led to the construction of offices, a powerhouse, weigh house, pens, stables and a water tower, with St. Boniface becoming the terminal point for much of the Prairies cattle lands. The latter continues to function to the south-east of Old St. Boniface as one of the world's largest rail yards.



TOP LEFT:
Canadian Northern
Railway Station in St.
Boniface. Since
demolished.



TOP RIGHT:
Advertisement for St.
Boniface industry
featuring Western
Canada Flour Mills.



LEFT:
Union Stock
Yards water
tower.



ABOVE:
Advertisement for St.
Boniface from *The
Winnipeg Tribune*. 31
May 1926.



ABOVE:
Western Canada Flour Mills
Company, 1908. Made of
reinforced concrete and brick.



LEFT:
CPR Engine House,
198 rue Archibald,
1908.



ABOVE:

A rendering of St. Boniface's Hôtel-de-Ville. Architect: Victor Horwood, 1905. St. Boniface incorporated as a city in 1908.

TOP LEFT:

View of Provencher Boulevard. From St. Boniface 1958 50th Anniversary Jubilee Pamphlet.

CENTRE LEFT:

View of St. Boniface (along Provencher Boulevard) ca. 1910. From the St. Boniface Historical Society.

BELOW LEFT:

View of St. Boniface (Avenue Taché at rue La Vérandrye) ca. early twentieth century. From the St. Boniface Historical Society.

RIGHT:

St. Boniface Fire Hall, Victor Horwood, 1907. Photo by Jeffrey Thorsteinson.

In addition to industrial growth, the first half of the twentieth century saw St. Boniface develop a new commercial and civic heart. The nucleus of this expansion was Provencher Boulevard. Provencher had long been an important thoroughfare; since the 1880s it had housed a train station and a college. In 1882 an iron bridge for foot and horse traffic was erected over the Red River, connecting the street with Winnipeg's Broadway; washed away by ice that winter, the bridge was reconstructed the following year and later replaced by an openable bridge in 1918. As of 1905 Provencher's civic role was expanded, first by means of the red brick and Tyndall limestone L'Hôtel-de-Ville (town hall) designed by architect Victor Horwood. This a structure to this day anchors the street, lending a sense of local identity; it has recently become home to an art gallery.

In 1907 two new civic landmarks joined the Hôtel-de-Ville on or near Provencher Boulevard: the St. Boniface post office (a two-storey brick structure) and the buff brick and limestone Fire Hall Number One, also planned by Horwood. These constructions and many commercial projects contributed to the rise of the street as a key St. Boniface axis, a route that has been called a symbol and motor of Franco-Manitobain dynamism.





In due course Provencher Boulevard came to host a number of buildings of a more modern variety. These included examples of Art Deco and Art Moderne design. Among such structures were 157 Provencher Boulevard, a two-storey store from dating to 1937 that was originally a drugstore and the Labossière Service Texaco Station at 353 Provencher Boulevard. The latter remains standing, much altered and hidden by a later strip-mall addition.

These examples of modern styling appeared years after St. Boniface first welcomed buildings that made innovative use of modern construction materials. These included 221 Dollard Boulevard, a two-storey 1911 structure which housed a store and a private residence in a space built of concrete block. The neighbouring Laurier Apartments (at 419 rue Aulneau) were erected three years later, also built of concrete block and likewise developed by the Mesnage Sisters, the owners of 221 Dollard. These buildings stood out in an area which contained many examples of more traditional residential construction.



ABOVE:
375 rue Deschambault, 1905. Once home of author Gabrielle Roy.

LEFT:
157 Provencher Boulevard, 1937. Daoust & Cie, builder.

FAR LEFT:
Couture Motors Limited. From St. Boniface 1958 50th Anniversary Jubilee Pamphlet.

TOP RIGHT:
221 Dollard Boulevard. 1911. St. Boniface Historical Society.

BELOW RIGHT:
Laurier Apartments, 1914. 419 rue Aulneau.

LEFT:
Labossière Service Texaco Station, 353 Provencher Boulevard. From St. Boniface 1958 50th Anniversary Jubilee Pamphlet.

BELOW:
Residential housing in St. Boniface in the mid-twentieth century (rue Aulneau). From St. Boniface 1958 50th Anniversary Jubilee Pamphlet.





Eastward along Provencher Boulevard, St. Boniface continued to bear the influence of the Belgian community who had first settled in the area in the nineteenth century. Among the remaining traces of this history is Le Club Belge, at 407 Provencher Boulevard. Dating to 1906-14 this cultural centre is comprised of a two-storey meeting hall clad in brick and Tyndall limestone. In front stands a memorial: a portrayal of one soldier standing over a fallen comrade. Dating to 1938, this monument was paid for by the Belgian Veterans Association, executed by artist Hubert A. Garnier. South and west of this site, rue Des Meurons had evolved into a vital commercial street frequented by the Belgian community and others. Across the Seine River from Des Meurons stood Sacred Heart, the first Belgian church in Manitoba. Erected by Flemish-speaking settlers, this edifice opened in 1917, built by F. Wyndels for \$9,000 in 1917. Adjacent to Sacred Heart was the “Grotto of Notre Dame de Lourdes.” Situated on the banks of the Seine River, the Grotto opened 25 May 1936 in front of a crowd of thousands. Built of concrete and stone assembled to recall a natural geological formation, it served as a tourist attraction and a pilgrimage site until its destruction by floodwaters. Belgian-Canadians from this area would continue to play a role in St. Boniface’s growth in later years with such nearby projects as Place Cabana, a housing cooperative for French-speaking Catholic families initiated by the Archdiocese of St. Boniface in 1952, built by local contractor Boel.



TOP:
552-554 rue Des
Meurons (formerly the
Gauthier Block), 1906.

FAR LEFT:
Le Club Belge, 407
Provencher Boulevard,
1906 & 1914.

LEFT:
Sculptor H.A. Garnier working on the
Belgian War Monument, 1938. From the
Province of Manitoba Archives.

ABOVE:
“The Grotto” at the Seine River Sacred
Heart Church grounds. From St. Boniface
1958 50th Anniversary Jubilee Pamphlet.



FAR LEFT:
St. Boniface Golf Club interior. From St. Boniface 1958 50th Anniversary Jubilee Pamphlet.

TOP CENTRE:
Happyland Pool, 520 rue Marion, Nikola Zunic, 1962.



During the middle of the twentieth century modern architecture found a home across St. Boniface. Notable examples include a number of outdoor pools built by the City of St. Boniface. Among these are Happyland Pool, a spare one-storey concrete block building at 520 rue Marion designed by University of Manitoba School of Architecture graduate Nikola Zunic.

Another significant work is École Taché, an elementary school located at 744 rue Langevin. This structure – which makes use of exposed trusses and a large amount of fenestration – was planned by the firm of Libling Michener Diamond, who earned official Massey Medal recognition for their efforts.

LEFT:
La Tour Eiffel modern apartment block, 261 rue Goulet. Photo by Jeffrey Thorsteinson

BELOW LEFT:
École Taché rendering, 744 rue Langevin, Libling Michener and Diamond, 1958. From St. Boniface 1958 50th Anniversary Jubilee Pamphlet.



BELOW:
École Taché by Libling Michener and Diamond, 744 rue Langevin, 1958.





LEFT:
St. Boniface Clinic,
Étienne Gaboury,
1963. Photo by Jeffrey
Thorsteinson.

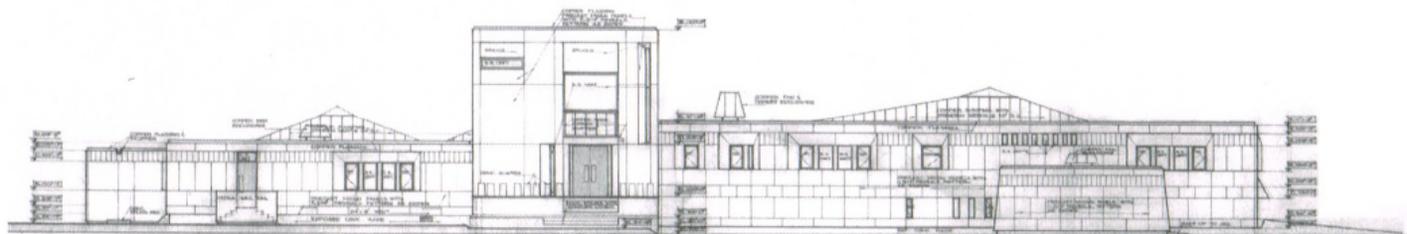


No firm or architect is as associated with modern architecture in St. Boniface as Étienne Gaboury. Indeed, few architects anywhere possess a body of work so closely associated with one community. Born in Bruxelles, Manitoba, Gaboury was educated at the College St. Boniface, the University of Manitoba and the École des Beaux-Arts in Paris. In 1964, after only a short period of independent practice, Gaboury obtained a commission for one of the most prominent structures in the area: a new S. Boniface civic centre. Located next to the former Hôtel de Ville, this complex would include a police station, health office and a magistrate's court. Set around a plaza, the civic centre is a striking ensemble. It bears a number of typically Brutalist details, while nevertheless expressing a highly individualized character that displays hallmarks of Gaboury's approach. These particularized elements include deeply inset doors and windows and angular rooflines. Gaboury's play with light and the plastic possibilities of concrete speaks to the influence of French-Swiss modern architect Le Corbusier, most especially his Chapel of Notre Dame du Haut in Ronchamp, which Gaboury visited in 1958. As with this example, the St. Boniface civic centre thematizes the power of illumination; to quote the author Rebecca West on Gothic architecture, the civic centre's interior conveys "the meditative integrity of darkness considering light." A similar effect is also evident in Gaboury's earlier St. Boniface Clinic (343 rue Taché, 1963).

LEFT:
St. Boniface Civic
Centre, Étienne
Gaboury, 1964.

BELOW:
St. Boniface Civic Centre
interior, Étienne Gaboury,
1964. Photos by Jeffrey
Thorsteinson

BOTTOM:
Rendering of St.
Boniface Civic Centre,
Étienne Gaboury.





In the years after he designed the civic centre, Gaboury and his firm, Gaboury Lussier Sigurdson Venables, would have a hand in multiple other key St. Boniface projects. Perhaps most famous is Église du Précieux Sang (1969), the architect's most identifiable work. Located at 200 rue Kenny, this church has been deemed an "outstanding example of Canadian regionalism." Dominated by the silhouette of a spiralling cedar shake roof, Précieux Sang's primarily Métis parish inspired Gaboury to conceive a tipi-inspired form as a cultural reference. At the same time, this dramatic gyre of wood draws the eye upward in a visual evocation of spirituality.

ABOVE LEFT:

Église du Précieux Sang interior, 200 rue Kenny, Étienne Gaboury 1969. Photo by Jeffrey Thorsteinson.

BOTTOM LEFT:

Église du Précieux Sang I, 200 rue Kenny, Étienne Gaboury 1969. Photo from the Winnipeg Tribune archives. University of Manitoba Special Collections.

ABOVE:

Église du Précieux Sang, 200 rue Kenny, Étienne Gaboury 1969.





"We're not trying to reconstruct the old church, we have these ruins, the burning is part of the church's history and from these a new cathedral arises."

- Étienne Gaboury, 1971



Not far away another church would be Gaboury's most significant commission of the late 1960s: the reconstruction of St. Boniface Cathedral, which had been greatly damaged by fire in 1968. Vincent Scully has said that "architecture is a conversation between generations." Seldom has that been more true than in this case, wherein Gaboury carefully situated a new chapel within the ruins of the previous building. Both forms share the use of Manitoba Tyndall limestone, while the addition is set apart through its angular shapes and materiality. The cathedral's interior, defined by warm wood cladding and a soaring roof continues the dramatic use of sunlight found throughout Gaboury's oeuvre. This was not the first remodelling of a church space in the architect's career, recalling his earlier repurposing of a small chapel into his firm's office only a few blocks away. In the case of the cathedral, a conscious decision was made by Gaboury not to recreate the previous structure and instead create a new hybrid construction. This choice recalls another prominent project of the post-war years: Coventry Cathedral, in the United Kingdom. This much-publicized work, executed by architect Sir Basil Spence and engineers Arup, saw the maintenance of a 14th-15th century building much damaged by the German Luftwaffe during the Second World War in concert with the erection of a new modern building sharing the same stone material. At the same time, the St. Boniface building maintains its own distinct character, the result of the dramatic design of the original cathedral's facade in combination with Gaboury's stylized approach. To this day the cathedral's impressive appearance speaks to its status as the heart of a diocese which once stretched all the way to the Rocky Mountains.



ABOVE LEFT:

St. Boniface Cathedral interior, 190 avenue de la Cathédrale, Gaboury Lussier Sigurdson, 1970-72.

ABOVE RIGHT:

St. Boniface Cathedral, 190 avenue de la Cathédrale, Gaboury Lussier Sigurdson, 1970-72. Photo by Jeffrey Thorsteinson.

LEFT:

St. Boniface Cathedral, 190 avenue de la Cathédrale, Gaboury Lussier Sigurdson, 1970-72.

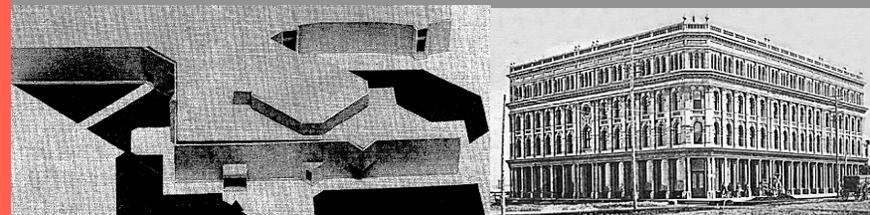
BELOW RIGHT:

Architectural model of Centre Culturel Franco-Manitobain, 1970s.

BELOW FAR RIGHT:

Historic photo of Winnipeg's Cauchon Block.

Another key work by Gaboury from these years is the Centre culturel Franco-manitobain, of 1974: a large Provencher Boulevard space featuring an art gallery, restaurant and concert halls. Clad in off-white brick this late-modern building – a hub of Francophone cultural life in Winnipeg – parallels aspects of the design of the 1974-78 National Art Gallery in Washington, by I.M. Pei. Housed within the Centre are remnants of the historic Cauchon Block, which originally stood along downtown Winnipeg's Main Street, clad in decorative segments made of cast iron, galvanized iron sheet metal and pressed zinc. Notably, in 1974 the area north of Provencher remained 65% French-speaking, even though this group made up only 8.5% of Winnipeg's total population.





Over the following decades St. Boniface would witness the construction a many projects of Brutalist and late modern character, among them small commercial structures on Provencher Boulevard and rue Marion, as well as the towering concrete housing tower 101 Marion. The latter features a unique concrete-walled Brutalist garden at its base.

What was without doubt the most remarkable structure to arrive in St. Boniface in many years appeared in 2003: a dramatic cable-stayed footbridge over the Red River. In line with Provencher Boulevard, the Esplanade Riel is suspended from transversely inclined pylon which rises 57 metres above the river below. Notably, besides its striking form, the bridge is uncommon for housing at its centre an enclosed space, a cantilevered space home for many years to a restaurant. Unbeknownst to many, the bridge is in many ways the culmination of the earlier vision of its architect, Gaboury, who, in 1971, envisioned such a footbridge connecting St. Boniface and Winnipeg. He stated at that time: "It should be more than just a bridge. It could house shops and other facilities and pay for itself. We could build an island causeway — a meeting place."

During the rest of the twenty-first century St. Boniface has experienced increasing architectural growth, particularly manifested in the development of multi-tenant residential properties and creative additions to St. Boniface Hospital, Université de Saint-Boniface and Centre culturel Franco-manitobain. These projects and others have remade the area through post-modern, neo-modern and hybrid approaches. Nevertheless – indeed, often through such evolution – St. Boniface continues to possess a character distinct in Winnipeg, continuing of a long legacy of uniqueness that dates back centuries.



CENTRE:

Esplanade Riel, Étienne Gaboury and Wardrop Engineering, 2003. Photos by Jeffrey Thorsteinson.

ABOVE LEFT:

101 rue Marion. Moody Moore Duncan Rattray Peters Searle Christie, 1972.

ABOVE CENTRE:

Holy Cross Credit Union, 255 rue Marion, 1975.

ABOVE RIGHT:

Belgian Credit Union, 387 Provencher Boulevard, Pratt Lindgren Snider Tomcej and Associate, 1975.

BOTTOM:

Centre Culturel Franco-Manitobain - Cercle Moliere addition, Cibinel Architects, 2010.