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A conversation with Luc Noppen, the "hero of Quebec churches"

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Interview conducted by Henrik Lindblad and Rolando Volzone on 16 July 2024

Transcribed and edited by Rocío Sánchez

This is an edited version of a longer interview done via Zoom to learn about Luc Noppen's professional career, his view on ongoing debates about the future of religious heritage, and the role of young people and the most relevant research topics in this field.

Abstract

This interview with Professor Luc Noppen, a renowned architectural historian specializing in church architecture, explores his career, research, and perspectives on the challenges facing religious heritage. Noppen reflects on his early academic journey, sparked by a fascination with Quebec's historic churches, and his eventual role as a professor and advocate for their preservation. He discusses the dramatic decline of church attendance and the consequent need for repurposing religious buildings. Through initiatives such as the Religious Heritage Council in Quebec, Noppen has played a key role in securing funding and developing strategies to transform churches into spaces for community use while maintaining their historical significance. He highlights the importance of community engagement in heritage conservation, arguing that the preservation of churches should be a bottom-up process driven by local interest rather than dictated solely by experts.

Noppen also stresses the role of young professionals in finding innovative solutions to heritage challenges, noting a growing number of interdisciplinary teams working on church conservation projects. He addresses the difficulties of maintaining large churches in urban centres versus smaller ones in rural areas, advocating for municipal policies that protect churches from speculative redevelopment.

Further, the discussion touches on the role of religion in heritage management, emphasizing the need to separate architectural preservation from religious practice. Noppen underscores the value of historical church buildings as cultural and social assets, warning against their loss due to neglect or commercialization. He also calls for greater international collaboration and innovative research into sustainable reuse strategies.

The conversation with Luc Noppen provides a comprehensive overview of the current debates on religious heritage preservation, offering insights into both the challenges and opportunities in repurposing churches for future generations.

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Interview

HL: I think we should start this interview by asking you a more personal question about your interest in this field. How did your interest in architecture, heritage and, of course, in Canadian churches come about?

LN: Well, the whole thing began when my family migrated from Africa to Canada, in 1964. I was born in Belgium but lived in Africa. We arrived in this country when I was 15, and then I was posed the question, what are you going to do? I was quite good at school, so I was moved up a grade and then another grade. I enrolled at university at 16 and at the age of 17 I decided to become a filmmaker. The only department teaching filmmaking was Art History, so I registered there. I did some filmmaking for schoolwork and so forth, but I became very interested, because of some professors, in Quebec's architectural history. At that time, there was no interest at all for that. However, to me, it was just fabulous.

As someone coming from Africa, but having been born in Belgium, I was amazed by the French traditional architecture of Quebec. The most typical buildings were of course churches, stone buildings from the late 17th century, 18th century and 19th century with rich interior decoration, including wood carvings. So I started to ask my professors if I could do my homework on Quebec's churches and they said "Well, there's no topic there, that's not architecture". But I wanted to do so, and so I started to do all my research for school on Quebec's churches.

After I got my bachelor's degree in architectural history, I decided to pursue this field further. I wanted to enroll in a subject related to the architectural history of Quebec, but I couldn't find one. I was told to enroll in other classical subjects such as the Renaissance, Middle Ages, etc. In the end, I enrolled in the Middle Ages and started to learn about 15th century architecture in northern France and Belgium. But my interest was elsewhere. Around this time I did the first publication on a small but known church in Quebec, that was the third small book I wrote while I was a MA student (Noppen & Porter, 1972).

Then I moved on with my career. I didn't want to do a PhD about the topics they proposed. They once even mentioned the churches in Cappadocia in Turkey. "What the hell" I thought for myself, "What am I going to do there?". I had already found my subject and I discovered a way of presenting it in an interesting manner that people also liked.

At the age of 21 or 22, I became a kind of hero of the Quebec churches. They looked so peculiar, so unique to me coming from somewhere else... It was then when I decided to start a career in teaching like my father did. I was hired as a professor at the age of 22, with a special mission to teach and conduct research on Quebec's architecture. Around that time I also started publishing books on Quebec's architecture and its churches. And that was the way it all started.

I first entered the Department of History of Art and, after about 15 years, I moved to the School of Architecture because I noticed that many of the students in my classes came from there. Finally, in 2001, the University of Quebec at Montreal offered me a chair in research. I didn't ask for it, but they made me this offer, which was interesting both for my career and from a financial perspective. By then I had already met Lucie, my wife, and we were talking about marriage. She was hired in Montreal, so this position was also a way for us to live together there. We went for it and published several books on the topic of churches (Noppen & Morisset, 2005). In 2005 we organised a big conference in Montreal: 'What future for which churches?' (Morisset et al., 2006)

HL: I remember it. That was the first international conference, right?

LN: Yeah. That was the beginning of the whole thing. Now, 52 years later, I'm still doing the same. I'm teaching, researching full-time, and I always put an accent on religious architecture because this is important. But as I told you, I was trained also in medieval architecture. I still have a great interest in church buildings from the 13th, 14th, and 15th centuries.

HL: Is that the reason for your trips to Europe, to study medieval architecture as well?

LN: Most of the time when I go to Europe, over the last 20-25 years let's say, I go to talk about Quebec and Canadian architecture. I am invited because of what I know in this field and all the research I have done here.

In the 1990s I started to give some lectures on the originality and typical features of Quebec churches. Then, at the moment when all these churches were struck by financial problems, I started to talk about the future of the churches. Nowadays, when I give a lecture, it is mainly about the conversion of churches to a new use and the experience we have with this in Quebec.

I have a second topic in my career, it's on industrial architecture because I love machines, I work a lot on canals, locks, the machinery of the locks, and hydraulic problems, so all over Canada I work as a counsellor on rehabilitation and restoration of historic canals. But that's what I'm doing on Sundays.

HL: At what point did you start thinking about the challenges of church heritage in Quebec and also in other progressively secularised countries? I suppose that must have been before the 2005 conference…

LN: Yes, while I was studying I went to many parish archives for documentation and met many priests and people involved in church management. I started quite soon to observe that there was a real problem with the future of the sites. No one was talking about it, but everyone was aware of the decline of religious practice, the lack of funding and the waning public interest in maintaining this kind of heritage. There had been a great interest in church heritage buildings in Quebec during the 1950s and the 1960s, partly because of a nationalistic uproar saying "This heritage is important for the identity of Quebec because all this is French", because it was linked to the origins of the community. But in the 1970s came the decline of the church in Quebec. Churches moved away from education, social services, health services and all these things, so they become less important, leaving only some activities on Sundays in some buildings. So, at the same time I was working on the buildings I noticed this and I started asking myself "What are we going to do with these churches?".

My research and interpretation of this topic became more and more oriented towards the knowledge that would guide the conservation of the buildings. Being in a school of architecture, I started to educate myself and gather more information about conservation, theories in restoration and all these things which at that time were being researched and taught extensively in Italy. I became very fond of this Italian move in restoration[1], and I got involved with ICOMOS, and other movements thinking about churches, what to do with them, why we have to keep them, etc. You know, as religion fades out and the government comes in saying "We are now a lay society, and we have legislation to protect the lay society from bad religious influences", a controversial debate arose: Luc Noppen wants us to save the churches, but the government is never going to be involved in the religion. The same thing at my faculty, they said, "Why are you involved in religion?". I answered with a quote from a colleague of mine: "When God is gone, there is still a nice building there".

Church buildings have been very important here. In Quebec, the church was in the midst of the village, it is the most important building in the city; we have three thousands of them and they're quite different from what you see all over America. This is something typical of Quebec, so if I can build knowledge on this, making people adopt these as landmarks of their city, icons of the French identity of Quebec, then we could maybe find a way to forward. And so we did.

We created the *Fondation du Patrimoine Religieux* (Religious Heritage Foundation), a non-profit organisation that manages public funds to restore ecclesiastical buildings, but also the conversion of these buildings for new uses. The government agreed to its creation. The foundation later became the Religious Heritage Council[2], of which I have been a Board Member for about a year now. Through it, we offer guidance and training to young people, architects, scholars and locals so that they can set up a heritage society, buy a church, take it over, draw up a budget, make a project and get funding to carry it out.

Nowadays, the Religious Heritage Council hands out about 35 million a year to help churches. So altogether, over the almost last 25 years, we handed more than a billion Canadian dollars of public money for the restoration and conversion to new uses of churches all over Quebec. And that's only part of it because when we give money to a group to take care of a church, they also have to find other sources, other finances. So that's great. As you know, in France and other countries with historic monuments there is public money – the reconstruction of Notre Dame is a clear example.

1 E.g. Cesare (2005). *Theory of restoration*. Roma: Istituto centrale per il restauro.

2 Conseil du Patrimoine Religieux du Québec : https://www.patrimoine-religieux.qc.ca/en/home.

But for Quebec, this is the most important move from the government and the bodies related to the church to put as much money to make sure that these buildings will survive the decay of the prior religious practice.

HL: Would you say that your foundation exists because of a lack of interest from the authorities or because of a lack of state money or legislation protecting the churches?

LN: We do have legislation in Quebec about historic monuments – or cultural belongings as we say nowadays. But this is open-ended: it includes houses, bridges, churches, old courthouses and other types of built heritage. We were aware that we needed special interest in church buildings because we have so many and the decrease in attendance and funding of these buildings was very quick. If we considered church buildings together with other historic buildings, it would be too much. We have to consider them as a special case.

The matter of ownership is important here. All these buildings belong to the parishes, the diocese, the religious orders and so forth, so we had to find a formula that allowed us to put public money into the religious body to help in the name of heritage. The idea was to support the transfer from religious ownership to lay ownership (to the society). So when the church empties, the money no longer comes from the churchgoers, but comes from the lay society for different uses. That was the whole construction needed to take care of churches as a special case in heritage.

A lot of people were not very fond of that. They would say "Why do you make a difference between an old house and an old church?". I would answer "Because the churches are the most significant buildings in the landscape. They are structural: If you lose the church, you lose the middle of the village. It keeps the community together". The church building also houses a lot of services to the population in the world, in the area, and in the parish. Now we have to maintain these buildings and give the same services to the local populations. But, as I say in French, we have to do this "Sans le mystère de la transubstantiation (without the mystery of transubstantiation)".[3] We have forgotten about this part of the matter: It becomes a lay organization that takes care of a building. This way, in the basement we can have social services where we take care of people who can be helped with food, with clothes, and things like that. In the nave, we can have concerts, public meetings, sports facilities, and so on. So the building itself stays in the midst of the community and most ideally belongs to the community.

I've always had a strong opponent to the private ownership of church buildings. If you trace back the history of heritage, the church belongs to the community. In the Middle Ages, you had the heritage of the King and his family, and then the heritage of everybody. "Le patrimoine des pauvres" (the heritage of the poor) was managed by the church in the name of the poor. So let's come back to that principle. At the Religious Heritage Council, we are always striving to donate money to help reinvent church buildings, etc., but we don't hand out subsidies and other money to private companies who say "I have bought a church, could you help me to restore the façade?" In this case, companies should not have bought a church because this building is a burden that we can only take care of as a community, with the support of those who live over there. There is no way we are going to let you make a profit out of it.

HL: This was a very good phrase to quote in your book.

LN: These days we have a problem with this because of the price of the land. When a church is on the outskirts or in a village, it's not so much a problem. The economic value of a church is always the price of the land where it is built, minus the cost of demolition of the building, because the land is worth something without the church in there. So as long as the church building is there nobody can make profit with the land.

HL: Yes, when it's still protected by legislation.

LN: Well, you can protect it with legislation about historic monuments, but you can protect it just with the municipal by-law, stating that the use of the church can only be changed to certain specific uses, for example, social housing or as a community building, so that nobody can ask for the building and destroy it to do something else. The best protection is the municipal by-law, which establishes

3 Transubstantiation: the change by which the substance (though not the appearance) of the bread and wine in the Eucharist becomes Christ's real presence—that is, his body and blood (https://www.britannica.com/topic/transubstantiation).

a very narrow scope of re-use, only at the community level.

HL: I have many more questions, but I need to give some space to my colleagues also. Just a last one because I'm thinking about countryside churches, maybe in remote locations where there is not that much population. We have many of these in Sweden that are not very much in use and they really will be in danger in the future. What could we do with these churches?

LN: I would say, from our experience with these buildings, that it's easier to handle a small church in a regional area than the church downtown because there's no speculation with the land. First of all, nobody wants to buy it because it's nowhere. Secondly, we find two different situations: there are churches of Protestant traditions and then Catholic churches.

When it comes to Protestant traditions, very often all we have is a tiny old church with a cemetery. There's no community left because all the English-speaking population moved away. People in Quebec will say, "This is not French, so, for us, it is not heritage". These churches are easy because they're inexpensive to buy and the Anglican diocese is very much in the business, selling their churches. Most of these small abandoned churches have been converted to new uses, most often a small local museum, a small community centre, a small sports facility, etc. Many of them have also been converted into houses because the square metres in a small church are more or less the same as in a country house.

Then we have strong Catholic communities with smaller churches, but still seating three, four or five hundred people. It's not difficult to convince people living there that these churches are important for the community because very often this little Catholic church is the only important building in the area. So they are willing to invest time to work on a project. We first make an inventory of the needs of the local population, such as "Is there a café, is there a post office?", etc. Then we consult locals and decide what services to put in the church and we draw a project. Usually the municipalities like this and say "This project is going to revive, attract new families around, and then the school will be kept open" and so on. And like this, the church gets a new place in the community, it becomes the main factor in the revitalisation of the community, it is a building for the future.

So on the outskirts, all these projects work very well. The difficulty is in the bigger cities, like Quebec or Montreal, where there is a big fight for land to construct new buildings, most times for housing at elevated prices. The churches are also bigger in these places. So that's much more difficult.

HL: Yes, I noticed the huge size of many of these Catholic churches in Quebec City.

LN: Precisely, if you have a church with a capacity of 1,200 people, 1,500 people, what can you put as a single use in the building? It's very difficult to find just one. And if you start putting it to multiple uses, then you have to start partitioning the building, or even build new layers of floors, and that's the most expensive thing you can imagine. In downtown Toronto, housing permits are being issued to build apartments that are sold for four, five, six or seven million dollars on the land formerly occupied by a church. I'm grateful that in Montreal we don't have this economic pressure on the land to do these stupid things. We can still afford to transform the churches for social use and for communities.

HL: I'm thinking about many examples of this. But I would like to give the floor to my colleague Rolando. You had some questions for Luc, right?

RV: Yes. Hello Luc, my question is in line with this last intervention. So I'm actually Italian, but I'm living in Lisbon, in Portugal. It's a very different reality in terms of scale but we are facing similar issues to Canada. For example, in Lisbon, we have a huge problem with the prices of housing. Many people cannot afford them, and of course, these former religious buildings, not just churches, but also monasteries that have been dissolved, could actually be a solution to this problem. If we go to the inner lands of Portugal, in my case, I can see that social and cultural equipment are also actually missing. We mostly speak about the rights to cultural heritage but not so many times do we speak about the responsibilities that the civil society has towards this former religious heritage. My question is towards this direction. How do you think we could try to promote this connection between people and cultural heritage and also increase the awareness of local communities to defend, use and reuse this cultural heritage?

LN: As I told you I'm convinced that this kind of heritage that we call "religious heritage" and involves churches, monasteries, and so on, was "the heritage of the poor". It was financed by the people for

the people and managed by the church, which was a non-profit corporation operating to support communities. I think that we always have to keep this in mind. We have to go back to the origins: if the church was beautiful – and maybe a bit richer than most of the buildings around it – it was because all these people put their means together to have at least one thing that was of some importance to them (and it should remain of importance).

In my opinion, we should always strive that these buildings stay or go back to the community because over time the church became more and more private. As the people walked away from the church, there were fewer and fewer people deciding about this heritage. For example, in Quebec, the three last churchwardens sold a church building to a developer saying, "Well, we sell you the church for a good price, but on the other hand, you sell us a new housing unit inside of it at a good price". That becomes tricky. In Portugal, in the Netherlands or in Canada, if we take over all the church buildings, it's not going to be easy to find the money. The idea we have here at the Religious Heritage Council is that if people want to preserve their church building, they should gather their energies and build a project, and then we will be able to help them. In Quebec, it's no longer required that the church must be an exceptional historic monument, it's enough if the building counts on the public appreciation and support. Not only financial support but the support in action, in time that they can spend getting together and building a project for the future.

In some cases, an old church building with a lot of damage is sold at a cheap price. People buy it because the land is still worth something without the church in it. If you need to put in 10 or 15 million to repair the roof, the inside, the heating, the systems, etc. to make sure that it stands before you can put it into use, it becomes very expensive. Unfortunately, there are cases where one has to admit that it's too late and that the cost will be too much. In these cases, the church can disappear entirely or partly, but at least the ground on which it stands should remain common.

So, the heritage notion is shifting from the building to the land. Churches were always built first as a small church and, as the community grew over the centuries, they would be enlarged. But now religious practice is decreasing, the value is returning to the land where the church is built and not so much to the building. But in any case, this land should remain common heritage. As soon as you can have a consecration of this with the municipal by-laws to protect the use of the land (so to take it out of the market) then a lot of things become possible. You don't have to pay millions for the land, you can take a part of the church, keep it, and the other one can be rebuilt new or so on. You can put inside new activities, cultural activities, community activities. Even the poorest communities need gathering places where you can afford to keep historic features around.

We have a lot of immigration for example and people say you know "we can't open a new church to this public because, you know, these days we have so many Muslims and they were going to be obfuscated by the image of Christ. They're not. The people coming to Montreal – the Jewish and Muslim communities and others – walk into historic buildings and they're not afraid or provoked in any way by an old historic religious symbol. That's in the building because it's part of the building. It's really lay people in the society that invoke that kind of problem to get rid of all kinds of religious symbols, even the most important.

If you throw out all the Christian symbols of Europe, you no longer have tourism, cruises, visitors, etc. and then you have an eradication of the local identities. So you must be aware that this used to be important in the past, even if fewer and fewer people are aware of the meaning of these symbols. When my students hear about these buildings and are taken on a visit to a church building, when they open the doors, they say "Oh we didn't know it was so beautiful". Most of them have never been in a church building before. And then you show them the altar, the pulpit, and all these things, and they start asking, what's that? What is it for? Why is this ...? The original purpose of all these things is gone. And there is no way to try to rebuild it. What I sometimes regret within the FRH network is that, in some cases, people come to the conferences and try to revitalise a church building only to regain a religious activity.[4] I always say that's the wrong way. It doesn't work anymore. The greatness of the churches of the religious groups is from another period. What we see nowadays is that if any religion stays too strong, it builds extremism, and it comes to war.

4 Future for Religious Heritage (FRH), the European Network for historic places of worship, (https://www.frh-europe.org). Luc Noppen is one of the founders of the network.

HL: I think we will come back to this issue of minorities and other religions quite soon. But Rolando, have you got any more questions?

RV: I was just thinking while Luc was talking. I remember when I was a child, in a village in the south of Italy. We had the church, of course as each village, but I remember that there was this spirit of community. So if the roof needed to be repaired, there were always the woodworkers that would help with this or that. If we had some problem in the church, there was always this voluntary-based action from the community that was actually active in the maintenance of the church.

Now, of course, once these buildings are losing their original function and meaning, I would like to ask: How do you think we can infuse this sense of common belonging to a religious place? And how can people reactivate this role in the maintenance and decision of different and new uses? I don't think there is yet a formula for this.

LN: Well, you know, the problem we have with this kind of heritage is that there are still a lot of people who are either shy or angry at the church as an institution. We have to make a difference between heritage and religion. As soon as the Church walks away, it's a good thing for heritage because while it stays there, it's compromising the takeover by the community in the name of public interest. There's resistance from the last believers, they always try to get closer and closer to the church institution, especially some more radical wings of the churches that are very extremist. They try to use religious heritage as their symbol, as their flagship in society. There are a lot of people coming in and trying to save their church, not because it is heritage, but because they want to regain interest in religious practice. That's doing harm to the cause of conservation.

In my opinion, the church as an institution is gone. It's over. We have to work on the future of this public heritage. It's not easy. I know that in Portugal, in all the Southern countries of Europe, the churchgoers are more intense than in the North. In Quebec, we lived more or less the same situation as in France when there was a huge disaffection of the church and the takeover by the state of several heritage questions related to religious buildings. So it's quite easy for me to say that. But I think if you're in a remote village of Sicily and you talk about the priest or the church and say we should take over the church to make it a community service, I would be dilapidated on the public place. So, it's a question of timing and intensity because not every country and not every social group is at the same level.

But I think we are right in thinking that heritage can only be saved if it is taken up by the community, and certainly not for religious purposes. That doesn't mean, and that's what we are doing in Quebec, that when we take over a church for a new use, we forget about the maybe 10, 12 or 15 churchgoers who would like to continue attending a religious service in the building. We work for that so they can keep a small chapel. You cannot work on religious heritage without the people involved in religion. Because otherwise they're going to object and they can say that they are the legal heirs of the church and its belongings. You have to integrate them in some way. But this needs for them to acknowledge that the great time of the Catholic church or the Christian church is maybe over – not in all countries but in many. And I think that's a fight.

If you want to save the heritage, you have to convince people that the church building or the convent, for example, are interesting buildings at the service of the community, so that this idea prevails over the common belief that this belongs to the church and should be used only for ecclesiastical purposes and so on. This can be more difficult in some areas than others. I used the examples we have in Quebec when I go and lecture elsewhere. I think we never really disturbed a religious group with our projects. At first, they were against it, but then they changed their minds and said, "Well, okay, at least our building is going to survive, and it will continue to be helpful, aid the poor, educate society, etc.". We indeed guarantee that all of this goes on in the new use of the building. So they can only agree that this is the best thing.

I work very often with religious traditions, especially nuns who want to find a sustainable future for their convent. At the end of the day, they come and say, "Okay, you have a good idea, for the future and we like that because it's going to take our mission in society further, it's going to keep helping people". And then they not only give the building, but they give an awful lot of money with the building to make sure that this new use can be implemented and has a future. It is fabulous when

these people come together. We did a conference about the churches last year in a huge convent that was related to a hospital. There were only a community of twelve nuns left, but they all attended the event. The superior later came to me and said, "Well, the last bank account we have, that's for you". And we have a lot of examples.

The situation is different with men. They have done their business over the years. They walked over to the Life Society, they sold their building, etc. But with women, we have a nice experience with all these big buildings. And that includes, for example, the chapel. One of their concerns is, "What's going to happen with the chapel?". Well, we may house some events, concerts, exhibitions, and you know, if somebody wants to get married, he can be married in the chapel. He will call for a priest to come and marry them. If somebody wants to have a service for his burial, it can also happen in the chapel. It all depends on the Bishop, he gives the license to do these activities in the building. We usually have a lease and, for the next 10 years, we can have the space at our disposal. In exchange, we give the religious community a space for worship inside the building, which is lit, heated and well-maintained. This is our compensation for the gift they give to the community, giving this building. So everything is quite possible as long as you work with respect.

The difficult thing is if you give back that facility to a Catholic congregation and two weeks later a Muslim group comes in saying "We run the same thing". Then you have a problem because the Muslims wouldn't share a space with the Catholics. And the Catholics are very opposed to sharing space with Muslims. They can do it with Orthodox and other denominations. But there's a struggle between these two very strongly opposed groups where the heritage cannot really merge their needs. But, well, most of the Muslim immigrants that come over here don't really like the church shape, so they rather buy an old McDonald's to make it a worship place than buy an old church, because this looks too Christian and the other building, they have no heritage regulation, they can rebuild and redo it over and over.

HL: Is there, Rocío, anything else you would like to ask when it comes to different religions and the question of various minorities trying to "take it over" so to speak?

LN: I would just add something on that topic. About the idea of heritage embedded in the stone of the building. That's very Christian, especially Catholic because the Anglicans and the Protestants don't care so much. They care about the memories but not so much about the building itself. That is a very Catholic thing. So if we sell a church building to another Christian tradition – we have a lot of churches that have been sold to Orthodox, Methodists, and Adventists – because it's a bargain, the new group will take over the church only because it's inexpensive but they won't care about the heritage. They won't, in fact, do any maintenance in the building to preserve this heritage. The diocese says nowadays that converting from church to church is the best thing (they didn't say that 20 years ago). I say, no, that's not the best thing for heritage. Because if you sell your church building to a group that is not concerned with heritage, they're going to use it, and when the roof leaks and it crumbles, they're going to leave it for another one. And then you find yourself at the end of the road with the building, it's too late, too expensive to intervene.

So you must be careful. As you say, if it's not heritage, then you can eventually destroy part of the building and keep the land. But, even in that case, the experience we have with the new traditions is that they sell the building for the land because it's crumbling. And then it becomes a new apartment house or a luxury building.

HL: Thanks, Luc, for bringing up this situation. So many of our questions have been raised or discussed, I think. Rocio, do you have any more questions?

RS: Nothing else to add on the matter of religious minorities. My other question is specifically related to young people. You mentioned that when you started your career there wasn't much attention to this kind of heritage. Do you think that this has changed now? Have you noticed more interest from young people?

LN: When I started I felt a bit lonely. Over the years, especially from 1995 onwards, I started to notice a certain interest, at first of a scientific kind. We had many students, even Master's and PhD students, who decided to do their theses on the subject of churches, mainly on new uses of these buildings.

In the last five years, I have seen many groups formed by four or five students who decide to set

up a cooperative or a non-profit organisation. Usually, there is an urban planner, an architect with experience in church buildings, some local social workers and people involved in the community. Together they visit the buildings, conduct research on them and start to draft a project. Then they go to the municipalities or town halls and propose a concrete plan for the future of the church. In Quebec we have at least five or six of these small groups. Most of them are not architects or urban planners, they're not traditional practitioners. It's a new kind of group of people who work for very low wages but work for the community. When the project goes further, one or two of them usually continue with the project while the others leave the group.

At the Conseil du patrimoine religieux (the Council of Religious Heritage), we've created a program where we fund these kinds of initiatives. We give $120,000 to a group to make a study. This group of people can work full-time for a year on the development of a project and then collaborate with the municipality. We also hand out a prize[5] for the best project. In the early days, when we created the Conseil du patrimoine, I used to be the one giving lectures and speaking at our annual forum[6]. Nowadays I don't do it anymore so much. The forum is now made up of these young people who present the projects they are working on, what they did last year and what they are going to do next year. It's a complete change. A lot of people getting active in this field.

RS: What would be, in your opinion, the key to encouraging more young people to pursue a career in this field?

LN: Well, finding young students willing to pay a visit and finding the church nice and pleasant is one thing. But building a career and finding a job in this field is another thing. Fortunately, religious heritage is now a new opportunity for young scholars to build a career. And, you know, the more they work on it, the more awareness they get because they understand what is happening here.

The only thing that is more difficult for us in Canada, is connecting all these people with other professionals and experiences abroad, with FRH members for example. This is a bit expensive nowadays. We are looking into the possibility of setting up some funding at the Conseil du Patrimoine Religieux in the next months to send these young people abroad to international conferences so that they can broaden their experience.

Money is also getting more and more scarce for projects because of the number and the cost of the buildings. We used to make projects with churches for 1,5 or 2 million Canadian dollars. Nowadays, we need 10, 12, 15 million. And according to government forecasts, the budget projections are not very good for the next ten years. So things are getting more and more difficult and that makes people feel hopeless. They think they're alone and nobody will help them. But we still have good news and nice examples to put some motivation on the stage and give people some hope to save their churches. We have an organisation to support them and to help them connect with young people who can get involved.

In any case, this whole topic has to be reviewed under a different lens. An old town planner or an old architect is no longer of use because they have old habits. When these young people call me to take a look at their projects, I am always amazed at how imaginative they are. They are not stuck in the old ways of thinking. They have opened a new path, they think about fabulous things that could happen in this or that building. And also about ways to finance it. I've never been very good at setting up the financial structure. It's a very tough field with everything local, the government. But they are very creative with all these things. So in this way, to answer your question, as soon as there is no longer a group of people with old ideas involved, then you can involve a group of young professionals.

HL: Thank you, Luc. To conclude this interview, I have one last question: What is the most urgent line of research now in the field of religious heritage, and what is missing, in your opinion?

LN: There was a time when some specialists decided what was heritage and what was not. So heritage-making was a top-down process. Nowadays we have to ensure that heritage making is

5 Religious Heritage Council of Québec. Awards of Excellence (Prix d'excellence): https://www.patrimoine-religieux.qc.ca/en/awards-of-excellence.

6 Religious Heritage Council of Québec. Forum on religious heritage (Forum sur le patrimoine religieux): https://www.patrimoine-religieux.qc.ca/fr/evenements/forum-sur-le-patrimoine-religieux.

bottom-up. The more people like their building, the more it will be considered heritage. I might think that certain building is not the most interesting of the many that we have, but if there is a feeling coming from the community saying that that is their heritage, then it is their heritage. All that public authorities can do is accompany that movement. If people like to gather around this building, you have to help them protect it, and then it's going to be a success story. But if you're stuck with your architect or your architectural historian saying this is not an important building, you won't go anywhere. So this is one change. Most of the people involved in heritage have been educated in the old-fashioned way. Nowadays everybody has a say about heritage, about what is valuable for them, and that must be taken into account.

The second thing is that, nonetheless, we will not have money to save all the buildings, so we still need to make a choice. This choice is often between investing money in the magnificent Cathedral of Notre-Dame-de-Paris or saving some 250 smaller churches with the same budget. That's a difficult decision, often driven by public interest. The most interesting buildings in terms of architecture and history are devoted to tourism. Tourism is a kind of industry, but this industry does not pay enough to maintain the building. So if tourism likes a building and says: "This place is very nice, it should maintained for visitors", then the local community or the government have to pay for its upkeep so that the tourism industry can make money from it. We could also say, "No, we can keep this building, but we keep it for local purposes, for our community". Just because the building is very nice and beautiful does not mean that it should be taken away from the community only to be looked at by foreigners coming on a cruise ship.

There should be some more research on the destination of heritage buildings: Who are we working for? What's the purpose? Because heritage could be national buildings, heritage could be economics, could be tourism or could be social uses. There needs to be more work on linking social and community purpose with the beginnings of the church. The idea of the church was to gather the poor, to help the sick. If somebody went back to the old writings and put all this together we would have a scientific basis. There are several topics linked to heritage buildings, social destinations, the problem of the tourism economy, etc. Because of the tourism economy, churches that are considered worthless are being demolished. I made once a joke in Quebec saying "We are going to save this church but don't expect 250 Japanese coming around every week" (that was at the time when tourism in this region was mostly Japanese), because there's this kind of idea that if the church building is not on a tourist itinerary it's not so interesting – and that's something that has to be more questioned.

HL: We have a similar situation here in Sweden. We have several Romanesque churches, well-preserved, very interesting and beautiful, but which are not promoted as destinations for tourists at all. They have very few visitors. I think if you do it in the right sustainable way it would be a good idea to develop these sites more, also for the benefit of the local communities.

LN: In the case of state churches, there has been a lot of work and research done. For example, against fire destruction. Too many churches in Canada and also in Sweden are built with wood. If everything goes the way it is, we are going to lose them all in the next two centuries. We should invent new ways of protection because these places are so precious. Whenever I show pictures I took of churches in my lectures and conferences people say "Oh, what's that?" So if they were better known they would be better protected.

HL: Yes, it's a lot about promotion because not everybody is interested in the details of the architecture or art of the church, but they could be fascinated by the history of the site and all the people who have been there, involved in the church. I think we lack this kind of promotion, at least here in the diocese in Southern Sweden. But I am not sure how to do it in the best way because most of the information and material is written by art historians and is not always very interesting.

LN: I still work on architectural history because I still have to convince more people that churches are important. The notoriety of the buildings is always to be built and rebuilt and rebuilt again before every generation because what people knew about churches in the 1960s is almost forgotten now. Only the knowledge about some huge monuments, like Notre-Dame-de-Paris and others has been transmitted by this economic machine that is the tourism industry. However, most of what we know about the church buildings – the things, for example, that I wrote about them and were well

known in Quebec in the 1970s, 80s, and 90s – if we don't come forward again and again with these materials, they are forgotten. On the internet, you find nothing from the 1980s or 1990s. All you find is from this year, last year or two years ago. So we have to rebuild the knowledge in a way that can be transmitted more easily in the actual trend of social media. I'm not saying I will go on TikTok, but maybe some people should do it.

RS: We already gave it a thought at FRH.

LN: Yes, I noticed that. I have seen some things you are doing at FRH to convince people that this matters. But religious heritage is a huge field, and society is not only involved in church buildings, but in cultural heritage in general, and that opens up the range a lot. You need a lot of manpower.

HL: I think one problem is that it's the parishes that still have the monopoly – and the state, of course. They don't really let in voluntary organisations or committed local groups. This is still a very rigid system in Sweden in my opinion.

LN: If you want to gain the respect of the church – the church owners or the church as an institution – you have to fight them in some way. They want things to go on the way they are going, even if they know they are not going very well. And when someone comes forward with new ideas, new uses for these buildings, they are not fond of it. We had once a meeting with FRH in Venice and I gave a talk about churches in Quebec. The patriarch of Venice was so upset with my presentation that he stood up, walked away and slammed the door after him. People looked at me and said, "Oh, Luc, what' s going to happen now". And I said "Nothing. Nothing is going to happen. He's just an old-fashioned man living in an old world, and that's his problem, not mine". But, you know, sometimes you have to provoke because if you always follow the ideas that the church puts on the table, you don't go anywhere. It's a dead end. So you have to be good friends with the church because collaboration is always the best thing. But we have to fight against some ideas and their vision of the future of religious heritage.

HL: That is good advice. And we are trying. Thank you very much, Luc, for this incredible conversation. We will keep in touch.

LN: Thank you. Goodbye.

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