

CHALLENGING “AMATEUR ARCHITECTURE” IN THE DIOCESE OF BRITISH COLUMBIA 1875-1900

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FIG. 1. ST. JAMES, JAMES BAY, BC (NEAR VICTORIA). WILLIAM DE LA PENOTIÈRE (1883). | BRITISH COLUMBIA ARCHIVES

In the last quarter of the nineteenth century, “untutored” architects continued to work in Western Canada despite the increasing professionalization of architectural practice.² Those informally trained builders-cum-architects and enthusiasts-for-hire were constructed as “amateurs” by a process of professionalization in architectural practice.³ An analysis of the status and practice of “amateur architects” in British Columbia affords an opportunity to look at a complex and conflictual social and economic system regarding “taste” and “fashion.” In this paper, I will analyze the interface between the condition of the “amateur” and the claims of the “professional” with regard to churches built in Victoria, British Columbia in the last quarter of the nineteenth century.

METHOD

A description of the social operations of taste-cum-fashion will be followed by a cross-denominational case study focused upon the Anglican Church of St. James, James Bay (near Victoria) (1883) (fig. 1), and the Metropolitan Methodist Church (1890) (fig. 2) on Pandora Avenue in Victoria. The purpose of the case study is to illustrate an inversion of some contemporaneous observations about the way amateur architects found their inspiration. My employment of case study invites a multi-perspectival approach to data analysis that makes use of those nuances in the complicated social dynamics of church-building. Afterwards, the construction of those churches will be re-contextualized by identifying particular geographical and inter-denominational



FIG. 2. METROPOLITAN METHODIST CHURCH, VICTORIA, BC. THOMAS HOOPER (1890). | BRITISH COLUMBIA ARCHIVES

tensions that took the form of architectural rivalry. Situating the analysis in the last quarter of the nineteenth century will illustrate how the development of eclecticism inverts the concept that amateurs were more susceptible to the latest fashion trends.

CHALLENGING THE “FASHIONABLE AMATEUR”

The term “amateur” architect had associations in the nineteenth century with less formal education and with the construction of more humble buildings. However, the term “amateur” refers less to the quality of architecture produced than it does to the legitimizing claims of so-called “professionals” relative to artistic and economic statuses. More recently, the term’s association with the vernacular has resulted in a re-imagining of the status of local building practices in relation to artistic production.⁴ That is, architecture produced by amateurs, upon close examination, was conducted in all seriousness and was also infused with the same nostalgic or antiquarian processes as those buildings produced by professionals.

To set themselves apart from a so-called lesser class of builder, professional architects instituted a kind of preferential and refined taste around themselves and their designs.⁵ Indeed, taste was advertised as an enduring aspect of civilized society, the proof of which was visibly related to the appropriation of an ancient aesthetic in architectural design.⁶

Some late nineteenth-century audiences readily accepted that buildings designed by professional architects had greater claims to those more enduring—often antiquarian—aspects of taste. Those who followed such rationale believed that other less discerning amateurs would have been expected to follow the transient fashions of the day. Such audiences might be convinced that amateurs were “hopelessly” tied to rapid changes in style, an economic condition of modernity. That type of argument depended upon the logic that education in architecture meant that professionals rose above the whims of public fashion in ways less formally trained amateurs could not avoid. That is, economic pressures might cause amateurs to succumb to the dictates of their

clientele while professionals might be immune. I contend, quite the contrary, that such pressures affected all practitioners, each in their own way.

So-called “professionals,” to legitimize claims of social superiority, continued to describe their practice in terms of “taste” as separated from those transient elements of “fashion.” At the same time, fashion had a way of being presented as taste, in no small part, due to the marketing of new commercial practices. The conflation between taste and fashion was so complete that even those “elite” persons, whose social statuses depended upon projecting the “refined” aspects of taste, often stood accused of following fashion while calling it taste.

An astute contemporary observer marked such distinctions. The British architect and author Charles Eastlake complained about the lack of education forming public taste-cum-fashion in his popular book *Hints on Household Taste in Furniture, Upholstery, and Other Details*. He lamented: “The faculty of distinguishing good taste from bad design in the familiar objects of domestic life is a faculty which most educated people [...] conceive that they possess. How it has been acquired few would be able to explain. The general impression seems to be, that it is the peculiar inheritance of gentle blood, and independent of all training.”⁷ He continued by accusing both the “generally ignorant” and the educated classes of following the latest fashions being passed off as those more enduring aspects of taste. “The latest invention, although it might violate every principle of good design,” he complained, “was sure to be a favourite with the majority.”⁸ Meanwhile, the public’s fascination with the latest design, no matter how distasteful according to Eastlake, constructed the new as admirable and the old as hideous.⁹ In Eastlake’s

estimation, those untutored amateurs pursued the latest trends erroneously associated with taste. Meanwhile, he argued that those educated professionals should remain dedicated to tradition, though it was mistakenly referred to as old-fashioned and ugly. Eastlake's position was a reaction to the way marketing compressed "fashion" in architectural practice together with taste.¹⁰

Eastlake blamed the shift in the social operation of taste on the development of eclecticism, which he found aplenty in architecture. He wrote: "artistic taste in the nineteenth century, based as it is upon eclecticism rather than tradition, is capricious and subject to constant variation."¹¹ Eastlake's references to taste straddle domestic and religious architecture in his long introduction leading to an attack on the "miserable" status of English home décor. He knew his architecture, having reinforced the "invention" of the Gothic Revival by way of his contemporaneous and historical accounts of eighteenth and nineteenth-century architectural practices.¹² More importantly, his position indicates both a desire to separate taste from fashion while clearly recognising the practice of their inextricable porosity.

To put those observations into a Canadian context, I present a case study of two churches built nearly contemporaneously in the final decades of the nineteenth century and located not more than a mile from one another in Victoria, B.C.

CASE STUDY: TRADITION AT ST. JAMES, JAMES BAY

On November 4, 1883, the *British Daily Colonist* newspaper announced that four lots in James Bay (near Victoria) had been purchased at the cost of \$2500 for an Episcopal church. Contributions of

\$1000 were received from England. The following November, a cornerstone was laid by Mrs. Cornwall.¹³ Construction of the timber-framed church, dedicated St. James, was completed in January 1885. The *Colonist* described the church as "very pretty," noting its vestry location under the tower. The press listed the church's cost of construction as \$3500 and its architect as William de la Penotière.¹⁴

Arriving in Vancouver from Ontario in 1884, de la Penotière had no formal architectural training.¹⁵ He went into partnership with George F. Wake as real-estate agents and surveyors. Their one commission was St. James, James Bay, though de la Penotière later formed a brief partnership with S.C. Burris, designing a residence on Victoria Crescent, as well as the fittings for the Victoria Club.¹⁶

Archival images of St. James, James Bay, in the B.C. Provincial Archives, show that the church was a simple timber structure with clapboard finish (fig. 1). Nave and chancel were separately articulated, as was the tower and broach spire that connected those two building components. A fine proportion was achieved between the triple lancet window in the east end and the slim buttresses articulating the tower. In sum, the church was a competent version of Augustus Welby Pugin's "True Principles" for Gothic Revival building, popularized nearly forty years earlier. Pugin's principles called for separate building components that externally reflected internal liturgical functions, the truthful use of building materials, and simple planning that could allow the completion of a tower and spire in the initial building phase. In contrast with another church building by Methodist and Presbyterian congregations only a few miles away, St. James must have appeared old-fashioned and rather incongruous.

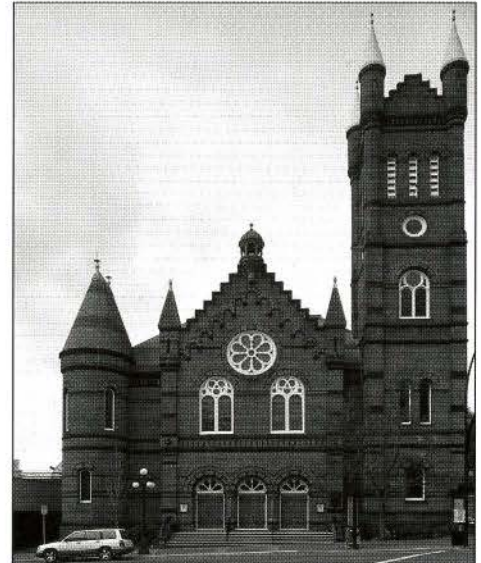


FIG. 3. ST. ANDREW'S PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH, VICTORIA, B.C. (1890). LEONARD BUTTRESS TRIMEN. | BARRY MAGRILL

By November 1887, St. James had undergone a renovation, not to alter the aesthetic, but to insulate the walls and add a small antique porch in the main entrance. The church's aesthetic appeal must have endured because the *Colonist* continued to refer to the church as "handsome."¹⁷

CASE STUDY: VICTORIA'S "FASHIONABLE" ECLECTICISM

By contrast, eclecticism on a grand scale signalled social privilege and pretension throughout most other parts of Victoria. Various religious congregations hired several prestigious architects and gave them large budgets with which to work. In the case of the Metropolitan Methodist Church on Pandora Avenue (1889-1891), social aspirations had dramatic economic results. The church's congregation opted to use stone for Thomas Hooper's (1857-1935)¹⁸ Richardsonian Romanesque design originally envisioned and budgeted for brick. The rusticated masonry incorporated into the Scottish Baronial hanging turrets and a French Château arrangement created a more prestigious aesthetic. Unfortunately, the church's contractor,

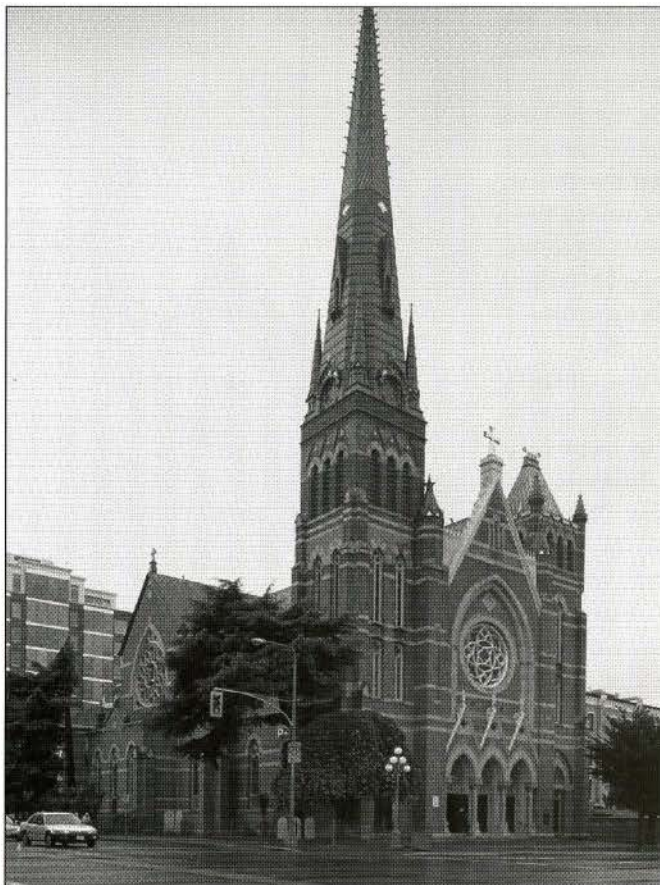


FIG. 4. ST. ANDREW'S ROMAN CATHOLIC CHURCH, VICTORIA, BC (1892). PERRAULT & MESNARD. | BARRY MAGRILL

"professionals," according to Eastlake and other dominant Anglican voices forming Canadian society. The *Colonist* described the design as Romanesque and drew attention to the 120-foot tower surrounded by an elaborate iron finial and its delicate ceiling. A roomy entrance area and superior heating and acoustics also merited mention.²⁰

ANALYSIS

St. James was designed by an enthusiast-for-hire. Aside from real-estate sales and possibly some surveying work, William de la Penotière had little legitimate claim to architectural practice. That is, he was not a contractor or

builder trying to elevate his status. Interestingly, his design shows no signs of those fashionable aesthetics that Charles Eastlake complained amateurs were susceptible to. Still, the church was referred to as "pretty" and not hideous, in spite of its old-fashioned design.

Otherwise, Thomas Hooper's design for the Metropolitan Methodist Church exhibits many of those fashionable elements of the day. Hooper had an exceptionally lengthy and respected career in architecture, though he died penniless after making and losing four fortunes.²¹ These cases show an inversion of the positions of amateur and professional. More importantly, Metropolitan Methodist signals an instance wherein "fashion"

was marketed to Canadian audiences as "taste." That is, the *Colonist* recognised the nomenclature of Hooper's design—Romanesque—most likely because of the style's fashionableness.

An amateur working in a city enamoured of the eclectic produced a conventional and not a fashionable design. To understand the diverse positions the churches used in this case study requires some re-contextualization.

RE-CONTEXTUALIZING THE CASE STUDY: CHURCH-BUILDING ACROSS THE STRAIT OF GEORGIA

To put these cases into perspective, we examine a geographical rivalry between Vancouver and Victoria as well as inter-denominational rivalries between Anglican and nonconformist congregations.

Vancouver Island and lower mainland British Columbia experienced rapid growth in church building in the last quarter of the nineteenth century, commensurate with settlement expansion in Canada West. That growth in religious institution was associated with other factors affecting settlement expansion, such as increased branch-line rail travel, shipping, and resource extraction. The boom and bust economies introduced into Western Canada came along with increased missionary activity along coastal communities, especially with respect to First Nations and mining communities. Christian missions were established alongside the gold and coal-mining camps as quickly as strikes were discovered, and sometimes they moved on just as rapidly when resources dried up. Meanwhile, large towns such as Victoria had wealthy religious congregations that attracted some impressive and progressive architects to design churches.

W.H. Burkholder, who bid \$50,224 for the tender, was unable to adjust for the change in richer material and was probably bankrupted by the building committee's desire for increased social status in the community.¹⁹

The progressive and eclectic design for Metropolitan Methodist, which incorporated an amphitheatrical seating plan, roomy entrance area, and integrated Akron plan Sunday school, was more acceptable to nonconformist tastes. Such functional elements were rational manipulations of Gothic planning, but the exterior arrangement was precisely the aesthetic that Eastlake had termed "fashion." That "fashionable" look was to be avoided by those architects calling themselves

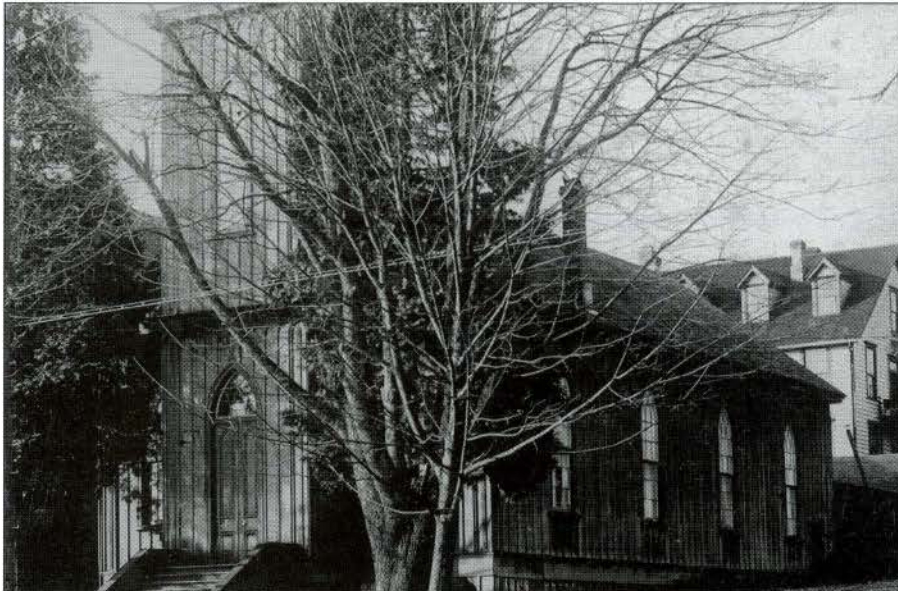


FIG. 5. ST. ANDREW'S PRESBYTERIAN, VANCOUVER, BC (1892). WILLIAM BLACKMORE. | BRITISH COLUMBIA ARCHIVES

In the 1880s, settlement expansion and the growth in religious institution in British Columbia coincided with an architectural rivalry that occurred between Victoria and Vancouver (the area formerly known as Granville dispersed around Hastings Mill). Agitated when the Canadian Pacific Railway was enticed to alter its western terminus from Port Moody to Vancouver, the political-cum-architectural rivalry between Victoria and Vancouver was given spatial expression in civic, religious, and domestic buildings.²²

That architectural rivalry continued in Victoria even after the actualization of the terminus in Vancouver in 1884. Thus, throughout the 1880s and 1890s, Victoria continued to produce a more metropolitan—almost cosmopolitan—vision, which included new churches by a variety of denominations. The urban aspirations of Victoria tended to produce eclectic, progressive, and innovative architecture when one might have expected to discover more conventional architectural tastes. Leonard Buttress Trimen (1846-1892) won the competition to design St. Andrew's

Presbyterian Church (1890) (fig. 3), which incorporated Scottish Baronial elements in a brick-built Richardsonian Romanesque body. The Montreal firm of Perrault & Mesnard produced a High Victorian Gothic brick-clad design for St. Andrew's Roman Catholic Cathedral (1892) (fig. 4), complete with a tripartite west portal surmounted by a rose window within a large enclosing arch housing a central gable and sporting a 175-foot spire. Indeed, the *modus operandi* of those wealthy patrons and congregations was to pursue the leading edge of architectural design—eclecticism—, but call it "taste." That was precisely what Eastlake had deemed unacceptable.

By contrast, dioceses located around Vancouver produced more modest church structures in the same time period, due to limited funding. Examples are St. Andrew's Presbyterian (1892) (fig. 5), Christ Church (1889-1895) (now Cathedral) (fig. 6), St. James Church (1898) (fig. 7), and the Wesley Methodist Church on Georgia (1901). The notable exception was Holy Rosary built for a Catholic congregation

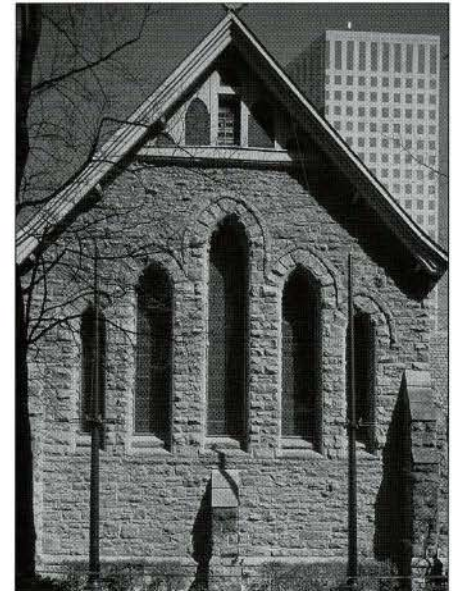


FIG. 6. CHRIST CHURCH (NOW CATHEDRAL), VANCOUVER, BC (1895). C.O. WICKENDEN. | BARRY MAGRILL

by T.E. Julian in 1899. St. Andrew's and the Wesleyan Methodist churches comprised impressive elements but were built of timber, not as rich a material as stone. Those more imposing churches in Vancouver arrived during the first two decades of the new century. Two examples are St. John's United Presbyterian Church (1906), which combined a Gothic Revival design with hammer-dressed stone finish and amphitheatrical seating plan, as well as St. Francis Xavier Church on Pender Street (1910), which combined a large Gothic brick-built edifice with tall double towered western façade. The increased economic activity in Vancouver after the turn of the century played a significant role in determining the town's ability to portray the latest architectural fashion.

Vancouver's lack of early success in building monumental church stock is exemplified in the competition held to construct Christ Church on Georgia Street in 1891. The competition judges awarded the first prize to J.C.M. Keith's (1858-1940)²³ impressive Latin-cross design which incorporated a traditional arrangement of Early English



FIG. 7. ST. JAMES CHURCH, VANCOUVER (1898). | BRITISH COLUMBIA ARCHIVES

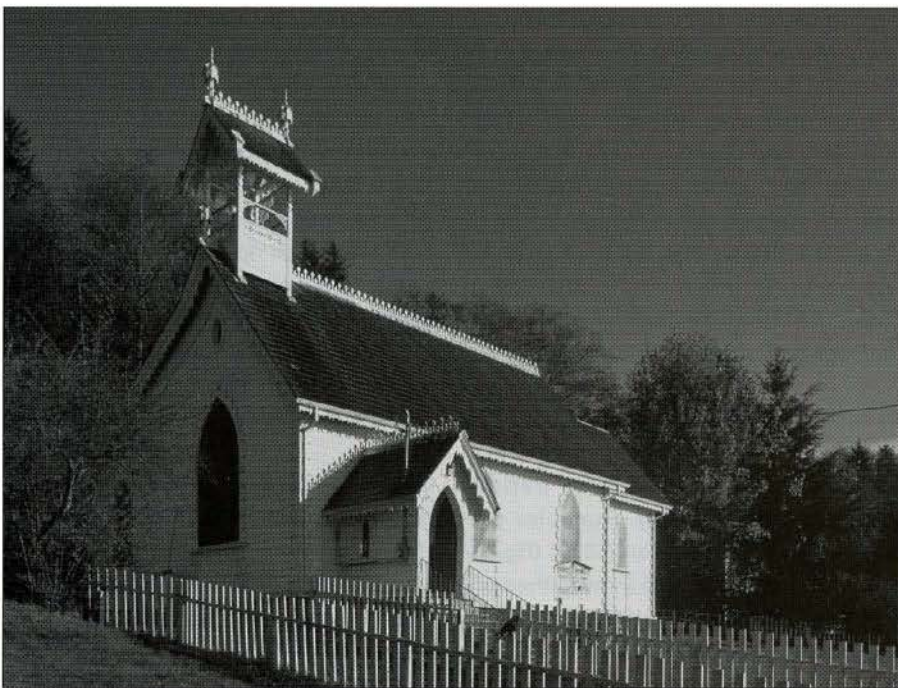


FIG. 8. CHRIST CHURCH, ALERT BAY ON CORMORANT ISLAND, BC (1882). REV. ALFRED JAMES HALL. | BARRY MAGRILL

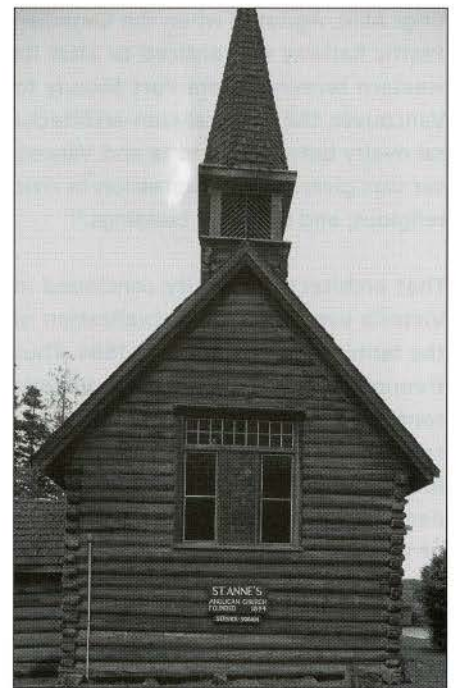


FIG. 9. ST. ANNE'S, PARKSVILLE, BC (1894). | BARRY MAGRILL

lancet windows throughout an aisled nave, east and west transepts, as well as a monumental western tower and spire. However, funding limitations left Keith's plan unrealized. Three years later, local architect Charles Osborne Wickenden (1851-1934) produced a more modest but progressive design consisting of a longitudinal nave with side aisles, north and south porches, transepts, and a five-light lancet arrangement in the western wall. The exterior walling was done in hammer-dressed masonry, an economic nod to the fashionable Romanesque Revival. The innovative open interior space was spanned by a hammer-beam roof punctuated by fully integrated dormer windows. Though lagging behind Victoria in architectural aspirations, Christ Church shows a community catching up with some of the latest fashions by hiring the services of a professional architect, C.O. Wickenden.

INTER-DENOMINATIONAL RIVALRY

Architects designing religious buildings had multiple "clients." Church architecture tended towards a collective process involving the designer, select parishioners formed into a building committee and members of the religious institution. Architects therefore did not always have a free hand. At times, even the voices of respected financial benefactors and general publics were also anticipated in a church design. Those audiences may have been especially prevalent in the minds of some designers with respect to advertised competitions. Amateurs and professionals alike tried to design what their clientele wanted.

Designing religious buildings required tact, especially in cases where architects crossed denominations, each believing as much in the correctness of its position with regard to architectural style as it did in the complete incorrect position of its

rivals. Those rivalries were often spatial expressions of differences of liturgical opinion. One need only glance at publications by the Cambridge Camden (later Ecclesiological) Society (1841-1868), which was affiliated with Anglicanism, to appreciate the depth of such rivalries.

As the case studies data indicate, Anglican church-building continued into the end of the century with the use of a Gothic Revival idiom. Anglicans' dedication to antiquarianism remained almost completely intact. That de la Penotière exhibited nostalgia for Anglican church stock nearly forty years old was also the responsibility of his clientele. By contrast, nonconformist congregations like the Methodist appeared more willing to encourage architectural experimentation. Those "professionals" who responded positively to eclecticism likely believed being *au courant* helped build their careers. Given the state of eclecticism and its usage by professionals in Victoria, one can imagine the difficult task facing the Anglican congregation in James Bay when it was looking for an architect who would produce an anachronism in a city dominated by a fashionable eclectic. St. James's "architect" turned out to be a well-intentioned real-estate agent.

CONCLUSION

Despite some porosity between the labels "amateur" and "professional" in the last quarter of the nineteenth century, clear career distinctions developed between those self-proclaimed, educated architects and building enthusiasts-for-hire. Gone were the early days of a "pioneer" mentality associated with multiple careers in surveying and architecture.²⁴ By the 1870s and 1880s, that compression of careers was largely vanishing, due in part to professionalization and culminating in eventual self-regulation in the

body of the Architectural Institute of British Columbia (est. 1914). As a result, those enthusiasts-for-hire became less involved in urban church-building efforts. Amateurs and enthusiasts-for-hire continued to pursue a kind of nostalgia for earlier Gothic themes, but they did so in rural locales throughout Vancouver Island. Built in the last decades of the nineteenth century, Christ Church, Alert Bay (1882) (fig. 8), exhibits a traditional timber Gothic Revival design punctuated by imitation wood quoins articulating the windows and cornering. As well, St. Ann's, French Creek (Parksville) (1894) (fig. 9), reimagines churches of log construction popular in Canada West in the earlier part of the century.

Those distinctions between "amateur" and "professional" reinforced a system that privileged a group already more economically and socially advantaged. Thomas Hooper, for instance, was known as an "architect," not only because of his ambitious artistic output, but because he advertised his services in newspapers like the *Daily British Colonist*. The fact that he could afford to advertise himself as a "professional" has resulted in his being historically recorded as an "architect." Thus, the architecture industry in the late nineteenth century increasingly constructed and projected an elite and scholarly public persona. Through their position of economic and social dominance, "professionals" and their clientele used marketing strategies to make fashion appear as taste. "Amateurs" did not have the financial luxury of following the latest fashion.

NOTES

1. I wish to acknowledge special thanks to Professor Rhodri Windsor-Liscombe for his advice and consultation in matters pertaining to the framework of this paper. It should be noted, however, that any inconsistencies in the data are my own responsibility to bear. Research for

- this paper was generously provided by University of British Columbia Graduate Fellowship.
2. Luxton, D., 2003, *Building the West*, Vancouver, Talon.
 3. Upton, D., 1984, « Pattern Books and Professionalism: Aspects of the Transformation of Domestic Architecture in America, 1800-1860 », *Winterthur Portfolio*, vol. 19, nos. 2-3, p. 105-150.
 4. Sandilands, R. (ed.), 1972. *Architecture of the Fraser Valley*, Vancouver, Opportunities for Youth, p. 6. The authors argue convincingly that the functionalist movement has tended to ennoble vernacular forms on the basis of their satisfying environmental demands, though I would add that less expensive and smaller buildings are no less significant constituent elements of society.
 5. Upton : 105-150.
 6. Windsor Liscombe, Rhodri, 2004, « The Commodification of Civic Culture in Early Nineteenth-century London », *London Journal*, vol. 29, no. 2, p. 17-32.
 7. Eastlake, C., 1878, *Hints on Household Taste in Furniture, Upholstery, and other Details*, London, Longmans, Green, p. 8.
 8. *Idem* : 12.
 9. *Ibid.*
 10. My thanks to Professor Rhodri Windsor Liscombe for drawing my attention to the specific social operations of taste-cum-fashion.
 11. Eastlake, 1878 : 40.
 12. Eastlake, C.L., 1872, *A History of the Gothic Revival*, New York, Humanities Press, Leicester University Press.
 13. *Victoria Daily Colonist*, November 7, 1884, p. 3.
 14. *Victoria Daily Colonist*, January 25, 1885, p. 3.
 15. The *Victoria Daily Colonist* April 15, 1883 lists de la Penotière's previous experience as thirteen years postmaster of Elora, Ontario.
 16. Luxton, *op. cit.*
 17. *Victoria Daily Colonist*, November 20, 1887, p. 3. The church has "undergone a complete renovation and now presents a handsome appearance. A small and antique looking porch has been added to the main entrance, which sets the church off to advantage. The outside walls of the building are reconstructed and with double boards. No inconvenience from cold is feared."
 18. For Hooper's long and prolific career, see Luxton : 138.
 19. *Victoria Daily Colonist*, February 21, 1890. The probable bankruptcy was pointed out to me by Professor Jim Bugslag. Documented evidence was still forthcoming at the time of publication.
 20. *Victoria Daily Colonist*, May 17, 1891, p. 2.
 21. For Hooper's biography, see Luxton, *op. cit.*
 22. Dempsey, H., 1984, *The CPR West: The Iron Road and the Making of a Nation*, Vancouver, Douglas & McIntyre, p. 93-99.
 23. Keith emigrated from Scotland after studying with Alexander Ross (architect of St. Andrew's Episcopal Cathedral, Inverness 1866-1869). After brief stints in San Francisco and Seattle, Keith intended to move to Victoria but settled instead in Vancouver. See, Luxton, *op. cit.*
 24. *Ibid.*