

# architecture institutions and change

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## **Nantes Protestant Church: Symbolising Post-World War II Changes Between Architecture and Protestant Institutions in France**

*In France in 1905, after the separation of the church and the state, all religious buildings became property of state and local governments, while the latter stopped funding religious groups all together. This fundamentally questioned the role of architecture in the exercise and maintenance of the long tradition of religious institutionalised power and authority. Yet, the aftermath of World War II also contributed to new changes. In this trial of meaningfulness and reconstruction, steps for partial reconciliation with the churches were more present, even more so in the heavily destroyed areas of France such as along its west coast. Looking specifically at one department of the west coast – Loire Atlantique – the purpose of this paper is to use the case of the reconstruction of the Nantes church to show how the role of architecture has shifted and impacted the reconceptualisation of Protestant institutions.*

Several countries have witnessed heavy strain resulting from the relationship between architecture and religion due to the weight of history. In France, the Revolution (1789) not only symbolised the end of an era – the supremacy of Catholicism – but also generated the nationalisation of church properties, the suppression of the clergy and the temporary relocation of a large number of religious buildings.<sup>1</sup> Although the following century attempted to introduce religious pacification, a definitive rupture took place in 1905 with the separation of the church and the state.<sup>2</sup> At that point, all religious buildings became property of local governments and the state, while the latter stopped funding religious groups. This fundamentally questioned the role of architecture as the expression of institutionalised power and authority, as well as it being a repository of faith and cultural traditions. Yet the separation provided a new freedom for religious denominations since they were now fully in charge of the construction of new buildings and could designate their own architects, which previously were nominated by the state.

This considerably impacted the creation of new religious buildings, since most of the people involved had strong religious faith including their architects.<sup>3</sup> The lack of financial means also generated a wave of entirely committed “builder-priests”, for whom the construction of “their” church was often their lifetime achievement.<sup>4</sup> This phenomenon was not restrained to a specific denomination but a general reaction to a new conjuncture. In term of architecture, it also meant a period of renewed creativity and inspirations.

As the dominant religion in France, Catholicism’s sacred art has attracted many scholars and interesting studies have unveiled the architectural work from the 1930s onward.<sup>5</sup> Less research has been focussed on minority religions and denominations especially in the troubled period after World War II. In the same way, cities where cults and religious orders were the most celebrated have often been the centre of existing studies and less attention has been given to those places in France where minor religious denominations are found.<sup>6</sup> Looking at Protestant architecture in Nantes (city on the west coast of France, along the Loire river), this paper traces the history of the construction of a new Nantes post-war Protestant church in order to reveal the relationship of this specific denomination to architecture, its response to societal transformations, and the position of Protestants in the city.

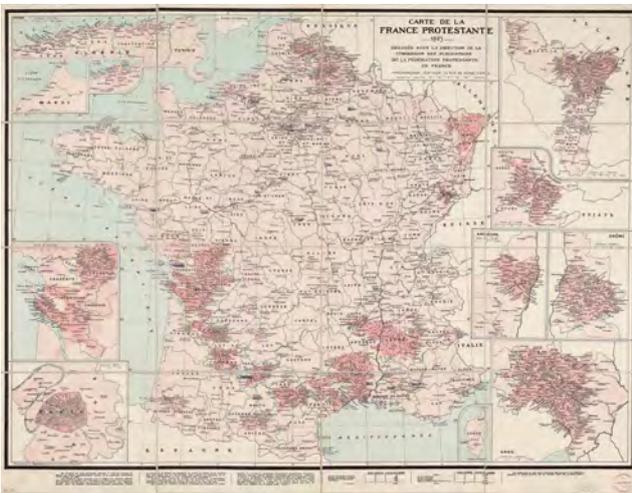
## **Nantes and the regional context**

Despite being famous for hosting the first treaty about Protestantism tolerance in France – Edit de Nantes in 1598 – the denomination reached a very small minority in Nantes and its region.<sup>7</sup> The following events of revocation, murders and exile did not help the expansion of the religion. The protestant population decreased from eleven per cent of the overall population in the 1560s to two per cent in the 1810s.<sup>8</sup>

The Concordat of 1801 definitively approved the freedom of religious worship for all and for the Protestants it symbolised the end of nearly four centuries of treaties and their cancellation, and the possibility to peacefully practice their faith. Napoleon Bonaparte also regulated the structure of the denomination with a standard of one church for 6000 Protestants.<sup>9</sup> In

Nantes, the Carmelites chapel became the first official Protestant church in 1804, while it was raising the funds needed to build a new church. Following current procedures, several key stakeholders were involved in the building process. They were mainly the Protestant community and the pastors, the municipality and the State Minister of Cults.<sup>10</sup>

Inaugurated in 1855, the building's location on a public square (formerly place Gigant), allowed for monumentality but architecturally there was no innovation or discrepancy with the built surroundings. The map of Protestant France by Charles Read in 1851<sup>11</sup> evidenced a merely existing Protestant community, and it could be assumed that in this context the Protestants of Nantes rather adopted a 'conservative' or classical architectural style to maintain a certain peace – if not a discrete profile – within the city. The same map in 1923 evidenced an unchanged situation (Figure 1).



**Fig. 1** Carte de la France Protestante, 1923/  
Dressée sous la direction de la Commission des Publications de la Fédération Protestante de France. [Map of Protestant France, 1923. Established under the direction of the French Protestant Federation]. Compiled by L. Hermann. VU University Library Amsterdam, LL.06948gk.

In the region, the construction of new churches was quite rare because, except for the church of Saint-Nazaire (the second largest regional city) that opened in October 1898, most of the time religious worship was still practiced in private homes, as was the case in Prefailles where the Durand-Gasselien family opened their cottage to this effect.<sup>12</sup> This was also reinforced in the following years by the loss of funding with the separation of the church and the state in 1905. This loss generated an inward-looking phase among all denominations that paralleled a change in the principles and values that underpinned the architecture of religious buildings. Smaller towns would have to wait until after the 1920s to see the erection of new buildings that often reflected social changes of that time.

Built in 1930, the choice of the locations of the La Baule and Saint-Brevin churches expressed, for example, the desire of the Central Society for Evangelisation to reach a new type of population – tourists<sup>13</sup> – while their architectural style also revealed a new way of thinking about the physical representation of the place of worship. Indeed, opened in 1931 and designed by the architect Paul-Henri Datessen,<sup>14</sup> La Baule church displayed this profusion of architectural styles that characterised seaside buildings of the time. For example, the overall look and layout of the La Baule church were typical of places of worship, but the proportions

of the building, slightly larger than some neighbourhood villas, barely smaller than others, were incongruous. Additionally, the mix of styles clearly showed the architectural influences in vogue on the Atlantic coast during the 1930s: Breton-style for the rubble granite basement, Moorish-style plaster for the exterior façade, wrought iron openings, seaside-style for the oculus, and so on (Figure 2).



**Fig. 2** Protestant churches of Saint-Brevin, c. 1950 (l) and La Baule in 1947 (r). Archives du temple de Nantes.

Four years later, the Saint-Brevin church opened in August 1935. At this time there existed a hierarchy between the various seaside resorts in terms of visitors, character and architectural display. The Saint-Brevin church was located in one of the more modest seaside resorts and was designed by local architect Kourkène.<sup>15</sup> Here Kourkène did not use a variety of styles but rather a design based on simplicity. The uniform rectangular building blended into the surrounding vegetation and was fenced in the same way as neighbouring villas. The addition of an awning above the front door came shortly after the building was completed. The church was clearly designed to provide a 'home' feeling.

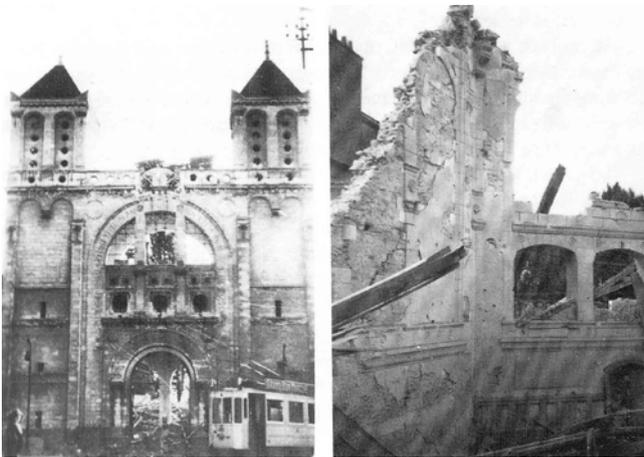
Eight decades later, the La Baule and Saint-Brevin churches had not undergone any major changes since their construction. Surviving the ravages of war and the fierce real estate speculation that began in the 1960s, the two churches remained unchanged in an urban landscape that faced major transformations. Particularly affected by the bombings of World War II, the French west coast lost many buildings if not whole cities. Some churches, such as those of Saint-Nazaire and Nantes, did not escape the destruction and in the austere post-war period the Protestant community needed to prioritise its choices for the reconstruction of buildings, as was the case for every religious community. Architecture played a relevant role in the reconceptualisation of the religious institutions for numerous values and beliefs had been deeply shaken with the war's atrocities, while reconstruction and urbanisation reframed places of interest and their built forms. In Saint-Nazaire, the Fraternity was rebuilt and completed in 1955 without the church, whereas in Nantes it was decided to build a new church to replace the former one which had been destroyed during the 1943 bombing.

This was the start of a new adventure, not only for the small Protestant community, bringing together the faithful around a new building that would take 15 years to complete and whose architectural expression would be hotly debated, but also for the city of Nantes, which, thanks to the construction of this church and the personalities involved, would write a new page in the urban reconstruction of its neighbourhoods stressing the importance of local involvement.

### Nantes church: the context

During that evening, while I headed toward the centre of the city with my Passive Defence team, I was shocked when I entered Bertrand Geslin street. Instead of seeing the full facade at the end of the street, I saw the greenery through the ripped facade, still framed by the two towers. The fact was there, brutal: the church no longer existed.<sup>16</sup> (Victoire Durand-Gasselín)

The bombings of September 16 and 23 in 1943 destroyed the Nantes church (Figure 3) as well as the neighbouring Marchix, Sainte-Anne and Chantenay districts, and further away the city docks and shipyards, to name a few of the affected sites. The City Work Departments quickly set up a reconstruction program, but it was slowed down by the vicissitudes of a war which was not yet over. The administrative structure where the state, at a national level, was still the main decision-maker also slowed down the process since it always took extra time to answer regional needs.<sup>17</sup>



**Fig. 3** The old Protestant Church after the 1943 bombing. Archives du temple de Nantes.

While waiting for a new church, temporary solutions were found to enable worship to continue. First, the community gathered at the Protestant retirement home in Bouchaud Street, then in a timber building – “the Swiss Chalet” – which was a donation from the Protestant Churches of Switzerland. The Ministry of Reconstruction finally sent subsidies for the design of a timber construction of greater importance. This building opened in a new location, at the Edouard Normand square, on June 3, 1945, and officially replaced the destroyed church.<sup>18</sup> Architect Victoire Durand-Gasselín designed the timber building and spoke about it with enthusiasm: “I have to confess that this modest construction has been

one of the joy of my career. Besides, the parishioners liked it so much they found no use to build a permanent church.”<sup>19</sup>

The proposal for a new location was quite significant at the city scale since the land upon which the former church stood was subject to urban restructuring, which considerably reduced its original size. With the new plan to enlarge Gigant Street, the church land was reduced by one third. Although the city eventually approved the land exchange in 1955 (Gigant land against part of the Edouard Normand square), the Protestant community did not wait to start developing the project of a new church. Funds were sought, as well as people who would manage the project. By 1948 the leaders of the project had been identified and the sources of funds clarified. Since the state would provide a maximum of 60 per cent of the funding needed for construction or restoration projects, religious authorities had to cover the remaining costs.<sup>20</sup> For the Protestant community this created a great rallying point.

First, it must be said, Nantes municipality dutifully fulfilled its assigned functions with complementary flexibility. For example, in order to shorten completion times for cases requiring a full appraisal, approval and decision from the state, the municipality took the initiative to submit all the documentation<sup>21</sup> long before the deadline of July 31, 1946. At the same time the municipality gave religious representatives control over the design and conduct of their restoration or reconstruction projects. Approving in 1948 the list of architects proposed by the parishes, dynamism characterised both the municipality and all the religious communities since the first project proposals were submitted the same year. As such, it can be said that architecture crystallised a fundamental institutional change, both for the city and religious groups.

With specific regards to the Protestant community, several individuals emerged as leaders of the construction of the new Nantes church. In addition to the members of the parish council, the pastor Raoul-Duval and his successor pastor Matiffa were fully involved in the project. Although pastor Matiffa is often remembered as the main carrier of the project because of his longevity in the position, starting in 1951, it was pastor Raoul-Duval who submitted the first new church proposal to the municipality on July 20, 1948. On the other end of the project, the architect of the new church was also a remarkable person, being one of the few women architects of the time in France.

In her forties at the start of the project, Victoire Durand-Gasselín was rather a novice in the field of religious architecture, even though she was the architect of the temporary government timber church; but she already had more than ten years of experience. After graduating from the Ecole Nationale Supérieure des Beaux-Arts in Paris in 1939, she immediately began her practice by directing the architecture firm that Charles Friésé left her while he was mobilised during the war. Being a woman in a male-dominated environment, and under exceptional circumstances, this experience certainly shaped her expertise but also accentuated her strong personality: “I tested the culotte skirt that I had ordered in Paris in anticipation of the future exercise of my work. It was very successful on worksites where I did not hesitate to climb on scaffoldings and even on the roofs.”<sup>22</sup> By opening her own

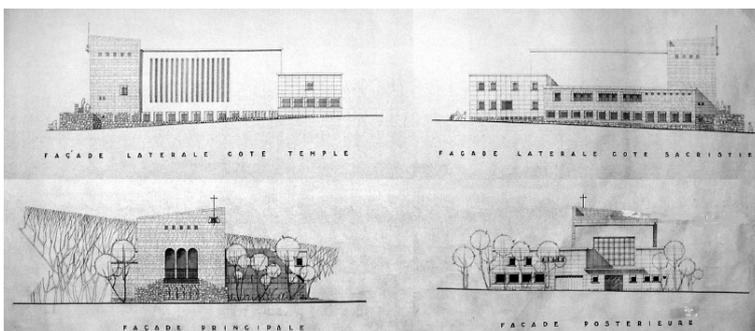
architectural firm in 1940 and registering to the French National Architect Board in 1942, she became one of the first woman architects in Nantes, if not the first one. Although the exact reasons for her appointment by the parish council have yet to be determined, her family history as the granddaughter and great-granddaughter of an architect, her membership of the Protestant community, her proximity with Charles Friésé (who she married in 1960), and her strong personality may have played a significant part, not to mention the desire of the parish council to continue a tradition of open-minded and forward-thinking approaches. It also reveals quite a societal innovation and institutional change through the practice of architecture of this religious community.

### From sketches to construction

Miss Durand-Gasselin and I have attended two conferences that took place in Paris on November 14 and 15; the first was about the location of the cross in evangelical churches, the second about architecture and decoration. It can be concluded that the construction of an evangelical church is difficult; there is indeed no style and interior layout that is required as is the case in England where churches are built in the Gothic style and with the same plan. Research, how exciting, is required to find a style, the interior layout and a simple interior decoration that faithfully reflect the spirit of our worship and be an evangelical witness.<sup>23</sup> (Pastor Matiffa)

Almost ten years after the bombings, the temporary timber building still served as a church. In 1952 Durand-Gasselin started working on the plans and the building permit, as well as the presentation of the project to the community.<sup>24</sup> Yet, the project faced many challenges. For example, the new site was complex because it was basically empty land surrounded by a continuum of five-storey buildings that presented a real historical architectural unity. How should the new church relate to this context? In this new location all four façades would be very visible: this not only meant that economically it would cost more to realise a coherent building, but also that the whole building needed to be considered aesthetically in terms of its details and not just its main facade as was the case with the previous church.

The construction of the new church raised many questions among the parish: how to find the right design that would address both doctrinal and practical matters? What style to use? What form to give the church? What was the architectural representation of worship?



**Fig. 4** Facades of the church, 1952, by Victoire Durand-Gasselin. Archives du temple de Nantes.

These questions addressed a national concern and it is why both Durand-Gasselín and Matiffa went to Paris to look for answers. Many drafts were presented,<sup>25</sup> reflective of the lively debates and the engagement of the community. In this process, and from the start, the architect's answers were clear: from the first sketches of 1952 to the plans submitted in January 1954 for the building permit, Durand-Gasselín chose a modern style with a simple concept: several rectangular volumes arranged in a L-shape composition was to serve as a symbolic gate and new urban landmark for the reconstructed neighbourhood (Figure 4).

Pragmatically, the design would take advantage of war damages, which were to be the basic materials for the new church's construction. Architecturally it would contrast strongly enough with its historical surroundings to impose its identity and serve as a new landmark for the protestant community, as well as for the city. The project regarded within the broader context was certainly innovative as per past constructions, location and timing, but was also derived from the architectural investigations that were conducted regionally and nationwide. For example, at the same time Le Corbusier had almost completed Ronchamp and was actively working on La Tourette.

Although Durand-Gasselín regretted later that the initial size of the building was reduced because of a lack of finance,<sup>26</sup> in 1956 the church-to-come was monumental, with a sleek design and simple volumes. Forty-five metres long and nearly 35 metres wide and surrounded by trees, the church was located to the northwest of the Edouard Normand square. The main rectangular volume housed a hall for worship, while on its sides two smaller rectangular volumes provided several rooms for parish activities, as well as two apartments (Figure 5).<sup>27</sup>



**Fig. 5** The church under construction, c. 1956 (above) and ground floor plan by Victoire Durand-Gasselín (below). Archives du temple de Nantes.

Three arches and a cut façade marked the main entrance, with stairs in rubble stone that enhanced the site topography. If the external composition seemed quite classic, especially with the use of white Charente stones on the facades that perfectly matched the surrounding buildings, the originality of the building is more explicit within its interior. There one finds no old-style or regionalist pastiche but rather a coherent design that expressed the spirit of that time. For example, the hall dedicated to worship clearly mastered the latest techniques for concrete and iron structural work, while the lighting of this hall also showed the finesse with which one could combine these techniques. The modern metal-frame windows offered a lateral natural light, which strengthens the overall staging of the hall while keeping in mind the theological approach and its humbleness. Without any pillars, visibility was provided up to the chancel, which included all the specific furniture for the different religious acts, without focusing too much on the officiant. In the same way, the various surface treatments (floors, walls and ceilings) demonstrated both architectural and theological thinking, paralleling financial constraints. For example, the choice of timber casing in the ceiling of the hall of worship and fibralith panels on the walls helped to ensure good acoustics, as well as sustaining a warm sobriety. Similarly, the tile floor of the entrance, which then gave way to the wooden floor, highlights not only the practical, good use of materials, but also some thought on how to experience the church. The fact that Durand-Gasselín designed almost everything, from the building to its smaller furniture pieces (benches, lectern, grid lamp, and so on), certainly contributed to the overall unity.

The inauguration of the building in October 1958 rapidly underlined the ‘details’ that still needed to be finalised: mainly the organ – inaugurated four months later – and the pastor’s apartment that would take three more years to complete. Nevertheless, the quality of the building was such that, 50 years later, very few changes were noticeable. Most of the later changes concerned decoration, implemented as finance and patrons became available. As such, the artist and painter Guy David was invited by pastor Matiffa to decorate the lobby of the entrance. On the full height of the wall, David portrayed his interpretation of the crucifixion and resurrection with colours and an artistic style that certainly contrasted with the traditional idea we have of the atmosphere of a place of worship. The work was acclaimed and, little by little, several other works would complete the decoration of the church.

## Conclusion

The history of the construction of the Protestant church of Nantes in the aftermath of World War II was part of a larger process of reconstruction, both for civil society and religious communities. In a country where over 90 per cent of the population practiced Catholic rites (e.g., baptism, religious weddings and funerals), in the mid-twentieth century<sup>28</sup> Protestantism was – and still is today – a minority. In this context, the fact that the Nantes church was the first new church to be erected post-war in the city evidences a real dynamism and desire to be part of the future of the city. This is in harmony with the principles regularly preached by the Protestant community. As such, architecture was not the representation of power, which rarely existed anyway for Protestants in France, but rather the expression of a cultural

group's activities within the city. This attitude evidences at least one major change that operated within Protestant institutions in the post-World War II context: architecture was not to mimic a certain establishment, as was the case with the first Nantes protestant church, but was to serve the community and be more approachable.

On more practical matters, although the construction of the new church was intrinsically linked to the constraints of the time such as the use of war damages or being subject to urban reconstruction measures, some choices still seem very bold. For example, the appointment of a female architect is significant in a city where there were many talented male architects who could have interfered, as well as the fact that a Parisian chief architect (Michel Roux-Spitz) was in charge of Nantes' reconstruction. The architectural style is also totally contemporary with the best productions of the time that renewed sacred architecture. Obviously the Nantes church is not as audacious as Le Corbusier's Ronchamp Chapel, inaugurated in 1955, but it definitively questioned the role and expression of architecture, as did the Sainte-Thérèse Chapel in Hem (1958) by Hermann Baur. If it is true that, at the national level, little is said about the impact of the Nantes church because there might be none, at the regional scale this is another story. There is no doubt that the Catholic churches that were constructed in the 1960s and 1970s, such as Notre-Dame du Rosaire (1961) or Saint-Etienne de Bellevue (1972),<sup>29</sup> were impacted by the Protestant church of Nantes.

Furthermore, the celebration of the 50th anniversary of the Nantes church in 2006 evidenced the achievement of the initial thoughts regarding the project: not only did the commemoration bring together the city's Protestant community, but also the broader population of Nantes, hence showing how the building has gained significance as an important part of the city's cultural heritage (Figure 6).



**Fig. 6** The Protestant church in 2006.  
Photograph by Karine Dupre, 2006.

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- 1 Guy Saupin, "Couvents tridentins et formes urbaines: Nantes du XVIIe au XIXe siècle," in *Nantes religieuse, de l'Antiquité Chrétienne à nos jours*, ed. Helene Rousteau-Chombeau (Université de Nantes, 2008), 141.
  - 2 Legifrance, Law of December 9, 1905.

- 3 Marie-Josée Simon-Bouttier, "L'Église Sainte-Thérèse de Nantes," in *Nantes religieuse*, 216-217.
- 4 Franck Debié and Pierre Vérot, *Urbanisme et art sacré, une aventure du XXe siècle* (Paris: Critérian, 1991), 43-49.
- 5 An important reference in the French Catholic community is the journal *L'Art Sacré* that was published between 1935 and 1969 and displayed all the main spiritual questions over this period in relation to architecture.
- 6 Three of the latest overall contribution are Philippe Wolff, ed., *Les protestants en France, 1801-2000* (Toulouse: Privat, 2001); Patrick Cabanel, *Les Protestants et la République* (Bruxelles: Editions Complexe, 2000); Rémi Fabre, *Les protestants en France depuis 1789* (Paris: La Découverte, 1999).
- 7 Dominique Gaurier, "L'Histoire de la Réforme à Nantes et en Loire-Atlantique," in *Livre du Cinquantenaire du Temple de Nantes, 1956-2006*, ed. Karine Dupré and Isabelle Richard (Nantes: Templenfête, 2006), 37.
- 8 Patrick Cabanel, "Napoléon et les protestants: l'institutionnalisation du pluralisme religieux," *Revue du Souvenir Napoléonien 470-471* (May-August 2007): 37.
- 9 Patrick Cabanel, "Napoléon et les protestants,"<sup>39</sup>
- 10 Dominique Gaurier, "L'Histoire de la Réforme à Nantes et en Loire-Atlantique,"<sup>37</sup>
- 11 Bibliothèque Nationale de France, Richelieu-Cartes et plans: GE DL 1851-189.
- 12 M-C Frisch et al., *Centenaire des cultes protestants à Préfailles*, 2010, [www.protestants-reformes-labaule.org/histoire-communaute-protestante-prefailles](http://www.protestants-reformes-labaule.org/histoire-communaute-protestante-prefailles) (accessed January 11, 2015).
- 13 Charles Nicol, *Enfants de Luther et de Calvin, De l'Édit de Nantes à nos jours l'histoire méconnue des protestants à Saint-Nazaire et dans sa région* (Vélizy: Edition Maignon, 1997), 67.
- 14 Datessen built at least 37 villas in La Baule! For further information, see Alain Charles, *La Baule et ses villas, le concept balnéaire* (Edition Massin, 2002).
- 15 I would like to acknowledge here the help of Mrs Weber, grand-daughter of the church builder, René Moritz. To know more about the construction of this church, see Nicol, *Enfants de Luther et de Calvin*, 67.
- 16 Extract from the account of the Nantes church construction by Victoire Durand-Gasselien, dated September 7, 1995, private collection of Mr. Jousselin.
- 17 Archives municipales de Nantes, "La reconstruction de Nantes," *Journée du Patrimoine* (2003).
- 18 Extract from the account of the Nantes church construction by Victoire Durand-Gasselien, dated September 7, 1995, private collection of Mr. Jousselin.
- 19 Extract from the account of the Nantes church construction by Victoire Durand-Gasselien, dated September 7, 1995, private collection of Mr. Jousselin. Translation from the author ("Je dois avouer que cette modeste construction a été une des joies de ma carrière professionnelle. D'ailleurs, les paroissiens s'y trouvaient si bien qu'ils estimaient inutile de reconstruire un Temple en dur!")
- 20 Archives municipales de Nantes, conseils municipaux des 8 février et 31 juillet 1946 dans "La reconstruction de Nantes," *Journée du Patrimoine* (2003).
- 21 This process was normally carried out by the parishes, which presented their case of reconstruction according to the availability of in-kind war damages such as concrete bricks, steel pieces, etc.
- 22 Departmental Archives of Loire-Atlantique, Fonds 181J "VDGF, Architecte".
- 23 Extracted from the General Meeting of January 25, 1953, in *Lien Fraternel* (newsletter of the protestant community), Nantes Church Archives.
- 24 Decision from March 11, 1952, Nantes Church Archives.
- 25 *Lien Fraternel*, October 1953: "Et le Temple? Les plans qui vous ont été présentés il y a un an ont été entièrement remaniés. Prenez patience, on travaille activement aux nouveaux plans et nous pourrions bientôt vous les montrer," Nantes Church Archives.
- 26 Interview with the architect, *Presse-Océan*, April 24, 1998.
- 27 Because of the lack of finance these apartments were completed in 1961. Nantes Church Archives.
- 28 Colette Muller and Jean-René Bertrand, "Où sont passés les catholiques," *Sciences Humaines* 41 (June-August 2003).
- 29 To know more about these two buildings, see Jean-Louis Kerouanton, "Les églises nantaises après la Seconde Guerre mondiale, l'architecture entre modernité sociale et nécessité urbaine," in *Nantes religieuse*, 224-235.