

## MONTREAL BEHIND THE SCENES | October 2007

Written by Ronald T. Harvie

# Behind the scenes

### Architectural Awareness in Montréal

In 1973, I was living just up the street from one of Montréal's most meaningful mansions, the Van Horne house. It wasn't the best-looking house in the "Golden Square Mile" where most of the city's 19th-century rich folks resided, but it had belonged to one of the most flamboyant tycoons, Sir William Cornelius Van Horne (1843-1915), builder of the great Canadian Pacific Railway, and by extension, one of the fathers of Canada itself.

Anyway, a developer had managed to get hold of the property and rumour had it that he was planning to raze the mansion and put up an office building. Just what Montréal needed, another glass and concrete box! At least, that was what enough people thought to create a vocal opposition to the project. The developer's response was to demolish the house secretly, before protesters could organize. How? One night, at 3 a.m., I awoke to the wild crashing of wrecking balls and within an hour, all that remained of the Van Horne

mansion was a huge mound of dusty rubble. For days afterwards, people—including me—scrambled over the pile looking for anything worth saving. But, of course, the place had been meticulously stripped beforehand.

Well, in 1975, that was the approach to architectural heritage in Montréal! But that was then and this is now. And in Montréal, as in most cities in North America, attitudes to historical sites have taken a U-turn in the last few decades. Too late, say the moaners. No, say the heritage people, stop mourning what's lost and concentrate on saving what's left.

So, for the past seventeen years, the city of Montréal, in partnership with other interested parties, has sponsored the Montréal Architectural Heritage Campaign. Its purpose, in official terms, is "to make our architectural heritage better known, to highlight its wealth and scope and to

honour those who contribute to enhancing the city's treasures."

In other words, heritage is everybody's business and until everybody takes an interest in it, the remaining Van-Horne-like mansions might meet the wrecker's ball at 3 a.m.! But since Montréal has the highest concentration of historic monuments in Canada—more than 40,000 buildings are protected under provincial or municipal legislation—heritage preservation is heading in the right direction.

Every autumn, the Montréal Architectural Heritage Campaign highlights the city's visible historic fabric with a program of exhibitions, guided tours, lectures, documentaries and other activities to help and encourage Montrealers to discover their multifaceted past through buildings—industrial, residential and religious.

# MONTRÉAL BEHIND THE SCENES | October 2007

Perhaps most importantly, through its Special Awards, the campaign also focuses on the contribution of individuals or groups who, with passion and conviction, involve themselves in the preservation and promotion of Montréal's heritage. Of course, the winners for 2007 are unannounced as of this writing, but here are some of last year's laureates:

Father Claude Turmel, who received the Award for Excellence, given to an individual or group that has demonstrated the will to contribute to heritage preservation in the common interest. For over 25 years, Father Turmel has been a leader in the conservation of Montréal's religious architectural heritage.

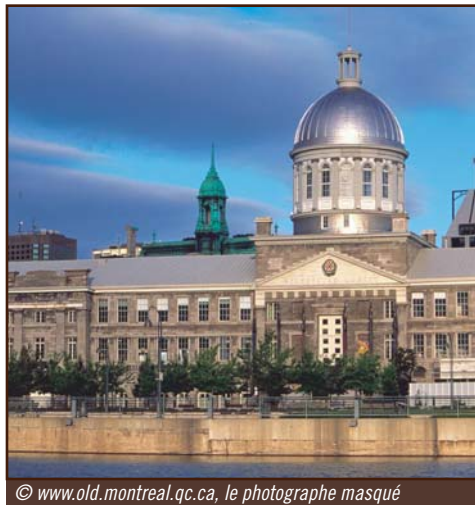
Atelier l'Établi walked away with the Artisan Award, presented to an individual or company for particular work in the area of building restoration. The company has been actively involved in architectural woodwork reproduction and restoration since it was founded in 2002.



© Société de développement de Montréal, Denis Tremblay

Développements McGill Inc and the architectural firm NOMAD were given the Award for Heritage Enhancement, bestowed on a corporation for an exemplary restoration of a historic building. They

recycled and transformed the Outremont Convent for residential use.



© www.old.montreal.qc.ca, le photographe masqué

The same two firms also won The Award for Architectural Integration. This recognizes a project which maintains the beauty and integrity of an old neighbourhood while adding a new building—in this case a commercial building on Gosford Street.

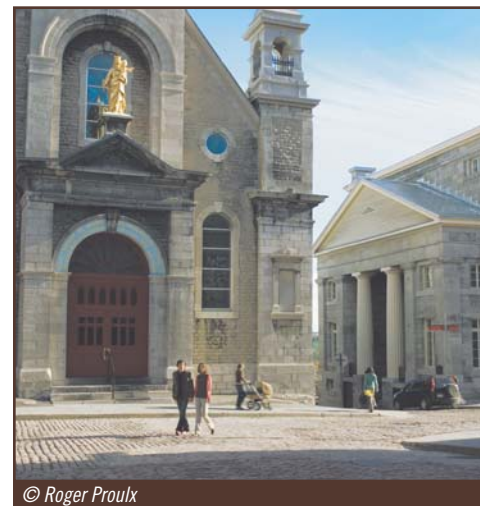
Finally, Samen Investments, Gestion Sidev Inc., and Beïque Legault Thuot architectes went home with the Commercial Heritage Building Award of the Greater Montréal Real Estate Board, for the preservation of heritage commercial structures. They were responsible for the restoration of 400 de Maisonneuve Blvd. West.

You'll notice that this last award has a private sector partner. And there are several non-governmental participants in the Architectural Heritage Campaign. One key player is Héritage Montréal. This not-for-profit group was founded in 1975 (the same year as the Van Horne house debacle—coincidence? Hmm...) to "ensure that urban development in our city follows appropriate rules and benefits the greater good."

Héritage Montréal helps assess and monitor projects affecting heritage properties and keeps

the public informed about such activity. It co-publishes a renovation guide/handbook for homeowners. It offers renovation courses, given by experts in their fields. It even helps train firefighters in dealing with old construction methods! And it provides a research/documentation centre, open to the public, at its offices—not fancy digs by any means, but appropriately located in a historic greystone building at 100 Sherbrooke Street East. Telephone 514-186-2662. Or visit [www.heritagemontreal.org](http://www.heritagemontreal.org)

The point here is that in the space of thirty years, architectural awareness in Montréal has increased exponentially. Now everyone is passionate about it, from the city council to the city's craftspeople. Even heavy-handed developers are getting in on the act: a few years ago, when the office building on the site of the Van Horne mansion was converted into a high-end hotel, the man who called in the wrecking balls 30 years earlier presented a few relics of the old house to be displayed in the hotel. A cynical ploy to look heritage conscious? Probably. But just maybe there was a tiny twinge of conscience. After all, he had kept the fragments...



© Roger Proulx

## SOURCE

[www.ville.montreal.qc.ca/patrimoine](http://www.ville.montreal.qc.ca/patrimoine) | [www.heritagemontreal.org](http://www.heritagemontreal.org)  
Nathalie Vallerand, "Lover and defender of Montréal's heritage",  
Destination Centre-Ville, Winter 2005.

Tourisme Montréal authorizes you to use and/or reproduce this monthly in whole or in part. If you wish to quote the author, please do. To receive this monthly, please send a request by e-mail to [mdube@tourisme-Montréal.org](mailto:mdube@tourisme-Montréal.org)

To receive this monthly, please send a request by e-mail to [mdube@tourisme-montreal.org](mailto:mdube@tourisme-montreal.org) and let us know if you prefer to get it by regular mail or by e-mail. For previous issues of Montréal Behind the Scenes, please have a look at our Web site: [www.tourisme-montreal.org/Media/03/default.asp](http://www.tourisme-montreal.org/Media/03/default.asp)

Production: Bobby Branchaud