

THE SAD SAGA OF MAISON ALCAN

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Shortly after the publication of an article in the Montreal Gazette on the demolition of a substantial part of Maison Alcan, I was approached by a journalist who wanted to understand what the controversy was all about. Was Maison Alcan not merely a jumbled assembly of old and new buildings, most of average quality? Some were in stone, some in brick, while others were clad in glass and metal. Their respective heights varied significantly; they were erected at different times. The cluster of buildings includes Victorian patrician residences, a semi-modern office building, an abandoned temple, a marble-clad office tower, and a former brick-clad residential hotel. There is no coherent architectural language holding these buildings together. The public spaces were not exceptionally significant or beautiful and were not genuinely public. To my interlocutor, Maison Alcan, lacked unity (hence beauty) and was nothing more than a hodgepodge of disparate elements. Maison Alcan did not possess the urban presence of Montreal's City Hall, or the elegance of the Mount Royal Club, or the finesse of the Ritz Carleton hotel. Her queries were legitimate, but her assessment was based on a wrong premise. I attempted to convince her that the Alcan project should be read as a faithful microcosm of the city, a city within the city, as well as a textbook exemplar of modern urban conservation. There was a lesson to be learned from Maison Alcan.

To appreciate the full extent of the calamity of the “redesign” of the initial project, one must look back in time and know its history. The saga began when the Aluminum Company of Canada, Alcan, made the courageous decision to abandon its rented headquarters in Place Ville Marie and elected to build its own *Maison* on Sherbrooke Street. David Culver, Alcan's president at the time, sought the corporation he directed to have its own address, instead of being part of an entourage of corporate headquarters. He convinced his Board of Directors that its new headquarters should be unique and not be another archetypal corporate tower, of which Montreal had many. He was committed to build a head office which would contribute positively to the urban development of Montreal and would stand as a paradigm of a more responsible urban corporate architecture. Alcan had a long tradition of patronage of good architecture.

Most importantly, Culver knew that he needed to work with an architect who shared his view of the city to reach his stated goal. In other words, he sought an architect who was conversant with the essence of Montreal, who shared his affection for the city, and who had the professional wherewithal to undertake such a large mandate. Most of all, Culver wanted to work with an architect whose main concern was other than one of producing yet another “signature” building. The appointment of architect Ray Afflek became the obvious choice. And thus, the Afflek-Culver team was born, that of an enlightened client and a dedicated designer.

Maison Alcan became an instant architectural icon in Canada and was acclaimed at the national and international levels as a significant and innovative urban prototype. The consensus was that

Montreal was showing a fresh way to do corporate architecture. The days of the brutal demolition of the Van Horne Mansion and the Prince of Wales terrace might be over. Conservation and recycling could be achieved in a truly contemporary and organic manner, where old and new can co-exist in a symbiotic relationship. To Afflek, contextualism was an architectural ideology focused on relationships between the existing and the new, between what is primary and what is secondary, what is formal and what is not. In other words, contextualism had less to do with the re-use of old forms than with connections between parts: This concern for “relationships” is the most significant aspect of the Alcan project.

If built, the proposed insertion of a 30-storey office tower on that site would make a mockery of Afflek’s gentle weaving of the old and new buildings into the existing urban fabric. The “Maison Cirque-du-soleil” would become a brutal and out-of-scale foreign body “plunged” into the area. It would be an absolute misunderstanding of the very premise that drove the initial design of Maison Alcan.

As is obvious from the design of the new proposal, the new Owners of the project, its architect, and the City Planning authorities are either oblivious to the importance of the existing project as a significant urban prototype, or worse, do not care. The architect (who also is the author of the odd addition to the Mount Stephen Club) expressed no sympathy whatsoever for Afflek’s project. The proposed tower will obliterate the better part of the Maison Alcan, kill the Culver atrium, demolish a significant segment of the existing project, injure the façade of the old Berkeley Hotel. It will overshadow the open-air spaces, trivializes the patrimonial component to the saving of three Greystone houses. In Afflek’s project, the old structures held hands with the new additions. In the proposed project, the tower thumbs its nose to the older parts by virtue of its overwhelming size and height and its grandstanding language. While Afflek was modest in form and architectural syntax, the new architecture is bombastic and overly heroic.

I am reminded of Amsterdam, a city in which I lived for a year. Historic Amsterdam was considered an urban masterpiece *sans pareil*, and yet, hardly any of its buildings ARE masterpieces in themselves. The quality of Amsterdam is derived from its architectural modesty, its rich mix of old and new, its juxtaposition of many different activities, and its just relationship of solids to voids, and its clear demarcation between the public and the private realms. Maison Alcan is like a microcosm of Amsterdam: a city within a city, an essay of correct relationships, and done without pretence. Like Amsterdam, none of the component parts of Maison Alcan are masterpieces, but they are all very good. Being very good is often better than being outstanding or unique. Maison Alcan speaks of Ray Afflek, the *boulevardier*, the man who loved the streets of his city, who enjoyed encountering friends, who remained an informal and accessible professional and colleague despite his international fame. Maison Alcan, much like Afflek himself, is joyful, accessible, and inviting. It is simple and convincing.

Any city is, by its very nature, an economic organism where trade and commerce are one its vital vocations. Economic stewardship is one of the primary roles of a city administration. Yet, a city is much more than an economic reality. It must fulfil a social role, advance its culture, inspire its residents, and be a responsible steward of its physical and cultural patrimony. No responsible city can afford to neglect, or worse, condemn any of these concerns. The “Maison Cirque-du-soleil” may be a solid real-estate operation supported by a client wanting to maximize its profits and a city administration seeking more tax revenues. It is a sad fact that so much contemporary

urban development, here and elsewhere, is reduced to an economic concern or, worse, to a wealth-making endeavour for the benefit of the private sector.

The argument that three grey stone houses on Sherbrooke Street are preserved in the new project is missing the very point of urban conservation. Heritage conservation must not be limited to a concern reserved for the so-called better buildings. Once the city is understood as an organism made of a rich variety of components parts: small and large buildings, old and new structures, buildings that make a statement and those that make up the background, spaces that are private and those that are truly public, the exclusive preservation of a few architect-designed houses constitutes a limited and elitist view of architectural conservation.

We live in an era of the heroic urban statements. We fear the quiet or silent architecture. We are obsessed with self-expression, with individualism, and so-called creativity. We forget that being new does not mean being good. We reject the idea that the ideal city is a composite work of art where the whole is greater than any of the parts.

Most irritating is the intellectual pretence used to justify this anomaly. The architects speak of a pixilated tower that adjusts itself to its context. In this case the pixilation is nothing more than a superficial façade treatment where some panels can be pushed in or out at will. The pixilation metaphor is, at best, questionable and irrelevant. Ultimately, a work of architecture must be judged based on its social meaning, its construction, its liveability, its permanence, and its beauty. The proof of the pudding is in the eating, not in its rhetoric.