A view of 3283 Cedar Ave. in Westmount: the Category 1 house on the site seems to have disappeared.

A sad situation

How Westmount’s design process failed is a mystery

ANNMARIE ADAMS Special to The Gazette

Trying to add a window or change your porch in upper Westmount is like preventing a snowfall in January. For the past 15 years or so, a multi-layered process has policed all renovations to older homes in order to maintain and enhance Westmount’s distinctive buildings and the overall quality of its neighbourhoods.

Westmount’s strict design guidelines are the envy of countless Canadian municipalities, especially those that have lost heritage buildings and settled for mediocre new design. The same sort of careful scrutiny of old and new pieces like Nantucket, Mass., and Charleston, S.C., are so lonely.

In these American cities, the rules in Westmount are clear. Houses designed to be Category 1, the former city’s most prestigious designation, are to be kept in perpetuity, restored to the highest standards. Only additions or exterior alterations that harmonize with the original building are acceptable. Demolition? Unthinkable. The interiors are not controlled by the municipality.

Now is it, then, that the Category 1 house at 3283 Cedar Ave. seems to have disappeared? From the front and back, not one square inch of the five-bedroom Tudor-revival house, probably constructed as early as 1927, is visible amid a sea of new construction. As well, several mature trees are now missing, a 25-metre fence and a slightly shorter weeping willow.

By all accounts, the exterior of the mansion was unremarkable and rundown, but the house retained features of its 19th-century origins. The entry and exterior cladding of the original house had been substantially altered over the years. (The 1872 house was probably clad in wood siding. The roof was intact and the interiors were impressive. Especially grand was the dining room, featuring fine wood paneling. Visitors to the house remember the original chandeliers, and that even the bathroom had stained-glass windows.

And what does this episode mean for the bigger problem of endangered historic buildings in the megacity? Could the Notman house or the Royal Victoria Hospital disappear during a process of renovation, despite all our watchdogs? Westmount is one of the best systems for managing historic architecture in Quebec.

Second, if the new construction is allowed to proceed, what incentive remains for owners of other historic homes to preserve their homes?

In cases where demolition has occurred without a permit or in excess of what is allowed by a permit, fines in Westmount run from $5,000 to $25,000. Even this maximum is only 2 per cent of the assessed value of the Cedar Avenue property in 1958: $1.2 million. (Some California cities penalize those responsible for the unlawful demolition of designated historic houses as much as 10 per cent of the property’s assessed value.)

In such cases, Westmount officials also have the right to order that an improperly demolished structure be rebuilt at the owner’s expense. In this particular case, even if it were found that the demolition was unlawful, it would make no sense to rebuild the much altered house. The exquisite interiors can never be replaced, but their senseless loss could be acknowledged by demanding the design review process begin anew, including full public hearings.

An obvious third lesson is that so-called partial-demolition permits should be monitored more carefully.

Exactly why or when Westmount’s seemingly footloose design process failed in this instance is a mystery. The details should become clearer as the legal battle takes shape. What’s important now is to acknowledge that public confidence in our best preservation planning is history.

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### A history of political Islam

If it’s true that Islamism is in decline chances are it won’t go quietly

Jihadi: The Trail of Political Islam

Harvard University Press, 454 pages, $29.95

TODD HOFFMAN Special to The Gazette

The massive terrorist assault of Sept. 11 was not, Gilles Kepel argues, the dying paroxysm of a movement in decline and despair. Islamism is a spent political phenomenon rooted in the Trail of Political Islam. While some fanatics associated with the movement are still at loose ends, the cause of what they see as a holy war, the ideology they seek to advance has been exposed as “a political blueprint that is now faded and unworkable.”

Political Islam — or Islamism — emerged from the generation of first post-colonial nationalist leaders to satisfy the rising aspirations of newly educated, urbanized (but poor and growing) populations. At a time of rapid change and uncertainty about where Muslims fit into a world dominated by the alien ideologies of the Soviet Union and the United States, Islamism was presented as an opportunity for Muslims to assert their own cultural characteristics. As the disasters of the Dar al-Islam, the land inhabited by Islam, and to live under the sharia, the law according to the holy texts.

In order to succeed — by which Kepel means, consolidate political power — Islamism has had to act in two parts: stigmatizing the young urban poor and the devout middle class. However, these groups have also been the beneficiaries of the ideologies. The young urban poor seek a social revolutionary alternative to the status quo. The devout middle class is concerned about the share of power within the existing social order. From this cleavage, Kepel concludes, political Islamism has been able to consolidate the two polarizing forces.

And what about the future of political Islam? Kepel argues that the threat to the West from political Islam’s name is a symptom of its bankruptcy.

“Despite the latest frantic round of intellectualism, the world remains more and moreligious, and its political consequences remain potent.”

Kepel argues that the turmoil and climate of Islamic fundamentalism is the result of the world’s growing Islamic population, which is increasingly disillusioned with the West’s policies towards the Middle East.

Political Islam is the result of the West’s policy towards the Middle East, and its political consequences remain potent. The world is becoming more and more religious, and its political consequences remain potent. The world is becoming more and more religious, and its political consequences remain potent.

‘‘Islamism is a movement that has become a political force, not a religious one.’’

Kepel’s argument is that the West’s policy towards the Middle East has contributed to the rise of political Islam, and that the West should take responsibility for the consequences.

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