

## THE DEVASTATION OF THE BAY DEPARTMENT STORE

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Once again Montreal is confronted with the proposed destruction of one of its architectural landmarks. The planned demolition of a significant portion of the Bay Department Store (formerly, Henry Morgan and Company) on Phillips Square would be a tragic loss for the city and an irreparable urbanistic blunder. The story of this latest proposal is but a continuance of a depressing narrative of demolition of significant buildings in the city-centre. Over the years, owners of major commercial and institutional buildings have demolished or disfigured their properties with the sole purpose of increasing their commercial values. The Bay Store is one of the very best, if not the best, examples of 19<sup>th</sup>-century large-scale commercial architecture in Canada. In most other countries, a building of the architectural and urbanistic excellence of the Bay would be entered in a national register of significant architecture. In Montreal, it is mere real estate left to the whims of the developer and the City Administration.

The recycling or reuse of buildings for new uses is an unavoidable consequence of the constant urban evolution. While commerce and business are fundamental ingredients that make up the city, the economic well-being of the urban environment should be but one of many concerns. A “good city” is the embodiment of its history, its culture, its ethics, its symbols, and its aspirations.

The rendering of the proposed Bay project, as published in the Montreal Gazette of February 24, depicts the superposition of a 25-storey office tower atop the existing 8-storey store. The new tower will dwarf the original 130-year-old store and reduce it to a leftover of what was once a *grande dame* of Montreal architecture. Mercifully, the proposal calls for the preservation of the smaller original store facing the Square, but the northern section of the building is to be demolished, except for part of façade wall. This so-called “preservation” component of the new project is a mere exercise in facadism, a token gesture to satisfy local conservation movements. Facadism has become, unfortunately, a Montreal forte.

The promotional image of the project shows a high massive and cumbersome tower “dropped” onto the roof of the old building and consigns the existing lateral façade of the Morgan’s Store to a scenographic décor to be applied to the base of the new tower. One does not “drop” a 25-storey tower atop a 130-year-old 8-storey building. The addition can only be built by demolishing the existing low-rise building and constructing an entirely new tower from the ground up. The current red sandstone façade will be anchored to the skeleton of the new building. As such, this project is not one of architectural conservancy, but it should be called for what it is: untruthful conservancy. It may appeal to the “scenographers” in this theatre of absurd urbanism, but it misses the very essence of what significant conservancy is all about. A building is more than a stage design. Its interior must resonate with its exterior, it must complement its context, it must acknowledge its allegiance to the public domain, it must stand for continuity. Conservation, by definition, is an exercise in continuity.

The rooftop tower sits surrealistically on the “existing store” and will contribute precious little to its immediate environment. The design of the tower is neither an intelligent architectural counterpoint, nor a prolongation of the original building. It exists as an object unto itself. The tower conveys what it is: a space-accounting exercise which speaks only of rentable square meters. This is not architecture. This is not urban planning. This is not urban design. It is a mercantile exercise. The city, for its own economic reasons, approved the proposal primarily because it will collect more real estate taxes from the over-development of the site. How far we have come from the day when Henry Morgan built his new store on a prestigious public square, and selected John Pearce Hill, an outstanding architect, to produce an equally prestigious building. It was a building designed with skill and built with pride. It was a gift to the city.

It is disheartening that the only public criticism heard so far in the media relates to circumstances of the real estate market: the overabundance of vacant office space, the decreased demand for office space, etc. One must lament City Council’s abdication, once more, in its role as defender of its patrimony. As is usual in Montreal, there was no public involvement in the process. There were no critical discussions on the consequences of the development. There were no serious deliberations on its impact on the environment, on the destruction of a 19<sup>th</sup> century commercial icon, on the polemical questions between old and new architecture, on the motive of zoning changes for the benefit of a private client. Is the Drapeau era back with us?

Maison Alcan, designed by Ray Afflek with Julia Gersowitz, stands as an eloquent paradigm of how to integrate modern architecture within a Victorian context. They showed the way and made us proud. Alas, the authors of the Bay project never heeded the lesson of Maison Alcan.

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