

# Chinatown's architecture comes of age

## Hotels reflect community's confidence

(Second of two parts)

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SPECIAL TO THE GAZETTE

**M**ontreal is a city of communities, each with distinguishing characteristics that are reflected in the neighborhoods they inhabit. In any given area, the predominance of an ethnic group may be expressed on billboards, storefront graphics and the "labels" on community buildings. Often these superficial signs are the only tangible evidence that the group forms a significant part of the population in the neighborhood; with few exceptions, newcomers to Montreal have occupied and adapted the buildings they found in the areas where they settled. St. Laurent Blvd., for example, has buildings dating back a century that have served as important centres for half a dozen different groups.

As a community matures, however, it often commissions its own structures for specific purposes: churches, community centres, schools, etc. The fondness for the homeland expressed in the new architecture reveals a lot about the group. As an example, the Golden Square Mile with baronial mansions demonstrated the power and confidence of the Scottish population that lived in the area a century ago. In this way, our built environment is an interesting record of the settlement of Montreal.

Seen from this perspective, Montreal's Chinatown has come of age. Originally the community centred on St. Laurent Blvd. and la Gauchetière St. harbored its population within a host of re-adapted buildings. Recent architecture in Chinatown has become much more assertive. The new Holiday Inn Sinomonde Garden and the Furama Hotel are examples of the growth and confidence of the Chinese community, which is burgeoning even in the face of the recent recession. The projects are, of course, also a reflection of the uncertain future facing Hong Kong.

Unlike the hotels discussed last week — the Vogue and the Inter-Continental — the new inns of Chinatown occupy entirely new buildings.

The Holiday Inn Sinomonde Garden was designed by the Montreal architectural firm Jacques Beique and Associates, in conjunction with Hua Eyi Design Consultants, Hong Kong. The eight-storey, buff-brick building sits squarely on the corner of St. Urbain St. and Viger Ave.; its complex, U-shaped plan accommodates 235 rooms, a bar, two restaurants, 40 boutiques and a health club. Two magnificent Chinese pagodas perched on the roof lend the building a distinctive silhouette.

The interior, too, has several interesting Chinese features. A skylit atrium on the second floor features a third pagoda and with an ornamental pool with a bridge across it. All the materials for these parts of the building were imported from China.

Modelled on the Old Palace of the Forbidden City in Beijing, the pagodas are designed and constructed using ancient Chinese techniques in which standardized structural parts are connected without nails.

Publicity material from Holiday Inn



GAZETTE PHOTOS, GORDON BECK

Holiday Inn Sinomonde Garden, with its distinctive rooftop pagodas, will open in October.



Stripped of its Chinese flourishes, Furama becomes an ordinary building.

claims the building was also designed according to the ancient code of Fung Sui, a code developed to prevent evil spirits from entering a building. It is thought these spirits travel in straight lines. By the careful placement of walls and screens and special consideration of the building's orientation the spirits' paths can be blocked.

Fung Sui has received an unprecedented amount of coverage in professional architectural journals since it was used in English architect Richard Rogers' massive Hong Kong Bank.

Even though the hotel will not open until October, it already promises to be one of the more interesting additions to Montreal's architectural inventory. The building shows an honest attempt to combine modern North American planning with ancient cultural traditions.

This effort, however, has not been without its trials. The owners and the architects encountered many problems — from difficulties in obtaining technical specifications on the imported building materials to having the Chinese artisans arrested on site for purportedly

violating Quebec labor laws.

One hopes the Chinese community will be rewarded in a centre whose reference to the homeland runs deeper than the building's skin.

The Furama Hotel, on René Lévesque Blvd. at Hôtel de Ville Ave., was designed by Montreal architect Claude Touikan. Patrick Tsui, a Hong Kong immigrant who came to Montreal about six years ago, was the developer. Regrettably, the claim made in the Furama's publicity brochure, that the hotel's "elegant architecture distinguishes itself," does not bear scrutiny.

Externally, the Furama's Chinese character is pure appliqué. If the two Chinese lions and the oversized lantern at the main entrance were removed, what would remain would be an undistinguished, low-budget inn. Although there is undoubtedly a demand for reasonably priced hotel rooms in downtown Montreal, the Hotel Furama contributes only minimally to Chinatown's architecture. Its character is skin deep. The hotel's plan is standard; with its eight floors, 107 rooms are arranged along double-loaded corridors. The building's exterior of precast concrete panels and overscaled bay windows of mirrored glass reveal little of the interior organization or scale of the hotel rooms.

Hotels, of course, are much more than their architecture. Food, ambience, service and security also figure in the equation. From an architectural perspective, however, Chinatown's new hotels are perfect examples of the expression of a cultural community at different levels. The Furama's reference to Chinese precedent is applied, while the Holiday Inn Sinomonde Garden's Chinese character is an integral part of the hotel's plan, cross-section and details.

It is ironic that of the two hotels, the building expressing the firmer commitment to Chinese traditions is the project sponsored by an American multinational corporation whose reputation until recently was based on rigid standardization of its buildings.

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