Hospital is Chinese in spirit

Appearance is mostly functional, but building is vital to community

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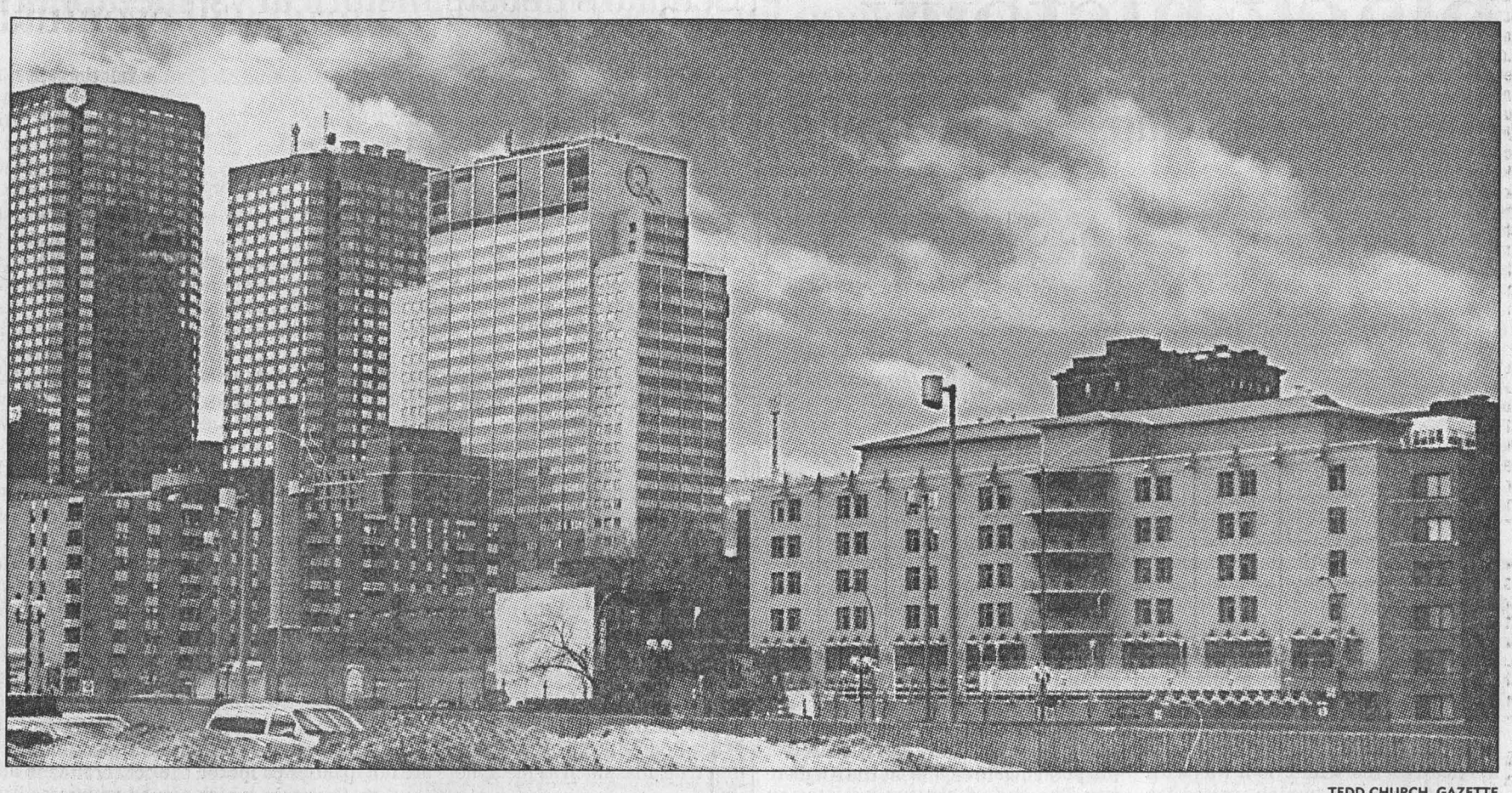
Special to The Gazette



TEDD CHURCH, GAZETTE

The Chinese Hospital (building in right foreground) in its downtown setting.

Just when hospital administrators and politicians are considering the abandonment of several historic buildings in the centre of Montreal, a brand new health-care facility is about to open downtown, underlining the continuing relevance of the hospital as a vital, urban institution.

This is indeed a happy story. After its official opening on April 20, the staff and patients of the Chinese Hospital will move into their sparkling, purpose-built, six-storey, red-brick home on a site facing Viger Ave., between de Bullion St. and Hôtel de Ville Ave. Having previously occupied a temporary shelter on Clark St. (1918-20), a former synagogue on de la Gauchetière (1920-65), and, since 1965, a building at 7500 St. Denis St., the evolution of the hospital is a tale of great community strength and cohesion.

The facility's main role is the provision of long-term care to elderly members of the Chinese community. The idea of moving it to Chinatown came directly out of administrators' observations, as early as 1984, that patients' families were likely to visit more frequently if their loved ones were more conveniently situated. In 1981-82, the St. Denis St. building was expanded with the addition of 44 beds for relatively autonomous, elderly patients. These patients and their families would often take the No. 55 bus to Chinatown, usually to eat out in restaurants. A team of researchers from the Royal Victoria Hospital studied the impact of relocation, exploring the possibility of setting up a branch or satellite hospital in Chinatown. Their results confirmed what hospital administrators suspected; patients were likely to become even more self-sufficient (thus happier and healthier) if the hospital were moved to the heart of Chinatown.

"There's no such thing as a Chinese hospital in China."
Pierre Lalonde, director

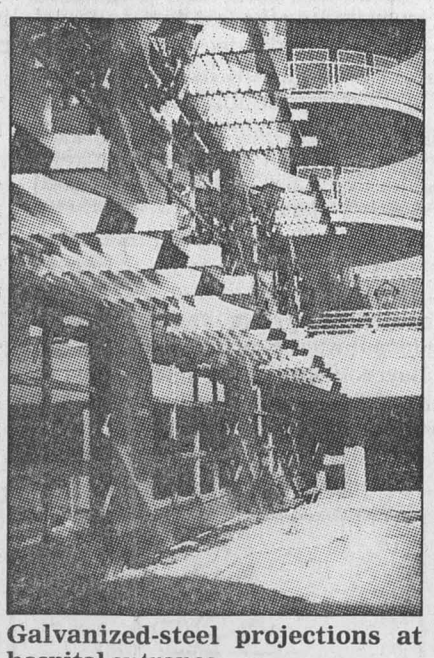
Establishing the institution's citizenship in the Chinese neighbourhood was thus imperative in the design of the new hospital. The building is basically a large rectangle, sitting comfortably back from Viger Ave. The main entrance is located in the centre of the long, south-facing facade, under a projecting second-floor terrace. Underground parking is accessible just behind the building, from a ramp off de Bullion. The daycare facility, a modestly scaled single-storey pavilion, bridges the change in grade above the ramp.

Not surprisingly, the first two storeys of the new Chinese Hospital are dedicated to the more public functions of cafeteria, day centre, outpatient department and administrative offices. The four upper floors each accommodate 32 patients (the size of the floor plate was determined by the area one staff member could supervise), in variously designed pleasant rooms for one, two and four patients. All the patient rooms are located along the periphery of the building, to allow for great views, natural light and clear orientation. Services requiring less exposure, such as linen, medical supplies, and baths are situated in the centre of the block.

According to Jacques Reeves, of the consortium of architects responsible for the project (Blais Bélanger Reeves Martin Morris Marcotte), the simple rectangular footprint of the hospital proved to be the most efficient use of the site and caused the least conflict for residents along Hôtel de Ville, who, in 1996, had voiced concern about the scale of the project and its fit in the neighbourhood.

What's so Chinese about the architecture of the Chinese Hospital? It's all in the details, according to Reeves. The intensity of the red brick came from the colour of sunsets reflected on the Imperial Palace in Beijing. And following the ancient practice of Feng Shui, the entrance to the hospital is designed so as to block the paths of evil spirits. This ancient code, which governs the placement of cities, buildings and furniture in order to live harmoniously with the environment, also stipulates that the entrance could not face east. The galvanized-steel projections above the windows of the first two storeys and at the roof line recall, in a thoroughly abstract and contemporary way, the forms of the traditional pagoda, as do the lantern-like lamp standards outside.

With the exception of the entry design, these details may seem rather superficial. Given that the Chinese Hospital is the only one of its kind in Canada, shouldn't the architecture be more Chinese? Not in today's quickly changing health-care world, according to Reeves. He speculates that the building may be transformed into something completely different in the future, and so intentionally designed the Chinese references to be relatively disposable.



Galvanized-steel projections at hospital entrance.

Pierre Lalonde, director general of the hospital, agrees with the minimal use of Chinese features, even though 83 per cent of the hospital's clientele are unilingual Chinese. "There's no such thing as a Chinese hospital in China," he said, noting that new health-care institutions in that country tend to follow Western standards of design.

But Xin Wu, an architect from Shanghai, now living in Montreal, sees trends in hospital design in her homeland from a different perspective.

"The hospital, as a house for patients, is thought to hold turbid air (zhuo qi), which should be dispersed as soon as possible. We also believe that the god of disease fears sunlight. There are quite a few wards in China designed as court garden houses with external corridors, using natural ventilation rather than air conditioning for most of the year. The main wards face south or north for better ventilation and more sunshine, while the service parts face east or west," she said, after seeing the Montreal building.

Wu adds that most traditional architecture in mainland China is white, gray or black, not red. To her, the most purely Chinese aspect of the new hospital is its fenestration design. "What I find quite interesting," she said, "is the asymmetrical division of the window, a metaphor of the window division in vernacular houses in southeastern China." Clearly pleased with this Chinese reading of his elevation, Reeves is quick to note that the design does double duty: the vertical emphasis in the openings was intended, in his mind, to harmonize with the Victorian rowhouses along Hôtel de Ville.

While the new Chinese Hospital is clearly not "authentic" Chinese architecture, then, it is genuine Chinatown architecture. Most of the shops, restaurants, hotels and other buildings that line the streets of Chinatowns in North American cities, including Montreal, bear little resemblance to structures in mainland China. They tend to be based, rather, on a superficial North American idea of Chinese culture. Like Reeves's rather cosmetic nods to China in the design of the new hospital, most of the neon signs, Chinese lettering, and stuff inside the structures of Chinatown can be easily removed, leaving generic buildings that could become, almost overnight, something completely different.

"We believe that the god of disease fears sunlight."
Xin Wu, Chinese architect

In this regard, the Chinese Hospital is a much more contemporary take on Chinatown, especially when compared with some of its neighbours, such as the Holiday Inn Sinomonde Garden, at the corner of St. Urbain St. and Viger Ave., which opened in 1991. It features two rooftop pagodas constructed by Chinese artisans of materials imported from China. The Chinese Hospital, in fact, has more in common with facilities designed for other cultural groups in Montreal, such as the Jewish Hospital of Hope which opened in 1993, than it does with traditional Chinese construction.

Despite the successful integration of the building's elevations into Chinatown, there are a couple of disappointing details in the site planning of the new Chinese Hospital. Unfortunately, the institution was unable to acquire the piece of land at the corner of Viger and de Bullion. Rather than occupying the full block, then, the actual building site is L-shaped. This southwest corner, sadly, remains an unattractive parking lot. Hopefully, the Chinese garden planned for the other front corner of the site, but then cut in the final scheme, will be realized in the near future.

Secondly, the large projecting terrace on the second floor gives the appearance of an elevated roadway or parking structure. This is actually the roof of the cafeteria and is accessible from both the multi-purpose room intended for religious ceremonies and the physiotherapy area. Had it been finished in the same red brick as the rest of the building, or perhaps detailed in such a way as to break down its massive scale, this generous terrace would seem more truthful to its purpose as a place for significant human activity (it's for Tai Chi).

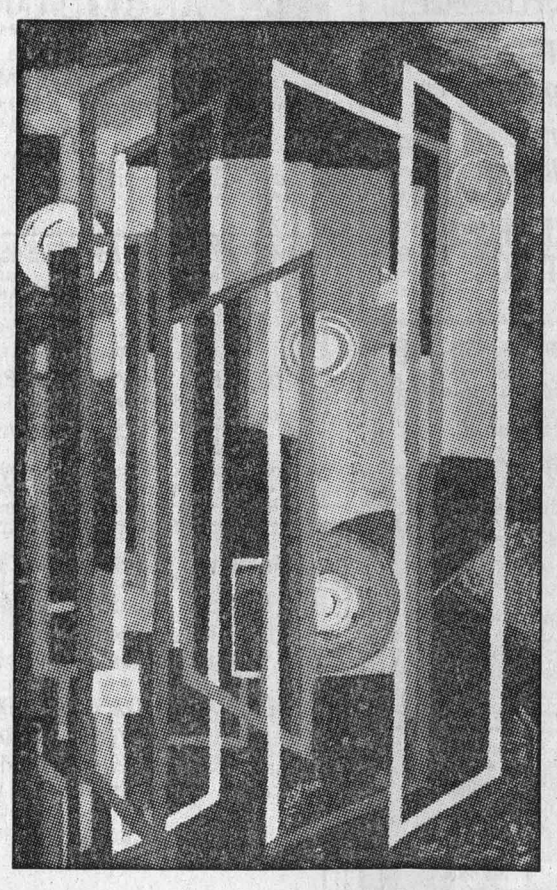
In spite of these difficulties, an extremely modest budget ($11.75 million), and a long list of bureaucratic snags, Montreal's newest hospital is a no-nonsense, cheerful addition to Chinatown. And its message is essential: hospitals still have a place in the heart of the community. For health care to be truly accessible, hospital architecture deserves a place in the core, rather than on the edge, of the city.

✤ *Annmarie Adams is an associate professor at McGill University's school of architecture.*

Early Canadian modernist is underrated

Fritz Brandtner was ahead of his time, blazing a trail toward abstractionism while most of the Canadian art scene was still preoccupied with the stylings of the Group of Seven.

HENRY LEHMANN
Special to The Gazette



Open windows, a Fritz Brandtner painting from 1939.

Fritz Brandtner (1896-1969) is one of the best kept secrets of Canadian art. Indeed, the small selection of his works – in all, 17 drawings, gouaches and oils – now on view at the Stewart Hall Gallery remind us just how gifted and unique this artist was. In his quiet manner, Brandtner helped pave the way for modernism in a Canadian art scene still, well through the 1950s, dominated by the Group of Seven.

Brandtner did not try to take the art scene by storm. For him, art was not a career strategy but life in all its complexity and contradiction. His other activities, as commercial artist, high-minded socialist and dedicated teacher, took up much of his time. Painting was part of a larger whole.

Yet the question as to why people hated abstraction – they still do – continued to burn and bubble in his thoughts. This preoccupation is reflected in his journals – more than 300 hand-written pages – Brandtner kept in his later years. At one point, he declares that "we have all been taught in looking at pictures to look for too much. Something of the quality of a child's delight in playing with colour and shapes has to be restored to us before we learn to see again."

Born in Danzig, Brandtner, who served in World War I on both the Western and Russian fronts, came to Canada in 1928. Canada had been on his mind since his childhood, when his mother gave him a book about Indians. His final move, from Winnipeg to Montreal, in 1934, came partly on the encouragement of LeMoine Fitzgerald, the pioneering abstract painter, who was convinced that Montreal was the most fertile Canadian ground for experimental art.

In his work, Brandtner weaves back and forth between objective and subjective worlds; but if the path is multi-directional, it is also strangely consistent. In Brandtner's art, so indelibly Expressionist, line remains the central element, the pulsing source of art. We might say that Brandtner's art begins and ends with line and outline.

There are the charcoal studies of the human figure, in which the outlines harden into a kind of armour. And there are the oils, such as the one titled Open Window, in which hard line – suggesting both architecture and canvas stretchers – is heated up to almost garish hues of orange. These are being visually pulled into oceanic expanses of deep blue – divine nature itself. And punctuating the show are the anti-war cartoons, reminiscent of those by George Grosz and a testament to Brandtner's denunciation of the very concept of patriotism.

But perhaps Brandtner's best works are his Cubist studies, in which feeling and idea intersect. One of these, simply called Still Life 1935, almost breathes idea. This subtly flickering brown and yellow pen-and-ink attacks the very notion that the world is made up of discrete things, each with its own shape and contour.

The table, tilted abruptly forward, is at odds with gravity; while the smattering of apples seem immune to it. Though much of this drawing is heavily worked with lines, the over-all sense is of de-materialization – that there is no real distinction between matter and void.

Compared with European work of the time, Brandtner's little drawing – he was most comfortable with the small-scale – appears almost tame. However, when this work was penned, in 1935, few Canadian artists, among them Brandtner's friend LeMoine Fitzgerald, were anywhere near this close to pure abstraction – though, for Brandtner, pure abstraction was not artifice but just another aspect of nature.

Putting Brandtner in the Montreal context at its most progressive is the small show Montreal Women Painters on the Threshold of Modernity also at the Stewart Hall Gallery. This exhibition, first shown at the Montreal Museum of Fine Arts and already reviewed in these pages, includes paintings by Jori Smith, Sarah Margaret Robertson and Louise Gadbois, among others.

Yet only now is Brandtner, who had just a few major shows in his lifetime, gaining the recognition that is his due. It should be noted that the National Gallery of Canada recently purchased about 50 Brandtners. Through the years, it has been almost solely up to the Kastel Gallery, Brandtner's long-time gallery and lender of the works in the current show, to keep the faith.

Brandtner, a member of Montreal's Contemporary Art Society, a group devoted to the furthering of contemporary art, was at the epicentre of artistic experimentation. But, to some people, Brandtner was – and is – known mainly as an educator. With Norman Bethune, whom he met in Montreal, he founded a workshop for poor kids and he set up classes for the Children's Memorial Hospital and for the Negro Community Centre in the city's southwest district.

Ingeborg Hiscox, director of the Stewart Hall Art Gallery, recounts watching one elderly woman burst into tears at the current Brandtner show. It turns out, explained Hiscox, that "Brandtner had been her teacher at Miss Edgar's and Miss Cramp's School." Many students weren't even aware of his other life as an artist, though they did know of his love of nature. An inveterate camper who went numerous times to the Gaspé, Brandtner often took his students out on field trips.

The artist's persistent obscurity can partly be attributed to the fact that he didn't cultivate the image of the European sophisticate; he was, in the best sense, rough-hewn and unrefined. And a major drawback was sheer timing – here was a German native who arrived in Canada right between the two big wars, at a time when being German wasn't especially popular. Also, it is still hard, even now, in a time in search of simple answers, to pin down Brandtner's restless, ever-questing art, which seems, stylistically, to roam all over the place. Indeed, to both his credit and detriment, Brandtner was more a hiker than a settler, with no hesitation about stepping off the path.

Don't miss this small but enlightening show.

✤ ***Fritz Brandtner: Drawings and Paintings,*** *remains at the Stewart Hall Art Gallery, Pointe-Claire Cultural Centre, 176 Lakeshore Rd. Until April 11. Information: (514) 630-1254.*