

## A R C H I T E C T U R E

# It doesn't take much room to build innovative housing

*Filling in gaps repairs urban fabric*

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SPECIAL TO THE GAZETTE

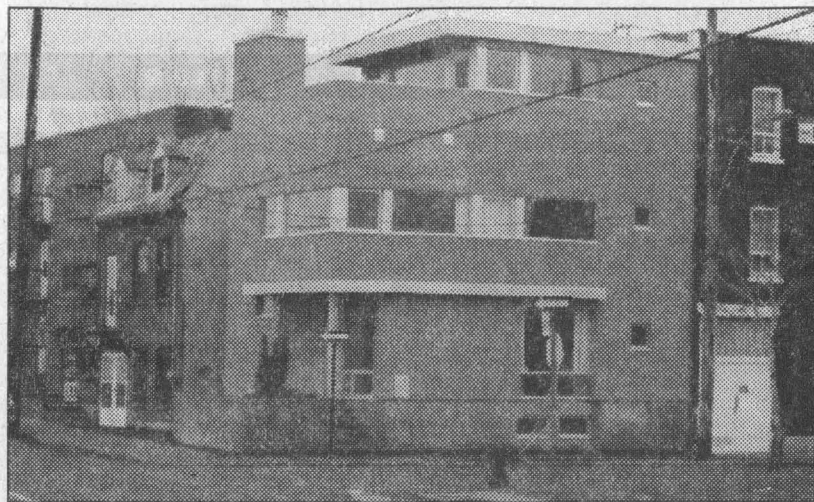
One of the most surprising and revealing aspects of viewing Montreal from above is the sheer amount of vacant land in the city. Most of it consists of large tracts, created by the abandonment of harbor or railway facilities.

Less visible are the hundreds of small vacant sites. These tiny plots — many are modest residential lots — constitute a significant potential for development by their large numbers.

Unlike the opening up of new tracts of suburban land or the redevelopment of bigger sites, filling in small sites is possible without major capital outlays for infrastructure. On the contrary, the development of small sites increases the efficiency of existing services, such as power, water, sewers, electronic communications and transit. If left empty, these tiny holes in the city fabric often become garbage dumps or "terrains vagues." There are many good reasons for the city to encourage individuals or small entrepreneurs to build on small sites.

Opération 20,000 Logements was a successful incentive program to help prompt developers to build housing within the city limits during the 1980s. Last year, the city organized a competition — L'Art de Vivre — inviting teams of designers and contractors to submit innovative designs for five infill sites.

Opération Habiter Montréal is the most recent attempt by the city to boost local small-site development. Seventeen sites, owned by the city and varying in size from about 200 to 500 square metres, were auctioned off to the



Architects Nancy Shoiry and André Fortin (in their living room at right) designed their own home on a small lot in St. Henri.

highest bidder in mid-October.

Some sites were suitable for only one cottage; others could accommodate one or two triplexes. The city's call for bids was accompanied by a catalogue of site plans and zoning information that greatly facilitated the work of prospective builders.

Even with this basic information, the uninitiated typically confront a number of problems in small-site development: unclear titles, obscure servitudes, ambiguous site information, difficult conditions at party walls and hard-to-interpret zoning regulations are among the most common challenges.

## Small sites left vacant

It is no surprise, therefore, that so many small sites have remained vacant for many years.

The house recently completed by architects Nancy Shoiry and André Fortin on a tiny site in St. Henri west of the Atwater Market is a good case study of the woes and triumphs of small-site development in Montreal. Their strikingly modern, three-storey house, at the corner of St. Ambroise and Rose de Lima Sts. facing the Lachine Canal is the result of a lengthy process, which included finding a site and overcoming numerous other hurdles.

After investigating several potential sites — some owned by

the city, others owned by individuals — Shoiry and Fortin finally gained title to the privately owned lot in January.

Typical of the type of unexpected problems particular to small sites, Shoiry and Fortin discovered when excavation for the foundations was started that the sewer of a neighboring house ran through their property. This was because the lot originally had belonged to a larger parcel of land.

But within three weeks, a servitude agreement was reached with the owner of the neighboring house. The legal fees for this arrangement were, of course, not part of the couple's original budget.

Construction began in May, and the house was occupied by Shoiry and Fortin a few weeks ago.

"If we had not been patient and relatively experienced architects, willing to invest time," said Shoiry about the process, "I don't think we would have succeeded. Our site has a net area of less than 100 square metres, while the bylaws only allow a house to occupy 60 per cent of the site. In addition, there must be a 10-foot setback opposite the front entrance, while the facade must align with the houses on both sides."

But a visit to the finished house shows how the architects resolved these seemingly contradictory requirements by their innovative design.



GAZETTE, PIERRE OBENDRAUF

Refreshingly free of architectural affectations, the Shoiry-Fortin residence was clearly inspired by the early Modern era. Crisp geometrical forms, punctuated by clean, industrial details imbue the blue stucco building with an unusual sense of place in a relatively undefined environment.

Within the small envelope, the architects managed to plan their house to accommodate both work and living space. The basement and ground floor were designed to function as the couple's architectural office as well as the kitchen, dining and entry space of their home.

## Simple organization

The over-all organization of the building is simple. An open, straight-run metal stairway in the centre of the house defines the rooms; this stair, the focus of the house plan, is transparent, as the architects chose to enclose it in industrial metal screening, rather than using walls and thereby eliminating the need for expensive handrails. Maple floors run throughout the house, including the stair treads, unifying the various rooms and making the house appear larger than it is.

Generous views of the Atwater Market, the Lachine Canal, and downtown Montreal also serve to enhance the sense of spaciousness inside the building. In addition,

the main bedroom on the top floor gives on to a comfortable deck, which makes up for any lack of garden space at street level. This concept of a rooftop terrace or garden, a device used in the mediterranean architecture for millennia, was introduced to Modern architecture by the Swiss architect Le Corbusier in his villas of the 1920s.

Another challenge in any infill project is to harmonize the new building's exterior design with the neighboring buildings. What the Shoiry-Fortin residence shows, in its bold, abstract forms, is that the slavish imitation of historical detail is not necessary to achieve a satisfactory fit. Despite its unabashedly Modernist vocabulary, the house completes the corner splendidly by matching the heights and alignments of adjacent buildings.

The final trial faced by the architects concerned financing. In the bank's opinion, the building's "avant-garde" design as well as its location within a context of century-old buildings, made it eligible for only a very limited mortgage, when compared with an "ordinary" house in a more homogeneous neighborhood.

The bank's conservatism doesn't augur well for the hundreds of unbuilt sites strewn about Montreal. And the experience of Shoiry and Fortin underlines the need for special incentives to encourage the development of

small sites.

The city's Operation Habiter Montréal is a good first step to familiarize Montrealers with the type of sites available and their various restrictions such as zoning and easements. In addition, special resources could be made available to help unwary entrepreneurs untangle the many unforeseen ownership, legal and construction problems involved in small-site development.

The proposed decentralization of permit offices by district will enable city officials to be more familiar with conditions in the various sectors. A mechanism by which zoning and construction by-laws might be modified to suit particular sites would also encourage development.

After all, not every prospective buyer will possess Shoiry's and Fortin's expertise and patience.

By minimizing the unanticipated hurdles, the city will allow owners to concentrate their efforts on the many remaining concerns, such as design, construction and financing.

By helping to patch the holes in Montreal's urban fabric, the city, the neighborhoods and the owners will all benefit.

Besides, the resulting view will look more complete from the street, as well as from the sky.

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