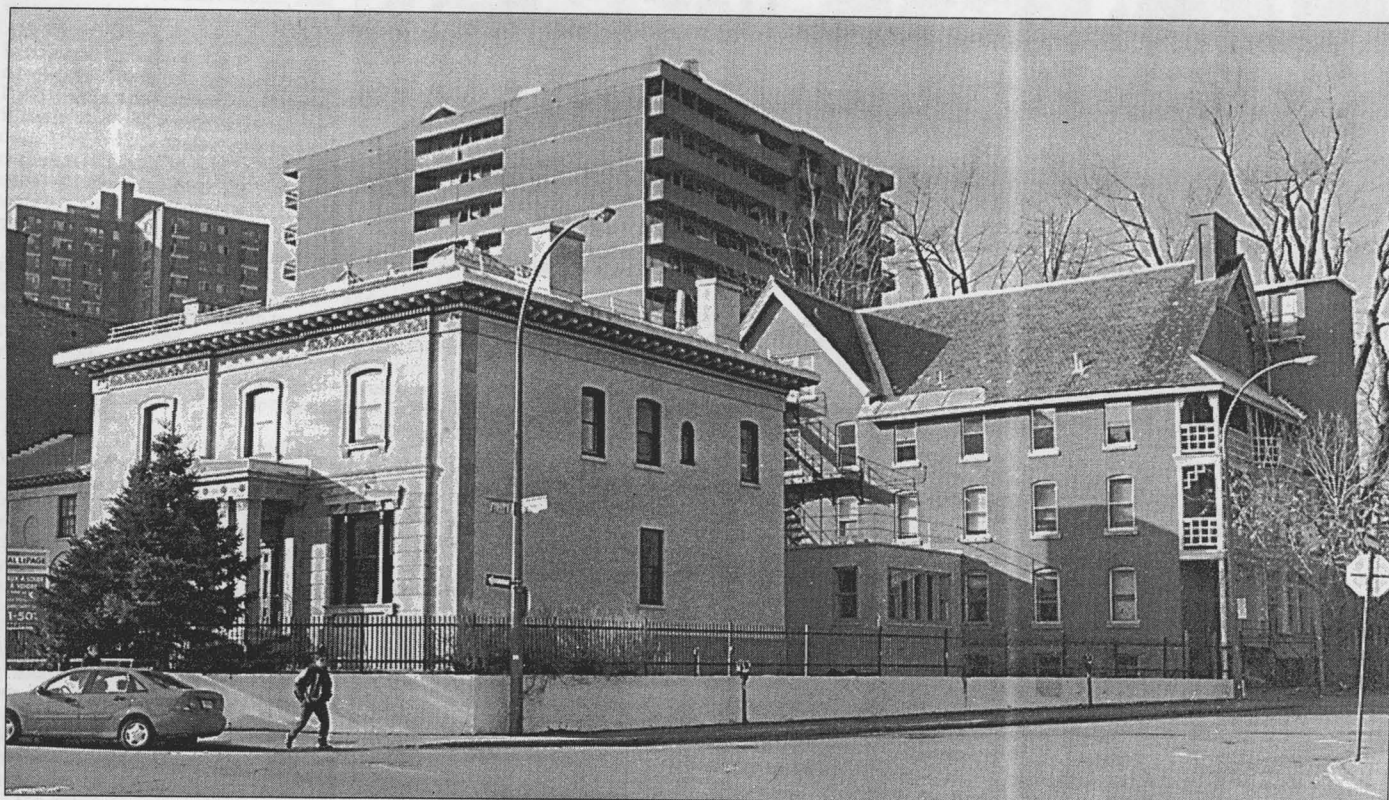


ARCHITECTURE AND VISUAL ARTS



Notman House on Sherbrooke St. at the corner of Clark St. with St. Margaret's Hospital in the rear.

TEDD CHURCH, GAZETTE

'Notman Hotel' is stalled

Owner puts property up for sale after ministry says project is unacceptable

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Special to The Gazette

More than five months after the hearings on the controversial Notman Hotel, the heritage property at the corner of Sherbrooke and Clark Sts. stands a chance of reprieve from an insensitive project. And at least one promising alternative for the site, a photography centre, is being pursued.

In June, the Commission des Biens Culturels, the group that advises the Ministry of Culture on heritage, listened to the concerns of local residents, heritage groups, academics, conservation experts and politicians about the proposed hotel project. The design involved converting the 1845 Notman House (the former residence of photographer William Notman) into a hotel lobby, bar and restaurant and replacing its 1894 addition, St. Margaret's Home, and a century-old garden with a five to seven-storey hotel.

On Nov. 30, Diane Lemieux, minister of culture and communications, said the proposed project was unacceptable. Although ministry spokesman Colette Proulx could not elaborate on what the developer, Montreal lawyer Dario Pietrantonio, would have to do to make it acceptable, she confirmed that the design did not adequately respect the character of the Notman House and its environment. Since then, the Pietrantonio has put the property back on the market.

This is good news for those who expressed concern not only about the so-called "restoration" of the classified mansion, but also the intention to destroy its addition and garden, which are not classified. Opponents of the project argued the addition and garden are an integral part of the Notman House ensemble.

The addition was constructed in 1894 after philanthropist George Drummond bought the mansion from the Notmans for the sisters of the Anglican order of St. Margaret, founded in England five decades earlier. Designed as a hospital, it accommodated men, women and children patients until 1920 when it became a residence for women.

The handsome red-brick building, linked to the Notman House by a glass corridor, is a unique combination of three Montreal building typologies: the convent, the hospital and the home. Its long, narrow, gabled form set a premium on fresh air, natural light, and greenery, ideals that health-care planners are returning to today. And its modest scale, use of brick, gable roof, double-hung windows were overt associations to the cozy, middle-class world of home, from which hospital administrators hoped to lure patients.

St. Margaret's Home was intended to function in harmony with its surroundings, a predominantly residential neighbourhood. The "healing" garden, with its trees and paths, provided a peaceful retreat for patients, staff, and visitors.

Hospital gardens are rare in Montreal. The garden at the Hôtel-Dieu, a superb example, was thankfully saved from development in the mid-1990s. (However, its future is again uncertain as the historic hospital is part of the proposed French mega-hospital.)

While the heritage evaluation that accompanied the hotel project lauded the heritage value of the Notman House because of the importance of its



A view from the 1930s of the interior of St. Margaret's Hospital.

COURTESY OF THE MCCORD MUSEUM OF CANADIAN HISTORY

architect, John Wells, it discounted its addition as an anonymous structure. In fact, the architect was Andrew Taylor, Drummond's nephew and the highly respected designer of about 50 Montreal buildings. These include some of the city's outstanding structures: the Redpath Library, the Macdonald Engineering Building, the Physics Building, and the Macdonald-Harrington Building at McGill University.

St. Margaret's Home is probably clos-

Andrew Taylor, the hospital's architect, was well known in the late 19th century.

er conceptually to Taylor's Diocesan Theological College on University St., built in 1895-96 to accommodate the education of Anglican priests. Its delightful courtyard on a tight urban site demonstrates the commitment to integrating exterior spaces and architecture.

Since the hotel project was rejected, those determined to ensure the integrity of the Notman site have mused over a variety of ideas ranging from a "deluxe bed and breakfast with a therapeutic garden" to a heritage centre. To our knowledge, however, the only idea that is being actively pursued is the transformation of the former home of Canada's famous photographer, along with its hospital addition and garden, into a centre for photography.

This idea is not new. Conceived in 1991 when the property was up for sale, the Notman Photography Centre is the brainchild of three photographers - Robert Hébert, Daniel Kieffer and the late Robert Fournier - who worked with others in the photography community to develop their idea into a preliminary

proposal. By the time they presented it, however, the recession of the early '90s had set in and cultural initiatives were not a priority. The project was shelved, and the property was purchased for the proposed facility.

During the last two weeks, Hébert and Kieffer have been working diligently to refine their preliminary proposal. In an interview this week, Hébert outlined the mandate of the proposed facility:

- To promote and disseminate work of Quebec photographers, locally and internationally.
- To increase awareness about contemporary photography.
- To enhance existing educational and training opportunities for photographers.

■ To provide a forum for exchange for the photography community

■ To establish an archive and documentation centre to help to collect, preserve and manage Quebec's contemporary photographic heritage.

Hébert stressed that the Notman Photography Centre, which is modeled on similar facilities in Belgium and New York, would "fill the voids that do not fall within the mandates" of existing museums and archives with photo collections, and colleges and universities with photography programs. "And we also want to provide more opportunities for the public, including children, to experience photography as an art form."

The location at the heart of Montreal's cultural centre, he suggested, is ideal. "After all, Montreal was the birthplace of photography in Canada," he said.

Architecturally, the proposal poses some challenges, but these are not unsurmountable. Clearly, research, teaching, and meeting activities could be respectfully accommodated in the for-

mer mansion, its hospital addition, and its garden. The exhibition and storage of photographs, however, require special environmental conditions. Hébert agreed that it is important that such needs be met without compromising the heritage values of the buildings.

How would the Notman photography centre be financed? Hébert gives a preliminary cost of the centre as being between \$5 million and \$10 million. A

A home is "exactly what the Montreal photography community needs."

combination of public and private funding is being sought. Hébert, is approaching individuals, companies, institutions and government authorities for feedback, advice and support. So far, he said, reactions have been positive.

"This is exactly what Montreal's photography community needs," said photographer Guy Lafontaine, adding that the Notman site is an ideal venue for such a facility. For Dinu Bumbaru of Heritage Montreal, the proposal has the potential to "respect the heritage values of the entire ensemble," which in his view is critical. James Dormeyer of the Groupe de Défense de la Maison Notman feels that a photography centre is an "excellent vocation" for the site, and that such a facility would be "a welcome addition to the neighbourhood."

The next step is to transform the preliminary proposal into a viable project.

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