

TE, MONTREAL, SATURDAY, DECEMBER 23, 2000

## CTURE AND VISUAL ARTS

# Old Montreal gets a virtual twin

### Web site packed with architectural, historical detail

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Special to *The Gazette*

**T**oo tired, too cold or too broke to head to Old Montreal? Fed up with stores crowded with frantic shoppers? Now you can enjoy the ambience of the old town from the comfort of your home office and conduct cutting-edge architectural research to boot.

Patrimoine en Détail is a recent addition to the official Web site of Old Montreal ([www.vieux-montreal.qc.ca](http://www.vieux-montreal.qc.ca)) offering users a wealth of historical information on the city's heritage district. The brainchild of Gilles Lauzon of the Société de Développement de Montréal, Madeleine Forget of Quebec's cultural affairs department and historians Léon Robichaud and Alan Stewart, the new Web site is a distant cousin of the award-winning exhibition *Opening the Gates of 18th-century Montreal*, held at the Canadian Centre for Architecture in 1992-93. Robichaud and Stewart undertook the bulk of the research for that show.

Like the interactive museum show, Patrimoine en Détail offers users many layers of architectural and historical information, and customizes their visits to places of interest. All virtual tours begin with a map of Old Montreal, divided into 18 areas like the Faubourg Saint-Louis and the Récollets, as well as the immediate environs of places like Bonsecours Market and Place d'Armes.

To the left of the map is a list of ways users can personalize their research, through particular buildings, people, events or places. To the right is a time line showing six historical periods and some key dates for Old Montreal. They range from the era of Ville-Marie, in 1642, to Old Montreal's development as a self-consciously historic district, from 1950 to the present.

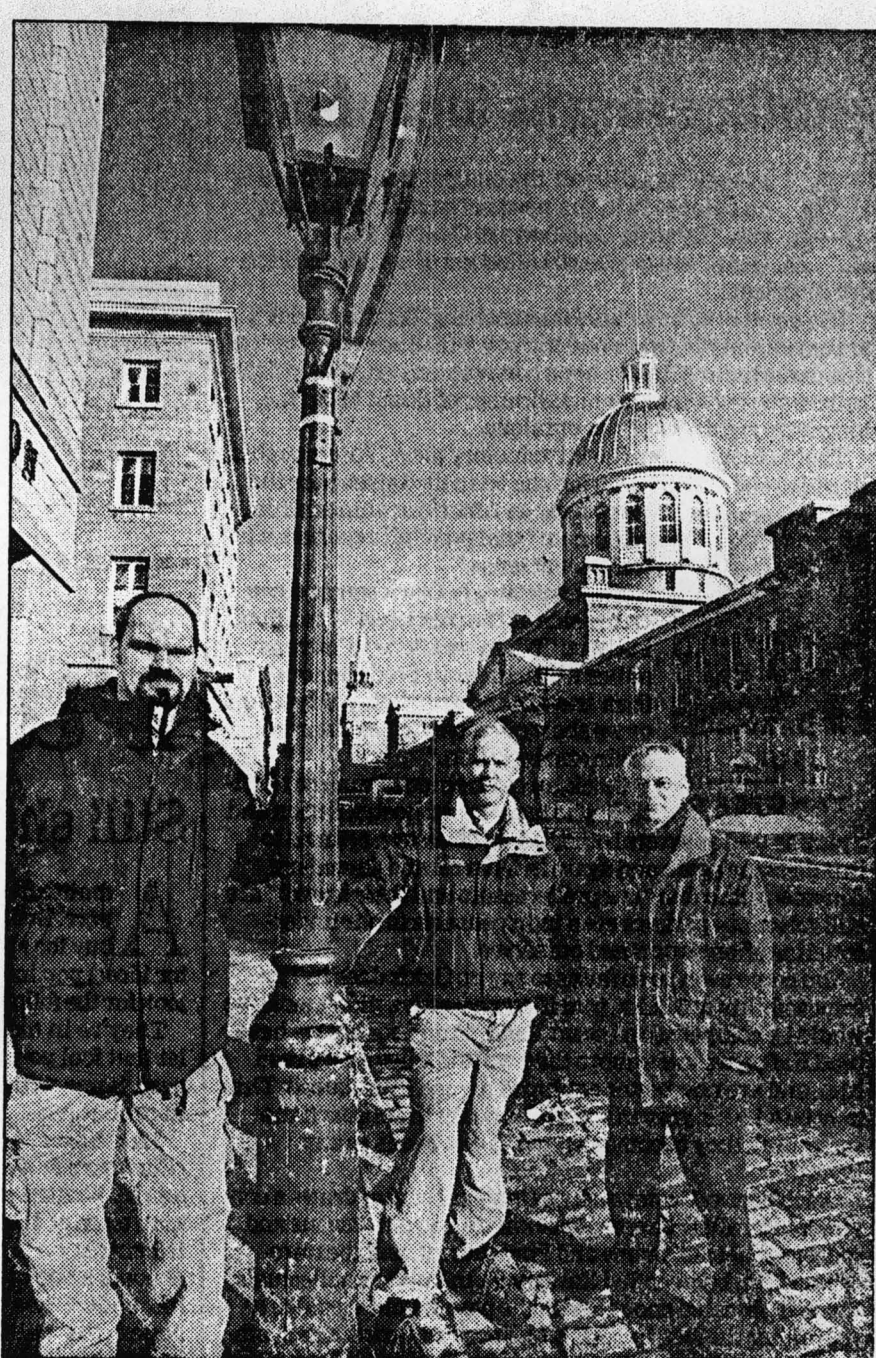
The possibilities of this virtual tour far exceed what a standard architectural guidebook can offer, since users need not proceed in a linear way, but can jump willy-nilly from a favourite place to its owners, occupants or architects.

I started my virtual tour on St. Jacques St., hoping to visit some of my favourite old banks. Just passing my mouse over the footprints of the buildings allowed me to get my bearings, since the name and address of each one then appeared on the screen. Click on the Molson's Bank, at the corner of St. Pierre St., and coloured photos of the building and construction photos (1864-66) appear. I also learned it was modified in 1900 and found references for further reading. Click on the building's architect, George Browne, for biographical notes. Under the client, the Molsons, is a tiny note explaining that special information is available for the year 1873. Following up on this intriguing lead, I learned what a rocky year it was for the company because of the bankruptcy of one of its major investors, Jay Cooke and Co. Browse some more, and you'll find references to the *Monetary Times* of 1872-74, a daily business paper which covered the story.

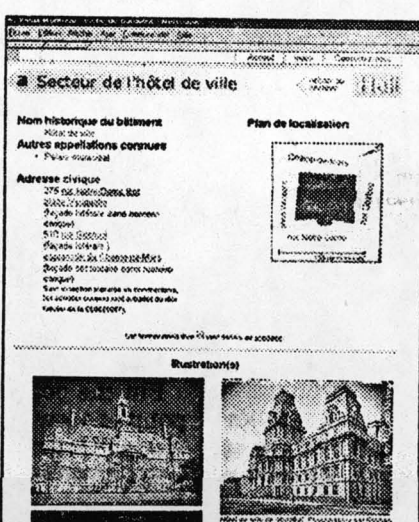
Craving a more modernist aesthetic, I jumped over to *The Gazette* at 250 St. Antoine St. and learned that the building was designed by Barott, Marshall, Merrett and Barott for the Montreal Star in 1957-61. Clicking on "physical characteristics," I found a thorough description of the six-storey block's four elevations, its decorative elements, and more than I would ever want to know about its roofing and windows.

A particularly fascinating route through the Web site is to choose "criteria" and "architectural details" under "buildings" next to the introductory map of Old Montreal. Here you can write your own wish list - the degree of a building's legal protection, number of storeys, materials, roofs, dates of construction, or owners and architects. This way, you can visit 31 structures in Old Montreal with mansard roofs, both extant buildings constructed in the 1750s, and the 11 structures designed or renovated by local architect A.C. Hutchison.

In its sheer depth of architectural information, Patrimoine en Détail offers a more open-ended experience of urban space than most Web-based tours. Others typically give only anecdotes on buildings (check out the Quick Tour on the Old Montreal official Web site as an



Three of the Web site's creators: (from left) Leon Robichaud, Alan Stewart and Gilles Lauzon in the part of town they know best.



Web page from Patrimoine en Détail features Montreal's city hall, in the past and present.

example). And in most other virtual tours, users are expected to visit a series of predetermined and predigested stops, rather than negotiating architectural information for themselves. I especially appreciate the fact that individual buildings on Patrimoine en Détail are not labeled as belonging to a particular style.

An obvious advantage of the virtual tour over the traditional guidebook is that it can be constantly revised and expanded. One improvement would be an English version. At the moment, everything's in French.

Another problem is that the closer users get to the present day, the less intricate the information. Click on the 1992 Pointe à Callière archeology museum and architect Dan Hanganu is listed under a photo and description of the building, but there's no link to biographical information on him, like I found for Browne, nor to the other buildings he has designed in Old Montreal. Ditto modernists Barott, Marshall, Merrett and Barott. In fact, search for persons under the category "cultural" in the period after 1950 and it comes up "none." By about 2004, Stewart expects that all 580 buildings in virtual Old Montreal will include descriptions as full as the Molson's Bank's (presently 60 are covered in depth). Archeology and interiors will soon be added to the database, too, as well as a

systematic study of building stone.

And there are still some kinks to work out in searching the names of architectural firms. Submit Alexander Hutchison and you retrieve only three buildings while Hutchison and Wood apparently did five. Entering only the surname Hutchison produces 11 buildings. And the all-important potential to retrieve by building type - churches, houses, businesses - is still in the works.

My fear is that students are going to find the new Old Montreal Web site so useful they may stop going to the library. Or even worse, an hour on the Internet may come to replace a stroll along St. Paul St.

But no doubt it will greatly increase tourism, help the city to manage this precious resource and even turn some Montrealers into armchair architecture aficionados. In the long run, the Web site will certainly bring Montreal's unique architectural heritage to an even broader audience, since the Web visit begs for a follow-up in real time (no way can a computer simulate the feeling of walking on cobblestones). The opportunities for teaching everyone from young children to doctoral students about architecture using this Web site are mind-boggling.

Patrimoine en Détail is a fabulous addition to our 21st-century city, both virtual and real. The price is right, the distances are short and the information is first-class.

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## art galleries & MUSEUMS

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- Leo Bellefleur
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## Montrealers on prize list

Two Montrealers, Geneviève Cadieux and Jana Sterbak, are on the shortlist for a new visual arts prize to be presented by the the National Gallery of Canada.

The Millennium Prize for excellence in contemporary art is worth \$50,000.

Diana Nemiroff, the gallery's curator of Modern art, came up with a short list of 10 names. Besides Cadieux Sterbak, they include Canadians Jeff Wall and Liz Magor; Shahzia Sikander (Pakistan); Valeska Soares (Brazil); Yoshihiro Suda (Japan) and Diana Thater (United States).

The winner, to be chosen from by an international jury of five, will be announced on March 7. The members of this jury are Montrealer Chantal Pontbriand, editor of *Parachute* magazine; Lynn Gumpert, director of the Grey Gallery in New York; and National Gallery director Pierre Théberge.

Meanwhile, works by the 10 short-listed artists will be shown at the gallery in an exhibition titled *Elusive Paradise: The Millennium Prize*, which will run from Feb. 9 until May 13.

Henry Lehmann