

ARCHITECTURE

Sale of Notman House will put Cultural Property Act to test

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SPECIAL TO THE GAZETTE

The For Sale sign in front of the Notman House suggests that the protection promised by its classification as a historic monument will be put to the test.

The 1845 edifice, one of Montreal's most important residential landmarks, fronts on Sherbrooke St. just west of St. Laurent Blvd. Its large lot also contains a three-storey rear annex, a small western extension, a garage with living quarters above and a lovely garden. The entire property is selling for a modest \$2.5 million.

According to the Cultural Property Act the conditions of its sale include a number of obligations as well as some benefits. The act, which is administered by the Ministry of Cultural Affairs, was passed in 1973 with the aim of promoting the "safe-keeping and development of the most representative and best preserved elements of our heritage." It protects some 2,500 places, buildings, objects of art and ethnography, archaeological remains and archival documents in Quebec.

The Notman House (as it is now officially called) was classified as a historic monument in 1979. What does this status mean, and what are the implications for the future of the property?

A historic monument, according to the Cultural Property Act, is "an immovable which has historic interest because of its use or architecture." Both criteria apply in the case of the Notman House.

Named for photographer

The building is named after its most prominent resident, the photographer William Notman, who lived there from 1876 until 1891. Shortly after his arrival from Scotland in 1856, Notman set up what soon became one of the most successful photographic studios in North America, with branches across Canada and the United States. The 400,000 photographic images belonging to the Montreal studio, now the McCord Museum's Notman Photographic Archives, provide an illuminating record of all the important events and personalities in Montreal's and Canada's history between the late 1850s and 1935, when his son Charles sold the business.

Notman was not the only influential resident of the house. It was originally built for William Collis Meredith, an eminent Montreal lawyer and Quebec Superior Court



GAZETTE, TEDD CHURCH



NOTMAN ARCHIVES

The Notman House on Sherbrooke St. as it appears today, and an interior view of the main floor corridor.

judge. After living there only a few years, Meredith leased the home to notable members of 19th-century Montreal society, and, in 1866, the property was sold to Alexander Molson, son of John Molson (founder of the Montreal brewery). Notman bought it a decade later.

Following Notman's death, the estate was purchased by George (later Sir George) Alexander Drummond, who had come to Montreal to manage the Redpath Sugar factory. Drummond had just built a magnificent brownstone mansion further west on Sherbrooke, and he turned the Notman House over to the Anglican sisters of the Society of St. Margaret for use as a residence for the terminally ill. The 1845 building, along with an annex which was constructed behind it, was soon known as "St. Margaret's Home for the Incurables." It later became a residence for elderly women. In March of this year, St. Margaret's Home amalgamated with the Good Shepherd Home for elderly men and relocated to Westmount.

Such is the historical significance of the Notman House. But the building also merits attention for its architectural interest. The handsome edifice with its limestone portico, was designed by John Wells, a British architect who was active in this city during the 1840s. Among the other important buildings that bore his signature were the Bank of Montreal on Place d'Armes, and St. Ann's Market on Place d'Youville, which housed the Parliament of Upper and Lower Canada until it burned in 1849.

Like these classically-inspired landmarks, the residence that Wells designed for Meredith is characterized by formal simplicity, refined elegance, and the highest quality of construction. The central hall plan of the house — symmetrically-placed grand rooms off a generous corridor — fol-

lowed the tradition of aristocratic domestic architecture in both Britain and the United States. In his specifications for the building, which was constructed almost entirely out of local materials by Montreal contractors, Wells required "all the stone used to be the best greystone and the mortar to be made with river sand and no other."

According to the cultural affairs ministry, the Notman House constitutes one of Quebec's finest domestic buildings of the 1840s. Its front façade, considered "a masterpiece of classical motifs," represents one of the province's few residential examples of Greek Revival architecture, a popular style in Britain and the U.S. at the time.

Thanks to the sisters

Due mostly to careful maintenance by the sisters, the Notman House is in remarkably good condition today. Although its masonry requires restoration, its exterior surfaces are relatively intact. Inside, the original layout is legible, despite the addition of a few partitions; the plaster and wood surfaces seem to be protected under numerous coats of paint; the wood floors are probably in fine shape under layers of linoleum. Over the years, sprinkler pipes and electrical wiring have been introduced in a rather indiscreet manner, but thankfully such surface-mounted installations minimize the damage to the building's original finishes and structure.

Both the rear annex and the west extension provide striking contrasts to the original house, as well as noteworthy testimonies to the architectural preoccupations of their day. The rear annex, which was apparently constructed in the early 1890s, possesses architectural interest in its own right; its red brick walls, steeply sloping roof and elegantly proportioned windows were inspired by the English

Domestic Revival, which was popular at that time for buildings related to health. The west addition, which dates to the 1930s, is a carefully balanced composition clad in pale yellow brick, respectfully set back from the front façade of the original building. And the garden still provides a wonderful shade-filled setting; its old trees and the remains of its early plantings suggest its former allure.

Although only the 1845 building is classified, its status affects the rest of the property, as well as all properties within a 152-metre radius. All exterior modifications within this "protected area," which was established in 1984, are subject to review by a multidisciplinary team of experts. According to Jacques Robert of the cultural affairs ministry, projects reviewed range in scope from minor alterations (such as the replacement of windows on the houses on nearby houses), to major developments, like the mixed-use project proposed a few years ago for the site of the fire-ravaged church and the neighboring apartment building across Sherbrooke St. Normally, such reviews are conducted in collaboration with the city, which maintains the responsibility for issuing permits.

The same conditions apply to the buildings and gardens on the Notman property. Of course, the exterior and interior of the original house will receive particular attention. While the province will encourage its restoration to a state that reflects as closely as possible the spirit of its original design, it is acknowledged that certain changes are imminent given the building's current condition, its future vocation, and contemporary requirements for safety and accessibility.

So much for the obligations imposed by the Cultural Property Act. As for its benefits, the cultural affairs ministry offers technical expertise, as well as an attractive fi-

nancial assistance program covering up to 40 per cent of the cost of construction work that is directly linked to the protection and restoration of the monument's historic features.

But the promise to restore the Notman House does not imply the right to demolish and replace, or to drastically alter, its various appendages. It will take both intelligent thinking and creative insight to find a use for the property that will not only allow its respectful rehabilitation, but also offer its owner some return in dollars or social and cultural benefits.

Although it is no longer as easy as it used to be to demolish once-prestigious buildings with the object of replacing them by nondescript highrises — a fate that has befallen too many of Montreal's old mansions — the currently popular use

of historic buildings (or, worse, selected parts of their skins) as heritage frontispieces for insensitive development projects has become a profitable marketing tactic under the guise of preservation.

It will be interesting to see if the classification of the Notman House as a historic monument will protect it from such mistreatment. Much will depend on the collaboration of the new owner and architect, who must work together to interpret and extend the historical and architectural significance of the property, and the city and the cultural affairs ministry, which will have the final say in approval of the project.

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