

ARCHITECTURE

Westmount Library plan seems respectful of original design

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SPECIAL TO THE GAZETTE

There are few buildings in the Montreal area as beautifully sited as the Westmount Public Library. Designed in 1898 by architect Robert Findlay, the red-brick Victorian edifice nestles cozily in picturesque Westmount Park. M.J. Howard Manning transformed the large plot of farmland on Sherbrooke St. into a romantic park especially for the ensemble of civic buildings constructed to celebrate Queen Victoria's Jubilee. He intended the park to provide the citizens of Westmount with a sacred refuge from the evils of industrial urban development.

At the opening of the library in 1899, the mayor of Westmount, J.R. Walker, praised the architecture of the new building, remarking on its charming location. He noted the structure's "picturesque position, being surrounded by trees and flower beds."

Indeed, both the library and the park, like other reform institutions developed at the time — public baths, settlement houses, and specialized hospitals — were designed to refresh and to invigorate the minds and the bodies of the citizenry. Westmount Hall, or Victoria Jubilee Hall, the building adjacent to the library, which burned in 1924, contained a swimming pool and bowling alleys. It, too, was designed by Findlay.

The affection held for Westmount's library-in-the-park is evident once again as the city plans a nearly 10,000-square-foot addition to the historic building, scheduled to begin in March 1994. Attention has been diverted somewhat from the architecture of the project, as the recent firing of the head librarian has been linked to her opposition to the addition.

Architect Peter Rose has designed a conceptual scheme for the library's expansion, indicating the over-all layout of the addition and its relationship to the existing buildings. This schematic design was required in order for the city council to pass a loan bylaw in January for the \$7.5 million required for the library renewal project.

If approved by the provincial government, the extension to the Westmount Library will be the fifth in the building's history. A special reading room for children — probably among the first in Canada — was added to the west of the original library in 1910. This sensitive addition, also by Findlay, appears like the tiny offspring of the main structure. In fact, the library for children was connected by a glass passageway that led from the special ladies' reading room of the older building. In those days, men and women sat separately in libraries; in the case of the Westmount Library, the two reading rooms were divided by monumental arches supported by magnificent columns of yellow marbleite and an immense fireplace, open to both sides.

To mark the 25th anniversary of the structure, Findlay was commissioned in 1924 to design a new reference room for the library. This time the architect extended the building to the south, mirroring on the exterior the original design of the building.

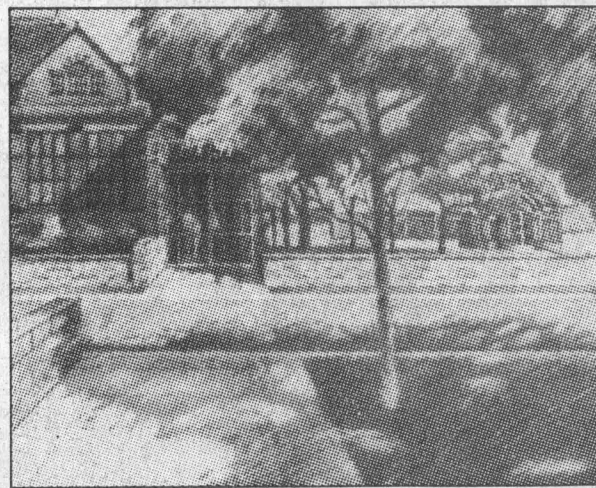
The third addition to the library, a workroom at the back of the new south wing, was designed in 1936 by architect Philip Turner. At this time, the existing building was also substantially reorganized.

Finally, in 1958, the South Annex, a three-storey modern addition, was added by the architectural firm of Durnford, Bolton, Chadwick and Ellwood. Further reorganization of the entire complex was done at this



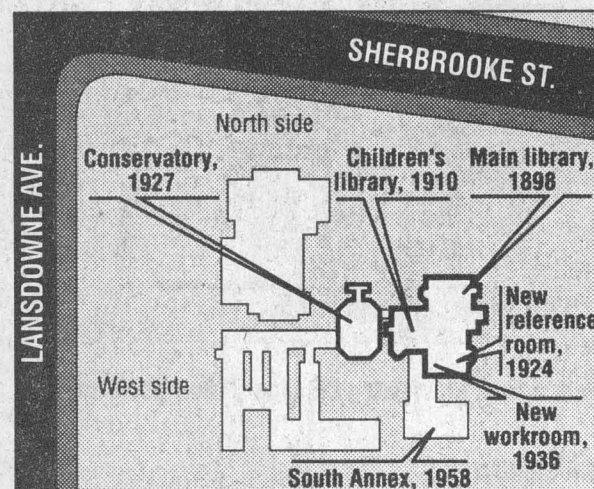
GAZETTE, DAVE SIDAWAY

Westmount Library seen from east side where the main entrance is now located.



PETER ROSE

Peter Rose's proposed new entrance on library's north side. Diagram shows layout of library



THE GAZETTE

time. Most unfortunate among these changes was the subdivision of the original children's library of 1910 into three offices.

Rose's proposed addition to the Westmount Public Library calls for the demolition of the entire South Annex and comprises a new, three-storey rectangular block on approximately the same location as the 1958 addition. Library consultants have pointed out that the inadequate floor loading capacity, low ceiling heights, the close spacing of columns in the building, and the invisible connections between departments in the most recent addition inhibit the library's efficient use of space and its ability to keep up with the changing format of library resources, which today are largely electronic.

Following the pattern set by Findlay in his first expansion of 1910, Rose has designed a relatively autonomous "pavilion," connected to the original building by a narrow link. This is a strategy often used by architects adding to historic buildings on university campuses, where the ample green space of the site permits the construction of an entirely new block. This

pavilion approach is preferable to a more piecemeal strategy, as it preserves the historic building's silhouette or outline. In the case of Findlay's library of 1898, with its unique asymmetrical layout, round tower and massive, sheltering roof, this approach makes sense.

Depending on the final elevations of the building, which unfortunately have not been developed, the addition to the library could act as a neutral backdrop to the older building, allowing a relatively undisturbed reading of the original library from Sherbrooke and Melville Sts. The new building is supposedly brick and stone, following the pattern established by Findlay.

A particularly difficult issue in the development of the scheme has been the question of entrance to the new complex. The original entry to the Findlay building, on the east side of the library facing the park, was one of the finest aspects of the structure. Over the years it has been changed substantially. Findlay's entry sequence comprised a projecting, gabled porch and carved wooden doors. Even if restored, this entrance could not accommodate the volume of users anticipated in the enlarged library. It would also

require a ramp as long as 80 feet to provide access to handicapped users.

Rose's proposed expansion calls for the renovation of this east entry as well as the construction of a new entrance on the north elevation, to run between the 1898 block and the original children's library. The new entry would mark the beginning of a sequence of architectural adjustments to the complex, making clear the building's evolution while at the same time facilitating access to the library for handicapped patrons. It would also announce the modernity of the library to Sherbrooke St.

The long, glass corridor, which would comprise the new entry sequence, is the boldest aspect of Rose's proposed addition. Just inside the new door, the large bay window, which once pierced the western-most exterior wall of Findlay's original reading room, would project into the new circulation spine. Across from the original children's library, the entry corridor would widen into a generous lobby space, accessible as well from the original east door.

In addition to marking the intersection of old and new, Rose's proposed north entrance would reinforce the concept of the library as a complex of buildings, rather than as an isolated architectural gesture. By offering views of nearly all the earlier additions to the original building, including the splendid conservatory added to the west of the children's library in 1927, the new circulation space would provide a carefully guided tour through the entire complex, helping to orient users to the various departments. In many ways, the new entry sequence, with its changing, oblique views of the building's components, seems inspired by the romantic pathways of Manning's plan for the park.

Over-all, the proposed north entry would serve to clarify some of the congested spaces resulting from earlier, less sensitive expansion projects. It would ensure that the Findlay building, the jewel of the ensemble, remains more than simply a lobby space to the subsequent additions. The east doorway would remain, in the new scheme, a subsidiary entry from the park. In addition, a lovely courtyard would be defined by the new spine and the north wall of the Rose block in the rear.

Fortunately, a large percentage of the budget for the library's renewal project is targeted for much needed repairs and maintenance to the existing buildings. Included in this part of the scheme is a new slate roof and restoration of the heating and air conditioning systems for the older buildings. The original children's library, in Rose's scheme, would be transformed into the "Westmount Room," intended for community exhibitions and meetings for up to 60 people.

Although difficult to judge before the full development of the elevations, Rose's scheme appears from the plans to be a modest approach to the project. Like the building it is intended to replace, the new addition risks having little character of its own. But it does allow for a relatively unobstructed reading of the original building, while it enhances the present confused relationship between the building's parts.

It is to be hoped that historical detail is not "applied" to the scheme in the final hour, as is often the case when clients are concerned that an addition appear as if it were part of an original structure. The best additions to historic buildings are honest expressions of their own period that are at the same time respectful of their older neighbors.

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