



LIVING  
WITH  
OUR

WESTMOUNT  
HERITAGE

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## LIVING WITH OUR WESTMOUNT HERITAGE

**W**ESTMOUNT. TO PEOPLE ACROSS CANADA, THE NAME CONJURES STONE MANSIONS PERCHED ON A HILL, PROTECTED BY TALL IRON FENCES, WHERE THE PRIVILEGED ELITE TAKES TEA IN THE Drawing Room, oblivious to the changing realities around it.

We who live here know that Westmount today is far different from this outdated stereotype. It has a considerable number of people whose annual salary is less than stratospheric and at most a few hundred of Westmount's more than four thousand buildings could be called mansions. Actually, most Westmounters live in semi-detached or attached houses or in multi-family buildings; a slim majority are renters.

However there's no arguing that we *are* privileged when it comes to location. On the south flank of our little mountain -- tilted to get that extra sun, sheltered from the harsh north winds -- Westmounters are among the few Quebecers that successfully grow rhododendrons and garden azaleas. Living right next to downtown Montreal, we can walk to work, art galleries and the best night life on the continent.

Even if Westmount is much more varied than the stereotype, there are some qualities that set it apart. For one, it has one of Canada's most significant collections of residential and public buildings. Most of the city was built around the turn of the century when buildings were still

modestly scaled, solid, well detailed and used high quality materials -- usually local greystone or red brick. People could afford to build well, and they did.

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## WE LIVE WITH TRACES OF WESTMOUNT'S HISTORY

**W**ALKING AROUND WESTMOUNT, WE CAN SEE THE TRACES LEFT BY SUCCEEDING WAVES OF THE CITY'S EVOLUTION.

CÔTE ST-ANTOINE FOLLOWS THE PATH OF THE OLD Indian trail that hugged the south flank of the mountain, leading from Hochelaga to the western part of the island. Along the road, we still find the farm houses of the Hurtubises, the Decaries and other French habitant families who settled in the 17th and 18th centuries along this côte road and travelled it daily to bring produce from their farms to market in Ville-Marie. Their long, narrow, seigniorial fiefs are reflected in today's north-south streets. On Côte St. Antoine Road near Metcalfe Street are two remaining houses of the four that made up Metcalfe Terrace, located on the country road leading from the bustling early 19th Century British town of Montreal to the Governor General's mansion *Monklands*, now the main building of Villa Maria School facing Decarie Boulevard.

Throughout Westmount, there remains a scattering of mid-19th Century houses dating from the period when the town of Côte St-Antoine

was still a country village where some of the wealthy Montreal families built year-round or summer retreats.

We can walk down The Glen -- once an Indian trail beside a long-since buried stream -- and under the massive stone bridge that spanned the gully in 1892 to allow Westmount's first train station near Abbott Street to be moved to the grand, new *Westmount C.P.R. Station* at the foot of Victoria Street.

Towards the end of the century, the train as well as the streetcar that ran along St. Catherine, Sherbrooke, Greene and Victoria sparked the twenty-five-year building boom that established most of the Westmount we know today. The area below Sherbrooke Street, that we now call Lower Westmount, became a "streetcar suburb" where speculators crammed townhouses within easy walking distance of the streetcar stops or train station. They were built individually, in ensembles of several identical houses, or in the case of Blenheim Place, making up a whole street. Interspersed among these row houses, duplexes and triplexes we now find small apartment buildings, schools and shops, built in the first half of the Century.

The focus points of community life lie in Lower Westmount. The two civic centres -- the clusters of public buildings around City Hall and Victoria Hall -- are made up mainly of buildings in the Neo-Gothic style that City Fathers chose to express Westmount's strong character. The two "village" centres -- Greene Avenue and Victoria/Sherbrooke -- are still full of life though most of the architecturally interesting buildings are now gone.

At the beginning of the 20th Century, the extension of the street network and the widespread use of the car made all parts of the city easily accessible, leading to the more spread-out development of the rest of Westmount. The middle part of the city is largely made up of semi-detached houses. Above the Boulevard, in Upper Westmount, large stone houses were erected by some of the wealthiest families in Canada, leaving Montreal's increasingly-crowded Square Mile. Stylistically varied, running the gamut from English Baroque to Neo-Canadien, they nevertheless present a homogeneous character.

In the past few decades, buildings of a different style and scale -- straighter lines, boxier forms, longer shadows -- filled gaps left by previous eras or demolition.

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## FORMAL & PICTURESQUE ARCHITECTURE

**T**HROUGHOUT ALL PARTS OF WESTMOUNT ARE EXAMPLES OF FINE STONE CARVINGS, SUPERB BRICKWORK, INTRICATE CORNICES, ELEGANTLY-PROPORTIONED WINDOWS, RICHLY-DECORATED PORCHES and balconies, and imposing front doors. Almost every building is either significant in its own right, or is an essential component in an architectural ensemble or a streetscape that, while maybe not a masterpiece, recalls a special history and defines a special character unique to that street or area.

What I savour most is not the formal, architect-designed houses and public buildings with their symmetrical stone facades and classical porticos, as remarkable as they are. It is the informal, picturesque-but-not-too-self-consciously-pretty, often a bit decrepid, and sometimes threatened structures scattered through the city. Structures such as:

- THE WESTMOUNT GREENHOUSES, unchanged since they were built out of catalogue parts in the Twenties, still complete with their original cranking mechanisms;

- Robert Findlay's 1899 romantic, Richardsonian Romanesque LIBRARY in the park, with its unpretentious atmosphere;

- the green and yellow LAWN BOWLING BUILDING, sagging roof and all;

- 22 SUMMIT CIRCLE -- Victorian foreground counterpoint to the distant towers in the view from the Lookout -- now ramshackle, abandoned and almost certainly doomed;

- the secret courtyard of DARMO'S GARAGE where Packards and Austins were once repaired;

- the powerful stone GLEN UNDERPASS, being insidiously covered with untamed vegetation;

- the still boarded-up C.P.R. WESTMOUNT RAILWAY STATION, perched on its grassy hill, terminating the views looking down Victoria or St. Catherine;

- the rear, service side of THE MOTHER HOUSE -- now Dawson College; the galleries are gone, the chimney is largely hidden and most of the remaining small service buildings on de Maisonneuve are slated for demolition.

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Each Westmount street is a unique combination of architectural, topographic and natural features. Each building is a product of a particular moment in time when a builder combined materials according to a coherent, purposeful and precise pattern. Its character and texture comes not only from the solid stone or brick facade. It also depends on a filigree of details, easily lost . . . window divisions, cornices, balcony railings and pure caprices of decoration that serve no purpose other than providing visual delight. To me, the parts of the buildings not facing the street have a special charm with their wood-and-glass sunrooms, their coach-houses, and their garages with original wood-panelled doors.

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## MORE THAN JUST BUILDINGS

**I**T'S NOT JUST BRICKS AND MORTAR THAT MAKE WESTMOUNT DISTINCTIVE. THE CITY IS ALSO MARKED BY ITS OWN COMMUNITY TRADITIONS. IN SPRING, WE TAKE OUR KIDS TO THE Conservatory to see the bunnies, turtles and giant goldfish in the Spring Flower Show. In Summer, we stop during a Sunday stroll to figure out the mysterious intricacies of lawn bowling. In Fall, we listen to *The Last Post* at the Armistice Day ceremony at the War Memorial. And in Winter, we pull our

toboggans up the park we stubbornly call Murray Hill, (instead of its real name, King George Park,) between the two rows of trees that once led up to *West Mount*, the Murray house.

In addition to its twenty thousand residents, tens of thousands more work, study or worship in Westmount. A disproportionate number of churches and private schools were built here to serve the local population or to profit from the prestige of a Westmount address. Private schools today are far different from their staid stereotypes. The girls' schools may once have been pink-velveted finishing schools for the daughters of privilege, but today, they are graduating strong, independent women.

Westmount's vegetation sets it apart. Flying over the island, it is striking how green the city is with the wildness of Summit Park; the planned picturesqueness of Westmount Park; the public stairways climbing through wild, rocky escarpments; the large, manicured lawns and the gazebos in lush gardens, higher on the hill. Because of our tradition of not having fences in front of buildings, Westmount tree-lined streetscapes have an open, green feeling (except for those undermined by the totally perverse Westmount practice of asphaltting front lawns to park cars).

Because it is on the side of a mountain and has many curving streets, the views in Westmount are constantly changing and dramatic. Looking up north-south streets like Greene, you are always aware of the lush, green presence of the mountain with trees interspersed with the roofs of houses carefully sited to get the best possible view of the river valley and mountains to the south.

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## THREATS TO WESTMOUNT'S CHARACTER

**W**ILL THE WESTMOUNT OF THE FUTURE STILL HAVE THOSE QUALITIES THAT WE TREASURE TODAY?

THE DRAMATIC TRANSFORMATIONS OF THE PAST FEW decades have, for the most part, undermined rather than enhanced Westmount's special character. New towers are clustered in the city's southeast corner and are scattered throughout the city. They are not only out of scale but, except for Westmount Square, are architecturally mediocre. Many of Westmount's finest old houses were destroyed to make way for bigger new buildings or projects like widening Dorchester Boulevard. Others had their settings ruined such as when *Braemar*, on the Boulevard, was screened from public view by three bland new houses in its front lawn.

It is very unlikely that these kinds of things could happen again.

Over the past two decades, sensibilities throughout the world have changed with respect to preservation and development. Once, saving old buildings was of interest only to the few members of "hysterical societies", concerned about a handful of isolated, very old examples of outstanding historic or architectural value. Today, there is a broad concern with how an older community like Westmount can maintain its distinct character by preserving not only its exceptional buildings, but also its more humble structures, its streetscapes and landscapes . . . *le tout ensemble*. In response, various Westmount City Councils have changed zoning bylaws to reduce the potential height of buildings, to prohibit the construction of

one building in front of another, and to more carefully review proposals for demolition.

However, there are still important threats that could seriously undermine the character of the city.

One is pressure for growth. Residents or speculators seek to enlarge existing buildings, or demolish and build anew, in order to squeeze in every cubic inch of construction the bylaws allow. So-called "monster houses" are out of scale with the street and can plunge neighbouring yards into perpetual shade.

Another threat is pressure for change. Our homes were solidly built, but let's face it, they *do* need work. Unless maintained, wood features and decorative details rot; rather than repair, some people hide them or rip them out. How many cornices were covered with metal siding, behind which the rot continues unseen? How many original curved-glass, double-hung windows were replaced with the latest model of vinyl-covered *Tilt-N-Turn*? How many Westmount facades have only scar marks, left after the removal of gracious verandas? How many elaborate wood balustrades were replaced with plain wrought iron?

Some of these changes may reduce maintenance costs, but at what price to a building's integrity and aesthetic value? The cumulative effect of many seemingly minor, inappropriate changes can degrade the appearance and attractiveness of an entire neighbourhood. Details *do* matter. In a row of six identical townhouses with identical double-hung windows, it *does* matter when one owner changes the windows to single sheets of glass (the Little Orphan Annie, punched-out eyes look) and when

another puts in small-paned, casement windows with the wrong-sized shutters, trying to make the house look much older than it is. The result? A stylistic mish-mash.

Many buildings are changed just for the sake of change. Consciously or not, people want to be able to show some "improvement" to a visiting friend and say "I did that". But a feature that looked really good in the decorating magazine, a friend's house or a salesman's brochure may be inappropriate in *their* house. Seeking professional help usually helps, but not always; some architects are far too interested in make a clever statement by twisting an old building around. Through the hundred-year life of a building, it takes just one insensitive owner to rip out the original features and they are lost forever.

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## PRESERVATION

**I** BELIEVE THAT MOST WESTMOUNTERS WANT AND EXPECT THE CITY'S BASIC CHARACTER TO REMAIN ESSENTIALLY THE SAME. WHAT CAN WE DO TO MAKE THIS HAPPEN?

It requires preserving not only the most outstanding buildings listed in the City's 1988 heritage study. It means keeping virtually all of the city's buildings including those features and decorative details that define their design character, as well as the trees and other landscape features.

The City can help preserve Westmount's heritage by further fine-tuning zoning regulations so they correspond precisely to existing building heights, setbacks, and site coverage. This would remove most incentive for demolition by banning excessively-scaled new construction, and it would ensure that any new buildings harmonize with their surroundings.

Owners often want the freedom to do anything they want to their *own* houses since *their* proposals are in impeccable good taste; but they want to make sure that their neighbours don't do anything tacky that would mess up the character of the street. The best way for a municipality to fairly, effectively and carefully manage change is through a process of design review, in which each proposed new building or alteration to an existing one is evaluated by a panel of independent architects, with respect to design criteria. Thanks to its special charter, Westmount has such a process, the Architectural and Planning Commission.

Its aims for existing buildings are to seek the minimal possible intervention -- "it is better to preserve than to repair, better to repair than to restore, better to restore than to reconstruct" (A.N.Didron, 1839) and to respect a building's design integrity -- "to thine own house be true" (motto of The Old House Journal) by preserving character-defining features. When it comes to new buildings, the aim is to minimize any negative impact on neighbours and to harmonize with the street. The City does not insist on any specific style, leaving architects free to use a contemporary or traditional expression, provided the new building fits in. If not, they have plenty of room to make their dramatic architectural statements somewhere else in this big country.

What makes Westmount unique and worth preserving extends beyond a small elite of buildings. The responsibility for its preservation must also be broadly shared. It cannot just be left to the City or the experts. It's up to all of us to appreciate how remarkable and valuable Westmount is, both for its beauty and the quality of life it affords. And whether we live in a mansion high on the hill or in a simple town house near the tracks, it's up to each of us to preserve that part of the city's fabric entrusted to our care by maintaining *our* own properties well and improving them carefully.

Mark London

April 1994

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