

When the Van Horne mansion fell 50 years ago, citizens stood up

Anglophones and francophones united to save the city's distinct heritage.

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Published Sep 07, 2023 • Last updated 19 hours ago • 9 minute read



The Van Horne mansion's demise spurred Phyllis Lambert to save another mansion, the former home of Lord Shaughnessy, in 1974. She turned it into the Canadian Centre for Architecture. PHOTO BY PIERRE OBENDRAUF /Montreal Gazette

The only outward sign of the epic battle in 1973 on the site now occupied by a 17-storey highrise at Sherbrooke St. W. and Stanley St. is a granite slab inscribed with the name of the victor.

It was 50 years ago, on Sept. 7, that the city of Montreal issued a demolition permit to real estate developer David Azrieli to raze the Van Horne mansion, a Victorian greystone in the sumptuous Square Mile that had been the residence of a tycoon of an earlier era, Sir William Cornelius Van Horne. The permit to tear it down was delivered after months of legal motions, newspaper editorials and protests opposing the destruction.

The neoclassical house with its glass-roofed conservatory was just one of many historic buildings that fell to the proverbial wrecker's ball in the demolition derby happening in many parts of the city at the time. The Montreal of 1973 was still giddy from the success of Expo 67 and looking toward hosting the Olympics in 1976. Mayor Jean Drapeau was particularly bent on "modernizing" the city.

Yet amid the ruins of 19th-century residences in the Square Mile, also called the Golden Square Mile, and of entire neighbourhoods elsewhere in the city, the demolition of the Van Horne mansion at 1139 Sherbrooke W. became a turning point in the movement — led by citizens — to preserve what was left of Montreal's heritage.

It was the last straw.

The demolition, which began the next morning — Saturday, Sept. 8, 1973 — was a catalyst that united many Montrealers against the mass destruction of their heritage, said historian Martin Drouin, director of the department of urban and tourism studies at Université du Québec à Montréal.



The Van Horne mansion, at Sherbrooke St. W. and Stanley St., circa 1969. PHOTO BY TEDD CHURCH /Montreal Gazette

“The proof is that less than a month later, Save Montreal was created,” he said. Sauvons Montréal/Save Montreal united two dozen preservation groups that had been working separately until then.

“What is extremely important about the creation of Save Montreal is that it created a federation of citizens’ groups from across the city,” said Drouin, who researched the history of the movement for his thesis and a book, *Le combat du patrimoine à Montréal, 1973-2003* (Presses de l’Université du Québec, 2005).

The founding of Heritage Montreal followed in 1975, initially to support the frontline efforts of Save Montreal.

“And the strength of these two groups in the 1970s and 1980s would be extremely important for Montreal,” Drouin said.

The citizens' battle brought significant changes, notably the recognition of a distinct Montreal heritage.

It's hard to fathom today, but Montreal had no regulations on demolition and no urban plan in 1973, and therefore no legal grounds to refuse any request to tear down a building.

The power to protect historic properties resided with the province. But Victorian architecture wasn't considered heritage in Quebec, Drouin said.

"Heritage" was associated with New France, and it was thought of in terms of "monuments."

Yet with few exceptions, the Victorian mansions of the Square Mile were built for wealthy Scottish and English families, "and our knowledge of the architecture of the 19th century was extremely deficient," Drouin said.

To boot, William Van Horne was born in the United States and buried there following his death in 1915. Yet he played an important role in Canada's history, running the Canadian Pacific Railway when it completed the first transcontinental line to the west coast and building railway hotels.

"Is he a Quebec figure? Today, we'd say yes," Drouin said. "But at the time, it was questioned."

Van Horne bought the mansion in 1890 to house his valuable paintings and ceramics. He had one of the largest private art collections in the world.

The original house was built for Sir John Hamilton in 1868, and has been attributed to architect John William Hopkins. Van Horne added the conservatory and hired Edward Colonna, a pioneer of Art Nouveau in North America, to remodel the interior.

The Van Horne estate put up the mansion for sale in 1969, citing the cost of upkeep. In April 1973, newspapers reported that Azrieli had a \$50,000 option to buy the mansion for \$800,000 pending a demolition permit so he could build a tower.

The Quebec cultural affairs minister, François Cloutier, said initially that he intended to classify the house under the 1972 Cultural Property Act, but then abruptly reversed his decision. The province stated the Van Horne mansion had little to do with "Quebec cultural heritage."

Thousands of Montrealers were of a different opinion, however.

"It resonated with both francophones and anglophones," said Jean-Claude Marsan, professor emeritus of architecture and urban planning at Université de Montréal.

"Everyone was struck by it. The fact that this house was threatened with demolition brought francophones and anglophones together to protect Montreal heritage."



A 17-storey highrise, home to the Sofitel hotel, rose up in the spot left behind by the Van Horne mansion's destruction. PHOTO BY JOHN MAHONEY /Montreal Gazette

The 1973 battle to preserve the mansion “was a kind of renaissance,” Marsan said.

“When I was young, St-Laurent Blvd. was the border between anglophones and francophones. But from that moment onward, this border disappeared. We all felt, francophones and anglophones, that we have to protect our heritage. We didn’t say French or English heritage, it was Montreal heritage.”

Architect Michael Fish bridged the language divide, writing against the demolition in French and English newspapers, Drouin said.

Fish was working to save another landmark, the Windsor Station. But he also helped Great Places when the group sprang up to save the Van Horne. Great Places bought ads in French and English newspapers and waged a legal battle to block the demolition. However, a judge ruled there were no legal grounds to stop it.

The court battle and the question of classifying the mansion stalled the city’s issuance of the demolition permit.

Finally, Azrieli filed a court motion that forced Montreal’s hand.

Phyllis Lambert, who has devoted her life to heritage and urban design, was one of the last — and only — people to see the inside of the mansion.

A scion of the Bronfman fortune, Lambert had just returned to the city after 30 years’ absence and was horrified to learn of the planned demolition of the Van Horne. She had an idea to buy the mansion for Cemp Investments, a Bronfman holding company.

However, “Leo Kolber, CEO (of Cemp), was not convinced,” Lambert said.

Nevertheless, she went to Azrieli’s office on Durocher St. “I tried to convince him not to destroy it.”

The developer wound up giving Lambert a private tour of the mansion, though it would turn out to be its last hours.

“I’m not sure how I managed to see the house, except that I was trying to buy it for the Cemp offices,” she said. “The plan of the house was amazing — a very wide hall the length of the house with rooms off it on both sides.”

Azrieli would later tell the Montreal Star that he had not planned to rush to tear down the mansion once he got the permit. But he said he had changed his mind on the night of Sept. 7 after learning that Great Places had taken out another injunction that afternoon.

A decision was made that weekend to create Save Montreal, Fish said. Founded by Lambert, Marsan and Fish, the group was announced to the press a few weeks later.

The battle had broad consequences at the provincial and municipal levels, Drouin said.

“We lost the Van Horne, but almost the next day ... the Quebec government started to include 19th-century architecture in its bank of national heritage.”

In January 1974, the province classified four buildings around the Van Horne site: the Atholstan house (today part of Maison Alcan), the Mount Royal Club, the Louis Joseph Forget house and the James Reid Wilson house (a.k.a. Corby Distilleries).

“It seemed to be an act of contrition,” Drouin said, as if the province was saying ““Maybe we made a mistake.””

Montreal city hall immediately ordered an inventory of buildings worth saving. And once the province accorded Montreal the power to regulate demolitions several months later, it adopted its first restrictive zoning bylaws. In a section downtown, for example, builders were limited to the same number of storeys as the buildings they wanted to demolish.

Meanwhile, Lambert was spurred to save another mansion from certain destruction. She bought the former home of Lord Shaughnessy on Dorchester Blvd. (now René-Lévesque Blvd. W.) in 1974 at the urging of photographer Brian Merrett, who had discovered it was threatened.

Merrett had asked the owner of the Shaughnessy mansion, the Sisters of Service, to photograph the interior. One of the nuns let slip that it was about to be sold to a developer who wanted to build a hotel in its place.

Lambert transformed the Shaughnessy house into the home of the Canadian Centre for Architecture. Merrett later joined the founding board of Heritage Montreal.

“No one believed that 19th-century houses could be used for any modern purposes,” Lambert said.



A granite plaque honouring real estate developer David Azrieli outside the tower he erected. PHOTO BY JOHN MAHONEY /Montreal Gazette

The Van Horne demolition also shaped the paths of individuals.

Dida Berku became a heritage activist in her first year of law at McGill University in 1974. She discovered at city hall that anyone could obtain a demolition permit with an address and \$5.

She created the group CRISE with a federal student grant, documented the demolition requests downtown and organized “anti-demolition walking tours.”

“It was a very alarming situation as there was a demolition permit request on literally every block,” said Berku, a city councillor in Côte-St-Luc. One of her sources of pride is having helped save the Bishop Court apartments on Bishop St.

Clément Demers saw the changes from the inside as a young architect hired by the city in July 1973.

“It was so automatic, that a person could request a demolition permit for a property that didn’t belong to him,” said Demers, who was later director of Montreal’s urban development department.

Demers was tasked by his superiors to carry out the inventory of buildings of historic interest. From thereon, a demolition request for any building on the list had to be sent to the city executive committee before the permit was issued. The city didn't yet have the power to refuse, but the delay helped, Demers said.

“In certain cases, I recommended that the ministry classify the building.”

Architect Julia Gersovitz says she chose a renovation project for her final year university thesis following the Van Horne demolition.

“This was a first at McGill in 1974 and it was highly controversial,” she said. Gersovitz joined Save Montreal and spent 20 years on the board of Heritage Montreal. She went on to save the Grey Nuns motherhouse from destruction and was the conservation architect on the team that created the Maison Alcan in the 1980s.

Save Montreal faded out in the '90s.

Marsan, for his part, oversaw the creation of the first masters program in conservation in Canada while dean of Université de Montréal's design faculty from 1985 to 1993.

Nevertheless, Montreal heritage still faces threats.

Conservation is too often limited to the building face — façadism, Demers said.

“Heritage will always be threatened,” he said. “The important thing is we should never create unfavourable conditions to saving heritage.”

Lambert said the province “doesn't do enough” to protect what is already classified.

“The idea of heritage is really well established and there have been good things done and a lot saved,” she said.

“The problem is a kind of underground threat. The city does what it can. But the province doesn't have enough agents to protect the houses. There's no real oversight.”

Fish contends there's less cohesion again among preservationists, and scant interest “in saving poor people's housing.”

“Look, I'm an old man and I've seen conservation get popular and unpopular,” Fish said.

Gersovitz noted that Quebec still has almost no protection for heritage interiors.

“Historic preservation is one of the most successful strategies for urban sustainability that any city can employ,” Gersovitz said.

“Reusing existing building stock conserves energy and avoids the high environmental costs of new construction.”

Pieces of the Van Horne mansion still exist, if a person knows where to look.

Azrieli, who died in 2014, removed elements from the house the night before it was demolished. Stained glass, doors, a fireplace mantel, chandeliers and other elements are present — though unlabelled — inside the hotel that stands in its place.

It’s time for the province and the city to officially recognize the battle that changed the definition of heritage, said Dinu Bumbaru, Heritage Montreal’s policy director.

“I think it should be declared a heritage event,” he said.

The 50th anniversary “is a period of reflection,” Drouin said.

“The Van Horne is still an important legacy. The battle isn’t over.”

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