Recalling the wrecker's ball: A Q&A on the Van Horne mansion's legacy

Fifty years later, seven people who were part of the nascent preservation movement reflect on the demolition's lasting impact.

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On Sept. 8, 1973, photographer Louise Abbott "was awakened early by the sounds of the demolition crew." She shot nine rolls of black-and-white film as the Van Horne mansion fell. "I was caught up in the mix of sadness and outrage that marked the occasion, and I wanted to create as comprehensive a record of the demolition as I could." *LOUISE ABBOTT*

September 1973. Montreal and its mayor, Jean Drapeau, were riding the success of Expo 67. Excavation work had recently begun in the east end to build the stadium that would host the 1976 Olympic Games. And across Montreal, it was demolition derby. Older buildings, and in some cases entire neighbourhoods, were being ripped down to make way for expressways and large-scale projects. In downtown's Square Mile, on the southern flank of Mount Royal, developers were razing the opulent 19th-century mansions of that era's wealthiest families to erect concrete and glass towers.

On Sept. 8, the Square Mile mansion that had belonged to Sir William Cornelius Van Horne, at the northeast corner of Sherbrooke and Stanley streets, fell to the wrecker's ball despite a protracted citizen-led battle to try to save it. The fight to preserve the Van Horne mansion was over, but it proved to be the turning point in the movement to save Montreal heritage. Save Montreal, an umbrella organization of citizen groups working to preserve buildings, green space and the city's identity, was created in the days following the demolition. The municipal election the following year resulted in the creation of the first opposition at city hall as 18 members of the Montreal Citizens' Movement (MCM) were elected on a platform that included stopping rampant demolition. That was followed by the creation of Heritage Montreal in 1975.

On the 50th anniversary of the demolition of the Van Horne mansion, the Montreal Gazette has asked seven people who were part of the nascent preservation movement to reflect on the event and its legacy for the city.

Louise Abbott: Writer, photographer, filmmaker

Arnold Bennett: Former Montreal city councillor, tenants' rights advocate

Dida Berku: Lawyer, Côte-St-Luc councillor

Michael Fish: Retired architect

Julia Gersovitz: Montreal architect and professor, McGill University

Jean-Claude Marsan: Emeritus professor of architecture and urban planning, Université de Montréal

Brian Merrett: Architectural photographer and heritage activist

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Côte-St-Luc city councillor Dida Berku recalled how in 1974, as a law student at McGill University, she was inspired to organize “anti-demolition walking tours.” She is pictured here at the Bishop Court apartments on Bishop St. that she helped save from demolition. *DAVE SIDAWAY*

Can you recount where you were and what you were doing when you first heard that the demolition of the Van Horne mansion had started early Saturday, Sept. 8, 1973?

Louise Abbott: In 1973 I was living on Stanley St., kitty-corner to the onetime home of Sir William Van Horne. I’d moved downtown four years earlier. As a Canadian history buff, I was concerned about the disappearance of numerous 19th-century buildings, and as a photojournalist I decided to document some that remained in the Golden Square Mile, including the Van Horne mansion.

On Sept. 8, 1973, I was awakened early by the sounds of the demolition crew. I got dressed quickly and went outside with my camera. The sidewalks were nearly deserted. But as the morning wore on, more and more people gathered to watch the greystone come down. I don’t recall chatting much with anyone; I focused on photographing.

I shot nine rolls of black-and-white film that day — far more than I’d typically shoot in a few hours. I was caught up in the mix of sadness and outrage that marked the occasion, and I wanted to create as comprehensive a record of the demolition as I could.

Michael Fish: I was going to the United States to climb a mountain. But I happened to pass the house as we drove to the border and I stopped. Then I had to get out of the car and become involved. You have to understand that I was doing nothing else but trying to save that house for about six months.

Jean-Claude Marsan: When I heard the demolition had started, I didn't want to go and watch. I was very uncomfortable. I didn't want to watch the destruction.

Julia Gersovitz: I was not present for the demolition of the Van Horne house, and I must admit that I find such wanton destruction too painful to watch. I do know that its demolition had an impact on me in the next several years and helped set me on my career path in conservation architecture.

"The trajectory of conservation in Montreal has been that of a pendulum — swings toward conservation, swings toward destruction," said Julia Gersovitz, on Sherbrooke St. in front of Maison Alcan, a conservation project she collaborated on after the Van Horne mansion's demolition. *JOHN MAHONEY*

Demolition permits were being issued left and right at that time. Why was the Van Horne mansion a turning point in the battle for heritage conservation in Montreal?

Louise Abbott: Sir William Van Horne had been responsible for completing the first Canadian transcontinental railway — the CPR — and for initiating the construction of the Banff Springs Hotel and other grand railway hotels. So his house was of significance because he'd played such a prominent role in Canadian history. But it was also of significance for its architectural style, particularly the Art Nouveau interior that he'd commissioned after acquiring the building in 1890.

Mayor Drapeau was bent on modernizing Montreal and keeping it on the world stage after Expo 67. As a Quebec nationalist, he had no interest in preserving buildings that he perceived as symbols of Anglo-Canadian heritage. But conservationists of various stripes — francophones among them — felt that he'd gone too far when he allowed the Van Horne house to be destroyed. Thus, they organized to create Save Montreal and then, two years later, Heritage Montreal.

The demolition of the Van Horne mansion had an enduring impact on my life. It galvanized me to continue to document heritage architecture and collaborate with fellow conservationists, first in Montreal and then later in the Eastern Townships.

Jean-Claude Marsan: The Van Horne mansion was an absolutely remarkable heritage asset. It was quite exceptional, and on Sherbrooke St. And Van Horne was a figure who played a major role in the history of Canada with the railway.

Save Montreal appeared a month after the demolition of the Van Horne mansion. I participated in the creation of Save Montreal with several people. And it was francophones and anglophones. That's very important.

It was a kind of break. The Van Horne mansion is a kind of symbol that we finally moved from the destruction phase to conservation.

Michael Fish: It had so much press coverage. It was a really stupid thing to have happened and the government had really covered itself with shame for allowing it to happen. Also, there was no organized conservation in the city at the time before the Van Horne mansion was demolished.

If the house hadn't been demolished, the reorganization of conservation in Montreal would not have happened, or it might have happened later. Phyllis (Lambert) and Jean-Claude Marsan met with our lawyer and they formed Save Montreal over a weekend. And the three of us were the original directors. Everybody decided to help everybody else and work together. And for a few years, all the conservation people in the city worked very well within the Save Montreal envelope, and a lot of people saved their buildings. All of a sudden they were one big happy family fighting together to save everything. It made a big difference.

Arnold Bennett: Probably because it was so visible. It wasn't just the home of some rich guy. It was the home of the founder of the CPR. It was right on Sherbrooke St., where anybody could see it, not up the hill.

This was a period when heritage preservation groups and anti-demolition groups were becoming much more active. It was one of the reasons you had the MCM, which had its founding convention the next spring, in 1974.

The Van Horne mansion came after thousands and thousands of homes and entire neighbourhoods were torn down. The Drapeau administration was an administration that wiped out Griffintown to build a parking lot. The CBC building wiped out a whole neighbourhood. The wrecker's ball was working all over the place, and that mobilized communities. It was wholesale. And of course the Ville Marie Expressway wiped out a whole neighbourhood. That left a disgusting open trench ever after.

Also, the Van Horne mansion brought in all kinds of people from the west end of the city. It was probably a symbol that made things more visible to the anglophone community, who did not live out where these other huge demolitions happened, with the exception of the Décarie Expressway.

Julia Gersovitz: The conservation movement has broadened enormously over the last 50 years. We now understand that the uniqueness of 'place' and the individuality of a city stem in large measure from the texture of its streetscapes — the greystone triplexes, the curving iron staircases — and the strength of its neighbourhoods. They are now protected, to a greater or lesser degree. But in 1973, the conservation movement was still focused on monuments. And the Van Horne mansion was a monument. Despite the narrow and preposterous statements of the politicians, many people understood it as a significant work of architecture and an important part of our culture.

The ambience of that portion of Sherbrooke St. was defined by the Van Horne mansion and its immediate neighbours to the west and south — the Mount Royal Club, the Macdonald Stewart Foundation, Corby's and the houses that were to be incorporated into Maison Alcan.

I imagine that its glorious interiors by Edward Colonna were not known to many, but everyone walked by it on the street and many appreciated its age, its architecture, its contribution to the streetscape, its garden.

It was a very visible loss.

It happened at a time when certain segments of society were questioning authority, and I think many Montrealers understood that its demolition was wrong. It was wasteful of our resources on every level — cultural, environmental, esthetic. It was simply the last straw.

A 17-storey highrise, home to the Sofitel hotel, rose up in the spot where the Van Horne mansion once stood. Some elements of the mansion, including doors, a fireplace mantle, chandeliers and stained glass, were spared and are now stored in the hotel. *JOHN MAHONEY*

How would you describe the progress that has been made in protecting Montreal's built heritage over the 50 years since that event?

Jean-Claude Marsan: There was a really remarkable improvement. Before, we had the impression that the city of Montreal will be destroyed to build bigger temples. But with the Van Horne mansion, it became a kind of break from that culture toward another culture that has since progressed but still needs to progress further.

The only problem is that we get the impression that at the political level they're insensitive to it. Citizens are sensitive to heritage, but the government isn't very sensitive to it.

Julia Gersovitz: The trajectory of conservation in Montreal has been that of a pendulum — swings toward conservation, swings toward destruction. I recently contributed a chapter to a book, Evolving Heritage Conservation Practice in the 21st Century (Christina Cameron, editor, Springer, 2023). In it, I trace what was happening in Canada, and most particularly Montreal, on a decade-by-decade basis. The 1970s was characterized by a growing grassroots movement that challenged the status quo of demolition. The 1980s demonstrated that conservation projects could be built — Maison Alcan, the Canadian Centre for Architecture — and be very positively received. As the 1980s waned, preservation laws were put in place and Canadian universities began to establish academic programs — the first one was at the Université de Montréal. The economic downturn of the early 1990s allowed for a period of reflection and planning.

But since the 2000s, the pendulum has been swinging in the other direction, despite increasing legislation to enlarge and diversify the definitions of "heritage."

At the architectural firm I helped establish, EVOQ, we have participated in the mise en valeur of some marvellous buildings and spectacular interiors, such as the Eaton's 9th floor restaurant. While there are still successes, there is an increasing sense of frustration about what is being lost.

Now with development pressure and speculation rampant, the destruction is hiding behind facadism. The examples are very visible in the downtown core. Horrible masquerades.

I have talked about this to a number of colleagues and the consensus seems to be that we are on the wrong arc of the pendulum swing. Very depressing.

But of course it's not inevitable if we collectively demand that the politicians enact broader laws. And of course, we can demand this protection for other reasons than those first understood in 1973.

Arnold Bennett: There have been all kinds of institutional reforms. But there have been fights between communities and developers over various other mansions over the years under different administrations. In the MCM's first mandate (1986-90), you had Overdale, which was the big disappointment of the Doré administration. If you want to take iconic moments, you have Milton Park, which was a fight of several years. You've got Benny Farm, which was years of struggle to get the federal government to back down and include affordable housing in the redevelopment. There's the whole movement to preserve Mount Royal. These are just a few examples. Every few years, you have a cause célèbre.

But there's more to the preservation battle than each heritage building. Over the years, the issue has become less a matter of wholesale demolition and more a matter wholesale gentrification, 'renovictions,' Airbnbs. It's also an issue about affordable housing and neighbourhood preservation. If you want to preserve your neighbourhoods, you have to preserve the entire fabric of the neighbourhood.

And while there are tighter regulations, there's inadequate enforcement of the regulations. An insufficient number of inspectors, an insufficient number of inspections, very unequal enforcement depending on the borough.

Dida Berku: Over 50 years, there were many ups and downs when it came to demolition. Most notably the demolition of the Redpath Mansion in 1986, just north of the Museum of Fine Arts. It was just before the last election for Drapeau and I took an injunction on behalf of Heritage Montreal to stop the demolition, which had not passed all the proper procedures. I was the one who hammered the court order (to halt demolition) onto the crumbling brick walls right in front of the sledgehammer. The city had not respected due process. The file was not reviewed by the heritage protection committee, and the demolition had been granted directly by the executive committee. Notwithstanding an agreement between the owner, the city and Heritage Montreal guaranteeing the protection of the façade in any new construction, that half-abandoned property remained abandoned for two decades, until the administration of Denis Coderre finally ordered its demolition for so-called "security reasons." That was not a case to be proud of.

Brian Merrett: The demolition of the historic Van Horne mansion was a turning point for heritage awareness but was not the end of the destruction of buildings in Montreal's western core. The following year, three Queen Anne houses on neighbouring Drummond St. were viciously defaced.

A decade after the loss of the Van Horne house, Alcan set new preservation guidelines by incorporating not just the façades — a burgeoning trend downtown — but the entire structures of four human-scaled buildings as its headquarters diagonally across from the Van Horne. Yet a generation later, Alcan's successor applied to replace that with a 30-storey tower (but was refused).

In 1981, we lost the Maison Dandurand and, four decades later, we await the decision on the fate of the Fulford residence.

A stone plaque in front of the Sofitel hotel on Sherbrooke St. pays tribute to David Azrieli, the real estate developer who tore down the Van Horne mansion. *JOHN MAHONEY*

What, if anything, have we still not learned? Could something on the scale of the loss of the Van Horne mansion happen again in Montreal?

Julia Gersovitz: I think that it could very well happen again, because as I have said, the value of a building like the Van Horne mansion is embedded not just in its street presence — it is in its interior design and planning and finishes. And these interiors are very much at risk in many Montreal buildings as fine as the Van Horne was.

We need to ensure that they are not lost to us all as well.

Jean-Claude Marsan: We can't predict. Everything can be threatened in some way. But when it arises, we can understand what's happening better. At the moment, with climate change, where we really need to invest is in nature.

Michael Fish: Sure it could — history repeats itself. Somebody will come along and will have enough influence one way or another. As soon as they find out there's money involved, all of a sudden things start to follow money. It's a human thing.

Arnold Bennett: If you talk about wholesale demolition of neighbourhoods, things have changed. If you talk about piecemeal attacks, like on the housing stock and forcing people out of neighbourhoods, they haven't.

Dida Berku: The Ministry of Culture has recently adopted very strict guidelines when it comes to demolition of heritage properties. They have introduced a blanket protection for all properties built before 1940 and have mandated all municipalities across the province to adopt inventories and guidelines that will protect heritage properties. Every municipality is forced to update their demolition bylaw to protect heritage properties or properties with cultural value. In fact in Côte-St-Luc, where I am a councillor, we are looking at the inventory of homes built before or around the 1940s to see which should be subject to more scrutiny when it comes to demolition and replacement. We have history to protect across the island and these new rules will certainly help.

And I know that the Ministry and the Agglomeration of Montreal are doing a full-scale inventory of all heritage properties and demolition bylaws, and looking at how they will be amended and updated according to the new rules.

Brian Merrett: Municipalities need authority to protect and guide the repurposing of their heritage buildings. When we lose pieces of our past, we lose our history. Without history, we cannot knowledgeably form a future, we cannot properly educate our children and we cannot enjoy a broad perspective of visual witness to that history.

Louise Abbott: Canadian history is being rewritten to include individuals and communities that were unfairly overlooked in the past. In the process of this revision, some historical figures who were once respected are now reviled. If a heritage building is associated with someone who has fallen from grace, then, yes, a loss on the scale of the Van Horne mansion could occur again unless the architectural importance of the building is perceived to outweigh the status of the historical occupant, and the structure can be meaningfully repurposed.

Whether in Montreal or elsewhere in Quebec, heritage preservationists will continue to be pitted against developers who want to put up new buildings, not restore old ones, and have the wherewithal to get their way.

Fire has always been a threat to heritage buildings, as was witnessed tragically in Old Montreal in recent months. Climate change and the extreme weather events it's producing are posing new and equally serious threats.

Regardless of the obstacles, I feel that we must do our best to maintain heritage buildings that remind us of the history that has helped to bring us where we are today.

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