

Future of Pre-Confederation PM's Residence Uncertain

by Sheila Ascroft

There is hope that the last home of Sir Louis-Hippolyte La Fontaine in downtown Montréal—derelict for decades—might be saved, but no one is saying exactly how, at least not yet.

La Fontaine, one of the key figures in the fight for responsible government in Canada, was prime minister of the United Canadas in the 1840s when Montréal was the capital. He lived in the Overdale Avenue residence (in what is today the Ville Marie borough of the city) for 15 years until his death in 1864.

The three-storey Georgian mansion withstood the attacks of enraged 19th-century mobs, which sacked it after burning the Parliament Building in reaction to La Fontaine's controversial Rebellion Losses Bill of 1849. Now it is struggling to survive 21st-century neglect.



Les Amis de la résidence Louis-Hippolyte La Fontaine say that only designation as a national historic site will save the house from destruction. It currently sits abandoned, marked by graffiti, with boarded windows and a decrepit balcony, surrounded by a parking lot. In 2001, it was occupied by activists decrying the shortage of affordable housing.

Les Amis, made up of professional educators and Canadian and Quebec history researchers, say the house should become an interpretive centre exploring the evolution of responsible government in Canada. The owners, on the other hand, see commercial development possibilities and have appeared distressingly hard-hearted about the building's development value, including its value as part of its whole city block, for which the asking price is \$50 million.

Robert Landau, the majority owner in the development consortium that owns the building, recently submitted a proposal to the city to renovate the house into condominiums.

"It is not yet a public document. It requires input from the Conseil du patrimoine," said Jacques Alain Lavallée, spokesperson for the Ville Marie borough. (The Conseil is an independent group that reviews heritage properties in Montréal.)



Twenty years ago, developers wanted to pull it down—as they did with the rest of the Victorian greystone neighbourhood that had grown up around it. It was temporarily saved when Heritage Montréal convinced the city to designate it a historic monument using the then new powers granted to municipalities by the 1986 Cultural Property Act. That is why the proposal must go to the Conseil du patrimoine for review before the Ville Marie borough can reveal the details of the plan.

Heritage activists, including former federal cabinet minister Senator Serge Joyal, want the building restored, but no level of government seems willing to put up the requisite money. Representatives of heritage groups are to meet with city officials in September to express their concerns about the fate of the property.

"We are looking to protect the entire site. We are not just looking to save the four walls," Senator Joyal, who spearheaded the 20-year movement to restore the property, told *The Montreal Gazette* in August. "Just to integrate the walls into a development that might house condos or offices isn't what we're looking for. We want the site saved, restored and turned into a public property."

A year ago Senator Joyal submitted a request to the Historic Sites and Monuments Board of Canada to have the La Fontaine house declared a national historic site.

“It is very important because it illustrates the partnership between an English-Canadian (Robert Baldwin) and a French-Canadian (Louis-Hippolyte La Fontaine) who for the first time expressed the idea of what was to become the foundation of Canada . . . The objective in protecting and preserving this house is not to decorate it or refurnish it to make it look like it might have looked when Louis-Hippolyte La Fontaine lived there, as all of his furniture and other personal effects are gone. What is important is to use this site . . . as an interpretive centre. It will be in the area where university students are located. It is so close to the downtown area that it will be easy to integrate it into the tourist network. It will not be a ghost monument.”

The building, located on prime real estate below René Levesque Boulevard, was built between 1844 and 1846 according to a plan by architect John Ostell. Montréal architect Michael Fish described the house as “a very sober Palladian neo-Renaissance style with some Second Empire details. The sobriety is typical of the cut grey limestone buildings in Montréal, which has one of the most severe climates in the world.”

John Ostell was the city surveyor by the early 1840s and drew up the first comprehensive city plan of Montréal in 1841. He also had a flourishing private architectural practice that included such major projects as subdividing the large villa property of businessman John Redpath, and the Séminaire de Saint-Sulpice’s lands along the Lachine Canal.

Between 1836 and 1856 John Ostell designed the customs house on Place Royale (1836), the McGill College arts building (1839-43), the McGill Normal School (1845), the Protestant Orphan Asylum (1848-49), the toll-collector’s office on the Lachine Canal (1851), the church of Notre-Dame de Grâce (1851-1853), the Grand Séminaire and the Montréal courthouse (1850-56), among others.

Repeated attempts to have the federal and provincial governments intervene to save the La Fontaine property have been rejected. Costs for converting the site into a museum have been estimated at between \$8 million and \$15 million.

Parks Canada included both Louis-Hippolyte La Fontaine and Robert Baldwin as national historic persons in its 2004 System Plan. Attempts to discuss options with Robert Landau that could reverse the building’s deteriorated state were ignored.

“The federal government has adopted a silly rule that requires it to have the owner’s consent before it will declare the property a national historic site,” Heritage Montréal’s Dinu Bumbaru said. “We wrote to Minister Dion in August 2005 to revive the file, asking the Canadian government to play a dynamic role in restoring the house and to give it a mission as an interpretive centre of Canadian history.”

“Preservationists need only a small corner of the block to dignify the memory of this celebrated man,” said Mr. Fish. He noted that “intentional damage has been inflicted on the site and its neighbourhood, slowly, quietly over the past 30 years. It must be properly secured under the building code, and this work should be done forthwith by the city at the owner’s expense.”

The Federation of Historical Societies, which represents 200 heritage organizations in Quebec, also wants the city to intervene and dictate how the property is developed. “We’re not giving up the fight to save the house,” said Lyne St. Jacques, federation president. “Mayor Gérald Tremblay has been encouraging. Now we are lobbying Quebec’s heritage minister and Parks Canada to support the project. One possibility is for the owners to donate the building to the city in exchange for zoning easements,” she added.

The Gazette, Montréal, 08/15/06 and 06/16/06; Debates of the Senate (Hansard), 1st Session, 38th Parliament, Volume 142, Issue 87, 09/29/05; Les Amis de la résidence Louis-Hippolyte La Fontaine (www.geocities.com/residencelafontaine/home.html); Sen. Serge Joyal (<http://www.sen.parl.gc.ca/sjoyal/e/index.html>); Conseil du patrimoine (<http://ville.montreal.qc.ca>).