The Tipping Point

By Norman Spatz

The demolition of the Van Horne mansion\(^1\) was, unquestionably,\(^2\) the galvanizing event for many Montrealers, and an affair that attained national attention. The home was purchased by developer David Azrieli with the intention of erecting an office tower on the site. News of the mansion’s proposed demolition inspired Michael Fish to help found a small group called Society for Great Places that included future Save Montrealers Audrey Bean and Peter Lanken. They joined a growing chorus of opposition that was calling for the home’s preservation. They took to the press, calling for the house, once home to Van Horne’s revered art collection, to be taken over by the Museum of Fine Arts.

Eliot Perrin

At Washington University during the Sixties while I was there as a student, there was an extremely well-organized weekly architectural lecture series run on Wednesday nights. Not the most famous architects on the international scene, but those who were doing something innovative, something trend setting or breaking as the case might be frequent speakers. Those lectures were often the highlight of my week, presenting points of view which made me think about what I was learning, and more often than not question the wisdom of the approach to the urban environment that was being presented by many of my professors.

When I arrived in Montreal I was no longer a student; I was a worker, no longer learning but producing. I often felt lost adjusting to a new city, a new climate, a new language, new friends and a new culture. But I very quickly found one thing that linked my old life and my new one. The McGill School of Architecture offered a Wednesday night lecture series. The choice of speakers was


\(^2\) Footnote above and quote from Perrin, Eliot Thesis Concordia University Department of History “It’s your city, only you can save it!”:
Save Montreal’s Grassroots Opposition to Urban Redevelopment Page 36
not as edgy as what I had grown used to in Saint Louis, but these people gave me insight into my new life in an architectural office, which was after all, not as edgy as being a student in the Sixties.

It was probably the second lecture of the series on Wednesday September 5, 1973 when I bumped into Adele. Maybe the word “collided” would be more appropriate, Adele Issac, now Adele Mardoche, was outside the doors of the auditorium of the Architecture School. Armed with a clipboard holding many sheets of a signed petition to save the Van Horne Mansion, she was frankly beautiful in the stark force of passion that animated her every move. She had enormous eyes that made her seem exotic but her devotion to the cause was what dominated my first impression of her.

The demolition of the Van Horne mansion affected a number of Montrealarers on an immediate and personal basis. As alluded to, these individuals were primarily Anglophone, but not exclusively so. These residents were awakened to the fact that virtually nothing was sacred in the city, not even cherished local landmarks. The provincial and municipal governments, nationalist and pro-development in outlook, could not be relied upon to protect these structures.

Eliot Perrin

We both knew that we had found a kindred soul almost from the first sentences that we spoke. Listening to Adele talk about what was going to happen to the heritage of the city was like listening to my own thoughts being spoken by another. There was no denying the urgency that she felt. I signed the petition. Adele told me that there would be a demonstration in front of the Van Horne House that Sunday, September 9, 1973. I wasn’t asked to attend. My presence was assumed with no words spoken.

The developer David Azrieli was probably scared that his project would be blocked by one level of government or another. Opposition to the demolition was growing like a tidal wave. The forces of public outrage were becoming increasingly visible and vocal in both the press and the street. The impending demolition was all that many people could discuss.

And Azrieli acted, strategically, selfishly, thoughtlessly, ruthlessly. It didn’t matter. On Saturday September 8, 1973 the beautiful, elegant, refined vestige of a time of Anglo privilege that had passed fell to the attack of a front-end loader. A demolition permit had not been issued, but Azrieli figured that whatever fine would be charged was small change in comparison to the potential value of what could be built. The morality of what he was doing was of little concern.

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Ibid Pages 41-42
Demolition dust hangs in the air like no other material that I have experienced. It is almost as if the soul of the building could not bear to leave the location where it had stood. On Sunday September 9, 1973 I attended the demonstration in front of the remains. The scene was post-apocalyptic with shards of ornate woodwork, slabs of imported cut stone and pieces of detailed cast plaster jutting out in all directions. And the cameras were rolling. Surrounded by reporters holding mikes to her almost in positions of worship as she stood upon a high point in the ruins was Adele giving a press conference. She could have stood in for the Madonna grieving the loss of her dead child or the dazed widow mourning the loss of a decades-long relationship after the kind words at the funeral have all been said. Words were incapable of expressing her loss, but she still had those words to give to the press. When she finished I was in tears.

And then she began again. This time in a French that was so beautiful that it made the English seem like a prelude to the loss that was now being portrayed. Speaking the accent of her native Egypt, she grieved. And the French-speaking journalists grieved with her.

My heart had been given to the city that I had adopted, and for a time, to a woman who had brought me into the inner circle of kindred souls fighting together to keep the past alive. We worked so that the future could continue to be nourished by the roots that it had grown from.