

## The RVH and the New Vic Project

### History

In the mid-1970s, as my photographic career in documenting heritage architecture - including Montreal's Windsor Station and Maison Shaughnessy - was gathering momentum, the architectural firm Barott, Marshall, Montgomery and Merrett was winding up a quarter-century of work with the Royal Victoria Hospital. J. Campbell Merrett<sup>1</sup> was my father. I grew up watching him work at his draughting table at home and recall him sketching the flow of people through the proposed spaces at the Ross Pavilion.

The buildings and modernizations that this firm incorporated into the hospital complex allowed the institution to provide health services to the public of Greater Montreal and the key to these services is that they, as per the mandate of the founders of the Royal Victoria Hospital, were and remain public. Those founders - Donald Smith, 1st Lord Strathcona, and his cousin, George Stephen, 1st Lord Mount Stephen, intended the Royal Vic *"to be for the use of the sick and ailing without distinction of race or creed"*.<sup>2</sup>

Later, major financial contributors included James Ross, Richard Angus, Sir Vincent Meredith and Sir Montagu Allen and, in recent years, the late Elspeth Angus<sup>3</sup>, descendent of Lord Mount Stephen, frequently made the strong point of reminding us that the mandate of any re-use of the land and buildings must be for the benefit of the public.

### Demolition, ok ..

As I understand it, many, if not all the Modernist additions to the Royal Vic will be demolished for the New Vic project. While sad from a personal perspective, it is understandable and, perhaps, even welcome: if demolished, the footprints of those buildings would free up space on the land that should become green spaces, public spaces.

In my role as a founding director of Héritage Montréal, I might feel torn about the demolition. The buildings evoke a history, a legacy; they are patrimonial, they should be kept and repurposed. And yet, the example being followed here is that of the founder of that landmark institution, Mme Phyllis Lambert. As she was looking to establish a home for the Canadian Centre for Architecture and, after purchasing the Maison Shaughnessy in 1974, went on to completely restore the building. In doing so, the 1910 'billiard' wing was demolished, bringing the house back to its original 1874 design by architect William Tutin Thomas. The only post-1874 addition that was kept was the 1890 solarium at the western end of the Maison Shaughnessy. This is an applicable solution for the Royal Victoria Hospital / New Vic project - take the original building back to its roots.



The draughting table of J. Campbell Merrett at 232 Senneville Road where many designs for the post-war additions to the Royal Victoria Hospital were conceived.  
- photo © 1991 Brian Merrett

<sup>1</sup> [J. Campbell Merrett](#) - 1909 - 1998; McGill School of Architecture, 1931; architect of Montreal's Central Station

<sup>2</sup> [Royal Victoria Hospital, Wikipedia](#)

<sup>3</sup> [Elspeth Angus, YouTube](#)

What, then, are my concerns regarding the removal of the post-war buildings? We know that demolition can create a threat to our delicate ecology. Significant carbon emissions are produced as a building is destroyed, cleared away, and the terrain subsequently landscaped. This unfortunate generation of greenhouse gasses must be kept to a minimum and offset.



Royal Victoria Hospital, 1890-93, 687 avenue des Pins ouest. Henry Saxon Snell (London); p. 111, *Montreal Architecture, A Guide to Styles and Buildings*. - photo © 1990, Brian Merrett,

First, I hope that all documentation of the evolution of these RVH buildings can be made available to the public. As walkers traverse the RVH land on their way up the mountain, what an opportune space for them to learn the history of the land, the founders, the original buildings and new additions. With didactic panels illustrated with paintings, historic and contemporary photographs and architectural drawings<sup>4</sup>, perhaps a walk-through history maze could be created within the footprints of the postwar buildings. Trees would be planted and public awareness created of the evolution not only of the hospital but of the Indigenous history of the region. The most certain way to help people look to the future is to ensure that they understand the past.

As well, the materials used in the post-war buildings must be recovered and recycled for re-use.

### **.. but, new construction?**

In conversations with two McGill representatives, I was very surprised to learn from one that it is felt that the post-war buildings cannot be repurposed and would be demolished - and then be replaced with newly-built lab facilities. In my mind, it is unacceptable to tear down an existing building and then construct a replacement.

Environmentally-aware architects understand that the greenest building is the one that is already standing. Besides the requirement to bring fenestration and other components up to code, repurposed buildings avoid the creation of fossil fuel emissions for demolition, waste removal, the importation of new materials and landscaping. Knowledgeable contemporary architects draw on innovative skills and imagination to retain, restore and repurpose existing buildings. I have no doubt that the Peter Guo-hua Fu School of Architecture at McGill instils in students the imagination to create such a project, given the current availability of spaces to be repurposed at the Royal Victoria Hospital.

### **Conclusion**

When I feel that these concerns are addressed by McGill in a subsequent announcement - that the property will serve the public, that the project will respect and create awareness of the history of the land, that any demolition will be ecologically sensitive and serve to create public green space, and that any new construction will incorporate and repurpose an existing building - I will then be honoured to support the New Vic project. Thank you for this opportunity to share my concerns.

- Brian Merrett, *photographer of heritage architecture since 1969*.

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<sup>4</sup> McGill University Archives maintains a large volume of architectural drawings and photographs of these buildings.

\* Appendix - J. Campbell Merrett, design architect for the Royal Victoria Hospital, 1951 - 1976



ROYAL VICTORIA HOSPITAL: For 30 years I was involved in design and construction of additions and almost continuous "upgrading" of all buildings - those (above) north of Pine Ave. and west of University St.

- from the diary of J. Campbell Merrett, Senneville, Quebec, 1989.

1951 : Rénovation du pavillon des Femmes - Barott, Marshall, Montgomery & Merrett

1953 : Ajout à l'arrière de l'Institut Allan Memorial - Barott, Marshall, Montgomery & Merrett

1954 : Animalerie et laboratoires - Barott, Marshall, Montgomery & Merrett

1956 : Aile chirurgicale : modification de l'entrée principale et corridor souterrain d'accès - Barott, Marshall, Montgomery & Merrett

1959 : Aile médicale - Barott, Marshall, Montgomery & Merrett

1960 : Programme de modernisation, pavillon Ross - Barott, Marshall, Montgomery & Merrett

1962 : Agrandissement de l'aile ouest - Marshall et Merrett

1964 : Ajouts au pavillon chirurgical; niveau supplémentaire à l'aile ouest (climatisation) - Marshall et Merrett

1976 : Rénovation de la résidence des infirmières - Merrett, Stahl & Elliot