



Birth of a local living
history collection / 3

Description

The Atwater Library and Montreal Island seniors construct a living a history collection

By Wanda Potrykus

Children's stories – Part 1

Once upon a time there was what there was, and if nothing had happened there would be nothing to tell.

Dreams Underfoot, Charles de Lint, 1993

Once upon a time in 2017... on the border of Montreal and Westmount

Over the last 9 months of the Seniors' Living History Project at the Atwater Library, as members of the team entered and exited the building, they came face to face with an ever evolving landscape in front of them, in short, the gigantic demolition site of the swiftly disappearing and former Tupper-Dorchester campus of the Montreal Children's hospital (MCH). The hospital, itself, had moved further west in May 2015 to a brand new campus located at 1001 Decarie Blvd in the Montreal borough of NDG (Notre-Dame-de-Grace).



The new 2015 premises of the Montreal Children's Hospital at 1001 Decarie – Image: Children's Hospital Foundation

Hospital Down Time and Demolition on Street

Meanwhile back on Atwater Avenue, Ramsay Blair, one of the team of senior amateur oral historians, has been devoting a portion of his time on a weekly basis to documenting the ever-changing vista of the controlled destruction of the former Children's hospital campus. Employing film editing techniques that include speed ramping and time-lapse, he has created a [cinéma vérité](#) work-in-progress documentary entitled *Hospital Down Time*. The finished documentary will eventually be available online with other Living History recordings and at the Atwater Library. Meanwhile, you can view another of Ramsay's artistic short docs, entitled [Demolition on Street](#), a 2.5 minute, slow-mo(tion) snapshot of the area, created as part of the Atwater Library Digital Literacy Project's *Canada in 150 Seconds*, which saw students and seniors filming 150-second videos as part of their contribution to celebrating Canada's anniversary year. It's a unique Ramsayesque view of the MCH demolition/Cabot Square/Alexis Nihon corner of Montreal and is accompanied by one of Ramsay Blair's incomparable soundtracks.

Il était une fois... plus ça change, plus c'est la même chose

From May 2015 to the fall of 2017, the former MCH campus, shuttered and derelict, silently waited as rumours swirled and the Quebec provincial government finalized the laborious process of scrutinizing offers to purchase and the City of Montreal looked at development proposals and conducted neighbourhood consultations. Luc Poirier was the original winner of the bid for the site, which had been valued at \$47.5 million and whose fantasies had included building a professional baseball park. That dream quietly faded away, for in spite of its large surface area, the site still wasn't quite big enough to accommodate a baseball stadium.

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Besides the neighbourhood had already benefited from one of those; however, it too had fallen to the rapacious needs of real estate developers 50 years previously when the Atwater Park baseball field, where the Montreal Royals had first played on the corner of Ste Catherine and Atwater opposite the Montreal Forum, had been sold early in the 1960s to enable the construction of the Montreal metro and the Alexis Nihon towers and shopping mall.



Atwater Baseball Park c 1928 – Image: public domain

In the end, Poirier flipped the property, selling out to a consortium that included Philip Kerub, Fiera Capital Corp and Devimco, a large residential real estate developer. They, in their turn, were no doubt salivating at the thought of the seven to eight soaring (20-32+ storey) mixed-use towers they had originally proposed to shoehorn onto the site (more than twice the height of what was previously there). Their plans will also gobble up part of yet another Montreal street (Lambert-Closse) just as the MCH had erased Essex Street from the map in the 1970s, and in the process will irrevocably change the neighbourhood footprint and skyline yet again.

Devimco's original concept drawing, for what they are calling "Children's Square", makes their development look like it's floating in a spacious open area with plenty of breathing space surrounding it. Unfortunately the reality, once realized, will be far less idyllic. Most of that paltry green space featured in the drawing won't be at ground level but up on a plinth and classified "private". Potential buyers, however, don't seem at all dismayed as Devimco has announced that as of December 2017, 95% of Phase One of their two Est/West residential tower spaces (i.e. the two condo towers slated to be built first) have been sold, so they are opening up the sales of the West tower ahead of schedule. Only five more towers to go!

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What is somewhat more unsettling is that in Devimco's presentations, the illustrator has tacked on a somewhat unrealistic and idealistic depiction of Cabot Square and surrounding area (erasing in the process the crush of people, the traffic clogged streets, the bus terminus, the metro exit, the statue of John Cabot and the Roundhouse cafe). In addition, they have subsumed Place Henri-Dunant, the neighbouring green space, into the Children's Square development, along with the lower end of Lambert-Closse (at least that's what is shown in Devimco's presentation materials).

Why is that being allowed? Or is it not so much a case of “truth in advertising” but rather Montreal awarding city property in the form of streets and green space to developers without so much as a “by your leave” to local residents? What is evident though is Place Henri-Dunant will no longer be the sun-filled oasis it once was, as even in their concept drawing the tall buildings (soon to be adjacent) will block its previously sunny aspect and cast deep shadows over it and Cabot Square.



Square Children's concept drawing – Image: Devimco

The City sidesteps residents' requests

For their part, the neighbourhood residents came up with suggestions, wrote letters and briefs, attended meetings, and campaigned for more public access green space, parks and play spaces, more light not less, more social housing units and firm assurances a new primary school would be built, as well as clinics and medical facilities to absorb the estimated 8000+ new residents that the Children's Square huge development would attract in conjunction with several other new condo projects in the area. These include the 20-storey twin towers of the Union Park just across Rene-Levesque on the Franciscan Priory grounds, proposed around the same time by Prével, another big real estate developer and the O'Nessy development, south of Fort St, yet another Devimco property.

'... the City of Westmount, stepped into the picture, since... it has jurisdiction over a small parcel of land on the eastern side of Rene-Levesque... where the former... MCH residents-interns residence now stands.'

Ultimately, the residents, in a further example of the ongoing proof of that old maxim that no matter how hard one tries “you can't fight City Hall”, didn't get anything much in concrete terms in spite of all their various concerted efforts, except ongoing obfuscation from the City of Montreal and the CSDM (Conseil scolaire de Montréal), a small amount of social housing and a community centre, along with a promise from the developers they would install children's play equipment, if the City gave the go-ahead that the two small existing green spaces – the Places Henri-Dunant and Hector-Toe-Blake – on the east side could be joined together (and from

their drawings it doesn't look as though that is going to happen). In addition, the Art Deco exterior reliefs from the former Western Hospital Private Patient Pavillion along Tupper, designed by J. Cecil McDougall and dating from 1928, which had been incorporated into the Children's as D wing when it moved from Cedar Avenue to take over the site in the 1950s, would be removed and re-used somewhere in the new development. However, sadly, nothing from the Art Deco interior of the former Western building, including the spectacular mural, would be saved.

As for Devimco and co, their plans were eventually curtailed by one building as their construction plan was approved by the City of Montreal to allow for six towers not seven.



Former nurses/interns residence

Meanwhile, the City of Westmount, stepped into the picture, since through an anomaly of border delineation, it has jurisdiction over a small parcel of land on the eastern side of Rene-Levesque (Dorchester), across Atwater from where most current residents thought the borders of Westmount were to be found, and where the former Western hospital nurses' and later MCH residents-interns' residence now stands. Westmount mandated that the 1919 colonnaded building, which it had designated a Category 1 heritage building, had to be saved (its exterior at least). To this end, the City of Westmount appointed architect [Miguel Escobar to oversee its restoration and renovation](#).

Once upon a time in 1902... in West-end Montreal on Guy Street

In 1902, in a handsome mansion rented for \$20 per month, located at 500 Guy Street, just below Sherbrooke, a small, and initially temporary, children's hospital was opened with 10 beds catering to disabled children. Its nursing staff was paid \$15 per month. Its average overall monthly budget was pegged at \$300. It was the initiative of Dr Alexander Mackenzie Forbes, an orthopaedic surgeon, who had long been upset at the sight of "crippled children begging in the streets", often as a result of tuberculosis of the bone (consumptive bone disease), and who had set about raising support and funds to help some of them. Named the Children's Memorial Hospital (CMH) in memory of Queen Victoria, who had passed away the previous year in 1901, the records inform us that the CMH was not "officially" opened until January 30, 1904.



Children's Memorial Hospital – 500 Guy
Image: Hospital Architecture in Montreal

Why, it's sometimes asked, was it named in memory of Queen Victoria? Among certain groups of Canadians at that time, Queen Victoria, who had reigned over Great Britain and Ireland for 63+ years, and who was also the titular sovereign of Canada, was an extremely popular monarch, even though, unlike other royalty, she never actually stepped foot on this side of the Atlantic.

Nevertheless, she had grown up knowing quite a lot about her 'dominions' of Upper and Lower Canada and had maintained a life-long interest in them, including being very favourable to Canada's official 'creation' in 1867. This was perhaps due, in part, because her father, Prince Edward, Duke of Kent and the fourth son of King George III, had lived for nearly ten years in Quebec and the Maritimes in the last decade of the 18th century, and, even after returning to the UK, had maintained many of the friendships he had made when living here.

Indeed, in 1832, while residing at Kensington Palace during the reign of King William IV, Princess Victoria (aged 13) had received one of her father's Canadian friends, the famous Quebec topographer, Surveyor-General of Lower Canada, and noted naval and militia officer **Lt-Colonel Joseph Bouchette** and his family, who were in England hoping to get Bouchette's three volume set entitled [The British dominions in North America](#), or a topographical description of the provinces of Lower and Upper Canada, printed and to receive the full amount of the payment he had been promised from the British Crown upon its completion. (By the way, he did get it printed but only in one language, although he had written both a French and an English version, and he did not receive his full payment.)

'(The Children's Memorial Hospital) was the initiative of Dr Alexander Mackenzie Forbes, an orthopaedic surgeon, who had long been upset at the sight of 'crippled children begging in the streets'...'

In truth, since the Victorian age, West-end Montreal, in particular, named a number of its hospitals after

members of the British and Commonwealth Royal family such as: the Children's Memorial (now the Montreal Children's), the Royal Victoria, the Royal Edward Institute (now known as the Montreal Chest Institute), the Queen Elizabeth (formerly the Montreal Homeopathic Hospital and named after the Queen Consort of George VI) and the Alexandra (named after the Queen Consort of Edward VII).

Until the 1960s, the majority of hospitals in Canada were religious or local community funded efforts, with little or no major government funding until [T.C. \(Tommy\) Douglas](#), premier of Saskatchewan, pioneered government hospital care insurance in 1947 and universal healthcare in Canada in 1967-59.

Thus, it is worth remembering, in this the 21st century, that many of Montreal's oldest hospitals and institutions have their roots in religious organizations (predominantly Catholic), such as North America's first hospital, l' [hôpital Hôtel-Dieu](#), set up in 1645 by Jeanne Mance, and in the West End, the Grey Nuns' Hôpital Général on the corner of Dorchester and Guy, dedicated to the compassion and care of the vulnerable and to making a difference in the lives of the poor and unfortunate.



Jeanne-Mance detail, Maisonneuve Monument
Image: Jean Gagnon, Wikimedia Commons

Place Émilie Gamelin at St Denis and Ste Catherine is named after a Montreal widow (Émilie Tavernier), who, in 1843, founded the Sisters of Providence, a Catholic women's religious order dedicated to heeding Christianity's call to compassionate services, whose hospital buildings dot Montreal. They, along with the other orders such as the Sisters of Charity and the Missionary Sisters spread out across Canada establishing hospitals, orphanages, schools, homes for the aged and mental care asylums in Canada.

Later as the population grew exponentially in the mid to late 19th and 20th centuries, their efforts were supplemented by some municipal monies but mostly by ordinary citizens and their various communities. For instance, in spite of the significant hardships of the Great Depression, the Montreal Irish community raised a million dollars to build the new St Mary's hospital in Côte-des-Neiges in the early 1930s, although its first location was in the Shaughnessy House on Dorchester (Rene-Levesque), where it had opened as a 45-bed

hospital in 1929. At the same time, the expanding Montreal Jewish community was raising funds to build the Jewish General Hospital (JGH), also in the Côte-des-Neiges area, and whose ongoing financial support has been steadfast. However, what is less known is prior to the building of the JGH, the community had supported the Hebrew Maternity Hospital (opened in 1925) that had provided obstetrics services to the Montreal population of the area. It was absorbed into the JGH when it was incorporated as healthcare institution in 1933.

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In addition, from the early to mid-19th century onwards, a wide range of concerned lay Montrealers played their part, especially doctors, business people and philanthropists with highly developed social consciences, who funded hospitals such as the Montreal General, the Royal Victoria, the Royal Edward, the Montreal Neurological, the Alexandra, the Douglas, and the Montreal Homeopathic Hospital (that eventually became the Queen Elizabeth in NDG), and whose herculean efforts were helped by endowments and smaller contributions from users, according to their means. It's a practice that continues today with private individuals and foundations, set up in the name of some of those original donors (such as the Birks family), continuing to donate to hospital foundations, as well as the numerous volunteers, who contribute in additional ways by easing the lives of patients in our modern day medical institutions.



Christmas at the Children's Memorial Hospital – Image: public domain

Nevertheless, it was only in 1961 across Canada that hospital care began to be paid for out of the public purse, and it took a further nine years for outpatient doctor visits to be covered, which finally happened in 1970 in Quebec. In fact, in Montreal, hospital funding was a perennial issue well into the 1970s and beyond. Both the CMH and for the MCH had ongoing budget shortfalls for much of their existence up till then and many of its physicians, who had volunteered their time until the introduction of Medicare in 1970, habitually waived fees for those who could not afford to pay for their medical services. Thus, the survival of the CMH/MCH, throughout

most of its first 75 years, along with many other hospitals and institutes, had depended extensively upon the support of their private sector donors.

The Growth of Paediatric Care in Montreal in the late 19th and early 20th centuries

Although the first paediatric children's hospital in Canada was opened in Toronto in 1875, it was another 10 to 20 or so years before Montrealers saw a major growth in institutions devoted specifically to this developing branch of medicine of which the Children's Memorial Hospital (CMH) was one of the first. It catered to both the English and French population of Montreal, since it provided services, from the outset, in the two languages.

'Both the CMH and for the MCH had ongoing budget shortfalls... and many of its physicians... habitually waived fees for those who could not afford to pay for their medical services.'

However, treating children as a separate medical specialty was a developing practice in the latter part of the 19th century. For instance, in 1880, noted medical pioneer, Dr Alexander Blackader opened a child-centric outpatient clinic near the McGill University Lying-In Hospital on St Urbain, south of Dorchester (renamed the Montreal Maternity Hospital in 1887). It moved to St Urbain and Prince Arthur in 1905 and then onto the Royal Victoria hospital campus in 1926 when the Women's Pavilion was established.



Patients getting fresh air at the Children's Memorial Hospital – Image: public domain

He also inaugurated a paediatric clinic in the Montreal General in 1883, just a few months after the first paediatric hospital facility had opened in NYC. In addition, he worked as a medical consultant at the Protestant Infants' Home of Montreal, the Montreal Dispensary, and the Montreal Foundling and Baby Hospital, which opened in 1892, but it only looked after the medical needs of children until two years of age. Of course, the Grey Nun's hôpital Général also cared for foundlings and sick children on separate floors in their huge building on Dorchester.

'... treating children as a separate medical specialty was a developing practice in the latter part of the 19th century.'

In addition, a public campaign was mounted in 1900 demanding Montreal create a hospital for contagious

diseases, especially childhood diseases. This resulted in the establishment of two municipal hospitals: St Paul's in 1905 to serve the east end of Montreal and in 1906, the Alexandra Hospital, which opened in Point St Charles for the western end of the city, although both still relied heavily on private donor funding to maintain services.



L'Hôpital Ste-Justine, 644 St-Denis, 1907
Image: CHU Sainte-Justine

In 1907, l'hôpital Sainte-Justine opened its doors in a small home at 644 St Denis Street with 12 beds, for the treatment of primarily francophone children due to the area of the city in which it was located. It was established as a result of the combined efforts of [Dr Irma Levasseur](#), Quebec's first female francophone doctor (who greatly deserves far more recognition for her ground-breaking achievements, her life and career, her grit and determination than she has ever received) and Mme Justine Lacoste-Beaubien, who helped raise the necessary funding, and who remained connected to hospital for the next 50 years.

During its first week of operation, the Children's Memorial took in five children, and all too quickly its paltry 10 beds could not keep up with the demand. This great need touched the heart of 19th century department store magnate Samuel Carsley (then the proprietor of the largest department store in Montreal) and his wife who lived across the street, and who, possessing a substantially sized garden, a benefit 500 Guy street did not have, offered to lend it to the CMH during the summer months, when he and his family moved to their summer residence. This meant the hospital was able to house a further 500 children in tents and start a school for the young patients. This is not as outlandish as it seems since tuberculosis (TB) was rampant in the city and the principal remedy at that time was deemed to be rest, fresh air and good food.



'The city already has enough hospitals... (and) it's too close to the city to provide the 'full benefit of sun and fresh air'.'

[The Montreal Gazette, June 20, 2004](#)

Not everyone was convinced of the need for a hospital, especially one devoted to the care of children. [The city already had enough hospitals](#), they said, and one more would "dilute the efforts of all the others". But Mackenzie Forbes and his supporters persevered and definitively proved the need was there.

Coming soon

Watch for Part 2 of Children's Stories coming soon in WestmountMag.ca

Further updates and the public access launch date

The Atwater Library Seniors' group will have some of the collection available for access by the public as of mid-2018 but do check back over the coming months in the [WestmountMag.ca](#) and/or the [Atwater Library website](#) for more snapshots and updates on this vibrant Living History Collection project.

For further info on the background and rationale of the Living History Collection see: [Birth of a Local Living History Collection – Part 1](#) and [Part 2](#)

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Feature image: "Only a memory", the Montreal Children's Tupper-Dorchester campus winter 2016-17. Courtesy MCH Foundation

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