

The forces and considerations that weave the fabric of a city...

YESTERDAY'S TOMORROWS

Some early plans for Montréal.

by Jeanne Wolfe

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IT IS GENERALLY AGREED that modern town planning originated from three converging movements in the last part of the nineteenth and the beginning of this century. These were public health and housing concerns, municipal administrative reform, and the city beautiful movements.

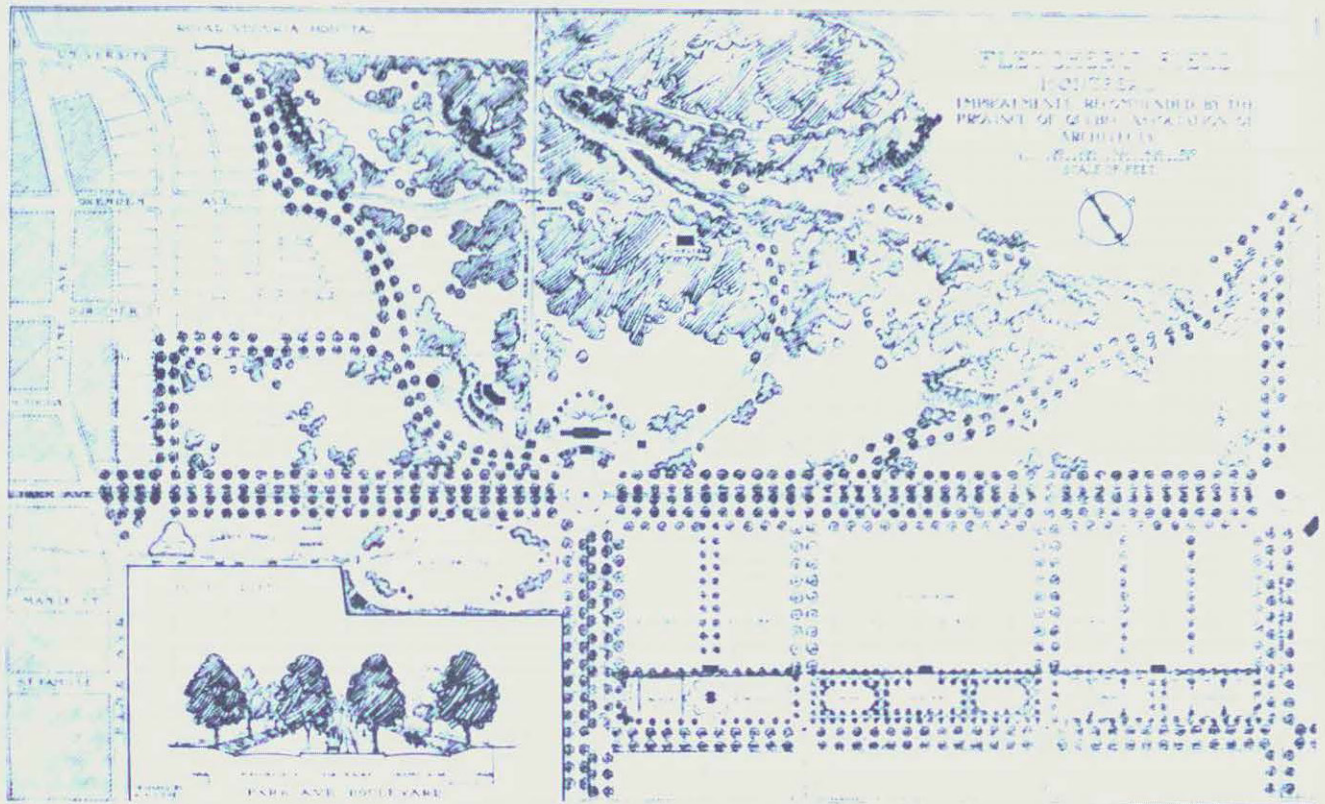
Montreal was no exception to this generality. The urban reform movement arose at the turn of the century in response to the conditions created by large scale industrialization and immigration. From a population of seventy-eight thousand in 1851, just prior to the construction of the Grand Trunk Railway, it grew to a third of a million by the turn of the century, and by 1931 was Canada's first one-million metropolis.¹ As immigrants flowed into the city to fill unskilled jobs in the growing industrial economy, crowding and health problems increased, particularly in the industrial areas strung along the Lachine Canal, the railways, and the St. Lawrence River. Concern for the city's poor, voiced by a scattered few in the late 1800's, foreshadowed the rise of the town planning movement in the 1910's and 1920's, and the establishment of town planning as a separate profession.

The public health movement, with its

emphasis on improving the condition of housing for the working classes, was triggered by the appalling health problems of Montreal. Typhoid and cholera epidemics, the result of contaminated water supply and poor sewage systems were common. Tuberculosis was rampant, and smallpox outbreaks frequent. In the 1880's, the infant mortality rate was one of the highest in the world, significantly greater than that of London, Paris, and Toronto, and second only in magnitude to Calcutta.² In 1898, there were an estimated fifty-eight hundred privy pits in the city, three thousand horse stables, and five hundred cow barns.³ Early reformers led by people such as Herbert Ames, a manufacturer and council member, Dr. Adami, a McGill professor, and Professor William Atherton of Loyola, set about getting water quality improved, organising child welfare services, founding the anti-tuberculosis league, and lobbying for adequate worker housing and more parks and playgrounds. The discovery of the germ theory of the transmittal of disease in the latter half of the nineteenth century gave a scientific spur to their efforts for improved water and sewer systems.

A major obstacle facing urban reformers in Montreal around the turn of the century was a series of corrupt

civic administrations. The Tammany Hall scandal of New York in the 1870's was widely publicized in Canadian urban centres, and by the mid-1880's reform mayors had been elected in both Montreal and Toronto. Yet the spirit of reform was not long lived in Montreal as voting improprieties, the lack of tendering for public contracts, the fraudulent gaining of franchises for public utilities and streetcar lines, and the siphoning of funds from the city treasury continued. In the face of such blatant wickedness, an active campaign was launched by Herbert Ames and his friends to clean up the civic administration. 'Efficiency in city management' became the motto of the municipal reform movement which believed that a municipality should be run on business-like lines, preferably by an expert board of control, who would make rational, apolitical decisions. A Royal Commission investigating Public Works contracting was appointed in 1902 by Justice Cannon. For seven years evidence was collected, culminating with a report that concluded that the city was saturated with corruption, including having dogs entered on the electoral rolls, that most aldermen were concerned only with "private interest for themselves, their families, and friends," and that "25% of the annual revenue was siphoned off as



The development of Fitchers Field by Outre, 1908, part of his master plan for Montreal

spoils."⁴ The provincial government was forced to take notice and in 1909 a public referendum overwhelmingly endorsed the creation of a four-man Board of Control. Similar disclosures had resulted in the establishment of Boards of Control in many Canadian cities, including Toronto; the public purse had been removed from the purview of City Council.

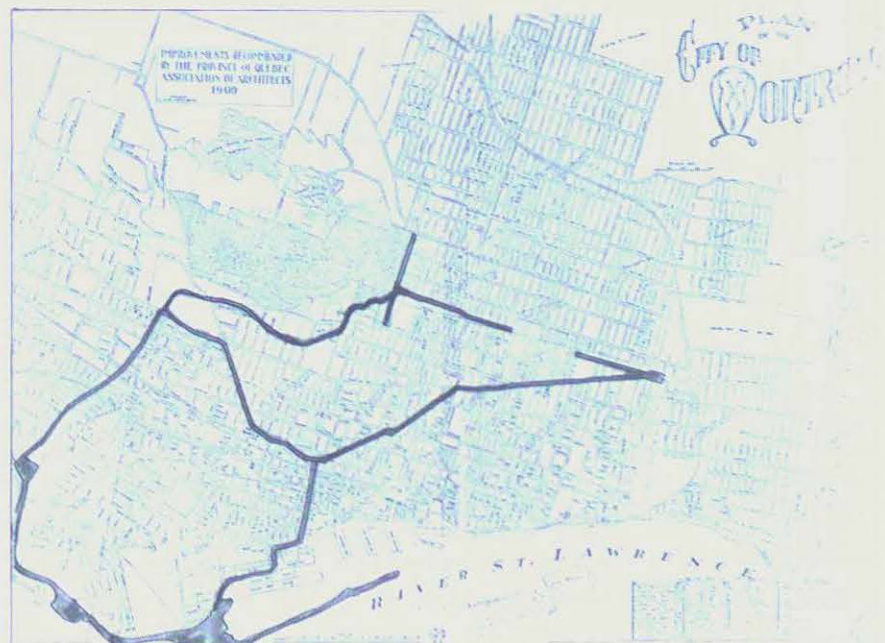
Whilst attempts of social and administrative reform were the most basic and weighty concerns so far as the day-to-day life of the poor were concerned, physical planning was also seen as one element of a solution. The rest of this paper is devoted to this topic.

The town planning movement, as such, initially gained a following in Montreal, as in other North American cities, through the seductive solution of improving the city's appearance. For many, the Chicago World's Fair of 1893 and the city beautiful movement which it publicized provided an appropriate answer to urban squalor. The first organised group of city beautiful advocates was the Province of Quebec Association of Architects, established in 1890, which lent its support to the idea of construction of monumental boulevards and grand parks in the city centre. As a movement it was a direct reaction to

the mean squalor and ugliness of jumble growth, and its implementation was seen as a vehicle not only to improve urban aesthetics, but also to get rid of slums, improve traffic circulation, build modern sewer and

water systems and to achieve harmonious land use patterns.

Returning from the Chicago exhibition, PQAA President, A.T. Taylor, told his colleagues of "the fair white city in



Proposal for diagonal avenues in the City of Montreal by Ruben A. Outre, 1909



Outhet's proposal for Confederation Boulevard intersecting Parc Lafontaine, 1906.

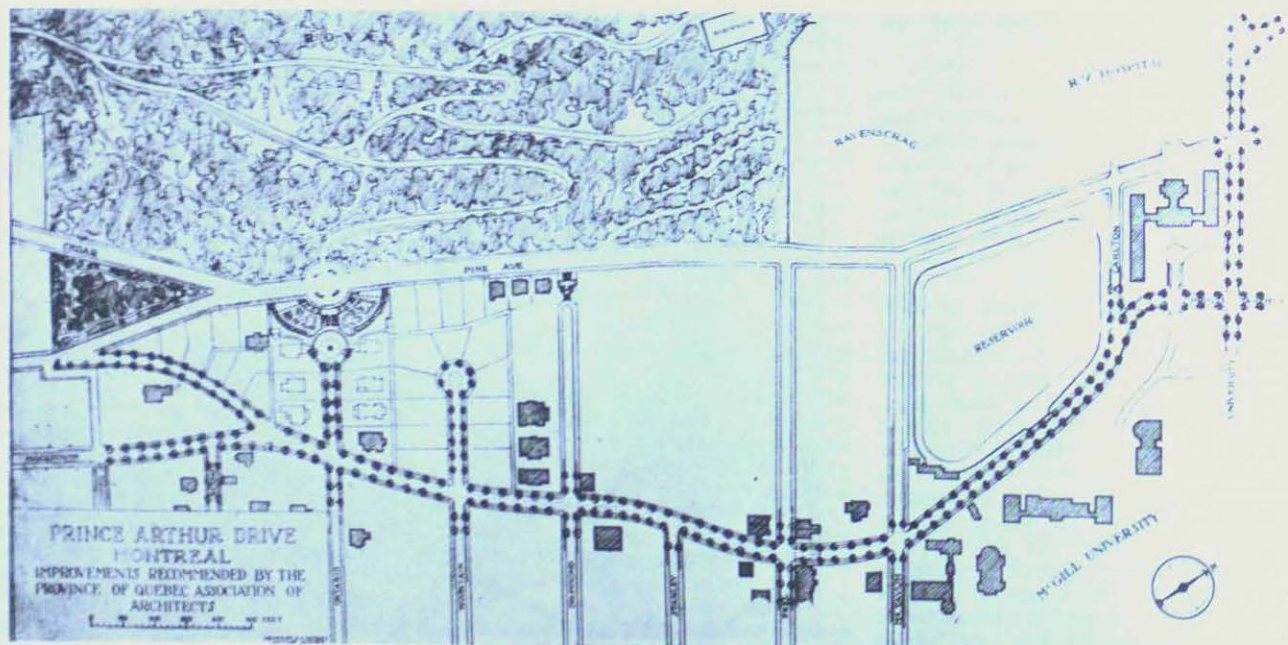
the shores of Lake Michigan."⁵ Fired up by his experiences he immediately initiated the drafting of a petition to the Montreal City Council requesting the appointment of a 'Standing Art Committee' to "examine and report on all plans, designs and models of monuments and embellishments of the public squares and avenues."⁶ Such a Committee would include distinguished architects, and would approve all new building plans and foster the coherence of city streetscapes. The 1894 petition was signed by many prominent and influential citizens, and endorsed by the Mayor, but, in fact, no Standing Art Committee was ever appointed.

Not to be daunted, the PQAA continued its campaign to beautify

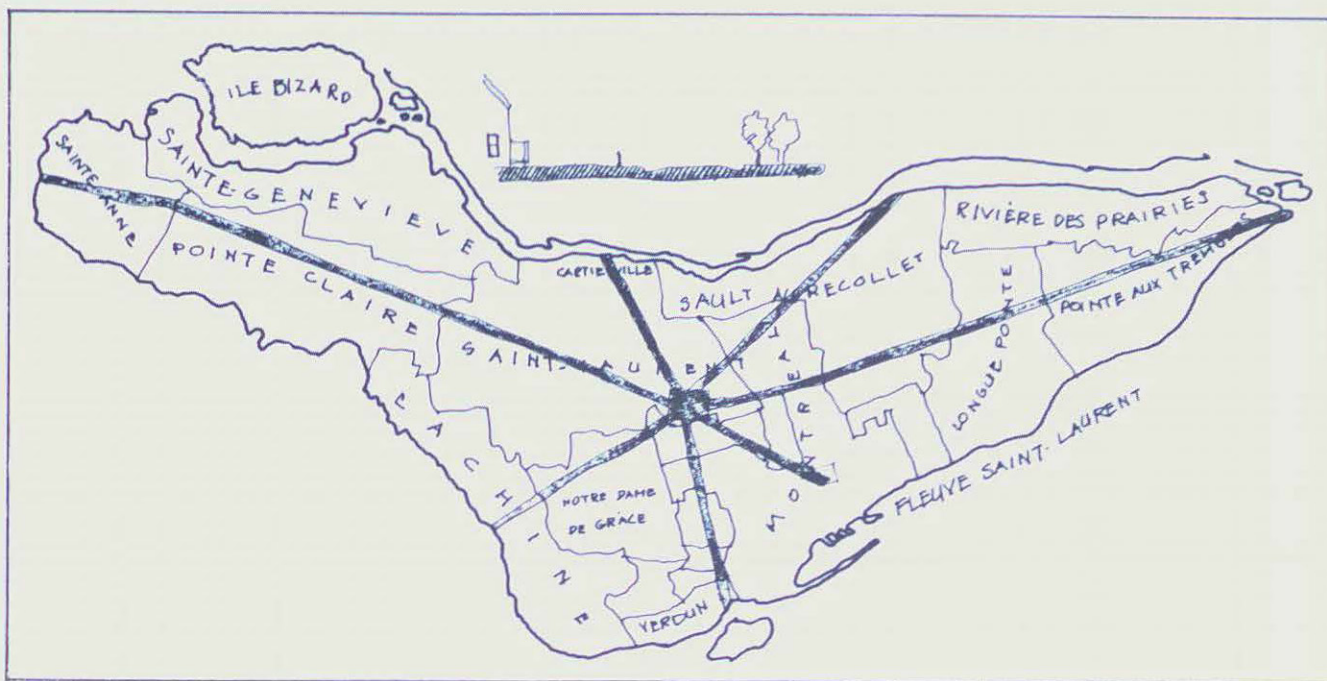
Montreal, and in 1906 published a sketch plan recommending the creation of five avenues to form uninterrupted circuits connecting the principal parks and open spaces. Little attention was paid to this scheme, but with the establishment of the City Improvement League in 1909 "to form a central clearing house for the betterment activities" and "to make the city cleaner, healthier, and more attractive physically, morally, and aesthetically," interest in the plan became intense.⁷ Rickson A. Outhet, a landscape architect, redrew the plans, which featured two main diagonal streets running outwards from Victoria Square across the grid to the intersections of Sherbrooke and Guy and Sherbrooke and St. Denis respectively. This would ensure rapid access to and from the

city centre. At the same time, a fine boulevard was planned leading south from Victoria Square across the Lachine Canal to the Bikedale Pier, then westward along the riverbank, north through Verdun, up Atwater, along McGregor (Penfield) and thence north of the McGill campus to Park Avenue. Park Avenue would also become an elegant boulevard with gracefully arched trees, as would Duluth from Park over to Lafontaine Park and eventually to Sherbrooke at Papineau. Three major open spaces, the riverbank, the Mountain, and Lafontaine Park would thus be linked by broad, leafy carriageways and streetcar service.

There was at least one observer who found this scheme too timid. Mr.



The Prince Arthur Drive development proposed by Outhet, 1906.



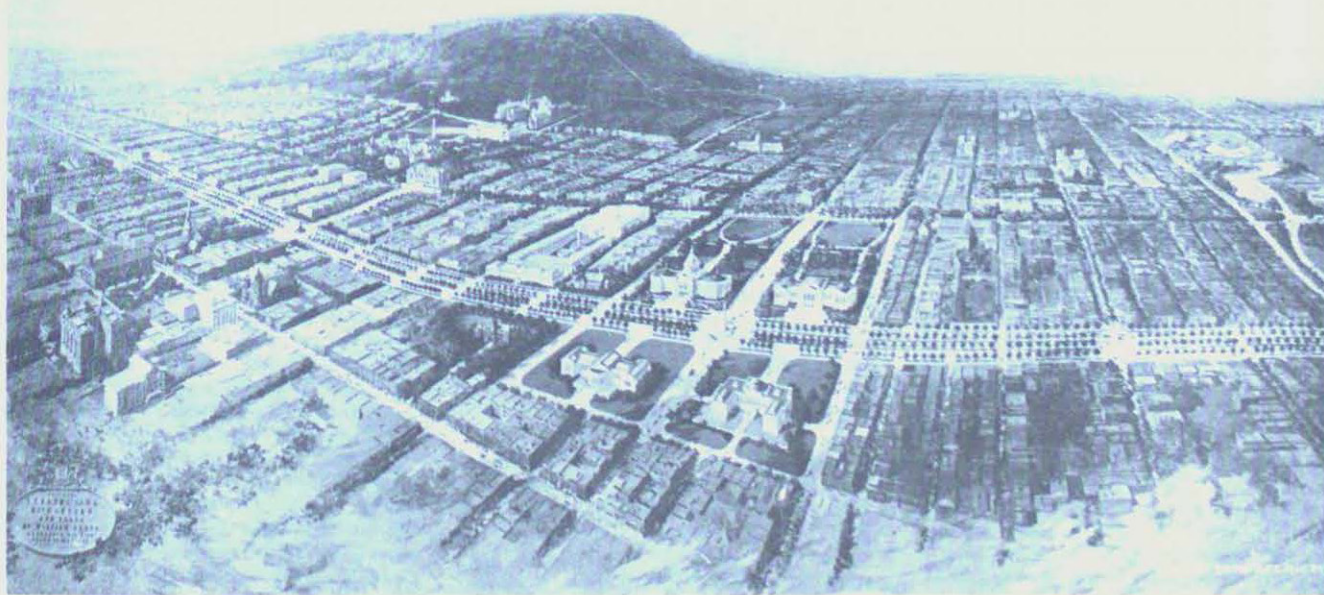
Plan for radiating boulevards by L.-A. Lavallée, 1909

L.-A. Lavallée, a former alderman of the city, produced a marvellous plan in 1909 for a series of boulevards radiating out in seven directions from a geometrically central point on the Island of Montreal.⁸ His central area oddly enough is more or less that presently occupied by the Town of

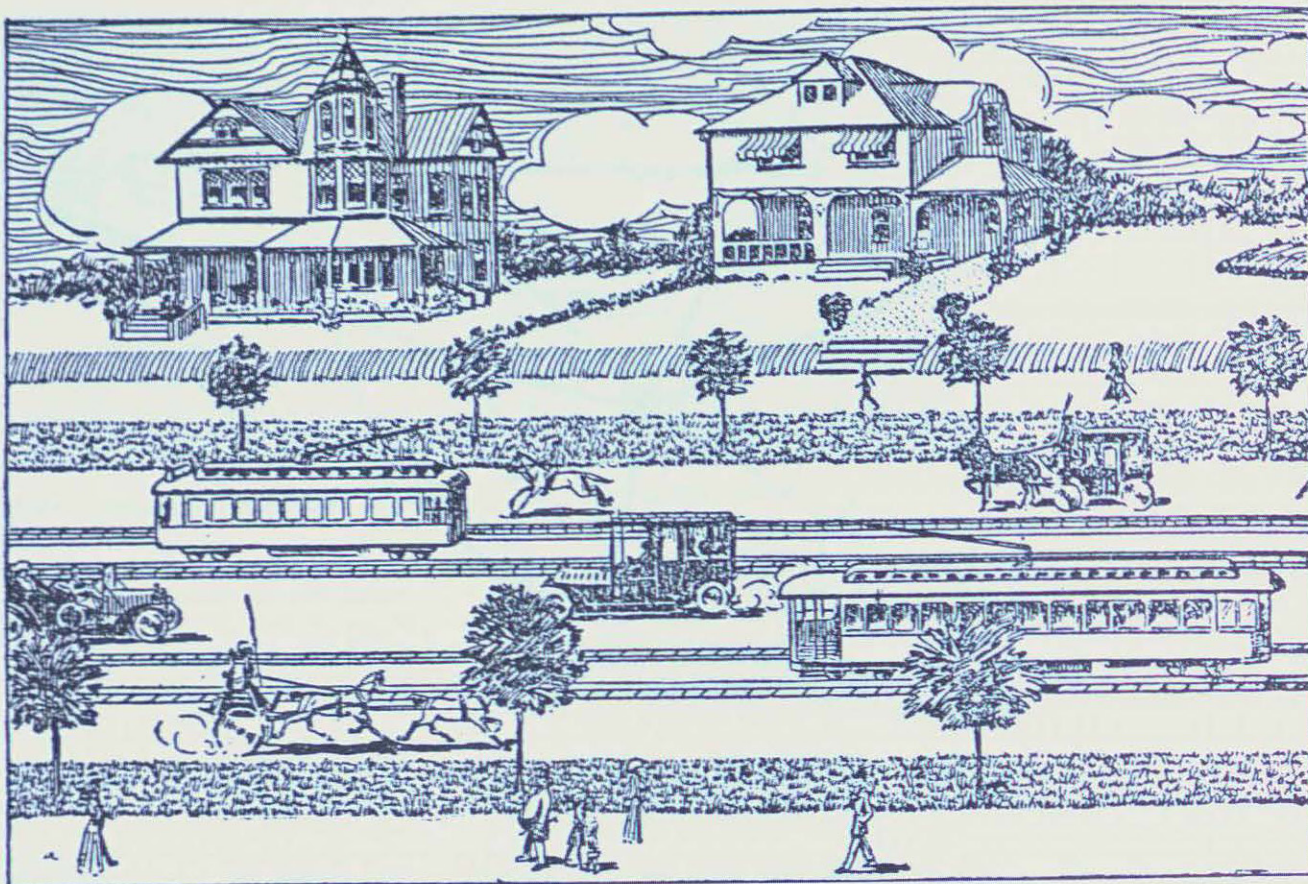
Mount Royal, which in fact was not laid out until 1912. One can only wonder if he stimulated the idea.

The 1909 PQAA plan was to come to naught, although it was still being debated as late as 1927. However, it did spur many other proposals, one of

which was that of Mr. William Lyall, unveiled in March 1910. He proposed that the city expropriate and annex land to build 'Strathcona Boulevard,' a thoroughfare that was to run from one end of the island to the other, joining Ste. Anne de Bellevue to the Bout-de-l'Île, passing through Montreal



Perspective rendering of the new 'Strathcona Boulevard', as proposed by William Lyall, 1910



Grand boulevard proposal by Dr. A. Lapthorne Smith, 1910

along what is now de Maisonneuve. (At this time Ste. Anne was linked to Montreal only by the Lakeshore road. Neither Route 2-20, nor the Metropolitan Boulevard existed.) Mr. Lyall proposed that the boulevard consist of four streetcar lanes, bordered by trees, with a twenty-five foot two-lane automobile road on each side, the whole 192 foot width gracefully flanked by paths and trees.⁹ Mr. Lyall estimated the cost of the project to be ten million dollars, which he felt was recuperable if sufficiently large amounts of land were expropriated on either side, land that could be sold off for development at a handsome profit after the boulevard was built. Further, certain key areas in the city could be elegantly redeveloped for civic purposes. His favorite idea was to redevelop each corner of the intersection of St. Laurent Boulevard and Strathcona to house the City Hall, and other buildings such as the Court House, Library, Concert Hall and Art Gallery in a splendid Beaux Arts fashion, with lovely driveways and formal plantings. The City Council was so entranced by the scheme that it went so far as to seek permission from Quebec to undertake the project.

Fast on the heels of Mr. Lyall's proposal came another one from Dr. A. Lapthorne Smith. Dr. Smith's proposition was "to lay out a beautiful boulevard twenty-one miles long before a single house has been built on the line of it, and to have it so straight that you could see a man standing in the middle of the street in St. Anne's (if you could see that far).... This street would be two hundred feet wide and would have in addition to an extra-wide sidewalk on each side, a place for automobiles in the middle where they could go at a rate of a hundred miles an hour if they liked."¹⁰ He also planned carriageways for horse-drawn vehicles, pathways, and parks every few miles.

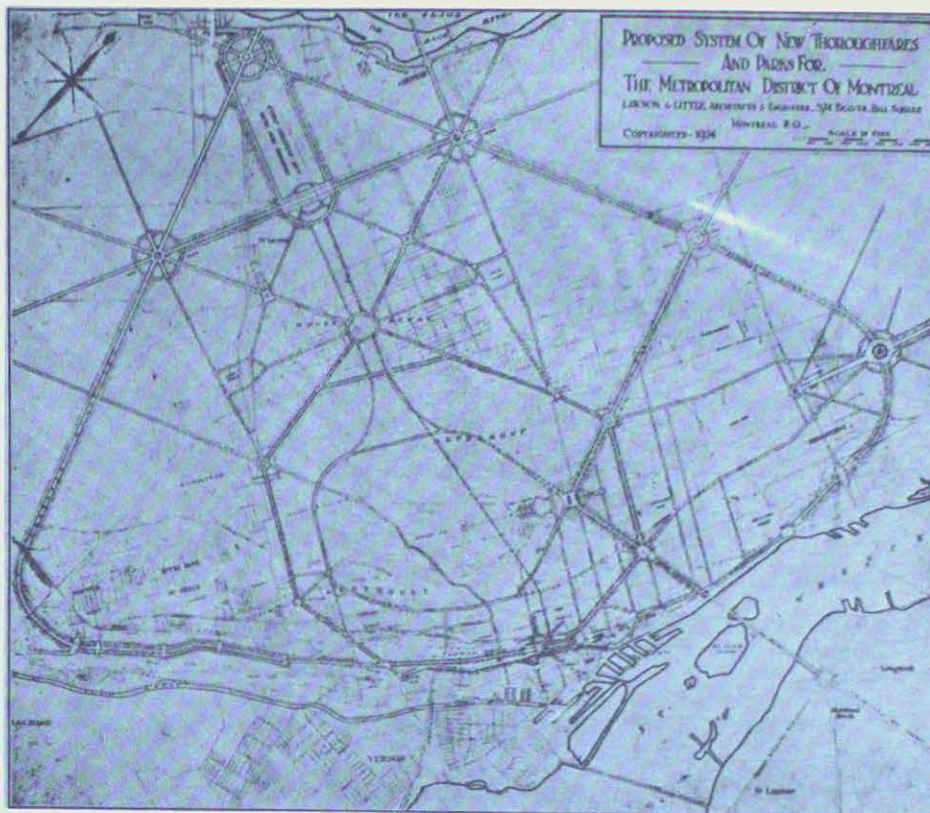
Dr. Smith firmly believed that this plan could cost the city nothing, if lots of land were expropriated, and later sold off for development.

It was also in 1910 that the first Metro for Montreal was proposed. The Montreal Underground and Elevated Railway Company was formed by a group of businessmen, and large advertisements showing the proposed system were published in all the leading newspapers.¹¹ The underground portion of the track was

to be along St. Antoine and along St. Catherine and a north-south line was to run under St. Laurent or St. Denis. It will be noted that the first Metro tracks built in the mid-Sixties followed these alignments. Elevated tracks were to be built outside the central area, and ground level tracks in the under-developed suburbs. Some readers will be proud to know that the Architectural Association demanded that the idea of an elevated railway be dropped on aesthetic grounds.¹²

The first subway bill was passed by the Quebec legislature in March 1910, but no Metro was forthcoming. Whilst the City Fathers evidently smiled on the idea, public opinion was not all in favour. For instance, the Montreal Herald ran a 'Hands Off Montreal' editorial decrying the notion that a subway should be planned by a private company and insisting that "the community ought to have control of its (traffic) solution."¹³

Progress, technology, and speed were all linked ideas in these early days of the twentieth century when the city beautiful movement was at its height. However, little came of it, although some activists continued to agitate for changes that would have ensured



Lawson and Little's plan for Montreal of 1924.

Montreal a reputation as the 'Paris of North America.' One of the more lucid was G.A. Nantel, who, in 1910, espoused his concept of regional administration and beautification based on the Paris experience in his tract *La Métropole de Demain: Avenir de Montreal*. Percy Nobbs, Professor of Architecture at McGill, who was to play a prominent role as a supporter of more utilitarian planning proposals in the Twenties, was an early advocate of public building in the classical style with spacious public grounds to accentuate their importance. He justifiably complained about the ugliness of early twentieth-century Montreal, making specific mention of the overcrowding, tall buildings, utility poles, water tanks and billboards, noting that the main streets looked like a "Chinese harbour after a typhoon."¹⁴

The last overt city beautiful scheme produced for Montreal was the plan of Lawson and Little, architects and engineers, published in 1924. This plan proposes a gloriously bold cobweb of radial boulevards for the centre of the island, ingeniously linking existing nodes such as the centres of Ville St. Michel and the Town of Mount Royal, and creating marvellously symmetrical

nodes bounded by octagonal roads where none exist. A 'Park and Aviation Field', again symbolic of aspirations and progress is incorporated into a ceremonial layout of Cartierville.

The waning of the city beautiful movement has been ascribed to its overly grandiose manner, its fadism, its lack of social concern, and its overshadowing by utilitarian considerations of health and hygiene through building regulations. The city beautiful architects had offered parkway systems, inspiring views, studiously composed vistas, and magnificent public buildings to a population unwilling and unable to bear the cost.

Notes

1. George A. Nader, *Cities of Canada*, Vol. 2; *Profiles of Fifteen Metropolitan Centres*, 1976, p. 126.
2. Terry Copp, *The Anatomy of*

Poverty: The Condition of the Working Class in Montreal 1879-1929, 1974, pp. 26 and 100.

3. Herbert Ames, *The City Below the Hill*, 1972, p. 97.

4. Leslie Roberts, *Montreal: From Mission Colony to World City*, 1969, p. 264.

5. Walter Van Nus, "The Fate of City Beautiful Thought in Canada 1893-1930" in Gilbert A. Stelter and Alan F.J. Artibise (eds.), *The Canadian City: Essays in Urban History*, 1977, p. 163.

6. Walter Van Nus, "The Plan Makers and the City: Architects, Engineers, Surveyors and Urban Planning in Canada, 1890-1939," (unpublished Ph.D. thesis, University of Toronto) 1975, p. 154, and *La Presse*, 2 mars 1910.

7. William Atherton, "The City Improvement League of Montreal," *La Revue Municipale*, décembre, 1927, pp. 30-32.

8. *La Presse*, 28 avril 1926.

9. *La Presse*, 21 mars 1910 and *Montreal Herald*, March 21, 1910.

10. *The Standard*, April 2, 1910.

11. *La Presse*, 22 avril 1910.

12. *Montreal Herald*, March 22, 1910.

13. *Montreal Herald*, March 29, 1910.

14. Percy Nobbs, "City Planning," *Canadian Municipal Journal*, Vol. VII, No. 4, p. 141.