Montreal's Duplexes and Triplexes

Andrea Kennedy

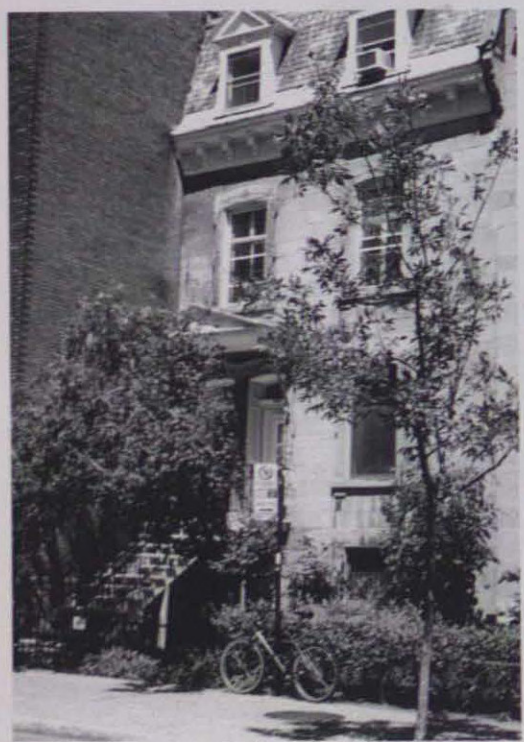

Figure 1. Duplex on rue Sainte Famille (bicycle not included),photo by author.

THE ORIGINAL LATE nineteenth century duplexes and triplexes of Montreal generated a unique residential urban environment and shaped the identity and image of the city. Montreal's residential streets consist of row upon row of these town houses with their characteristic steep staircases running up to the top floors. Popularized in the building industry at a time when affordable, high density housing was badly needed, these row houses remain an ideal type of urban housing for many economic and cultural reasons. I lived in one of these row houses, and experienced first hand the benefits of this type of home which is recognized as truly Montreal (fig. 1).

Montreal's town houses are unassuming but they dominate the urban residential scene. The strategy of stacking houses one on top of the other was introduced by British colonists, and it quickly caught on in Montreal. By 1880, row house construction accounted for the majority of building projects in the city.

In the thirty years before the twentieth century, Montreal's population almost tripled resulting in a tremendous building boom.[1] This population increase was due to the attractive employment opportunities in the city as workplaces became industrialized.[2] A vertical type of standardized housing, specifically the three and four story multi-family town house, solved the problem of how to cope with this intense residential demand.

Unlike their European counterparts, the designs had to address the harshness of the Quebec climate.

However, similar to the townhouses of Europe, those in Montreal had to guard against the threat of fire and provide for the needs of the working class. With mass-produced components, the homes could be realized quickly and economically; a low-cost type of housing resulted, affordable to rural immigrants being paid low wages in the city.[3] The houses were also sturdy and safe. Efficiently constructed with inexpensive materials, they featured wooden beam frameworks with brick infill to guard against the threat of fire and storm hazards as well as to provide insulation during the cold winters and hot summers.[4] Building trade artisans, and entrepreneurs, local shopkeepers and skilled workmen all contributed to the construction of Montreal's townhouse neighborhoods.[5]

The origins of the narrow town house form are to be found in fortified medieval cities where circumvolution restricted city areas.[6] In Montreal, the three or four story double or triple units were built on standard lots of 14.3 to 15.2 meters by 26.5 to 29 meters with two dwelling units per lot. Additionally, a bylaw of 1865 imposed certain limits on the size of these types of dwelling units: a multi-family dwelling could be no wider than 9.1 meters if freestanding or 7.6 meters if built in pairs or rows.[7] To avoid the high costs of masonry firewalls, builders opted to construct two superimposed flats, sometimes as narrow as 3.7 meters. This resulted in the stacking of affordable homes at high densities.

Although the duplexes and triplexes were largely aimed at the low-income market, they also responded to the needs of other of income groups. The unit in which I lived would have been considered a luxury duplex, consisting of two full floors of living space per family. Traditionally, each family occupied a single floor. The desirable upper floor belonged to the owners of the house, and tenants or extended family would occupy the unit below. In a three-story duplex, the two top floors constituted one dwelling with the third floor laid out under a mansard, gabled or flat roof.

The three-story type was the most common because it satisfied two different residential markets with the smaller unit on the ground floor for the lower income family. The prevalence of this model gave Montreal its distinctive vertical stratification.[8] A dwelling with three stories was built with a staircase leading to the entrance landing at the second storey (fig. 2). Later, the triplex dwelling model was built for the work-

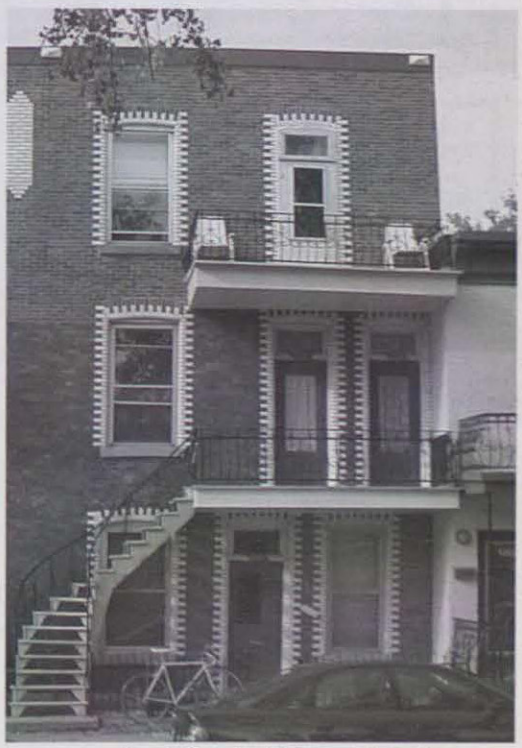

Figure 2. Ground and 2nd storey typical triplex entrances.

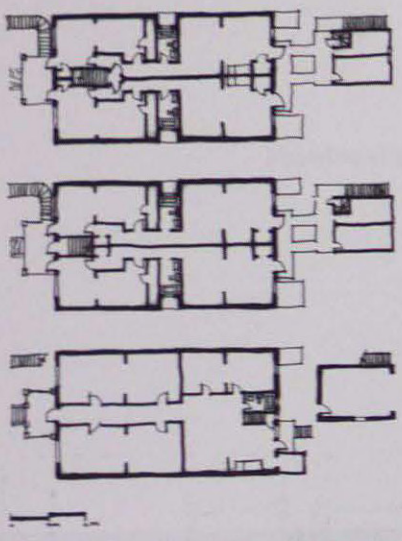

Figure 3. Three level dwelling (split into five flats), Plateau Mont Royal and Verdun Area. Adapted from Marsan, Montreal in Evolution, *(Montreal: McGill-Queen's University Press, 1974), 278.*

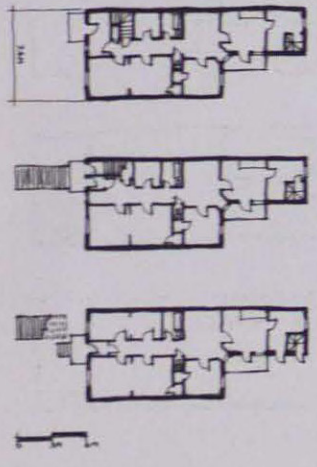

Figure 4. Typical triplex dwelling, one flat per storey, L-shape plan. Adapted from Marsan, Montreal in Evolution, *277.*

ing class, housing either one family per floor, or one family on the bottom floor and two families on the two upper floors, dividing the buildings lengthwise into narrow apartments. With internal divisions, the duplex and the triplex could yield a four-plex and a six-plex respectively, or odd number variations (fig. 3).

Inside these narrow houses, there is a standardized layout of rooms distributed along the length of the building. In a typical one story flat, the living room and bedrooms are located on the street side with the kitchen and other utility rooms facing the backyard or lane (fig. 4). A duplex apartment has an entrance vestibule and living room at the front and the kitchen with a dining room at the rear, similar to the triplex. The bedrooms are located on the ground floor for the lower unit and on the top floor for the upper unit (fig. 5). Lanes running the length of the block behind the rows of homes allow access to the utilities of two rows of housing. Courtyards between the more luxurious duplexes and their old coach houses are accessed at the ground floor and can be reached from the upper floors by staircases off balconies or fire escapes. Often, a storage room above the coach house was linked to an upper unit home by a catwalk. Dwellings without this coach house used to have a rear shed in which to store coal or other items.[9]

Attached to other apartments on either side, the duplex and triplex are somewhat limited in their options for room orientation. However, this type of plan has many advantages. The single story apartments usually have an open plan arrangement while apartments with two floors are only two rooms deep, each with high ceilings and tall windows, allowing for sunlight to filter in. In some houses, skylights provide light into the interior rooms of the top story. Advantageously, the light-maximizing layout of rooms allow for cross ventilation through each floor of the dwelling unit – much appreciated during a hot and humid Montreal summer.

Other innovative advantages of these town houses are inherent to their vertical organization. Firstly, the stacked units conserve heat well as warmth is shared between apartments and not lost to the outside. With only two narrow, exposed building façades the heat loss is minimal compared to a dettached dwelling. Secondly, the narrow street frontage allows for greater affordability with a reduced land cost for a smaller lot size and consequently, less cost for services such as sidewalks, aqueducts, sewers, gas and electrical lines. Finally, this compact, vertically attached

housing helps control the rate of urban sprawl. In the past, this helped to preserve the outlying lands that were used for agriculture.[10] This land use efficiency is important now as Montreal grows outwards and has less inner city land available for development.

There are many notable elements that make up the row house façades, distinguishing them from the row houses of other cities. Of all these, the outdoor staircase is the hallmark element, and is also the most symbolic. The outdoor staircase has an entrenched symbolic history: during the Middle Ages, the use of ladders in European town houses provided access to upper floors; only the rich could afford the luxury of an inner staircase.[11] Centuries later, in Montreal, the location of the staircase still reflects the social and economic position of the inhabitants. The development of steep, winding staircases, leading to small front balconies, became popular in Montreal at the end of the nineteenth century (fig. 6). The front staircase leads to a landing, which doubles as a small balcony and becomes a natural extension of the apartment. This feature was originally attractive to the recent immigrants for whom these dwellings were designed, reminding them of the porches and verandahs of their rural dwellings.[12]

Although the units may be generally uniform in plan, each duplex and triplex can vary tremendously from one to another due to these balconies and staircases. These small idiosyncrasies set Montreal's town houses apart from their European counterparts, which were designed to have a uniform exterior, as it was the fashion to emulate palatial buildings.[13]

A notable characteristic of Victorian town houses that were located in the wealthier residential districts was the flamboyant architectural treatment of façades on saw-tooth silhouettes.[14] As the townhouses were built, diversity was ensured by different types of cladding such as red brick, glazed brick or greystone and various ornamental combinations that "can be seen in no other architecture" (fig. 7).[15] In some cases, the stone veneer had designs etched into it. The elaborately decorated façades were intended to animate the streets and draw attention away from the street-side windows. Meanwhile, in contrast to the adorned façades of the British-style greystones of the wealthy, the façades on the row houses of the French working class were usually quite austere, with dormer windows and cornice details to provide some decorations on the mansard roof. The mansard roof in particular added a distinctly French flavor to these

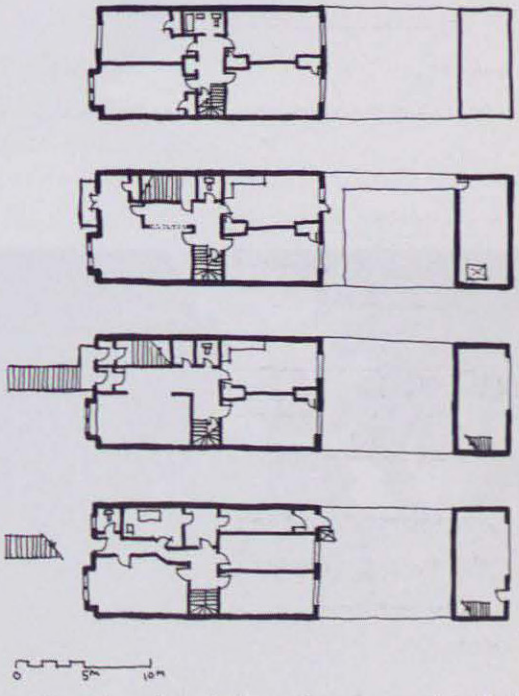

Figure 5. Luxury duplex dwelling, two flats per storey, rue Sainte Famille, drawn by author.

Figure 6. Serpentine staircase, rue Saint-Hubert.

duplexes, complementing the heavy British overtones in a classically Montreal mingling of styles.[16] Tin cornices were used to disguise firebreaks on the roof until 1910 when a brick parapet was introduced.[17] Eventually, industrialization made these aesthetic additions easy to manufacture, and decoration became an affordable option. Even the low cost homes became more ornate. The very nature of the town house, after all, being street orientated and outward looking, places an importance on the appearance of the façades. The town houses are a lively presence on the streets of Montreal with their varying façades, enriching the pedestrian experience, as well as conveying a key part of the city's residential history.

Although town houses have existed for centuries in many cities in the world, the duplexes and triplexes built in Montreal in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century are of singular presence. However, currently, with the spread of irresponsible development in the downtown, the original stock of town houses is being swept away; and with it, its economical merit and historical value. Yet there is still a way to preserve our heritage as my own personal experience shows: the row house in which I lived was recently sold to new owners who are now in the process of renovating it. They are preserving the original structure and updating all the facilities. Unfortunately, their extensive work on the building forced me to move out, but I know that when finished, the house will once again be a haven for downtown urban living.

Note: I owe much to the late Professor Norbert Schoenauer of the McGill School of Architecture, whose "History of Housing" and "Housing Theory" classes served as catalysts for this article.

1. David Hanna, *Montreal, A City Built by Small Builders, 1867-1880* (Montreal: McGill University, 1986), 15.

2. Jean-Claude Marsan, *Montreal in Evolution*, (Montreal: McGill-Queen's University Press, 1974), 267.

3. David Hanna, *The Layered City: A Revolution in Housing in Mid-Nineteenth Century Montreal* (Montreal: Dept. of Geography, McGill University, 1986), 4.

4. Marsan, *Montreal in Evolution*, 279.

5. Hanna, *The Layered City*, 7.

6. Norbert Schoenauer, *Cities, Suburbs, Dwellings in the Postwar Era*, (Montreal: School of Architecture, McGill University, 1994), 69.

7. Hanna, *The Layered City*, 59.

8. Ibid., 58.

9. François Remillard, *Montreal Architecture: A Guide to Styles and Buildings* (Montreal: Meridian Press, 1990), 152.

10. Schoenauer, *Cities, Suburbs, Dwellings*, 72.

11. Marsan, *Montreal in Evolution*, 270.

12. *Ibid.*, 272.

13. Schoenauer, *Cities, Suburbs, Dwellings*, 78.

14. Marsan, *Montreal in Evolution*, 269.

15. Remillard, *Montreal Architecture*, 152.

16. Hanna, *The Layered City*, 9.

17. Remillard, *Montreal Architecture*, 152.

Figure 7. Triplex, circa 1910, rue Laval.

Andrea Kennedy, M.Arch 2000, is currently working in London, England.