

# The Prince of Wales Terrace

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*Remembering past elegance on Montreal's Sherbrooke Street...*



*The seemingly inherent romanticism portrayed in an old black and white photograph conjures up a powerful human sentiment. A discrete emotional longing to recapture that image, suspended in time, motivates us to explore and document the past.*

*"The heart has reasons of which reason has no knowledge."*

*Blaise Pascal, Pensées.*

NINETEENTH century Sherbrooke Street was lined with the splendid mansions of Montreal's elite and their densely ascending elms, and was trekked by spirited horses and cabbies searching for a well-heeled fare. It bristled with the wealth characteristic of entrepreneurial success. Its premier disposition and fragile texture were irretrievably lost, however, during the course of the twentieth century. The blessed curse of development swept away a legacy of charm, scale and beauty, in a tremendous onrush of banal corporate structures. This torrent of destruction, spanning two decades, claimed a landmark residential group virtually unique in all of North America: The Prince of Wales Terrace.

An individual house would have had to be very large and indeed grand in order to command any attention on Victorian Sherbrooke Street. Combining several houses into a terrace, could however, due to their very number, bestow an otherwise unattainable weight and proportion onto the whole. The Prince of Wales Terrace was a rare synthesis of nine houses behind the grey dignity of a uniform Montreal limestone facade. It comprised a series of residences ranked amongst the most exclusive in the city.

The Terrace, which was situated on the north side of Sherbrooke Street, between McTavish and Peel, was built

on land which was originally part of the estate of Simon McTavish, a founder of the North West Company. It was purchased in 1860 by Sir George Simpson, the Governor of the Hudson's Bay Company; a singularly diminutive man with a Napoleonic complex. Construction was begun that same year and by late August, several of the houses were completed. Sir George offered them forthwith as a residence for the Royal household, during a visit by Albert Edward, the Prince of Wales. The future King Edward VII was in Montreal to officially inaugurate the Victoria Bridge. As accommodation for the Royal visitor had already been secured at the house of John Rose, the Commissioner of Public Works, Sir George placed the partially built terrace at the disposal of the Royal suite in attendance. He was remunerated for his generosity by the Prince of Wales, who granted permission for his name to adorn the terrace. Unfortunately, Sir George Simpson, a man who cherished associations with the nobility, did not live to see the Prince of Wales Terrace completed. He was stricken with apoplexy and died several days after the Royal visit had ended.

Sir William MacDonald, McGill University's greatest benefactor, took up residence at the Terrace around the year 1890 and lived there until his death in 1917. The Montreal tobacco magnate, absolutely secure in his wealth and the superiority of his position, led a life characterised by the utmost simplicity. Indeed, Sir William personified the attitudes of earlier generations. His lifestyle evoked that of Georgian London, where the affluent felt no compulsion to advertise themselves. It was considered right and natural to live in a refined, austere decorated house.

The striking similarity between the Prince of Wales Terrace and many of London's Georgian terraces was more than coincidental; the architecture of



the fashionable Bloomsbury squares doubtlessly generated their profound influences. Whereas subsequent facades tended to be handled in relief, composed of varying materials, light and dark colours and distinct degrees of hardness, the Terrace bore the traits of a graceful but hard classicism. It intimated a homogeneous block of stone pierced by windows; voids in the solid mass. The roof was viewed as a mere technical necessity. Architecturally it was as inconsequential as the chimneys, and both were disguised with a balustraded parapet.



The severe elegance of the limestone facade was tempered by the entrances. Their small wooden porticoes were designed as pedantically as a piece of furniture and then simply attached onto the building's taut surface. As was commonplace, they were disposed along the outer of each house's three bays. Although this arrangement permitted a superior utilization of interior space, its asymmetrical nature clearly defied the rules of Classical Architecture. This dilemma was resolved by Browne and Footner, the architects, with the brilliant, though deceptive, implied symmetry of the whole. The central unit, projected forward from the face of the building, crowned with a triangular pediment and bearing the inscription: The Prince of Wales Terrace, was its visual focus. Over the entire length of nine abutting houses, the eye could not ascertain that the projection was in fact off center. It encompassed one bay of a neighbouring unit, thus providing for its symmetry and an overall illusion of balanced proportions.

The virtues of the Prince of Wales Terrace were not to be exclusively sought in the expression of the elevation, for its interiors embodied a definite pride of place. A formidable entrance hall, lofty ceilings and tall windows imparted a restrained sense of opulence. Classical architectural details: elaborate cornices, plaster







Corinthian columns and aedicular passageways, were both literally and figuratively applied.

The basement floor of each unit was occupied by the kitchen, which contained an immense cast iron stove, and the servants' quarters. A concrete slab inlaid with coloured tiles constituted the extent of its embellishment. In direct contrast, the ground floor incorporated an impressive entrance hall, a top-lit staircase and a vast living room, the latter of which comprised no less than 960 square feet and penetrated the depth of the building. The staircase which ascended in the middle of each house, despite its frugal economy, exemplified the cultivation of an intrinsic beauty. Its graceful curves led sinuously to the first floor parlour and dining rooms, whose two storey separation from the kitchen elucidated the residents' utter dependance upon a service staff. Ensuring a certain degree of seclusion, their private rooms, as many as five intimate bedrooms per house, were located on the second floor.

In the face of mounting developmental pressure, the Prince of Wales Terrace quietly endured. Its continued residential desirability was underlined, in 1958, by the exemplary sale of one house for \$140,000. It was to survive another decade, slowly deteriorating at the hands of its attritional owner, McGill University. The inevitable destruction of the Prince of Wales Terrace constituted not only a tragic architectural loss, but a further fragmentary deprivation of Montreal's imperilled historical and cultural heritage ●

#### References

1. Edgar A. Collard, "Montreal: The Days That Are No More", 1976
2. Gerald Sheff, "The Prince of Wales Terrace", paper in The Canadian Architecture Collection, McGill University, 1963

