

Learning From The Point

by Pieter Sijpkens.

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Below the mansions and on the wrong side of the tracks, workers' housing endures and adapts to changing times...

NUMBER 369 rue Ste-Madeleine in Pointe-St-Charles, a building which I bought five years ago, has been my home now for over three years. I had mentioned to a friend who lives there that I was looking for a small building that needed a lot of renovating, to try out some self-help and reuse ideas. Within a week I was the owner of an abandoned 'dépenseur': boarded up, vandalized, and very cheap. In fact, the demolition contract had already been let. I knew the area quite well; as a student I had spent a term and two summers there in a 60's function of 'architecte-animateur'. With my partner Richard Morrison and a cast of other characters, we started renovating, and in January 1978, I moved in, because my other place had burned down. This article, hopefully, will illuminate some of the aspects of the whole operation.

The current wave of 'gentrification' or 'white painting' of formerly scorned areas is a well established trend. Encouraged by government grants, disenchanted with high commuting costs, nice people are moving into un-nice areas and making them nice by dislocating the un-nice people who lived there before. It would take a Solomon to settle what is equitable in this delicate matter; people have moved before, the rich by choice, the poor for lack of it. But if these areas are suddenly so attractive to former suburbanites, then architects might well be advised to look at them in some detail, hopefully learning to accommodate the new city dwellers without having to uproot the people

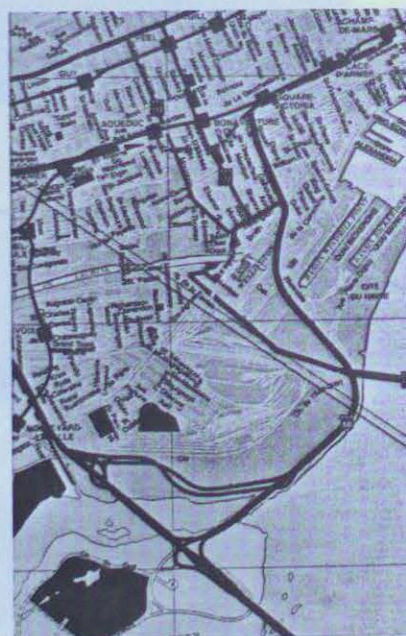
who have been holding the fort under adverse conditions for so long.

The Area

Pointe-St-Charles is an area in Montreal rigidly defined by the Lachine Canal and the Bonaventure Expressway. It is neatly dissected by busy elevated railway tracks from which most people, on their way to and from Ottawa or Toronto, catch a glimpse of the area. It was originally a farm established by Marguerite Bourgeois (the beautifully restored farmhouse is now hemmed in by railway tracks and ill planned housing projects). The Lachine Canal, which was originally constructed in 1825, became, after enlargement, an important artery in the mid-1850's. At the same time the original Victoria Bridge was constructed by the Grand Trunk Railroad (1859). Transport and the opportunities for industry, which accompanied it, became the impetus for a great boom in the construction of workers' housing. Jean-Claude Marsan, in his book **Montreal in Evolution**, gives an excellent account of the development of this type of housing, typical of the Montreal area. Pointe-St-Charles became the laboratory for 'high' density low cost options. Solid masonry, cavity masonry, balloon and Quebec plank frame were used side by side. So were detached and semi-detached cottages, rowhouses and flats. The great demand for these dwellings resulted in immediate overcrowding, which in 1898 led to the publication of the first systematic study into the plight of Canada's working class, the



Pointe-St-Charles, 1861

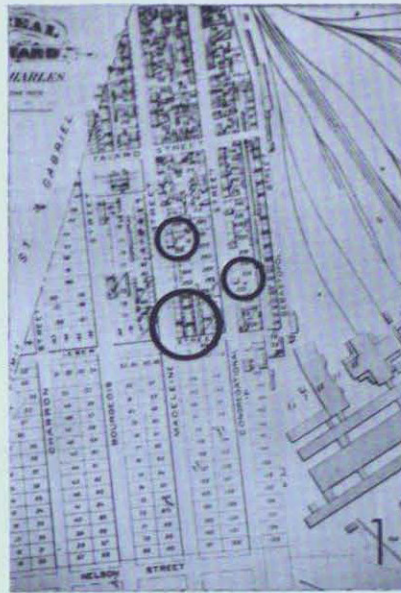


Pointe-St-Charles, present

classic **City Below the Hill** by Herbert Brown Ames. St-Henri, Ste-Cunegonde and Pointe-St-Charles were for the first time identified as the 'wrong side of the tracks'. Interestingly, the specific area in which I live was excluded from the survey: "Beyond Centre Street lies that special district of Pointe-St-Charles which is almost an independant suburb by itself, being sustained by employment furnished in the offices and workshops of the Grand Trunk Railroad".

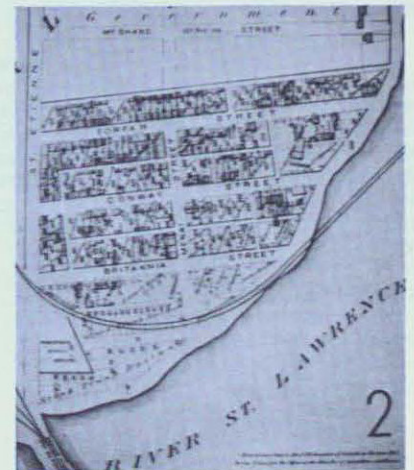
Planning

Number 369 rue Ste-Madeleine (on part of lot 199, 200 and 201) was built in approximately 1875 as part of a block of eight two storey dwellings. The map shows how simple the layout of the area was: uniform lots (44 feet wide and 100 feet deep), back to back, fifteen in a row to form a block; each block separated by a sixty foot right of way. The absence of a planned alley indicates that the original idea may have been to build detached cottages such as the one on lot 234 or porte cochere type row housing as on lot 207. Most of the blocks in the area now, in fact, have 20 foot alleys, because the owners found it cheaper to build a continuous

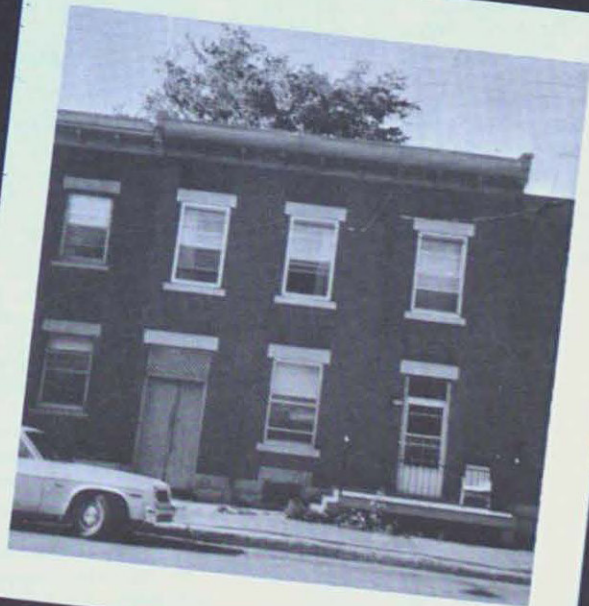


Pointe-St-Charles, 1881

row of houses, without openings, supplemented by a 'private' service alley. As a result, some of the alleys stop abruptly, some are centered on the rear lot line and some are merely eccentric (as in the case of Madeleine Street, resulting in an 80 foot lot depth on one street and 100 feet on the other).



Lot #234



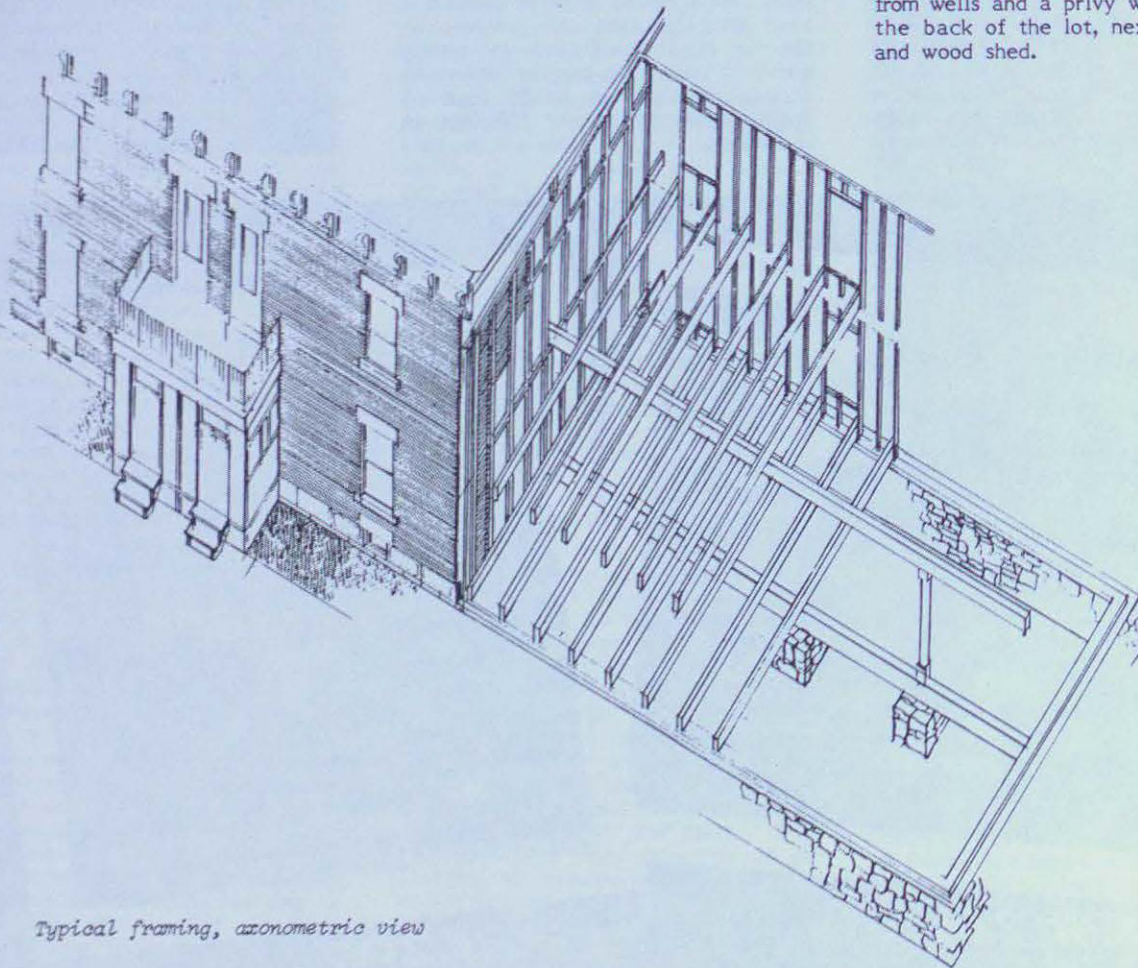
Lot #207

Construction

The eight units in question were constructed as simply and cheaply as possible: a perimeter rubble foundation, faced with cut stone only above grade; no cross foundation walls; stone piers support girders which in turn support 3"X10" joists,

38" on centre. The framing is genuine balloon construction; 2"X4" studs, 19" on centre, 20 feet long. The second floor joists are supported on a girder and a 1"X10" 'ribbon' let into the continuous studs. The windows, crawl space, vent openings and interior stair openings all fit neatly into this elegant system. The 3'-0" wide

balconies, running the full back of the building on the ground and first floor are supported by 1"X10"s, nailed to the joists and protruding through the sheathing. Similarly the front entrance porches are cantilevered, side by side and clad in wood, providing a small balcony for the first floor. The windows have double hung sashes, wood modular lintels and sills, with removable storm windows. A shared brick chimney is the only original service provided. Water was obtained from wells and a privy was located on the back of the lot, next to the coal and wood shed.



Typical framing, axonometric view

The amazing fact about these developer-built houses is that they seem to have been designed for retrofitting. The missing cross foundation walls have gradually been put in place to counteract the excessive sagging of the lot line joists. The balloon frame is ideally suited for accommodating insulation; either poured in from outside, when new brick veneer is put up, or installed in batts from the inside when the plaster is replaced. The space between the ceiling and roof is perfect for blowing in insulation. The deep widely spaced floor joists provide ample room for installation of electrical and plumbing services. My own house has gone through at least three distinctive renovation addition processes in the last hundred years. The only tough problem is the fire separation, which, between buildings, is virtually nonexistent; only every other party wall has brick infill between the studs. Injecting the stud spaces with cement, might be a solution.

My objectives in renovating this slice of rowhousing were to see if it was feasible to reuse old building materials, and whether it was possible to gradually renovate, over a period of time. Both were aimed at reducing costs. The isometric lists some of the materials and their origins: bowling alleys for counters, old railway car floors turned upside down and sanded for new floors, conveyor belting for floor covering and obsolete neon signs for lighting, as well as a seemingly endless supply of doors and windows, collected from the heart of Westmount to the tip of the East end, which currently give the house an appropriate ad-hoc look.

Is it worth it? As with all cost comparisons, what does **cost** mean? Money? Satisfaction? Obsession? Depending on your level of willingness to put up with a chronic state of chaos, this gradual approach, may be satisfactory to some, unbearable to others. It certainly is not appreciated

by the inspection department of the City of Montreal: to try occupying a house which is not 'finished', according to by-law 1900, seems to be of great concern to them. Five court cases, all amicably settled after pleading guilty, resulting in \$20 fines, might be a bit much for the average renovator (my muttered defence these days is simply: "a tree would never get a building permit in this town...").

The gradual approach has the advantage that decisions don't have to be made in the abstract. By ripping out an eight foot plaster ceiling and living underneath the exposed sloped rafters, you have the advantages of comparison. By using a 'temporary' entrance, for a year, you get a 'feel' for the consequences of tight turns and openness versus privacy. Familiarizing yourself with the way the sun moves and the trees cast shadows, allows you to place a window where it optimizes these variables, for different times of the day or of the year. The house becomes a mock-up. Drawing a plan or a section is an abstraction. The mock-up approach is a luxury generally reserved for aircraft, naval and plant design, and curtain wall details.

The whole operation was financed with a series of overlapping 36 month personal loans. Mortgage companies don't like the gradual approach either. You pay off half of one loan and your credit rating becomes good enough for another. As a result, the total amount of interest you pay, even at elevated rates is relatively small.

My experiences have not been of much direct use to my neighbours; different lifestyles, different outlooks and different patterns. My agonies and ecstasies have met with curiosity, sympathy and occasional suspicion. "Not much good comes from uptown", it is felt. But I have benefited immeasurably. Looking at the entries to the 1979 Design Council Awards, I feel that what I found here is quite

comparable to the cream of Canadian designs at similar densities:

The frontage provides enough space for on-street parking, one car per dwelling. There is an identifiable private entrance, cross ventilation throughout the house, two different exposures, a large private garden and separation of living and sleeping areas. The particular variant in which I live provides, on top of that, two extra bedrooms, more ground floor space, a balcony in the front, allowing for a greenhouse and a large balcony in the back. The house is energy-efficient by virtue of its shared party walls, due-south orientation and because of its modular, standardized design. The Dutch S.A.R. system has been alive and well here since 1900. (Just turn the street into a **woonerf** and we could compete with the Dutch.).

Could it be that taking the single family bungalow as the ideal model for housing families, even in high density situations, as witnessed in some of the Design Council submissions, is as counterproductive as North American attempts to shrink the Cadillac into an economy car? Could the approach that was taken here, frugality, first principles, simplicity and adaptability, lead to better results than trying to squeeze the 'American dream'? Could we all do some 'learning from Pointe-St-Charles'? ●

References

1. Jean-Claude Marsan, Montreal in Evolution, 1981
2. Herbert Brown Ames, The City Below the Hill, reissued: 1972

Some Hints

- How to estimate costs:
Easy: Estimate as carefully as you can all expected expenses... then double that amount if you're experienced, triple it if you're not...
- Fix the roof first, it's a drag to get wet...
- Every square inch of surface, inside, outside, front, back and on top needs work...
- Don't cut a hole in your roof where you have found a used skylight, unless you are willing to cook up some very tricky detailing
- Don't reuse plumbing fixtures, unless they are extra ordinary... it's not worth it.
- Airtightness is more important than high R-values.
- You don't see structural work such as new foundation walls, jacked-up floor beams... so don't be discouraged when people, after six months of hard work ask you when you will start?
- A wood stove is a marvellous device: it keeps you warm and cleans out your yard.

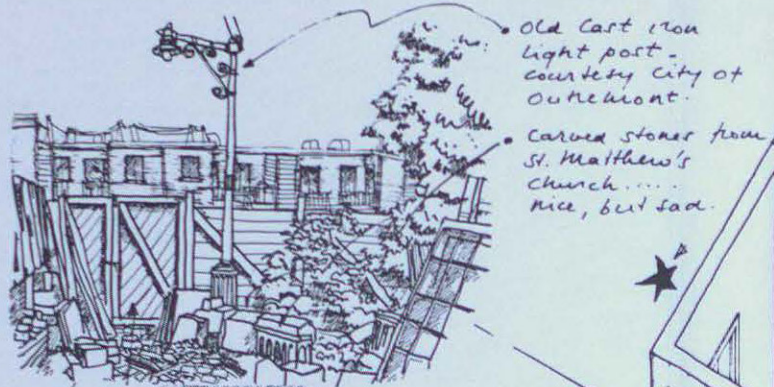
SOURCES:

- First look around you.

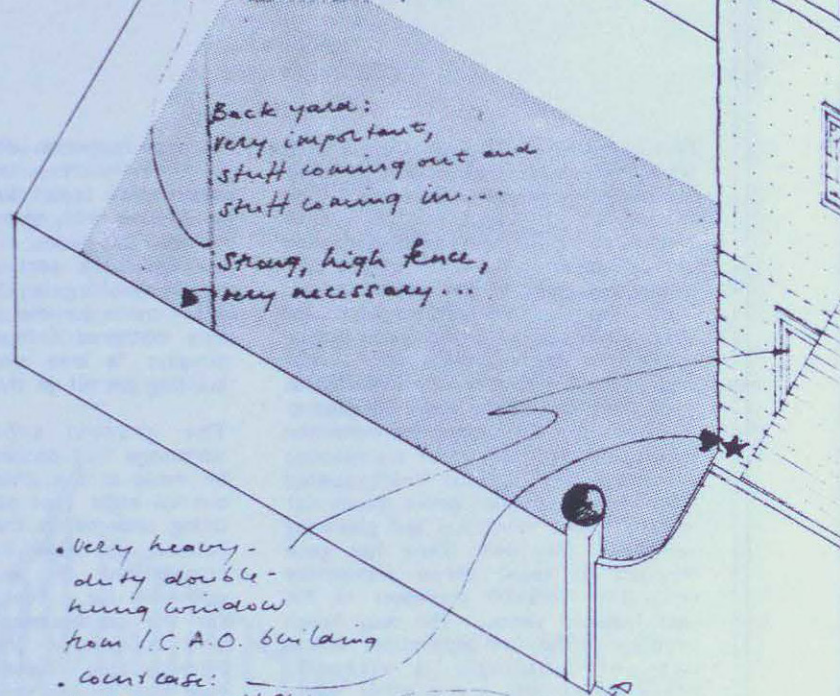
The best source for materials is demolition sites.
You save the contractor transport and storage.
The old C.B.C. building on Borchester was the source for a lot of materials in this house.

- Demolition Contractors
check yellow pages. (They change location often).
- Star Demolition
- A.B.C. Demolition
- Goyette Demolition
- Antique Stores
Generally expensive, but sometimes cheaper than new, for better quality.

- Wall of former shed cut to form fence



- Old Cast Iron light post - courtesy City of Orléans
- Carved stones from St. Matthew's Church... nice, but sad.



- Very heavy-duty double-hung window from I.C.A.O. building

- Count case:
No second exit stair (not needed after changing occupancy from depanneur + flat into "cottage")

- Two nice doors from Westmount - remember: you find one set of doors free, you still have to make the double (storm) doors!

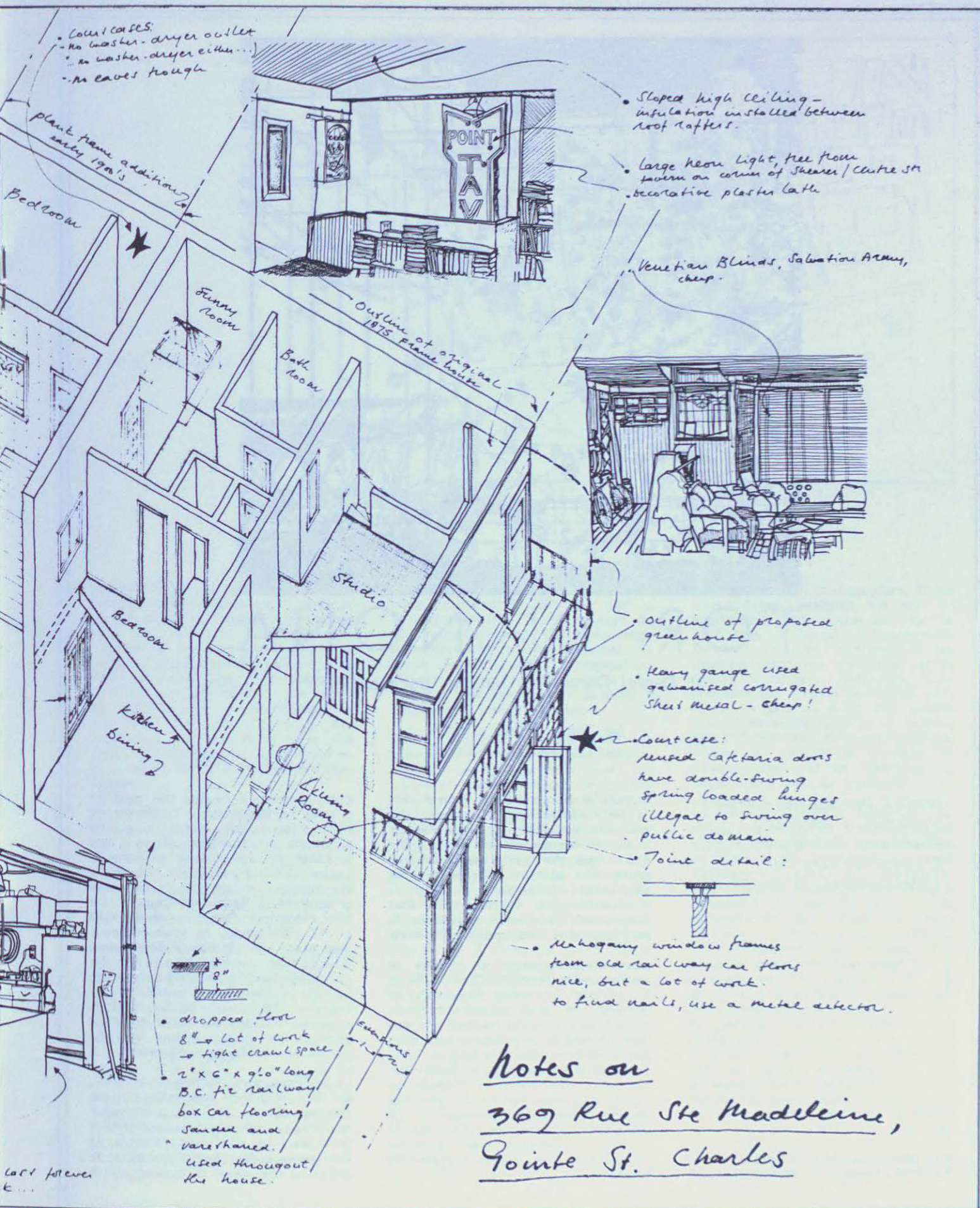
- Mountain goat-horns turned capitol-shawbrage flea market
- 40's prefab metal kitchen, courtesy Tim Holt

- Bowling alley countertop suspended on pulleys (makes cleaning the floor easy)

- Polished marble garbage can enclosure (top not finished) formerly column cladding old C.B.C. building.

- Conveyor belt used throughout the house for kitchen, w.c., bath room - cheap, well but is black





Notes on
369 Rue Ste Madeleine,
Pointe St. Charles