

In & Around Montreal

Heritage activist tries to save Mount Sinai building

By JANICE ARNOLD
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An eleventh-hour effort is underway to save the former Mount Sinai Hospital building in Ste. Agathe from the wrecker's ball.

Local heritage activist Joseph Graham says the old Mount Sinai, which started out as a tuberculosis sanatorium, is an exceptional example of the Art Deco style popular in the early 20th century and a reminder of the Jewish community's contribution to the area.

He believes that, despite the abandoned building's deteriorating condition and an oil contamination problem, it could be salvaged and used for a purpose other than health care. One idea is to use part of the building as an academic retreat for McGill University's Jewish studies program.

The building, which sits on 25 acres of land outside the town centre, was transferred to the province by Mount Sinai in exchange for its current location in Côte St. Luc more than 10 years ago. The three-storey, 45,000 square-foot structure, has been vacant since 1998, when it was last used by the Centre Hospitalier Laurentides (CHL) as a chronic-care facility.

At the start of 2003, the CIIL became the legal owner of the property and announced its intention to demolish the building without delay. Graham said the CIIL intends to solicit tenders for the demolition shortly, but is sympathetic to his proposal to wait awhile to see if a new use can be found for the building.

Apparently, it is too expensive for the government to clean up an oil accumulation underneath the foundation. There is also coal dust contamination in the basement and partial asbestos insulation, which is now illegal. Being unoccupied, it has also been impossible for the CIIL to get the building insured.

"I believe the CIIL would happily give the property to whatever credible group came forward and assumed the risks and responsibility. It is going to cost them a small fortune [otherwise] to demolish and clean it up," Graham said.

The original Mount Sinai, believed to be the first Jewish community-funded health centre in Canada, was built in 1909 and the current building went up in 1930 on the same site.

Graham, a founding member of the Ste. Agathe Heritage Committee, said he has asked local MNA Claude Cousineau to arrange a meeting with Culture Minister Diane Lemieux, which has yet to be scheduled.

But he said he recently received an expression of support from Heritage Montreal, an independent non-profit preservationist group, that may allow for the hiring of independent experts to evaluate the extent of the oil contamination.

In Graham's ideal scenario, the property would be taken over by a foundation that is willing to negotiate with the environment ministry to allow for some level of contamination on the site, for which there are protocols.

Graham noted that the oil is confined to beneath the old nurses' wing, which was built after the main building. As this part is in the worst condition and is not in the art deco style, he said razing it might make sense.

The leak from a buried tank is believed to have taken place in the 1950s or '60s, and therefore any damage to the environment should have become apparent by now, he said.

If the government does tolerate some contamination, it would reduce the clean-up costs, currently estimated at around \$1 million. The money saved on demolition, which is expected to

cost about \$500,000, might then be put toward decontamination and renovation, Graham proposes.

Graham thinks the building would best be used for some kind of educational purpose, if not Jewish studies then perhaps extension courses or off site activities for a university, technical college or artists' colony. It could also be used by Elderhostel, a program for senior tourists, or as low-cost housing, he said.

To get around the occupancy problem for insurance requirements and to discourage vandals, Graham said, he is willing to move his real estate business, Doncaster Realties, into the building temporarily while it is being renovated.

In her 1996 book *Northern Deco: Architecture in Montreal*, Sandra Cohen-Rose writes that: "[A]rt Deco was essentially an urban architectural style, Mount Sinai sanatorium... is a rare example of its use in a country setting" and has changed little since the days when Montrealers went there to breathe the fresh air.

"With its buff stucco, set off by dark brown metal spandrels and trim, and turquoise-glazed tiles, Mount Sinai is reminiscent of Southern deco and would seem appropriate surrounded by swaying palm trees rather than gigantic pines."

She notes that "Judaic symbols are found everywhere." Stone bas-relief Stars of David decorate the main entrance. There's a chapel with a large stained-glass window under a central copper dome. The chapel walls are adorned with gold mosaic menorahs with candles of white mosaic, set against a blue mosaic background.

Gershon Hundert, chair of McGill's Jewish studies program, approached McGill's board of directors with the idea of acquiring the building, but it was unwilling to put up the money.

He is still hopeful a benefactor can be found. He thinks the peaceful country setting is suitable for a retreat and would like to see the old Mount Sinai preserved because of its Jewish historical value.

"It's a cultural monument and it would be a shame if it simply disappeared," Hundert said.

Since the CIIL closed, a group of interested people has been trying to save the building. Among them is mechanical engineer Jack Wolofsky, who, with Pierre Ancil, persuaded the federal government to designate St. Laurent Boulevard as a National Historic District last year.

Wolofsky has said that the building, despite having been repeatedly vandalized, is in reasonably good shape.

"The structure is poured concrete and has weathered the past four years very well," Graham said.

