



Making Heritage: Maison Alcan

By Julia Gersovitz

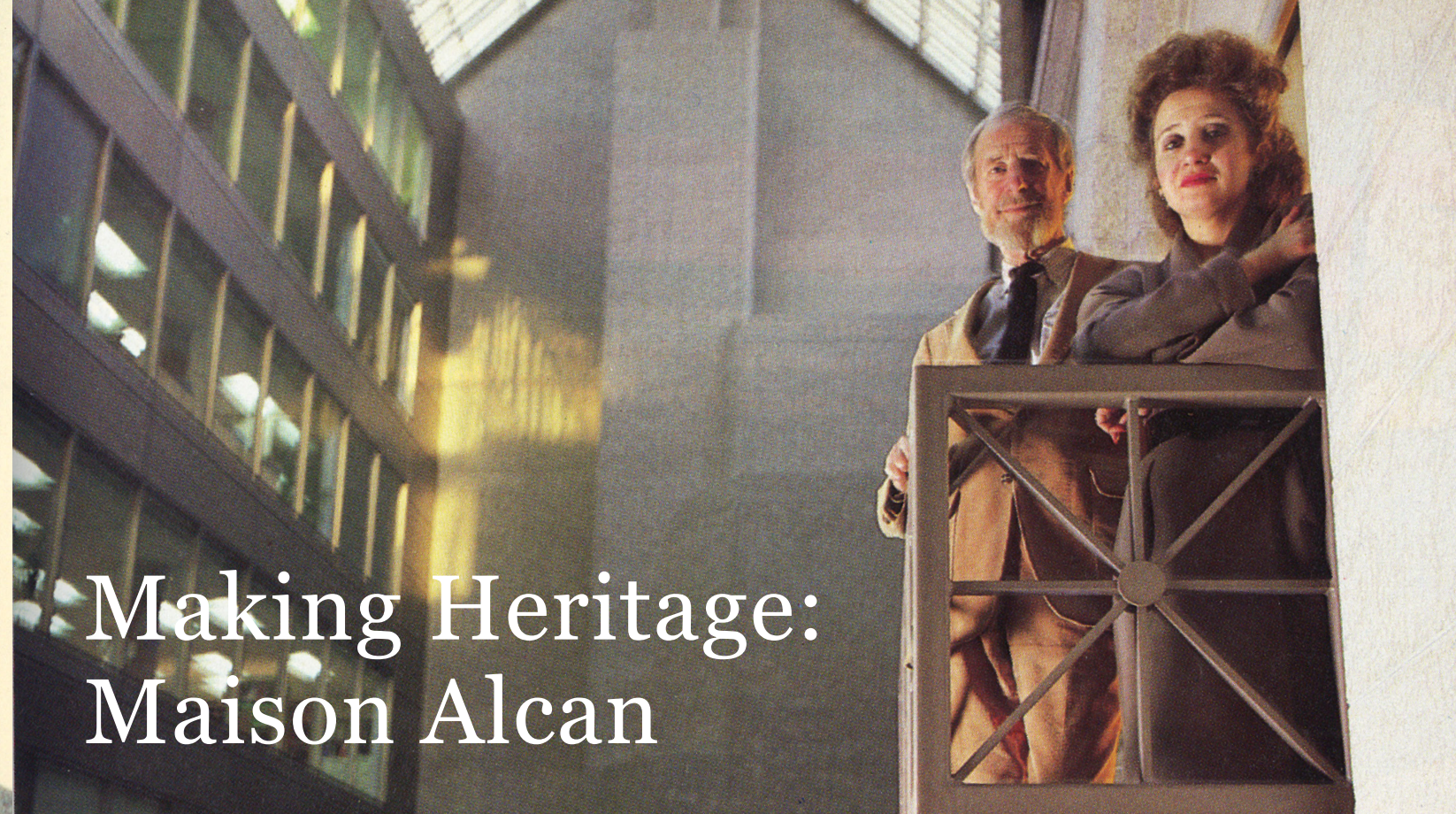
Thirty seven years ago, I returned to Montréal with a Masters in Historic Preservation from Columbia University. I was not the first Canadian, but I was one of the first to graduate from the program and return home. In July 1980, I went back to visit Art Nichol of Arcop, where I had worked from 1975-77. Speaking from his great height, in his slow, gravelly voice, he told me that they would be announcing the Alcan project the next day and maybe I would like to be in charge of the old buildings. That's how it happened. No interviews, no offers. Just start working.

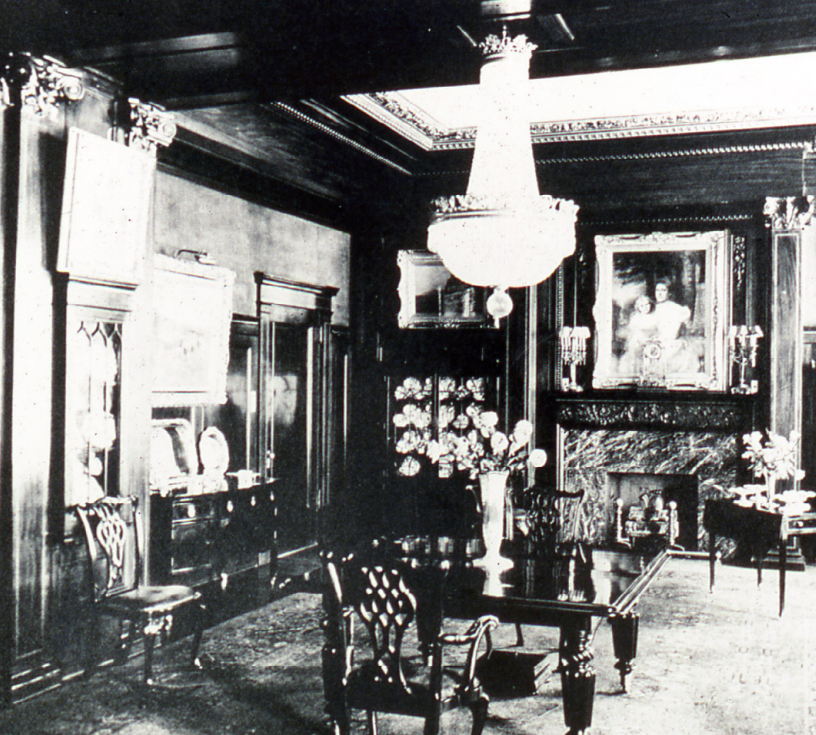
It is fascinating that the entire project, once the land assembly was completed and the project was announced, took three years from start of design to opening day. It is fascinating not because we were working with pen and ink on mylar and trace and without computers, but because it remains a demonstration for me that while construction contracting has changed so much in the past four decades, little has changed for the better from what I have experienced – not the process, the product nor the interests of the client.

The architectural team grew over the three years, expanding to fill the ground floor of the Atholstan House, which was the project office until we had to kick ourselves out and restore the building. The design team was separated into two – one for the old buildings (the Atholstan, Beique and Holland Houses, the Berkeley Hotel and the Congregational Church) and one for the new construction (the Davis Building, the Salvation Army Headquarters and the Atrium). Ray Affleck¹, was the partner-in-charge of the project. The key design team on the old buildings included Mary Antonopoulos, Karl Fischer, and Allan Thomas. Around opening day, completely happy, we all assembled at the Stanley Street arch that Yves Lespérance designed, to be frozen in time in one of the very few photos that I have of any of the people who collaborated on the project.

Left: From left to right – Allan Thomas, Ray Affleck, Yves Lespérance, Mary Antonopoulos, Julia Gersovitz and Karl Fischer.

Above: Chatelaine Magazine 1988 issue, Atrium of Maison Alcan five years after the project opened





1911 – Notman Archives, Dining room



1983 – Restored dining room



Before – Sherbrooke street view of the Alcan properties looking West.



Rehabilitated front facade of the Berkeley Hotel once the canopy / bar was removed. The three arches were opened up to create ground floor loggia and to disguise the fire exits onto Sherbrooke street.

Ray was generous in giving me responsibility and freedom to make decisions about the old buildings. I don't think that he was particularly interested in them, but he supported me. I remember a bang-up fight with one of Ray's partners who wanted to gut the houses and paint what remained white. He wanted a fairly radical erasure of the palimpsest, also proposing the replacement of the Berkeley Hotel with two replica houses that had never existed. It would be empowering to claim that I was so very persuasive in getting my way, but I recently learned from Clement Demers that the City of Montréal architects – Clement was the chief architect of the division – were pushing hard to save each building and restore their interiors. They also had little time for the idea of 'tidying up' the site by demolishing the Berkeley.

So it turns out that there was a consistency of message, and quite early on, we got what we wanted.

From the outset, it was very important to me that each building speak of its own history and period. This desire to understand the past meant that I first had to do a fair amount of research to determine which buildings had, as we would say today, value and which did not. The first step lay in discovering the age and evolution of each of the significant buildings.

These included the extremely well documented Atholstan House (1895)², the mysterious Beique House (1893)³, the Berkeley Hotel (1928)⁴, the remarkable Holland House (1872)⁵, and the Emmanuel Congregational Church (1906)⁶. Knowing the original owners led to honouring them in the renaming of the properties and helped to establish the houses as having individual personalities. Once the research was compiled, the design work respected the principles that were set out, even if they were informally described, or lodged only in my brain. We were able to explain what needed to be saved and where change could be tolerated, or even encouraged.

One of the biggest challenges was to figure out a means of linking all the buildings and sharing fire exits. Weaving in fire stairs and exit doors and elevators without damaging important rooms was extremely complicated. I remain very pleased with the loggia that I designed at the base of the Berkeley, to hide the exit doors onto Sherbrooke Street.

We decided immediately to hide all the HVAC systems and to use ways and means that were compatible with the age of the building to express the grilles and the air returns. There were some shortcuts – we specified gypsum board instead of plaster for the large expanse of repaired walls, but we married them to original decorative plaster rosettes and cornices, and the overall effect is still convincing.

We were inventive, but we were also respectful. Within the buildings, we did our new design work quietly and in such a way that it completed the experience; it never sought to take the front stage. I would say that we always tried to understand the architectural decisions of the past and to defend them passionately when they were still present and to fight equally passionately when we wanted to reinstate elements that had been removed and which really needed to be put back to re-establish the coherence of the spaces.

1 Raymond Tait Affleck, (1922-1989)
 2 Dunlop and Heriot Architects
 3 Architect unknown
 4 Lawson and Little Architects
 5 William Tutin Thomas Architect
 6 Archibald and Saxe Architects

I wish I could say that I remember every step of the design process. I don't. I remember going into the Berkeley and realizing that the place was like the Marie-Celeste ghost-ship of legend. Cigarette butts still snuffed out in cheap circular tin ashtrays beside the unmade beds. Food still smeared across the thick slab of butcher block in the kitchen....Discovering the grained doors in the Holland House, after the firemen had hacked their way into the room following a small and ineffective fire....Finding the wallpaper in one of the Atholstan bedrooms that matched the Notman photos, admittedly not the archeological find of the century, but strangely satisfying...Making a crude periscope and finding the hidden plaster cornices in the Atholstan, hacked and destroyed and hidden by dropped ceilings, but still enough was present to serve as models for the recast work.

In the early 1980s there was no conservation construction network nor specialized heritage craftsmen. But there were terrific men who knew their stuff and took palpable pride in their work. Henry Hoffman did extraordinary work in the Atholstan –in the wood restoration and as the general contractor for the house. I was in the building recently and his work is so very skilful and fine and he was

so honourable about doing the job perfectly. Everyone was fretting about how we we would never find plasterers to recast the cornices. Such arrogance! Although decorative plasterwork was an anathema to the modernists, the Italo-Canadians of St. Leonard had been continuing the craft in their houses and restaurants, and the art was scarcely lost. Sam Santorelli from Stuc-Nola and his kid brother did all the casting and the meticulous placing of each of the modillions for the recreated cornice in the Atholstan boardroom.

So what makes this complex so important that it was just recognized as a heritage site by the Quebec government? I think the answer probably lies in several very powerful design decisions. Ray's understanding of how the complex should fit into the existing urban fabric, respecting the scale of the block, was brilliant. This was the world headquarters of an international corporation, but it was the antithesis of the 'power tower'. It was a gracious insertion, with elegantly detailed materials – think of the anodized aluminum curtain wall – that spoke rather subtly of Alcan's product and presence.

In the historic buildings, we placed a very high emphasis on scholarship, authenticity and craftsmanship and that is all still evident. Recently, I walked through each building and was surprised by how little had changed in nearly four decades. Alcan honoured what we did and we certainly honoured Alcan and Mr. Culver for the remarkable vision he brought to Montreal.