

A “Medium of Cultural Memory”:  
The Simon-Lacombe House and its 1957 Relocation



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As Freud once remarked, the same space cannot possibly have two different contents. But an urban imaginary in its temporal reach may well put different things in one place: memories of what there was before, imagined alternatives to what there is.

Andreas Huyssen<sup>1</sup>

Apart from brief entries in Guy Pinard's four-volume architectural history of Montreal and in the Répertoire du patrimoine culturel du Québec, the Simon-Lacombe house has been the subject of only one critical in-depth study. Conrad Gallant's *La reconstruction d'un monument historique: La maison Simon-Lacombe au cimetière Notre-Dame-des-Neiges* explores the house's history and issues related to its reconstruction. Gallant's is an excellent contribution to the critical and historical literature on this site; however, as I demonstrate in this essay, it is productive to pay special attention to how the house's 1957 reconstruction relates to its present state and its immediate future.

The Simon-Lacombe house is a reconstructed eighteenth-century rural house situated on the western border of the Notre-Dame-des-Neiges Cemetery in Montréal, Quebec. Built on a rectangular cement base, the two-story house comprises a traditional shell and a modernized interior. Although set toward the back of the lot, the house is still visible from the street, where Avenue Decelles and Queen-Mary Road intersect.

Prior to being moved here in 1957, the Simon-Lacombe house was located three blocks away on Côte-des-Neiges Road. The original house was built between 1751 and 1781 by Joseph

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<sup>1</sup> Andreas Huyssen, *Present Pasts: Urban Palimpsests and the Politics of Memory* (Stanford, California: Stanford UP, 2003) 7.

Henri Jarry dit Henrichon, one of the first resident tanners of Côte des Neiges.<sup>2</sup> In its earliest years the building served as both a residence and a workshop. Then, between 1825 and 1848, Simon Lacombe, a tanner and then-owner of the house, decided to turn it fully into a residence. More significantly, he replaced the original *pièce par pièce* wood structure with stone possibly gathered from a nearby quarry.<sup>3</sup> It is at this time that the Simon-Lacombe house took on the distinct form it has today. Some of the traits that place it within the typology of the traditional Quebec rural house are: a tin-leaf covered roof punctuated by two dormers on each side, exposed masonry work, protective gables and double-chimneys, and exterior shutters.<sup>4</sup>

This essay focuses on the Simon-Lacombe house's move into the cemetery. In 1957, the Simon-Lacombe house was threatened with demolition when the Ville de Montréal began its expansion of Côte-des-Neiges Road. The Commission des monuments historiques (today the Commission des biens culturels du Québec) stepped in by organizing and paying for the building's relocation. In the Fabrique de la paroisse de Notre-Dame (owner and operator of the cemetery), the Commission found a willing, if tardy, collaborator. By the middle of March 1957 – almost two months after the city had started to gut the inside the building – it was decided that the house (or what remained of it) would be carefully dismantled and reconstructed as faithfully as possible some two hundred meters toward the north, on a plot of land provided by the Notre-

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<sup>2</sup> The Simon-Lacombe house has acquired many names over the course of its history. The most prevalent are Côte-des-Neiges house, Hery-Jarry-dit-Henrichon house, and Simon-Lacombe house. For reasons of clarity and consistency, I use “Simon-Lacombe house” in this essay.

<sup>3</sup> Conrad Gallant, *La reconstruction d'un monument historique: La maison Simon-Lacombe au cimetière Notre-Dame-des-Neiges* (Montréal: Éditions de la Fabrique de la paroisse Notre-Dame de Montréal, 2009) 46.

<sup>4</sup> For a genealogy of this typology, see Peter N. Moogk, *Building a House in New France: An Account of the Perplexities of Client and Craftsmen in Canada* (Toronto: McClelland and Stewart, 1975) 22-48. Conrad Gallant suggests that the building's symmetry also brings it into contact with the neoclassical model popularized in the region in the 1800s. See Gallant 41.

Dame-des-Neiges Cemetery.<sup>5</sup> This, on the condition that the Commission agreed to rent the house without charge to the cemetery's director.<sup>6</sup> The reconstruction was finished by the Fall of the same year. At the same time, as part of the same sequence of events, the Simon-Lacombe house was classified as a "historic monument" by the Commission des monuments historiques. The year 1957 therefore marks not only a physical shift in the house's history, but a legal one as well. Both of these transformations have had a significant impact on the building's present state and the functions it may serve in the future.

The Simon-Lacombe house continues to be property of the Fabrique de la paroisse de Notre-Dame. In a 2004 Master Development Plan, the Fabrique indicates that it plans to turn the house into a centre for the interpretation of the cemetery's history.<sup>7</sup> Far from being novel, this proposition is surprising on account of its belatedness. In Québec, as elsewhere, it is common practice to turn newly restored heritage buildings into museal spaces. The Maison des Jesuites in Sillery (classed in 1929, transformed into a museum in 1956), L'Hôtel Chevalier in Québec (classed in 1956, with the intention of turning it in museum at the same time), and the Chateau de Ramezay in Montréal (already partially a museum when it was classed in 1929) are some well-known examples. But the question, particular to each location, remains: what visions of the past are being elaborated, spatialized, and imagined here?

This essay looks back at the 1957 Simon-Lacombe house displacement to ask what is at stake in the cemetery's current attempts at self-memorialization. While the Fabrique's respect for heritage satisfies a real need to preserve the traces of a national past, a more critical perspective

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<sup>5</sup> See Gallant 26-30.

<sup>6</sup> Guy Pinard, *Montréal, son histoire, son architecture, Vol. 4* (Montréal: Éditions du Méridien, 1991) 82.

<sup>7</sup> As reported by Daniel Cyr, Director of Operations, in the cemetery's newsletter, *Dialogues* 10.22 (April 2008): 7.

recognizes that such an approach may also marginalize other forms of remembering. Art historian Annie Gérin points out:

In the national context, collective memory can...be understood as the capacity—and the legal right—to remember selectively, but most importantly to organize experience in a way that can repress or efface other interpretations of the past. This seems to indicate that collective forgetfulness can be as important as collective memory in this process of generating a deceptively homogeneous spatiality.<sup>8</sup>

The Simon-Lacombe house persists today as a material sign of the complex and inevitably political link between remembering and forgetting. As a way of countering instances of deceptive “collective forgetting,” Gérin encourages her readers to be more aware of promiscuous forms of remembering. That is a good place to start.

Gérin’s attempt to read public art in Québec and Montréal for signs of “promiscuous memory” is reminiscent of Andreas Huyssen’s definition of the urban palimpsest, which he associates with “media of critical cultural memory.”<sup>9</sup> In my reading of Huyssen, a medium of cultural memory is the material form that a palimpsest takes when it flares up in the imagination. One might say that media of cultural memory *deliver* palimpsests; they vehiculate them, making them intelligible. According to Huyssen, urban palimpsests emerge whenever “the strong marks of the present merge in the imaginary with traces of the past.”<sup>10</sup> Thus, urban palimpsests name an encounter in the imagination between the present and the past. I liken palimpsests to the effect of depth I experience whenever I feel touched by the present and the past simultaneously. This

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<sup>8</sup> Annie Gérin, “Maîtres Chez Nous: Public art and Linguistic Identity in Quebec,” in *In Canadian Cultural Poetics: Essays on Canadian Culture*, eds. Garry Shubert, Annie Gérin, and Sheila Petty (Waterloo: Wilfrid Laurier University Press, 2006) 331.

<sup>9</sup> Huyssen (2003) 6.

<sup>10</sup> Huyssen (2003) 7.

paper proposes that the 1957 reconstruction of the Simon-Lacombe house allows for an understanding of the Simon-Lacombe house as a medium of cultural memory.

Whichever definition of the palimpsest one chooses, it is important to recall that media of cultural memory retain a critical dimension. Media of cultural memory help us approach the past in a way that enables new imaginings of the future to emerge.<sup>11</sup> These imaginings, Huyssen argues, are too often foreclosed by a hypertrophied memory discourse. Recalling Nietzsche's idea of critique, I would say that Huyssen is encouraging us to ask after the Who, and not just the What, of our present situation.<sup>12</sup> In the context of the Simon-Lacombe house's move into the cemetery, this means foregrounding an issue that was already implicit in my original question. In asking: *What is at stake in the Fabrique's current attempts at self-commemoration?* I also hear: *In whose name, and with what interests, does the Fabrique de Notre-Dame invoke the figures of memory, heritage, and history?* These questions are important because, as Gérin reminds us, mythical evocations of Québec's colonial past have often served a political function, carving out, in the present, territories of memorialization that are open to some yet not to others.<sup>13</sup> Here, I attempt to think critically about these processes.

### **Une restauration dite "historique"**

On page twenty-five of Conrad Gallant's monograph about the reconstruction of the Simon-Lacombe house, one finds a small reproduction of a black-and-white photograph of the residence

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<sup>11</sup> Huyssen (2003) 10.

<sup>12</sup> I am here following Gilles Deleuze's description of Nietzsche's approach to critique. See Gilles Deleuze, *Nietzsche and Philosophy*, trans. Hugh Tomlinson (New York: Columbia UP, 2006).

<sup>13</sup> Gérin 329.

as it was in the early-twentieth century (Fig. 1). Part of the collection of the architectural historian, Ramsay Traquair, the picture locates the viewer on the sidewalk looking east along Côte des Neiges Road. A series of telephone or electrical poles lead the gaze into the background of the image, eventually spitting it out of the picture towards the border of the page.

I like this image in part because it is a rather poor visual record of the residence itself. While the house is framed at a forty-five degree angle, showing both the front and the side of the building, a large bush occupies most of the foreground of the image. This bush effectively blocks visual access to most of the building's façade. The house's neoclassical portico, added by Grattan Thompson in the 1920s, is almost fully obscured, leaving only the second story (the sloped roof with the two dormers) and one of the house's characteristic gables fully visible. Taken from a distance, this view also works to draw attention to the house's surroundings: to its context and location. One notices a much larger house in the background, and a fence, bordering the sidewalk in the fore. This is in stark contrast with the tightly-cropped colour photographs representing the house in the present.

A Scottish immigrant to Montréal, Traquair taught architectural history at McGill University during the early 1900s. According to Annmarie Adams and Martin Bressani, Traquair's peripheral relation to England seemed to resonate with Canada's and Québec's own "edge condition" as it was being fashioned at the time. They write:

Traquair pioneered the study of Canadian vernacular architecture, focusing on the old architecture of his beloved Quebec. In the first decades of the twentieth century, he took generations of architecture students into the field to record with great accuracy the architecture of New France, which led to the publication of his pioneering monograph, *The Old Architecture of Quebec*, in 1947. Traquair's vision was couched in a specifically Canadian form of conservatism: the surrounding ancient Quebec vernacular was an instrument in shaping a Canadian architecture resistant to the universalizing

Beaux-Arts style and other more commercial trends coming from the United States.<sup>14</sup>

Traquair's photograph of the Simon-Lacombe house should therefore be understood as part of this process of teaching and documentation. Around the same time, Gérard Morisset (founding member of the Commission des monuments historiques in 1921) was infusing the study of Québec's vernacular architecture "with a Quebec nationalist sentiment."<sup>15</sup> As Adams and Bressani point out, Traquair and Morisset converged in their desire to preserve the province's built heritage during a time of intense social transformations.

Though by no means self-consistent, this thirty year period in Québec's architectural history (roughly from the late 1920s to the 1950s) is marked by the inventive and selective "discovery" of the region's old vernacular architecture. Inventive, because the emergence of architectural regionalism in Québec corresponds to a broader search for new beginnings during the first half of the twentieth century.<sup>16</sup> And selective, because the appreciation of heritage quickly became tethered to a rising wave of nationalist sentiment, at the crest of which could be seen the distinct vernacular forms of traditional buildings which, in the minds of some, had become emblematic of *les valeurs d'antan*.

For Paul Gouin – leader of the Action Libérale Nationale and president of the Commission

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<sup>14</sup> Annemarie Adams and Martin Bressani, "Canada: The Edge Condition," *The Journal of the Society of Architectural Historians* 62.1 (March 2003): 76.

<sup>15</sup> Adams and Bressani 76.

<sup>16</sup> Of this period in Québec architectural history, architectural historian Claude Bergeron writes: "Regard sur le passé et modernité n'apparaissent donc pas comme deux phénomènes opposés, mais plutôt comme deux manifestations d'un même phénomène. Elles sont toutes deux liées à une remise en question de l'architecture comme des autres aspects de la société dont on fit le procès à faveur de la crise [d'entre deux guerres], qui apparut comme l'occasion d'un nouveau départ." Claude Bergeron, *Architecture du XXe siècle au Québec* (Québec: Éditions du Méridien, 1989) 126.



des monuments historiques from 1955 to 1968 – this crescendo of preservation seems to have been primarily a question of atmosphere:

Ce réveil national devrait de s'accompagner de la création d'une atmosphère nationale. ... Cette atmosphère, il existe mille moyens de la créer, en commençant par l'enfant, à l'école, et en l'étendant à la population par l'architecture, par exemple, qui pourrait épouser un style plus en harmonie avec notre caractère ethnique.<sup>17</sup>

There is an implicit violence in Gouin's idea of culture. This violence is foregrounded in Gouin's statement from 1956 (quoted by Gelly, Brunelle-Lavoie, and Kirjan): "Selon Paul Gouin, tous les monuments restaurés par les soins de la Commission, de 1952 à 1955, ont fait 'l'objet d'une restauration aussi consciencieuse que possible, au cours de laquelle on a cherché d'éliminer les parasites qui avaient crû au cours du siècle dernière et à revenir à la belle simplicité de nos pères.'"<sup>18</sup> Selective forgetting, indeed.

The elimination of such architectural "parasites" is consistent with the practice of stylistic restoration. This way of doing heritage restoration was informed by an honest desire to restore buildings to their original style. It was primarily a cosmetic operation: traits not associated with original style would be removed, while others that may not have been there would at times be added. One may qualify this as tyrannical, and it is – a tyranny against time, especially – but it is important to recall that Morisset was working under the impression that a collective past was in

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<sup>17</sup> "This national awakening should be accompanied by the creation of a national atmosphere. ... There are thousands of ways to create this atmosphere, beginning with the child, at school, and by extending it to the population through architecture, for example, which could adopt a style more in harmony with our ethnic character" (my translation). Quoted in Gallant 24. For interesting notes on the connection between ethnography and regionalism in Québec, see Bergeron 126 and Adams and Bressani 76.

<sup>18</sup> "According to Paul Gouin, all the monuments restored by the offices of the Commission, from 1952 to 1955, were 'the subject of as conscientious a restoration as possible, during which was sought the elimination of parasites which had accrued during the past century and a return to the beautiful simplicity of our fathers.'" (my translation). Alain Gelly, Louise Brunelle-Lavoie, Cornéliu Kirjan, *La passion du patrimoine: la Commission des biens culturels du Québec, 1922-1994* (Sillery: Éditions du Septentrion, 1995) 69.

the process of disappearing. In light of this, stylistic restoration, at least of the sort that Morisset and Gouin championed, may also be understood as an attempt to bring sense to a world whose temporal and spatial coordinates had been rendered problematic by an especially careless, and equally selective brand of modernization.<sup>19</sup>

Stylistic restoration became especially prominent in Québec during the 1950s. At this time, the Commission des monuments historiques was working with a drastically increased budget, compared to what it had in the 1920s.<sup>20</sup> These funds it often used to purchase and restore threatened historic buildings. Acquired during what appears to have been a windfall year for the Commission (1957-1958), the Simon-Lacombe house literally got swept up in this preservation process. And when it re-appeared on the grounds of the cemetery, it did so bearing the blinkered signature of stylistic restoration: absence of the neoclassical portico and presence of exterior shutters, placed there, one presumes, to remind everyone of the house's original style and of the values attached to it.

In 1922, Grattan D. Thompson purchased the house from William Thomas Nichols. A student of Traquair's, Thompson was also a fan of regionalism. In 1924, he drew the plans of his house.<sup>21</sup> In March, 1932, Thompson's plans were published in a *Canadian Homes and Gardens* article about the Simon-Lacombe house (Fig. 2). These plans would later play an important role in Victor Depocas' 1957 reconstruction.<sup>22</sup> The *Homes and Gardens* article is instructive for another reason as well. In it, an anonymous author states: "about twenty-five years ago the house

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<sup>19</sup> Gérard Morisset appears to be the main figure associated with "stylistic" restoration. For commentary on Morisset's embrace of Viollet-le-Duc's theory of restoration, see Gelly et al. 70.

<sup>20</sup> The Commission's budget by the end of the 1920s was \$24, 480. In 1953-54, it was \$48, 170. In 1957-58, \$190, 000. Gelly et al. 74-83.

<sup>21</sup> Gallant 26.

<sup>22</sup> Gallant 26-27.

was made into a modern residence with hot water heating, plumbing and hardwood floors.”<sup>23</sup>

This statement indicates that the house’s interior was renovated around 1907. The 1957 move contributed even further to this process, prompting Guy Pinard to come to this conclusion in 1991: “l’intérieur de la maison n’a aucune valeur historique puisqu’il y été réaménagé à la moderne.”<sup>24</sup> But what if we considered it differently? Against Pinard, I would suggest that the house’s modern interior does in fact have a historic value.

In 1957, apparently lacking any other means, Victor Depocas was forced to turn to Grattan D. Thompson’s drawings for direction. Given Depocas’s relationship with the Commission (he was involved in many of their restoration projects of the 1950s and 60s), one can assume that he did, in fact, make “tous les efforts possibles pour reproduire fidèlement la maison d’origine.”<sup>25</sup> While the original interior could not be reproduced, the exterior of the building was reconstituted with care, using the materials that were salvaged. In keeping with the principles of stylistic restoration, whatever could not be verified was imagined according to the aesthetic models of the eighteenth century.<sup>26</sup>

The point that I want to make here is that, in his attempt to preserve the traditional exterior of the house, Depocas could do nothing other than reproduce the house’s already-modernized interior. There were no other plans, for one. And, secondly, the house was meant to serve as the residence of Laurent Danserau (the Fabrique’s director) and his family. These needs produced, in Bill Bantey’s words, a “split personality” in the house’s structure; while the outside remained “a

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<sup>23</sup> Quoted in Gallant 27.

<sup>24</sup> “The interior of the house has no historical value, since it was refitted in a modern way” (my translation). Pinard 84.

<sup>25</sup> “all the efforts possible to faithfully reproduce the original house” (my translation). Gallant 28.

<sup>26</sup> Gallant 28.

fair example of early Quebec provincial architecture,” the interior became “ultra modern, complete even to abstract lamps and wall-to-wall carpeting.”<sup>27</sup> Dansereau’s reasoning is simple. “We don’t want to feel as if we’re living in a museum,” he says in Bantey’s 1957 *Gazette* article. “Outside the house can remain antique but in the interior we want modern conveniences.” There is perhaps no better way to describe the contract between heritage discourse and Montréal modernization at the time.

This memory of the modern interior, neatly encased in a traditionalist shell, is something that I think is in the process of being forgotten as the Fabrique works to turn the Simon-Lacombe house into something like a museum. I can imagine Laurent Dansereau in 1957, standing in his modern kitchen sink, having a glass of water and looking outside. In front of his house, progress and modernization in the form of the expansion of Côte-des-Neiges Road. Out the back, the Catholic cemetery. Though it might not be historic in the general sense of the word, the house’s “split personality” does constitute an object for a materialist history.<sup>28</sup> For me, the story of the Simon-Lacombe house’s connection to Montréal’s modernization has been an unexpected discovery. More surprising still, however, is the by-now widespread acknowledgement of the house’s function as an historiographic document.

Gallant concludes his essay by writing: “Telle que définit par Gérard Morisset, la restauration stylistique réalisée pour la maison Simon-Lacombe en fait donc un témoin essentiel de la pratique patrimoniale typique des années 1950.”<sup>29</sup> Note that there is no such mention in his

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<sup>27</sup> Bill Bantey, “Still Antique, Modern Too,” *The Gazette*, 18 Dec. 1957.

<sup>28</sup> See Walter Benjamin, “Theses on the Philosophy of History,” in *Illuminations*, trans. Harry Zohn, ed. Hannah Arendt (New York: Schocken Books, 1968) 253-264.

<sup>29</sup> “As it is defined by Gerard Morisset, the stylistic restoration carried out for the Simon-Lacombe house thus makes it an essential witness of the patrimonial practice typical of the 1950s” (my translation). Gallant 46.

conclusion of the house's significance as a typical historic monument. Gallant's appraisal is echoed in the Répertoire des monuments historiques' evaluation of the building, which gives three basic reasons for why it is protected as heritage. For the Répertoire, the house constitutes an important reminder of the social history of Côte des Neiges and of the region's architectural history (described in paragraph one and three of the document, respectively); but, more importantly for my purposes here, it also serves as a reminder of an old way of doing heritage. I quote from the second paragraph: "la valeur patrimoniale de la maison repose sur sa représentativité en tant qu'illustration du concept de restauration dite « historique ». Cette approche propose le retour à un état antérieur jugé significatif, en fonction d'objectifs politiques ou idéologiques, par les maîtres du projet."<sup>30</sup> By the 1960s and 1970s, the values associated with stylistic restoration became the object of critique because they detracted from the building's authenticity.<sup>31</sup>

These statements present the Simon-Lacombe house not so much (or not only) as an historic monument, but as an historiographic monument as well, that is, as a remainder and a reminder of the history of modern heritage. Put differently, they turn the house into a vehicle of what Lucie K. Morisset calls "patrimonial memory." For Morisset, patrimonial memory resembles a kind of "open work," insofar as it gives heritage the capacity to operate reflexively. She writes:

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<sup>30</sup> "the heritage value of the house rests on its representativeness as an illustration of the concept known as "historical" restoration. This approach proposes a return to a former state, considered significant in light of political or ideological objectives, by the directors of the project" (my translation). Répertoire du patrimoine culturel du Québec, "Maison Simon-Lacombe: Valeurs et caractéristiques," Ministère de la Culture, des Communications et de la Condition féminine (2009), web, accessed 16 Dec. 2009.

<sup>31</sup> See Noppen, "Arrondissement historique de Carignan: Maisons Prévost at Saint-Hubert," in *Les chemins de la mémoire: Monuments et sites historiques de Québec. Tome II* (Québec: Les Publications du Québec, 1991) 295.

La notion de la mémoire patrimoniale sous-tend que le patrimoine nous renseigne davantage sur ceux qui l'ont patrimonialisé que sur lui-même ou sur le passé: en d'autres mots, le monument ou un patrimoine apparaît ici ... comme une oeuvre produite en vertu de configurations culturelles, politiques, et sociales logées dans cette oeuvre elle-même et dans les représentations (discursives ou autres) qui y sont associées.<sup>32</sup>

This is essentially a historiographic procedure. I say "historiographic" with some trepidation, however. For what I am referring to is more specific: not a "history of history," but a "patrimonialization of heritage." Gallant's and the Répertoire's evaluations invite us to consider the Simon-Lacombe house as a memory of how the future was being imagined in the 1950s by a culture marked by the creative-destructive effects of modernization.

Though it lacks the critical teeth of Huyssen's media of critical cultural memory, Morisset's concept of patrimonial memory seems to perform a similar function, namely, that of inscribing time into the equation. Patrimonial memory implies the exposure of heritage to time and to the processes of transformation associated with it. On the other hand, by gaining the capacity to speak about itself, patrimonial memory also takes on some of the more sobering attributes of historiography, such as the idea that historiography "operates ... by running a knife between the tree of memory and the bark of history."<sup>33</sup> Both media of cultural memory and patrimonial memory work by establishing a distance between memory and history. This spacing of the terms perhaps anticipates a different, or rekindled, rapprochement in the future.

In retrospect, it seems rather remarkable that the Simon-Lacombe house was classified as

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<sup>32</sup> "The notion of patrimonial memory implies that patrimony [e.g. heritage sites] tells us more about those who made it patrimony than about it itself, or the past: in other words, the monument or patrimony appears here ... as a work produced by virtue of cultural, political, and social forces that are inscribed in the work itself and in (discursive or other) representations associated with it" (my translation). Lucie K. Morisset, *Des régimes d'authenticité: Essai sur la mémoire patrimoniale* (Rennes, France; Québec: Presses Universitaires de Rennes; Presses de l'Université de Québec, 2009) 18.

<sup>33</sup> Pierre Nora, "Between Memory and History: *Les Lieux de Mémoire*," *Representations* 26 (Spring 1989): 10.

an historic monument. This is what the Répertoire's idea of "une restauration historique" renders sayable: "how remarkable: that was then, now restoration is done differently." But if this is true, and that *was* then, why does the Simon-Lacombe house continue to be classified as an historic monument? After all, in the words of one commentator, today we would not accept the Simon-Lacombe house's classification.<sup>34</sup>

This is not revisionism. Even by the standards of the day (prior to the 1964 signing of the Charter of Venice), the Simon-Lacombe house seems to have snuck into history but barely. First, it was almost razed by the Ville de Montréal. But consider this as well: in 1959, due in part to a freeze in funding for acquisitions, the Commission was forced to refuse the purchase of two other historic residences: one, because it was deemed to be in too mediocre a state of conservation; the other because it had "inadequate restoration of certain elements."<sup>35</sup> However, just two years prior, a partly-demolished Simon-Lacombe house managed to receive both funding and heritage status. Keep in mind, also, that the building's interior had already been renovated. Although it seems pointless to ask whether hardwood floors would have been seen as "inadequate restoration ... elements" two years later, such a thought experiment forces us to ask valid questions. What is the rapport between heritage-value and financial cycles? While money comes and goes, the watermark of Quebec's heritage reserve seems to either stay the same or increase (I have yet to learn of a de-classification, though I am sure it exists).

At the present historical juncture, the emergent "historiographic consciousness" of heritage (to borrow Nora's phrase) seems to take on an added significance. Perceived as lacking

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<sup>34</sup> Jacques Bénard, "Maison de la Côte des Neiges," in *Les chemins de la mémoire: Monuments et sites historiques de Québec. Tome II* (Québec: Les Publications du Québec, 1991) 148.

<sup>35</sup> Gelly et al. 82.

an authentic connection to the past – because it has been demolished, displaced, and reconstructed – yet still classified as an historic monument, many evaluations of the Simon-Lacombe house appear today to be tipping towards its historiographic value. These evaluations encourage us to consider the house as an object that evokes a modality of heritage typical of the 1950s. Maybe in time the house's *weakening* historic value will depend increasingly on its historiographic value for support. If this happens (if it is not already happening), the house will begin to limp. The Simon-Lacombe house: a *bien* (a good) that limps, not for want of time, but for an excess of it – an object suffused with complications.

### **The Notre-Dame-des-Neiges Cemetery**

The image of a hobbling Simon-Lacombe house, however useful, cannot really capture the entirety of the situation. While the Répertoire appears to carve out a critical space in which the house can be imagined as a memory of Montréal's distinctly modern (because patrimonial) past, the Notre-Dame-des-Neiges cemetery seems much more pragmatic. On the cemetery's website, one reads the following (and only) description of the Simon-Lacombe house: "En 1957, une maison historique ... construite entre 1751 et 1781, est rélocalisée à son emplacement actuel, à l'entrée du cimetière, rue Decelles. Cette maison avait longtemps appartenu à la famille Lacombe, qui l'a habitée de 1802 à 1907."<sup>36</sup> The dates and the family name here should be understood in the context of the cemetery's physical and symbolic landscape, in which actual commemorative monuments present family names wedded to the date of birth and death of

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<sup>36</sup> "In 1957, a historic house... built between 1751 and 1781, is relocated to its current site, by the entrance to the cemetery on Decelles street. This house belonged for a long time to the members of the Lacombe family, who lived in it from 1802 to 1907" (my translation). Cimetière Notre-Dame-des-Neiges, "Historique," Cimetière Notre-Dame-des-Neiges (2009), web, accessed 16 Dec. 2009.



individuals. The cemetery's outreach to the general public, via the website, appears to recover some of the house's value as an historic monument. Indeed, if we listen to the Fabrique's current director, there is no doubt that the Simon-Lacombe house "[fait] partie du patrimoine de l'ancien village Côte-des-Neiges, de la Ville de Montréal, et du Québec."<sup>37</sup> However, as I have tried to show, the situation is more complicated. In what follows, I tell a story of the Simon-Lacombe house and its displacement in relationship to various facets of the cemetery's changing cultural landscape.

Conrad Gallant's monograph on the Simon-Lacombe house is an invaluable document for anyone concerned with the details of the building's history. At the same time, and insofar as it is funded, published, and distributed by the Fabrique, Gallant's book may be considered as a pendant to the cemetery's attempts to "ensure the conservation and enhancement of [the] heritage components of [its] property."<sup>38</sup> Though it swings in interesting directions, Gallant's narrative stops at 1996, and has little to say about the Fabrique's stakes in the current situation.<sup>39</sup> Reading Gallant – or any other document I have come across, for that matter – I get the impression that the Fabrique's hospitality in 1957 was purely an act of good will. While this might have been the case (and may continue to be so), such an impression ought not dissuade us from asking after what other interests might have been in play.

Why did the Fabrique take the house in 1957? It is possible that there were very concrete financial reasons. In the 1950s, properties owned by Quebec's Catholic religious establishment

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<sup>37</sup> "is part of the heritage of the old village of Côte-des-Neiges, of the City of Montreal, and of Quebec" (my translation). Yoland Tremblay, "Mot du directeur," quoted in Gallant 4.

<sup>38</sup> Yoland Tremblay, "The first part of our master plan," *Dialogues* 4.13 (2002): 1.

<sup>39</sup> For what has happened after 1996, Gallant tells us only that, since it was vacated by the Fabrique's director, the house has had "une nouvelle vocation en complémentarité avec les activités du cimetière." Gallant 44.

did not fall under the same taxation scheme as that which applied to regular, property-owning citizens. As Gelly, Brunelle-Lavoie, and Kirjan point out, regular citizens often rejected the classification of their homes on the grounds that heritage designation would raise their property's value, and hence their taxes.<sup>40</sup> The Fabrique, on the other hand, did not face such a limitation. In other words, it would have made good economic sense to reconstruct the house on their property.

Furthermore, the acquisition also allowed the Fabrique to offer the cemetery's director and his family a service, namely, in the form of a modern, conveniently located, rent-free residence. Today, only one of the Cemetery's employees continues to live at the cemetery, but in the past there were more; they lived in such places as the guard houses that were built into the Cemetery's main entrance on Côte-des-Neiges Road, as well as on the top floor of an administrative building located at the summit of the site.<sup>41</sup>

Designed by the architects Victor Bourgeu and Henri-Maurice Perreault in 1888-1899, the two guard houses at the entrance also interest me because they seem to set an architectural precedent. That is, through their positioning, they prepare the ground for the 1957 siting of the Simon-Lacombe house next to the cemetery's entrance on Avenue Decelles. Another house/gate ensemble can be seen nearby, at the Mount-Royal Cemetery. But beyond this spatial organization, there appear to be strong symbolic reasons for this layout as well. In acquiring the Simon-Lacombe house, the Fabrique acquired an historic monument. More specifically, it acquired an old, French-style rural residence whose date of origin was, at the time, generously

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<sup>40</sup> Gelly et al. 88.

<sup>41</sup> Michelle Bourget and Michel Payment, "One Hundred and Fifty Years of Work," *Dialogues* 6.18 (March 2004): 8.

pegged to the year 1713.<sup>42</sup>

Designed by John Ostell and Henri-Maurice Perrault, the Notre-Dame-des-Neiges cemetery has functioned as a site of civic memory since it let the public in in 1854. Some have argued that the Notre-Dame-des-Neiges Cemetery was designed in a monumental style reminiscent of the Père-Lachaise Cemetery in Paris.<sup>43</sup> Others have traced its roots to the rural cemetery movement, which emerged between the 1830s and the 1870s in the United States (the model here being Boston's Mount Auburn Cemetery). According to Blanche Linden-Ward, rural cemeteries served as "genteel pleasure grounds" to an increasingly urbane public. In that era, individuals were encouraged to go to the cemetery to "learn from the exemplary life of notables interred there."<sup>44</sup> In other words, rural cemeteries have, from the beginning, served a museal function, in the sense that they have been programmed to serve as cultural training grounds, or places where citizens can go to learn how to read and experience history.

Bearing this at once pedagogical and leisurely function in mind, it is not surprising that the Notre-Dame-des-Neiges cemetery publishes, in the form of a free pamphlet, a "Repertory of [the] famous, historical, and notorious personalities" interred there.<sup>45</sup> It is not surprising, either, that it offers tours to those who become members of its friendship society. Though it does not figure as part of this Repertory, the Simon-Lacombe house is implicated in the same networks of

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<sup>42</sup> "Lorsqu'il classa la maison monument historique, le ministère des Affaires culturelles situa à 1713 la date de sa construction. Cependant, le service de la planification du territoire de la CUM n'a retrouvé aucune trace de cette maison dans un acte notaire antérieur à 1751." Pinard 81.

<sup>43</sup> See Pierre-Richard Bisson, Mario Brodeur and Daniel Drouin, *Cimetière Notre-Dame-des-Neiges* (Montréal: Henri Rivard, 2004) 45-51.

<sup>44</sup> Blanche Linden-Ward, "Strange but Genteel Pleasure Grounds: Tourist and Leisure Uses of Nineteenth-Century Rural Cemeteries," in *Cemeteries and Gravemarkers: Voices of American Culture*, edited by Richard E. Meyer (Ann Arbor: UMI Research Press, 1989) 295.

<sup>45</sup> The Répertoire de personnalités notoires, célèbres et historiques, is a pamphlet published and distributed by the Fabrique de la paroisse de Notre-Dame (2009).

signification. The use of rural cemeteries as “genteel pleasure grounds” waned after the 1870s, as these spaces became disarticulated (due to internal growth and overuse), and as city parks were opened. According to Linden-Ward, the creation of museums of fine art also contributed to their depreciation.<sup>46</sup> Note that Linden-Ward’s research focuses specifically on the genealogy of American cemetery landscapes. Having said that, there are clear indications that the Notre-Dame-des-Neiges Cemetery shares with its southern cousins many of the same historical markings – these range from the decision to move Montréal’s burial grounds to the outside of the densifying city in the mid-1800s, to the subsequently mixed uses of the site by a diversity of publics, for both pleasure and commemoration.

There are also more local forces at play which have affected the cemetery’s development. Meredith Watkins point out that, historically, the cultural landscape of this site has developed in relation to that of its Protestant neighbour, the Mount-Royal Cemetery. Their mutual difference, she explains, “is partially due to the existence of two distinct visions of death. The Catholic cemetery has two associated ideologies: Catholicism and nationalism,” whereas the Protestant cemetery values “the diversity of cultures and religions and more importantly individuality.”<sup>47</sup> While it is tempting to map this dichotomy onto the cultural landscape of the city – Anglophones on one side, Francophones on the other; regionalism on one side, modernism on the other – such a move would suppress the overlapping times, spaces, and practices that they also share. One may mention again the complex relationship between Ramsay Traquair and Gérard Morisset as

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<sup>46</sup> Linden-Ward 323.

<sup>47</sup> Meredith G. Watkins, “The Cemetery and Cultural Memory: Montreal 1860-1900.” *Urban History Review* 31 (Fall 2002) 55.

an example.<sup>48</sup>

Nevertheless, given the social, cultural, and political climate of the era, it seems significant that the Notre-Dame-des-Neiges Cemetery would want to adopt the Simon-Lacombe house as part of its symbolic arsenal. According to Debarbieux and Marois, numerous transformations to the cemetery's urban surroundings during the twentieth century may be read as spatial expressions of a politically emergent French-Canadian nationalism. For example, they cite the rising concentration of Francophone residents in the neighborhood of Outremont (on the Northern border of the cemetery), as well as the nearby emplacement of two "monumental" architectural projects: the Oratoire Saint-Joseph (finished in 1967) and the Université de Montréal's campus (inaugurated in 1943).<sup>49</sup> That this connection is presently being maintained by the cemetery is suggested by the Fabrique's desire to identify these last two monuments in a new draft of the cemetery's map.<sup>50</sup>

By the 1950s, Québec's "old houses" had become strong signs of remembrance. Residents might have acquired this taste for the past at home, at school (pace Traquair's and Percy E. Nobbs's outings), or even in public gatherings organized by the Commission for the special unveiling of commemorative monuments.<sup>51</sup> This cultural atmosphere may have allowed the Simon-Lacombe house to perform a palliative function for many visitors and would-be clients of the site. Poised next to the cemetery's entrance, the house in 1957 would have announced to them: you too shall, or can, be remembered.

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<sup>48</sup> See, for instance, Adams and Bressani, cited above.

<sup>49</sup> Bernard Debarbieux and Claude Marois, "Le Mont Royal: Forme naturelle, paysages et territorialités urbaines," *Cahiers de Géographie du Québec* 41.13 (septembre 1997): 186-187.

<sup>50</sup> Yoland Tremblay, "The Second Part of our Land-Use Plan," *Dialogues* 4.14 (Dec. 2002): 1.

<sup>51</sup> Gelly et al. 33-36.

Such a message, however, would not have been without political implications. For what remains unsaid is that other forms of identification that *diverged* from this model were not worth remembering. Although the two process do not fully explain each other, “l’idéologie clerico-nationaliste” and Québec’s heritage apparatus appear to have supported one another.<sup>52</sup>

Correspondingly, in the course of its history, the Notre-Dame-des-Neiges Cemetery has facilitated the construction of monuments which invoke a sense of nationalism and Catholicism. This was often done in order to sell plots.<sup>53</sup> However, while such public monuments were being preserved at the time of the Simon-Lacombe house reconstruction, little attention seems to have been paid to the cemetery’s temporary graves: essentially plots (sometimes paid for, sometimes given *gratis*) which were “alloted for a term of five years to persons of families known to be too poor to pay burial fees.”<sup>54</sup> Thus, at a certain limit, the Simon-Lacombe house may also be understood as having spatialized the following command: remember, or else be forgotten.

This complex set of issues concerns the politics of memory and has a direct bearing on how the Simon-Lacombe house is interpreted and imagined in the present. It is precisely for this reason that I think the house’s historical “parasites” are important. Although they might not appear “historical” from the perspective of a monumental history, the house’s modernized interior and neo-classical portico remind us that the building has always played host to a palaver of values. It is the rise, fall, and intersection of these values that make the Simon-Lacombe house a worthwhile medium of critical cultural memory.

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<sup>52</sup> Bergeron 28.

<sup>53</sup> Bisson, Brodeur and Drouin, *Cimetière Notre-Dame-des-Neiges* (Montréal: Henri Rivard, 2004), 118. See also Gabriel Bodson and Louis-Alain Ferron, “Les deux cimetières du mont Royal,” *Continuité* 49 (Hiver/Printemps, 1991): 22.

<sup>54</sup> Watkins 60.

It is only in the 1970s and 80s that rural cemeteries such as Mount Auburn began to be appreciated again, attracting “extensive public recreational and tourist use comparable to that of their heyday in the mid-nineteenth century.”<sup>55</sup> In Montréal, this is the period when the Notre-Dame-des-Neiges Cemetery begins to be recognized as part of the city’s, Québec’s, Canada’s official heritage.<sup>56</sup> These various designations have at times conflicted with the cemetery’s particular needs.<sup>57</sup> The 1970s and 1980s is also a period when the Notre-Dame-des-Neiges Cemetery begins to respond to the proliferation of corporate, non-denominational cemeteries in the city. The projected repurposing of the Simon-Lacombe house – its transformation into a museal space – is part of these ongoing processes. Whether or not the contemporary branding of the cemetery as a museum of the city’s monumental history works to re-territorialize Québec’s colonial heritage is hard to say. Probably. At the same time, such a process of musealization may also provide new openings and new platforms for imagining the past differently.<sup>58</sup>

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<sup>55</sup> Linden-Ward 324.

<sup>56</sup> In 1987 the cemetery is recognized as a heritage site by the city of Montréal; in 1998, it becomes an official national historic site, and in 2002 it is designated, within the broader Mount-Royal ensemble, as part of the province’s natural and cultural heritage.

<sup>57</sup> See Bisson, Brodeur and Drouin 109, 116-117.

<sup>58</sup> As Huyssen suggests, museums have the capacity to expose visitors to the actual age of things, which is not necessarily equivalent to their timelessness. He writes: “The older an object, the more distinct it is from current-and-soon-to-be-obsolete as well as recent-and-already-obsolete objects. That alone may be enough to lend them an aura, to reenchant them beyond any instrumental functions they may have had at an earlier time.” Andreas Huyssen, “Escape from Amnesia: The Museum as Mass Medium,” in *Twilight Memories: Marking Time in a Culture of Amnesia* (London and New York: Routledge, 1995) 33.

**Figures**



Fig. 1 *The Simon-Lacombe house in the early 1900s.*

Unknown photographer. "Village House." Montréal, Cote-des-Neiges.  
Fonds Ramsay Traquair: The Architectural Heritage of Quebec (Item 101870)  
John Bland Canadian Architecture Collection  
McGill University Library





Fig. 2 Simon-Lacombe house (façade), October 2009.

Photograph: Pablo Rodriguez.

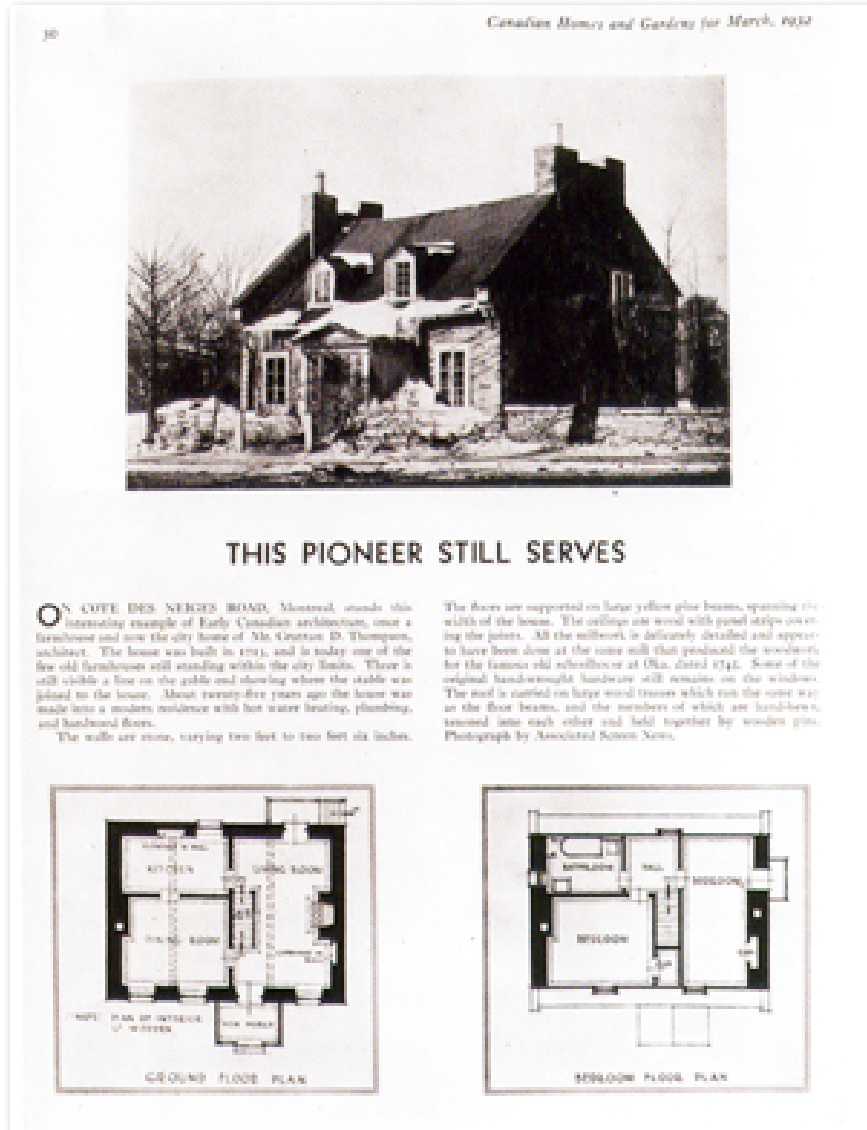


Fig. 3 Simon-Lacombe house, as pictured in *Canadian Homes and Gardens* (March 1932). Reprinted in Conrad Gallant, *La reconstruction d'un monument historique*, 27.

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