

Since the late nineteenth century the office building has evolved from low-rise office/warehouse to high-rise office tower. This has occurred for numerous reasons, from new building materials to economic prosperity. Rampant capitalism set the stage for developers to get more money per square foot of land than ever before because there was more usable space available when more floors were added. Since those footloose days many things have been changed in an attempt to encourage designs of high quality: there are now laws regulating height, density, and air space rights; there exist heritage groups and protected buildings; there are symbolic "oranges" and "lemons" in recognition of good or bad architecture. The office building is the type most affected by many of these initiatives. Consequently, designers of office buildings are now exploring innovative possibilities for their clients.

## La Maison Ultramar: A Short Building *by Donna McGee*



*Tolchinsky & Goodz, La-Maison Ultramar. Proposed main entrance and east façade on the corner of McGill College and President Kennedy Avenues. (Photo: First Québec Corporation)*



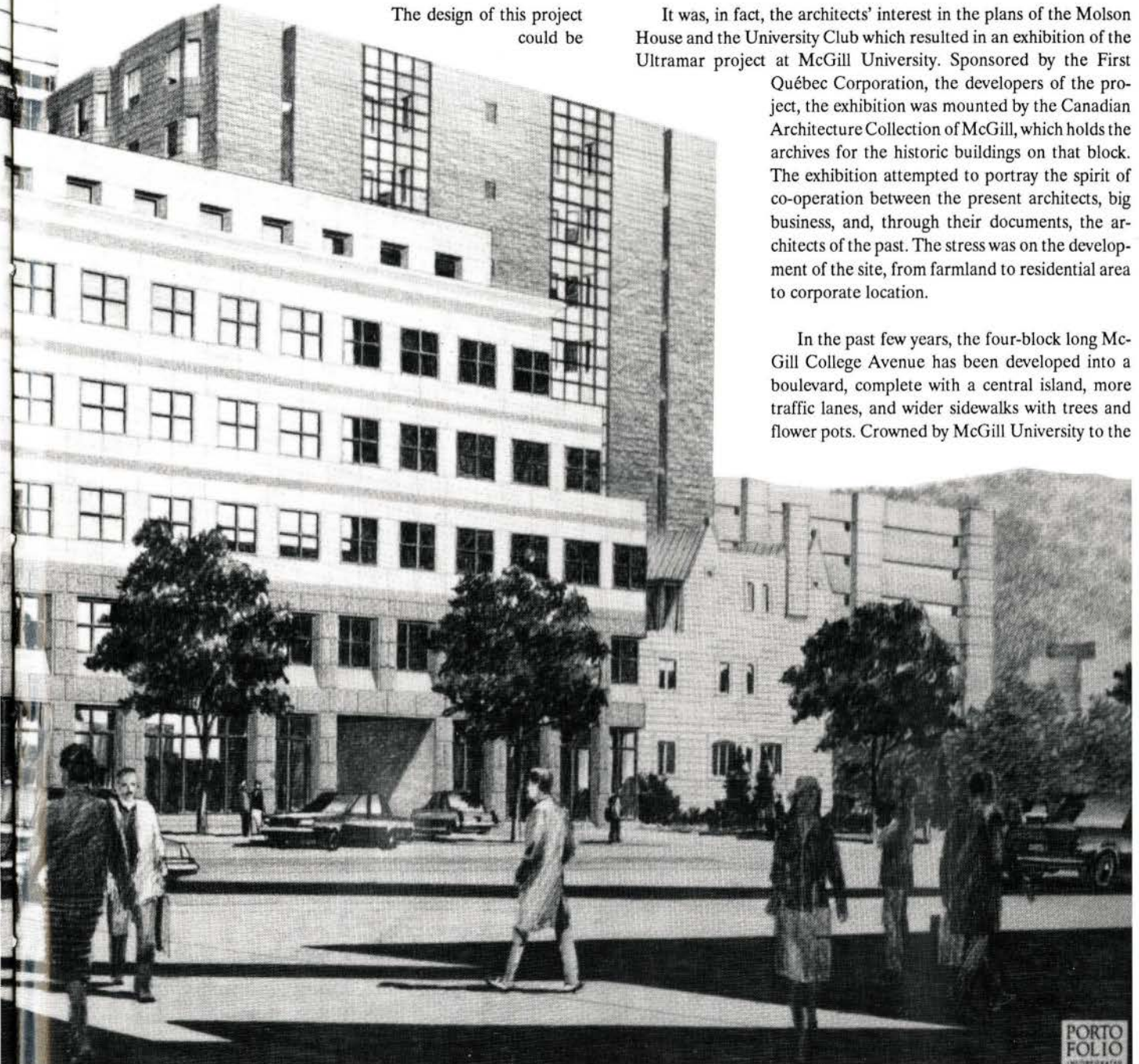
La Maison Ultramar is the name given to the head office for Ultramar Canada Inc. currently under development on McGill College Avenue. It is not to be a tall building. In fact, it will rise only six storeys in all, making it a rather short building by modern standards. Its interest lies in the development concept – taking its cue from La Maison Alcan, it is to share a city block with a number of other buildings, and will try to unify that block. Perhaps the most interesting aspect of this project is that the architects involved have consulted the archives which hold the plans for two other important buildings on that site, the Molson House, built by Robert Findlay in 1906, and the University Club, built in 1912-13 by Percy E. Nobbs. Bound by Sherbrooke Street, McGill College Avenue, President Kennedy Avenue, and Mansfield Street, it is a prime location in Montreal for a head office.

The design of this project could be

considered to be postmodern for various reasons. "Postmodern" is a slippery term, connoting on one hand a chronological demarcation following modernism and, on the other hand, a renewal of a pre-modernist architectural vocabulary. But it is usually used in a pejorative or even humorous way. It can also mean contextual, in contrast to the placeless nature of the so-called International Style. In this project, it does not refer to superficial references to older styles, for unlike, say, La Maison des Cooperants and the adjoining Les Promenades de la Cathedrale, its contextualism is not just a vulgar visual reference to its surroundings. Nor is its postmodernism an attempt to imitate the styles of the important yet disparate buildings on the block; rather, it is an attempt to harmonize with these turn-of-the-century buildings as well as with the nearby new buildings, and to complement the style of McGill College Avenue itself.

It was, in fact, the architects' interest in the plans of the Molson House and the University Club which resulted in an exhibition of the Ultramar project at McGill University. Sponsored by the First Québec Corporation, the developers of the project, the exhibition was mounted by the Canadian Architecture Collection of McGill, which holds the archives for the historic buildings on that block. The exhibition attempted to portray the spirit of co-operation between the present architects, big business, and, through their documents, the architects of the past. The stress was on the development of the site, from farmland to residential area to corporate location.

In the past few years, the four-block long McGill College Avenue has been developed into a boulevard, complete with a central island, more traffic lanes, and wider sidewalks with trees and flower pots. Crowned by McGill University to the





north and stretching south to Place Ville Marie, the avenue has become one of the most prestigious addresses for corporations. Many of the buildings between St. Catherine and Sherbrooke Streets take up one whole block each – the Montreal Trust complex, the Industrial Life tower, the Banque Nationale de Paris building, and Place Mercantile, which flanks McGill's Strathcona Hall on two sides and incorporates some recycled greystone façades.

The block which the Maison Ultramar is to occupy contains three important buildings: the previously mentioned University Club and Molson House, and the Maxwellton, built by Edward and William S. Maxwell in 1914. (The Maxwellton is now known as Château Nasso.) A fourth building, a plain, modernist box called the Landau building, is situated on the southeast corner of Sherbrooke and Mansfield. Beside it, across the alley on Mansfield, a small apartment building which recently housed the Kyoto Japanese Steakhouse has been torn down to make way for part of the complex. The three older buildings vary in style from the Norman Shaw-like eclecticism of the Molson House, to the Arts and Crafts-influenced University Club, to the Chicago School-type antecedents of the Maxwellton.

La Maison Ultramar incorporates in varying degrees three of the four buildings. The University Club will be surrounded on the north and east sides by the Ultramar building, and its south side, which borders on President Kennedy Avenue, will be finished in the spirit of that Club's style. Since Nobbs assumed that another building would flank the south side, that wall was never given a "finish."

Bruce Anderson, of Anderson Architects, is responsible for the design of the south elevation of the Club. The transitional section between it and the Ultramar building is a glass curtain wall, deemed to be the most neutral solution to the problem of joining the buildings. It was designed by the architectural firm Tolchinsky and Goodz, who are responsible for the design of La Maison Ultramar. Like the original existing façade, the south wall of the Club will be finished in red brick and yellow sandstone. The east and north sides will be repaired, but generally left as they are.

The Molson House will be flanked in the rear by the Maison Ultramar, and will be restored as much as possible and otherwise renovated by Tolchinsky and Goodz. Unfortunately, this once prestigious house, built for Dr. William Alexander Molson, senior physician of the Montreal General Hospital, has fallen to ruin from neglect. The original plans indicate a large waiting room and a consulting room and coat room for receiving patients in Dr. Molson's private practice. The renovated structure will be available for rent for professional offices.

The top two floors of the Landau building will probably be torn down, to be replaced with three floors. The roof will slope at an angle similar to that of the Molson House, and will be clad in copper. The exterior will be refinished to match the rest of the project. Ultramar will occupy the top two floors and these will be linked by a catwalk to the part of the building adjacent to the University Club.

The main Ultramar building will be covered in polished granite and brick and capped at the entrance on the corner of McGill College and President Kennedy with a copper-clad turret. All these materials refer to various buildings in the immediate vicinity. For example, the use of copper relates to the roofs of the Molson House and to many McGill University buildings across the street. Polished

granite was used in the neighbouring Industrial Life tower, and brick is used in the University Club. The McGill College corner entrance will be rounded off and framed by a corniced projection on either side of the entrance arch, which has radiating voussoirs like those at the entrance to the University Club. Like the Alcan building, some areas of La Maison Ultramar will be lit by skylights; one public space, to be covered by what the architects call a light court, may be used as exhibition or concert space. The First Québec Corporation and Ultramar have also planned for retail spaces on the ground floor.

Another entrance on Mansfield Street beside the University Club, leading to the inner light court and retail stores, will repeat the motifs of the McGill College side. There will also be a passage to the Metro, thereby expanding the underground shopping network, and providing weather protection at a greater distance from the station. By opening up its head office to pedestrian traffic, Ultramar is implying approachability; and like Alcan, by providing a pleasant environment, that company bespeaks its concern, whether real or feigned, for the public which has helped it prosper as a company. The rent from the retail stores will probably also help pay the bills. The expected cost of the project is thirty million dollars.

Complexes like the Alcan and Ultramar buildings are a welcome relief from the seemingly unending proliferation of tall glass boxes in a city that still has undeveloped lots downtown (Dorchester Street and the former railway corridor come to mind). Prior to Ultramar's inclusion in the project, The Laurentian Group, which had owned the lot, had planned a twenty-four storey office tower for the site. Strong objections at that time by heritage groups such as *Sauvons Montréal* and *Héritage Montréal* caused the developers to re-think the issue, which allowed enough time for the University Club to be declared a historic monument. Since the Molson House was owned by The Laurentian Group, it seems that no one decided to do the research and report necessary to protect that building. As it turns out, however, the developers and Ultramar have won praise for their heritage-conscious decision to preserve the old house.

Because of the small number of storeys and the modest size of the building, the employees of Ultramar and others who will work in the complex will spend their time in a human-scaled environment. This is probably appropriate for a company that fled the province in 1976 after the election of the Parti Québécois, proceeded to lose eighty million dollars between 1980 and 1985, and then returned to the province, implying that they had erred by moving in the first place – a very human and uncorporate thing to do. Furthermore, the good press they will receive as a result of this project will probably help repair some of the damage done by their initial move, just as the Alcan building, and that company's cultural sponsorship, helps some people forget that it is considered responsible by ecology and wildlife protection groups for the pollution that is killing beluga whales farther up the St. Lawrence River. But these are not purely architectural issues.

What these offices do represent is a return to humanism – a sign that big business and the mega-corporation have recognized a responsibility not only to their customers, the public, but also to the urban environment, culturally and aesthetically. By providing considerate and intelligent solutions to corporate needs, urban restrictions, and the quality of urban life as expressed through its architectural presence, these companies deserve to be applauded. It remains to be seen whether La Maison Ultramar will live up to the plans. If it does, Montreal and McGill College Avenue will be all the richer for it.