

BISHOP COURT APARTMENTS: *Symbol of a Lifestyle*

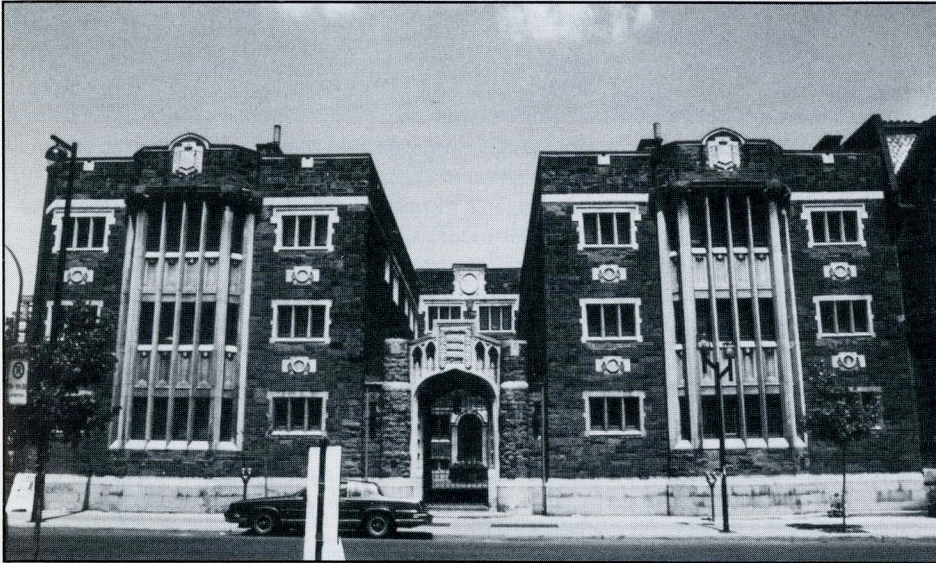


Figure 1. Bishop Court Apartments: front view along Bishop Street, 1991. (I. Puchalski)

The Bishop Court Apartments, built in 1904 by the Montreal architectural firm of Saxe & Archibald (1897-1915), is an early Canadian example of a residential building developed in response to an emerging socio-economic situation in North America.¹ When real-estate developers first hired society architects to design multiple-unit dwellings they intended to create an alternative to the detached or row houses then favoured by families. The early apartment buildings in New York and Boston were called French flats, evoking the glamorous influence of the Continent.

America's earliest apartment buildings were the Hotel Pelham in Boston, built in 1855 by Arthur Gilman, and the Stuyvesant Flats at 142 East Eighteenth Street in New York (demolished in 1959), an 1869 project by the Beaux-Arts trained Richard Morris Hunt. Each building contained a centralized kitchen and services, with separate suites of rooms to house a small number of well-to-do families and bachelors, all under one roof.² The New York French Flats, as the Stuyvesant building became known, signalled the beginning of a socio-economic movement: the tenants of the French Flats were the city's elite.³ By the turn of the century, it was estimated that there were approximately forty thousand apartment houses in New York City alone.⁴ The value of real estate was high, and individual houses became expensive to build and maintain. As a result, apartments and flats became an economic necessity.⁵

During the early 1900s the popularity of apartment living in the United States increased dramatically when the long, dark, narrow corridor typically found between living and dining rooms was abolished. The compact grouped-apartment plan was "opened out" on large lots in semi-urban locations, with apartment suites arranged around a courtyard. Providing the amenities which were important to the comfort of the apartment — a view, fresh air, and sunlight — by means of a courtyard⁶ rendered the apartment a better class building, rentable to the discerning tenant. Until this time, the apartment had been tolerated only by those who were unable to afford any other mode of city dwelling; after this time, the apartment became the chosen and fashionable way of living, favoured even by those who could afford a single-family city residence.⁷

By Irene Puchalski

- 1 Apartment living is not a modern phenomenon. In Rome, insulae (apartment houses) were in evidence as early as the third century B.C. See Axel Boethius, *The Golden House of Nero: Some Aspects of Roman Architecture* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1960), 145.
- 2 Gwendolyn Wright, *Building the Dream: A Social History of Housing in America* (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 1981), 136.
- 3 Wright, 136.
- 4 Paul R. Baker, *Richard Morris Hunt* (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 1986), 208.
- 5 Robert A.M. Stern, Gregory Gilmartin, and John Montague Massengale, *New York 1900* (New York: Rizzoli, 1983), 280.
- 6 Frank Chouteau Brown, "Tendencies in Apartment House Design: Part IV — Buildings on Narrow Sites," *Architectural Record* 50 (September 1921): 212.
- 7 Frank Chouteau Brown, "Tendencies in Apartment House Design: Part III — Buildings on Narrow Sites," *Architectural Record* 50 (August 1921): 112.

Figure 2. The Richmond Court Apartments, Boston, Mass., Cram, Goodhue & Ferguson, architects. (*American Architect and Building News* 63 (no. 1212, 18 March 1899))



Economics aside, the apartment house also captured the nation's interest in technological advances and the efficient organization of domestic duties. The apartment house underwent significant modification, resulting in a move away from public kitchens and centralized services to the more traditional domestic model of self-contained units. Gas and electric companies installed stoves and refrigerators in the private kitchens of each household. Enormous refrigeration plants, water lines and heaters, gas mains, and electrical wiring circuits still existed in the basements, but these services were connected to numerous private appliances.⁸ Garden apartments and U- or H-shaped blocks with an interior garden court provided alternatives to the earlier generation of poorly lit and ventilated apartment buildings.⁹ Apartment houses became the characteristic dwelling type for many urban areas, with most of the new construction aimed at a wealthy market. At the turn of the century, this type of residence was made available to prospective occupants of the Bishop Court Apartments in Montreal.

BISHOP COURT APARTMENTS, MONTREAL

Bishop Court was among the first apartment buildings constructed in a wealthy quarter of Montreal, and represented a new way of living for Montreal's upper class. Over the years, Bishop Street had become home to a number of physicians and surgeons. Following the custom of the day, they had their waiting rooms and consulting rooms on the first floor (or occasionally in the basement) of their private dwellings, and their living quarters upstairs. Bishop Street was inhabited by the well-to-do. This directed the type of residential buildings that would fit into the neighbourhood and the class of residents who would occupy them.

The man credited with introducing apartment living to Montreal is Roswell C. Fisher, a developer, scholar, and philosopher who wrote on political economy and social problems. Fisher believed the time was right in the 1880s to introduce a new manner of living to Montrealers. Instead of contending with the problems and expenses associated with living in individual houses, Fisher believed Montrealers could live more comfortably and as fashionably in handsome apartment buildings. His concept of providing Montrealers with the option of apartment living grew from his sociological and philosophical studies. Fisher thought that people who felt compelled to live in houses of their own were being annoyed by the details of domestic upkeep. His idea was to provide gracious living without the cares of housekeeping.¹⁰ Fisher demonstrated his idea by building an apartment house on a vacant block on the south side of Sherbrooke Street, between Crescent and Bishop.¹¹ The first section, called The Old Sherbrooke, was built in 1888 at the corner of Crescent. The architect is unknown. In 1905, Fisher had architects MacVicar and Heriot build a second section of the apartment house, called The New Sherbrooke, at the corner of Bishop. Fisher's aim was to provide elegant living in apartments on Montreal's most fashionable street.

Nearby on Bishop Street, at the corner of de Maisonneuve, stood the Bishop Court Apartments, erected one year prior to The New Sherbrooke at an estimated cost of \$50,000 (figure 1). Bishop Court, reminiscent of the Great Gatehouse, Hampton Court, exhibits the strength and dignity of an English manor house. The Richmond Court Apartments in Boston, designed by Cram, Goodhue & Ferguson in 1899,¹² may also have served as a prototype, both in style and the use of an open-court plan (figure 2). The large bay windows with splayed mullions of Roman stone and the decorative plaques and medallions set in panels are in the Tudor style.¹³ The façade is of rough-hewn red sandstone, with a contrasting trim of light-coloured stone around the doors and windows. The change in building materials on Bishop Street from below St. Catherine to above St. Catherine is pronounced. In the older

8 Wright, 147.

9 Spiro Kostoff, *A History of Architecture: Settings and Rituals* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1985), 709.

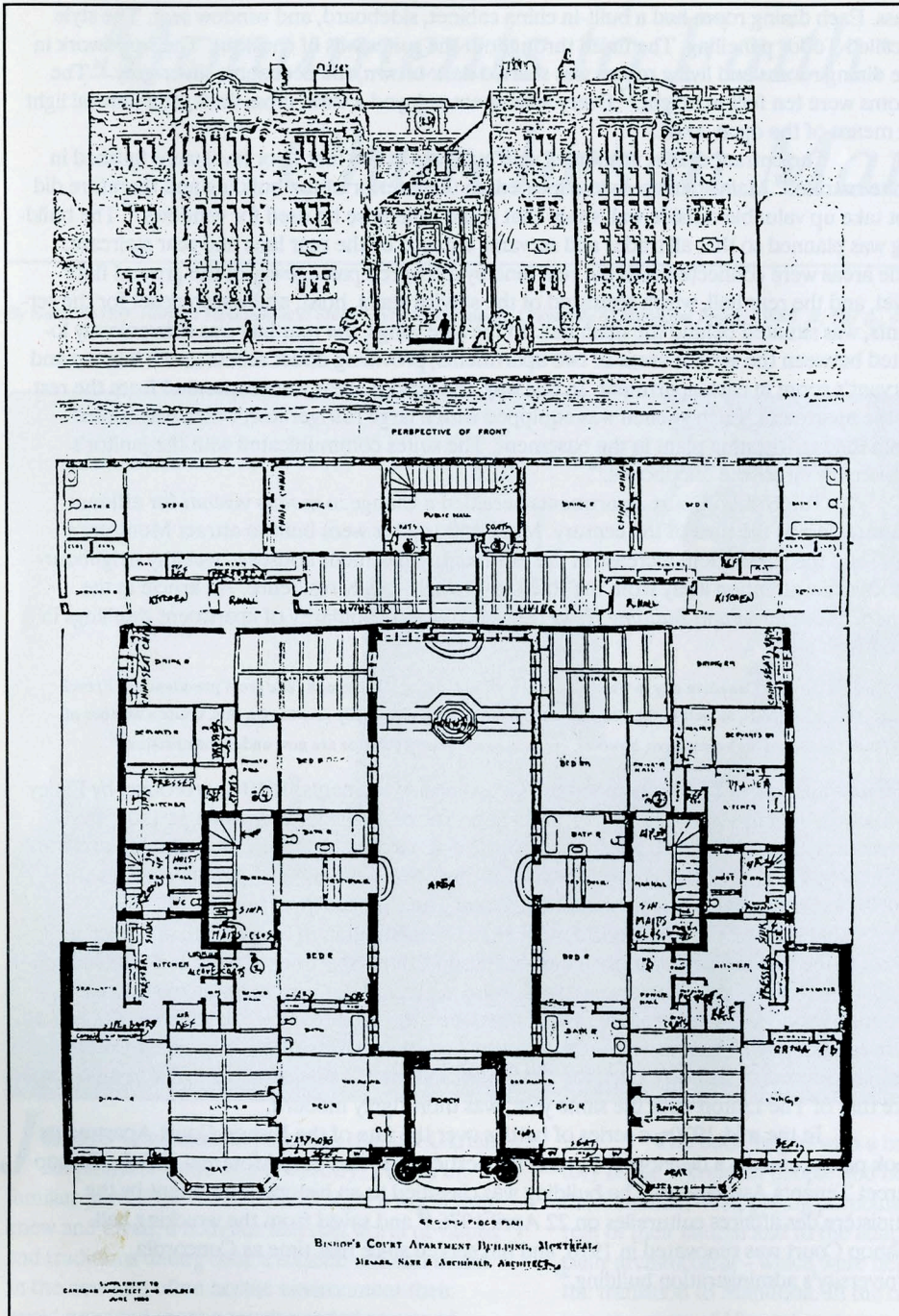
10 Edgar Andrew Collard, "City's First Apartment Building in Danger," *The Gazette*, Montreal (Saturday, 14 February 1987), B-2.

11 This is now the site for the extension to the Montreal Museum of Fine Arts, into which has been incorporated the façade of 'The New Sherbrooke.'

12 "The Richmond Court Apartments, Beacon Street, Boston, Mass. Messrs. Cram, Goodhue & Ferguson, Architects, Boston, Mass." *American Architect and Building News* 63 (no. 1212, 18 March 1899): 88.

13 Robert Lemire, "Tudor Gothic in Downtown Montreal 1900-1929," *Society for the Study of Architecture in Canada Bulletin* 12 (March 1987): 18.

Figure 3. Bishop Court Apartments: perspective of front and ground floor plan. (The Canadian Architect and Builder (June 1905))



section below St. Catherine (from 1172 to 1246 Bishop Street), the houses are predominantly of grey limestone. Above St. Catherine, the buildings, including Bishop Court, display the later vogue for red Scottish sandstone.¹⁴

Facing Bishop Street, the three-storey building has a frontage of 98.9 feet and a depth of 99 feet.¹⁵ The plan of the building is U-shaped, with wings around a courtyard (figure 3). The open court is separated from the street on the fourth side by an imposing stone archway with a castellated tower guarding each side of a Tudor-inspired depressed arch. The keystone above provides the name of the building, and the year 1904 is inscribed on the stone above the central entrance. Through the archway is the courtyard, paved with Scottish fire brick; the entrance to each wing is from the courtyard (figure 4). Each entrance provided access to six suites.

The suites along Bishop Street consisted of six and a half rooms, the others five and a half rooms. This did not include private halls. Each suite had a formal living room with a beamed ceiling, built-in shelves, and a fireplace with wood panelling above. The living rooms facing Bishop Street had a built-in window seat in front of a six-panel bay window of leaded

14 Edgar Andrew Collard, "Of Many Things ... The Story of Bishop Street," *The Gazette*, Montreal (Saturday, 9 September 1972).

15 Inventaire des Permis de Constructions de la Ville de Montréal — Permis 1033.

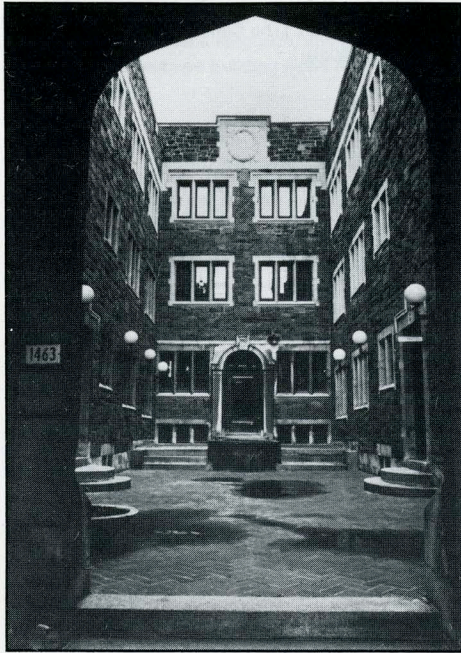


Figure 4. Bishop Court Apartments: view through archway, 1991. (I. Puchalski)

glass. Each dining room had a built-in china cabinet, sideboard, and window seat. The style recalled Tudor panelling. The finish throughout the suites was of chestnut. The woodwork in the dining rooms and living rooms was stained dark brown, the bedrooms silver-grey.¹⁶ The rooms were ten feet in height.¹⁷ Every apartment enjoyed a view, cross draft, and natural light by means of the open court.

The entrance halls, vestibules, and staircase at the first floor level were finished in white marble.¹⁸ Main staircases were located on the interior of the building and therefore did not take up valuable outside wall space that could otherwise be used for windows.¹⁹ The building was planned so that all trades and servants entered by the rear lane and rear staircase. Side areas were connected with the rear lane by a covered passageway at the ground floor level, and the rear hall, which consisted of the service stairs, hoist, and water-closet for the servants, was situated behind the main hall. In the side wings, the rear hall was conveniently located between the service areas of two apartments, providing direct access to the kitchen and servant's room in each apartment. In this way, the service areas were separated from the rest of the apartment. Each kitchen was equipped with a large refrigerator, which was cooled from the refrigerating plant in the basement. The suites communicated with the janitor's apartment by private telephones.²⁰

The Bishop Court Apartments heralded a change in *modus vivendi* for affluent Montrealers at the turn of the century. More apartments were built to attract Montreal's elite, and the subsequent increase in the number of apartment houses in wealthy neighbourhoods drew attention away from the traditional single family residence. An article in the *American Architect and Building News* reflected on the popularity of apartment dwellings in Montreal:

Montreal is the only Canadian city in which apartment houses are at all common. The great prevalence of French blood in its inhabitants, as well as the size and compactness of the city, easily account for this. Quite a number of apartment houses of high class have, however, recently been erected there or are now under construction.²¹

The new apartment houses included the Grosvenor Apartments, 1610 Sherbrooke, by Finley & Spence, built in 1905; The Linton, 1509 Sherbrooke, by Finley & Spence, in 1907; the Cavendish Apartments, 120 Sherbrooke, by Saxe & Archibald, also in 1907; the Maxwellton Apartments, 900 Sherbrooke, by Edward and W.S. Maxwell, in 1914; Acadia Apartments, 1227 Sherbrooke, by David Brown, in 1925; and The Chateau Apartments, 1321 Sherbrooke, by Ross & MacDonald, with H.L. Fetherstonhaugh as associate architect, in 1926. In the Cavendish,²² as in their earlier Bishop Court Apartments, Saxe & Archibald succeeded in avoiding long, narrow passages. Suites were laid out with the principal rooms grouped together for entertaining. Bedrooms were arranged to allow the occupants to move between the private rooms without being seen from the public reception rooms. In keeping with the success of Bishop Court, the Cavendish was also U-shaped in plan. The equipment, like that of The Linton built the same year, was thoroughly modern.²³

In the mid-1970s, a series of battles over the fate of the Bishop Court Apartments took place between a developer, Curzon Properties Ltd., and Save Montreal and the Bishop Street Tenants Association. The building was classified as an historic monument by the Ministère des affaires culturelles on 22 April 1976,²⁴ and saved from the wrecking ball. Bishop Court was renovated in 1976, and has served since that time as Concordia University's administration building.²⁵

16 "Bishop's Court Apartment Building, Montreal. Messrs. Saxe & Archibald, Architects," *The Canadian Architect and Builder* (June 1905): 85.

17 Fran Halter, "Concordia leases Bishop Court," *The Georgian* (9 September 1975): 9.

18 *The Canadian Architect and Builder* (June 1905): 85.

19 Frank Chouteau Brown, "Tendencies in Apartment House Design: Part VII — Courtyard Plans," *Architectural Record* 51 (1922): 70.

20 *The Canadian Architect and Builder* (June 1905): 85.

21 "Apartment-Houses in Montreal, Canada," *American Architect and Building News* 91 (no.1619, Saturday, 5 January 1907): 17.

22 The Cavendish, 120 feet x 145 feet in three stories, consisted of 19 dwellings. The estimated cost was \$80,000. Shearer, Brown & Wills were the contractors. In "New Buildings in Montreal," *The Canadian Architect and Builder* (July 1906): 108.

23 "Apartment-Houses in Montreal, Canada," *American Architect and Building News* 91 (no.1619, Saturday, 5 January 1907): 18.

24 Gouvernement du Québec, Ministère des affaires culturelles, dossier III-106. III - Description du Monument Historique.

25 Fran Halter, "Bishop Court Beautiful," *The Georgian* (Friday, 10 September 1976): 1.

Irene Puchalski is a librarian at Concordia University, Montreal. This article is based on research undertaken for her M.A. thesis entitled "An Analysis of Four Building Types by John S. Archibald, Architect (1872-1934)" (Concordia, 1991).