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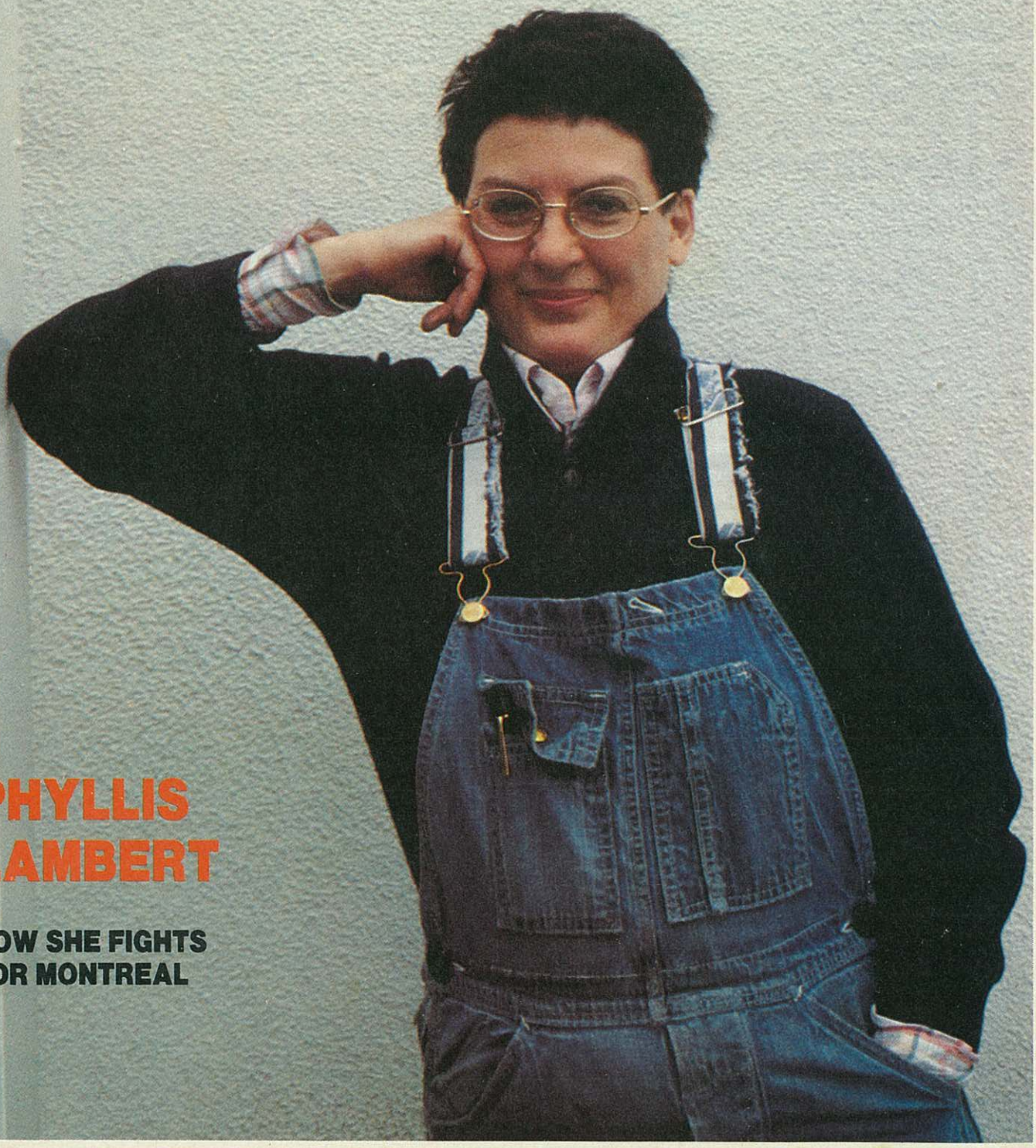


PHYLLIS LAMBERT

HOW SHE FIGHTS FOR MONTREAL

Profile

"What Would We Do Without Her?"

Phyllis Lambert: Architecture-aholic

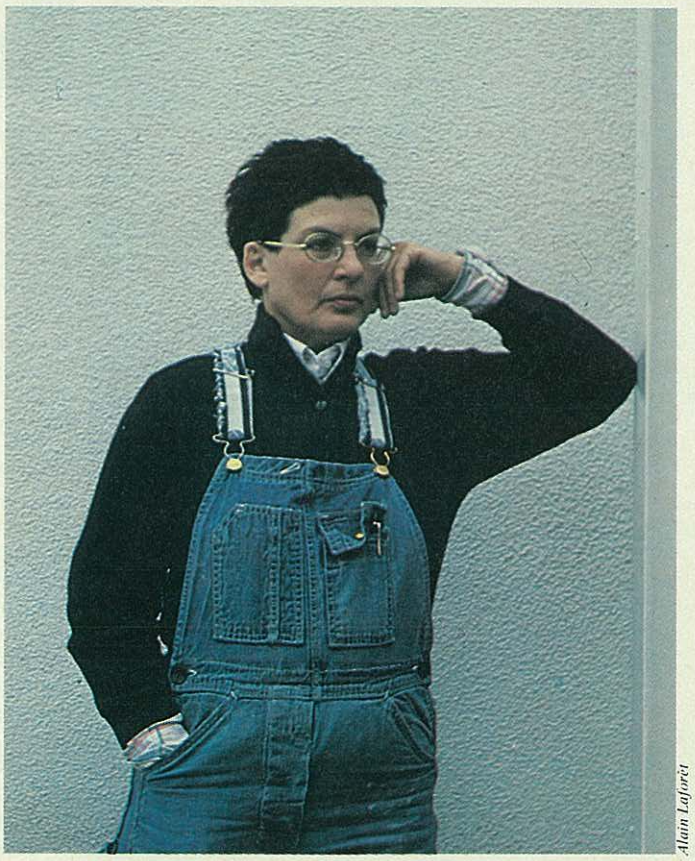
The epiphanal moment came for her on a bright, clear morning in the spring of 1971. She was giving visiting English architect Peter Carter a close-up view of Montreal and their car had just slowed in front of the Sœur du Providence house—the umpteenth greystone building of the day—when it suddenly struck her that the Montreal of this tour—*her* Montreal—was not the city of the spanking new international highrises just then changing the face of downtown. No. The buildings singled out this morning were older structures, the venerable greystone buildings which had lent character and grace and stability to the city for over a century. In the moment that she realized the focus of her tour, a long and growing appreciation suddenly solidified. From now on, Phyllis Lambert was going to spend a lot of her time recording these old greystones and fighting for the conservation of her kind of city.

By all accounts, she has fought the good fight with rare vigour and with surprising success. "Most small towns," says one Phyllis-watcher, "can point to one or two people in the community who are the sparkplugs of the local movement. In larger communities, it becomes more difficult to single out only one or two. And in a city the size of Montreal, with its 50 heritage and neighbourhood groups, you would think it would be all but impossible. And yet, in Montreal a handful of persons can be picked out. One of them is Phyllis Lambert." Montreal architect Michael Fish goes further: "She has been *the* key figure on the Montreal conservation scene over the last ten years," he says. "Without her, little would have happened here."

How is it that Phyllis Lambert garners such accolades?

"The most important thing about Phyllis," says one staffer from her 21-person office, "is that, like many very successful, very busy people, she can cut through all the garbage. She has a very good, very logical mind, that goes right to the heart of a matter. She asks the right question. And she surrounds herself with the people who will give her the right answers. As far as the conservation work goes, she doesn't waste time on peripheral problems. She goes to the core of heritage questions and says What's the best thing to do here? That's what accounts for her effectiveness."

According to others, her effectiveness springs largely from what Fish characterizes as tenacity, her sheer stick-to-itness. "When Phyllis decides to go with a certain project", says one observer, "watch out. Projects consume her. She lives them day and night." Art historian Luc d'Iberville Moreau seconds that opinion: "Phyllis calls people at all hours", he says. "When she gets an idea in her head, she'll phone you at midnight or one in the morning. When you work on a project with her, it helps to be as committed as she is—and that seems to be 24 hours a day." The stories of Phyllis's tenacity are legion. One recent tale has it that after a two-day round of conservation meetings in Ottawa and a tour of nearby Perth, she found she had two hours left before her scheduled Saturday evening return to Montreal. What to do? Relax over a drink, perhaps? No way. Off she raced to the Chateau Laurier and slipped into a deserted conference room in order to get an extra hour's heritage work out of the way. "Phyllis", says one friend, "is, quite simply, a heritage-aholic. She eats, sleeps, and breathes conservation. She wears buildings the way other people wear clothes . . ."



Alain Laforêt

Heritage Canada Governor Phyllis Lambert: "When she goes with a project, watch out: she lives it day and night . . ."

The building Phyllis wears most frequently is in Old Montreal. Built in 1865 and once known as the Jane Tate House, the three-storey greystone structure has had a chequered career: in the 1920s, its original residential character was drastically changed when the place was transformed into a dried-fruit factory; in 1963 it became a residence-cum-place of business when noted fashion leader Marie-Poule Nolin recycled it as an elegant Salon de couture on the ground floor and living apartments above. Phyllis acquired the house in 1974 and renovated it, restoring old touches such as vintage doors and mouldings and adding new elements based on contemporary construction design: a large skylight was added, and so were a photographic studio and dark room; the elevator was removed; and the second floor meeting room/kitchen was completely redesigned. The result is simple, abstract, philosophical: great open spaces, white walls, high ceilings, highly-polished wooden floors, indoor trees, few adornments. There is something ascetic about the place: in it, space and light are all. The effect is one of quiet order, control, crispness—and, in some places, humour. On the walls of the large second floor washroom hang a dozen Laura Volkerding photographs—and no mirror. The effect is startling: where a visitor expects to see the same old reflection of himself he is offered instead 12 off-beat reflections of the world.

Hedrich-Blessing

McMahon Productions

Alain Lafortet

Scenes from the Lambert heritage. Top: an interior view of Phyllis's award-winning Los Angeles Biltmore Hotel. Above: a streetscene in Old Montreal; and, right, an office in Phyllis's renovated Old Montreal office/home.

The sense of the off-beat continues when you enter the airy kitchen/meeting room and meet Phyllis. As likely as not, the hostess will be on the floor, half-wrestling with Bogart, her giant Bouvier des Flandres. Expecting a jet-setter? That's not what you get. Her hair? crew-cut short. Make-up? None. Clothes? Cartier overalls with a peanut decal at the shoulder strap. Shoes? Boots.

"Phyllis, why do you dress this way?"

Phyllis's eyebrows rise behind steelrim glasses and she gives a smile some consider the sexiest in the history of Canadian conservation. "I wear the same kind of clothes every day," she shrugs, "because then I don't have to think about clothing. It's like a uniform. It gives me more time to get on

How Heritage Montreal Works as a Catalyst

"Heritage Montreal," says Phyllis Lambert, the foundation's first president, "was born of a marriage between two kinds of conservationists: the activists, who really didn't know how to raise long-term money for heritage projects; and people who weren't activists but who knew how to raise money and were concerned about what was happening to Montreal." The marriage, by all accounts, has been a happy and fruitful one.

In the straight-laced legalese of its letters patent, the foundation was incorporated five years ago to

- promote and encourage the preservation of the historic, architectural, natural, and cultural heritage of communities within the Province of Quebec, and to
- receive and maintain funds and apply . . . all or part of the income for charitable purposes by grants to organizations, corporations, groups, and persons having objectives similar to those of the foundation . . .

Run by a board of 15 directors and a part-time staff, the foundation acts as a resource centre that helps groups preserve and 'animate' their neighbourhoods. To date, the foundation has raised $200,000 (an average of $40,000 a year) and has supported 40 projects (an average of eight a year).*

Alain Lafortune

Phyllis and fellow Heritage Montreal board members develop new plans: shifting gears to meet post-crisis problems.

Much of Heritage Montreal's early work was directed at saving such endangered landmarks as La Maison Mère des Sœurs Grises, le Monument National, le Prison des Patriotes au Pied-du-Courant, le Bon Pasteur and le Mont Saint-Louis. Today, these buildings are classified as are many residential and commercial buildings such as Haddon Hall, Somerset Apartments, Bishop Court, Habitation Saint-Louis, and the commercial buildings of the Grey Nuns in Old Montreal.

Single buildings, however, were never Heritage Montreal's main concern. "If it had ever come to a choice between an individual building and a neighbourhood," says Phyllis, "we would have chosen the latter. Happily, we never had to make that hard choice." Among the neighbourhood projects the organization has funded or supported with low-interest loans are La Société Conservation Sault au Récollet, neighbourhoods of Saint-Louis Sud, the Main, downtown Montreal, a planning study of renovation in N.D.G. and animation of a sector of Sherbrooke Street West. The other main area of funding by Heritage Montreal has been for educational programs. These include newsletters; community bulletins, and the widely circulated *SOS*; tours organized by various groups; pamphlets and historic calendars on buildings and neighbourhoods; films; and exhibitions (including the recent much-praised *Notre Port* exhibition at the McCord Museum.

Heritage Montreal has recently shifted gears. Initially, all the projects it funded were generated and carried out by Save Montreal (a coalition of groups) and, to a lesser degree, by Green Spaces. Both were crisis-oriented organizations and as the crises lessened so did their requirements for funding. At the same time, long-term projects (education projects and programs for recycling and renovating buildings) were quickly becoming the new number-one concerns. Heritage Montreal reacted to this happy state of affairs by switching emphasis from being a funding organization to one which initiated and at times carried out projects which it had generated. Its new major concerns were such undertakings as the Cours le Royer project in Old Montreal and the Milton Park co-operatives.

After supporting studies and a newsletter in Milton Park, Heritage Montreal was asked by the community to help buy the houses in which 2,000 people live. Almost incredibly, with heavy backing from the federal government, Heritage Montreal was able to do so and is now involved in what it has always dreamed of doing: helping to renovate a neighbourhood. What is important in Milton Park is that Heritage Montreal is not an agency from the outside that takes over the buildings and renovates them; it is essentially a technical resource group that provides know-how through its new "not for profit" corporation, SPUM (Société du Patrimoine Urbain de Montréal). Approximately 20 to 30 housing cooperatives and not for profit organizations in Milton Park will themselves be renovating 550 residential units.

The Milton Park project and such educational undertakings as the Notre Port exhibition (jointly sponsored with McCord Museum) underlying Heritage Montreal's new direction: from crisis fighter to catalyst in longterm neighbourhood development and educational programs.

"The nature of our work has evolved and changed," says Phyllis. "This process is essential to the vitality of an organization as it is to that of an individual. In the same way, it has its dangers—Heritage Montreal must not perpetuate itself; there must always be a need for its activities. We must keep in balance our role as a funding organization and one which generates its own projects. I believe our basic usefulness is to act as a technical resource group, to help people who animate their own neighbourhoods themselves. We must keep a balance between the activities.

with other things."

As it happens, the life of Phyllis Lambert O.A.Q., O.A.A., R.C.A., has always been crowded with other things. The daughter of Samuel and Saidye Bronfman (of the Seagram empire), Phyllis grew up a nice, bright, Jewish girl in Montreal's toniest circles. An early childhood influence: from the age of nine she studied sculpting with Herbert McRae Miller, who taught her to stand back from a work and to observe it objectively, disinterestedly. Private and secondary education was taken at a private school known simply as The Study. Later, she won a B.A. at exclusive Vassar in Poughkeepsie, New York. Married early (and briefly) in the '50s, her interest in sculpture shifted to architecture and found a propitious outlet when she became director of planning for New York's award-winning Seagram Building. It was she who chose celebrated Ludwig Mies Van der Rohe to be the building's architect. In the early '60s she moved to Chicago where she took an M.S. in architecture at the Illinois Institute of Technology (thesis subject: "A Study of Long-Span Concrete Roof Structures"). A longtime Mies disciple (one of the few photographs she displays at her Old Montreal residence is of the architect and she is Chairman of the Advisory Committee of the New York Museum of Modern Art's Mies Van der Rohe Archive), his influence on her pervades her later work as an architect.

The Mies' portfolio, from such precedent-setting works as the 1929 German Pavilion at the Barcelona Exhibition to a wide range of buildings at IIT, is characterized by rationalism, logic, classic serenity and clarity. These attributes are found in such Phyllis Lambert works as the Saidye Bronfman YM-YWHA in Montreal. The award-winning centre is a venue for adult education and it contains classrooms, workshops, a theatre, exhibition space, and offices. Conceived as a slab floating above the ground level, it provides a sense of openness, of accessibility. "That's important", says Phyllis, looking up from Bogart. "I felt that it was important that there be a sense of openness within the building so that the varied activities would be accessible to each other. It's a *community* centre. It should invite people in."

Her description of the Centre is, to a large extent, her concept of the ideal community: variety, life, accessibility, cohesion. But if these are attributes which should characterize all communities (including conservation areas) they are qualities which were, until recently, sadly lacking in her Old Montreal.

The boundaries of Old Montreal, the renowned conservation quarter which rises north from the city's docks, very nearly follows the line of the 18th century fortification walls. Within its official 82-acres can be found a superb collection of greystone buildings from the French Regime, the British Colonial Period, late 19th Century, and the more recent commercial industrial period. For many years Old Montreal teemed with life and industry but fell on slower times when the heart of the city moved north and west. In its slow period plans were at one point made to run a highway through it. The idea was quickly scotched. Long considered one of the country's most important stocks of heritage structures (preservation action was urged there as early as 1951), the City created the Jacques Viger Commission for its conservation in 1962 and the province named it an historic district two years later. But recognizing the area as an important cultural legacy was not enough to ensure that it would ever again bustle with life.

Among Phyllis's main concerns are the Saidye Bronfman Centre, which she designed (top); the revivification of Old Montreal (centre); and the proper development of Montreal's Old Port (bottom, as it appeared at the turn-of-the-century).

In her 20s, Phyllis was planning director for New York's Seagram Building.

"Area conservation," says Phyllis, "was, until recently, involved with areas of cities which were not healthy, areas which were not functioning. It was not reasonable in Old Montreal, for example, to conceive that it would change by itself, and that the very fact of recognizing it or designating it would ensure that process. That, however, was exactly what happened in Montreal and in historic districts in other cities . . ."

Sharply critical of the Viger Commission which, she claimed, was secretive and antiquarian in its attitudes, Phyllis pushed the argument that Old Montreal was, in fact, a New Town within the city and as such needed all the careful planning, the controls, and the incentives which had been

"We Had Better Know What Business We're In"

Heritage Talk with Phyllis Lambert

When Canadian Heritage *visited Phyllis Lambert recently at her 19th century office/home in Old Montreal, conservation covered a wide range of subjects. (Phyllis's view of heritage is broad: "heritage in its largest sense," she says, "is the life of the city.") Delivering thoughts at her characteristically fast-clipped, staccato pace, she drew attention to several issues which concern her. We started with a thought or two about area conservation.*

Haven't you been critical of the way some conservation zones have been developed, claiming some of the people involved don't know what business they're in?
That's right. Some years ago an article in the Harvard Business Review dealt with the subject of knowing what business one was in, and pointed to the failure of the railroads in the United States as a result of their thinking they were in the railroad business and not recognizing that they were in the transportation business. By the same analogy, conservation areas are in the business of urban renewal—they are *New Towns* within the city and as such they need all the careful planning which was built into urban renewal areas of the '50s and '60s.

Can you give us an example of bad planning—or, rather, lack of planning—in Old Montreal?
Take traffic. Heavy trucks thunder down Notre Dame Street shaking buildings and pedestrians. Parking lots are insinuated into empty lots, and the empty lots in the tight rows of buildings present the prospect of missing front teeth. Traffic causes congestion on the narrow streets and concentrates the emission of exhaust pollutants destructive to pedestrians and to the greystones.

What about building usage?
Under use is another problem. Where the ground floor is used by a boutique or other commerce, or restaurant, the upper floors are more often than not vacant, and there is a high level of vacancy. Occupancy problems are also caused by incompatible use—bars and restaurants which drive away residents in some areas, and heavy trucking needed for existing warehouses is not sympathetic to the establishment of a new type of tenancy.

What about deteriorating buildings?
Buildings are visibly deteriorating, and although provision is made under Bill 2 to protect neglected property, no control is exercised, nor is there any control over restoration despite provisions of Bill 2 and the existence of the Viger Commission. Bad renovation is all too common including the wanton painting of stone. There are no standards for cleaning buildings, for repointing of stone, for reroofing. Nor is there control over signage, a subject to which one-third of the articles on historic districts is devoted. Demolition and illegal renovations are problems despite Bill 2. The list could go on, but evident in each category is the failure of proper legislation to provide for implementation and control.

Lack of control has hurt the area financially, hasn't it? Lowered for example, the area's standing with banks?
Oh yes, certainly. Lack of control has led to reluctance on the part of financial institutions to invest in the historic district. In fact, the area has been red-lined by local lending institutions. The only mortgages for housing have been obtained from institutions in Ontario and Alberta. Equity financing is rare and provided only through private investors.

Your Heritage Montreal group has been instrumental in helping to bring life to Old Montreal through the development of Le Cours Le Royer. Tell us about that.
Le Cours Le Royer, off St. Sulpice Street beside Notre Dame Church, was once a warehouse but has now been converted to condominiums. This conversion has started revitalization of Old Montreal as a viable urban community by providing a critical mass of residential units—an essential component of stability. Despite a depressed economy, thirty-five out of thirty-eight apartments placed on the market in the last six months have been sold. The success of Le Cours Le Royer has also generated other renovation projects in the area: a major group of commercial buildings on St. Pierre Street nearby at *Pointe à Callières*, are now being transformed into a residential and commercial complex. In both cases, Heritage Montreal has been instrumental in helping to secure the financial resources.

Who do you think is to blame for the problems in Old Montreal?
There is no clear responsibility for the historic district of Old Montreal. The Viger Commission [the Commission formed by the city in 1962 to oversee the development of Old Montreal] is only an advisory body. It could function actively, but it was created at a time when interest in conservation was still largely antiquarian and it developed bad habits. The Viger Commission has not learned to focus and direct private concerns and interests into public action.

To what extent has the public been involved in the redevelopment plans for the Old Port of Montreal?
Well, the federal government made a two-pronged approach to the development of the port. On the one hand, a team of architects hired by the government produced four proposals to stimulate discussion. Their proposals (which ran the gamut from high-density highrises to open parkland) were, however, based on the *tabula raza* philosophy which was at the root of what went wrong with urban development between 1950 and 1975—and which still threatens some cities today. Their trial balloons called for huge-scale all-or-nothing redevelopment which simply didn't take into account the port's diversity.

And how did the other approach differ?
The redevelopment strategy arrived at by the Association/Le Vieux-Port (which has over 1,000 members) started from the other direction by asking: what resources does the port already offer and how can we best use them? The Association (a citizen's group for which the government hired an animator and gave partial funding) constantly consulted with all sectors of the community. The consensus arrived at was that any development of the port area should take into account its complexity, that it is not homogeneous and monolithic but, rather, is composed of industrial, commercial and residential sectors (and that the latter two have both local and regional character). The Association's proposal underlines the wisdom of retaining the area's rich diversity; it builds on facts, is feasible, and acknowledges the need of each area of the port to develop in logical, manageable stages.

In fact, what's true of the Association/Le Vieux-Port is also true of the Milton Park co-op: the best ideas for both projects have come not from outside 'experts' but from people intimately concerned with the right development of their environment. ■

built into urban renewal areas of the '50s and '60s. "It is logical," Phyllis says, "that at least the same commitment and the same investment should be made in recycling old areas as in knocking them down. But one difference must be borne in mind: urban conservation must be as considerate of people as the urban renewal of the '50s and '60s was ruthless."

Phyllis's concern for creating areas which are real "people places" has been one of her overriding interests. As she sees it, Old Montreal's revival hinges upon both involving the locals in the redevelopment process and in ensuring that the area's longtime unfavourably low residence-to-business mix be improved. To this latter end, she and her five-year old Heritage Montreal Foundation (*see story, page 40*) have encouraged recycling once-deserted industrial buildings as residences.

Is all of this enough conservation involvement for one person? Perhaps for most. Shortly after that bright spring morning she and Peter Carter toured Montreal's historic zones, Phyllis got it into her head to produce the ultimate book on the city's greystones. In the seven years or so since then, she and an army of staffers have researched and photographed most of the city's venerable architecture. But why has the longtime work-in-progress yet to see the light of day? "Phyllis works quickly when speed is necessary," says one staffer, "but for this project she has the luxury of time. The book (books, actually, since three are planned), won't be published until they're exactly right." "Phyllis is a perfectionist," explains Michael Fish. "Absolutely nothing she does is second rate." That assessment is shared by Wolf Von Eckardt who characterized the Phyllis/Richard Pare 1976 collaboration *Court House* (Horizon Press, $35) to be one of the U.S. Bicentennial's most lasting, useful and imaginative projects. Said Von Eckardt, comparing *Court House* to an earlier Lambert project: "The Seagram Building acquainted the American public with the best the so-called International Style of architecture could offer. The court house project acquaints us with the richness and ingenuity of our own indigenous architecture. Even those of us who have long taken an interest in historic building will be astounded just how rich and indigenous it is."

As the *Court House* project indicates, Phyllis' conservation activities are not restricted to Canada. Back in 1973, she and American architect Gene Summers took a tremendous gamble by buying the historic Biltmore Hotel in Los Angeles. Although they bought the 50-year-old landmark for the depressed price of $5.25 million, the dilapidated hotel, which stood on the fringe of a deteriorating part of downtown, was in urgent need of repair. Was the purchase financial folly or redevelopment wizardry? With grit, guts, and good restoration and renovation design, the latter prevailed. Today, the once-faded Biltmore is again one of America's finest hotels, its area has been rejuvenated, and it is making money. This autumn, she and Summers will receive the American Institute of Architects' 1980 National Award for the extended use of the Biltmore.

While Phyllis's work has attracted high praise and admiration outside the country, her efforts have sometimes elicited quite different responses back home. Pro-development members of Montreal's city council (although some are now grudgingly beginning to accept her arguments) have long ignored and vilified her by turn. Even among conservationists, her contributions until recently went largely undervalued. "Montreal owes a tremendous debt to her," Michael Fish states flatly. "She hasn't received half the recognition that is her due . . ."

McMahon Productions

The crisis decade: in the 1970s, Heritage Montreal helped local conservation groups save numerous endangered landmarks. Above: Windsor Station, one of the preservationists' most celebrated victories.

Brian Merrett

Today, Heritage Montreal promotes such neighbourhood programs as the Milton Park co-op.

The late afternoon shadows now draw long across Phyllis Lambert's kitchen and it is time to go. A handshake. A tentative pat on the head for Bogart. And one last question. "Why is it, Phyllis, that with all your resources, you don't spend your life galavanting around the world, sipping long drinks on the Mediterranean? Discoing at Studio 54? Why stay here, fighting for by-law changes, pushing for co-op rights? . . ."

Phyllis shrugs and pulls her turtleneck up over her chin. "The central thing," she says, "is the way people live, and the major influence on the way we live is our built environment. Now, in this regard, I don't see myself as a heritage-aholic because I don't think of 'heritage' as something you can distinguish from our entire built environment. The buildings from each part and period of our civilization make up our towns and cities, and 'heritage', in its truest sense, is the entire built-up community. As an architect, being involved in the process of developing our built environment in the most human way possible is one of the great thrills of life . . ." ■