

An architectural surprise is taking shape in Old Montreal. Not another renovation of some relic from Montreal's halcyon days as Great Port – a vacant insurance headquarters or goods warehouse transmogrified into an imitative lofted condo; not a glitzy heap of federal dollars metamorphosed into erratically arranged aluminum and glass set upon unhappily angled concrete. No, what rising in the tiny square des Frères-Charon, (bounded by McGill, Marguerite-D'Youville, Des Soeurs-Grises and Wellington) is, of all things, a stylized Martello tower.

Martello Towers - the last word in military defensive infrastructure of their day - were erected throughout the British Empire during the late 18th and early 19th centuries to protect the English colonial masters from their subjugated peoples; which is why we find two Martellos on the Plains of Abraham in Quebec City. Abandoned by the military when they proved of dubious use, Martellos nonetheless remained very visible and hated symbols of imperial power over the conquered. James Joyce famously launched Stephen Dedalus as Telemachus on his Bloomsday adventures from the top of a Martello tower in Dublin, one that Buck Mulligan had renovated into what we might today call a loft; the Martello representing festering English usurpation of Irish political power, lost language and corrupting culture.

Architects Affleck & de la Riva have cleverly incorporated the Martello motif in their design of what is, in fact a very utilitarian structure. It houses the ventilators and exhaust machinery clearing gases from the storm sewers deep below Old Montreal. In so mundane a context it is a delight to find an architecture so richly rooted in the political, historical and cultural symbolism of Montreal. The square is suffused with history. Dwarfed by the dominating flag-bedecked Federal presence of the Old Customs House; sitting on the edge of Irish Griffentown; in the shadow of the home of English Montreal's once powerful St. James Street financiers; within earshot of the bells of French Catholic Notre Dame; and, at least from one corner, with a view of a once-busy quay and Metcalf's elevators; the Affleck & de la Riva project recalls the ineluctable evolution and decline of Old Montreal. The march of history is reflected in the Frères-Charon Martello tower cut down in size by half and turned inside out providing half-remembered allusions to English/French/Irish competition for place and space, religious/secular tensions, and the symbiotic proximity of privilege and poverty. Of course, the credit/blame for naming the square to celebrate Montreal's first entrepreneurial doctors will lie with the planners at Hotel de Ville. Are they too sending a coded message in our 2007 debate on the benefits of privatized medicine?

The tops of Martello towers normally featured a defensive cannon that could be swivelled 360 degrees. Instead, dare we hope for a panoramic installation of Montreal that contrasts the production of architects with the vacuous constructions by accountants and engineers? Then could one mount Old Montreal's new Martello to call to mind the edifices of Montreal from the quiver of the House of Ulysses a half century ago. Set up the axes for Penelope, Telemachus! Your father's métier will stand in judgment of the quality of suitors who rushed to refurbish the fabric of Mother Montreal.

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MARTELLO TOWERS

Around 1807, due to sharp tensions between England and the United States, engineer Ralph Henry de Bruyères obtained from Governor James Craig the authorization to build four Martello Towers on the heights of the city of Québec. Somewhat less efficient than redoubts, Martello Towers were very fashionable in England at the time, as they were not very costly to build, could be quickly erected and were sturdy enough to impress the enemy. So, from 1808 to 1812, four Martello Towers were erected in Québec. Unfortunately or fortunately, because of the 1812 conflict between British and American forces the towers never demonstrated their efficiency since the Americans never reached Québec.

Quebec City's Martello Towers constitute military remains unique in Québec. Out of the 196 towers throughout the world, 16 were built in Canada, four in Quebec City. Out of these four, two (No. 1 and No. 2) are located on the Plains, while the third (No. 4) is found in the faubourg Saint-Jean-Baptiste.

The Martello Towers have been classified (Tower 1) or recognized (Tower 2) as historic monuments. Martello Tower 3 was pulled down in 1905 to make way for a new wing of the Jeffery Hale Hospital, which was in that location at the time. Considering their advanced state of deterioration, the other Martello Towers were restored in 1992.

Source: http://www.ccbn-nbc.gc.ca/_en/index.php