

Proposals for improvements on Mount Royal:

Peel Street entrance

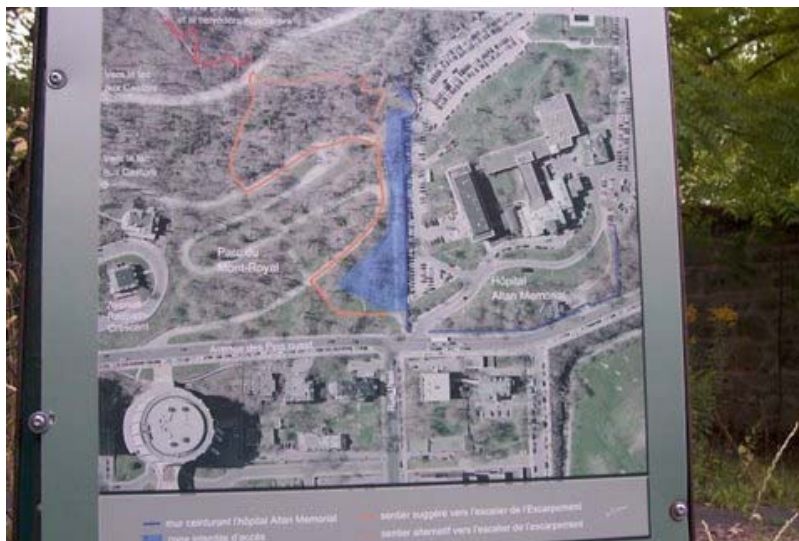
by Donovan King

Submitted to the City of Montreal Public Consultation
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Introduction

The Peel Street entrance to Mount Royal is currently in a state of serious disrepair and dilapidation. In fact, certain areas have actually been fenced off due to potential dangers such as crumbling stone walls and stairways. The City of Montreal has undertaken plans to redevelop the area, hopefully resulting in greater accessibility, while keeping important aesthetic, cultural, environmental and historical considerations in mind.



Peel entrance to be re-developed

Renovations at the Peel entry to the park, set for 2008-09, are expected to cost \$3.8 million. The plans include new stairs, landscaping, artwork and improved pathways and drainage.

Wisely, the City of Montreal has decided to consult its citizens on this issue, and a final report is expected in November. As one such citizen, I am making my own observations and submitting my own recommendations. I divide my proposal into two sections: 1. Gateway Redesign; and 2. Marking History.

Gateway Redesign

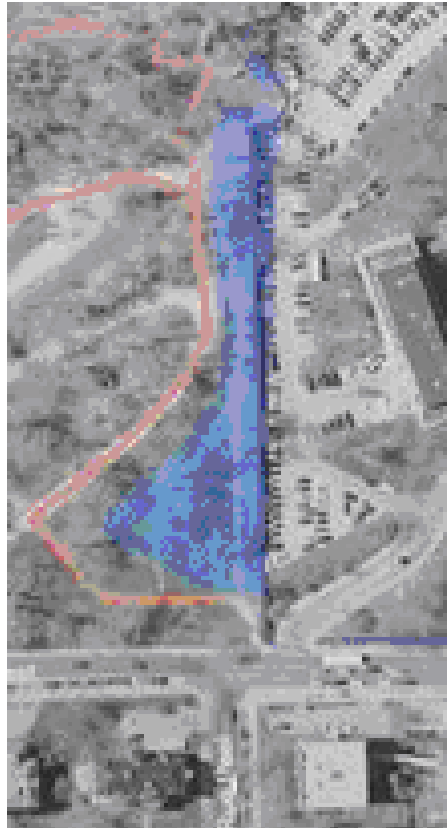
Currently the entrance to Mount Royal from Peel street is not only crumbling, but is also visually unattractive. Here is a recent photo I took from the top of Peel street:



The entrance is uneven, asymmetrical, and relatively non-descript. It is easy to see the crumbling infrastructure, trampled paths beaten into the slope, and a jumble of electronic traffic signals and other signs.

The Peel Street entrance should be seen as a magnificent gateway to the mountain. Given its importance as the southern entrance to Mount Royal (and the only one bordering the downtown core) it should be visually stimulating while reflecting the park and its natural environment. Also because of its pedestrian nature, the entrance should cater especially to those on foot, plus keep in mind a safe entrance for bicycles, wheelchairs, and other users.

The current area being looked at has stairs to the East, running next to the crumbling wall of the Ravenscrag property. From the view coming up Peel the stairs appear to be on the right of the entrance. They snake up the mountain in a non-direct fashion. Eventually they form a path that meanders into other paths, which one can take upwards, towards the steps leading to the Chalet on top.



Zoom of Peel entrance to be re-developed

The old design is somewhat problematic. With no access for bicycles and wheelchairs, it is also visually unappealing and does nothing to announce the entrance to the park, highlight its features, or provide information about the park. Hence the visitor gains no insight into the space's history, cultural significance, flora and fauna, and the treasures to be found within the park.

What I am proposing is a dramatic entrance from Peel Street that will draw the visitor's eye from far below on the hill. The new design I am proposing is symmetrical and central to Peel Street. The design makes use of magnificent stratified Mount Royal rock formations as borders to the staircase, and as a column in the middle.



Stratified Mount Royal Stone Formations

There would be a bicycle and wheelchair path to the left. This is what the new gateway might look like:



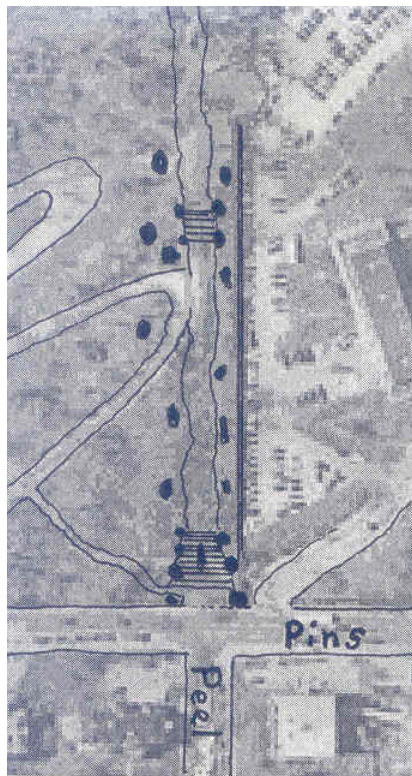
Proposed dramatic staircase highlighting Mount Royal geology and nature

Colourful indigenous flora from the mountain could dot the new stairways, highlighting the magnificent stone formations with colour and softening them with foliage – a beautiful dance between the rocks and the plants:



Foliage mingling with Stone Formations

Furthermore, I propose continuing the line of Peel Street into a pedestrian “Grand Trail”, including new staircases where necessary:



New Gateway Design

The “Grand Trail” could also highlight various other stone formations, trees, flowers, plants, and include markers explaining the various important aspects of the park – its history, cultural value, environment, trails, and sites of interest. Facilities might include water fountains for thirsty visitors.

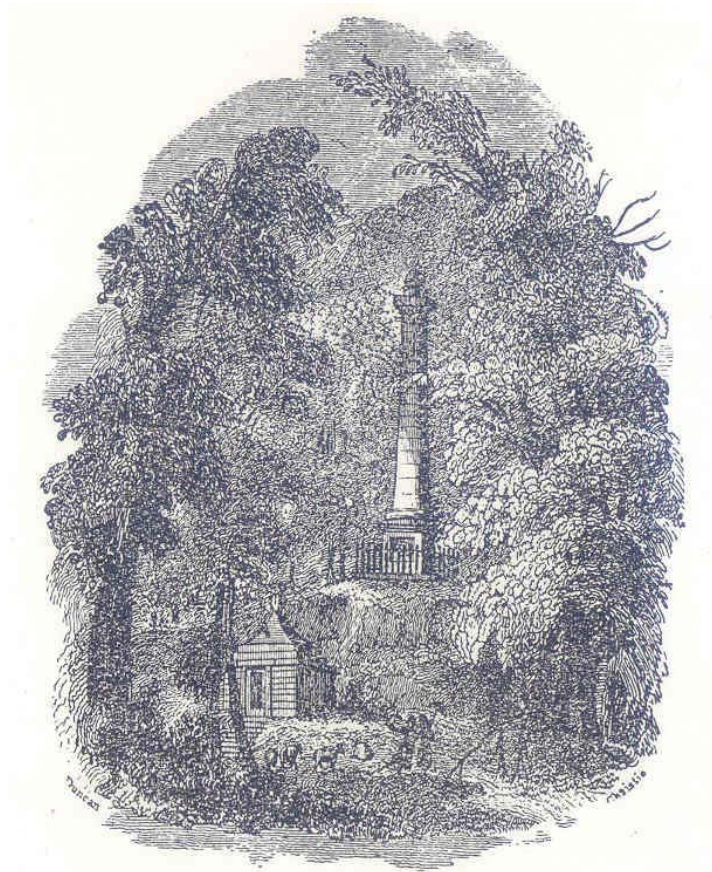
Most importantly, a visionary approach is needed to make the Peel Street Gateway to Mount Royal. The final configurations should aspire to become a “must-see” in the City of Montreal for locals and tourists alike.

The next section deals with important history that needs to be marked in the area. Most people are not aware that there are human remains buried in the area to be redeveloped...

...or the fact that the site is reportedly haunted by the ghost of Simon McTavish...

Marking History

There is a fascinating “hidden history” within the boundaries of the area being redeveloped, including the elaborate tomb of Simon McTavish, which is currently buried under mounds of rubble.

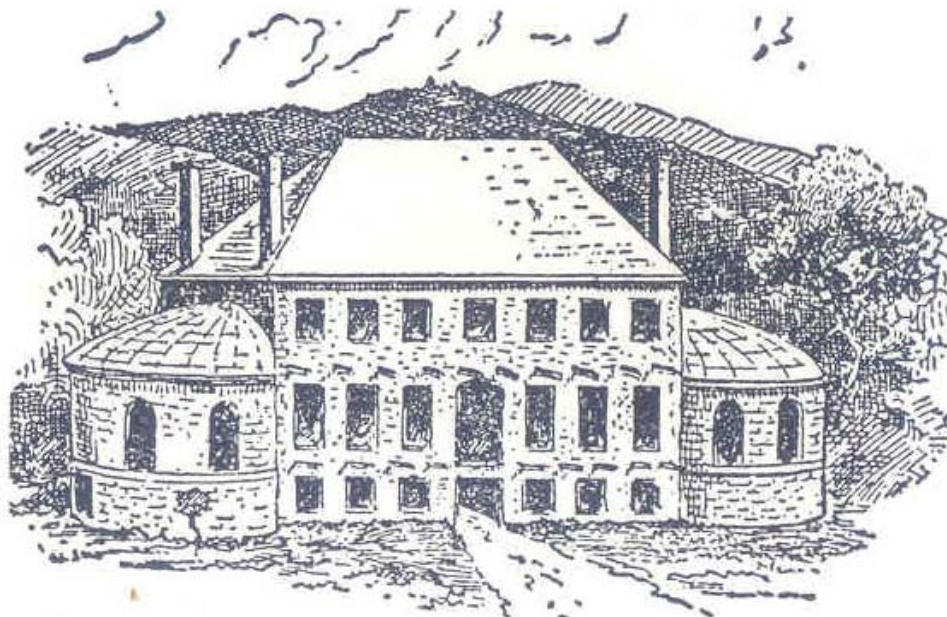


THIS DRAWING, made by James Duncan about the year 1839, shows the grave of Simon McTavish above Pine Avenue, at the head of Peel Street. The tall monument is now gone, and the mausoleum below it is covered with earth and rocks to protect it from vandals.

Simon McTavish came from Inverness-shire, Scotland, and he arrived in Montréal in 1775. As the founder of the North West Co., a rival of the Hudson Bay Company in procuring furs from the *pays d'en haut* for export, he made his fortunes very quickly. With his ruthless business skills, he was soon the richest person in Montréal. McTavish became famous (and some would say arrogant), and presided over an

Assembly of prominent Montrealers that he called “The Cream of the Town”. With all of his wealth and lavishness, he insisted on being known as “The Emperor” and “The Marquis”.

In October 1793, at the age of 43, he married a beautiful 18 year-old French-Canadian girl named Marie-Margueritte Chaboillez, the daughter of a trading partner. With his fortune secured, McTavish and his new bride moved to London, England directly after the wedding, where he hoped to live permanently. However, his wife soon became seriously depressed, and in 1795 they moved back to her home of Montréal. McTavish, perhaps in an effort to cheer up his wife, decided to build a castle high on the slopes of Mount Royal on land he purchased as his “Country Seat”. Using the finest materials available such as hand-cut limestone blocks, the McTavish Castle was to be a striking and luxurious building that could be seen from the city below. By 1804 the castle was almost finished – the foundations, walls, and roof were in place, and work was about to start on the interior. McTavish, who was supervising work from a small cottage a few hundred yards to the west, fell ill with pneumonia, and died suddenly on July 6th, 1804.



SIMON McTAVISH the leading figure in the North West Company, was building his “castle” on his country estate at the head of McTavish Street when he died suddenly in 1804. His “castle” was never finished and was said to be haunted by his ghost.

The construction of the castle was immediately abandoned, and a magnificent vault with a tall stone column was built in the back of the garden, where McTavish liked to read. It was here that McTavish was interred. The tomb held his remains, while the nearby abandoned castle held his dreams. His wife soon married another man – British soldier Lt-Col. William Smith Plenderleath – and moved back to England to raise another family.

As the years passed, the house was soon said to be haunted. Some reported moaning noises from within the unfinished building, whereas others said that a ghost was reported to be dancing on the roof. Over time, the castle took on a look of dilapidation, as it slowly decayed. Cattle wandered inside in the summer to keep cool, while in the winter it took on an eerie appearance as snow drifted through it. From the city below, it took on the appearance of an old blind figure staring down. It is said that McGill students would go to the vault in the winter, wearing snowshoes, and shout and holler to try and raise the ghost of McTavish. In 1827 the locks of the vault were smashed, and the interior of the tomb was violated. An indignant article appeared in *The Gazette* condemning the vandalism. The locksmith later reported that he felt a frightening presence in the vault and noticed McTavish's coffin had fallen on the floor spilling its contents. Without venturing inside, he quickly repaired the lock and fled. By 1832 there were many McTavish ghost sightings - it is said that he could be seen certain nights tobogganing down Mount Royal in his coffin, terrorizing people. Some folks claimed it was a "Ressurrectionist", a doctor harvesting a pauper's grave in the Catholic cemetery, who delivered the cadaver to the McGill Medical Building for study and dissection. It was illegal at the time to obtain corpses for dissection. In any case, citizens grew uneasy about the haunted castle and vault.

Finally, with litigation of McTavish's will complete in 1839, it was decided that the vault would be buried under mounds of rubble to protect it from further abuse, while the crumbling castle was to be demolished. While McTavish's castle was being dismantled, a worker mysteriously fell three stories to the ground and died before

surgeons could help him. It was thought to be an act of vengeance by McTavish, before the vault containing his earthly remains was buried and forgotten.

For 103 years there was nothing whatsoever to indicate McTavish's gravesite, until 1942, when the city installed a small marker.



McTavish Marker ("restored" by City of Montreal in 1942)

The small marker does very little to indicate the history of the area or the precise location of McTavish's grave. There is no proper indication or signage as to the significance of McTavish, his now-demolished castle, and the fact that his ghost is said to haunt the area.

Furthermore, there are disturbing remains of crumbling infrastructure in the area that appear to be related to McTavish's tomb:



Crumbling infrastructure near the McTavish Marker

Is this the foundation of the column that once stood here? Could it be the actual tomb? Or is it something else entirely?

In any case, the City of Montreal would be foolish to ignore this “hidden history”, and should consider ways to mark it instead of ignoring it. Some ideas include:

1. Put up signs explaining the story, with drawings and maps of how things used to be here.
2. Decide what to do about McTavish’s remains and vault. Should it be restored to its former glory? Should there be a better marker to indicate it? Should archaeologists investigate? What about the crumbling infrastructure?
3. Place markings on the ground to signify the footprint of the McTavish Castle, Vault, and Cottage.
4. Promote the story within the cultural milieu of Montreal – the arts, literature, drama, film, etc. Attract Montrealers and visitors to the site based on its unique history and importance as the “downtown gateway” to the Mountain. Create re-enactments and cultural events.

Overall, the City of Montréal has a responsibility to enhance the area’s natural beauty, accessibility, and relate its unique history to Montrealers and visitors alike. I hope my vision in some way helps to accomplish a Gateway all Montrealers can be proud of. I look forward to the day I can sit there with a good book, and perhaps with a thermos of tea, and enjoy the tranquility of the area just like Simon McTavish used to do back in the day...

- Donovan King

Suggested Reading

Collard, Edgar Andrew. "The Haunted House of Simon McTavish", pp 26 – 41.
Montreal Yesterdays. Longmans. Toronto. 1962.