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Requiem for the Medical Dental Building [Speaking of Places]

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all the flap about nutrition. Americans devoured 71 football fields of pizza in a day last year.” (Sept. 16, 1986)

As a final note, it should be observed that football field itself is only one ingredient in the territorial game. If we add its accoutrements—special access roads, V.I.P. parking, public parking lots, space for hawkers, pitchmen, charity exhibits and caterers for tailgate parties, if we were to include room for garages, associated gymnasium and occasional Tente Cities and motel complexes—we would end up with a 50- to 200-acre operation, plus half mile traffic jams. Now we’re talking real size—say, a hundred or so football fields.

Besides offering food for thought, the football field serves other functions almost too numerous to mention: as a battleground, an ego test plot, a betting venue, a fashion showplace, a reunion site, a coming-of-age ritual ground, a yardstick in multiples of ten, ams—for a host of Americans—the site of the largest crowd gathering in that lifetime experience.

There is here operating a rule of some sort, namely, that the wide and bustling world of multi-mega-
spaces and of multi-use complexes, annexation area and redevelopment intervention zone continually outstrips the powers of advertising writers to accommodate its shifts and scene changes. Football field is a familiar tool for eutering that expanding world down to human conversational scale.
Vancouver's Georgia Medical Dental Arts Building — one of three Art Deco buildings in western Canada — was demolished last May to make way for a larger office-retail complex. For a year before that, the city engaged in a vigorous debate about the architectural merits of the building, the merits of architectural preservation and even the merits of dentistry. Arthur Allen, a Vancouver architect and a leader of the battle to save the building from destruction, forwarded to us these slips and transcripts of radio interviews in which the debate was conducted. From these, we have excerpted a range of comments on the demolition of the building.

The issue is not whether the new building is “better” than the old one. The point is that the old one has been there all this time and forms an important part of our collective civic memory. A city without a past suffers amnesia, and Vancouver is fast becoming a world-class center for architectural Alzheimer's disease.


City Council's condemnation of the Clara-Ashbrook Medical Dental Building was accompanied by some strange reasoning: The Art Deco structure should go to the wrecker's ball because some people suffered pain in that building, according to Alderman Philip Owen. Maybe he had a bad childhood experience with the dentist. But think of all the patients who found joy, happiness and even life there — good news from the obstetrician, successful treatment for their ailments and relief from pain in the neck. If the building is to be destroyed (and that is not proven), then at least the knockers-down should come up with a better reason.


By now most people know a good deal about the three terra-cota nurses high on the corners of the Medical Dental Building. Many people also know, or have felt vaguely, that these nurses are indeed twentieth-century gargoyles, placed there in 1929 to remind us that it is now the wonders of modern medical science, not the mysteries of medieval superstition and magic, that will save us from evil spirits.... In the case of the Medical Dental Building, its charm and inner beauty rest to some degree on the fairy tales that can be told about its ornamentation.

A few people know, for instance, that the decorations, including the nurses and the panels around the arch at the main entry, include symbols and epitaphs of medical science, Christian belief and faith, and medieval and ancient magic and superstitions. This fascinating mixture of motifs could indicate that the doctors and dentists who occupied the building in 1929, or possibly the artists and architects engaged by them, put their tongues in their cheeks and have even advised viewers that in case of illness they should try medicine, prayer or magic in suitable proportions....

Who in his or her right mind would deter evil spirits by placing large and expensive gargoyles-nurses high on a building, and then place 10 snakes, the symbol of evil itself, writhing all over the main entry? That's enough to force the conclusion that dentists really are sadists and that they enjoy intensifying the already deadly fear of children arriving for tooth extractions.

Does anyone know that at the entrance the caduceus, a rod with two snakes entwined on the shaft, is a symbolic mistake? A shaft with twin serpents is a symbol of Hermes or Mercury, gods of commerce, not healing or charity.

You may know that Hippocrates, the father of modern medicine, was the first person to proclaim that epilepsy was not a condition of demonic possession but an illness that could be treated by medical procedures. However, Hippocrates lived and worked at a time when people believed firmly that epilepsy (otherwise known as falling sickness) could be cured by sowing the skin from a live snake.

Discarded snake skins found in the countryside were left there, it was said, by snakes that cast off their skins, leaving them to epileptic pursuers, while the serpent escaped, in this case without its skin. Aware of these beliefs, it seems Hippocrates fed biscuit to snakes at a temple near his clinic to keep them nearby just in case his patients should doubt his new-fangled ideas.

The diagnosis: The Medical Dental Building in Vancouver is suffering from epilepsy, the falling sickness. The cure: Remove the caduceus of com-
merce from the entrance and install a caduceus of the healing arts.

The loss of the Georgia Street monument had to represent more than
the loss of a tiny lobby, a warren of
small dentists’ and doctors’ offices and
a creaky elevator. But what? What
was lost?

Beauty? Poke any beholder in
the eye and you’ll get a different re-
action. To preservationists, the Art
Deco style of the Georgia Med was a
time and lifestyle preserved, the
sculpted terra-cotta nurses were gen-
ue art treasures.

But 20 years ago, I used to receive
angry letters from an activist who saw
those statuesque nurses as public vul-
garity. Thousands of Vancouver pedes-
trians, some of them actual church-
goers, passed that building daily and
dowed, but deliberately to look up
the nurses’ skirts. Beauty was in the
eye of the beholder, he claimed.

Like many, my most vivid memory
of the red brick building has to do
with pain, a hellacious toothache that
Dr. Wes Munroe eased with a quick
flip of his forceps. But on Saturday
night, I spoke with a woman who had
only fond memories. Her wedding
ring had been made by a jeweler on
the top floor, and it was emotionally
important to her.

When the Devonshire Hotel hit
the street... artist Dave Webber pho-
tographed it and had 10,000 copies
of a color poster in souvenir shops
the following morning. But Webber saw
no market in a Georgia Med poster. “I
love the place and I’ll miss it, but
there’s no broad emotional attachment
like the Dec. Who ever honeymooned
in a medical building?”

—Denny Boyd, columnist for the
The hoopla was certainly more than the ugly old trolley deserved, but watching a 68-year-old structure crumple in 15 seconds holds understandable fascination. . . .

The careful preparations leading up to the building’s destruction were too-eerily like the arrangements for a high-profile prison execution. Remove the window glass; shave the prisoner. Mount protective scaffolding; ready the chair. Set the wires and the detonation drops; check that the flow of current is unbroken so death will be swift. . . .

Always, there are the curious onlookers: 10,000 in the last hour of life for the Georgia Medical Dental Building, a handful pressing at the glass of the observation room on death row and sometimes thousands outside, counting down the minutes with dread or glee. . . .

As with the Ted Bundys and the Gary Gilmore of the world—

we will relive the presence and the demise of the Georgia Medical Dental Building through fictional earthquake movies, documentaries and year-end news recaps. . . .

Mourn if you want to, but progressive cities look forward—not behind.

Let our “heritage” be the subject of full-color coffee table books, which in the usual way of things these days, tend to be celebrated at their publication and never opened thereafter.

Let the preservationists finger picture pages tipped with gold filigree and mutter under their breath about days gone by while the rest of us get on with living and working in tomorrow’s world.


As an architect I spend all day building them so it’s neat to see them come down.

—Nigel Pages, architect witnessing the demolition, quoted in the Vancouver Sun, May 29, 1989.

Are we going to blow up our part of the world?

—Travis Latham, 6, witnessing his first building demolition from atop his father’s shoulders, quoted in the Vancouver Sun, May 29, 1989.