

## Building with style

**City architectural firm celebrates century of lending elegance to the urban landscape, from Holt Renfrew to the Château Laurier.**

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From the towers and turrets of the Château Apartments to the understated art deco of the Holt Renfrew store, you can't walk far in Montreal without bumping into one of their buildings.

When Montreal was in its heyday as the financial centre of Canada, Duschenes & Fish Architects/D.F.S. Inc. was designing many of the city's landmark buildings.

The Montreal and Saint John, N.B., firm is also responsible for seminal architecture across the country.

Duschenes & Fish, which lays claim to being Canada's oldest continuously operating architectural firm, is celebrating its 100th anniversary.

To mark the occasion, the partnership is hosting a series of public lectures, an exhibition on its history and tours of recent projects.

Since the firm was founded as Ross & MacFarlane in 1904, there have been more than a few father-and-son combinations in the practice.

David Fish, senior partner in Montreal, is one of them. "I've been with the firm, in a sense, all my life," he said. His father, John, joined the firm in 1925 on his arrival from England.

John Fish collaborated on Sherbrooke St.'s Château Apartments with partner Robert Heughan.

"The client disliked the first design - Scottish baronial - for that building," Fish recounted. "So Heughan decided 'He's French, I'll give him French Château.'" The Scottish idea didn't go to waste though: it ended up on the castle-like Gleneagles apartments on C te des Neiges Rd.

Duschenes & Fish was known for adapting classical styles to the function of each building, said David Rose, an architectural historian.

Rose spent over a year organizing the firm's archives, acquired by the Canadian Centre for Architecture in Montreal.

Founding partner George Allen Ross trained in the beaux-arts style in Paris and also apprenticed in New York.

"He combined American practicality with dressing up buildings in classical styles," Rose said.

Ross was also well-connected to business leaders of the day, Rose said. That helps explain how the firm landed so many important commissions.

(David MacFarlane also came from an establishment family: his father had been mayor of Westmount.)

And there were a lot of commissions to be won. "When the firm was formed, Montreal was in serious expansion," Rose said.

"The city was the financial, transportation and communications centre of Canada, and its manufacturing was supplying the Prairies, which were being settled," said Rose. "Everything was here."

It was also the era of the railways. Duschenes & Fish won the contract to build both the Château Laurier hotel in Ottawa and the train station across the street for the Grand Trunk Railway, later part of CN.

The firm went on to build many of the grand railway hotels across the country.

Eaton's stores in many Canadian cities, including Montreal, were also designed by Duschenes & Fish.

After the devastating Halifax explosion of 1917, the firm, then known as Ross & Macdonald, did the lion's share of the reconstruction.



**Credit: Gordon Beck,  
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**Duschenes & Fish Architects / D.F.S. has a plan: partners Andrew Todd (left to right), Fernando Pellicer, Edward Chin and David Fish look at a building design. The firm is hosting a series of public lectures to mark its 100th anniversary.**

(cont'd)

Avant-garde for its time, Maple Leaf Gardens hockey arena in Toronto is also part of the firm's portfolio. "Mr. Ross was a bit nervous about whether the design would work," recounted David Fish. It was one of the first arenas with no intermediate columns, to give an unobstructed view. "There were just four big arches meeting in a ball over centre ice. I guess we know it worked."

Over the years, the firm also did a lot of government work. In 1948, a contract to build a veterans' hospital in New Brunswick led to a permanent office in Saint John, headed by Rolf Duschenes.

Now 86, Duschenes still pops into the office, but no longer works on projects.

From YMCAs to breweries, schools and churches, Duschenes's work has run the gamut.

"It's been fun," said Duschenes, a member of the Order of Canada for his community work.

Andrew Todd, one of a new generation of partners in the Montreal office, agrees the firm is a fun place to work.

"The environment is very positive and there is a lot of empowerment of employees," Todd said. "You are given the opportunity to grow with the firm."

Along with colleagues, Todd is developing a new expertise for Duschenes & Fish: designing "green" or environmentally sensitive buildings.

Todd worked on the consortium that built the new, energy-efficient Montreal store for Mountain Equipment Co-op, an outdoor-gear retailer. Green features on that building include a cistern to collect rainwater used in washrooms.

Light-industrial buildings, office refurbishment and restoration of historical buildings, including Bonsecour Market in Old Montreal, account for another chunk of the firm's practice.

The Saint John office, currently headed by partner Michael Start, recently made a foray into China, where it does residential, institutional and commercial work.

With 30 employees between the two offices, Duschenes & Fish is smaller than its 1920s peak of about 80.

But David Fish says the firm has maintained its innovative spirit. "If clients throw odd challenges at us, we're willing to take them on."

For information on anniversary events, check the firm's Web site as of March 24 at [www.dfsarch.com](http://www.dfsarch.com)

#### Achievements

Other Montreal buildings by Duschenes & Fish

- Montreal Neurological Institute
- Mount Royal Hotel
- Dominion Square Building
- Original Drummond St., Westmount and Park Ave. YMCAs
- Former Queen Elizabeth Hospital (built as the Montreal Homeopathic Hospital)

- Roslyn School in Westmount

Buildings in other cities:

- Royal York Hotel, Toronto
- Union Station, Toronto
- Price Building, Quebec City
- Fort Garry Hotel, Winnipeg
- Hotel Macdonald, Edmonton

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