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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 gymnasias and occasional Tent 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, and—for a host of Americans—the site of the largest crowd gathering in their lifetime experience.

There is here operating a rule of some sort, namely, that the wide and booming world of *multi-mega-superblock* and of *multi-use complexes*, *annexation areas* and *redevelopment intervention zones* continually outstrips the powers of advertising writers to accommodate its shifts and scene changes. *Football field* is a familiar tool for cutting that expanding world down to human conversational scale.

Requiem for the Medical Dental Building

Detail of cornice and
sculptural elements.

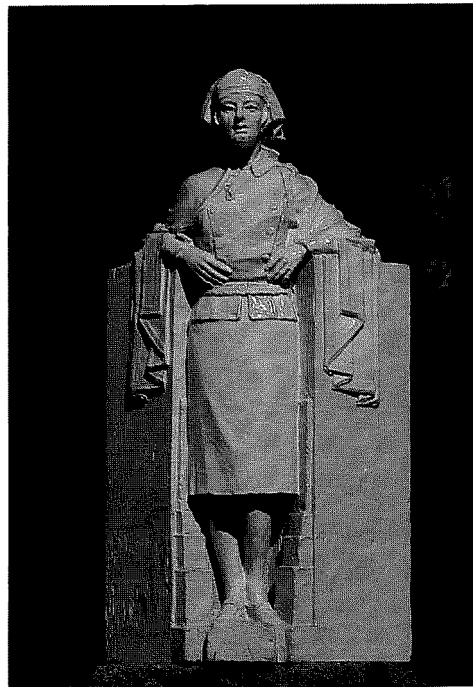
All photographs courtesy
Arthur Allen.



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 news clips and transcripts of radio interviews in which the debate was conducted. From those, 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.
—John Davis, letter to the *Vancouver Sun*, May 11, 1988.

City Council’s condemnation of the Class-A heritage 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 at 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.
—Editorial, *Vancouver Sun*, July 16, 1988.



By now most people know a good deal about the three terra-cotta 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 pictographs of scientific medicine, Christian belief and faith, and medieval and ancient magic and superstition. 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 ever since 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 gargoyle-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 deathly 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 snatching 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 biscuits 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-



Detail of entrance arch.



The caduceus: symbol of healing or of commerce?

merce from the entrance and install a caduceus of the healing arts.

—Arthur Allen, letter to the *Vancouver Sun*, May 8, 1988.

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 reaction. To preservationists, the Art Deco style of the Georgia Med was a time and lifestyle preserved, the sculpted terra-cotta nurses were genuine art treasures.

But 20 years ago, I used to receive angry letters from an activist who saw those statuesque nurses as public vulgarity. Thousands of Vancouver pedestrians, some of them actual churchgoers, passed that building daily and slowed down deliberately to look up the nurses' skirts. Beauty was in the eye of the leerer, he claimed.

Like many, my most vivid memory of the red brick building has to do with pain, a hellacious toothache that Dr. Wes Muncie 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 photographed 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 Dev. Who ever honeymooned in a medical building?"

—Denny Boyd, columnist for the *Vancouver Sun*, May 30, 1989.

The hoopla was certainly more than the ugly old trollop deserved, but watching a 60-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: 30,000 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 Gilmores 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.

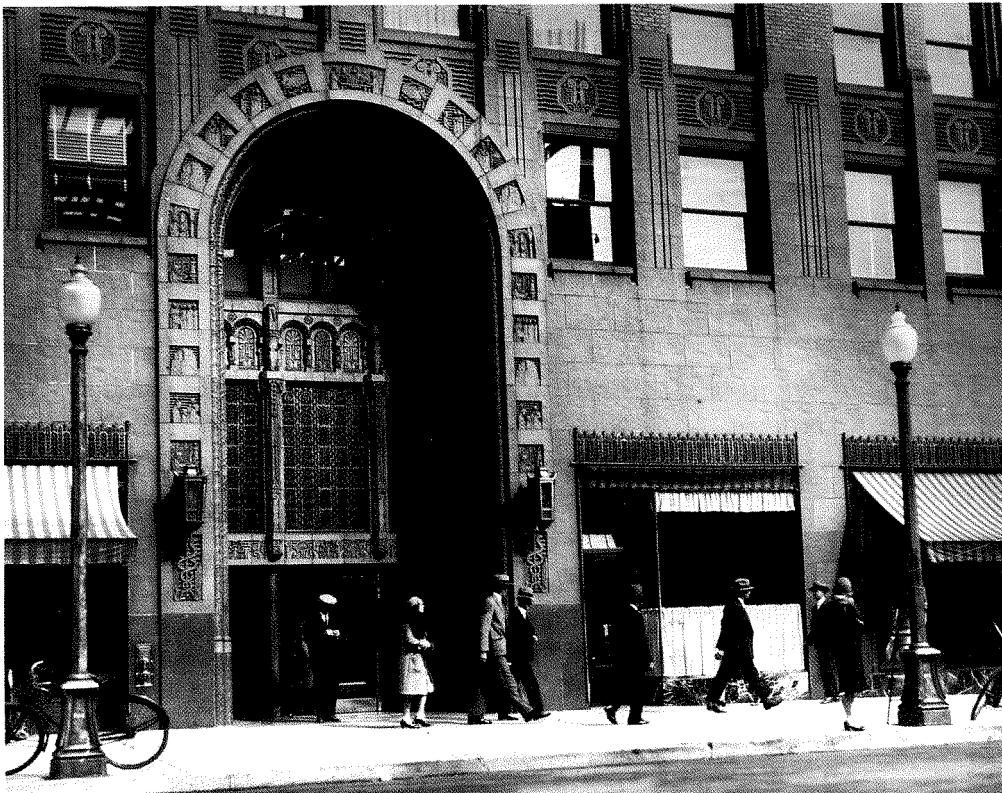
—Nicole Parton, columnist for the *Vancouver Sun*, May 31, 1989.

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.



Entrance arch.