

THE FAMILY THAT BUILT THIS CITY

For almost a century and a half, architects with the last name Dumaresq have been creating iconic spaces and shaping Halifax—it's a unique and remarkable legacy, a record "unmatched in Canada."

BY MARJORIE SIMMINS
PHOTOS BY LISA ENMAN AND ANDREA RAHAL



“Architecture got into the blood somehow,” says Phil Dumaresq, 94-year-old patriarch. “Can’t get rid of it. You live and breathe architecture when you grow up in an architect’s family. It’s also a responsibility when you carry on an architectural firm for four generations.”

Firehouses, towers, infirmaries, nunneries, legislative buildings and millionaire’s residences—pick a type of building. Sometime in the past 145 years, a Dumaresq family architect has designed it in Nova Scotia or New Brunswick. More than 100 of their buildings are in Halifax.

With family ties running back to the British isle of Jersey, the Dumaresqs have been practicing architecture in the Maritimes since the 1860s. “To my knowledge, this record of family architecture practice is unmatched in Canada,” says Paul E. Frank, the Atlantic representative and Fellow of the Royal Architectural Institute of Canada.

Currently, three generations work together at the South End offices of SP Dumaresq Architect Ltd., owned by fourth-generation architect Syd Dumaresq. Syd, 64, is a graduate of McGill’s School of Architecture. Syd’s youngest son, Dean, 26, is in his first year of architecture at Carleton University. Syd’s father Phil closed out his own business in 1987 but remains senior architect at his son’s firm. Phil came to architecture after serving with the Royal Artillery in Europe during the Second World War. He has a Masters in Civil Engineering from MIT but was born and raised in Halifax.



LEFT: PHIL AND SYD DUMARESQ.
TOP: CBC BUILDING, CORNER OF SACKVILLE AND SOUTH PARK STREETS.
MIDDLE: DENTISTRY BUILDING, DALHOUSIE UNIVERSITY.
BOTTOM: FOREST BUILDING, DALHOUSIE UNIVERSITY.

“I was born on the dining room table,” laughs Phil. “Babies were born at home then.” It was also a dramatic time and place for a baby to come into the world. “I was one year old at the time of the Halifax Explosion [in 1917],” he says. His family’s home in the South End, which still stands, “had all its windows blown out.”

The Dumaresq architectural legacy began with Phil’s grandfather, James Charles Dumaresq, born in Sydney, Nova Scotia in 1840. Today, Haligonians stroll past many of his buildings: the Forrest Building at Dalhousie University, the Gatehouse in Point Pleasant Park, the St. Paul Building at Barrington and Prince streets and “the Keeper’s Lodge” across from the Public Gardens. Most locals know that red-bricked Edwardian-era beauty, built in 1903.

J.C.’s son, Sydney Perry co-designed (with Andrew Cobb) one of Halifax’s most iconic structures, the Dingle Tower in Sir Sandford Fleming Park. The tower, dedicated in 1912, marks the 150th anniversary of the establishment of representative government in Nova Scotia. Syd and Phil are pleased to be heading the Tower’s restoration efforts for its 100th anniversary in 2012.

The CBC Radio building on the corner of South Park and Sackville streets is another well known SP Dumaresq project. “The CBC Radio building is my favourite building of SP Dumaresq’s,” says senior reference archivist Garry Shutlak of Nova Scotia Archives and Record Management. “The building’s style is art moderne, which is curved and sensual.”

The building’s future as a city landmark is short-lived, however. According to the HRM Council Agenda for March 8, 2011, “The YMCA intends to remove the existing YMCA and CBC Buildings and develop a new complex.” The CBC, meanwhile, intends to relocate its radio operations to its Bell Road site.

Shutlak also favours the Local Council House at Young Street and Inglis Avenue. J. C. Dumaresq designed The Queen Anne-style home, with its two-storey pillared portico and three-



TOP: DINGLE TOWER, SIR SANDFORD FLEMING PARK;
 BOTTOM: CORNER OF MORRIS AND SOUTH PARK STREETS.

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storey turret, for millionaire George Wright, the only Haligonian who died on the *Titanic*.

A bachelor, Wright hoped to someday bring home a bride and raise a family in the stately residence. Instead, the house was bequeathed to the Local Council of Women, which owns it still. “Dumaresq buildings are on a human scale,” says Shutlak. “Halifax has narrow streets, so this is important.”

Contrast this to the Bell Aliant Building that looms over the corner of Barrington Street and Spring Garden Road. “It’s an intimidating cement blob that causes wind tunnels for blocks,” Shutlak explains. “It has no architectural merit.”

Phil and Syd Dumaresq love to talk about their forebears’ work, speaking rarely of the hundreds of buildings they’ve designed themselves. Like his grandfather, Phil has had a lifelong tie to education, designing more than 100 schools in Nova Scotia. He also designed Dalhousie’s Tupper Medical Building, Dental Building and residence building, Fenwick Towers.

Among Syd’s projects are professional centres, nursing homes, rinks, recreation and resource centres, schools and academies. In 2000, he had the unusual opportunity to renovate one of his grandfather’s buildings, the T. Eaton Building (the former Eaton’s store), at Barrington and Prince streets. The conversion became the new home for the provincial Department of Transportation and Public Works. Fittingly, three generations of Dumaresqs worked on it.

Phil and Syd believe that the guiding principle of architecture is service. “The customer is always right,” says Syd. “We take the client’s wishes and use our architectural expertise to give the client a building that is unique to them.”

Phil agrees. “Tell us what you want and we’ll conceive it,” he says. “Of course it takes more than one try [to get it right] ... it’s all about accomplished dreams.”

Working in Atlantic Canada affects their practice. “It goes back to service, because the work teaches you that everyone is your neighbour and you have to enjoy and respect everybody,” Syd says. “There is no hierarchy in life. That will serve you well in Nova Scotia. Two, there are a lot of iconic features to the landscape and buildings in Nova Scotia.” He cites turrets and pitched roofs.

Until recently, the family legacy was uncertain. “You should only do architecture if you love it,” says Syd. He and Sandy, his wife of 40 years, were “quite prepared” for the possibility that none of their four children would continue the tradition.

For his part, Dean says that he and his siblings were always aware of the legacy, but “didn’t really talk about it.” He took a BA in Environmental Studies at Memorial and did the first year of a Masters of Science from Mount Allison, before turning to architecture.

Now he feels relief. “I am relieved that our generation won’t be the end of the line,” he says. “I always felt I was missing something. This direction has so much meaning. I am on track, with something to strive for.”

Dean’s decision is also deeply personal: “I want to be like my father and grandfather as people, not just architects. I look up to both of them and I am already grateful for the time spent working with them.” Would he like to see “SP Dumaresq & Son Architect Ltd.” on the door of his father’s office? “I’d love that!” he answers at once.

There might even be a sixth generation, says Syd. His six-year-old granddaughter, Emma, “loves to draw, is very artistic and hopelessly dyslexic—you need all these things to be a good architect, I really believe that.”

Phil calls himself retired but rarely misses a day of work, unless it’s to spend a day with his wife of 66 years, Leila. “You can’t retire, really,” says Phil. “You may try to do it, but you can’t.”

The Dumaresqs are keenly aware how good the life has been for them. “I can’t overstate the joys of working in a multi-generational firm,” Syd says. “People ask me when I am going to retire, and I say ‘certainly not until my Dad does.’ Now I say, ‘not until Dean graduates.’” He glances at his father and the two men laugh. ■■■



TUPPER MEDICAL BUILDING, COLLEGE STREET
(below: during construction in 1967).

FEEDBACK

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