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Mental Block

By James FitzGerald

Opened 150 years ago – on January 26, 1850 – the Provincial Lunatic Asylum at 999 Queen Street West was proclaimed a paragon of progressive architecture that embodied enlightened 19th century principles for the “moral treatment” of the insane. The original white brick, four-storey, 250-bed structure boasted a breath-taking 600 foot façade, classical dome, and the most advanced ventilation and plumbing systems in North America. Verandahed sunrooms overlooked 50 acres of landscaped gardens and farm land where inmates tilled the soil and took physical exercise as part of their convalescence.

The designer, John Howard, believed that a soothing, aesthetic milieu of good food, warm beds, Mother Nature, and human kindness could redeem tortured souls. His view was motivated by personal compassion: his wife was expected to number among the asylum’s first occupants.

Tragically, the humanity of Howard’s vision was fettered by generations of misguided government policy-making. Despite the dedication of such medical pioneers as Joseph Workman and C.K. Clarke, the asylum, plagued by over-crowding and under-staffing, gradually succumbed to the horrors of the unregenerate snakepit.

After World War II, intensification of the treatment of the “mentally ill” through insulin shock, electro-convulsive therapy, lobotomy and drugs spurred the anti-psychiatry movement of the 1960s and 1970s, leading to the disgorging of patients into community-based programs, and more often, the streets.

Despite proposals to renovate the 1850 edifice and restore its original ergonomic ideals, it was demolished and, from 1976 to 1979, rebuilt. The stigmatized “999” address, as if infected by some inverted, satanic numerology, was sanitized to 1001. In 1998, it merged with the Clarke Institute of Psychiatry, the Addiction Research Foundation and the Donwood Institute to form the cost-saving, vaguely Orwellian-sounding Centre For Addiction and Mental Health.

Across a century and a half, the abiding mysteries of the disturbed psyche have stubbornly resisted many forms of therapeutic redress, from farming to pharmaceuticals. Today, a weathered, 12 foot brick wall, built in the late 1800s by male inmates seeking the dignity of honest work, survives as the sole fragment of the original lunatic asylum. A squiggling purple logo, like a Medusa-headed Rorshach inkblot, struggles to humanize the blunt, bunker-like entrance to CAMH. A far cry from the soaring, Howardesque moral imagination, the structure has a pedestrian outward face and inner chambers that resemble the blandest of post-modern, technocratic headquarters. On the lip of our brave new millennium, CAMH’s occupants are referred to as “clients”, its psychiatrist-in-chief as “President and CEO.”