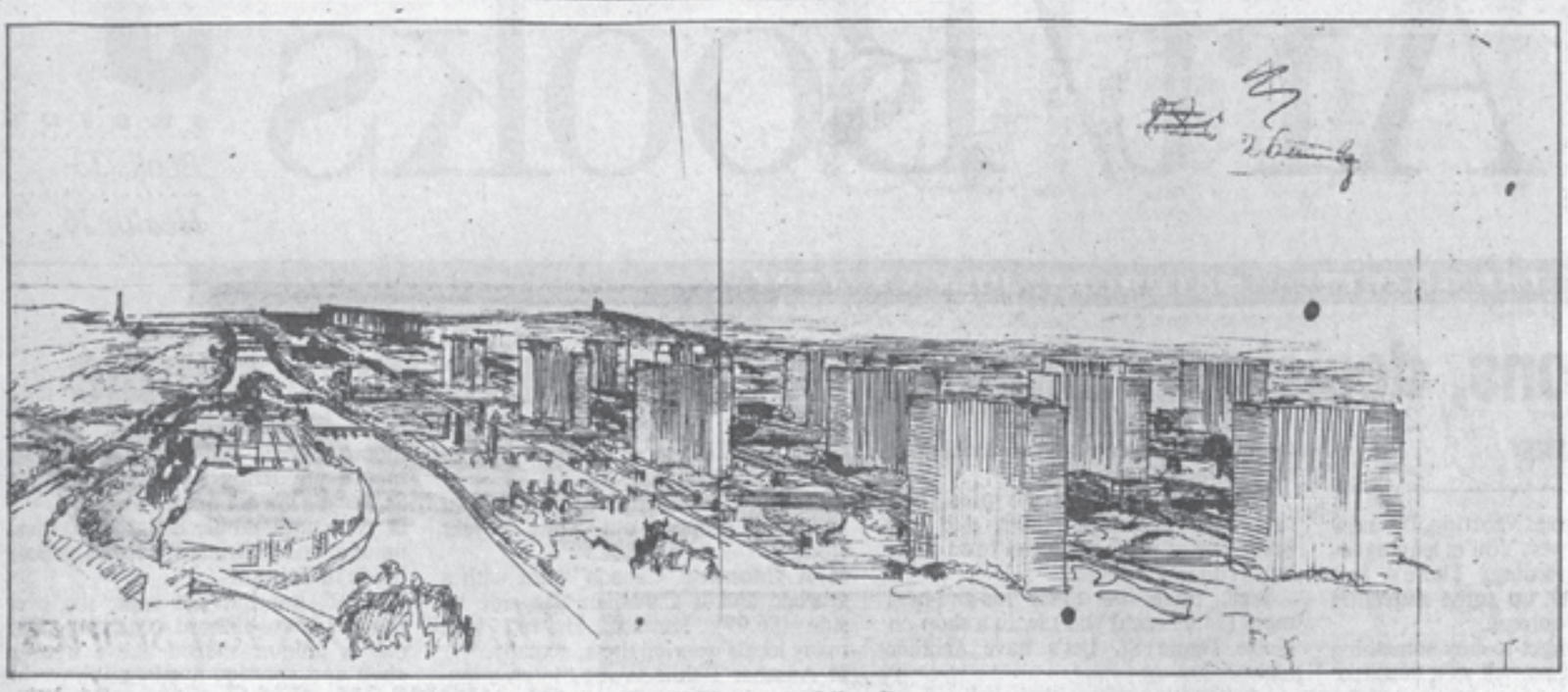
ARCHITECTURE



Le Corbusier's 1925 "Plan Voisin" for Paris. It envisioned demolishing part of the city.

Architects are heroes at Metropolis

Exhibit features all-star guest list of 20th-century designers

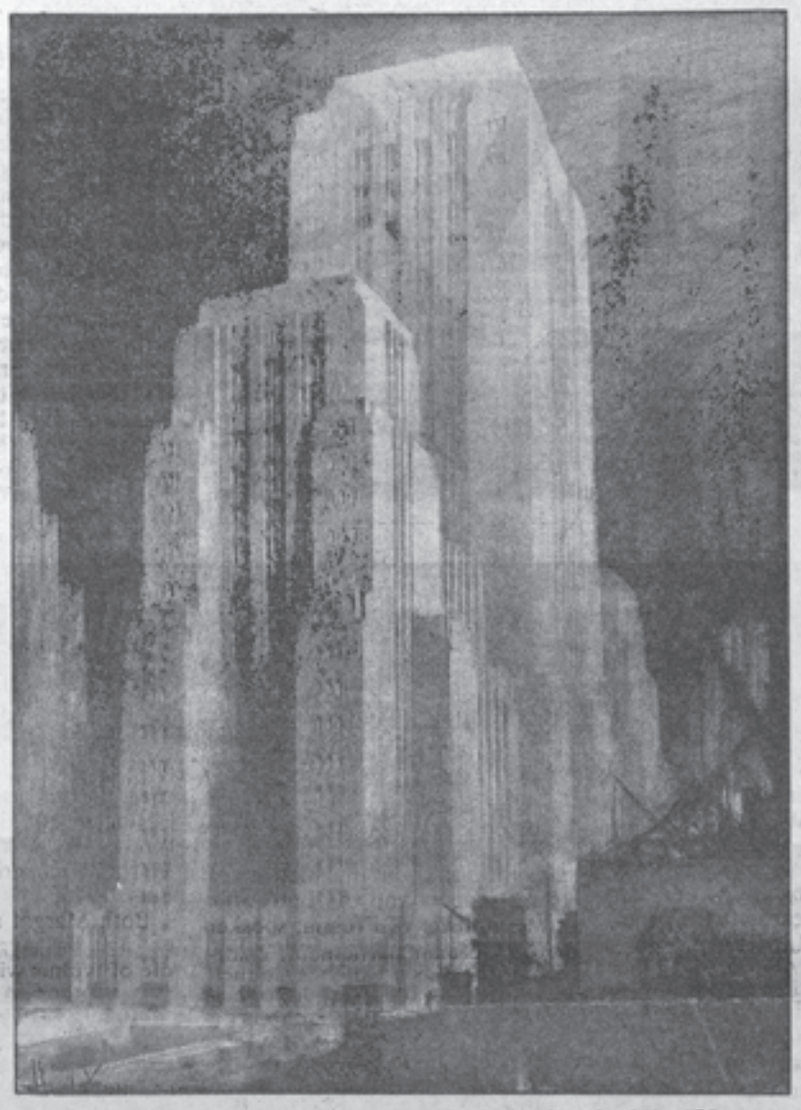
ANNMARIE ADAMS
and PIETER SIJPKES
SPECIAL TO THE GAZETTE

Organizing an exhibition is a lot like planning a party. Decisions regarding the size of the party, possible themes, the invitation list, the seating arrangement, the best time, date, and locale, anxiety over whether X will come if Y is invited — aspects of planning even the smallest gathering — are echoed in museum curators' organization of a major show; simply replace the guests with the objects or artworks to be displayed. And as with a party, its success lies as much in who is there, as in who is absent. A visit to the current show at the Montreal Museum of Fine Arts, "The 1920s: Age of the Metropolis," will convince anyone that like a successful party, this event was well worth the effort and expense.

The exhibition is especially rewarding for architects. Jean-Louis Cohen, director of the architecture section, has assembled an incredible treasury of first-rate documentation. The museum's commitment to consider a particular period — in this case the 1920s — through the theme of the city, has meant the exhibition "guest list" includes an unusual number of architects. Of the 18 themes broached in the show — already the subject of several reviews in *The Gazette* — no less than seven deal directly with architecture and urban planning.

In addition, the interdisciplinary nature of the exhibition shows the process of making buildings and cities in a broad perspective; master plans for world capitals share the stage with wine jugs; drawings of skyscrapers greet a breakfast table of the same period; and architectural models carry on instructive conversations with photographs, films, and even music of the period. If ever there were an opportunity to explore architecture from several perspectives, this is it.

Architects appear in the exhibition as the heroes they were considered to be 70 years ago. The 1920s were marked by revolutionary change, and architects played pioneering roles as revolutionary thinkers. The period between "Red October," 1917, and "Black Monday," 1929, saw the rise of influential figures such as Ludwig Hilberseimer, Le Corbusier and Hugh Ferriss whose ideas changed forever the ways we look at cities. It is through the eyes of these architectural innovators that "The 1920s: Age of the Metropolis" focuses our perspective of design on Berlin, Paris, and New York.



Hugh Ferriss design for skyscraper in style that epitomized the '20s.

The all-star guest list of the exhibition includes some of the most influential documents in 20th-century architecture. Berlin, for example, is represented by the visions of major architects like Hilberseimer as well as Bruno Taut, Ernst May, and Ludwig Mies van der Rohe. They all saw the vast destruction of Berlin during World War I as an opportunity to experiment with new urban forms.

At the same time, Le Corbusier, a leading figure of European Modernism, actually visualized the demolition of parts of Paris. His utopian schemes for the French capital, which form the core of the Parisian section of the show, seem uncomfortably familiar today even though few of his urban ideas were realized during his lifetime. The exhibition includes material from Le Corbusier's "Plan Voisin" and the "City for Three Million," as well as many paintings by the Swiss architect.

The third city featured in the exhibition is represented by the quintessential New York building type: the skyscraper. Hugh Ferriss's impressionistic views of tall buildings, composed in subtle tonal nuances, are among the most beautiful drawings in the entire history of architectural representation. Raymond Hood's constructed works in New York — the Daily News building, the Rockefeller Centre, and the McGraw-Hill building — were equally influential as models for skyscraper design.

As mentioned in previous reviews of the show, the 729 works that comprise the exhibition fill Montreal's museum to capacity. While it is certainly exhilarating to see such a vast array of objects and artifacts from one time period in one place, in some cases, the connection of the objects to the exhibition's Berlin-Paris-New York theme is stretched. Architectural devotees will no doubt enjoy the inclusion of Walter Gropius's and Eliel Saarinen's famous entries to the Chicago Tribune competition of 1922 — so influential in the evolution of the International Style — but their primary location in the sequence of New York rooms is baffling. Similarly, the large-scale model of the "Monument to the Third International," a reconstruction of Vladimir Tatlin's never-built design of 1919-20, seems oddly placed in the context of Berlin. It serves well, however, to remind visitors of the complementary show currently at the Canadian Centre for Architecture, featuring Russian drawings of the same period. Furniture and architecture from the Bauhaus and the Dutch de Stijl movement, important as they were in the development of Modernism, bear an equally tenuous relationship to Berlin, Paris, and New York. In this respect the Metropolis exhibit loses some of the clarity of its original intentions and appears in spots as a general show on Modernism between the wars. It is a wonderful party, but who did they not invite?

The hefty catalogue accompanying the show has equally fluid views of what constitutes Berlin, Paris, and New York. Essays in this beautifully produced book include Cologne and London in the 1920s.

In order to gain from the clarity of the original three-city focus, following the 18-step sequence suggested by the museum guide is a good idea; this also makes the vast array of information easier to digest. When information overload sets in, the museum's cafe and terrace offer a wonderful opportunity to step out and ponder the value of revolutionary schemes by overlooking non-revolutionary Montreal. Like most western cities, we have our housing à la Hilberseimer, our attempts at masterplans following Le Corbusier, and our high-rises like Ferriss. All revolutionary schemes, when realized, are tempered by reality. "The 1920s: Age of the Metropolis" is an evocative reminder of the eerie purity of the original vision.

■ *Annmarie Adams and Pieter Sijpkes teach in the school of architecture, McGill University.*

DIALOGUE

On saying no

And pointing out who says it

In the letter to the editor below, architecture professor Joseph Baker responds to Henry Lehmann's column of June 29, which featured an interview with architect Dan Hanganu.

So much of what Dan Hanganu had to say in his exchange with Henry Lehmann about architecture made eminent sense and could be expected of someone who has demonstrated undeniable skill as a designer. His views on the use of materials, the importance of history and of public spaces must have evoked a sympathetic response in more than one breast, be it professional or lay.

What sat a little less lightly, and this within the abdominal cavity, were the later sections where we are treated to some lessons of a moral nature: "on saying no," "on bigness," "on stupidity."

"It's time that more architects stood up and said no when they can't stomach what their clients want." Oh yes indeed, but coming from one of the authors of the notorious Overdale project, which proposed two 40-storey towers and a handful of token town houses (with no attempt to integrate existing residents or buildings) on its three-acre site and has subsequently blessed this less-than-beautiful part of Montreal with another wasteland of a parking lot — well, my own digestive tract for one is made decidedly fidgety.

Perhaps more irritating is the self-elevation to the moral high ground in the follow-up phrase: "It happens sometimes you know. I know an important architect who was part of the La Cité project who quit when he decided he couldn't go along with the developer."

The important architect was the late much-respected Ray Affleck who couldn't stomach the clearance of six city blocks in Milton-Park and their residents envisaged by his clients, Concordia Estates. It was an act of great professional courage, one which in the face of quite similar dilemmas, it has proven easier to cite than to follow.

On bigness: "Towers themselves are not to be blamed. Remember that Renaissance cities were dominated by towers . . . some people criticize the shadows cast by tall buildings. But why must a shadow by definition be bad? Is the Campanile in the main square of Florence bad because it makes a shadow?"

Well, I do remember, and without going back to the Renaissance, that Montreal was also once dominated by towers; it was dubbed, "city of a hundred steeples." Landmarks of social significance in every parish, these church ornaments were pencil thin, and any shadow they cast had as much negative environmental impact as the hand of a sun-dial on its roman numerals.

The cited Campanile in Florence's Piazza della signoria, is a tower, all of 10 metres square, perched on top of a palazzo, (itself no higher than a modern nine-storey building) without a rival in sight. Good grief, the critics are not carping about bell-towers; the floor plans of the behemoths currently rearing their conical heads and rotund façades on the Montreal skyline occupy entire city blocks and would even outshadow Overdale.

On stupidity: When every scrap of the centre city becomes grist for the developer's mill and we walk in the perpetual penumbra of — how did architect Hanganu put it? — "Something as bad as the new BNE building" but 20 or more times over — we may all wish that the "silly" general guidelines in the recent Montreal city plan had displayed a little more muscle.

As long as greed and speculation are given free rein my confrere's sleep will still be troubled by the enigma of "why some cities are so beautiful and others so ugly."

Montreal will remain a fractured landscape, pitted with parking lots and derelict weed-patches, its more modest but attainable development deferred. "Venice" it could never be, but with a little good judgment, a greater esteem for the unique features with which this city is endowed (and please, there is a difference between the threat posed to Mount Royal by a "structure four feet tall and one of 40 storeys) it might distance itself from the "Chicoutimi" image that haunts with all too good cause, the other end of his dreams.

Desirable, nay, essential, as are the skills of talented designers, this city will not be transformed, made whole, even though they come in legions, if each, as your caption put it, is "Striving to leave (his/her) imprint." On the contrary, only in their recognition of the primacy of the whole over the part, street over "objet" building, of the public realm over private gain and display, lies any real hope that the good, the beautiful and compassionate city will be achieved.

— *Joseph Baker*

Boarded up buildings on Overdale site.

Sphinx's imminent collapse is hotly debated

ALAN COWELL
NEW YORK TIMES

GIZA, Egypt — If the sphinx could dispense smart rebuttals with the ease of its inscrutable riddles, what it might be saying right now is that reports of its imminent death have been much exaggerated.

Like some aging celebrity too proud to admit, time's travesties and too frail to deny them, the great monument guarding the pyramids on Cairo's ragged fringes has seen glory give way in relatively recent times to all the vagaries of age.

First, it was the looks, ravaged by wind and weather and pollution beyond a tuck and a nip of facial rebuilding.

Then, it was the legs, swathed in casts of cement that offered no rejuvenation; and then the indignity of monitoring devices placed on its rump to see which way the wind blows and other hazards that limestone is heir to.

Now, its keepers say, after 4,600 years — many of them spent safe and submerged under the desert's sand until outsiders invented the imprecise art of Egyptology in the 19th century — the chest of the monument, half-human, half-animal, is going too.

All that was troubling enough for those who want to halt the monument's erosion. But none of it evoked what appeared in a Cairo newspaper the other day: that the sphinx's head was about to fall off.

Sphinx is 4,600 years old.

"The problem is the chest," said Zaki Hawass, the Egyptian Antiquities Organization's director in charge of possibly the most famed of Egypt's old sights — the Pyramids of Giza and nearby Saqqara. "It's a problem but it's not dangerous. There is no danger of the chest collapsing."

That is not what the Egyptian Gazette, an English-language paper, had reported.

Quoting a British archeologist, identified as Paul Brankart, it said the main problem affecting the monument — known in Arabic as the Father of Terror — was "stopping the head of the sphinx from falling off without covering the monument with a permanent, ugly brace."

That account is not true, Hawass said. Just a few months ago, he said in an interview, experts from the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization examined the head and neck of the monument with ultrasonic devices and pronounced them both to be strong.

The problem, he said, lay in the crumbling of the monument's chest, exposed to wind, pollution and other indignities, like the salts drawn into the sphinx over the years by a rising water table beneath it that has now receded.

Moreover, he said, restoration work using limestone blocks (modelled on those used by the original builders) have succeeded in buttressing a yard-deep cavern across the bottom of the chest that had been created by wind erosion.

Neither do other specialists seem to think that the head — its features worn away over the years and its one-time beard but a memory — is in any immediate danger.

"The head of the sphinx will not fall down," said Rainer Stadelmann, head of the German Antiquities Organization in Cairo. "It is in a much better condition than most people think."

The suggestion that it might tumble, he said, had more to do with newspaper silly-season reporting than archeology.

"It will be another 10 or 15 years until there's greater endangerment," he said. "And it's hoped that much better ways of dealing with limestone will be found before then."

For the sphinx to be at the centre of controversy and misperception is not new. For most of the 1980s, some foreign and Egyptian specialists watched aghast as other officials sought to restore the sphinx's great paws with a concrete that interacted badly with the original limestone and further weakened layers of stone already damaged by rising ground water.

In more recent years, Hawass has led a new restoration effort that has stripped much of the concrete away and replaced it with limestone blocks.

At the same time, tour buses have been barred from areas near the sphinx where up to 60 of them at a time used to idle their motors and thus belch noxious gases onto the monument's stonework.

And, in the village below, a new sewer system has brought down the water table dramatically, so that the threat of waterborne chemicals gnawing away at the monument has been greatly reduced.