

HOUSING THAT BELONGS ON MONTREAL STREETS

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By and large, the course of Montreal's recent development is not a happy one. To a great extent, the city is cluttered up with buildings devoid of any sense of place. They are designed by architects who are oblivious to the city's form and traditions, for patrons who lack an architectural or urban culture. Most critics will argue that the struggle for survival of the downtown is already lost, that the core is fast becoming a lifeless collage of over-sized "complexes", where middle-income housing can no longer be sustained.

Fortunately for Montreal (and for the more responsible members of the architectural community), the picture is not entirely bleak. Sprinkled throughout the Island is a significant number of recently completed low-to-medium cost housing projects that stand as exemplars of good urban architecture. These new developments clearly break away from the monotonous trend of either banal or egocentric buildings that have come to characterize the city's centre. They fit the definition of architecture as "culturally responsible building" because they integrate well with neighbourhood buildings and respect the social and historical context of the city streets as well as their traditional form. It has been Montreal's fate to have been either too poor or too conservative in its urban attitudes to succumb radically to the Modernist transfiguration in public housing. The tradition of small-scale housing development, at ease with the traditional city street, has not entirely been lost. In fact, some critics point out that Montreal's most important contribution to urban architecture in recent years lies precisely in the realm of public housing.

The purpose of this essay is to examine some of the unsung heroes of Montreal architecture in terms of their urban and cultural relevance and in terms of their ability to build upon or repair the urban fabric. The common denominator in these projects is their willingness to sustain rather than oppose existing lifestyles and the conscious desire to be dependent on the physical or cultural circumstances of which they are a part.

To have a critical appreciation of local architecture, one must understand the ordering ideas and the formal structure of the city. The traditional well-balanced urban environment always was made up of clearly defined open spaces that were contained and supported by continuous low profile, medium density building fabric. These spaces constituted a hierarchy of interrelated squares, streets, parks, and gardens. The fabric itself was made up of large number of background buildings and relatively few foreground buildings. The background buildings which gave the city its structure, contained more private and anonymous functions. These included offices, places of commerce and most of the housing, while the foreground buildings, those that

made up the urbanistic statements and housed the socially more significant functions. They included churches, schools, or major civic buildings. The close interdependence between building and spaces, between solid and voids, background and foreground, provided the urban environment with a hierarchical order. It enabled the city to have its landmarks and its focal points stand as visible counterpoint to the neutral urban tissue. It gave the city its manifest clarity.

Modernism, as an architectural and planning ideology, laterally reversed this order. The sense of hierarchy has been jettisoned. The buildings have taken precedence over the spaces. The free-standing buildings conceived a sculpted object is favored over the contiguous ones. The largest buildings are no longer the most significant ones, and the most significant ones are not the best. Few public buildings attain landmark status, and many that ought to be relegated to the rank of fabric posture for attention.

Fortunately, the pendulum is beginning to swing back the other way. The focus of the current architectural debate is shifting from the importance of the autonomous building to the relationship of building to city, city to culture, and city to history. The examples discussed in this study have been chosen precisely because they embody this recent view yet are able to continue the very traditional attitudes about the city: that an urban building is an integral part of a larger organism, the city, and that it derives its meaning from that relationship with its context.

For the most part, Montreal's housing stock was built by small developers producing relatively modest scale projects that responded accurately to the needs and the cultural habits of its occupants. A 10-to-20 unit dwelling project was the norm, too small to upset the urban ecology in a radical way, but large enough to have a presence. David Hanna, an urban geographer who has studied the history of housing in Montreal, persuasively explains the reason for, and the benefits of the cyclical and small-scale housing industry. The well-defined construction cycles throughout the city's history, together with the relatively modest size of the development ventures, shaped our city and gave it an immense variety in housing. The diversity relates equally to the building typology as to architectural expression of the housing.

In more recent times, Montreal had not been spared from the violent intrusion of large housing projects such as the Rock Hill Apartments, La Cite, Place Frontenac, and Fort de la Montagne. Mercifully, these have been relatively few compared to other North American cities. The local market conditions, and the nature of the building industry have maintained a tradition of modest-size housing developments. Non-corporate housing developers as well as small contracting firms specializing in housing are still common. This has been particularly evident in the realm of public housing, where a marked effort has been made by municipal authorities to sustain the tradition and to encourage the fragmentation of large projects, even where economic considerations or needs could warrant the construction of larger projects.

The story of Montreal's public housing began in earnest in 1942, with the construction of la Cite Jardin du Tricentenaire, located northeast of Parc Maisonneuve, near the Olympic Village. The project originally called for 500 units but was aborted after 168 units were completed. Unlike all his successors, it contained only detached dwelling units; there were no multiple-unit residential blocks. Cite Jardin remains today one of the most successful Canadian applications of the

Radburn plan, a 1920 Garden-City concept developed by Clarence Stein and based on the principal of segregation of auto traffic from pedestrian movement within the residential districts. It is a significant project, but one that stood somewhat apart from the rest of the city, and it had no real follow up.

Les Habitations Jeanne-Mance, located along de Boulevard de Maisonneuve, one block east of Boulevard Saint-Laurent, was completed in the mid-1950s and was the first significant and largest-ever public housing project built in the centre of the city. The project was imposed on the municipality by the provincial government of Maurice Duplessis, who defined its form, scope, and location. The mayor, Jean Drapeau, was violently opposed to the project but was unable to prevent it. Ironically, Drapeau was the man who later came to rally behind many large-scale projects, including the Olympic Village, stated at the time that we had entered a new Nuclear Age, and in the event and of a nuclear war, it would be nearly impossible to evacuate the inhabitants from the proposed towers in an efficient manner. At the time, public housing was the exclusive jurisdiction of the province. In fact, the city administration did not even include a housing authority.

Les Habitations Jeanne-Mance, designed by architects Greenspoon, Freedlander and Dunne with architects Rother, Bland and Trudeau acting as planning consultants, stood at the time for progressive urban renewal. The project conformed to a simple planning formula that had an impeccable, albeit a limited logic: that the quality of life within a neighborhood has more to do with the quality of light, sunshine, greenspace, and levels of hygiene than with traditional urban values. As such, this “urban regeneration process” began with a radical clearing of the site and the old “quartier” and was replaced with what is essentially a park, onto which are deposited several low-rise blocks interspersed with a few high towers to compensate for the low-density of the low-profile buildings. In such a planning formula, there are no more fronts and no more backs to the buildings, there are no more lanes, no more streets, no more complementary solids, and voids. There are no more private or semi-private outdoor spaces. The project was the embodiment of a heroic, but fundamentally anti-urban vision.

Although the city was to wait until 1967 to have its own housing authority, the *Service de l'habitation de Montreal*, it had begun negotiations with the province for greater autonomy in a field of housing since 1965.

When Petite Bourgogne, the second public housing project of importance was started in 1966, the responsibility for its design and management was given over to the city. Not unlike Les Habitations Jeanne-Mance, it was conceived at first as a “conventional” urban renewal project of magnitude. However, the city rapidly rejected the *tabula rasa* strategy used in the planning of the Habitations Jeanne-Mance and adopted instead a gender attitude towards the insertion of new buildings in an older neighborhood to maintain and repair the urban fabric and rebuild or rehabilitate as many existing dwelling units as possible. The designers, Ouellette Reeves, Allain, where no doubt conscious of the current urban theories about connections between old and new parts of the city, and about sympathetic attitudes towards older neighborhoods. Most importantly, the city would reduce the scale of the project from 800 to 315 dwelling units. But because of its visit visibility, its scale, and its marked delineation, Petite Bourgogne was still perceived by some residents and outsiders alike as an isolated ghetto in the city.

Petite-Bourgogne was the first child of the recently constituted *Service de l'habitation*, while undertaking its second venture, *Operation 300-logements*, (a project unrelated to the later housing programs, *Operation 10,000-logements* and *Operation 20,000-logements*) that the city finally set the tone and defined the policy for the future housing developments. Architect Guy Legault, the Service's first director and its guiding light reduced, once again, the scale of the project (completed in 1969) by fragmenting it into four 75-units' developments and dispersing them in unrelated neighborhoods in the city.

This process of small-scale interventions, virtually always built on vacant land, continues today. Each project becomes an opportunity for urban repair and constitutes a more humane manner of implanting social housing in the city.

Les Habitations Notre-Dame, designed by architects Mercier, Boyer, Mercier stand as one of the better illustrations of its dual-purpose mission: that of providing "background" public housing, and that of repairing and consolidating a damaged urban fabric. This the project, located along Rue Notre-Dame, both east and west of rue Viau is nearly completed and includes 75 low-cost dwelling units spread over 11 separate sites, all of which are "residues" of expropriation done for the construction of the Ville-Marie Expressway. When the expressway was built, a series of adjacent city blocks were "decapitated" as they literally lost what is commonly referred as the "*tetes d'ilots*", the end-buildings that gives the streets it's urban facade and shields the semi-public inner spaces and service lanes from public viewing.

The project was conceived as a "re-completion" of the city blocks, with a series of triplexes not very different from those of the neighborhood, but different enough in their architectural language to set them apart from their predecessors and to express unequivocally their variances of scale, program, and construction. These building speak of Montreal, of its block morphology, and of its occupants.

Not all the good examples of this new architecture to public or social housing. Les Cours Sainte-Famille, built in 1984 and designed by architects Cayouette and Saia is one of the most successful medium-cost insert in a close-fitting urban street. Its expression is frankly contemporary even though this project is more concerned with the issue of urban continuity than with its own strictly functional requirements. The project is built around a private internal courtyard which gives it a unique sense of place, but without in any way disassociating itself from the street of which it is a part. When compared to the adjacent Victorian houses, the project is tight and compact, yet a comfortable addition to rue Sainte-Famille.

Two other private-sector projects developed and designed by architect Dan Hanganu, on Nun's Island, are possibly the best and most credible illustrations that good housing can be both contemporary and contextual. Although both were built on vacant land and away from the city centre, these townhouse projects have a distinct urban character. The initial project, on rue de Gaspé, and dating from 1980, was Hanganu's first venture into housing of that type. Without being an tangible copy of any housing project in the city, this project embodies and continues a well-established Montreal housing vocabulary of double-hung windows, elevated and protected main entry, predominant verticality, wood construction, masonry mitoyen walls, and ornamented

brick veneer. While the units depart from the traditional row-house, they are, nevertheless a correct response to conditions of site, living style, and market realities.

Hanganu's second project on rue Corot, dating from about the same time, is possibly Montreal's most elegant contemporary housing complex. Like their sister project, it is a terrace of townhouses built on vacant land, but in this case, overlooking the Saint Lawrence River. Despite its relatively low overall density, the row of houses has a vigorous street presence. Here one finds no references to the traditional Montreal housing vocabulary. The form and expression are more derivative of early 20th-century social housing in Europe than a reinterpretation of local housing design. Nonetheless, the project sits comfortably in its milieu and relates more successfully to its context than most similar developments on the Island. As a new contemporary housing prototype for Montreal, it sets a new standard of architectural excellence.

In direct contrast to Hanganu's low density housing projects on Nun's Island, is Mario Biocca's *Cooperative d'habitation l'Escale*, built in 1986 on avenue du Park at the very centre of the Milton Park area. It is a tight, high-density, multi-use infill project that embodies the essence of meaningful background architecture. The building acknowledges its privileged position on the corner of a city block. It establishes a sympathetic relationship with its immediate neighbors, and it grows directly out of its contextual reality. The building contains two shops at grade level and 15 dwelling units on the upper floors. To the passerby, the eye is first drawn to the new building, but in fact, it is an addition to a smaller adjacent building to the north. As such, they were conceived made of two distinct parts: one old, and one new. Despite some dated Postmodernist appliques, the facade deals cleverly with the problem of scale manipulation. It is inevitable and somewhat disconcerting to compare this project to its counterpart across the street, an overblown pseudo-Quebecois farmhouse crowned with a plastic, orange-coloured roof decorated with make-believe vinyl-clad dormers.

If one could describe projects such as *Les Habitation Jeannne-Mance*, *Habitat 67*, and the *Olympic Village*, as standing at the heroic end of the housing spectrum in Montreal, then one would place *Cooperative Louis-Cyr* on saint-Jacques Street and *Les Habitation de Grand-Pre* on the architecturally and urbanistic silent end. In their self-conscious desire to relegate themselves to a background position, these projects exemplify small "a" architecture at its best. They are certainly non-modern, insofar as their main urban role is to restructure the block and to be part of continuum rather than assertion of formal and functional independence from setting. In their desire to contribute to this reconfiguration process, and to integrate themselves totally in a family of neighboring buildings, they unabashedly resort to the use of familiar architectural language of the Montreal rowhouse without any visible attempt to reinterpret it.

Bianchi and Voissard's 1984 housing project on rue Saint-Andre, north of rue Roy, follows the same ideological premise. As an infill in a milieu of traditional Montreal triplexes, this project blends in so effortlessly that, except for some subtleties in the details of the facade, one hardly is aware that this is a new addition to the street. Here is the ultimate example of background architecture. In its literal sense, all the traditional elements of domestic architecture of the plateau Mont-Royal are used: the sculpted parapet, the curving external access stairs, the polychrome brickwork and the guillotine window. It is obvious that the textual re-use of familiar elements

implies a loss of critical comment, which the building could have made. Nonetheless, this loss is offset by the project's significant contribution to the re-culturalization of the street.

Until the 1950's, Montreal had developed and maintained a strong architectural and planning tradition, which was manifest in the institutional buildings, the conventual architecture, the urban villas on the Mountain, and most importantly, in its medium-density housing. This tradition produced not only a readable and cohesive cityscape but gave rise to some of the more outstanding residential streets to be found in any North American city. These streets, which urbanist Jean-Claude Marsan aptly baptized *rues spectacles*, or joyous places of healthy interaction and unlimited visual interest. In his book, *Montreal in Evolution*, he describes interesting examples of two such streets: rue Laval south of avenue des Pins, and avenue de Lorimier south of avenue Mont-Royal.

No tradition can be preserved unimpaired and forever within a natural evolving culture and city. Lifestyle change, socio-economic realities undergo interminable mutations, technology modifies our means of construction. A vital architecture reflects this, avoiding the repetition of the past, comfortable as it may be.

Dan Hanganu resisted this nostalgic reflex in the design of his housing. In the Parc Quesnel project of 1984 on rue Quesnel between rue Guy and avenue Atwater in Petite-Bourgogne, no ambiguity about the affirmation of its modernity, there is no giving way to the safety of recycling old forms. The project responds to its context in the broadest and most meaningful sense, for it makes references to the cultural and physical framework within which the work has been conceived. It is an architecture that speaks of connections, continuity, and the interdependency of building and setting, that is to say, the “essence of place”. Here, the traditional elements of the architecture of the housing terraces of the *quartier* reappear, albeit in a reinterpreted manner. The porte-cochere, the polychromies of the façade, the solid massing, the predominance of the vertical over the horizontal, and the “punched” window are elements that are retained and recycled, but not copied. They are the sympathetic quotes from a past architecture.

Imitation, duplication, or subservience, all constitute familiar strategies for responding to context and for establishing physical relationships within an existing milieu. The analogical reference, as a contrast to the above, establishes an association, not based on repetition, but derived from a process of reinterpretation of existing forms or from the abstraction of a familiar language of architecture. The Centre d'accueil Armand-Lavigne on rue Chapleau in Plateau Mont-Royal by architects Blouin, Blouin, and Associates, completed in 1981, illustrates this latter course of action for urban integration. The centre is both an institution and a large housing development that sits in the middle of an all-residential area. The project reflects the dual nature by being simultaneously a focal point and a background building in its neighbourhood.

If some of the latter-day small housing developments have given Montreal a reason for cautious optimism in architecture, the other significant contributors to the New Architecture, are the very noteworthy large-scale recycling projects. The conservation/recycling movement began in earnest with the birth of the non-profit housing cooperative movement which led to the saving and conversion of abandoned schools. In general, these first ventures were relatively small, containing 30 units on the average. They contributed to a new awareness of the urban

environment and demonstrated the economic viability of renovation. Eventually the preservation of larger institutional buildings such as Couvent du Bon-Pasteur and College Mont-Saint-Louis, both on rue Sherbrooke, east of boulevard Saint-Laurent, and Cours Le Royer in Old Montreal came about as a matter of course.

Valuable as these projects are, conservation and rehabilitation are passive forms of building that cannot respond to all the changing realities of an urban reality as a new architecture can. Not all older buildings can be adapted easily to contemporary needs, or incorporate modern facilities, or respond to present-day construction or legal constraints. One must look to new buildings and to new architecture to make vital, critical, and contemporary comments about the city and our common values.

The recent housing projects described here have one thing in common: they have accepted their responsibility to the public spaces of the city, which is to say, they have rediscovered the street, the street that is not merely a road, but a public space within the city, and an integral component of urban life. With the advent of the Modern Movement, the street had been under attack, partly because of the misguided perception that the traditional street was a constraining organism which could no longer fulfil its role, and partly because of the preoccupation with the building as an independent construct, subject only to the authority of its function. The revisionists of Modernism no longer accept this view.

Suburbia, unfortunately, is still creeping into the odd place of the city as can be witnessed in several recent redevelopments in Pointe-Saint-Charles, the Cooperative les Tanneries, in Saint-Henri, and Les Floralies built on the abandoned railroad yards south of Petite-Bourgogne. These low-density suburban implants constitute a complete reversal in the traditional order of normal city growth.

Good architecture always speaks of its physical and cultural circumstances. It is through architecture that we understand our cities. Good cities are places where the whole adds up to much more than the sum of its parts; where each building is part of a larger whole; where there is a healthy density of use and occupancy to allow for healthy and voluntary interaction; where a balance exists between the public and the private domains, where its architecture is the embodiment and the expression of the common rules of conduct and place.