Visual History Reviews

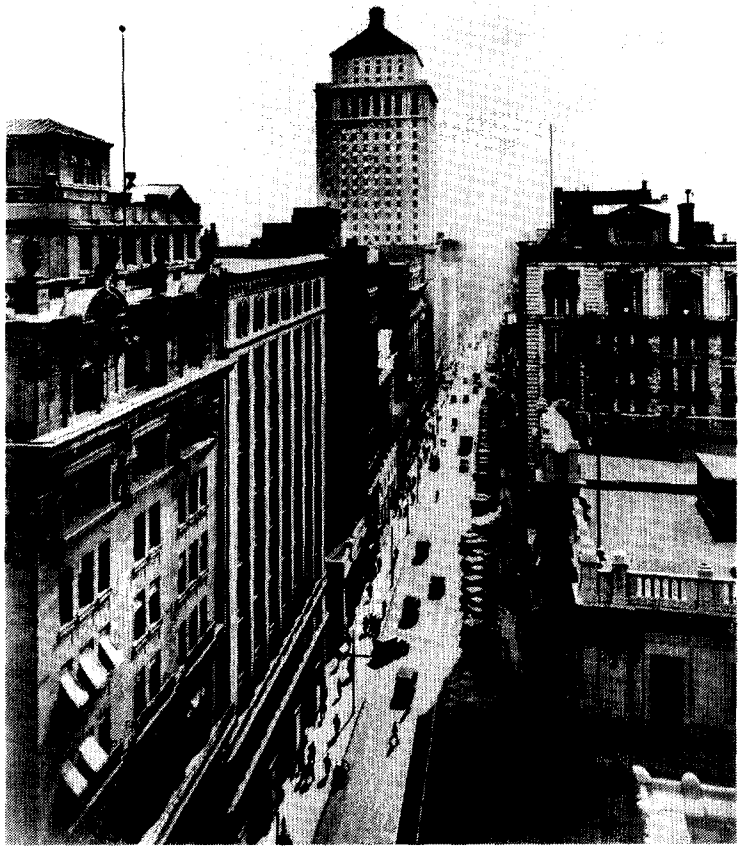
Of Monuments and Men: A Review of 'Montreal Metropole'

Architects and buildings played pivotal roles in Montreal's modern metamorphosis. This is the main point underscored in the exhibition 'Montreal Metropole, 1880–1930,' presented at the National Gallery from 27 November 1998 to 24 January 1999. The show is not about the way Montreal architects operated during this half-century. Rather, it argues that the appearance of particular building types – office buildings, railway stations, stores, theatres, hotels, museums – is evidence of the emergence of a modern metropolis.

Is this idea news? What student of urban and architectural history would argue otherwise? Very few, perhaps, but never before have so many drawings of Montreal's most-inspired edifices appeared in one place. And never before has it been intimated that the architecture of a Canadian city, Montreal, was as modern as Chicago, the birthplace of the skyscraper, or other 'world-class' cities.

The exhibition begins with a wall-sized list of seventy architects responsible for the design projects represented in the exhibition. These names include famous architects such as Bruce Price and Percy Nobbs as well as more obscure figures. The first room is devoted to the architecture of transportation: train stations, airports, bridges. Montreal's Grain Elevator no. 2 is given substantial attention here, just as it was when the world's best-known modernist, the Swiss-born architect Le Corbusier, included the utilitarian structure, designed by engineers from the John S. Metcalf Co. in 1910–12, in his modern manifesto, *Vers une architecture*, published in 1923.

Subsequent galleries are showcases for the buildings representing such themes as the Financial Heart of Canada, the Civic Centre, the City Expands, and the Industrial City Beautiful. Each section begins



St James Street and the business district, showing the Royal Bank of Canada tower, 1930. This twenty-storey tower exemplified the conservative style of head-office towers in Montreal and inspired the city council to accept a formula linking building heights to street widths in 1929.

with one or two examples highlighted as the first to do this or that. The red sandstone New York Life Insurance Co. building on Place d'Armes, for example, designed in 1888 by the New York firm Babb Cook and Willard, was the first in a line of wider, higher buildings for the city, and 'set new standards for technical excellence and comfort in Montreal workplaces.'

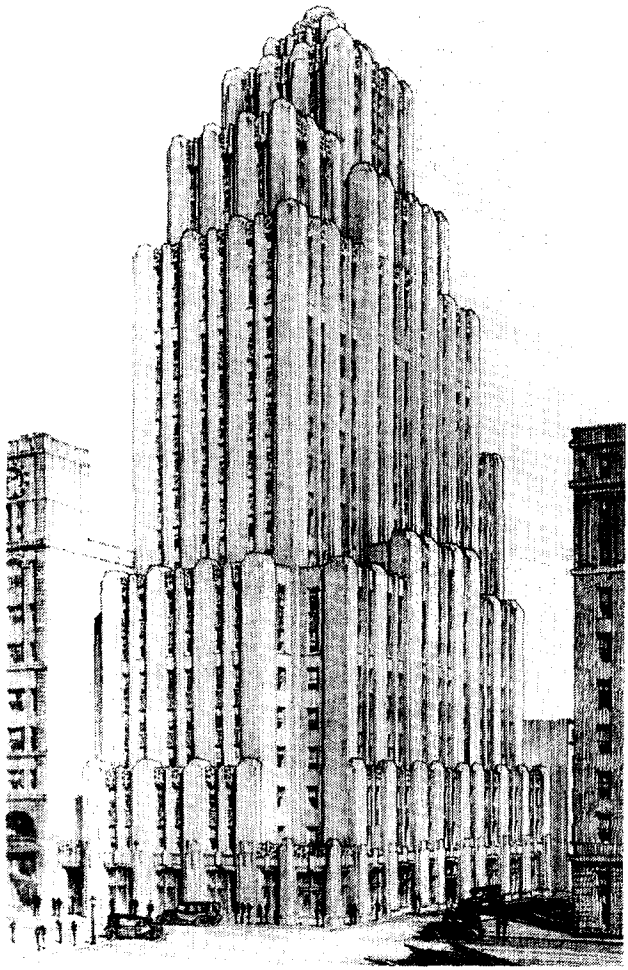
Organized by Montreal's Canadian Centre for Architecture and restaged by the National Gallery, 'Montreal Metropole' is impressive to the point of being overwhelming. The show includes about 350 drawings, photographs, maps, and other artifacts. It gives the impression of

a comprehensive inventory of architectural information on Montreal's monumental buildings of the era. Like the upper-class domestic interiors of the period under consideration, the exhibition layout at the National Gallery expresses the Victorian notion of *horror vacui*, a fear of empty space. The walls of the galleries are packed floor to ceiling, like the late nineteenth-century parlour, with interesting things to see.

This is not to say that the exhibition materials were carelessly chosen. Curators Isabelle Gournay and France Vanlaethem know their subject intimately. Gournay curated the highly successful exhibition at the CCA in 1990, 'Ernest Cormier and the Université de Montreal.' Vanlaethem is the former editor of the professional journal *ARQ*, and has published extensively on modernism in Quebec. The exhibition is accompanied by a 222-page book, *Montreal Metropolis, 1880–1930*, edited by the curators (also available in French), with contributions by scholars drawn from a number of disciplines: Anthony Sutcliffe, Paul-André Linteau, Marcel Fournier, Véronique Rodriguez, David Hanna, and Walter Van Nus.

The sheer quantity of material on the walls of the museum, however, means that some of the scholarly points made in the book are difficult to glean from the exhibition itself. This situation is not helped by the show's organization. 'Montreal Metropole' appears in four temporary exhibition galleries at the top of Moshe Safdie's majestic ramped colonnade, next to the Great Hall (otherwise known as the Café l'Entrée) at the National Gallery. The material is grouped by building type rather than theme, as it is in the book. The density of material and the division of the galleries into six even smaller spaces gives visitors little opportunity to make links between these building types. It is equally difficult to find on the walls of the gallery Gournay's fascinating look in the book at the magnetism of Montreal for foreign architects, especially those from Boston and New York (not Chicago, as was the case in Toronto). Also lost is Sutcliffe's subtle argument that although Montreal more closely resembled such provincial capitals as Glasgow or Milan in Europe, or Detroit and Baltimore in the United States, it was nonetheless influenced by giant world cities, such as London, Paris, Berlin, and especially New York. By importing ideas from cities much bigger than itself, according to Sutcliffe, Montreal's urban experience was unique in North America. Since no material from other cities is included in the exhibition, this point is impossible to discern from the show alone.

Second, the typological organization means that entire building types – hospitals, for example – are conspicuously absent from 'Montreal Metropole.' Clearly, the curators could not include every building



Aldred Building, by Barott and Blackader, 1934. Its stepped profile and non-historicist ornamentation illustrate the influence of New York's Art Deco skyscrapers on Montreal architecture.

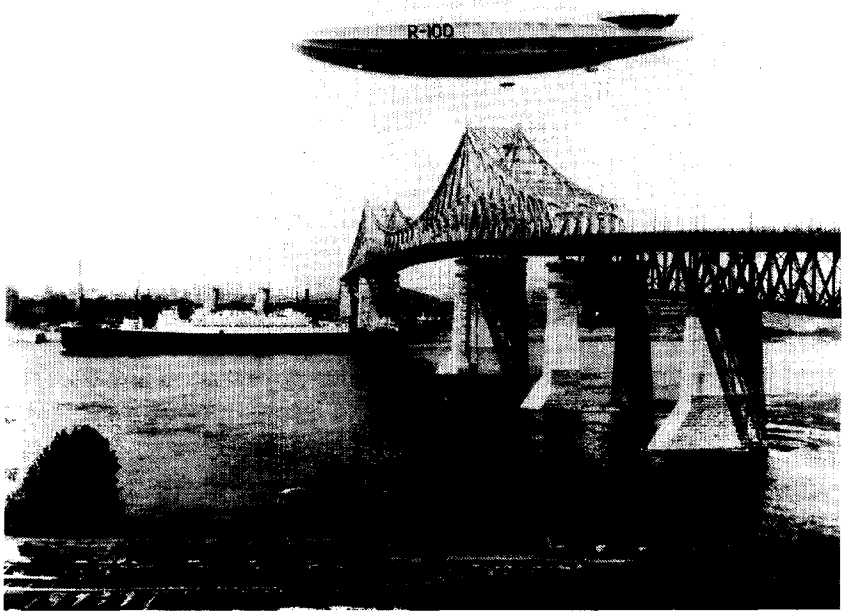
type that appeared in the burgeoning metropolis. The omission of hospitals, however, is particularly perplexing, since they were among the first buildings to exhibit many of the characteristics emphasized in the show: multiple complex uses, growing professional specializations, functional zoning, efficiency, and accommodation for automobiles, elevators, and a

host of other innovative technologies. Besides, hospitals such as Montreal's Royal Victoria were designed by prominent and highly specialized foreign architects – in this case Henry Saxon Snell of Britain and Stevens and Lee of Boston – and thus would have made a nice link between the exhibition material and the arguments articulated in the book.

Despite these organizational challenges, there is plenty to delight the eye in 'Montreal Metropole.' Most of the architectural drawings are large-scale ink presentation drawings on linen, beautifully framed, and mounted reproductions of blueprints. Both these forms of representation are now obsolete. Smaller texts and some photographs appear in glass cases in each gallery, cantilevered from the walls or in table-style cases. The exhibition also includes some spectacular examples of Canadian painting. In its first incarnation at the CCA, Adrien Hébert's 1928–30 painting of the Old Port, *Loading Grain, Montreal Harbour*, whose luminous hues absolutely radiated in the sombre light of the main galleries, greeted visitors at the entrance of the show. Here in the National Gallery's version of 'Montreal Metropole,' the painting appears in a less conspicuous place. And at both venues, various pieces of real buildings provide refreshing counterpoints to the congested gallery-scapes of two-dimensional material, such as a lamppost from the Bank of Montreal Annex of 1901–5 by McKim Mead and White, and a few steel grilles from one of the city's best preserved Art Deco interiors, the ninth-floor restaurant and lounge by Jacques Carlu at the Eaton department store.

A less successful aspect of the exhibition as it appears at the National Gallery is the addition of a second, parallel show, 'Views of Montreal,' made up of prints, watercolours, and paintings of Montreal from the museum's permanent collection. Complementary exhibitions are a great idea. The CCA, in fact, frequently stages smaller, highly provocative shows in the hallcases leading to its main galleries and library. But in this instance, 'Views of Montreal' is interspersed among four unconnected galleries in the Canadian Art section of the museum and has no clear physical link to 'Montreal Metropole.' Many of the images in 'Views of Montreal' are directly relevant to points made in 'Montreal Metropole' and are included in the book, such as A.F. Dunlop's splendid 1890 inked perspective of the entrance to the Temple Building. This six-storey building was considered 'among the finest of its kind in North America' and became a popular locale for architects' offices. Why wasn't 'Views of Montreal' rearranged as a coherent second show with a real connection to the larger exhibition?

Even though 'Montreal Metropole' is old-fashioned in many ways, the show makes a substantial contribution to our understanding of



Photomontage of Jacques Cartier bridge, c. 1930, with dirigible, ship, and railway tracks. The 3-kilometre-long structure was intended to increase tourism and trade with the United States.

Canadian architecture. Its more traditional aspects, drawing on the methods and assumptions of art history, include the way it looks at building commissions in isolation and how it equates a place's importance to the renown of its architects. In this way, 'Montreal Metropole' highlights the city's 'greatest hits' and underlines, with a hint of nostalgia, Montreal's long-faded reputation as a centre of power and beauty.

'Montreal Metropole' should be enthusiastically applauded, however, for several important innovations. Thankfully, it does not employ the old 'Two Solitudes' model of Montreal's development (although this theme is touched on by Sutcliffe and Linteau in the book). It also moves away from outdated art historical stylistic and chronological models of architectural change that emphasize formal similarities among examples. The buildings portrayed in the show are, for the most part, shown in plan, section, and elevation, rather than through scattered details. And perhaps most important, it looks beyond architectural form and considers the social, cultural, and economic

factors that affected building shape. A particularly bold assertion of the exhibit, in fact, is that Montreal's growth from 1880 to 1930 mainly related to an expansion of its transportation systems. Not since the 1991 exhibition 'The 1920s: Age of the Metropolis,' staged by the Montreal Museum of Fine Arts, and the CCA's 'Opening the Gates of Eighteenth-Century Montreal,' which opened the following year, has the vital link between architecture and urban form been so closely scrutinized in a Canadian exhibition.

For these reasons, the book, in particular, will be extremely useful for teaching Canadian architecture, and should act as an important methodological model for research on other Canadian metropolises. And, because the book includes material on the international context for Montreal's meteoric rise to urban magnificence, it also goes way beyond the limits of local history – always a danger in exhibitions exploring the architectural history of a single place. As for the architects whose names appear on the wall at the entrance to the show, they are one step closer to fame and glory.

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