Between Everywhere, Connecting Everything, and Nowhere

Mark Pimlott: Delft University of Technology, The Netherlands

ABSTRACT

This visual essay concerns connective spaces without status of their own, spaces that are presented as though free of values, transparent, only functional. The spaces of Montréal’s ‘ville intérieure’ of the 1960s are taken to be representative. These are spaces that connect buildings, or other places, and so find themselves repositories for things and activities that cannot be placed within view anywhere else. The places are like those associated with infrastructure truly un-homely spaces, produced by a combination of accident and necessity, they are closest in character to ruins, in nature, and thereby, paradoxically, free, and models, for spaces to come.

It was in Montréal, years ago. Moving through those endless spaces was second nature to me. I wandered along routes that bypassed the regular arrangements of streets and buildings, of outdoors and indoors, by walking through and under them, in favour of a ramble across an all-embracing, all-inclusive, continuous interior realm, an everywhere apart from the world, which one traversed like the incident-strewn landscape that was characteristic of the vacant lots and pavements of the city above.

There were times when one moved through this interior with little awareness of where one was; or, one would stride across a segment of space purposefully or without purpose; or, one would encounter tunnels, perfectly designed, that simply connected from a conservative, colonial, history – precisely, the 1960s – which saw the city transformed into focus. These places of consciousness were where form and architecture of the interior. An attention to the moment came into focus. These places of consciousness were where form and the spaces were almost invisible – pauses in the spaces of flows – were spaces that were at once visible and invisible, a breeding between two opposite characters; at once monumental and mundane, vulgar. They tried it all on, playing casual and grand all at once, familiar and false. With their plays to being known, they offended, and usurped one’s anonymous freedom. These were the interior malls and atria, all fountains, mirrors and glass, bred from the union of opposites and although the relatives of streets in the real world, they were, paradoxically, unbearable.

In the great spaces of movement, the continuous flow of people was balanced with the congestion that formed at the edges and in the corners of these great spaces. While the constant absorption and expulsion of huge numbers of people continued through the concourses, others waited, as though floating in eddies of still water. Beyond the edges of the concourses but still moving with the flow, one was pushed into the tributaries of a network of passageways, narrowed, yet the only way through; conduits that were either clogged or clear. When the spaces of movement were purely so, purposelessness set in, and dust and filth gathered in its corners, as did its unseen denizens, like the barnacles on the side of a ship, collecting anything that would be left for them. And if there was enough space, there was a fungal sprouting of waffle stands, game machines, shooting galleries, and racetracks under domes, whose music played endlessly whether anyone played or not. Everyone knows there is a science to this kind of thing an ‘ecology’ of shopping, which transforms every pause into an opportunity to capitalise supermarkets, shopping malls, and even airports and museums are designed to calculate for these ‘eddies’, where people might pause to momentarily avoid the endless rush of people, and make them ‘pay’; but the great yet ad hoc spaces of the ‘ville intérieure’ too crude to account for them, and so other forms of life gestated and bloomed. And seeing this life, while guided along with the crowd, in this space that was between everywhere and connected everything, or being part of it, settling amongst others or on one’s own, in the many folds and creases of its ambulating routes, one forgot oneself, and felt free.

One’s receptiveness to these kinds of spaces came from childhood, adolescence and young adulthood in Montréal, over a period of history – precisely the 1960s – which saw the city transformed from a conservative, colonial, laissez-faire economic capital to a city of modernity in spirit and form and act, which celebrated refinement and of vulgarity. Quite naturally, the proper spaces appeared in those interiors where people come together and are aware of each other; and in those residual spaces among others in which one feels alone or still, and hence, at once, feels both alienation and intimacy; passageways, the eddies and corners, clearings. And I picture them, simply, where I have found myself, in the hope of retrieving them, and their Utopias Lost, and the freedoms they seemed to promise, anywhere, everywhere.
Figure 3: Montréal, 2011 ©Mark Pimlott.

Figure 4: Montréal, 2011 ©Mark Pimlott.
Figure 9: Montreal, 2004 ©Mark Pimlott.

Figure 10: Montreal, 2005 ©Mark Pimlott.
Figure 11: Montréal, 2005 ©Mark Pimlott.

Figure 12: Montréal, 2004 ©Mark Pimlott.
Figure 15: Montréal, 2004 ©Mark Pimlott.

Figure 16: Montréal, 2007 ©Mark Pimlott.
NOTES

6. In Montréal, the English minority— who firmly established themselves after the military victory of England over France in Québec in 1763— dominated a French majority benighted by the prescriptions of the Roman Catholic Church and institutionally corrupt provincial governments. The Ville-Marie development was the making of Donald Gordon, the chairman of Canadian National Railways, and William Zeckendorf, a renowned New York developer. Gordon commissioned Zeckendorf and his in-house architects, Mappin & Webb, led by Ieoh Ming Pei, to make a master plan for a 22-acre plot of three city blocks owned by the railway at the ridge between the historical centre, oriented toward the St. Lawrence river and the burgeoning commercial centre on the escarpment above it, in the shadow of the hill called Mount Royal. The site had been a deep railway cutting since the beginning of the twentieth century. The new development had the Central Railway station at its heart—a functional room in the mid-Depression style—and two super-blocks or mega-structures at either end: Place Ville-Marie to the north (completed 1962) and Place Bonaventure to the south (completed 1967). The underground transport network was plugged into the grid in 1966, while a new metropolitain and regional elevated motorway system was completely integrated by 1967. Added to this were the utopian buildings and quasi-urban infrastructure and scenery of the Universal Exposition exposition. See Lortie, André [ed.], The 60s: Montréal Thinks Big (Montréal, Canadian Centre for Architecture, 2004).
7. The development, at its heart, inspired all that followed in the growth of the city centre. Central to the Ville-Marie development—is its master plan by I M Pei with Henry N Cobb and Vincent Ponte—was the idea of a congested and interconnected three-dimensional multi-level downtown core (inspired by the ideal city Sforzinda designed by Leonardo da Vinci), which managed the movement and distribution of vehicular transport underground and pedestrians under and at street level each were free to move as they required, and this was equated to a kind of desire. The connections to the suburban and national train line (CN), the autoroutes and the Métro rendered unto the development a captives population who worked in offices above and in the vicinity, many of which were connected to the below-surface network of pedestrian passageways, at whose heart was the shopping promenade of Place Ville-Marie itself, the representational core of the development and the symbol, with its cruciform office tower, of the rejuvenated city of Montréal. Any place that was connected to the Métro, or was anywhere near Place Ville-Marie, wanted to connect to its network, and so the network grew incrementally and ad hoc, (as had been Ponte’s hopes), and spread out in myriad directions. In this underground city or ville intérieure network, the Métro stations were the monuments alongside a small group of public interiors, such as the shopping promenade of Place Ville-Marie, the exhibition halls of Place Bonaventure, the concourse of Central Station; and in a parallel, later development known as the French Axis, Place des Arts, Complexe Desjardins, Place Guy-Favreau and the Palais des Congrès; and finally, the campus of the Université du Québec à Montréal. See Peter Blake, Downtown in 3D in Architectural Forum (September 1966); Jan C. Rowan, The Story of Place Ville-Marie in Canadian Architect col. 8, no. 2 (February 1962).