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 spaces 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, to 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 spaces, or pass dull runs of shoe repair stores or dry cleaners or shops for umbrellas and luggage, or doughnut shops or coffee bars, or tobacco stores or shops with watches or transistor radios or camera equipment: those kinds of stores one couldn't imagine being used by anyone, yet those that always came to mind when contemplating the worn elbow on one's jacket or the heel of one's shoe or the low battery in one's tape recorder.

These places, which were not really places at all, would suddenly be punctuated by clearings of sorts, open spaces where one was aware of oneself and all that was around; aware of other people, of an obligation to decision or commitment, of space itself, an architecture of the interior. An attention *for the moment* came into focus. These places of consciousness were where form and space and material were all together, and articulate. And then, between these spaces of attention in which one was aware of oneself, others, one's place and the movement of oneself and others and the spaces that 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.[1]

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 flotsam in eddies of still water.[2] 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,[3,4] 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*' were 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 ambling routes, one forgot oneself, and felt free.[5]

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 its awakening in all that it did.[6] Central to its physical and civic change was the development of a 22-acre plot of three city blocks at the threshold 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, called Ville-Marie, with Place Ville-Marie as its epicentre.[7] Through its new interior spaces, the entire city took on the character — and appearances and connectivity — of a single, coherent entity.[8] An 'underground city' or '*ville intérieure*' spread beneath it and around it in a haphazard manner, as though the expressions of some kind of desire to create another city that lived in the midst and depths of that which was known;[9] and this interior had its own logic, its own character, its own monuments and mysteries.

As this network continued to spread and connect, it made streams and backwaters, and from time to time, due to a lack of funds or vision, or pure expediency, these opposites coincided; and there were occasions when the backwaters were inundated with public life, and the streams were abandoned and without incident. And so the whole network, many kilometres long, was one of places and non-places, of monumentality and banality, of refinement and of vulgarity. Quite naturally, the proper spaces were balanced by improper spaces. The underground network was not utopian, but bore similar disparities to the city above.

Other urban episodes came to be read in the context of these interiors, which, free of cars, now defined the city's public space. An earlier network of underground pathways that connected buildings on McGill University's campus to the north became part of the greater network by virtue of association, though it was built earlier. This network evoked an undulating landscape: walking in its corridors, following the contour of the land, one turned and stooped as one might follow the individual branches of an extensive system of roots, alongside pipes and conduits that supported life above ground. A pronounced physicality characterised one's experience of the rest of the city, whose paths and terrains were rendered more intimate, sensual, the features of a deep landscape beneath.

In having abandoned that city, an exile by choice in Northern Europe, it seems that the same places reappear, or some phenomena that share deep resemblances with them. They appear 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.
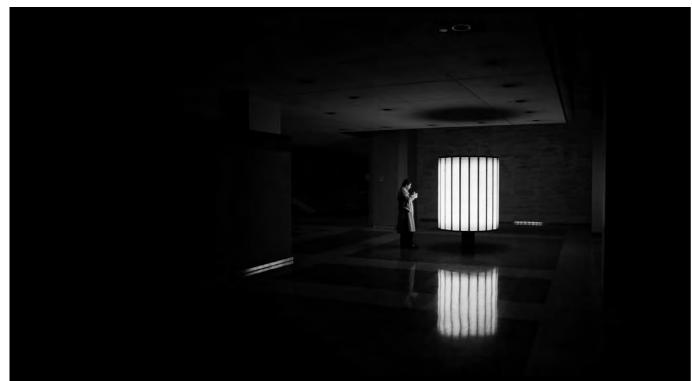
Figure 1: Montréal, 1991 ©Mark Pimlott.

Figure 2: Montréal, 2010 ©Mark Pimlott.

Figure 3: Montréal, 2011 ©Mark Pimlott.

Figure 4: Montréal, 2011 ©Mark Pimlott.

Figure 5: Montréal, 2005 ©Mark Pimlott.

Figure 6: Montréal, 2003 ©Mark Pimlott.

Figure 7: Montréal, 2005 ©Mark Pimlott.
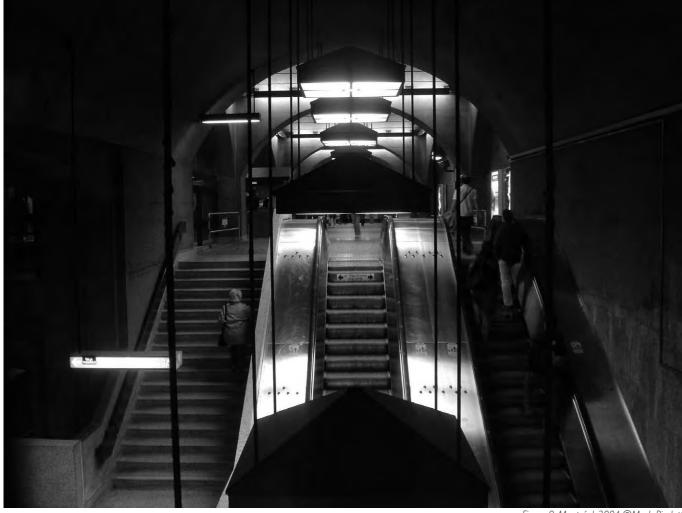

Figure 8: Montréal, 2005 ©Mark Pimlott.

Figure 9: Montréal, 2004 ©Mark Pimlott.

Figure 10: Montréal, 2005 ©Mark Pimlott.

Figure 11: Montréal, 2005 ©Mark Pimlott.

Figure 12: Montréal, 2004 ©Mark Pimlott.

Figure 13: Montréal, 2004 ©Mark Pimlott.

Figure 14: Montréal, 2004 ©Mark Pimlott.

Figure 15: Montréal, 2004 ©Mark Pimlott.

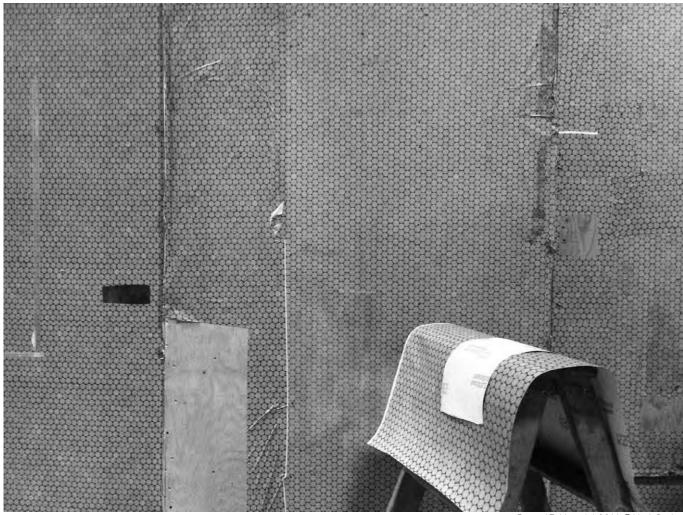*Figure 16: Montréal, 2007 ©Mark Pimlott.*

Figure 17: Montréal, 2011 ©Mark Pimlott.

NOTES

1.   Marc Augé, transl. John Howe, *Non-places: introduction to an anthropology of supermodernity* (London, Verso, 1995)

2.   Rem Koolhaas, 'Junkspace' in Nobuyuki Yoshida [ed.], *Rem Koolhaas, OMA@work*, Architecture and Urbanism, May 2000 Special Issue (Tokyo, A+U Publishing, 2000)

3.   Tae-Wook Cha, 'Ecology' in Chuihua Judy Chung [et al.], *The Harvard Design Guide to Shopping/ Project on the City 2* (Köln: Taschen, 2001)

4.   Victor Gruen, Larry Smith, *Shopping Towns USA: the Planning of Shopping Centers* (New York, Reinhold, 1960)

5.   Henri Lefebvre, *The Production of Space*, transl. Donald Nicholson-Smith (Malden MA: Blackwell, 1991: 16

6.   IIn 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 this group in 1966, while a new metropolitan 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 expo67. 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—its master plan by I M Pei with Henry N Cobb and Vincent Ponte—was the idea of a congested and inter-connected '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 (CNR), the autoroutes and the Métro rendered unto the development a 'captive' 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 hope), 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, Complèxe 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 Progressive Architecture (February 1960); Norbert Schoenauer, 'PVM: Critique One' in *Canadian Architect* col. 8, no. 2 (February 1962)

7.   Vincent Ponte, 'Montréal's Multi-level City Center' in *Traffic Engineering* September 1971

8.   Peter Sijpkes, 'Montréal's Ville Intérieure with Special Reference to the French Axis' in Detlef Mertins [ed.], *Metropolitan Mutations: the Architecture of the Emerging Public Spaces* (Toronto, Royal Architectural Institute of Canada/ Little Brown, 1988)