

Cultural Daily

Independent Voices, New Perspectives

CITYSCAPE and LANDSCAPE: Points of Entry and Epicentres (1)

Maurice Amiel · Wednesday, September 2nd, 2015

General considerations.

In my last two posts I examined the relationship between cityscape and landscape in terms of limits, linkages and memory figures, whereby the land and the history of its urban settlement contributed to the qualification of those figures.

*I have become interested, since then, in the question of the **physical articulation of entry point(s) at a city's limits and of its epicentre(s) where we find its most representative core(s).***

Given that large **cities' limits** tend to visually blur where they meet suburbia, their **perceivable entry point(s)** are generally **dedicated means of access** where they **bridge a major landscape feature**, ex. the Golden Gate Bridge, or where their **physical treatment** such as width, lighting, landscaping, and their **occupancy**, clearly distinguishes them, ex. a “mac-street” leading into town off a highway exit.

Epicentre(s) of a city are generally more perceivable, being associated with **downtown** building concentration **and other activity nodes** that usually provide a city's visual signature ex. Manhattan's skyline.

I have, for practical reason, concentrated on the way some **particularly defined districts of the city treat their limit-signalling architectural cohesion, their limit-crossing dedicated means of access, and their circulation bound epicentres of activity.**

Sometimes, as in the case of the historical core of Montreal a **major epicentre will also be its entry point**, in addition to harbouring the monument to the city's founder. (See feature image)

For ease of first presentation of the topic I have selected two ethnically characterized districts of my city, located at either end of a series of such districts, strung along a major cross island street that has a long history of harbouring immigrant communities.

A comparison of two urban districts' limits, entry points and epicentres.

Chinatown

Montreal's **Chinatown** occupies the first section of the old St Lawrence Road, now Boulevard,

leading out of the fortified historical core. It just so happens that the Jewish, Greek and Portuguese communities have also settled there in adjacent sections of the boulevard, ending with **Little Italy** to be examined in comparison.

*Note: **St Lawrence Blvd**, besides crossing the entire island from south to north, is also the historical divide between Francophone and Anglophone communities of the city. This being so, it is quite understandable that immigrants, probably not wanting to seem to favour one side over the other, chose to settle on and around that social and linguistic divide, and become integrated multilingual citizens!*

The image below shows that section of St Lawrence Blvd between two classic Chinese portal arches that constitute the district's main points of entry, and imaging reference, while delimiting the north and south extent of the district.

The concrete structure, the wood roof and the marble statuary guarding the portals are, with the inscriptions and color scheme, universally recognizable.



Montreal Chinatown portals framing the core business area

The district has no real architectural cohesion that can define its limits, except for the perennial Chinese signs that literally cover them. Some principal community institutions have an identifiable Chinese roof profile and/or decorations, the rest of the building stock consists simply of appropriated pre-existing buildings.

The east-west extension of the district is symbolically delimited with similar but smaller portals at both ends of the district's sole pedestrian street. The edges of the district are street bound north and south but are more irregular on its east side where it meets a sprawling major hospital complex, and to the west where it meets the frayed outer reaches of downtown.

Being so constricted, the district has only a limited amount of residential buildings, making of Chinatown mainly the business and cultural center of the community.

The heavy duty commercial heart of Chinatown is located in large non-descript old commercial buildings and warehouses on St Lawrence Blvd as shown above, while the cultural institutions which serve the community have found their place in a narrower old residential cross street turned into a pedestrian haven.

It is on this street that we found the only building of classic Chinese architectural signature: the local meeting hall for game playing, political discussions and rallies, etc., with its fronting Sun-Yat-Sen Plaza as shown below.

Note the elevated platform-stage with granite bas-relief backdrop and trees gently bending over under an imaginary breeze carrying the pigeon aloft ... talk about an oriental ambiance!



Montreal Chinatown Sun-Yat-Sen Park, its social center

Of course, ever present in the district are the usual eateries, with their regional variants and specialties which attract most of the local and visiting clientele.

Given the intense traffic on St Lawrence Blvd we may think of it as carrying the “entry points” of the district and we may think of the cross pedestrian street as its “epicentre” in part due to its above mentioned traditional architectural heart and pedestrian scale.

Note: A major hotel and community hospital, each bearing distinctive Chinese decorative themes, and planned according to the Feng Shui tradition, are located to the east of St Lawrence Blvd, but within its north-south delimitations, while west of it is located the Community and Cultural Center harbouring exhibitions and performances.

Little Italy

Having settled in the northern suburbs of the city and eventually founding its own municipality there, Montreal’s Italian community remained faithful to its first settlement on St Lawrence blvd where its main socializing park anchors its south end and the Jean Talon Blvd and Public Market its northern one, four city blocs away. Its own hospital and untold number of traditional eateries, coffee houses, and housing with flowered balconies, vegetable gardens, orchards and vines, give the district its Mediterranean flavour.

Of course, emulating most likely the Chinatown portals, the Italian community, which is reputed for its construction skills, particularly masonry, has built two urban doorways of its own marking the northern and southern limits of Little Italy, featuring assemblages of pricy stonework capping concrete columns from which springs a discrete metal arch lit up during holidays and special event.

This strip of St Lawrence Blvd between the arches is the commercial heart of the district, rendered distinctive by the building occupancy pattern, with business at street level and residential occupancy on the top floors, mostly condominiums. (See image below)



Montreal Little Italy northern portal, looking south, on Italian Week Event

Eastward, along the district northern limit, the pre WWII CASA D’ITALIA, next to its home for the elderly, and further east its own hospital, constitute Little Italy’s institutional epicentres, while its traditional informal socializing heart remaining the Little Italy Park, under the watchful eye of the neighbourhood church just outside the southern arch. (See Image below)



Little Italy Park on Italian Week event

Note: At the north-eastern extremity of the old immigrant settlement, the Italian community has built a brand new Community Center aptly named Leonardo Da Vinci; but that is not where Montreal citizenry comes to eat and drink Italian fare or shop for Italian cycles and shoes or plan Italian vacations ... or hear Italian spoken in all its variety.

Little Italy, like Chinatown, remains the home of events and rituals promoting traditional identity, such as the yearly “Italian week” when these images were taken.

*There is something particularly poignant and urban with **the entry and epicentre of these two districts, so clearly pointing to the identity and history of their founding communities:** from imported source of manpower to full participation in the life of the city, the province and the country.*

Discussion

Administratively, Little Italy occupies an area of about fifty city blocks limited by major city streets north and east and by railroads south and west for a population of Italian origin and descent of about 250,000 in the greater Montreal area.

Administratively, Chinatown occupies an area of about ten city blocks limited by major city streets north and south and minor ones east and west for a population of Chinese origin and descent of about 50,000 in the greater Montreal area.

The ratio of population to area may be comparatively the same yet perceptually Chinatown is definitely easier to locate in terms of its limits than is Little Italy; the major difference is the density of symbolic identity indicators with which Chinatown clearly communicates its presence through the intense use of signage in Chinese on all buildings, storefronts, etc. while Little Italy relies on the iconic tri color flag attached to the light posts of its main streets and the Italian sounding names of its businesses and institutions spread over a much wider area, including populations of diverse origins at its edges.

On the whole, both districts have entry points clearly demarcated by the use of ceremonial portals between which are located their epicentres, carriers of their respective identity: dense and exotic for Chinatown, expansive and familiarly Latin for Little Italy.

*What about the role of **the physical landscape** in relation to limits, entry points and epicentres dimensions of these two distinctive city districts?*

It seems to boil down to the strategic location of each district: Chinatown remains close to river shipping and the southern public market of the old city to say nothing of its tourist traffic, while the essential part of Little Italy remains close to the busy interior east-west main street which is its northern limit, and the northern public market where vegetable gardeners can bring their produce; it is also and, most importantly, close to the initial community settlement for continuity of property development and social and economic networking.

It is therefore mainly in terms of the spatial expression of a “social landscape” that limits, entry points and epicentres of both these districts have been articulated in the cityscape.

More on this subject when I visit and observe a new town in town and a garden city neighbourhood in the same terms of limits, entry points and epicentres as spatial expressions of a social landscape.

Credit all photos: Maurice Amiel

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