Cultural Daily

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Figures of the Plex building entrance (bis)

Maurice Amiel · Wednesday, November 15th, 2017

Preliminary note

When I started to examine the way the physical city set the table, so to speak, for patterns of urban sociability, I spoke of **settings, pathways and rituals** as the main social-spatial figures articulating those patterns.

I wish to highlight these figures in the exploration of the spatial and social dimensions of the entrance to the Montreal **Tri-Plex** building type, defined by the fact that each of its three units has a civic address and a street entrance door.

In the case of the selected **Tri-plex** building one unit is on the ground floor and the other two are on the upper floor, as shown on the feature image, and as reprised below.

88-90-92 Mozart Street, Montreal

Pathways

The building was built in 1924 and exhibits a **split pathway** system from sidewalk to street entrance: a direct walkway through a tiny front yard for the ground floor unit, and a separate walkway leading to a winding stair to reach the upper floor two units.

The difference is clearly marked, not only by the **horizontal vs. vertical opposition** of the pathways but also by the **territorial marker** of wrought iron fences delimiting the two approaches and their respective direction.

We note that the street entrance to the ground floor unit incorporates a generous glazed panel, and that this panel feature wears a **modesty veil**, so to speak, with a lace curtain gathered at the top.

We also note that the lower unit left hand window, against which runs the winding stairs, has no such modesty veil while the right hand window is completely covered with a roll up-down opaque blind: we can safely assume a **private** function in the room thus protected from visual indiscretion (a bedroom), and a more **semi-public** function (a front room) already protected from visual indiscretion by the general public, given its location behind the **territorial markers** of the stair and the fence.

We note finally that both street entrances to the upper units incorporate a large glazed panel that is

completey covered with a roll up-down opaque blind for the simple reason, we assume, that the circulation in front of these two doors is **too narrow** to prevent an indiscrete side glance, plus the fact that two armchairs in front of the doors indicate a summer balcony use of the landing that may bring visitors who, inadvertently or by curiosity, would attempt such a side glance at the doors.

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Settings

The main settings detected on the ground floor are the *front yard and front balcony-covered porch* and, at the upper floor, the *balcony-landing*.

In the case of the *front yard and porch*, these play an essentially **ceremonial** role, hint of the **rituals of entering the building step by step, and a security** role considering the fact that **the porch allows to deal with unsollicited callers outside the home.**

For its part, the upper *balcony-landing* plays a dual role: as **end-landing** of the stair to the upper entry doors, and as **balcony shared** by the two upper floor units. As such the two exterior armchairs are not only useful for sitting but also have a **signaling role** of that function to the passer by.

In all cases it is safe to assume that, located **so close to the sidewalk**, **facial recognition and ensuing contact** between residents and passer by is possible, if not downright invited. Note that the **exterior lighting** of these settings speak of their **ritual evening use**, quite pleasant during the hot summer days.

I am not forgetting the single specimen “tree of heaven” that provides for **privacy** from passers by across the street and **shade** for the residents and **cooling** for the building front façade and interior adjoining spaces … it is, however, located on city property!

Let us note, finally, that the interior rooms abutting the entrance façade have windows that place them at risk of indiscrete peeping. The single window of the upper left hand unit is completely curtained since **the stair passes right by it**. The equivalent window of the right hand unit, even if technically located outside the balcony-landing, is **within visual and social reach** from it, and is therefore partly curtained down.

Rituals

Since the building is located in what is known as ‘Little Italy”, we can safely assume that the Mediterranean **patterns of socializing outside the home** are habitual to both French Canadians and Italian immigrants and their descendants.

The presence of the two armchairs and the subtle play of hide and seek with privacy treatment of windows and doors speak of a 21st century variation of these patterns.

While men will ritually go to the local café to watch the latest soccer game, the ladies may be found on their doostep ritually engaged verbally with the neighbour or familiar passer by. I use “will” for the men and “may” for the women in deferrence to **current less stringent patterns of gender spatial distribution.**

No adjoining **piazza** is to be found here for **gathering,** nor do we find **corridor type streets** for **shoulder to shoulder walking,** but the neighbouring Jean Talon **Public Market** is where one will hear French, English and Italian spoken on both sides of the veggie and fruit displays … of course mixed with a good dose of Middle Eastern and other languages.

By "speaking" I mean the **ritual banter** characteristic of all public markets, with all the **body language and pitch modulation** that go with it, to the distinct pleasure of shoppers out for a **ritual bath of live community contact.**

Discussion

If I feel justified to draw a social-functional profile of the Tri-plex entrance, based on the analysis of this one case, it is because its notable level of **architectural sophistication** allowed it to adapt to a century of social, cultural and economic changes.

Notable elements of that profile are:

- The question of **privacy** related to pathways passing in front of doors and windows.
- The question of **practicality** and **shared responsibility** for the removal of snow and ice in winter related to stair and walkways.
- The **social stigma** attached to the tenants who spend their summer hanging out on stairs referred to as "balconville" vs the more **socially palatable use of** landing-balcony.
- The question of the **functional planning** of the upper floors units, vs the **interior or exterior locations of stairs** leading to them.
- The question of **symbolic-ritual** aspects overlaying practical ones, depending on the various cultural backgrounds of occupants.

In a nutshell, aligned on the street, the Plex front entrances, in all their variations, become something of ***a public theatre … the most spatially conditionned form of sociability … I rest my case ;-)***

Credit image Maurice Amiel

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