Cultural Daily

Independent Voices, New Perspectives

Live Places: The Monument Moment

Maurice Amiel · Thursday, June 11th, 2015

General considerations

A monument is generally a work of art and/or architecture erected to **commemorate a person or an event of public significance.** I wish to discuss the "point" type of monument, rather that the architectural type, because it can be set in just about any public space, and because, if it finds its full significance at certain ritual moments, it adds under ordinary conditions a bit of cultural "sparkle," if not downright "sparks," to one's peregrinations in the city.

Between these ritual moments, that significance is important enough for the monument to remain a somewhat **"sacred precinct,"** usually separated from its more profane context with a railing or planting, and/or through an elevated position as in the feature image.

As such, monuments and their rituals can be viewed like epicentres of socially meaningful "moments" as much as "places"… hence the title of this post.

To explore the expressive-symbolic dimensions of theme (what or who is commemorated), placement and treatment (where and how) of monuments in the city, I have selected three pairs to be discussed in terms of historical, social and cultural contexts; plus the feature monument in conclusion.

Two historical monuments

Erected practically one century apart, **Admiral Nelson' column** overlooks Montreal's first market place since 1804, while the **Fountain monument to Sieur De Maisonneuve,** founder of the city, was erected in 1895 on the site of the city's first public square. Both are located in the Old Montreal district, and both are highly significant.

The first monument is significant of the British dominating foothold on newly conquered New France, and erected by the British governing body a few decades after their military conquest of New France, and the second monument, significant of the historical role of France in colonizing North America, was erected on the occasion of the 250th anniversary of the founding of the city, a few decades after the failed bloody rebellion of the Patriots seeking more political rights for the French Canadian.

The monument to Admiral Nelson

While Admiral Nelson, in typical British reserve, shows only his missing right arm inside a folded sleeve as evidence of personal prowess, his elevated stance and distant gaze embody British self-righteous colonial ambitions. The column he stands on is high enough, on its elevated base, for his gaze to reach the Mount Royal beyond downtown. On the basis of the column is a bas-relief showing naval action at the battle of Trafalgar, defeating the French navy.

Beside dominating the old city public market, Nelson's column stands a stone throw from the Montreal City Hall and Municipal Courts of justice which he faces … this placement is probably a conscious reminder of who is lording over the country and city.

Monument to De Maisonneuve

In contrast to Admiral Nelson's apparent reserve, De Maisonneuve's stance is all flag and sword bearing bravura, standing over representatives of military, civil and religious elements of French society and of the Iroquois resistance that had to be defeated in establishing New France on the American continent.

De Maisonneuve faces Notre Dame Basilica, the Pope's church when visiting, in the proud stance of someone who has fulfilled his engagement to conquer the land and found a city for a king under divine right *(Montreal is short for Mount Royal at the base of which the city was established on the shore of the St. Lawrence river).* The fountain at the foot of the monument embodies a sense of local rootedness, if not freshness and purity.

Besides the Basilica, the monument is surrounded by local banking and insurance institutions where the French business establishment is now equally represented after a long struggle to establish French language as the official one of the Province of Quebec.

Two sculptural monuments

The historically troubled relations between the Anglophone and Francophone components of Canadian society, particularly in Montreal, has given rise to an independence seeking political movement which, two failed referendum later, is still simmering and gives rise to mutual jabbing via such symbols as monumental statuary.

Two of these have caught my eye recently: a pair of large sculptures representing **English and French dog types** were erected in 2011 on private property bordering on the main public square of Old Montreal, not far from the monument to the founder of the city.

Sculpture-monument to the English Pug

While the monument to the founder of Montreal stands in the left background of the image, we see standing in the foreground the larger than life sculpture of a man in contemporary dressy garb wearing a Commedia del Arte mask with upturned nose, in a semi provocative stance directed somewhere between the New York Life Insurance brownstone headquarters and the Basilica of Notre dame, off to the right … in his bent left arm is an English Pug dog.

Sculpture-Monument to the French Poodle

At the opposite end of the façade stands the sculpture of a woman dressed in a very conservative British business garb, and wearing a similar Commedia del Arte mask with a snubbed nose directed, in tourist like stance, toward the first Headquarters of the Bank of Montreal. In her right arm she holds a French Caniche that she caresses with her left arm.

The plaques on the base of both sculptures, at eye level off the sidewalk for ease of reading, bear the same title: "English Pug and French Caniche."

The fact that these sculptures, monument by association to their setting, are erected on private property harbouring culturally mixed business establishments are symbolic, I think, of the new political and economic dynamic in the province of Quebec. The humorous treatment of that dynamic serves only to defuse the underlying cultural tension by using theatrical tropes.

Two war monuments

That death is part of life is conventionally accepted … but the sacrifice of one's life for the general welfare deserves honouring at the foot of appropriate monuments, with public ceremony and ritual.

On the western flank of Mount Royal we find the Anglophone upper class municipality of Westmount, while on its eastern flank lies the Francophone equivalent municipality of Outremont.

Both have erected monuments to their war dead in such marked different placement and treatment as to warrant a comparative analysis of their symbolic and expressive value.

Westmount war monument

Erected after WWI near its City Hall in the middle of a civic park, the monument bears all the distinctive traits that define it as such: separate, elevated, associated with national flags, inscribed with the usual name and date of the wars and with reference to courage, sacrifice, glory and victory, it bears a sculpture showing a soldier in battle gear shoulder carrying his rifle and in marching stance, being guided by a winged angel guardian.

The war is won, the dead buried, we have here a representation of a typical soldier moving on to battle, or his incarnated soul moving on to heaven … all in a flowing movement drawing pride and inspiration in the viewer, specially during speech and wreath placing ritual time, and most inspiring probably, when time came to recruit citizens for WWII, whose dead are also commemorated at the monument.

The placement of the monument between City Hall, off to the right, and the local Cathedral Church, visible across the street, should be noted as evidence of the participation of these vital civic institutions to the war effort and to its vital commemorative function.

Outremont war monument

Erected after WWI, in 1925, to commemorate its dead, the monument is located within the main municipal park bordering on an artificial lake and surrounded by a parterre of flowers.

It was commissioned with a specific theme being mandated to the sculptor and architect: "the city

of Outremont mourns its dead under the national flag."

The monument funerary aspect is clearly within the mourning theme while the haut relief sculpture makes use of a universal iconography of mourning and grief: bent knees, bent and covered head … the gestures with both hand seems to want to ward off the horrors of war.

The scripture in Latin making reference to glory and victory, and the dates in Roman numerals, add to the religious aspect of the tomb-like monument given the fact that Catholic mass was celebrated in Latin at the time the monument was erected. The other sides are inscribed with the names of those who served, the dead and the wounded.

War is over and victory won through the glorious military feats of its citizens … now the city mourns their death in the quietness of a park that could well be a cemetery. No visual reference to marching soldiers onward to victory or upward to heaven.

It is known that, for the French Canadians, WWI and WWII were considered British wars, "Their wars" as commonly spoken. The mood of the monument is appropriately formal and austere … if not with a note of regret mitigated by victory.

Discussion

Live places have in common the ability to sharpen our awareness of social facts, to make us feel active and knowledgeable participants in civil life, to orient us in time and space and in social realities and, finally to give us a sense of connection to our fellow citizens and/or attachment to city and state.

Commemorative monuments are but one of such places in any city that prides in its history and makes its symbolically accessible and readable in its public spaces, in meaningful moments of social and cultural connection, whether ritually organized or as individually experienced.

The variety of types and treatment of monuments we have discussed is witness to the enduring value of monuments as live places of urban sociability through history to the present.

An example of this, in conclusion, is the monument erected to Louis Cyr, Quebec strong man issued from the rural sector of society but who achieved international notoriety, and who still elicits pride in working class neighbourhoods of the city where a commemorative monument has been erected in early 1970's.

Monument to Louis Cyr

Something of a folk hero, a film was made about the life of Louis Cyr making light not only of his athletic exploits but also of his deep love for his family and pride in his social and cultural roots.

Both these aspects were enough to inspire not only the monument but more tellingly the stance of the short and stocky strong man, the placement of his statue on the site and the fact that over his athletic belt he wears a traditional woven Quebec belt.

His back to the neighbourhood industrial and residential components, Louis Cyr has a calm but unshakable look about him as if a guardian of the territory. Cast in bronze and muscles bulging Louis Cyr faces also a freeway physical and social divide, off to the left of the image, as if

confronting a similarly powerful presence in a challenging stance.

All photos credit Maurice Amiel

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