

Cultural Daily

Independent Voices, New Perspectives

LIVE PLACES: The Strip

Maurice Amiel · Saturday, April 25th, 2015

Introduction

By “strip” I do not mean those sections of thoroughfares coming into cities with their procession of gigantic signs and illuminated roof lines of motels, service stations, diners and used cars dealerships, manufacture outlets, etc. ... nor their oasis-like antennas at truck stops.

The strips I refer to are of the more urban types, whether the classic strip-mall or simply activity-dense portions of neighbourhood main streets, and at intersections, that have a characteristic “**local color**” in terms of types of business, clientele and physical relation to the environment they are located in. (see top image)

The expression “local color”, borrowed from “couleur locale” in French, refers to characteristic traditions as well as to the landscape and architecture of a particular region, implying learning experiences as well as life long souvenirs for visitors ... and also providing a sense of pride, identity and attachment to the “natives”.

The following are a local color’s most characteristic dimensions that can be applied to understanding strips as Live Places:

Scale, as in the way the physical strip is sympathetic to the visual structure of its immediate environment. As such, particular architectural details and styles can provide focus to our attention and fine grain landmarks for ease of recognition and orientation.

Variety, as in the richness and/or specificity, of the activity in the strips which speaks of particular local needs justifying their existence, change and eventual demise. Experiencing them is experiencing the “social and economic time” of the strip’s neighbourhood and its relationship to the larger city.

Accessibility, as in the way the strip will be located along bus routes and near subway stations. Their off-street parking facility, when provided, will sometimes be used not only by users but also as incentive parking to use public transportation to other places in the city.

Neighbourliness, as in the way the strip allows for the residents to see each other and recognise, among the crowd, some of their direct neighbours. A covered arcade over a wide sidewalk being the “nec plus ultra” of that dimension of sociability.

A live street-strip



Framed to the left by a 24/7 drugstore and to right by the local public library, cultural centre and subway station, this strip harbours watering holes, eateries, a banking facility, a regular supermarket and a specialty grocery, a hair dresser, a large bookstore and state run liquor store.

Most eateries and watering holes have spring to fall open patios where it is good to while the time away, ogle the passers by, meet friends and neighbours, etc.

It used to have a lone clothing store (made in L.A. !) occupied now by a beer joint.

It used to have a large Italian fare restaurant occupied now by the specialty grocery.

It used to have a fifties retro restaurant now replaced by a fast food joint.

It used to have residential occupancy on top floors now practically all gone except for the white façade building next to the bank. The top floors are now occupied by small specialty commercial venues and offices. Whereas the architecture is rather bland there is an effort to remain within the three stories building height. For some the old Italian restaurant enclosed gallery which has been retained by the specialty grocer remains a link to the past ... and a neighbourhood landmark.

Across the street we find the more sedate half of the strip with an apartment hotel, a pre-kindergarten facility, a chain chicken eatery, a première bakery, a specialty bookstore, a lone flower shop next to a shoe repair shop ... and a series of ethnic cuisine eateries that jostle for survival.

This strip's variety is enough to satisfy the needs of students and faculty of the neighbouring oldest and largest Francophone university in the city ... and the needs of the residents of the strip's upscale residential hinterland.

The street itself is built over an old stream coming down Mt Royal "mountain" and the city has accommodated mid block pedestrian crossing with a traffic light making it easier to move from one side to the other of the strip ... Not to forget the busiest bus line in the city, that runs from a downtown terminus to the northern suburbs, on a ten minute schedule with twin articulated wagons where you can hear just about every language of the world spoken by recent immigrants, or older ones still attached to their language and the neighbourhood.

A gutted street-strip



A bloc east of the main drag strip we have just described, lies the limit of the historic founding village of the district, originally inhabited by leather tanners that had their workshops along the stream, channelled now under the main drag.

The street we see in the above image was the original village commercial strip that has gradually been squeezed out of business but for a Greek restaurant to the left, and a butcher shop and commercial printing shop behind the butcher to the right of the vacant lot. In between them, beyond the vacant lot, we can see the back of the apartment-hotel located on the main drag strip. To the right of the butcher shop is the large hulk of a senior residence.

The butcher shop serves custom made sandwiches students stream in to buy and eat in the park across the street during outdoor activity seasons.

Across that street is a two bloc sized park that occupies what used to be the village itself that originated the city district of Côte-des-Neiges. The park in question is named after a French Canadian officer and Victoria Cross recipient hero of WWI. A memorial to that fact stands in one corner of the park ... one can almost say that it stands in remembrance of the village itself!

In the vacant lot, shown between restaurant and butcher shop, stood once a locksmith store, a specialized collegiate bookstore and a one-counter Portuguese grilled chicken eatery, and, behind them a mechanic shop and which is causing the vacant lot to have remained exposed for over a year until the polluting chemicals leaked by that shop are absorbed or neutralized, making the site safe for new construction and occupancy.

These developments will most likely match the historic trend to satisfy residential needs of the district in terms of higher density middle to upscale rental and condominium venues that draw their market value from the university campus across the park, the edge of which we see at bottom of image.

Will these new development be strictly residential gutting the small scale strip or will they import new business to revitalize its local color, once steeped in history?

Discussion

My point is simply that strips as live places, are born, live and are transformed in response to forces built in the real estate dynamic relation of economics and demographics that give them their particular “local color”.

It is difficult not to see the power of city zoning ordinances in the distribution and type of commercial activity of the strips, and the central role of **accessibility** in the power shift from original village main street to current city district main drag in the examples presented.

The other major role in that power shift being the **scale** of demographics favouring the new city main drag over the old village main street, given a recent quantum jump in both student and immigrant populations: the large multi family residential pool and the availability of student residences making the district of Côte-des-Neiges the first stop for the former and the temporary home for the latter.

Together these major forces will shape the **variety** of commerce and **neighbourliness** practices that take place in the live strip and give it in essence its local color.

This is not the end of the story of course as down and around the main drag, northward to the

suburbs, past a concentration of hospitals and mid scale housing developments for a large immigrant population, commercial activity strives and flourishes at and near intersections of bus and subway lines, its local color issued from the spatial and behavioural dimensions of its demographics and of its economic means as they develop, stabilize and change with time.

All photos credit Maurice Amiel

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