Cultural Daily

Independent Voices, New Perspectives

LIVE PLACES: Summering in the city

Maurice Amiel · Wednesday, July 8th, 2015

General considerations

Summering is a very evocative term, of times and places and people: memories redolent of smells, tastes, sounds, of sun and shade, of sand and sea, of starry skies and beach bonfires, perhaps a time for our senses to reclaim some attention on our part ….

Summering in the city*, evokes situations of similar rich sensorial experiences within the context of urban sociability, as shown in our feature image taken in Portland, Ore.*

Such things as riding bikes on a shoreline lane, swimming in a neighbourhood pool, picnic barbcues in parks, seeing an outdoor movies or listening to street music festivals, throwing a Frisbee, sampling "cultural" food in the park, reading a book on the public library roof top terrace, and drinking a fresh beer on an outdoor terrace at sunset with friends, etc. … all have their own evocative power of summering in the city, as activities and as venues.

Such venues have their own particular territorial status and norms of sociability which usually span from the private patio to the street and public plaza, and from graceful courtesy between neighbours to enforced control of behaviour at crowd gatherings.

For example, one summer activity particular to Montreal is the African drum beat gathering at the foot of Mount Royal Park dubbed "tam-tam city." It attracts performing amateurs of the instrument, while around them spectators hang out indulging in the usual Frisbee throwing, dancing and smoking … while one or more police cars and an ambulance are usually discretely standing by in case of excesses!

Summering in the city is indeed a great social mixer, an eye opener, a feast for the environmental observer.

*At the core of these activities, and their respective venues****, is the subtle tension between norm and experimentation,*** *not to say transgression, which makes of summer in the city a* ***social and cultural play time*** *par excellence, whereby the city brings to bear natural, man made and social resources to the making of its particular summering experiences.*

A sampler of summering places in the city

The sidewalk terrace

Two generic versions can be found: those that hug the storefront on wide sidewalks and those that hug the sidewalk street edge on narrower sidewalks (shown below).

Whether well delimited or permeable to pedestrian access they are the quintessential urban oasis for civil exchange and tasteful filling up.

The rooftop terrace

A more private patio like space for a quiet read or lunch break for the library and cultural center clientele and staff, this rooftop terrace would be easily passed by if it were not for an adjoining prize winning roof top garden, visible from the street, that really helps soften the hard edge of the urban skyline.

The neighbourhood swimming pool

Closer to home, the classic neighbourhood pool opens on the day school is out for the summer, and closes on the back to school day. That gives you an idea of the privileged clientele!

Given its location in a large park and sport and recreation complex one can simply remain outside of the pool area for picnic, or near the pool under the umbrella, while kids are in the water within eye and ear distance.

The neighbourhood intercultural food fiesta

This is one particularly interesting event bringing the various ethnic groups of the district to offer their best and most typical fare to the general public and to each other.

A fun, rather inexpensive way to encourage intercultural contact and integration to the wider social body. Of course the children get to have their kicks at an inflatable climb, crawl, jump and slide super gadget.

The jazz festival

When Montreal hosts its international summer jazz festival the whole area of Place des Arts cultural center is cordoned off with about four outdoor stages free to the public, while the paying shows are held in indoor venues of the center and surroundings.

Around the stages, the area is crowded with eateries and watering holes where to while the time before, after and between gigs.

Night time is of course the most desirable time to be there after the July day heat has had a chance to dissipate. Subway running hours are extended to accommodate late shows, and police and first aid stations are discretely present of course, as is a semi serious security back pack control at the entry gates to the stages area.

The scale of each stage area is of the order of one half to one full block long between stage and back of standing audience, see images below, and the musicians on stage need to be relayed via huge television monitors and loud speakers along the sides of the audience for a really wrap around musical immersive experience.





To walk and/or sit: street environment

Where can one sit outside a store while waiting for a friend to finish shopping or simply to stop and ponder one's next move for a group of teenagers … without giving the impression of loitering that is?

A sidewalk bench, of course … or a thematic series of concrete blocks and table like sculpture islands down the main drag of the neighbourhood.

Please note how sitting gives one a view point from which to ogle the passers by, just as it makes one to be a subject of such ogling from the same passers by. The magic of this two-way social experience is enhanced of course by the summer particular informal sociability.





To walk and/or sit: park environment

In this neighbourhood park one can find, and be allowed, all sorts of prescribed or improvised ways to sit or squat in the grass.

The context allows of course for no time limit, for peripheral activity, and of course for lying down

… to say nothing of boy meets girl walking dog and of police agents stopping for a bit of relaxed community relation building.

Discussion

Shown below is a typical street scene in majority rental districts of Montreal: as students go home and others arrive, as established immigrants move up and new ones move in, as couples with children seek larger accommodations and as elderly people seek smaller and/or adapted accommodations.

It just so happens that moving day is fixed on July 1st given the conventional end of rental leases on June 30th … a ***definite introduction to summer****, a time for great sidewalk finds and for a bit of philosophising, as "from furnishing to trash" drives a wedge in our sense of the relative value of things …* ***very much, perhaps, in the experimental spirit of summering in the city.***

I leave you with these thoughts in order to go on a bit of summering myself, and to return hopefully with new insights into the urban life and its sociability as inscribed in the physical city.

All photos, credit Maurice Amiel

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