

Cultural Daily

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PLACE MAKING: on the poetics of the street (3)

Maurice Amiel · Wednesday, February 17th, 2016

Street, Square, Housing and Walkway: the poetics of an “urban set piece”

In Montreal East End, diagonally across half a dozen blocs of an old industrial and residential neighborhood, an abandoned railroad right of way has been transformed into a pedestrian walkway, flanked by new residential development and anchored by a new square, at a street corner, surrounded by a pseudo arcade of shops and eateries as shown in the feature image.

The ensemble I called an “urban set piece” was qualified by its planners as a “zone de rencontre” i.e. a “zone of encounter,” effectively summarizing the social and spatial program of the project: a place where one can bump into a neighbor, take the sun, read a book under a tree, shop at surrounding stores, grab a bite or have a drink outdoor or indoor, etc.

*The disorienting relation of the chessboard city blocs pattern crossed by the diagonal railroad right of way has been re-invented by sympathetic urban design and landscaping, **sympathetic to human scale and to historic memory**: the history of an industrial district, the memory of those who worked or played along the tracks, and the scale of an urban ensemble with a sense of public room in the middle of the city.*

*In the context of the above social program and historical sensitivity which **sum up the spirit of the place**, I looked at two subsets of that ensemble at night and during the day: the subset of the square as center piece of the ensemble, and the subset of the housing as it relates to the diagonal walkway.*

Square at night

The square in winter is hardly an encounter zone, it does however serve as forecourt to an arcade-like string of shops occupying the ground floor of the surrounding buildings with retrofitted façades (new uniform fenestration and red brick finish, elimination of projecting balconies and of exterior stairs), and the creation of an L shaped circulation strip around the dedicated landscaped central area with trees and benches ... all well used under milder climes.



the square at night

At night the lit up stores along the L circulation strip “are” the square and, from spring to fall, as these stores sprout exterior terraces and display area, a *subtle urbane conversation starts to appear between the square proper, its built limits and the L shape circulation strip ... the three social and physical elements of the encounter zone ... the heart of the “urban set piece.”* (See image above)

Note: At the corner of the L shaped circulation strip is located the passage to the incoming walkway (see right hand side of feature image where the red brick façade turns to yellow brick), at the onset of which the paved part of the walkway bears the parallel marks of the old train tracks... **THE** main symbolic reminder of the walkway past tenant!

Square during the day

One element that holds the set together socially are the overall dimensions of the square that accommodate close encounter and distant social recognition, while offering sub-spaces in the square to sit, gather or stand apart ... that social-spatial dynamic helps, if it does not constitute, the “subtle urbane conversation” mentioned above.

***Note:** The “ subtle urbane conversation” is really just an image that would have been richer had the balconies of the surrounding residential buildings not been eliminated.*

The square, however, makes for quite an interesting spectacle from behind the windows of these surrounding residential buildings which become a virtual participant of that conversation, at the heart of the spirit of the place. (See image below)



the square at daytime

Housing and Walkway at night

This (see image below) is an iconic image in the way it harkens to one of Antonioni’s favorite urban settings: the street corner and the lamp post.

Not an ordinary street corner as the illuminated stair cases are the only sign of occupancy in the two buildings flanking the walkway ... housing? Offices? Both?

Given their identical massing these buildings read as a pair, which in fact they are under their given name of “Cours” or Court: a residential complex that incorporates a semi private courtyard which we guess, here, to be the old railway right of way.

At night the blind windows of the buildings and the difficulty to see the urban furniture of the walkway produce a mysterious theater setting effect, quite pertinent for an “urban set piece” after all. (See image below)



housing and walkway at night

Housing and Walkway during the day

Daytime allows one to better see the true alignment of the two buildings and, thanks to urban furniture (bollard, railings, public garbage can, etc.) and signs of residential occupancy (curtained windows, recessed and projecting balconies, realtor’s sign, etc.), to gather that these are indeed residential buildings of the condominium type, quite consistent with the slow growth of property tenure versus traditional rental in a popular district.

The handling of the staircase enclosures at the ground level seems to have created a security hazard with access from the street controlled by lock and key, while their part translucent and part transparent materials create a privacy versus natural lighting issue.

In other words the above mentioned mysterious theatrical ambiance clears out during daytime, particularly since we can now appreciate the depth of the walkway diagonal penetration into the bloc all the way to the next street.(See image below)



housing and walkway at daytime

The dual private-public nature of the walkway as forecourt to the Court residential complex and as public pedestrian axis is handled tactfully with discrete urban furnishing such as public garbage can, bollard and railing and shade trees, and more residentially connoted signs such as entrance doors and recessed balconies.

Further down the walkway-forecourt we can see a widening of the building mass where we discovered a public mini park serving old and new residential developments, and where a “near monument” recalls the past industrial nature of the district (See end of discussion below).

Discussion: on street type, history and memory

The square named Place Valois and the walkway named Promenade Luc Larivée are rooted in the industrial past of the area when the steam engine trains would arrive at the streets that would then be closed to traffic with the usual barriers, bells, and signal lights.

Here is how my colleague B.K., who lived a few blocs away, remembers it:

“What I find interesting is that (...) I have a historical perspective on the East End because I have memories going back over 60 years.

For example, the Promenade that crosses Place Valois, which used to be the track from the triage yard further west (...), that track continued east and crossed Pie-IX several streets east. I would often drive down Pie-IX from my parents’ place in Rosemont and cross those tracks. Between Ontario and Pie-IX the track doubled, so at Pie-IX, you got yourself a bumpy ride across two sets of tracks, and the occasional train.

Then One day, the signal lights and barriers disappeared, no more trains ... several years later, the tracks were asphalted over ... several years later, the tracks were taken out, it is probably around that time that Place Valois and the promenade were created. Last time I drove through there ... nothing. Wiped off the face of the earth.”

After our daytime visit to the square and vicinity, B.K. retraced for me his itinerary from house to square, past some of these souvenir laden places which still bore traces of their original state... ***the material traces of the district history.***

It did not take long before I asked B.K. if the first house his family lived in upon arriving in Montreal was still up and if we could drive there.

Not only was it still up but it still jostled industrial buildings, serviced by the functioning section of the railroad, and the current residents had installed a front patio to better take in the sights, sounds and smells of the neighbourhood on cool summer nights ... ***the stuff memories are made of!*** (See image below)



BK’s original house

Speaking of memories, some of them are quite bitter as we found, pasted on a bollard in the afore mentioned mini-park at the corner of the walkway and the bordering street, *the evidence that at the center of this social and economical transformation, local residents still remember the working conditions in the manufactures serviced by that train ... a ‘crappy life’ it was!* (See mini poster in the image below)



I read the pasted mini poster as an “encounter” of another kind than the ones foreseen for the “zone of encounters,” an encounter with the past perhaps, but still much in sync with the spirit of the place ... with its Genius Loci.

Pertinent bibliography

Hayden, D. “The power of place – Urban landscapes as public history”, MIT, 1995

Credit all photos Maurice Amiel

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