

Cultural Daily

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URBAN FIELD NOTES: The Neighborhood as Urban Commons – Two Walks

Maurice Amiel · Monday, August 25th, 2014

Back to basics

The original Commons involved two groups of people: the landowners and the commoners in a mutually beneficial relation, whereby the commoners would have free access to the land to bring their sheep to graze, thereby maintaining and enriching it with the animals manure...simplifying it of course!

We know that all this went the way of history with land parcels enclosed and commoners sent to man the 19th century British Industrial Revolution urban production venues.

The need to examine the possibility of something like that relationship in today's urban settings is issued from curiosity, and from a crooked desire to discover its existence, however tenuous, in our individualistic society.

Urban manifestations of the Commons, so far:

Applying the Commons mutually beneficial relationship to a contemporary urban context was helped, so far, by the relative ease of identifying the entities involved and the nature of the mutual benefit.

The town owned Green on the one hand, and the local citizenry on the other that knows how to observe civil use conventions; the city owned “Ruelles” on the one hand, and their block occupants on the other that select with whom they share a common interest in that space; the city owned Public Market on the one hand, and the stall tenants on the other that have adopted civic minded commercial manners, however theatrically ... *these people obviously know of the mutual benefit of “holding together **that** which holds us together in return”.*

Urban manifestations of the Commons: looking ahead

The long sampler list of settings I had tentatively identified in [my first post on the subject](#) as producing Commons-like experience seems to lack an integrating perspective.

At the scale of the city there aren't that many integrating social-spatial agents that invite identification with, and attachment to.

*As the parish role has declined in that respect, I have come to wonder if the **neighborhood** has not replaced them as efficient agents of urban integration, as urban Commons-like agencies.*

That figure was touched upon in my [“Here and There”](#) post where I interviewed B.K. about the set of micro settings of front yard-sidewalk-street as supports for neighborly behavior, from shared daily concerns to meeting and welcoming new residents.

That interview reinforced the accepted view on neighborhood as based on overlapping ego-centered aggregates of places and people involved in mutual recognition, and in shared interest in common issues.

My neighborhood may spatially differ from the one of my next-door neighbor who is physically challenged by the city, or has no car, etc...

By sheer propinquity and information sharing, we may, however, hold a common image, or narrative, about certain aspects of our neighborhood(s): it may be its socio-cultural composition, its institutional vocation, its housing typologies, its public transportation and open space networks, etc.

We know that these aspects affect us in our sense of security, of identity and of organization for our daily routine and our more ritual practices; we have an interest in them because we are directly or indirectly involved with them in a Commons-like mutually beneficial relationship.

*Beyond their instrumental value, the spatial dimensions of these neighborly settings may come to constitute **the expression of a neighborhood identity**.*

Two neighborhood walks

Once out of one's place of residence and into one's neighborhood, one is usually walking. That simple fact provided, for a long time, a unit for the optimum size of neighborhood: the walking distance for a given time span, usually fifteen minutes beyond which one would ride car or bus to the outer reaches of one's neighborhood, into the next one and/or into the city core.

I was privileged to walk two neighborhoods that share an industrial basis redeveloped for residential occupancy. The resemblance stops here since demographics, density and relation to open space, and connection to the city are quite different, not to speak of social-cultural framework.

I was guided in my visit to the Pearl neighborhood in Portland, Oregon, by my friend and colleague Falken Farshaw (FF), cultural geographer, and resident of the Pearl at the time of the walk.

I was guided in my recent visit to the Petite Bourgogne neighborhood in Montreal, Quebec, by my friend and colleague Florence Lebeau (FL), management and design consultant, and current resident of la Petite Bourgogne.

I will describe the walks then summarily discuss them in terms of Commons-like experiences encountered.

Walking the Pearl.

Leaving the apartment through the rear we crossed the patio into the pedestrian spine of the block. As simple low wall and a metal barrier is all that separates private from public: discretion is a must here!



The photo below shows the block point of entry of that pathway which leads also to rear building entrances and is open to the public. Familiarity with the pedestrian network connections to streets is useful here to find one's way.



As we follow the path, it leads us to one of many central open areas that gather families out for a walk or a jog ...



... and children out for some water play. (see below)



It is around such open spaces, usually bordered by a street, that we found a place to eat and shop as well as the recycled loft type housing and most services.

The type of housing is multi-story and multi-family, most with balconies going from the sliver, accommodating a couple of chairs and friendly occupants, to the "diving board" used as architectonic means to separate visually adjoining buildings. (see Below)

Of course in the upper reaches of the top floor the visual and social connection between ground and apartment becomes quite tenuous.



Once we reached a main thoroughfare we encountered the key feature of the Pearl that is its electric tramway public transportation, providing access to the farthest reaches of the neighborhood and to the various points of interest within the neighborhood.

The high density of the Pearl provides the ridership of the system, keeping the private cars in their underground parking. The municipal limit on its physical growth helped also in developing this agreeable, quiet, non-polluting public transportation, and in discouraging the use of private cars in the city for longer than fifteen minutes walks. (see Below)



At the outer reaches of the neighborhood one can appreciate its other sustainable development feature which is a drainage marsh for neighboring surface rain waters. (see Below)



This small sample of urban design features of the Pearl do show what is at stake here mutually beneficial terms: a balancing act of high density and sophisticated open space scheme, and another one that introduces local electric tramways as alternative to using private cars for longer than usual intra neighborhood, and city, walking distances.

A mixed occupancy at ground level of residential buildings and mixed residential tenure keeps the Pearl accessible and desirable to the lower, middle and upper echelons of the middle class.

The Pearl could not have been feasible without the heightened environmental awareness of the citizenry that has developed, over a generation of planning policy intelligence and architectural imagination and sensitivity, a sense of necessary mutual responsibility for reaping maximum benefits of a healthy sustainable urban environment: neighborhood by neighborhood

Walking la Petite Bourgogne

Across the street from the condominium complex where FL resides, we faced the first manifestation of the street layout manipulations caused by the building, in the 80s and 90s, of 20,000 residential units (from social housing to condominium and owner occupied row houses) in the old industrial neighborhood of la Petite Bourgogne. (see Below)



What used to be Canning Street, shown above, is now a pedestrian alley running between a social housing building on the right, and a new row housing project to the left.

As we move along the Canning Alley we arrive at the largest open space, sport and recreation venue of the neighborhood that gathers families, adolescents and fresh air amateurs out for a walk. The building on the left was the old elementary school turned into a Housing Coop. (see Below)



As we turn right, we come across the “rear” of the social housing block facing Canning Alley, which gives us a good idea of the “before” state of the neighborhood housing stock.



Further down, we start the visit with what was a demonstration project for a mixed-use housing and commercial complex dating from the Model Cities planning and architectural competition.



Attempting to do everything, from connecting to an existing interior swimming pool (the red brick Bain Public) to replacing aged housing stock with a community garden across the street, the project radical approach remained orphan. (see Above)

The public favor went to perimeter block designs with interior common open space. The housing units being of the row house or the low-rise apartment type, it is striking to see how the line between private and common or public domains is clearly set. The wood fences reach over six feet in height, indicating rather blatantly the privacy concern of housing project occupants. (see Below))



It must be mentioned that where the city maintained landscaped area meets a surrounding street, it is identified as EUREKA ASSOCIATION PARK, dedicated to the effort made to provide access to the property by Afro-Canadian citizens. (See below)



The variety of mid block treatment is interesting.

Where parking is provided in the rear of the buildings the degree of appropriation of abutting land clearly demonstrates, again, the preoccupation with privacy and security of the new ownership empowered residents who enclose rear yards and, particularly, rear access/exit stairs landings. (See below)

Note also the building of outdoor storage structures in front of garages, building up volumetrically on the fence as limit of privacy.



The pre-existing street corner convenient stores remains here and there as proximity service, tied to a new pedestrian pathway network, identified as such, and going from the nearby main transfer subway station to the local one, and linking a few parks in between. (See below)

Note the stenciled footsteps indicating the dedicated status of that footpath ... the lady in the photo is walking toward the blue colored corner convenience store. Further beyond is the street that used to run where the footpath is today, just as Canning Alley runs today where Canning Street was initially.



As the neighborhood has matured over the thirty odd years of existence, it has attracted newer condominium projects built for singles and childless occupants oriented to biking on the nearby Canal Lachine bike path, attracted to a bit of slumming near artists colonies squatting old industrial

buildings, and to swinging to the action around the renovated Atwater Public Market and art exhibition venue. (See below)



All in apparent peaceful coexistence and in respect of an interesting architectural heritage, all connected to the neighborhood main drag for major services, and all in good understanding of the mutual benefits of such state of affairs justifying the efforts in maintenance and self governance these projects require for la Petite Bourgogne to remain what it prides itself in being: “un quartier en santé” ... a healthy neighborhood.

Shades of the Commons!

Discussion

*What these neighborhood setting types seem to do is insure opportunities **for social co-presence while providing the necessary social breathing room** for nuanced and qualified voluntary participation in the basic “holding-and-being-held together” social-spatial dynamic of the Commons.*

There is the sense, however, that things are not as direct now as the triad landowner-Commons-commoners was then; between residents and neighborhood there is a multitude of municipal and social agencies acting on, with and on behalf of developers and residents.

The resulting neighborhood environment is convincing enough since the Pearl and La Petite Bourgogne have evolved a distinctive social and physical identity and a satisfying neighborhood quality of life that is the subject of a constant re-appraisal process ... of a conscious “holding together that which holds us together”.

Our hypothesis for the socially integrating function of the urban neighborhood as neo-Commons entity seems to hold, however cursory the research has been.

The walks were enjoyable and informative and my thanks go to my informants: Falken Forshaw and Florence Lebeau.

Note on the Feature Image

The Feature Image shows a youthful sidewalk-swarming end of school day, pointing to the necessary inclusion in our daily life, and ritual occasions, of the very young and the very old, as a reminder of our **Commons** stake in the neighborhood.

All photos credit Maurice Amiel

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