

# Ah Montreal!

## Reflections on Differing Views of Public Space, Past and Present

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### Summary

A lack of consensus about the idea of public space, its purpose and design, often characterizes the discourse of designers and social scientists concerned with the contemporary city. The article is a reflection on this situation but more particularly on differences between those who would follow what could be called a typological approach to public space versus those preferring functional determinist methodologies. The author prefers the former approach and uses examples drawn from the city of Montreal past and present, to structure the argument. References are also made to examples of public space drawn from other places in North America and Europe.

### Résumé

L'impossible consensus sur le concept de l'espace public caractérise souvent le discours des designers et des chercheurs en sciences sociales qui sont préoccupés par la ville contemporaine. Cet article présente une réflexion de cette situation; il discute plus particulièrement les différences entre ceux qui favorisent l'approche dite typologique et ceux qui préfèrent un déterminisme fonctionnaliste. L'auteur favorise l'approche typologique et illustre sa thèse à l'aide d'exemples concrets concernant les espaces publics de la ville de Montréal, dans le passé et dans le présent. Il fait également référence à d'autres exemples concernant des villes d'Amérique du Nord et d'Europe.

### 1. Differing Views

As a practitioner of urban design interested in history and theory, I often find myself embroiled in debates which highlight the lack of consensus in contemporary society as to what is the nature and role of public space in the modern secular city. On a recent trip to Montreal for just such a debate I was once again struck by the difficulty those of us concerned with the city have in finding common cause when it comes to adapting existing or making new public spaces suited to the contemporary needs and aspirations of society.

On the one hand, some practitioners and theoreticians prefer, indeed insist upon, what I would describe as a functional determinist approach to the problem. They would argue that no viable public space can be proposed without knowing the precise socio-economic background and service needs of its anticipated future clientele. Others prefer

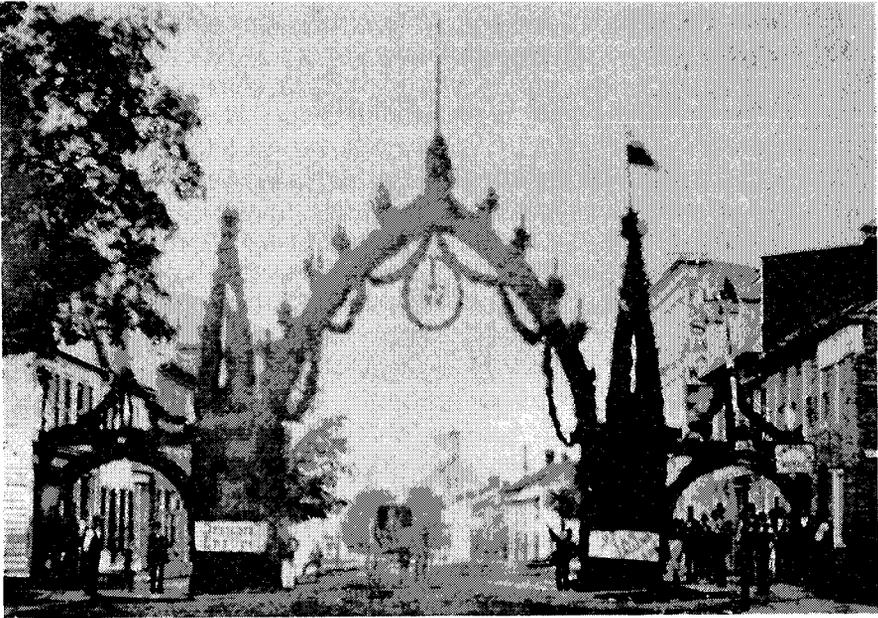


Fig. 1 View of King Street, Brockville, Ontario on the occasion of the visit of the Prince of Wales, ca. 1860.  
Vue de King Street, Brockville, Ontario, prise au moment de la visite du Prince de Galles, vers 1860.



Fig. 2 Post card view of St. Catherine St., Montreal, at night.  
La Rue Ste-Catherine à Montréal, le soir.

to see the problem in more historical and generic terms, since over the long term the "social profile" of any clientele is likely to be changeable and thus unknowable in specific behavioural terms.

The first point of view is one for which I have limited sympathy, but recently as a stranger passing through the public spaces of Montreal, I was stimulated to reflect on it and to reconsider the second point of view which is closer to my own.

It can be said that an important role of public space is that of providing a relatively fixed framework within which public activities and rituals can be carried out on a cyclical as well as spontaneous basis. It necessarily plays this role within an ever changing physical, cultural, and political context. Its relative fixity both contributes to a tangible sense of place on which visitors and inhabitants rely, and serves as a link between generations inhabiting the same locale over time.

This is not to say that new public space does not need to be created from time to time nor that once established existing public spaces will not themselves experience a process of changing use, significance or even decline in visibility within the city over time. It is also not to confuse the potential impermanence of installations within them with the more durable idea and purpose of any public space.

Now some consider that the pace of change within the North American city precludes the very idea of permanent public spaces. After all, a positivistic pioneering sensibility remains close to the surface of much North American cultural mythology, although I would claim it takes a more romanticised and anti-urban form in the United States than in Canada. In addition, economic elites prefer a model of the city in which the existence of historical fabrics is not seen as a significant impediment to the working out of economic forces.

Even European critics from the left, such as Manfredo Tafuri (1976) go so far as to argue that a true notion of public space does not exist in the North American city except perhaps in Washington, where it takes the form of an emblematic exception that decisively proves the rule. As a lad growing up in Ontario and witnessing main street parades, my own experience suggests to me that this view is misleading, that there is not so much an absence of public space as there is a difference in typology as compared to older European cities. Montreal, although perhaps somewhat unique, is a particularly interesting example. One finds in its elaborated system of public squares a clear memory of European cultural patterns. At the same time, we find "main street" type promenades such as St. Catherine or St. Laurent, which have assumed mythical proportions in the identity of the city. This fusion, to borrow a descriptive term from folkloric analysis, of European traditions and North American social patterns, is distinctly "Montrealais" and particularly enticing to a person from Ontario.

The fusion of European roots and local development patterns takes a somewhat different form in Ontario towns and cities of which Toronto is one. Most of these were established in the late eighteenth or early to mid-nineteenth centuries, and like Montreal were laid out with squares as well as streets; usually a market square, often a court-house square, sometimes a church square (Baird & Sampson, 1981). However, unlike their European influences or Montreal, the square tended to remain as conceptual spaces that were barely realized in physical and thus perceptual terms. This was usually due to the fact that their edges were developed inconsistently with highly varied free-standing individual buildings rather than uniform contiguous ones, and thus the square appeared more as an assemblage of buildings rather than a space made by buildings. Hardly visible as an identifiable public space, many of these failed to develop

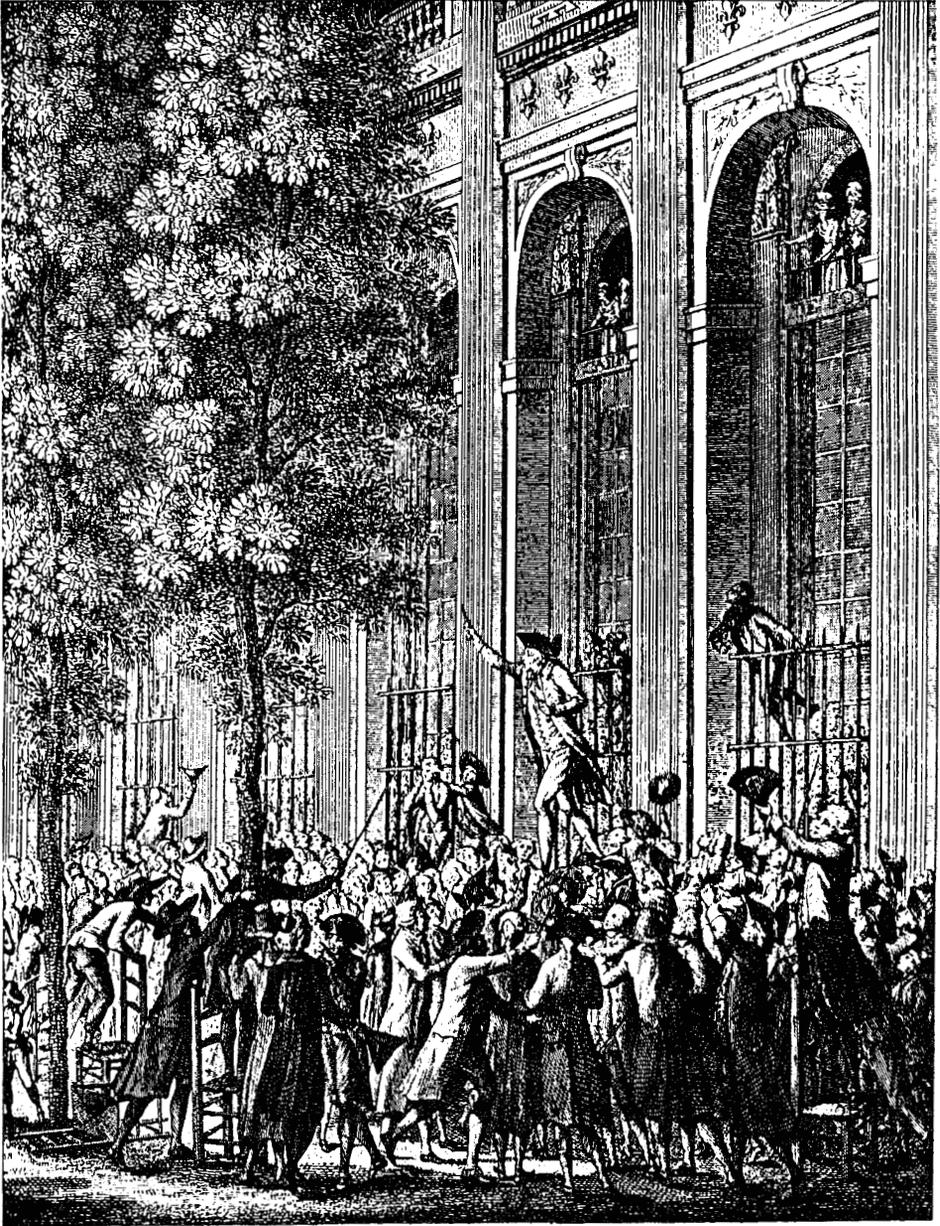


Fig. 3 After the Orleans development of the Palais Royal, Camille Desmoulins addresses a crowd in front of the famous colonades. From an engraving by Berthault, 1789.

Camille Desmoulins tient un discours révolutionnaire devant les fameuses colonnes du Palais Royal, construit par les Orléans. Gravure de Berthault, 1789.

or, in the case of market squares, sustain significant, social roles and have subsequently become subject to redevelopment. Those that remain, typically courthouse squares, have a largely honorific symbolic role.

By contrast, the straight street generated by the rectilinear street and block layout of the land surveyor, when continuously lined with commercial/residential buildings, created a socially charged space. Akin to street vistas of certain Baroque compositions that European theoreticians like Camillo Sitte despised because of their open-endedness and spatial simplicity, the main streets served as the primary loci of spontaneous urban sociability as well as civic celebrations (Collins & Collins, 1986). In cities like Toronto, this is true to this day. Innovators such as Victor Gruen perceived the power of such street spaces and permuted them to create the private shopping mall.

Also in contrast to many European cities, the "public park" assumed a more significant social role first as a place for fairs and exhibitions serving the urban as well as surrounding rural populations, and later as a place of relief from the effects of urbanization. Typically the latter emphasized greenery presented either as a "formally composed pleasure garden" or as a symbolically pastoral composition, a place to get away from the hustle and bustle of the city. In more recent years an increasingly strong emphasis on recreational facilities and functional zoning has supplanted these earlier forms and produced a new park type which typically lacks an equally evocative image.

From my own point of view, an understanding of a typology such as this is quite useful when considering the issue of how specific a design brief must be in order to create a new public space or reintegrate an existing one into the physical and social fabric of the city. Most of the great public spaces and many of the lesser ones I have known in European and North American cities were created with a relatively notional social purpose in mind. By contrast they seem to have been conceived with a relatively specific set of "formal" or typological characteristics in mind.

For example, the removal of the fortification walls from Paris under Louis XIV provided the occasion to create tree lined "voies publiques". Their form was strikingly similar to the grands "allées" of the royal hunting forests. Rather than being simply elements of visual order and places of amenable passage, the new boulevard attracted to themselves the early form of *café* activity that subsequently came to be codified as an integral part of what we now think of as Parisian Boulevards. Furthermore the *café* society they engendered, which we associate so intimately with public life in that city, is by now quite sociologically diverse in terms of class and to some extent even ethnicity. As a result, the boulevards, although formally simple in terms of type, are often highly differentiated one from the other in terms of use, character of activity and symbolic prominence within the city.

## 2. Uses of Public Spaces

From my point of view, the unpredictability of the uses to which public spaces such as these will be put once they are established is likely to be more a by-product of shifts in broad cultural patterns and historical circumstances than a lack of social precision in their design. In this regard, I am always struck by images of revolutionaries giving anti-aristocratic speeches to crowds in the Palais Royal which was built by the Orleans branch of the Royal family for speculative gain (Geist, 1983). It was definitely not intended for this purpose. It was intended to be a place of order, genteel

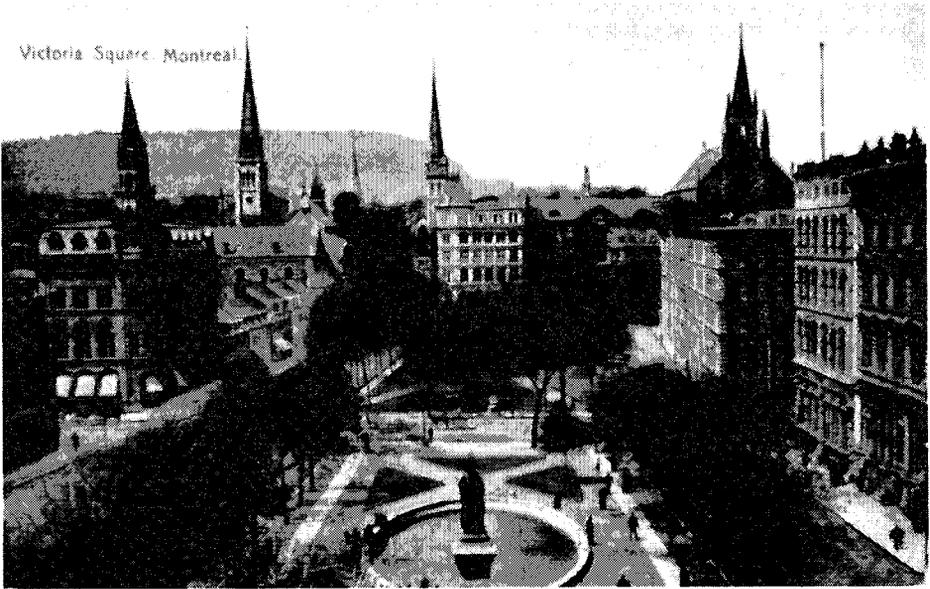


Fig. 4 Postcard view of Victoria Square, Montreal, looking toward the mountain, ca. 1890.  
Vue de Victoria Square, Montréal, prise dans la direction de la montagne, vers 1890.



Fig. 5 Contemporary photo view of Victoria Square, looking toward the mountain.  
Vue contemporaine de Victoria Square, prise dans la direction de la montagne.

promenade and residence like the earlier Place Royale (now Place des Vosges) built under Henri IV. However, once established as a formally focused place of public gathering, the use of its arcades and gardens for political discourse of the most robust kind was likely inevitable, given a revolutionary moment in society.

At such times and circumstances a group or groups in society need not only a place in which to "act", but also a place to symbolize such action, that is an identifiable theatre of action. Such symbolic marking and social incubation is one of the roles of public places, however inconvenient it might be to the ruling government of the day.

In pre-secular urban societies such as that of Imperial Rome or classical Greece, a typological idea of public space went hand-in-hand with a highly evolved set of ritual activities and behaviours. Cultural mythologies and social values were to a large extent shared. Political visions and initiatives could for the most part be dictated from the top of the social pyramid downward.

Today we often tend to view our own contemporary societies as more dynamic and sociologically complex. Values are perceived to be more personal and changeable. Thus our cities are also thought to be more changeable in form and content. Given the tremendous technological ability to transform that our modern societies have developed, it is easy to view the city as being made up out of purpose built pieces which are subject to inevitable processes of obsolescence. I would argue that this latter view does not understand the city in the way Lévi-Strauss (1961) has justly encapsulated it as the "human artifice par excellence". In other words, the City is the product of human organization and social enterprise and thus has some enduring human value that is passed on from one generation to the next. As a product of society, it has a purpose and role beyond that of pure exchange value and functional service such that each generation must not only adapt the city to its own aspirations but it must also adapt itself to the city as received.

This idea of the city also understands that human activities, particularly ones which are social in nature, are to some extent ritualized and to a large extent repeated in pattern. That is to say, there is a high degree of predictability in social behaviour given a certain typological setting and given certain social conditions and symbolic presences.

In addition, it implies that even a public space designed for a specific purpose will likely continue to be used and publicly valued once that initial purpose has become, to some extent, obsolete. This is certainly true of Italian piazzas which were once so intimately tied to the ritual activities of the Christian church to which they historically served as foreground and outdoor extension. Now used for a diversity of daily and secular activities, they provide an image of Italy to outsiders in which contemporary social uses are overlaid with ones of historical memory.

Most certainly one can expect that certain public spaces will come in and out of fashion and thus be subject to dramatic changes in clientele, intensity of use and character of use. Victoria Square in Montreal is a particularly poignant example. In its heyday it was a popular pleasure park surrounded by a diversity of institutions and uses. Now it is little more than a subway stop (D'Iberville Moreau, 1975).

Normally, so long as the minimum juridical and physical conditions for the survival and "appearance" exist in such a public space, the potential for expanded use and greater symbolic purpose in the future always exists as well. With Victoria Square

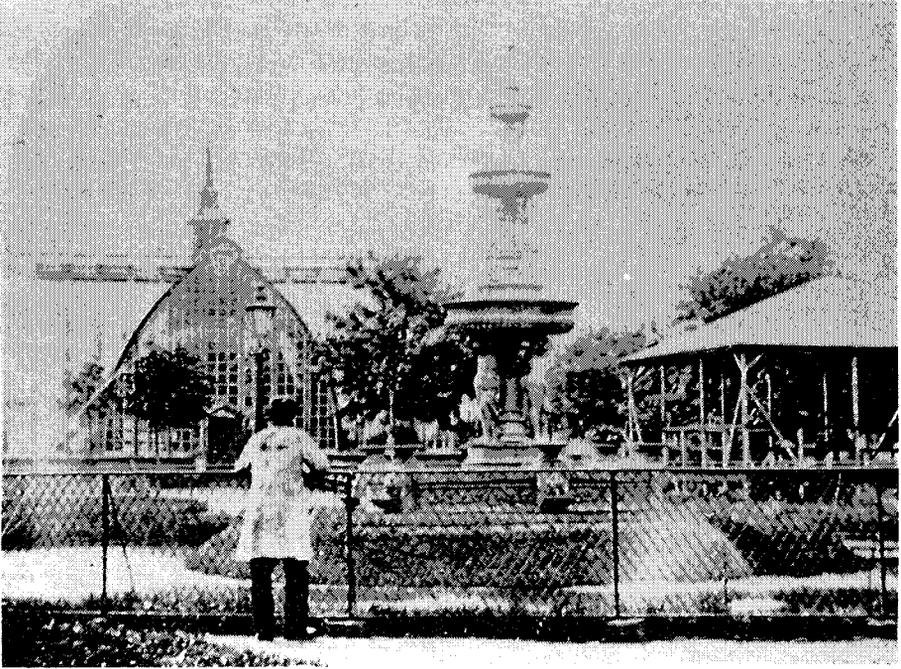


Fig. 6 19th century photo of Square Viger featuring a public fountain, pavilion and greenhouse.

Photo du Square Viger, datant du 19e siècle, et sur laquelle on voit une fontaine, un pavillon et une serre.

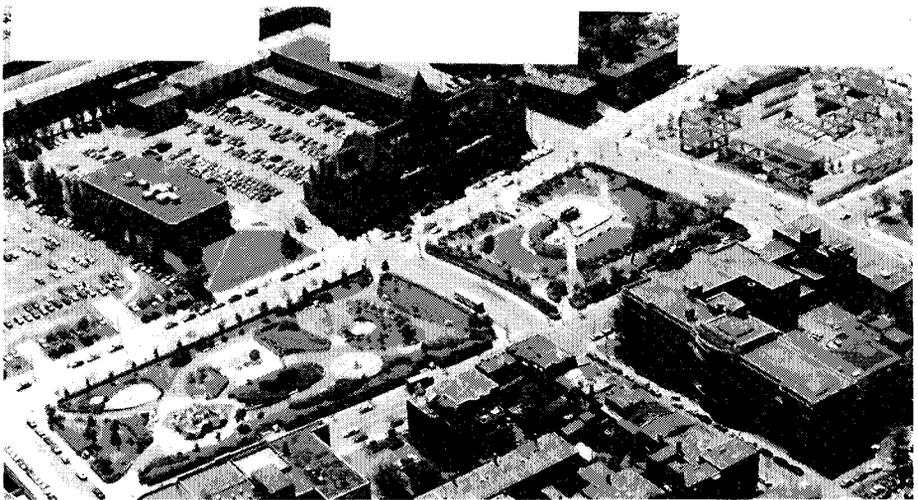


Fig. 7 Contemporary aerial view of Square Viger showing art installations.

Vue aérienne contemporaine du Square Viger et de ses installations artistiques.

the first condition is satisfied in that it remains in public ownership. However, in physical terms it has effectively been made to disappear from the identifiable urban landscape, such that the possibility that at some time significant groups of people might choose to centre their activities or stage events of public interest there and by so doing give it a much larger political and social meaning once again seems most unlikely. Its disappearance resulted from redevelopment of its edges in ways incompatible with the form of the original public space. Generally the form of this development focused on the symbolic goals and perceived functional needs of the adjacent private parcels, and ignored its role in outlining the public space in three dimensions.

### 3. Private and Public Realms

An understanding of the differing interests of the private and public realms is essential to the long-term viability of public space in the North American city. In the private realm one is free to pursue individual, even selfish interests. In the public realm private interests are necessarily subservient to the interests of civil society which, according to Rousseau, provides, by its collective agreement (the "social contract"), the conditions for individual freedom. Unfortunately our public realm, in spatial terms, depends to a large extent on the private realm at its perimeter to give it shape and thus make it appear.

In recent years, cities in the United States, like New York and San Francisco, have relied more and more on private sector developers to provide and maintain public space within private developments. While this is cost effective and ideologically consistent with an era in which confidence in government to protect the public interest has declined, it seems to me that it is expedient and politically dangerous in that it confuses private and public interests. In so far as the public can at times be fractious and unpleasant, both to its own government as well as to private corporations, it is always best in a democracy to maintain a clearly defined public realm in juridical as well as spatial terms.

The issue of personal copyright that arises at Montreal's Square Viger presents a paradox for public space that illustrates this point in a slightly different way. Square Viger, like Victoria Square, was subject to redevelopment in recent decades but in this case as a result of building a below grade expressway. Artists were commissioned to design whole pieces of the new square despite their limited previous experience with public space design on this scale. Few people now use the square and aspects of the artists designs may actually discourage greater public usage. Yet the artists hold copyrights that make it difficult to change or dismantle parts of their installations in order to make Square Viger more active and inviting. While the artwork could thus be said to contribute to the permanence and durability of the space, it could also be said to privatise it by confusing the individual goals of the artist with the idea and purpose of the public space.

Historically, public spaces have served a role as outdoor museums for artistic and commemorative artifacts. In this regard they can in a very significant way provide places for collective memory and cultural celebration. However, extending this role to one paralleling a modern gallery celebrating the products of personal statement and creativity can create irresolvable tensions between public and private visions. For example, Richard Serra's Tilted Arc sculpture that was located in Federal Plaza in New York was intended to criticize the mediocrity of the idea of the Plaza and give it new

spatial meaning (Senie, 1989). Nonetheless, public outcry over the obtrusiveness of the piece resulted in its eventual removal by public authorities, thus setting the artistic community supporting Serra's work against the community of users of the Plaza. Having a certain regard for Richard Serra's work myself, I don't mean to imply that the resolution of such conflicts in favour of the collective will and the primacy of publicness is necessarily so straightforward. One thinks of Henry Moore's "The Archer", at Toronto's City Hall Square, the installation of which at first caused much criticism on the part of the popular press and the public who saw it as a meaningless piece of modern art. The mayor at the time who had promoted its installation was even defeated at the polls largely as a result of this controversy.

However, many years later the presence of the "Archer" in Toronto led to the donation of a major Moore collection to the Art Gallery of Ontario, at a time when Moore had become an acknowledged modern master. Now the Archer and this collection are proudly pointed to by Torontonians as symbols of the City's sophistication and cultural heritage.

#### 4. The Clientele of Public Space

At this point I would like to return to the issue of who the clientele for public space is. In his article, "Paris, Capital of the Nineteenth Century", Walter Benjamin (1969) makes much of the presence of the *flâneur* on the boulevards and squares of Paris. It is the *flâneur* who crosses social boundaries and has no interest in commercial exchange that denotes the public places within the new mass culture of the city.

This illustrates a fundamental principle of public space in the cities of any democratic society and that is they are free and open to all. Poor design that allows hooligans to dictate use by others or overspecificity of design to accommodate one user group to the exclusion of another are both inconsistent with this principle.

Many practitioners and theorists believe that one needs only identify the users to be served and their social needs in order to design public space. They rely on methodologies intended to arrive at public space design through a process of analysis of specific functional and sociological factors. The anti-design bias often characterizing such methods seems to imply that the design of a public space is a process akin to developing a photograph, that is its shape and outline is produced by an accretion of determinants that one need only expose to the light of reason.

While there is no doubt that the user types within a public space will be to an extent a by-product of the social mix produced by its surroundings, this may not conclusively be so. Tourism is one factor that can affect this and the power of symbolism may be another. For example, every New Year's Eve a broad range of people is attracted to Times Square in New York, despite its location in one of the seediest sections of Manhattan. Michelangelo undertook the famous Capitoline Hill project on what was then a derelict but once glorious hill, in Rome.

The reason I raise this issue is I don't believe sufficient due is generally given to the role public space plays in stimulating our imaginations and thus the importance of creative design ideas that are evocative and accessible to a breadth of users known and unknown. In saying this, I do not intend to undervalue the importance of knowing the general need and social purpose to be fulfilled by the design of public space. I think that is essential, but I do not think that they are likely to determine the form of public space in the way that many assume they will.

In this regard it is interesting to consider two parks Haussmann commissioned for Paris, Buttes-Chaumont and Parc Montsouris, to be installed in "popular" *quartiers* of that city (Alphand, 1882). They were intended to satisfy perceived social needs of the modern metropolis. They were to be voids in the dense urban fabric of their respective *quartiers* and to serve as "lungs" for their resident populations of workers and artisans, as well as places for recreation away from insalubrious places and activities. Their form and character was modeled after Parc Monceau which was not only situated in a wealthy quartier but was originally an aristocratic park, not public at all. Having started from different social programmes, all three are now part of a distributed park system that bespeaks a certain egalitarianism of services and, despite their typological similarities, they have served their diverse populations well. Of the three, Buttes-Chaumont is the most romantic, the most developed as an ideal landscape and yet it is located in the poorest part of the city.

Of course Haussmann, unlike the politicians and planners of today, was an executive with autocratic powers serving an autocrat, Louis Napoleon. He was criticized by Emile Zola for the brutality of his operations on the city (Haussmann, 1979) and Victor Hugo's "Notre-Dame de Paris" (1948) is an elegy to the medieval Paris through which he cut the great boulevards, and parts of which he cleared away in order to disengage the Cathedral of Notre-Dame (see chapter "Paris à vol d'oiseau", "Notre-Dame de Paris", etc.). Needless to say, contemporary politicians and planners would be unable to employ such autocratic methods nor would one be able to defend them doing so. Indeed Montreal still suffers from the wholesale clearing of blocks of the city that occurred under Jean Drapeau's long time mayoralty.

## 5. City Versus Nature

The picturesque character of the Haussmann Parks, however, raises perhaps an interesting issue: that of city versus nature. As I noted previously with the Levi-Strauss quotation, the city is most certainly an unnatural thing, yet there is a great body of anti-urban literature, much of it written during the age of industrialism, much of it American, and much of it celebrating natural landscapes and the virtues of country life. In his analytical article on Olmsted's Central Park, Robert Smithson (a conceptual artist) uses, as I recall, the term "dialectical landscape" to describe the idea behind that much venerated park. He suggested in the article that Olmsted created the paradigm of an urban park, not just a simulacrum of nature (Smithson, 1979).

Interestingly, if one examines Olmsted's other major park scheme for New York Prospect Park, one finds a codified natural landscape comprising meadow, lake and wood, but the drawings also include streets outside the park (Fabos *et al.*, 1970). These are not naturalistic but feature straight allées of trees. They extend into the adjacent built-up urban fabrics to provide streets of a higher than normal pedestrian amenity that recall and connect to the naturalistic environment of the park. The key here in my opinion is that Olmsted understood the social as well as connective role of streets just as well as he understood how to orchestrate topography to put one in mind of one's primal natural roots.

This subtle nuance is often ignored by those concerned primarily with functionalist methodologies. Typically this results in what I would call a "systems approach" which conceives the street as a component of a system primarily suited to vehicular movement, a system which is unhappily compromised by the fact that it inevitably mixes pedestrians with cars and buses. Parks are conceived as being part of

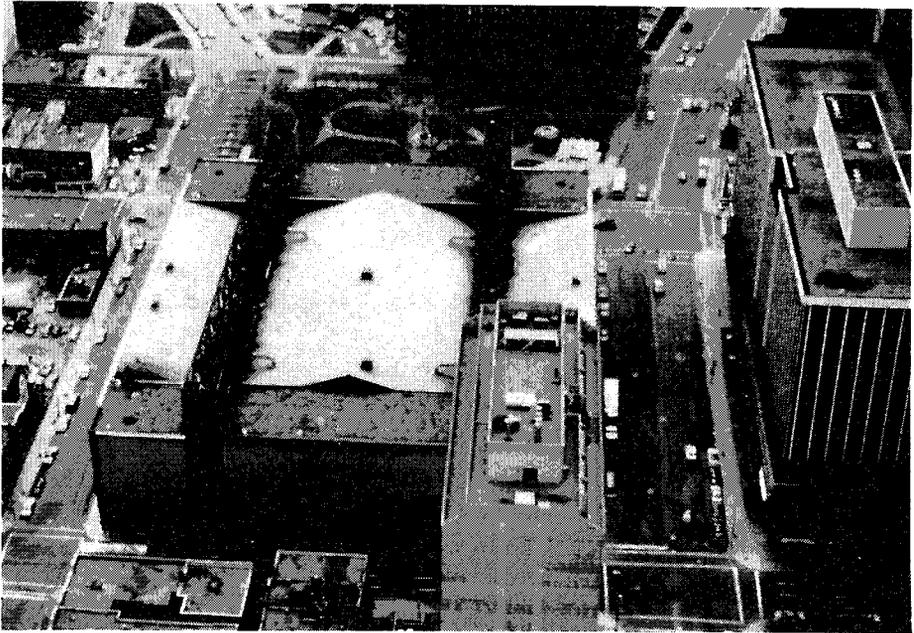


Fig. 8 Aerial view of Square Cabot seen from over top of the Forum hockey arena.  
Vue aérienne du Square Cabot, prise du sommet du stade de hockey, le Forum.



Fig. 9 Contemporary view of the interior of Square Cabot.  
Vue contemporaine de l'intérieur du Square Cabot.

another system which ideally would be made up of linked open spaces providing a purely pedestrian oriented system of movement within a "natural" setting.

For this approach, urban squares such as Square Cabot in Montreal are seen as isolated islands, anomalies in the park system that could be made better by linking them up with other park spaces and pedestrian oriented routes within the system.

In the end, this preoccupation with creating a secondary parallel system (or is it meant to be primary as in Radburn or La Ville Radieuse) is likely to result in a fatalistic acceptance of more and more impoverished street spaces in terms of their pedestrian amenity. At the same time, it may well produce ill considered linkage spaces whose publicness is highly ambiguous, as occurs with the through block pedestrian routes through private development that occur in more and more modern cities. The relocation of the Forum, home of the Montreal Canadian Hockey team, from the block north of Square Cabot will make way for a redevelopment project that may well be organized around such a mid-block route. I have seen just such a proposal which also includes Street closures west and south of Square Cabot to create a new linear park system.

Perhaps most unfortunate from my point of view would be the effect of such proposals on the clarity of the existing typology of squares in Montreal. In place of their clearly defined perimeters one would find circumstantially configured edges, some made by adjacent development of private parcels, and some made by public streets. In this regard the distinction between public and private would be eroded as compared to the existing square.

Furthermore a system of streets and urban squares has real merits on its own terms. What makes the relatively small squares so powerful is their role as spaces of contrast and pause, that is oases. They depend as much on the density and congestion of the surrounding built up fabric as it does on them. Making your way along the street, you come upon them as if by surprise. Thus they are a symbiotic part of the street system in terms of use and perception as much as they are part of the park system in terms of programme and administration.

In a similar way I believe that the city/street versus nature dichotomy is to a great extent conceptually counterproductive. I prefer an approach to the city that allows natural elements such as topographic features and water courses to reveal and assert themselves across the face of the city in a myriad of ways, at a variety of scales. This process of give and take between human artifice and the natural world is certainly evident already in Montreal where natural features burst out of, or visibly warp the street grid. An example is Sherbrooke street which cuts across the grid as it follows a ridge below the mountain and above denser lower lying parts of the city.

In addition, one cannot rely entirely on concepts of nature or the revelation of natural substructures to help with the design of every public space. Square Viger is particularly interesting in this regard in that it is entirely the product of human invention and social history. It began with the draining of a swamp and now sits atop an expressway. The trees running along its northern edge constitute a memory of its verdant past and mark the last bit of *terra firma* remaining at the edge of the cut for the expressway. The artists who have designed the four areas making up the new square have made no apologies for its "artificiality". To this extent their approach seems reasonable and potentially successful. Unfortunately the elaboration of the artworks at Square Viger does not produce a corresponding richness of place that would invite and sustain significant social use. In the end the works are not recognizable or usable in

ways comparable to Montreal's established typology of public places. Although perhaps not intended to be so, they are monumental and thus too overspecialized to constitute a workable idea of public space.

## 6. Ah, Montreal!

In my opinion, a workable and desirable idea of public space is necessarily more complex than such unique and personal design approaches can embrace or that conceptual models that see individual public spaces as systemic components defined by a particular function can elucidate. They are, to use a metaphorical concept of Hannah Arendt, the spaces of appearance of our society (Arendt, 1958). We appear in them as public actors just as they appear as theatres of such action, their form, their character, their commodiousness or lack of it representing what we think and do as a society. Like myths and recurring story forms that underpin our culture and provide the basis for a shared discourse, the design of public space must to a certain extent be based on "types" that are deeply rooted in our cultural pattern and social history.

Montreal has to its great good fortune a highly evolved system of public spaces ranging from major parks like Mont Royal and Parc La Fontaine to a well distributed system of small urban squares. This is largely an inheritance from the generations of the nineteenth century. There is clearly an opportunity for the generations responsible for building the city of today to reinvigorate, re-inhabit and extend, that network of public places. In taking up this challenge over the years to come I hope, as a stranger, that social scientists, planners, and designers will successfully find common cause in this most essential theatre of public society.

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