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THE URBAN FRINGE:

Montreal: Planning and Politics, Quebec Style

Raphaël Fischler

The most striking realization for a person who moves from the U.S. to Canada is that, contrary to common perception, there is a whole country north of the 49th parallel. The faint image of Canada one gathers from the American media is generally that of a vast and sparsely populated expanse of frozen tundra, with settlements built around large skating rinks, where the four seasons are winter, winter, winter, and July. Sure, Americans know of Vancouver and Toronto; but aren't these really American towns that happen to lie at the other end of a bay, on the other side of a lake? Americans also know of NAFTA, the free-trade agreement with Canada and Mexico; but wasn't Canada admitted into the partnership so that empty land would be available, further north, for the hordes of Mexicans who are invading from the south? The dim impression that there is nothing of real significance in the big pink area on the map between the U.S. and the North Pole is not really fortuitous. The rhetoric of national difference aside, many Canadians seem to do all they can to resemble their southern neighbors and blend into their mental and physical landscape. U.S. companies, of course, are only too happy to lend the strong, extremely visible hand of the market to this process of Americanization.

This state of affairs helps to explain, in part, the political events in Canada that did receive some attention in the U.S. media in the recent past, namely the Quebec referendum on sovereignty of November 1995. Since the colonization of *Nouvelle France* in the seventeenth century, and especially since the conquest of their territory by the British, French Quebecois have felt threatened as a small community in a hostile environment. The main threat, today, is assimilation into the North-American English-speaking mainstream, a fate that has befallen hundreds of thousands of French Canadians over the past two centuries. Quebec separatism, which

started to gain political strength in the 1960's and 70's, is based on the idea that Quebecois--those of French origin, really--constitute a distinct nation in North America, a nation that needs and deserves a country of its own. (That about a dozen Amerindian nations also live in Quebec doesn't seem to phase the sovereigntists.) The nationalism of many French Quebecois is likely to put people ill at ease in this decade of murderous ethnic strife. On the other hand, if the future of Canada is America, with its deep social divisions and its extremist religious right, then who can blame the Quebecois for wanting to opt out?

The wish for cultural survival does not alone explain the near-victory of the "yes" vote in the referendum. (The "no" side carried the vote by a margin of less than one percent). Transformations in the country as a whole account for sovereigntist feelings as well. The unequal growth of population in Quebec and the rest of Canada has altered the balance of power within the country. In 1867, Canada was founded as the union of two peoples, English and French. (The First Nations did not have much of a say.) Though the English had vanquished the French militarily and dominated them economically, the latter constituted the majority of the population, and their numbers translated into great political clout within the (imperfectly) democratic system that the British authorities had instituted. Today, as opponents of confederation feared would happen, the French are vastly outnumbered. Their influence on national politics and culture is waning and so is the bi-national character of the country. Since the conditions under which the 1867 contract was signed have changed, the contract itself is losing validity in some people's eyes.

The tension generated by the independentist movement is most visible in Montreal, not in the streets and coffee shops, where things are very peaceful, but in the halls of power and in the media, where the debate rages on. Montreal may be said to be the only truly Canadian city, the only city where the French and the English coexist in harmony, together with a myriad of other cultural groups. Still, the political upheaval of the last twenty years has had a noticeable effect on the metropolis, if only because it has provoked the departure of many wealthy and highly educated anglophones to other Canadian provinces or even to the U.S., thereby depriving the city of much-needed capital, entrepreneurship and civic leadership. Whatever makes Toronto great, some say, has

come from Montreal. Also, as political uncertainty is the investor's foe, Quebec in general would see more entrepreneurs, companies and dollars coming in and fewer leaving, if the question of sovereignty was laid to rest. (The new Prime Minister, Lucien Bouchard, has promised to do just that, but the more radical wing of his party, aided by the more vocal members of the anti-independence camp, are making sure that the issue remains at the top of the political agenda.)

In *The Question of Separatism*, a short book published in 1980, the year of the first referendum on Quebec independence, Jane Jacobs argued that "the question of separation [will] be raised again and again in coming years until it is finally settled either when Canada accedes to some form of sovereignty for Quebec or when the Quebecois accept the decline of Montreal and become resigned to it and to its repercussions." Jacobs suggests that the heart of the issue of independence is the rank of Montreal in the urban hierarchy: Quebec can only thrive--economically and, hence, culturally--if Montreal becomes "a creative economic center in its own right" rather than a mere "regional city"; that, in turn, requires that Quebec become independent, since the Canadian business and government establishment is unlikely to support the city in its bid to reclaim its continental position. The argument makes sense; but the current situation does not support it. In many ways, Montreal did become a "creative economic center in its own right"; it ranks among the top ten urban regions in North America in information technology, pharmaceuticals, and aeronautics. At the same time, like other western cities, it has suffered from deindustrialization, global competition and suburbanization. However, these factors have a distinct political coloration here, and the intermingling of local politics with global processes of societal change has had interesting effects on the evolution of the metropolitan area.

Political instability has dampened economic growth and worsened the effects of industrial obsolescence. Yet, in the face of decline, sovereigntist governments have not shown an incredible zeal in helping out the central city of Montreal and its older suburbs, where a strong majority of the population votes for the opposition, and in slowing down the process of suburbanization which benefits politically friendly municipalities. The separatist government does not seem to be so interested in building a strong Montreal, in addition, because it is still a bilingual place and because many separatists wish to restore Quebec City as the true capital of the nation-to-be. Josh

Freed, the local Art Buchwald, has recently argued that what Montreal needs is a "U-Can't-Haul" law that would forbid or at least discourage francophones from leaving the city. This would help the city directly and indirectly, by keeping middle-class families within its borders and retaining voters who have the ear of the current Quebec government.

While Freed is not holding his breath in expectation of an anti-suburban law, he and his fellow residents have witnessed the adoption, over the past few years, of other initiatives targeted at Montreal--and "targeted" is indeed the right word in some cases. For the planning educator who needs illustrations of the undue meddling of politics with planning, this is a great place. For instance, the Quebec government has engaged in a major overhaul of the health-care system. One of its decisions, which reflects its desire to boost Quebec city, if needed at the expense of Montreal, was to consolidate lung transplants into one medical center. While a Montreal hospital would have been the obvious choice for the new center, a Quebec city hospital was chosen. There, patients brought in from Montreal are under the care of doctors from ...Toronto, flown in to perform the operations and train the local staff.

The current mayor of Montreal, Pierre Bourque, is also setting valuable examples of rational planning. As head of the city's Botanical Gardens under the previous administration, Bourque had created and managed the very popular Biodome, an ecosystems exhibit housed in one of the buildings of the 1976 Olympic Games. Having been sacked from his position by then Mayor Jean Doré, Bourque found his revenge in defeating Doré in the 1994 municipal elections. And since Doré had been a strong proponent of city planning and public participation (though with a mixed record), one of Bourque's first measures in office was to dismantle the planning department and abolish the neighborhood councils. Montreal got its first comprehensive city plan in 1992, under Doré; it is unlikely that the city will witness similar initiatives under Bourque. But then, who needs a Master Plan when there is virtually no growth? On the other hand, Geranium I, as Bourque is known in town, has set out to green the city in a systematic manner. Vacant lots and parking lots are shielded from view by planted buffer zones; touristic parts of town are filled with flowers in summer months. In fact, Bourque is trying to position Montreal as the world capital of environmentalism. Those who thought that sustainable

development was a California fad should come and see how thoroughly it has invaded the planning psyche here.

Likewise, those who thought that design guidelines for urban heritage sites in the northeastern U.S. were the epitome of public controls on urban aesthetics should make the trip north to learn about Quebec's law on commercial signs. Bill 86, as the law is known, is the French planner's response to the hegemony of English in this part of the world. It ensures that streetscapes in Quebec will be unmistakably French by restricting the presence of English on facades and billboards. Generally speaking, businesses and institutions must put up commercial signs in French and they must limit the size of English lettering to half that of French lettering. This leads to bizarre situations, such as local KFC's being called PFK's (*Poulet Frit Kentucky*). Since trademark names are protected, the gallicization of KFC was really unnecessary. Tourists can safely look for blue signs saying "GAP" and not "TROU" or "ÉCART" and for big letters spelling "Burger King" rather than "Roi du Bourgeois." Lest anyone think that Bill 86 indicates a purely Quebecois sensitivity, agitation is growing in the U.S. and in English Canada on the use of "foreign" languages in government documents, on street signs and on commercial signs.

Another interesting feature of building controls in Quebec, at least in Montreal, is the institution not just of maximum building heights but also of minimum building heights to preserve important streetscapes. Perhaps one may see in this well-accepted measure the fact that while Americans care about "Life, Liberty and the Pursuit of Happiness," Canadians worry about "Peace, Order and Good Government." Be that as it may, those in charge of keeping order in the urban landscape are not particularly busy these days. Very few construction cranes tower over the rooflines, especially in the CBD. With office construction at a standstill, at least in the speculative market, whatever real-estate activity there is tends to take three forms: residential projects, institutional buildings and entertainment centers. While builders continue to destroy the peace and quiet that they advertise to market houses on the urban fringe (it is hard to forego the Canadian/American dream when it comes with a price tag of US\$60,000), some developers are banking on historical significance and special amenities to sell condominiums, albeit in small numbers. Historical *cachet* and great views come easily and naturally when one builds in the nineteenth-century harbor-front area;

they come in more contrived forms when one develops a suburban brownsite. Thus post-modernism *pastiche* is a flourishing art form here too. Another art form that is alive and well is seemingly excessive public spending on university buildings. Operating budgets are being cut (and cut, and cut), but capital budgets adopted years ago are still delivering their manna of new facilities, to the benefit of stable or shrinking student bodies.

But the big real-estate story in Montreal, recently, has happened in the sports and entertainment sector. Anticipating somewhat, here is how the story runs. Scene one: The *Canadiens* (the local hockey team) need a new arena, as their old Forum is not up to the standards of the day. Scene two: The Molson beer company, in partnership with the Canadian Pacific (C. P.) rail company, proposes to build a new facility for the team, right next to the downtown C. P. station. Scene three (accelerated motions): Molson finances, builds and opens the new home of the *Canadiens* on budget and on time. Scene four: The team is happy, the fans are happy, the City is happy, everybody is happy. Scene five: Privately, though, some people, especially at City Hall, feel rather uneasy: the project was a terribly convincing piece of evidence for the efficiency of the private sector and the inefficiency of the public sector. Scene six (flashback): Twenty years before the "Molson Centre" (private funding comes at a price), the Olympic stadium became part of the Montreal landscape; while it graced the skyline with a sculptural leaning tower, it also left a hole of a billion dollars (Canadian dollars, but still) which Montrealers will continue to fill with their tax dollars for many years. Scene seven (back to the present): Meanwhile, the old Forum is empty and business owners in the vicinity are desperate; this part of town was already not in great shape when the arena was in use, and the closure has made things worse. Scene eight (bright lights): the Canderel real-estate company, the largest player in town, announces that it has purchased the Forum and that it will transform it into an urban entertainment center, a huge box full of bread-and-circus attractions, from exotic food outlets to out-of-this-world virtual reality games and a thirty-screen theater. Scene nine (looking into the future): Canderel builds the complex and Montreal becomes known for having the largest movie-and-entertainment complex in the universe. Closing scene: Americans look northward, to contemplate the latest wonder of the world. Beaten at their own game of building the biggest commercial entertainment

center, they are forced to acknowledge that, after all, there is a there, there.

A representative of Canderel recently presented the project to a class of city planning and architecture students at McGill University. Judging from the students' reactions, should the province secede as the specter of Americanization rises in the heart of Montreal, francophone and anglophone alike would petition the National Assembly to declare the urban block of the entertainment center extraterritorial land. Should Quebec remain within Canada, however, visitors will be able to enjoy American entertainment, shoppertainment and eatertainment in an environment regulated by Bill 86. "*Voulez-vous du ketchup sur votre Big-Mac?*" But we're not there yet. For the moment, the old Forum is standing vacant, a symbol of the city as whole: in transition between a glorious past and a promising future, in search of its identity, neither American nor European, and hoping that the language of money will speak louder than either French or English.