

**Marrelli, Nancy, editor. *Montreal Photo Album: Photographs from Montreal Archives*. Montreal: Vehicule Press, 1993. Pp. 140. 59 black and white photographs. \$22.95 paper**

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aces, tracing the changing ways in which they related to public streets in late medieval and Renaissance Italy. He writes as an architectural historian, sensitive to the urban setting of his buildings. Micha Bandini compares the way in which British and Italian architects have treated the question of urban design, noting the relative strength of the British empirical tradition. Finally, Paul Knox argues that a new kind of packaged residential development emerged at the fringe of American metropolitan areas during the 1980s. This piece sits uneasily in the collection, for Knox's interest is more with the economic context and social meaning of such developments than with their morphology. (Indeed, the editors suggest (p.304) that, in morphological terms, packaged developments are not especially distinctive.) Even so, its inclusion indicates that new areas of dialogue are opening up between morphologists and other urban scholars.

If this exchange is to proceed, morphologists need to clarify the connections between urban form and wider processes of economic and social change. The editors acknowledge (p.2) that earlier research concentrated upon description, at the expense of explanation. Some of this imbalance is being corrected. But even an explanatory account of lot lines, street orientations, or building facades, gains significance only when it can be shown to have been meaningful, or to have had an impact upon urban life. Like James Vance—a prominent morphologist whose work is almost completely ignored in this collection—many contributors to *Urban Landscapes* simply assume that historic morphological features are significant, and therefore worthy of preservation. I am sympathetic to this point of view. To be useful, however, its proponents must make it clear whether urban form is significant as a source of aesthetic experience, or as a unique insight into the past. A striking

landscape may tell us nothing about the past that we cannot discover another way. Another may be ugly, but instructive. An argument could be made that both should be retained deliberately. Only when such reasoning is made explicit, however, can we decide which landscapes are worthy of attention, and which are not. Such a distinction is fundamental, not only for the scholar choosing what to study, but also for those planners and politicians who daily decide which building or neighbourhood to save and which to abandon safely to the irreverent attrition of the market.

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Urban historians, perhaps because of their interest in the built environment and the spatial aspects of city-building, seem particularly attuned to the use of visual sources. One thinks of the emphasis on photographs and maps in the History of Canadian City series or Peter Bacon Hales' *Silver Cities: The Photography of American Urbanization, 1839–1915*. Thus the publication of a book devoted to archival photographs of Montreal is worthy of a close examination. Do we learn something new of the city's history from these images from the past? Does this volume contribute to discussions of the photograph as a source in the study of urban history?

Edited by Nancy Marrelli, Director of Archives at Concordia University, *Montreal Photo Album* accompanies an exhibit that highlighted the photographic collections of Montreal's archival institu-

tions, organized as part of the Association of Canadian Archivist's 1992 conference held in that city. Clearly, as the book vividly illustrates, Montreal's archives contain a wealth of visual information on the city's past. Here are views of buildings, city streets and markets; pictures of public events, such as the visit of King George VI and Queen Elizabeth in May 1939, or the mass wedding of 105 couples later that summer; and images of institutions, particularly religious, devoted to the education and health of the city's inhabitants. A note on the page facing each photograph gives a brief description of the subject and its history, and indicates the date, photographer and source. The appended list of participating university, religious, government and corporate archives further whets the appetite, holding out the promise of hours of fruitful research on a variety of topics, from the architectural to the social aspects of Montreal's history. What treasures are held in the Canadian Jewish Congress National Archives, or hidden away in the files of the Archives des Soeurs Grises?

Dating from the 1870s to the 1950s, the photographs in *Montreal Photo Album* present varied perspectives of urban life. They range from the surrealistic quality of the book's opening image, of a dirigible hovering beside the Sun Life Building under construction (1930), to the studied artistry of William Notman's composite of curlers on the St. Lawrence (1878), to the candid snapshot of a dancing couple at Victoria Hall (1942). Yet despite this diversity of time, subject, and style the selection of photographs (and Marrelli's prefatory remarks) suggest a celebration of the heritage of one of Canada's great cities. Following the family photo-album analogy of its title, this book of photographs presents the public face of Montreal. And like the family album, conflict and tension are kept hidden in this orderly presentation of urban life.

As Pierre Nepveu's brief yet insightful introduction notes, much is missing from these photographs, including the poverty and violence or urban experience. Furthermore, he suggests, what is pictured is strangely tranquil: the newly-arrived immigrant family is smiling and well-dressed under the benevolent eye of the nun and government official; the Hotel-Dieux Hospital ward presents a clean space of "health," curtains drawn around the patients' beds, shutting out the suffering and death from the photographer's gaze. Yet despite these absences, these photographs are strangely evocative, offering up otherwise unavailable glimpses of Montreal's past, and prompting questioning by their silent presence.

What is missing from *Montreal Photo Album*, besides Nepveu's remarks, is a

consciousness of the artifice of the photograph, of the presence of the camera and its effects. In general these are not haphazard pictures, but planned representations. Why were these particular photographs taken, and just as importantly, how did they end up in archival collections? The Royal Bank Corporate Archives, one assumes, has preserved a particular aspect of Montreal's past, one that would differ from the images collected by the city's religious institutions.

*Montreal Photo Album*, then is not an urban history of photographic practice. It does not deal with the production of the photographs that it displays, or place these images within the context of their circulation within the urban environment. Marrelli, in her preface, explains how she

chose the pictures "on the basis of historical interest, quality of the photographs, aesthetic considerations, and contributions to the overall view of my favourite city" (p.10). The selection of images, coupled with the factual nature of the book's accompanying text, reinforces a superficial reading of this procession of photographs. Marrelli has chosen to highlight the "progressive" nature of Montreal's urban development—the first motorized snowplough, the construction of the Jacques Cartier Bridge—over a critical reading of historical images. The task of incorporating these rich visual sources into an understanding of the city's past still remains.

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