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[See table of contents](#)

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Society and Space in the Industrial City: Introduction

Jason Gilliland

Over the last decade, historians, geographers, and other urban analysts have devoted an extraordinary amount of attention to the history of Montreal. This attention derives not just from the fact that Montreal celebrated its 350th birthday a decade ago (landmark anniversaries do encourage us to reflect on the past), nor is it solely because for most of those 350 years, Montreal was “the largest, wealthiest, and most progressive city of the fair Dominion.”¹ Interest in Montreal is in part a function of these circumstances, but it is related mainly to the fact that the city has managed to maintain a distinctive social, cultural, and physical fabric in an increasingly homogeneous world.²

This issue of the *Urban History Review / Revue d'histoire urbaine* focusses on society and space in the 19th century, when Montreal was “Canada’s Metropolis” and industrial powerhouse. During the second half of the century, Montreal underwent rapid industrialization. Its population doubled every twenty years (from 40,465 in 1842 to 324,880 in 1901), and the labour force was segmented into ever more specialized tasks in which the positions people held differed according to age, gender, ethnic origin, and recency of immigration.³ In the volume and timing of its waves of immigration, Montreal resembled other east coast cities of North America, but no other city had a comparable cultural mix. At mid-century Montreal’s population was one-half French Canadian, one-quarter British Protestant, and one-fifth Irish Catholic. Each group of actors – whether united by common ethnicity, religion, language, occupation, or social class – competed intensely for urban space, or the best locations on the monopoly board.⁴

The city’s unique social fabric helped construct a distinctive urban fabric. At the outset, the *côte* system of settlement under the French Regime produced long narrow lots which dominated the shape of future land subdivision and building practices.⁵ Drawing influences from Edinburgh, London, and Paris, as well as New York City and Boston, the built forms of 19th-century Montreal were also distinctive.⁶ The unique Montreal triplex, for example, which continues to make up a significant portion of the housing stock today, finds its roots in the industrial cities of northern England and southern Scotland; however, the winding external staircase, which is the hallmark of this form, was a French innovation.⁷

The papers in this issue consider a diversity of spaces, at different levels of resolution: parishes and churches; cemeteries and graves; streets, lots and buildings. What ties the four papers together is not only 19th-century Montreal, but also the collective focus on the production of space and social-spatial relations in the rapidly industrializing city. Given the common theme, readers will not be surprised to learn that all of its authors are current or former students of historical geographer Sherry Olson. For the last two decades, Professor Olson’s research on the “shared spaces” of 19th-century Montreal has made important contributions to our understanding of urban survival strategies.⁸ To celebrate Olson’s larger contribution to geography, in May 2000, past and present students and colleagues participated in a day of special sessions at the 50th anniversary meeting of the *Canadian Association of Geographers* held, appropriately enough, in

Montreal. This theme issue evolved out of those special sessions, and is also dedicated to Professor Olson.⁹

All of the papers in this special issue incorporate “spatialized” approaches and present considerable new evidence to address previously neglected topics in Montreal urban history. The first article by Rosalyn Trigger contributes to our understanding of the role of the church in the industrializing city. Social and cultural geographers have written much about the spatial distribution of religious populations and their impact on landscapes, but, until recently, few scholars have examined the historical relationship between religion and the city.¹⁰ In 19th-century Montreal, the increasing social and spatial segregation along class lines brought about a restructuring of the city’s religious landscape. Using textual evidence from parish archives, Trigger compares the strategies adopted by Anglicans and Presbyterians as they attempted to improve their provision of church accommodation in the working-class district of Griffintown over the latter half of the century. Trigger argues that Protestant places of worship not only came to reflect the transformation of class relations that emerged with industrialization, but also created opportunities for the negotiation of these new relations within the religious sphere.

Churches have long been a popular subject among art and architectural historians – particularly in Montreal – who have traditionally been preoccupied with society’s exceptional monuments and celebrated architects.¹¹ On the other side of the tracks, cultural landscape studies by scholars of the “Berkeley School” such as geographer J.B. Jackson have, in recent decades, inspired a multi-disciplinary approach to architectural history which focuses on the ways in which the informal buildings of “ordinary” landscapes have been produced, used, and transformed.¹² Much has been written from a historical perspective about vernacular dwelling types in Canada,¹³ and Luc Carey makes a significant contribution to this expanding body of literature with his paper on the rise and decline of the *maison de fond de cour*, or rear dwelling, in Montreal. Scorned by housing reformers, the rear dwelling was a small-scale solution to an acute shortage of accommodation for working-class residents during a period of rapid industrialization and population growth. In addition to a meticulous interpretation of archival sources, Carey conducted a field survey of rear dwellings still extant in the present-day landscape to examine the morphological characteristics of this important yet little-known building type.

The study of urban form, or urban morphology, has a long tradition in geography, and in recent years, has attracted much attention from scholars in urban design, architecture, planning, history, and archaeology.¹⁴ Early work by urban geographers in Britain helped to develop methods for classifying urban elements, and decades of inductively driven case studies have served to identify the features common to cities and the features that make cities distinctive.¹⁵ Despite many valuable contributions, it has been argued that the crucial issue of how the form of a city changes has not been afforded the attention it deserves. In the third paper of this issue, Jason Gilliland broadens our understanding of the dynamics associated with the physical transformation of the industrial city. He applies the theoretical concept of “creative destruction” to the literal destruction and

creation associated with 19th-century street widenings, to illustrate how the dynamics of the capitalist economy are imprinted on the urban landscape. Detailed case studies of the planning and execution of major street widenings reveal how the built environment of Montreal was periodically destroyed and recreated by a local growth coalition committed to increasing aggregate rents, property values, and municipal revenues, through the intensification of land use.

The morphology of landscapes of commemoration, such as museums, heritage sites, monuments, and cemeteries is an increasingly popular area of study.¹⁶ Geographical studies have traditionally treated the memorial landscape as a text, which can be read to reveal the interests, beliefs, practices, and context of the society within which it was created.¹⁷ It is appropriate that this special issue should end with Meredith Watkins' exploration of the cemetery landscape on Mount Royal, since this was the final resting place of most 19th-century Montrealers. Or was it? Watkins cautions that the cemetery is limited as a site of cultural memory, since there were certain biases about who was commemorated. Her systematic tracing of a controlled sample of individuals from the historical record to their grave markers extant in the cemetery today reveals that more individuals are missing from the landscape than are present. Furthermore, Watkins explains that men were much more likely to be commemorated than women and children, and that this reflects the different gender roles and high infant mortality rates that prevailed in 19th-century Montreal.

Collectively, the papers in this theme issue embrace creative approaches to the study of historical urban landscapes, present significant new evidence for Montreal, and expand our understanding of society and space in the North American industrial city.

Notes

1. *Montreal Illustrated 1894* (Montreal: Consolidated Illustrating Co., 1894), 37.
2. See A. Germain and D. Rose, *Montréal: The Quest for a Metropolis* (New York: Wiley, 2000); P.-A. Linteau, *Histoire de Montréal depuis la Confédération*, 2nd ed., (Montreal: Boréal, 2000). For recent trends in the literature, see C. Poitras, "L'histoire urbaine au Québec durant les années 1990: de nouvelles tendances?" *Revue d'histoire de l'Amérique française* 54(2): 219-45.
3. B. Bradbury, *Working Families: Age, Gender, and Daily Survival in Industrializing Montreal* (Toronto: McClelland & Stewart, 1993).
4. R. Lewis, "The segregated city: class residential patterns and the development of industrial districts in Montreal, 1861-1901," *Journal of Urban History*, 17 (1991): 123-52; J. Gilliland, "Modeling residential mobility in Montreal, 1860-1900," *Historical Methods* 31 (1998): 27-42.
5. J.-C. Marsan, *Montréal en évolution: historique du développement de l'architecture et de l'environnement urbain montréalais*, 3rd ed. (Montreal: Méridien, 1994); J.-C. Robert, *Atlas historique de Montréal* (Montreal: Art Global, 1994); R.C.H. Sweeny, "Land and people: property investment in late pre-industrial Montreal," *Urban History Review / Revue d'histoire urbaine* 14 (1995): 42-51.
6. I. Gournay and F. VanLaethem, eds, *Montreal Metropolis, 1880-1930* (Montreal: Canadian Centre for Architecture, 1998).
7. R. Legault, "Architecture et forme urbaine: l'exemple du triplex à Montréal de 1870 à 1914," *Urban History Review / Revue d'histoire urbaine* 18 (1989): 1-10; D.B. Hanna, "L'architecture de l'échange," in R. Boivin and R. Comeau, eds., *Montréal. L'oasis du Nord* (Paris: Éditions Autrement, 1992).
8. For examples of recent work, see: S. Olson, "'Pour se créer un avenir', Stratégies de couples montréalais aux XIX^e siècle," *Revue d'histoire de l'Amérique française* 51 (1998): 357-89; J. Gilliland and S. Olson, "Claims on housing space in nineteenth-century Montreal," *Urban History Review / Revue d'histoire urbaine* 26 (1998): 3-16; S. Olson, "Feathering her nest in nineteenth-century Montreal," *Histoire sociale / Social History* 33 (2000): 1-35; P. Thornton and S. Olson, "A Deadly Discrimination Among Montreal Infants, 1860-1900," *Continuity and Change* 16 (2001): 95-135.
9. Papers were also presented by Robert Lewis, Kate Boyer, Patricia Thornton, David Hanna, Julie Podmore, Chris Boone, Grace Brush, Warren Boothman, Gail Chmura, and Tom Fletcher.
10. In 2002, *Journal of Urban History*, *Social & Cultural Geography*, and *International Journal of Urban and Regional Research* devoted special sections to religious landscapes. See: J. Holloway and O. Valins, "Placing religion and spirituality in geography," *Social & Cultural Geography* 3 (2002): 5-9.
11. F. Toker, *The Church of Notre Dame in Montreal*, 2nd ed., (Montreal: McGill-Queens, 1991); and Gournay and VanLaethem, *Montreal Metropolis*.
12. See D.W. Meinig, ed., *The Interpretation of Ordinary Landscapes: Geographical Essays* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1979); J.B. Jackson, *Discovering the Vernacular Landscape* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1984); P. Groth and T. Bressi, eds., *Understanding Ordinary Landscapes* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1997); and the eight-volume *Perspectives in Vernacular Architecture* (1982-2000).
13. For example, P. Ennals and D.W. Holdsworth, *Homeplace: The Making of the Canadian Dwelling over Three Centuries* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1998); and theme issues of *Urban History Review* (1997 and 1998). On Montreal, see: F. Dufaux, "A new world from two old ones: the evolution of Montreal's tenements, 1850-1892," *Urban Morphology* 4 (2000): 9-19; J. Gilliland, "Visions and revisions of house and home: a half-century of change in Montreal's 'Cité-jardin'," in H. Nicol and G. Halseth, eds., *(Re)Development at the Urban Edges* (Geography Publication Series, University of Waterloo, 2000): 139-74.
14. The field is much more developed in Europe (esp. Britain, Italy and France) than in North America. A.V. Moudon, "Urban morphology as an emerging interdisciplinary field," *Urban Morphology* 1 (1997): 3-10. On Montreal, see: Marsan, *Montréal en évolution*.
15. The foundational work is: M.R.G. Conzen, *Alnwick, Northumberland; a study in town-plan analysis*, 2nd ed., (London: Institute of British Geographers 27, 1969). For recent contributions, see the journal *Urban Morphology* (established in 1997).
16. For example, D. Lowenthal, *The Heritage Crusade and the Spoils of History* (London: Viking, 1996). On Montreal, see: B.S. Osborne, "Constructing landscapes of power: the George Etienne Cartier monument, Montreal," *Journal of Historical Geography* 24 (1998): 431-58; B. Young, *The Making and Unmaking of a University Museum: The McCord, 1921-1996* (Montreal: McGill-Queen's, 2000); A. Gordon, *Making public pasts: the contested terrain of Montreal's public memories, 1891-1930* (Montreal: McGill-Queen's, 2001).
17. See J. Duncan, *The City as Text: The Politics of Landscape Interpretation in the Kandy Kingdom* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990).