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THIRTY YEARS OF URBANISM IN QUEBEC CITY

A CITY HIT BY A TRAUMATISM THAT AIN'T THE ONE WE THINK IT IS

BY MARC BOUTIN*

Quebec City’s urban history was marked by a major event which is not the Conquest or the Battlefields of Abraham. It is not to exaggerated to speak here of a cataclysm around which stands the history of many areas downtown. Indeed, it explains the morphology and the structure of the metropolitan region. Its impact on our daily life's organization is from far more important than all other local historical phenomenon of the last 400 years. Nevertheless, our valorous tourist guides are not mentioning it and historians rarely discuss it in this respect. It is, without a doubt, because the stir it has generated is yet to calm down. To say the least, the public as well as experts often mistakes it for its timely corollary, the Quiet Revolution. This event is called “Urban Renovation” (U.R). Like a natural catastrophe, the U.R. hit North America without any warning. Each city had to cope with it in its own terms. Younger cities like Winnipeg and Edmonton, in Canada, adapted rapidly. It was for them a form of rapid growth considering their short past and some infrastructures already in place. In 1950, Boston and Toronto, cities viewed as the most dynamic today, resisted the temptation to get rid of their tramways. But Montreal and Quebec City, wanting to be modern, were eager to get rid of it. Today, Toronto is part of the advantage with a vast rail network and its costs are easy to absorb. Quebec City is still hesitant to go ahead with a new network which would include structures that existed not a long time ago. It is important to be careful of your own time.

**Guy Conrad**

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*P.S. Thanks for all of this.*
dealing with the intermediary stage of the urban boulevard. Indeed, because of the strong pressure coming from the business world (as if it wanted to get even with a past from which it was always excluded) things had to be done thoroughly and in spite of the built environment and the existing site. And to this day, Quebec City finds itself having only few boulevards. And the ones that exist, for instance Pierre Bertrand, often ends mid-way.

To justify its concept, the City produces a report and turns it into an event. Published in 1972 and written by the firm Vandy-Jobin, under the supervision of the Service d’urbanisme de la Ville, this report is a futurist and yet, its projections are presented to the public as a given. After a 30 difficult years, Quebec City enters into a well deserved prosperity. The cover page shows a prospective image of downtown becoming, in the year 2000, a small version of Manhattan. And to make sure that this image becomes a reality, a network of highways and roads beyond a million people green with envy, is proposed. It is an insane stretch of cement and asphalt cutting, like in butter, the middle of many residential streets of the downtown core. Saint-Roch being the main target: three highways (Montmorency, de la Falaise and a direct link with Lévis) run through the parish Notre-Dame-de-la-Paix, soon to disappear. And to be consistent, this two other highways (Laurentien and Champlain via a tunnel). But the project of building a bridge to Lévis is currently on hold, the construction will have to wait the change of mentality. And what does this report entail forty years later? While only one highway (Dufferin-Montmorency) made its way in the heart of Saint-Roch, forced to face the wall of popular resistance as much as the Cap Diamant, and even if less than 25% of the global network proposed by Vandy-Jobin was completed, the spirit of the report has prevailed. Its elaboration, even partial, has shaped recent history. At the end of the 1960s, Saint-Roch was aWORD long region has found itself with one of the biggest road networks in the world, considering itselation ratio: a total of 145 km, that is 20 km for each 100 000 people. These numbers correspond to twice the average of North American cities showing more than half a million people. Only rural and average cities of the mid-West in the United States (such as Tulsa or Oklahoma City) are comparable to Quebec City in this respect. And in 2003, our road engineers have pushed further with the prolongation of the Vollon Highway. All things considered, this record which could be in the Guinness, explains at once the spreading, the dependency to cars, the excessive costs of maintenance of such network and the City’s low population density. To say the least, when it comes to its relations to the car, Quebec City is ultimately "redneck".

Indeed, today’s city has been modeled by the brutal and sudden endeavor of a polynuclear metropolitar structure, one that has a dispersed and week template. And the whole trauma was enhanced by the fact that the new structure was implemented on its complete antithesis. Since then, metropolitan Quebec City is made of two antagonistic cities. One of these two cities celebrates if 400 year in 2008, the other will celebrate it in 2370. This dichotomy in the landscaping has had an impact at the electoral level: the first of these cities voted for the Bloc Quebecois, PQ and Bourget, at the federal, provincial and municipal level, respectively. And the other, already old in spite of its age, voted Conservative, ADQ and Labeaume in the same levels, respectively. In fact, these two cities were placed in a form of sterile rivalry, because no serious consideration was foreseen, by the fathers of the U.R, to establish between them complementary infrastructures. Accordingly, the first serious attempt was the establishment of the bus services Métrobus in 1967, by Claude Furse. This autonomous transport network “light on the rails” could, in a foreseeable future, play an important role in bringing things closer. But to do so, it would have to give back to the urban city its lost vitality.

Bipolar Trouble: Urban Renovation Places Urbanity in Half-mast

The U.R, seen as a conservative revolution, is not a vision of the mind. Contrary to other North American cities – with the exception of Kingston in Ontario – Quebec City has lived through radical changes. The most urban city in North America has collapsed under a rural revolution. Maybe this is temporary – but we will have to wait and see. The city of Boston, under similar pressures, was at first casual before it became again conscious of its traditional urban role, amongst all cities in the United States. Boston known as a universal capital and research center. Boston and its unique residential downtown core, preserved to no end, etc. Urban. In its form and by tradition during the last 350 years, Quebec City became a rural city when the heart of its urban past, that is the Latin Quarter, was destroyed by the tourist industry wanting it to become Old Quebec City.

Indeed, the key element of this "revolution" is not to find in the likes of "Drummondville", this suburb as vast as can be and heavily relying on cars. This is a city that has given an image of the province, as told "of the ancient limits" from the 1950’s. We can find it in the city center, in the so-called village d’antan which simultaneously appeared at the Place-Royale as much as within the walls. Laval University established a precedent as early as 1960. It has turned its back to its long urban history by moving to the fields, far from the noises and social diversity of the Latin Quarter of its origins. It built a campus of the pavilion type that could resemble Ohio State or Georgia Tech. To better understand, just imagine that Harvard University is leaving Harvard Square in Cambridge Massachusetts, for the suburbs near the commercial center. Boston would lose its whole identity. Laval University leaving the neighborhood opened the way to a form of mass tourism that did not ask for that much. Becoming the main tenant of the Latin Quarter was more than profitable in this area, already named Old Quebec City with affection. This move was enough to give wings to any emerging industry. Indeed, two industrial parks, such as an industrial Disneyland, by Couillard, were designed. This autonomous transport network “light on the rails” could, in a foreseeable future, play an important role in bringing things closer. But to do so, it would have to give back to the urban city its lost vitality.

An Emerging Balance of Power

Until 1967, the search for a consensus served as a working method for politicians in City Hall. By consensus we mean the discreet predominance of the favorable bourgeois point of view. Between each election, the idea of opposition was in itself put on hold. Many meetings of the municipal council, where the rule of unanimity prevailed, were over in less than twenty minutes. The unhappy ones – perceived as frustrated individuals in need of recognition – were doomed to complain to their counselor.

From 1967 and on, dissidence took another shape. It became a question of collective survival, mostly located in the living areas of the downtown core. On the front line, a resistant force took place at the eastern limit of the Faubourgs Saint-Roch, Saint-Jean, Saint-Louis and Cap Blanc. It is along this border which separates the tourist and bureaucratic zones within the inhabited areas, that the strongest urban fights happened. In particular, the ones of the Ilots Saint-Patrick (called the Faubourg Saint-Louis), Berthelot (the Faubourg Saint-Jean) and Fleurie (the Faubourg Saint-Roch). The exterior limit of these Faubourgs. Includes areas such as Mercier, Saint-Sauveur, Vanier, Limollou and Malzéres, served as a base supporting this frontline. In a larger scale, we could see how the closed territory formed by these nine quarters as a whole was caught in a stranglehold. Towards the exterior (in the East), this territory had the pressure of the expanding white zone around the walls. This zone includes Parlement Hill, d’Youville Square and the sectors of the new Saint-Roch, of the Palais de Justice and of the Gare du Palais. Toward the exterior (in the West and in the North) the very heavily built-in Haut-Ville, its southernmost part, the vast suburb at the periphery which continues to expand since 1960. On the one hand, sky-scrapers and big parking lots take over the inhabited spaces. On the other hand, the car invasion regulates the work week, invades empty lots and creates traffic jams on commercial and residential streets.

"Excuse Us, This is Progress!" From 1967 to 1980, opposition is for the lot of few organized citizens. They take the streets and use media strategies to convince a split public opinion. Along the borders of this territory, uncertainty is heavy. In this respect, Bush’s intelligent bomb labeled "Excuse us, this is freedom" could evoke the bulldozers of mayor Lamontagne while they were politely demolishing with their proud credo: "Excuse us, this is progress!" It is indeed a slow war between unequal forces. On the civil side, eight committees of citizens (only three of these are
still in operation today) offered a strong resistance. This resistance has contributed to create the actual urban setting: of the four highways pointing towards Saint-Roch, none was able to cross downtown. The Dufferin-Montmorency highway, solely, was able to do some damage before stopping at Lépine Square, in front of the now famous lot Fleurie. One doesn’t count the emerging groups defending rights and services such as Day care, Houses for the youth, coop housings, etc. One of these groups, the ACEF Quebec (Association coopérative d’économie familiale) regroups few sociologists and social agents which published the EZOP report Une ville à vendre (A City for sale) in 1972. This report is a manifest answer to the Vinyard jobin commission. Its content denounces the two-faced language of the city. It reveals the ramifications linking real estate companies to this trend of Urban Renovation. Its publication will open the way to establish a better structured popular movement. It will see to the creation of a new municipal party, the Rassemblement populaire (RP) which will gain power in 1989.

A Cosmetic Urban Planning

This battle will move on to the political scene. For the RP, urban management will become a tool to accomplish the impossible to please the tourist industry as much as the militant base of the party. Downtown, the great structuring projects are put aside to benefit a typology of cultural projects. The heart of the city, one that seeks to restore the most striking mistakes done by the U.R. over the years. We are assisting to few changes: the Saint-Roch mall is demolished, the banks of the Saint-Chambers are made to look more solid bases, the left, even in few changes: the Saint-Roch mall is demolished, the banks of the Saint-Chambers are made to look more solid bases, the left, even in the eyes of the militants. The Saint-Roch area is called "new technologies" with its park "where we don’t want to see any bellies", or, say, its series of giant parking lots often hidden behind an artistic facade (such as La Chapelle Street, behind the Cinéma Odéon, and Saint-Vallier Street, next to the Faubourg elevator). As far as the citizens projects are concerned, realisations such as the public garden and the sculpture garden of the former hospital of the city have survived for a period (and with a very small financial support). They later disappeared to the benefit of green spaces in complete agreement with the new "urbanocratic" correctness. Indeed, if political powers come and go, bureaucracy stays. Nonetheless, some urbanist bureaucrats which were also artisans of the U.R., were able to keep their positions in the party. They contribute further to the make-over, or the abolishment of their own masterpieces. As the logic prevails, when a wind from the left is rising, bureaucrats are making such a "Citifort God" shifts smoothly towards the right.

Ruralopolis

In the Kingdom of lawn mowers, frost metallic fences, tarmac parkings lots, golf courses and the likes, the form of the pavilion dominates the architectural landscape. From the smallest bungalow with a garage to the largest airport facilities, one finds cubic or rectangular constructions isolated or surrounded by grass or asphalt everywhere. Austere or simplistic, they are isolated randomly or aligned orderly at the centers of lots of all sizes. They are framed by what Pierre Reverdy calls "the most durable and solid hyphen between beings": the fence. In this magma high in gaz and tarmac covering more than 90% of territory in cities like Quebec City and Laval together, the "architectonic" lines are blended. One doesn’t know the difference between a primary school and a water treatment plant, a public high school and a high security jail. From morphological and organisational points of view, what differentiates is there between (sic) University Campus and the Laval Commercial Center? As Siamese rejects of the U.R., the two urbanistic landmarks of the suburbs are indeed neighbors, today, in a cozy stretch that the well named Robert Bourassa Highway reaffirms instead of weakening it. Since 1960, this perspective and Sobeys’ complicity with the University to open an experimental supermarket on the highway’s west side goes hand in hand with the industrial complex dominating Saint-Foy’s core. As a simple sign of growth, the idea of an "academic" food market is only a "natural" step towards the creation of an hyper-campus Pepsi-Laval coming with an integral market. Such campus comes from the fact that to be able to move, it depends almost exclusively on a blood stream too large and sucking up too much energy. The road networks, the real blood system of the rural city is to Quebec City what the Olympic Stadium is to Montreal: a vast grey elephant falling apart, showing prematurely its wrinkles. Vast and performing enough to serve a metropolis of two million people, this network has a colossal cost of maintenance (for snow removal, security and renovation, etc) that is three times heavier for a population of two people. Besides the fact that it doesn’t age well, it is like a human being. The ageing process is even more active because the city is young.

The strength of Ruralopolis is in the demographic domain. The great suburb, with its two thirds of the population, gives the tone to the rest of the region with its conservatism. The success of the "radios-poubelles", for instance, is not so much downtown as it is in the suburbs. But the suburb’s hold on the region is weakened by a fictional ties linking it to popular areas, to the historic core of the city altogether perceived as a playground for suburbia. Indeed, people walk, celebrate, and interact in great numbers with tourists in this "enlarged" Old Quebec City. This includes the harbor, the agora area, Carnival Place, the bassin Louise, D’Youville Square, etc. Very often during such festivities, the "natives" hide in their homes or simply desert it.

The Postcarded City, The Object City

All urbanists have not sold their soul to the city or the tourist industry. Here is a commentary from Jean Cimon, retired urbanist and artisan of the first urban battles in Quebec City: "As long as there will be a commercial lobbying to use Old Quebec as a merchandise, as if it was an open mine, and as long as the profit will prevail over the aesthetic of an extraordinary city, its future is threatened. And the promoters, when they will have killed the life within Old Quebec City walls, will go elsewhere...". The diagnostic is clear: free speculation will win over residential life within the walls...

Like in the Arab Emirates, in Dubai, in the Persian Gulf, Old Quebec City doesn’t tolerate new residents unless they are the richest of wanderers. These enjoy few pied­à-terre elsewhere in the world. This allow them — on the contrary to the latest native person — to escape the urban terrors and to create their own little local agenda. We think here of the long list of medieval festivals and carnivals. Festivals like the Oktoberfest, the Grand Rire Bleu, the Red Bull, the many national festivities and other costumed parties. All events which give rhythms to the life on each side of the walls, and that, with the help of grants and the likes, stimulate the hospitality industry in America’s oldest city.

The white zone (or zone of the hospitality industry) is an extension of the glaze of the fortifications. It runs up to the living limits of the French authorities and the original tourism district (usually say CBD, or Central Business District) in the city. It is because of the enclaves of the city-between-walls that the white zone has annexed Old Quebec City to itself and that the tourists industry can screen all the festive activities. Until 1979, we celebrated the Carnival in popular neighborhoods, in areas like Saint-Sauveur or the Latin Quarter. With the U.R., the Carnival installations are now closer to Hotel areas and the like. To submit to room rentals regulations, the event calendar is accommodating scheduled dates (the beginning of February). And, contrary to the Rio or New Orleans Carnivals, Quebec City’s Carnival had to break away from the Mardi gras, a celebration which gives full meaning to its historical as well as political aspects. In this regard, the affective relations linking it to downtown residents is also broken. It is too close for certain people, too far for others.

...and its Forbidden City

Quebec City wall is breaking the mold left by Quebec City’s urban history. The city is a path, and the interventions orienting its development, as massive as they are, are not beyond remedy.

The key to a possible change in Quebec City’s urban history may be found in one of the seven doors of the city. It is important to know that in the 19th Century, Quebec City walls had seven passages and doors. Behind them were seven churches and seven chapels. Only six of the seven doors coincided with a passage, the...
one of McMahon Street. Built later, it never had a door but only a simple postern. The seventh door gives access to the Citadel. It is today the only authentic door that remains. The others if they have been destroyed or have been simply replaced by stylized imitations.

While the U.R. transformed the whole agglomeration from top to bottom, the Citadel, perched on its pedestal, remained intact and husbanded. The others if they have been destroyed or have been simply replaced by stylized imitations. Some monumental constructions are imposing by their rigor to the extent where getting rid of them is becoming a necessary step towards the conquest of our terrestrial autonomy. Since 1668, Quebec City passed from a military governance to another, from a governance of spirits to another; from the French Regime to the British Empire; from the domination of the Church to a kind of market tyranny. And in 2001, in terms of the liberation of the minds, this was more than enough. Isn’t our most recent tyranny assumed by many as if it was a form of “freedom”?

To break this chain of servitude, civil society could take possession of the Citadel — like some have done with the Bastille. It would not be to destroy the urban-rural road network, but break away from a taboo. People could inhabit it. They would inhabit it like we would in a modern urban area with people walking and no cars. This green area would not contribute to further spreading of the city. It would be utterly devoided of speculation, composed of social housing for families and children. We would inhabit it in more inventive, intelligent and enlightened ways than what the Governor General has proposed. Let’s think seriously about it before the tourist industry, financed by some rich emirates, takes it over. The Citadel could become our next Saint-Gabriel Street!

**The Story of M. Keuner**

Let’s end with a story authored by Bertold Brecht. An emigrant from the government arrived at a man’s house and this man “had learn to say no.” He asked to requisition the man’s house, and food, and asked him: “Would you like to me be at your service?” During 7 years, the man put him to bed, covered him, stayed late with him and obeyed him. But whatever he did, the man never pronounced a word: When the seven years were over, while the emissary was drinking, eating, got bigger, slept, and gave orders, he died. The men covered him, threw him out of the house, washed the bed, painted the walls, took a breath of happiness and said: “No”.

**Theoretical Summary**

The formulas Quiet Revolution and the Revolutionary avant-garde improvisations. They have been recycled to no end in Quebec to serve political agendas, by public relation agencies known to make announcements which are the opposite of what is to come, in order to move the attention away from what is really happening. If we look at facts, the Quiet Revolution was not revolutionary, nor was it quiet. The Urban Revolution, at least in Quebec City, was in no way renovating or urban. We can speak, in the first, of a form of rattrapage (or reform) evidently more agitated than quiet. In the second, we can see a form of reversal, indeed devastating, but absolutely not reforming. We could qualify it as anti-urban to the extent of naming it a Rural Revolution.

The Urban Revolution is the result of a certain hesitation on the Revolution, the latter being the “temporalization” of the other. Spatial formations have been part of the Quiet Revolution. They had an impact on the dominant values of today. Instead, there was a first phase of planning that dominated the 1950-1960, urban-ization period. It has produced and reproduced the consumerist and individualist postmodern values of today. Another form of planning (dominating the past in Quebec City, and these days on the offensive mode or withdrawn since the Urban Revolution) tends to foreclose and offer similar values. The first is said to be rural or industrial. The second is urban. The first relates to the so-called lucid vision of Quebec City. The second is a vision showing solidarity.

Rural economy relies on material production and global markets. Urban economy is driven by social reproduction and valorizes self-sufficiency and local autonomy. A rural type of planning (say albertan) tends to isolate the different functions to better disperse and regroup them by categories. The residential is found in the peripheral and vertical sleepy suburbs. The commercial takes place in the halls, the industrial in the parks, the academic in the campuses, etc. An urban type of planning (say utopian) tends, on the contrary, to fragment all functions to mix and regroup them according to their variety. It wants to unite them like Lego blocks of varied colors. The Albertan (or the citizen) moves daily from one role to the next on a regional scale. The space is divided in productive lots. Each lot is identified to a home in order to facilitate a familial self-sufficiency where each farm could diversify its production to the maximum. Since thirty years, this form of road network is largely disappearing. The farms exist in groups. They submit to monoproduction and industrial agricultural norms which tend to eliminate what is considered “residential”. The country side in Quebec is becoming rural again. By doing so, it follows the same geographical patterns than its capital. Quebec City’s urban planning has French origins and progressed until 1950, thanks to the extended parochial networks. The sky-scraper connected by highways to sleepy suburbs turn the urban area into an inhabited quarter, as a perfect rural trio. The urban city in itself shrinks around mixed commercial streets such as Saint-Jean, Saint-Joseph, Saint-Vallier, 38 Avenue, Cartier, Marguerite, Bègue, Racine, Royale, Trait-Carre, etc. Similarly, the patch that cities become cities doesn’t imply that they become more urban. In the 20th Century, masses of people running to slums and sleepy suburbs have not lost their urban characters by magic.

Contrary to current opinion, the 20th Century was not the one for the “urbanization” of societies. It was rather one of urban decline, of massive and adamant “ruralization” of cities.