Thirty Years of Urbanism in Quebec City
A City Hit By a Traumatism That Ain’t the One We Think It Is

Marc Boutin
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BY MARC BOUTIN

Quebec City's urban history was marked by a major event which is not the Conquest nor the Battlefield 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 urban 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, ours 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 mistake it for its timely corrosion, the Quiet Revolution. This event is called "Urban Renewal" (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 tramsways. But Boston and Quebec City, wanting to be modern, were eager to get rid of it. Today, Toronto is part of the avant-garde 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 to be of your own time.

The Urban Renewal

In Boston, between 1950 and 1960, urbanists made their first mistakes under the name of the Urban Renewal. Scollary Square is central location amongst the most lively and welcoming. It is typical of some third-world megapolis, the urbanist's response to this pressure, is becoming a panacea for the business world. It is the beginning of the great malls at the periphery of the city - something most daunting for inhabited areas.
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 futurist and yet, its projections are presented to the public as a given. After 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 rather than 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, la Falaise and a direct link with Lévis) run through the parish Notre-Dame-de-la-Paix, soon to disappear. And to be consistent, add to this two other highways (Laurentien and Champlain via a tunnel). But the project of building a bridge to Lévis (Middlesex) is left aside, its construction will have to wait the change of mentalities. 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 1967 on one hand, an old residential region has found itself with one of the biggest road networks in the world, considering its population ratio: a total of 1.45 km, that is 20 km for each 1000 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 regard. And in 2003, our road engineers have pushed further with the prolongation of the Vallon 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 metropolitan 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 its 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 UR, to establish between them complementary infrastructures. Accordingly, the first serious attempt was the establishment of the bus services Métromet 1994, by law of 1987. 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 “Drunkmenville”, 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 integral part of an industrial Disneyland, a University and a Commercial power center in the West, would dominate the peak of Saint-Louis-Grande-Allee-Laurier Streets, with, in between the two, a parliamentary zone located under the supervision of the Hotel Hilton International. This axial cohabitation of two white zones had an impact on the rural destiny of an “old National Provincial Capital”, which, in the end, is very quiet. It would make possible, among other things, shows as terrible as the Red Bull Cushed Ice in the East and the Budweiser Tail Gates, so cherished by André Arthur in the West. At the end, we have a city that has nothing to envy the city of Val-Béalair, when it comes to being “redneck”.

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, discord took another shape. It became a question of collective survival, mostly located in the living room of the downtown core. On the front line, a resisting 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 one 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 Montmorency, Saint-Sauveur, Vanier, Limolliou and Malzerets, 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 Parliament Hill, d’Youville Square and the sectors of the new Saint-Roch, of the Palais of Justice and of the Gare du Palais. Toward the exterior (in the West), this territory had the pressure of the expanding territory, uncertainty is heavy. In this respect, Bush’s intelligent war between unequal forces. On the one hand, sky-scraper 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 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 Ilet 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 ACFE 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 of the frame of mind of the Vaudreuil-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 populair (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 typical urbanistic project: 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-Charles river are made to look more natural, trees are planted, and, an urban complex is built to replace the wall of shame represented by the René-Levesque Boulevard and to “humanize” the boulevard Honoré Mercier. This recent demolition of the access roads of the Montmorency highway, now obsolete, testifies to the same obliviousness. Such cosmetic projects are simply not enough to give development new directions. Without projects with solid bases, the left, even in power, could do nothing more than reape the mistakes done by the first engineers of the Urban Renovation. Consequently, by the end of L’Allier’s years in power, the regional dependence to cars was aggravated. Among the best realizations, the rise of area councils supporting the Métrobus network is noteworthy. Also, in the white zone, we see the emergence of a new Saint-Roch area called "of new technologies" with its park "where we don't want to see any belleves", or, say, its series of giant parking lots often hidden behind an artisitic facade (such as La Chapelle Street, behind the Cinéma Odéon, and Saint-Valler 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 pot-bellied pigs 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: "Gift from God" shifts smoothly towards the right.

Ruralopolis

In the Kingsdom 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. Aureate or simple,, they are constructed 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 gas and tarmac covering more than 90% of territory in cities like Quebec City and Levis 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 organizational points of view, what difference 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 Sobey's complicity with the University to open an experimental supermarket on the highway's west side goes hand in hand with the industrial complex dominating Sainte-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 upon 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 million 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 third of the population, gives the tone to the rest of the region with its conservatism. The success of the « radios-pouffières », 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, by 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, Carnaval 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 urbansits 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...

...and its Forbidden City

Quebec City 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 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 haunted. The others if have been destroyed or have been simply replaced by stylized imitations.

The Story of M. Keuner

Let's end with a story authored by Bertold Bretch. An emissary from the brahmin 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 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 like we would in a modern urban area with people walking and no cars.

Notes

1 Terms which designate parks and industrial zones where residential spacesday are excluded.
2 Dixit Jean-Paul L'Allier.
4 See Jean Cimon, in Daphné Dons-Viens, La Veuve du Vieux Québec: Théâtre est à la réception in Le Soleil, February 24, 2008.
6 This a street in the Faubourg Saint-Jean in Quebec City. It was supposed to become an access road to the highway, but all houses were preserved and transformed into co-op housing.

Legends

> Map 1 (Page 34) The wall. Although it is cut off form its historical core (D'youville Square, Garneau), the Faubourg Saint-Jean was able to maintain a strategic position for an inhabited quarter, as a high ground of urban resistance. When you are at the corner of the square and the street Saint-Jean and Saint-Vallier meet, the white zone is narrower. But the skyscrapers, with the wind tunnels that it generates, and the suspended highway are obstacles to overcome for the pedestrians.

> Map 2 (Page 35) Quebec 2008: a white zone downtown. The urban renovation has created a non-residential zone (in white on the map). It enclous the city within the walls. Linked to Ruralopolis by a access roads (the Montronorey, La Salle, etc.) they create a public realm that the foreign. Here, the zone has become a kind of straw jacket regulating the whole metropolitan region. In the urban zone, the signs of our most recent tyranny are evident. More agitated than quiet, the sky-scraper connected by highways to sleepy suburbs. From a governance of power. It is along this frontier that a new urban life, is dividing the once the heart of the city.

> Map 3 (Page 36) Ruralopolis. In black, the quiet suburbs; in squares, the services zones with their multiple functions. In squared, the urbanised zones before the Quiet Revolution. The urban economy is driven by social and rural.

> Map 4 (Page 38) Quebec 1968. This map and the one on the streets St-Jean, St-Jacques, the four highways confronted by the passive or active resistance of the urban milieu. Contrary to what the think­ers of the Urban Revolution had wished, they could not cross the heart of the city.

> Map 5 (Page 38) The west frontier of the white zone: the emergence of a balance of power. It is along this frontier that separates the tourist and bureaucratic zones from the residential area where we will see urban battles unfolding, in particular the ones of the lot Saint-Patrick (Faubourg Saint-Louis), Berthelot (Faubourg Saint-Jean) and Fleurie (Faubourg Saint-Roch). The territory formed by popular neighborhoods is caused by the kind of social conflict. On the one hand, sky-scraper and big parking lots take over the inhabited spaces. On the other hand, the car invasion regulates the work week, and generates daily traffic jams on commercial and residential streets.

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