

City Metaphors, urban constructs

ALAN KNIGHT and IRENA LATEK
Université de Montréal

For almost twenty years now, the *Unité d'architecture urbaine* — the Urban Architecture Unit — has been promoting the teaching of architecture with regards to its double significance: on the one hand, architecture as a social practice, on the other, architecture emerging from public space which is considered as a socially constructed entity. The Unit built its fundamentals on our everyday critical experience of the physical environment.

By dealing with what is significant in urban space (that which is part of our knowledge and constitutes our social identity) this methodology instigates personal feelings, sometimes emotional, and promotes the shaping of something familiar as well as collective. The form and ideas behind the projects resulted in the Unit breaking away from the established structure of the University of Montreal's School of Architecture. Apart from a few Italian cities, which like Bologna, have quickly learned from the obvious lessons, it was only by the early 1980's when cities such as Berlin, Barcelona, Paris or Edinburgh have begun applying urban architecture principles. In Montreal, the Urban Architecture Unit of the university appeared as the most significant contributor to the advancement of critical thought about the form of the city. It was actually due to the diffusion of this thinking within the Urban Planning Department of the City of Montreal that it has recently been possible to refer to the emergence of an *École de Montréal*.¹ Works such as the *Promenade de la rue de la Commune* and the *Place de la*

Paix, or even the new plan for Charlotte Street, are representative of an emerging, influential train of thought within the public administration.

In this brief essay, we would like to discuss the developments of the global project of the Unit with regards to developments in contemporary architecture, to address its emergence on the public place and finally to present the works of the *École de Montréal* for the Urban Planning Department of the City of Montreal. As well, we aspire to elaborate on the question "What, in the teachings of the Urban Architecture Unit, transcends the simple academic framework?"

Peter Reyner Banham was the first to identify "Pop-Art" as new interest in mass produced consumer objects which decorated our daily lives during the 50's and 60's and which revealed itself as a cult. These artifacts of the big city's popular culture, which undoubtedly had mythical origins, will become the subject of an almost anthropological interest. The writings of Levi-Strauss can clearly be identified at the source of Banham's, Stirling's, the Smithsons' and Richard Hamilton's interest in the minor architecture of daily urban life. It was then possible to see the urban forms of American cities as worthy of a new cultural interest. They could no longer be considered as purely outdated forms from the past.

Subsequently, the Urban Architecture studio of the School of Architecture of the University of Montreal finds the

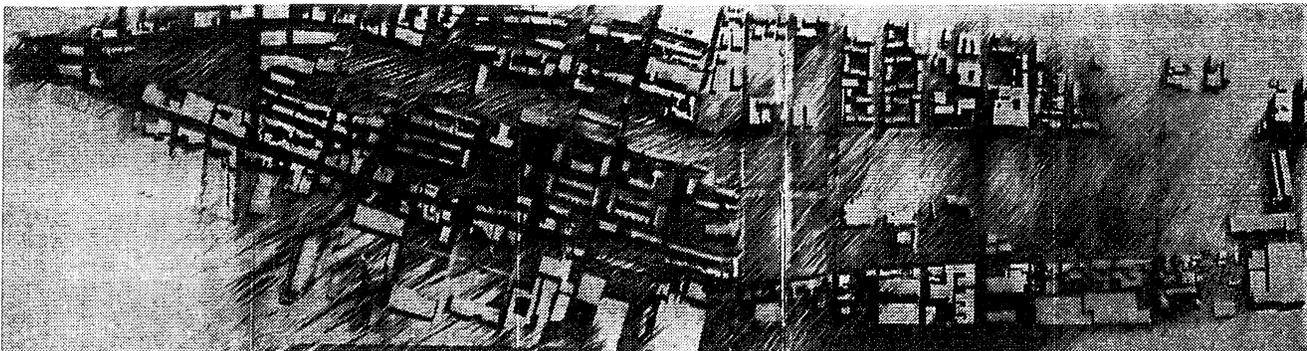


Fig. 1. François Rioux: *Lieux et non-lieux*, graphite and colored pencil on tracing paper (in 5 parts), 56 x 212 cm.

origins of its pedagogical project in many students' demonstrations that aimed at the re-organization of academic programs at the beginning of the 1970's. At this time, the traditional systems of design studios; the "horizontal" promotion of students every academic year was replaced by a series of vertically structured units founded upon the concerns and research interests of the Faculty. This new system regrouped students of second, third and fourth year.

Such a structure, inspired by the well known Architectural Association's unit system in London, encouraged the students to undertake a research work for a period of at least two trimesters; this allowed, among other things, to restrain the contemporary tendency towards the fragmentation and the diminishing of architectural knowledge. The more advanced students played an important role in the shaping of the Unit's essential teachings by contributing to the tutoring of newcomers. Later on, while in professional practice, these same people would be invited to join the school as guest critics.

During its early manifestations towards the end of the 1970's, the Unit, which was then known as *Aménagement Urbain*, responded to two critical objectives: a) the affirmation of the specificity of the city of Montreal as an urban form, and b), the assertion of a school attached to a French-speaking university where students were familiar with the research and political practices of the "soixante—huitard" philosophers such as Michel Foucault or Jean-Francois Lyotard, who had recently been invited to the University of Montreal.

By the late 1970's, the Unit changed its name and went through a second stage of conceptual development and methodology. At the beginning of the 80's, the *Unité d'architecture urbaine*—Urban Architecture Unit—brought together Melvin Charney, Denys Marchand and Alan Knight, — Charney being the founder of not only an extensive part of the critical thinking of the studio, but also of an original and truly exciting teaching approach. In 1984, Irena Latek joined the team and continually, ever since, has supplemented the efforts of the group with an unmatched energy and exceptional intelligence.

If the main objective of the Unit had, until then, been "the

elaboration of alternative solutions to the conventional practice of designing physical spaces in the urban domain," as one reads in the annual school publications of 1976 and

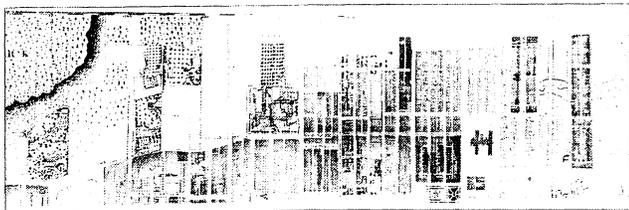


Fig. 2. Nicolas Roquet: *The memory of the site*, collage and colored pencil on photocopy on paper, 61 x 126 cm.

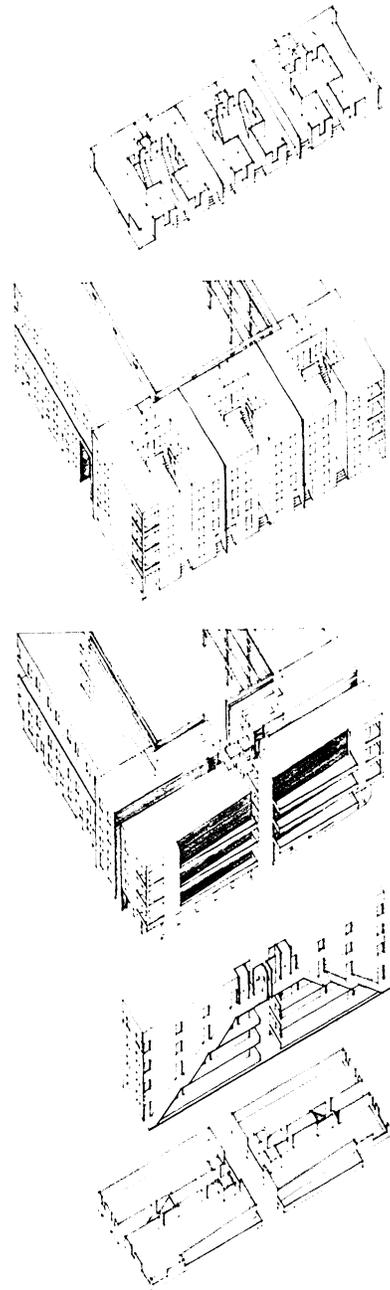


Fig. 4. Nicolas Roquet: *Housing types: Roy Street and Pine Avenue*, graphite on vellum, 132 x 61 cm.

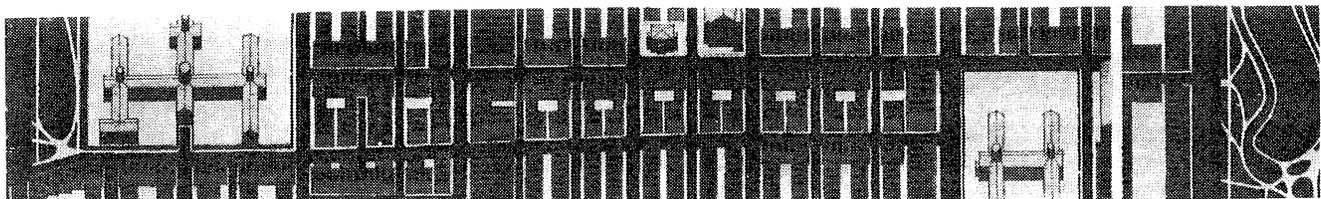


Fig. 3. Nicolas Roquet: *The figure of the block*, colored pencil and transparent paper, 41 x 80 cm.

1978, the Urban Architecture studio subsequently developed reading techniques of the city through the use of drawing and its interpretation as a “text” that could be deciphered, thus rendering its elements visible.

Drawing became an essential instrument, the very matter of the project. At the same time, the reading of the city was enriched by different significations clearly emanating from the structural linguistic analogy (vocabulary, narration, syntax, signification). This represents a key moment because such a linguistic analogy allows the identification of the pathology of contemporary attitudes concerning the city as an outcome of an hygienist and medical analogy, dating back to the nineteenth century (organism, growth, tissue, artery, circulation, etc.)

Beginning in the 1980’s, the studio explored a disciplinary autonomy of architecture by means of its own techniques, amongst them typo-morphology. The city and its urban knowledge appeared as the very place and matter of contemporary architecture.

These ideas are undoubtedly inspired by the research of the TENDENZA and other discourses concerning the “program of the second modernity” in Italy. Such ideas were promoted in America by the Institute for Urban Studies in New York, starting in 1981-82. This refers to the idea of the urban project based on the relation of the form of the city to its history, an idea greatly enhanced within the Unit by the specific nature of the North-American urban experience and the popular artifacts of its physical culture.

The idea surfaced that architecture should identify its foundations within the cultural body of the city. The Unit’s projects therefore transcend the whole of aesthetic invention in many ways:

Firstly, concerning the relationship between architecture and history.

By accepting to draw and redraw the traces of the city, we are not aiming at the simple recollection of data about historical layers nor even at their conservation, but rather we strive towards the **transformation of the city**, a transformation based on the understanding of the uniqueness of the city’s self-building process throughout time.

Secondly, concerning the exploration of the contemporary city.

The student, acting as both client and architect, is responsible for the choice of the site for the project. In such a manner, the Unit gathered considerable knowledge on the problematic issues of the intervention and the concretization of the projects within the contemporary conjunction of the peripheral expansion of the city. Many **key sites** for the re-ignition of the city’s physical development, i.e. the Ville-Marie highway, the Pine Av./ Parc Av. interchange, etc. have been repeatedly studied in projects proposed by many students during the 1980-90’s.

Thirdly, concerning the theoretical conjunction of contemporary architecture.

The studio mainly concentrates on the **figurative structure** of urban forms. The opposition between the theory of

expression of the Modern Mouvement, which expresses itself through the notion of “form and function,” and our exploration of the figure and its collective significations had begun to widen the gap between the Unit’s practice and those of the School of Architecture as well as that of the wider professional field. Nevertheless, the exhibitions and press conferences regarding topics of public interest and concerning projects for the city of Montreal, have kept the Unit in the public eye and therefore reinforced its original objectives of encouraging an alternative practice.

Fourthly, concerning the originality of the projects.

The quest towards an understanding of the singularity of the urban form of the site attains the creative aspect of the project in striving for a rationality able to develop an hitherto unknown clarity in the architectural project. These projects represent heroically authentic architectural work proposed by young designers. Their accomplishments strive for **truth** in the architecture of the city of Montreal.

Finally, concerning the relationship between architecture and philosophy.

Such a quest for truth within artistic and poetic activity characterizes the modernity of this last ten years production. As Irena Latek has pointed out in her article “The city and its double” (*City Metaphors, Urban Constructs*, p. 115.) the nucleus of the critic of the modern paradigm, from Husserl to Heidegger, considers that the main goal of our times resides in **surpassing** a truth which is limited to the sole

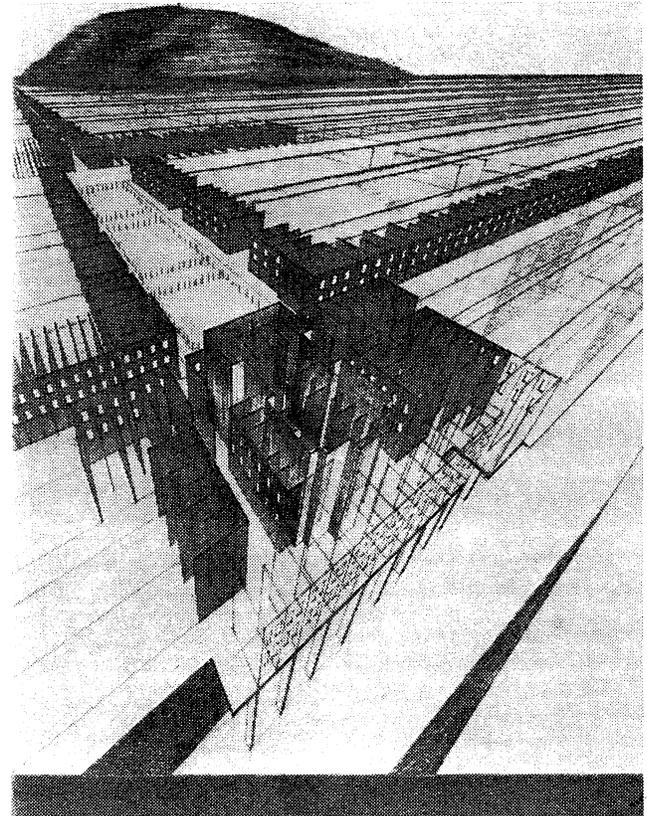


Fig. 5. Matthieu Geoffrion: *A school within the city*, ink, graphite and colored pencil on paper, 58 x 44 cm.

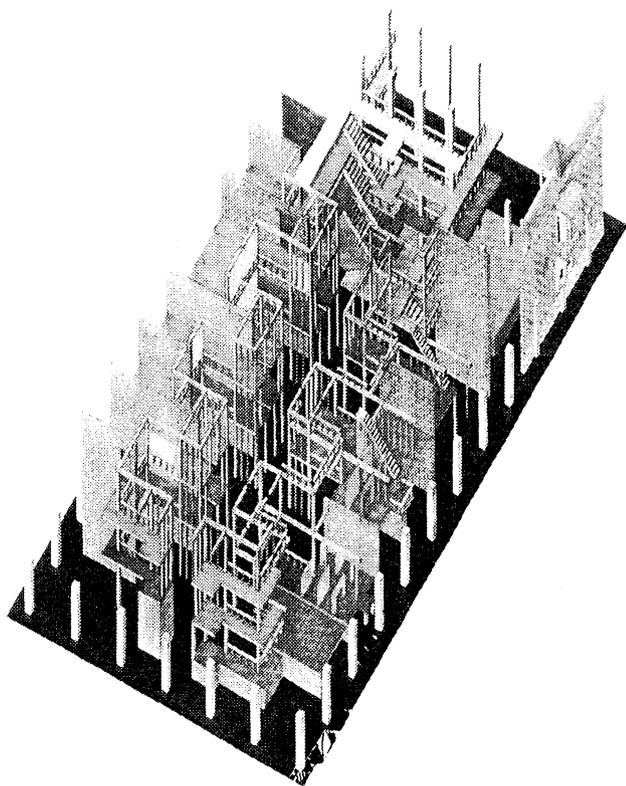


Fig. 6. Matthieu Geoffrion: *Tel que construit*, collage, graphite and colored pencil on paper, 89 x 58 cm.

instrumentalization of its own thinking. As Heidegger pronounced, "*L'homme habite en poète*;" thus considering art, and not science, as man's main abode.

These five transgressions from the common notion of aesthetic creation (art as a novelty) constitutes in our opinion the strength and the reason for public interest in our work. Some could misunderstand this as a "new working method" and consequently perceive it as a mere extension of instrumentalist thinking. Others however, could regard it as a meaningful renewal of architectural practice expressed through the metaphor of the city interpreted as a text.

This explains both the international interest manifested by the holding of exhibitions in Paris and New York and the promotion of a simple local show of architectural propositions to that of the *École de Montréal*. This also explains the interest that the Urban Planning Department of the City of Montreal has shown for the past ten years towards the studio and its young architects.

The Unit's project is, from thereon, animated by the critique of modern architecture, a debate which is conducted within its approach and through the project process. Such a methodology revolves around three objectives:

- repositioning the city at the center of the projectual working methods as a **space of modernity**, bringing together rationality in the process of drawing (typomorphology) searching for the intelligibility of the project specific to a given city;

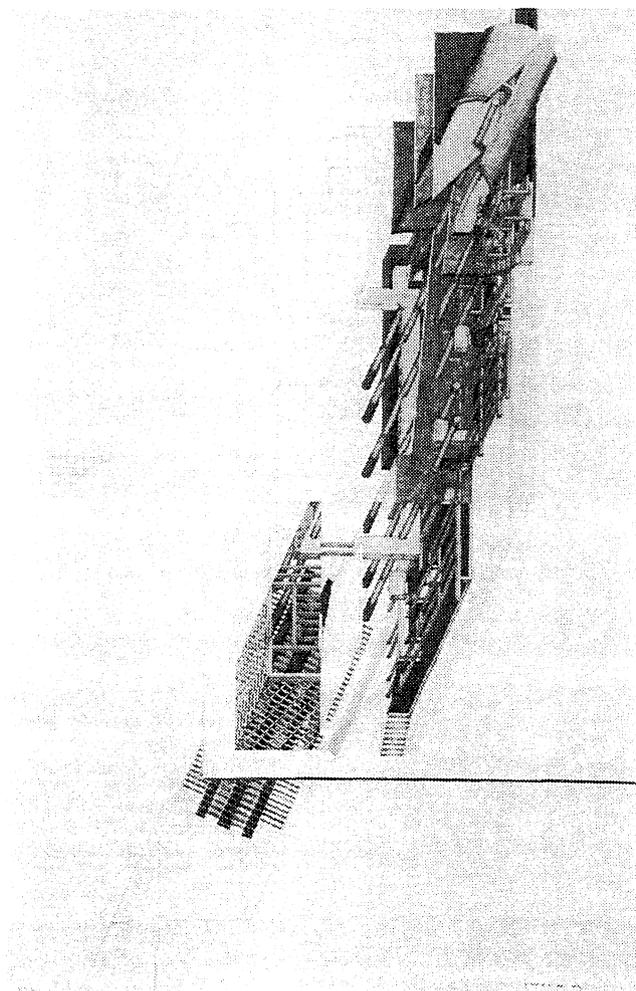


Fig. 7. Matthieu Geoffrion: *The presentation ball*, ink, graphite and colored pencil on paper, 89 x 58 cm.

- perceiving the city as a linguistic **structure** possessing of its own principles, figures and metaphors;
- exploring the mythical content of the **collective ritual** through the use of metaphor, of allegory and narration within the contemporary project.

The projects that characterize the latest production of the Unit are recognizable in their use of poetic *montage* procedures that make past and present come together in one piece. These demystify and render visible the origins of modernity as manifested in the big city. The city is then perceived as "second nature" and as the "theater" of everyday life.

Towards the end of the 1980's, the School of Architecture had to endure, as many other educational institutions, several antagonistic questionings. The goal of better management of the teaching program resulted in the unit system being replaced by a structure which recalls that of the school of the early 1960's. The work produced in the Urban Architecture Unit was interrupted in 1991. Today, only one trimester is offered as an optional studio among a number of different thematic workshops. The teaching of a critically oriented working method has since become very difficult and ex-

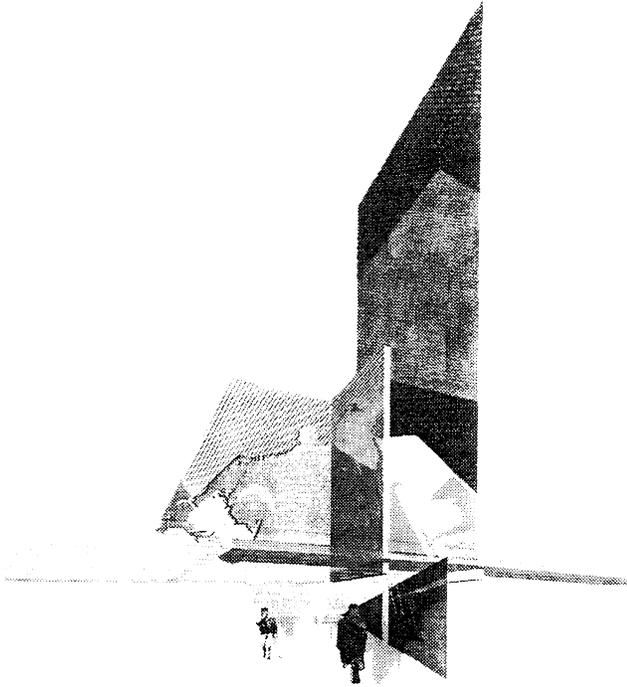


Fig. 8. Matthieu Geoffrion: *Entrance from the subway, a tribute to Laszlo Moholy-Nagy*, collage, ink and graphite on paper, 89 x 58 cm.

tremely demanding for both students and teachers. Nevertheless, the work has not stopped and the ideas and objectives of the unit are attaining many more different social circles.

By the end of 1980's, the urban planning department opened their doors to the leading protagonists of this approach; to both teaching staff and graduating students from the Unit. Melvin Charney prepared a designed plan for a sector of the city, while Alan Knight consecrated three years to the department directing many projects, some of which are today on the construction. Returning to the University, he has produced three preliminary planning studies for the city of Montreal. Since then, an Urban Architecture Research group has emerged. These projects, which had an important impact on the development of the city, are taking place in a professional context greatly enriched by the growing circle of ex-students of the Unit. At the same time, a group working under the direction of Irena Latek, have undertaken several international design competitions for cities such as Toronto, Berlin and Barcelona. A summer school devoted to the study of Urban Architecture has recently been inaugurated in Paris.

All these efforts are animated by evolving ideas taking new forms. These ideas continue to engage the same type of research on our material reality. They are still involving the generating power of collective memory, developing the metaphysical dimension and the universal symbolism of architecture in order to build a concrete context for our lives.

NOTES

- ¹ Martin, Louis «De l'école à la ville: la naissance d'une école de Montréal», ARQ : Architecture-Québec, no 83, Montréal, Québec, printemps 1995, pp. 8-13.