

# Billboards and Qualification of Urban Sites

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## Introduction

Motivated by the acknowledgement that urban landscape is a cultural heritage, which needs to be protected, our research analyses the role played in this setting by advertising posters. This work aims, foremost, at testing the possibilities offered by the urban project process as a means to subvert visual pollution caused by billboards, and foster the latter to play a positive role in the creation of public space.<sup>1</sup>

With the same momentum as public space degenerates and shrinks, the city loses its collectively recognisable form. According to this hypothesis, since the CIAM crisis during the 50's, protection of the urban landscape as a heritage, is an issue acknowledged by professionals and largely considered a necessity and a socio-political objective. Numerous post-war philosophers such as Arendt, Lefebvre, and Senett raised questions on the ethical dimension of urban space. The notion of city as heritage undoubtedly reflects this philosophical probing. Within the field of architectural theory this very idea acquires the greatest clarity in the typo-morphological approach. Concerned with the crisis of urbanity, this discourse is founded in the notion of the collectively recognisable image, and the possibility to extract from the city, such as it has developed throughout the centuries, the typology of urban landscapes, urban fabrics, and built objects. Therefore the study of existing morphologies, their typological classification constitutes therefore the basic tool of any urban project.

The notion of the city resulting from this approach is, however, still confronted to another, older and essentially modernist, which claims that the urban landscape changes whenever conditions and means of production change. Thus, the urban project must, first and foremost, reflect, even anticipate these changes. In this respect, urban advertising phenomenon could be considered an important argument of the theoretical perspective in question. In fact billboards are the symbol, and the very demonstration of the *modus operandi* of a restless society, also ever the telling signs of a landscape in crisis. Further, the advertising phenomenon within the city is an important factor in altering the general character of urban form. Indeed, with the presence of billboards, the essential aspect of urban form, provided by the lasting character of a city to its composed figures and its places, heedlessly changes thus creating spontaneous and ephemeral forms.

Our work on billboards and the city then deliberately aims to place itself within this apparent contradiction. That between understanding urban form, as linked to the collective memory, with the intent to find there the instruments of the project, and the opposed approach which is that of allowing change to take place, thereby feeding the creation with contemporary phenomena, themselves triggers of change. Finally this study also attempts to consider the city through the spontaneous forms of popular culture, and to point to ways of project-ing, while accepting the signs of a consumer society and at the same time transgressing their familiar sense. In brief, this research explores the ideas and possibilities of actions aimed at transforming contemporary de-structuring phenomena into constructive agents of public space.

## Historical context of the problem

In order to set the context of our research, let's briefly go through the history of the billboard phenomenon and its input into the urban landscape problematic.

The practice of billboard is well rooted in the city and has, in spite of its fundamentally modern character, a somewhat long tradition. Although it can be widely accepted that the practice is largely linked to cultural life and commercial exchanges, the billboard phenomenon stills exhibits extremely diversified aspects, born from diverse aspirations and social practices. As a medium of landscape, it has multiple effects on the environment.

The fast paced development of the advertising phenomenon is accompanied by its hold on the city. As early as the nineteenth century, there is a swarming of advertising posters on every available wall of the city, itself going through changes with the changing society. It is a people's brand of advertising, aimed at everyone, sometimes assuming a particular form of the *architecture parlante* of the industrial society. Immortalised by great photographers of the nineteenth and early twentieth century, these urban landscapes are sometimes almost exclusively built with images.<sup>2</sup>

Later, the billboard as a vehicle for commercial or social propaganda messages, becomes a cultural sign of the new era for the modern *avant gardes*. Markedly preferred as electrical sign

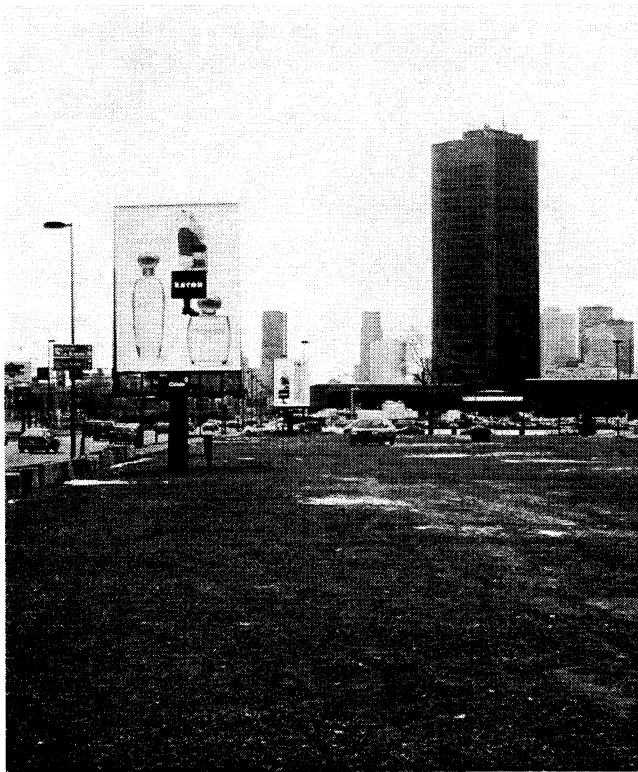


Fig. 1. Analogy between the advertising image and the landscape, formal affinity

and, always metaphorical, this icon, from then on, nurtures the architectural language of the 20's and 30's. This tendency is particularly evident in works of Bauhaus' and De Stijl members as well as Russian Constructivists.

Whereas, between the world wars, the poster myth operates strongly within the scholarly form of architecture, it is its popular and spontaneous version, that of mass culture, which produces, a little later, unequalled spatial effects. During the 70's, this phenomenon will provide an important theoretical argumentation to post-modern architecture. Robert Venturi's, Denise Scott Brown's and Steven Izenour's *Learning From Las Vegas* is its *traité classique* and also makes up the extraordinary registry of the diversity and wealth of this ephemeral phenomenon, offering examples among the most striking of the period.

Nowadays, advertising billboards take on forms essentially issued from standardised products. It is not uncommon, however for billboards, these essentially ephemeral signs, to organise places, which have become urban myths and quite the original icons of public spaces. The most eminent example can be seen in the case of Times Square.

Beyond the exclusive role as advertising medium, which is presently that of the billboard, the poster phenomenon has other traditions. It has been for a long time an instrument of political and social propaganda. However, its richest tradition comes from the domain of the arts. With the development of graphic techniques, the poster has become an artistic genre on its own, collector's items and favoured advertising vehicle for other artistic domains and their official institutions, such as theatres, museums, exhibits, etc... Only recently has the practice of billboard been used in marginal art forms. The artists without galleries form the graffiti movement, set themselves in the public space, thus affirming the link between this space and freedom

of expression, and the symbolic relation between the poster and the city.

Further, one of the major concerns of contemporary art, is the relation between art and mass culture and thus, the poster becomes a central symbolic object.<sup>3</sup> Artistic and critical researchers have recently raised diverse questions on this issue. Some of which have strongly slanted our look, in our own study, upon the landscape of billboards in Montreal.

We have thus re-appropriated the Bauhaus' observations that the aesthetics of the printed sign and the reproducible image shape the sensitivity of our epoch. Thus the intent to transfer artistic experiences to ordinary reality, present in their studies, is close to the aspirations in our work.

We have been inspired by the observations of certain *affichistes* painters of the 40's, 50's and 60's such as Mimmo Rotella, and Jacques de la Villeglé among others. According to them, not only can one find the aesthetic of gestural energy of abstract expressionism in the contemporary spaces shaped spontaneously by posters, but also these images reveal the surprising underground of collective unconscious.

From a different perspective, our work was also strongly influenced by the observations of the artist Barbara Kruger, whose photographs have furthered the critique of social control exerted by advertising. Notably in our proposal, we have sought to find a specific way to use the advertising message, which introduces a critical distance from its ordinary meaning. We bestowed on billboards a role other than purely commercial.

More generally, the work of artists such as Daniel Buren caught our interest for his appropriation of advertising techniques for the production of artwork. And finally, works that went even further in the transformation of the artist into the advertiser, such as those of the Philippe Thomas agency, claiming that "ready-made belongs to everyone", thus making the role of the artist as author vanish.

Concerns for contemporary art and the history of the poster phenomenon, in the setting of the research/project, have been the focus of the first part of our work. At the same time we have also studied and examined other facets of our problem: ethical issues and general aspects of the present practices, notably the relation between advertisers and sign makers, as well as the social critique of the phenomenon. We have noted that, in the last two decades, this critique dealt mostly with the physical aspects of the phenomenon such as the problem of visual pollution; it focused less on the advertising content. Our work, in the second and third parts, will follow the same scheme, dealing with billboards and urban landscape, but will also attempt to uncover the possibility of a critical billboard practice. Throughout our study we have also noticed that the present billboard practice is governed by to antagonistic forces: on one hand commercial efficiency and on the other hand municipal regulation. Consequently any intervention of environmental professionals, be they architects, planners or landscape architects, has a strictly instrumental character. Whereas our work attempts to take up the challenge of the creative approach.

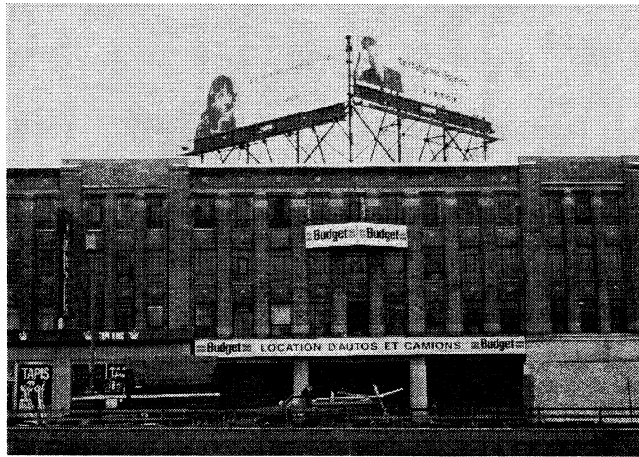


Fig. 2. Confrontation of two symmetries



Fig. 3. Analogy between the advertising image and the landscape, coincidence in the meaning of the two.

### Aspects of the billboard practice in the urban landscape and typology of these landscapes

The second part of our work has a dual characteristic. The first step which raises the question of possible contribution of advertising billboards to the qualification of urban landscape, leads to another, in which the potential for this medium to structure public spaces is tested, through a series of projects. These two processes are directly related since our approach infers that any creation of new urban space should ensue from the extensive reading and the qualification of this space. We have chosen urban Montreal as the site for our work, given the particular wealth and relevance of this study territory to the questions raised. Montreal is a city with sound structures, typical fabrics and important public spaces, but it also has extensive waste ground, a generous infrastructure and numerous vacant lots downtown displaying billboards; a rather common sight in the whole of the city.

Throughout this work we have attempted to understand the impact of billboards on the cohesiveness of urban structure and the quality of public space. We also wanted to find the correlation between the specificity of this medium and the specificity of public space or that of urban morphologies in general.



Fig. 4. Triple confrontation of figures, and displacement of scales

### Characteristics of the billboarded urban landscape

We have, in a first step, uncovered the aspects of the poster phenomenon in the urban setting allowing us to formulate considerations of an aesthetic order.

We have noted that any situation, in which an analogy exists between the landscape and the advertising image, catches the eye and bestows a certain quality to the site composition. This quality is particularly noticeable when the built forms of the landscape and the pictorial forms of the advertising show a formal affinity. Coincidences between the sense of the place and the meaning of the message further contribute to the qualification of the site. These two relations may be contradictory or concordant in nature i.e. through formal imitations, rhythmic affinity, confrontations of symmetries and dissymmetries, associations or opposition of scales, stratification of layers of billboards and spatial planes, and many other types of formal and semantic relations. The examples uncovered in our study allow us then to state that certain relations between built forms and billboards can create successful compositions in which a more specific and recognisable form is provided to quality-less places. Finally, not to be forgotten, billboards in a night landscape are a potent factor in shaping public space.

## Typology of billboarded landscapes

In this second step the emphasis is put on the relation of typical urban configurations, collectively recognisable, and the existence of billboards in the territory describable by the categories in question. This is the pivotal point of our study, in which different identified billboarded places are classified and organised along recognisable types with stable characteristics. Hence the described categories are ensued from general categories of urban structures and configurations inherent to Montreal while always specific to the question of billboards. We postulate that this typology of billboarded landscapes could become a tool for the project of transient forms, as are the typologies of buildings and urban morphologies to the project for lasting forms.

The typology of billboarded landscapes emerging from our observation of the city comprises two types of territories: Territories affected by the metropolitan infrastructures and those by the urban grid.

In the former, we have studied two types of infrastructures: highways and railways both exhibiting numerous billboarded landscapes. In the urban grid, we have focused on the main streets

and downtown. Whereas the first is a well defined type of billboarded landscape, the second, more than a type, is rather a general category displaying a multitude of different billboarded situations. Finally, it is notable that in the highway system, which presents in the city with multiple situations, we have identified two main cases: the highway set against industrial zone, characterised by its chaotic fabrics and the highway in a typical urban grid setting.

The systematic observation of these types consisted of the description, in each case, of the characteristics of the built forms and their interrelations, and in the examination of the logic of the introduction of advertising billboards. Besides identifying different types, we were able to qualify these diverse situations. Throughout these types we found billboards to be harmful and de-structuring with varying degrees, creating landscapes of unequal levels of interest and with different potential for structuring public space. Further, this potential was unrelated to the nature of the said space, be it exclusively for automobile use or pedestrians or both.

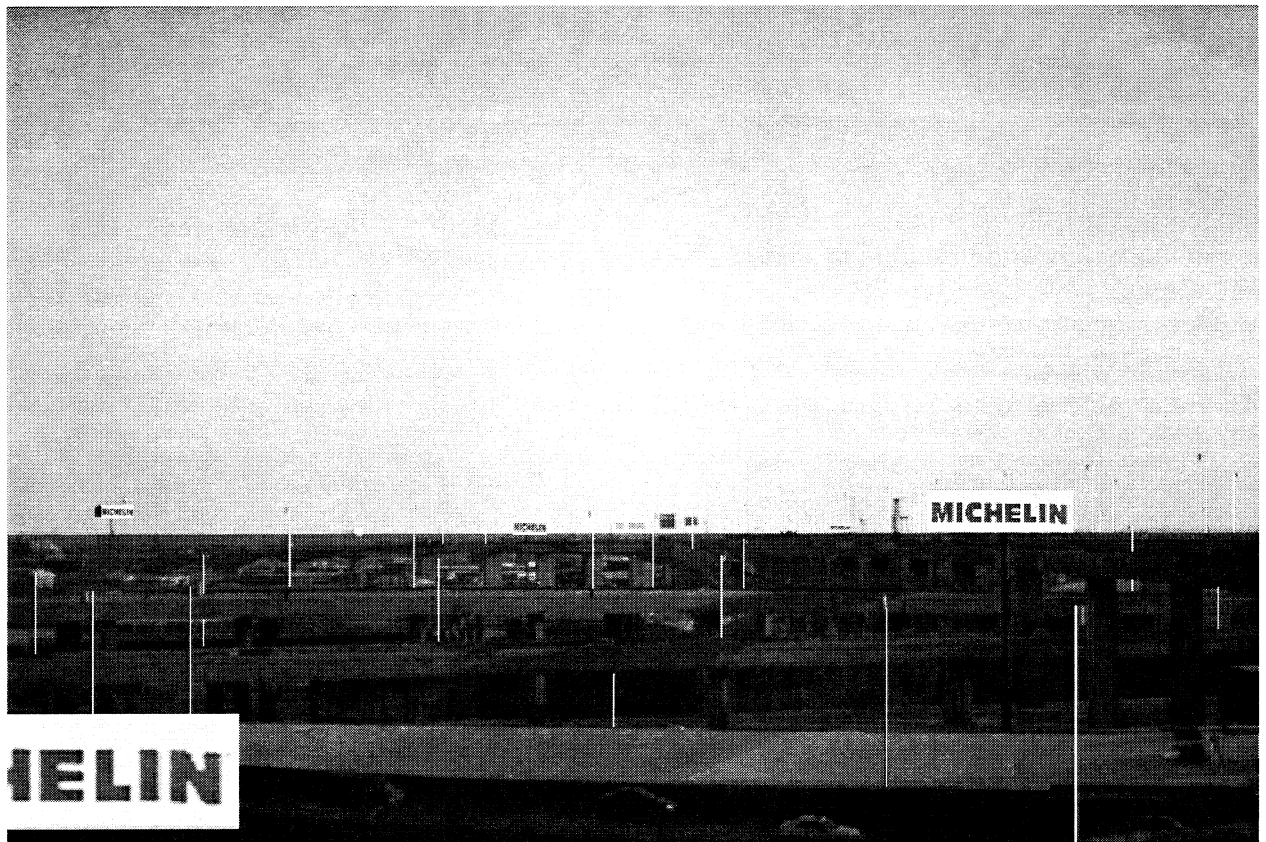


Fig. 5. Turcot turnpike

## Projects perspectives

The final step of our study attempts to bring to light, in selected instances, the numerous possibilities offered by the billboard project when coupled with the public space project. Our central objective was to go beyond the present practice in which advertising billboards are managed by a commercial logic of effectiveness on one hand and restricted by city regulations on the other. Further, in a purely creative perspective, to take advantage of particular aspects and situations offered by posters to explore the new and very contemporary qualities of public spaces. Our other underlying objectives were to emphasise the potency of images (their form and semantic) as they relate to the place, to explore the ephemeral characteristic and the fun side of this medium, while working along the logic of urban form, supporting its cohesiveness and increasing its legibility.

By the same token we aimed to go around the aspect of billboards as visual pollution and de-structuring agent of urban cohesion, and bring it to qualify and put in form public space. Also, through the design approach, to create a platform for the critical practice of billboards while subtly erasing or suspending its status as an instrument of consumption. From all the photographic simulations we have elaborated, six projects appear to illustrate our process the most.

### Turcot turnpike

This project, located in urban Montreal represents the type billboarded landscape: highway in and industrial setting.

The photographic montage illustrates a hypothesis of development of highway setting favouring a more lasting intervention. The polychromatic composition recalls the elements of the highway. The site acquires a particular theme: billboard of tri-dimensional quality, offering a unique instant in a path otherwise flowing and devoid of quality. The complete vista: billboards recurring in space/time, the colour of the highway light posts (here yellow) is taken from the poster (Michelin), marks this site in the collective memory.

This project amplifies the relation between horizontals and verticals and stresses the need to go beyond the mere poster and use other physical components of the environment, to qualify this space through advertisement.

### Metropolitan Boulevard

This project illustrates the type of billboarded landscape: highway in an urban grid.

Raised highways create gloomy and under-utilised areas under the bridges. The case of the metropolitan Boulevard is quite typical. The existing advertising billboards located under the bridge along the St. Lawrence Boulevard add nothing to this not so charming space. Indeed this site, dominated by a monumental structure, lends itself to billboards, but at the proper scale. Here the installation of a giant, illuminated poster nestled between the two pillars offers a more effective ad while making the passage safer for pedestrians. An illusionist landscape that



Fig. 6. Metropolitan Boulevard

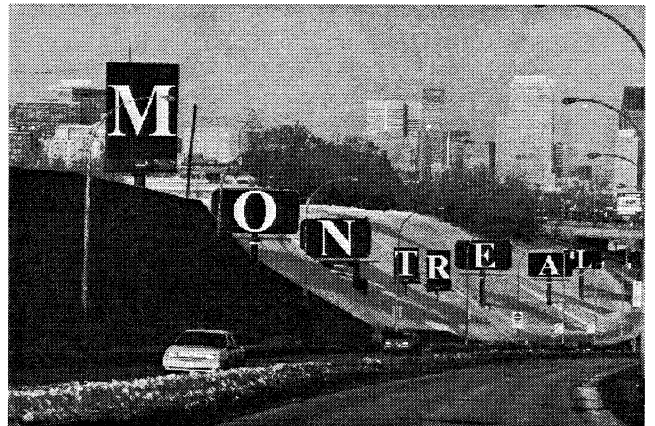


Fig. 7. Entrance into town / exit of highway 20



Fig. 8. Viaduct



will attract to this place new activities (flea market, games etc...).

The project emphasises the semantic content of the image and its input into the place. Here the contrast of a stone archway that could be from a far away land transports the viewer, while accentuating the similar character of this ordinary concrete engineering structure.

### Entrance into town /exit of highway 20

This project is representative of the type of billboarded landscape: highway exit.

The sides of highway exits are often lined with series of illuminated billboards in such a way that it becomes possible to use all of them in one unique ad. Thus the place might acquire an identity and a specific sense.

The surprising quality of this opening calls for an intervention whose only objective would be the actualisation of the landscape. This proposition underscores the transformation, which could come from the semantic content of the message, without necessarily suggesting that the example would be the only suitable message for this place.

### Viaduct

This project corresponds to the type of billboarded landscape: railway infrastructure, Viaducts

Visual landmarks along a street, viaducts often foretell a change in urban landscape. They generally mark the border between districts. They sometimes are thresholds between plots divided up in distinct periods, on different grids. Other times, they are passageways from one neighbourhood to another, each with a different vocation and social character.

The photomontage tries to show the billboard's capacity to

"ennoble" a minor work such as a viaduct in the urban landscape. Four large posters accentuate the image of a door well suited to this place, giving this work of engineering the quality of a portal. A series of smaller scale posters convey the same advertising message to pedestrians, emphasising the passageway quality of this place and providing it with a warmer ambience.

### Boulevard St. Lawrence

The type of billboarded landscape corresponding to this project is the urban grid, main streets.

Vacant lots along commercial streets, transformed into parking lots give to these streets the sad aspect of a mutilated figure. The lasting quality of these features in the urban fabric though, leads to believe that the chances for these lots to be built again, in the near future, are slim. Billboards could probably contribute to the enhancement of these sites, which disrupt considerably the urban cohesion.

Certain parking lots, by their location, (close to theatres, cinemas or areas used for festivals) could become an extension of these public institutions via a related program. Cultural and thematic type commercial advertising would be refreshing and provide structure to these places through ephemeral forms.

Here on St. Lawrence Boulevard the photographic simulation suggests that a parking lot could be flanked by large icons, guarding the cars parked there during a show.

### Park Avenue and Sherbrooke

In this project, the urban grid type of billboarded landscape is illustrated: downtown core, main streets and the corner vacant lot.

Waste grounds are the most favoured places for advertising.

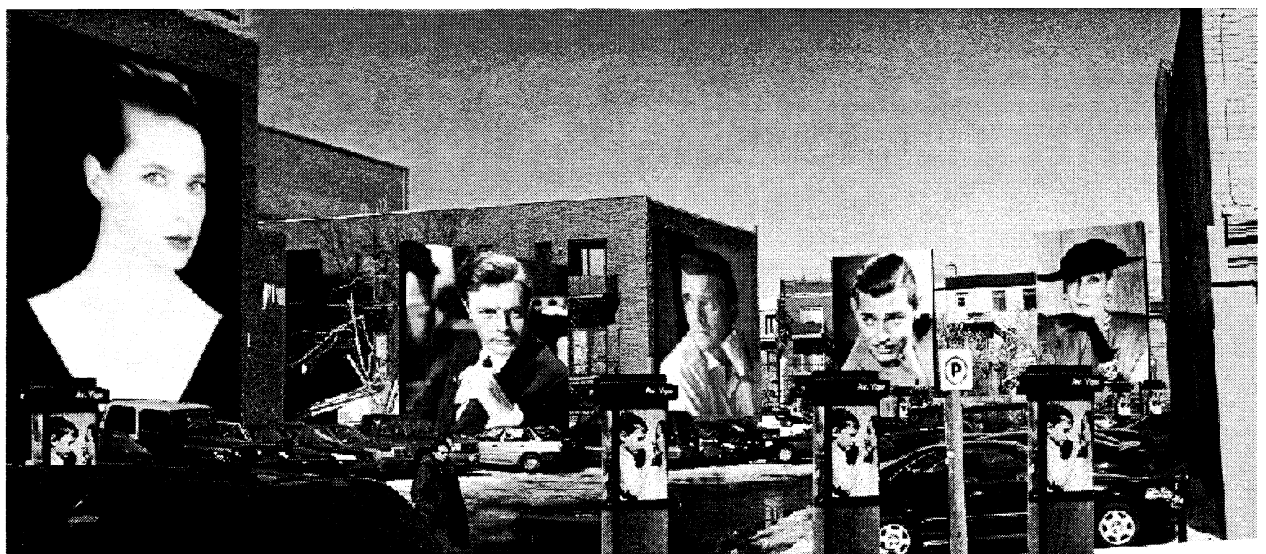


Fig. 9. Boulevard St. Lawrence

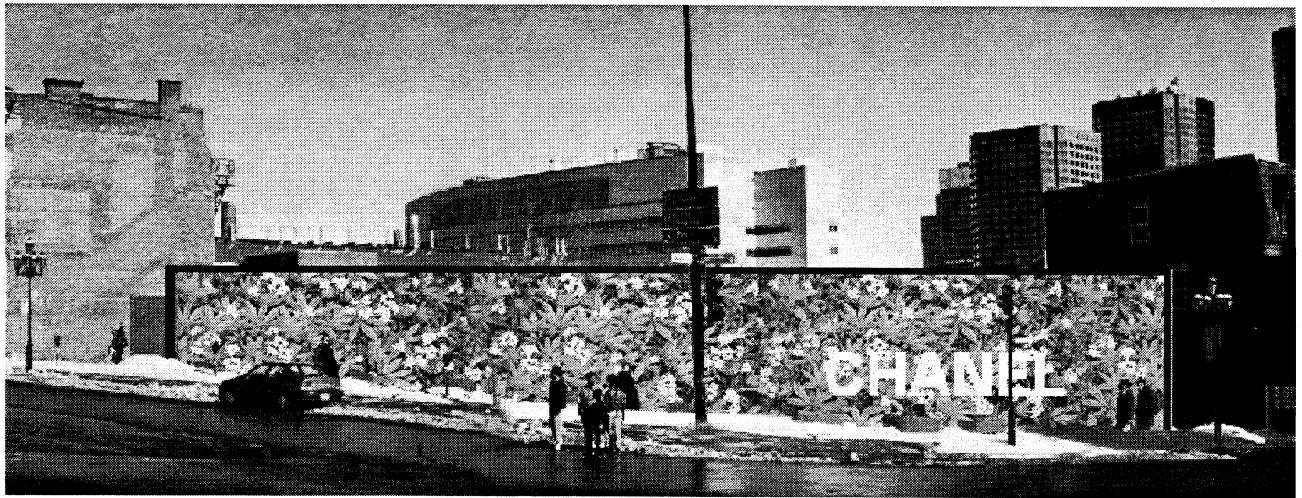


Fig. 10. Park Avenue and Sherbrooke

They always offer a opening well suited for posters, but they also invariably de-structure the block in which they are located.

The photograph of the corner of Park Avenue and Sherbrooke shows how posters can become devices supporting a public program. The unusual topography and the position of the corner lead people to shorten their route by crossing diagonally. Anonymous passers-by leave their permanent tracks on this lot.

The proposition thus attributes a kind of minimal public program to this site, which when all is said and done is almost as used as a public square. The illuminated billboard borders on, and brightens a set of outdoors steps thus facilitating the passage. The giant object subtly acts as the corner building, but also stresses its absence. It is set in an abandoned lot as a reminder of the ephemeral character of its existence. Its generous scale acts as a sound and sight barrier to protect the backyards of the broken down block.

It is not easy to conclude objectively upon a creative process. However the mere confrontation of our projects to the existing landscapes clearly confirmed the shortcomings of the usual approach, on one hand, and the potential of the project strategy on the other hand. Working the billboard as a design problem and taking advantage of the positive aspects of the urban landscape is the same challenge whether it be in less structured, de-structured, or more strongly structured urban territories. We can neither standardise nor render systematic the intervention through posters, but we can rather proceed with the logic of the site and let the context inform the project of the billboarded landscape. The latter must keep a dialog with the physico-spatiale, cultural and social characteristics of a place as well as reflect the imagery inscribed in the collective memory. Commercial logic must be anchored to this frame in order for the billboard phenomenon to participate positively in the idea of the city.

#### NOTES

- <sup>1</sup> The research on which this article is based, entitled *Affichage aérien et paysage urbain: balisage du phénomène et des pratiques*, was realized by the team from the Chaire en paysage et environnement of Université de Montréal with the collaboration of Luc Beaulieu, director, Département d'Exploitation et Développement, Société d'Affichage Omni. The research team consists of Philippe Poullauec-Gonidec, Director, Irena Latek, Associate Professor, researcher École d'Architecture, Université de Montréal, Djemila-Hadj-Hamou, Master's student, Institut d'Urbanisme Université de Montréal, (re-

search assistant), Alain Carle, Architect, (research assistant), Georges Adamczyk, Professor, Département de Design, UQUAM (advisor), Marie Lessard, Professor, Institut d'Urbanisme, Université de Montréal (advisor).

- <sup>2</sup> We are referring to photographs by Charles Marville (dating back to the 1860's) and other pictures from the same era, as well as photos by Eugène Atget (from the beginning of the twentieth century) representing urban spaces completely covered by advertising. An important collection of these documents is at the Bibliothèque Historique de la Ville de Paris.
- <sup>3</sup> Two important exhibitions have recently been devoted to this subject, the advertising theme celebrated by modern and contemporary art: *High & Low, Modern Art and Popular Culture*, exhibition at New York' MOMA, took place in 1991 and *Art & Pub*, at Paris' Centre Georges Pompidou in 1990/1991.

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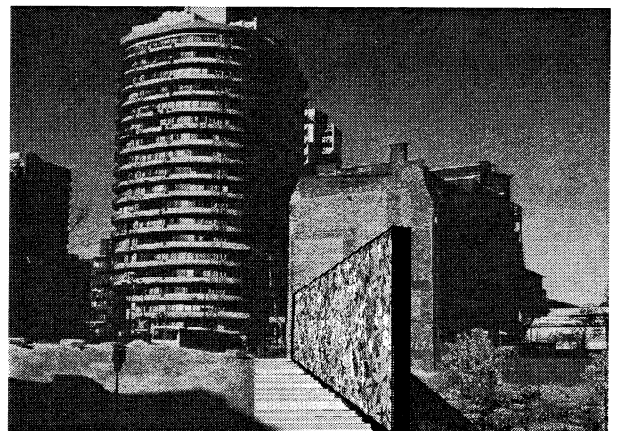


Fig. 11. Park Avenue and Sherbrooke, diagonal view