After Branding—A Lively Downtown?

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What happens after the branding of an urban district is initiated? In the case of the *Quartier des Spectacles*, or Theatre District in Montréal, the results have been contradictory, even contrary to the essential strategic aims. While the distinctive quality of the somewhat rundown entertainment district lies in its concentration of venues for live music and evening diversion, two pivotal venues have shut down: the *Cinéma Parisien* and *Le Spectrum*.

During the last two decades, the downtown theatre district of Montréal has become the site of intense programming of summer and winter festivals, notably the International Jazz Festival that takes place in July, the international Film Festival in September, as well as a number of smaller events including festivals of francophone song, the *Francofolies*, African music and dance, *Les Nuits Africaines,* and a winter festival of light. These events traditionally have taken over the empty undeveloped lots that are common throughout the city. The uneven development of the theatre district, an area that might also be designated the red light district, permitted a wide range of cultural production activity associated with music and performance. The unofficial, alternative culture linked with low rent buildings and dwelling has continued adjacent to official sites of culture such as a mega-block built in the 1960s called the 'Place des Arts' that boasts a symphony concert hall, sophisticated theatre facilities and a contemporary arts museum.

A recent branding project has accompanied attempts to redevelop the area. Branding so far involved generating a web site, some signage and a new lighting scheme and media board, by a European-based graphic design agency. Behind the branding effort are plans to construct a large number of new buildings on the many empty lots. While the new buildings often are described as urban additions complementary to the cultural facilities, the circumstances surrounding development ventures sometimes result in the problematic lack of participation of the small-scale cultural venues that the developments officially are intended to foster. Meanwhile significant open-air festival space is disappearing, replaced with proposed building sites. The issue of formal public space versus the informal streets in the district such as boulevard Saint Laurent and rue Ste. Catherine, places where artistic and daily life were fused, is in question. Can contemporary real estate development partner with the ephemeral, counter-cultural nature of this city's cultural life?

This paper looks at a series of interventions in what is now branded as Montréal's 'Quartier des spectacles' or Theatre District. A lively, if distressed, performance district in a city that has consistently produced an interesting, significant range of performance-related cultural phenomena, from the alternative music of Arcade Fire and Malajube to mainstream organizations such as the Montreal Symphony or OSM, or the circus performance company Cirque de Soleil, is undergoing transformation that may alter the circumstances that were once favourable to fostering small, independent and innovative cultural groups. Larger questions of the authenticity of local cultural production when connected or confronted with the invasion of official capital are raised in the particular context of the arts in a city that has used its somewhat marginal status to managed to resist many of the homogenizing effects of aesthetic production in the early twenty-first century.

BRANDING AS AN URBAN DESIGN STRATEGY: MONTRÉAL'S *QUARTIER DES SPECTACLES*

What are the consequences of branding? Do the results have anything to do with the intent? How is this tracked? How can one demonstrate that urban branding brings a particular result?

In observing the *Quartier des Spectacles*, or Theatre District in Montréal, although the distinctive quality of the somewhat rundown entertainment district was clearly identified as a concentration of venues for live music and evening diversion, two pivotal venues have closed. It seems like a step backward.

Fig. 1. Le Spectrum, live music venue, closed summer 2007.

Montréal is a city where these contemporary struggles play out with odd alliances. The downtown red light district has been subject to a dubious urban branding strategy. The area is notable for its 28 venues, and some 28,000 seats, including concert halls, theatres, as well as for its bars, discos, cocktail lounges, burlesque houses, and strip joints, and its distressed population, including street people, homeless youth, drug users and addicts, and prostitutes. Still the cultural vibrance of the city is interwoven with its seedy downtown (1). Low rents and rundown venues are part of its charm. There is a tradition of citizen resistance, linked to political independent movements that date from the 1960s, A recent symposium, the Fourth Citizens' Summit, held in the district in June 2007, gave a rousing account of the citizens' movements that had successfully either initiated

projects with residents' interests foremost, or successfully modified or restructured urban projects that were too corporate, too destructive, or simply crushed blatantly ill-conceived urban development proposals such as the recent push to relocate a casino in a low income area. The symposium's keynote speaker, Saskia Sassen, summarized her analysis of inter-city flows of capital while praising the legacy of local citizens' movements.

What is urban branding? Why has it been perceived as a tool in urban design? Branding appears to treat cities, districts, neighbourhoods, museums and mass produced goods similarly, as a marketing concept. A firm called Wolff-Olins that brands the Tate Modern also brands the town Bracknell. Branding has had an impact on architectural and urban design, transforming the perception of design into the realm of the purely visual or graphic, even though many, sometimes even most aspects are invisible. Complex mixed-use developments in a great metropolis have spawned the term, 'brandhubs'. In reaction, a municipal administration of the importance of the metropolis of Sao Paulo has taken the extreme step of removing commercial billboards from urban view.

From the realm of advertising comes the branding process, once more familiar to luxury goods, than architectural and urban design. The surge of urban branding initiatives can be tied to the increased status and prominence of architectural and urban design as commodity, as well as to re-inhabited downtowns and a new focus on urban centrality. Critique of that phenomenon ranges from radical urban theory of the Situationists, notably Guy Debord's *Society of the Spectacle*, to the work of Saskia Sassen, in which an understanding of the city and its architectural and urban precinct design is presented as an arena where local groups struggle and grapple with interest groups representing global marketing trends. An inescapable reference is Karl Marx's chapter on Commodity Fetishism in *Capital*. Marx references buildings as not as commodities, rather treating the issue of rent more than the commodity status of built form in the urban environment, an evolution that demonstrates the saturating reach of commodity status into layers of everyday.

The branding strategy for Montréal's Theatre district sprang from an alliance of local municipal,

governmental and commercial interests. In early 2005 the *Partenariat du Quartier des Spectacles*, (which could be translated as the Theatre District Partnership) published a call for proposals to provide an urban branding strategy for the crucial central precinct. The Partenariat is a consortium of quasi-public bodies that includes the organization known as ADISQ, or Québecois Association for Music Industry. It organizes yearly *Félix* awards given out to best selling pop music in Québec, similar to the Canadian Junos or the American Grammy awards, or British Mercury awards, aimed to raise the profile of the area and market its music halls with a new visual identity strategy. As such it represents an astonishingly literal link between the urban and the spectacle industry. The scenario and strategy were provocative, as if the American Grammy organization were to call for urban design proposals for troubled downtown Detroit, or a European music competition were to propose changes to central Lille. The Partnership sought out designers through a workshop-style competition, showing a flair for innovation in the call for proposals, and a jury with sympathetic members.

The dAb collective responded to the open Call for Proposals, with a rhetorical critique of the notion of urban branding as a means to conduct urban planning in such a vital part of town. The dAb collective produced a Proposal Statement that explicitly criticized the graphic emphasis on urban design of the Call for Proposals, so selection of the collective as one of the finalist teams was a surprise. Its proposal first quoted the celebrated Debord citation, 'Spectacle is capital accumulated to such a degree that it becomes image.'

THE dAb COLLECTIVE PROPOSAL

The dAb collective developed a three-pronged strategy for approaching urban issues in the area. The main aim was to rhetorically inject 'real' urban design (as opposed to the ersatz urban design of branding) into the branding exercise. The anti-branding proposal by the dAb Collective linked urban wandering to issues of urban ecology and sustainability, to social activism, to an urbanism sensitive to hearing and smell, and to the network of urban venues in the district.

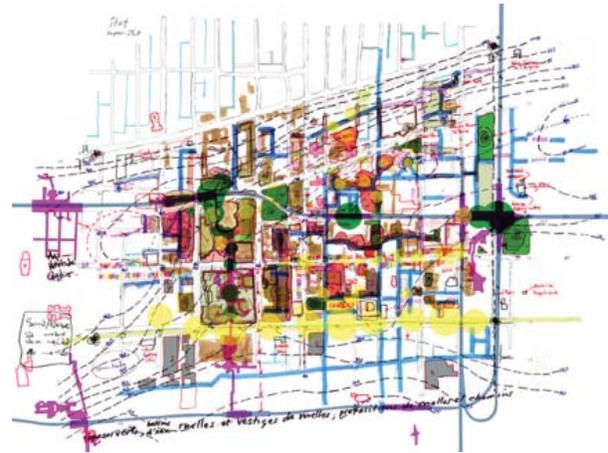Research provided by the City of Montréal, a mem-

Fig. 2 Composite map of the Quartier des Spectacles by the dAb Collective.

ber of the Partnership and host to the competition, indicated that there are many venues and seats concentrated in the area. Visitors to the city tend not to purchase tickets when in town, tending instead to frequent the free festival events they wander into. This corresponds to many traditions of urban analysis, from the Baudelairian or Benjaminian 'flaneur' to the architectural promenade to the situationist 'derive'.

SOCIALLY SUSTAINABLE COMMUNITIES

Lik many central districts, distressed citizens live in or frequent the precinct because there is a street life, social programmes are located there, and they belong to the neighbourhood. The theatre district is an urban home to a variety of street inhabitants and that can be an incorporated into the urban design process. The collective interviewed social workers, and digitally recorded Aki Tchitacov, of le Bon Dieu dans la rue (loosely translated as A Benevolent God in the Streets), a local organization that works with street youth. He explained how radical transformation of the neighborhood destabilizes homeless youth. He cited several successful initiatives including outreach projects such as a roaming book-lending programme: 'One of our more successful little programmes, that we started and spun off, was a mobile library, but run by somebody who knows the street population… and have books and magazines and just go to the park and have the kids, have people come and pick up what they wanted and discuss everything from politics to the environment.'(2). Most impor-

tant, he described the street youth as 'artistic', linking them to the desirable programming of the area.

New university facilities in the area already demonstrated insensitivity to existing social programmes. In one case, a major new university cafeteria building entrance faced the main door of a church-organized meal programme for street people that had been operating for some time. Two years later, while those facilities have garnered architecture awards, local organizations representing social workers make public announcements suggesting that the reduction in the number of social workers is causing an exodus from the profession. The aim should be to preserve existing programmes as well as conserve small business in the area.

ECOLOGICAL URBANISM

The group mapped topography in the precinct to launch an ecologically sensitive approach to urbanism: to encourage walking in the city, to connect the subway to grade, to manage water resources. The fine-grained network of existing lanes and lane fragments would expand to a tissue of paths and laneways that privilege all-season bicycle and pedestrian movement through the city. Another strategy that is becoming more prevalent is the greening of roofs for institutional buildings proposals showed government structures and police headquarters with a green roof. As lighter plantings become more available, existing public buildings can realistically contribute to a comprehensive water management strategy by installing green roofs, on a wide range of buildings from the podium of the major arts centre, to offices for civil servants, to large commercial buildings, private and public. The low-lying areas could become sites of new storm water retention basins, as part of a larger strategy of water infrastructure in cities attuned to the value of integrating landscape with the flow of rainwater, as opposed to more traditional and decorative approaches to landscaped parks. The study of topography also identified a natural amphitheatre next to the Place des Arts that could be intensified with a proposal for a new structure for bicycle parking, that would serve as well as a sound-attenuating wall as well as a listening and observing balcony for festival events.

The attention to such amenities as bicycle parking structures, examples of which can be found in bicycle-oriented cities such as Amsterdam, linked to a larger infrastructure integrating bicycle laneways with a network of green laneways. Linked to the water strategy would be the use of more ecologically appropriate porous surfaces in the areas used for festivals, as well as use of conifer trees planted to create sonic screening. Another facet of the proposal was a Lighting Strategy inspired by the visual character of many distinctive existing marquees. The Collective favoured ecological lighting strategies, such as directing lighting towards the ground or towards reflective materials, intensifying luminous effects, and using phosphorescence.

ACOUSTIC URBANISM

The Collective experimented with mapping sound in the district, producing a test cartography of urban noise, recognizing the Canadian tradition of soundscape awareness in the tradition of R. Murray Schafer. Street performers were video documented: performances in the subway: break dancers spinning on their heads, a flute player who playing two instruments at once. The creative performers who spontaneously entertain in the streets were seen as in continuity with the official performances in the local venues. In addition to the existing visual marquees of the neighbourhoods, a proposal for a range of street furniture that would accommodate street performers included sound marquees, discrete amplifying walls, and small acoustic shell installations for pocket parks and vacant lots. Lorraine Oades proposed a prototype real-time video link between the underground subway and the sidewalk, so that transit users would be aware of street events happening above the station. These proposals were accompanied by mapping of festivals and demonstrations in the area. Tony Round adapted his proposal for an innovative acoustic web site to the area, allowing the potential audience to sample the sounds of a performance as part of the process of choosing which performance, concert or sound event according to a test listening using a customized web site with an ear icon instead of an arrow.

Anti-branding is not anti-building. The dAb Proposal advocated new small scale affordable hous-

ing and criticized demolition proposals where vernacular buildings accommodating small business were to be torn down to create empty public squares, while outsize-scaled development projects were proposed for adjacent vacant sites. These inappropriate kinds of projects contradict the urban commercial patterns of the downtown. Suggestions for small-scale development that could still be relatively high-rise, in particular respecting the traditional small property lot patterns in the neighbourhood, were advocated, in contrast the massive lot consolidation and bloated volumes characteristic of the built form proposals in recent competitions. The scale of new building could positively affect the acoustic environment, creating pockets of varying character of sound. The team advocates development of smaller parcels of land, that could be small high-rise residential and mixed use projects. This runs counter to the large, entire block developments favoured by the alliance between government, and business and commercial concerns.

REAL ESTATE EVENTS

After selecting a conventional, graphic design-based branding strategy, the urban redevelopment process continued. In March 2006, the Quartier des Spectacles Partnership held another kind of spectacle, a four-day real-estate fair called Montréal of the Future. According to the press release, the central theatre and arts district is underbuilt, with a potential 1.3 million square feet of buildable area. Brochures declared, "The Quartier des Spectacles is an extraordinary opportunity for real estate decision makers to work together and invest in Montréal's creative heart". The proposals – architectural and urban models, posters, projections, audio-visual displays, and drawings and photographs - included two modest proposals for artists' live-in studios, but much more significant in proportion were projects for office and condominum use. The marketing strategy reared into view: vacant lots used for festivals to be prized as hot condominium development opportunities. A scenario of artificially stimulated, absurdly soaring rent and hyper-building - such a scenario appears as the underbelly of the branding strategy. What comes along with rampant redevelopment is an unwanted de-stabilizing of many of the more fragile and vulnerable of the creative residents of this pivotal precinct. Even the director of the Mon-

tréal Jazz festival criticized of the proposed loss of empty lots used for temporary staging for the festival. In the light of the proposed new building projects, Jazz festival director Alain Simard inserted an editorial in the 2007 schedule of events, asking where the festival would take place in the coming years, once its downtown performance sites were built over.

Fig. 3, Sidewalk Lighting Strategy, Boulevard Saint Laurent.

BRANDING AFTERMATH

What are some events the branding of an urban district introduced? What were concrete interventions? By summer 2007, several venues had installed the sidewalk lighting scheme recommended by the branding, identity and graphic design specialist. It consists of a play on the red light district status of the area: in front of each venue, a double row of red downlights illuminating the sidewalk.

Another new addition to the sidewalk was a media board, called 'Le Vitrine'. This echoed a competition-winning proposal by Atelier Big City from 2005, a scheme that was not built because of concerns that it would become a focal point for the most marginal denizens of the area. An initiative undertaken independent of the competition was completed: the Saint James Church received an architectural facelift: scraped off, the layer of offices across the façade erased, a unique phenomenon became a small plaza.
The losses of key significance were two pivotal venues: an independent cinema and a famous live music venue. The *Cinéma Parisien*, former host

venue for the Montréal World Cinéma Festival, stands empty. The cinema festival found its interiors too run down. The 'sprucing up' process that is the most obviously associated with branding could have been put to use in this instance, as the fundamental qualities of the building are manifest: its vertical stacking and its urbanity. The façade manifests some remarkable architectural qualities: while not noble architecture, rather the cheap construction of commercial ventures, the façade features an ambitious void with mirrored ceiling, that manages to terminate the street connecting Ste. Catherine with Sherbrooke: the cinema features a grand void on axis with the end of City Councilors street. The void features a wraparound reverse marquee: the movie titles punch inward at the perimeter of a grand rectangular void, its outdoor ceiling clad in a mirror ceiling tile. Inside the cinemas themselves are larger, traditionally scaled spaces suitable for the large crowds of a festival. Only the interior finishes needed updating. Another modest lost landmark was the Stelly shoe store, a seedy shop that sold thigh-high red vinyl boots with platform heels, seen mainly on the sidewalks of the red light district a block away, at the corner of St. Laurent and Ste. Catherine.

The mystifying development project to knock down an entire block, including the Spectrum, a longtime live music venue, was put on hold, but redevelopment of the block proceeds without renowned music hall, Le Spectrum. Journalists wrote of the legendary role of the venue, fostering numerous local performers in an acoustically intimate venue, while noting that several renovated theatres, such as the recently re-opened Olympia, provided competition for Le Spectrum. The loss represents the most glaring inconsistency in the urban branding strategy: destroying an urban block with an important music venue in the name of reinforcing its character.

Ironically, before the branding initiative, several original music venues had relocated to the area. *Le Nouveau Club Soda* moved down from a location on Avenue du Parc. A renovation by architect Luc Laporte remodeled an existing building on St. Laurent into a classic rock venue, its marquee jutting over the street, its facade merging seamlessly with the urban character of the Red Light district. Just south of it, and just after, the *SAT* remodeled a corner location for a more experi-

mental music venue and sound art gallery. In the flesh-eating tradition of competing venues, these fine new music halls rendered *Le Spectrum* obsolete – or at least that was a perception.

Fig. 4. The Le Parisian Cinema, closed summer 2007.

CONCLUSION

In the case of the Quartier des Spectacles, or Theatre District in Montréal, often branding runs at cross purposes with the underlying aim of reinforcing the distinctive quality of the somewhat rundown entertainment district, even when that aim was clearly identified as a concentration of venues for live music and evening diversion. Two pivotal venues closed since the branding process began. The cultural generation that relies on cheap rent, an open structure of easy-to-find dwelling, hang-out and performing space, open to marginal citizens, and related social programmes, was threatened by the upscale interventions and at odds with effects of tourism and gentrification.

Recently Mark Jarzombek asked rhetorically, 'When are we going to reclaim the unmarginal spaces?' The branding posturing demonstrates how the process of reclaiming marginal pockets of central downtown raises the question of what is essential and what is marginal. This central part of town would be well served by smaller scale precinct planning and development that recognizes the advice of perceptive urbanists, experts ranging from Françoise Choay to Jane Jacobs to Christian Devillers. This informed the perspective of the dAb Collective: the ideal of an urbanism that integrates

the concerns of ecology, the sounds and senses of the city, and the social needs of the neighbourhood to come together in a collective project and process that aims to connect the urban population with its urban form and landscape. As for the effects of the branding exercise: it appears that urban live performance venues remain vulnerable to large scale urban development proposals.

Branding cannot take the place of investment in real infrastructural initiatives relating to drainage, affordable housing, and transport that emphasizes pedestrian and bicycle travel. Ultimately, branding a downtown is no substitute for a well-rounded, sensitive, socially and ecologically relevant urban design intervention. A last question is whether there is any place for the seedy part of downtown? *Arcade Fire* one of the city's cultural exports, began in the informal clubs in downtown Montréal. Branding seems to play a game of musical chairs.

Fig. 4 Stelly Shoe Store, closed winter 2007

ENDNOTES

1. Michel Tremblay set his play 'Saint Carmen de la Main' in the red light district in 1976. Characters included a chorus of transvestites and of prostitutes (*une choeur de travesties et une choeur de putains*).

2. Guy Debord, *The Society of Spectacle*, 1967, chapter 1, 34. (1). The dAB Proposal incorporated the well-known quote,reading,
> **abrand** Under capitalism, all is spectacle. Branding is the antithesis of neighbourhood. How can the symbolic language inherent to branding adjust to the reality of a process that includes a local community: those neighbourhood residents who study and work there, plus the daily flux of permanent and temporary occupants.
> dAb takes up the radical theory of the text, *The Society of the Spectacle*, by Guy Debord, in order to suggest alternatives to work and leisure, in the light of contemporary problematics of technology and the environment in the city. An approach influenced by Lacan emphasizes games of symbolic language in the creation of an urban identity. Branding connects consumer culture to raging capitalism, this global economy that, in North America, leads to incoherent urbanism and banal architecture. How can the slow tempo of long duration, that of architecture and urbanism, influence the rapid cycles of advertising and capital accumulation?
> The neighbourhood undergoes extremes of spectacle, of population flow, of culture, of temperature. Its urbanism must connect permanent and temporary daily living. Neighbourhood residents include small shopkeepers, homeless youth, suburban teens, a symphony conductor, civic employees, musicians. One must avoid sterile profiles and offer an intense diversity to correspond to the pivotal place.
> This approach thus privileges recognition of the full range of occupants of the area, beautiful and ugly. The dAb collective proposes a three-pronged approach, adding the importance of an approach to urban form that is sensitive to urban acoustics, to the urgent themes of the environment and the questions of an urbanism that is sustainable from both a social and ecological perspective.

The members of the dAB Collective: Cecilia Chen, Andrea Kordos, marie-paule macdonald, Lorraine Oades, Ana Rewakowicz, Tony Round, Frances Stober, Steve Topping. The urban proposals can be found at www.collectifdab.ca

3. Aki Tchitacov, interviewed and digitally recorded by Lorraine Oades, Ana Rewakowicz, 2005.

4. An Anti Pragmatic-Manifesto by Mark Jarzombek http://varnelis.net/blog/anti_pragmatic_manifesto_ mark_jarzombek accessed 1 Nov 2007.

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