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The Palace, the Terminal and the Park: Three Blocks in the Middle of Montreal

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Abstract

In 2007, a Montreal professor of architecture spoke of a 'curse of the east', a jinx which appears to have condemned several blocks near the centre of Montreal, Canada, to scandal, decay and the ongoing crashing of utopian hopes. The essay presented here studies these three blocks: one containing the city's main bus terminal and a scandal-ridden construction project involving a major university; a second housing the Grande Bibliothèque du Québec, recently constructed as a proud symbol of Quebec nationalism; and the third, the Parc Emelie Gamelin, a place of uncertain purpose which remains a prominent site of social contestation within Montreal.

This three-block agglomeration has been the site of ongoing tensions between religion and secularism, the French and English languages, commercial and anti-capitalist uses of public space, novelty and decay, stasis and mobility, urban modernity and its failures. It has been the repository of dreams of a 'Francophone downtown' where the social and commercial energies of Montreal would be moved closer to the city's east end, and away from neighbourhoods that are more traditionally Anglophone.

The three blocks studied in this essay have long been marked by the tension between a cosmopolitan, outward-looking city and the atmosphere of sin and transience which has often been taken to characterise this neighbourhood and the city as a whole. Within these three blocks, cultural waste and uprooted populations have gathered and circulated, producing a sense of moral and economic flux that has challenged attempts to settle this area and its meanings. Upon these three blocks, subcultures have settled, made certain spaces their own, and then fought to keep them. While this area is marked by a rich history of civic involvement and collective purpose, it is among the most forgetful of areas within the city, known for its failure to preserve any marks of its previous incarnations or of the social forces that have made and remade it over a century and a half.

1. Introduction

This essay in [Global Cities/Local Sites](#) discusses three adjoining city blocks located just east of downtown, in the city of Montreal, Quebec. On the accompanying map of Montreal's 'Quartier Latin', these blocks are those labelled 'Grande Bibliothèque', 'Station Centrale' and 'Place Emile-Gamelin' within the map's innermost circle. These three blocks have unusual and distinct histories, which have been obscured by the relentless transformation of this area over time. They occupy one of the more fluid districts of Montreal, one whose uses have been in almost permanent flux, and through which a wide variety of populations pass on a daily basis.

This three-block agglomeration has been the site of ongoing tensions between religion and secularism, the French and English languages, commercial and anti-capitalist uses of public space, novelty and decay, stasis and mobility, urban modernity and its failures. As if in a game of metropolitan three-card monte, the settling of any one of these blocks into a stable purpose and meaning has usually coincided with new contestation over the meanings and uses of the other two.

One of these blocks is the current site of the Grande Bibliothèque du Québec. This enormous national library for Quebec opened in 2005 to considerable acclaim after many years of controversy, indecision and planning. Prior to the building of the bibliothèque, this block housed the Palais du Commerce, a showcase for manufactured goods, which, at the moment of its opening in 1952, expressed Montreal's aspirations to a commercial, Americanised modernity. As a structure which, in the years of its success and subsequent decline, drifted through a variety of uses, the Palais serves as a key focus of the analysis which follows. In the final twenty years of its existence, before its destruction and replacement by Quebec's Grande Bibliothèque, the Palais du Commerce was a site for the commercial recycling of cultural detritus and a wide range of subcultural practices.

Facing the bibliothèque, to the east, sits Montreal's main inter-city bus terminal, a point of embarkment for people, typically of modest means, travelling to places outside of Montreal. Buses departing from the terminal take passengers to the northeast of the United States, the regions of Quebec, and the rest of Canada. Scattered around the bus terminal are the familiar signs of urban and inter-urban transience: cheap hotels, fast food restaurants, people asking for hand-outs, long taxi queues and pawn shops.

In 2006 renovations began that would shift the bus terminal below ground level (following the model of New York City's Port Authority Bus Terminal), and build above it a new research complex for the Université du Québec à Montréal (UQAM). After repeated failures to make this area a centre for wholesale or commercial commerce, these new developments—if they survive the scandal which now threatens their financing—are intended to complete its transformation into a knowledge district (*un quartier du savoir*).

South of the terminal, and diagonally adjacent to the bibliothèque, is a block whose only enclosed structure is the above-ground entrance to Montreal's metro (subway) system, located on its south-west corner. Otherwise, the block consists of an open area which, in often confusing fashion, combines the features of a cement concrete plaza with those of a park.

Since 1992 this area has been known as Place Emilie Gamelin, after a well-known Catholic charity worker of the nineteenth century whose home for the poor faced onto the square. As we shall see, the uses and symbolic meanings of the Place Emilie Gamelin have been among the most controversial in Montreal's recent history. This is the square from which protest marches depart or where they often conclude; this is one of the key venues for Divers Cité, Montreal's annual celebration of alternative sexualities. In recent years it has been a major place of congregation for the homeless and the itinerant.

Speaking of this three-block area, in 2007 Université de Montréal architecture professor Jacques Lachapelle described its 'horrible karma' (Baillargeon 2007: B1). Lachapelle was responding to the scandal that had erupted over plans to tear down the bus terminal and transform it into a new facility for research and learning. One could almost speak, the newspaper *Le Devoir* suggested, of a 'curse of the east'—of a jinx which, for almost a century, has made this three-block area a graveyard for utopian dreams and a trap for ruinous investments.

What interests me most about these blocks is their place within a traffic of goods, signs, people, sensations and beliefs. As important junctures in networks of transit and communication, these three blocks have played key roles in linking Montreal to larger spheres of influence and opportunity. This is a traffic that has regularly taken people and things in and out of Montreal, tracing circuits of international belonging and circulation. These blocks have also played important roles in the sedimentation of local habits and textualities, in gathering up the residues of local creativity. That function has recently assumed literal form in the mammoth structure of the Grande Bibliothèque du Québec, a repository of Quebec's national memory whose political function goes undisguised.

2. Urban morphology

St Catherine Street has been Montreal's main commercial artery since the late nineteenth century, when commercial activity moved north of the river, and away from what is now called Vieux Montreal. The poles of attraction on St Catherine Street were, until the last quarter of the twentieth century, the large department stores (Eaton's, Simpson's, Morgan's and Ogilvie's), whose names still carry significant patrimonial weight in Canada, even though most of the stores which bore them have disappeared. Their replacement by large downtown shopping malls, now joined by tunnels to form Montreal's '[Underground City](#)' has sharpened the contrast between the hygienic, morally upright world of enclosed, contiguous shopping spaces and the long stream of strip clubs and fast-food restaurants that continue to give downtown Montreal an air of sleaze, at least at street level. The city's recent prosperity has not yet fully eradicated that sleaziness, and the area

along St Catherine Street between St Laurent Boulevard and the Place Emilie Gamelin remains one of the most resistant to gentrification.

Commercial investment renews itself just east of Place Emilie Gamelin, where Montreal's [Gay Village](#) (considered by many to be the largest gay neighbourhood in North America) unfolds along St Catherine Street. Since the 1990s this strip has been a highly vibrant, successful community of bars, restaurants, shops and street-level socialising.

The three-block area analysed here stands at the eastern edge of Montreal's downtown [core](#). As St. Catherine Street unfolds in an easterly direction, from the city's Central Business District (CBD) towards Place Emilie Gamelin, a withering of commercial energies has long been observable. We may read the three-block area under study in this essay in terms of a conventional urban morphology, as one boundary of Montreal's [skid row](#).

The traditional heart of this skid row is eight to ten blocks to the west of Place Emilie Gamelin, closer to downtown, at the corner of St Catherine Street and St Laurent Boulevard. Throughout the post-Second World War era, this intersection has remained a centre for the street-based sex trade and enduring evidence of Montreal's longstanding reputation as a 'city of sin'.

The corner holds in its orbit the Café Cleopatra (claimed, by some to be first modern strip club in Montreal) and several sex shops. Also within a block of this intersection may be found the counters selling steamed hot dogs and bars featuring live country music which stand as the last vestiges of a certain kind of popular Montreal culture. To either side of it are the side streets whose speakeasies (illegal bars), brothels and gambling houses nourished the [image of Montreal](#) as a wide-open city during and after the Second World War.

The eastern parts of Montreal have traditionally been the most homogeneously French-speaking. The social character of Montreal's neighbourhoods has been defined by an uneven [distribution of wealth](#) and opportunity which, throughout the twentieth century, disadvantaged the city's French-speaking majority.

One effect of this distribution is that Montreal's most strongly French-speaking neighbourhoods have always seemed far from the city's CBD, as if commercial effervescence exhausted itself in the movement east. This has led to recurrent attempts, typically by city governments, to build commercial and cultural 'anchors' east of downtown. Planners and politicians believed these anchors would re-centre the city, shifting its axis towards the high concentrations of Francophone citizens who live in the east.

The three blocks examined in this essay have figured prominently in recurrent dreams of a new Francophone downtown for Montreal, one anchored in the city's east-central neighbourhoods.

3. Block No. 1: The Palace

In 1950 a group of Montreal businesspeople announced plans to build a commercial exhibition centre on Berri Street, on the block just north and west of Place Emilie Gamelin. The centre was completed in 1952 and named the Palais du Commerce. (In English, it was known, less grandiosely, as the 'Show Mart'.) The Palais was modelled after those facilities known in the United States as 'merchandise marts', large complexes that typically housed manufacturers' showrooms exhibiting a variety of goods. The most influential of these complexes, and a key model for the Montreal structure, was James Simpson's '[Merchandise Mart](#)', built in Chicago in the 1920s.

The building of the Palais du Commerce was a response to three overlapping anxieties relating to the place of Montreal and Canada within a continental economic system. As the first 'show mart' in Canada, the Palais would equip Canada with a commercial institution to match those already established in the United States, thus countering the perception of a Canadian 'backwardness' in business relative to its southern neighbour. In particular, it was hoped that the Palais could attract major international trade exhibitions.

At the same time, the Palais sought to slow the ongoing shift of economic power within Canada to Toronto—a shift that had been underway for decades but whose effects had become more pronounced in the years following the Second World War. And finally, as noted, the Palais was one among several attempts to construct an important economic and cultural institution anchored to the east of the city's centre. The Palais was meant to draw commercial energies from the business district to its west and audiences or customers for its various events from populations residing to its east.

Prior to the building of the Palais, a series of plans to make this block a centre for Quebec media were launched to no effect. In 1939 the Canadian Broadcasting Corporation (CBC) announced plans to build its principal Montreal facilities there, but the outbreak of the Second World War led to their suspension, then abandonment.

In 1952 the French language arm of the CBC used the facilities of the Palais to announce the coming of television to Quebec, but the first regular television broadcasts originated elsewhere, in the CBC's recently constructed studios on Dorchester Street. Major Quebec newspapers, like *La Presse* and *La Patrie*, likewise talked of moving their headquarters to the block on which the Palais was built, but failed to do so.

In its thirty-nine-year history, the Palais du Commerce would house several media organisations within its walls, but none of these was of sufficiently monumental scale or cultural significance to make the Palais a genuine media centre.

The original plans for the Palais called for a palace-like structure with meeting rooms, projection facilities, radio studios, restaurants, retail stores and recreation-based enterprises like bowling halls and billiard parlours. This was to be 'une petite ville ultramoderne au coeur de la grande métropole', the first of the many enclosed environments which Montreal would nest within its broader urban fabric ([Larose 1988: A6](#)). Quickly, however, these plans were scaled back. When the Palais opened in 1952 it contained one large room with a mezzanine, and a variety of smaller, service-oriented facilities (such as restaurants and a pharmacy) clustered around it.

During the 1950s and early 1960s, at the peak of its success, the Palais fulfilled the often contradictory purposes for which it was intended. It was, on the one hand, a location for locally based, popular activities of a traditional character, such as religious festivities and live entertainment. The Palais hosted enormous community dinners, presided over by local Catholic leader Emile Léger, which attracted 6000 people at a time, turning the Palais into a major repository of local religious sentiment at regular intervals. At the same time, it served as a site for cosmopolitan and modernising gestures characteristic of the so-called '[Quiet Revolution](#)' that was transforming (and secularising) Quebec during this period.

Many events held at in the Palais stand as milestones in the formation of a Quebec nationalism, where an opening onto international circuits of cultural influence went hand in hand with a new interest in Quebec's own cultural traditions as the foundation of a newly valourised collective identity. In 1963, for example, the Exposition Française de Montréal brought André Malraux to the Palais to promote cultural relations between Quebec and France. Exhibitions of new automobiles and fashions were regular events on the Palais's calendar.

A key, recurrent activity in the history of the Palais was its hosting of the Salon de l'Artisanat or Salon des métier d'art, exhibitions of arts and crafts which began in 1955 and continued to be hosted at the site until 1967. Photographs from the collections of the Bibliothèque et Archives Nationales du Québec, which can be viewed in an [online slide show](#), attest to the variety of artefacts on display and sale at the Salon.

As Jocelyne Lepage suggests, the Salon represented a key moment in the emergence of a self-consciously nationalist project for Quebec artisans: 'Gone were the days, it was said, when artisans and poor farmers sold their "works" for next to nothing to Americans' ([1994: D13](#)). Increasingly, Quebec artisans sold their creation for higher prices to an emerging Quebecois middle class drawn to the signifiers of national cultural authenticity.

While the Palais du Commerce contributed to the modernising forces that were transforming Quebec, it was eventually outrun by these energies. A rush of construction activity in the 1960s produced major office, shopping and convention complexes like [Place Bonaventure](#) and [Place Ville-Marie](#), both west of the Palais and thus closer to the city's traditional downtown. Both of these were faithful to period fashions in the building of urban mega-projects, with high office towers arrayed around concrete plazas and lower-level shopping malls.

Place Bonaventure, in particular, became Montreal's major site for industrial exhibitions, quickly displacing the Palais du Commerce in its core function. [Place des Arts](#), the performing arts complex constructed just east of downtown in 1963, followed the model of other North American municipal arts facilities, such as the Lincoln Center, built during this period. In particular, it conformed to the technical and architectural standards required for touring symphony orchestras and theatrical productions. Place des Arts quickly usurped much of the function of the Palais du Commerce as a venue for live music concerts or theatre.

No event expressed Montreal's aspirations to international stature more than its hosting of Expo '67, the World's Fair which opened in April 1967 under the title, 'Man and His World'. As one of its residues, Expo '67 left clear distinctions in the city's imagination between those buildings and institutions that partook of its forward-looking sensibility and those left over from what had come to be known as 'le grand noirceur' or 'great darkness' in Quebec history—the repressive, backward-looking period of the 1940s and 1950s.

The Palais du Commerce quickly came to seem dowdy and retrograde, particularly when compared to the towering places that had transformed Montreal's downtown. In 1967, the Salon des métiers d'art moved to the site of Expo '67, then after the Fair closed migrated to Place Bonaventure. Like other exhibitions and touring events whose scale and ambition were magnified by the World's Fair, the Salon never returned to the Palais du Commerce.

The final, doomed expression of hope for a Palais du Commerce at the heart of Montreal's cultural and commercial life came in the wake of Expo '67, when François Dallegret, a French-born designer and artist living in Montreal, re-imagined the site as the 'Palais Métro'. Dallegret's Palais was planned as a multi-levelled psychedelic labyrinth devoted to shopping and sensory experience, blending European and US culture, high art and pop, 'BD avec Françoise Hardy'.

Among its many purposes, it would return public attention and traffic to this eastern edge of downtown, away from the shiny new shopping complexes of the city's central core. Unlike the old Palais du Commerce, the Palais Métro was designed to play aesthetically with the site's connections to the underground transport system, mobilising, in its construction of a fantasy world, the mobile passageways contained within the Berri-de-Montigny metro interchange.

Dallegret had organised the spectacular 'Super Party' which opened rival complex Place Bonaventure, and perhaps out of regret, saw his Palais Métro as a way to restore to the Palais du Commerce some of the centrality it had lost. The magazine *Art in America*, reviewing Dallegret's plans, called the Palais Métro the 'world's most avant-garde shopping centre' ([Baker 1968](#)); Reyner Banham included it among his Megastructures in his 1976 book of the same name (Banham 1976).

Dallegret's labyrinth was never built, however, and he took the plans to New York, adapting them in his design of a bar ('Eat & Drink') built to serve workers engaged in construction of the new

World Trade Center. An elaborate visual archive of Dallegret's designs for the [Palais Métro](#) is available on the internet.

In 1960 the Palais housed a rich variety of businesses, services, media and associations. Over the course of the next four decades, these occupants declined in variety and number. Barely visible in these shifts was the slow transformation of the Palais into a centre for subcultural, youth-oriented activities. In 1974 the Palais, then known in English as the 'Berri Showmart', featured a concert by the New York Dolls, an event now seen as foundational in the emergence of a Montreal punk scene.

Shortly thereafter, the central room of the Palais was hollowed out, renamed the Palladium, and transformed into a roller-skating rink to which my fellow graduate students and I went regularly around 1980. In the 1990s this space followed the trajectory of other leisure-oriented spaces, acquiring subcultural edges and re-inventing recreational activities such as roller-skating as willfully oppositional, extreme sports. In 1993 the well-known Anglophone Montreal journalist Nick Auf Der Maur reported in the *Montreal Gazette* on a rave at the Palais du Commerce which had been disrupted by the police ([Auf Der Maur 1993: A2](#)). Like the 1974 New York Dolls concert, this event became a milestone within genealogies of Montreal's musical undergrounds.

For much of its final decade, the interior space of the Palais du Commerce was known as the Taz Mahal, described by those who adored it as the largest indoor skateboard park, in-line skating facility and BMX-riding surface in the world. Initially, in-line skating and skateboarding transpired inside the circular lanes used by conventional roller-skaters. By the time of the Taz Mahal's closure, inline-skating and BMX-riding had conclusively [redefined this space](#).

Video of the Taz Mahal captures the significant transformation of the Palais that had taken place as its surfaces were rearranged and covered with graffiti. The destruction of the Taz Mahal, which came with the final demolition of the Palais du Commerce in 2001, lingers on in Montreal's cultural memory as an event that fractured rich coalitions of skateboarding and hip-hop, French and English, black and white.

In 2005 the new Grande Bibliothèque du Québec opened on the land where the Palais had once stood. Just before it was torn down, and after most vestiges of commerce had been removed from its interior, the Palais du Commerce served as the site for the Montreal 2000 Art Biennale. As with so many commercial or industrial buildings destroyed or renovated over the last two decades, art served here to re-sanctify a site whose original nobility and purpose had long since faded.

The 2000 Biennale de Montréal was devoted to the theme of time, and a concern with decay linked many of the individual artworks to the larger drama of the building's imminent disappearance ([Lamarche 2000: D8](#)). In one of the biennale's most striking works, by Swiss artist [Christian Marclay](#), a room was filled with several hundred old vinyl musical recordings. These were strewn and stacked in haphazard fashion across its floor.

Visitors to the biennale were invited to walk across the records in order to access the rooms beyond. This accumulation of discarded vinyl recordings appeared, to most viewers, as one more instance of the contemporary art world's preoccupation with material artefactuality and cultural waste. Those familiar with the recent history of the Palais knew that the vinyl records referred directly to one of the building's long-time functions.

Since the 1980s much of the space of the Palais du Commerce had functioned as a graveyard for unwanted cultural artefacts. Over the last twenty years of its existence it contained within its enormous basement several interconnected warehouse-like stores offering thousands of old books and records for sale. One of these stores specialised in vinyl records, and was called Le Fou du Disque; its companion, devoted to books and magazines, was Le Colisée du Livre. (It was this feature of the Palais which brought me to it dozens of times, in the 1980s and 1990s, often in the company of visiting popular music scholars from other countries.)

In photographs of these stores we see the street-level windows (looking onto Berri Street, and facing the bus terminal), behind which hundreds of thousands of books and vinyl records were arranged according to the loosest of classificatory schemes.

The abundance of cast-off commodities within both stores had long seemed emblematic of Montreal's long-term economic weaknesses, which had nourished innumerable informal markets and forms of second-hand commerce across the city. In particular, these stores seemed to epitomise the undervalued abundance that plagued Montreal throughout the 1990s. The huge inventories and the large size of these stores were somehow typical of a city in which there were, until recently, too many unwanted things and too many underutilised spaces.

The transformation of the Palais du Commerce into the city's largest market for used books and records was obviously rich in irony. Built as a modern showcase for commercial and technological innovation, it had become a resting place for artefacts characterised by stylistic and technological backwardness. In its final years the Palais was cut off from the main currents of the city's commercial life. It had become, in fact, a node within the city's economy of pawnshops, informal markets and second-hand stores, an economy through which artefacts travelled along convoluted and usually uncharted routes.

By this point in its history, it seemed appropriate that the Palais du Commerce was located directly across from Montreal's bus terminal, and near the main intersection of metro lines. This was, and remains, an area of the city marked by the predominance of the transitory and of cheaply acquired pleasures.

In fact, the used book and record stores within the Palais could be reached from the metro station or bus terminal through a confusing series of underground tunnels. Through its proximity to transportation crossroads, its own labyrinthian structure, and its place within the itineraries of discarded objects, the Palais du Commerce evoked what, several decades earlier, Pierre Mac

Orlan had called 'le fantastique social': that atmosphere of secret itineraries and mysterious adventures that marks such urban institutions as the railroad station or the sea port ([Mac Orlan 1997](#)).

The irony of the Palais's decline into a market for used cultural commodities was magnified with the construction, upon its site, of Quebec's huge national library. While Quebec law designated the Grande Bibliothèque as a legal repository for all new titles of printed matter, Le Fou du Disque and Le Colisée du Livre had been almost as efficient in gathering within their walls the historical heritage of Quebec's music- and book-publishing industries. These were the places to which radio stations, libraries, bankrupt companies and dismantled households sent their stocks when their continued possession was no longer feasible or desired. The records and books within the store resonated richly as parables of local and international exchange, as material residues of a lively urban commerce, and as clues to the trade routes which brought artefacts to Montreal from other places.

In 1997 the Premier of Quebec, Bernard Landry, announced the allocation of CA\$75 000 000 for the building of a Grande Bibliothèque du Québec. His Minister of Finance defended the project in the loftiest of terms: 'A people without culture is a poor people, whatever its level of material wealth' ([Cloutier 1997: B8](#), author's translation). Four years later, at the start of construction of the new library, Landry pointed out that 'one of every two books published in Canada is published in Quebec. It is time for Quebec to consolidate its uniqueness. And that uniqueness is its intelligence, its culture, its humanism' ([Levesque, 2001: A6](#), author's translation).

The choice of the Palais du Commerce site for the new library came late in the process, and many felt that this neighbourhood, with its fast food restaurants, bus fumes and legacy of activism and transience was not worthy of so noble an institution.

On its completion, the new national library was generally praised for the user-friendly quality of its interiors and, in particular, its rich technological resources. Designed by the Vancouver-based firm of [Patkau Architects](#), who were chosen following an international competition, the bibliothèque was reviewed in leading architectural magazines (see, for example, [Whitehead 2006](#)).

Some commentary on the building's exterior form noted its failure to acknowledge the history of the site on which it was built. Indeed, in the weeks following its opening critics openly mourned the loss of any reference in the new structure to the Palais du Commerce, now remembered fondly as an emblem of Montreal's postwar optimism rather than as the object of seemingly endless neglect. (This nostalgic rediscovery of the Palais came too late, and in terms too unconvincing, to have any impact.)

In a lengthy analysis published in the daily newspaper *La Presse*, Jean-Claude Marsan, a leading historian of Montreal, described the form of the Grande Bibliothèque as that of a [giant 'losange'](#) in

which no accommodation of the surrounding area was to be found. For Marsan, the structure did not provide a stabilising frame for Place Emilie Gamelin, one block over and one block down, nor did it offer a clearly marked, ceremonial [entrance](#) of the sort that would structure the spatial environment of the library in relation to activities transpiring around it ([Marsan 2005: A12](#)).

By the summer of 2007, nevertheless, as the bus terminal across the street was torn apart, and as Place Emilie Gamelin became a battleground between protestors and police, the Grande Bibliothèque du Québec, only two years old, already seemed among the most stable and familiar features of this area.

4. Block No. 2: The Terminal

Until the late 1960s Montreal's current bus station (built in 1951) was known as the 'terminus de l'est' or Eastern Terminal, to distinguish it from what had been for many years the city's main bus terminal in the centre of the city. *Montreal '67*, a widely distributed magazine published to promote Expo '67, touted Montreal's terminal and inter-city bus service as a key feature of the city's infrastructure in the year of the World's Fair. As in most North American cities, however, Montreal's bus terminal came to seem emblematic of decay transpiring on the edges of the city's centre. Built in an area long criticised for its failure to anchor a new city core centre, the bus terminal could be seen as actively reversing any stabilising forces within its immediate environment.

To the south, the Montreal bus terminal faces Place Emilie Gamelin. In a widely shared moral geography of Montreal, each of these sites has come to be contaminated by an image of sleazy transience associated with the other. Facing the eastern edge of the terminal, along St Hubert Street, century-old row houses have been transformed into low-budget hotels, after most families, charitable orders and businesses that originally occupied this block until the 1960s moved away.

At the far north end of the terminal block, Ontario Street, which has one of the country's highest concentrations of pawn shops, runs east through a traditional working-class neighbourhood slowly being transformed through its proximity to the increasingly prosperous Gay Village.

Rue Saint Denis, one block west of the terminal, has long been known as one of the easiest places in Canada to purchase hashish on the street. The main campus of the Université du Québec à Montréal (UQAM), south of the Grande Bibliothèque and west of Place Emilie Gamelin, has brought some degree of bohemian and professional respectability to the area. However, UQAM's presence has also increased the proliferation of fast food restaurants and second-hand stores, institutions whose ephemerality is a further challenge to any anchoring of the neighbourhood.

In 2007 the greatest public investment scandal in recent Quebec history erupted over UQAM's plans to purchase and redevelop the block on which the bus terminal stood. UQAM had announced its [plans](#) in 2005: it would move the bus terminal underground, build university residences over

top of it, and fill the remaining parts of the block with a new university complex and office tower. This project would resolve UQAM's need for new space in the midst of a wave of university expansions within Montreal. At the same time, it would eliminate the existing bus terminal (now, with the building of the Grande Bibliothèque directly opposite, acknowledged as an eyesore), and complete the transformation of this perennially problematic part of Montreal into a 'quartier du savoir', a neighbourhood of knowledge and learning.

In a decade that had seen all four of Montreal's universities take over substantial parts of the city for expansion purposes, UQAM's plans for the bus terminal manifested a credible logic. Architectural critics applauded the fact that the new complex, with its high walls and imposing size, would further the enclosure (or 'framing') of Place Emilie Gamelin, across Rue de Maisonneuve—thus perhaps calming its restless social energies. City planners, for whom this entire area continued to pose a formless puzzle, embraced the scenario of a 'knowledge quarter', now rendered uncontroversial by a decade of culturally focused urban regeneration schemes throughout the world.

Opposition to plans for redeveloping the bus terminal site focused, first, on the public-private partnership which UQAM had proposed in order to fund the project. The university had signed a deal with a private developer from whom it was stipulated UQAM would lease the new facilities over several years, until the university assumed full ownership. Large portions of the UQAM community opposed this privatisation in principle. Others were horrified at the highly disadvantageous terms which UQAM had accepted, particularly as cost estimates grew from an initial CA\$325 million dollars in 2005, to CA\$406 million in 2007.

Lucien Bouchard, a former premier of Québec, was engaged to renegotiate the university's terms with Busac, its private partner in the project. As the scandal unfolded, accusations of incompetence gave way to revelations of fraudulent, double bookkeeping schemes on the part of high university administrators. As of June 2007, construction work had slowed on the bus terminal and the future of the project was uncertain ([Cauchy and Lévesque 2007](#)).

5. Block No. 3: The park

In 1848 Emilie Gamélin, the widow of a man named Jean-Baptiste Gamelin, founded a religious order to provide services to the old, poor and sick within Montreal. Following Jean-Baptiste's death in 1827, Emilie Gamélin had devoted her time to charitable work among residents of her neighbourhood. A notice in the *Montreal Transcript* newspaper, from 25 August 1840, announced a bazaar organised by Madame Gamelin to raise money for this purpose, describing it as an annual event already having run for several years. In 1842, with money from her husband's estate, Emilie founded the Congrégation des Soeurs de la Providence (the Sisters of Providence), a charitable order of the Catholic church.

Emilie Gamelin died in 1851, in the midst of a cholera epidemic. However, the Sisters of Providence order subsequently grew over the remaining nineteenth century and into the twentieth century to involve women religious in nine countries (Canada, the United States, El Salvador, Haiti, Chile, Argentina, the Philippines, Egypt and Cameroon).

As a refuge for the elderly and ill among whom she worked, Emilie Gamelin provided a house, situated at the corner of St Catherine and Saint-Hubert streets, on the block where the park which bears her name now stands. The house remained the property of the Sisters of Providence until 1960, when the City of Montreal bought the block in order to build one of Montreal's new metro (subway) stations upon it, constructed so as to open in time for the Expo '67 World's Fair.

While the Berri-de-Montigny Station (later renamed Berri-UQAM) is the key juncture within the metro system, the entrance constructed on what is now called Place Emilie Gamelin took up little of the square's above-ground space. The rest served, for almost thirty years, as a parking lot, servicing the bus terminal to its north and the miscellaneous businesses that look onto the square. For most of its life this block has been known in English as Berri Square, a designation that lingers despite its renaming as Place Emilie Gamelin in 1992.

An inventory of buildings around the square, from the 1960 Lovell City Directory captures this and adjacent blocks at one moment in the unending transitions that have marked their history. Place Emilie Gamelin sits between Berri and St Hubert Streets, and is bounded by St Catherine Street to its south and De Montigny (now De Maisonneuve) to its north. Then, as now, the Archambault music store anchors the corner of St Catherine and Berri, though its function has shifted (musical instruments and sheet music have been largely replaced by CDs and DVDs) and the Archambault company is now part of Quebecor, one of Canada's largest media conglomerates.

In 1960 miscellaneous forms of commerce were interspersed between the charitable and religious institutions that had maintained a strong presence in this area. To the asylums and soup kitchens of the nineteenth century were now added the offices of the Pères blancs (the White Fathers, an order of Catholic missionaries working in Africa) and a Musée d'Afrique, intended to promote their activities.

In the 1980s the city of Montreal announced its intention to transform the block into the Place du 350e, a square to commemorate the 350th anniversary of the founding of Montreal. An architectural competition to redesign the square was won by Melvin Charney, the internationally acclaimed, Montreal-based architect and artist whose works include a highly regarded garden on the site of the Canadian Centre for Architecture. Charney's redesign of the square included a multi-formed sculpture, 'Gratte-ciel, cascades d'eau, rues, ruisseaux ... une construction' (Skyscraper, Waterfall, Roads, Brooks ... a Construction), which expressed the larger logic with which he had reimagined the square.

Place du 350e was organised around different levels, which made it seem to descend towards the river and thus follow the broader descent of Montreal down from its mountain. Combining grass and concrete, it was meant to capture the diversity of forms and materials characteristic of city life.

Charney's sculpture was willfully complex and experimental, intended to refocus public attention on a piece of land long consigned to neglect. The intervention was one in a series of acts which have sought to use the park as a showcase for experimental works of public art. In 1992, however, the city renamed the square after Emilie Gamelin. This reassertion of the square's prominent role within local Catholic history was seen by many as a challenge to recent reinventions of the site as a place of avant-gardist expression. (The city claimed its renaming was in response to complaints about the low number of public places in Montreal named after women.) Charney's sculptures now sit on a square whose four corners all contain old-fashioned, pedagogically-oriented plaques recounting the life and works of Emilie Gamelin in rich detail.

Each of these interventions into the naming and purpose of this block has added to the sense of dense unintelligibility that continues to mark it. References to the square in popular and journalistic discourse may still call it 'Parc Emilie Gamelin', 'Square Berri', 'Berri Square' or 'Place Emilie Gamelin'. Recent photos express the sedimentation and collision of meanings characteristic of the block in its present state. Charney's sculptures look increasingly like shards of metal caught in the trees, or alien life-forms lumbering across the grass, or, at the very least, like assemblages in the process of breaking apart. In a square known for the refuse typically strewn across it, and for the eclectic mixes of signage and architectural form arrayed along its borders, the sculptures often fall out of attention, their distinctiveness dissolving within a generalised sense of clutter.

In 2005 I was one member of a research project (the Digital Cities Project), which undertook to sample the sonic and visual dimensions of Place Emilie Gamelin. (The Project was directed by Michael Longford, now Chair of the Department of Design Art at Concordia University.) ['Sampling the Park'](#) offered Ipaq Personal Data Assistants (PDAs) to people visiting the park over a weekend period. These devices contained sounds, moving images and photographs documenting different aspects of the park's histories. The playback of specific audiovisual materials was triggered by signals embedded in different locations within Place Emilie Gamelin as participants moved about it. The database of materials loaded onto the PDAs was based on extensive interviews and archival research undertaken by the team.

Prominent in this research, and in the sound content available to participants in the project, was a long interview with Soeur Thérèse, now in her eighties, who had spent most of her life preparing the case for Emilie Gamelin's canonisation as a saint. The Sisters of Providence had long ago moved to a high-rise home for religious women in Montreal's north end and Soeur Thérèse's recounting of Emilie's life and works seemed quaint and distant against the rough, noisy activity

that characterises Place Emilie Gamelin in its present incarnation. Rather than a site of tranquil memorialisation, the square remains one of Montreal's busiest places of arrival and departure.

For many years now, and as the result of no coordinated plan or policy, Place Emilie Gamelin has been the principal site for alternative cultural expression in Montreal. In 1995 the Nuits d'Afrique music festival moved there when its longstanding venue in the Club Balatou became too small to contain its growth. During the weekend of the festival, the Place is transformed into the Village des Nuits d'Afrique, with free outdoor concerts and a wide range of related activities. [Divers Cité](#), the annual festival of the performing arts celebrating 'sexual diversity', holds a series of live musical and theatrical events at the square each August.

While these events are now part of the city's tourist-oriented festival calendar, the square remains a point of departure for marches and of temporary settlement for the city's homeless and itinerant. In 2001 a 'March for Peace', protesting against violent crime in the city's club scene, assembled and left from Place Emilie Gamelin. Marches to 'Save Darfur', to protest capital punishment elsewhere in the world, to free political prisoners held in Canada, to prevent tuition increases in Quebec's colleges, and to fight climate change have all used the square as a place of assembly or dispersal in the last two years.

In 2005 a group of artists called [l'Action terroriste socialement acceptable](#)(ATSA) installed a temporary camp for victims of social exclusion on the Place Emilie Gamelin. ATSA's transformation of the block into a space of artistic intervention, intended to renegotiate citizens' relationship to public space, is emblematic of the multi-layered politics now directed at the block. While populations move through it, either onward to marches or in passage to somewhere else, others dream of artistic uses of the park that will stabilise it, making of it a place of contemplation or community.

Among the most interesting of these scenarios were those developed by the 'CCA/Inter-university Charrette', a consortium of architecture and design students from across Montreal which works in collaboration with the Canadian Centre for Architecture. In 2005 Charrette teams were assigned the task of re-imagining the Place Emilie Gamelin as a Carré des Arts et de la Culture, a place of artistic expression whose new coherence would come in part from the framing effects produced by the Grande Bibliothèque and new UQAM/bus terminal facility. The [students' plans](#), available in detailed exposition on the internet, begin with the widely shared conviction that with the transformation of the other two blocks into mega-structures of learning and culture, Place Emilie Gamelin has become a problem that must be addressed.

As Melvin Charney's sculptures seem more and more to exaggerate the block's decrepitude rather than resolve it, and as the memorials to Emilie Gamelin herself meet with utter disinterest, a flurry of new artistic interventions struggle to grab and hold the attention of those passing through this square. 'Passers-by sneak through [Place Emilie Gamelin] without appropriating it', noted France Parenteau, the director of a group called Dada Diffusion Art Actuel, in May, 2007. 'We want

to make it into a living place, a showcase for the arts' (Paré 2007). Dada Diffusion received a CA\$80,000 grant to turn the square into a giant checkerboard signed by the pochoir artist Roadsworth, whose career has taken him from the status of vandal quasi-graffitist to that of recognised creator of public art works.

In these multiple attempts to stop the hurried move through Parc Emilie Gamelin, to enforce the individual's confrontation with works of art, we see public policy and interventionist intention acting upon that 'ethically incomplete subject in need of training into humanness', which Toby Miller counts among the types of cultural subject produced by modern nation-states (Miller 1993: xi).

City planners and private developers continue to imagine functions for these three blocks that would cure their unsettled character, making each of them a sturdy anchor within a new urban economy of culture and information. In this vision of the neighbourhood, the Grande Bibliothèque will face the research/creation laboratories of the Université du Québec à Montréal. Both will sit adjacent to a Place Emilie Gamelin whose restless energies have been pacified by whimsical forms of artistic experimentation.

This vision is slowly being realised, but it confronts two countervailing factors which we have described in this essay. The first is the long-time status of these three blocks as a zone of transience—a space to be crossed on the way to somewhere else. Caught between Montreal's official centre of mainstream commerce, to the west, and a Gay Village blossoming to its east, this area has long failed to communicate any sense of itself as a destination. A second factor is the long history of these blocks, which has seen contradictory functions overlaid upon each other time and time again, confounding any clear public sense of this area's meaning and purpose. In turn, this area has been a centre of religious charity, the imagined core of a new Francophone downtown, a crossroads in Montreal's transportation system, and a run-down gathering place for socially marginal populations. Each stage in this history has left its traces on this richly diverse and highly contested terrain.

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