

Cultural Daily

Independent Voices, New Perspectives

Adaptive Interventions and Urban Sociability of “Live” Places

Maurice Amiel · Thursday, November 21st, 2013



Introduction

I would like to use the situation shown above to illustrate our proposition concerning the relation between sociability and adaptive interventions on the environment.

Because the hedge that limits the front yard of the corner property is a way back from the street corner, passersby took to cutting a diagonal dirt path across the public grassy area, in order to save

part of the walking along the two sides of the right triangle formed by the sidewalk.

It did not take long before the city thought it would help if it paved and widened the users created dirt path, not with concrete which would be expensive nor with asphalt which would be out of context but with rough hewn brick pavers in a rather handsome curved shape.

So why did a new dirt path reappear soon after?

The answer, as any one can imagine, is the difficulty of walking on an uneven paved surface or keeping to it in cross traffic. The new dirt path was not created by the passer-by as a new shortcut, but as a “usable” version and/or extension of the “landscaped” one.

Of course in winter, when the snow is packed, a tamped snow path appears over the ones below. The sidewalk gets also more use in winter, mostly by people pushing strollers, because it is regularly cleaned of snow and ice and thus provides a safer surface to walk on ... however longer the distance may be.

That is what may be called a pathway made “**live**” through successive adaptive interventions by a variety of social actors.

Environmental adaptive intervention and urban sociability: general

Adaptive interventions on the environment, the result of conscious actions by users and/or for users require, to be fully appreciated, that we take stock of the situations and the motivations that brought them about.

Furthermore the experimental aspect of adaptive interventions gives an evolving, dynamic quality to the cityscape, sometimes with a characteristic social profile with which one may identify, or not. Because environmental adaptive interventions are forms of appropriation, they bond us to the city turning it into a **live environment** and into a hub of sociability.

Environmental adaptive interventions and urban sociability: some “live” places.

A place that provides an experience of being in **live company** is a place we are attracted to with the anticipation of finding what is happening, or what has happened, there. It involves and embodies a set of intentions, be they practical and/or aesthetic. It involves us as potential co-actors and witnesses rather than as merely spectators or consumers.

Live street



The stretch of Côte-des-Neiges road, shown above, has kept its three-story residential typology as it accommodated street level mixed uses due to commercial pressures. A funeral home has become a hardware store, another was demolished to make place for luxury condominium, shown below, a short stretch of duplexes has been torn down to make place for a yellow brick mid-rise structure with a sympathetic low rise street level front, as shown above.

In general, street and basement levels commercial uses have become service and food retail venues with signs and shop fronts reflecting demographic changes of that part of the district of Côte-des-Neiges, as will be seen later on.

On the whole one can say that the nature of urban adaptive interventions can best be appreciated in social historical context. As adaptive interventions are made to space and structure, old time residents need to adapt to the new social and spatial environment. In doing so they retain their

status as “environmental memory holders”, passing that memory to newcomers.

Live street corner



The street corner above, at the intersection of a trans-city mixed-use street and a local residential one, typifies what I mean by a place where something is certain to happen. The bus station bench, the storefront marquee, the decorated enclosure of a day care centre play ground, the overarching shade tree, are all elements that keep live company to each other and that combine to make the street corner, as it is now, live company to be in.

As an old-timer, I remember the difficult social process of dealing with tenants as the building on the corner was renovated, some remaining in it during construction. I remember the surprise I felt at seeing it resurface from the dust and struggles of reconstruction. Not seen in the image is a convenience food market, the entrance to the day care centre and a sign over the building entrance with the street name followed by the complimentary qualifier of “Place”.

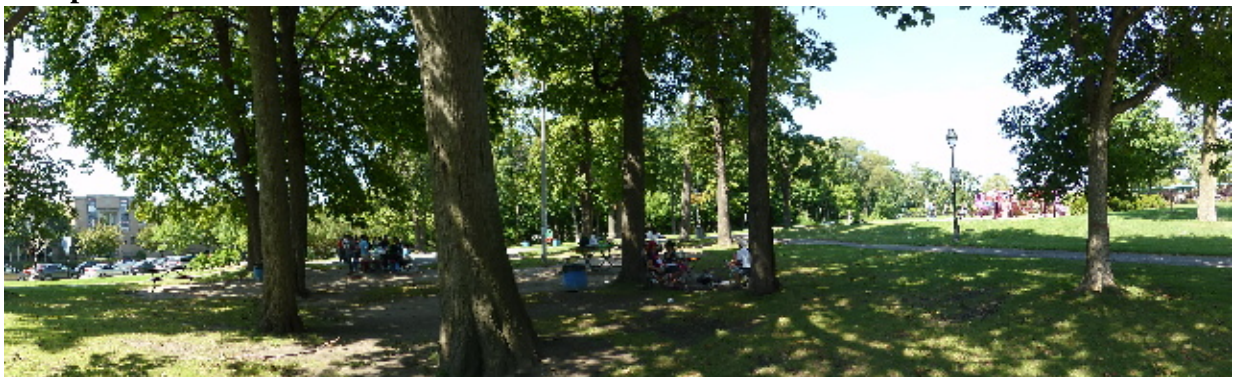
Live sidewalk



We know the formula of the sidewalk café for its social animation and arcane social pick up manners. Montreal does not lack examples of sidewalks that borrow easement space from fronting buildings to such purpose. The example above is made richer because of the layering of residential stairs coming down across and over the tiny terraces, because of the residential balconies with view over same, and because of the mature trees that cast a welcome shadow in summer.

With the university a rock throw away, the cross-reference business is simply amazing: a second hand bookstore, a candy shop, a now defunct computer repair shop, a grill restaurant, and a unisex hairdresser ... talk about potential for sociability!

Live park



On summer weekends all the Pilipino neighbours living around this park gather in its picnic area and occupy all the tables for their weekly community food fest. The neighbourhood smells of grilled meats, the park resounds with laughter and Tagalog talk. Even non-Pilipino neighbours revel in the unabashed sociability of this weekly outdoors ritual.

Live façade



We chose from the top street panorama two façades, shown above and below, to illustrate the variety and extent of adaptive interventions at ground level of the traditional Plex* residential building type. The integration of the “front yard” and basement space should be noted, as are the more formal aspects of these interventions, expressive of ethnic colour, nature of business and taste or social standing of clientele.



Discussion

Most of the adaptive interventions presented here must be understood in terms of an interaction of certain physical characteristics (such as deep sidewalks, density of occupancy and spatial organization of building types, vegetation and climate, etc.) and social constraints (such a zoning laws, market and demographic forces, individual enterprise and political forces, etc.) that operate at the core of the adaptive intervention process.

The result of this process is one of dynamic **change-in-continuity**, for instance, the change from the series of three story residential or commercial buildings to larger buildings that will retain, at the street level, the historical scale and commercial space organisation of the surrounding buildings.

Sociability is not only the art of getting along with others in the present, but also in the present's inheritance from the past, given both past and present are inscribed in an evolving urban environment.

*NOTE: A Plex is a small two or three story residential building with anywhere from two to five units, each **with its own street address**.

All photos credit: Maurice Amiel

This entry was posted on Thursday, November 21st, 2013 at 8:08 pm and is filed under [Architecture](#)

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