

Cultural Daily

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CITY STILLS: Balcony Stories

Maurice Amiel · Wednesday, May 28th, 2014

A reminder

The balcony's specific agency of urban sociability resides in the fact that it acts both as a **loge** from which street life could be looked at, and as a **stage** upon which some private activities could be set as part of street life.

The rest is a question of social attitude and physical design: from near anti-social withdrawal behind balcony opaque screens to the theatricality of two ways communication with the street via balcony design and social distance to the street.

The two balconies presented below seem to use both strategies: screening and theatricality to the ends of both privacy and participation in city life.

The case of the visual trap.

The balcony shown below juts over Lake Washington, next to Heritage Park in Kirkland, Washington.



Being at eye level of the promeneurs on the adjoining marina mooring pier this situation has created, for the resident, a conflict of interest between safeguarding the view of the lake and his or her privacy.

The solution to this conflict is rather original and amusing.

By installing a female mannequin in light summer clothing just inside the glass door-window the resident has created a visual trap of sort whereby any voyeurism is nipped in the bud by satisfying it immediately, albeit virtually.

It takes a double take to distinguish the furniture on the balcony from the interior one, and to become aware of the curtains, no longer needed to screen the large glass door-window that is rendered opaque and mirror like by the contrast of sunlit exterior and dark interior.

The loge and stage functions of the balcony have found here a congenial expression of urban sociability ... with a twist of humour.

The case of “balconville”.

The balcony show below is at near street level, but at the second floor level of a building sited in depressed fashion from the street.



The small tower building provides second generation integrated social housing in a central Montreal middle class neighbourhood.

The balconies have been framed with a building scaled narrow side panel and with a privacy partition between pairs of balconies leading to appropriation and personalisation by the tenants in most cases.

The physical treatment of this particular balcony is determined by the privacy requirements of the tenant who has forsaken his view to the street (the loge function) in order to neutralize the view into the balcony from the street (the stage function).

One could say that the balcony’s agency of urban sociability has been neutered if it were not for the richness and details of its treatment that is referred to locally as “balconville” whereby the balcony takes the form of an outdoor room, a micro summer residence of sorts,

With temperature and atmospheric pressure gauges, generous planting, a wall clock and decorative framed images...and, most likely, a table and seats and probably storage furniture for games, etc. these residents will certainly enjoy their summer in “balconville”.

Discussion

If in the first case the passers by’s curiosity has been “morally” chastised by the visual trap; in the second it has been plainly blocked by the screen while giving enough visible cues to imagine its uses...enough elements therefore to safeguard the balcony’s agency of sociability.

With enough patience one could see the users top half as they enter or leave the balcony ... that is if one REALLY cared to!

All photos and collage credit Maurice Amiel.

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