
Cultural Daily

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CITY STILLS: The Framing Window

Maurice Amiel · Wednesday, May 21st, 2014

What is a window for?

Common sense and a bit of research will tell you that a window allows air and sunshine in a room, or any type of interior space, and that as such it insures, minimally, their practical and hygienic occupation. Because of that, building codes will usually specify the minimum dimensions of a window in terms of a percentage of the floor area of the room it belongs to, with no undue restraint on the designer's formal imagination.

Because a window allows view from inside out, and vice versa, building code will usually specify, for privacy reasons, the minimum distance between buildings and a preferable diagonal versus a vis-à-vis positioning of windows of neighbouring buildings.

Once a room or interior space is occupied, its windows will usually be appointed with all sorts of sun breaking, privacy protecting and status showing devices, making them ready to function as providers of social view framing experiences!

Window and site

In the general event based spirit of CITY STILLS, a contrasting pair of windows situated in fast and slow food eateries have caught my attention, and provided some observations and thoughts as to their differing treatment, and to the respective social view framing experiences they provide.

The fast food case

Situated in a transition zone between residential and light industrial zones this Mac food eatery had large windows, completely open to view the outside, and be viewed from it.

Not that the view was so special, and that is precisely my point because the attitude of the client, looking through one of these windows, seems to be less one of curiosity or aesthetic appreciation of the view and more like one of bemused meditation lightly posed on an array of non descript buildings and vehicles.

I may of course be projecting my own appreciation of the surroundings, yet the quiet, immobile, slightly hunched over attitude of the client definitely implied some preoccupation that had nothing to do with the Mac place or the view.



The slow food case

Situated on a busy commercial strip of an upper class municipal enclave on the island of Montreal this slow food eatery, organic, “home made”, etc. is designed for take out service but has a few tables for on site consumption.

Seated by the window this is the view it framed: interestingly split between interior treatment of the window sill and exterior pedestrian and car traffic.

There is no question the window sill area has been designed to keep my attention to the inside, while keeping the passers by “social” curiosity at bay thanks to a planting screen.

In a way the main reason for the lower-screened-window-half and the upper-open-window-half treatment was to focus the client on the eating experience while allowing the curiosity of the passers by to be satisfied without intruding on the eating client.

Most street fronting eateries of this type will have these lower half window curtained treatment for that purpose.



Discussion

While I may be tempted to categorically characterize fast food venues with a complete visual openness to the exterior and the opposite in slow food ones, a sample of two is not significant unless placed in a qualitative bipolar field exemplified, at its opposite poles, by the street car food vendor (totally exposed to social and physical environment) and the executive dining club (totally controlled relations to the social and physical environment).

What then does the framing window frame in our two cases?

I would say it frames opposite **degrees of culturally significant exposure to the physical and social environment**, to wit, the *fast food spirit dwells on the sense that one has not really left one's principal activity to stop and eat* (hence a venue with wide open view from inside out and vice versa) while *the slow food spirit dwells essentially on making a socially specific occasion out of eating* (hence a venue with modulated visibility, and access, from inside out and vice versa)

Now look again at those two windows!

Photos and collage credit Maurice Amiel

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