Cultural Daily

Independent Voices, New Perspectives

As different as day and night…

Maurice Amiel · Wednesday, March 12th, 2014

Context

There are but two main sets of preoccupations through which one usually filters the various environmental situations we face ordinarily while going about our activities with others in the city, and these are a sense of security and efficiency.

To satisfy these preoccupations we need to know where and in whose place it is we are, and what we are doing in it: how and with whom; we also need to control our personal "bubble", to adequately place ourselves while going about our activities and to properly distance ourselves in interaction with others.

To be so oriented, and in control, we need to know what spatial resources and behavioural strategies to use in order to operate in a sociable manner under various conditions … for instance during the day and at night.

Night will usually bring about a change in the hierarchy of these preoccupations, spatial resources and behavioural strategies. **Spatial orientation and general security will be the lead preoccupations, lighting and human presence will become critical resources, and hearing, smell and touch will be as important as sight.**

The nocturnal city presents itself usually as oases of lit, approachable and secure places (24/7 commerce, police and gas stations, hospitals and hotels, etc.) distributed along the network of more or less lit pathways for pedestrian and vehicular traffic. While a car may provide a GPS guided and protective bubble, walking at night in the city, or certain parts of it, can be taking a social, economic, and gender related security gamble.

"As different as day and night …"

This common expression recognizes the fact that the physical city is itself different, hence experienced differently, during the day and at night.

While photographers have been inspired by the city at night, I don't know of any who have documented the same spot at night and during the day, probably because of their different visual aesthetic potentials. Shadow patterns in daylight, and artificial light source pattern and colour at night, are not always to be gotten in the same place.

Our interest in urban sociability has caused us to search, in a variety of spots in the city, for the different sets of social information, experiences and expectations issued from the differing preoccupations in daytime and at night. Below are some rather typical situations of daytime versus night situations, shown at the same place.

Tower buildings

I think for instance, as shown in the two images below, of tower buildings that during the day are experienced as masses lost in the heights of the urban landscape under dramatic sky light, while at night as masses dissolved in darkness with only a scattered patterns of lit windows to indicate human presence, whereby one's attention is redirected to the more intense presence, physically and socially, of the well lit street.

Comparing the downtown chic high-rise condominium building discrete show of lit windows at night, with the rather livelier one of a high-rise apartment building located in a university district, one cannot help but sense the difference in intensity and quality of human presence at night in these two buildings … one seems aloof and indifferent while the other seems more reassuring and accessible.

The street

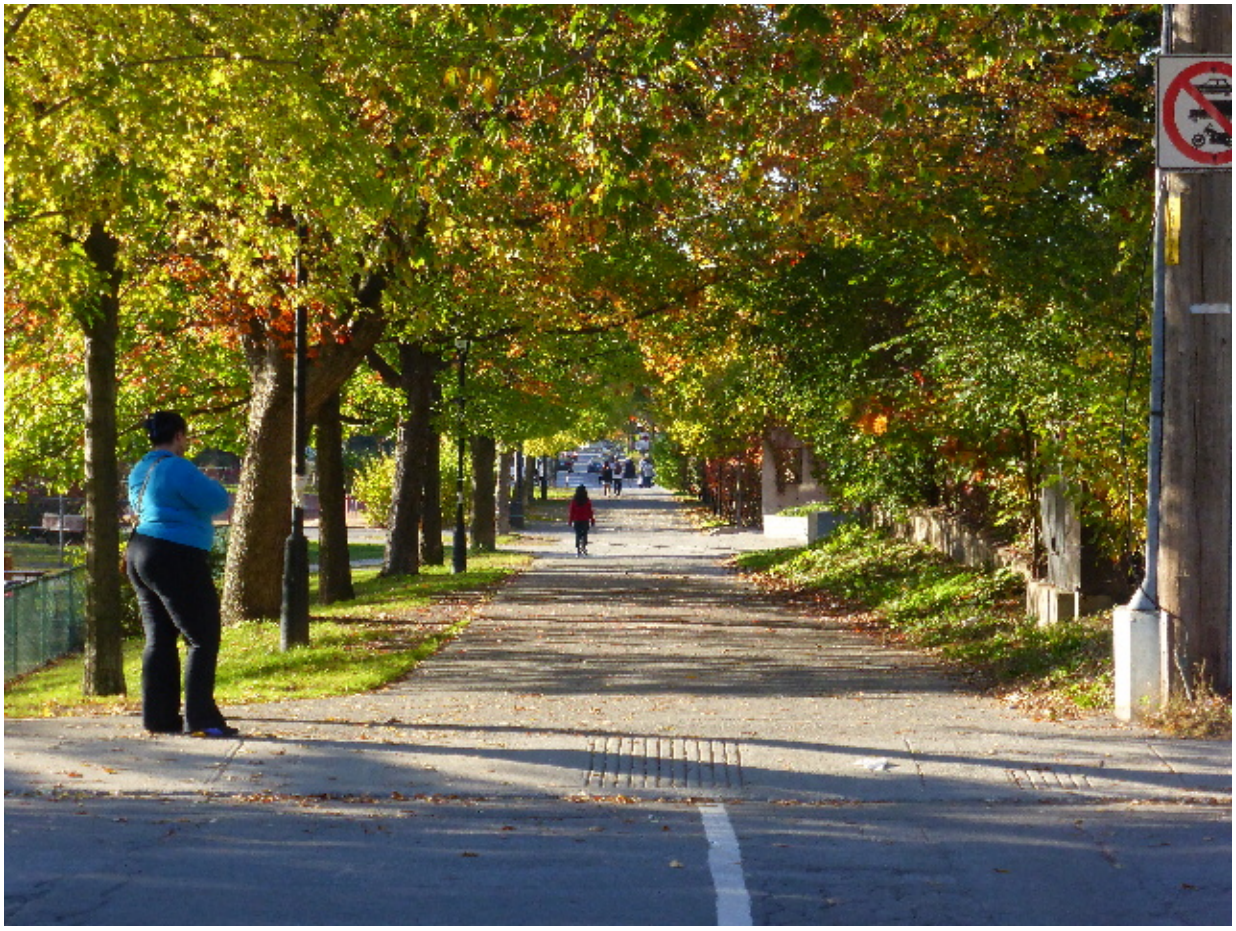
I think also of streets, in the two images shown below, that during the day can be visually busy with information, and are therefore seen in terms of general stable background versus a more localized dynamic and detailed foreground to be attended to, while at night are to be experienced as a sequence of lit spaces we depend on to move along the street … always in a state of heightened awareness to sounds revealing of distant, or near, social presence, etc.

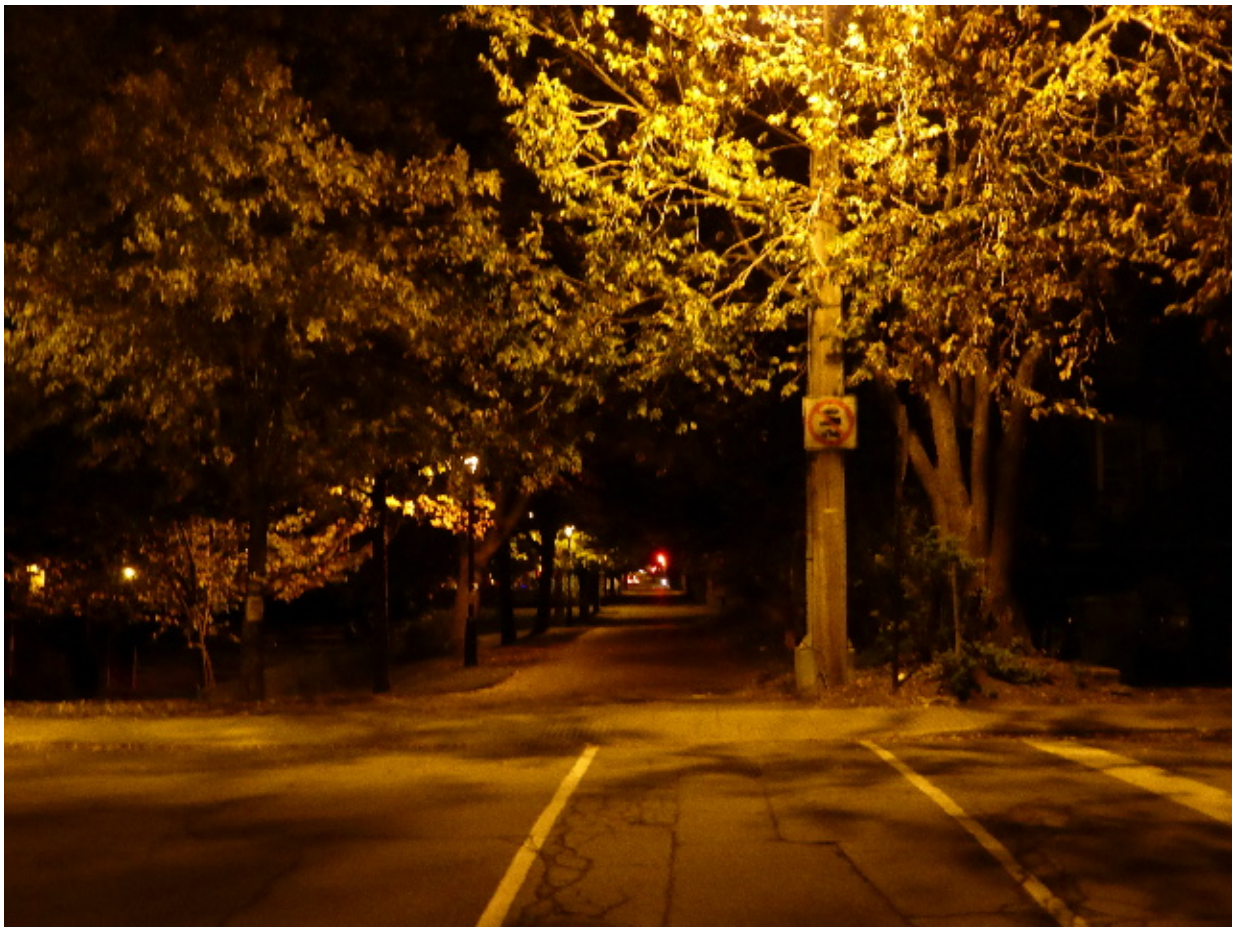
Monuments

I think of architectural monuments that draw their symbolic power from their sculptural massing and processional access under daylight, and that turn into an other worldliness presence under man made lighting, designed to place them above pedestrian concerns, as is the case of this famous Montreal Oratory shown in the two images below.

Pedestrian pathways

I think of pedestrian pathways, which provide shady shortcuts across city blocks during the day when mothers and children and older folks come to stroll on the way to the shopping centre while passing by a cheerful outdoor children play area, and which become rather menacing black holes surrounded with more darkness and silent buildings at night, as shown in the two images below.





Home surroundings: identity and privacy

I think of the part of a residential building the shape of which seems to be foreign to residential purpose during the day, and which becomes clearer, in terms of its possible purpose, when its cathedral ceiling is lit from inside at night, as shown in the two images below.

Home surroundings: privacy and security

I think of the reverse situation where the entrance to a duplex building, and its threshold, hold a magic aura of privacy mixed with a sense of neighborly welcome during the day, and which turns unto itself as a single, distant and lonely luminous point of entry at night, as shown in the two images below.

Urban parks

I think of a particular city park service structure which feels as functionally straight forward during the day as a plaster cast can be on a foot, albeit with an Andalusia twist, and which dazzles at night, under lights and their reflection in the surrounding flooded pond, as shown in the two images below.

Discussion

It is said that because the human species sleeps at night it had to institute, for the sake of survival, the function and role of night watching to keep safe from night predators. What these function and role require in terms of responsibility toward, and attachment to the group, is also considered essential to the nature, evolution and organization of human society: social and environmental.

What these function and role entail in terms of heightened awareness to environmental resources and behavioural strategies for nocturnal risk management, as well as to the mystery and awe of night as aesthetic experience, does colour to this day nocturnal urban sociability.

Edward Hopper in his paintings of night cafes and dark street corners, and Brassaï in his *Paris by night*, have insightfully sensed and rendered this subtle mix of night time lit shelters and menacing darkness.

All photographs by Maurice Amiel

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