



...nerve treatment,  
gas administered...

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ONE OF THE JOYS of living in a large city is the radically different environments a metropolis presents: from classiness to seediness, from the bland to the exciting. Another aspect well worth observing is the continuous change that goes on, particularly in a city as young as Montreal. Montreal's 'new' downtown, with its Place de this and its Place de that has left Old Montreal a completely different environment, in comparison with its former center-city function. In French-Canadian, 'la rue St. Jacques' still conjures up powerful images of English robber barons headquartered on St. James Street, living up on the hill. When Birks moved uptown to Phillips Square, the conventional wisdom of the day was that they were reckless to go that far afield.

One major street curiously resistant to change has been Boulevard St. Laurent, commonly referred to as 'The Main'. Originally the first overland route between the harbour, downtown, and the Riviere des Prairies, it clears the Mountain just sufficiently so as not to be too steep for horse-drawn carts. The typical building form on the street, commercial space on the ground floor and two or three stories of dry goods manufacturing or cheap rooming house accommodation above, is still largely intact. Very beautiful Victorian facades are common between Vitre Street and de Maisonneuve.

The urban quality of an environment is generally related to the variety of activities which a particular environment supports, in analogy to the number of species which prosper in a forest. St. Laurent is indeed a rich environment, measured by that yardstick.



A major thoroughfare, it is a spine which until recently divided the island of Montreal rigorously into the French area *dans l'est*, and the English area to the west. Immigrants occupied the St. Laurent corridor. The Duddy Kravitzes have long ago moved on to be replaced by Portugese, Italians, Chinese, and a host of other nationalities. The Main has quitele accomodated all new arrivals. The dry goods business has now almost completely moved to the modern buildings at the intersection of The Main and the Metropolitan Boulevard,

but rooming houses are still common. The manufacturing lofts have, in recent years, been taken over by artists and assorted types, who enjoy large, open spaces. But the street is still there....

As a resident of one of these lofts for several years, I was in a very good position to see what was going on on the most animated section of The Main: the block between Dorchester and St. Catherine Streets. From a finely carved grey-stone window sill, high up on the third floor, I spent



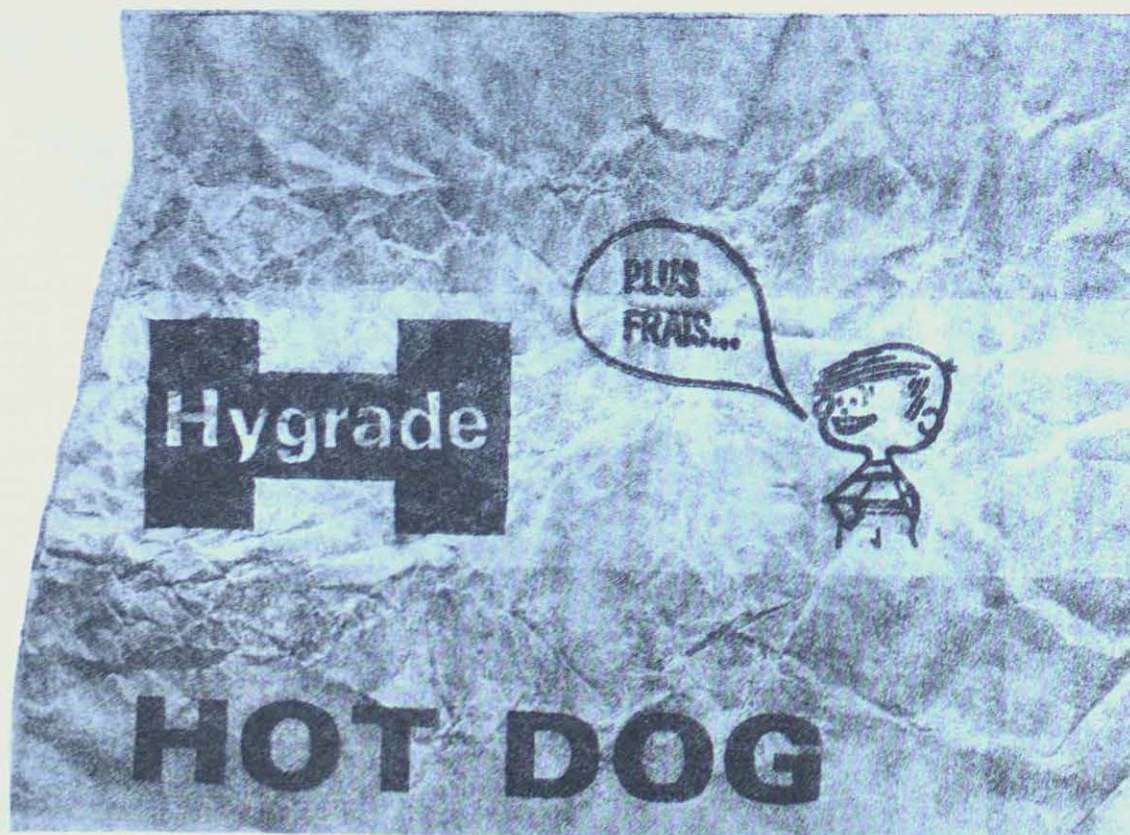


many hours looking over this fascinating street. The particular block in question has three grocery stores, under Greek, Jewish, and Lebanese management, a Greek fish store, five bars, three pool halls with the mandatory hotdog and **frites** concession, a news stand, two large movie houses, a Woolworth department store, a large meat market, and the venerable Monument National. Two rooming houses still are in operation on the second and third floors.

A typical day, dawn. The first noticeable event is invariably the sight of pigeons competing with the broomwagon for last night's french

fries and hotdogs, strewn about the curb area. The sun is just rising through the haze over Old Montreal. Between six and seven o'clock, the grocery store employees and owners start arriving. Supply trucks pull up, the most notable being the ice truck noisily grinding up large ice blocks into chips for the fish store. The Eldorado restaurant has been open since six, serving up generous portions of bacon, eggs, potatoes, and odd-tasting coffee to its motley clientele of early or very late birds. When the stores open at seven, or seven-thirty, particularly on Saturdays, the first customers to arrive are a large colorful group of Carribeans;

used to shopping early in their native land to avoid the heat of day, persisting here in their habit, even when the temperature is twenty below. Lengthy conversations, cars double-parked, stalks of sugar cane, and bunches of green bananas stick from shopping bags. Enkin, D.G. Groceries, and the St. Lawrence meat market become, for a few hours, a veritable Carribean neighbourhood. A Lebanese crowd, less numerous than the Carribean one, can be observed on the western side of the street at Main Importing. These early customers make way for a more anonymous crowd around eleven.







The hotdog emporiums have opened their doors, and a steady flow of cars tries to find parking space to indulge in a peculiar habit of the street, sitting in your car, and consuming a couple of hotdogs, french fries, and a Coke while looking at the scene, which by now includes the odd prostitute, walking slowly up and down the block; how slowly and how cautiously depending on how long ago the paddy wagons have been let loose on the street. The movie houses have opened around ten and, depending on the weather, old men start filing in, sometimes not appearing again till closing time around midnight, when they stumble out, after a day's warmth and repetitive entertainment of one western, one kung-fu, and one girly movie. The large hand-painted advertisements for the movies, changed weekly, are no more - but one of the real pleasures of living on the street was to be able to look out of the window and make up your mind to go or not to go on the basis of a life-size action-portrait of Clint Eastwood or Brigitte Bardot.

Around noon, the bars start opening, the New Rialto, the Midway Tavern, Peter's Place, the Brasserie, and just one block south, the Capitol, and the Lodeo, each catering to its clientele.

Saturday afternoons are particularly busy ones, and by the closing time of the stores, the double or sometimes triple-parked cars choke the traffic. The store owners start taking stock, the floors get mopped, and piles of boxes and crates get stacked high on the curb. It is time for the evening to start.

With parking space freed by the departing shoppers, the night people move in. Corvettes slowly cruise to find a space in view of a favorite hotdog place or bar. Cars with families, on their way back from an outing, looking for a cheap and different way to feed the gang....

The first show in the various bars generally starts around nine, and about that time the patrons start really flocking in. People who work in factories, stores and shops, old people, uptown and downtown folks seem to be eager to be entertained, to meet friends, to dance, in places where 'un gros Mol' costs two dollars or so. The decor of dark red painted walls, gold speckled, lit largely by half a dozen or so plastic clocks supplied by various beer companies, hail more from the pop-art era than from the current oh-so-self-conscious one, but this does not seem to bother the patrons. 'Le Spectacle' invariably features the M.C. belting out some hits at very elevated volume, the band consisting of an organist and a drummer, augmented, when business is good, by an electric guitarist. The featured artist is most often a singer - country and western or Elvis imitations form the bulk of the repertoire. Additional acts may consist of 'Uncle Satchmo' imitations, frightful knife throwers, magicians... all done with jovial professionalism. The announcement that "...maintenant,

mesdames et messieurs, notre jolie danseuse Angelique...." introduces the last act, which is a strip show, good-naturedly endured by the audience. The first show over, the stage, subjected to a sonic boom produced by a hefty juke box, becomes a dance floor, which quickly overflows.

People move sometimes from bar to bar, but prostitutes making the rounds are a regular sight.

After the second show, which ends around midnight, the scene changes; the straight crowd heads for home. The movie houses empty out, the overflow from the Place des Arts crowd heads for their cars. The street belongs to the street people. The old people from the rooming houses, young punks, the pimps, and, around this time, a gay crowd is noticeable and starts claiming its turf. Ben Ash Deli, with its large picture window overlooking the intersection of The Main and St. Catherine Street, becomes the Dunn's of the Main: to see and to be seen. Past two, when

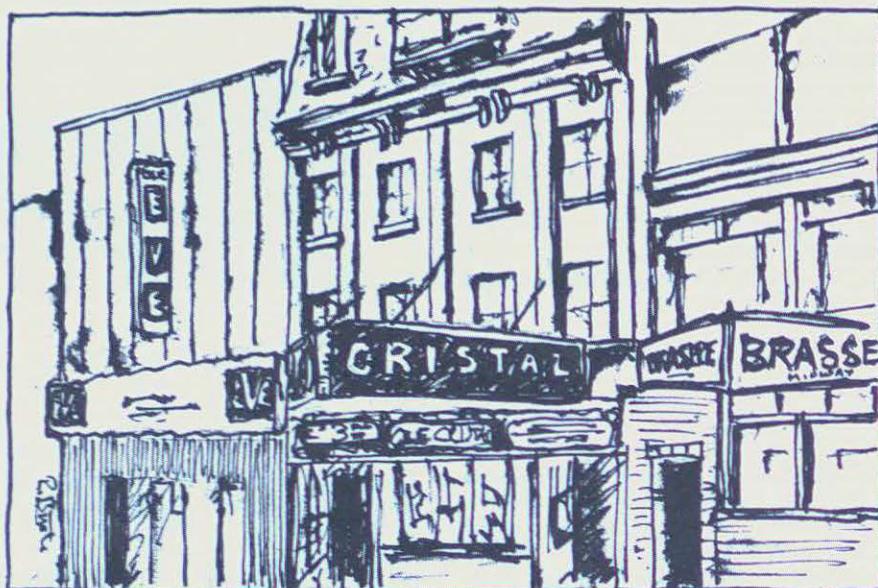






the bars have closed, the street becomes quieter. Taxis and cop cars start becoming more dominant, the real diehard customers swagger around, deals of various kinds are made. Oddly enough, transvestites are the last identifiable group to claim the street as their turf. It's three-thirty, the eastern sky is starting to brighten. With the arrival of the first light, the last street people retreat...where, I don't know. The pigeons start swooping down at the curb area, the broomwagon starts working its way up from Old Montreal, again.

I've often wondered why St. Laurent, rather than St. Denis or Bleury, or any street for that matter, became 'The Main'. It must have been the early through traffic, heading north from the old city. Could we design a street like The Main? It seems that time created it, and that time will



uncreate it again. Place Desjardins, the Hydro Quebec Building, the expressway are already being felt. The old, privately-owned pool hall/hotdog empires are being edged out by Harvey's, and soon Burger King. Woolworth's, that eternally Thirties store, has closed. Who takes time to play a full-fledged game of pool in this era of electronic beep-beep games?

But despite these changes, The Main is still essentially The Main. It is still the multi-ethnic, multi-purpose, non-gender, layered cake it has always

been, and, barring large-scale, grandiose intervention, it will likely remain so, by virtue of its diversity, rooted in history. Across the street from the Eldorado, on the corner of Clark and St. Catherine, on the first floor above a tavern, now burned out, there are still two small wooden placards visible, put up long ago by a dentist: one says "nerve treatment," the other says "gas administered." In an era of multinationals, computers, and narrow nationalism, it is sometimes soothing to take the treatment the good doctor prescribed....

