

The Editorial.

In 1970, Montreal was a very different city from the one we now know. The construction boom which radically changed the appearance of Montreal during the 1960's was slowly dying down, with the apartment towers in the Atwater-Guy region consuming the last of the construction industry's energy. As political and social certainty seemed to dissolve throughout the 1970's, Montreal's expansion, which was such an urgent issue during the sixties, became overshadowed by troubled socio-political debates. It became evident, as the seventies went on, that the city which had attracted world wide attention and had shown such vitality during the sixties, had stagnated. 'Growth' was not true growth. Projects which had profound social significance were simply not being done, and the tragedy of this situation became acutely omnipresent as the Olympic Games drew to a close. The fact that there are such a great number of vacant lots lying dormant within the boundaries of what we know to be the 'Downtown' area has been a steady and disconcerting problem for quite some time now.

Of course, the last ten years have seen these plots of land pass through the hands of one entrepreneur to another, thus gradually losing their identities as elements of the urban visions of the sixties; making incoherent statements. In the end, the murmurings of these parcels of land, without the guidance of an urban scheme, can only amount to a cacophony of feeble statements about the state of mid-priced corporate imagery. As it happens, Montreal is building right now, and the 'parcel' syndrome, which traditionally works well in cities with a long architectural heritage, is unfortunately bound to have disastrous consequences here. In the fifties and sixties, Montreal seemed to blossom

naturally from the hole in the ground that the trains lived in. The presence of the trains, and the circulative logic implied by the arrival of the Metro guided the city on a harmonious path to the future, a path laid by buildings and complexes which worked **together**. Their inception reflected the social purpose of Canadian cities at that time: to be modern (and Modern) and be places where people would feel at home.

Our new boom bears none of the unity of vision or harmony that the previous one did. As the previous boom carried out Montreal's aims, this one ignores the issues which have come to haunt our city and nearly all North American cities during the last ten years; that being the retention of a community within the boundaries of the inner city. What is happening instead, is something for which I feel very sad. **Buildings** are being done (and that is all they attempt to be) which say absolutely nothing about the way cities work, and are indeed contradictory about the way that Montreal works.

Time and time again, we find the same extremely limited group of offices perpetuating a saga of inhuman and mediocre architecture which reminds one of the inhumanity of 'the New Calgary'. The architectural dialogue which these new blocks carry on is temporal and irrelevant, and at no time speaks to the pedestrian or the automobilist.

Rue de Maisonneuve is certainly the most pitiful victim of our city's false prosperity. With the Banque Nationale de Paris, Manuvie and IATA all preoccupied with reflecting the backs of buildings across the street and vacant lots (as well as their own sidewalks), the street promises to be as pleasant as Fifth Avenue in New York is at night. Their internal dialogue is a competitive one, and as the architect has control over such competitions, the dialogue should be at worst, fierce, and at best, enlightening. Unfortunately, the nature of the dialectic is inherently neither, and the buildings either babble incoherently or remain unspoken individuals.

There are two other points which round out this disappointing period in the history of architecture of Montreal: one is that a large input of homogeneously mediocre architecture at any one time in a city can be a serious detriment to the quality of life in that city. We know how Calgary has suffered. Must we tolerate the same level of ignorance of concepts of urbanism in our own city? Finally, how has the City of Montreal managed to neglect its responsibility to its citizenry and health by allowing such ignorant schemes to be built, and by lacking direction in city planning? Movements being made in the United States, other cities in Canada, and those in Europe are returning to an awareness of urbanism that is seemingly being moved away from in Montreal. The conscientious work and writings of Rob and Leon Krier and Colin Rowe contrast sharply to the rusty mechanics of municipal government, the mind for money of the local developer, and the dull-witted sensitivities of our architects.

We must learn through others' successes rather than our own repeated failures.

The second issue of 'The Fifth Column' derives its theme from Italy and its influence on architecture and our perceptive attitudes. Our traditional sense of a city that works well comes from Europe, and particularly from the Italian demarkations of via and piazza. The great urbanistic endeavours of Italian architects such as Sansovino, Michelangelo and Bernini has seen continuation even through the fascist period and the work of Brazini and Terragni to today, and the Rationalist work of Botta, Aymonino and Rossi.

This issue will attempt to deal with the workings of these urbanistics and find clues to their allure through more emotive analyses. Finally, a profile of Italy's presently most published architect/urbanist/artist, Aldo Rossi, will conclude our look at 'The Old Country Influence'. □

by William Mark Pimlott

The Column.

The scale and character of Sherbrooke Street has changed drastically over the past two decades. The mansions of the 19th century economic elite of Montreal have virtually disappeared, swept away by a torrent of faceless corporate structures. The wanton destruction of the street's identity mobilized countless citizens to lobby for a preservationist stance with regards to future development. The climax of this battle occurred in 1975 with the demolition of the Van Horne House. Its loss, strangely enough, signalled a victory for the forces of preservation. Surely such a tragedy could never happen again?

1980... McGill University, after four years of discussion, finally sold its property holdings on Sherbrooke Street, directly opposite the campus. Hiding behind the banner of preservation, McGill approved the construction of a 24 story office tower by Devencore Realities Ltd. The 'incorporation' of four greystone facades into this reflective glass clad behemoth constitutes the lowest possible form of tokenism. This lack of integrity is not characterized merely by the retention of only the facades, for upon the project's completion, these facades will have been cut down by half a story and set further back from their present building line. Preservation indeed.

McGill University has a very consistent recent record of architectural self immolation. Some of its most recent buildings attain an unparalleled level of sheer ugliness, for instance: Burnside Hall, Physical Plant and the Rutherford Physics Building. By now approving the development of a building that will forever ensure the disappearance of early morning sunshine from its campus, will encourage an empty and sterile eight hour environment, and constitutes yet another example of a bland and unimaginative architecture, McGill University has done itself and the community a great disservice. □

by Orest Humennyj.