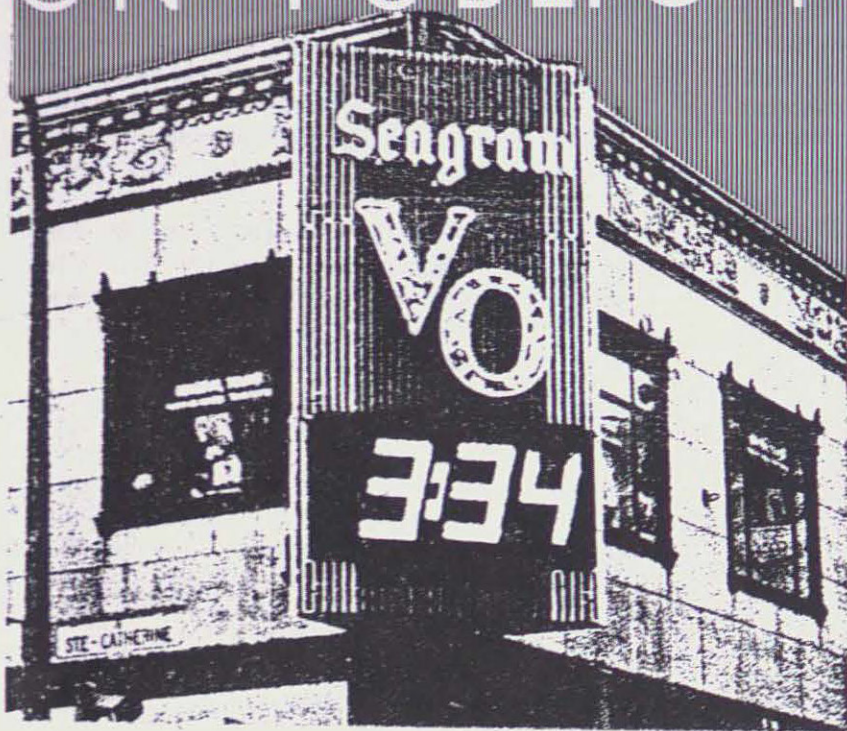


ON PUBLIC TIME

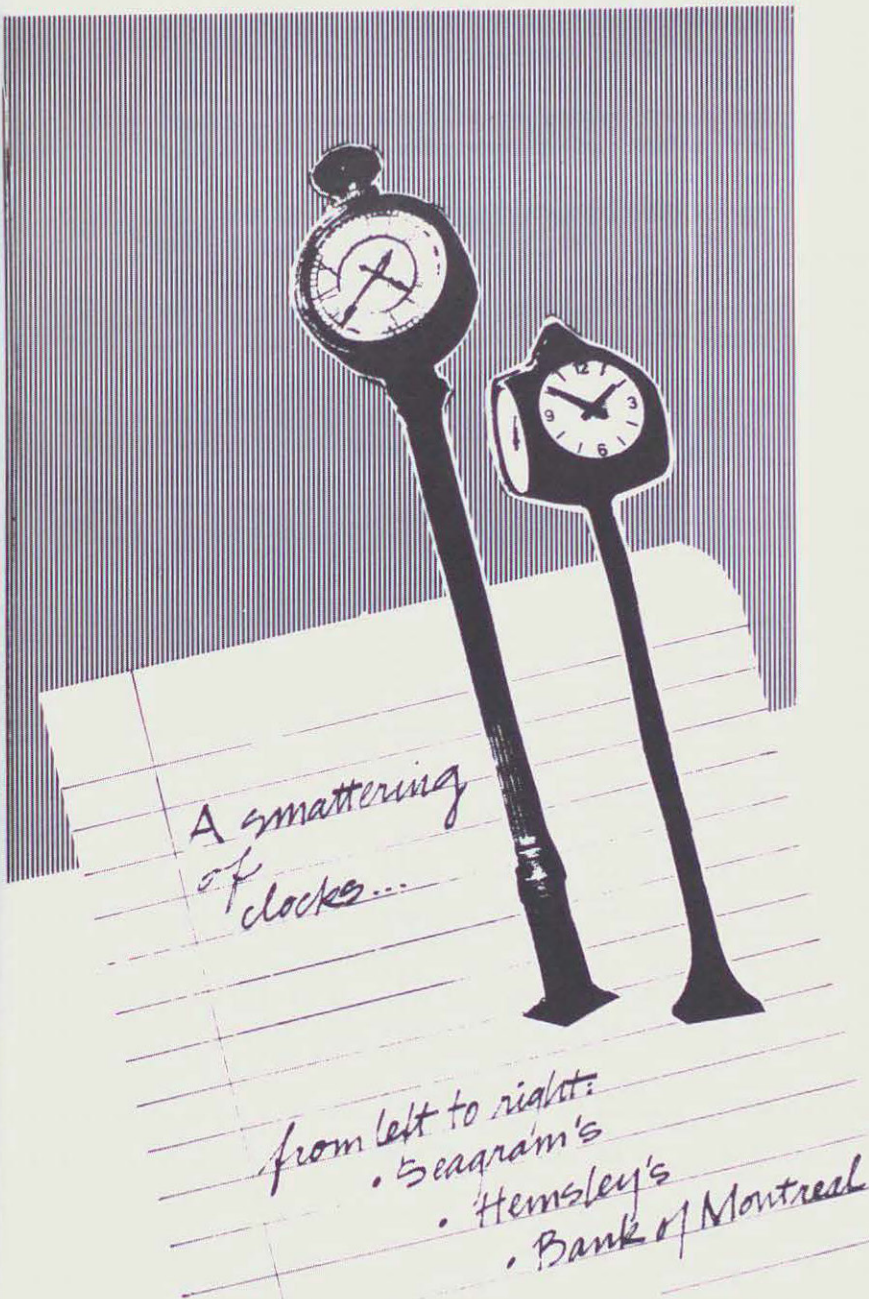


by Nathan Godlovitch.

As the motorist enters Montreal along the elevated Metropolitan Boulevard, he encounters as a backdrop the perpetual images of the city: the mountain; the university tower; the dome of Saint Joseph's Oratory. Dominating his immediate view, built specifically for his benefit are scores of brilliant electronic billboards conveying vital information: the time, the temperature and the corporate owner of this contemporary version of the public clock. Strangely, it is difficult to remember the names of the companies who supply this service to travellers;

rather, one notices the oddity that in their digital precision none of these gargantuan clocks ever agree with each other. Perhaps this is somehow symbolic of the present state of the realm of public time.

Exploration of the older part of Montreal reveals the dual nature of public clocks; those which were designed solely to relay relative position of the sun to the many without pocket watches and those which served as important architectural elements. Most often used as the 'rose



window' - the central culmination of facade, the latter clock is a focus of attention to passers-by.

With changing scales of building in the past half century, the clock came to be considered an insignificant element and its use withered. It is these 'architectural' clocks which today usually convey the time they **stopped** running, a memorial to their functional lives.

The central block of the Sulpician Seminary is among the oldest standing

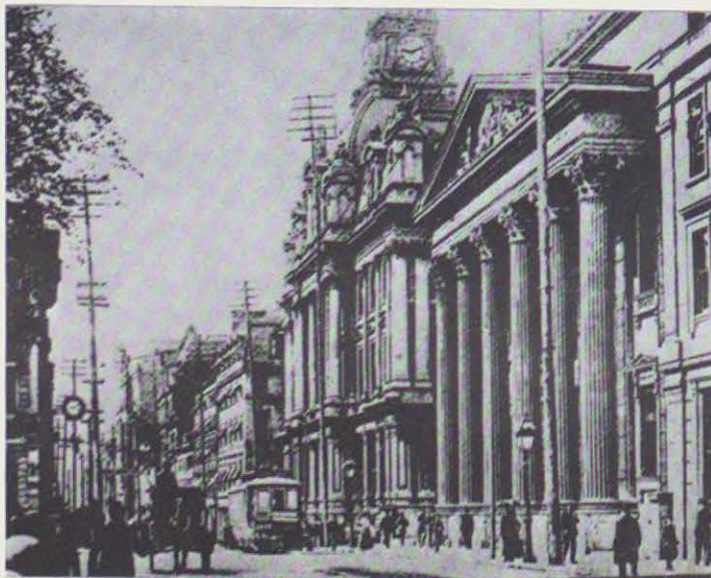
structures in Montreal, dating back to the 1680's. The building was expanded in the 1740's by the addition of an east and west wing, a third masonry storey on the original block, and, at the focus of the enlarged structure, a clock which still dominates the facade. The effect of a large, ornate time-piece, the first major public clock in the small mercantile settlement, must have been considerable. Already established as an important building, housing the Sulpician order, the Seminary clock embraced the attention of the soldiers and merchants who frequented the area about the Place d'Armes. Later uses of the clock in ecclesiastical architecture is typified in the gothic-revival Christ-church Cathedral where a fairly small four-faced clock appears at the base of the spire. While the spire dominated the 'west-end's' skyline of the mid-to-late nineteenth century, the clock was never overly noticeable. Now overshadowed by recent buildings on University Street the clock still marks the right time to any interested St.Catherine Street shopper or drifter.

Montreal's development as an inland port in the mid-nineteenth century led to an explosion of construction along Commissioner Street (now rue de la Commune). Outside of the old city, the buildings on the street were all directly related to the operation of the harbour. In the 1870's, the customs inspection office moved from John Ostell's Custom House on Place Royale into new quarters at the triangular intersection of Commissioner and Place d'Youville. The 'new' Customs House, originally built in 1858 for the Royal Insurance Company, dominated the junction of two thoroughfares with a striking clock tower which served as the entry pavilion to the building. The elegance of composition and relation to space as evident from early photographs made the New Customs House Montreal's finest example of the architectural use of the public clock. The departure of the customs department in 1917 precipitated the rapid decline of the building. The tower was removed leaving a truncated, aesthetically

ineffectual structure. After a fire, the shell was mercifully demolished in 1949. Several other port-related buildings in the area of Commissioner Street and Place d'Youville bore clocks. With few exceptions, the shifting of harbour activity to the east has led to the removal of these inoperative devices, leaving circular scars on their building's faces.

A Montreal landmark was established with the construction of the Harbour Clock Tower in 1921. Built to commemorate casualties of the First World War, the yellow tower and fancifully articulated clock face still dominate incoming ships' view from its position on the tip of Victoria Pier. The demolition of harbour facilities on the pier have left the tower a lonely guard on a desolate site. Surrounded by chain-link fence and uncontrolled plant growth, the memorial is in disrepair; the clock is motionless.

Government and public clocks are historically related, particularly in the case of civic administration. The city hall, demarking the administrative core of an urban conglomeration is traditionally adorned by a clock tower or some reduced version there-of. Citizens of Montreal can look to three legislative buildings representing their complete governmental spectrum and see three clock towers of diminishing success. The



original Ottawa Parliamentary complex of 1859 had no central clock. The fire of 1916 permitted the rectification of this omission with the construction of the ungainly-thin Peace Tower. This disfigured neo-gothic structure has become a cherished national symbol. The clock tower of the National Assembly Building in Quebec appears, by comparison, to be stunted. Montreal's city hall is weakest in projecting its presence into its foreground. As in the National Assembly, the clock is low in relation to the tower, and thus barely memorable to the casual passer-by.

A much more successful clock tower rose from the old Post Office building erected next to the ostentatious Bank of Montreal Building on St. James Street in the 1870's. Photographs convey the readability of this clock from Place d'Armes (although not visible from directly in front of the building). Unfortunately, the 'first Canadian bank' would not be second to its neighbour and the Post Office was removed to make way for the bank's intrusive new headquarters. Financial institutions commonly employed clocks on their local branches, possibly to perpetuate the concept of 'banker's hours' (the limited times during which one has access to one's accounts). The old Place d'Armes branch of the Bank of Toronto (now Toronto Dominion) had time integrated above its rounded-corner entrance. Later branches mimicked the central branch although recently the bank has gouged-out many of its analogue

devices in favour of the faceless electronic digitals.

The 1880's brought the construction, again on Place d'Armes, of Montreal's first skyscraper, the ten-storey New York Life Building. In order to insure the building's prominence (the towers of Notre Dame Church were still taller), it was insisted that a huge clock be incorporated into the tower. The two-faced clock, occupying one full storey in height, was to be the visual companion of the hourly-struck bells of Notre Dame. Suffering the ravages of nearly a century of weathering and corrosion, the clock is not as impressive as it once was and is in disrepair. Next door, the 'deco' Provident Building of the late 1920's uses small but elegantly incorporated clocks over its main entrances.

Aside from banking and insurance, the commercial world was late in adopting time as a focus of attention. Jewellers and watchmakers traditionally displayed large outdoor clocks, much as any store would use an exaggerated example of its wares to draw the consumer off the street.

The development of a dominant advertising industry has seen the clock become the side-kick of the commercial billboard as in the huge signs of Molson's and Imperial Tobacco's factories. Both of these are typically designed for motorists rather than for pedestrians. The recent emergence of the 'digital' has further eroded the role of the clock as an architectural front-piece.

The absence of the clock from contemporary architectural vocabulary is one of the symptoms of the dehumanizing facelessness and monotony of too many 'corporate' buildings. Fortunately, current trends in public architecture indicate a new-found sensitivity towards the scale and presence of the pedestrian. This rediscovered respect for human size and design heritage may well bring about the re-emergence of the public clock as a central, functional and personable element of a more humane architecture. □

Facing page

The Old Post Office Building on St. James St. with its central clock tower; The Sulpician Seminary clock's deconated face; the "New" Customs House clock tower, unfortunately demolished in 1947.