

## Montreal City Zero (and Beyond)

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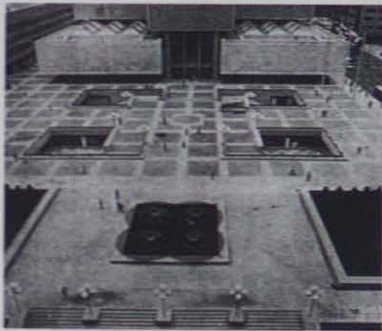


Figure 1. Place Ville-Marie (PVM), before 1988 renovations.

ZERO IS REALLY nothing else but zero.

But it would not be wrong to say that the zero was invented to signify empty space and circumvent the great confusion that arose in the early mathematical systems as far as nothing was concerned. The Babylonians, for example, wrote "106" as "1. .6," a subtlety that could easily be missed by a tired or drunk scribe. Without zero, an empty space next to an empty space (as in 1006) could easily be read as a single empty space.

"Zero" is actually said to derive from the Sanskrit "shūnya." Indian civilization distinguished over 25 nuances of "shūnya" (the non-existent, the non-present, the unthought, the unborn, the immaterial) and can be rightly designated as the great breeding ground of zero. It was in India also that was born "shūnyata," a Buddhist concept that relates to vacuity and does not distinguish between reality and non-reality, thus throwing the tangible and the intangible into the same void.

We usually think of zero as being a point of origin, like "ground-zero," somewhere close to the birth of Christ or the universe. But as anchors, foundations, points of reference and the ground become distant from our ever-accelerating world, it seems that zero may also be waiting for us at the end of the line of time. Roland Barthes has demonstrated the ineluctability of the "zero degree" of writing, nuclear weapons give us the chance to reduce our planet to dust and scientists discuss at what rate the universe is confirming the third law of thermodynamics by becoming more and more cold and homogeneous. As someone once said, time for action is long gone.

The zero is often mediocre, as in "you're just a zero," as in petty emptiness standing between states of shapefulness. But this zero mediocrity can also be a fruitful mediocrity that gives birth to the beautiful and the unexpected, and endows Montreal with its wonderful urban experiences of drift and freedom. Montreal: the city of vacant lots, urban wastelands, empty underground corridors and interstitial spaces.

### Controlled Void-Place Ville-Marie

En effet, il est question de la croix et aussi de Marie qui, précisément, n'a pas été crucifiée.

Hubert Aquin, "Essai crucimorphe."<sup>4</sup>

Place Ville-Marie is a collection of many twentieth century concentrations of void:

1. The lofty immateriality of the Corbusian cruciform towers, "those translucent prisms that



seem to float in the air without anchorage to the ground.”<sup>1</sup>

2. The extremely precise lifelessness of the Miesian skyscraper lobby with all its travertine, glass and steel and its obsession with cruciformity.

3. The fleeting uncaniness of the modern public square devoid of figurative symbols, blown by the winds and under constant surveillance.

Laudable efforts have been made to transform the plaza of Place Ville-Marie into something more enjoyable than the original 1962 shaved table, but parachuting lone trees, polished-granite-bench-and-grassy-knoll-lined skywells, outdoor terraces and empty kiddie playgrounds is the equivalent of “putting Brossard in downtown Montreal.”

Place Ville-Marie could certainly be understood through the idea of *transparency*, as a piling up of transparencies where each and every part of the whole is strategically conceived so that light, be it natural or artificial, may reach every square foot — a process that cannot be dissociated from surveillance and ultimately control of space.<sup>3</sup> Hence the cruciform shape of the skyscraper that reduces the maximum distance between a window and any office space to forty feet.

But against all this bright light, frail trees remain frail, and cold polished benches remain cold and polished. An effective, though subjective, position of resistance against the ruthless domination of the cold-lighted Ville-Marie void may be given to us by “Essai Crucimorphe,” a short essay written by Hubert Aquin in 1963 which begins by stating the obvious (“Place Ville-Marie is a sort of exceptional concentration of nothingness”), but then suddenly veers off-course to establish a relation between Heideggerian dialectics and the “polydimensional void” of Place Ville-Marie: “Mineralisation of life, schizoid fenestration, pure void, the Villemariac *Dasein* defines itself by what it is not, and, even, by what contradicts it.” Place Ville-Marie, says Aquin, is a space that expresses the ambiguity and confusion that characterize Montreal. It is that kind of void that is full of nonsense such as a “crucifying construction” built on Mary’s Place, a “Maison du livre” having nothing to do with a house, a “Carrefour des Canadiens” with a rotunda, and a “Café de France” that is nothing but a snack bar. Worse still is the spatial paradox of a building that appears grandiose from a distance but that upon closer examination, breaks down into “an incoherent accumulation of small places” where “the ceilings are too low,

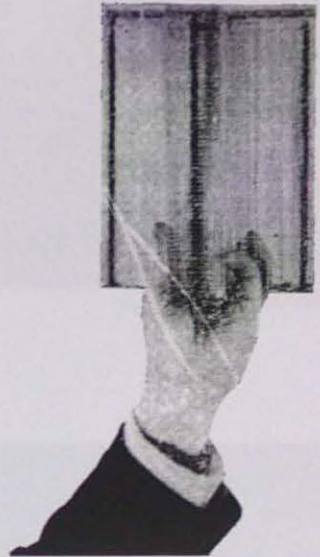


Figure 2. Le Corbusier presenting a model of a cruciform tower.

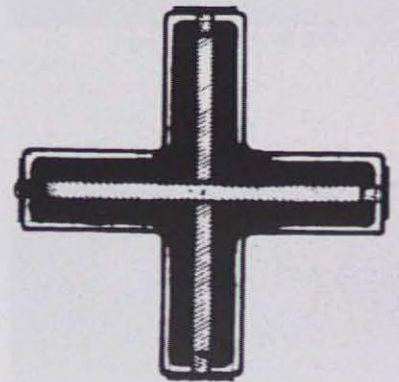


Figure 3. Section of column design by Mies van der Rohe for the Barcelona Pavillion.

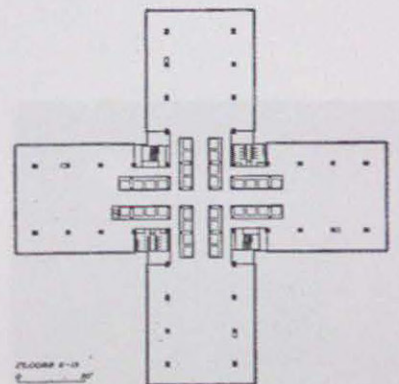


Figure 4. Typical plan, floors 8-13, Place Ville-Marie.



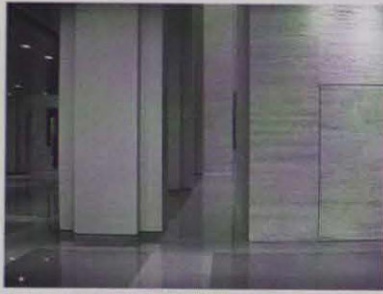


Figure 5. Place Ville-Marie, lobby.



Figure 6. Place Ville-Marie, lobby.



Figure 7. 2001 University, main entrance.



Figure 8. 2001 University, main lobby.

clearances pathetic and space sparingly distributed.”

Aquin’s tactic is one of conflation. If I can, he reasons, bring Place Ville-Marie, Heideggerian dialectics, Jesus-Christ’s Mother and *my own life* together somehow, I will perhaps have achieved something worthwhile.<sup>5</sup> I will have exposed some of the naked contradictions that underly this cross-shaped construction. As Aquin says, “imagine a poor fellow suddenly invested by the multiple: all at once his privileged sensations dissolve, his original thoughts lose their edge, his subtle tastes evaporate. Nothing left. Smoke for a thinking reed. Rotting meat for vegetarians. Christ of christ of christ.”<sup>6</sup>

The void of Place Ville-Marie is in the end as solid an object as can be imagined. It exemplifies the failure of modern architecture to provide true urban freedom (as in free-plan). Modernism—which seemed to function wonderfully at the level of a house—has fallen short at the height of a skyscraper, and produced the most rigid, strict and austere, environments in the city. It is only through acrobatics of the mind that a void such as Place Ville-Marie may be made more humane.

#### Productive emptiness: Cinéma Centre-Ville, 2001 University St.

*But oh, no. Slothrop instead only gets erections when this sequence happens in reverse. Explosion first, then the sound of the approach: the V-2.*

Thomas Pynchon, *Gravity’s Rainbow*

One enters 2001 University through a silver anodized lobby. Three bonsai trees stand in tall triangular pots, natural light enters from a suprisingly central skylight and a security guard sits in a corner behind a long black desk. Tiny signs indicate that the cinema, metro and restaurants are down below and that the parking lots are stacked somewhere above.

What follows is set in sharp contrast to this calm touch-of-the-Orient silver lobby. The route to the cinema winds down three flights of mechanical stairs through a succession of rough concrete walls and temporary plywood partitions. Arrows of all sorts proliferate, streaks of Odeon neon pink lead the way and the occasional, four-foot-tall schematic sections of the building on display for visitors are supposed to be reassuring. The bonsai trees are replaced by awkward rows of lush tropical plants and, indeed, nothing is straightforward anymore. Doors lead to staircases that go nowhere and bright corridors seem to be going somewhere but remain inaccessible.



Washrooms are disproportionately large and landings are disproportionately small. Down the last flight of mechanical stairs, a set of round mirrors indicates that the Cinéma Centre-Ville level has finally been reached. After negotiating a hairpin 180° turn, one is poised at the start of a climatic (and quasi-monumental) 60 meter-long axis that ends in the McGill Metro Station. Along this axis, and in quick succession, there is a waiting area bathed in Sylvana's daylight, a miniature ticket booth lost in the middle of a vast room, popcorn machines and tiny cinema theaters.

This architectural promenade results from the juxtaposition and interpenetration of a number of tightly controlled systems: the skyscraper and its vertical circulation, the stack of parking lots, the food counters and eating areas of Burger King and Wok n' Roll, the Odeon Cinema, the Montreal Metro and the underground spaces of neighboring skyscrapers. For any here-to-there, the visitor must navigate through the spaces where these systems coincide and through the interstitial trenches left between them. The logic of the tight juxtaposition is the usual brand of architectural cannibalism: one space consumes the next. However, this logic has been pushed to create an atmosphere of spatial formlessness that has forced the closure of half the available food stalls and obliged the Cinéma Centre-Ville to transform every day of the week into a cheapie Tuesday.

Here, though, unexpected results have emerged from the most banal and controlled systems. Not a dissolution of events but rather the apparition of a new sort of eventfulness. Corporate America goes stuttering into space. But is Cinéma Centre-Ville exciting? Does it really turn you on? Does it make fastfood taste better? Do people get married there? Will it become a Japanese tourist cult favourite? Are hip-hop videos being shot there?

Well, not quite.

What we have at 2001 University are a series of weak events: disorientation will not make you think you're on a rough sea but it may still make you smile; spatial surprises are not quite stunning but they still make you wonder; the programmatic intertwining will not keep anyone from sleeping but they are certainly eery.<sup>8</sup> Hence, the zero of the urbane is to be studied for the slight, and slightly weird, signs of life that appear within its rarefied atmosphere. What exists mostly in words in Place Ville-Marie becomes experience-able in a weak form at Cinéma Centre-Ville, and



Figure 9. 2001 University, main lobby.



Figure 10. 2001 University, direction box.



Figure 11. 2001 University, mechanical stair.



Figure 12. 2001 University, cinema lobby.



could eventually, with the proper means and frames of mind, be used in architectural design.

#### Putting the zeroes to work

Maybe architecture is heading straight to hell—air is sucked in from the outside and then recirculated forever, windows stopped opening a long time ago and fluorescents don't even flicker anymore. Grey carpets accumulate whatever dust they can, toilet seats are no longer wooden and the humming of the ventilation machines won't kill your day-job. Have you ever worked night shifts sipping bad coffee and staring at the soundproofing patterns of the suspended ceiling, Soft Rock radio stations being the only ones "powerful" enough to reach your sterilized underground workplace? And then, just for a little change, have you ever spent an entire summer sleeping outside? Thrown proverbial caution to the wind?

But while we might consider spending the summer outside in the wild and having classrooms and offices with windows, it may not be a bad idea to act as if air-conditioning was here to stay. Huge buildings and horrid underground spaces are certainly not heading towards extinction: we may have no choice but to look at what can be done with the materials of the zero, in the way of building. The zero can be the empty, the banal, the normal, the boring, the leftover or the interstitial. But it stands between frenetic gesturing and rigid immobility, between the neon flashiness of Las Vegas and the controlled obsessiveness of Chandigarh. And it can be eerily normal.

A Montreal example of what could be called an "inflection of the normal," is the small, imperfect-but-still-interesting, park huddled against the North side of Saia-Barbarena's massive UQAM President Kennedy Pavilion. Here, in the interstitial space stuck in-between three buildings, one *inflects* that-which-



Figure 13. Interstitial park, UQAM, President Kennedy Building



is-already-there and that-which-is-given. The park simply consists of an expanse of grass-covered land crossed by a diagonal path, some gravel surfaces and three triangular ventilation shafts connected to the underground parking lot. One shaft has a narrow staircase leading up its hypotenuse to a tiny tribune at its apex, from which it is possible to address the neighboring vacant lot. Against the two closest buildings, more ventilation outlets cascade from higher floors down to the ground. At night, the air conditioning roars. It is soothing indeed, but (and this is a problem) no space has been provided for communal events. The first step was to preserve the interstitial atmosphere by making something—anything—out of it. The next step will be to make some room for shared, purposeful events as the campus develops.

Montreal may be more about its empty spaces than its solids, and therein may lie the chance to develop new types of buildings and landscapes. Architects need to develop a series of strategies to inflect the normal, work on the zero, and nurture the void into usefulness. On the other hand, the uncanny and barely noticeable can be used intentionally. Perhaps they can even be pushed towards the exciting—towards grey carpet tsunamis, air conditioning hurricanes, fluorescent earthquakes, plastic seat cascades, suspended ceiling avalanches, wild sonic fields of plumbing sounds . . . almost . . . and with minimum effort.

1. Le Corbusier, *Oeuvres complètes* vol.1 (Paris: Morance, 1928), 115. While the Mies void would be easy to establish, that of Le Corbusier would require certain nuances. He never had the chance to actually "build" his urban void, except perhaps in Chandigarh where emptiness is de rigueur. On Le Corbusier's urban projects as places of "total banality" and "programmatically void," where life is "to be born, to die, with an extended period of breathing in between," see Rem

Koolhaas, *Delirious New York* (New York: Oxford, 1978), 213. Other uses of the term zero include Roland Barthes' "degré zéro de l'écriture" that was derived from Jean-Paul Sartre's idea of "écriture blanche." More recently and in the domain of architecture, Rem Koolhaas has qualified American Typical Plans as being examples of "zero-degree architecture." See "Typical Plan," *S, M, L, XL* (New York: Monacelli Press, 1995): 335-50.

2. Dinu Bumbaru, "The 'Diva' of Montreal Buildings," *The Gazette*, 8 April 1989.

3 See Anthony Vidler, *The Architectural Uncanny: Essay in the Modern Unhomely* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1992) for a counter-position to the over-used Foucauldian metaphors that, in their overemphasis on light, forget to what extent darkness has been inherent to the modern project ever since Boullée and Ledoux: "In this sense, all the radiant spaces of modernism, from the first Panopticon to the Cité Radieuse, should be seen as calculated not in the final triumph of light over dark, but precisely in the insistent presence of the one in the other" (172).

4. "Essai Crucimorphe," *Mélanges Littéraires II* (Montréal: Bibliothèque Québécoise, 1995), 115-18. Hubert Aquin (1929-1977) was a Montreal writer whose work could be described as a baroque-metal-amphetamine-meltdown (broken suspension and no steering wheel). His interest for the void of the urbane can also be found in "De retour le onze avril," "Le texte ou le silence marginal" and in *Trou de mémoire*. On the importance of the concept of the hole in Aquin's work, see "À la conquête du trou," in Anthony Wall, *Hubert Aquin: entre référence et métaphore* (Candiac: Éditions Balzac, 1991), 115-27.

5. "Trou de mémoire se fonde, nous semble-t-il, essentiellement sur la juxtaposition constante d'une multitude de lectures et d'espaces sémantiques, qui viennent sans cesse se frotter les uns contre les autres dans toutes les combinaisons imaginables. Il s'agit donc de se positionner précisément là où ces choses viennent s'entrechoquer" (Wall, *Hubert Aquin* 114).

6. Hubert Aquin, "Le texte ou le silence marginal," 558-59.

7. R.L.P. On January 31st 2000, *Cinéma Centre-Ville* was shut down. It had been in operation since 1981 but had been losing money in the past few years and could simply no longer compete with the recently sprouted megaplexes.

*After spending a summer in the Land-where-they-invented-the-zero, and surviving many burning-rubber mornings, kerosene-rice dinners and late-night yak-attacks, Michel Moussette now mostly stands in peaceful erectness.*