

City voices, city eyes

"The science of the city has the city as object. This science borrows its methods, approaches and concepts from the fragmentary sciences, but synthesis escapes it in two ways. Firstly, because this synthesis which would wish itself as total, starting from the analytic, can only be strategic systematization and programming. Secondly, because the object, the city, as consummate reality is falling apart... the urban remains in a state of dispersed and alienated actuality, as kernel and virtuality... The prescription is: there cannot be a going back (towards the traditional city), nor a headlong flight, towards a colossal and shapeless agglomeration. In other words, for what concerns the city the object of science is not given. The past, the present, the possible cannot be separated."

Henri Lefebvre, from *the Right to the City*

"A town: stone, concrete, asphalt. Strangers, monuments, institutions.

Megalopolises. Urban sprawl. Traffic arteries. Crowds.

Ant-hills?

What is the heart of a town? The soul of a town? Why is a town said to be beautiful, or said to be ugly? What's beautiful and what's ugly in a town? How do you get to know a town? How do you get to know your town?

...

We shall never be able to explain or justify the town. The town is there. It's our space, and we have no other. We were born in towns. We grew up in towns. It's in towns that we breathe. When we catch the train, it's to go from one town to another town. There's nothing inhuman in a town, unless it's our own humanity."

Georges Perec, from "The Town", in *Species of Spaces and Other Pieces*.

We begin this assignment with these words to emphasize the fragility and the provisional nature of our understanding of the city. Many of the tools urban designers have at their disposal represent "hard facts", whether they are geographic information, demographic data, or building plans. These are useful and informative, and they are everyday necessities of urban design. But we should remember that they are lenses through which we see the city; and like all lenses, they bracket out some aspects of the world. The city *itself* always, to some extent, escapes them. This is a truth recognized here by, on the one hand, a highly respected social scientist and, on the other, a poet.

To give a concrete example, this semester we will examine a part of Montréal which can be looked at through several lenses. It can be seen as a piece of infrastructure: it serves to move people and things from one place to another. It can be seen as a barrier: it stops people moving in other directions. It can be seen as a political and social boundary: it marks a line between two *arrondissements*, and to a lesser extent, between different populations. It can also be seen as, despite itself, a site of inhabitation: people pass through it, dwell momentarily and episodically in it in ad-hoc and marginal ways. The plots of land around this site can be represented in different ways: in dollar values, in terms of investment potential, in terms of potential provision of housing or employment space. This space (or network of spaces) can be seen quite differently depending

on whether one is driving a truck, walking through, setting up an office, investing money, painting graffiti.

Viewpoints tend to have voices associated with them. Some of these voices are more articulate than others. Voices associated with wealth or political power tend to be very articulate: we all know the expression “money talks”. As people employed by agencies of power, urban designers (and architects, and urban planners) are often engaged with articulating these voices and viewpoints. But if urban designers can be seen as professionals they have a responsibility beyond the need to satisfy a client. They must be aware of the other voices of the city, articulated in many subtle ways. These include, for example, the traces of inhabitation left behind in spaces such as these in the form of graffiti, pathways, and other creations.

We begin this project with an interpretive exploration of those aspects of the site which can only be read on the ground. These include social conditions already alluded to, and the complexities of space characteristic of urban sites like this, often very difficult to map objectively.

It is worth reiterating that any professional has a responsibility to appreciate the complexities and the nuances which extend beyond the pragmatics of their discipline. This is especially true in design, where creative solutions and emotive spaces often depend on thinking “outside the box”. Even when we are working with tools and techniques which are largely about legibility and transparency, we need to cultivate a sensitivity to what may not show up on a map, what might be missed by a census, what viewpoints might not be represented, and what voices might be muffled.

Put a viewpoint and a voice together and you have a story. The city can indeed be seen as a great intertwining of narratives, different voices articulating different viewpoints. The urbanist needs to be sensitive to these stories, and the urban designer needs to contribute to them.

I ask that you bear all this in mind as we proceed through the first assignment toward the first goal of the semester, which is to get you, as soon as possible, working on designs of spaces and scapes which will contribute to the intertwined stories of the city.
