a synthesis of architecture, landscape, infrastructure and public art in an eventful public space

“SCAPE©,” a term introduced by Rem Koolhaas, implies a reading of the urban territory as landscape…[it] is an idiom for the edgeless city, in which the distinction between center and periphery, between inside and outside, between figure and ground is erased…The boundaries between architecture, infrastructure, and landscape dissolve while de-centering the notion of the architectural object as a closed entity” (Angélil & Klingmann, 16 & 24).

“The building of spaces in the city has already been assigned to established disciplines: the vertical is allotted to architecture, the horizontal to landscape architecture, and the network of lines between and through them to engineering… Public art has to squeeze in and fit under and fall over what already exists in the city.” (Acconci, 92).

As Acconci outlines above, the integral physical components of city may be organized, albeit non-categorically, into four sorts: architecture, landscape, infrastructure, and public art. Public space is a synthesis of these elements.

The public square, as a subset of public space, often functions as a platform for political, social and cultural events. Phillips Square is a revered public square in the city of Montreal. When the Phillips family ceded the piece of land that is now Phillips Square to the City, the intention was that the land would be a civic park. Its function as a traditional public square – that is, a design with a centre and a periphery – has thus far been satisfactory: the space frequently is used for rallies, parades, lunchtime meetings etc. When the limits of the site are called into question though – the horizontal, the vertical, the sidewalks, the streets, the centrality of the monument, for example – it secures a new place in the contemporary ‘edgeless city.’ If Phillips Square serves the contemporary city in an adequate manner in its current state, how much more potential could it fulfill as a vital public space that reflects the contemporary needs of Montreal?

When civic life and activity are manifested in public space, events occur. An event, in physics, is defined as a point in space-time having three spatial coordinates and one temporal coordinate. When a space is consciously considered in terms of an event, it becomes tied to a specific time. In the design of the built environment, the fusion of space and time requires us to consider events, rather than space in isolation from time. Events in public space are integral to a contemporary public space’s significance in the city. The re-design of Phillips Square accommodates events on the site in a spectrum of event modes. By providing points, surfaces and spaces of activation for events to occur and by re-interpreting of the boundaries of the site, the potential of the site can be maximized.

The cloak

The concept of the re-design of Phillips Square springs from the central point of its existing design. The statue of King Edward VII – once considered a revered form of public art and has since become a forgotten relic in the city – depicts him in a cloak that falls to the bottom of his pedestal. The image of his cloak coming to the ground is an inspiration to engage the total space of the square in its vertical potential in addition to its horizontal surface. The element of a ‘vertical plaza’ – which not only consists of a surface, but a garden space behind it as well – becomes the leading element of all that exists on the square. The conceptual cloak that falls from the top of the vertical plaza to become the horizontal surface of the square weaves together architecture, landscape, infrastructure and public art, blurring the distinction between ‘figure and ground.’ The folds and bends of the cloak provide activation points, surfaces and spaces for events to occur on the site. These activation points are determined through mapping devices.

Interplay of (infra)structure and surface
As a programmatic element, parking underneath the public space is a rational structure on which the cloak floats. The space between the parking element and the surface of the public space is habitable marketspace, event-space and service space. The delaminated layers are pinned together with existing trees on the site. The integration of landscape, structure and infrastructure contribute to the ‘SCAPE’ of Phillips Square.

Ideas as an extension of event
The large part of Phillips Square’s within the city of Montreal lies in its capability to accommodate events of many different types. Its most prevalent event function is the rally / protest, providing a space for ideas to be voiced (Figure 1).

Figure 1: Events at Phillips Square as reported by the Montreal Gazette, 1986-2006

In the re-design of this public space, the potential for public forum in Phillips Square is furthered by offering multiple activation points and surfaces for this type of activity, while still maintaining its current function as a space for ideas and opinions. Three specific devices at as this provision: the scrim wall, the speaker’s corner, and the vertical plaza as scaffolding.

The scrim wall is an expanse of glass – part of the ‘cloak’ – that acts a surface for projection. In theatre, a scrim refers to a thin screen that appears transparent to the audience when lit from behind and opaque when lit from the front; glass acts in this same manner. The glass’ location facing the plaza allows it to be used as a projection surface to display ideas and to present films and other public art in event modes. A programmatic element, the Speaker’s Corner is located in the interior of the vertical plaza and channels directly into the function of the scrim wall. Those wishing to express their thoughts on any topic are encouraged to input their ideas at a computer station, where the thoughts are displayed on the wall after a given time lapse.

A portion of the structure of the vertical element remains uninhabited with the intention that its scaffolding-type quality provides an opportunity for spatial intervention. As a ‘surface’ or more accurately, space for expression, the element of public art contributing to public space is specifically accommodated, without excluding the possibility that the space provided as a re-design for Phillips Square as a whole will be appropriated by people.
These particular outlets for the expression of ideas contribute to the interior space of the vertical plaza, as well as speak to the horizontal portion of the public space and the surrounding area. They act as points of potential activation in public space, stemming from the notion of public space as a surface for ideas.

**Flexibility for multiple events**

In addition to the flexibility that is inherent in open-air public spaces, the cloak provides an ‘other’ space underneath it, although it is of a different quality. The interior event-space, which resides between the cloak and the infrastructural automated parking below it, consists of a skewed grid of columns that occur at random from the flow of the cloak. The events that occur in this space could, for example, feed off of the permanent marketspace provided by one of the flows of the cloak (eg, an indoor flea market). It could be an exhibition space that occurs in conjunction with the public art installations in the vertical plaza. It could house a localized celebration for a parade that begins on the site above. The cloak provides an underspace that hosts events of a different nature than the open-air space above it. It can be appropriated for indoor events that the site currently cannot accommodate, operating as an activation surface for events.

**In the absence of a specific event**

In everyday mode, especially in the summertime, the landscape provided by the cloak operates at its fullest. The square currently is most used in the summer as a meeting place and market place. The interior of the vertical plaza serves the same function as the exterior horizontal portion of the cloak. The vertical plaza is also an archival device, which records the traces of activity in the square, and projects them on the scrim wall at different times of the day. These everyday occurrences are eventful in a less obvious manner, but a magnification of these activities contributes to the public space as a whole.

**Non-event space**

When a public space is empty, the nature of its engagement in the city is different. At night, Phillips Square in its present state is solely illuminated by the commercial buildings and streetlamps that surround it. The potential for (favourable) events to occur can be increased by lighting it in a provocative manner, as a piece of public art in itself. The cloak’s infrastructural strategies, which include automated parking and a connection to the underground city render the public space a prominent nodal entity in the urban setting.

By building upwards in Phillips Square and engaging the vertical, the horizontal, the network of lines between them, and public art, a significant potential is activated – the square’s capacity to be a space in constant verge of eventfulness.

**WORKS CITING**
