Place Bonaventure: Architecture and the Anxiety of Influence

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The design of an architectural form and the reception of the completed structure are both influenced by numerous factors. While architects strive to incorporate theoretical ideas into the built environment, writers and the general public may interpret meanings different from those initially intended. There exists a commonly held notion that architectural identity is fixed or homogeneous. This belief is challenged by an understanding of the diversity or anxiety of influences that shape both the design and the reception of a building.

Place Bonaventure, a multi-use reinforced concrete complex in downtown Montreal (**Figure 1**), was designed and built in 1964-67 by the architectural firm Affleck, Desbarats, Dimakopoulos, Lebensold & Sise, informally known as "Architects in Cooperative Partnership" (ARCOP). Place Bonaventure is a seminal work in the career of architect Raymond T. Affleck (1922-89). As partner in charge of the project, Affleck was given an unprecedented opportunity to apply theoretical ideas to a method of architectural production. Knowledge of the roots of Affleck's design stance during the Place Bonaventure project and of how the building was perceived and politicized by writers from within and from outside the architectural establishment permit a multi-level understanding of this massive mixed-use complex.

The philosophical position of Affleck at the time of the Place Bonaventure project can be traced in part to his formal training at McGill University from 1941 to 1947. The school of architecture, under the direction of John Bland, incorporated into its study program the principles characteristic of the Modern Movement as derived from the Bauhaus School of Design in Germany.[1] The professional diversity of the faculty recalled the pedagogical belief of Walter Gropius, Bauhaus director (Weimar, 1919-25; Dessau, 1925-28), in the "common citizenship of all forms of creative work, and their logical interdependence on one another in the modern world."[2] As a student, Affleck was exposed to concepts involving an interdisciplinary approach to building design, a concern for the intervention of architecture into social matters, and an experimentation with architectural form, space, and materials.

The School of Architecture offered the students an opportunity to view the built environment from many perspectives. The eclectic staff assembled by Bland in the 1940s included Canadian designer and painter Gordon Webber.[3] McGill graduate Arthur Erickson recalled that Webber, whose own artworks incorporated various media, "made you study the potential of materials, following Bauhaus methods."[4] Swiss-born architect Frederic Lasserre, who later was to play a central role in the establishment of the University of British Columbia's school of architecture, expressed the need for Canadian architects to play the "democratic" role of "intermediary between the building industry ... and town planning which represents the interests of society — of the people."[5] Lasserre perceived the postwar Canadian architect as a "servant" of the nation, but cautioned that the designer could not perform this intermediate job alone.[6] McGill sociology professor Carl A. Dawson, in the words of ARCOP partner and McGill alumnus Guy Desbarats, "opened the eyes of many students to the mysteries of the whole range of human cares in housing, in a metropolitan, cosmopolitan city like Montreal."[7] Affleck had progressively gained a strong social conscience since his youth and his experience at the school of architecture reinforced this.[8]

Collaboration, humanization of the built environment, and experimentation with form, space, and materials were concepts to which Affleck was directly exposed at McGill. Collectively, these ideas were first implemented in a creative process when ARCOP received the Place Bonaventure commission. Affleck's chosen readings at the time of the Place Bonaventure project enabled him to order, validate, and expand upon the basic architectural positioning he developed at McGill. It was theorist Marshall McLuhan (1911-80), and in particular his 1964 book *Understanding Media: The Extensions of Man*, that most inspired Affleck's approach to the design of Place Bonaventure.[9] (It was in *The Gutenberg Galaxy* [1962] that McLuhan introduced the concept of the world as a "global village," made possible through mass communication systems that offered a decentralized vision of the universe.) In a 1989 interview, Affleck recalled

> my excitement back in 1965 when I first read *Understanding Media* — every paragraph a challenge to the conventional wisdom....

Figure 1. Place Bonaventure, Montreal, built 1964-67, Affleck, Desbarats, Dimakopoulos, Lebensold & Sise (ARCOP), architects, Raymond T. Affleck, partner in charge. (*Place Bonaventure, Montréal* [Montreal: n.p., 1990], courtesy of Place Bonaventure Inc.)

I found most of McLuhan's work strikingly original, but sometimes I felt I already understood his probes, albeit in a halting vague unstructured way. What he did was bring it all together in a meaningful way fitting it in to the fabric of the emerging post-modern world.[10]

One of Affleck's primary concerns in the design of Place Bonaventure was the quality of spaces that people experienced with *all* of their senses; the art of architecture was not just a visual exercise for Affleck. In *Understanding Media*, McLuhan explained:

This faculty of touch, called the 'haptic' sense by the Greeks, was popularized as such by the Bauhaus program of sensuous education, through the work of Paul Klee, Walter Gropius, and many others in the Germany of the 1920's.... More and more it has occurred to people that the sense of touch is necessary to integral existence.[11]

Affleck admired McLuhan's approach to art. Of particular importance were "his perceptions about the multi-sensual environment — his critique of our tendency to stress the visual sense at the expense of the other senses, particularly the tactile."[12] McLuhan's theories helped Affleck understand the medium of architecture as space itself, and enabled him "to develop the design process around probes of spatial

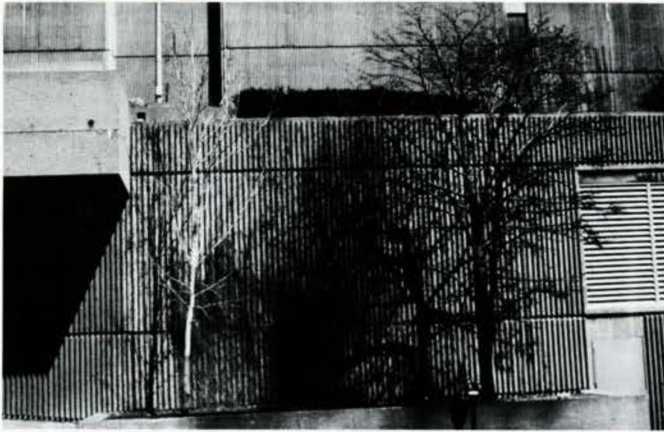

Figure 2. Place Bonaventure, detail of ribbed concrete facade. (J.A. Viloria, 1993)

experience."[13] The use of rough-textured reinforced concrete for Place Bonaventure exemplified Affleck's concern for tactility (**Figure 2**). It was also a matter of convenience: since the construction of Place Bonaventure coincided with the preparations for the 1967 World Exposition held in Montreal, the selection of concrete was due largely to the sparsity of other materials that had been diverted to the site and pavilions of the fair.[14]

Affleck referred to the methods undertaken in the design of Place Bonaventure as a "game" in which all of the players maintained a "professional level of commitment." He employed Venn diagrams to illustrate the generative practice that he supported (**Figure 3**).[15] He admired McLuhan's ideas concerning productivity, explaining that

> McLuhan's insights also helped me break away from a rigid linear process of design, design development, and decision making. The alternative process involved simultaneity and dialogue among the principal players — replacing a linear process by a cyclical one — that operates through the intersection of imaging, judging, and understanding.[16]

Affleck echoed the thoughts of McLuhan, who wrote that "Games are situations contrived to permit simultaneous participation of many people in some significant pattern of their own corporate lives."[17]

Affleck's understanding of McLuhan was reinforced by the work of theorist William J.J. Gordon, who discussed the concept of "synectics," from the Greek "the joining together of different and apparently irrelevant elements." Gordon applied this definition to the idea of an "integration of diverse individuals into a problem-stating problem-solving group."[18] His idea of "synectics" was consistent with McLuhan's thoughts regarding productivity and with the collaborative procedure undertaken in the design of Place Bonaventure, which, in turn, was an extension of Gropius's belief in the union of all forms of creative work. For the design of Place Bonaventure,

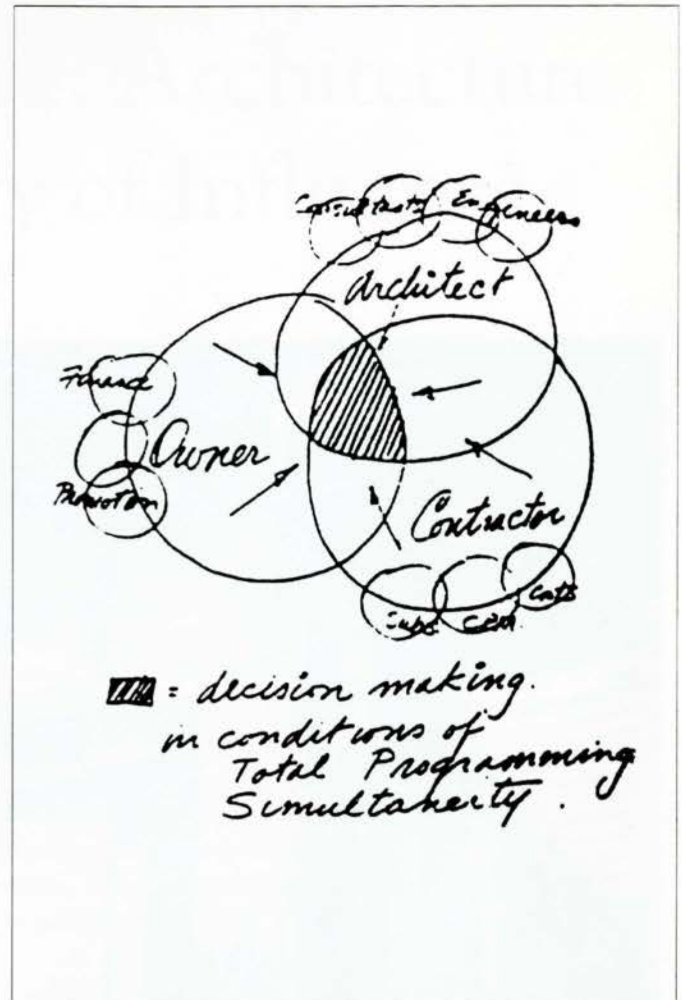

Figure 3. Raymond T. Affleck, Venn diagram depicting the design decision-making process. (Raymond T. Affleck, "Place Bonaventure, The Architect's View," *Architecture Canada* 44, no. 7 [July 1967]: 32)

Affleck acknowledged that sources of creativity were not limited to members of the architectural team; he found that "the origination of basic concepts frequently transcended professional or occupational divisions."[19] This design process was encouraged by the fact that the financial backers of the project, the Concordia Estates Development Company, included friends and contemporaries of Affleck whom he had met during his studies at McGill University.[20]

Affleck was equally concerned with systems of circulation (**Figure 4**), an interest that seems to have been supported by his reading of McLuhan. Affleck observed:

> As the program-design process advanced, it rapidly became apparent that it was not the design of the entities themselves that was the major problem, but rather the design of the linkages and connections between these diverse functions. This led to the development of an extensive system of pedestrian circulation, both horizontal and vertical, and the architectural celebration of significant nodal points within the system.[21]

While individuals involved in the design of Place Bonaventure participated in a dialogue in the attempt to achieve productive results, each component of Place Bonaventure was designed with a focus on their interrelations. These ideas are analogous to McLuhan's observations regarding electrical automation:

Anybody who begins to examine the patterns of automation finds that perfecting the individual machine by making it automatic involves 'feedback.' That means introducing an information loop or circuit, where before there had been merely a one way flow or mechanical sequence.... Feedback or dialogue between the mechanism and its environment brings a further weaving of individual machines into a galaxy of such machines throughout the entire plant. There follows a still further weaving of individual plants and factories into the entire industrial matrix and services of a culture.[22]

Place Bonaventure incorporates a shopping concourse, exhibition hall, merchandise mart, international trade centre, and hotel, and each of these elements can be seen as a "mechanism" woven together through a communicative system of circulation. Furthermore, the entire form of Place Bonaventure is connected to exterior systems of pedestrian, subway, railway, and, to an extent, highway transportation (**Figure 5**).

A diversity of meanings has been applied to Place Bonaventure by writers within the field of architecture and urban planning, as well as by those working outside of the disciplines of design. As a matter of course, Place Bonaventure has acquired many architectural identities. While an analysis of Affleck's formal education and chosen readings allows for an interpretation of the goals and factors underlying the design and construction of Place Bonaventure, knowledge of his stance is not necessary in applying meaning to the structure. "Designers may in fact try to anticipate," wrote Juan Pablo Bonta, "and to even control, people's interpretation of these forms — but their ultimate failure in achieving effective control need not invalidate the process of assignment of meaning."[23]

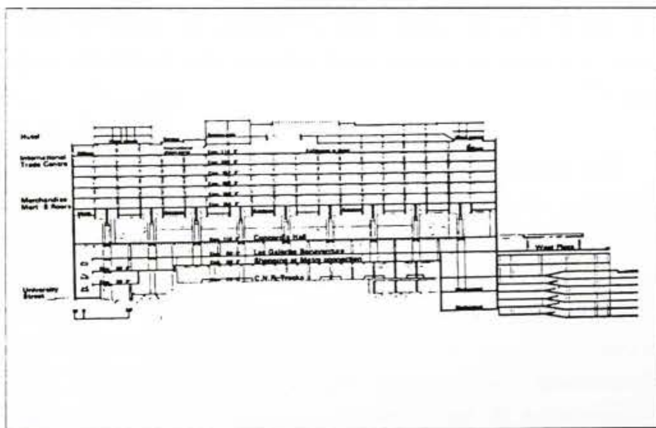

Figure 4. Place Bonaventure, section looking south, 1966. (ARCOP Archive, Bibliothèque nationale du Québec)

Figure 5. Place Bonaventure, south facade. (J.A. Viloria, 1994)

Figure 6. Place Bonaventure, north facade. (J.A. Viloria, 1994)

The extent to which individuals were aware of Affleck's intentions have affected their approach to and understanding of the structure. Methods such as formal analysis, classification, and socialism have been used to situate the complex within a particular trend: Reyner Banham, for example, examined Place Bonaventure within the context of what he termed a global "megastructure movement" that occurred in the 1960s and 1970s,[24] while Kenneth Frampton, among others, situated the building within a stylistic time line, claiming that the rough concrete exterior of the building (**Figure 6**) was "clearly derived as surface syntax" from Paul Rudolph's Art and Architecture building at Yale University, and ultimately derived from the later work of Le Corbusier.[25]

The building has also been placed in a nationalist context by writers within the province of Quebec. Jean-Claude Marsan, in his 1981 work *Montreal in Evolution*, compared the building to the massive Complexe Desjardins, built in 1972 by La Société La Haye-Ouellet (**Figure 7**).[26] Marsan wrote that Complexe Desjardins constituted the best symbol, at the time, of the advancement of French Canadians to architectural

Figure 7. La Société La Haye-Ouellet, Complexe Desjardins, 1972. (Place Desjardins Inc.)

parity with the rest of North America.[27] Montreal architect Melvin Charney interpreted Complexe Desjardins as "the last gasp of the Quiet Revolution" of 1960-70, a period in which Quebec was rapidly modernized by a new generation of individuals who attempted to bring its government in line with the needs of a modern industrial state.[28] As Charney pointed out, Complexe Desjardins "was backed by a local credit union, which was founded at the turn of the century in church basements, and which, by the 1970's, is [sic] one of Québec's most important financial institutions...."[29]

Marsan compared the size of Complexe Desjardins to that of Place Bonaventure, which he described as one of its "rivals." Since Complexe Desjardins was built in a sector of the city "traditionally associated with francophones," he stated, it tended "to reserve this part of downtown for this group" and thus create a new version of the English- and French-speaking "two solitudes" of the city.[30] From a financial standpoint, Marsan identified the economic dominance of the English- and French-speaking communities in Montreal at the time, but his analysis excluded information pertinent to a cultural understanding of the city. Through his geographic and political comparison, Marsan infused Place Bonaventure with a symbolic English-Canadian meaning.

Marsan would have one believe, therefore, that Place Bonaventure was created by the Anglophone establishment when, in fact, architects of diverse backgrounds, including Hungarian, Indian, and French-Canadian descent, took part in the design of the building. Furthermore, when he described the location of Complexe Desjardins as one "traditionally associated with francophones," he ignored a large, established Chinese community near the site. Marsan's desire to see an architectural and planning dichotomy shaded the reality of a quickly changing and growing cosmopolitan population, where in 1971 the first language of nearly 20 percent of the inhabitants of metropolitan Montreal was neither French nor English.[31] Marsan wrote seriously only of French, Irish, British, and American immigration in *Montreal in Evolution*, neglecting to acknowledge the "others"; by continuing to speak of "two solitudes" he perpetuated a misinterpretation of the actual situation. It is significant to note that Place Bonaventure was included in Claude Beaulieu's *Architecture contemporaine au Canada français* (1969).[32] Since the title of the work itself would suggest that its contents were buildings in French Canada, Place Bonaventure could be seen as a structure that is symbolically French-Canadian. In this case, Marsan's argument would be further flawed.

Marsan's commentary broached the issue of architectural analysis through national influences. When writers impose national identity on a building, or when architects try to design with national identity in mind, what resulting architectural meaning is constructed? The *Village Voice*'s social and political critic Edward Ball has addressed problems of alienation when a heterogeneous society meets architecture rooted in a homogeneous programme.[33] Ball cited Seaside, Florida, a housing development planned by DPZ Associates in the 1980s, as a town with a design agenda rooted in nostalgia:

> A 'model' town, Seaside uses Southern coastal architecture from up to one hundred years ago as its medium, that is, the white middle-class vernacular architecture of the old segregated South. The town is proud of its own re-creations from that region and time: pedestrian walkways, picket fences, wood siding, and peaked roofs.[34]

Aside from the complaint that Seaside is not architecturally diverse enough, Ball voiced his distrust for such exclusionary design:

> Seaside and its Old South values may evoke the dominant historical narrative of Northern European migration to the Americas (up to but not including industrialization), but theoretically, African-Americans are welcome, so long as they share the same fantasy and walk down the same memory lane.... Seaside is the town as tombstone. What we see in it here is a creeping nostalgia for a period that can only be lived as a death mask. At bottom, the motive for such a place is a desire to restore social relations that have been superseded.[35]

The challenge of designing for any multicultural territory, including Canada, is huge. How does an architect design structures to which many can relate? If designing with nationalist or nostalgic themes is problematic, both for architects and for writers, what then would be a process in which architecture could be more inclusive? Even Affleck had goals of epitomizing Canada, intending the rooftop garden on Place Bonaventure to be a reflection of the Canadian landscape (**Figure 8**).[36]

Although the search for architectural inclusiveness may seem futile, this should not undermine the attempts by design-

Figure 8. Place Bonaventure, detail of hotel and garden. (J.A. Viloria, 1993)

ers and theorists to suggest new ways, or old ways in new contexts, to deal with the built environment. Acknowledging that there is a multiplicity of viewpoints may help designers and historians in their creative processes. Affleck's design process mirrors the pursuit of architectural analysis: both involve discourse rather than closure.

Architectural identity is not fixed, and is influenced by countless factors, including time. The launching of Expo '67 brought Montreal a new sense of pride and made architecture a subject of lively interest and fresh possibilities. Robert Fulford captured the atmosphere created by some of the pavilions of the fair:

> New shapes, new facts, new ideas opened up the minds of the people who attended the affair.... You had the sense, wherever you turned, that the world's problems were being solved.[37]

Newspaper articles give evidence of the general optimism of the city at the time. Journalist Al Palmer included several articles about Place Bonaventure in his daily column in the Montreal *Gazette*. Palmer extolled Place Bonaventure and the new structures rising in Montreal, predicting that the city would be a "great ... town — if they ever finish building it."[38] Unfortunately, in 1998, Montreal lacks the strong optimism that was so apparent in the era that Place Bonaventure was designed and constructed. The exterior of the structure has been renovated and altered, and there are many vacant spaces in the once bustling shopping concourse, which has been given a facelift at least once.

The identities of Place Bonaventure are directly related to knowledge: from the perspective of the design process, much of Affleck's approach came from his formal education and reading of Marshall McLuhan; from the perspective of form, the use of concrete can be tied to particular international architectural movements, as well as to reasons of economy and availability. Place Bonaventure can be read as a political symbol charged with contentious meanings and ideologies, or it can be said to embody the optimism of the city of Montreal during a prosperous period. Place Bonaventure can be seen, in yet another sense, as both a product of and an element in McLuhan's "global village." It is apparent that our information society has allowed designers, writers, and the general public to shape their perceptions of this massive complex.

Endnotes

1. Irena Murray and Norbert Schoenauer, eds., *John Bland at Eighty: A Tribute* (Montreal: McGill University, 1991), and Anne McDougall, "John Bland and the McGill School of Architecture," *The Canadian Architect* 33, no. 3 (March 1988): 33-37. Canadian schools of architecture, according to Dieter Roger, opened up to Bauhaus ideas after 1934, the year Great Britain honoured Walter Gropius with an extensive exhibition of his work. See Dieter Roger, "From German Pioneer Building to Bauhaus," in *German-Canadian Yearbook* 4 (1978): 135-67.
2. Walter Gropius, *The Scope of Total Architecture* (New York: Harper & Brothers, 1955), 7.
3. Gordon Webber was a pupil of Laszlo Moholy-Nagy (1895-1946) at the New Bauhaus in Chicago. See Joseph Harris Caton, *The Utopian Vision of Moholy-Nagy* (Ann Arbor, Michigan: UMI Research Press, 1980), and Walter Abell, "Young Canada: Gordon Webber," *Canadian Art* (June/July 1944): 200.
4. Arthur Erickson, quoted in Edith Iglauer, "Profile," *The New Yorker*, 4 June 1979: 56.
5. Frederic Lasserre, "A Canadian Architect Looks at His Profession," *Canadian Art* 3, no.1 (October/November 1945): 29.
6. *Ibid.*, 28.
7. Guy Desbarats, in *John Bland at Eighty: A Tribute*, 49.
8. Betty Ann Affleck, personal interview, 18 March 1993. Mrs. Affleck attributes Affleck's social concerns to the wounding of his father in the First World War, and to the death of two uncles at Passchendaele, Belgium, also during the First World War. These circumstances led Affleck to a pacifist point of view. She also pointed out that, as a young person, Affleck was interested in the writings of Karl Marx, although he never joined the Communist Party.
9. Betty Ann Affleck, personal interview, 18 March 1993.
10. Raymond T. Affleck, in Barrington Nevitt, *Who Was Marshall McLuhan?: Exploring a Mosaic of Impressions*, ed. Frank Zingrone, Wayne Constantineau and Eric McLuhan (Toronto: Comprehensivist, 1994; Stoddart, 1995), 145. Affleck was interviewed for this book by Barrington Nevitt and Maurice McLuhan. Affleck refers to McLuhan in "Architecture, The Tactile Art," *Building With Words: Canadian Architects on Architecture*, ed. William Bernstein and Ruth Cawker (Toronto: Coach House Press, 1981), 18-19.
11. Marshall McLuhan, *Understanding Media* (New York: Mentor, 1964), 105.
12. Affleck, in *Who Was Marshall McLuhan?*, 145-46.
13. *Ibid.*
14. Eva Vecsei, personal interview, 29 October 1993.
15. Raymond T. Affleck, "Place Bonaventure, The Architect's View," *Architecture Canada* 44, no. 7 (July 1967): 32. Affleck's use of Venn diagrams came as a result of helping his son Neil with his high school mathematics homework. Betty Ann Affleck, personal interview, 6 January 1994.
16. Affleck, in *Who Was Marshall McLuhan?*, 146.
17. McLuhan, 216.
18. William J.J. Gordon, *Synectics: the Development of Creative Capacity* (New York: Harper & Row, 1961), and Affleck, "Place Bonaventure, The Architect's View," 31-39.
19. Raymond T. Affleck, "Celebration of the Mixmaster," *Modulus* 5 (1968): 65.
20. Betty Ann Affleck, personal interview, 18 March 1993.
21. Affleck, "Celebration of the Mixmaster," 68.
22. McLuhan, 307.
23. Juan Pablo Bonta, *Architecture and its Interpretation* (London: Lund Humphries, 1979), 227.
24. Reyner Banham, *Megastructure: Urban Futures of the Recent Past* (London: Thames and Hudson, 1976), 105.
25. Kenneth Frampton, "Place Bonaventure, Montreal," *Architectural Design* (January 1968): 42.
26. Jean-Claude Marsan, *Montreal in Evolution* (Montreal: McGill-Queen's University Press, 1981), 387-88.
27. *Ibid.*, 387.
28. Melvin Charney, "Modern Movements in French-Canadian Architecture," *Process Architecture No. 5* (Tokyo, 1978): 15-26, reproduced in Geoffrey Simmins, ed., *Documents in Canadian Architecture* (Peterborough, Ontario: Broadview Press, 1992), 277.
29. Charney, 277.
30. Marsan, 387-88.
31. Statistics Canada, *Ethnic Origin* (Ottawa: Industry, Science and Technology Canada, 1973), 1971 Census of Canada, catalogue number 92-723: 6.3.
32. Claude Beaulieu, *Architecture contemporaine au Canada français* (Québec: Ministère des Affaires culturelles, 1969).
33. Edward Ball, "To Theme or Not to Theme: Disneyfication without Guilt," in *The Once and Future Park* (New York: Princeton Architectural Press, 1993), 31-38.
34. *Ibid.*, 33.
35. *Ibid.*, 34
36. Ironically, the roof-top garden was designed by an American firm, Sasaki, Dawson, & DeMay Associates of Watertown, Massachusetts.
37. Robert Fulford, *Remember Expo: A Pictorial Record* (Toronto: McClelland & Stewart, c.1968), 8.
38. Al Palmer, "Our Town," *The Gazette* [Montreal], 11 April 1966, 3.