

# Montreal: A Landscape of Modern America

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“What to see in Montreal? ... Everything — it is one great building project ....” — *André Blouin (1965)*<sup>1</sup>

André Blouin, a significant contributor to Montreal's architecture in the 1960s, both through his design work and through his teachings at the *École d'architecture de Montréal*, was justified to hope for the best as he wrote an article to inform his colleagues across Canada about what to look for in Montreal on the occasion of Expo 67. Expo itself, arguably the premier event to take place in the city during this century, was largely a celebration of modern city planning, architecture, and design. These disciplines were set to create a better world, for which Montreal would be the laboratory and the prototype.<sup>2</sup> Three decades later, Expo appears not as the beginning it was intended to be, but rather as a wild carnival before a long architectural Lent.

In 1967, barely ten years had passed since the beginning of the great building projects that revolutionized the discreet and somewhat reticent modernity of Montreal. After 1967, the rhythm of building activity was to drop abruptly in the city. A cycle of economic, social, and cultural crises was to sweep all Western countries. To this general upheaval, Montreal would add some problems of its own. In fact, the coming of less favourable days was already in the wind on the very site of Expo. In a desperate attempt to seduce a falling market, many architects were running in all stylistic directions (the pavilions of France and Great Britain may be presented as examples). A discipline as coherent as that of the Modern Movement was rapidly becoming impossible to implement. Nowadays, the traces left by these interventions to the history and landscape of Montreal appear as parenthetical passages, Islands of Utopia, like *une île inventée* — an invented island — to quote Expo's theme song.

## METROPOLITAN BOULEVARD (1958-60)

These trace elements of Utopia did not pass the test of time with equal success. A case in point is the Metropolitan Boulevard (figure 1). A powerful symbol of the New Montreal of the 1960s, this piece of radical urban surgery certainly deserves a prominent place in the description of the modern city. As early as 1956, Mayor Jean Drapeau, who did much to create the image of a new, dynamic Montreal, identified the

“need for transportation” together with “growth” as the main factors required in the renewal of a city.<sup>3</sup> And indeed, the resulting east-west Metropolitan Boulevard drastically redesigned the city. Far to the north of the old city centre, in what had been essentially an empty quarter, it created a new centre, so to speak, a speedway slicing through a no-man's land. It also opened the northern half of the island to urbanization and integrated its eastern and western ends into this new urban space. Lastly, it brought to the city the new experience of a rapid, indifferent, almost blind transit through a variety of hitherto more-or-less marginal spaces.

An incomplete and dysfunctional utopia, the boulevard imperfectly satisfied the demands of technical modernization, and satisfied even less the ideals of architectural modernity. Except for the hours of lowest use (shorter every year), it now often fails to deliver the fast transit it was designed to provide. It was poorly built, must be constantly repaired, and shows no evidence of concern for urban aesthetics. Nevertheless, it carried in its wake a redefinition of the perception of the city, and introduced new typologies: commercial and industrial “strips,” shopping malls, traffic circles, vacant lots, dormitory suburbs, etc. Even today, the Metropolitan Boulevard is still at work modifying the image of the city. What the final result of this modification will be remains an enigma.



Figure 1. Metropolitan Boulevard, Montreal, begun 1958-60. (Y. Deschamps, 1997)

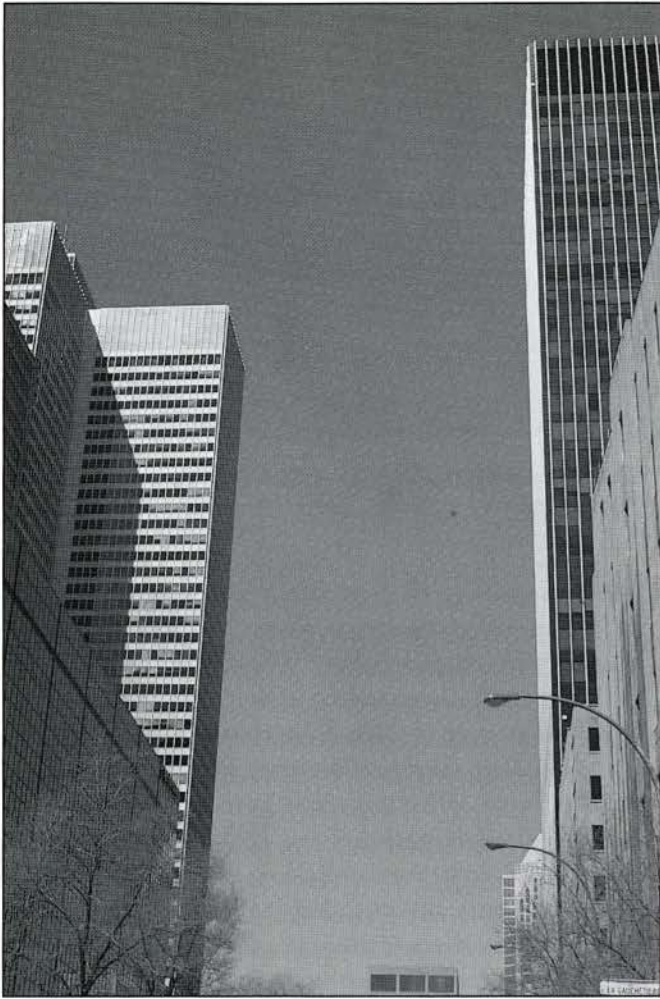


Figure 2. The Place Ville-Marie and C.I.L. House towers (both completed in 1962) on Boulevard René-Lévesque, Montreal. (Y. Deschamps, 1997)

### THE NEW BUSINESS CENTRE (1958-68)

The skyscrapers that bloomed along Boulevard René-Lévesque almost overnight in the late 1950s and early 1960s were to remain unchanged for many years (figure 2). They stand to this day the symbol of Montreal's modernity, as it was then meant to be. This new business centre is not, like the Metropolitan Boulevard, a mere case of technical modernization unaware of its own visual and symbolic impact: the financial elites took advantage of the northward movement of the business district to display their power and their contribution to the prosperity, quality, and cultural prestige of the city. But those elites were part of a continental culture whose architectural emblem was the International Style, and their buildings, however significant for Montreal, are mere steps in a vast, undifferentiated North American process. A possible exception is Place Bonaventure, whose radical citadel-like gesture of isolation from the rest of the city is indeed the result of a unique and local brand of architectural thought.<sup>4</sup>

Earlier generations of local Anglo-Canadian financiers had wanted to make Montreal into a replica of London or Edinburgh;

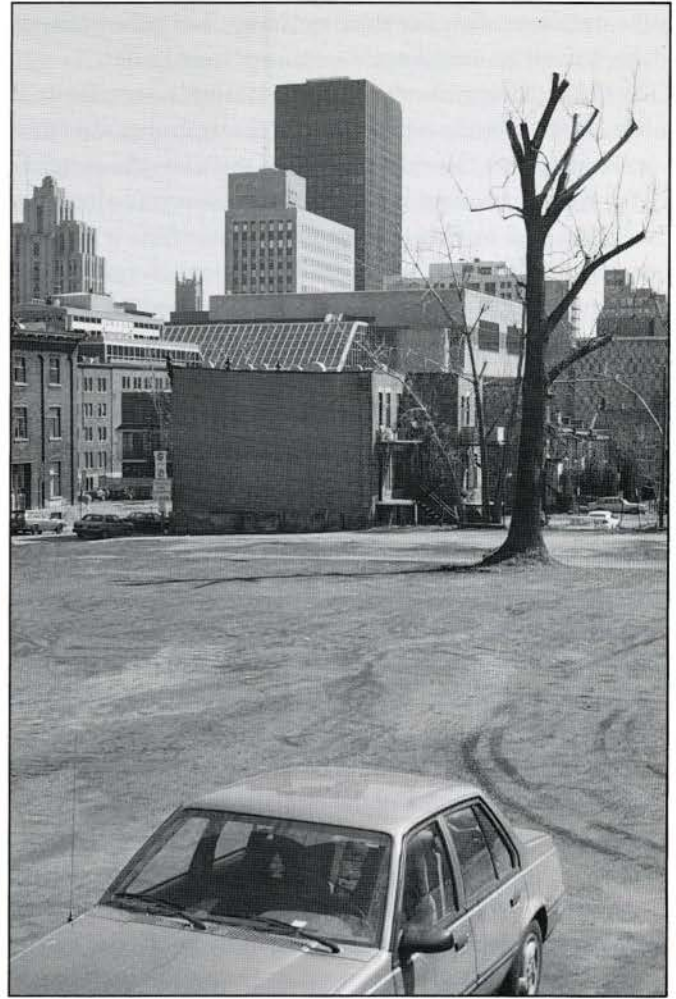


Figure 3. The urban wasteland south of Boulevard René-Lévesque, between de Bleury and Anderson streets. (Y. Deschamps, 1999)

in 1960, their progeny had become much more cosmopolitan, and fairly indifferent to the specific character of the place. What seduced them were the success-symbols created by the "Second Chicago School." Consequently, they often chose their architects from among its most prominent members (I.M. Pei, Skidmore, Owings and Merrill, Ludwig Mies van der Rohe). Of course, within the limits of private building projects and without a strong public coordination, the sum of their works could produce only an approximation of modern city planning.

The politicians played a different but no less foreign tune: Montreal would find its place on the map. It would be "the Paris of America";<sup>5</sup> Dorchester (now René-Lévesque) Boulevard would be its Champs Élysées.<sup>6</sup> These were eloquent visions, but were unsupported by real urban spaces, since the politicians were in no position to impose either grand schemes *à la* Haussmann or the radical prescriptions of the CIAM — the power was not theirs. Rather, true power was scattered among a few big corporations that apparently thought of the city as the mere sum of *their* buildings. This situation in Montreal was not new; only the size of the properties and buildings of

the corporate elite, not their ambitions, had grown considerably since their emergence a century or more earlier.

The buildings introduced into Montreal's cityscape in the late 1950s and early 1960s were of a new scale that was entirely in keeping with the vast horizons of the river, the mountain, and the surrounding plain. And the economic slump that followed had at least one positive side effect: it limited a visually counter-productive multiplication of towers along Boulevard René-Lévesque. Unfortunately, nothing mitigated the absence of a plan that would have integrated the private buildings into a coherent cityscape. A few blocks away from these skyscrapers, speculative ventures created urban wastelands, some of which have remained vacant to this day (figure 3).

### NEW CITIES ON THE RIVER

In the 1960s, not only a new landscape was created far from the Saint Lawrence River, the birthplace of Montreal, but a revival of this very place was also attempted with a renewed consciousness of the island site. A case in point is *l'Île des Sœurs* (Nun's Island, figure 4), which did not result from a public concern for planning, but from a felicitous and temporary coincidence. This residential development, well-defined and separated from the rest of the city, was totally controlled by a single firm that, in turn, hired competent urban designers, among them Ludwig Mies van der Rohe, who also designed some of the buildings. Although by the late 1970s the initial scheme had been partly abandoned in favour of shoddy improvisations, Nun's Island remains a rare example in the Montreal area of a true application of the modern vision of the city.

While Nun's Island may have been a novelty for Montreal at the time of its construction, from an architect's point of view it appeared rather as an exercise in classical modernism. On the other hand, Expo 67 (figure 5) was clearly seen by many of its proponents and designers as a rehearsal for urban things to come. In 1965, André Blouin wrote that Expo

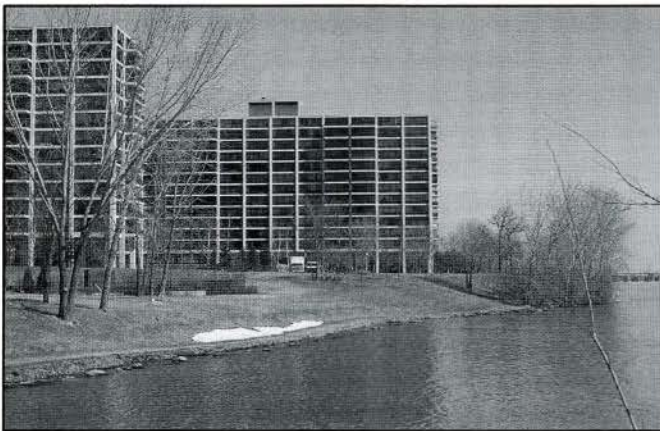


Figure 4. Apartment blocks on Nun's Island (*l'Île des Sœurs*), Montreal; Ludwig Mies van der Rohe, architect, Philip Bobrow, associate architect, 1967-69. (Y. Deschamps, 1997)

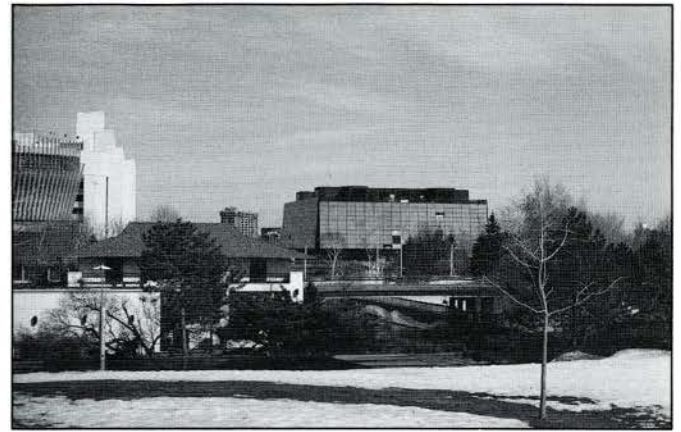


Figure 5. The site of Expo 67, Montreal, with the Quebec pavilion in the distance. (Y. Deschamps, 1997)

“will be only a preview. Montreal will continue to march steadily onward in expansion. Our role is to prepare logical plans for life in the year 2000 for 4,000,000 Montrealers.”<sup>7</sup>

Obviously, this intention was difficult to reconcile with the traditional program of a World Exposition, a short celebration that had to meet the demands of the cultures, economies, and prides of many different nations. In spite of this — and in spite of the fragmentation of the ideals of modern planning and architecture that materialized on the Expo islands — the project of a new urbanity revealed itself in the design of spaces, and in the experimental transportation networks connecting the various parts of Expo to one another and to the Montreal “mainland.” In addition, it provided visitors with a new vantage point from which to view the city.

The experimental character of Expo was even more clearly expressed in Habitat 67 (figure 6), a residential structure halfway between Le Corbusier's *Unité d'Habitation* and the megastructure.<sup>8</sup> Many negative comments have been made about this project designed by Moshe Safdie, then a McGill University student, who probably made the headlines of the architectural presses too quickly. But, in spite of its many failings, and in spite of a desperately inadequate site and the fact that only one-third of the original proposition was actually realized, Habitat is a rare example in Montreal of a building that exceeded a conscientious application of the rules of the International Style and proposed a whole new environment for daily life in the city.

### WHICH MODERNITY?

Anybody who lived, day to day, through the quick and spectacular modernization of the landscape of Montreal in the 1960s will find it difficult to separate it from the confusions and contingencies of daily experience, or to appreciate it accurately after so many years, without falling prey to either the temptations of post-modernistic sneering and indiscriminate demolition, or to the ultimate misunderstanding of a nostalgic neo-modernism.

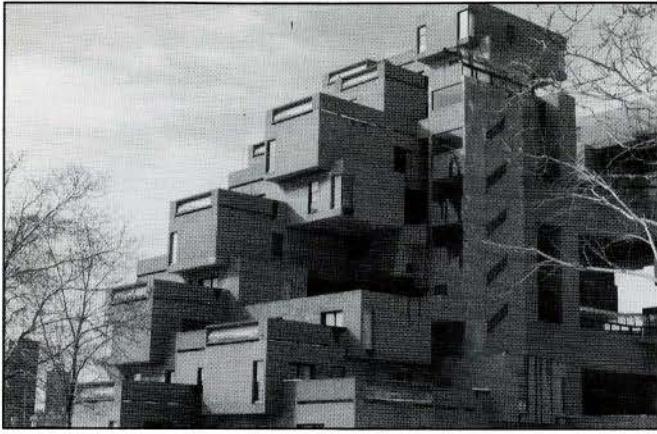


Figure 6. Habitat 67, Montreal; Moshe Safdie, architect, David, Barott, Boulva, associate architects, 1965-67. (Parks Canada, 1986)

In the interest of the future, however, it is essential to gain a clear view of modern Montreal. More precisely, it is essential to go beyond the evidence of its falling in line with international (or at least North American) fashions and practices in order to discover, beyond the “international” façade, how Montreal reacted to such fashions and practices and integrated them into a specific history and discourse.

It could be argued, in fact, that Montreal — and for that matter America — has never known pre-modern culture. Be that as it may, modernity has been at work in the city at least since the beginning of the century. To be sure, it was nothing comparable to the militant European variety: it was rather a typically Anglo-American *de facto* modernity characterized by a comparative absence of conflicts in the use of space and buildings, a context in which architecture would hardly appear as a *critical* object. It was only in the 1920s and 1930s, when intellectuals in both linguistic communities woke up to a renewed realization of architecture’s role in the definition of identities — threatened by an invasion of some *Other* — that it became such an object.

For some English-speaking architects, this *Other* was the body of architects practicing in the United States. Of their work, Percy Nobbs, president of the Province of Quebec Association of Architects, wrote that “Standardization is the vice of the Americans; one town becomes like another throughout the States of the Union and, by an infection ... throughout the provinces of Canada as well.”<sup>9</sup> For French-speaking theoreticians such as Gérard Morisset, a “French” space had to be restored or created so that, “before the end of the century, our architecture, returning to simplicity and logic, should contribute to the embellishment of this New France that appeared to 18th-century memorialists as a remote province of beautiful France — the country of architecture.”<sup>10</sup>

After 1950, however, with the international success of the United States in creating a new geography of cultures and architectures, a world that from Montreal seemed totally

dominated by the American-based International Style, the idea of a Canadian “resistance” based on English or French models became obsolete. In such a context, the International Style did not present itself as the *revolution* implicit in modern architecture so much as a matter of common sense and normalization. It was not the result of local polemics and debates, but rather of a timely reconciliation between the American Dream, already victorious in many aspects of daily culture, and the formal vocabulary of architecture.

This in no way detracts from the qualities of the buildings that were realized in *The Style*. Moreover, it must be stressed that the discourse of the Modern Movement neatly disposed of the illusions of Frenchness or Britishness, and placed the problem of Montreal’s architectural identity in its correct — that is American — context. On the other hand, by flooding the city with solutions to unposed problems and answers to unasked questions, the International Style nearly drowned any active participation of Montreal architects in the Modern Movement and prevented them from looking at the real and specific problems of their own city.

#### WHICH AMERICA?

The urban landscapes presented here are unmistakably “American,” but which “America”? When a picture was needed for the cover of *Amérique*, a book by Jean Baudrillard published in 1986, a view of Montreal’s skyline was chosen.<sup>11</sup> Yet, not surprisingly, the book is entirely dedicated to a discussion of various landscapes of the United States. Montreal is briefly mentioned in a sentence whose purpose is to stress, by contrast, the characteristics of a “true” American city: “In Montreal, all the elements are there — ethnic communities, skyscrapers, the North American space — but without the brilliancy and violence of US cities.”<sup>12</sup>

This is but one variation on a classic theme: the ambiguous situation of Montreal, half-European and *presqu’Amérique*.<sup>13</sup> Is Montreal, in fact, more or less “American” than Buenos Aires or New York (the “real” American city, in Baudrillard’s mind)? Is there an answer to such a question? To be sure, there is something European about Montreal, but then, is there not a certain amount of “Europe” (realities, nostalgias, Old World dreams) in every “America”?

Obviously, Montreal is an American city; obviously, Montreal is not a city in the United States of America. Then, what sort of American city is it? This — I believe — is a question of some interest to architects and students of architectural culture in Montreal, and possibly elsewhere. While I have no definitive answer, I will quote a Montreal architectural historian of the 1960s in order to show the specific context into which the International Style intruded in Montreal and in the province of Quebec. In 1968, while the last building sites of the 1960s were still humming, Claude Beaulieu wrote:

In order to respond to the demand for a way of life with which our Southern neighbour dazzles us, we adopt indiscriminately not only his industrial norms ... but the very concept of his habitat.... we accept to be subordinated to an American life to which we belong geographically.... in this field, we are almost totally assimilated.<sup>14</sup> We rush quite readily to our neighbours to ask for solutions as if we had accepted our bondage once and for all.<sup>15</sup>

Such sentences remind us of a significant and specific condition that must be considered when dealing with anything Québécois, including architecture in this particular case. Behind the official, optimistic International Style façade of the Quiet Revolution, a modern American community was and still is in the making, but this community was denied the accomplishment of a fundamental ideal of modernity and "Americanness": the mastery of its own destiny.<sup>16</sup>

Elsewhere in his book *Architecture contemporaine au Canada français*, Beaulieu expressed hopes of municipal regulations that would make the cities of Quebec into "Canadian cities with a Latin character"; he appealed for an architecture that would provide "a sensitive translation of our spirituality." All this may sound rather vague, timid, idealistic, and outdated when confronted with the formidable uniformizing powers at work in North America, but it testifies to the uneasiness created by the "invasion" of the International Style to Montreal's architectural scene — yet another figure of a chronic feeling of invasion inherent in Quebec's culture. This uneasiness is all the more significant and convincing because Beaulieu was, indeed, a true believer in the basic principles of the Modern Movement. He did not lament the passing of an earlier regional or ethnic tradition, but the "drowning" (already mentioned) of a different modernity that might have taken place in Quebec were it not for the flood of solutions that submerged (and still submerge) its home-grown architecture.

When he alludes to the "Latin character" of the cities of Quebec, or mentions "Mexico, Brazil, and several other countries [that] found their way," he is referring to the great Latin dream of the 1930s, a dream still alive in the *Otra arquitectura* of the 1990s, the dream of a multicoloured modernity that, instead of creating a new international academicism or a "controlling style," would place the young nations of the continent on an equal footing with the Centres, traditional or modern, European or American.<sup>17</sup>

## CONCLUSION

Borrowing a well-known concept proposed some years ago by Alexander Tzonis and Liane Lefaivre, and by Kenneth Frampton, one could say, perhaps, that the case of Claude Beaulieu is one of (insufficiently) "critical regionalism." Nevertheless, a line can be traced from Beaulieu to Gérard Morisset and beyond to the Arts-and-Crafts regionalism of Ramsay Traquair, which could be seen as a major tradition of Montreal

in the field of architectural culture.

In continuity with this tradition, our task, then, would not be so much to discover *whether* Montreal was modern, or whether it is American, but *how* it was and still is *both*, and what the practical meaning is of Montreal's Americanness. Or, to put it differently, perhaps we have made up our minds too quickly as to what is American, or what is modern. Is not America the sum of a thousand Americas, and modernity the sum of a thousand modernities, the outlines and nuances of which we have only begun to make out?

## Endnotes

- 1 André Blouin, "Montreal ... to See or Not to See," *Journal of the Royal Architectural Institute of Canada* 42, no. 5 (May 1965): 54.
- 2 Guy Desbarats, "Montréal — laboratoire urbain," *Habitat* 10, no. 2 (January-February 1967): 26. Desbarats was a member of ARCOP Associates and dean of the School of Architecture at the University of Montreal.
- 3 Blouin, 48.
- 4 It was designed by ARCOP Associates, a Montreal firm that had previously collaborated with I.M. Pei on Place Ville-Marie. See France Vanlaethem and Isabelle Gournay, "A Long-Term Perspective on Place Vile-Marie," in this issue of the *JSSAC*.
- 5 *Montréal: Paris d'Amérique*, is the title of a book by Michel Régnier (Montreal: Éditions du Jour, c. 1961).
- 6 The parallel was suggested by Mayor Jean Drapeau, whose well-known tendency to look for Parisian models was not limited to speeches. "His" Metro was designed by the engineers of the Paris Metro, and "his" Olympic Stadium by the architect of Parc des Princes in Paris, Roger Taillibert.
- 7 Blouin, 54.
- 8 See, for instance, Reyner Banham, *Megastructure: Urban Futures of the Recent Past* (New York: Harper & Row, 1976), 106.
- 9 Percy E. Nobbs, "Architecture in Canada," *Journal of the Royal Architectural Institute of Canada* 1, no. 3 (July-September 1924): 92.
- 10 "... avant la fin du siècle, notre architecture redevenue simple et logique, contribue à l'embellissement de cette Nouvelle-France qui apparaissait aux yeux des mémorialistes du XVIII<sup>e</sup> siècle comme une province éloignée du beau pays de France — le pays de l'architecture." Gérard Morisset, *L'architecture en Nouvelle-France* (Québec: G. Morisset, 1949), 121-22.
- 11 Jean Baudrillard, *Amérique* (Paris: Grasset, 1986).
- 12 "À Montréal tous les éléments y sont — les ethnies, les buildings, l'espace nord-américain — mais sans l'éclat et la violence des villes US." *Ibid.*, 36.
- 13 *Presqu'Amérique* (Almost America) is the title of a periodical that appeared briefly in Montreal (1971-73).
- 14 "Pour satisfaire au mode d'existence dont notre voisin du sud nous éblouit, nous adoptons d'emblée, sans la moindre restriction, non seulement ses normes industrielles [...] mais [...] la conception même de son habitat. [...] nous admettons notre subordination à la vie américaine à laquelle nous appartenons géographiquement [...] nous sommes, dans ce domaine, à peu près assimilés." Claude Beaulieu, *Architecture contemporaine au Canada français* (Québec: Ministère des Affaires culturelles, 1969), 7.
- 15 "Nous nous précipitons volontiers chez nos voisins pour leur demander des solutions, comme si nous avions admis une fois pour toutes notre vassalité." *Ibid.*, 57.
- 16 "Maîtres chez nous" (Masters in our own home) had been the slogan of the Liberal political campaign in 1962.
- 17 For "*Otra arquitectura*," see, for instance, Enrique Browne, *Otra arquitectura en América latina* (Mexico: Gili, 1988). A "controlling style" is a quote from Henry-Russell Hitchcock and Philip Johnson, *The International Style* (New York: Norton, 1932; reprint ed. 1995), 34.