

RAHUL MEHROTRA AND PETER ROSE

# INCREMENTAL URBANISM FROM MONTREAL

**Rahul Mehrotra** This project, Quartier International de Montréal, is important for a few reasons. One is that it is about healing an urban fabric that was fractured in more ways than physical separation. Another is that it is a strategic urban design project in that it deploys many strategies that urban designers often use in cities making small green interventions, using public space to incorporate a mobility system (in this case the Metro). So it is interesting in the multiplicity of modes of deployment. I want to start by asking: What were the compulsions that triggered it?

**Peter Rose** The political-economic situation in Montreal has, since the 1970s, been very complicated. In 1976, Quebecers voted for a government that had as its agenda separating Quebec from Canada and, for the most part, making it entirely French, at least in terms of language and culture. As a result, Quebec suffered a massive exodus of population and devastating economic consequences. Within this difficult situation, one of the few points of agreement was that Montreal was a wonderful place. Its future became the subject of much debate among civic officials, intellectuals, and businesspeople across the political spectrum. It was clear that the city was fragile and that money to spend on it would be scarce. This was when the heritage

movement grew strong. And I think actually out of those conditions grew some of the best, and most strategic, urban thinking in the country. The Canadian Centre for Architecture and Phyllis Lambert, its founding director, played an important role in keeping the debate about the city at a high level.

**Mehrotra** In a sense, listening to you, one imagines that political resistance actually contributed to Montreal's fine-grained nature—perhaps this is actually its strength by default. Would it be a correct reading to say that the city deploys so many different strategies that it is perhaps using them as the path of least resistance?

**Rose** Yes, I think political resistance did contribute to the nature of the city—and continues to do so. And the many different strategies deployed did, to some degree, emerge from a path of least resistance. However, to characterize the strategies in that way diminishes just how inventive and hard-won they really were, and just how many political constituencies and stakeholders—many with wildly divergent positions and interests—collaborated to achieve them.

**Mehrotra** So then what is the direct correlation between Montreal with this history and the form of this place?



Above: New west facade of the Convention Center. Photo, Marc Cramer. Below: Aerial view, from the west, of the old Convention Center, showing the exposed highway underneath, before new additions and renovations. Courtesy, Montreal Convention Center



**Rose** That is an interesting question. Formally, the project is composed of what appear to be two relatively large, rather regular orthogonal pieces. The low, dramatically colorful convention center (Palais des Congrès) and the tall, elegant headquarters building for the Quebec Pension Fund (Caisse de dépôt et Placement du Québec) face each other across an important public square. A walk around the buildings and the square reveals surprising layers and worlds of complexity. Both buildings cover the highway and sit on top of and connect to a vast underground pedestrian network and to the Metro in multiple ways. They are radically accessible to the public and riddled with public passages and spaces. Further, the convention center and Quebec Pension Fund building incorporate, in aggregate, more than a dozen previously abandoned structures—a feat that required a high degree of architectural agility. And to answer your question, the correlation between the project’s form and the political resistance that was part of the process of its making has to do with the fact that all elements of the formal project were negotiated, and every piece is contingent on relationships with other pieces. Interestingly, as in the political sphere, there is no dominant formal player. It is a balancing act in which the whole is vastly greater than the sum of the parts. One of the great achievements of the project is that it provides an enormous and diverse amenity for the public around and within it. It has become one of the great public places in the city.

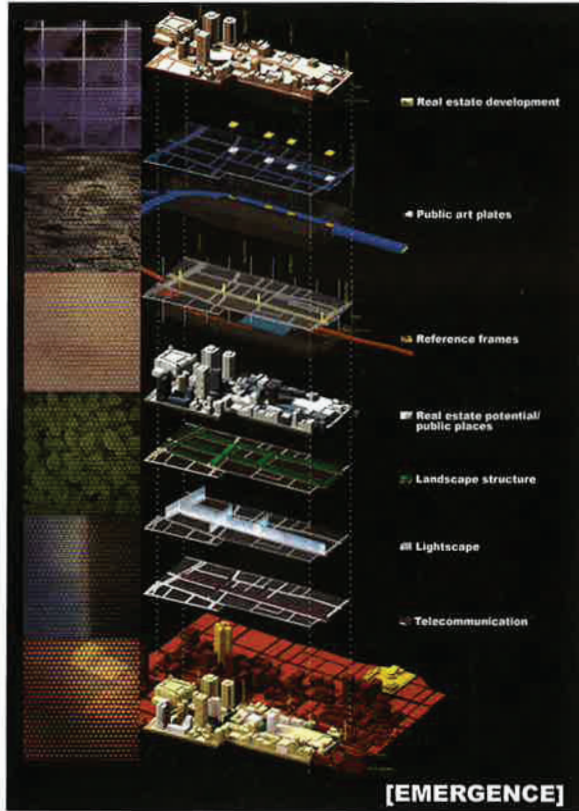
## AS IN A PLACE LIKE BARCELONA, MONTREAL HAS HAD THE GOOD FORTUNE OF HAVING SOME OF THE SMARTEST PEOPLE SITTING IN THE PLANNING DEPARTMENTS, NOT JUST BUREAUCRATS WAITING TO LEAVE AT FIVE.

**Mehrotra** The richness of the project is that it comes out of local contingencies as well as out of aspirations that are much larger than the locale. It can be the way capital finds its form in the bank or the way in which the big footprint or megaprograms like the convention center signal a preparedness to welcome the world.

So both these local impulses and the aspiration to connect to the world at large, specifically the resulting mix of programmatic content, are very interesting. Is that something that happens by default, or is it something that was finely orchestrated?

**Rose** The “Quebec condition” necessitates compromise between and engagement of an enormous number of contingencies just to get along. Everybody is marginal to some degree, and for anything to happen there has to be a high level of agreement, some piece of a pie that everybody can identify with. So to some extent the mix of programmatic content does happen by default. That being said, the project, with the exception of the convention center itself, was initiated by a small group of key players, beginning with the architects Renee Daoust and Real Lestage, who, when the government of Quebec announced, in 1997, a massive expansion and renovation of Montreal’s convention center, had the vision to see this project as a catalyst for something much larger and more important for the city. On their own initiative, and pro bono, Daoust and Lestage prepared a masterplan for an area that included, but went far beyond the convention center, an area now known as the Quartier International de Montreal. The plan they produced was remarkable in its subtle understanding of the complexities of this piece of the city and in the thoroughness of its scope. Astutely, they arranged a presentation of their proposal to Jean Claude Scraire, the CEO of the Quebec Pension Fund, which was the major landowner and stakeholder in the area and also to Clement Demers, who was then head of the Pension Fund’s real estate division. Jean Claude Scraire and Clement Demers both saw the enormous potential that the Daoust Lestage plan could unlock for the area. The visionary CEO lent his full support to the project and to the setting up of a non-profit organization, the Quartier International de Montreal, known as QIM, with Clement Demers as director and project manager to run it. Crucially, in 2000, the Pension Fund also announced it would relocate all of its Montreal subsidiaries into a new building, which would anchor the Quartier. Thus began the “orchestration,” to use your word, of this incredibly complex project.

**Mehrotra** What is interesting is that these complexities play out in a fairly small part of a city, as opposed to various larger projects around the world. Who was the client, who drove it? If there was a master plan, who made it? How were the architects appointed? It is



Axonometric Diagram of the project. Courtesy, Daoust Lestage

interesting to clarify the structure of instrumentalizing a project like this.

**Rose** In the late 1980s the area was a mess. It was surrounded by parking lots, and it was open to the expressway below. The area was unsightly, with security problems; it was not inviting for tourists who came to the old convention center, and it did not put forth a good image for the city. A decision was made to add to and improve the convention center and to hold a design-build competition to select architects and builders for the project. The competition was won and the building executed by the very good Montreal architecture firm Saia Barabrese Topouzanov. As for the rest of the project, Clément really invented and then directed it. As head of the nonprofit organization, he directed the hiring of architects and planners, raised funds to pay for all consultants, built consensus among many stakeholders about what to construct, and then managed the construction of it all on a tight budget and schedule. He hired another very good Montreal architecture firm, Daoust Lestage, to do the master

planning and also to design the Quebec Pension Fund building. Daoust Lestage's master planning, in particular, is exceptional. In an indirect way, Clément Demers played an important role in the shaping of the convention center project as well. As originally conceived by the Quebec Government, the upgrade of the old convention center was to be a modest one, lacking underground parking and connections to the underground pedestrian network. Crucially the original brief did not include the covering of the highway. Before the competition for the convention center was launched, Clément Demers was deftly able to convince the Quebec Government to include these elements in the brief.

If the client for the convention center was the center itself (and of course its sponsor, the Quebec Government), the question of the client for the rest of the project is not so clear. The many stakeholders in the nonprofit organization all had a voice. Clément was not the client, but he was certainly the driver of the project and in my view played the biggest role, especially in making it happen with such a high level of thinking and execution. There were either many clients or no client, but it was Clément Demers who made the project happen.

**Mehrotra** When we walked around this district, it was fascinating to see that there were some background buildings, some remnants, and some new buildings—all intelligently and strategically woven into the landscape. If you had to point out or surface the important pieces that create a synergy for this locality in terms of programming (all the way from the Metro to the convention center), what would these pieces be?

**Rose** The convention center is the iconic piece, I think, because of the intensity of its program and the vast numbers of visitors it brings to the city. It is also a terrific civic object. The Quebec Pension Fund, insofar as it represents the Quebec Government and is inhabited by high-level bankers and administrators, brings with it a certain cachet that this part of the city never had. But it is the extensive series of public spaces both above and below ground—embedded in the program from the beginning—and the incredible way they weave through the buildings and extend seamlessly into the city beyond that creates the most important synergy in my view. Headquarters buildings and convention centers typically feel private. Not here. Public space runs all through them. Boundaries between inside and outside, public and

private, are blurred to an extreme extent. These types of synergies sometimes evolve in cities but rarely are they made to work so effectively so quickly.

Something else that I mentioned to you as we walked around last summer, which relates to programming, is the fact that above all, Montreal is a winter city. Winter is long and very cold here, and one has to live with it and in it. Part of what allows the city to operate effectively in winter is the Metro. Built in the 1960s, it is a terrific subway system that, over time, has spawned the development of an extensive underground pedestrian network to which this project deftly connects.

**Mehrotra** Using the winter or its imagination as a driver in decision making has led to quite complex sectional imaginations vis-à-vis the Metro. It becomes a weave that makes the fabric even denser. The other question I wanted to ask, What is the role of historic preservation in creating the mix that we see? And how important is that movement within the discussion in Montreal?

**Rose** It is tremendously important; it happened almost overnight. A city without much of a preservation mentality suddenly developed one, which became a movement (Heritage Montreal) and remains very strong. It was the result of a developer knocking down a wonderful house, the Van Horne Mansion, in order to do a project. He did not have approval to demolish, and there was a lot of support for keeping it. It was a wonderful house, iconographic like the Frick Mansion in New York. Yet this incredibly bold developer knocked it down in the middle of the night, knowing that there was no legal structure to force him to rebuild it, and that the inevitable result was that he'd be able to develop the land. Around that time, in the 1970s, when both Phyllis Lambert and I had

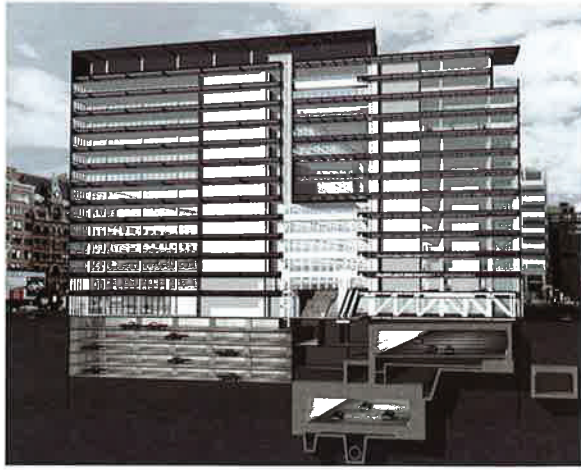


East Facade of Quebec Pension Fund Building, facing the new public square, Place Jean-Paul Riopelle. Courtesy, Stephan Poulin. Below: South Elevation of Convention Center, showing the incorporation of existing buildings. Photo, Marc Cramer

returned to Montreal after many years in the US, when the economy was weak and the city was embroiled in the politics of separation, heritage issues became very important. We weren't building anything new, so we focused on trying to keep what was there. I would say that in the sector of this project there were about twenty abandoned buildings. People said, "Look, you're building a convention center, take them down." But very few were knocked down. And they're not just facades they are integrated into the larger project. Part of the brilliance of the convention center is its embedding of those early structures within it, so that many of the convention rooms could be within them and much of the texture of earlier eras remains. The new convention center is a very large building, but it seems quite small, very much at the scale of the neighborhood. It is the deft absorbing of the preexisting buildings that helps to achieve this.

**Mehrotra** The reason this project, for me, needs greater recognition in the discussion about urban design is really twofold. First, it challenges the role of the urban





Section Perspective of Quebec Pension Fund Building. Courtesy, Daoust Lastage

designer in the city, in a way that multiple agencies, aspirations, forces, contingencies are represented in the repertoire of propositions made for that particular zone. From the master plan to the individual buildings, these are complex negotiations. It suggests that urban design is a lot about advocacy; it's a bridge practice, between planning policy, planning contingencies, and architectural aspirations or aspirations played out particularly in architectural form. Second, to extend that idea, it is a wonderful example, a seminal one, of the way that different attitudes and strategies within the repertoire of urban design are deployed to create a rich fabric. It involves alteration, repair and preservation, additions—all working simultaneously but reinforcing cohesively the urban form of the place—and in that way it enriches the historic fabric of the city of Montreal.

**Rose** Montreal is a very particular place. The debate about the city, for the last thirty or forty years, has been intense and relatively intelligent. As in a place like Barcelona, Montreal has had the good fortune of having

some of the smartest people sitting in the planning departments, not just bureaucrats waiting to leave at five. There's a real urban intelligence in the planning departments, in various levels of government, and even among a number of developers. Certainly the architects are quite sophisticated as well. The architects I know would mostly describe what they do as “working in the city.” The city is something that everybody is expecting to work on collaboratively across many disciplines. As opposed to, say, in a more resolutely capitalist place where a developer typically takes a piece of land, treats it as an isolated project, prepares a plan, and markets it and sells it—a kind of solo piece. Most of the important players in Montreal have an acute sense of the interconnectedness of things and, for the most part, see their projects in the context of a larger continuum. The last thing I would say about this project is that in the design of everything—buildings, landscapes, furniture, and the city—it displays an acute understanding of the importance of dimension and of detail. Everything is very finely calibrated, to the scale of the footstep, the bag, the corridor, and including how much space you provide for the car. Unlike many projects at this scale, there is very little surface parking and the streets are not very wide. The project is mostly viewed as a pedestrian space that allows cars in. In a sense the project can be seen as kind of transitional with respect to the car, existing somewhere between a time say thirty years ago when the car was spatially dominant and fifty years from now when there may well be significantly fewer automobiles. I think one of the many skillful achievements of the project is the careful calibration of the size of things and, importantly, how little space you can get away with providing for the car.

