

Galerie FMR
Gilles Bissonnet, Pierre Crépô
Montréal, Qc.,

L'Urbaine Urbanité II

A virtual, nomadic culture centre

Adjacent to 3748 Ontario East, Metro Joliette
Production Galerie FMR, 19 September 2003 at 2 pm
Place Valois, Hochelaga-Maisonneuve,
Montreal

Summary report

Text : Guy Sioui Durand
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Facilitator: Louis Jacob, sociologist
Rapporteur: Guy Sioui Durand, sociologist and art critic
Panel: Ariane Émond, general director of culture Montreal
Michel Roy, community group representative
Jean-Claude Laporte, BAILS committee
Gilles Bissonnet, Philippe Côté, artists

The spirit of the new initiative Off-the-Radar: Initiatives in Critical Thinking calls for an explanation of the intellectual status of the rapporteur. For *Urbain Urbanité II*, I acted as an observer and participant, in part at the request of Galerie FMR, but also because of my own views as a sociologist and art critic active in the field of socio-artistic artists and their work. I practice an approach in the sociology of subjects in social reality in the tradition of Fernand Dumont, Marcel Rioux, Jurgen Habermas, Alain Touraine and Pierre Bourdieu. This did not prevent me from having an independent position in terms of critical judgment of the event. I took part in the round table and analyzed the event subsequently.

In this paper, I first set out the circumstances, and then place the intellectual motivations that led to my participation within the context of the cultural life of Hochelaga-Maisonneuve. Last, I give an analytical overview of the discussions on the role of a culture centre as an alternative to the familiar models. The conclusion brings utopia face to face with reality.

Part One: The Circumstances

In September 2002 the first *Urbaine Urbanité* event took place at Place Valois in this neighbourhood of East Montreal. Returning for a second year to the same intersection –

where the restaurant and garage of the first year have been torn down – the zone of *Urbaine Urbanité II* looked like a construction site where a new culture centre, trendy boutiques and condos would eventually be built.

The first edition, in abandoned buildings, had orchestrated socio-artistic interventions emphasizing the aspects of cultural loss, and what was going to disappear. One year later, Galerie FMR planned to create a situation, giving a cultural alternative in the local life of the area through site-specific works, and creating a debate with a round table in a construction trailer.

To animate a full week of public art from September 14-20, 2003, the mentors of this utopian culture centre ‘without walls’, Gilles Bissonnet and Pierre Crépo, would again work with the artists of the first edition, Johanne Chagnon, Paul Grégoire, Armand Vaillancourt, Philippe Coté and company.

There was a real neighbourhood issue to be grappled with!

The cultural and artistic life of Hochelaga-Maisonneuve is subject to a constant series of events, some unfortunate, others promising. Since the beginning of this century, there have been a number of controversies, failures and bankruptcies here. However, we have to know how to recognize other signs of a commitment to social emancipation.

For example, the socio-artistic interventions of *Urbain-Urbanité II* would deal with the recent saga of the removal of the Riopelle sculpture-fountain *La Joute*, and the bankruptcy of *Faites de la Musique*, with the closure of *Zest* in a new building after only four months being a determining factor.

Motivation

Apart from the socio-artistic context of the area and the appropriate timing of this debate, three other critical sociological reasons motivated me in the project.

First, it corresponded to my nomadic nature, which has been the basis of my art criticism from the outset. I move around and get involved in art that experiments with society. Second, the experiences of *Urbain Urbanité* seemed to participate in the growing trend of art actuel, moving out of the sacred sites of art (museums, galleries, exhibition centres and artist-run centres) to become active as events in various aspects of urban and rural life. These attitudes and situations are one of the innovative characteristics of art actuel.

Third, the round table provided a concrete opportunity to validate the new program Off-the-Radar. One year earlier, I had discussed the question of a more alert, more connected art criticism with Claude Schryer at the Inter-Arts Office. As shown in the recording of our exchanges, Gilles Bissonnet clearly explained the nature of my participation and the support of the program. I could have been merely a presenter. But, as is more often than not the case, the communities are more orally based than text-based. I thus agreed to act as rapporteur, and to better develop my analyses of the relations of art in the city.

Round Table

In this age of new media technologies, I took part via video in the round table, which had a surprising impact not only on the process but also on the content of discussions.

Epilogue

I thought I had finalized the report, when on December 16, my perusal of *Le Devoir* threw everything into question. Two articles on the cultural life of Hochelaga-Maisonneuve caught my eye.

The first concerned the *Chic resto pop*. A veritable community institution, it could operate in an old church and feed 600 people a day, thanks to a \$1.7 million grant from the Ville de Montréal. This was great news for social action against poverty. The *Chic resto pop* was at the origin of *Faites de la musique*. From a choir, it became a music promoter and then Espaces émergents, then *Zest*, the old firehall renovated at great expense. The fusion between community action and emerging culture went under last fall.

The other article announced that Quebec's cultural policy authorities (Ministère de la culture, Culture et patrimoine de la Ville de Montréal and the Mercier/Hochelaga-Maisonneuve council) had approved the transformation of the old (sic) *Zest* into a new culture centre, 'ending the plan for a culture centre in the future Place Valois!'

Does this mean that the two editions of *Urbaine Urbanité* and its debate imagining an alternative as a culture centre based not on a building and outside the established mold was back at the utopian dream stage? That the democratic exercise would remain marginal? Ipso: a standard culture centre that recuperates a failure, the cultural-commercial gentrification of Place Valois? Unless they act in secret, from time to time, in local 'ephemeral' zones....

Guy Sioui Durand

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