

Montréal – A City of Contrasts

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An additional epithet for Montréal is that of a city of many contradictions. The world's second largest French speaking city is a predominately Latin culture living in a Nordic setting; however, even this is contradicted by the existence of an English speaking minority that has shared in much of the development of the city since the British conquest of la Nouvelle France in 1760. Montréal has a European temperament that is nonetheless resolutely located in the recent history of the vast North American landscape.

Perhaps eclectic is a better word to describe Montréal's layers of architectural and urban history dating back to before it was founded in 1642 as Ville-Marie. Beginning with the French Catholic origins of Montréal, the city's façades are also composed of examples from Victorian era eclecticism, optimistic 1920s Art-déco, clean post-WWII modernism, commercial post-modernism, and now a contemporary design, characterized by 'interventions' in the urban landscape. These interventions are conscious of the past, this place, and where we are at present.

Montréal is an urban experience that is most understood by walking through the city's interwoven neighbourhoods. The AIA Committee on Design conference was conceived to plant the members in the city between the river and the mountain. Walking through the 'underground city' to Montréal's modernist 'diva', Place Ville-Marie (IM Pei, 1962), was the first contradiction whereby the group left the streets to walk underground in order to arrive at a panoramic cocktail on the top of the PVM tower.

The tour of the rigorously detailed Canadian Centre for Architecture was followed by a reception and dinner honouring Phyllis Lambert in the gritty Darling Foundry, a multidisciplinary art centre in the middle of Montréal's multimedia city. The Foundry was at the centre of Montréal's industrial revolution and now the old surviving factories and warehouses of this precinct have been converted into the trendy high-tech offices of the information revolution.

Héritage Montréal conducted two walking tours dedicated to placing the city's contemporary interventions within the historical layers of the city's context. In particular, the tour of the Quartier Latin was one of the thematic highlights of the conference. It was later followed by a panel discussion of five well-known Montréal architects at the Université de Montréal. The Quartier Latin is a vibrant cultural neighbourhood containing Québec's newest university, l'Université du Québec à Montréal. The Quartier Latin is also a project of ongoing urban repair containing several contemporary interventions that locate the preoccupations of Montréal's design culture. The AIA members were then able to connect many of the buildings from the tour to the five panellists. The contradictions between the effervescent design of the Quartier Latin and the Montréal architects' concerns about a withering architectural culture were the basis of heated debate at the reception following the panel discussion.

A conference about Montréal, design, and culture is not complete without mentioning the array of fine dining experiences that line many of the city's dynamic streets such as St-Laurent, St-Denis, and Avenue Mont-Royal. Here Montréalers can choose from sidewalk cafés and terraces to exclusive eateries, all located within walking distance of each other on bustling urban shopping streets that service the city's large urban population.

Curiosity about Montréal's recent past was explored on the final day with a visit to Buckminster Fuller's Dome at the former site of Expo'67 which was topped off with a champagne brunch and tour of Moshe Safdie's Habitat'67. From Habitat'67, the view of the city centre, between both the Saint Lawrence River and Mount Royal, was the conference's final image of a city that so many Montréalers passionately argue about and equally love.