

Overdale Avenue: Narrative, Urban Design and Utopia

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## **Introduction**

I once heard in a walking class, *Architecture and Urbanism in Montreal*, conducted in 2006 by Dr. Jean Bélisle from Concordia University that to truly experience a city, one must walk in it to grasp its texture, sound, scale, colour, energy, aesthetic, design, part of its history and identity. This encounter with the city is referred to by Jane Rendell in her text *Architecture-Writing* as an intimate position as opposed to a distant position.<sup>1</sup> In addition to being the author's encounter with a work of art and/or space, an intimate position is also the author's own involvement, criticism and imagining of a site as an architectural object.<sup>2</sup> Rendell explains the distant position as a factual account of an object's or a space's history, politics, formal elements, etc.

In the past, when I used to take Montreal's Lucien L'Allier Metro station, I would walk up the hill towards René-Lévesque Boulevard, on Lucien L'Allier Street, passing the old *Guaranteed Pure Milk Company*. I always wondered why, beside me, were a shoddy parking lot and a building in ruins, facing the *Milk Company* building. I imagined the parking lot and the building as being frozen in time in front of a row of pretty period houses on Overdale Avenue, perpendicular to Lucien L'Allier Street. I was later surprised to learn that the building in ruins, as well as the parking lot, used to be the house and the property of Sir Louis Hippolyte Lafontaine (1807-1864), who, with Robert Baldwin (1804-1858) was the Prime Minister of the *United Province of*

*Canada* from 1842 to 1843 and from 1848 to 1851. I started researching the four-storey greystone Georgian house situated on 1395 Overdale Avenue and I learned that it was built between 1844 and 1849.<sup>3</sup> This research led me to discover the complex and enigmatic history of the lot (which I will refer to as Overdale) framed by Mackay Street to the east, Overdale Avenue to the south, René-Lévesque Boulevard to the west, and Lucien L’Allier Street to the north. I started to ask myself why, when this lot used to be the estate of an influential political figure, is it now a parking lot and a neglected house bereft of identity? This question led me to evidence which in turns leads me to conclude that the city of Montreal is in constant renegotiation with the needs, facilities and inhabitants of the Overdale site.

Like a written work in progress, the city is inscribed through its physical, urban developments, partially erased and overwritten. However, what is erased does not become completely invisible; its traces are still perceptible beneath the new version of the city. This phenomenon can be understood as a palimpsest. Knowing that a palimpsest presents simultaneously traces of the city’s past and present, I can say that a palimpsest is also a city’s narrative, which traces the “political route of engagement between people and their place, between the environment and its interpretation.”<sup>4</sup> In addition to being a narrative, the city is also a successive series of urban designs. Each era produces various urban designs and stories which are dialectically connected with each other and which are part of the city’s broader contemporary storyline and urban planning. Hence, the city is composed of a multi-layered narrative and urban design. Because the city’s narratives and urban designs

are constantly modified through time and space, the city is therefore not perfect, thus not utopic in nature.

“Utopia”, a term coined by Thomas More (1478-1535) in his two-part book *Utopia*, is both a “no-place” and a “good place,” an ideal, imaginary and highly attractive island nation inhabited by a supposedly perfect society.<sup>5</sup> More constructed the word “utopia” by fusing the Greek adverb *ou* (not) with the noun *topos* (place).<sup>6</sup> However, the author Latinized his newly-constructed word, *eutopia*, into *utopia* which in Latin means “good-place”.<sup>7</sup> Therefore, as Elizabeth Grosz points out in her essay, *The Time of Architecture*, “utopia” is linguistically ambiguous.<sup>8</sup> She continues by suggesting that perhaps the “no place is the good place.”<sup>9</sup> I would like to take up this ambiguity in the paper that follows, on the Overdale site in Montreal. To strive for utopia, an ideal, is an ongoing and endless process which forms a multitude of layers of narratives and urban plans within a city.

The matter I would like to address in the following research paper is: what is the storyline of Overdale based on its past narratives and urban designs? With this essay, I aim to introduce a journey into Montreal’s multi-layered narrative, made possible by travelling into a portion of the city’s larger and equally multi-layered urban design. I want to argue that Overdale’s storyline is composed of a succession of failures to establish a utopian social order and, today, has an undetermined future. I will discuss the idea of utopia in relation to the houses that were demolished from this site for the purpose of revitalization and gentrification. Then I will analyze the abandoned Lafontaine House when it was occupied by squatters, as an attempt to create a mini-utopian society. Finally, I will argue that the present urban design of

Overdale suggests a sequence of events in an undetermined future when narratives and urban designs are frozen in time and space.

### **A succession of narratives and urban designs**

I want to discuss four different phases that the Overdale site has witnessed over the years. I consider these phases to be the lot's most significant stories and urban developments. Overdale's first narrative can be dated between February 3, 1849 and February 26, 1864 when the lot belonged to Sir Louis-Hippolyte Lafontaine.<sup>10</sup> In February 1849, the land 1574 (Overdale) which previously belonged to George Bourne, a bankrupt businessman, was sold to Lafontaine.<sup>11</sup> The lot was then composed of “(...) a large cut stone front, two storey house, facing towards the River St. Lawrence, stables, sheds, coach house and other buildings thereon erected (...) planted with fruit trees (...).”<sup>12</sup> Today, the visible remains of this era are the house and the entire Overdale site which once formed the totality of the Lafontaine domain. The second sequence of events occurred in the late 1980s when Overdale underwent a contested urban revitalization, meaning the displacement of its tenants and the demolition of its Victorian Eclectic houses. I situate the third narrative in the summer of 2001 when a number of individuals squatted in Lafontaine house to protest the City of Montreal's lack of affordable housing. The final narrative is the one we are witnessing today: Overdale as a parking lot and a house in ruins.

## Utopia

In Book I of *Utopia*, Thomas More, the fictional personification of the author himself, criticizes and denounces the contemporary circumstances of sixteenth-century English society. Book I presents conversations on contemporary European troubles between the fictional characters Raphael Hythloday, Peter Giles, Thomas More and Cardinal John Morton, Archbishop of Canterbury. In *Utopia*, Hythloday is an explorer who condemned the European society of his time and praised Utopia Island which he had recently visited. “Hythloday” is another Greek compound word created by More (the author) and means “nonsense peddler.”<sup>13</sup> Because the word “utopia’s” literal meaning is “no place,” More (the author) appears to have been aware that the utopic, as an ideal, in reality is impossible to achieve. Although the author was conscious that utopia was unattainable, he nevertheless recognised the importance of an idea that would present the *honestas* and *utilitas* (the moral and the practical) as equally important in a society.<sup>14</sup>

In Book I of *Utopia*, More writes:

For if you suffer your people to be ill-educated, and their manners to be corrupted from their infancy, and then punish them for those crimes to which their first education disposed them, what else is to be concluded from this, but that you first make thieves and then punish them? <sup>15</sup>

This quote comes from a specific context in *Utopia* when the fictional More in the text, has a conversation denouncing the current situation in sixteen-century England with Cardinal John Morton. However, I want to utilize the idea of “ill-education” in the context of Overdale’s gentrification and revitalization process. In

1987, Overdale, which previously belonged to private speculators, was sold to Robert Landau and Douglas Cohen, two private developers and art dealers. In the summer of 1987, Landau and Cohen, under the Galleria Dorchester trademark, obtained a permit from the City of Montreal, then under the former mayor Jean Doré's administration. With this permit Landau and Cohen were free to proceed with the destruction of almost an entire neighbourhood, considering some of its houses insalubrious, neglected and/or deprived of any architectural interest.<sup>16</sup> Galleria Dorchester's proposed project was to construct two thirty-nine-storey towers of 650 condominium units to be sold to wealthy individuals.<sup>17</sup> A variety of services such as boutiques, restaurants and a pedestrian tunnel, were to be incorporated into the condominium complex in order to create a self-sufficient community.<sup>18</sup> The Overdale community protested this municipal decision because it involved the loss of homes and the displacement of residents. The area in question was composed of 107 apartments occupied in the majority by eighty low-income tenants.<sup>19</sup> Various manifestations and petitions were organized by the neighbourhood in order to save Overdale.<sup>20</sup> Galleria Dorchester's proposition for Overdale's urban revitalization can therefore be seen as an attempt to create a mini utopia. Nevertheless, like the question asked by More in Book I of *Utopia*, if the society suffers its people, such as Overdale tenants, to be of a lower income, and then punishes them for the circumstance to which their society and/or their education disposed them, what conclusion could one draw from this, but that the tenants were first made modest and then punished for their situation by being evicted for their homes?

## **Displacement and the elderly**

In a study entitled *Social Differentials in Metropolitan Residential Displacement*, Barrett A. Lee and David C. Hodge suggest that the people who suffer from displacement in an inner city are conventionally blacks, elderly, women, and other “underclass groups” such as students.<sup>21</sup> The 1987 Overdale neighbourhood, which could be considered to be part of Montreal’s inner city, although not composed of a black community, aligns with Lee and David’s description: it was substantially composed of elderly, low-income residents and a student community.<sup>22</sup>

I would like to discuss the impact of displacement on Overdale’s elderly community. Hazel Craig, an eighty-seven-year-old woman with no relatives was an Overdale tenant at the time of the Galleria Dorchester proposition. In an interview with *The Gazette*, Craig stated “They [the developers] are throwing me out of my home – the only one I ever had.”<sup>23</sup> Craig died one week after having been evicted from the home in which she had lived for forty-eight years.<sup>24</sup> Two other elderly tenants from Overdale were victims of heart attacks after they were relocated.<sup>25</sup>

Furthermore, when talking about her immanent displacement, Craig said: “I’m going to be very lonely. I won’t know anybody. My family is all dead; I’ve got nobody but the neighbours.”<sup>26</sup> In a less empirical analysis, Henig asserts that an older person is subject to being socially affected when displaced because he/she relies on his/her friends’ and neighbours’ support.<sup>27</sup> Consequently, the elderly individual not only finds him/herself victim of great stress that could aggravate their state of health, but also he/she is socially isolated, and thus more susceptible to the development of depression.<sup>28</sup> In an interview with *The Globe and Mail* conducted in 1987, Landau

was reported saying: “If the tenants affected by the deal [the condominiums project], are not happy, they have no right to be.”<sup>29</sup> Landau and Cohen aimed to present a project that they judged ideal for Overdale’s and Montreal’s urban advancement and community, hence a plan that might be considered utopic or a “good-place.” However, the developers seemed to focus only on the *utilitas* (the practical), without seriously taking into account the consequences of their project on Overdale’s tenants, and thus, they fail to respect *honestas* (the moral).

### **Gentrification**

In their essay, Lee and Hodge discuss the theoretical justifications of the displacement of a city’s low-income neighbourhood. They write: “(...) displacement moves also occur because of an excess of demand and supply.”<sup>30</sup> This displacement takes place when a majority of middle income and wealthy households are attracted to a modest neighbourhood. Yet in a 1991 interview with *La Presse*, Landau affirmed that “It is ridicule to suppose that someone would build condos when there is no demand in current market”<sup>31</sup> Thus, according to Landau and Cohen the demand from wealthy patrons for condominiums in downtown Montreal barely existed. Knowing that the displacement experienced by Overdale’s tenants was not then determined by the principle of demand and supply, what then could justify the Overdale proposal? Why were occupied, and therefore functional, houses destroyed to be replaced by condominiums that would satisfy neither the previous nor the potential future tenants?



### **Condominium project as a utopia?**

I want to demonstrate that by demolishing the existing houses on Overdale, the private developers aimed to create a brand new, self-sufficient, isolated and controlled mini-society with idealistic aspirations through the construction of the condominiums on their newly-acquired 50 million dollar lot.<sup>32</sup> Also, as illustrated by the urbanist Jacques Berne in *Projet Overdale: Étude d'Impact (Preliminaire)*, Galleria Dorchester's condominium project positive characteristics are the increase in the street's traffic and security, as well as the encouragement of pedestrian circulation and public transportation.<sup>33</sup> Berne continues by stating that the condominium complex might have had a positive impact on the Montreal economy through the creation of employment on the building site, and in the boutiques and restaurants surrounding the project.<sup>34</sup>

In her essay *The Time of Architecture*, Grosz recognizes that utopia can never be embodied because of the city's element of constant change, of progress.<sup>35</sup> Therefore, a city, or an architectural structure can never reach the state of utopia since they are both a form of embodiment. In fact, as Grosz states: "the utopic is beyond the architectural."<sup>36</sup> Once a building is built, it has a future in which its initial ideal is in constant renegotiation.<sup>37</sup> "The utopic is fundamentally that which has no future" since past and present have no control over the future.<sup>38</sup> Therefore, the building can never be a utopia because its initial perfection is not constant, predictable, nor eternal.<sup>39</sup> Also, Grosz states that utopia provides reassurances of an improved future.<sup>40</sup> Finally, Grosz argues that, in the architectural domain, utopia should be followed as an idealistic model to the advancement of urban design since it enables questions leading

to the enhancement of the actual situation of an architectural design.<sup>41</sup> Striving to attain utopia involves change and helps the advancement and development of a city's narrative and urban design even though utopia could never be reached.

Galleria Dorchester's project reads as an attempt to create an ideal city, isolated from the exterior world and self-sufficient, since it would provide its own standardized security (secure entrance, underground pedestrian passage), services (parking, boutiques, fitness centre, restaurants), interior design, and environment (the building complex and park). The condominium complex, if it had been built, would have accommodated 700 to 800 wealthy citizens.<sup>42</sup> It was designed to be connected to Lucien L'Allier Metro through a pedestrian underground tunnel.<sup>43</sup> Also, the developers announced that instead of accommodating only eighty tenants, the condominiums would be integrated into existing apartment buildings on Overdale and would thus provide a home for 1 200 residents.<sup>44</sup> Moreover, the two condo towers were designed to occupy twenty percent of the 142 000 square foot lot, while the restored low-rise buildings and a 50 000 square foot park would complete the lot.<sup>45</sup> A large park would have been situated in the space between the towers and would have therefore been private and would not have been accessible to the public.<sup>46</sup> Landau even specified that in winter, the condo complex would incorporate an outdoor ice-skating arena.<sup>47</sup> Within the complex there would also have been included restaurants, boutiques, a fitness centre, and an indoor parking with a thousand parking spaces.<sup>48</sup>

If the condominium project had indeed been created, it would have lost its utopian characteristic. In his study, Berne also demonstrates that Landau's and Cohen's project had serious problems.<sup>49</sup> If the condominium complex had indeed

been created, it would have had a direct impact on the increase in real estate values, which would consequently result in an increase in the tax rate.<sup>50</sup> Berne also points out that Galleria Dorchester did not conduct a study on the impact that the ground wind may have on the high condominium towers.<sup>51</sup> He continues by writing that the two high towers would interrupt important lines of sights and would block the sun to their adjacent low-rise buildings.<sup>52</sup> In his conclusion, Berne argues that although there are more positive than negative consequences that would result from the construction of the Galleria Dorchester's condominium complex, the negative outcomes are considerable, and thus should not be neglected since they deal with social concerns.<sup>53</sup> In 1987 Sam Boskey, the former City Councillor, Decarie District, states that the City of Montreal's administration did not protect the tenants' rights in the case of Overdale since it agreed to the destruction of an entire neighbourhood.<sup>54</sup> This would therefore considerably alter the urban fabric of Overdale. Like Berne, Boskey discusses the greatest problem in the project proposed by Galleria Dorchester as being its lack of details and studies.<sup>55</sup>

Perhaps Galleria Dorchester's condominium complex plan is a utopia because it was never created hence the embodiment aspect of the project is non-existent. Thus, using Grosz's words, Landau's and Cohen's project may be regarded as a space of "fantasmatically attainable (...) personal ideals, [and] the projection of idealized futures."<sup>56</sup> The condo complex is frozen in time and space; it has no future since it has never been created. The condominium project was instead replaced by a parking lot.

### **Squat: an ephemeral utopian society?**

I would like to discuss Overdale during the squat that took place in 2001. By definition, to squat is the action undertaken by a homeless individual, a squatter, who takes refuge illegally in a deserted building or one intended for demolition.<sup>57</sup> On July 27, 2001, the *Comité des Sans-Emplois* (Committee of the Unemployed), an anti-poverty organization established in the low-income Centre-Sud neighbourhood, organized a major gathering in Square Saint-Louis.<sup>58</sup> The committee invited Montreal citizens to join them for a squat of an unspecified vacant building in downtown Montreal. The unspecified squatting site had to remain anonymous for the success of this enterprise for it had as its goal to keep the police uninformed and therefore unprepared to intervene. The general objective of this call for a squat was to protest the national and provincial governments', and more particularly the City of Montreal's, subsidy of real estate promoters.<sup>59</sup> These subsidies were aimed at transforming a number of Montreal's inner neighbourhoods, such as Overdale, by destroying old tenancy buildings for the sake of gentrification through the construction of condominiums. Yet gentrification was not the only issue protested by the squat. In 2001, Montreal tenants suffered a housing crisis. The availability of housing in Montreal was under one percent and approximately fifteen thousand individuals were homeless.<sup>60</sup> Of this number, thirty to forty percent were women and four to five thousand were youths.<sup>61</sup> Following the principle of supply and demand, landlords increased the rent and became more selective concerning potential new tenants. Consequently, Montreal's tenants endured an increase of rent, forcing some to move, while some others were simply not able to find a home. The militants who

participated in the protest aimed to reclaim what they considered to be rightfully theirs: a home.

The *Comité des Sans-Emplois*' invitation to squat assembled about five hundred people. Among them were included various local housing and activist organizations such as the *Front d'Action Populaire en Réaménagement Urbain* (FRAPRU), student activists, and the *Anti-Capitalist Convergence* (CLAC).<sup>62</sup> Present as well were Quebec City citizens, and the *Ontario Coalition Against Poverty* (OCAP). From the Square Saint-Louis, the crowd walked along Saint-Denis Street, then on Sherbrooke Street heading towards downtown Montreal, past McGill University towards the secret building, the squatting space. Eventually, the crowd turned on MacKay Street towards René-Lévesque Boulevard. Then, the building to be squatted was announced: Louis-Hippolyte Lafontaine House.<sup>63</sup>

Squatters established themselves in the summer of 2001 inside the abandoned and boarded-up three-storey Lafontaine House. The squatters assumed the house to be the property of the Canadian government, not knowing its rightful owners, Landau and Cohen.<sup>64</sup> A squatter and member of the *Comité des Sans-Emplois*, was reported saying: "Now this house belongs to us and we warmly invite you to move in, to decorate it and renovate it."<sup>65</sup> At home they were indeed. The squatters started to rip off the boards of the house's windows and doors to have access to the building's interior. Banners were attached, and spray-painted slogans such as "housing is not a luxury; it's a right!" began to appear on the building.<sup>66</sup> A little group painted the house's interior as an attempt to decorate it. Surprisingly, the squatters, estimated by the press at fifty individuals were able to stay in the house from July 27 to August 1,

2001 under the close surveillance of the Montreal police.<sup>67</sup> *Food Not Bombs* and the *People's Potato*, two local organizations coordinated an outdoor kitchen, and provided collective meals, such as boiled corn.<sup>68</sup>

The five days that the squatter society established itself in Lafontaine House is an example of a community in quest for a better future. By squatting, this community created a micro-utopian society. In fact, by isolating themselves in Lafontaine House, the squatters were detached from the society's political, social and economical constraints. They identified themselves as squatters, and were therefore all equals. Moreover, by squatting, the squatters took local and idealistic actions in an imperfect reality to seek a better future.<sup>69</sup> By squatting in an abandoned building situated next to a parking lot, they aimed to denounce injustices and fight for their fundamental right to shelter. In a sense, the squatters' radical action highlights the irony of an empty building in ruins and the presence of a parking lot on a site which had, and perhaps still has, the potential to provide a space for new homes. The squat of Lafontaine House ceased on August 1, 2001, when the former Montreal mayor Pierre Bourque offered another building, Centre Préfontaine, to the squatters. And that ended the existence of the mini-utopia society created by the squatters. This follows Grosz's argument that states that utopia has no future.<sup>70</sup> As Grosz has demonstrated, utopia cannot exist because it is restrained in time and space.<sup>71</sup> Therefore, I can say that the society created by the squatters in Lafontaine House, because it was restrained in time and space, was close to an ideal functional society. However, as Grosz reminds us, utopia, or perfection, is unobtainable.

## Garage

At first, I thought the parking lot's main entrance, a white box building with a flat roof, was contemporary with the parking lot itself. This, however, is not the case because the building's architectural style does not correspond with the Overdale parking lot's era (1990s). I contacted the parking lot's representative, Fonda Pappas at *Stationnement Métropolitain Inc.*, a Montreal based enterprise specialized in urban parking spaces, to inquire about the building's history and previous function. Although Pappas did not know the details, I was informed that the building was previously a garage and a car wash. I decided to research the City of Montreal's archives to push further my investigation. It became clear that the Overdale parking entrance was indeed once a garage. Nonetheless, I was not able to find any information on the garage itself. Given that it is today part of Overdale, and therefore part of the lot's narrative and urban design, the garage deserves a closer analysis.

Because of its proximity to a gas station, indicating the presence of an underground oil storage system, and because of its architectural characteristics, I want to present Overdale's garage (now converted into an interior parking space) as originally being a gas station. In *Picturing Vernacular Architecture*, Annmarie Adams discusses the architecture of Irving gas stations in Canada. She writes that the majority of Irving gas stations were white boxy buildings, with flat roofs and considerable amount of glazing. These formal characteristics are connected with International Style modernism, as embraced by the Swiss architect Le Corbusier, and Bauhaus principles and ideas.<sup>72</sup> Adams adds, "Irving stations typically included a one-

to-three-bay garage with rolling glass doors, adjacent to a small office or store, legible by its separate entrance and big windows.”<sup>73</sup>

The Overdale parking building’s façade may be compared to an Irving gas station’s typical design. The former two-bay garage is today the parking lot’s entrance and exit, and interior parking space. The wall between the bays has today been converted into a kiosk. The former Overdale gas station’s office and/or store, has been completely dismantled, yet, the façade still carries the traces of its past. This is visible by the difference in the use of material on the façade. The white brick wall switches style into a flat concrete white wall where the windowed office used to be.

Like the Irving gas station presented by Adams, the Overdale parking lot entrance is composed of vernacular architecture since it adapted its function over time to reflect the environment, cultural and historical context within which it exists. In other words, the garage evolved in parallel with the city or, more precisely, Overdale neighbourhood’s narrative and urban design. It is now part of Overdale’s parking lot, possessing the functions of entrance, exit and interior parking. At present, only the garage’s skeleton remains intact. Thus the garage, as architectural structure and because of its adaptation asset, could be perceived as going against utopia’s stability in time and space. The garage’s structure has been adapted to today’s urban planning by being incorporated into a parking lot system.



### **Parking lot: a non-place**

A parking lot may be regarded as the modern acre for pasture referred to by More in a passage in *Utopia*:

Living in idleness and luxury without doing society any good no longer satisfies [nobles and gentiles]; they have enclosed every acre for pasture; they destroy houses and abolish towns, (...) – but only for sheep-barns. And as if enough of your land were not already wasted on game-preserves and forests for hunting wild animals, these worthy men turn all human habitations and cultivated fields back to wilderness. (...). Thus, (...), the tenants are ejected. One way or another, these wretched people – men, women, husbands, wives, (...) – are forced to move out.<sup>74</sup>

Instead of accommodating sheep, the modern pasture field offers car space, which in the case of Overdale's parking lot involved the ejection of tenants. In addition, as explained by Anthony King in his essay, "Parking," a parking space is the contemporary stable where horses are replaced by cars.<sup>75</sup> Following King's argument, within the city's urban design, narratives sometimes repeat themselves. In its earliest incarnation as a living space, Overdale had stables on its surface, and now it is occupied by a parking lot and a building which used to be a garage.

The parking lot and the Lafontaine house ruin are part of today's Overdale narrative and urban design, whose future is undetermined (fig. 9, 23). The narrative of Overdale, or at least its north side, is today what Marc Augé coined a "non-place." According to Augé, a non-place refers to a space which has lost its identity and which consists of transit, circulation, communication and consumption.<sup>76</sup> A non-place is a space which does not incorporate the earlier places, a space surrendered to solitary

individuality that never existed in pure form.<sup>77</sup> In fact, Augé argues that non-places create solitary environments where the connections between people and their surroundings are made of words and symbols.<sup>78</sup> A non-place deals only with individuals.<sup>79</sup> A parking lot exists only through the words and symbols it evokes for the individuals transitioning through it. These words and symbols might be: parking, car, yellow lines, fees, hour, handicapped space, pay here, exit, entrance, opened and closed (fig. 24, 25). Therefore a parking lot is nothing much more than what Augé would refer to as a “banal utopia, a cliché which offers us instructions for use.”<sup>80</sup>

In general, nobody is really excited when they enter a parking lot. People are looking forward to the place they will go after having passed through the parking lot. A parking lot is like an airport; in normal circumstances, one is only excited to go to the airport either to welcome a family member or a friend, or to take a plane which will lead to a destination, an adventure or a come-together of some sort. The true source of excitement is not the airport or the parking lot itself, but rather the destination following the transition in the airport’s and parking lot’s space. Thus, like the airport, the parking lot is a place of transition, a space shaped in parallel to definite ends.<sup>81</sup>

I would like to connect Augé’s “non-place” with Grosz’s account of utopia and as her suggestion that the “no place is the good place.”<sup>82</sup> Is Augé’s non-place the same as Grosz’s good place? Perhaps it is. Maybe the parking lot, a non-place, is the good-place. Being a non-place and a good-place, the parking lot could thus be

considered as a utopia. Yet, as More and, more explicitly, Grosz has argued, utopia is a fantasy and could never survive time, because time implies change.

### **Lafontaine House**

As for Lafontaine House, a building classified as a heritage monument by the City of Montreal in 1988, it is now barricaded and inaccessible to any individuals except those who enter the house illegally.<sup>83</sup> In the late 1980s, the house has lost its authenticity: its interior was completely altered by Landau and Cohen. As Jean Bélisle stated in his essay *Une résidence oubliée: la maison de Louis-Hippolite LaFontaine*: “There is absolutely nothing left.”<sup>84</sup> For the architect Michael Fisher’s point of view, “The renovations are a joke. That’s vandalism, that’s not fixing it up. They renovated the inside structure completely, there’s virtually nothing authentic left.”<sup>85</sup> In a 1987 interview with *The Globe and Mail*, Claudette Daniel, archivist at the Canadian Centre for Architecture (CCA), said that only part of the house’s original 1845 front façade is intact.<sup>86</sup> Today, still belonging to Landau and Cohen, the house is non-functional and its future is irresolute. In what then heritage classification is useful in this case since the house is not protected, maintained or utilized?

### **Conclusion**

The city’s palimpsest says a lot about its history, communities and development: what was once there, what has been erased and yet continues to appear on the urban space. As argued in this essay, Overdale lot’s palimpsest is composed of a multi-layered urban planning: Lafontaine domain, low-income housings, a condominium project, a

garage and a car wash as well as a parking lot. Also, the city's palimpsest is composed of a multilayered narrative, which is directly related to the city's succession of urban designs. This narrative can be read as: the domain of a former prime minister of Canada, the displacement of an elderly community, a gentrification process for a neighborhood revitalization through a condominium project, an ephemeral squatters community, a non-place, and a house in ruins covered with graffiti. Overdale's present urban design is a structural reminder of a past society's unachieved and unattained dreams and ideals. Overdale's various utopian aspirations have led to no improvements in either architectural design or urban planning. Thus, at present Overdale lot is a space in limbo, an example of urban development failure since it ceased to initiate a continual questioning of ideals. Overdale's palimpsest is thus put on hold for an indeterminate period.<sup>87</sup>

- <sup>1</sup> Jane Rendell, "Architectural-Writing," *The Journal of Architecture* 10, no. 3 (2005): 257 and 260.
- <sup>2</sup> Rendell, 261.
- <sup>3</sup> Jean Bélisle, "Une Résidence Oubliée: La Maison de Louis-Hippolite LaFontaine," *Annales d'Histoire de l'Art Canadien* 20, no. 1-2 (1999): 51.
- <sup>4</sup> Eamonn Canniffe, "Narratives," *Urban Ethic: Design in the Contemporary City*, (London and New York: Routledge Taylor & Francis Group, 2006), 112.
- <sup>5</sup> Thomas More, *Utopia*, Georges M. Logan and Robert M. Adams, eds., first published in 1516, (Cambridge and New York: Cambridge University Press, 2002), xi-xii.
- <sup>6</sup> More, xi.
- <sup>7</sup> More, xi.
- <sup>8</sup> Elizabeth Grosz, "The Time of Architecture," *Embodied Utopias: Gender, Social Change and the Modern Metropolis*, Amy Bingaman, Lise Sanders and Rebecca Zorach, eds., (London and New York: Routledge, 2002), 267.
- <sup>9</sup> Grosz, 267.
- <sup>10</sup> Serge Joyal to Christina Cameron, 8 July 1987, *Maison Louis-Hippolyte Lafontaine*, (Montreal: Parti Libéral du Canada (Québec)).
- <sup>11</sup> Quebec National Archives, Montreal "Transferees' Sales of Bourne's Bankruptcy to Sir Louis-Hippolyte Lafontaine," *Minutier J. Belle*, no. 10 764, (Montreal: Quebec National Archives, February 3, 1849).
- <sup>12</sup> Quebec National Archives.
- <sup>13</sup> More, xi.
- <sup>14</sup> More, xxiii.
- <sup>15</sup> More, 20.
- <sup>16</sup> Grinch Investments LTD, *Proposition d'Entente et de Contrats de vente avec Notes Explicatives Entre Grinch Investments Ltd et la Ville de Montréal*, March 25, 1987, annexe II.
- <sup>17</sup> Isabelle Paré, "Les Locataires d'Overdale Reviennent à la Charge," *Le Devoir*, October 5, 1990, np.
- <sup>18</sup> Galleria Dorchester, *Galleria Dorchester: Un projet de Qualité Réanime le Centre-Sud de Montréal*, August 17, 1987, 30.
- <sup>19</sup> Front d'Action Populaire en Réaménagement Urbain (FRAPRU), "Overdale: de 1988 à 2001," *Le FRAPRU Frappe Encore*, no. 100 (Fall 2003), <http://www.frapru.qc.ca/no100/overdale.html>, (accessed April 20, 2008).
- <sup>20</sup> Front d'Action Populaire en Réaménagement Urbain (FRAPRU).
- <sup>21</sup> Barrett A. Lee and David C. Hodge, "Social Differentials in Metropolitan Residential Displacement," *Gentrification, Displacement and Neighbourhood Revitalization*, John Palen and Bruce London, eds., (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1984), 143.
- <sup>22</sup> Front d'Action Populaire en Réaménagement Urbain (FRAPRU).
- <sup>23</sup> Charlie Fidelman, "MCM Caught in Overdale Crossfire," *The Gazette*, July 11, 1987, B5.
- <sup>24</sup> Overdale Association of Tenants, *Why Are Montreal Citizens Being Arrested?* A poster available at the Canadian Centre for Architecture, EPH M (ID 89-B 1 0247), 1987.
- <sup>25</sup> Overdale Association of Tenants.
- The impact of displacement on the elderly population of Overdale's community is not an isolated case. As argued by Jeffrey R. Henig in *Gentrification and Displacement of the Elderly: An Empirical Analysis*, an unpredictable change in one's lifestyle is an aggressive source of psychological and physiological stress for the elderly (p.171). Elderly populations are subject to suffer more from displacement because they have a more pronounced routine, convention and habits, as well as they rely on a steady and predictable milieu (p.171). Scientific studies have shown evidence that elders' psychological stress, when combined with their physiological changes, such as the diminution of visual and hearing capacities, and of balance, has the potential to make "adjustments to environmental change more difficult" (p.171). Also, some elderly persons found their ability to absorb stress diminished because of the changes occurring in their brains and nervous systems, such as the slowing of blood flow to the brain and the gradual loss of neurons (p.171).
- <sup>26</sup> Fidelman, "MCM Caught in Overdale Crossfire," B 5.
- <sup>27</sup> Henig, 171-172.
- <sup>28</sup> Henig, 172.
- <sup>29</sup> Oakland Ross, "Mansion Set to Go: Montreal Developers Fight History's Ghost," *The Globe and Mail*, June 27, 1987, A 1-4.

- <sup>30</sup> Lee and Hodge, 143.
- <sup>31</sup> “Il est ridicule de penser que quelqu’un va construire des condos quand le marché ne s’y prête pas.” Jean-Paul Soulié, “Overdale: Il Faut Tout Reprendre à Zéro,” *La Presse*, October 11, 1991, np.
- <sup>32</sup> Alan Hustak, “Heritage Site Moves Closer to Salvation,” *The Gazette*, August 15, 2006, A7. With the mere exceptions of Lafontaine House, the garage, later converted into the parking lot’s entrance, on corner René-Lévesque Boulevard and Lucien L’Allier Street and the gas station on René-Lévesque Boulevard.
- <sup>33</sup> Berne, section E.
- <sup>34</sup> Berne, section E.
- <sup>35</sup> Grosz, 265, 267-268.
- <sup>36</sup> Grosz, 267.
- <sup>37</sup> Grosz, 268.
- <sup>38</sup> Grosz, 270, 272.
- <sup>39</sup> Grosz, 269.
- <sup>40</sup> Grosz, 270.
- <sup>41</sup> Grosz, 277.
- <sup>42</sup> Bélisle, 48.
- <sup>43</sup> Ville de Montréal, *Rapport d’Étape de la Commission de l’Aménagement, de l’Habitation et des Travaux Publiques Présenté au Conseil Municipal: Projet Galleria Dorchester inc.*, September 21, 1987, 10.
- <sup>44</sup> Ville de Montréal, 10.
- <sup>45</sup> Galleria Dorchester, 30.
- <sup>46</sup> Michel C. Auger, “Audiences Publiques sur le Projet Galeries Dorchester,” *Le Devoir*, August 19, 1987, np.
- <sup>47</sup> Galleria Dorchester, 30.
- <sup>48</sup> Galleria Dorchester, 30.
- <sup>49</sup> Jacques Berne, *Projet Overdale: Étude d’Impact (Préliminaire)*, Service de l’Habitation et du Développement Urbain, Ville de Montréal, September 15, 1987, section E.
- <sup>50</sup> Berne, section E.
- <sup>51</sup> Berne, section E.
- <sup>52</sup> Berne, section E.
- <sup>53</sup> Berne, section E.
- <sup>54</sup> Sam Boskey, “Why I voted Against the Overdale Project,” *The Monitor*, October 27, 1987, 16.
- <sup>55</sup> Boskey, 16.
- <sup>56</sup> Grosz, 265.
- <sup>57</sup> Comité des Sans-Emplois, “Montreal: Opening for a Squat,” *Infoshop News*, July 3, 2001, <http://www.infoshop.org/inews/article.php?story=01/07/03/0281377>, (accessed April 21, 2008).
- <sup>58</sup> Jaggi Singh, “Montreal: Housing Action Re-Appropriates Empty Downtown Building,” *Indymedia Montreal and the Quebec Alternative Media Centre (CMAQ)*, July 28, 2001, <http://squat.net/en/news/mont280701.html>, (accessed April 28, 2008).
- <sup>59</sup> Comité des Sans-Emplois.
- <sup>60</sup> Comité des Sans-Emplois.
- <sup>61</sup> Silvia Galipeau, “Pour un Squat à Montréal,” *La Presse*, July 28, 2001, np.
- <sup>62</sup> Singh.
- <sup>63</sup> Singh.
- <sup>64</sup> Jeanne Corriveau, “Les squatteurs sur le qui-vive,” *Le Devoir*, July 30, 2001, np.
- <sup>65</sup> “Maintenant, cette maison-là est à nous autres, et on vous invite très chaleureusement à l’habiter, à l’aménager, à la rénover.” Galipeau.
- <sup>66</sup> Singh.
- <sup>67</sup> Front d’Action Populaire en Réaménagement Urbain (FRAPRU).
- <sup>68</sup> Singh.
- <sup>69</sup> Herbert Muschamp, “Service Not Included,” *Visions of Utopia*, (Oxford and New York: Oxford UP and New York Public Library, 2003), 29.
- <sup>70</sup> Grosz, 270.
- <sup>71</sup> Grosz, 265.

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<sup>72</sup> Annmarie Adams, "Picturing Vernacular Architecture: Thaddeus Holownia's Photographs of Irving Gas Stations," *Material History Review* 61, (Spring 2005): 37-38.

<sup>73</sup> Adams, 38.

<sup>74</sup> More, 18-19.

<sup>75</sup> Anthony King, "Parking," *City A-Z*, Steve Pile and Nigel Thrift, eds., (London and New York: Routledge, 2000), 174.

<sup>76</sup> Marc Augé, *Non-places: Introduction to an Anthropology of Supermodernity*, (London and New York: Verso, 1995), 108.

<sup>77</sup> Augé, 78.

<sup>78</sup> Augé, 94.

<sup>79</sup> Augé, 111.

<sup>80</sup> Augé, 122.

<sup>81</sup> Augé, 94.

<sup>82</sup> Augé, 267.

<sup>83</sup> Frédérique Doyon, "Nouveaux Espoirs de Sauvetage à l'Horizon pour la Maison Lafontaine," *Le Devoir*, December 18, 2007, B8.

<sup>84</sup> Bélisle, 57, "Il ne reste absolument rien."

<sup>85</sup> Eleonor Brown, "Overdale Site Is a Parking Lot," *Montreal Mirror*, August 8, 1991, Housing Section.

<sup>86</sup> Ross, A 1-4.

<sup>87</sup> Finally, Overdale's polemic is not an isolated case of controversies, displacement and urban revitalization. In fact, today another Montreal neighbourhood, Griffintown, finds itself on the verge of an urban change. A new urban development project for Griffintown has been proposed and recently accepted by the City of Montreal. The issue was given a lot of importance by the media such as *Radio-Canada*, *La Presse* and *The Gazette*. On April 27, 2008, residents of Griffintown protested the City of Montreal's decision proposed by private developers by having a mock funeral procession for their neighbourhood. The present Griffintown community asks for more housing and less commerce in their neighbourhood. It seems as though the urban revitalisation project will go through, and only time can demonstrate how it will affect an area of the city that was of great importance in a time when the neighbourhood was more industrialized than it will be in its future. (Charlie Fidelman, "Project Foes Gather to Praise Griffintown," *The Gazette*, April 28, 2008, A4.)

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