

Turcot Yards: On the ephemerality of physical presence.

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In various conversations that I had with colleagues while researching for this article, when I brought up the fact that I was writing on the Turcot Yards and Interchange, I was continuously met with a look of sheer astonishment. It was hard for them to grasp why someone invested in Performance Studies and dance would dedicate time to study a highway and an urban interchange. What intrigued me from the beginning in this particular site was how it relates the movement of a city (in this case, the history of Montreal) with a body in motion (from the collective body to the individual one).

Can the history of urban space also be the history of the body? The story of the Turcots has its own answer to this question. What has become one of the largest empty urban areas in North America has started as a major railroad center, inaugurated in the first decade of the Twentieth Century. In the sixties it became the terrain of an urban highway, designed as the modern salvation for transport in Montreal, hosting a complex of interchanges that is soon to be demolished and re-planned, since it has become an unpleasant reminder of modern taste. Abandoned in 2002, the Turcot Yards has recently become a site of struggle between the community, who has begun to discuss the possibility for a park to be created in the area, and private investors, who see in the site bordering major communities, such as the one of Notre-Dame-de-Grâce and of Saint Henri, an enormous potential for real estate investments.

When in 2003 the government bought the land back from the Canadian National Railways the administration and holding buildings were demolished, and the records of what the site had once been were erased. This left behind an giant terrain, which is said to be the largest empty urban area in North America. After 100 years of train activities though, the soil is contaminated and because the costs of cleansing are high, as of today its future remains uncertain.

My interest in this site began as a curiosity, since I am often attracted to urban spaces that are on the verge of disappearing, as is currently the case of the Turcots. I am intrigued by the fact that urban settings (that I consider to be in motion as much as a body) are usually taken as a reference because of an apparent stability.

Through his seminal text entitled *What is a City?* (1937), Lewis Mumford was one of the first theorists to take a step towards the understanding of the city as a dynamic construction. In his writing, the architectural elements are established primarily by the actors of a city. He defines a city as “a geographic plexus, an economic organization, an institutional process, a theatre for social action, and an aesthetic symbol of collective unity” (185). In his theory the physical, or built elements, become secondary to the relationship to the natural environment and to the community. Nevertheless, the fact that the city becomes a process, a stage for human actions that establishes the possibilities for common life, means that it is still understood as a stable construction (at least more stable than human actions). It is only in more recent urbanism and architecture theory that the dynamics of the pedestrian, its movements and rhythms, once considered to be determined by the environment are understood to be simultaneously and actively

transforming the city and the form of the city itself becomes a continuous sequence of dynamic of events.

Recently, architects and writers Arakawa and Madaleine Gins have made a theoretical move in which they've propose the understanding of architecture as a mobile element, imprinted and transformed by human actions. They defend the idea that architectural settings do not pre-exist the subject's actions; first by defining subject in a way that dismantles its dichotomist constitution as body and subjectivity, transforming it in what they name as organism.body.that.persons. They affirm that "It may seem that an organism has a person with which it is associated, but rather than actually having a person, an organism has a long-term association only with behaving as a person" (1). Then, secondly, with their concept of landing sites they construct a theory that "bypasses subject-object distinctions" (22), exploring the city and the subject's bodies as mutually constructing and defining each other's shapes.

Through Arakawa and Gins's lenses at the same time that the body becomes a site (and an organism) that behaves as a person, architecture develops a fast dynamic, of being moved by this body. For them there are no sites, but landing sites, which are space felt. Landing sites are a recombination of bodies, (environmental bodies and human ones), that are organizational at the same time as they express affective relations. In other words, a site only exists when landed at a body. It is not the body that lands on a site, creating and shaping itself in relation to the environment, but, according to Arakawa and Gins, the site lands through and with the body, being created only in the very moment of perception. With this theory they intend for the development of an

architecture that considers the body in its physical essence (biological and spatial) and avoid the notion of a person (static subjectifications).

Using an interesting methodological strategy, they transform the body into an architectural event, and are able to personify architecture. Arakawa and Gins position the body in the top of the spatial hierarchical system and defend that architecture should serve this body. They propose a practice that would “(...) have the architectural surroundings themselves, by virtue of how they are formed, pose questions directly to the body. The unit for consideration, that which to be measured and assessed, should be the body taken together with its surroundings. How to put all that one is as a body to best use becomes the [architect’s] chief ethical concern.”(xx)

One of the main critiques made to their work is that they were not considering immaterial aspects of the subject and their relations to spatiality. Nevertheless they have established diverse levels in which the encounter between these two bodies and the immediate creation of the world takes place, which take place through spatiality but access other layers of being and experience. These levels are described as perceptual landing sites, imaging landing sites and dimensionalizing landing sites and encompass distinct ways in which the *body.person* engages with the architectural body (7).

In the context of the Turcot Yards the philosophy developed by Arakawa and Gins becomes important as it allows us to understand the ways through which such a site not only defines how bodies move, but how each body determines and invents the site through its movements and the ways it allows space to land in the body. In this process environment is incessantly inscribing in the individual, and being engraved by it through its movement, and not only framing directions and encounters between subjects.

I'd like to stress at this point that, according to their theory, everything that is perceived can be a landing site: a passer-by, a bridge, a river, a building, a shadow, the corner of a table or even memories that are recalled in relation to a spatial practice. Columns, graffiti, a pile of dirty snow and the vast absence of bodies become a landing site for those walking at the Turcot Yards.

Perceptual landing sites refer to an internal report of what the site is and the definition of its features; it is about locating a body in relation to physical constraints. It refers to the special awareness of the moment. Imaging landing sites refer to a response, a sited awareness that "presents areas of the world without mimicking" (8). It refers to elements that may not be taken into consideration in the moment perception of a site is being assimilated; imaging landing sites are awareness without becoming a point of focus and includes all the imaging that bounces off, which surrounds a person. Dimensionalizing landing sites define positioning, coordinating bouncing information and assembling the world into a sense of kinesthetic depth (8), building the relation between the outer site (environment) and the inner site (body).

The understanding of site as an element that more than framing presence, lands into the subject, is essential in order to comprehend the ways through which physical and functional changes on the Turcot Yards, and even its abandonment, have directly influenced how bodies move in Montreal. On the other hand, the conceptualization of the body as an environment will allow us to recognize how ephemeral and almost invisible actions of single bodies in movement (the ones of the artists) can influence our understanding and memories of that site. In this regard it is crucial to conceive subject and architecture as elements of the same physical quantity, so that apart from it's

dimensions a body, a gesture, can impact a site as giant as the Turcots (at least on how we conceptualize and remember it's history).

The city is created by presence and the body is invented in the very moment it lands as a site. A body lands as a site when it cuts space and it fills up the environment; it moves while being moved, it frame while framing. This notion opposes the predominant idea that architecture provides the spatial dimension of cities, while bodies grant the temporal one, in which case a body would land on a site. In the article *Comparing Cities*, Alan Blum engages in the discussion on how mobility and knowing diverse cities allows the conceptualization of one's own living environment, and states that "the distinction between temporal and spatial is ontologically decisive to any action because it derives from the primordial relation of self to other: to recover constancy in what changes (temporality) and to discover diversification in what persists (spatiality)." (22)

Once there is talk about reshaping a city's area, and people witness the juxtaposition of times of a certain location this twisting of space-time relations becomes more graspable. When past is brought into discussion to define future uses of a site, the present becomes volatile and the future is closer than ever. The idea of space in motion becomes more graspable when reshaping is eminent, which is the case of the Turcot Yards nowadays. Blum writes about the persistence of the past and the inevitability of the future in relation to the present and states: "if the past is viewed as obsolete and the future as unknowable, we have the conditions for a nihilistic conception of a present unhinged in time" (23). This happens when it is being decided who should the site serve, which activities should be performed there, how it should be shaped. Should the Turcots remain

a site of play or be dispersed as a zone of passage? Can its past be effaced and the land taken as a neutral and empty lot, ready to be filled?

When reshaping of a site is eminent, it becomes clear how space is performed differently and heterogenic by each individual and how much affect is invested in the use of an urban area, so that the negotiations that will define its future uses become a delicate process that need to articulate individual and community interests.

Through this violent movement of destruction and reconstruction that overlaps past, present and future the city starts to be seen as a flexible body. The city, as described by Michel de Certeau, is an operational concept, a spatialization that allows the individual to produce an individual space (to perform a body in relation to an outer space), to produce a synchronic system (to perform time in relation to a shared history). The city is “a universal and anonymous subject” (94) to which we all relate. Although these relations are built based in the collection of stable materials that constitute a city, de Certeau defends that the individual, through acts of every-day life is constantly destabilizing this constitution. To him “This is the way in which the Concept- city functions; a place of transformations and appropriations, the object of various kinds of interference but also a subject that is constantly enriched by new attributes.” (95)

The notion of entanglement and destabilization happening between these two sites, the one of the city and the one of the individual, through movements of the body is not a metaphor for spatial practices but an actual relation between bodies of two different magnitudes that can be better understood in relation to the philosophical concept of embodiment. Embodiment theory includes the study of the ways through which individuals learn how to perform patterns from the environment. Many theories explore

specificities (in aspects such as gender, social and power relations) of how physical and spatial constraints are engraved in the surface of the body, and thus implicated in behavioral models. Theories of embodiment have addressed the issues of self and environment in order to understand the subject as a phenomenon that is more complex than subjectivity and consciousness, since it considers the intrinsic relation between materials (and architecture, for extension) and the shaping of the subject. How are we bound and influenced by the sites that surround our bodies?

In the work of Elizabeth Grosz, she highlights different manners through which identity has become related to spatiality. This author reminds us that embodiment represents the opposite of utopias in architectural theory as the first refers to what is realized in the world and the spatialization of concepts, while the second is a conceptualization of spaces (268). She stresses that in order to reconceive a body beyond rethinking its matter and form, one must also alter the environment, since this is where the body defines “its spatio-temporal location” (84). She affirms that bodies are not “culturally pregiven”, but constantly being produced by the built environment. Grosz also theorizes about a rapid transformation of a cultural milieu, in a way that a body is brought into re-creation involuntarily. According to her “This is not to say that there are not uncondusive city environments, but rather there is nothing intrinsic about the city which makes it alienating or unnatural. The question is not simply how to distinguish conducive from uncondusive environments, but to examine how different cities, different socio-cultural environments actively produce the bodies of their inhabitants.” (109)

Although her theory has focused on questions of gender, which we won't specifically elaborate in this essay, Grosz explores how a site inscribes the particularities

of a culture on the surface of the body, presenting the city as a crucial factor in the production of corporeality. According to Grosz,

“The city is one of the crucial factors in the social production of (sexed) corporeality: the built environment provides the context and coordinates for contemporary forms of body. The city provides the order and organization that automatically links otherwise unrelated bodies: it is the condition and milieu in which corporeality is socially, sexually, and discursively produced” (104).

Grosz challenges architecture to consider more than surfaces and *outsides*, hence to become a study of dynamisms and movements, rather than of stasis. Nevertheless, her focus on the interconnections between city and body is still on how the first is shaping the later.

Richard Sennet is also among the theorists who have established a framework for the study of the body and the city as interrelated entities. He emphasizes corporeal kinetics as constitutive of the urban environment in the book entitled *Flesh and Stone*, where he writes that “The new understanding of the body coincided with the birth of modern capitalism, and helped bring into being the great social transformation we call individualism. The modern individual is, above all, a mobile human being.” (256)

Within his work it is suggested that the history of body displacement is the history of the city. According to Sennet’s essay *Moving Bodies- Harvey’s Revolution*, as a result from the knowledge of the structure of the body, its circulatory systems, culminating in the development of new plans and expectations in regards to human health in the eighteenth century all urban planning started to be developed in relation to the body in motion. Sennet affirms that “planners sought to make the city a place in which people could move and breath freely, a city of flowing arteries and veins through which people streamed like healthy blood corpuscles” (256)

The uses of and planning for the Turcot Yards are a good example of how the developments on the ideas of the body in the twentieth century have influenced the shaping of large urban areas. The investigation of how this site has changed in the past century entitles us to understand important shifts in last century's body politics. This yard's history is embedded with our passion for speed and valorization of privacy; it exposes our discomfort in sharing space with strangers, and our resistance to accepting productive and unproductive time, functional and nonfunctional spaces as society's necessities. Henri Lefebvre in *The Right to the City* defends "the need for creative activity, for the *oeuvre* (not only of products and consumable material goods), of the need for information, symbolism, the imaginary and play" (147), arguing that more than establishing spaces for open encounters in the city, it is also necessary to create a city in which time for those actions is possible to exist.

Let us look at some facts in the history of the Turcot Yards in order to identify how bodies in motion have been reshaping the city at the same time they create affects with specific urban areas, embedding form and structure with meaning. Some details in its history give us important clues on how movement and flux have been managed in Montreal and will also enable us to understand the importance of this site to Montreal's history. This site has changed owners in the past years for a couple of times, what makes the work of the researcher rather difficult when it comes to find first source information. The archives of transport Montreal, or of Grand railway declare not to have any information on the Yards, because it does not rely under their jurisdiction any longer. Michel Leduc has collected important numbers and facts of this city's area, which he published in the book *The Turcot Story* (2004). He has interviewed former workers of the

yard and accessed original photographs that were the source of accurate descriptions on the architecture and structure of the facilities during the railway period.

According to Leduc's recount, by the time Philippe Turcot sold his lands in Saint Henri in 1847 for individual housing, the first railroad in the Montreal area was already nine years old. The Grand Train Railway bought the land in 1903, the same year that they began the constructions of the running sheds, which were projected in hope to decongest Point St-Charles. In 1909 the Turcots occupied an area larger than the Park Mont Royal with a total of 10 million square feet. In order to build straight lines the government drained the river, but because the soil was so damp it required tons of stones and gravels for a good foundation. Montreal was the center of the railways in Canada for the first half of the twentieth century and this activity was responsible for many urban developments and for the economy of this city.

This station, part of the longest and most complex rail line on Montreal Island was where the largest Roundhouse in Canada, accommodating 40 locomotives, was built in 1906. This important building was located around the turntable, a structure responsible for moving the locomotives into different directions, since they would only move forward by themselves. The roundhouse had tracks radiating from it, pointing to garage, stalls and doors. It would be extended and reconstructed in 1940. It is astonishing to conceive that a whole transportation system and mechanics have been conceived thinking its motor system as moving only in one direction, depending on a secondary structure to accommodate its course. At the Turcot there were coal chutes, sand facilities, steamfitters stores, carpenter shop, oil stores, blacksmith shop, lumber and iron stores and

offices. The site had sleeping quarters, recreational facilities, dining rooms and a library, for out of town crews.

Many transformations in the Yards took place throughout the time when the Turcot was the center for all railway transportations in Canada (a period that would end in the 50's only), such as the construction of a station that served only to greet First Class passenger's, known as the Turcot West, built in the 1940's. It wasn't enough to separate first and second classes in the wagons, but there was a demand to greet them differently when trains arrived in their destination.

The movement at the Turcot was of about 128 locomotives dispatched daily, a number that raised during World War II to an average of 138. In the 1950's, due to a coal shortage, it would reduce its activities to about 215 locomotives a week. It was also in the 50's that there was the first employees strike. By this time there was already a sign of the slow decline of its activities, as the yard held about 142 dead locomotive.

With the restriction of steam locomotives entering Central Station, it was at the Turcot that the trains changed power for the final 6 km of the trip. Steam power operations ended only in 1960, the same time passenger operations ceased. The Turcot still served the diesel/electrics for another year, and then was finally closed.

In 1962, after two arson related fires the administration decided that the buildings be demolished; the roundhouse structure was the first to be dismantled. The site became a terminal to handle containers and trailers between road and rail transport vehicles. It was still vital in railroad activities, although it did not handle any trains, only the industrial content which was transferred from the trains to the truck trailers to transport into town. Since the yard could not be expanded, and therefore would accompany the development

of the town in the following decades, this activity was transferred to the Taschereau Yard in 2002 (Leduc 40).

Up until today, in a vast country such as Canada the railroads play an important role in the consolidation of national identity, while establishing the possibility for travel across the land. The Trans-Canada railroad is said to hold the country together and it represents the potential kinesthesia between the individual and the land: it is a chain of possibilities of moving together. In this regard Alan Blum affirms: “Mobility and the capacity to move about has always given us opportunities to compare and contrast, to collect and differentiate the same and the others” (19). The Turcot Yards were a point of intersection between cities, between communities and for a period of time it was highlighted as an important city’ area, since the activity of traveling played an important role in the definition of local identity. After seeing the disappearance of passengers it was appointed to be a place where goods were rearranged from the trains to the trucks. Before interrupting completely its rail activities, in the late Sixties, the Turcot became an important part of the plans to transform the city into a metropolis of the future.

Andre Lortie points out that Montreal, by the end of the sixties had become Canada’s “uncontested metropolis” (76). The modernist atmosphere was widespread in local and international politics and it started to become visible through art, and in particular, architecture. Montreal had created a city planning department in 1941 and had been investing in a system of urban development based on projections that were predicting the city do reach a total of 4.8 millions inhabitants by the beginning of the 80’s (77). Place Ville Marie, a project developed by Webb and Knapp, craved in downtown Montreal a 150,000 square meters of office space (81), signaled the start of a building

boom. The city would redesign its “ordinary network of streets” (85) into a system of highways, viaducts that end up creating structures that end up creating a centralization of flux on the Montreal Island (87). The new system of roads segregated the suburbs from the downtown area (92).

In the years that preceded Expo '67, the international fair that marked the celebration of the hundred years of the creation of Canada, the urban changes in Montreal became even more intense. The World Exhibition became the “moving force behind an ambitious program of urban development” (Lortie 94). The celebration of a country’s invention culminates with the establishment and ruling of new ways through which bodies would cross the space in its assumed metropolis.

According to an article published in 1967 in a traveling magazine (Ventura, the traveler’s word, APRIL/MAY 1967) Mayor Jean Drapeau was acknowledged for having transformed Montreal from a city ridden with crime, into the city of the future. The first measure of the major, curiously, was to hire a commander from Scotland Yard and an ex chief of *Paris Sureté* to fight crime in the city in order to attract investors. In the magazine’s article the crime rates are reportedly to have dropped 50% in his first year of mandate.

In the same magazine the creation of the metro system is being celebrated and one can see a picture of its opening, in 1966, with all workers and their families, invited by the major to take the first ride inaugurating this new way of crossing space. The metro construction took less than four years to be completed and this system was essential in order to manage the expected 30 million visitors that would come to Montreal during the six months of the Expo '67. Because of all the architectural and urbanistic changes,

Drapeau's plans for expo '67 were called "*dreapeunian dreams*", in allusion to the changes promoted by Napoleon's in France. The political, financial, and social investment was so intense that it took less than three years for all to be planned and built (even the artificial island that would host the seventy pavilions). He envisioned not the preparation of an international fair, but rather used the event as an excuse to build and plan a city. For this reason, from the beginning the mayor was not intending to return the pavilions to the participant countries, the common procedure. In the interview he conceded for the *Venture* magazine Drapeau declared: "Everything is built temporary, but then we know that nothing lasts longer than temporary" (70). During this period montrealers went through the re-invention of their cities, but also of their own bodies, that would be establishing new spatial relations and affects with recent developed sites.

The notion of the transformation the city went through for the Expo '67 is rather important to understand how a major structure such as the one of the Turcot Yards and the whole system of railroad transportations became obsolete within a decade. It was through the changes from the late '60s that Montrealers started to have a city shaped in favor of automobiles<sup>1</sup>, a topic that brings us back to the analysis of the Turcot area.

Among all the urban changes Highway 20 was built along what used to be the railway and an interchange was erected in each end of the Turcot Yard, which was inaugurated just before the opening of Expo '67. The Turcot Interchange remains up until today a gathering of 28 structures with a total of 167, 000 m<sup>2</sup>, and 25 highways that sum 12.76 km. The complex is composed of four Interchanges: the Turcot, De la Vérendrye, Angrion and Montréal- Ouest.

During the sixties the automobile became a symbol of freedom and highways were thought of as beautiful structures, as can be seen in the description elaborated by Lawrence Halprin in his book *Freeways*, from 1966:

“Freeways out in the countryside, with their graceful sinuous, curvilinear patterns, are like great free-flowing paintings in which, through participation, the sensations of motion through space are experienced. In cities the great overhead concrete structures with their haunches tied to the ground and the cast flowing cantilevers rippling above the local streets stand like enormous sculptures marching through the architectonic caverns. These vast and beautiful works of engineering speak to us in the language of a new scale, a new attitude in which high-speed motion and the qualities of change are not mere abstract conceptions but a vital part of our everyday experiences.”(17)

The passage from railroads to highways represent a major transformation in regard to the experience of traveling, with the establishment of a new scale of speed and distances and, as a consequence, a new pattern of body behavior. However the trains had also represented an important switch on how bodies relate while crossing public spaces. Richard Sennet gives a clear example of the delicate relation between structures of motion and behavior models when he relates that the sitting plan from the trains, derived from the horse-drawn coaches provoked major embarrassment once the noise was gone, with the advent of the engines. Passengers did not know how to act with the closeness of their bodies. With the smoothness of the railways people tended to read by themselves or look silently out the window (343).

Trains were though still a shared space, where body encounters were carefully organized. The collective experience of the Railway Station was a very important one. They were carefully planned, not only in terms of functionality, but also according to an aesthetic that established the city’s identity to all travelers.

It was indeed only with the culture of automobiles that transport would become a private and individual enterprise. As a result of the diminishing public places the body also started to disappear (Solnit 11) and with the dependency on the automobile, an obsolescence of the human physical presence in the city begins to take place.

The encounter between the self and the city begins then to be mediated by the car and choreographed by the ones who design the highways. It is not that the roads strictly define how one's body would encounter the city but the roads do create an emphasis of landing sites. City planning is not exclusively responsible for choreographing people's movements, believing in so would be to forget the role of the body in the definition of the city's contours. Although urbanism does act as choreography of encounters between these two bodies, Erin Manning points that:

“A choreographed encounter is never wholly what it seems. You can't really choreograph movement. Movement slips through the grid, it micromoves into morphings not only unforeseeable but even unseeable, microperceptions more virtual than actual. I can train you to move-towards a sense of space, toward a quality of speed, of extension. I can offer you openings for the creations of experiential spacetimes. But I can't choreograph your landing sites.” (forthcoming, n/p).

In relation to the subject of this paper this means that one can establish and determine paths but the way each individual crosses space is unique, a notion that foregrounds the idea that artistic interventions in the site of the Turcot Yards are more than expressing personal relations with an area, but are re-inventing the site in the very moment of the artist's action.

The ways through which a body and a city merge as spaces and surfaces are partially choreographed by urban planning, but what makes the encounter possible is one's movement towards the city. The directions may be predefined but it is only when the two surfaces touch each other rhythm and affect are revealed. As put by Lefebvre,

“the architect, the planner, the sociologist, the economist, the philosopher or the politician cannot out of nothingness create new forms and relations” (150), but only help certain patterns of behavior and of encounters to take shape.

I am interested in movement, particularly of the body, but moving a body is the result of a negotiation between a corporeal instability, as a potential of postures, with the stillness of the physical environment, as a potential for occupations. The space around a moving body is more than a medium; it is equally transformed while it surrounds. Site and body simultaneously print qualities on each other’s surfaces. Movement philosopher José Gil defines this relationship as follows “The space of the body is the body becoming space.” (Gil 19)

As a non-driver I encounter the city through the Turcot Interchange only when arriving in Montreal by airplane. Having to cross the knots on Highway 20 I encounter its body from above and the Turcot Interchange creates a vista where my body is situated on the top of all public spaces. I slide over a collection of curved lines that divide the neighborhoods of NDG and St-Henri. My path is decided without having any contact with the two communities that border the Interchange, and the vastness of the unoccupied Yards works as a spatial void separating those two urban areas.

If a hundred years ago travelers were greeted in Montreal in very specific ways, through the train stations, which represented a gate and the flag of the town’s official identity, nowadays the airport becomes a neutral spot, or, in the terms of Marc Augé a non-site. When the traveler calls upon a car to enter the city a hierarchy of motion systems is created and the car is responsible for distancing the feet from the ground. In this arrival, on the moment the relation between body and city are first being established

the traveler's body doesn't touch the city anymore and a highlighted separation between traffic and pedestrian ways changes all qualities of movement. The absence of a tactile experience with the city's body strongly interferes with the construction and momentary creation of the world. According to Arakawa and Gins, "Objects that are not touched have no immediate tactile component" (13) and with my body increasingly distancing itself from the body of the city, the latter acquires characteristics of an abstract entity.

The process of abstracting the body from public spaces has one particular political implication, which is the loss of intimacy between communities that share a determined area. Their practices of space are placed aside in favor of certain transport politics, planned according to economical interests of investors.

With transportation progressively more dependent on private vehicles the traveler only meets the other bodies when it reaches its destination. The way-to becomes a solitary moment. The ways (and highways) become a *non-site*. The Turcot Interchange though, for the load of history it carries could be considered not a site, but an event that, now silenced for so long, has become a *non-event*.

Although several people whom I asked were not aware even of the location of the Turcot Yards, it became one of the favorite terrains for urban explorers who put together a movement that proposes walking as a strategy to reclaim urban areas. Those passionate about heritage and graffiti artists are among the diverse groups calling attention to the area through their physical, minimal and ephemeral actions. These groups affirm with their practices that the Turcot Yards are an important part of Montreal's history and are hoping that the authorities will develop a more careful planning towards its future development.

Curiously these artistic practices re-establish the notion of play within the urban space. Christopher Alexander, in his essay *A city is not a tree*, from 1965, foregrounds urbanism schemas where people's movements and activities entangle structures and architecture. Also in this text he writes about the notion of play and how it happens outside the areas that were predetermined as play zones within the urban realm. He affirms: "as they play, children become full of their surroundings" (126), reason why there is an intrinsic need for rupturing the borders and fences to embody the city, through play.

Performers working with urban spaces are responsible for spreading this notion of play among a city's inhabitants. The Situationist International were a group of artists and intellectuals active in Paris during the 1950's and 1960's who have opened a precedent for the kind of practices that are happening in the Turcot Yards: ephemeral and political, carrying strong individual poetics that reflect a collective force towards a shared space. The Situationist International's propositions reinforced affective relations between space and the body and claimed for the strength of every individual gesture as a reinvention of the site and of the entire city. For the Situationists International, corporeal movements in the city were determined by capitalist practices and consumerism (once again following the notion of urbanism as predominantly creating patterns of movement and of behavior). Therefore they encouraged people to go on walks, or *dérives*, as they named them, in order to get lost and explore areas in a way that would allow them to escape the pattern of consumption that typically governs our spatial practices in the city. They defended and worked with the need for unruled play within the collective realm.

As for the Situationists International, walking also becomes more than a way through which one can reach a site for the artists working at and with the Turcot Yards. Their creations bring into focus the act of walking as a tactile creation of the space, regardless its final goal. The walkers transform a place into a space through movements and physical interactions (de Certeau. In: Wilson 259)

Arakawa and Gins mention in *The architectural body* that “nothing happens without kinesthetic investigation, corporeal proceedings” (11). Ken McLaughlin has been taking this affirmation as his own. The author of a popular blog entitled “Walking the Turcot Yards” is the most relevant example of how individual actions have been highlighting the importance of that site. Known by his online nickname, Neath, the author is a collector who’s been chasing everything related to Turcot Yards since December 2005. Almost every source I found he had been there before. He knows the history of that site in detail and has been to all public hearings that discussed its future. He published all interventions and graffiti that have recreated the Turcots in the past years on his webpage<sup>2</sup>.

When I talked to him he said to have been first attracted to the site while looking at urban abandoned areas and documenting graffiti in Montreal, he has now an exclusive focus on the yards. Fascinated by all the potential held by its emptiness and its ambiguous categorization as public-private space, he’s been conducting regular walks there since 2004.

In his postings he portrays himself as a solitary walker, an image he confirms when declaring to be skeptical about bringing other people with him in his Turcot

journeys. As it is officially forbidden to walk in that area he says it would be impossible to be responsible for someone else's safety.

What is most impressive about his practice is his loyalty to this one project. In his blog one finds images of summer and winter, pillars, graffiti and rails, as well as news of other artistic projects, realized in diverse parts of the world that he somehow hopes could inspire a more drastic kind of intervention at the Turcot. He says that he rarely meets other people walking there, except for some NDG inhabitants who cross-country-ski there in winter, people from St. Henri walking their dogs, and the regular graffiti artists. Most of the time these people are more curious about his presence than he is about theirs.

No matter who bought or will buy the land, Neath is the real owner of the Turcot. When I asked him about his dream for the future of that site he responded to have hope it will become an urban park, an area that would provide a pleasant escape and also interconnect all the surrounding neighborhoods. He admits, though, that there is a lack of articulation between groups interested in owning the future of the Turcot complex. Even with all the interests and activities from such a variety of social groups gathered at the *walking the turcot yards* blog, when the time came for the public audiences to discuss the upcoming changes on the site, there was a lack of articulation among all interested in maintaining that area as a realm for possible walks and preserving its history.

Neath has been accumulating a vast documentation, available in his website, images which he hopes will become more visible in the near future, either through exhibits or a book. He also dreams of organizing meetings and artistic interventions in the area, in collaboration with other artists, something that would gather more people and call attention to such an important and impacting site to Montreal's history.

One of the artists with whom he has been in contact, having featured her works on his website is Montréal-based Karen Spencer. In 2001 Karen Spencer was living in St-Henri and used to go to the Turcot Yards to walk her dog along the rails. She was attracted to the industrial aspects of the site and the sense of loss she'd feel there. When I met her she mentioned that the feeling of being in such a vast and forbidden space was so impressive for a space in the middle of the city that it made her go back many times. Even after being stopped by the security, which would tell her to leave (although they seemed to be enforcing a rule that they did not feel strongly about) she still felt free to come back. Although she had been interested in vacant lots around Montreal, the Turcot provided an environment that was empty but loaded with history. Better said, it was not empty, but voided. It was not vacant, but filled with absence.

At that time she was doing urban interventions using bread; in her artistic practice she would buy extremely cheap loaves of the industrialized kind, using it to build installations and settings for her performances both in and outdoors. She had in her backyard a big pile of leftovers from her past works. From her feelings of the Turcot as an unwanted site, and her observation of it as being a dump space, the idea of giving a poetic end to the breads was born.

She invited the photographer Paul Litherland, with whom she had previously collaborated in other projects, to witness and document her action that succeeded as follows: They brought the bread bags and she covered her head with the loaves, fixing it with nylon. She walked around with the hidden face.

The disappearance of the head gives this action a peculiar characteristic. It is not only the audience who is absent, but also what the camera witnesses is the disappearance

of the performer herself. The strongest exterior element of her identity, her face, is covered by white bread. When we see the images of this body, contorted on the floor, making an effort to hide behind the loaves of industrialized and nutritiously poor bread, the feeling of deterioration is almost immediate. The fact that during that time of year the snow was melting and the ground was still muddy reinforces the image of a decaying site. What Spencer is articulating from the Turcot is the aspect of abandonment, of a site and of a person, left to be fed by the waste of industrialization.

A couple of years have passed since her first action when her son, a teenage graffiti artist invited her to see some of the works he had been doing beneath the Interchange. She was surprised to experience the area at a whole other level of intimacy, as he was very familiar with deep corners of the empty terrain. By this time she came to know Ken McLaughlin's blog and her next project would become a homage to his relationship with the Turcot.

She was working with a collection of cardboards, in which she would recount her dreams, to be installed in diverse areas of Montreal. For him she wrote:

*"I dreamt I was invited to give a presentation of my work- but the only thing I could think to say was: 'I walked a lot'".* And she placed the cardboard upon the site hoping that her recent friend would find it. Both being authors of blogs that register their artistic experiences, this is how they have exchanged this event in the form of open comments:

# neath Says:

September 24, 2007 at 2:43 pm

This is the coolest thing yet! I saw it yesterday and would love to see more of this at  
Turcot.

# dream listener Says:

September 24, 2007 at 3:43 pm

neath,

the dream was really meant for you, more than for the turcot...because of the sense i have  
of you as a solitary walker...and for how i find a kind of humanity in your preoccupation  
with this abandoned space and the time you spend there soles touching earth.

but if i have any other dreams that seem appropriate for turcot...i 'll definitely put them  
there and will hope you find them.

d.l.

(<http://dreamlistener.wordpress.com/2007/09/22/202/#comments>)

Through the *dreamlistener* action Karen exposes a most intimate layer, the one of her dreams. The space of her imaginary is overlapped with the spatiality of the site. By dedicating the Turcot's board to Neath she also plays with how men and site can be interconnected and have their frontiers interwoven.

Many other artists have been working on projects on that area such is the case of Daniel Marchand, who hopes to paint all the Interchange in vibrant colours. He is the founder of *Meandres Urbanes Essentiels*, an association created in 2004 through which he spreads his proposal. In his idea he would paint in different colours all the horizontal

lines of the Interchange, maintaining the verticals black, for the sake of contrast (<http://www.meandres.org>). He has already studied and defined all tones and phases for the project and collected many letters of support, from the community and enterprises in the area. The necessary budget of 8 445 600,00\$ makes of this artistic intervention something yet to be realized. Marchand practice does not involve walking but proposes an interesting conception between speed and colour, so that the lines created by the Interchange roads are transformed into colour-filed forces of attraction.

Another group directly engaged with the Turcot Yards is known as Urban Exploration Montreal. Dedicated to walks in very abandoned places in the city they prefer anonymity, and their identity is known exclusively as a collective. They declare to have developed walking practices from the interest on discovering what was behind closed doors. On the opposite extreme of Daniel Marchand, The UEM avoid any intervention on the sites they visit. The pictures they took from their walks at the Turcot Yards in 2002 show all the buildings of the Rail Companies intact and are an immensurable register of history, all available online at their webpage, which has been recently reactivated.<sup>3</sup>

These artistic practices recreate the meaning of that site in peculiar ways, more than performing on the Turcots, they perform different enunciations of this city's area. By establishing singular walking practices these projects state an open call to all inhabitants to cross the frontiers of pre-established grounds for walking, furthermore, to institute walking as a libertarian way to reinvent the experience with the city. When a site lands onto a walker the one who moves becomes the canvas for the city to express itself.

Even with the unavoidable destruction of the Interchange, these artists consider the Turcots more than eminent ruins, their initiatives remind us of the complexities of the urban fabric and of what an urban body can be. Only in such a site, planned to be driven, hoped to be walked can one face the contradictions between driving as an analytical act, and walking as an improvisational one. It is only by understanding of such a site that one can face the possible effects of these two ways of dealing with space and practicing dislocation in today's society. Walking, being when the body moves but the world changes (Solnit 27), becomes the symbol of resistance against the fast speed that has modeled urban sites and shaped our encounters.

With the future of this urban area yet to be known what remains now are the artistic interventions that reveal that it is not enough to build and re-plan, nor to only preserve the constructions; it is necessary to feed their views, and constantly articulate memories. These can be accomplished by any walker, by anyone who is willing to become with a site, who is open to allow architecture to land in the body of the one who crosses space; and by doing that outline the city with gesture and movements, the material that primarily shapes people and the urban environment.

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<sup>1</sup> In the area served by public transportation there were 172,365 cars in 1956 and in 1971 this number was raised to 476,303. (Gaudry, n/d : 18)

<sup>2</sup> All his catalogue can be found at [www.neath.wordpress.com](http://www.neath.wordpress.com)

<sup>3</sup> (<http://uem.minimanga.com/abandoned/turcot/>)