Palimpsest III: The Dialectics of Montreal's Public Spaces
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The Atwater Market:

Heritage, Tourism, and the Politics of the Public Sphere

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Introduction

An essential feature in considering what constitutes a public space is the ability for people to gather there freely. A truly public space should be one where people can come together and exchange not only goods, but also ideas and information. This idea of public space as one that accommodates free assembly and freedom of speech suggests that these spaces might be ones in which the expression of political views is appropriate or even necessary. In her book *Space, the City and Social Theory* sociologist Fran Tonkiss highlights this political feature of urban public space when she writes that "the city provides public space in itself – streets, squares, parks, bridges – and therefore provides an informal spatial infrastructure for political action and association."[1] Alongside these informal public spaces, art historian and administrator Helen Tangires points to public markets as centuries-old sites for the exchange of essential goods and argues that even if a market is not necessarily "located on public land or owned by a public entity, it has public goals and creates a public space."[2] More than many other spaces or buildings that are only accessible to select members of the public, the public market is certainly one of the most open, democratic, and accessible forms of public space and one that has a strong historic role as a place of gathering and exchange within a community.

I have chosen Montreal's Atwater Market as the subject for an investigation into the changing tendencies in the construction, use, and articulation of public space. I am interested in how the Atwater Market has been (and continues to be) used as a site for the public expression of political views, albeit in ways that have shifted alongside transformations of the surrounding

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[1] Fran Tonkiss, *Space, the City and Social Theory: Social Relations and Urban Forms* (Cambridge, MA: Polity, 2005) 65.

[2] Helen Tangires, *Public Markets* (New York: W.W. Norton & Co. in association with Library of Congress, 2008) 9.

neighbourhood. In the statement for her 2005 performance *Public Sphere As Project*, artist Kirsten Forkert wrote that "in the present political climate the public sphere is diminishing, so that we increasingly think in terms of individualism (such as niche markets), or monolithic ideas of collectivity (such as nationalism). In this context, how do we conceive of 'the public,' other than through mass marketing terms or 'bums in seats'?"[3] Through a consideration of the Atwater Market's uses and surroundings this paper examines changing ideas about public participation in political actions and traces Forkert's claim that the public sphere is often enacted either in terms of individualism or collectivity and is a space that may in fact be diminishing. By comparing two images of the market – one from shortly after its construction in 1932 and one from 2009 (Fig. 1-2) – this paper will consider the physical and architectural properties of the building and what they might additionally reveal about how public space is enacted there. This paper will also investigate the role of heritage, redevelopment, and tourism as factors both affecting and reflected in the Atwater Market's changing role within its community.

Previous research into the Atwater Market includes historian Sandra Cohen-Rose's book about Art Deco architecture in Montreal, which features a brief section on the Atwater Market, and a short document produced by the *Corporation de Gestion des Marchés Publics de Montréal* (CGMPM), which describes the history and role of the Atwater Market from the perspective of this municipal agency. Alongside these sources, this paper draws from existing research relating to public market architecture and history in both Europe and North America and

[3] Kirsten Forkert, "Public Space Archive, Calgary,"compiled by Tomas Jonsson. *The April Memo: A Cultural Notebook,* ed. Peter Conlin (Vancouver: Access Artist Run Centre, n.d.) n.pag.

Fig. 1 *Atwater Market, 1933*. Gestion de documents et archives (VM94-Z-81-2). Source: Héritage Montréal.
Fig. 2 Atwater Market. Photograph: Nicole Burisch, 2009.

applies these findings to the specific case of the Atwater Market. Thus, this paper represents a further attempt to gather and consolidate this existing information in order to develop a more in-depth reading of this building through an art historical lens.

To Market, To Market…

The Atwater Market is located in the South-West borough of Montreal, and sits in between Atwater Avenue to the East and Greene Avenue to the West. Its location places it at the intersection of the neighbourhoods of Saint-Henri, Little Burgundy, and Pointe Saint-Charles, and it sits a block North of the Lachine Canal. Many of the neighbourhoods surrounding the Market have historically been working-class, lower-income, and economically tied to the factories and industrial composition of the area along the Canal. It is also, correspondingly, an area that has been the subject of a number of studies, dating back to social reformer Herbert

Brown Ames' 1897 *City Below the Hill*, and through to more recent studies interested in understanding its population and the living conditions of its residents.[4] Studies of Saint-Henri in particular recognize the history of this neighbourhood as one that is intimately tied to its industrial roots: "Râres sont les rues, sauf dans les anciens îlots bourgeois de la fin du siècle dernier, où une usine n'avoisine pas les demeures ouvrières."[5]

Built from 1931 to 1932, the Atwater Market was part of a series of public works projects designed to help combat unemployment and fuel the economy during the Depression under Montreal mayor Camilien Houde (1889-1958).[6] Designed by the father and son architectural team Ludger and Paul Lemieux at a cost of over one-million dollars, the market replaced the old St. Antoine Market building located a few blocks east on de la Montagne Street, which had previously served the area since 1861.[7] Built in the Art Deco style, the new Atwater Market opened in April of 1933 and featured ground-floor stalls for fruit and vegetable vendors, butcher stalls on the second-floor level, space for offices and administration, and an enormous upstairs hall that could accommodate up to 12,000 people – the largest in the city at the time.[8] According to a *Montreal Gazette* article published on the occasion of the opening of the market, it was "one of the most modern, hygienic and elaborate public buildings in the city."[9] Also notable among its

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[4] See: Claude Larivière*, St-Henri: L'univers des travailleurs* (Montreal: Les Éditions Albert St-Martin, 1974), and Antonino Scozzari, *Understanding Gentrification and its Implications for a Revitalized St. Henri* (M.A. Thesis, Dept. of Political Science, Concordia University, Montreal 2007).

[5] Larivière 3. "Rare are the streets where a factory does not neighbour workers' residences, except in the old bourgeois sectors from the end of the last century." Trans. Nicole Burisch.

[6] Sandra Cohen-Rose, *Northern deco: art deco architecture in Montreal* (Montreal: Corona Publishers, 1996) 13-14.

[7] Linda Biesenthal and J. Douglas Wilson, *To Market, To Market: The Public Market Tradition in Canada* (Toronto: PMA Books, 1980) 77.

[8] "Public Throng to New Market Place" *The Montreal Gazette* (17 April 1933): n.pag.

[9] "Public Throng to New Market Place" n.pag.

features was a central refrigeration system that served the specialized stalls for butchers and fruit and vegetable vendors.[10]

Since its opening, the Atwater Market has primarily functioned in its important traditional purpose as a place where local residents could shop for food, but it can also be seen as a symbol and reflection of the particular values of the municipal government at the time it was built. Tangires points to the role of public market buildings as symbols of "government's commitment to a well-ordered public economy" and their role in managing problems associated with urban

Fig. 3 *Personnes regardant des fleurs*, n.d. Gestion de documents et archives (VM94-U-641-19). Source: Héritage Montréal.
Fig. 4 *Un boucher et sa cliente*, n.d. Gestion de documents et archives (VM94-U-641-16). Source: Héritage Montréal

growth in the early twentieth-century, such as "rising food costs, lack of fresh food, traffic

[10] "Public Throng to New Market Place" n.pag.

congestion, and poor public hygiene."[11] Similar to their American counterparts, the history of public market buildings in Canada traces its roots back to the architectural models and organizing principles of market traditions in Europe.[12] Market squares and simple wooden shelters had existed in Montreal since the first settlements in the area and were gradually replaced with more complex and permanent buildings as the city grew through the nineteenth-century.[13] In Britain, market halls were built to replace open-air or street markets and were in many ways a response to the disorganized, messy, and unsanitary nature of more uncontrolled spaces.[14] Similarly, Canadian market buildings originally evolved from the "modest, functional, long rectangular buildings" of smaller settler towns to more elaborate and symbolic buildings that would function as "a civic ornament" and a source of pride for local citizens.[15] The Atwater Market is representative of the combined market hall and public building structure, an architectural model that dates back to medieval Europe.[16] The construction and regulation of public market activities also went hand-in-hand with increased government involvement in controlling and standardizing the distribution of goods within these spaces,[17] and represented efforts to ensure that sales and trade within the market were fair, a feature that was also a part of the Atwater Market, which included "public scales, conveniently located throughout the building where purchasers may weigh their goods to be sure that the quantity paid for has been

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[11] Tangires 25-6.

[12] Biesenthal and Wilson 25.

[13] *Les Marchés Publics* (Montreal: Corporation de Gestion des Marchés Publics de Montréal, n.d.) 12-14.

[14] James Schmiechen and Kenneth Carls, *The British Market Hall: A Social and Architectural History* (New Haven: Yale UP, 1999) 47-8.

[15] Biesenthal and Wilson 26.

[16] Tangires 141.

[17] Biesenthal and Wilson 17. Schmiechen and Carls 176.

received."[18]

Fig. 5 *St. Jacques Market*, 1933. Trudel and Karch Collection. Gestion de documents et archives (VM94/Y1,17,24). Source: Héritage Montréal.

Fig. 6 *Gadbois Gym, Upper Hall of Atwater Market*, 2009. Photograph: Nicole Burisch.

The Atwater Market's construction and design can be positioned in relation to other public works projects and Art Deco buildings of the time, including the St. Jacques Market (Fig. 5) and the St. Henri Fire Hall.[19] Similar to these other public buildings, the Atwater Market's role as a symbol of government order and national pride was emphasized through the use of the Art Deco style in particular, which was frequently used when "1930s government architects looked to a restrained classicism to communicate an image of authority and order."[20] As seen in Figures 1 and 2, the Atwater Market features strong and ordered vertical lines, "ziggurat/stepped pyramid

[18] "Public Throng to New Market Place" n.pag.

[19] Cohen-Rose 130.

[20] "Art Deco," *Encyclopedia of 20th-century Architecture*, ed. R. Stephen Sennott, 3 vols (New York: Fitzroy Dearborn, 2004).

outline,"[21] and a prominent clock tower reminiscent of other Art Deco-style skyscrapers in Montreal's downtown, such as the Aldred Building.[22] These are all features that reinforce the symbolic role of the Atwater Market as a monumental public building designed to inspire loyalty and nationalist pride at a time of economic hardship.

Many Art Deco buildings of the 1920s and 1930s often featured decorative embellishments in the form of stained glass and bas-relief carvings "to represent pride in national heritage, faith in technology and easy functional identification,"[23] and in this regard the Atwater Market is something of an exception. The spires along the Market's roof, seen in Figure 1, were something of an embellishment, but were atypical of the more integrated kinds of ornamentation favoured by this style, and were removed in the 1950s due to deterioration.[24] While the Atwater Market has less of the usual Art Deco-style decorative elements, Sandra Cohen-Rose suggests that the "creative deployment of bricks is a comparatively inexpensive way to introduce abstract geometric designs, to accent a building's vertical thrust and to give it a certain rhythm,"[25] and she identifies Montreal's public markets as sites where this kind of brickwork was employed.

Historical and present-day aerial images reveal that the positioning of the market within the neighbourhood and its surrounding area could have contributed also to the sense of its significance and monumentality. Surrounded by a wide space, and with its prominent clock tower visible over the roofs of the mostly two- to three-story buildings around it, the Market would have been an imposing presence, and certainly played "un rôle important comme entité

[21] Cohen-Rose 17.

[22] Cohen-Rose 57.

[23] Cohen-Rose 16.

[24] Cohen-Rose 139.

[25] Cohen-Rose 21.

symbolique et comme repère visuel dans le quartier."[26]

Gossip and Grain

Beyond the emphasis on patriotic sentiment inherent in the building's physical structure and architectural style, what is also important to understanding the Atwater Market as a significant public site in its early years is the use of the upper hall. Linda Biesenthal underlines the role of markets in the distribution and exchange of ideas and as a social and cultural hub: "As much gossip as grain has been exchanged in the marketplace. Political uprisings have germinated there. In marketplaces everywhere duels have been fought, scandals uncovered, ideas and skills exchanged, and men and women punished in the pillory."[27] While social exchange certainly took place alongside the buying and selling of goods on the lower floors, the upstairs hall of the Atwater Market was a key site for these social, cultural, and political uses, including exhibitions, fairs, wrestling matches, educational events, film screenings, and political rallies and speeches. A publication of the governing agency for Montreal's public markets, the *Corporation de Gestion des Marchés Publics de Montréal* notes that the Market hosted everything from sporting events to speeches by notable Quebec politicians, such as Camilien Houde et Maurice Duplessis, often attracting thousands of spectators.[28]

One use of the upper hall in the Atwater Market that is of particular interest is that of *La Ligue pour la défense du Canada.* The *Ligue* was an anti-conscription organization formed in 1942 around a campaign to oppose Prime Minister Mackenzie King's plebiscite asking

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[26] *Les Marchés Publics* 11. "…an important symbolic role and visual landmark in the neighbourhood." Trans. Nicole Burisch.

[27] Biesenthal and Wilson 5.

[28] *Les Marchés Publics* 16.

Canadians to allow him to reinstate mandatory military service to assist in Canada's participation in World War II.[29] The *Ligue* held several massive rallies in the Atwater Market's upstairs hall space, as well as at the St. Jacques market. According to a pamphlet they produced about their activities, one of the rallies at the Atwater Market had 20,000 men crowded into the upstairs hall.[30] On another instance surrounding their efforts, Quebec MP René Chaloult presented a lecture at the Atwater Market "dans une atmosphere d'entrain et d'enthousiasme sans pareil."[31] While the *Ligue* was unsuccessful in defeating the plebiscite (it passed with strong support from English-speaking Canadians), it would seem that their efforts in many ways succeeded in mobilizing an awareness of French Canadian identity or community: Quebecers voted overwhelmingly against the plebiscite, a trend echoed across the country in other French-speaking communities across Canada.[32] Despite the defeat and the eventual decline of the *Ligue*, the strong support from Quebecers was seen as a "massive victory for the Ligue."[33]

The public hall at the Atwater Market was an ideal space for gathering and rallying support for the *Ligue*'s efforts and in publicly building a sense of collective French Canadian identity. Chaloult's address "Pour une politique Canadienne française" included pointed questions about the status and mistreatment of French Canadians that reinforced a sense of a united French Canadian community, separate from their English-speaking counterparts.[34] One

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[29] Susan Purcell, "Drapeau the Magnificent," *Your Worship: The Lives of Eight of Canada's Most Unforgettable Mayors*, ed. Allan Levine (Toronto: James Lorimer & Company Ltd., 1989) 154.

[30] La Ligue pour la défense du Canada, *La Ligue pour la défense du Canada: Ce qu'elle a fait, son attitude présente, ce qu'elle fera* (Montreal: L'Imprimerie Populaire, Limitée, 1942) 10-11.

[31] La Ligue 20. "...in an incomparably spirited and enthusiastic atmosphere." Trans. Nicole Burisch.

[32] La Ligue 14.

[33] Purcell 154.

[34] René Chaloult, *Pour une politique canadienne française* (Montreal: Les Éditions des Jeunesses Patriotes, 1942) 7.

can see in Figure 6 the impressive size of the hall and can imagine the feeling of being there amongst an excited crowd of 10,000 people gathered to rally in support of pressing political issues. Based on the numerous accounts of gatherings, speeches, and other similar uses, the hall (and by extension, the Market) can be read as a space of gathering within an existing community hub that encouraged or reinforced a sentiment of belonging or collective participation in the public sphere beyond the market's function as a place to buy and sell food. This version of the public sphere is one that clearly fits with both the architectural aims of the Art Deco style, and with Forkert's idea of "monolithic ideas of collectivity (such as nationalism)."

These Are the People in Your Neighbourhood

While renovations and upgrades have altered some of the Market's surface features and cosmetic appearance, its physical layout has not changed much since its original construction and it is still being used in a way that is quite similar to its original purpose: fruit and vegetable stalls on the outside perimeter, cheese and fish shops along the inside ground floor, butcher stalls on the second level, and administrative offices on the third and fourth floors. The one significant exception is the use of the upstairs hall, which since the early 1980s has housed the Gadbois Gym (Fig. 6), a private gymnastics facility.[35] If the Market has in many ways remained the same since its inception, the neighbourhood surrounding the market has undergone significant changes in the last twenty years. This shifting physical, cultural, and socioeconomic context is key in understanding the Market today, as it is depicted in Figure 2. Factories in the area were productive throughout both World Wars, but with the end of World War II and changes in manufacturing standards, many of the factories in the neighbourhood closed their doors to move

[35] *Les Marchés Publics* 16.

to more spacious or less expensive locations on the outskirts of the city, resulting in many lay-offs.[36] According to Larivière's study done in the late 1970s, "St-Henri, depuis une vingtaine d'années a perdu graduellement sa fonction industrielle." [37] He goes on to identify the corresponding economic decline as the main factor in the decline of Saint-Henri.[38] Following the closure or departure of many of the factory businesses in the area, the Lachine Canal itself was also closed in 1970, further contributing to the economic and social decline of the surrounding neighbourhoods during this time.

The Market also underwent a period of decline and neglect at this time, similar to other public market buildings across North America. The availability of packaged branded goods, the rise of supermarkets, and urban development that saw increasing numbers of people moving out of the city centres all contributed to a shift from "the homely and friendly atmosphere of the old public market…to the world of swift, rather impersonal, and homogenized assembly-line shopping. Shopping became less and less a social act and more a private and isolating activity driven primarily by economic considerations."[39] Protests by Saint-Henri residents saved the Atwater Market from demolition in 1968, which mayor Drapeau had planned to tear down,[40] but it was not until 1982 following a series of renovations and upgrades that the Market began to regain some of its popularity.[41]

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[36] Larivière 91.

[37] Larivière 97. "Over the course of about twenty years, St-Henri gradually lost its industrial function." Trans. Nicole Burisch.

[38] Larivière 101.

[39] Schmiechen and Carls 208.

[40] *Les Marchés Publics* 16.

[41] *Les Marchés Publics* 16.

In the early 1990s, the city of Montreal began plans for a major overhaul and revitalization project of the Lachine Canal and it was reopened in 1997. The Canal has since been designated as a National Historic Site of Canada and is currently managed by Parks Canada. Through Parks branding, interpretation, and promotional tools, the Canal is now positioned as a significant cultural and tourist destination, and the Atwater Market is mentioned on the Parks Canada website and in their literature as an important destination for those visiting the site. According to the Memorable Montreal website, the Market itself has been given a historical designation of "a building of exceptional heritage value"[42] as part of the Built Heritage Evaluation carried out by the City of Montreal and is clearly an integral part of the area's historical and cultural value.

Alongside the area's redevelopment, many of the former warehouse buildings along the canal and adjacent to the Market have been converted into condominiums. One such development, the *Cours du Marché Atwater*, was the focus of intense debate and community opposition in 1999 but, despite efforts opposing zoning changes to allow its construction, it was still approved.[43] Articles published in the *Gazette* and *La Presse* reveal that local residents and Market administrators were concerned about the effects that this development would have on the composition, character, and rents in the neighbourhood.[44] In a catalogue essay for an exhibition about the changes happening around the Lachine Canal, Dinu Bumbaru writes:

We must ask ourselves who the true beneficiaries of this remarkable infrastructure

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[42] *Memorable Montreal*, n.d.

[43] Linda Gyulai, "Condo Protestors tossed out of council," *The Montreal Gazette* (9 Mar. 1999): A5. Michele Ouimet, "Oui au projet domicilaire Les cours du Marché Atwater en bordure du canal Lachine," *La Presse* (3 Oct. 1999): n.pag.

[44] Gyulai A5. Ouimet n.pag.

are to be. The Lachine Canal is undergoing change and sparking discovery and appreciation of the site among growing numbers of people. It has also spawned a form of development that is disturbing residents of the sector.

Fig. 7 (left) Condo Sales Centre outside the Super-C.
Photograph: Nicole Burisch, 2009.

Fig. 8 (right) Converted warehouse on Rue Charlevoix.
Photograph: Nicole Burisch, 2009.

Aside from their standards of living and lifestyles, it is newcomers' perceptions of the canal that separates them from long-term residents. Newcomers value the site's qualities, its picturesque nature, industrial architecture, lofts, and proximity to the city centre. While long-time residents acknowledge these qualities, they feel dispossessed by development that bypasses them and deprives them of the space they deem essential to their survival as an industrial society.[45]

While it has not always been the Atwater Market itself that was the focus of these neighbourhood changes and debates, in many ways the Market is certainly at the centre of these

[45] Dinu Bumbaru, "Revival Or End of An Industrial Landscape," *An Industrial Landscape Observed – The Lachine Canal* (Montreal: Canadian Centre for Architecture, 1992) 38.

discussions about the way the neighbourhood is changing. The Market is billed as one of the main attractions of the neighbourhood and is consistently mentioned as a key selling feature in brochures, websites, and print ads for condominium developments and real estate listings in the area (Fig. 7). The CGMPM's own publicity reflects this positioning, acknowledging that many of the recent real-estate developments use their proximity to the Atwater Market as a marketing tool.[46]

The Market as Tourist Destination

To return to the two images of the Market (Fig. 1 and 2), one can look at the present-day image in light of the gentrification and changes taking place in the neighbourhoods surrounding the Market and consider how the Market itself also functions as a tourist destination. Where the Lachine Canal has now assumed official status as historical and tourist site and is being marketed to a visiting public in a way that reinforces this status, Figure 2 reveals that the Market has also been positioned and branded in a similar way. The large banner on the clock tower, as well as the signage for the Première Moisson bakery, designate the Market as a site of consumption and point to it as a destination along an existing tourist route.

Walking north across the pedestrian bridge towards the Atwater Market today, one is greeted by an open square with bike racks, benches, picnic tables, and flower planters next to a small kiosk building that houses a Parks Canada information booth and a gelato shop in the summer months. Here cyclists, visitors, and shoppers stop to sit and rest or get information before continuing on to the bike paths, boat rental, or to the Market. From there, one can head

[46] *Les Marchés Publics* 15.

North-East from the Market to Notre Dame Street, and continue walking past antique shops and an eclectic mix of quaint cafés, restaurants, and designer furniture stores. In addition to the rest area adjacent to the Canal, the outside space around the Market was expanded in 1982 to create a larger space conducive to outdoor stalls with seasonal displays and café-style seating along the outside and serves to draw people into the Market.[47] The Market's unique and distinctly historical Art Deco architecture stands out among surrounding commercial, residential, and church buildings, the clock tower is still visible for blocks around, and the parking lot and wide intersection leading to the adjacent Atwater tunnel create a clear and somewhat staged view of the Market when approached from the North.

Alongside the presence of Parks Canada information and signage, these features of the Market also fit with what Alan Gordon identifies as the way the "organization of the tourist gaze by state and private initiatives" is "an attempt to construct tourist experiences and …to shape the way visitors view the local past."[48] Sociologist John Urry also points out that "the tourist gaze is increasingly signposted. There are markers which identify what things and places are worthy of our gaze"[49] and the Atwater Market has certainly been identified in this way. In his book *Consuming Places*, Urry traces the history of Lancashire, a former textile factory town in North West England, a place that until recently no one would have visited for tourist purposes. He describes how it has now been reinvented as a new kind of tourist destination: "what was seen as a set of characteristics which were peripheral to mainstream British life have now been

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[47] *Les Marchés Publics* 16.

[48] Alan Gordon, "Exploring the Boundaries of Public Memory," *Making Public Pasts: The Contested Terrain of Montreal's Public Memories, 1891-1930* (Montreal: McGill-Queen's UP, 2001) 12.

[49] John Urry, *Consuming Places* (London and New York: Routledge, 1995) 139.

reassessed. As working industry has disappeared so vast numbers of people seem to be fascinated by the memories of that industry and of the forms of life that were associated with it."[50] Similar factors are clearly at play in the positioning, understanding, and signposting of the Atwater Market, where a working-class neighbourhood and its industrial history are now providing the backdrop for a renewed and authentic tourist experience that in some ways romanticizes this history.

Considered in this context, the Market provides an authentic and interactive experience that contributes to the way that the area's history is (re)presented to visitors and potential new residents. While shopping at public markets declined through the 1960s and 1970s, the early 1980s saw a return and renewed interest in these sites, one that was often tied to romantic or experiential versions of the past. In discussing the revival of public markets at this time, Linda Biesenthal describes the sounds, smells, and activity that contribute to the market's charm, such as "the energetic activity – robust, suntanned farmers hefting crates of cabbages from their trucks to their stalls, and buxom, kerchiefed women building pyramids of ripe tomatoes," and goes on to point out how this atmosphere seems "to belong to another time and place."[51]

You Are What You Eat

Given the ongoing gentrification of the neighbourhood and the positioning of the Market as a heritage or tourist destination that may well be complicit in this process, the question now becomes: can the Atwater Market still be viewed as a site where the public sphere is being

[50] Urry 159.

[51] Biesenthal and Wilson 5.

Fig. 9 Seasonal displays outside the Atwater Market. Photographs: Nicole Burisch, 2009.

created and enacted? And, if so, can it still function as a site for political activity and expression?

Recent and growing interest in ecologically sustainable lifestyles and food politics has highlighted "locavore" diets, organic and seasonal produce, and farmers' markets as some of the preferred alternatives to the problems of large-scale industrial food production. In her article "Is Food the New Sex?" Mary Eberstadt traces the recent emphasis on food as an increasingly politically and even morally charged terrain and suggests that we are experiencing a revolution "in how we now think about food – changes that focus not on today or tomorrow, but on eating as a way of life."[52] These new trends in food politics suggest that the Atwater Market may still be a site where an engagement with political action can take place. In particular, groups like the Slow Food movement emphasize regional cuisine, locally grown and artisanal food production, and a slower more pleasurable approach to food consumption and preparation, in contrast with fast food and, more broadly, "fast" lifestyles (conveniently exemplified by the Super-C chain-

[52] Mary Eberstadt, "Is Food the New Sex?" *Policy Review* 153 (Stanford: Hoover Institute, Stanford U, 2009) 4. Web. 4 Dec. 2009.

store supermarket located directly across the street from the Atwater Market). Public markets are well-suited for providing the setting where a "slow" experience of shopping can be had – one that emphasizes aesthetically pleasing displays, one-on-one interaction with food vendors, and an emphasis on personal choice. Brochures and newsletters reveal that the Atwater Market and its parent organization, the CGMPM, are aligning themselves with these views, emphasizing local and seasonal produce and promoting shopping at the Market as a more leisurely and enjoyable activity.

A major feature of these recent trends towards locally grown and independently distributed food is the placement of power and responsibility in the hands of individual consumers, which has further positioned the very consumption of food as a political act: what we buy, where we buy it, and who we buy it from are increasingly important. In his book about Slow Food, Geoff Andrews states that the rise of the "critical or ethical consumer has been one of the most significant developments in politics in recent years."[53] However, I am interested in taking a more critical reading of this type of consumption-based activism and, in turn, the Market as a site where this activism might take place.

If these recent approaches to food activism emphasize individual consumer choice as an important political tool, it becomes necessary to consider who is able to participate in this kind of action. In several interviews conducted as part of a study of the effects of gentrification in Saint-Henri by Antonino Scozzari was the mention of the Atwater Market as a site that was "too expensive"[54] or no longer suitable as a place for long-time (lower-income) residents to buy food.

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[53] Geoff Andrews, *The Slow Food Story: Politics and Pleasure* (Montreal: McGill-Queen's UP, 2008) 86.

[54] Antonino Scozzari, *Understanding Gentrification and its Implications for a Revitalized St. Henri* (M.A. Thesis, Dept. of Political Science, Concordia University, Montreal) 79.

This view was reinforced in a number of food blogs, many of which point to the Jean-Talon Market as the more affordable and more authentic alternative to the "expensive and sanitized" Atwater Market.[55] The combination of tourism and consumption further suggests that the shopping experience at the Atwater Market is one that is tied to the consumption of leisure, and one that might also be functioning as marker of identity. As described by Urry, "a further crucial feature of consumption is to be able to buy time, that is, the ability to avoid work and to replace it either with leisure or with other kinds of work."[56] Central to this kind of consumption is a focus on individual taste and a construction of customized or personalized versions of political and (by extension) public actions. In their book *The Rebel Sell*, journalists Joseph Heath and Andrew Potter describe the way that countercultural movements and critiques of mass society have in fact "been one of the most powerful forces driving consumerism for the past forty years."[57] They identify the quest for individuality and distinction, rather than a need to conform, as one of the main factors driving consumption.[58] Similarly, Colin Campbell describes a new kind of "craft-consumer" who purchases and "transforms 'commodities' into personalized… objects"[59] through processes of customization. He identifies the amateur chef and food preparation as exemplary of this form of consumption.[60] Both of these models emphasize the role and the choice of the individual as central to the enactment of a particular (political) identity or

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[55] Gayla Trail, "Planty Things I Saw in Montreal," *You Grow Girl* (9 Sept. 2009) n.pag. Web. 4 Dec. 2009.

[56] Urry 130.

[57] Joseph Heath and Andrew Potter, *The Rebel Sell: Why the Culture Can't be Jammed* (Toronto: Harper Collins, 2004) 99.

[58] Heath and Potter 103.

[59] Colin Campbell, "The Craft Consumer: Culture, craft and consumption in a postmodern society," *Journal of Consumer Culture* 5 (March 2005): 28.

[60] Colin Campbell 28, 33.

affiliation, and echoes Kirsten Forkert's other version of the public sphere as one that is enacted through individualism and niche markets.

Conclusion

My initial intentions in researching the Atwater Market revolved around an interest in thinking about how recent trends in food activism might be taking place there, and in positioning the Market as a site for the public presentation of political views. However, while the politics of food consumption, distribution, and provisioning are all certainly enacted in the Market to some degree, the current emphasis on consumption and tourist experiences shifts potential political actions to those that are enacted largely through individual consumption, and that may well be excluding long-time residents. This suggests that, while the Market certainly remains a public site of community pride and attention, it might be better read as a public site that reflects the impact of redevelopment and gentrification on its surrounding neighbourhoods.

The Atwater Market's historical and present uses return us to Forkert's question: how might it be possible to interact with the public sphere in ways that do not rely on collectivity (as in the historical case of mass rallies or sporting events) or individuality (as in the case of present-day individualized consumption)? Forkert's "Public Sphere as Project" developed one possible answer to this question: through a series of group conversations and consultations, the project culminated in a collection of blank posters distributed throughout Calgary's downtown that could be used by anyone as a space for expression. Her project used collaborative processes to create spaces for individual expression in public, presenting a model that exists somewhere between collective and individual enactments of public space. In their chapter in *Actions: What You Can*

Do With the City (a book produced in conjunction with the exhibition of the same name at the Canadian Centre for Architecture), artist Debra Solomon and architect Hans Ibelings point to another possible approach in the form of urban agriculture that is "being rediscovered as a strategic tool for building sustainable cities."[61] Other chapters in this book discuss dumpster diving, guerilla gardening, community gardens, and urban food scavenging. In contrast to the model offered by the Atwater Market, these activities infiltrate and use public space as a means to grow, provide, distribute, and gather food, often without official administration or permission. Here, consumption-based models of activism and public engagement are avoided in favour of consensus-based processes and individual or small-group control of food collection and production – again representing a model that is somewhere between collectivity and individuality. These activities suggest that, rather than looking to large public buildings or commercial sites such as the Atwater Market as spaces for enacting the public sphere, it is increasingly productive and even necessary to seek out alternative strategies and neglected sites to find, create, and activate truly public space.

[61] Debra Solomon and Hans Ibelings, "The Edible City: Urban Agriculture in Adolescence," *Actions: What You Can Do With the City*, eds. Giovanna Borasi and Mirko Zardini (Montreal and Amsterdam: Canadian Centre for Architecture and SUN, 2008) 189.

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