

## Architectural Beacon: The Joseph-Arthur Godin Building as Cultural Witness



Above: The Godin Hotel (1915), Montreal, prior to 2004.  
Below: Hanganu Design, Opus Hotel, 2004.  
Photographs: courtesy of Flickr.com, 2009.

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Located on the southwest corner of Sherbrooke Street and St-Laurent Boulevard in Montreal sits one of Canada's first residential Art Nouveau style buildings made of reinforced poured concrete (*Architecture domestique* 312). Referred to from time to time by its address, 2116 (St-Laurent Boulevard), but mainly as the "Edifice Godin", after its architect Joseph-Arthur Godin, the building has been through several incarnations since its construction in 1915. It is with this building in mind that I propose that architecture can act as a witness to the development of its surrounding community, a monument to the lived experiences of past tenants, and can express an ongoing example of sociopolitical priorities. This essay examines this site from two perspectives, socioeconomic and aesthetic, within three major phases during its existence. Rosalyn Deutsche and Robert Neuwirth's explorations of spatial politics, notions of property and ownership are utilized in order to investigate the relevance of the site and the changing dynamic of the city. An integral part of this investigation are the written experiences and oral attestations of tenants and visitors; having shaped the public and private perceptions of the Edifice Godin, their experiences made a significant impact to this site and will not be overlooked.

Joseph-Arthur Godin was born in 1879 and like many of his contemporaries was educated at the Ecole des Beaux-Arts in Paris (*Architecture domestique* 335). He was responsible for the design of municipal buildings, schools, churches, theatres, and apartment complexes (Pinard 129). Godin became involved in real estate in 1914, building on three plots of land that he had co-purchased during a very short period of time: the *Saint Jacques* on St. Denis between Ontario and De Maisonneuve, the *Riga Apartments* on Christin street near St. Denis and St. Catherine street, and the *Edifice Godin*. Although architecturally successful, it was these final ventures that ultimately lead him to financial ruin. By the time 2116 was completed, the architect

was in debt to over fifty-two creditors involved in its construction (Pinard 131). These last buildings are arguably the most significant of his career as they reinvented urban dwelling in Montreal and evoke the nature of Godin's avant-garde approach to designing residential spaces (Pinard, 135). Not only did he display an unconventional use of concrete, which up until then had been used for the construction of industrial buildings in Canada, Godin built on plots that were all in walking distance from theatres, universities, and shopping districts (Pinard 135). Two of these locations were designed with the intention to accommodate commercial businesses on the first floor and apartments on the successive floors, which was also uncommon.

By 1911, the city of Montreal had a population of half a million, practically doubling itself since 1901 (Marsan 313); this boom would have been incentive for Godin to build in the downtown area. During this time, structures in Montreal were still dominated by stone façades in the Beaux-Arts style (Marsan 237). The use of stone in the city's architecture began as a structural necessity but soon became a reinforcement of identity, as this material was readily available throughout the island (Marsan 237). With this in mind, Godin's approach should be considered quite atypical. As many Quebecois architects had been influenced by French styles, so too was Godin. During a trip to France in 1909, he witnessed the work of Auguste Perret (*Architecture domestique* 335), whose adoption of the François Hennebique system and stylistic treatment of concrete in his designs had a profound effect on future uses of the medium. Hennebique is known for buildings designed in a classical rationalist style, art nouveau, and art deco.<sup>1</sup> While Perret created buildings of greater prestige, Hennebique's 1904 apartment building on the corner of Niel Avenue and Rennequin Street in Paris could have influenced the aesthetic

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<sup>1</sup> See his design for the Théâtre des Champs-Élysées, 1911, and the Garage at 51 Rue de Ponthieu, 1905.

of the Edifice Godin; the pale color of the concrete, cylindrical corner entrance and commercial spaces on the first floor bear similar traits to 2116. Patented in 1892 (Newman 9), François Hennebique used the slogan, “Plus d’incendies desastreux,” to garner interest in the benefits of reinforced concrete (Collins 66). His method consists of first creating an iron skeleton structure which is then framed with wood. Following this, concrete is poured over the skeleton and into the frame, which is removed after the medium has dried. This process provided an exposed, “transparent,” concrete structure, which, due to its plasticity, could be molded into fantastic shapes and was solid enough to carry more weight, permitting extra fenestration (Collins 66-67). For Perret, “considerations of appearance were conceived as inseparable from considerations of stability” (Collins 343). This is linked strongly to theories of Modernism at the time.

The Edifice Godin was likely to have been designed with a specific tenant in mind and an interest in creating a new dynamic space. The lot, shaped like a parallelogram, restricted architecture to its north-south axis and necessitated a vertical design; one advantage was that the slope of the boulevard permitted the construction of an extra floor. According to an article published in a local paper at the time, *Le prix courant*, Godin was constructing a four story apartment building with twenty-four small apartments, which seemed to be more like studios as they varied from two to four hundred square feet each, and room for a commercial enterprise at street level (Pinard 134-135). Although it was designed in an art nouveau style, its ornamentation is quite subtle, save for the keystone on the lower central arch at the centre of the building, which serves a purely aesthetic function. There are two arched entrances; the central arch, which is actually made up of two arches overlapping one another and framing a cylindrical light well (Fig.

1); the second entrance is recessed into the cylindrical north corner, directly under two cantilevered balconies crowned with simple iron balustrades.



Fig. 1 View of overlapping arches, entrance, Edifice Godin.  
Photograph: Viola McGowan, 2009

While the façade is vertically symmetrical, our gaze is led horizontally by a bandeau, which divides the building and provides a streamline effect. The white color of the concrete serves to unify the overall structure and white brickwork adds variation to the top portion, as do

arched and rectangular windows. Very little had been done to the interior (Pinard 131), however, an impressive concrete spiral staircase with an iron railing was accessible from the main entrance connecting each floor and framing the building's elevator (Fig. 2). It has been speculated that the elevator was installed posterior to the original design, this is difficult to confirm however as the building's original plans were lost in a fire that took place at City Hall in 1922 (Pinard 131).



Fig. 2 Concrete staircase encased in glass (view from second floor), Edifice Godin.  
Photograph: Viola McGowan, 2009.

By the end of the nineteenth century, luxury apartment buildings on Sherbrooke West, such as the Linton, catered to the changing lifestyles of the upper class and, only four decades earlier, as commercial buildings were blossoming, the bourgeoisie had begun to inhabit St-Laurent between Sherbrooke and St. Antoine. Drawn to this prominent commercial centre, residential and professional life was melding (Fulton 719). Located in immediate proximity to the Edifice Godin was the former home of the Molson family (the northwest corner of St-Laurent and Sherbrooke), who lived there from 1825 to 1907, even after selling their home and land to the Bank of Montreal in 1905. The Sherbrooke Methodist Church, constructed in 1864 after the Molson family had sold their southwest lot the Methodist community (Pinard 130) and its presbytery hugged the west side of the Edifice Godin. On the southeast side of the intersection was the Wing Lee First Class Laundry. The Godin building had not yet been furnished when it was seized due to aforementioned outstanding debts and sold to the Bank of Montreal on 30 March 1915 (Pinard 131). The bank would operate a branch on the first floor from 1920 to 1949 (Pinard 131).

From 1870 to 1945 an influx of immigrants to St-Laurent Boulevard, also known as “the Main” of Montreal, further changed the social and cultural dynamic of the area (Fulton 720). The Greek community had a strong affinity to St-Laurent Boulevard and purchased the Methodist church in 1925 (H.C.M.). It became the Holy Trinity Greek Orthodox Church (one of the most important in the community) and the presbytery was used as the Socrates Anglo-Greek School (H.C.M.). By 1967, the Hellenic community had purchased the entirety of the land upon which the church and Godin building sat; the 2116 housed their official offices (H.C.M.). By 1982 a large part of the Greek community had settled on the northern portion of Parc Avenue leading to

Parc Extension. At this point, a new centre had been built to accommodate changing needs and the offices in the Godin building had been emptied. Four years later, a fire would claim the Holy Trinity Church (Rose).

The year 1990 marked a pivotal moment for the building; it was granted heritage status (Rose), and therefore could not be demolished, nor could its façade be altered. The recession of the early nineties meant that there were no investments to be made in the building leading to little intervention in its state of decline (Theodore). According to the Montreal Hellenic Community's archivist, Nick Mitsopoulos, with the exception of some commercial businesses on the first floor, the building had been vacant and was unfit for tenant housing. There had, however, been many residents at 2116. Each floor maintained two apartments that measured one to two thousand square feet (Hanganu). A drastic change from Godin's original intentions for the interior was that the architect never fully finished the interior of the building and the space was never partitioned to accommodate twenty-four apartments. Graffiti on the inside and outside of the edifice was expressive of activity on the premises, inside the building artists had set up studios and living quarters. The scene in the building was highly creative but was otherwise known as having been "invested by squatters" (Hanganu).

Those who have described the social life of the Edifice Godin, prior to its retrofitting, have done so with great nostalgia; the building as ruin became a bastion for unbounded artistic invention.<sup>2</sup> Serge Lotosky was one of many artists who lived and worked in the apartments. His sculptures mainly consisted of soldered metal. In a 1990 interview, his studio, dubbed "Artland", was described as a "sculpture-crammed" place where "all languages [were] accepted except for

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<sup>2</sup> It should be stated that it is difficult to trace most of the artists who lived in the building during the 1990s. While attempts were made to reach the interviewed parties, there have been no replies as of this writing. Articles pertaining to the eviction of the tenants have been likewise difficult to locate.



bureaucratic double-speak” (Duncan). As a political expression in the “wake of the collapse of the Meech Lake accord,” Lotosky declared his studio to be the “independent nation of Artland,” a place that was free from the grips of cultural tension (Duncan). Filmmaker Jean-Philippe Duval recently released *Dédé à travers les brumes* (2009), a film based on the life of André Fortin, the lead singer of the Québécois music group, *Les Colocs*. Fortin and several members of the band lived and practiced in 2116, which they describe as a squat. When recreating the look of the apartment for his film, Duval stated that he wanted to invoke the same energy as the “artist commune” that was the Edifice Godin (Duval). *Murmure*, a web-based audio archive project with a mission to keep local stories alive and present, seeks to reveal histories of urban spaces that are otherwise unrecorded by interviewing people who have experienced them in unique ways. The notion of the artist commune is clearly described in two *Murmure* interviews regarding the Edifice Godin. Michel Vézina, then arts director of *ICI*, explains:

Ce lieu a déjà été, au début des années quatre-vingt-dix, un lieu hautement créatif. C’est à dire qu’il y avait des gens qui habitait la qui était des musiciens, des sculpteurs, des decorateurs, des photographes, qui animé ce lieu de haute en bas, toute les espaces etait occupées... je peux dire ainsi parcequ’il y avait beaucoup de monde qui payé leur loyer quand même, mais y en avait beaucoup d’autres qui squatté cet immeuble. Ce lieu va devenir un grand hôtel et ça m’étonnerait énormément qu’il y a une plaque qui rapelle des ses événements si créatifs, les années quatre-vingt-dix. <sup>3</sup>

Serge Robert, former bassist of *Les Colocs*, describes the qualities of the space:

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<sup>3</sup> This site, during the early nineteen nineties, was extremely creative. That is to say, the people living here were musicians, sculptors, designers, photographers, these people enlivened the entire premises. Every space in the building was occupied... I say this as there were many people paying rent and many others who squatted here as well. This site will soon become a luxurious hotel and it would surprise me considerably if there were any plaque to commemorate the creativity that went on here during the nineteen nineties” (trans. Viola McGowan).

Y avait même pas de sonnerie en bas, l'immeuble était ben décrépit, y avait un ascenseur au milieu qui marché pas, les mûres était délabré, y avait des bouts de plâtre qui tombé... je montais ses escaliers et immédiatement j'ai senti que je quittais l'univers un peu douillet de la banlieue et que j'étais en train de rentrer dans un univers qui sortait de l'ordinaire ... .<sup>4</sup>

Robert Neuwirth asserts that squatting has existed since the development of cities and that the act of squatting is a form of urban development (179). Neuwirth sees property as “a setting for inequality” (287) and claims that the act of squatting challenges society as an “assertion of being in a world that rationally denies people the dignity and the validity inherent in a home” (311). Rosalyn Deutsche shares a similar view, namely that urban space is constructed through multiple socioeconomic conflicts that need to be understood and contested, as oppression. Homelessness tends to be viewed as a problem rather than a symptom of a greater, social problem. Deutsche asserts that space is in conflict as it is constructed conservatively as a binary space, based on what perception of coherent space is permissible and what should be excluded. Taking these insights to bear on the history of the site of concern in this paper, it is important to consider the 1966 fire that consumed the presbytery located at the west wall of the Edifice Godin. Although Godin's concrete structure resisted the flames, minor damage occurred and the upper story apartments, occupied by squatters and paying tenants alike, were evacuated. Businesses on the ground floor, however, continued to operate (Rose). This small piece of the Edifice Godin's history is akin to what Deutsche sees as cities being redesigned over time to facilitate capitalism, with gentrification being the ultimate outcome (403).

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<sup>4</sup> “There wasn't even a doorbell downstairs, the building was decrepit, the elevator at the centre of the building was out of order, the walls were dilapidated, pieces of plaster were falling ... I made my way up the stairs and immediately felt that I was leaving the sheltered world of the suburbs and entering an extraordinary universe ...” (trans. Viola McGowan).

A 2001 evaluation report of the state of the Edifice noted that the deterioration of the structure, while due in part to the presence of squatters and vandals, was also caused by the property owners' neglect during and after the presence of tenants (Hanganu). Deutsche might describe the property owners as "keyholders," those that hold authority. She states that these figures are entitled to their place within a community and to a quality of life, something that should be extended to include everyone (402). Tenants (i.e. squatters) are often subject to moral scrutiny, mainly as a response to their financial instability and inability to adequately shelter themselves to preconceived standards. The visibility of squatters neither guarantees the social recognition of a greater problem nor legitimizes conflicts over space; it perversely reinforces a contrasting image of what a harmonious space should look like, which could legitimize the eviction of those who do not subscribe to that specific image of harmony (Deutsche 408). Squatters are deemed "undesirable" as they do not have the financial means to maintain the space in which they dwell; their eviction is often done under the guise of security, which was the case for the evacuated tenants of 2116. While the lack of affordable housing was apparent during the nineties (as it is today), the city of Montreal was promoting property purchases through "lifestyle marketing" in an effort to repopulate the inner city. This included new constructions in older parts of the city, east of old Montreal for example, and recycled buildings in the downtown area. A 1998 brochure produced by the city's program called *Le Nouveau Montréal* advertised, "Housing in the city for everybody- My Property, A Dream Come True" (Germain 172-173). These development projects were aimed at young families, empty nesters and especially young professionals. The aim was to reach new keyholders for an idealized and harmonious-looking cityscape.

The late 90s saw a rise in the economy; investors who had already successfully created high-end restaurants, nightclubs, and trendy repertory cinema along St-Laurent Boulevard saw potential in the dilapidated site of the Edifice Godin as a boutique-style hotel and were eager to forge a “gateway to the ‘Soho of Montreal’” (Theodore). The “artist commune” of the early 90s had bestowed a substantially bohemian character to the lower Plateau. This romanticized lifestyle quickly became marketable and was soon polished enough to attract a corporate-friendly clientele of young professionals.<sup>5</sup> Enter Dan Hanganu, an architect who, like Godin, has designed many residential complexes and churches. For the Edifice Godin, Hanganu was asked to retrofit the existing building and create a substantially-scaled new volume to the west, on the site of the former Sherbrooke Methodist Church (Fig. 3).

In general, Hanganu employs a postmodern approach to architecture, seeking to create relationships with his sites' surroundings instead of mimicking or replacing history. While he recognizes the importance of heritage, he “never submits completely to [it] because he agrees to develop an architecture which manifests our contemporary condition in its contrasts and contradictions” (Vanlaethem 44). Renowned for his firm's designs for the Pointe-à-Callière museum (Montreal, 1992) and the HEC business school (Montreal 1996), Hanganu's design for the expansion of the Edifice Godin has been described as using a “big box” strategy, while also “providing a surprising, dramatic interior” (Theodore).

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<sup>5</sup> The Opus Hotel's director of sales, Pino Nicosia, proudly stated that the hotel's clients are young professionals, mostly working within fashion, cinema, and technology- a clientele naturally drawn to St-Laurent Boulevard. He added that the mention of Koko lounge in Conde Nast's hot list of 2009 had provided the hotel with a greater sense of prominence, attracting more clients.



Fig. 3 Hanganu Design, Opus Hotel, 2004.  
Photograph: courtesy Flickr.com, 2009.

While the color of the new building's exterior cladding reflects traditional greystone it does little else to "fit in". The Godin building and Hanganu's new design do not give the appearance of a seamless synthesis but rather seems to represent two egos standing alongside one another, one exemplifying the historic and the curvilinear, and the other the rectilinear and the new. Hanganu's new structure stands two floors higher than the former Godin, but he manages to relate the exteriors through the extension of a cantilevered roof, which he likens to a "protective gesture, like you might put your arm out to protect someone dear to you, or hold out an umbrella" (Theodore). This "umbrella" actually houses a fire escape that links both structures, now conjointly named the Opus Hotel.

The interior of the new portion of the Opus Hotel succeeds in reflecting the aesthetic of the Godin; the spirit of modernism is evoked in the decorative use of raw materials. Hanganu seems to share the same view on ornament as Auguste Perret, seeing it as “inseparable from the logic of construction” (Vanlaethem 42). In the lobby, for example, warmth is conveyed as walls near the elevators are lined in quark and wooden beams, while sculptures are found throughout. Granite-tiled floors and pillars frame the entrance and large panes of glass provide a sense of transparency. The greatest links between architectural aesthetics can be found in the poured concrete columns, the artistic use of metal wire – which might reflect the iron rods used in the framework of the concrete – and the giant symmetrical panels of polished marble exhibited behind the front desk. The Koko lounge, located within both segments of the hotel, creates a compromise between both design aesthetics through its trendy modern furnishing and the giant Art Nouveau illustrations by Aubrey Beardsley, which can be found hanging on the walls and within the coffered ceiling of the private lounge area. These images are also used in advertisements for the lounge. While the original elevator has been removed, the staircase has been spared. In Hanganu’s original evaluation report, he mentioned that the stairs would have to be demolished as they could pose a safety hazard (Hanganu). Instead, it was decided that the stairs would be partially extracted at the main entrance level while the rest was encased in glass and visible from each successive floor. This encasement positions the stairs as a relic, an index to the history of the building. All of these elements create an interesting dialectic between interior and exterior.

The aesthetic of reinforced concrete conjures the image of monumentality, a structure that offers itself as a seamless and continuous stylized form, a structure that might serve as a

monument, if not for its representational quality, then certainly for its capacity to withstand the elements and time. Referencing Maurice Halbwachs' theory of collective memory, Alan Gordon states, "every memory requires the support of a group delimited in time and space" (6). Gordon draws attention to Jürgen Habermas' definition of the public sphere as informal areas where people come together to form a consensus that establishes, through negotiation with constituted authority, their legitimacy in collective life" (6). This drives Gordon's argument that if the plurality of publics exists so does the plurality of public spaces; that "public memory is formed by competing interests, often using unofficial channels, who desire to enshrine a singular, 'official' civic past" (6). Within the context of the Edifice Godin, the authority here would be the property owners and the consensus would be that tenants participated in a creative lifestyle that spanned most of the nineteen-nineties. With this in mind, the supported memory of this time and space would manifest itself in the Godin building, hence, the building as monument, the enshrined past. With respect to the significance of a site, Gordon refers to Pierre Bourdieu's notion that memory is a part of the cultural field, in which people, ideas, apparatuses, systems and audiences frame the production of art. The significance of historic sites and monuments is thus subject to change according to needs and abilities of the public that routinely passes them and according to the perceptions and tastes of travelers for whom the site is not routine" (10). This would actually broaden the significance of the building as monument, meaning that it too holds the potential for plurality.

In discussing hierarchical notions of architecture and the way society constructs this in relation to the status of people entertaining these sites, architectural historian Jean-Claude Marsan asserts that "architecture is not an image; it should be a complete answer to the needs of

a given situation” (378). Today, it seems that the integrity of Godin’s original design is still intact within the Opus Hotel. But the success of the hotel is inextricably linked to gentrification on the Main, an evolution that has forsaken the residential and community history that made this area of Montreal so unique in the first place. Notions of the starving artist, the itinerant squatter and the immigrant Other – romanticized and demonized alike – continue to shape public memory on St-Laurent Boulevard, and play a part in the often problematic way in which socioeconomic, spatial conflicts are resolved in Montreal. Yet little of the Edifice Godin’s own history of spatial conflict can be found in the beautifully, if controversially, retrofitted Opus Hotel. This paper has attempted to bring the plurality of these histories into consideration as part of the architecture and legacy of the Edifice Godin. The various communities that the Edifice Godin has served, sheltered and witnessed deserve recognition and legitimization, not only in the romanticized past but in the present of the building as well, as determined by their own collective notion of harmony in a built environment. Although there is no plaque to commemorate the immigrant, squatter and creative histories that took place in and around the Edifice Godin, knowing these histories means that the building itself can be the monument that this plurality deserves.



## Works Cited

Editor's note: some newspaper sources cited in this essay are located in the Vertical File collection of the Library of the Canadian Centre for Architecture (CCA) in Montreal. The CCA collects news and other clippings in files on Montreal streets and buildings. Not all items in these files retain their original pagination, and for this reason the references in this list and in this essay do not always show page numbers. For more information, please see the Vertical File holdings for the Edifice Godin at the CCA.

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