

The Desire for Integration:
Attempts to Engender a Utopian Social Order at
Les Habitations Jeanne-Mance, Montreal



Alexandra Mills
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Utopias, according to architectural historian, Nathaniel Coleman, “argue against inadequate existing conditions while drawing upon the past to augur a transformed future envisioned as superior to the present.”¹ While there is a connection between utopias and architecture, Coleman continues, their union is neither good nor bad. Although utopian architecture appears optimistic through the suggestion that new architectural forms will be far superior to those they replace, Coleman asserts that utopias ensure their own demise since the perfection they desire is unattainable.² This statement accurately describes the contradictions existing at *Les Habitations Jeanne-Mance*, the first American style, low-income housing development in the province of Quebec and the only urban renewal project to be endorsed and financed at the municipal, provincial and federal levels.³ Constructed between 1958 and 1961 in a district directly east of Montreal’s downtown core, the architecture and site planning of *Les Habitations* are indicative of the hopefulness associated with utopian architecture as well as the difficulty of attaining that ideal. It was hoped that *Les Habitations* would improve the lives of its inhabitants; however, like many mid-century mass housing projects, *Les Habitations* have had an ambivalent history, including decades of sustained segregation and the stigmatization of its residents. Nevertheless, *Les Habitations* is unique. What makes it particularly special is that it has managed to escape the destruction that was the fate of many, similar post-World War II

¹ Nathaniel Coleman, *Utopias and Architecture* (London and New York: Routledge, 2005) 48.

² Coleman 48.

³ Michèle Picard, “Social and Political Battles Over an Urban Renewal Project, Public Housing in Canada, and the Case of Les Habitations Jeanne-Mance and the Dozois Plan,” *Conference Proceedings: Vision and Reality: Social Aspects of Architecture and Urban Planning in the Modern Movement*, ed. Marina Botta (Stockholm: Swedish Museum of Architecture, 1998) 109.

housing projects. This unique circumstance invites the question: what is it about this development that demanded another chance?

Architectural historian, Annmarie Adams suggests that perhaps one the reason *Les Habitations Jeanne-Mance* exists today is because people care enough for the site to keep it from falling into complete disrepair.⁴ Drawing upon this insight, in this paper I explore how this and other reasons may have contributed to the resilience of *Les Habitations Jeanne-Mance* despite the general unpopularity of its building type. In particular, I argue that the project has enabled a renewal of the design's original, utopian outlook and desires. To this end, this essay explores four stages in the building's history: its conception; the 1966 and 1985 tenant-led attempts to integrate the development into the surrounding area and eliminate the stigma associated with living in "the projects"; and finally the 2006 City of Montreal rejuvenation plan, as it is indicative of utopian, city planning pursuits.

A theme that will run through this paper is the notion of the palimpsest. Cities are active and always evolving; the present is continually overwriting the past. It is impossible to remove all physical and psychological traces of a city's history. The traces of the past that remain detectable in the present form a palimpsest that has an effect on the narrative of the city. The palimpsestic nature of the city becomes evident when looking at the development of *Les Habitations Jeanne-Mance*. Haunted by the slum it replaced and the slum it became, *Les Habitations* paradoxically acts as its own catalyst for the renewal of its original utopian intentions.

⁴ I am grateful to Dr Adams for making this suggestion in the context of the conference, "City as a Palimpsest II: Hauntings, Occupations, Theaters of Memory" (17 April 2009), where I presented a working version of the present essay.

Les Habitations Jeanne-Mance was conceived in 1954 in order to replace dilapidated tenements with rational, functional buildings, designed according to the tenets of modern architecture. Its construction was the first urban planning project during Quebec's Quiet Revolution and is now considered by some to be "a symbol of the modernization of Quebec society."⁵ Constructed between 1958 and 1961, *Les Habitations Jeanne-Mance* was designed by architects Greenspoon, Freedlander and Dunne and Jacques Morin, along with chief architect Ian MacLennan from the architecture and town planning division of the Central Mortgage and Housing Corporation. Architectural and town planning consultants Rother, Bland and Trudeau were also involved.⁶ Located in the Faubourg St-Laurent district, *Les Habitations* is comprised of almost eight hundred housing units, spread over a collection of buildings: one fourteen-story tower, four twelve-story towers, fourteen three-story walk-up apartments complexes and nine two-story row houses.⁷ The entire development is located on nearly twenty acres in a previously destitute neighborhood in the city center, enclosed by rue St-Dominique, rue Sanguinet, rue Ontario and rue Ste-Catherine est.⁸

Les Habitations Jeanne-Mance was the end result of the reform and public health movement in Quebec promoted by the powerful former mayor of Montreal, Maurice Duplessis. This movement was conceived during the transitional period between the *Grande Noirceur*

⁵ Picard 109.

⁶ While the development was only completed in 1961, people moved into the development as buildings were completed. The first tenants moved into *Les Habitations* in 1959.

⁷ "Project: Jeanne-Mance Project, Montreal," *RAIC Journal* 35.9 (September 1958): 351-352. There are 796 units spread out into a total of twenty-eight buildings, 536 of which are contained within the high-rise towers, 210 in the three-story walk-ups and 50 in the two-story row houses.

⁸ The figure above is the net acreage of *Les Habitations Jeanne-Mance*. The gross acreage is 20.8. This figure includes De Maisonneuve, a street that passes through the development. David Wai Chan, "Design Considerations in Urban Low-Income Housing Redevelopments with Special Reference to Montreal," MA Thesis, McGill University, March 1970, 145.

(“great darkness”, when the Catholic Church and a repressive government worked closely together), and the Quiet Revolution, an era that signaled the beginning of institutional, social and political reform in the province.⁹ The late fifties and early sixties also mark a period in which modernist architectural projects began to find favour in the city, although the popularity of modernist mass housing would soon fall out of favor. According to Michèle Picard, *Les Habitations Jeanne-Mance* were considered a failure very soon after their construction, in part because of problems related to the complex union between multiple levels of government, as well as the site's late conception.¹⁰

The history of *Les Habitations* began in 1951 with an authorized loan by the municipal government, which set aside twenty-five million dollars for slum clearance. In 1952 the Dozois Committee was formed, identifying thirteen slum areas for potential redevelopment (Fig. 1 and 2).¹¹ The site of *Les Habitations* was the first area to be expropriated, the existing buildings demolished and the land developed, possibly due to its proximity to the Red Light district or its highly visible position in the downtown (Fig. 3). Mayor Drapeau was a firm advocate of the morality and health movements in Quebec; however, he was in opposition to the construction of social housing on this particular site, as he feared it would prevent the development of the downtown core. Drapeau's opposition to the Dozois plan led to many years of controversy associated with the development of *Les Habitations Jeanne-Mance*, including modifications to the original plan that involved downscaling the development, originally intended to cover more

⁹ Picard 109.

¹⁰ Picard 109.

¹¹ The Dozois committee was headed by city councilor, Paul Dozois.

of the Faubourg St-Laurent district.¹² As a consequence of this tension, the project developed slowly. As a writer in *The Herald* wrote in 1958, “the vision of model, modern homes at moderate, income tailored rentals conjured up for [families living in crowded tenements] a couple of years ago, became daily more remote.”¹³

An article titled “Les Habitations Jeanne-Mance déjà populaires,” published in *Dimanche Matin* on 2 November 1958 stated that seven hundred families were willing to trade their dilapidated, outmoded apartments for modern spaces and conveniences (Fig. 4). This article presents *Les Habitations Jeanne-Mance* as a haven comprised of “roomy and modern residences in the heart of Montreal, in a district that up until now contained only dilapidated houses and slums.”¹⁴ This same article makes reference to architectural qualities promoted by the famous Swiss modernist and housing reformer, Le Corbusier, suggesting that the new inhabitants of *Les Habitations* would be leaving unhealthy living conditions in favor of “modern, clean apartments, where the air and the sun will enter in abundance.”¹⁵ While some tenants continued to believe that the City of Montreal intended to provide its citizens access to a better quality of life than that to which they were accustomed, many others did not share this opinion. *Les Habitation Jeanne-*

¹² Jean Drapeau was the mayor of Montreal when the Dozois report was proposed instead a Cité-des-ondes, or Radio City, which would have moved the CBC and Radio Canada from the east end to the center of Montreal. Also of interest is he anticipated the expropriation of 30 acres over the then proposed 17.6 for *Les Habitations Jeanne-Mance* for his radio city, showing little consideration for the families living in the Domain. He also proposed a Cité-Famille, or Family-City, to be built in the north end, away from the downtown business district as a response to the outcry of social housing groups. (“Council Meet: Drapeau Plan Bid Quashed” *Montreal Star* 6 June 1958.)

¹³ “The Slums Remain,” *The Herald* 24 Sept. 1958.

¹⁴ “... des logements spacieux et modernes au coeur même de Montréal, dans un quartier qui à venir jusqu’à maintenant ne contenait que des maisons vétustes et des taudis.” See “Les Habitations Jeanne-Mance déjà populaires,” *Dimanche Matin* 2 Nov. 1958. Forty percent of the neighborhoods residents were anxious to inhabit *Les Habitations* after their homes were expropriated and demolished by the city.

¹⁵ “... des appartement moderne, propre où l’air et le soleil entrèrent à profusion.” See “Les Habitations Jeanne-Mance déjà populaires.”

Mance never did become to modern sanctuary initially envisioned.¹⁶ As has been widely observed, the failure of modern, mass housing can be attributed in part to the fact that utopias are difficult to both envision, design, execute and maintain, not least because the social problems that have led to their necessity are themselves complex and historically deep.¹⁷ As Edward Rothstein succinctly puts it, “the real is always less elegant and more complex than the ideal”; utopian dreams rarely make provision for the instability and messiness of day-to-day life.¹⁸

The vision of model housing development is congruent with utopian ideals as put forward by Thomas More in his book *Utopia*, first published in 1516. More coined the term “utopia” by combining the Greek adverb *ou* (not) with the noun *topos* (place), and subsequently providing the compound with a Latin ending. When read together this term means “no-place.”¹⁹ However, there is a linguistic ambiguity inherent in the word “utopia,” as another Greek compound of the word, *eutopia*, means “good place” or “fortunate place.”²⁰ Both the no-place and the good-place refer to the newly discovered island upon which a perfect society resides: it is both a no-place as it resides solely in the imagination of More, and a good-place because it is said to be a perfect, harmonious society that should be emulated in reality. In More’s utopia, all people are considered equal, and there is no poverty, starvation or homelessness. Yet *Utopia* can also be read as a cautionary tale; according to writer Georges M. Logan, this egalitarian nation “frequently puts us

¹⁶ Corporation d’Habitations Jeanne-Mance, *Quarante Ans de Logement Social: Rapport Annuel 1999* (Montreal: Corporation Jeanne-Mance, 2000).

¹⁷ On this point, see Katherine G. Bristol, “The Pruitt-Igoe Myth,” *Journal of Architectural Education* 44.3 (May 1991): 163-71.

¹⁸ Edward Rothstein, “Utopia and its Discontents,” *Visions of Utopia* (New York and London: Oxford UP, 2003) 22.

¹⁹ Thomas More, *Utopia*, Georges M. Logan and Robert M. Adams, eds., first published in 1516, (Cambridge and New York: Cambridge UP, 2002), xi.

²⁰ More xi.

in mind of modern totalitarian regimes,” as they restrict individual freedom to the point of being completely authoritarian.²¹

The designers of modernist, utopian cities hoped to provide an ideal environment for their users; however, this was not always the result. The construction of *Les Habitations Jeanne-Mance* exchanged dangerous, overcrowded tenements for healthy, organized and rational spaces, on the basis of the hope that the lives of residents would be markedly better. Yet there are negative aspects linked to utopian development because of the ambivalence of the very notion of utopia. With improved living conditions come the restriction of individual freedom through the prescribed, mechanized and sterile environments that result from architecture that attempts to be or provide a machine for living, the famously utopian idea put forward by Le Corbusier. Furthermore, while it could be expected that the construction of an authoritarian society would result in decreased criminality, this is not so. Though *Les Habitations Jeanne-Mance* may have acted as a refuge from living in the slums, they did not automatically provide a safe, idyllic and egalitarian community; indeed, the area has seen the growth rather than the diminishing of illegal activities in the area. The lack of social cohesion, the loss or abandonment of shared space, and the deterioration of the towers and row housing might collectively suggest that the development should be demolished to make way for something new. Yet attempts have consistently been made to realign *Les Habitations Jeanne-Mance* with the project’s original utopian premise. As this paper will show, it is by altering old conceptions of utopia to conform to contemporary reality that this realignment has taken place.

In recent texts, architectural theorist Elizabeth Wilson and philosopher Elizabeth Grosz play upon the indeterminate meaning of the word “utopia”. Wilson considers the “unspecified

²¹ More xii. In More’s *Utopia*, the constraints put upon its inhabitants remove all possibility for illegal activities, leaving no room for corruption in this so-called perfect society.

possibilities” of utopias,²² while Grosz suggests, “the utopic is beyond the architectural,” arguing that perhaps the “no place is the good place.”²³ Grosz argues that the utopian is not the projection of a better future, but more specifically a “projection of a past or present as if it were the future.”²⁴ This idea is reiterated in Coleman’s *Utopias and Architecture* (2005), in which the author suggests that we draw “upon the past to augur a transformed future envisioned as superior to the present.”²⁵

The ambiguous meaning of the word utopia as discussed by both Grosz and Wilson is applicable to the desires for renovation at *Les Habitations Jeanne-Mance*, as the search for an ideal social housing development is an ongoing process that has an effect on the city’s palimpsestic narrative. By questioning traditional distinctions between the past and the present, Grosz leaves open the possibility of reading the present condition of *Les Habitations Jeanne-Mance* as undoubtedly connected to its past as a overcrowded, inner-city slum. Even if the tenements have been demolished to make room for modern apartments, the psychological association the area has with its former identity remains. Moreover, the unspecified possibilities of utopias that Wilson discusses are found in the indeterminate aspects of the project, such as the unregulated green spaces found throughout the development.

Frequently, public housing projects are conceived as places of hope and correspond to the desire to create a utopian social order. However, due to contemporary urban renewal endeavors,

²² Elizabeth Wilson, “Against Utopia: the Romance of Indeterminate Spaces,” *Embodied Utopias: Gender, Social Change and the Modern Metropolis*, ed. Amy Bingaman, Lise Sanders and Rebecca Zorach (London and New York: Routledge, 2002) 259.

²³ Elizabeth Grosz, “The Time of Architecture,” *Embodied Utopias: Gender, Social Change and the Modern Metropolis*, ed. Amy Bingaman, Lise Sanders and Rebecca Zorach (London and New York: Routledge, 2002) 267.

²⁴ Grosz 272.

²⁵ Coleman 48.

whose distaste for modernist housing projects frequently lead to their demise, many social housing projects exist only in the memories and imaginations of people who encountered those sites. According to Lawrence J. Vale, approximately one hundred thousand public housing units have been destroyed since 1993.²⁶ Why then was *Les Habitations Jeanne-Mance* not demolished?

Eugene Meenhan proposes that modernist social housing is considered unsuccessful because of the commonly-held belief that problems are built directly into their design. He describes this as a “programmed failure,” which is an idea that Katherine G. Bristol elaborates upon in her essay “The Pruitt-Igoe Myth.” Bristol states that this “programmed failure” does not take into account other factors that played a part in the demise of modernist social housing.²⁷ Perhaps it is simpler to blame objects rather than political, social or economic events. However, the problems that lead to the demolition of social housing elsewhere have provoked the constant desire for renewal at *Les Habitations Jeanne-Mance*.

Bristol finds the presumption that “social problems are caused, and therefore solved, by architectural design” troubling.²⁸ Moreover, she suggests that the “direct relationship between physical environments and human behavior” discussed by Oscar Newman in his famous book, *Defensible Space* fails to take into the account social, economic and political problems that

²⁶ Lawrence J. Vale, *Reclaiming Public Housing: A Half Century of Struggle in Three Public Neighborhoods* (Cambridge & London: Harvard UP, 2002) 1. Although this statistic is directly related to American public housing projects, it is still applicable to the situation in Canada. Although there have been fewer public housing projects erected in Canada, it can be assumed that there has been less demolition, though there are no current statistics in Canada to substantiate this claim. However, regardless of the lack of figures concerning the status of public housing in Canada, the problems that provoked the destruction of modernist housing projects in the United States are nevertheless valid.

²⁷ Eugene Meehan, *The Quality of Federal Policymaking: Programmed Failure in Public Housing* (Columbia: University of Missouri Press, 1979) 83-87, 194-198.

²⁸ Bristol 163.

played a part in the demise of social housing.²⁹ Bristol argues that it has become too easy to relate the so-called failure of social housing projects to their architectural design that she believes to be “insensitive to the needs of the lower class population.”³⁰ Architectural historian, Charles Jencks echoes this idea in his essay, “The Death of Modern Architecture,” where he proposes that although modernist architecture was meant to embed high moral values in its residents, the hoped-for correlation between new architectural forms and improved behavioral patterns was too simplistic.³¹ While the destruction of modernist housing projects can be related to the above-mentioned problems, I believe that the attempts to redevelop and rejuvenate *Les Habitations Jeanne-Mance* stem from the desire to overturn the assumption that modernist architecture has failed by modifying its original utopian premise with regards to contemporary utopian constraints. The renovations at *Les Habitations* indicate the desire to work with the complexities found within society, which is by nature a layered and intricate place.

In 1977, Jencks famously declared that modern architecture died with the 1972 demolition of the Pruitt-Igoe housing development in St-Louis, Missouri.³² This statement inspired the widely-rehearsed presumption that all modern social housing developments had therefore “failed.”³³ Jencks claims that the rationalization, simplification and universalization of architecture within modernism created an environment that fostered social problems rather than

²⁹ Bristol 167-168.

³⁰ Bristol 167. Although Bristol is writing about the Pruitt-Igoe housing project, I believe that her arguments are applicable to social housing projects in general.

³¹ Charles Jencks, “Part One: The Death of Modern Architecture,” *The Language of Post-Modern Architecture* 1977 (New York: Rizzoli, 1984) 9-10.

³² Jencks 9.

³³ See Bristol.

solved them.³⁴ Jencks also suggests that modern architects neglected historical and social signs in favor of designing for a “universal man,” ignoring individual communities in favor of a collective community.³⁵ The idea of a collective community fits well within utopian ideals, but the universality of this community is a physical impossibility that relies on the abandonment of history and individuality. Like Pruitt-Igoe, *Les Habitations Jeanne-Mance* attempted to unite their residents under the common purpose of self-improvement. However, like the former, *Les Habitations* deteriorated over the years, resulting in a history of controversy linked to the development’s political, social and economic problems, prompting residents and non-residents alike to label the site a ghetto. Although both housing projects were conceived in the tradition of utopian architecture, *Les Habitations Jeanne-Mance* was spared the “final *coup de grace*”³⁶ experienced by Pruitt-Igoe, and has been made subject to multiple renovation projects over the years. Unlike Pruitt-Igoe, which critics like Jencks saw as a monument to the failure of modern architecture, *Les Habitations Jeanne-Mance* can be considered a monument to the perseverance of modernism in Quebec through the almost continuous attempts to renew its original utopian motive.

Situated on a once highly populated tract of land, *Les Habitations Jeanne-Mance* was designed to maintain a high-density area while maximizing the amount of green space available for recreational use – a far cry from the site’s original incarnation as an overcrowded slum (Fig. 5). This objective is reminiscent of both Ebenezer Howard’s Garden City concept and Le Corbusier’s Radiant City ideal, but neither of these foundational, modernist concepts

³⁴ Jencks 13.

³⁵ Jencks 24-25.

³⁶ Jencks 9.

was fully executed at *Les Habitations*, resulting in the development's difficulty in achieving its utopian goals.³⁷

Howard and Le Corbusier emphasized the importance of constructing self-sufficient communities, an idea congruent with the utopian ideals imposed on *Les Habitations Jeanne-Mance*. In addition, the designers borrowed from Howard's concept of garden communities, which emphasized the importance of nature.³⁸ Howard highlighted the botanical nature of each site, stressing that each community should develop naturally, believing that "a town ... should at each stage of its growth, possess unity, symmetry, completeness," suggesting that growth does not destroy the unity of the city, but that the "completeness of the early structure should be merged in the yet greater completeness of the later development."³⁹ However, the designers of *Les Habitations Jeanne-Mance* did not take into account the likelihood of future development; the project remains constrained in its dense, central urban environment.⁴⁰

Neither Howard nor Le Corbusier considered the adverse effects that the destruction of a neighborhood would have on its residents, choosing demolition over retrofitting existing architecture. Their projects were based on the idea of progress and perfectibility and the belief

³⁷ This is not to say that other utopian modernist housing projects fully succeeded, but some have been more successful than others, typically low-rise projects. See Cynthia I. Hammond, "The Interior of Modernism: Catherine Bauer and the American Housing Movement," *Craft, Space and Interior Design, 1855-2005*, ed. Sandra Alfoldy and Janice Helland (Aldershot & Burlington, VT: Ashgate, 2008) 169-187.

³⁸ Edward Relph, *The Modern Urban Landscape* (London & Sydney: Croom Helm, 1987) 56.

³⁹ Ebenezer Howard, *Garden Cities of To-Morrow: A Peaceful Path to Real Reform* (Massachusetts: MIT Press, 1965) 76-77.

⁴⁰ Along with the emphasis on green space and the importance of nature to the health of the residents, another principle of the Garden City applicable to *Les Habitations Jeanne-Mance* is the use of multiple types of housing, in this case both low-rise and high-rise buildings, to avoid the separation of different social classes. But *Les Habitations* also departs from the principles associated with garden cities, as the types of housing associated with this ideal were principally associated with traditional vernacular housing, of medieval and Georgian styles. Howard 59, 61.

that the transformation of the urban environment is an outward sign of internal social change.⁴¹

Le Corbusier saw architecture as future oriented and as an “active force, distributing the benefits of the Machine Age to all and directing the community onto paths of social harmony,”⁴² without considering the history of the site.

Le Corbusier based his “Radiant City” concept on the importance of air, sun and greenery, spatially translated through his proposed use of high-rise structures placed geometrically within a wide expanse of green space.⁴³ Le Corbusier’s principles for an ideal city can be seen at *Les Habitations Jeanne-Mance*:

a large segment of Montreal’s business district has been opened to light and air. Dilapidated, poorly built houses, which were often left overrun by vermin, make room for healthy, well-ventilated buildings, properly spaced at a distance from each other, make this a pleasant district in which to live.⁴⁴

There were, however, problems with Howard and Le Corbusier’s ideal societies. As Robert Fishman explains: “to appeal to everyone on the basis of universal principle’s is to appeal to no one in particular.”⁴⁵ While the desires of both the utopian societies of Howard and Le Corbusier were built into the architectural plan of *Les Habitations Jeanne-Mance*, they were

⁴¹ Robert Fishman, *Urban Utopias in the Twentieth Century: Ebenezer Howard, Frank Lloyd Wright, and Le Corbusier* (New York: Basic Books, 1977) 6.

⁴² Fishman 4.

⁴³ He refers to these as *Unités*, which he believed should have distinct functions and be constructed in human scale. Fishman 230-233.

⁴⁴ “... un vaste quadrilatère de la cité de Montréal s’est ouvert à la lumière et à l’air dans le quartier des affaires de la métropole. Aux maisons délabrées, mal construites, souvent laissées aux ébats de la vermine, font place des bâtiments salubres, aérés, suffisamment distancés les uns des autres pour qu’il sont agréable d’y vivre.” “Air, Lumière et Espace aux Habitations-Jeanne-Mance, Mtl,” *Cités et Villes* (March 1961).

⁴⁵ Fishman 18.

never realized, spurring the continual attempts to rework the plan to bring it closer to utopian ideals.

Les Habitations were not well integrated into the surrounding development (Fig. 6). The inward orientation of the buildings around a common recreational space, typical of the mass housing movement, aims to integrate individual structures within the development by visually connecting them to one another.⁴⁶ Despite the footpaths that run through some sections of the development, however, there are no unifying links between each segment of the project. This is the primary spatial contradiction of *Les Habitations*; even though small sections of the development are spatially related, there are no outdoor linking systems that connect all the elements together, apart from decisions about cladding. The lack of spatial relationship, or programmatically coherent shared space between sections of *Les Habitations Jeanne-Mance* creates an atmosphere that challenges the unity of the development. The failure to connect the building produces a “no-man’s land”, an often empty and inconsistently used “non-place” at its heart.

The architecture of *Les Habitations Jeanne-Mance* is unified through commonalities between each structure. All the buildings in the development have flat roofs and are faced with brick, which provides *Les Habitations* a certain amount of visual continuity (Fig. 7 and 8). However, this unification comes at a price: the inability of the development to visually merge with the surrounding Faubourg St-Laurent, a district that was made up of many different types of architecture. There are a few factors that keep the development from appearing mundane, such as the use of different colored bricks in horizontal banding on each of the four building

⁴⁶ The buildings’ primary façades all face inwards with the rear of the buildings facing the surrounding streets.

types, the treatment of the balconies, and their various volumes.⁴⁷ It can be argued that because of this variety they are better able to integrate into the surrounding neighborhood, as they can be seen as an echo of the diverse duplexes and triplexes in the greater Faubourg St-Laurent district. Nevertheless, the architectural design of the buildings differs radically from the triplexes and duplexes that constitute the surrounding area, hindering their ability to fit within the broader urban environment.

Another factor that isolates *Les Habitations Jeanne-Mance* within the Faubourg St-Laurent is the alterations that were made to the city's grid to accommodate the project. Since the design of *Les Habitations* emphasized the separation of vehicular from pedestrian traffic, an idea in line with Le Corbusier's Radiant City, the urban planners eliminated the north-south streets of de Bullion and L'Hotel de Ville, replacing them instead with pathways and green spaces.⁴⁸ Although a welcome addition, these modifications had the effect of spatially separating *Les Habitations* from the surrounding city. While the green space was intended to be a safer, more pleasing space to walk, today the site remains underused, people choosing instead to avoid *Habitations* altogether, walking around rather than through the development. Even if people do use the grounds of *Les Habitations* as a shortcut, they do not linger to use the space, especially at night. This segregation stigmatizes the residents of *Les Habitations Jeanne-Mance*, who are often the only people who use the pedestrian walkways on a regular basis, and does not foster the establishment of a good-place. *Les Habitations Jeanne-Mance* is typical of

⁴⁷ The balconies on the high-rise structures are in concrete while those on the low-rise structures are in iron. However, at the time of its conception the iron balconies of the low-rise structures were encased in wood that matched the wood paneled sections located under the windows on the first floor. Also of importance is that the balconies on all structures are the same size.

⁴⁸ The urban planners were the firm Rother, Bland and Trudeau.

the “walled city”⁴⁹ found in literary utopian societies, but isolates its users without providing them with the benefits of a self-contained community.

Although the original proponents of social housing sought to create “independent enclaves that would be socio-economically stronger and morally purer than the slums they replaced,”⁵⁰ the original mandate of *Les Habitations* was to: “produce a new and handsome section of the city, well integrated with the surroundings and as far as possible having the variety of pattern normally associated with lively urban areas in Montreal, which would provide opportunities for the continuation and extension of the cultural activities of people inhabiting the area.”⁵¹ While the idea of creating a well integrated development was congruent with utopian ideals, which relies on the conviction that architecture forms a part of a potential whole, this is not successful in two ways at *Les Habitations*: it is neither integrated with the surrounding neighborhood, nor does it incorporate enough services for it to act as a separate city within Montreal.⁵² Today, *Les Habitations* is something of an island within the island of Montreal (Fig. 9).

According to critics such as Catherine Bauer, who wrote on post World War II era housing projects, the low-rise units at *Les Habitations* were considered a better alternative to high-rise living. Unlike many American style housing projects that were made up of monolithic high rise towers, *Les Habitations Jeanne-Mance* was partially modeled after Regent Park in

⁴⁹ Grosz 268.

⁵⁰ Vale 8-9.

⁵¹ “Project: Jeanne-Mance Project, Montreal,” *RAIC Journal* 35.9 (Sept. 1958): 352.

⁵² Coleman 11.

Toronto (1949) to be a social housing project made up of both high and low rise buildings.⁵³

Developments with a relatively low concentration of high-rise buildings are considered ideal, because they are able to house a large number of people while having a better chance at integrating with the larger city.

However, it remains that many of the tenants of *Les Habitations* lived in its high-rises, and shortly after its construction some questioned the suitability of living in the projects.

According to Cynthia I. Hammond, Catherine Bauer believed that that high-rises were unacceptable forms of social housing because “their monolithism ... engendered a new ghettoization of the same populace their designers purportedly sought to help.”⁵⁴ While the use of high-rise buildings is an effective way to house a growing population in a high density neighborhood, this type of architecture has the effect of stigmatizing its residents.

Utopian architecture traditionally considered users as a whole, an entity that “function[s] in specific or required ways” and can be shaped according to “certain modes of political regulation.”⁵⁵ This so-called collective ideal is impractical and impossible, as it is dependent on the fixity of a community rather than its growth and development. This universalization presents “a static and idealized vision that oppresses its inhabitants and stifles the possibility of social transformation.”⁵⁶ The attempt to control the living situation of tenants at *Les Habitations*

⁵³ An example of which are those erected by the New York City Housing Authority, which are highly visible in the urban landscape.

⁵⁴ Hammond 181.

⁵⁵ Grosz 269.

⁵⁶ Amy Bingaman, Lise Sanders and Rebecca Zorach, “Embodied Utopia: Introduction,” *Embodied Utopias: Gender, Social Change and the Modern Metropolis*, ed. Amy Bingaman, Lise Sanders and Rebecca Zorach (London and New York: Routledge, 2002) 10.

exacerbated the tendency of the architecture and the siting to segregate the residents. Ironically, this new ghettoization recalls that which existed prior to the implementation of the Dozois plan.

By 1961 residents' opinions had changed dramatically from their pre-inhabitation hopes. According to Bill Bantey and Myer Negru, residents were critical of the loss of anonymity at *Les Habitations Jeanne-Mance* and expressed that they were "living ... in a sector for the poor."⁵⁷ This sentiment expresses the paradox created with the construction of *Les Habitations*: while living in minimum-standard, modern housing created some improvements in the residents' standard of living, the address itself caused problems for some tenants, such as being tagged, by employers, as residents of the projects.⁵⁸ Some tenants countered this stigma with the belief that the development was "rehabilitating many of [the] tenants" and that "people feel cleaner because they are living decently."⁵⁹ However, in the fifteen months since *Les Habitations Jeanne-Mance* was ready for occupancy, forty-two families left the building, equaling a 10% turnover rate in just over a year.⁶⁰ This was an indication that the stigma was more powerful than politicians wanted to recognize.

The first renovation of *Les Habitations Jeanne Mance* was planned in 1966, only five years after the project's completion. According to an article published in *The Montreal Star*, large-scale social housing projects were considered "out of date" by 1962.⁶¹ By the time of its renovation, the development was considered a ghetto and was seen by some residents, such as M.

⁵⁷ Bill Bantey and Myer Negru, "Dozois Plan Loses Slums 'Anonymity'." *Gazette*, 25 Jan. 1961.

⁵⁸ Roland Savignac, the former chairman of the now obsolete Municipal Sanitary Housing Bureau, stated that in some cases people who sought to live or resided in the development lost their jobs as a result of mandatory checks with their employers. Bantey and Negru.

⁵⁹ Bantey and Negru, "Dozois Plan ...".

⁶⁰ Bantey and Negru, "Dozois Plan ...".

⁶¹ "Hopes to Lure Residents From Blighted Areas: City-Owned Housing Branded 'Out of Date'," *The Montreal Star* 22 May 1962.

G rard Dufort as “a prison for the poor,” a far cry from the original, utopian hopes for *Les Habitations*.⁶² Other tenants, in contrast, were generally satisfied with the living conditions. The ambivalence of opinion could be understood as a source for the almost continuous renovation plans, stemming from the desire to reconstruct the utopian social order the city planners wanted from the outset, as consensus is much easier to deal with than controversy.

The first indication that *Les Habitations Jeanne-Mance* was unsuccessful came, however, even earlier in the form of an article written for *Montr al Matin* on 21 October 1960, published before the entire complex was even complete.⁶³ The development had failed to attract future tenants and in 1961, 174 apartments remained vacant.⁶⁴ In the same year, it was recorded that the City of Montreal had not yet constructed the promised community center, saying that it would have to wait until they procured more funding.⁶⁵ To decrease the vacancy rates, the corporation Jeanne-Mance, appointed by the city to run *Les Habitations*, loosened occupancy requirements to include people who were not initially considered for residency, such as the elderly and single persons.⁶⁶ Once the development was filled, it was reported that a new community spirit had been engendered at *Les Habitations Jeanne-Mance*. According to Leopold Rogers, the manager of *Les Habitations*, this spirit was related to the conviction that

⁶² “... la prison des pauvres!” Claire Dutrusac, “Les Habitations Jeanne-Mance, c’est la Prison des Pauvres,” *La Presse* 27 septembre 1967.

⁶³ “Qu’arrivera-t-il aux Habitations Jeanne-Mance,” *Montr al Matin*, 21 octobre 1960. The future of *Les Habitations* was questioned in this article, insinuating that the projects future was dependent on the results of an upcoming election.

⁶⁴ “Les Habitations Jeanne-Mance: 174 Logements ne sont pas Occup s,” *Le Devoir* 25 janvier 1961.

⁶⁵ “Chalet au Terrain de Jeu des Habitations Jeanne-Mance,” *Le Devoir* 21 March 1961.

⁶⁶ “Jeanne-Mance Houses Filled for the First Time,” *The Montreal Star* 2 May 1961.

the tenants were given a “new lease on life.”⁶⁷ However, when asked about the aforementioned problems, he simply stated that he hoped they would disappear.⁶⁸ Rogers’s comments reflect the complexities inherent to modern architecture and the ideal societies its adherents hoped to create. While the construction of a utopian ideal promises transformation, what defines a utopia changes with the passing of time, which in turn demands renovations based on a new set of ideals.

In 1961 there were mixed opinions concerning the success of *Les Habitations Jeanne-Mance*. Although the City of Montreal insisted that the development was a positive change for the neighborhood, the problems at *Les Habitations* persisted. Difficulties included bathrooms without showers, closets without doors, rooms that were too small, poorly executed paint jobs and poor quality fixtures, susceptible to breakage. These problems were justified as deterioration due to the negligence of the tenants and not the poor quality of the building.⁶⁹ Furthermore, some tenants were upset at the lack of anonymity at *Les Habitation*, while others believed it to be a “haven for comfort [and] privacy.”⁷⁰ Nora W. Johnstone goes as far as insisting that there is “no stigma attached to living in a well-ordered community,” but states in the same article that there are definite problems that need to be addressed, such as vandalism to the grounds and buildings, littering, and the deliberate uprooting of plants and trees.⁷¹ In

⁶⁷ Bill Bantey and Myer Negru, “New Community Spirit Notes in Dozois Area,” *The Gazette* (Montreal) 2 Sept. 1961.

⁶⁸ Bantey and Negru, “New Community Spirit ...”.

⁶⁹ “On Vit Bien dans Les Habitations Jeanne-Mance,” *La Presse* 17 septembre 1966.

⁷⁰ Nora W. Johnstone, “Nine Year Resident Finds Jeanne-Mance Still a Haven for Comfort, Privacy,” *The Montreal Star* 7 May 1969.

⁷¹ Johnstone.

addition to Johnstone's claim, many residents complained that they were being spied upon, and lived in fear of the "secret police tactics" of the administrators.⁷²

An article printed in 1966 questioned the success of *Les Habitations Jeanne-Mance*, which at that time was being used as a model for a new social housing development in Little Burgundy. The article concluded that while the area was outwardly improved, the original slum dwellers who had intended to live at *Les Habitations* are "staying away in droves," and that the high turnover rate complicated the rehabilitation of tenants. Even though the tenants seemed to take pride in the project as a whole, it was nearly impossible to engender a community feeling.⁷³ Moreover, this article addressed problems with the architecture. Individual units were sized presuming that large families would occupy the buildings, giving little provision to small families or single persons, who had to pay for units that were too large for their needs.

It was now believed that the emphasis should be on small apartments rather than large apartments or homes.⁷⁴ In 1966 the tenants made it clear what they desired. They wanted a community center, more volunteers to run social programs, a childcare center, supervised playgrounds, a police presence to curb vandalism and violence, and more housing for single individuals.⁷⁵ In addition, they requested more community programming.⁷⁶ At this time the redevelopment centered upon problems that prevented the site from functioning as a self-

⁷² John Yorstone, "Jeanne-Mance Spies Claimed," *The Montreal Star* 27 Sept. 1967.

⁷³ "The Dozois Project was Montreal's Pilot Slum Clearance Plan: How Well has it Done the Job it was Designed For?" *The Gazette* 17 Dec. 1966.

⁷⁴ "The Dozois Project was Montreal's Pilot Slum Clearance Plan ...".

⁷⁵ They condoned the admittance of university students under the condition they would volunteer at the said community center.

⁷⁶ "The Dozois Project was Montreal's Pilot Slum Clearance Plan: How Well has it Done the Job it was Designed For?" *The Gazette* 17 Dec. 1966. They complained that irresponsible mothers and fathers would take advantage of the playgrounds to "dump" their children so they would be able to go and drink in the neighboring taverns- a sign that the initial plan to improve the lives and character of those in the development was not successful, partly due to the shortage of community programming.

sufficient city within Montreal. Tenants were concerned with the stigma attached to living in the slums, but they believed that making *Les Habitations* an enviable place to live would alleviate this issue.

Since redefining the rental criteria, *Les Habitations Jeanne-Mance* had a growing waiting list. By the 1970s, fewer tenants were leaving the project. Regardless, there was still the fear that a new slum would grow out of the old.⁷⁷ Many believed that “the fear [was] collective and the insecurity daily” and that *Les Habitations* “is made only for the ‘poorly off’, which tends to create a ghetto within the district.”⁷⁸ In 1985 both the tenants and the City of Montreal wanted renovations that would integrate the development into the surrounding area, while eliminating the stigma associated with living in the projects. In the mid-eighties *Les Habitations* was no longer considered something to emulate, but a model whose replication should be avoided.⁷⁹ The City of Montreal considered *Les Habitations* to be a ghetto, prompting physical and psychological attempts towards its integration. 1984 was the apex of authoritarianism at *Les Habitations*, with tenants and housing groups alike believing that “the municipal administration is ... rule-maker, owner, administrator, manager, and judge,” and that the attitude of administrators is “one of aggression and attack [and that] according to them we are always wrong.”⁸⁰ The tenants believed that the pressure of administrators further isolated them, prompting letters of protest to the city, to no avail. In 1985, it was suggested that the

⁷⁷ Leon Harris, “Housing Project Success Belies Dire Predictions,” *The Gazette* 21 Jan. 1975.

⁷⁸ “... la peur est collective et l’insécurité quotidienne.” “... n’est fait que pour des ‘mal pris’ ce que tend à créer une espèce de ghetto à l’intérieur du quartier.” “Rien ne va au ‘Plan Dozois,’” *La Presse* 29 janvier 1975. According to L’Association des Locataires, in 1975 49% of tenants at *Les Habitations* claimed that they had been robbed, 26% had been victims of acts of vandalism, 21% had been attacked by an unknown person and 53% had noticed illegal and undesirable activities in the hallways and on the ground. See “Ils Veulent une Protection Accrue: Près de la moitié des locataires ont déjà été Victimes de Vols,” *La Presse* 7 juin 1975.

⁷⁹ David Wimhurst, “How Not to Run Public Housing,” *The Gazette* 18 Jan. 1984.

⁸⁰ Wimhurst.

reorganization of the open spaces and renovation of the buildings could solve problems, an idea that harks back to the utopian belief that making corrections to architectural forms has the ability to fix social problems.

The tenants wanted an improved atmosphere at *Les Habitations Jeanne-Mance*, and believed one way this could be achieved was by removing the chain link fences, installed in an effort to create individual lots within the larger development, which were in complete opposition to utopian ideals that promote integration and communal living. Although permeability was a problem at *Les Habitations*, the chain link fences acted as visible signifiers of poverty, which countered the equality inherent in More's *Utopia*. In addition, tenants demanded that the deteriorating structures be fixed immediately, as they left the inhabitants open to stigmatization.⁸¹

Residents also believed that they were prevented from taking an active role in the management of the building and demanded to appoint someone to oversee daily activities.⁸² Renovations at *Les Habitations* remained an uphill battle because the desires of the residents. Tenants wanted to take control of how they lived in their homes and attempted to create a community environment that would remove the stigma associated with living in the slums. Reconstructions were planned for 1985, but they were superficial at best, replacing fixtures, appliances and other cosmetic problems, without addressing the resident's underlying concerns. The area's potential deterioration remained immanent in the eyes of both tenants and outsiders alike.

⁸¹ "Les doléances des Résidants," *La Presse* 28 janvier 1985.

⁸² Jean-Guy Dubuc "Les Erreurs du Plan Dozois," *La Presse* 29 janvier 1985.

The first real attempt made by the City of Montreal to actually integrate the development into the surrounding area was in 2006 and continues today, perhaps because of the redevelopment of the Red Light district and the inauguration of the Quartier de Spectacle (2003). The city desires to increase the density of the area in order to make it more economically viable. *Les Habitations Jeanne-Mance* has over the years accumulated a 296.5 million dollar deficit, prompting the government to attempt to increase the area's revenue by constructing condominiums as well as more apartments on the site.⁸³ In May 2006, the Université de Québec à Montréal (UQAM) proposed to increase the density of the development by constructing student housing on the site. They also planned to improve the footpaths that run through *Les Habitations*, partly to connect its Berri street campus to the Place-des-Arts campus, but also to facilitate general movement through the grounds.⁸⁴ Mayor Gérald Tremblay anticipates adding multiple types of housing on the site of *Les Habitations Jeanne-Mance* to make the site mixed use, to heighten security, to improve the quality of the buildings for current and future needs, and to assist the development's integration into the district, all while keeping or augmenting the number of social housing units.⁸⁵ Tremblay argues that these improvements have to be done to reverse the stigma associated with the development from the beginning.

⁸³ André Beauvais, "Sociétés Paramunicipales: Montréal Comble pour 296,5 M\$ de Déficit," *Le Journal de Montréal* 5 décembre 2004.

⁸⁴ André Beauvais, "Site des Habitations Jeanne-Mance: L'UQAM Intéressée," *Le Journal de Montréal* 19 mai 2006.

⁸⁵ André Beauvais, "Haro sur le Ghetto," *Le Journal de Montréal* 18 mai 2006.

Sally Kitsch brings forward the idea of “utopian myopia” when looking at the reasons for the so-called failures of utopias, locating their problems within the narrow focus that considers the lives and experiences of some while alienating or ignoring others.⁸⁶ Myopia, as a lack of long-range perspective in thinking or planning, also suggests an inability to see into the future. Utopianism is both a social activity and a thought process.⁸⁷ At its best, utopian architecture works from the position that new architectural inventions must learn from past efforts in order to surpass them and is based on the idea of what could be or how things ought to be.⁸⁸ According to Nathaniel Coleman, “renewal and reform always depend on a capacity for going backwards to go forward.”⁸⁹ According to Elizabeth Grosz, the utopian is a picture of the future that has no future, and is something that can be endlessly sought after, without being realized. The past, the present and the future are all present within the architecture of *Les Habitations Jeanne-Mance*, where vision of an organized built environment, capable of improving the lives of its residents and users, still places those residents and users in an ambivalent position, between the utopian goals of architects and urban planners and lived realities.

Les Habitations is representative of the idea that “utopias are meant to be pursued” and “represent an ideal towards which the mundane world must reach.”⁹⁰ The renovation plans at

⁸⁶ Amy Bingaman, Lise Sanders and Rebecca Zorach, 3. Their narrow focus can be seen in their inflexibility regarding their tenants, an example of which is the eviction of widows whose partners had passed. See “Deux Problèmes aux Habitations J.-Mance: Éclairage et Stationnement,” *Nouveau Journal*, Montréal (27 avril 1962). Many tenants also complained of “la discipline assez rigide” and the lack of organized activities. See “Tendances ’66- Appartements et les Logements pour les Économiquement Faibles? L’Expérience des Habitations Jeanne-Mance,” *Bâtiment* 41.6 (juin 1966): 38.

⁸⁷ “Tendances ’66- Appartements et les Logements ...” 1.

⁸⁸ Coleman 11.

⁸⁹ Coleman 11.

⁹⁰ Rothstein 3.

Les Habitations embrace the idea of continuous, progressive social improvement, and this tenet of social utopianism is, I believe, the reason why this unique Montreal housing project has thus far escaped demolition. David Pinder suggests we have stopped looking for the ideal city and have come to settle for the “good enough” city,⁹¹ but the continual desire for redevelopment at *Les Habitations Jeanne-Mance* suggests otherwise.

⁹¹ David Pinder, “In Defense of Utopian Urbanism: Imagining Cities After the ‘End’ of Utopia,” *Geografiska Annaler. Series B, Human Geography: Special Issue The Dialectics of Utopia and Dystopia* 84.3/4 (2002): 232.

Figures



Fig. 1 Site identified as a slum by the Dozois Report, 16 May 1957
Photo: Marc H. Choko, *Un Project Social: Les Habitations Jeanne-Mance* (Montréal: Les Éditions Saint-Martin, 1995) 53.



Fig. 2 Site of 1586 and 1590 De Bullion prior to their demolition in 1959.
Photo: Marc H. Choko, *Un Project Social: Les Habitations Jeanne-Mance* (Montréal: Les Éditions Saint-Martin, 1995) 67.

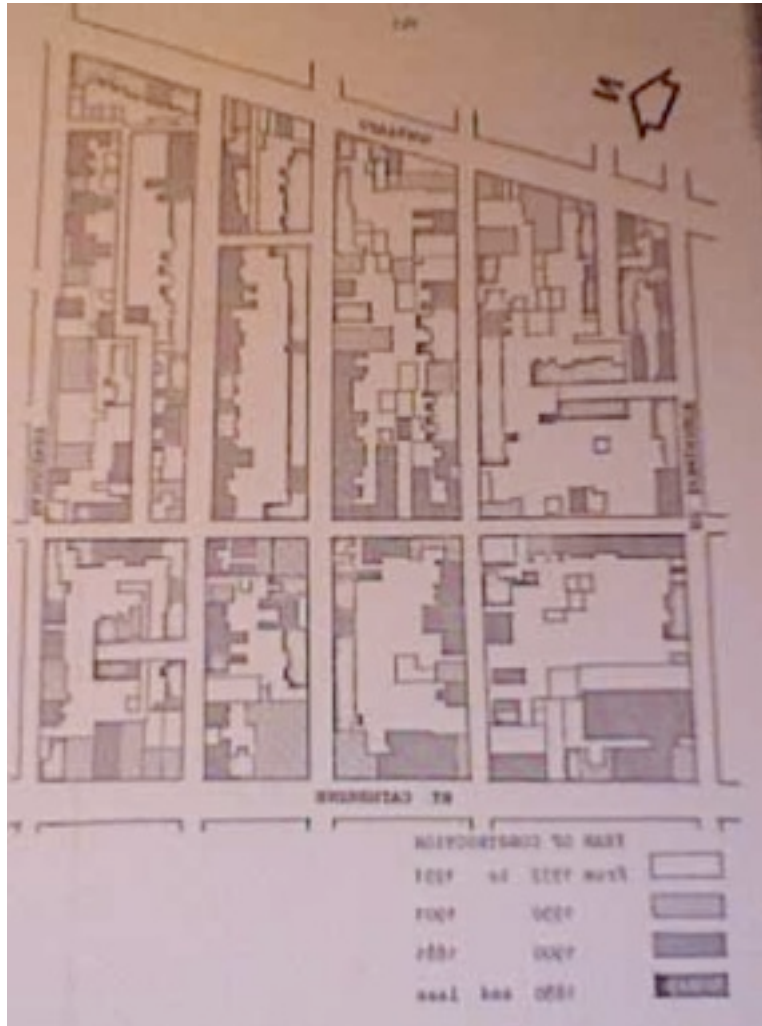


Fig. 3 Plan of the neighborhood prior to the Dozois plan.
David Wai Chan, “Design Considerations in Urban Low-Income Housing Redevelopment with Special Reference to Montreal” (MA Thesis, McGill University, 1970) 147.

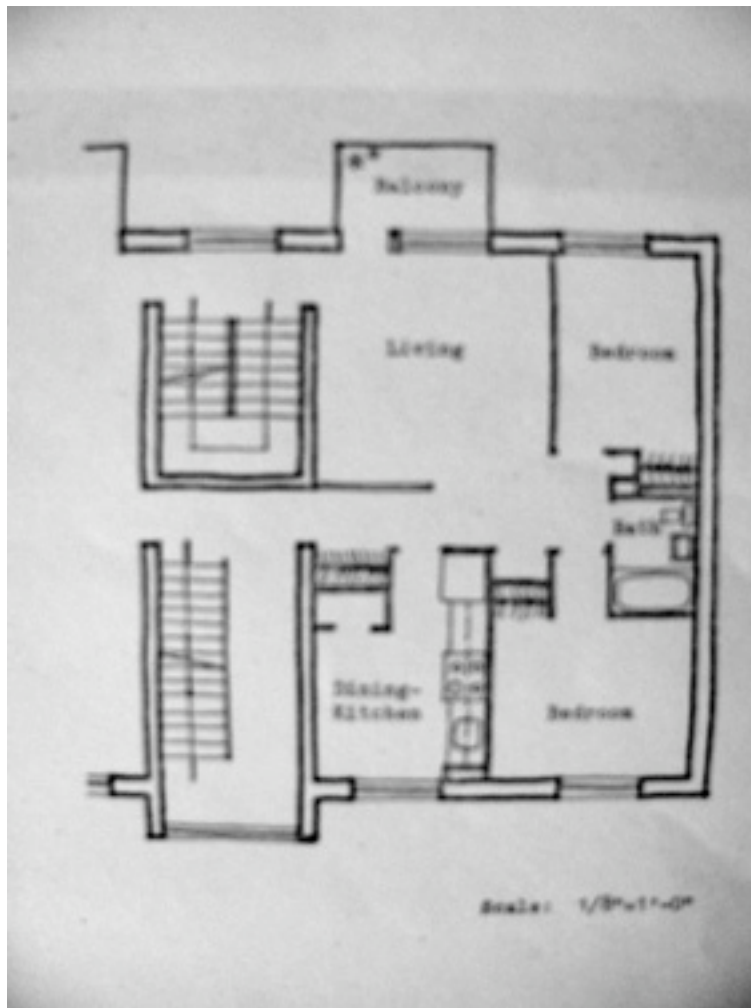


Fig. 4 Interior Layout for three-story Walkup Apartment.
David Wai Chan, "Design Considerations in Urban Low-Income Housing Redevelopment with Special Reference to Montreal" (MA Thesis, McGill University, 1970) 160.

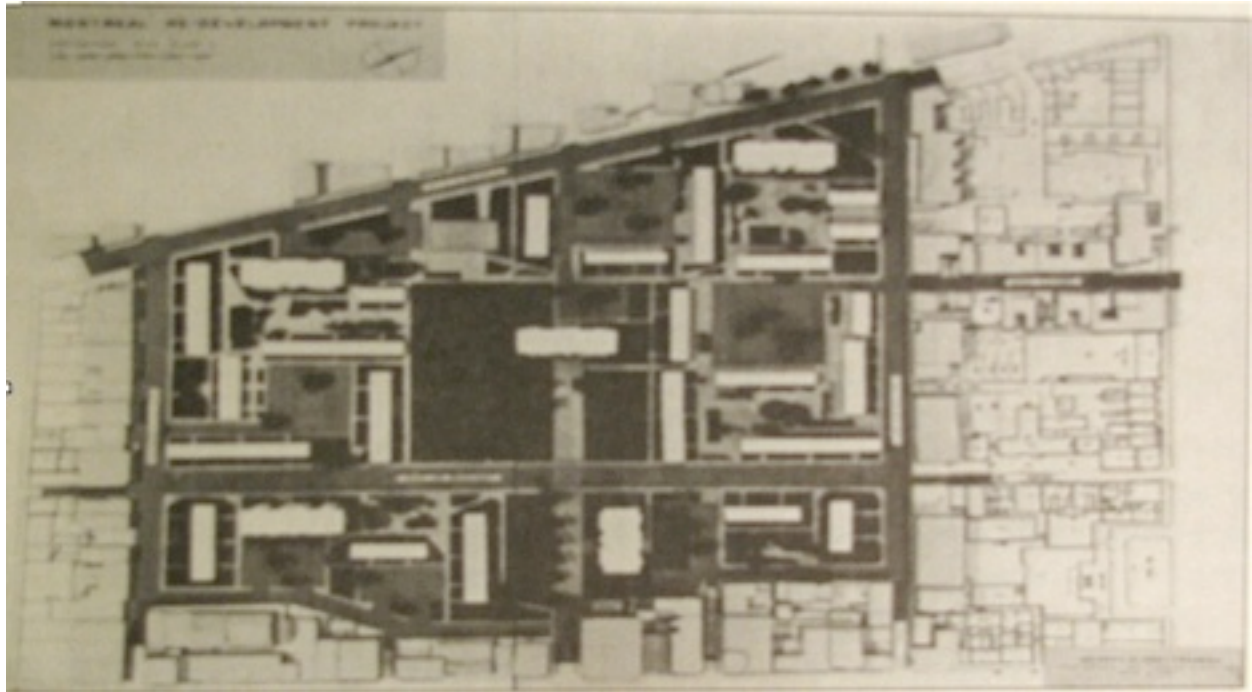


Fig. 5 Plan for *Les Habitations Jeanne-Mance*, 1957
Marc H. Choko, *Un Project Social: Les Habitations Jeanne-Mance* (Montréal: Les Éditions Saint-Martin, 1995) 45.



Fig. 6 Image shows *Les Habitations Jeanne-Mance* within the surrounding neighborhood. Photo: Marc H. Choko, *Un Project Social: Les Habitations Jeanne-Mance* (Montréal: Les Éditions Saint-Martin, 1995).



Fig. 7 *Les Habitations Jeanne-Mance*, 1960.

Photo: The John Bland Canadian Architecture Collection, McGill University
<http://cac.mcgill.ca/cac/bland/building/pictures/full/46-128.jpg> (accessed 1 March 2009).



Fig. 8 *Les Habitations Jeanne-Mance*, c. 1980

Photo: Université de Québec à Montréal, *DESS en Architecture Moderne et Patrimoine*, <http://www.design.uqam.ca/dess/architecture/projets/jeannemance.html> (accessed 1 March 2009).



Fig. 9 *Les Habitations Jeanne-Mance*, looking West towards the city.
Photo: Marc H. Choko, *Un Project Social: Les Habitations Jeanne-Mance* (Montréal: Les Éditions Saint-Martin, 1995) 45.

Works cited

Editor's note: Many of the local 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's footnotes do not always show page numbers. For more information, please see the Vertical File holdings for *Les Habitations Jeanne-Mance* at the CCA.

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