

## Writing on the Main:

### Tracing Street Posters in the Red Light District of Montreal



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## **Introduction**

Street posters are white noise within the city (introductory image/Fig. 12). They are part of everyday encounters then every day encounters within the city, but do they always inspire a second glance? The posters discussed in this paper, I argue, merit serious consideration as part of the visual and spatial experience of the city. Street posters are authors, travelogues and metaphors that describe urban space. They accumulate on city structures, revealing and concealing activities, identifying venues and suggesting the tastes of the inhabitants within a given area. Street posters are a true urban palimpsest. The posters are continuously effaced, covered, degraded and yet they persist, building in layers, writing and overwriting the local cultural history of a place. Meticulous separation of the posters' layers unveils both the historical and contemporary social conditions of a particular city location: in this paper, Montreal's historic Red Light district, whose nexus is widely agreed to be the intersection of St-Laurent Boulevard and Ste-Catherine Street.

Street posters in this location of Montreal are, I argue, entwined historically, in their marginality, with the local history of prostitution and the fight against prostitution. Restrictions upon both the street posters and sex entertainment, gambling and other illegal or unsanctioned activities in the Red Light district reveal a continuous effort to socially and spatially cleanse this part of the city. Campaigns to prohibit posters are contemporaneous with the social sanitation campaigns that repeatedly target the Red Light district and with cyclical initiatives for the visual or spatial reform of this neighbourhood, which consistently have imposed severe legal restrictions upon street posters and prostitutes alike. Street posters in this part of Montreal have

been characterized as undesirable, as evidence of urban decay that needs to either be removed or forced to conform within prevailing social ideals. In this essay, I draw upon this analogous treatment of both posters and prostitutes in the Red Light district, drawing upon the methodological perspective of urban historian, Ella Chmielewska. Her essay, “Signs of Place: a Close Reading of the Iconosphere of Warsaw,” analyzes the “shifting local identity” of Warsaw through the signage observable in archival photographs. Chmielewska conceives of urban space as an “iconosphere,” which encompasses both the literal content and social context of signs as vital components in the development of meaning.<sup>1</sup> She draws from the work of theorists Edward Casey and Karl Buhler in order to understand the links, in the city, between the content and context of signs. Casey conceptualizes, further, a notion of “implacement” that provides a theoretical base to “[shift] the focus of the analysis from representation alone,” while Buhler provides a theory of communication that “considers any language as sign and context dependent.”<sup>2</sup> Chmielewska’s approach to understanding the iconospheres within cities helps in assessing how seemingly banal signs and images are significant urban artifacts, capable of exposing the transitory conditions of a given place in a city. Using signage and context to trace shifting regimes of power through a city, in time, Chmielewska’s study of the evolution of urban signs is an important resource for the present study of Montreal street posters, and the goal of this paper to illuminate the moral, spatial and visual histories of the Red Light district, through its own iconosphere.

While Chmielewska used archival photographs to examine Warsaw’s iconosphere, in preparation for this paper I observed the posters in their urban context firsthand, over a period of

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<sup>1</sup> Ella Chmielewska. “Signs of Place: a Close Reading of the Iconosphere of Warsaw,” 243-255.

<sup>2</sup> Chmielewska 244-250.

time. I walked in the city, repeatedly traversing and photographing the district. During each walk, I noted the content and location of specific street posters. These repeated examinations provided me with the opportunity to discover disparities such as changes in advertising content, design style, venues or posting locations. I discovered two types of posters through my observations. The first type of poster was affixed to hoarding boards and construction sites. The second type of poster was consistently fixed upon structures such as lampposts, mailboxes and other street furniture. My investigation into the unvarying locations of these two types of posters revealed a further, possible, grouping, into “legal” and “illegal” posters.

Legal posters are, in a general sense, socially acceptable; more precisely they have the sanction of authority and the person affixing the posters to these surfaces has obtained the right to post. The posters themselves tend to advertise activities, locations and inhabitants that appeal to the general population. In contrast, what I am calling illegal posters frequently advertise activities, locations and events that appeal to various subcultures, including groups and minorities that tend to be marginalized, socially and spatially. Their placement on “illegal” surfaces – places where no posting is allowed – contributes to their fragility and temporary nature. Reading what quickly became evident as the predictable location and type of these two kinds of poster allowed me to reconceive them as urban guides. The perceptions that tend to be associated with each type of poster also parallels the perception of the two communities they represent; the repeated palimpsestic overwriting that the posters enact can be understood as a continuous battle for space within the Red Light district, a swiftly gentrifying and deeply contested part of Montreal.

## **The Red Light District of Montreal**

The core of Montreal's Red Light district encircles the St-Laurent Boulevard and Ste. Catherine Street axis in the Ville-Marie borough of Montreal (Fig. 1).<sup>3</sup> St-Laurent bisects the city and represents a cosmopolitan and interstitial territory. St-Laurent Boulevard is a unique space and this location was paramount in the development of the Red Light district. It is where Montreal's French, English, immigrant, wealthy, working class and diverse citizens collide on shared ground. As Aline Gubbay describes it:

St-Laurent Boulevard is ... a street unique in Montreal and rare in the world. It is not a spectacular thoroughfare. There are no great monuments or outstanding buildings to see." What it offers, along with the continuity of its long history, is a parade of city life, humanity in scale, diverse in its background, which, through recurring cycles of change, poverty and prosperity, has retained a sense of neighbourhood, stubbornly rooted in people.<sup>4</sup>

The St-Laurent and Ste-Catherine axis is also close in proximity to Montreal's port. The transient nature of this location attracted and encouraged all varieties of social interaction.<sup>5</sup> As described by Norman Olson in 1960,

you'd have all the factories and the moment twilight hit and all the clothing workers went home, all the kids and perverts and tourists would come out. ... It was like a stage—as the lighting changed, the city changed; it underwent a daily metamorphosis. At twilight

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<sup>3</sup> Julie A. Podmore, "St.. Lawrence Blvd. as 'Third City': Place, Gender and Difference Along Montreal's 'Main'," 176.

<sup>4</sup> Aline Gubbay, *A Street Called The Main: The Story of Montreal's Boulevard Saint Laurent*, 11.

<sup>5</sup> William Weintraub, *City Unique: Montreal Days and Nights in the 1940s and '50s*, 65. The Red Light madams would send young boys down to the port with business cards for the sailors.

all the lights would flicker and the hoors [sic] and transvestites came out and this other world began.<sup>6</sup>

The most vibrant era in this “other world” occurred between 1900 and 1950. During this era, the Red Light district represented a free space run by mobsters, madams and corrupt officials. The Monument National was a vital site for avant-guard and Yiddish theater. The Frolics, Montreal’s first major nightclub, employed free spirits like the celebrity hostess, Texas Guinan.<sup>7</sup> The Gayety Theater regularly presented the strip-tease “star artistes” Lili St. Cyr on the stage (Fig. 2).<sup>8</sup> The area was alive with vaudeville, burlesque, music, avant-guard theater, cinemas, prostitution and many activities that could be perceived as immoral. Montreal’s disregard for the prohibition laws of the 1920s further encouraged the theaters and clubs in the Red Light district. American productions, performers and entrepreneurs flooded into the city in order to take advantage of the employment opportunities, while tourists flocked from across the continent to indulge in Montreal’s entertainments. Montreal’s Red Light district became famous in North America as a glamorous destination where prostitutes could be found easily. Bruce Hutchinson nostalgically describes this period in Montreal’s history in his 1942 book, *The Unknown Country*:

there is something about Montreal, a feeling that we do not have in our other Canadian cities – city manners, the acceptance of the city as a natural home and way of life, where most other cities are only villages trying to ape New York. There is something here which, for lack of a better name, must be called elegance with a touch of wickedness; for

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<sup>6</sup> Quoted in Kristian Gravenor, “Standing up for sleaze.”

<sup>7</sup> Aline Gubbay, *A Street Called The Main*, 102. The Frolics was the first nightclub in Canada to host a radio broadcast and Texas Guinan was a celebrity. She arrived at work in a bullet-proof limousine and made upwards of \$30,000 dollars per month. Her presence brought in other performers and fueled Montreal’s reputation as an entertainment center.

<sup>8</sup> William Weintraub, *City Unique*, 116-119. Lili St. Cyr was widely agreed to be a singular strip-tease artist. Her performances were renowned as art.

beneath all the culture, the refinement, and luxury, is not the only poverty but an organized underworld of vice and crime, with politics not as bold as in some American cities, but worse than anything Canada has ever known.<sup>9</sup>

The success of lower St-Laurent Boulevard's thriving entertainment district had its price; the City of Montreal also saw an increased and powerful demand during these years for social reform. WWI, the rise in venereal disease, increasing leisure time, access to sex workers and sex entertainment, the transition away from stringent Victorian values and the development of a new youth culture all contributed to social anxiety and an intense, social purity movement. In 1918, the anti-vice organization, Committee of Sixteen released a survey that presented the Red Light district as a corrupt space, teeming with drunks, prostitution and venereal disease.<sup>10</sup> The Committee of Sixteen survey also marked a shift in the perception that women of the Red Light district were "victims" to the perception that they were "problem girls." The general public became convinced that girls in the city were "occasional prostitutes" willingly meeting and flirting with men and trading sexual favours for a night on the town.<sup>11</sup> Social reformers equated a girl's moral downfall with the negative influence of the city, mental deficiency, independence and a young woman's quest for a "good time." The new attitude saw the moral downfall of women around every corner. Delinquency in young women no longer represented prostitution alone; it represented girls who participated in dating, leisure and dancing activities. The delinquent girl was found in public spaces such as streets, parks, cinemas, theaters and

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<sup>9</sup> Bruce Hutchinson, *The Unknown Country*, 74-75.

<sup>10</sup> Tamara Myers, *Caught: Montreal's Modern Girls and the Law, 1869-1945*, 60-61. Three thousand copies of the survey were disseminated to police and civic officials.

<sup>11</sup> Myers 63-64.

restaurants. The Committee presented the city as willingly ignorant of and apathetic about the problems of the district and their goal was to draw the attention of the church and social reform groups to what they deemed a growing social menace. The survey resulted in a vociferous demand to eradicate what was seen to be the threat of prostitution and immoral behaviour. Although vice was seen to be society's problem, the cure was believed to be located in women: the committee and their followers' primary focus was "saving" young women and girls.<sup>12</sup>

Many of the new social reform beliefs stemmed from two branches of psychiatric sciences that also propagated the view that the Red Light district was a threat. Psychologists, such as Henry H. Goddard and Alfred Binet, pursued the first branch in the 1910s. In the first branch, they determined through various forms of cognitive testing that delinquent behavior was the result of a hereditary "feeble-mindedness." This eugenic downfall was supposedly most common within the female, immigrant, poor and delinquent populations. Lucy M. Brooking of Toronto's Alexandra Industrial School for Girls, and Nancy Stork of Montreal's Girls Cottage Industrial School further supported this notion with their 1920 publication documenting the close relationship between girls' "mental deficiency" and "loose morality." Their efforts fostered the belief that feeble-mindedness resulted in girls who were both easily corrupted and a threat to society.<sup>13</sup> The second branch of psychology emerged in 1904. Psychologist G. Stanley Hall purported that delinquency was caused during puberty when "the adolescent experienced an emotional upheaval and was tormented by confusion." He declared that adult supervision and direction was necessary in order to prevent adolescents from a "descent into delinquency."<sup>14</sup>

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<sup>12</sup> Myers 63-64.

<sup>13</sup> Myers 78. This branch of psychology was popular with the Anglophone Catholic elite.

<sup>14</sup> Myers 78.

Psychologist William Healy further propagated the notion that delinquent behavior was caused by more than feeble-mindedness. Healy believed it was more complex and caused by additional factors such as home life, education, social and environmental factors.<sup>15</sup> This second branch of psychology resulted in a school of thought that blamed the urban space, modernity and poverty for the demoralization and delinquency of girls. Catholic and Protestant church associations, social workers and members of the judicial system viewed the Red Light district as particularly dangerous territory. The Red Light theaters, cinemas, dance halls and restaurants were spaces that embodied the alleged “social evils” and were connected to the production of delinquency and the moral downfall of girls. Films introduced new fashions, emphasized rouged lips, exotic hairstyles and the rejection of modest outfits.<sup>16</sup> Love scenes in films produced a “deplorable mentality” because they were thought too authentic and passionate.<sup>17</sup> The Red Light restaurants and dance halls provided a place where the youth populations could connect physically.<sup>18</sup> Furthermore, there were large immigrant and working-class neighbourhoods nearby, providing girls with easy access to the district.

The Red Light district appears to have threatened early-twentieth-century Montreal society in large measure because everything in that district was related to sexuality and young girls were a part of the demographic drawn to the space. The district provided girls with work, anonymity and freedom – benefits that may not have been available to them in other parts of Montreal.

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<sup>15</sup> Myers 79.

<sup>16</sup> Myers 68. A survey printed in *La Bonne Parole* determined that of 284 films viewed there were: 448 immoral, 6 antireligious, 93 antisocial and 113 scenes in bad taste.

<sup>17</sup> Myers 68. The Fédération national Saint-Jean-Baptiste discovered through a survey on how girls spent their wages that a large quantity was spent upon the cinema. Furthermore, judge Lacroix advocated that children under sixteen be banned from the cinema.

<sup>18</sup> Myers 160. A young girl named Irene J. claimed that a restaurant was where she “learned to be bad.”

Lodging was inexpensive, while the character of the neighbourhood may have provided an escape from the stifling surveillance that was the daily experience of many young women; if their families were not watching their movements and friendships, then social reform groups would. As fears about young women's morality grew, the Red Light district came to embody more and more the downfall of a corrupt society and the weakening of traditional values. Church and social reform groups responded to what they saw to be the growing threat with initiatives to rescue and protect a female, youth population that had been characterized as "at risk".

Significantly for this paper, one of these initiatives was to aggressively regulate "certain pictorial representations displayed in front of places of amusement."<sup>19</sup>

### **Legal and illegal posters/legal and illegal bodies**

The definition of a poster as legal or illegal is derived in part from Montreal's actual bylaws and in part from an unwritten street code. Under bylaw 99-102, Section III, Article 21 (6), no person may

stick, nail or staple anything onto street furniture," where street furniture is defined as all, "trees, shrubs, benches, bollards, dry fire hydrants, fire hydrants, benchmarks, speed bumps, cables, gate chambers, fences, conduits, fountains, grates, lampposts, monuments, walls, low walls, street signs, parking meters, poles, waste containers, catch basins, containers for recoverable resources, manholes, street lights, pipes, vaults and other similar objects, whether useful or ornamental, put up by the city for its purposes."<sup>20</sup>

The only exceptions to this bylaw are stated under Chapter V, Section III, Article 564 and

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<sup>19</sup> "Picture Posters are Condemned" *The Gazette* (Montreal) 26 June 1924.

<sup>20</sup> City of Montreal By-Law 99-102, Section III Cleanliness and Protection of Public Property, 21.

565 of the urban planning bylaws. These acceptations state, “[temporary] advertising posters may be put up without limit on poster display modules specifically used for that purpose by the city” and “[temporary] advertising posters may be put up without limit on hoardings except if the owner prohibits it or limits it by means of a notice to that effect.”<sup>21</sup> While the city controls definitions and actions of legal street postering, it is an advertising company, *Publicité Sauvage* that dictates the unwritten street code. Efforts put forth by *Publicité Sauvage* in 1994 are responsible for the official legalization of postering upon hoarding walls and construction sites in Montreal.<sup>22</sup> As a result, *Publicité Sauvage* has a monopoly on the spaces where one can legally affix signs (Fig. 7). Francisco Garcia, the individual responsible for the few municipal poster display modules, describes the code:

*Publicité Sauvage* monopolizes the construction walls. They don’t share them. If you go and try to use a small area of those walls for a poster, they’ll consider it a good reason to use more of their clients’ posters and they’ll cover yours up. They feel they can dominate these walls and as a result the smaller people have to stick to illegal alternatives—mailboxes, private walls, posts.<sup>23</sup>

As a result of these factors, it is rare to find the “illegal” type of posters affixed to a “legal” location. But beyond this recent history, there are deeper reasons for the present situation. Montreal has utilized signage bylaws to control and influence the visual appearance of its urban space since this era of almost hysterical social fear over young women and prostitution in the

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<sup>21</sup> City of Montreal By-Law 21.

<sup>22</sup> *Publicité Sauvage*, “History,” *Publicité Sauvage*.

<sup>23</sup> Kristian Gravenor, “Paper chases.”

early twentieth century.<sup>24</sup> In the post-WWI era, legal restrictions on postering and signage went beyond the realm of practical spatial concern, such as sign size and location, and entered the realm of social control. The municipality began to impose stringent regulations upon street postering, an important means of advertising in the district, and Red Light residents in order – it was hoped – to eliminate the sex work and morally purify the neighbourhood. Reformers targeted all street posters and pictures displayed in front of the theaters, cinemas and dance halls in the Red Light district (Fig. 3). Street posters, part of the daily visual experience of that neighbourhood, began to become synonymous with what they signified: the entertainments and specifically, the sex workers within the Red Light district. To some degree this is not surprising; posters advertising establishments of concern did tend to represent alluring women and were explicitly intended to entice customers into the businesses. The posters were also located in the public sphere, on the street, making them highly visible to girls traveling to work and back home. Social reformers who believed that working-class girls living or working in the district were predisposed to “feble-mindedness” felt that those same women were particularly vulnerable to the visual seduction of the posters, and therefore vulnerable too to the physical seduction that was promised, nearby, where the descent into prostitution was just steps away.

The City of Montreal responded to religious and reformist outcry with the instigation of a bylaw that would exert extreme control over all street posters in the Red Light district. In the mid 1920s, the city legislated that the police “morality squad” must approve all theater advertising so that nothing exhibiting adverse morals could be displayed. In addition, no signs could be posted upon poles or posts in any public street or lane; to post upon private property, it became

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<sup>24</sup> Newspapers are an excellent local resource for locating this history. See, for example, “Censorship of Theater Posters Evokes Protest” *The Gazette* (Montreal) 19 March 1925 and “City to Supervise Poster Publicity” *Montreal Daily Star* 12 May 1925.

necessary to have the owner's written permission. Anyone breaking the bylaw could be charged a maximum of forty dollars or sentenced to two months of incarceration.<sup>25</sup> Montreal's poster bylaw of the 1920s, however, was only (visually) tactical. Permitting vice in the Red Light was, as church groups and reformers well knew, very financially profitable for the city. The district attracted tourists and provided regular bribe money, which allowed administrators and police a high quality of life.<sup>26</sup> Furthermore, many members of the city council and police department believed that prostitution was a necessary evil.<sup>27</sup> The Red Light sex entertainment distracted, it was thought, Montreal's delinquent men from pursuing women of higher morals, reserving such women for the men who deserved them.<sup>28</sup> The Red Light's illegal yet tacitly permitted activities continued, in part thanks to the police department's visual restrictions on street posters.

Despite this uneasy balance, Montreal officials could not support the Red Light district or maintain the illusion that they were cracking down on crime forever. World War II reinvigorated anxieties that venereal disease would weaken the Canadian military.<sup>29</sup> Montreal was a primary port. When the military discovered that more soldiers were contracting venereal diseases in Montreal than any other city, they demanded the Red Light be extinguished. They claimed that between 1 January 1940 and 31 December 1943, four thousand and seven cases of venereal disease were reported in Montreal and that seventy-eight percent of those cases were contracted

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<sup>25</sup> "City to supervise Poster Publicity" *Montreal Daily Star* (Montreal) 12 May 1925.

<sup>26</sup> William Weintraub suggests that gambling establishments, alone, provided around \$5000 in regular payoffs. *City Unique*, 61.

<sup>27</sup> Weintraub 64.

<sup>28</sup> The police used numerous strategies to create the appearance that they were cracking down on vice within the Red Light. They also made false arrests and padlocked front doors, leaving side entrances functional. Paulette Déry was arrested approximately 85 times in place of Madam Beauchamp, a woman who owned 24 brothels. Weintraub 60-61, 81.

<sup>29</sup> Weintraub 67.

in the Red Light district.<sup>30</sup> The military refused to port in Montreal if the city did not eliminate the problem; Montreal's economy could not withstand the loss of the military support. The brothel doors closed in 1944.<sup>31</sup>

The anxiety about venereal disease affected all girls in public spaces. World War II amplified the presence of women in the city and young girls suddenly became extremely visible.<sup>32</sup> The prevalence of both father *and* mother working outside the home meant girls could move easily beyond the domestic sphere.<sup>33</sup> Girls now gathered in social groups outside the home. Women were working in factories and were demanding a new, more public role in society; their movement away from the domestic sphere was often blamed.<sup>34</sup> Prostitutes and factory girls alike were condemned and women out of the domestic sphere were perceived to be under constant threat of demoralization.

Social reformers continued to believe that exposure to sinful imagery within urban space could directly result in delinquent behavior, prostitution and the seduction of impressionable girls (Fig. 4). In the mid 1940s, reformers led by Monsignor Joseph Valois demanded that more severe censorship be imposed upon street posters. Montreal's police director, Fernand Dufresne, was subsequently installed as the head of a new "censor squad" and "purity drive." All street

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<sup>30</sup> Podmore 189.

<sup>31</sup> Weintraub 67.

<sup>32</sup> Myers 71.

<sup>33</sup> Myers 70-72. World War II brought additional risk to these girls because mothers were working and fathers were away at war.

<sup>34</sup> Myers 70-72.

posters had to be personally approved by Dufresne before they could be displayed; it was now explicitly forbidden to display photographs, statues, magazines and billboards that depicted nude or semi-nude women.<sup>35</sup>

In 1945, the City of Montreal also formed a committee to study the spread of venereal disease. The findings blamed venereal disease upon prostitution and resulted in legislation that required that all girls who were arrested submit to a medical exam. This law officially stripped these women of their rights and placed them under municipal control.<sup>36</sup> Prostitutes and other women in the Red Light district's public space were increasingly targeted as visible markers of disease. They were perceived to be a plague upon society and social reformers believed they had to be eliminated. The year 1946 would mark the commencement of a complete downward spiral in the Red Light district. Pacifique Plante, the recently assigned commander of the morality squad, believed that the Red Light district needed to be completely destroyed. He began to initiate raids upon the brothels that were re-opening in the postwar era. In 1948 Plante was fired for these tactics, but he would return in the early 1950s, united with Jean Drapeau to finish the task. In 1954 Plante and Drapeau were responsible for finally removing the corrupt police and city officials from power. Jean Drapeau went on to become mayor from 1954 to 1957 and 1960 to 1986, reinstating Plante as the new head of the police morality squad. Together they initiated a new crackdown upon crime and attempted to wipe clean the perceived sins of the past.<sup>37</sup>

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<sup>35</sup> Posters were defined as “posters, illustrated or not, bill-boards, cards, placards, photographs of vaudeville or other theatricals, of paper, cardboard, metal or other material exhibited to the public for the purpose of bringing something to their notice.” “Police Director Starts Campaign for ‘Purity’,” *The Gazette* (Montreal) 28 May 1946. See also “City to Censor All Trade Signs In Sweeping ‘Purity’ Campaign” *The Montreal Star* 28 May 1946.

<sup>36</sup> Podmore 190-192.

<sup>37</sup> On 28 November 1949, Plante published the first of several articles in *Le Devoir* in a series titled, “Montréal sous le règne de la pègre.” The articles provided a detailed account of Montreal's underworld, and prompted the Public Morality Committee to petition the courts for an enquiry. This petition led to the subsequent court proceedings, led by Plante and Drapeau, and the removal of the corrupt police and officials. Weintraub 72-84.

Efforts to restrict the posters, remove prostitution and sanitize the Red Light district have recycled repeatedly since this period. In the mid 1950s and early 1960s, Mayor Jean Drapeau imposed new taxes and content restrictions upon all signage within the city as a part of a “beautification” campaign. The new tax and restrictions were intended to “change 'several streets' characterized by garish and disgraceful advertising.”<sup>38</sup> In the late 1970s, Drapeau attempted another crackdown on “poster pollution” by requesting a bylaw that would allow the city to charge promoters listed on the posters. The proposed law was based on the assumption that those listed were also responsible and it would bypass the need to catch offenders in the act. His request was rejected and even denounced by the Montreal Citizens Movement as an “infringement of the freedom of speech.”<sup>39</sup>

Social reformers continued to stigmatize the Red Light district to the extent that any woman living or working in its vicinity was perceived to be “immoral”. In 1951, the Comité de Moralité Publique demanded that dancers at the Roxy nightclub be removed and claimed that Lili St. Cyr was immoral. Pacifique Plante also claimed that the exotic shows only served to provide clientele for prostitutes. In the 1960s, legislation would further blur the distinction between prostitutes and women in the district by preventing interaction between female club workers and clients. All women working in a Red Light club were perceived as living an immoral life.<sup>40</sup> Prostitution laws in Canada also intensified, constricting freedom of the public space. In 1972, it was declared in Canada’s criminal code that, “[every] person who solicits any

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<sup>38</sup> “‘Tough’ sign bylaw sought.” *The Monitor* (Montreal) 12 Sept. 1963.

<sup>39</sup> “City plans hard line on ‘poster pollution’” *The Gazette* (Montreal) 21 May 1977. See also “City loses bid to control posters” *The Gazette* (Montreal) 11 Nov. 1977.

<sup>40</sup> Podmore 205-229.

person in a public place for the purpose of prostitution is guilty of an offence punishable on summary conviction.”<sup>41</sup>

Mayor Drapeau attempted to wipe out businesses in the Red Light district through increased police surveillance and discouragement of citizen and tourist travel to the area. He also continually withheld liquor licenses and imposed earlier closing times. In 1963, twenty establishments in the Red Light district, including the Canasta Café, Taverne Montréal and the Rialto, were refused new liquor licenses due to the upcoming world exhibition, Expo’ 67. Then, during Expo’67 the district attorney instructed taxi drivers not to bring tourists to the establishments in the Red Light district for fear of moral contamination.<sup>42</sup>

### **The Red Light District today**

These cycles of renewal and reprobation have left their mark; today, the Red Light district is a shrinking and dilapidated version of this formerly vital part of Montreal. Residents are socially marginalized, thought by many to be sexually ambiguous, while the built environment of this location is in physical disrepair.<sup>43</sup> Yet cabarets, cafes, theaters, dance clubs and modern strip-clubs continue to dominate in the area; reform has perhaps not changed as much as had been intended. The Old Frolics’ location at 1417 St Laurent now houses the Kingdom Gentleman’s Club, while Café Canasta became Café Cleopatra; both are strip clubs. The closure of the brothels remains an issue in the district; many prostitutes must work the streets and this visibility is known to be dangerous. Everywhere, businesses that could not be sustained are now

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<sup>41</sup> Wendy Miller, “Prostitution in Canada.”

<sup>42</sup> Podmore 225.

<sup>43</sup> Podmore 230-233. In the 1960s and 1970s, the Red Light district began to attract a large portion of the homosexual and transvestite communities. The neighbourhood also began to attract male prostitutes.

abandoned, leaving some beautiful Montreal greystone structures in shambles, opening the door for discussions of another wave of urban renewal.

The belief that street posters, sex workers and other forms of supposedly illicit entertainment need to be eradicated from the Red Light district remains prevalent; police continue their attempts to control residents and iconosphere alike through the regulation of urban space and the imposition of categories of legal and illegal action.<sup>44</sup> Today, posters and sex workers have been renamed “poster pollution” and “anti-social occurrences.” Efforts to cure these anti-social occurrences have shifted from severe campaigns for eradication and censorship to the quiet removal of posters, repainting of telephone poles, distribution of information and community association meetings.<sup>45</sup> In the year of this writing, the City of Montreal will spend 2.3 million dollars to send “cleanliness brigades” into the downtown core to clean up posters and refuse.<sup>46</sup>

As history has illustrated, where specific types of posters *are* located is as important as where they are *not*. Legal posters are located on hoarding boards, fences and construction sites around the city (Fig. 5). They are colourful, glossy, mass-produced advertisements designed for commercial products, museums, theaters or social events. Legal posters are a part of a more comprehensive advertising scheme and are intended to influence a vast audience. These posters function as a key to understanding a specific urban space because they tend to be affixed to the sites where the city is changing, where abandoned buildings and derelict spaces are about to be renewed. In contrast, illegal posters typically have a personal or idiosyncratic aesthetic and

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<sup>44</sup> Service de police de la Ville de Montréal, “Annual Review 2001,” 2.

<sup>45</sup> Service de police de la Ville de Montréal 2.

<sup>46</sup> Ville de Montréal.

promote grassroots causes, modest events and local venues or artists (Fig. 6). Illegal posters are typically affixed to lampposts, mailboxes and any other available surface and are often a method of advertising for individuals with a modest budget. Promoters using illegal posters often do not have the financial means to develop a full-scale professional advertising campaign. The presence of illegal posters signifies something else, however: the existence of an active site or business in an area. The posters thus function indexically, signifying the presence of an alternate culture or resistant community. In this way, both legal and illegal posters, and their locations, can be read as signs in urban space, indicating presences and (soon-to-be) absences through *their* appearance and disappearance; when illegal posters vanish it often means a loss or a change within the area's urban fabric to come, particularly, gentrification or city beautification.

### **The Red Light District, tomorrow**

When I first began to walk in the Red Light district on February 11, 2009, I found an abundance of both legal and illegal posters. I also found posters for Katacombs, a bar presently located in the Red Light, fixed on street poles for several blocks north of Sherbrooke Street in the gentrified Plateau area (Fig. 8). I returned two weeks later to discover that the Katacombs posters had been completely removed; they did not return. However, the other posters remained constant and on their allotted surfaces for several more weeks. When I returned to the district on March 31st, 2009, numerous lots on the west side of the street were boarded up and covered with legal posters. The Red Light district's street poles had been stripped, clean. Legal posters dominated the area and construction seemed imminent. The change was dramatic; the entire aura of the area shifted. Two weeks later, on April 14, the developer Société de développement Angus held a

public meeting. This developer now has authority over most of the block between Rene Levesque Boulevard and Ste. Catherine Street and lot 2-22 at the corner of St-Laurent Boulevard and St. Catherine Street. At the public meeting, the developer announced enormous changes in the future of the Red Light district's built environment, and cultural character.

Angus has proposed to revitalize Montreal's Red Light district along environmentalist-friendly line, to turn, in short, the Red Light "green." Their plan includes new, multi-storey buildings whose glass façades will tower over the current two- and four-story Montreal greystone buildings (Fig. 9). The green plans include eco-friendly designs, pedestrian green spaces, bike racks and spaces for electric cars.<sup>47</sup> The pitch declares the developers' responsible approach to development, their devotion to environmental concerns and to working with social groups in order to respect the current residents of the area. The buildings are meant to be architectural tourist attractions, intended to house theaters, cinemas, dance companies and businesses dedicated to fair trade and socially responsible activities. The developer has even designed a glass case on the outside of the building on lot 2-22 to house legal posters. In short, Angus promises that the new development will remain true to the district and integrate with the space, simply adding a new built layer to the architectural fabric of the Red Light district's history.<sup>48</sup>

The benefits of such proposals notwithstanding, it is clear that a new attempt to cleanse the Red Light district of its "poster pollution" and "anti-social occurrences" is about to take place. Interestingly, however, Montreal residents are already opposed to the new development.<sup>49</sup> While

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<sup>47</sup> Société de développement Angus, "Assemblée de consultation populaire," 9-16.

<sup>48</sup> Jason Magder, "Changes to The Main must fit in, residents;" Société de développement Angus, "Assemblée de consultation populaire," 9-16.

<sup>49</sup> Magder 15.

most citizens agree that something needs to be done in the area, they are opposed to the undeniably out of character, tall glass buildings. As resident Michel Leblanc commented, “the area is near the Monument National; you should be inspired by the stone façade of this building, even if it means going back to the drawing board.”<sup>50</sup> Perhaps citizens are wary of the idea that new architecture can – or should – change old districts. The City of Montreal previously attempted to influence the Red Light district through architectural development, with the construction of *les Habitations Jeanne Mance* in the late 1950s on the Dozois site in the Red Light district.<sup>51</sup> The development represents Montreal’s first and only large-scale low-rent housing project to be built in the downtown core. It was justified partially on the hope that the Red Light slum area might be morally purged through architecture.<sup>52</sup> *Les Habitations* represented a vision of urban renewal that, like the Angus plan, included green spaces, modern design and pedestrian walkways. The development proposals are thus rather familiar as is the conclusion that the *Habitations Jeanne Mance* did not quite meet the proposed expectations for revitalization. Bulldozing the original neighbourhood did not eliminate the sex trade or drugs; both are still apparent on the street.<sup>53</sup>

Interestingly, Jean Drapeau was against the *Habitations Jeanne Mance* project. He

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<sup>50</sup> Magder 15.

<sup>51</sup> The site is bounded by the streets Ontario, Boisbriand, Sanguinet and St. Dominique. See Alexandra Mills’ essay on *Les Habitations* in this same collection of papers.

<sup>52</sup> Annick Germain and Damaris Rose, “Montreal’s Built Form: French Heritage, Victorian Legacy and Modernist Ambitions,” 82-83; see also Eric Siblin, “City housing experiment 40 years old: Habitations Jeanne Mance was Montreal’s first and only U.S.-style project.”

<sup>53</sup> Siblin A3.

envisioned a center for radio and other telecommunications for the site that would foster a francophone presence in the area.<sup>54</sup> In a sense, if the new Angus project is built, Drapeau will get his wish. The developer's intention is to cater to Quebec businesses and cultural endeavors. 2-22 St Laurent Boulevard is intended to house CIBL Radio Montreal.<sup>55</sup> The City of Montreal also attempted to regulate the posters through the construction of poster display modules. In 2006, a pilot project was initiated and six display modules were installed upon Ste. Catherine Street (Fig. 10). The modules are to be used by a select number of club and concert venues regularly fined for illegal postering. The display modules are regulated by an individual from the Table de concertation de Faubourg St-Laurent, who receives the posters through email, prints them in black and white and posts them. The poster modules are used and maintained, however, they do not provide enough advertising space and illegal postering still occurs; frequently "illegal" posters are affixed to the regulated boards. The continued presence of illegal posters, both on and off the modules, is explained by John Milchem, posterer and front man for local band Starvin' Hungry":

The plan is doomed ... Postering culture, which is street culture, is competitive and driven by individual, [need and] desire. If you have some sacred space where posters are supposed to go, people are obviously going to cover it [with other posters]. And the whole notion of people going out of their way to visit the postering site is moronic and completely out of touch with the audience for posters ... The reason for the repetition [of putting up posters everywhere] is because people aren't really going out of their way to look at posters. They notice them when they walk from one destination to another.<sup>56</sup>

The City of Montreal has continued attempts to regulate both posters and sex workers,

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<sup>54</sup> Germain and Rose 82-83.

<sup>55</sup> Magder.

<sup>56</sup> Pohanna Pyne, "Off the wall?"

rendering them invisible. The city, however, has not been successful at eradicating the alleged social ills; posters and sex workers are still present and fighting to be heard. Eradication of established social practices is not that simple and neither postering nor the sex trade is, or should be, illegal. Section 1 of the Canadian Charter of Rights and Freedoms forbids a complete ban upon street posters as a violation of freedom of speech.<sup>57</sup> The sex trade itself has never been illegal. The status of posters and sex workers as a “problem” is a direct result of a social ideal.

There are numerous citizens, individuals in the trade and clients, who support the decriminalization of prostitution and consider the sex trade a viable form of financial support. As the advocacy group, WHORE: Women Helping Ourselves to Rights and Equality, points out, actors who work in pornographic films have sex in front of a camera for money, actors participate in sexual activity in movies and on television, and many other people participate in sexual activities for personal gain — they are not considered prostitutes; their activities are not prohibited; and they are not invisible.<sup>58</sup>

## **Conclusion**

One aspect of street postering that I have not addressed in this essay is their artistic and cultural importance. Poster design and dissemination constitute a valuable form of public art, a fact that is recognized in Montreal’s own collecting institutions.<sup>59</sup> Jack Dylan, a renowned Montreal poster artist, explains that this medium provides opportunities that do not exist in

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<sup>57</sup> See “Guarantee of Rights and Freedoms: Case Law,” *Fundamental Freedoms: The Charter of Rights and Freedoms* (Canada, Inc. 2006) web (accessed 1 March 2009).

<sup>58</sup> Wendy Miller, “Prostitution in Canada.”

<sup>59</sup> The Bibliothèque et Archives nationales du Québec keeps an archival collection of posters from Publicité Sauvage and by Jack Dylan. Christopher Dewolf, “Bibliothèque nationale to preserve posters.”

traditional arenas, and how these opportunities open the doors to multiple forms of culture and entertainment:

I love the music scene for its energy. Coming from a fine-arts background, I realized that the audiences weren't in the galleries. They were at the shows. You can get any kind of audience to go see bands in Montreal, all the time. I loved that energy. I wanted to do art shows that were a big event. At my first one-man show, we had can-can and burlesque dancers, absinthe being served, people showing up in costumes.<sup>60</sup>

When examined closely, street posters are intimately connected to new forms of music, resilient subcultures, and unique individuals. Posters exist at the most immediate, accessible level: street level. They are a record of society in its rawest form. A Katacombes club poster advertises a concert to be held on 6 March 2009 (Fig. 11). The poster is simple and eye catching, displaying a rather literal female incarnation of the headlining band's name, the Saigon Hookers. The female figure is dressed in lingerie and holds a guitar between her legs. She looks out from the poster, daring, maybe even seductive, attempting to attract an audience to the show. The poster is obviously an advertisement; it has something to sell and uses a language of commodification to do so. But upon deeper analysis, however, this poster could allude to issues regarding representations of women in advertising. The poster is drawing attention to the use, and possible abuse, of female imagery to sell a product. This poster could prompt us to question the use of hyper-sexualized images of women in advertising.

A small piece of the iconosphere of the Red Light district, the Saigon Hookers poster is, in fact, a visual summation of the issues I have attempted to address in this paper. When I encountered it, the poster was affixed to a lamppost, partially covered by another sign, as if the

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<sup>60</sup> Rupert Bottenberg, "Ordinary heroes: Montreal poster artist Jack Dylan rocks a fine line."

female figure were struggling to be seen (Fig. 12). Like the sex workers of the Red Light district, past and present, who are fighting for their right to be visibly part of the community in which they live and work, this poster also struggles, if in a much smaller way. In this moment too was a literal enactment of the idea of the city as palimpsest; a trace of the previous poster always remains. Peeling back of layers in the history of Montreal's Red Light district can transform the way we read tattered posters on a wall from merely superficial, ephemeral object into a clue, a crucial and multilayered sign of the issues at work in urban space.

## Figures

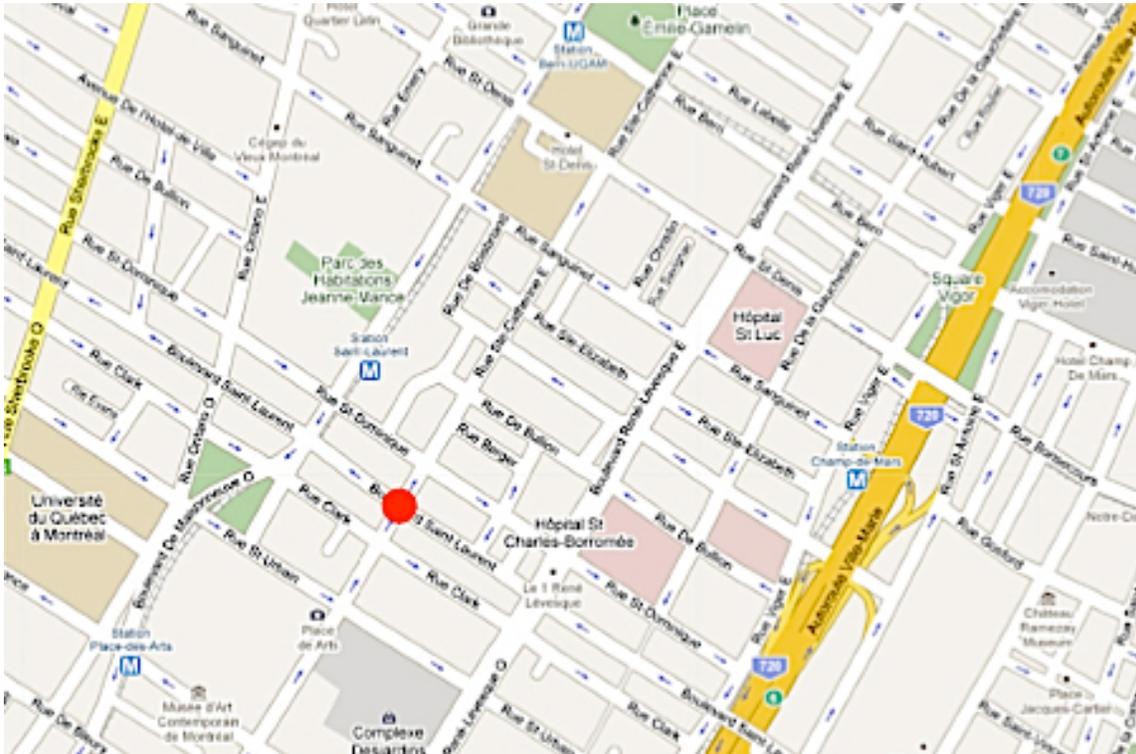


Fig. 1. The centre of the Red Light district of Montreal, indicated with red dot (the intersection of St-Laurent Boulevard and Ste-Catherine Street.

Source: Google map, 2009.



Fig. 2. John Read, *Lili St. Cyr* publicity photo, photograph. Date unknown.  
Source: Nancy Marrelli, *Stepping Out: The Golden Age of Montreal Night Clubs* (Montreal: Véhicule Press, 2004) 85.



Fig. 3. Advertisement from Connie's Inn.

Source: Nancy Marrelli, *Stepping Out: The Golden Age of Montreal Night Clubs* (Montreal: Véhicule Press, 2004) 85 28.



Fig. 4. *Montreal today*. Political Cartoon.  
Source: *Le Canada*, 31 May 1946.



Fig. 5. “Legal” poster wall (in this case, a hoarding wall surrounding a building site), Montreal.

Source: Photograph by the author, 2009.



Fig. 6. An example of “illegal” postering, in this case, a poster for a musical event has been affixed to a “legal” poster beneath, Montreal.

Source: Photograph by the author, 2009.



Fig. 7. Publicité Sauvage representative adding posters to a legal site, Montreal.  
Source: Photograph by Alvaro Pacheco



Fig. 8. Katakomb, a bar located in the Red Light district, affixed to a street pole several blocks north of Sherbrooke Street in the gentrified Plateau, Montreal.

Source: Photograph by the author, 2009.



Fig. 9. Developer's proposal for #2-22 St-Laurent Boulevard.  
Source: Quartier des spectacles, <http://www.quartierdesspectacles.com>. (accessed 15 April 2009)



Fig. 10. Poster display modules, pilot project, Ste-Catherine Street, 2006.  
Source: Photograph by the author, 2009.

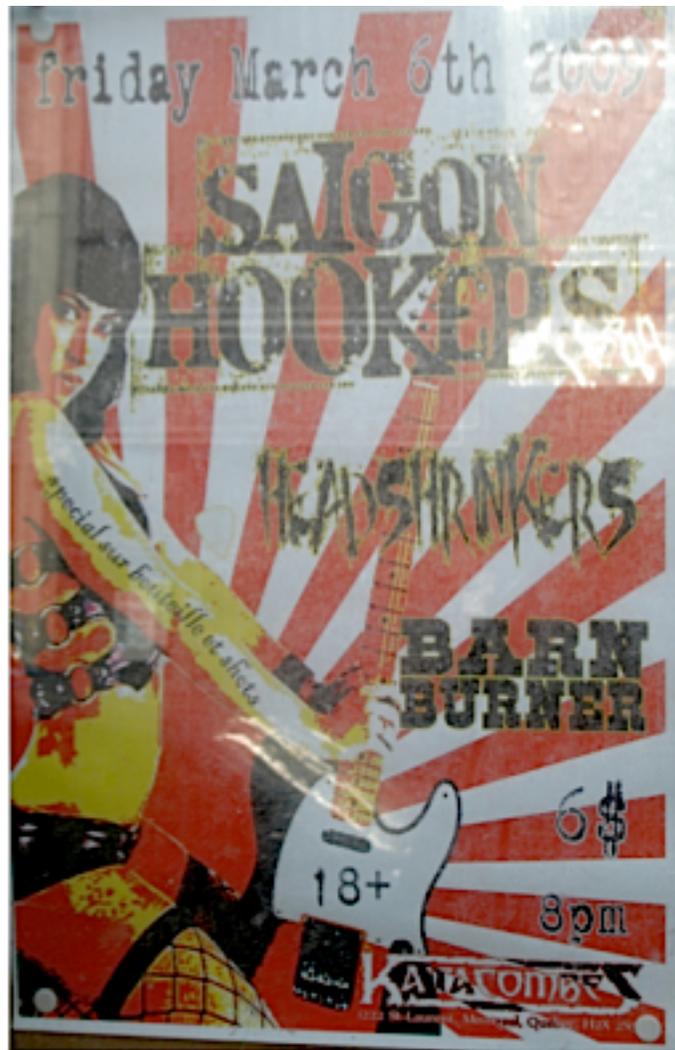


Fig. 11. Poster advertising the Saigon Hookers show at Katacombes club, 2009.  
Source: Photograph by the author, 2009.



Fig. 12. Street poster, St-Laurent Boulevard, Montreal.  
Source: Photograph by the author, 2009.

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