

Concordia Journal Home > Archives > April 23, 2009 issue >

## TRACING THE USES OF SPACE

By Karen Herland

[Back to Original Version](#)

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For the second year, art history students presented work designed to retrace and remember buildings across Montreal's urban landscape.



Graduate art history stories explored the cracks between intended and unintended uses of Montreal buildings at the second annual Palimpsest conference.

City as Palimpsest II takes up where students in last year's graduate seminar led by art history professor Cynthia Hammond left off— uncovering the intended and unintended meanings of architectural space around the city. In traditional manuscript illumination and production, a palimpsest is the still-visible trace of marks that have been erased yet linger. Graduate students chose twelve distinct sites in Montreal to explore the idea of the human imprint on built space, over time. April 17 they presented their works in progress.

The public event was held in the Espace des Neuf Soeurs, a Beaux-Arts building that embodies the day's theme. The former bank has been the home of McGill architecture professor Pieter Sijpkens for two decades. Though now residential, the space retains much of its public mission (including regular use by local cultural organizations, such as theatre groups, musical and visual artists). It also maintains some concrete elements of its former life — Sijpkens has repurposed the vault as a bedroom.

It is that sense that buildings never quite shake off their former use, even as they are sold, reinvented, or razed, that dominated the day's dozen presentations.

Of particular note were the buildings that no longer exist. Two different sites, a trailer park and the Verdun dance hall, were recreated through the traces and evidence found by their chroniclers. Robin Simpson worked with the Verdun Historical Society to piece together a narrative of a simple wooden pavilion that was also the site of a major confrontation between Zoot Suits and sailors in the 1940s. Joanna Nawracaj interviewed former residents of the Blue Bonnets Trailer Park (now the site of the Decarie Walmart,) who told of an idyllic, domestic environment marred only by the prejudice of the more permanently housed neighbours. The trailer park was destroyed just prior to Expo 67 — it was considered an eyesore on the gateway to Montreal's purpose-built exhibition islands.

"It is a real challenge to recreate a building through social and cultural history," remarked Hammond. When the architecture under discussion is designed by an unknown hand or produced collectively over time, the parameters of architectural history need to move away from the paradigm of the individual designer.

Other students discussed the repurposing of buildings. Jennifer Patterson presented research on Concordia's purchase of the Grey Nun's Mother House, paying attention to how the university's mission dovetails with the order's traditional mandate of serving the public through education and health care.

Impermanent traces were recalled with Sandie Jensen's discussion of street posters on the Main and Adrienne Connelly's paper on the Charles H. Este Cultural Centre in Little Burgundy—the first black community centre in Montreal, now derelict and in dire need of funds. But more recognizable monuments also came into the day's events: Silvia Sorbelli discussed Moshe Safdie's Jean-Noel Desmarais Pavilion of the Montreal Museum of Fine Arts, while Adam van Sertima explored Ernest Cormier's Motordrome building, both on Sherbrooke and both the subject of heated debates about heritage and the best way to respect the surrounding architectural fabric.

Given the brave new world the Turcot Interchange signified when it was opened just before the equally forward-looking Expo 67, its dated, unwieldy and inhumanly monumental scale seems awkward and unsustainable today. Danielle Lewis's meditation on the alternative uses of the space under and around the structure seemed particularly à propos in light of calls for its redevelopment.

Lewis speaks of the space as ripe for re-interpretation by marginal social groups "who do not fit into the city's established binaries." It is precisely this interstitial, reclaimed, unprogrammed use that she

celebrated in opposition to the “sanitized” orderly direction the thoroughways themselves suggest.

McGill architecture professor Annmarie Adams was also present to provide a critical response to the work presented.

## In this issue

### Feature Articles

[\\$22 million in funding](#)

[Orality of the visual](#)

[English-language research network unveiled](#)

[Bethune's exceptional legacy](#)

[Understanding Desire a huge success](#)

[Draft strategic plan goes to Senate](#)

[Arts & Science serving the community](#)

[Community campaign is all about the students](#)

[Art in constant revolution](#)

[Finding the voice to tell difficult stories](#)

**[Tracing the uses of space](#)**

[2009 capstones innovate in more ways than one](#)

[--> Mechanical and Industrial Engineering Design and Awards Day results, April 14](#)

[CCSL awards honour excellence](#)

[Undergraduate researchers aim high](#)

[Stripping down mall culture at Blue Met](#)

[Concordia hosts international conference on men](#)

[Sustainable research across disciplines](#)

[Another season of staff hockey ends](#)

### Departments

[Accolades](#)

[ConcordiaPix: Sa Rang Woo](#)

[In Memoriam: John White](#)

[Stingers: Celebrating our athletic success](#)

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