

THE RHETORIC OF CONTEMPORARY URBANISM: A DECONSTRUCTIVE ANALYSIS OF CENTRAL CITY NEIGHBOURHOOD REDEVELOPMENT

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Résumé

Prenant appui sur l'exemple du quartier Saint-Roch à Québec, l'article analyse la rhétorique du discours urbanistique qui depuis une décennie environ justifie et programme la revitalisation des quartiers anciens en Amérique du Nord. L'objectif est de contribuer, sous l'angle de la géographie culturelle, à la compréhension de ce nouvel urbanisme qui semble avoir autant de succès dans l'opinion que dans la pratique. Il est d'abord montré que ce discours se construit essentiellement comme une autocritique puisque son premier ressort argumentatif est de reconnaître l'échec de l'urbanisme qui, après la Seconde Guerre mondiale, a voulu rénover les quartiers anciens en recourant aux démolitions massives et à la reconstruction systématique. Il est ensuite expliqué que, sur cette base, se développent des figures de rhétorique paradoxales capables de justifier : (1) la protection du patrimoine bâti tout en le destinant à des usages innovateurs ; (2) la mixité des usages tout en écartant rigoureusement certaines d'entre elles ; (3) la nécessité de l'urbanisme participatif tout en reconnaissant l'impossibilité d'y inclure toutes les catégories sociales.

Mots clés : Nouvel urbanisme, revitalisation urbaine, patrimoine urbain, démocratie participative, Ville de Québec, récit urbain

Key words: New urbanism, Urban renewal, Urban Heritage, Participative Democracy, Quebec City, Urbanistic narrative

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Abstract

Using the example of the Saint-Roch district in Quebec City (Canada), this paper is an analysis of the rhetoric of urban discourse which for the last decade or so has driven and justified the revitalization project of older urban areas in North American cities. The goal here is to add from a cultural geography perspective to the understanding of this so-called new urbanism which seems to have great success in both practice and public opinion. This paper will firstly demonstrate that this discourse is built essentially as a self-criticism, since its fundamental principle is to recognize the failure of post World War II urbanism which favoured the renewal of older urban areas through large scale demolition and systematic reconstruction. Next, this paper explains that on this basis a set of figures has emerged which have paradoxically been used to justify: (1) the protection of built heritage while at the same time allowing for innovative uses of this heritage; (2) the diversity of uses of urban heritage while at the same time actively excluding certain options; (3) the necessity for participatory urbanism while at the same time acknowledging the impossibility of including certain social categories.

North American city centres have undergone major changes since the end of the Second World War. Formerly located at the heart of urban life, they first of all absorbed the shock of an exodus to the suburbs. Abandoned for the most part by industry, business and the middle class, whole neighbourhoods deteriorated and became havens for fringe groups. These circumstances tarnished the reputation of such neighbourhoods while at the same time spawning ambitious projects to rebuild these inner-city areas. The areas were then subject to large demolition campaigns in an effort to radically modify their role and appearance. Such urban renewal, mainly geared toward restoring the service sector, gave rise to modern large-scale CBDs (Garvin 1996).

The optimism of the instigators of this movement was not, however, shared by all. Many lamented the disappearance of an urban landscape inherited from a time when the coexistence of industry, business and housing expressed the very purpose of a city. Some people were also worried about the lot of the captive population groups whose living conditions deteriorated as their neighbourhoods were modernized (Harvey 2000a).

This renewal-oriented urban planning (which was perhaps as much a victim of its own excessive nature as of the resistance it generated) did not always "deliver the goods," at times leaving the typical city with an unfinished appearance (Fishman 1987). Soon, however, an about-face, or at least an adjustment, took place: urban planners discovered that these areas, which, only yesterday, they sentenced to disappear, were still of considerable worth. And this is why today these older neighbourhoods are restored rather than demolished: their historic

value – even if they are first and foremost remnants of the industrial era – as well as their essential social character are now fully recognized and appreciated (Harvey 2000b).

While the urban-renewal movement rejected the older neighbourhoods, the new urban planners built upon them, on their physical presence and on what they represent culturally, by starting new projects, bringing together residents and visitors, and channelling capital into these neighbourhoods. Given that this restoration process was to some extent based on the marketing of urban culture, it is not certain that it was in the best interests of the latter since the operation was above all else a strategy designed by the holders of capital to increase their grip (Zukin 1995). This strategy, which led to a confusion between culture and consumption, guaranteed these interested parties increased control, not only over the production of goods and services, but also over the production of urban space (Lefebvre 1974; Boyer 1994).

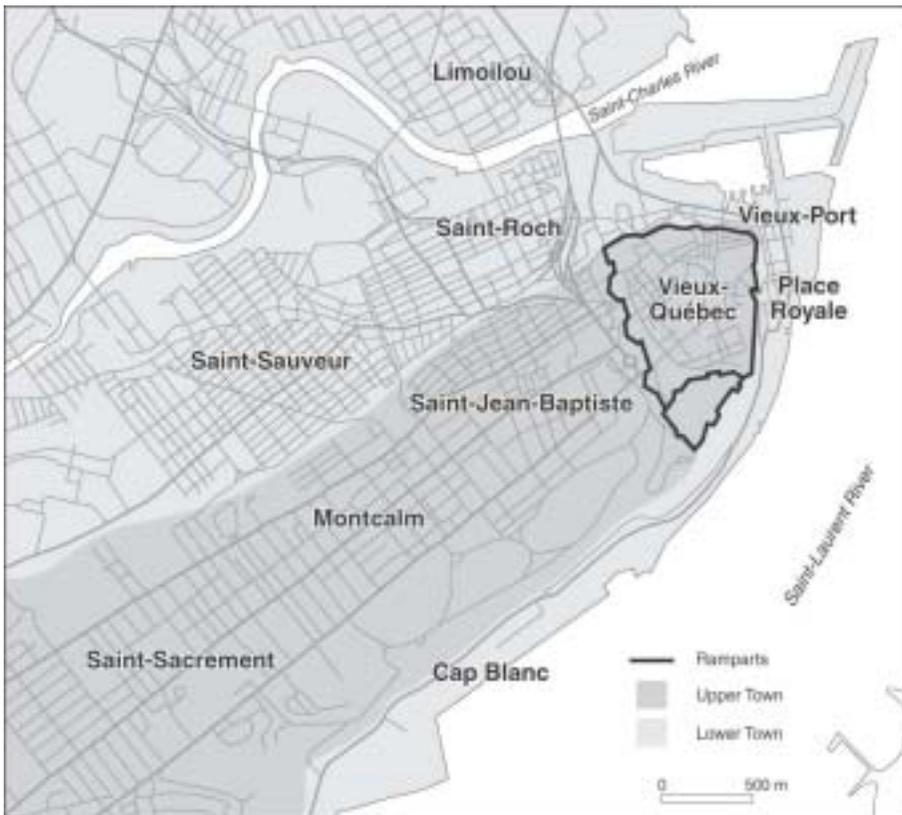
The role played by capital in the revival of older neighbourhoods has clearly been a significant one, and it must also be recognized that this revival has been accompanied in many cases by a certain reinforcing of grassroots democracy (Parenteau 1990). A strong democratic deficit was an outgrowth of the preceding era, whereas the emerging consensus today is that decisions concerning urban issues should reflect the will of the people (Mayer 2000), so much so that the current renewal of older neighbourhoods has become the main source of inspiration for participatory urban planning (Hamel 1999). In this case, we should probably talk about a convergence of interests between holders of capital and local society, or at least a significant segment of the latter (Morin 1998). This convergence, if confirmed, would mean that the movement has come to reflect, more fundamentally, a genuine cultural reorientation. And this new cultural keynote, expressed in a restored urban lifestyle, would in turn signal both the development of more complex market-economy relations and a diversification of social and political institutions (Cybriwsky *et al.* 1986; Smith 1986, 1996; Simard 1999).

The Example of Quebec City

It is of course much easier to advance the hypothesis of a new North American urban culture given the support provided by the current discourse in urban planning where it has been raised to the level of a leitmotif.¹ It is also difficult to grasp the true significance of this new urban culture since both public and private bodies, realizing that a successful renewal of older neighbourhoods is in their best interests, are constantly reiterating that its arrival is at hand - as a justification for their own actions. Hence any analysis has to take this ideology of urban cultural renewal into account. But how does one stake out new ground?

The Saint-Roch area of Quebec City, where the new urban planning displays its proudest face, would seem fertile ground for examining such a question. This densely populated lower Quebec City neighbourhood (an area which was for a long time prosperous due to the industrial and business activities that were centred there) was once a worthy rival of the traditional downtown core, located just above the cliff, where the city's main institutions, including the provincial parliament, were clustered (figure 1). However, like so many other central city areas in North America, Saint-Roch experienced a precipitous decline from the time of the Second World War (Trotier 1962-63; Blanchet 1987). The situation became so critical that Quebec City's urban-planning department admitted in 1990 that Saint-Roch "[had become], over the years, a neighbourhood that, in spite of significant public efforts in recent years, [had] not yet managed to

Figure 1 Map of Quebec City (Upper and Lower Town)



Source: Department of Geography, Laval University

develop its own self-renewal dynamic.” The incapacity of this “forgotten neighbourhood” to “generate its own renewal” stemmed – or so it was contended – from “a complete lack of interest in Saint-Roch.” Moreover, to nobody’s surprise, this part of the city had come to offer “nearly insurmountable resistance” to political voluntarism (City of Quebec 1990: 1-2).

Now, thirteen years later, the situation has completely changed. Today’s Saint-Roch is a veritable standard bearer for urban renewal: its main routes have undergone a complete face-lift and a number of old buildings have found a new vocation as locations for institutions, organizations or businesses, while others have been converted into apartments. As well, vacant lots, once numerous and sometimes quite extensive, are gradually disappearing beneath new residential, commercial or institutional complexes. Especially noteworthy is the proliferation in the area of public and private buildings designed for the arts, education, entertainment, innovation and recreation sectors (Morisset 2001; Noppen & Morisset 1999). Furthermore, this new vocation has received the unequivocal support of municipal authorities who are determined “to provide whatever is necessary to make Saint-Roch the cultural hub of Quebec City” so that it will become “the Latin Quarter of the 21st century” within the Quebec City urban community (Morisset *et al.* 1996: 47).

The conversion of the area’s built environment, concrete evidence, as it were, of a substantial financial influx, has been accompanied by sociological change (Cassista 1995). In fact, a new population group, both wealthier and better educated than the average neighbourhood resident, is now flocking to Saint-Roch to live, work, teach and/or relax (Hangard 1998). These changes have led the aforementioned municipal authorities to contend “that the neighbourhood is truly undergoing a process of renewal” (City of Quebec 1998b: 4) so that, in their view, it is no longer time to lament the failures of urban planning but rather to celebrate its recent triumphs (Théroux 2000; Vézina 2001).

Urbanistic narratives: a deconstructive perspective

Saint-Roch seems to experience the future that has been designed by urban planners since 1990 for this neighbourhood. Is it true or not? Is it good or bad? Those could be good questions but my intention is instead to understand this new urban policy. The idea is to approach it through an analysis of *urbanistic narratives*. An urbanistic narrative is what the social actors of the urban life are saying about the city or the neighbourhood they are living in. In that sense, the urbanistic narratives are more than what has been said or written by decision makers. It includes all the discourses coming from any groups or individuals about their own urban life. Each urbanistic narrative consists of three elements:

- A *judgment*: the narrator says what is good or bad, what we like or dislike in the city or in the neighbourhood, what is the cause of it, and whose the fault it is.
- A *project*: the narrator says what he would like to be done, to be changed.
- A *program*: the narrator says how this goal should be achieved, it identifies the agents or the adversaries of this change, anticipating the role each of them should play in order to encourage the earlier and to resist to the latter.

In order to examine the new urban planning experienced in Saint-Roch, I propose its *contextualisation* and its *deconstruction*. The contextualisation will be done by comparing the urban planning advocated in Saint-Roch prior to 1990 with the approach that may have fuelled the recovery of recent years. Deconstruction, as formulated by Derrida (Derrida & Caputo 1996), considers that reality is presented like a text composed on the basis of pairs of opposites. Those opposites are tied together because the significance of any situation has to be found in what it is about *and* what it is not. For instance, an urbanistic narrative can promote the preservation of the built heritage of a neighbourhood *and* not offer any resistance to the construction of new buildings. This epistemological posture made it possible to *read* any urbanistic narrative as a thesis and an antithesis at the same time. It reveals that its meaning lies ultimately in the relation between the thesis and the antithesis that are expressed within. Since it is an attempt to make believable a paradox, this relation is essentially rhetorical. The goal, therefore, is to deconstruct the so-called new urbanism to discover its paradoxical figures in order to discover its rhetoric.²

The Failure of Urban Renewal

After having been the main business and industrial centre of the Quebec City region and a highly populated neighbourhood, Saint-Roch entered an era of profound change after the Second World War as evidenced by the decline of its business and industrial sectors, the exodus of well-heeled population groups toward residential suburbs, the deterioration of its built environment, the concentration within its boundaries of a socio-economically unstable population, an increase in social disturbances, etc. (Cliche 1980, Ritchot *et al.* 1994; Bélanger *et al.* 1999; Villeneuve & Vachon 1999). Thus Saint-Roch, which previously constituted one of the main hubs of downtown Quebec City, lost its powerful capacity to attract industry, business and housing, people and capital. Starting in the 1950s, this decline awakened a political will to give the neighbourhood back its vitality of years gone by and to devote considerable urban-planning efforts to it. The 1956 *Gréber Report* first proposed neighbourhood renewal. The idea was passed on and fine-tuned in a number of projects and reports, including the *Martin Report* (Martin *et al.* 1961-63), the *Vandry-Jobin Report* (Vandry *et al.*

1967-68), the *Renovation of Space 10 Program* (Ville de Québec 1971) and *Quebec City Urban Community Development Plan* (Communauté urbaine de Québec 1975). The result was a broad plan involving massive interventions whose direct influence was felt until the end of the 1980s (Cimon 1978; Filion 1987).

The modernization project carried with it the hope that the neighbourhood could at long last benefit from the urban dynamic that had been unfavourable to it up until that point. This dynamic, as it swept through the entire Quebec City urban community, fostered a clear separation between places of residence, work and business, resulting in more numerous and more lengthy daily trips from one place to another. Seen from this perspective, it seemed only appropriate that Saint-Roch should be provided with facilities that would allow it to compete with other areas and ensure its rightful place in the new regional economy. This was the key condition – or so it was postulated – that would enable Saint-Roch to remain an active part of downtown Quebec City life (Mercier 1998; Morisset 1999). And this is why renewal-oriented urban planners promoted the construction of infrastructures for the benefit of the business, service and transportation sectors. Housing was not ruled out, of course, but it was to play a supporting role that would in no way compromise the revival of Saint-Roch as a business centre (figure 2).

In the grip of this development model, Saint-Roch's urban and social landscape was destined to undergo a rapid metamorphosis. We can summarize the evolution of Saint-Roch as envisioned by renewal-oriented urban planners under four main headings:

- A concentration of jobs and businesses as a means of confirming the central role of the neighbourhood within the urban community.
- An increase in the size of its facilities, especially those designed for the business, service, and transportation sectors, in order to promote a concentration of activities. For instance, at the beginning of the 1970s, this justified tearing down the neighbourhood's eastern edge in order to make way for the giant viaducts of the Dufferin-Montmorency expressway (figure 3).
- A special segregation of functions in order to ensure that the efficiency of each was not compromised by any limitations stemming from their overlap. This segregation was intended as a boost for the tertiary sector (businesses and services) and as a means of excluding industry, which was deemed too environmentally unfriendly.

Figure 2 Quebec City in 1990



Source: Vandry-Jobin Report (1967)

- Massive public and private investments in order to fund construction of the necessary facilities.

As the municipal authorities themselves noted in 1990 in *The Saint-Roch Neighbourhood Action Plan*, this policy, which was designed to reconstruct Saint-Roch, did not, as it were, deliver the goods. Its failure may be attributed to at least two factors.

On the one hand, major investments were required in order to bring about such changes. Unfortunately, the spaces to be transformed in Saint-Roch were not only immense but also in direct competition with other sectors located elsewhere in downtown Quebec City or in outlying areas. After 20 years of effort, it appeared that, in spite of a few scattered successes, the Saint-Roch area was not a priority sector in the eyes of most public and private investors,³ or so it seemed given that the funding they provided did not meet the needs of the neighbourhood as defined by municipal authorities. This is why “renewed” Saint-Roch remained a vast worksite where a few completed projects did not give it the appearance of a “finished product.” Worse still, the vacant lots and abandoned or nearly abandoned buildings that seemed to proliferate more quickly than any examples of reconstruction served to reinforce the neighbourhood’s bad reputation in the court of public opinion, to such an extent that the difficulty of mobilizing investors was exacerbated since the renewal process was slow to erase the ever-deepening signs of Saint-Roch’s decline (Hulbert 1994).

Aside from this shortage of funding, such a large-scale undertaking was also undermined by the widespread opposition that it could hardly have failed to elicit. Indeed it was inevitable that such a shaking up of ideas and landscapes would ruffle the feathers of neighbourhood residents as well as those most concerned about their fate. Of course, at this point a number of people fled Saint-Roch for the suburbs, which offered them a living space more in keeping with their hopes and aspirations, nourished by the spirit of the age. Others, sometimes by choice but mainly because they lacked the means to participate in the exodus, stayed in the area and experienced a series of shocks, such as the shock of seeing their once-familiar surroundings transformed due to decisions that were, more often than not, made against their will and contrary to their interests; or the shock of seeing their neighbourhood (in spite of promises for a better future made by renewal boosters) mired in a decline caused precisely by the aggressive nature, as well as the impotence, of renewal-oriented urban planning (Plamondon 1966; EZOP 1981).

The most spectacular symbol of this impotence was, without a doubt, the large quadrangle that was left vacant and that scarred the centre of the neighbourhood for a long period of time. This quadrangle, where, in times gone by, factories, warehouses, businesses and residences were clustered, gradually

Figure 3 Dufferin-Montmorency Expressway under construction (1974)



Source: Quebec City Archives, Photograph number 24646

emptied during the 1970s and 1980s (figure 4). Municipal authorities had pledged to expropriate the sector and tear down its buildings as of 1972, when they tabled their plan to build a large-scale business complex south of Charest Boulevard. Given its architectural dimensions and economic impact, the complex was meant to dominate the neighbourhood while guaranteeing it a new central importance. The project was finally abandoned, but it was periodically replaced by similar projects until 1989 (Ville de Québec 1988, 1989a, 1989b). Like the first, these subsequent initiatives also fell through, each time revealing the reluctance of investors to fund the urban renewal of Saint-Roch in spite of persistent appeals by municipal authorities (Ligoune 1989; Lemoine 1995; Morisset 2001).

The failure of the renewal movement thus prompted the appearance in Saint-Roch's urban and social landscape of "pockets of resistance" with which political voluntarism collided. Furthermore, this resistance movement spawned another way of envisioning neighbourhood development; thus any description of Saint-Roch's decline and the proposed urban-planning solution to it should also mention the opposition that these elements provoked. Indeed, an anti-establishment view was expressed as a counterpoint to the planned renewal of the neighbourhood. Neighbourhood defence groups, the proponents of this position, spread their point of view by denouncing the municipally controlled urban-renewal venture. According to these critics, urban renewal sounded the death knell for the familiar community environment of Saint-Roch's residents and represented a denial of their right to make decisions for themselves concerning the future of their own neighbourhood (Villeneuve 1982). Speaking out against municipal urban planners, who were accused of working, first and foremost, in the interest of promoters, business people and government, these critics called for a restoration policy designed in the best interest of neighbourhood residents. This is why anti-establishment groups favoured improving low-income housing conditions, the development of community services, and the construction of public facilities intended primarily for local residents. This alternative viewpoint, reflecting a profound distrust of official urban planning, would turn into a fiercely contentious barrage of arguments each time municipal officials or promoters proposed a large-scale project for Saint-Roch (Mercier & Mascolo 1995).

Distrust, which until this point was brewing at the grassroots community level, then became an integral part of overall public opinion as expressed in the November 1989 municipal election when the Rassemblement Populaire (grassroots coalition), a political party that hoped to extend the actions initiated by the citizens' defence committees, was handed the reins of power (Quesnel *et al.* 1991). During the election campaign, the Rassemblement Populaire had denounced the Citicom-Gagnon project, the latest proposed development project

Figure 4 Saint-Roch's "hole" in the 80s



Source: Quebec City Archives

for the immense vacant lot that cut across Saint-Roch at the foot of the cliff. By mounting an attack on this project, the Rassemblement Populaire was attempting to voice its opposition to urban-planning orientations that municipal authorities had been imposing on Saint-Roch for several decades. This strategy was well chosen indeed since it propelled the Rassemblement Populaire to an electoral triumph. However, the winners had to take action at once; public opinion demanded not only that the hated project be blocked but also, and above all, that a completely different approach to urban planning be proposed for Saint-Roch (Simard 2000, 2001; Senneville 1996).

Municipal authorities drew up a new city plan, the *Action Plan for the Saint-Roch Neighbourhood*, as of 1990, when it was tabled for public consultation (Ville de Québec 1990, 1991a, 1991b; Cimon 1991), leading in turn to the creation, in 1992, of an ambitious program entitled *RevitalizAction at the Heart of the Capital* (Ville de Québec 1992). Downtown renewal remained part of the plan but a “place of honour” was reserved for housing, whether through assistance provided for the restoration of old lodgings or incentives for new construction (Piché 1991). Furthermore, proposals for road repair and the conversion of abandoned buildings were also contained in the plan, and municipal authorities promised to protect the neighbourhood against “real-estate or public-works projects that ... due to their large-scale physical or economic dimensions ... destroy their immediate surroundings and undermine the local quality of life.” At this point in time, a pledge was made to “seek simplicity and respect the traditional physical contours of the neighbourhood.” *RevitalizAction* inspired new zoning procedures which especially served as an incentive for artists to set up workshops in the neighbourhood. It was also used to justify a number of public investments that led, for example, to the completion of the Méduse complex designed as a centre for the avant-garde arts (figure 5); the conversion of the former Dominion Corset factory into the municipal-services department and the Laval University School of the Arts; the transformation of the former Quebec City Technical School into a cultural centre; the creation in 1993 of the Saint-Roch Garden (Ville de Québec 1993; Ligougne 1993; Morisset 1995; Mercier 1998, 2000), which served to fill in part of the notorious “hole” that was first dug then abandoned during the earlier urban-renewal period; the transformation of the former *Le Soleil* newspaper building into the Centre for the Development of Information Technologies;⁴ the construction of the ENAP (national school of public administration); and the establishment of the CEQ (Quebec teachers’ union) headquarters. These initiatives inspired a process of reflection concerning the protection of neighbourhood heritage and led to proposals for the demolition of the mail Centre-Ville (downtown mall). In the eyes of many, this shopping arcade, built at the beginning of the 1970s (Filion 1970), symbolized, along with

the Dufferin-Montmorency expressway viaducts, the errors and failures of urban-renewal projects that had dominated the neighbourhood for far too long (Mercier *et al.* 1999).

Private investors joined forces with public agencies to provide funding for residential construction (new or restored buildings) (figure 6), other restoration projects, restaurants, the hotel business, the recreation sector, the food industry, and other sectors. This is without mentioning the significant number of individuals who decided to live in the neighbourhood and whose presence served to stimulate the local goods-and-services market (Noppen & Morisset 2000; Nicole 2001).

Urban Renewal: Arguments and Make-Believe

Recent accomplishments certainly testify to the success of the new urban-planning orientation adopted in 1990 and provide a glimpse of a future Saint-Roch that will once again become an attractive, lively, and densely populated city centre, if and when current projects, and others still, are finally completed. Furthermore, if present trends continue, there is every reason to believe that Saint-Roch will acquire the trappings of a Latin Quarter since it will bring together creative spirits (from the arts and technologies sectors) and students; tourists and local night owls; and business people and consumers.

But the issue that I am focusing upon here is not whether Saint-Roch is truly destined to experience the future that the new urban planners have outlined for it. As mentioned earlier, my intention is to take note of this new discourse and to understand the motives beneath its arguments through a deconstructive analysis of its rhetoric.

Self-Criticism

The quirks of local politics dictated that the affirmation of a new approach to urban planning in Saint-Roch would be linked to a change in municipal government. Such interrelated transformations led, in the case at hand, to even sharper criticism of the ideas and practices of the once-dominant urban planners. However, this dual change cannot in itself explain the degree of disapproval permeating the views of the new city planners. The repudiation of old-fashioned urban renewal has indeed been repeated so often that it is heard as a leitmotif, the veritable drumbeat of the prevailing party line. Moreover, reproach quickly turned into self-criticism, as the thrust of partisan politics was suddenly abandoned and the true nature of the new discourse, revealed. Self-criticism then became the order of the day, the foundation of the structured arguments proposed by the new urban planners who claimed to be taking over. It is true that self-criticism, under these circumstances, is much more effective from the rhetorical standpoint than outside criticism

Figure 5 Meduse complex, a centre for avant-garde arts (2002)



Photo: Pierre Gignac

Source: Centre collégial de développement du matériel didactique, Photograph number 17930

Figure 6 New condos in Saint-Roch (2002)



Photo: Pierre Gignac

Source: Centre collégial de développement du matériel didactique, Photograph number 17931

that could lose credibility by appearing opportunistic. By accepting responsibility for the sins of earlier urban-renewal ventures, the new urban planners display greater integrity while assuring all concerned that they won't repeat the same mistakes since they are both aware of what went wrong and fresh converts to a just cause. In other words, the advantage of the process is that it relegates the errors of earlier urban-renewal initiatives to days gone by while demonstrating that the root of all misfortune has been eradicated through the recanting of the guilty party. By presenting their guilty deeds as ancient history, the new converts create a discursive context in which the future appearing on the horizon becomes, thanks to self-criticism, a world free of conflicts and opposition.

The return to normality

In Saint-Roch's new city-planning project, the repudiation of past errors serves to express a condemnation and rejection of the various perceived flaws of earlier tenets of urban renewal. Repudiated, for example, is the conviction that older facilities, which had formerly ensured the prosperity and attractiveness of the neighbourhood, no longer provided any development potential. (Thus arose the need to tear them down so that they could eventually be replaced by modern facilities.) From now on, substituting new facilities for the old is no longer politically correct. In fact, the opposite is currently the case: the new urban planners make it a point of honour to preserve and improve buildings inherited from the past. To do so, furthermore, they even allow themselves to destroy⁵ or cover over anything constructed in the name of earlier urban renewal and anything seen as offending what is deemed our precious heritage.

This change in perspective with respect to neighbourhood heritage serves a dual purpose on the rhetorical level. It is important, first and foremost, to persuade all and sundry that the new approach to urban planning reconnects us with the past, that it takes up the thread of continuity that the thrust of urban renewal, an approach so outrageously different, had unfortunately, if only temporarily, severed. Seen from this angle, the past approach to urban renewal appears not only as an error, but worse still, as an unnatural act that contained the seeds of its own destruction since it denied the very specificity of the place that it was attacking. By advocating respect for the traditional image of the neighbourhood, the new urban planners become self-professed saviours who have finally restored neighbourhood history, of which the area had been dispossessed – or so the story goes – by a modernist invasion programmed by urban-renewal advocates. By claiming in this way a privileged link with history, with the current of ordinary life, the new urban planners express their attachment to the contours of a reasonable and soothing normality that they oppose to the trauma caused by the

massive demolitions and constructions of days gone by. This does not actually mean that these born-again planners are against all new construction as a matter of principal. Saint-Roch has inherited so many vacant lots as a legacy of urban renewal – including the infamous Saint-Roch “hole” – that a zero-construction position would be impossible to defend. Nevertheless, while advocating the filling in of emptied spaces, the new urbanists intend to subordinate new construction to certain conditions designed to protect and promote the development of older buildings. Within this ideological framework, new construction is justified only to the extent that it is integrated into the traditional landscape. Its main virtue is to highlight the older buildings that surround it, a radical change from the spirit of past urban-renewal projects that rejected architectural integration so that new buildings were not diminished in any way by the embarrassing proximity of the remains of an older city.

Heritage as a promise of a better future

The new urban planners thus have a favourable prejudice for the neighbourhood's architectural past, but their ideology does not exclude the notion of social progress for the neighbourhood itself. In fact, they would argue quite the opposite: in their view, underlying the change in perspective concerning matters of heritage is the promise of prosperity regained, since the past, with which we are supposedly being reconnected, appears today without the disadvantages it presented at the end of the Second World War. This point of view is conveyed through a sort of rhetorical sleight-of-hand whereby the new urbanist associates neighbourhood sorrow and strife with the failure of urban renewal itself rather than with the incapacity of older facilities to sustain jobs, businesses and a sufficient population base, as traditional proponents of urban renewal would have it. Starting with this argument, the new urbanist seeks support by overturning the old-versus-modern dialectic that earlier urban-renewal enthusiasts used to legitimate their undertakings. For the latter, new facilities guaranteed the sustainability of activities that had traditionally ensured neighbourhood prosperity, which the continued existence of older facilities put into peril. In other words, old eggs needed to be put into a new basket in order to ensure the continuity of past activities that proponents of this sort of urban renewal wished to preserve and develop. However, for the new urban planners of the 1990s, the old basket is absolutely essential as a nurturing environment for new activities, since protecting the neighbourhood heritage ultimately leads to its rebirth. This is why Saint-Roch, an area bursting with buildings to salvage, is presented as an open playing field where the most highly touted and fulfilling activities of our day and age can take root and flourish. From this point of view, Saint-Roch, an unrestricted area thanks to heritage protection, is all of a sudden

destined to become the preferred gathering place for innovators of all stripes. For the latter, Saint-Roch provides not only available space but above all social surroundings that can be made over in their image.

Diversity and harmony

For the new urbanist, a better future for Saint-Roch is ensured not only by the rebirth of the neighbourhood heritage, but also by a rich local mix, in other words the greatest possible interweaving of varied yet compatible activities (Ville de Québec 1994). The interweaving being sought at the community level sometimes extends to the typical housing unit where a workshop designed for the so-called self-employed artist or artisan (an individual pursuing traditional artistic endeavours or those related to the new technologies) may be incorporated.

On the rhetorical level, the existence of this social mix is used to buttress two complementary arguments. First of all, support for the social-mix project, an initiative that now has the backing of new zoning regulations, serves to confirm the repudiation of past errors by guaranteeing that the segregation of functions, a concept dear to the hearts of urban-renewal traditionalists, will never become a reality. By sending out a clear signal that significant designated areas can never be reserved for one purpose only, new urbanists reinforce the idea that urban space cannot be subdivided and its component parts offered piecemeal in order to be monopolized by any one particular activity.⁶ The social-mix doctrine effectively denies traditional urban-renewal proponents (who counted on this functional alienation of the area in order to introduce large-scale buildings and facilities) the capacity to put together large property holdings, such as the infamous “Saint-Roch hole” mentioned earlier, for their own ends.

This mixing of functions not only constitutes an effective line of defence; it is also seen as an essential element of the neighbourhood’s quality of life. Whereas the segregation of functions advocated by traditional urban-renewal enthusiasts served to promote general economic growth, the doctrine of local mixing is designed to foster the personal well-being of residents and visitors alike. Thus the message is delivered loud and clear: from now on, the objective is to be able to live well in Saint-Roch (which involves both improving housing conditions and encouraging the proliferation and diversification of businesses and services); no longer will priority be given to the efficient organization of a few large-scale economic activities.

Exclusion as a consequence of participation

By focusing on the best face of social mixing, the new urbanist helps to cultivate the image of a diverse Saint-Roch as an antidote to the one projected by urban-renewal traditionalists. Not that the Saint-Roch envisioned during the

halcyon days of traditional urban renewal was devoid of diversity; its multiplicity was, however, eclipsed by a very limited number of massive structures (the downtown mall, the Dufferin-Montmorency highway, the Grande-Place, etc.) looming so large that they literally took up every inch of available space and overshadowed all the rest. This domination was not restricted to the urban landscape; it also encroached upon the local political playing field since, with municipal authorities mesmerized by urban-renewal projects, attention was focused on the few players who were – or were supposed to be – restructuring the neighbourhood. Given the nature of the neighbourhood master plan, these favoured players were large public or private investors. As well as undermining the physical appearance of the neighbourhood, urban-renewal projects gave this handful of powerful players a central role since they alone seemed to possess the means to pull Saint-Roch out of its decline. This served to put the community even more out of kilter, making bit players out of the majority of local residents. Once again, this does not mean that the latter were considered insignificant. Instead they were cast not as active players but rather as beneficiaries. In other words, the political model for urban renewal could not fail to give the impression, in spite of all the gains made in the area of municipal democracy, that it was elitist, to the extent that it seemed to promote the ideas and actions of a few, who claimed to hold the solution for the benefit of the largest number.

According to the new urbanists, this model is reprehensible since it lacks grassroots support. In fact, the model was the source of the conflict and resistance that plunged the local population – or at the very least the organizations representing it – into a profound state of mistrust which often became such an obstacle to urban-renewal projects. In order to make a clean break with the past, it must thus be possible to claim that neighbourhood diversity can finally be expressed not only through a mixing of functions and landscapes, but also on the political level (Bherer 2002; Simard & Landry 2003). This is why the new urban planners have turned to public consultations more than any of their predecessors (Ville de Québec 1996, 2002). Whatever the democratic efficiency of the consultations that have characterized local life over the past few years (and the jury is still out in this regard), it is nonetheless clear that these soundings have served as a useful means of affirming that Quebec's urban planners are now ready to listen to the population of Saint-Roch. In other words, if nothing else the exercise has been incorporated into populist rhetoric. It is indeed essential for the new urban planners to be able to assert that they have, first and foremost, the interests of neighbourhood residents at heart, for it is absolutely vital to avoid generating another conflict-and-opposition dynamic such as that which paralysed all action only a short time ago.

The new urban planner-populists plead for the development of Saint-Roch's social diversity. They defend the idea of a public place where a wide range of voices can be heard and where each and every person is able to put forth his or her point of view concerning neighbourhood development. Their intentions are certainly praiseworthy. It may also be contended that by forging a tool for participatory democracy, the public-consultation experiment carried out in Saint-Roch represents real political progress. It is a fact, however, that for the new urban planners, this democratic apparatus is above all designed to facilitate neighbourhood transformation. In the final analysis, therefore, the will to act and to transform underlying each consultation reflects the limitations of the exercise itself. Under these circumstances, it should come as no surprise that the democratic value of the consultations is above all appreciated by those – probably a majority, it is true – who support the idea of a change in neighbourhood planning. Of course true believers in the new urbanism may differ with respect to the type of action to be initiated, but such differences emerge as variations upon the same theme since everybody agrees, *a priori*, that some sort of action based on new city-planning tenets must be undertaken. The others, i.e. all those living in Saint-Roch because they have nowhere else to go, or because nobody, up to now at least, has shown interest in the places where they live, are immediately shunted to the sidelines. On the one hand, the project submitted for consultation, no matter what form it finally takes, puts them at a definite disadvantage owing to the simple fact that it will change the face of the neighbourhood and at one fell swoop create a competing interest in their places of residence. On the other, the consultation process, in which they are nonetheless invited to participate, is based on the widely held conviction that some action must be undertaken in order to change Saint-Roch. In this context, where their position is by definition so far from the spirit of the new urban planning, it is difficult for them to appear as credible representatives of a viable alternative position.

Bureaucracy as a democratic desire

To my way of thinking, the consultation concerning the project to demolish the downtown mall, entitled *Rebuilding Saint-Joseph Street*, provides an excellent illustration of the situation (Ville de Québec 1998a, 1998b). When the project was presented during a public meeting on May 29, 1998, a brutal collision occurred between municipal authorities, for whom the project represented the very credo of the new urban planning, and those in attendance, made up for the most part of welfare recipients, the physically disabled and so-called de-institutionalized people.⁷ For this marginalized population group, the announcement was seen as a catastrophe since for them the mall represented, first and foremost, a living space and secondly a shopping centre. The effect of this bombshell was

so great that it was impossible for any true dialogue to be established at the first meeting. However, the subsequent public consultation changed the givens of the situation since various individuals were heard from, including average citizens, business people and heads of various associations, all of whom shared a negative perception of the mall and who therefore could not help but see the advantages in tearing it down (Ville de Québec 1998c, 1998d). Of course opponents of the project were also given an opportunity to express their opinions, but if the truth be told, they were more prominently featured in the views expressed by organizations sensitive to the fate of Saint-Roch's marginal population. These organizations presented the local poor and dispossessed as inevitable victims who did not deserve to have their lot in life worsened by an urban-planning initiative that was itself inevitable. This version gained the support of municipal representatives and was incorporated into the officially sanctioned position (Ville de Québec 1998e). In turn, the impression was given that both the promoters and defenders of the planned demolition of the mall assumed, without having to admit it, that the Saint-Roch transformation project could not possibly be carried out with the interests of these people as a first priority and that in any case they remained on the margins of a broadly based, and, above all, democratic movement. These marginal folk could, at most, hope to arouse a certain compassion so that the urban-planning solution could be accompanied by parallel measures of a social and health-related nature, in order to lessen the impact of the shock they were about to absorb. In other words, participative democracy gave birth to a new kind of bureaucracy, especially designed to face local problems and managed by the municipal authorities in partnership with local actors.

Conclusion: A need for a deepening of local democracy

The result of this situation has been a very different social division from the one noted during the earlier urban-renewal period. This first split involved a conflict between a powerful minority, who wanted to establish a foothold in Saint-Roch, and the neighbourhood population. The consequence of this clash was, as mentioned earlier, an anti urban-planning movement that finally set the stage for a new style of urbanism. The schism that now seems to be appearing involves very different parties indeed. In one corner, we have the municipal authorities, key proponents of the new urbanism, who are supported by a particular segment of the local population, especially newcomers to the neighbourhood, whose numbers are swelling and who are major agents for change. In the opposite corner, we find another segment of local residents who see no advantage whatsoever in neighbourhood change since, in any case, the area will be transformed at their expense. The key question is whether this group, which is slated to be swept aside in the march of progress proposed by

the new urban planners, will one day really take part in the debate, either by becoming full-fledged partners in the new urban-planning movement (Hamel *et al.* 1999), or by forming a viable political opposition group proposing another alternative to urban planning, traditional or otherwise, i.e. anti-urban planning, as the central plank of its platform. In either case, a broadening of our local democracy will once again be required and that implies more than an analysis of the contradictions of the discourse of new urbanism – like the one I just proposed – but its complete deconstruction through a fair social debate and responsible and efficient political actions.

Notes

¹ One is easily persuaded after consulting the *Congress for New Urbanism* Web site and especially after reading *The Charter for New Urbanism* of this American organization. (Please refer to www.cnu.org.) For a critical perspective on new urbanism, see the spring 2001 special issue of *Urban Geography* (Falconer Al-Hindi & Till 2001).

² The material used for this rhetorical analysis is all the main documents released by the municipal authorities of Quebec City since 1990 concerning the redevelopment of Saint-Roch. For the list, see the bibliography, section *Official documents*. That includes all the reports presented during two public hearings, one held in 1990 about *The Saint-Roch Neighbourhood Action Plan* (Ville de Québec 1991a), and the other in 1998 about the project of tearing down the Mail Saint-Roch (Ville de Québec 1998c). Those reports are an excellent source to collect the different urbanistic narratives that took place in Saint-Roch in the last decade.

³ Even if, in 1979, the Quebec government identified Saint-Roch as “a priority receiving area for its institutions” See Mercier (1998: 184).

⁴ It should be noted that since 1999 the Quebec provincial government has granted a tax credit to companies that invest in Saint-Roch in the new technologies and communications sector.

⁵ As was the case with the destruction in 2001 of the mail Centre-Ville (downtown mall), a shopping arcade built at the beginning of the 1970s on the site of Saint-Joseph Street.

⁶ Certain exclusively residential pockets do nevertheless remain protected.

⁷ Referring to those who, due to the new treatment procedures administered to the mentally ill, have left psychiatric institutions after confinements of varying lengths. In the province of Quebec, de-institutionalization has been implemented as a systematic policy over the last few years and has enabled a large number of people to be “reintegrated” into society.

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