
Negotiating Aestheticized Urban Space: What About the Modernist Mass Housing Project Sitting in Montreal's Quartier des Spectacles?

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Abstract

As image is becoming a central component in the production of contemporary cities, public spaces, viewed as potential "reflectors" of a desired urban identity, have recently been under scrutiny of urban planners, architects and policy-makers. The "aestheticisation of public spaces" conceptually describes a large array of urban regeneration strategies where culture, urban design and public art act as the main ingredients in the makeover of a designated – usually central – area. These transformations, in return, are believed to signal a shift in the overall image of the city (Miles, 1997). The Quartier des Spectacles, a vast project launched in 2002 that encompasses diverse cultural interventions in a kilometer square sector of downtown Montreal, is undoubtedly a great example of urban aestheticisation. But while the Quartier's visual identity displays a cohesive façade, a big part of its territory is actually occupied by an enclosed housing project, the Habitations Jeanne Mance (HJM), a functionalist complex built in the 1950's that 1,800 low-income dwellers call home. Our research will tackle the question of the inherent tension between two urban projects of opposing nature that are forced to interact with each other. If the site of HJM indeed appears as "out of place" in the Quartier, the first years of cohabitation have seen a similar desire on both sides to revitalize, aestheticize and open up the public grounds of the housing complex. The current negotiation of the socio-spatial barriers between the two sectors thus seem to produce promising results, but in the long run, it is questionable whether a carefully branded, open-air art and entertainment district will tolerate or not the disruptive presence of this group of towers destined for the poor. Is there an implicit will at the municipal level to eradicate the HJM in the long run, and do these residents perceive the aestheticisation of the Quartier as a threat that has to be countered by a movement of resistance? Or, on the contrary, does the normalization and inclusion of this residential area in the global aesthetic of the Quartier is believed to be a suited outcome for the community as a whole? Through these questions, we will handle the question of power relations that play an integral role in the process of aestheticization of public spaces.

Keywords: public space, Quartier des Spectacles, Montreal, cultural urbanism, aestheticisation

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