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ROBERT DESJARDINS + LUU NGUYEN

PLACE D'ARMES

MEMORIES IN STONE

"Why?"

"If it ain't broke, don't fix it!"

"Save Place d'Armes"

"Leave it alone!"

WHEN A PROPOSED renewal of Place d'Armes was announced, the headlines seemed unanimous in their desire to calm public fears and proclaim the symbolic value of the square in the heart of Old Montreal. Despite the square's deteriorating condition, some people preferred to maintain the status quo rather than risk feeling shut out of the renovated square. The trepidation confirms the square's role and meaning as a gathering place and significant community space, reflecting the phenomena of the transfer of emotional attachment from a public space's use to its specific physical form. Beyond any arguments about aesthetics, methodologies or values, the transformation of a public space invariably involves substantial emotional baggage.

BEGINNINGS

The square was created by the Sulpicians in 1693. As the city was built up, grew economically and lived under successive military and political regimes, the square underwent numerous transformations. A centre of religious, commercial and civic life anchored by the first Notre-Dame church, it was a military parade ground, a fenced public garden, a ceremonial space, a venue for state funerals, a public transportation hub and a centre of popular and commercial activity; over time, Place d'Armes came to be defined as a gathering place imbued with historical memory.

As a living space, its civic role is undeniable and has remained coherent through several permutations of its physical form. Two typologies have dominated the space: for more than a century, it was as a square structured by its surrounding streets, and for more than two centuries as a place it was defined by the surrounding building façades.

As the first material manifestation of the area's identity, Place d'Armes served as a public space essentially since the city's founding. Its evolution as an urban space was punctuated by the construction of institutions and head offices, leaving behind significant architectural specimens with remarkable heritage value. Today the square is surrounded by a set of architectural treasures that collectively form an abstract of Montreal's architectural history: representatives of every major period, arranged around a monument to the city's founders.

Despite a succession of major changes worked on the square by its evolving surroundings and land uses, there is a pattern of strong resistance to any proposed change to its form, which can be traced to the fear that the square's sense of place might be lost.

SENSE OF PLACE

For both Old Montreal and the city as a whole, Place d'Armes has always had a key civic role. That fact leads to the notion that the square's continuity, or sense of place, is not grounded in its specific physical form. When we try to define its continuity, the attempt fails as soon as we try to associate it with a particular form, because it



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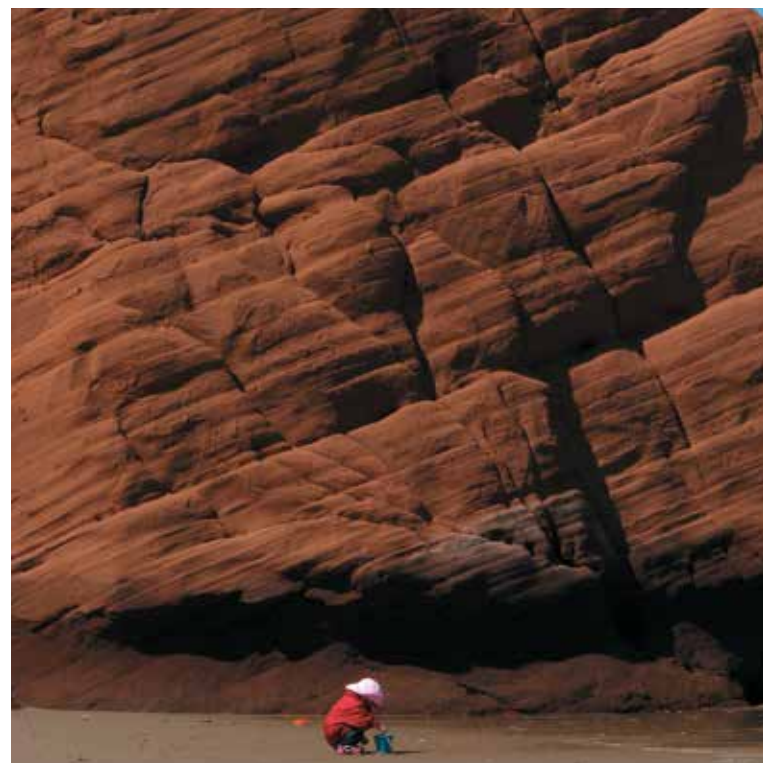
is fundamentally grounded in the square's use. Thus, physical form has not given the square its identity. Rather, it is the product of the immaterial nature of the square's uses and civic meaning, acquired from its public role.

In Place d'Armes, the sense of place resides primarily in the succession over nearly three centuries of religious, political and popular events and both individual and collective appropriations. As witnesses to every past moment, the buildings surrounding the square embody a capsule history, visible to all, of the city, its architecture and people; it is a history that continues to accrue in every cobblestone and façade as time marches on. In one of his final pieces, *Fragments d'éternité*, Pierre Vadeboncoeur wrote that "architecture plays this role splendidly. It sets a thousand shapes in stone and other materials, preserved as a memory through the ages."

In literature, we often encounter the idea that there is a close relationship between soul and stone. Who among us has never visited a place or favourite spot and taken home a stone as a keepsake, imbuing the object with a stored memory? The memento, chosen through patient observation, is almost childlike in its inspiration. Each glimpse of this stone gives rise to the idea that stone can have the ability to record a child's visit and those of thousands of others, like a memory, suggesting an equally non-material connection between sense of place and the stone of which the place is made.

The overarching idea for the square's renewal was grounded in the concept of stone as a bearer of memory. This idea takes shape and is expressed on the ground first by the use of granite paving stones throughout the site, and second by dividing the surface into areas with new pavers and others with stones already buffed by footsteps, in either case ready to record more footsteps. Made with paving stones reclaimed from the historic quarter of Old Montreal along with newly cut stones, these surfaces are, in a sense, the square's memory, highlighting the monument, cobblestones and buildings and honouring the archaeological artifacts found there.

CREDIT 1 OVERVIEW, 2011 - LUU NGUYEN **2** STONES FROM THE BUILT FRAMEWORK ROBERT DESJARDINS **3** IN FRONT OF THE NOTRE-DAME CHURCH IN MONTREAL, CIRCA 1838, ANONYMOUS, FROM W.H. BARTLETT (ROYAL ONTARIO MUSEUM) **4** PLACE D'ARMES, MONTREAL, CIRCA 1848, ANONYMOUS (NOTMAN COLL., MCCORD MUSEUM) **5** PLACE D'ARMES AND NOTRE-DAME CHURCH, MONTREAL, 1876. NOTMAN & SANDHAM (NOTMAN COLL., MCCORD MUSEUM) **6** PLACE D'ARMES, 1946, CONRAD POIRIER (LESSARD, MICHEL. MONTRÉAL 20TH CENTURY) **7** VIEW OF THE PLACE D'ARMES (DETAIL), 1965, ARMOUR LANDRY, ©BANQ, FONDS ARMOUR LANDRY **8** COLLECTING MEMENTOS - ROBERT DESJARDINS



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THE PROJECT

The square's surface – its main compositional element – has been levelled and, around most of the square, made flush with the sidewalks. The new surface consists of granite paving stones in colours inspired by their neighbouring stones; the stones include old pavers reclaimed from the streets of Montreal and the 1960 resurfacing of Place d'Armes, as well as newly cut granite. The regular, offset pattern enhances the surrounding built environment. Through the use of contrasting textures, the paving pattern brings out characteristic elements of the square's major historical periods; first, an expanded square occupying all public space from façade to façade, a configuration true to the original layout, and second, distinct square and street spaces characteristic of 19th-century configurations. Raising the surface to be flush with the sidewalk, along with markers for the first Notre-Dame church, commemorates the parvis role played by the original parish square and recognizes the present Basilica's significance.

Remaining in its original position but with its 1960s-era walls removed, the Paul de Chomedey, Sieur de Maisonneuve monument, dating from 1895, is at the centre of the spatial composition, in keeping with the important role in the city's founding of the people portrayed.

Although primarily associated with major civic events, the square has always had a major role in everyday life. For that reason, the new configuration welcomes visitors, residents and workers to an environment amenable to comfortable, peaceful use. High-quality materials, excellent sightlines and streetscapes, ease of access, a sense of proportion and separation, and the banishment of tour buses, taxis and other vehicles to locations outside the perimeter, all help make the space welcoming, as does the inclusion of two strips featuring trees and street furniture. Their spatial arrangement frames a view that opens a dialogue between the religious authority embodied in the Basilica and the economic power symbolized by the Bank of Montreal complex.

According to an article in National Geographic magazine, by 2015 Americans will be taking 105 billion digital photos a year. Will all those souvenirs and memories compare to the three hundred years of memory stored in the paving stones of Place d'Armes?

CREDIT VIEWS OF PLACE D'ARMES AFTER THE REVAMP
9 GRANITE CARPET – LUU NGUYEN **10 + 11** NEW
 APPROPRIATIONS – STEVE BILODEAU-BALATTI.



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