Lateral spaces

(*Espaces latéraux*)

Fabio Lima

It's the sound they first talk about when they tell me about their home.

Voices scattered like a muffled whisper; words heard while leaving a shop; phrases in forgotten songs that flowed deep into the sea, spitting out a soggy and trembling *saudade*. From Avenue des Pins to Boulevard Saint-Laurent, the rumour soon grew, always moving.

In the decades from 1960 to 1980, while my grandfather was working on the construction sites building the national identity - carving out Montreal's inner roads and pouring out the concrete blocks that would make the rivers rumble - and my grandmother was shaping leather in the textile factories of the Chabanel district, they struggled to see themselves in the cries of universal brotherhood that echoed through the megastructures of Expo 67 and the monuments to the "new man" (l'*Homme Nouveau)*. Those triumphant architectures were foreign to them, something in their grandeur made their newcomer voices ring hollow.

Rather, their language inhabited an in-between place. They tell me that it was most clearly heard in the repeated conversations between shopkeepers and their regular customers, in the stark rooms of the maids thinking about the family home they left behind. The whisper running through the neighbourhood wove an architecture of togetherness, a rallying cry that became space. In 1953, Canada welcomed its first legal Portuguese immigrants. The economic appeal of the Montreal metropolis made it a popular destination for many who gradually built today's Portuguese district. The *Missão Santa Cruz* (community and religious centre), established back in 1964, moved definitively into the newly constructed and rehabilitated buildings in 1984.

The built complex itself fails to dazzle; the modest architecture is not one of those places whose experience transcends the ordinary, nor is it one of those fanciful settings of a revelation of beauty. To the north of the lot, the community centre occupies the former premises of Our Lady of Mount Royal school, to which the rectory and the seniors residence have been annexed. Under the plans of architect Celestino Garcia and engineer António Silva, the more recently built church completes the ensemble: its austere white façade, pierced by a series of arches and flanked by a belltower, showcases the borrowed appearance of transplanted models. Nevertheless, for the first generations of immigrants accustomed to a persistent sense of placelessness, these community spaces marked a transformation in their relationship to the city. The wandering in search of a communal space (successively going from the basement of Notre-Dame church to the chapel of the Hôtel-Dieu hospital and the abandoned gymnasium of Neighbourhood House on Clark Street) was replaced by the materialization of an "us" through which it became possible to establish a relationship with the host society. Between recognition, openness and exclusion, they were invited to be involved on an equal footing in co-creating a city. Having emerged from their spatial invisibility, their urban presence became legitimate. This is not an isolated case: a 2009 study by Shampa Mazumdar and Sanjoy Mazumdar of a Hindu community in Southern California highlights, beyond religious identity, the community building that takes place

through the construction of a temple in their image.[1] From temporary neighbours who were always on the move, they become entrenched members of society able to sustain long-term actions.

Architecture thus becomes the vehicle for self-determination beyond the initial spiritual impetus. It provides a sufficiently stable framework to accommodate the experience of vulnerability or the possibility of exchange. If integration necessarily raises the issue of renunciation, this type of architecture offers a first step towards the creation of spatial and emotional connections with what exists.

In common usage, the word *comunidade* (community) can mean both the geographical space of the neighbourhood and the people comprising it, giving tangible form to the substance that unites bodies to the places they inhabit.

In everyday conversations, the words *Santa Cruz* and *comunidade* have become interchangeable.[2] At a time when our ways of being together are breaking down with the neoliberal unravelling of the social safety net, can architecture still embody our desire to reach out to the other and be transformed by that encounter?

While I have not been to the Santa Cruz church in a few years, its impact on the community goes beyond mere religion (the complex's social and educational program attests to this) and, as with any good building, it is measured in a temporality all its own. Its power does not lie in the transfiguring instant, but rather in the repetition of the gestures that it allows. It becomes an exercise of passage, accompanying the intergenerational transmission of language, culture and identity. And from it radiates this whisper demarcating the sensory limits of the neighbourhood. Like good stories shared around a fire, architecture as a unifying space becomes a guarantor of the preservation of narratives on the fringe of the dominant narrative curve.

This type of transformation achieved through architecture seems to me the most radical, given that it safeguards and sustains. Its scope extends beyond territorial mutations in the emotional bond it creates and the urban memory it preserves. In an era of spatial commodification and the fragmentation of neighbourhoods due to economic pressures, "good" architecture, if it exists, generates areas of resistance that avoid homogenization. It becomes a place apart, a platform for multiple imaginations from which it becomes possible to observe the mechanisms of the city from within.

Naturally, these spaces are not limited to places of worship, nor even to contemporary buildings with carefully thought-out construction principles and contextual integration. When I look at what used to be the run-down premises of Our Lady of Mount Royal school, I think that good architecture is not built as such but is activated by a community nurtured by it in return.

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[1] Mazumdar, S., & Mazumdar, S. (2009). Religious Placemaking and Community Building in Diaspora. Environment and Behavior, 41(3)307-337. https://doi. org/10.1177/001391650832 045

[2] - Linguistic features noted in Scetti, F. (2019). *La communauté portugaise de Montréal : Langue et identité*. Les Presses de l'Université Laval.

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FIG. 1
Architecture and diaspora: duplex in the Portuguese neighbourhood / Montreal, 1960s-1970s.

Photo: © Amadeu de Moura, Amadeu de Moura Collection.
Taken from *Rencontres : la communauté portugaise de Montréal 50 ans de voisinage* (p.16), Centre d'histoire de Montréal, 2004.

FIG. 2
Santa Cruz church belltower, rectory and seniors residence / Montreal, 2022.
Photo by the author

FIG. 3
Portuguese speaking community centre, seen from Rachel Street West /
Montreal, 2022.
Photo by the author

FIG. 4
Santa Cruz church in back, behind the community centre /
Montreal, 2022.
Photo by the author

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