The Social and Material Foundations of Creativity for Montréal Design

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Montréal as a creative city

- Renowned for fashion and style

    – UNESCO international design capital
    – Headquarters of International Design Alliance (IDA)

- Sixth largest design centre in North America

Outline

- Interpreting the role of 'quality of life' in creativity

- History of Mile End, Montréal

- Social Dimensions of the Urban

- Material Dimensions of the Urban

Reinterpreting the Role of 'Quality of Life'

- Focus has shifted from traditional inputs to production to more *creative* uses of such inputs

- Creativity and innovation are now seen as the basis for competitive advantage
  - Florida's creative class thesis: creative class as 'carriers' of creativity

- Emphasis on factors that attract creative people obscures an analysis of factors that nurture (local) creativity

- The production of talent is a social and geographical process (Lloyd 2004)

Culture work is filled with uncertainty and disappointment; aspirants face both financial and identity risks in the pursuit of their vocations…Identification with bohemia's traditions of the edge helps sustain necessary levels of commitment in the face of this reality. It provides a model that incorporates the possibility of failure, at least in the short term. Thus the neighbourhood does not just magnetize creative talent; it also nurtures crucial dispositions (Lloyd, 2004: 366).

Montréal's Mile End

Map created by Mandana Nouri and Ryan Craven

History of Mile End

- Waves of immigration since the early 20th century
  - Eastern and Southern European Jews, Greek, Portuguese, Hassidic Jews
- Formerly industrial, de-industrialization in the 1970s-80s
- Has become a center of a thriving independent art and music scene
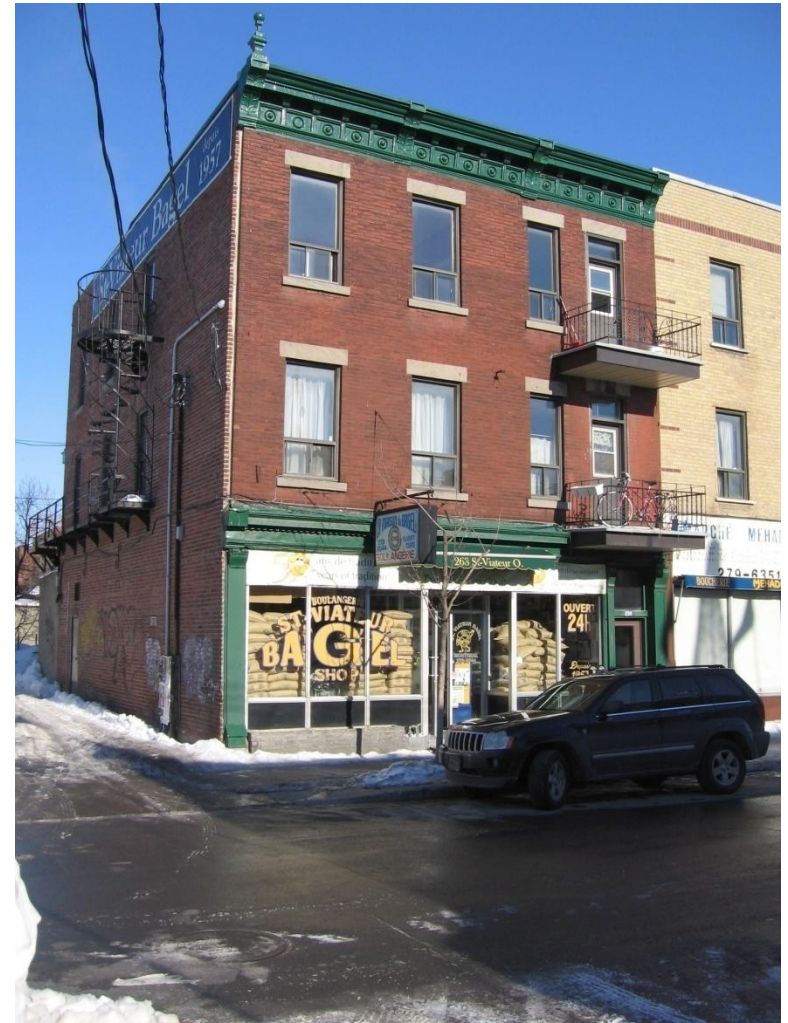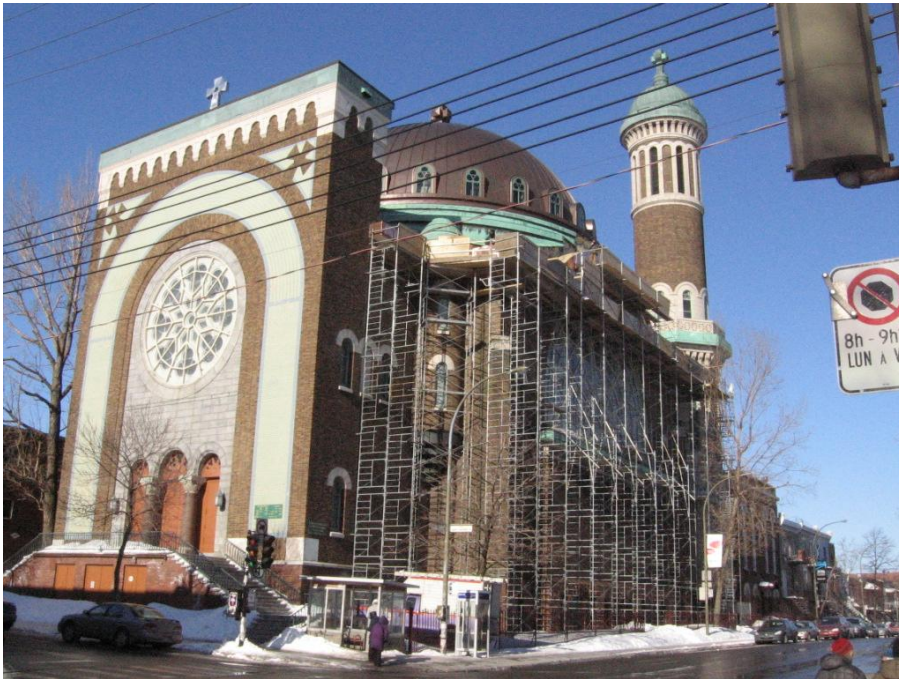
Artist Centres in Mile End

Local performance space

Source: http://www.npr.org/templates/story/story.php?storyId=5176473

Quality of life attributes of Mile End

Diverse in terms of ethnicity, language and class

Photos taken by Carla Klassen

Photos taken by Carla Klassen

Social dimensions of urban creativity

- Cultural and socio-economic diversity support production, distribution and consumption processes

- Diversity also contributes to conception of designs

- Openness can facilitate departure from established conventions

We have all these different cultures that are enriching us tremendously. This is why I say Montréal could be a hugely artistic city if it is well supported. Yes, even the design in Montréal could become definitely leading worldwide, because of the mixture of cultures. The disadvantage of being a maestro in Italy doing bags is the knowledge that they have. It becomes their prison. The fact that we don't have this knowledge, as I said it in the past, gives us definitely the possibility of doing much more without even knowing it. Yes, I would say today, I have a huge advantage being in Montréal because I'm not limited to a fifty or one hundred year world way of doing something (Interview, fashion designer).

- Mile End less competitive & atomistic than more established design clusters

  It's a very comfortable place when you have a lot of uncertainty about your work and it's nice, it felt like we were kind of at home there…cultural, linguistic, also that kind of socio-economic status. Everyone there is foreign, freelancing, or musicians or just getting by. You don't see business people ….It's kind of like you're in a small town. And we were the graphic design shop on the street and there was, you know, other shops. So it's kind of like a little community…it's inspiring- cultural diversity and when cultures come together there's always a milieu that's created, right. That street is very hybrid, very much an eclectic mishmash (Interview, graphic designer)

- Local community can foster spill-across linkages

   In my case, where I'm a small company, all my pictures I've done with a photographer who is a friend. What we did is I paid for the cost and he uses the pictures for his portfolio. No one really got paid for any of it. The models were his friends and I gave them bags. Or, even for the last fashion show, I paid her in clothes. We do a lot of exchanges. I work with a graphic designer and in exchange she'll take some clothes.. I also like to work with people who are at the same stage in the sense that we can all learn together. They're open to what it is I am. Sometimes if you work with people who are too professional, they're working at a different speed. They're not patient. When you're still at the beginning, where you're kind of exploring your whole creative process, you want to work with people who are exploring as well, or have less limitations (interview, fashion designer).

Material dimensions of urban creativity

- Buildings, infrastructure, iconography and public space shape creative production

  The look and functionality of the city influences designers as they do their work, producers as they figure out what to make, and consumers as they develop wants. The built environment and its accessories - directional signs, shop design, advertising regulations, window displays, street hardware - provide durable evidence to people of the kind of place they are in, of how things are done, of what is appreciated, and what is devalued (Molotch 2003)

Material dimensions of urban creativity

- Vibrant public spaces

- Urban density (Stolarick and Florida 2006)

- Low rents

Montréal is quite an exciting place to live for a creator because, first the rents are quite cheap. So the quality of living we have here is allowing us to do a lot of activities. Going to theatre, to movies, eating in restaurants because you don't have to put necessarily all your money into rent. You can also rent for a respectable amount, a design studio. So the conditions here are well put together, to enhance these aspects. …Let me put it this way. I think the way we're less taken by the bills every month, is maybe freeing our mind a bit in order to create (Interview, Graphic designer).

The cost of living here and the kind of cultural importance they put on art and making things and community and being involved, regardless of culture, regardless of age. It's so important for fostering that environment where you can go out and open a gallery. And you might meet your goal and fail in it after a year and people will still commend you…..I like the healthy balance right now that I have in Montréal between making money at what I do and not having to compromise my aesthetic because the support is there for trying (Interview, graphic designer).

Montréal Housing

Photos taken by Carla Klassen

Montréal Housing

Photo taken by Carla Klassen

Material dimensions of urban creativity

- Desire for rougher, more 'authentic' parts of the city

- Warehouses; factory buildings (Hutton 2006)

Photo taken by
Carla Klassen

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Carla Klassen

The space that I found was exactly what I was looking for; I was looking for some light because being in a basement for so many years, I had to go out to see the colours of the fabric…the loft aspect was also interesting; the space itself was nice, wooden floor, an old factory. The place was like that to remind you that Montréal is a place of contrast (Interview, fashion designer)
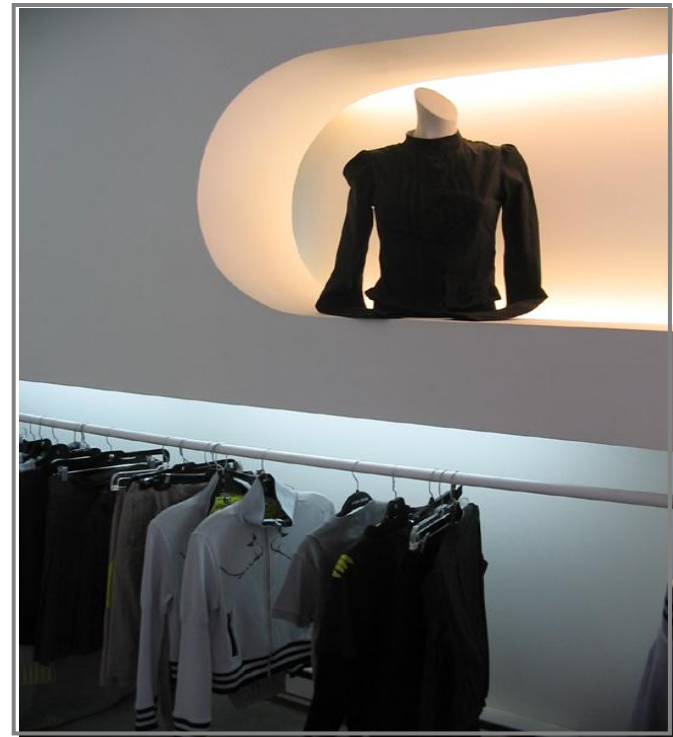
Designer studio and showroom

Photo taken by Mia Hunt

- Cafés and other physical spaces facilitate a process of word-of-mouth networking, act as 'third spaces' (Lloyd 2004)

Photo taken by Carla Klassen

Club Social Café

Photo taken by Carla Klassen

Conclusions

- Vernacular spaces in city provide social and material foundations for nurturing the creation of design talent:

  - mediating risks associated with cultural employment

  - facilitating an exchange between cultural sectors