

Skyscrapers by the Roots: Reflections on Late Modernism

PLACE VILLE MARIE

ENGLISH

INTRODUCTION

In the early 20th century, Canadian Northern acquired several properties in the downtown area in order to build a terminal not far from the Windsor and Bonaventure stations of its competitors. In 1912, it excavated a tunnel under Mount Royal to access the densely constructed area around Dominion Square. The war curtailed Canadian Northern's aspirations—only a temporary station opened on Rue de La Gauchetière—and the company was nationalized in 1919. Later on, the Great Depression hindered the ambitious development project and valorization of the aerial rights in the open section of the downtown area. During World War II, Central Station (1943) was built in the middle of the railway right of way, which extended from Cathcart to Saint-Antoine streets. Once peace returned, the Montreal Terminal Development was relaunched with the construction the ICAO and Queen Elizabeth Hotel.



The spirit of it ... tout était possible! [The spirit of it ... anything was possible!], 2018. Duration: 30 min, French/English original version with English subtitles, director: Antonio Pierre De Almeida.

Produced as part of the Montréal Cultural Development Agreement between the Ministère de la Culture et des Communications and the Ville de Montréal. Courtesy of the Ville de Montréal (Service de l'urbanisme et de la mobilité).

ORIGINS [1, 2]

In 1955, having first solicited Canadian entrepreneurs, Donald Gordon, President of the Canadian National Railways (CNR), engaged the famous New York real estate developer William Zeckendorf to develop the northern quadrilateral. The architectural division of Webb & Knapp, led by architect I. M. pei, drew up a new development plan. The project managers were Henry Cobb and Vincent Ponte, who had graduated, along with Pei, from the Harvard Graduate School of Design where Joseph Hudnut and Bauhaus founder Walter Gropius taught. To construct Place Ville Marie, I. M. pei & Associates collaborated with the Montréal agency Affleck, Desbarats, Dimakopoulos, Lebensold, Michaud, and Sise (ARCOP). The tallest skyscraper of the Commonwealth, Place Ville Marie quickly became a symbol of the city's economic development on the cusp of the Quiet Revolution.

1. ***C.N.R. Track Adjustment. August 25, 1959***, 1959. Silver gelatin print, photo: Associated Commercial Photographers LTD.
2. ***Aerial view of the Place Ville Marie site***, undated. Silver gelatin print, photo: unknown to the MAC.

MODERNISM AND THE UNDERGROUND CITY [3 to 5]

As the Canadian Imperial Bank of Commerce Building (Peter Dickinson) and CIL House (Skidmore, Owings & Merrill), which were also built around the same time on René-Lévesque Boulevard, Place Ville Marie is representative of the late (corporate) phase of the International Style, the principles and foundations of which were famously advocated by Henry-Russell Hitchcock and Philip Johnson in their 1932 exhibition at MoMA. In addition to the visible influence of Le Corbusier and Mies Van der Rohe, the complex has characteristics typical of modernism (technological innovation, functional rationalism, spatiality). Nevertheless, it was constructed at a time of significant tension between modernism's ambition of democratization and social progress and its adoption by a capitalist ideology whose growing domination was drawing much criticism.

Building on the pre-existing trench and natural slope of the downtown area, Place Ville Marie was an ambitious, multi-level complex of urban development that combined office spaces, retail stores, and transportation infrastructures. Almost half of its spaces are underground, and its air-conditioned shopping promenade (the first of its kind in Montréal) was the starting point of the "underground city" prefigured by urban planner Vincent Ponte.

PUBLICATIONS ON DISPLAY:

3. ***Master Plan, Ville Marie Montreal***, 1957. Webb & Knapp (Canada) Limited. Webb & Knapp fonds, John Bland Canadian Architecture Collection, McGill Libraries.
4. **"The Story of Place Ville Marie,"** 1960. Jan C. Rowan, *Progressive Architecture*, vol. 41 (January-June). McGill Libraries.
5. **"Man, Buildings, New Dimensions for Downtown,"** 1967. Vincent Ponte, *Skyscraper Management*, vol. 52, no. 12, p. 15. Webb & Knapp fonds, John Bland Canadian Architecture Collection, McGill Libraries.

MEGASTRUCTURES [6 to 10]

In 1976, British architectural historian Reyner Banham saw this pedestrian underground area as a kind of organic megastructure, which he conceptually related to other Montréal structures such as Place Bonaventure (ARCOP, with Eva Vecsei and Vincent Ponte), the metro, and the many developments of Expo 67 (in particular the Man the Producer Pavilion by Affleck and Desbarats).

Emerging in the late 1950s in the often utopian and rarely realized projects of architects such as Archigram, Yona Friedman, Louis Kahn, Constant Nieuwenhuys, Cedric Price, Paolo Soleri, and Kenzō Tange, megastructures were massive, extensible, and self-sustaining complexes, comparable to miniature cities, whose open structures could support standardized and adaptable cellular units. Conceived in response to the planned functionalism of conventional modernism, against which their designers championed flexibility, impermanence, organicity, and creative spontaneity, megastructures didn't achieve the expected success. In subsequent decades, several of their founding principles were altered to support a form of consumerist individualism that coincided with the development of neoliberalism.

6. **Place Bonaventure, 1968**, 2025 (1968). Digital print, photo: unknown to the MAC. Archives de NCK Inc.
7. **Construction of Château Champlain**, 2025 (1966). Digital print, photo: unknown to the MAC. Ville de Montréal archives (VM94-Ad063-006).
8. **Place Ville Marie, Montréal**, 1971. Silver gelatin print, photo: Arnott Rogers Batten Ltd. (Montréal).
9. **"Expo 67: Space/Time in Montreal,"** 1967. Ervin Galantay, *The Nation*, vol. 204, May, pp. 557-562. With annotations by Vincent Ponte. Webb & Knapp fonds, John Bland Canadian Architecture Collection, McGill Libraries.
10. **Place Ville Marie, with a view of the Expo 67 pavilions**, 1967. Silver gelatin print, photo: Armour Landry, Montréal.

PUBLICATIONS FOR CONSULTATION:

- Knott, Leonard L., and Gisèle Poisson. **La Place**. Montréal: Rolph, Clark, Stone, Benallack Ltd., 1962.
- Banham, Reyner. "Megacity Montreal." **Megastructure: Urban Futures of the Recent Past**. New York: The Monacelli Press, 2020 [1976], p. 110-133.
- Aquin, Hubert. **"Essai crucimorphe."** *Liberté*, vol. 5, no. 4 [28] (July-August 1963): 323-326.
- Blake, Peter. **"Downtown in 3D."** *Architectural Forum*, vol. 125, no. 2 (September 1966): 31-49.

FRAMING A VISION [11 to 67]

The two vertical display cases [11 to 52] in this section present photographs of Place Ville Marie, many were taken just before the completion of phase 1 (1962) by professional architectural photographers such as George Cserna and Joseph W. Molitor (New York), for promotional publications and trade journals. The rarity of human figures and the meticulous calibration of the shots (lighting, composition, planes and volumes, perspectives) support the formalist and functionalist principles of their subject.

The display case in the corridor [53 to 64] presents photographs taken by Canadian commercial agencies such as B&I, Associated Commercial Photographers, and Panda, which emphasize the occupants (often hired extras) of Place Ville Marie as well as the modernity of their environment.

11. ***Aerial view of Place Ville Marie: the observatory under construction***, undated. Silver gelatin print, photo: Hans Busse.
12. ***Place Ville Marie, view from Dorchester Boulevard***, undated. Silver gelatin print, photo: Joseph W. Molitor (Architectural and Industrial Photography, Ossining, NY).
13. ***Place Ville Marie, the tower viewed from the esplanade***, undated. Silver gelatin print, photo: Joseph W. Molitor (Architectural and Industrial Photography, Ossining, NY).
14. ***Place Ville Marie, the tower***, undated. Silver gelatin print, photo: Daniel Bordeleau.
15. ***Place Ville Marie, view from the Queen Elizabeth Hotel***, undated. Silver gelatin print, photo: Joseph W. Molitor (Architectural and Industrial Photography, Ossining, NY).
16. ***Place Ville Marie, perspective view of Mount Royal***, undated. Silver gelatin print, photo: Joseph W. Molitor (Architectural and Industrial Photography, Ossining, NY).
17. ***Place Ville Marie, view of the esplanade from the southwest, with its four access courtyards to the shopping promenade***, undated. Silver gelatin print, photo: Langford Studios (developer: Webb & Knapp [Canada] Limited).
18. ***Place Ville Marie, view of the esplanade from the southwest, with its four access courts to the shopping promenade***, undated. Silver gelatin print, photo: George Cserna (New York).
19. ***Place Ville Marie, overhead view of the esplanade and two of its access courts to the shopping promenade***, undated. Silver gelatin print, photo: George Cserna (New York).
20. ***Place Ville Marie, overhead view of the esplanade, corner of Dorchester Boulevard and Mansfield Street***, undated. Silver gelatin print, photo: Joseph W. Molitor (Architectural and Industrial Photography, Ossining, NY).
21. ***Place Ville Marie, view of the tower from a staircase descending to the shopping promenade***, undated. Silver gelatin print, photo: Joseph W. Molitor (Architectural and Industrial Photography, Ossining, NY).

22. **Place Ville Marie, view of the tower from a staircase descending to the shopping promenade**, undated. Silver gelatin print, photo: George Cserna (New York).
23. **One of the access courtyards to the shopping promenade**, undated. Silver gelatin print, photo: Joseph W. Molitor (Architectural and Industrial Photography, Ossining, NY).
24. **The IBM Building (Phase 2), view from Dorchester Boulevard (west)**, undated. Silver gelatin print, photo: Associated Commercial Photographers Ltd. (Montréal).
25. **The IBM Building (Phase 2), view from Dorchester Boulevard (east)**, undated. Silver gelatin print, photo: Associated Commercial Photographers Ltd. (Montréal).
26. **Portico of the Greenshields Building**, undated. Silver gelatin print, photo: George Cserna (New York).
27. **The Greenshields Building's north facade viewed from the east end of Cathcart Street**, undated. Silver gelatin print, photo: Joseph W. Molitor (Architectural and Industrial Photography, Ossining, NY).
28. **View of the Esso Building at the corner of Mansfield and Cathcart Streets**, undated. Silver gelatin print, photo: Associated Commercial Photographers Ltd. (Montréal).
29. **The Esso Building viewed from the esplanade**, undated. Silver gelatin print, photo: unknown to the MAC.
30. **Portico of the Esso Building at the esplanade level**, 1966. Silver gelatin print, photo: Associated Commercial Photographers Ltd. (Montréal).
31. **The esplanade between the tower and the Greenshields Building**, undated. Silver gelatin print, photo: Joseph W. Molitor (Architectural and Industrial Photography, Ossining, NY).
32. **Entrance hall of the tower on University Street, information kiosk**, undated. Silver gelatin print, photo: Joseph W. Molitor (Architectural and Industrial Photography, Ossining, NY).
33. **Entrance hall of the tower on University Street**, undated. Silver gelatin print, photo: Joseph W. Molitor (Architectural and Industrial Photography, Ossining, NY).
34. **Revolving doors, entrance hall of the tower**, undated. Silver gelatin print, photo: "Developer Webb & Knapp, photographer W-4".
35. **Royal Bank of Canada teller hall**, undated. Silver gelatin print, photo: Joseph W. Molitor (Architectural and Industrial Photography, Ossining, NY).
36. **Cross-sectional view of the Royal Bank of Canada teller hall**, undated. Silver gelatin print, photo: Joseph W. Molitor (Architectural and Industrial Photography, Ossining, NY).
37. **Near the elevator shafts**, undated. Silver gelatin print, photo: George Cserna (New York).

38. ***Near the elevator shafts***, undated. Silver gelatin print, photo: Joseph W. Molitor (Architectural and Industrial Photography, Ossining, NY).
39. ***Service counter***, undated. Silver gelatin print, photo: Joseph W. Molitor (Architectural and Industrial Photography, Ossining, NY).
40. ***Lobby of the tower on the Cathcart side***, undated. Silver gelatin print, photo: George Cserna (New York).
41. ***Royal Bank of Canada teller windows***, undated. Silver gelatin print, photo: Joseph W. Molitor (Architectural and Industrial Photography, Ossining, NY).
42. ***The Southwest Banking Hall from the Second Mezzanine Elevator Lobby***, undated. Silver gelatin print, photo: Joseph W. Molitor (Architectural and Industrial Photography, Ossining, NY).
43. ***Royal Bank of Canada teller hall***, undated. Silver gelatin print, photo: George Cserna (New York).
44. ***Interior, Royal Bank of Canada***, undated. Silver gelatin print, photo: Joseph W. Molitor (Architectural and Industrial Photography, Ossining, NY).
45. ***Interior, Place Ville Marie***, undated. Silver gelatin print, photo: unknown to the MAC.
46. ***Offices, Place Ville Marie***, undated. Silver gelatin print, photo: Panda Photography (Toronto).
47. ***Offices, Place Ville Marie***, undated. Silver gelatin print, photo: Associated Commercial Photographers (Montréal).
48. ***Corner Office, Place Ville Marie tower with view of Mount Royal, Place Ville Marie***, undated. Silver gelatin print, photo: CFCF-TV (Montréal).
49. ***Office, Place Ville Marie tower, junction between the drop ceiling and the curtain wall (detail)***, undated. Silver gelatin print, photo: George Cserna (New York).
50. ***One of the branches of the tower before occupancy, Place Ville Marie***, undated. Silver gelatin print, photo: Bob Acciaro (Montréal).
51. ***Kitchen, Place Ville Marie***, undated. Silver gelatin print, photo: Panda Photography (Toronto).
52. ***Shopping promenade, Place Ville Marie***, undated. Silver gelatin print, photo: Joseph W. Molitor (Architectural and Industrial Photography, Ossining, NY).
53. ***Entrance hall of the Esso Building at the esplanade level***, 1966. Silver gelatin print, photo: Associated Commercial Photographers (Montréal).
54. ***Office, Place Ville Marie***, undated. Silver gelatin print, photo: unknown to the MAC, (Montréal).

55. **Place Ville Marie, reception desk of a typical 1960s office**, undated. Colour print, photo: Panda Photography (Toronto).
56. **Office, Place Ville Marie**, undated. Silver gelatin print, photo: Panda Photography (Toronto).
57. **Office in the tower, Place Ville Marie**, undated. Silver gelatin print, photo: Panda Photography (Toronto).
58. **Control room, electromechanical systems**, undated. Silver gelatin print, photo: Associated Commercial Photographers (Montréal).
59. **Control room, electromechanical systems**, undated. Silver gelatin print, photo: Associated Commercial Photographers (Montréal).
60. **Shopping promenade, Place Ville Marie**, undated. Silver gelatin print, photo: Canada Wide Photo (Montréal).
61. **Shopping promenade, Place Ville Marie**, undated. Silver gelatin print, photo: Arnott Rogers Batten (Montréal).
62. **Shopping promenade, Place Ville Marie**, undated. Silver gelatin print, photo: Alan Bowering (Montréal).
63. **Town & Country Cleaners, Place Ville Marie**, undated. Silver gelatin print, photo: B&I Photography (Montréal).
64. **La RueElle, Place Ville Marie**, undated. Silver gelatin print, photo: unknown to the MAC.

PUBLICATIONS ON DISPLAY:

65. **Building Standards Place Ville Marie tower Office Floors**, undated. Webb & Knapp (Canada) Limited. Webb & Knapp fonds, John Bland Canadian Architecture Collection, McGill Libraries.
66. **Master Plan Ville Marie Montreal: A Report to the Officers and Directors of the Canadian National Railway Company**, 1957. Webb & Knapp (Canada) Limited. Text by Vincent Ponte. Webb & Knapp fonds, John Bland Canadian Architecture Collection, McGill Libraries.
67. **In Montreal All Shopping Roads Lead to Place Ville Marie**, undated. Webb & Knapp (Canada) project. Webb & Knapp fonds, John Bland Canadian Architecture Collection, McGill Libraries.