

Tech, Torah and G-spots: mining Mile-Ex

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For 10 years, I have lived, worked, confabulated, and partyed, with dozens of incredible artists and thinkers in my JEMA studio loft. My eviction now brings this adventure to a close for me, for this space, and probably for the neighbourhood that made it possible. My experience of this special moment in the transition of a neighbourhood has led me to ponder about the origins of life and community, and their expression in the dream of the affordable and vital city.

In the last couple of years conservative multinational techies and orthodox religious sects have been competing to buy up my neighbourhood of Marconi-Alexandra, and its periphery, known as Mile-Ex. At the very same time the city and the media continue to promote this 'hood' as our country's most innovative and creative. The irony of this is not lost on many of us.

A few nights ago I attended a vernissage at the BATTAT CONTEMPORARY art gallery. Mr. Battat's acclaimed project has also been in this neighbourhood for 10 years. He told us an IT is taking over the space he rents. He doesn't know where he will go or how the gallery will continue. We reminisced about 1970s New York, the post WW II epitome of artist spaces that spurred revolutionary output, and its subsequent downfall as NYC's 'problems' were 'solved'. A high-end outdoor shopping mall is all that remains.

My space has been taken over by the international dynastic Wiznitz sect which will convert it into a 12000 sqft Torah school. However, the zoning laws were just changed to prohibit specialized schools. Will the city hand them the necessary derogation? Will local residents agree to have school buses and hundreds of boys (but no girls) descend on this recently embourgeoised residential block? Who knows? Maybe the Hassidic group in their turn will give up and have to leave like the rest of us, after selling to the highest IT bidder?

Tech companies and fundamentalist Jewish communities have been creeping north from Mile-end and Outremont for some years now. Such groups, with international, and expanding demographics, have the purchasing power in this area. They move quickly and forcefully, evicting all in their path. For techies the attraction is the already tested coolness and affordability, for the sects it's the proximity to their epicenter in Mile-End and Outremont, with the additional advantage of less probing neighbourhood eyes.

This is a well known, well-documented pattern of urban development is now almost a century old. Jane Jacobs and Richard Florida have well described it. In the last decade university grant and city consultation dollars have been poured on the phenomenon, resulting in a river of research, reports and recommendations; Google and other such companies have scratched their brains to figure out what makes an 'innovative' environment; start-ups and 'sharing' economy companies flock towards these places in hopes to increase creativity by osmosis.

Yet the how, why and what exact combination of activities, people, buildings in grit, griminess and beauty produces such fertility and pleasure in city landscapes remains a mystery. These places are 'Goldilock Zones', a kind of G-spot of urban life. Early urban explorers are drawn to this promised land; they get high on the sexy, 'organically' generated environments they discover, so full of potential that creatively challenges their resourcefulness. Their presence and projects get others turned on, with each wave of occupation being less adventurous, more rapacious. Marconi-Alexandra was a formidable example. Unfortunately we don't know any more about what makes these zones 'tick', much less how to reproduce them, then we know about the origins of life on this planet. We know even less about how to avoid exploiting them to the point of ruination. As much as some may aspire to it, we seem unable to stop the destruction – a sad symbol for what we face with climate change. Which brings us to the other G word (guess what that is).

It was addressed in recent local Radio-Canada documentary *Quartiers sous tension*. The bottom line is that the city of Montreal currently has no measures to protect any affordable rental residential space or any affordable workspace either. As much as they hyper-promote Montreal as an international creative center, they have yet to ensure creators long-term survival in inexpensive neighbourhoods.

Marconi-Alexandra was factories, worker's housing, immigrant gardens and then artist's spaces. Makers of products from textiles to tofu mingled with mechanics and ceramicists, furniture builders and bakers. The smells and sounds of their activities spilled through doors onto the streets. The residential back lanes all had gardens that fed families, way before 'urban agriculture' was a thing. Railroad line fauna and flora cut through this vibrant, unpredictable, sensual mix of production and life. For me it was daily inspiration.

Now Microsoft and other moguls are moving their offices into uber-renovated manufacturing buildings, and their employees are buying up condos built by tearing down the once humble housing and garages. City subsidized organizations such as Soder gives workshops on 'greening' the alleys and pay for planned graffiti projects. Eat, shop and drop cash commerce is cropping up, with their typical hip and slick

upgrading aesthetic. All changes we recognize as hallmarks of Gentrification (the other G word).

As an architect, artist and ecologist who experienced this 'overnight' transformation directly, my thoughts on design and city life have also transformed. The natural environment and the raw charm of these unplanned or under planned zones all have something in common: continuous lessons about what creates aliveness and human happiness. Designers, city planners, and all purveyors of the good and healthy future need to take their studies out of their offices get them on the ground; they need to detach themselves from what they think they know and have the right to plan.

Local citizen groups, each in their own way, seek to voice the issues. Coalition Jeanne-Mance aims to keep citizens informed on what is happening in the 'hood', and to aid residents and businesses to cohabit harmoniously. Their lobbying has alerted the municipality to infractions and brought attention to resident's predicaments.

This September, Projet Ex, founded by some young Mile-Exers, sought to both promote the diversity of the new businesses, artists by highlighting with conferences, arts festival, and fun the conundrum of this area.

Yet it seems such event may herald the end of what made this neighbourhood what it was: unsolicited, under-the-radar magical chaos, and a cheap place to live and work.

The space I called JEMA studio was an artist's residence for over 20 years, one where well-known cultural figures developed their careers. There are some established older residents who own property here, artists like painter Peter Krausz, intellectuals like philosopher Charles Taylor, and artisans like sculptor and molder Jules Lasalle, but most renters have moved on. Like Mr Battat, I also don't know where I will land; I will probably travel for a bit, take a breath.

At this late date, what would it take for the municipality to walk their talk, to reverse or decrease some of the damage? What can citizens do at this point to increase pressure on the decision makers?