

Montréal's Olympic Park, Still Alive

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The return of summer in Montréal's Olympic Park marks the complete takeover of the vast mineral Esplanade (Fig. 1) extending to the foot of the Stadium by the city's population, especially by the citizens of the surrounding neighborhoods. On each first Friday of the month until October, they are invited to a large festive celebration with a convergence of roadside foodtrucks. Throughout the year, activities are programmed to suit lovers of good food as well as addicts of action sports or social dancing. Since 2012, the highlight of the season has been the grand free concert given by the Orchestre symphonique de Montréal (Fig. 2). This year, the orchestra would have highlighted director Kent Nagano's farewell to Montréal. But in 2020, the Park will remain desperately empty for reasons of the worldwide pandemic (Fig. 3): the Montréal Tower's Observatory, one of the metropolis' major tourist attractions, is closed as is the Stadium it overlooks. Also, the Park resembles these all-too-many abandoned Olympic installa-

tions, without the degradation. The post-Games use of the complex, built to host the 1976 Summer Games, was part of its functional program. Also, the use and profitability of the site have always been a major preoccupation of the Régie des installations olympiques (RIO) that was created in November 1975 by the Québec government for the purpose of ensuring on-time delivery of the installations and their subsequent operation. In the long run, this was quite a challenge given their gigantic nature and their negative reputation for many citizens.

The Games of the XXIst Olympiad mark a turning point in the history of modern Olympic Games; they witnessed an unprecedented increase in construction costs due to a paternalistic handling of their preparation by Mayor Jean Drapeau. Also involved are the use of construction techniques that were unusual in Québec and, most of all, a very unfavorable conjuncture that saw repetitive strikes and a strong inflation brought on mainly by the 1973 oil crisis.



Fig. 1 Aerial view of the Olympic Park from the west, May 21st, 2018



Fig. 2 The Esplanade during a concert by the Orchestre symphonique de Montréal, August 14th, 2014

Mayor Jean Drapeau, who presided over Montréal's destiny almost continuously from 1954 to 1986, had great ambitions for his city. Following the successful 1967 International and Universal Exposition, the metropolis was in a better-than-ever position to bid for hosting the Olympic Games that it had been hoping for since 1932. In May 1970, after five fruitless attempts, Montréal was chosen to host the 1976 Games. To improve its chances, the construction of a major sports complex in Maisonneuve Park was in planning since the end of the 1930s. Under Drapeau, the location, in the eastern, francophone, part of the city, was in line with his will to rebalance the urban development that was concentrated in the anglophone western side. In August 1971, the city chose French architect Roger Taillibert to design the Olympic Park, a decision that was criticized by local professionals despite his unequalled competence on the matter of sports facilities.

During some ten years of professional practice, Roger Taillibert (1926–2019) had created many sports facilities, such as the pre-Olympic complex of Font-Romeu (1968) in France, built in record time thanks to the intensive use of prefabrication. Like many of his architect and engineer contemporaries, Taillibert showed great interest in the new constructive technologies and a particular liking for concrete. Educated at the Paris École des Beaux-Arts, Taillibert kept his ties to the “grand geste” initiating monumentality, while favoring curved “natural” shapes. Among his accomplishments, we find the open-air theater in Palm Beach, Cannes (1965) that was equipped with a retractable roof designed in collaboration with Peter Stromeyer, a manufacturer of tents, and architect Frei Otto. This is a solution he was to use again to cover many public pools. In 1971, Taillibert had just finished the Parc des Princes in Paris, the world's first prestressed concrete stadium, that was to serve as a model for Montréal's Olympic Stadium, with one difference, namely that this one would be covered. It was put in place to welcome not only the Olympic Games, in particular the



Fig. 3 The Esplanade, closed to the public during the COVID-19 pandemic, March 2020

athletics events that must be held outdoors, but also commercial North American ball games and, in particular, the Expos baseball team.

The construction of the Olympic facilities allowed the City to acquire a movable roof stadium, as they promised in their bid to obtain a major-league baseball franchise in 1969. They never mentioned this aspect during their attempts to obtain the 1976 Games. They did, however, promise to cover the construction and renovation costs for all facilities and to manage the technical aspects of their construction. In Maisonneuve Park, the plan was to install the Stadium, the swimming facilities, and the Velodrome so that they would occupy the southern part of this vast territory of 240 hectares that was still mostly undeveloped despite previous development projects.

Unlike his predecessors, Taillibert didn't go for a pavilion approach. For functional as well as security reasons – the terrorist attack in Munich had left its mark on people – he gathered all the installations in one compact whole and designed the set following the principles of ‘above the street’ urban planning, with the stadium enclosure installed on a vast esplanade covering an underground multi-level parking comprising nearly 4500 parking spaces (Fig. 1). Moreover, Taillibert imagined it at the scale of the Park, the mineral character of the complex contrasting with the greener plant environment provided by the Botanical Garden and the municipal golf course that extend to the North. The pools, with their 9220 seats, and the arena that is surrounded by 72 406 seats are sheltered within a single building, the first being housed at the foot of the gigantic inclined mast to which is hung the retractable covering of the second. Prefabrication was used intensively during the construction, as was the technique of prestressed concrete. The Stadium is a huge Lego comprising some 12 000 pieces and the Velodrome vault, concrete lace.

The Games were opened on July 17th by Queen Elizabeth II, the Canadian head of state, in a packed, vibrant stadium. The Olympic flag that had been kept in Munich was then



Fig. 4 The renovated Olympic Park Sports Centre, April 19th, 2015

handed to Mayor Jean Drapeau who received a long ovation despite the fact that he had been banned from the building site, as had been Taillibert, in November 1975 as the Stadium was barely emerging from the ground. The event was a huge popular success. However, the future was not so bright: the Stadium needed to be completed, the 700-million-dollar debt incurred to allow the on-time delivery of the installations needed to be paid. This took ten years, the Stadium mast needed to be completed, which was done in 1986 not without problems, and the future of the Olympic Park needed to be ensured.

In a way, this future was guaranteed because the Olympic Stadium had been configured for baseball and football. The Alouettes played the first of their games there as early as September 26th, 1976. The following summer saw the first non-sport events in the Park. Historian Benoît Clairoux wrote about the many sports, cultural, economic, and social events that were organized at the site in a generously illustrated book *Le Parc olympique. 40 ans d'émotions / 40 Years of Emotions* published on the 40th anniversary of the Montréal Olympic Games. At the turn of the 1980s, the Park was ripe for a new, redefined vocation. The installations having been completed, a repositioning was made necessary by the fact that ball game attendance was in decline and that the Velodrome was underused.

The RIO then emphasized the recreation and tourism value that the opening, in 1987, of the Observatory atop the

highest inclined tower in the world would promote. Along with its neighbor, the Botanical Garden, the Olympic Park was to become “a true city of sports, leisure and environment”. Recycled as the Biodome, a museum dedicated to all forms of life, the Velodrome was given to the City of Montréal which inaugurated the new facilities in 1992, the year of the city’s 350th anniversary. One master plan later, on the threshold of the new century, they considered densifying the Olympic Park: a cinema complex was built and the planetarium was moved there, thus reinforcing the Maisonneuve touristic pole. In addition, a soccer stadium would replace the former running track in 2006 to welcome the Impact de Montréal professional team.

It was also time to plan the refurbishing of the Olympic installations that were nearly 30 years old, or else demolish them, an option that was examined and rejected in the early 2000s. It is worth remembering the announcement of the departure (they played their last match on September 29th, 2004) of the main occupants of the Olympic Park, the Expos baseball team. One sports team was leaving and others were arriving, attracted by the aquatic facilities. The amateur sports vocation of the site was reinforced when the new Institut national du sport du Québec opened a complex in the Olympic Park in 2010. The space and the equipment that were lodged at the foot of the Tower were revitalized so as to offer athletes services and training areas that meet international standards (Fig. 4). Among other things, an



Fig. 5 Raising the Olympic Stadium's retractable roof, April 1987

event-driven approach was adopted to make the Park “a modern urban park, a unique meeting place for creation, discovery, entertainment, and physical activity”. In the summer of 2012, the Esplanade was livened up thanks to a program of family and sport activities and to temporary developments that were financed with the help of the private sector.

The Olympic Park's reputation is inseparable from the avatars related to its bold retractable roof. Freshly installed in 1987 (Fig. 5), it tore ten months later and again, more seriously, in 1991. A fixed steel-framed roof was chosen to replace it, but this solution was rejected by the new government following provincial elections. A new soft roof was then put up in 1998 but it tore the following year.

One must admit that, through the numerous interventions related to their completion, their adaptation or their upgrade, the installations have been relatively well preserved. Despite conflicting intentions, respect for Taillibert's work has ultimately always prevailed, at least for the Stadium itself, while the Park has been eroded by the new equipment.

Concern for its architectural integrity is one element of the report on the future of the Olympic Park that was commis-

sioned by the RIO to an advisory committee and submitted in 2012. In addition to tracing out the future site in terms of major equipment for amateur sport and school sport, and as a “family and educational destination that can attract international tourism and welcome the surrounding population”, the committee recommended the heritagization of the Park in the context of the Quebec Cultural Heritage Act. The Minister of Culture and Communications did not follow up on this proposition, even though the heritage value has become indisputable, as is shown by the reception given to the events surrounding the Games' jubilee in 2016. Also, the Act that regulates the Régie des installations olympiques was re-examined by the Quebec government in 2020 in order to redefine the functions of the agency, now called the Société de développement et de mise en valeur du Parc olympique. Its role as a versatile developer of events and an institutional actor in the eastern part of Montréal is strengthened, as is the preservation and the promotion of sports history and the architectural heritage of the installations, symbiotically with the institutions of the greater Olympic perimeter, planned for almost 100 years.

An extraordinary fact: 33 years after the inauguration of the Montréal Tower, more than half of its floors, a surface of 18 000 m² that had been left vacant since its construction in 1987, have now been rented to the important Quebec cooperative financial institution Desjardins for the next 15 years. 2 000 people work there. One has to admit that the Montréal Olympic Park, despite all the delays surrounding its construction, its completion and its operation since 1976, is one of the Olympic Game installations of the modern era that exhibits the best public uses: it keeps attracting over a million visitors each year.

Bibliography

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Credits

Figs. 1, 4 and 5 Montréal Olympic Park

Fig. 2 Montréal Olympic Park (Jean-François Hamelin, photographer)

Fig. 3 Montréal Olympic Park (Michel Labrecque, photographer)