

SPORT VENUES AND THE SPECTACULARIZATION OF URBAN SPACES IN NORTH AMERICA

The Case of the Molson Centre in Montreal

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Abstract As global corporations scan the world for preferential locations, particular places are forced into a competitive race to attract inward investors. All of this is leading to increased global inter-urban competition around entertainment industries, where cities must reimage and reimagine themselves in order to position themselves as 'world-class'. Sports stadiums and other complexes have become increasingly important in this dynamic. In this article, the shift in sports venue from the Montreal Forum to the Molson Centre is examined as a means to explore a variety of issues: the privatization and spectacularization of urban spaces, the local customization of those developments through a marketing of nostalgia, the increasing importance of sport teams and venues in investment in civic images and infrastructure.

Keywords • identity • nostalgia • spectacle and space

The last 30 years of economic restructuring and development have brought both an emphasis on the interplay between global and local forces in western societies and a renewal of interest in the economic importance of the 'urban' as a site of capital accumulation. In this context, urban centres worldwide have been swept along by a new phase of entertainment consumption indicating the integration of a new entertainment economy with a new urban economy. In its wake, this phase, which can be called the spectacularization of space, is creating a new urban landscape filled with casinos, megaplex cinemas, themed restaurants, simulation theatres, stadium and sports complexes. As cities around the world are being transformed into aggressive entrepreneurial cities through the industry of the spectacle, so too are identities and memories being reformed within these spaces. In fact, the conflicts between discourses promoting new urban entertainment destination projects and local memories and identities are a notable element of the social and political confusion accompanying transformations in cities as they are becoming a moving force within the dialectics of uneven capitalist development.

I am interested in exploring the role played by certain types of new spectacular development projects, mainly sports venues, in western cities as a response to pressures associated with flexible accumulation and globalization. In this article I focus on the mobilization of increasingly spectacular forms and spaces of urban entertainment, used by strategic alliances of public and private

investors to sell a post-industrial vision of contemporary urban environments. I look at Montreal and the Molson Brewery Corporation's initiatives in urban development as an expression of these changes and dynamics. I want to argue that the shift from the Montreal Forum to the Molson Centre (hockey arenas and the home of the Montreal *Canadiens*, an NHL team, as well as major entertainment venues for the city) enables us to examine the connections between the spectacularization of urban spaces through private capital and local popular memories.

The article is organized in the following sections: the mobilization of spectacle in the city; strategic alliances and synergies as key dimension of the urban and the sporting spectacle; private investors as social and spatial engineers; marketing memories to sell spectacular sites; Montreal and the case of the Molson Centre. Through the juxtaposition of these sections, I offer the opportunity to explore critically the increasing presence of sports in the integration of a new entertainment economy with new urban economies.

The Mobilization of Spectacle in the City

There has been a great surge of interest recently — especially in association with the flexible accumulation thesis — in local spaces as the key units of capitalist production. This interest has arisen in a context in which regions implode into localities and nations explode into a complex global space. As part of this process, the role and significance of the nation state has become ever more problematical. As Gruneau and Whitson (1997: 359) put it, 'By the late 1980s the postwar era of increased international trade was giving way to a post-national economy in which the effective power of governments to control transnational capital was diminished.' In fact, there is an intense debate among geographers, sociologists, and political economists about the implications of these changes for cities (Harding and LeGalès, 1997). Still, there is widespread agreement that the new mobility of capital and the global spatial reach of communications technologies — when coupled with the deregulation of national economies — have created significant pressures on cities. These pressures have been exacerbated by technologically induced job loss in manufacturing industries, by de-industrialization more broadly, and by the 'delocalization' and 'decentralization' of various industrial tasks and functions.

Some theorists see all this as giving new powers and opportunities to 'the local', with the result that we are now seeing a resurgence of urban regional economies with 'established metropolitie, a critical point at which regions and nature are wired into circuits of global business' (Harding and LeGalès, 1997: 182). Other writers argue that globalizing processes 'now erode the autonomy and distinctiveness of places at an ever-increasing rate'. In this view, flexible accumulation and globalization simply mean that:

... decisions which have most impact on local labour, land and capital markets are increasingly taken at distances further removed, psychologically and geographically, from the locality and on the basis of what suits transnational organizations, not what benefits local workers, firms or consumers. (Harding and LeGalès, 1997: 183)

Meanwhile, the offloading of former national subsidies of various types onto localities has actually diminished the autonomy of local authorities, forcing them into fierce competition for mobile international resources. In the words of Harding and LeGalès: 'Transnational organizations hold all the cards in this game and can play sub-national authorities off against each other to the ultimate advantage of none' (1997: 183).

The key point here, in my view, is the recognition of intense urban 'entrepreneurialism'. Following David Harvey, Bob Jessop (1997: 28) argues that the 'entrepreneurial city' can be defined through one distinctive feature: '[its] self image as being proactive in promoting the competitiveness of [its] respective economic spaces in the face of international (and also, for regions and cities, inter- and intra-regional) competition'. The entrepreneurial city can be understood as the dominant response to urban problems, as well as a 'contributing element in securing international competition — for provincial — and national governments' (Jessop, 1997: 31).

Following this, Harvey argues that this resurgent entrepreneurialism has generated 'leap-frogging urban innovations in cultural forms, products and even political and consumer based innovations, all of which have actively promoted the transition to more flexible forms of accumulation' (Harvey, 1989: 366). During this time there has been a subtle shift in the nature of urban spectacles. According to Harvey, since 1972 the postwar urban spectacle has been transformed from counter-cultural events, anti-war demonstrations, street riots and the inner-city revolutions of the 1960s to more managed, accumulation-oriented spectacles to make the city a more attractive centre for tourism, consumption and leisure. Echoing Harvey, Gruneau and Whitson (1997) note that as industrial work has fled northern nations to far more accommodating and flexible labour environments in the south, civic authorities in North America and Europe have increasingly felt the need to offer the infrastructure and other incentives to attract businesses. Cities have long done this for manufacturing, they argue, but now civic leaders campaign aggressively to attract the industries of spectacle to compensate for the diminishing numbers of jobs available in industrial employments. Cities also campaign for these spectacles in order to create appealing consumer and recreational environments which, in turn, attract smaller contractors and professionals in the design, advertising, media and information industries. In addition, the entrepreneurial city, as Jessop (1997: 37) describes it, refers to the promotional reimagining of local economies in and through discourse and projects about the space, as well as through the reorganization of urban governance to feature a greater reliance on the private sector.

According to Harvey, much of the urban revitalization promoted in the USA in the 1980s involved 'a mobilization of the spectacle' to draw tourists, shoppers and business back into the city through such things as the redevelopment of downtown areas, waterfronts, and other older areas. Fuelled by the overheated real-estate market of the 1980s, this mobilization of the spectacle was manifest in a number of dramatic projects around the world — projects that ironically often had the effect of sacrificing locally distinct areas to the interests of spectacular consumption. The global crash in real-estate values in the late 1980s curbed the speculative nature of many of these developments. However, into the 1990s,

cities continued to search for spectacular responses to industrial decay. In this context, Gruneau and Whitson note how citizens have been repeatedly exposed to 'public discourses that aggressively celebrated the role of markets and consumer choices in the delivery of a better life' (1997: 359). Related to this, Harvey concludes that 'the need to accelerate turnover time in consumption has led to a shift of emphasis from production of goods to production of events: marked shift in occupational structure and mobilization of spectacle' (1989: 157). It may be overstating the issue to say that these urban economies have transcended the nation state as a locus of capitalist accumulation, however, large urban economies undoubtedly do have a renewed importance in the age of flexible accumulation. Spectacular entertainment and professional sports appear to be an increasingly important element of these urban economies as they compete for spectacular entertainment as a strategy for growth.

Harvey's argument that urban life, under a regime of flexible accumulation, increasingly presents itself as an immense accumulation of spectacles draws heavily on the work of the French situationist Guy Debord. In the 1960s, Debord had already observed that life in modern societies is experienced as an accumulation of spectacles. For Debord (1967), spectacle has a dual character: on the one hand, the spectacular nature of everyday life refers to the increasing passivity of human beings. In the society of the spectacle human beings are reduced to the status of mere spectators in history rather than that of active historical agents. The spectacle is the fetishized world of the commodity form, universalized like never before. On the other hand, Debord also uses the word spectacle to refer to the highly mediated image-based nature of contemporary life. In the spectacle, Debord tells us, the complexity and contradictions of life become unified behind the veil of appearance.

In this respect, Debord saw the increasing presence of the spectacle as an ideological expression of the development of capitalist accumulation. In other words, the spectacle can be viewed as a self-portrait of power at a particular time; most notably an urban expression of capitalist power relations. In Debord's view, the spectacle can be understood as nothing other than the sense of the total practice of a socioeconomic formation, its use of time: the spectacle is the historical movement in which we are caught.

Debord offers important insights into a conception of the spectacle and of the reorganization of urban spaces through a mobilization of the spectacle and the commodity form. Still, we need to adapt his ideas with a caveat in mind. It is important to recognize that audiences are never simply being played with, alienated, manipulated, and pacified by spectacle. Following David Morley and Kevin Robins (1995), for example, we can recognize possible participation, re-appropriation, and resistance to the spectacle from the public.

It is also important to recognize the extent to which the spectacular nature of contemporary life involves political dimensions that both augment and go beyond the commodity form. As governments in urban centers have sought to replenish their spaces, the neo-liberal climate of deregulation and deficit in North American cities has limited government's direct financial involvement in these redevelopments or revitalization projects. The results have given greater promotional clout to private partners such as developers and real-estate investors.

This new clout achieved by the private sector has solidified in a climate of intense inter-urban competition around the industries of spectacle — a competition fuelled by coalitions of civic boosters, investors, property owners and developers. Molson, with its beer-hockey synergy in Montreal is an example of built strategic alliances leading to a pattern of urban development that is necessarily connected to the promotion of spectacular consumption.

Strategic Alliances and Synergies as Key Dimension of the Urban Spectacle

New investments in urban entertainment were stimulated by technological breakthroughs in digital technologies, most of them in the motion picture industry. These technologies meant that sophisticated special effects could be compressed in time and space, making it possible to situate attractions such as IMAX theatres in downtown locations where land is at a premium (Hannigan, 1998). At the same time that these technological breakthroughs were occurring, a number of important socioeconomic and demographic factors were contributing to a 'new entertainment economy' that was gathering momentum in the USA and abroad. In Hannigan's words (1998: 72):

Together, the 'boomers' and the 'Xers' are regarded as the backbone for these new and sophisticated forms of entertainment that are conveniently located in urban settings. As visitors to the 'private city' they want to have the best of both worlds, embracing the benefits of traditional cities — energy, variety, visual stimulation, cultural opportunities, the fruits of a consumerist culture — without exposing themselves to the problems that accompany urban life: poverty, crime, racial conflict.

This emergent entertainment economy became an attractive area of investment for entrepreneurial cities attempting to create a sense of distinctiveness about themselves and striving for the promotional title of 'world-class city'. Investment in, and control of, this economy was one factor that underlay significant changes in corporate strategies in the cultural industries in the 1980s and early 1990s, with a huge burst of activities centred around mergers, takeovers, acquisitions, joint ventures, alliances and collaborations of various kinds (Morley and Robins, 1995). In the current political economic climate corporations in the cultural sector have sought to combine a mobile and flexible approach to organization with tight control and a complex integration of their activities. Entrepreneurial cities have become an important part of this dynamic, they are caught in it in the sense that they have to compete on a global playing field for investments, development projects and head offices of large corporations. For example, Montreal recently campaigned successfully to be the location for head offices of international animation software and multimedia companies — Soft Image, Ubisoft — as part of a project to reorganize a section of the Old Port as a exclusive area for these companies. Already home to international comedy, jazz and film festivals, the Grand Prix, etc., Montreal's ability to attract these multimedia companies was touted as an indication of the city's status on the cutting edge of multimedia entertainment.

An important aspect of mergers and new developments in the entertainment economy is the opportunity for cross-marketing and cross-ownership that has been taking shape through convergence. Convergence refers to the joining of marketing functions with production and distribution functions in different industries, as well as the integration of certain media technologies such as video and telecommunication. Convergence in the cultural industries also reaches out to encompass lifestyles, cultures, and the built environment. As Hannigan puts it, the resurgence of the urban entertainment economy has benefited from a 'recent escalation of "convergences" or "synergies" within and among the communications, entertainment, retail and real estate development industries that have influenced, changed the urban landscape, and therefore its cultural experience' (1998: 61). Through a series of mergers and takeovers, major conglomerates and corporations sought to both consolidate and diversify their holdings through vertical and horizontal integration in and outside of the entertainment industries. Edward Herman and Robert McChesney note how one industry observer has characterized merger activity through the 1990s as 'an all-out rush to claim global turf' (1997: 53).

Consider some examples. In 1995, Walt Disney acquired Capital Cities/ABC for \$19 billion; and in 1994 Viacom bought Paramount Communications Inc. and, with it, Blockbuster Entertainment for \$17.4 billion:

... giving it control of a variety of entertainment properties such as video rentals, a movie studio, a book publisher and MTV; Seagram, the Canadian liquor and orange juice giant, bought MCA for \$57.4 billion thereby acquiring a movie studio, a theme park and a theater chain. (Hannigan, 1998: 62)

Seagram has also recently acquired the European company, Polygram music, as well as owning the Montreal Expos and the entertainment and real-estate firm Trizec, the company which still manages the old Montreal Forum.

Even more relevant for the present study are the 'synergies' which characterize the Molson Corporation Ltd. As a parent company Molson owns the home retailing giants, Beaver Lumber, Home Depot and Reno Depot, as well as Diversey corporation, which specializes in industrial active disinfection and cleaning. Molson's parent company also owns Molson Breweries, the *Canadiens* and a series of affiliate companies, such as the television sports production company Molstar Communication. For Molson, the Montreal *Canadiens* NHL team is part of a 'special enterprise', one that they qualify as an aspect of Canada's 'heritage' along with the Forum. In Molson's integrated system, the *Canadiens* are used to market beer and Molstar is brought in to produce the games.

The Molson Corporation's involvement in television goes beyond mere game production. Molson also owns the national and local television rights to almost every Canadian team in the NHL, except Ottawa and Vancouver, which control their own local rights. All of these takeovers and mergers in general have been pursued with the objective of creating growth through the control of both programming and distribution. Molson illustrates this objective most clearly with respect to the 'beer-hockey' synergy that it has created and which is supported by its holdings in television and video production as well as by television

rebroadcast rights. In the rapidly transforming business climate of the last decade, entertainment and commercial activity under the Molson's umbrella became 'complementary and mutually supportive of land uses in downtown renewal projects' (Hannigan, 1998: 195). The planning and development of the Molson Centre, new home of the *Canadiens*, was a further expression of this mutually supportive relationship, an issue to which I will return in the next section.

Strategic alliances have become especially notable in the area of sport, arguably one of the fastest growing merchandising sectors. Wasco and Philips (1993: 195) claim that major league contractual arrangements — where a league licenses the uses of its name, logo, images of athletes, and team uniforms to other contractors — generated over \$2 billion in revenues in 1992. Strategic alliances at the club level within major league sports have often been more directly connected to revenues generated from sports arenas and stadiums themselves — typically because most league revenue-sharing agreements allow teams to keep 100 percent of any revenues raised in their own venue. One result of this has been a virtual fire sale of the official names of newly constructed stadiums and arenas. So now, instead of stadiums and arenas with generic or metaphorical names — Maple Leaf Gardens, the Montreal Forum, Boston Garden, the Olympia — downtown arenas proudly wear the names of new strategic partner-sponsors. Such has been the case, for example, with the new Corel Centre in Ottawa, General Motors Place in Vancouver, the Air Canada Centre in Toronto, and, most notable for my purposes, the Molson Centre in Montreal.

Within this densely packed world of synergies and strategic alliances the boundaries between culture, commerce and promotion are hopelessly blurred. It is a world that has proved to be irresistible to civic boosters and promoters in the entrepreneurial city. Like the Spielbergs in the film industry the city has something to promote too — its distinctiveness and the vibrant nature and investment potential of its downtown areas. The idea is to build new 'strategic alliances' around this 'product', leading to a pattern of urban redevelopment that is necessarily connected closely to the promotion of spectacular consumption. In marketing their own distinctiveness, entrepreneurial cities often engage in a 'selective appropriation of past events and forces' which are then incorporated into a story or a sequence which become the basis for a promotional campaign (Jessop, 1997: 32). Consumers are often drawn to new urban developments, such as gentrified areas, cinema megaplex, theme parks and theme restaurants as well as stadiums and arenas, because of the nostalgic appeal of 'historical' architecture and heritage attractions.

Private Investors as Social and Spatial Engineers

The appeal of urban redevelopment campaigns, discourses and the built environment they promote, depends often on the way they are able to resonate with memories of the space. In this context, the spectacle must sell/promote itself through discourses and strategies that are at the same time informed by local traditions and memories and that might reorganize, reconstruct them. In this sense it is important to understand that the urban spectacle not only comprises the

spectacular projects — or the buildings themselves — but also the business strategies underlying them, the power relations associated with them, the marketing discourses associated with them and the shared cultural experiences they create. In fact, it is these reconstructed cultural traditions and experiences, as well as the reorganization of public spaces, that should be the locus of the critique of the mobilization of the spectacle.

Along these lines, Sharon Zukin (1991) has argued that these coalitions have helped to reorganize urban space around consumption to such a great extent that we can now refer to many of these places as 'consumption-biased spatial complexes'. In these consumption-biased spatial complexes new urban alliances are reconstructing the city primarily in terms laid out by the private sector. On the one hand, these private investors have often been considered urban saviours, as they offer cities a chance to reverse years of decay. On the other hand, they have also been blamed as profiteers and destroyers of established urban communities. New theme parks, gentrified spaces and entertainment complexes, the argument runs, are glaring monuments to the values of privatization and the reorganization of the 'public' nature of space. A number of contemporary critics (Hannigan, 1998; Harvey, 1989; Philo and Kearns, 1993; Zukin, 1991) have argued that the most significant consequence of the competition for privately funded redevelopments for contemporary North American cities is the erosion of the social and cultural experience of 'publicness' in urban spaces and the redefinition of experiences of unity. While the commercial districts which emerge from the spectacularization of space provide places for the 'public' to congregate, the problem is that these places are by no means 'public' in the traditional sense of the word. These places 'are carefully controlled and socially homogenized environments specifically orchestrated toward the spectacle of the commodity and the rationalization of high-end consumption' (Zukin, 1991). While these spaces are often engaging and comparatively safe public environments, the price to be paid is the repressing or homogenizing of social, cultural and economic diversity.

There is one further aspect of the blurring lines between public and private investment, and public and private spaces, that warrants comment. In a provocative recent analysis of Sea World in San Diego, Susan Davis (1997) draws attention to the hollowness of many claims to 'publicness' made by privately run spectacular uses of space. Sea World acknowledges that it is in the entertainment business, but it couches much of its activities in the language of 'public' education. In addition, while Sea World appears to allow for the free movement of its visitors within the Sea World space, this apparent freedom conceals a corporate agenda designed to ensure that public movement is channelled into venues designed to sell food and merchandise. Moreover, surveillance in the space is very high and the tolerance for behaviours beyond a hypothetical 'middle class' norm is minimal. Finally, the zoning concessions received to enable the Sea World development have removed effective control of the space from public hands.

Sea World turns nature into a spectacular urban entertainment, Davis argues, a space filled with interesting performances, fun and excitement. It is certainly possible that much of Sea World can be read in alternative, even oppositional,

ways — to provide, for example, a critique of the capturing and holding of live whales. However, her analysis emphasizes the hegemonic overtones of Sea World packages for its visitors. At Sea World the public nature of space is clearly oriented to consumerism more than citizenship.

On this point Hannigan argues, for example, that the working classes tend to be evacuated from the spectacular sites of the entrepreneurial city (1998: 74):

Such quasi-urban environments seek to provide all the energy, variety, visual stimulation and cultural opportunities of the real thing, while, at the same time, shutting out the problems that have come to accompany urban life, notably poverty and crime. In doing so, the new developments end up discouraging the mixing of different classes of people in order to make the city safe for the middle-class.

Continuing along these lines, he claims that such spectacular entertainment venues in the city provide a form of 'affective ambience' which is perfectly suited to the collective mood of the 1990s, a culture of consumption based on images where '[q]uasi-streets such as those found in Universal City walk in California may be inauthentic but they provide comfortable and convenient sites of social centrality where people can interact lightly in crowds without too much hinging on the outcome'.

Some critics also note that festival market-places are too similar in their design and content and can therefore easily interchanged. Urban landscapes are often sold on the basis of their distinctiveness, but ironically, they are often redeveloped in favour of a singular North American generic model. On this point, Zukin argues that what is being created in urban spaces is a 'national middle class culture as represented by a coast-to-coast chain of red-brick shopping centers with their standardized assortment of gourmet and ethnic food shops, crafts boutiques, bookstores, etc.' (1991: 54).

Following these comments and critics around the effects of the spectacularization of urban spaces and at the same time the reorganization of public urban spaces through alliances with private partners, we can point to three important critical dimensions: the spectacle seems to modify cultural experiences of public spaces; it tend to marginalize certain classes around the city; and it necessarily involves the remodelling of identities, traditions and memories attached with these spaces and places towards a North American generic model.

Marketing Memories to Sell Spectacular Sites

We have seen how the redevelopment of urban centres across North America during much of the 1980s and 1990s has involved what Harvey (1989) calls a 'mobilization of the spectacle'. One implication of this has been the growth of private investors as social and spatial engineers, as producers and redefiners of the urban 'public interest' and of public uses of space. In these processes of promotion and redefinition, local history and the local past have been made to sell the projects initiated by investors and promoters. Interestingly, these new dynamics require that urban centres pull their cultural history in contradictory directions: on the one hand, the past must be valorized; on the other hand,

selective aspects of the past must be devalued. Typically, the past that is being marketed and sold is selectively embellished, involving a reconstruction of chosen historical fragments and — to use Connerton's (1989) phrase — an 'organized forgetting' of other fragments.

On such occasions, traditions, heritage and the past become 'things' that enterprise and governments often exploit: they have become products (Morley and Robins, 1995). And these products can be very popular: for instance, some public museums have shown that new levels of profitability are possible by representing the past in more spectacular ways, for example, through Disneyfied modes of presentation using digital technologies, and by capitalizing on nostalgia. Arguing along these lines, Frank Harris (1989) notes how heritage museums of the industrial era in England are typically a testament of the greatness of a past era, one of economic dominance. In this case, it is a particular romantic nostalgia about an imperial industrial past that is represented and marketed. These memories became particularly comforting during the deindustrialization of large parts of England in the 1980s, providing incentive for people to come and pay to experience and relive the glory of the past. Heritage sites and museums have been much less likely to display more contentious memories associated with poverty and deprivation unless they cloak these memories with romanticized images. According to critics such as Hewison (1987) and Harris (1989), the association of enterprise and heritage inevitably leads to more closed and conservative representations of the past rather than to more open or ambivalent reorderings.

More generally, the spectacular sites are built but also marketed and sold following particular logics:

The practice of selling and marketing places entails the various ways in which public and private agencies — local authorities and local entrepreneurs, often working collectively — strive to sell the image of a particular geographically-defined place, usually a city, so as to make it attractive to economic enterprises, tourists and even to inhabitants of that place. (Philo and Kearns, 1993)

According to Philo and Kearns, this selling and marketing usually involves a dual logic — both economic and social. In their words:

... self-promotion of places may be operating as a subtle form of socialization designed to convince local people, many of whom will be disadvantaged and potentially disaffected, that they are important cogs in a successful community and that all sorts of 'good things' are really being done on their behalf. (1993: 3)

A convincing repackaging of the past plays an integral role in the strategies involved in the selling and marketing of the heritage places such as 'festival market-places' and gentrified 'old downtown', but also new stadiums and arenas, because the acceptance of these places is crucial. The relevant point of this, for my purposes, is the extent to which such projects involve a conscious and deliberate juggling of culture and popular memory in order to enhance and customize their place-appeal. In many instances the promotional juggling of culture and memory is performed to promote traditions and lifestyles that are supposed to be locally rooted. Instead, there is a great deal of invention behind these traditions, so that the selling of heritage places entails a construction of an 'quasi-authentic' quality.

This is the core strategy associated with selling of historical places, and why such strategies are so closely tied to a commercialization of the past in the present context of flexible capitalist accumulation. Notably, the selling of historical places is typically connected with a promotional discourse around a city's past and distinctiveness that refuses any sense of historical ambivalence. It is not that promotional discourses of 'pastness' always ignore complexities of cultures, histories and memories; rather, as Philo and Kearns puts it, they declare 'mastery' over these realities by 'dismissively rearranging them into new patterns that might earn money and acceptance' (1993: 23). There are various ways in which the managers of the entrepreneurial cities play with cultural and historical legacies — largely by decontextualizing them and sucking any political controversy out of them. Blandness speaks better to outsiders who might otherwise feel alienated and it is less likely to encourage political defiance. Still, the selling of such blandness often takes on a politicized polemical tone — a point, as we will see in a moment, that has certainly been evident in Montreal. In order to sell their projects place marketers have often employed a variety of strategies, ranging from the mobilization of a 'New Right' discourse that treats as reactionary any oppositional position to the adoption of the 'public' language of collective good, and to the 'coding of "friendly" consensual and locally rooted cultural historical references into the built environment so as to secure acceptance of present transformations' (Philo and Kearns, 1993: 25).

Local memories and nostalgia have come to play an important role for capital in the selling of places, not only as a resource for economic gain, but also, as Gramsci might put it, as a way of generalizing hegemonic interpretations of history and society so that these interpretations come to be widely seen as a matter of common sense. In this case, Molson (supported by a strategic alliance with the local government and facilitated by their established beer-hockey synergy) sought to produce for Montrealers a particular version of the past, invoking particular nostalgia, not only to legitimate their new arena project, but more importantly to convince the public to 'let go' of the old one.

Montreal and the case of the Molson Centre

To discuss these dynamics more clearly, I want to look into the particular case of Montreal and the shift in venue from the Montreal Forum to the Molson Centre — the shift from a space embedded in local history and memories to a new spectacular 'consumption-biased' complex. In other words, I want to look at Montreal as an entrepreneurial city and at the example of the Molson Centre as a spectacular entertainment site.

Montreal is an interesting site of debates about strategies of adjustment to the global political-economic forces of the 1990s. As Montreal has changed from an industrial space to a more post-industrial space — and a post-referendum space — the relations of production-consumption have been transformed and the structure and meaning of urban public places has been subtly redefined.

Like most North American cities, Montreal at the end of the 20th century was experiencing a profound series of economic and cultural transformations.

Notably, the city's position as a major industrial and financial centre in North America had been challenged by global recessionary tendencies and the widespread economic restructuring occurring in capitalist societies around the world since the early 1970s. Such transformations happen in a context of the international restructuring of the capitalist economy, which implies a consolidation of supra-national blocks through deregulation and free-trade agreements, the changing role of the nation state and the urban form as a central expression of these changes. The effects of these changes, though, have been mediated by Montreal's distinctive historical and cultural context. For example, widespread changes in the economy and culture of Montreal have occurred against the backdrop of postwar struggles for Quebec independence, the election of pro-sovereignty governments and significant changes in Quebec's socioeconomic and demographic composition. In this context, the Quebec state has tended to maintain a high presence in the city, not only as a promoter of Quebecois business interests and as an investor in urban development projects, but also as a custodian of public memory. However, in recent years the role of the state in these areas has eroded and international private interests have arguably come to play a more prominent role than ever before both in Montreal's economy and in the production of urban social memories.

Facing a period of deindustrialization and the decreased power of the state and the public sectors, Montreal's development has come to rely increasingly on the private sector in a partnership and often a leading role, and therefore has to respect the private sector's particular agenda. Over the last three decades this has been evident in developments such as the gentrification of the Old Montreal, the Museum Just for Laughs, the Paramount multi-megaplex and now the Molson Centre, all of which have played a role in rearticulating a cultural experience of the downtown core around a mobilization of the spectacle. In this respect, I argue that the building of the Molson Centre can be viewed as an expression of the restructuring movement of capitalist accumulation, especially around a beer-hockey synergy. Drawing on the popularity of hockey, the arena, and of the *Canadiens*, Molson attempted to present itself as an urban saviour contributing to the revitalization of Montreal.

The case of the shift in venues in Montreal offers an expression of the customized spectacularization of urban space for various reasons. However, this particular case becomes interesting when we acknowledge the strong popular attachment (political, cultural, civic and sporting) to the old arena. In fact, reference to the Forum and its particular meaning in Montreal was the key element in Molson's marketing campaign around the shift in venues. Markers of memory are powerfully encoded into popular cultural practices in general — such as sports teams — and the buildings that have housed these teams. But few sports teams and few buildings have been as culturally significant as the Montreal *Canadiens* and the Montreal Forum. Founded as an all-French-speaking hockey team in 1909, *Les Canadiens* have acted to champion both Montreal's civic identity and Quebecois cultural identities for nearly a century.

It is sometimes said that in Quebec hockey is a kind of religion, and to the degree that this is true, the Montreal *Canadiens* have been the official church of hockey in Quebec, and the Forum has been the game's Temple, its Sanctuary. It

has also been said that the building was haunted by all the heroes of past teams, 'throwing the torch to their successors from failing hands', so that the flame of hockey in Quebec would continue to be carried shoulder high. However, in 1996 the ghosts were forced to look on during a public auction in which the Forum's seats and other memorabilia were literally ripped from the building. In the end-of-the century world of staggeringly expensive urban sporting spectacle, the Forum no longer measured up as a prime vehicle for capital accumulation: no room for added luxury boxes; too uncomfortable for new upmarket spectators; too expensive to renovate for enhanced media hook-ups and new digital media formats. So the building's owners, the Molson Brewery Corporation, decided it was time to move on to a new high-tech arena/entertainment venue.

Montreal is a very different context to other Canadian cities and Ottawa for example.¹ For one thing, compared to the Ottawa Civic Center, the Montreal Forum was still a viable arena. Secondly, Molson had the history, capital and the connections to build the arena mostly on their own. Indeed, Molson was often praised in the press for being 'audacious' enough to launch and fully fund the Molson Centre in spite of economic decline and in spite of political uncertainty in Montreal and in the province of Quebec. Other grand projects of this sort — such as the Olympic Stadium — have stayed in Montreal's popular memory as municipal if not provincial disasters. The difference is that these disasters were publicly initiated, run and funded, leaving a sour taste for such projects in Quebecois culture. A local newspaper noted, for instance, how the

... Olympic Stadium was the dream of a politician, Mayor Drapeau, the project of an eccentric French architect and twenty years later, Montrealers are still buying cigarettes to pay for it, when it is sinking in a few inches a year, is having structural and roof problems and the Expos, the main occupants, are threatening to leave. (*La Presse*, 3 March 1996)

With the Molson Centre, the budget and the deadlines were respected and instead of having to take from public funds, Molson argued that the project would generate, through salary taxes, TPS and TVQ, and material and service costs, dozens of millions of dollars for the public treasury. In other words, in addition to taking the initiative to launch such a project in the precarious political and economic context of Montreal without asking for any government help, the Molson Brewery promised to produce economic benefits through the construction of the arena itself and through an arena-enhanced downtown economy.

In 1996, the Montreal Canadiens were poised to move to a new 'Temple', only this time christened with a corporate name: the Molson Centre. Completely financed by private capital and integrated into the 'revitalization' of the Windsor block in downtown Montreal, the construction of the Molson Centre was heralded as an all-Quebecois economic masterpiece. The creation of this new spectacular entertainment complex was promoted as a significant boost to Montreal's economy and as an act of bravery on Molson's part for solely financing this project in an unstable political and economic context.

However, the prospective closing of the Montreal Forum in favour of a new high-tech arena created an uproar of reaction in the city and launched an unprecedented wave of nostalgic sentiment. The Forum had emerged as a vital public space in Montreal, the argument ran. It was a commercial space, of course, but

the building had been claimed symbolically over the years by 'the people'. Not only had the Forum provided a home for legendary hockey games, but also for concerts and political rallies that were significant in the development of Quebec's pre and postwar popular cultures. As a much more self-consciously corporate space, the Molson Centre threatened to redefine that vital tie to the Quebec public by creating new exclusions and more distance from 'the people'.

In promoting the shift in venue for the Canadiens, the planners and the builders were encroaching on tricky and even sacred territory. 'A nation's birthright was under the knife', as Bellinge (1993) put it, and Molson had to be strategic, effective, but yet sensitive in planning their campaign. From the outset, the Molson Centre became immediately a space simultaneously won and lost, an ambivalent, hybrid space of competing discourses. Molson understood the traditions well enough to know that the shift in venue would have to be a participatory event in the history of the city. It is important to reiterate here that the Molson Brewery Corporation had a privileged historical connection with Montreal as one of the city's most established corporate entities. Indeed, the company's own office building have been part of the city's image and imagination for almost a century. The building even forms part of my own memories — I grew up with the Molson sign just under the Jacques-Cartier bridge looking over downtown. For many generations now that sign and the Molson building have been integrated into Montreal's cultural fabric as well as Montreal urban landscape.

Building on the notion of political and cultural nostalgia — nostalgia around the decreased power of the welfare state and the fading participation of the public sector along with a romantic nostalgia for a traditional Canadian hockey and the *Canadiens*' dynasty of past years — in and around Montreal, the Molson family and the Canadiens mounted a campaign designated to articulate the new spectacular urban site to older memories. The Molson Centre was to become the same kind of place for the expression of identities as the Forum in its time, the argument ran, or at least it would aspire to reflect what the Forum stood for. In this discourse, the past along with traditions and memories was mobilized for a new promotional purpose.

The Molson Centre was to become the fifth home of the *Canadiens* after the Jubilee Arena in 1910, the Montreal Arena in 1916, the Mount-Royal Arena in 1920 and the Forum in 1926. Acknowledging strong attachments to the Forum, Molson had to insist and persuade Montrealers that popular memories and traditions could in fact be effectively transported from one venue to another. In this regard, the company orchestrated a dramatic marketing campaign surrounding the shift in venues, striving to maintain close ties with *Les Canadiens*' history and legends, and criticizing a 'conservative romanticism' that blinded people to new possibilities for tradition-making in the future. It started with a game of the 'living legends' or the old-timers at the Forum. A closing commemorative ceremony followed at the Forum — including various stars, politicians, legends of the game and others — on the ice before the last game. The next day there was a public auction (\$5 entrance fee) where all the historical objects of the Forum were up for sale (the profits going to United Way Canada). Commenting on this 'public' auction, a local newspaper noted that:

The wealthy people who gathered at the Forum last night to pick the bones of the departing ghosts hoped to capture the intangible aura of the place. By bidding on the banners and time clocks and the penalty box, they hoped to bottle it and take it home. For a few, it was a chance to give to charity while indulging a personal memory. (*The Gazette*, 13 March 1996)

There is more. The day before the opening game in the Molson Centre a parade was organized called 'le Grand Déménagement' (The Great Move). The parade was designed to move the team, and the ghosts, and the memories, from the old to the new arena — the Stanley Cup banners and some living legends. The theme of the parade was 'the pride and soul of the Montreal Canadiens'. Even the Forum's Zamboni (the machine that cleans the ice during hockey games) was officially part of the parade; in fact, it led the parade! Plundering the vault of historical symbols, the parade's organizers also included an Olympic torch meant to reinforce the ideal of transferring the traditions and memories of the old building. Molson was clearly trying to bank on symbols in enacting tradition in the streets of the city and included strolling giant ghosts in the parade that 200,000 people came to see. The promotional discourse was clear: the ghosts of the Forum were moving into the Molson Centre and the parade invited people to come and see it with their own eyes.

In addition, on the same day an 'open house' day was held for the public to get familiarized with their new space (150,000 people attended). Molson's vice-president for arena operations stressed the importance of the open house in order to give the chance to everyone to come see the new arena for themselves. 'We want to give them the feeling . . . and thank fans and citizens for their support' (*The Gazette*, 18 March 1996). This open house event was connected in the campaign with the claim that the arena was an 'all-Quebecois' masterpiece — the people's masterpiece. The open house was to strengthen a sense of public ownership and public identification with the building.

I took a particular interest in the way that Molson elaborated a marketing strategy which put memory to work to create several types of support: political support, civic support, fan support. This campaign was quite successful in constructing a hegemonic discourse around the imminence of change, the necessity of progress and the importance of companies such as Molson to Montreal's civic and cultural life. However, these discourses were marked by cracks and openings which left room for competing interpretations and for critique. In fact, contradictions in interpretation do frequently arise because the articulation of culture and history by the place marketers sometimes runs against alternative understandings of local culture and built into people's daily encounters with city spaces. In my survey of the press, I found a diversity of popular themes around the reactions to the shift in venue, the promotional campaign mounted by Molson and the two arenas.

Some journalists fully supported the move:

The new arena is not only the home of a team that is world class and a source of pride for all Montrealers, it also carries the proud name of a family with deep roots and commitments for this city . . . The Farewell to the Forum and the opening of the new arena were a true reflection of marvelous bilingual and bicultural character of Montreal. Much more than multi-million dollar real-estate deal and the launch of a new business venture, the Molson Centre is what makes Montreal proud. (*The Gazette*, 19 March 1996)

However, the most recurrent theme was a stringent critique rather than support of Molson's intentions and values. Building the Molson Centre, many argued, demonstrated that the corporation cared more about profits than they did about the game, or the public, even if the corporation tried to argue otherwise. Witness this comment from the Montreal *Gazette* (11 March 1996):

Molson wants to have it both ways with the Forum, wants to close it with one last nostalgic wallow and milk every tear — and it wants to extract every cent of profit, just like any other corporation whose anonymous investors see nothing but the bottom line.

The name of the new arena also generated frequent comments: 'the Forum's name belongs to North American sport heritage. It cannot be sold!' (*La Presse*, 15 March 1996). Similarly, the big public auction drew considerable commentary around the argument that it was not the public that left with cherished historical objects, but mainly American collectors and business owners. In *La Presse* a journalist wrote: 'The cathedral of democracy left with little integrity' the day of the 'public' auction (13 March 1996). Even the Toronto *Globe and Mail* wrote (16 March 1996):

Could it be that Les Canadiens sold off its birthright? The seats, the penalty bench and the 24 banners, marking each Stanley Cup, were put up for auction. That the proceeds went to charity did not make this any less sacrilegious.

Other examples of such critical comments were couched in a more ironic way, expressing the strong religious undertones of the popular attachment to the Forum at the same time:

Why not dismantle Notre Dame Cathedral, building a larger Cathedral, perhaps in that quasi-pulp-mill style of the new Molson Centre? We could sell off bits and pieces of Notre Dame's interior, altars, stained-glass windows, pews, paintings of stations of the cross, chalices and light fixtures. That circular staircase winding up to that pulpit would bring thousands of dollars. And let's face it, the church, like the Brewery, needs money to keep up with good work! (*The Gazette*, 1 March 1996)

A similar critique focused on Molson's commodified conception of the *Canadiens* and of the Forum's heritage:

You would feel better about it — losing part of the fabric of the city — if Molson was not so grimly determined to sell every bit of the Forum that can be carted off, from the seats, to the penalty boxes, to the grill that made the Forum hot dogs. That's everything — including the unmatched row of 24 Stanley Cup banners that dangle from the Forum ceiling. Those are the original banners, each an emblem of the epic battles fought with blood, sweat and tears to claim hockey's ultimate prize. Molson sees those banners as just another commodity, right up there with panty liners, dental floss and beer, so the banners will be sold along with everything else. The excuse is that the banners are too small to be seen way up there in the girders of the magnificent Molson Centre so they are to be replaced by banners that are twice as large and not one-tenth as real. (*The Gazette*, 11 March 1996)

In addition, fan letters to the press brought up the fact that the Forum was occupied symbolically by the 'people' for decades, but it was never inhabited physically. One letter said: 'For me, the Forum was a place that I was never able

to get into . . . too expensive. Imagine what I think of the new one!’ (*La Presse*, 16 February 1996). In other words, the Forum was already rarely financially accessible for the people and they understood the Molson Centre to be at a greater distance. The press and the public also made very clear the irony in the ‘consumer-friendly place’ that Molson was offering them. Although these last comments and critiques were not at the forefront of the media extravaganza surrounding the opening of this new spectacular site of sports and entertainment in Montreal, they still work to support and to bring to life the critical analysis of the reorganization of urban public spaces through the spectacle. Notably, it was evident in this case study that not only was the ‘shared’ cultural experience of the Molson Centre promoted through the marketing campaign in fact rather exclusive and homogeneous, but even ‘shared cultural experience’ of the old Forum was demystified and understood by many as symbolic and constructed shared experience.

In different ways these popular press comments pointed at transformations in their relations to the arena, the team and the city’s public space, which in turn shows a critical understanding of the workings and the impacts of the new strategic alliances around the city.

Conclusion

As Montreal has changed from an industrial space to a more post-industrial space, the relations of production–consumption have been transformed and the structure and meaning of urban public places has been subtly redefined. This shift is part of a general volatility and ephemerality that makes it hard to maintain any firm sense of continuity in the city’s public culture. Such changes have immense significance for the ways in which memory now works to articulate popular attachments to space. Notably, the spectacularization of urban spaces such as Montreal has the potential to radically transform memory at the same time as it is defining limits and imposing necessities upon the shapes and forms of urbanization. Urban elites and transnational corporations which are promoters, such as the Molson Brewery Corporation, work hard to construct a hegemonic representation of historical continuity in the selling of their spectacular places and attempt to celebrate this representation as common sense.

In general, two main issues from this case study stand out as points of departure for a critic of the spectacularization of urban spaces. The first is the ability of dominant forces to articulate memories in self-interested ways and thereby induce specific possibilities of reimagining mainly geared towards a North American generic model. Molson produced a selective history throughout its campaign and tapped a vein of conservative romanticism in Montreal’s public culture. But this conservative romanticism was linked, ironically, to the promotion of a calculating economic logic and a celebration of ‘progress’ through the creation of a bigger, more high-tech, consumer-friendly space. Notably, nostalgic sentiments towards a stronger Quebec, a healthier city and a winning team, mainly on the part of francophone Montrealers, were repackaged to the public to sell the project as ‘progress’.

Although the spectacle is often viewed as a homogenizing force, diverse memories influenced the way that social groups reacted to the Molson project, partly through the demystification of the 'public' ownership of this 'public' space. However, Molson's use of memory (memory of the team, of hockey traditions and of the building), their conception of history and nostalgia, allowed no recognition of plurality or alternatives. In this way their promotional discourse resonates with other new experiences of unity in cities. This is a tendency, in my view, to be resisted. The progressive and imaginative planning and uses of space in urban life surely require a sensitivity to the multiple and plural nature of memory — of different histories and of incompleteness and ambivalence of everyday life, and experiences of public space.

Second, the example of the move from the Forum to the Molson Centre also carries with it an allegory about the roles of capital and the state. Private capital erects redevelopment projects while the state is often left with the role of absorbing the impact of these changes and negotiating criticisms of them. In this case, the residues of Molson's spectacular development project — the old Forum and its surrounding desolated area — was to be renovated into a megaplex cinema and entertainment centre. (Trizec promised the completion of the new megaplex by the end of 1997; renovations began in 1999.) The dissatisfaction of anglophone business owners and people living in the area can only lead to blame of the municipal government for their worries. The municipal government, through a partial appropriation of the new spectacular development for civic boosterism was left as the only concrete and present instance of power involved in the dramatic reorganization of these local memories and traditions. The new owners of spectacular sites are often not only unknown, but also not present. This changes the traditions and possibility of discourses and dialogues between the public and private instances of power. Instead of forming a dialogue with the new private owners, the result was to replay old linguistic dualities around the city. This situation resonates with Castells and Henderson's (1987) idea of placeless power and powerless place and it is important because it moves the debate of the reorganization of Montreal and mega developments away from questions of corporate power and philosophies of renewal and towards established stereotypes and grudges about ethnicity, language and local control. In other words, it deflects attention from critiques of new experiences of publicness and reorients them towards long-standing local conflicts.

In summary, we can see how the use of nostalgia and of the reconstruction and marketing of the past are generally hegemonic in various ways: they can act as an ahistorical defence of the status quo; they can help transfer authenticity and the authority of history to private capital; they can act to remove the ambivalence and plural nature of memories through the production of a unified official historical viewpoint; they can suppress a recognition of historical discontinuity; and they can be mobilized to create new senses of community. In fact, all of these hegemonic elements were present in Montreal in the attempt to use history and nostalgia to build a strong sense of attachment to the Molson's Centre and to prevent the public's nostalgia from attaching itself irrevocably to the old arena and to a specific time. In addition, this particular case study shows the prevalent place of sports and sports venues in new urban entertainment economies and its

central position in articulating different support for the new social engineers as well as emancipatory possibilities for the public. In other words, in the current context of global and more flexible modes of capitalist accumulation, along with an increased commercialization of culture worldwide, sports is at the core of the pressing debates around the spectacularization of urban spaces.

Notes

- 1 The arena in Ottawa was made possible by the American corporation Ogden Entertainment Services which specializes in stadium management. (Among its clients are Rich Stadium, home of the Buffalo Bills; the Great Western Forum, home of the Kings and the Lakers; and the Arrowhead Pond, home of the Mighty Ducks.) Ogden Entertainment Services was able to help convince a range of potential investors to finance the Palladium, notably some American and English banks who lent US\$95 million to a Terrace Corporation's affiliate. In addition, Ogden provided a loan for \$33 million CAN and Terrace Corporation itself invested \$10 million CAN. The Ontario government, and the Premier at the time, Bob Rae, refused to invest in the project but agreed to a loan of \$25.6 million CAN, and the federal government offered a grant of \$6 million CAN. Shortly after completion, Ottawa's major software company Corel, paid to have the new arena take the company's name.

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