

colonial territories that stretched from Brazil to Asia.

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On architecture. Melvin Charney: a critical anthology edited by *Louis Martin*, McGill-Queen's University Press, Montréal, Canada, 2013, 483 pp. ISBN 9780773541825.

As one of the founders of the so-called 'Montreal school of urban architecture', Melvin Charney made an original contribution to contemporary architecture and urban planning in Quebec. He was not only an architect but also a thinker and architectural critic, a committed artist and a pedagogue, who sparked an authentic Montreal school of thought while following a path all his own. Louis Martin has meticulously compiled the work of Charney that has appeared in an array of architectural journals published in Canada (*Canadian Architect*, *Architecture Canada*), the USA (*Progressive Architecture*, *Yale Architectural Journal*) and Europe (*Architectural Design*, *Deutsche Bauzeitung*). In his introductory essay to the book, George Baird emphasizes the contribution that Charney's thought and teaching made to the protection of Montreal's urban fabric as well as the appeal of his innovative approach to planning and urban design in the development of Montreal. His approach was reflected in the restructuring of Montreal's urban fabric over the years in a way similar to the influence that the Reconstruction of the European City School, led by Bohigas, had on the city of Barcelona. It can be said that, together with professors Alfred Neumann, and Pierre Larochelle (the translator into French of Caniggia and Maffei's *Composizione architettonica e tipologia edilizia. Lettura dell'edilizia di base*) (Larochelle, 2011), Charney is one of the founding fathers of the morphological approach in Quebec. However, his work had an impact at an applied level (for the practice of urban architecture and design), rather than at a theoretical level in urban morphological research.

Martin structured his anthology in four parts, corresponding to phases that he sees in Charney's

intellectual development. Each part is introduced by a critical contextualization, outlining continuities as well as reconsiderations and even contradictions in Charney's thought. The articles grouped under the initial phase stretching from 1962 to 1966, entitled 'Beginnings', retrace the premises for the construction of Charney's original thoughts. Like Le Corbusier in his youth, and upon the suggestion of Louis Khan, with whom he studied at Yale, Charney took up a quest to uncover the origins of Mediterranean architecture. At the same time, he became interested in Pop Art's aestheticization of everyday objects symbolizing North American consumerist culture. As highlighted by Martin, this foray into the world of contemporary art was reflected in his later work, in particular his obsession with deciphering the underlying meaning and cultural manifestations of popular architecture and his ability to have a lucid perspective on everyday banal forms of vernacular architecture.

For the purpose of illustrating the second phase, covering the period from 1966 to 1969 and dubbed 'Beyond architecture', Martin chose articles that testify to Charney's active involvement in major international debates on modernity and architecture. Martin points out the very optimistic tone of Charney's writings, defending the liberating power of technology in a context in which the modernist doctrine of Congrès Internationaux d'Architecture Moderne was losing steam. In his article 'Grain elevators revisited', however, Charney sets about criticizing Le Corbusier's discourse and his manifesto book, *Vers une architecture*, and finally returns to his own territory of predilection, Montreal. The observation of forms bequeathed by industrial architecture, such as Montreal's grain elevators, is what gave him the theoretical basis for formulating a critique of the formalism of early modern architects. Charney was more concerned with the process and liberating potential released by new technologies than he was with machine aesthetics.

In the third part of the book, 'Other monuments', the period from 1971 to 1976 is presented by Martin as a defining moment and the culmination of Charney's intellectual journey with the attainment of maturity. In his critical introduction to this part, Martin asserts that the postmodernist school of thought and Rossi's work on city architecture, as well as Venturi's on the American strip among others, encouraged Charney to return to the rigorous observation of vernacular architecture that he had developed at the outset of his career. In an

article entitled 'The Montrealness of Montreal: formations and formalities in urban architecture', Charney highlights the system of rural land division – the so-called French system of *rangs* (long narrow plots perpendicular to access roads or watercourses) – and the fact that Montreal's urban form and working-class neighbourhoods were superimposed on the organizational framework inherited from a millenary tradition. In his view, the building tradition of the French Regime accounts for the importance attributed to public spaces and the street in Montreal's urban form, the purpose of which is to provide a framework for everyday life. Transitional spaces such as balconies and exterior entrance stairs provide a space for social interaction, which governs 'living together' in an urban environment. The typology of Montreal's plexes, derived from the Quebec-style house, is an example of the inventiveness and adaptiveness to climatic constraints that reflects the genius of Quebec's builders. This architectural knowledge was developed over time and is reflected in the buildings' material shapes. Thus, according to Charney, there is such a thing as an authentically Quebec urban architecture, upon which a specific practice of contemporary architecture can be based.

This is indeed the task that Charney set for himself between 1980 and 1990, with the founding of the Urban Architecture Unit at the University of Montreal's School of Architecture (Charney and Latek, 1992). Among his most prominent contributions was his work on Faubourg Saint-Laurent (the Saint-Laurent district) and the definition of a strategy for intervention based on recognition of the figures and spatial syntax specific to Montreal's urban architecture (Charney

et al., 1990).

In the book's fourth part, 'The image and its double', Martin chose to group together four essays published between 1982 and 1989 to illustrate the contextualist approach, which informs the realization of Charney's installations, such as at the Chicago Museum of Contemporary Art and his masterpiece, the garden of the Canadian Centre for Architecture. It is worth noting that Louis Martin commendably took a back seat to Melvin Charney while also presenting the crown jewels of Charney's work, so as to allow readers a perspective of their own on Charney's fascinating intellectual trajectory.

References

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Cutting into the substance of urban form

A lecture on this topic was given to the Urban Design Group by Karl Kropf of Built Form Resource Ltd and the Urban Morphology Research Group, University of Birmingham. A video of it is included in the archive of previous talks recorded as part of the UrbanNous initiative.

The lecture illustrated the common use of the core morphological concept of urban tissue or character areas. Examples included conservation area appraisals, urban historic characterizations, as well as urban character studies, research into

methods of assessing environmental performance of urban form, the French application of urban morphological analysis to the Plan Local d'Urbanisme, and the use of morphological analysis in design.

The lecture can be viewed in a browser at: <http://www.urbannous.org.uk/urbandesigngroup/UrbanMorphologyKarlKropf.htm>.

The full UrbanNous catalogue can be found at: <http://www.urbannous.org.uk/udgevents.htm>