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STROLLING THROUGH THE OLD NEIGHBOURHOOD

Robert Walker, born and bred in Montreal, is an internationally known photographer who has lived and worked in Toronto and more recently New York, where he had shows at the International Center of Photography and at the Berth Urdang Gallery. His experiences of New York also resulted in a number of photo books, such as the powerful *New York Inside Out* (published by Skyline Press in 1985 and including a text on Walker's images by William Burroughs). But for a long time now, Walker has had a love-hate relationship with the city.

And by the mid-80s, after ten years in New York, he was starting to hate the place. Crime, prices, and the sheer effort of maintaining oneself turned his thoughts back towards the north. Finally, in 1987 he packed up and boarded the Montreal bus.

Even though Walker is from Montreal, it wasn't easy to decompress—to get used to the very different look and feel of Montreal. "Every block in New York is crammed with many lives; there's an incredible density of people, images and things. You have to travel much further distances in Montreal to find the same amount of stuff," says Walker, who is always looking for intriguing combinations of objects that somehow tell both a local story and also a bigger, city-size story. "Here in Montreal I can't just walk around one block to find things to photograph. I have to cover distances on a bicycle."

Certainly, it would be hard to find a part of Montreal less dense than Ville Maisonneuve, one of the more economically depressed areas of Montreal. This sleepy, east end, working-class district is where Walker, now 45 and living on a grant to document the city, grew up and where he has, after so many years, once again taken up residence. Starting from the beautiful studio/home Walker inhabits with his designer wife, Ania Zofia, we set out on a casual tour into the photographer's past. We step onto the streets of Maisonneuve, a curiously impressive collection of homes and semi-abandoned factories quietly slumbering somewhere between the giant, futuristic tower of the Olympic Stadium and the mighty St. Lawrence River.

We step out between the two elegant granite

by Henry Lehmann

columns framing the door of Walker's house, and head west along venerable Adams Street past lovely greystones with ornate stained-glass windows. Soon, we get to a former convent on the corner of Adams and St. Clément. "It has a wonderful tennis court in the back where I'd go with a friend and we'd go and see the nuns, which was an outrageous thing to do. And we'd bang on the door and they'd let us in. I remember the absolutely glistening floors I'd see when they opened the door."

After that, we saunter past a triplex with a typical Montreal exterior staircase. "That's where I lived till I was five," says Walker. "One of my early memories is falling down those stairs."

"Now this is Morgan Blvd. It was a major street during Maisonneuve's heyday just after World War I. Most of the people in Maisonneuve were French, but there was a small percentage of anglophones like my family. One of the things I've noticed here on Morgan Street is they've taken out all the old ceremonial streetlights," laments Walker. Indeed, this street with its planned vistas at both ends is a kind of mini Champs-Élysées.

At the north end of the street is the awesome Empire-style market building, part of Walker's earliest memories. "I remember it when I was a kid—now it's been kind of revitalized. I remember I was always horrified by the hanging chickens bleeding out into the gutter. On weekends this place was jammed—it was a social centre."

While in the immediate area, we also examine an unlikely building, with giant neo-classical statues reclining grandly on its roof, near the market on the east side of Morgan. "Now this was very important," explains Walker. "This is where my father took me swimming. I hated it so much I never swam again. Now it's a local cultural centre but also still a bath house. Maisonneuve," he goes on, "became a kind of industrial powerhouse. My father worked in Canadian Vickers. There was St. Lawrence sugar refineries, there was tobacco. These places had thousands and thousands of workers."

Now, on this summer weekday, the streets and buildings are almost deserted, indicative of the



PHOTOGRAPH BY JOSHUA RADU

chronic economic depression afflicting many parts of east-end Montreal.

“And this is Maisonneuve School, where I went as a kid.” Walker points towards a stern brick structure across the street. “When I look at it now I notice they’ve taken out all the small panes.”

Heading over to Ontario Street, we proceed west past remnants of a once-thriving downtown. “And there used to be a tramline over there. It ran from electric wires over head. Remember wires? They used to be all over the place, a visual pollutant—we forget almost too easily.”

“You see those two banks?” asks Walker, pointing to still more grandiose architecture at a corner of Ontario. One bank is permanently closed, the other a bit grimy. “There were a lot more people here then.” And those armies of workers had paychecks to cash.

Moving ever east on Ontario, we soon come to the corner of Desjardins, the site of a magnificent fire station. With its dramatic tower behind, the building slightly recalls Italian churches with their attached campaniles. Until the late 50s, firehouses needed towers in which to dry hoses that were made of fabric.

Further west on Ontario, we encounter an even more stately monument to the glory days, a stone building almost worthy of Imperial Rome. We climb some magnificent stairs and enter what used to be Maisonneuve’s town hall and now lives on as the municipal library. “It’s marvellous,” sighs

Walker as we proceed through the hush towards a fascinating artifact, a framed, turn-of-the-century rendering of Maisonneuve.

This portrait of a once and future city is not an objective plan but rather, like many portraits, a flattering mix of fact and fancy. The crisp yet distorted image, showing the town in profile and at the same time from high above, intersperses the actual monuments, each one lovingly drawn in, with idyllic developments that never were.

“Here we see the city at its very height and on into the future because there are buildings in it that were never built,” whispers Walker. Everything in this portrait speaks of progress and orderly activity. Those were the days when smoke wasn’t bad but good, signalling that factories were at full tilt with full employment. Neatly sliced into urban rectangles and regularly punctuated with happy puffs of smoke coming from factories, trains, and a plethora of riverboats, the naive image speaks of an age before cynicism. Walker points out the industries, the dry dock, the Angus Yards, and Vickers. Now, of course, with heavy industry nearly dead—and aside from cars rushing through the town for more important destinations—the local air is smokeless and still.

Walker then indicates the edges of the rendering. “Look. Here we see just the last remnants of rural life—like those cows up there in the picture.” As we go further out in the rendering, things become more and more fictional, even dreamy—

a mythological complex of buildings reminiscent of Versailles, the Crescents in Bath, or Hadrian's villa. To see this image is to believe that Maisonneuve, now so faded, was once the throbbing orderly centre of the universe.

Outside and along Ontario the scene is peaceful but, with the jumble of little shops, not exactly the classical picture of divine harmony. And, of course, in reality it never was. As we leave Ontario and turn south on Pie-IX, another once-grand boulevard, we glimpse the decaying factory buildings of American Can Company, partially hidden behind the high bars of an ancient cast iron fence and now an ideal place for sculpture studios. "You can't romanticize too much because it's not the kind of place you want to spend 35 years of your life—it was a prison," says Walker. "Still in business, but obviously not what it used to be," he adds, pointing to the scabrous buildings and overgrown lawn.

Now moving south on Pie-IX Boulevard, we pass more late Victorian houses loaded with stained-glass and the old United Church. "It's quite substantial," muses Walker. But things have changed. As we speak, a few people dressed in orange-pink drift out of the building. It's the Hari-Krishnas.

Ahead in an industrial cluster of buildings at the southern foot of the street, there's that other kind of steeple, a smokestack. Smokeless and propped up by some scaffolding, the structure seems somehow appropriate.

Presently, we turn another corner and head east along Ste. Catherine Street East. This stretch of that great street is rundown, a patchwork of junk shops, bars, and greasy spoons. Faces, as ungentrified as the street, peer from front steps. A tough-looking young couple rush by. Once again, here we seem to be looking into the future—the unpretty future, that is, of downtown Ste. Catherine Street, several miles west and now in steep decline.

We come across an interesting store-window, filled with kitsch, a collection vaguely resembling the subjects of some of Walker's photos. But Walker isn't impressed. "You just can't photograph a chaotic window full of junk. There's got to be things in the window that are emblematic—something happening. If you're going to look at a picture of a second hand shop, the picture's got to sum up all second hand shops. It can't just be random—it's got to 'read'. This window's too random, arbitrary—that's what I meant when I said I have to travel huge distances to find something."

But almost before the explanation is over, we are on to something else. "Look at this huge beautifully designed theatre. When I went here as a kid, it was already in its last days. I recall seeing *I Was A Teenage Werewolf* with the young Michael Landon. This was the big movie theatre of the district. It was called the Granada. Because of a fire in the late 20s, a law was passed banning kids under sixteen from going to theatres. To get in I'd stand on my tiptoes to look a little taller and a little older." The place, with its grand marquee, is being kept alive as the current home of a local theatre group.

Then, moving past a once-modern fifties-style

foodstore and cutting through the ragged fields of Morgan Park, we head south over Notre Dame East. Across the street, which in this part of greater Montreal is a bleak highway with speeding cars, we see the pale looming spectre of a building. For Walker, the place has some memories. "That building over there used to contain a firehouse and a police station, and I remember one of my friends getting into trouble and we sneaked up and looked in to see him. We were horrified."

Now, with everything boarded up, it's impossible to look into this incredible limestone structure, which was designed by the Dufresne brothers, and could easily be confused for the early work of Frank Lloyd Wright. Massive, yet delicate, this finely proportioned building recalls Wright's famous Larkin Building in Buffalo.

"What a waste," exclaims Walker as we take a last look at the old building, once a proud part of Maisonneuve, now a giant white elephant left out to dry.

Moving back north towards civilization, or what's left of it, we enter a wide, grassy, seemingly endless strip of wasteland running roughly east and west and sandwiched between the highway and bleak rows of residential flats. "In the 50s, everything was torn down here to make way for the Ville Marie Expressway."

In the distance, caught in a corner of this no-man's land, stands a tawdry purple wall. "This was a very important building," says Walker. "A nightclub called the Café de l'Est. Live entertainment in pre-television days. And across the street there was the Rainbow Club which was much smaller and less fancy. I originally wanted to be a musician and I would sometimes work there. We played horrendous organ cha-cha. A juggler or something would come in and we had to back him up with drumrolls. But I was sweating. It was a tough audience."

From there, we head back north, generally in the direction of Walker's home. And directly ahead, on a corner of Ste. Catherine East, we encounter a white trapezoidal building very unlike some of the Greek temples we've seen earlier on. This was an original Dairy Queen. "I used to come here and get sick on ice cream," Walker tells me as we survey this splendid place, one of the few places with human activity we've seen all day. Even as we speak, kids are getting cones, those perfect but all too transitory examples of pop architecture.

Walker points at the Dairy Queen sign, a thick double-delight with neon tubing snaking around to give full force to the giant blue and brown image of an ice cream cone. "This is probably one of the last of these signs still around," comments Walker as, our tour nearly over, we saunter back to his house.

In a way, Maisonneuve's long sojourn in the dim afterglow of its heyday may be a good thing. Stillness and poverty seem to run against the whole western tradition, but they are among the best natural preservatives. Just look at Maisonneuve, a princely kingdom with stone and iron palaces on almost every corner. All that's missing are the people. □