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Book review of The landscape's memory. The urban form history of a town centre: Saint-Roch, Quebec (La mémoire du paysage. Histoire de la forme urbaine d'un centre-ville: Saint-Roch, Québec", by Lucie K.Morisset

Anne-Sophie A.S. Cléménçon

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Anne-Sophie Cléménçon

Book review of

The landscape's memory. The urban form history of a town centre : Saint-Roch, Quebec (La mémoire du paysage. Histoire de la forme urbaine d'un centre-ville : Saint-Roch, Québec)

by Lucie K.Morisset

in *Urban Morphology, Journal of the International Seminar on Urban Form*,
Birmingham, 2003, vol.7, n°2, p.130.

Summary

This short text, published in the periodical *Urban Morphology*, is a book review of Lucie K.Morisset's book *The landscape's memory. The urban form history of a town centre : Saint-Roch, Quebec (La mémoire du paysage. Histoire de la forme urbaine d'un centre-ville, Saint-Roch, Québec)*, Les presses de l'Université de Laval, Canada, 2001, 286 pp. Written in French, this is a case study of an important area of Quebec City.

Key words

Urban forms ; landscape ; Canada ; Quebec city ; Saint-Roch district ; Lucie K. Morisset

Résumé en français

Ce court article, publié dans la revue internationale *Urban Morphology*, est une critique du livre de Lucie K.Morisset *La mémoire du paysage. Histoire de la forme urbaine d'un centre-ville, Saint-Roch, Québec*, Les presses de l'Université de Laval, Canada, 2001, 286 pp. Il s'agit d'une étude de cas, en français, d'un important quartier de la ville de Québec.

Mots-clés en français

Formes urbaines ; paysage ; Canada ; ville de Québec ; quartier Saint-Roch ; Lucie K. Morisset

The case study presented in Morisset's book refers to an important area of Quebec City whose name is Saint-Roch. The title of the book may be confusing. Quebec being a city and a province as well, we can guess that the study is about some other town. However, this confusion reveals something. One of the central subjects of the study is precisely the competition between Saint-Roch, the industrial, business, American looking district, with the administrative and European looking old part of the town, settled on the hill. The author traces the fascinating urban development of Saint-Roch from the 17th century to now and its different stages : a suburb cut from the city, the industrial and economic heart of the whole town, then a rejected and almost pulled down area and finally a rehabilitated part of the town center. By rediscovering the memory of this important part of Quebec City, on the one hand Morisset rehabilitates its image and, on the other hand, she gives us a completely new vision of the whole town.

History of urban forms is the methodological approach stated by Morisset and based on the current urban landscape and a majority of first-hand sources. It focuses on the network of streets, land divisions, volume built, and urban models used to plan the district, when this is the case, and the representations of this later. The different persons occurring in the making the town are identified as well as the traces they have left within the urban fabric. The complex connections between the economic, social and political history of Quebec city and the making of Saint-Roch district are well explained. The book contains 300 illustrations, well cross-referenced to the text, with long captions which provide a second level of comprehension :old and recent photographs, paintings, prints, typological models of dwellings...More than anything, the author gives us numerous maps and knows how to interpret them : maps from archives and the author's own maps summing up the increase of the network of the streets. The maps are sometimes too small and the page set-up is classical, but it is thorough and efficient for the reader. A general bibliography, sources list (texts and maps) and detailed index are also included.

There can be no doubt that this book represents a significant contribution to the understanding of the evolutionary process of urban forms. The scale of the case study chosen by the author, the district, is in my opinion, the best to analyse such processes. In fact, by studying a whole city, we usually focus on local council politics and main developments which tend then to hide the complexity of the making of the ordinary town. The district is the only scale where we can precisely observe the links between town and buildings. This study, made possible by an important and thorough work, is a very precise historical reconstitution. Divided in chapters following the chronological development, it gives an opportunity to identify numerous themes which come out from this history. The three chapters devoted to the 18th and 19th centuries, periods which are particularly stressed on, are especially interesting and new.

A detraction from the general excellence of the study is a general lack of synthesis. The reading is made difficult because Morisset tells us a story based on a lot of successive small events. I would say, a story from the inside. So, it is difficult for readers to locate themselves within Saint-Roch and within the whole town if they don't know the place. If the urban processes are precisely described, the synthesis has not been made For example, numerous strong themes run through the book such as "identity and urban form" (French, British, North

American and European influences), “actors making the town”, “urban regulations”, “connections (or not) between streets, plots and buildings”...but they are never identified for themselves. Except for the 20th century, there is no attempt to broaden the subject in the direction of other towns or other countries.

This question aside, this is a valuable work which inclines a French reader to make comparisons. The most surprising is to realise how similar the evolutionary processes of urban forms are until the second world war, between a North American district and those studied at the same scale in Europe. Nevertheless, this is not the same continent, the same history nor the same culture. It is very interesting to observe this parallelism during a period where a strong centralised town planning doesn't exist yet, that is to say from the first settlement to the end of the 19th century. During the following period, until the second world war, the processes are close too, but they are better known. North American references to the main urban models are not far from European, even if the vocabulary is different. A comparative work between North American and European notions in different languages would be very useful (for example :“City beautiful”, “haussmannisation”, “embellissement des villes”...). After 1950, differences in town development between both continents increase, mainly because of a very different influence of cars. Comparative works in the history of urban forms have to be developed to bring to light the processes which are common in the making of towns. We strongly need studies made on the same scale and with the same accuracy as Morisset's book, this is why this latter is a valuable contribution towards a common knowlege.

Anne-Sophie Cléménçon. Centre National de la Recherche Scientifique et Université Lumière Lyon 2. Institut des Sciences de l'Homme, 16 avenue Berthelot, 69363 Lyon, cedex 07. France. Email : Anne-Sophie.Clemencon@univ-lyon2.fr