

# The Shifting Sightlines of Montreal's Silo no. 5

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Though, during the 1920s, Montreal's port enjoyed the distinction of being the greatest exporter of grain in the world, its significance today is primarily historical. Silo no. 5, the most recognisable relic of the port's former glory, is a massive complex of grain elevators built in stages between 1903 and 1959; measuring almost a half a kilometre long, it is also the city's largest industrial ruin, abandoned in 1994. In the intervening twenty years, there has been much handwringing in the local press about the fate of the derelict grain elevators, alternately derided as a dangerous urban blight or heralded as a monument to the city's industrial past. Despite its designation as a Recognised Building by the Federal Heritage Buildings Review Office in 1995, the silo has largely been left to moulder. It was not widely considered a potential tourist attraction until its purchase in 2010 by the Canada Lands Company (CLC), a Crown property management firm, as part of the Federal Government's 'Montréal's New Harbourfront initiative', an urban development project undertaken in 2007 with the mandate to create an 'exceptional urban space for Montrealers to live, work and play'.<sup>1</sup>

Since its construction, the silo has enjoyed an ambivalent, sometimes fraught relationship with the city that has been largely negotiated through visual media. From early postcards and paintings showing the silo as a technological wonder, to the use of its undulating concrete surface as a giant screen for large-scale projections in the 1990s, it is the persistence of the silo as a visual phenomenon that has largely determined public reaction to the otherwise inaccessible site. Though the CLC's plans for the site are still undetermined, there are indications that this approach to the complex as a primarily visual phenomenon will continue. The aestheticisation of the Silo as an erstwhile urban ruin suitable for commercial redevelopment mirrors the situation in other postindustrial port cities such as Liverpool, which has similarly incorporated former sites of industry into contemporary sites of culture and leisure.

It was not until the early twentieth century, with the construction of unprecedentedly large concrete and steel silos, that Montreal's port gained an imposing visual presence. At its construction in 1903, Elevator B – exempt from the city's ten-storey height restriction<sup>2</sup> – stood at approximately twelve storeys. At its construction seven years later, the now-demolished neighbouring Silo no. 2 became the tallest building in Montreal, dwarfing a city skyline previously dominated by church steeples. The widespread industrialisation of the port garnered mixed reactions from citizens: the most vociferous complaint about the massive new grain elevators, aside from a more general Victorian distaste for industrialism, was that they created a barrier between the city and the river, obscuring the picturesque view of the water with concrete and steel. As Stephen Leacock described, these structures were 'a blot on the landscape, a disfigurement of nature's work ... [but] they mean so much to the life and industry of Canada, to the life line of imperial safety, that the eye that looks on them becomes trained to a new adjustment.'<sup>3</sup> This new adjustment, a description that echoes Walter Benjamin's characterisation of the 'complex kind of training'<sup>4</sup> that the human sensorium had to undergo in confrontation with modernity, was formalised and negotiated by the contemporaneous development of representational media such as photography and the postcard.

Internationally, the postcard became one of the most important ways in which the images of new industrial buildings permeated the public imaginary and symbolic landscape. This medium was a powerful tool for disseminating an image of the grain elevators as modern architectural curiosities representative of technological progress, wherein the monumental 'sublimity' of the structures was emphasised. In these images, the complexity of the structures was downplayed in order to transform them into 'transcendent symbol[s] of technology', what Le Corbusier described as 'the magnificent first-fruits of the new age'.<sup>5</sup> Early postcards of the silos of Montreal tended to represent the structures as cut off from their wider urban context: in *Towards a New Architecture* (originally published in 1923), Le Corbusier went so far as to remove the cupola of Marché Bonsecours from a photograph of Silo no. 2, so as not to distract from the pristine form of the elevator.<sup>6</sup> As Réjean Legault points out, photographs such as these continue to haunt architecture as a creation myth for modernism, which partially explains their contemporary

heritage value.

There is evidence that these same photographs took on an important iconicity in Montreal, where Charles O'Shea created a series of stained glass windows for the City Council Chambers, crowning the Mayor's chair with a quasi-religious depiction of Silo no. 2 that appears to be based on the same postcard that Le Corbusier reproduced in his book a year later. Local artists Adrien Hébert and Marian Dale Scott painted heroic portraits of Montreal's silos and industrial port during the 1920s and 1930s, and the Federal government drew on this same vernacular for the 1937 Paris Exposition, where the Canadian national pavilion was designed to resemble a complex of concrete silos in an attempt to rebrand the country as technologically sophisticated. During these years, the image of the silos represented progress and the promise of a prosperous future, as in Gabrielle Roy's classic Depression-era novel *The Tin Flute*, first published in 1945, where the ambitious working-class character Jean Lévesque looks to the rows of elevators for 'a final confirmation of his destiny'.<sup>7</sup>

When the Saint Lawrence Seaway opened 1959, it allowed many ocean-going vessels to bypass trans-shipping to Montreal, and the giant silos grew increasingly obsolete; by the mid-1960s, resentment was growing regarding the inaccessibility of the harbour, which had been cordoned off by a permanent fence during World War II. The sudden visibility of the silos was also seen as a problem by organisers in the run-up to the 1967 World Exposition, who worried that the massive grain elevators would detract from the picturesque view of Montreal that they wished to present from the manmade island fairground across the river. Given the triumphalist tone of technological progress characteristic of Expo, the disused silos represented a reminder of technological obsolescence. In an attempt to help them blend in with the view of the city, the silos were given a coat of grey paint.<sup>8</sup> Despite these efforts, they generated much attention during Expo: Melvin Charney published an article about them in *Architectural Design* that summer,<sup>9</sup> and visiting critic Reynar Banham remarked that the grain elevators 'suddenly became some of the most widely commented [on] buildings there'.<sup>10</sup>

As early as the mid-1960s, proposals calling for the demolition of the silos as a way to open a 'window on the river'<sup>11</sup> became commonplace in local newspapers. With the designation and redevelopment of Old Montreal as the city's first historical district in 1964, the network of silos was increasingly represented in the local press as an obstacle to the city's heritage, in that they blocked the view of Old Montreal from the water. While a few dissenting voices argued for their preservation, most were in favour of the eventual demolition of Silos no. 1 and 2 in 1983 and 1978, respectively. Despite its heritage status, the fate of Silo no. 5 was uncertain, with editorials showing a split in public opinion regarding the silo as patrimony or monstrosity.<sup>12</sup>

Abandoned now for nearly twenty years, Silo no. 5 has been host to a number of artistic interventions such as the light installation *Projections* by Atelier In Situ in 1997, their 'Machine à voir' campaign in 2000, and the Silophone project in 2002. These projects, which foreground the site's status as a neglected urban landmark in the city, have consecrated the Silo, making it more important as a heritage building replete with cultural credentials. Though the CLC's plans for the site remain unclear, it has said that it plans to repurpose and not demolish the structure, and there is preliminary evidence that the historical approach to Silo no. 5 as a primarily visual phenomenon will continue; so far, the only major external change has been the installation of a system of floodlights along the base of Elevator B-1 as a way to beautify the view of the silo from Old Montreal as part of the 2011 *Festival Montréal en Lumière*. One official has also mentioned the possibility of creating an observatory at the summit of the silo,<sup>13</sup> and in 2011, the company posted a video on YouTube featuring a 360° view from the top of Elevator B-1.<sup>14</sup>

The redevelopment of decommissioned industrial sites into urban promenades is something that has gained popularity in recent years. The appropriation of urban ruins functions as an efficient way to make the erstwhile industrial site itself more picturesque, while simultaneously reorienting the gaze away from the structure back towards the city in much the same way that Maupassant recommended lunching

at the Eiffel Tower as a way to avoid having to look at it.<sup>15</sup> A deceptively simple and powerful way of colonising once-inaccessible sites, this conversion process also effectively capitalises on the ‘contemporary ruinophilia’<sup>16</sup> and industrial nostalgia of the present as a way to bring tourism and gentrification to previously underused areas of the metropolis. For over a century, Silo no. 5 has continued to challenge Montreal as an anomaly: a symbol of modernity that the city could not readily assimilate or claim outright; a blight on the local landscape praised by international critics; a heritage building that distracts from the city’s historical quarter, and a barrier to Montreal’s sightlines with unparalleled views of the metropolis. In the CLC’s tentative proposal to create a belvedere at the top of Silo no. 5, an obstacle in the city’s panorama is potentially converted to the site of its ultimate reconciliation, where one might glimpse the fractured spaces and histories of Montreal’s modernity and urbanity reanimated in a fantasy of visual plenitude.

1 [www.montrealsnewharbourfront.ca/en/](http://www.montrealsnewharbourfront.ca/en/), *Montreals New Harbour Front*, accessed 29 November 2013.

2 Jason Gilliland, ‘Redimensioning Montreal: Circulation and Urban Form, 1846–1918’, in?, eScholarship@McGill, 2011, p.24.

3 Stephen Leacock, *Montreal, Seaport and City*, McClelland & Stewart, Toronto, 1942, p.241.

4 Walter Benjamin, ‘On Some Motifs in Baudelaire’, *Illuminations: Essays and Reflections*, Pimlico, London, 1999, p.175.

5 Le Corbusier, *Towards a New Architecture*, Pimlico, London, 1999, p.175.

6 Ibid, p.104.

7 Gabrielle Roy, *The Tin Flute*, McClelland & Stewart, Toronto, 1980, p.221.

8 Gilles Lesage, ‘L’apparence du port sera amélioré pour l’Expo’, *Le Devoir*, Montréal, 11 November 1966.

9 Melvin Charney, ‘The grain elevators revisited’ *Architectural Design*, July, 1967, p.328–31.

10 Reyner Banham, ‘Megacity Montreal’, *Megastructure: Urban Futures of the Recent Past*, Harper & Row, New York, 1976, p.117.

11 Lesage, op. cit., p.3.

12 Nicolas Kenny, ‘Patrimoine ou monstruosité? S.O.S. silo!’, *La Presse*, Montréal, 4 October 2004.

13 Kaj Huddart and Cory Lesk, ‘The former glory of grain: Investigating a relic of Montreal’s industrial past’, *The McGill Daily*, 17 October 2011, <http://www.mcgilldaily.com/2011/10/the-former-glory-of-grain/>, accessed 5 February 2013.

14 ‘Pointe-du-Moulin, Montreal – Silo No.5 – 360° view’, <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=fsNKt8sDsiE>, accessed 6 January 2011.

15 Roland Barthes, ‘The Eiffel Tower’, *Rethinking Architecture: A Reader in Cultural Theory*, Routledge, London, 2003, p.172.

16 Svetlana Boym, *Architecture of the Off-Modern*, Temple Hoyne Buell Center for the Study of American Architecture: Princeton Architectural Press, Princeton, 2008, p.20.

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