

Colloquium UnSITEly!
Leveraging Design to Improve Urban Construction Sites

Summary of Session 1a

« Worksites and Culture : Design Communication »

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Celebrating and Experiencing the Worksite / The Worksite as Landscape

In 2012, the UNESCO Chair on Landscape and Environment (known by its French initials, CUPEUM) partnered with the Montréal borough of Côte-des-Neiges–Notre-Dame-de-Grâce to develop an initial research project on the landscape of construction sites. The goal was to improve the living environment for residents, users and workers who would be spending several years in close proximity to the worksites for two major local hospitals, the Jewish General Hospital and the Centre Hospitalier Universitaire Sainte-Justine. Although the initiative never got off the drawing board, the questions it raised are still topical today, in the context of the *Unsitely!* Colloquium.

Does a construction site constitute a project per se? If so, what is the nature of that project, and what function does it serve?

A quick overview of several sites revealed that worksite projects generally aim to reduce disturbances (noise, dust, heavy vehicles, and so on). Since users are quick to notice everyday disturbances on a worksite, it was understandably this aspect that generated the initial worksite project experiments, with the goal of attenuating the impacts of such nuisances on the quality of the living environment.

But what is there beyond managing these disturbances? As Jean-Pierre Grunfeld noted at the very start of the day of reflection on construction sites, his first thought is to highlight the benefits of the site rather than solely managing disturbances. He explained that considering the benefits of the construction site makes it easier to accept the disturbances it can cause. The presentations during the Colloquium suggest that beyond the issue of disturbances, the construction site exists as an urban landscape, and in that sense provides experiences and plays a role in constructing the imaginary life of the city.

Each in turn, Grunfeld, Annemike Banniza and Patrick Roux placed their worksites in historical perspective – respectively, the redevelopment of rue d’Alsace-Lorraine in Toulouse, the reconstruction of the Royal Palace in Berlin, and Paris Les Halles. In their presentations, the construction sites cease to be independent objects of attention in the audience’s mind, transitional moments of no particular interest. Each site has a narrative that goes well beyond the simple history of the project. Each construction site is a lynchpin in its city’s history. The renovation of rue d’Alsace-Lorraine recounts the golden age of a medium-sized city, with its beautification projects and the renewal that brings it alive today. The reconstruction of the Royal Palace brings to mind the birth of Berlin, the war, the division and subsequent reunion of Germany and the desire to find lost symbols once more. The redevelopment of Paris Les Halles illustrates the history of the economic heart of Paris, the major projects of the 1960s, the social struggles they provoked, and the desire to revitalize the streets of the area today.

In this way the three speakers depicted the history of the construction site as part of the city’s lengthy past. An early timescale of the worksite project emerges from the presentations – a scale by which we seek meaning in the ongoing actions. This shows that far from being a blot on the city, the construction site is a true sign of urban vitality, thus playing a role that is inherent in maintaining the quality of the living environment.

While illustrating the projects they are working on, the speakers also gave us a glimpse of a second timescale, one that includes the construction site, the timescale for the project from the original planning and motivations to the vision of the future it offers, which can be seen from the architectural illustrations. In Toulouse, the proposal was to initiate communications about the construction site on rue d’Alsace-Lorraine even before work started, with the arrival of a “time zero” in which users became familiar with the communications tools that would become more visible with the start of construction. During this period, the antiquated state of the underground infrastructures was shown with photographs of elements not usually visible, such as aqueduct and sewer pipes. Their construction dates were given so that everyone could understand how essential it was to repair the pipes. Here, the focus of communication was the justification for the work.

Other communications activities around the construction sites aim to publicize the features of the project to come in a more direct way. Building a “project house,” including models of the project-to-be, plans and photos of the site, appears to be an activity common to several of the worksite projects presented at the Colloquium. Some projects go beyond that gesture, plunging the user into future programming right now. The Humboldt Box, for example, is designed to provide an exhibition space that gives a sneak peek at the programming of the Royal Palace in Berlin. Before the Palace even opens, visitors to the Humboldt Box can see the high quality of the collections that will be exhibited there. Another case in point is the addition of benches alongside the Paris Les Halles construction site, enhancing the adjacent public space in a way. This device also provides an opportunity to appreciate the qualities and nature of the public space to come, not from the architectural illustrations but through the concrete experience of the urban space. The site ceases to be separate from the final project and becomes a continuum, a foretaste of what is to come.

Finally, the third timescale for the construction site is the story of the site itself, its progress and participants. This is the timescale of proximity. Thanks to the communications tools linked with this timescale, users understand how to navigate around the site and how they will need to adapt their habits. Of course, newsletters on the progress of the work and planned interventions are part of the story of the site, but the construction sites illustrated generate innovative initiatives designed to make everyday life easier. The Toulouse site project highlights right up front the presence of those who make rue d’Alsace-Lorraine a place of such vitality, with markers showing the names and locations of local merchants. This specific attention to the merchants strengthens their power of attraction when work on the site first begins and regular customers are tempted to take their business elsewhere. This emphasis on the people around the site may also be centred on those who work on the site. The rue d’Alsace-Lorraine and Paris Les Halles sites both chose to highlight the history of the people who participate in the site, helping users to gain a better understanding of the workers with whom they cross paths every day. By taking their pictures or showing their portraits, these site projects salute the work of participants in the project.

As the speakers discussed the history of their respective projects and drew connections among the city, the project and the construction site, they gradually revealed how the values that orient the construction project itself can become values underpinning the worksite communication project.

Dialogue lies at the heart of these values. The public nature of the projects presented probably influences the strong desire to focus worksite projects on dialogue with the populations involved. Nonetheless, it was from that emphasis on creating a dialogue among the developers, site managers and users that the desire to use the whole site as a communications tool emerged – aiming to go beyond sending out newsletters or exhibiting posters on the project to enrich the experience. By including raised terraces, convivial spaces or clear and consistent signage, all of the projects pay attention to the experience of people on the site, even trying to make the site an attraction for urban living. Instead of being a vacuum or a pause in the hum of the city, the site becomes a catalyst for a new and ephemeral animation that takes its surroundings by storm.

The same concern can also be seen in projects from other sessions at the Unsightly! Colloquium. The art installations from the Times Square transformation in New York City and the *Skirt of the Black Mouth* palisade from the Tate Modern extension in London are both designed to generate quality urban spaces near the construction site. In addition, the nature of these site projects is directly inspired by the spirit of the place from which they come. Sherry Dobbin aptly describes Times Square as “fast, cheap and tacky” and notes the inexpensive and ephemeral installations that the Times Square Alliance is bringing there. Similarly, the public space program adjacent to the *Skirt of the Black Mouth* is part of the logic of involving various audiences set in motion by the Tate Modern within its walls.

Grunfeld echoed this search for the specificity of the worksite project as he described the way he works. Walking, listening and reading are the three key activities in his approach to worksite projects, bearing witness to his desire

to germinate the project from the features that are part of its surroundings. While the words clarity, consistency and simplicity are regularly used to describe various projects, the fact remains that he is moving away from the homogeneity and reproducibility of the answers offered by each project.

And so it becomes clear that beyond the objective of creating a dialogue between the project manager and the user, the worksite project must reflect the construction project from which it was born, and in that sense cannot be reproduced from one place to another. The planning process for each worksite project must draw upon a specific context, which is at once physical and functional, but also institutional. The site project arises from the generic nature of the usual experience on a construction site where there is no project.

In view of this constraint, the worksite projects presented by the speakers employed a method of intervention through experimentation. In fact, the ephemeral nature of the worksite creates a certain freedom, outside the perennial nature of urban spaces under construction, to create new ways of experiencing the city. Under such circumstances, it comes as no surprise that the competition approach was used by a great many of the people who spoke throughout the day. In Paris, Berlin, New York, Saint-Étienne and Nantes, calls for proposals, idea competitions, project competitions and artwork contests have all been advanced as ways of exploiting the worksites' potential for innovation and creation and urging the next generation to take action. The result is a renewal of the landscape expression of the construction site, opening the door wide for the emergence of a broader variety of worksite projects.

The research activity developed by CUPEUM in 2012 on creating worksite landscapes was called "*Viv(r) le chantier.*" (The French pun means both "long live the construction site" and "experiencing the site.") The play on words made the point that the objective of the project was to find both the potential for celebrating the site (*Vive le chantier*) and opportunities to make the site part of the living environment (*Vivre le chantier*). Intuitive at the time, the two separate themes naturally emerged from this exchange on the worksite as a communications medium. A construction site is a source of worry and insecurity because of the changes in habits it generates and the unknown nature of the project to come. As it evolves, the reference points and pathways shift, and the environment begins its transformation towards a still uncertain future for the user, who must constantly develop new habits. A worksite to be experienced and celebrated is one that places humans, the users of the city, at the heart of development concerns, positioning the site not as an absence of urban life but as an urban space to be filled with life.



Patrick Marmen holds Bachelor's and Master's degrees in Architecture from Université Laval. Since 2004, he has been working mainly in the fields of urban design and heritage. He is interested mostly in the development and improvement of urban mechanisms that foster design quality in architecture and urban design, and has been involved in many characterization studies on land and landscape development in various Quebec regions (Quebec City, Montréal, Lanaudière and Montérégie) and internationally (Hanoi, Vietnam; Qingdao, China). He has also run many knowledge transfer and training activities for professional and student groups.

As a research officer with the UNESCO Chair in Landscape and Environmental Design at the Université de Montréal (CUPEUM) since 2011, Patrick acts mainly as a co-ordinator for research-action projects aiming to use joint action and communication in planning processes. In particular, he was a professional advisor for the development and co-ordination of the YUL-MTL: Moving landscapes international ideas competition. He is also involved in co-ordinating the CUPEUM's international intensive design workshops (WAT_UNESCO), including those in Binzhou (China, 2014) and Sao Paulo (Brazil, 2015).

At the same time, he is responsible for practical training at the Université de Montréal School of Landscape Architecture and is a substitute member of the Urban Planning Advisory Committee for Montréal's Le Sud-Ouest borough.