Last Dance on the Main

An animated documentary on the demolition of a row of historic buildings on Montreal's St Laurent boulevard, also known as 'The Main', by politicians and building developers, and the resistance put up by the burlesque artists and local community.

A film by Aristofanis Soulikias
Supervised by Luigi Allemano
Produced at the Mel Hoppenheim School of Cinema
Concordia University
“Historic buildings saved by burlesque performers?”, I thought, after reading about it on a Heritage Montreal post, and after seeing a youtube video featuring local cultural historian Louis Rastelli and activist/actor Donovan King lamenting the loss of the Main's architectural heritage.

To my mind, it was the perfect idea for an animated documentary on architecture, urbanism, people’s empowerment, Montreal and the invincible spirit of celebration!
Visiting the Lower Main

The Lower Main is a colloquial name for the southern part of St Lawrence (St Laurent) boulevard. The site in question is just south of the corner of St Catherine street. I soon visited the crossroad where developers had already gone ahead with demolishing a series of 19th century heritage buildings with the blessings of the municipal and provincial authorities.
Visiting the Lower Main

An entire row of 19th century greystone buildings were gone. There was promise that they would be reassembled and part of a mid rise glass tower for Hydro Quebec and that the area would be revamped and “upgraded”.

Visiting the Lower Main

Architectural detail from one of the dismantled buildings on the west side of the Lower Main.
Visiting the Lower Main

The buildings that remain on either end of the empty site are the Theatre National, a national heritage site that could not be demolished, and Cafe Cleopatre, currently a striptease club but also a burlesque theatre venue on the second floor, housed there since it was built. The latter's owner and artists resisted expropriation.
A few days before the municipal elections, Tuesday, October 1, 2013, candidates Richard Bergeron, Denis Coderre, Marcel Côté and Mélanie Joly present their platform on Montreal's culture at a public event at Club Soda. Questions were repeatedly raised regarding the safeguarding of the heritage buildings across the street but answers remained, typically, vague.
Visiting the Lower Main

The burlesque scene.
Applying Ideas

The Dancers Scene

Preliminary sketch - Animatic

Final Film
Visiting the Lower Main

Big buildings – big entertainment – quiet people
Applying Ideas

“Cartier des spectacles” scene
Finding people

Conservation Architect, Luce Lafontaine was one of the names suggested to me by Heritage Montreal. After weeks of correspondence, we meet at the crossroad, the sunny morning of 5 November 2013 and chat. I’m looking for a quiet space, she suggests the nearby Place de la Paix. I accept, worried that there might be noise coming from the street. Her interview is magnificent, she raises all the points with little effort from my part and the only noise that might cause problems in editing comes from the wind. There is one line, however, that comes clearly across and I already know it will be central in my film :“Ce n’est pas nécessairement une belle rue, mais c’est rempli de Montréalité!”

Later that evening I’m walking up St Urbain street in Little Italy to meet Louis Rastelli who was one of the two men on that youtube video. He runs the Montreal Archives and although he is an architect he prefers the title of “cultural historian”, which the Montreal Gazette once used for him. The place is full of books on Montreal and the city’s night life, CDs but also, curiously, of old cigarette vending machines that are destined to be reused and sell various Montreal memorabilia in clubs across the city. The interview is 23 minutes long, and of course the description and analysis of how St Laurent boulevard came about, what it was, is and what will happen is more than thorough. As he euphemistically said at the end, “you probably have more than two minutes”.

Books he recommended:

• St Laurent: LA Main de Montreal by Pierre Anctil
• City Unique: Montreal Days and Nights in the 1940s and ’50s by William Weintraub
• The Street Called the Main by Aline Gubbay
• Le red light du Montreal by Daniel Proulx
• Swinging in Paradise: The history of Jazz in Montreal by John Gilmore

From http://aristofanisblog.wordpress.com
Finding people

Again, ordering hot dogs at the “Montreal Pool Room” to legitimize – to the suspicious eyes of the cashier – my presence there. Thankfully, she does accept my plea for lowering the music, even if she doesn’t crack a smile. With me is actor, teacher and Concordia graduate, Donovan King, the other voice of that youtube video, the one voice I had not replaced so far in my soundtrack. We discover common interests, backgrounds and ideas and the discussion flows very comfortably. The recording should yield some good material for the film, albeit different from the equally good youtube footage.

The next night, after eight hours of classes, I am dressing up again to head down town. This time I am meeting with the owner of Cafe Cleopatra, Johnny Zoumboulakis. I had called him the week before after a few days of inner debate and reluctance. “To whom is this intended?” he asked me in Greek.

Now, midnight of 18 November, having walked through a crowd of strippers and onlookers, I am sitting in a little back room of Cafe Cleo, next to the man who said no to the Société de développement Angus, while I am trying nervously to connect the 722 sound device cables. “Are you going to make a cartoon out of me?” he asks and I laugh. He is flipping his keys as a Greek would flip his worry beads, their sound not as prominent as the one coming from the dance floor, outside. “We are missing a door”, he says and I assure him that this ambient sound will work to the film’s advantage. As he speaks, slowly, with a sense of gravitas looking at a certain vacuum, there isn’t much additional information I am getting about the Main and the events regarding Cafe Cleo’s resistance, but there is definitely a shift in style from the previous interviews. The style I was missing. That, along with a very good punchline:

“The way I met the Main and the way the Main accepted me… it was something very exceptional, because the Main is the only place where francophones, anglophones and allophones meet, entertain and nobody says my Main”.

From http://aristofanisblog.wordpress.com
News of proposals for building up the area.

Un immeuble de 160 millions au coin St-Laurent et Ste-Catherine

Publié le 02 décembre 2013 à 12h08 | Mis à jour le 02 décembre 2013 à 12h08

On trouvera une tour résidentielle de 150 logements du côté de la rue Sainte-Catherine. Sur le boulevard Saint-Laurent, il est prévu d'aménager le rez-de-chaussée un marché d'alimentation à aire ouverte formé de plusieurs commerçants indépendants.

> Blogue de l'immobilier: Projet de 160 millions dans le Red Light
(http://blogues.lapresse.ca/laressa/immobilier/2013/12/02/projet-de-160-millions-dans-le-red-light/)

Le projet propose de contourné le célèbre bar d'effeuilleuses le Café Cléopâtre, dont le propriétaire John Zouboulakis, refuse d'être exproprié.

Sur la rue Sainte-Catherine, on trouvera une tour résidentielle de 150 logements. Sur le boulevard Saint-Laurent, il est prévu d'aménager le rez-de-chaussée un marché d'alimentation à aire ouverte formé de plusieurs commerçants indépendants comme on en trouve à l'intérieur du marché Atwater. Le premier étage sera consacré à des organismes culturels du domaine de la création. Les étages supérieurs d'une superficie de 14 000 mètres carrés logeront des 700 fonctionnaires du gouvernement du Québec, dont une bonne part loge actuellement au Centre de commerce mondial, dans le Vieux-Montréal. Le bail est d'une durée de 25 ans.
Understanding the past

Maps from the CCA
Understanding the past

Maps from the CCA

Map of the City and Suburbs of Montreal, John Adams, 1825

When John Adams published this map, the fortification walls had completely disappeared from Montreal's urban landscape and hardly a trace of them can be seen in the street grid shown here.

Chemin de Saint-Laurent, on the other hand, had grown by leaps and bounds, in the space of a few years becoming the town's main artery for north-south traffic.

Soon, if they had not already started doing so, English-speaking Montrealers would call it the Main, for "Main Street"—reflecting its importance to trade and business in general.

Applying Ideas
Opening Scene

Montreal and the Main's evolution (plans)
Understanding the past

Street Elevation of the Lower Main before demolition (looking West)

Source:


Plan of Red Light district
Applying Ideas

Scene based on west elevation of St Laurent Boulevard
Understanding the past

Testimonies of past traces
Understanding the past
Photographs from publications
Applying Ideas

A collage of traces (used in several scenes)
Readings and other sources


Quaint Montreal. (192-). Montréal: Gray Line.

Quebec album. (1880). Montreal: Canada Railway News Co..

Reid, T. H. (1949-1967). This Canada: a concise illustrated description of interesting places and landmarks in Canada including their historical backgrounds. Montreal: Published by Folkard Co. of Canada Ltd..

Results of the study in view of the urban renewal of the area bounded by Craig, Bleury, Sherbrooke Streets and Saint-Laurent Boulevard. (1959). Montréal: City of Montréal, City Planning Department.
