

Helen Rosenau, *Social Purpose in Architecture Paris and London Compared, 1760–1800*, London: Studio Vista, 1970, 144 p., illus., £2.25

Pierre de la Ruffinière du Prey

Volume 1, numéro 1, 1974

URI : <https://id.erudit.org/iderudit/1077465ar>

DOI : <https://doi.org/10.7202/1077465ar>

[Aller au sommaire du numéro](#)

Éditeur(s)

UAAC-AAUC (University Art Association of Canada | Association d'art des universités du Canada)

ISSN

0315-9906 (imprimé)

1918-4778 (numérique)

[Découvrir la revue](#)

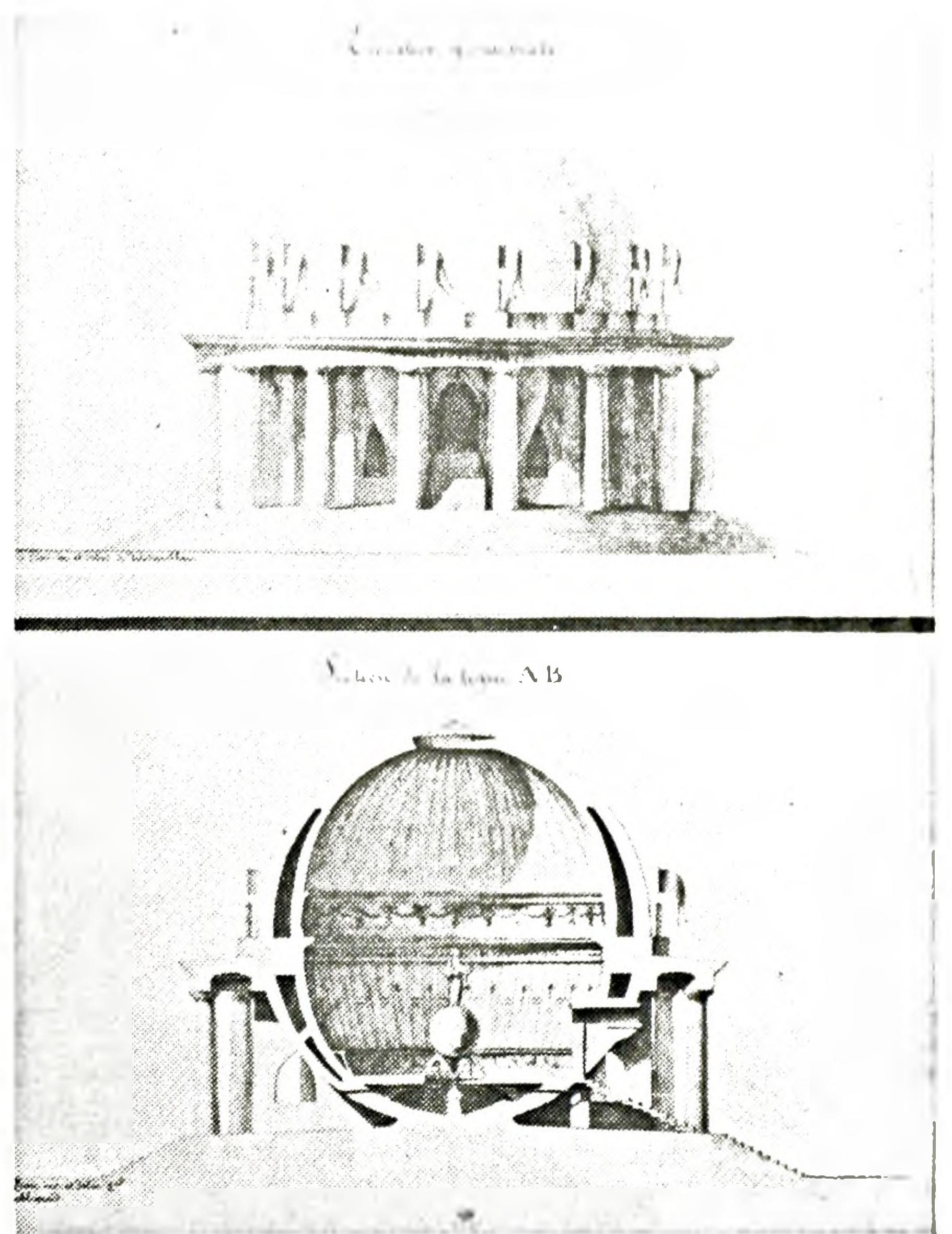
Citer ce compte rendu

de la Ruffinière du Prey, P. (1974). Compte rendu de [Helen Rosenau, *Social Purpose in Architecture Paris and London Compared, 1760–1800*, London: Studio Vista, 1970, 144 p., illus., £2.25]. *RACAR : Revue d'art canadienne / Canadian Art Review*, 1(1), 63–65. <https://doi.org/10.7202/1077465ar>

Helen ROSENAU, *Social Purpose in Architecture Paris and London Compared, 1760-1800*, London: Studio Vista, 1970, 144 p., illus., £2.25.

To the Canadian student or teacher of architectural history a book is bound to be of interest that bears the title, *Social Purpose in Architecture Paris and London Compared, 1760-1800*. Apparently a tale of two cities, the book is actually nation-wide in its scope, and genuinely bi-cultural in its approach. Time and again, Helen Rosenau makes clear the frequent intellectual exchanges between Canada's two parent empires in spite of the less favourable means for the propagation of ideas, and the political turmoil of the period. The influence of Abbé Laugier's architectural thought upon the English, for example, finds its exact counterpart in the impact of Edmund Burke's aesthetic philosophy upon the French. One comes away from reading *Social Purpose in Architecture* with the impression that an ideological "shuttle service" must have existed across the Channel from 1760 until 1800.

Miss Rosenau's title gives fair warning at the outset of her consciously one-sided interpretation of the architectural material she discusses. She repudiates formal analysis by arguing, rightly although perhaps exaggeratedly, that "a work of art cannot be entirely explained by aesthetic consideration . . .", and "If this approach is true in general, it is even more relevant to architecture in which the purpose of a building is of predominant importance". This statement not only suggests that architecture be discussed by building-types; it has far deeper implications as well. Style as a criterion disappears, to be replaced by the degree of "social involvement", or awareness, of the architect. To this reviewer the shift in emphasis does not, *per force*, produce more objectivity, because a lot depends on what one means by "social involvement", and whether one gauges it by modern standards or by those of the period in question itself. I feel that Rosenau consistently mixes in her own subjective value judgements when she uses interchangeably as terms of approbation such words as "revolutionary", "utopian", "forward looking", etc. She also succumbs to a temptation to make folk heroes of such



Lequeu, *Temple de Justice*, Rosenau, p. 126.

famous men as John Howard, Jeremy Bentham, F.-M.-C. Fourier, and lesser known personalities like Antoine Petit. The often repeated confrontations between these "good guys", and the implicit "bad guys" of the Establishment, may strike some readers as naive in a scholarly work; others could suspect that behind many of Rosenau's opinions may lie an unstated political bias. To this bias I attribute the complete omission from the book of the homes, churches, places of amusement, commercial buildings, or sweatshops of the rich. But social purpose is on the face of it a broad concept that belongs by rights to no one class; only in a very modern and restrictive sense can it be said to apply mainly to architecture for the downtrodden masses.

The seven chapters comprising a total of 141 pages of text and illustration, are each devoted to an individual theme; the first concerns "The Intellectual Background" in France and England. Here, with impressive command of the contemporary literature, Rosenau places architecture within the bigger context of the Enlightenment, in which aspirations for social betterment characterize virtually every intellectual endeavour. In France, where political ferment was much greater than in England, ironically enough many of the architects commonly thought of as "Revolutionary" because of their humanitarian beliefs, were fostered under the *ancien régime*, and remained faithful to it. In that Auguste Cheval de Saint-Hubert (who wisely changed his name to plain "Hubert" after 1789) is ranked by Rosenau as one of the few political as well as architectural revolutionaries, it is a pity she did not reproduce any of his designs. In England, meanwhile, a quiet revolution was being waged through the down-to-earth proposals of the so-called "cottage books" that provided for better housing among agricultural workers. Rosenau concludes with an interesting contrast between theorizing, oppidan French intellectuals, and pragmatic English thinkers with their "back to the soil" doctrine.

In "The Growing Capitals", Rosenau convincingly demonstrates the "close contact", and "mutual influence", that united Paris and London in the latter half of the eighteenth century. Again it is the French who predominate in the theoretical domain (Pierre Patte, Jacques Gondoin, and above all F.-M.-C. Fourier). The English, though spurred on by the example of Paris, developed London through a series of small, privately financed speculative ventures, but more attention was paid to the housing of the lower and middle classes (John Gwynn, and George Dance). The general validity of these remarks diminishes because they are based on some pretty sweeping statements about individual architects. Can one really dismiss Claude-Nicolas Ledoux's astonishing schemes for the "new town" of Chaux as "by no means particularly revolutionary or forward looking" just because of "their scanty provisions for the housing of workers"? This seems to me a narrow view indeed of what "revolutionary" means.

"Hospitals" form a fascinating chapter because Rosenau includes some of the dream designs by Frenchmen that she has discovered. As early as 1774, Antoine Petit, a surgeon, brought out a proposal for a 2,000 bed hospital along innovative, radially symmetrical lines. A decade later Bernard Poyet enlarged the size to even more megalomaniacal proportions while keeping the round form. Say what she will, I am not convinced by Rosenau's argument that actual soaring population figures and a concern for public health, rather than a simple love of the grandiose, gave rise to such huge proposals. In regard to Petit's scheme, and the pavilion plan of ca. 1780 for the Paris Hôtel Dieu by Charles-François Viel, Rosenau may have overlooked a specific source of English influence. Both Frenchmen's hospitals feature elaborate systems of ventilation. It could be that they had referred to Dr. Stephen Hales's *Treatise on Ventilators*, published in London in 1758, and highly regarded by such men as John Howard. In turning to

English hospitals, Rosenau's choice wisely falls on lunatic asylums, a subject she could have made more of. St. Luke's Hospital, London (1782-84), the foremost example of such a structure for its date, is passed over in a brief paragraph. Rosenau is unaware that a competition, held in 1777, elicited designs for St. Luke's by James Gandon, James Lewis, John Soane, and George Dance, among other leading practitioners of the day. In that a number of the plans survive, it would have been possible for her to analyze *exactly* what social provisions were demanded and provided for, instead of bluntly stating that St. Luke's was "regarded as old fashioned" because of its system of wards. In fact the ward system remained the standard for a very long time, while, by contrast, the elaborate radially symmetrical schemes like those of James (*sic*, for John) Bevans, remained on paper. Rosenau misses a nice connection between John Bevans and the most advanced system of psychiatric therapy for its day, the "moral treatment" practiced at William Tuke's asylum, the Retreat, York. Bevans advised on the design of the Retreat in 1794, and it is significant that for inspiration with details he turned back to St. Luke's, as his correspondence clearly shows.

There can be little doubt that in the "Prisons", discussed next, French planning excelled from an early date, if, that is, the Belgian Maison de Force at Ghent (1772-75) ranks as a French example. Rosenau points out that the Maison de Force profoundly influenced John Howard, the prison reformer, and the British penitentiary legislation of 1778, that grew out of his writings. Moreover, though Rosenau fails to note this, the plan of the Maison de Force cut in half is reflected directly in the centric design for a male penitentiary by John Soane, which she illustrates. She laments that Soane's 1781 schemes seem to be the only remnants of the famous penitentiary competition held the next year with far-reaching effect on prison design in England and the United States. Yet she makes only a very cursory examination of his plans in the much-reduced versions published in 1828 and, as with St. Luke's, draws hasty conclusions. Soane's surviving original drawings in their elaborate provisions for prisoners negate, I feel, Rosenau's contention that "no social involvement is apparent... in the welfare of prisoners". It is true that Soane also emphasized creating an aesthetic of gloomy walls and towers that would act as a deterrent. But so did such other notable prison designers as Dance, Ledoux, and Étienne-Louis Boullée, all discussed by Rosenau. This simply goes to show that it is hard to search out the truly "revolutionary" in architecture when divorcing aesthetic from functional aspects in a way that is contrary to normal architectural practice of the period.

It is surprising, and perhaps significant, that not more developments in the methods of teaching occurred to bring about changes in the design of "Educational Institutions" considered in chapter five. This explains the paucity of material which causes Rosenau to stretch her definition to include libraries, museums and, somewhat illogically I feel, the spherical monuments of J.-P.-L.-L. Houël. The theme of the library fascinated Boullée, and other compatriot visionary architects, who collectively

may be credited with another instance of Franco-English cross-fertilisation of ideas: the greatest central plan library ever built, Sydney Smirke's main reading room in the British Museum. So too, as ought to have been mentioned, the museum as a means of distributing culture *en masse*, had roots in the abortive attempts of 1777-89 to open the Louvre to the public. Ultimately, however, England has proven herself in her free national museums to have stuck closer than France to the admirable principle of admittance without charge.

To my mind, the chapter entitled "Utopian and Ideal Visions" is, over all, Rosenau's best. Although most of the visionary schemes here dealt with are ebulliently French, a surprising number are English as well. The passages devoted to Soane's enormous Royal Palace and Senate House not only contain some of the best prose in the book, but also some of the most incisive remarks ever written about the architect. But then, to mar the general effect, there is a section dealing with Clapham Common (pp. 129-130), the *raison d'être* for which completely escapes me.

The last chapter, "Concluding Notes on Form and Function", rambles so much in nature as to provide no cohesion for the book as a whole, and it sheds precious little light on the important topic of form and function in eighteenth-century architecture. Rosenau saves to the very end some of the revealing remarks that would have been more instructive right at the beginning. Only now does she "tip her hand" when she writes: "The age was opposed to Romanticism... Its emphasis was on a collective and social consciousness, a concern with mankind rather than with the individual". Here we are back to the one-sided interpretation I spoke of earlier; for I feel that any study that eliminates Romanticism as a prime factor in eighteenth-century architectural thought is missing a very large part of the whole picture.

The variable quality of the text is reflected in the calibre of the illustrations. Some are of superb clarity. But in a book addressing itself to a scholarly audience, there seems absolutely no excuse for printing illustrations made from photocopies of originals. Nothing in a picture is more disagreeable to the eye than the fuzzy areas of pale grey, and the burned out areas of black, with which everyone who has used the photocopy process will be familiar. The reproduction of Blackburn's important Ipswich Gaol (p. 84) is totally inadequate in size, and Flaxman's elegant triumphal arch design is incorrectly described in the legend as being from the Yale University collection, whereas the text makes clear the author knew it was in Princeton.

In the final analysis, despite flaws, *Social Purpose in Architecture* plays a pioneering rôle in drawing attention to a long-neglected segment of architectural history: the limbo zone to which utilitarian structures have been banished. Hospitals, prisons, asylums, schools, are all alike in being a prey to changing technology and insufficient awareness of their value as monuments to an age. For this reason, many of the fine examples mentioned by Rosenau have been destroyed, and the toll continues to mount unabated. Perhaps there is about such buildings a lingering "unsavouriness" not found in domestic architecture. Take, for instance, the wanton

demolition by Frontenac County of its unique mid-nineteenth-century jail complex in Kingston, Ontario. Helen Rosenau's book ought to be mandatory reading for all county councils, even if it is still optional I would say for the student of architectural history. Her controversial system of contrasting France and England yields some valuable general notions, though, in a number of instances, deeper research would have led to more precise conclusions.

Pierre DE LA RUFFINIÈRE DU PREY
Queen's University, Kingston

Jean-Claude MARSAN, *Montréal en évolution*,
Montréal, Fides, 1974, 423 p., \$12.95

Le volume de Jean-Claude Marsan, *Montréal en évolution*, publié récemment chez Fides, constitue à notre avis l'une des synthèses importantes qu'il nous ait été donné de lire depuis plusieurs mois, voire quelques années. Une telle étude était souhaitée depuis longtemps par les urbanistes et les historiens de l'art. Nous pouvons sans crainte affirmer qu'ils ne seront point déçus dans l'ensemble à la lecture de ce texte dense, bien illustré et riche en renseignements de toutes sortes touchant la croissance et la vie de la métropole.

De plus, si on sent fort bien la démarche scientifique de l'auteur s'attachant, dès le début du volume, à cerner les facteurs géographiques, géologiques, climatiques, etc... qui déterminèrent en grande partie la mise en place des premières structures économiques et sociales ainsi que l'évolution subséquente de la ville, il nous faut souligner ce qui semble être l'intérêt primordial de cet ouvrage à savoir: la présence de l'homme dans la cité, présence que M. Marsan se fait une obligation permanente de signifier.

Lorsqu'on connaît un tant soit peu les intérêts de Jean-Claude Marsan dans la vie de tous les jours, on comprend fort bien cet attachement à faire sentir l'activité humaine dans un environnement devenu parfois hostile ou tout au moins menaçant, tant sur le plan culturel que social. Diplômé en architecture de l'Université de Montréal et docteur en urbanisme de l'Université d'Edimbourg (Écosse), M. Marsan s'est depuis plusieurs années fait le promoteur du droit du citoyen à une meilleure qualité de l'environnement. Défenseur acharné des richesses culturelles et sociales de la métropole véhiculées à travers ses édifices, ses parcs et ses monuments anciens, Jean-Claude Marsan est directeur de l'« Association Espaces-verts », des « Amis de la gare Windsor » et de « Sauvons Montréal ». Une participation aussi active dans un milieu fort bien connu (M. Marsan est originaire de Montréal), enrichie par une formation académique de grande valeur, ne pouvaient qu'assurer le succès d'une étude dont on ne peut qu'espérer d'heureuses retombées.

La démarche de l'auteur est simple. Présentant l'évolution de sa ville de manière chronologique, il