

For Everyone an Isolated Garden



Figure 1. "Terrace Door" Meredith Dixon Slide Collection

Alice Lemay – 260 234 682

ARCH 251 - Architectural History II

Professor Annmarie Adams

23 March 2018

The years following the Second World War are iconic for three things: picture-perfect cocktail parties, the baby boom and urbanization. Those who lived through the sixties still reminisce about the good years and those who are too young to have experienced them simply admire the period for its enjoyment of life.

At the time, it was customary for the wives of neighboring households to alternate hosting duties after a tiresome week at work for their husbands.<sup>1</sup> Neighbours would gather at one's house to enjoy barbeques and drinks in the backyard or in the living room while the children ran off to play wherever they pleased.<sup>2</sup> The architecture of middle class houses anticipated the common social gatherings of the time and incorporated generous spaces to accommodate guests comfortably.

Expo 67 came about in Montreal, igniting a change in the city that was fueled by its international exposure and the desire to achieve recognition.<sup>3</sup> What had once been considered modern was now *reconsidered*, this time including transportation and housing. With his strong beliefs in the value of urban living in combination with nature, Moshe Safdie was selected to build a housing complex based on his thesis from the McGill University Architecture Masters program.<sup>4</sup>

The young architect uses the motto “For everyone a garden” to describe Habitat 67 as an urbanized version of the suburban house lifestyle.<sup>5</sup> His structure communicates with nature through its open corridors and generous sunlight exposure to integrate the sense of living in an

---

<sup>1</sup> Grosvener Ellsworth, “The Golden Touch of Hospitality,” 1953, 40.

<sup>2</sup> “Birth of the Suburbs,” 2001.

<sup>3</sup> Chodan, “Editor’s Note: Expo 67 Front Page Brings Back Happy Memories,” 2017.

<sup>4</sup> “The Moshe Safdie Archive,” *Biography*, 1998.

<sup>5</sup> Safdie, “For everyone a garden,” 1974.

individual household within the city. Transferring the quantity of space per suburban household to the city seems implausible, however Safdie claims Habitat 67 does just that.

Meredith Dixon's "Terrace Door" captures a cocktail party being hosted on the patio of a Habitat apartment (Fig. 1).<sup>6</sup> This image exposes the attempt to incorporate the social scene of the sixties into an urbanized context. The many subtle constraints exposed in this photograph motivate the argument of this paper.

I will focus on outdoor rather than indoor spaces because of their crucial role in suburban communities' weekly gatherings all throughout the year. More precisely, I will be comparing Habitat units to suburban houses and evaluating how they accommodate the lifestyle of typical middle-class inhabitants of the 1960s. To that effect, I will argue that Moshe Safdie's Habitat 67 fails to adequately incorporate into an urban context Montreal's middle-income family homes that bordered the city in the late sixties through its insufficient outdoor living spaces and isolated location. This will be demonstrated through the lack of exterior spaces to host events and cocktail parties popular in the sixties, the isolated balconies depriving children of their freedom to go from one backyard to the next and the incomplete urban experience due to the difficult city access from Habitat's location.

The middle class of the 1960s will be defined according to yearly income during that time. In those years, the middle class made up the majority of the population and thus average statistics can be safely associated to this particular social group. In Canada, the average annual income in 1960 was \$3 192.<sup>7</sup> In this essay, the middle class corresponds to people who earned approximately this much per year. Today, the middle class has shrunk and thus average statistics

---

<sup>6</sup> Expo 67 Dixon Slide Collection Website, <http://digital.library.mcgill.ca/expo-67/search/slideSearch.php>

<sup>7</sup> Statistics Canada, « Les Générations Au Canada. »

are unbalanced and lean away from the outweighed middle class and towards the growing population suffering from poverty. This assumption could thus not be made today.

Safdie's Habitat 67 does not provide middle-class families with sufficient outdoor space to host the same neighbourhood events as they did in the suburbs. It seems as though the 1960s were filled with expectations and implied guidelines for all realms of lifestyle. In order for something to be considered proper, it had to conform to the societal "rules" it corresponded to. Along with men working to support the family and women fulfilling their wifely duties, expectations were put on things as specific as how to host a successful cocktail party.<sup>8</sup>

Mary Grosvenor Ellsworth's "The Golden Touch of Hospitality, To the Hostess – a Word About Today's Parties" outlines the preparation required to ensure the comfort of the guests and to avoid any chaos that could risk disrupting the ambiance. The author also stresses the importance of planning the flow of traffic in three aisles of circulation: one for food and drinks, one for those in charge of replenishing and cleaning out the serving station and one for the late-comers' self-service bar. It is also crucial for the hostess to make sure none of these lines cross.<sup>9</sup> From this chapter, it becomes clear that a minimum amount of room is required to attain all these requirements. Although it may seem unfeasible, most middle-class houses of the 1960s did have sufficient space to enable this flowing circulation.<sup>10</sup>

I had the chance to interview Huguette Fontaine, a French-Canadian wife and mother whose family inhabited a small Montreal-West duplex and then later moved to Repentigny, a

---

<sup>8</sup> Grosvenor Ellsworth, "The Golden Touch of Hospitality," 1953 1-48.

<sup>9</sup> Grosvenor Ellsworth, "The Golden Touch of Hospitality," 1953, 40.

<sup>10</sup> Ibid.



suburb bordering the city. She was 28 when she visited Expo 67 with her three children and husband, who had worked on the landfill for the islands during the year preceding the fair.<sup>11</sup>



**Figure 2. Huguette Fontaine and her husband dancing at a neighbourhood house, Repentigny, 1972.<sup>12</sup>**



**Figure 3. Huguette Fontaine attending a dinner at a neighbour's house, Repentigny, 1969.<sup>13</sup>**

---

<sup>11</sup> Huguette Fontaine's interview was originally in French. For the purpose of coherence, the quotes have been translated to English. Original quotes will be included in the footnotes.

<sup>12</sup> Source: Huguette Fontaine personal collection.

<sup>13</sup> Ibid.

Figures 1 and 2 are typical examples of events that took place amongst neighbouring households. Figure 1 illustrates a party of the 1960s where couples danced and Figure 2 lays out the typical dinner scene where one family would invite another. The presence of alcohol can also be observed and hints at the social scene of the day. I questioned Mrs. Fontaine about the social life in suburban neighborhoods and she recalled how “it was really about the community.”<sup>14</sup> They would reunite for the Saint-Jean-Baptiste, birthdays and Holidays. Everything was cause for celebration. “We also had picnics in a backyard where we would bring our blankets and the gin. The husbands had some. It was mainly the men [who drank], the women barely drank because they were with the children. They took care of the candy, the desserts, the chips...”<sup>15</sup> She added that “during the weekends and on weekdays when it was nice outside, [neighbours would meet up] between six and eight in the evening.”<sup>16</sup> Huguette Fontaine explained how these neighbouring relationships were present in Montreal-West, in Repentigny and at her sister’s house in Laval. Hence, the strong sense of community was very important at the time. She also stated there were at least 40 people at these events because the whole street would attend.

The guide to a perfect cocktail party and Mrs. Fontaine’s memories of the sixties set the tone for typical events that occurred in the middle-class of those years. Observing archived bungalow plans from suburbs in various Canadian provinces gave rise to a noticeable consistency in backyards’ surface areas. According to a Masters Thesis from the Université du Québec in Montréal, they measure from 40’-0” by 30’-0” to 40’-0” by 100’-0” on average.<sup>17</sup>

---

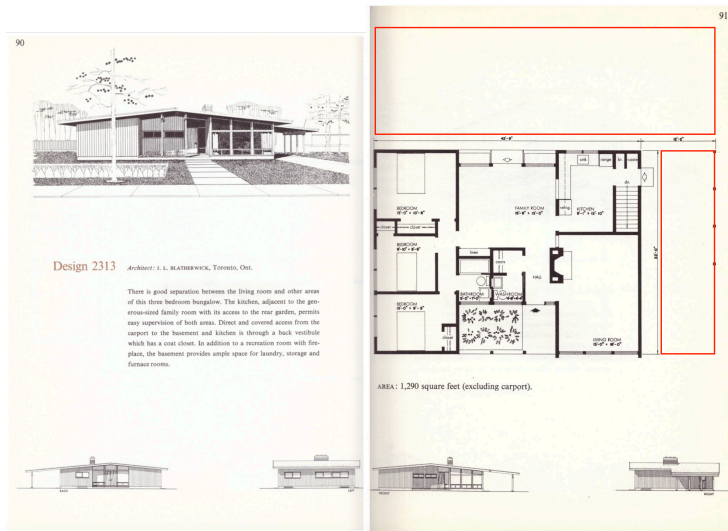
<sup>14</sup> Original citation: « C’était vraiment le voisinage. »

<sup>15</sup> Original citation: « On faisait des pique-niques sur un terrain, on apportait nos couvertes et le gin. Les maris en prenaient. C’était surtout les hommes, les femmes ne buvaient pas beaucoup parce qu’elles étaient avec les enfants. Les femmes étaient en charge des bonbons, des desserts, des chips... »

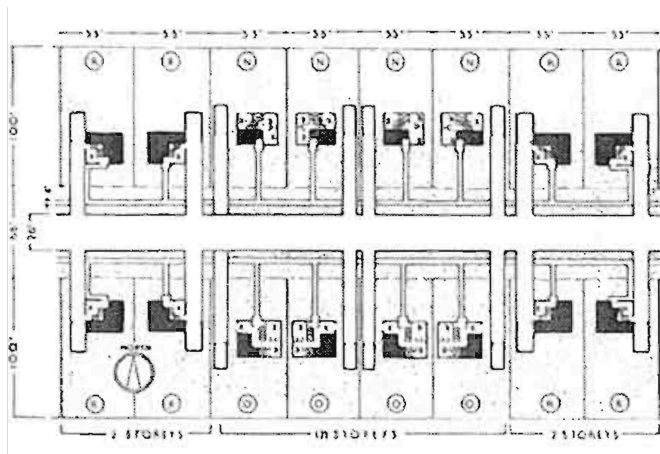
<sup>16</sup> Original citation : « Les fins de semaines ou les semaines quand il faisait beau entre six et huit heures. Huit heures, tout le monde était couché. Mais ça ne buvait pas dans la semaine. »

<sup>17</sup> Lachance, “L’architecture des bungalows de la SCHL: 1946-1974,” 2009, 54-72.

Figures 4 and 5 exemplify the typical size of backyards in the sixties. Without analyzing specific measurements, the generous amount of space allocated to these exterior spaces is visible in both the individual and neighbourhood plans. Logically, 40 by 30 to 100 feet is realistic because the yards' widths run along the house's rear façade and extend to the fence, which is normally set between 30 and 100 feet away from that point.



**Figure 4. Typical bungalow in Toronto, Ontario by architect J. L. Blatherwick, 1960.<sup>18</sup>**



**Figure 5. Grouping of houses from *Housing Design Part I*, Ottawa, 1952<sup>19</sup>**

<sup>18</sup> Blatherwick, "There's Lots to Learn from these Small House Plans from the '60s," 1960, 91. (Note: Backyard is cut off in plan)

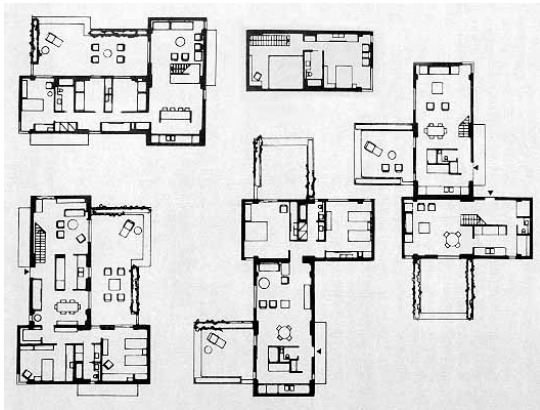
<sup>19</sup> Lachance, "L'architecture des bungalows de la SCHL: 1946-1974," 2009, 167. (Note: Backyards are not cut off in plan)

A visual example of a typical backyard like these comes from a 1960s house in Toronto that has remained untouched since its first purchase (Fig. 6).



**Figure 6. Sizable backyard of 1960s Toronto House<sup>20</sup>**

Relating the previous plans (Fig. 4, 5) to the Habitat 67 plans (Fig. 7) demonstrates the difference in outdoor spaces. Habitat's units often have two balconies measuring 37'-0" by 17'-0" combined.<sup>21</sup> This gives a total surface area of 629 squared feet. Therefore, if one were to host a typical party as they did in the 1960s suburbs, assuming there were forty guests on one balcony,<sup>22</sup> there would only be 7.9 squared feet per person. According to Ellsworth's guide,<sup>23</sup> this space may seem a little too restrained.



**Figure 7. Habitat 67 Unit Configuration Plans<sup>24</sup>**

<sup>20</sup> « L'intérieur de cette maison vous ramènera en 1960, » 2016, 32.

<sup>21</sup> Stanton, "Habitat 67," 1997, 4.

<sup>22</sup> Reference to Huguette Fontaine's interview

<sup>23</sup> Grosvenor Ellsworth, "The Golden Touch of Hospitality," 1953, 40.

<sup>24</sup> Stanton, "Habitat 67," 1997, 4.

Recalling “The Golden Touch of Hospitality” once again, three different traffic lanes are required to host a successful evening.<sup>25</sup> In Meredith Dixon’s photograph (Fig. 1), the door leading from the interior to the terrace of the Habitat 67 apartment proves itself to be quite limited. It is difficult to imagine how three separate and uncrossing aisles can coexist on these balconies, let alone fit through the units’ inadequate doors.

All the cocktail parties and social events taking place in the backyard were vital to suburban middle-class culture, though these celebrations mainly included adults. Families also had many children in those years and they have not yet been taken into consideration. They were greatly influenced by suburban planning and architecture and practically lived a life of their own, making use of connected backyards to run around from one lot to the next.

In fact, Huguette Fontaine mentioned how the children would run across all the lots along the street freely as if there were no barriers at all<sup>26</sup>. Her Montreal-West duplex had an alley behind it, where the same effect was created: an interconnection amongst all separate properties of the community. At her Repentigny home, she describes how “in the winter, there was one who made an ice rink, the other one had a tractor and made small hills of snow for the kids to slide on.” Needless to say, the families shared their backyards to the point where they practically became public spaces for the community (Fig. 8).

---

<sup>25</sup> Ibid.

<sup>26</sup> Reference to Huguette Lafontaine’s interview



**Figure 8. Huguette Fontaine's backyard in Repentigny with children and friends, 1967<sup>27</sup>**

As for apartment living, because units are built one on top of the other, there are no individual lots that can be shared. Moreover, although Habitat 67 incorporates an urbanized version of lots, children cannot climb from one terrace to the other, thus the suburban effect is not recreated in this regard. Pia Teichman, a resident in Habitat 67 since 1973, speaks in an interview with the National Gallery of Canada. "Habitat is very, very private. There are people but I don't see them. We just don't see other tenants for days or weeks at times."<sup>28</sup> Contrary to suburban life, Habitat's architecture does not include a connectedness between properties and in turn, residents' paths do not coincide remotely as much as neighbours' do in the suburbs.

Moshe Safdie did, however, attempt to build shared spaces taking into consideration the children's needs. In a 1967 interview, he presents his Habitat project to CBC news. The young architect states that "there are two playgrounds where the children can play within the

---

<sup>27</sup> Source: Huguette Fontaine personal collection.

<sup>28</sup> National Gallery of Canada, "Global Citizen: The Architecture of Moshe Safdie. Interview with a Resident of Habitat '67," 2010, 3:30-3:39.



structure.”<sup>29</sup> However, looking at the aerial view (Fig. 9), these playgrounds are not very significant. If Habitat were properly accommodating to middle-class families who had an average of four to five children, a much larger space would have had to be dedicated to playgrounds for them to become slightly more adjacent to the suburban effect.<sup>30</sup>



Figure 9. Aerial View of Habitat 67 circling children's playgrounds<sup>31</sup>

To summarize, as much as the suburban house layout helped adults fulfill their weekly endeavors, it was also tremendously profitable for the children. The kids were used to running around freely and learning along the way. Habitat's isolated terraces and limited communal playgrounds are insufficient to come close to replacing the suburban neighbourhood backyards. Huguette Fontaine had a pianist friend who lived in Habitat and having visited the building several times stated that “there is simply not enough room for kids in there.”<sup>32</sup>

Safdie's goal in bringing the suburban lifestyle to the city may have been problematic in the realms of social life and children's freedom, however the general concept of building within

<sup>29</sup> CBC Archives, “Little Boxes: Moshe Safdie's Habitat '67,” 1967, 1:25-1:29.

<sup>30</sup> Statistics Canada, “Les générations au Canada,” 2015, 4.

<sup>31</sup> Westmount Magazine, “Habitat 67: The Shape of Things to Come,” 2017.

<sup>32</sup> Original Citation: « Il n'y avait simplement pas assez de place pour des enfants là-dedans. »

a city may have failed in itself. Most people who live in the suburbs get to enjoy spacious lots and larger houses, however the sacrifice they make to compensate lies in their commute to work. An average commute into Montreal today is between 40 and 1.5 hours.<sup>33</sup> In the 1960s, at a time when there was less traffic, it may have been shorter but nonetheless remains a negative factor associated with living outside the city.

Habitat 67 was technically built a few kilometers across from downtown. If a path connected both locations directly with no traffic, it could be considered an ideal location. Although in reality, the river separating the apartment complex and the central area of the city deviates that distance significantly. Figure 10 exposes the few paths available to reach the general downtown area from the Habitat 67 location.

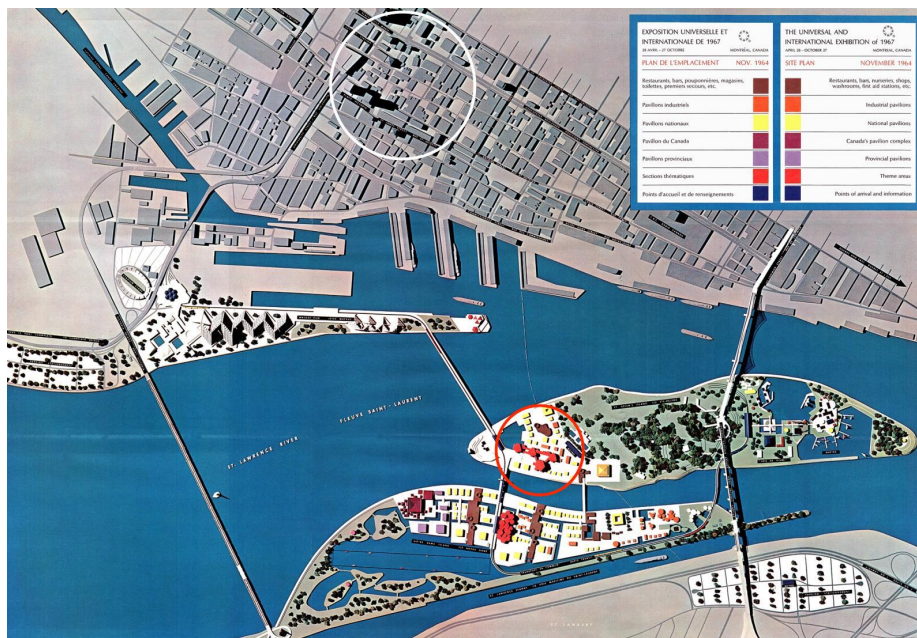


Figure 10. Expo 67 Map including Habitat 67 (circled in red), the general downtown area (circled in white) and the highways available to reach the city from the island.<sup>34</sup>

<sup>33</sup> Riga, "Montreal's Exercise in Frustration: A Commute That's Longer than Ever," 2016.

<sup>34</sup> Ville de Montréal, "Un plan directeur évolutif," 2015.



Pia Teichman, the Habitat resident, says the bus ride into the city is approximately 45 minutes.<sup>35</sup> Before the grocery store was built near Habitat, it was otherwise somewhat deserted in utility stores and residents still had to make the commute, just as they did in the suburbs.<sup>36</sup> In an interview with CBC, Mr. and Mrs. Robin Randall spoke about life in Habitat during Expo. Mrs. Robin Randall stated that if one needed a loaf of bread, “you have to go into Montreal (...) onto the buses to Montreal to buy a loaf of bread or whatever and then all the way back again.”<sup>37</sup> It is important to recall at this time, that Habitat 67’s main attraction is its “city location.” Whether it replaces the suburban middle-class house successfully or not is another part of the equation but its initial goal was to be in the city. Is “technically” living in the city worth moving to Habitat if the commute is still a prominent factor?

As mentioned in the start of this paper, the middle-class of the sixties is defined by those who earn \$3 192 per year.<sup>38</sup> Habitat’s rent in its beginnings ranged from \$350 to \$750 per month, an amount that is simply unaffordable to the middle class of the time.<sup>39</sup> His argument is that, just like any prototype, costs run much higher than the estimated ones because molds must be made for the first time and problems are encountered along the way. He explains how “one third of the construction budget [was] for equipment. But when it is reproduced in quantity, it would be competitive with conventional structure.”<sup>40</sup> This means if it were hypothetically recreated, since the molds would already exist, the price of construction would be much lower and by

---

<sup>35</sup> National Gallery of Canada, “Global Citizen: The Architecture of Moshe Safdie. Interview with a Resident of Habitat ’67,” 2010, 3:18-3:22.

<sup>36</sup> National Gallery of Canada, “Global Citizen: The Architecture of Moshe Safdie. Interview with a Resident of Habitat ’67,” 2010, 3:12-3:15.

<sup>37</sup> CBC Archives, “Living in Habitat ’67,” 1967, 5:38-5:50.

<sup>38</sup> Statistics Canada, « Les Générations Au Canada. »

<sup>39</sup> Stanton, “Habitat 67,” 1997, 3-5.

<sup>40</sup> CBC Archives, “Little Boxes: Moshe Safdie’s Habitat ’67,” 1967, 3:35-3:47.

consequent, so would the rent. However, it is rare that cities have pieces of land like the one Habitat lies on as it was artificially erected. Therefore, future projects like these would probably lie in the heart of the city. If that were the case, it would entail much less free space for the construction site. The location where Habitat is situated allows for a wide sprawl of equipment, tractors and cranes but downtown Montreal only has restricted spaces. In fact, the factory where the boxes were made stood 300 meters away from Habitat.<sup>41</sup> Boxes were carried whole to the site, which was located next door. This type of proximity between the construction site and its factory is unthinkable in city's core.<sup>42</sup> It would entail a much steeper cost of construction. Safdie's initial statement of reduced cost post-prototype is proven unguaranteed because with new projects comes new constraints. This concludes that Habitat 67 did not stay true to its urban vision and even if it had wanted to, it had almost no chance of being in the real city and at the same time, remain affordable to the middle-class of the sixties.

To conclude, Habitat 67's conception does not exactly hold true to Safdie's initial purpose for the project. Substantial differences create a fracture in the transition from suburban middle-class houses to these urban apartments. More specifically, neighbourhoods outside the city encouraged social events through their generous backyard spaces, children's freedom with their connected yards and remained somewhat isolated from the city. Habitat attempted to recreate these phenomena within the city. The collected research in this paper demonstrates how the effects were not comparable between the two and that Habitat's remaining advantage of being location in the city had the same consequences as the suburbs in terms of commuting. Huguette Fontaine answers the question of whether Habitat corresponded to the suburban home

---

<sup>41</sup> « Partie II Le Secteur De La Cité Du Havre: Étude Patrimoniale Sur Les Témoins Matériels De L'Expo 67, » 2.

<sup>42</sup> Ibid.

by saying “not at all. It corresponded to single adults, to people with financial means; not at all to the middle class.”<sup>43</sup> In the end, Safdie’s concept was not a failure, but was rather ahead of its time. Intrinsically, Habitat 67 foreshadowed society’s desires today; those of urban life, independence and isolation.

---

<sup>43</sup> Original citation : « Ça ne correspondait pas du tout. Ça correspondait aux adultes célibataires, assez en moyens, pas du tout à la classe moyenne. »

## Bibliography

"Biography." The Moshe Safdie Archive. 1998. Accessed March 22, 2018.

<http://cac.mcgill.ca/moshesafdie/index.php>.

"Birth of the Suburbs." CBC. 2001. Accessed March 22, 2018.

<http://www.cbc.ca/history/EPISCONTENTSE1EP15CH3PA3LE.html>.

Blatherwick, J. L. "There's Lots to Learn from These Small House Plans from the '60s."

TreeHugger. January 04, 2017. Accessed March 23, 2018.

<https://www.treehugger.com/slideshows/tiny-houses/theres-lots-learn-these-small-house-plans-60s/page/23/#slide-top>.

Chapsal, Agnes. "L'intérieur De Cette Maison Vous Ramènera En 1960." Huffington Post Québec.

April 04, 2016. Accessed March 23, 2018. [http://quebec.huffingtonpost.ca/2014/04/12/linterieur-de-cette-maison-vous-ramenera-en-1960\\_n\\_5138704.html](http://quebec.huffingtonpost.ca/2014/04/12/linterieur-de-cette-maison-vous-ramenera-en-1960_n_5138704.html).

Chodan, Lucinda. "Editor's Note: Expo 67 Front Page Brings Back Happy Memories." Montreal

Gazette. April 27, 2017. Accessed March 22, 2018. <http://montrealgazette.com/news/local-news/editors-note-expo-67-front-page-brings-back-happy-memories>.

Dixon, Meredith. "Expo '67 Slide Collection - A Photographic Journey." Digital Collections and

Exhibitions. February 16, 2007. Accessed March 22, 2018. <http://digital.library.mcgill.ca/expo-67/search/slideSearch.php>.

Ellsworth, Mary Grosvenor. *The Golden Touch of Hospitality*. New York: Seagram-Distillers, 1953.

"Expo 67. Un Plan Directeur évolutif." Ville De Montréal. May 31, 2017. Accessed March 23, 2018.

<https://ville.montreal.qc.ca/memoiresdesmontrealais/expo-67-un-plan-directeur-evolutif>.

"Global Citizen: The Architecture of Moshe Safdie. Interview with a Resident of Habitat '67."

National Gallery of Canada. October 13, 2010. Accessed March 23, 2018.

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=5Zt4443mhZY>.

"Habitat '67: The Shape of Things to Come." Westmount Magazine. July 27, 2017. Accessed March 23, 2018. <https://www.westmountmag.ca/habitat-67/>.

Lachance, Jonathan. *L'architecture Des Bungalows De La SCHL: 1946-1974*. Masters thesis, Université Du Québec à Montréal, 2009. 1-308.

"Les Générations Au Canada." Statistics Canada. December 21, 2015. Accessed March 23, 2018.

[http://www12.statcan.gc.ca/census-recensement/2011/as-sa/98-311-x/98-311-x2011003\\_2-fra.cfm](http://www12.statcan.gc.ca/census-recensement/2011/as-sa/98-311-x/98-311-x2011003_2-fra.cfm).

"Little Boxes: Moshe Safdie's Habitat '67." CBC Archives. 1967. Accessed March 23, 2018.

<http://www.cbc.ca/archives/entry/little-boxes-moshe-safdie-habitat-67>.

"Living in Habitat 67 at Expo." CBC Archives. Accessed March 23, 2018.

<http://www.cbc.ca/archives/entry/living-in-habitat-67-at-expo>.

*Partie II Le Secteur De La Cité Du Havre: Étude Patrimoniale Sur Les Témoins Matériels De L'Expo 67.*

Riga, Andy. "Montreal's Exercise in Frustration: A Commute That's Longer than Ever." Montreal Gazette. October 1, 2016. Accessed March 23, 2018. <http://montrealgazette.com/news/local-news/montreals-exercise-in-frustration-a-commute-thats-longer-than-ever>.

Safdie, Moshe. *For Everyone a Garden*. London: MIT Press, 1974.

Stanton, Jeffrey. "Habitat 67." Westland. 1997. Accessed March 23, 2018.

<https://www.westland.net/expo67/map-docs/habitat67.htm>.

### Interviews

Huguette Fontaine, telephone interview, March 17, 2018

### Acknowledgements

Thank you to Huguette Fontaine for her insightful memories on suburban life during the 1960s. Her photographs were a great help in understanding the lifestyle at the time. Thank you to Gina Page for devoting so many extra hours to helping the students in the class. My paper would not have evolved at all if it had not been for her helpful comments. A final thank you to Professor Adams for her compelling lectures that evoked a new interest for realms of architecture I did not know existed.