

Spaces for the people:
An exploration of Montréal's self-managed community spaces

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Abstract

Montréal, a city celebrated for its vibrant communities and the strong roles played by civil society, is now grappling with growing inequality and gentrification. Many observers argue that the city's vitality is being compromised by community displacement, loss of neighbourhood identity, and increasing social polarization. These changes, in combination with unstable funding streams for social services and public infrastructure, now hamper the existence of what sociologists call 'third spaces' such as music and event venues. Nevertheless, an array of self-managed community spaces such as Bâtiment 7 have arisen across Montréal in recent years. Could such collectively governed and jointly managed third spaces be part of the response to widespread gentrification to make communities more equitable, sustainable, and resilient? This study explores how various community groups develop self-managed community spaces in Montréal to ponder the roles that professionals in urban planning and related fields can play in supporting these efforts. An investigation of three case study spaces is informed by a review of academic studies, grey literature, and media. The study also makes use of semi-structured interviews with a variety of stakeholders, which are combined with participant observation to inform recommendations for policy and practice. Key findings suggest that the shared challenges around creating and sustaining these spaces and collaborating with planning and design professionals arise from intersectional structural and systemic issues of capitalism, neoliberalism, and a lack of institutional support. Steps toward systemic and cultural shifts are recommended to facilitate the creation and maintenance of self-managed community spaces and to better prepare practitioners to get involved with impactful community-led initiatives. The study concludes by asserting the importance of reframing the roles and responsibilities of planners toward stewardship of engagement in the ongoing care of communities and built environments.

Résumé

Montréal, reconnue pour ses communautés dynamiques et l'engagement de la société civile, fait face à une montée de inégalités et à la gentrification. Ces phénomènes entraînent le déplacement de populations, la perte d'identité des quartiers et une polarisation sociale accrue. En parallèle, le financement instable des services sociaux et des infrastructures publiques compromet l'existence des « tiers lieux », tels les espaces de rassemblement ou les salles de spectacle. Malgré ces défis, des initiatives comme Bâtiment 7 illustrent l'émergence d'espaces communautaires autogérés à Montréal. Ces lieux, gérés collectivement, pourraient-ils contribuer à contrer la gentrification et à renforcer l'équité, la durabilité et la résilience des communautés ? Cette étude examine comment divers groupes développent de tels espaces, et explore le rôle que peuvent jouer les professionnels de l'urbanisme pour les soutenir. Trois études de cas sont analysées à partir de recherches académiques, de littérature grise, de médias, d'entretiens semi-structurés et d'observations participantes. Les résultats révèlent que les difficultés partagées par les professionnels de la planification et du design pour la création et pérennisation de ces espaces sont liées à des enjeux structurels et systémiques : capitalisme, néolibéralisme, et manque de soutien institutionnel. L'étude recommande des étapes favorisant des changements culturels et systémiques pour supporter ces initiatives et mieux préparer les praticiens à s'y engager. Elle conclut en soulignant l'importance de redéfinir les rôles et les obligations des urbanistes davantage comme gardiens de l'engagement communautaire et du soin apporté aux milieux de vie.

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Chapter 1: Introduction

What makes cities good? What, within the purview of urban planning, can help people in cities feel happy, safe, and supported? What kinds of built environments or infrastructures nurture creativity, solidarity and positive change? How can a city offer its residents the time and space to pursue what makes life meaningful, for themselves and their communities? These are the questions that many urban planners regularly ask themselves. There are no easy answers to these questions, but it may help to narrow the scope by focusing on one city in particular. This study turns its attention to the wonderfully complex and dynamic city of Montréal, the cultural and economic capital of Québec.

In 2025, Montréal faces a host of interconnected challenges, including growing inequality and isolation, a rising cost of living, and a worsening housing crisis. These issues are not unique to Montréal. Many post-industrial North American cities are undergoing similar transitions, reorienting their economies towards knowledge-based industries, competing with other major cities to attract the “creative class” (Moser et al., 2019), using a concept popularized by Florida (2003). Montréal’s internationally-recognized cultural sector has played a key role in this shift, with its rich concentration of theatre companies, museums, fashion designers, performance venues and over 100 festivals (Moser et al., 2019). Yet while this restructuring has stimulated growth and investment in certain parts of the city, other communities, particularly those associated with Montréal’s industrial past, are experiencing deepening inequality, gentrification and displacement (Moser et al., 2019). These dynamics are evident in the city’s struggling underground music scene, which once thrived thanks to Montréal’s relatively low rents and affordable commercial spaces (El-Soueidi, 2024). For years, this affordability allowed up-and-coming artists to grow outside the pressures of the mainstream music industry (Dunlevy, 2023). But those days are now largely gone. A combination of skyrocketing rents, gentrification, and increasing noise complaints have led to the closure of dozens of well-loved small music venues over the last decade or so. Their disappearance is detrimental not only to the city’s cultural landscape but to its broader network of third spaces, where diverse groups come together to connect, create and build a sense of community.

As historically industrial, working-class neighbourhoods like Pointe-Saint-Charles and Verdun become increasingly gentrified, long-standing local businesses that once gave these districts their distinctive character and vibrancy are disappearing. Rising rents and property values are displacing long-time residents, transforming neighbourhood demographics and threatening to erase their historical and cultural identities. Gentrification is a wicked problem, one that can leave communities feeling powerless as neighbours are renovicted and their favorite gathering places shut down, replaced by generic chain restaurants deemed “quality tenants” by corporate landlords, who consider them more financially stable

and easier to insure than independent businesses (Léouzon, 2024). Yet even in this somewhat bleak context, there are powerful examples of communities coming together to reclaim spaces on their own terms. These are spaces that reflect collective values and aspirations, spaces that are actively shaped through collective governance, where people of all ages and socio-economic backgrounds can gather, connect and form lasting bonds. These are self-managed community spaces. This research focuses on three such spaces in Montréal that are confronting the pressures of gentrification head on. This study seeks to answer the question: *How can community groups in Montréal establish collectively run community spaces such as Bâtiment 7, and what roles can urban planners play in supporting these efforts?*

This study posits that self-managed community spaces are valuable quasi-public spaces that equip communities with tools to resist loss of identity, growing inequality and social isolation in gentrifying areas of Montréal. While insightful studies have been conducted on Bâtiment 7 in Pointe-Saint-Charles and on similar anarchist social centres abroad, there remains a lack of academic research on more recent Montréal initiatives with diverse origins and missions. This study seeks to fill that gap by documenting the origins of three spaces and analyzing their impact on their respective communities. By identifying opportunities for partnerships and collaboration between grassroots initiatives and urban planning professionals, this research aims to foster greater institutional support for planners engaging with community-led efforts. Ultimately, it argues for a shift in professional education and culture that reframes planners not as technocrats in the service of the State, but as stewards involved in the ongoing care of resilient communities. This study echoes the views of Aberley (2000) that urban planning and related professions should be understood as practices to care for communities, ecosystems and built environments:

If you are unfortunate, you see planning only as a career. If you have somehow managed to keep your 'private heart' alive and have helped individuals and communities realize aspirations for social justice and ecological sustainability in whatever form, you have made your life something more. It is this joining of service to a spectrum of generally accepted purpose that I hope will define planning in the new millennium. In this way, we will be able to participate more fully in the many processes that weave strong connections between humans and the ecosphere, between neighbours, and between cultures. We will be better able to balance what we 'do' with what we 'believe.' Simple as that.

(Aberley, 2000, p.25)

To address these research objectives, the study reviews a cross-section of academic and grey literature on self-managed community spaces. Building on this foundation, semi-structured interviews with stakeholders (including community members, planning and design professionals, and subject-matter experts), offer diverse perspectives on the benefits, challenges, and potential for collaboration in these spaces. Finally, In-situ participant observations for each case study inform a firsthand appreciation of the

relationships among the users and administrators, as well as the prevailing dynamics and sentiments within each space.

This report begins with a literature review, followed by in-depth case studies that document the origins, evolution and current realities of each space. These case studies offer a preliminary evaluation of individual impacts and challenges. A subsequent chapter synthesizes key themes that emerged from interviews. The final analysis examines shared challenges across cases and proposes policy recommendations aimed at supporting the creation of self-managed community spaces. Findings are analyzed to make sense of shared challenges. These include institutional, culture, and practical shifts to better equip professionals to collaborate and with grassroots actors. The study concludes with recommendations for practice and directions for future research.

Chapter 2: Literature review

Before exploring the impact of self-managed community spaces, it is necessary to understand the economic and cultural context in which these spaces operate. Neoliberalism has increasingly been identified as a key driver of growing inequality and polarization in cities around the world. Emerging as the dominant political and economic ideology in the late 20th century, neoliberalism replaced the Keynesian system, which held that the role of the government and urban planning was “to improve the welfare of its citizenry” (Rennie-Short, 2004). In contrast, neoliberalism reframes the state as a facilitator of market efficiency and urban competitiveness, rather than a provider of social welfare (Rennie-Short, 2004). Rather than planning for the welfare of citizens, governments under neoliberalism tend to rely on market forces to allocate resources, effectively outsourcing care to the private and non-profit sectors. A key consequence of this shift has been the normalization of regressive social policies which entrench existing social and economic inequalities.

While the negative impacts of these trends are widespread, they are particularly pronounced in historically working class, industrial areas of Montréal such as the Sud-Ouest borough, Verdun, and parts of Rosemont-La Petite-Patrie. For example, in Pointe-Saint-Charles deindustrialization in the 1960s led to the loss of relatively high-paying, stable, unionized manufacturing jobs, leaving its predominantly English-speaking immigrant residents socially and economically marginalized (Duncan, 1978). As David Harvey notes, inter-urban competition for capital investment leads to what he coined as “uneven geographical development”, with some areas receiving huge investments in infrastructure while others are basically abandoned by the state and private sector (Douglas, 2018). In recent decades, many of these once neglected areas have been “rediscovered” through the processes of revitalization and gentrification, becoming sites of concentrated new growth, dramatically increasing rent and property values, while displacing of longtime residents (Douglas, 2018). Since the early 2000s, Pointe-Saint-Charles has undergone significant transformation, with many of its former industrial buildings being converted into higher-end condominiums, despite the neighbourhood’s historically high proportion of low-income residents and social housing.

In Montréal, gentrification has contributed to the closure of many beloved third spaces, ranging from independent music and cultural venues to cafés and bookstores, as rising rents and changing neighbourhood demographics reshape the urban fabric. These closures affect more than Montréal’s celebrated cultural scene and identity, they erode the everyday infrastructure where people from different walks of life congregate, interact and form relationships. As well-loved local venues and third spaces are replaced by chains, or upscale businesses catering to a wealthier clientele, long-time residents may feel

excluded or alienated from their own neighbourhood. This loss of accessible, informal gathering spaces contributes to growing social isolation, eroding neighbourhood cultural diversity, economic vitality, community identity and weakening cohesion.

A growing body of research in urban studies underscores the importance of social infrastructure, public and quasi-public spaces—such as libraries, community centres, churches, and cafés—that serve as venues for regular social interaction and support a sense of belonging, as comprehensively argued by Eric Klinenberg (2019) in his book *Palaces for People*. Klinenberg argues that social infrastructure is foundational to civic life, especially for economically disadvantaged and marginalized communities who may lack access to private services and spaces. Other studies have demonstrated how these spaces play vital roles in countering loneliness, social polarization, and poor mental health outcomes (Latham & Layton, 2022)—challenges that are increasingly urgent in neoliberal cities characterized by inequality and displacement. Yet, despite their significance, social infrastructure like libraries and community centres are often overlooked in planning frameworks and tend to be chronically underfunded, struggling to keep up with growing demand (Yano, 2024). This context invites the question, what tools do communities have at their disposal to combat negative trends of loss of neighbourhood identity, displacement, and social isolation? And what models of governance and management can offer durable, equitable alternatives to capitalist norms?

In a neoliberal context where social infrastructure is underfunded and beloved affordable third spaces like music and cultural venues are closing, self-managed community spaces are a mechanism for resisting these trends. While the many disused industrial buildings and areas or “interstitial spaces” left behind by industrialization present opportunities for profit driven urban revitalization, they also have the potential to be appropriated by the community to serve their needs and desires (Baba, 2019). In Pointe-Saint-Charles, the community drew on its deeply rooted culture of political activism to mobilize for community ownership of an abandoned locoshop, giving birth to Bâtiment 7, a 90,000 square foot collectively managed space. Spaces like Bâtiment 7 aim to resist gentrification and capitalist appropriation by providing space and services to their communities, while upholding politically radical values of collective autonomy, mutual aid and anticapitalism through a horizontal governance model. In a study on the tensions surrounding community and capitalist appropriation of interstitial spaces, Concordia University scholar Mira Baba identifies the three main tensions at play in interstitial spaces as profitability vs. affordability, identity erasure vs. identity reinforcement and separation vs. inclusion (Baba, 2019). Among the various examples of interstitial spaces in Pointe-Saint-Charles, Bâtiment 7 is highlighted as a case which exhibits all three tensions and showcases key strategies the community implemented to

counteract capitalist appropriation, support the local community, and reinforce identity. A study focusing on anarchist self-managed social centres in London, England argues that these spaces embody anarchist values and allow diverse actors to come together and put their ideals of solidarity and collective care into practice through prefiguration (Heinen, 2023). For the members of London's anarchist social centres and community spaces here in Montréal, these spaces provide alternatives to capitalist structures of domination (Heinen, 2023), aligning closely with David Harvey's concept of "spaces of hope".¹

To say that self-managed community spaces help reduce inequality and meet community needs is not to suggest that they can replace government support or public services. Scholars like Gordon C.C. Douglas warn against the pitfalls of DIY urbanism in the "help-yourself" city, where chronically underfunded cities retreat from traditional service provision of essential infrastructure such as park benches, public spaces and gathering areas (Douglas, 2018). In responding to the failures of public space and infrastructure, Douglas notes that grassroots urban interventions can inadvertently legitimize this retreat, playing into neoliberal ideology, functioning within rather than challenging it. Non-profits and civil society, in this context, are a double-edged sword: DIY urban design emerges in reaction to neoliberal economic restructuring, and is shaped by it (Douglas, 2018).

This paradox plays out in practice in self-managed community spaces. Baba's (2019) study shows how community appropriation and improvement projects such as the CN wall mural, while meaningful to local residents, can also make neighbourhoods more attractive to affluent newcomers, contributing to gentrification (Baba, 2019). Similarly, Carrere and Bélanger (2024) observe that Bâtiment 7 functions as both a form of resistance to gentrification and a contributing factor, by increasing the neighbourhood's appeal to developers and new residents (Carrere & Bélanger, 2024). Even spaces founded on anti-capitalist values must navigate the legal, financial and bureaucratic realities of operating within a capitalist system, giving rise to numerous challenges. These tensions are explored in a graphic novel produced through a collaboration between Bâtiment 7 and The Canadian Philanthropic Network, which illustrates the challenges of maintaining collective autonomy, ensuring staff and volunteer wellbeing and resisting professionalization all without undermining the project's financial and organizational sustainability (Curodeau-Codère et al., 2023). Maintaining the Bâtiment 7's founding values by refusing

¹ The book *Spaces of Hope* by David Harvey (2000) critically analyses the socio-economic landscape of the late twentieth century, characterized by uneven geographical development and growing inequality, through a Marxist lens. The book interrogates the shortcomings of older utopian movements and introduces the concept of "dialectical utopianism", one that is deliberately and explicitly spatiotemporal (Harvey, 2000). He emphasizes the vital role of imagination and hope in envisioning more equitable alternatives to capitalism and neoliberalism.

to adopt hierarchical structures or conventional funding models places enormous pressure on those maintaining the space, limiting growth and straining collective resources.

Despite these challenges, the example of Bâtiment 7 demonstrates how a strong neighbourhood identity, alongside a culture of mobilization and political activism, can provide critical support for the creation and ongoing maintenance of self-managed community spaces. While not all such spaces emerge from a groundswell of grassroots organizing, as we will see in other case studies, the case of Pointe-Saint-Charles is notable. The community has been successfully mobilizing for services since the 1960s and played a key role in keeping the fight for Bâtiment 7 alive for over a decade. Research on Bâtiment 7 frequently underscores the importance of communities drawing on their own resources, histories, geographies, and social ecosystems to create spaces that are deeply rooted and responsive to their specific values and needs (Curodeau-Codère et al., 2023). Navigating the various tensions around collective autonomy, financial sustainability, accessibility and inclusion requires continuous negotiation and reflection among its members and the broader community (Curodeau-Codère et al., 2023). Beyond service provision, one of the greatest strengths of self-managed community spaces lies in their capacity to foster collective care and hope for a better world. By regularly bringing together people with shared values, these spaces help cultivate a sense of connection and the belief that change is possible, what Heinen (2023) describes as “spatiotemporal locations of hope”. At their core, self-managed community spaces place care at the heart of their mission, governance and everyday practices, including the sharing of resources and knowledge.

This review has looked at the neoliberal context in which these spaces operate, the importance of social infrastructure, and self-managed community spaces’ major challenges and strengths. Together, these works highlight the potential of self-managed community spaces to bolster Montréal’s social infrastructure by providing inclusive gathering spaces and resisting the harmful effects of gentrification. Despite these contributions, there remains a lack of academic research on self-managed community spaces in Montréal beyond Bâtiment 7. Much of the available literature comes from reports produced by the spaces themselves, or brief newspaper articles, highlighting the need for deeper external analysis. This study aims to address this gap by providing case studies and in-depth analysis of spaces with diverse origins, missions, governance models, and challenges. This is significant as neoliberal policy and gentrification continue to weaken social infrastructure. The loss of beloved third spaces like music venues reduces opportunities for gathering and forming social ties. These trends negatively affect the city’s celebrated cultural scene and contribute to growing social isolation and loss of neighbourhood identity. This research is grounded in the belief that self-managed community spaces help equip

communities with tools to resist these trends. My research aims to build on this body of work by exploring three key Montréal case studies with different origins and missions, including Bâtiment 7 in Pointe-Saint-Charles, Espace des Possibles in Rosemont-La Petite-Patrie and Suspicious Fish in Verdun, to analyze their impacts and challenges. Additionally, this study investigates the opportunities to foster partnerships and collaboration between community groups and professionals in urban planning and design, to foster institutional support and facilitate the creation and on-going maintenance of these spaces. In doing so, it contributes to on-going conversations about the provision of public gathering space, preservation of neighbourhood identity, promoting community resilience and the role of planning professionals as stewards engaged in the ongoing care of communities.

Chapter 3: Case Studies

The following three case studies contextualize the selected self-managed community spaces in Montréal to inform the analysis of themes emerging from the semi-structured interviews that follow in Chapter 4. These accounts also document the histories, impacts, and challenges these spaces face, providing a record which others may consult in the future. While numerous resources including documentaries, graphic novels, books, and academic writings have recorded the origins of Bâtiment 7 and analyzed its challenges, the other case studies, Suspicious Fish and Espace des Possibles, are newer and therefore are not as well documented. The histories and contexts of the latter two spaces are informed through publicly available annual reports as well as firsthand accounts from stakeholders. Where appropriate, accounts are supported by information gleaned from news media and grey literature. These narrative accounts aim to serve as a resource to groups aspiring to create their own self-managed-community spaces, inspiring them to learn from the lessons of successful mobilizations.

3.1. Bâtiment 7

The story of Bâtiment 7 starts in the humble Canadian National Railway (CN) yards of Pointe-Saint-Charles, historically a working-class neighbourhood in the southwest of Montréal. After almost two centuries of use for agricultural activity following colonization by French settlers, the first Lachine Canal was completed nearby in 1825 and enlarged in the 1840s, bringing industrial activity to the area which increased with the construction of the Victoria Bridge in the 1850s. New housing for the workers in these industries were built, and by the second half of the 19th century, large numbers of French-Canadian migrants from rural areas settled in what is now known as the Sud-Ouest borough. Many Irish, English, Scottish, Polish, Ukrainian, and Lithuanian immigrants also came to work in the thriving industries, such as the Grand Trunk Railway. For a time, Pointe-Saint-Charles was one of North America's most important industrial precincts. However, everything changed with the opening of the Saint Lawrence Seaway in 1959 and the subsequent closure of the Lachine Canal in 1970, spurring the decline of industry in the sector (Luka & Braiden, 2017).

Struggling with high levels of unemployment and poverty, the residents fostered bonds of solidarity and mobilized for essential services. The neighbourhood's successful political activism in the 1960s led to the creation of several institutions such as Pointe-Saint-Charles Community Health Centre (which served as the model for the Centre local de services communautaires (CLSC) system for the province), a community legal clinic and multiple social housing developments. With a strong culture of political activism, the Pointe-Saint-Charles community was quick to mobilize in 2005 when CN sold its 32.5 ha of land, including the future Bâtiment 7, to corporate developer Groupe Mach for the symbolic price of one

dollar. It became known that Vincent Chiara, the head of Groupe Mach, intended to demolish the 20 historical industrial buildings on the land to construct a Loto-Québec casino and exhibition centre in partnership with Cirque du Soleil (Centre social autogéré, 2013).

By 2005, revitalization projects along the Lachine Canal and the construction of condominium housing had engendered changes in the demographic composition, the character, and the cost of housing in the area. Recognizing the very real threat this project presented to the heritage and people of Pointe-Saint-Charles, the community organized a series of collective actions and successfully opposed the Casino project, which was dropped in 2006. In 2009, a large section of Bâtiment 7's roof collapsed under the weight of the snow, to which Chiara responded by bulldozing (without a permit from the borough) that part of the building, inciting outrage from the community (Centre social autogéré, 2013). At this time, a committee was formed, the 7 à nous Collective, made up of heterogeneous actors, including members of the Centre social autogéré (CSA), the Société d'histoire de Pointe-Sainte-Charles, and architect Mark Poddubiuk, which demanded immediate cession of Bâtiment 7 to the community, beginning the long fight for community control of the historic building.

As the radical leftist, anarchist members of the collective were disinclined to negotiate directly with the corporate landlord, it was Founderie Darling, a member of the collective and contemporary art gallery, which undertook somewhat tenuous negotiations with Chiara. Meanwhile Action-Gardien, the table de concertation Communautaire took on negotiations with the borough's administration and elected officials (Centre social autogéré, 2013). Deeply concerned for the preservation of heritage, following a suspected arson in November of 2008 which completely destroyed another CN locoshop,² residents were vocal participants during monthly borough council meetings and practiced direct action such as occupations (Centre social autogéré, 2013). The wind changed when Benoit Dorais, a member of Projet Montréal who was more amenable to community-led projects, was elected to be mayor in November of 2009.

Dorais undertook measures to encourage Chiara to cede Bâtiment 7 to the community in exchange for the zoning changes he needed for his proposed development, and members of the Collectif 7 à nous showed up at every public consultation to maintain the pressure. Despite numerous setbacks due to negotiations with Groupe Mach and bureaucratic processes, the Collective maintained momentum by hosting neighbourhood events on the Bâtiment 7 grounds. Frustrated by endless delays, the collective issued an ultimatum to the city, to finalize the cession of Bâtiment 7 by September 2012, or the members of the

² A building in which locomotives were repaired.

collective would use any means necessary (such as occupation of the site) to draw public attention to the issue (Centre social autogéré, 2013). Finally, after years of negotiations, public consultations, manifestations and direct actions, the development agreement was ratified by the city on October 22nd, 2012, making official the cession of Bâtiment 7 to the collective and the community of Pointe-Saint-Charles (Centre social autogéré, 2013).

3.1.1 Bâtiment 7's impact on the Pointe-Saint-Charles community

Hard-won after many years of collective action and sustained negotiation, the transfer of Bâtiment 7 to the community is a monumental symbolic victory for the Pointe-Saint-Charles community. The relocation of the Montréal Casino to Pointe-Saint-Charles, along with the development of a permanent Cirque du Soleil tent, luxury hotel, and international exhibition centre, would have engendered various detrimental effects on the local population. An interministerial report on the relocation of the casino warned that the project could lead to the accelerated gentrification of the borough, rapidly increasing the cost of housing, leading to displacement of the local population (Ministère des finances, 2006). Additionally, the Ministère de la santé et des services sociaux and Montréal's Direction de la santé publique warned that the casino could lead to an increase of pathological gambling in the borough, leading to a variety of harmful social and health effects (Ministère des finances, 2006). This report seriously hurt the publicity of the casino project, notably causing Loto-Québec's partner, Cirque du Soleil, which advertises itself as a socially conscious company, to withdraw (Centre social autogéré, 2013). In rallying to oppose the casino project, the Pointe-Saint-Charles community protected itself against the project's detrimental effects and paved the way for the cession of Bâtiment 7 to the community.

For the activists and community members that fought for years, Bâtiment 7 presents an opportunity to create a form of neighbourhood utopia, providing much needed space and services that reflect the needs of the community. Bâtiment 7 currently provides access to a wide variety of resources and services including Les Sans-Taverne, a co-op tavern which welcomes people to drink beer brewed onsite, eat, and above all, socialize, share and relax. There are also political, artistic and educational resources such as Les Archives Révolutionnaires, various artistic workshops (ceramics, photography, woodworking), The Pointe-Saint-Charles Art School, as well as resources which promote the development of autonomy such as bike and car mechanic workshops. A total of 5520 hours were booked for all the different workshops and studios in 2024, without counting the thousands of hours of member-supervised timeslots (7 à nous, 2024). The coop grocery store l'Épicerie Le Détour provides food at a low cost to members in exchange for volunteering, while La Fermette grows food in a greenhouse and keeps chickens, raising awareness of

urban agriculture and promoting autonomy and food security. Bâtiment 7 offers a range of volunteer opportunities through different forms of membership, each with corresponding responsibilities, such as joining one of many “circles” and paying dues (typically around \$10, with no one turned away for lack of funds), and privileges, including the right to vote at annual general meetings.

Bâtiment 7 maintains a strong connection with the community through a wide variety of activities and events that regularly attract hundreds of participants. The focus of events varies, from distributing free meals to creating economic opportunities and increasing visibility to local artists and artisans through craft fairs. In 2024, Bâtiment 7 hosted eight Bouffes pop events, during which an average of 80 free meals were served, feeding a total of 400 community members (7 à nous, 2024). Mindful of food waste, any leftovers from these events are placed in a community refrigerator (7 à nous, 2024). The holiday market, Marché de Léon showcased over 30 artists and artisans from Pointe-Saint-Charles and attracted approximately 1,000 visitors over a single weekend (7 à nous, 2024). In September 2024, the corporation de développement communautaire (CDC), Action-Gardien, an umbrella organization for local community organizations, opened its space within Bâtiment 7. Since then, it has hosted over 125 work sessions, meetings, and workshops, helping to raise awareness of local resources (7 à nous, 2024).

Together, these initiatives create opportunities and spaces where diverse community members can engage, collaborate and connect with like-minded people. Judith Cayer, a founding member of the 7 à nous collective emphasizes that part of Bâtiment 7’s “raison d’être” is to resist growing trends of individualization and isolation by nurturing human connection (Henriquez, 2021). In a neighbourhood that continues to be transformed by capitalism and neoliberal policy, Bâtiment 7 provides a space for community members to experiment alternative ways of living together while upholding values like solidarity, cooperation, and horizontality. While it may be just a drop in the sea of expensive condos in Pointe-Saint-Charles, Bâtiment 7 stands as a meaningful and hard-won victory for the community.

3.1.2. Challenges: Tensions between values and legal and financial responsibilities

While getting the keys to Bâtiment 7 was a historic victory for the Pointe-Saint-Charles community, it was only the first step of realizing their dream of collectively run community space. The real challenges lie in managing the utopia that the community fought for, which started with building a democratic, decentralized, and horizontal governance structure. A key challenge with which members wrestle is balancing ideals of self-management, anti-capitalism, and anti-professionalism with financial and legal responsibilities (Curodeau-Codère et al., 2023). Although the cession of Bâtiment 7 became official in

2012, the building was in bad shape, and it would take years of renovations before the first phase (approximately 25% of the building) could be opened to the public in May of 2018. While the second phase was completed in 2022, according to their website, approximately 6,500 m² (70,000 square feet) of the building is still in need of extensive repairs and renovation before it can be used. This reality places the collective in a race against time to raise enough money to complete renovations before the aging structure deteriorates. Each of the many projects and programs Bâtiment 7 supports has differing needs for financial support, meaning the team must be careful to avoid favorizing more profitable projects over those that are less profitable but have important social impacts (Curodeau-Codère et al., 2023).

3.1.2.1. Difficulties maintaining long-term engagement

Bâtiment 7 relies on a combination of paid staff and volunteers to run its diverse programs, requiring them to wear many hats. In order to remain autonomous and avoid professionalization or the formation of hierarchies within the coordination of the building, paid staff and volunteers take on a wide variety of tasks from administrative tasks to accounting, to cleaning (Curodeau-Codère et al., 2023). Each project is managed differently depending on its needs. For example, the coop grocery, l'Épicerie le Détour has only one paid staff person and most of the operations are handled by members who volunteer three hours per month. However, preserving Bâtiment 7's collective autonomy in this way has consequences for individual autonomy, with staff often feeling overwhelmed and exhausted by their many responsibilities and daily tasks. Volunteers tend to start out with loads of enthusiasm and energy for the mission but suffer from burnout very quickly. For these reasons, it is difficult to retain staff and volunteer engagement in the long-term.

3.1.2.2. Paradoxically contributing to gentrification

Although Bâtiment 7 was conceived as a form of resistance to gentrification in Pointe-Saint-Charles, it has also indirectly contributed to it by increasing the neighbourhood's appeal to developers and new residents. The gentrification of Pointe-Saint-Charles largely started in 2002 with the completion of the Lachine Canal Decontamination Project and the opening of the canal to boating and recreation. Decontamination was necessary as the canal, officially closed to shipping in 1970, contained high levels of harmful contaminants such as lead, chromium and mercury, after serving as the main industrial thoroughfare for 150 years (Lachine Canal Decontamination Project, 1996). The opening of the canal started a trend of reclaiming abandoned industrial buildings to create lofts and developing upmarket condominiums, rapidly transforming the built environment and the demographic composition of the historically Irish, working-class neighbourhood. Between 2011 and 2016, median income and median rent

increased by 36.7% and 23.2% respectively, outpacing the city-wide averages of 18.9% and 11.4% (Carrere & Bélanger, 2024). Part of the 7 à nous collective's vision for Bâtiment 7 is for it to serve as a tool against gentrification and displacement by providing space and services to the local community, but rather than prevent gentrification, Bâtiment 7 is actively being promoted by real estate developers to attract new residents (Carrere & Bélanger, 2024). As a successful and visible urban common existing within a neoliberal context, Bâtiment 7 inadvertently contributes to a "symbolic enclosure", attracting investment and paradoxically encouraging the gentrification it seeks to resist (Carrere & Bélanger, 2024). Aware of this dynamic, Bâtiment 7 members must engage in continuous reflection and adjustment to maintain inclusivity and accessibility while navigating the pressures of gentrification.

3.2. Suspicious Fish

Suspicious Fish is the brainchild of founder Gary Purcell, a Verdun school teacher with a BA in Creative Writing from Concordia University. Purcell was inspired by 826 Valencia, a literacy-based non-profit organization working with youth from underserved communities in San Francisco, as well as the 826NYC Superhero Supply Store, a whimsical shop which sells costumes and accessories to equip young superhero writers. Spending several summers with the organization back-to-back in 2004-2005, Gary felt inspired by the organization's programming and mission.

Working as a substitute teacher in Verdun after graduation, Gary became aware of a need for additional academic and creative support for students who were struggling but did not have access to support intended for children with learning disabilities, behavioural issues, and/or socio-economic vulnerabilities. What would later become Suspicious Fish started off in 2006 as a clandestine after-school creative writing program called The Shadow Writers, hosted at an elementary school. Run out of an empty classroom with around nine participants, no funding and almost no supplies, the first year managed to be a major success. Over the next four years, the program grew a network of volunteers and engagement steadily increased. Students from Concordia's Creative Writing program got more involved and the empty classroom was decorated to create a cozy clubhouse atmosphere for the participants.

Over time the program grew, expanding from an after-school program to include enrichment programs held during regular class hours. As the reputation of the program grew, so did the number of registered participants, increasing to around 40 per session. The anthologies showcasing collections of student writings continued to grow each year as well. Quickly becoming an important community institution,

Suspicious Fish formed partnerships with local organizations such as Reclaim Literacy, which has been providing adult literacy programs since 1980.

The year 2017 was important for Suspicious Fish, filled with major challenges but also growth. That year, Fish lost access to its classroom after damage to a local elementary school building led to the two schools to merge into one. At the same time, Gary was reassigned to teach in LaSalle. These challenges made running Suspicious Fish logistically difficult and threatened the existence of the program. However, Suspicious Fish rose to meet these challenges, improving organization, registering as a non-profit and assembling a board of directors. Dreaming about acquiring a dedicated space for the program, in 2018, Gary reached out to McGill University and collaborated with Prof. Nik Luka and Doctoral Fellow Jaimie Cudmore to create a Community Design Workshop (CDW). The CDW was composed of Suspicious Fish facilitators, Reclaim Literacy staff, and McGill students in urban planning, architecture, geography, and law, who worked with the participants to imagine what a dedicated space for Suspicious Fish would look like, through design and mapping activities.

When Covid-19 swept through Montréal, programming was moved online, making use of grant funding from Concordia University and the New Horizons grant from the Ministry of Education. This grant funds categories of education outside of the convectional school structure, focusing on adults with low literacy levels and dropout prevention, to work with seniors. Although conducting programming virtually was challenging, the pandemic gave Suspicious Fish the opportunity to take time to build their governance infrastructure and focus on an exciting challenge: finding a storefront in Verdun. Finding a space accessible to the elementary school and a metro station and within the budget was challenging but finally they got the keys to the space on Verdun Avenue in late 2022. After 8-9 months of DIY renovations, with the help of Gary's contractor friends and other members of the community, the Suspicious Fish space opened to the public in the fall of 2023.

3.2.1. Suspicious Fish's impact on the Verdun community

Suspicious Fish was born out of a need for greater literacy programming in Verdun and supports the community with a variety of intergenerational activities. Not limited to young school children, Suspicious Fish provides intergenerational programming which gives adults and seniors opportunities to develop their literacy, writing and storytelling skills in a fun, relaxed atmosphere. At any given time, Suspicious Fish's busy schedule provides bi-weekly after-school literacy programing to elementary school students, evening adult creative writing workshops, story-telling workshops for seniors, art workshops for young

mothers and their children, and weekly all-ages art and story-telling activities. This programming encourages people to not only express themselves creatively, but to hang out, get to know each other, and build community. All programs are provided at very affordable rates and often institute a “pay-what-you-can” model where there is a suggested donation but no obligation to pay. The space’s location on Verdun Avenue is within a short walk from the elementary school, the Verdun metro station, and can be reached via multiple bus routes, making it highly accessible to program participants. The storefront is wheelchair accessible and lends the space enhanced visibility, often attracting curious pedestrians to drop in and discover its offerings:

Because it’s a storefront and the way that the programing runs, it’s very open. So even if there’s a set program, people can still drop in and just hang out and relax. And I think that’s one of the key elements [...] it tries to be what people need it to be at the time they come in.

-Jaimie Cudmore

An important driver of Suspicious Fish’s success is its continued presence in the neighbourhood for many years, its partnerships with likeminded organizations, and its ability to maintain relationships with alumni. Over the course of its history, Suspicious Fish has worked with multiple schools in Verdun and has collaborated with university students from Concordia and McGill, to reflect on and improve their programming and space. Their strong ties to community organizations and Suspicious Fish alumni help to create an interconnected network which raises awareness of their programs, primarily through word of mouth. Suspicious Fish maintains strong ties to the Verdun community while also welcoming new arrivals to participate and get to know the neighbourhood better. Suspicious Fish provides space for learning and creative expression but also for fostering new connections, which is important in a community which is changing rapidly. Growing gentrification over the last decade has transformed the built environment and the community structure, bringing an influx of comparatively affluent new residents while displacing more vulnerable or low-income community members. As tenants of a central retail space, Suspicious Fish serves as an important point of contact and exchange between long-time residents and new arrivals. While reflecting on the program’s impact on both the community and their personal lives, two Adult Creative Writing program participants shared these comments:

It’s super meaningful. Before this, as far as a creative space for adults to go, I don’t think there was anything locally in Verdun. And not for the English community, that’s for sure. At first, I thought it was just for kids, but it was my sister, who’s always looking for creative stuff, that said ‘you should go there, you should go there!’. Because I’ve been a writer since I was a teenager, but I’ve never shared it. Ever. [...] So, for me it was a big thing that there was this space, and I decided to try it out and it’s changed a lot of things for me. I’m much more motivated. I’m more creative in my daily life. I’ve made solid connections, surrounded by really cool people. The space has just been a comfort and a haven for me. And most of the time I’m exhausted by the end of the day and half the time I’m like ‘I don’t think I’m gonna go,’. But then I do go, and I’m always grateful.

-Erin Leonard

When I was a teenager, I used to write poems and stories, but I stopped writing 35 years ago. I didn't feel like writing anymore. But my girlfriend, who writes also, said to me last November 'there's this thing called Suspicious Fish. We could go together. It could be a couple activity once a week. What do you think?' I said yes and I have never regretted it. It's been amazing. It's stimulated me amazingly. I got back to writing and the space, the people, the welcoming feeling... You know, it's easy to feel uncomfortable and uneasy about it (sharing your work) but no, the group is fantastic!

-Edith Haulotte

As a flexible third space, Suspicious Fish demonstrates the ability to adapt and respond to the needs and aspiration of a diverse community, providing a space which feels comfortable for everyone. The variety of programs makes space for people of all different ages, backgrounds, and abilities to express themselves creatively and connect in an analog space that is becoming increasingly rare. Creative Writing Workshop participants expressed a pervading sense of trust, respect and care amongst users of the space, which encourages users to open up and grow creatively. Every year Suspicious Fish publishes an anthology of program participant's stories, providing community members with a tangible record participants creativity and a powerful reminder of community impact (see figure 1):

The fact it can be this analog space where people are creating, sharing, and connecting as human beings, there's something special about that. And honestly, I'm not sure in this day and age when I've witnessed that and been a part of that. Especially not spaces that are welcoming of people of all genders, races, ages, sizes.

-Erin Leonard

3.2.2. Challenges: Financial insecurity and gentrification

Like its neighbour, Pointe-Saint-Charles, Verdun is a historically working-class, primarily low-income neighbourhood which has experienced rapid gentrification in recent years. For instance, although around 20% of Verdun's population lives on low income, the average rent for a one-bedroom apartment increased sharply by an average of \$429 between 2020 and 2022 (*Gentrification Spikes in Verdun*, 2025). With more upmarket condos going up, expensive stores and restaurants opening, and more affluent people moving in, rising rents have displaced local businesses and low-income residents. Before securing their highly accessible location on Verdun Avenue, Purcell spent many months searching for an affordable venue which met the needs of the organization, a task which proved very difficult. In the search for a Suspicious Fish storefront, Gary had to give up on Wellington Street, which has experienced the most dramatic change since being labeled the "coolest street in the world" by Time Out magazine in 2022, spurring immediate buzz and gentrification (Léouzon, 2024). Three years later, many of the local

businesses that made Wellington Street cool have been priced out, replaced by established chains which landlords consider more reliable than comparatively precarious independent businesses (Léouzon, 2024).

It's sold by the city, as [...] this great destination. And I mean, it's just put so many people out on the street. And it's very trendy and very upscale looking and has like a lot of cute restaurants and things that most people can't afford to eat in. [...] It's a great little tourist destination but it's really gutted the history of this community and it's really taken away the opportunity for a lot of people to live here.

-Gary Purcell

The rent for the space on Verdun Avenue was twice as much as they budgeted for in 2022 and as tenants of a commercial space, Suspicious Fish is subject to rent increases with each lease renewal, contributing to financial insecurity. With such financial restrictions, Suspicious Fish must be very careful with its money, focusing on cost saving measures such as using donated furniture and supplies or practicing DIY to improve the space.

3.2.2.1. Institutional vulnerability and language politics

In Verdun, where gentrification has undermined access to affordable third spaces, Suspicious Fish's role as a primarily anglophone organization makes make it a vital resource to the anglophone community, while also contributing to its vulnerability, due to the state of language politics in Québec. The 2022 amendment to the 1977 Charter of the French Language, known as Bill 96, imposes stricter language requirements, placing increased strain on anglophone organizations with limited resources, to comply with new laws. New language laws target educational institutions, such as Dawson College, Québec's largest English-language CEGEP, which had to cancel the long-awaited expansion of their medical and technology department after the government cut their funding to prioritize French-speaking institutions (Scott, 2022). The restrictions of new language laws are also being felt by grassroots programs, such as The 2SLBGTQ+ literature-focused Violet Hour Book Club, which was kicked out of the Père-Ambroise library early this year, citing new language laws that would require all English conversations to be translated (Yanez-Leyton, 2025). Although the library would later apologize for their inappropriate application of the new law to a bilingual group, these incidences contribute to a growing sense of social and political marginalization of the Montréal English-speaking community. In such a political climate, Suspicious Fish serves as an important example of cooperation and co-existence of French and English speakers.

Unfortunately, in Québec, there's this will to... metaphorically kill the English. [...] So, a place like this is even more meaningful.

-Edith Haulotte

Just the fact that this is a space where people can express themselves is whatever language... Because whenever I'm here there's at least a couple people speaking French and a lot of Frenglish... And I think that's super important because there's no animosity. Everyone meets each other half-way.

-Erin Leonard

However, new language laws which prioritize French could potentially limit how readily Suspicious Fish can qualify for government grants (particularly those provided by the province) and other sources of funding by imposing more requirements, creating additional administrative burden. Having to work around language laws adds an extra layer of work for Suspicious Fish which operates with limited funding and staff capacity.

3.2.2.2. Organizational capacity and governance challenges

Although Suspicious Fish has existed in some form for over a decade, they are still figuring out the daily ins and outs of running a space, juggling governance alongside prosaic tasks like mopping the floor. Suspicious Fish's three staff members (including Purcell) work there part-time, in addition to full-time jobs and personal responsibilities. While the board of directors plays an active role in outlining the governance of the space, they are still in a learning process of figuring out how to best delegate tasks and responsibilities in a balanced, organized way. Although this process sometimes leaves staff feeling disorganized or overwhelmed, they have also learned to roll with the punches.

And then you start to realize it's ok. [...] I think that this is probably the nature of working with limited resources. You just have to (at a certain point) develop a good level of acceptance for what you can control and what you can't control.

-Gary Purcell

However, the fact remains that working in a part-time capacity means staff and volunteers have limited time for community outreach and partnership building. Although their network has grown through word-of-mouth, relying on the grapevine limits Fish's capacity to collaborate with other organizations. The challenges of staff's limited capacity extend to the crucial task of increasing program participation, which fluctuates as it's proven difficult to get the word out.

3.3. Espace des Possibles

Before telling the story of the Espace des Possibles, we must talk about the organization that founded it, the Solon Collective. Solon is a non-profit organization founded in 2015 by a group of friends in a ruelle verte in Rosemont–La Petite-Patrie, with the mission of “accompanying citizen groups and institutions in the creation of a more ecological and united world, while promoting the creation of social ties” (Solon, 2024). Solon works to realize their mission through three general projects. Firstly, rethinking the car's

place in the city, collectively building the future, and creating third spaces for meeting, connecting, and contributing to autonomy (Solon, 2024). In 2018 Solon created LocoMotion, a community-run network for sharing personal vehicles, bikes and bike trailers with the mission of moving “towards a society with fewer cars and more social ties” and facilitating “active and shared transportation in Québec” (*LocoMotion*, n.d.). In 2019 Solon helped the city of Montréal win the \$50 million Smart Cities Challenge by contributing its mobility vision, securing an \$8 million grant to decrease car dependency by fostering commons around bikes (Bérard, 2022).

As Solon grew, thanks to funding from the Smart Cities grant, the organization recognized the need for a physical space to host citizen-lead activities, inspiring them to create the *Nos milieux de vie* project, which would transform into *les Ateliers de la transition socio-écologique* (ATSÉ) in 2020 (*Nos milieux de vie | Solon*, n.d.). To realize ATSÉ’s mission of offering “spaces for sharing, gathering and co-development dedicated to both the local community and the wider ecosystem of the socio-ecological transition”, Solon enlisted the help of the *groupe de ressources techniques* (GRT), *Bâtir son quartier* to find a venue (*Wiki Des Possibles, Ateliers de La Transition Socio-Ecologique*, n.d.). *Bâtir son quartier* happened to be negotiating the acquisition of the Académie Sainte-Anne at 6450 Avenue Christophe-Colomb for *Maison Le Parcours*, a non-profit which provides housing and services to people with severe mental health problems. In November of 2020, ATSÉ and *Maison Le Parcours* became joint owners of the building, with ATSÉ occupying the first three floors of the building and *Maison Le Parcours* the top three.

Espace des Possibles was created at the same time, with the vision of becoming “a place to exchange ideas and host activities related the socio-ecological transition” (Solon, 2022b). While programs like *Locomotion* focus on increasing the mobility of the neighbourhood, *Espace des Possibles* supports “l’immobilité du quartier”, which is defined as “not the absence of the need for mobility, but as a necessary element in the creation of the vitality of the neighbourhood and the implementation of the socio-ecological transition.” (Solon, 2022b). Similar to the 15-minute city, the concept of immobility suggests that residents have access to a wide variety of cultural, environmental, commercial, and professional dimensions and services without having to leave their neighbourhood (Solon, 2022b).³ While renovations and remediations were conducted at 6450 Avenue Christophe-Colomb, *Espace des Possibles*

³ On immobility, see Salazar (2021) and Sheller (2014). The concept of the 15-minute city has gained popularity in recent years, despite growing evidence that it is grossly unrealistic and counterproductive as a policy goal; see Birkenfeld et al. (2023) and Marquet et al. (2025).

shared a space with an alternative education organization, Mont-Libre at 6790 Saint-Hubert starting October 2021, until its return to ATSE's building in November 2023 (Solon, 2022a).

Espace des Possibles is a citizen-led third space which engages the community in the socio-ecological transition, a paradigm shift away from the current exploitative capitalist system, towards a more equitable, sustainable and democratic one, as well as provides services that reflect the needs of Rosemont–La Petite-Patrie communities (lespacemaker, 2024). Citizens, non-profits, companies, and even municipalities can apply to use the space, through an online form, to host a wide variety of events and activities, provided that they are open to the public, free of charge, and align with the values of the space. Proposals for private events are also evaluated and granted by the citizen committee on a case-by-case basis. While event must be free, groups that make use of the space pay different rental fees depending on who they are. Companies and municipalities pay \$25/hour or 200 for the whole day, while non-profits and citizen groups pay \$15/hour or \$100 for the whole day.

Initially managed in equal parts by Solon/ATSE, partner community organizations, and the volunteer citizen committee, the governance structure has changed over time to give the citizen committee full autonomy in managing the space (Solon, 2022a). The citizen committee, normally composed of around 12 volunteers, meets regularly and oversees reviewing and approving applications for usages of the space, managing finances, maintaining the space, conducting community outreach and preparing reports (Solon, 2022a). To support the committee, ATSE employs a full-time coordinator to ensure the committee's sustained engagement and a physical presence in the space. Drawing on *sociocracy*, the committee's decision-making process is consent-based, defining valid and invalid reasons to disagree. All meetings can be observed by the public, and anyone from the community can become a member of the committee after attending at least three committee meetings.

3.3.1. The impact of Espace des possibles on the Rosemont–La Petite-Patrie community

As a citizen-led third space, Espace des Possibles provides spaces for groups that may not otherwise have access to a venue and promotes the forming of community and social ties. Espace des Possibles hosts a variety of events that support marginalized groups such as the 2SLGBTQI+ community and seniors. The Violet Hour Literary Series & Book Club, which was told it could not meet at the public library because of new language laws, now holds monthly gatherings at Espace des Possibles. Additionally, Espace des Possibles hosts weekly workshops which teach elderly community members computer skills, enabling them to stay better connected, remain independent, and access services which are increasingly offered

online. As an intergenerational event, these workshops also provide older community members with opportunities to meet new people and form bonds to help combat social isolation. The Espace des Possibles space is made more accessible to citizen groups through a flexible pricing scheme which allows for citizen groups to pay a lower hourly rate, in exchange for volunteering (Solon, 2022b). Espace des Possibles also hosts activities such as board game nights, coworking sessions and communal meals, which create opportunities to meet new people, have fun, get work done, or grab a meal without having to spend any money. A survey, conducted by Espace des Possibles from January 2022 to June 2023, revealed that 83% of the people surveyed reported meeting at least five other people as a result of their participation in an event or activity (Solon, 2022a). Fully 71% of activities and events are organized by citizen groups and the majority of participants are residents of Rosemont–La Petite-Patrie, indicating that they are succeeding in their goal of the promoting the immobility of the neighbourhood.

True to its mission, Espace des Possibles provides services that respond to the needs of the community while contributing to the socio-ecological transition. Activities which exemplify these aspects of the Espace des Possibles mission include the Repair Café, the Cercle de partage activist support group, and screenings of films covering contemporary political, environmental and social issues, among others. The Repair Café is a very popular bi-monthly event where volunteer “fixers” repair community members’ broken items such as small appliances, helping to combat planned obsolescence, conserve resources, and promote repairing items, rather than tossing them. The activist support group, gives activists a space to share their inspirations and well as frustrations amongst like-minded people, supporting renewed motivation and avoiding burnout in a very emotionally challenging sector. Finally, movie screenings raise awareness of important contemporary political, environment and social issues, support a well-informed, politically active community in Rosemont–La Petite-Patrie. Survey participants reported that events such as these helped them better inform themselves on the socio-ecological transition, learn from others, develop skills and increase their personal autonomy (Solon, 2022a).

3.3.2. Challenges: Lack of diverse representation in the citizen committee

The citizen committee of Espace des Possibles is predominantly composed of university-educated, middle-class white individuals and there is a recognized need for the committee to better reflect the diversity of the Rosemont–La Petite-Patrie neighbourhood. This demographic composition may mirror that of the larger Solon community, which also tends to include mostly white residents of French immigrant backgrounds. As some volunteers have noticed, organizers tend to attract participants who resemble themselves, highlighting the importance of efforts to improve representation in the Espace des

Possibles committee. Some committee members describe this as a “chicken and egg” dilemma, where in order to diversify the committee, greater representation is needed, yet attracting broader participation depends on that very diversity. To address this issue, the committee has been investing in building relationships with local organizations, such as the Centre d’aide aux familles latino-américaines (CAFLA), which hosts regular events for local Latino immigrant families in the Espace des Possibles space. The committee also tries to lower language barriers and increase outreach by printing posters and fliers in Spanish, alongside the usual French and English.

3.3.2.1. Limited visibility, accessibility, and financial stability due to ongoing construction

Espace des Possibles’ location in the basement of 6450 Avenue Christophe-Colomb limits its visibility and accessibility. While there are plans to build a *cour anglaise* and street-level entrance that will significantly improve both, the construction phase presents serious challenges. The construction will limit Espace des Possibles’ capacity, potentially entailing financial precarity for ATSE. During construction work hours, Espace des Possibles will be unable to host events, reducing its operational capacity and threatening a key source of revenue. Since a portion of Espace des Possibles’ revenue goes towards covering ATSE’s operating expenses, including mortgage payments, this disruption creates financial uncertainty for both organizations. These difficulties come at a time when Solon, the organization that founded ATSE, announced in April that it will cease its operations in the fall after years of financial difficulties, citing a lack of funding to finance the socio-ecological transition (Solon, n.d.). Although, ATSE and Espace des Possibles are now organizationally independent from Solon, its dissolution raises concerns about the broader funding environment for ATSE, whose mission is similar to that of Solon. As construction progresses, both ATSE and Espace des Possibles are likely to face heightened financial strain.

While the self-managed community spaces introduced here vary in origin and mission, they share similar values and are united by a commitment to providing space, resources and services for their communities. Whether born from years of activist mobilization, or shaped gradually through collaboration, their creation demands vision, long-term dedication, creativity, and resilience. By offering diverse services and events, these collectively managed spaces affirm the importance of gathering to learn, play, create and connect. Despite their strengths, they face common challenges rooted in operating within a capitalist, neoliberal context. These dynamics are explored further through participant observations and interviews in the following chapter.

Chapter 4: Participant observation and semi-structured interviews

In this chapter, we explore key dynamics, themes, and tensions identified during the fieldwork, which combined participant observations and semi-structured interviews. Observational notes shed light on the social dynamics, embodied values, and spatial components of the case studies, illustrating how these elements support their respective missions. Interview notes highlight recurring themes that emerged from conversations with community members and subject-matter experts, followed by urban planning and design professionals. These insights nourish the discussions and policy recommendations presented in the final chapter.

4.1. Participant observation

Participant observations were conducted as a form of field work or “ground truthing” to gain direct experience with the case studies researched for this project. With the consent of event organizers, I participated in public activities such as general meetings, workshops, and guided tours in each space. The primary goal of this method was to get a sense of what it is like to be a user of these spaces, and to enrich my understanding of them beyond what could be gleaned from the literature. This method is particularly important for case studies with little available literature, such as Espace des Possibles and Suspicious Fish. In some cases, all present users were aware of my presence as a researcher and were familiar with the goals of my research, such as during citizen committee meetings at Espace des Possibles and the Adult Creative Writing Workshop at Suspicious Fish. During these “open observations”, I took notes on the interactions and relationships among users, opinions, and concerns expressed, as well as descriptions of my personal experience in the space. In other cases, I participated as a member of the public, refraining from taking notes or drawing attention to myself as a researcher during the activity, but then taking detailed notes immediately afterward. This was done to allow me to participate more freely, but also to ensure users felt comfortable and avoid them feeling observed. All of the data from these observations is anonymous, containing no information which could be used to identify participants.

4.1.1. Social dynamics

The social dynamics among users of the self-managed community spaces were always warm and friendly, with organizers and users alike making efforts to make visitors feel welcome. In all three case study spaces, someone always greeted me as a newcomer in the space, inviting me to make myself comfortable or providing guidance on how to participate in an activity. In the context of the Adult Creative Writing Workshop, where the participants had been meeting regularly for months, there was obvious affinity among participants, who excitedly chatted and exchanged homemade food with each other before and

after the workshop. Upon arriving at the Citizen Committee meeting at Espace des Possibles, a member of the committee offered a beer, instantly establishing a friendly and laid-back tone, despite it being our first meeting. At events such as the Repair Café, where most visitors did not know one another, people often struck up lively conversations while awaiting their turn with a fixer, or with the fixers themselves during their turn. It is worth noting that my observations were limited and realistically speaking occasional conflict is unavoidable, but based on anecdotes gleaned through informal conversations with regular users, social dynamics are usually friendly and harmonious as observed.

4.1.2. Embodied values

The values of the self-managed community spaces, notably those around mutual aid, horizontality, anti-capitalism and the socioecological transition, are reflected in and upheld through the activities, management, and governance of the spaces. Almost all events were free and open to the public. While most participants who came were probably already familiar with the spaces, events are also open to first-time visitors, with no requirement to reserve or pay to enter the space and participate in the activities. Participants use these spaces casually throughout the day, suggesting they play a role akin to that of a third space. The Repair Café is a fun event that brings together elements of environmentalism, mutual aid and education. The event was infused with a positive, hopeful energy and I got the sense that volunteers and community members alike felt proud to take part in an event that promotes the conservation of resources and a culture of repairing and caring for everyday objects. During my participation, I witnessed participants exchange knowledge about repairing items and parents explaining key sustainability concepts to their children, which prompted me to write this in my notes on the 22nd of February 2025:

While waiting for my turn with a fixer, I sat on a chair in the makeshift waiting room and chatted with another community member who had brought her children along with her to have a broken toy fixed. She took the opportunity to teach her children the concept of planned obsolescence, explaining that it allows companies to make more profits through the sale of new products, and that the resulting perpetual cycle of disposal and consumption is unsustainable.

The Espace des Possibles Citizen Committee meetings were conducted in a horizontal fashion with no designated leader steering the discussions, and all decisions, ranging from programming to budget and governance, were made collectively. The committee members employed a hand-raising system where anyone who wanted to speak would hold up a certain number of fingers to reflect the order in which hands were raised. This way, no one's comment, or question would be skipped, and all participants shared the responsibility to call on people that had their hands up once the current speaker had finished speaking. The committee addressed all the matters on the agenda, taking time to answer questions that were raised and discuss any ambiguities until they came to an agreement. The coordinator participated as any other

member of the committee, and members either volunteered to take on tasks or they were assigned in accordance with their interests and capacities. While members spoke frankly about challenges such as increasing participation, conducting community outreach and the anticipated disruption of the pending construction, the tone remained cheerful and amiable.

4.1.3. Spatial components

Although the spaces vary significantly in terms of size and accessibility, the case studies share key spatial features and infrastructure designed to welcome, accommodate, and engage a wide variety of users. All spaces prioritize universality of access, and contain flexible areas furnished with comfortable chairs, sofas, and tables as well as materials such as art supplies, board games, or books, elements that invite the visitor to sit, linger and make themselves at home. At Bâtiment 7, this welcome zone is located near the reception and the rear entrance of the Sans Taverne bar and is well stocked with toys for children to play with while their parents drink and socialize within sight and earshot. At Espace des Possibles and Suspicious Fish, the welcome area takes up most of the site, equipped with mini fridges, electric kettles and coffee makers, encouraging visitors to help themselves to free food and refreshments. Across all cases, the furniture and objects, tables, chairs, sofas, mugs, toys, that fill these spaces are mismatched and visibly worn, likely donated or repurposed. While much of the furniture, fittings, and materials are somewhat worn, participants seemed completely unbothered by these imperfect states, instead focusing on the functional beauty of the chairs which are comfortable and accommodate a wide range of different bodies.

4.2. Interviews

Semi-structured interviews were conducted with a broad range of stakeholders who are categorized for the purposes of this project as either Community Members, Planning Professionals, or Experts. Interview scripts were prepared for each category of interviewee, but questions were also personalized to each individual, to capitalize on their unique perspective and expertise while maintaining a common overarching structure and themes. The Community Member category encompasses actors who interact with the case studies as participants, staff or organizers, and are not necessarily involved in professions or research associated with the work of urban planning. Planning Professionals includes formally accredited urban planners and architects with specialized knowledge of urban planning, architecture, and real estate. Finally, Experts are individuals who are currently, or were for a time, involved with one or more of the case studies, and possess specialized knowledge related to self-managed community spaces or this research. This final category includes academics and experts in their professional fields. In total, I

conducted seven one-on-one interviews and one group interview with four participants from the Suspicious Fish Adult Creative Writing Workshop. Individuals named in this section have given permission to be identified.

4.2.1. Community Members and Experts

The following section distills themes that emerged during conversations with community members and experts about the self-managed community spaces in which they participate. The themes and quotes are taken from interviews with David LeRue, Assistant Art Professor at Concordia University and former board member of Bâtiment 7, and Jaimie Cudmore, doctoral candidate at the McGill University's Peter Guo-Hua Fu School of Architecture and active board member of Suspicious Fish. Conversations around Espace des Possibles were informed through an interview with an involved community member who chose to participate anonymously. Although each self-managed community space is unique, common themes emerged during interviews in relation to challenges around ensuring accessibility and inclusion, the socio-political identity of the space, and the daily ins and outs that go into keeping the lights on.

4.2.1.1. Inclusion and political identity

Self-managed community spaces are, as the name suggests, collectively conceived and managed by communities. However, the “community” is not a monolith, and members often hold different visions for the space and disagree about who should be welcomed within it. At Bâtiment 7, these tensions are particularly apparent in the contrast between older members, many of whom were involved in the long fight for the cession of the building and hold more radical, anarchist political views, and newer participants who may prioritize economic viability and be more willing to make compromises. LeRue, whose dissertation focuses on contradictory demands and desires for specific kinds of spaces, highlights how disagreements around inclusion indicate ideological differences. As he notes, the vision for Bâtiment 7 is constructed differently by different community members, with discussions around inclusion often raising the idea of Bâtiment 7 as a utopia, as well as a place of refuge or safe space:

There were some people who said people who live in condos shouldn't be welcome here. And there's a lot of people who live in condos who are renters, right? There's a lot of people who live in condos because they sold the family home etc. There are so many complications there, right? And that never got traction or anything. I think it was just an offhand comment, but it was certainly alive at that time.

-David LeRue

Also raised during interviews were questions about the definition of “community” in a North American context, where communities have not historically been spatially defined, and are often becoming

increasingly transient given the worsening housing affordability crisis. Interviewees noted that the notion of community becomes unclear in a context where people may not necessarily share the same physical living space, socio-demographic characteristics, or value systems. Another dimension of these spaces that was raised during interviews was how the spaces align themselves with different political groups, in constructing their political identity. One interviewee explained that the citizen committee of Espace des Possibles has become more political over time, electing to put up pro-Palestine posters and host activist meetings. The committee has also reflected on their relationship with anarchism and what it would mean to be an anarchist space. Suspicious Fish, while less overtly political than Bâtiment 7 or Espace des Possibles, plays its part in promoting political literacy by hosting community workshops for Verdun residents to help them understand rent increases and their rights as tenants.

4.2.1.2. Representation and outreach and governance

Interviewees frequently questioned whether the diversities of their broader communities are truly represented in the membership and management of self-managed community spaces, and how this affects their ability to respond to the community's needs. At Espace des Possibles, for instance, one interviewee noted that Solon's founders were not from the community sector and at first were perceived as having weak ties to the neighbourhood. This initial lack of connectivity or embeddedness created social barriers which hurt local partnership opportunities and limited the early outreach efforts on the part of Espace des Possibles. They emphasized the importance of forming strong, trust-based local partnerships to ensure good integration with the existing network of community support organizations. As discussed in the case studies chapter, both Bâtiment 7 and Espace des Possibles have acknowledged a lack of representation in their boards and citizen committees. However, increasing representation remains difficult due to limited organizational capacity, as noted by one interviewee:

The activists often invoke the “we” and invoke the community. Even though, you know, who’s coming and being part of these meetings, I mean, if you pulled 30 random people from Pointe-Saint-Charles, they hold very little in common with the 30 members of Bâtiment 7.

-David LeRue

Limited capacity for outreach also affects the kinds of programming these spaces are capable of offering as well as participation. Interviewees from Espace des Possibles and Suspicious Fish expressed that although gradually increasing over time, participation still fluctuates. In some cases, limited resources for outreach make it riskier to introduce new types of programming that may not appeal to their established base of participants. For example, at Suspicious Fish, Cudmore described efforts to revisit the Community Design Workshop concept they conducted with McGill in 2018, in hopes of gathering feedback and

fostering stronger community connections. Despite careful planning, turnout was low. Reflecting on the experience, they explained:

We worked hard to develop an idea and the program, but when it came to it, we realized that no one was coming. So, we had to think through like, Ok, why aren't people coming? So figuring out the right programming for the right people and then understanding, Ok, this is the amount of work it'll take to attract the people we want to come to this program, because our base for a long time has been families. If we were looking for an adult to come on a Wednesday evening in the middle of winter, is this the right time? So, figuring out programming has been a challenge.

Closely tied to outreach challenges, balancing long-term stability with bringing in new voices emerged as a key governance issue. While fostering long-term engagement is essential, community member and expert interviewees drew attention to the importance of having regular turnover on the board and citizen committees. Cudmore observed that self-managed community spaces require the stability of long-term engagement to function, but that too little turnover can take away from the growth of the organization. Regularly hearing from new voices helps infuse the board with fresh energy and new ideas to keep adapting to the needs of the community, and pivot when it needs to. A member of Espace des Possibles echoed this, stressing that it's especially important for paid staff to rotate on a regular basis. Regular staff rotation is necessary to prevent concentrations of power or hierarchies that may develop, even in horizontal governance structures, and maintain openness and accountability in governance processes.

4.2.1.3. Keeping the lights on and making meaning

A key theme raised in interviews with community members and experts is the inherent complexity and messiness of collectively managed spaces. Different models of management and governance have different benefits and drawbacks. For the case studies explored in this research, upholding the values of horizontality and *sociocracy* means that it normally takes longer to make decisions than in top-down models. As discussed earlier, these spaces also rely on a combination of volunteers and paid staff to run and maintain their facilities, taking care of everything from balancing the budget to unclogging the toilet. Interviewees expressed that these realities could lead to the spaces feeling somewhat chaotic and navigating their daily challenges requires enormous patience and dedication. Reflecting on his experiences at Bâtiment 7, LeRue expressed that while everyone's contributions are necessary, it is often a small group of passionate people who truly believe in the mission that help keep the lights on:

Organizations like this are run on many, many, many small things. People doing small things. It's easy to celebrate the big contributions, but I think it really is the small contributions that will or will not make a site like this successful.

This sentiment was echoed by another interviewee, who highlighted the mundane yet essential maintenance tasks that keep the space functioning:

So yeah, the challenges remain the day-to-day. We're not in that rhythm of knowing, Ok, we need ink for the printer. Who's going out and getting that? It's all those little things. Or, we're missing all our coffee cups, or we're out of coffee. Who's going to pick this up? Why is the back door unlocked? I can spend probably an hour or two just talking about all the little things that we deal with every day.

-Gary Purcell

Although self-managed community spaces face significant challenges, both externally in a context of increasing neoliberal pressures and shrinking funding opportunities, and internally in terms of governance and day-to-day maintenance, interviewees consistently emphasized their value. Interviewees criticized aspects of governance, inclusion or implementation, but explained that although flawed, these spaces are important experiments, and alternatives to normative capitalist spaces. For instance:

I think it is important in our current moment where we're facing numerous political challenges across all kinds of fronts. [...] There needs to be moments where things are open to possibility and Bâtiment 7 opens to possibility and experiments in different ways. And we can look at the successes and failures of the site, but even the experiment is important, and it's still adapting.

-David LeRue

4.2.2. Urban Planning and Design Professionals

To gain perspective from specialists in planning and design, I first spoke to Mark Poddubiuk, an architect specialized in urban design with over 25 years of professional experience. Having graduated from McGill University's School of Architecture, Poddubiuk specializes in affordable housing complexes and their infrastructure, leading the Benny Farm redevelopment project with his firm L'OEUF (Office of Urban and Functional Eclecticism) in 2001 ("Mark Poddubiuk - École de Design - UQAM," n.d.). Poddubiuk started teaching at the Université du Québec à Montréal (UQÀM) School of Design in 2006, around the same time that Chiara of Groupe Mach purchased the Pointe-Saint-Charles CN yards for a dollar. Due to his extensive experience with renovating buildings and community work, Poddubiuk was invited by the founder of Foundry Darling, a member of the 7 à nous collective, to assist them in negotiating the acquisition of Bâtiment 7 and to assess the necessary renovations. Poddubiuk was instrumental in negotiating reasonable property lines for Bâtiment 7 site (as Groupe Mach insisted on surrendering as little land as possible), as well as addressing the building's architectural and code issues. Very busy with a full teaching schedule, Poddubiuk transitioned to acting as a consultant for the collective once the

acquisition had been finalized and the initial funding obtained, with project architects from L'OEUF then taking on the mandate for the first phase of renovations.

I also spoke with Simon Mammone, a 2019 McGill Master of Urban Planning graduate and co-founder of Spazi, a private real estate firm, as well as the founder and director of Échelle, a non-profit which develops non-profit commercial real estate with the mission of creating “a portfolio of affordable properties that contribute to the social, cultural and economic life of Greater Montréal” (*Échelle | Immobilier*, n.d.). As the Director of Real Estate Development for Village Urbain, which shares a space with ATSE, Mammone is involved in numerous projects which aim to create third spaces for community use, although the majority are governed through the comparatively top-down non-profit model of governance. As a student in the Master of Urban Planning program, Mammone participated in the Suspicious Fish Community Design Workshop with Cudmore and Luka, where he worked with the participants to help them imagine the location and amenities of the future space and understand their neighbourhood. Years later, after Fish acquired their current space, Mammone ran into Purcell who invited him to join the board of directors as treasurer. With an interdisciplinary background in urban planning and real estate development in both the private and public sector, Mammone contributes valuable insight to Suspicious Fish's board and assists them in negotiating lease renewals and balancing their budget.

4.2.2.1. Barriers

What barriers do community groups face in establishing self-managed community spaces? What are the barriers from the planner's perspective? Interviewees discussed the barriers community groups face in establishing self-managed community spaces as well as barriers from the planner and designer's point of view. Mammone identified the most significant barriers for community groups, in descending order, as financing, finding real estate opportunities, proving affordability and establishing an effective governance structure. He emphasized that municipal political will and the leadership's vision also play a major role in determining whether community projects receive the necessary support to compete with private real estate interests and overcome the hurdles of financing, permitting and construction. As Mammone put it:

That's what's tough with community projects, it feels like it can always fail at each stage. The ideation, the construction, the acquisition, some people die there, go bankrupt. Then there's all the operational stuff, which could also kill a project. And I could cite many examples of projects who went through the initial hoops and failed because it was mismanaged.

Drawing from his experiences, Mammone notes that local governments vary widely in how they prioritize community projects and the kinds of support they provide. In some municipalities, leadership has been

responsive and supportive, providing access to an array of experts in zoning, permitting and community data analysis, enabling them to adapt proposals to fit the community's needs and accelerate progress. Most often, however, community projects are treated "like a number" and the political culture of the city results in siloes, stalling the project indefinitely.

Interviewees also highlighted how planning policies and regulatory frameworks, particularly zoning, often act as significant barriers for both community initiatives and the urban planning and design professionals who support them. Poddubiuk described zoning as a double-edged sword. While it can be used to pressure developers into negotiating community concessions, it also imposes rigid limitations on community projects and adds substantial administrative burden. The Sud-Ouest borough has historically elected to keep the intensity of use as is, zoned well below its potential density (as compared with similar neighbourhoods in central Montréal). This forces developers to negotiate for necessary zoning changes, creating opportunities for public leverage. This is effectively what happened with Chiara of Groupe Mach, where the mayor was able to put pressure on Groupe Mach to cede Bâtiment 7 to the community, in exchange for the zoning they needed. Yet, Poddubiuk pointed out that while this outcome may appear to be a monumental win for the community, it was a very modest compromise for the landlord, who acquired the entire CN yards site for the token cost of one dollar. This system, while effective, Poddubiuk asserts, is inefficient and vulnerable to misuse by local government officials who may not prioritize the public good.

Several interviewees emphasized how the inherent inflexibility of conventional zoning is at odds with the adaptability and flexibility required by self-managed community spaces, which must respond to the evolving needs of the neighbourhood. Reflecting on his experience working with the 7 à nous collective, Poddubiuk noted:

The nature of these projects, and the kind of people that you're working with, is that it's very hard to fix them in the long-term. [...] Because it's constantly in flux, and at some point I realized with Bâtiment 7 that it really makes you rethink notions of how you program a building, but also how you categorize it relative to zoning and other things. Because you really don't know where it's going to go five years from now and what's going to happen, and what things are going to be priorities for the people involved. I was always trying to pin down what we were doing with the building. We need to define it! We need to move forward! And then suddenly, I realized it is by definition in a constant state of flux.

Because zoning is static by design, whenever a space like Bâtiment 7 might want to introduce a certain new activity, they must often request a zoning modification accordingly, a process which can take anywhere from 12 to 18 months, according to Poddubiuk. The perceived administrative burden of applying for a zoning amendment alone may weaken busy community members' willingness to consider

new uses for the space. In contrast, Poddubiuk recalled being involved in debates around a major redevelopment proposal for the *Northern Electric* building parking lot in Pointe-Saint-Charles. The community ardently opposed the proposal, feeling that the lack of specificity about the project's impact left them unable to meaningfully assess its implications for the neighbourhood. The developer was reluctant to define the project and insisted he needed approval that would allow him the reflexivity to create either housing or office space. Poddubiuk acknowledged the contradiction: while community groups seek flexibility with regard to zoning for their own initiatives, they resist granting the same to private developers, especially when transparency is lacking. Ultimately, it seems that it is difficult to resolve these tensions, but these examples point to a need for greater flexibility in zoning and new tools to accommodate this shift:

I think we are moving towards a need to be more flexible. Clearly the demand is there from the point of view of the community and from the development world. We just don't have the tools to deal with it now, that are acceptable from all different perspectives.

-Mark Poddubiuk

While the demand for greater flexibility in zoning frameworks is evident, significant challenges remain. Chief among them is how to accommodate and even encourage community uses without inadvertently creating loopholes that could be exploited by private developers.

4.2.2.2. How can urban planning professionals and community groups collaborate to help establish and maintain self-managed community spaces?

Interviewees elaborated on the challenges and opportunities for collaboration among urban planners and architects and community groups working to establish self-managed spaces. In Poddubiuk's view, the greatest obstacle to collaboration is financial. While community groups often welcome input from professionals, they typically lack the resources to remunerate urban planners and architects. As a professor at UQAM, Poddubiuk was able to make the choice to get involved with Bâtiment 7 without relying on the project for income. However, he acknowledges that most professionals cannot afford to do unpaid work. It appears that continuity is essential for building trust and effective collaboration, but existing organizations or programs that enable collaboration do not provide sustained support.

My sense of it is that it's really important to develop a rapport of trust and a way of working together. It's something that takes a lot of time and you can't just go in there, be there for three months, help out, do everything, and then disappear. Well, you can and it's helpful and it's great but [...] then something else comes up, someone else comes in and they've got a completely different take on it, and you start all over again.

-Mark Poddubiuk

Having had the opportunity to contribute to multiple community initiatives himself, Poddubiuk admits that there may be no "magic recipe" for enabling these collaborations, which are often possible thanks to

exceptional circumstances. Poddubiuk argues that greater institutional support for pro-bono work is a possible solution. He pointed to the *American Institute of Architects'* pro-bono work policy, which even provides liability insurance, as a model for legitimizing such efforts in professional practice (*Institute Guidelines*, 2008). Of great importance is supporting community initiatives, especially early on in the process, as Poddubiuk noted:

There are really good projects out there that need to be done, and really need help upstream, really early in the process. They need help when there's no funding available for it, and we need as a society to invest in that stuff. That's the really good stuff. And they often never get off the ground, those really good projects, because they just don't get the help at the really early stages when they need it.

Mammone cited examples of different ways he's seen urban planners support community groups. Echoing Poddubiuk's point about pro bono work, Mammone added that one meaningful way urban planners can help is by volunteering to coach community groups on specific issues. He cited an example of one Master of Urban Planning program graduate who now works at the City of Montréal as an economic urban planner and creates grant programs that support grassroots initiatives. However, Mammone also emphasized the limitations of urban planners' influence vis-à-vis politicians, who ultimately decide whether to approve zoning changes, pass bylaws, or advance projects. Having briefly worked as an urban planning in local government, Mammone expressed frustration with the system's bureaucracy and structure, saying he felt he would need to become a politician to achieve his goals as a planner:

When you're a politician and a planner, you start thinking 'oh my god, why isn't anybody working on these types of projects that I like?'. Sometimes it's a chicken and egg situation. As a planner, you can be a good planner at a city but have no community initiative. So how do you create this community initiative? And then, most often, there's a lot of community initiative but there's no one at the city to get it accelerated and the project dies. Projects die. That's what happens.

-Simon Mammone

Mammone stresses the importance of urban planners as advocates and liaisons for community projects within local governments, as professionals with the expertise and power to guide groups through permitting, zoning and funding processes, and push internally to remove institutional barriers. For example, exempting community projects from permit fees, which have sometimes cost as high as half a million dollars, Mammone reports. Waiving such fees, would be one powerful way to support community projects with limited budgets. Despite the limited power of urban planners within a complex political system of local government, Mammone considers planners, with their ability to coordinator with the involved departments at the city, as strategically positioned to support community projects:

If I were to push it even more philosophically, I think the urban planner is the professional at the city with the best capacity to coordinate such a project [...] Because planners have an interdisciplinary background and have a passion for these types of uses. Usually.

-Simon Mammone

At the municipal level, both Poddubiuk and Mammone highlighted the opportunity for cities to make better use of municipally-owned vacant land and buildings, properties worth millions that often sit unused, gathering dust. They identified *Entremise*, a non-profit organization dedicated to “transforming vacant and underutilized spaces into collective real estate projects for more just, sustainable and resilient cities” as a prime example of how urban planners and architects can actively support community initiatives (*Entremise | Accueil*, n.d.). Finally, reflecting on his time in the Master of Urban Planning program, Mammone drew attention to the need for planning education to better equip students for real-world challenges. He argues that professionally accredited programs should offer more training in the technical and financial world of real-estate development and municipal finance, to better prepare graduates to navigate its challenges and complexities.

Professionals can also play a critical role in advising and training community groups on effective governance, an issue that emerged as a main theme in interviewees’ reflections on the sustainability and functioning of self-managed community spaces. Mammone identified two principal models: the centralized but participatory non-profit model, and the horizontal cooperative model, exemplified by *Bâtiment 7*. The more professionalized non-profit governance structure is most often implemented in Echelle’s projects that include collectively managed spaces. In this model, the initiative is financed and managed by a defined leadership or board but incorporates participatory mechanisms for community input. By contrast, Mammone described the cooperative model as typically offering greater socio-economic benefits, such as empowerment, ownership, and knowledge sharing to participants, but noted that decision making tends to be slower and more complex than the non-profit model. These spaces often operate through decentralized management, with responsibilities being shared and rotated among participants. While this can be empowering, Mammone observed that the considerable workload and constant negotiation and reflection required can lead to burnout rather quickly.

Mammone acknowledges that governance exist along a spectrum, and that hybrid structures that blend elements of both the non-profit and co-op models exist as well. Ultimately, Mammone emphasized the importance of having a diversity of governance models in collectively managed spaces to accommodate the varying capacities, time commitments and values of participants.

I sometimes disagree with the more radical community groups (who insist on the cooperative model). You know the non-profit, more top-down model is also needed because some people work

60 hours a week and they can't get involved but still want access to these spaces. And the opposite is true. When these non-profits shit on co-ops. I'm like, well, there are also people who want to get involved and see value in that. So, it's important to have diversity in our system.

-Simon Mammone

While significant barriers to the creation and sustainability of self-managed community spaces persist, both from the perspective of community groups and urban planners, interviews revealed promising orientations for supporting these initiatives and fostering collaboration. The following chapter draws on these emerging themes to present the key findings of this research, which will inform the subsequent discussion and recommendations for policy and practice.

Chapter 5: Discussion, recommendations, and conclusions

This study has investigated how community groups in Montréal can establish collectively run community spaces and what roles urban planners can play in support such efforts. Three main objectives guided this work. First, the study sought to document the histories of several self-managed community spaces, focusing on the factors that contributed to their success, such as partnerships, mobilization strategies, governance models, and policy supports. The aim is to share lessons learned from successful initiatives to guide aspiring groups in the creation and management of their own spaces. Second, efforts were made to examine the challenges these spaces face both internally, in terms of governance and management, and externally, in terms of their different dimensions of vulnerability in a neoliberal urban context. Third, the study aimed to identify opportunities for collaboration between community groups and urban planning professionals, offering guidance on how planners and architects might provide their expertise or professional advice to these initiatives and hopefully inspire them to do so.

To achieve these objectives, I conducted a review of relevant literature, including academic and journal articles, reports, policy documents, primary source accounts, and grey literature such as blogs and newspaper articles. This review provided a historical and contextual understanding of the selected case studies and the broader socio-political Montréal landscape in which they operate. Semi-structured interviews with a diverse group of stakeholders, community members, planning and design professionals, and subject-matter experts, helped fill gaps in the available literature, particularly for lesser-known spaces like Suspicious Fish. These interviews reveal different perspectives on the missions, challenges, and community impacts of these initiatives, shedding light on what makes them meaningful to their users. Finally, participant observation in each space allowed for a more nuanced, experiential understanding of how these spaces function on a daily basis and the social dynamics between users—insights that may not emerge through the literature or interviews alone.

Together, these methods help paint a picture of the unique paths and hurdles of Montréal's self-managed community spaces, as well as potential roles for planners as facilitators and advocates. As cities grapple with gentrification, growing inequality and social isolation, this research suggests that self-managed community spaces are a step towards more just, sustainable, and resilient cities. Democratically governed and collectively managed, guided by values of care and solidarity, self-managed community spaces have the capacity to make a difference in their communities, and planners can play a role in helping them thrive.

5.1. Key findings

This section presents four key findings that emerged from the research, highlighting the role of self-managed community spaces while also revealing tensions between politically radical values and the need for organizational stability. We examine both systemic and internal issues that affect the sustainability of these initiatives, and underscore the need for an institutional and cultural shift towards collective care and collaboration. Together, these findings provide a foundation for the discussions and recommendations that follow.

5.1.1. The role of self-managed community spaces

Self-managed community spaces are third spaces and social infrastructure that embody Harvey's "spaces of hope"—enabling community members to uphold politically radical ideals like horizontality, mutual-aid and solidarity through prefiguration. They furthermore support the "right to the city" as influentially argued by French philosopher Henri Lefebvre in 1968. These spaces support spatial justice, equity and sustainability by providing physical space for community members, particularly the socio-economically marginalized, to participate in a wide variety of events and benefit from services that would otherwise be out of reach. Each case study demonstrates a commitment to community well-being through different forms of service provision. Bâtiment 7 offers affordable food through its cooperative grocery store and democratizes access to artistic workshops and political resources. Espace des Possibles hosts daily events and workshops, aimed at fostering political consciousness and advancing the socio-ecological transition. Suspicious Fish provides intergenerational literacy and creative writing programming to the anglophone community of Verdun.

Beyond services, these spaces play an important social role in fostering a sense of belonging, community building and intergenerational ties, which helps combat increasing social isolation and polarization in modern, neoliberal cities. In a group interview, participants of Suspicious Fish's Adult Creative Writing program emphasized its impact on their lives and praised its ability to combine creative expression with community building:

There's a need for people like us, for a place like this one. [...] I wish there would be other places like this one. These days it's very difficult to have a place like this one which lets people and kids come and help them to express themselves. [...] Creation is something that builds you. So, when you create, you go inside yourself and you find something you don't especially know about or you want to express, you're curious about yourself. It's the journey you are making in yourself and it's amazing.

-Edith Haulotte

Everyone here is super fresh and into what they do. I see bonds building so quickly. [...] You can kind of fight isolation by having a warm place to come to, without requirement to do or be anything. And that's something that this place does really well.

-Erin Leonard

Unlike public social infrastructure such as libraries, parks and plazas, or private third spaces like cafés and barbershops, self-managed community spaces are shaped directly by the communities they serve through collective governance. These spaces redefine public space, defying conventional categories of public and private space, challenging this obsolete conceptual binary.

5.1.2. Tensions between politically radical values and organizational stability

The ethos of many self-managed community spaces is rooted in politically radical ideologies, particularly anarchism, which often gives rise to tensions around financial sustainability and organizational stability. In an effort to maintain collective autonomy and avoid cooptation by funders, value-forward spaces often refuse funders or resist institutional support deemed misaligned with their values. These communities also tend to resist professionalization and institutional partnerships, viewing them as fundamentally incompatible with principles such as horizontality, mutual aid and autonomy. This resistance can affect the acceptability of collaborating with urban planning and architecture professionals, making partnerships politically contentious. As a result, value-forward organizations frequently limit their relationships with institutions and instead rely on their internal networks and DIY approaches.

However, this commitment to collective autonomy comes with trade-offs and consequences for the individual well-being of volunteers and staff. Limited access to funding and institutional support constrains organizational capacity and contributes to financial precarity. Refusing professionalization places significant burdens on volunteers and staff, who must balance many responsibilities and heavy workloads, frequently resulting in burnout from overwork. Balancing anti-capitalist values with the practical demands of running a community space requires constant negotiation. Members must continuously reflect on how political commitments are practiced and upheld and to what extent compromises are acceptable.

5.1.3. Systemic issues and internal challenges

The internal factors of self-managed community spaces, such as management, are highly influenced by external, systemic and structural issues of capitalism and neoliberalism. The ongoing housing crisis and rising gentrification make it increasingly difficult for community groups to find affordable real estate to

rent or buy. Renter spaces, like Suspicious Fish are especially vulnerable, as commercial rents remain unregulated and continue to rise dramatically, particularly in rapidly gentrifying areas like Verdun. Despite aiming to resist displacement and support community resilience, self-managed community spaces can sometimes find themselves inadvertently contributing to gentrification. Bâtiment 7, for example, was designed to serve the historically working-class community of Pointe-Saint-Charles, yet tends to attract middle class, university-educated folks (closely associated with gentrification), and is actively promoted by developers as neighbourhood amenity to affluent newcomers. Such dynamics risk perpetuating cycles of displacement, even as Bâtiment 7 is committed to social inclusion. While these spaces strive to be a welcoming space for people from all backgrounds, they frequently struggle to reflect the full diversity of the neighbourhoods they serve.

Although shaped by radical, anti-capitalist values and collective autonomy, these spaces remain embedded within a capitalist context and are often dependent on funding from state and philanthropic sources. This paradox places them within what scholars refer to as the non-profit industrial complex, a system in which organizations that seek to challenge dominant hierarchical structures of power are nonetheless constrained by those same systems. Shifting political priorities further complicate access to stable funding. National austerity measures cut grant opportunities for the socioecological transition-focused initiatives, while Québec's language politics threaten the viability of resources like Suspicious Fish, which primarily cater to the anglophone population. In some cases, these challenges prove insurmountable. Solon, the organization behind les ATSE and Espace des possible was forced to cease operations due to chronic financial difficulties stemming from a lack of sustained funding to support its mission-driven work.

Lastly, self-managed spaces often find themselves at odds with conventional planning frameworks. Zoning regulations in particular are inherently inflexible and assume a static use, which clashes with these spaces desire for flexibility and adaptability. This mismatch between institutional expectations and the aspirations of self-managed spaces reveals a systemic failure to accommodate alternative models or urban life.

5.1.4. Institutional and cultural shifts towards care and collaboration

A community space's political orientation will likely influence the extent to which collaboration with planning and design professionals is seen as acceptable. However, when such collaborations are welcomed, there are several meaningful ways in which professional can lend support. With their

interdisciplinary backgrounds and connections to different departments at the city, planners are strategically positioned in local government to coordinate the creation and support the long-term viability of self-managed community spaces. Interviewees noted that one of the most significant barriers to collaboration is financial, as most community initiatives lack funds to hire professionals. To help address this gap, a cultural shift is needed within the planning and design professionals, one that reframes professionals not just as technical experts but as stewards of sustainable, inclusive communities and built environments, and practitioners of *caring with*.

This shift must be accompanied by corresponding institutional and educational changes. Planning and design education should place greater emphasis on “soft” skills such as active listening and communication skills, which are essential to working with diverse communities. Curricula should focus on increasing literacy around municipal budgeting and real estate, equipping students with the practical knowledge to facilitate community initiatives. The professional culture must also shift from merely tolerating pro bono, community-centred work to actively encouraging and facilitating it through greater institutional support. Such shifts would not only benefit the communities served but also the practitioners involved and the profession as a whole. By working closely with grassroots initiatives, planner and designers are likely to find a deeper sense of meaning and greater personal satisfaction in their work. An emphasis on supporting community initiatives could enhance the public’s perception of the planning and design professions as aligned with the pursuit of just, resilient cities.

5.2. Discussion

Self-managed community spaces present important experimentations in collective governance and alternatives to dominant top-down, capitalist, neoliberal norms. These spaces offer the opportunity for users and community members to participate in governance, which is not possible in municipal or institutional public spaces such as libraries and parks or private third spaces like cafés and barber shops. As physical spaces that facilitate social connections in communities, forming ties and sharing resources that help them thrive, self-managed community spaces are crucial pieces of social infrastructure in today’s cities (Klinenberg, 2019). Open to all people of different socio-economic backgrounds, with no obligation of membership or to pay anything at all, self-managed community spaces embody Lefebvre’s all-important arguments for the “right to the city” and thereby promote social justice. In *Rebel Cities*, David Harvey explained that the right to the city extends beyond the mere individual or collective right to its resources, but the power to shape the urban environment to reflect our values and desires (Harvey,

2012). Self-managed community spaces are also “spaces of hope” as defined by Harvey, where diverse actors come together to put their ideals of solidarity and care into practice through prefiguration.

5.2.1. Redefining Publicness

Self-managed community spaces challenge the notion of what constitutes public space and who it is meant for. When thinking of public space, people often picture state-owned and municipally operated infrastructure such as libraries, parks and plazas. These spaces are government-funded and shaped by state priorities, run or maintained by paid staff and or subject to rules and norms that are typically enforced through law enforcement and surveillance. Although such spaces are supposedly open to everyone, certain behaviours and individuals, especially marginalized groups are often excluded. In neoliberal cities, where market interests are paramount, groups who are perceived as disorderly are whose uses of the space are deemed inappropriate are regularly kicked out, unable to benefit from bastions of “public space” (Wildmer, 2021). Public institutions such as libraries and parks are portrayed as politically neutral while most private third spaces are only political insofar as it does not affect business, staying clear of controversial topics. In contrast, self-managed community spaces, uninterested in marketability, have a political identity, and while they are open to people of all socioeconomic backgrounds, they tend to attract social aware, politically engaged folks who share their values. Values which draw on socialist or anarchist beliefs like anti-capitalism, mutual aid and horizontality are upheld through the collective governance and care of its board and citizen committees. This model does not fit neatly into accepted definitions of public or private spaces, demonstrating an alternative to this binary. Sometimes framed as utopia, these spaces can be havens for marginalized communities, functioning as alternative mechanisms or what Fainstein (1999) termed counter-institutions to advocate for equity and inclusion.

5.2.2. Service provision

Self-managed community spaces are politically radical spaces that promote equity, solidarity, mutual aid, and community resilience through collective care and service provision. While their missions and offerings vary, these spaces democratize access to arts, skills, and resources by providing workshops and services at accessible price points, or no cost at all. For example, Bâtiment 7’s car mechanic workshop offers classes that teach participants how cars work and how to perform basic maintenance. The workshop actively encourages women, people of colour, and LGBTQ+ individuals (groups often excluded from male-dominated garage spaces), to participate (*Ateliers Collaboratifs Du BÂTIMENT 7*, n.d.). By doing so, it empowers them to make informed decisions and avoid undesirable situations that may arise in conventional mechanic shops. Espace des Possibles’ Repair Café exemplifies the socioeconomic

transition rooted in anti-capitalist values. It promotes care and resource sharing by enabling people, especially those with limited financial means, to repair and reuse broken items, reducing reliance on consumerism and resisting the cycle of planned obsolescence. Similarly, Suspicious Fish offers intergenerational literacy and creative writing workshops, including an Adult Creative Writing group where writers receive feedback on their work and grow through community support. The services foster social connection and are especially valuable for Montréal's anglophone community, where such spaces and resources are scarce and threatened by increasingly strict French-language laws. These examples illustrate how self-managed community spaces uphold radical values like anti-capitalism, horizontality, and mutual aid, through their services and everyday practices. Beyond service provision, these spaces also act as political actors by hosting activist gatherings, disseminating information (e.g. on tenant's rights), and screening films with politically relevant themes. In this way, they align themselves with political movements, deepen community political awareness, and actively contribute to broader mobilizations.

5.2.3. Clash between ideals and financial sustainability

While the radical values of self-managed community spaces, particularly their anarchist principles, give them meaning and offer vital alternatives within a neoliberal context, adherence to anti-capitalist and anti-professional ideals often clashes with the practical demands of sustaining a space, especially in terms of financial and organizational stability. In line with anarchist principles, these spaces are resistant to generating revenue through traditional means, even as they find themselves in financially precarious positions. Bâtiment 7, which relies heavily on grants and loans, is racing against time to raise enough money to restore the remaining sections of the building before decades of neglect lead to irreversible damage (Carrere & Bélanger, 2024). Suspicious Fish, whose programming is intentionally low-cost and offered on a sliding scale, depends on core funding but faces vulnerability to sharp rent increases with each lease renewal in rapidly gentrifying Verdun, as commercial rents are unregulated. Their funding is also subject to shifting political priorities, particularly in the current context, where Québec's conservative government is reluctant to be seen funding English-language educational institutions (Serebrin, 2024). While Espace des Possibles does not pay rent in the conventional sense, it must contribute to ATSE's mortgage payments to help ensure the financial viability of its co-landlord. The closure of Solon, the non-profit organization with a similar mission that founded ATSE and Espace des Possibles, further underscores the vulnerability of such models. Solon announced it will be ceasing operations in fall 2025, citing years of financial challenges due to the scarcity of funding for socio-ecological transition initiatives (Solon, n.d.). Considering their overlapping values and objectives, ATSE

may face similar financial obstacles. These examples reveal the central tension between upholding anti-capitalist values and ensuring long-term financial and organizational sustainability.

5.2.4. Collective autonomy vs. individual well-being

Efforts to maintain community autonomy and resist professionalization or institutional dependence often have unintended consequences for the functionality of these spaces and the well-being of the people who run them. Even the decision to hire staff can be considered controversial, as some community members worry it introduces power imbalances between paid workers and volunteers (Carrere & Bélanger, 2024). Some spaces therefore remain entirely volunteer-run, in keeping with their horizontal ideals. Where staff are employed, they are typically paid very little despite being expected to wear many hats, managing finances, running programs, handling administrative tasks and maintaining the physical space, in order to avoid the perceived pitfalls of professionalization (Curodeau-Codère et al., 2023). While volunteers also contribute valuable support, this model places immense strain on both groups, leading to frequent overwork and burnout. In response to these tensions, some spaces make compromises between ideological purity and organizational survival. For example, some interviewees observed that in recent years, Bâtiment 7 has shifted priorities slightly, focusing more on financial viability and access to space, even if that means straying from some of its founding anarchist principles. LeRue noted that Bâtiment 7's Grand Atelier room, once a flexible gathering area, is now primarily used as an event hall, which is regularly rented out for events. While this change may limit informal community use and alienate more politically radical members, Mammone framed it as a necessary shift, prioritizing the provision of a functional, sustainable space over strictly adhering to original ideals. Such compromises might be seen as “selling out”, but increased revenues and a more professionalized structure generally result in smoother daily operations and greater long-term resilience. Ultimately, they can also protect the well-being of staff and volunteers by distributing workloads more sustainably and allowing for a healthier work-life balance.

5.2.5. Relationships to institutions

Different spaces maintain different relationships with institutions. Spaces that are more ideologically informed by anarchism, like Bâtiment 7, are more likely to avoid institutional support in order to protect their autonomy, resist cooptation by funders, and preserve legitimacy within politically radical circles. However, in the absence of institutional support and professionalization, service provisions and improvement projects are often limited to the capacities of volunteers and DIY efforts. This stance can also extend to research partnerships, entailing potential consequences for knowledge sharing and awareness raising. One anarchist self-managed community space in Montréal, originally short-listed as a

potential case study, declined to collaborate, citing an unwillingness to work with an institution like McGill University, which they perceive as fundamentally misaligned with their organizational values. Although they supported the aims of the research, such as its goal to support efforts to establish self-managed community spaces, they felt that any affiliation with a mainstream, hierarchical institution could compromise their political credibility within their community. This space identifies as a revolutionary project for all people oppressed by the capitalist system and rejects all forms of hierarchical or institutional entanglement.

A resistance to institutional collaboration can also affect relationships with urban planning and design professionals, who are often viewed as entangled with state power and hierarchical institutions. There is a well-documented history of marginalized communities having negative experiences working with universities, which have left many highly skeptical of partnerships with these institutions (Reardon, 2003). Poddubiuk noted that while he maintained good relations with the 7 à nous collective, he always sensed some discomfort around relying on him in a professional capacity, suggesting they would have preferred to complete the work themselves. This highlights a key tension and additional complexity, while collaboration with planners, architects or researchers could support the longevity or expansion of these spaces, ideological commitment can make such partnerships difficult.

While politically radical principles shape how these spaces are run and with whom they engage, even the most ideologically committed spaces remain constrained by material realities, particularly the need for funding. The example above illustrates that concerns about cooptation are not merely ideological but structurally rooted in what has been dubbed the Non-Profit Industrial Complex (NPIC). Popularized by the *INCITE! Women of Color Against Violence*'s 2007 collection of essays, *The Revolution Will not be Funded*, the NPIC is defined as “a set of symbiotic relationships that link political and financial technologies of state and owning class control with surveillance over public political ideology, including and especially emergent progressive and leftist social movements,” (INCITE!, 2007). This concept explains how non-profits, even those that explicitly challenge dominant systems, are constrained by their dependence on funding from the state or philanthropic resources, which are embedded in the very systems that these organizations criticize and seek to dismantle (Finley & Esposito, 2012). The proliferation of non-profits is symptomatic of neoliberalism, wherein social services that were traditionally the responsibility of the state have been delegated to the private and non-profit sectors. This self-perpetuating system has the detrimental effects of justifying the state's withdrawal from addressing social issues, while entrapping non-profits in a hierarchical system which encourages them to model themselves after for-profit corporations to secure institutional legitimacy (Finley & Esposito, 2012). The NPIC thus lies is at

the heart of an enduring tension faced by self-managed community spaces: the conflict between their deeply-held anti-capitalist values and their need for financial stability in order to serve their communities.

That being said, not all self-managed community spaces reject institutional support, and some even embrace collaboration with universities and urban planning professionals. Suspicious Fish, for example, has initiated a number of fruitful partnerships with faculty and students from both Concordia and McGill. Concordia's Creative Writing program helped connect the organization with a book printer for its anthology publications. Suspicious Fish also worked with McGill's Urban Planning program and the literacy non-profit Reclaim Literacy to co-organize a community design workshop. In 2020, it received its first multi-year grant project thanks to their application through Concordia University. Suspicious Fish's openness to institutional collaboration and support likely stems from its origins within the formal education system and its primary focus on service provision, rather than upholding anti-capitalist values. Compared to Bâtiment 7 and Espace des Possibles, Suspicious Fish seems to place greater emphasis on organizational stability and delivery of services, making collaboration with professionals more compatible with its mission and acceptable to their community. This is not to suggest that one model works better than the other but to illustrate that some while some spaces prioritize values and collective autonomy, others lean more towards considerations like organizational stability and outreach capacity. Ultimately, all self-managed community spaces along this spectrum play valuable roles and a diversity of models is essential to support communities with different values, needs and capacities for engagement.

5.2.6. Shared challenges as systemic issues

The challenges around establishing and maintaining self-managed community spaces can be understood as both endogenous, those internal to the group or initiative, and exogenous, external systemic issues that shape and influence internal dynamics. Core challenges such as financial precarity, volunteer and staff overwork and burnout, difficulty sustaining mobilization, and limited capacity for outreach are highly influenced by structural issues of capitalism and neoliberalism. The ongoing housing crisis has made it increasingly difficult for community groups to find affordable buildings and spaces to rent or purchase. This is exacerbated by the fact that Canadian cities primarily rely on property taxes as their main source of revenue, which makes it so that cities have a vested interest in rising property values, ultimately contributing to gentrification and unaffordability (Macdonald, 2024). Renter community spaces such as Suspicious Fish are particularly vulnerable to steep rent increases at the end of each lease cycle, since commercial rents are not regulated, further adding to their financial precarity. Self-managed community spaces are also highly dependent on public and philanthropic grants to finance their missions. However,

in Canada's fossil fuel dependent, capitalist economy, there is little political will for the government to invest in socio-ecological transition initiatives (Gobby, 2019). The government is less likely to prioritize long-term, costly investments in equity and when short term investments in fossil fuels or military spending yield faster returns and face less political resistance (Gobby, 2019). Austerity measures, such as the federal government recent spending "refocusing" strategy announced in 2023, further constrain these initiatives. These cuts reduced Environment and Climate Change Canada's departmental budgets by 3%, or \$43 million for 2024-2025, and included significant reductions in grant opportunities and contribution expenditures ("Green Budget Coalition's Budget 2024 Recommendations," 2023). These structural issues place enormous strain on the finances, and by extension the organizational capacity of self-managed community spaces, increasing the workload for already underpaid staff and volunteers.

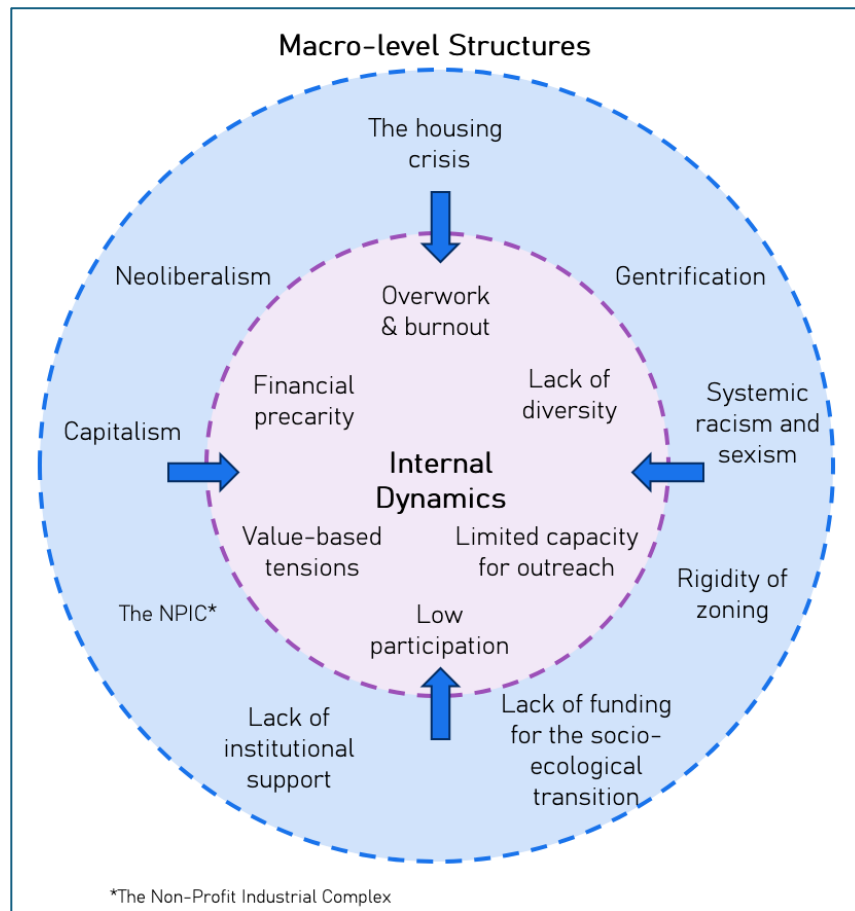


Figure 2: Endogenous and exogenous issues effecting self-managed community spaces.

The inner purple circle symbolizes the internal dynamics of self-managed community spaces, while the outer blue circle represents external systemic forces. Blue arrows illustrate pressures and influences exerted by these external systems on internal workings of these spaces. The dashed outline of the inner circle suggests the fluid and sometimes blurry boundary between internal and external dynamics. Similarly, the dashed outer circle indicates that the macro-level structures identified here are not the outermost layer, there may be broader forces beyond them.

Other constraints arise from structural issues within planning frameworks and the lack of sustained institutional support from urban planning and design professionals. Poddubiuk emphasizes that while there is a strong demand for beneficial collaboration between professionals and community groups, most grassroots initiatives lack the resources to pay for professional services. He advocates for a broader culture of pro bono within the planning and architectural professions, to ensure that community initiatives, especially in their early phases, receive the technical support they need. Frameworks such as the *Guidelines to Assist AIA Members, Firms and Components in Undertaking Pro Bono Service Activities* published by the American Institute of Architects help to legitimize pro bono work by offering liability insurance to and professional recognition. The guidelines position pro bono work as a public

good that elevates “the stature of the profession [...] in the eyes of the public” (*Institute Guidelines*, 2008). While some funding opportunities exist to support collaboration between planning and design professionals and community groups, they are rare, highly competitive and do not sustain the long-term engagement needed to build a rapport of trust and effective systems of working together. Finally, the inherent inflexibility of zoning regulations clashes with self-managed community spaces’ desire for flexibility and adaptability. Self-managed community spaces aspire to evolve in response to the evolving needs of their communities, such as adjusting their use to include a day care. However, the cost and administrative burden of applying for zoning adjustments are usually beyond the limited capacity of these spaces’ staff, making them largely unable to accommodate new uses. Yet zoning is currently the primary tool municipalities use to control land use and is frequently leveraged in negotiations with private developers to extract community benefits. These conflicting demands suggest the need for zoning frameworks to change in a way that supports equity, sustainability, and the adaptability desired by community initiatives, without creating loopholes that private developers can exploit to avoid regulation.

5.3. Recommendations for policy and practice

This section outlines key recommendations for policy and practice aimed at addressing the systemic, organizational, and cultural barriers to the creation and on-going management of self-managed community spaces in Montréal. It advocates for the promotion of pro-bono work among planning and design professionals, reframing of these professions as stewards of equitable and sustainable community development. It also proposes the development of new programs that facilitate collaboration between community groups and planning professionals, drawing inspiration from a successful international model. Additionally, it calls for increased support for complimentary initiatives that enable the adaptive reuse of vacant municipally owned building for community purposes. The section concludes with recommendations to expand financial mechanisms and contribute to a growing body of research on self-managed community spaces. While these recommendations do not specify the actors responsible for implementation, they articulate strategic directions, both systemic and cultural, that could significantly enhance the viability and sustainability of self-managed community spaces.

5.3.1. Promote pro bono work by urban planning and design professionals

While community initiatives often welcome input from urban planning and architecture professionals, they often lack the resources to pay for their services. Promoting a culture of pro bono work is an important action which could facilitate collaboration and help self-managed community space initiatives get the support they need to increase their chances of success. Developing policies like the American

Institute of Architects' (AIA) pro bono work policy can help lend enhanced legitimacy to these partnerships, as well as support practitioners by providing liability insurance. Industry guidelines on pro bono work could help guide practitioners navigate the particularities of grassroots initiatives to ensure all work upholds ethics and professional conduct of the discipline and ensure clarity of expectations. The AIA policy actively encourages pro bono work, emphasizing benefits such as the personal satisfaction many architects experience when applying their knowledge and skills to “good causes” as well as improving the public standing of the profession (*Institute Guidelines*, 2008). Similarly, Doug Aberley, a bioregional planning consultant in British Columbia, argues that planners must move beyond simply serving the mandates of employers, by choosing to engage in “free” work that goes beyond the status quo (Aberley, 2000). Developing similar policies for urban planning and architecture in Canada could help reframe the profession, shifting the perception of planners from state technocrat to mediators and stewards of community development. To further support this shift, planning education should better prepare students for successful collaborations with community groups. Curricula must include training in municipal financing and real estate, to equip future planners with the skills needed to support community initiatives. Just as importantly, education should emphasize listening and communication skills, which are essential to building trust and fostering co-creative relationships with grassroots initiatives.

5.3.2. Reframe the professional ethos: planners and architects as stewards

The culture of urban planning and architecture should shift to emphasize the role of planners and architects as stewards, professionals engaged in the ongoing care of communities, ecosystems and the built environment through the thoughtful planning and design of urban spaces and buildings. Their work aligns closely with Fisher and Tronto's definition of care as “a species activity that includes everything that we do to maintain, continue, and repair our ‘world’ so that we can live in it as well as possible” (Fisher & Tronto, 1990). Planning, like all “caring activities” is inherently political. It involves decisions about whose needs are met and how, dealing directly with issues of “justice, equality and trust” (Fisher & Tronto, 1990). Particularly relevant to the profession is Tronto's fifth phase of care, *caring with*, which calls for care practices that are “consistent with democratic commitments to justice, equality and freedom for all” (Tronto, 2013). Recognizing planners as professionals engaged in *caring with* challenges the conventional perception of planners as politically neutral, rational technicians. Instead, it positions them as active participants in democratic relationships, with a responsibility to not only design just spaces but to work together with the communities they serve. Seeing planners and architects this way would further legitimize their support of self-managed community spaces, which can be understood as spaces of care where communities are engaged in caring for themselves and each other.

5.3.3. Create new programs that support professionals working with communities

New programs could be developed to directly support the work of planners and architects for and with community groups, making it affordable for communities and feasible for professionals on a case-by-case basis. This operationalizes the concept of *caring with* articulated by Tronto (2013) and asserted more recently as an imperative for planning by Jon (2020) and Williams (2020), and is congruent with the notion of *place-keeping* (Dempsey et al., 2014). One practical precedent, albeit in a very different geopolitical context, is the Cuba Community Architect program. Founded in 1994 by non-profit Habitat Cuba in response to the growing demand for housing in the wake of the fall of the Soviet Union and subsequent national economic crisis (Valladares, 2013), the program focuses on self-help housing strategies where architects develop plans to build, expand or renovate dwellings, informed by a participatory co-creation process involving role-playing games that engage all residents. The participatory techniques employed in this program acknowledge resident knowledge of their spatial needs and reflects a view that experts must go beyond simply dictating solutions to their clients (Valladares, 2013). Clients benefit from the professional expertise of the architects, and they are provided with a personalized and detailed instructions on how to execute the work. Starting with 24 architects working in two municipalities, the program has spread across the country, with over 1,000 participating architects, helping to increase the proportion of self-help built housing from 25% in 1988, to 38% in 2002 (Valladares, 2013). While the political, economic and cultural circumstance of Cuba and Canada differ substantially, the program's participatory framework offers valuable lessons. A similar initiative could be adapted in Canada, with planners and architects collaborating with municipalities or universities to provide their expertise to grassroots initiatives. Although such a program may not enable longer-term partnerships, it could provide community groups with expert guidance and personalized plans during the crucial early stages of a project, support that many would otherwise be unable to access. Other precedents include work by Engle (2018) on post-disaster reconstruction and by Zwarteveen et al. (2024) on the stewardship of groundwater.

5.3.4. Tools and Support for Community Initiatives

Municipally-owned vacant buildings should be prioritized as real-estate opportunities for community programs, non-profit organizations, and self-managed community spaces. In his interview for this study, Mammone noted that many municipally-owned lots and buildings, valued in the millions of dollars, are underutilized, and in some cases being left to decay. Entremise connects underutilized or vacant buildings with entrepreneurs and communities groups that have innovative ideas for reactivating them (*Entremise | Accueil*, n.d.). Through a website, community organizations can fill out a survey detailing the intended

use of the space, along with desired specifications such as size, amenities and length of occupation. With a focus on architectural heritage preservation, Entremise also provides publicly available toolkits and resources to help community groups navigate the legal, architectural and financial complexities of collectively managing real estate, particularly in churches and heritage buildings. Supported by an interdisciplinary team with expertise in urban planning, architecture, heritage, finance and communication, Entremise is well-equipped to guide community organizations through the numerous hurdles of creating self-managed community spaces (*Entremise | Design Montréal*, 2022). This innovative model deserves increased support and investment and could be expanded to facilitate the acquisition and transformation of disused buildings for permanent community use. Other solutions could include collaborating with GRTs to develop training programs where community members are empowered with procedural literacy and some of the necessary knowledge to navigate the procedures involved in establishing co-ops and collectively managed community spaces.

5.3.5. Adjust planning and zoning frameworks

Zoning should be made more flexible so that community spaces are able to adjust their uses to respond to the evolving needs of the community. The aim of these changes should be to reduce excessive administrative burden for community initiatives with limited resources, without creating loopholes for private developers to bypass regulations. Ville-Marie's recent series of differential zoning regulatory amendments, adopted in April 2025, facilitate the construction of non-market housing by making it easier and faster for developments to get approval (Montréal, n.d.-a). These adjustments simplify regulatory processes, and make it possible to increase the number of units per project, thereby reducing development costs per dwelling (Montréal, n.d.-a). Inclusionary zoning bylaws are no silver bullet, however, and future regulations should learn from the frustrations in application of the 2021 *Règlement pour une métropole mixte*, or the "20-20-20" bylaw as it is sometimes called, because of its requirement that developers allot 20% of built unit to social housing, to produce any social housing at all (Shearmur, 2023). In order for inclusionary zoning bylaws to be more effective, they must be situated within a broader provincial housing policy which invests in social housing, and provide incentives to developers, rather than attempt to force them into subsidizing non-market housing (Shearmur, 2023). While it is too early to evaluate the effectiveness of the 2025 bylaw, its approach of incentivizing non-profits to build social housing gives them an advantage on private developers, who face stricter requirements (PUM 2025 Rapport de Consultation Publique, 2025). Through adopting similar structures, additional zoning bylaws could incentivize the construction of not only non-market housing but supporting infrastructures such as community centres, day care centres, and of course, self-managed community spaces.

5.3.6. Systemic change and long-term resilience: financing mechanism and research

Municipalities should invest in expanding financial mechanisms such as participatory budgeting to help increase funding for community-led initiatives like self-managed community spaces. Invented in Porto Alegre, Brazil in 1989, participatory budgeting is a democratic process which allows citizens to propose and vote on how municipal governments invest a portion of their budget, helping to prioritize community-led initiatives (Kohler, 2023). Since the inauguration of Montréal's first city-wide participatory budget in 2020, funding allotted to projects has increased from \$25 million to \$45 million in 2024 and so far 24 citizen-proposed projects have been selected to date (Montréal, n.d.-b). Eligible proposals must meet criteria such as advancing one or more themes, youth, equity and safety. Project realization costs must fall between \$500,000 and \$10 million, up from a maximum of \$3 million in 2020 (Montréal, n.d.-b). Despite its popularity, the mechanism has been criticized for failing to strike a balance between quantity and quality of projects, limiting its impact and focusing on “trivial” matters rather than assigning real power to citizens (Durand Folco, 2016). One potential response is to restructure the process to allocate large sums to fewer, high impact projects, rather than many smaller initiatives. However, this approach may necessitate expert involvement, potentially making the process feel less accessible to community members. It could also raise concerns about fairness, as some neighbourhoods might receive significant investments, while others receive none. Participatory budgeting, while not without flaws, is a valuable democratic instrument which should be leveraged to fund self-managed community spaces, particularly to cover high up-front costs of acquiring a space. More broadly, participatory budgeting should be part of larger shift in public investment at the provincial and federal levels. Funding must be redirected away from short-term, profit-driven sectors such as fossil fuels and towards long-term, sustainability and community-centred infrastructure. Dedicated funding streams for initiatives advancing the socio-ecological transition, such as self-managed community spaces, are essential for fostering resilient communities and equitable cities.

Self-managed community spaces should be researched at local, national, and international levels, to better understand successful models of mobilization, governance, management, and funding, and to enable inter-communal knowledge sharing. This supervised research project aims to contribute to that growing body of work by shedding light on this complex yet promising approach to promoting equity, sustainability, and community resilience in the face of contemporary urban challenges like gentrification and climate change related threats. Knowledge sharing could be further facilitated through the creation of self-managed community space networks, combining virtual platforms with in-person gatherings. Inspired by Solon's Réseau des tiers-lieux montréalais, such a network could help raise awareness about of the social and spatial impacts of these initiatives, foster the development of a shared mission, and strengthen

collective advocacy efforts for funding and policy support, facilitating the creation of new spaces (*Réseau des tiers-lieux montréalais* | Solon, n.d.). A well-designed online network could also contribute to outreach efforts by helping residents discover existing initiatives and encourage participation and stewardship.

5.4. Conclusion

This study has examined three self-managed community spaces in Montréal, taking a close look at their successes, challenges, and the potential for collaboration with planning and design professionals. It is my hope that this research contributes to a deeper appreciation of the transformative potential of these spaces as forms of social infrastructure that fosters connection and mutual aid as well as embodying radical anti-capitalist values such as horizontality and solidarity. At the same time, this research has only scratched the surface of the rich and complex world of self-managed community spaces in Montréal. Due to the scope and limitations of this study, it was not possible to investigate a broader range of models, but future research could greatly benefit from examining a wider variety of cases across Canada and internationally.

One notable limitation of this work is its underlying assumption that planning and design professionals are sympathetic to the aims of self-managed community spaces and willing to support alternative models of urban futures, an assumption that may not hold in all contexts. Building on this study, future research could explore additional mechanisms for supporting self-managed community spaces that were beyond the scope of this project, such as community land trusts or integration with non-market housing cooperatives and cohousing developments. Comparative studies across jurisdictions could also reveal valuable insights into the kinds of political, cultural and institutional shifts required create and sustain mobilization for these initiatives.

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Appendix: Figures

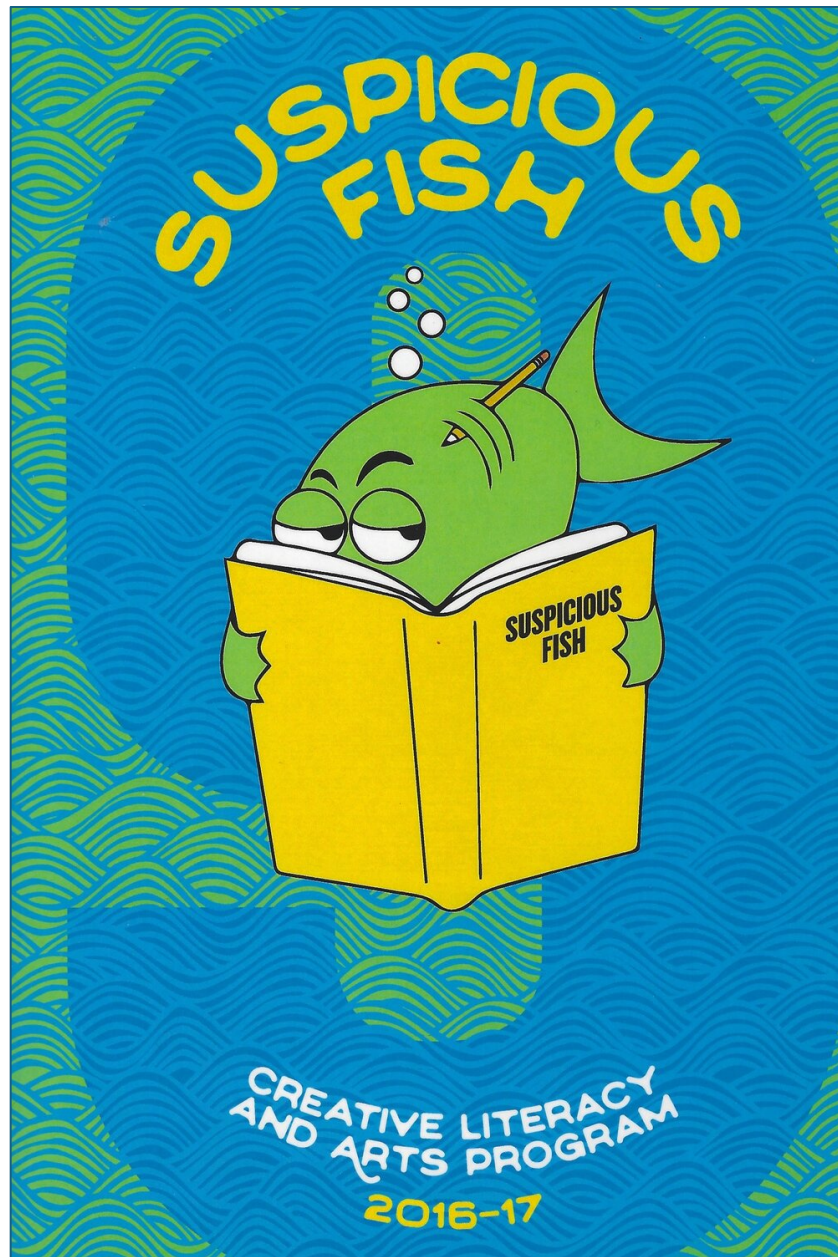


Figure 1: Suspicious Fish 2016-2017 anthology cover.

Source: Suspicious Fish. Retrieved from: <https://www.suspiciousfish.org/our-collection>. Used with permission.

Appendix: Research Ethics Board approval certificate

Firefox

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McGill University
Research Ethics Board Office
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CERTIFICATE OF ETHICS APPROVAL

REB File Number: 24-05-110
Project Title: CROWDSOURCING ATTITUDES TOWARD NEIGHBOURHOOD CHANGE ON THE URBAN-PERIURBAN CONTINUUM
Faculty Principal Investigator: Nicholas James Luka
Department: Urban Planning, School of
Sponsor/Funding Agency (if applicable): SSHRC
FRQ

Research Team (if applicable):

Name	Affiliation
Teresa Hunkeler	M.Sc. student, Urban Planning, McGill U.
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Masha Wakula	M.Sc. student, Urban Planning, McGill U.
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Elise Durie	M.U.P. student, Urban Planning, McGill U.
David Ste-Marie	M.U.P. student, Urban Planning, McGill U.

Approval Period:

FROM	TO
29-Jul-2024	28-Jul-2025

The REB-1 reviewed and approved this project by Delegated review in accordance with the requirements of the McGill University Policy on the Ethical Conduct of Research Involving Human Participants and the Tri-Council Policy Statement: Ethical Conduct For Research Involving Humans.

- * Approval is granted only for the research and purposes described.
- * The PI must inform the REB if there is a termination or interruption of their affiliation with the University. The McGill REB approval is no longer valid once the PI is no longer a student or employee.
- * An **Amendment** form must be used to submit any proposed modifications to the approved research. Modifications to the approved research must be reviewed and approved by the REB before they can be implemented. Changes to funding or adding new funding to a previously unfunded study must be submitted as an Amendment.
- * A **Continuing Review** form must be submitted before the above expiry date. Research cannot be conducted without a current ethics approval. Submit 2-3 weeks ahead of the expiry date.
- * A total of 5 renewals are permitted after which time a new application will need to be submitted.
- * A **Termination** form must be submitted to inform the REB when a project has been completed or terminated.
- * A **Reportable New Information** form must be submitted to report any unanticipated issues that may increase the risk level to participants or that may have other ethical implications or to report any protocol deviations that did not receive prior REB approval.
- * The REB must be promptly notified of any new information that may affect the welfare or consent of participants.
- * The REB must be notified of any suspension or cancellation imposed by a funding agency or regulatory body that is related to

this study.

* The REB must be notified of any findings that may have ethical implications or may affect the decision of the REB.