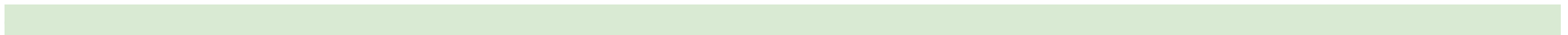# Engaging Children and Youth in Urban Planning and Environmental Design: A Guide to Youth Engagement in Montreal

Supervised Research Project

School of Urban Planning

McGill University

Submitted to Prof. Lisa Bornstein

Written by Berta Kaisr

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Acknowledgements

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Abstract

In 2030, 60% of people living in cities will be under the age of 18. The present and the future of these cities must be planned for and with consultation of youth and children. However, there are many barriers to the consultation process that can exclude children and youth, especially from marginalized backgrounds. This supervised research report asks the question of why youth engagement is important and how we can make it more inclusive, meaningful and accessible to children and youth of all backgrounds.

Exploring the research questions, the report reviews histories of engagement, the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC), examples of what engagement actually looks like, as well as insights from interviews with 6 Montreal-based organizations and initiatives. The findings emphasize innovative strategies to involve marginalized communities, such as targeted outreach and culturally sensitive methods. They also highlight the importance of establishing trust through sustained dialogue. This report concludes with insights and recommendations for future research and engagement. The hope for this research is to contribute to a more inclusive and equitable urban planning landscape that recognizes the vital role of youth and children.

Résumé

En 2030, 60 % des habitants des villes auront moins de 18 ans. Le présent et l'avenir de ces villes doivent être planifiés pour et avec la consultation des jeunes et des enfants. Cependant, le processus de consultation se heurte à de nombreux obstacles qui peuvent exclure les enfants et les jeunes, en particulier ceux issus de milieux marginalisés.. Ce rapport de recherche supervisé pose la question de savoir pourquoi l'engagement des jeunes est important et comment nous pouvons le rendre plus inclusif, significatif et accessible aux enfants et aux jeunes de toutes origines.

En explorant les questions de recherche, le rapport passe en revue l'histoire de l'engagement, la Convention des Nations Unies relative aux droits de l'enfant (CDE), des exemples de ce à quoi ressemble réellement l'engagement, ainsi que des idées tirées d'entretiens avec 6 organisations et initiatives basées à Montréal. Les conclusions mettent l'accent sur des stratégies innovantes pour impliquer les communautés marginalisées, telles que la sensibilisation ciblée et les méthodes sensibles à la culture. Ils soulignent également l'importance d'établir la confiance par le biais d'un dialogue soutenu. Ce rapport se termine par des idées et des recommandations pour la recherche et l'engagement futur. L'espoir de cette recherche est de contribuer à un paysage de planification urbaine plus inclusif et équitable qui reconnaisse le rôle vital des jeunes et des enfants.

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Chapter 1: Introduction

In recent decades, public engagement has gained prominence as a vital component of urban planning processes. Unfortunately, engagement efforts historically have fallen short, especially with respect to marginalized groups such as lower-income individuals, women, children, seniors, immigrants, and Black, Indigenous, and People of Color (BIPOC) (Zhuang, 2013; Hou, 2013). People in these groups, who may identify with one or more of these identities, have been underrepresented in engagement initiatives and, as a result, have had their perspectives and voices excluded from planning and decision-making (Mansfield et al., 2021).

Child and youth-friendly urban planning is an emerging field, one responding to the many opportunities for meaningful engagement and the creation of better cities for all. The concept of child and youth-friendly urban planning, while not necessarily new, has gained significant recognition in recent years. From Arnstein's (1969) ladder of participation to Hart's (1991) youth-focused one, the understanding of how cities need to be designed with the needs and perspectives of children and young people in mind has been evolving over time. The 1989 United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC) played a crucial role in articulating, and promoting, the rights and well-being of children in society, including in urban environments. The Convention states that children have a right to safe, inclusive, and stimulating environments; cities around the world are recognizing the need to create such environments for children and young people. Since adoption, the Convention has also prompted researchers, planners, and advocates to consider children and youth in urban planning processes. Cities around the world–including Montreal, as Canada ratified the CRC in 1991–are increasingly recognizing the importance of creating inclusive, accessible, and engaging environments for children and young people.

This supervised research report examines how youth and children from diverse backgrounds participate in various planning processes. The research delves into the following key questions:

- Why is youth engagement important and how can we make it more meaningful?
- How can we create more inclusive practices and spaces for all youth, including those who come from marginalized and/or racialized backgrounds?
- How can the experiences of current professionals working with child- and youth-centered engagement inform future practice?

In four different chapters, this report describes research undertaken on these questions with the aim of gaining understanding of youth-inclusive engagement processes, generating policy recommendations, and providing resources for local educators. Chapter 1 contains this introduction,

presenting the scope and approach taken to the research and report. Chapter 2 defines youth engagement, outlines its importance, and describes its evolution. Chapter 3 presents profiles of six organizations in the City of Montreal, with highlighted projects and key findings from their engagement methods. Chapter 3 can be read as part of the larger supervised research project, but it has been designed to, in future, be produced as a stand-alone document, one that can be made available to the wider public, planners, educators, and community practitioners. Finally, in chapter 4, a discussion and analysis of the findings from the interviews and first-hand experience are discussed and a conclusion for the research is provided.

Scope & Methods

This report examines models of youth engagement in urban planning and environmental design with a focus on processes of inclusion and the narratives that surround them. The research aimed to (a) track the evolution of youth engagement approaches, (b) highlight successes in daily practice, (c) identify challenges encountered, and (d) synthesize the findings to generate recommendations that could better include diverse youngsters in participatory planning.

In the context of this report, a child is identified as anyone under the age of 18, and the youth definition overlaps with that as anyone between 15-30 can be considered part of the youth category. The research approach taken was to focus on organizations local to Montreal that are involved in engagement with children (aged 5-15) and youth (roughly 16-30). Engagement with these two age groups can manifest in different ways, but it needs to always be meaningful, respectful, and acknowledging their perspectives, opinions, and experiences. Creating engagement within urban planning and environmental design entails the active involvement of children and youth in the processes that shape the built environment around them (Hart,1992; Gill 2007; Derr et al., 2018). Examples, drawn from literature and the interviews, include: engagement through consultations (OCPM); storytelling (Suspicious Fish; Sandercock, 2003); through creativity and play (Hadani et al., 2021; Rojas, n.d.); and through educational and interdisciplinary programming (Youth Fusion, Montessori, YEP!). In this report, these different methods are further explored with illustrative examples.

The research methods in this document include:

1. Literature review
2. Interviews
3. Illustrative cases of inclusive engagement
4. First-hand experience

The literature review covers the theories on child- and youth-centered engagement drawn from child development, education and psychology of education, urban and

environmental design, participatory planning and more. Recent developments and tendencies are traced. Academics and practitioners from diverse fields—e.g., participatory planning, education, and child development—agree on the importance of engagement as part of a process that asserts and grounds the rights of the child in the communities in which they live. Practices of child-friendly design and participatory engagement—from different illustrative cases and projects—are described.

The interview phase of the research entailed outreach to organizations known or suspected to be working with youth and/or children around urban design and planning issues. Ten organizations were contacted via an outreach email, sent in both French and English. Six organizations identified an individual willing to be interviewed. Six interviews were conducted, all in English. Each interview lasted between 30-60 minutes and was completed between the months of April and May 2023. Five out of the six interviews were conducted using Google Meet calls and one interview, with the OCPM, was in person. All participants signed consent forms prior to their interviews; all respondents agreed to be named and linked to their comments. Notes were taken on each interview, and thematic analysis made of the respondents' stories; attention was paid to their challenges and recommendations for improving engagement work, which allowed for the identification of good practices.

For each call or meeting, I had a set of open-ended questions, some common across the interviews, and others specific to the organization under study. Additional questions arose organically during the semi-structured interviews that were specific to each organization and which helped gain insights into their approaches to engagement. See Appendix A for a list of the general interview questions.

The list of interviewees is not meant to be comprehensive or fully representative of the ways youth engagement is carried out, even just on the island of Montreal. Instead, as Professor Bornstein observes, "the aim is to learn from current practitioners, those with knowledge, experience, and insight into the craft of doing engagement" (pers. comm.) The effort is in line with the "learning from practice" approach to planning (Watson, 2002; Saija et al., 2017). The interviewees' comments direct our attention to examples of work underway in the City, which then can serve as a point of reference for further studies of and experimentation with engagement.

In addition to the data and analysis are added stories drawn from my personal experiences as a community worker in the Côte-des-Neiges–Notre-Dame-de-Grâce (CDN-NDG) borough with the NDG Community Council.

There are acknowledged gaps and unevenness in coverage. The report does not explore questions of experience based on gender. The researcher's reliance on English for interviews

may have introduced bias in coverage as most of the groups interviewed were in majority Anglophone or highly language diverse areas of the city; many of the observations came from the Notre-Dame-de-Grâce (NDG) neighborhood. With adequate time and resources, this research could be expanded and the guide presented here as Chapter 3 could include more organizations from across the city.

Chapter 2: Literature Review

In 2030, 60% of all people living in cities will be people under the age of 18 (ARUP, 2017). As such, it is imperative that when planning for these cities, children and youth are part of that process. This section takes a look at key "periods" in approaches to engagement and themes surrounding youth and child engagement. This chapter discusses the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC) and the child's right to participate, the evolution of the Ladder of Participation, barriers to engagement and why engagement is important, and, finally, different approaches to engagement, together with illustrative examples.

Rights: UN & Rights-Based Approach to Engagement

Participation and engagement applied through a rights-based lens is discussed by many authors. In *Placemaking with Children and Youth: Participatory Practices for Planning Sustainable Communities*, Derr et al. (2018) discuss engagement with a rights-based approach describing how in the 1989 Universal Declaration of Human Rights, children were granted protections and rights, but had limited participation in local governments and planning. Engagement and participation is a right for everyone, regardless of age, gender, socio-economic background or racial and ethnic makeup. The right to participate is described as essential according to the CRC and is most prevalent in article 12 which states:

States Parties shall assure to the child who is capable of forming his or her own views the right to express those views freely in all matters affecting the child, the views of the child being given due weight in accordance with the age and maturity of the child. (UNICEF, 1989).

Engaging with children and youth can only begin when the baseline understanding is that they have the right to democratic participation and to voice their opinions. Planning child and youth-friendly cities is a necessity, but it cannot be designed solely from a top-down approach where higher levels of authorities make all the decisions without consulting with the children whose cities we are designing.

Ladder of Participation: Arnstein & Beyond

Two decades before the CRC came into action, in 1969, Sherry R. Arnstein provided the world with the concept of the Ladder of Participation through her article "A Ladder of Citizen Participation" which describes the different levels of citizen participation in decision-making processes (see Figure 1). The ladder portrays a hierarchy of citizen involvement, with each rung representing a distinct level of participation and power-sharing between authorities and the public. The ladder offers insights into the varying degrees of citizen influence and aims to promote meaningful engagement. It consists of eight rungs that reflect different levels of participation and include:

1. Manipulation: Citizens have no real power or influence in decision-making processes. They are treated merely as objects or tokens to legitimize decisions made by those in power.

2. Therapy: Efforts are made to "heal" or "fix" citizens without granting them any actual power. This level often involves educational campaigns or counseling programs aimed at changing citizens' attitudes or behaviours.

3. Informing: Authorities provide information to citizens about decisions or projects, but there is no opportunity for their feedback or input. Communication is typically one-way, with authorities disseminating information without genuinely seeking citizen engagement.

4. Consultation: Citizens are asked for their opinions, ideas, or feedback, but the decision-making power remains in the hands of those in authority. The public's input may or may not be taken into account.

5. Placation: This level involves superficial forms of participation where authorities incorporate public input to create the appearance of involvement, without genuinely intending to incorporate citizen perspectives or address their concerns. The public's role is often limited to being placated or appeased.
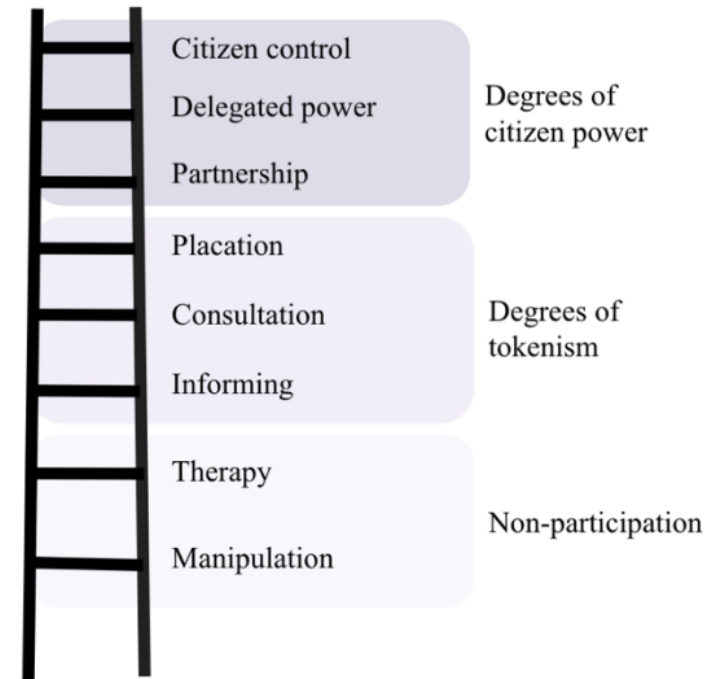

Figure 1: Arnstein's Ladder of Citizen Participation. Source: Figure adapted by Emma Nors. (Nors, 2021, p. 20).

6. Partnership: At this level, citizens and authorities work together collaboratively. Power and responsibility are shared, and decisions are made jointly. This level of participation emphasizes mutual respect and a commitment to meaningful collaboration.

7. Delegated Power: Citizens have significant decision-making authority and are empowered to make decisions independently or on behalf of the larger community. Authorities support and respect their decisions, acknowledging the legitimacy of community-led processes.

8. Citizen Control: The highest rung on the ladder represents citizen control, where citizens have complete power and ownership of the decision-making process. They have the ability to determine and implement decisions, while authorities serve in a supporting role.

The ladder of participation serves as a valuable tool to assess the extent of citizen engagement and power-sharing in decision-making processes. It highlights the importance of meaningful involvement and challenges tokenistic forms of participation, aiming for higher levels of citizen participation to achieve more democratic and equitable outcomes (Arnstein, 1969; Nors, 2021).

Around the same time as Arnstein, Kevin Lynch, a pioneer of creative workshops around understanding the adult experience in the urban and public space, proposed the UNESCO program *Growing up in Cities t*o apply his methods of map-making, walks, and interviews to children and youth, especially in lower income areas (Chawla, 1997; Derr et al., 2018). Lynch and his colleagues working on this project found remarkable connections to children health and happiness when they were

in environments where they felt safe enough to explore and play on their own. However, they also found that City officials at the time in the 70s were not interested in involving the opinions of children in their city planning. Lynch moved on to other projects. By the 1990s, the project came into prominence again with the aid of Louise Chawla who wanted to study its impact and identify how the research could be furthered (Derr et al., 2018). At Lynch's time in the 70s, *Growing Up in Cities* worked in research in four countries. In 2002, it was looking at twelve countries. Today, *Growing Up in Cities* is an international research initiative examining how children use and perceive their environments with practice-based results and headquarters in many countries, including Canada.

As part of Lynch's timeline, Roger Hart (1992), after years of researching and applying different participation and engagement methods, published "Children's Participation: From Tokenism to Citizenship". It is a seminal work, in which Hart explored the concept of children's participation and advocated for meaningful involvement of children in decision-making processes that affect their lives. The central argument of Hart's work is to move beyond tokenistic forms of participation, where children are merely consulted or their views are superficially incorporated, towards a more substantive and empowered form of participation. He emphasizes the importance of recognizing children as active agents and citizens in their own right, with the capacity to

contribute to decision-making processes and shape their communities.

Hart presents a framework called the "Ladder of Participation" that is similar in concept to Arnstein's ladder (see Figure 2). However, Hart's ladder specifically focuses on children's participation:

1. Manipulation: Children have no real power or influence. Their participation is purely symbolic or manipulative, serving the interests of adults.

2. Decoration: Children are included to provide a façade of participation, but their opinions are not taken seriously, and decisions are made without their genuine involvement.

3. Tokenism: Children's participation is symbolic, and they are consulted or informed, but their views are not given significant consideration or influence.

4. Assigned but Informed: Children are assigned specific roles or tasks within decision-making processes, and their views are sought and considered. However, the final decisions are made by adults.

5. Consulted but Informed: Children's opinions are actively sought, and they are provided with information about the

decision-making process. While their views are taken into account, the final decisions still rest with adults.

6. Adult-Initiated and Shared Decisions: Adults take the initiative to involve children in decision-making processes. Children's input is actively considered and holds genuine weight in the decisions being made, but the ultimate authority remains with the adults.
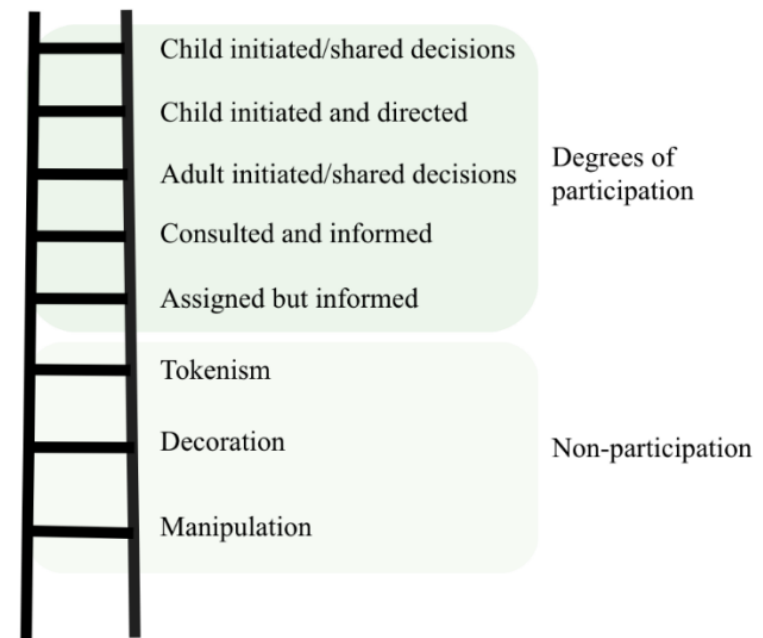

Figure 2: Roger Hart's Ladder of Children's Participation. Source: Figure adapted by Emma Nors. (Nors, 2021, p.22).

7. Child-Initiated and Directed: Children take the lead in initiating discussions and decisions. They have the authority to direct the decision-making process, with adults playing a supportive role. This level recognizes children's autonomy in shaping the agenda and outcomes.

8. Child-initiated and Shared Decisions: Children have the opportunity to initiate and share decisions, and their views are given meaningful consideration. They actively contribute to decision-making processes, sharing power and responsibility with adults.

Hart's work challenges the traditional perception of children as passive recipients of adult decisions and argues for their inclusion as active participants in matters that affect them. He emphasizes the importance of creating supportive environments that enable children's participation, promoting their agency, and recognizing their rights as citizens.

Table 1: A comparison of Arnstein & Hart's variations of the "Ladder of Participation"

Aspect	Arnstein's Ladder (1969)	Hart's Ladder (1992)
Focus	Citizens	Youth
Number of levels	8	8
Level of influence	Citizen power and influence	Youth influence over decisions
Emphasis on Symbolism	Less focused on symbolism	Emphasizes avoiding tokenism
Goal of participation	Substantive participation	Meaningful youth engagement
Stages of participation	Manipulation, Therapy, Informing, Consultation, Placation, Partnership, Delegated Power, Citizen Control	Manipulation, Decoration, Tokenism, Assigned but Informed, Consulted and Informed, Adult-initiated Shared Decisions with Children, Child-initiated and Directed, Child-initiated, Shared Decisions with Adults

Source: The author's own table. Arnstein 1969; Hart 1992.

Barriers to Engagement

Expanding on the exploration of different modes of engaging with children, according to Arnstein (1969) and Hart (1992), there are negative and positive ways of engagement. It is equally important to address the obstacles that hinder children and youth from participating fully. Traditional engagement methods often center around formal sit-down meetings and interviews, which might not be conducive for energetic toddlers or lively young children (8 80 et al., 2021). Adults often have a condescending attitude towards children due to their size, creating an intimidating dynamic. This unequal relationship must change for children to feel valued and equal. City planners can gain valuable insights from early childhood educators experienced in meaningfully connecting with young children, ultimately contributing to the creation of safer, more inclusive urban spaces for the youngest members of society (8 80 et al., 2021).

Power dynamics, lack of representation, and tokenism can further limit children and youth from participating authentically. These dynamics often stem from traditional hierarchies and the perception that children's perspectives hold less significance (Derr et al., 2018; Chawla, 2002; Hart; 1992).

Language and jargon also play a role. For instance, in the episode "I love that you think we deserve suits: Youth engagement & participation" as part of the Youth Know Stuff podcast discussing indigenous youth engagement from a policy standpoint, the concept of code-switching arises (Bird, 2023). To engage effectively, it is suggested that adults should adapt and shift their communication style to create a safe space for indigenous youth. The responsibility to code-switch and communicate formally is often placed on the youth, but there's a call for this dynamic to be reversed (Pitter, 2021). This shift involves policymakers and engagement coordinators showing up in a more approachable manner to bridge class divides and foster meaningful connections. This perspective is reflected in the episode's title, which suggests moving away from formal attire to create a more inclusive environment.

The language is also a problem for children who are still developing their language skills, especially in discussions related to complex subjects like urban planning. To create a productive and mutually beneficial engagement environment, it is essential to recalibrate adult facilitators' expectations and to understand the capacities, behaviours, and needs of young children as valuable learning opportunities. Training facilitators to effectively engage with children helps address power and physical imbalances highlighted by the Urban95 initiative. This is an initiative which takes its name from the concept that designing cities with the needs of a child at the height of 95 cm (the average 3 year old) in mind fosters greater inclusivity, safety, and enjoyment for everyone (Mansfield et al., 2021; Urban van Leer foundation, n.d.).

Why is Engagement Important? Participation & its Psychological benefits

The importance of an engaged youth may not have always been discussed under the umbrella of urban planning, but it is not a new concept. In the late 1800s and early 1900s, many schools of thought emerged in the fields of psychology and philosophy that preached the benefits of nurturing children who were engaged in their environments and communities. Two such schools were the Montessori and Steiner philosophies which have, in their ways, inspired generations of enthusiasts to take an active role in their learning and community (Steiner Waldorf Schools Fellowship; Stehilk, 2008).

The Montessori method, inspired by Dr. Maria Montessori has many elements, but at its core, it motivates children to be active members in their communities emphasizing inclusivity and respect (Montessori Foundation, n.d.). Translating these principles to urban planning means involving children and youth in decision-making processes that affect their neighbourhoods and cities. Planners can engage young people through participatory processes, such as youth councils, where they can voice their opinions, contribute ideas, and actively participate in shaping their urban environments. This engagement fosters a sense of ownership and empowerment among youth, encouraging them to take pride in their communities and actively contribute to their development.

The psychological benefits nurture the children's overall development. Through active participation, children experience empowerment, taking ownership of their communities and boosting their self-confidence (Montessori Foundation, n.d.; Chawla, 2002). This engagement fosters a sense of belonging as they contribute to shaping the spaces they inhabit, positively impacting their emotional well-being and social integration. Involving children in design processes cultivates critical thinking and problem-solving skills. In addition, collaborative activities teach effective communication and teamwork, equipping them with vital skills for their future endeavours. Their early involvement sparks a sense of civic responsibility and an understanding of community dynamics, fostering a commitment to positive civic engagement. These interactions nurture creativity and imagination, enabling them to envision innovative solutions and enhance their cognitive growth.

Participation in urban planning also instills spatial awareness, as children gain a deeper understanding of their physical surroundings and develop improved navigation skills (Angello, 2020; Rojas, n.d.) . Such involvement offers a healthy outlet for stress and anxiety, providing them a means of control over their environment. Moreover, engaging with peers from diverse backgrounds encourages empathy and appreciation for differences, contributing to their holistic development.

Child & Youth Engagement: What Does it Look Like?

Arnestein and Hart describe different types of engagement with adults and children, but what does that look like in practice? How can we mitigate against the challenges and barriers that are present today? Here are a few engagement approaches:

1. Youth-Led & Designed Programs: In this approach, young individuals are actively involved in designing programs, activities, or services that cater to their needs and interests. This can extend to aspects of education, recreation, and community development, ensuring that their perspectives are integrated into the planning process.

An example is the By and for Youth project by the City of Montreal which is a funding initiative for groups across the City with youth-led projects. See chapter 3 for more details. Another example is the Happy City initiative in partnership with Insight Global Education in Vancouver. In 2022, they organized an event involving a class of Grade 8 students. The focus of the four-day learning initiative was on equitable urban planning and inclusive engagement. Throughout the course of four morning sessions, the students actively engaged in a range of activities. These included an on-site assessment of Pandora Park and its user dynamics, as well as a design charrette centered around a public plaza in Port Moody. The overarching theme throughout these activities was equitable access to urban spaces.

On the final day, the students skillfully applied their accumulated knowledge by transforming the parking lot of the Happy Cities office into a dynamic pop-up public plaza. The extent of their creativity left a lasting impression on observers. Notably, the teenagers presented an array of impressive ideas such as incorporating garden spaces and pedestrian skywalks. This showcase of imagination and innovation highlighted the potential of young minds to contribute to urban planning.

2. Consultation & Focus Groups: Engaging children in consultations and focus groups can allow them to express their thoughts on specific topics or policies. This approach often involves open discussions and gathering feedback directly from children. In chapter 3, the Office de Publique Consultation de Montreal is highlighted as specializing in consultations as they recently did youth consultation for their 2050 Monreal Vision plan. In my experience in community work, some of the ways we tried to create engaging consultation are through using large boards with pictures of important places in the NDG neighbourhoods and we set it up in the local library. Many people frequented the table and put their comments on the pictures. This was a way of bringing engagement to the public rather than expecting the public to come to you.

3. Educational Initiatives: This is an approach with a focus on educating children about their rights and encouraging them to critically engage with their surroundings. This empowerment

can lead to informed participation as children learn about issues, discuss them, and voice their opinions. An example is YEP! Youth Engagement Planning: Born out of an urban planning master student's project in 2006, the U.S based organization began as a manual for "Planner's Day in School" at Ohio State University. The manual was meant to provide step-by-step instructions on how to lead various activities for young people from Kindergarten to grade 12. It has since grown to provide curriculum, workshops, and other resources useful for the education of K-12 students about civic engagement and planning.

The way it works now is that the co-founders Corrin Wendell and Monica Tibbits-Nutt, along with their team, travel to different schools across the U.S. to educate youth about urban planning and provide exposure to different careers in the field.

The YEP! organization is led by the belief that engaging youth in local planning offers benefits such as creating leadership opportunities, having a better understanding of their communities and how to address local issues, better use of resources for youth and exposure to potential careers in planning and local government (YEP!, n.d).

In their approach, they combine knowledge from multiple disciplines and fields such as urban planning, sociology, psychology, education and more. By taking a holistic view and integrating various perspectives, YEP! Ensures that its efforts are both impactful and sustainable as it caters the material to the specific groups they work with, fostering a more inclusive and well-informed approach to youth engagement and community planning.

4. Media & Arts-based Participation: Encouraging children to use media, art, or storytelling to share their perspectives can be an effective way to amplify their voices. This could involve creating videos, artwork, or even theatrical performances to convey their thoughts and experiences.

Storytelling is a part of our daily lives whether it takes the shape of sharing a real story about our day or imagining future scenarios—storytelling is present as our oldest method of communication and tapping into its benefits within the urban planning world is imperative. Discussing storytelling as an approach with the benefits of communicating knowledge, Jay Pitter (2021) describes the potential that storytelling has in providing meaning to evidence and in engaging participants to share their stories. Gall and Haxhija (2020) concur; they describe the use of storytelling as a method in the +CityxChange project, which had workshops across Europe discussing the impact of storytelling and implementing storytelling elements to foster collaboration for the creation of better cities. They see stories as playing an "important role in how people assign value to a place since all those stories can give a place an identity" (2020) and they argue that Storytelling

and urban planning are intrinsically linked.

Thinking of how to further apply storytelling approaches to engagement with youth, certain guides are created such as the "A Kid's Guide to Building Great Communities" (n.d) by the Canadian Institute of Planners (CIP) which describes various types of workshops and activities to use to promote community engagement for young people. One of the recommended workshops includes answering the question of "how does your community work for you" and they answer it in the sense of how walkable it is, how easily accessible are services, and what it can offer for others. The guide also has activities that prompt participants to create stories around their neighbourhoods and engages their imagination (CIP, n.d.). Attaching stories to the neighbourhoods one lives in adds the connection needed to create memory and social meaning.

5. Intergenerational Dialogue: Bringing together children, youth, and adults for dialogues fosters mutual understanding and allows children's perspectives to influence decision-making. This approach acknowledges that children's experiences are valuable contributions to addressing societal challenges. An example can be found in the Suspicious Fish profile in chapter 3. Additionally, in his 2018 book *Palaces for the People*, Eric Klinenberg discusses the importance of social infrastructure: places where we can create social cohesion and foster connections among individuals and community members like libraries, parks, playgrounds...etc. The term "Palaces for

the People" was used by Andrew Carnegie to refer to Libraries. Klinenberg broadens that definition to include a range of social spaces and institutions. His thesis argues for the investment in social infrastructure as a crucial effort for addressing various societal challenges, such as inequality, polarization, and the erosion of civic life.

Klinenberg shares a personal anecdote in the book of the differences in his experiences with his children's schools when living in New York versus when living in Stanford. In New York, his children went to a small school in a small building that lacked outdoor spaces, but that fostered engagement. The parents were encouraged to join in the classrooms for fifteen minutes in the mornings which not only allowed for an easier transition for the child, but also for the parents to create connections with the school and more importantly, with each other. In comparison, while living in a suburb near Stanford University, the new school for his kids had large expanses of outdoor space, but it lacked the design that allows for informal connections with peers. Parents were dissuaded from lingering at the school and aside from structured and organized activities, the parents rarely interacted as the drop-off and pick-up period were now a classic suburban scene of lined up cars discharging their children or boarding them: an automated activity primed for efficacy and devoid of social interactions. The emphasis of the story is how the design and infrastructure of a space like a child's school can foster "natural" interactions and connections. This story, while not directly speaking to the engagement of

youth, considers the parental involvement of the child in the spaces they inhabit as critical to the resiliency of a community because living in isolated bubbles is not sustainable.

6. Design-centric: In their 2017 report on building cities with and for children and families, 8 80 highlights cases of engagement globally including some of their own such as the 2012-2013 Ottawa case study. Essentially, in partnership with the Centretown Community Health Center (CCHC), 8 80 took on the project of transforming the under-utilized Dundonald Park in Ottawa and making it "a place for People" through community engagement. Their engagement style utilized an approach that allowed community members to provide their opinions while participating in free activities such as hula-hooping, yo-yoing and engaging in tai chi while snacking on free food. The takeaway from this case study was to use a space people frequent and are familiar with already: They did their engagements for the park at the park itself. Another takeaway is to be creative and provide food and activities the children can adapt to and engage with on their own to stimulate creativity.

7. Creativity & Play: The goal of this approach is to unlock participants' creative potential, enabling them to contribute unique perspectives, ideas, and solutions to complex challenges. By fostering a sense of joy and enjoyment, engagement becomes more inclusive, as participants from diverse backgrounds and ages can feel at ease and participate actively (Hadani et al., 2021; ARUP, 2017).

In his 2022 book *Stolen Focus,* Johann Hari talks about how modern children spend much of their time indoors, often glued to screens. Contrastingly, historical norms encompassed young children spending their time engaged in group activities that facilitated exploration, play, and skill development. However, the modern context often isolates kids and restricts their play opportunities. Playtime serves as a crucial avenue for children to uncover their passions, hone problem-solving abilities, and cultivate social interactions. Tim Gill (2007) also talked about this topic in his book *No Fear: Growing Up in a Risk-Averse Society*. In the book, Gill explores the contemporary trend of risk aversion in society and its impact on children's lives. The book reveals how modern children have fewer chances for independent play due to safety concerns, resulting in a decline in their physical and cognitive development and restricting children's autonomy and creativity. The advocates for urban planning that promotes active play and exploration while acknowledging manageable risks, as such experiences contribute to children's resilience, independence, and overall well-being.

In this chapter, discussions of why engagement is important were provided through the lens of engagement as a human right. Beginning with an overview and analysis of Arnstein (1969) and Hart's (1992) versions of the ladder of participation, it is clear the desirable methods of participation are those near the top of the ladder: the levels where the children are informed, have an opportunity to share responses and make decisions and also initiate change. However, barriers such as inaccessible language, dismissal of opinions, and inequitable access to opportunities of engagement create challenges especially for marginalized children and youth. Based on the cited literature, it is imperative that engagement with children be taken seriously, which does not mean that it cannot be playful and fun. Approaches to overcome barriers and challenges include design-based placemaking efforts and creative and playful projects.

The next chapter highlights 6 organizations and initiatives in the City of Montreal to learn how they are tackling engagement with youth and children, some of which employ one or two of the mentioned approaches.

Chapter 3: Montreal's Guide to Youth Engagement: How Six Organizations Engage

Montreal, like other cities in Canada, is committed to upholding the principles of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC) within its programs and policies. The CRC serves as a foundational framework for children's rights and well-being, and Canada ratified the convention in 1991. As a result, Montreal, as a municipality within Canada, is guided by the CRC's principles in its approach to programs that involve children and youth.

Montreal's commitment to the CRC can be observed through various initiatives, policies, and programs aimed at promoting children's rights, participation, and overall well-being.

In addition, in an effort to transform Montreal into a benchmark for inclusivity, the city devised a three-year strategy aimed at facilitating the integration of newcomers. This initiative was outlined in the Montreal Inclusive Action Plan for the period of 2018 to 2021.

To highlight some of the projects and work around engagement and inclusivity, this chapter takes a look at 6 different initiatives and organizations. The chapter is divided into profiles of each organization with contact details, history, notable projects, unique factors, challenges, and key learnings. For pictures of mentioned projects, see Appendix B.

1. Office de Consultation Publique de Montréal (OCPM)

Type: Municipal

Interviewee: Nadim Tadjine - Coordinator of Participatory Processes and Innovation.

Where to find them:

- 1550 rue Metcalfe, bureau 1414, Montreal, QC, H3A 1X6
- Phone: 514 872 3568
- Website: https://ocpm.qc.ca/fr/a-propos

About:

The Office de Consultation Publique de Montréal (OCPM), or the Montreal Office of Public Consultations, is an independent body created in September of 2002 and officially registered in the Charter of the City of Montreal. The role of OCPM is to carry out public consultation as required by the mandates they receive from the municipal council or the executive committee of the City of Montreal. The OCPM's employees are neutral in their debates and are neither elected officials nor municipal employees. The OCPM's main responsibility is to collect public opinions on various subjects which provides an in-depth understanding of different projects and issues facing the City.

How it Works:

When the OCPM receives a mandate from the City regarding a new project, whether real estate, urban planning, or design-related, they get to decide how to engage the public with this information. From there, they create specific consultations for different groups and engage in the following three phases:

- Dissemination of information
- Question and Response period
- Collection of opinions

Generally after the Question and Response period, the innovation team works on special activities to further engage the public:

> Sometimes the youth especially of marginalized groups don't automatically come to the office to give us their opinions, so our plan is to go out of the office and meet these people during their daily life. We try to create

tools to meet these people and more specifically, collaborations with groups and organizations to meet more youth and more of the marginalized groups. (Nadim Tadjin, 2023).

In addition, the OCPM provides a voice to the public through different avenues:

- A dedicated forum to ask questions and collect opinions about specific projects to info decision-making and recommendations.
- No limitations on consultations.
- A bottom-up approach meaning working together with the public rather than prescribing what they think the public needs from a top-down approach.

Unique Factors

- Independence of the City. While the structure of consultations can be found in other types of cities, Montreal's unique in its employment of the OCPM.
- The Innovative Participatory aspect: the OCPM team has a specific focus on innovation and ensures that the same tools are not being used for the same groups: such as 5, 15, or 25 year olds.

Notable Projects:

- Montreal's Future Plan of Urbanism and Mobility 2050: This plan determines a vision for Montreal's future by 2050. As the majority of the City's population dwellers will be the children and youth of today, the OCPM emphasized the need to consult with these groups of different backgrounds: The OCPM is actively trying to develop creative and appropriate tools to engage youth especially in the 2050 plan because it will be affecting them the most. These efforts include:

  - The OCPM spoke with 200-300 youth from high schools and CEGEPS to discuss what their daily lives look like in the City. Mapping, storytelling, pictures, journals and other tools were used.
  - **The "Alien lost in the City of Montreal in 2050" activity:** When working with kids, there are many storytelling components. For example: in this alien project, kids were asked to describe how the alien can navigate the city when it's 2050 and everything has changed. What would their vision for mobility in the city look like? How would they direct the alien?

- "Right of the Initiative" or "Droit d'initiative" which is an initiative in accordance with the Charter of Citizens' Rights and Responsibilities. This is a tool that, since 2010, Montrealers can use to propose consultation ideas or innovate projects important to them and the public. How it works is that a draft position is filed with the OCPM which includes 25 signatories and 3 representatives of the cause. Within 90 days of the acceptance of the petition, 15,000 signatures must be obtained if it is a broad city issue, but if it's a borough issue then 5% of the population of the borough must sign on it. To encourage youth participation, anyone above the age of 15 is able to sign.

Challenges:

- Language barriers for those whose first language is not French or English. It is not common to have translators for other languages as the language of communication is French.
- Consultations are broad, so it makes it hard to reach specific types of groups. For example, unless the City's mandate is consultations about Equity, Diversity, and/or Inclusion, there are not many specific consultations with immigrants or other marginalized youth.
- It is hard to follow up post consultation to confirm next steps. Usually an opinion is gathered and then an analysis and recommendations are created, without

follow up from the public. There is a desire for this type of work, but as it is not an official obligation of the City, it rarely occurs.
- The documents the City of Montreal provides are not often designed to be easy to read by children and youth groups:

> Here, we try to, to think more at the office, about the way that we engage, but also the way that we publish the results of these public consultations, not only with the words, but also with a lot of data visualization, or storytelling. (Nadim Tadjin, 2023).

- Lack of evaluation tools to measure and analyze the success.

Key Lessons & Recommendations:

- *Go where the people are: Meet them at the spaces they frequent in their daily lives. As youth and marginalized groups do not typically go to consultations on their own, the consultations must be brought to them.*
- *Think outside of the box and use innovative tools: An engagement tool used with a classic middle aged white person with a master's degree will not work with a 15 year old BIPOC youth.*

- *Ensure the information is easily digestible for the age group you are presenting it to.*
- *Do not rely on mapping and drawing alone when engaging with children. These are important tools, but it becomes difficult to not appropriate the information and become the unintended interpreter. Ask the participants what a drawing means to them or why they drew a map a certain way.*
- *Do not do it alone: Make it a process of co-creation with colleagues, with communities.*

2. City of Montréal - For Youth By Youth Project

Type: Municipal

Interviewee: Gabrielle Laliberté - Planning consultant & Main project lead

Contact Information:

- Email: pourlajeunesse@montreal.ca
- Website: https://montreal.ca/programmes/appels-projets-par-et-pour-les-jeunes#pg-multi-volet-1

About:

The For and By Youth project is a new initiative by the City of Montreal that engages local organizations across the municipality in order to support their various projects with a collaborative, bottom-up approach.

In 2022, there was a forum about firearm violence among youth. The mayor and elected officials were involved and came to a decision to create funding to build resilience in Montreal's neighbourhoods to prevent and mitigate violence. This funding includes the allocation of $1,400,000 towards youth-led projects to position the youth as agents of change in their city and to enable innovation. The total amount of projects receiving funding at 52 across the City.

How it works:

After the announcement of the funding, two call outs for the project have been published: One in the fall of 2022, and the other in the summer of 2023.

Any organization with a focus on youth and following the criteria outlined on the City's website could apply as long as their project included youth-led activities in the 19 boroughs of Montreal.

Gabrielle Laliberté was in charge of designing the outreach campaign. In their planning process, they asked questions like: who is a missing actor in the community? Who are the rare organizations that never get to participate? How to approach them?

From there, they created a database of a minimum of 650 community contacts to outreach to. A contact email and a

phone number were provided in order to provide better access to the initiative. Gabriele and her team also held coaching in different areas to help answer questions about the projects. In the end, a record number of 120 projects were submitted.

The 52 funded projects were selected based on a 100 point system assigned by a jury of 12 people. This jury was made up of 4 youth, 85% of people living in Montreal, 75% identifying as racialized people, 25% speaking other languages than English and French, 25% religious people. It also included diverse expertise of nonprofits, public, and private groups.

Unique Factors:

This project is a first of its kind in the City:

> There are so many things happening on the systemic level that if you want to do things differently, you really have to put a lot of effort into making things happen. But then once you create a first, then it's easier to build on what you do right. (Gabrielle Laliberté, 2023).

Before this project, the funding was by mission but this type of funding is by project which can have its own challenges, but it also proposes an advantage of tackling an emergency immediately. The submitted proposals all were innovative and combining themes of culture and inclusivity.

There is a real desire within the City to push for this initiative and for projects with themes of diversity and inclusion of marginalized communities.

Notable Projects:

- **Agora Gardens for Youth:** A project by Sentier Urbain aiming to raise awareness, educate, and involve 540 young individuals through a sequence of outdoor activities hosted in the Circuit Jardins de Sentier, including the Îlot Voyageur and Émilie De Witt greenhouses. These activities will be held at the grounds of the Bibliothèque et Archives nationales du Québec (BAnQ), utilizing thematic gardens and spaces with educational, recreational, cultural, and inclusive purposes. Through these experiences, participants will enhance their ability to take action, boost self-esteem, and gain new skills.
- **Shaping your Power:** A project by the Bureau de Consultation Jeunesse with the aim of creating a multifunctional space to increase the civic participation of 35 young tenants living in temporary spaces in Verdun. This space will be used to hold tenant committee meetings, popular education workshops promoting social justice, social participation and the fight against discrimination.

Challenges:

- Language challenge: The City publishes in French and English in English newspapers, but it is not allowed to publish in other languages locally. The solution is often to submit the information to local cultural groups and allow them to disseminate that information in their varying languages.
- Not enough services and workshops: while there were workshops held to answer questions, this initiative could benefit from more coaching especially in boroughs with high populations of marginalized youth.
- Choosing proposals: usually for these types of projects, the City receives 50-60 applications, but for this initiative, 120 were sent in. This means there are many communities interested and willing to improve their neighbourhoods, but it makes it difficult when the funding is limited.

Key Lessons & Recommendations:

- *Inform applicants and the public about the process and the project ahead of time: the sooner the better.*
- *Provide adequate sessions for different boroughs to be able to have 1 on 1 coaching and application review sessions.*

- *Provide writing workshops for proposal to create more accessible pathways to these applications and initiatives.*
- *Give more services in the English-speaking communities.*

3. Youth Fusion

Type: Municipal and global

Interviewee: Hannah Tait - Environmental Design Program Support

Where to find them:

- 1200 boul. Crémazie Est, suite 101, Montréal, QC, H2P 3A6
- Tél. : (514) 657-7630 | info@fusionjeunesse.org
- Website: https://fusionjeunesse.org/en/home/

About:

Youth Fusion is a Quebec-based award-winning charity founded by Gabriel Bran Lopez in 2009. They work with more than 15 000 youth in 500 schools every week in rural, urban, and Indigenous communities in Canada, France and Senegal. Its main locations are in Canada, specifically in Ontario, Quebec, and New Brunswick.

Youth Fusion's vision is that every student, without exception, deserves an educational path that allows them to reach their full potential and reduces the rates of school dropouts.

How does it work?

Youth Fusion realizes their vision and ambition through their exceptional experiential learning model, characterized by a range of innovative educational programs. These programs empower students with cross-curricular skills and transferable disciplinary knowledge while fueling their passions and guiding them towards career pathways.

Unique Factors:

- Youth Fusion's interdisciplinary educational programs are seamlessly integrated into both regular class hours and extracurricular activities throughout the school year. Diving into four distinct areas—Arts, Science & Engineering, Design, and Leadership & Entrepreneurship—these programs are led by dedicated young coordinators, who are graduating students employed by Youth Fusion. Collaborating with primary and secondary students, these coordinators bring their expertise and passion to the projects, building meaningful relationships and emphasizing the value of continuity and dedication.

- It is a process of co-creation for Youth Fusion. The coordinators work with the students throughout the whole process, from start to finish from the concept creation to the building of the project.
- A focus on lower income neighbourhoods especially for programs in high schools.
- When possible training for working with Autistic students is provided and they aim to hire people who work with different languages to create more inclusive spaces especially in areas with high concentrations of minority languages.

Notable projects:

Their Environmental Design stream has many interesting projects in helping the students understand their communities and environments better. The projects under this stream are often done in the common spaces of a school so that the whole school could participate and not just the dedicated classroom.

> With environmental design, students get to do experiential learning and they don't have to be sitting down and listening to someone for an hour. They get to do something different. So even if they're not fully understanding the material, they learn to and they learn to like it because they're not doing traditional classes. (Hannah Tait, 2023).

In addition, they do public consultations with the school. For example, in one of the projects looking into how they wanted to create an exterior classroom, the students created presentations that were given in each classroom of the school and to collect opinions and feedback. This task enhanced their public speaking skills in English and in French and allowed them to learn how to make surveys, collect information and create charts based on the results.

Example of these projects include:

- Murals: They create murals around their schools to represent their values and beautify the community (see Figures 1-4 in Appendix B).
- Garden boxes with seating areas in the playground: They integrated math into this project as they had to buy wood and had to calculate how many planks were needed, what sizes (see Figure 5 and 6, in Appendix B).
- Reading spaces / exterior classrooms: in consultation with the school, they create other spaces for learning

Challenges:

- Unable to follow up and review the process with the participating students. Surveys are sent out to schools and coordinators, but it is hard to follow up with participating students. Usually, if a school accepts the

project for a second year in a row, it is a sign of the success of the program.
- Some of the challenges include the construction phase: the building of the projects can only happen during the warmer months at the end of the school year so it creates a time constraint: Snow melted, murals have to be done on non rainy days.
- Hard to find people who have experience with construction.

Key Lessons & Recommendations:

- *Create engagement techniques: in the context of a school or a workshop, if a student is not paying attention, try giving them more responsibilities and include them more in the process.*
- *Integrate learning into aspects of their lives and in an interdisciplinary manner that combines different subjects they are learning about together.*

4. Table de Concertation Jeunesse NDG

Type: Borough-specific - NDG

Interviewee: Anne Dupont-Huot - Table Coordinator

Where to find them:

- **Email:** concertationjeunesse@ndg.ca
- **Website:** http://www.ndg.ca/fr/ndg-youth-table

About:

La table de concertation jeunesse NDG, or NDG Youth Table, is a coalition of youth-based NDG organizations working with individuals aged 6-30 and their families. Its purpose is to unite organizations and institutions to enhance support for youth, aiming to enhance their quality of life and health.

The table started out as a master's project in the late 2000s and today the table's goals and objectives include:

- Encouraging the exchange of information and experiences between institutions and organizations that work with youth.
- Promoting youth engagement and participation in the community.
- Sensitizing the community, organizations, institutions and schools to be more involved in the social, cultural, recreational and health-related issues affecting youth today.
- Identifying gaps of resources and creating new innovative and alternative programming and solutions.
- Supporting and encouraging new initiatives and new collaborations within the community.

How it works:

The table is composed of one representative of each organization . The table receives funding from the Ministry of Health then allocated it to different projects across the organizations based on the needs highlighted in their action plan and the portarain youth of NDG document. This document gets updated every 3-5 years.

Notable Projects:

- The "Ça bouge dans mon parc" project which was started in 2011 in collaboration with Prévention

CDN-NDG[1], to mitigate youth violence. Different organizations participated in this project where they hired coordinators to go and animate the parks and spaces which the youth already use.

- Projet SOIR: another project in partnership with many organizations offering arts, sports, cooking, design, workout programming among many others across different locations, free of charge.

Challenges:

Since COVID-19, some new challenges have emerged based on the experiences the organizations within the table have had:

- Youth stayed at home and were behind their screens, so it is now very hard to get them back out. and it's really hard to get them back out. Many of the organizations working with the table follow the youth from birth to adulthood. However, since many of the participants transitioned from children to teenagers under COVID conditions, the connection many of these organizations had with them was lost.
- This is a table so it lacks the title of an organization as it is not often recognized by the City whether it is for funding or simply the legitimacy of its existence.

- It is important to follow up with participants to ensure connections are maintained and the youth remain connected, however, it is a challenge and requires more capacity which the table does not always have.

Key Lessons & Recommendations:

- *With teens, what works is word of mouth. For instance: in the case of Projét SOIR in the Saint Raymond sector of NDG, they offer soccer activities for 13-17 year olds. Only 2-3 kids would show up regularly. One day the coordinator went to talk to a random kid playing soccer outside of the center and the next week, 15 kids showed up because of him. This means you need resources and capacity on the ground to get the youth in : they will not go in just because of a poster.*
- *Go where the youth are: This includes going to schools, parks, hang out spaces. An example is the Ça Bouge dans mon Parc project.*
- *Be innovative in the recruitment style: Use tik tok, instagram, other social media tactics as posters alone do not work for this demographic.*
- *Continuity is important: for children and youth and their families to have stability within a program or to work with organizations that follow.*

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[1] Prévention Côte-des-Neiges-Notre-Dame-de-Grâce is an organization that works to improve the quality of life in terms of urban safety, the environment and other social issues.

5. Jeunesse Loyola

Type: Borough-specific - NDG

Interviewee: Alfonso Fernández - Communications Specialist

Where to find them:

- 6975 Chester Ave, Montreal, Quebec H4V 2Z7
- Email: info@jeunesseloyola@org
- Website: www.jeunesseloyola.org

About

Founded in the 1970s in Notre-dame-de-Grâce as a grassroots organization, Jeunesse Loyola formally became a registered charitable nonprofit in 1998. It was born out of community efforts between parents and local organizers who saw a need for activities for children in the 1950s and it has grown into the community-based, children and youth-centric organization that it is today.

Their aim is to create higher quality of life for the community and empower participants through a focus on their strengths and the development of skills like leadership, independent thinking, positive and cooperative interpersonal relationships.

How does it work?

Jeunesse Loyola works with the municipality and local partners in order to provide high quality programming for children and teens ages 6-17. Their programming includes homework help, sports and recreational services all free of cost in order to offer their services to people who would otherwise not have access to it.

They offer homework help, sports programs for 6-12 years old after the after school programming, drop in programs for teens, and an open gym program for teens amongst other services.

Their end goal is to create an inclusive community and a sense of belonging among the youth and their communities.

Unique Factors:

- Jeunesse Loyola uses a strengths-based approach meaning they focus on the positive qualities and skills children and youth already possess and want to acquire, rather than the negative qualities and what they lack.
- Financially accessible program: free of cost.

- Agency given to children during activities.
- Self-sustaining programming involves curating opportunities that enable participants from various programs to eventually take on leadership roles and manage the activities. This creates a feedback loop of contribution and support.

Notable Projects:

- French immersion camp to help students whose first language (and sometimes second or third) is not French, to maintain practicing outside of the school year.
- Projet SOIR: Jeunesse Loyola is part of Table de Concertation Jeunesse NDG's project offering free sports programming as part of their preventative strategy.
- Ça bouge dans mon parc: In 2022, Jeunesse Loyola organized "ça bouge dans mon parc", a summer initiative in Loyola park. The program included sports, arts & crafts, group games, splash pad visits, and more, providing free engaging activities for local children and youth. The aim was to create a safe and welcoming environment for kids in the neighborhood, especially those not in day camps, promoting accessibility and community engagement.
- Pour La Jeunesse/For Youth by Youth project funding: arts programming.

Challenges:

- Outreach is a challenge because of inaccessibility to parents: the key to engaging children is to engage their parents and sometimes that is difficult because the children come and leave events alone.
- Many families are also newcomers and can find it difficult to access information and understand services due to language barriers.
- Issue of not having a specific location. Jeunesse Loyola has partners throughout NDG and uses various locations, but they have struggled to find an operations location that meets their needs and it creates a precarious situation for their programming and accessibility obstacles for community members.

Key Lessons & Recommendations:

- *There is not a one size fits all solution: you must try to cater your solutions and services to the people in need of those services.*
- *Solutions need to be culturally specific.*
- *Get to know the people behind screens whether it is the children and/or their parents to foster real relationships and create engagement.*
- *A well designed space in an accessible location that people know increases retention rates of engagement.*

6. Suspicious Fish

Type: Borough-specific - Verdun

Interviewee: Gary Purcell - Founder

Contact information:

- **Address:** 4811 rue de Verdun, Verdun, QC H4G 1N2
- **Email:** all.the.suspicious.fish@gmail.com
- **Website:** https://www.suspiciousfish.org/

About:

Suspicious Fish was founded in an elementary school in Verdun in 2008 by Gary Purcell. Inspired by the 826 Valencia, a storytelling program for marginalized students in the United states, Suspicious Fish works with all age groups to provide fun approaches for participants to share their stories. The founder, a teacher himself, saw a need to engage marginalized students and to create an atmosphere of encouragement where their individual and collective narratives can flourish.

Since then, the Suspicious Fish team and participants have published one thousand stories.

How they work:

Primarily run on volunteers, the Suspicious Fish programming was mainly in elementary schools as after school programming. However, due to change in circumstances, they are now officially opening their own Suspicious Fish office and center (opening in September 2023). The after school program worked well as the participants had a specific space to go every day throughout October to June. During this time, the program would function in drop-in session format where students could write and share their stories in a judgment-free environment.

In the new dedicated center, the hope is to be open 7 days a week and to have a drop-in session style where it is up to the participants what they want to do and how much they want to work. Typically, their programming includes 1 facilitator for every 8 students, but they want to start including 1 on 1 sessions.

Unique Factors:

- They use storytelling and trauma-informed pedagogy to create social link, boost of self esteem and a sense of community belonging and involvement for the students.
- They have loosely structured programming creating a space for students to come in and work on their own ideas and projects.
- The workshops and programming are also co-planned and co-created with the groups based on their needs using responsive workshops, and pair and share techniques.
- The new center will have two dedicated rooms:

    - The secret room for writing and after school programming;
    - The front room will be a community space with coffee and snacks that anyone can access on a small donation basis.

Notable Projects:

- Annual published anthologies of the stories participants create/
- Video stories and films that the participants write and act in.
- Under the Red Roof 2022: An oral history project led by seniors in Montreal's South West area. This was an intergenerational online storytelling program where participants of all ages share their stories. The seniors planned and conducted interviews, filmed and edited their stories and collaborated with youth to create artwork for the stories.

Challenges:

- Tight funding has made it so that they have had to shift spaces a few times over the years creating instability in where they are based.
- Lack of consistent funding has also made it so that the staff all work other jobs and there are no full-time dedicated staff.
- Sometimes the content of what the participants write about can be difficult, but with school psychologists available and with a trauma-informed approach, these cases are handled.
- Lack of capacity: there are many great proposed ideas, but the inability to follow through with them due to lack of capacity creates a challenge.
- The restrictions and specific guidelines around building a non profit which can be discouraging.

Key Lessons & Recommendations:

- *Adequate Social Infrastructure: Providing consistent, safe places where all participants, regardless of their age or background.*
- *Understand what it means to engage people*
- *Identify what are the available resources and team capacity.*
- *Use existing networks to recruit participants.*

Summary of Key Lessons for Improved Practice

1. Targeting Engagement:
- Engage participants where they naturally gather in their daily lives.
- Bring consultations to youth and marginalized groups instead of expecting them to come to consultations.

2. Adapting Tools and Approaches:
- Tailor engagement tools to different demographics; one size does not fit all.
- Present information in an easily understandable format for each age group.

3. Diverse Engagement Techniques:
- Incorporate various engagement methods beyond mapping and drawing.
- Ask participants about their interpretations of drawings and maps.

4. Collaborative Approach:
- Co-create engagement processes with colleagues and communities.

5. Transparent Communication:
- Inform applicants and the public about projects and processes early on.
- Offer coaching and application review sessions for different boroughs.

6. Accessible Pathways:
- Offer services in English-speaking communities.
- Provide writing workshops for proposals to make applications for projects and funding more accessible.

7. Innovative Recruitment:
- Use social media platforms like TikTok and Instagram for recruitment.
- Use word-of-mouth approaches to engage teens effectively.

8. Context-Specific Solutions:
- Tailor solutions and services to specific needs.
- Consider cultural factors when designing engagement strategies.

9. Building Relationships:
- Foster relationships with participants and their families beyond digital interactions.
- Foster well-designed and accessible spaces to enhance engagement and retention.

10. Social Infrastructure:
- Provide safe, consistent spaces for engagement.
- Ensure accessibility for participants of all ages and backgrounds.

11. Understanding Engagement:
- Gain insights into what effective engagement means to different groups.
- Identify available resources and team capacities.

Chapter 4: Discussion & Conclusion

In chapter 3, the six organizations and initiatives interviewed are explored, their engagement challenges highlighted, and key recommendations on how to further the work of engagement outlined. In addition, the organizations are quite different in their profiles; some of them do not mention urban planning or environmental design at all. My bias going into the research and interviews was thinking that engaging children in art, sports or other activities not directly related to urban planning was separate from urban planning engagement. I have since come to understand how intertwined the different forms of engagement are. Over the period of writing this, I also began working for the NDG Community Council, which further enriched my understanding of the term engagement. It allowed me an inner look into the way community engagement works. I think my questions and analysis evolved from not simply trying to find the good practices, but also *how* to get to these good practices, and what does engagement really mean?

All of the organizations I interviewed employed different approaches to their engagement. For example, the OCPM and For Youth By Youth project stressed the importance of bottom-up inclusive planning and engagement. They also heavily emphasized the importance of innovation. The borough specific groups, NDG Consultation Table, Jeunesse Loyola and Suspicious Fish described that for them, successful engagement is not solely based on numbers, it has to be qualitative. There

has to be follow up to ensure the quality of their services and that the benefits are being reaped by those who need them.

Additionally, the interviewed groups almost all follow the highest 3 levels of Hart's ladder: Adult-initiated and shared decision, child-initiated and directed, and child-initiated and shared decisions. The OCPM's engagement style falls within level number 6: Adult initiated and shared decision. It is true that children and youth are consulted within the OCPM's processes, but the decision making remains only within the reach of the adults in the City. Jeunesse Loyola also falls within the 6th level as they provide services that participants can opt in and out of, but the decision for how the services are planned is not necessarily always a collaborative effort. The By and For Youth program and the NDG Youth Table are within the 7th level: Child-initiated and Directed. The By and For Youth program funds youth-led projects with support and the projects are chosen by a jury which has youth members as part of the makeup. The NDG Youth Table consults their children and youth on the decision-making of their funding and projects, with the support of the adults and organization leaders. Youth Fusion and Suspicious Fish fall on the 8th level: Child-initiated and shared decisions. Both organizations allow for a process of co-creation and independence with guided support from adults through an equal partnership.

Through the interviews and the literature research, independent and collective play emerges as a vital element within child- and

youth-centered engagement strategies. Through independent play, children develop essential cognitive skills, including problem-solving, creativity, and focus, akin to a superpower that enables them to navigate the complexities of the modern world (Hari, 2021; Hadano et al., 2021). This capacity to filter distractions and engage actively with their surroundings cultivates a sense of agency and empowerment, contributing to their role as future citizens. Moreover, independent play nurtures an understanding of their preferences, strengths, and interests, facilitating their active participation in shaping their communities. By embracing and facilitating independent play as a cornerstone of child-centered engagement, urban planners recognize the significance of cultivating individuals who possess the cognitive tools necessary for future civic engagement. Children are already influencing city planning.

While working at the NDG Community Council, I came across a few projects around youth engagement. Notably, the Bloc Nettoyage project is one where children and youth—mostly from marginalized backgrounds—in NDG's Fielding-Walkley sector learn about waste and recycling while working on a community clean up each week. In the first year this project was done, the coordinators learned about how passionate the kids were about basketball, yet their area lacked many basketball net courts. Together with the kids, the coordinators scheduled a meeting with their local elected officials and demanded to have the right to play and to have a basketball court in their community. Within a few months, a basketball

court was allocated in the parking lot of Walkley Centre. The basketball court serves the needs of the Block Net kids, but it also adds to the amenities of the area so that anybody else living nearby is able to benefit.

It is clear that, by creating connections and building meaningful relationships within the organizations and the communities where children and youth live, meaningful change can happen. The participants of an organization like Youth Fusion get to see their local community transform into places they can access, enjoy and learn in. The youth from Suspicious Fish get to be agents of their own lives and, therefore, they are able to be vocal about what they want to see changed and made better in their communities.

Over recent years, efforts have been made to involve young people in various aspects of urban planning and decision-making. Montreal has witnessed initiatives aimed at creating platforms for youth voices to be heard, such as youth advisory councils, community workshops, and participatory projects. These initiatives have shown positive signs of engagement and participation from young individuals, indicating a growing interest in shaping their city.

However, challenges and gaps still persist in ensuring comprehensive and meaningful youth engagement. While some young people are actively participating, others might face barriers like limited access to resources, language barriers, or

feeling disconnected from traditional engagement methods. There is room for improvement in tailoring engagement strategies to reach a more diverse range of youth, including those from marginalized backgrounds.

Despite the gradual progress in urban planning awareness, there is still a notable lack of widespread understanding regarding the intricate interplay between urban planning and various local initiatives. The extent of their symbiotic relationship, and how one influences the other, often remains elusive. This knowledge gap signifies that, even in our increasingly interconnected world, the potential impact and collaborative prospects between urban planning and other sectors are not fully recognized. The challenge lies in bridging this informational gap and fostering a greater appreciation for the synergistic effects that can arise from a deeper integration of urban planning principles with the goals of diverse local organizations.

What works to ensure inclusion is a multifaceted approach that acknowledges diversity in all its forms – from cultural backgrounds and abilities to socioeconomic differences. Inclusive strategies consider the varied needs and preferences of children and youth, providing adaptable platforms that resonate with different communities. Incorporating languages that resonate with children's experiences, ensuring physical spaces are accessible to all, and recognizing that not all forms of play are universally appealing are pivotal steps in creating

environments where everyone can actively participate. By embracing a holistic approach to inclusion, urban planners pave the way for a diverse range of voices and perspectives to be heard, enriching the engagement process with valuable insights and fostering a sense of belonging among all participants.

In conclusion, to address the barriers children and youth face and to foster more inclusive engagement, it is vital to implement innovative strategies that actively reach out to and involve marginalized communities. Possibilities include initiatives such as targeted outreach programs, community-led workshops, and culturally-sensitive approaches, all of which could help ensure meaningful participation. Engaging these communities from the outset, valuing their input, and considering their unique experiences and needs can lead to more comprehensive and equitable urban planning outcomes.

Moreover, it is crucial to recognize that engagement should not be a one-time event but an ongoing process. Establishing long-term relationships and sustained dialogue with communities can build trust, empower individuals, and ensure their ongoing involvement in decision-making processes. By incorporating their perspectives, knowledge, and lived experiences, urban planning can better reflect the needs and aspirations of the diverse populations it serves.

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Appendix

Appendix A: Interview Questions Guide

1. What inspired your organization to focus on engaging youth in urban planning and environmental design?
2. What are some of the key projects your organization has completed in this area, and what impact have they had on the community?
3. How do you go about identifying and recruiting young people to participate in your programs and projects?
4. What kind of training or support do you offer to young people who are interested in urban planning and environmental design?
5. How do you measure the success of your programs and projects, and what kind of feedback do you receive from the youth participants and the broader community?
6. What are some of the challenges your organization faces in working with youth in urban planning and environmental design, and how do you address them?
7. How do you incorporate principles of equity into your planning and design projects?
8. Do you have any aspects of your organization focusing on marginalized youth, specifically immigrant youth?
9. What are recommendations, key learnings you want to share in this line of work?

Appendix B: Images

1. Credit: Thierry Bossé, 2017. Image is part of Youth Fusion's 375° project in collaboration with RBC and the Board of Governors of the Société des célébrations du 375e anniversaire de Montréal, elementary and high school students are working on the beautification of outdoor spaces.

2. Credit: Thierry Bossé, 2017. Image is part of Youth Fusion's 375° project in collaboration with RBC and the Board of Governors of the Société des célébrations du 375e anniversaire de Montréal, elementary and high school students are working on the beautification of outdoor spaces.

3. Credit: Thierry Bossé, 2017. Image is part of Youth Fusion's 375° project in collaboration with RBC and the Board of Governors of the Société des célébrations du 375e anniversaire de Montréal, elementary and high school students are working on the beautification of outdoor spaces.

4. Youth Fusion, n.d. Image is of a four-seasons mural at one of the Youth Fusion schools done by the students as part of the environmental design program.

5. Youth Fusion, n.d. Image is of garden boxes students designed and built together in their schoolyard.

6. Youth Fusion, n.d. Image is of garden boxes students designed and built together in their schoolyard.