

Le Champ des Possibles - The Field of Possibilities.
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Introduction

Les Amis du Champ des Possibles is a Montreal based non-profit group whose ambition is to preserve an urban green space as a community park and Urban Biodiversity Reserve. The three acre site is located in the Mile End district, which contains the smallest percentage of green space of all Montreal's Plateau-Mont-Royal districts. The city purchased the site from Canadian Pacific Railway in June 2009. The Mile End is undergoing substantial gentrification, and due to the site's proximity to the district's cultural and economic hub, it was earmarked for development. Negotiations are currently ongoing¹ between Canadian Pacific Railway and Montreal city officials regarding the provision of a bicycle and pedestrian level crossing at the northern edge of the site. If this proposal is accepted, the site's location would assume a strategic importance as a gateway to and a first impression of the Plateau borough.

The following discussion describes the project of *Le Champ des Possibles* from its' inception to the present. The intention is that in describing the particular intricacies of the community group's approach as well as of the field, the project may set an example and offer encouragement to other similar civic engagement initiatives.

Essentially, *Les Amis* reinforces the importance of the commons². Active since 2007, our group promotes: participatory processes, artistic practices, recreational activities, educational walks, scientific research; and public dialogue about how the space is perceived and interacted with. By engaging in concrete gestures with the space, we influence decisions regarding our neighbourhood's future.

True democratic process and participatory politics can be complex - collaboration is key and compromises must be made. City officials are seldom connected to the ground-level needs of a neighbourhood, and so, empowering neighbourhood committees to take a lead is the first step. Significant talent, skills, knowledge, and social expertise are ready to be mobilised if city administrators are willing to engage, collaborate and invest, thus enabling a win-win situation. Citizens can collaborate within the social landscape to create and implement the content and programming necessary for their community. By incorporating the opinions of a community, reflexive change can take place. Physical gathering should not be underestimated either. Face to face encounters, forums and events have played a big role in the success of *Les Amis du Champ des Possibles*, and has been instrumental in mobilising the project.

¹ April 2012.

² Three of the primary aspects which define a true commons: i-they cannot be commodified; ii- contrary to private property, the commons is inclusive as opposed to exclusive; iii- the commons must be preserved regardless of its return on capital. [source: wikipedia.](http://en.wikipedia.org)

From freight yard to urban meadow

Physical historical remnants play a vital role in a culture's evolution. From these we learn about the past, in order to make decisions about the future. *Le Champ des Possibles* was the industrial heart of the Mile End district. In 1876 an additional train line was required to link Montreal's expanding port to the continent's rail network. Montreal is located on an island and spatial constrictions between the island's edge and the central mountain informed the decision to loop the new train route - with its' associated industrial fringe - around the city to enclose the Plateau borough.

In 1896 the Carmelite religious order built a convent adjacent to the train tracks. At this time, the site was relatively isolated from the city. Their presence alongside the site continues to this day. In 1910 the Saint-Louis freight yard was opened. It attracted industry as it provided a direct link between local businesses and continental markets. It stimulated the local economy and was a major factor in the district's growth. From 1950 to 1975, several giant concrete textile factories were built and these industrial developments attracted large numbers of workers and accompanying services to the district. Therefore the original decision to locate the freight yard in this district resulted in the Mile End developing into an urban nucleus.

Today, the site could be perceived as a microcosm of the district's evolution. Several elements in this open air museum testify to the site's previous industrial function. These include crumbling loading docks, buried train tracks and buildings which curve in response to subsequently dismantled train lines. The respectful conservation of these remaining artifacts is fundamental in ensuring that the space can continue to recount its' fascinating story to visitors. Through these actions, the district's industrial heart is appropriately acknowledged and re-imagined as its' present-day community heart.

Biodiversity in an urban setting:

Since the closure of the freight yard in the mid-nineteen-eighties, the field has been left to develop unhindered and it now possesses enormous biodiversity. The biodiversity present is site-specific and in dialogue with its' industrial and cultural surroundings, as nature gradually re-appropriates the space using whatever means it can. Seeds have train-hopped here from all over the North American continent. The wind, birds, animals, and humans have each brought seeds and the space is now home to an astounding number of plant and animal species. This array of indigenous and introduced species is a vibrant botanical reflection of the of Montreal's diverse demography.

Les Amis du Champ des Possibles seeks to establish an Urban Biodiversity Reserve and promote critical reflection on the relationship between humans, urban development and urban biodiversity. According to Roger Latour - urban

botanist and founding member of *Les Amis*,

“An Urban Biodiversity Reserve is the ecological transformation of post-industrial or residual spaces into rich biodiversity habitats. This is achieved by the diversification of the topography (making water holes, ditches, hillocks, rock piles, etc.) and the introduction of plant species (enrichment). The choice of plant species is made according to their ecological value, human preference is not considered. The landscaping is based on what spontaneous processes have established, aesthetics being irrelevant. Such a space could be viewed as an assisted and accelerated product of a given space’s biological potential.”

The proposed reserve is considered in a larger geographic context as an important link along the train tracks in the city’s network of biocorridors³. These biocorridors allow wildlife to permeate and to establish themselves within the broader cityscape. “For the purpose of allowing biodiversity in the city, it is the most efficient use of the limited space available” (Latour). The introduction of fruit-producing plant species would attract and sustain more bird, animal, and insect life. This in turn has the potential of creating a rich playground for study - from individual visits to school field trips. Again, Latour reiterates that an Urban Biodiversity Reserve “is a collaborative work between us, our history and spontaneous biological processes”. *Le Champ des Possibles* is a the meeting place for such collaboration.

Roerich Project

Several artists have intervened to create integrated site-specific works in the open-air studio and informal exhibition space that is the field. Some of the first documented actions which engaged with the field creatively and documented the reclamation of a public space in the face of looming development included the *Roerich Garden Project* and the *Sprout Out Loud Guerilla Gardener's Ensemble*.

The *Roerich Garden* was created in 2007 as a living landmark to pay homage to the threatened green space. It drew attention to the city’s plans and provoked dialogue about the many ways the community used and interacted with the space. It provided a forum to gather and to valorize the space before it was forgotten in silence. The Roerich Symbol is the cultural equivalent of the Red Cross. Its’ three circles are said to represent art, science and religion. Russian artist and cultural activist Nicholas Roerich developed it as an internationally recognized symbol to protect historical, cultural, and scientifically valuable monuments. Intended to prevent aerial bombing in WWII Europe, it was installed on rooftops of museums, churches and universities.

³ Also known as a wildlife or green corridor, a biocorridor is an area of habitat connecting wildlife populations separated by human activities (roads, development, logging, train tracks, etc.). [Source](#).

The gardeners' ensemble *Sprout Out Loud* occupied the southern section of the field from 2008 until 2010. Through their collaborative seed exchanges, planting sessions, and maintenance of the *Roerich Garden*, they explored concepts of public space and sought to encourage the relationship between urban dwellers and the land around them. Their goals included: i- stimulating citizen engagement and provoking dialogue regarding the importance of the commons through workshops and community events; ii- engaging with the field to document how people used and cared for the space; iii- empowering people and inviting them to plant similar ideas in their own environments where needed.

In 2008, an initiative to document the *Roerich Garden Project* was launched in collaboration with Artefatica⁴, a local open publishing project. Over the span of three years, members of *Les Amis* and Artefatica collected stories from more than 40 contributors about the space's history, uses and potential. The result — an online book at roerichproject.artefati.ca — brings together texts, photos, news clippings, and archival materials, as well as examples of similar international precedents.

Les Amis du Champ des Possibles

The intention to formally protect the field as a community-appropriated space began in 2008, when the city announced the first phase of development of the Saint-Viateur East sector. Our political relationship with borough's officials grew from several existing activities: guided botanical and historical walks, seasonal garbage clean-ups, and the continued maintenance of the Roerich Garden. Over a couple of years, substantial media and political attention was garnered. One of the most notable formalized events was a *Citizen's Forum* organized by the Mile End Citizen's Committee in 2009, which was attended by over 200 people. It featured a public lecture series centered around issues affected by development plans for the Saint-Viateur East sector. Among the topics tabled concerning the city's 9M\$ makeover of the neighbourhood, concerns emerged around the acquisition of the field by the city and their proposed construction of a holding lot for city maintenance vehicles. Resistance to this drastic alteration concentrated the efforts of our group. The proposed redevelopment of the site provided the impetus for the community to develop an alternative proposal. In reacting to the city's redevelopment plan, community members were forced to ask themselves what they thought about the future of the site.

The *Mile End Citizen's committee* mandated a sub-committee to explore alternative options which would better incorporate the local community's own suggestions. *Le Champ des Possibles* includes members from a variety of disciplines including biology, horticulture, design, architecture, urbanism,

⁴ See book with Artefatica at: roerichproject.artefati.ca

landscaping, science, art, journalism, and photography. Each background contributes to enriching the foundation of a well-grounded perspective. Civic engagement is most effective when it is most accessible to the broadest general public - an example being citizen's ideas explored through design charrettes⁵. In the fall of 2010, *Les Amis* became a non-profit organization whose objective was to liaise with the borough representatives and city officials, to better communicate the local population's concerns and suggestions.

Activities and strategies

Les Amis also facilitates knowledge exchange through educational activities. The popularity of guided visits by the local historical group, *Mile End Memories* proves that the community is curious about its' heritage. Keen public participation in ecologists' biodiversity tours demonstrates the educational potential of the field as a rare place for discovering biological and botanical phenomenon within an urban setting. *Les Amis* also organizes community cleaning days to maintain the site. The fact that the site has been adopted by people is palpable. It is a loved place, a citizen approved place. Spontaneous declarations of affection for this place occur often through acts of creation, celebration and memory-making. However, if involvement feels like a burden, duty or chore, it may never have lasting impact and burn-out becomes inevitable. If engagement happens spontaneously and encourages genuine community participation, it will grow organically and be more likely to endure. These activities are important for other reasons too. As well as serving practical functions, the educational and cultural activities are also important as a means of countering negative perception regarding the site and its' topical issues such as fires, vandalism, broken beer bottles, strewn garbage and graffiti. Such instances provide authorities with an excuse to assert their power. Community activities mitigate a developers' option of unfairly justifying detrimental decisions by falsely arguing that the space is unused or unsafe.

For instance, the need for vigilance was underscored by a recent event. The demolition of a building which afforded artists the opportunity to transmit public messages through graffiti could be likened to the cutting out of the community's tongue. This building was a colorful and dynamic forum whose rare curved form recalled the historic railway lines. Other means of on-site dialogue happen through the appropriation of the site's physical infrastructure. A local artistic group, *Les Filles Anonymes*, staged a colourful protest in their 2009 series *Actions Roses*. They highlighted the questionable illegality of pedestrians crossing the train tracks through a series of transient messages woven with fluorescent pink ribbon into the wire fence bordering the train tracks.

Reconnection

⁵ A design charrette is an intensive, hands-on workshop that brings people from different disciplines and backgrounds together to explore design options for a particular area or site. [source](#).

In his book, *The Anesthetics of Architecture*, Neil Leach states: ‘*The modern metropolitan individual has to develop a defense mechanism against the over stimulation of mental life in the city... We under react to form a defensive cocoon*’. Alongside their usual functions, in an urban setting our senses operate as protection mechanisms to subconsciously filter out our immediate surroundings. This editing gradually results in a numbing of the senses, a degree of detachment as we tune out of our immediate physical environment, and a general reduction in civic engagement.

Le Champ des Possibles’ wild space provides visitors with an opportunity to reopen their senses of perception. It addresses a fundamental human need to reconnect to natural phenomena and cycles. The freedom found in wild spaces such as these plays an important role in the cultural vibrancy of a neighbourhood. The project was founded on the conviction that recuperation, revitalization and creative expression are essential to individual well-being and to the improvement of the wider urban environment.

The physical appearance of the site has come into being through a chain of aesthetically unbiased decisions and events: from its geographic origins through periods of industry and abandonment to a subsequent return to nature. Instead of aesthetics, decisions were based on the laws of science, industry, and nature. No preconceived models influence how a visitor is expected to feel or behave in this unregulated and ambiguous space. Instead, each creates their own rules. This type of refreshingly raw and beautiful landscape is incredibly valuable to any city, whose urban design is typically determined by rules of commerce, fashion, efficiency or prestige.

The idea of creating a nature reserve is interesting as it enables unpredictable results to flourish. As William Cronon says “What I celebrate even more is that they (wildernesses) remind us of the wildness in our own backyards, or the nature that is all around us if only we have eyes to see it”.

Interpretive signage could be perceived as a first step towards determining how an individual might experience and consider the space. We argue that the site’s dubious *wild state* is justifiably compromised in exchange for a better overall chance of surviving the imminent threat posed by redevelopment projects. Minimal interventions, described below, are proposed to encourage the public to use the space. This use may in turn lead to a strengthened sense of appreciation, so as to encourage future citizen guardianship.

Nearby is an example of another project which vindicates this strategy. The Twilight Sculpture Garden currently exhibits 52 metal works by sculptor Glen LeMesurier. It has undergone several transformations since 1997 due to vandalism and threats of sale. LeMesurier’s garden provides an excellent example of how continued physical presence and on-site response can successfully demonstrate - to both the general public and city officials- the

effectiveness of creative intervention and its role in shaping urban development.

Design methodology and proposal:

Les Amis du Champ des Possibles proposed that the site be split into two areas: the northern section protected as an Urban Biodiversity Reserve and the southern section zoned for public activity. The proposal addresses visitors' basic requirements, whilst educating them about the site. Services might include paths and lighting for safe pedestrian passage; garbage bins and composting for maintenance; and robust multifunctional furniture for rest, play and events. To counter the paradox of development for conservation, a flexible and sustainable approach would need to be employed. Adopting the concept of community empowerment, prototypical structures would be built by voluntary semi-skilled labour, working with members of the local crafts industry. This process would discriminate in favour of indigenous skills. Using locally recycled materials would add an intrinsic quality to the project. Using adaptable construction systems, the community would be empowered to implement future change when deemed appropriate.

The design process involved an analysis of the physical parameters of the site which influenced a visitor's physiological senses. This resulted in a series of drawings describing a range of factors such as history, natural environment, circulation, human activity, and soil quality. A comprehensive photographic study was also undertaken. This method tested an alternative springboard for initiating a design process. It started with the emotional, the inherent essence of the place, and allowed it to inform design decisions from the bottom up. The appropriation of analytical methodologies from various disciplines was useful in establishing a wider perception of the site's context. Historical references and maps were used to imagine the landscape's various past appearances. Geographic, social and cultural research helped to better understand the forces acting throughout the site and the complex interrelationships between these various strands. Instead of applying a generic cosmetic style to the site, our ambition was to incrementally uncover, analyze and exhibit the accumulated remnants still present on-site. Interpretive signage would subtly inform visitors about these intricacies. Similar to a project by landscape artist *Mary Miss*, the counterpoint between the new elements and the site would concentrate one's focus on particular details, while simultaneously enabling a broader comprehension of the whole environment.

Care of the field and its facilities could be managed by a staff of local artists, botanists and educators, supported by local volunteers. By keeping it local, relying on the skills and resources of the immediate community, the city's budget is inevitably reduced and citizens are given a role in the shaping of their neighbourhood. The city could appoint citizens as stewards of the space, or a partnership could be formed. The staff and volunteers could continue to work in an independent grass-roots manner, similar to how the legendary Liz Christy

community garden began in Manhattan.⁶

Conclusion

City representatives and community members form a symbiotic relationship. Ultimately elected officials are accountable to taxpayers. Decision-makers need the participatory voice of citizens to express and reiterate their opinions. Citizens have a social responsibility to make their voices heard. For a vibrant cultural city, communities need the support of open-minded politicians. We must continue to bridge the gaps in our social reality, because meaningful communication across different cultures, languages, and disciplines is essential to a participatory democracy. Quality of life will only improve if we strive to efface distinctions between identities or disciplines and work towards common values.

The commons has a social value that is far reaching. Without physical places belonging to everyone, we diminish our ability to determine our collective values. We also need urban wilderness to observe the complexities of life in their many rhythms across the seasons. We need open spaces with fresh air and open skies with a view. We need light and the freedom to encounter strangers in surprising ways. We need time to allow our senses to open wide. For fruitful hands-on participation, we need to feel effective. To feel effective, we need to influence the way our environments are planned, managed and maintained through tangible gestures. Urban landscapes need to be revived as essential places of discussion and creation. Cities contain cultural diversity, critical mass, and incredible potential for citizens to organize. For civic participation to take root, citizens need face to face opportunities to re-imagine their environments. *Les Amis du Champ des Possibles* exists because it fervently believes that cities need natural, subtle, ambiguous, and generous spaces - environments where people can gather, where the rules are undefined. These spaces are vitally important as they provide an opportunity to breathe and celebrate diversity.

In April 2012, the City of Montreal announced its' intention to re-zone *Le Champ des Possibles* as a park. This decision signified a positive landmark and was greatly appreciated by the group, city and borough officials, and the wider community. Although generally welcomed, the initial draft of the city's proposal seems disappointingly generic. A municipal park is not the vision of *Les Amis*. A fine balance will need to be maintained between the preservation of this wild space and a public park that is overly manicured. Keeping the dialogue open and transparent is imperative. The city proposal, *Allée Saint Viateur Est (2012)* must pay more attention to the site's various nuances in order to respectfully integrate itself. Despite the series of meetings between City officials and *Les Amis*, too few of our recommendations have been included so far. This oversight concerns us, considering the fact our submission of community derived requests

⁶ With the help of the neighbourhood, the Liz Christy Community Garden was one in which a garbage strewn lot was transformed - over several decades - into city-approved public garden, expanding across an entire block of prime real-estate at the corners of Bowery and Houston in New York City.

and supporting documents contained professional research and proposals. It is certainly not an ideal world, but if we are to take progressive steps towards true democratic process, we must act on a municipal level. Authorities must realize that sometimes locals know best, and that most often a particular set of circumstances requires a subtle tailored approach. Apparently, ongoing negotiations with the city will be crucial in order for us to reiterate our ambitions for the site.

Le Champ des Possibles' will continue to: strive towards retaining its' wild character through minimal intervention; promote urban biodiversity; and develop a customized approach to respectfully acknowledge the site's particular attributes. Although such an approach requires energy, perseverance and a willingness to do things differently, an opportunity exists to create a fantastic new type of wild place which would provide a hugely positive influence on the district and act as a model on a much larger scale.

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EMAIL

1. Roger Latour, email message with definition of Urban Biodiversity Reserve, to E.R. Michaud, May 11, 2012.

WEB LINKS

- ___ Amis du Champ des Possibles. <http://amisduchamp.com>
- ___ Artefatica - Roerich Project. <http://roerichproject.artefati.ca>
- ___ Emily Rose Michaud. <http://emilyrosemichaud.com>
- ___ Roger Latour. <http://www.floraurbana.blogspot.ca>

Chosen images (to be sent by email asap)

1. Bing maps
2. Seasonal panoramas: Owen Mc Swiney
3. Living armour by Emily Rose Michaud: Melissa Campbell
4. Guided botanical tour by Bronwyn Chester: Marke Ambard
5. Roerich Garden, aerial view: Emily Rose Michaud