

<a>COMMONING PROPERTY IN THE CITY: the on-going work of making and remaking

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** Introduction**

Gentrification is a global force affecting urban communities across the world (Simet, 2016). Point St. Charles, an urban area located in close proximity to downtown Montreal in Quebec, Canada, is no exception. Originally hunting and fishing grounds of the Kanien'kehá:ka and other Indigenous peoples, the areas' marshlands were enclosed by colonizers for agricultural and residential purposes (Greer, 2012). Later redeveloped for industrial purposes, this "urban village" of 13,000 souls, has been the terrain of struggle against gentrification for the past three decades. In the wake of policy adopted by Montreal City officials and supported by capitalist real estate developers, the vacant factories along the Lachine Canal were converted into luxury condominiums. More recently, with the expansion of the downtown, "affordable" condominium developments have multiplied, as has the conversion of multiplex buildings into single-family homes by middle-class professionals wanting to settle close to Montreal's urban center. Property values have skyrocketed as properties are bought up to be renovated and "flipped" onto the capitalist market for profit. In just a decade, average rent has increased by 42% and the percentage of social housing units has decreased from 40% in 1996 to 33% in 2016¹. These policies and practices, as is the case in most metropolitan cities (Lees, Bang Shin & Lopez-Morales, 2016), are causing the displacement of less privileged populations.

Notwithstanding these forces, Point St. Charles is renowned as a bastion of solidarity and resistance and has managed to slow down the forces of gentrification in ways that adjacent neighbourhoods have not. One explanation for this is a strong tradition of commoning from the 1960s onward (Collectif courtepoinette, 2006; Sévigny, 2009). The peoples' health and legal aid clinics that were set-up in the late 1960s, and that were the precursors of state-run local community service centers and legal aid services, are still thriving today, fully-funded by the State, but self-managed by neighbourhood residents. Other longstanding community organisations offer alternative mental health, education and family services, and still others manage a peoples' grocery store, collective gardens and kitchens, as well as a public fruit and vegetable market. The housing organisation, via its development wing has built cooperative and non-profit housing units, while its advocacy wing works to protect tenant rights. All these organisations and more not only share access to several buildings and meeting spaces, they are also regrouped into a concerted-action round table called Action-Watchdog. This autonomous political institution has been at the forefront of many successful battles against forces of gentrification, austerity measures and regular attempts by the State to absorb its autonomous health and legal aid services (Triollet, 2013). These historical commons have no doubt contributed to a durable collective imaginary of what a commons is in this neighbourhood, one that commoners today can build upon (Healy, 2017, personal communication). This imaginary inspired La Pointe Libertaire (the Anarchist Point), a Bookchin-inspired local affinity group born in the wake of the Global Justice Movements that erupted at the turn of the century. As of the mid-2000s, La Pointe Libertaire organized several direct actions (Kruzynski & Silvestro, 2013), pushing back against legal boundaries in the name of legitimacy, and, at the same time, creating, expanding and protecting urban commons. This chapter contributes to the emergent literature on urban commoning (Foster & Iaione, 2017; Gorenflo, 2017; Huron, 2018). In it I draw on my personal

experience as co-founder and active member of La Pointe Libertaire to analyze three urban sites that I was directly involved in commoning.

 Le jardin de la liberté

It had been a longstanding demand of community organisations that an unmanaged piece of public property located near the Lachine Canal be zoned as a park in order to protect it from enclosure by private real estate developers. Although in theory this property was accessible to all, in reality, people stayed clear of it because it was overgrown with ragweed, a potent allergen that is a public health nuisance. It is in a prime location; cyclists pass by it regularly on the city bike path, as do tourists and locals accessing the banks of the Lachine Canal. The site was nested between a vacant but fenced-in lot on the one side, and, on the other, a building that housed state employment services and a social enterprise that trained people without employment to do metalwork. It was only a matter of time before these waterfront properties were purchased by real estate developers, thus completing the cycle of transformation of abandoned factories into luxury condominiums that had begun in the 1990s.

<c> *Commoning the site*

In 2007, La Pointe Libertaire took matters into their own hands, taking responsibility for the care of this plot of land. We organized a festive family-oriented guerrilla gardening activity and created a beautiful urban garden that we named le Jardin de la liberté (the Garden of Liberty). In doing so, we were both initiating the process of commoning, by enlarging access to green space in this cement-laden neighbourhood prone to the heat island effect and defending the common public entry-ways to the banks of the Lachine Canal from enclosure by private condominium owners. Today, the longstanding demand has been won - the garden is now a park that remains publicly-owned. It is also a biophysical commons: it is accessible to, and benefits, neighbourhood residents who like to exercise their green thumb, cyclists taking a break from their ride along the Lachine canal, homeless people who have set-up temporary living quarters nearby, birds, insects and many forms of plant-life. Use is not explicitly negotiated, but the Jardin's commoning-community, in its continued role of caretaker, remains vigilant and acts to ensure that those who use it do so by respecting its integrity.²

<c> *Challenge to the commons by public authorities*

Although La Pointe Libertaire generally lacks faith in public authorities, we nevertheless decided to ask the Borough council to take on official responsibility for the garden by changing its zoning to the status of a park. This was a strategic move in order to strengthen the commoning-community by bringing in protective legislation and in doing so, make it more difficult for real estate developers to enclose the garden for the sole use of owners of condominiums. The public authorities, however, were not interested. An article in a major newspaper on the subject refers directly to this request; the journalist writes that

although the council generally appreciates it when citizens take action to beautify the city and even help them out sometimes, this act is frowned upon: "There is a lot of provocation going on here" says Claudette Lalonde, spokesperson for the municipal council. "Under no circumstances will the City take on the care of this garden", she says. "We are ignoring them. We are letting them do their own thing and that's it" she adds, noting that the borough does not "get involved in political controversy"³

Not only did the public authorities ignore us, but they also interfered with the commoning process. A civil servant wrote us an email asking us to remove the bushes and plants because the municipal workers were scheduled to cut everything down, as they do every year. We refused, publicly, and they did not actually do it. Interestingly, on several occasions, municipal workers actually decided, of their own volition, to help us with commoning. They transported a picnic table from a nearby park using their pickup truck. They left a pile of compost by the plot as they did their rounds of the borough-sanctioned community gardens. Once in while, they even made a detour to come and water the plant-life while on their watering round.

La Pointe Libertaire continued, year after year, to organize gardening bees, until, at one point, the garden took on a life of its own. Birds, insects, worms and plant-life no longer needed human intervention to flourish in this urban landscape – the bushes burgeoned and the plants flowered, drawing strength from the nutrients in the soil that had multiplied from years of compost.

A couple of years later however, an extremely powerful actor literally trampled the commons like the proverbial elephant in a china shop. The publically owned *Commission des services électriques de Montréal* (Electrical Commission of Montreal, CSEM) dumped their heavy equipment and materials directly on the garden, squashing most of the plant-life. Outraged, members of La Pointe Libertaire wrote a letter to the Mayor and then posted images of the garden on social media, along with a call to the borough authorities to take action. The Mayor replied to the post with the following:

The refurbishing of the garden will be taken on by the CSEM as they are responsible for the destruction of the garden [...] [I'd like to know] what types of plants [have] been planted over the years by the citizens, so that the garden [can] be redone at best. It will be my pleasure to get back to you to confirm the date⁴.

As of this writing, the CSEM has fenced off the garden to prevent it from being used as a parking lot by construction workers building the new condominium complex on the site that, just a few years' prior, was home to a metalwork shop. The garden has yet to be refurbished, but incredibly, the plants have begun sprouting green and orange through the rubble and someone has raked and disposed of the garbage.

<c> *Lessons learned*

Several lessons emerge out of this experience. First, direct action gets results or, as the slogan has it, “direct action get the goods” (at least in this case). We took action, and in doing so, we jump started the political process of struggle-negotiation. Second, we learnt that public institutions are not monolithic entities; they are a coming-together of a diversity of actors, with different interests, connections and access to power. In this case, some civil servants and the CSEM interfered, while municipal workers and politicians assisted commoning of the site. The garden's commoning-community made strategic choices to bring certain municipal actors in, while pushing others out. Third, even after the site was zoned green, the garden was trampled, un-made, un-commoned. The garden has and will be refurbished, but, in the years to come will it remain accessible to all? Will the homeless people who have set-up camp on the site be pushed out by folks living in the newly-built adjacent condos? Will local folks no longer feel at home, as the landscaping is uplifted to reflect the tastes of those living nearby? The lesson here is that commoning is never finished; the commoning-community must always remain vigilant and take action when needed to defend and expand the commons.

 The Point all dress⁵ – a community mural

This was another longstanding demand of community organizations – to transform the eighty-meter railway viaduct-wall that forms a physical and psychological barrier between the North and South parts of Pointe St. Charles – by painting a mural. Although every passer by has access to the site, in the sense that they can contemplate its drab concrete greyness covered with mold and toxic drippings from the trains passing above, they do not benefit from it as they would if it was a beautiful vibrant piece of community art.

<c> *Commoning the site*

As with the Jardin, La Pointe Libertaire initiated the commoning of the viaduct by taking responsibility for the care of the eyesore. We began painting, others continued; some of us were arrested and charged with mischief for defacing the property of the once state, now privately-owned Canadian National Railway Company (CN). We then negotiated a first-ever in Canada agreement with the CN to create a community mural, seeing to it that our charges were dropped.

Shortly thereafter, the commoning-community was expanded, formalized and made more visible with the creation of the Collectif au Pied du Mur (At the Foot of the Wall Collective). The Collectif regrouped 10 artists ranging from 26 to 72 years of age from the neighbourhood who had never done a mural before. The commoning-community also included 120 volunteers who helped paint (neighbours, kids, local artists), as well as the borough council and staff, as they provided scaffolding, permits and funding. By the Fall of 2013, the thus constituted commoning-community had produced one of the longest murals in Montreal, an incredibly vibrant depiction of the people's history of Point St. Charles, from colonization to today.

Although the property remains privately owned, the mural is a cultural commons. The benefits are distributed far and wide. Immediate neighbours are able to access beauty as they look out their windows or hang out on their stoop. Passers-by stop to contemplate or discuss one part of the fresco or another. Tourists partake in the audio-tour on the history of the neighbourhood that the mural is part of. Cyclists on the adjacent bike path catch their breath as they cycle by this surprising flash of urban landscape.

<c> *Challenge to the commons by white supremacists*

The commoning-community has had to engage in struggle-negotiation with respect to use in order to push back against attempts by white supremacists to undo the inclusive, social justice message that is at the heart of the project. The most poignant example occurred on December 3rd 2013:

An explicitly racist act was committed during the night in Point St. Charles. A painting of a black woman's face on the wall of a CN viaduct was vandalized. The act is clearly targeting the Black community because the vandal(s) did not touch any other part of the 400 square meter mural⁶.

In fact, the vandals had carefully repainted both the woman's face and hand, with white paint, making sure to stay within the contours. The effect was spectacular as the painting is huge, over 20 feet high. The commoning-community reacted immediately. The next day they held a press conference at the site. Three days later, the Collectif repainted the face and organized a well-attended anti-racist rally in front of the mural. In parallel, and without any kind of official coordination, other members of the amorphous commoning-community took action: emplacing an anti-facist banner on the viaduct, anti-racist graffiti on the walls of surrounding buildings and sidewalks, solidarity messages on poster-boards attached to telephone poles, and pushing out radio

broadcasts and articles in both mainstream and alternative media. At the time of writing, no other racist incursion into the mural has occurred.

<c> *Lessons learned*

In the garden example the unmaking of the commons was caused by the actions of a public institution. In this example, racist individual(s) did the unmaking. The lesson here is that although this type of commons can easily be unmade, a strong and durable commoning-community that is always alert, is able to remake and, through that process, contribute to a culture shift. In this case, the remaking created the conditions for the naming of white supremacy and for the emergence of a process of ethical deliberation around the use of the commons and who benefits from it. When faced with this racist act, the commoning-community “decided” that racists were not welcome; or, in other words, the commoners chose to exclude racists from the community they had created in which a social justice message guided action.

 Bâtiment 7: a factory of collective autonomy

Bâtiment 7 (Building 7) is a 100,000 square foot building located on the CN rail yards in Point St. Charles that now belongs to a non-profit organisation, 7 à nous (It Belongs to Us)⁷. The conversion of the abandoned train repair shop is happening in several phases. The “local services and collaborative practices hub” opened in the spring of 2018. It includes five collective enterprises - a youth-led arcade and upcycling program, a worker-run brew-pub, a member-run grocery store, a cooperative artistic foundry and an art school. It also includes several collaborative membership-based workshops: bike, auto, wood, silk-screening, ceramics, digital printing, dark room and common infrastructure such as a multi-function venue and a co-working space. Next is the family and health services hub (daycare, birthing center, affordable alternative health services) and the urban agriculture and food production hub (greenhouse, chickens, horses, industrial kitchen, vegetable garden, green and blue alleyway, etc.).

<c> *Commoning the site*

As is the case with other post-industrial neighbourhoods in the minority world, Point St. Charles is home to many vacant buildings. Bâtiment 7 was one of these and is located on the CN rail yards. Neighbourhood outcry was loud when this land, which represents 1/3 of the territory of the neighbourhood, was sold for \$1 to the capitalist developer Vincent Chiara. After having decontaminated the land, Chiara would then be free to resell lots to build condominiums and tourist venues for profit. Thanks to nine years of struggle, however, Chiara was forced to reserve 25% of housing units for social purposes, to cancel his plans to replace a park with an access road and to donate Bâtiment 7 to the community along with \$1 million for renovations.

This incredible outcome, the collectivisation of a private property of this size and value, could not have happened without the coming together of a diverse and durable commoning-community (La Pointe libertaire, 2013; Kruzynski, 2017). The 7 à nous collective, set-up in 2009 to spearhead the campaign to expropriate Bâtiment 7, was composed of a dozen politically experienced organisations. Action-Watchdog, the roundtable of 30 local organisations led the political negotiations with the borough, while the Autonomous Social Centre, a loose grouping of local antiauthoritarian activists and their allies built power by organizing festive family-oriented mini-squats in an unpredictable manner on the Bâtiment 7 site. The CEO of the Darling Foundry, who happens to live next door to Bâtiment 7, used the power of her elite board of directors to engage in direct negotiations with Chiara, while the local Community Economic Development Corporation representative did work

behind the scenes to help us secure funding and to incubate the collective enterprises that would house the space. The coming together of all of this into a commoning-community that took responsibility for Bâtiment 7, made this historic moment possible. On April 28th 2017 the official transfer of property was signed.

Now that the building belongs to a non-profit organisation, the relationships at play shift away from confrontational ones with the capitalist owner to other, much more complex dynamics that break away from the a simple “us and them” dynamic. The 80 active members of the ecosystem (that will grow to 200 over the next decade) form the current commoning-community; many of us were involved in the groups that were in the trenches during the battle to secure the building. This re-constituted commoning-community is now responsible for the building and its common infrastructure. We have intentionally created horizontal management structures to enable ethical deliberation regarding viability and development, use of infrastructure and space, and mission/vivre ensemble. The latter is particularly innovative, in that it institutionalizes the spaces for action-reflection on diversity/accessibility, integration/onboarding and tensions/conflicts.

<c> *Challenges to commoning by forces of gentrification*

One of the tensions that we are currently struggling with is related to the fact that Bâtiment 7 is a potential gentrifying force. Although we do not use the word (anti-)gentrification, we carefully designed the mission to include most of its elements (see italics):

1. To self-manage a collective property *rooted in the area's popular history*;
2. To create a hub of artistic, cultural, social and political services and activities *to respond to the needs and desires of the local population*;
3. *To safeguard the accessibility of the site to all, with a strong and affirmed bias in favour of marginalized and impoverished populations*;
4. To establish an ecosystem based on experimentation and learning, in order to promote self-reliance, interdependence, complementarity and resource-sharing;
5. To practice a horizontal and *inclusive* democratic mode of management;
6. To demonstrate *solidarity towards other social justice efforts* and to engage in *the collective reappropriation of our neighborhoods, our cities* and our sense of togetherness.

Fundamentally, we want to create a space of innovation that does not contribute to the displacement of the working-class and impoverished local population by another, with more cultural or material capital. This is easier said than done.

This brings us back to the composition of the commoning-community and to the observation that although it is quite diverse in terms of gender, sexuality, age, income and political stripes (on the left), it does not mirror some of the key demographics of the neighbourhood. While 25.1% of the population of Point St. Charles identifies as a visible minority⁸, the members of Bâtiment 7 are overwhelmingly white. While 26.4% of people 15 and over in the locality have not finished high school, most members of the commoning-community are university-educated and benefit from the symbolic capital that is thus conferred to them/us. The fact that Bâtiment 7 is managed by a mostly white coordinating class of activists is problematic given that our mission is rooted in *autogestion* (self-management).

If the most marginalized and impoverished folks from the neighbourhood are not part of the commoning-community, are we not, inadvertently, contributing to gentrification? Each of us attracts

our friends, who oftentimes resemble us, who then get involved in the member-run initiatives. Some decide to move into the neighbourhood, to be closer to the building and in doing so reduce the number of affordable housing units available to local folks. Many prefer to buy organic, local produce and to spend time in hip cafés. Developers know this, open speciality shops and businesses, which attracts young, middle-class families who transform multiplexes into single-family homes and successfully pressure public authorities into investing in beautification projects. Property values go up. Investors buy real estate, and then flip it. Rental housing owners transfer tax increases onto their tenants. All this has the potential to lead to displacement of those who can no longer afford to live there or who no longer “feel at home”.

<c> *Lessons learned*

This example sheds light on the messiness and the complexities of the relationships at play in the process of commoning. The “adversary” in this case are the ubiquitous forces of gentrification which are oftentimes not external to “us”. Following the idea that a diverse ecosystem is more resilient and durable, the ability of Bâtiment 7 to stave off and slow down forces of gentrification in the years to come will be a direct result of our current efforts to enrol a diversity of actors into the commoning-community. It will also depend on our ability to make those who are different from us feel at home within the building and its ecosystem, even if that means navigating discomfort and cultural shifts. It will also mean joining forces with other commons-communities in their campaigns to reclaim other vacant lots and buildings for collective use. Fundamentally, it will be about our willingness to participate actively in the intentional process we have set-up to engage in those difficult ethical negotiations that require time, energy, conflict, compromise... but also love and rage.

 Conclusion

In each of the three examples, different types of property have been commoned. A commoning-community has used direct action to create a commons and has taken on responsibility for its care. A space of ethical deliberation has been opened up in which commoners and other potential uncommoners negotiate use, access and benefit (Gibson-Graham, Cameron & Healy, 2016). Because of the diversity of actors involved, these ethical discussions always take the form of struggle-negotiation. Some actors – such as the Borough authorities, the Electrical Commission of Montreal, the capitalist owner of the CN rail yards – are clearly powerful, easy to identify and thus to target. The power of others – such as the white supremacist neighbour or the gentrifier-inside-many-of-us – is less obvious, and therefore not as easy to identify. In the examples I have presented in this chapter, the commoning-community was able to make strategic choices about which actors to enrol in order to harness and expand power, but also about who to exclude, in order to protect the integrity of the commons. What has been learnt is that commoning is never neutral and never finished; it involves an ongoing process of making and remaking, struggling with and celebrating the messiness of surviving well together.

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Notes

¹ Action-Gardien & RIL (2019). 'Étude sur l'habitation à Pointe-Saint-Charles', accessed 27 March 2019 at <https://www.espacesendisparition.org/documentation/>.

² This discussion of commoning draws on the set of criteria summarized in the Commons Identi-kit in Gibson-Graham, Cameron and Healy (2013 p. 135), namely access, use, benefit, care, responsibility and ownership.

³ Elkouri, R. (2008), 'L'anarchie fleurie de Pointe-Saint-Charles', *La Presse*, accessed 5 June 2017 at <http://www.lapresse.ca/debats/chroniques/200809/08/01-656308-lanarchie-fleurie-de-pointe-saint-charles.php>, author's translation.

⁴ Dorais, B. (2017), comment on Anna Kruzynski's Facebook thread, author's translation.

⁵ This is a play on words, a point of pizza, all dressed.

⁶ Le Collectif Au pied du mur (2013), 'Vandalisme raciste sur la mural : Au pied du mur riposte rapidement', accessed 8 June 2017 at <http://lecollectifaupieddumur.tumblr.com/post/69298499680/vandalisme-raciste-sur-la-murale-au-pied-du-mur>, author's translation.

⁷ This is a play on words, 7 is the number of the building, but also sounds like « c'est », meaning « it ».

⁸ Ville de Montréal (2015), *Profil sociodémographique de Pointe-Saint-Charles*, Direction Culture, Sports, Loisirs et Développement Social, accessed 15 June 2018 at https://ccpsc.qc.ca/sites/ccpsc.qc.ca/files/PORTRAIT_CSSS_SudOuestVerdun_2014_v1.1_0.pdf.