

Whose Commons? Inclusion, Exclusion, and Social Power at Bâtiment 7

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- Hello, my name is Anna Kruzynski. I am a professor at the School of Community and Public Affairs at Concordia University which is located on unceded Indigenous territories known as Tiohtiá:ke to the Kanien'kehà:ka, as Mooniyang to the Anishinaabeg, and as Montréal to many others.
- Today I will discuss inclusion, exclusion, and social power at Bâtiment 7.
- Bâtiment 7 is a former industrial building in Pointe-Saint-Charles, in Tio'tia:ke/Montreal. After nine years of community organizing, it was transferred in 2012 to the Collectif 7 à Nous, a non-profit organization. Today it houses a wide range of self-managed initiatives.
- My objective today is not to provide a complete portrait of Bâtiment 7. Rather, I want to explore a specific question: who has access to the commons that exist within this space, and why do some people become deeply involved while others remain at the margins?
- Using the concept of social power and an intersectional materialist perspective, I will examine how dynamics related to whiteness and everyday racism shape participation within these commons.

- I will focus on three commons: Press Start, the Indigenous cultural space, and the governance structure of Bâtiment 7.
- This analysis draws on participatory action research, participant observation, and my long-term involvement in the project.

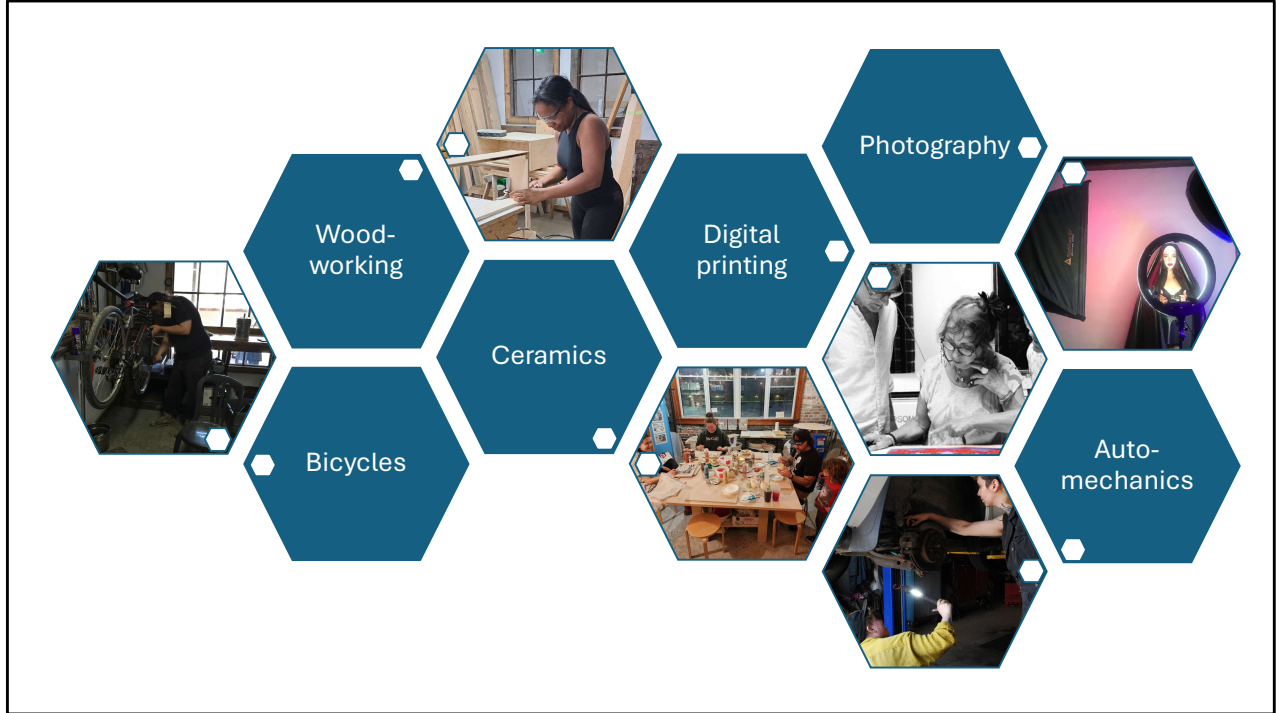
Rationale

Four reasons shaped my choice:

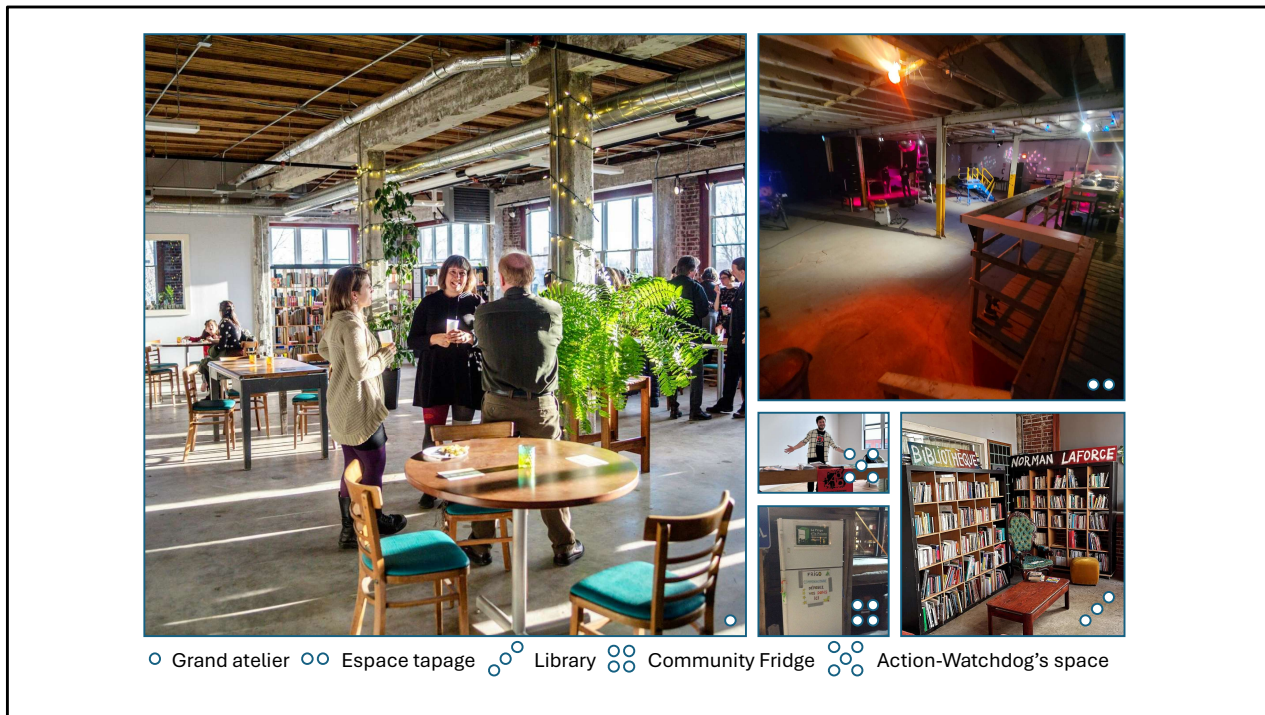
1. *With the rise, especially in Quebec, of anti-racist politics, the Black Lives Matter movement, and Indigenous resurgence, I see it as my responsibility as an engaged researcher to contribute to public discussions on these issues;*
2. *Because racism and the inclusion of racialized people have been at the center of tensions at Bâtiment 7 since it opened, I cannot imagine writing about the commons connected to this space without addressing this difficult question;*
3. *I do not have the room here to examine all identity markers in depth; and*
4. *This analysis may support members of Bâtiment 7 in our/their action-reflection processes on anti-racism, processes that are fostering — and will continue to foster — emancipatory practices and a diverse, inclusive form of collective life.*



- Bâtiment 7 brings together a wide range of commons.
- One important category is the occupants: autonomous organizations that rent and self-manage their spaces while participating in the collective governance of the building.
- These include a a metal foundry, a neighborhood grocery store, a brewpub, a sewing space, an art school, a revolutionary archives center, a worker cooperative focused on recycling and upcycling, and Press Start, an arcade managed primarily by young people.



- A second category consists of collaborative workshops.
- These spaces are owned by the Collective 7 à nous, but collectively managed by craftspeople.
- They provide shared access to equipment and knowledge related to auto mechanics, bicycles, ceramics, woodworking, printing, and photography.
- In that sense, they function as commons where both material resources and practical skills are shared.



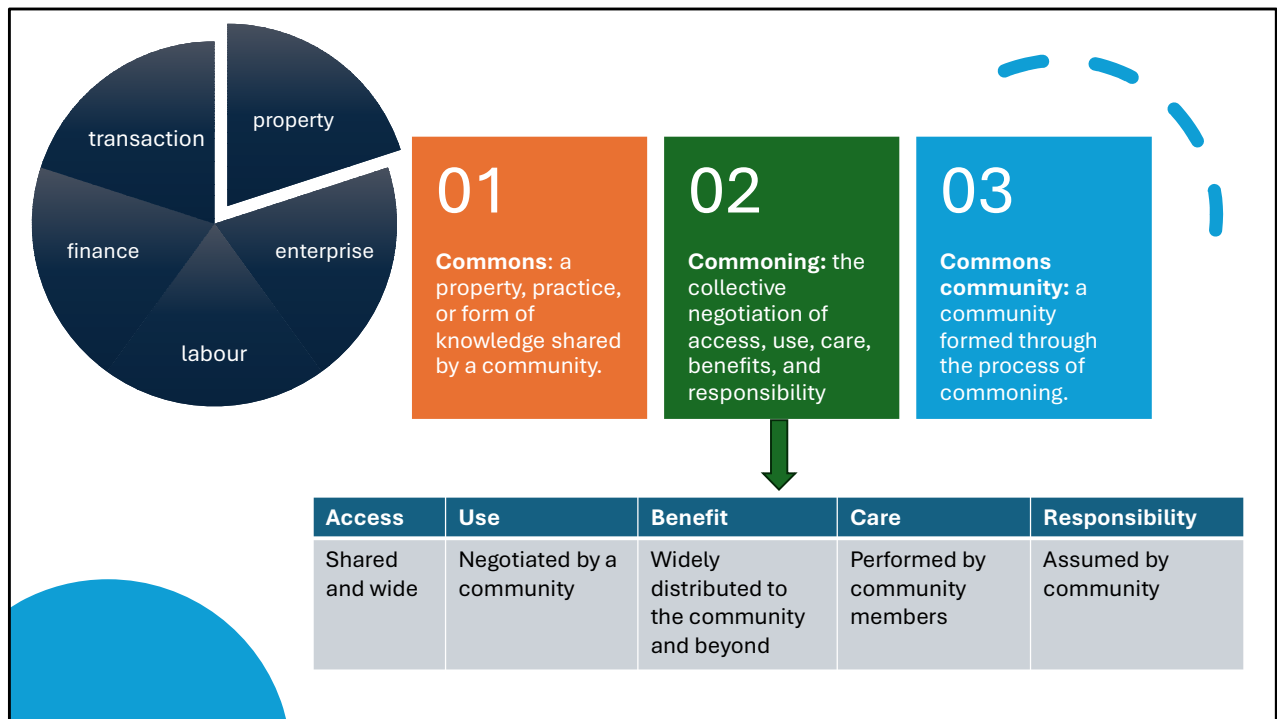
- The building also includes meeting spaces, rental spaces, and a community fridge.
- Together, these initiatives support daily interaction, collaboration, and mutual aid.



- Outside, the fermeite brings together gardens, a greenhouse, food-processing facilities, and other infrastructure that supports a local food system.
- It is not simply a farm or a garden.
- It is an attempt to build community-controlled food infrastructure.



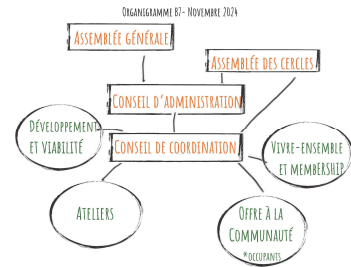
- There is also a blue-green alleyway that combines ecological rainwater management with shared green spaces.
- Taken together, these initiatives illustrate the diversity of commons that exist at Bâtiment 7.
- The challenge, however, is not simply identifying commons. It is understanding who participates in them, who benefits from them, and who feels that they belong.



- To analyze these spaces, I draw on the work of J.K. Gibson-Graham.
- Their framework identifies five ethical coordinates of economic life: labor, enterprise, transactions, finance, and property.
- Today, I focus specifically on property and the commons.
- Gibson-Graham proposes three concepts that are useful here:
 - First, a commons is a property, practice, or form of knowledge that is shared by a community.
 - Second, commoning refers to the collective negotiation of access, use, benefits, care, and responsibility.
 - Third, a commons community is the community that emerges through that process of commoning.
- What is particularly important is that commons are never static. They require ongoing negotiation. Decisions must constantly be made about who has access, who participates, who benefits, and who assumes responsibility.
- These questions are inherently political.
- As a result, commons inevitably involve tensions, disagreements, and power relations.
- This is where questions of inclusion and exclusion enter the picture.

Memory cue

- *The commons identi-kit helps us identify spaces where people come together with others to create and share commons and community.*
- *For J.K. Gibson-Graham, for knowledge, property, or a practice to become a commons, access must be shared and broad, its use must be negotiated by a commons community, the benefits must be distributed widely among members, members must care for it, and the community must take responsibility for it.*
- *Different commons communities engage in ethical deliberation around these elements.*
- *This is an ongoing political process shaped by conflictual relations, debates, and points of tension.*
- *This is where questions of inclusion and exclusion emerge, particularly in relation to whiteness.*



- Among the many commons present at Bâtiment 7, I want to focus on three.
- The first is Press Start, an arcade held in common by a community composed largely of racialized youth and their allies.
- The second is the Indigenous cultural space developed by the Buckskin Babes collective, which brings together Métis people and members of several First Nations.
- The third is the governance structure of Bâtiment 7 itself.
- What interests me is that these three commons tell very different stories about participation and belonging.
- The first two are spaces where people marginalized by colonialism and white supremacy occupy a central position.
- The third, however, presents a very different demographic reality.
- Exploring this contrast helps us better understand the relationship between commons and social power.



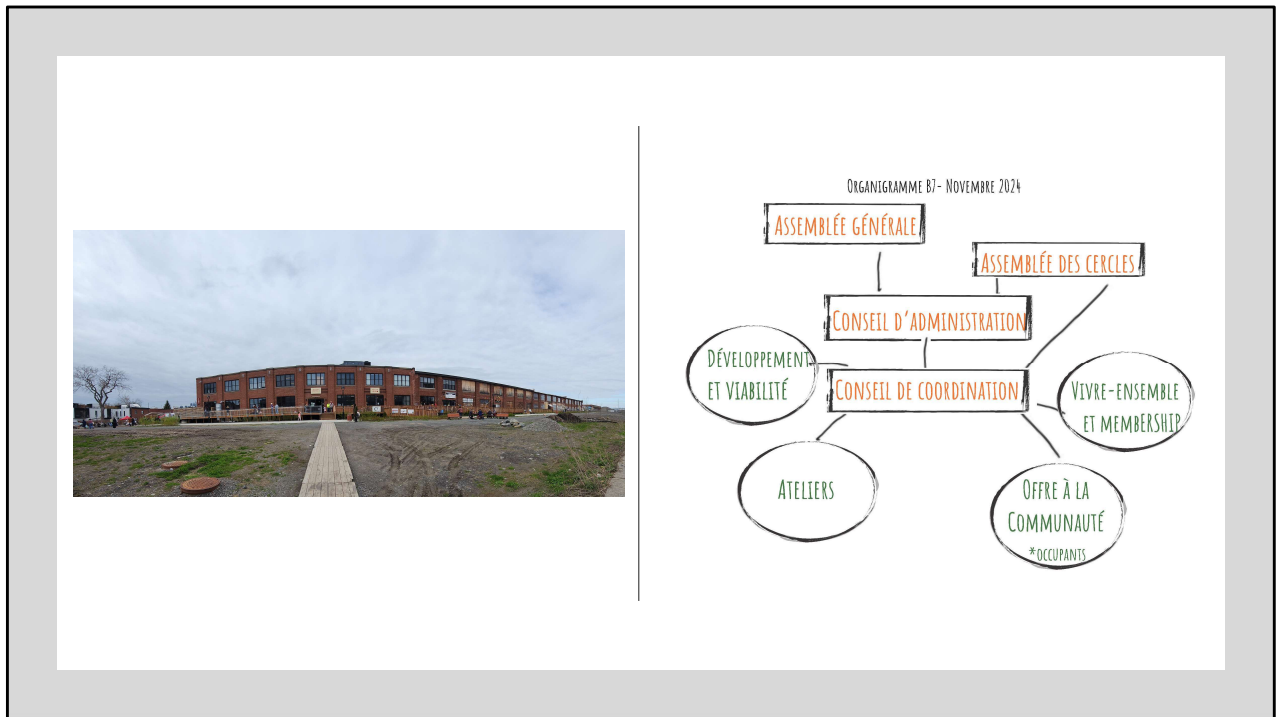
- Let us begin with Press Start, the youth-led arcade.
- From its creation, Press Start deliberately centered youth who had been marginalized by colonialism and white supremacy.
- Young people are not simply participants in this space. They manage it, care for it, and collectively decide how it is used.
- A number of concrete choices support broad access.
- Most activities are free, reducing financial barriers. The space includes visible symbols of decolonization and resurgence. Events such as Hip Hop as Resistance create opportunities for Indigenous and racialized artists to gather and share their work. Paid mentorship programs allow young people to acquire new skills while being compensated for their involvement.
- These choices matter because they shape who feels welcome.
- As a result, many Indigenous and racialized youth experience Press Start as a place where they belong, where they are recognized, and where they have meaningful influence over the direction of the project.
- This is important because, as we will see, that experience is not equally available throughout the broader ecosystem of Bâtiment 7.



- The second example is the Indigenous cultural space.
- Originally, the land next to Bâtiment 7 was slated for condominium development. Community mobilization successfully challenged that plan, and the City eventually purchased the land for community use.
- The Buckskin Babes collective, with support from Press Start and other allies, then organized a campaign to create an Indigenous cultural space on the site.
- This represents a double victory: a private development project was transformed into a community resource, and Indigenous people secured a space dedicated to their own cultural practices and knowledge.
- Today, this commons is imagined, governed, and developed by Indigenous people themselves.



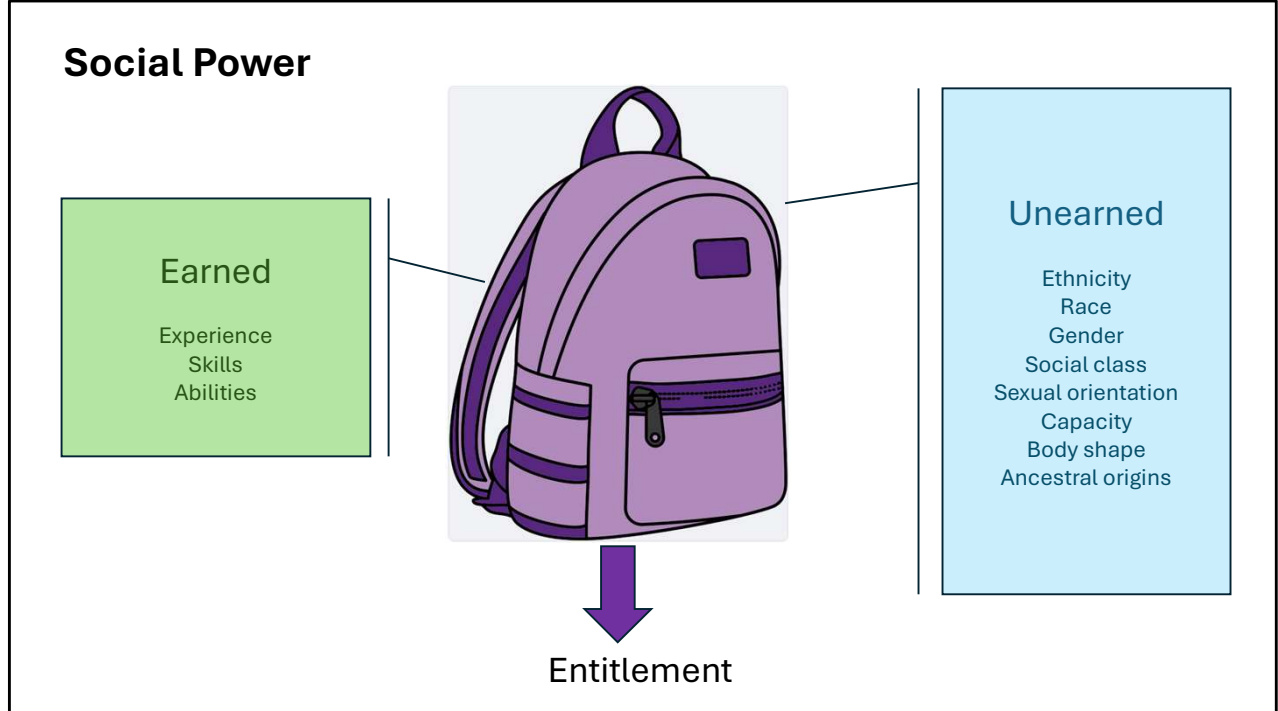
- Although the site is still being developed, it has already been used for several years.
- Workshops and gatherings take place under the leadership of the Buckskin Babes collective.
- A large “Land Back” banner marks the site and serves as a reminder of the broader political context in which this project exists.
- Access to the space is reserved for Indigenous people. This allows participants to learn from Elders, strengthen relationships, practice cultural traditions, and transmit knowledge in a supportive environment.
- The collective continues to negotiate the use of the land with both the City and actors within Bâtiment 7.
- Future plans include a fire circle, gathering spaces, hide-tanning facilities, and infrastructure that supports cultural practices.
- Even people who do not directly access the space benefit from its presence through greater recognition of Indigenous cultures and knowledge systems.



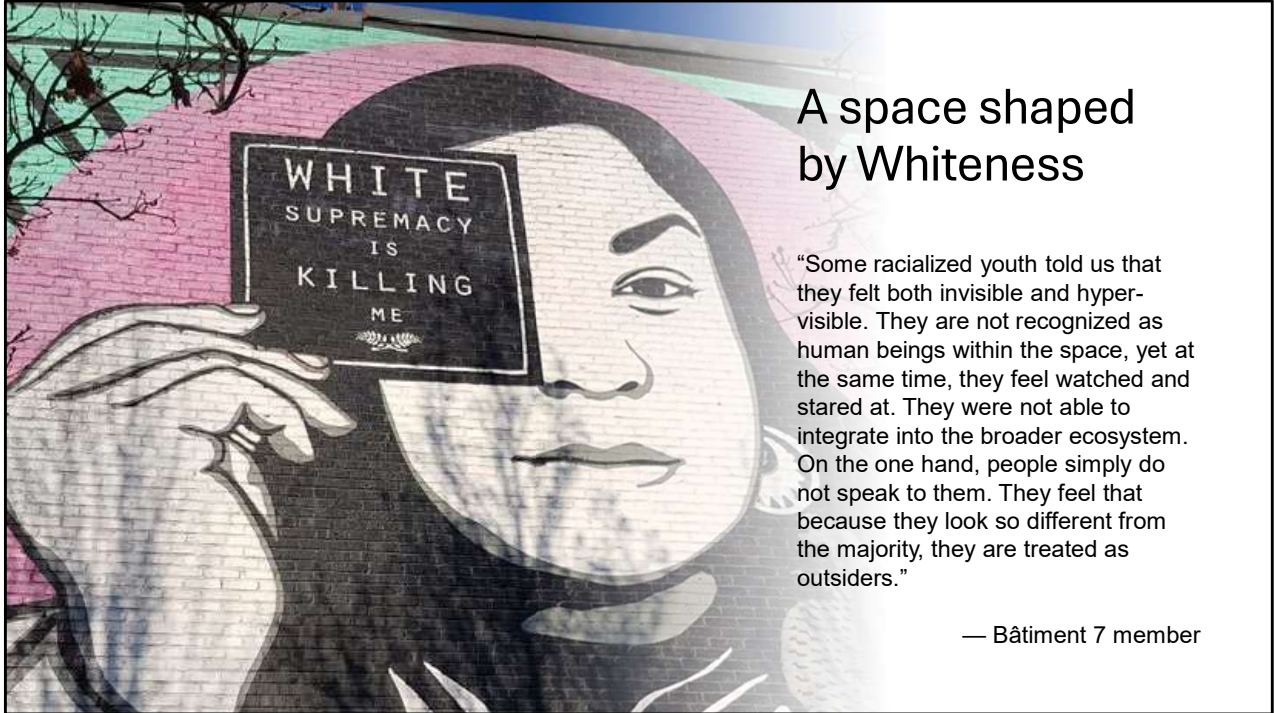
- Press Start and the Indigenous cultural space are both highly diverse commons.
- The governance structure of Bâtiment 7, however, presents a different picture.
- The building's democratic practices draw inspiration from sociocracy, union organizing, and traditions found in autonomous community action.
- Decision-making is distributed among several circles, supported by a board of directors and a coordination council.
- Operational decisions are made through the assembly of circles, while broader policies are decided by the general assembly.
- This structure was intentionally designed to promote participation and collective decision-making.
- Yet formal structures do not tell us everything about power

Local statistics	Members of the core
20,2 % without a high school diploma	University educated
25,1 % visible minorities	All White
16,1 % Allophones / 24,8 % Anglophones	Almost all Francophone

- When we look more closely at the people who occupy the core governance roles, an important pattern emerges.
- The core group is diverse in many respects. There is diversity in terms of gender, sexuality, age, income, class background, ability, and political tendencies within the left.
- At the same time, the group does not reflect several important demographic characteristics of Pointe-Saint-Charles.
- The neighborhood includes substantial numbers of visible minorities, anglophones, allophones, and people without university education.
- Yet the governance core remains largely white, francophone, and university educated.
- This pattern has persisted despite repeated efforts by racialized people to become involved.
- Over the years, many racialized people attempted to become involved, but most eventually left.
- Eight years after the opening of the building, the demographic profile of the core group had changed very little.
- The question, then, is why.



- My argument is that social power helps explain this pattern.
- Peggy McIntosh's image of the invisible backpack is useful here because it reminds us that people carry different combinations of privilege and advantage.
- At Bâtiment 7, members of the core group often benefit from several sources of social power at the same time.
- These include whiteness, fluency in the dominant language, educational credentials, activist experience, and long-term involvement in the project.
- Because these factors accumulate and reinforce one another, some people occupy positions from which their voices carry greater weight.
- Social power influences who is listened to, whose ideas are taken seriously, and who feels legitimate speaking in the first place.
- Closely connected to social power is what we might call a sense of entitlement.
- By entitlement, I do not mean arrogance. I mean the confidence that one's voice belongs in the conversation.
- The problem arises when some people possess much more of it than others.
- When that happens, the same individuals tend to dominate discussions while others gradually withdraw.



- To better understand this dynamic, I draw on Sara Ahmed's work on whiteness.
- Ahmed argues that spaces are shaped by histories of colonialism and racial hierarchy.
- As a result, some bodies move through those spaces with greater ease than others.
- In spaces shaped by whiteness, white people often experience comfort, familiarity, and belonging.
- Others may experience discomfort, hyper-visibility, or a sense of being out of place.
- For many of us in the governance core, Bâtiment 7 feels like a second home. That sense of comfort is real.
- The problem is that it is not distributed equally.
- One member described how some racialized youth felt simultaneously invisible and hyper-visible. They felt ignored in some moments and intensely scrutinized in others.
- These experiences make participation much more difficult and contribute to processes of othering.

Memory-cue

Whiteness — definition

“The concept of whiteness highlights the fact that being ‘White’ is a social

construction, just like being 'Black' or 'Arab' [...] Naming whiteness means questioning the underlying assumption that 'White' people are the reference point, a universal category representing all humanity, while 'non-White' people are seen as particular or different [...] Whiteness therefore sheds light on the assumptions associated with white identity and reveals the privileges attached to it" (Pierre, 2017).

Les microagressions semblent banales mais pourrissent nos milieux de travail.

«BEN LÀ, PREND PAS SA D'ÊME!»

Racial microaggressions are brief, everyday insults, slights, indignities, and demeaning messages directed at racialized people by well-intentioned white people who are unaware of the hidden messages they are communicating (Sue, 2010).

- Another important element involves racial microaggressions.
- These are often subtle, everyday interactions that communicate exclusion or inferiority, even when no harm is intended.
- Examples include comments about language abilities, tone policing, or unilingual organizational cultures.
- In addition, people with less social power sometimes experience the effects of entitlement exercised by members of the core group.
 - Ideas may be dismissed too quickly.
 - Work may be redone according to implicit standards.
 - Proposals for change may be blocked before they receive serious consideration.
- Individually these incidents may seem minor, but collectively they shape who feels welcome and respected.

Memory cue:

Microaggression — definition

“Many well-intentioned white people consciously believe in and profess equality, yet unconsciously act in racist ways, especially in ambiguous situations. Racial microaggressions are brief, everyday insults, slights,

indignities, and demeaning messages directed at racialized people by well-intentioned white people who are unaware of the hidden messages they are communicating” (Sue, 2010).



White Fragility

“In North America, white people live in a social environment that protects and isolates them from racial stress. This insulated environment of racial protection creates expectations of racial comfort among white people while reducing their capacity to tolerate racial stress, leading to what I call white fragility... The result is a range of socially sanctioned defensive responses directed at the perceived source of discomfort, including punishment, retaliation, isolation, ostracism, and refusal to continue the conversation”

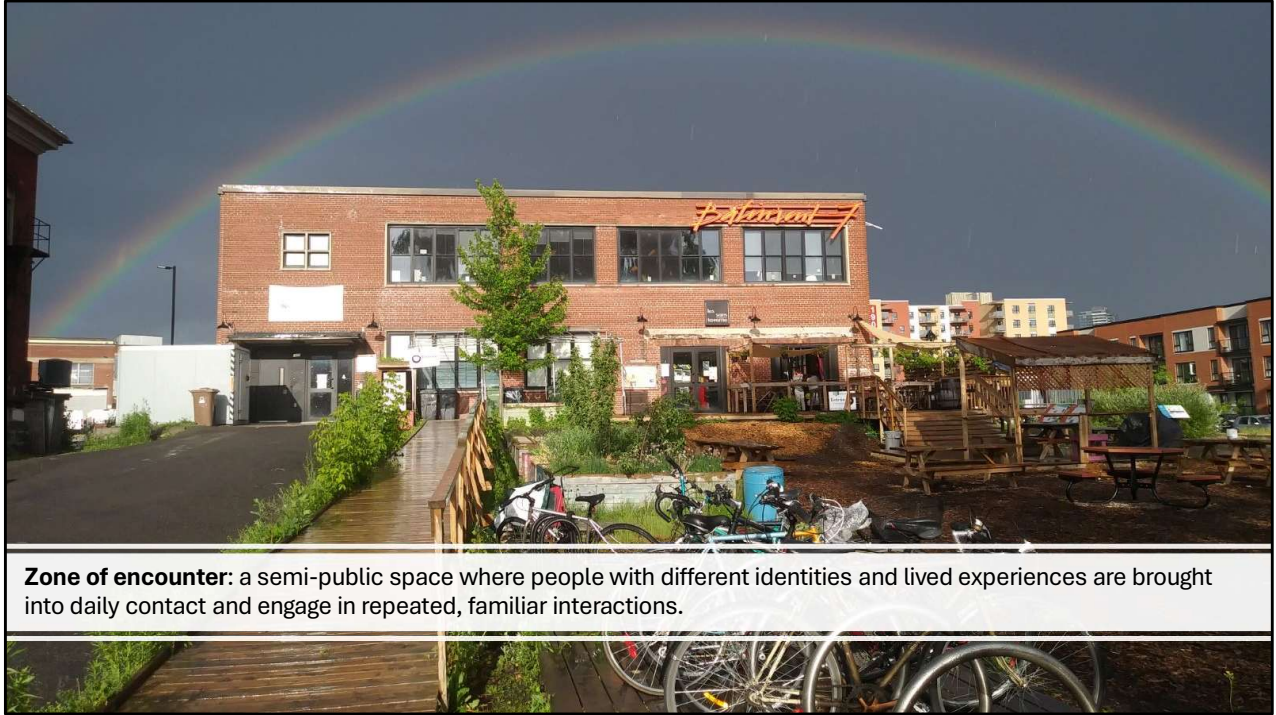
- Robin DiAngelo, cited in COCo, Yee Clare et al., 2019, p. 27

- These dynamics often generate tension and conflict.
- Over the years, Bâtiment 7 has experimented with different mechanisms to address these challenges, including conflict-resolution processes, codes of conduct, and accountability initiatives.
- Yet one issue remains particularly difficult.
- When accusations of racism emerge, some people react defensively rather than treating the situation as an opportunity for reflection.
- Instead of asking how racism may operate within organizational practices, they focus on defending themselves from criticism.
- Robin DiAngelo describes this response as white fragility.
- The result is often a culture of avoidance in which difficult conversations become harder to sustain.
- What we repeatedly observe is that unresolved conflicts frequently lead racialized people to leave while members of the core group remain.
- Why?
- Because the space continues to feel familiar and safe to us.
- We know that even when we make mistakes, our place within the community is rarely in question.
- That is one of the ways social power operates.

Memory cue:

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Zone of encounter: a semi-public space where people with different identities and lived experiences are brought into daily contact and engage in repeated, familiar interactions.

- So where does this leave us? I believe that diversity must be built into commons from the very beginning.
- People participate where they see themselves reflected and where their needs, experiences, and aspirations are recognized.
- At the same time, I remain hopeful. Bâtiment 7 is what we call a zone of encounter: a space where people with different identities and experiences interact on a daily basis.
- Those interactions create opportunities for transformation. As Sara Ahmed suggests, changing everyday practices can challenge dominant norms and reshape organizational cultures. Philomena Essed reminds us that these transformations rarely remain local. People carry what they learn into their families, workplaces, and communities. In that sense, change spreads through a process of social pollination.
- Despite its tensions and contradictions, Bâtiment 7 remains a living ecosystem. New initiatives continue to emerge. They create discomfort at times, but they also redistribute social power and open possibilities for new ways of being together.
- If deeper change is to occur, the responsibility rests largely with those of us who occupy positions of power. We must recognize the dynamics at work, create conditions for genuine dialogue, and commit ourselves to transforming the organizational culture rather than simply preserving it. Thank you.