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MY GARDEN, MY CITY

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Good afternoon. My name is Jenna Smith and I am the director of Innovation Youth, a community organization under Christian Direction. I have served this ministry since 2006. I am very grateful to the United Nation Development Programme office for the opportunity to come to share our urban agriculture project, “My Garden, My City”, based in Montreal, Québec.

I must warn you: I am not a researcher or theoretician, as so many of you are. Rather, I am a practitioner. However, I feel that this project, in its execution, framework, observations, and learnings, applies and tests many development theories, especially where Henri Lefebvre's *Right to the City* and Martha Nussbaum's *Capabilities* approach are concerned. In this address, I will explain to you how the combination of the two - the belief that those who occupy urban space have a right to it, and the growth of capabilities within teenagers - are key to creating agency within marginalized urban adolescents and can actually act as a vehicle towards democratic and fair access to public urban spaces.

THE CONTEXT

Innovation Youth is located in the district of Peter-McGill, in the western part of downtown Montreal. It is one of the most densely populated urban areas of Canada. With a population of 33 300 residents, and easily double those numbers of what we call our “transitory population”, i.e., day users, workers, students and clients of local services, it holds a typical downtown North American city feel – busy, quick-paced and full.

It is a district that is full of contradictions. It is located at the foot of Mount-Royal; as you drive up towards the mountain, the historical houses were home to some of Canada's most prestigious figureheads. The Trudeau family house is here (yes, those Trudeaus) as are many other homes of famous authors, politicians, academics and consulate officials. As you drive down the mountain, you get into what we call “South of Sherbrooke street” which is where the density actually occurs: sky rises of sometimes slum housing, a rich diversity within residents, a growing number of families (3000 families with children under the age of 5, up significantly in the last ten years) and many young people – in fact youth under the age of 25 make up 25% of the district's population, compared with only 16% of the rest of downtown Montreal.

This is no doubt due to the presence of several colleges and universities in our area. The household income is \$8000 per annum lower than the rest of downtown Montreal. In 2011, the average household income was \$70,000 per annum for the entire district of Peter-McGill, which in Montreal is more than sufficient to pay for housing, food, transport, and school. And yet 40% of the population lived under the poverty line, marked at \$23,000 per annum. Do the math.

We are a landing pad for newcomers - 40% of our population were born outside of Canada and our neighbourhood has over 12,000 immigrants, with almost half of them having arrived within the last five years. Nearly 30% of the district speaks a language other than English or French, our two official languages, at home.

With the density of population and the marked rise of gentrification that Peter-McGill has undergone in the last years, the issues faced by the community of Peter-McGill have been complex and challenging. Our municipal and federal governments are caught in a game of "catch-up", having realized only a few years ago, after a series of studies, that the neighbourhood of Peter-McGill was poorly equipped to serve its own residents. The district lacks any public primary school and there is no community centre, no public pool, or sports facilities.

The issues surrounding access to green or recreational space are ever-present and have been studied, documented, and stated several times over, including by our own municipal government. It is one of the most densely populated areas in Canada with 4775 people per square kilometer. (Source: *Mise en valeur du territoire et du patrimoine Montréal, Profil sociodémographique Ville-Marie*, 2009). *The Plan Particulier d'Urbanisme des Grands Jardins 2011* confirms, "the presence of heat islands" in the heart of the Peter-McGill District and "the lack of green spaces accessible to the population". (PPU, section 3.2.3). There are 0.6 hectares of green space per 1000 residents, as compared to two full hectares of green space per 1000 residents in the rest of the city of Montreal. The public consultation office of Montreal actually recommends four hectares per 1000 residents.

As well, the final report of a City of Montreal Study on the needs in the district (Arrondissement Ville-Marie 2014) confirms the problem of isolation and the need to create links among its residents, accentuated by the lack of outside areas to gather (p.1) Therefore, youth and families in the neighbourhood need better and more access to public spaces and to activities where they can gather as a community.

Not surprisingly, citizens' focus groups, community councils, and residents' voices have often expressed access to green space as a basic need in this neighbourhood; and social isolation is one of our most expressed and felt factors of poverty in Peter-McGill.



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In the meantime, the Planification communautaire jeunesse du centre-ville ouest de Montréal (p.17) recognizes the need for services in pre-employment for youth in our neighbourhood who are in situations of extreme vulnerability, of which there are many. Because of linguistic barriers, issues related to social isolation, economic poverty and related difficulties accessing resources, our neighbourhood knew that one place where it could grow was indeed in ensuring opportunities to our youth for growing capabilities and competencies.

THE PROJECT

In 2014, the Innovation Youth centre was lent its first plot of land on which we were allowed to landscape and grow a vegetable garden. The land, belonging to Concordia University was, during the 1970s, a second-hand car lot, and the soil was contaminated. In order to make the ground workable, we had to dig down a foot and a half and remove all that topsoil and rocks and pour in hundreds of kilos of good earth.

Six teenagers, aged 14–19 years old, were selected to be our interns. The project, despite its complex political context, is surprisingly simple in its form: find an abandoned or neglected piece of land. Train youth to make a garden. Take care of the garden.

The youth that we work with as interns are all, in general facing a variety of challenges, previously listed. However, the project is built around the notion of skills development and capacity augmentation. In this sense, the work they do does not focus on eliminating weakness but rather on growing strengths. They acquire technical skills: manual labor, using tools, gardening techniques, landscaping, and cooking.

They also are trained in what we call “soft skills”: communicating with their teammates, following orders, punctuality, conversing with passers-by and being able to articulate their work, expressing frustrations in a healthy fashion, building autonomy and a sense of responsibility (for instance, it was decided as a group that the adult supervisors would not remind the interns to drink water and put on sunscreen. They needed to be responsible enough to remember to do so on their own. We start there and move up to being able to send kids to the gardens on their own without any adults and report back on how their work went.)



Specifically the teens will also learn:

- cooking and using the harvest
- community engagement: the extra harvest gets distributed to day centres for the homeless
- names and uses of plants
- urban health and safety
- workplace health and safety practices
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From the neighbourhood's perspective the gains are real as well: the structure of the spaces are specifically designed so that they are not typical community garden plots, fenced in, and spaced out for individual use, but rather open designed spaces, accessible to the entire neighbourhood, gardens in box planters and knee or waist height and visible to all.

The purpose of this design is to answer the biggest priority for our neighbourhood: access to public, communal green space. Food security is obviously a factor in our urban agriculture initiatives and we do spend considerable time selecting and planning the gardens to reflect food-based needs of the youth and their families (choosing produce, planning how will we harvest and cook the vegetables, food distribution, skills teaching related to cooking, canning, preserving, etc). But the emphasis of our gardens is always focused on allowing the biggest number of people access to safe, green spaces and opportunities to beautify street corners, alleyways, private land and abandoned plots.

Because Innovation Youth is under the umbrella of Christian Direction, a faith-based ecumenical organization, the historical connections and partnerships we have had with local churches enabled us to develop a fair amount of land on parishes that had not had the capacity to garden themselves. Several downtown churches, such as Evangel Pentecostal, Church of St Jax and the Church of St. Stephen's have seen their front yards transformed by Innovation Youth's urban agriculture initiatives. Other spaces include Concordia University, Ste-Catherine's street and areas around the financial district.

The project, therefore, really has a double mandate: first, providing disenfranchised youth with opportunities to grow capabilities (in the case of this project, we think the main capabilities according to Martha Nussbaum are affiliation and control over one's environment) and augment the skills that will help them eventually integrate professional, social and academic life. Second, empowering those youth to develop and maintain sustainable green spaces that will actually have a measured impact on the community's sense of well-being in its land.

WHAT IS RIGHT TO THE CITY ?

Henri Lefebvre, in 1968, proposed a definition to "*Right to the City*: It is a demand for a renewed and transformed access to urban life." (Lefebvre, 1968).

His book was a manifesto of sorts, concerned with the rise of capitalistic approaches of land purchase in cities, and he observed that urban development trends were excluding those from the city who had no buying power.

Chendan Yan, in his Habitat III article, elaborates on Lefebvre's definition: "*Right to the city* goes beyond basic human rights and access to resources. It is a renewed access to urban life, one that empowers' city dwellers to shape the city as they see fit through rights to participation and active civil engagement." (Yan, 2016).

In other words, a citizen who participates in urban life has a right to urban life. Not just the citizens who can afford square footage of real estate. Concretely, this would play out that residents of a city who reclaim political space also regain access to employment, cultural, social, and any other opportunity that urban life has to offer.

In the words of Séverine Deneulin, the UN-Habitat endorsed a *Right to the City* definition as a means of positioning that the "value of urban space lies not in the income it can generate but in what does for people, whether the urban space enables all urban residents to exercise their human rights equally, like decent housing, education, health, access to public services, whether it facilitates social relations and peaceful co-existence between its residents."

Deneulin writes, "Human well-being does not lie only in what each individual human being is able to be or do but in the quality of his/her social relations. And this point lies at the core of *Right to the City*." (Deneulin, 2014)

Deneulin is of the opinion (and I share this opinion) that the capability approach is actually a valid means to implementing *Right to the City*. In a sense, we intuitively knew, at Innovation Youth, that it would not suffice to simply mobilize or sensitize youth around their needs or rights where urban space/life was concerned. They had to occupy space in such a manner that it would be conducive to their own individual development and personal growth.

Deneulin explains this nuance: (residents or community groups) can, through protests, revert the decisions to allocate capital in a certain area of the city, through direct participation, influence how best to use vacant land. The capability approach attributes a direct link between the quality of political processes – whether all the voices of people affected by a decision have been heard – and wellbeing outcomes. In this sense, it echoes right to the city's initial concern that the production and shaping of urban space be under citizen control, but it takes a more nuanced perspective whether this control should be direct or indirect and does not make the assumption that state channels are necessarily prioritizing the interests of capital." (Deneulin, 2016).

In applicable terms, the young garden interns are claiming their Right to the City, by taking real ownership over the spaces they are gardening. They feel personally attached to specific parts of the garden ("those are the tomatoes I planted!") and even give guided tours to neighbours, tourists, and passers-by at times. They demonstrate pride in what they have grown and show ease when distributing leftover harvest to the homeless or neighbours. We could have taken a more vocal political route with the youth – taught them about the inequities of urban space and about their human rights of accessing space and of the intricacies of food security, urban safety, etc.

But My Garden My City has a much different angle, one that is anchored in experiential learning: as they grow capability, they also integrate urban spaces and structures, claiming them for their own, taking their rightful place in the city and in the neighbourhood as they are civically engaged, morally implicated and contributors to the neighbourhood's well-being.

In this sense, our urban agriculture initiatives both mirror and draw from Deneulin's concepts: The idea of a "Just City" proposes to capture the combination of the capability approach with *Right to the City*. It does not suffer from the confusion of what type of Right to the City is and what it legally means. It is not divided between those who endorse capitalism and those who call for its abolition. It could simply connect residents, privileged and less privileged alike, and unite them around the question of whether current urban structures and the quality of urban residents' relations enhance or undermine their opportunities to live well in a common space.

PROJECT RESULTS

Since 2014, here are the accomplishments of the project, My Garden, My City:

- Innovation Youth created nearly 6000 square feet of permanent gardens (actually translating into the infamous 0.06 hectares of green space for 1000 residents) in different locations around the district, by reclaiming private spaces made available by private landowners, churches, and universities.
- More than 50 young people have served as interns. The majority of them are able to find part-time employment or summer jobs following their experience with Innovation Youth.
- 30% of the interns live with learning difficulties. This project allows them to acquire new skills that help them build a future in school and in the workplace.
- The plots of land that are developed into gardens are prone to a decrease in vandalism, crime, and litter, and an increase in foot traffic, social interactions, and recreational use.

During the internships, youth have demonstrated the following:

- Increased circulation in their neighbourhood, walking to different areas that they would not normally access.
- Increased autonomy through gains made by team-work, community engagement and work training.
- Increased knowledge in issues of urban life, gardening and civic engagement.
- Increased positive interactions between different groups in the neighbourhood: practitioners, landowners, youth, families and homeless peoples.



CONCLUSION AND LEARNINGS

The combination of the capability approach and *Right to the City* help create an urban initiative that underlines well-being and justice (Deneulin, 2014). This theory, from a practitioner's perspective, has validity in its concrete application and empowers children and youth both as individuals (in their increased knowledge, skills, and experiences) and as a social entity within the urban environment (larger access to space, breaking down of social barriers, growing affiliation).

In terms of concrete learning, we now know that "If you don't use it, they will abuse it". This is a principle of positive occupation of space which has been invaluable.

We also can say with confidence that growing affiliation to one's neighbourhood of proximity and growing skills within marginalized youth has been at the heart of this initiative. And that as these two capabilities are grown, the participants develop both personally and collectively.

In conclusion, we are encouraged by My Garden My City (which has since been renamed "From Root to City".) While the effects of gentrification and urban misplanning remain ever-challenging in the district of Peter-McGill, we see initiatives such as this, youth and community-led, as beacons of hope in a changing urban landscape.



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