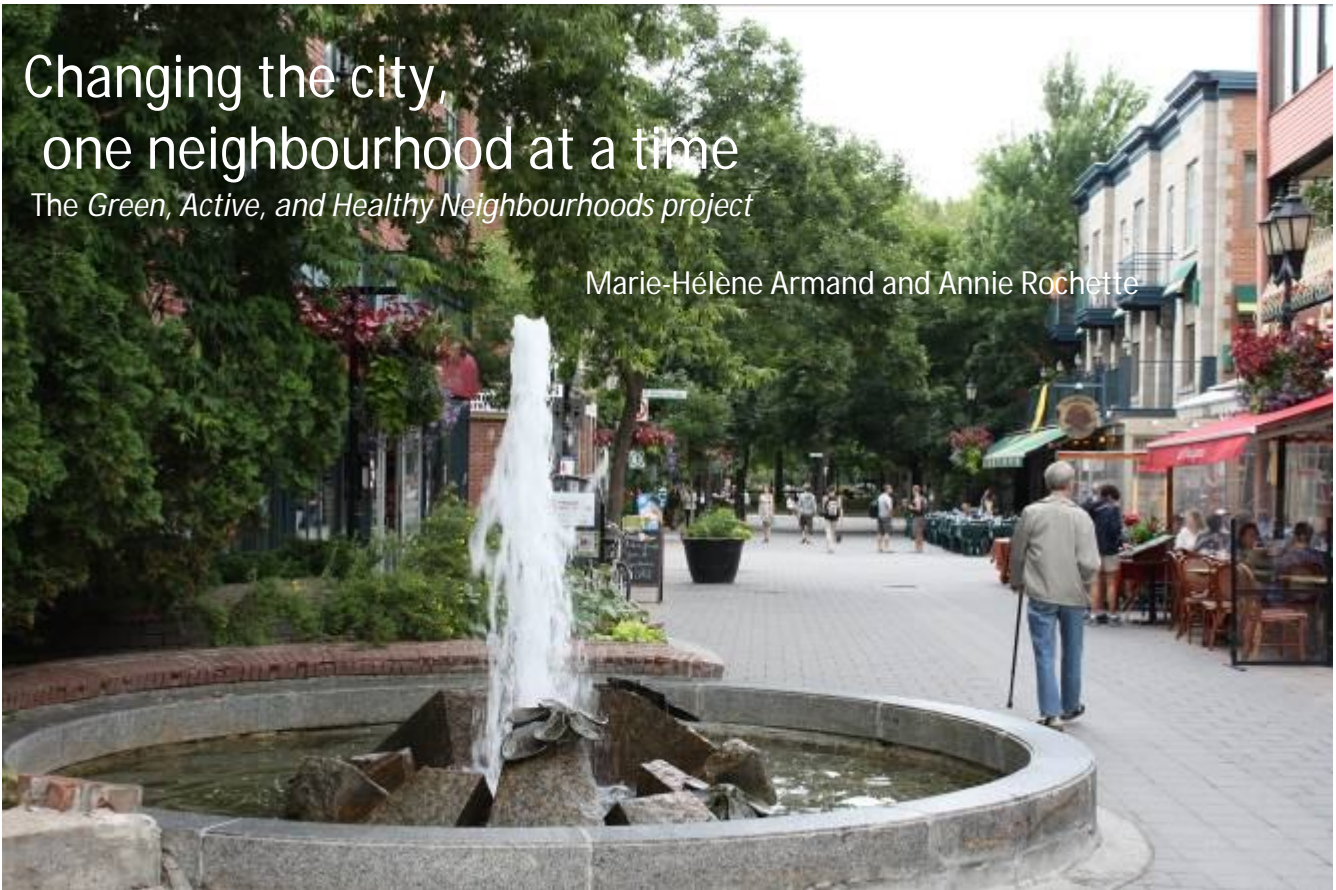


# Changing the city, one neighbourhood at a time

*The Green, Active, and Healthy Neighbourhoods project*

Marie-Hélène Armand and Annie Rochette



There is now widespread agreement that a shift to active and public transit is necessary to reduce the negative impacts of transportation on health and the environment and to improve the safety and quality of neighbourhood life. Urban space, however, is still being analyzed and developed to facilitate the flow of traffic. The Montréal Urban Ecology Centre's project *Green, Active, and Healthy Neighbourhoods* proposes an innovative approach to redesigning public spaces in favour of walking and biking and creating pedestrian-friendly neighbourhoods.

## **A good time for a daring change**

Quebec is ready to welcome change. The numerous plans, policies, and programs adopted by different municipal agencies demonstrate the willingness of public bodies to participate in transportation and sustainable development. In particular, the City of Montréal's announcement about creating green neighbourhoods that will enhance pedestrian and cyclist safety and the quality of neighbourhood life (Transportation Plan, Development strategy no. 16) is an excellent opportunity to sustainably change the way we design our living environments and achieve the city we want.

In hopes of inspiring a green neighbourhood model for Montréal, the Montréal Urban Ecology Centre (MUEC) launched the project *Green, Active, and Healthy Neighbourhoods* (GAHN)<sup>1</sup> in December 2008 to explore innovative approaches for designing public spaces, such as streets and sidewalks. The project aims to develop four participatory planning pilot projects and create a GAHN Plan for each

---

<sup>1</sup> The Green, Active, and Healthy Neighbourhoods project is carried out in partnership with the *Coalition québécoise sur la problématique du poids* and made possible by the financial support of the *Fonds-Saines habitudes de vie* and Canada's Public Health Agency.

one. Each pilot project will be developed over the course of one year with the close collaboration of citizens, local organizations, and municipal representatives.

For the GAHN project, the MUEC formed a scientific committee of 15 specialists from different areas, such as universities, the City of Montréal, public health, transit agencies, and private firms. The committee advises the MUEC on the orientation of the project, contributes to the participatory process and the urban planning content, and approves the use of certain methods and tools. Sylvie Tremblay, development project manager of the City of Montréal's Green Neighbourhoods team and a member of the GAHN scientific committee, says the MUEC has a freedom of action in the field that has already allowed them, after just one year, to test out the green neighbourhoods concept in two Montréal neighbourhoods.

### A holistic vision of a green, active, and healthy neighbourhood

To orient neighbourhood development towards sustainable urban solutions, the MUEC created a holistic vision for the GAHN projects that is divided into six elements emphasizing public space. It reflects the MUEC's mission and values, such as the promotion of sustainable urban development and participatory democracy. The GAHN vision also covers topics related to physical growth as well as the necessary conditions for the planning and implementation of the projects.

### Interventions that prioritize public space and transportation

Creating neighbourhoods that favour walking and biking requires looking at land use and transportation on a citywide level in order to develop more sustainable modes of transportation on a larger scale. At the neighbourhood level, the elements of the built environment that influence active transportation such as density, mixed use, and urban design (Cervero and Kockelman, 1997) also have to be considered. It means that public and private spaces must be designed so that people can move easily from one to the other.

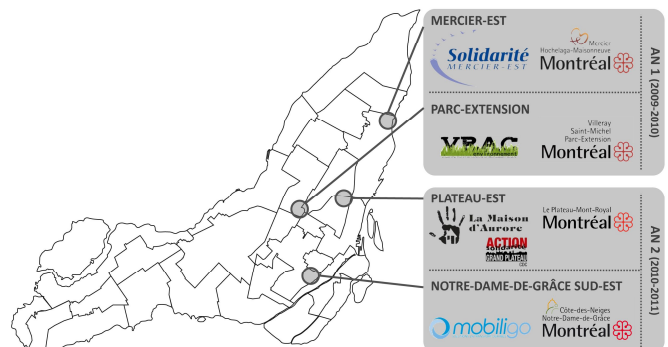


The MUEC's GAHN vision

Since the GAHN initiative aims to transform already-existing neighbourhoods into pedestrian-friendly places, it prioritizes design solutions for public space (although recommendations for private space are also included). The project's areas of intervention are thus related to the first two elements of the GAHN vision: public spaces designed for all users and active and public transit enabled by adequate infrastructure.

### A participatory approach combining citizen and professional knowledge

The MUEC believes that a closer collaboration between citizens, community organizations, urban planning professionals, and municipal governments is the best way to accelerate the



The GAHN partners

transition to sustainable urban environments. The inclusion of citizens in the decision-making process – not only through consultation but also through active participation – helps to establish a common vision, develop analyses and proposals, and facilitate the social acceptance of the GAHN project. These exchanges also allow citizens to learn about municipal policies and urban planning, and actively participate in urban decisions that affect them.

### The first stages of planning for Green, Active, and Healthy Neighbourhoods

Since the GAHN project's launch, the MUEC has undertaken four pilot projects – the first of their kind in Montréal, if not Quebec.

The GAHN projects aim to support Montréal community initiatives by empowering them with a common tool (a GAHN Plan) to help them shape their neighbourhood's future. In January and December 2009, the MUEC announced two calls for proposals to community organizations involved in the development of Montréal's neighbourhoods. Four organizations were selected as primary partners based on their mobilization efforts and the development and transportation issues in their neighbourhoods. These organizations are interested in the GAHN project because it can help them translate their vision into concrete planning and design solutions.

A selection committee comprising members from the scientific committee reviewed the applications. The selection criteria focused on the experience of the partner organizations and the local neighbourhood committee, the neighbourhood and its needs, the organization's openness to innovative approaches, available resources, especially those provided by the local government, and the organization's abilities to ensure the project's implementation.

The MUEC also established a collaborative relationship with the local governments, or boroughs, who are real partners in the GAHN process. This would be essential to the project's success because borough representatives are the primary players in the implementation of the project's design proposals. Elected officials, therefore, need to play a strong leadership role and planners need to participate in validating the neighbourhood portrait and creating realistic and well-adapted design solutions that consider future development projects in the neighbourhood.

Once the partners were chosen, the local neighbourhood committee, made up of representatives from local organizations and community institutions, as well as citizens, had its first meeting to define the priority issues for the three major phases of the project.



## **PHASE 1: UNDERSTANDING THE NEIGHBOURHOOD AND LIMITS TO ACTIVE TRANSPORTATION**

Phase one examines active transportation in the neighbourhood in order to target problems or possibilities related to mobility. Different data collection methods are used to create a neighbourhood portrait. The local committee produces certain sections of the neighbourhood portrait including a neighbourhood history, a report on the participatory culture of citizens and community actors, and a neighbourhood profile, all of which help particularly to enrich the GAHN process.

The first step is to develop a summary of technical analyses and planning and consultation documents in order to establish a neighbourhood knowledge base and discover areas where analysis and intervention are most needed.

The next step is to consult with citizens using a variety of methods and activities, for example, an online survey to quickly reach a large proportion of the general population. During the pilot project in the Plateau-Est, 300 people responded to such a survey. This allowed the MUEC and its partners to identify the neighbourhood's key destinations and citizens' preferred modes of transportation as well as the neighbourhood's qualities that create a sense of place for residents, workers, and visitors.

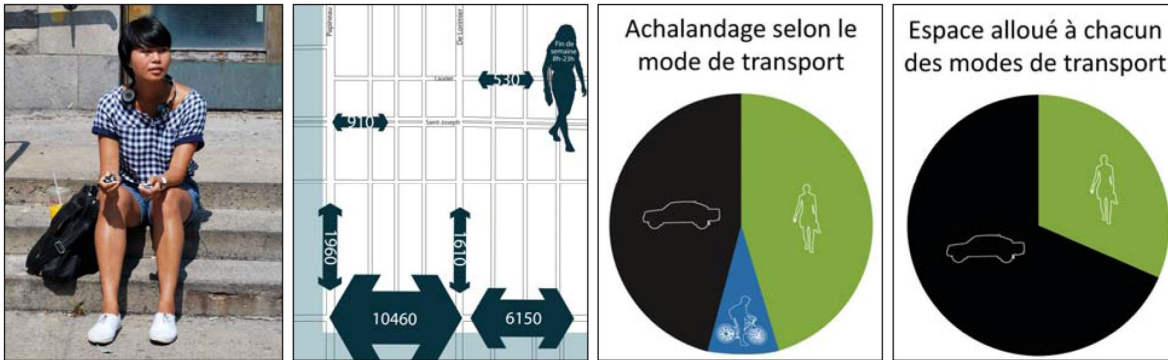
Organizing exploratory neighbourhood walks is another way to engage with citizens. The walks provide citizens with an opportunity to look critically at their neighbourhood and identify active transportation and safety deficiencies. Another advantage of neighbourhood walks is they can be carried out with different groups of people, such as children. In Parc-Extension, 47 school children had the opportunity to take a walk through their neighbourhood. "Children have an organic connection to their neighbourhood; it's their playground. Going

out with them and seeing through their eyes how they experience the neighbourhood provided us with incredibly relevant observations and analyses," says the program director at *Vrac Environnement*.



**Exploratory neighbourhood walk with children from Barthélemy-Vimont elementary school**

The third step involves conducting field observations to develop a better understanding of the neighbourhoods. These observations study how people use public space, the walkability of commercial streets, average walking speed, traffic, and urban safety. The *Public Space, Public Life* usage studies, developed by Gehl Architects in Copenhagen, enabled the GAHN team to quantify how pedestrians and cyclists use public space – valuable information that is generally left out of official statistics. Studies of walkability and the urban environment evaluate how the elements of the built environment influence how pedestrians use public space. Attention to actual walking time shows how far pedestrians can walk in a given interval, which can lead to more realistic pedestrian crossing times at traffic lights.



Counting pedestrians and cyclists on Mont-Royal Avenue on the weekend

**Cool Ideas** – The Montréal Urban Ecology Centre created an online database of “Cool Ideas” – exciting urban experiments from all over the world – to provide ideas and inspire new, innovative projects for the Green, Active, and Healthy Neighbourhoods project. The examples are accompanied by photos and Google Streetview maps and can be explored by region or by one of the six components of the GAHN projects: active and public transportation, greening, creative neighbourhoods, citizen participation, and long-term vision.

[www.urbanecology.net/cool\\_ideas](http://www.urbanecology.net/cool_ideas)



Workshop in Parc-Extension

Workshops are another great way for citizens and specialists to exchange information, document problems in the neighbourhood, and identify priority sites for intervention.

## PHASE 2: EXPLORING URBAN DESIGN SOLUTIONS FOR THE NEIGHBOURHOOD

Phase two establishes a common vision, defines intervention priorities, and creates design solutions that respect the local identity and practices of the neighbourhood. At the first citizen’s forum in Notre-Dame-de-Grâce, citizens, representatives from organizations, and elected officials came together to take on the ambitious tasks of developing a neighbourhood vision, establishing desired changes, and creating development goals. These goals served as reference points during workshops where professionals from different fields worked together and shared proposals that were well-adapted to the neighbourhood context in order to find solutions to recurring transportation problems. A second citizen’s forum measured citizen support for the solutions from the workshop before developing them further in the project’s final phase.



**Exercise to establish desired changes in Mercier-Est**



**Professional workshop to find solutions for reoccurring mobility problems**



**Approval and validation of design solutions at the final major citizen's meeting in Mercier-Est**

### **PHASE 3: BUILDING THE NEIGHBOURHOOD'S FUTURE TOGETHER**

In the third phase, design scenarios are submitted to different partners who approve them and make any necessary changes before integrating them into the GAHN Plan. The Plan itself has three chapters. The first describes the general initiative, the second presents the neighbourhood portrait, and the third presents proposed courses of action. Although the Plan mainly addresses the local government, it also addresses the City of Montréal, transit agencies and companies, and upper levels of government, as well as community institutions, merchants, and individuals.



Design solutions for the GAHN Plan in Parc-Extension and Mercier-Est



Réal Ménard, mayor of Mercier-Hochelaga-Maisonneuve, at the GAHN Plan's launch party in Mercier-Est

### Moving from planning to action

The participation of the elected officials and development professionals from the borough during the project's three phases helps considerably to move from the planning stage to real action. This was the case in Mercier-Est where, at the launch of the GAHN Plan, Réal Ménard, the mayor of the Mercier-Hochelaga-Maisonneuve borough, announced the creation of a follow-up committee of which he would be the chair. The committee is made up of representatives from the borough, the City, the Société de transport de Montréal, the Agence métropolitaine de transport, Canadian National Railways, Solidarité Mercier-Est, and the Montréal Urban Ecology Centre. The challenge is now defining how they are going to ensure the implementation of the document's 131 courses of action.

These are, of course, only the first pilot projects. Many questions still need to be explored further: how can we counteract gentrification and maintain neighbourhood identity? Can a green neighbourhood and a mixed society coexist? How can we ensure the implementation of various GAHN Plans? Who should lead the implementation? Who should work with local leaders? What tools need to be developed? How can we support long-term citizen mobilization?

The next GAHN projects will be wherever and whenever other communities take on the challenge of building their neighbourhood's future together. Although the GAHN model was developed and experimented with in Montréal, it could readily be adapted to other municipalities in Quebec. Réal Menard says, "I am convinced that this project can work elsewhere but it needs to be a model that values public space (...) and civil societies, elected officials, community groups, and public service

professionals need to agree to work together on this collective project. It's challenging, different, and hard, but I think it can work."

Marie-Hélène Armand is an urban planning officer at the MUEC.

Annie Rochette is a project manager of sustainable development at the MUEC.

Online: [www.urbanecology.net](http://www.urbanecology.net)