The Struggle to Belong

Dealing with diversity in 21st century urban settings

Amsterdam, 7-9- July 2011

Annick Germain

Institut national de la recherche scientifique - Centre Urbanisation Culture Société (INRS-UCS)

385 Sherbrooke Est

Montréal (Québec) H2X 1E3

Canada

annick.germain@ucs.inrs.ca

From social mix to ethnic mix? Montréal experience at the crossroads

1. Social ties: vehicles of support for low-income populations in social mix projects?

The critical literature on projects that fall under the heading of social mix tends to denounce the neoliberal turn that characterizes them, whereby the redistribution policies of the Welfare State have been replaced by policies in which the middle classes have a major role in poverty-dilution. This turn is accompanied by a discourse focused on the virtues of social ties in social mix projects (which were formerly described by Sarkissian, 1976), where mix is framed as being vital for social cohesion as well as ensuring access to social capital, role models, and resources for low-income populations in the hopes of enabling them to break free from the logic of the ghetto.

The general idea is that by living alongside the middle classes, low-income households will be able to benefit from their networks, break from isolation, and increase their aspirations in the image of the middle classes, as well as share a safer environment with better services. However, this can be achieved provided that these groups do not lead parallel lives and mingle together in order to mobilize these resources and capital.

Research has sought to empirically test this condition and has usually found that just the opposite occurs (Chaskin and Joseph, 2011). Not only do social mix projects end up providing new resources to the middle classes, but these groups hardly ever worry about the fate of their low-income neighbours.

These are quite minor conclusions, particularly given that solid sociological work has long shown the inversely proportional relationship that exists between social distance and spatial proximity (Chamboredon et Lemaire, 1970).

Thus, it is necessary to change the research agenda and look at the spatial proximity of social difference as a hardship, rather than as the easy way to poverty reduction.

The Montreal experience is interesting in this respect because social mix practices were never based on this type of optimistic bet on the virtues of social ties. From the outset, social mix itself was never the end goal nor was there a deliberate will to mix social categories in the name of principles of equity or social progress. At best, it was a way to offer various modes of tenure (renting, owning, private or public housing). Nevertheless,

this did not hinder the success of the Angus Shops project that will be discussed later in this paper.

Today, social mix is more the result of a real estate compromise imposed by shrinking State resources (or its withdrawal). And project's successes are viewed as a negotiation which requires a specific reflexive knowledge built upon experience and shared among different actors. While the role of public space comes up often in conversations, ethnic mix seems to be a blind spot. Yet Montréal has become a multiethnic city and has acquired a complex "super-diversity", which raises questions about usual modes of belonging.

Thus, this paper constitutes an effort to reintroduce questions of super-diversity in the conversation on social mix.

The presentation will discuss three social mix experiments in Montréal that illustrate the evolution of "narratives", particularly regarding the role of public space. Public space is a central aspect of social mix experiments which fosters the creation of a sense of belonging.

2.   The Angus Shops: a successful mix

Montréal's history of social mix housing projects is quite modest because from the outset it tells the story of limited State resources to intervene in housing and, as a result, its "dependence" on other actors both in the private sector and at the community level. However, it is also for this reason that this history is modern and informative for our current debates.

The first large-scale project was the Angus Shop, which was planned at the end of the 1970s on a large brownfield site and conceived as a new multi-use neighbourhood for the middle classes. It was only after intense struggles and negotiations between the developer, political actors and civil society (mainly local community organizations) that this new neighbourhood came to include 40% of social housing (300 units of public housing, 552 coop units, and 200 units managed by non-profit organizations) and lose its commercial component. The negotiations were mainly focused on the diversity of tenure (owners, private and public renters) and not on social mix as was the case in Vancouver a few years prior. A post-occupational study will show that this somewhat successful cohabitation was based on limited social mix (no vast social, generational or ethnic contrasts) and a set of public and

semi-public spaces that act as buffer zones between groups because they are appropriated and planned by each one according to their needs and lifestyle (Dansereau, Germain and Éveillard, 1997). The lessons of this first experiment pointed to the importance of negotiations that occur early-on between different actors (and in particular the crucial role played by community-based organizations throughout the project) and the conditions of a good balance between distance and proximity.

The projects that followed were required to adapt to the withdrawal of different levels of government, which left the City of Montréal with little choice but to rely on what we have called makeshift alliances with multiple actors and obliged community-based organizations to become professionalized, reorganized, and, in some cases, actual community developers (Germain, Rose and Twigge-Molecey, 2009).

3. Neoliberal times: the Lavo project and the Place Valois in Hochelaga

The Lavo project was a pilot project for the development of a new policy created by the City of Montréal in 2004 prudently entitled "Strategy to include affordable housing in new residential projects", a strategy which mainly consists of convincing private developers who wish to build more than 200 units to include a proportion of social housing (15%) and private affordable housing (15%). This project, carried out between 2000 and 2006, can be understood in the broader context of contemporary neighbourhood revitalization where gentrification is used to fight neighbourhood effects which perpetuate poverty.The neighbourhood in question here, Hochelaga, was one of the last working class neighbourhoods still in decline (also in terms of demographics since it lost 42% of its residents between 1961 and 1986) meanwhile everywhere else in Montréal social and urban transformations had begun. However, this a tight-knit area with strong community organizations that are important both in terms of providing services and being very vocal in advocating for residents' needs. Therefore, the low-income households are not really as "isolated" as is usually described in the literature on deprived neighbourhoods. Given that these organizations are well connected politically and have considerable expertise in urban planning, they have played a key role from the beginning to the end. Some of them have also developed a rather uncommon narrative among civil society stakeholders by asking for a certain dose of gentrification (in particular owners who want to restore decrepit housing)

in order to re-establish a level of social heterogeneity that was lost following the flight of the middle classes to the suburbs (Germain and Rose, 2010).

Overall, aside from some exceptions, the different types of stakeholders we interviewed[1] believe that they can control gentrification and rarely evoke the virtues of social mix on the quality of social ties: they seesocial mix more as a challenge to overcome. In addition, little mention is made of the advantages of social mix to compensate for the weakness of the social capital of low-income populations (they count on the services offered by community-based organizations that have a strong presence in the area, including in social housing complexes).

But in this neighbourhood that is still primarily ethnically homogeneous (14% are immigrants whereas immigrants represent 30% of Montréal's total population), the ethnic mix that could accompany social mix is hardly ever mentioned, even though data suggests that high numbers of immigrant households figure on the waiting list for social housing for large families (large affordable housing units were very rare at the beginning of the 2000s in Montréal). Next to this small residential project (200 units with 71 coops, 93 condos of which ¾ are deemed affordable, and 40 non-profit units), municipal authorities and business associations invested in the revitalization of commercial streets. One public square, Place Valois, was planned on one of these streets at the beginning of this experiment. This place is particularly interesting in many respects. It the first of its kind to be included in the morphology of this working-class neighbourhood that contains no public squares. It has a sophisticated design that contains elements of the old railway that used to pass through the neighbourhood and transport products from the Lavo bleach factory, which was relocated in the suburbs to make room for the residential project on a piece of land in the heart of the neighbourhood. In addition, Place Valois was conceived to be lined with new stores geared towards attracting a middle class clientele (new housing has been built since), including a café that gave a new name to this neighbourhood – HoMa (for Hochelaga-Maisonneuve) which is meant to evoke the legendary SoHo area in New York. This square was not welcome in the neighbourhood because it didn't seem to fit into the area's urban fabric and signalled the potential invasion of gentrifiers.

---

[1]This research was part of a larger international project carried out by D. Rose, M-H. Bacqué, G. Bridge, Y. Fijalkow, A. Germain and T. Slater: "Social Mix and Neighbourhood Revitalization", funded by the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada from 2006-2008.

During the past decade, the Hochelaga-Maisonneuve neighbourhood has increasingly become home to a new population of young artists who were forced out of the central areas due to an explosion in rents all over Montréal, but particularly in downtown and adjacent areas. During the past few years, some incidents have occurred that speak to a sense of uneasiness about the recent transformations that have taken place in the neighbourhood, and most of all the branding of a new image of the neighbourhood. Some community groups fear that they will lose some of their low-income clientele and that they will no longer be able to capitalize on the area's reputation as disadvantaged, particularly with political actors. Further, the presence of populations with diverse ethno-cultural origins has become tangible.

4. A multi-ethnic village?

In another sector of the metropolitan area, another chapter in the history of social mix in Montreal is being played out. We are referring here to the construction of a large housing project in an enclave surrounded by highways where, up until last year, Place Henri Bourassa and Place l'Acadie were located. These poor quality buildings (21 buildings with 560 units) which had unsanitary and slum-like conditions were inhabited primarily by newcomer immigrant families. After many years of struggles by residents and community organizations advocating for better living conditions as well as numerous municipal fines given to the owner, the buildings were demolished as the site had been purchased by a developer when the former owner passed away. The project was planned as a high-density community, including 600 housing units for the elderly, 470 affordable condo units, 223 social and community housing units, as well as a daycare, a community centre, and amenities. A small public place located in the middle of this large housing project called la *Cité de l'Acadie* is to be planned after consultations with former residents (165 households have been temporarily relocated and the others will receive assistance and will have priority status if they wish to return). Some of the opinions expressed by the residents regarding the configuration of this small park (the 3 buildings for the elderly will also have their own public space) and for the general design of the project seem to evoke the image of urban village, although it is located at the heart of a very high-density development. The park is meant to encourage mingling and act as a place where families can gather. The residents also stress the importance of the closure of the site and have agreed to having only one access route ,

which fits in with the idea of the village. An organization called *Prenez Place*, has also been created in order to coordinate the community activities and foster a sense of belonging.

The proposals submitted differ greatly from the decorative green spaces that are often put forward by middle class residents in other projects (such as the Angus Shops), but the new inhabitants of the condos have not yet arrived. The opinions expressed during the consultation process were then mostly the ones of the households already living there.

This site, which is still in construction, will include a mix of tenure (and socio-economic status), but also a high generational and ethno-cultural mix. In fact, the site is located in an area that has become increasingly multi-ethnic over the past few years. It is very likely that the central public park will be used by the residents and that tensions may eventually arise regarding the different uses that will prevail. Nonetheless, we can envision the park as a site for the coexistence of different groups, particularly given its central location in a high-density residential area as well as the popularity for different forms of public sociability observed in Montréal in recent years.

5. Elements of discussion

It will be very interesting to observe the evolution of the Lavo project and its surrounding areas and the evolution of the *Cité de l'Acadie*: which regimes of social interaction (Charmes, 2006) will be formed there? While in Montréal there is an analytical tradition of social mix experiments that most stakeholders agree upon, which is evidence of a sort of precious reflexive attitude, it remains to be seen whether it will take into consideration the new reality of Montréal's multi-ethnicity. In France issues of ethnicity were considered taboo for a long time in some political circles and even among academics, in relation to urban policy. However this is not the case in Montréal (where 9 out of 10 immigrants in Québec are concentrated), which was shown in a study on the collection of ethnic data in about 15 organizations and institutions in sectors such as transportation, housing, police, employment, and health (Germain and Gravel, 2008).

The social climate seems to be changing, since the crisis about the reasonable accommodation of cultural differences which was the main topic of conversation in the media during 2007. There has been a change in attitudes towards the occupation of public

space, which aim to overlook the identities and belongings embodied in certain spaces in order to create a so-called neutral space (Germain and Liégeois, 2010).

Indeed, taking into consideration the relationship to the Other and ethno-cultural variables is more complex today given the new realities of multiethnic Montréal.

Montréal is far from being as multiethnic as Toronto where half of the population is born outside of Canada, or Vancouver which is also home to many immigrants. Yet in its own way, Montréal presents a significant "super-diversity", to borrow from Steven Vertovec (Vertovec, 2010). The portrait of immigration in Montréal is very complex, in terms of ethnic origins (Montréal breaks all the records of ethnic diversity), socio-economic status of immigrants (middle classes, modest or poor residents, highly educated individuals and those who are not, etc.), and residential areas, which vary greatly.

Thus, it is not easy to take into account these variables when analyzing dynamics of social negotiation in a social mix project without falling into the particularities of over-ethnicization or the denial of ethnicity. The intersectionality of social and cultural categories poses major problems.

Yet this is, after all, the main challenge that urban sociologists face, particularly in the analysis of relationships to public space in social mix projects. By looking at this relationship, it is possible to read more into how diversity in its multiple dimensions is put to the test and how belonging is built by inhabitants as a hardship (Martuccelli, 2002).