

# The Champ des Possibles: A Communitarian & Biodiverse Urban Prairie

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Located in the Mile End neighbourhood along the Canadian Pacific Railroad tracks and delimited by the Carmelites Monastery on the east and old garment factories on the west, the Champ des Possibles is a unique local green space. What is now a protected urban prairie, the Champ des Possibles has had an interesting history that has recently led to its protected status and a unique co-management governance structure between a community-led non-profit organization, Les Amis du Champ des Possible, and the Plateau-Mont-Royal borough. Different from other parks nearby, the name of this space, the "Field of Possibilities" in English, suits it well with the wide array of uses and appropriations that take place. For those who frequent and take care of the Champ des Possibles, it has become an important place to demonstrate how a community can be involved in the official management of a park-like space. It is known for its characteristics of being "wild" and "natural", but this has not always been the case. The Champ des Possibles has transformed throughout the last 150 years from a quarry to a landfill, to a rail yard, to gradually becoming the space it is today (Desjardins, 2019). Simultaneously, the surrounding area of the Mile End has undergone many changes and has experienced heavy gentrification. In its trajectory to becoming the popular area it is today, it has transformed from a stop on the rail line, to Montreal's garment district, to a hub for tech companies (Desjardins, 2019; McSwiney & Michaud, 2014). Both the physical and social changes throughout the decades have shaped the current reality of the neighbourhood and its spaces such as the Champ des Possibles. The story of the Champ des Possibles and its current co-management governance structure, which emphasizes community-led decision-making, exemplifies how spontaneity and looseness can be positive in the context of urban planning for both policy and design.



Image 1.Champ des Possibles

During the 1850's the land where the Champ des Possibles is currently located had several quarries. At this time the area was still rural, and by the end of the 19th century the quarries had become abandoned (Desjardins, 2019). Some were simply left unfended and became dangerous, while others were turned into dumping grounds, such as the Champ des Possibles (Desjardins, 2019). Eventually, in the early 1900's, the dump was filled and in 1906 the Canadian Pacific Railway purchased the land and used it as a rail yard to store its cars. Between 1950 and 1975, large textile factories were built in the area and some of these megastuctures that housed these factories are still around today (McSwiney & Michaud, 2014). With the presence of the textile industry and the rail yard, workers and services came into the area and the Mile End quickly transformed into an urban hub (McSwiney & Michaud, 2014). The rail yard closed in the mid-1980's and the field was left to grow freely and with this spontaneous rewilding process gained great biodiversity (McSwiney & Michaud, 2014). This was due to its location where seeds were being brought in by the nearby trains and people sowing seeds and planting vegetation themselves (McSwiney & Michaud, 2014). Since the space was left essentially untouched until recently, there are still physical signs of the space's history: the buildings along de Gaspé Ave. are curved to accommodate past train lines, there are crumbling loading docks, and buried train tracks (McSwiney & Michaud, 2014).

The Canadian Pacific Railway (CPR) officially owned the land until 2005 when the Plateau-Mont-Royal borough took ownership (Poteete et al., 2021). At first, the city was going to use the lot as a service yard, but soon many proposals were made for the area (Beaudin, 2013). With the borough's acquisition of the lot in the early 2000's, there was increased interest in the development potential of the area. Many studies were carried out to determine how to develop the Saint-Viateur East Sector, which is delimited by Saint Denis Street, Saint Laurent Street, Maguire Street, and the railway. Initially the priority of the development plan was to increase vehicular accessibility and connectivity to the area (Desjardins, 2021). It was proposed to connect Saint-Viateur Avenue to Henri-Julien Street by building a road connecting the two, where there is now a pedestrian and cycling way. Carmel Avenue was also to be extended to Alma Street to create a new connection behind the buildings along de Gaspé Avenue (Desjardins, 2021). In addition to these new roads, the proposal included the expropriation and demolition of buildings like 5555 de Gaspé Avenue, which housed many artists' studios and was a defining feature of the neighbourhood at the time (Desjardins, 2021). Residential buildings were also to be built in the area and on the site of the Champ des Possibles. Many factors led to these proposals never being realized.

In 2005, following citizen mobilization, the nearby Carmelite monastery was deemed a historical monument by the Ministry of Culture (Desjardin, 2021). This resulted in the area, including the adjacent Champ des Possibles, becoming protected and several building constraints being implemented. There are height restrictions for any new buildings in the area and tranquility is an explicit objective (Desjardins, 2021). Two major documented actions specifically challenged the development of the field: the Roerich Garden Project, and the Sprout Out Loud (McSwiney & Michaud, 2014). The Roerich Garden Project was created in 2007 to "provoke dialogue about the many ways the community used and interacted with the field" (McSwiney & Michaud, 2014, pp. 272). This project was initiated in the Champ des Possibles, at the time known as the Maguire

Meadow or le champ, by Emily Rose Michaud (Michaud, n.d.). The garden was a 312-square foot Roerich symbol made up of living materials and was maintained for three years by Sprout Out Loud, a community group. The Roerich symbol was created and used to protect historical, cultural, and scientific monuments during World War II from aerial bombings (McSwiney & Michaud, 2014). Building a living garden in the shape of this symbol was a way to challenge and reflect on the uses and potential development of the Champ des Possibles (Michaud, n.d.). The project led to citizens gathering and better defining what they wanted for the space and critically reflecting on the city's development plans (Michaud, n.d.).

Image 2.The Roerich Garden Project, photo taken from <http://emilyrose michaud.com/portfolio-item/roerich-garden-project>



In 2008, the city announced it would begin to develop the Saint-Viateur East sector, and another initiative subsequently followed to formally protect the space. Another community group, the Mile End Citizen's Committee, had a citizen's forum that addressed the city's upcoming plans for the \$9 million development of the Mile End neighbourhood (McSwiney & Michaud, 2014). Following this forum, community resistance for the city's redevelopment of the Champ des Possibles was reinforced. At the same time there was a change in government at the municipal level. In 2009, Projet Montréal swept the borough council winning all seats which would contribute to the municipal administration's decisions regarding the Champ des Possibles and broader Saint-Viateur East Sector (Desjardins, 2021). The actions taken in the Champ des Possibles in combination with the reaction from the broader neighbourhood community and change in political leadership were a catalyst for proposing alternative plans (McSwiney & Michaud, 2014). The Mile End Citizens' Committee mobilized a subcommittee to develop and propose options that would better represent and serve the locals (McSwiney & Michaud, 2014). Eventually, Les Amis du Champ des Possibles was created out of this effort with the objective to collaborate with the borough and municipality to advocate for the local community's concerns (McSwiney & Michaud, 2014).

Les Amis du Champ des Possibles (ACDP) was officially formed in 2010 as a non-profit organization with three main aims:

"to make the Champ des Possibles a permanent public green space and urban biodiversity reserve; promote and encourage public education on natural science, history, and art; promote the creation of new urban green spaces and biodiversity corridors." (Poteete et al., 2021)

Since 2013, ACDP has had a formal co-management agreement with the Plateau-Mont-Royal borough. In May of the same year the site became formally recognized as a natural green space. The co-management agreement came into place simultaneously with the borough's new redevelopment plan for Saint-Viateur East. The objectives of this plan were to: establish conditions that are more favourable to artists and to the creative and tech industries; review the use of the first floors to promote animation of the area; formalize the creation of a park; and to protect the heritage integrity of the Carmelite Monastery (Plateau-Mont-Royal, 2013). This led to the existing pedestrian and cycling way that connects de Gaspé Avenue and Henri-Julien Street in the Champ des Possibles.



Image 3.The Pedestrian and cycling pathway between de Gaspé Avenue and Henri-Julien Street

The first co-management agreement between ACDP and the Plateau-Mont-Royal borough was for four years, a revised version was put into place in 2017 and expired in 2019 and has since been renewed. During 2020 a research partnership project entitled *Supporting the Possibilities of Urban Commoning in Montréal's Champ des Possibles* began between ACDP, Prof. Amy Poteete from Concordia University and Prof. Nik Luka from McGill University. The aim of this project has been to co-produce knowledge about the uses, interests in, and future aspirations for the Champ des Possibles. The project is still currently underway and has a multidisciplinary team employing various research methods such as direct observations, participatory observations, focus groups, interviews, and questionnaires. Although the co-management structure has so far resulted in a non-interventionist approach to the development of the Champ des Possibles, there is a plan in place to decontaminate the site which is set to start between 2022-2023. In combination with the rapid gentrification of the surrounding neighbourhoods, and attractiveness of the site to those with financial interests, the partners of the *Supporting the Possibilities of Urban Commoning in Montréal's Champ des Possibles* project are concerned with developing ways to help ensure commoning practices can continue and community voices remain an important part of the development process.

Community involvement is part of what makes the Champ des Possibles a unique local green space. Not only is this apparent in how the Champ des Possibles came to be an official protected green space, or its ongoing co-management governance structure, but also in how it is being used and users' aspirations. In 2021 the *Supporting the Possibilities of Urban Commoning in Montréal's Champ des Possibles* project published its first report which outlines interesting findings related to the activities that take place in the Champ des Possibles and peoples' wishes for the future of the space and its management. One of the interests of the researchers was to examine care and stewardship of the Champ des Possibles. Poteete et al. (2021) found that the most common and frequent activity was the disposal of garbage, while other activities included the removal of physical barriers to the site and maintenance of paths and other features of the site.

The removal of physical barriers to the site is an ongoing issue in the Champ des Possibles, particularly the cutting of holes in the fence alongside the railway as shown in the photo below. Since 2011, the Plateau-Mont-Royal borough has been in negotiations with Canadian Pacific Rail and Transport Canada regarding the construction of a level crossing that would allow pedestrians and cyclists to safely travel over the train tracks (Norris, 2019). The informal pathways that are continuously upheld by citizens are a clear indication of the need to safely connect the Champ des Possibles, and the Mile End, to Rosemont (Norris, 2019). As of 2019, Montreal's case for a level-crossing was still under examination by a Transport Canada tribunal (Norris, 2019). In 2022, the debate arose again after a fatal accident happened at the Van Horne Street and Saint-Laurent Street informal crossing (Samson, 2022). Following the accident, railway police reportedly began giving \$650 fines to individuals crossing the tracks and residents of the area expressed their frustration with the ongoing situation (Samson, 2022). The sentiment felt by many residents is that the alternative pathways are inconvenient, adding approximately 20-30 minutes of travel time, and are unpleasant for pedestrians (Samson, 2022). Some individuals in Poteete et al.'s (2021) study perceive upholding these informal crossings as one way to care or participate in the stewardship of the Champ des Possibles.





Image 4 Informal Crossing Through CP Rail Fence

Within the theme of care and stewardship, respondents were also asked about their desired management strategy related to the vegetation of the Champ des Possibles. Poteete et al.'s (2021) findings indicate that the least desired strategy is a conventional one with lawns and decorative greenery, where respondents understood the current stewardship of the Champ des Possibles as allowing it to grow freely and as a rejection of the typical landscaping of urban parks. It is precisely this type of "wildness", both in terms of greenery and its communitarian orientation, that is important and exemplary for many of its visitors (Poteete et al., 2021).

For many of the respondents of Poteete et al.'s (2021) research, access to green space such as the Champ des Possibles where individuals can closely interact with various types of vegetation, small animals and insects is undervalued in an urban context. Biodiversity and the "natural" features of the Champ des Possibles are emphasized, where for many the space provides a reprieve and positive contrast to its surrounding large buildings (Poteete et al., 2021). The "wildness" of the Champ des Possibles is where one of its paradoxes lie; for some it represents what they love most about the space whereas for others it represents unstructured management. A non-interventionist approach that allows for the Champ des Possibles' biodiversity and "natural" green space also leaves room for behaviours that damages the space such as "littering and illegal dumping, lighting campfires, making noise, and destroying some plants" (Poteete et al., 2021, p. 13). For now, the Champ des Possibles accommodates this paradox and allows for both realities to co-exist. Of course, the concerns are if and for how long the Champ des Possibles will be able to continue as this type of liminal green space, delicately balancing this paradox.



Image 5 A Fire Pit and Art Installation in the Champ des Possibles

Its historical trajectory illustrates how community involvement is an important part of the Champ des Possibles' identity and current co-management governance structure. With the forthcoming decontamination plan of the site, there will be inevitable physical changes. Poteete et al.'s (2021) research points to the importance of this space and its biodiversity to its community and the broader surrounding areas. The management and development of the Champ des Possibles that has taken place over the last decade showcases the complexity as well as the advantages of a non-interventionist approach both for policy and design. Having a co-management agreement between ACDP and the Plateau-Mont-Royal borough has ensured that community voices are part of the management and development processes. Because of this, the Champ des Possibles has not become like other urban parks and has mostly remained "wild" and "natural". The lack of manicured design is precisely what many enjoy about this green space and wish for it to continue (Poteete et al., 2021). This looseness allows for spontaneity and appropriation which can have both positive and negative outcomes, manifesting in many ways such as care through garbage removal or making bonfires which can be harmful (Poteete et al., 2021). The cooperation between grassroots organizations and eventually the borough has resulted in a space that is less structured both physically and socially. This has led to vegetation growing more liberally and for a multitude of behaviours and activities to take place in the Champ des Possibles. Green spaces such as this are rare, and the Champ des Possibles can serve as an example for the benefits of merging bottom-up and top-down approaches to urban planning.

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