

# The Green Alley Program in Le Plateau-Mont-Royal: tensions between beautification and privatisation of public space

Emma Ezvan

07.2022

The first green alley in Montreal was created in 1995 in Le Plateau-Mont-Royal, at the intersection of Napoléon, Roy, du Parc-Lafontaine and Montana streets. The Green Alley Program (*Programme des ruelles vertes*) enables residents to transform public back alleys into green and community spaces, with financial and technical support from the boroughs and the Eco-Qualités Program. The main objective is to revitalise spaces that are generally underused or mainly used by cars, and to create urban spaces that are beneficial both socially and environmentally.

## A borough rich in (green) alleys

At the time of writing, there are around 500 green alleys in Montreal, in 12 of the 19 boroughs. Le Plateau-Mont-Royal, which is scheduled to have 110 green alleys by the end of 2022, has the second highest number of green alleys in the City; Rosemont-La-Petite-Patrie, with 136, has the most. The Green Alley Program is particularly popular and successful in Le Plateau. While some boroughs, such as Montreal North and Ville-Marie struggle to have residents participate in the program, Le Plateau is one of the boroughs that receives more applications than the number of green alleys they can actually create. Since there are many back alleys in Le Plateau, there is huge potential for the creation of green alleys.

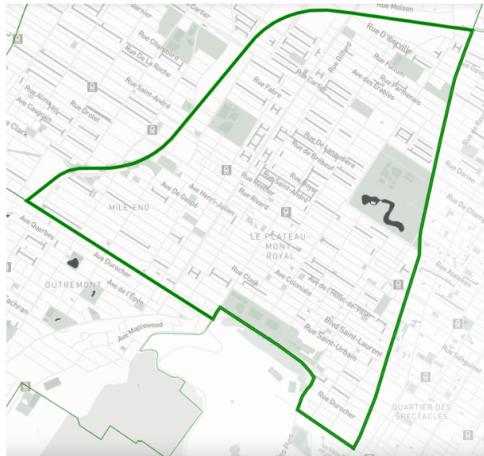


Figure 1. Green alleys in Le Plateau-Mont-Royal.



Figure 2. Back alleys and green alleys in Le Plateau-Mont-Royal.

The emergence of back alleys dates back to the 1840s; they are mostly present in boroughs located in the central and southern parts of the city that were built before World War II (Pham et al., 2022). Other boroughs, such as Montreal North, Ahuntsic-Cartierville and Côte-des-Neiges-Notre-Dame-de-Grâce have fewer, therefore presenting less potential for the development of green alleys. Moreover, the borough is very environmentally proactive. It has the highest budget for the implementation of the Green Alley Program, spending around \$50,000 per alley. They can therefore prioritise excavations that are more expensive and that will have major environmental benefits.

"In the Plateau we prioritize the environmental dimension. (...) There are boroughs that have less of a budget that will focus more on social things, but our vision in the borough is that the citizens can do it by themselves. The borough does not have to be involved in the social aspect of the alley... organizing a neighbours' party... there is no cost to that, or the costs are minimal. So we're not going to finance the neighbours' parties every year. So the neighbours are able to organize potlucks or things like that. But they can't remove concrete. Our priority is to do what they can't do and what is expensive." -Green Alley Program manager in Le Plateau-Mont-Royal

This priority given to the environmental aspect of the program seems to be one of the specificities of Le Plateau. It is also the borough where "tronçons champêtres" were invented (see Fig. 3). They are sections of or entire green alleys that are closed to car circulation, where the asphalt has been fully removed and greenery has been added. These "tronçons champêtres" are expected to improve rainwater management and reduce heat island effects.





Figure 3. Examples of "tronçons champêtres": Ruelle Cartier-Chabot, Napoléon/Saint-Christophe/Roy/Saint-Hubert, Laurier/Marquette/Saint-Joseph/Fabre, rue de Lorimier/des Érables

Finally, the environmental orientation of the borough is also seen in the adoption of a bylaw in 2018 which bans the creation of new parking spaces in alleys. Considering that cars and parking spaces are a major obstacle to the greening and appropriation of back alleys, this new measure is fundamental for the success of the Green Alley Program.

### The appropriation of green alleys and the creation of semi-private spaces

Le Plateau also presents interesting characteristics in terms of appropriation of the alleys. The Green Alley Program not only enables public space appropriation by the residents of the alleys, but it also encourages it. Appropriation can be achieved by greening the alley, adding elements that create a sense of community, such as benches, tables, play areas for children, or organising events for neighbours.



Figure 4. Ruelle champêtre Henri-Julien/Drolet, via ruelle Marquette, ruelle Chalat, Masson/de Bordeaux/Laurier/Chabot, rue Demers, Jeanne-Mance/Saint-Viateur/Espérance/Fairmount

The appropriation of green alleys by residents can have different motivations and outcomes. The *ruelle bariolée*, located close to Square Saint-Louis, was created in 2006 in order to get rid of undesirable uses. Indeed, people would come to consume drugs and leave their garbage. As two residents explained: "The idea was to make the alley used to avoid undesirable uses, and it really is a success", "the idea really was to clean up the alley". Indeed, the transformation of the alley and its improvement strikingly reduced these undesired behaviours. The more a space is developed, improved and maintained, the more it is respected, and the cleaner a space is the cleaner it stays. The residents of the alley also decided to add paintings on the floor to deter passers-by from leaving their cigarette butts or other garbage in the alley. In the case of the *ruelle bariolée*, the appropriation and beautification of the alley had many positive outcomes. It became a more inviting space where people now enjoy taking their walks and walking their dog. The redevelopment of the alley also contributed to reducing car circulation: the alley is not used as a shortcut anymore.

However, it seems that the appropriation of green alleys can also lead to the semi-privatisation of public space. The fact that residents can legally appropriate the alleys gives them power over this space and they tend to create spaces where those who do not live in the alley sometimes feel out of place, even if green alleys are part of the public realm. The decoration of the alley and the organisation of events - most of the time meant to be for residents of the alley only - tend to exclude those who do not live in the alley.

"The events... we try to really make them for the people of the alley, but once we had made a call to all and some people came, we were like 'ok who are you, you don't even live close by', it was a little strange." - Resident of the *ruelle bariolée*

Such forms of appropriation of green alleys, with residents somehow claiming ownership of these spaces, reinforce the ambiguity of green alleys as shared public spaces supposed to benefit everyone. Green alleys indeed tend to be seen by the residents living in the alley as an extension of their courtyard, where they are in their "intimacy" as a resident of a green alley in Rosemont-La Petite-Patrie explained.

"There are even people who do private things in the alley. Once we had the whole Italian family over, it was Thanksgiving and the weather was nice, we put everyone outside in the alley, everyone was happy. And there are many people who do this, for children's birthdays... In the idea of making it live, it's great..." -Resident of the *ruelle bariolée*

A more extreme example of privatisation is the case of Milton alley, located at the intersection of Milton, Clark, Saint-Urbain and Prince-Arthur Streets, where fences were installed at each end of the alley. This decision was taken by the borough after receiving many complaints from residents about people coming to their alley at night during the weekend. The alley is very close to Saint-Laurent Boulevard, and its multiple bars and clubs.

"Well it is forbidden to fence off the public domain. But in this case, we tolerate it because there was too much nuisance from people who... there was theft, but there was also crime, people who were shooting up, so they found syringes in the alley... a lot of condoms, all that. So it was not safe. So it's really for safety issues that we tolerate the fact that it's closed. It is supposed to be closed at night and then reopened during the day. We don't check everyday..." -Green Alley Program manager in Le Plateau-Mont-Royal

The fences are supposed to be closed on Thursday, Friday and Saturday evenings. However, they seem to be closed more often than that. And a new door with a code was installed at the beginning of the year on Clark Street, making it even more complicated to enter the alley. Even if there is a justification behind the installation of fences in order to ensure the safety of the residents and the maintenance of the alley, it still contributes to the privatisation of public space, and it seems that the space is being privatised even more than what has been allowed by the borough.

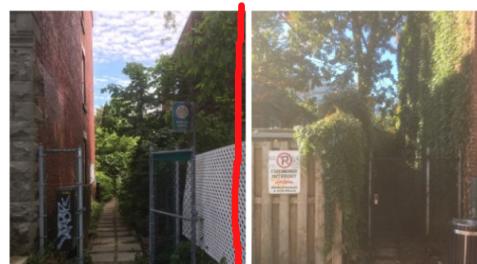




Figure 5. Milton Alley

This fear of undesirable uses is expressed by many residents, as well as by the persons in charge of the program. There is a particular emphasis on the need to strategically choose the furniture that will be installed in the alley.

"But sometimes we don't install benches as part of our green alley projects because we don't want to have to manage nuisances. So what we often say... because people almost systematically include benches in their projects. Then we give them advice, we tell them 'it's as you wish... we could integrate benches'. If they're next to Mount-Royal, it's sure I'm gonna say no. But if they are a bit far away, if there are no adjacent bars, if they don't already have a problem with night-time nuisances, we could provide them with benches, we have already done so in the past. But I would strongly suggest that they take benches or folding chairs out of their yard when they want to enjoy the alley, and then they can bring them back in at night. That way, there is no problem at night. Usually, citizens are like 'yeah, you're right'. I don't really have to convince them." -Green Alley Program manager in Le Plateau-Mont-Royal

A resident of ruelle Nelligan, also located next to Square Saint-Louis and created in 2020, indeed had this discussion with the program manager when they started the project. The residents wanted to put benches, "but the City said 'be careful with that, it invites people you don't want in the alley, so if you want to do something, bring your own chairs, have a party, and then take the chairs away'". This desire to avoid undesirable uses somehow underlines the idea that green alleys are bound to become semi-private spaces that can be protected from the nuisances of regular public space.

Green alleys definitely are interesting urban spaces, at the intersection of the public and the private realms. The revitalisation of these spaces that used to be underused contributes to transforming them into usable and attractive spaces that are greener, quieter and cooler alternatives to other streets. Green alleys are ambiguous spaces that offer potential for privatisation and the program encourages that. Indeed, the appropriation of alleys by residents also ensures their involvement in the maintenance of the alley in the long term. But the privatisation of the alleys sometimes results in the exclusion of some persons or groups of people that feel less comfortable using the alleys.

## Bibliography

- Pham, T.-T.-H., Lachapelle, U., & Rocheleau, A. (2022). Greening the alleys: socio-spatial distribution and characteristics of green alleys in Montréal. *Landscape and Urban Planning*, 226.
- Le Plateau-Mont-Royal (2022). *Guide d'aménagement d'une rue verte*.