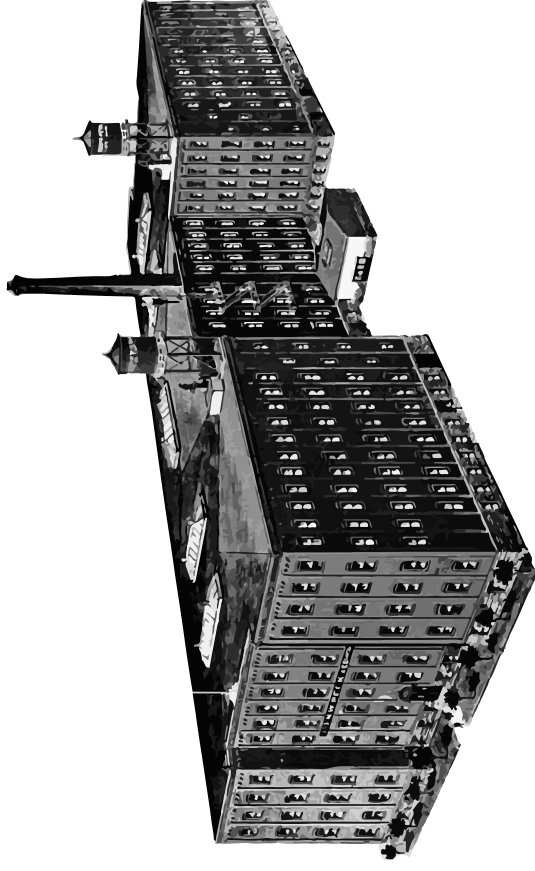


*A*  
**BRIEF HISTORY**  
*of*  
**GEN'TRIFICATION**  
*in*  
**MILE END**

**COEUR**  
**de L'ÎLE**  
**ANTIGENTRIFICATION**



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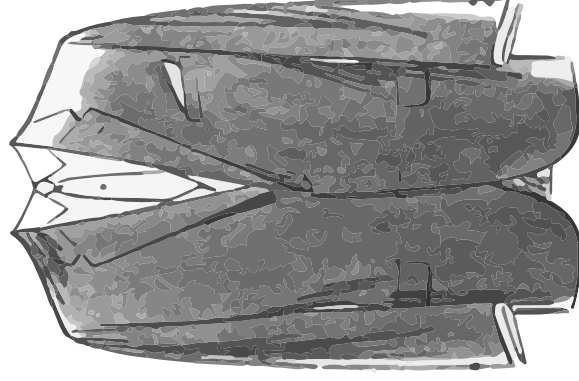
✉ gentrification@coeurdelile.org

**COEUR**  
**de L'ÎLE**  
**ANTIGENTRIFICATION**

# FROM WORKING-CLASS GARMENT DISTRICT TO PLAYGROUND FOR THE WEALTHY

The gentrification of Mile End is a process that has been taking place for over 25 years. The borough was known for its garment industry throughout the 19th and 20th centuries, until changes in free trade regulations on the global market in the late 1980s and early 1990s led to a collapse of manufacturing in North America. During that time, it was also the site of a strong, working-class immigrant population — particularly Eastern European Jews — who settled in the area before and during the postwar period. The melting pot of Greek, Portuguese, Romanian, Polish, German and other immigrant residents helped to create the diverse and rich cultural reputation that the neighbourhood is known for.

Many of the famous garment factories where these workers toiled — and sometimes rebelled, as in the former Vineberg Building, where 4,500 workers went out on strike for 45 days in 1912<sup>1</sup> — closed down in the early- to mid-1990s. Several of these old factory buildings would later be converted into new commercial and residential housing, including the Peck building, which became the site of Ubisoft Montreal in 1997. This followed the province's adoption in 1996 of the Québec



## RESOURCES & FURTHER READING

Regroupement des comités logement et associations de locataires du Québec (RCLALQ)

<https://rclalq.qc.ca/>

Is your landlord harassing you or trying to evict you? RCLALQ is the Québec federation of housing committees (*comités logement*) and tenants' associations (*associations de locataires*). These committees and associations are a great first port of call in any kind of housing crisis or legal or extralegal conflict. Check their map (<https://rclalq.qc.ca/comites-logement/>) to find the one nearest you!

Comité logement du Plateau Mont-Royal

<https://clpmr.com/>

The comité logement for the Plateau Mont-Royal borough, which includes the neighbourhood of Mile End.

Comité logement de la Petite Patrie

<https://comitelogementpetitepatrie.org/>

The comité logement for Petite Patrie, the neighbourhood directly to the north of Mile End which includes Little Italy. They recently put out an excellent investigative report on evictions in the city, which among other things remarks that 85% of evictions in Québec are fraudulent in nature. (See note 6 on previous page.)

Front d'action populaire en réaménagement urbain

<https://www.frapru.qc.ca/>

A federation of organizations in Québec advocating for tenants' rights and for social housing.

Then, in 2013, the artist collective Pied Carré signed a 30-year deal with Allied promising 208,000 square feet of gallery and studio space in the de Gaspé megastructures. This move was brokered by municipal politicians and endorsed by Ubisoft. These sorts of public-private agreements, while perhaps better than nothing, hinge entirely on Ubisoft and Allied continuing their investments in the area. As far as they're concerned, projects that beautify the area and make it attractive for business are beneficial for them too — as long as there's still a profit to be made. But that's irrespective of whether or not working artists and other working tenants can keep affording to live in the area. These projects have done nothing to curtail runaway speculation, rent hikes, or renovations. The art will still be there for a wealthier, whiter, and smaller population to enjoy at commercial galleries and chic boutiques, while poorer artists struggle to get by.

## NOTES

1. <https://bit.ly/38A0yH6>
2. <https://bit.ly/30FqQ6o>
3. <https://bit.ly/30GxXeE>
4. <https://bit.ly/3bHWJ4B>
5. <https://bit.ly/3tjH3dR>
6. <https://bit.ly/3rItxjj>
7. <https://bit.ly/3vIV3pe>
8. <https://bit.ly/3l9ZJKb>

Multimedia Tax Credit, which allows a 37.5% refundable tax credit that subsidizes staff wages at tech companies operating in the province. (Interestingly, this parallels the original establishment of the Peck suit factory, which similarly benefited from a tax credit.)

By the time of Ubisoft's arrival, the garment industry's collapse had caused a **wide-scale disinvestment of capital** in the neighbourhood. Disinvestment manifests as urban decay: property owners see no monetary incentive to perform maintenance, repairs or improvements. Buildings start to leak and crumble. The neighbourhood acquires a reputation as a “bad part of town” or even a “dump.” (Later, this decay acquires a patina that contributes to the area's “charm” and “character,” but this takes time.)

Disinvestment also means falling property values and rent prices. Property becomes cheap and ripe for renovation and subdivision. There is a gold rush as former renters become owners, pushing out poorer residents and forming a new generation of small landlords in the borough. (This, too, is a case of history repeating: former residents who moved out of the area in the 1940s formed the basis of a landlord class who would exploit new immigrant tenants for the remainder of the century.<sup>2</sup>)

For a time, the area remains relatively affordable. Artists move in, lured in both by low rents and by abundant cheap workshop space in subdivided former factories. It's at this point that the neighbourhood starts to acquire its reputation as a “trendy” arts hub. Small capitalists follow; the first new company to move into the Peck building is Discreet Logic, a scrappy young tech firm founded in 1991. (Discreet Logic was acquired by Autodesk in 1998; only later did Ubisoft expand to fill the entire building.)

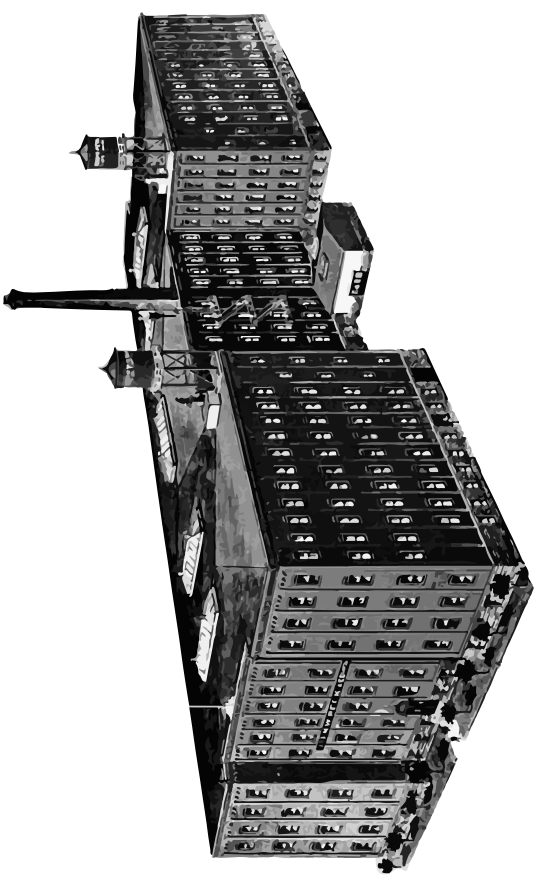
Finally, city planners start to take note, kicking off *reinvestment* plans under the mantle of “urban renewal.” Active encouragement from the municipal, provincial, and federal governments lead to an influx of tech companies from the late 90s up to the present day. Ubisoft, Microsoft and smaller tech outfits like French aerospace company Thales are incentivized to move into the neighbourhood. With them come new boutiques, venues, condos and higher rents.

In only a few decades, the character of the neighbourhood has changed dramatically— from working-class garment district, to slum, to art and tech hub. For landlords and business owners, who both hold capital that stands to grow or appreciate from more affluent residents and shoppers, this is a welcome change. For those who have been displaced by exorbitant rents and social isolation — including many of the workers who helped build the neighborhood — this has been catastrophic. In 2018, while residents openly worried about the encroachment of tech companies leading to unaffordable rent hikes in Marconi-Alexandra, mayor of Rosemont—La Petite-Patrie François Croteau tried to have it both ways, saying:

*“We don’t want to be the next Silicon Valley in terms of social impact. In technological impact, of course, in economic development, of course, but not the social impact of the neighbourhood.”<sup>3</sup>*

Incidentally, Mile End originally comprised the area north of the Van Horne underpass where the Marconi-Alexandra area is located. The coming of the railroad tracks set this area on a different trajectory — it was only later that it came to establish itself as Little Italy. The concept of “Mile Ex” as a

that followed the founding of Ubisoft Montréal, rising rents threatened to push out poorer artists who could not buy property, just as they had years before in Old Montréal.



It was in 2008 that Toronto-based real estate company Allied Properties Real Estate Investment Trust purchased the Peck Building, as well as two other buildings behind it, for \$30 million more than they had cost four years earlier. In response, artists determined not to be priced out of the area formed a strategic alliance with other residents, politicians, and even some local business owners to resist redevelopment. In 2012, the borough passed a zoning law to restrict the size of commercial tenants in megastructures to prevent another Ubisoft from occurring. This move ultimately failed to halt rents from rising — and neither did it stop Allied from refusing to renew these tenants’ leases, since they preferred instead to simply push them out and make way for smaller commercial tenants. Right here, we see an antagonism between the interests of residential tenants and small business owners.

# THE CONSEQUENCES FOR WORKING ARTISTS

The Mile End boasts a vibrant art scene and is often associated with beloved boutiques, music venues, eateries, commercial galleries and bookstores, not to mention fantastic murals, public spectacles and beloved cultural icons. In many people's minds, it is very hard to separate this scene from specific businesses such as Divan Orange, Le Cagibi, Phonopolis or S.W. Welch, and it's hard not to feel a certain sense of betrayal when these businesses also fall victim to predatory rent hikes and fraudulent evictions. When there are fewer and fewer public arts spaces available, it's natural that people will form attachments to the private institutions that come in to fill the void. What is less acknowledged, however, is the effect that gentrification has on those artists who are not wealthy, who do not own capital, and who can't afford to keep living in a neighbourhood they, too, helped to build by their labour.

**A more honest historical account of the role of artists in the city** would situate the rise of the borough as a creative epicenter in the 1980s and early 1990s, when the garment industry was in the process of collapsing. Artists who had formerly lived in Old Montréal faced gentrification caused by new development projects there, leading to a mass exodus and resettlement in Mile End, where rents were suddenly dirt cheap. These working artists helped to create a lively center for mural artists, filmmakers, musicians, writers and others. This helped to beautify the neighbourhood and, incidentally, made it more attractive for developers and city officials looking to raise property values in the area. With the advent of the tech sector and the influx of new capital

district or neighbourhood is a much more recent construct, one entirely fabricated by developers and planners to facilitate and accelerate gentrification.

This is a good argument for thinking of the problem holistically, tracking the effects of gentrification beyond the artificial boundaries of the current-day Mile End. Consider the fact that it was Jeremy Kornbluth and Brandon Shiller (son of Stephen Shiller, of notorious predatory real estate firm Shiller Lavy) that were responsible for the rent hike that caused Le Cagibi to move to Little Italy in 2018. Kornbluth and Shiller were also responsible for a highly unpopular (and ultimately doomed) Starbucks franchise opening at their Jean-Talon Market property in 2015.

Despite whatever developers and landlords might say about a neighbourhood's special "character," they know full well these divisions are artificial. For their part, they always have their sights set on the next hot development zone, ready at a moment's notice to divest in one place and reinvest in another. Consider, also, that many residents of nearby



