Perceptions, Planning and Play Spaces: Soliciting Youth’s Perspectives in Saint Henri

Context: James Lyng High School and Youth Fusion have been collaborating since 2009 to reduce the school’s absenteeism rate. James Lyng is a public, English language high school in Saint Henri, one of the most socio-economically underprivileged neighbourhoods in Montreal (1). Youth Fusion is a non-profit that creates partnerships between schools and universities in order to engage youth in learning and lower high school drop-out rates. Over the past two years, Youth Fusion has collaborated with teachers to develop a project that aims to involve students in the decisions that affect their urban environment, while supporting the Minister of Education’s secondary cycle 1 geography curriculum. Several large scale urban renewal projects are planned and underway in the area, including the Turcot Interchange and the McGill mega-hospital. The school is also located in proximity to the Lachine canal, the CN rail line, a struggling commercial street, abandoned and recycled industrial buildings, and a buried river.

Project: The location of James Lyng presents an interesting, albeit challenging opportunity to engage students in a hands-on urban design project. The project hopes to stimulate student interest in school by creating a hands-on project with real-world applications, that is relevant to students’ experience, and that provides opportunities for community engagement. This research project records work done between October, 2011 and May 2012 with forty students in two secondary 1 classes at James Lyng. The purpose of this project was to:

- develop student’s abilities to observe and critically analyse their urban environment;
- develop sense of belonging to the neighbourhood of the school
- elicit their opinions and ideas as to how the area could better serve the interests of youth,
- engage the students in an urban planning design project, and
- create an opportunity for students to communicate their ideas and preferences about the urban environment to the wider community.

Program Outcomes: This program resulted in three main interconnected outcomes: opinions, interests, and projects:

- Opinions: Generally, the students expressed that the neighbourhood was polluted, noisy, boring and lacking in sanctioned spaces for activities that interested them. On a more positive note, the students felt the historic buildings in the area were of value to the neighbourhood, as were local community gardens and the naturalistic recreational trail alongside the Lachine Canal.
- Interests: Regarding appropriate youth-friendly places, the students indicated a preference for green spaces, play spaces, legitimate spaces for artistic expression and urban gardens.
- Projects: The students completed two major projects. The first was a map collage: students added their photos and comment cards with their thoughts and opinions regarding certain places to a base map. For the second project, students planned a redesign of their schoolyard in order to reflect their own interests for a youth-friendly recreational space. The students built 3D models illustrating their ideas and presented them to their classmates, as well as to members of the wider community, including teachers and school administration, representatives of the school’s governing board, and representatives of the YMCA, local Eco-quartier, and McGill’s School of Urban Planning.