Rethinking St Henri for pedestrians and bikes: A citizen-based street redesign experiment

Researchers: Ten Master’s level students from McGill’s School of Urban Planning
Instructors: Denis Lévesque & Shannon Franssen
Date: June 10, 2011

Research Aims:
- Can citizens without any technical expertise help redesign their local streets in order to encourage active modes of transportation, calm car traffic and increase pedestrian safety?
- Does citizen involvement in such a process produce better designs that those done by professionals only?
- How can students engage in “real world” community processes?

St-Henri is located east of the Turcot Interchange, and enclosed between the Ville-Marie Expressway and the Lachine Canal. The neighbourhood is marked by large boulevards that are heavily used by commuters traveling between the West Island and Downtown. Local residents have continuously voiced complaints to municipal authorities regarding the heavy traffic volume, high vehicle speeds and the lack of safety for pedestrians. The South-West borough has begun implementing measures to address these concerns, but lacks the resources to consult the public about the kinds of solutions to apply. Solidarité St-Henri, a local community group with a history of mobilising residents on community issues, wanted to influence the borough’s actions with a street/intersection design project, based on input from local residents and key neighbourhood informants. Via an interactive McGill Urban Planning course, students and community researchers piloted a 3-step community engagement process on traffic-calming options for “trouble spots” in St. Henri.

The research aims to:
- Field test a process inspired from the Quartiers verts, actifs et en santé approach developed by the Montreal Urban Ecology Centre;
- Develop tools to enable non-professionals to identify which specific locations present a safety or walkability problem, and how the current design impairs pedestrian movement or safety;
- Propose new design ideas based on input from residents;
- Work with the borough planners to implement some of the proposed changes.

Key results to date:
The project has gone through its three main phases (understand issues, explore solutions, build solutions). Twenty residents participated in the project’s activities.
- In phase 1, the project flagged eight specific problem areas and mentioned specific goals for improving walkability or safety for each of these areas (figure1 and figure2).
- Out of those eight areas, two were further researched and presented to a small committee of technical experts for a brainstorming design exercise (Phase 2). Three new design scenarios were proposed for each of the two areas selected (figure3).
- Participants in the third phase of the project indicated which designs they thought responded best to the goals previously identified.

The project has not gone through final evaluation yet, but comments gathered at the end of each activity were very positive. How and when some of the proposed changes will be implemented by the borough still remains to be determined, but the active involvement of borough staff and councillors throughout the project has been encouraging. We anticipate offering this course again next year.