BEYOND THE FOUR WALLS: THE SAINTE MARIE NEIGHBOURHOOD AS SEEN BY ITS IMMIGRANT RESIDENTS

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ABSTRACT

This article presents the results of an exploratory qualitative survey[1] of immigrant families carried out by a local community organization, the Carrefour de Ressources en Interculturel (CRIC), in Sainte Marie, a disadvantaged neighbourhood in the urban core of Montreal. The aim was to determine how immigrants perceive their neighbourhood, how they read their environment and what role housing plays in that perception. Housing is one of newcomers' primary concerns, but what dœs their level of satisfaction with their housing depend on once they have settled? What makes the place they live in a "home", and determines whether they want to live in the neighbourhood in the longer term?

INTRODUCTION

In the fall of 2006, the CRIC, a local community organization, sought the assistance of two INRS-UCS researchers to do an exploratory survey to gather immigrant families' perceptions of the Sainte Marie neighbourhood and of their needs and their proposals for improving the quality of community life. The neighbourhood in question is located near the downtown area, and is one of the most disadvantaged on the Island of Montreal. It has only recently become a settlement neighbourhood for recent immigrants. CRIC's objective in carrying out this project was, first, to give immigrants a voice, and second, to mobilize them to initiate local projects in cooperation with other community organizations.[3]

Unlike the usual surveys concerning immigrants' needs and services to assist them, our survey asked immigrant families first about their general perceptions of the neighbourhood, so that we could better understand their reading of the strengths and weaknesses of the community where they live, and also better identify their concerns. A short open ended questionnaire consisting of 10 questions about the Sainte Marie neighbourhood[4] was administered to 75 people[5] who were interviewed by CRIC community workers in their homes. We will be dealing with the issue of housing here, but we will see that for immigrant families, that issue cannot be separated from issues relating to cœxistence and neighbourhood life. Before presenting the results of the survey, a brief description of the Sainte Marie neighbourhood is needed.

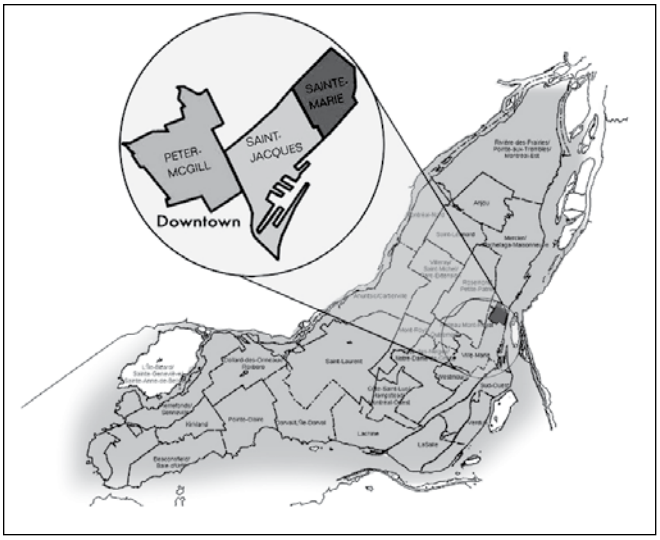
THE SAINTE MARIE NEIGHBOURHOOD

Sainte Marie can be described as a traditionally French Canadian working class neighbourhood that has been in economic decline. The United Way of Greater Montreal says: [translation] "in Sainte Marie, the 'east end' of south-central Montreal, many families live in serious and sometimes chronic poverty. Access to decent housing, a green and safe neighbourhood and nutritious food within a reasonable distance are issues in the battle against poverty. All of the schools rank higher for indicators of disadvantage than the average for schools in Montreal" (United Way 2007, 1). In addition, given how close it is to downtown, this neighbourhood is characterized by a high concentration of social problems (crime, delinquency, drugs, prostitution, etc.). On the surface, the neighbourhood is not particularly "attractive", and yet a growing number of recent immigrants are settling there. Today, about one in five people in the neighbourhood are of immigrant origin (CDC Centre-Sud 2008).

Since the mid-1990s, these immigrants have been concentrated in low cost housing (LCH) units, the result being that long-term residents have become increasingly hostile to them, since there are long-term residents who are themselves on waiting lists for social housing. When tension erupted between French speaking White youth and young visible minority newcomers, community associations and institutions in the neighbourhood mobilized to find ways of addressing this new issue (United Way 2006, 16).

One outcome was the creation of the CRIC, in the first instance as a forum for sharing ideas and pooling efforts. Over time, the organization has become a true

Map of Montreal



"toolbox" for community workers and a way of building bridges among residents in an environment that is becoming increasingly multicultural. It is the CRIC's aim to promote greater inclusion of immigrant residents in the neighbourhood and to build a dynamic based on connections among residents of all origins.

IMMIGRANTS' PERCEPTIONS OF THEIR HOUSING

These are some of the comments received:

> "Because rent is cheaper in this neighbourhood, it's a good springboard from an economic standpoint."
>
> "Our apartment (LCH) is comfortable, it's good for the children."

The relatively high number of large affordable apartments, particularly social housing units, is one of the key factors that attracted respondents to settle in the neighbourhood. This is a crucial issue for the families who made up the very large majority of participants in this survey. Nearly two thirds of respondents live in some form of social housing (LCH, cooperative housing, non-profit housing), while one third rent units in the private market; a very small minority own their homes.[6] It is important to note that the proportion of residents in the private rental market is much higher among newcomers than among immigrants of longer standing.

The concentration of immigrants in LCH units in Sainte Marie is undoubtedly a result of the shortage of affordable family housing in the Montreal rental market. In addition, waiting lists for LCH units are generally long, and this limits newcomers' access to them. However, some respondents said that waiting times for this kind of housing are shorter in Sainte Marie than in other neighbourhoods. For them, the decision as to where to settle was less a matter of neighbourhood choice than of the immediate need for housing.

In response to the question "Do you think this is a good neighbourhood for housing?" about 60 percent of respondents said they were satisfied with their housing and thought it met their family's needs in terms of space and comfort, whether they were in the private rental market or in social housing. Interestingly, all respondents in cooperatives and non profit housing reported that they were satisfied. When they identified weaknesses, the main problem cited in the private rental market was the lack of space; some respondents reported disputes with their landlords or the high cost of housing. In LCH units, an apartment that was once suitable sometimes becomes too small as the family grows, and in some cases maintenance problems were also reported (insects, overheated units, etc.).

Having said that, it is important to point out that in general, respondents were not overly concerned with the physical characteristics of their housing, and talked more about their neighbours, even though no specific question was asked on this subject. Clearly, meeting housing needs is something that gœs beyond "the four walls" and seems to relate primarily to people's immediate neighbours.

NEIGHBOURS AND INTER ETHNIC CŒXISTENCE

What did our interviews reveal about people's perceptions of their neighbours? Respondents' experiences in terms of living with their neighbours varied widely. Overall, their experiences can be described as "polite but distant". The type of living environment respondents live in seems to have a significant influence on how good their relations are with their neighbours, or how serious their cœxistence problems are.

Relations between neighbours seem to be best in housing cooperatives. While tensions did arise in those situations, the cooperative management approach calls for active involvement by members (on the board of directors, the maintenance committee, the good neighbours committee, etc.), and several respondents said that this facilitates interaction and the creation of trust between neighbours, as illustrated by these comments:

> "In the co-op, people take an interest in each other; outside it, people don't even say hello."
>
> "Apart from the co op, I have no social life in the neighbourhood."
>
> For some, co op living is similar to the relations they had with their neighbours before immigrating:
>
> "Co op living is a great experience. My relations with my neighbours are like what I had in my country. Here, I am

> back among people who say good morning and good evening."

In the private rental market, however, respondents did not have much to say about relations with their neighbours, which are generally somewhat distant, as this respondent explained:

> "We have no relationship with them, but no problems either."

For some, however, having no relationships with neighbours is not the ideal situation:

> "The neighbours don't know one another and that's too bad; everybody gœs about their own business."

In fact, a number of respondents said they would like to know their neighbours better, particularly their neighbours who are native Quebecers. For others, the fact that Quebecers make up a majority of the neighbours even determined their choice of housing:

> "I wanted to avoid neighbourhoods with too many immigrants; to me, that means problems. For us (Algerians), the experience of the French suburbs is fresh in our minds. ... The cities haunt me. Here, I meet a lot of Quebecers, and that is reassuring."

While there may be few serious problems in terms of cœxistence, they are relatively more common in low-cost housing projects, where there is a significant concentration of social problems. Some people have experienced difficult and strained relations, and have even been subject to intimidation by their neighbours:

"The apartment is fine, but it is very difficult to live where I live. ... My neighbours on the second floor make life hard for us: they are drug addicts, they shout, they make a lot of noise, sometimes there's blood. ... I'm afraid to complain because once when I called the police they came here and threatened me."

Noise is also a very common bone of contention between neighbours:

> "Our neighbour has four dogs and we hear them barking all the time. She complains that our children make noise, but she's the one making noise. I take a detour with my children so we don't go by her door. You have to be careful when it comes to the neighbours in low cost housing."

This kind of cœxistence problem exacerbates some families' feelings of insecurity, and this results in them isolating themselves, because they see their immediate environment as a dangerous place for their children.

Reports of discrimination and physical or verbal violence were relatively rare in our interviews, but they were serious and involved members of all visible minorities, particularly the South Asian and Black communities:

> "In the beginning, people threw eggs at my windows in the summer. ... They only threw them at immigrants. On the third floor, there was a Rwandan woman and someone walked up and insulted her—they told her she was a dirty Negro. She was extremely afraid and she went to live somewhere else."

These serious cases obviously need attention, but they should not result in a simplistic reading of inter-ethnic relations in terms of immigrants and native-born residents, as this respondent reminded us:

> "People often talk about Quebecers' racism toward immigrants and they forget about racism among immigrants, and that racism is stronger."

It should be noted that problems of cœxistence in low cost housing, as in other environments, in fact, are not only a matter of inter ethnic relations; rather, they are often a question of social class. While immigrants share the same living situation, they are more educated than native Quebecers, overall, and often regard the "poverty" in which they are living as a matter of circumstances. One respondent said:

> "The Quebecers in the neighbourhood are people on social assistance whose minds are closed."

Another respondent added:

> "If you assimilate into the neighbourhood, you don't grow."

The result is that some respondents are not interested in building relationships with neighbours whom they regard as not belonging to their social class or sharing their aspirations in the host society.

We found from our interviews that the quality of people's relations with their neighbours depends largely on the type of housing they live in. Different living situations in the same neighbourhood are characterized by different kinds of social relationships. The immigrants interviewed regard good relations among neighbours as crucial to their idea of "good housing". Their immediate neighbours are the factor that ensures that they have a peaceful and safe environment to raise their children in, and that provides the social life that is essential for our respondents.

NEIGHBOURHOOD LIFE

What determines whether immigrants want to live in the Sainte Marie neighbourhood in the longer term? Responses were divided in terms of whether respondents want to settle there or leave, and many were undecided. Half of the people who wanted to move were in fact satisfied with their housing, as compared to an only slightly higher proportion among people who would like to stay in Sainte Marie. Thus, although housing is an immediate issue, from a longer term perspective it cannot be separated from respondents' image of their neighbourhood.

Residents who want to leave the neighbourhood said things like:

> "Our apartment is comfortable ... but the problem in this neighbourhood is the people, ... they have no morals. There is no solution. The best thing to do is leave."
>
> "As a father-to-be, I think it is not a good neighbourhood for children. A child needs space, and here, when they go outside, they are not safe."
>
> "There are needles; it's dangerous when the children play outside. And it's also dirty."

Dirtiness and feelings of insecurity were recurring themes in the comments from respondents, who echœd the widespread perception of Sainte-Marie's "bad reputation". Although some of the people who wanted to move had adjusted relatively well to these circumstances, they were unanimous in their perception that "it is not a good neighbourhood for children". The lack of safe spaces for children is a crucial factor in the desire to leave the neighbourhood.

As well, the often negative perception of the quality of the schools and the fear of exposing their children to the bad influence of other young people are key factors in explaining why some families were thinking about leaving:

> "If there were better schools, we wouldn't have to move."
>
> "The young people in the neighbourhood aren't good, and so as soon as my children are older we will be moving, because I'm afraid for them here."

On the other hand, a large majority of the people who wanted to stay in Sainte Marie in the longer term had a positive image of it:

> "The neighbourhood is very peaceful. I'm happy with it. I don't understand why people call it a disadvantaged neighbourhood; people are respectful, ... we don't have anarchy in the streets."
>
> "The neighbourhood is not very safe, but I have services, the CLSC, the métro, the shopping centre, parks, childcare, and it isn't far from downtown."
>
> "I like living here, I don't want to live in another neighbourhood. ... There are parks, there are community centres; we get along with everybody."

These responses highlight a number of the neighbourhood's assets, such as its central location, which respondents primarily associate not with the problems of the urban core (such as crime) but rather with its practical advantages: it has good public transit, easy access to services, numerous community resources, and so on. In that sense, to recent immigrants, Sainte Marie is not a ghetto, in the sense of a stigmatized space cut off from the rest of the world. Some respondents even see it as a neighbourhood on the rise.

A large majority also consider it a "good neighbourhood for children" because of its numerous parks, its infrastructure, its good childcare facilities and activities for young children, although feelings were more mixed on the quality of the schools. These respondents are more involved in community life in the neighbourhood than the people who want to move, and this indicates the importance of civic engagement as a factor in people's desire to settle in Sainte Marie in the longer term.

There is a striking contrast between the negative and positive perceptions of the two groups of respondents. First, it seems to reflect the lack of cohesion in the Sainte Marie neighbourhood: it is geographically fragmented (major arteries, industrial zones, etc.) and so is divided into micro-environments with different physical characteristics and social climates. And second, it is worth noting that newcomers to Canada who have recently settled in the neighbourhood have a more positive image of it and are more inclined to want to stay there longer than are immigrants of longer standing who have already settled in the neighbourhood.

These two findings illustrate the strong connections between type of housing, the immediate environment, the quality of relations among residents and the perception of the neighbourhood and the desire to settle there in the longer term. As a result, newcomers, who live mainly in housing in the private rental market or in cooperatives, have better relations with their neighbours and a more favourable image of Sainte Marie, and more often want to live there in the long term. Although they are aware of the neighbourhood's problems, those problems are outweighed by other practical advantages that they perceive as more important.

FROM RESEARCH TO ACTION

From the perspective of a community organization, a desire on the part of immigrants to stay in the neighbourhood is a positive factor in the integration process, since it helps to create a feeling of belonging to the neighbourhood, build formal and informal social networks, and carry out collective social development projects.

This survey identified for us the concerns shared by immigrant families (safety and cleanliness, schools, activities and access to information, as well as relations with neighbours and neighbourhood life), but it was just the first step in a process of mobilizing residents to improve the quality of their community. We were surprised by the high level of participation (44 out of 75 people) among respondents who were invited to a working session to validate the main findings from the survey and define options for action. The participants were then the ones who took over the job of publicizing the results of the survey themselves. With support from the CRIC, a committee composed of eight people who had participated in the survey, all immigrants, presented the results and options for action to 85 representatives of institutions and community organizations, to generate interest in initiating local projects.

In fact, there have been concrete projects relating to various topics, ranging from improving inter ethnic relations on a neighbourhood-wide basis to social integration in low cost housing developments, and including improving relations between parents and early childhood centres and schools; improving people's feelings of security, cleanliness and beautification; and preventing racism and discrimination among young people.[7] These initiatives do not directly target housing issues, but are part of an intervention process that builds on the idea that housing cannot be separated from community. These proposals also got immigrants involved, as they proposed to participate in carrying them out.

FROM FOUR WALLS TO THE NEIGHBOURHOOD

What we learned from this exploratory survey is that how immigrants read the conditions in which they are living can never be completely anticipated, even by the community workers who are in daily contact with them. How many of us had lost sight of some of the obvious assets of the Sainte Marie neighbourhood, such as its central location, something on which our respondents in fact placed considerable value? We discovered the importance they assign to certain aspects of their environment (including their neighbours, safe spaces for children, good schools, easy access to resources, etc.), but we also learned what they consider to be more secondary. In this regard, the question of housing seems to be inseparable from the question of the quality of the human relationships on which their human environment and neighbourhood life are built. It is crucially important that there be an adequate supply of affordable housing for low income immigrant families, particularly newcomers. However, this must go hand in hand with neighbourhood-wide actions that help to develop a human environment of a high standard that will ensure the social inclusion of immigrant families. Creating a real "home" means more than just providing four walls!

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NOTES

[1] This survey was carried out in collaboration with Annick Germain, a full professor at the Institut national de la recherche scientifique – Centre urbanisation, culture et société (INRS-UCS); Mabel Contin, a doctoral student at INRS-UCS; and Daniela Repetto, a CRIC community worker.

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[3] This project was carried out with the support of the City of Montreal's integrated urban revitalization plan for the Sainte Marie neighbourhood and also received support from the United Way of Greater Montreal and Canadian Heritage's multiculturalism program.

[4] The 10 questions dealt with image of the neighbourhood, housing, resources for children, health, food, employment, the location of the neighbourhood, activities and services, and also inter ethnic cœxistence.

[5] The following are some characteristics of respondents: 80% were families; 40% were newcomers (in Canada less than five years); they came from 35 different countries: 25% from Sub-Saharan Africa, 20% from Maghreb, 20% from Latin America and the Caribbean, 13% from South Asia, 10% from Asia and Southeast Asia, and 12% from Europe and the Middle East; on average they had high levels of education: 40% had a university diploma.

[6] Of all respondents, 40% lived in LCH units, 16% in housing cooperatives, 6% in non-profit housing units and 34% in private rental units; 3% owned their own homes.

[7] For more details, consult the projects and activities section at www.criccentresud.org.

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