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PIERRE BOUCHARD

# MONTREAL : a natural choice

In 2004, the City of Montreal noted that governments were making policies to protect biodiversity in regions far from large cities. In response, the City itself set the goal of protecting 8% of its territory, including 6% of its land base. But how could the City protect 6% of its most valuable and developable land? It was necessary to develop a strategy to protect 2,000 hectares of land with an estimated value of \$200 million, at minimal cost. Innovative methods were needed; to that end the City division responsible for major parks invented the concept of the Ecoterritory – ten special zones covering the local ecosystems with the highest ecological value. The City's goal was not to acquire the land, only to preserve it. And the concept worked. Six years after the strategy was launched, the City has protected 5.8% of its land base and revised its goal to 8%.

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For residents of any city, access to green space and the integration of natural features remain core issues. Nature is crucial to quality of life and harmony of surroundings. It tempers urban spaces, softens the city's rough edges, and gives people the feeling of living closer to the "right" environment.

**SOFTENING THE CITY** Every city approaches its relationship with nature differently. The different approaches stem from a society's level of concern, just as they reflect the particular culture of a place.

There are thus many ways for cities to approach the question of nature, each of them resulting from a choice. In Montreal, the choice was to favour an approach grounded in the preservation and enhancement of biodiversity – an approach with its own benefits and limitations. Its most important characteristic is that it reflects Montreal's society and culture. Residents feel they have a stake, and are ready to talk, debate, and get involved. This path became practically inevitable in the early 1990s, after the Rio Earth Summit of 1992 made a deep impression on the people of Montreal. The mayor of the day was an active participant in the summit, and every mayor since has assumed a leadership role in environmental matters, a level of commitment that culminated in the city's selection as the home of the UN's Secretariat of the Convention on Biological Diversity.

In 2004, the City noted that governments were making policies to protect biodiversity in regions far from major urban centres. It decided to rise to the challenge set out by the IUCN, adopting a policy designed to prove that preserving nature within large cities is both possible and necessary. The resulting City strategy aims to preserve the remaining natural ecosystems within its borders, by setting the goal of protecting 8% of its territory, including 6% of its land base. The office responsible for large parks and green spaces was tasked with developing the means to reach the objective.

**MAJOR CHALLENGES** The challenge was substantial: how would it be possible to protect 6% of the city's land, precisely where the province's strongest development pressures were being felt, and where the land is most valuable? There was also the fact that the tools available to cities are much less powerful than those at the disposal of the higher levels of government. A city's most powerful tools are its master plan and associated by-laws. But the fundamental purpose of a master plan is to guide development. It is not designed, strictly speaking, to prevent development. Furthermore, the master plan had barely changed as an urban planning tool in the previous 40 years.

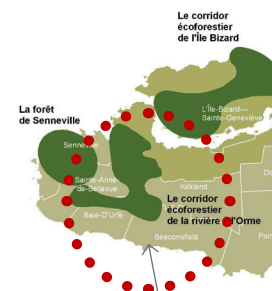
**PROTECTION AT MINIMAL COST** It was therefore necessary to develop a strategy that would make it possible to protect 2,000 hectares of land, with an estimated value of \$200 million, at the lowest possible cost. Achieving the goal would require innovative methods. To that end, the City authority responsible for major parks and green spaces (Direction des grands parcs et du verdissement) created the concept of the Ecoterritory. The ten Ecoterritories are special zones covering the local ecosystems with the highest ecological value. Their boundaries are deliberately vague, in that they are not defined in relation to the cadaster, nor included in the master plan.

**THE ECOTERRITORY CONCEPT** Each Ecoterritory is covered by a conservation plan, which defines the area to be preserved, ecological corridors to be maintained or expanded, and buffer zones to be conserved. The plans are developed in cooperation with owners, subject to public consultation.

With this type of planning tool, every developer, city department, government agency, and public utility must receive approval from the City before taking action affecting the ecoterritory. The tool is therefore first and foremost an invitation to talk to the City to negotiate the terms of compliance with the conservation plan and establish guidelines for future adjacent development.

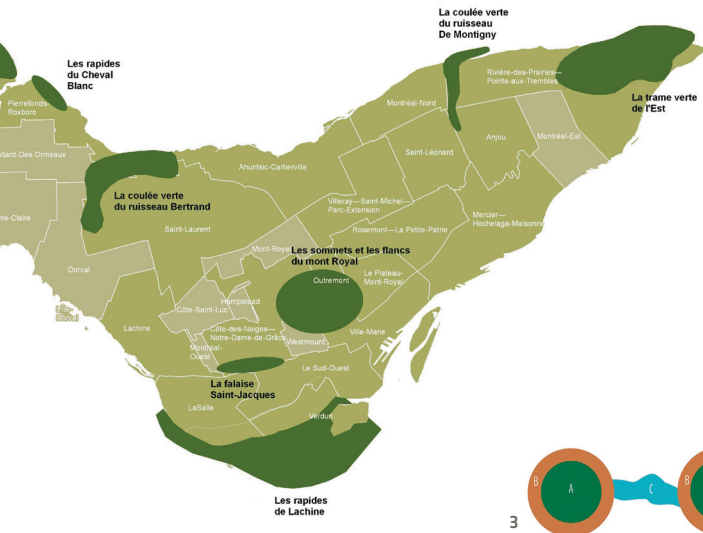
The City's goal is not to acquire the land, only to preserve it. In addition, every developer is offered three options: first, to make an ecological donation in exchange for tax benefits; second, to confer protected status on the land for a period of 30 years; and lastly, to provide compensation in the form of money or other ecologically significant land. The amount of compensation is based on the market value of the land and must be deemed satisfactory. As a last resort, the City has a budget of \$40 million for the complete or partial acquisition of certain parcels.

**A WIN-WIN PROPOSITION** The strategy is therefore based on negotiation and discussion. But developers soon realized it was a win-win situation, because the resulting housing developments sell out six times faster, for an average premium of 20%. The strategy

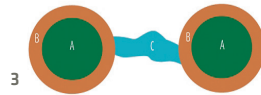


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2 MONTREAL ISLAND'S 10 ECO-TERRITORIES 3 A MODEL FOR ECOLOGICAL DEVELOPMENT : CONSERVATION ZONES ARE SURROUNDED BY PROTECTION BUFFERS AND LINKED BY ECO-CORRIDORS



has also led to more densely built developments, and the emergence of companies specializing in this type of project.

In order to facilitate discussions, the City works with two major partners in the conservation field: Ducks Unlimited Canada and the Nature Conservancy of Canada. Without their support, it would have been more difficult for the City to make use of the tax breaks offered by other levels of government.

Six years after the strategy was launched, the City has protected 5.8% of its land base and revised its goal to 8%. In addition, the large parks office is working with a citizens' group to create a humanized landscape that would make it possible to expand the size of the protected zones and preserve the remaining parcels of agricultural land within city limits.

**A SHORT-LIVED SHOCK** The creation of the innovative Ecoterritory concept as an adjunct to the urban planning apparatus set off a powerful shockwave among planners, who generally see it as their duty to ensure that planning regulations are free of all vagueness. At first, they saw the Ecoterritories as gaps, even aberrations. But the overall experience has been so positive and successful that planners are now looking for ways to innovate and adapt the master plan to today's realities, to the point that the next iteration of the plan will be labelled as "sustainable."

Of all components of the City's biodiversity strategy, the natural areas protection strategy has been the easiest to implement. In a word, protecting an existing ecosystem is always easier than restoring a damaged one.

The City's toughest challenge starts now, since the second phase is to improve the quality of life in extensively paved inner-city neighbourhoods. The best way to fulfill residents' desires is to green the city, and increase urban biodiversity as much as possible in order to enhance residents' comfort through the reassuring presence of nature in their immediate environment. Once again innovation will be required, and the city's landscape architects are already hard at work. And we are very, very confident about the future.

DONALD RAKE, LANDSCAPE ARCHITECT, V D E M, IS THE PROJECT CO-ORDINATOR OF THE 'POINTE AUX PRAIRIES' PROJECT ILLUSTRATED IN THE CASE STUDY. HE IS WORKING IN COLLABORATION WITH THE FIRM PLANIA.

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