

The Old Port of the Future: Who Does Urban Connectivity Serve?

Examining Montréal's New Plan to "Integrate" the Old Port with the Historic District

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Since the 1500s, what is now called the “Old Port of Montréal” was bustling with life. The Kanien'kehà:ka Nation were the area's most prominent residents. Where the water of the Kaniatarowanenneh (now St. Lawrence) river met the land of Tiohtià:ke (now Montréal), the Kanyen'kehà:ka fished and traded with other First Nations.¹ In 1641, Paul de Chomedey Sieur de Maisonneuve and Jeanne Mance left France. As members of the Société Notre Dame de Montréal, they hoped to convert the Indigenous people of Montréal to Catholicism. They arrived in 1642, set up a settlement called Fort Ville-Marie, and began rapidly constructing the Port. What followed were two centuries of conflict and trade with the Kanyen'kehà:ka and the Haudenosaunee. The fur trade was most influential in expanding the port, and by the late 1800s the advent of steamships, canals, and railways made the port an essential landmark for Montréal.²



The Port of Montréal in 1830 (Port of Montréal Historical Image Gallery)³

¹ Abler, Thomas S., and William Berczy. “Kanyen'kehà:ka (Mohawk).” *The Canadian Encyclopedia*, <https://www.thecanadianencyclopedia.ca/en/article/mohawk>

² Old Port of Montréal Corporation. “History of the Old Port.” *Old Port of Montréal*, <https://www.oldportcorporation.com/history-old-port>

³ Port of Montréal Historical Image Gallery. “The Port of Montréal in 1830.” Port of Montréal, <https://www.port-Montréal.com/en/component/igallery/historical-photos/facilities?Itemid=331&i=HAVRE-EN-1830>

By the 1970s, the port had closed all commercial activities and the area was declared a “historic district”. The next fifty years saw three major redevelopment projects in the area. The first in 1981, starting with the creation of the Old Port of Montréal Corporation (the OPMC) under the Canada Lands Company (the CLC).⁴ In 1989, their master plan was put into action, extending some of the boardwalks and designing larger walkways.⁵ Next, in 2005 the government of Montréal and the OPMC adopted *Vision Development*, a ten-year plan that set out to complete the vision proposed in the 80s.



Old-Port of Montréal, Vision 2005-2015 (LAAB)

Vision Development was taken on by Claude Cormier Landscape Architects with the plan to revitalize “aging infrastructure”, define “a strong public image... [with] a site vocation and genius loci of the area”, and “fasten” the Old Port to Montréal’s historic district.⁶ Their vision was completed around 2015 with enhanced greenspace and an expanded walkway leading to Rue de la Commune.

⁴ Old Port of Montréal Corporation. “History of the Old Port.” *Old Port of Montréal*, <https://www.oldportcorporation.com/history-old-port>

⁵ Canadian Centre for Architecture. “Old Port of Montréal Master Plan, Montréal, Québec.” *CCA Archives*, <https://www.cca.qc.ca/en/archives/144578/peter-rose-fonds/474194/architectural-projects/476121/old-port-of-Montréal-master-plan-Montréal-quebec>

⁶ LAAB. “Old-Port of Montréal, Vision 2005-2015.” *LAAB*, <https://www.laabarchitecture.com/vieux-port-de-Montréal>

Having established this historical context, we can turn toward the present-day plan — *The Old Port of the Future*. This plan was initially unveiled in 2021 by Anita Anand, the Minister of Public Services and Procurement of Montréal and the Minister responsible for the CLC and the OPMC. The \$50 million investment seeks to “invest in green spaces”, “integrate the Old Port with Historic Montréal” and “enhance visitor safety”.⁷ In more detail, they’ve outlined how they hope to improve the flow of pedestrian traffic between the Old Port and the historic district, provide extensions from Old Montréal that reach directly toward the river, and replace certain concrete areas with grass surfaces.



The Old Port of the Future - Rendering from the Master Plan (CLC & OPMC)

All of this begs the question: What does “integration” or “connection” between a historic district and an Old Port look like in practice? Who is that “connection” for, and who is not part of that “integration”? I have arrived at this intervention because I’m fascinated by how a space with such a long social history can be collapsed into a single future-oriented plan. Corporate and

⁷ Canada Lands Company. “Canada Lands Company invests \$50 million to revitalize the Old Port of Montréal.” *Canada Lands Company*, <https://www.clc-sic.ca/newsroom/canada-lands-company-invests-50-million-revitalize-old-port-Montréal>

governmental stakeholders behind the plan have all cited community efforts and public forums as integral parts of the process. Even as the project's construction began in early 2023, they continued framing the plan as having two audiences in mind — tourists and “Montréalers”. However, reactions from those “Montréalers” have been mixed.

“More green spaces, more safety for pedestrians, better access to the river and greater integration of the historic district are some of the benefits of today's significant investment to revitalize the Old Port. This is great news for Montrealers, but also for all those who visit or work in the city, with a special focus on local businesses.” - The Honourable Steven Guilbeault, Minister of Canadian Heritage

Quote from the CLC's press release of the new plan (CLC)

In early September, the Link (a small newspaper from the University of Concordia) published an article titled, “Old Port Tourist Season Foiled by Heavy Construction”.⁸ The article spotlights a few business owners near Montréal's Old Port who have cited diminishing sale numbers resulting from construction. Many of them voice frustration with the construction being so close to their business, creating noise pollution and in some cases completely blocking access to the entrance of their stores. Camille Albri, owner of a lifestyle and fashion accessory shop on St. Paul St. West Street says simply, “We had no sidewalk. It was extremely noisy, so of course, far fewer people came”. The project that obstructed her business was the St. Paul St. West redevelopment project, which is not directly outlined in *The Old Port of the Future*, but is one of the city's preliminary projects before commencing the larger-scale construction. The head of planning for the St. Paul St. West redevelopment project, Sébastien Breton, said they are doing everything “one sidewalk at a time” and that they always set up walkways to ensure storefront

⁸ Pahmer, Dexter. “Old Port tourist season foiled by heavy construction.” *The Link*, 17 September 2024, <https://thelinknewspaper.ca/article/old-port-tourist-season-foiled-by-heavy-construction>

access. Yet other business owners share different stories, like construction workers setting up walkways but later blocking them to pour concrete.⁹ However, “breaking the rules” that the project has set is not the sole issue. Sometimes the construction is well within the regulatory framework, but the noise is so aggressive that even business owners don’t want to walk outside their stores. The city has responded to these concerns by providing \$40,000 of compensation to businesses that have experienced storefront construction for over six months and can prove a financial loss of 5 percent or higher.¹⁰

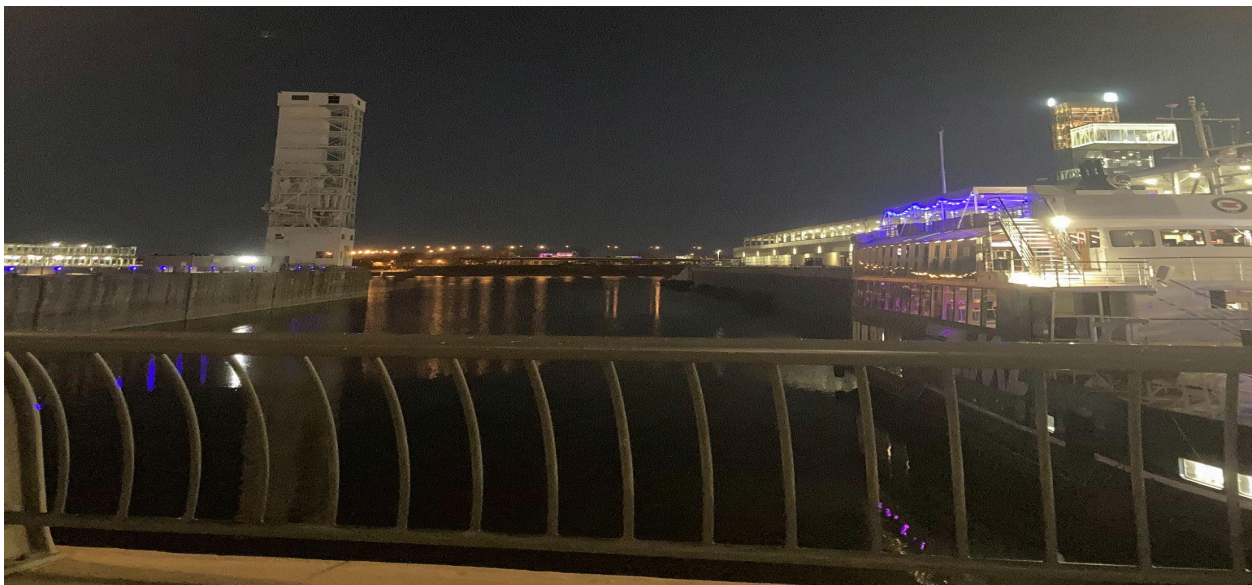


Photo from the Old Port walkway, looking out at the old dock (My camera, November 2024)

However, around 200 businesses have submitted claims with proof and have not received compensation. Nonetheless, not all business owners harbor negative feelings toward the plan — many are excited about increased tourism and “greener” spaces. Yet those who are frustrated feel like, in the face of plans to “enhance connectivity” and integrate different parts of the city, they are deemed disposable.

⁹ IBID

¹⁰ MacLellan, Ainslie. “Montreal unveils details of plan to help businesses suffering from construction woes.” *CBC Canada*, 14 November 2018, <https://www.cbc.ca/news/canada/montreal/montreal-unveils-details-of-plan-to-help-businesses-suffering-from-construction-woes-1.4905414>

Keeping these testimonies in mind, I conclude by returning to the site's earliest known history. As presented before, originally this less populated space held fishing and local trade activities. In citing this history, I do not seek to romanticize the past or to simplify the complex political dynamics that have always been at play. However, this history can serve as a tool to analyze the present situation. Today, when you look up the Vieux Port on Google Maps, you find numerous tourist attractions, some of which are open year-round and others that are seasonal.



Google Maps Aerial View of a section of the Old Port (Google Maps, December 2024)¹¹

The presence of Montréal businesses is nearly nonexistent on the actual Old Port strip. In addition, the strip of green space between the Old Port and the historic district is not large or wooded enough to constitute a park. I wonder if instead of building more “connective” walkways, the plan could shift its attention to bringing shops or services that Montréalers need year-round to the Old Port strip. Tourism comes in seasons and waves, but residents of Montréal

¹¹ Google Maps. “Old Port of Montreal.” *Google Maps*, December 2024, https://www.google.com/maps/place/Old+Port+of+Montreal,+Montreal,+QC,+Canada/@45.5069722,-73.5498074,2726m/data=!3m2!1e3!4b1!4m6!3m5!1s0x4cc91a57c0570d4f:0xd16f257ab5a74cac!8m2!3d45.5076798!4d-73.5508688!16s%2F%2F1hg4vlnzn?entry=tu&g_ep=EgoyMDI0MTIxMS4wI

are always there. Perhaps “connectivity” and “integration” can be better served by centering the needs of Montréalers completely outside of the tourism industry. As I indicated above, tourism-oriented services already exist. Instead of framing the goal as connecting the Old Port to the historic district, the city should frame it as connecting Montréalers to one of their most important landmarks.

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