

Le public dans les musées : visiteurs ou citoyens agissants?

The Public in Museums: Visitors or Citizen Partners?

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THE PUBLIC IN MUSEUMS: VISITORS OR CITIZEN PARTNERS?

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Abstract

The Écomusée du fier monde (Ecomuseum of a proud community) was opened in Montreal's Centre-Sud district in the early 1980s. Informed by New Museology thinking, it played a key role in the newly emerging community movement of the time. In 1996, the Écomusée du fier monde was formally recognized as a museum by Quebec's Ministry of Culture and Communications. It has a team of museum professionals specializing in history and museology and engages in the same kind of museum practices employed by many other heritage institutions. In contrast, however, from its very inception, the Écomusée du fier monde has challenged widely accepted ideas about the relationship between museums and their publics. Over the years, it has pioneered a number of projects and experiments designed to foster increased community involvement in certain museum activities. This emphasis on participation is reflected not only in the Museum's exhibition projects but also in its collection development activities. In this alternative perspective, museum visitors are seen as active citizen partners and key players in the development of new forms of shared authority.

Keywords: New Museology; ecomuseum; participatory practice; ecomuseum collection

The advent of New Museology has led to important changes in museum practice in the past few decades. Confronted by a climate of growing challenges and uncertainty, museums have had to redefine the very foundations of their contribution and role in society. This current issue of *THEMA* constitutes an opportunity to pause and reflect on how the worlds of museum conservation, curation, and exhibition are changing. When these changes are weighed, the main conclusion to be reached is that in recent years there has been a trend away from an emphasis on the role of curators and content specialists to that of management and communications professionals. In some cases, institutions even offer exhibition curatorship responsibilities to artists, writers or other recognized public figures. This evolution in roles is supposedly driven by a growing respect for what the public wants. The “communications” dimension apparently reflects the new weight attached by museums to how their publics respond to exhibitions. Changes in the importance attributed to these different forms of expertise seem to be reflections of a growing trend toward increasingly shared authority between museums and their communities.

Even so, whether or not the leaders of exhibition projects are communications specialists or experts in project management, artists or “recognized public figures”, the discourse adopted and disseminated by museums is all too often legitimized by the authority of individuals who enjoy some particular status. This status can stem from their professional expertise or simply from their reputation; in both cases their

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involvement provides added value to how a collection or a theme may be interpreted. When considered in this light, the sharing of museum authority remains firmly in the orbit of museum specialists, with museum publics left on the margins. Is there any imaginable way things might be done differently? In its own particular fashion, this is precisely how the *Écomusée du fier monde* is hoping to contribute to current thinking on the subject, in proposing a “shared authority” approach under which visitors play a more active role in how museums operate. Effectively, since its opening in the early 1980s, the *Écomusée du fier monde* has made a point of adopting practices driven by New Museology and community education principles. The Museum has engaged in a significant number of projects centred on community participation with residents and marginalized groups in Montreal’s Centre-Sud district. One telling example is the Museum’s over 15-year association with the *Atelier des lettres* (Learn Your Letters Workshop), a local community organization for literacy skills development. The association between the Museum and the *Atelier* eventually led to the presentation of five exhibitions curated by illiterate adults in the community. What is more, the latest of these projects, *La parole est à nous* (We now have the floor), was awarded the 2013 Award for Excellence in Education by the Association of Canadian Museums.

Citizen participation in museum practice is far from being limited only to curating particular exhibitions. Shared authority is also a fundamental part of the dynamic behind other aspects of the approach taken by the *Écomusée du fier monde* toward its community. In a further application of New Museology principles, the Museum has developed the concept of the “ecomuseum collection” (Binette and Romano 2015). In addition to its permanent collection of objects and documents, the *Écomusée du fier monde* has established an ecomuseum collection policy that includes a community participation process (which will be described more fully below).

The considerations presented here are not simply theoretical in nature. Rather, they are an occasion to describe experiments in authority-sharing in the museum context. We will try to illustrate how projects of this nature transform the relationships between museum professionals and their publics, so leading to sea changes in the way expertise is recognized and shared. These new relationships underscore the crucial role “active citizen partners” can play within a museum.

Choosing to work in close collaboration with local residents and community groups does not mean stepping entirely away from more conventional approaches to curating exhibitions. The *Écomusée du fier monde* is also a well-recognized museum specializing in the history of industrialization and the working classes and plays an active role in this respect on the Montreal museum scene. In the course of its existence, it has developed widely-recognized expertise relating to the heritage and history of its surrounding urban area. In recent years, drawing on research carried out in conjunction with knowledgeable academic specialists, the Museum has staged several exhibitions exploring themes and issues in industrial history and the history of the city’s working people. The *Écomusée du fier monde* has an ongoing close relationship with the community services sector of the Université du Québec à Montréal (UQAM) and also with a number of research teams and scholars. The Museum is one of the members of the management committee of UQAM’s *Laboratoire d’histoire et de patrimoine de Montréal* (Montreal History and Heritage Laboratory) whose Director, historian Joanne Burgess, has been a long-standing associate of the *Écomusée du fier monde*. These different partnerships are fundamental to ensuring that the approaches adopted for the historical research carried out by or for the Museum meet accepted standards of scientific rigour. In certain cases, the organization of particular exhibitions is entrusted entirely to specialists in history or museology.

Before we look more specifically at the different efforts made by the Museum to encourage community participation, it would perhaps be useful to briefly sketch out the background to the establishment of the *Écomusée du fier monde* and some major highlights of its evolving history over the past 35 years. The Museum developed out of a specific neighbourhood and a particular historical context and both of these factors were fundamental to forging its identity. As a result, we focus particularly on the changes that



Figure 1. A view of the Centre-Sud district, circa 1984. © Écomusée du fier monde.

have taken place in the area where it is located. This kind of analysis of the Museum's environment is necessary for any in-depth understanding of its neighbourhood and community. The changes that have occurred in this urban environment and in the makeup of its residents have undeniably impacted on the different practices adopted by the Museum.

THE CENTRE-SUD DISTRICT: A HISTORICAL OVERVIEW

The Centre-Sud is an urban neighbourhood of downtown Montreal, located east of the city centre between Sherbrooke Street and the Saint Lawrence River (Figure 1). It has a rich history stemming from the early industrial dominance of the City of Montreal and the very difficult living conditions experienced by working class families during the industrialization and post-industrialization periods¹. Even so, the economic decline and population losses experienced after the Second World War revealed the resilience and pride that could be found in a community determined to take charge of its own destiny.

It was in the early 19th century that the area – known at the time as the Suburb of Quebec – began to take shape. The neighbourhood first developed along the Québec Road, which was given the name Notre-Dame Street in 1890. This latter thoroughfare developed into a major industrial corridor in the second half of the 19th century, as large companies like Molson Breweries located there and began to employ thousands of workers. With increasingly dense industrialization, any available undeveloped sites on the outskirts of the city were in high demand. A number of industrial hubs began to take shape and, in close proximity, residential areas to house the thousands of workers they employed, along with their families.

A growing number of other factories, often smaller in size and centred around light industry, also became part of this increasingly dense urban fabric. Worker housing was surrounded by factories, stores,

churches and schools. Urbanization spread to the north and had reached Sherbrooke Street by the beginning of the 20th century, by which time the number of residents in the area had climbed to 80,000 people. All these changes led to the development of a clearly identifiable community environment, known to Montrealers by the nickname *Faubourg à melasse* (the Molasses District).

In 1941, the district was at the height of its boom years. The factories were running at full capacity and the population of what was to become the Centre-Sud had risen to 100,000 people. Working class families with their many children were living in small, cramped housing. Yet in spite of the fact that both living and working conditions were far from easy, people felt proud of who they were and believed things could only get better.

The end of the Second World War saw a wave of deindustrialization hit Montreal's inner city areas. Many factories or businesses left the Centre-Sud district to relocate in new industrial premises, often in more peripheral locations. Other spheres of economic activity were hit by transfers of manufacturing operations to developing countries. A large number of factories, notably in the footwear and clothing fields, and previously major economic influences in the district, closed down entirely. These upheavals coincided with a period of major urban redevelopment designed to modernize the city of Montreal. The 1963 expropriations that took place to make way for the new Radio Canada Tower, for example, forced over 5,000 people to leave their homes. Many of the workers affected by these changes also felt that this was the right moment to leave the Centre-Sud and move to more modern suburbs with less cramped living conditions and more green spaces. In November 1974, fires that broke out on what later became known as the "flaming weekend", during a general strike called by the Firefighters' Union, destroyed a large number of homes and left more than 185 families on the street. Living conditions grew increasingly difficult for people who had decided to remain in the area. The number of out-of-work people was rising all the time and poverty was the norm for far too many families.

In spite of the challenges they were facing, residents of the Centre-Sud district were far from resigned to them. People took their affairs into their own hands and got organized. They set up community groups and rallied together to address crucial issues, ranging from housing, community education and the protection of rights to services for seniors and the organization of childcare.

HISTORY AND HERITAGE AS TOOLS FOR MOBILIZATION

At the end of the 1970s, the Centre-Sud district was still in a process of almost complete deindustrialization. The shop floor and the working class experience had become increasingly less of a shared reality for residents there. It was a time of transition, where a mix of social groups were living together in the one community. Faced with these tremendous social changes, factory shutdowns and a declining number of residents, some people decided the time had come to act to preserve their community's heritage and inform others about the history behind their way of life. And so it was that the idea of providing the district with a tool for highlighting its history and its heritage gradually developed.

Among the organizations established in the course of this same period, there was one called *Habitations communautaires Centre-Sud* (Centre-Sud Community Housing). This group actively campaigned for improved access to quality housing but also, by extension, for improvements to the service, sports and leisure infrastructures available to local residents. And it was inside this organization that the idea of increasing public awareness about the district's history really took off. The people involved at the time believed strongly that an improved understanding of the districts' particular environment, history and heritage would result in increased pride and feelings of belonging, two crucial factors needed to produce community solidarity. To this end, they set up a committee that was to draw up a comprehensive plan. But these pioneer activists were all too aware that they were venturing into unknown territory; they undertook the necessary steps to find "experts" in the field and turned for assistance to the Université

du Québec à Montréal (UQAM). And so it was that a professor in the Department of Art History, Pierre Mayrand, along with a small group of students, became involved in the project and formed with the residents a “museum committee” (see Champoux-Paillé 2007). Drawing on his experience as a pioneer in the field of New Museology in Quebec and founder of the Haute-Beauce Ecomuseum, Pierre Mayrand introduced the idea of an ecomuseum² for the Centre-Sud district. This was the context in which one of the members of the committee remarked that “... people see the Centre-Sud as a third-world (*tiers monde*) community, but no, we are a proud community (*fier monde*)”. And quite naturally, there they had the name for the new museum: the *Écomusée du fier monde*.

The Museum had modest beginnings. The team at the heart of the project was small and members were working on a volunteer basis, but their combined degree of involvement and strength of conviction led to some significant achievements. What was called at the time the *Écomusée de la maison du fier monde* (Ecomuseum of the home of the proud community) was initially quartered inside the *Habitations communautaires Centre-Sud* housing project, with no areas that might be suitable for museum displays. Projects were developed in conditions of considerable uncertainty and funding was extremely limited. Museum exhibitions were presented in different locations like community centres or other such places and could draw only on minimal resources. In 1988, the Museum team decided to take the necessary steps to be accredited as a museum, with the consequent formal recognition and funding of operations that this would produce. In spite of having existed for only a few years, the *Écomusée du fier monde* had already assembled a small collection which had been built up as the Museum’s different projects had taken shape. The documents and artefacts in the collection constituted tangible traces of the Centre-Sud’s industrial past and the living conditions of the working class families of the period who lived there. However, although the Museum was designated a “Quebec museum of cultural interest”, the hoped-for annual funding grant did not come through.

Only in 1996 did the *Écomusée du fier monde* finally obtain formal accreditation as a museum, together with an annual funding grant from Quebec’s *Ministère de la Culture et des Communications*. That same year saw the *Écomusée* established in its new premises, former public baths known as the *Bain Généreux*, ceded to it by the City of Montreal (Figures 2-3). In addition to pursuing its mission of developing increased public awareness about the history and heritage of the Centre-Sud district, the *Écomusée du fier monde* has positioned itself as a museum dealing with the history of the working classes and of industry in Montreal. Like all museums, the *Écomusée* now has its own permanent facility for displaying and curating its collection (Figure 4). Even so, it has never called into question its community origins and its unbending commitment to working closely with the local community and community groups.

In spite of what has been a significant qualitative leap forward in its role as a Montreal museum, the work done by the *Écomusée* draws on a small team of only eight people, including four professionals with university qualifications in history, cultural animation, communications and museology. They carry out their tasks inside a simple, uncompartimentalized framework and have developed a wide variety of skills by working closely with different community organizations and by staying involved at all stages of their projects. These conditions of practice, while demanding, also make task-sharing and the development of the Museum’s unique expertise markedly more successful.

In 2010, the *Écomusée du fier monde* adopted a new strategic plan where it defined itself as a “museum of history and community museum” (see Meunier 2009). This designation reflects an important duality in the Museum’s mission: to function both as a museum on the history of the working classes and of industry in Montreal and even more importantly, as a museum committed to citizen participation. The phrasing of the very first objective of its action plan was: “To put the part played by our citizens at the heart and centre of Museum activities”, a goal that clearly illustrates the organization’s commitment to developing this field of museum practice.



Figure 2. Interior of the Bain Généreux, in 1928. © Archives of the Institut de technologie agroalimentaire in Saint-Hyacinthe.

EXHIBITIONS AS TOOLS FOR COMMUNITY EDUCATION

Clearly, the Écomusée du fier monde was the product both of the community movement and of developments in New Museology. Many of the practices it has developed are based on community education principles. From the very outset, one of the first goals of the new Museum was to adopt a “shared authority” approach with the community or its organizations, in mounting exhibitions. A certain degree of experimentation had to take place initially before the institution was able to arrive at a more structurally appropriate framework for authority sharing. Different levels of participation were phased in progressively for the early projects undertaken by the Écomusée du fier monde.

The first level was clearly that of ordinary visitors. It may seem strange, even contradictory, to analyze the act of visiting an exhibition in terms of the level of participation involved. But, in the Centre-Sud district of the time, drawing people to the Museum was a real challenge, as a large proportion of the community was underprivileged and poorly educated. The simple act of going into a museum or visiting an exhibition thus became a measure of the level of participation. To a certain degree, this was the guiding idea behind the first of the Museum’s projects, organized in 1981 under the title *Du marché d’autrefois au musée de demain* (From Yesterday’s Market to Tomorrow’s Museum). This exhibition was designed to put the spotlight firmly on the meeting places and gathering spots of relevance to the local working-class community. In the Centre-Sud, the Saint-Jacques market had previously been an important hub of community activity before the building was repurposed in 1960. Inside the market building, there had been a large hall that was used for meetings of all kinds, political rallies, social get-togethers or community entertainment events. The final part of this same exhibition was designed to steer



Figure 3. Interior of the Écomusée du fier monde, 2010. © Julie Landreville, Écomusée du fier monde.

Figure 4. Section of the permanent exhibition *À cœur de jours! Grandeurs et misères d'un quartier populaire* (All the lifelong day! The triumphs and tragedies of a working-class neighbourhood). © Écomusée du fier monde.

visitor attention toward the future, to what the Museum could eventually be, a place that would ideally become an equally important meeting place, gathering-spot and venue for discussion and debate. The approach adopted was grounded in recognized historical research methodology and reflected the goal of developing a fruitful relationship with the local community so as to ensure the successful establishment of an ecomuseum for the Centre-Sud district.

In 1983, the members of the *Écomusée* embarked upon the preparation of an exhibition entitled *Entre l'usine et la cuisine*³ (Between the Shop Floor and the Kitchen) featuring the everyday lives of the women of the district. The objective in preparing and presenting this new exhibition was to put more emphasis on the day-to-day realities of how local residents lived and worked. The research behind the project drew on some forty interviews with women from the community who described their schooldays, their teen years on the shop floor and their lives as wives and mothers – and “monarchs of the kitchen.” They also provided a range of personal items, photographs, wedding gowns and christening robes, as well as a certain number of household utensils, all of which were used to illustrate different aspects of the exhibition. Explanatory texts were written in a first person singular style and, while based on a variety of experiences described by participants, used only a single voice for each description.

This project opened the way to a second level of participation, where members of the community are seen as a resource that can be drawn on, not only for information about real-life experiences, but also as a source of objects and documents that can constitute invaluable background material when exhibitions are being mounted. The women who were part of the project emerged stronger from the experience. Seeing the realities of their daily lives presented and given structure in an exhibition that was open to the general public boosted their self-confidence and left no doubt in their minds that they had a rightful place in the history of their district. For the Museum, citizen participation was seen as being a valuable approach to use, both as a way to focus attention on lesser-known realities, and also as a tool for empowerment when working with marginalized individuals or groups.

In 1983, the ICEA (Institute for Cooperation in Adult Education) organized an event in Montreal for people to meet the Swedish writer and public speaker, Sven Lindqvist, author of *Dig where you stand*⁴ (freely translated), a guide for workers wanting to research the history of their own particular field of

work. The book had met with a considerable degree of success in Sweden and had led to the development and circulation of a variety of different community research initiatives ranging from exhibitions to drama productions and published works. With support from the community services sector of the Université du Québec à Montréal (UQAM), a study trip to Sweden was subsequently organized to give Quebec participants opportunities to assess how they might best apply this method to achieve concrete results.

Stimulated by this approach, the members of the *Écomusée du fier monde*, still with the support of UQAM's community services sector, undertook a new initiative, beginning in 1986. They contacted a group of retirees from a well-known tobacco factory in the area, the MacDonal Tobacco Company, which had been founded in 1854 and is still in operation today. They set up a working group with the retirees and worked closely with them at every stage of the process leading to the production of an exhibition. It was these retirees who chose the themes for the exhibition, carried out the necessary historical research and undertook the collection and selection of the items and documents to be displayed. They also contributed to the scripting of the exhibition and themselves wrote the texts that would be used. When the exhibition finally opened to the public, it was these self-same retirees who acted as facilitators and animators. Who better than they for that task?

As the project moved ahead, the different steps in the process were noted down in a methodology document, later to become a series of small instruction sheets entitled *Exposer son histoire*⁵ (Reveal your history) (Figure 5). One of the results of this project was the development of what became known as the “Reveal your history” method, which added a third level of participation. This latter level communicates the idea that the people from the community must be recognized as the key players at every stage of a project. That method has become one of the ongoing tools used by the *Écomusée du fier monde* to accomplish its particular role.

Although initially intended for workplace environments, the “Reveal your history” method would later be adapted to an entirely different context, as part of a crucially important partnership that must absolutely be recognized in this present article: the relationship developed with a community literacy organization in the Centre-Sud district: the *Atelier des Lettres* (Learn your Letters Workshop).⁶



Figure 5. The guide entitled *Exposer son histoire* (Reveal your History) was awarded the “Publications” prize by the Société des musées québécois in 1991. © *Écomusée du fier monde*.

In Quebec alone, almost one million people are thought to be illiterate. This number includes elderly people who had little or no formal schooling, but it also reflects the situation of many Quebeckers who experienced difficulties in school but never received adequate support. Many others have had to deal with, or are currently dealing with, a broad gamut of problems ranging from homelessness to drug or alcohol dependency and a variety of mental health difficulties. Problems of this kind are major issues in the Centre-Sud district and people wanting help with reading and writing are the target clientele of the *Atelier des lettres*.

It was the *Écomusée du fier monde* that initially approached this latter organization.⁷ In 1998, the Canadian Museums Association had implemented a program it called “Reading the Museum” that would support the introduction of initiatives aimed at reaching adult visitors experiencing difficulty with reading and writing. The resulting project proposed by the *Écomusée du fier monde* was ambitious, to say the least: working with adults with literacy problems, to help them create an exhibition of their own making – a goal that would allow the Museum to reach out to a particularly neglected part of the population. None of the people in the workshops of the *Atelier des lettres* had ever set foot in a museum and the *Écomusée* hoped that this project might enable it play a role as a resource for literacy development.

The project began with a recruitment phase. After a visit to the Ecomuseum’s permanent exhibition, accompanied by one of the *Écomusée* staff, four people from the *Atelier des lettres* workshops agreed take up the challenge. The theme that had been proposed was “work”. The four volunteers were asked to describe a work situation they had experienced, but also to put it into context by doing some related library or archival research.

A simple example might be the way one of the participants went about providing a description of his work for a major metallurgical firm. To usefully document his experience, he went to the local library and did some research on the history of this company he had worked for. Participants also had to select relevant graphic material and items pertaining to the topic being explored. In addition, the exhibit of course also called for very short explanatory texts, taking into account the writing skill levels of the different participants.

Every stage of what became the *ABC et travail* (ABC and the workplace) project took place under the careful supervision of a literacy resource person from the *Atelier des lettres* and the facilitator from the *Écomusée*.

Responsibility for the visual production design was assigned to a professional, with the participants actively involved in the actual mounting of the exhibition. At the conclusion of the project, the vernissage event for the exhibition was organized so as to feature the participants and allow them to address their guests and meet the public (Figure 6). This event even obtained a certain degree of media coverage. For the participants, the entire process was felt to have been extremely positive. Mounting a real exhibition in a real museum was a highly motivating experience for those volunteers; not only did they achieve enormous progress in their learning process, they also developed increased self-confidence and gained a real sense of accomplishment. This created a very strong motivation to renew the experience and led to agreement among the partners to continue their collaboration.

In 2003, a new project was initiated, under the title *Jours de fête* (Special holidays). This time, it was the participants who chose the theme. They had to describe special holiday celebrations they particularly loved and do some related library or archival research on the same topic. For example, one of the participants decided use Christmas to illustrate the theme, explaining why this holiday was important and presenting, along with a few personal photographs, some old etchings from public archives collections and a number of items associated with traditional Christmases of the past. Once again,

the results were highly gratifying. Not only was there media coverage of the launch of the event, but participants were also asked to give interviews for a radio program broadcast on Radio Canada.

Subsequently, in 2005, the *Écomusée du fier monde* and the *Atelier des lettres* undertook a new project identified as *Histoires d'alphabétisation: les 20 ans de l'Atelier des lettres* (Stories in Literacy: the 20-Year History of the *Atelier des Lettres*). This project marked a real turning point for the two organizations, as the exhibition was in and of itself a learning activity for *all* the students of the *Atelier des lettres*. This time, the activity was not developed with volunteers who had chosen to come forward; instead, it involved every single person in the literacy group, more than twenty people in all. The purpose of the project was to celebrate the twentieth anniversary of the *Atelier* and showcase the organization's unique history and achievements. With this objective in mind, the group went through the archives the *Atelier* had built up and also carried out oral history interviews with former educators and participants. After these preparatory steps, they developed an exhibition scenario and selected the documents or items that would be put on display. The task of writing of any explanatory texts the group felt were needed for the exhibition was assigned to small two or three-person working groups, with contributions from all participants, according to each person's individual strengths and abilities.

This project introduced a different dynamic, since it did not go deeper into the personal experience of the people involved, but explored a theme outside their habitual frame of reference, though it was a subject they were all familiar with. By going deeper into the history of the *Atelier des lettres*, these literacy students from the *Atelier* were obliged to step aside from the usual challenges of their daily lives and focus more on historical research methods. The new project was also an opportunity to raise awareness about community literacy issues, and so give these issues greater political relevance (Figure 7).

In 2008, the students from the *Atelier des lettres* launched another project, *Citoyen à part entière* (Full and Equal Citizens), joined this time by two other groups working in the community literacy field. All in all, over 60 people were actively involved in the project. The underlying goal of the *Écomusée du fier monde*



Figure 6. Participants from the *Atelier des lettres* addressing attendees during a vernissage held in 2005. © Julie Landreville, *Écomusée du fier monde*.



Figure 7. The exhibition *Histoires d’alphabétisation: les 20 ans de l’Atelier des lettres* (Stories in Literacy: the 20-Year History of the *Atelier des Lettres*), 2005. © Julie Landreville, Écomusée du fier monde.

monde and the *Atelier des lettres* was to expand the impact of the strategies they were using to include other community literacy groups and have participants describe how they understood the concept of citizenship. For this project, it was art and creativity, not historical research methods, that were the main basis for communicating their message. Each of the organizations involved offered art classes to participants, all of whom were given opportunities to find creative ways to communicate their own particular understanding of the concept of “citizenship”.

The most recent project, *La parole est à nous!* (We now have the floor!) was initiated in 2012 and this time involved again only the Écomusée du fier monde and the *Atelier des lettres*. It was designed to focus attention on the district through the use of two different strategies. The first was to use photography to capture the neighbourhood from a particularly original perspective. Two professional photographers, Miki Gingras and Patrick Dionne, conducted training workshops in digital photography for participants in the project. These latter then fanned out around the neighbourhood in order to identify and photograph different components of the landscape that could suggest letters of the alphabet – an architectural detail, a natural feature or a particular object. After several photography excursions, the participants had amassed a bank of photos with many examples for all the letters of the alphabet. The next step was for them to assemble these photographs together so as to build words that resonated for them, then write short personal explanations about those words. A number of the words built up from the photos were then chosen for the exhibition itself. The layout adopted for the exhibition used eight separate areas where three or four words were presented crosswise on their vertical and horizontal axes, to suggest the idea of a crossword puzzle (Figure 8). Visitors interested in doing so could even work with a blank crossword sheet and try to fill it in by identifying the words represented on the assembled photos. To a certain extent, trying to identify the letters and words in the exhibit was a way for them to experience the kind of challenges people with literacy difficulties have to face every day.

The second strategy, still in keeping with a photography-based approach, involved the creation of an immense photomontage showing a holistic view of the Centre-Sud district. This huge piece of photo-art was created by the photographer-artists Gingras and Dionne, drawing on a number of workshops conducted with the student participants. Their wall mural was then incorporated into the *Écomusée du fier monde*'s permanent exhibition. Shortly after the addition of the photo-art wall, work was done to develop a presentation format for guided tours, to be conducted entirely by participants from the *Atelier*. It was they who would serve as interpreter-guides for the exhibition and, on several occasions, would be present to welcome and guide other community literacy groups and special guests (Figure 9). These participant-guides presenting the *Écomusée* to visitors always began their tours with the words: "Welcome to *our* Museum". The entire project was a highly successful venture at many different levels. In 2013 it won both the Andrée Daigle prize in citizen culture awarded by the *Les Arts et la Ville* network, and the Canadian Museums Association Award for Excellence in Education.

THE ECOMUSEUM COLLECTION: A NEW TOOL FOR COMMUNITY PARTICIPATION AMONG MUSEUM PUBLICS

In light of its own particular understanding of museum practice, the *Écomusée du fier monde* has adopted a unique approach to the function of museum collections and developed special ways of working with the concept of heritage. The different philosophy guiding ecomuseum practices, compared with more traditional museums, is most clearly evident in their attitude to objects. In ecomuseums, more comprehensive approaches centred around heritage replace the previous paramount importance attached to collections of objects. Far from focusing on a particular collection or on obtaining further items for its displays, the *Écomusée du fier monde* chooses to centre on the tangible and intangible aspects of the heritage connected to its territory and on the related themes arising from it. Certainly, the formal accreditation received by the Museum in the mid-1990s means that, just like all other museums, the *Écomusée du fier monde* is required to have and practice a collections policy. However, in addition, to be consistent with its particular mission and establish the best possible framework for activities relating to its local heritage, the *Écomusée* has also adopted an ecomuseum collection policy. This relatively recent initiative still remains somewhat experimental and exploratory in nature⁸.

For the *Écomusée du fier monde*, an ecomuseum collection is comprised of tangible or intangible heritage elements that illustrate the cultural history of a community, or one or more of the scopes of activity of an ecomuseum. These heritage elements may be deemed to be representative or exceptional or they may be factors that contribute to community identity. They may take the form of buildings, infrastructures, specific locations, or of personalities or events of significance to the history of the community. They are chosen through an identification-designation process that brings them into the ecomuseum collection in exactly the same way acquisitions bring artifacts into traditional museum collections. In the case of ecomuseum collections, an ecomuseum can choose different ways of interacting with them, without actually having ownership of them. As a result, since the institution does not "own" these heritage elements, it is considered to have what is called a "heritage responsibility" toward them, a responsibility that is necessarily shared with the community.

The *Écomusée du fier monde* is in effect committed to working in collaboration with local stakeholders to identify the elements to be included in its own ecomuseum collection and to practice shared authority with these same stakeholders. The Museum uses community consultation to identify which elements are seen as being representative and recognizes that local citizens have a role to play in any actions taken as regards the elements included in the collection. While a good deal of behind-the-scenes work falls to the Ecomuseum's internal team or its Board of Directors, local stakeholders and partners who decide to become involved play a vital role in every *Écomusée* project. The entire process is built on the local knowledge and expertise that people have about their own community. After all, the underlying purpose



Figure 8. A section of the exhibition entitled *La parole est à nous!* (We now have the floor!), 2012. © Écomusée du fier monde.



Figure 9. Participants from the *Atelier des lettres*, talking about the exhibition they themselves had mounted, during the 2012 vernissage. © Écomusée du fier monde.

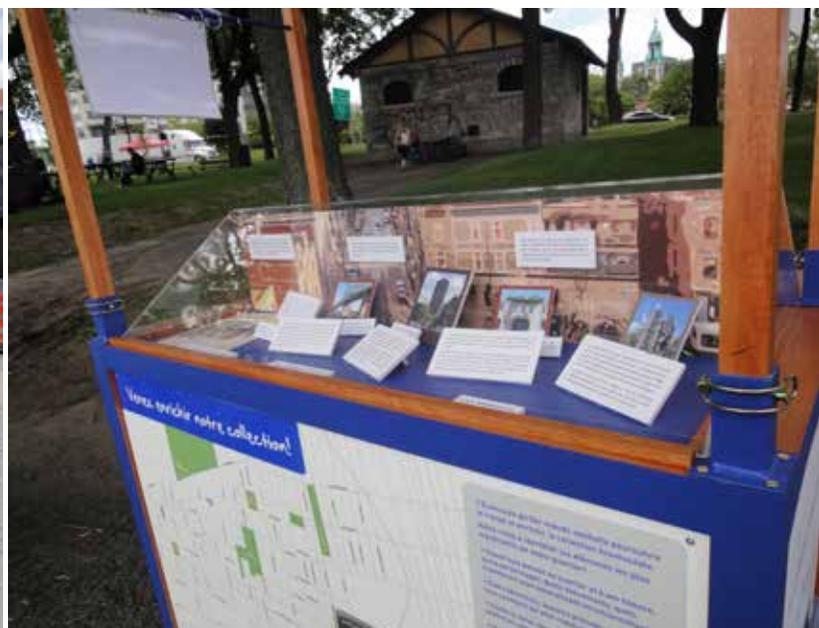
of an ecomuseum collection is to contribute to an increased awareness of local history and heritage and so ensure that this knowledge can be passed on to future generations.

The *Écomusée du fier monde* adopted its collections policy in June 2011, followed by a corresponding action plan. The project entitled *Collection écomuséale en action* (the Ecomuseum Collection in Action) was the strategy the Museum used to implement the action plan. To begin with, volunteers from the community were invited to a day of workshops where they could choose the first elements to be included in the collection. As a result of this initial citizen consultation, about fifteen different elements were identified. They were then included in the ecomuseum collection catalogue and became the subject of different documentation and value-adding activities. One approach used to catch people's attention and make local residents more aware of the ecomuseum collection was the creation of a travelling exhibit that circulated in different public areas in the district whenever special events were being held (Figures 10-11).

The creation of this collection was a tremendous opportunity to see the high level of interest, on the part of local residents, in their neighbourhood and their heritage. Two other points also became rapidly evident: people's desire to learn more about the origins and history of their community and their strongly-felt sense of identification with and attachment to their neighbourhood. Over the coming years, certain special events, such as the celebration of the 375th anniversary of the founding of the City of Montreal, will provide valuable opportunities for further development of the ecomuseum collection, while at the same time raising awareness about the collection and the *Écomusée du fier monde* itself. The Museum intends to take full advantage of these celebrations to promote its mission and its collection through *in situ* exhibitions, digital applications, guided tours and other forms of citizen action.

CONCLUSION

The kind of partnership the *Écomusée du fier monde* has built with the *Atelier des lettres* is an example of an innovative approach to sharing different areas of expertise. For its part, the *Écomusée du fier monde* has developed significant expertise in the design and production of exhibitions, while the *Atelier*



Figures 10-11. The travelling exhibition on the ecomuseum collection which circulates during different events held in the area and encourages local residents to become involved in the identification and promotion of their heritage. © *Écomusée du fier monde*.

des lettres contributes its recognized expertise in community literacy and adult education. It is the particular skills of the *Atelier* that bring out the best in the non-literate adults who become involved in the Museum's different projects. These adults themselves bring their own special expertise to projects: an expertise based upon their own condition. The perspectives they bring to issues or themes also deserve recognition and their rightful place in exhibitions.

In the development of an ecomuseum collection policy, the areas of expertise residents have about their own neighbourhood again become elements to be considered synchronously with the expertise of the professionals at the museum. The identification process surrounding elements of the collection necessarily draws on community expertise and leads to a sharing of the authority for heritage protection in respect to the elements so identified.

Inevitably, these different approaches and projects challenge accepted thinking about museums and their publics. When visitors become engaged in the museum experience, they may decide to make the transition from being simple observers to becoming "active citizen partners" who can have an impact on their own condition and that of their environment. By adopting new museum practices of this nature, the *Écomusée du fier monde* is demonstrating its commitment to creating opportunities for dialogue and shared experience between museum professionals, academic experts, the community, local groups, and marginalized members of society – all of whom have expertise that should be recognized.

The years have seen the *Écomusée du fier monde* move from being a non-profit volunteer organization to becoming a nationally accredited museum with a well-established scientific reputation. In developing its expertise through experimentation in association with its community base, the *Écomusée* has not only maintained its connection with its local community, it has also developed museum practices and tools which, without necessarily standing as models, can perhaps serve as a source of motivation to other institutions interested in exploring new ways of practising shared authority in the museum context.

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NOTES

- 1 Further detail on the history of the Centre-Sud District, as regards its industrialization and post-industrialization, can be found in Burgess 1997.
- 2 The name of the *Écomusée du fier monde* draws its inspiration from the definition proposed by Hugues de Varine which states that an ecomuseum is at once an environment and a community, its role being to contribute to the development of the area where it is located.
- 3 The project also led to the publication: *Entre l'usine et la cuisine* (French only), Montréal, *Écomusée du fier monde*, 1988.
- 4 Published under the original Swedish title (never translated): *Gräv där du står. Hur man utforskar ett jobb*, Stockholm: Bonniers, 1978.
- 5 *Exposer son histoire* (Revealing your history), available in French only. Montréal, *Écomusée de la Maison du fier monde*, Service aux collectivités de l'UQAM, 1990. This guide was awarded the 1991 "Publications" prize by the Québec Museums Association.
- 6 For a more detailed description (in French) of the organization, see Fillion (2003:97).
- 7 For more information (in French) on this partnership, see Fillion (2006).
- 8 The *Écomusée du fier monde* has used the term "ecomuseum collection" since the late 1990s, but it was only in its 2010-2015 action plan that the goal of establishing a "policy" on the subject was specifically identified.

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