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Changing Cities, Changing Museums

CAMOC ANNUAL CONFERENCE 2023 **MUSEUM OF THE CITY OF NEW YORK** **Citizen-centred Museum Practices**

A CULTURAL RE-AWAKENING IN THE CITY THAT NEVER SLEEPS • STRETCHING THE BOUNDARIES OF ITS CITIZEN MUSEUM MODEL: MEM • SINGAPORE AND ITS CITY MUSEUMS

Stretching the Boundaries of Its Citizen Museum Model: MEM

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Figs. 1a.-b. MEM's or the Centre des mémoires montréalaises' new building with the logo featured on its façade. © Ophélie Raffin (left) and © Sokhan Sim (right)

Created by the City of Montreal in 1983, the *Centre d'histoire de Montréal* (CHM) began its transformation from a municipal institution dedicated to local history into a new museum and civic space in 2018, changing its name to MEM - *Centre des mémoires montréalaises* (<https://memmtl.ca/>). By collecting and disseminating personal accounts, MEM is a pioneer in the production and promotion of oral history linked to Montrealers' memories. Its activities intend to stretch the boundaries of conventional models of collecting memory. By promoting citizens' voices, MEM affirms its intent to be a museum designed for, by and with

citizens. It wants to give pride of place to the people who shape the city's "montréalité", as well as to the collections it safeguards. Its narrative and relational perspectives have broadened to align with the new institutional mandate of co-creation and shared authority. The following article records a conversation between Annabelle Laliberté, MEM Division Manager, and the museologist Johane Bergeron.¹

JB: Can you give us a brief history of MEM from the founding of CHM to its current metamorphosis?

AL: The city of Montreal set up a number of cultural infrastructures contemporaneously: the network of *maisons de la culture* and the *Centre d'histoire de Montréal*

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which quickly made a name for itself as an interpretation centre telling Montreal's stories and showcasing its history. In the 2000s, the institution made a major shift focusing on people, citizens and Montrealers, and placing greater interest in communities and newcomers. Inspired by the Museum of the Person in Brazil², this approach allowed others to inform the content of their memories, opening doors for the existing team to think about different ways of doing museology. We began to collect memories in exhibitions such as *Quartiers Disparus*, *Scandale* and *Expo 67*³. In so doing, memory earned a place in our databases, leading us to adopt new methods for collecting oral history. This different approach to talking about the city was so successful that the municipal administration recognized the opportunity to distinguish CHM from other history museums in Montreal and to expand it⁴. In 2016, the City of Montreal became the tenant of the first floor of

² *Le parcours du Musée de la Personne au Brésil: une collection de récits de vie 1*. Rosali Henriques. *Musées. Enjeux et défis du patrimoine immatériel*. Intangible Heritage and Museums: Issues and Challenge. VOL. 29, 2010, pp.80-95. Consulté le 22 mai 2023, https://www.academia.edu/41009287/Le_parours_du_Mus%C3%A9_de_la_Personne_au_Br%C3%A9sil_une_collection_de_r%C3%A9cits_de_vie_1

³ For more information, turn to: <https://ville.montreal.qc.ca/memoiresdesmontrealais/dans-les-coulisses-de-quartiers-disparus>; <https://ville.montreal.qc.ca/memoiresdesmontrealais/dans-les-coulisses-de-lexposition-scandale>; <https://ville.montreal.qc.ca/memoiresdesmontrealais/memoires-dexpo-67>

⁴ For more information, visit: <https://museeshistoiremontreal.ca/les-musees/>

the new Angus Société de développement building, where CHM continues its transformation into a new kind of museum⁵ (figs. 1a-b). In other words, it's a museum where citizen collaboration is 100% part of the design; we share a holistic vision that always takes into account shared authority and co-creation. Diverse voices, sometimes with opposing or parallel points of view, all find space in exhibitions, programming and communications. In short, these dynamics influences all areas at MEM and their development.

JB: With this new impetus, what remains of CHM's DNA as a citizens' museum?

AL: The team sought to preserve CHM's DNA. In fact, MEM's DNA comes from the same root, but expands it exponentially. We elaborated the centre's identity together with Boîte Rouge Vif⁶, which has expertise in community museology, oral practice and transmission, especially with Aboriginal communities. We took time to go into detail about everything that sets us apart and everything that we find important; we realised that we've been working together for a long time and that this is the kind of work

⁵ The lease was signed in 2016. At the end of 2018, the *MEM - Centre des mémoires montréalaises*, announced its new name and in 2019 set up its offices.

⁶ For more information, visit: <https://www.laboiterougevif.com/>



Figs. 2a-c. A view of the entire constellation entitled "The constellations of the hippocampus" (2023) by Raphaëlle De Groot with details.
© The artist

we want to continue. Our conversations resulted in a guide to best practices and helped define co-creation, as well as different forms and levels of citizen collaboration: processes for which everyone will be held accountable. I believe it comes down to shared authority. The phrase that best sums it up is the one that is used in all our communication: “You are the memory of Montreal, let’s talk about ‘you’ together”.

JB: What is MEM’s governance structure and, since you have no board of directors, who determines the governance practices?

AL: MEM is a municipal museum that reports to the *Service de la culture*, and more specifically to the *Direction du développement culturel*. The institution is a municipal cultural facility that is entirely dedicated to the public.

Our ‘big bosses’ are the municipal councillors. They approved our mission, vision, values and broad guidelines. Our dream, once the museum opens, is to go a step further and set up a governance committee made up of citizens. This council could act like a board of directors to continue the work we’ve begun. Together we could reflect on next steps, while posing challenges, making recommendations and fomenting our evolution.

JB: How did MEM go about rethinking its mission and its citizen-centred cultural projects?

AL: Our mission was developed during the strategic planning process which was carried out by a team for over 18 months. This process gave rise to a five-year plan that guides our operations while appealing to our scale of values.

JB: To achieve its new mission, MEM intends to give pride of place to the voices of citizens, both past and present. It aims to reveal “montréalité” and the wealth of facets that constitute Montreal. What then is “montréalité”?

AL: To answer the question of “montréalité” and how to represent it, we set up committees made up of citizens who love the city. There were about sixty people involved, including academics, resources drawn from diversity, aboriginal groups, accessibility organisations and people from other city departments. We wanted them to point out directions we might want to take and to avoid. When all is said and done, it’s all about working with Montrealers of all backgrounds, letting them have their say and guiding us on how to tell the story of Montreal. It’s about being as inclusive as possible.



Fig. 3. MEM’s recording studio: an exception among other Quebecois and Canadian museums. © Sokhan Sim

JB: In fact, the City of Montreal has a “Solidarity, Equity and Inclusion Action Plan 2021-2025” to make the city more inclusive⁷ and to put human beings at the heart of its actions. The term ‘inclusive’ also appears in your new mission statement⁸. As a city museum, to what extent are you obliged to adhere to the municipal vision? Does it allow you to respect your own mission in your programming activities?

AL: Nothing is imposed on us. The general vision of the city of Montreal is inherent to our DNA. We’ve been operating within this paradigm for 20 years. On the other hand, culture has yet to assume its rightful place in the city and for the administration; it is an underestimated vector. There are a few cities that value heritage, but there are few North American examples to date. It’s a Western epiphenomenon.

JB: How do you address issues of social justice and specific ways of dealing with inequality? How does MEM put inclusivity into practice?

AL: We’ve made a promise to address difficult issues for citizens and society, such as homelessness or housing, from a 360-degree angle. One of the best examples of this is the cultural mediation work that artist Raphaëlle De Groot has done with audiences who never come to the museum. For a year and a half, she went out to meet them to create a dialogue and to get them to talk about the city. She used significant objects that she had collected and then integrated into a collective work of art that tells the story of Montreal like a polaroid. The piece is titled *The constellations of the hippocampus*⁹ (figs. 2a-c).

JB: While it was founded as an interpretation centre without a collecting mandate, the institution has evolved into a museum about society. Today, MEM has major 20th and 21st century collections that embrace memory and oral history or mentefacts¹⁰. What

⁷ To know more about the city of Montreal’s action plan, visit : <https://montreal.ca/articles/plan-solidarite-equite-et-inclusion-pour-ne-laisser-personne-derriere-20662>

⁸ “To promote the diversity of Montreal’s identities and histories through authentic and inclusive human experiences, where citizens tell their stories and meet each other.” For the MEM’s full mission, visit its website: <https://memmtl.ca/apropos>

⁹ For more information on the artist’s approach, go to: <https://www.constellations-hippocampe.net/>

¹⁰ The mentefact is understood as the trace of an event, a performance or an interview that took place but is no longer there. The mentefact is therefore a witness to what happened, a re-creation of the event without being the event itself, a “substitute”, as Jadé puts it. It requires a material support (magnetic tape, CD, DVD, etc.) to ensure its preservation and, above all, its dissemination. Without a suitable medium, the mentefact cannot be represented in all its complexity, hence the undeniable contribution of technical and technological progress. Blanchet-Robitaille, Ariane (2012). “Le mentefact au musée: la mémoire mise en scène”. *Muséologies*, 6(1), 55-75. <https://doi.org/10.7202/1011532ar>

spawned this transformation and how can you stretch the boundaries of your collecting model?

AL: We have objects that represent everyday life and popular culture in Montreal. Our oral collection came about when we decided to record memories to create exhibitions and document them. The current challenge is to implement optimal strategies for collection management and to integrate it into our activities.

MEM has given itself a structure that didn’t exist five years ago. We now have a dedicated collections curator and a cataloguer to put the system in place. The museum has grown from a permanent team of 5-18 people. We now tend to make acquisitions by having donors tell the story of the object in our studio. Once their story has been recorded, they realise that they have shared a part of their lives by talking about a piece of their cutlery, for example, in a different way than if they had just given it away. This object is more robustly documented. This is what sets us apart in the way we collect, and what creates a different and meaningful relationship between the city and the museum. We’re going to review our collecting policy once the museum is open and see what’s missing from our collections. We may be too heteronormative and risk missing parts of history. We’re going to carry out this analysis through a collaborative process. We plan to watch what’s happening elsewhere while forming a committee of old and new donors who can look at how they want the museum to talk about their collection and highlight it.

JB: MEM plans to expand its narrative and relational perspectives through citizen participation. How do you envisage meeting this challenge? What are the operational criteria that will make this vision work in a museum context? How do you maintain a balance between the roles of museologists and citizens?

AL: We have had a variety of experiences so far. The level of collaboration developed by Boîte Rouge Vif varies according to the group, the theme, and people’s level of commitment. Some projects allow for more collaboration and others less. At this stage, we’re trying to maintain a balance between museologists and the general public by using different strategies. When developing a new project, we keep given criteria in mind. On the one hand, we know our mission, vision and values, and we know where we want to go. On the other, we listen to the ideas that are suggested to us and take them into consideration. We are there as a guide or to ensure that the basic standards in museology retain MEM’s personality. With each project, we ask ourselves how far we can go with the public. We also ask ourselves another

question: has MEM lost its soul? Sometimes people are only consulted, other groups are more involved and present from beginning to end or somewhere in between. MEM professionals need to constantly assess the nature of projects. It is the role of my curatorial colleague, Catherine Charlebois, in particular, to guide the groups. Each process unfolds organically.

JB: So each project has an exploratory part?

AL: It's like stepping into a void every time, and it constantly challenges us. Yes, you have to be prepared to dive in and make mistakes. Frankly, the team makes this trial-and-error possible, as does the administration. We're lucky to be able to experiment, but you have to give yourself the time and the budget to do it.

JB: Can you tell me a little about the recording studio you set up in the museum offices?

AL: It was a *sine qua non* for us to have a recording studio in order to have more autonomy and to produce our own materials. This was missing when we were at CHM because we always had to go off-site to do the editing. We now have top-quality equipment that will enable us to improve our collections, but above all we'll be able to react to a topical issue on the spot. We can quickly change information in the permanent exhibition or take advantage of someone's visit by spontaneously inviting them into the studio to talk about their experience. This space allows us to edit and broadcast material almost immediately (fig. 3).

JB: Since the 1990s, museums have been trying to include diverse messages and audiences. They are also making an effort to diversify their teams. The hope is to mirror the diversity that exists outside museums' walls. How does this diversity manifest itself within MEM? How have you defined your audiences and how do you intend to cultivate active citizenship?

AL: The issue of diversity poses a number of multifaceted challenges and open questions. The first step we have taken is to ensure the team's own diversity. We are working with the city's human resources department to experiment new strategies. We are making a significant effort to hire people from diverse backgrounds to occupy permanent and part-time positions. As far as visitors are concerned, we hope to attract a variety of people through greater representativeness in our communication and programming. We also count on engaging citizen committees. With their input, we hope to develop exhibitions and activities that appeal to all age groups. In fact, we have chosen not to be a family museum, but a museum aimed that caters to visitors

age 12 and over... even age 90 or beyond. We also chose not to target tourists directly since tourists will come if Montrealers come.

We're in the process of defining how we can be even more welcoming. We have a lot of work to do to develop MEM, to become better known, and, above all, to welcome groups who don't think they belong here or have a role to play in a museum. We are especially eager to work with aboriginal communities who live in the area. By including people of all walks of life, our museum can help empower people to recognize their capacity to become agents of social change.

JB: How does MEM make use of digital and interactive tools? Can you elaborate on these topics especially in light of their roles in outreach and accessibility?

AL: In short, MEM has assumed the position that we are a people-centred museum. Digital technology is unavoidable, that's for sure, but we still have a lot of thinking to do. It will undoubtedly take shape as we move forward, but we're not there yet: we can't do everything at once. We have various platforms and we're reviewing our website. We developed online educational activities during the pandemic, but as soon as they were finished, we went straight back into the classroom. We've also just won an award from the Canadian Museums Association (CMA) for our "*Montréal en cinq sens (Montréal in Five Senses)*" project¹¹. The idea was to reach out to community organisations that were less likely to visit a museum like senior citizens' centres or groups devoted to the seeing-impaired. If I had money to invest, I'd prioritise projects that allow us to do this type of outreach. Our most important digital showcase is the "*Mémoires des montréalais*" ("Montrealers' memories") website¹². It offers an extraordinary encyclopaedia dedicated to Montreal with articles available in Chinese, English, Arabic, Portuguese, and Spanish. These have been translated and subtitled, but we would like to make this platform accessible in other languages and better known. We are also exploring ways to showcase our collection and tinkering with digital tools that help people access MEM from a variety of perspectives.

JB: MEM will open its doors in the heart of the Quartier des spectacles for the Rentrée culturelle montréalaise in September 2023. It will be inaugurated under the auspices of the Mayor of Montreal Valérie Plante with four exhibitions and related cultural and educational programming.

¹¹ For more information, go to: <https://memmtl.ca/en/programming/montreal-in-5-senses>

¹² Pour visiter le site Web, allez à: <https://ville.montreal.qc.ca/memoiresdesmontrealais/>