

Public Spaces, Public Life in Montréal

Assessing Differences in the Utilization of Urban Parks in Two Contrasting Boroughs



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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

This report examines the complex and ephemeral ways in which public life unfolds in Montréal's urban parks, both small and large. By employing the Public Spaces, Public Life (PSPL) method of analysis first conceptualized by Jan Gehl (2013), this research aims to highlight the various physical, social, and psychological factors that govern how people navigate through four distinct urban parks. The findings from this study contribute to the fields of public realm planning and urban design by expanding on prevailing research into the uses and benefits of urban parks, while also identifying recommendations to improve access to high-quality public spaces in Montréal.

Specifically, this research was guided by the following questions:

1. How do the policies and objectives outlined in the City's Nature and Sports Plan (2021) enable and constrain the utilization of Montréal's large urban parks and small neighbourhood squares?
2. How does the utilization of large urban and small neighbourhood parks vary between contrasting boroughs in Montréal?
3. How do existing design conditions and surrounding neighbourhood context influence the utilization of Montréal's large urban parks and small neighbourhood squares?

Summary of Findings:

- The Nature and Sports Plan (2018) identifies a clear need for increased ecological resistance and social inclusion throughout the City's network of green spaces. However, it neglects to focus on small-scale neighbourhood parks or adequately describe policy directives targeted at fostering inclusive public spaces for vulnerable populations.
- **More emphasis on social inclusion at the neighbourhood level and physical improvements for small parks and public squares** are needed to adequately address the Plan's mission.

- The results of this study suggest that there are **substantial differences in park utilization across Montréal**, depending on their location and intended function. Each of the four parks has distinct geographic and morphological qualities that influence the overall use of their public space. Yet, when looking for emerging patterns it became clear that **park typology plays the largest role in determining user profiles and activity levels.**
- Large urban parks provide a large range of potential amenities and attractions, functioning as flexible spaces that serve diverse purposes throughout the day. Similarly, both **large parks clearly serve a social purpose and function as wider community gathering spaces**, frequently attracting youth and young adult visitors, as well as larger groups of people in both the afternoon and evening.
- In contrast, **small neighbourhood squares saw a higher concentration of individual visitors, older adults, and primarily solitary passive recreation usage.** Due to their smaller size and lack of on-site facilities, these public spaces saw substantially lower levels of physical activity compared to large urban parks.
- When assessing differences in the use of small neighbourhood squares in affluent and deprived boroughs, **there was a clear correlation between overall park popularity and both education level and average household income.**
- The results of this study also show a clear relationship between existing urban design conditions and user behaviour patterns in both park typologies. **The most animated and successful parks were the ones that featured a wide range of amenities, along with complimentary design elements** that helped to define the sense of place and stimulate public activity.

The report concludes with the following 8 recommendations for the further activation and animation of public life in Montréal parks:

1. Emphasize the Importance of Small Neighbourhood Squares
2. Build Connections with the Community
3. Adopt a Gender-Responsive Approach to Public Realm Planning
4. Undertake a Full-Scale PSPL Study of Montréal's Parks and Open Spaces
5. Implement Sustainable Materials
6. Rehabilitate the Western Shore of La Fontaine Lake
7. Expand the Tree Canopy in Villeray–St-Michelle–Parc-Extension's Parks
8. Increase the Amount and Mix of Seating Options