

The Right to the City

@ Atwater Library

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- p. 6–7 Postcard for exhibition designed by Maisa Mreiwed.
- p. 16–17 Maisa Mreiwed working on *Journey of Knowledge, Vol. 7*.
Photo credit: Amal El-Dabbagh.
- p. 24–25 Detail of *Transition of the Montreal Children's Hospital
Through the Year* by Avy Loftus. Photo credit: Avy Loftus.
- p.30–31 Installation detail of *Youth and Spaces* by Marie-Pierre Labrie.
Photo credit: Dominic Morissette.

In partnership with Atwater Library and Computer Centre
Department of Art Education, Faculty of Fine Arts
Department of History, Faculty of Arts and Sciences
Concordia University



Catalogue design by Tina Carlisi
2018



Video capture of *Whose Square?* by Wendy Allen.

THE RIGHT TO THE CITY @ the Atwater Library



The Art of Urban Resilience and Change



Map of the general area of the inquiry: Shaughnessy Village “plus.”
Image Credit: Google Maps with additions by Kathleen Vaughan.

The Right to the City @ Atwater Library

Kathleen Vaughan, Steven High and Eric Craven
righttothecity.atwaterlibrary.ca

The Right to the City is an on-going interdisciplinary pedagogical initiative at Concordia University (Montreal, Canada), which invites students to learn in place and with place and the people and creatures who inhabit a neighbourhood or locale. Sited outside the university walls in community settings, the courses of the Right to the City bring Concordia University undergraduate and graduate students into conversation with the politics, cultures, histories, ecologies and aesthetics of a place – place being construed, in the words of feminist geographer Doreen Massey, as “a simultaneity of stories so far.” Students work with locals and each other to highlight existing stories of place and to contribute new ones, via research and creation.

The Right to the City or RTTC was launched in 2014 as a collaboration between Cynthia Hammond (Art History), Steven High (History), Edward Little (Theatre) and Kathleen Vaughan (Art Education), and with the ongoing participation of Eric Craven (Atwater Library). RTTC has a political and activist orientation, drawing on the thinking of philosophers Henri Lefebvre and David Harvey, who consider the right to the city to be a fundamental collective right. Harvey wrote, “The right to the city is far more than the individual liberty to access urban resources: it is a right to change ourselves by changing the city ... the freedom to make and remake our cities.” In five iterations, Concordia students in tethered and sistered courses have worked across disciplines to consider the right to the city with respect to Montreal neighbourhoods in transition, experiencing urban redevelopment, gentrification and displacement of some longtime residents: Pointe-St-Charles, Little Burgundy, and, in the fall of 2017, Shaughnessy Village.

Shaughnessy Village is the name given by residents in 1981 to a small area of western downtown, bordered by Guy St. to the east and Atwater to the west, Sherbrooke to the north and Highway 720 to the south. It was named in

honour of the notable Second Empire-style mansion of Shaughnessy House, one of the neighbourhood's 19th century greystone homes constructed by members of the successful merchant and professional class, buildings that were subsequently sold and subdivided into rooming houses or destroyed, as the neighbourhood's fortunes edged downhill. Shaughnessy House was saved and made part of the Canadian Centre for Architecture (founded in 1979). Other notable neighbourhood features include the sites of the since-repurposed Montreal Forum, the in-deconstruction Montreal Children's Hospital, the Grey Nuns' Motherhouse (now part of Concordia University), Cabot Square and the vital, active Atwater Library and Computer Centre. The number of highrises – many home to new Canadians and to students – make this area the densest in the province of Quebec – a density increasing through extensive condominium construction. New-builds stand alongside older Victorian homes which perch alongside the many cafés and the several shelters that address the needs of women and men experiencing homelessness or addiction in downtown Montreal. Relatively small, Shaughnessy borders the more storied neighbourhoods of Westmount, St. Henri, Little Burgundy, and Ville Marie – and is right in Concordia University's back yard.

In 2017, the Right to the City was developed in partnership with Atwater Library and Computer Centre, a registered charity and learning resource independent of the Montreal public library network, located just 15 minutes' walk from Concordia's downtown campus. Students in Steven High's (History) *Urban History Laboratory* and Kathleen Vaughan's (Art Education) *Studio Inquiry* courses, and seniors from two Digital Literacy projects facilitated by Eric Craven explored the specifics of Atwater Library itself, its histories and contexts, as well as the broader swath of Shaughnessy Village. Sharing a common preoccupation with neighbourhood change and based in experiential learning – learning by doing – the seniors' and students' work took various forms across multiple media, including a series of 150-second videos which cast a critical, reflective, irreverent and celebratory light on Canadian life, in observation of the 150th anniversary of the country's Confederation.

This catalogue features 20 Right to the City projects, exhibited at a community showcase at Atwater Library on November 30, 2017.



Installation view of *Youth and Spaces* video by Marie-Pierre Labrie. Photo credit: David Ward.

Why @ Atwater Library?

A resource for adult education for 189 years, the Atwater Library shares not just proximity with Concordia University, but also a history of commitment to the educational aspirations of working people and the citizen engagement agenda of the Right to the City. Founded in 1828 as the Mechanics Institute of Montreal by prominent local industrialists, this vital place of learning was one of the first organized adult education efforts in Canada. The Institute provided its members with access to books (at a time before public libraries), technical training (before technical schools), and a place for the exchange of the latest ideas. Learners even had the opportunity to take drawing classes with notable local artists of the day. History student **Heather Kousik**'s graphic novel explores the Mechanic Institute's shifts and changes over the years, while other students worked with key moments and artifacts.

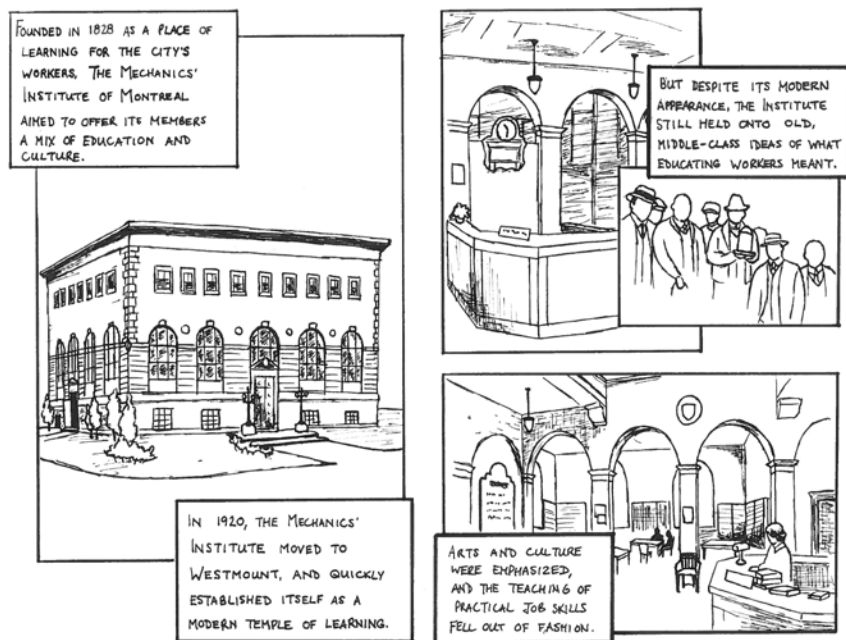
"The Mechanic's Institute of Montreal existed within an international movement of education institutions dedicated to 'useful knowledge.' The first Mechanic's Institute was founded in Glasgow in 1823 and like-minded institutions quickly spread around the industrializing world. Because of the international nature of the Mechanic's Institute of Montreal, the institution's identity was deeply rooted in the notion of class uplift through technical knowledge. Within thirty years of opening, the reading room was a key fixture of the Montreal Mechanic's Institute." So wrote History student **Laura Lasby**, one of 20 enrolled in the Urban History Laboratory who had the opportunity to delve into the Library's boxes of archival materials, held in the basement vault.

History student **Elijay Herron** reported that the vault contains "Correspondence files, minute books, annual reports, public lectures, and financial records track nearly two centuries of change. Since the beginning, the Mechanics Institute/Atwater Library has sought to preserve its history. Records were kept but also its history was inscribed into the very architecture of its buildings. The original building on Saint-Jacques was inlaid with a time capsule with items from the day to give future generations a perspective of where they had come and was moved in the 1920s to the Atwater Street location. The current building is emblazed with nine medallions highlighting the fields of 'useful knowledge' that the Mechanic's Institute has promoted since its inception."

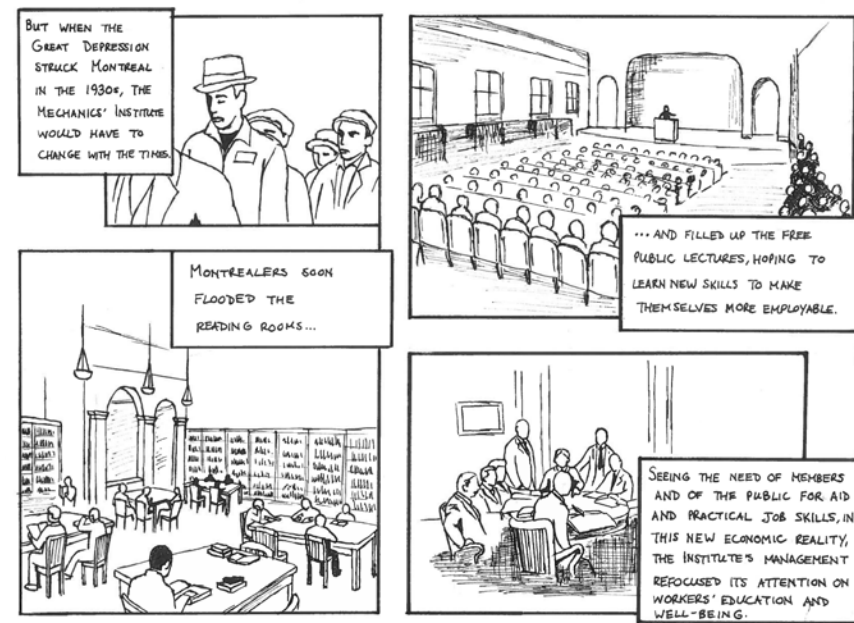


Top: Library archives from Elijay Herron's research project.

Bottom: Image capture of Frogger video game from Catherine Dubé's research project.



Excerpts from Heather Kousik's graphic novel on the Mechanic's Institute of Montreal.







Installation view of *Journey of Knowledge, Vol. 7* by Maisa Mreiwed. Photo credit: David Ward.

These medallions as well as Atwater's Library's long history of contributions to Montreal inspired **Maisa Mreiwed**, Art Education student, to create her poster-sized artwork, *Journey of Knowledge, Vol. 7*. Her intricately-wrought, over-sized book cover features the Library's medallions, two parrots and other architectural elements and symbols from the building, a National Historic site.

Atwater Library supports digital literacy, as History student **Catherine Dubé's** research and creation reminds us. She reported that federal funding enabled "the Atwater Library to retool for the digital age and open its Computer Centre in 1985. This made it one of the first public access and training-points in the city for computer literacy. Courses were offered on the latest computer hardware and software, including tools for word processing, graphic design, data management, and programming." Dubé also created a video installation which combined the Atwater Library's original Computer Literacy Test from 1987 as well as some examples of early interfaces and graphics including early video games such as Frogger.

Other video works screened at the November 30 showcase were created by seniors participating in Atwater Library's year-long media projects, such as workshops on slow motion techniques facilitated by Eric Craven and independent filmmaker Shireen Pasha. Participant **Lilian Harper** remarked that creative video work helps to "discover in yourself skills that you were unaware or haven't developed." She commented that participating contributed positively to her retirement: "The first thing that happens when you retire is you lose who you are because your identity has been defined by work. This type of creative workshop helps me to find ways of redefine myself."

Participating senior **Wendy Allen** found that the video workshop made possible multiple ways to understand Canada and the neighborhood: "Using microphotography and slow motion to get another perspective on Canada and to create innovative videos was an adventure that opened more of the infinite possibilities of digital literacy." Allen's video, *Whose Square?*, explored the spatial politics of Cabot Square, a public park named for John Cabot, one of the early European explorers of this area, located directly across the street from the Atwater Library. Somewhat controversially redeveloped by



Video capture of *Traffic with the Ears of a Pigeon* by Lilian Harper.



Video capture of *Demolition on Street* by Ramsay Blair.

the city to encourage casual walk-through and reduce visible drug use and crime, the Square has also been a gathering point for homeless and aboriginal peoples as well as a site of outreach activities and the Roundhouse Café, a snack bar managed by aboriginal people for the community at large. Cabot Square was also the subject matter of Art Education student **Dominique Turk**'s interactive collaboration, *Let's Chalk*. Responding to what she felt to be the underuse of the park terrain, on November 17, Turk engaged members of Shaughnessy in discussions about art, community events and everyday life through a playful collaborative art piece worked with sidewalk chalk. Visitors to the end-of-term showcase got a taste of Turk's outdoor activities via her installation of photos, chalk pieces and chalk boards, where they were invited to leave comments and drawings.

Across the street from Cabot Square is the old site of the Montreal Children's Hospital (MCH), public lands sold to a private developer after the Hospital itself was relocated. During the Right to the City term, the old buildings were being taken down as locals reviewed the developer's plans to replace them with condominiums, a children's library, a community centre and other features. Senior **Ramsay Blair** created a video that offered an impressionistic sense of this *Demolition on Street*, while art Education student **Avy Loftus**'s artwork took a more collage-like approach to the *Transition of the Montreal Children's Hospital Through the Years*, using mixed media and batik on cotton. Her work was informed by interviews around the neighbourhood, asking people what they knew about the MCH and their hopes for the site in the future. The artwork also acknowledges the indigenous people who use the neighbourhood as a place for gathering.

Also reflective of indigenous presence in Shaughnessy is the audio work of **Colleen Leonard**, who through the fall term volunteered at the Open Door shelter, an essential resource for locals including indigenous people, located in nearby St. Stephen's Anglican Church. Montreal's only wet shelter, the Open Door does not turn a person away even if they are drunk or high – or have a dog. Since 1988, it has been providing hot meals, vital services and a place to sleep during the day to Montreal's most vulnerable. However, St. Stephen's has been sold to an unnamed buyer and The Open Door must find a new home. In 5:39 minutes, Leonard's *The Intervention Worker/L'Intervenant – John Tessier*, explores the vital work of the shelter and its uncertain future through the oral history of a person who works there.

For Colleen Leonard's audio project see: <https://vimeo.com/244459532>



Installation detail of *Let's Chalk* by Dominique Turk. Photo credit: Dominique Turk.

Cabot Park

BUS SHELTER

MONTREAL CHILDREN'S HOSPITAL

PROT. STL FRAME BK ON TO WALLS TO PARTITIONS
CONC. FIRE & ROOF ALL SIDES

ATWATER AVE.





Wanda Potrykus at the Atwater Library's circulation desk, presenting excerpts from the Atwater Library's *Living History Collection*, a seniors led project. Image credit: Eric Craven.



Nero Jones at home on his bench at the Open Door. Photo credit: Colleen Leonard.

Oral history was also the medium of seniors including **Wanda Potrykus**, who developed a Living History project related to the four Montreal neighbourhoods of Shaughnessy Village, Westmont, St-Henri and Little Burgundy, which come together at the Atwater Library site. Like the students participating in the Right to the City, the seniors are concerned about the way the neighborhood has shifted and is shifting. They possess an activist spirit that matches the students' energy and also is informed by witnessing how the neighborhoods have changed over the decades and experiencing the frustration that comes from seeing 'new' proposals that mirror the neighborhood as it once was or that propose facilities that duplicate existing places and services. The Living History project honours the history and the micro stories as seen and heard by the community.

In her own explorations of neighbourhood change across the last century, Art Education student **Bettina Forget** used 3D printing and installation to create *Critical Code: Dorchester 1915*. The 3D prints are based on a 1915 Fire Insurance Map, rendering one city block located on Dorchester Avenue, the main street to the south of the Library. After printing one intact 3D model, the file was disrupted by inserting quotes from art theorist Lucy Lippard's, *The Lure of the Local* (a course reading) and was then reprinted. This artwork reflects on the recursive relationship between the citizen and the city.

Fellow PhD student **Marie-Pierre Labrie** integrated local youth's understandings of the neighbourhood into a work of video art. Drawing on a community project she developed with participants at Youth Innovation, her *Youth and Spaces* integrated the young artists' animated gifs. These proposed features the youth wished to see in Shaughnessy Village – a part of the city without a school. Labrie's video was shown in projection on the Library's



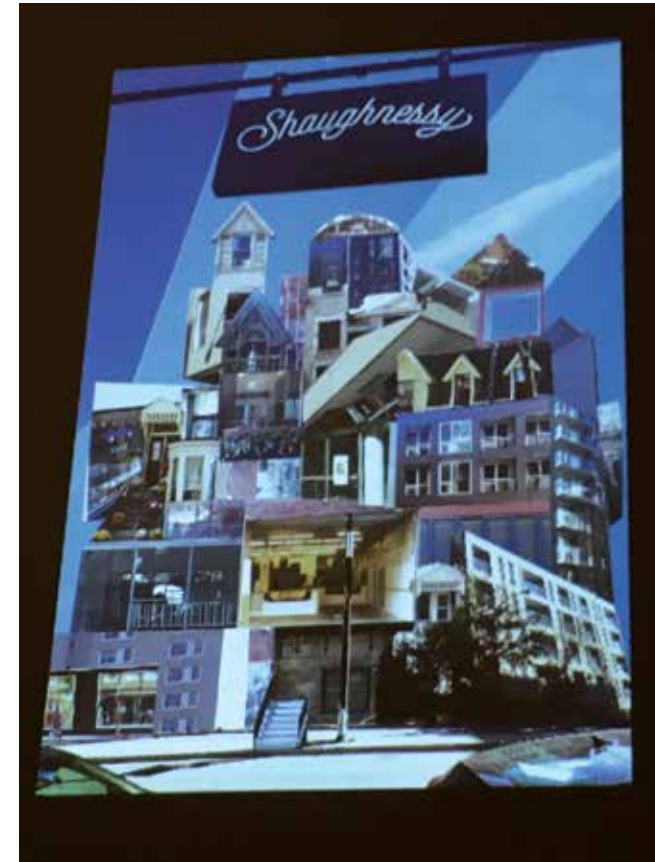
Installation detail of *Critical Code: Dorchester 1915* by Bettina Forget.
Photo credit: Bettina Forget.

I dream of a
park with a
Pond

walls during the showcase, creating a larger-than-life youth presence. Three Art Education students' artworks engaged with questions of perception and representation, mixing old and new visual media to portray the neighbourhood's juxtaposition of architectural features – from Victorian row houses through mid-20th century concrete brutalism to contemporary glass and steel structures. **Gianni Berretta** developed *Shaughnessy Digital*, a Dada-ist digital collage featuring a surrealist treatment of a building, integrating images of older and newer architectures. Shown at the Right to the City showcase in projection, Berretta's work is an intervention into the Beaux-Arts style building of the Library. **Thibault Zimmer** used both digital and film photography as well as a paper map and yarn installation to showcase the eclectic variety of *Places, Traces and Footprints* discovered and observed in Shaughnessy Village. **Emma Hoch** created *Windowed Reflections* based on her fascination with the reflection of the city in plate glass, with each window creating a unique frame for a variety of abstracted colours and shapes.

Concordia University itself was the subject matter of the artworks of **Shabnam Loghman** and **Naheed Gul Ali**. For *My Right to the City*, Ali drew on her architectural and artistic training as well as her alignment with Harvey's contention that individuals are entitled to propose changes in the city. "My hand shook as I painted again after 19 years! This project explores who I am and the part of Montreal resonates with me. Concordia University's EV (Engineering/Visual Arts) Building represents my right to be here: this is an analytique of how the architect in me feels the space ought to be laid out."

Loghman used artwork and research practice to explore Shaughnessy locals' access to green space in what is sometimes referred to as the Garden District of Montreal. Considering the garden of the Grey Nuns Motherhouse in particular, she wrote, "The Northwest wing of the building was never completed with the land serving as a fruit and vegetable garden for many years. In later years, the garden was converted and modified to include a skating rink and tree-covered garden spaces with gravel walkways. In 2007, the building was bought by Concordia University and the garden preserved for use by only members of the Concordia Community.



Installation detail of *Shaughnessy Digital* by Gianni Berretta.
Photo credit: Gianni Berretta.



Installing *Places, Traces and Footprints* by Thibault Zimmer.
Photo credit: David Ward.



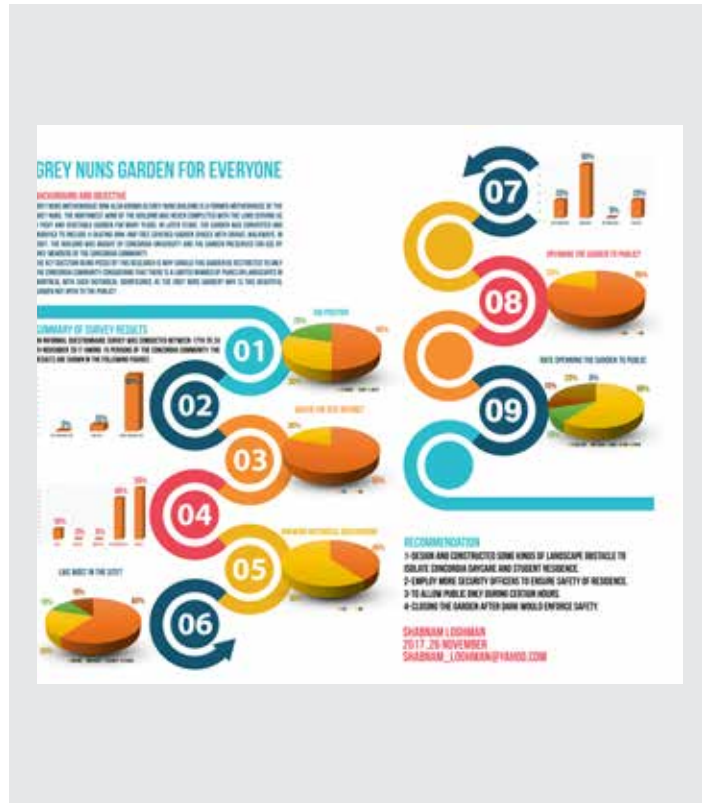
Installation detail of *Places, Traces and Footprints* by Thibault Zimmer.
Photo credit: Kathleen Vaughan.



Installation view of *Windowed Reflections* by Emma Hoch.
Photo credit: Kathleen Vaughan.



Installation detail of *Windowed Reflections* by Emma Hoch.
Photo credit: Emma Hoch.



Installation detail of *Grey Nuns Garden for Everyone* by Shabnam Loghman.
Digital File: Shabnam Loghman.



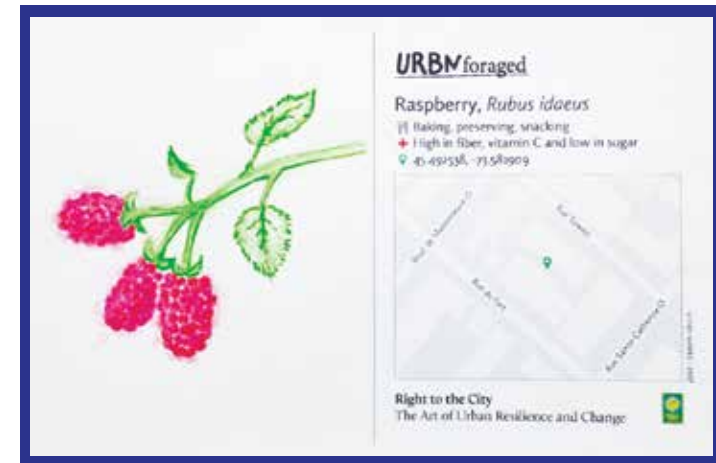
Installation detail of *My Right to the City* by Naheed Gul Ali.
Photo credit: Naheed Gul Ali.

The key question being posed by this research is why access to this garden should be restricted only the Concordia community considering that there is a limited number of parks or landscapes in Montreal with such historical significance as the Grey Nuns garden.” Loghman’s *Grey Nuns Garden for Everyone* included both a mixed media (reactive dyes and acrylic paint on watercolour paper) artwork and a diagrammatic rendering of the results of her interview-based research, which in November 2017 asked 15 random Concordia-affiliated individuals for their opinions on the question.

Shaughnessy’s natural world was the inspiration for *URBNforaged* by Art Education student **Arrien Weeks**. He created six collages that identify and geo-locate an urban edible, indicating its common use as food, reported medicinal qualities, textual information juxtaposed with a delicate impressionistic watercolour of each plant. Most, if not all of the plants are found in ‘green alleys,’ an initiative of the City of Montreal to revitalize laneways into vibrant urban oases.

Weeks’ and Loghman’s activist projects emphasize the importance of nature in the city. They suggest that – as urban landscape theorist Joern Langhorst has asserted – the right to the city implicitly comprises a right to urban nature, a right held by non-human creatures and species as much as by people. In Shaughnessy Village, nature is most visible in public parks and private gardens, but also in the *terrains vagues* or edgelands of the railway tracks that boundary the neighbourhood. These run along the top of the St-Jacques Escarpment, a hillside that marks the original shoreline of the Champlain Sea, created by ice dams and melting waters more than 10,000 years ago at the time of the retreat of the Ice Age’s glaciers. The escarpment and its green spaces are topographical reminders that life in cities encompasses eventualities beyond human scale or control, even as we research and share our stories, desires and wishes for the neighbourhood – our exploration of the Right to the City – of Shaughnessy Village, Montreal.

In 2017, the Right to the City was supported by special funding from Concordia University’s Faculty of Fine Arts and the Institute for Urban Futures, and the Atwater Library and Computer Centre.



Top: Installation detail of *URBNforaged* by Arrien Weeks.

Photo credit: Arrien Weeks.

Bottom: Shaughnessy Village “green alley” documented by Arrien Weeks.

