

RECLAIMING AN EXTRACTIVE/LANDFILL LANDSCAPE AS PARK AND ENVIRO-CENTRE

Renamed Frédéric Back Park in 2016 after the Oscar-winning director of *L'Homme qui plantait les arbres* (The Man Who Planted Trees, 1987), the Miron limestone and cement quarry and works in Montreal's St Michel neighbourhood operated from the 1940s through the 1980s. From 1968 it also served as a dump and landfill site, renamed the Complexe Environnemental Saint Michel in 2000. This site is a study in material and symbolic appropriations, of ongoing processes of extraction and consumption of urban land, labour and communities, and the possibilities for reclamation and repair.ⁱ



fig.1 As big as Mount Royal, Montreal's new urban park in the former Miron quarry and landfill (Susan Ross, 2021).

Imagine an immense limestone crater spanning some 192 hectares in area, reaching 70 m in depth, and which is gradually being reclaimed for public uses following its transformation of over 100 years as an expanding geological cut, including four decades as a putrid open wound in the working-class neighbourhood. Its most prominent vertical landmarks, two chimneys from the cement works, were torn down in front of a crowd of over 50,000 citizens in 1988. The landfill gradually closed about a decade later

and has now been repurposed to capture the biogas emitted from the waste below. This renewable energy is made available to the city and adjacent sites and made visible in the surface landscape adapted to recreate a habitat friendlier to living creatures.

A chronology of the site and area provides overview of the many phases of development:

- By the late 1600s: lime kilns are observed near Montée St. Michel

- 1912: Carriere Labesse begins exploitation of the site for limestone
- 1947: Miron brothers consolidate several smaller extraction sites to create Miron & Frères
- 1950: Cement production begins, eventually employing 200, with a fleet of 800 trucks
- 1940s-1980s: Ville St Michel in full development: population increases 10-fold with two main waves of immigration from Italy and Portugal, then Haiti and northern Africa
- 1968: Miron & Frères begin to use parts of the site as a garbage dump
- 1984: Ville de Montréal takes over the site
- 1988: Demolition of two chimney associated with the plant
- 1995: Construction begins of the Gazmont biogas power station
- 2000: Complexe Environnemental Saint Michel opens
- 2004: TOHU, a performance centre for the circus arts opens, with the Cirque du soleil headquarters and École nationale du Cirque, forming the Centre des arts du cirque.
- 2009: Taz interior skatepark opens
- 2014: Construction begins of the Stade de Soccer de Montréal
- 2016: Site renamed after Frédéric Back
- 2017: Anamnèse 1+1 by artist Alain-Martin Richard in collaboration with local communities

The island of Montreal was once home to multiple quarries, related to different eras of the city's development, with first, extracted stone, and then manufactured cement embedded in the historic built environment. The cement from Miron is part of the concrete used to build the city's Gare Central, Hôpital St. Justine, Place Ville Marie complex, the St Lawrence Seaway, and Complexe Desjardins amongst many others iconic structures of modern Montreal.

The closure of the quarries ended an era of extractive destruction and challenging labour conditions. Still, the next stage brought even less regard for the urban environments that surround these huge open pits, as they were identified as 'sinks' for urban wastes, from domestic garbage and snow collected from city streets to soils and other materials excavated from construction sites. Such waste landscapes initially took advantage of the vast pits but also exploited the lack of environmental regulations to dump the unwanted discards of urban development and consumption.



fig.2

Reinvented picturesque, with waste inspired art, community stories and interpretive panels (Susan Ross, 2021).

Montreal's history of green spaces is closely connected with its quarries, including the iconic landscapes built both on former sites of excavation (such as the Jardin Botanique), or with excavated materials (such as Expo 67's Ile Ste-Hélène). The process of turning the Miron quarry/landfill site into a landscape oriented to ecological remediation began under the city's 'green mayor' Pierre Bourque (1994 to 2001), whose earlier career had included directing the maintenance and development at both these and other historic landscapes. But the Miron site's destiny is at least as much that of neighbouring citizens who have long had to battle to reclaim a healthier environment, even when the closure of the site's industrial functions meant economic loss. This story of labour, protest and community is now told as part of the park's art works and interpretation panels.

In 2022, the Park/Enviro-Centre boldly integrates active waste management with restorative recreational green space. The wide-open space of the former quarry is further re-framed along the pit's upper perimeter by a ring of cultural and sports facilities showcasing Montreal's passion for circus, soccer, and skateboarding. As Anne Whiston Spirn has argued (*The Language of Landscape*, 1998), telling paradoxical landscape stories can be a necessary strategy to address former industrial sites in urban areas — but how far can interpretation help reconcile physical complexity and awkward adjacencies, or mitigate risks and futures associated with still active sites? Despite its expanding and evolving purposes, the giant crater — a virtually inverted Mount Royal in scale — remains an element of discontinuity in the urban landscape, one whose uses both serve

and challenge the neighbourhoods that continue to grow around it.



fig.3

Former landfill landscape with inspection spheres revealing the biogas capture wells below (Susan Ross, 2021).

Landscape scholar Susan Herrington has argued for a new type of picturesque landscape to help describe how to look critically and creatively at post-industrial landscapes ("Framed Again," *Landscape Journal*, 2006); certainly, this new type of park merges the familiar with intriguing strangeness. The most photogenic elements of the site's current use are the spherical inspection stations for monitoring the biogas being 'captured' in over 300 wells below the park, extracting new energy from the deep layers of organic waste in the landfill. This gas began to be exploited by the Gazmont company ca. 1996. Said to provide enough power for 10,000 households per year, this supply has been estimated to be depleted in 25 years. In the not-too-distant future one can easily imagine these space-age reminders of the hidden man-made geological layers, as new artefacts of industrial archaeology, technical sculptures increasingly overgrown by vegetation planted to repair the site.

Naming the park after Frédéric Back, a famous filmmaker/environmentalist, is in the tradition of city branding, but in 2022, naming any park after settler Canadians – of global or local importance – should indeed be questioned. The original process of extraction, begun here as early as during the 17th century, has been part

ⁱ This is an earlier version of the text published in the *TICCIH Bulletin* no.97 3rd quarter 2022, pp. 6-9.

of the ongoing project of colonization, in taking land violently, extracting and using its gifts, then re-taking it again as part of both repairing past damage and promoting greener types of extraction. A project to rename such a large part of the city should engage in the process of recognition of the city and wider region's Indigenous rights holders. Such a process is already underway at Mount Royal Park, where one of the summits was renamed to honour the Haudenosaunee territory. If in scale, ambition, and complexity the Parc Frédéric-Back is the city's new Mount Royal, there is also much to learn from the many challenges that Parc Mont Royal's protection has faced as its popularity has grown. Of course, name changes are mainly symbolic, but they can help signal a path forward to more substantive, and hopefully systemic change.

Further reading

This site is discussed widely in the press and local blogs, and interpreted through academic analysis, mostly in French. This is just a sample of longer studies and sources of information:

- Anamnese 1+ 1. [Art Public de Montreal](#).
- Brassard, Pierre. 2018. "[Les légendaires carrières de St Michel](#)." Arrondissement.com
- Gazmont Carbon and Energy. [Biothermica](#).
- Jolivet, Violaine and Marie-Noëlle Carré. 2017. "Métabolisme urbain et quartiers péricentraux dans la métropolisation. L'exemple du quartier de Saint-Michel à Montréal." [Cybergeo: European Journal of Geography. Aménagement, Urbanisme, document 816](#).
- [Radio Canada article](#) with links to two archival film reports on the Miron quarry.
- Tischer, Stefan. 2008. "Stratégies paysagères de transformation pour les anciennes carrières. La carrière Miron de Montréal au Canada." [Workshop Tunisie : Invention paysagère des carrières de Mahdia](#). Montréal : Presses de l'Université de Montréal.
- [Tohu site history](#)