

**Modalities for Establishment of the Relational Firm:
a Case Study of the *Cité du Multimédia*, Montreal**

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Modalities for Establishment of the Relational Firm: a Case Study of the *Cité du Multimédia*, Montreal

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Résumé:

À partir d'une stratégie de reconversion fondée sur le principe de l'entreprise relationnelle, du district industriel ou du milieu innovateur, on cherche à reconvertir un quartier péri-central de Montreal en une *Cité du multimédia*. On offre des incitatifs financiers visant à amener les entreprises à s'établir proches les unes des autres afin de favoriser l'innovation et les échanges qui paraissent essentiels au développement des compétences collectives essentielles à la *Cité du multimédia*. Nous analysons le rôle des divers acteurs de ce projet et les relations entre eux.

Abstract:

Industrial district or innovation milieu theories are at the origin of the reconversion of a peri-central district of Montreal into the *Cité du multimédia*, a strategy based on the relational firm. Financial incentives are offered to motivate firms to set up close to each other in order to foster innovation and exchanges, which appear essential to the development of the collective competencies needed for the *Cité du multimédia*. We analyze the roles and relationships of the different actors in the project.

Introduction

The paper deals with the reconversion of a peri-central district of Montreal, the Faubourg des Récollets, into the *Cité du multimédia*. Formerly an industrial district in the early 20th century, the Faubourg des Récollets, like many other districts in Montreal, began to be de-industrialized in the 1960s. Today, the district is striving to become a multimedia industry showcase in Québec through a reconversion strategy based on the principle of the relational firm and with the support of the Québec Government. Indeed, the strategy being implemented aims to motivate multimedia firms to set up within a defined territory, the *Cité du Multimédia*, which is part of the district known until now as the Faubourg des Récollets. The reconversion strategy is based on both a spatial and sectoral logic, which involves both public and private stakeholders and, to a certain extent, draws on theories of industrial districts and innovation milieux. The aim is to develop simultaneously both the multimedia sector and the Faubourg des Récollets district by encouraging the development of inter-firm relations and collaboration. This will help build up the collective competencies so essential to this sector in which continuous innovation is a must. To achieve this aim, firms are offered financial incentives to set up in proximity to each other, thus fostering the innovation and exchange that appear to be crucial to the long-term development of this sector in Montreal and Québec.

We will begin by briefly outlining some of the elements of theories of industrial districts and innovation milieux, emphasizing the sources of innovation and development of collective competencies. We will then present the Faubourg des Récollets district so that the question of territory can be better understood. We found this particular case study interesting since it allows us to explore ways to stimulate the creation of districts, innovation milieux and relational

enterprises, concepts that are usually viewed as the product of History. Thus, from this perspective, we will focus on the cooperation put into practice, in this case, between those in charge of territories and decision-makers in firms. The latter are involved in highly competitive, entirely “de-territorialized” global competition in the multimedia sector, currently one of the most fiercely competitive and demanding sectors in terms of innovation. We will consider the actors involved and the dynamics and strategies that have been developed, which promote the importance of interfirm relations, and their relation to theories of districts and innovation milieux. Although these are well-known theories, to date no conclusions have yet been drawn about the possibility of stimulating the creation of these innovation milieux, which are often the product of History. Hence the interest of the case studies. The fact that the history of *Cité du Multimédia* is only in the making means that it is all the more interesting since we can follow it from its beginning, to see if it will be possible to create this innovative milieu through the reconversion of the Faubourg des Récollets.

1. Territory, the relational firm and innovation

The overall goal of our research is to study the role of interfirm exchanges and territory as the source and location of exchanges, as part of a broader examination of the sources of dynamics in the innovation process and territorial development. By innovation, we mean social innovations, that is, the organizational and structural changes that contribute to the development and diffusion of productive innovations (forms of innovation more generally studied in economic theory).¹ It should be recalled that the economic theories of innovation generally attribute little

¹ See Tremblay, Diane-Gabrielle (1989). *La dynamique économique du processus d'innovation; une analyse de l'innovation et du mode de gestion des ressources humaines dans le secteur bancaire canadien*. Doctoral thesis

importance to territory and the role of proximity in the developments of exchanges and competitive advantages. The very process of innovation is one that takes place in a “black box,”—essentially the firm. The firm’s territory and environment, notably the institutional environment, are excluded from the analysis. In contrast, theories on districts and innovation milieux give priority to these factors, which was the case in the creation of Montreal’s *Cité du multimédia*.

Theories of spatial economy or economic geography have generally provided a linear treatment of the links between development and territory, territory being at best a theatre for economic development and at worst an obstacle to its growth. From a linear perspective, innovation spreads automatically in the economy and development occurs on a given territory, then grows from development poles. Territories that have development problems are thus seen as territories in which innovation and development are confronted by a series of resistance or obstacles to their diffusion.

In the Fordist and Keynesian era, the nation-state implemented regional development or industrial development policies. It sought to promote the homogeneity of territories and the adaptation of territorial characteristics to the wishes of the dominant firms (especially multinationals and oligopolies). This was the source of innovation and development of a territory and of the firms that set up in that territory. However, the failure of this strategy for many territories and firms has been observed for several decades. State strategies that focus primarily

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or even exclusively on supporting private enterprise considered separately, as well as policies directed exclusively by the state have not succeeded in furthering the development of firms and competitive sectors, nor in spreading innovation and development. We need only look at the situation of many territories and sectors in Québec, for example, the peri-central districts of the Montreal region, including Faubourg des Récollets, the topic of the present paper.

Thus, our research is in line with a new vision of the development of the firm and innovation, a vision that we would like to test through the empirical analysis of a number of territories and sectors, such as the *Cité du multimédia*, since there is still ample room for theoretical development in this area. We hypothesize that the vitality or institutional and social dynamism of a milieu or territory is fundamental to implementing the innovative dynamisms that motivate firms to develop. The aim of our case study of the Faubourg was to highlight and evaluate the effect of actors taking charge of the milieu in order to counter the failures of previous strategies, that is, those based essentially on markets, or those directed exclusively by the state. As our interest in the Faubourg developed, the government adopted a policy aimed at transforming this district into a multimedia city. Our focus is now on whether or not the diverse actors in firms and from other milieux will work together, whether interfirm exchanges and collective competencies in this highly competitive sector will be developed, and whether this territory, which was more or less deserted only a few years ago, will become an innovative milieu in the multi-media field. Our research process drew on existing theories of industrial districts and innovation milieux, which are briefly outlined below.

1.1 Industrial districts

An industrial district may be defined as a geographic concentration of a production system, established on the basis of a marked division of labour between several flexible small businesses that specialize in a single dominant activity sector or in a few industrial sectors. This concept particularly emphasizes the significant potential for *endogenous* development of a group of firms and collectivity in a naturally and historically defined area. This development potential takes shape as the firms engage in cooperative and partnership activities.

The following organizational principles underly the concept of districts: (a) significant interfirm exchanges, conveyed through a high level of *cooperation* between firms based on strong social cohesion but which does not eliminate competition; (b) the existence of trust relationships which foster exchange of information and collaboration between firms; (c) recognized expertise in a skilled labour pool and firms with a tradition of developing expertise in the district's field of specialization; and (d) the strong support of a local institution, either from the local administration or an agency that gathers and provides information to firms, maintaining a form of "techno-watch" or monitoring developments in marketing (Tremblay, 1998).

Although these elements might be found in the Faubourg district, it is still not certain that they are already in place. There is no doubt that the labour pool is taking shape in the district and surrounding areas, but it remains to be seen whether the innovation and collective competencies being sought will develop. In principle, innovation should develop through exchanges between firms and workers. And, indeed the state is attempting to foster innovation by developing physical and relational proximity and providing firms with financial incentives to set up in the district.

1.2 Innovation milieux

Aydalot and Maillat's theory of milieux of innovation, which is well-known in Europe, emphasizes the role of the territory or milieu as a source of innovation. According to this theory, firms do not come into existence before the territory, but rather district and proximity of competencies lead to the development and emergence of new firms. The authors attempt to identify the factors needed for innovation to emerge and firms to develop as a consequence. The notion of local links, partnership and cooperation established on a local scale appear to be the key to economic dynamism.

The concept of milieux of innovation has certainly provided inspiration for the *Cité du multimédia* project, which is based on the idea that territorial proximity should foster the innovation needed to develop multimedia firms. The *Cité du Multimédia* project will help answer the question of whether it is indeed possible to develop such milieux.

Theories of industrial districts and innovation milieux make it possible to bring out the importance of formal and informal relations for circulating information which appears to be essential to the development of competencies and innovation. Indeed, information can play a fundamental role in innovation since it constitutes what we have referred to elsewhere as a "socio-territorial capital" (Tremblay, Klein and Fontan, 1999, 1998, 1998a; Tremblay, Klein, Fontan, Rousseau, 1998), which is fundamental to the dynamism of a local milieu. We will now provide a brief history of the Faubourg des Récollets, since its history is a key to understanding its heritage, which is one of the district's major assets.

2. The Faubourg des Récollets

The Faubourg des Récollets is situated in a district that has been more or less deserted for a number of years, and, thus, may seem like a sort of “no man’s land.” However, since 1996, and particularly since 1998, discussions aimed at revitalizing the district have been taking place. To begin with, the City of Montreal and the milieu consulted each other about a (potential) short-term and long-term development strategy. But in 1998, the *Cité du multimédia* questioned community participation through the *Agence du Faubourg des Récollets* (@FR), a group composed of both firms and residents.

2.1 The history of Faubourg

Throughout its history, the district has seen periods of prosperity and decline, and is now experiencing a period of revitalization. Being part of the industrial belt encircling the city centre, the Faubourg district was considered the country’s cradle of industrialization. Its roots date back to the 1830s, but it was during the 1880-1930 period, with the construction of new transport routes, that its industrial structures took shape. Thus, during the roughly one-hundred-year period from 1850 to 1950, the Faubourg developed into an industrial district intensely involved in activities related to the operation of the Lachine Canal. Then, from the 1950s onward, with the decline of activity on the Canal, the transport revolution and movement of urban activity to the suburbs, firms gradually left the Faubourg.

The 1980s brought new occupants to the district—young entrepreneurs and artists such as painters, fashion designers, artisans and computer-generated imagery designers—who were attracted by its geographical location, the low price of land and the myriad potential use of available locations. Without fanfare, they gradually moved into the Faubourg. In 1990, the Faubourg was identified in the City of Montreal’s planning and development blueprint as a

sector with “an interesting heritage.” The problems of the district’s deterioration and the importance of preserving its heritage had already been raised in 1975 by the district’s property-owners association, the *Association des propriétaires du Faubourg des Récollets*, which recommended that the following four measures be taken to protect the Faubourg:

- mandatory stop to all demolition, such as demolition on rue St-Pierre;
- immediate classification of Petit Séminaire as a historic site;
- restrictions on future development of parking lots only;
- elaboration of a new development plan with participation of residents.

Because it was the site of Montreal’s first industrial firms, the district was already seen as unique. However, many buildings had to be altered significantly to accommodate new residents. Also, it was essential that the association and tenants participate in planning for the district so that they could invest in residential and work locations with assurances of being able to remain there.

With the announcement of the creation of the *Cité du multimédia*, the face of the Faubourg des Récollets changed radically. Several multimedia firms joined those already located in the district. They were attracted to the idea of setting up in the district by the financial advantages granted by the government as well as by the *Centre de développement de technologies d’information* (CDTIs—centre for development of information technologies), an incubator for new projects. Through this reconversion directed from above by the government—with its advantages and disadvantages—the district began to resemble an incubator of creative activities, oriented toward the new economy in which human capital and collective competencies play such an important role in creating a good’s value added.

2.2 The Cité du multimédia project

The *Cité du multimédia* project was initiated by the Québec state to support development and innovation in Québec's sector of new information technologies. The government's intervention in this field was actually triggered by a previous experience with the French firm Ubisoft, which a few years previously had been given tax advantages by the government to help it get established in Québec. Other firms in the relatively new multimedia sector reacted and in 1997, the government responded to accusations of favouritism by announcing the creation of three CDTI pilot projects, in Hull, Québec City and Montreal. A fourth is currently on the way for Laval, north of Montreal. In 1998, the government also announced the creation of the *Cité du multimédia* in Montreal, in a designated area within the Faubourg des Récollets. Firms that set up within this area would be eligible for refundable tax credits equal to 60% of wages incurred in the first year, to a maximum of \$25,000 per employee and to 40% of wages up to a maximum of \$15,000 per employee in the following years, up to 2008. These policies, which were both sectoral and spatial in character, were based on by theories of innovation milieux and therefore aimed to foster exchanges and relations between multimedia firms by locating them close to each other. The idea was that physical proximity would foster deeper and more regular exchanges, thus encouraging the development and constant renewal of the collective competencies of multimedia artisans and technicians. This strategy was aimed at creating dynamic activity at three levels:

Local: the reconversion of a peri-central district in Montreal, the Faubourg des Récollets, into the *Cité du multimédia* where the sector's firms would be concentrated. This concentration was aimed at creating a critical mass which should then lead to the institution of an "industrial ambiance" (as in the industrial districts) and a synergy between firms. This would then help

develop the structure of the multimedia sector, which is evolving rapidly, as well as the permanent innovation so critical to the sector's medium- and long-term survival.

Regional/national: CDTIs were established with the aim of putting Québec in an advantageous position within the most promising niches, such as new information technologies, including multimedia. The creation of these centers was meant to promote investments by local and foreign firms, to create jobs for young people and finally to develop a skilled labour pool in promising sectors. Thus we can see the influence of theories of industrial districts and innovation milieux, which attribute importance to developing skilled labour and collective competencies.

Global: to make Montreal an international multimedia centre, able to compete on world markets and thus to position it as a leader as quickly as possible, given the speed of development and high level of competition in this industry at the international level.

This intervention by the Québec state was preceded by a discussion of the future of the Faubourg which had been initiated by its citizens. The Faubourg citizens had already formed the “@FR” and then reorganized, integrating new actors and thus giving themselves the means to act as the interface between the community and the state. The Faubourg community has thus played an important role in raising awareness of the district's potential.

3. *Cité du multimédia*: the actors

The reconversion of Faubourg des Récollets into the *Cité du Multimédia* took place in several phases during which actors and strategies changed. Indeed, the “@FR” was no longer centrally involved in decision-making during the process of coordinating the emergence of the *Cité*. We will focus on the actors in the Faubourg district community since they are the ones who are expected to collaborate in order to promote innovation and development of the district's multimedia sector .

3.1 Actors from the economic sector

The district's economy relies mainly on a mosaic of small firms. Slightly more than half of the firms (56%) were established between 1995 and 1997. During the same period, the main activity related to services (computer, scientific and technical, consulting services, etc.), which reflected the tertiarization of the economy observed elsewhere, with a preponderance of multimedia-related firms. There was a rapid increase in the number of firms setting up in the district: two of the firms set up between 1985 and 1990, four between 1991 and 1994, and ten between 1995 and 1997. New firms developed in the fields of computer-generated imagery, film production and post-production. In total, there are 16 multimedia firms in the Faubourg. Some of these act as driving forces, such as Discreet Logic (which invests in the development of production tools), or the Groupe Coscient, which alone represents 600 jobs. The potential to create a critical mass which would attract other multimedia firms and related services therefore exists.

In early 1997, Discreet Logic (which had already acquired an old building) negotiated the acquisition of other buildings in the Faubourg with the *Société de développement de Montréal* (SDM). The buildings were to be used to set up production activities, for example, Behaviour Entertainment Inc. The objective was to create a multimedia complex measuring 58 576 square feet for a sale price of \$2 million (which is not expensive given the location). The project would create a concentration of jobs and therefore the possibility to attract other firms. By the end of 1997, Discreet Logic announced that over the next five years it would invest \$240 million in the field of multimedia technologies (including \$210 million from private investors and \$30 million from the government). Discreet Logic's goal was to rank among world leaders in the field of special effects. This investment should create 600 fixed-term jobs. The company, which has

mainly concentrated on post-production tools, such as special effects and editing software, would now like to focus on production tools. The government will contribute to this investment through its FAIRE program (*Fonds pour l'accroissement de l'investissement privé et la relance de l'emploi*-fund for growth of private investment and employment). The repayable contribution of \$2.8 million will be used to purchase and develop new technologies in the field of computerized motion picture production. The firm will also be able to take advantage of refundable tax credits to create multimedia productions (i.e., 25% of their production costs) and for research and development. If the goal of creating 600 jobs is reached, it will also be eligible for a \$16 million job creation tax credit. Ottawa is also injecting \$10 million into the project through various programs, such as wage subsidies and youth programs. More than \$100 million will be devoted to R&D.

Other firms, attracted by the tax advantages, will soon be setting up in the *Cité*. For example, Cognicase and Tecsys, will alone create 2 400 jobs. Cognicase, a Canadian computer and software firm with its head office in Montreal, will establish its international software engineering centre in the *Cité*,. thus moving its software development operations back to Montreal. The number of employees at Cognicase has grown from 150 in 1997 to 500 in 1999. In 1997-98, it acquired eight firms, extending its operations to just about everywhere in the world. Cognicase plans to invest \$500 million and create 2 000 jobs over the next five years (*La Presse*, September 2, 1998). The number of people employed by Tecsys, which supplies specialized software in the field of distribution management, increased from 100 to 215 between 1996 and 1998. Tecsys will invest \$150 million in its centre during the next five years, creating 400-500 jobs. The firm already has two locations, one in Dorval, Québec, and the other in

Schaumburg, Illinois, and has three other establishments in the United States, where it makes three-quarters of its sales.

Before the creation of the *Cité* was announced, firms tended to be attracted to the Faubourg for reasons related to corporate image. They were attracted by the image of heritage, the “look,” the environment (Lachine Canal, Old Port), the ease and flexibility in setting up and arranging facilities (compared to office towers), the low real estate values (at least in the southern part of the Faubourg), high ceilings, availability of spaces, proximity to downtown Montreal and road access, and probably by the arrival of Discreet Logic and the creation of its very large complex. The SDM also played a role in attracting certain firms to the Faubourg (Intellia, St-Remy Publications). However, today firms are attracted largely, if not entirely, by the tax credits granted to firms by the Government of Québec in its effort to develop the *Cité du multimédia*. The large firms that first set up in the district (Discreet Logic, Cognicase and Tecsys) may also act as a magnet for smaller firms in the sector. Although the latter may have concerns about losing their staff to the larger firms, they may also expect to benefit from the many informal and formal exchanges in the district between artisans and technicians in their field. In any case, the intended goal of the *Cité du multimédia* project is to encourage such exchanges, which should themselves foster innovation and ongoing development of collective competencies.

3.2 Association Actors

The two main associations that play a role in the district are the *Agence du Faubourg des Récollets* (@FR) and the *Quartier éphémère*.

The *Agence du Faubourg des Récollets* is located in the *Centre d'entreprises et d'innovation de Montréal* (CEIM-Montreal business and innovation centre), which provides it

with space and technical support. The *Agence*, which represents the community, has approximately 50 members, either firms or individuals. Although not all of them are well-established, approximately 80 % are from the entrepreneurial sector, which represents 600 employees, or approximately 10% of all the people who live and work in the district. The “@FR” was created to formalize orientation and planning for the district in ten years, a result of the consultation process begun in the 1990s, during which the community formulated its vision of the Faubourg’s development. Development planning was to have included utilization of the district’s industrial heritage (founderies, ironworks, factories and warehouses). The *Agence* would like to play an intermediary role, as a place for meeting, exchange and defence of its members’ interests. It has created a directory of its members to encourage exchanges among them. Since the *Cité du multimédia* projet was announced, the “@FR” has been striving to increase its membership. Its priority goal is to have all the buildings in the Faubourg qualify for grants under the *Cité* programme.

A number of firms have been more involved than others in the *Agence* in the process of reconversion and development of the district: Construction CRIS, which has expertise in development; the CEIM, which provides an office and support to firms; Intellia, which has a representative on the Board of Directors; and St Remy Publications, which is also on the Board of Directors and which collaborated on the special event, “Rave à la ré@lité.”

The organization *Quartier Éphémère* was created in 1994. It is based on the French concept of *les Usines Éphémères*, established in Paris in 1987. “Temporarily reclaiming locations (waiting to be demolished or renovated), they transform them into centres for artists of the future.” (Mandalian, 1994) The term ephemeral means for a limited time, that is, the artists use the factories while waiting for the owners to decide what to do with them. *Quartier*

Éphémère is a non-profit organization which supports and promotes young visual artists. In addition to workshops and studios, the organization also has exhibition and reception halls for the public. In this way, the organization both safeguards the district's architectural heritage and promotes upcoming artists.

The *Ministère de la Culture et des Communications* (department of culture and communications) first asked the promoter of *Usines Éphémères* in Paris to carry out a feasibility study on the introduction of the concept in Montreal. As a result of the study, *Quartier Éphémère* promoters set up in the Faubourg and obtained a 5-year lease to create a centre which rents out music workshops and studios at the very reasonable price of \$250 per month (the lease will soon come to an end and apparently the organization will then move a bit further north to rue Prince). The buildings are loaned free of charge (the owner thus becomes the city's private partner) and in exchange, the lessees take care of expenses related to maintenance, heating, electricity, plumbing and taxes. The *Quartier*, which has a total of five workshop/residences, is situated in a former merchandise warehouse and is subsidized by the departments of culture of both Québec and France. This allows exchanges to take place between Québécois and French artists, who can set up in Québec or France, and who are provided with a workshop for approximately three months.

3.3 The institutional actors

The *Centre d'entreprises et d'innovation de Montréal* (CEIM) plays the role of incubator for businesses and views itself as a motor of economic development. It helps establish new projects and provides support to aspiring entrepreneurs who lack the funds to get their businesses started. The CEIM was moved into the Faubourg because of the latter's proximity to the downtown area, its easy accessibility by roads, the abundance of reasonably priced space and,

lastly, the opportunity to participate in the renaissance of an environment that could stimulate the birth of new businesses. The CEIM participates in the district's development and also has a regional mandate, since its activities extend to the western end of the island of Montreal.

The CEIM participates in the district's revitalization through its director who is the chairperson of the board of directors of "@FR." It also provides space and certain services to the *Agence*. This can be seen as part of its mandate to support both organizations and businesses that are starting up. The CEIM dates back to 1986 when the YMCA started its program, *Centre d'entreprises Jeunesse de Montréal*. On March 31, 1996, the YMCA decided to withdraw from the program and to turn over its operations, clientele and lease to the CEIM, a non-profit organization that promotes the emergence of new innovative businesses by providing a variety of services to people who showed initiative and entrepreneurship potential. In 1996, the CEIM set up a governing office and board of directors with members from the business and academic communities as well as from the three levels of government —federal (Canada), provincial (Québec) and municipal (City of Montreal).

During the same year, the CEIM changed its orientation, creating a technologies sector. The latter was aimed at a clientele made up mainly of researchers and young entrepreneurs in high-technology sectors such as application software, information and telecommunications technology, multimedia, environmental technologies, industrial design, biotechnologies and health-care services. In 1997-98, its first year of operation in this sector, CEIM provided support to 12 high-technology firms, among them, Intera Multimédia, a firm specializing in the design of interactive terminals for the funeral industry and Raid Multimédia, specializing in cyber-reporting. Future entrepreneurs must have an innovative product with a high marketing and export potential, a business plan, and a team with the motivation and ability to acquire business

skills and, finally, the determination to make use of all these elements to carry the project through. CEIM also provides support to the micro-business, fashion and textiles sectors.

CEIM offers services similar to those found in the industrial district or considered to be essential for establishing a local production system, for example: specialized seminars, training courses, strategic planning, coaching, technical and management support, access to funding, marketing, documentation centre, rental space and office services. It includes a team of 20 professionals, as well as external human resources and technical resource persons who sit on its committees. The latest innovation by CEIM was the creation, in autumn 1997, of a business incubator for the industrial sector in partnership with the Ville St-Laurent and the real estate company SITQ.

From 1986 to 1996, CEIM contributed to the creation of over 250 firms (housed at CEIM or not), which generated 700 jobs. In addition, each year since 1993, the CEIM has provided support and coaching to over 200 self-employed workers. It was also behind the establishment of the *Centre d'entreprises de mode de Montréal*, which today involves 65 firms, representing approximately 600 jobs, in direct or indirect employment.

Some of the firms that were housed at the CEIM over the years have remained in the district, thus helping to renew the district's dynamism. The following list, which indicates sector of activity, shows that these firms are mainly concentrated in the handicrafts, business services and multimedia-computer fields.

- Grafnetix: data bases, informatics, graphic design
- Verrerie Vermeil: glass-making
- Groupe de levée de fond: fundraising techniques
- Groupe M.P.L.: production of shows, entertainment

- Vincent Dan Agapi: architect
- Prométour Inc.: travel specialist, especially for French market
- Multimax: multimedia
- Groupe Séguin Lacasse: landscape architect

The institutional milieu also includes the Centre Écho (UQAM's centre for experimentation and development of multimedia technologies), which is also a member of the “@FR.” This non-profit organization is devoted to research on and creation of new image and sound technologies: telecommunications, virtual reality, multimedia, 3-D animation, digital video, electro-optics and exhibition techniques.

Lastly, the *École de technologie supérieure* (ETS), situated nearby, has a laboratory for the integration of information technologies and a centre for entrepreneurship in technology, a “pre-incubation” service intended for graduating students and young graduates of the ETS. These organizations play a fundamental role according to the industrial district theory by circulating information and fostering exchange.

3.4 Actors in the community (or the residential sector)

The residential sector is still not highly developed because of the current economic situation and the over-supply of housing on the island of Montreal. However, new constructions have attracted 600 residents, including those at the prestigious *No. 1 rue McGill*. The construction of phase 2 of the *Quai de la Commune* will increase the number of residents. It should be noted that the residences are all top-of-the-line and preserve the heritage look of the district and its traditional buildings.

4. The Actors and their Role in the Construction of *Cité du Multimédia* and its District

The role of the various actors from outside the district in implementing the *Cité du multimédia* project will be described below, beginning with the role of the Québec government, particularly the *ministère des Finances* (finance department).

4.1 The Québec government and finance department

The Québec government was the main architect of measures related to the CDTI and the *Cité du multimédia* and thus must ensure that they function well. These measures are aimed at creating jobs, training the work force and providing incubation for innovative projects in the multimedia sector.

Government grants contribute to the economic recovery of Montreal. In this way, the Québec state is helping the municipal administration to benefit from acquisitions made in the late 1980s to set up its residential project in the Écluses neighbourhood, a project that was opposed by the population of the Faubourg in the early 1990s, and was finally in large part abandoned.

The government supports firms who set up in the *Cité* through a program of tax credits. In the program's first year of operation (June 15, 1998-June 15, 1999), the credits amounted to 60% of wages, to a maximum of \$25,000 **per employee**. For the following years, up until 2008, the credit was reduced to 40%, to a maximum of \$15,000 **per employee**. Eligible activities are production or multimedia services and activities related to information technologies, subject to the approval of the finance minister.

4.2 Partnership between the municipal administration and the private sector

Through the SDM, the municipal administration is responsible for developing the Faubourg's potential as the site for both the CDTI and the *Cité du multimédia*. This provides the municipality with the opportunity to find a new functional vocation for this space (in any case the municipality is responsible for planning for the district). At the end of the 10-year period of

government assistance, it is hoped that the firms will have developed a sufficiently strong sense of belonging and important enough exchanges among themselves to keep them in the district and preserve the presumed advantages of belonging to an innovation milieu or a network of exchanges similar to the relational firm or industrial district.

In order to establish conditions that will foster the development of the multimedia industry in the Faubourg, a consortium of public and private sector partners was formed. This includes the SDM (25%, that is, it provides land and buildings), the real estate company SOLIM of the *Fonds de Solidarité* (37.5%) and *SITQ Immobilier*, a member company of the real estate group of the *Caisse de dépôt et placement du Québec*. These partners signed an agreement to pool their resources to develop the *Cité du multimédia* site. The role of the consortium is to draw up a plan for the comprehensive development of the *Cité du multimédia*, and to ensure funding and construction of real estate infrastructures adapted to the needs of firms.

Thus, on December 15, 1997, the partners signed a \$10 million dollar agreement to reconvert a four-storey former textile mill into a 30,000-square-foot multimedia “nursery,” the CDTI. Plans include a fibre optic column at the building’s centre, branching out to each floor and thus feeding the CDTI’s high-tech firms. Plans also provide for a fibre optic hook-up for a satellite antenna on the building’s roof.

4.3 Coordination among the actors

It can be seen that over the years, citizens and community actors of the Faubourg have been replaced by more traditional actors, that is, the Québec state and the municipality. It can be said that the state and municipal actors have provided support for the business community actors who had started to develop a new vocation for the Faubourg in the multimedia niche. New actors

have thus been added to the original ones. It remains to be seen if and how they will coordinate their respective objectives and actions to create the dynamic exchanges and an innovation milieu.

The state has set up mechanisms to coordinate the *Cité du multimédia* and CDTI strategy in order to ensure that projects run smoothly. For example, the *Bureau des Centres de développement des technologies de l'information* (BCDTI) was created and given the responsibility to promote and administer the CDTIs, as well as the measures concerning the *Cité du multimédia*. The BCDTI office administers the financial aid related to CDTIs and its main role is to ensure that the objectives pursued by the Government of Québec are met.

Thus, as regards accessibility to CDTI and *Cité du multimédia* measures and programs, the advisory committee recommends the activities and employees that are eligible for CDTI and *Cité du multimédia* support to the Minister of Finance. Until now, some 25 firms have already been selected. The advisory committee has 11 representatives from the public, private, association, research and training sectors, including: APMQ (Québec association of multimedia producers), CREPUQ (Québec conference of university presidents and principals), CÉSAM (the centre for expertise and services in multimedia application), the *ministère de la Métropole* (Québec government department responsible for the Montreal metropolis), CEFRIO (the francophone centre for research on organizational information), the *ministère de l'Industrie, du Commerce, de la Science et de la Technologie* (Québec government department of commerce, science and technology), Sodec (society for the development of cultural enterprises), *Télé-université*, the *ministère de la Culture et des Communications* (Québec culture and communications department), the *ministère du finance* (finance department) and the Corporation Hierapolis. There is no representative of the City of Montreal per se, other than the Québec

department responsible for the Montreal metropolis whose primary responsibility is to develop Montreal.

Thus, today the advisory committee has the broadest range of institutional actors and representatives of the multimedia business community (APMQ). This committee can be seen as representing the district's collective or community interests, while at the same time giving priority to the development of multimedia firms. Of course, it remains to be seen whether this will be achieved through the actions and decisions made in the next few years, that is, whether the committee will consider only the needs and interests of firms considered individually, or if it will also consider other goals. For example, will it also strive to establish the structures and means to encourage exchanges, collaboration and innovation, in other words, the means to make the *Cité* a true *innovation milieu*.

Territorial proximity is already guaranteed for firms that set up in the *Cité*, but it remains to be seen if relational or organizational proximity will go beyond isolated success for multimedia firms in the short term and lead to productive exchanges and innovation on a long-term basis. What is at stake is all the more important in a sector such as multimedia, or informatics in general, with its very short product life cycles and rapid innovation and where business decline can sometimes be as quick as lightning. Thus, it is easy to imagine that in the absence of a sustained innovation process in the field, many firms would have only a short life span, thus compromising the territorial dynamism and the reconversion of the Faubourg.

5. *Cité du multimédia*: an innovation milieu based on the relational enterprise?

Having presented the actors involved in the *Cité du multimédia* district, we will now consider the current situation of the multimedia industry in Montreal in relation to theories on the relational firm and innovation milieux.

5.1 The relational firm in multimedia?

In contrast to what is suggested by the most recent theories on the development of strategic competitive advantages, to date, multimedia firms have not been characterized by a high degree of collaboration. Firms have confined themselves primarily to rather individualist, competitive strategies, sometimes associated with periodic alliances and linkages (network of agreements, contracts and often informal associations). Sub-contracting and free-lancers appear to be used quite frequently and from this point of view, the development of collective competencies could be seen as advantageous for firms. However, for the moment, the industry is only emerging and collaboration and the exchange of information is still a rare phenomenon.

The consolidation of certain firms through mergers and acquisitions can also be observed, for example, Intellia and Socom. This helps create a critical mass that can offer a wider range of services, fostering greater stability for firms (if one production sector slows down, another sector can take over).

Since the market is rather local, firms often find themselves competing with each other, including on public markets where competitive bidding is the order of the day. In the private sector, although relations of trust have been established between certain clients and nominated suppliers, competition still exists. Occasionally, there are partnerships or periodic agreements with firms such as Bell, DMR, LGS, etc. In other cases, firms will form a consortium to compete with industry giants (Méthé, 1998). In short, many different forms of association or partnership exist, but they are not consistent and therefore not very stable.

Although there are still many highly specialized free-lancers, for example artistic designers, 3-D application designers, or specialists in very specific softwares, it appears that they are being brought together in small firms through a process of concentration and that a specific

niche is developing. For example, VDL 2 has become an important firm in the field of commercial communications, Intellia Productions works in the field of intranets, Intera Multimédia in interactive terminals, etc. Thus, a fair number of small- and medium-sized businesses (SMBs) specialize in various niches or parts of the production process.

Several Québec firms appear to be experiencing problems in marketing, and there seems to be no organization which can play the role of information broker. According to theories of industrial districts, this role seems essential to the development of small- and medium-sized businesses. An increasing number of Québec firms believe that it would be in their best interest to find partners that have this capacity and those that manage to do this are in a winning situation. Some Québec firms are linking up with large international firms in order to gain access to bigger markets, particularly in France. This is the case for Micro Intel, the multimedia producer located in Montreal, which has struck a strategic alliance with the French corporation Infogrames (a publishing house) to distribute its series “Les animaux sauvages” in French megastores.

A half-dozen Québécois software producers have formed a consortium in an effort to break into the American market. They have hired an American to represent them in dealings with buyers for megastores. It appears to be quite difficult to crack the American market, especially for firms that are not established in the United States. The president of one distribution firm therefore decided to have his firm and five others represented on the American market. Acting as a consortium will allow these firms to make costs savings and to establish a higher profile. The group is made up of six publishers, five of which can boast major product successes: Micro-Intel, Machina Sapiens, Logiciel de Marque, MID and PMT. The company Diffusion Multimédia will be in charge of logistics and if all goes as planned, the Québec products will be launched on the

American market in 1999. They will be stocked in a warehouse in Syracuse (New York) and from there, distributed to various sales outlets in the United States.

For the moment, this group is limited to marketing in the United States, but it could eventually lead to other alliances or agreements with other objectives, for example in the field of training. However, it should be noted that the sectoral committee on information technologies and communications (baptized *Technocompétences*), part of the Québec government's sectoral policy, has the mandate to develop knowledge of markets and jobs in the sector, as well as training and development of skills.

Although presently there are few opportunities for collaboration and concertation in this highly competitive industry, there are nevertheless a number of organizations, with diverse and complementary objectives, which provide firms in the sector with opportunities for meeting and exchange (“@FR”, the CDTI advisory committee, *Technocompétences*). Thus, the practices such as those found in an innovation milieu may well develop, ensuring the long-term survival of firms located in the *Cité* and of the multimedia sector in Montreal. The future holds many possibilities since the district and industry are still very young.

5.2 Challenges faced by the industry and the impact of relational exchanges

Multimedia firms face four major challenges: financing, distribution, creativity and the development of continuous innovation.

The first challenge relates to the difficulty of obtaining risk capital. Many investors are still reluctant to support a multimedia firm, which results in uncertainty among industry professionals who have a hard time arranging the loans that they need. Capitalization of firms rarely exceeds one million dollars in the multimedia sector, while production costs can easily

reach \$200,000 for a single project—and we are not talking about large-scale productions for mass audiences. This helps explain the difficulties in putting together financial packages.

When it comes to distribution, the multimedia route means designing cultural products for very wide audiences. Distribution, which has yet to be developed, will play a crucial role in the development of multimedia. This is why many Québécois firms are attempting to reach distribution agreements on international markets, which is often considered a prerequisite for the cost-effectiveness of multimedia products.

Finally, a further challenge relates to creativity, that is, the value-added of artistic and cultural content. The development of original writing for multimedia is still at an embryonic stage. Québécois have many assets in this regard, including their technological expertise in 2-D and 3-D animation and navigation architecture (Ministère de la Culture et des Communications, 1997). This expertise could mature rapidly in a field centred on innovation, which brings us to our fourth challenge, the continuous development of both artistic innovation and innovation in content, in technology, and more specifically, in informatics.

The development of innovation poses considerable challenges, which relate to the sector's long-term viability. It is precisely in this regard that theories of industrial districts, the relational firm and innovation milieux can provide interesting directions. Thus, collaboration in developing collective competencies in the sector as well as exchanges that will help build a true innovation milieu may constitute an essential condition for the sector's survival.

CONCLUSION

To conclude, it should be recalled that this case study of the reconversion of the Faubourg des Récollets is part of a broader research program that includes different cases and seeks to identify the factors needed for the successful reconversion of a territory. The present case study

examines factors in relation, specifically, to the creation of a true innovation milieu that could guarantee the long-term survival of a reconverted territory.

Our research is exploratory in nature since the evolution of the Faubourg is ongoing and thus the analysis of the district, as well as that of the multimedia sector, should be continued. Hence the attractiveness of a study that is able to follow the development of the project as it unfolds over the years rather than to simply reconstruct events after the fact, as researchers are so often obliged to do. The analysis has already uncovered a number of advantages, constraints and challenges in relation to the district's reconversion based on the development of multimedia. Our analysis has also revealed that certain elements, essential for developing an industrial district or innovation milieu, are at least present at this embryonic stage, even though they have not been fully developed.

Indeed, there are a number of associations in which the various actors of the milieu participate and which could, among other things, assume a coordinating role, follow technological developments, assist with marketing, and transmit information on markets. However, it must be recognized that these associations are new and also include representatives from beyond the community. For example, government representatives are in the majority on the BCDTI advisory committee while representatives of firms predominate in other associations. The sectoral committee is made up of a wider range of members, since it includes worker representatives, but it is not restricted to the multimedia sector only. In any case, it is possible to see how one of these associations could increase collaboration and assume the functions of coordination and information exchange, which today seem essential to the development of an innovation milieu.

However, there seems to be a problem of linkage between the various networks, organizations and firms. Although there are many networks, their logics do not necessarily converge. It therefore remains to be seen how the actors will unite their efforts and link up with each other. Observation of future developments should help to identify the factors of success or failure in this regard.

As regards theories of innovation milieux, which attribute great importance to the role of associations and the qualities of the local entrepreneurial milieu, it must be acknowledged that in the present case, these actors seem to be more and more dominated by the government. While artists and residents played a larger role in the early stages of the district's reconversion, the *Cité du multimédia* project tipped the balance in favour of real estate developers and the government. Indeed, according to some reporters, the *Cité du multimédia* project was the brainchild of an industrial developer with multimedia firms as clients, and the movement to this specific district was initiated by the purchase of buildings in the southern part of the Faubourg by the corporation Discreet Logic.² Thus, the most recent phase identified in this reconversion process is one in which the agents of change are the private and public sector, the latter acting as "guide and facilitator."

Once this stage of our research is complete, we will be able to put forward a number of hypotheses in relation to innovation milieux. Is there a true willingness on the part of the institutional actor to support the development of this territory by attempting to develop the proximity needed to create an innovation milieu? Will these effects continue to last in the long term, once state support has stopped? For the effects to continue, so must patterns of collective competencies and collaboration continue to develop, which would ensure the long-term development of the multimedia industry and the Faubourg district. The district must offer

significant competitive advantages through proximity and ease of exchanges between the actors who would benefit from the development of competencies and firms. For the moment, this case study has shown that there is an effort to create an innovation milieu or type of industrial district, but only the future will determine which factors are essential to establishing this type of relation between firms.

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