

My name is Stephanie Coleman and I'm the owner of Mezari Atelier & Boutique, on Duluth Avenue just one block west of St. Denis.

As you probably know, this strip of St. Denis has been hit particularly hard with abandoned storefronts. Independent stores like Arthur Quentin and larger chains like Urban Outfitters, Starbucks and MAC cosmetics have all closed their doors within the last 12 months or so.

I opened my store in the summer of 2017 with a textile and wallpaper design studio in the back, and a boutique in front where I sell my own products, as well as the work of about 15 other local designers and artists.

The block where my store is located used to be the restaurant Le Vieux Duluth. The commercial spaces in the building were empty for about 5 years before it was subdivided into four units. I was the first tenant in my current space-

(show photos of the building interior and exterior)

The other units were rented around the same time and we all opened our doors in a span of about 6 months.

Since 2017, I've seen a lot of stores close around me. Luckily, the 3 of the 4 original tenants in my building have been able to stay in business, and we've had a lot of amazing feedback from the neighbourhood. People sometimes come in just to boost their mood and browse the displays, and I've often heard how much impact this block of stores has had on the quality of life in the neighbourhood. We took an eyesore and made it into something beautiful.

I also hear a lot of fear.

In general, people seem worried that I won't survive. With all the stores closing, and streets strewn with garbage and orange pilons, I can see how the outlook can appear bleak.

In turn, I worry sometimes that people will kind of give up coming out to this area to shop; with fewer stores to draw people, they'll start assuming there's no point, and maybe no hope.

I also just want to point out that while online sales are on the rise, brick and mortar stores still account for about 90% of retail sales in Canada, according to a recent article from Retail Insider. While basic household articles like toilet paper and grocery items will go more and more online, there is a lot of proof that people like going to stores to gain experiences that can't be duplicated online.

Visual displays, interesting small batch local products, customized items and hands on workshops are becoming more of a part of retail shopping. I try to include all of these aspects in my store. So I think that assuming that online sales is killing retail in Montreal is not based on much fact. I just think people are bored with fast fashion, and the lack of variety in stores and the lack of effort put into visual display. People don't just care about prices- they want more from their shopping experiences. Aesthetics are a huge part of this.

I'm happy to report that I've had my best year yet of sales, however, as an independent artist running a store on a walking street, there are a lot of challenges- particularly in the winter.

While I think that every business owner has to think strategically, find ways to predict down times and creatively problem-solve, independent store owners face a lot of obstacles that could easily be removed or reduced.

First of all- I pay a portion of the property tax on the building, which works out to about 500\$ a month. I understand that we need to pay taxes for all the services that are provided in the city; however, I still need to take time every single day to clean up garbage all over the street in front of the store. I sometimes wonder what exactly I'm paying into.

Another obstacle is the bylaws around signage and sandwich boards.

I used to place a sandwich board out front, which really helps to draw people into the store. I stopped this after my neighbor was fined \$1000 for their sandwich board. Whatever the original reason was for this bylaw- maybe it was to avoid clutter on the street- it's hard to swallow that when there's orange cones and very dangerous construction debris scattered all over our streets.

Another note about signage- just to put an exterior sign on my building, I have to pay a \$200 permit. I know that may not seem like a large sum, but there are hundreds of expenses in running a business and this just seems like an extra cash grab when I'm already paying property taxes monthly. Some people go into business with more cash behind them, but as someone who came out of art school and built this place with elbow grease and hope, every single expense has a big impact.

I have a few thoughts about what the city can do to remove obstacles for small businesses.

One would be to offer rent or tax subsidies, even if it's just for the winter months on walking streets like Duluth. This could be on a sliding scale, based on revenues and # of employees; even distance from the metro could be a factor. Even an extra couple hundred dollars would really help to cover basic costs like high heating bills.

The other would be to get rid of the sandwich board fines. While I have a good local client base, I get a lot of business from tourists in the summer who 'stumble upon' my store. I've never heard one complaint about a sandwich board, but again, tonnes of comments and despair over the eyesore of the construction sites.

Finally, I would love to see some incentives for eco friendly business initiatives, especially when they're locally based. For example, in my studio I use only organic, pesticide free cotton for my home textiles, and I take all my cotton scraps to a local paper mill that recycles them into cotton ragstock paper. The mill is called St Armande and they're based in Lachine- you can buy their products at Deserres nationwide, as well as lots of independent art supply stores. In return for the cotton scraps, they give me paper which I then use for different projects, or they pay by the kilo.

We hear a lot about carbon tax, but it would be great to financially reward companies that can provide measurable proof of their reduced environmental impact.

Thank you so much for your time, for listening to my perspective, and for taking action to improve this situation.