



# **GRAFFITI: A TRACE AT THE RIGHT PLACE?**

## **OPINION PAPER ON SIGNED GRAFFITI**

### **SUMMARY**

April 2008

Representations of popular expression, graffiti have been a part of Montreal urban landscape for a very long time. If their presence has always been, up to a point, tolerated in Montreal<sup>1</sup>, the increasing number of the most recent form of this phenomenon, the “signed graffiti”<sup>2</sup>, has brought the City to implement, as soon as 1996, an intervention plan to channel this practice within legal boundaries. The dual intentions attributed to it (art/vandalism) and the group involved – youths – are contributing to render this practice a complex problem for the municipal authorities. In 2007, the City of Montreal has solicited the Conseil jeunesse de Montréal (CjM) in order to find out about the young Montrealers’ perspective on this question. To officially consult young people about this reality was a precedent.

This opinion paper contends with the most recent form of graffiti – the tags – as well as other signed graffiti, most often drawn with marker pens or spray paint. Our aim was not limited to bringing a better understanding of the signed graffiti phenomenon in Montreal, but also putting forward new solutions in regards to municipal intervention. To do so, CjM called upon the expertise of numerous stakeholders concerned by this question. This opinion is also based on the analysis of a focus group made up of graffitiists – some of them active on the graffiti scene since its beginnings in Montreal – another focus group made up of young students and the results of a survey of 765 young people between 12 and 30 years of age.

This document summarizes the Conseil jeunesse de Montréal’s opinion paper, entitled *Graffiti: a trace at the right place?*, and presents the 21 recommendations issued from it.

In order to better understand the phenomenon, the complete version of the opinion paper presents detailed information on the motivation that drives young people into trying their hand in graffiti, what makes them stop the practice, the various types of graffitiists, as well as the boroughs where the practice is the most prevalent, and the favoured interventions within each borough.

## **THE SIGNED GRAFFITI PHENOMENON IN MONTREAL**

Signed graffiti have appeared massively in Montreal at the beginning of 1990. The phenomenon presents an evolution in its form and practice to which municipal intervention, developed in 1996, is not unrelated. Actually, the graffiti scene in Montreal is characterized by a practice combining legal and illegal forms, and by a style bestowing American and European influences. The constant attraction shown for signed graffiti reveals also that it is not a fad but a genuine cultural phenomenon.

This graffiti culture, linked to the hip-hop movement, is actually a culture young people identify strongly with. Its recuperation by fashion marketers is certainly playing a part in this identification. Also, the act that characterizes graffiti, which is to sign it, constitutes an answer to a typical question among teenagers: the identity quest.

At the same time, signed graffiti are an answer to another sociocultural characteristic relating to a sense of belonging and self assertion. It is noteworthy that physical and social spaces are created, in which graffitiists express themselves and communicate with each other. Being a graffitiist brings respect from others and allows someone to transcend its own capabilities. Thus, a graffitiist is recognised by its peers on the basis of three major criteria not necessarily related to each other: quantity, aesthetics, or signature visibility. Furthermore, graffiti culture followers have various motivations and approaches which may evolve with time. Besides, with the recent increase in the number of graffitiists, the transfer of know how and unwritten rules has decreased. As a result, the practice is becoming more dangerous and destructive,

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1 With the exception of violent or hateful graffiti.

2 “Signed graffiti” are the graphic form of hip-hop culture, an urban culture that combines musical genre (rap, dj), choreographies (break dancing) and visual arts (graffiti).

and the graffiti circle more disparate. Signed graffiti are a relatively complex urban phenomenon, particularly when a city plans to intervene on that matter.

As mentioned earlier, the teenage phase is inducing the emotions that release the practice, and corresponds to the age period when some individuals initiate the practice. In our young Montrealers' survey, which the results are shown below, it is clearly demonstrated that there are multiple reasons to become a graffitist, but the most prevalent is linked to the aspiration to commit acts of delinquency and provocation. In fact, 36% of respondents were of this opinion. Let's remember that, at this phase, young people have a tendency to seek group identification and affiliation. It brings them to perceive realities according to their involvement, notably the absence or presence of a vocation (artistic talent...) or even unseemly behaviour (vandalism...)

The reasons to stop being a graffitist are as multiple as the reasons to become one. The same survey shows that these reasons are mainly linked to the level of maturity and the degree of awareness that a young person will reach (close to one third of the respondents). Another frequent reason, cited earlier, is the absence of vocation, or specifically a disinterest (one fourth of the answers). Other reasons have been mentioned to explain why a young person stops to draw graffiti, but were not prevalent, for example: repression or removal measures and lack of time to practice.

The graffiti scene is not only versatile, but also very disparate. With the evolution of the phenomenon, interventions and their approaches are also becoming more complex, particularly when we consider the spatial aspect. The next section will describe the City of Montreal's current policy and methods of intervention toward graffiti.

#### **CITY OF MONTREAL'S INTERVENTION PLAN TOWARD GRAFFITI**

Facing this complex urban phenomenon, the City of Montreal has developed an Intervention plan that takes in account the legal, environmental, social and cultural aspects specific to Montreal. Its approach is both corrective and preventive; recognising that beyond the reprehensible act, there is a form of expression. Thus, the City's plan consists of four major axis of intervention:

- ***Removal Axis***

Removal has been, and still is, the axis on which the City focuses its intervention efforts. The main reason is that graffiti proliferation suggests to the population a dereliction of duty from the part of the City and that the authorities are losing control of the graffiti phenomenon. A concentration of graffiti in a particular area may induce, or contribute to, salubrity problems. This in turns creates a sentiment of insecurity among citizens. This is why the City has to intervene. Furthermore, it has been verified that the faster graffiti are removed, the lower the number of subsequent offences.

- ***Prevention and Awareness Axis***

Prevention and Awareness are complementary to the Removal axis. Their goal is to prevent proliferation of illegal graffiti. These axis mainly target young people – most graffitists belong to this age group – through proposing alternate practices that are satisfying, and promoting legal practices. Another goal consists of calling upon the general population and concerned institutions to contribute to the City's efforts to channel the phenomenon within its legal forms.

- ***Regulation Axis***

Regulation is the legal and judicial framework that guides the City in its interventions. Consequently, it is a prerequisite to the other axis. Regulation includes repressive measures, which, unlike Prevention, target recidivists.

The City<sup>3</sup> and the boroughs<sup>4</sup> are sharing jurisdiction for the implementation of the plan: the City provides general coordination and development of the plan while the boroughs are in charge of the interventions' organisation and realisation. The City also counts on the collaboration of many stakeholders in the application of its plan.

In 2007, the municipal budget allocated to the intervention plan implementation amounted to 3,32 million. Of this amount, 3,1 million were dedicated to the Removal Axis.

### **AN EFFICIENT APPROACH? EXAMPLES OF INITIATIVES IN NORTH AMERICA**

Looking at various initiatives put in place in North America, it appears that two approaches are favoured to act upon illegal graffiti. One approach is strictly promoting corrective interventions. This is the case in the city of New York, where signed graffiti were seen first. The other approach is preventive but also corrective. As in Montreal, this is the approach favoured in Halifax, Ottawa and Vancouver in Canada, and in Philadelphia in the United States, one of the first cities affected by the phenomenon. These North American initiatives reveal a variety of means in the application of their interventions to channel the practice of signed graffiti. Which approach is the best? We observe that, no matter which approach is promoted, illegal practice of signed graffiti remains ubiquitous. Nevertheless, the traditional approach, strictly corrective, appears to be slightly less efficient than the alternate approach, combining a preventive aspect<sup>5</sup>.

Considered as more efficient, the City of Montreal's approach presents however some gaps in its implementation, as we observe more efforts put on removal measures than on prevention and awareness.

### **YOUNG MONTREALERS' POINT OF VIEW ON SIGNED GRAFFITI**

Data obtained through a survey of young Montrealers aged between 12 and 30 allowed us to reach the following conclusions:

- At first glance, graffiti does not seem to be a concern among young Montrealers surveyed. Of the five socio-urban phenomena presented in the survey<sup>6</sup>, graffiti was selected as the least worrying by two thirds of our respondents (66,8%).
- The point of view of young Montrealers concerning graffiti is mixed: a quarter of them (25,8%) are unfavourable while one respondent out of five (18%) is favourable; two respondents out of five (39,9 %) consider graffiti acceptable if they present an aesthetic, artistic or meaningful quality, or are located at an appropriate site<sup>7</sup>. The survey also reveals a slight tendency to perceive the phenomenon more negatively as respondents get older.

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3 The term *City* (translation of *Ville centre*) means here all political authorities and municipal services that are intervening on the whole territory of the city of Montreal.

4 The term *Borough* (translation of *Arrondissement*) refers to the municipal level that is offering services of proximity to citizens. The City of Montreal has 19 boroughs.

5 D.D. Brewer, *Hip Hop Graffiti Writers' Evaluations of Strategies to Control Illegal Graffiti*, in *Human Organization*, Vol. 51, No. 2 (Summer of 1992), p. 188-196.

6 Those were the following socio-urban phenomenon: street gangs, drug use, homelessness, taxing and graffiti.

7 It should be noted that 16,3 % of the respondents have stated that they do not have an opinion on the matter.

- According to surveyed young Montrealers, public infrastructures appear to be the sites most affected by the phenomenon.
- Surveyed young Montrealers perceive and tolerate signed graffiti differently according to the type of graffiti :
  1. *Scraffiti*<sup>8</sup> and tags are the most often condemned by surveyed young Montrealers (respectively 77,1% and 59,4%). Tolerance level toward this type of graffiti is very low, especially toward scraffitis. This type of signed graffiti seems to be in a class of its own in comparison to other forms considered.
  2. Consulted young Montrealers' perception and tolerance level regarding *throw-ups*<sup>9</sup> are strongly linked to the aesthetic, artistic and meaningful quality of the work, as well as to their location.
  3. Finally, over half of surveyed young Montrealers (59,1%) appreciate or tolerate fresco<sup>10</sup>. It remains that, in the eyes of respondents, this type of graffiti should be displayed in designated places, not everywhere and anywhere.
- Among suggestions presented by surveyed young Montrealers related to a respectful practice of signed graffiti and a control of its illegal form, many advocate a preventive intervention with graffitiists, enhancing the value of artistic and legal practice of signed graffiti and adapting the intervention according to the type of graffiti.

Our opinion paper presents numerous tables illustrating various perception factors expressed by respondents, and linking these perceptions together.

## **CJM'S 21 RECOMMENDATIONS**

To aspire to the complete elimination of signed graffiti practice is to negate its socio-cultural dimension, which renders this goal futile. Aware of this, the City of Montreal has developed an approach that aims to channel the practice in its legal forms. The Conseil jeunesse de Montréal supports this approach. Nevertheless, improvements must be made in the plan's implementation in order to enhance its efficiency. In this regard, the CjM has put forward many recommendations. The first ones are of general nature; the others are classified under the following axis: Joint-action, Prevention, Awareness, Removal, and Regulation.

Thus, the Conseil jeunesse de Montréal recommends:

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<sup>8</sup> *Scraffiti* or *scratchiti*: signature left by scratching the surface.

<sup>9</sup> *Throw-up* or *flop*: signature more elaborated than the tag, presenting outline and filling.

<sup>10</sup> Fresco: collective work, very large and coloured, with cartoon-style characters generally containing each graffitiist's signature.

## RECOMMENDATIONS

- R1.** To promote municipal public service within the young population.  
**R2.** To develop a tool to follow up on the Plan.

### *Joint-action Axis*

- R3.** To collaborate with police stations, enterprises and organizations in affected neighbourhoods in order to combine their data with the City's data bank regarding graffiti.  
**R4.** To require the establishment of an advisory committee on graffiti in boroughs where the signed graffiti phenomenon has become a problem.  
**R5.** To pursue the activities implemented by the working committee composed of the City and five Quebec government departments<sup>11</sup>, and to improve its collaboration toward a joint-action approach that maximizes their respective resources to implement practical projects and to follow up on results.

### *Prevention Axis*

- R6.** To develop, in targeted sectors, sites where signed graffiti would be legal.  
**R7.** To make public a list of sites where practice of signed graffiti is legal, for example at paint/art stores, on the City of Montreal Website, or through 311 Info-line.  
**R8.** To work with street workers or social activity leaders in high schools, in order to do prevention work with graffitiists that they may be in contact with, and to inform them regarding sites of legal practice.  
**R9.** To promote the integration of artistic practice of signed graffiti in cultural events.  
**R10.** To sponsor the realisation of fresco and mural projects.  
**R11.** To allow the use of panel boards placed around municipal construction or renovation sites as canvas for mural.  
**R12.** To seriously consider the recommendations presented in CjM's last opinion paper, *Montréal, ma ville, mon choix?* about the development of a sense of territorial belonging within the young population of Montreal.  
**R13.** To support the initiative consisting of planting vegetation at the base of cleaned up walls.  
**R14.** To develop environmental design measures, in particular when creating or renovating public spaces (i.e. type of material for street furniture, lighting, landscaping, etc.) aiming at thwarting the appearance of graffiti on walls and street furniture.

### *Awareness Axis*

- R15.** To create a Website containing information on the integrated fight against graffiti conducted by the working committee formed by representatives of the City of Montreal and of five Quebec government departments.  
**R16.** To develop training tools related to the identification of potential graffitiists, the intervention strategies to make them aware of their actions. Offer these tools to street workers and high school social activity leaders.  
**R17.** To develop new awareness tools for parents, containing information on graffiti culture and ideas for them to play their role as parents.

### *Removal Axis*

<sup>11</sup> The following departments are involved in the working committee: Municipal Affairs and Regions; Transportation; Justice; Culture, Communication and Women Status; and Education, Recreation and Sport.

<p><b>R18.</b> To develop partnership between institutions and the private sector in order to promote a more active involvement in graffiti removal on their walls and street furniture.</p> <p><b>R19.</b> To support professional insertion of youths through social projects aiming removing graffiti in targeted boroughs (such as the organization <i>Y'a quelqu'un l'aut'bord du mur!</i>)</p>
<p><i>Regulation Axis</i></p>
<p><b>R20.</b> To be more rigorous in the enforcement of the laws regarding <i>scraffiti</i>.</p> <p><b>R21.</b> To make arrangements and take measures for young offenders to do community work as a sentence.</p>

## Conclusion

By gradually bringing graffiti artists toward alternate solutions that are stimulating and interesting, recognising graffiti as an art form, the City will reinforce youths' sense of belonging and pride while developing their sense of responsibility as citizens. It is the opinion of the Conseil jeunesse de Montréal that any initiative aiming at this, with graffiti artists as much as with youths in general, would certainly prevent and reduce illegal forms of signed graffiti. The City of Montreal has everything to gain in involving the population in its intervention efforts. Promoting the municipal approach and the measures in place, or encouraging community's active involvement, are awareness measures that may help the implementation of the other axis of intervention. Finally, illegal graffiti's removal operations must be more efficient in order to have a true impact on recidivism.

The Conseil jeunesse de Montréal wishes to convey to municipal elected representatives and to the City management authorities the point of view of young Montrealers regarding the signed graffiti phenomenon. With the 21 recommendations, the CjM hopes to provide inspiring solutions to better respond to this urban reality.