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Reconstruction of Turcot Interchange faces strong opposition

Environment, corruption, traffic among activists' concerns

Written by [Carla Green](#) | Photo by Camille Chabrol

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There is one thing everyone agrees on: the Turcot Interchange is crumbling, and in desperate need of repair. The Interchange is a massive three-level highway that cuts through St. Henri. Since 2007, the city has been in a struggle with architects, activists, and engineers over its reconstruction.

The history of the Turcot Interchange is littered with social movements, class struggle, and politics. The Interchange was rushed to completion in time for the 1967 World Expo as part of a larger international movement towards developing superhighways, even amid popular dissidence and social mobilization against its construction.

The Ville-Marie Expressway, which connects to the Turcot and has been included in its reconstruction plans, was built in 1970. Its construction involved raising about 2,000 homes.

This displacement was part of a series of construction and demolition projects in the name of modernization in Montreal. Altogether, these projects caused the displacement of as many as 20,000 people and fully eliminated three lower-income neighborhoods, including the former red light district.

In many ways, the current situation mirrors that of the original construction in the sixties.

Shannon Franssen is the spokesperson for Mobilization Turcot, a citizen's group with the goal of constructing "a better Turcot" and informing Montrealers about the reconstruction project.

"There are a lot of parallels between the original construction and its reconstruction, but what's especially clear is that the current project is as focused on a vision of urban transport centered around the car as it was in the sixties," Franssen told The Daily. "Nowadays, we see that as a very dated vision of

urban transport.”

In October, Mobilization Turcot endorsed the Cure Minceur, a reconstruction plan developed by architect Pierre Brisset and Concordia Urban Planning professor Pierre Gauthier in 2010. Previously, Mobilization Turcot supported Turcot 375, another alternative plan that put a strong emphasis on public transport.

However, Franssen explained that because Turcot 375 was never formally considered by the Liberal government and renovation of the Interchange has become urgent, Mobilization Turcot decided to adopt the Cure Minceur.

“What we’re proposing right now is that they simplify the project and don’t make the highway bigger or increase the capacity, saving money and time,” said Franssen. “With the money that’s saved, we can invest in public transit infrastructure, so that we can start really solving some of these congestion problems in a sustainable way.”

The city of Montreal commissioned the Ministère des transports du Québec (MTQ) to oversee the reconstruction of the Interchange. [The MTQ’s] proposal involves renovation of the Ville-Marie as part of the Turcot reconstruction, which Brisset argues isn’t yet necessary.

“The Ville-Marie has a survival of another ten years, because it was built six years after [the Turcot Interchange], and under different conditions,” he told The Daily. “There are alternative solutions to recuperate it. Between now and 2022, let’s look at real alternatives.”

However, the MTQ firmly holds the position that the Ville-Marie needs to be reconstructed just as urgently as does the Turcot. Caroline Larose is the ministry spokesperson.

“The Turcot Interchange and the Ville-Marie are both at the end of their lives,” MTQ Spokesperson Caroline Larose told The Daily in French. “The reconstruction of each is equally as urgent.”

The city’s plan has evolved over the years, responding to some of the complaints of its opponents. Central to this discourse has been traffic volume – in particular, its environmental impact and implications for the residents of St. Henri.

Larose emphasized that the MTQ’s plan “strictly maintains the current capacity of the Interchange, and would in no way increase traffic volume.”

However, according to Franssen, under the MTQ’s plan, the highways’ vehicle capacities would increase, increasing the environmental impact on surrounding neighborhoods and possibly worsening highway congestion.

“Although [the MTQ] says that their plan wouldn’t significantly increase the capacity of the two highways that meet at the Interchange, it’s not true. There will be lanes added to the Ville-Marie, and by their own estimates, it will increase the capacity by at least 30,000 vehicles per day.”

Cure Minceur – which translates roughly to “diet plan” – refers both to trimming down the Turcot itself and to the scope of its reconstruction. In the MTQ’s current proposal, a branch of the highway loops around to permit access to the McGill University Health Centre (MUHC), a feature that is excluded from the Cure Minceur plan.

“[MUHC] somehow managed to convince Transport Québec to start building special ramps for them,” said Brisset.

Larose argued that constructing special access to the hospital was a “good citizen” act that would be universally beneficial.

“[MUHC] is already close to the Interchange, and the ramp will be maintained by the hospital and therefore won’t add extra costs to the city’s plans. It will reduce traffic going to the hospital in residential neighbourhoods. I don’t understand why people are making a problem out of this.”

Franssen challenged the notion that the planned route to the hospital would reduce traffic through residential areas.

“The way that the access road is designed would reroute traffic through St. Henri. So this idea that it won’t go through residential neighbourhoods – well, it won’t go through Westmount,” she said. “Does St. Henri not matter because the medium income is a whole lot lower there and the people have a lot less political influence?”

Franssen, among others, has struggled to understand the inconsistencies in the MTQ’s plan and the government’s resistance to adopting an alternative plan like the Cure Minceur.

“There are lots of people who propose theories that the government’s plans to make the highway bigger and keep transport car-centered come from their connections with the construction industry, [connections that] we’re learning more about every day,” said Franssen.

“It’s an interesting theory, because it’s pretty clear that what they’ve proposed is not in the public interest, so who’s interest is it in? Well, somebody’s going to be making \$3 billion off of it.”

Another difference between the two proposals is the degree of demolition that they would require. While the MTQ’s plan would displace somewhere between 90 and 130 residents of St. Henri and Westmount, this number has been greatly reduced from the thousands who would have been uprooted from their homes under the original 2007 plan. The Cure Minceur requires no demolition.

Victor Arroyo is a filmmaker working in Concordia’s department of Film Studies. His video installation project, *Turcot 2.0*, illustrates the displacement that occurs as a result of the demolition required by the original construction of the highways, as well as by their reconstruction. The installation is currently on display at the Canadian Centre for Architecture in Montreal.

“You have to ask the question: why is [St. Henri] being affected and not Westmount? I call it annihilation; you’re just cleaning,” Arroyo told The Daily. “It was even acknowledged by the government when it was done the first time [in the construction of the Ville-Marie] – it’s just a little bit of cleaning.”

Arroyo drew a contrast between Brisset and Gauthier’s motivation in developing their plan and that of the MTQ in their proposal.

“[Brisset and Gauthier] are architects by profession, but they also have a social perspective, so they have a social concern. They have the social perspective that no displacement is necessary.”

It seems that the new provincial government may be more open to reviewing the plan than its predecessors. The MTQ is currently holding an online public forum about the Turcot project, although the project already went through the requisite public audience process in 2009.

Franssen said she remains cautiously optimistic that the government will take another look at the concerns highlighted by Mobilization Turcot and revise the reconstruction plans. The organization has put out a letter to the Minister of Transport about the Cure Minceur, which supporters can sign online at turcot.info/en/letter.

“The sense that we’re getting is that Pauline Marois’s government is much more focused on doing things in the public interest than their Liberal predecessors. That being said, we don’t really know what their final decision will be,” said Franssen.

Larose confirmed that the MTQ has received the Cure Minceur proposal, but refused to comment on whether it would be incorporated into the final plan and emphasized the urgency of renovation of the Interchange.

“The Minister is looking at how to improve the plan, but I’m not in a position to say what those improvements will be. You must understand, we can’t allow delays in reconstructing the Interchange.”

But according to Brisset, adopting the Cure Minceur would allow construction to start in early 2013 as planned, and there is still time to alter the renovation plan.

“It’s happened before with construction plans in Montreal, even after they’d passed public audience and been ratified,” Brisset told The Daily.

The city of Montreal declined to comment for this story, citing the fact that the Turcot project is still under review by the provincial government.

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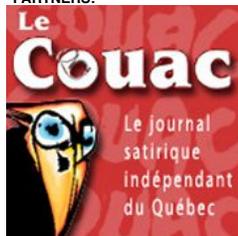


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The Turcot Interchange is falling down

How activists, architects, and government officials are in a death struggle over its reconstruction

by [CARLA GREEN](#)

There is one thing everyone agrees on: the Turcot Interchange is crumbling, and in desperate need of repair. The Interchange is a massive three-level highway that cuts through St. Henri, and since 2007, the city has been in a struggle with architects, activists, and engineers over its reconstruction.

Its history is littered with social movement, class struggle, and politics. The Interchange was rushed to completion in time for the 1967 World Expo as part of a larger international movement towards developing superhighways, even amid popular dissidence and social mobilization against its construction.

The Ville-Marie autoroute, which connects to the Turcot and has been included in its reconstruction plans, was built in 1970. Its construction involved destroying about 2,000 homes.

This displacement was part of a series of construction and demolition projects in the name of modernization in Montréal at the time. Altogether, these projects caused the displacement of as many as 20,000 people, and fully eliminated three lower-income neighborhoods, including the former Red Light district.

In many ways, the current situation mirrors that of the original construction in the sixties.

Shannon Franssen is the spokesperson for Mobilization Turcot, a citizen's group with the goal of constructing "a better Turcot" and informing Montréalers about the reconstruction project.

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This October, Mobilization Turcot endorsed the Cure Minceur, a reconstruction plan developed by Pierre Brisset and Pierre Gauthier in 2010. Previously, Mobilization Turcot supported Turcot 375, another alternative plan that put a strong focus on public transport.

However, Franssen explained that as Turcot 375 was never formally considered by the Liberal government and renovation of the Interchange has become urgent, Mobilization Turcot decided to adopt the Cure Minceur.



Victor Arroyo's art installation, pictured here, is a series of videos that focus on displacement as a result of the construction and reconstruction of the Turcot Interchange. (Victor Arroyo)

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"What we're proposing right now is that they simplify the project and don't make the highway bigger or increase the capacity, saving money and time," she told the Daily in a phone interview.

"With the money that's saved, we can invest in public transit infrastructure, so that we can start really solving some of these congestion problems in a sustainable way."

The Ministère des transports du Québec (MTQ) was commissioned by the city with reconstructing the Interchange. Its proposal involves renovation of the Ville-Marie as part of the Turcot reconstruction, which Brisset argues isn't yet necessary.

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The city's plan has evolved over the years, responding to some of the complaints of its opponents. Central to this discourse has been traffic volume: its environmental impact overall and its implications for the residents of St. Henri in particular.

Larose emphasized that the MTQ's plan "strictly maintains the current capacity of the Interchange, and would in no way increase traffic volume."

However, according to Franssen, under the MTQ's plan, the highways' vehicle capacities would go up, increasing the environmental impact on surrounding neighborhoods and possibly also even worsening highway congestion.

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Franssen is guardedly hopeful that the government will take another look at the concerns highlighted by Mobilization Turcot and revise the reconstruction plans. The organization has put out a letter to the Minister of Transport about the Cure Minceur, which supporters can sign at turcot.info/en/letter.

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This article originally appeared in the [McGill Daily](#).

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