

# Mutual Aid and Social Networks

## *A Feminist-Inspired Housing Co-op in Montreal*

BY GISELE YASMEEN

### Rethinking the Home, Neighbourhood and City

**W**ithin the ideal of the “liveable city” lies the realm of the alternative neighbourhood and, ultimately, the *possibility* of a truly egalitarian home. This is one in which both men and women take equal domestic responsibility and, perhaps more importantly, the boundaries between public and private space are rearranged so that reproductive work (caring for children, food preparation) becomes a community responsibility rather than that of a sole individual or couple. The ideal home is one that has forged a new relationship with the neighbourhood and the city at large; the links between the individual, the family and the larger community become ties of mutual support.<sup>1</sup>

In light of the above ideal, increasing attention has been paid to alternative housing strategies, such as housing co-operatives, which are regarded as a step toward achieving the communitarian ideal.<sup>2</sup> Housing co-operatives — in which residents collectively own and manage their living space — are said to provide opportunities for residents to help one another. Some housing co-operatives have explicitly vowed to play a role in the support of women who, for the most part, are disadvantaged members of society and often suffer in the housing market due to discrimination and lower incomes. “Co-opérative d’Habitation Tournesoleil,” located in a traditionally working-class neighbourhood of Montreal, is an example of such a housing co-operative.

This article will profile Tournesoleil co-op, which promotes the selection of socio-economically disadvantaged women as its members yet maintains a diversity of households: lone-parent families, couples with and without children, and single women and men. The history and geography of the co-operative will be traced, followed by a discussion of the organizational structure of Tournesoleil and the composition of its households. Finally, I will focus on the nature of mutual aid taking place between residents by employing the concept of *social network*.

### Feminist Roots in the Plateau

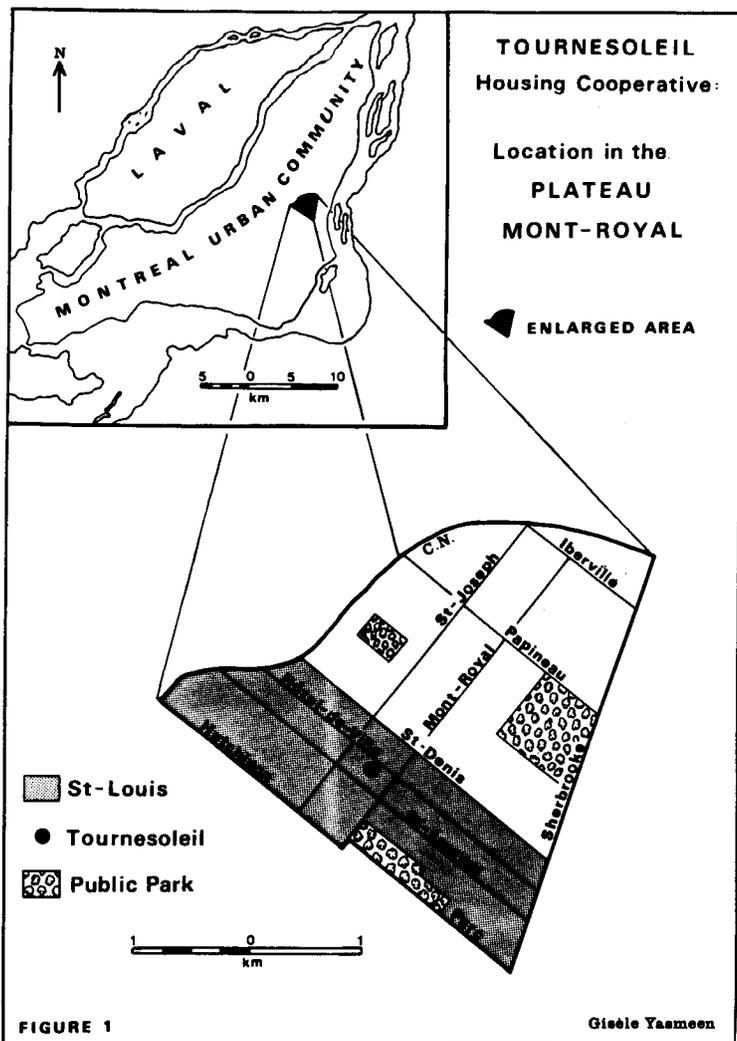
Co-opérative d’Habitation Tournesoleil, incorporated as an association in 1979, recently celebrated its tenth anniversary. The first members of the co-operative were recruited through the participation of a local feminist organization, the *Centre d’Information et de Référence pour les Femmes* (CIRF). The project was coordinated by a local *Groupe de Ressources Techniques* (GRT). GRTs are often responsible for developing co-operative housing projects in Quebec. From the beginning, the

project attracted mostly women, following the diffusion of information about the co-op through the CIRF bulletin. One of the primary mandates of Tournesoleil is a commitment to improve the socio-economic conditions of women. Recently, this objective has been officially ratified; two-thirds of the members of the co-operative must be women. At present there are three men residing in Tournesoleil, two of whom are members. Some members have pointed out that it would be good to have more men in the co-op, as there were in the past, in order to maintain an equilibrium and heterogeneous atmosphere.

Initially, co-op members wanted to purchase and renovate a former nurses’ residence, but due to cost difficulties and negotiation problems, ended up choosing their current site on Hôtel-de-Ville Street between Mont-Royal and Villeneuve Avenue (see Figure 1). This area of Montreal is part of a working-class and multi-ethnic neighbourhood known as “St-Louis,” an immigrant corridor that is a transition zone between English and French-speaking areas of the city. St-Louis is considered part of a much larger neighbourhood known as the “Plateau Mont-Royal.” The Plateau is a neighbourhood which, like other areas of the city, has been undergoing considerable change in the last few years as a result of “gentrification.” A number of women professionals — in the arts, communications and social service sectors — have moved into the area because of the easy access to various cultural facilities, transportation and places of employment.<sup>3</sup> The upwardly mobile professionals of Tournesoleil are very conscious of the displacement of low-income individuals by professionals in “gentrifying” neighbourhoods: many have stated that they will move out of the co-operative once they are financially solvent in order to give someone else the opportunity to benefit from the low cost and other advantages of co-operative living. The ideal for many of the residents is to purchase private property in the Plateau or a house in the country.

The many housing co-operatives in the Montreal Urban Community (approximately 300) have offered an alternative to gentrification by renovating the housing stock while maintaining the local population and often improving its living standards. Housing co-operatives are highly concentrated in the Plateau together with an unusually large number of grass-roots community groups. A strong sense of belonging and a thriving community spirit is both a cause and result of this high level of local involvement. The Plateau, and especially St-Louis, are thriving neighbourhoods with urban animation and a vibrant street life. The residents of Tournesoleil identify with this neighbourhood and participate in its social and political life.

Tournesoleil is nestled amidst Mont-Royal Avenue, St-Lau-



rent Boulevard and St-Denis Street: all highly developed commercial arteries. Mont-Royal and St-Laurent both offer reasonably priced food shops, inexpensive clothing stores, hardware stores and other amenities. The ethnic diversity of the area guarantees the availability of a range of specialized goods and a cosmopolitan atmosphere. St-Denis street, with its cafés and bistros, provides a distinctive night-life.

Like most housing co-operatives in Montreal, Tournesoleil is a renovated project. The fifteen units are divided between five triplex rowhouses — the typical late nineteenth-century and early twentieth-century brick housing of many neighbourhoods in Montreal. Most of the apartments are comprised of four and one-half to five and one-half rooms (two and three bedrooms). Each apartment has a private entrance off the street and a section of balcony facing the backyard. Many members feel that separate entrances are a positive design element because privacy is more easily maintained when access to

and is landscaped with a lawn, flowers and bushes. Picnic tables were constructed by the spouse of one of the members and are for collective use. In the summer, the yard is extensively used for leisure activities and for child play. The yard was a factor that led many of the members with children to choose Tournesoleil over other housing options. Members are also highly concerned with the safety of their children in the vicinity of the co-op. The street is known to be "tough" and the presence of a few bars and video arcades nearby aggravates the problem. The co-op has been in contact with the city about this issue. Since the formation of two other co-ops on the same street, the safety of immediate neighbourhood has improved according to some members of Tournesoleil.

#### Organizational Structure and Household Type

Tournesoleil decided to adopt a consensus decision-making model and committee system in order to complete the many

and fro is inconspicuous. Separate entrances also cut down on noise. Even an eight-year-old child living in the co-op remarked on how proud she was of the fact that her family now had its own door!

The most prevalent in feminist design, such as children's play space and security, have been important aspects of planning Tournesoleil. A well-designed backyard was one of the priorities of the co-op. The fenced yard is for the use of members and their families

tasks involved in managing a co-op. In other words, there is no *de facto* executive, although a president and treasurer are officially appointed and given signing authority for bureaucratic purposes. All members are involved in one of four committees: secretarial, accounting, maintenance or communications. The communications committee is the newest and its mandate is twofold: i) to mediate between the community and the co-op and to diffuse information to members through the publication of a newspaper; and ii) to organize social events for co-op members (e.g., Christmas party, corn roasts). Each committee has a number of established tasks and presents a report of its activities to the annual general meeting. Decisions that are the responsibility of the membership at large are made, as much as possible, by consensus. When this is not possible the issue in question is brought to a vote.

Consensus decision making is an ideal. In practice, power struggles still take place. Some members have more influence than others due to their knowledge and greater management skills. Others are unfamiliar with "meeting jargon," and as a result are intimidated and hesitate to voice their opinions. Sub-groups or "cliques" come together out of natural affinities and often form political "blocks." Tournesoleil, like all human organizations, has a rich political life.

The membership of Tournesoleil underwent several changes from the time the association was formed in March 1979 to the day the units were ready to be occupied, in July 1980. Some of the first members of the association abandoned the project because they were offered a more suitable housing alternative (e.g., specialized housing for senior citizens). Tenants who were already located in the building prior to the purchase by the co-op were invited to join as members. When it was finally time to move into the renovated apartments, there were five original members of the co-op association, with the remaining units being taken by former residents and a few people from the immediate neighbourhood. Over time, some members moved away. Currently, Tournesoleil has 18 members who are housed in 15 apartments. Some spouses have chosen to be members while some have not. Table 1 shows the breakdown of household types.

**Table 1**  
**Household Composition**

Household Type	Number
Lone parent families headed by women	5
Younger and middle-aged women living alone	3
Couples without children	4
Older women (60 and over) living alone	2
Couple with children	1

The diversity of household types is accompanied by a diversity of professions, ethnic backgrounds and lifestyles. There are several students and professionals in the co-op, most active in the social service sector (see Table 2). Of the professionals, a number are middle-aged women who have undergone a career change in the last few years. Residents originate from a variety of cultural backgrounds, and are all primarily French-speaking. There are two members of Italian background, one family from Chile, one member of Lebanese origin, one bilingual anglophone of Irish background and one person from France. The remaining members are French-Canadian. The presence of a variety of age groups also adds to the heterogeneity of the co-op. Finally, members have a diversity of interests, many in the fine arts but also in the sciences, spirituality and politics.

**Table 2**  
**Occupations of Residents**

Occupation	Number
Students	6
Social service professionals	4
Homemakers	4
Fine arts professionals	2
Foster families	2
Retired	2

(Total exceeds number of adult residents due to dual occupations.)

**Mutual Aid**

Theoretical and empirical analyses of feminist-inspired housing strategies, including co-operatives, have consistently mentioned the "community" that usually develops within such environments. Community implies a strong sense of belonging and, more importantly, mutual support. In order to make co-operative living

easier to understand and plan, it is useful to analyze the nature of this support. One approach is to look at the social networks within a particular housing environment.

Social relations can be thought of in terms of networks, which are analytical tools depicting the "links" between a given group of people. The social network concept is useful for understanding the forms of various types of relationships and the flows of resources between members of a group.<sup>4</sup>In terms of neighbouring — relations that develop between those living in close proximity — resources include babysitting, food, services (such as typing, filling out tax returns) and non-tangible exchanges such as conversation, or information about jobs and events.

A number of networks have formed between the residents of Tournesoleil. These links seem to have developed as a result of several factors. Shared values, lifestyles, needs and even schedules, have led to the development of certain patterns of interaction. (Figure 2 illustrates the links between the households of Tournesoleil).

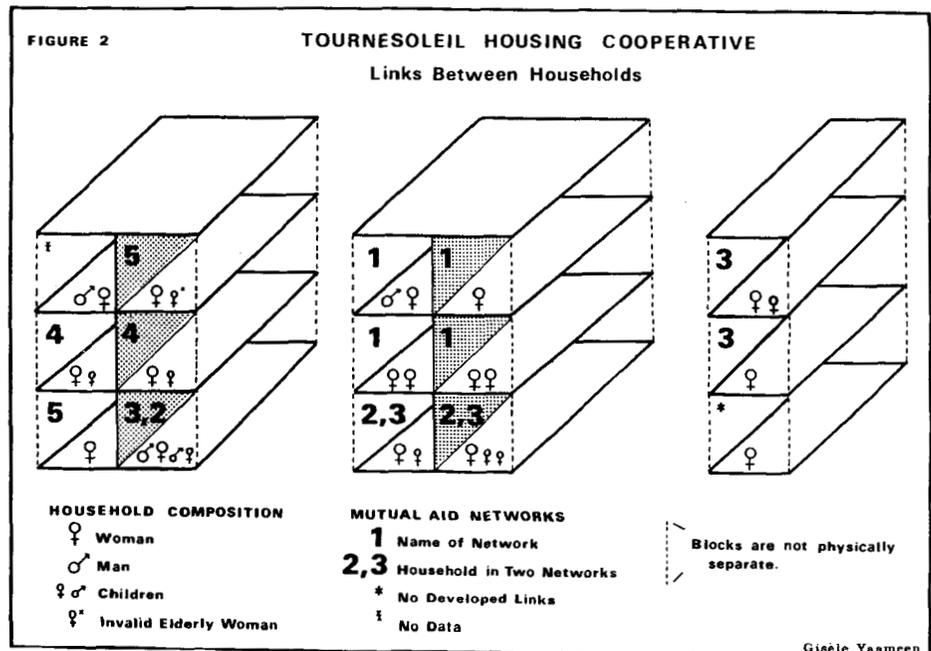
One of the most important factors linking people in the co-op are pre-existing ties, in other words, people who knew one another prior to moving into Tournesoleil. Two sisters and their respective partners form a first network (number one in Figure 2). Also linked to this cluster are those who went to school together and those who share common values (feminist, progressive) and lifestyles (professionals without children). This cluster is also

spatially conditioned; all members are immediate neighbours.

A second cluster, comprised of those who have young children, illustrates another factor leading to network formation. Three apartments on the ground level each houses families with children under the age of ten. Some of these children are playmates, which has resulted in a number of exchanges between the parents. Babysitting after school is a frequent occurrence. A used-clothing "pipeline" has also developed, whereby clothing (usually for children) arrives from a source outside the co-op and is circulated among the parents.

Other smaller networks have developed between immediate neighbours who share interests and lifestyles and usually have similar responsibilities in the co-op. Committees present an opportunity for members to interact on a regular basis and often encourage the formation of relationships of mutual aid. There is an "artistic" cluster (number three), based on shared interests in the arts, which developed partially as a result of membership in the same committee. There is a recently formed link between two single parents who share certain life experiences and whose daughters play together (number four). These two women are immediate neighbours and members of the same committee as well.

The senior women in the co-op present an interesting scenario (network number five). One woman, Thérèse (all names have been changed), is already a "care-



giver," or foster family, to an invalid. The second senior woman member, Alice, was recently widowed and receives a lot of material and emotional support from Thérèse, her friend of 25 years, as well as from the entire co-operative. The members organized a "corvée" or work crew to paint and upgrade Alice's apartment following her husband's death.

Information on community events, help in an emergency and friendly interaction, such as the occasional cup of coffee, are all resources that flow between co-op members who did not know each other before moving into Tournesoleil. Yet most members have maintained their strongest ties with people outside the co-operative. Mutual aid relationships between co-op members are not necessarily links of friendship; the role of neighbour and the behaviour associated with it is distinct from that of "friend," which involves emotional commitment and companionship.<sup>5</sup> Perhaps the greatest consolation for many of the residents of Tournesoleil is the knowledge that someone they know and trust is within easy reach if the need for emergency help arises.

Problems have developed as a result of people living as neighbours as well as "co-managers" of the housing project. When friction arises due to personality differences, noise complaints or difficulties related to co-op affairs, members cannot avoid interacting with one another. These "negative links" are a common feature in other situations, such as the workplace and even the family, where people are required to interact with one another. If the lines of communications are "open" so that meetings or other organizational structures allow for the airing out of difficulties, these problems can be resolved. Frictions related to more profound incompatibilities — such as personality conflicts, jealousies or prejudices — are more complicated and sometimes cannot be resolved.

### Blueprint for a New Society?

Members of Tournesoleil consider the co-op environment to be supportive compared to their previous living arrangements. The women in the co-op help each other to a great extent with domestic responsibilities such as childcare, finding clothing and exchanges of food, and in times of crisis, such as following an accident or death, with tasks like laundry and shopping.

Have private and public spaces been radically redefined in this feminist living environment? Members generally wel-

come each other into their homes for official co-op functions and the occasional request for aid. A few strong friendships have developed between members. Unlike other housing contexts, members subtly encourage each other and share many resources. Although it would be an exaggeration to say that the housing co-operative is a "blueprint" for a new society, this kind of mutual aid is very exciting and a step towards achieving more efficient and egalitarian homes, neighbourhoods and cities.

<sup>1</sup> For explorations of this theme see Dolores Hayden, *Redesigning the American Dream: The Future of Housing, Work and Family* (New York: W. W. Norton and Company, 1984); Gerda R. Wekerle, Rebecca Peterson and David Morley, eds., *New Space for Women* (Boulder, Colorado: Westview Press, 1980); Caroline Andrew and Beth Moore Milroy, eds., *Life Spaces: Gender, Household, Employment* (Vancouver: UBC Press, 1988).

<sup>2</sup> See Gerda Wekerle, *Canadian Women's Housing Co-operatives: Case Studies in Physical and Social Innovation*, in Caroline Andrew and Beth Moore Milroy, eds., *Life Spaces: Gender, Household, Employment* (Vancouver: UBC Press, 1988) and Gerda Wekerle, *Women's*

*Housing Projects in Eight Canadian Cities* (CMHC, Ottawa, 1988). For an historical discussion of innovative egalitarian housing environments, see Dolores Hayden, *The Grand Domestic Revolution* (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 1982).

<sup>3</sup> For an analysis of gentrification in the Plateau Mont-Royal see Damaris Rose, "A Feminist Perspective of Employment Restructuring and Gentrification: The Case of Montreal," in J. Wolch and M. Dear, eds., *The Power of Geography* (London: Unwin-Hyman, 1989).

<sup>4</sup> See Barry Wellman and Saul Berkowitz, eds., *Social Structures: A Network Approach* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1988).

<sup>5</sup> For a discussion of the role of neighbour and the socially defined behaviour associated with neighbouring see Suzanne Keller, *The Urban Neighbourhood* (New York: Random House, 1968).

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