Saint-Henri is one of the neighbourhoods in Quebec’s former industrial heartland, the low-lying area south and west of downtown Montreal. It is a historically French-Canadian and Irish working class district that has experienced rapid gentrification, centered on the Canal, that has displaced many former residents while changing economies, and environmental pressures. Two mega-projects now under way directly impact the social ecology of the west end of Saint-Henri: the rebuilding of the Turcot Interchange and the development of the McGill University Hospital Centre.

Between 1966 and 2001, the population fell by almost fifty percent—to 13,563 from 26,699. When the Lachine Canal closed to shipping in 2002, the City of Montreal annexed the town in 1905, it was the largest industrial centre in all Canada, known for its heavily unionized and close-knit residents. A long period of de-industrialisation and economic decline followed World War II. Highway construction in the 1960s demolished hundreds of homes and fragmented the neighbourhood spatially, effectively cutting off the eastern and western halves. Between 1966 and 2001, the population fell by almost fifty percent—to 13,563 from 26,699. When the Lachine Canal closed to shipping in 2002, the City of Montreal invested millions in encouraging private developers to create mixed-use business and residential properties in the former warehouses on the waterfront. The redevelopment has begun to reverse Saint-Henri’s population loss but also triggered a wave of gentrification, centered on the Canal, that has displaced many former residents while exacerbating income inequality and social stratification in the neighbourhood.

While parts of Saint-Henri continue to gentrify, other areas retain their traditional character or have been resettled by immigrants. Almost a third of all renters live in social housing, and the area as a whole continues to have a high incidence of poverty. Dozens of contaminated sites can be found in Saint-Henri, and the rates of cancer, social housing, and the area as a whole continues to have a high incidence of poverty.

Saint-Henri is shaped most prominently by its industrial past and the major highways and railroads that surround and cut through it. These features take a marked toll on the health of residents while contributing to the neighbourhood’s physical isolation. Two hundred years of industrial activity have left scores of sites contaminated by all character or have been resettled by immigrants. Almost a third of all renters live in social housing, and the area as a whole continues to have a high incidence of poverty.

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