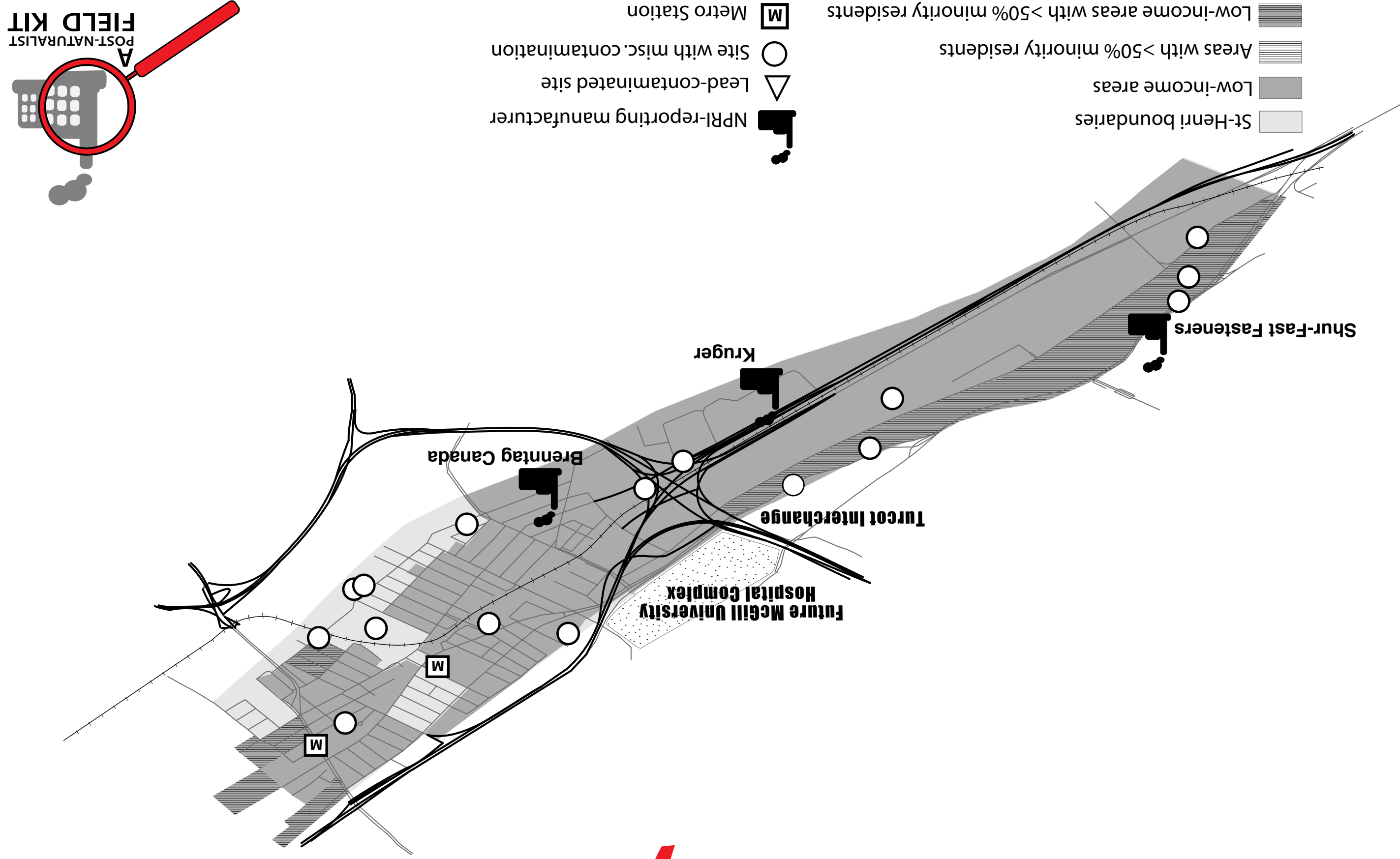


Saint-Henri, Montreal





A POST-NATURALIST FIELD KIT

saint-henri

MONTREAL

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 and some of its social characteristics.

Two hundred years of industrial activity have left scores of sites contaminated by lead and other heavy metals, petroleum-based solvents, and volatile organic compounds. When a building is demolished, it becomes the responsibility of whomever wishes to rebuild to decontaminate the soil to acceptable levels. Because residential pollution standards are the most stringent and the cost of soil decontamination very high, construction is a prohibitively expensive proposition. Only high-end residential developments make soil remediation cost-effective. In the absence of a strong public commitment to building affordable housing, contamination pervasively and counter-intuitively encourages gentrification.

The concentration of transportation infrastructure in Saint-Henri also reflects its industrial heritage. The Canadian National railroad tracks that bisect the district into northern and southern zones were built in the 19th century; the Turcot interchange is so named because it was built above the Turcot railroad yards. Even the concentration of transportation infrastructure, and especially the presence of the highways, produce noise and air pollution that no doubt contribute to Saint-Henri's remarkably high levels of asthma, bronchitis, and respiratory mortality. Those who live within 200 metres of the highways are disproportionately affected.

Saint-Henri's industrial roots also contribute to a lack of green spaces to mitigate pollution and improve residents' quality of life. Although several community gardens have formed and neighbourhood groups have planted thousands of trees, there is still too little greenery to cleanse the air, rebuild the soil, and cool the streets effectively. Saint-Henri is an urban heat island, noticeably hotter in summer than areas with more greenspace.

Neighbourhood Organizations

Solidarité Saint-Henri
<http://www.solidarite-sh.org>
75, Sir Georges-Étienne Cartier
Bureau 200
Montréal, QC H4C 3A1
514-937-9813

POPIR Comité Logement
<http://lepopir.blogspot.com>
4017, Notre Dame Ouest
Montréal, QC, H4C 1R3
514-935-4649

Citizens' Committee of the Village Des Tanneries
<http://www.villagedestanneries.com>

A Post-Naturalist Field Kit for Saint-Henri, Montreal
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Beneath the Turcot Interchange.

Mega-Projects in Saint-Henri

The City Below the Hill

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 in the last decade.

Settled by tanners of animal hides as early as 1685, the area became known as the "Village des Tanneries." The construction of the Lachine Canal in the early 19th century brought rapid growth and industrialization to the sleepy village of artisans and farmers, and the area incorporated as the City of Saint-Henri in 1875. By the time Montreal annexed the town in 1905, it was the largest industrial centre in all of 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, hospitalisation, and death from respiratory disease are higher than in Montreal as a whole. Many community organizations grapple with these issues daily as they work to improve life in the neighbourhood.

The Turcot Interchange was built as part of Montreal's preparation for the 1967 World Expo. With a height of more than 30 metres, the three-level structure remains the largest interchange in Quebec and serves over 280,000 vehicles per day. The 40-year-old highway is badly deteriorated, and Transports Québec would like to reconstruct it by 2015. Their proposal expands the capacity of the interchange and requires the demolition of almost 200 residences. The proposal is widely opposed in Saint-Henri, with pollution, traffic safety, and spatial segmentation high on the list of concerns. But many beyond the neighbourhood also question the wisdom of redeveloping a 20th century transportation system rather than responding to the realities of oil shortages and climate change. Several alternative proposals have been made, and the project is snared in delays until Transports Québec decides how to proceed. The McGill University Hospital Centre (MUHC) brings together several major hospitals and research centres on the site of a former train yard just north of Saint-Henri. Although McGill has announced its commitment to making the project as "green" as possible, it remains to be seen how the mega-hospital's development will impact the environment, economy, and character of the adjacent neighbourhoods. Many community groups fear the complex will lead to gentrification and displacement. Since 2004, a coalition of scholars and planners has been working with community organizations to study the hospital's impacts and devise ways for it to benefit the stability and diversity of the surrounding areas.