

Researcher detects traces of HIV in the city

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being written. Between fascination, passing the torch, and compassion, this story can sometimes efface the current issues of the epidemic. While the urgency is not the same in the North, there are still many problem areas, and we are never immune from setbacks to hard-won rights," he explained, while stressing that the "social geography of HIV deserves to be worked on more systematically." Credit: Gabriel Girard, University of Montreal.

Since the treatment has become available, HIV is often described as "undetectable" and the risk of transmission has been drastically reduced. However, the epidemic is still quite present in the lives of many gay and bisexual men... and in public spaces. This often overlooked dimension of the disease has been brought to light by Gabriel Girard of the University of Montreal's Public Health Research Institute (IRSPUM) - HIV is still alive in the city, especially in the Village, Montreal's gay district. "Urban traces are significant as they shed light on the social and historical realities, in this case the realities of the HIV epidemic, at a time when AIDS is less present in the news," Girard explained. A sociologist and post-doctoral fellow, he presented his research on May 28 at the AMADES (Anthropologie Médicale Appliquée au Développement et à la Santé) conference in Ottawa.

Speaking on the theme "What cure means," Girard revealed significant and often overlooked traces of the disease in the urban landscape that resulted from community mobilization. "The most obvious example is Park of Hope, at the corner of Panet and Ste-Catherine Streets. The location owes its existence to a struggle by Act Up Montréal to create a place of commemoration and remembrance for those who died of AIDS in Quebec," he explained. "It took several years for the city to formalize the park's role in 1996." He also cited Raymond Blain Park, which, as noted by the plaque erected there, is named after a city councillor involved in the fight against the epidemic, who died of AIDS in 1992;

and the creation of a mural at the corner of Wolfe and Ste-Catherine Streets, which displays a quote by Ron Fahra, who set up a foundation for men, women, and children living with HIV/AIDS.

The presence of HIV in the city is also linked to community and care organizations, which are numerous around the Village, such as the Actuel and Quartier Latin clinics, organizations such as RÉZO, and La Maison Plein Coeur. Other traces identified by Girard are less visible: "The Chapel of Hope, located in the Church of Saint-Pierre-Apôtre at the corner of Visitation and René-Levesque Streets, is a place of contemplation, and a flame has burnt there since July 22, 1996 in memory of the victims of AIDS," he said. Indeed, research into the urban traces of the disease also involved analyzing how [public spaces](#) have been reclaimed. "A vigil is held every year in Park of Hope on December 1, World AIDS Day. And in late September, the FARHA Foundation Walk mainly takes place in the streets of the Village. These two events are the only public events currently held in relation to AIDS in Montreal," Girard said.

His analysis intersects the history and presence of the gay and lesbian community in South Central Montreal with the history of mobilization against HIV. "The study involved considering a whole range of emotions reflected in these urban traces: anger and indignation, but also sadness and melancholy, which a place like Park of Hope incarnates in itself. But these vestiges of HIV in the neighbourhood also reflect hope, put into words by the mural's quotation - AIDS will disappear one day - which has special significance at a time of ongoing programs to eradicate the virus," Girard said. "Finally, the lasting marks of HIV also reflect nostalgia - for a changing neighbourhood, but also for a time when the gay community showed more solidarity in the fight against AIDS."

Current interest in this dark period of the epidemic, especially in cinema, is a positive development since it contributes to the collective

memory of the gay, lesbian and transgender community. However, the researcher also feels that this nostalgia can obscure the complexities of the present situation. "It is the story of the homosexual mobilization against AIDS in the 1980s that is being written. Between fascination, passing the torch, and compassion, this story can sometimes efface the current issues of the epidemic. While the urgency is not the same in the North, there are still many problem areas, and we are never immune from setbacks to hard-won rights," he explained, while stressing that the "social geography of HIV deserves to be worked on more systematically."

Provided by University of Montreal

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