

# Habiter la mixité, a decade already!

September 10, 2009

Habiter la mixité kicked off 10 years ago already. The project has made incredible headway since then. While the first get-togethers attracted only a few tenants in a makeshift meeting space, Habiter la mixité now reaches tenants from nine multiethnic public housing projects, offering them a range of activities and connecting them with local resources. This souvenir booklet provides a glimpse of what has been accomplished in the last decade.



## A wonderful adventure

The Habiter la mixité adventure began in 1999 when the city of Montreal and Quebec's ministry of immigration drew up an action plan to welcome immigrants and integrate them into francophone life here.

Back then, Montreal's housing bureau, the OMHM, was facing a new challenge as more and more recent immigrants moved into public housing. This multiethnicity raised several issues of concern. For example, tenants needed to understand societal rules and maintain neighbourly relations.

Thanks to the new agreement, the OMHM was able to set up the project Habiter la mixité<sup>1</sup>. The goals of the project today are both modest and ambitious:

- Inform immigrant families of their rights and duties as tenants of public housing.
- Help immigrant families communicate in French and offer them opportunities to converse with their neighbours.
- Forge ties with local resources.

Over the years, the project has certainly evolved. Initially focused on families, it has recently reached out to young people and seniors, too. Time has gone by in a flash for the team of four outreach workers and their coordinator. Through personal contacts, the team has made inroads in nine housing projects. So far, it has helped hundreds of tenants integrate and participate actively in their new community.

<sup>1</sup> The goals of Habiter la mixité have changed slightly over time. The project now favours solidier links between community groups and immigrant tenants of public housing.

## Our partners

Habiter la mixité is funded through an agreement between the city of Montreal and Quebec's ministry of immigration. The boroughs of Montreal and many other partners also lend the project support.



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# Claire Katma, a decade of dedication



*Claire Katma and MNA Yolande James at the ceremony for the Jacques Couture Award in May 2009.*

From the very first time she knocked on a stranger's door, Claire Katma had a goal in mind. A native of Greece, she wanted others to benefit from her own experience as an immigrant. "I saw people arriving here, often under difficult circumstances. I gave them keys to their apartment, but I never knew what became of them." So she quit her permanent job at the Société d'habitation et de développement de Montréal to become an outreach worker on contract.

With passion, sensitivity, conviction and perseverance, Ms. Katma has given a big boost to our local approach. As a coordinator of our family division, she's helped hundreds of people, mainly immigrant women, feel less isolated while increasing their self-confidence and teaching them about their host country. "People inspire me," she says. "I listen to their requests and make myself available to them."

Her outstanding achievements earned Ms. Katma a nomination for a 2009 Quebec citizenship award called the Jacques Couture Award for fostering intercultural relations (private citizen category).

## A local approach

Habiter la mixité owes a great deal of its success to its on-site approach. For outreach workers, what's the best way to lend tenants support? The answer is extremely simple and effective: by going to them.

The workers knock on lots of doors, make plenty of phone calls and shake countless hands. By making first contact, they show interest. By offering support and activities, they establish trust. Thanks to this local approach, they can guide tenants to needed resources, act as a go-between with organizations in the area, facilitate communication with the OMHM, and, of course, nurture good relations between neighbours.

## The OMHM in brief

- Under its present form, the OMHM was created in 2002 when 15 housing bureaus merged on the Island of Montreal.
- This non-profit organization serves as an agent both for the Société d'habitation du Québec and the city of Montreal.
- The OMHM manages:
  - 20,382 apartments in low-rent housing.
  - Agreements with landlords of 7,313 apartments within rent supplement programs.
  - 1,608 apartments built within the Quebec affordable housing program.



# People helping themselves

About two out of three families (66%) living in public housing come from outside Canada. Habiter la mixité helps them settle into their new community by organizing outings with neighbours, arranging activities for kids, assisting with small projects and helping set up tenant committees. The following pages present a few examples of these accomplishments and the observations of tenants involved.



*A first Green Thumb prize for André-Grasset tenants and their outreach worker.*

## Sprucing up André-Grasset

Habiter la mixité mobilizes tenants in public housing whenever the écoquartier program in Ahuntsic puts together a work project. For example, outreach worker Claire Katma urged tenants to plant flowers and enter the OMHM's Green Thumb Contest. The prize they won the first year spurred them on, and further prizes followed. "They realize that their efforts pay off," says Ms. Katma. "In a way, the garden outside their home has become their own little plot of land."



*"I get a bit bored and want to go out and talk to immigrants like me. So every week I come here to chat with others. I visited a sugar shack and went apple picking for the first time."*

*Rosa Vicioso, a native of the Dominican Republic, with her children (Habitations André-Grasset).*



*"I've gradually gotten involved. I attend meetings and knock on the doors of Haitian tenants to invite them out to activities. I make meals. I like meeting people of other nationalities."*

*Eminne Versaillau, a native of Haiti (Habitations André-Grasset).*







## A vegetable garden for seniors

A few years ago, Hyacinth Rose Hamilton and Sylvia Kelly had an idea for the gardening boxes at Habitations Place Newman, a building for retirees and handicapped people. With the help and expertise of Véronique Roy-Bouliane from the Société environnementale de Côte-des-Neiges, these women and a dozen other tenants have been caring for a beautiful vegetable garden ever since. Edwige Simon, an outreach worker for Habiter la mixité, lends her unwavering support to an activity that brings people together.



"I used to know only one country. With these meetings, I've learned about Laos, Iraq and Bangladesh. When I talk to people, I can understand their culture and many other things."

Naila Bannani, a native of Tunisia (Habitations De Maisonneuve).



"Thanks to Claire, I've taken French classes at Centre Lartigue. I have a better grasp of the language—the verbs, nouns and pronouns. The centre was nearby, and the lessons didn't take the whole day."

Shamina Begum (right), a native of Bangladesh, with her daughter (Habitations De Maisonneuve).

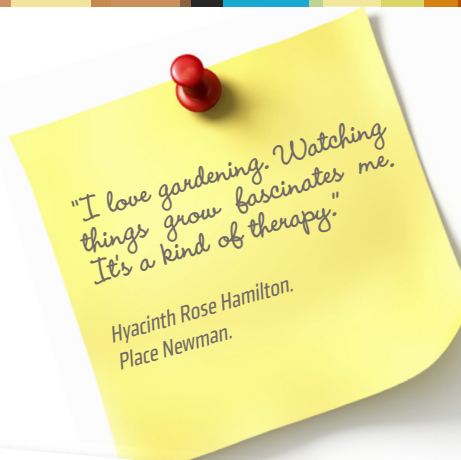
"In summer, we garden. In winter, we play inside—dominoes, bingo, cards. I enjoy myself."

Sylvia Kelly, Place Newman.



"At Claire's request, I did a presentation on my country at the Saint-Laurent women's centre. I was well prepared, and participants enjoyed it."

Olga Kadenskaia, a tenant of Slavic origin (Habitations Parc Royal).



"I love gardening. Watching things grow fascinates me. It's a kind of therapy."

Hyacinth Rose Hamilton.  
Place Newman.



"The door to the community centre was always locked before. Now I know lots of people here. We eat together, plan outings, dance together. Because of my handicap, I never dared to dance. I danced for the first time with Claire at the Christmas party."

Yessra Elgbaili, a native of Lebanon (Habitations Parc Royal).

"Taking part in the activities here keeps me spry."

Loris Henry, Place Newman.

## The OMHM's 2008 calendar

The youth division of the project was looking for a fun way to attract children every week from Habitations Alexandra in the southwest sector. Encouraged by Danielle Lacroix, an outreach worker at the time, a dozen kids aged 10 to 13 had a ball designing a calendar depicting the seasons. The calendar was so beautiful that the OMHM made it its official calendar. Governor General Michaëlle Jean even sent the kids a letter to congratulate them.

"Danielle suggested we make a calendar honouring the seasons. So we dressed up, posed for photos and had loads of fun," says Pascal Kiteme. "Afterwards, people at school and in the neighbourhood recognized us," adds Kevin Mbembe.

Both boys are 13 years old and live at Habitations Alexandra.







## Parc Royal community garden

A flourishing, bountiful garden is a great source of pride! At Habitations Parc Royal, tenants suggested setting up a community garden on vacant land. An outreach worker got involved in the project, sought approvals, recruited participants and provided supplies. Residents started working the soil, drawing on their individual skills and traditions. The beautiful area is now fenced in and carefully tended.



## Multicultural meals

A few years ago, at the request of CDEC Centre-Sud, Claire Katma asked 10 women of different origins (Lebanon, Laos, Bangladesh, Pakistan, Morocco and Greece) to prepare food for 200 people. Since then, other tenants have accepted similar requests from community groups. Inspired by this success, the women sit down each week to plan a multicultural meal with help from an outreach worker. Their favourite topic of conversation is their plan to launch a catering service.



"I come here every week. It relieves boredom and helps me get to know the families I now babysit for. I open up to people and chat with everybody. I make sure to respect others, and they respect me."

Diane Martel, a native of Quebec (Habitations De Maisonneuve).

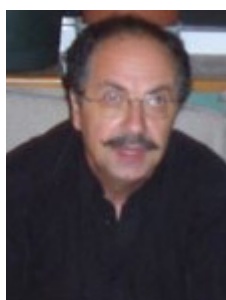
*Habiter la mixité lives and grows with help from many partners. Their joint ventures are truly rewarding as the following examples show.*

### Pooling efforts

For several years now, the people behind the program Tandem Ville-Marie Est and Habiter la mixité have pooled their talents for projects that meet their respective goals. “Habiter la mixité helps us fulfill our mandate for activities in public housing,” says Laurence Tessier-Dansereau, who heads up the project Sécurité par la mobilisation (SÉMO) within Tandem Ville-Marie Est. SÉMO mobilizes citizens to improve their safety and quality of life. For each activity, the two teams divvy up the tasks and seek to involve tenants. In the summer of 2009, Habitations De Maisonneuve hosted an evening of outdoor cinema, a bingo-buffet and a cleanup day.



*Habiter la mixité and Tandem Ville-Marie Est joined forces to organize a wonderful sugaring-off party in Parc Médéric-Martin. Other collaborators included police officers from Station 22, CRIC, the organization La Famille, and the Écoquartier in Sainte-Marie. This special block party attracted 350 people.*



### Inspiring others

Azzédine Achour, who coordinates the umbrella group Solidarité Ahuntsic, has a clear memory of when Habiter la mixité moved into his area. “At the time, I led a group that assisted newcomers. Claire Katma came to ask me to organize French classes for tenants at Habitations André-Grasset. Her drive really impressed me. She essentially launched the local approach in our neighbourhood. I was really inspired. Today, what Claire is doing in public housing, the 18 organizations of Solidarité Ahuntsic are doing throughout the entire neighbourhood.”



## Integrating newcomers

In the Centre-Sud area, the influx of immigrant families has created a stir and posed many challenges. The Carrefour de ressources en interculturel (CRIC) was set up to foster harmony between different cultures. The new group quickly saw Habiter la mixité as a useful tool for achieving its aims within Habitations De Maisonneuve. Through all kinds of smaller and larger initiatives, the two teams provide tenants with tools for living together peacefully and becoming independent. Special focus is placed on women.



For Anti-racism Week, the Centre d'éducation et d'action des femmes welcomed tenants from Habitations De Maisonneuve at the invitation of CRIC and Habiter la mixité.

## Teaching French on site

When the Centre de ressources éducatives et pédagogiques (CREP) asked Louise Meunier to provide services in public housing, she turned to Claire Katma to find out what the needs were. The number one need turned out to be French classes. "Classes given on site are an excellent way to integrate people, particularly women," says Ms. Meunier. For two years now, classes have been held at Habitations De Maisonneuve and Parc Royal. Habiter la mixité promotes the service to tenants. Depending on demand, other services might also be offered.



Students from a French class organized in conjunction with CREP celebrate the end of their session with their teacher.

## Building a tenant association

To succeed in setting up a tenant association, Habitations Parc Royal took advantage of the combined support of Habiter la mixité and the Y in Saint-Laurent. "Habiter la mixité provided the springboard we needed to reach tenants and organize activities," says Oneyda Arias, who coordinates programs for families at the Ys of Quebec. After five years of concerted efforts, this empowerment project came to life, with a first general meeting of tenants held in May 2009.



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