

Montreal's Public Consultation Bureau



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DE MONTRÉAL



PARTICIPATORY DEMOCRACY WITHIN THE FRAMEWORK OF THE NEW GOVERNANCE FOR URBAN, SUSTAINABLE AND INCLUSIVE DEVELOPMENT



Ajuntament de Barcelona

metropolis ●



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Observatorio Internacional de Democracia Participativa



Municipalidad de Córdoba

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Introduction

01

01. Introduction

Within the framework of the pilot project Participatory Democracy, the cities of **Córdoba (Argentina), Montreal (Canada), Madrid and Barcelona (Spain)** exchanged insights about their participatory experiences in order to contribute to the increase of institutional capacities of the metropolises for the construction of governance and the decentralized cooperation. This project was developed at the request of the

World Association of Major **Metropolises** and with the support of the International Observatory on Participatory Democracy (**OIPD**).

Since this initiative was planned and undertaken before the pandemic, it had to be adapted to a new context for it to be viable. Between September 2020 and December 2021, representatives¹ of diverse cities participated in online workshops where they could present their different trajectories along their experiences and reflect on the strengths and points of improvement of the participatory tools of each city. In

addition, interviews and workshops were held with representatives from the public administration and citizens of Córdoba, Montreal, Madrid and Barcelona. These allowed us to analyze different aspects and perspectives of the participatory practices that made up this project, namely, **Córdoba Participatory Budget, Montreal's Office of Public Consultations, and platforms Decide Madrid and Decidim Barcelona**, from each city.

Such actions led to the systematization of participatory democracy experiences in each city, which involves generating knowledge that can enhance the strengthening and improvement of these practices in each of the four metropolises. Similarly, spreading knowledge arising from the analyzed experiences and tools has the potential of promoting more active citizen participation.

The present document shares the systematization of the case of Montreal's Office of Public Consultations (Office de consultation publique de Montréal, OCPM) in Quebec, Canada.

¹ *The extensive use of the masculine grammatical gender is avoided. This choice is made without detriment to the search for gender equality and with no intention of rendering the difference invisible, but just to facilitate fluent reading. This is why inclusive expressions are used and articles are omitted occasionally. Please, refer to Metropolis (2021) **Manual de lenguaje no sexista (Manual on non-sexist language)**.*

A nighttime photograph of the Montreal skyline, showing illuminated buildings and a bridge over a river. A large, white, stylized number '02' is overlaid on the lower half of the image. The sky is a deep purple and blue.

Montreal's Public Consultation Bureau



02. Montreal's Public Consultation Bureau

In practice, the experience starts in 2002 as a result of Montreal² citizens' demand for consultation instances regarding public projects, especially, those related to territorial planning.

Since there has been a decrease in the instances of participation in the past years, the creation of the Bureau sought to guarantee the presence of a neutral, foreseeable and permanent mechanism for consulting citizens, mainly, in processes of territorial and urban planning. Nevertheless, its scope is not limited to previous topics only. It can also be entrusted with the task of consulting about other issues relevant to the city of Montreal.

The establishment of the OCPM was a decision made by the Provincial Government of Quebec, which is why the Municipal Council cannot decide to dissolve this organization since it does not belong to the local or provincial public administration. However, the Municipal Council is responsible for the OCPM funding.

The OCPM emerges with the aim of surveying and analyzing the opinion of citizens and representatives of the civil society in order to make ad hoc recommendations to the Municipal Council³.

The functions of the OCPM are limited to the city. At the Municipal Council level, there exists the possibility of carrying out other public consultations, with thematic character. It concerns simpler and narrower processes. Besides, the need for an instance of participation at the metropolitan level, which has not materialized yet, has also been expressed.

The OCPM is characterized for having positioned itself as a neutral space between the government, the private sector and the citizenry, and for allowing

the mediation between the interested parties through a foreseeable, transparent and reliable process in which consultations have been made accessible to all citizens and recommendation reports are of a public nature.

Values of the OCPM:

- *Transparency*
- *Information accessibility*
- *Efficiency in processes*
- *Equity and respect for each participant*

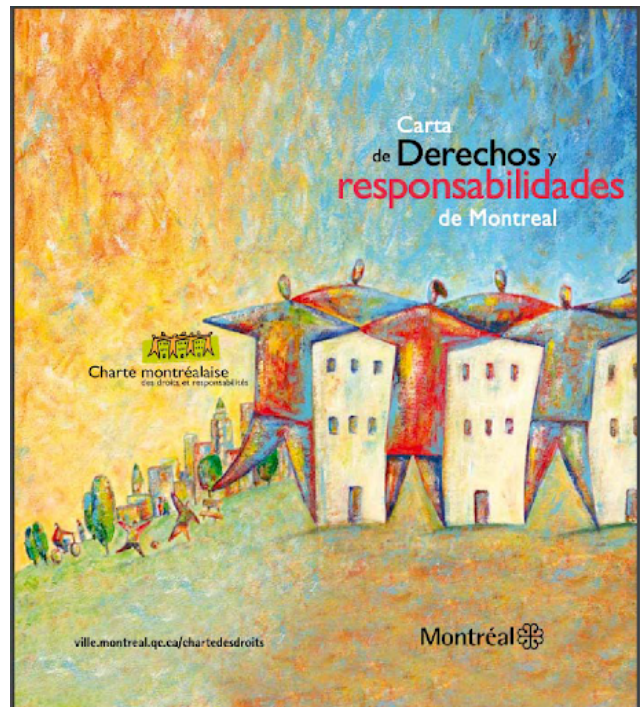
² Montreal city has a population of 1,700,000 and the metropolitan region has one of 4,000,000, approximately.

³ In a parliamentary system, the Mayor is the head of government and the first among equals within the Municipal Council, which is made up of 65 members, one per each city district. The Council is the ultimate authority to make decisions in the city.

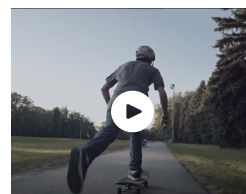
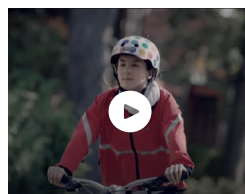
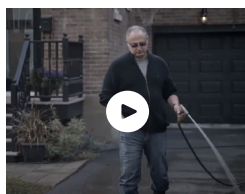
Regulatory Framework

The regulatory framework that makes this tool possible includes the **Charter of Ville De Montréal** (2000), which creates the OCPM as an organization. Besides, the **Montréal Charter of Rights and Responsibilities** (2006), a Municipal Council initiative, grants citizens the right of initiative in terms of public consultation, by submitting a request. In this last case, even though the Charter was issued after the creation of the OCPM, it is an instrument that supports the role and the function of such Office by creating a type of social contract that foresees the city government's commitment to continuously improve services for its people. Likewise, the Charter establishes some central values on which the city is founded, such as openness towards other people, respect for human dignity, solidarity, participation, transparency and democracy. Both, the sense of belonging and commitment and awareness-raising efforts to promote adherence to the Charter are very important for city life. The OCPM is composed of a president and 35 delegates⁴. The requirements are that they are not and have not been involved in politics and that they enjoy a good reputation. In general, the members are people who have pursued an academic career and who have experience in urban planning and territory issues. Efforts are made to achieve gender-balanced participation and to attend to diversity considerations in other respects, such as individuals belonging to indigenous communities. Two-thirds of the Municipal Council votes are required for the appointment of members, but, to date, all of them have been made by unanimous vote. The president holds the position for four years, whereas delegates are appointed

annually, but can be designated for a total period of up to four years. In practice, in most cases, members are appointed for a period of three years. What is more, for specific consultations, a subcommission with three members—chosen among the 35 delegates—is created. The OCPM is entitled to define the norms that regulate public consultation in order to ensure its credibility, transparency and efficacy. Besides, it is subject to the code of public ethics.



Picture of the Charter of Ville De Montréal



⁴ This term has been chosen in order to reinforce the role they have been provided with. Other alternatives would be commissioners or representatives, as they are given a mission or a mandate that they must carry out.

In short, the OCPM task consists in communicating with citizens through informative sessions and public consultation activities. Then, the gathered information is analyzed, reports are compiled including recommendations about the project consulted on. Then, those reports are given to the Municipal Council.

A consultation can begin by three different means:

- a) a Municipal Council request,
- b) an Executive Committee request, or
- c) a request within the scope of the right of initiative.

En los tres casos, reviste el carácter de mandato para la OCPM.

Respecto del derecho de iniciativa, puede ejercerse por la ciudadanía mediante la reunión de quince mil firmas de apoyo respecto de la realización de una determinada consulta pública. Hasta ahora, esto ha ocurrido tres veces, logrando que se realicen consultas sobre:

- **Urban Agriculture**,
- **Reducing Dependence on Fossil Fuels in Montreal**
- **Racism and Systemic Discrimination in Montreal**

As regards the Municipal Council and the Executive Committee requests, as previously mentioned, the main topics were urban and territorial planning, whether it be as a result of public projects (municipal policies, master plans, ordinances) or private ones (such as real estate development). Other topics about which public consultations have been made are cultural policies, heritage policies, industrial projects, institutional projects (such as airports, universities, movie theaters), and projects that might affect heritage sites (such as a historic center or green areas).

Once a consultation is entrusted to the OCPM, **the first phase is informative**. That is to say, all means are provided for citizens to receive all the necessary information about the project.

The regulation covers consultation advertising, through advertisements in the



mass media, brochure distribution and informative sessions. During informative sessions, the project under discussion is presented to the citizens with the corresponding regulatory framework. This phase is not limited to a narrative function, but it is the starting point for dialog, allowing those participating in the sessions (citizens, civil society, delegates) to ask all the necessary questions to complete the information being presented. Both questions and answers are put at the disposal of users on the Office website together with a transcript. Similarly, the information presented by those who promote the analyzed project is also made available to users online. A fundamental premise is information accessibility: Citizens must have the same level of access to information as the commission, which is essential for opinions to be well-founded.

There is a three-week compulsory period between the first and the second phases for the different agents to form their opinion. During this period, registration for expressing opinions in subsequent events is open.

The second phase corresponds to the hearing of opinions. Public in-person or virtual meetings are convened, in which the different registered individuals (citizens on their behalf or as representatives of civil society organizations) can voice their opinions. This space allows for the exchange of information with the commission in charge of drawing the report. Besides, there exists the possibility of expressing an opinion in writing, without being present, through regular mail, email, phone, or even in the form of a video.

It is important to emphasize the decisions that guide the process:

- All consultation sessions are public.
- They must be carried out in places appropriate to and accessible to all citizens.
- Meetings are recorded and shorthand notes are taken.
- Presentations are published online.

Drawing on the gathered information in the previous phases (project documentation, regulatory framework, questions, and opinions), the commission unanimously compiles a **report of recommendations**, which is submitted to the Mayor and the Municipal Council. Reports are of public nature; therefore, once submitted, they are available at the OCPM website.

Each report includes four chapters: the first one describes the subject of consultation; the second one presents citizens' concerns; the third one analyzes the problems and the positions that emerged; and the fourth one proposes recommendations the Municipal Council must consider.

The OCPM recommendations are non-binding, but efforts are made for the Municipal Council to inform about the

reasons and arguments for a rejected proposal.

The average duration of a traditional public consultation (one in which the debate is about the laws that will be passed) is of three months, and for a previous consultation (one in which the debate is about a public policy that is to be implemented), the period is of six months.

Besides the ad hoc reports, each year the OCPM submits to the Municipal Council general recommendations and an estimate regarding the extent to which these suggestions are taken into account.

Resources

The OCPM is funded by the Municipal Council.

The budget is set depending on the number of consultation mandates the Office is entrusted to and on the activities it must carry out within the frame of its mandate to promote better public consultation practices.

In this respect, each year efforts must be made to define an approximate volume and scope of the activities the OCPM must undertake. Then, the Municipal Council votes the budget. This procedure is done in accordance with Article 82 of the By-law that states "the Council shall grant the Office the necessary sums for the proper execution of its duties."

Specifically, the budget was of CAD 2,666,300 in 2020, and of CAD 2,717,000 in 2021.

IV A Constantly Evolving Process

The OCPM has implemented different strategies for its own control and improvement. As a permanent resource for **control**, once a consultation has finished, all participants are invited to respond to a survey to gather key information about the overall functioning. This is complemented by phone surveys and focus groups in order to measure citizens' satisfaction with the Office's functioning, its website, and the online means of participation that have been incorporated. Questionnaires include the possibility of making suggestions.



On the other hand, in 2010, a systematic **assessment** of the first eight years of existence was carried out, which allowed the Office to measure achievements and make adjustments to the implementation.

Likewise, in 2014, as a result of a proposal by a civil society organization, women's participation in the Office's consultations was analyzed. Consequently, an action program was designed to facilitate **women and family participation**. Some of the measures taken are the introduction of nurseries in consultation headquarters, turn-taking alternation between women and men in informative sessions, and the priority for parents of young children for participating during sessions. Such measures resulted in higher participation of women, which increased from 32% in 2014 to 48% in 2018. Besides, the OCPM has been constantly innovating the methods employed for consultation, trying to create participatory environments of greater relevance. Regarding in-person instances, apart from the informative sessions and

hearing-of-opinions sessions, open debates and co-creation workshops for civic contribution are carried out. There is a strong interest in all people being able to express themselves; that is why efforts are made to broaden spaces for debate by working with reduced groups so that those individuals who feel intimidated by a wider audience can also express their opinion and make contributions to the projects. Co-creation instances are the way to counteract the rigidity of the process already established.

Besides, interventions are made in public spaces, such as parks and squares, to offer information, conduct surveys and hold thematic workshops.

At the same time, technology-mediated mechanisms are offered, such as online participation platforms, online questionnaires, 3D visualization of projects under consultation, and many more.

As a result of the combination of methods and resources, better conditions have been created for participation: while in-person sessions guarantee process transparency and generate high-quality information for the analysis of projects, virtual sessions incorporate vitality to participation by including new voices, and by overcoming material and temporal obstacles of in-person participation.





Learning

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I ▶ Enabling Factors

The learning acquired by the OCPM throughout history includes some enabling factors for citizen participation and better results in the execution of its duties. The following are identified:

- ▶ Characteristics of the process, which is foreseeable, neutral, equitable, transparent, independent, reliable and accessible.
 - ▶ Mechanisms for guaranteeing equity in women's participation, two of which are, for example, turn-taking alternation and the access to a nursery in places where consultations are held.
 - ▶ Promotion of recent immigrants' participation, who start to exercise citizenship rights, by spreading information in plain language, carrying materialstocentersofFrench-language learning and immigrant integration. In many cases, this approach is key since they did not count on this type of participation possibilities in their places of origin.
 - ▶ Democracy caravan, which is a tour around the city neighborhoods that contributes to increasing participation by taking OCPM actions to different places and explaining to those who have not participated yet what the Office is about and who can participate.
 - ▶ Universal accessibility to consultations, which includes sign language interpretation, Braille documentation, among others.
- ▶ Population diversity is reflected in delegates and Office staff.
 - ▶ A wide range of alternatives for participation is offered. On the one hand, it is completely possible to participate without resorting to digital tools. This decision is based on the concern about closing the digital divide, be it due to difficulties in having access to equipment or the Internet, limited knowledge about technology, or generational reasons. Simultaneously, technology incorporation broadens the participation scope by removing other reasons that might represent an obstacle to participation, such as time, distance, dependent care, and social distancing due to the pandemic.





Limiting Factors

Persistent challenges can be identified, which might condition participation. In the case of the OCPM, the following are identified:

- ▶ The process complexity. This is a determining factor in two ways. First, it might discourage participation and limit it to people experienced in the approach and the proposed dynamics. Second, the process is demanding for OCPM teams, terms might be long, and it entails a generous budget.
- ▶ There are still difficulties in making the participation space accessible to the less-educated sectors of the population and, in some cases, to new immigrants. The promotion of diverse participation requires permanent innovation and the incorporation of new access methods and channels.
- ▶ Public consultation applies to projects of great importance and magnitude, so many other matters of public interest remain outside its scope.
- ▶ Independence in relation to authorities and interested groups. In the beginning, the Office could face pressure concerning the content of the reports. For example, political parties attended the sessions. Over time, it has positioned itself and it has gained Montrealers' confidence. Maintaining its independence will always be a challenge.
- ▶ The monitoring of recommendation reports. Although they are non-binding, the fact that recommendations are taken into account is something valuable for OCPM, and it has a visible effect on those who participated in the consultation. It contributes positively to the Office's credibility and the motivation for citizen participation. Work is being carried out regarding the design of mechanisms for monitoring recommendations and for response communication in those cases in which recommendations are not adopted, which should include the motives why they were rejected. However, these mechanisms have not been put into practice.



Achievements

Despite resisting many challenges, it is worth highlighting the undeniable achievements made during the journey. Visibility of the Office as a reliable space for democratic citizen participation. According to a 2017 survey, 25% of citizens knew about the OCPM existence and 85% of them had a very positive opinion about it.

Public consensus regarding the relevance of OCPM initiatives. Elected municipal counselors as well as the public administration, the private sector and citizens positively value the Office's role.

Regarding the challenges the OCPM faced during the pandemic, the main one was related to the loss of participation and diversity due to virtuality, since many sectors of the population do not use digital tools yet. To compensate for this damage, new channels have been incorporated, such as the possibility of sending opinions by regular mail (with postage prepaid) or by phone, leaving a voice mail. Somehow, the solution involved the multiplication of non-in-person channels but not necessarily of digital ones. In fact, when resorting to digital means, alternatives with different levels of difficulty were considered: from emails and online questionnaires to the use of participation platforms. Regarding this idea, it is noteworthy that the spread of technology to access social networks, for example, does not necessarily imply the digital skills needed to take part in instances of participation mediated by technology. In this respect, having in place a variety of means for participating ensures diversity in participation.

Some alternatives had already been put into practice before the pandemic, which enabled an agile adaptation to the new situation.

At the same time, the new scenario allowed for a deeper testing of remote mechanisms, demonstrating some perceived advantages regarding virtual consultations:

- ▶ Consultation continuity generates tranquility among citizens and consolidates democracy.
- ▶ A completely online process provides a high level of transparency.
- ▶ Remote accessibility enables new possibilities for participation.
- ▶ Participation figures were comparable to other consultations held before the pandemic.

OCPM 2020 Annual Report - Excerpts about Participation during this Period

"While people's daily lives were monopolized over the course of three seasons by the learning and implementation of measures to protect their health, and although the impact on the economy was significant, their desire to take part in the consultation process did not seem to have been affected. Almost 92% of survey respondents insisted on the need for different government administrations to keep encouraging citizens' contribution to the public debate. That opinion was confirmed in debates with developers and representatives of community-based organizations. Although their reasons were varied, all of them believed that life had to continue and that there was no time to lose to start rebuilding Montreal's economy, to maintain the dialog between the city government and the citizens and, above all, to avoid unilateral public authorities' decisions using an emergency situation as an excuse.

Our results show that citizen participation in 2020 did not decrease and that adherence to democratic values was not negatively affected by the crisis. During the preliminary survey, most of the online respondents—more than 62%—expressed their interest in continuing with the virtual activities of a public consultation to be an eight on a scale from 0 to 10. That proportion reached more than 80% in those individuals examined by phone, which indicates that, in general, digital means of participation do not represent an obstacle to participation. Since the moment it was established that a consultation was of great interest, respondents had no problem with the idea of using virtual means, although they did admit that a continuous period of two hours in front of a screen was, probably, the most they could tolerate. That level of interest was verified during the test, while the amount of online opinions, summaries and presentations before commissioners remained quite similar to that of comparable consultations made before the pandemic."

Simultaneously, some limitations have been identified in relation to the implementation of virtual consultations:

- ▶ Digital divide that prevents the participation of already marginalized groups.
- ▶ Loss of interaction between the interested parties which may imply less understanding of the other person's point of view.

- ▶ Debate suspension and reduction of diversity of opinions.
- ▶ High deterioration of participation and difficulty in keeping participation throughout time due to virtuality.

V ▶ Technology Transfer Potential

Every transfer indeed requires the adaptation of the model to specific local conditions. However, within the Participatory Democracy pilot project, we are interested in reflecting upon the possibilities of replicating each participatory practice.

When observing the OCPM, it is relevant to indicate that the origin of this type of institution is the result of a great volume of complex queries, generally considering the size of the cities and knowing that medium and big cities have better conditions to implement similar models.

On the other hand, in a small city, citizens may pose specific questions to ad-hoc groups without the need of creating an institution for that purpose.

In any case, a key element will be distance and neutrality of the responsible officers

that are part of the decision-making process.

It is important to say that concrete tools are easily transferable to other realities and participatory policies.



VI ▶ Notes on Participation

In general terms, participation has constantly increased and has balanced in terms of gender inclusion since the inception of OCPM, but its composition varies depending on the topic. Based on the data provided by this institution in 2015, 31% of the opinions came from women, while in recent years, the percentage reached a peak of 48% or it has maintained around similar values, like a 45% in 2020.

For example, it can be seen that in a real estate project within a small territory, the participation is that of proximity: The participation is characterized by a greater presence of unorganized

“From an average of a few dozen participations at the time of our founding in 2002, we now have thousands of participants who are making their voices heard using the various tools available to them.”

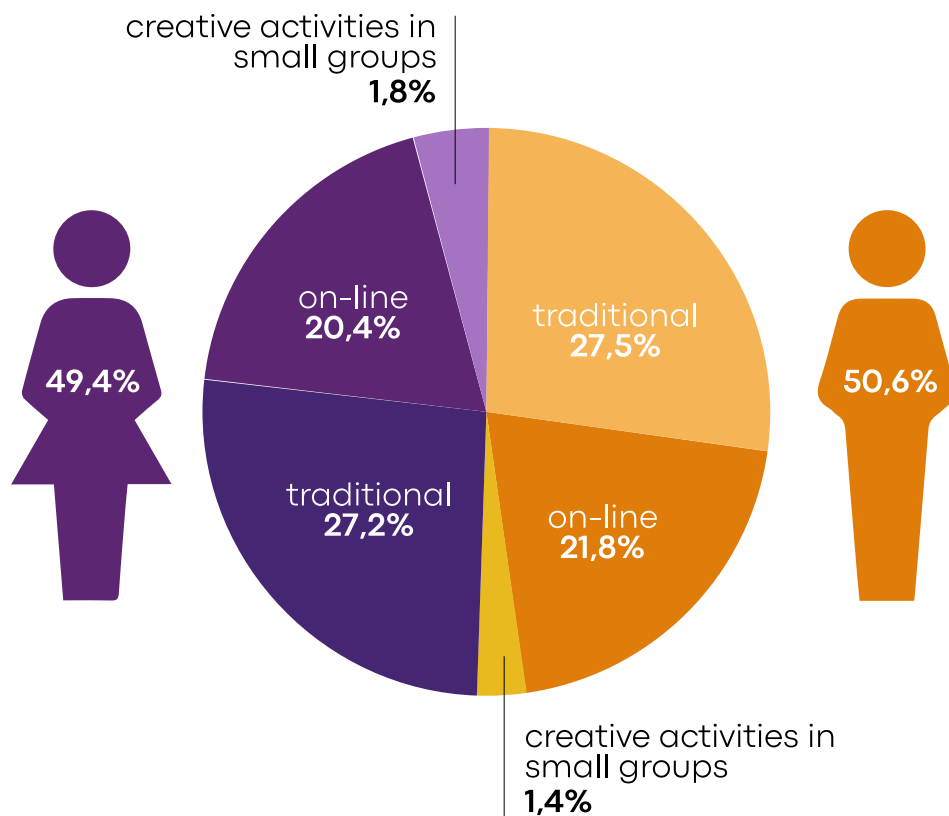
2018 OCPM Annual Report

community members. However, when the topics are more transversal, the consultation steps away from the average and there are individuals with

more knowledge, specific expertise. It is more frequent to see organizations, organism networks, associations for the protection of heritage. In the three consultations carried out by the right of initiative, participation was outstanding, hybrid, homogeneous,

from those who participated due to a professional interest to individuals who participated as citizens only.

By query activity types



Source: 2019 OCPM Annual Report

Participation (Figures)	2014	2015	2016	2017	2018	2019	2020
Number of Consultations Made	3	4	5	10	9	10	7
Public Events	20	32	103	68	93	216	51
Oral and Written Opinions	77	98	623	620	5072	1575	1041
Session Streaming Views	-	-	1251	2077	11416	5021	5463
Participants (present and virtual mode)	1400	2351	2159	2053	24450	22630	5976

Source: Own creation based on data from OCPM and its annual reports.



Opinions on
OCPM

04



Those who have been elected to be in office, as well as those belonging to the public administration, positively value the OCPM, recognizing as its main features neutrality, independence, transparency, credibility, trust promotion and technical work value at the level of participation processes, analysis of consulted topics and recommendations made.

Likewise, evolution is recognized from its origin to the present day, not only of the organization but also of the bonds and relations between different areas, and thus, the opinions and conceptions built around this Office.

Among the aspects that have shaped its experience and journey, the following ones can be mentioned:

Opportunity and Content of Consultations. Initially, consultations were made when the projects were in an advanced stage; thus, it was not possible to incorporate big changes to the core ideas of the projects. It was only possible to modify particular regulations or construal of a policy framework that made the project possible. A consultation on construction carried out at the Montreal University (2007) is considered a landmark. In this case, based on the citizens' complaints as to

the possibility of providing suggestions related to regulations only, it was understood that it was paramount to listen to the needs of those living in the neighborhoods that would be affected by this urban intervention. Therefore, the project was taken to a preliminary stage to incorporate citizens' contributions. The final project was enhanced by the incorporation of the society's viewpoints and implied a change in the public administration's perspective, which started to make public consultations at projects' earlier stages, generating an instance of collaborative planning. This implied a radical change in the development of initiatives related to urbanism and territory.

Consultation Deepness. In 2004, there was a consultation on urban drawing that is remembered due to its wide scope related to the geographical diversity seen in the consultation data and the variety of groups consulted. This is especially valuable since it was possible to access the opinion of individuals who normally do not participate: individuals in an adverse economic situation, single-parent families, children and young people. It is believed that the comprehensive approach of a consultation and the different perspectives collected helped to delimit the urban development towards the future. It is said that the OCPM permanently incorporates new methods to achieve a wider participation and to help citizens feel more comfortable when participating, not only during debate but also in co-creation exercises. As it is observed, the OCPM benefits from instances of decentralized cooperation in order to explore new possibilities that, eventually, transform into innovations.

Right of Initiative. The turning point occurred when this right went from being a possibility to being exercised as such in three different occasions. It is considered a turning point in terms of the citizens' adoption of the OCPM. Additionally, it is highlighted that the Office was able to provide an adequate approach in cases of consultations related to racism and systematic discrimination, which consolidated its position in the democratic life of Montreal.

"Citizens see the Office as having credibility. They go, participate in consultations to tell those in office how they want their city to be built. For many years, the Office has built credibility before the citizens and main political players. Since the Office is independent from the Municipality, when the citizens work with the Office, they can trust that it will defend their points of view and will communicate their needs."

Interview to Montreal's prestigious society members

The First Steps of Public Consultation in Montreal: Brief Summary of Experiences Prior to OCPM

During the 60s, the social and community movements have gained more importance in the public debate, influencing the authorities to establish adequate mechanisms for public consultation. Therefore, there occurred advances in the 60s and 70s. In 1984, a coalition formed by different groups of the society and the business sector exerted pressure for the occurrence of an independent public consultation about an important real estate project to be made on one of the main avenues in the city center that would block the iconic view of the park and the mountain: the iconic landscape of Montreal. After a consultation funded by a real estate agent, the project was dropped. Likewise, in 1985-1986, due to pressure exerted by different groups, the Société du Vieux-Port carried out an independent consultation on the remodeling of the territory under its responsibility. Little by little, the authorities felt the need to provide a legal framework to these situations in which citizens participated into discussion. Consultations were performed with higher frequency, included those related to projects about museums expansions.

The formalities of public consultation were not established until the late 80s with the creation of the first formal structure of public consultation in Montreal. Created in 1989, the Montreal Public Consultation Bureau (Bureau de consultation de Montréal, BCM) organized consultations on matters presented by the city authorities during five years. Nonetheless, at that moment, the BCM existence was strictly linked to the current political power. This institution was created pursuant to the regulations approved by the Municipal Council. In 1994, the administration that had the majority at the Council decided to abolish the Office by repealing its by-law. After this, public consultation could only be done through a unique commission at the Municipal Council. This was the situation until the creation of the OCPM in 2002.

Resistance from the Private Sector.

In the beginning, there were concerns related to how the OCPM role would impact the private sector activities. There began an understanding concerning the importance of projection based on the citizens' needs so as to maintain the continuity and usefulness of projects. The private sector values more and more working side by side with the Office, even in instances in which they felt their initial expectations were not met. The sector understood that an early consultation has a positive impact on the evolution of projects and a closer look at the citizens' needs.

Relationship with other Participation Spaces.

Although the Municipal Council and Public Administration have the power to create participation spaces, it is remarkable that, while the role of the OCPM consolidates, its intervention is preferred. This choice has its foundation mainly in its credibility and the capacity to gather opinions from those spaces

that are difficult to reach. When there is a need for consultation, the overlap of mechanisms is not allowed: It is either done by OCPM or by other alternatives, but never simultaneous. Considering there are multiple alternatives, it is interesting that the complex process established by the OCPM is not seen as something negative, even when this may imply a certain loss of control of the schedule designed for a project. The reason for this is that access to quality citizens' information is a priority to create projects that are more socially acceptable and a reflection of the community's needs.

Reports. These are seen as elements for a better decision-making process that respect the viewpoints of citizens. It is highly valuable to access information of specific groups from which their opinions are not known since the Office makes the effort to contact all groups that would potentially be affected by a decision. The recommendations are well-received

“Among real estate agents, some of them see the Office as a necessary evil (...) but, there are also many agents that start seeing this joint work with the Office as productive, so they even promote consultations before completely defining the projects (...) The agent knows that those elected officers will make a decision about their projects and will base their decisions on the Office's recommendations.”

Interview to Montreal's prestigious society members

and necessary to have in mind in order to reflect the citizens' concerns. The public sector understands that citizens see the Office as an advocate of their viewpoints and believe the Office will adequately communicate the needs of this society. There is a need to establish a system to account for the recommendations implementation, understanding that this is necessary so that the trust citizens have in the participation process is not damaged.

Among the **challenges** that the OCPM must work in, the public sector mentions the following:

- ▶ In some occasions, the recommendations do not include topics related to budget and this prevents projects from being carried out.
- ▶ Sometimes, citizens do not understand who the recipients of these recommendations are and this results in unmet expectations.
- ▶ Lastly, the need to widen even more the access to public consultation is highlighted with the aim of listening to all voices. It is expected that everyone can express themselves individually or through community spaces.



The Viewpoint of Citizens and Society

In this case, the idea about the OCPM is positive and there exists a consensus related to the need for its existence. This entity is seen as a space where the collective opinion can be enriched from this shared information, the active listening to other people's concerns and the debates that generate. Citizens value the fact that these are regular instances of democratic exercise in the city and the fact that the entity is formed by prestigious society members.

Different prestigious society members describe it as competent in terms of collection and analysis of opinions, and that is what allows the Office to provide adequate recommendations. Its coherence, neutrality and transparency can also be highlighted.

Among the valued features, professionalism, autonomy, agility, technical rigorousness, credibility, accessibility and usefulness are essential. It is important to remember that the appearance of the Office is a consequence of a social demand; however, it is true that its creation faced resistance not only from the private sector, but also from the public sector. The companies dedicated to real estate development worked independently and had to adapt to this new practice. Today, they accept the need for an Office, they realize the value added by the Office considering how projects enhance with citizens' contributions and gain the acceptance of the community. It is also indicated that there was an evolution of

the consultation modalities. In the case of the municipal public sector, the Office creation generated concerns related to the loss of power and excessive bureaucracy. Currently, the level of acceptance of the OCPM is remarkable in the city. Even though there is consensus as to the Office's importance and its role, the consultation with prestigious society members brought to the OCPM's attention the **tensions and challenges** the entity faces:

"Analyzing is one of the many activities the Office performs; there is a lot of material, many opinions that are expressed, so the Office must know what it is transmitting. It must frame those ideas within policies, etc., and make adequate recommendations. That is extremely important because we see more and more diversity (...) The Office is seen as a neutral place, that is important; a place where you can work freely to organize these consultations (...) every topic is debated with transparency."

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"When a group appears in the Office, there is always an underlying interest. Sometimes, we do not know it well and it is important to consider how representative that is of social organizations and interested associations (...)"

I understand but there is also a risk in giving certain hierarchy to opinions."

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▶ **Concerns in terms of the representativeness of opinions.**

As the Office dynamics is presented today, those individuals present in a debate may be those against the project or that belong to specific interested groups. The project can even be adequate, but if those in favor do not participate in these sessions, their opinion is lost and there is bias. At the same time, qualifying others' opinions is even worst and something that must be avoided.

Two factors that might contribute to counteracting this risk are insisting on a formative phase during consultation so that opinions are well-founded. When participation is bigger, more voices are included and efforts are made to look for opinions from those that find difficulties in participating. Everything

that is done has an underlying aim: not to affect the objective of a public consultation, which is not a referendum.

- ▶ The general public may experience a risk when **interpreting reports**. Sometimes, the media and the citizens take recommendations as if they were binding, but they are not. It is important to keep manifesting that the Municipal Council is the one with the power to make a final decision.
- ▶ In relation to the reports, there exists an important deficiency: It is not possible to **follow up the recommendations** and to know their real extent. In many cases, citizens do not know what happened with the recommendations, if they were considered or not, and the arguments that led to a specific decision taken. The development of a management capacity must occur in order to cope with expectations generated after a public consultation.
- ▶ The regulation degree of the process offers advantages in terms of guarantee and predictability, but, at the same time, it can be translated into **rigidness against innovation**, and incorporation of new resources into the participation process.
- ▶ There can be a **competence of alternative models** since it is possible to carry out consultations through other means. For example, hiring an entity to perform private surveys in a specific neighborhood is a possibility. So as to avoid this, it would help that the OCPM is perceived as accessible and not as complex and distant.

► **Terms and costs.** What worries is that some consultations extend in time, turning into an excessively complex matter that can only be followed by field specialists and not the general public. Simultaneously, it can be seen that the OCPM model can be quite expensive.

► **Previous consultations** for prior agreements: Is it feasible to work with previous consultations? Second consultations. The Office model must be revised so that the processes do not turn into long ones, and can be effective.

► **Virtual participation.** Without a doubt, this alternative diversified participation, but discussion is held in terms of the legitimacy of a consultation of this kind. No matter the means of participation, either physical or virtual, the question remains the same: during a consultation in which there is more than one neighborhood affected, the opinions do not reflect the viewpoints of all the territories.

"We know about those participatory democracy processes but we do not know the extent of the recommendations, the complete list the Office provides. What happens then? That is not systematized."

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► At the same time, the expansion of participation can affect the **process complexity** and the analysis of opinions. This is a challenge in terms of resources and efficiency.

► Another aspect is related to an increasing concern on the part of the citizens about **sustainable development**, matters of community interests such as climate change, or, for example, the proximity between the workplace and their residences. These topics show us that urban planning requires updates that reflect the

"Is a digital consultation legitimate? From the citizens' perspective, I mean. (...) I do not know, but I understand that this must still be an option. I am not saying we should rule it out. I believe we must evaluate it."

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reality of not only neighborhoods but also the entire city, considering future generations as well.

► **Consultations level.** Related to the previous idea, but not exclusively linked to it, there is a need to have instances of public consultation at the metropolitan level.

► **Participation follow-up.** The Office incorporated changes to register different forms of participation and being able to characterize them. Based on the results obtained, more adjustments were made to diversify participation and neutralize bias. It is paramount to maintain these efforts of follow-up.

"A family with children, young people who work from 9 a.m. to 6 p.m., that run to go home, that run to arrive at the nursery, that have to make dinner. Asking those people to move and come to a public consultation is a challenge. How can we meet with those people?"

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Conclusion

05

05. conclusions

Summarizing an experience implies learning from the revision of the whole process, rebuilding contexts and turning points, decisions, evolution, and problems that shape this experience and that offer multiple interpretations and explanations of the achievements.

There is no doubt that focusing on initiatives that foster citizen participation requires tools that open up the dialogue between different parties, each of them with an opinion based on their roles and at different time frames. It is an exercise that starts from the description to finally achieve a stage of criticism and reflection. When we reflect upon the journey made, the changes implemented and the expectations about the improvements needed, we promote new adjustments and decisions that shape the instrument to comply with its ultimate objective.

Additionally, being able to share experiences and doing so during the register process implies being open to hearing other voices and getting to know other journeys that may be valuable and may bring innovative ideas into this

practice.

Lastly, socializing our register and shared information leads us to have an open dialogue with those that participated in some of these experiences but not in the systematization, and with those who are interested in the topics developed, either with a study objective or intervention objective in their own communities.

From this perspective, with these pages, we hope to provide information to discuss about and innovate in the tools cities use and to align them with this new model of governance. Mainly, the objective is to contribute to strengthening citizen participation and participatory democracy.

An aerial night view of a city, likely New York City, featuring a large bridge spanning a wide river. The city is illuminated with warm yellow and orange lights, contrasting with the dark blue and green tones of the sky. The foreground shows a dense urban landscape with various building heights and styles.

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06



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