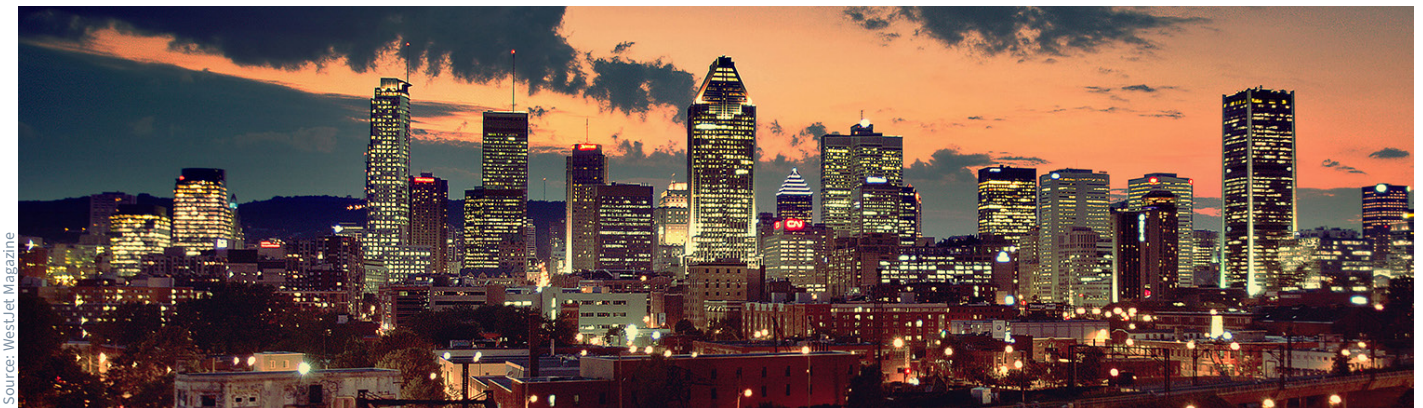


# Social sustainability in brownfield redevelopments

RESEARCH FROM THE FIELD



Skyline of area near Lachine Canal in Montreal, Quebec

This column summarizes the key themes and findings and provides recommendations based on the article:

Darchen, S., & Poitras, C. (2020). Delivering social sustainability in the inner-city: The transformation of South-West Montreal, Quebec (Canada). *Local Environment*, 25(4), 305–319. <https://doi.org/10.1080/13549839.2020.1744117>

## Delivering social sustainability in the inner-city: the transformation of South-West Montreal

By Julia Bevacqua

Brownfield redevelopment projects can have a lot of economic and environmental benefits, but can these projects be a tool for achieving social sustainability too? While this is possible, many brownfield redevelopments, unfortunately, prioritise economic development at the expense of social sustainability. In the recent article, “Delivering social sustainability in the inner-city: the transformation of South-West Montreal, Quebec (Canada)” (2020), Sébastien Darchen and Claire Poitras analyze how social sustainability is integrated in brownfield redevelopments by the private sector and suggest how this integration can be improved.

The article looked at two case studies near the Lachine Canal in Montreal, an area with a rich industrial heritage and multiple brownfield redevelopment projects. The first case was Griffintown, a developer-led mixed-use project. The second case was Bassins-du-Nouveau Havre, led by Canada Lands Company, a self-financing, federal commercial Crown corporation. Like Griffintown, Bassins-du-Nouveau was also a mixed-use project.

To understand how social sustainability was understood and implemented during the brownfield development process, the authors looked at six contributors to socially sustainable renewal projects and applied them to each case study. The components included: townscape design, preservation of local characteristics, ability to fulfil psychological needs, accessibility, availability of job opportunities, and provision of social infrastructure. These are based on past research, but Darchen and Poitras provide a useful application of the concepts to a brownfield redevelopment-specific context.

When comparing both projects, the authors found that the Bassins-du-Nouveau project was more successful in achieving social sustainability goals, in part because it was able to learn from the mistakes of the Griffintown project, which happened a few years prior. Bassins-du-Nouveau provided more affordable housing and employment opportunities. However, overall achievements and innovations towards social sustainability were still limited across both projects. The authors suggest that these shortfalls are in part due to a lack of developer monitoring and incentives. Therefore, more policy and oversight is needed to encourage developers to execute on social sustainability goals during the brownfield redevelopment process. Based on this analysis, three key takeaways can be drawn that are particularly useful for practitioners looking to achieve social sustainability through brownfield redevelopment.

## Understand your local context's definition of social sustainability

There are many ways to define social sustainability, and each definition will be different for each local context. The authors encourage municipalities to consider this and come up with their own understanding of social sustainability to guide future development, especially brownfields. A clear definition will help ensure goals and desired outcomes are understood and achieved. For instance, the City of Vancouver has their own definition of social sustainability that can serve as a guide for other municipalities.

## Determine an appropriate method for evaluating and measuring the social sustainability of brownfield redevelopment

The authors present six components of socially sustainable urban renewal that could aid in understanding how socially sustainable brownfield redevelopments are. In line with the previous takeaway, these components may vary depending on local contexts, but it is helpful to have a consistent set of criteria and desired outcomes to track how well brownfield developments are meeting social sustainability goals.

## Implement policy to incentivize and monitor developer strategies related to social sustainability goals

Planning instruments and institutional frameworks can play a useful role in encouraging and mandating developer execution on social sustainability. Developers may have plans and intentions to embed social sustainability goals during brownfield redevelopment projects, but these informal goals are not always realized. More oversight and clear demands in formal documents like development contracts may help turn these visions into reality.

In conclusion, this article looked at two brownfield redevelopment projects in Montreal to understand how social sustainability is integrated into the development processes. Social sustainability goals are important for brownfield redevelopment projects, but there are many ways to understand social sustainability. Each locality must understand what social sustainability means to their community and then evaluate and measure projects based on agreed-upon definitions and components. Policy must also back up these goals and ensure that developers are held accountable to visions for social sustainability.