

## VAUDREUIL-DORION: JE SUIS... / RECONSTRUCTING A COMMUNITY THROUGH CULTURAL MEDIATION



COMMUNITY SOCIAL DEVELOPMENT PARTICIPATION CREATIVITY  
INTERGENERATIONAL CULTURAL CROSS-SECTOR DIVERSITY  
SUSTAINABLE YOUTH IDENTITY PROMOTION INTERCULTURAL  
EDUCATION REGENERATION CITIZENSHIP MONITORING

### 1. Context

Located in Canada, in the outskirts of Montreal, Vaudreuil-Dorion has a population of 37,000 citizens. The community began to undergo a significant transformation. Listed below are some of the changes from 1994 to 2014 (Statistics Canada):

- Number of residents: + 115 % (17,000 to 37,000)
- Number of immigrants: 5 % to 48 %
- Number of cultural communities: 10 to 92
- In 1994, 80 % of the citizens spoke French at home in comparison to 60% today.
- The number of low-income residents went from 16 % to 8 %
- The unemployment rate dropped from 7.2% to 2.3 %

While on the one hand the economy improved, on the other social cohesion began to disappear. The ensuing intercultural tensions and lessened sense of belonging made it clear that action had to be taken to prevent the situation from deteriorating. In 2009, the arrival of a new director of Arts and Culture, Michel Vallée, provided the impetus that gave rise to JE SUIS... (I Am...) a comprehensive project based on cultural mediation, a concept that was still in its infancy in Canada at the time.

Due to the demographic explosion, Vaudreuil-Dorion has become a community made up in great part of young families (for the past 5 years, the city has been among the leading Canadian municipalities with the greatest number of births). Over a period of barely ten years, French has fallen behind as the main language spoken, with more than half the population speaking English, Hindi (India) or Urdu (Pakistan). The Director of Arts and Culture was told by one longtime resident: *"I no longer feel at home in my own city, even though I've been living here for 50 years. I plan on moving away in two years"*. The same day, a young Pakistani woman told him: *"I hesitate to approach you now (native-born Quebecers) because I know that you are bothered by my differences"*. He was especially troubled by the third comment he heard from an artist who said: *"I've put a lot into my community, but everything has changed now and people don't even notice that there are artists in their city."*

## THE JE SUIS...PROJECT INTEGRATES CULTURAL MEDIATION AS A PHILOSOPHY OF ACTION FROM THE PERSPECTIVE OF SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT.

How could we address the challenges of cultural diversity? How could we provide a community that was creative, united and strong? A recommendation was quickly agreed upon by the city's elected officials: to enforce culture as the 4<sup>th</sup> pillar of sustainable development aimed at bringing the community together and achieving harmonious cohabitation. The JE SUIS... project soon became the central thread for the city's reorientation cultural plan. The key to establishing the grounds for the project: The willingness to overcome the fear of diversity of ghettos through gatherings with others, understanding others, and showing respect for their differences in order to build for the long term.

Over a period of approximately 20 years, the small Canadian community of Vaudreuil-Dorion has watched as the number of citizens grew from 17,000 to 37,000. Over the past few years, the community's population has been growing at an annual rate of 2,000 new residents. These new citizens, who come to us from all corners of the world, have brought with them their different languages and cultures. The city's economy has been exploding with the arrival of major companies and a multitude of superstores. Throughout all this however, the community's spirit, along with its sense of pride and belonging, appeared to have taken a downward turn.

How could we prevent the situation from becoming causing conflict, or even become explosive?  
How could we address the challenges of cultural diversity?  
How could we come together and grow stronger?

Vaudreuil-Dorion's elected officials decided to turn to culture to address the situation. In 2010, the JE SUIS... project was launched. Its objective: To use culture to create a sense of belonging and promote the emergence of a united community, proud to belong to an environment where diversity is the strength of a community.

Every year, 20,000 citizens take part in approximately 600 workshops stemming from 50 flag ship activities. The objective: To bring people together and provide them with the opportunity to get to know each other and learn to respect each other's differences by actively participating in a creative community project, a cultural action, and the reinvention of their community. Here, citizens mix and mingle, interact together and get to know each other. In an effort to provide the community with an efficient means of reconstructing social cohesion, creative and cultural activities are organized in all sectors of society with the collaboration of over sixty partners from all areas (culture, health, community, business, recreation, etc...).

Through the JE SUIS... project, the city transforms culture into a tool of community cohesion.

## 2. Vaudreuil-Vaudron and culture

Seeing one's community go through so many changes over 20 years leaves its mark and gives way to concern. This is why, prior to undertaking the task of revising the cultural policy written in 1998, the city opted to include it as part of a **Social Reconstruction Strategy**. Ultimately, the plan was put into effect and served to lead our citizens to an Agenda 21 for Culture. The goal: To bring people together first, and consult with them later.

**2009-2010:** The Consultation Committee for Culture was formed, and the different sectors came together to talk (financial, health, social, education, etc...). The JE SUIS...project was launched. The city's Director General gathered city employees together to gain their support for the project.

**2012-2013:** With the help of a university, work began towards the development of Quebec's first regional cultural mediation task force for innovation (tools, training, support). The local cultural policy was revised according to the frame of reference supplied by Quebec's Agenda 21 for culture.

This policy was created while taking care to include all the community's areas of activity in order to promote transversality, for example through the creation of an arts and culture committee and training sessions for the cultural sector to understand the challenges of other sectors. *"The culture we refer to is formed of memory, presence and projects. Of presence, because culture becomes the daily relationship that exists between citizens and their living environment. A relationship that evolves and allows each other's differences to lend the community its uniqueness. Of projects, because culture is the means by which cultural practitioners and citizens are able to aid society in acknowledging, valuing, criticizing itself, evolving, and being ready to take on new dimensions"*.

**2013 TO 2015:** Implementation of the cultural policy's action plan.

**2014 À 2018:** Beginning of work toward the establishment of a local Agenda 21 for culture

BY CREATING PARTICIPATIVE ACTIVITIES THAT TRANSFORM INTO MAJOR FESTIVE EVENTS, THE CITIZEN BECOMES A TRUE CULTURAL PLAYER, PROVIDING THE PERFECT ATMOSPHERE OF CONVIVIALITY AND EXCHANGE

## 3. Aim, specific goals and implementation of the project

### 3.1. Aim and specific goals

The goal of the project is to recreate and reinforce the sense of belonging and social cohesion through meaningful cultural activities and new social ties. It is focused on ensuring the participation of the public in creative and cultural activities in order to:

- allow them to become true cultural actors and citizens in their city;
- allow them to express their feelings, gather together, learn about each other's differences
- allow them to feel part of their community;
- create a living environment that is shared and nurtured by everyone.

#### For citizens

- Encourage encounters with artists, focused on learning, community involvement, influence;
- To urge citizens to rethink their city with the actors in the role of mentors (collaborative collective creations of paintings, sculptures, choreographies, plays, poems, etc...).
- To allow people with limitations due to a condition or difference to break out of their isolation and build a network.

#### For artists and cultural actors

- To allow professional artists to break away from the prejudices that separate them from their community;
- To allow them to gain recognition and engage in interaction with their co-citizens.

### 3.2. The project and Agenda 21 for culture

JE SUIS... is able to meet the challenges of **cultural diversity** and living together in harmony. It recognizes cultural diversity as an asset for its territory and strives towards establishing conditions

that are favorable to **peace and social cohesion**. It is founded upon creative diversity and recognizes the contribution all cultures bring to social and cultural ties building. It encourages the participation of citizens of all origins and enhances personal and collective growth throughout the city. By promoting the use of inter-community spaces for encounters and creative activities, the project helps promote the resolution of intercultural conflicts as well as harmonious coexistence.



The project is focused on allowing all citizens, of all origins, all social classes and all ages, without discrimination, **to participate actively in cultural life and creation** so that all may take advantage of the benefits produced by the social and cultural processes. Cultural freedom is at the heart of the program. By creating participative activities that transform into major festive events, the citizen becomes a true cultural player, providing the perfect atmosphere of conviviality and exchange. All public spaces are used. The 600 annual activities are offered wherever the citizens live or spend time (streets, schools, parks, clinics, stores, nursing homes, etc.) in order to produce creative spaces for diversity where differences can lead to the enhancement of individuals and the community.

JE SUIS... fosters social cohesion, dialogue, a sense of belonging and the development of the community thanks to the involvement and cooperation of all sectors (social, health, education, financial, etc...) and the **transversality** of public policy in matters related to culture (art. 10, 30 A21C). JE SUIS... calls upon the involvement of all creators to improve quality of life and social fellowship by helping develop the creative ability and critical thinking skills of all. It provides a new role for culture professionals in the social development of the territory. Close ties and a sense of reciprocity are forged with the population.

### 3.3. Actions

To reach these goals, the City created JE SUIS..., a cultural mediation project that was integrated:

- into all municipal operations (all departments): Ranging from the Director General's office to the Public Works Department, including Arts and Culture and Communications;
- into the community as a whole (social and political life, education, business, sports, leisure, culture, etc...).

The JE SUIS...project integrates cultural mediation as a philosophy of action from the perspective of sustainable development. Each year, 600 public workshops are carried out as part of 50 flagship activities aimed at promoting encounters, knowledge of other cultures and respect for differences. The city and the project have had a major influence on the approach that Quebec will be adopting in terms of cultural mediation through its participation in a Quebec university research group and in the work carried out by Quebec's Agenda 21 for culture.

#### **MOZAÏK - The Exhibition**

As the project was launched, 40 volunteers from different cultural communities were gathered to take photographs of 10,000 of the City of Vaudreuil-Dorion's 30,000 citizens. An outdoor exhibition took place, combined with a full program of participatory cultural activities. Imagine 10,000 photos, some



of which measured 16 feet high. The Mozaïk Exhibition allowed citizens to gain a sense of belonging.

### **MOZAÏK - The Parade**

1,000 citizens, working alongside 10 artists, are called upon to design and produce a unique and artistic parade that will occur for the 4<sup>th</sup> time in 2014. Throughout those 5 months, each group of participants is asked to select a theme, and work alongside the artists to design and create the costumes, makeup, choreography, accessories, etc. This new annual tradition that brings together citizens of all cultures, ages and backgrounds takes place before a crowd of 20,000 spectators.

### **Back to the Sun** (Pour remonter jusqu'au soleil)

A process of more than 5 months involving 24 parents suffering perinatal bereavement, four artists, four health practitioners and three of the City's cultural actors.

- Creation of a text taken from letters written by the parents to their deceased children.
- Creation of a sculpture where the open arms of the parents represent the Tree of Life.
- Delivery of the text and unveiling of the sculpture before an audience (250 citizens).

### **The Artists or Happiness** (Les artistes du bonheur)

5 days a week, 12 adults living with an intellectual disability work on projects alongside professional artists. Several times per month, they are joined by a variety of community groups who experience something so extraordinary it changes them forever. Vaudreuil-Dorion's model goes even further by projecting the intellectually disabled right into the heart of the community.

### **If you could tell me all about Vaudreuil-Dorion** (*Si Vaudreuil-Dorion m'était conté*)

Over 18 months, a storyteller went from nursing home to nursing home gathering memories from the elderly, compiling them into a booklet, and writing short stories from them. 350 children were invited to illustrate each story. The spoken word had become created encounters and overcome isolation.

### **Zone de graff** (Graffiti Zone)

15 young illegal graffiti artists were offered to take part in graffiti workshops presented by professionals, and then provide workshops to citizens of all ages over 4 months. An exhibition of their work was held in an 18<sup>th</sup> century church for 1 month in an effort to create encounters. A promotional campaign featured the graffiti artists being photographed with the Mayor, a police officer, and the President of the Chamber of Commerce to demonstrate that they had everyone's support.

THE CITY HAS HAD A MAJOR INFLUENCE ON THE APPROACH THAT QUEBEC WILL ADOPT IN TERMS OF CULTURAL MEDIATION THROUGH ITS PARTICIPATION IN A QUEBEC UNIVERSITY RESEARCH GROUP AND IN THE WORK CARRIED OUT BY QUEBEC'S AGENDA 21 FOR CULTURE.

## 3.4. Obstacles

It needed to be stressed that the goal of the City was not to control the work of the cultural actors, but rather to provide them with the means to reach the population. The actions succeeded in earning their support. In order to obtain the participation of citizens, organizations, public institutions and the City's networks were mobilized. In some cases, we reached one person or one family at a time.

## 4. Impacts

### 4.1. Impact on the local government

With a strong determination to transform the difficulties experienced in the past few years into positive factors able to contribute to a happy community life, every department in the City worked together to build a strong and efficient team.

### 4.2. Impact on culture and cultural agents

The Upper St-Lawrence Valley (65 municipalities) decided to join in by creating Quebec's first regional cultural mediation unit in order to provide training support to municipalities. Already, a

number of cities and institutions have implemented projects inspired from JE SUIS... On their part, local organizations and institutions have stopped waiting for city funding and begun to carry out their activities on their own. The impact can be seen elsewhere in Quebec. 4 regions have already sought help from the project initiator to provide training, including Longueuil, the 5<sup>th</sup> largest City in Quebec.

#### 4.3. Impact on the territory and its population

JE SUIS... transformed the territory with the arrival of public works of art for example. These works of art are currently created within the framework of cultural mediation and co-creation with the public. Participation from citizens has grown continuously since the launching of the project and many have stated that their quality of life had been greatly enhanced. Parents have become more involved in their children's cultural activities, seniors are less lonely... In short, JE SUIS... has been successful in bringing people together, and continues to do so.



#### 4.4. Cross-sectorial impacts

The City's actions have helped to build a better quality of life for its residents and in doing so they have made it a more attractive option for companies. The 1.3 billion dollar investment announced by Ericsson, for instance, is in part a direct result of the transformations undergone by the City. In the words of Marie-Julie McNeil from the CSSS (Vaudreuil-Soulanges Health and Social Services Centre): *"The JE SUIS... project permitted to attain significant results within the health sector and has shown that we can do things in a different way and obtain even better results. Thanks to the partnerships created we no longer have to work in a vacuum. Every area has benefitted, from mental health to perinatal bereavement and problems linked to homelessness. By working on areas such as violence against women and seniors, we have made the public aware of the need to open its eyes to injustices. Thanks to the City of Vaudreuil-Dorion, cultural mediation has become an important tool that saves lives and rebuilds social ties."*

The JE SUIS... project benefitted from many recognitions.

- "Best practice", from Les Arts et la Ville (2011)
- Mérite Ovation municipale from l'Union des municipalités du Québec (3 in 2011 and 2014 among which the "silver award")
- Culture et développement Awards 2011, Les Arts et la Ville
- Villes et Villages en santé Award (2013)
- Award of merit from the Vaudreuil-Dorion chamber of Commerce (2011)
- Ovation Award Vaudreuil-Soulanges (2011)
- Over 35 conferences given across Quebec and abroad

## 5. Other information

The City of Vaudreuil-Dorion has been a candidate for the first "UCLG - City of Mexico - Culture 21" International Award (January-May 2014). The Committee of the Award prepared its final report in June 2014 and requested the UCLG Committee on Culture to disseminate this project as an exemplary experience.

Vaudreuil-Dorion is part of the 8 pilot cities or province programme settled in the framework of the revision of the new Agenda 21 for culture.

Application approved in September 2014.

Good practice published in October 2014.

This report was written by Michel Vallée, Directeur des arts et culture de Vaudreuil-Dorion.

Contact: [mvallee \(at\) ville.vaudreuil-dorion.qc.ca](mailto:mvallee@ville.vaudreuil-dorion.qc.ca)

Website: [www.ville.vaudreuil-dorion.qc.ca](http://www.ville.vaudreuil-dorion.qc.ca)

Social networks: Facebook: <https://fr-ca.facebook.com/pages/Je-suis-Vaudreuil-Dorion/102016189863345>

Youtube: <https://www.youtube.com/user/vaudreuildorioninfos>  
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=-9ujuSl31qk>