



Bois Public: an approach to support the contribution of the social economy to the circular economy in partnership with the city of Montreal (Canada)

What?

The expansion of the emerald ash borer, an invasive species that causes extensive and often fatal damage to ash trees, created a challenge for cities across Quebec province, who had to cut down and dispose of a significant number of dying trees in a short period of time. By promoting and partnering with Bois Public, a Montreal-based non-profit organisation, the City of Montreal was able to establish a mutually beneficial model that leveraged the social economy to achieve social and environmental policy objectives while saving public resources. Founded in 2016, Bois Public developed close partnerships with municipal authorities in Montreal, local work-integration social enterprises and universities to achieve its dual mission to produce circular products and integrate marginalised groups into the labour market. Rather than disposing of felled trees themselves, municipal authorities allow Bois Public to collect the trees, which it processes into planks and furniture for both public spaces and homes. The organisation leverages the vibrant social economy in Montreal and Quebec to establish partnerships that support work integration by providing vulnerable young people from difficult backgrounds with woodworking training and job experience, as shown in this [video](#) [1].

Why?

Municipal governments regularly fell old or diseased trees that threaten public safety or infrastructure. These trees are typically viewed as a bulky waste product that is costly to dispose of and, at best, can be turned into wood chips. Damage to ash trees caused by the emerald ash borer, forced the city of Montreal to fell thousands of dying trees located on public land in recent years.

Where most saw a problem, the partnership forged between Bois Public and public authorities created an opportunity in order to not only capitalise on the new supply of lumber, but also support a number of social and environmental objectives. The partnership between municipal authorities and Bois Public offers an innovative way to process would-be waste into lumber and re-introduce the wood into public spaces while also creating employment and training opportunities. Consequently, this partnership between Bois Public, public authorities and work integration initiatives turns the initial problem posed by the glut of dead trees into an opportunity for the city, the business, the community and the environment.

Key Activities

Bois Public established strategic partnerships with public authorities at the borough (arrondissement) and later city-wide level, as well as a network of local social economy organisations (such as the Groupe Information Travail and Les Ateliers d'Antoine, which support work integration) and circular economy organisations to transform public trees into raw lumber and furniture while integrating marginalised youths into the labour market by providing training in woodworking and work experience. In this sense, Bois Public acts as a bridge connecting Montreal's vibrant social economy with the rapidly expanding circular economy ecosystem and highlights how public authorities can effectively support the social economy. The initiative also promotes circular economy principles at the university level and provides design students with opportunities working within the circular economy. This helps ensure the social economy is promoted at the university level and features in the public debate.

Bois Public funds its activities through the sale of raw lumber, public and household furniture, and a small number of public grants. The organisation opened a new atelier in May 2020 during the COVID-19 pandemic, which allowed it to diversify its product range and expand its direct sales of lumber and furniture during a period when contracts with municipal authorities were difficult to obtain due to strained public budgets.

Bois Public has expanded its operations from a single district in Montreal to the entire city, which it accomplished by establishing a working relationship with the city of Montreal. Moreover, Bois Public supports similar initiatives throughout Quebec in areas that have been affected by the Emerald Ash borer. The initiative has begun developing a province-wide network of partners including a forestry school and lumber mills to expand its impact and promote circular practices beyond Montreal.

Impact

To date, Bois Public has collected over 3 600 trees from across Montreal, which it used to construct over 550 pieces of furniture and other objects, many of which can be found in public spaces throughout the city. From 2017 to 2019, the organisation collected around 50% of the trees felled within Montreal, which it used to construct over 120 pieces of public furniture that can be found in public spaces across Montreal, helping to raise the profile and public awareness of the impact of social enterprise in Montreal. This helped to stimulate the circular economy in Montreal by avoiding unnecessary waste and establishing a more local lumber supply chain. In 2019, Bois Public employed six permanent employees and its activities provided training to 26 woodworking apprentices in partner organisations in that year alone. The permanent team has remained the same in 2020 and the organisation welcomed one additional woodworking trainee. This experience endows participants with woodworking skills and the means for financial independence and equips them to produce highly visible furniture that directly benefit their local communities.

The evolution of Bois Public's product line has enabled the organisation to amplify its social and environmental impact. Although the organisation initially focused on producing public furniture to be sold to public authorities, it now produces planks and household furniture that it sells directly to consumers and woodworkers, and works with municipal authorities to identify ways to utilise local wood in order to benefit local communities. These changes enabled it to increase production and diversify its income streams while remaining true to its initial social and environmental objectives.

References

- BoisPublic: <https://www.boispublic.org> [2]
- Article 1: <https://journalmetro.com/actualites/montreal/1493396/les-frenes-malades-du-mont-royal-transformes-en-mobilier/> [3]
- Article 2: <https://journalmetro.com/actualites/montreal/939998/des-bancs-en-bois-de-frene-bientot-dans-rosemont/> [4]
- Video: <https://vimeo.com/546705090> [1]

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Links

[1] <https://vimeo.com/546705090> [2] <https://www.boispublic.org>

[3] <https://journalmetro.com/actualites/montreal/1493396/les-frenes-malades-du-mont-royal-transformes-en-mobilier/> [4] <https://journalmetro.com/actualites/montreal/939998/des-bancs-en-bois-de-frene-bientot-dans-rosemont/>