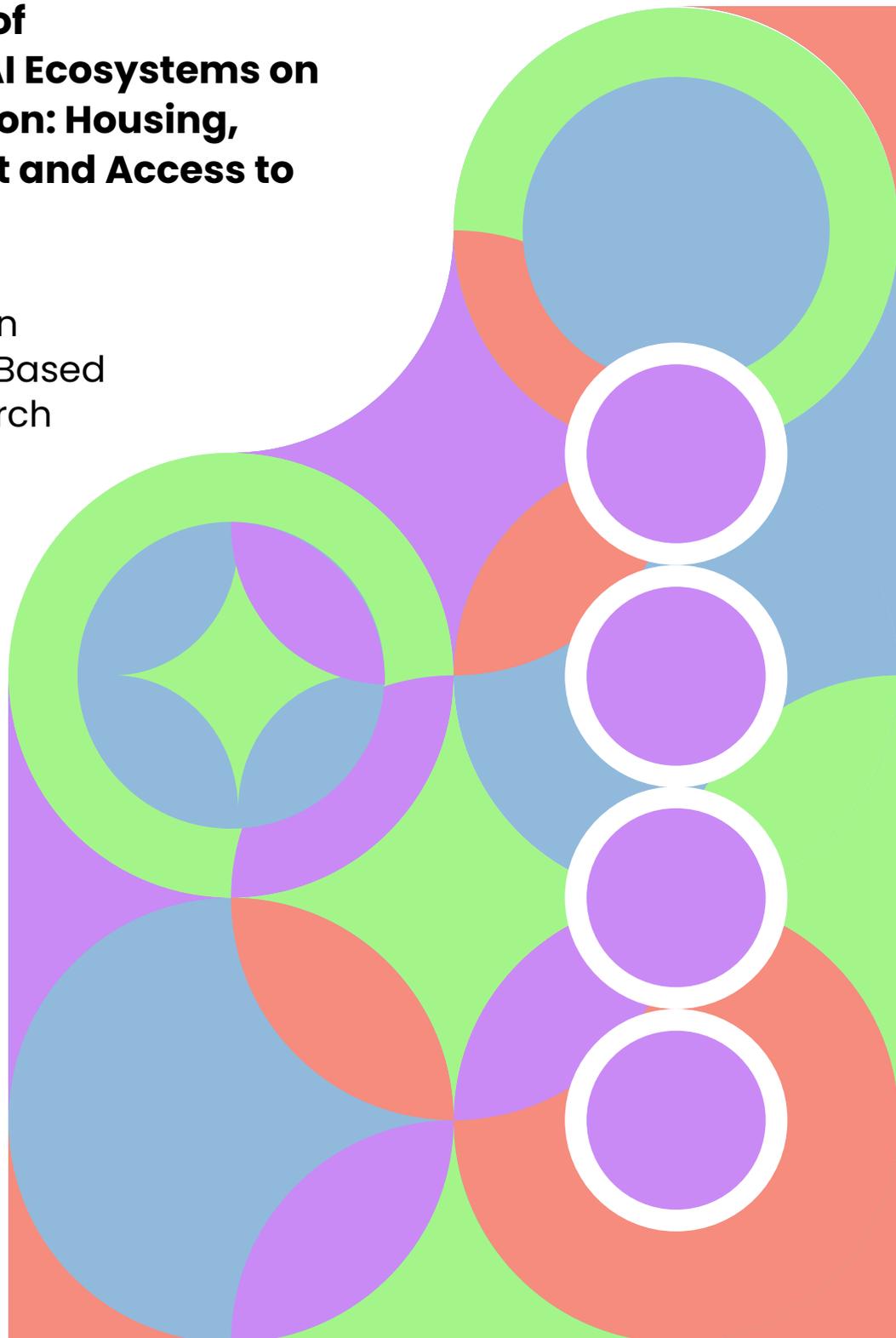


DIGITAL DIVIDES

The Impact of Montreal's AI Ecosystems on Parc Extension: Housing, Environment and Access to Services.

Parc Extension
Community-Based
Action Research
Network
2022

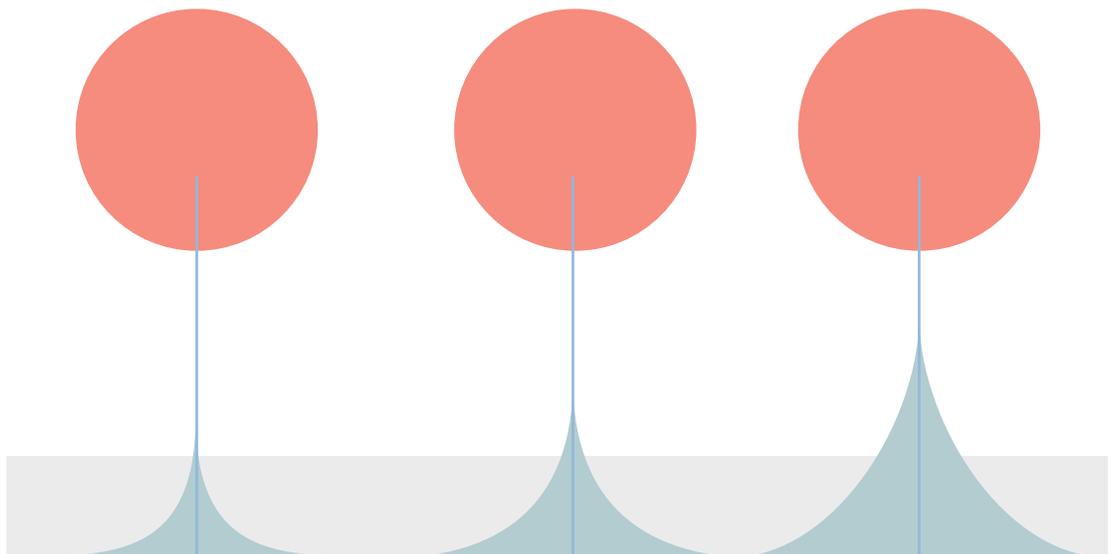


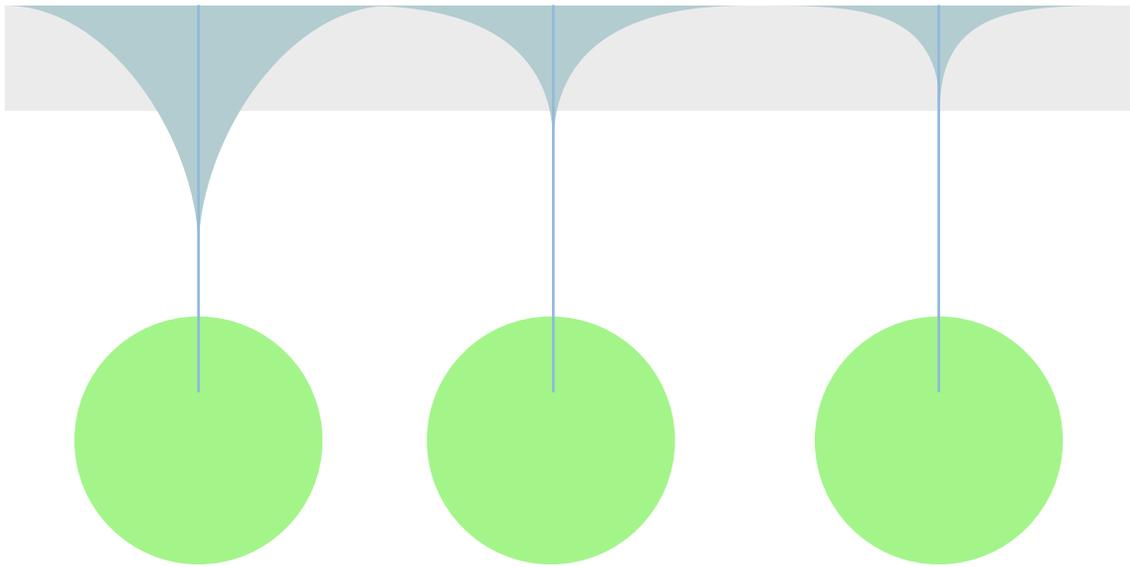
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REPORT SUMMARY.

The Digital Divides project brings together researchers, activists, and community members to examine the emerging Artificial Intelligence (AI) sector in Montreal and understand its social, economic, ethical, and environmental impacts that are all too often ignored by its proponents in government and the private sector who encourage its unabated expansion into our neighbourhoods. To this end, the Digital Divides project, facilitated by Concordia University's Office of Community Engagement (OCE) and the Parc Extension Community-Based Action Research Network (CBAR), employs both traditional and community-based research to mobilize knowledge in an accessible and action-oriented manner. Our aim is to forge long-lasting relationships between academics, community organizers, and residents of neighbourhoods impacted by the AI sector that are built upon trust and accountability, while working toward collective solutions to inequalities perpetuated by this industry.

The report provides the socio-economic context for the neighbourhoods most impacted by Montreal's AI sector, specifically Parc Extension and Marconi-Alexandra, with an emphasis on issues of housing and gentrification. We are particularly interested in the entanglement between the AI sector and the Université de Montréal's Campus MIL, which has exacerbated exclusion in the area's housing market. We approached the topic at two levels: 1) a large-scale analysis of AI ecosystems and their many-sided impacts on people and the environment; and 2) a small-scale focus that conveys the experience and expertise of community groups and individuals living in Parc Extension—in regard to what digital divides exist in their specific context, how they are experienced, and which bottom-up solutions are being proposed to address them. While the first level allows us to better understand the broader policy and economic dimensions of the AI sector, the second identifies techno-social issues that impact residents, especially women and youth, in Parc Extension through embedded research and collaboration with community groups such as Afrique au Féminin and Table de Concertation des Femmes de Parc-Ex.





KEY FINDINGS.

Montreal's AI "ecosystem" illustrates how a collection of public and private actors drives the revaluation of Parc Extension through investment and policies that aim to drive technological development and innovation but fail to benefit the residents of the local communities who already experience higher than average levels of poverty, housing and food insecurity, police violence, and other forms of precarity in regard to their immigration status.

There are direct connections between AI innovation in Montreal and the housing crisis, which is exacerbated by AI corporations, publicly funded institutions such as Scale AI, and the Université de Montréal, whose presence in the neighbourhood drives up the cost of rent and provides opportunities for luxury real-estate development while failing to deliver on promises to build much-needed affordable student housing.

While there are many examples of more equitable urban development, such as Community Benefit Agreements (CBAs) or commons-based approaches, there is no such framework in place in Parc Extension, despite the efforts of local housing rights groups as well as the Community-Based Action Research Network (CBAR) to communicate with actors from within the AI ecosystem, particularly the Université de Montréal, and hold them accountable to their own declared goals of social responsibility as part of "AI ethics."

As long as the AI industry remains indifferent and/or unresponsive to questions of social and economic equity within the communities where their offices are located, AI research and development will remain a driver of the sorts of debilitating tech-led gentrification poignantly manifest in cities like San Francisco, Seattle, and elsewhere. Unfortunately, the municipal and provincial governments did not anticipate this and failed to put in place adequate policies to mitigate the effects of tech-driven gentrification.

In stark contrast to the high-tech facilities now present in the neighbourhood, digital divides in Parc Extension include a lack of affordable and stable internet access, lack of ownership or access to laptops, and limited computer literacy. This has prevented individuals, particularly women and youth, from participating in online learning activities during the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic, resulting in an infringement of the basic human right to education. For adults, it is an obstacle to French/English language acquisition, for entering the job market, and for accessing public health services. Individual and community initiatives are providing some remedies to these problems, but more comprehensive and long-term investments are needed that redistribute technology, offer computer training in languages other than English and French, and provide free and reliable internet access.

RECOMMENDATIONS.

In response to these findings, the Digital Divides report calls for a number of reforms to AI and housing policy that prioritize justice-oriented, rather than for-profit aims and involve meaningful community consultation. It highlights the importance of mutual aid and community organizing—rather than just academic and government intervention—as key forces in the pursuit of these goals.

AI policy

AI policy needs to recognize the limitations of the AI “ecosystem” framework in providing equitable access and benefits for groups that do not belong to private, academic, business, and government sectors. Beyond the hype surrounding this R&D model, AI is not an ecosystem unto itself. Rather than simply subsidizing private sector initiatives, all levels of government should provide direct incentives for new types of community-managed data commons and for community-managed AI projects (including start-ups) with explicit justice-oriented ends to ensure that an AI ecosystem provides public benefit rather than perpetuates harm. A process of commoning can only be meaningful if it is accessible, transparent, and inclusive of all groups that are impacted by it. The example of Barcelona and information commons and data sovereignty initiatives from other cities can provide inspiration to this end.

Housing policy

Accountability is key. We call for a comprehensive plan at the municipal level to mitigate the rise in housing costs that accompanies development in the AI and other sectors, especially in low-income residential areas. Making use of the right of first refusal should figure as one of many tools in this regard. Given the limits to existing by-laws and regulations, the City government should commit to making an adequate number of social housing units available that can be accessed immediately by individuals who qualify, and procure the necessary funds from the provincial government. Further, Community Benefit Agreements (CBAs) should be incorporated into urban planning more generally and need to be structured around specific provisions for accessibility, transparency, and inclusion to guarantee fair and equal representation for residents/citizens who have no affiliation with the corporations and state actors involved in urban and industrial development.

Social infrastructure

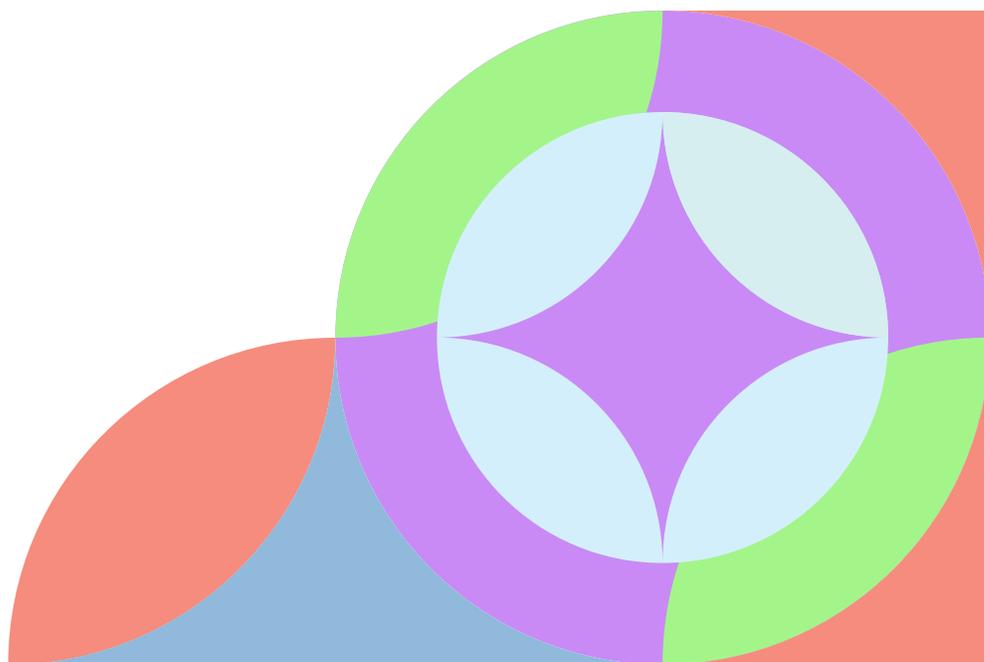
We call for comprehensive and long-term support for community-led initiatives for digital literacy and general access to technology such as affordable or free, reliable, high-speed Internet. The City should expand the public wi-fi network into priority neighborhoods. Universities, government institutions, and AI firms can support community initiatives by contributing or sharing infrastructure, financial and material resources, as well as training, while community groups would retain sovereignty when deciding how these resources are used. All levels of governments should recognize informal networks of mutual aid as legitimate entities to support and consult as needed. Mutual aid is a citizen-based, informal practice of urban politics and should be viewed as a crucial component of building a better city for everybody.

Community organizing and advocacy

A critical mass including academics and community groups to push governing bodies is needed to implement better policy, research and development by participating in decision-making bodies in the AI industry and its ecosystem. What's more, the principle of technological sovereignty implies the use of free software, open data, and open standards, formats, and protocols, which are meant to ensure non-discriminatory access to and provision of online services independent of the influence of large IT corporations. In the context of Parc Extension, information commons that support technological sovereignty could be part of an infrastructure for advocacy (e.g., offering public data on housing and evictions) and could be set up to offer training to residents and spur bottom-up tech initiatives. Community groups already active in the neighbourhood could begin imagining what kind of data and technical infrastructure would be beneficial to them in order to envision an equitable technological future for Parc Extension.

Community-led research

Universities and research funding bodies should support more community-led research. Support can come in the form of funds that adequately compensate community-resident researchers for their labour, in-kind donations of space and resources. It is crucial to further empower the Parc Extension community by supporting a process in which its members lead, identify their own problems, self-organize and are agents of their own change. Community researchers should focus on these processes as much as on the results of research projects to improve synergy between all those involved in the research, valorize local knowledge, provide long-lasting training and share research results without exploiting community members.



Download the report at:

<https://communityactionresearchparcex.ca/projects/digital-divides-the-impact-of-montreals-ai-ecosystems-on-parc-extension-housing-environment-and-access-to-services-april-2022/>

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