

The sidewalk, waste and garbage collection: practices and representations of an “in-between place”

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The aim of this article is to grasp the nature of the representations generated by the sidewalk and to understand how they relate to the work of the garbage collector. Viewing the sidewalk as a place of various expectations reflected by its design, this article analyzes the way in which the representations of the sidewalk do or do not convey expectations of garbage collectors, and how garbage collectors are working with these expectations. Using a methodology that mixes press review and in situ observation, this article shows that the sidewalk is an “in-between-place” that is constantly being redefined. For residents, it is both an appropriated and a rejected place at once as well as a place of control, particularly over the work of garbage collectors. For the latter, the sidewalk is the site where most of their work invariably takes place, yet where that same work is undermined and frustrated with constraints. The challenges encountered by garbage workers consist in large part of the constraints posed by contemporary street furniture.

Keywords: socio-spatial representations, urban practices, sidewalk, waste, garbage collectors.

INTRODUCTION

For several years now, the city of Montreal has been transforming its streets to make them more user-friendly and conducive to active travel. Aside from the addition of bicycle paths, sidewalk design has been transformed. For example, the city now allows restaurant owners to set up patios on sidewalks. It also offers a wide range of street furniture, such as sitting areas where pedestrians can sit and socialize, as well as flowerbeds that can be cultivated by the citizens (MacDonald, 2023). In this way, the sidewalk is becoming a space that is no longer simply about pedestrian circulation. Instead, residents and passers-by are now invited to “occupy” the sidewalk, transforming it into a place for exchange, rest, leisure and food consumption – together generating specific representations of the sidewalk as a welcoming, inviting place.

However, alongside these new conceptions, the sidewalk still retains the important function of being a space where residents’ and shop owners’ garbage is deposited and collected. This function cannot be overlooked, especially since most complaints received through the city’s 311 phone portal concern the deposit and collection of waste (Ville de Montréal, 2023). Yet, waste, alongside the profession with which it is associated (that of the garbage collector), appears to solicit negative social representations, unlike the more positive representations of the other above-mentioned functions and practices (Soares, 2011). This reality raises the question of the cohabitation between these variety of practices and representations of the sidewalk and the place of garbage collection on it. What representations do residents have of sidewalks as a place for the disposal and collection of waste? How do these representations convey specific expectations of garbage collectors? Do contemporary sidewalk designs enable garbage collectors to meet these expectations?

In the literature, the sidewalk is presented as a vital organ, essential to the hospitality and conviviality of a city (Jacobs, 1961). Most studies deal with the urban design and layout of the sidewalk (Hotyat, 2023) and the formal and informal appropriations (Capron & Monnet, 2022) it tends to elicit, generating specific representations of this place. To the best of our knowledge, these studies rarely mention garbage, and when they do, only to point out that the presence of public garbage cans is a necessary amenity for the conviviality of the sidewalk. By contrast, there is a stream of

research in France that focuses primarily on garbage collection, and that does mention the sidewalk and the place it occupies for the prescribed and actual work of garbage collection (Le Lay, 2010; Corteel & Le Lay, 2011; Le Lay & Pentimalli, 2013; Le Lay, 2015; Bilat & Le Lay, 2020). In these writings, the sidewalk is recognized as the place where waste is deposited and collected, and thus as representing the locus of garbage collector's "core business" (Le Lay, 2010, p. 3). They also acknowledge the sidewalk as being unwelcoming to garbage collectors, so much so that the successful removal of garbage is credited to the practices which this group of workers have put in place themselves to "cope". Finally, the sidewalk's configurations and layouts are represented as a set of obstacles and risks that place garbage collectors in situations of potential conflict with other users of this space (Le Lay, 2010; Le Lay & Pentimalli, 2013). In Quebec, however, no research – to our knowledge – has examined how the location of garbage drop-off and collection is tied to and affects the work of garbage collectors. Most existing studies of garbage collectors' work focus on the arduous nature of the profession in terms of the pace of the work and the weight and danger of the waste (Bret, 2020; Denis & Cloutier, 2010). One exception to the rule might be the biographical account of Paré-Poupart (2024), a part-time garbage collector, in which the various functions and practices associated with the sidewalk, as they relate to the work of the garbage collector, figure prominently. However, it does not link that topic specifically to how and where garbage is disposed of and collected.

In this context, the aim of this article is threefold: a) to grasp the nature of the representations generated by the sidewalk, b) to understand the way in which these representations do or do not convey expectations of garbage collectors, and c) to identify whether the design of sidewalks enables garbage collectors to meet these expectations. To this end, we first review the literature on sidewalks and garbage collectors. In a second step, we outline our methodological approach for meeting our objective, including an analysis of a press review (146 articles spanning from 2007 to 2023) and an observation of garbage collectors' work (30 hours, summer and winter). In the main body of the article, we present two main conclusions and observations. One, sidewalks represent ideals of safety and cleanliness for residents, which in turn create a set of expectations of garbage collectors. Insofar as garbage workers are generally challenged to meet these expectations, the latter then contribute to the professions' negative social representations. These

observations show that the sidewalk is an “in-between-place” that is constant being redefined. For residents, it is an appropriated and a rejected place at once – depending on the functions attributed to it – as well as a place of control, particularly over the work of garbage collectors. For the latter, the sidewalk is the site where most of their work invariably takes place, yet where that same work is undermined and frustrated with constraints. The challenges encountered by garbage workers consist in large part of the constraints posed by contemporary street furniture (bicycle paths, bike racks, terraces, etc.).

FROM SIDEWALKS TO GARBAGE COLLECTORS, OR FROM MULTI-PURPOSE PUBLIC SPACE TO A LITTLE-VALUED PROFESSION

Defined as “the space between the street and the bottom part of the facades of buildings and houses” (Baraud-Serfaty, 2022, p. 82; our translation), the sidewalk has been the subject of many studies. These cover both the design and formal and informal appropriation of the sidewalk as well as its impact on public space.

The concept of the sidewalk has evolved considerably over time (Baraud-Serfaty 2021). During the time of Roman cities (Saliou, 1999), it served primarily to isolate pedestrians from vehicles and traffic. Yet by the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, it had become a central urban planning element in the improvement of the urban environment (Laurant et al., 2019). This later understanding also imbued the sidewalk with a specific imaginary: a public place for strolling and self-exposure, and a response to urban health issues (Capron & Monnet, 2022). In this way, the sidewalk came to signify cleanliness, in opposition to the street, a place consigned to handle wastewater and garbage (Côté, 2017). Gradually, the sidewalk became equipped with street furniture (benches, lampposts, litter garbage cans, fountains, trees), installed not only for the sake of hygiene but also for the comfort of pedestrians.

In the mid-twentieth century, the advent of the automobile led to a profound transformation of cities, and consequently of sidewalks, which saw their spatial footprint reduced in favor of the street and parking spaces (Laurant et al., 2019). Sidewalks found themselves, yet again, reduced to facilitating roadway traffic and urban flow management. It is only more recently that the sidewalk received renewed interest from both planners and

researchers (Baraud-Serfaty, 2022). New roles were thus assigned to the sidewalk (Capron & Monnet, 2022) that had become forgotten, secondary and sometimes relegated to the term “interstice” or marginal space (Agier, 2011). Rediscovered as a “quality of the city” (Baraud-Serfaty, 2022), it became the site of multiple “possibilities” for sustainable urban development. While remaining a place par excellence for promoting walkability and soft mobility in the city, it became increasingly referred to as a place of sociability (Sainsaulieu, 2012).

Thus, today’s perception of the sidewalk has been broadened to conceive of it as a place of varied uses and multiple functions beyond that of facilitating traffic: “It is a technical surface that is available and easy to use, to enhance and even to clutter up” (Laurant et al, 2019, p. 11; our translation). While continuing to host street furniture of all kinds, from utilitarian to recreational (café terraces, restaurants), that contribute to a city’s attractiveness, the sidewalk is now also coveted by new mobilities, such as electric charging stations or scooters (Baraud-Serfaty, 2021). As a new playground for planners and a venue for urban greening and street art programs, the sidewalk is increasingly becoming the place of the commons (Baraud-Serfaty, 2022), of communal life (Côté, 2017) and of appropriation (Pellegrini, 2012). Between public and private space, it is no longer just the space of the urban walker; it is also that of the resident. New practices on the part of local residents (encouraged by municipalities) strive to conserve this space, to occupy it, and to use it as the site of events or even gardening projects. The sidewalk is becoming an “extension of the home” (Baraud-Serfaty, 2022).

On the other hand, these new roles assigned to the sidewalk come with expectations and criteria, namely that of enhancing urban comfort. Roussel (2016) has established that urban comfort is determined according to the following criteria: noise pollution, air quality, lighting, aerothermal atmospheres, odors, cleanliness/maintenance, sense of conviviality and ambiance. Moreover, once a space that was free and open to all, today’s sidewalk is fraught with norms and codified uses and has become standardized both in terms of the types of activities to be carried out there and the feelings to be experienced (Sainsaulieu, 2012). It must be safe for all, especially women and children, and accessible, especially for people with reduced mobility (Quintin et al, 2021). In that context, today’s sidewalk displays a mixture of both tolerance and intolerance toward activities that are socially

represented as marginal (e.g., itinerancy, begging, prostitution, informal sales, dumpster diving, recovery of objects and waste). Indeed, it has been shown to be more proscriptive of these activities if they call into question the ideal of comfort, safety and pleasure expected of the sidewalk (Zeneidi, 2002; Loukaitou-Sideris & Ehrenfeucht, 2012; Roux & Guillard, 2014; Mainsant, 2021).

These different evolutions, uses and representations have led some authors to define the sidewalk as an “in-between space” or a “place of multiple in-betweens” (Baraud-Serfaty, 2022). Capron and Carbone (2023, online), for their part, refer to it as a “hybrid local order,” which they define as “a local space where intimate and communal expectations are mixed with those concerning traffic and stay” (our translation). However, what is absent in all these definitions is the use of the sidewalk as a place for depositing and collecting waste – a potential other “in-between” space that threatens the realization of the ideal of the sidewalk as a clean space. This dilemma calls on us to examine the work of garbage collectors and waste collection to identify the place occupied by the sidewalk in these reflections.

Even though research on garbage collectors falls within a variety of disciplines, such as sociology, anthropology, geography, environment and health, work on this topic in Quebec is scarce. Of the few studies that do exist, the majority focuses on the drudgery and risks associated with this profession (Bret, 2020; Madsen et al., 2020). For example, they emphasize the solitary nature of this work that requires particular physical strength (Cloutier, 1994) and demanding repetitive movements (such as handling, pulling and throwing bags) for seven to eight hours on end (Kuijjer & Frings-Dresen, 2004), including an average of twelve minutes per hour of running in order to maintain each tour’s performance targets (Volkoff, 2006). These physical factors play a role in the life expectancy of garbage collectors, reducing it by an average of three years (Volkoff, 2006), and contribute to the elevated risk of accidents in this profession (Kuijjer & Frings-Dresen, 2004). These hazards and risks depend not only on the organization of the work and its effects on cooperation between garbage collectors but also on the characteristics of the collection areas (Denis & Cloutier, 2010). But studies on these characteristics are few and far between in Quebec.

Studies on garbage collectors done outside Quebec, comprising the vast majority of works, provide further insights for our context. In these works, garbage collectors are described as actors and witnesses of the environment, public space and images of the city (Ferrant & Mourad, 2018; Béguin, 2015; Jolé, 2000). Indeed, Béguin (2015) explains that although garbage collectors are frustrated by the demands for cleanliness, the standards of which are seemingly continually on the rise, they are also motivated by that same quest. Jolé (2000), for his part, explains that the profession implies a great deal of adaptation, with workers expected to work “in the thick of things,” among passers-by, residents and vehicles, and to put in long working hours. Far from being passive, they are prominent actors in their environment, implementing strategies to raise their profile (Jolé, 2000) and gain recognition (Gonzalez-Lafaysse, 2019) in the face of external invisibilization and often negative representations of their profession (Bilat & Le Lay, 2020). The implementation of these strategies is met with two main constraints: 1) the representations of cleanliness of the users of public spaces (Segaud, 1992), alongside the attendant conceptions of waste and dirtiness; and 2) public resistance, generated by new rules and practices for waste selection and recovery introduced by the cleanliness standards and policies imposed on collection sectors (Barbier, 2002). The arrival of composting as a type of collection within Quebec municipalities illustrates this phenomenon: although driven by environmental concerns, it exposes garbage collectors to various biological agents while increasing their workload and multiplies the risks of waste sorting errors among users (Salambalaga, 2020).

These practices, strategies and negotiations for the use of space all take shape in the collection sectors, between the street where the garbage trucks circulate and where the waste is transported, and the places where the waste is produced: residences and businesses. This in-between space is occupied by the sidewalk, an area that has received little attention in research on garbage collectors in Quebec yet that is central to the planning practices of the largest municipalities.

This observation can be explained by the fact that garbage collectors are underrecognized as a producer of the daily and ordinary urban fabric (Roux, 2011), which continues to elicit often negative representations that contribute to his invisibilization. These negative representations are threefold. Firstly, a common simplified vision of the

profession is that “the function of garbage collector is not effectively considered as a ‘profession’ with specific skills” (Denis & Cloutier, 2010, p.9; our translation). Describing his experience as a garbage collector in Quebec, Paré-Poupart (2024; our translation) recounts a dialogue he had with a resident who complained about his work, to which he replied that he did the best he could:

- “You chose your job; you don’t have to whine.
- [...] I suggest you come and work for a day in conditions like these [...].
- I went to school; I don’t need to do this. All you have to do is go to school.”

The author goes on to say, “I couldn’t help but tell him I had a master’s degree. I don’t like to talk about that with other guys. But there ... the man was surprised and asked me what I was doing picking up garbage” (Paré-Poupart, 2024, p. 69-70). This excerpt captures the prejudices that surround this profession, in Quebec at least.

Secondly, even though garbage collectors are involved in providing for a clean city, the fact remains that this image of cleanliness is ephemeral and “never-ending” (Bellamine et al., 2021), detracting from the actual value of the trade performed. Finally, garbage collectors themselves struggle between trying to meet “customer” expectations on the one hand and collection standards on the other (Béguin, 2015). These injunctions position the garbage collector either as the one who leaves the space dirty (failure to collect a bag that has been poorly sorted by residents) or as the one who fails to respect municipal rules, thereby contributing to polluting a large quantity of waste at the sorting center (Béguin, 2015). This is particularly visible when they go on strike, as media coverage often focuses more on the consequences of their absence, in other words, overflowing garbage cans (Burnot & Cardenas, 2022; Bilat & Le Lay, 2020), than on the garbage collectors themselves. Socially speaking, waste collection is still represented as a polluting action (Béguin, 2015) and garbage collectors are still “frowned upon” both figuratively and literally (Corteel & Le Lay, 2011; Piccardi, 2022). And yet, they make waste disappear from the urban landscape, contributing to the visual, aesthetic and hygienic improvement of cities.

At the end of this incursion into the literature, two observations emerge. Firstly, the new vocations given to the sidewalk and the addition of distinct amenities are all elements

that generate a specific imaginary of the sidewalk. Within this imaginary, little room is given to the sidewalk's functions as a site where waste is deposited and collected.

Secondly, work on waste and garbage collectors highlights the negative representations associated with them. While a number of studies have shown the importance of the sidewalk in waste collection, to our knowledge, no study has examined this relationship in the case of Quebec. These findings thus invite us to identify the representations associated with the sidewalk, and how these convey certain expectations not only with regard to waste collection but also with regard to how garbage collectors are supposed to meet these expectations. The work cited above suggests that representations of the sidewalk and the way it is laid out strongly condition the work of garbage collectors, accentuating social and media representations that tend to highlight the negative effects of their interventions. In the following section, we present the methodological approach adopted in this study to grasp these various elements.

FROM REPRESENTATIONS TO PRACTICES: METHODOLOGICAL APPROACH

To understand how the sidewalk is defined in relation to waste, we chose to focus our investigation on the city of Montreal. This choice reflects the latest urban developments outlined in the introduction, namely that the city of Montreal has been transforming its streets to make them more user-friendly and conducive to active travel. Our undertaking aligns with the so-called geography of representations, which studies space as a social, relational, conflictual and transactional product (Clementi, 2023; Breux, 2007; Ramadier, 2017; Di Méo, 1998; Moscovici, 1961). The aim is to understand, using a relational approach, the construction of a particular place, the sidewalk, based on the expectations and practices it generates as well as the effects produced by these expectations on the daily work of garbage collectors and the discourses carried about their profession.

In the vast field of research comprising the geography of representations, the latter are studied using numerous approaches. These may revolve around the stories and drawings of those who bear them (Clementi, 2023; Avry, 2012), the observation of practices in spaces (developments, movements, uses) (Dureau et al., 2014), media

representations (Cournoyer-Gendron, 2023) or texts, laws and gray literature. All these approaches provide partial access to socio-spatial representations. While they complement each other in their interaction, they also remain limited by what remains inaccessible, imperceptible and indescribable through language (Chenal et al., 2009).

The context under study led us to focus our research on two main information-gathering tools: press review analysis and field observation accompanied by photographic series (Dureau et al., 2014). There are two reasons for choosing to carry out a press review. The first is that the press provides access to a variety of discourses: “[the press] synthesizes a plurality of discourses and creates and conveys a representation [...] The press can offer an arena for debate to its readers and the actors in its territory of influence” (Flaminio, 2016, p. 160; our translation). The second is that the use of the written press is as common as it is useful for studying controversies since it is one of the stages on which the controversy is played out (Cefaï, 1996). In this sense, the content of a newspaper is based on a reality that is already present and merely reflects the facts that emerge in the public arena (Dana, 2016). The media thus contribute significantly to our knowledge of geographical spaces, near and far (Beauguitte et al., 2016).

At the same time, newspapers are endowed with the means to frame events as appearing in ways that differ from their actual type of presence. This is because a newspaper has two aims: to make known (aim to inform) and to make felt (aim to capture). Depending on the newspaper, one or the other may predominate (Charaudeau, 2013). Thus, the press, while being a space for expression, also promulgates dominant representations and yields discursive influence around specific issues inscribed in its own temporality and spaces (Trudelle, 2003). In other words, the press is not neutral, and the media agenda and its framing of events (Cefaï, 1996) must be considered. This framing influences the social representations of those who read the newspapers, generating a discourse that is disconnected from reality and needs to be deconstructed (Moscovici, 1961).

Our press review was carried out using the Eureka database, which includes most of Quebec’s French-language newspapers. We omitted social media networks, reports and radio and television coverages to focus on the press alone. We focused only on the local, regional, provincial and continental scales of media coverage, excluding the international scale. The press review began in 2007, one year prior to the arrival of compost collection

in Montreal and ended in the fall of 2023. Our first search was based on the word “éboueur” (garbage collector), yielding a total of 992 articles. Since this initial sample contained many duplicates and repeats published in different journals, and since we removed articles that did not mention Montreal, that number decreased significantly, and our final sample was comprised of only 146 articles. Each article was classified according to its publication date, its nature (opinion, news, editorial, etc.) and the scale of the newspaper’s coverage (e.g., local, micro-local, borough newspapers). Each article was then coded in MAXQDA¹ software, using holistic coding (Saldaña, 2016), to determine the themes raised when talking about garbage collectors. Three main themes were identified: 1) an unattractive profession (97 articles); 2) a positive valuation of the garbage collector’s job (46); and 3) more nuanced representations of the profession, including evidence of an indirect dialogue between citizen complaints, delinquent practices and the City (56). The word “sidewalk” was then searched to see how it related to waste and garbage collectors, resulting in 48 occurrences in 34 documents. Of these, in addition to duplicates of the word in articles, 21 occurrences dealt directly with waste and garbage collectors.

We then opted for direct observation to get to know the terrain (Arborio & Fournier, 2021)². By positioning ourselves as close as possible to our object, we wanted to discreetly immerse ourselves in the environment, experience the ordinary situations of waste collection, observe the constraints, and then exchange interpretations of what was observed and captured (Beaud & Weber, 2012; Chauvin & Jounin, 2010; Cefaï, 2003; Becker, 2002). Indeed, the whole point of observation is, firstly, to immerse oneself and feel and walk through the same space as the people being surveyed, namely alongside them, at the same time. Secondly, the aim is to identify spaces of negotiation, constraint and action that contribute to engendering the representations that take shape in these spaces, namely through the careful observation of gestures, interactions with the environment and other actors in the space (Becker, 2002). Knowledge is constructed not through the eyes of the respondent but through those of the researcher. In other words, the representation is constructed in relation to the environment and the action observed, as perceived and

¹ Coding in MAXQDA could have been done by hand, given the short length of the newspaper articles and the small sample size. In our case, the software allowed for a fast calculation of the occurrences and faster detection of the links between “sidewalk” and “garbage collectors.”

² The authors would like to thank Nathan Mascaro for his help carrying out the field surveys.

interpreted by the researcher, and is then related to other research to validate, nuance or corroborate the interpretations (Cefaï, 2003). Our survey protocol was based on the recurrent observation of several pre-defined collection areas, the exact course of which became clearer through contact with the field.

The city of Montreal is divided into 19 boroughs. Each of these boroughs has its own specific waste collection policies, and since most waste collection is outsourced, each borough is free to choose the companies it works with. In Montreal, there are three main types of waste collection: household waste, compost and recycling. Paré-Poupart's autobiographic account reveals a hierarchy among garbage collectors: "Among the garbage collectors of my generation, there is an undisputed hierarchy of tasks: garbage collection is for real people, recycling is for amateurs, composting is the most detestable task" (2024, p. 61; our translation). The author also emphasizes that the profession is handled and perceived quite differently in Quebec compared to France, where numerous studies have analyzed this profession:

The majority of Quebec garbage collectors were white. [...] no whiners, few immigrants, no students. I was the exception. Raphy was out of this reality because in France, there aren't many white people behind the trucks [...]. [...] In the middle of the run, he exclaimed: "Simon, if they saw us running at this pace in France, the newspapers would call our work modern slavery" [...] Raphy was discovering a world he'd never known existed. He had been a garbage collector in France; but here that experience meant little. He had to relearn the job. Back home, they were unionized and the work was supervised, protected and policed. [...] In France, garbage collectors may be engaged to sweep, pick up cigarette butts and clean up after demonstrations. The work mixes roadwork, public works and janitorial tasks. Some garbage collectors even perform TikToks to raise public awareness of cleanliness issues. In Quebec, the garbage collector is never the agent of cleanliness. Never. (Paré-Poupart, 2024, p. 113-114 and 117; our translation)

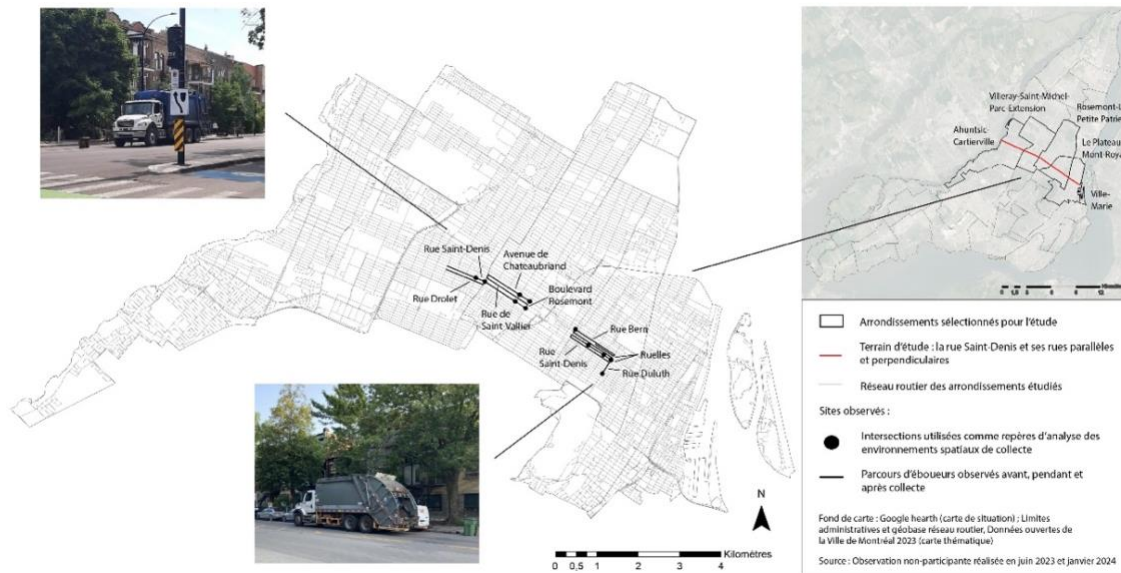
These distinctions are important for understanding the specific features of the profession in Quebec: cities subcontract waste management to private companies, influencing both the recruitment of garbage collectors and their working conditions.

To capture a diversity of contexts, we chose to select a central artery in the city that crosses several boroughs. This gave us access to a range of urban realities (building and

population density, urban layout, degrees of frequentation and use, etc.) that could influence both the quantities of waste present in public space and its disposal, and consequently the work of the garbage collectors. From this central artery, the observation then moved on to the perpendicular and parallel streets, less frequented and with different urban layouts. This was done for comparative purposes and to catch a better glimpse of the garbage collectors. Since we were not privy to the precise routes of the garbage collectors, we had difficulty estimating where and when they would pass, forcing us to remain between the main arteries to observe their work. Figure 1 describes the streets analyzed. The chosen artery is Saint Denis Street, which crosses five boroughs from north to south, three of which are predominantly residential (Ahuntsic-Cartierville, Villeray–Saint-Michel–Parc-Extension and Rosemont–La Petite-Patrie) and two of which are commercial, tourist and residential (Le Plateau–Mont-Royal and Ville-Marie). Our research focused on three of these boroughs: Villeray–Saint-Michel–Parc-Extension, Rosemont–La Petite Patrie and Le Plateau–Mont-Royal.

Figure 1.

Descriptive map of the study site and the various districts it cuts across.



We developed an observation grid with the aim of identifying links between the study of the physical setting in which the observations took place and the practices of the users of

these spaces (Chenal et al., 2009), focusing on an analysis of the practice of garbage collectors and their interactions with other users of the space. Each observation began with a detailed descriptive drawing of the built environment (types of thoroughfares, types of infrastructure, signage, objects in space). These helped put the observations into context. Added to this was a detailed description in the field notebook of how the public space was used (types of users present, frequency of use) before collection (number of garbage cans, layout of bins, nature of bins), during collection (in situ observation of the garbage collectors, including their practices, behavior and relations with other users), and the nature of the space after collection (waste left behind, location of empty bins). Of course, the aim was not to judge the quality of the work carried out but to observe how it takes shape in and through space. The observations were documented with photographs (Chenal et al., 2009; Piette, 1992). When it was possible to observe the garbage collectors in situ (i.e., when sighted), we did so as far as possible from a distance, so as not to interfere with their work. To this end, we tried to emulate the behavior of users of public space, in constant movement, aware that as users, our actions in the space would inevitably have an impact on what happens and what we observe (Cefaï, 2003). Twenty hours of observation were carried out in June 2023 and ten hours in January 2024. Since weather conditions influence the garbage collector's profession, we also observed the exercise of the profession during different temperatures and climatic hazards.

The following section presents the results of our research. We begin with the press review, starting with an identification of the representations of the sidewalk, followed by representations attributed to garbage collectors' roles in this space. We then compare these representations with observations made in the field to highlight the constraints faced by garbage collectors and the influence of these constraints on representations of their work.

UNIFORM REPRESENTATIONS, DIVERSE PRACTICES

From place where garbage is deposited to landfill

Unsurprisingly, discussions on the potential links between the sidewalk and the garbage collector in the press were neither numerous nor in-depth. The discourse as a whole, if it

mentions the term “sidewalk” at all, focuses primarily on waste as an undesirable object. Moreover, it was partial to very specific representations of the sidewalk, such as that of a clean, standardized, safe territory that must facilitate traffic-friendliness.

First and foremost, the sidewalk is seen as a place that must meet an ideal of cleanliness. This injunction to meet certain cleanliness standards emanates above all from residents’ testimonials condemning the non-respect of this injunction. They deplore that the sidewalk has become a “dumping ground,” with some 15 out of 21 articles testifying to delinquent practices on the part of residents: “Struggling for decades with what they call the ‘sidewalk dump,’ some thirty homeowners on Chartrand Avenue in Montreal-North are fed up with the daily sight of mountains of garbage accumulating across the street [...]” (Guibert, 2015; our translation) [News section], or “Yesterday at noon, at the intersection of Lafontaine and Frontenac streets, in the Ville-Marie borough, two sofas, an old mattress and a dozen boxes filled with garbage littered the sidewalk” (Lacoursière, 2008; our translation) [News section].

In their testimonials, these residents focus their criticism directly at the garbage collectors, blaming them for not doing their job properly and for compromising both the cleanliness of the sidewalk and the safety of passers-by:

But what about the broken glass that they [the garbage collectors] have left on the sidewalk? A child could fall down and maim him- or herself, the postal worker could walk on it and end up on the CSST for a very long time, a cyclist could get hurt, or even an animal. And who would be “responsible” for this? Nobody, of course! Why shouldn’t employees who accidentally break a bottle be obliged to pick up the shards of glass? It’s about time the City of Montreal reacted to this aberration. (Laverture, 2009; our translation) [News section].

These representations are corroborated by comparisons with other cities, and hence other sidewalks: “We’ve just come back from a little jaunt in the central United States that took us to Memphis, Nashville, Louisville and Cleveland. We certainly didn’t visit these cities in depth, but the sidewalks we did see were almost impeccably clean” (Collard, 2023; our translation) [News section].

At the same time, some of the articles (6 out of 21) evidence that the sidewalk is also governed by certain rules relating to waste disposal. These rules concern the obligation of residents to keep their front yards clean as well as the manner in which waste is

deposited: “Since last year, the borough has been applying a strict cleanliness policy. Citizens and businesses are responsible for keeping the front of their homes, the sidewalk and the first sixty centimeters of the street clean, or else risk getting fine of about one hundred dollars” (Lacoursière, 2008; our translation) [News section]. In addition, there are rules governing the deposit of waste: “Garbage collectors will not go rummaging through garbage cans; garbage must be separated in the containers provided and lined up correctly on the sidewalk on the morning of collection” (Gravel, 2018; our translation) [News section].

Finally, in all these articles, the sidewalk is presented as a place where pedestrians are supposed to be able to circulate smoothly and easily. Some complain that the empty compost bins strewn on the streets are a hindrance to this circulation and to the landscape: “My street (mostly made up of triplexes, fourplexes and sixplexes) has been littered with brown bins for the past three weeks. They’re everywhere. It’s like an urban art installation by Swedish designers. It’s mostly a happy mess” (Girard, 2017; our translation) [News section]. Others lament the fact that garbage collectors stop their trucks on the bike paths: “The sidewalk and adjacent paths serve as the scene for these operations [garbage collection, moves], with the cyclist, almost as much as the pedestrian, expected to squeeze by [...] When I was cycling on a BIXI bike on a two-way path last Thursday, a food waste collection truck rumbled right behind my back. To let it pass, I rode off-path” (Messier, 2017; our translation) [News section]. Among our 146 articles, this is the only text that addresses both the presence of an amenity (the bike path) and the practice of garbage collectors.

One main observation from this summary of the articles studied is that the sidewalk, where waste is collected, is fraught with many expectations, including, above all, that of meeting the ideal of cleanliness. Yet, garbage collectors often fail to meet that ideal, indeed, at times even contributing to making it dirtier. These considerations devalue the profession. Nevertheless, of the 146 articles studied, 33 point to the arduous nature of the profession and 34 point out the contexts in which it is practiced: “Garbage collectors, delivery drivers or workers in slaughterhouses or even on fields are all exposed to increased risk in addition to having difficult working conditions” (Boutros, 2020; our translation) [News section], or: “And what about the odors they have no choice but to smell, or the sharp or dangerous

debris they may come into contact with?” (Émond, 2016; our translation). These working conditions are exacerbated by the climate, with heat waves in the summer months and extreme cold spells in the winter months. In addition, garbage collectors in Quebec are particularly challenged every July 1st of the year, a day when rental leases across the province end and many residents move in and out of their dwellings. Press articles about garbage collectors are, expectedly, more numerous during such events, reminding us of the demanding nature of the profession: “Year after year, waste piles up on Quebec sidewalks following the July 1st moving fiasco, waiting for the garbage collectors’ next pass. Yet many of these items simply don’t belong in the garbage” (Guillemette, 2018, online; our translation). These press articles therefore serve to, in part, nuance the criticism levelled at garbage collectors. The last quote also reminds us that garbage collectors do not work in a vacuum and that the ideal of cleanliness cannot be achieved alone but rather in interaction between several groups of actors, and in particular residents, other users of public space and those who develop these spaces.

Based on direct observations made in June 2023 and January 2024, the following section presents in greater depth this re-contextualization of garbage collectors’ work in relation to the configurations of the sectors they traverse.

Challenges for garbage collectors to access sidewalks and waste

Waste collection is an object of geographical study: it takes shape within territories and their characteristics and mobilizes these same territories through the insertion of specific objects that participate in their transformation. While urban amenities are part of the garbage collectors’ daily working environment, they differ from one area to another, with different effects in each. By travelling through the above-mentioned study areas, by examining the layout of spaces and objects in space and comparing them from one street to another, and by observing garbage collectors in action within these different territories, we identified two main types of effects.

Firstly, urban development slows down the work of garbage collectors by creating a succession of physical obstacles. In this case, Saint Denis Street is an interesting field of study, having been, since 2020, equipped with a wide bike path that cuts off the street (and

its parallel parking spaces) from the sidewalk used by pedestrians. To reach the garbage cans on the sidewalk, the garbage collectors have to cross the parking space and the bike path, which is generally busy throughout the day. To access the garbage cans and bags, the garbage trucks need to 1) stop frequently, clogging up road space and accumulating cars and sometimes trucks behind them, and/or 2) occupy the bike paths, wide enough to allow their passage, in turn forcing cyclists to switch to the sidewalk and inconvenience pedestrians. As parking spots are always occupied by cars, the space available for trucks to stop is limited. Hence, the garbage collector is challenged to keep up with the truck's pace, moving quickly from the street to the sidewalk to get the waste to the right place without impeding road (or bicycle) traffic for too long.

Secondly, trees and bushes as well as urban furniture such as benches and terraces can obstruct, both physically and visually, the route of garbage collectors, who have to weave in and out of them as they seek to identify the garbage containers and carry them to the truck for emptying. Moreover, garbage is not placed just anywhere on the sidewalk. Most often, it is left on either the public or the private "frontage," the public frontage being the area between the gutter and the edge of the sidewalk, and the private frontage being the boundary between the building façade and the sidewalk. Garbage is therefore either located at the side of the sidewalk flanking the buildings or placed between street furniture, abutting the sidewalk. In both cases, the garbage collector must pass between several obstacles to access the waste. In summer, other sidewalk features such as terraces limit the space where residents can put their garbage cans, creating micro-zones of high concentration on small sections of space. As a result, piles of garbage bags or cardboard boxes may accumulate between, for example, the edge of a wooden terrace and a bicycle rack. In such cases, garbage trucks may remain parked in the same place for longer periods to load all the waste present. The three photos below show examples of waste landscapes. The photo on the left show garbage cans placed at once along a terrace installed on the street for the summer and in front of a bike rack onto which a bicycle is attached. In the photo on the right, recycling bins are placed in the midst of green areas of the street as well as next to trees and behind cars – all presenting obstacles for the garbage collector. The photo at bottom center, lastly, shows garbage placed on private frontages (brown bins and

blue bags). Here, garbage collectors must cross parking spaces and sidewalks (often icy in winter) to reach the waste.

Figure 2.

Photos taken in the Villeray–Saint-Michel–Parc Extension and Plateau–Mont-Royal boroughs

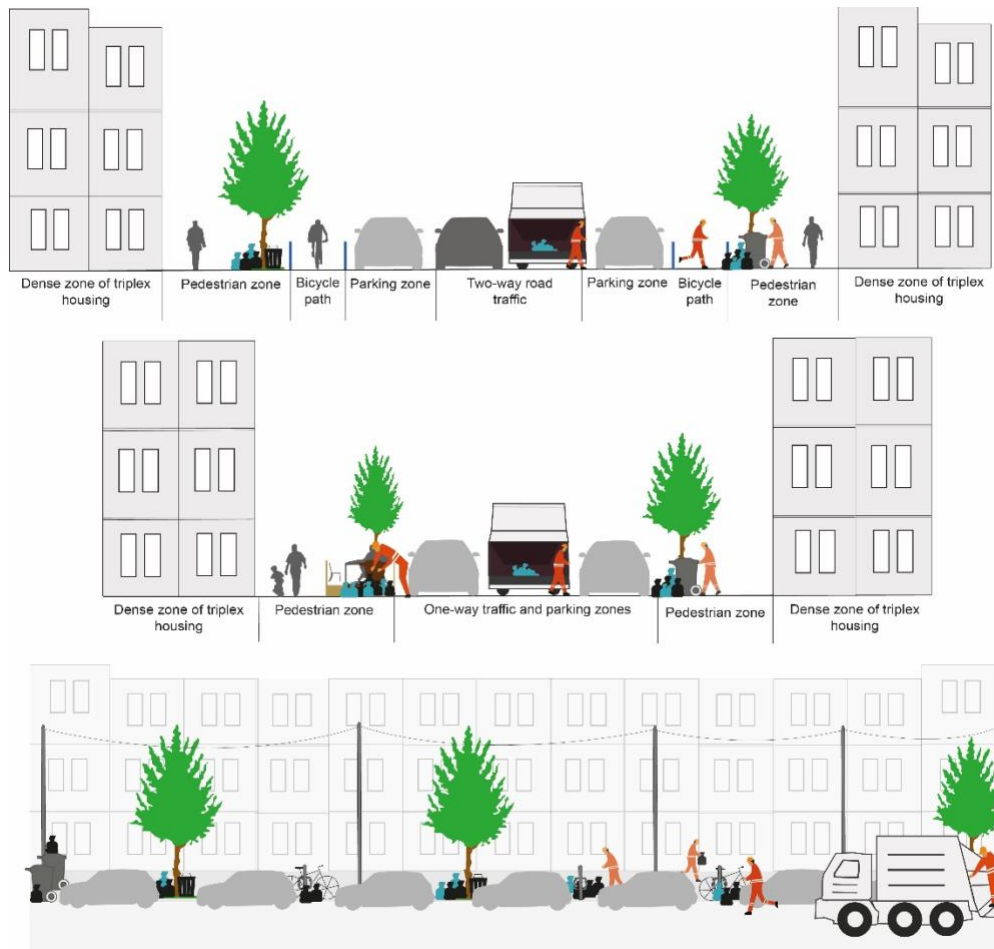


Faced with these situations, garbage collectors must constantly adapt. They have to keep a watchful eye on passers-by, avoid obstructing the road and motorists for too long, and watch out for cyclists – all the time fetching distant containers and transporting them to the truck. In this context, they find themselves in risky situations, as observed by us and

reported in studies carried out in Montreal on the subject (Denis & Cloutier, 2010). The figure below shows three cross-sections of the territories observed and crossed by garbage collectors (in orange). The first is a wide section of Saint Denis Street. The second figure cuts across a one-way street parallel to Saint Denis Street. The third figure shows the length of these territories. Together, they represent the movements of garbage collectors according to the location of the collection truck and the layout of the collection area. They show the succession of obstacles that garbage collectors encounter in the areas they traverse. The figures show containers of different colors, namely, to demonstrate that any given collection date normally includes containers and waste scheduled to be picked up on either previous or future collection dates. These different types of waste thus additionally complicate the work of the garbage collectors, who have to select the right bag or bin from the jumble of containers. Under pressure to perform quickly, garbage collectors may then pick up the wrong container or deliberately leave behind waste that has been incorrectly sorted by users and residents.

Figure 3.

Cross-section of Saint Denis Street (top), a parallel one-way street (middle) and the two territories along their length (bottom).



Garbage collectors generally work in pairs, accompanied by the truck driver who, when facing numerous garbage cans or bulky waste (mattresses, furniture), steps out of his cab to help his colleagues. On wide two-way streets like Saint Denis, featuring many urban obstacles, we have repeatedly observed garbage collectors moving ahead of the truck to amass garbage bags and bins on free parking spaces. This manner of concentrating different volumes of waste, rather than carrying each container separately from the sidewalk to the truck, reduces their workload significantly and contributes to reducing road congestion on the street.

THE SIDEWALK: AN IN-BETWEEN PLACE?

The research presented here remains exploratory and our approach has several limitations. In Quebec, it is well known that local and regional media coverage is weak and in a delicate position: many newspapers are closing, and few journalists are dedicated to local news. This dive into newspapers therefore offers a snapshot that is invariably partial and biased. Similarly, our observations of the garbage collectors in the field do not allow for generalizations, due to the variety of urban street furniture and because each collection is distinct and dependent on several hazards (number and volume of garbage cans, weather, traffic on the bike path, road traffic, etc.). Our study therefore provides only a snapshot of all the phenomena at a given point in time.

Despite these limitations, at the end of our study, a cross-reference of the press review with direct observations made in three Montreal boroughs suggests that the sidewalk generates a set of specific social and spatial representations among residents. For the latter, the sidewalk has become an extension of their private space, according to a dual dynamic of appropriation and rejection. For example, it is where residents engage in practices for embellishing their neighborhood and for building a sense of community, yet also where the waste produced in private dwellings is deposited. So, while seeking to enhance their urban quality of life and placing expectations on the work of garbage collectors, residents also contribute to transforming this space into an undesirable area that is filled with garbage on collection days. On the one hand, residents are both entitled and obligated to dispose of their waste on the sidewalk, in keeping with municipal standards. Yet on the other hand, insofar as they consider the sidewalk to be an extension of the home, they expect garbage to be removed from it as quickly as possible, even filing complaints if necessary. When trash is “moved from a resident’s kitchen to the sidewalk” (Baraud-Serfaty, 2022, online; our translation), it does not disappear into a sorting container. Similar to its place in the kitchen, garbage outside should be discreet and disappear quickly. The sidewalk should be as clean as our home. As one resident puts it: “I’ve called the city three times since July 1. My driveway looks dirty” (Coutu, 2008; our translation) [News section].

In Montreal, sidewalk maintenance is managed entirely by municipal services. This means that the responsibility for the cleanliness of the public space is delegated at the very moment the waste is placed on the sidewalk, and residents will not hesitate to contact their municipal services if they feel that the state of the space does not conform to their expectations following the passage of the garbage collectors and cleaning trucks. In this way, the sidewalk becomes a place of control: residents monitor how other residents dispose of their garbage and do not hesitate to lodge complaints and offer advice. Moreover, the resident monitors whether garbage collectors do their job properly (e.g., does not pick up the wrong garbage can) and, more importantly, ensure that the sidewalk is both clean and unobstructed in the sense of allowing for carefree, pleasant foot traffic. Garbage collectors thus find themselves conflicted between two paradoxical injunctions (Béguin, 2015). Their intrusion is tolerated, as their work is socially deemed necessary to keep the city clean, yet it is also expected to remain discreet.

This control is also institutional, insofar as the sidewalk is a place where rules apply. City officials control residents in their management of garbage cans (e.g., residents may not deposit garbage just anywhere and may not park on sidewalks on street-cleaning days) as well as, at times, garbage collectors when these are the subject of complaints. This evidence one of Jane Jacobs' assertions:

The first thing to understand is that the public peace—the sidewalk and street peace—of cities is not kept primarily by the police, necessary as police are. It is kept primarily by an intricate, almost unconscious, network of voluntary controls and standards among the people themselves and enforced by the people themselves. (1961, p. 31-32)

However, this control tends to accentuate the already numerous negative representations of garbage collectors and to make this group of people invisible in discourses on urban production (Bilat & Le Lay, 2020). They are expected to keep the city clean, yet the context in which they are supposed to accomplish this is not given any consideration and they are not seen to be, in the words of Paré-Poupart (2024), “agents of cleanliness” (p. 117, our translation) in any official or formal way.

Contemporary urban planning forces them to adapt constantly, reinforcing their invisibility. The space between the street and the garbage is filled with obstacles, all the

while garbage collectors are under performance pressure in terms of speed (both to avoid blocking the street and by targets set by their company). They need to adapt to urban layouts designed first and foremost for residents. Overall, the collection process is thus governed by constraints imposed by buildings and urban layouts, by social representations comprised of multiple expectations as well as by planning policies that tend to increase rather than reduce the obstacles in the way of garbage collectors. This reality limits the accessibility of the sidewalk as a public space and shows that the socio-territorial vocation of the sidewalk, as promoted by various planning approaches, relegates the work of garbage collectors to the margins. This subaltern nature is all the stranger given that the function of depositing and collecting waste is not new (unlike other, more contemporary functions associated with the sidewalk) (Baraud-Serfaty, 2020).

Thus, as a “multiple in-between” (Baraud-Serfaty 2022), the sidewalk meets Bédard’s (2005) definition of the in-between place as a third space, a “space of freedom where everything is possible. [...] A space in the process of territorialization” (p. 62; our translation). Its functions and representations have also evolved over time: once primarily a space for strolling and circulating, it is increasingly the site of new types of street furniture and plural appropriations. As part of that, the sidewalk is a carrier of the ideals of regeneration, possibility and reinvention. “In-between places are characterized by an embryonic symbolic function and identity role” (p. 62; our translation). In conclusion, although little studied in the Quebec context, the functions of waste disposal and collection represent one of the many “in-betweens” of the sidewalk, where the practices and expectations of many players intertwine and even collide, notably those of residents and garbage collectors.

As an in-between place, however, the sidewalk has the capacity to reinvent itself with new arrangements in favor of a collection practice that contributes both to improving the working conditions of garbage collectors and to meeting the expectations of residents. Solutions do exist, and some municipalities have already adapted their collections to the characteristics of the areas they serve (Pierrat et al., 2021). Overall, the sidewalk bears witness to the complex relationship between human beings and waste as well as to the “triangular relationship between waste/people/space” (Le Dorlot, 2004, p. 6; our translation).

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