

A Big Story In A Small Place

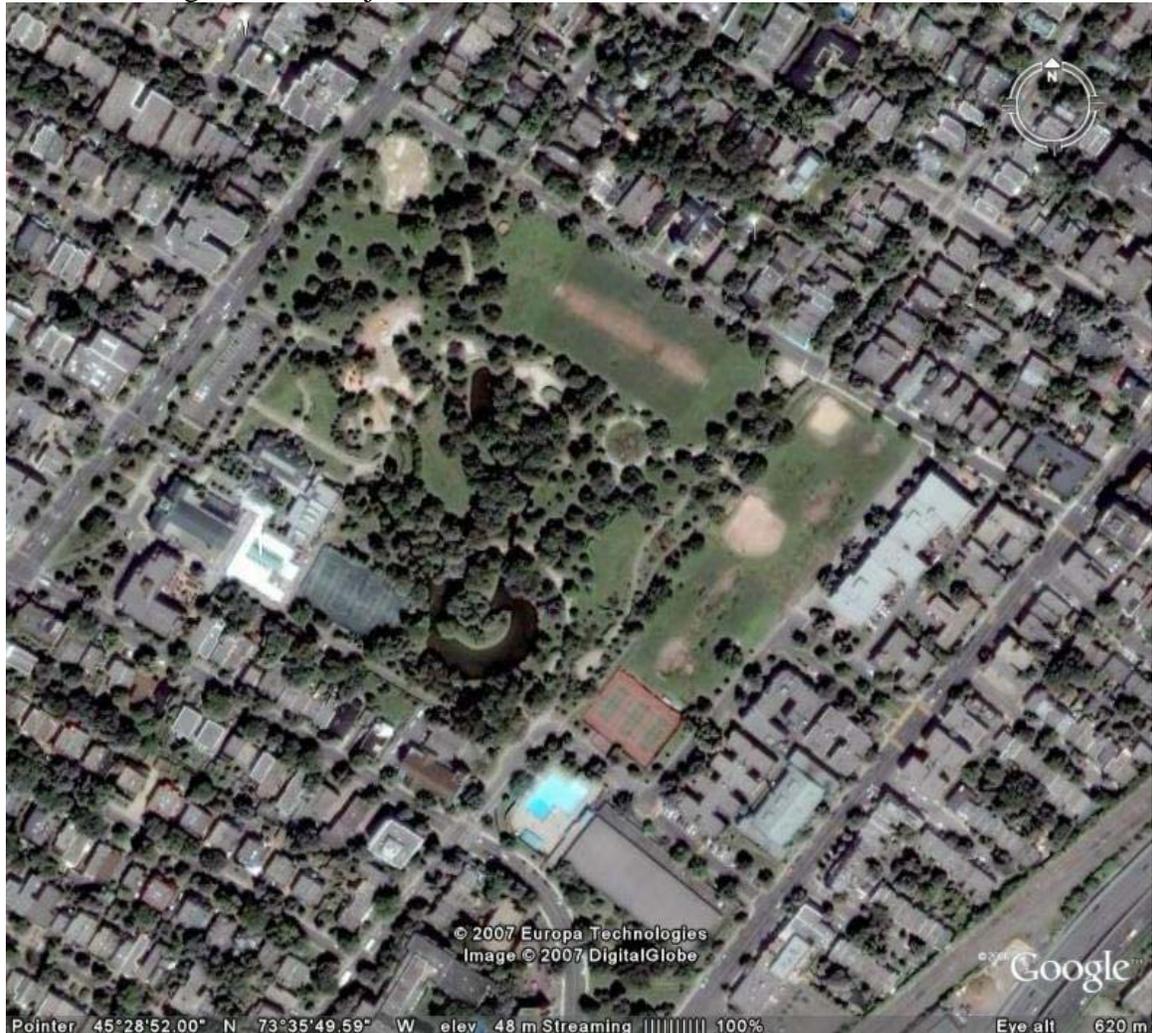
By Patrick Barnard

I – A Public Place Like A Painting

We are all acutely aware that our world is both a big and a small place. There were about 1 billion of us in 1900, but now we are 6 billion. And at the beginning of this new millennium, for the first time in human history, more than 50% of the human race live in cities. In 1974, the Italian writer Italo Calvino told Italian Swiss Television that he felt “close to the epoch in which one can experience Europe as almost a single city.” Today, no doubt, he would say the same thing about the world.

With appropriate equipment, we can visit Google Earth and downsize from the globe to a very small place we know well – a rooftop, a street, a school, a tree we remember from childhood. These are the small places that form our souls, and we can see them on a computer, or ask others to.

As you read this digitalized text, you could – if you wanted – use Google Earth to home in on Canada... then Montreal... then a wealthy city enclave called Westmount... and finally a public space in that city-within-the-city: Westmount Park. Let's use Google now to do just that...



Do you see the bottom rectangle of the park? It runs roughly southwest to northeast (moving from bottom center to top right), where there is the blue of a public swimming-pool, the sienna brown of public tennis courts, and then a long greenspace (12,000 square meters) with two white patches where there are baseball diamonds. You do see?

I am writing to you now from an 1897 apartment which looks out at street level, from the northeast, onto this meadow-like green:



An incredible sight – a landscape painting, but one which has been done by nature and art, with human beings wisely and deliberately using the natural things around them to bring the country into the heart of the city.

This small, public place, the southern section of Westmount Park, has a little-known and fascinating history which connects it directly with North America's – and the world's – greatest parks.

The connection here is with Frederick Law Olmsted, the designer of Central Park and North America's most famous landscape architect. Olmsted did not plan Westmount Park, but his ideas shaped its design from the very beginning in 1899, since Olmsted Brothers acted as the first consultants for the rectangular park. It is truly a child of Olmsted, a progeny of his majestic Mount Royal Park which lies at the very center of greater Montreal.

In 1910, the smaller but very natural-looking Westmount Park had a gorge crossed by wicker bridges, and that greenspace became so popular that in 1910 Westmount City Council spent \$300,000 dollars – millions today – to extend the area to the south, and relieve the ecological stress. A series of purchases were made with great deliberation “for the purposes of a public park” and over the last ninety years these southern fields have served as a multi-purpose recreation space giving free access for all sorts of activities. The 1910 acquisition has proven to be the wisest type of stewardship.

Today students from poorer areas in Montreal bus to Westmount Park School and every morning spill onto the southern fields which they use as their greenspace for recreation and science study. Toddlers from the neighborhood daycare, Narnia, also spread themselves out there, as they squeal and dig into the dirt. Westmount's children's soccer program uses the fields; so do softball players, people playing pick-up games of

all sorts, kite-fliers, walkers, star-gazers, and lovers. These fields are also used for all sorts of community activities, from Family Day to Les Fetes de Saint Jean.

Strangely, though, in the autumn of 2006, this virtual village green became the epicenter of an intense struggle pitting Westmount City Council against its own citizens.

On Oct. 3, 2006, Westmount City officials summoned residents abutting the park to a meeting and announced the City's "intention" to install synthetic turf on these southern fields. Suddenly, it seemed, in the age of global warming, the "Green" City of Westmount proposed destroying 15% of Westmount Park's total greenspace by replacing it with a polyvinyl carpet.

An uproar ensued. Within days, citizens formed an association to keep the park a natural green, and they called their group Save The Park! Sauvons le parc! A web-site was created (savewestmountpark.com) and many Westmounters signed a petition to protect their lively, congenial, aesthetic greenspace. Signers included the renowned Quebec film-maker, Denys Arcand, his wife, Denise Robert, as well as writers, lawyers, translators, teachers -- people of all sorts, from the very young to those ripe in years.

Distinguished Montrealers from outside of Westmount put forward their names on the petition, including such people as the founder and director of the Canadian Centre for Architecture, Phyllis Lambert. Also signing was Nancy Pollock-Ellwand, Canada's foremost expert on the landscape architect, Frederick Law Olmsted.

Save The Park! Sauvons le parc! joined the National Association for Olmsted Parks (NAOP.org) in Washington, D.C. and were welcomed because Westmount Park is a miniature jewel of North American landscape design. The placement of a synthetic surface over its southern area would have the same effect, on a smaller scale, as covering New York's Sheep Meadow in Central Park with artificial matting. In truth, the original architectural plan used by Westmount in 2006 envisaged a "new sports area" which would effectively cannibalize the whole park by shifting a bike-path, decreasing CO2 fixation, vastly increasing heat, imposing concrete walkways, destroying valuable trees, and worst of all, privatizing public space through far more intense rental to private schools.

II – The Turf War

From October 2006 until May 2007, an intense struggle took place in Westmount, characterized by the magazine Canadian Geographic as a "Turf War" (see Canadian Geographic, Mar./April 2007, P.28). A coalition of three groups emerged as passionate defenders of the park's natural grass: the citizens of Save The Park! Sauvons le parc!; the Council of Westmount Park School; and the staff and parents at Narnia daycare. On the other side were the proponents of the artificial surface within Westmount City Council, centered on the Mayor, Ms. Karin Marks. These turf enthusiasts, interestingly, never completely identified themselves, but they fought very hard for six months to marginalize the opposition, until that became impossible because resistance was so widespread.

And here is the global meaning of this conflict. Urban greenspace in 2007 is an endangered species. Montreal, for example, ranks near the very bottom of North American cities for per capita greenspace. Every time a parks manager or a sports and recreation official decides to replace natural grass with synthetic surface, a terrible logic sets in. There is less remaining natural area, so the pressure on the vestigial greenspace

increases, and the argument for further synthetic installation becomes stronger. Synthetic surfaces are destroying urban green areas everywhere in the world.

And here is another global link – the future and the children who will live in it. Because there are only so many stadiums, the manufacturers of artificial surfaces have been aggressively expanding into their new markets – municipalities, schools, and playgrounds. The suppliers of the synthetic surfaces have been pushing them on very small children, such as the kids at Narnia. But what are the “third generation” synthetic fields made from? Most of them, from the rubber crumbs of re-cycled rubber tires, the equivalent of 20,000 to 40,000 tires in a single field, material so toxic that it is illegal in Europe to dispose of this stuff in a conventional landfill.

In Westmount, what we are seeing is part of a much larger, emerging movement. Over the last five years, hundreds of artificial fields have been installed throughout North America, without any prior testing. Now, educated, globally-linked people are beginning to question why we are allowing our own young children to be guinea-pigs and to do the “testing” which we adults should have done for them, before they play on such fields.

On May 16th, the City of Westmount finally held a public consultation about the Park in a large, jam-packed hall, with the City’s consultants at the front, facing an audience, it turned out, full of opponents of the artificial surface. In the second half of the meeting, citizen intervenors, many of them with scientific backgrounds, relentlessly critiqued both the assumptions and facts put forward by the consultants.

The first citizen intervenor pointed out that Westmount’s own consulting landscape architect, had pointed to the hazardous nature of the synthetic material, commenting in his report that “it is practically impossible to determine a disposal cost for an artificial surface over twenty years” (Marc Fauteux, “Westmount Park Soccer Fields: Design Costs and Estimates,” April 6, 2006, P.8). That citizen speaker also pointed to P. 9 of that document, a page which City authorities had lifted from the architect’s report when they made it public. The “missing page 9,” as it is now known, contained the architect’s assessments of the “pros and cons” of various options, and gave the synthetic surface option his lowest possible rating for environmental value – 1 out of 10!

But the most striking material presented at that meeting was information which has never been given the publicity it deserves.

It is a 2005 collation of satellite infra-red photos done by a geographer from the University of Quebec, Camilo Perez Arrau, who now lives in Westmount. In this visual study, Arrau uses Westmount’s natural grass fields as his “gold standard” to demonstrate the “heat island effect” of the synthetic fields in Montreal, those fields outside of Westmount. Synthetic fields are extremely hot, hotter than asphalt. In Arrau’s photos, Westmount’s natural fields have a cool, blue colour. The artificial fields – such as McGill University’s Forbes Field – glow in the photographs with a deep, hot red.

People at the May 16th meeting saw these photographs projected before them. And they also heard from citizen intervenors about an altogether new development in this global story.

On April 15th, the Public Advocate of New York, Ms. Betsy Gotbaum, held a press conference. She and her staff at the Public Advocate’s Office (PAO) of the City of New York had just received the second, preliminary study by Prof. William Crain (Psychology) of the City University of New York and Dr. Junfeng Zhang of Rutgers (Environmental and Occupational Health). In both 2006 and 2007, Crain and Zhang had

examined rubber pellets from New York synthetic fields and found that they contained hazardous levels of potentially carcinogenic molecules known as Polycyclic Aromatic Hydrocarbons (PAHs).

The PAO issued its press release on April 15, 2007:

Public advocate Betsy Gotbaum today called for immediate, independent testing of rubber pellets that may pose serious health risks to New Yorkers. The rubber pellets, used to fill in synthetic turf in more than 70 fields throughout the city, are made from recycled tires that contain high levels of cancer-causing chemicals.

Many people in the Westmount audience on May 16, 2007 were hearing information in public that few populations have been privy to in the developed world, and many of us were asking ourselves the obvious question: what happens when the very high heat of these artificial fields affects the volatility of PAHs? Crain and Zhang want to study how these molecules – and other dangerous ones in rubber crumbs – might enter organisms through ingestion, inhalation, or skin absorption. Westmount’s own environmental consultant said, of this issue, that further study was needed. Why has this study not been done?

The answer is that synthetic fields have become a kind of fad, to the point that sports and recreation managers feel that they can’t have a proper soccer program without a synthetic surface – yet most of them are woefully ignorant about the surfaces they are unconsciously promoting.

At one point in the May 16th meeting, an informal hand vote was called for. The overwhelming number of people attending rejected the idea of an artificial surface for the southern portion of Westmount Park.

At most times, Mayor Karin Marks has appeared as the major proponent of synthetic turf, but at others, she has strategically said nothing has been decided. Her latest statement, as quoted in the local paper, The Westmount Examiner, is worth quoting in full:

“No decision has been made. We are looking at all natural turf options. People have told us overwhelmingly that they do not want artificial turf. It is not the direction we want to go, but we are also committed to expanding the recreation programme. We want to know all that would be involved in staying with natural turf – not just what type of grass, but the layout of the fields, comparative costs, scheduling, usage and, in fact, every detail. Hopefully, they [City staff] will find a solution that works. Only then will we make a decision” (Westmount Examiner, June 21, 2007).

Have the supporters of natural grass and the defenders of the park won the turf war in Westmount? It certainly seems that the popular will has made an effect on local politicians. But many groups have fought and will fight over this issue, and there are two rules to the game: 1. Bring the hidden agenda to light; 2. Be ever vigilant. The “artificial turf lobby” is enormously strong and consists of the supplying companies, governments seeking to recycle tires and other materials, politicians seeking prestige, developers, sports and recreation officials, and bureaucrats seeking to cut costs (even though artificial surfaces are and will be extremely costly).

There is an added factor. The resistance to synthetics is just beginning, and the scientific, public health issues at play involve the future of a very lucrative industry, so a lot is at stake. The enthusiastic lawyers in the Public Advocate's Office in New York, when they talk among themselves, think the "turf issue" may very well resemble another recent case history involving a popular material – asbestos. Are they right? No one knows for sure. . All I know is that synthetic surfaces are dangerous for the parks we love.

III—Olmsted and The Parks We Love

Frederick Law Olmsted knew deeply about the small places that form our soul, perhaps because nature was the touchstone of what was really an itinerant life. He was born in 1822, worked as a common seaman, farmed, visited the American South as a journalist and wrote some of the most important literature in opposition to slavery. But he did not really find his profession until the middle of the American Civil War, and it was only near its end that his partner, Calvert Vaux, decided to use the term "landscape architect" to describe what he and Olmsted had been about when they designed Central Park. At the end of 1865, Vaux and Olmsted wrote an extraordinary report for the City of Brooklyn in preparation for their conception of Prospect Park, and in this text we see Olmsted's most basic ideas. Witold Rybczynski, in his book, A Clearing In A Distance, rightly points out that the Prospect Park report is "a remarkable document."

In the document, Vaux and Olmsted indicate that public parks really embody four main values: Freedom, Pleasure, Community, and Art. They asserted that "the most valuable gratification afforded by a park is a sense of enlarged freedom." And they stressed that parks are places with a precise social end "for people to come together for the simple purpose of enjoyment." Community, with all its social implications, is important, since in parks people "must come together, and must be seen coming together." Finally, unequivocally, they insisted that a public park is "a work of art."

The fact that Westmount City Council – like many other such bodies -- has toyed so long with ideas that would desecrate the City's own, prized park is an indication of how shallow the post-modern world can be.

We think we believe in freedom. What do artificial surfaces often mean? Extremely high capital costs, so that intense rental is required. What was free becomes monetized. Furthermore, artificial fields are almost always fenced and highly regulated, so that programmed activity replaces unprogrammed, spontaneous, self-organized sport.

Pleasure of a varied kind, involving different ages and classes -- if synthetic fields are installed -- can often become replaced by something more resembling work.

Community is the very essence of a multi-purpose park area, a coming together...and that is lost with the regulated specialization accompanying artificial fields.

And Art? Well, that is virtually forgotten. At one point in the Westmount Turf war, the head of the City's Sports and Recreation department, which had helped drive the synthetic turf agenda in the city bureaucracy for nearly two years, said that these southern fields "had no value." A decent man, he is simply incapable of seeing their beauty.

But these kinds of places inspire love, because they have to do with childhood and the satisfaction of our very deepest needs. There is one young man named Matthew who knows these southern fields. He is an international volunteer in Afghanistan, and he

periodically writes letters of encouragement to Save The Park! Sauvons le parc! Here is his latest one :

“Dear y’all

Matthew Gray here, who grew up at 52 Academy Road where the park was my front yard. My mom still lives there.

This is just a short note to say that I have sent several postcards to our mayor to let her know even people who are 11,000 kms [away] know that it’s worth fighting for. And, for her to be right around the corner from it and to not know this, is a conundrum to me.

From North Afghanistan,

Matthew.”

Such is the power of a small and beautiful place, of the parks we love. They speak to us, across the globe, of freedom, pleasure, community, and art.

Patrick Barnard teaches English Literature at Montreal’s Dawson College and is a founding member of Save The Park! Sauvons le parc!

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