

# The Hybrid Performance of a District: A Study of the Work of a Tenants' Association

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*Using the case of a four-year ethnography of a tenants' association in an underprivileged district of Montréal, Québec, Canada, I show how workers use artefacts to translate the built landscape – the physical characteristics and issues of buildings – into language. This translation, I contend, is necessary to ground the association's calls to city officials for intervention as legitimate and necessary. In turn, those calls, as they are recirculated, open up or deter programs of action. In other words, action is transformed into language which in turn calls for further action – and the distinction between action and language fades. This is not only a theoretical stance but also a preoccupation of participants themselves, whose daily work consists of effacing their own intervention and of presenting their calls for repairs as genuine demands from the district's built landscape itself. This is especially important in a district where gentrification and other physical changes have a growing impact on poorer citizens. As researchers, we need to keep in mind that pitting materiality against language, or action against its descriptions, is unproductive from a pragmatic point of view and fails to account for the way in which community workers – among others – work and attempt, discursively, to shape their environment while presenting that environment as speaking “by itself.”*

## Introduction

Since 2000, I have been involved – at first as an employee and subsequently as a member of the board – in the tenants' association of a poor district of Côte-des-Neiges, Montréal (Québec, Canada)<sup>1</sup>. Through my work at the Côte-des-Neiges Tenants' Association (CTA) and through a four-year ethnographical inquiry

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1 Montréal (among many other peculiarities) federates several *arrondissements*, which I translate here as boroughs. Côte-des-Neiges is part of the Côte-des-Neiges/Notre-Dame-de-Grâce borough, which has its own mayor and administration. Borough mayors and some of their city councillors are members of Montréal's city council.

conducted there between 2007 and 2011, I became increasingly interested in the crossfire of discourses that community organizations, city officials, government agencies and other players exchange as part of their daily work to improve the lives of district residents. I felt, however, that something was omitted from the usual descriptions of public debate: could the object of the debate, too, play a part in the discussions? Studies tend to sort beings, in advance, into two categories: knowing subjects on the one hand, and known objects on the other (see e.g. criticisms addressed to Latour by Lenoir 1994). The first are humans who can talk and produce discourse about the second, who are usually non-humans (or humans-as-objects, e.g. the bodies of medical patients). My experience, though, suggested a different direction. Given the importance of materiality in the work of the CTA – they constantly work with buildings – I was under the impression that a large part of their daily life remains unaccounted for by a depiction that would focus only on human actors and talk. In addition, had I produced such a depiction, I would have been unable to explain how talk becomes concrete, material action, except by using a basic model of action. A model where people make a decision and then act on the basis of that decision omits the constant adjustments that are made as action feeds back onto itself. Saying that concrete material action feeds back on itself amounts to acknowledging that materiality is active and plays a part in the very definition of the program of action to be undertaken (for a redefinition of the activity-passivity divide, see Cooren 2010).

What especially struck me is that contrary to the “townhall” model often used to account for local politics (e.g. Gastil & Levine 2005; for a discussion, see Deetz 1992; Tracy, McDaniel & Gronbeck 2007; Tracy 2010), both the CTA and the city spent relatively little time invoking values, norms, principles and other “Kantian” preconditions to “good” action. Rather, some courses of action were being presented as natural or as made necessary by the contingencies of the current situation – and especially by the material condition of the district’s built landscape. This also means, paradoxically, that participants, rather than invoking their subjectivities and agencies try (e.g. Marks 1995; Allen 2007), on the contrary, to efface themselves and appear as the mere faithful intermediaries or spokespeople of those necessities (for the distinction between active mediators and passive intermediaries, see Latour 2005, 37).

What is at stake, then, is to get the built landscape to talk and say whether any action is good for it. Of course, buildings cannot actually talk. Different methods (in the sense of Garfinkel’s ethnomethods; see Garfinkel 1967) are used to translate what the building has to say into language, in order to feed it into the conversation. Such a method must ensure that what is being said is faithful to the original, but faithfulness does not mean fewer intermediaries, less translation, but on the contrary *more* mediators (Latour 2005, 40) to ensure that some sort of equivalence is preserved between the “original” and the translation (see Latour 1988; 1999, 24–

79). I will focus here on two examples of mediators used to turn a building's actions into language and thus allow the building to participate in the conversation, namely moisture meters and thermal imaging.

Making the buildings speak is also important because language allows the establishment of relations between entities of various ontologies – for example between the building and the law. Materiality also establishes relations: for example, it is the physical disposition of dwellings that constitutes some people as “neighbours”. However, it is at the linguistically-established intersection of ontologies that a state of facts (the way the building *is*) can become a call for further action (the way things *should be*; see Blackburn 2003). That the pipes of a building are leaking is not in itself good or bad. When put in relation with the health of the building's inhabitants, though, an ethical dimension appears and we can now say that leaky pipes are bad *for* people's health.

My understanding of the way materiality can participate in conversation, though, requires a different understanding of language. I cannot maintain a clear divide between, on the one hand, the realm of discourse and, on the other, the realm of materiality and action (e.g., to which language would refer in a descriptive relationship). Thanks to speech act theory (Austin 1962; Searle 1969), it is possible to acknowledge that the boundary between both is in fact blurry (or altogether inexistent). Then, not only can buildings talk (I will tackle this metaphor below), but talk can lead to action, and action can then feed back into talk.

Before going into more detail, however, I must first introduce the Côte-des-Neiges district of Montréal, which is both the setting and the lead character of this article.

## The District of Côte-des-Neiges

The Côte-des-Neiges district of Montréal is as large as a small city – and has many of the problems that come with size. It counts over 100,000 inhabitants<sup>2</sup>, of whom 50% are not native speakers of the country's official languages, French and English (and 4.4% cannot speak these languages at all, compared to 2.8% for the whole of Montréal). About 58.1% of Côte-des-Neiges residents are first-generation immigrants (against 32.9% for Montréal) and a good part of them has recently arrived in the country, Côte-des-Neiges being, thanks to its relatively low rents, where many newcomers first establish. Half of residents are members of visible minorities, against 25% in Montréal.

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<sup>2</sup> I wish to thank Christian Paquin, from the CSSS de la Montagne, for having produced and shared this very useful set of data about the Côte-des-Neiges district. His work is based on the 2006 Canadian census.

For the Côte-des-Neiges Tenants' Associations, working with this poor, often resourceless population is routine, but also a daily challenge as the association itself lacks stable funding and is unable to hire more than three permanent employees. It counts on a network of volunteers and on the punctual help of law and social work interns, who help the employees give legal advice to tenants, organize class actions against landlords (Côte-des-Neiges has many large residential buildings of over thirty units) or, more generally, help newcomers find their way in Montréal's labyrinthine bureaucracies. A good deal of the CTA's work also consists of lobbying city officials and national agencies in order for current sanitation and maintenance laws and regulations to be better applied, for example by demanding that more city inspectors be hired and shortening the delays at the Rental Board, which is the administrative court for housing (a very precise description of the CTA's work can be found in Bencherki & Cooren 2011).

I contend that the CTA is involved into the shaping of Côte-des-Neiges as a district, by producing discourses and opposing those produced by concurrent entities, most importantly those of the borough administration. Those discourses are not "mere talk" but open or limit possible programs of action. In turn, concrete, material action feeds back to allow or deter possible discourses. That materiality does things – and indeed embeds morality, as Verbeek (2006), among others, points out – is very relevant for Côte-des-Neiges community workers and residents, who are witnessing a considerable gentrification of the district. One cannot ignore the everyday effects of the fact that upper-scale apartment towers are being built in place of more accessible housing, or that a railroad track isolates the district from the adjacent richer ones. On the other hand, the availability of bike lanes and bike-share stations, or the recent installation of benches along the main street, constitute concrete improvements to the daily life of district inhabitants. It may be tempting to argue that these are "real" actions or effects, in contrast with the "softer" effect of talk (this is what the distinction between "corporeal" and "non-corporeal" effects implies in Deleuze & Guattari 1987). This is not, though, the way in which I view the role of language. Such a view is based on a misunderstanding of Austin's (1962) speech act theory where only the illocutionary is considered as the "real" speech act, while the perlocutionary (i.e. the consequences of talk) is viewed as being a mere after-effect: in other words, the effects of talk on materiality is only indirect, thus the two domains remain distinct. However, not only did Austin not establish such a distinction, but the CTA workers, as we will see, were very much preoccupied with erasing oppositions between the built landscape of Côte-des-Neiges and the discourses produced about them: their efforts to change the district through speech relied on speech being attributed to the buildings and the district themselves.

This is why I allow myself to say that buildings "talk": of course I've never actually had a conversation with a building, but from a pragmatic point of view,

what is at stake in the work of the CTA is to show that the built environment *caused* the discourse they are holding and, in a sense, is its author. A stronger, and much longer, argument for the idea that “things do things with words” (to borrow from Austin’s title) can be found in Cooren and Bencherki (2011). In this paper I will limit my work to showing empirically how CTA workers make use of two artefacts, moisture meters and thermal images, that in effect allow the buildings of Côte-des-Neiges to “say things by themselves,” but then proceed to downplay their active role in the “voicing” of the buildings.

As mentioned, the data for this paper is taken essentially from a four-year ethnography (see also Bencherki & Cooren 2011) conducted at the CTA, where I was employed previously (and where I still volunteer). In addition, for this paper in particular, I interviewed two of the employees on their use of the moisture meters. I will focus especially on two related issues. I will mainly concentrate on the case of a specific building – let’s call it the Hymans building – to show how the CTA’s discourse interacts with that of other entities to make material action (repairs, mostly) possible or not. I will then expand the discussion to the CTA’s work more generally to show how moisture meters and thermal images allow buildings to take part in the conversation and, in their turn, constrain possible discourses.

## Shaping a District

The Hymans building case became important when a school for autistic children discovered that one of its pupils had severe bedbug bites and referred the case to the Public Health Services (PHS). When PHS doctors visited the building, they discovered that in addition to a major bedbug infestation, the building was riddled with mildew. At that moment, the PHS decided to focus special attention on Côte-des-Neiges and asked for the help of the CTA to get access to the tenants, who are usually not fluent in either official language and are reluctant to open their doors to people they do not know. The CTA was to be the PHS’s eyes and arms in the district. The case got even higher priority when a woman from the building, who suffered from a respiratory disease, was independently referred to the PHS by her own physician.

CTA workers already knew the Hymans building. They had already asked city inspectors to visit the building, which they did regularly since 2008. The typical inspection report, though, never actually mentioned the mildew.

**Figure 1. Extract of an inspection report regarding the Hymans building: “Repair the wall surface, which is damaged. These works must be completed at the latest 30 days after receiving this notice.”**

10. Art. 25.1. Réparer le revêtement du mur qui est brisé.

**Ces travaux doivent être exécutés au plus tard 30 jours après la réception de cet avis.**

As is shown in Figure 1, the inspector’s report of April 2010 only ordered the landlord to “Repair the wall surface, which is damaged.” This had been the way in which mildew issues were addressed by Côte-des-Neiges city inspectors for a long time. However, as long as landlords were only required to “repair the wall surface,” they could get away with only washing or painting over the walls, thus not actually getting to the root of the problem, which is usually a water leakage in the pipes running through the walls.

When the PHS became involved, later in 2010, it declared the building unfit for human living. The PHS’s declaration, however, is not legally binding. Yet, while they could have gone on writing their reports the same way, city inspectors changed the way they spoke of mildew. In a February 2011 report, they tackled the question directly (Fig. 2).

**Figure 2. Excerpt of the February 2011 inspection report: “During a verification on February 4, 2011, we noticed the presence of mildew in the aforementioned building, especially in apartments 104, 105, 106, 301 and 306, which may cause health problems to inhabitants; this contravenes to Article 25.10 of the Bylaw on sanitation and maintenance of dwellings, according to which such a presence, as well as the conditions that allow its proliferation, are prohibited and must be suppressed.”**

Lors d’une vérification en date du 4 février 2011, nous avons constaté la présence de moisissures dans le bâtiment précité, notamment dans les appartements nos 104, 105, 106, 301 et 306, pouvant causer des problèmes de santé aux occupants, ce qui contrevient à l’article 25.10 ° du Règlement sur la salubrité et l’entretien des logements selon lequel un telle présence, ainsi que les conditions qui en favorisent la prolifération, sont prohibées et doivent être supprimées.

I will later explore in greater depth why the city inspectors may have changed the way they address mildew issues. For the moment, it must be noted that in spite of this new, more detailed report, nothing was done three months after the notice was given to the landlord, and people still lived in the apartment. To the CTA (and to the PHS), this delay was intolerable as the health problems related to mildew (not to mention bedbugs) were not improving.

The CTA, the PHS and the district’s health administration (which is an agency of the national government) asked to meet the borough mayor. The mayor, however,

asked to know the intended strategies of all partners and to receive all related documents prior to the meeting, a demand all parties rejected. Instead, they asked a journalist to get involved (Elkouri 2011). The mayor refused to talk to the journalist, but a borough spokesperson said to her there was “no urgent need to act” and that the landlord was collaborating. The landlord, the journalist discovered, did make a few cosmetic repairs, which the borough deemed sufficient, but a PHS epidemiologist, after yet another visit to the building, confirmed that the mildew was still there and that the water leakages had not been repaired, stating that the PHS maintained the same verdict it had issued three months earlier: the building was unfit for human habitation.

On the very day the newspaper article was published, the CTA called for a press conference, in effect re-circulating the content of the article, and, in order to give a more “human interest” edge to the case, provided the example of a specific family. Within the same day, the borough issued a press release in which it stated that the family had been offered low-income housing, or the option of staying at the hotel, and implied that the PHS intervention was in fact its own idea. A controversy was therefore sparked over how long the mayor had been aware of the situation (since, in order to have invited the PHS, he should have known about the building’s condition for over a year). The mayor then called his own press conference, where he asserted that the city could not evacuate the building because it had to give a chance to the landlord (it should be noted that the case had been going on for years) and because the tenants need to respect their leases (Karwatsky 2011). This latter assertion was denied by the CTA, since Montréal bylaws allow the borough to evacuate buildings as it deems fit.

The case is still ongoing as I write this.

## **Making Buildings Speak by Themselves**

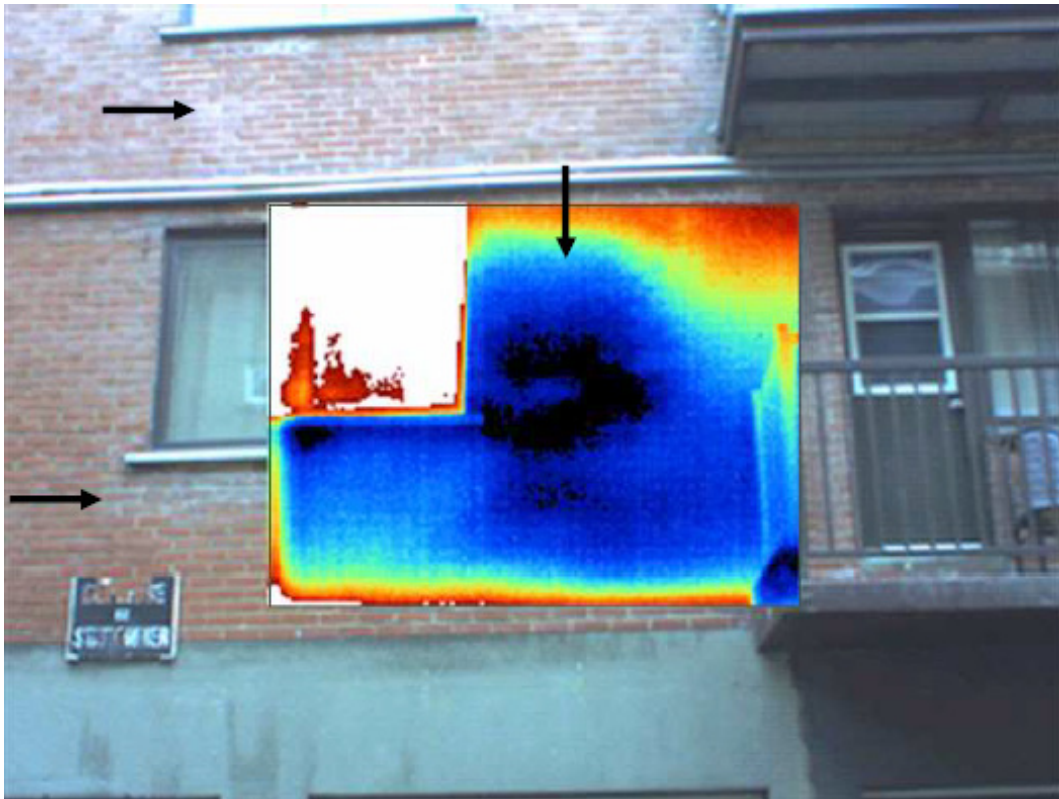
Let us return to one particular element of the case: the fact that city inspectors changed the way they spoke of mildew and began to address it upfront, in contrast to their earlier habitual cryptic references to wall surfaces needing repair.

I contend that this change hinges on the PHS’s involvement in the case. More specifically, working with the PHS has changed the way the CTA files its complaints to the city, giving them a technological twist. Prior to the collaboration with the PHS, the CTA would merely mention the presence of mildew, as eyewitnessed by workers or tenants themselves. PHS specialists, however, used – and convinced CTA workers to use – moisture meters. These devices, when applied against a wall, measure humidity, effectively providing proof not only of the presence of mildew, but also of water leakages, which would have otherwise required the removal of

the wall and the visual inspection of the pipes that lie behind it. The experts of the PHS also use thermal photography (Fig. 3), which provides colour-graded images superimposed on pictures of the building, exposing locations of excessive humidity.

In the interviews<sup>3</sup> I conducted with two CTA workers involved with the organization's outreach program (i.e. they visit the apartments and buildings, as opposed to the in-office legal help clinic, which is the CTA's other major program), Tania and Christopher showed how the moisture meters and the visual presentation of their readings constituted important elements in convincing tenants and courts of the importance of repairing buildings.

**Figure 3. A thermal image as reproduced from a PHS report. Photo: Yves Frenette, Direction de la santé publique de Montréal, used with permission.**

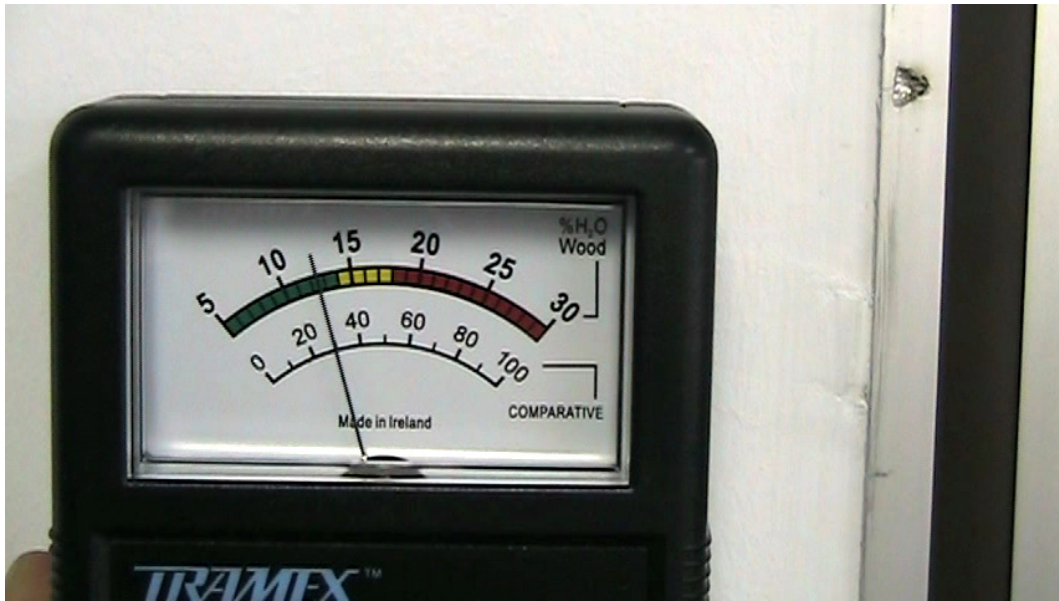


Tania recounts the story of a building where some tenants did not want to take steps to solve their water leakage problems, as they did not believe the problems were severe enough to be worth the fight. After she started using the moisture meters, things changed: “The machine would go ‘beep-beep’ in the yellow-red”, tells Tania. “He understood there was a water leakage. I did not have to convince him with words, the machine did.”

<sup>3</sup> The interviews were conducted in French. I provide here my own translation.

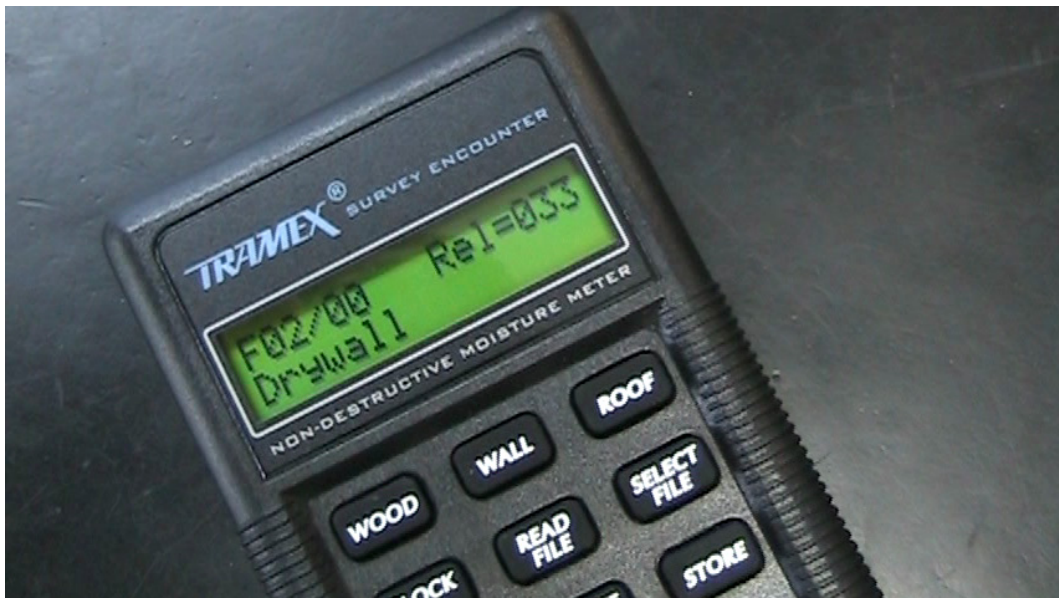


Figure 4. The moisture meter applied against a dry wall. Photo: Nicolas Bencherki.



Her colleague Christopher shows me the binder where he keeps his file for the Hymans building. A map of each apartment shows little numbered marks that indicate where measures were taken. The next page of Christopher's binder features pictures of the meters' dial displaying values (similar to Fig. 4), with numbers referring to each numbered mark.

Figure 5. The new electronic meter. Photo: Nicolas Bencherki.



He also tells me about a new meter purchased recently by the CTA (Fig. 5). "It does not have a dial, but it can record up to 625 measures in different folders. Instead of pictures that can take up a lot of space, you can upload the data on the

computer.” He explains that the first meter, the one with the dial, is easy to use, but it requires experience to know whether it is being employed properly. The trickiest issue is that there can be metal objects behind the wall that the meter mistakes for humidity (e.g. pipes or structural elements). Experience teaches the user, though, that while water leakage readings will gradually fade as you get farther from its core, a metal object will give a single, localized high reading.

What is at stake with moisture meters is whether the Rental Board will acknowledge the CTA’s capacity to use the machines and accept measures made by CTA personnel as receivable proof. Christopher and Tania fear that they may need to find some expert to explain the working of the meters at the Board and then testify that CTA workers did use it the proper way.

Even if the Rental Board should not accept as a proof measures made by the CTA using the moisture meters, Christopher suggests they could use them to identify buildings with mildew problems and then bring in the PHS, “the real, undisputable experts.” They could even lend the devices to the tenants, who could themselves take measurements regularly, in order to draw a broader picture of the situation.

As for the newly bought meter, since it does not have a dial and only displays and stores measures as numbers, Christopher is worried that it may require some work to figure out an appealing, visual way of presenting the measures at the Board. For example, the plan on which measures are plotted could be improved. However, the fact that this meter records precise numbers, while being less visual, could have its positive side: “With the needle, it’s not like the number. With the first, you know it’s between 40 and 60, with the other device, you get ‘59!’”

When I ask what changed in their work since they bought the meters, Christopher does not hesitate: “The device gives us the ability to see behind walls!” Tania explains that without the devices, trying to spot mildew with one’s bare eyes is rarely accurate. “Visually, if it’s black, you can tell. Otherwise, there’s no way of knowing.” Christopher also explains that, “We’ve got landlords who are experts at cleaning and painting over the walls.” He gives the example of a volunteer who had been led to think an apartment had been cleared of moisture, only to see it coming back even stronger a few weeks later. “It’s almost more dangerous, warns Christopher, because during that time, the water keeps leaking.” Thanks to the moisture meters, Tania and Christopher hope that water leakages and the resulting mildew will be diagnosed earlier and be tackled at the source.

Another technology that has become available thanks to the PHS’ involvement is thermal imaging. The cameras as such are not in the hands of CTA workers, but PHS specialists include the images they generate in reports that they share

with the association. Figure 3 shows an example of such an image. These images allow a visual representation of where water leakages may be located in a building thanks to a color-graded picture superimposed on a conventional photograph. Colors, ranging from blue (colder) to red (hotter), correspond to more or less humid regions.

## Analysis

Before analysing the Hymans building case, I was given a more detailed description of the moisture meters and the thermal imaging methods. There are two ways of describing the way in which these technologies make a difference. The first is to say that PHS and CTA workers *use* the devices to see things they could not see otherwise. This would be a more conventional view of technology as an extension of human organs, as developed for instance by medium theory, its most famous proponent being Marshall McLuhan (1965). However, Cooren (2004) remarks that it can also be said that the technology does something, too. Cooren gives the example of a note: while it can be said that “I remind myself of something using a note,” it would be just as true to say that “the note reminds me of something”. It is in fact this very capacity of the note to do something on its own that is at work when, the next day, I see the post-it note on my computer screen. As I remember I have an appointment, whether it is I, or someone else, or some helpful angel who put the note becomes irrelevant at that moment. If I were just reminding myself and if the note were completely passive, then why would I use the note at all? The heart of Cooren’s argument is that within a “chain of agency” (Castor & Cooren 2006, 572), selecting a specific author is a matter of debate rather than an intrinsic property of action.

This is why it can also be said that the building “tells” the PHS specialists and the CTA workers, through the lens of the thermal camera or through the moisture meters, that there are water leakages at some places. This is what makes science “objective”: the apparatus the scientists of the PHS put in place are not only means of extending their own sensory organs, but also ways of making objects speak by themselves, and much of scientific writing is dedicated precisely to making the authors vanish and letting “the facts speak by themselves” (Latour & Woolgar 1979; Latour 1987).

This is also what the CTA wishes to achieve at the Rental Board with respect to the moisture meters. Christopher and Tania are worried that the court could accuse them of making the building say things it does not “intend” to say, if they improperly use the devices. They seek the help of specialists who, thanks to their “objectivity” (i.e., their capacity to make objects speak), could testify that when CTA workers use the moisture meters, their own selves are not involved in the process and that

their reports (the maps that show where the measures were taken) are transparent portraits of what the buildings have to tell.

This may explain the change in the city inspectors' reporting of the presence of mildew in the buildings of Côte-des-Neiges. Thanks to the CTA complaints and to the PHS reports, to which they have access and which feature the thermal images and the moisture meter measures, it is now possible for the city inspectors to state "objectively" that there is mildew. Just as Tania said that, prior to her use of the moisture meters, she could only tell of the presence of mildew when there were large dark spots on the walls. Moreover, the city inspectors could not tell, for sure, that there was mildew in the buildings, let alone whether there were leakages behind the closed walls. Now that an apparatus is in place that allows the buildings to say by themselves, as it were, that water leakages are present, city inspectors can make such assertions in their reports and change the phrasing from a vague testimony of walls needing repairs (Fig. 1) to a specific description of the problem (Fig. 2). In other words, city inspectors can now also vanish in their reports: they are not describing their own interpretation of the issue; they are now "merely" repeating what the buildings already say by themselves.

The PHS and city inspectors' reports are especially important because they feed back the building's statements into the debate. Just as the moisture meters and the thermal images operate a first translation to allow the buildings to "speak," the reports correspond to a second level of translation: they do not only describe what the situation *is*, but, from this observation, draw a conclusion on what the situation *ought* to be. This is, as Blackburn (2003), among others, notes, the characteristic feature of ethical discourse. The reports, indeed, state that the situations of the buildings – there is mildew and water leakage – should not be the case, and justify this evaluation according to standards – the law in the case of city inspectors, human health in the case of the PHS. In the same way as the physicians ensure that the human body does not suffer from any aggression, the city inspectors ensure that the body of the laws and, relatedly, the structure of the buildings, are not threatened (for an "immunological" perspective of the social and the world, see Sloterdijk & Heinrichs 2011).

This passage from *is* to *ought* is important as it stresses that the way things are calls for further action when it undergoes translation through language. Language, then, is not only a way of describing a world outside of speech, as a supplementary layer on top of reality. Rather, in the same way as Castor and Cooren (2006), as I mentioned earlier, speak of "chains of agency," language is also part of a same mesh with action, turning actions into further actions. That words do things is not *per se* a new observation: Austin (1962) and Searle (1969) are well-known academic names and speech act theory has been used in a variety of fields for a long while already. However, for the most part, authors still understand language as a separate stratum.

This limited view does not allow accounting for the *many* things that are in fact performed in a single action, and maintains an unnecessary distinction between, on the one hand, “real” actions and, on the other, their descriptions. Deciding that one point in the chain of agency should be the privileged locus of action is a matter of debate, which stresses the role of language not only in describing action, but indeed in transforming it, connecting it with others and generating even further action (see Deleuze 2006, 79).

Taking such a stance allows the dissolution of the distinction between talk and “real” action, which would precede or follow it, and in any case be different from it. Talk is now one action among others in a chain or a nexus, where choosing a focal point is a matter of decision – that is, of *de-caedere*, of cutting what is not separate in itself. This does not mean that talk plays no specific role: as I said, re the transition from *is* to *ought*, a passage that cannot be performed by materiality itself. Talk is one way of connecting singular points together (in other words, of establishing relations) and it is especially powerful in that it can do so across ontologies. In a Peircian vocabulary (Peirce 1931, 545–559), we could say that firstness, or the “thing in itself”, can only reaffirm its existence, but it needs to be connected with something else in order to mean anything – and in Peircian semiotics, meaning is equated with action: asking what something means is asking what it does. In other words, it is in relatedness that action obtains, and language is one way in which that connection – and therefore action – is performed. This is why the building *per se* cannot demand anything, but once it is put in relation, through talk (or otherwise) with rules, public health, and other considerations, then it starts *asking* to be repaired.

The relation is therefore productive, and it is so in at least two ways. It produces something new: a new meaning (“this is a run-down building”), a new action (the building is repaired) and/or a new being (the new, repaired building). It also produces the very elements of the relation, which do not pre-exist the latter. Said otherwise, there are not buildings and words waiting to be put in relation with each other – rather there are buildings being constituted as they are being described by city regulations, which in turn gain a new existence each time they are applied to specific buildings.

This is what is at stake when the borough mayor claims that the Hymans building could not be evacuated because tenants had to respect their leases. CTA workers quickly understood that the mayor was not merely reminding people what the law said and putting it in relation with the building. He was both constituting the building as an object to which the law applies and constituting the law itself (and that specific interpretation of it) as he was summoning it. CTA workers, for their part, contended that the building escaped the scope of law (because of its deplorable condition)

and that, in fact, the law could not be as the mayor attempted to constitute it (i.e. there are exceptions to the necessity of respecting the lease).

In this case, it is human beings who attempted, through language to perform (the mayor) or resist (the CTA) the relation between the law and the building. However, things can also resist their enrolment in relations (see Benoit-Barné 2009). For example, the building could have collapsed or the wording of the law could have turned out to be different: in such cases, the mayor's attempted constitution of both elements would have failed, and the relationship would have been unable to produce new things (for example, a responsible administration that is respectful of the law). This is practically what happened some years ago when the CTA was working in a different building, not very far from the Hymans one. It was one of Côte-des-Neiges's largest buildings and was inhabited mostly by recent immigrants from Sri Lanka who did not know the state of their building was illegal and (wrongly) feared that the landlord could interfere with immigration procedures. The CTA organized the tenants into a class action against the landlord, but it was clear that no serious action could be undertaken without the collaboration of the borough. In that case, too, the borough initially denied there were any problems and deferred action by claiming legal obstacles. Even inspections by the Régie du bâtiment (Québec's building authority) did not encourage the borough to act. The case took a new turn only when the CTA organized visits of the building for the media. When *images* started circulating on television and in the press – images that claimed to be faithful representations of the building – it became obvious that the building resisted attempts by the borough to constitute it as properly maintained (and to constitute itself as a good administration).

## Discussion and Conclusion

The figure of the city cannot be reduced to the built environment. The *polis* has deep roots, for example, in Plato's *Republic* (see 1937; see also MacIntyre 1966), as a matter of concern for public debate. This is so because Plato held that proper action and evaluation stem from each individual's position within the *polis*. A good citizen is one who acts according to his assigned place and fulfills his role thoroughly. Interestingly, the philosopher did not *observe* any existing city to draw conclusions about what proper behaviour should be. While he certainly had an acute understanding of his contemporaries, he *built* imaginary, ideal cities in his writings, and then drew conclusions as to how people should behave given the way those cities were structured. In a sense, Plato already acknowledged that a) the city influences the way people behave and b) the way the city is built is important in the influence it may have. What Plato lacked, though, was empiricism and materialism. He failed to recognize that if people *should* act according to the precepts of their ideal cities, people already *did* act according to those of existing,

actual cities. Those real cities are not only built in writing (although they are, too), they are also built of stone and wood. A city's materiality is both the result and the setting of debate, conversation and quarrel. Put otherwise, talk and materiality are not two different realms; rather, they are intertwined and cannot be separated but analytically. Why is this so? Because both language and materiality establish relations, stabilize them and make them durable (on the example of the city of Paris, see Latour & Hermant 1998). I do not need, each time, to renegotiate my position in the city and decide what constitutes proper action given that position. The city is built in such a way that already includes my position: the gates keep me out of the affluent houses, I cannot access some districts without a car, or the absence of benches makes it impossible for me to linger in the financial district. It is clear that I am expected not to go to those places.

This explains why the stakes are high for the Côte-des-Neiges Tenants' Association. As rental buildings are being replaced by condominiums, as the district is being gentrified, not only is there less space for the poorest, but less actions become available to them. It is exactly through this feature of the built environment – that it is active and asks for actions – that the very shaping of the district is possible. Since the mayor, the CTA, the PHS and their partners claim to work *for* the district, the latter is the standard against which their actions are evaluated. For this to be possible, there has to be ways to turn the district's evaluation into language, so that it can feed back into the constitution of the relations that open up or deter actions.

I have attempted here to offer detailed observations of practices and artefacts that operate this translation. However, these are not only *my* concerns as a researcher, but also very much those of CTA workers themselves. As the account of the Hymans building case shows, getting the translation right has important practical consequences, as it means getting the borough to act or not. Conversely, the borough attempts to present itself as a responsible administration by relating the building with elements of the law – that is to say, a *good* administration, one that does what its place in the polis demands. Yet, in the cases I presented, the CTA and its PHS partners have been able to mobilize artefacts that succeeded at producing translations that staged the buildings as *speaking by themselves*, and therefore presented the building's evaluation as objective, i.e. as not tainted by the CTA's involvement.

This leads me to insist, as a final word, on the idea that action can never be the product of a single actor, but always already shared. In order for the CTA (or any of its workers) to act, it needs to shape its action as conforming to the buildings' or the district's program of action. Otherwise, the CTA could not act legitimately: since it is the Côte-des-Neiges Tenants' Association, it needs Côte-des-Neiges to "agree" with what it does, and must therefore spend a good deal of effort at making

the district speak and make it say that it *wants* them to do whatever they do. If they acted entirely on their own, they would not be acting *for* Côte-des-Neiges, but merely for themselves. An idiosyncratic justification, in extreme cases, could be completely incomprehensible, for justification always involves borrowing from a repertoire that is not entirely internal to the actor (for example, Derrida stresses that speaking is never speaking one's own tongue, but a tongue that is already that of the other: see Derrida 1996).

If a single lesson should be retained from this paper it is that understanding our cities and, more generally, our collectives is impossible if we do not accept that action is always already shared among a variety of entities, rather than the prerogative of humans. Or, as Paul Grice (Grice 1975, 30–31) put it: "To exclude honest working entities seems to me like metaphysical snobbery, a reluctance to be seen in the company of any but the best objects."

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