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## Sylvain A. Lefèvre: Bâtiment 7, philanthropic foundations, and universities – The story of a common ground

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Published in: *The Philanthropist*, PhiLab Profiles

ISSN: 2562-1491

Date: June 8, 2021

Original Link: <https://thephilanthropist.ca/2021/06/sylvain-a-lefevre-le-batiment-7-philanthropic-foundations-and-universities-the-story-of-a-common-ground/>

Date of PDF Download: June 16, 2021

*This Q&A is part of a [series of interviews](#) with six PhiLab researchers about their areas of study. PhiLab is a Canadian research network on philanthropy based in Montreal, on the campus of UQAM.*

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**Sylvain A. Lefèvre, director of the Centre de recherche sur les innovations sociales (CRISES), co-chair of the Territoires innovants en économie sociale et solidaire (TIESS), professor in the Department of Strategy, Social and Environmental Responsibility (ESG UQAM) (report co-authored with David Grant-Poitras)**

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### **What did you want to be when you were 15?**

My dream was to coach a soccer team. In addition to soccer, I have always had an interest in the social sciences. I like to discover new environments.

### **As a researcher, you favour an ethnographic approach. Could you explain why?**

Yes, I find it very enriching to enter different universes. It's like walking through a wall. Sometimes I'm just there to observe, like a fly on the wall. Other times I interact with my subject.

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## **Why does the world of foundations appeal to you?**

I started my doctorate in political science at the time of the big anti-globalization rallies. Other PhD students were focusing on collective action, like the Zapatista movement in Chiapas, Mexico, and the anti-globalization organization Attac. I chose to explore the backstage of collective action instead, looking at things like its mode of financing. I use this as a handle to explore bigger questions in the field of philanthropy.

## **You say that philanthropy is “trapped” in two frames. What are these?**

Donors' generosity is either celebrated or denounced as a ruse. In the end, there is very little focus on the actual work of foundations. My work explores how foundation staff work on a daily basis.

## **Since summer 2019, you have been studying an innovative collaborative project between four foundations. What is it about?**

The Béati, Chagnon, McConnell, and Mission Inclusion foundations are jointly funding the [Bâtiment 7](#) (B7) project in Montreal's Pointe-Saint-Charles neighbourhood. B7 is a multiservice centre that's being built inside an industrial heritage building. It includes a grocery store, workshops for artists (for ceramics, woodworking, a darkroom, et cetera), repair shops (bicycle and mechanical), and a treatment room (naturopath, osteopath, massage therapist, et cetera).

This project is extraordinary in its scope and ambition: it involves rehabilitating a 90,000-square-foot building. B7 is also a magnified example of an emerging trend that links social justice, land use, and the environment. The other thing that makes B7 stand out is its vocation: it is self-managed by the Collectif 7 à Nous and describes itself as a “factory for collective self-management.”

The building, which was slated to be knocked down to make way for a casino, owes its recovery to a process of intense citizen engagement. It is a revolutionary initiative whose goal is to be financially autonomous. The Collectif 7 à Nous raised \$50,000 by issuing community bonds purchased by 21 investors. However, the initiators' idealism in this area was put to the test, and in fall 2018, four foundations agreed to join forces in giving financial support for B7's start-up phase. Starting in the summer of 2019, along with PhD student David Grant-Poitras, I helped document the story behind this unusual funding model.

## **What makes this project such a useful subject of research?**

It provides a learning opportunity for the B7 project itself but also an opportunity for foundations to collaborate on a project. The dynamics of industrial-building reclamation and gentrification are become more and more present in many neighbourhoods. The issues associated with them are consistent with the missions of many foundations, things like social inclusion, poverty, employment, and so on. The experience of creating a model of joint foundation funding highlighted some institutional rigidities.

## **You looked at the events that led up to the fall 2019 creation of the foundation partnership. Why?**

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To understand why the different foundations agreed to fund B7, you have to go back to the late 2000s. At that time, citizens of neighbourhoods were invited to share their aspirations for future development on the Canadian National Railway land, which is where Bâtiment 7 now stands. The exercise was funded by the Béati Foundation, which participated in the birth of the Collectif 7 à Nous and the negotiations with the city and the landowner, as well as in the structure-building period of the B7 project. This relationship of trust explains why Béati agreed to finance phase one of B7. The foundation's keen understanding of the project made it possible for them to convince three other philanthropic partners to contribute to the funding.

**The partnership includes four foundations, but more were approached. What motivated the acceptances and rejections?**

The foundations that accepted were already thinking about how to reach out to the communities they were funding. They accepted, first, because B7 had a link to their mission, and second, because they wanted to learn how to collaborate with each other. The foundations that declined did so either because B7 was not relevant enough to their mission, or because they did not feel experienced enough to begin a formal process of collaboration with other foundations. And finally, some foundations were concerned that by consolidating their actions, they would drain financial resources from other non-profit organizations in the neighbourhood.

**Your research identified three challenges to creating collaboration between foundations. What are they?**

The first is dealing with institutional rigidities. Although foundations like to present themselves as innovative and risk-taking, the opposite turned out to be true. None of the foundations that were involved was able to get funds for the project through their regular funding channels. One avenue toward solving this problem could be the creation of "organizational uncertainty zones," which would allow foundations to deviate from standard procedures.

The second challenge is the tension between organizational autonomy and the sharing of resources (such as networks of contacts) and tools (such as accountability processes). For example, not all of the foundations' representatives came from the same position in the hierarchy of their organization. So, when it came to the question of giving up some of their organization's autonomy for this project, not all of them had the same decision-making power to do so.

The third challenge is one of governance. The Béati Foundation took on the leadership in facilitating and convening because of the history of trust it had already established with the Collectif 7 à Nous and because of its position in the sector. However, assuming this de facto leadership role ended up hindering the establishment of an effective structure and the assignment of clear responsibilities among the foundations involved. This, in turn, hampered the commitment of some representatives and put a lot of pressure on Béati, which has limited resources.

**How do the partners intend to overcome these challenges?**

A process of reflection has been initiated to relaunch the collaboration on a different basis. The Chagnon Foundation has injected \$600,000 over three years, which has taken the financial pressure off. Committees have also been formed to facilitate strategic processes and decision-

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making.