
Innovation as a Floating Signifier in Urban Governance: Discursive Struggles in Montreal's Quartier des Spectacles

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ABSTRACT

Introduction: Innovation has become central in contemporary urban governance, often mobilized as a solution for economic restructuring, cultural development, and social inclusion. In cultural districts, it functions as a key organizing principle shaping policy rationales, governance arrangements, and urban imaginaries. This paper examines how innovation is articulated and deployed in the governance of Montreal's Quartier des Spectacles (QdS), a flagship cultural development project.

Literature Review: While studies on creative cities and cultural quarters emphasize economic and symbolic aspects of innovation-led development, less attention has been paid to innovation as a discursive and political construct. This paper addresses this gap by conceptualizing innovation as a floating signifier embedded in struggles over meaning, legitimacy, and urban citizenship.

Research Method: A qualitative, interpretive approach grounded in discourse analysis is adopted. The empirical material includes strategic plans, urban planning documents, and economic development policies related to QdS, notably the Quartier des Spectacles Strategic Plan (2022–2026), the Special Planning Program – Quartier des Spectacles (2013), and Montreal's Economic Development Strategy (2011–2017). Documents are analysed through a post-structuralist discourse theory lens.

Findings: Innovation functions as a central governance technology, structuring urban transformation while masking social antagonisms. Official narratives frame innovation as self-evident, inclusive, and universally beneficial, legitimizing particular forms of cultural production, participation, and visibility. Simultaneously, counter-discourses expose tensions such as cultural gentrification, selective inclusion, and marginalization of non-conforming cultural practices.

Theoretical and Practitioner Implications: Theoretically, the paper contributes to urban governance debates by showing innovation as a floating signifier maintained through social, political, and phantasmatic logics. Practically, the findings urge policymakers to critically reassess innovation-led cultural policies and adopt pluralistic, democratic approaches to cultural development.

Limitations: The study focuses on institutional discourse and policy documents, without ethnographic or interview-based data. Future research should incorporate perspectives of artists, residents, and community organizations directly impacted by innovation-driven governance.

Keywords: Innovation, Discourse, Creative city, Urban governance, Montreal, Social imaginaries.

INTRODUCTION

Over the past two decades, innovation has emerged as a central organizing principle in urban policy, economic development strategies, and cultural governance. Across global cities, innovation is routinely mobilized as a universal response to a wide range of structural challenges, including economic restructuring, inter-urban competition, cultural revitalization, and social inclusion. Within this dominant narrative, innovation is commonly framed as inherently positive, future-oriented, and politically neutral—a technical solution capable of reconciling economic growth, creativity, and social

cohesion. Such framing, however, tends to obscure the political, symbolic, and ideological dimensions through which innovation operates in contemporary urban governance (Peck, 2005).

Critical urban scholarship has increasingly questioned this apparent consensus. Rather than functioning as a clearly defined or stable policy instrument, innovation often operates as a polyvalent and ambiguous concept, capable of accommodating heterogeneous and even contradictory demands. This semantic openness allows innovation to circulate as a powerful discursive resource, one that legitimizes specific models of urban development while marginalizing alternative imaginaries of the city

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(Peck, 2005; Harvey, 2012; Zukin, 2020). In this sense, innovation does not merely describe urban change; it actively participates in the production of urban realities, shaping priorities, allocating legitimacy, and structuring forms of inclusion and exclusion.

Building on poststructuralist discourse theory, this paper argues that innovation functions as a floating signifier whose meaning is continuously negotiated through hegemonic struggles (Laclau & Mouffe, 2001). Rather than asking whether innovation “works” as a policy outcome, the analysis shifts attention to how innovation is discursively articulated, stabilized, and contested within urban governance. From this perspective, innovation becomes a symbolic mechanism through which particular visions of the city are naturalized, while social antagonisms and power asymmetries are rendered invisible or depoliticized.

The central research question guiding this inquiry is therefore: *How do discourses of innovation structure social imaginaries and govern urban reconfigurations in creative city projects?* To address this question, the paper mobilizes a theoretical framework that combines discourse theory (Laclau & Mouffe, 2001), critical discourse analysis (Fairclough, 2010), and the logics of social, political, and phantasmatic explanation proposed by Glynos and Howarth (2007). This framework allows for an examination of how innovation becomes sedimented as common sense, how it is contested by counter-discourses, and how affective investments sustain its hegemonic appeal.

Empirically, the paper focuses on Montreal’s Quartier des Spectacles (QdS), an emblematic cultural redevelopment project that has occupied a central place in the city’s creative city strategy since the early 2000s. Promoted as an innovative, inclusive, and globally competitive cultural district, the QdS is frequently presented in official narratives as a successful convergence of culture, creativity, technology, and urban revitalization. These narratives position innovation as both the means and the outcome of urban transformation, reinforcing Montreal’s branding as a creative and forward-looking city.

At the same time, a growing body of critical scholarship and local commentary has problematized this representation. Studies have highlighted processes of cultural gentrification, the commodification of public space, the normalization of event-based urbanism, and the symbolic exclusion of non-commercial or dissident cultural practices (Harvey, 2012; Harel, 2013; Harel *et al.*, 2015; Zukin, 2020). These tensions reveal that the QdS is not merely a cultural district, but a contested terrain where competing social imaginaries of the city are articulated and negotiated.

Drawing on theories of social imaginaries (Castoriadis, 1997; Appadurai, 2013), this paper conceptualizes innovation as a central element in the fabrication of urban futures. Innovation discourse does not simply project technical solutions; it organizes collective expectations, aspirations, and norms regarding what the city is and what it should become. By framing certain trajectories as innovative and desirable, while rendering others obsolete or illegitimate, innovation discourse actively governs the horizon of political imagination.

By analysing the Quartier des Spectacles as a discursive formation rather than a purely spatial or economic project, this paper contributes to critical debates on urban governance and creative city policies. It demonstrates how innovation operates as a floating signifier that simultaneously enables consensus and conceals conflict, producing a symbolic closure around urban development agendas. In doing so, the paper invites a re-politicization of innovation, opening space for alternative articulations that foreground social justice, democratic participation, and the plurality of urban experiences.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

The study draws on discourse theory (Laclau & Mouffe, 2001; Laclau, 2014), which conceives innovation as a floating signifier structured through hegemonic struggles. Glynos & Howarth’s logics (social, political, and phantasmatic) provide analytical tools to understand how discourses become naturalized, contested, and affectively invested. Critical perspectives on the creative city (Florida, 2002; Peck, 2005; Harvey, 2012; Zukin, 2020) and theories of social imaginaries (Appadurai, 2013; Castoriadis, 1997) situate innovation as both a discursive and symbolic device of governance.

Innovation and Urban Governance: A Critical Perspective

Innovation has historically been associated with technological advancement, productivity gains, and economic growth, particularly within economic and managerial paradigms that frame innovation as a motor of competitiveness and modernization. In contemporary urban contexts, however, this association has been significantly broadened. Innovation now encompasses not only technological development but also cultural production, creative industries, urban design, governance models, and place branding. This semantic expansion reflects a transformation in urban governance, in which innovation becomes a transversal principle organizing economic, cultural, and social policy domains (Jessop, 2016).

Influenced by creative city paradigms (Florida, 2002), municipalities increasingly mobilize innovation as a

strategic asset capable of attracting talent, investment, and global visibility. Within this framework, innovation is articulated as a unifying objective that promises to reconcile economic growth, cultural vitality, and social inclusion. Urban policies inspired by this logic frequently emphasize symbolic infrastructures, cultural districts, and flagship projects as catalysts of urban regeneration. Innovation thus appears as a consensual horizon, presented as both inevitable and desirable, and rarely subjected to explicit political contestation.

Critical urban scholarship has challenged this apparent consensus by exposing the power relations embedded in innovation-led urban strategies. Peck (2005) argues that creative city policies function as neoliberal policy scripts that circulate globally, promoting standardized models of urban development centred on competitiveness, entrepreneurialism, and market-oriented governance. Rather than addressing structural inequalities, these scripts tend to intensify socio-spatial polarization, privileging mobile elites, cultural consumers, and knowledge-based industries, while marginalizing less market-compatible forms of social and cultural life.

Zukin (2020) advances this critique through the concept of the “innovation complex,” understood as an assemblage of public institutions, private capital, technological infrastructures, and cultural narratives that collectively reshape urban space. Within this assemblage, innovation operates as a cultural and symbolic filter, valorising certain forms of creativity—typically aligned with technological entrepreneurship, consumption, and branding—while rendering other practices invisible or illegitimate. Harvey (2012) situates these dynamics within broader processes of neoliberal urbanism, emphasizing how culture and innovation become instruments of capital accumulation, spatial restructuring, and urban entrepreneurialism.

While these perspectives highlight the material and spatial consequences of innovation-driven governance, they also reveal a deeper conceptual tension: despite its centrality, innovation remains a remarkably unstable and indeterminate concept. Its widespread use contrasts sharply with the absence of a fixed or universally accepted definition. This indeterminacy is not incidental; rather, it constitutes a key source of innovation’s political effectiveness. Innovation’s semantic openness allows it to absorb diverse, and often contradictory, meanings—economic efficiency, cultural diversity, technological progress, social inclusion—without resolving the tensions between them.

This condition invites a poststructuralist reading grounded in the discourse theory of Laclau and Mouffe (2001). From this perspective, social reality is not given but discursively constructed through contingent articulations

and hegemonic practices. Central to this framework is the notion of floating signifiers: terms whose meaning is not fully fixed but temporarily stabilized through political struggle. Floating signifiers emerge in contexts of social complexity and conflict, where no single discourse can definitively close meaning.

Innovation exemplifies this logic. Its capacity to unify heterogeneous demands under a seemingly coherent vocabulary allows it to function as a nodal point in urban governance discourse. Through chains of equivalence, innovation becomes linked to creativity, diversity, modernization, sustainability, and inclusion, producing a discursive closure that appears natural and consensual. At the same time, this closure is inherently precarious, as it depends on the exclusion or marginalization of alternative articulations that might challenge the dominant configuration.

Understanding innovation as a floating signifier enables a shift from instrumental to political analysis. Rather than assessing innovation in terms of policy efficiency or outcomes, the focus turns to how innovation is articulated, by whom, and with what effects. Innovation discourse actively structures the field of urban governance by organizing priorities, legitimizing interventions, and delineating the boundaries of acceptable participation. Certain actors, practices, and imaginaries are rendered intelligible and desirable, while others are positioned as obsolete, inefficient, or incompatible with the innovative city.

In this sense, innovation operates as a hegemonic discourse that contributes to the depoliticization of urban governance. By presenting contested choices as technical necessities or self-evident solutions, innovation discourse conceals underlying antagonisms related to class, space, culture, and citizenship. The promise of innovation as a path toward a harmonious urban future function to displace conflict and sustain attachment to dominant urban projects, even when their exclusionary effects become visible.

This theoretical reconfiguration of innovation lays the groundwork for the analysis developed in the following section. By conceptualizing innovation explicitly as a floating signifier, and by mobilizing the logics of social, political, and phantasmatic explanation (Glynos & Howarth, 2007), the paper develops an analytical framework capable of capturing both the discursive stabilization of innovation and the moments of contestation that disrupt it. This framework will be applied to the case of Montreal’s Quartier des Spectacles, where innovation discourse plays a central role in shaping urban imaginaries and governing cultural redevelopment.

Theoretical Framework: Innovation as a Floating Signifier

Building on the critical perspective developed in the previous section, this paper advances a poststructuralist theoretical framework that conceptualizes innovation not as a fixed or self-evident category, but as a discursive construct whose meaning is contingent, relational, and politically constituted. If innovation has become a central organizing principle of contemporary urban governance, this centrality cannot be explained solely by its functional or instrumental capacity. Rather, it must be understood in terms of its symbolic productivity and its role in the construction of hegemonic urban imaginaries.

Conceptualizing innovation as a floating signifier allows for an analytical shift from policy outcomes to processes of meaning-making. This perspective foregrounds the ways in which innovation acquires temporary coherence through discursive articulations that link diverse demands, actors, and aspirations under a common vocabulary. Such articulations do not eliminate conflict; instead, they manage and displace it by producing partial closures that appear natural and consensual. Innovation thus operates as a privileged site for observing how power, discourse, and governance intersect in the production of urban space.

To theorize these dynamics, this section draws on discourse theory as developed by Laclau and Mouffe (2001), complemented by subsequent methodological refinements proposed by Glynos and Howarth. Discourse theory provides the conceptual tools necessary to analyse how meanings are stabilized, how hegemonic projects are constructed, and how alternative articulations are excluded or marginalized. In this framework, innovation is approached not as an empirical object with a predefined meaning, but as a discursive nodal point whose significance emerges through hegemonic struggle.

The following subsection introduces the core principles of discourse theory and the concept of hegemony, which form the foundation for understanding innovation as a floating signifier within urban governance. By clarifying these theoretical premises, the analysis establishes the conditions for examining how innovation discourse is articulated, contested, and affectively sustained in creative city projects such as Montreal's Quartier des Spectacles.

Discourse theory and hegemony

This study draws on the discourse theory developed by Laclau and Mouffe (2001), which conceptualizes social reality as discursively constructed and inherently contingent. From this perspective, social objects, identities, and practices do not possess essential or fixed meanings; rather, they acquire temporary stability through discursive

articulations that are always partial, provisional, and open to contestation. Discourse is understood not merely as language or representation, but as a structured totality of practices through which meaning is produced and social relations are organized (Howarth, 2000).

Central to this theoretical framework is the concept of hegemony, which refers to the contingent process through which particular meanings, identities, or social projects come to be temporarily fixed as dominant. Hegemony does not imply the elimination of conflict, but rather its management through the construction of discursive closures that present specific arrangements as natural, necessary, or universal. These closures are always precarious, as they depend on the exclusion of alternative articulations and are therefore susceptible to disruption and rearticulation.

Within this framework, floating signifiers play a crucial role. Floating signifiers are terms whose meaning is not fully stabilized within a discursive system and which become sites of political struggle. Their semantic indeterminacy allows them to be invested with different meanings by competing discourses, making them particularly effective in contexts characterized by social complexity and fragmentation. Rather than representing ambiguity or conceptual weakness, the openness of floating signifiers constitutes a source of political productivity.

Innovation functions as such a floating signifier in contemporary urban governance. Its semantic openness allows it to unite heterogeneous and potentially contradictory demands—such as economic growth, cultural vitality, technological modernization, and social inclusion—under a single discursive banner. Through processes of articulation, innovation becomes linked to a series of positive signifiers, including creativity, diversity, competitiveness, sustainability, and global relevance. These links form chains of equivalence that produce the appearance of coherence and consensus, even as underlying tensions and antagonisms persist.

At the same time, these chains of equivalence are structured through logics of exclusion. For innovation to function as a unifying signifier, certain meanings, actors, and practices must be marginalized or rendered unintelligible. Alternative forms of creativity, non-market cultural practices, and claims grounded in social justice or the right to the city may be positioned as inefficient, outdated, or incompatible with the innovative city. In this sense, innovation discourse not only articulates inclusion, but also actively produces boundaries that delineate legitimate and illegitimate forms of urban participation.

Discourse theory emphasizes that such articulations are not merely rhetorical but have material and institutional

effects. By stabilizing particular meanings of innovation, hegemonic discourses shape policy priorities, guide resource allocation, and inform urban planning and governance practices. Innovation thus operates as a nodal point around which diverse policy domains—economic development, cultural policy, urban design, and social inclusion—are organized. Its hegemonic function lies in its capacity to temporarily unify these domains while obscuring the political decisions and power relations that underpin this unification.

Importantly, the hegemonic stabilization of innovation is always incomplete. The presence of antagonism—understood as the limit of discursive objectivity—signals the impossibility of fully fixing meaning. Contestations surrounding gentrification, cultural commodification, and exclusion reveal the fragility of innovation discourse and open space for counter-hegemonic articulations. These moments of dislocation expose the contingent nature of innovation and create opportunities for rearticulating urban imaginaries in more plural and democratic directions.

By mobilizing discourse theory and the concept of hegemony, this study approaches innovation not as a neutral descriptor of urban change, but as a political and symbolic practice that structures governance and shapes visions of the urban future. This theoretical lens provides the foundation for the subsequent analytical framework, which further operationalizes these insights through the logics of social, political, and phantasmatic explanation (Glynos & Howarth, 2007), enabling a nuanced examination of how innovation discourse is stabilized, contested, and affectively sustained in the case of Montreal's Quartier des Spectacles.

Logics of social, political, and phantasmatic explanation

To operationalize discourse theory in empirical analysis, this paper mobilizes Glynos and Howarth's (2007) distinction between social, political, and phantasmatic logics. Rather than constituting a formal method or a sequential procedure, these logics function as an integrated analytical framework that enables the systematic examination of how discourses are stabilized, contested, and affectively sustained. Together, they provide a structured way of interrogating the symbolic, political, and affective dimensions of innovation discourse in urban governance.

Importantly, the three logics are not mutually exclusive. They are analytically distinct yet empirically intertwined, allowing the analysis to move across different registers of meaning-making. In this study, they serve as guiding lenses through which the documentary corpus related to the Quartier des Spectacles is read and interpreted.

Social logics: sedimentation, normalization, and common sense

Social logics refer to the rules, norms, and routines through which particular discourses become sedimented and taken for granted as common sense. They illuminate how social practices are organized and reproduced in ways that obscure their contingent and political origins. Social logics thus explain how things come to appear natural, necessary, or inevitable (Glynos and Howarth, 2007).

In the context of innovation and urban governance, social logics are used to identify how innovation discourse is normalized across policy documents, planning instruments, institutional narratives, and promotional materials. Analytically, social logics direct attention to: Recurrent vocabularies and metaphors associated with innovation; Assumptions presented as self-evident (e.g., innovation as inherently positive); Institutional routines and governance practices that presuppose innovation as a shared objective; Silences or absences, particularly regarding conflict, inequality, or exclusion.

From this perspective, innovation appears not as a contested concept but as an unquestioned horizon of action. The analytical task is therefore to reveal how innovation is embedded in the everyday language of governance and how it structures policy rationalities without being explicitly politicized.

Political logics: contestation, antagonism, and rearticulation

Political logics focus on moments of dislocation—points at which sedimented discourses are disrupted and their contingency becomes visible. These logics foreground the role of antagonism in the constitution of social meaning, emphasizing that discursive stability is always precarious and dependent on exclusion (Glynos and Howarth, 2007).

Analytically, political logics are mobilized to identify: Sites of conflict or disagreement surrounding innovation-led projects; Counter-discourses that challenge dominant narratives; Boundary-making practices that distinguish legitimate from illegitimate actors, practices, or claims; Processes of equivalence and difference through which collective identities are constructed.

Applied to innovation discourse, political logics reveal how claims of inclusivity and consensus are challenged by critiques related to gentrification, commodification of culture, or restricted access to public space. These moments expose the limits of innovation as a unifying signifier and highlight the power relations that underpin its hegemonic stabilization.

Rather than treating contestation as external to governance, political logics conceptualize conflict as

constitutive of discourse itself. They allow the analysis to capture how innovation discourse is continuously negotiated and redefined through struggle.

Phantasmatic logics: affective investment and ideological grip

Phantasmatic logics address a different but complementary dimension: the affective and ideological mechanisms that sustain hegemonic discourses despite their contradictions. Drawing on Lacanian psychoanalytic theory, phantasmatic logics explain why subjects remain invested in certain discourses, even when their promises are only partially fulfilled (Glynos and Howarth, 2007).

In urban governance, innovation discourse often operates phantasmatically by projecting an imagined future in which economic growth, cultural vitality, and social harmony are seamlessly reconciled. Analytically, phantasmatic logics guide attention to: Narrative structures that promise wholeness, resolution, or harmony; Idealized representations of the future city; Moral or emotional appeals associated with innovation (hope, pride, optimism); The displacement of blame or responsibility onto abstract obstacles or technical challenges.

Through this lens, innovation is understood not only as a rational policy framework but as an affective fantasy that sustains attachment to creative city projects. Phantasmatic logics help explain why innovation discourse remains persuasive and resilient, even in the face of empirical evidence of exclusion or inequality.

Integrated analytical use of the three logics

In this study, the three logics are applied relationally rather than sequentially. Social logics identify how innovation discourse is normalized and institutionalized; political logics reveal how this normalization is contested; phantasmatic logics explain how the discourse retains its affective grip and ideological coherence despite such contestation (Glynos and Howarth, 2007).

Together, these logics enable a multi-layered analysis of innovation as a floating signifier within urban governance. They allow the study to capture stability and change, consensus and conflict, rationalization and affective investment within a single analytical framework. Applied to the Quartier des Spectacles, this approach provides a rigorous and reflexive means of examining how innovation discourse structures urban imaginaries, governs cultural redevelopment, and shapes forms of urban citizenship.

As summarized in Table 1, the three logics are applied relationally rather than sequentially. Social logics capture the normalization of innovation discourse within urban governance; political logics illuminate moments of contestation and rearticulation; and phantasmatic logics explain how innovation retains its affective appeal and ideological coherence despite persistent tensions (Glynos & Howarth, 2007). Together, these logics enable a multi-layered analysis of innovation as a floating signifier within urban governance, capturing stability and change, consensus and conflict, rationalization and affective investment within a single analytical framework.

Social imaginaries

The analysis is further informed by theories of social imaginaries, particularly those developed by Castoriadis (1997) and Appadurai (2013), which provide a critical lens for understanding how collective meanings, aspirations, and expectations are socially produced and sustained. Social imaginaries are not merely symbolic representations or shared ideas; they constitute generative frameworks through which societies make sense of themselves, project futures, and organize social action. As such, imaginaries play a central role in shaping both the horizons of political possibility and the limits of what can be legitimately thought, demanded, or contested.

For Castoriadis (1997), the social imaginary is the instituting force of society. It refers to the creative capacity through which societies produce meanings, norms, and institutions that cannot be reduced to functional necessity

Table 1: Integrated Analytical Use of the Three Logics

Analytical Logic	Analytical Focus	Key Questions	Application to Innovation Discourse in the Quartier des Spectacles
Social Logics	Normalization and institutionalization of practices and meanings	How is innovation defined as “normal,” necessary, or taken-for-granted? What routines, rules, and institutional arrangements stabilize its meaning?	Identifies how innovation is embedded in policy documents, strategic plans, and governance frameworks as a naturalized principle of urban development, creativity, and competitiveness.
Political Logics	Contestation, dislocation, and hegemonic struggle	How are dominant meanings of innovation challenged, rearticulated, or resisted? Which actors and discourses are included or excluded?	Reveals tensions between official narratives of innovation and critical discourses highlighting gentrification, exclusion, and commodification of culture within the QdS.
Phantasmatic Logics	Affective investment and ideological grip	Why do certain discourses remain compelling despite contradictions? What fantasies sustain identification and coherence?	Explains how innovation operates as a desirable promise—of inclusion, vibrancy, and global recognition—masking social antagonisms and sustaining affective attachment to the creative city project.

Source: Glynos and Howarth (2007), adapted by the author

or rational calculation. Social imaginaries give coherence to social worlds by providing shared references that render practices intelligible and legitimate. Importantly, imaginaries are inherently political, as they define what counts as desirable, normal, or possible within a given social order, while simultaneously excluding alternative visions.

Appadurai (2013) complements this perspective by emphasizing the future-oriented and aspirational dimensions of social imaginaries. In contexts marked by globalization and uncertainty, imaginaries operate as navigational devices that enable collective actors to orient themselves toward anticipated futures. Rather than being passive reflections of reality, imaginaries actively shape action by framing expectations, hopes, and fears. They thus function as powerful mediators between discourse, affect, and material practices.

Within this theoretical horizon, innovation discourse can be understood as a key mechanism in the production of contemporary urban imaginaries. By projecting innovation as a desirable and inevitable horizon, urban governance discourses construct images of the future city characterized by creativity, technological advancement, cultural vibrancy, and global competitiveness. These imaginaries do not simply describe potential outcomes; they actively organize policy agendas, legitimize interventions, and shape citizens' expectations regarding urban development.

Importantly, innovation-driven imaginaries operate through processes of selection and exclusion. While they foreground certain futures—those aligned with creativity, entrepreneurship, and market-oriented cultural production—they simultaneously delimit what can be legitimately imagined or demanded within the city. Claims grounded in social justice, alternative cultural practices, or non-market forms of urban life may be rendered marginal, unrealistic, or incompatible with the innovative city. In this sense, social imaginaries function as a subtle but powerful mode of governance, structuring political possibility without relying on overt coercion.

Articulated with discourse theory, the concept of social imaginaries highlights the symbolic depth of hegemonic projects. Innovation does not function solely as a floating signifier at the level of policy discourse; it also operates at the level of imagination, shaping how collective futures are envisioned and desired. The hegemonic stabilization of innovation thus involves not only discursive closure, but also the affective and aspirational investment of subjects in particular urban futures.

This perspective is particularly relevant for analysing creative city projects such as Montreal's Quartier des

Spectacles. As a flagship cultural district, the QdS is embedded in an imaginary of the city as innovative, creative, and globally connected. This imaginary is reproduced through policy narratives, architectural symbolism, cultural programming, and promotional discourse, all of which contribute to the normalization of specific visions of urban life. At the same time, tensions surrounding exclusion, commodification, and spatial inequality reveal the contested nature of these imaginaries and the presence of alternative visions that challenge their dominance.

By integrating theories of social imaginaries into the analytical framework, this study extends the analysis of innovation beyond discourse and policy toward the broader symbolic and affective terrain in which urban governance operates. This approach enables a critical examination of how innovation discourse not only structures governance practices, but also shapes collective horizons of expectation, thereby influencing how urban futures are imagined, negotiated, and contested.

METHODOLOGY

This study is grounded in a poststructuralist discourse perspective (Laclau & Mouffe, 2001; Glynnos & Howarth, 2007), which conceives language as a space of articulation where meanings and power effects are produced. The objective is to identify the discursive articulations through which certain meanings of innovation are stabilized, while others are marginalized or excluded.

Type of Research and Researcher's Position

This research adopts a qualitative and interpretive approach (Lincoln & Guba, 1985; Creswell & Poth, 2018), drawing on reflexive methodology (Alvesson & Skoldberg, 2009) and critical discourse analysis (Fairclough, 2010). The study assumes a constructivist and critical stance, recognizing the researcher as an engaged actor in the interpretive process, whose subjectivity is an integral part of meaning production.

For this article, the empirical corpus is limited to official and institutional documents, selected for their relevance in articulating innovation discourse within the Quartier des Spectacles:

- A. *Quartier des Spectacles Strategic Plan 2022-2026*
- B. *Special Planning Program - Quartier des Spectacles, Quartier Latin Pole (2013)*
- C. *Montreal Economic Development Strategy 2011-2017*

This documentary focus enables an in-depth analysis of institutional discourses and their power effects, without relying on interviews or ethnographic observation, which are part of the broader doctoral project.

Documentary and Critical Discourse Analysis

The analysis follows the principles of critical discourse analysis (CDA) (Fairclough, 2010), complemented by tools from poststructuralist discourse theory (Laclau & Mouffe, 2001; Glynos & Howarth, 2007). The analytical process unfolds in three main stages:

- A. *Corpus construction*: organization of the selected documents, considering a temporal framework (2010-2026) to observe the evolution of discourses on innovation and creativity, as well as shifts associated with different municipal administrations and provincial and federal cultural policies.
- B. *Thematic and discursive coding*: identification of key discursive categories related to innovation, creativity, inclusion, and participation.
- C. *Articulation and relational mapping*: identification of nodal points and chains of equivalence and antagonism, enabling the analysis of hegemonic and counter-hegemonic logics.

The aim is to shed light on discursive tensions, exclusions, and partial stabilizations of meaning surrounding innovation in official documents.

Levels of Analysis and Interpretation

The analysis operates across three interrelated levels:

- A. *Textual level*: vocabulary, metaphors, and narratives of progress.
- B. *Practical level*: institutional and symbolic dispositifs.
- C. *Social level*: production of collective imaginaries and urban affects.

The social, political, and phantasmatic logics (Glynos & Howarth, 2007) structure the interpretive process, and the researcher's reflexive posture remains central throughout the analysis (Alvesson & Sköldbberg, 2009; Denzin, 2017).

The use of qualitative data analysis software (NVivo) is envisaged to support coding procedures and ensure interpretive traceability.

Rather than rigidly opposing hegemonic and counter-hegemonic discourses, this analysis seeks to reveal the plurality of voices and positions, as well as the coexistence of competing meanings that generate effects of partial hegemony or localized resistance (Laclau & Mouffe, 2001; Glynos & Howarth, 2007).

CASE STUDY: THE QUARTIER DES SPECTACLES

The Quartier des Spectacles (QdS), located in downtown Montreal, is one of the city's most prominent cultural districts. Its development began in the early 2000s as part of Montreal's broader "creative city" strategy, aiming to consolidate the city's image as a global cultural hub and to stimulate economic, social, and urban revitalization. The district was strategically planned to bring together performance venues, public spaces, cultural institutions, and entertainment facilities within a concentrated area, creating a vibrant urban environment that attracts both residents and tourists (figure 1).

Historically, the area that now constitutes the QdS was a mixture of older commercial buildings, parking lots, and underutilized urban spaces. The municipal government envisioned a transformation that would revitalize downtown Montreal through culture-led urban renewal, integrating festivals, light installations, and pedestrian-friendly streetscapes. Key stages of development include the creation of the Place des Festivals in 2009, which became a central gathering space for events, and the successive strategic plans guiding



Figure 4.1: Map of the Quartier des Spectacles in Downtown Montreal.



Figure 4.2: Place des Festivals, Quartier des Spectacles.



Figure 4.3: Montreal Jazz Festival in the Quartier des Spectacles.



Figure 4.4: Governance Structure of the Quartier des Spectacles.

Figure 1: Overview of the Quartier des Spectacles, Montreal. The map highlights the district's boundaries, cultural venues, public spaces, and the Place des Festivals. Icons represent major festivals and governance stakeholders

Source: Ville de Montréal (2013). Programme particulier d'urbanisme – Quartier des Spectacles

infrastructure, programming, and economic development (e.g., *Programme particulier d'urbanisme – Quartier des Spectacles*, 2013; *Plan stratégique 2022–2026*).

The QdS hosts a wide variety of cultural activities, from major festivals like the *Montreal Jazz Festival* and *Just for Laughs* to smaller community-led initiatives. This diversity of programming reflects the district's dual mandate: to foster innovation and creativity while supporting Montreal's cultural economy. Official narratives emphasize inclusivity, accessibility, and cultural participation, presenting the district as a model of sustainable urban and cultural development.

However, the QdS has also been a site of social and cultural tensions. Critical perspectives point to gentrification, rising property values, and displacement of long-standing communities, as well as the commodification of urban culture, where cultural events are packaged to attract tourism and investment rather than serve local communities. These dynamics reveal innovation not merely as a neutral or technical concept, but as a contested discourse that both projects a desirable future for the city and conceals underlying social antagonisms and power relations (Harel *et al.*, 2015).

From a governance perspective, the QdS is coordinated through a partnership model involving the city, cultural institutions, private investors, and tourism agencies. Over the years, this partnership has expanded from around twenty founding members to more than eighty organizations, reflecting broader shifts in urban governance and the diversification of stakeholders. This evolution highlights how discourses of innovation and creativity are shaped, stabilized, and challenged by the interactions between institutional actors, economic imperatives, and community interests.

Overall, the Quartier des Spectacles exemplifies how urban cultural policies mobilize symbolic and material interventions to construct a specific vision of innovation, creativity, and urban vitality. Its history, spatial design, and governance model make it an ideal case for examining the contested nature of urban innovation discourses in contemporary cities.

THE QUARTIER DES SPECTACLES: INNOVATION IN PRACTICE

Building on the historical and spatial overview of the Quartier des Spectacles (QdS), this section examines how innovation is articulated and operationalized in practice within the district. While the previous section highlighted the QdS as a site of urban transformation and cultural concentration, this part focuses on the discursive

construction of innovation, exploring how it is framed, legitimized, and enacted by institutional actors, public policies, and cultural stakeholders. By analyzing official documents, strategic plans, and promotional materials, the discussion moves from the physical and organizational structure of the QdS to the symbolic and practical mechanisms through which innovation is represented, performed, and contested. This sets the stage for Section 5.1, which delves into the official narratives that define and promote innovation as a central value of the Quartier des Spectacles.

Official Narratives of Innovation

Since the early 2000s, official narratives produced by the City of Montreal and the *Partenariat du Quartier des spectacles* (Quartier des Spectacles Partnership) have consistently framed the Quartier des Spectacles (QdS) as an innovative urban project. Innovation is not presented merely as a characteristic of specific technologies or infrastructures, but rather as a comprehensive mode of urban organization encompassing cultural programming, governance arrangements, architectural design, and the management of public space. In strategic documents such as the *Programme particulier d'urbanisme – Quartier des spectacles (2013)* and the *Plan stratégique 2022–2026*, innovation is articulated simultaneously as the driving force behind urban transformation and as its expected outcome, thereby reinforcing its centrality within the district's institutional narrative.

From the perspective of social logics, innovation is naturalized as a self-evident and universally desirable objective. The documents rarely define innovation explicitly; instead, they rely on a dense network of associated signifiers—creativity, experimentation, excellence, intelligence, vibrancy, and inclusivity—that collectively stabilize its meaning. This discursive strategy allows innovation to function as common sense, operating below the threshold of explicit political debate. The QdS is repeatedly described as a space that “lives 24/7,” a “laboratory” for cultural experimentation, and a model of integration between culture, technology, and urban life. These formulations presuppose innovation as an unquestioned horizon of action rather than a contested political choice.

Innovation discourse also plays a key legitimizing role in governance. By framing the *Partenariat du QdS* as a “*leader facilitateur* (Facilitating leader),” official narratives emphasize flexibility, collaboration, and experimentation, aligning governance practices with contemporary managerial ideals associated with innovation. This framing depoliticizes decision-making processes by presenting them as technical or organizational necessities rather than as sites of power and negotiation. In this sense, innovation

functions as a nodal point that organizes heterogeneous policy domains—cultural policy, economic development, urban planning—into a seemingly coherent project.

Counter-Discourses and Tensions

Despite its hegemonic stabilization, innovation discourse in the Quartier des Spectacles is neither total nor uncontested. Critical scholarship and local interventions have articulated counter-discourses that expose the exclusions and contradictions masked by official narratives. These critiques activate political logics by revealing the contingent and conflictual nature of innovation as a governing signifier.

Studies such as Harel *et al.* (2015) highlight how the QdS participates in broader processes of cultural gentrification and event-based urbanism. From this perspective, innovation-led redevelopment privileges large-scale festivals, tourist-oriented programming, and commercially viable cultural forms, while marginalizing smaller, non-commercial, or dissident practices. Public space, although discursively framed as inclusive and accessible, becomes increasingly regulated and programmed, limiting alternative uses and expressions. These dynamics challenge the claim that innovation naturally produces inclusion and cultural diversity.

Political logics are also visible in the boundary-making practices embedded in innovation discourse. By defining what counts as “innovative” culture—often aligned with visibility, scalability, and market compatibility—official narratives implicitly exclude practices that do not conform to these criteria. Innovation thus becomes a mechanism of differentiation, distinguishing legitimate cultural actors from those deemed outdated, inefficient, or incompatible with the creative city model. These exclusions reveal the antagonistic underside of innovation discourse and disrupt its presentation as consensual.

The QdS therefore emerges as a terrain of discursive struggle, where competing imaginaries of the city coexist. On one side, innovation is articulated as a unifying and progressive force; on the other, it is problematized as a vector of commodification and symbolic exclusion. These tensions underscore the impossibility of fully fixing the meaning of innovation and highlight its role as a floating signifier within urban governance.

Phantasmatic Dimensions

While political logics reveal the fragility of innovation discourse, they do not fully explain its persistence and affective appeal. This endurance can be understood through the phantasmatic dimension of innovation discourse. Official narratives surrounding the QdS

project an imagined future in which creativity, culture, and technology seamlessly resolve economic challenges and social tensions. Innovation promises a city that is simultaneously competitive, inclusive, vibrant, and harmonious.

This fantasy structure operates by offering a vision of wholeness that displaces conflict. Structural inequalities, displacement, and cultural exclusion are not denied outright but are reframed as temporary challenges that innovation will eventually overcome. The affective appeal of this narrative sustains attachment to the creative city project, even as critiques accumulate. Innovation thus functions as an object of desire, anchoring hopes for urban renewal and collective progress.

Phantasmatic logics also help explain why innovation discourse remains resilient despite its empirical contradictions. By mobilizing affects such as optimism, pride, and anticipation, the QdS narrative encourages identification with the project and discourages radical questioning of its premises. In this sense, innovation does not merely organize policy; it structures emotional investments in a particular vision of the urban future.

DISCUSSION: INNOVATION, GOVERNANCE, AND CITIZENSHIP

The case of the Quartier des Spectacles reveals that innovation operates less as a neutral policy objective than as a technology of governance that organizes urban imaginaries, regulates cultural practices, and shapes contemporary forms of citizenship. Far from being merely descriptive, innovation discourse actively participates in the production of norms regarding creativity, participation, and belonging in the city. Through its institutionalization in planning documents, strategic visions, and governance arrangements, innovation becomes a key mechanism through which urban power is exercised.

From a Foucauldian perspective, innovation can be understood as a governmental rationality that aligns cultural policy, urban planning, and economic development under a shared logic of optimization and experimentation. As Foucault (2007) suggests, governance increasingly operates through indirect techniques that structure the “conduct of conduct,” guiding actors’ choices and aspirations rather than imposing explicit constraints. In the Quartier des Spectacles, innovation discourse encourages cultural actors, institutions, and citizens to align themselves with values such as flexibility, visibility, experimentation, and market compatibility. Participation is thus framed not as a political right but as an adaptive capacity to fit within innovation-oriented regimes.

At the same time, poststructuralist discourse theory helps illuminate how innovation functions as a floating signifier whose meaning is never fully fixed but temporarily stabilized through hegemonic articulations (Laclau & Mouffe, 2001). In the QdS, innovation is articulated with creativity, inclusivity, excellence, and urban vibrancy, producing a seemingly coherent narrative of progress. This stabilization, however, is contingent and exclusionary. By defining what counts as “innovative” culture—often privileging large-scale events, technological mediation, and economically viable forms—innovation discourse draws symbolic boundaries that differentiate legitimate from illegitimate cultural practices.

These boundaries have direct implications for urban citizenship. As Hall (2011) and Thompson (1995) argue, cultural regulation operates through symbolic forms that structure recognition, visibility, and legitimacy. In the QdS, citizenship is increasingly enacted through cultural participation that conforms to institutional expectations of innovation. Artists, residents, and organizations that do not align with these expectations risk marginalization, not through overt repression, but through subtle mechanisms of normalization and exclusion. Innovation thus produces a differentiated citizenship, where access to visibility and voice is unevenly distributed.

The political dimension of innovation becomes particularly visible when considering the critiques raised by scholars and local actors. Processes of cultural gentrification, the normalization of event-based urbanism, and the commodification of public space reveal the antagonisms concealed by consensual narratives of innovation (Harvey, 2012; Harel, 2013; Harel *et al.*, 2015). These critiques activate what Glynos and Howarth (2007) describe as political logics, disrupting the apparent naturalness of

innovation and exposing its role in the reproduction of power relations. Rather than a shared good, innovation emerges as a site of struggle over the meaning and direction of urban development.

Yet, the persistence of innovation discourse cannot be explained solely by its institutional power. Its durability is also rooted in its phantasmatic dimension. Innovation promises a future in which creativity reconciles economic competitiveness with social cohesion, and where cultural vitality resolves urban inequalities. This fantasy, as Žižek (1989) and Glynos and Howarth (2007) suggest, sustains affective attachment to hegemonic projects by masking antagonisms and offering a vision of wholeness. In the context of the QdS, innovation functions as an object of desire that mobilizes optimism and pride, even as critical voices point to its exclusions.

Importantly, this analysis does not advocate for the rejection of innovation as such. Rather, it calls for a critical re-politicization of the concept. Treating innovation as a floating signifier opens analytical and political space for alternative articulations that challenge its technocratic and market-oriented fixation. Innovation could be rearticulated around principles of social justice, cultural plurality, and democratic participation, foregrounding practices that are currently marginalized within dominant creative city narratives.

Such a re-politicization requires recognizing innovation as a contested terrain rather than a consensual horizon. It also demands greater attention to the voices and experiences of those who inhabit and use urban cultural spaces beyond institutional frameworks. In this sense, the Quartier des Spectacles illustrates both the power and the limits of innovation-led governance. While innovation can enable experimentation and cultural visibility, it can also

Table 2: Innovation as a Technology of Urban Governance: An Analytical Framework

Analytical Dimension	Function of Innovation	Discursive Mechanisms	Effects on Urban Governance	Implications for Citizenship
Social logics	Innovation as a normative and consensual value	Naturalization of innovation as synonymous with creativity, inclusion, and urban progress	Legitimizes cultural and urban policies oriented toward competitiveness and experimentation	Produces an “adaptive” form of citizenship based on conformity to innovation norms
Political logics	Innovation as a criterion of distinction and exclusion	Delimitation of what counts as legitimate culture and innovative practice	Institutionalizes hierarchies among cultural actors and uses of urban space	Differentiates visible/legitimate citizens from marginalized practices
Phantasmatic logics	Innovation as a promise of a harmonious urban future	Affective narratives of creativity, vibrancy, and conflict resolution	Sustains attachment to the urban project despite tensions and critiques	Mobilizes identification and belonging while obscuring antagonisms
Cultural governance	Innovation as a technology of government	Articulation of culture, economy, and urban planning	Depoliticizes decisions by framing them as technical and inevitable	Redefines participation as performance and institutional alignment
Urban citizenship	Innovation as a condition of belonging	Valorization of visibility, scale, and market compatibility	Regulates access to voice and recognition in public space	Produces a selective and unequal form of cultural citizenship

Source: Author’s elaboration based on discourse theory (Laclau & Mouffe, 1985; Glynos & Howarth, 2007) and empirical analysis

constrain citizenship by narrowing the conditions under which participation is deemed legitimate.

Ultimately, the discussion of innovation, governance, and citizenship in the QdS contributes to broader debates on urban democracy and cultural policy. By revealing how innovation operates as a technology of governance and a symbolic resource, this study underscores the need to critically interrogate the concepts that structure contemporary urban futures. Innovation, far from being an unquestioned solution, must itself become an object of democratic debate.

This analytical framework (table 2) allows for a direct response to the central research question of the article: *how does innovation operate within contemporary urban governance, and what are its effects on citizenship?* The case of the Quartier des Spectacles reveals that innovation functions not merely as a technical policy instrument, but as a discursive and symbolic dispositif that organizes urban governance, establishes regimes of cultural legitimacy, and structures differentiated forms of urban participation. As a floating signifier, innovation is temporarily stabilized through social logics that normalize its desirability, political logics that turn it into a mechanism of inclusion and exclusion, and phantasmatic logics that sustain its affective appeal. This process produces a form of urban citizenship conditioned by alignment with institutionalized ideals of creativity and innovation, while marginalizing cultural practices that fall outside market-oriented or event-based frameworks. Innovation thus emerges as a technology of cultural governance that reorganizes not only urban space but also the symbolic boundaries of belonging and democratic participation in the city.

CONCLUSION

This paper has examined innovation as a central yet contested concept in contemporary urban governance, arguing that it functions less as a neutral or technical instrument than as a floating signifier embedded in hegemonic struggles over meaning and power. Through an in-depth analysis of Montreal's Quartier des Spectacles, the study has shown how innovation discourse contributes to the production of urban imaginaries that promise creativity, inclusion, and economic vitality, while simultaneously obscuring the social antagonisms and exclusions that accompany innovation-led development.

By mobilizing a poststructuralist discourse-theoretical framework, the article has demonstrated how innovation is temporarily stabilized through social logics that normalize its desirability, political logics that delineate boundaries of legitimacy and exclusion, and phantasmatic logics that sustain affective attachment to the creative

city project. In the Quartier des Spectacles, innovation operates as a nodal point that aligns cultural policy, urban planning, and economic development, producing a powerful narrative of urban progress. Yet this narrative remains inherently contingent and fragile, continuously challenged by counter-discourses that reveal its exclusions and contradictions.

Empirically, the analysis has highlighted how innovation discourse reshapes urban citizenship by redefining the conditions of participation, visibility, and recognition. Cultural practices and actors that align with institutionalized notions of innovation are valorized, while others are rendered marginal or invisible. This process unfolds not through overt coercion, but through subtle mechanisms of cultural regulation and symbolic power, underscoring the need to critically examine how governance operates through discourse and affects rather than solely through formal policy instruments.

Theoretically, this study contributes to debates in urban studies, cultural policy, and critical governance research by extending the concept of innovation beyond its dominant technocratic framing. Treating innovation as a floating signifier offers a powerful analytical tool for unpacking the symbolic and political dimensions of urban transformation, particularly in cultural districts and creative city initiatives. It also bridges discourse theory with urban governance scholarship, demonstrating the relevance of poststructuralist approaches for understanding contemporary cities.

Importantly, this paper does not advocate the abandonment of innovation as a policy goal. Instead, it calls for a re-politicization of innovation, one that acknowledges its contested nature and opens space for alternative articulations grounded in social justice, cultural plurality, and democratic participation. Such a shift requires moving beyond consensual narratives of creativity and competitiveness, and engaging seriously with the voices, practices, and claims of those who are marginalized within innovation-led urban projects.

Future research could extend this analysis through comparative studies of cultural districts in different urban contexts, or by examining how grassroots cultural actors negotiate, appropriate, or resist innovation discourse in their everyday practices. In doing so, scholars can further illuminate the possibilities and limits of innovation as a framework for imagining more inclusive and democratic urban futures.

In conclusion, the case of the Quartier des Spectacles illustrates both the power and the ambivalence of innovation in urban governance. By foregrounding its discursive, political, and affective dimensions, this study

underscores the necessity of treating innovation not as an unquestioned solution, but as a site of ongoing struggle over the meaning and future of the city.

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