

Montréal Mirabel International Airport: The Abandonment and the Commemoration

If you fly into Montreal today, you land at Pierre Elliott Trudeau International Airport (YUL). It's crowded, under constant construction, and situated in the heart of the city's suburban sprawl. About 40 minutes north, however, lies a massive expanse of concrete and runway that was intended to make YUL obsolete: Montreal Mirabel International Airport. Born from 1970s ambition, it ultimately became a costly and underused infrastructure project.

Announced in 1969 by the government of Pierre Elliott Trudeau, Mirabel was designed as the "airport of the future." At the time, planners expected supersonic jets like the Concorde would be the norm and that Montreal would be the gateway to North America.

When Mirabel opened in 1975, shortly before the 1976 Montreal Olympics, it was the largest airport in the world by surface area. The terminal incorporated futuristic features, including large passenger transfer vehicles to shuttle travelers between aircraft and terminals. However, one critical component—the high-speed rail link connecting Mirabel to downtown Montreal—was never built, and highway access remained incomplete for years. Passengers transferring between international and domestic flights often faced a 50-kilometer road journey between Mirabel and Dorval.

This logistical challenge quickly became a major obstacle for airlines and passengers. Airlines had to split staff and operations between two distant airports, increasing costs and complicating schedules, while travelers experienced missed connections and long transfer times. By the 1990s, Mirabel was operating far below its projected capacity and had become eerily quiet. In 1997, the government allowed international flights to return to Dorval, and the final commercial passenger flight departed in 2004. The terminal, emblematic of 1970s modernist architecture, was demolished a decade later due to high maintenance costs and asbestos management, overseen by Aéroports de Montréal (ADM).

While Mirabel is often remembered as a planning failure, its story is also about the people displaced by the project. Families who had farmed the land for generations were forced to leave their homes and communities. March 27, 1969, remains engraved in the collective memory of Mirabel: the Liberal government announced the construction of the largest airport complex in the world in Sainte-Scholastique. "This decision led to the requisition of 97,000 acres of land, on 8,000 lots, across 14 municipalities. For some 12,000 people directly affected, this announcement created a shock. Then the citizens gradually mobilized to have their rights recognized," reads an article in *Le Journal Le Nord*.

More than fifty years later, these experiences continue to shape local memory. In 2023, ADM announced it would dedicate over 41,000 square meters of land to create a memorial space honoring those expropriated during the construction of Mirabel. The site will host the [Centre de](#)

[mémoire collective de l'expropriation de Mirabel \(CMCEM\)](#), dedicated to commemorating the struggle of those displaced since 1969.

“Through this gesture, we aim to preserve our collective memory while offering comfort to the families who lived through this difficult episode. This is an unequivocal support for the memory work undertaken by the CMCEM,” said Philippe Rainville, President and CEO of Aéroports de Montréal, in a statement.

“We plan to erect a monument designed by none other than Quebec sculptor Armand Vaillancourt. This monument will become a strong and unifying symbol of memory for future generations,” stated Ms. Drapeau-Monette of CMCEM. “We are proud of the work accomplished to get here and salute the contribution of Aéroports de Montréal,” added Ms. Beaudoin of CMCEM.

“With respect for the past we must continue to build our future. Because history continues to be written here, in Mirabel. Let us recall that YMX International Aerocity of Mirabel is a home of innovative energy that brings together nearly 8,000 people each day. It is a unifying space where the aerospace industry thrives and shines globally thanks to Quebec’s expertise,” emphasized Mr. Rainville.

Source:

<https://thelightshot.com/montreal-mirabel-international-airport-what-really-happened-to-the-worlds-biggest-failure-230j>

<https://www.journallenord.com/actualite/un-espace-pour-commemorer-les-expropries-de-mirabel/>