

Development project on the site of the former Philosophy College

After city-wide public hearings and careful study, Montreal gave itself an Urban Plan which established criteria and provisions for the orderly growth and development in the newly arrived 21st century. Presumably its aim was to avoid the rash of demolitions, the loss of heritage properties and disruption of established communities that had characterized the latter years of the previous era. However no sooner formulated and adopted than multiple requests for exceptions to its provisions called into question the validity of the Plan.

The establishment of the Public Consultation process, a worthy mechanism to ensure public input and satisfaction with future development has become an ongoing struggle to stem a tide of proposals that seek to avoid constraints imposed by the Plan.

The list of such projects is long and each has been presented jointly by the project developer and representatives of the municipal planning services.

Significant changes are requested upon which the feasibility of the projects seemingly depend and the public is called upon endorse or disagree with the proposals. The task is made difficult as at times officers of the Urban Planning services seem to openly endorse and advocate the proposed derogations. It becomes difficult to distinguish between the positions of the municipal planners and those of the developer's consultants.

All urban development implies change but one looks with envy at those cities that have established clear urban design guidelines based on competent study as to where and what form such development should take place. It was presumed that the countless hours invested in the preparation of the Plan d'urbanisme had provided such a framework. Apparently this is not the case.

The public must rely on watchdog organizations, - Les amis de la Montagne, Heritage Montreal or simply the Press to alert it to proposals that would subvert the Plan.

Griffintown can be re-written in the image of a suburban shopping centre, a starting pad for several apartment towers all with the collaboration of the Borough planning Office and hastily endorsed by City Council

The University of Montreal can retreat from its obligations and dispose of a property acquired for educational purposes from a religious order, then resold for the construction of upscale condominiums.

Entering eagerly into the game, the owner of a clutch of greystone houses can postulate a thirty story mega project on his property and in the current laissez faire climate may win approval!

The Viger Complex, Gare Windsor, CHUM, Hydro Quebec and its neighbors on Boulevard St- Laurent....The OCPM and the public must respond to one crises after another in the absence of a coherent Planning policy as to where, when, and how development should take place. The project for the transformation of the former *Séminaire de philosophie* and construction on it's hitherto park like setting is just the latest example of this incoherence

On the subject of this Public Hearing, a religious order, for decades granted favorable status as an educational institution can feel free to retreat from its obligations to society and dispose of its property for profitable private residential development.

The City's urban planners are apparently not adverse to the loss of a valuable green space that is part of Montreal's most precious asset, namely Mont Royal. Together with the conversion of the existing building to house some fifty residential units they are prepared to consider the construction of 275 additional condominium buildings on the site and the insertion of an underground parking facility for 375 automobiles to serve this new population

The Seminary is not a relic to be conserved and admired. It is an integral part of a landscape planned in another era and together they convey an image of permanence and tranquility worthy of preservation.

Like churches, seminary buildings are valuable societal assets and when no longer required to serve their original purpose it is incumbent on their proprietors to confide their deployment to the further benefit of Montreal's community. They are not free to dispose of them to the highest bidder.

One can envisage divers and multiple uses for the seminary other than its conversion into upscale condominiums: The stately chapel is capable of meeting a variety of community and cultural needs. In this respect it is worth noting that the Federal government has just announced a multi-million dollar programme to support the renovation and construction of cultural spaces in the country, principally, drama facilities, galleries, museums and patrimonial organizations.

Certainly the Seminary can be converted to housing but such housing should not be in the interest of maximizing profit by the construction of luxurious residences but in responding to pressing social needs. Its tranquil site and its location make it ideally suited to respond to the accommodation of senior citizens many of whom have limited income and particular needs.

Well served by public transit, such a residence would not require the extensive parking facility envisaged by the developer's proposal – 671 places- and its incumbent damage to the site.

Close by, the Montreal General Hospital is to be enlarged and incorporate a trauma centre, minutes away from the Seminary site, precious minutes for a population susceptible to stroke and heart malfunction.

The proposed development would include 325 housing units and an underground parking garage for 671 automobiles - that is more than two spaces per household. Despite the green washing of roof top planting, this is hardly an ecological approach to the treatment of what is currently and could continue to be a delightful landscape able to support mature trees and gardens.

PRECEDENTS

In several Quebec communities, properties once owned and administered by religious communities have been transferred to non-profit and co-operative organizations to respond to the needs of seniors and persons with physical disabilities.

In Quebec adjacent to the administrative complex of the Quebec government, the vast ***Couvent des Soeurs du Bon Pasteur***, vacated by the congregation that had long administered it, was condemned to be demolished to make way for a new *Palais de Justice*. My colleagues and students at Laval University were able to demonstrate that this ensemble could better be transformed into several non-profit housing co-operatives. Its splendid chapel was conserved and serves as a venue for concerts open to the public. The non-profit corporation that undertook the transformation, purchased the property from the Quebec Housing Corporation for the sum of one dollar. The project flourishes today after thirty years of successful operation.

In the event that the developer of the proposed development would be unwilling to complete the proposed transaction with the proprietors of the Seminary without the construction of additional housing units and extensive underground parking, a similar scenario to that described above can be proposed and with the collaboration City of Montreal and the Quebec Housing Corporation a similar transformation of the patrimonial building could be accomplished. Its splendid green spaces and plantations conserved to serve for the enjoyment of residents and neighbours.

It is worth noting that a community non-profit organization the ***Fonds foncier Benny farm*** was at the origin of the reorientation of the original Canada Lands Corporation's proposal for high rise development of the site. Currently under construction is a mixed use project of housing and community facilities.

A MODEST PROPOSAL

That the request for changes to the Urban Plan that would permit the construction of additional housing units on the Seminary site be rejected.

In the event that the approval of such changes has been a condition of purchase of the property by the developer and hence the sale cannot be concluded, this would be without prejudice to the owners of the Seminary or to the developer

That a non-profit corporation be established to undertake, with the co-operation of the City of Montreal, Federal and Provincial Housing authorities, the transformation of the Seminary for co-operative housing.

Such housing would favor independent living for senior citizens, single or couples and those with needs for special care.

The Chapel would be retained for cultural activities and accessible by the public.

The green spaces be conserved for the enjoyment of the future residents and those associated with cultural activities. Public access would be maintained and subject to municipal ordinance.

The writer thanks the OCPM for the opportunity to explore a resolution of this Controversial challenge to the Urban Plan and trusts that organizations and individuals concerned for the for the future of the Seminary site would support and collaborate in order to realize the alternative development outlined above.

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May 21st 2009