

The Development Project of the Former Philosophy Seminary

Submitted By: Diane Quart – A concerned citizen
A rationale against the development project

Opportunity is a matter of perspective – the proposed development of the former Marianopolis site on the side of the mountain is a case in point. To the developers the project is a financial windfall, a self-serving opportunity to construct 325 high-end dwellings on prime real estate with unmatched views of the city, the St. Lawrence River and the Adirondack Mountains, but at what cost? The city and the citizens of Montreal lose a green space that cascades down the side of the mountain and provides not only scenic views, but also recreational space. To the concerned citizens of Montreal, and beyond, the development project represents yet another incursion on the protected area of Mount Royal. It is an opportunistic land grab by a consortium whose mission is to maximize profits through the sale of as many residential units that can be built on the site, regardless of the impact. The concern of the citizens is compounded by the lack of transparency and process by a City Hall that should be guarding their interests but is complicit with, and seemingly a partner in the realization of the project.

In the Opinion piece of May 11 in the Montreal Gazette, M. Marcotte, spokesperson for CATO, the developer, accuses Mr. Peter Howlett of demonizing the project. - Again, a matter of perspective. To the concerned citizens of Montreal Mr. Howlett is the voice of reason. He, and Les amis de la montagne are speaking out on behalf of the citizens of Montreal who in this instance feel betrayed by the actions of City Council and robbed of land that until recently was zoned as protected as a heritage site.

On March 30, 2009 City Council adopted draft By-Laws P-09-22 and P-04-047-78, in effect amending previous provisions to accommodate the developer's plans. These By-Laws authorize the demolition and construction of buildings on the site and the residential conversion and occupation of the main building. The amendments provide for variances in the terms of uses, notably height, volume and land coverage. They also contain provisions concerning occupation and layout of interior spaces, accesses, parking, landscaping, architecture, design and heritage. These By-Laws are tailor made to the specifications of the project.

The public has been invited to "Public Consultation" meetings that in reality have proven to be information sessions where City Hall has announced its endorsement of the project. This development touches the very soul of Montreal, its impact is too far reaching to get the go ahead without public scrutiny and evaluation. The "consultation sessions" made it clear that neither the consultations nor the referendum will halt the project. Surely the citizens of Montreal should have first say on the acceptability of the project.

The promoter presents certain “facts” that should be challenged:

-85% of the current site will remain green space-no asphalt.

To make credible comparison it would be relevant to know, using the same method of calculation, the percentage of green space at the current site.

-There will be no more cars than when Marianopolis College was located at the site, and traffic will be less concentrated.

Consider that the project allows for 671 underground parking spaces. Marianopolis College provided for approximately 80 outdoor parking spaces. Students were not given permits to park on campus and the majority of students, faculty and staff used public transit to commute from home to school. Granted some students did park on the streets surrounding the campus – but the numbers are nowhere near the 671 vehicles provided by the project.

- New homes will not hide the former seminary, nor will they obstruct the view of Mount Royal or the city of Montreal, complying with the required criteria.

First the required criteria has been doctored with the city’s adoption of draft By-Laws P-09-22 and P-04-047-78. The proposed 9, 8 and 7 storey buildings will not only obstruct the views of the seminary from Cote des Neiges road, they will also obstruct the views of the city from the same vantage point. City Hall’s response is to build a lookout 122 meters high on the north-east corner of Cote des Neiges and Cedar. This proposal would call for more tree cutting on the mountain. These proposed buildings would make Cote des Neiges Road into a tunnel- like thoroughfare similar to the Decarie Expressway. They would create a wall blocking the vast open spaces and accessibility so characteristic of the mountain.

If this project cannot be stopped, the hope is that voting against the amendments to the By-Laws can at least impact the scale of the project by restricting the construction of any additional buildings. The refurbished seminary should remain the focal point of this property. No new construction should be tolerated on this exceptional site. Only then, can we talk of truly protecting our mountain.