

TO: SÉCRETAIRE GÉNÉRAL
Office de consultation publique de Montréal

FROM: JOSEPH BAKER, ARCHITECT

RE: BENNY FARM REDEVELOPMENT

DATE: November 26th 2003

There are several concerns that motivate my request to appear before this public hearing on the future development of the Benny Farm site and that I share with the many community organizations and individuals that will appear before you. Specifically mine are related to what I consider to be an unacceptable waste of valuable housing resources.

BACKGROUND

Early in the last decade Central Mortgage and Housing Corporation decided to relocate the residents of its Veterans' housing project, demolish the existing properties and prepare the site for a high-density, high-rise development by the private sector. Together with housing advocates, heritage organizations and fellow architects, I have expressed my reservations on this course of action in the press and professional journals, and by representation at Federal, Provincial and Municipal levels government. As a founding member of the Board of the Fonds foncier communautaire Benny Farm, I have dedicated the past three years to the vision of making the site and its buildings, a home for a new generation of families.

FONDS FONCIER AND CLC

As the Commission is no doubt aware, the FFCBF entered into an agreement with Canada Lands Corporation to acquire the site and buildings at a market value of 5.7 million dollars, a sum guaranteed by an interest free loan from a major foundation. Long term financing for the renovation of all the existing apartments and the construction of a further 125 new units was assured by the Caisse d'économie Desjardins des travailleurs et travailleuses (Quebec).

For reasons that FFCBF found questionable, CLC declined to conclude negotiations and decided to prepare a new development plan, with itself the principal developer. The result of this unfortunate outcome is the long process that has engaged the commitment and energy of individuals and organizations of the NDG community. It has passed through the creation of a Task force whose members were selected, not by community organizations but by CLC's consultants and a somewhat irregular architectural competition that has resulted in the proposal presently before this Commission and the public.

Skilful plans and presentations aside it is deplorable that the authors of this project envisage **the demolition of sixty percent of the existing buildings and the 200 dwellings they contain**. By any measure this is a scandalous waste of

desperately needed accommodation that make all reference to sustainable development in the CLC proposal ring hollow.

CRITERIA

The criteria deployed as to which buildings will be destroyed or which will be retained have little or nothing to do with their respective condition. While long maintaining that the cost of renovating the existing sixplexes would equate to the cost of their replacement by new construction, its own later analysis shows that this is far from the case. **Evaluation of the four development proposals presented to the public indicated renovation costs ranging between \$42,000 to \$55,000 as opposed to those for new construction placed at anywhere between \$77,000 and \$104,000.** This has been the experience of the hundreds of co-operative enterprises throughout Quebec that have created sound affordable housing out of properties left to deteriorate or threatened with demolition. When renovated apartments can be sold for \$65,000 to a family with an income of \$35,000p.a. or rented for \$615 per month, services included, to those with incomes of \$25,000 p.a. Here we are truly speaking of affordable housing.

URGENCY

What is equally evident is that renovation of the Benny Farm buildings as opposed to their demolition and replacement would make sorely needed accommodation available with the minimum delay and disruption, on site or in the surrounding neighbourhood. **In the face of a continuing housing crisis in Montreal, it is unacceptable that CLC should contemplate the elimination of any part of recoverable housing stock.** Already this year, work should have been completed on many units and available for occupation by families in need. Certainly it should not base such an action on the unconfirmed construction of major recreational facilities that could as well be constructed off site.

HERITAGE

On what basis then does CLC justify retaining the 40% of the existing stock, what its architects have described as *the more important buildings*? As all the modest sixplexes are practically identical, this qualification has little meaning. Rather specious is the claim to be found on page 17 of the CLC document *A project for the community*: - *Another factor was the desire to retain a portion of the site to respect the original development and show the evolution of Benny farm, a feature of the Montreal landscape for over fifty years*'.

The destruction of the major part of this development will leave but a feeble memory of the original concept. Architect Harold Doran's layout for the veterans housing provided a rare North American example of Garden City planning. In this tradition it was a brave vision that offered the returning servicemen, a healthy spacious environment in which to raise their families. Its generous green courts would cease to retain this special character when filled with new construction, or when sixty percent of the wings that form them have been amputated.

Admittedly, in appearance and design the buildings of Benny Farm are modest in nature but it is equally true that they reflect the rational standards that motivated twentieth century planners. They are planned without corridors, enjoy double orientation and none of their units are located below grade and their simple expression compares favourably with more recent architectural affectations. The heritage value of this ensemble should not be easily dismissed. Ideas on what constitute Heritage have significantly evolved and as Jean Claude Marsan ancien doyen de la faculté d'aménagement, l'U de M, has pointed out,

qu'est considéré comme culturel, donc digne de conservation non pas uniquement les monuments exceptionnels mais ce qu'est approprié par les gens, à savoir ce qui sert de support à leur genre de vie.

The approach to Conservation posited in the CLC development plan has much in common with the too well known practice of *facadism* where all that remains of the original building is the front facade. The buildings and layout of Doran's plan are the carriers of true memory and worthy of greater respect than token gestures

RENOVATION POLICY

Many of us hoped that we had seen an end to the sad period when the bulldozer reigned unopposed in Montreal, when the homes of low-income families were swept aside. As the economic climate of the 80's put a hold on the construction, of mega-projects, architects and builders turned their attention to the renovation of numerous kinds of existing buildings - abandoned warehouses, redundant schools. empty convents and old apartment blocks. More labour intensive than new construction, renovation and retrofit played an important role in job creation. Home-Depot and the like responded to a new interest in the repair of older homes, as curiously, age and wear do not appear to have discouraged the purchase or bidding up of older homes in Montreal's desirable districts. There would be opportunity for such skills in a community-based project, seriously committed to conservation and to self-help.

IMPROVING THE PROPOSAL

In its advice to citizens intending to present briefs, the OCPM requests suggestions to improve a proposed development plan. It should be obvious from the foregoing that the improvements I might suggest cannot be of a minor nature. I therefore propose:

- CLC revert to an approach based, either on the original proposal made by the Fonds foncier communautaire Benny Farm, or the modification of this proposal submitted by the same architects, Pearl and Poddubiuk, the Project D of the CLC mandated competition. Both retained a maximum number of existing buildings while incorporating new construction. It was the approach

that garnered the most public support during the presentation of the four competing proposals.

- Limit the time during which space on the site may be reserved either for construction of a CLSC or major recreation facility. Neither of these projects has received the necessary approvals and assurance of funding and until such time as they do so, existing buildings in their designated location will further remain unoccupied and threatened.
- Assure long term affordability of all housing for the benefit of low and moderate income families by establishing structures for long term community control. Benny Farm was paid for by Canadian taxpayers and the families who lived there. It must never be a source of speculation. **Affordable housing is not a slogan, it is not only a technical solution, it is a right for all citizens.**

Respectfully submitted,

Joseph Baker Architect

The writer is a Past President of the Order of architects of Quebec and former Director of the École d'architecture d l'Université Laval. He has been a founding member of Housing co-operatives in Montreal and Quebec City and has chaired national and international conferences on conservation and housing rehabilitation.