

October 10, 2020

ATTN: Office de la Consultation Publique de Montréal

RE: Îlot Saint-Catherine Ouest

Dear Members of the Office de la Consultation Publique de Montréal,

Thank you for the opportunity to provide comments on the proposed zoning changes accompanying the Ilot Saint-Catherine Ouest development. This openness is the sign of a healthy democratic culture in which everyday voices matter. I offer my remarks as a private citizen but also as an architectural historian concerned about the urban planning of my hometown.

The proposed Îlot Saint-Catherine Ouest rests on the need for a zoning height variance (from 25 metres to 45 metres). I do not wish to protest this change. Densification (here in the form of taller buildings) is in many cases a crucial need in major cities. It is especially true in this era of rising housing costs and climate concerns. Montreal has indeed an admirable record of advancing new buildings in earmarked zones – from brownfields to historic districts – that combine modern aesthetics, environmental technologies, thoughtful landscaping, and public amenities. These are the building blocks of a healthy, livable city.

My concern lies in the corresponding call to lower the height restrictions (from 25 metres to 16 metres) of the neighbouring sector. The simple question is *why*? There is just no connection – urban, spatial, historic, or aesthetic – between the specific Îlot Saint-Catherine Ouest site and the rezoning of the far larger area in the heart of Peter-McGill. How does densifying only one part of a single street corner suddenly demand that a rather large adjacent area – which is, it must be noted, at the scale of *several city blocks* – will never enjoy similar opportunities and improvements? The act of reducing building heights – and we are not talking about high rises here – may well *prevent* pioneering architecture from emerging and taking root in the district. Such preclusion will limit, indeed curtail, inventive solutions to the ongoing urban vitality and liveability of this important *quartier*. (This is surely self-evident given your concern to assess the commercial life along rue Sainte-Catherine.) Cities must

of course protect and preserve urban space for the well-being and comfort of all. Yet cities have always relied on *good* – namely well-built and well-intentioned – private development as spur of a better urbanity. Architects, developers, property owners, and citizens' groups working together can contribute enormously to forward-thinking plans – plans that might not yet be on the drawing board but could easily appear, even from the pen of young architecture student, in the coming years. Forestalling or precluding any prospect of change is misguided. Change is coming to our cities – climate change, demographic change, economic change, and above all the social change accompanying the long fallout of Covid-19. These pressures will require wholly new approaches to urban life. The next great contribution – maybe truly liveable micro apartments, maybe radically innovative seniors' housing, maybe the best mixed-use development we have ever seen – may very well need the *current* scale and context of district (and not its diminishment).

Limiting the neighbourhood heights – a truly arbitrary decision with little apparent basis in demographic, environmental, or patrimonial need – will stop the possibility of a better tomorrow for this wonderful part of the city. I know this area having spent many years as a researcher in and out of the Canadian Centre for Architecture library. I know its shops. I know its restaurants. I know its character. It is a diamond in the rough. I urge you not to proceed with this arbitrary reduction in building heights. Such a decision will only cripple an urban future that awaits imagining.

Yours very sincerely,



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