

**GRIFFINTOWN** : Brief to the Office de la consultation publique de Montreal

One can only have praise for the OCPM's initiative in launching a public debate on the redevelopment of Griffintown, bringing together those concerned with its diverse aspects: planners, architects, historians, sociologists. To make the process more manageable a second day was allotted to members of the public who might have a variety of interests in the future reclamation of this much abused area of the City of Montreal. The complete record of the two day discussions provide an opportunity to evaluate and reflect on the situation unfolding to date following the abandonment of the wide ranging development proposed by the Devimco corporation and hastily approved by the Tremblay administration.

To whet the appetite of participants a noted urban planner, Kenneth Greenberg, was invited to lead off the Colloquium with a wide ranging survey of civic regeneration. While many elements were familiar to the professional audience and worthy of admiration they elicited cries of frustration from those alarmed by the rash of projects that have been initiated once the Devimco project had been abandoned. A flurry of crane towers dotting the city below the hill in the absence of a comprehensive plan is sufficient cause for alarm. Background information furnished by representatives of the urban planning department did little to reassure professionals and members of the public alike and that there was little matter to seriously discuss now as it were that the horse had left the gate and some seventeen major projects were already prepared and ready to initiate construction. What they might ask were they to consider - the colour of the brickwork, interior décor ?

I confess that until very recently I was not aware of the extent of construction and preparations for sale of properties by realtors, their professional consultants and construction companies. The designated area of the new Griffin town stretching from the Bonaventure autoroute to the fringes of the Basin du havre project on the west, is one vast construction site. Structural forms abound, new streets appear, older ones suppressed, interior courts are rapidly taking shape and enticing images of condominium apartments are widely displayed – 600 square feet of space at \$300,000 is a clear indication of a less than permanent community is envisaged.

At the Colloquium representatives of the Montreal planning department offered little assurance of the quality of the urban environment that could be anticipated in the rash of construction under way or which matched those with which the keynote speaker had illustrated in his introduction, drawn from Canadian and other sources. Yes they indicated the disposition of urban lots but of criteria of design by which proposed projects might be measured there was little or no mention.

Reference to the redevelopment of the St Lawrence market area in Toronto that engaged the participation of several noted architectural practices subject to the overall planning authority and the participation of non profit housing organizations would certainly be pertinent.

The renowned Byker District project in Newcastle UK, home to 9500 residents equally so. The first action of its architect Ralph Erskine was to set up an on site office in a former undertakers parlor which offered the opportunity for future residents to drop in and

discuss their concerns and desires. Sounds lugubrious but the results were admirable. By contrast, the Tremblay administration opts for the grand gesture - a spectacular entrance to the city of Montreal for off island commuters and visitors feeds the appetite of the press and is heralded as a breakthrough. In previous submissions to the OCPM I have expressed my opposition to the destruction of the Bonaventure Expressway and have cited cities that have found creative uses for the space below similar structures. Certainly the much abused Griffintown does not merit further demolition and the disgorging of city bound traffic on Dalhousie and other of its streets. The Bonaventure **is** the entrance to downtown Montreal and could well be adapted to include rapid transit vehicles. Bringing eight lanes of traffic down to grade surrounding a pedestrian plaza bordered by high rise towers neither meets the needs of future Griffintown residents nor the frustrated backed-up commuters. Given past experience with stalled super projects, abandonment of the Bonaventure is not only premature but irresponsible.

I attended my first consultation meeting on the future of Griffintown in July 1970 at a Teach-in weekend at Camp Oolihwan In Ste Margherite, Two young people Joanabbey and Robert O'Callaghan providing help and serving meals at Benedict Labre house called to alert me to the perilous state of the neighborhood, subject to the neglect and indifference of the the Drapeau administration. There were still 1000 people residing in the district, survivors of attrition and neglect . Students enrolled in my Community Design Workshop (CDW) at MCGill University School of architecture set up shop in a vacant house on Barre Street investigated housing conditions, consulted residents on their housing needs, proposed alternate uses for abandoned ecclesiastical properties and activities for children who were being bussed to schools out of he district. The school in Griffintown had been abandoned and was consumed in a fire. It proved too late to save major buildings - the great Church of St Anne fell to the wrecker's ball as we were measuring it for possible future use, as did the Academy of the same name. The story has been told in Michel Regnier's Film series Urbanose that the OCPM found pertinent to display at the Colloquium.

The question remains, is it too late to save Griffintown from a further wave of abuse? According to our guest Kenneth Greenberg, **it is never too late** and he could cite examples. that he had encountered in his own practice. Close to home is the history of **Benny Farm** in NDG where the Garden City housing project, built to receive returning veterans of the second world war and their families, was slated for demolition by its owners, Canada lands Corporation and replacement by a series of multi story apartment blocks. Such development, though welcomed by many veterans dissatisfied with the condition of their aging homes, would have been totally contrary to the nature of the surrounding neighborhood and a waste of a valuable heritage resource Tenacious opposition by community activists led to the formation of the non profit group *Fonds foncier Benny Farm* that proposed to acquire the properties and undertake their up-grading by a number of autonomous housing agencies. It took several years of advocacy to convince Canada Lands to assume responsibility and undertake a mixed housing project that includes renovated and new housing and community facilities. The Corporation appears to be quite proud of its achievement.

If further encouragement for caution regarding wholesale demolition is needed there is the saga of Milton Park. While blocks of grey stone housing were assembled by Concordia Estates Ltd, its tenants expelled and several blocks reduced to rubble, others were snatched from the claws of of the bulldozer by determined citizens and transformed into several non profit housing corporations that are the pride of the

neighborhood. So perhaps Mr Greenberg was right and more than one of his questioners can bear witness.

If further proof is needed, it should be remembered that two years ago the vast transformations posited by the Devimco project and its supporters in the South West Borough was hastily approved by Montreal City Council. To Mayor Tremblay any further question regarding the viability of the project was effectively resolved. Time and circumstances proved otherwise. Devimco withdrew its offer and tempered its ambition. Although the towering cranes on the Griffintown' skyline must give us pause, perhaps there is time for reason to reassert itself.

The colloquium has addressed the concerns of both professional and public audiences regarding the future of Griffintown. The minutes of the meeting provides a wealth of insights which will be amplified in the scheduled consultations and submissions of briefs. It is to be hoped that its summation will quickly lead to firm recommendations and to the establishment of a mechanism that will guide future development of the site. In effect a **Review Board** that would bring developers and their consultants, representatives of existing and future residents together with members of the urban planning department

The Board would act to ensure that adequate attention is paid to community priorities, to diversity and social mix. In this sense it would question an overwhelming construction of minimum space units that are acquired as investments for short term occupation

It would spell out clear **Design Criteria** according to which built form and urban space must conform and contribute. Such criteria have been well documented and followed in both in this country and elsewhere. The following is not an exhaustive list but would address:

**Security** the presence of 'eyes on the street' the construction of many street level entrances, front gardens to encourage coming and going.

**Climate protection** for pedestrians from rain, snow, and summer heat, by the provision overhangs colonades, pergolas , awnings.

**Pedestrian and cyclists safety** clear separation from motorized traffic.

**Children's space** for play and security for the very young close to home and for the energetic adolescent in parks and skateboard landscapes

Provision for the special needs of the elderly or infirm - places to meet, exercise, sit and watch

**Urban agriculture**, community gardens, in back yards, on ,roof top terraces, balconies.

**Artists' housing and studios** exhibition and performance space, amphitheatre seating in landscape design

**Recognition of Griffintown's history and identity** in the conservation of its patrimonial elements.

**Architectural Design quality - Build the *patrimoine* of tomorrow.**

