

To : Office de Consultation Publique de Montréal

January 6th 2010

Re: Bonaventure Autoroute

Over many years, as an architect and professor of architecture, I have vigorously opposed the construction of highways that posed a threat to established neighborhoods. I established a Community Design Workshop on rue St-Antoine to aid its residents avoid eviction and demolition of their perfectly sound homes to make way for an extension of the Trans-Canada highway. So I might be expected to welcome a proposal that would demolish a structure dedicated to automotive traffic with the promise to replace it with a grade level boulevard, bordered by eye catching *signature architecture* and elegant pedestrian promenades. Surely this is what I have posited time and again, *places publiques* instead of overpasses for indeed I am a lover of the City, its streets its neighbourhoods, homes, shops, schools and parks, fiercely opposed to bureaucratic or speculative measures that threaten their existence.

Within memory Montreal's subjection to demolition is long, From the wholesale clearance of the Dozois Plan to the wasting of the gracious homes of Dorchester Boulevard, the razing of Goose village to make way for the Autostade, to the rampant destruction in Milton park, of ecclesiastical properties and once gracious hotels...

Our city has been reduced to a patchwork of parking lots and weed covered remnants, the result of premature demolition and aborted dreams, Years of municipal indifference left Griffintown to decay, a target for one more illusion that was hastily espoused by City Council only to melt into thin air. Is the Société du havre proposal that would see the Bonaventure Autoroute reduced to rubble and from the settling dust rising on the shores of the St Lawrence, a triumphant gateway to downtown Montreal, to be one further failed dream?

Taken together, Montreal's past and recent history illustrates a lack of coherence that should be evident in the urban planning of a major city. Indeed the concerns addressed to the OCPM are a mirror of this incoherence:

-A handful of grey stone residences would front for a 32 storey hotel while before and aft gaping holes in the urban fabric proliferate.

Seminary priests plead for permission to cover a precious green space on the doorstep of Mont-Royal with luxurious condominiums. A University would dispose of its interest in a patrimonial building in favour of private and profitable development. Meanwhile the future of Boulevard St Laurent hangs in the balance and plans for the city's two major hospitals are on the sick list

All illustrate the lack of a Master Plan that would guide and determine the future of our city, establish priorities. Nothing makes this need more evident and pressing than the hasty and erratic proposal before the Office today.

Much has been made of the Bonaventure's deterioration that it has reached the end of its shelf life and is hopelessly beyond repair. It should however be remembered that In the euphoria of Expo 67 its construction was heralded as a major testimony to contemporary engineering and in the haste to get folks to the Fair, little concern was then expressed as to the effect Montreal's brutish weather might have upon its reinforced concrete structure. They are now glaringly evident and rusting reinforcement and flaking concrete pose serious threats to traffic above and to passage below. It should be clear that repair and continual maintenance are essential in the case of aging properties – patrimonial building, residences great and small, bridges and road beds - they are the essential components of good conservation practice and it comes at a price. The SHM representatives considered this inordinate, beyond consideration concluding that the only solution lay in demolition. It does not. In a recent publication *Montreal at the Crossroads*, McGill Professor Pieter Sijpkes explored immediate measures to support concrete failure in the Turcotte Interchange by the introduction of a supplementary steel structure. They merit consideration in the case currently before the Office.

As already indicated, demolition is a very questionable answer in urban development issues; a case of special pleading on the part of those with a pecuniary interest in what would be the territory thus liberated. With the gloomy images projected in its presentation of the current state below the road bed - desultory parking of service vehicles, decrepitude and the storage of trash, the SHM seeks to reinforce its argument that nothing is worth preserving. However, reference to conservation and recycling experience in North American and European cities show a different side to the coin and where recaptured space below above grade highways has been imaginatively exploited.

in Amsterdam the space under seven meter high AG elevated highway was transformed into a 400 meter long civic arcade, a gathering space – awarded the European prize for Urban Public Space in 2006

in New York the East River Esplanade below the FDR elevated highway that extends over 125 city blocks forming a barrier between downtown neighbourhoods and the waterfront. New pavilions under the FDR and surface treatments to its structure provide a transition from Lower Manhattan to the waterfront

In Louisville Kentucky the Waterfront Park slopes under the Highway 1-64 providing a new waterfront connection

Far from the depressing images projected by the SHM, passage between the Bonaventure's monumental supports could become an inviting experience, linking communities on either side of the highway and accommodating a variety of public and private facilities – community centre, public library, indoor swimming pool, skateboard park, garden center, big box store...an exciting

environment that given the challenge, the Promoter's gifted architectural and landscape consultants, could surely evoke.

In the wider perspective of transportation policy, ecological imperatives have placed mass transit as opposed to unbridled use of the private automobile at the heart of the discussion. Today, repaired and properly maintained, the Bonaventure can accommodate reserved bus lanes rather than imposing this charge on neighborhood streets. Future developments in transportation technology and policy will see new ways of rationalizing use of the existing road bed: a decrease in automobile traffic into the city centre due to entrance charges on the London UK model, high speed public transportation - for which the technology was deployed forty years ago on the Concord bridge at Expo 67!

Plans for the destruction of the Bonaventure propose to bring its traffic to grade level. Without effective mass transit this proposed Urban Boulevard would be obliged to carry this same number of vehicles. Despite the seductive images conjured by the promoter and its consultants, it is hard to believe that that the noise and fumes emitted by vehicles previously carried above will be compatible with the sophisticated environment that has been pictured.

Frequent marked crossings between communities and commercial enterprises disposed either side of this grade level highway do little to reassure regarding pedestrian safety. We are told that the frequent disposition of traffic signals will offer young and old safe passage. Nevertheless crossing eight lanes of impatient traffic will prove a challenge for the most alert. Early modernist architects and planners did perhaps go to extremes in separating vehicle and pedestrian traffic - le Corbusier's streets in the air et al - but the proposed grade level highway is not Jane Jacob's little old Main street

The proposal to demolish the Bonaventure autoroute and in its place implant a high density commercial and obviously high price residential development, flagged with signature architecture, is to say the least audacious. However, even should the Bonaventure be grounded, the mountains of rubble cleared, the rough made plain, there is no more certainty that this proposed development is likely to proceed than have other recent promotional bubbles. It promises disruption, traffic chaos, fear and concern in the surrounding communities, adding another scar to the Montreal landscape. It is one further indication of the need to establish an urban planning authority under competent leadership, able to determine which and at what place are this city's development options. Caution is advised.

Respectfully submitted

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