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Mémoire

*Modifications au Plan d'urbanisme visant les hauteurs et les densités permises sur
l'Îlot Sainte-Catherine Ouest et dans le secteur avoisinant*

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As owners of numerous contiguous properties fronting rue Ste Catherine ouest, running up all of rue St Marc and continuing on boul. De Maisonneuve ouest¹, we object to the proposal by the City of Montreal to reduce allowable building heights as it is our opinion that this plan is untimely and inequitable, runs counter to the interests of our city, and will derail what is perhaps the largest remaining development potential in the western downtown core.

Please be aware that the zoning area under review includes real estate holdings that surpass 5,500 m² of surface area, which were carefully assembled and managed over the last sixty years with a master plan to create a large-scale mixed-use development. A clearer illustration of the scope of these holdings within the area under review can be seen below in red:



¹ 1827-31 rue Ste Catherine ouest, 1837-41 rue Sainte Catherine ouest, 1861-71 rue Sainte Catherine ouest, 1407-15 rue St Marc, 1419 rue St Marc, 1423 rue St Marc, 1427 rue St Marc, 1431 rue St Marc, 1435 rue St Marc, 1439 rue St Marc, 1441 rue St Marc, 1445 rue St Marc, 1864 boul. deMaisonneuve ouest, 1858-62 boul. deMaisonneuve ouest, 1840 boul. deMaisonneuve ouest.

The development we envision comprises numerous elements, including commercial and office spaces, residential rentals, a senior's residence, a curling club, green spaces and underground parking. Such a development would increase densities and tax revenues, resolve ongoing issues related to garbage disposal and aesthetics, and permit a much better quality of construction than that which currently exists, thereby reducing the environmental footprint of the area.

Such a visionary plan would also serve to augment and complement the incredible Canadian Centre for Architecture and the *Grand Séminaire de Montréal* on the first and primary access corridor to the downtown core from the Ville-Marie expressway. The Commissioners should know that this area represents a unique gateway to Montreal and its vibrant downtown. Unlike the Ville-Marie Expressway off-ramps at Atwater or Mountain, which pull drivers to empty streets, the entry via St Marc Street draws traffic right into the heart of the city, passing through a collection of Victorian homes, high-rise apartments, shops and restaurants, sites of education and higher learning, and places of culture such as the Canadian Centre for Architecture and the *Grand Séminaire de Montréal*, mentioned above. It is a singularly unique experience: there are few cities where entry from a highway allows citizens and visitors alike to feel the thrill of immediately entering a downtown core.

Within our two land holdings is the Royal Montreal Curling Club, the oldest sporting club in North America. Our undertakings are supported by the Royal Montreal Curling Club who have expressed willingness to collaborate with us and the City of Montreal in the development of a project which would serve common and respective interests. In the context of such a redevelopment the Royal Montreal Curling Club would be able to address pressing restoration issues, update their infrastructure, and ensure their continued presence contributing to the vibrancy of our downtown core.

While the City of Montreal has not, as of yet, been presented with a formal plan, the Commissioners should be aware that such a complex and long-term property assembly speaks to our intentions. These orientations were delayed between 2011-2016 as the City of Montreal attempted to expropriate a key part of the land assembly and then subsequently abandoned its efforts. Since such time we have worked with reputable international partners and planners towards an integrated vision, sensitive to history and place, which will augment our neighborhood and provide visitors travelling into the downtown core an incomparable greeting.

The imposition of a lower zoning for building heights will require an enormous reevaluation of such a complex project. What is most peculiar is that such a restrictive zoning in the middle of the downtown core runs counter many earlier objectives and recommendations for this neighborhood.

For example, in 2011 this neighborhood was extensively examined as part of the *Programme particulier d'urbanisme, Quartier des grands jardins*. In order to support the improvement, densification and dynamism of the area, the PPU called for and resulted in an increase in building heights along rue Ste Catherine ouest between rue Lambert-Closse and rue Towers. There was much debate on this issue and questions as to why the increase in building heights was not extended until rue Bishop. Ultimately, the OCPM Commissioners recommended that the increase in building heights should actually be extended until rue Bishop.² The current plan not only ignores these earlier recommendations, it actually imposes a more restrictive framework.

In support of its orientation, the urban planning department suggests that lowering building heights is necessary for the protection of heritage buildings. In such regard, it is worthy to reexamine the *Cadre de révision des hauteurs et densités du centre-ville*, a far-reaching analysis published by the City of Montreal in 2011. In particular regard to the interaction between allowable building heights and protection of heritage, it was stated:

“En 1992, dans certaines parties du territoire à l'étude, les plafonds de hauteur et de densité du Plan d'urbanisme ont été rabaissés pour mettre fin à plusieurs décennies d'érosion du bâti patrimonial et de densification désordonnée. Cette approche de « downzoning » n'a pas toujours porté fruit. En effet, malgré le mouvement de consolidation des quartiers centraux des dernières années, les secteurs qui étaient les plus déstructurés en 1992 le sont toujours aujourd'hui.

La présente démarche de révision est l'occasion de revoir cette approche, particulièrement dans le cas du secteur Ouest. Cette démarche offre aussi l'occasion d'adapter les paramètres d'aménagement au nouveau marché immobilier du centre-ville. Les cartes existantes ont été conçues en fonction du développement d'espaces de bureau, et non de l'habitation. Alors que le bureau exige de grandes surfaces de plancher, les édifices résidentiels doivent être suffisamment étroits pour assurer à chaque logement une fenêtre sur l'extérieur. Un rehaussement de la hauteur, sans modification de la densité, favorisera donc des typologies de bâtiments plus compatibles avec l'habitation.”³

² “La commission recommande que la zone couverte par le rehaussement à 44 mètres des hauteurs maximales en vertu du Plan d'urbanisme s'étende jusqu'à la rue Bishop, à la condition de garantir la protection patrimoniale des bâtiments jugés remarquables sur la rue Sainte-Catherine”, Programme particulier d'urbanisme (PPU) du Quartier des grands jardins, Rapport de consultation publique (Le 19 juillet 2011) p. 76.

https://ocpm.qc.ca/sites/ocpm.qc.ca/files/pdf/P47/Rapport_ppu_grands_jardins.pdf

³ Cadre de révision des hauteurs et densités du centre-ville, Ville de Montreal p. 26
http://ville.montreal.qc.ca/pls/portal/docs/PAGE/ARROND_VMA_FR/MEDIA/DOCUMENTS/VDM_CADRE-DE-REVISION-9A-CR.PDF

Density and permissible building heights are directly related to land values. Where land values are higher, owners and developers have greater access to capital to maintain and improve upon their holdings. In contrast, the suppression of values through restrictive or “downzoning” often has an unintended consequence, the degradation of building stock.

After the city planners increased allowable building heights along rue Ste Catherine ouest, the neighborhood experienced a long-awaited burst of renewal. An area which sat stagnant and deteriorating since the departure of the Montreal Forum in 1996 found the motivation and incentive to upgrade, supported by a simple regulatory change. Since such time, the neighborhood has replaced abandoned and decrepit buildings with Le Seville (3 buildings, 11 stories, 2012), La Catherine (16 stories, 2017), S Sur le Square (14 stories, 2017), Le Gabriel (14 stories, 2021) and now the proposed Sergakis development. Each one of these projects had heritage issues at play which were resolved in consultation with the City and relevant stakeholders. The increase in zoning heights and densities had its desired effect and a struggling neighborhood benefited from renewed housing stock, commercial dynamism and compelling offerings in the downtown core to combat the ills of urban sprawl.

The City of Montreal adopted a similar orientation in the *Cadre de révision des hauteurs et densités du centre-ville*, when allowable building heights were increased in the area of rue Bishop to rue Crescent, between rue Ste Catherine ouest and boul. René-Levesque ouest. This area is quite informative as, similar to our own, it involves a patchwork of Victorian homes abutting much larger commercial buildings. In this area the following was decided:

“Les plafonds de hauteur sont rehaussés aux abords du centre des affaires, de manière à créer une transition graduelle qui s’inscrit dans le massif bâti du centre-ville. La zone existante de 25 m qui s’étend de la rue Sainte-Catherine au boulevard René-Lévesque est ainsi subdivisée en trois zones de 80 m, 65 m et 35 m. De plus, la zone de densité (COS) de 9 de la rue Sainte-Catherine est étendue pour englober le corps de l’îlot compris entre les rues Drummond et Peel, où le plafond de hauteur a été relevé à 80 m.

Ce nouveau découpage permet de réaliser une transition progressive entre les zones de plus basses hauteurs et la zone de hauteur maximale. Cette modification devrait avoir un impact déterminant sur la partie sud du secteur Bishop-Crescent. La limite actuelle de 25 m ne permet pas d’atteindre des hauteurs suffisantes pour rentabiliser les coûts de base d’une construction en béton. Un minimum de 10 étages est généralement requis pour qu’une construction de béton soit rentable, ce qui correspond à la limite de 35 m mise de l’avant dans le Cadre de révision.”⁴

⁴ Cadre de révision des hauteurs et densités du centre-ville, Ville de Montreal p. 34
http://ville.montreal.qc.ca/pls/portal/docs/PAGE/ARROND_VMA_FR/MEDIA/DOCUMENTS/VDM_CADRE-DE-REVISION-9A-CR.PDF

After these zoning changes were implemented the area then experienced a surge in construction and redevelopment. Vacant parking lots, the source of many environmental and aesthetic problems, were finally developed and the area became an attractant to new residents.

From these two experiences we can better understand that zoning, when properly utilized, can lead to a natural renewal of a neighborhood. In contrast, when restrictively applied it can lead to the deterioration of housing stock the inability to maintain buildings of a patrimonial nature. The *Quartier des grands jardins* is in the midst of a large and much-awaited renewal. There is a palpable sense of energy – and optimism – emanating from new developments underway, at both large and small scales. This revitalization was planned for and supported by the City of Montreal through well-conceived zoning incentives.

In the public consultation process which took place in 2011, when the urban planning department was asked why the zoning changes were to stop at rue Towers, one of the responses was because they wanted to see the area between rue Lambert-Closse and rue Towers developed in priority. The city planners stated that they did not want to dilute development potential and decided to focus their intervention where it was most pressing required. Since such time, however, the area between rue Lambert-Closse and rue Towers has been substantially redeveloped. The opportunity, now, is squarely on the area between rue Towers and rue Pierce. It seems counterproductive at this point in time to suppress building heights and densities specifically in this area and prejudice the potential to revitalize the remaining connective portion of the downtown core.

The area being discussed is contiguous with Downtown and must be treated in the same urban sense. The major boulevards of Montreal – Sherbrooke, de Maisonneuve, Ste Catherine, and René-Levesque – either pass through or border the neighbourhood. While we perhaps no longer live in an era of “thinking big” – that is, of unilaterally developing massive projects – we should not relinquish our collective aspiration to envision greater things for our city. We must strive for projects that will achieve a mix of uses, provide density and variety to the urban fabric, accommodate different people in unique types of housing, and tackle the pressing issues of sustainability – in short, projects that will irrevocably enhance the civic and cultural character of meeting in the street and making residents of the *Quartier des Grands Jardins* feel that they are at once neighbours and citizens.

The opportunity to enliven the urban fabric of Montreal is a question of making the city liveable, walkable, and sustainable. Cautious zoning with a narrow view of protecting heritage will not singularly lead to such results. The City benefits from a rich arsenal to protect such built heritage through the *Comité consultatif d'urbanisme* (CCU), and *Plans d'implantation et d'intégration architecturale* (PIIA) and from regulations regarding "*Projets Particuliers*" (P.P.M.C.O.I.). Adding to the rich architectural vocabulary and fabric of the street, and thinking of building densely as a decidedly environmental strategy, will certainly have long-lasting effect. These are the precise objectives and orientations expressed in the Urban Plan for the City of Montreal, and the Specific Urban Plan for the *Quartier des grands jardins*. Yet, the restrictive zoning proposals under consideration run counter to these goals.

The rejuvenation and densification of rue Ste Catherine ouest and its environs presents an important opportunity to enrich and enliven the built and lived sense of this wonderful and world-class city. I urge you, Commissioners, not to support this proposed decrease in building heights and densities and to signal instead your commitment to opening up possibilities to rebuild the neighbourhood as a new gateway to Montreal.

Yours Very Truly

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