

Monday, June 13, 2022

## **RE: Proposed Changes to the Plan d'urbanisme for Montréal Chinatown**

### **BACKGROUND**

The Next-Generation Cities Institute (NGCI) is the place for rigorous, imaginative, forward-looking city-(re)development. Essential functions relate to participatory visioning, partnership development and integrative consultation capacity to create responsive and responsible cities. We envision new ways of living and working in the city, a new experience of the city and more collaborative and engaging movements and initiatives. As a large team of researchers who closely collaborate with other universities, citizens, municipalities and industry, we aim to enable solutions for green, just and equitable cities and take up emergent and experiential phenomena around us.

We aim to work across multiple scales in cities - from buildings to larger urban systems, from vehicles to integrated transportation networks, and from backyard urban biodiversity to more substantial ecosystem services. We engage and connect with city dwellers, from individuals to communities, businesses and governmental institutions, to develop directions for improving the quality of life and responding to challenges like climate change. We believe that a vast range of research methods are required for next-generation city building, ranging from fundamental and applied research to living labs, human-centred design research and creation.

The Institute encompasses the full spectrum of next-generation cities' research. It integrates engineering and the natural sciences with arts and design-led research-creation, the humanities, economics, health and social sciences, thus providing a holistic approach to solving cities' problems. We are a research institute that studies cities to transform them into sustainable, resilient and inclusive entities and communities. Therefore, understanding uncertainties and providing science-based solutions to society is one cornerstone of the NGCI.

Transforming cities is particularly challenging, given the deeply entrenched barriers to sustainability and inclusivity arising from systemic barriers. Transition research needs multiple stakeholders to analyze choices of different pathways in urban mobility, infrastructure and further sectors. Recognizing systemic barriers allows us to move forward towards a positive vision, using joint up thinking and heuristic pluralism to seek insights from a broad range of standpoints. At the same time, cities as a form of human development are among the most sustainable and innovative, so their promise needs to be encouraged and enabled.

Our research seeks to address these barriers while enabling the emergence of their innovation through multisectoral and transdisciplinary research that simultaneously transcends social, technological, natural, and spatial aspects.

## CONTEXT

Concordia University has been collaborating with the Chinatown Working Group since 2020 through the Department of Geography, Planning and Environment in response to the community's concerns about gentrification and the public outcry over a prominent developer's land assembly of the most historic block in Chinatown. In order to broaden the scope and further this collaboration that aims to empower the community to advocate for itself with information and analysis by the academic Institute with its community-based and action-oriented research, in spring 2022, the Next-Generation Cities Institute at Concordia developed a partnership agreement with the Jia Foundation. Jia Foundation is a new non-profit organization formed by the Chinatown Working Group with the mandate to protect and grow Montréal Chinatown's cultural heritage through storytelling and placemaking. The objective of this partnership is to perform analysis and various simulations, set up a Living Lab and facilitate co-design workshops to enable different community and city-building stakeholders of the process with informed decision-making.

As stated by both the Chinatown Working Group and the Jia Foundation, Montréal Chinatown is not alone in the context of today's Chinatown Movement. "What is happening in our Chinatown is happening in Chinatowns all over North America. New condos and hotel developments that have no relevance to Chinatown chip away at its identity and living culture from within. The old Chinatown, its architecture, and even its population – have become a marketing backdrop for businesses and luxury developments that are accelerating the displacement of Chinatown's most vulnerable residents and legacy businesses. With the living community and culture of Chinatowns being driven out, several of these neighbourhoods are being reduced to nostalgic settings for museums, art galleries or tourism. Still, today, planning major infrastructure projects in different cities continually fails to consider Chinatown's future properly.

Meanwhile, this phenomenon is paralleled with the increased visibility of several related social justice issues, including addressing increased anti-Asian racism in solidarity with others, indigenous reconciliation and cultural redress, and fighting gentrification and displacements. Therefore, the discussion of Chinatown is much more than preserving "the old"; the efforts are also about mapping "the future" – not just for Chinatown but for the type of city we want to build. We are pushing for an alternative conservation-focused development vision that is inclusive, equitable and takes care of vulnerable populations. We seek a new approach to cultural and heritage planning."<sup>1</sup> It is in the spirit of seeking a new approach to planning and assisting the Chinatown community to "map out its future" with expertise and tools available at the Next-Generation Cities Institute at Concordia, we see our role in this important part of Montréal.

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<sup>1</sup> See their websites' full statements by the Chinatown Working Group and the Jia Foundation. <http://www.cwgmntl.org> and <http://www.jiafoundation.org>

## **RESPONSE TO THE PROPOSED MODIFICATION OF PLAN D'URBANISME**

We support the proposition to expand and formalize the perimeter of Chinatown and designate the district as an area of "exceptional value". Furthermore, we support the city's proposal to limit building heights and densities in the area to protect Chinatown from real estate pressure and enhance its distinctive character. The heritage protection (and we consider "exceptional value" as a kind of heritage protection status) serves in the case of Chinatown to protect cultural monuments and culturally and historically relevant overall facilities (ensemble protection). We agree that it is essential to ensure that monuments/ ensembles are permanently preserved and not degraded, damaged, impaired or destroyed, thus requiring permanently safeguarding these mostly architecturally executed cultural assets. The aim is to preserve the neighbourhood as a whole like as ensemble protection in the long term. We also strive to understand the spirit of the place and create an architectural vocabulary that builds on the material history of the neighbourhood as well as its intangible heritage.

As the Next-Generation Cities Institute, we are convinced that honouring our cultural and social urban history is of the highest importance. We are convinced that we can and must learn a great deal from the social and cultural achievements, architectural structures and religious memorials of the generations before us to find answers and solutions for future challenges. Not only global organizations like UNESCO should be voices of reason and call for honouring cultural heritage. Also, the built environment of our ever-changing cities should remind us how we try and try through culture, religion, and zeitgeist to find answers to what living, working and thriving in the city means. Not only climate change, the sustainability transformation of society, and the increasing visibility of the grandiose failed American dream of the car city should find space here and become a stumbling block. Also, other uncomfortable truths that are part of our history. Chinatown and the Chinatowns all over the Americas are ethnic enclaves of many generations of Chinese and Asian people. These districts and neighbourhoods serve as a home for millions of people and are an essential cornerstone of the story of neighbourhoods in many different cities. Therefore, we strive to think about sustainability beyond the sole environmental and economic challenges and consider socio-cultural aspects as key dimensions to creating more sustainable and resilient urban spaces.

If we don't honour the past and preserve/ protect such historically important places for future generations, we also delete our own history and prevent a critical discussion about current and future developments. We need those culturally important places to create identity, a sense of belonging, and purpose and create an ethical and cultural compass. We are deeply convinced that there is a public interest in protecting the Chinatown neighbourhood because it is significant to the local human history, to the urban history, to the development of labour and production relations, and there are artistic, scientific, folkloric, and urban planning reasons for its preservation and conservation of the tradition / cultural heritage.

Besides, historic preservation is an antidote to our fast-moving times with "disposable buildings". Renovating an existing building may not always be the quickest solution, and it requires precise planning - but from the point of view of sustainability, it is more than worthwhile. Renovations can save around two-thirds of the material used compared to a new building. Contrary to popular belief, renovation and adaptation of buildings generally perform significantly better than demolition and new construction when building materials, production processes and recycling options are assessed holistically. Another advantage is that previously untouched green spaces are spared much more from development if the existing buildings are optimally used and renewed or renovated in a way that is appropriate for historical monuments.

## **CONCLUSION**

We fully support the modifications of the "plan d'urbanisme". The cultural heritage of a society has the function of informing about the history of society by means of tangible and sensually perceptible historical evidence and, in the field of monument protection, thus preserving a vivid picture of the architecture and way of life of past times. The preservation of historical monuments can therefore also be seen as a component of the preservation of quality of life.