

## PUBLIC CONSULTATION – Montreal General Hospital Expansion project (MUHC)

Memorandum submitted by Joseph Baker architect June 4<sup>th</sup> 2008

It was not very long ago that the MUHC embarked on a process that envisaged closing its several hospital components - The Royal Victoria, the Montreal General, the Children's and the Chest Hospitals - and relocating their facilities in a totally new complex to be constructed on the site of the Glen Railway yards. With that in mind it launched a public hearing under the chairmanship of Mr. Roy Heenan regarding the re-use of the existing facilities. Some twenty architects and urban planners subscribed to a brief under the heading MUHC for MUCH LESS, urging the renovation and retrofitting of the above mentioned facilities. Several other groups and individuals expressed reservations regarding the closing of these facilities - the impact it would have on Montreal's inner city neighbourhoods, difficulties of access to the new site and the potential hazard of concentrating all of MUHC facilities in one location. Yet no presentation to the Hearings received greater attention than that made at length by the Denver based developer who expressed an interest in purchasing all the properties with a view to their transformation into condominium housing. Fortunately this bizarre option was not realized.

The adoption of a policy that would conserve in particular the Montreal General and add to the downtown facilities under the rubric of the Mountain Campus can only be appreciated and welcomed by all who expressed their concern regarding the concentration of all MUHC health care facilities at the Glen site. Equally appreciated are the efforts made to add and integrate new facilities with due respect to the Montreal General Hospital's location on the flanks of Mont-Royal. The presentation made by the promoters of the project and City of Montreal representatives at the OCPM hearing showed that considerable effort had been made to arrive at an acceptable response. The stepped volumes indicated that consideration had been given to the perception of the visual impact both from above and below the site. One must applaud the efforts of Les Amis de la montagne and of Heritage Montreal in aiding the promoters to arrive at a satisfactory resolution. However some aspects of the proposal presented to the public remain open to question.

### **ACCESS.**

While emergency services require rapid and convenient access, either by ambulance, taxi or private automobile, convenient access is also essential for the numerous walk-in patients and visitors arriving by public transport and subsequently on foot. The several existing improvisations of steps and stairs required a more accommodating solution and the creation of an entrance from a landscaped forecourt is certainly preferable to the existing rebarbative and perilous ascent. Montreal has long chosen to ignore its unforgiving climate and

its buildings spurn the evident response of the covered walkway, colonnade or canopy. The restructuring of the Pine Avenue entrance would do well to offer such protection for the foot traveler in conjunction with shelter for those arriving or leaving by public transport. Patients and visitors arrive at a hospital in a mentally and physical fragile state. Entrance to a hospital by its very nature must be facilitating ,protective, reassuring and welcoming, which leads to the next concern.

## ORIENTATION AND PERCEPTION

As indicated in the Mountain Campus brochure, the Montreal General is perceived towards the north from Guy Street and towards the west from Pine Avenue. These axes terminate and are resolved in the creation of Block 2 that will rehouse the Montreal Neurological Hospital. In effect this new wing becomes the new public face of the restructured MGH. If we are to judge by the model and images presented on the first evening of the OCPM Consultation, it is a face that fails to inspire confidence. Perhaps we can assume that the model and images serve only to indicate the volumes required to house the equipment and services of the new Neurological hospital and that the perspective views - “**before**” and “**after**” - were only offered to indicate a possible redefinition of the outward aspect of the new facility.

Indeed there could be different ways of confronting the issue of adding to the public face of the Montreal General. This has long been the familiar conservative brick mass punctuated by rows of vertical openings. For some it might lie in replicating the material and pattern, integrating the new wing into the overall composition. Alternatively the solution might lie in establishing a new relationship through the use of a contrasting material of a different scale. The images presented in “before” and “after” versions would appear to indicate that the latter approach was taken - non load bearing panels with fenestration of vertical and horizontal stripe, somewhat related to the pattern of the earlier building. One must presume that that the logic of this pattern relates to the internal disposition of the Neurological hospital’s facilities but it could easily represent almost any commercial enterprise, which obviously it is not.

By dint of its position, combined with the improved landscaped approaches, and sheltering the new entrance, the Neurological wing becomes the portal to one of Montreal’s new improved major medical facilities. It places the Neurological Hospital front and centre in the composition and one assumes it will encompass facilities at the high point of technology; Surely these should inspire an aesthetic more explorative, more technically sophisticated that would truly express the spirit of renewal, a new twenty-first century beginning.

While it is obvious that the principal functions of the hospital will require carefully controlled environments and privacy, facilities for personnel and visitors could benefit from the exceptional orientation of this wing, from the light and views it

offers. In the proposals importance is rightly accorded to the creation of green roofs as this extension of the natural landscape will be valued for its environmental and restorative qualities. Equally Montréal's climate makes it imperative that consideration be given to the creation of indoor spaces that could benefit from generous daylight, inspiring views and the presence of thriving plants. Among them are employee's and visitors' lounges, cafeterias, conference rooms and therapeutic facilities. A rapid survey of recent hospital developments would indicate that leading practitioners in the hospital field have sought to exploit these attributes with atriums and glazed promenades. Presenting a lively open and generous face to the new entrance wing against the unique backdrop of Mont-Royal would do much to compensate for, if not dispel fears that inevitably confront those who must approach and enter a major medical complex

There may well be reaction to these remarks both on the part of the promoters and on the part of their consultants. They may well assert that the images presented at the first Consultation meeting and in the brochures made available, are of a very preliminary nature and will undergo considerable modification as the design process continues. However one expects that initial studies will be presented with conviction, and that however preliminary, they will indicate that which their authors hope to achieve. If the consultation process is to be of value, the documents and proposals presented to the public must be sufficiently advanced and developed to inspire confidence or merit debate. At the conclusion of these hearings considerable investment will be made in time and resources on the part of many consultants. The public can only make its evaluation on what is placed before it and cannot be asked to take on faith reassurances of a very different final product. If there is documentation that indicates considerable divergence from what has been illustrated and presented, this should be made available to the Commission and made publicly available. All stand to benefit, promoters, the designers, the public and the users.

Respectfully submitted,

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The writer has enjoyed a long career as practitioner and as an educator both as professor at McGill University and as Director of the School of architecture at Laval University. In both his teaching career and as a citizen he has maintained a strong interest in the area of urban design. Concerned with the abuse and deterioration of the urban fabric and elements of heritage value he was a founder member of Save Montreal. In Quebec City he was a member of a special committee responsible for the preparation of a revised plan for the Colline parlementaire. He has personal and not always pleasurable experience of hospital environments and as a frequent user of Mont-Royal's trails he welcomes measures to conserve the mountain's unique qualities.

