

Real Estate development project for 1475 Rene Levesque Boulevard west

Following the presentation of the above project by its promoter and the City of Montreal Planning department, I examined the details of the proposals available on the OCPM web site. Although long familiar with the area in which the project is situated, I thought it wise to take another look at its current state. Walking the length of Mackay Street and both north and south side of Boulevard René Lévesque, I was once again dismayed by the plethora of dismal parking lots and unkempt weed covered, seemingly abandoned properties, that were still its mark.

A stranger to our city might well assume that the neighborhood had suffered a vicious attack, some terrorist outrage that spared but a handful of Victorian grey-stone residences, We know this was not the case, far from it. What we see is but one further example of the rampant fever of speculation, municipal complicity and wanton destruction that characterized the latter years of the past century. The void on the south side of boulevard René Lévesque bears witness to the failed dreams of the once controversial Overdale project.

What remains of MacKay Street, as it makes its way north, is a reminder of the dignified and solid street architecture that once graced the entire area. The four Victorian houses on boulevard René Lévesque are exemplary survivors. By good fortune they now enjoy protection by dint of their proximity to the classified patrimonial monuments of the *Chapelle de l'invention de la Sainte-Croix*.

Given the overwhelming picture of stagnation that prevails in the area, Montrealers can only applaud an initiative that proposes to inject new life into a moribund and shameful situation: the reconstruction of this damaged neighborhood, the replacement of every one of the shameful parking lots by new construction in keeping with the scale of McKay Street, just as they would welcome the development of the south side of Boulevard René Lévesque

making it worthy of its role as a major urban artery and of the illustrious name it bears.

The proposed conservation and adaptation of the four Victorian residences proposed by their owners and their integration with a hotel complex that would replace the parking lot to the north, is a welcome enterprise that will hopefully spark further regeneration on Mackay. If this were the extent of the proposed development, the issue would not need to exercise the deliberations of the OCPM, nor evoke the evident public concern. It might only have been subject to submission and approval through channels reserved to assure conformity with building codes and bylaws governing construction, materials, heights, lot coverage etc.

What has occasioned this Hearing is the alarming proposal that would crown, at some uncertain future date, an otherwise straightforward project with a thirty seven storey apartment tower. This is hubris run amok! It is in effect an unwarranted claim to inflate the value of what is at present a modest property by ensuring air rights for future development. One must seriously question the wisdom of the Urban planning department that would even entertain the coupling of a reasonable proposal for the conversion of four historic residences and the construction of a hotel to an architectural extravagance that defies all good sense. Given the proximity of the site to the classified patrimonial chapel and its *clocher*, the proposal is quite outrageous, an architectural exuberance that would give substance to the overweening ambition of an eager client.

Whatever qualities the tower might possess as an object in purely aesthetic terms, these are irrelevant given its preposterous imposition on the urban context. Deplored by the City's *ad hoc commission d'architecture* and as an outright derogation of the Urban Plan, it should never have reached the stage at which it has arrived. Indeed it should not have occasioned deliberations of the *Office de la consultation publique*.

With no coherent overall plan for the sector, one that would include the south side of the boulevard, there can be no excuse for permitting this pre-emptive strike against coherent planning principles. This is one more example that illustrates the absence of a comprehensive approach to urban planning in our city, one that would establish a coherent context for future development and which by default, leaves the form and future of the city to the sporadic interest of individual property owners. As a result the OCPM is burdened with a miscellany of projects and the public engaged increasingly in contesting their logic and desirability.

Urban planning departments, both those of the Boroughs and of the City of Montreal, invest time and resources in examining and responding to unashamed attempts to modify and change the course of limits on development that were supposedly established after hours of study in numerous committees and public consultation. Evidently the result of this effort is inadequate to guide and direct the growth, form and quality of the city - witness the controversy evoked by the overreaching redevelopment of Griffintown, the building over of the green spaces of the *ancien Séminaire de philosophie*, the University of Montreal's sell-off of the *Maison mère de la congrégation des Saints Noms de Jésus et de Marie*. Increasingly Public consultation is called upon to serve as a palliative for invasive and arbitrary civic incursions.

The need becomes abundantly clear for the creation a genuine Master Plan that would define the parameters for the orderly growth within the Montreal territory. If we wish to reconstruct this badly damaged city this cannot be undertaken on a lot by lot basis. There must be a framework into which owners of property may confidently situate their efforts. Such a framework provides not only for the insertion of individual projects but for the creation of livable harmonious urban spaces, for well proportioned streets, public squares.

This is the role of Urban Design and the city administration must seek and avail itself of the leadership and talent to accomplish the task. Cities both in Canada and Europe have grasped this opportunity to meet this challenge and the results can only fuel the envy of Montreal citizens. Until such order is established we will continue to confront ad hoc proposals such as the one before this Hearing.

At best the promoter of the project under consideration can be encouraged to carry out the initial stage of his project, the construction of the proposed hotel, subject to permitted height, site occupancy limitations and the modification of the residences on Boulevard René Lévesque. Request for the construction of the proposed apartment tower should be forcefully rejected and the promoter encouraged to seek the possibility for the expansion he contemplates through negotiation with adjacent vacant properties. In this way coherence can perhaps be re- established in one portion of Mackay Street and perhaps spark the reclamation of other unfortunate voids in the area.

Humbly submitted

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