

TO : OFFICE DE CONSULTATION PUBLIQUE DE MONTRÉAL
RE : Revitalisation de l'ouest du centre-ville
PPU Quartier des grands jardins

BY: FRANKLIN GRIGAT
12 avril 2011

Dear Commissioners,

I write to you in regards to the draft version of the special planning program which is now in the public consultation process. I am the owner of a magazine store on the northwest corner of rue Ste Catherine ouest and rue St Marc. With my family, I am also the owner of the associated building and two other neighbouring buildings. I have a particular interest in the many changes planned for my neighbourhood as my family has owned buildings and operated a small business in this area for over 40 years.

Having attended all three nights of the public consultation to date, I was left quite uncomfortable with the number of questions left without meaningful answers. I, amongst many others, raised questions in regards to the proposed park on deMaisonneuve. I also asked about the rationale for limiting the new zoning for increased building heights to the area west of Tower. On encouragement of the commissioners, I now submit this "memoire" of my opinion on these issues, and the answers provided by the city planners. I am most grateful for your consideration of my views, and hope that the voice of one merchant and property owner can actually have an impact on plans for this neighbourhood which I know to be both wrong and short-sighted.

In regards to the park, and issues of security, it seemed that the city was completely unaware of the difficulties of the neighbourhood and that, in light of the many concerns brought up in the consultation, they would now take the time to inform themselves. This is a reasonable answer, but one that leaves me questioning how we could get to this point. City council has approved this draft urban plan and from information on your website groups like the CCU and the CUA have also noted their approval of the park. Yet, no one seems to have looked into the issue of security, an issue that was raised by the community so many times that the commissioners needed to redirect the conversation onto other subjects.

As the expression of the opinion of a merchant and owner of over 40 years, I strongly appeal to the commissioners to recommend against the placement of a park on deMaisonneuve as described in the plan. As mentioned time and time again by the people who live and work in the neighbourhood, this park will undoubtedly become the hang-out of the most disruptive and antisocial elements. This opinion is based on the shape of the park (a long strip with narrow frontage on deMaisonneuve), the location of the park (between three buildings and at the rear of a bar), and most importantly the consistent history of all parks in the area. Whether Cabot Square or the park that used to be on the corner of Guy and deMaisonneuve or the small park that was put in the lane behind my building, all are misused by transients, alcoholics and drug addicts. I bring my dog to work, and would not consider walking him in one of these parks, and I am not alone. This park makes no sense, and we should not waste taxpayers' money creating a new problem in an already challenging neighbourhood.

The city planners spoke of a budget of millions of dollars to "redo" Cabot Square. I would ask the commissioners to recommend that the city should direct these amounts to combating social problems in the neighbourhood such as the abuse of hard drugs and a large transient group of aboriginals who wander drunk and begging. This latter group, in particular, seems to defy out conventional approaches to dealing with social issues. There are cultural issues at play which require much more creativity in our solutions. Cabot Square has been prettied up many times over the years. Today it has mature trees and unistone walkways and a small wrought iron fence, but still the local citizens don't dare use it.

Throwing more money at its landscaping once again ignores the social issues which make the park uninviting. And if the plans are successful (or even in the construction phase), isn't it blatantly obvious that the social problem will simply migrate to a better, more secluded retreat right beside a favoured watering hole. If the goal of the city planners is to move transients to this new

park, this goal should be stated clearly and debated publicly. The urban plan as currently formulated cynically talks of trees and landscaping when the problem is not about parks, it is about people who have fallen through the cracks. While this certainly makes the challenges more complex, I believe that we can only tackle these persistent issues by first admitting what they are. We must not continue to fail this area by ignoring the transient residents while spending enormous sums on aesthetics.

A long park situated between three buildings in a neighbourhood which is quite well known for its seedy elements does not bode well for the future. I cannot emphasize enough that this park will have a negative impact on our commercial livelihoods and will create an even less secure environment for the many surrounding residents. Its creation seems to run against the entire goal of this new urban plan - to improve of our neighbourhood. Please use your authority to recommend against this mistaken and misguided effort.

The urban program also sets out a plan to increase the zoning for building heights along Ste Catherine between Atwater and Tower. In this regard, I asked the commissioners more than once why this rezoning would be limited to the area west of Tower when there were high-rises on Guy, St Marc and St Mathieu (all to the east). Curiously enough I received different answers on different evenings, none of which were fully logical. On the first night I was informed that the area east of Tower was richer in patrimonial value than the area west of Tower, and therefore needed the current limitations. We were also told that density development must be near a subway station. Of course, there are 2 metro stations (Atwater and Guy), one at each end of the proposed high density area. On the second night I was informed that the city did not want to “dilute” development opportunities in the area west of Tower by allowing too much densification all the way until Guy.

For the reasons that I will now set out, I hope that the commissioners will see that the limitation of rezoning to the area west of Tower is arbitrary, and that it would be in the best interest of this neighbourhood if higher densities were permitted all the way until Guy.

In Annex A, I have attached a number of photos which set out the current situation from Tower to Guy along Ste Catherine. I have attached these photos in order to illustrate that the area east of Tower is almost completely filled in with poor and irregular buildings and that the city should encourage their redevelopment. Reviewing these photos, it does not take a professional to understand that beauty is lacking and that not a single structure cries out for protection. I have also attached a photo of an emplacement to the west of Tower, in the area to be rezoned, which speaks clearly to its formal grandeur and stature.

The point is that: (a) the densification of an area is not incompatible with objectives of preservation, and (b) the answer given by the urban planning department is insufficient. In fact, a representative of the heritage department even admitted that the inventory of “patrimonial” buildings was not yet complete, yet the city seems willing to limit the zoning changes nonetheless. The planning program proposes to handle the protection of heritage building everywhere in the Quartier des grands jardins area by implementing a PIIA bylaw. As I understand it, all heritage character buildings would be protected from demolition. So there is no need to focus on the architectural quality of buildings on either side of Sainte-Catherine Street.

As I am not an expert in architecture, I would ask the commissioners to review these photos and to draw your own professional conclusions. For your additional information, I have attached at Annex B a plan submitted by the city which I have marked up to include an illustration of all tall buildings in the area. I think that this plan, once again, argues in favour of increasing densities until Guy simply as a means of bringing a more uniform aesthetic to the existing high-rises in the area.

The other justification provided by the city planners for limiting the rezoned area had to do with “diluting” development opportunities. I went to the area west of Tower the next day in order to better understand the opportunities left after the development of the Seville Theatre block. Once again, while I am not a professional, there seemed to be very few opportunities left for development, and certainly nothing approaching the scale of the Seville project. In contrast, I can personally attest that there are very interesting opportunities in the area east of Tower, and many owners who have been inspired by the success of the Seville have entertained discussions of joining assets to create even larger opportunities. Once again, I must emphasize that these are not the ramblings of a person who is disconnected from the area. As an owner within this area for 40 years, I know the area well, and I know that the current positive spirit in favour of development is at a historical high and should not be arbitrarily stifled.

A representative of the city planning department mentioned that increasing the density to 44 meters in the program does not necessarily mean it would be developed that way. As I understand it, it is an objective but there will be detailed planning of the area to account for heritage buildings, sunlight, etc. In my opinion, this is another reason why the high-density zone in the planning program should be enlarged to include between Atwater and Guy streets.

The urban plan places great importance on the objectives of durable development, economic development and overall quality of life. The current stock of buildings along Ste Catherine between Tower and Guy is old and unimpressive. Due to their age, size and techniques of construction they are environmentally inefficient and insufficient to support the commercial operations of the area. An increased densification of this area would permit for a better quality of construction, a cleaning up of the area, and more customers for the local merchants. As we also know, the residents of taller buildings tend to have a much smaller environmental footprint than those of detached or row housing.

A densification of the area would help the city to stop a constant and damaging migration to the suburbs. Finally, in the context of large integrated developments, many other solutions become possible such as the inclusion of social housing, community centres and green spaces.

For these reasons, it is my sincere hope that the commissioners will recommend to the city that the increase in zoning along Ste Catherine should extend from Atwater to Guy.

Conclusion

Having looked over the proposed urban plan several times and attended all the public consultations to date, I am left with the distinct impression that the facts on the ground have already passed the intentions of planners. In the plan, there is much talk about increasing densities in the area west of Tower and slides were presented setting out the desire to replace certain buildings such as the former Seville Theatre. Needless to say, the entire Seville block has already been demolished and piles are deeply buried within an enormous excavation. Phase I and II have sold out in record time, and densities have already been modified (I believe that the tallest of the Seville towers is to exceed 20 stories). In terms of green space, plans are set forth for the renovation of Norman Bethune Square, when the Square was in fact renovated over a year ago. It almost seems that these plans were put together long ago, and only recently dusted off for presentation to the executive committee.

The enormous investments in Cabot Square will simply push a social issue to new green enclosures on deMaisonneuve, and adversely impact on the surrounding area. The change of zoning east of Tower will similarly validate and enhance investments at the nearby Seville development.

But, this entire neighbourhood needs a stronger vision which more thoroughly considers the realities which challenge and excite all the residents of the western downtown core. The draft urban plan focuses on parks while ignoring root social issues affecting people. It sets a vision of development which is mostly seen through a rear-view mirror. Unfortunately, while the intentions of the plan are well placed, this neighbourhood needs more. The Seville project has taught us that there is a great demand pent up by many years of neglect. The city should do its most to encourage great projects throughout this area of downtown, and to avoid premature steps that would derail this rising demand and sense of opportunity. This neighbourhood has remained stagnant for over 20 years. We should not have to wait another 20 years before this entire strip of Ste Catherine gets developed.

I thank the commissioners wholeheartedly for taking the time to consider my views.

Very truly yours,

Franklin Grigat

Owner

Mediaphile

ANNEX A – AN AREA TO BE PROTECTED??

From Tower to St. Marc (please note high-rise in rear). While not clear from the photos, these buildings on the left, are clad in aluminum sheeting.



From St. Marc to St-Mathieu (please note high-rises in surrounding area)







From St. Mathieu to Guy (please note high-rises in surrounding area)



A few buildings to the west of Tower, described as an area of poorer heritage value (??)



ANNEX B – TALL BUILDINGS IN THE AREA

