

Re: Programme Particulier d'Urbanisme, Quartier des grands jardins

8th April 2011

Dear Commissioners,

I am writing to express my strong reserve regarding the proposed park next to the Victoria School on Boulevard de Maisonneuve. I believe this park will irrevocably set back what should be the proper development strategy for the immediate downtown core: to densify (while respecting neighbourhood context) and thus to create a strong, rich, and unified urban fabric, one that celebrates the street and returns life and vitality to the neighbourhood.

Long somewhat neglected, this is a neighbourhood on the cusp of change. There is a palpable sense of energy – and optimism – emanating from new developments underway, at both large and small scales: notably, on one hand, the important Le Seville condominiums project and, on the other hand, the encouraging refurbishment of the Victoria School (and its reprogramming as the new Ecole des Métiers du Tourisme de Montréal). Next door, Concordia University has been an incubator of development, helping redefine the city by creating, properly, an academic village that has brought a richness of life and people to the *quartier*, many of whom are new residents. There is the further benefit, too, of growing cultural diversity, especially by what can only be celebrated as a small but growing Chinatown. An increasing number of “ethnic” restaurants are packed tightly here, offering a delicious and affordable variety of world cuisines. The very vitality of the area is evident from its host of names: Lincoln-Tupper, Peter McGill, Centreville Ouest, Shaughnessy Village, or, more recently, Quartier des Grands Jardins – names signalling an historical depth and richness of urban sentiment.

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 if not a *terrain vague*, 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. 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.

The neighbourhood is contiguous with Downtown and must be treated in the same urban sense. The major boulevards of Montreal – Sherbrooke, de Maisonneuve, Ste Catherine, and Rene Levesque – either pass through or border the neighbourhood. Indeed, the heralded revitalisation of Ste Catherine into an

active, busy shopping promenade continues well into Lincoln-Tupper; with the completion of Le Seville, this will become a dynamic and *continuous* stretch of city, leading past Atwater and into Westmount.

As an architectural historian, I have specialised in the urban renewal projects of Montreal during the 1960s and 1970s, its so-called “heroic” era. My PhD, which I am completing at the Graduate School of Architecture, Planning, and Preservation, Columbia University, looks at the impact Expo 67 on both local and world architecture culture. While certainly grand, the legacy of these earlier operations is still visible today: empty, leftover spaces, pock-marking the city. While we perhaps no longer live in 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 Lincoln-Tupper (or Centreville Ouest, or Quartier des Grands Jardins) feel that they are at once neighbours and citizens.

As countless politicians and urban thinkers have observed, Montreal is in danger of losing residents to off-island suburbs. Rebuilding the urban life of the city – by densifying through infill projects and perimeter block strategies – is a critical step towards further enhancing Montreal as liveable and attractive. The small park next to the Victoria School will not achieve this. This is, rather, a block ready for further development, one in which continuous architectural expression around de Maisonneuve, St Marc, Ste Catherine, and St Mathieu, will give a renewed architectural character and civic scale to a place nestled between its “village” character and “downtown” sensibility.

Finally, as someone who knows the area, especially through regular periods of walking to the Canadian Centre for Architecture to undertake research, I realise that this remains in parts a precarious neighbourhood. Despite best intentions, drugs, prostitution, and homelessness thrive here. Creating a small park, one that dead-ends in an alleyway, will only make a magnet for these activities – especially worrisome considering that this space will directly abut a new school.

The opportunity to enliven the urban fabric of Montreal is a question of making the city liveable, walkable, and sustainable. A small park will not make a difference; indeed, even its possible “green” qualities can be exceeded by innovative practices including in new buildings (for example, green roofs and waste water collection and reuse, among others). Yet 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. The Programme Particulier d’Urbanisme (PPU) argues for increased density from Atwater to Tower Streets; a similar strategy, extended towards Guy Street and the important urban node now created by Concordia, 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 small proposed park, and to signal instead your commitment to opening up possibilities to rebuild the neighbourhood as a new gateway to Montreal.

Yours very sincerely,

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