

The Former Montreal Children's Hospital Project: Underplanning and Overbuilding

The developer of the former Montreal Children's Hospital site goes to some pains to assert that its proposal meets the goals of the urban planning programme of Montreal's *Quartier des grands jardins*. We are told that this redevelopment will "preserve built heritage, increase public green space, and consolidate the residential character of the district."

As an immediate neighbour, and with 8% of the site lying within its borders, the City of Westmount has been asked to comment. In our view, this project turns its back on heritage, adds no real green space, and does nothing to attract young families. And above all, the buildings proposed are egregiously too tall.

As a passing nod to the area's built heritage, the project will conserve the colonnaded nurses' building built in 1919. Yet the adjacent 1931 Art Deco building will be demolished. This project, in effect, amounts to the wholesale importation of the Griffintown formula. A smattering of heritage buildings are grudgingly preserved, stuffed in beside massive modern behemoths whose very height causes them to thumb their noses at any remaining older low-rise buildings.

In common with the forest of residential towers currently springing up along René-Lévesque and points south – including on the land across from the Canadian Centre for Architecture – they all have the same high densities in an exclusively upward rather than outward physical expression. Whether the Montreal market is tired of this high-rise formula, only the future will reveal. Certainly, it does no service to the past.

Fully 70% of the floor space in this proposed project will be residential. While the increased residential property tax revenues are easy to calculate, the resulting increased demand on municipal and provincial services is not. Assuming that the people who will populate these high-rises will not just be students, singles, and empty-nesters, where is a primary school needed to attract young families to the district?

The recent downtown condo-craze is already the cause of a dramatic increase in student numbers at Westmount's *St-Léon* primary school with no solution in sight for its overcrowded classrooms. Children and families need places to play and relax outside. And while there may be some scraps of leftover green spaces in the district, there are no public parks worthy of that name, and certainly nothing resembling the playing fields and natural areas found in a proper municipal park.

In trying to convince us that the needs of families will be met, the developer touts that in addition to convenience stores, a hotel, offices, and social housing, there will be 60,000 square feet of facilities such as an auditorium, multipurpose rooms, and a community hall. But this lengthy list only serves to confirm that this project, in common with so many that have come before it in Griffintown and downtown, will provide little or nothing in key services and neighbourhood facilities that families need: namely, schools and parks.

To be fair, developers of this area have to deal with leftovers and orphans. Ville-Marie has been forsaken by its government-owned institutions. For example, in the 1990s, the federal government got rid of the Army headquarters building and its six acres of grounds that fronted on Atwater Avenue just above Sherbrooke. Instead of bequeathing this land to Montreal as a park, the government sold it for a song to a developer. In the same cavalier fashion, the provincial government now washes its hands of the fate of this site.

Mind you, no level of government can claim the high ground when it comes to land-use planning. Fifty years ago, the City of Westmount generously up-zoned to permit such massive high-rise developments as the Alexis-Nihon complex and Westmount Square. And, it must be said, in our enthusiasm for such overbuilding, we condemned a hundred heritage houses to the wrecking ball.

Westmount, of course, was not alone in being caught up in the postwar expansionist zeitgeist. We were not alone to be egged on by the urban planners who were giddily predicting in 1967 that there would be 7 million people living in Greater Montreal by the year 2000 and who lectured us about the need to build places to house the apprehended hordes. But can we not learn from such ephemeral intellectual fads and home-grown panic? This is why we look askance at the sheer size and scale of what is being proposed right next door to us at this site. We have seen this film before in our own home cinema.

And before we are accused of wanting the repopulation of the Island of Montreal to take place outside Westmount's borders, I must point out that the City of Westmount is the most densely populated City in Quebec. Westmounters know that density does not mean that you have to renounce local schools or proper urban parks. And we also know that you don't have to resort to freakishly tall buildings to get a reasonable population density.

In fact, the highest building in the current hospital complex reaches 13 floors, with the other buildings ranging from three to eleven. If you thought these hospital buildings were tall, they are Lilliputian compared with what is being proposed. The new project is overladen with a surfeit of structures that reach for the sky. One building – right next to Westmount – will rise 32 floors, or 400 feet – two and a half times what is there now. Even the lowest tower is 20 floors, or 215 feet.

This project must be scaled down. And the whole district needs more public green space if it is to avoid making a mockery of its name, *le Quartier des grands jardins*.

Mistakes in urban planning, once transformed into concrete reality, are irremediable.

Peter F. Trent, Mayor of Westmount

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