

Montreal Neighbourhood or Devimco Monopoly?

Everyone agrees on the need to redevelop Griffintown. The problem for opponents of developer Devimco's megaproject – backed in a very pushy way by the Montreal administration – is in the kind of redevelopment proposed, which involves the wholesale expropriation of a neighbourhood, displacing commercial and residential owners from their properties in order to build a massive shopping area, equivalent to 30 floors of Place Ville-Marie, mere blocks from the downtown core.

The developer plans to build high residential towers atop the enormous commercial space. Purely residential blocks would also be constructed around – and over – existing public parks. Nineteen historic buildings would be preserved, though mightily squashed next to their giant new neighbours. Most other existing buildings would be razed.

The Special Planning Program (SPP) created by the administration to regulate the megaproject outlines admirable principles but suffers from a case of doublespeak in its specifics. The extra heights specified in it are particularly shocking to many urbanists and architects, to the City's own *Conseil du patrimoine*, to numerous fans of this historic three-story neighbourhood – and to stunned Griffintowners. Currently, the highest building in the area is the 22 metre high (7 stories) ÉTS student residences. The SPP would restrain new buildings along the Lachine canal to a similar height, but would allow excessive heights of 44 m for the residential blocks around Sainte-Anne Park and 60 m for most of the rest, a height equivalent to Complexe Desjardins.

As for using neighbouring giants like Grain Elevator no 5 or the Five Roses plant to justify a nosebleed height of 80 metres at the Peel basin, well! Those legendary landmarks have earned their visual status in the collective mind of Montrealers, while no new deluxe hotel deserves to block our mountain view of the St-Lawrence.

Density, says the city, is essential, and largely we agree. European cities solved this problem long ago; Dublin, for example, boasts 1000 more people per square mile than Montreal does, in mostly six-story buildings. Even here, older neighbourhoods like the Plateau Mont-Royal prove that higher population density is achievable on a human scale – unless, as in this case, it needs to be built above the equivalent of the Fairview Pointe-Claire shopping center.

Many Griffintown home and business owners want to be included in the redevelopment of their own neighbourhood and feel affronted that their city administration is ready to expropriate to allow Devimco to acquire nearly the entire area. Although widening streets is cited as one reason to expropriate, city officials also frankly cite the law allowing the city to expropriate in favour of a private developer if he owns or has options on 2/3rds of the land. Such expropriations would create a dangerous precedent. No neighbourhood, no homeowner or business owner would ever again feel safe from its own city administration.

Devimco stands to make a considerable windfall from the deal. By acquiring mostly industrial land at pre-rezoning prices, the developer could double its investment once the rezoning goes through. Not only that, but the Devimco project, as currently structured, would externalize its

astronomical infrastructure costs onto the city -- new water, sewer, gas and underground electric lines; street-widening and more. Not to mention the cost of a new tramway.

When all is completed, after years of rush-hour chaos, we foresee an area littered with entrances to 6300+ underground parking spaces, choked with shopping motorists and delivery vans, its streets bare of the pedestrian traffic a more human-scaled neighbourhood attracts. This Griffintown would also have shamefully exiled its own living memory -- its long-time businesspeople and residents.

There's something inherently wrong about erasing an existing neighbourhood, and a historic one at that, in order to mainly build a shopping area over it. Whether we need one more shopping centre on the island of Montreal (especially this close to a downtown core crammed with them) is a whole other discussion, but Griffintown is the wrong place for it. If Devimco – or any other developer for that matter – insists on justifying one by the need to prevent Montrealers from shopping off-island, please, let them find a truly empty area or an abandoned industrial site slated for demolition, instead of preventing the human-scaled redevelopment of Griffintown into a real and lively neighbourhood, more in tune with its working-class neighbours of Little Burgundy and Pointe St-Charles.

There are empty lots galore in Griffintown and developers are already lined up, just waiting for the long delayed rezoning. They're more than a little miffed, if truth be told, at seeing the whole pie gobbled up by a single firm.

So let's imagine a more attractive scenario. Much has been said of the historical importance of Griffintown, a natural extension of Old Montreal and situated along the Lachine canal so cherished by Montrealers. The city's last stables are there, and horse-drawn calèches can be heard trotting through its streets year-round. The Irish community feels a strong attachment to this, their early Montreal home. These characteristics spell out an entirely different kind of redevelopment. Why not use them as inspiration?

We all wish this highly visible entrance to Montreal to be a showpiece! Instead of selectively preserving the odd building, the urban fabric of this industrial neighbourhood could be integrated, even emphasized, rather than erased. Griffintown could become the '*quartier des calèches*' with a calèche stand looping with Old Montreal; a pedestrian-friendly neighbourhood offering shops, canalside cafes, galleries to showcase the many artists who have lofts in the area, maybe a cultural centre or museum saluting the former immigrant population. All this plus high-density residential buildings, including the social and student housing promised by the megaproject. Even the much-vaunted tramway line could add immeasurably to the local atmosphere. Montrealers and tourists alike would enjoy this new extension to Old Montreal, a neighbourhood both vibrant and mellow, architecturally redolent of its history, a great place to visit and to live in.

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