

Lowney Phase 8+

Reflections on Scale, Architecture and Longevity

In the Spring of 2010, Prével unveiled Lowney Phase 8 (likely phases 8 through 11) which would be the largest instance of their successful condo project in Griffintown. The following are reflections on questions of scale, architecture and longevity.

SCALE

The site of future Lowney phases 8 through 11 is currently occupied by a light industrial building of no more than three stories (12.5m) and an adjoining surface parking lot. Before Expo 67, the parking lot was the site of the Diamond Court housing project, itself standing no taller.

Lowney phases 8 through 11 are presented as 8-story buildings (25m), a scale necessary for economic viability, according to the developer, Prével.

Across William street are phases 1 and 2 of the Lowney project, occupying recycled centenary factories of five stories. These phases, completed but a few years prior, were clearly an economically viable use of only five floors. Were it otherwise, it is extremely unlikely that an eight phase would be in the planning today!

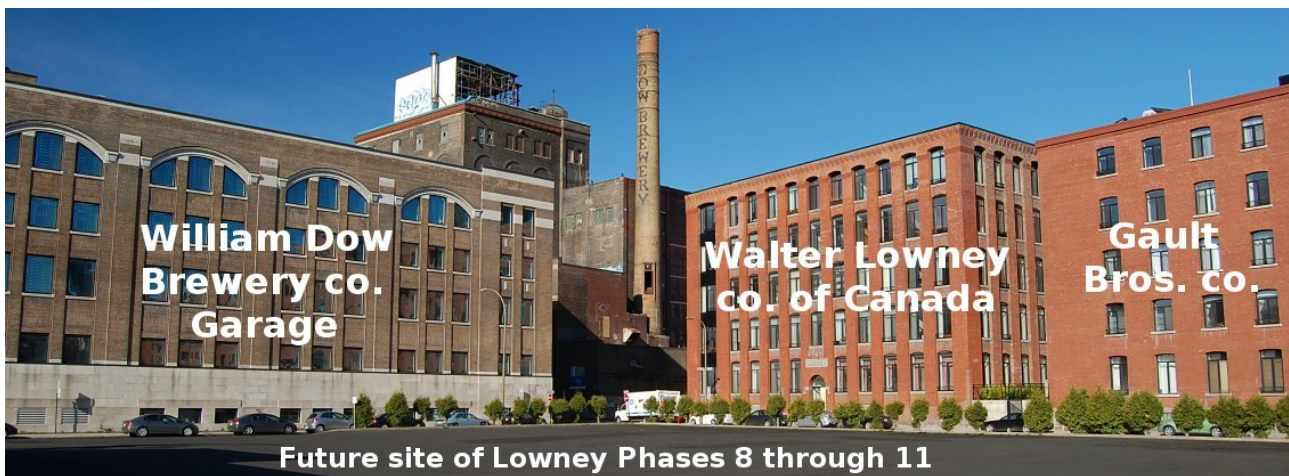
This raises the following questions:

- If light industry and parking lots were a reasonable use of the site until 2010, wouldn't almost any modern residential development represent a more suitable occupation? Should scale not be of secondary concern?
- If the neighbouring phases 1 and 2 proved to be economically viable with only five stories, what has changed in less than five years to increase this threshold to eight stories?
- If 113 years ago, philanthropist Herbert Brown Ames was able to successfully build a complex of 39 affordable units on the site (Diamond Court), why today are 500 units (only 15% of which represent affordable housing) a challenge to build and market?
- If one-third of Griffintown consists of vacant lots and surface parking lots, why such impetus to build higher than the neighbouring buildings, all of which stand around the 20m mark?

ARCHITECTURE

The site of future Lowney phases 8 through 11 is immediately bordered by three historically significant buildings:

1. Gault Brothers co.: Garment factory built in 1901, now recycled as the first phase of the Lowney condo developments
2. Walter M. Lowney co.: Chocolate factory built in 1905, now recycled as the second phase of the Lowney condo developments
3. Dow Brewery Garage: Garage for beer trucks built in 1929, now recycled for use by the École de Technologie Supérieure



These buildings were constructed during an era when external appearances conveyed the strength of the contained enterprise. As a result, each is of superior architectural quality and detail which would ideally be complemented and enhanced by any adjacent development.

It is unusual to find a cluster of three such examples in an outstanding state of preservation within a sector still reeling from the demolitions of Expo 67.

This raises the following questions:

- How is it that eighty years ago, a garage for beer trucks was bestowed with a stoic architecture of stone, brick, arches and sculpture, while today, with all of our advances in technology, a modern housing complex is unlikely to match, let alone surpass, this level of architectural affinity?
- How is it that over a century ago, the factories that are today Lowney phases 1 and 2, were constructed, with human and horse power, to a level of architectural finesse exceeding that seen on most modern exterior-clad condo-boxes such as the subsequent Lowney phases?
- How is it that in Old Montreal, new constructions must meet rigorous criteria for integration while in Griffintown, the two centuries of rich history rooted in the birthplace of our nation's industrial revolution are given but cursory consideration?

LONGEVITY

The future site of Lowney phases 8 through 11 is located adjacent to:

- A brewery complex which has been converted to accommodate an educational institution
- A chocolate factory and a garment factory which have been converted into residential lofts

While the designers of these early 20th century buildings certainly could not envisage their current configuration at the time of conception, the durability and versatility of their constructions permitted their recent repurposing rather than demolition.

This raises the following questions:

- Will Lowney phases 8 through 11 be constructed in a manner conducive to eventual repurposing to meet the inevitably changing needs of the neighbourhood?
- Will Lowney phases 8 through 11 enjoy similar longevity as their counterparts? In fifty years or one hundred years, will phases 8 through 11 represent better candidates for repurposing than the already reconfigured early 20th century factories?

In summary, **there is surely a way to construct Lowney phases 8 through 11 at a reasonable scale, of a dignified, befitting architecture, and built to last well into the next century.** The same applies to every subsequent development within Griffintown and the whole of Montréal.

If these simple criteria cannot be met, then we must clearly identify the problem(s) before proposing solutions. There are many actors including the developer, the architects, the clients (future residents), the city, the construction industry, and the financial sector, among others. If we want sustainable redevelopment of Griffintown, and if we intend to build the Montreal of tomorrow today, we must seriously question the status quo!

Jeffrey Dungen
for the
Committee for the Sustainable
Redevelopment of Griffintown

See also: <http://griffintown.org/projects/lowney/phase8.htm>