

Intervention by Laurie Neale, Architect, Heritage expert, artist.

Commissioners: Danielle Casara Jean Caouette Suzann Méthot

*Merci de me donner la chance de venir vous parler aujourd'hui.*

*Je vais vous parler en anglais parce que même si je suis née à Montréal, j'ai vécu pendant 30 ans aux Pays-Bas et quand je suis nerveuse, je mélange mon français et mon néerlandais. Ce ne serait pas joli.*

I want to today plead emphatically to not allow the deviation of zoning height that is being requested for the building of this Hudson's Bay Company project.

I want to ask that the Commission – and I hope that this Commission of Public Consultations has actual power to affect the decision that seems to have been already taken by the urban planning department of the City of Montreal – I want to ask that this Commission recommend or insist that the city planners take a broader view of the La Baie/HBC urban setting and site, than that which has been evidenced by their comments during the Question & Answer session of 28 April last, a recording of which I listened to.

I will argue that the city's planning forefathers had true foresight in keeping the height limitation to 65 meters on a much wider expanse of city blocks than the few implied by the promoters, and that this urgently needs to be taken into account. I will ask for a broader context to be looked at than the one proposed by the HBC project designers. And I would like to also question some of the assumptions which their project promoter and architect are trying to sell the City of Montreal, to convince them to accept this potential aberration to Montreal's urban fabric.

I grew up in Saint Lambert on Montréal's South Shore. I grew up gazing across the futuristic and pretty funky buildings of the Expo 67 site – a year which put Montréal on the modern world map as a city of interest. Beyond the pavilion tops, I could see the graceful profile of Mount Royal and a few iconic skyscrapers which radiated quality and design against the city's namesake mountain. As soon as I was able, I made my life in this city, attending CEGEP at

Marianopolis on upper Peel and then Brébeuf, and afterwards in the second half of the '70s, studying Architecture at McGill University. It was a time when heritage buildings were being bulldozed and destroyed by arson with impunity, and the Save Montreal and later Heritage Montreal groups were born.

In the mid-'80s I travelled through Europe and Asia studying older and newer cities and their architecture and urban spaces. I continue my education with a Master's Degree from the Bartlett of University College London, studying Space Syntax, a theory and methodology of analysing our urban fabric and how this affects people on social, interpersonal and psychological levels. It is a study of how our urban design and built structures influence people to use the spaces around them in certain ways, and how this affects how they act and use public spaces, and how they feel when they do so. It is a methodology and an understanding of cities which has been applied by some of the world's leading architects when designing over 40% of the City of London, keeping it a very dynamic and loved part of the center of London.

I later settled in Europe - in Brussels and mostly The Hague - where for the last two decades I have been working in the field of Cultural Heritage – in promoting its values and benefits, and protecting it from the many threats that are forever putting it at risk. I am on the advisory Council of Europa Nostra, Europe's pre-eminent Cultural Heritage NGO - the Voice of Civil Society working to safeguard Cultural Heritage, this the soul of Europe. I am on the Jury of their, and the Institute of the European Investment Bank's '7 Most Endangered' programme which works to try and save some of Europe's most threatened heritage.

This case of La Baie evokes a *Cri de coeur* in me. It makes me despair and it makes me angry. I applaud you, the Commission and you the Commissioners for listening to the many voices trying their best to save and protect their city. Montréal is a city of which I am fiercely proud and one that I lament as I see it filling in every hole of sky and sun by closing in every available air-space with boring office towers and ubiquitous condominiums. Let La Baie remain an *'îlot'* in the city center which will exude quality and grandeur.

My intervention today is a cry to say that Montreal can do better! It must do better. When promoters are only trying to squeeze every possible dollar out of their property with a building which exudes pure commercialism, and when the city government is complacent in this and lacks the conviction to protect the uniqueness of our city, the public must be vocal! I am glad that the citizenry of this city is allowed a chance to stand up to be heard. I urge you to ensure that we can also be of influence.

In 2006, Montreal was chosen to be a UNESCO City of Design. According to their site: *“The UNESCO designation is neither a label nor a form of recognition. It is an invitation to develop Montréal around its creative forces in design. Montréal, UNESCO City of Design is thus a collective project that, to become a reality over time, demands that all stakeholders – elected officials, citizens, experts, entrepreneurs and designers – buy into it and make it their own.”*

I would like to address first the matter of the broader context of The Bay site. During the April question and answer session which I referred to, both the promoters and the city defended the project by trying to convince the Commission that the extension of the 65m height limit governing the *îlot* of La Baie all the way to De Maisonneuve Boulevard was an left over from the past, intruding into the otherwise 120m zoning height for that boulevard. They suggested that it would make no great difference to the boulevard to just continue, to just fill in at that 120m height between Aylmer and Union. I vehemently disagree! The *îlot* of The Bay has a parallel one - that of Eaton on the other side of the Christ Church Cathedral. Both of these Grande Dames of Montreal retail are buildings of the same restrained height. There is a certain symmetry to the massing of this broader context. Both of these retail buildings have been quietly and modestly standing guardian of the Cathedral since they were built, and I pray that they will be allowed to continue to do so into the future.

In days when Mark Twain famously said (in 1881) that *“This is the first time I was ever in a city where you couldn't throw a brick without breaking a church window”*, there was respect and a valuing of buildings and their urban setting. At the time, Christ Church Cathedral was only 22 years old. In 1987-88 when the what is now the KPMG building was built (by Architect René Menkès), it reflected the history and reality of its site with its ecclesiastical elements of the building as well as its reaching to the sky as a sort of modern tapering spire, reflecting the one which its construction helped to save. This whole project was one of giving back. The Cathedral was renovated and saved, a hidden-away urban oasis was created at the back of the church, and the whole makes a graceful and generous ensemble. The shopping floors below ground are accessed by the most discrete entrance pavilions. I always think of the KPMG tower as the ‘Batman’ building, as if it is benevolently keeping a watchful eye on downtown Montréal.

Allowing for the HBC tower to be built to such a height will irreparably destroy this balance. The proposed tower will take away from the stateliness and symmetry of the KPMG building by being too close and too high - an unwanted neighbor who stands too close and within one’s personal space. This HBC project is a concern for the wider urban site which spans from McGill College to Aylmer, not just this city block island of La Baie. Yes, the piling up of allowable floor space on the north side of the site keeps the buildings low facing Ste Catherine and Philips Square, but that is assuming that these are the only areas needing protection. It is also

assuming that it is imperative to build upwards and fill every possible square meter of floor space without regard to the basic principles of good architecture and urban design.

One of the unique things about Montreal downtown was always the sense of space, the views to the sky and mountain, the sense of nature and of fresh air and stretch room along the streets and boulevards. The wealth of churches and mansions and the grounds which surrounded them, would create intervals between the blocks of buildings built-up to the sidewalk, and create a visual and visceral experience of expansion and contraction, sort of like a string of beads, while progressing down almost any main artery in the city. This is quickly disappearing. Shadows and wind tunnels reign.

The upper limits and density of towers is already too high in downtown. These cannot be measured alone from the view from one single belvedere on top of the mountain as did the city urban planning employee while defending his recommendation to allow for this additional tower along De Maisonneuve. He had no comment – nor mention – of the disappearing view of the mountain for the pedestrians around this important site.

Back to The Bay proposal. I am not impressed with the new building design. Heritage protection is not just about preserving old buildings and sites, it is also making sure that what we build today is of excellent design and built with materials of value. Paramount as well, there must be an important consideration taken into account for its setting. Quality architecture is the Cultural Heritage of tomorrow, and as such is of as much a concern for the heritage sector as protecting the grand buildings which once graced our city. The Bay is such a Grande Dame of downtown. The side facades shown in the project proposal illustrations, however, look like a paper thin theatre-set glued to the sides of the glass tower. The new building will overpower the Christ Church Cathedral beside it. The crude and chunky set-backs as the mass rises to meet De Maisonneuve Boulevard offer little solace. This is not architecture worthy of Montreal. This is a developer's building that is filling in every possible limit of zoning allowances only for profit and then greedily demanding more and for a relaxation of the existing well thought out rules and limits.

I would like to respond to a few things that the urbanist Mr. Fahey said in the end of the April Q+A session.

He suggested that the city and its citizens should be grateful that HBC is going to spend a lot of money to renovate their heritage building. I would like to assert that this maintenance and proper renovation should have been done decades ago. Of course HBC will pay for the

renovation, that is what property ownership is about and we should not be asked to feel grateful for this. Why did they not do so when there was such a prestige project completed next door in the 1980s? Think of what this building could have contributed for all these decades to the more eastern end of downtown's Ste Catherine Street leading to Place des Arts! Why has Montreal had to endure this neglect all this time?

European studies have shown that the proximity of history and heritage to a building project, especially a commercial project, leads to higher demand and desirability to live or work there. It increases the value of the buildings in question. The Bay is already a commercial object which would be successful if it is restored to its former glory. If HBC wants to use the site to generate additional revenue, they could better commission a high quality and unusual or daring architectural design statement. This would create a link along De Maisonneuve to the new buildings edging the Quartier des Spectacles. There are so many examples of these throughout the world, from Frank Gehry buildings such as the Fred + Ginger one in Prague, to the Guggenheim in Bilbao. There is the Selfridges Building in Birmingham and the striking Galleries Lafayette in Metz, France. If HBC wants to attract high-end ICT people, there is a pixel looking building by OMA/Rem Koolhaas in Gwanggyo, Seoul. Montreal needs buildings that show-off design, and that generate emotions and pride. Montreal has sufficient creative architects to rise to the challenge. We need to strive to this to live up to the city's designation as a UNESCO City of Design.

I would also like to point out that the Hudson's Bay Company made an unsuccessful foray into the Netherlands between 2016 and 2019. They took over 15 prime location stores from one of the Netherlands most well known and loved department stores - V&D - which had gone bankrupt a few years previous. The Canadian Hudson's Bay Company marketing strategy and positioning didn't fit into the already oversaturated field, and they quickly pulled out of the country. However what is of concern to us today, and what was universally appreciated by the Dutch, is that the Hudson's Bay stores were all very carefully and sensitively renovated in the heart of these Dutch cities, and that the company did not have to build sky scrapers on top of or behind their newly renovated buildings to make a financial go at opening the stores. They would not have been allowed to in any case because the Dutch are very protective of their city centers and skylines and they have strong heritage (architectural and urban) protection regulations. Such a move would have evoked vehement protests all round - definitely not good for business. It would never have been accepted.

To be clear, this is to say that the overly tall building proposed for along De Maisonneuve should not be held over Montreal's head as a condition for the project to go ahead! I applaud the proposal's plan to renovate and refresh the original stores but this should just be the

normal state of affairs. Mr. Fahey's offhand mention that the City of Calgary pays developers to renovate heritage buildings is not relevant as the subsidy is to motivate developers to purchase and renovate buildings not in their original possession. This Bay store in downtown Montreal is a jewel in HBC's treasure chest, and it has been insulting to the city to have let it go for so long in the current worn out state it has been in these last decades.

To me, this proposal smacks of the rich uncle throwing a few crumbs to his neglected niece and then demanding that she be grateful for them. What is HBC giving back to Montreal? In the way that the Cathedral project gave back to the city? The idea that we can look into the office building windows and watch the dynamism of workers in front of their screens is ridiculous. A glass curtain wall is as visually impenetrable as the concrete walls they propose to replace, and about as interesting. The outside terraces of the crude building-mass setbacks will be unusable for most of the year, either because of the cold and wind, or the searing sun. The few trees overhanging the top of the original building in the illustrations look like an unruly haircut on an otherwise elegant monument! Why not design a beautiful winter garden – botanical gardens glass and iron greenhouse style – overlooking Philips Square? That would be a usable gift to the city.

I would also like to say something relevant to the current provincial politics of preserving the unique qualities of Quebec culture. This cannot just be done by protecting the French Quebec language alone. The uniqueness of Quebec stems also from the dynamism of Montreal and the interaction of its myriad rich cultures and ethnicities over the centuries, and this is reflected in the beauty and vitality of the city of Montréal. For someone who loves this city, I find parts of it are turning the city into a version of overbuilt downtown Toronto where the almighty dollar reigns supreme. Parts of downtown Montréal are becoming just as gray and glassy and boring. Some streets have become canyons between overly tall buildings of corporate business. Is this the future we want for Montreal? A unique culture needs a unique city to survive. If you allow Montreal to become a second Toronto, then the culture of Montreal will also go that way.

In closing, last week when I crossed the Victoria Bridge to come into the city, I could see that the skyscrapers were so numerous that at least one third of the profile of Mount Royal is obliterated. You have to guess what the outline of the mountain is now-a-days. This skyline of Montreal is one of the iconic calling cards of the city. And it is being thrown away by the mentality of filling in every possible zoning airspace without regard to the city.

We cannot allow this to happen!