

## The Former Montreal Children's Hospital Proposal: Dossier 1164869005

### This Site deserves a Better Plan

#### Context

Of the recently abandoned hospital sites, the former Children's Hospital is the easiest to develop because the existing buildings--less encumbered by heritage and legal constraints-- can more readily be demolished.

The two lots of this site are of great value to both of the cities they span. Equally, as prime real estate, they are obvious candidates for development. There are few if any comparable building opportunities remaining in this central quartier: the site itself, surrounding buildings and spaces, and existing amenities together offer a unique combination of assets.

These lots await the right kind of development. The present proposal is not the answer. Ville Marie and Westmount do not have to jump at the first idea or the first draft. They should demand the very best plan, one that truly delivers on the developer's promise to "preserve built heritage, increase public green space, and consolidate the residential character of the district." Devimco, or any other developer awarded the privilege of building on this site can and must do better.

The Sommaire décisionnel mentions no architects, urban planners, or landscape designers being considered for this project. The document notes that the "traitement architectural de l'enveloppe" will be addressed in greater detail in revisions during the application process. The "architectural envelope" is a vague term that morphs through procedural stages. This approach—architecture as afterthought—leads to many poorly conceived, nondescript, out-scaled structures of which there are far too many in Montreal. We deserve better. Why put up more slabs when there's a chance to showcase architecture of distinction? Clearly, the point of this proposal is to get the two municipalities to sign off on maximum volume and density first, then run with the rest. That's not good enough for any site worth developing in the enlightened cities of Westmount and Ville Marie, and certainly not this one.

The design and development of a building complex as demanding as this requires a professional team equal to the challenge. In addition to architects, urban planners are essential from the start of the project for site access, traffic management, infrastructure, and liaison with the two cities. Also, the proposal cites the Quartier des grands jardins without contributing to the concept within the site or beyond. The sparse paved areas do not count as gardens. In this haphazard proposal, "landscaping" is no more than the space between buildings.

The site plan featured in the OCPM brochure (source: Fahey et associés) and renderings shown on Devimco's website show five buildings essentially indistinguishable one from the other except for their height from 20 to 28 floors, and one other, literally towering above them, at 32 floors. The towers are separated by paved pedestrian ways, with some planting.

## Scale and Exposure

The proposal resembles a patchwork intended to fit as many structures as possible into a space too small. The buildings have no architectural quality and no relation to the site, in placement or design. In a well-designed complex, buildings of varying height and volume should be positioned to benefit from daylight without impinging on each other's views and exposure. In this plan, no shaping of volumes or set-backs relieve the unrelenting rigidity of the verticals in regimented alignment.

The six towers shown range from 17 to 29 floors higher than the remaining 3-story structure, the former nurses' residence. Here are some comparisons. The tallest tower, 32 floors, would be just one floor lower than the massive Port Royal, at 33 floors, dominating Sherbrooke Street in the former Golden Square Mile. It would be as high as the east tower of Complexe Desjardins, 32 floors, and higher than Tour Scotia, 29 floors. Four of the six towers would be taller than both the Sun Life Building and the Deloitte Tower, both 26 floors. The lowest tower projected for the site, at 20 floors, would be twice the height of 1550 Metcalfe Street, home of the OCPM. To get a sense of scale, look up as you leave this building. Monoliths of these heights do not belong in a mixed use development in a predominantly low-rise part of town. Density does not require verticality and massive scale.

Within and surrounding the development, very high buildings will produce wind tunnels aggravating the already strong currents everywhere. The proposal minimizes the wind patterns that will affect the entire sector. Six towers densely situated in this site will certainly create forces and turbulence. Let the developer's calculation and simulation back up the claim that "les impacts respectent les normes de confort du règlement d'urbanisme en bordure d'une rue ou dans un parc."

Similarly, the proposal does not accurately depict the shadows cast by this complex. It is difficult to understand the equation by which "le gabarit des tours proposées améliore l'ensoleillement du square Cabot le matin comparativement au bâti existant (aile D) de 10 étages qui borde le square Cabot." This must be a narrow measure. "En fait, bien que le projet ne soit pas sans impacte sur l'ensoleillement du milieu..." is an understatement.

Also, how can it be said that "rehaussement de la hauteur permise n'entraîne pas plus d'ombre portée qu'un projet qui serait conforme aux dispositions actuelles"? Are we to believe that six towers from 20 to 32 floors will not cast more shadow than the present buildings? The Fahey aerial view itself shows almost all of Tupper Street and half of Sussex in the shadow of the towers. Towers 1, 2, and 3 shade their adjacent open space and part of Parc H-Dunant. Towers 6 and 4 cast their shadows on the open space between neighbouring buildings.

And that view is just one moment at an unspecified hour of an unknown month and season. A full study of seasonal and daily shadow patterns will reveal the full extent of the light deprivation for the proposed towers, and a broad expanse of streets and buildings in the neighbourhood. To get a sense of the drastic effect, demonstrate shade calculations for each building, including the 32-floor tower, in June and December. For wind and light, computer simulations are more reliable than developers' renderings.

## Logistics and Use

Development of this prized site is complicated by its footprint in two cities, each with its own priorities, bylaws, zoning, and regulations. What is the transfer procedure from the hospital to a buyer? What is the land exchange entre “la Ville et le propriétaire?” and where would the servitudes be created? Negotiating and decision-making will be even more complex because Tower 1, “Tour Kerub,” crosses the two cities' limits. Is this building part of the Devimco plan, or a separate entity? As the tallest and widest, its design has no relation to the other five structures. Tour Kerub, the 32-floor sheer, glassy skyscraper, looks like a transplant from a downtown business district. Again, for comparison, recall that the tallest wing of Complexe Desjardins is 32 floors.

Demolition and construction will be a process of long duration. No time-line is provided, nor mitigation measures for 360 degree protection that will be required for toxins released in the take-down, blasting for underground parking, vibrations, noise, and debris throughout. Construction staging areas and traffic will be intense. How will the two cities manage that, and at what cost? Whose jurisdiction will enforce stringent regulation of contractors and subcontractors from start to finish?

Mixed use is a basic requirement of any program for this site at the heart of an already vibrant neighbourhood, a hub for commercial and professional activity, for pedestrian traffic and public transportation. A significant allocation of the floor area is projected as residential. Who is the target buyer or renter? With no schools in the area, the location would not be a draw for families. Despite the “Grand jardin” label, the few parks anywhere in the quartier are modest, and there are no areas for play. Cabot Square is a fine pedestrian space, but not a garden. Again, not much to appeal for families.

As to traffic, thorough studies would be needed to support the developer’s claim that, “le projet n’aura pas d’impacts notables sur le milieu.” Atwater and René Levesque, with Ste Catherine and Sherbrooke Street West, are avenues and streets with already high traffic volume and congested crossroads. What is the plan for entry and egress from the underground parking; for commercial deliveries, loading docks; for car passenger arrivals and departures? How will two cities manage these demands? How will the high residential and vehicular needs in this densely built quadrant relate to the present residential neighbourhood immediately to the west, north, and south of Blvd Dorchester?

At the intersection of these heavily-trafficked streets and avenues, the site is also situated at the edge of a downhill grade. What provisions are made for water supply, intake and output? With systems, pipes, and drainage already at capacity, how will the proposed complex manage and support access to basic services? Where are the design and engineering studies to support how the demand from all the sectors-- owned and rented residential units, office, retail, hotel, municipal functions, and parking--can be accommodated with existing infrastructure?

Developers of this key site would greatly benefit from long-established amenities, notably the Atwater Metro station, Cabot Square, Alexis Nihon, and the former Forum building with a variety of tenants including Concordia. The project must enhance the community, not over-rule it in scale and self-interest.

It is worth noting that this proposal fails even to recognize the presence of the immediately adjacent Atwater Library, a distinguished institution whose heritage building and grounds enhance Atwater Avenue and Tupper Street. This omission signals how out of touch this developer is with the realities of the area. It's all the more ironic that the proposal in some iterations cites a library among its features. But just across the street is the Atwater Library, Canada's oldest subscription library whose building is a designated National Historic Site, with well maintained grounds. Since 1828, the Atwater Library has served a wide public of every age and need, and created a diverse community of users.

The proposal for this prestigious, complex site seems to be random, without any regard to context or program, and without respect for the urban culture and social fabric of the neighbourhood. The idea as presented recalls both the monolithic densification of Griffintown, and suburban mega-centers for which this developer is known. In aspiring to "un milieu de vie intégré et inspirant" Devimco can do better. To be considered as a potential developer of this site, it must.

## Conclusions

Even allowing for the developer's strategy of over-estimating projected building heights in anticipation of negotiation down, this proposal is extraordinarily top heavy. It would be hard to find another area of under 14,000 square meters in Montreal as densely packed with skyscrapers.

Based on this completely inadequate proposal, why would either city have confidence in the developer to change the concept and implementation for the better once approval is granted? A proposal is the first indicator of intentions. This one is offensive: it does not even come close to doing justice to the potential of the site. Out of scale and off balance, it shows no regard or respect for the character of Ville Marie and Westmount in this quartier.

Ville Marie and Westmount should derive great benefits from the constructive development of this prime site that would be the envy of any city. In Devimco's plan, the developer is the winner. This proposal must be rejected.