

A MEMORANDUM ON THE SUBJECT OF THE PROPOSED CHANGES TO THE DEVELOPMENT OF POINTE-NORD ON ILE-DES-SOEURS

Adrian Sheppard, FRAIC
Emeritus Professor
School of Architecture
McGill University

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PREAMBLE

This memorandum addresses a number inter-connected situations related to the design of Pointe-Nord: it introduces the planning notion of the Garden-City of which Nun's Island is a good examples, it looks at the existing urban development plan of the Pointe, it examines the proposed readjustment to its urban design, and it discusses the issues of automobile parking on the Island. The Memo abstains from discussing or analysing the procedural or administrative aspects related to the existing or proposed development of the area. In other words, this brief speaks primarily of the physical and formal characteristics of the project. The author is familiar with the extensive and complex planning saga of the area. As a final note, the author was not involved in the development of the planning concept.

NUN'S ISLAND AND THE GARDEN-CITY CONCEPT

The idea of the Garden-City was first developed in Britain at the cusp of the twentieth century as a new form of urban utopia. It was thought of as a harbinger of a new age. In its desire to formulate a balanced community, the Movement was inspired by a notion of unity between the physical environment and its social content. Although many reformers, planners and architect were involved in myriad studies for the "New City", it was Ebenezer Howard, an English town planner, who formulated most clearly the governing intellectual premise of the Garden Cities as we understand it today. His book, *Garden Cities of Tomorrow* (1902), became the foundation of the Movement, and remains an icon of modern planning literature.

The Garden-City movement was not limited to Britain. It took root, albeit in different forms, in other countries such as the USA, France, Belgium and Holland. In America, Frank Lloyd Wright developed his own version of the Garden City which he baptized *Broadacre City*. In France, Le Corbusier explored similar ideas by way of his various *Ville Radieuse* proposals. In Belgium, Louis Van der Swaelmen was responsible for two garden cities, *Le Floréal* and *Le Logis*, both towns designed following the garden-city principles. All these projects had one thing in common: a desire to produce a viable alternative to the declining urban condition of the time.

The name *Garden-City* is somewhat a misnomer. Uninformed planners and politicians assumed the Garden-City as a place of low-scale housing construction positioned within a

pastoral environment, low density developments, and social cohesiveness. This assumption was part of the whole truth, since the Movement saw itself as inclusive and comprehensive in terms of building types, activities, and a range of building heights. It would be unrealistic, even silly, to think that one could develop the modern city as a bucolic environment. As such, Nun's Island (as a whole) is an eloquent and unique Canadian illustration a Garden-City. It stands today as a persuasive antithesis to the much too-frequent banal suburban real estate developments surrounding most Canadian cities.

GOOD URBAN DESIGN

Urban design is a constituent element of the urban planning discipline. Urban design should be seen as architecture writ-large. Correct urban planning relies on many factors, from judicious environmental principles, to effective mobility of goods and people, to orderly physical milieu. In the case of the on-going development of Pointe-Nord, the sense of order is created by way of its cohesiveness, its visual clarity, its proper emphasis of the various elements, and the correct hierarchical relationships between component parts.

In the traditional city, these concerns were considered the constants which informed good planning. These so-called constants need to be reinterpreted in a contemporary way. Order, environmental common-sense, visual cohesiveness, and clear geometric parameters are principles which transcend time and place. Kevin Lynch, in his seminal book *The Image of the City* (1960) speaks to the value of a clear reading of the city. He correctly points out that good city form is achieved, partially, by the making of definable nodes, edges, routes, landmarks, etc.

Pointe-Nord follows these conditions persuasively. Furthermore, the towers, as initially conceived, act as a landmark for the Island. They constitute a notable point of reference by being tall, proud, and unique. Their position on the site and the simplicity of their design fit unequivocally the definition of a landmark.

A COMPOSITION OF SIX TOWERS

Traditionally, architects and planners have struggled with design of an *ensemble* of repetitive large-scale buildings. In and of itself, size is neither good nor bad. The challenge lies in linking them into a visually cohesive unit. The latter plan of Pointe-Nord called for the towers to be identical, except for minor variations in height and finish. They constitute a striking edge of both the Pointe and of the Island. The cluster of towers can be read as an interconnected whole, as well as an entry signal for south-bound traffic leading into Montreal. The initial plan made sense at the neighbourhood scale and at the Island scale.

The arrangement of the towers at the edge of the Pointe is intentionally conceived as a ribbon of relatively slim forms which define the edge of the neighbourhood. They are judiciously spaced to provide its inhabitants with optimum views of the city, of the island, and of the water. Because of the spatial gaps between them, the prospect from the island and the Pointe to Montreal is maintained.

The composition of towers is intentionally framed by the two highest towers which, in fact, act as the “bookends” of the ribbon. The first five of the six towers are placed perpendicularly to the water’s edge, and there is no obvious reason why all six should not follow the same logic. The physical inter-relationship between the towers is by far more important than its linkage to an adjoining road. It is an error to judge the merit of the ribbon of towers in terms of the number of meters that separates them from one another. Distance is but one factor. Prospect, context, surface material, height of the towers, sun orientation, applicable exemplars, etc. are all factors needed to evaluate the merit and the flaws of plan.

One must bear in mind that Pointe-Nord, not unlike many Garden-City or New Urbanism projects in America and in Europe, is conceived as a neighbourhood comprising low, mid-rise, and tall buildings. The project must be evaluated in terms of the relationship between parts and the cohesiveness of the plan. One must consent that subjective criteria are determinant which are equal to objective rules and regulations. There is a reflexive tendency to rely primarily on quantitative criteria since they are the easiest ones to gauge. Yet the application of metrics alone to assess an urban plan undoubtedly leads to an abdication the exercise of judgement. Urban planning and urban design are disciplines which must be judged also in terms of the quality of life, aesthetic merit, and the values it projects.

The towers are relatively high compared to the other surrounding buildings, yet their footprint is moderately small. This notion freeing as much land as possible to retain (or create) maximum green spaces in exchange for height is totally consistent with the Garden-City concept. As is often the case, it can be argued that the height of the towers ought to be lower, but given the programmatic exigency for a relatively large number of dwelling units, height, rather than sprawl, is the best option. Finally, it is axiomatic that the optimal location for the towers is in the vicinity the proposed REM station.

A DUBIOUS MODIFICATION TO THE INITIAL PLAN

In the proposed revision to the plan of the Pointe, the EXISTING composition is severely compromised. The last of the six towers is arbitrarily re-shaped and its immediate vicinity is used to implant a sprawling mid-rise building that is out of scale and unrelated to the other existing buildings. The polygonal form of the sixth tower reads as a foreign body that has been migrated into an orderly-planned zone, and done so for no apparent architectural or planning logic. The strength of the Pointe’s initial plan lies in a definite experiential visual order. It is unfortunate that this new proposal compromises the whole. Why, one must ask, is there a wish to introduce a new architectural language mid-stream? Why not leave well-enough alone? Why not build following the well-established premise rather place oneself in opposition to it? Minor changes to any project may be needed over time, but these should be implemented in a manner that is respectful of the existing reality.

TO PARK OR NOT TO PARK ON THE ISLAND

There is a growing penchant within many city administrations to reduce the number of automobiles in our urban environments. One effective way to respond to this objective is

to reduce the number of parking spaces permitted within a given area. Our new concerns for the quality of the environment are justifiable on many fronts. The demand for an eventual diminution of cars in our streets fits this objective, but this reduction entails a transformation of habits and values, and the implementation of alternative modes of mobility. It can and should be done, but over time.

Living on the Island, away from the epicentre of the city, makes car ownership a *sine qua non* conditions for the vast majority of its inhabitants. To reduce the ratio from 1.3 to 1 to .75 to 1 parking spaces per dwelling unit might have a drastic consequence on the nature of the Island's demographic make-up, and even on its economic well-being. A ratio of less than 1 to 1 means that 25% of the families living on the island would be deprived of owning an automobile. Low car ownership makes sense WITHIN a denser urban context but not on an island which is relatively distant from the city centre.

IN SUMMATION

Large architectural and planning projects require a long time to design and even longer to implement. Circumstances, key players, municipal agencies, economic realities, etc. change over time. Inevitable modifications become *de rigueur*, and can even provide an opportunity for improvement. Fortunately, in the case of Pointe-Nord, the owners and the design team has been in place to formulate and execute the project from start to finish. To a great degree, the consistency in design quality is the result of the stability of the developing team. This fortunate instance provided an assurance that the initial design impulses were maintained throughout the development. Amendments to a project should not entail a loss of design integrity. The proposed changes dilute the initial design qualities by placing this new proposal in opposition to the exiting plan.

This brief is a plea for continuance rather than for opposition.

*Adrian Sheppard, FRAIC
Montreal
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