

A Brief

Projet de schéma d'aménagement et de développement de l'agglomération de Montréal (SAD)

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Habitat for Humans A true quality of life for Montrealers

“For most [environmental activists] natural habitats were accessible for unstructured play and discovery nearly every day when they were kids. ... Studies of environmental activists in [diverse] locales ... indicate that childhood experiences are significant precursors for adult activism on behalf of the environment”

— Richard Louv, LAST CHILD IN THE WOODS

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“Together, in the CMM, we need to balance the interests of the region and it is by working together, beyond our differences, and in solidarity, we will ensure a better quality of life for the population.
— Denis Coderre, *MOT DU PRÉSIDENT CMM Document de Présentation 2014*.

“... as a zoo curator ... I saw the captive zoo inmates as telling metaphors for the tense citizens I encountered in everyday life.
... there is a need to transform the urban environment into something more appropriate for its long — suffering inhabitants. If this succeeds we will then be able to retain the heady excitements of the city while still enjoying community life on a scale the human brain can comprehend.”
— Desmond Morris, *THE HUMAN ZOO*, Preface 1995 edition

«Des recherches célèbres ont montré qu’un bébé singe privé de mouvement devient un adulte timide, effrayé et insécure. En revanche, celui qui, très jeune, est encouragé à bouger beaucoup grandit en singe curieux, et avide de contacts visuels et tactiles. Bon singe, il se fait fier et autonome, et trouve vite du plaisir à interagir socialement avec sa tribu. ... À ce chapitre de la torpeur ou de l’ardeur, le cerveau du bébé humain n’est pas différent de celui de son cousin et a un égal besoin de prendre l’air.»
— Jean- François Chicoine, M.D., FRCPC, *Préface de PERDUE SANS LA NATURE* par François Cardinal

HABITAT FOR HUMANS: the core objective needed for the Schéma

The *Schéma d’aménagement et de développement de l’Agglomération de Montréal* seeks to reiterate and reinforce the commitment given in Mayor Coderre’s remarks at the beginning of this year. As Montreal now moves to bring its land use plan into conformity with the *Plan métropolitain d’aménagement et de développement (PMAD)*, citizens of the Montreal Agglomeration will dearly hope that, above all, quality of life will be the guiding principle. Redefining Montreal over the coming decades must, create not merely habitation for workers, their families and taxpayers, however clean and affordable, but more broadly *habitat for humans*.

With the present schéma hearings focused on refining goals defined in the PMAD, and with a larger population and greater densification of Montreal’s urban core being a key objective, it is important to have a well-conceived definition of human well-being that is comprehensive, that takes into account societal needs across all sectors, and that is able to conceive of people beyond their narrow roles as contributors to the economy and the tax base.

Drawing families to take up residence in Montreal will be difficult unless the city is perceived to be a safe, clean and inviting living space. Perceptions of neighbourhood poverty, homelessness and crime will factor negatively in the decisions of those looking at a home on-island and, particularly, in the city core. Noise, traffic, crowding, uncleanliness, isolation, anonymity, and fears of delinquency and crime, are all downside contributors to the choices people make about their place of domicile, whatever their income status.

Efficient transport, affordable and commodious housing, public housing for the poor and socially dependant, convenient public schools and ready access to local services are all unassailable features of a progressive plan and are welcome parts of the land use scheme as it is given. However, by themselves alone they are an insufficiency. They serve basic physical needs but do not necessarily nourish the spirit, and do not in themselves contribute either to personal or societal enhancement.

Beyond householders with a certain heightened affluence and level of accomplishment, the planning process must accomodate as a major priority those parts of the population that are in some respects at a disadvantage or that have reduced prospects. According to figures in the Schéma for the Agglomeration, 29.7% of the population lives at or below the poverty line, defined as households subsisting on 50% or less of the CMM’s median income of \$53,072. That is a figure that has been as high as 41% in recent decades (2002) and could rise again.

Attention needs to be paid to those afflicted with mental health issues, physical disability, substance abuse problems, poverty, familial abuse, deviant social behaviour, and just plain boredom, within a population sector concentrated in the centre of the city. Working deep solutions to these societal challenges as part of land and services planning is desperately needed. These solutions must extend to quality surroundings beyond simple lodgings and community services.

If the city hopes to invite families back into the city core, it must not be simply to attractive and affordable homes and schools, but to neighbourhoods that are attractive and inviting, as well. This means enjoyable living spaces extending beyond the walls of a simple place of domicile. This is, after all, what young families seek when they bolt the city for the suburbs, and must be seen as a first order priority. Families seek the best home *and community* available within a price range they can afford. And they want a quality environment wherein children can develop as children in a setting conducive to the needs of children. Could this lack be a factor in why Montreal has been experiencing population deflation?

QUALITY OF LIFE REQUIRES QUALITY OF LIVING SPACE

A community that hopes to offer up a «*cadre de vie de qualité*» is one where nature is everywhere evident and abundant and readily accessible close to home.

A growing body of scientific literature is now establishing that exposure to diverse natural surroundings with their sights, sounds, smells and rich complexity are essential to human health. In children, experiences in nature contribute indispensably to proper growth, as well as to affective and cognitive development. Yet in that part of the draft plan devoted to quality of life too little recognition is given to this aspect, while considerable space is devoted to different sorts of affordable housing and service utilities devoted to “health, education, culture, sports and tourism.” This vision, sadly, equates life’s values with infrastructure and the services those bring. It fails to see people as more than domesticated urban livestock, albeit human, that serves and brings benefit to the urban economy.

According to Tableau 1, on page 29 of the Schéma, 80.8% of housing units in the Agglomeration consist of apartments, a figure that rises to 85.9% in Montreal proper. No figure is given for the availability of either natural or green space in proximity to these apartment dwellers, who presumably have little access to private garden space. A distance of 400 metres has been suggested as an upper benchmark distance to the nearest natural space in some literature, a figure that may be debated. However, in response, no comparable criterion is to be found in the document.

Clearly this is an egregious omission on the part of Montreal planners, given the very poor ratio of greenspace per capita compared with other major urban centres in Canada. According to figures made public this year in a report by the McGill University School of Environment (MUSE), Montreal on average has 1.2 hectares of greenspace per 1000 people, while Toronto has 3.24 hectares and Ottawa nearly 8. It is astounding that this very considerable deficit does not feature in the plan, particularly as it applies to the already most densely infrastructuralized residential neighbourhoods in the city core. Indeed, these are among the very sectors earmarked for further densification in line with criteria set out in the PMAD and where the ratio of greenspace per capita is at its lowest. Against the World Health Organization’s standard of .9 hectares per 1000 people, the most densely developed residential neighbourhoods can provide barely half that figure, a little more than .45 hectares. Redressing this deplorable shortfall should mean that no suitable and available vacant space would be considered too small to protect.

The Institut national de santé publique du Québec, in a document entitled *Les espaces vert urbain et la santé, 2011*, notes that 80% of the surface of Montréal is covered either in buildings or asphalt. This important research compilation speaks authoritatively to the negative physical and psychological effects of a highly infrastructuralized environment, such as Montreal is. It also points convincingly to the positive, miti-

gating health effects attributed to close contact with nature, as summarised in its concluding sentences, here quoted.

«En outre, plusieurs études suggèrent que les espaces verts urbains sont associés à une meilleure santé auto-rapportée et diagnostiquée, un meilleur niveau d'activité physique, un moindre taux de mortalité, moins de symptômes psychologiques, moins d'anxiété, dépression et stress, et un niveau de cohérence sociale plus important. De plus, quelques études suggèrent que ces liens sont plus forts parmi les groupes de la population les plus désavantagés. Bien que des études futures seront nécessaires dans le but d'affiner l'analyse des relations observées, il semble que les espaces verts sont très importants pour la santé en milieu urbain et doivent être considérés comme un élément central lors de la planification urbaine.»

Clearly, this should be central to any rational definition of «un cadre de vie de qualité» and clearly, in Montreal, it is not. Those examining the Schéma are left to conclude that green spaces, and in particular those richly endowed with indigenous biodiversity, are not considered as a central element in the urban planning process.

Making Montreal a truly green city must encompass more than simply deriving ecological services from green roofs, and planted walls and streetside tree canopy, as valuable as these are; the major purpose of re-greening initiatives, in effect, appears to be reducing the heat island effect, rainwater retention, air purification and enhanced property values. Much more than this people need a place to “forest bathe,” as has become the practice in Japan, a finding of refuge and comfort in natural spaces large enough to lose oneself in.

DEFINING CHARACTERISTICS OF THE CITYSCAPE

Montreal is a city recognized for its cultural life and old-world charm. As a major metropolis, it is considered a centre for the arts, and draws attention for its contributions to theatre, cinema, music, literature, the visual arts, fashion and architecture, not only in the French-speaking world but globally. To its vibrant francophone cultural scene it adds the energies that derive as well from its minority communities. Montreal is, admittedly, a city of world renown.

That being said, Montreal also faces many of the challenges that afflict large cities worldwide. It is quintessentially a place of limitation, direction and prohibition. From ubiquitous signage informing citizens what and what not to do, and where and where not to go, to the physical indicators and barriers presented by urban infrastructure itself, people find their independent options limited. These restrictions on behaviour, everywhere evident, are reinforced by extensive by-laws that define penalties for non-compliance, electronic surveillance devices that keep citizens forever under watch and a corps of police officers that sees the rules are adhered to. Entering public parks other than by a path and straying onto the grass can draw fines between \$100 and \$1000, depending on the number of offenses and the whimsy of enforcers, according to bylaws that remain on the books. If there is offense, then surely such draconian regulation, enforced or not, is it.

No list of these constraining features could ever be complete because they are so numerous, and, indeed, are embedded in the very design and layout of the city. The grid or labyrinth of streets, depending on the age of the neighbourhood, determines the trajectory to be followed from start to finish for anyone traversing a neighbourhood by foot or on wheels. And the streets are, by their nature, designed for passage. Generally speaking, they do not present themselves as places to linger, to be at ease or to make social contact. Particularly with strangers, who make up by far the greatest number of people encountered on sidewalks, attempts to engage might arouse considerable suspicion and irritation. Loitering is not welcome as posted signs so often make clear.

This is of course self-evident to any urbanite. It is what he or she was born into and the condition to which he or she has become habituated. Citizens, generally, can conceive of no other arrangement in their living space.

Restrictions on behaviour are seen to be necessary, given how cities have developed since the beginning of the industrial age. They ensure safety, security and efficiency, all of which are essential in the modern urban context. Citizens put aside their frustrations and conclude that where they live is as good as it gets. Adverse reaction to modern urban conditions takes place at deeper levels, often beyond reach of conscious examination, in physical and mental health symptoms, reduced cognitive function and aberrant social behaviour.

So, development takes place where it will. The constraints grow along with it, generally increasing rather than diminishing year by year. And along with that growth comes a growth in stress and an abnormal physiological and psychological state. The stated goals in the PMAD and the Agglomeration Schéma to densify the city core must deal with the implications of that objective not only for existing residents, but also for any new arrivals. More crowded conditions and an improved *cadre de vie* might be incompatible objectives.

DEFINING CHARACTERISTICS OF HUMANS IN THE PRIMORDIAL LANDSCAPE

Humans, of course, did not evolve in cities. Our suite of biological and ethological adaptations was not a response to conditions in cities, and particularly modern cities in the age of automobiles. We are and remain essentially what we were as hunter-gathers through the hundreds of thousands of years of our prehistory. Biomechanically and metabolically we are designed to move efficiently through long distances on foot. We, like other animals, are designed to be alert to and cope with ever present danger, including that brought by predators. We behave out of curiosity, a need to explore and are by nature creative and inventive. We are also fundamentally tribal and socially attuned to cooperate within a maximum band size of 150 people (the so-called Dunbar Number). We are also fundamentally inclined to scheming and thinking about how we can, to one degree or another, gain advantage over competitors. These proclivities need satisfying and if they are frustrated they may lead to problematic behaviours, that may even extend to delinquency and criminality. They are seen to one degree or another in the development of children right up to adulthood. They are not necessarily compatible with an urban setting preoccupied with safety and efficiency, and an obsession with above and beyond all building the economy.

THE PRIMAL NEED FOR STIMULATION

Zoologist and animal ethologist Desmond Morris, in his 1969 book, “The Human Zoo,” speaks convincingly to the constant “stimulus struggle” that humans engage in, and how the removal of stimulation can lead to considerable stress, anxiety, even neuroses, and in the end deviant behaviour. No less than captive animals living in sparse, unrewarding conditions, humans may respond in bizarre, atypical and even aggressive ways. I consider that this work, and a number of others like it, should be required reading by urban planners. I have listed several in a bibliography following my conclusion.

FREE PLAY: A CHILDHOOD ESSENTIAL

Climbing Trees, Skinned Knees and Getting Dirty

Childhood play, undirected or interfered with by adults, answers to an innate drive in children, as it does in other mammals that must adapt through learning, that equips them in the most effective way to cope with the physical challenges that they will later face in life. This sort of activity gives them a chance to discover their own limitations and capabilities while exploring the possibilities and challenges the play space provides. They learn first hand from experience and this builds confidence that they are able to take on their surroundings on their own terms.

Free play, the evolutionarily determined natural occupation of children, involves running, jumping, throwing, climbing into and over whatever prominently presents itself, and allows youngsters to extend their understanding of space, while developing self-assurance and strong muscles and bones. Nowhere is the need to engage space more evident than in self devised activities that involve hiding — finding or constructing places to hide themselves from others, or hiding away objects for others to find, as in treasure hunts. These are activities that arise from deeply-embedded, primeval imperatives that prepare children for their futures as adults.

Young children need to learn new concepts — and skills — in the order that is meaningful and useful to them. They will build new learning on a solid base of their own construction and importantly, at a time when they are ready. They will learn through emulation and sharing, while interacting with their peers, all the while developing communication and social skills that are relevant to them. Adults pushing children beyond their inclinations and levels of readiness is generally counterproductive and can even be dangerous to their self-esteem and emotional stability.

ORGANIZED ACTIVITIES

Author Richard Louv writes in his groundbreaking book *LAST CHILD IN THE WOODS*:

“ ... the obesity epidemic has coincided with the greatest increase in organized sports for children in history. What are kids missing that soccer and Little League cannot provide? Generalized, hour-to-hour physical activity is the likely absent ingredient. The physical and emotional exercise that children enjoy when they play in nature is more varied and less time-bound than organized sports.... While it's true that heart disease and other negative effects of children's physical inactivity usually take decades to develop, another result is more readily documented: kids get depressed.”

Structured activities in school and in the community have their place, and may be important in the development of the next generation as they prepare for their eventual roles as adults. Children watch and emulate not only their peers but their elders and have an inborn wish to grow and do the things they see adults do.

However, as given in the Schéma under the heading “LES ÉQUIPEMENTS COLLECTIFS,” it seems the only recreational spaces and facilities offered up to children will involve scheduled, “organized” activities under the direction, supervision and adjudication of adults. One is led to ask where in the Schéma space will be made for citizens, including children, to be themselves in spaces relatively free of limitation and direction.

Where, in our future city, will the copious swathes of natural space that children need to be children, and eventually well-adjusted adults, come from?

CONCLUSION

There is one singular characteristic of children that is incontrovertible: they do not remain children. In a few decades they become the dominant drivers of both the economy and of life in the city. They will define our society, and they will be the product of what we now allow them to be. And, one way or another, they will preside over the fate of a sorely troubled planet. Dysfunctional children become dysfunctional adults. This is not a trivial consideration.

In creating the Montreal of tomorrow, we must not think so much of constructing buildings as building a healthy, sane and inventive society. Montreal will need a city that softens its edges and that is more in tune with people's deeper needs. Those needs are not more buildings but greater contact with biodiverse spaces that resonate within us. I think of a space like the Meadowbrook site in Lachine, enhanced with the species richness that once graced it. I think of Angell Woods, protected to the total extent available. I think of important sites «en friches» in northern Ste-Anne-de-Bellevue and Western Pierrefonds, and the Petty property on Île-Bizard. I think of the marvellous “Champs des Possibles” in The Plateau that is a natural magnet for the young and curious. I think of the long defended and now destroyed Parc Oxygène. And I think, particularly, of all those impoverished neighbourhoods in the city centre without a natural space to be seen that will soon undergo densification.

We need considerably more nature in the city, in the form of conserved *and* restored spaces, than we have. Providing such would be the true route to a «*cadre de vie de qualité.*» Please, make restoring *habitat for humans* your chief priority!

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