

Times

The Franciscan site – To build or not to build?



The now empty site where the old Franciscan site used to be



The project as conceived by Groupe Prével

By Sergio Martinez
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Saint Francis of Assisi might have been a man of peace and also a defender of the poor, but now, ironically, in Montreal a battle is being waged over the destiny of the site that belonged to the order he founded, a battle which also involves lots of money.

It all started with the

decision made by the Franciscans in 2006 to vacate their historic site at 1980-2080 René-Levesque West, between the entrance to Highway 720 and Atwater Ave. in the west end of the city. A few years later a fire destroyed their church which accelerated the exodus of the religious order from the area.

The site became a magnet for real estate developers: close to important avenues, with a metro station nearby, central yet

relatively quiet, and surrounded by a middle-class neighbourhood; the location was perfect for a large scale project. Residents in the area, however, had a different idea in mind. For them, the now demolished religious installations were already surrounded by gardens and green space, which with just some few structural modifications, adequate lighting, and indeed, a substantial investment on the part of the city which should have pur-

chased the land, it could have become a new park for that sector. It could even include a soccer field for young people. Having a new park in the area was then the demand of the neighbours.

Residents of the area grouped in the Peter McGill Community Council have already prepared a brief which the organization intends to present on June 7. That's the date of the next hearing on the topic organized by the Office de Consultation publique de Montréal, an autonomous body that has the mandate to hold public hearings on the main projects in the city. In part of its brief the Council states that: "Despite the presence of more than 34,000 residents, among them 2,800 families, 4,300 senior citizens and a large number of young people, the Peter McGill district has a percentage of green space that is six times lower than environmental norms, that is 0.6 hectare par 1,000 residents while the recommended ratio is 4 hectares par 1,000 residents."

During the information session held on May 12 representatives from the developer, Groupe Prével, pointed out that they have set aside a small pub-

lic space with a garden in front of the two towers they plan to build. Another public park will be placed on the western part of the site which will have access from Souvenir St. and from René Levesque via a small path. Even though the developers tried their best to convince the commissioners and the public that their project will not be in contrast with the general ambience of the area, most of the residents remained doubtful.

The project itself has quite impressive dimensions: two 20-storey towers containing 360 lodging units plus 210 underground parking spaces—some units will be reserved for low-income potential buyers—plus some visitors parking and the preservation of the gardens and green areas that were part of the Franciscan site. The Saint Jacques ravine which is just behind the property should not be affected and it will be preserved in its natural state, said the developers. The two heritage mansions in the site, Masson House and Judah House will be maintained and remain in Franciscans' hands and would probably be rented for housing or office use.

At this point, it seems

unlikely that the project could be stopped. The city supports it and in fact, the city prevented the calling of a referendum on the issue by resorting to Article 89 of the law on public consultation which allows the city to bypass that step in cases of projects of "major importance." This move by the city made many residents angry since it circumvents an important democratic process: to seek the citizens' consent when projects of such magnitude are planned which are likely to have a significant impact on their neighbourhood.

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