
How David beat Goliath in Milton Park: [FINAL Edition]

Type Article de journal

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Résumé THE MILTON-PARK AFFAIR Canada's Largest Citizen-Developer Confrontation; By Claire Helman; Vehicule Press; 183 pp, \$12.95 The story has all the ingredients for a gripping drama: powerful capitalists, insensitive politicians and heroic citizens squaring off defiantly against helmeted riot police to save their neighborhood. Few Montrealers know it, but it's all part of the city's history. In the 1960s and '70s, a group of residents in the Milton Park district north of downtown fought a developer's plan to raze their district for a mammoth real-estate development. After a long battle, the citizens won, saving most of their houses and turning their once-doomed neighborhood into the largest co-operative housing project in Canada. The David-and-Goliath story is chronicled by Claire Helman in *The Milton-Park Affair*. It began in what Helman describes as an "urban village" of students, drifters, immigrants and professionals clustered in mostly rundown rowhouses in the area bounded by Milton St., Pine Ave., Hutchinson St. and St. Famille St. To residents it was home; to the city and the development company Concordia Estates - developers of Place Bonaventure - it was a slum. Working together, the city and Concordia earmarked the neighborhood for a grandiose, '60s-style redevelopment scheme: they would tear down a six-block area and put up a gleaming new real-estate complex. The proposal triggered a classic confrontation. Residents came to resort to "guerrilla theatre" - like volleyball matches in the streets to block traffic - that culminated in 1972 in the occupation of several abandoned houses slated for demolition. For Montreal, it was a turning point. Milton Park marked the first time citizens rose up to reject the postwar vision of "progress" and an authoritarian style of municipal government. "(It was) a confrontation, not just between business and socialists, but about a new consciousness, new ways of thinking about cities, new kinds of democracy and people power," Ray Affleck, the project architect who resigned over the controversy, is paraphrased in the book as saying. Milton Park was the breeding ground for a new generation of activists in Montreal, a generation that would eventually take power in Montreal city hall. It is no coincidence that some of the organizers of the project were elected in last November's city election, such as John Gardiner, now executive committee member responsible for housing. "People power" brought Milton Park's giant developer to its knees; the FLQ crisis and a faltering economy crippled the project permanently. Concordia managed to build only Phase I - a hotel, apartment towers and a shopping plaza on Park Ave. Today, the complex stands as testimony to the folly of the project, a vindication to the citizens who fought it. The hotel has changed hands several times, the apartment tower has had trouble finding tenants and many stores are faring poorly. But the Milton Park saga had a happy ending. With the help of Bronfman family member Phyllis Lambert and a vote-seeking federal government, the remaining houses in Milton Park were bought off the private market to be renovated and returned to the occupants as co-operatives. Today, the co-operatives form a "low-rent oasis" to about 2,000 people, some of them pensioners and low-income earners, some of them middle-class. While the tale is dramatic, Helman gets so wrapped up in the

arcane details of the plot that she often fails to capture the headiness and excitement of what was Montreal's most compelling urban battle. Most readers won't want to wade through the tedious details about the comings-and-goings of the Milton Park Citizens' Committee, much less fight their way through the forest of acronyms blanketing the book. Helman rightly pays tribute to the numerous Montrealers who, against the odds, took up the battle to save Milton Park, often at the risk of their jobs. To many of them, their fight was not just about saving old houses but about a "better world" that protected the traditionally defenceless. It is a shame the book doesn't give a voice to some of these people - the ordinary residents, such as immigrants and the elderly, with normal fears and apprehensions about the project. One also wishes the author had interviewed the developers, one-time Communists who are typecast in the book as one-dimensional villains. Ultimately, The Milton-Park Affair is an excellent reference book. Helman has done prodigious research and offers a blow-by-blow account of a fascinating part of Montreal's history. In the latter part of the book, she also does a good job of telling the stories of people, such as loners and the elderly, who benefit from the project. And the book helps raise important questions about the future of co-operative housing and development projects in the city. Have Montrealers learned a lesson from Milton Park, or are we doomed to repeat our mistakes? Ingrid Peritz is The Gazette's municipal affairs reporter.

URL

https://search-proquest-com.res.banq.qc.ca/docview/431486250?accountid=8612

Publication

The Gazette

Date

1987-05-16

Pages

p. J-8

Select in Zotero

zotero://select/library/items/KGWGMBRV

Date d'ajout

10/11/2019 à 16:49:48

Modifié le

10/11/2019 à 16:51:58

Milton Park stands at crossroads in urban planning: [FINAL Edition]

Type

Article de journal

Auteur

Isabel Corral

Résumé

They don't build neighborhoods like they used to. This may well have been the rallying call of Montreal's Milton Park residents in the late 1960s and '70s. As recounted in Claire Hellman's recently published book, The Milton Park Affair, these residents began a battle with developers that culminated in the creation of the largest resident-controlled low-rent housing project in Canada. The neighborhood, bounded by Hutchison St. to the west, Pine Ave. to the north, Ste. Famille St. to the east and Milton St. to the south, was threatened with demolition, which a number of residents strenuously opposed. Although their opposition was not initially successful in stopping the demolition of housing and subsequent construction of five high-rises in a first phase of La Cite, later phases of the project were not realized and the traditional housing stock was saved, renovated and amassed to form the Milton Park co-operative development. The co-operative neighborhood, while

largely considered a success, was costly to develop and still has some detractors. Most people agree, however, that Milton Park wins hands down over La Cite when we compare the two developments. With the possibilities hindsight affords us, it is interesting to look at the ironies inherent in the whole struggle and development process. The neighborhood dates back to the second half of the 19th century, when Les Religieuses Hospitalieres de Saint-Joseph (founded by Jeanne Mance) built their new hospital, Hotel-Dieu on an estate quite a distance from congested Old Montreal. The area, previously occupied by a smattering of mansions owned by English-speaking Montrealers, was quickly transformed during the 1870s-1900s into an upper-middle class residential neighborhood inhabited by newly arrived francophone merchants who built two and three-storey rowhouses in the Victorian Picturesque style popular at the time. The buildings, with their stained glass windows, wrought iron balconies, detailed greystone facades and carved wooden decoration, reflected the tastes and wealth of the emerging French gentry. It was not until after the Second World War that forces combined to change the residential nature of the community. With the advent of the suburb, many upscale residents began to move out of the area to newer affluent neighborhoods. At the same time, the Pine-Park interchange was built, increasing traffic in the area and decreasing its attractiveness as a residential community. Finally, economic forces and the presence of a large student population led to the subdivision of many large Victorian houses into rooming houses and small apartments. With absentee landlordism and speculation on the increase, and a transient population occupying many buildings, the physical state of the housing was deteriorating at an alarming rate. Yet this physical deterioration was not accompanied by a social one. The heterogeneous mix of students, immigrants, professionals and the blue collar workers that lived in Milton Park still felt a sense of community and believed that this traditional type of urban form made for a friendly "urban village." This was the setting for what was to become a 15-year urban battle over the rights of a community. Proximity to the downtown had made the land more valuable than the buildings standing on it and in the 1960s, Concordia Estates, a large-scale developer began buying up properties in the area with the objective of replacing the low density, Victorian style housing with a new urban form. It was a modern real-estate complex: a large scale, multifunctional highrise project spanning six city blocks. While the developers and the city considered the area a slum (efforts were made to get it declared an urban renewal area in the great North American tradition of the 1960s), the residents, certain urban planners and academics at the University of Montreal claimed otherwise. Run down housing did not a slum make. Many vowed that the area would not follow in the footsteps of Little Burgundy, where a municipal urban renewal scheme levelled blocks of "unsuitable housing," forced residents to relocate and transformed a living community into empty lots. Residents organized and met with the developers, the city and politicians in an effort to get the project stopped. While they generated support for their cause and illegally occupied some houses, in the summer of 1972, 255 buildings were demolished to make way for the construction of Phase I of La Cite. But suddenly the tide changed. Increasing political instability in Quebec and changing economic conditions meant that the developers fell on hard times. This, combined with evolving notions on how to intervene and develop the urban environment put a halt to the construction of subsequent phases. Finally, in the late 1970s efforts were renewed to save the

remaining housing. The financial difficulties of the developers, much hard work and politicking by concerned individuals and the development of government programs financing co-operative and non-profit housing finally allowed the residents to realize their plans to control their housing. By the mid-1980s, 597 dwellings had been rehabilitated in 135 buildings previously owned by Concordia Estates. The buildings had been organized into 14 co-operatives and seven non-profit organizations, literally taking the housing off the market and doing away with speculation which drives up housing costs. The result is that La Cite (renamed Place du Parc in yet another change of owners) and the Milton Park co-operative neighborhood, having waged battle for 15 years, are now forced to co-exist. Two contrasting urban forms live side by side in what could be considered a symbiotic relationship. While the co-op residents had at one point boycotted Steinberg and other shops in the La Cite complex, the profitability of these stores is now due largely to patronage of many co-op residents. And while the project's management did not care for the radicals of the 1960s, the co-operative project's inauguration saw the La Cite hotel hosting a free dinner for the community. Recently, the residential complex was marketing its units using the charm of the turn of the century greystones it once threatened to demolish. While La Cite's high-rise towers, out of scale with the existing architecture, have physically dominated Milton Park's rowhouses, the complex's financial difficulties and many years of high vacancy rates reveal its failure. However there has been a beneficial side effect. It has been claimed that residents organized because of the developer's plan to develop the neighborhood on a large scale, and that had the company built each highrise separately, as was already happening, the neighborhood would have eventually disappeared. It was also due to the developer's plan and the opposition it provoked, that in 1976 the city downzoned the area disallowing the construction of any more high-rises. Today, sensitive infill projects are built on vacant lots, existing housing is renovated and the livable scale and architectural heritage of the area is maintained. The Milton Park residents, aided by good timing, have had an important effect on their environment's development. However, while they now have their housing secured and have managed to preserve a large part of their neighborhood, they have not been able to stop the area from evolving. Gentrification and condominium conversion are apparent in the surrounding streets. External elements such as the upgrading of nearby commercial arteries are affecting the neighborhood. The Milton Park-La Cite experience and subsequent events show that areas change, for better and for worse. We can influence change, but the organic city does not allow us to control it.

URL

https://search-proquest-com.res.banq.qc.ca/docview/431486145?accountid=8612

Publication

The Gazette

Date

1987-05-30

Pages

p. J-16

Select in Zotero

zotero://select/library/items/WWSYCP5P

Date d'ajout

10/11/2019 à 16:53:13

Modifié le

10/11/2019 à 16:56:03

Overdale project's foes ask city to arrange deal so tenants can stay on: [FINAL Edition]

Type Article de journal

Résumé Opponents of a \$100-million condominium project on downtown Overdale Ave. want the developer to sell buildings on the lot to allow tenants to remain in their homes. The Overdale Tenants Association yesterday proposed to the city that it persuade the developer to sell the buildings in exchange for permission to expand the project. "The city should buy the existing buildings or encourage (the developer) to sell them to the federal or provincial government, a non-profit housing association or the tenants themselves as was done in Milton Park," architect Michael Fish said. Working on behalf of the tenants, Fish sent the city a scheme he drew up that would accommodate both the developers and the tenants who will be relocated if the project proceeds. The developers plan to build luxury condominiums on a lot bounded by Dorchester Blvd., Overdale Ave., and Lucien L'Allier and Mackay Sts. Some dwellings will be demolished, and developers have promised \$1.2 million to rehouse the 69 tenants who will be displaced. The Montreal executive committee approved plans for the project on Wednesday, but said permits to demolish the buildings in question will not be issued until new lodgings are built for the tenants affected. The development plan will be made public on Monday when it is presented to council, which will not vote on it until a month later. Fish said his proposal that the city allow the developers - Grinch Investments Ltd. and Waldorf Realities Ltd. - a profitable increase in the density of their project in exchange for selling the existing buildings is one the developer "cannot refuse." Fish estimated that the buildings could sell for \$700,000 and be renovated through a joint federal-provincial program for about \$1.1 million. "It is not acceptable to expel these people for the sole reason that their incomes are low," Fish said. "These people will supply a variety and human concern for the area when the project is developed and lived in." Carole Burgess, a tenants' representative, said about 45 per cent are low-income workers, 45 per cent are senior citizens, and about 10 per cent are students and welfare recipients. "Relocation will destroy our community," she said. Heritage Montreal yesterday also denounced the developers' and the city's "paternalism and irresponsibility" toward the tenants.

URL <https://search-proquest-com.res.banq.qc.ca/docview/431520014?accountid=8612>

Publication The Gazette

Date 1987-08-15

Pages p. A-3

Select in Zotero <zotero://select/library/items/2A8TYN58>

Date d'ajout 10/11/2019 à 17:05:08

Modifié le 10/11/2019 à 17:09:25

Marqueurs :

Fish, Héritage Montréal, Overdale

Quality report

- Item has no authors