

Reworking the Main

A missed opportunity to propel Montreal into the twenty-first century

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The Tremblay administration recently launched a \$25 million project to upgrade Saint Lawrence Boulevard, from Sherbrooke to Mont-Royal. With the \$6 million already invested between René-Lévesque and Sherbrooke, this makes \$31 million that the administration is spending to beautify the Main. But not in the right way. When we look at what other large cities are doing and what Montreal could become, when we see that our infrastructure needs major repairs, we should not lose this opportunity to apply our will and intelligence to rethinking Saint Lawrence Boulevard in the light of today's challenges.

Everyone knows that Montreal's underground infrastructure and her streets and sidewalks are a shambles. Gérald Tremblay has made it a priority to bring them up to standard. He has brought in two new taxes to do this, one to rebuild the water system and the other for streets. These taxes are bringing in \$67 million for the City in 2006. The new money makes it possible to invest \$150 million in the aqueducts, twice the amount of past years. Including the simultaneous efforts above and below ground, \$500 million has been allocated to infrastructure this year. More is planned for 2007, 2008 and the following years, to the extent that several billion dollars will be invested in our streets, a veritable James Bay.

The cost of a project depends on its scale. For Saint Lawrence south of Sherbrooke, it is a surface renovation at \$8 M/km. Between Sherbrooke and Mont-Royal, substantial underground work raises the cost to \$16 M/km. Rebuilding Saint Denis between Maisonneuve and Sherbrooke cost something on the same order. McGill Street, between De la Commune and Saint-Jacques, needed a complete makeover, at a cost of \$39 M/km.

These projects cause a lot of inconvenience. The liveliest part of Saint-Denis was closed for two months in the Autumn of 2005, hastily repaved for the Winter, and closed again in the Spring. Since the beginning of the Summer, it was on Saint Lawrence south of Sherbrooke that driving and walking were difficult. But this was nothing compared to McGill, practically closed to traffic since Spring. As for Saint Lawrence north of Sherbrooke, there remain only two lanes of traffic, and sometimes only one.

Rebuilding a street is expensive and annoying, agreed. We should at least see a difference when it is all over. Unfortunately, this is hardly the case.

On Saint-Denis, sidewalks and street are almost the same as they were before. There are still two lanes for traffic and two for parking. Since this is a place where it is important to be seen behind the wheel of a glittering vehicle, the congestion is here to stay. The mass of pedestrians is confined to sidewalks around three meters wide, with no improvements to make things safer and more comfortable, especially at intersections. To the naked eye, all that has changed on Saint-Denis is that the cement of the sidewalks and the asphalt on the street are new.

It won't be much better on Saint Lawrence, since we are keeping two lanes of traffic and two of parking. This means that the boulevard will remain a part of Montreal's arterial network whose primary function is to disgorge the maximum number of automobiles and other vehicles. They proclaim loudly that the sidewalks will be 75 cm. wider. But how can we be happy if the highway function doesn't change, in other words if this is done to the detriment of width of the street, which has up to now allowed for cyclists? In private, a member of the Tremblay administration reproached us as follows: "You should be proud of yourselves in Projet Montréal. By clamoring in favour of pedestrians, you've lost us the equivalent of a cycling path. Great result!" As if we wanted the space for pedestrians to come from the cyclists instead of from the automobile. The "renovators" of Saint Lawrence continue to think automobile and parking spaces. They offer esthetic and historic refinements which would be appreciated in a better context, but which here merely mask their lack of clear vision.

The new McGill Street stands apart from Saint-Denis and Saint Lawrence by virtue of its finishing materials, since it is a prolongation of the luxurious installations in the international quarter. Here the stroller will find the most polished development; here, where there are very few cyclists, we find a magnificent cycling path, abruptly interrupted as soon as it reaches the dense downtown traffic.

Massive investment in our infrastructure is urgent. It will disturb residents and change the functioning of significant parts of Montreal for long periods. Instead of continuing to promote fluid traffic flow, let us seize the moment to adapt our city to the values of the future: priority to pedestrians, bicycles and non-polluting vehicles, optimization of public transit, taking account of the quality of life of residents and restoring urban space to the benefit of the human beings we are. For the rest, the Tremblay administration claims to be holding to these values through its recent pedestrian charter or its strategic plan for sustainable development. To be avant-gard on paper is all very well; to be so in reality is better.

We have studied the return of the streetcar to our streets for eight years now. Gérald Tremblay, visiting Paris last February, said he was amazed by the New Tramway on the "boulevard Des Maréchaux". In fact, we have lost count of the cities, from Barcelona to Dallas, by way of Strasbourg, Porto, Munich, Dublin or Istanbul, which have made the re-invented tramway the keystone of their urban policy. In Montreal, even if we can't establish the exact configuration of a New Tramway network, certain axes impose themselves, such as a connection between the downtown and the eastern end of the island, along Notre-Dame, or Pie IX and Henri-Bourassa boulevards, or Côte-des-Neiges road. But Saint Lawrence Boulevard enters entirely into this category, for at least two reasons: first, it is the first street east of Mount Royal to cross the island from the Saint Lawrence to the Back River; as well, when the Laval metro comes into service, the already overexploited Orange line will need relief.

In Paris, with one of the world's highest construction costs, the "Nouveau Tramway des Maréchaux" cost \$35 M/km, including everything: renewal of the underground infrastructure, construction of the railway, purchase of rolling stock, complete redevelopment of the boulevard. The work undertaken on Saint Lawrence is supposed to cost \$16 M/km. For barely more than twice that, without any more inconvenience to the people along the street, the historic axis of Saint Lawrence Boulevard would become the equivalent of Main Street in Houston, of "l'avenue Magdelone" in Montpellier or of the "boulevard Des Maréchaux" in Paris, which is to say one of the most beautiful arteries in the world (and this without excluding the automobile, which would

still have two lanes, even in the narrowest sections of the boulevard).

The present reworking of Montreal's infrastructure lacks vision and scope. It harks back to concepts of progress and modernity from the middle of the last century. We are going to spend billions of dollars to replace the pipes, pour cement and spread asphalt the way it was done sixty years ago.

It is not too late. The administration should interrupt the work long enough to take another look. The redevelopment of Saint Lawrence Boulevard should be the occasion to give a concrete sense to sustainable urban development and to propel Montreal at last into the twenty-first century.