MONTREAL’S PLATEAU MONT-ROYAL BOROUGH: AN INNOVATIVE APPROACH TO CONSERVING AND ENHANCING AN HISTORIC URBAN NEIGHBORHOOD

Isabelle Laterreur♠, Marlène Schwartz♣, Claude Laurin♦ & Susan Bronson♥

Abstract
In 2004, as part of the City of Montreal’s Master Plan review, the Plateau Mont-Royal Borough organized an extensive public consultation process to stimulate a collective reflection on planning and heritage conservation issues affecting its territory and to define a vision for the protection and future development of its urban landscape. While several issues were identified as major concerns for Plateau residents, heritage conservation was one of the most important ones. Citizens were more interested in conserving the heritage character of the urban landscape of their neighborhood as a whole than in conserving a limited series of isolated monuments defined as “heritage” by experts.

This paper presents the various steps undertaken by the Borough in developing bylaws to preserve the heritage character of its urban landscape as defined by its citizens during the public consultations. It will also link this approach to various recommendations advocated by international and national charters and guidelines.

We will begin with a brief history of the development of the Plateau Mont-Royal Borough, with specific reference to the urban morphology and architectural typologies that make up its urban landscape. We will then discuss the concerns raised by citizens during the public consultation, the changes to the regulatory model, the selected approach, and the resultant bylaws. We will conclude with some examples and a reflection on the relevance of the Plateau’s conservation approach to the recommendations of various charters and guidelines.

Keywords: urban conservation, public consultation, regulatory framework

1. Plateau context

From its foundation in 1642 until the early 19th century, the fortified town of Montreal and its suburban villages were concentrated mainly between the Saint Lawrence River and a steep incline leading to what is now Sherbrooke Street. At the top of this cliff and extending eastward from Mount Royal, was a large flat area known today as the Plateau Mont-Royal due to its geographic proximity to the mountain and its flat topography. Several villas and convents were constructed here, taking advantage of the large expanses of farmland, the fresh air, and views of the emerging industrial city below.

♠ Consultant for the Plateau Mont-Royal Borough
♣ Urban planner, Plateau Mont-Royal Borough
♦ Architect, Plateau Mont-Royal Borough
♥ Architect and member of Plateau Mont-Royal Planning Advisory Committee
By the 1860s, the rural landscape was gradually being transformed into a series of suburban municipalities that became, at the beginning of the 20th century, working-class and middle-class neighborhoods. Their dense urban landscape was composed predominantly of two- and three-storey rowhouses, or “plexes.” These adjoining buildings, which housed one apartment per floor, illustrate turn-of-the-century residential construction technology and municipal bylaws: they are clad in masonry and possess prefabricated windows, doors, cornices, and other decorative features. A dozen institutional and civic nodes and several dynamic commercial streets contributed to the quality of life in the neighborhood. In addition to residential, commercial and civic buildings, the urban landscape of the Plateau included streets, the more recent of which were lined with trees and gardens, back alleys, and a series of small and large urban parks. By 1930, the entire territory of the Plateau was completely built (Patri-Arch, 2003).

In 1992, the City of Montreal adopted a Master Plan that recognized this rich heritage by identifying about 30% of the Plateau’s urban landscape as “exceptional” and about 40% as “interesting.” It also identified over 100 individual buildings of particular heritage value (Ville de Montréal, 1993). A decade later, in 2002, a municipal amalgamation involved regrouping the Island of Montreal’s municipalities and the creation the present-day boroughs (Le Plateau-Mont-Royal, 2006). This led to the decentralization of urban planning and heritage management decisions, and gave each borough the responsibility of developing its own planning and heritage bylaws. The Plateau Mont-Royal Borough saw this as an ideal opportunity to adopt an innovative approach to defining, conserving and enhancing the unique heritage character of its urban landscape. More recently, the 2005 municipal elections paved the way for the creation of an even more practical and equitable heritage conservation framework. The newly elected officials were, for the most part, community-based activists, having have been elected on a platform of social and environmental change.1

---

1 For biographies of elected officials, refer to: http://ville.montreal.qc.ca/portal/page?_pageid=98,1482442&_dad=portal&_schema=PORTAL (last consulted 17 July 2007).
2. Citizens speak out

The Plateau Mont-Royal Borough, which spans almost 8 km² and houses over 101,000 citizens,² is the most densely populated neighborhood in Canada. It encompasses several historically and architecturally distinct neighborhoods. While 80% of its population is francophone, it is also the home of members of several cultural communities. Many of its residents are young – indeed, almost half are between 20 and 39 years old – and a high percentage are well-educated. The population includes many artists, university students and young families (Statistics Canada, 2001 census).

More than half of the 56,800 homes in the Plateau Mont-Royal were built before 1946. Today, 78% of these are still rental units, but this portion has decreased over the last few decades, during which the neighborhood has become increasingly “trendy” (Plateau Mont-Royal Borough). This reputation has led to the conversion of the rental units in rowhouses into separately-owned condominiums and co-properties as well as to major increases in property values. It has also sparked new development, including some poorly conceived renovation and construction projects.

In the fall of 2003, the Borough hosted a public consultation process known as the “Soirées du Plateau.” Since heritage conservation was identified as a priority by citizens, this forum provided the perfect opportunity to present the initial results of the Borough’s typomorphological study (Patri-Arch, 2003), which provided an in-depth analysis of the evolution of its urban landscape and architecture. Citizens immediately recognized the unique and special character of their built environment and realized their role as stakeholders in its conservation and future development (BRAC, 2003).

However, they also pointed out two weaknesses of the proposed heritage protection model: first, the wide range of conservation measures used for similar types of renovation projects and second, the different means of treating certain permit applications. For example, a permit to replace a window in a “heritage area” could take up to eight weeks to obtain, whereas a permit for a similar intervention in a non-designated area could be issued the same day (BRAC, 2003).

Residents also expressed concern about the progressive loss of the heritage character of their urban landscape largely due to the replacement of original architectural features by products of inappropriate design and poor quality. They noted as well that new constructions, more often than not, were essentially designed in response to profit-making strategies to the detriment of their architectural quality and the respect of their context. For example, maximizing density and area was often more important than compatibility with the streetscape, and parking spaces were often preferred over gardens in rear yards (BRAC, 2003).

Finally, while expressing their interest in heritage conservation and the improved integration of new buildings within the existing urban landscape, citizens also called for an innovative, contemporary approach to the development of their neighborhood, rather than an approach that relied solely on replication of historical features (BRAC, 2003).

² For population and area of the Plateau Mont-Royal borough, refer to: http://ville.montreal.qc.ca/portal/page?_pageid=98,1482255&_dad=portal&_schema=PORTAL (last consulted 17 July 2007).
3. Two major challenges

In response to these concerns, the Borough’s Planning Department identified two major challenges: (a) to develop a heritage protection model that could apply to its entire territory comprising 15,000 buildings, mostly modest in character, and (b) to ensure that this model could be applied efficiently and that permits could be issued on the same day whenever possible.

Now, most Québec municipalities focus on the protection of specific buildings and older parts of their territory through the creation of “historic monuments,” “protected areas” and “heritage sites.” This approach was rejected by the Plateau Mont-Royal Borough because it protects only selected buildings and areas while totally neglecting others. Furthermore, this approach requires Planning Advisory Committee input even for minor modifications to these buildings or areas, leading to delays in issuing permits.

However, a few Québec municipalities have opted for an approach that protects all buildings within their territory. This second model works best in upscale municipalities such as Westmount (an independent city on the Island of Montreal), which has a small number of buildings and a high proportion of resident property-owners who benefit directly from the maintenance and improvement of their property due to the increase in property values associated with heritage protection. This is not the case in the Plateau, where a majority of residents are renters and the dense urban landscape includes over 15,000 buildings.

The Plateau Mont-Royal Borough decided to apply this latter approach, but to adapt it to meet its particular needs, following the example of the Town of Mount Royal (another municipality on the Island of Montreal) (Ville de Mont-Royal, 2003). In order to define the unique heritage character of its territory, it undertook a typomorphological study that analyzed the urban development and dominant architectural typologies of its different neighborhoods. The resultant model led to a heritage protection bylaw that applies to the entire Borough. Due to the large number of buildings involved, it was necessary to implement this bylaw in a manner that would allow permits to be issued in a timely manner.

4. A few words on the typomorphological study

The typomorphological study allowed the Borough to divide its territory into a series of areas of distinct heritage character due to their urban development and architectural typologies. These landscape areas, or “aires de paysage,” and landscape units, or “unités de paysage,” formed the basis of a regulatory framework that could be easily and efficiently applied by municipal employees without necessitating the review by the Borough’s Planning Advisory Committee of each and every minor modification.

In order to divide its territory into distinct landscape areas, which in turn are subdivided into landscape units, the following three-step methodology was followed:

3 Each borough of the City of Montreal has a Planning Advisory Committee, or “comité consultatif d’urbanisme.”

4 For more information on the City of Westmount’s approach to heritage and planning, refer to: http://www.westmount.org/sections.cfm?Section_ID=6 (last consulted 7 July 2007).

5 (Patri-Arch, 2003)
• determination of the primary development periods and areas with similar typomorphological characteristics using historic maps and urban plans, as well as secondary sources;

• preliminary identification of landscape areas and landscape units based on urban development and form with specific reference to the proportions of blocks and lots;

• validation of the geographic limits of each landscape unit through extensive fieldwork in order to relate the urban form to the architectural typology, massing, and front and lateral setbacks of the existing built fabric.

This study led to an identification of the major influences on the development of the built landscape of the Plateau Mont-Royal: (1) the laying out of the major roads (before 1845), (2) the creation of the villages (between 1845 and 1880), and (3) the building boom (from 1880 to 1914).

As a result of this analysis, five landscape areas emerged, each representative of a particular period of construction and urban form. Within a specific landscape area, it was possible to identify a number of distinct urban landscape units. A total of 53 landscape units were defined in accordance with specific urban and architectural characteristics: the size and proportions of blocks and lots, the massing and setbacks of buildings, the architectural typologies, the treatment of the landscape, and the design of the façades, including materials, decorative elements, and proportions of masonry openings. The study also identified nine major architectural typologies, such as the duplexes and triplexes (rowhouse building forms unique to Montreal), and institutional buildings.

The typomorphological study includes about 60 descriptive « fiches » that have been made available to citizens, contractors, professionals, and Borough employees. It is an invaluable tool that serves as a reference on the heritage character of the urban landscape of the entire Plateau Mont-Royal, including all its buildings, even the most modest.

Image 2: The five landscape areas of the Plateau-Mont-Royal.
Source: Plateau Mont-Royal Borough, 2006
5. An innovative regulatory framework

This tool became the foundation for developing the Borough’s new regulatory framework. The challenge was to develop a framework that could be applied effectively to the Plateau’s large building stock and at the same time ensure the efficient treatment of permit requests, in particular those for minor modifications such as the replacement of doors and windows. Thanks to sound knowledge of the heritage character of each landscape unit and area and the development of an approach based on type of intervention, it became possible for Borough employees to handle a large portion of standard permit requests in a timely manner and to make better use of the Planning Advisory Committee’s time for more complex modifications and new construction.

Based on the interpretation of the urban landscape that emerged from the typomorphological study, bylaws were developed according to two major objectives: first, to preserve the original architectural components and character of existing buildings and second, to ensure that new construction is high-quality, well integrated into its context, and contemporary (as opposed to falsely traditional) in architectural expression and materials.

The heritage conservation provisions are embodied in two distinct bylaws that divide the building permit application process into two levels of approval and analysis. Normative regulatory provisions for more simple projects are integrated into the existing zoning bylaw (Le Plateau-Mont-Royal, 2007). A separate bylaw incorporating qualitative criteria is used for evaluating larger and more complex development projects (Le Plateau-Mont-Royal, 2006c).

The introduction of normative regulatory requirements for the conservation of original architectural features allows for three possible solutions, in the following order of priority: (1) maintenance and restoration; (2) replacement according to the original appearance and form, if maintenance is not possible; (3) replacement according to the original appearance and form, based on an evaluation of neighboring buildings with a similar typology, if the original architectural features are unknown (Le Plateau-Mont-Royal, 2007). An architectural technician applies these norms in the evaluation of more than 450 projects per year; this represents 3% of the Borough’s buildings. Already, after only a few years of application, the positive impact on the streetscapes can be appreciated.

For more complex projects, a bylaw introduces a discretionary element based on evaluation criteria (Le Plateau-Mont-Royal, 2006c). It provides for the evaluation by the Borough’s Planning Advisory Committee, which is composed of two elected officials and seven Borough residents, most of whom have expertise in architecture, urban planning or landscape architecture.

In order to facilitate the implementation of the new regulations, a photographic data base documents the façades of all buildings in the Borough in the years 2003, 2005 and 2007; this is accessible to employees responsible for applying the bylaws. The photos, which are updated every two years, facilitate the identification of original architectural elements and the monitoring of the evolution and impact of the new bylaws. Another innovative aspect of the Borough’s approach involves the dissemination of this new information. Since the heritage bylaws were adopted, the “fiches” showing the division of

---

6 (Laterreur and Laurin, 2006; Ville de Montréal, 2005)
the territory and the regulatory provisions are easily accessible to residents, owners and building professionals on the Borough’s Internet site.7

Featured in several reports and articles by local media, the new bylaws are becoming well-known and increasingly appreciated by the population. The approach has also resulted in the reduction of delays for issuing permits for minor renovation projects such as window, door and balcony railing modifications and replacements. Indeed, the portion of such permits issued on the same date as the application has increased from 27% to 64%, and the portion of permits issued within a week has increased from 60% to 77%. In addition, better use is made of the volunteer time of the Planning Advisory Committee, which now focuses on the qualitative evaluation of projects having the most impact, such as new construction and extensions. In the past, only 50% of such projects were assessed by this committee.

The Planning Advisory Committee is also responsible for approving applications for demolition permits (Le Plateau-Mont-Royal, 2006a). Each year, about a dozen permit requests for demolition, and their replacement projects, are reviewed. Normally, in keeping with sustainability and heritage conservation principles, demolitions are not approved unless the building in question is structurally unsound, a threat to public safety or health, or in a condition or on a site that prevents viable renovation or adaptive re-use. Demolitions are not approved unless a viable replacement project is approved.

6. Some examples

A few examples showing the application of the Plateau Mont-Royal Borough’s approach to heritage conservation are in order.

The bylaw that deals with the conservation of original architectural components is illustrated by a permit to modify this modest duplex with non-original exterior windows and a non-original balcony door. The property owner applied for a permit to change the two windows and the balcony door. As the bylaw requires a return to the original form and appearance, the owner was obliged to restore the interior casement windows, which were in good condition, and, for reasons of energy conservation and appearance, to replace the non-original aluminum double-hung exterior windows with new exterior windows that are similar in style to the original interior windows. The style of the original balcony door was identified thanks to the photographic inventory which showed a double door on the neighboring building that was once identical to the building in question.

7 These “fiches” can be consulted via the following link: http://ville.montreal.qc.ca/portal/page?_dad=portal&_pageid=98,6895555&_schema=PORTAL (last consulted 17 July 2007).
While the previous permit request was handled in a timely fashion by a Borough employee, this next example, being a permit request for a major modification to an existing building, necessitated a qualitative evaluation by the Planning Advisory Committee. The building, which was constructed as an office tower during the 1960s, was to be converted into an apartment building. Because of its height and massing, not to mention its modern architectural vocabulary and materials, it stands apart from the typical two- and three-storey buildings that make up most of the Borough’s urban landscape. Based on a heritage study undertaken by an independent expert, the Planning Advisory Committee approved the project and recommended that the transformed apartment building be contemporary in architectural expression, residential in character, and well-integrated with the distinct character of Sherbrooke Street, which includes a mixture of Victorian townhouses and modern towers. The revised proportions of the masonry openings, the addition of balconies, and the new masonry units helped to respond to the objectives of the Borough’s new bylaw.

The bylaw applying to new construction is illustrated by a recent building on Saint-Laurent Boulevard, the Borough’s first major transportation artery. Like the preceding example, the proposed project was evaluated by the Planning Advisory Committee on the basis of objectives and qualitative criteria that aim to ensure that its design was of high quality, that it integrated well with its context, and that its architectural expression was contemporary. The resultant infill project meets these objectives and criteria by respecting the height and alignment of neighboring buildings, by the presence of residential units...
with balconies on the upper stores and commercial activities with storefronts on the
ground floor, by the type and proportion of its masonry openings, by the division of its
façade into sections corresponding to former lots, by topping it with a simple cornice, and
by its resolutely contemporary expression and materials.

Requests for demolitions, as mentioned above, are also subjected to qualitative
evaluation. The above infill project required the demolition of a two-storey building,
originally designed for an automobile dealership. As well as favorably recommending the
replacement project, the Planning Advisory Committee approved the demolition because
there was little potential for the re-use of the building and its architectural expression,
proportions and form contributed little to the streetscape, creating a rupture with its
immediate context which consists mostly of three-storey buildings dating to the turn of
the 20th century.

7. Link with conservation charters and other doctrinal texts

To what extent was the development of the approach of Montreal’s Plateau Mont-
Royal Borough to conserving its heritage inspired and influenced by the multiplicity of
international and national charters and other doctrinal texts? While it cannot be claimed
that such documents guided the development of this approach, there is no question that
many of the fundamental principles promoted in these documents are exemplified by the
Borough’s methodology and the resultant bylaws.

With regards to methodology, the importance of having a sound knowledge of the
heritage to be protected and the use of an interdisciplinary approach to understanding
and documenting the history and heritage character of the urban landscape are pointed
out by the Charter for the Preservation of Québec’s Heritage (better known as the
Deschambault Declaration) (Deschambault Declaration, Article III) of 1982 and the Xi’an
Declaration on the Conservation of the Setting of Heritage Structures, Sites and Areas of
2005 (Articles 3, 4 and 12). The necessity of citizen consultation and participation is
emphasized in the Deschambault Declaration (Articles I and VII), and mentioned in
Canada’s Appleton Charter for the Protection and Enhancement of the Built Environment
of 1983, the Charter on the Conservation of Historic Towns and Urban Areas (better
known as the Washington Charter) of 1987 (Articles 3 and 5), Australia’s Burra Charter of
1999 (Background and Article 12), and the Xi’an Declaration (Article 12). Finally, the
importance of the documentation and monitoring of change, as a management tool, is also
noted in the Xi’an Declaration (Articles 9, 10 and 11).

The notion of considering the urban landscape as a whole, rather than focusing on
selected individual buildings, and of embracing ordinary as well as exceptional buildings,
is touched upon in the International Charter for the Conservation of Monuments and Sites (better known as the Venice Charter) of 1964, which defines the “concept of historic monument” as “not only the single architectural work but also the urban or rural setting in which is found the evidence of a particular civilization, a significant development or a historic event,” and notes that “this applies not only to great works of art but also to more modest works of the past which have acquired cultural significance with the passing of time” (Venice Charter, 1964, Article 1). This notion is further developed by the Washington Charter of 1987, which zeroes in on the same qualities that the Plateau Mont-Royal Borough has identified as worthy of documentation and protection:

"Qualities to be preserved include the historic character of the town or urban area and all those material and spiritual elements that express this character, especially:

a) Urban patterns as defined by lots and streets;

b) Relationships between buildings and green and open spaces;

c) The formal appearance, interior and exterior, of buildings as defined by scale, size, style, construction, materials, colour and decoration;

d) The relationship between the town or urban area and its surrounding setting, both natural and man-made; and

e) The various functions that the town or urban area has acquired over time.

Any threat to these qualities would compromise the authenticity of the historic town or urban area” (Washington Charter, 1987, Article 2).

Finally, most of the national and international charters and other doctrinal texts promote, as does the Plateau Mont-Royal Borough, the avoidance of conjecture and imitation and the use of contemporary expression, construction technologies and materials for new interventions, which are expected to respect the heritage character of their surroundings. Among those that promote an approach similar to that of the Borough in this respect are the Venice Charter of 1964 (Article 9), the Deschambault Declaration of 1982 (Articles V-C), the Washington Charter of 1987 (Article 10), the Declaration of San Antonio of 1996 (Article 3), and Australia’s Burra Charter of 1999 (Article 22). With regards the Borough’s use of two bylaws, one more prescriptive for straightforward modifications and another that allows for qualitative analysis for more complex conservation proposals and new construction, the Washington Charter provides particularly relevant insight: “Conservation in a historic town or urban area demands prudence, a systematic approach and discipline. Rigidity should be avoided since individual cases may present specific problems “(Washington Charter, 1987, Article 4).

While not one of the charters or other doctrinal texts mentioned above could have provided a perfect “recipe” for developing an appropriate approach to conserving and enhancing the heritage character of the urban landscape of the Plateau Mont-Royal Borough, this was certainly not their intention. But collectively they do outline a series of fundamental principles that were applied to this process, and thus help to confirm that we are on the right track!

8. Conclusion

In Montreal, as in many municipalities, heritage conservation has traditionally been the bastion of experts who identify selected areas and buildings that they consider to be of heritage value and present their findings to citizens in the form of heritage legislation. In the Plateau Mont-Royal Borough, a different approach is being applied. Citizens,
consulted at the outset of the process of developing new bylaws, expressed the desire to protect the heritage character of the urban landscape as a whole as well as the traditional architectural elements of historic buildings, and to ensure that new construction, while contemporary in expression, construction technology and materials, integrated well with its historic context. These objectives are now being met thanks to a typomorphological study that provided enough detailed knowledge of the territory to develop and implement new regulatory measures to this end.

Preliminary results are promising. The Borough is in the process of compiling visual documentation of exemplary renovation and new construction projects, and this will serve as a useful tool for assisting owners and professionals propose appropriate projects, as well as for monitoring the results of this approach and identifying potential areas for ongoing improvement. Since the bylaws came into effect at a time when the Plateau was experiencing a renovation and construction boom, we can already see the positive impact on the urban landscape of this historic urban neighborhood.

Bibliography


