

Heritage battle raging in Sud-ouest

Heritage battle over condos in Sud-ouest

With a record number of demolition permits in Griffintown and St. Henri, the borough has come up with a plan to help preserve the area's working class history. Montreal's Sud-ouest borough, a former industrial hub transformed by the low-interest-rate-fuelled residential boom, has become a heritage battleground, often pitting heritage activists against developers and municipal authorities.



DARIO AYALA THE GAZETTE

The 50-unit La Machinerie lofts on St. Jacques St. is one of many residential redevelopments underway or proposed.

In response to an unprecedented number of requests for new residential projects in sectors like Griffintown – where demands for demolition permits alone have tripled from 11 in 2007 to 33 in 2011 – borough officials have come up with a three-year-plan calling for more help from the central city to protect the area's working-class heritage .

The recent plan, financed with \$100,000 and the hiring of an additional inspector, aims to make owners more accountable for neglecting buildings and place greater value on the sector's industrial history, among other goals.

While heritage activists have warned that the development of homes and transportation infrastructure have put structures such as the New City Gas complex, Griffintown Horse Palace and Édifice Rodier at risk, some developers also caution that in Montreal, the definition of historic can be overly broad.

In certain cases, fights to save deteriorating facades, or crumbling structures have been unreasonable, some developers say.

"We are 300 per cent in favour of protecting heritage ," said Raymond Bouchard, president of the Urban Development Institute, Quebec, which represents real estate developers, property managers and other industry professionals. "But we have to be reasonable. The happy medium – the common sense – is not always there." In the Sud-ouest, the plan acknowledges that the borough lacks the resources and

expertise to cope with demand.

"This is an excellent report. The borough has been facing an unusual number of demands for development. So this can put a considerable strain on their staff, already suffering from budget cuts," said developer Émile Fattal, president of Bourget Capital Inc., which is converting the historical former Williams sewing machine factory in Saint Henri into 50 condos. "Sensible and orderly development which respects the heritage value and urban impact is a major challenge for both the developer and the city. Obviously, it also requires considerable cooperation, active dialogue and timely exchange of information. So both parties need to put the necessary resources in place for this to happen successfully."

Fattal, who converted the Snowdon theatre into a public gymnasium in 1990, said it took about 14 months to obtain authorization to reinvent the former, second-Empire tradition, 19th-century textile factory as mostly one- to three-bedroom condos.

The approval process for a similar project Fattal worked on in London, England, took half the time.

"The staff are really overburdened," Fattal said.

Sud-ouest borough councillor Véronique Fournier said concerns for the sector's heritage will influence urban planning decisions to award permits to develop or demolish buildings.

Fournier, however, couldn't say whether the borough could afford to continue its financial commitment to preserving its heritage next year. "We hope to be able to continue with recurring investments," she said.

Meanwhile, the borough has asked the city of Montreal to intervene by reserving the right to expropriate land recently acquired by a developer next to the Griffintown Horse Palace.



"The message is clear," said Fournier, who is also president of the Sud-ouest's urban planning and advisory committee. "We need to value these buildings instead of allowing them to deteriorate."

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