

## *sitelines*

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# Lot machine

*Surface parking  
in the downtown  
distorts land values*

**D**URING the 1950s and 1960s, planning policies were put into place that had an unanticipated negative impact on our downtown.

Basically, they resulted in a large number of buildings being demolished and turned into parking lots.

This impact easily could have been averted had the drafters of the new zoning bylaws of the 1960s foreseen what they were doing, and prohibited the development of new surface parking lots.

Of course, it's easier to have 20-20 hindsight than 20-20 foresight, but we hope we are able to learn from our mistakes.

However, at times this seems a rather idle wish.

When planning for the new downtown campus for Red River College began several years ago, the college demanded that very large amounts of parking be provided by the successful developer. Following some public chastisement for importing their suburban habits to a downtown revitalization project, the college administration reduced its demands — but continued to make it clear that more parking would be required (even though such parking might not be formally provided by the project developers).

Since the college has opened, at least eight buildings in the immediate vicinity of the college have been demolished.

The demolition of these buildings has not resulted in new downtown buildings and enter-

prises. Instead, it has led to the "construction" of literally acres of new asphalt parking lots.

This was hardly the vision of the planners and politicians who worked so hard to develop this important downtown project. It was supposed to bring new housing, more public-transit usage, local services and commerce, and an overall good sense of downtown life — it was not supposed to bring new parking lots.

Some of this was predicted by some city planners, who recommended that, in order to avert wholesale development of surface parking lots in the area, zoning bylaws should be changed before the campus was developed. And there was an opportunity to make the appropriate changes — but it was decided these measures were not necessary.

I will continue to discuss the impact that rampant surface parking has on the psyche and economy of our downtown. (And I anticipate some complaints that we do not have adequate parking downtown.)

But today I want only to point out an evolving dynamic: Land values in the Exchange District stood for a number of years at approximately \$200 to \$250 per square metre. At this value, it was feasible for private-sector development to occur for mid-rise buildings (that is, buildings of a scale comparable to the scale of the Exchange District's existing buildings).

But as parking rates increased downtown, the effective value of land has doubled (based on what landowners who cover their land with asphalt can earn). This has distorted the market and development potential of all land in the Exchange District, and is making it impossible to carry out normal land purchase and development activity at the scale of the existing urban fabric.

Montreal has recently passed a bylaw prohibiting the development of surface parking lots in the city's downtown. This bylaw is retroactive, and will result in the removal of all such land use in the city.

There are certainly legal fights to come. But Montreal's decision should be taken as a good and knowledgeable omen for those who are charged with the management of our city.

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