

CHINATOWN WORKING GROUP STATEMENT

RE: OCPM CONSULTATION ON MODIFICATION OF PLAN D'URBANISME

May 29, 2022 – FINAL

BACKGROUND

Chinatown Working Group (CWG) was formed as a community collective in 2019 to fight gentrification in Chinatown. As a collective, our vision of Chinatown is for our history, living culture and diverse communities to be protected, preserved, and promoted.¹ CWG called for a community consultation for a Chinatown plan. As such, between 2019 and 2020, we actively participated in the advisory committee and workshops organized by the Centre d'écologie urbaine de Montréal (CEUM) mandated by the City of Montréal to develop a plan for Chinatown. The work led to the City's declaration of Chinatown's historical significance in December 2020.

In May 2021, in response to the public outcry over a big developer's land assembly of the most historic block in Chinatown, CWG started community mobilization efforts along with many other Chinatown residents and organizations. Our main objective was to advocate for Chinatown's heritage designation and immediate development control measures. With a sense of urgency, a tripartite heritage working group was formed with representatives from the municipal and provincial governments, and community representatives from organisations such as Héritage Montréal and CWG to develop recommendations for appropriate heritage protection measures. In June 2021, the *Plan d'action pour le quartier chinois* was announced by the City, including a \$2M initial funding for implementation. In January 2022, Chinatown received heritage designation and protections at both the provincial and municipal levels.

For the provincial protection:

- Part of Chinatown was designated as an Institutional Hub (*site patrimonial du Noyau-Institutionnel-du-Quartier-Chinois*) by the provincial government. This protection will cover the Wing Noodles' block, delineated by de la Gauchetière, St-Urbain, Côté and Viger streets.
- Two buildings were granted heritage status, including the British and Canadian School (Wings Noodles) and S. Davis and Sons' factory (where the Chinese Family Services of Greater Montreal was formerly located)

For the city protection:

- The city designated all of Chinatown, within the borders of de Bleury, René-Lévesque Blvd., Sainte Elizabeth and Viger Ave., as a historic site, adding further protection. This new boundary of Chinatown aimed to better include the residential part of Chinatown.
- The city will modify its urban plan to preserve Chinatown by reducing high-rise zoning that could have incentivized owners to demolish or alter heritage buildings.
- It also passed an interim development control measure called "contrôl intérimaire" preventing new developments that do not respect the intended new zoning.

¹ For more information about the Chinatown Working Group, please visit: <http://cwgmtl.org>

- Public consultations, facilitated by the Office de Consultation Publique de Montréal (OCPM), are being held on the zoning changes.

The Chinatown Working Group would like to thank the OCPM for the opportunity to share our statement. You will find below our full statement, including our response to the proposed modification of the Plan d'urbanisme.

CHINATOWN MOVEMENT IN CONTEXT

The Save Chinatowns movement emerged in the 1960s in the face of mass land expropriation and displacement that took place in many cities across North America for their urban renewal programs.² In Montréal, between the 1960s and 1980s, over 200 structures were demolished in Chinatown for government projects, in the process draining away 90% of the residential population.³

We saw the same thing happening in Toronto in the late 1950s and early 1960s whose Chinatown was demolished when, despite community outcry and resistance, the city expropriated land to build city hall and Nathan Phillips Square. In the late 1960s and early 1970s Vancouver's Chinatown fought back against residential "slum clearance" and stopped a freeway from being built through their neighbourhood. The late 1970s also saw American Chinatowns like those of Philadelphia and Seattle fight against interstates and expressways that would slice through their neighbourhoods. Beginning in the 1980s there was a huge push in Chinatowns across North America, including Montréal's Chinatown, to preserve their cultural heritage and maintain their geographical footprints in the city. These movements built upon the struggle to save North America's first Chinatown, [San Francisco](#), after the 1906 earthquake when the city planned to relocate Chinatown and its Chinese community out of the city core. To survive, the local community had to create an exoticized so-called Chinatown architecture for tourism to prevent its erasure.

Montréal Chinatown is, again, not alone in the context of today's Save Chinatowns movement. What is happening in our Chinatown is happening in [Chinatowns all over North America](#). New condos and hotel developments that have no relevance to Chinatowns chip away their identity and living culture. The old Chinatowns, their architecture and even their population, become a marketing backdrop for businesses and luxury developments that are accelerating the displacement of Chinatowns' most vulnerable residents and legacy businesses. With the living community and culture of Chinatowns being driven out, several of these neighbourhoods are being reduced to nostalgic settings for museums, art galleries, or tourism. Still today, the planning of major infrastructure projects in different cities continually fails to take Chinatowns' future and community into proper consideration. Examples include the construction of a [40-Story Jail in New York's Chinatown](#), a [light rail that sliced through Edmonton's Chinatown](#) cutting off the South end, and the recent proposal for the [REM de l'Est in Montréal](#) that would have significantly impacted Chinatown.

Meanwhile, this phenomenon is paralleled with the increased visibility of a number of related social justice issues, including addressing increased anti-Asian racism in solidarity with other communities, Indigenous reconciliation and cultural redress, and fighting gentrification and displacements.

² D. Vitiello, *The Planned Destruction of Chinatowns in the United States and Canada since C.1900*. University of Pennsylvania. (2018).

³ Ingrid Peritz, "City Tearing us apart Brick by Brick, say Montreal's Chinese", *The Montreal Gazette* (Nov 18th 1981).

Therefore, the discussion of Chinatowns is much more than preserving *the old*; the efforts are also about mapping the future for Chinatowns and the type of cities we want to build. We strongly advocate for an alternative conservation-focused development vision that is inclusive, equitable, and takes care of vulnerable populations. We seek a new approach to cultural and heritage planning.

Within this context, the Chinatown Working Group, with its diverse expertise, grass-roots involvement and a focus on community sensitization and empowerment, has taken the lead to inform and mobilize the Chinatown communities in Montréal regarding various developments, such as the proposed REM de l'Est, the application for derogation on the site of 1050 St. Laurent, designation of Chinatown as a historic area of Montréal, advocating for the creation of the Chinatown Roundtable and the Jia Foundation, and participating in national and international networks to Save Chinatowns.

RESPONSE TO THE PROPOSED MODIFICATION OF THE PLAN D'URBANISME

CWG supports the proposed changes to the Plan d'urbanisme by the City of Montréal. We hope that it will be part of the steps taken to implement the Chinatown Plan d'action and support Chinatown as a heritage area with planning regulations that facilitate a **human-scale urban environment** centred around its living communities and urban cultural landscapes.

We support the heritage designation by the City of Montréal of Chinatown as a historic site with its new boundary from Blvd René-Levesque to the north, Ave. Viger to the south, de Bleury to the west and Saint-Elizabeth to the east.

We support the identification of Chinatown as *un secteur de valeur exceptionnelle* and adding Chinatown as one of the "territories of archaeological interest" in Plan d'urbanisme.

We also support the proposal to reduce allowable height and density in Chinatown as an essential step needed to reinforce Chinatown's heritage status, deter further land speculation, and start setting up a basic framework that can guide development in the area in ways that respect both Chinatown's tangible and intangible heritage.

We agree with the approach to have a core area of Chinatown with lower height and density, and the edges with higher limits, as a transition space to its downtown surrounding areas. **However, we do find the core of Chinatown with a height limit of 25-35 metres (around 8-10 stories) and density of 4, too high in terms of scale, in comparison to the existing buildings, especially along rue de la Gauchetière.**

In addition, there are lots of critical unknown factors at play that are not addressed in the proposal and might counter the desired result of Chinatown being a human-scale environment centering around its existing community. We hope with the adoption of the proposed changes to the Plan d'Urbanisme et de Mobilité, the City of Montréal and the Borough of Ville-Marie will further consider the following issues related to the design and development of Chinatown:

I. Chinatown Heritage, Characters and Scales

- Family associations are an important part of Chinatown social-economic infrastructure because of their history, the community roles they play and the cultural traditions their members continue to practice. The buildings they own also hold important heritage significance because of their shophouse architectural typology and various historic objects inside the buildings that are part of the buildings' interior heritage. This aspect of Chinatown heritage needs to be better understood and supported as they are not included in the Study by Luce Lafontaine Architects (December 2021).
- We need to better define Chinatown's unique architecture style and have tools to ensure architectural integration for new projects proposed. In addition, there are several projects recently built that didn't respect Chinatown's heritage and character, and they should not be considered as the "existing context" reference for future projects.
- Chinatown's existing scales are built on smaller lots that tend to have smaller storefronts, resulting in a more human-scale urban environment. Such scale is an integral part of the Chinatown character. We need to ensure new developments respect and respond to such scale, especially when there is a tendency toward land assembly for bigger projects.
- Incremental development with courtyard and alleyways as secondary public spaces is another Chinatown character. We need to ensure retention and improvement of the existing courtyards and alleyways, and to encourage new developments to include such types of elements.

2. A Development and Urban Design Vision Needed

- It is encouraging to see the new 2021-2026 *Plan d'action* with its four themes: (1) quality of life, housing and public spaces; (2) commercial vitality (3) identity, outreach and heritage (4) neighbourhood consultation. However, it is still not clear who is the team with relevant expertise that is overseeing and accountable for the Plan implementation.
- Furthermore, the Plan does not yet have a holistic development or urban design vision for Chinatown that could illustrate how different aspirations for housing, economic, social, cultural and public space development in Chinatown can come together coherently.
- A study of existing vacant lots and under-utilized properties is needed as part of the preparation work for a development plan so existing density and development potential can be optimized. There is also a need to carry out a study of "at-risk buildings" that are deteriorating and facing pressure of demolition, acquisition or consolidation. Such study is critical in order to better assess gentrification pressure faced by individual buildings and the area as a whole.
- There is a need for development economic analysis to better understand how the proposed new zoning can facilitate the form of development desired and whether specific incentive programs will be required to assist renovation of old historic buildings. After all, we are not anti-development; we are advocating for conservation-focused development.

- Better modelling and visualization of possible achievable projects under the new zoning will also be helpful for the community to understand the impact of such regulation changes.

3. Development Projects Review Criteria and Process

- Determining whether a proposed development project will contribute to Chinatown's social, cultural and economic life requires a more holistic set of criteria that is more than height and density. Design and uses are also very important. It is unclear with the current proposal how the community will be informed about the future development projects and which set of the criteria will be used to consider these projects.
- The tripartite heritage working group with representatives from the municipal and provincial governments, and community representatives should continue to keep watch of the progress.
- A subcommittee with Chinatown planning and heritage expertise should join the *Comité consultative d'urbanisme de Ville-Marie* (CCU) to play an advisory role in project review. Other than the criteria set by the current revised *Plan d'implantation et d'intégration architecturale* (PIA), additional Chinatown specific design criteria should also be developed and applied.
- City staff needs to inform the community when major development permits are requested so that the community can have an opportunity to respond. In situations where there are adverse impacts to the neighbouring residents due to a development project, concrete mitigation measures and/or compensation should be facilitated as conditions of the issuance of the permit.

CONCLUSION

Chinatown Working Group supports the proposal by the City of Montréal to modify the *Plan d'urbanisme* and reduce allowable height and density in Chinatown as part of the steps taken to implement the *Plan d'action pour le quartier chinois*. However, we find the proposed height limit of 25-35 meters (about 8-10 stories) too high in terms of scale for the core of Chinatown, in comparison to the existing buildings, and encourage the City of Montréal and the Borough of Ville-Marie to further consider the three issues outlined above on: 1) Chinatown's heritage, character and scale; 2) Chinatown's development and urban design vision; and 3) Development project review criteria and process. Conservation of the urban and built environment of Chinatown is essential in order to preserve its historical, social and architectural values, and most importantly, it makes it possible for the way of life and the cultural practices to not only survive, but to thrive.