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Montreal coalition that snagged a huge property for arts and community development splits over division of the spoils

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The Batiment 7 land spans 32.5 hectares – equivalent to 55 football fields, or one-quarter of the entire borough.

7 À NOUS/BATIMENT 7

Some of the bitterest disputes over urban development break out over property that no one has had to think about for generations. Such is the case with a vast swath of former railway land in Montreal's down-at-heel Pointe-Saint-Charles district, where local activists have won more than one round against a powerful developer.

It's a classic David and Goliath story, about ordinary citizens who shut down a proposal for a casino, luxury hotel and convention hall in their neighbourhood, and also gained part of the property for community use. It's also about a struggle between former allies – the arts and culture organization Quartier Éphémère (QÉ) and the social-activist coalition Collectif 7 à Nous (C7N) – over how to divide the spoils.

The groups were united in their successful campaign to wrest a disused, 8,360 square-metre warehouse, known as Bâtiment 7, from Groupe Mach, a developer most recently in the news for its bid to buy Air Transat. But the alliance split over how much of Bâtiment 7 should be used for community services such as co-op workshops, event spaces and a daycare; and how much for artists' studios and galleries.

The initial tussle over Bâtiment 7 began in 2004 when CN Rail sold its disused property in Pointe Saint-Charles to Groupe Mach for the symbolic sum of one dollar. The land spans 32.5 hectares – equivalent to 55 football fields, or one-quarter of the entire borough.

Groupe Mach's first move was to negotiate a \$25-million sale of one-third of the rail land to a partnership led by Loto-Québec. The provincial lottery corporation envisioned a casino and luxury hotel on the site, as well as a marina, convention centre and permanent performance venue for Cirque du Soleil.

Community activists condemned the proposal, saying it would accelerate gentrification and offer nothing to residents of Pointe-Saint-Charles. A petition against the project was signed by an absolute majority of the borough's adult population.

Place Bonaventure, a downtown convention centre, was also unhappy with the plan, which would use public money to build a competing facility. After continued pressure by media-savvy activists, Cirque du Soleil withdrew and the project collapsed.



Part of Batiment 7 opened to the public in May, 2018.

7 È NOUS/BATIMENT 7

There are 20 buildings on the rail lands. Groupe Mach let it be known during public consultations in 2008 that it wished to demolish Bâtiment 7, the building nearest to dwellings in the borough, and raise condos on the site. When a roof over part of the five-section building collapsed under the weight of snow, Groupe Mach promptly bulldozed that end of the structure.

C7N activists mounted a campaign to save the remainder. One of their actions in 2009 was a squat, or illegal occupation, of another structure on the site. That ended with a forceful eviction by police, but the campaign continued.

“We said that Bâtiment 7 must belong to the community, free of charge,” says Marcel Sévigny, a former borough councillor and member of C7N. The collective put pressure on the borough government to refuse Groupe Mach's requests for zoning changes – needed to build condos on other parts of the property – unless it transferred Bâtiment 7 to the community. In May, 2010, after a change in local government, the new mayor agreed.

Montreal is known for the frequency and intensity of its street protests, including the long tuition-related campaign by students that helped topple the provincial government of Jean Charest in 2012. According to a 106-page booklet about the fight for Bâtiment 7, written by Sévigny and others, the borough's mayor told the chief of police that those involved in wildcat actions "aren't in the habit of asking for permits, especially for something which, in their view, belongs to them."

The booklet also states that Groupe Mach chairman Vincent Chiara resisted meeting with those whom he called "*les militants chialeux*" (loosely, "whiny activists"). As a collector of contemporary art, however, he was more willing to negotiate with Quartier Éphémère, whose director, Caroline Andrieux, also runs the Darling Foundry, a visual-arts complex in a raw industrial space.

Andrieux and members of the QÉ board negotiated a deal in which Groupe Mach would hand over Bâtiment 7 to QÉ for free, decontaminate the building and surrounding land, and pay \$1-million for the start of renovations. The accord was signed in 2011.

The developer, however, took six years to complete decontamination and the legal work needed to divide the property. During that time, QÉ transferred ownership to C7N, to protect its existing assets at the Darling Foundry in case anything should go wrong at Bâtiment 7 (C7N had no assets). Andrieux says that QÉ retained a contractual right to reclaim and develop two of Bâtiment 7's four remaining sections – 43 per cent of the whole.

"Groupe Mach used a strategy of delay," says Sévigny. "They wanted to wear us down, so that people would get discouraged and abandon the project. That was the most difficult period for us."

Activists turned the delay to their advantage, however, refining their plans and shoring up support. By the time the developer delivered the building in 2017, C7N had secured a commitment of \$2.2-million from municipal and provincial governments, and had a detailed plan for a \$4.2-million renovation of about half of the structure.

That part of Bâtiment 7 opened to the public in May, 2018. The complex includes an all-levels art school; sculpture, silkscreen and ceramic studios; carpentry, bike repair and metal-work ateliers; a youth-run game room and junk-repurposing centre; a food store and micro-brewery; and event spaces for whatever creative thing someone wants to do. It's all run with a non-hierarchical management structure, says Sévigny, and broke even during its first year.



C7N decided that Batiment 7 should include a daycare centre, in part of the space claimed by QÉ.

ALLEN VALLIÈRES /BATIMENT 7

QÉ was also working on its vision for the site. It spent \$65,000, including \$50,000 in public funds, on a feasibility study and detailed plan for its 43-per-cent share of the building. Its proposal, entitled *Le Rail*, includes 20 artists' studios, research and education spaces, and a multipurpose room, with at least one-quarter of the facilities reserved for people from Pointe-Saint-Charles. It informed C7N that it wished to execute its contractual option to take over the still-undeveloped rear sections of the building.

“[Bâtiment 7] is actually two projects,” says Andrieux. “We were supposed to do the artistic component, and they would do the community part” - though QÉ's part, she said, was always intended to have a strong local component. She was surprised when she learned that C7N's sections included an art school and studios.

Further surprises were in store. C7N decided that Bâtiment 7 should include a daycare centre, in part of the space claimed by QÉ. “We believe they take too much room, versus the expressed needs of [Pointe-Saint-Charles],” says Sévigny.

In early June of this year, on the eve of a meeting between the two groups to sort out their differences, C7N sent Andrieux an e-mail stating its position. “Instead of owning our part of the building,” she says, “we would be tenants and rent only the second floor. It was a very insulting proposition and we said no.” The meeting never happened.

“I respect their project,” says Andrieux. “I was a co-founder of Collectif 7 à Nous, I was its president for three years, and I made the deal with Vincent Chiara.

“We don't need approval by Collectif 7 à Nous,” she says. “The contract is very clear, there's no ambiguity.”



The former allies in the fight to save Batiment 7 both say that they're open to further talks, although a resolution of the current impasse may be painful for one or both.

7 È NOUS/BATIMENT 7

Sévigny, however, says that his group intends to defend its grass-roots principles. “I think that [*Le Rail*] is a cultural project whose general philosophy is close to that of the capitalist elite in Montreal,” he says. “We

want to develop something very close to the local community, not the business community.”

Andrieux says that QÉ’s board is reviewing its options, including legal action. C7N, however, has possession, and has not, in the past, shied away from squatting as a negotiating tool. It’s still in fighting mode, in part because it wants to develop a community farm and an entrance to its proposed daycare, near a space where Groupe Mach plans to build what activists call a “wall of condos.” C7N published an open letter to Montreal mayor Valérie Plante in May, asking that she intervene.

The former allies in the fight to save Bâtiment 7 both say that they’re open to further talks, although a resolution of the current impasse may be painful for one or both. “It’s a pity,” said Andrieux. “It was so clear, and we were so close, at the beginning.”

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