



The “Dozois Plan”: lessons learned from urban-renewal policies and the history of urban planning in Montreal

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Translated from the French by Oliver Waine

Urban-renewal policies justify their actions by decrying neighbourhoods earmarked for demolition. Frédéric Mercure-Jolette seeks to demonstrate this via the little-studied example of the massive operations affecting downtown Montreal in the 1960s. His article also highlights the inextricable links between urban renewal and the paradoxical institutionalization of professional urban planning.

The *Projet de rénovation d'une zone d'habitat défectueux et de construction d'habitation à loyer modique* (“Project for the renovation of an area of substandard housing and the construction of low-income rental housing”) – or “PR” project – presented in 1954 marks a key moment in post-war Canadian urban planning. This project is better known in Montreal as the “Dozois Plan”, named after Paul Dozois, city councillor, trade-board member and chair of the “Comité consultatif pour l'élimination des taudis et pour l'habitation à loyer modique” (“Consultative Committee for the Eradication of Slums and for Low-Income Rental Housing”). The Dozois Plan embodied a kind of urban planning that was hitherto unknown, and quickly became a structural element of the public debate – and controversies – on city planning. Between 1954 and 1957, the prospect of this plan becoming a reality aroused passions across the city. Ultimately, it would be modified with the agreement of the federal government (via the Canada Mortgage and Housing Corporation (CMHC), which financed the majority of the project) and the Quebec provincial government, where Paul Dozois had meanwhile been appointed minister for municipal affairs under Maurice Duplessis.¹ The criticisms would nevertheless persist. Barely a few years after its realization, the judgement of Hans Blumenfeld – European intellectual turned consultant urban planner at Montreal city council in the 1960s² – was categorical: the “Bulldozois Plan”, as he liked to call it, was a monumental error (Blumenfeld 1987, p. 264). In his view, the large-scale demolition of housing recommended in the plan – the initial report proposed the destruction of 1,383 dwellings – would neither raise the income of poor families, nor improve their access to housing, and so could not resolve the problem of slums (Blumenfeld 1971, p. 181), as its proponents claimed.

¹ Maurice Duplessis, a nationalist conservative and ally of the clergy, was premier of the province of Quebec (with majority governments) from 1936 to 1939 and from 1940 until his death in 1959. In reaction to his corporatist, oppressive and moralistic regime, the post-war period in Quebec was known as the “Grande Noirceur”, or “Great Darkness”.

² Hans Blumenfeld (1892–1988) was an urban planner with an unusual background. As a German Jew and communist sympathizer, he lived abroad for several periods, notably in the USSR, before settling in the USA in the late 1930s. In 1955, feeling that his freedom was being constrained under McCarthyism, he moved to Toronto, where he occupied various posts in the civil service and academia.

Figure 1. A sketch of the project



Source: *Projet de rénovation d'une zone d'habitat défectueux et de construction d'habitation à loyer modique*, p. 5A, plan 1, 1954. (cc) [BY-NC-SA 2.5 CA] Archives of the City of Montréal, ref. CA M001 VM103-(S)3-D3.

Accordingly, the Dozois Plan rapidly became a “counter-model” for later urban-renewal projects, such as the operation in the Petite-Bourgogne neighbourhood, initiated in 1966 (Dansereau 1974).

And yet lessons can be learned from the Dozois Plan by anyone who wishes to gain insights into the “urbanistic thinking” behind it and the history of urban planning more generally. It represents an approach to the city and a means of justifying public action that, in many respects, still pervades urban policies today in North America and beyond. While the discourse of the 1960s was marked by the introduction of slum-clearance measures and the preservation of urban built heritage, it remained focused on “denouncing old built fabric” (Drouin 2012, p. 22). The priority of government intervention was always to adapt existing buildings to the current and future needs of the city, based on surveys of both the state of the built fabric and the presumed needs of the population.

Taking the Dozois Plan as an example, these are the theoretical and discursive elements that we shall seek to analyse here by observing the links between social behaviours and the environment, studying the growing importance of specialist knowledge in urban public action, and the Plan’s legacy in terms of the institutionalization of urban planning as an academic discipline and professional practice in the province of Quebec.

Objectifying social aspects via the urban question

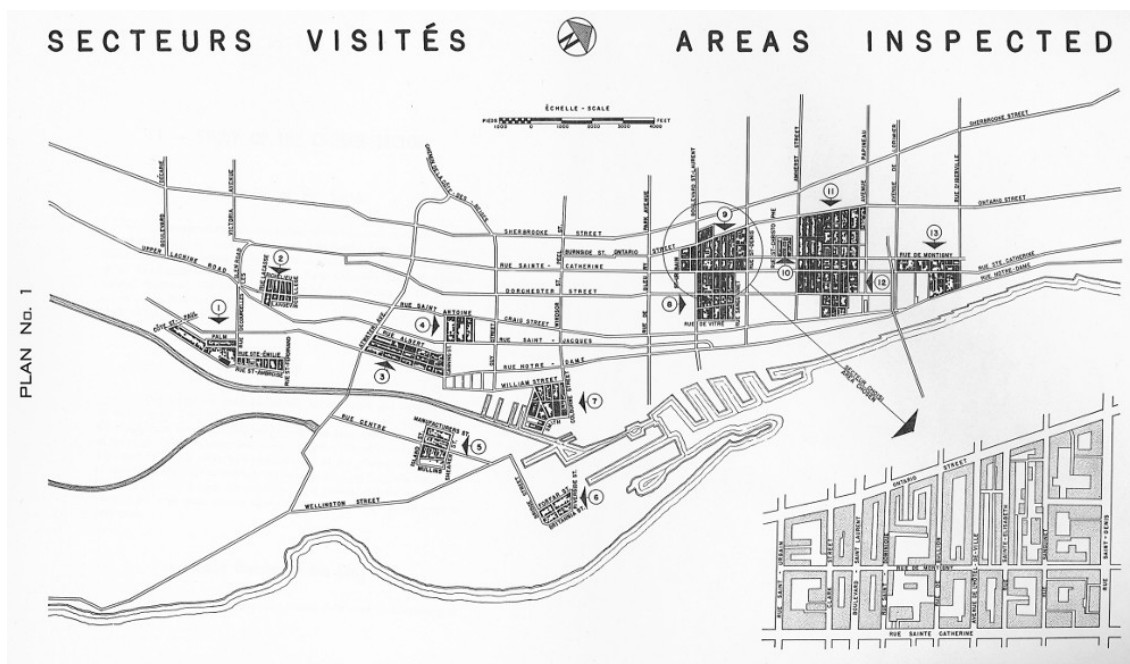
The Dozois Plan was important as it was the first government publication in Montreal’s history to describe the city’s changing housing needs, take stock of the current state of housing in the most disadvantaged neighbourhoods, and put forward a programme to provide low-income rental housing. This document was the fruit of 11 sessions of a consultative committee between 1952 and 1954, made up of eight city councillors, four representatives of the citizens’ committee, and three municipal employees (acting as technical advisers, with powers limited to making recommendations). This report was produced in a context marked in particular by corruption³ and a

³ From 1950 to 1953, an extensive and highly publicized investigation into public morality and the Montreal police – the Commission of Inquiry into Gambling and Commercialized Vice – was conducted by Justice François Caron,

lack of housing. A grouping of 55 charities, religious societies, unions, trade associations and economic associations, known as the “Comité des 55” (“Committee of 55”), for whom social housing was an action priority, had put its full force behind the establishment of this consultative committee – indeed, the four representatives of the citizens’ committee were all from the Comité des 55. The primary mission of this consultative committee consisted of “gaining an objective understanding of the housing problem” and demonstrating that an ambitious and financially realistic social-housing project was possible.

Using statistics from the 1951 federal census and figures produced by the city council, the first pages of the report show that the housing problem in Montreal was linked not to the total number of dwellings, which seemed adequate, but rather to their age, their poor state of repair and the average rents charged. The problem of overcrowding and de-densification did not appear to be a central concern. And indeed, the report did not suggest reducing the number of inhabitants in the city centre, but instead improving their living conditions and the general quality of the urban fabric: 35,000 tenants were paying rents that were too high compared to their incomes, without being able to benefit from low-cost rental housing. In a bid to objectively describe the phenomenon of slums, the report cited four factors that would devalue a residential area: the age of the buildings, sanitary conditions, the absence of local amenities and services, and traffic congestion. The committee, which had identified, defined and inspected⁴ 13 “areas of substandard housing” within Montreal, ultimately focused its attention on a sector bounded by Rue Saint-Urbain, Rue Ontario, Rue Saint-Denis and Rue Sainte-Catherine for its proposed urban-renewal action.

Figure 2. Map of the “areas of substandard housing” inspected, with a more detailed plan of the chosen sector in the inset



Source: *Projet de rénovation d'une zone d'habitat défectueux et de construction d'habitation à loyer modique*, p. 5A, plan 1, 1954. (cc) [BY-NC-SA 2.5 CA] Archives of the City of Montréal, ref. CA M001 VM103-(S)3-D3.

On a point of terminology, the expression *zone d'habitat défectueux* extended the concept of the more traditional term *taudis* (“slum” in the sense of a building unfit for habitation) to a whole

with the assistance of lawyer (and future mayor) Jean Drapeau, who questioned 373 witnesses, including prostitutes, owners of gambling dens, city councillors and police officers. In his report, Justice Caron recommended the impeachment of the chief of police, and a number of other police officers were subsequently convicted and fined. It should also be noted that, at the time, the term “corruption” encompassed both moral and political corruption.

⁴ The report does not explicitly state the nature of these inspections. A more detailed investigation could surely shed light on this point, which plays an essential role in terms of establishing the report’s authority.

neighbourhood, similar to the wider meaning of the word “slum” in English (i.e. a squalid and overcrowded street or district) or to the French expression *îlot insalubre* (literally “insalubrious city block”).⁵ The report sought to deal with urban issues using a specialized vocabulary and thus accentuate the apparent scientific nature of its conclusions. Unlike a purely “physical” definition, such as that of Le Corbusier and the CIAM (Congrès internationaux d’architecture moderne – International Congresses of Modern Architecture) (Le Corbusier 1957, p. 34), the Dozois Plan attached great importance to social life in the definition of its categories of action. In the public imagination, and in that of the members of the consultative committee, “slums” are associated with pathological forms of social life. In the second part of the report, the choice of sector was justified by a more detailed study of the area in question, which demonstrated that its “substandardness” was both physical and social. This sector – built for the most part in the first half of the 19th century – had one of the highest concentrations of dilapidated buildings in the city; its network of streets was deemed to be “unsuitable and cut off from the rest of the city”; land use was saturated; it had very little in the way of parks and playgrounds, and certain trades and industries appeared difficult to reconcile with the area’s residential function. Moreover – and this is essential – the level of youth crime was almost 10 times higher than in the rest of the city. The report presented a table showing the “sector’s criminal record” based on an inventory of complaints and arrests in 1952. The result is crystal clear: “This study demonstrates that, once again, the social disintegration of a sector is linked to its physical disintegration” (*PR*, p. 11).

However, one major feature of this sector goes unmentioned: it was a hotbed of prostitution in Montreal. It was home to one of the highest concentrations of brothels in the city, leading to high levels of police activity. The report suggests that by renovating living spaces, the social life of these spaces will be improved – or, to put it another way, that in a bright, well-ventilated housing environment surrounded by greenery and with modern sanitary facilities, moral standards would be more civilized. This assertion reveals that, at this time, the thinking that guided urban planning was still attached to a vague desire to eradicate “vice” and “crime”, with the effect of giving it greater legitimacy in the public debate. In parallel, the discourse on public morality finds in urban planning a series of measures to “clean up” urban mores. This particular discursive context made it easier to reduce certain social problems to mere spatial development issues.

⁵ Yankel Fijalkow suggests that the category of *habitat défectueux* (“substandard housing”), being more descriptive and emphasizing the relative importance of having access to the comforts of modern life, replaced the term *îlot insalubre* (“insalubrious city block”) during the second half of the 20th century in France (Fijalkow 2006). Similarly, while the question of insalubrity was intimately linked to the threat of tuberculosis epidemics in early-20th-century Paris, in the Dozois Plan it was limited to the absence of decent sanitary facilities (WC, bathroom, plumbing).

Figure 3. The “sector’s criminal record”

CASIER JUDICIAIRE DU SECTEUR							
Genres d'offenses	NOMBRE D'OFFENSES EN 1952						Rapport des 2 taux
	Secteur entier	Rues St-Laurent, Ste-Catherine, St-Denis (Note)	Secteur à rénover	Taux par 1000 personnes	Toute la ville	Taux par 1000 personnes	
Plaintes de tous genres	2,847	939	1,908	300	54,784	53.0	5.7
Arrestations							
Adultes	1,364	614	750	118	19,107	18.5	6.4
Adolescents	135	61	74	12	1,337	1.3	9.2
Population du secteur à rénover :					6,359 personnes		
Population de toute la ville en 1952 :					1,033,000 personnes		
<i>Note: Seulement la partie de ces rues comprises dans les limites du secteur.</i>							

Translation: **Heading:** Sector’s Criminal Record. **Sub-heading:** Number of offences in 1952. **Column headers:** Types of offence; Whole sector; Rue [Boulevard] Saint-Laurent, Rue Sainte-Catherine, Rue Saint-Denis (see Note); Part of sector to be renovated; Rate per 1,000 inhabitants; Whole city; Rate per 1,000 inhabitants; Ratio of two rates. **Column 1:** Complaints of all kinds; Arrests; Adults; Teenagers. **Text below table:** Population of the sector to be renovated: 6,359; Population of the whole city in 1952: 1,033,000. Note: Only the parts of these streets included within the boundaries of the sector.

Source: *Projet de rénovation d’une zone d’habitat défectueux et de construction d’habitation à loyer modique*, p. 5A, plan 1, 1954. (cc) [BY-NC-SA 2.5 CA] Archives of the City of Montréal, ref.e CA M001 VM103-(S)3-D3.

The other key goal underlying the Dozois Plan was related to the economy and productivity. However, while this aspect was essential for “urban renovators” – in the one and only study devoted to the Dozois Plan to date, Marc Choko maintains that everyone involved agreed that “slums cost money, generate no income and occupy sites that are essential to the restructuring of central spaces” (Choko 1995, p. 103) – it was only ever addressed indirectly. The only time economic arguments were cited was in connection with traffic issues, as if productivity depended directly on the state of the city’s transport infrastructure or, in other words, that flows of capital towards the centre of Montreal were dependent upon unhindered flows of goods and people. According to the report, traffic congestion and the lack of parking contributed greatly to the devaluation of the chosen sector. Congestion was thus considered as an obstacle to productivity and economic development, a recurrent theme throughout the 20th century.⁶ In response to this problem, the Dozois Plan proposed a dual solution: building higher, and reorganizing the street plan, in order to keep a high concentration of workers in a “well-ventilated and smooth-flowing” city centre. The implication is clear: improving traffic flows via urban planning will improve the economy.

The report viewed the location of this sector, in the heart of the city, close to the central business district, as advantageous. Its proximity to several places of worship and all the public services that future tenants would need (schools, library, public baths, police station, fire station and public transport) made it an ideal site for urban development.

This urbanistic view, based on a field survey and a study of the history of the area, therefore simultaneously laid down pathological elements to be destroyed and healthy elements to be encouraged. Those, like Blumenfeld, who criticized the lack of consideration for the urban fabric in

⁶ On the central role of the idea of congestion in discourse on urban reform in the early 20th century, see Topalov (1990).

the Dozois Plan sought to modify this aspect of it, albeit without calling into question the framework of analysis used.

Consensus in spite of discord

The final section of the report concerns the project proper, that is to say the assessment of the number of families to be rehoused, the composition and income of these families, the characteristic of the planned housing units and buildings, and financial projections. In order to rehouse the 1,305 families whose dwellings were to be demolished, 16 new buildings featuring “simple and functional” architecture were planned (*PR*, p. 32), representing 1,388 housing units in total. Parallels with the CIAM can be seen in the numerous sketches contained in the report (Choko 1995, p. 13). Moreover, the press, which was by and large in favour of the renovation project, missed no opportunity to note these international and modernist references, which could, in its collective view, only improve the city’s image (Choko 1995, p. 33).

In the months that followed, however, the focus would shift to the more tangible issues surrounding the redevelopment of the neighbourhood and the rehousing of the population. Jean Drapeau, a reformer and an ambitious lawyer who was elected mayor for a three-year term shortly after the submission of the report, and his right-hand man Lucien Saulnier, particularly sensitive to housing issues, waged a campaign against these proposals. In their opinion, the construction of a large social-housing complex ran the risk of creating a “concrete wall” between the French-speaking, working-class, residential east side of the city centre and the busier, more prosperous English-speaking west side. For Drapeau, who criticized the underlying vision of the city presented in the report, the city centre ought to be devoted to business, trade and the tertiary sector rather than to residential functions. As for Saulnier, he held the view that the Dozois Plan ran the risk of creating a “super-slum”.

Following his visits to several cities in the US that had already built developments of this kind – it was the era of the “projects” in a certain number of big cities – Saulnier asserted that “almost everywhere, there are signs of permanent vandalism: broken windows, damaged doors, deliberately blocked lifts, etc.” (Saulnier 1957). The comparison with other large North American cities was an essential aspect of the debate.⁷ The Dozois Plan was inspired by certain projects adopted in other countries or other Canadian provinces, in particular Regent Park in Toronto, the first large-scale low-income housing complex in Canada, built in the late 1940s. For Drapeau’s team, the mixed results of these first North American housing projects justified the preservation of a traditional model of housing. Drapeau, who advocated private investment, saw his rhetoric aligning with that of the Catholic Action movement: he proposed to give priority to encouraging access to home-ownership by building tracts of single-family houses on various sites throughout the Montreal suburbs. He would not, however, succeed in rallying support from either the federal or the provincial government for his vision, and so was unable to prevent the project – officially named *Habitations Jeanne-Mance*⁸ – from being built.⁹

In these debates, it was not so much the identification of the problem as the proposed solution that caused discord. There was a strong consensus on the assessment of the social context: the problem of slum housing had to be addressed by the city council and other public institutions. To a certain extent, the various “reformers” shared a miserabilistic vision of “slums”, with most in favour of undertaking a curative demolition-and-reconstruction operation. Ideas of salubrity and hygiene were omnipresent, and medical metaphors extensively used to describe the city – newspapers, for example, spoke of slums as a “plague on society” (*La Patrie* 1956) or “the very heart of our city

⁷ However, no mention is made of developments being produced at this time in France or elsewhere in Europe.

⁸ See: www2.ville.montreal.qc.ca/pls/portal/docs/page/chm_hjm/index.html (in French).

⁹ Indeed, this would be a decisive factor in Drapeau’s only electoral defeat. He would go on to be mayor of Montreal for a second time from 1960 to 1986 (Choko 1995; Gignac 2009).

[being] eaten away by cancerous slums, strangling its vital organs and paralysing its normal development” (*The Gazette* 1957).

This concept of slum housing was, in reality, nothing new, and did not emerge into Montreal’s public space with the publication of the Dozois Plan. It dates back to at least 1897, when a study was published into the living conditions of the poorest classes of south-west Montreal, “City Below the Hill: A Sociological Study of a Portion of the City of Montreal”, conducted by Herbert B. Ames in the spirit of the American and British reformists. Where the Dozois Plan did break new ground, though, was in terms of its data collection and summary work, the scale of the project, and the level of public dirigisme behind it. An “overlying of contexts”, as Isabelle Backouche puts it, perhaps explains why such an undertaking in terms of urban renewal came to fruition (Backouche 2014). It is true that a number of contexts overlapped and coincided, and produced a favourable climate for the Dozois Plan: first of all, the numerous scandals that hit the headlines forced the authorities to take significant action to clean up public morality in the city.¹⁰ Second, Montreal, as Canada’s undisputed metropolis at the start of the 20th century, was increasingly suffering from comparisons with other large North American cities, and indeed was gradually overtaken by Toronto as Canada’s largest city and leading centre of commerce, leading certain decision-makers to promote major projects on an international scale.¹¹

Furthermore, one of the major new features of this plan was that it sought consistency with the master plan for the city drawn up in 1944: the distribution of uses and, above all, the redevelopment of the road system that it proposed apparently chimed perfectly with other operations implemented elsewhere in the city. This means of justifying public action in the field of urban planning was essential and implied a specific time frame: all action was determined in accordance with an overall plan or overarching vision of the city, established on the basis of field studies and forecasts, and then implemented in such a way as to take account of the general changes in progress in the city.

Accordingly, a group of professionals specialized in urban issues gradually began to develop, putting pressure on the various governments to ensure that the production of the city was undertaken in a considered way, and that more resources were devoted to it, particularly with respect to housing.¹² It was also a means, for these burgeoning professions, to showcase their own expertise and reinforce their future roles.

An ephemeral paradigm?

The debates surrounding the Dozois Plan contained the seeds of some of the ideas and policies that would mark the modernization of Montreal in the following decades, a period in which Jean Drapeau and his team would dominate the city council (with clear majorities each time), and which would see Montreal host both Expo 67 and the 1976 summer Olympics, both events that presented opportunities to “modernize” the city. From the standpoint of urban-planning professionals, Hans Blumenfeld and some of his colleagues would make efforts to change the vision of public intervention with respect to housing. And, in one of the first conferences at the Community Planning Association of Canada, in 1962, he recommended certain changes in vocabulary: instead of “slum clearance”, the term “urban renewal” should be used, as this represents a shift from a negative, destructive approach to one that is positive and regenerative (Blumenfeld 1971, p. 192). From this point on, urban planners were called upon to work more closely with sociologists, ethnographers and community facilitators, in order to take account of “residents’ needs” more effectively.

¹⁰ See above.

¹¹ Several such decision-makers, including urban planner Jean-Claude Marsan, maintained that, between the late 1950s and the late 1970s, the dominant ideology and mindset in Montreal was one of “catching up” (Marsan 2012, p. 228).

¹² The CMHC is a perfect example of one of the places from which such lobbying emanated (Choko 1995, p. 28).

In the 1970s and 1980s, housing projects became more targeted, and preserving built heritage became a central aim of urban renewal (Drouin 2012). Furthermore, highlighting and decrying dilapidated sections of the existing built environment remained a key objective of urban public action, which seemed to justify the production of specialized knowledge. Criticisms of the Dozois Plan, accused of paying too little attention to built heritage and the continuity of the urban fabric, did not, therefore, lead to urban planning being discredited; rather, this discipline was redefined and redeployed. Moreover, the profession became more consolidated at this time in Quebec: for instance, in 1961, the Institut d'Urbanisme (Institute of Urban Planning) of the Université de Montréal was created; in 1963, a professional order of urban planners in Quebec came into being; and in 1964, the charter of the urban-planning department of Montreal city council (adopted in 1941) was reformed, so as to better incorporate these new specialists. Urban planners therefore saw their profession become more institutionalized against a backdrop of criticism of urban planning. This apparent paradox can be explained in particular by the success of initially “dissident” urban planners, such as Blumenfeld, who, in redirecting criticisms and channelling them into efforts to achieve a “better” form of urban planning, managed to limit the extent to which the profession *per se*, and its legitimacy to plan urban development, was called into question.

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