

## Taking on the monster houses

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### Full text:

In the real estate industry, they're referred to as manor homes or mansion-style houses, sprawling abodes with 3,500 to 10,000 square feet of living space and countless bathrooms, often adorned with stone facades.

Their detractors call them monster homes. McMansions. Houses on steroids.

Montreal city councillor Richard Bergeron calls them monstrosities, and he wants them eradicated.

"They are mansions that serve only to display the vanity of their occupants," he said. "Often, they have two- or even four-car indoor garages. Some owners can't even afford to furnish these places, or heat them.

"They are the pinnacle of a wasteful society, the antithesis of sustainable development."

Bergeron's focus is mainly on new housing developments, but the issue of so-called monster homes becomes particularly contentious when someone tries to erect one in a more modest neighbourhood.

One person's castle can become the community's shade-spewing, class-differentiating flashpoint.

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Bergeron's ire is directed in particular at new housing projects slated for Pierrefonds, several of which have set aside space for larger homes.

One proposal calls for the construction of 35 homes on 42 hectares of land, more than a hectare per house, he said. Compare that to housing projects in Laval that build 15 houses per hectare.

Sole member of the opposition Projet Montreal party to sit on city council, Bergeron has long railed against Pierrefonds's home- construction plans in its undeveloped western territory. The island's last remaining green spaces should be preserved in the interest of ecology, history and tourism potential, he argues.

Pierrefonds officials reply that the suburb is building in an environmentally conscious manner, with space set aside for parks and eco-territories, strict bylaws overseeing construction, and public consultations held on all new developments. Saving all green spaces is nice in theory, councillors said, but increased living costs mean the suburb needs the tax revenues new homes will generate.

"We respect Mr. Bergeron's arguments, but he lives in the Plateau, where they don't even have two blades of grass in front of their homes," said Pierrefonds councillor Bertrand Ward. "In the suburbs, we have more space."

Pierrefonds is merely responding to market demands, Mayor Monique Worth says.

"They are quite large houses (in the Cheval Blanc development project)," Worth said. "But you see that the new construction trend is toward the manor look.

"They're \$450,000 homes. I don't call them monster homes. They're nice homes."

In the Bois Franc housing development in St. Laurent, a 3,500- square-foot home retails for around \$800,000, and is modest in comparison to many of its neighbours, who enjoy 6,000 square feet of living space and more. Even larger houses border the golf course.

The outcome, says Dinu Bumbaru of Heritage Montreal, are "colonies of very unfortunate architecture, neighbourhoods with a dominance of asphalt and garage doors."

The effect is especially glaring in a metropolis filled with talented architects that was declared a City of Design by the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization in 2006.

"People try to hide it by putting a turret on it, but everybody can see it's just a garage door with a turret on it."

Architectural watchdog group Save Montreal identified monster houses as a virus in Montreal two years ago, Bumbaru said.

Neighbourhoods like Westmount, Outremont and Town of Mount Royal all have large homes, but they're not monster homes because the municipalities have long traditions of ensuring new construction fits its surroundings.

"Unfortunately, some municipalities don't have the experience or the courage to stand up to determined builders," Bumbaru said.

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Cote St. Luc residents protested last summer when a Randall Ave. developer was given permission to build his home 9.7 metres high, about 50-per-cent taller than its neighbours in the street of mostly bungalow-style split-level homes.

"A larger house might make house prices go up on the street, but does that mean those of us in smaller homes won't be able to afford to live here one day?" said a Randall resident who said she had nothing against the new construction on her street, but found other new homes in the neighbourhood too large and ostentatious. She asked not to be identified.

"How good is it if it makes every other house look like a pitiful little thing?"

Confronted with similar issues in the past, Cote St. Luc adopted a bylaw stating that any new construction cannot be more than 25-per-cent higher than its immediate neighbours, councillor Allan Levine said. (A variety of factors - including construction of new, larger buildings in the vicinity - influenced the Randall decision, he said.)

The city's planning advisory committee oversees every construction request in detail, down to the size of the driveway, colour of bricks and effect on existing trees and makes sure it will fit with the neighbourhood, said councillor Steven Erdelyi. With many small homes built half a century ago on large lots that allow space for expansion, and a lack of large homes for sale in the neighbourhood, many new homeowners are looking to enlarge or rebuild, Erdelyi said. And they have that right.

"But the aesthetics of the community and the rights of the neighbours have to be respected as well."

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Leaving the decision in the hands of the market is a cop-out, Bergeron said.

"There's always a market for everything, but that doesn't mean we have to sell it. As a public authority, it is our role to act as a defender of the public interest, for the collective good."

The market could become Bergeron's friend, however.

Sales of homes priced above \$500,000 in the Montreal region skyrocketed to 800 in 2005 from 57 in 2000, said Canadian Housing and Mortgage Corporation market analyst Paul Cardinal. But sales dropped by almost 20 per cent in 2006, to 650 sales. While sales of high-end homes remain steady on the island, there is a glut of manor homes in the surrounding regions.

People who built the million-dollar houses of their dreams may have underestimated the costs involved in maintaining them, Cardinal said.

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### **Illustration**

Colour Photo: MARIE-FRANCE COALLIER, THE GAZETTE / A large house on Gouin Blvd. One person's castle can become the community's shade-spewing, class-differentiating flashpoint. ;

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