Imagining Workforce Housing: a participant’s experience at Écolege 2011

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The Charrette:
Co-organised by Equiterre and École de technologie supérieure, the 2011 edition of Écolege was a 2-day, intensive integrated conception competition aiming to re-imagine a road intersection within a 10 minute walk of the MUHC’s Glen Campus, and re-design to accommodate housing. Student participants, from many different universities and with different specializations, including architecture, urban planning, civil engineering, construction engineering, environmental design and other related disciplines, were grouped into teams of 7-8 students.

Project aims:
We were asked to produce a development proposal for a triangular lot in Saint-Raymond, a neighborhood located in the borough of Côte-des-Neiges – Notre-Dame-de-Grâce. The “client” for the competition was Groupe CDH, a technical resource group that develops non-profit, community housing. The project had to respect a certain number of criteria; first, it had to include 200 residential units for three distinct clienteles, specifically half of the units were aimed at families of people who work at the McGill University Health Centre; 10% for seniors living in St. Raymond, and 40% non-profit community housing. Between 5 and 15% of the space needed to be devoted to public space for future residents. The conception of the buildings also had to respect certain norms, and use green yet simple technologies.

Results:
Our final proposal included three buildings located on the edges of the lot, leaving the central portion available for recreation or social events. Special attention was devoted to making the new development attractive and well-adapted for families and for the elderly. The orientation of the buildings, the positioning of the windows, the implementation of green roofs and the selection of materials were all carefully planned to maximize energy savings.

Overall, the charrette exercise was a great learning experience as all these obstacles are present in real-life working environments. Keeping in mind costs, durability, and energy efficiency constraints made it difficult to elaborate designs that were visually interesting and innovative. Functional elements required and desired by the client and community limited the physical layout of the space. We had to develop a common language and vision in an extremely short period of time.

Practical issue such as lack of sleep, stress and even personality incompatibilities, in addition to the challenges related to the project itself, came into play. I believe we all appreciated that some of our ideas might end up being implemented. It was particularly rewarding to see the range of work produced and presented to the client and other teams.