A new research project for the Observatoire

Title
Extensions of indoor walkways into the public domain: a question of access to public transportation, of 3D urban planning and of public-private partnership

Research project under the responsibility of
L'Observatoire de la ville intérieure, attached to the Institut d'urbanisme,
Université de Montréal

Researchers involved
Michel Boisvert, professor in the Institut d'urbanisme and head of the Observatoire,
David Amborski, professor and head of the Urban and Regional Planning School, Ryerson University
John Zacharias, professor in the geography department at Concordia University

Other partners in the project
City of Montréal,
City of Toronto
Société de transport de Montréal (STM)
Toronto Transit Commission (TTC)
Quartier international de Montréal (QIM)

Financial support
The main support comes from a grant by Infrastructure Canada of 221 750$ over a period of one and a half year.

Length of the project;
From April 2006 to October 2007

Expected results:
A final report including a detailed presentation of each new linkage examined and a GIS will be delivered to infrastructure Canada by march 2007. A set of guidelines aimed at planning officials and building developers will then be worked out and proposed to all parties involved by the end of summer 2007. An exploratory paper dealing the applicability of this public-private partnership experiment to utility tunnels will then be proposed to Infrastructure Canada.

Summary
This research proposal aims at a thorough assessment of the type of partnership which was experienced between the property owners and the municipal authorities in extending indoor walkways into the public domain. It implies two major dimensions, on the one hand the cost involved and the financial support for these infrastructures and on the other hand their social impact based upon a close examination of several design features, namely location of each additional linkage within its network, accessibility conditions such as opening hours and perceived environmental quality.

Downtown areas in large cities can reach such a high density of activities and user flows that the planning of pedestrian infrastructures raises major problems. Accordingly, in order for the walkways between public transportation and final destinations to be as efficient and safe as possible, alternate passages have been built as connected segments between private properties. Over time, these have become indoor pedestrian networks, either underground or above ground, and today RÉSO in Montréal, PATH in Toronto and PLUS 15 in Calgary are seen as unique assets for the future of their respective downtown area. They indeed provide shorter distances, protection against bad weather and optimal use of underground space for building owners. City planners and office building managers across the world show increased interest in these Canadian achievements. Still there has never been a comprehensive assessment of the partnership involved between private developers and municipal administrations when the former were allowed to build and operate walkways in the public domain. Lately, the need for extensions towards public facilities, less likely to finance these infrastructures on their own budget due to their limited capacity of returns on investment through rental fees, has been raised, leading some to reconsider the admissibility of such infrastructures to current 3-tier public grants.

This project is built up according to three successive steps. First there is a need to complete the information that researchers and partner-organisations do have on hand both on the type of agreements reached between the private developers and the local authorities as well as on the design features of these extensions to the pedestrian infrastructures. Current proposals for such extensions will be added to the data base as well. There will then be a thorough analysis of these experiments in order to provide a comprehensive assessment in a comparative way between Toronto and Montréal. The next stage involves the design of guidelines based upon the findings on best practices, aimed at supporting all partners involved in the extensions of such infrastructures. Finally, an exploratory effort will be made at adapting the public-private partnership framework experienced in the development of indoor walkways to utility tunnels, a strategy of shared location for urban infrastructures as opposed to the current separate locations whose implementation in North America faces huge difficulties compared to European countries. The timeframe has a horizon of 18 months.

The project will be administered by the Observatoire de la ville intérieure, a research unit attached to the Institut d'urbanisme at Université de Montréal and its chair person, Michel Boisvert, will act as the principal researcher. Other university professors involved are John Zacharias, from Concordia University in Montréal and David Amborski from Ryerson Polytechnic University in Toronto. Aside from the joint direction of the research project, each co-researcher will be in charge of heading a local steering committee made up of representatives of organisations which have been closely involved in the development of these indoor walkways.

This multidisciplinary proposal is set out in a collaborative way and it intends to extract knowledge sufficient to develop guidelines for future extensions and to explore its applicability to other infrastructure investments involving public-private partnership. The project clearly refers to the 4th and the 6th priorities of the PRRS program i.e. the finance and governance issues of public infrastructures, and it implies as a major input in the social and environmental impact of these infrastructures, the 3rd priority of the program.