

When marketing rules, architectural mediocrity reigns

John Barber



Who says Toronto is ugly? Just take a look at St. James Town. The new community centre in Canada's tallest and densest low-rent housing complex is a superb addition to a neglected corner of that thriving neighbourhood.

One must admit, however, that great architecture dies abruptly just a few blocks north of St. James Town, on the other side of the great divide. Despite ceaseless construction activity and legendary spending, there hasn't been an identifiable architect sighted in Rosedale for years. The bigger the budget, according to the precepts of the decorator-driven historicism that currently prevails within that neighbourhood, the duller the result.

The same strange discontinuity in architectural taste and cultural ambition is noticeable throughout the city. Smart, sophisticated new institutional buildings — from the opera house downtown to far-flung suburban library branches — appear regularly. But privately financed residential buildings — from the plywood châteaux of Rosedale to the latest whoop-de-do condo towers in North York — tend with few exceptions to the horrendous.

Nothing's so simple, of course. Two neighbouring, privately developed additions to the Spadina streetscape — the innovative District Lofts on Richmond and the faux-deco Morgan building on the west side of Spadina — demonstrate a design gulf as wide as any you'll find in this city. But the general picture suggests that the failings of architecture and urban design in Toronto are not official ones. Mediocrity is what the free market demands.

There is a growing body of opinion that the dominance of lawyers in the planning process is what kills

design in Toronto. But before killing all the lawyers, I'd target the marketing experts. That would immediately take care of the most visible aspect of the architectural crime wave sweeping Toronto — "the crisis of tops," as one architect friend calls it — with new towers supposedly distinguished by undersized minarets, expressionistic comb-overs and other ridiculous doodads on their roofs.

Then the private developers could begin taking their cues from the quality builders in town, beginning with the University of Toronto, which has established a record of enlightened architectural patronage over the past decade or so. With the help of both established star designers and talented local firms, U of T has shown not only how well modern architecture can be done, but why it is necessary.

As a welcome kick to the backside of staid, historicist Toronto, Graduate House at the corner of Spadina Avenue and Harbord Street remains the star of the new campus. The more recent Woodsworth College residence at the

southeast corner of St. George and Bloor streets, designed by Toronto-based Architects Alliance, makes an equally impressive, albeit much less exciting, northern entrance to the campus. And the ongoing transformation of St. George, which began with a groundbreaking redesign of the street itself, is brilliant.

It's a pity one can't say the same of the new Wolfond Centre for Jewish Campus Life at Huron Street and Harbord, a small but cringe-inducing exception to the mix. But on the other side of the campus, bordering Queen's Park, the university is giving Toronto its first building designed by British superstar Sir Norman Foster.

It's easy for city planners to say yes to such projects, but it's almost impossible for them to say no to the schlock that sells so well in Toronto. The real responsibility for improving the quality of design in Toronto lies with the developers who commission it — and, ultimately, the buyers who consume it.

The good news is that something does appear to be changing. Per-

haps responding to a clientele that is becoming more sophisticated — or simply the heightened expectations at City Hall — more developers are beginning to flirt tentatively with architecture once again.

The exemplars of the trend are Howard Cohen of Context Development and Peter Clewes of Architects Alliance, who have collaborated on a number of the best new residential buildings in Toronto, including the District Lofts and MOZO on Sherbourne Street. Their success has inspired a number of developers to try the same formula, hiring serious designers to create distinguished buildings or otherwise aping the sophisticated Context designs.

The city, meanwhile, is threatening to get tough on persistent schlockmeisters by turning down projects that fail to meet its design standards — even though it appears to have no legal right to do so. Planners and forward-thinking politicians are putting their faith in proposed reforms to the City of Toronto Act or the Ontario Municipal Board that might help establish en-

forceable standards. There is much hopeful talk of new permitting systems and design review panels. And the city is crammed with talented architects ready to prove the wisdom of design-led development.

None of that can happen, however, without a market that values design. As any developer will attest, they are mere servants of the market. Thus the ever-unfolding ugliness of Toronto is a project of the citizenry as a whole.

Most Torontonians either don't care about design or they have no idea what it is, and the vocabulary of a typical conversation reveals a cultural void: Would anybody criticize Belgravia as "cookie-cutter" or the Place des Vosges as "bland?" Yet those are the words one always hears, as if the sole function of architecture was to entertain bored drivers as they streamed by on nearby highways. And the buildings we get reflect the cultural expectations that produce them.

Clearly it's time for a change, but it can begin only from within.

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