

Daunting task for crap detectors

Design watchdogs have a lot on their plate

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There is a certain elegance about architectural terminology. Gothic, Bauhaus, Brutalist, Spanish Colonial Revivalist, Richardsonian Romanesque. The recent Capital Modern exhibit at the Art Gallery of Alberta, featuring Edmonton architecture from 1940 to 1969, was a revealing and even thrilling look at the beauty we don't often notice in our city. Yet one architectural term -- coined by Mayor Stephen Mandel -- supersedes all others.

In his first state of the city address, in April 2005, Mandel said, "The time has passed when square boxes with minimal features and lame landscaping are acceptable. Our tolerance for crap is now zero."

Crap.

On Tuesday, three years since Mandel spoke those words, the Edmonton Design Committee (EDC) presented its second annual report to city council. Of 108 applications last year, including helpful pre-assessments, the committee supported (or supported with conditions) 37 applications. They denied almost as many. The EDC is a volunteer coalition of experts, from private industry, from the public sector, and from the city at large, with no real power to stop a project. But no projects were approved by the city of Edmonton development office that were not supported by the EDC. Any square boxes with minimal features and lame landscaping going up today were initiated before the EDC.

Or they're outside the EDC's mandate.

Until recently, the extremely busy committee only looked at projects downtown. Now, their sphere of influence has expanded to include commercial areas of Old Strathcona and the near south side, between 109th and 99th Streets, all the way down to Argyll Road, along with the Gateway Boulevard and Calgary Trail corridor, and everything else council or the city manager feels is important.

"It's exciting, to get a look at what could be coming in the next few years, all the potential changes to the Edmonton skyline," Shafraaz Kaba, an architect, writer and vice-chair of the committee, said in the Three Bananas Cafe on Sir Winston Churchill Square, ground zero of Edmonton's urban renewal.

"I get a glimpse of what this city can be and what it should be. Hopefully, we're having a deep influence on the urban fabric of the city, in terms of walkability, density, environmental sustainability, public art."

The Principles of Urban Design set out by the committee, and available on the city of Edmonton website, are a truly inspiring read. It's easy to see why Kaba and his 10 accomplished peers on the committee sacrifice 20 hours a month, for free, to improve and enhance Edmonton and the lives of its citizens.

"It's sort of your public obligation to help improve your city," said Kaba. "But I do find the meetings quite frustrating. We see some very, very crappy projects, and some developers are still causing a fuss, wanting to get by on the old standard."

Don't developers read the Principles of Urban Design before they make their submissions to the EDC?

"They should," said Jeff Price, director of permitting and licensing at the City of Edmonton. "But not all of them do."

Broadly, the principles set forth by the EDC are designed to discourage the sort of development that has thrived in Edmonton over the last 30 years -- cheap, boxy, car-oriented, low-density, sprawling into the forests and fields instead of filling-in underutilized land closer to the core; and in the core, Edmonton's most resonant and historic neighbourhoods, equally cheap and ugly buildings with street-level parking lots instead of inviting retail.

The tragedy of reading the EDC's Principles of Urban Design is in imagining what the city would look and feel like today if the EDC were initiated and empowered in 1990.

"Not all development is good development," said Price. "That represents a cultural shift here, to demand the highest level of excellence in urban design."

It's a cultural change that was broadly supported by city council on Tuesday. If anything, council wanted the EDC to look at more projects, like transit-oriented developments. There is a new recognition in Edmonton -- by citizens, by governments and by a growing number of developers -- that good urban design is worth the extra thought, the collaboration, even the extra money.

"It might cost a bit more, but you get so much more out of it," said Price. "It's better for the developer, for the city, for the community, for tenants. Everyone wants to be associated with a better project."

The EDC had a hand in improving the Sobey's building going up on Jasper at 104th, on Enterprise Square, even on the Art Gallery of Alberta. Kaba is quite excited about the Ukrainian Canadian Archives & Museum of Alberta, an historic preservation and enhancement of the Lodge Hotel on East Jasper Avenue by HIP Architects and David Murray Architects.

"It'll help kick off the Quarters redevelopment," said Kaba. "It'll have a huge impact on an area that really needs a landmark project."

A number of landmark projects are in the works and, as long as Edmonton has the political will, we'll see less and less crap. The architectural terminology will soon shift, with the city's design culture. ■