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The Imperative for Housing on Main Streets

I am the true black sheep here, the true non-architect, puzzled, for example, why architects use the four-syllable word “typology” when the simple “type” will do. What I have learned in the past four days is that architecture is a much more difficult and complex process than I had ever imagined. It is hard getting buildings to look nice, but getting them to work, too, presents some profoundly difficult problems, especially when space is limited. These were problems about which I had thought little before this competition.

The original “Housing on Main Streets” proposal, put together in 1987, had two goals. One was to add more housing in the city. It came directly out of my experience as a municipal politician who was frequently frustrated by neighborhood opposition to housing projects. I found adding housing to main streets was of less concern to neighborhood activists. At that time, the goal of more housing was less concerned with intensifying the city as with meeting the strong demand for increased residential space per person. This demand was causing housing shortages, and the city’s population was declining, even though the overall amount of residential space had been increasing steadily for several decades.

The second goal was to do something about the appearance and function of our main streets. Jane Jacobs wrote a book in 1960 (*The Death and Life of Great American Cities*) that opened my eyes to what I experienced while growing up in London: the vitality and dignity of main streets. I wanted not only to add housing to Toronto’s main streets, but also to add it in a way that achieved that vitality and dignity. In Jane’s terms, I wanted to use main streets to unite neighborhoods, rather than to divide them.

Today there is a more urgent goal: to intensify our entire metropolitan fabric. In the last three years we have learned that we must huddle together to use less fossil fuel and help prevent global warming. Intensifying development along main streets is not simply a matter of housing people more cheaply and using infrastructure more efficiently and making main streets more vital: It is now almost a matter of life and death.

As an amateur among the gifted, I looked for very simple things in judging the competition. I cast my votes for ways of putting lots of density on a site in a package that was physically appealing and wouldn’t upset the neighbors too much. I looked for designs that were elegant, stylish and conservative, and appeared to provide comfortable, congenial living arrangements. Whether my choices were good architecture I still do not know. But neighbors would like them, and, perhaps, so would the people who would live in them.

Joe Berridge: *[We] professionals who are not in the public sector [have] been rather derelict in our duty, believing that the debate is essentially one between the public sector and the owner of land. There is a third interest, an interest that speaks for the city, the city as an organism, the city as a piece of sculpture, the city as a place to live in. We’ve all come to the point at which we know that that interest is not adequately protected by the other two corners of that triad.*

Donald Schmidt: *[The Main Streets program] has a significant benefit in terms of the architectural and neighborhood quality of the city. Because it’s a more fragmented and more complex notion about how the city is built, it engages a much broader range of the architectural and planning communities, and of the community as a whole, in the kinds of*

decisions about what the physical form of the city will be. [They can] present a very catholic and broad range of styles, positions and attitudes that can be accessible to a very broad range of architects, operating from the smallest to the largest practice. It holds within it the possibility of more accurately mirroring the complexity of an urban condition.

John Ferguson: *It’s assumed in this whole process that the execrable 24 story towers of the past 20 years will be replaced by marvelous six-story main street buildings. That’s not necessarily so; it’s quite possible a city of execrable six-story buildings could result. The architect is not [only] bearing the burden of regulations; he is also bearing the burdens of aesthetics and the emotions of the city. That cannot be forgotten.*