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PERSPECTIVES

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The New Collaboration

Creating an urban glasnost; Building a community that works

Urban issues in the past have often turned into pitched and acrimonious battles between adversaries who didn't communicate with each other. Recent encounters have been different. Debates over the Cadillac-Fairview downtown shopping mall in Victoria, the Macdonald Art Gallery in Regina, the Museum of Fine Art and the McGill College Street projects in Montréal have involved a greater number of public groups arguing on more complex levels. Instead of being forced into reactive stances, these new players insist upon participating from the opening bell; they insist upon being constructively involved in the decision-making process; they represent a broader constituency. While they participate in encounters no less acrimonious than earlier ones, the new players, by their diversity and maturity, open the way for a new kind of collaboration.

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For the past 35 years the traditional players who have shaped our communities have been the developers, the planners, and the politicians. To understand the role of the new players it is important to look first at how the game was played in the past.

In Canada, very little construction took place between 1930 and 1950. This, combined with a quickly-growing population, caused a major shortage of accommodation. On top of that, many of our existing buildings were in very poor condition. It is therefore not surprising that, over the past 35 years, politicians have become obsessed with development. It is also not surprising that the country concentrated upon quantity rather than upon quality.

Planners, meanwhile, were supposed to provide the framework in which developments took place. Theories of urban planning were formulated from around the turn of the century by people who had been traumatized by the urban squalor engendered by the industrial revolution. Ironically, those planning theories were created by people who hated cities. They thought in terms of radical change – but successful cities evolve, they are not created instantaneously. In the 1950s, when those planning theories became universally accepted, a comprehensive type of urban planning was set in place. It was so comprehensive, in fact, that it advocated the demolition of entire sectors of cities in favour of a completely new urban fabric.

While the planners were talking in terms of sweeping changes, the developers, courted by the politicians, saw incredible opportunity. They started with the development of the suburbs followed by the inevitable shopping malls. This accelerated the decline of the inner cities. They then turned their attention to the large-scale urban renewal of the core areas. By then, the developers had taken control of the game. They soon learned to establish their own rules. They did the logical thing for any business: they maximized their profit. And, in the process, development took place that was good for the shareholders – but not necessarily good for the public.

Even after we had largely caught up with the shortage of buildings, politicians continued to believe that their achievements were measured in terms of development. There were two reasons for this: development created jobs, and new buildings increased the tax base. But the continuing emphasis upon quantity over quality resulted in communities where the quality of life didn't keep up with the expectations of its citizens.

Thanks to the development of our suburbs and cities, there is no doubt that the level of comfort has improved since 1950. But changes in our society have created new needs on two levels. First, a demand for environmental quality characterized by visual continuity, human scale, variety, and a sense of place. Second, a demand for involvement since an ever-larger portion of a better-educated and more mature public was now critical of the decisions that had been made.

Since 1950, many other areas of life (consumer goods, travel, education, information, and leisure) have seen improvements in quality, variety, and accessibility. The demand for quality in these areas was dependent upon individual choice and was satisfied by the entrepreneurial system. The demand for quality in our environment is communal and the entrepreneurial system alone cannot satisfy it. Here, it is not just a question of supply and demand: public policies are needed. But politicians and planners have lost control; and leaving the initiative to the developers simply doesn't work anymore. No wonder, then, that a new, sophisticated public demands to participate in decision making.

But how can the new collaboration work? Municipal politicians are caught in a vicious circle. To be re-elected they have to show results. Because their terms are short, they show results by undertaking highly visible, short-term projects. They therefore do not have long-term policies and they do not favour incremental changes. Most politicians would no doubt welcome a process whereby they can think long-term and implement their visions. Public consultation used on a very open and systematic basis can provide them with such a process. Of course, a number of municipalities have already created citizen committees on such topics as heritage, planning, and design. But to be effective they must receive more recognition and visibility and their recommendations must be respected. This is only one form of consultation but it would increase the perception that the politicians are responding to the wishes of their constituents and would help them at election time.

The planners are caught in a paradox. They have to think long-term and they usually create rigid plans and promote out-of-scale developments but these are not easily adapted to the environmental and societal changes which constantly take place. Furthermore, many planners pursue plans for their own sake, losing sight of their real objective which is livable communities. What is needed is an approach which provides a vision and a framework within which incremental changes take place and directions evolve.

Planners have a tendency to work in isolation. Until recently, advocacy planning was dismissed as a fringe activity involving small, vocal groups. Now the potential is great to foster participation to develop the understanding and the expertise of the public.

Developers have recently been caught with increased frequency in public controversies that have stopped or delayed their projects – sometimes at great cost to themselves. They are therefore beginning to initiate their own public consultations. This encourages dialogue but developers naturally present their own point of view. The initiative is commendable but it must be counter-balanced by a parallel process initiated on a more objective basis by a public body.

The media, meanwhile, must play their role of objective reporters and of thought-provoking commentators. Unfortunately, very few journalists have developed an understanding of urban issues. The natural environment is well-served by a number of articulate, popular critics. But the built environment has traditionally been recognized by the media only when controversial political stories arise or as entertaining, superficial weekend columns. While, in the written press, there are encouraging signs of interest in urban issues, journalism on the whole has not facilitated dialogue among officials, developers, and the public.

But who is this public? From the taxi driver to the doctor, from the blue collar worker to the business executive, there is in this country a new consciousness of our built environment. But more importantly, organized groups – among them home-owner, landlord, and tenant associations, neighbourhood groups, merchant organizations, trade unions, heritage societies, chambers of commerce, and service clubs – are increasingly becoming involved in urban issues. To be effective, these groups must talk to each other, they must co-ordinate their efforts, they must work out compromises and, above all, like all the other players, they must gain a better understanding of the issues.

The importance of understanding the issues was particularly well-illustrated in two cities recently involved in Cadillac-Fairview mall proposals. In Montréal, Cadillac-Fairview proposed to construct a shopping complex on McGill College Street. The developer negotiated behind the scenes with the mayor, offering to contribute to the cost of a concert hall in the complex if the city would expropriate land necessary for the project and allow Cadillac-Fairview to build over the street. Once the plan became public knowledge, the controversy began. Public protest centred on two issues: the proposed development contravened existing plans which protected views of Mont Royal; furthermore, the placement of a concert hall within a shopping mall was considered, rightly or wrongly, inappropriate by many people. Those who joined forces to protest the proposal were heritage groups, the architectural association, the chamber of commerce, and nearby land-owners (mainly large financial institutions). Faced with this opposition, Cadillac-Fairview initiated a consultation process. The mayor, taken by surprise, decided to locate the concert hall elsewhere. A new project was proposed. In this one, Cadillac-Fairview associated itself with the other landlords on the site, taking into account the recommendations that came out of the consultation process. The public left it to the city planning department to work out the details with the developers.

The debate over the Cadillac-Fairview downtown shopping mall proposal in Victoria also had all the right ingredients for collaboration: it had the public, represented by a variety of groups; it had a developer who had learned to work with the public in Montréal; a media which reported the issue at length; and politicians and planners who wanted to do the right thing. And yet, everything ended in bitterness with a divided community. And, incidentally, the mall will be built.

The processes in both Montréal and Victoria were flawed. True collaboration didn't exist because the politicians and the developers made deals behind the scenes – and this was perceived as duplicity by the public. Montréal was lucky. The issues were simple and clear and when the developer established a consultation process the proper issues were debated. In Victoria, the developer also initiated a consultation process but it focused on too narrow a range of issues. And the debate became confused. In an ideal situation, the consultation would be initiated by the administration and the developer together in a spirit of openness, a kind of urban glasnost.

There is a great temptation for officials to think they know the public good better than the public knows it. Eventually, however, such an attitude leads only to misunderstanding and tension. It is true that officials have the information, dedication, power, and expertise but past performances have proved that this is not enough. Collective wisdom is more reliable. The public has the right to be involved and, in a democracy, it even has the right to be wrong. What is important is that a process is established, a system of openness and debate. In this sense, the process is more important than any decision that comes out of it.

When the system works, encounters are not decided in terms of winners and losers. When politicians, planners, developers, and the public work together, everybody wins. The issue is not whether a certain project is developed. The issue is to have a community that works, to have a community that has a sense of place and a sense of continuity, a community for which the greatest number of people have a feeling of ownership because they have collaborated in its development.

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