

WESTWORD COLUMN

If They Build It, Will We Come?

Whenever I drive or walk along Jasper Avenue toward 100 Street, and see one more time the forlorn façade of the abandoned Hop's Handbag Store on the north side of the street, I feel like weeping. And then I get very very angry. For this darkened storefront, its elegant neo-Edwardian (or whatever) columns and cornices all that is left of what had been a kind of architectural masterpiece, in these parts anyway, is a perpetual reminder of the perfidiousness of our city councils and mayors over the last couple of decades. I don't even remember who the mayor and councillors were at the time the decision was made to allow an offshore entrepreneur to gut this lovely building in order to sell *handbags*, and what the precise details were of the deal struck between this merchant and the city, and I don't remember when the Hop enterprise called it quits and shut the handbag store down. But the abandoned building in the dark is evidence in perpetuity of the abject failure of civic governors to stick up for a people's city.

So, when I hear the word "vision" come from the mouths of most of Edmonton's politicians, I want to reach for my Taser gun. They wouldn't know a vision if it had great big ears, smelt funny and took up half the room.

It was in this mood that I sat in on the Mayoral Candidates' Forum on Art and Culture in Edmonton, three weeks before the municipal elections for mayor and city council on October 18. [By the time you read this, the winner will have been decided.] The three (serious) candidates had been at a forum on housing and the homeless that afternoon; now they switched gears for the two hundred citizens who filed into the arts forum in the rehearsal room of the Winspear concert hall (one of the few downtown buildings that does not put Edmonton to shame.)

Did they know who they were talking to? I wasn't sure myself, not recognizing a whole lot of the audience. Was it possible that there are non-artist citizens who hope that their politicians have a vision for the community of arts? I bought a glass of wine from the Winspear's bar and sat down next to the guy who used to manage the Winspear Centre; he assured me that it was a pretty damn good wine. I found this enormously reassuring.

The host of the event was the Professional Arts Coalition of Edmonton [PACE] and they had assembled a crack panel of questioners: Pamela Anthony, producer and writer, director of the Comedy Arts Festival and Executive Director this year of the Media Arts Alliance; Daniel Cournoyer, franco-Albertan Artistic Director of L'Unitheatre; Alice Major, eminent poet and formerly president of the Writers Guild of Alberta; Tony Luppino, dapper ED of the Edmonton Art Gallery.

Was it possible, I wondered right off the bat, to hear from the would-be mayors a plan for a "creative city" that did not immediately bury it in economic indicators? I

am fed up with the expectation that the arts have to make a case for their *economic inputs* in our community: we all know that the single biggest economic contributor to the arts is the artists, who in effect subsidize themselves on their miserable earnings. Anyway, Bill Smith, the incumbent, three-term mayor, led off with his vision of a “rock-solid economy based on the knowledge industry.” Sigh. Arts policy driven by computer programmers? Corporate design. Efficiency. Residential development. Enlarged revenue base. Then, finally, Quality of Life, “central to which are the arts, sustained by my vision,” namely a Plan. Candidate Stephen Mandel allowed as how the “crowd here tonight” shows that the arts are...moving forward. Arts, after all, bring “creativity, innovation and economic activity” to a city. In the mind of candidate Robert Noce, arts and culture are “instrumental in attracting professionals” and providing them a “fun-loving environment.” Well, at least we are all having fun.

Then the panellists had their turn. Cournoyer wanted to know “how we are going to bring the artists, corporations and government together” to turn this into what Bill Smith never stops referring to as “the greatest city in the world” – yes, folks, Edmonton, even before it’s improved! Cournoyer referred to Montreal’s Semaine de la culture, to Vancouver’s policy of requiring developers to dedicate subsidized space in their buildings to arts organizations, to Toronto’s Arts Week, which involves more than a thousand artists and performers. Coincidentally, I had just read the Mayor David Miller’s Proclamation of Arts Week, and he managed not to mention the “e” word at all. *Whereas*, he proclaimed, *the arts are a unifying force that not only enrich our quality of life but contribute to Toronto’s social and cultural development...*

Tony Luppino wanted to know how the city was going to get hold of federal funds. Pamela Anthony asked for each candidate’s position on user fees charged to arts groups in city-owned arts facilities. Alice Major, who disclosed that her peak annual earnings from her writing have been \$4300, had the best question of the evening. Having described artists as the city’s “working poor” who are only alleviated here and there by an Edmonton Trust Fund grant or a bed sit in Arts Habitat or an appointment – one poet at a time – as Poet Laureate (“These can benefit a handful but we are thousands”), asked, “Given the prospects, would you want your child or grandchild to be an artist?”

After the hooting and hollering died down, only Stephen Mandel answered directly: “Yes, I would. Because I have the means to support him or her.” Mayors as Sugar Daddies to the arts?

But there was an awful lot of the old boilerplate that has been repeated year after year as a substitute for a real arts policy: “arts are central to quality of life,” “the arts bring creativity, innovation and economic activity to a community,” “culture is instrumental in attracting young professionals to a city,” “festivals attract tourists,” yadda yadda...the kind of language with which the speaker flatters himself that he has a *vision* but doesn’t really tell us what he will *do* (well, one candidate did

suggest that Edmontonians be encouraged to invite artists over for a home-cooked meal). To be fair, there was some thoughtful argument and proposals passed around the forum, whether the notion of the arts as a “key municipal service,” or the commitment to bring the province and the feds to the table, or the acknowledgement that we need actively to *keep* our artists interested in Edmonton by providing the infrastructure for their survival, such as affordable housing.

The question I wanted to ask was: “Level with us and tell us what in fact is standing between your much bally-hooed vision and its realization right now. What pressures will come to bear on you as soon as you take your seat in the mayor’s chair? What about those councillors who think paying for “self-indulgent” art is a waste of public funds? and the taxpayers’ lobby groups who think their taxes should hire more police? A provincial government which is obscene with oil bucks while the Alberta Foundation for the Arts rations artists’ grants? The developers who offer cut-rate deals on strip malls while our architects drift away? The SUV class that sprawls all over suburbia and says it’s scared to go downtown?”

Canadian Policy Research Networks dedicated a news release last August to the idea of “creative cities,” namely that the “lifeblood of the arts” – creativity, imagination, experimentation, diversity – just happen to be what all communities need if they wish to foster “social inclusion, democratic engagement, environmental sustainability,” never forgetting, of course, “economic innovation” too. The creative capacity of a whole community is at stake when it gathers to debate an arts policy. A case in point was the recent Creative Clusters conference last May in Brighton, UK. *Creative industries, creative entrepreneurs, creative inclusion, creative credit (“Peer-lending for the creative industries”), creative occupational clusters. Identity clusters.* There was a man from Northumbria University to talk about “the impact of culture-led regeneration” on Newcastle and a chap from Japan to address “the bridge between non-profit creativity and economic achievement.” The ED of Montana Arts described a “creative cluster” in rural Montana, and a Mexican representative to the International Network for Cultural Diversity proposed a “firewall to globalization” by means of something called a cultural observatory, “a Latin American tool for cultural development.”

Someday I would like to be able to talk about *my* city in these terms: “Creative clusters are places to live as well as to work, places where cultural products are consumed as well as made. They are open round the clock, for work and play. They feed on diversity and change and so thrive in busy, multi-cultural urban settings that have their own local distinctiveness but are also connected to the world.” Yoo hoo, Mr. Mayor! Over here!

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