

Thoughts About HRM by DESIGN's Outcomes from the Urban Design Task Force

- Gathered from the UDTF via e-mail between February 8 and March 6, 2007 -

From David Garrett

General:

- -Modifications to the guidelines of the Municipal Planning Strategy guiding growth and development.
- -Specific modifications to existing HRM Land-use bylaws addressing a broad range of issues in all current zoning categories, in particular requirements for existing R1 and R2 uses.
- -Policy recommendations regarding a range of central issues such as circulation/transportation, sustainability, heritage, parameters and prioritization for growth, measures for success, etc.
- -An urban design for the Regional Centre identifying a coherent overall vision for the Regional Centre, urban sub-centres, principal corridors, intensification targets, areas for intensification, means of intensification, etc.
- -Coordination with and influence upon other HRM planning initiatives such as the Regional Plan and Transportation.

Specific:

- -Guidelines for development and design in the downtown areas of Halifax and Dartmouth, in particular height and massing, retail zone requirements, sidewalk and street usage requirements, etc.
- -Solar access guidelines.
- -Water course guidelines.
- -Urban forest and habitat guidelines.
- -Architectural design guidelines (min. standards).
 - Height control guidelines in areas outside the CBD's.
- -Design and development guidelines concerning issues such as mixed-use and multi-use requirements, bonuses, provision of amenity and services (day-care, etc.), etc.
- -Recommendations for prototypes of development for sites of differing uses (opportunity sites).

END.

From Paul Shakotko

Attached are my thoughts on some of the compelling issues facing Halifax. We need to ask ourselves what parts of the issues do we want to accommodate and what parts we want to influence through urban design.

1) Demographic Shifts. Our community's average age is becoming older, more people are living alone, and we have more parents raising children on their own. For example, Nova Scotia Community Counts Demographic info reveals in the next 20 years the number of seniors over the age of 65 will double and the number of people under the age of 34 will drop by a third. Census data also shows that in the past 10 years the number of seniors living alone has increased by 50% and the number of single parent families has increased by 50%. Our urban design needs to be nimble enough to influence these trends immediately.

2) Cumbersome Development Process. The perception is that the Halifax development approval process is cumbersome, long, and expensive. As a result, there is little incentive for progressive/innovative development. This is evident in what I consider a plethora of sub-standard and inappropriate building designs for Halifax as compared to our competitor cities. Our urban design needs to quickly demonstrate to the business community a development-friendly approval processes that generates leading edge design.

3) Retail Incentives. The major industrial areas around the regional center (i.e. Burnside and Bayer's lake) were initially intended to house heavy industry but over the past 15 years have become more associated with general retail stores. This has created a disincentive for consumers to shop downtown and as a result fewer businesses are choosing to locate in the downtown cores of Dartmouth and Halifax. Our urban design needs to quickly articulate the attractiveness to new businesses of locating downtown.

4) Sprawl. The majority of new residential and business development in the past 10 years has taken place outside the regional center. This has a tremendous impact on the regional center from a transportation, walkability, air quality, etc.- we know most of these issues.. Our urban design needs to clearly show how it will immediately curb sprawl by making the downtown more attractive to developers and homebuyers.

5) Affordable Housing. Affordable housing is difficult to find on the peninsula, less so in Dartmouth. To bring the young families back to Halifax, we need to consider how new developments can accommodate greater diversity of families and students in the downtown areas. Our urban design needs to prove the effectiveness of integrating affordable housing options into the downtown.

6) Green space. Halifax boasts large green spaces but with little connectivity between them. Great cities have boulevards that link green spaces and public areas in such as way to preserve the 'human scale' but still allow for higher population densities. Our urban design needs to show the importance of environmental connectivity in a healthy, green Halifax.
END.

From Paul MacKinnon

It seems to me that, whether the terms of reference explicitly state this, the reason Council has put so much support behind the HRMbyDesign study is that they want the development process mess we are in (as best exemplified by TexPark) to be SOLVED. There is an expectation at Council, and in the public eye, that the issue of what is allowed to be developed and what is not allowed to be developed in Downtown Halifax (sorry, Dartmouth, but the pressures aren't there.....yet) will become clear. And, from this, hard and fast development guidelines will be put in place that allows Council to easily decide, and for subsequent appeals to be few. This is the #1 priority of this study in many people's eyes and we cannot lose sight of that. We need to have a solution around the height issue.

Having said that, I think there's a number of other things we can accomplish:

1. Residential Density. I believe a vibrant downtown needs more residential. As OforU has stated, the 25,000 figure in the CD is lowballing things. If you look in the Regional Plan, you'll see that most of that 25,000 are going to Dartmouth. I am in agreement with Bernie that we need to repopulate the peninsula to 1960 levels. We should take a page from Vancouver's downtown strategy, and stress the need for more people. That way we can go into neighborhoods and ask HOW they want to achieve greater density, not IF they should.
2. Demographics. Yes, as Paul said, we need to look at how the population is changing. But we also need to examine how we want the population to change in the study area. Without messing too much with the market, there are ways to ensure family dwelling in the downtown core (Vancouver does it by requiring 45% of any new residential development to be non-market family and affordable housing).
3. Development Aesthetics. There is a woeful lack of standards around how buildings should look. Without them we get things like the styrofoam walls of Mountain Equipment Co-op, the 8 ft. retail level of the Marriot on Argyle, the blank walls along Carmichael St., etc. Any building under 40 ft. has NO aesthetic standards, and the requirements aren't much higher for taller buildings. Lots of cities have stringent requirements that don't impinge on architectural expression.
4. Historical protection. New development will erase historic buildings, if left to its own devices. If we can possibly use this study to create better protection for historic buildings, we must do it. In fact, it's ridiculous that you can tear down ANY building without having a plan for its replacement (we've had the Birk's site for 10+ years, and I suspect the Kelly's Luggage building will be an empty space for that long).
5. Design review. This idea has been floated for a long time. Should Halifax have a design-review panel?

We need to stress the synergies that exist between current hot-button issues:

Heritage protection = tourism = economic growth

More residents downtown = greater safety
Greater Design guidelines = stronger architectural community
Less appeals = more money developers can spend on design, instead of lawyers
More families living downtown = less commuting = less pollution
More development downtown = economic growth for entire city (and the Conference Board would suggest for the Maritime Provinces)

I could go on, but will leave it there.

END.

From Adriane Abbott

I feel like the odd ball on this committee, without direct expertise related to urban planning. I am rendered speechless by the articulate and thoughtful emails exchanged by my fellow committee members. (I was particularly awestruck by Kendall Taylor's email last week.) However I do wish to comment on Paul McKinnon's note because he briefly touched on something I do know a little about. I agree with what he wrote, including his agreement with everything Paul Shakotko's wrote, but my reaction to his last suggestion, a design review panel, is not at all favorable. If our number one goal is to reduce wrangling over new development I can be emphatic; this is not the way to proceed. A design panel will add a layer of suspicion and frustration.

I did not have the pleasure of attending the latest Carmichael Lecture, but I have sympathy for Mark Childs' point of view and I appreciate Paul's comments about the need for standards. It is hair splitting but I'd be more comfortable with the notion of imposing design principles, not design standards. Standards, in addition to inviting controversy, run the risk of producing conformity of another type, which may well be of superior quality but will sell us short on inspiration nonetheless.

I believe we need regulations to carry firm and transparent incentives for developers which encourage high quality urban design, as outlined in the vision and the committee's work to date. My instinct, perhaps naïve and formed partially by my failed attempt to save the Kelly's Luggage Building, is that when the economics of good design and historic preservation work, we will have an abundance of both.

During a session with the group dealing with downtown Dartmouth at the last forum, Harold talked about rules which would allow a developer to add capacity, or other revenue related 'bonuses', in exchange for considerations at street level; environmental stewardship; and historic preservation, etc.. I reduce his brilliant explanation to a simplistic score card, you do X, we'll allow Y. This struck me as eminently sensible because it isn't about handouts, we'll contribute X if you do Y, it's about creating an imperative. (Authors of 'The Next Industrial Revolution' make this point about industry with eloquence and poignancy.) My experience is that philanthropy is often the domain of developers but it is generally delivered as one outcome of their earnings, not through their work directly!

Our ambitions are commendable, indeed inspiring, from carbon neutral to breathtakingly beautiful, but my view is that our highest aim (what I want to see come out of this...) must be to ensure that we back our effort and ideals with an economic equation which generates incentive for all.

END.

More from Paul MacKinnon

I am sure there are issues with design review panels, and they probably work in different ways in different places. I think they can be a combination of ensuring that the developers have followed the design standards and rules (because they are professionals, they are better able to do this than Councillors....although planning staff would have these skills already); and of being a body who can say, "nope, you can do better."

As far as adding another layer, I believe that most places that have them, they are a substitute for the political layer. In New York City the design review panel is the one who gives final approval to a project - councillors aren't involved at all. Same with Quebec City (?)

However, I'm no expert on this, and would not advocate a wholesale change, without knowing the cons. We may be able to achieve what we want from the standards alone. And I do agree with Adriane and Mary, vis a vis not creating anything that leads to a cookie cutter approach. The Hydrostone is so special because it is so small. If every neighborhood in the city looked just like that, it would be no better than what we're seeing in the newer suburban neighbourhoods.

Adriane is absolutely right that the economics have to work. One of the most interesting things to come out of Larry Beasley's (former Director of Planning in Vancouver) talk last spring was how he ensured that his planners all understood "pro formas" and the economics of development. Every developer is out to make a profit (and we do live in a capitalist society), and when they say (as they often do) "I can't afford to do X", it really helps to know if they really can't afford to do X versus just not really wanting to. This becomes an imperative in historic preservation especially.

We're getting some great thoughts via email! I think this is a great addition to our meetings, because we just don't have time to chat like this during those 2 hour, jam-packed session.

Paul (I guess I am up to \$0.04 now)

PS Frank Palermo is a GREAT addition to the group.

END.

From Kendall Taylor

The scope increase regarding heritage protection is vital to protecting our past. I think we should put equal emphasis on how we preserve our future.

'Eco-Density' is the first and necessary step in reducing our ecological footprint. We need to get that right, so that everything else will make sense.

The Sustainability Campaign sets a good foundation but I feel we should include further enhancements.

We need to set goals for clean air, water and land and also a reduction in GHG emissions to a point of Carbon Neutrality. The Canadian Green Building Council and the Royal Architectural Institute of Canada have set 2020 and 2030 (respectively) as target dates for carbon neutrality. Maybe someday our city can produce more than it consumes.

A great reference in Europe is simply called 'Display-Campaign'. They promote Energy, CO2 and water reduction programs where they reward you for your success over time.

Water - Water consumption stands out as one item densification may not resolve, without a reduction plan or localized harvesting. The water treatment plant is 25-30kms away and how will we deal with that infrastructure if the urban centre grows beyond the capacity of the current watershed? Does it make sense to pump water 30kms? What are the GHG consequences?

Air Quality - We have a power utility that has set some amazing GHG targets which should concern all of us. Every KW or BTU we can reduce will have a major effect on our air quality within HRM (Coal being the worst fuel to produce electricity). Density means the air temperature of a city will increase. This means increased respiratory problems and air conditioning loads. We should eventually set goals for Green roofs, Urban forests and soft landscaping.

Energy - We should set goals for renewable energy.

Urban forests - We should eventually study the effects of urban density on Species diversity. Continuous urban growth can deplete species by 96% and forests like Shubie Park/Point Pleasant only reduce them by 10% (taken from EcoIndicator99).

Strategies should be developed for waste reduction, storm water and sanitary management.

How these items make their way into the campaign or the vision and principles requires further review. I do believe we should include them and maybe others.

I think it would be great for HRM to set the framework to become the first carbon neutral city on the planet!

END.

More from Kendall Taylor

Adriane, thank you for your comments, you made my day.

I think you have brought up two very important issues.

Firstly, I think this committee is, and will continue to be, successful because of the diversity of its members.

Secondly, I think the discussion about principles vs standards, or a design review panel is great. Another concept might be a design competition for public and/or significant projects.

I have attached a picture of Halifax from 1929 that we have hanging in our office. The original street grid is still there with strong connections to a vibrant waterfront. The buildings all seem to be unique but respect each other with regard to scale and character. I can only imagine that at the street level, the downtown was full of life and had a great human scale. I know we can't go back in time but I do find these old pictures inspiring.

END.

From Dawn Sloane

What I'd like to see come out of this process is clear and concise aid for developers, architects, engineers so that we don't have substandard developments but ones of complimentary mass and style that fit in to the context of a vibrant, pedestrian friendly downtown.

Giving such direction to the development world will not only minimize the gray zone in the mps but will put in to place the necessary means for development to fit into the geographic difficulties of our downtown.

Right now we have huge tracks of land that would be redeveloped: Cogswell St. interchange, Sexton Campus, infirmary site, the waterfront, port authority lands and several smaller sites. If things are planned properly, and the designs for these areas cognisant of the surrounding built heritage, we could potentially have an incredible mix of housing and commercial/public developments.

Old and new can co-exist. I've seen it in Europe, Toronto, Los Angeles and New York. Faux historic buildings are not the answer. The answer starts with good quality buildings, Good street rooms, walkable streets, public areas, and inviting architecture will be our legacy to the future of Halifax. Innovation and good guidelines... that's what I'd like us to accomplish!

YAY! To Frank joining the team!

END.

From Bernie Smith

The following is my understanding of the outputs, which I expect from the "Halifax by Design" project together with a statement of my understanding of the function of the Advisory Committee.

Supplementary Item:

Before going into the list of issues I wish to attempt to explain my understanding of the relationship between the Advisory Committee and the consultants. This relationship is important since it has an impact on the issues to be addressed. This is especially important since at the last meeting I believe that there was a general lack of clarity on those roles and a consequent lack of understanding of the purpose served by the "sample area detail design" projects, which had been undertaken, in the previous sessions. My understanding is that the consultants are responsible for the recommendations to HRM Council of comprehensive urban design criteria in sufficient detail to determine specific design guidelines.

The purpose of the Advisory Committee is to act as a "sounding Board" for the consultants. The purpose of having the Advisory Committee prepare detailed local sub-area plans is to get an overall feel for the outcomes that would be acceptable to the community as represented by the members of the advisory Committee. This is background information for the consultants to give them a "feel" for the objectives and aspirations of the community. This was not intended to provide actual detailed design guidelines for the sample areas. It is my understanding that, using this background "feel" the consultants will then prepare recommendations and criteria in order to provide a set of design criteria for the entire regional center, which will then be put before HRM council.

Issues which I expect the project to address

- 1) The overall form and density of development and the density of population to be set as an objective for the regional center. This must be in a form that is sufficiently specific as to allow a potential developer to be able to identify early in the process what height, building mass and in the case of residential development, the number of units that will be allowed and will be approved on a particular site.
- 2) The organization of Regional Centre sub-component areas. The degree of self containment in those areas in terms of schools, retail and support services and the relationship of the sub-component areas to one another and to the whole.
- 3) The organization of the movement of people within the regional center. Specifically, how internal movement should be accomplished in the future.
- 4) The approach that should be taken with regard to the integration of designated historic designed properties or streetscapes in the overall fabric of the area.

5) The amount of green (open) space and the relationship of green space to residential areas. The degree to which recreational facilities can substitute for green space. The extent to which the development potential of open (green) space can be transferred in terms of additional density to adjacent developable areas. The distance over which development density may be transferred.

6) Finally, recognizing that the Regional Centre does not exist in isolation but must still operate as the focal point for the municipality, there will inevitably need to be some attention given to the means by which the population may access the Regional Centre, the relative importance to be given to road improvements, ease of vehicle access and parking or the degree of emphasis to be given to public transportation.

END.

From Cathy Carmody

The issue of density is one that needs much exploration, and direction flowing from this UDTF, because it's becoming clear to me that there are many ways to consider density. To me, creating density by building high rise apartment or condo complexes is not the way to go. To me that speaks of warehousing people in little boxes, creating social isolation, and having adverse effects on the environment. Creating low rise of 3-5 stories, either by renovations to existing 2 storey housing (infilling) or creation of new innovative housing that speaks to social inclusion is the way to go. The Outremont neighbourhood in Montreal seems to be an example of good density housing...low rise and a mix of social groups all living in the same area.

I find that the language around "affordable" housing in Halifax currently speaks of creating housing for those on limited incomes. Seems to me that we all need access to affordable housing - so how do we create the conditions for that to happen in HRM? (The last thing we want to do is to ghettoize those who live in affordable housing) In my mind there currently seems to be no clear message from HRM Council in terms of the kinds of mix people/incomes we want to attract into the core of the city. Currently I see little that would attract young families with young children and a mix of social groups to come into the central district of HRM - so many seem to want to get out into the suburban areas where the perception is that you get more sq. ft. per dollar, have more space and more green area.

So, to me the big question is: what do we want the centre of halifax to look like in years to come - in terms of the people living here - who will have the right to live here - and who will be excluded?

I could say a lot more, but I want to focus our attention on this issue, as it represents a lot more than density.

END.

From Stephen Terrauds

I agree with many of the thoughts being brought forward about what we would like to see come out of this process. I particularly feel that the points raised about density and affordability are key, and I have only a couple of points I would like to add:

I feel like this project must result in clear and useable guidelines for our councillors to use when making decisions. They are not designers, architects, or planners, and they should have the benefit of being able to rely on clear and concise reasoning for why a particular development is good, and why it is not. The end result cannot be filled with “we endorse,” or “we support ___ principle,” or “should” statements. It absolutely needs to contain “must” statements. I feel as though our municipal government needs to have the tools to be leaders by example. Whether it is washrooms on the common, or a sewage treatment plant, every piece of civic work must be a considered piece of urban (or suburban, or rural) design.

This brings me to Paul Shakotko’s mention of a design panel. I feel as though with the likes of Heritage Advisory Committees and Planning Advisory Committees it makes sense to have an Urban Design Review Board or committee. I do think it would be more beneficial to have it filled with a majority of urban designers, planners, and architects, as the expertise that these professionals have in this area is invaluable. Halifax has a good supply of candidates for positions on a board or committee like this with its faculty members at the School of Architecture and Planning at Dalhousie – not to mention the members of these professions practicing in our communities right now.

It’s been great to hear all these opinions expressed in this form, and I’m looking forward to our next meeting – Frank Palermo is a wonderful addition to the Task Force.

END.

From Bill Hyde

Bernie Smith's 6 points in his email are so close to my own thoughts that I will simply state my agreement with them rather than laboriously write a new list them.

I feel very strongly that whatever form our final product takes that it should improve the already over-complicated development environment in our community. It should be clear, concise, and specific as possible. It must be a useful tool, not just another barrier for change. We must be leery of overlaps with other policies and requirements. They may be unavoidable but we must be very careful how we handle them.

HERITAGE

This is a tremendously important urban design consideration. I hope our guidelines will concentrate on how new development that incorporates or is in close proximity to heritage resources should respect those resources. Matters of heritage resource protection should be dealt with separately although I would like to see changes there as well (I am keen for a two tier rating system with truly important buildings being protected with legislation with teeth such as provided by provincial heritage designation.)

DESIGN REVIEW PANEL

I have mixed feelings about this.

On one hand, we must do something to improve general design standards. People often overlook the fact that there are enduring design principles that can be codified and used to evaluate design proposals. The relative importance of these will vary from situation to situation so their application can be problematic. However these application problems can be handled.

On the other hand, I would hate to see a panel become a way for special interest groups to promote their narrow viewpoints.

Has there been any surveying of design review panel success or otherwise in other communities?

END