

TOMORROW'S SLUM ROW

HOW THE CITY WAS ASLEEP AT THE SWITCH IN QUEEN WEST OMB DEBACLE

By MIKE SMITH

I have a modest proposal, Toronto: we should no longer speak of the Ontario Municipal Board, but only of Caligula.

City staff will no longer attend OMB hearings, but have "audiences with Caligula." The press will not refer to OMB rulings, but to the "drunken edicts of Caligula." We will not call for "OMB reform," but for "token efforts to rein in the addled excesses of that braggart Caligula." And so forth.

How else to understand the ostensible planning body and its recent debacle of a decision about Queen West than via the person of a lecherous Roman emperor fond of saying, "Let them hate me, so long as they fear me"? Next to the Harris legacy, Caligula is the greatest force in the infantilization of Toronto.

Better, councillors say, to give developers 14 floors than 18. And better, at times, to blame Caligula than to make the needed arguments for density that no one wants to hear. Better, think the NIMBYs, to claim to be fighting an unaccountable decision-making body than to be perceived as myopically parochial or simply afraid of change. And better, think some builders, that people should stay afraid, so developers can exploit the already existing flavour of a community and scatter the poor rather than sit at table with residents who know what they want and can make it stick.

Sadly, Caligula leaves little space for such subtleties. "We need people to realize it's not a perfect world, and there needs to be a [density] balance," says Brian Ashton, chair of planning. "People love when they win [development decisions at the OMB], they hate it when they lose. It is anachronistic but to abolish it raises the question of what would replace it, and the responsibility that entails."

That responsibility needs to be shared. "The city needs to define and defend planning statements. Then we can get things down closer to the community councils," Ashton says. "And if we are saying, 'Yes, [Caligula] is a bad thing,' then we need that buy-in from the community. Community knowledge and support become the basis for our intervention."

Communities are still waiting, though, for City Hall to give that sign.

"The city seemed to want to talk to everyone in a way to make them happy, but not to facilitate results," says Jessica Wyman of Active 18, the coalition of very non-NIMBY residents and architects that offered an alternative to the condo plans of Verdiroc Developments, Landmark Developments and 2059946 Ontario Ltd. on Queen W. south of the Gladstone.

"The city said it organized, but the impetus came from the community, and by the time [the city acted] [Caligula's] deadline had already passed."

Why was a plan for the area not prioritized long ago? "Frankly," says chief planner Ted Tyndorf, "we just couldn't get to it." Tyndorf says the spike in development has outstripped the resources of an underfunded and overwhelmed planning department.

"There's an increasing expectation to engage the public. We've done that at a high level – the 30,000-foot view, the Official Plan. We need to get back to looking at things from grade level."

In 2006, city staff logged 14,000 hours in the court of Caligula that could have gone to consultation. But was there a lack of leadership? David Crombie famously imposed height restrictions on new buildings. Even Barbara Hall pushed for bylaws protecting zoning. This council could have imposed interim controls on the Queen West Triangle. Why didn't it?

"For whatever reason," says Tyndorf, "it didn't. It isn't something that can be done lightly, because it strips development rights from a property. The area is in transition."

But therein lies the problem: the perception of planning as something the city does in reaction to transition, rather than something neighbourhoods control through long-range planning. From 30,000 feet, that may look like micromanagement (anathema to a city reliant on taxes), but at street level it's people's lives.

This couldn't have been clearer at Monday's gentrification forum at the Parkdale Library, hosted by Parkdale Liberty Economic Development and attended on short notice by 250 folks.

Though framed as a pitch for more small business, beginning with a proposal by Ryerson planning students for green energy programs and beautification, it quickly became more: a reminder that planning is at the confluence of Toronto's visions and fears.

"This is a class issue," said panelist Victor Willis, of the Parkdale Activity and Rec Centre, to much applause and a handful of raised eyebrows.

If the community fails to grapple with the issues of development and autonomy, "beautification" only makes an area appealing for land speculators. Parkdale property values have spiked in the area near Dufferin, closer to places like the Bohemian Embassy.

According to Councillor Gord Perks, only the old city of Toronto licenses rooming houses; councillors in the former suburbs have resisted harmonization of that policy. "If our affordable housing stock is lost," he says, "people will end up in the same conditions they were in 20 years ago."

Margie Zeidler, of the Gladstone Hotel's Zeidler family, also invokes a grim future. "We are building tomorrow's slums with today's vertical suburbs," she said. "It'll take nothing short of a revolution. This is the Spadina Expressway of our time." She later recants, saying, "Maybe revolution was too strong a word." It's not.

The conversation hasn't even properly begun on how crucial planning will become as climate change tightens its noose, or as the oil begins to run out in earnest. Planning may indeed become the defining crisis of our era, and it's incumbent on us to make sure there are as many hands on the levers as possible. Today it's a question of who decides how many floors go where; in 30 years it could be a matter of who controls the local food supply.

Were there any concern at Queen's Park for sustainable planning, Caligula would have fallen on its sword, which it continues instead to wield ever more brashly. But it's best to live as though he didn't exist because the new age of community planning is coming, and in response to the sword of Damocles the Developer, we will need 10 thousand sharpened pencils.

Because this is our goddamned city. @

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