

HRMbyDesign - Public Hearing City Hall Tuesday, May 5, 6 p.m.

HRMbyDesign is a plan to eliminate most of the present rules for development in downtown Halifax. HRMbyDesign will seriously threaten the character of downtown Halifax. HRM Council will vote on the plan after a public hearing on May 5 at City Hall.

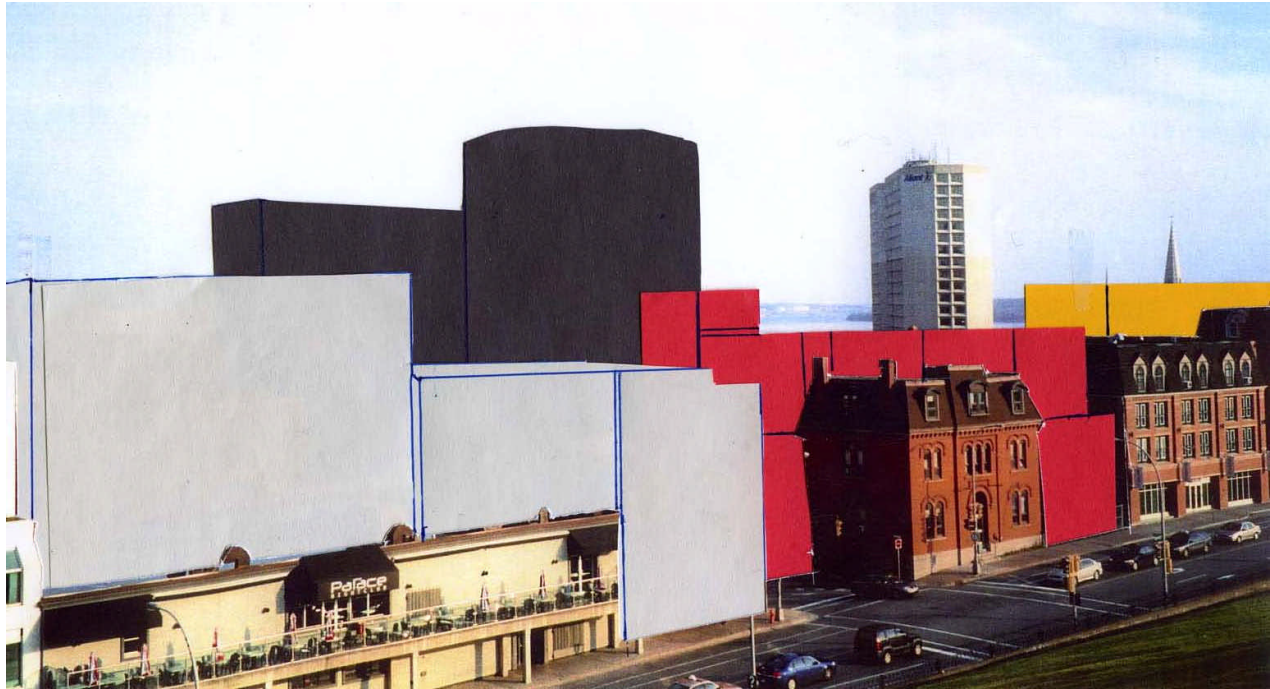


Citadel Views Blocked

HRMbyDesign claims to protect views from Citadel Hill, but will seriously diminish view protection. While viewplanes would be kept, HRMbyDesign would delete current mandatory policies in the Municipal Planning Strategy that control the heights of buildings in the vicinity of Citadel Hill and that protect the view of the central harbour between viewplanes.

Policy 6.3.1 calls for a “low to medium rise character of development in the area of approximately four traditional storeys” in the vicinity of Citadel Hill; HRMbyDesign would revoke this policy. HRMbyDesign would replace the present 40-foot as-of-right height limit by limits of 75-feet, 90-feet, and higher. In fact, HRMbyDesign would give developers an automatic right to construct tall buildings that would block out the central harbour view of George’s Island.

Also, Policy 6.2, which currently requires the city to “make every effort to preserve or restore” views from Citadel Hill, would no longer apply under HRMbyDesign. Both Policies 6.2 and 6.3.1 were recently used to stop the 17-storey Midtown Tower from blocking the centre harbour view and dominating the Citadel. Also, Policy 6.2 stopped two towers at the corner of Sackville and Brunswick Streets. Under HRMbyDesign, with fewer view protection policies and higher allowable heights, a wall of view-blockers could be constructed in the vicinity of Citadel Hill.



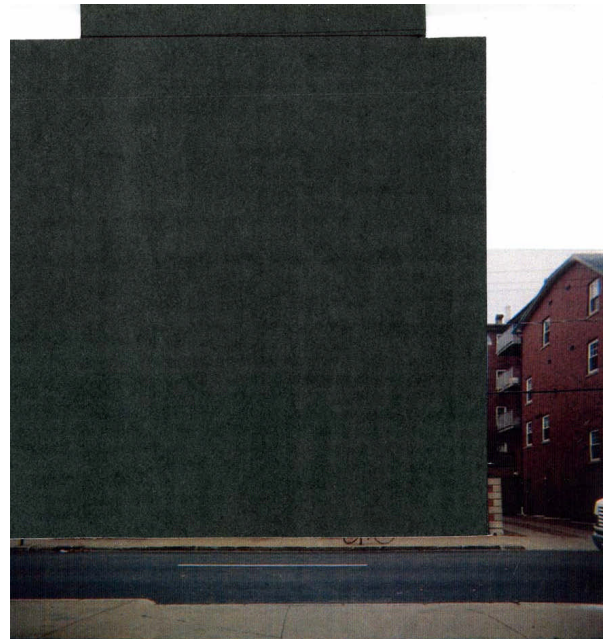
See above, from the same vantage point on the roadway on Citadel Hill as the view of George’s Island above, are the envelopes of five buildings that would be allowed by HRMbyDesign, from left to right: in light grey, a 7-storey building on the site of the Palace and the Alehouse; in dark grey, an 18-storey hotel on the Herald site and a 14-storey office office tower on the Midtown site, both as part of a proposed convention centre; in red, a 7-storey building behind and beside the Dispensary; and a 9-storey building on the block behind Cambridge Suites. Each building would block significant sections of the view. Together the buildings would block the entire centre harbour view of George’s Island from the roadway on Citadel Hill.

HRMbyDesign claims that the present policies are weak and calls them a “worst case scenario”. But we know the policies are clear and substantive, as the Nova Scotia Court of Appeal used them to reject the proposed Midtown Tower. There is no question that eliminating strong policies would weaken protection of views from Citadel Hill.

Incentive to Demolish Heritage Buildings

HRMbyDesign claims to provide “enhanced” protection for heritage buildings in “potential” conservation areas. In fact, about 95 heritage buildings would be under greater redevelopment pressure, as HRMbyDesign would increase height limits on heritage properties, creating a financial incentive for speculators to demolish and replace the heritage buildings.

For example, in the historic residential area, bounded by Bishop, Hollis, South and Barrington streets, where the current absolute height limit is 45 feet, HRMbyDesign would raise the height limit to 72 feet. Thus the 3½-storey, Alexander McLean House, built in 1797, could easily be



replaced by a 7-storey building. Also, if height limits are raised to 72 feet in this area now, it will be very difficult to establish a heritage conservation district in the future, as prospective developers will not want to relinquish their development potential.

HRMbyDesign claims that it would bring forward the Barrington Street Historic District Revitalization Plan, approved in principle by Council in 2006, but in fact HRMbyDesign has delayed the implementation of this conservation area.

The present system has protected 97% of the registered buildings for almost 30 years. We should not give up a system that works.

HRMbyDesign also claims to provide “enhanced” protection for heritage buildings with “heritage design guidelines”. In fact, these proposed design guidelines would allow large rooftop additions on heritage buildings, and demolition of all but the front facades of many heritage buildings. The character, historic fabric and prominence of registered heritage buildings would be completely undermined. Also, tall buildings would be allowed to dominate abutting heritage buildings.

Currently, Policy CH-1 in the new Regional Plan, adopted in 2006, calls for any addition to a heritage property to “be subordinate” to the heritage property. But under the HRMbyDesign scheme, Policy CH-1 would no longer apply in the downtown, where it is most needed.

Similarly, 17 strong heritage policies in the city-wide section of the Municipal Planning Strategy would no longer apply downtown under HRMbyDesign. For example, Policy 6.1, which calls for the retention of heritage “structures”, would be missing from the HRMbyDesign Downtown Secondary Planning Strategy, which has no clear policy to preserve our heritage buildings.

As a result, the Smith Brothers Building on Granville Street, currently protected by strong heritage policies and a 40-foot height limit, could be replaced by a 14-storey office block under the 160-foot pre-bonus height proposed by HRMbyDesign.

The current 40-foot as-of-right limits in the historic downtown core reflect the heights of the heritage buildings, whereas the proposed higher pre-bonus heights under HRMbyDesign create an incentive for demolition and redevelopment.

Any serious plan to keep our heritage buildings would keep the height limits and heritage policies.

Capacity and Character

HRMbyDesign claims that a large amount of office space is needed in the downtown, and that allowable heights must be high to accommodate this demand. However, when Turner Drake and Partners, a real estate consulting firm, was commissioned to produce the “Downtown Halifax Demand, Capacity and Baseline Indicators Study” last year, they found “no evidence to support the assertion that there is a large pent-up demand for office space.”

Turner Drake also highlighted the importance of heritage stating: “A key driver of demand for all types of space in downtown Halifax is its unique character ... which in turn is defined in large part by the heritage buildings and their relationship with the harbour. The environment thus created is Downtown Halifax’s major competitive advantage, which, once destroyed will never be reincarnated.”

In fact, there is no reason to jeopardize our heritage buildings and harbour views, as there are 1,050,000 square feet of vacant land in the downtown, enough to accommodate future development for the next 25 years. In addition, the Cogswell Street interchange could provide much more land for development.

Bad News for the Environment

HRMbyDesign claims that environmental sustainability is a key objective, but there are no mandatory environmental construction standards in HRMbyDesign.

The construction and operation of buildings leave an unsustainable carbon footprint, and the demolition of existing building stock accounts for 23% of the total waste in landfills.

A team of scientists in the United States has shown that the ‘embodied energy’ in heritage buildings is like money in the bank; they calculated that it would take energy equivalent to 32,000 litres of gasoline to replace the bricks in the exterior of a two-storey building. In Australia, the embodied energy in the existing building stock has been calculated to be equal to ten years of the total energy consumption of the entire country.

As well, high buildings cannot take full advantage of solar energy for space or hot water heating. According to Dalhousie University researchers, even with geothermal storage, only buildings up to six storeys high can be fully heated by the sun.

The “greenest” buildings are existing buildings, like our heritage buildings. The restoration, recycling, or adaptive re-use of heritage buildings is the most environmentally sustainable initiative for the historic core of downtown Halifax.

Reduced Democratic Rights

HRMbyDesign claims that the development process would be streamlined. In fact, public input on large development proposals would be seriously reduced. The public hearing May 5 would be the last opportunity to discuss the height or bulk of buildings, unless developers apply for even greater heights. An initial public information meeting would be the end of participation by the general public on each project. Only people who own property in downtown Halifax would have legislated rights under the site plan approval process in the HRMbyDesign plan.

A design review committee, 90% of whose members would be construction professionals, would make the decision to accept a development proposal based on weak design guidelines.

Even the elected councilors would not have input unless a downtown property owner appeals to them. Only the developer of a project would be allowed to appeal to the Nova Scotia Utility and Review Board.

More Information

For more information, including pictures of buildings at risk, full texts of the policies, and an alternative plan, please see the web site of the Heritage Trust of Nova Scotia, at www.htns.ca, and look under press releases at the right side of the home page.

Last Chance!

Please attend the public hearing on
Tuesday, May 5, 2009, at 6 p.m.
in City Hall on the Grand Parade

Messages may be sent to Mayor Peter Kelly and Members of Regional Council, Halifax Regional Municipality, P.O. Box 1749, Halifax, B3J 3A5, or clerks@halifax.ca, or Facsimile: 902 490 4208.

Please pass this message to others.

Heritage Trust of Nova Scotia
heritage.trust@ns.sympatico.ca

Press Release for April 25, 2009