

## **Cart Before Horse**

*By Denault Blouin*

Tonight we've heard serious concerns raised about the compromise of democracy in HRMbyDesign, about assumptions the plan holds regarding the need for a lot more office space in the Central Business District, and about the elimination of heritage protections from the Municipal Planning Strategy. But there is also an equally critical issue, which now surprisingly links heritage and development in the Downtown: Sustainability. When it comes to sustainability, HRMbyDesign asks Council to approve a plan for development before the city has put a plan for sustainability into law.

Probably everyone here knows that we live in a province that is 90% dependent on foreign coal and oil to heat, cool, light and service our buildings, as well as to drive our cars, trucks and machinery. We also know the age of cheap oil is over. We see and feel the effects of increasing climate change, to which Halifax contributes about 30% of NS's greenhouse gases. We know that we send almost all our gas and oil south, and much of our wood pellets off to Europe. And finally, we know that it will be quite some time, at least, until renewable energy sources become dependably available replacements for all of the energy we now import (and export).

Nonetheless, despite all that knowledge, HRMbyDesign is asking Council to approve a plan that will permit buildings to rise to energy-intensive, high consumption heights on sites across the Central Business District. McKelvie's could go from 2 to 11 storeys, the Five Fishermen from 3 1/2 to 9, the Waterfront Warehouse from 2 to 16. Throughout the Central Business District, those buildings and others (like the YMCA-up to 16 storeys too) would put at risk the sustainability of what the book, *Halifax: Warden of the North*, calls "the heart's core of Halifax." Furthermore, because of those heights, the city's heritage buildings would be threatened first with decay due to loss of sun and circulation, and then with demolition, as their owners realize they're worth more down than up.

To demolish heritage buildings, which long ago paid off their carbon debts, makes no sustainable sense. To build new, taller buildings that will incur much heavier debts in concrete, glass, steel and transportation greenhouse gases and that will have much shorter life spans, makes no sustainable sense. (Think of the Joe Howe Building, now 40 years old and up for the most expensive major systems retrofit in the Province's history.)

HRMbyDesign asks us to wait till after the design is passed for a Sustainability Functional Plan. That's putting the cart before the horse. Plain old horse sense tells us that now is the time to pre-fit HRMbyDesign with that plan, not retrofit it afterwards, as we have had to do so often in the past, in the politically ticklish task of revising plans and standards made without adequate foresight. Not anymore. We know what's coming, because it's already here. Now.

And we don't need to start over, or reinvent another wheel, because our heritage buildings have suddenly, unexpectedly, become surprisingly modern and green. They stand as models of how to build to topographical proportion (Think of the viewplanes.), of climate-sensitive energy conservation (Think of Historic Properties in the Age of Sail.), and as examples of genuine

architectural grace (Think of the Bank of Nova Scotia Building, the St. Paul's Building, the Shaw Building, or the Morris St. Scottish dormer row houses.).

By building to standards of least possible energy intensity, lower, on downtown lands obviously vacant, now is the time to make sustainability the primary practice in the life of city. Now is the time to ensure the long life of the heritage buildings, which give Halifax, to use HRMbyDesign's word, its "distinction" in Canada - and by the same stroke, in a rare moment of auspicious convergence between heritage and development, support the growth of authentically green development for long-term financial vitality and civic pride.

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What does Sustainability mean?

In 1989, the World Commission on Environment and Development (Brundtland Commission) articulated what has now become a widely accepted definition of sustainability: "[to meet] the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs."

What does Sustainability mean in Halifax?

In 2007, HRM became a founding member of the Atlantic Canada Sustainability Initiative, which follows The Natural Step Canada. The Natural Step Canada defines sustainability as:

"A state in which society does not systematically undermine natural or social systems within the biosphere. Achieving sustainability would happen when the four system conditions of The Natural Step are met: "System Conditions: Four conditions for achieving sustainability. The conditions are stated in the negative to create the constraints within which creativity can flourish. They are:

‘In a sustainable society, nature is not subject to systematically increasing:

- Concentrations of substances extracted from the earth's crust
- Concentrations of substances produced by society
- Degradation by physical means
- And people are not subject to conditions that systematically undermine their capacity to meet their needs.’"