The “right height” debate
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The recent approval by city council for a 24-storey building as part of the redevelopment of the Bay site was given as a reward for the developer’s commitment to preserve the circa 1921 Edwardian Classical Temple style edifice. But the DVA’s Rob Randall says we still haven’t had the critical dialogue about downtown height and density.

February’s Urban Development Institute (UDI) luncheon focused on a hot topic. Billed as “The Right Height Debate,” it offered presentations by artist and current Downtown Residents Association chair Rob Randall, and Victoria architect Franc d’Ambrosio.

As people stood in line at the buffet, I scanned the room, attempting to “profile” attendees. My inner profiler considered a young woman who passed my table, concluding: *Young, beautiful, stylish, and her escort personifies urban cool. Pro-height, definitely.* Now, what about the businessmen in suits? Or the community association folks in jeans? Who’s more invested emotionally? Financially?

Since I know both speakers, I didn’t spend too much time figuring their position(s) out, although I found it strange that they were cast in supposedly opposing camps: Randall pro-height, d’Ambrosio not so much. If the issues were as simple as that, we could just have a poll and call it a day. But in fact, Randall’s talk was a far more nuanced presentation of the issues than many in the audience, conditioned by the simplifications retailed by media and popular opinion, expected.

It soon became clear that his was no simple “pro-height” argument. I overheard one comfortable Grey Suit grumble, “Is he arguing for more height or not?” sounding impatient that Randall’s picture wasn’t in simplistic black and white.

Randall’s initial point was that, notwithstanding outrages about tall buildings ruining Victoria’s characteristic tourist image, we actually haven’t had a critical dialogue about downtown height and density. We fail to discuss where height is needed or should go. Another key point was that architectural excellence, not building height, determines Victoria’s character.

Currently, most of downtown is uniformly zoned to a 3-1 density, with a 43-metre height cap. According to planners Randall questioned, that zoning was supposed to spread density out evenly. But today, it’s doubtful that it serves our needs.

For one thing, it results not in variety and interest, but dull uniformity. Further, the cap was introduced in the ‘70s to “beat back” architecturally questionable 1960s apartment blocks. Since we wouldn’t approve such blatantly design-deficient buildings today, the height cap hardly continues to serve rational purposes. It’s also not the case that Victoria is a city only of low-rises: there are currently 35 buildings at or over 43 metres, many of which are the age of greying boomers.

Meanwhile, Victoria can expect population growth — including business growth and diversification, a prognosis reinforced by the recent City-commissioned Coriolis Report.

So the question is, do we go up, out, or way out? “Way out” means population and business growth goes elsewhere, leaving downtown Victoria open to depopulation and deepening decrepitude.

Downtown Residents Association chair Rob Randall

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“Out” means we continue to spread density around in a seemingly innocuous (if vertically parsimonious) manner across all of Victoria. But beware: this puts increased pressure on residential neighbour-
hoods to densify, which in turn would considerably modify (threaten!) their character.

“Up” simply means taller office buildings and condos downtown. It means coming to a decision about where and how densification should take place, which parts of downtown need revitalization, and how best to add taller structures that have the architectural excel-
ence to, as Randall put it, “sculpt the skyline.”

Under the 3:1 density, we can’t adequately densify downtown to attract and hold the critical population mass needed for business and city life to thrive. Current restrictions don’t accommodate profitability and architectural excellence, environmental standards, and desirable streetscapes/skylines.

Randall’s presentation was an enlightening contribution to our urban revitalization debates. Too often, we rely on “insiders” (planners, developers, architects) for guidance. Discounting “outsiders,” we challenge them: What makes you qualified to speak on this topic? Well, in his essay, “The Power of the Marginal,” noted programming guru and artist Paul Graham suggests this retort:

If you make something and people complain that it doesn’t work, that’s a problem. But if the worst thing they can hit you with is your own status as an outsider, that implies that in every other respect you’ve succeeded. Pointing out that someone is unqualified is as desperate as resorting to racial slurs. It’s just a legitimate way of saying: We don’t like your type around here.

Randall, the DRA, and the engaged community around Victoria’s downtown use “the power of the marginal” to question established thinking around our built environment. Experts would do well to listen.

As for the young woman I assumed was pro-height? When I saw her a few weeks later, she said she opposed high-rises, having moved to Victoria for its low-rise character.

Oops – my profiling powers flopped!

But then she added this: After hearing Rob Randall’s presentation and considering the options, she changed her mind, and understands that we really do need to increase density by building higher downtown.

Insiders listen up, and make room.

For information about Urban Development Institute luncheons and speakers, contact udivictoria@shaw.ca or 383-1072. Rob Randall’s presentation is available on www.vibrantvictoria.ca. For more on “guru” Paul Graham, see http://paulgraham.com/marginal.html.

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