The death of a good idea

YULE HEIBEL

A creative plan for a downtown location for the AGGV is toast. What went wrong?

May I be frank, even if that entails answering questions with more questions? Readers might recall last June’s Focus, where I wrote that the Art Gallery of Greater Victoria (AGGV) planned to “launch a satellite art gallery into the downtown orbit.” The idea was simple: the proposal called for a private-public partnership between a developer (Westbank) and a non-profit (AGGV), which would have given the non-profit outright ownership of a stand-alone facility in the heart of downtown’s tourism district.

But on November 28, 2007, AGGV sent out a press release chronicling its withdrawal from a proposal that had been anticipated by many, yet was opposed enough by some to eliminate it.

According to AGGV’s press release, Westbank’s original concept “was to develop the Crystal Court Motel site on Belleville Street (between Douglas and Blanshard) as a single [21-storey] residential condominium tower, located on the east end of the site, and an independent art gallery, on the west. When City of Victoria representatives indicated that the single tower concept was not likely to receive municipal approval—primarily because of the proposed height—Westbank went back to the drawing board and prepared an alternative design.

The revised plan involved two condominium towers [of 14 storeys each], with the proposed gallery situated under the second tower at the Douglas Street end.”

In essence, the City rejected the single tower option when the developer approached the planning department for a rezoning application, and staff indicated its lack of support. This forces Westbank to consider an inferior Plan B: a lower, but also much wider pair of buildings. In turn, this will certainly block view corridors for the Queen Victoria Hotel to the south, and if the building’s footprint fills the site, it will cast Belleville Street’s Lawn Bowling Green into shadow—which wouldn’t have happened with a single slim tower.

Further, AGGV loses what it stood to gain: a high-profile presence downtown in a stand-alone building it owns, and an outdoor sculpture park visible from the street. Occupying a couple of floors under a condo building doesn’t really amount to the same thing, does it? Occupying a couple of floors under a residential building, which is accessible 24 hours a day, also brings other issues into play, such as security concerns and insuring against flooding or fire hazards.

The plain truth is that the proposal that AGGV and Westbank wanted to embark on no longer exists. And here comes my “frank” question: Why is that? Is the city too cowed by the undue influence of community associations (in this case, James Bay’s), which, despite
THE PLAIN TRUTH IS that the proposal that AGGV and Westbank wanted to embark on no longer exists. And here comes my “frank” question: Why is that? Is the city too cowed by the undue influence of community associations (in this case, James Bay’s), which, despite the fact that they speak for just a small segment of the region’s population, exert undue influence over planning decisions?

the fact that they speak for just a small segment of the region’s population, exert undue influence over planning decisions?

Let’s break this down a bit: the slip of land—where the Crystal Court Motel sits—lies just inside the boundary of the James Bay neighbourhood, but any right-thinking person recognizes this patch of dirt as belonging to downtown. That’s problem number one, because if the land is part of the James Bay neighbourhood, downtown density bonus rules don’t apply to development proposals.

But here’s the bigger question: why should only the adjacent neighbourhoods determine the direction for the region’s downtown? Why don’t the citizens of Saanich or Oak Bay or Esquimalt get to have a say about the city’s amenities? After all, the city is certainly complaining with increasing vehemence about how those municipalities let Victoria shoulder the cost of policing the downtown.

But I would counter with this question: What can Victoria offer these municipalities in return for their contribution to the police budget? How about a say in Victoria’s municipal affairs or in its planning, including planning for new cultural venues? What would happen, I wonder, if our fellow citizens in any of the kissing cousin municipalities to our east, west, or north could vote on whether or not a tower on Belleville Street should be approved? How would they vote, if voting “yes” would bring a brand new gallery, designed by one of Canada’s best architects, to our regional downtown? Would the neighbourhoods then start acting more like neighbourhoods in a city, and learn that “vision” extends beyond the boundaries of parochial turf wars?

If Victoria actually offered Greater Victorians something other than complaints about being left to shoulder the region’s social problems, would people with a more nuanced interest in city-building start to feel enfranchised enough to take a positive interest in downtown? As it stands currently, it takes a crisis such as we’re seeing with open drug use, crime, and abject homelessness for downtown to become an object of active, albeit enervating, attention. But shouldn’t positive aspects and the creative vitality of our city be energizing and of interest at all times?

And why is it that Victorians get so confused about being a city?

The banter between Godfrey and the Maid Molly in “My Man Godfrey” (1936) is topped by the film’s exasperated pater familias, Alexander Bullock, who observes: “All you need to start an asylum is an empty room and the right kind of people.” Thirteen municipalities and an un-enfranchised citizenry work just as well, it seems.

Yule Heibel returned to Victoria in 2002 after living in the US where she earned her doctorate in art and architectural history at Harvard and taught at MIT, Brown, and Harvard. She is the author of a book and numerous articles.