Ditch height restrictions; adopt “good design” prescriptions

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A survey of downtown’s landscape shows that restrictive zoning is bad for our Savannah brains.

In a recently published interview, Arthur Erickson observed, “The skyline is getting much too blah.” He was speaking of Vancouver, noting that “the main complaint from visitors and designers is that all the buildings look the same.” In contrast, he wants his new Vancouver building (the 60-story Residences at the Ritz-Carlton) “to show change.”

In the same interview, Erickson explained that height has been the driving force behind “general design,” and that, coupled with views, it helps create a building’s “wow impact.”

His comments gave me pause, for Victoria’s skyline also clumps into blah-ness, although not because of any competitive striving to show who can be the tallest kid on the block. After all, Victoria has height restrictions, which are supposed to keep us from becoming “just like Vancouver.”

So how did our skyline get even blah-ier than theirs? By itself, height is never a blah predictor. But it does seem that Victoria’s height restrictions contribute to a brain-numbing blah-ness insofar as they force architects to devise buildings whose every square inch is maximized as revenue-generating floor space. The zoning is not written to reward any kind of individualizing flourish on top, much less an individually unique overall shape. And whether it’s three or 30 stories, nothing maximizes floor space more than the simple (and typically blah) cereal box.

Occasionally, there’s an exception. Consider the Sussex Building: I’m attracted by its ornamental, peaked top, and I can tell you exactly why that should be in terms that anyone familiar with principles of biophilic design or evolutionary psychology will understand.

Evolutionary psychology, in a nutshell, posits that you can take the human out of the savannah, but you can’t take the savannah out of the human. In other words, certain factors trigger brain responses that go back millennia, and help explain human preferences: attraction to enclosed refuges from which to survey the outside world (imagine your hillside cave dweller surveying the savannah—or the condo dweller enjoying the city view); a natural (reflexive) curiosity about moving figures (are they your dinner, or are you theirs?); an appreciation of landmarks, which make journeys predictable (and repeatable, of crucial importance if food or water is involved). There are others, but let’s start here.

I’m not attracted to the Sussex Building because it moves (it doesn’t); nor does it shelter me as I look out to enjoy the view (I don’t live there, and besides, it’s an office building). No, its appeal lies in its “landmark” quality. Its peaked top signals “mountain shape,” or maybe “really big tree shape,” which, amidst an otherwise nearly unrelieved flatness of rooftops, makes it...attractive. It literally attracts my attention. Our made-in-savannah brains are hard-wired to notice topographical standouts, which helps account for the thrill many of us get when we see a “wow!” skyline, that exciting plenitude of landmarks and feast for the eyes.

By the same token, an assembly of blah rooflines recalls a featureless no-man’s-land and makes you feel as though you’re precisely nowhere. A single “landmark” in turn becomes part of a larger community when other buildings around it also express an attractive or signature individuality. When the “congregation” is sufficiently numerous and individualized, a city develops a unique and attractive skyline.

Lowrise buildings can sport unremarkable rooflines since they don’t expect to attract attention; they’re no landmarks. But the tall building literally has a higher purpose.

In addition, a compelling skyline can’t be achieved at the expense of the building’s successful integration at street level, for the pedestrian experience of the built environment at sidewalk level is key to urban vibrancy. But our efforts to create “fine-grained” street-level interaction shouldn’t mean that we neglect rooflines. My high school art teacher, a potter, used to say that a thrown pot’s “foot” and “lip” were its most important aspects: get the foot (sidewalk level) and the lip (roofline) right, and what happens in-between has to fall into place.

Consider again the economic explanations for blah rooflines. Our architects aren’t conspiring to frustrate deeply hard-wired preferences, although stylistic dogmatism can give buildings the mouthfeel of extremely dry wine: terribly sophisticated, if not notably enjoyable.

The economic explanation is that architects can’t deviate too much from the box prototype because doing so means losing revenue-producing square footage. Anything fancy or shapely toward the top, as the building reaches the roofline, would require sacrificing square footage in the floors immediately below—and those top floors are the most valuable.

Recall Erickson’s “wow impact,” which is created when height and view come together. If stepping back to create a “Chrysler Building” type effect means losing floor space on the top floors, guess what? It won’t happen: the “wow impact” will be reserved for those inside the building looking out, but we on the street won’t reap the benefit of having another landmark.

We really should fix this. And the simplest way to start is by asking why we need height restrictions when we could have proactive “good design” prescriptions instead.

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